



## ISLAMIC STATE: MEDIA CYBER-TERRORISM?

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*Though ISIL isn't able to conduct real cyber-attacks against the computer systems of its opponents, it has however become an authority in the field of cyber-disinformation. By methodically using the flaws in the open communication systems of the web, and by relying on its own media, which nowadays broadcast in French, the Islamic State has become in the course of a few months a major player in the cyber-war. In this respect, the discrepancy between the information broadcasted in Arab and in French shows that its strategies are more learned than we might have thought.*

The cyber successes of ISIL are partly linked to its media know-how, which acts as a relay for recruiting its members and for their campaigns of terror against its opponents in Iraq and in Syria. This comprehensive knowledge of the media is inherited from the Bin Laden videos, as well as recordings of abductions or military operations shot by the Islamic Army in Iraq, previously linked to Al-Qaeda. On March 31, 2014, the IS published its second “activity report”, giving a detailed assessment of the results of its operations: 10,000 actions claimed in Iraq between November 2012 and November 2013, 1,083 assassinations and 4,465 car bombs<sup>1</sup>. The publicity of the exactions is the most chilling, and the most widely known part of the media coverage of ISIL. By communicating with its opponents, the organisation discredits them, and creates the terror which precedes its military action. The tragic flight of the Iraqi army soldiers from Mosul was caused by panic inspired, among others reasons, by these videos. The footage of the carnage of 1,700 soldiers in June 2014 was all over the social networks. Before that, hundreds of soldiers in their undergarments, with their hands clasped behind their necks and reduced to the state of cattle, were filmed advancing barefoot through the desert while the Jihadist soldiers circled and taunted them.

<sup>1</sup> Philippe Gelie, « The sinister accounting of ISIS » *Le Figaro*, 18/6/2014.

The civilian population is also the target of this terror communication: migrating families are shot down in their vehicle without warning; Muslims, lying on the ground, hands tied together, are shot, all of it interspersed with preaches, quotes from the Quran and cadenced by near Hollywood style musica<sup>1</sup>. The filming of beheadings of the abducted American and British journalists, be it James Foley on August 19 or Steven Sotloff on September 2, both are a form of live dramatisation of death: the yellow ochre desert as far as the eye can see, a masked Jihadist dressed in black, a kneeling victim wearing a orange tunic; the very contrasting colours create somewhat unreal aesthetics, emotionless, the executioner performing his work with poise and detachment. The message is explicitly addressed to the United States<sup>2</sup>, and immediately received: we will go to the end... After the feeling of horror, the viewer can only question and doubt the capacity of the West to fight against ISIL<sup>3</sup>. Disbelief precedes indecision, which is already the embryo of defeat.

<sup>1a</sup> « Macabre video of the Islamic State: the psychological warfare in Iraq », RTBF, 31/7/2014.

<sup>2</sup> The video *A Message to America* was put on YouTube then removed, which did not prevent it from circulating through Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, even in ordinary intelligence media, see Lee Ferran, « Video Appears to Show ISIS Execution of Second American Steven Sotloff », *ABC News*, 2/9/2014.

<sup>3</sup> « Obama, your foreign policy of intervention in Iraq was supposed to be for the preservation of American lives and interests, so why is it that I'm having to pay the price of your interference with my life.? » asks Sotloff facing the camera, *Site Monitoring Service Enterprise*, 2/9/2014.

Beyond the horror communication, all of the ISIL media means underline its religious message. The death of infidels, the elimination of vice in Raqqa or Fallujah, the greatness of the Quranic message, the self-sacrifice of the warriors of Islam, any action of ISIL is illustrated positively in order to carry the support of the Muslims, with a lot of quotations from the hadiths and jurists of the Sunna. The IS does not shy away from purely provocative actions with no real content: God willing, we will raise the flag of Allah in the White House” declared the ISIL spokesperson to *Vice* magazine in August. “Caliph Ibrahim” balances his declarations in order to preserve his aura. His phrasing of the classical Arab language and his compliance with the rules of the *tadjwîd* – the recitation of the Quran- are perfect. He mixes verse and hadith quotations with his own declarations. No doubt he is inspired. In July 2014, *Al-Furqân Media* broadcasts its message for the month of Ramadan, which alternates in a black and white manner the admonition for its followers, and the stigmatisation of its opponents: “*So take up arms, take up arms, O soldiers of the Islamic State! And fight, fight! ... So let the world know that we are living today in a new era... O ummah of Islam, indeed the world today has been divided into two camps and two trenches, with no third camp present: The camp of Islam and faith, and the camp of kufr (disbelief) and hypocrisy – the camp of the Muslims and the mujahidin everywhere, and the camp of the jews, the crusaders, their allies... They accomplished this by attacking and occupying our lands, placing their treacherous agents in power to rule the Muslims with an iron fist, and spreading dazzling and deceptive slogans such as: civilization, peace, co-existence, freedom, democracy, secularism, baathism, nationalism, and patriotism* »

The technical means used fall within efficient cyber-communication, its range reaching the entire Muslim world. The new generations – potentially candidates for Jihad – are receptive to ISIL’s “connectivity”, which uses imaging techniques which are superior to the low quality editing from most terrorist groups. Compared to them, al-Qaeda seems outdated. The hashtag campaigns are especially broadcasted <sup>1</sup> and the multiplication of English subtitles on the videos makes it possible to address non-Arabic-speaking sympathisers.

Owing to Qatar’s recent positions against al-Baghdâdî, Al-Jazeera (Qatari channel) is a transmission belt for the communication of the Islamic State. But by wanting to denounce it, it is serving it indirectly. Most social networks used by the IS, Twitter, Facebook, have a global impact and legal loopholes which the propagandists exploit. It is the case with Twitter, as a public site with limited supervision, where content is removed only when requested by users when it aims a defined entity. This explains the slow reaction of its administrators when it comes to block Jihadists or followers’ accounts <sup>2</sup>. The total freedom of the Internet guarantees that of Jihadist communication.

The Islamic State also relies on its own means, as it has, since 2007, its own video-production label, *Al-Furqan Media Production* <sup>3</sup>. This propagandist platform was capable of sending 40,000 tweets in one day during the capture of Mosul. But it is only partially centralised, as provincial offices develop their own communication, via Twitter, about their local actions <sup>4</sup>. The only requirement is to display the group’s banner on screen. ISIL still has the support of forums such as *Al-Minbars* through which it can appeal for donations from the believers. Lastly, the organisation publishes a few official brochures, in Arabic and in English, to justify its positions and promote the executions of non-believers <sup>6</sup>. It is the goal of the *Al-Hayat* (Life)journal, its second issue explained: the mission of the Al-Hayat media Centre is to broadcast the message of the Islamic State in different languages in order to unite Muslims under one and only banner”.

1 The hashtag *#StevensHeadinObamasHands* made President Obama directly accountable for the threats to journalist Steven Sotloff, executed on September 2, 2014. Most hashtags are however rather cursory: most of the time photos of executions or bodies.

2 Carmen Fishwick, « How a Polish student's website became an Isis propaganda tool », *The Guardian*, 15/8/2014.

3 Le *furqân* is Islam is the “criteria” distinguishing the believers and the non-believers.

4 Dominique Thomas de l'EHESS, questioned by *Le Monde*, 16/6/2014.

5 The *minbar* is the preacher's chair in mosques.

6 The document « Smashing the Border of the Tawaghit », published by Al-Hayat Media Center in June 2014, shows pictures of the execution of 1,700 Iraqi soldiers captured in the province of Salah al-Dîn

However, the communication strategy of the IS has many limits. They are firstly technical: the Caliphate does not have for the moment – and probably does not have in the foreseeable future – any capacity to lead a cyber-war. Therefore it can use the broadcasting of videos and images, but in no way attack the Iraqi, Saudi or Western cyber-networks, nor even their transmission, digital Intelligence or telephone services. The Islamic State uses an Internet which it can't control. Yet President Obama renounced cutting its communication and media platforms, in order to use geo-location for one thing, but also to let the IS discredit itself with moderate Muslims.

The Iraqi government, however, in a decision made on June 15, 2014, blocked the Internet in five provinces, and ordered censor of the main social networks, but its efficiency still needs to be proven<sup>1</sup>. The only current means capable of stemming the Jihadist spread remains boycotting<sup>2</sup>.

1 « Internet access blocked in a part of Iraq », *Le Monde*, 17/6/2014 ; Judson Berger, « State Department enters propaganda war with ISIS », *Fox News Politics*, 9/9/2014.

2. The black humour which the United States tried seems completely inappropriate. Using images of monstrosities committed by Jihadists, the Department of State broadcasted a video called “Welcome to the Islamic State”, which vigorously uses cynicism against the Islamic State, but the tone seems rather desperate.

For more information: Olivier Hanne and Thomas Flichy de la Neuville, *Islamic State, anatomy of the Caliphate*, Editions Bernard Giovanangeli, 2014.

