

# Assessing What Purpose Propaganda Serves to Terrorist Movements

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## INTRODUCTION<sup>1 2</sup>

Propaganda and the battle for men's minds is as old as the history of humankind.<sup>3</sup> The wars of the twentieth century brought propaganda, the "war of ideas on ideas", to the forefront of modern warfare.<sup>4</sup> There is undoubtedly a close link between terrorism as an asymmetric war and propaganda. As Maurice Tugwell argues, this link is more than "the visible tip of an iceberg" and what one may see in the media.<sup>5</sup> This analysis argues that propaganda serves a dual purpose to terrorist movements: it first serves as a tool for terrorist movements to enforce their belief system on potential recruits; secondly, it allows them to signal alternative forms of legitimacy and distinguish themselves from rival movements. This investigation therefore firstly discusses propaganda as a recruitment tool at an individual and then collective level, using both psychology and sociology lenses. Secondly, it demonstrates that terrorist movements use propaganda as a way to legitimise their terrorist activity from rival terrorist movements and states, using Neil Fligstein's *market-as-politics* approach.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This analysis relies mainly on propaganda materials made by the Islamic State (IS) as, Charlie Winter argues, it has revolutionised numerous features of terrorist strategic communication and propaganda more broadly. See Charlie Winter, "Apocalypse, later: a longitudinal study of the Islamic State brand," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 35, No.1 (2018): 105.

<sup>2</sup> IS published approximatively 1,316 pieces of propaganda in January 2017 alone including 922 pictures and 29 videos. See Islamic State Propaganda Now Focused on Perpetual War, Not State-Building Aspirations, HIS Markit Says," HIS Markit, 24 January 2018: <https://news.ihsmarkit.com/press-release/aerospace-defense-security/islamic-state-propaganda-now-focused-perpetual-war-not-stat>.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Roetter, *Psychological Warfare*, (London: HarperCollins, 1974), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Harold Lasswell, *Propaganda technique in World War*, (Cambridge, MA: The M.I.T. Press, 1971): 12 ; Lynette Finch, "Psychological Propaganda: The War of Ideas on Ideas During the First Half of the Twentieth Century," *Armed Forces & Society* 26, No. 3 (2000): 367-86.

<sup>5</sup> Maurice Tugwell, "Terrorism and Propaganda: Problem and Response," *The Journal of Conflict Studies* 6, No. 2 (1986): 5.

<sup>6</sup> Neil Fligstein, "Market as Politics: A Political-Cultural Approach to Market Institution," *American Sociological Review* 61, No. 4 (1996): 656-673.

## DEFINING “PROPAGANDA”

To discuss the role propaganda plays for terrorist movements, it is crucial to define how propaganda is understood in this work. As Leonard W. Doob asserts, it is neither feasible nor desirable to create a definite and universal definition of propaganda due to the intricacy of matters related to behaviour in human society.<sup>7</sup> Nicolas O’Shaughnessy concurs this idea by acknowledging the term’s complexity and the challenge it poses to scholars attempting to define it.<sup>8</sup> Doob and Robinson demonstrate that the current view of propaganda is tainted with negative connotations due to its usage during the wars and seen as a the dissemination of false and subversive ideas, discarding the fact that propaganda is fundamentally a psychological concept.<sup>9</sup> This analysis considers propaganda as “the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desire intent of the propagandist”.<sup>10</sup> One must also highlight the importance of nonverbal and verbal communication as well as audience appeals within the propaganda machine.<sup>11</sup>

## TERRORIST PROPAGANDA AND ITS PURPOSES

To demonstrate how propaganda primarily serves to terrorist movements as a tool to spread their ideology and recruit new sympathisers, one must employ both psychology and sociology to analyse all of its ramifications. One of the tripartite approaches of Social Movement Theory (SMT), Collective Framing Theory (CFT), whose key principle is to mobilise participants in social movements

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<sup>7</sup> Leonard W. Doob, “Propaganda”, In *International Encyclopedia of Communications*, ed. Erik Barnouw et al., (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 375.

<sup>8</sup> Nicolas O’Shaughnessy, *Politics and Propaganda: Weapons of Mass Seduction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> Leonard W. Doob and Edward S. Robinson, “Psychology and Propaganda,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 179, (1935): 88-95.

<sup>10</sup> Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, (London: Sage, 2015), 7.

<sup>11</sup> Anthony Pratkanis and Elliot Aronson, *Age of Propaganda: The Everyday Use and Abuse of Persuasion*, (New York: Holt Paperback, 2002), 11.

through a set of beliefs, offers a particularly interesting approach to analysing terrorist movement's propaganda.<sup>12</sup> Frames are "specific metaphors (...) used to render or cast behaviour and events in an evaluative mode and to suggest alternative modes of action".<sup>13</sup> However, as Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen asserts, framing theory does not focus enough on the individual level of analysis,<sup>14</sup> making it unlikely to figure out why some terrorist movements successfully acquire frame alignment with some individuals and not with others. Mayer Zald, a SMT scholar, does acknowledge that "culture, ideology, and strategic framing is our broadest and loosest conceptual cluster".<sup>15</sup> Jan Christoffer Andersen and Sveinung Sandberg concur the idea that CFT is not enough by itself to understand the complexity of terrorist movements' propaganda despite its relevance for studying social movements' rhetoric.<sup>16</sup> They supplement the SMT approach with theories of subculture to analyse some of the underlying tensions in IS' rhetoric.<sup>17</sup> Relying on Doob's assumption that propaganda is a phenomenon with wide psychological implications and that the overarching narratives created by symbols give meaning to collective and individual experiences with regard to their everyday struggles,

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<sup>12</sup> Doug McAdams, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald, "Introduction: opportunities, mobilizing structures, and framing processes-toward a synthetic, comparative perspective on social movements," in *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings*, ed. Doug McAdams et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996): XX

<sup>13</sup> Mayer N. Zald, "Culture, Ideology and Strategic Framing," in *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings*, ed. Doug McAdams et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996): 262.

<sup>14</sup> Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen, "Studying Violent Radicalisation in Europe I: The Potential Contribution of Social Movement Theory," *DIIS Working Paper*, 2 (2008): 10.

<sup>15</sup> Zald, "Culture," 262.

<sup>16</sup> Jan Christoffer Andersen and Sveinung Sandberg, "Islamic State Propaganda: Between Social Movement Framing and Subcultural Provocation," *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2018): 1-21.

<sup>17</sup> Andersen and Sandberg, "Subcultural Provocation," 1-21.

analysing propaganda necessitates the use of both psychology and sociology approaches.<sup>18</sup>

To understand how propaganda enables terrorist movements to enforce their belief system upon potential recruits requires, one must firstly examine how propaganda works at the individual level. While terrorist movements frame their message to reach a large audience, only some individuals are drawn towards these movements.<sup>19</sup> Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance best allows us to observe the mechanics of propaganda on a person.<sup>20</sup> Festinger describes cognitive dissonance as "an antecedent condition which leads to activity oriented toward dissonance reduction just as hunger leads to activity oriented toward hunger reduction".<sup>21</sup> Dissonance is psychologically uncomfortable and will motivate an individual to thrive to reduce it and achieve consonance by altering/adjusting his behaviour. This what Abraham Maslow calls homeostasis, "the body's automatic efforts to maintain a constant, normal state of the blood stream".<sup>22</sup> The stronger the magnitude of the dissonance, the more determined the person is to reduce it.<sup>23</sup> Consistency theorists like Garth Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell believe that the drive for consonance is a central motivator in behaviour and attitude formation.<sup>24</sup>

This theory can be applied to propaganda because, as Festinger argues, "its manifestations may be observed in such a variety of

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<sup>18</sup> Leonard Doob, *Propaganda: its psychology and technique*, (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1935); Nancy Ammerman, "Religious Identities and Religious Institutions," In *Handbook for the Sociology of Religion*, ed. M. Dillon, (New York: Cambridge University Presse, 2003), 207–224.

<sup>19</sup> Andersen and Sandberg, "Subcultural Provocation," 2.

<sup>20</sup> Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, (London: Tavistock Publications, 1959).

<sup>21</sup> Festinger, *Dissonance*, 3.

<sup>22</sup> Abraham Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1954): 35.

<sup>23</sup> Festinger, *Dissonance*, 1–31.

<sup>24</sup> Garth Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2015).



contexts”.<sup>25</sup> A propagandist can generate feelings of dissonance and induce tension in a person’s behaviour and attitudes. The propagandist next offers a solution, a way of alleviating this dissonance, which is to comply to whatever request the propagandist has in mind.<sup>26</sup>

Applying this to terrorist movements, one can assert they use propaganda as a way to create dissonance within individuals to force them to find a way to reduce the former. Certain individuals will then turn towards terrorist movements as a way to reach consonance. For instance, one can argue that IS’ overuse of extreme violence in its propaganda is a way for the movement to prevent the viewer from emotional relief. This leads some viewers to join the movement in order to alleviate the deeply-felt dissonance caused by the vision of extreme violence. Vivek Venkatesh et al., who analysed IS videos created between 2015 and 2016, demonstrate how IS overly emphasises the violence and follows up with more traumatic images in order to build over-stimulation and prevent the viewer from finding relief from the violent images.<sup>27</sup> As Kaplan demonstrates, emotional reactions to over-violent images are likely to remain disturbing for the viewer for some days.<sup>28</sup> Venkatesh et al. noticed that IS utilises techniques including abjection, horror and shock.<sup>29</sup> For instance, in the “Killing the Apostates In Revenge For the Monotheists #1–Wilāyat Khurāsān” video, IS members shoot two individuals in the head, then the scene is replayed in slow motion with an increased level of the gunshots’ sound. Finally, the camera stays on the victims’ bodies until they bleed out, giving time for the viewer to realise that a minute ago these individuals

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<sup>25</sup> Festinger, *Dissonance*, 4.

<sup>26</sup> Pratkanis and Aronson, *Persuasion*, 44-45.

<sup>27</sup> Vivek Venkatesh et al. “Promoting Extreme Violence: Visual and Narrative Analysis of Select Ultraviolent Terror Propaganda Videos Produced by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2015 and 2016,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2018), 1-23.

<sup>28</sup> E. Ann Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

<sup>29</sup> Vekatesh et al., “Extreme Violence,” 1-23.

were alive.<sup>30</sup> When the overplaying of violence leads to the creation of dissonance, some viewers may pursue anti-social outcomes, including joining IS, as a way to reduce the dissonance created by propaganda materials.

On a collective level, propaganda can act as a way to create and reinforce what the sociologist Gustave Le Bon calls a collective soul, thereby facilitating recruitment.<sup>31</sup> Le Bon argues that individuals can at a precise point in time and under the influence of violent emotions gather and become a psychological crowd. When individuals are part of the crowd, their individual personality disappears to give place to thoughts and feelings determined by, in this instance, the propagandist.<sup>32</sup> Nader Barzin asserts that one of the main purpose of propaganda is to create herds of people so that they can act as one. Once this crowd, even if it is ephemeral, is created, the group's mechanism takes over to direct the subjects' thoughts and actions.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, SMT argues that social movements including terrorist ones use strategic frames to give a rationale for individual action within a group and to attach a certain meaning to an identified event/ problem.<sup>34</sup> Propaganda allows terrorist movements to recruit and mobilise would-be sympathisers by enforcing their belief system upon them and thereby creating a "strong bond of esprit de corps".<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Islamic State, "Killing the Apostates in Revenge For the Monotheists #1-Wilāyat Khurāsān," 18 June 2015, <https://jihadology.net/2015/06/18/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-killing-the-apostates-in-revenge-for-the-monotheists-1-wilayat-khurasan/>, 3:26'-4:17'.

<sup>31</sup> Gustave Le Bon, *Psychologie des Foules*, (Paris: Les Presses universitaires de France, 1895), 8.

<sup>32</sup> Le Bon, *Foules*, 19-26.

<sup>33</sup> Nader Barzin, "Propagande et attentats-suicide," *L'Esprit du temps* 2, No. 111 (2010) : 59-72.

<sup>34</sup> Leonard C. Robinson, "Just Terror: The Islamic State's Use of Strategic Framing to Recruit and Motivate," *Orbis* 61, No. 2 (2017): 172-186.

<sup>35</sup> Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 70; Douglas Walton, "What is Propaganda, and What exactly is Wrong with it?," *Public Affairs Quarterly* 11, (1997): 383-413.

The analysis of IS' material concurs this idea that terrorist movements may appeal to the collective soul/identity using propaganda. A primary example is IS' use of *anasheed*, polyphonic songs from the Arabic musical and poetic tradition used in jihadist movement, in most of its propaganda videos.<sup>36</sup> Luis Velasco-Pufleau argues that *anasheed* can become collective symbols of an imaginary community of *mujahideen* that are aimed at *inter alia* building a collective memory and remembering martyrs.<sup>37</sup> In her sociological study of musical power, Tia De Nora demonstrates that music is dynamically related to social life and is a tool to establish a basis for collective action and set its parameters.<sup>38</sup> Rebecca W. Oettinger further asserts that songs themselves work as propaganda by disseminating a specific belief or mindset.<sup>39</sup>

In the video discussing the 2015 Paris attacks, IS uses a *nasheed* called "Avance, Avance", which aims to show the power of the Caliphate, motivating a collective identity, encouraging IS fighters to carry on their fight, and terrorising the enemy.<sup>40</sup> The *nasheed*'s lyrics reinforce this idea of the in- and out-group: "Either you kill them or they kill you, there is only profit!" or "Kill the traitors, attack them by surprise!".<sup>41</sup> The *nasheed* accompanies the eristic text of foreign fighter Fabien Clain, on the Paris attacks. Clain's text presents the dichotomy of *we are the good guys. If you are not with us, you are our enemy* to the audience. "And you, that doesn't bother you? You still live with them, still work with them!", says Clain.<sup>42</sup> Alexander Kinney et al. demonstrate

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<sup>36</sup> Luis Velasco-Pufleau, "Après les attaques terroristes de l'État islamique à Paris. Enquête sur les rapports entre musique, propagande et violence armée," *Transposition* 5 (2015): 1-28.

<sup>37</sup> Velasco-Pufleau, "musique," 9.

<sup>38</sup> Tia De Nora, *Music in Everyday Life*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>39</sup> Rebecca W. Oettinger, *Music as Propaganda in the German reformation*, (London: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>40</sup> Islamic State, "Paris s'est effondré," Trans. Author, 20 November 2018, <https://jihadology.net/2015/11/20/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-paris-has-collapsed-wilayat-%E1%B8%A5alab/>.

<sup>41</sup> Islamic, "Paris," Trans. Author, 2:52'-2:55'.

<sup>42</sup> Islamic, "Paris," trans. Author, 2:33'-2:37'.

in their analysis of IS propaganda that the movement explicitly focuses on a community and group level appeal.<sup>43</sup> IS constructs its propaganda to appeal to the audience's collective soul, the brotherhood, by enforcing upon them its belief system so that they may join the movement.

Finally, propaganda allows terrorist movements to signal alternative forms of legitimacy so that they can distinguish themselves from rival movements and states. In his sociology of markets, Neil Fligstein argues that the major drive that holds a market together over a long period of time is the capability of firms to continue to enforce a conception of control *vis-à-vis* each other.<sup>44</sup> He adds that actors are required to strategically frame their firm's action against their competitors and mobilise the resources to do so. He uses the "*market-as-politics*" metaphor to name the construct focusing on how social structures are created by firms to organize themselves and control competition across markets.<sup>45</sup> Less legitimate organisations, whether it is firms or terrorist movements, are more vulnerable to attacks by rivals, undermining their reputations and hindering their chance of survival.<sup>46</sup> According to the *market-as-politics* approach, propaganda is thus a way for terrorist movements to acquire legitimacy against rival movements and communicate their organisational identity to potential recruits.

Susan Olzak asserts that terrorist movements conveying a clear ideological identity are more likely to recruit as they are more easily interpretable entities.<sup>47</sup> Alexander B. Kinney et al.'s study of IS and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (APAQ)'s propaganda shows that IS and APAQ communicate, through respectively *Dabiq/Rumiyah* and *Inspire*,

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<sup>43</sup> Alexander B. Kinney et al., "Theming for terror: Organizational adornment in terrorist propaganda," *Poetics* 69 (2018): 27-40.

<sup>44</sup> Fligstein, "Market," 657.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Martha Crenshaw, *Terrorism in Context*, (University Park: Penn State Press, 1995), 9-11.

<sup>47</sup> Susan Olzak, "The Effect of Category Spanning on the Lethality and Longevity of Terrorist Organizations," *Social Forces* 95, No. 2 (2016): 559-584.

competing visions of legitimate terrorist activity.<sup>48</sup> Their findings suggest that terrorist movements actively articulate distinct themes under the umbrella of a broader ideology to would-be sympathisers using various symbols of terror.<sup>49</sup> *Dabiq/Rumiyah* is more than just a method of strategic communication for IS. It mostly serves to signal a distinct type of terrorism brand to a precise type of consumer (recruits), thereby creating a thematic contrast between this and other jihadist movements. This is what Kinney et al. calls “organizational adornment”.<sup>50</sup>

Additionally, Fligstein argues that there are three phases in market formation, namely emergence, stability and crisis, and that each phase generates different kinds of politics.<sup>51</sup> When a firm arise in the market, if it is powerful enough, it will seek to enforce its view upon the broader market.<sup>52</sup> Fligstein argues that the most fluid phase in a market is when its emerges. No social relations have been established and the role of competitors have yet to be defined. Firms will try to take advantage of this situation and construct their tools of control.<sup>53</sup> One can say that IS emergence phase coincides with Abu Bakr al-Baghadadi being announced as IS’ Caliph on 29 June 2014.<sup>54</sup> Winter’s study of IS propaganda reveals that between the 17 July 2015 and 15 August 2015, IS produced 892 propaganda events, which ranged from battlefield videos to photographic reports.<sup>55</sup> IS brand was also markedly more globalized in 2015 than in 2017.<sup>56</sup> One can therefore argue that IS produced more propaganda material during that time frame as a way to enforce its brand upon the jihadist market and establish itself *vis-à-vis* its rivals.

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<sup>48</sup>Kinney et al., “Theming,” 27-40.

<sup>49</sup> Kinney et al., “Theming,” 32.

<sup>50</sup> Kinney et al., “Theming,” 30.

<sup>51</sup> Fligstein, “Market,” 663.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Fligstein, “Market,” 664.

<sup>54</sup> Charlie Winter, “Documenting the virtual caliphate”, *The Quilliam Foundation* (2015): 9.

<sup>55</sup> Winter, “Documenting,” 9.

<sup>56</sup> Winter, “Apocalypse,” 107.

During crisis, firms are susceptible to transformation and actors may reframe their strategic action *vis-à-vis* one another in order to promote their survival.<sup>57</sup> As Olzak argues, terrorist movements operate in unstable environments.<sup>58</sup> To reassert themselves *vis-à-vis* their competitors in times of crisis, terrorist movements may adapt their propaganda material. For instance, Winter noticed that between the 2015 summer and early 2017, IS experienced “a branding volte-face”, which corresponds with the increased external pressures, including territorial loss, faced by the movement in 2016.<sup>59</sup> During IS’ market stability, namely summer 2015, the most common theme of its propaganda was utopia material depicting civilian life in the Caliphate.<sup>60</sup> Winter noticed the movement then shifted its narrative from utopia towards warfare and offensive operations.<sup>61</sup> One can say that terrorist movements’ propaganda is influenced by the phase in which the movement is and shift their propaganda’s narrative accordingly so that they can retain their legitimacy in the eyes of their challengers and recruits.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this brief investigation demonstrated that propaganda serves a dual purpose for terrorist movements. Firstly, it was argued that propaganda serves as a tool for them to enforce their belief systems on would-be sympathisers on two levels: the individual and collective levels. By arousing feelings of dissonance in individuals’ behaviour, propaganda allows terrorist movements to individually target potential recruits. As a result of the discomfort created by propaganda materials, individuals may pursue anti-social outcomes such as joining the terrorist movement as a way to reduce the dissonance generated by their propaganda. On a collective level, propaganda acts

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<sup>57</sup> Fligstein, “Market,” 664 and 671.

<sup>58</sup> Olzak, “Spanning,” 562.

<sup>59</sup> Winter, “Apocalypse,” 109.

<sup>60</sup> Winter, “Apocalypse,” 112.

<sup>61</sup> Winter, “Apocalypse,” 113-116.

as a way to create and reinforce a collective soul, thereby facilitating recruitment. Terrorist movements try to appeal to the audience's collective identity by propagating messages enabling a group identity. So that groups' mechanism may take over to direct the subjects' thoughts and actions, thereby forcing them to join the movement. Secondly, this analysis examined how propaganda allows terrorist movements to signal alternative forms of legitimacy so that they can distinguish themselves from rivals, using the *market-as-politics* approach. Terrorist movements' propaganda is highly influenced by the phase in which the movements are- that is emergency, stability or crisis. Terrorist movements will shift their propaganda's narrative accordingly so that they can retain their legitimacy in the eyes of their challengers and potential followers. There is therefore more to terrorist propaganda than meets the eye; the audience only perceives the tip of the iceberg.

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