

## REVIEWS

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**Media Persuasion in the Islamic State.** Neil Krishan Aggarwal. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019. 264 pages. ISBN: 9780231182386.

The Islamic State is not often thought of as a creative media entity. Scholarly portrayals of the group often focus on the mediums they used to spread propaganda such as social media, video platforms, and the internet. Irrespective of the medium, less attention is given to the set of methods they employed to influence the consumers of their media (Bodine-Baron et al. 2016; Blaker 2016; Khawaja and Khan 2016). In other words, it is one thing for the Islamic State to expand the reach and scope of their message through modern technology. It is a different matter how they make sure that their message has the intended effect on their chosen targets.

In his book, *Media Persuasion in the Islamic State*, Dr. Neil Aggarwal argues that his specialization of cultural psychology may hold the answers to the puzzle of the Islamic State's propaganda. Dr. Aggarwal takes a chronological view of the subject, beginning with the propaganda materials of its precursor organizations and tracing the evolution of its methods until the time the caliphate was declared in Raqqa, Iraq. In the book, special attention was paid to prominent figures in the jihadist movement as it mentioned Osama bin Laden and Abu Musab Al Zarqawi, as well as the subtle differences between them. Through comprehensive research on various documents, videos, and other forms of cultural output like songs and poems, Dr. Aggarwal paints a compelling and fairly unified picture of the group's messaging.

The book, in essence, is an analysis of how ISIS attempts to place itself in a position to influence aspiring militants to do violence in its name, both through prolific creation of content for encouragement and instruction, as well as competing for the right to do so in a diverse environment. As Aggarwal notes, one way that ISIS accomplished this is by constantly

drawing a clear line between themselves and their targets, whether they be Western armies or rival jihadist groups. ISIS establishes and strengthens its own identity by contrasting itself against its opponents, essentially a form of othering, which serves to consolidate and build cohesion among its members and prepare them for performing violence.

Abu Musab Al Zarqawi, the founder of Al Qaeda in Iraq, was a master of this technique. He used names and labels to emphasize the otherness of their opponents. For example, Americans and Christians were labeled as “crusaders” and Israelis as “monkeys and pigs.” Edward Said, in his book *Orientalism* (1978), discussed how Western practices of othering targeted the Islamic world. This process appears to have the unintended effect of creating a vicious cycle, where the original perpetrators find that their own acts have been turned against them by malicious actors.

Al Zarqawi combined the use of othering with an intuitive ability to manipulate the Arab language, culture, and historical memory, thus making his message even more emotionally potent. For instance, he skillfully used Arabic oratorical techniques to amplify his message. A particularly vivid example can be observed from his first speech, “A Message to the Tribes of Banu Hasan,” delivered in 2003 following the US invasion of Iraq. Al-Zarqawi displayed his oratorical skills by using literary techniques such as taking key phrases from the Quran (known as *tahmid*) and even a particularly persuasive type of rhyme (known as *saja*). By employing these techniques as well as a variety of other persuasive devices that resonate with his audience, Al-Zarqawi simultaneously articulated a general message and placed himself in a position of authority, as one who has the right to determine a proper course of action for Muslims. Identifying this dynamic may be the most valuable contribution of this book to the literature, and particularly in future counter-messaging against ISIS. The lesson to be learned is that terrorist messaging is not designed to implant messages into a *tabula rasa*, devoid of any prior content, but rather puts itself in a position to manipulate pre-existing impressions, beliefs, and practices towards its own ends.

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This also raises the question of whether radicalization introduces anything new to the psychological make-up of the recruits, or whether it is a *recombinant* process. In other words, is it necessary in the process to introduce feelings a prospective recruit has never known at all, or is radicalization primarily a matter of taking the optimum steps to mobilize latent energies which already exist? While this dilemma sounds trite and academic, it has implications from the perspective of counter-messaging, since the former would imply that there is a fundamentally non-violent way which targets can return to, while the latter would appear to indicate that damage mitigation is the best one can hope for. It appears that this is the question which Aggarwal's line of specialization—cultural psychology—would lend itself best to answering.

The central concept of the book is what Aggarwal calls “mediating disorder.” Aggarwal uses the term to refer to the psychological process by which an actor manipulates the turbulent emotional and mental states of a target for their own ends. This concept is transferred to other forms of media such as video, which proved to be a link between ISIS and younger Muslims. In chapter five, Aggarwal analyzed sequence by sequence a particularly popular video by the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), “Vanquisher of the Peshmerga.” A particularly effective tactic that ISIS employed in its video propaganda is the use of a parasocial character, a kind of lead character in a virtual drama through whom the audience of potential jihadists can establish an emotional bond, potentially leading to an eventual link with the larger organization itself. In the video, the parasocial character is a suicide bomber named Al-Mujahir, who eventually attacks Peshmerga headquarters in Mosul. An interesting dynamic that Aggarwal identified is the psychological process Al-Mujahir initiates by acting as the parasocial character. The audience first sees themselves in him, and it is precisely through this process that ISIS creates a new “allonymous self,” that is, a self with no identity other than the one the group provides them. Thus, ISIS does not merely provide in its propaganda guidance for action, but rather a fundamentally new sense of self. Whether this can be countered appears to depend on whether counter-messaging can also address questions of identity, as opposed to merely providing disincentives for terror activity.

Overall, Aggarwal's book is an enlightening account of the psychological processes utilized by ISIS to strengthen its propaganda. The synthesis of cultural and psychological factors in his analysis serves to provide a more holistic perspective on the issue at hand. Where the book somewhat stumbles are stylistic issues as certain phrases such as creating "out-groups" are mentioned to the point of repetitiveness. There can be no doubt however that as various iterations claiming the ISIS name appear in regions with weak or limited government control (such as ISWAP in West Africa and ISIS-K in parts of Afghanistan), the book is a valuable contribution to literature attempting to understand the group's inventory of techniques for radicalization.

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