

Alex Luchsinger
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Propaganda Pros: *The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria's Crusade to a Caliphate*

Background: The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, also known as ISIS or ISIL, has leveraged the power of social media and the Internet to spread its message through the most sophisticated propaganda campaign of any terrorist group. Thousands of Europeans have joined ISIS, and dozens of Americans have followed suit. It's estimated that foreign fighters make up one-third of ISIS' 40,000 fighters. The messages are often targeted at young disillusioned males, exploiting their imperfect circumstances and appealing to their religious sense of duty as a Muslim and a martyr. It's a growing problem that's hard to combat because there are no borders on the Internet.

Purpose: The purpose of this research was to examine the effects of ISIS propaganda, focusing on identification, empathy, exposure to propaganda and, ultimately, whether people plan to join or support ISIS.

Methods: Data were collected via survey in the United States (N = 206) and in 13 countries with large Muslim populations (N = 206) using Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). The survey was available in English and Arabic. A validation question was used to ensure the authenticity of the individual taking the survey (What day of the week is the Muslim holy day?). Multiple regression was used to analyze the variables in this study.

Results: All three independent variables (identification, empathy and exposure to propaganda) positively predicted the propensity to join or support ISIS (behavioral intention) and accounted for 72% of the variance ($R^2 = .722$, $F(2,55) = 5.56$, $p < .01$). Identification was the most significant predictor of intention to support or join ($\beta = .5$, $p < .001$), followed by empathy ($\beta = .25$, $p < .001$), and exposure to propaganda ($\beta = .14$, $p < .05$). The average age of both groups was, U.S. (M = 29.81) and other countries (M = 29.91), which is consistent with the ages of ISIS fighters and prospective recruits (The Soufan Group, 2014).

Conclusions: Future studies could include experiments and message analyses to examine message effects and persuasion. Examining the specifics of messages and measuring their effects would provide a deeper understanding as to why this propaganda is such an effective recruiting tool. Many splinter groups or factions of al Qaeda and ISIS are spreading throughout the Middle East and Africa, making this a fertile area for future research