

ISIS Media and Troop Withdrawal Announcements: Visualizing Community and Resilience

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When a president announces troop withdrawal, some factors change. Financial and human costs fall, and relations among international actors change. To expand contemporary understandings of how the influence of troop withdrawal announcements may extend beyond state-based media portrayals, and to explore additional factors that help explain changes in nonstate actor's media campaigns, this study asks whether troop withdrawal announcements in regions of military conflict correspond to changes in the visual media output of militant groups. Focusing on issues leading up to and following President Trump's Twitter announcement of U.S. troop withdrawals from Syria on December 19, 2018, we conducted a content analysis of 887 images in 102 issues of ISIS's official weekly newsletter *al-Naba* that examined variables related to presentational, individual, and institutional components. A chi-squared analysis and post-facto qualitative analysis revealed that militant, nonstate groups emphasize community building, resilience, and nonprovocative postures in their media campaigns after troop withdrawal announcements. The findings have implications for the intersections of platforms and gatekeeping, and of military, media, nonstate actors, and the public.

Keywords: media, military, visual, terrorism, social media

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Historically, states have faced challenges from many groups unsatisfied with or seeking to overthrow existing governing apparatuses. Hundreds of armed nonstate actors (NSA) have emerged since the 1800s to confront states that enjoy international recognition (Griffiths & Wasser, 2019). Yet the 21st century has brought about changes that complicate traditional understandings of armed NSAs and state responses to them (Brown, 2020). The combination of the information age and globalization has rendered armed NSAs more autonomous, more efficient, and more connected. Such groups are now able to sidestep traditional media gatekeepers (Dauber, 2009; Schwalbe, Silcock, & Candello, 2015) and use their own officially produced online media products to foster recruitment and radicalization of their followers (Precht, 2007; von Behr, Reding, Edwards, & Gribbon, 2013), plan attacks (Gill et al., 2017), signal impending attacks (Melki & El-Masri, 2016), produce more lethal attacks (Gill et al., 2017), create perceptions of resource equity with their enemies (Friis, 2015; Ingram, Whiteside, & Winter, 2020), and reinforce ideological worldviews (Gill et al., 2017; Ingram et al., 2020; Wignell, Tan, O'Halloran, & Lange, 2017).

The rising importance of the media campaigns of armed NSAs have recently prompted a growing corpus of studies seeking to identify contextual factors associated with both content and output level changes in the group's public messaging. To date, several on-the-ground conditions have corresponded to significant changes in militant group media campaigns. These include an intensification of opposing force military operations (Damanhoury, Winkler, Kaczkowski, & Dicker, 2018; Milton, 2018; Winter, 2018), heightened online censorship of media activities (Lakomy, 2017; Winter & Amarasingam, 2019), territorial losses (Kaczkowski, Winkler, Damanhoury, & Luu, 2020; Milton, 2016, 2018), military and media leader losses (Damanhoury, 2018; Winkler, Dewick, Luu, & Kaczkowski, 2019), successful attacks perpetrated by the group itself (Winkler et al., 2020), and the weakening of opposing regional groups with similar goals (Winkler et al., 2019).

A key situational element left unexplored is the announcement of troop withdrawals by forces fighting against armed NSAs. At one level, such an omission is surprising, as a well-documented relationship exists between countries withdrawing military forces and the governing apparatuses operating in the areas they leave. Research, for example, shows that previous troop withdrawals influence peace negotiations, sanctions, and enemy reparations in ways that form the basis for future bilateral relations between the two opposing parties (Asal, Gustafson, & Krause, 2019; Daniels, 2020). Unfortunately, this body of scholarship pertains only to interstate conflicts and civil wars, leaving possible interactions between state-based troop withdrawals and militant, nonstate groups an open question. As states typically have less incentive to maintain relationships with an armed NSA than they do with other state actors, the relational dynamics at play may indeed be distinct.

Contemporary changes in conflicts with armed NSAs also prompt the need to reconsider reactions to announcements of troop withdrawal. Conflicts between states and armed NSAs have become more frequent (Cunningham, Gleditsch, & Salehyan, 2013), and the defeat of an enemy on the ground no longer equates with ultimate defeat, as such groups can move online, regroup, and change on-the-ground locations for future attacks (Winter & Amarasingam, 2019). Finally, conflicts between state and armed NSAs have become more global in character. Previous work on conflicts between states and nonstate groups has generally focused on opponents in close proximity to one another. Examples include Colombia and Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and

Turkey, the Taliban and Afghanistan, Hezbollah and Lebanon, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and Sri Lanka, and Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army and Sudan (Cunningham et al., 2013; de Mesquita, 2005; Krause, 2017). Yet with al-Qaeda's presence in more than 100 countries (Al-Qaida/Al-Qaeda [The Base], 2020), and ISIS's demonstrated ability to recruit fighters from at least 85 countries (Picker, 2016), a focus on armed NSAs with a more global reach appears warranted. Thus, to avoid overgeneralizing earlier findings about announcements of troop withdrawals within the contemporary context, this study asks the following:

RQ1: Do changes in the visual messaging strategies of ISIS's online media campaigns correspond to U.S. troop withdrawal announcements, and if so, how?

We will begin by describing the nexus between states, militaries, media, and public opinion to provide a backdrop for understanding any noticeable shifts that occur in the context of armed NSAs. We will then describe the importance of visual messaging and describe how ISIS's media campaign relies on the approach to distribute its messaging to global audiences. After articulating the scope, method, and results of our study, we will discuss how the increased emergence of armed NSAs, and their rapidly evolving online media campaigns react to troop withdrawal announcements in the contemporary environment.

States, Militaries, and Media: A Symbiotic Relationship

Previous research of war and conflict demonstrates a clear connection between states, their militaries, the media, and the public (Gilboa, 2005; Jakobsen, 2000; Zelizer, 2010). Many studies demonstrate that the tone of Western media coverage has an integral relationship with U.S. public opinion, particularly in regard to sustaining public commitments to war efforts (Martin, 2006; Moeller, 2002; Porch, 2002; Robinson, 2000; Shaheen, 1985). In instances where Western media coverage does influence public opinion during wartime, it can add pressure on policy makers to comply with public sentiment (Robinson, 2002). Public support for continued military engagement tends to be contingent on war presence (or lack thereof) within an historical period, the goals and successes of the governments, and the success or failure of troops on the ground (Clements, 2013; Eichenberg, 2005; Jacobson, 2010). Overall, previous research examining the relationship between states, media, the military, and public opinion focuses on sustaining public support for governmental policies and related military efforts, leaving the interactions related to governmental announcements to withdraw troop deployments relatively unexplored.

The presence of NSAs further complicates a full understanding of the relationship between actors in a conflict, their militaries, public opinion, and the media. The few studies that do exist are large-scale examinations of the responses and attitudes of armed NSAs to the presence of troops for aid and amnesty purposes (Sexton, 2016). These studies operationalize NSA responses and attitudes as levels of violence that such groups perpetrate based on state-based attack counts. Nonviolent indicators of attitudes in nonstate communities remain unexplored, probably due to access limitations to reliable on-the-ground information. Yet the expansive growth in armed NSA's media campaigns distributed via the online environment provides additional opportunities for gaining insights into how such groups react to decisions about military presence and removal by state actors.

The Importance of Visual Messaging in Wartime

Visual images play key roles in how the public responds to messaging campaigns. Such messaging is not reliant on language fluency, making conveyed meanings more accessible to global audiences (Graber, 1990). Audiences also respond to visuals messaging with higher levels of attention and recall, as they serve as efficient vehicles to communicate narratives and other messages (Barry, 1997; Bolt, 2012; Kraidy, 2017; Lang, Newhagen, & Reeves, 1996; Newhagen & Reeves, 1992). Viewers cognitively process images more easily, respond to their messaging content more emotionally, interpret their meaning as more believable, and identify with the displayed in-group beliefs (Barry, 1997; Nabi, 2003; Waltman, 2014).

Accordingly, a growing number of studies focus on how visual images function during wartime. Most examine the images from Western media displayed either at the war's onset or during lengthy wartime engagements. Some focus on how images that recall embedded societal narratives work in the service of collective memory (Zelizer, 2017). Others analyze visual framing or the process of selecting "some aspects of a perceived reality . . . [to] make them more salient" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). These efforts find that the visual frames support master narratives during military engagements (Hackett & Zhao, 1994), downplay bad news (Aday, 2010; Aday, Cluverius, & Livingston, 2005), and often feature military weaponry and technology (Griffin & Lee, 1995). Previous research also documents that image framing changes overtime throughout the course of a war's evolution (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2008; Hallin, 1989; Schwalbe, 2006; Schwalbe, Silcock, & Keith, 2008), differs based on the media platform in use (Schwalbe, Keith, & Silcock, 2018), and gains widespread acceptability through dissemination within popular culture (Stahl, 2010). Studies often conclude that visual images have particular sway in shifting public opinion toward demands for troop withdrawal (Dauber, 2001; Zelizer, 2017).

Much less scholarly attention focuses on NSAs, whose own media systems now provide coverage both before, during, and after the withdrawal of Western forces. Studies document that violent images and other forms of war photography in both state and NSA's media campaigns hold sway in households distant from the battlefields, particularly in their depictions of enemies and fallen soldiers (Winkler, Damanhoury, Dicker, & Lemieux, 2016; Zelin, 2015; Zelizer, 2010, 2017). Yet left unaddressed is if and how NSAs visually respond when their enemies declare victory and leave the battlefield.

Media Campaigns of Armed Nonstate Actors

Initially, al-Qaeda served as the early Internet adopter but was quickly surpassed in the online space by its own offshoots (e.g., al-Qaeda in Iraq, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula) and other ideological extremist groups (Gaudette, Scrivens, & Venkatesh, 2020; Reid & Chen, 2005; Rudner, 2017). Social media platforms (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, Telegram), other less studied online vehicles (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat), and imageboard websites (e.g., 8chan, 4chan) now connect NSAs to global audiences in ways that ignore national borders and regulations (Alexander, 2017; Berger, 2018; Bloom, Tiflati, & Horgan, 2017; Chen, Thoms, & Fu, 2008). The online environment generally serves as NSA's primary channel of communication with target audiences (Gill et al., 2017; Weimann, 2015; Winkler & Lokmanoglu, 2019), as such platforms allow for cheap, easy, anonymous, and wide dissemination of multimodal content (Amarasingam, 2018; Weimann, 2006).

In part due to the shift to the online environment, visual images now function as critical components of NSA messaging strategies. ISIS, for example, uses still photographs, manipulated images, infographics, cartoons, memes, logos, and videos (Milton, 2018; Waltman, 2014; Winter, 2018). Currently, ISIS prefers the use of Telegram as its primary channel for sharing information, as it is a free, encrypted open-source messaging application. Nonetheless, ISIS migrates temporarily to different applications when social media companies' deplatform its members, as illustrated when ISIS previously moved from Twitter to Telegram, RocketChat, and Parler after Twitter suspended its member accounts (Amarasingam, Maher, & Winter, 2021; Clifford, 2020; Clifford & Powell, 2019).

The media campaign of ISIS represents a unique opportunity for understanding how armed NSAs function in the 21st-century context. Throughout the group's short history, its media campaign has become both centralized and distributed to global audiences through a myriad of languages and platforms (Winter & Ingram, 2018). Further, captured ISIS documents reveal that the group ordered its territorial provinces not to publish any content officially without prior approval with its central Media Monitoring Committee (ISIS's Central Media Diwan, 2018). Finally, unlike other nonstate actors like the Taliban and SDF that previously participated in negotiations during periods of troop withdrawal, ISIS never engaged officially in the negotiation process. As a result of both its range and separation from traditional media outlets, a key mode of its communications before and after troop withdrawals has been, and continues to be, the group's official media products delivered via social media.

Scope of Analysis

To assess if U.S. troop withdrawal announcements correspond to changes in ISIS's visual media campaign, the study focuses on U.S. President Donald J. Trump's tweet on December 19, 2018, announcing that the United States planned to withdraw troops from ISIS's previously controlled territories in Syria (Trump, 2018). The President's choice of social media to announce of executive decisions prompts our decision to focus on his tweeted announcement, as his official social media accounts arguably function as a condensed form of press release capable of reaching global followers instantaneously.

To see if and how ISIS altered its media output and content in the months leading up to and following President Trump's troop withdrawal announcement, we examine the visual output displayed in *al-Naba* one year before and after President Trump's tweet. Our full data set includes 887 images in issues 111–203 distributed online from December 27, 2017, to December 19, 2019, through official ISIS Telegram News Channels. We focus on *al-Naba* because as the official Arabic language newsletter, it targets ISIS' primary internal constituency and recruiting base (Dodwell, Milton, & Raswell, 2016). Since October 2015, the newsletter has also supplied generally uninterrupted, weekly issues, despite serious challenges by on-the-ground coalition forces.

Methodology

Our media content analysis evaluates what changes, if any, occurred in ISIS media content before and after U.S. troop withdrawal announcements. On the whole, we examine presentational variables to assess content emphasis and credibility, human factors to identify the characteristics of individual photo

subjects displayed in the newsletter, and institutional indicators to better understand the portrayals of community-based missions of defense and state building. As previous research has revealed, both individual and group content factors are key determinants for understanding electronic texts in the online environment (Warnick, 2005).

Our examination of presentational variables includes an analysis of page positioning, viewer distance, number of images per page, and language associated with the photograph. The position of the image on the page identifies which photographs appear in the foreground and background. Previous experimental studies document that images in the foreground draw more attention of viewers; in contrast, those in the background help define the scenic context (Schwalbe, 2006; Schwalbe et al., 2008, 2018; Stone et al., 2003), and tend to be less provocative than actors and actions featured in foregrounded images (Burke, 1969). Viewer distance encapsulates the perceived distance between the viewer and photo subject. Photo subjects appearing at an intimate or personal distance (zero to four feet) highlight the individual attributes of the subject, whereas those at a public or social distance (more than four feet) place emphasis of the attributes of the larger collective (Jewitt & Oyama, 2004). The number of images on the page, as exemplars of visual messaging more generally, contributes to the group's goals of heightening attention, recall, and attitude change (Fahmy, Wanta, & Bock, 2014; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2010). The language of the photograph both in the taglines and superimposed over the images help identify the group's specific target audiences.

The coding categories encompassing individual human factors include gender, stance, facial expressions, eye contact, and number of displayed humans. The gender of the photo subjects reveals the different male and female gender roles at play within the community (Gan, Neo, Chin, & Khader, 2019). The use of direct eye contact and standing postures each reinforces dominance and power of the photo subject (Henley, Miller, & Beazley, 1995; Knutson, 1996; Schmeichel & Tang, 2015). The number of humans in the images emphasize whether the photo subject is acting alone, as part of a small group, or as a member of the larger collective.

For analysis purposes we disaggregate group-related categories into two clusters: military and state-building activities. Coding categories having to do with the military include the presence of military personnel, the presence of dead bodies or those about to die, about to die image type, and cause of death. Displays of military personnel emphasize the NSA's military personnel strength in relation to enemy forces (Kraidy, 2017; Montgomery, 2020; Winkler et al., 2016, Winkler, Damanhoury, Dicker, & Lemieux, 2018). Images of death display the presence of dead bodies, those in caskets, those in body bags, and individuals who are about to die collectively, which show ISIS's perspective on the final outcome awaiting those who oppose its forces. Images coded as about to die fall into three image types: certain death (i.e., images of impending death with textual outcome verification), possible death (i.e., images of imminent death without textual outcome verification), and presumed death (i.e., images with no apparent, immediate occurrence of imminent death, but contains allusions to future death by showing ammunition, artillery, guns, and other implements of warfare (Winkler et al., 2018; Zelizer, 2010). Cause of death recognizes the party responsible for any fatal outcomes appearing in the photographs.

The coding categories associated with the second cluster of group-based institutional factors related to the display of a functioning state, include state-building activities, flags, and leaders. In addition to demonstrating the ability to attract allies to strengthen the collective, state-building activities display the elements of a functioning governing unit capable of providing social services, law enforcement, habitable lands, border enforcement, and a media apparatus capable of message dissemination (Houck, Repke, & Conway, 2017). Images of flags contain both the flags of NSAs and states. The NSA flags serve as an “ontological metaphor for . . . the restoration of the worldwide caliphate” (Matusitz, 2015, p. 10), while the state flags are often burned or otherwise destroyed to symbolize the need for a replacement governing entity that will adhere to a different ideology (Seib & Janbek, 2011). Displays of NSA leaders underscore the hierarchical nature of the organization, while images of enemy leaders remind sympathetic viewers that competing state apparatuses still oppose the formation and resilience of the NSA collective (Kraidy, 2017; Winkler et al., 2016, 2018).

The study’s coders received an oral training and a written copy of a pilot-tested codebook that had previously undergone multiple iterations to achieve sufficiently high levels of intercoder reliability on each item (i.e., .80 or higher on Cohen’s kappa). Two coders applied the instrument, with a third coder resolving any codes where the two coders disagreed. The overall intercoder reliability score is 93.4. Table 1 includes the percentage agreement and intercoder reliability scores for each coding category.

Table 1. Intercoder Reliability Scores Associated with Each Coding Category.²

Category	Percentage agreement	Cohen's kappa
Presentational variables		
Number	99.85	0.99
Page positioning	99.30	0.93
Viewer position	98.20	0.94
Distance	99.90	0.99
Language	100	1
Individual human variables		
Humans	99.00	0.98
Gender	99.60	0.99
Eye contact	98.10	0.96
Stance	98.65	0.98
Facial expressions	99.70	0.99
Institutional components related to the state		
State	93.65	0.86
Flag	99.50	0.97
Leader	99.40	0.79
Institutional components related to defense		
Military role	98.35	0.95
Death	99.50	0.97
Cause of death	99.90	0.99
About to die	92.75	0.87

We used descriptive statistics and chi-squared analyses to determine if differences existed between the image categories before and after the troop withdrawal announcement. Because chi-squared analysis does not identify the source of any significant results or which cell differences prompted the significant results, we conducted a post hoc analysis by identifying cells with the largest discrepancy between the observed and expected values. Our analysis adhered to Sharpe's (2015) recommendation to report adjusted standardized cell residuals exceeding one standard deviation from the observed count (± 1.96) to indicate findings that were significantly higher or lower than the expected statistical frequencies. To address alternative explanations, outliers, and the influence of other contextual factors across the time period we used locally estimated scatterplot smoothing (LOESS) regression (Jacoby, 2000; Klingemann et al., 2011). The LOESS smooth curve, a nonparametric smoother, uses least-squares theory to demonstrate the linear pattern and observe outliers (Jacoby, 2000).

² The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available because they contain information from a violent extremist organization.

Results

ISIS did change its level of visual media output in *al-Naba* after Trump's troop withdrawal announcement. The newsletter's image count rose 31% (from 384 before the troop withdrawal tweet to 503 afterwards). The group also changed its strategic use of visual content in the newsletter (see Table 2). Specifically, ISIS changed the presentation of its visual elements from pre- to post-withdrawal including its number of images per page, the position of those images on the page, the perceived distance of the viewer from the photo subject, and the language associated with the photographs. After the troop withdrawal announcement, *al-Naba* displayed a higher-than-expected number of images on pages with two or more than five images per page, as background for other content, with no text-based taglines, and photographed from a social/public distance. The newsletter showed a lower-than-expected number of images that were full page, foregrounded, and accompanied by Arabic or English/Arabic taglines (see Table 2). For the percentage of images in the pre- and post-withdrawal period related to presentational variables, see Figure 1.

Table 2. ISIS's Visual Messaging Strategy Presentational Variables in al-Naba Before and After 2019 U.S. Troop Withdrawal Announcement.

<i>al-Naba</i> newspaper	Pre-withdrawal (<i>N</i> = 384)		Post-withdrawal (<i>N</i> = 503)		χ^2
	Count	Residual	Count	Residual	
Presentational variables					
Number of images					0.000*
One image per page	323	3.7	371	-3.7	
2 images per page	52	3.3	112	3.3	
3 to 5 images per page	9	1.3	6	-1.3	
More than 5 images per page	0	-3.3	14	3.3	
Page positioning					0.001*
Foreground	378	3.3	473	-3.3	
Background	6	-3.3	30	3.3	
Viewer position					0.189
Looking up	14	0.6	15	-0.6	
Looking down	59	-2	103	2	
Looking at the eye level	311	1.7	384	-1.7	
Language in images					0.000*
English	0	-1.5	3	1.5	
Arabic	183	3.3	184	-3.3	
Mixed Arabic and English	26	3.8	9	-3.8	
N/A	175	-4.6	307	4.6	
Distance					0.000*
Intimate space	10	0.4	11	-0.4	
Personal space	80	-1.2	122	1.2	
Social/public space	118	-3.7	216	3.7	
Mixed	17	-0.1	23	0.1	

Note. * $p < .01$

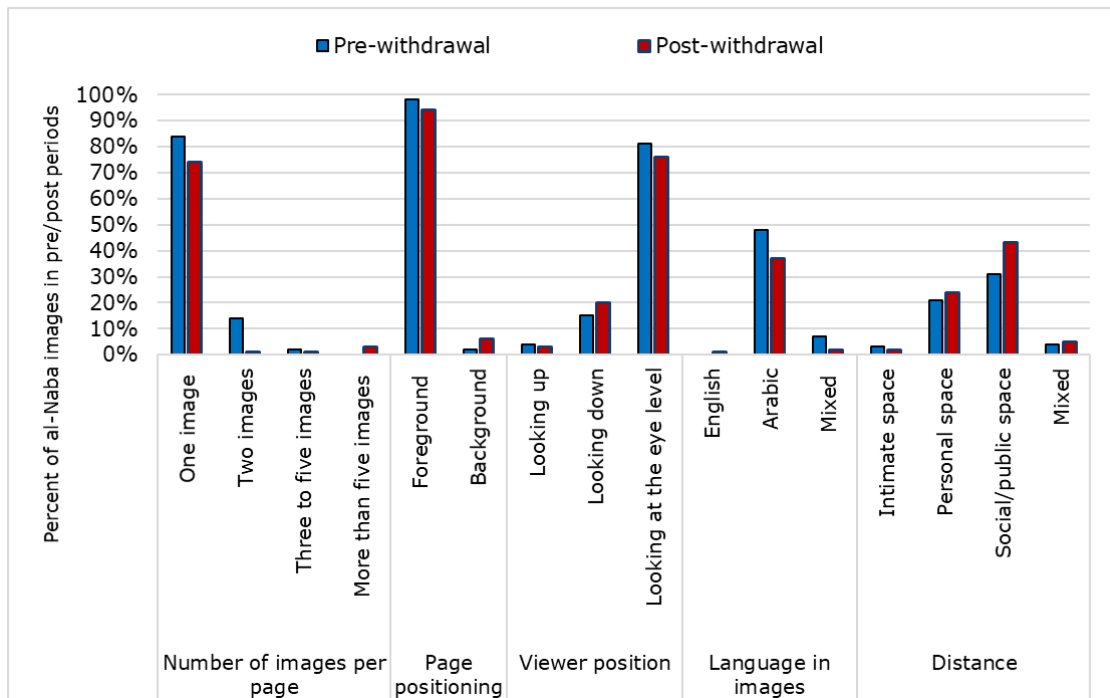


Figure 1. Presentational variables.

ISIS also changed its display of the number of humans in the image, as well as the photo subjects' gender, stance, eye contact, and facial expressions (see Table 3). For the percentage of images in the pre- and post-withdrawal period related to individual human variables, see Figure 2. After the troop withdrawal tweet, *al-Naba* showed a higher-than-expected number of images showing males in small and large groups, having negative or unclear facial expressions, standing or praying, and looking at unidentifiable objects or humans outside the photographic frame. The newsletter showed a lower-than-expected number of photographs where no humans were present, including their stance, eye contact, gestures, or facial expressions.

Table 3. ISIS's Visual Messaging Strategy Individual Human Variables in al-Naba Before and After 2019 U.S. Troop Withdrawal Announcement.

<i>al-Naba</i> newspaper	Pre-withdrawal (<i>N</i> = 384)		Post-withdrawal (<i>N</i> = 503)		χ^2
	Count	Residual	Count	Residual	
Individual human variables					
Number of humans in the image					0.000*
One human exists in the image	83	0.3	104	-0.3	
A small group 2~10	82	-3.2	156	3.2	
A large group <10	9	-2.8	32	2.8	
No humans exist in the image	210	3.8	211	-3.8	
Gender					0.002*
Male	172	-3.6	286	3.6	
Female	0	0	0	0	
Mixed	2	1.6	0	-1.6	
Unclear	2	-1	6	1	
N/A	208	3.6	211	-3.6	
Stance					0.005*
On knees (not praying)	8	-2	23	2	
Sitting	9	-1.1	18	1.1	
Standing	81	-2.6	145	2.6	
Laying down	30	0.5	35	-0.5	
Mixed	48	-0.4	68	0.4	
N/A	208	3.4	214	-3.4	
Eye contact					0.001*
Looking directly at the viewer	24	-1	40	1	
Looking downward	1	-0.7	3	0.7	
Looking at a person or things	116	-3.8	215	3.8	
Not looking (e.g., eye closed or mangled)	36	1.4	34	-1.4	
N/A	207	3.5	211	-3.5	
Facial expressions					0.000*
Positive	9	-1.2	19	1.2	
Negative	3	-2.7	18	2.7	
Unclear	163	-2.3	253	2.3	
N/A	209	3.6	213	-3.6	

Note. * $p < .01$

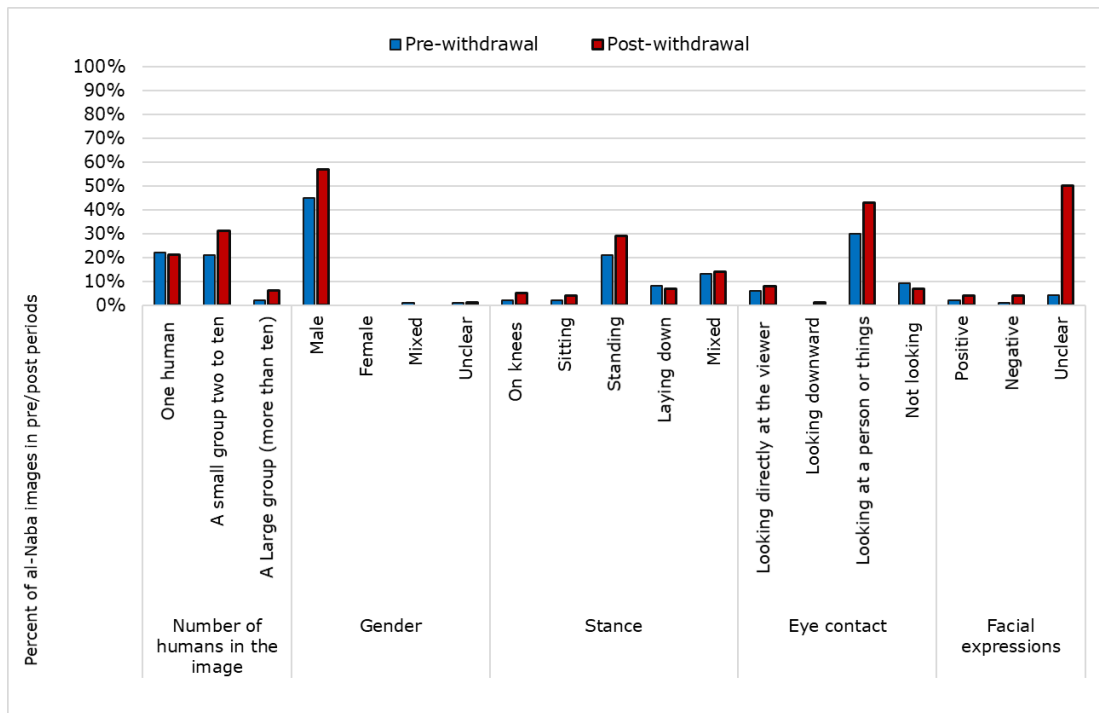


Figure 2. Individual human variables.

When featuring institutional elements, *al-Naba* changed its use of state-building images and flags, but its display of leaders remained the same (see Table 4). After the troop withdrawal announcement, *al-Naba* showed a higher-than-expected number of images showing no state-building activity, pledges by individuals and other groups to ISIS, and the display of ISIS flags or flags from multiple countries. The newsletter showed a lower-than-expected number of images showing ISIS’s state propaganda, natural landscapes, no flags, and no leaders. Figure 3 illustrates percentage of images in the pre- and post-withdrawal period related to institutional components related to state.

Table 4. ISIS's Visual Messaging Strategy Institutional Components Related to the State in al-Naba Before and After 2019 U.S. Troop Withdrawal Announcement.

<i>al-Naba</i> newspaper	Pre-withdrawal (<i>N</i> = 384)		Post-withdrawal (<i>N</i> = 503)		χ^2
	Count	Residual	Count	Residual	
Institutional components related to the state					
State					0.000*
Social services/state infrastructure	4	-0.5	7	0.5	
Law enforcements	12	-1	22	1	
Maps	0	-0.9	1	0.9	
Local markets	1	1.1	0	-1.1	
Passports	0	-1.2	2	1.2	
Natural landscape	5	2	1	-2	
Pledging allegiance to IS	2	-2.8	16	2.8	
State propaganda	152	5.9	107	-5.9	
Mixed	6	-0.5	10	0.5	
N/A	202	-4.4	337	4.4	
Flag					0.001*
At least one ISIS flag	24	-2.2	53	2.2	
A U.S. flag	1	-0.3	2	0.3	
A flag from MENA countries	1	-1.3	5	1.3	
Other	1	-0.3	2	0.3	
Multiple flags	1	-3.4	18	3.4	
N/A	356	3.9	423	-3.9	
Leader					0.1
Jihad leaders	0	-1.8	4	1.8	
Arab State leaders	0	-1.8	4	1.8	
Shiite/Tribal/ Other Muslim leaders	0	-0.9	1	0.9	
Mixed	1	1.1	0	-1.1	
No leaders are present	383	2.1	494	-2.1	

Note. * $p < .01$

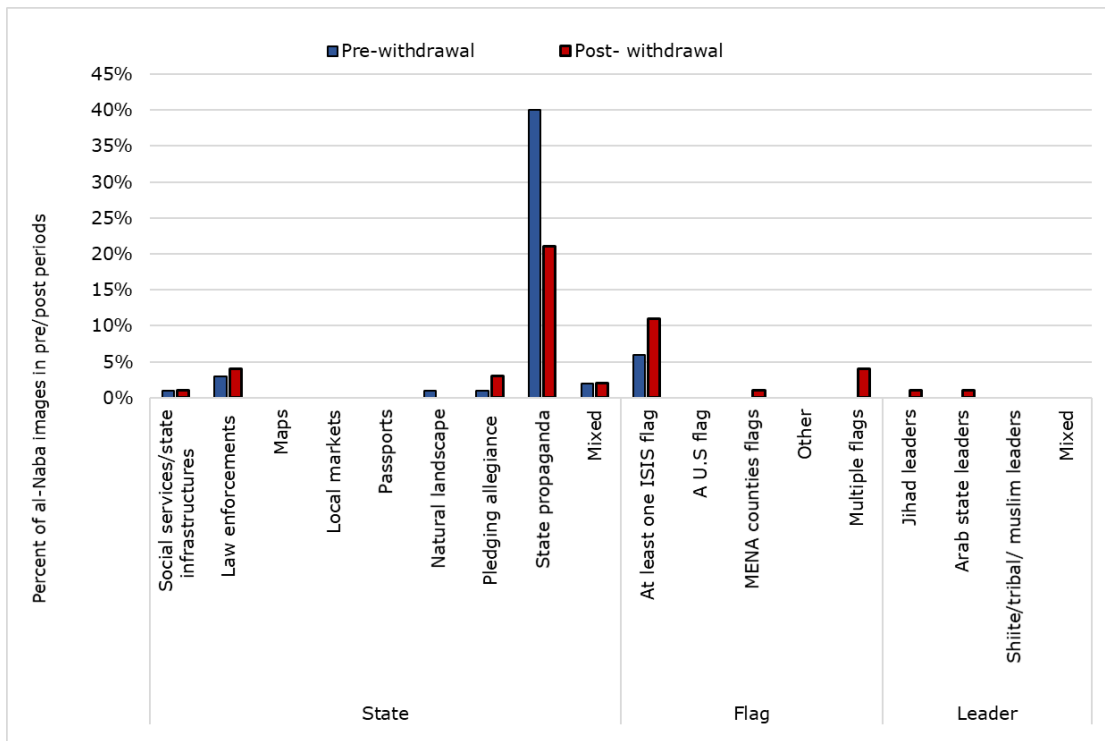


Figure 3. Institutional components related to the state.

When featuring institutional elements related to maintaining a strong defense, the newsletter did not change its display of cause of death, but did change its display of death, about to die image type, and images showing military personnel (see Table 5). After the troop withdrawal announcement, *al-Naba* showed a higher-than-expected number of about to die images, particularly those associated with presumed death. It displayed a lower-than-expected number of images showing death, possible death, or not about to die type. Figure 4 demonstrates the percentage of images in the pre- and post-withdrawal period related to institutional variables related to defense.

Table 5. ISIS's Visual Messaging Strategy Institutional Components Related to Defense in al-Naba Before and After 2019 U.S. Troop Withdrawal Announcement.

<i>al-Naba</i> newspaper	Pre-withdrawal (<i>N</i> = 384)		Post-withdrawal (<i>N</i> = 503)		χ^2
	Count	Residual	Count	Residual	
Institutional components related to defense					
Military					0.09
Martyrs (only after death)	1	1.1	0	-1.1	
Fighter/military	83	-0.4	115	0.4	
Fighter/military (non-ISIS)	23	1.4	20	-1.4	
Mixed	10	2.1	4	-2.1	
No human performing military roles	267	-0.9	364	0.9	
Death					0.001*
About to die	164	-3.7	278	3.7	
Dead	43	1.5	41	-1.5	
N/A	177	2.9	184	-2.9	
Cause of death					0.15
ISIS	41	1.6	38	-1.6	
FSA, SDF/YPG, other regional enemies	1	1.1	0	-1.1	
Western military forces	1	1.1	0	-1.1	
About to die					0.000*
Possible death	17	2.8	7	-2.8	
Certain death	23	0.1	29	-0.1	
Presumed death	128	-4.7	247	4.7	
N/A	216	3.7	220	-3.7	

Note. * $p < .01$

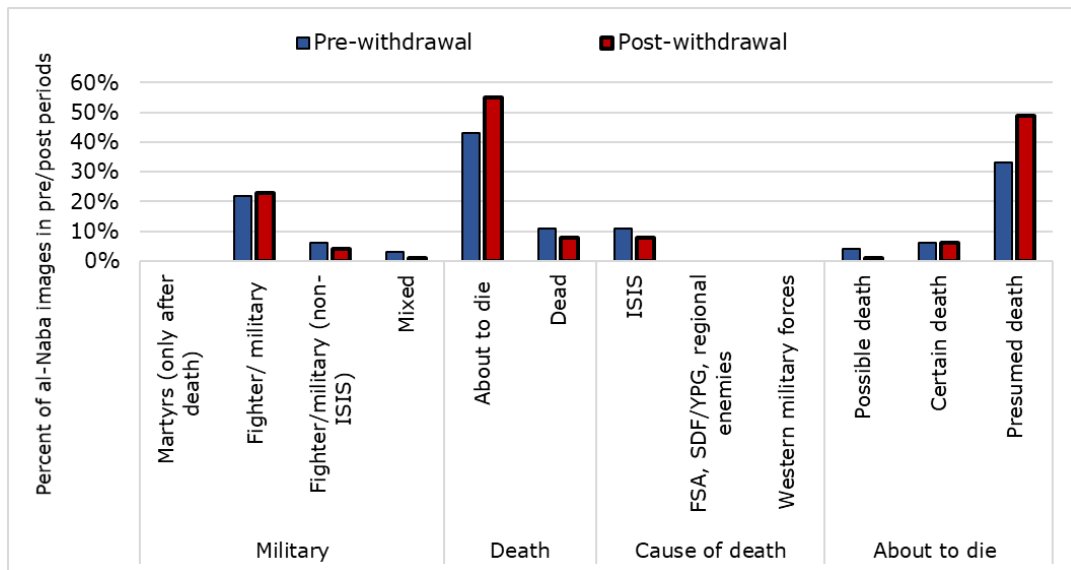


Figure 4. Institutional components related to defense.

The smoothed LOESS curve (see Figure 5) demonstrates the temporal trends of each significant variable across the time frame. As seen in the line graphs, an observable change exists in the variables after the troop withdrawal announcement (dotted blue line). The change in temporal trend following the announcement, weakens alternative explanations and influence of other contextual factors.

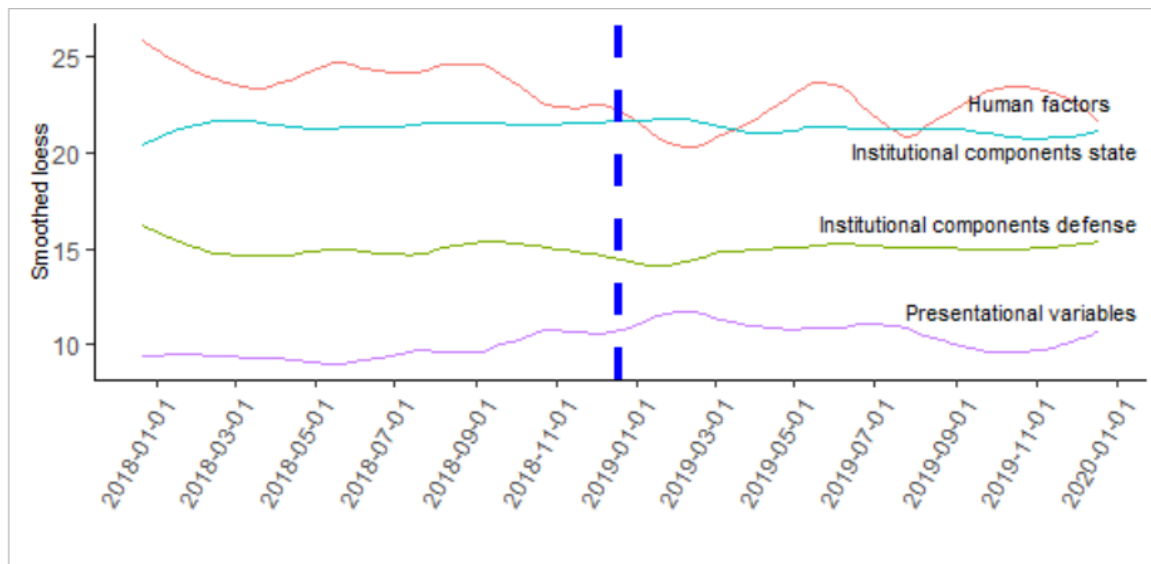


Figure 5. Smoothed LOESS curve of variables.

Discussion

This examination of the visual media output and content of *al-Naba* newsletter helps expand understandings of how nonstate actors react to troop withdrawal announcements in the context of the 21st century. ISIS's mode of reacting through an official magazine distributed primarily via social media after a tweeted troop withdrawal announcement differs from the practices and outcomes of previously studied state actors. With no announced negotiations between ISIS and the U.S. government, evaluations of the winners and losers in the conflict are left to the ingenuity of the media apparatuses of the opposing state and nonstate actors. One way that ISIS has taken advantage of such an opening is by changing its visual messaging campaign after President Trump's tweet announcing the U.S. troop withdrawal.

ISIS uses its visual messaging strategy to rebut premature claims of its defeat, and *al-Naba* stresses the continuity of ISIS's institutional presence by maintaining many of its visual image patterns established during the pre-troop-withdrawal period. The newsletter, for example, continues its expected frequency of images featuring militants, social service providers, maps, law enforcement, and passport control. Further, the newsletter emphasizes the resiliency of the group's membership by changing the number of humans it displays in its images. ISIS uses a higher than statistically expected number of images showing militants and other community members congregating in small and large groups and reinforces the sense of community continuity by using a higher-than-average number of photographs shot from a social or public distance (see Figure 6). Coupled with the sharply lower-than-expected number of images showing no human subjects, *al-Naba* strives to visually inoculate its followers against claims that group has disbanded in the aftermath of its defeat. At a symbolic level, the higher-than-expected number of images showing human subjects in standing positions visually buttresses the theme that ISIS is "still standing."



Figure 6. Image example: Small group of humans (al-Naba, 2018b, p. 7).

Despite its continuing presence, ISIS adopts a less provocative posture in its use of visual imagery. From a presentational standpoint, *al-Naba* reduces its more standard confrontational approach by changing the page positioning of its images. The newsletter deemphasizes the group's active agency by displaying a lower-than-expected number of images in the foreground. Instead, the group and its activities function as part of the scenic background at rates higher than statistically expected. Also, *al-Naba* deploys a less aggressive approach of displaying eye contact and the facial expressions of its photo subjects. After the troop withdrawal announcement, *al-Naba* uses a higher-than-expected number of images showing photo subjects looking outside the picture frame, a posture that defuses the focus by its pictured militia and community members (see Figure 7). The newsletter's display of a higher-than-expected number of photo subjects with negative facial expressions underscores the group's apparent reduced exuberance, at least in the near term, for fulfilling its stated mission of keeping its caliphate remaining and expanding.



Figure 7. Image example eye contact outside of the frame (al-Naba, 2019b, p. 7).

The content of the images in *al-Naba* also reinforces a less confrontation approach by ISIS in the post-troop-withdrawal period. The newsletter, for example, shows a lower-than-expected number of photographs showing dead bodies and individuals facing possible impending death, perhaps in an effort to avoid antagonizing its enemies or provoking the U.S. president into changing his mind about withdrawing troops. Similarly, on the media battlefield, *al-Naba* adopts a less forceful approach by displaying a much lower-than-expected number of photographs showcasing ISIS media products. In terms of the caliphate itself, *al-Naba* is also less aggressive in its visual strategy. The newsletter displays a lower-than-expected number of images showing pristine landscapes available for expansion of the ISIS community (see Figure 8). By relying on a less confrontational strategy of displaying its militants, media, and community in the near term, ISIS retains the option of fighting another day.



Figure 8. Image example: Natural landscape (al-Naba, 2018a, p. 7).

Moving forward, ISIS uses its visual messaging in *al-Naba* to stress that the group will strongly rebound in the future, and *al-Naba*'s significant change in its use of flag images signals (see Figure 9) ISIS's future plans because many of the flag images show the emblems of the group's enemies either burning or otherwise undergoing demolition (Seib & Janbek, 2011, p. 10). However, the higher-than-expected display of images showing pledges of allegiance to the ISIS leader suggests that the ISIS alliance will be more robust and capable of sustaining the caliphate in the future (see Figure 10). Further, the higher-than-expected number of presumed death images visually emphasizes that the group still has a ready supply of ammunition, guns, rocket launchers, and explosives to defend its group members. Finally, *al-Naba*'s use of many drone images showing the community from afar (i.e., social or public distance) helps reinforce the group's continued resilience in the sky, which position the group to produce intelligence and military readiness to relocate and defend the group moving forward.



Figure 9. Image example: ISIS flag (al-Naba, 2019c, p. 3).



Figure 10. Image example: Pledging allegiance (al-Naba, 2019a, p. 7).

The overall change in the ISIS media strategy to use more visual images to underscore its messaging in the post-troop-withdrawal period also has major implications for understanding how nonstate actors' function in the online environment. Assuming that the findings of previous experimental studies evaluating the impact of visual communication hold in the NSA context, ISIS followers should be more likely to attend to and recall shifts in the media campaign.

In sum, ISIS uses its visual media campaign in the aftermath of troop withdrawal announcements to reject notions of its defeat, to retrench into a less provocative posture in the near term, and to bolster assumptions about the group's success moving forward. With no officially negotiated settlement, nonstate actors are free to define both its present-day outcomes and future aspirations from their own perspective.

The online environment, coupled with inherent difficulties in controlling it, ensures that such alternative messaging will likely reach sympathetic followers.

Conclusions

To be consequential, U.S. presidential proclamations no longer have to appear in a declaration to the Congress or be embedded in a speech to the nation. As this study exemplifies, enemies and supporters alike attend to leader's social media posts and, depending on the content of such messaging, adjust their own media campaigns accordingly. By design, the condensed form of a tweet omits standard information such as the reasoning behind the leader's decision to remove troops from a particular theater, the timing of the proposed change, the spatial boundaries of the change, and the like. As such, it encourages the global audience to remain attentive to the leader's future words both on social media and in more traditional forums.

This study also contributes to understandings of online gatekeeping in the 21st century. Armed NSAs face many challenges from online followers who may have their own reasons to augment, disrupt, or otherwise change their official messaging. Through the use of both persuasion and the imposition of coercive orders, however, such groups can facilitate their gatekeeping roles over information. Even during periods of extreme stress, armed NSAs can officially brand publications, insist that content receive approval before distribution, and provide consequences to those who fail to comply (e.g., removal of access to encrypted chat rooms, restricted movement in or out of the caliphate). In short, armed NSAs can exercise traditional notions of gatekeeping even in the online environment by manipulating an individual's desire for belonging or by threatening harm to those and their families who fail to comply.

Finally, the different context facing armed NSAs expands upon standard, state-based understandings of wartime media frames. Unlike recognized states that experience defeats, negotiations, and reparations that lead to periods of "political plateau" (Jervis, 2010, p. 509) and "rationalization" (p. 508), armed NSAs lack a similar presumption of their continued existence after troop withdrawals. ISIS's media strategy reacts by downplaying bad news by visually demonstrating its continuing existence, shifting from a provocative militant stance to a short-term, visual retrenchment plan, and holding out a positive future with a well-equipped militant defense force.

This case study of ISIS could be used as a framework for examining other aspects of NSA's domestic politics and their responses to announcements from state actors. Even though this study looks at only one specific troop withdrawal tweet, it would be beneficial to compare the domestic politics of SDF/YPG to other content delivered via tweet. The comparative case study would strengthen the framework of analyzing domestic constituencies of NSAs and their responses to similar announcements.

This study is also limited because it only looks at a single case. Comparative cases with other groups, including al-Qaeda, SDF/YPG, as well as examining the differences between regional branches of ISIS, such as Boko Haram, could help see the more nuanced responses to official Twitter withdrawal announcements. Furthermore, this study only looks at visuals in their publication, a future study analyzing their propaganda videos, as well as the textual content would expand this study. Since troop withdrawal is

group specific, doing a larger case study by comparing different groups at different times will provide future insights to the relationship.

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