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**Tweeting Terror:  
An Examination of ISIL's Online Operations  
Through Rational Choice Theory**

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## Introduction

The Islamic State of Iraq's (ISIL) bold and surprising declaration of a caliphate in Iraq and Syria marks a radical departure from the strategy of Al-Qa'ida and ISIL's other rivals in Sunni extremism.<sup>1</sup> On 29 June 2014, Abu Muhammad Al-Adnani, the chief spokesman of ISIL, announced the violent terrorist group had restored the caliphate and declared Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi its caliph, a title referring to a class of Islamic rulers of the past.<sup>i</sup> These terms were not arbitrarily chosen from history books of the Middle East, but were deliberately selected by ISIL's leadership as part of the narrative it seeks to create around itself. ISIL's propaganda efforts deliberately attempt to portray the group as the rightful successors to the early leaders of Islam, beginning with the Prophet Muhammad. This position in Islamic history would grant ISIL much more than an enhanced sense of legitimacy on religious grounds. ISIL's declaration of the caliphate was also meant to "attract more volunteers, foot soldiers and professionals who are required to meet the demands of continued fighting alongside state building and governance."<sup>ii</sup> Through declaring itself a caliphate and Al-Baghdadi its leader, ISIL sought to claim authority over Muslims worldwide.

However, recognition of Al-Baghdadi's rule as caliph and ISIL's caliphate remains a strategically irrational goal for the terrorist group. Despite what ISIL claims, Al-Baghdadi's claim of sovereignty over all Muslims is a far-fetched and unattainable dream.<sup>iii</sup> Mainstream Muslims worldwide remain outraged over Al-Baghdadi's

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this work, I will be utilizing the US Department of State Bureau of Counterterrorism's term for the current incarnation of the Sunni terrorist organization controlling territory in Iraq and Syria, which is currently the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Due to difficulties encountered in translating Arabic into English, as well as ISIL's history of adjusting its name periodically, a variety of terms have arisen to refer to this group in Western media. Other terms for ISIL include the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, ISIS, the Islamic State, IS, Al-Qa'ida in Iraq, AQI, and Da'ish.

declaration of a caliphate, arguing ISIL's interpretation of Islam only represents the views of Islam's extremist minority. Even fellow radical Islamists reject ISIL's revival of the caliphate. Ayman Al-Zawahiri, Al-Qa'ida's current leader, quickly denounced the move and disassociated Al-Qa'ida from it, sharply criticizing Al-Baghdadi and ISIL.<sup>iv</sup> Furthermore, Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, an anti-Western and polarizing Egyptian preacher, declared ISIL's caliphate maintained no authority or standing, according to Islamic law. Al-Qaradawi elaborated, claiming merely declaring a caliph and caliphate was not sufficient to adopt these titles.<sup>v</sup> Despite worldwide rejection of ISIL's caliphate and its crass distortion of Islam, ISIL's successful rise represents a major issue for American policy in the Middle East.

Less than a year since its February 2014 split from Al-Qa'ida, ISIL has emerged as one of America's top national security priorities. The group has quickly become one of the most dominant and successful terrorist organizations in the Middle East. Recently, President Barack Obama advised ISIL was one of "the greatest threats...from the Middle East and North Africa, where radical groups exploit grievances for their own gain" in statements released by the Office of the Press Secretary.<sup>vi</sup> The terrorist organization has inspired fear throughout the Middle East, even in far-off Tunisia, where ordinary citizens fear attacks by ISIL sleeper cells.<sup>vii</sup> According to a recent estimate, ISIL has accumulated at least half a billion American dollars through seizing Iraqi banks.<sup>viii</sup> ISIL's rampage through Syria and northern Iraq not only threatens regional stability in the Middle East, but American homeland security, as well. According to a congressional report, ISIL "has the intent to attack the United States and is reportedly recruiting and training individuals to do so."<sup>ix</sup> The report quotes Al-Baghdadi, who threatened "direct

conflict” against the US for its policy towards Iraq and Syria.<sup>x</sup> As ISIL rises to the top of American security concerns, policymakers must shift their focus to overcoming the calculated and innovative tactics responsible for the group’s success.

Specifically, ISIL executes a variety of tactics in its online media campaign in furtherance of ISIL’s caliphate. The group utilizes social media sites, such as Twitter, as “a megaphone,” in order to garner support and intimidate its opponents, such as the Iraqi government and NATO.<sup>xi</sup> In addition to social media, ISIL’s online publications represent another outlet to disseminate propaganda. These works paint an alluring narrative of life in ISIL’s caliphate and exaggerates the group’s victories. Finally, ISIL’s use of video online aids in recruitment efforts, as well as facilitates the dissemination of its messages worldwide. This medium serves similar objectives to ISIL’s other online platforms, such as propaganda and recruitment, but has gained notoriety for depicting the beheadings of captured enemies of ISIL. However, despite the widespread proliferation of the internet in the twenty-first century, ISIL’s multi-pronged internet efforts are not typical of contemporary international terrorist groups.

Through the incorporation of social media, online publications, and online video in its operations, ISIL’s use of the internet far surpasses its peers in international terrorism. International terrorist groups readily adopted the internet, utilizing it for communication, facilitation, and planning.<sup>xii</sup> Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula’s (AQAP) online magazine *Inspire* aimed to radicalize Western readers and facilitate terrorist attacks targeting the US Homeland. The group also disseminated radical Islamic lectures online and maintains a presence on social media.<sup>xiii</sup> Taking a look at Hizballah, it was one of the first international terrorist groups to adopt the internet with the launch of

hezbollah.org in 1996. Since then, Hizballah utilizes the internet to disseminate propaganda, recruit, engage in psychological warfare, and even provide access to the social and welfare services it provides in Lebanon.<sup>xiv</sup> Despite its recent emergence in Iraq and Syria, ISIL has emerged at the forefront of internet use by an international terrorist organization.

ISIL's dominance online elevates it above other contemporary militant organizations. According to the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, "no one organization has the bundle of resources and capabilities that ISIL currently possesses" when it comes to internet operations.<sup>xv</sup> Unlike most other terrorist groups, ISIL specifically recruited for cyber experts and devoted the necessary infrastructure and resources required by these personnel to work with at an early stage in the group's development. Also, ISIL has demonstrated a willingness to expand into new forms of online communication, such as social media, while its peers, such as AQAP and Al-Nusra Front, experienced difficulty in making these transitions. Backing up ISIL's online operations, the group maintains strong leadership and an advanced organizational structure, which facilitates these types of operations.<sup>xvi</sup> However, ISIL's advanced capabilities in the online realm did not happen by chance.

ISIL's activities online remain proof the group behaves rationally at the tactical level. Terrorism studies scholars almost unanimously agree that terrorists, including ISIL operators, are generally rational actors. This means terrorists behave in furtherance of their objectives and take action, based on calculating the perceived consequences of their choices.<sup>xvii</sup> Regarding ISIL's online media efforts, these operations clearly demonstrate the group's capacity for rationality. Through social media, online media publications,

and high-definition video, ISIL utilizes these platforms to fulfill its need to disseminate propaganda, attract recruits, and solicit donations of money, weapons, and other resources. Unlike other platforms, the internet is a logical choice for a terrorist group like ISIL to capitalize upon, due to its relative low cost to operate and ability to rapidly disseminate information.

Each internet operation is meant to bring ISIL closer to its strategic goals, such as the establishment of ISIL's caliphate in the Middle East. This distinguishes ISIL's online operations from less than rational internet disseminations by terrorists. For example, if a terrorist actor's goal is to execute a mass-casualty vehicle-borne improvised explosive device attack within the US, he or she would not post the date, time, and location of the event on Facebook. This would increase the likelihood American intelligence and law enforcement agencies would discover the plot and subsequently disrupt it, lessening the chance for the would-be terrorist to reach his or her goal. Even though ISIL releases limited information regarding places it intends to attack through Twitter in order to intimidate its opponents, the group does not release enough information that would give its opponents an advantage. Despite the calculated and well-planned nature of ISIL's online operations, the group moves farther away from rationality when viewed from a more strategic level.

For terrorism studies scholars, the combination of rational tactics, in furtherance of an irrational strategy, is not a recent ISIL innovation.<sup>2</sup> As per Robert Nalbandov of Utah State University, post-Cold War terrorist groups, such as Al-Qa'ida's and Chechen

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<sup>2</sup> This work will distinguish between the terms *tactics* and *strategies* in the military sense, originating with the Prussian military theorist, Carl Von Clausewitz. According to Clausewitz, the domain of tactics was restricted to limited military operations, utilized to win a battle or achieve an individual objective. Strategy, on the other hand, dealt with utilizing military operations, in furtherance of an overall military or political goal.

separatist groups, are not rational when examined strategically. Nalbandov argues this breed of terrorists is not fighting in furtherance of attainable and physical goals, such as ISIL's attempt to revive the historical relic known as the caliphate.<sup>xviii</sup> However, this observation does not mean contemporary terrorist groups are irrational on the tactical level. Nalbandov continues these organizations specifically attempt to inflict as much civilian casualties as possible in their attacks, in order to generate media attention.<sup>xix</sup> As demonstrated in the past, increased media attention often leads to political change, such as the American invasion of Afghanistan after 11 September 2001. According to Ezra Klein of *The Washington Post*, Osama Bin Laden, the deceased leader of Al-Qa'ida, actually wanted the US to lead an invasion of Afghanistan. Bin Laden calculated such an endeavor would weaken the US economically and ultimately weaken the superpower.<sup>xx</sup> While ISIL's rationally-implemented tactics have garnered the organization a fearsome reputation amongst modern terrorist groups, its operations online are worthy of closer examination.

Further study on ISIL's rational use of the internet can aid American policymakers, dedicated to dismantling this international terrorist group. Examining ISIL's online media operations through rational choice theory can lead to viable policy options that can be utilized in disrupting ISIL operations. Rational choice theory refers to "to the idea that all action is fundamentally rational in character and that people calculate the likely costs and benefits of any action before deciding what to do."<sup>xxi</sup> This theory can be applied to terrorist actors, as well, including ISIL. The application of rational choice theory to terrorism is not a recent innovation and a significant amount of academic literature is dedicated to this subject. Once ISIL's online media operations are

understood and modelled, American policymakers will have the information they need to develop strategies, specifically tailored to combat this terrorist group. Through the application of rational choice theory to ISIL's use of online media platforms, the terrorism studies community can make a significant contribution to the group's permanent dismantlement.

This work aims to aid American policymakers, specifically engaged in counterterrorism and intelligence issues in the Middle East, develop strategies to thwart ISIL's rise in Iraq and Syria through the application of rational choice theory to its activities online. ISIL's presence in Iraq and Syria threatens American foreign policy interests, as well as the Homeland itself, necessitating such a study. Specifically, three aspects of ISIL's online media operations will be examined: social media, online publications, and internet video. ISIL's use of each one of these tactics will be explained through the lens of rational choice theory. From this application of theory to a contemporary terrorist organization, conclusions relevant to combatting ISIL will be developed and utilized to formulate policy recommendations with emphasis on the US Intelligence Community (USIC). Through this examination, I hope to aid policymakers in conclusively disrupting this rising threat to the stability of the Middle East, as well as American national security.

## **Background**

Rational choice theory aims to understand and model human behavior and revolves around the idea people are primarily rational actors. It advocates humans will consider the pros and cons of a decision and take action, in pursuit of the perceived best outcome. Important concepts within rational choice theory include instrumental

rationality and utility maximization. Instrumental rationality stipulates a person pursues his or her interests, utilizing whatever resources are available.<sup>xxii</sup> For example, if a landscape worker needs to mow a lawn, he would buy a gas-powered lawn tractor, as opposed to a hand-powered lawnmower, if he could afford it. Within rational choice theory, utility maximization takes instrumental rationality one step further. This concept advocates a person will attempt to gain the greatest value possible when making a decision.<sup>xxiii</sup> Going back to the aforementioned landscape worker, he would likely repair the lawn tractor when it breaks, as opposed to buying a new one, in order to maximize its value. Even though rational choice theory focuses on explaining the individual decision-making process, it was originally meant to explain systems of economic behavior.

Rational choice theory's roots lie in the field of economics prior to its introduction to other studies. Classical political economists, such as Thomas Hobbes, and Adam Smith, were amongst the first to develop ideas, which would grow into rational choice theory. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes posited people made choices, based on universal "appetites" and "aversions." In a similar fashion, Smith argued people carry out decisions, primarily out of self-interest in the *Wealth of Nations*.<sup>xxiv</sup> Economists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries continued to develop what would become rational choice theory, but the next breakthrough in this field came from the economist Alfred Weber. He observed rationality was the major driving force of society, especially in modern times.<sup>xxv</sup> Throughout the twentieth century, scholars outside of economics recognized rational choice theory's merit and incorporated it into a variety of other fields, such as criminology, political science, and sociology. Rational choice theory's entrance

into terrorism studies is a fairly recent development, considering its history began hundreds of years ago.

Rational choice theory maintains a prominent place in contemporary terrorism studies. In this context, rational choice theory “assumes that terrorist acts usually emanate from rational, calculated, conscious decisions.”<sup>xxvi</sup> These decisions are specifically formulated in pursuit of the terrorist’s sociopolitical objectives, such as the overthrow of a secular regime, in favor of harsh theocratic rule. Furthermore, the application of rational choice theory to terrorism implies terrorism itself is not the result of illogical behavior or mental instability, as past research advocated. According to the American Psychological Association, most researchers currently agree terrorist behavior is not pathological from a traditional view.<sup>xxvii</sup> While rational choice theory remains a popular method to explain terrorist behavior, its place within terrorism studies is not unchallenged.

### **Existing Arguments**

Besides rational choice theory’s application to terrorism, other theories within terrorism studies attempt to explain terrorist behavior. One of rational choice theory’s major competitors in explaining terrorism is the culturalist approach. The culturalist perspective divides the world into distinct and uniform cultures. These cultures are responsible for an individual’s behavior and thought, as opposed to rationality.<sup>xxviii</sup> Culturalists examine “beliefs about national identity, ideology, race and ethnicity, gender, and class beliefs,” in order to explain international relations. Culturalism came to prominence, as an alternative to rational choice theory, in the post-Cold War era. Culturalists advocated rational choice theory was inadequate to explain the presence of

ethnic and cultural conflict in the 1990's, such as the Rwandan Genocide.<sup>xxix</sup> Despite its aversion to rational choice theory, culturalism maintains a place in contemporary terrorism studies, as well.

Culturalist approaches to terrorism emphasize the role religious interpretation occupies in inspiring these acts. Specifically, when examining Sunni extremist groups, such as ISIL and Al-Qa'ida, culturalist scholars identify Islamic texts and symbols especially regarding jihad and martyrdom as the justification and impetus behind acts of terror. They cite displays of religious devotion and references to religion in propaganda disseminations as evidence of religiously-inspired terrorism.<sup>xxx</sup> For example, Anwar Aulaqi of AQAP gained notoriety for his religious lectures which inspired violence amongst listeners. Aulaqi's "The Dust Will Never Settle Down" sermon called for the murder of any individual who defamed the Prophet Muhammed.<sup>xxxi</sup> Many of Aulaqi's lectures were featured in *Inspire*, as well, amplifying his reach abroad.<sup>xxxii</sup>

Another approach to explaining terrorism, outside of rational choice theory, is grounded theory. Grounded theory "seeks to infer a hypothesis grounded in tangible data with respect to an act's context."<sup>xxxiii</sup> This approach attempts to explain terrorist behavior through gathering data after an operation is committed. On the opposite end of the spectrum, rational choice theory attempts to analyze factors that push an individual into engaging in terrorism in the first place and rationalize this decision. Proponents of grounded theory advocate obtaining access to terrorists via field research, in order to directly collect information on their interests and motivations, is a better way to formulate conclusions about terrorist behavior.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Grounded theory involves categorizing data, collected directly from research, and utilizing this data to craft theory. While grounded

theory represents a radical departure from rational choice theory in explaining terrorism, other theories utilize rational choice theory to build from.

Bounded rationality theory explains terrorism in a similar fashion to rational choice theory, but with limitations. This theory departs from rational choice theory in two fundamental ways. First, bounded rationality assumes people are simply not capable of estimating every possible outcome of their actions.<sup>xxxv</sup> Unlike rational choice theory, this paradigm assumes people do not maintain access to all relevant information upon making a decision, but choose the best option, based on what they know. Second, according to bounded rationality theory, people deliberately neglect to consider every possible option when making a decision.<sup>xxxvi</sup> This occurs because people would rather quickly reach a minimally sufficient decision, rather than expend extra resources and time to pursue the objectively best option. Even though bounded rationality theory attempts to address rational choice theory's shortcomings, rational choice theory's application to terrorism remains vulnerable from the field it originated from.

Criticism of rational choice theory from an economics perspective subsequently undermines its application to terrorism studies. Primarily, some scholars argue rational choice theory makes assumptions that are not always plausible. Rational choice theory assumes every individual is fully aware of all information relevant to making a decision, also known as the assumption of perfect information.<sup>xxxvii</sup> This observation is especially apparent for terrorist operations. National governments usually attempt to conceal tactics, utilized in efforts against terrorism, such as electronic surveillance and undercover operations. Also, rational choice theory assumes an individual always makes calculated rational decisions. This is not always the case, since additional factors affect

an individual's ability to make decisions. For example, "morality and tradition play a massive role in decision making and they do not involve utility maximization."<sup>xxxviii</sup>

Despite arguments against rational choice theory in economics, as well as terrorism studies, academic scholarship has developed significant discourse on this theory's application to terrorism.

### **Literature Review**

Academic literature, focusing on rational choice theory's application to terrorism, is comprehensive and well-developed. However, terrorism studies scholars differ on what aspects of terrorist operations rational choice theory is unable to explain.

Addressing the theoretical limitations of rational choice theory, Lindauer advocates rational choice theory is more applicable to short-term observations, while grounded theory is best suited for a long-term focus.<sup>xxxix</sup> Regarding rational choice theory, its applicability is most appropriate at the tactical level, such as when a terrorist makes the decision to join a terrorist organization or engage in a terrorist operation. According to Lindauer, the terrorist would act in a rational manner, considering all options and attempting to maximize utility. As for grounded theory, it can assist in explaining a terrorist's organization's strategic aims, which do not always appear rational from a Western perspective.<sup>xl</sup> For example, ISIL's goal of reestablishing the caliphate, a long-defunct Islamic political-religious institution, appears irrational from a Western perspective, but could be better explained through grounded theory. Other scholars in terrorism studies echo similar claims when examining terrorism through rational choice theory.

Like Lindauer, Berrebi endorses rational choice theory's role within terrorist operations, although not wholeheartedly. Berrebi affirms "terrorists and terrorist groups should be assumed to be rational, at least in the sense of taking actions they believe are consistent with their goals."<sup>xli</sup> However, he concedes those examining terrorism from the outside have a difficult time reconciling their own rationality with the rationality of a terrorist's. This disconnect occurs because both parties incorporate factors in the decision-making practice that are fundamentally different, such as culture, experience, and religion. Therefore, according to Ganor, when examining a terrorist group, cost-benefit considerations must be based solely on the terrorists' sense of rationality, as opposed to the observer's.<sup>xlii</sup> Due to discrepancies in perceptions of rationality, terrorism studies scholars must examine terrorists through their worldviews, in order to predict terrorist behavior through rational choice theory. Rational choice theory's weakness in addressing different senses of rationality between terrorists and those who watch them is examined elsewhere in academic literature, as well.

Furthermore, rational choice theory remains limited in providing an all-inclusive framework in explaining terrorist activity. According to Fussey, there is "[a] lack of a consistent framework of action that applies across cultures, organizational compositions and ideologies," when examining terrorism through rational choice theory.<sup>xliii</sup> He observes terrorists do not usually engage in objective and value-less decision-making processes. Specifically when applied to a terrorist organization's target selection, terrorists tend to pick targets they think would result in the most damage in a non-physical sense, not what would objectively be most destructive. For example, a terrorist may attach significant symbolic meaning with murdering a police officer, but such an act

would not nearly be as impactful as destroying a government building from a Western perspective. Like Ganor, Fussey acknowledges the variety of factors that form a terrorist's outlook, which are often very different from those who observe them. However, despite these weaknesses, rational choice theory remains a powerful tool in explaining terrorist operations.

## **Social Media**

ISIL's heavy use of various social media platforms over the internet can be explained through applying rational choice theory. While almost every terrorist group currently maintains a presence across various social media outlets, ISIL has proven the most adept in this approach.<sup>xliv</sup> It uses social media to spread the narrative of ISIL's revival of the caliphate, under Al-Baghdadi's command. These platforms also assist ISIL through disseminating propaganda, raising funds, and attracting recruits. According to ISIL spokesman Abu Bakr Al-Janabi, ISIL engages in an extensive public relations campaign over social media. He continues ISIL dedicates personnel to distinct groups for social media operations, such as the management of ISIL's Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube accounts.<sup>xlv</sup> ISIL's widespread presence across various social media platforms remains an effective tactic in its fight to revive the caliphate under ISIL's banner.

Twitter has emerged as a significant part of ISIL's social media operations. This website allows users to draft and disseminate 140-letter messages, referred to as "tweets." Twitter currently boasts over 140 million active users, who disseminate 340 million tweets daily.<sup>xlvi</sup> However, Twitter has recently gained notoriety as one of ISIL's preferred platforms to disseminate propaganda. ISIL regularly releases graphic depictions of executions across its multiple Twitter accounts, in an effort to intimidate

opponents. In one such release, an ISIL-associated Twitter account released photos of the execution of Sunni militiamen in Iraq by automatic gunfire. Additionally, most of ISIL's tweets are in English, indicating these propaganda efforts are meant to target the West.<sup>xlvi</sup> While Twitter continues to attempt to shut-down ISIL-affiliated accounts for violations of Twitter's site policies, its censors are unable to adequately keep up with the proliferation of these accounts.<sup>xlviii</sup> In September 2014, the creation of new Twitter accounts affiliated with ISIL skyrocketed, which corresponded with the timeframe Twitter became more aggressive in policing these accounts.<sup>xlix</sup> Not only is ISIL successful in incorporating the popular website Twitter into its propaganda operations, but the group is able to manipulate the social media platform in furtherance of its goals.

Complicating matters for Twitter, ISIL has developed an application, known as "The Dawn of Glad Tidings," which magnifies its propaganda disseminations via tweets. Also known as "Dawn," this Arabic-language application directly interfaces with a user's Twitter account. After downloading Dawn and submitting personal information, ISIL's social media operations teams begin posting tweets to the user's account. The tweets are identical for each user and contain hashtags, images, and links.<sup>1</sup> Since its release in April 2014, Dawn has become a successful platform for ISIL propaganda operations. Prior to ISIL's advance towards Baghdad, Iraq, hundreds of tweets depicted an ISIL militant with the text, "We are coming Baghdad." A search of "Baghdad" on Twitter generated the image within its top results, projecting ISIL's strength and attracting support.<sup>li</sup> In addition to the Dawn of Glad Tidings application, ISIL exploits Twitter applications, such as the Retweet application, in order to expand its Twitter footprint.<sup>lii</sup> Through its

Dawn of Glad Tidings application, as well as Twitter, ISIL demonstrates how rational choice theory in terrorism remains relevant today.

ISIL is also active on Facebook and utilizes the social media platform in a similar manner to Twitter. As mentioned earlier, these activities include distributing propaganda, fundraising, and recruitment. However, even though ISIL's social media operatives use Facebook and Twitter for similar purposes, the group adapts its approach with each platform to maximize impact. For example, ISIL adapted the popular Facebook activity, known as the "ALS Ice Bucket Challenge," in alignment with its goals. The ALS Ice Bucket Challenge is a recent social media trend, which aims to raise awareness of Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS), a deadly neurological disorder, and encourage monetary donations for researching its cure. It "involves being doused in freezing cold water as a dare and then making a donation to a charity."<sup>liii</sup> Participants are encouraged to post the results online and challenge friends to do the same via Facebook. Recognizing a potential fundraising opportunity, an ISIL supporter is depicted on Facebook dumping cold water on himself, but challenges viewers to make a donation to ISIL, rather than ALS research.<sup>liv</sup> Through Facebook, as well as Twitter, ISIL's social media operations are evidence of ISIL's rationality at the tactical level.

Rational choice theory's concept of instrumental rationality is manifested in ISIL's use of social media. As a terrorist organization, ISIL maintains relatively limited resources, compared to the national militaries and other security apparatuses combatting the organization.<sup>lv</sup> Despite its advances in Iraq and Syria and its seizure of military equipment, ISIL's resources are still limited, even when compared to the smaller nations currently engaging its fighters. Therefore, ISIL must leverage the few resources it

maintains at its disposal, in order to reach its strategic goals, as per the stipulations of instrumental rationality. ISIL's lack of resources prevents the organization from embarking on more expensive methods of fundraising, recruiting, and propaganda, leaving social media operations as one of its most cost-effective options. These activities, such as Facebook and Twitter, usually do not cost money, and require little time to implement basic functions. ISIL's use of Facebook and Twitter is also explainable through other concepts within rational choice theory.

Rational choice theory's idea of utility maximization influences ISIL to engage in social media operations, as well. As with instrumental rationality, limited resources dictate a terrorist organization's tactical behavior and impacts resource allocation choices.<sup>lvi</sup> However, due to a desire to maximize the effect of the few resources it maintains, a terrorist organization will seek out the most effective, as well as cheap, tactic. For ISIL, this means its social media teams use online platforms because they consider them the most effective method of reaching ISIL's strategic goals, taking into account resource constraints. In order to maximize impact, ISIL online operators will even tweet in multiple languages at once, in order to increase the audience size.<sup>lvii</sup> To some extent, ISIL's desire to maximize resources has "weaponized social media," meaning the group has been able to utilize the platform as a battlefield tactic, in pursuit of its strategic goals.<sup>lviii</sup> For example, the flight of Iraqi policemen from their posts upon news of ISIL's advances has been tied to videos of the bloody executions of ISIL's enemies, disseminated via Facebook and Twitter.<sup>lix</sup> While rational choice theory's concept of utility maximization explains ISIL's social media efforts, rational choice plays a significant role in other aspects of the group's internet operations.

## Online Publications

Like its social media operations, rational choice theory can explain the impetus behind ISIL's online publications. The group utilizes multiple internet magazines, each focusing on one of ISIL's goals. *Dabiq*, named after the supposed site of the apocalypse, according to Muslim scriptures, aims to radicalize and recruit Western readers to Iraq and Syria. On the other hand, the *Islamic State Report* strives to demonstrate ISIL is a capable governing authority and justify its seizure of territory. This medium not only allows ISIL to disseminate its message in an effective and cheap manner, but prevents international media outlets from adulterating ISIL's message. For Western media outlets, editors usually consider a complex set of factors prior to publishing a gory photo.<sup>lx</sup> However, through utilizing its own media platforms, ISIL is able to disseminate whatever material it feels would serve its strategic interests in the most effective manner. While ISIL might maintain the most well-known online terrorist publications today, observers must be careful to distinguish ISIL's work from the material of its peers.

Casual observers would likely fail in distinguishing AQAP and ISIL's online literature, since both groups are infamous for disseminating magazines filled with blood and jihadi propaganda. However, both groups use online publications in pursuit of different strategic objectives. One of AQAP's primary long-term goals is to attack the US Homeland and this is reflected throughout the pages of *Inspire*.<sup>lxi</sup> For example, the first issue of *Inspire* gained notoriety in the aftermath of the 15 April 2013 Boston Marathon Bombings. Its instructions on creating pressure cooker bombs were linked to the explosives used by Dzhokhar and Tamerlan Tsarnaev, resulting in the death of three people.<sup>lxii</sup> However, ISIL's online publications pursue different ends. As mentioned

above, ISIL's primary online magazines, *Dabiq* and the *Islamic State Report*, aim to recruit new followers in the English-speaking world and enhance its political legitimacy. Despite the notoriety that followed AQAP's *Inspire* after the Boston Marathon Bombings, ISIL's online magazines pursue a different agenda and continue to attract readers today.

*Dabiq*, one of ISIL's online magazines, aims to radicalize and recruit Western readers. The publication originates from ISIL's Al-Hayat Media Center, which also produces ISIL propaganda and recruitment videos. According to *Dabiq*'s first issue, the publication considers itself a "periodical magazine," focusing on Muslim religious issues and containing reports and informative articles regarding ISIL.<sup>lxiii</sup> In furtherance of ISIL's objectives of attracting recruits and garnering support, *Dabiq* portrays a romanticized narrative of ISIL's march throughout Iraq and Syria and life under its banner.<sup>lxiv</sup> It also provides justification for ISIL atrocities, which *Dabiq*'s authors claim are justified, since they are committed in furtherance of its caliphate and against ISIL's opponents. Through the dissemination of *Dabiq*, ISIL's Al-Hayat Media hopes to lower the perceived barriers potential recruits and supporters associate with joining and aiding ISIL. Like ISIL's use of social media platforms, ISIL disseminates multiple online publications in furtherance of its goals.

In an effort to boost its legitimacy and support ISIL's narrative about itself, ISIL's online publication teams also disseminate the *Islamic State Report*. The primary goal of this online magazine is not only to spread propaganda, but to demonstrate ISIL is capable of providing basic services, like a functioning government. For example, in its first issue, the *Islamic State Report* highlights ISIL's Office of Consumer Protection. The office is

“concerned with protecting shoppers by inspecting the goods being sold in shops, markets, shopping centers and wholesale outlets.”<sup>lxv</sup> According to the New America Foundation, the online publication of the *Islamic State Report* demonstrates ISIL realizes it needs to implement services in the territory in Iraq and Syria it has conquered in order to legitimize its rule.<sup>lxvi</sup> Despite working towards different goals, ISIL’s *Dabiq* and the *Islamic State Report* both exemplify how ISIL’s online media operations are rational tactics, in furtherance of ISIL’s strategic aims.

Similar to ISIL’s social media operations, rational choice theory’s idea of instrumental rationality impacts the publication of ISIL’s online magazines. Limits on resources force ISIL’s propaganda arm to focus efforts on the cheapest method of disseminating material possible. Additionally, ISIL’s relatively small amount of territory in Iraq and Syria hinders the group’s ability to disseminate more traditional mediums of propaganda, such as pamphlets and DVDs. Like Facebook and Twitter, the costs of disseminating magazines are relatively low. Furthermore, the proliferation of computer programs, specifically dedicated to creating online publications, and image-editing software have lowered the costs of publishing and disseminating magazines over the internet. According to the testimony of captured ISIL militants involved in ISIL internet operations in Iraq, ISIL deliberately falsifies old photographs, in order to “propagate...disinformation [and] to have a larger impact and reach.”<sup>lxvii</sup> Despite its impact on ISIL’s online magazine distribution, rational choice theory affects ISIL tactics through different means, too.

Utility maximization sheds additional light on the impetus behind ISIL’s online publications. For ISIL, online magazines are not only a cheap way to disseminate

propaganda, but enhance the impact of the few resources ISIL maintains at its disposal. ISIL's leadership is well-aware of the impact of disseminating online magazines and specifically recruits engineering and telecommunications professionals to serve this end, similar to Al-Qa'ida's past practices.<sup>lxviii</sup> Additionally, ISIL internet operators are able to gather data from their audience in ways more traditional media sources are unable to. ISIL's online magazine teams are able to track the amount of views, gather biographic data on its readers, and even determine the areas of the world most vulnerable to ISIL propaganda efforts through easily accessible tools on the internet. All of these factors are taken into account prior to the publication of *Dabiq* and the *Islamic State Report*, in an effort to increase the impact of these online magazines. ISIL's pursuit of utility maximization through its online publications also extends to more sensational mediums.

### **Online Video**

Online video recordings by ISIL can be explained through rational choice theory, similar to its use of internet publications. ISIL has gained notoriety for recording the execution of its captives, usually through beheadings, and posting them online. Through displaying its brutality over the internet via video, ISIL attempts to intimidate its opponents into submission. These efforts are credited with inspiring Iraqi soldiers to flee from ISIL's advances, shedding their uniforms and weapons.<sup>lxix</sup> However, ISIL uses online video for other purposes, especially recruitment. These videos contain ISIL militants with origins from Australia to Tunisia, encouraging viewers to join the fighting under ISIL's banner in Iraq and Syria. In some broadcasts, Arabic songs accompany the militants, glorifying ISIL and its caliphate.<sup>lxx</sup> Subtitles in English usually accompany

spoken Arabic, in an effort to expand ISIL's audience. Through its advanced online video operations, ISIL seeks to shock its opponents and attract new followers.

Online execution videos are a hallmark of ISIL's online media operations. ISIL has "drawn the world's attention" with these videos, which depict the execution of Western hostages, soldiers, civilians, and other opponents.<sup>lxxi</sup> In November 2014, ISIL released a video of a masked member, standing over the severed head of Peter Kassig. Kassig was an American aid worker, assigned to a Syrian refugee camp, and Kassig's death marks the fifth Western hostage to be executed by ISIL.<sup>lxxii</sup> The ISIL member present in the video was known as "Jihadi John," the nickname of the notorious ISIL executioner, who has appeared on several ISIL videos.<sup>lxxiii</sup> According to one of Jihadi John's former hostages, John leads a small group of British jihadists, tasked with guarding ISIL's foreign hostages in Raqqa, Syria.<sup>lxxiv</sup> While ISIL's online videos of mass brutality strive to intimidate ISIL's local and international opponents into submission, ISIL's appetite for destruction extends beyond murder.

ISIL's online media teams have released videos of the destruction of priceless cultural and religious sites, in addition to beheadings. In a video released last year, ISIL fighters dug-up the grave of the Prophet Younis, known as Noah in Christianity and Judaism, and proceeded to destroy the tomb.<sup>lxxv</sup> Other videos released by ISIL depict ISIL members bulldozing other Sunni and Shi'ite holy sites. According to UNESCO chief, Irina Bokova, the destruction of cultural and religious sites in Syria and Iraq is a form of "cultural cleansing." Bokovo continues these activities are meant to destroy cultural diversity in Iraq, which ISIL views as threatening to its rule.<sup>lxxvi</sup> Through disseminating videos of ISIL's mass vandalism over the internet, ISIL's leadership is not

only attempting to intimidate its opponents, but attract new recruits, eager to join ISIL's march of destruction throughout Iraq and Syria. Besides depicting its appetite for destruction and violence, ISIL's online media teams utilize video for other purposes.

Almost as infamous as its broadcasting of executions online, ISIL's *Flames of War* recruitment video seeks to attract new recruits to ISIL's banner. The "documentary-style production" showcases ISIL's major battles in Syria and reaches a total of 55 minutes and 13 seconds.<sup>lxxvii</sup> In an effort to broaden its appeal to young men, *Flames of War* contains gratuitous violence, explosions, heavy weaponry, and even slow-motion sequences. One sequence depicts 800 Syrian troops, shot at point-blank range, after digging their own graves.<sup>lxxviii</sup> In furtherance of ISIL's recruitment efforts, *Flames of War* romanticizes ISIL's campaign in Iraq and Syria, specifically targeting marginalized and unhappy young Muslim men. Its narrator justifies ISIL's violent activities, claiming the group only desires to establish God's will through its caliphate.<sup>lxxix</sup> Despite the brutality, depicted in *Flames of War*, as well as its execution videos, ISIL's mastery of online video production is another example of a rational tactic by a terrorist organization.

Rational choice theory's concept of instrumental rationality plays a significant role in influencing ISIL to use online video, like other internet platforms. As mentioned earlier, instrumental rationality forces a terrorist group to prioritize, usually scarce, resources, in pursuit of the group's objectives. Similar to social media and internet magazines, online video requires little resources and can be disseminated all over the world, despite geographic limitations. As with online publications, ISIL's internet teams have a wealth of cheap and user-friendly video software, utilized to edit videos prior to dissemination. Recently, ISIL utilized "at least four cameras, along with advanced

editing techniques” in the video depicting the murder of Muath Al-Kasaesbeh, a Royal Jordanian Air Force pilot, captured on 24 December 2014.<sup>lxxx</sup> However, instrumental rationality’s impact on ISIL’s online video disseminations is not the only impetus behind these operations.

Utility maximization also plays a significant role in pushing ISIL to release online videos. As mentioned earlier, the dissemination of propaganda via internet video, like publishing magazines online, is a cheap option for a cash-strapped terrorist organization. While the sensational nature of these videos are enough to impact viewers, ISIL’s online teams utilize video editing software to deepen the effect. For example, casual observers have noticed the similarities between cuts of ISIL’s video, depicting the execution of American journalist James Foley, with the popular American TV show *Homeland*.<sup>lxxxi</sup> Through incorporating Western popular culture into its online broadcasts, ISIL hopes to appear more appealing to a Western audience and attract new support and recruits. ISIL’s video editing is also meant to appeal to today’s generally more knowledgeable audience, who are more likely to scrutinize the source of the video and assess the purpose of its release. Nevertheless, if rational choice theory can explain the impetus behind ISIL’s online video operations and other internet activity, it can also help American policymakers in overcoming it.

### **Policy Recommendations**

After ISIL’s online activities are examined through rational choice theory, policymakers should be able to formulate strategies in order to combat ISIL online. Despite recent preparations by the Iraq Army and its Western allies in retaking ISIL territory, such as Anbar and Mosul, American policymakers must focus their efforts on

cyberspace, as well.<sup>lxxxii</sup> As indicated throughout this work, ISIL's online propaganda efforts are extensive and currently surpass all other terrorist groups worldwide. However, ISIL's overreliance on the internet is not only one of its most remarkable strengths, but also represents a critical vulnerability. Each online dissemination by ISIL, whether it is a tweet or a beheading video, contains a wealth of information regarding the people who created it. The USIC maintains many departments capable of collecting, exploiting, and analyzing this information, such as the FBI's Operational Technology Division.<sup>lxxxiii</sup> Even though the USIC's most intrusive techniques, electronic surveillance and physical searches, must meet certain legal thresholds to execute, other tactics can aid American national security agencies in combatting ISIL online. For policymakers, implementing strategies, aimed at increasing the USIC's ability to gather intelligence on ISIL can assist in the group's ultimate dismantlement.

Increased funding and support for Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) collection and analysis would substantially aid the USIC's ability to collect intelligence on ISIL's members and operations. OSINT refers to intelligence "produced from publicly available information that is collected, exploited, and disseminated in a timely manner to an appropriate audience for the purpose of addressing a specific intelligence requirement."<sup>lxxxiv</sup> Since ISIL's online disseminations are usually publically available, the USIC can easily collect this information for exploitation and analysis. For example, OSINT analysis of a recent video of tribal sheikhs pledging loyalty to Al-Baghdadi in Mosul can yield further information regarding ISIL's support network.<sup>lxxxv</sup> However, unlike traditional intelligence, the USIC has to contend with an overwhelming amount of publically available information. Even though ISIL's online disseminations are easily

accessible, the collective size of these disseminations is overwhelming and increases daily. Increased personnel and resources dedicated to OSINT collection and analysis targeting ISIL's online activities would enhance the USIC's efforts against ISIL overall.

USIC outreach to social media service providers, such as Facebook and Twitter, would assist in efforts against ISIL, as well. As mentioned above, ISIL is highly reliant on social media to disseminate propaganda, garner support, and attract new recruits. Unfortunately, due to privacy concerns, Facebook, as well as Apple and Google, recently introduced encrypted products that even its own employees would be unable to penetrate.<sup>lxxxvi</sup> These restrictions would directly impact the USIC's ability to monitor these communications. While public-private outreach efforts have been implemented in the past, such as the FBI's Domestic Security Alliance Council, they are an insufficient platform to build lasting partnerships between the USIC and social media service providers. Through USIC outreach to the specific social media service providers ISIL utilizes, both parties would have a platform to address concerns over customer privacy and the ability of the government to monitor ISIL activity.

Finally, increased emphasis on forensic media analysis on ISIL's online material would further empower the USIC against ISIL. This process involves acquiring data from a source, analyzing the data, extracting evidence, and preserving the evidence for use in court.<sup>lxxxvii</sup> For the USIC, forensic media analysis techniques can also produce intelligence regarding ISIL's activities, not just evidence for potential use in court. Taking a look at ISIL's internet operations, forensic media analysis targeting its dissemination would yield dividends. For example, the National Center for Media Forensics, located in Denver, Colorado, analyzed the beheading video of James Foley, in

order to determine where the incident took place.<sup>lxxxviii</sup> Similar forensic techniques can be applied to ISIL's disseminations over Facebook and Twitter, as well as its online magazines. Many ISIL supporters make the mistake of enabling location features on their smartphones, allowing observers to geo-locate them easily.<sup>lxxxix</sup> Forensic media analysis, as well as open source intelligence and outreach to social media providers, not only have potential to increase the production of intelligence regarding ISIL, but contribute to the group's demise.

## **Conclusion**

By examining ISIL's online activities through rational choice theory, American policymakers can implement strategies specifically tailored towards the group's dismantlement. As detailed throughout this work, the influence of rational choice theory is apparent in ISIL's internet operations. These rational tactics serve ISIL's implausible strategic goals, such as the revival of the caliphate under ISIL's banner in Iraq and Syria. ISIL's exploitation of Facebook and Twitter is not only a cheap way to disseminate propaganda and garner support, but allows ISIL to reach any computer across the globe. Online magazines by ISIL serve similar ends and also aim to enhance the group's political legitimacy. As for its use of online video, ISIL aims to shock the world and gain new recruits in a cheap and effective manner, as well. Despite the success of ISIL's online media efforts, American policymakers must respond with a strategy of rational tactics of its own.

Faced with ISIL's rapid ascent in Iraq and Syria, American policymakers are forced to contend with this raising national security concern. ISIL's expansion of territory is a direct threat to American interests in the Middle East. Recently, ISIL has

taken over a Palestinian refugee camp outside of Damascus, expanding its territory and attracting new followers.<sup>xc</sup> More alarmingly, according to American Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson, Americans returning home from fighting overseas may attempt to initiate terrorist attacks on American soil.<sup>xc<sup>i</sup></sup> National security strategies, calling for increased OSINT analysis,USIC outreach to social media websites, and forensic media analysis are a great way to realign America's national security apparatus against this mounting threat. However, continued collaboration between American policymakers and the terrorism studies community remains necessary, in order to guarantee an effective and all-encompassing strategy against ISIL. Through this relationship, rational choice theory and other terrorism studies concepts could play a significant role in ISIL's ultimate dismantlement.

Despite the strategic implausibility of reviving the caliphate, ISIL's online activities are rational and represent the cutting-edge of terrorist tactics today. Terrorists historically utilize the most current media technology and, as demonstrated above, ISIL is not an exception.<sup>xc<sup>ii</sup></sup> Unfortunately, ISIL's online efforts appear to be succeeding to a great extent, as well. Thousands of individuals from the West have traveled to Iraq and Syria and joined ISIL's ranks.<sup>xc<sup>iii</sup></sup> ISIL's online operations specifically target marginalized young Muslim men, eager to dedicate their lives to any purpose, even the expansion of ISIL's barbaric caliphate. Even though ISIL will never reach its ultimate goal of reestablishing the caliphate and gaining authority over Muslims worldwide, the group's rapid ascent and barbaric rules serves as a reminder that the war against international terrorism did not end with Osama bin Laden's death. Instead,

through posts and tweets, international terrorism is able to virtually eliminate geographic constraints and further expand the reach and impact of terror worldwide.

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