Dancing To Their Tune: The Image of ISIS in Kurdish media:

An Analysis of ISIS Warfare Coverage in Iraq

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Abstract— **Media is a powerful tool for disseminating information and shaping public perception. It also serves as a strategic instrument for governments and private entities to communicate their narratives. Engaging with media requires caution and expertise to avoid inadvertently spreading fear—especially in the context of terrorism.**

The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS, also known as ISIL) has been particularly adept at leveraging media to assert dominance, spread its ideology, and manipulate public perception. Kurdistan, an autonomous region in Northern Iraq, faced unique challenges in reporting on ISIS due to its proximity to occupied territories. In this complex media landscape, Kurdish outlets struggled to cover the terrorist group effectively, sometimes inadvertently amplifying its message. This phenomenon coincided with a surge in Kurdish recruits joining ISIS, leading to the formation of a Kurdish faction within the organization.

Using Framing Theory and the Agenda-Setting Model, this research employs content analysis to examine how Kurdish media portrayed ISIS. By analyzing news coverage from Kurdish news channels such as (Rudaw, NRT, K24, Kurdsat News, Spede and Payam) between June 2014 to June 218, this study investigates whether Kurdish media unintentionally contributed to the visibility or perceived legitimacy of ISIS. The findings will shed light on the unintended consequences of terrorism reporting and its role in shaping public narratives.

Index Terms— **ISIS, Kurdish Media, Framing Theory, Agenda-Setting, Terror.**

I. INTRODUCTION

The issues of extremism, as well as religious and political violence—particularly in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks in the United States—have become critical global concerns. Governments and international institutions have increasingly prioritized these challenges, especially following the rise of terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS. This subject has garnered significant academic, strategic, and political attention, as terrorism has developed into a transnational phenomenon that impacts all nations and poses a substantial threat to political stability and civil society.

Terrorism is widely recognized as a destructive instrument employed to instill fear and undermine the security of opposing entities and adversaries.(https://www.unodc.org/documents/e4j/18-04932_CT_Mod_01_ebook_FINALpdf.pdf, pp.5)

Religion plays a significant role in shaping individual actions and decision-making, as moral and behavioral frameworks are often influenced by religious teachings. This influence can serve as a powerful motivator in fulfilling personal and ideological objectives. Given the diversity of religious beliefs and human perspectives, ideological differences—both within and outside religious traditions—are inevitable. The emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was facilitated by security gaps, political instability in Syria, and weak border controls, which allowed the group to establish itself as a well-organized entity with both economic and military capabilities. (Cornwell, B., Chi Cui, C., Mitchell, V., Schlegelmilch, B., Dzulkiflee, A., & Chan, J. (2019). A cross-cultural study of the role of religion in consumers' ethical positions. International Marketing Review, 22(5), 531-546).

The geographical proximity of Iraq and Syria enabled ISIS to expand its operations, secure financial resources, and enhance its media presence. At this stage, the media played a crucial role in amplifying ISIS's influence, not only through its own propaganda channels but also through international news coverage. ISIS effectively exploited Kurdish media outlets to spread fear by broadcasting graphic depictions of violence, including executions, beheadings, and mass killings. This strategy of psychological warfare had a significant impact on the morale of regional military forces, illustrating the group's calculated military and economic strategies.

Kurdish media primarily functioned as a news-reporting means, often relying on international agencies rather than developing independent editorial narratives. However, over time, Kurdish media gained greater prominence and influence, bringing local organizations to the international stage. One of the most notable outlets was Rudaw, which provided consistent updates on military operations and battlefield developments. Rudaw was the first Kurdish media organization to report from the USS George Washington aircraft carrier, positioning itself

as a key source of information on military operations against ISIS.

Despite this growing influence, Kurdish media outlets, due to their relative inexperience, inadvertently became conduits for ISIS propaganda, amplifying its military actions and demonstrations of strength. While Kurdish media was still in its developmental stages, its extensive coverage of ISIS's brutal acts contributed to the group's psychological warfare, intensifying public fear. For example, when ISIS first entered Iraq, it filmed and disseminated videos of attacks on military and civilian vehicles, spreading them widely online. This created widespread panic, particularly regarding travel along major routes such as the Baghdad Road. Subsequently, ISIS advanced from Syria into Iraq, capturing Mosul with just 300 militants. (https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2014-09-26/debates/1409266000001/IraqCoalitionAgainstISIL).

They swiftly seized military equipment and ammunition from the Iraqi army, using these resources to consolidate their power.

This marked the beginning of ISIS's strategic use of media to shape public perception, drawing significant attention from both Iraqi and Kurdish media outlets. Their acts of terror and brutality dominated news coverage, fostering widespread fear and uncertainty among the population. (https://casebook.icrc.org/case-study/iraq-battle-mosul.)

A. The Research Problem:

Ensuring the security of a nation and its autonomous regions necessitates the presence of robust security agencies and institutions. Media, as a powerful communication tool, plays a crucial role in shaping public perception and can significantly influence the portrayal of events within a country, either to overestimate or underestimate their significance. However, insurgent and extremist groups are primary agents of disorder, leveraging media—particularly social media platforms—for war propaganda, psychological warfare, and the destabilization of security through fearmongering.

ISIS, in particular, successfully utilized other media outlets to disseminate its ideology, publicize its activities, and establish itself as a primary source of news for other media outlets. Its strategic use of propaganda facilitated recruitment, expanded its influence, and intensified psychological warfare on both regional and international levels. Thus, it should be studied carefully and a number of questions must be asked, including:

1. What media genre has been utilized as a means of conveying messages to the public?
2. understanding of the Kairos: what was the opportune moment for disseminating media content on social media platforms to ensure maximum engagement and impact
3. Understanding of the identities of actors or characters in media content in terms of gender, occupation, nationality, and other sociocultural attributes?
4. Understanding of the messages: What were the subject matter of the contents, and what messages did it aim to convey?

B. The Importance of the Research:

The significance of this research paper stems from the critical relevance of the topic, which has posed challenges to nations for an extended period. This study will serve as a valuable resource for researchers and individuals seeking to understand how radical and extremist groups strategically utilize media for their objectives

C. Research objectives:

1. Which media genre is primarily utilized, and what are the underlying reasons for its selection?
2. Is there a structured publication schedule, or is the content published on an ad hoc basis?
3. Which media genre do you rely on, and what are the factors influencing your choice?
4. What is the nature of the content produced? What type of content is predominantly published?
5. Which types or groups of terrorists are primarily discussed, and how much attention is given to the terrorists operating in Kurdistan? How are these groups portrayed?

D. The Research Methodology:

1. Through a descriptive content analysis method, 1636 news items and other media contents have been collected and analyzed using the classification form, frequencies and percentage to scrutinized how Kurdish media portrayed ISIS.
2. The research community for this study consists of ISIS propaganda and media materials. The research sample is drawn from the topics published on social media platforms over a one-year period, starting from June 2014, to June 218.

II. THE CONCEPT OF TERRORISM:

A. Historical Origins and Modern Perspectives

The term "terror" originates from the French word meaning to instill fear and terrorize individuals. Its historical roots trace back to the period following the French Revolution of 1789, during the power struggle between the Jacobins and the Girondins. (Patrice Hogonnet, The meaning of the Terror in the French Revelation, Journal Article, Translate by : cafenza academic translation, 1986, pp. 436-445) In the Reign of Terro, the Jacobins (Le Gouvernement de la Terreur), used the term when self-reflexively portraying their own actions in—and explanations of—the French Revolution. (Burgess, Mark (2003). A Brief History of Terrorism. Washington, D.C.: Center for Defense Information (CDI); Tuman, Joseph S. (2009). Communicating Terror: The Rhetorical Dimensions of Terrorism (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.)

In 1790, British politician Edmund Burke was one of the first to use the term "terrorism" to describe the Jacobin rule under Maximilien Robespierre (1793–1794). During this period, Robespierre's government carried out mass executions, resulting in the deaths of approximately 40,000 individuals. Additionally, around 500,000 people were arrested, 200,000

were prosecuted, and another 200,000 were imprisoned, where many perished due to starvation and harsh conditions. (Charles Tilly, Terror as Strategy and Relational Process, Colombia University USA, SAGE, 2005, Vol 46(1–2): pp. 11–32).

By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, acts of political violence increased significantly. Between 1894 and 1901, five heads of state—including the leaders of France, Belgium, Spain, the United States, and Italy—were assassinated. In 1914, the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary and his wife by Gavrilo Princip, a Serbian nationalist affiliated with the Black Hand organization, triggered the outbreak of World War I. These events prompted further scholarly inquiry into the concept of terrorism.

During the interwar period, the international community sought to define and address terrorism as a legal and political issue. In 1934, following the assassination of Yugoslav King Alexander I, the League of Nations introduced terrorism as a subject of international law, specifically addressing its nature and characteristics in Article. (John Philip Jenkins, Terrorism, Encyclopedia Britannica, 11/1/2025).

B. Defining Terrorism

Over time, numerous definitions of terrorism have emerged. One general definition describes terrorism as "Terror is a violent act that is done through fear and petrifying for the purpose of imposing and becoming superior to the ruling system or community".(United Nation Development Program, Preventing Violent Extremism Through Promoting Inclusive Development, Tolerance and Respect for Diversity, One United Nations Plaza, 2016, pp.12.)

Another definition characterizes it as the use of violent and aggressive tactics to spread fear, unrest, and instability within a community to achieve specific objectives (Mark S. Hamm, Crimes Committed by Terrorist Groups: Theory, Research and Prevention, published by the U.S. Department of Justice, 2005, pp.4).

These definitions suggest that terrorism is not an end in itself but rather a strategic tool used to exert pressure, create fear, and coerce opponents into submission or retreat in political conflicts. Recognizing this, the United Nations in 1947 defined terrorism as "all criminal acts committed against a state with the intent of instilling fear in individuals, groups, or society at large. (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Human Rights, Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism, fact sheet no.32, Published by the Peace and Security Section of the Department of Public Information – DPI/2439B/ Rev.2 – December 2007.)"Similarly, the United States defines terrorism as "all acts of unjustified violence, including murder and kidnapping, that cause physical harm and have international repercussions. Regardless of the motivations or justifications, terrorism is never excusable, particularly when it targets innocent civilians."(Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Bid), ISIS "Islamic State in Iraq and Syria is a transnational jihad movement that has orchestrated or inspired terrorist attacks around the world.(https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Isis), Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (or Islamic State in Iraq and Syria): a radical Sunni Muslim organization whose aim is to restore an Islamic state, or caliphate, in the region

encompassing Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, the Palestinian territories, and southeastern Turkey.(https://www.dictionary.com/browse/isis)

C. The Psychology of Terrorism

The motivations behind terrorist actions and the psychological profile of terrorists have been widely analyzed. According to Dr. Adib Khazur, in his book Media and Terror, terrorism stems from ideological, political, or religious beliefs that justify violent actions as a means of advancing an overarching agenda. He argues that terrorist groups rationalize their criminal acts as necessary for achieving their ideological goals, often resorting to political and religious violence against opposing entities. (Adeeb Khadour, Media and Terrorism, (without the name of the printer), Damascus, 2009, p. 13.)

Similarly, the Russian revolutionary and political theorist Peter Kropotkin describes terrorism as "propaganda through violence." In modern times, terrorism is regarded as one of the most powerful forms of psychological warfare, designed to break enemy morale and create widespread fear. (Peter Kropotkin, Terrorism, the Anarchist Body, and the Russian Revolution, Research for this article was carried out during a PhD funded by a Northumbria University studentship, Basingstoke, 2015, pp.8.) Walter Laqueur, a prominent scholar on terrorism, reinforces this idea by stating: "Terrorist acts alone accomplish little; their real power lies in their dissemination through media channels."(Josef Jařab, Media and terrorism, FrenchSenate,2005,https://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/X2 H-Xref- ViewHTML.asp?FileID=10914&lang=EN.)

Turkish researcher Asif Teljan further emphasizes the role of media in terrorism, arguing that "the execution of terrorist acts is only the beginning of the propaganda process." He asserts that terrorist groups rely on media coverage to amplify their presence, gain recognition, and attract attention within societies. Terrorist leaders are acutely aware of the importance of media exposure, understanding that successful propaganda depends not only on the execution of violent acts but also on their portrayal in the media through messaging and self-representation as victorious forces. (Adil Ali,Terrorism: Threats and Risks, Hamdi Publishing House, Sulaimani, 2011, page 11.)

D. The Rising of Islamic State:

Many researchers and historians attribute the rise of ISIS to sectarian tensions between Sunni and Shia factions in Iraq. The group sought to align itself with Iraq's Sunni population, particularly in the context of the largely non-violent anti-government protests of 2013. (Mossallanejad, A. (2016). The Rise of ISIS and the Future of Iraq's Security. In Geopolitics Quarterly (Issue 11)) Other scholars trace its emergence back more than a decade, arguing that ISIS evolved from Sunni insurgency movements, jihadist factions, and resistance groups that opposed the Multi-National Force and the U.S.-led coalition during the Iraq War.

What distinguishes ISIS from other insurgent and terrorist organizations is its self-proclaimed "caliphate" structure, which asserted authority over the entire Sunni population in Iraq and Syria. Additionally, ISIS's rise reflects broader global trends of Islamization, which emphasize the tensions between religiosity

and modernity, exacerbated by the growing influence of Islamic militancy. (De Spiegeleire, S., & Sweijs, T. (2017). Case Study: The Rise and Fall of ISIS: from Evitability to Inevitability. In Volatility and Friction in the Age of Disintermediation (pp. 155–172).) As Patrick Cockburn (2015) states, the emergence of ISIS represents "the most radical change to the political geography of the Middle East since the Sykes-Picot Agreement was implemented in the aftermath of the First World War".(Patrick Cockburn, "Isis Consolidates," London Review of Books 36, no. 16 (August 21, 2014): 3–5. See also Jason Burke, The New Threat (London: Penguin, 2015), 91.)

E. ISIS Propaganda Techniques and Their Impact on Media and Public Perception

ISIS employs a range of propaganda techniques to influence and manipulate public perception, particularly through strategic emotional appeals, misinformation, and radicalizing content. These techniques are designed to maximize psychological impact, shape narratives, and recruit followers. The following are key types of ISIS propaganda, their characteristics, and their effects on media and audiences:(https://works.swarthmore.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1004&context=swarthmoreirjournal, pp.5)

1. Violence and Brutality as a Psychological Weapon (https://www.ijlmh.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Psychological-Warfare-of-Sexual-Violence.pdf**, pp.8)**

Characteristics:
- ISIS frequently disseminates graphic images and videos depicting acts of extreme violence, including beheadings, executions, and the destruction of cultural heritage.

- These violent acts are often framed within religious rhetoric, presenting them as divinely sanctioned actions.

Impact on Media and Public Perception:
(https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10451722/)
- Such content is designed to provoke shock and fear, ensuring widespread dissemination across social media and news platforms.

- It serves as both a recruitment tool and a mechanism of deterrence, intimidating local populations and deterring opposition through psychological warfare.

3. Martyrdom and Sacrifice as a Recruitment Strategy
(file:///C:/Users/Netcom/Downloads/MartyrdomandSacrifice-TheUnspokenDutyofGoodMeninGeopoliticalStruggle.pdfm pp.17)

Characteristics:
- ISIS glorifies martyrdom, portraying its fighters as self-sacrificing heroes who die for a noble cause.

- Propaganda materials, including videos and publications, highlight personal stories of individuals who "sacrifice themselves" for the establishment of the caliphate.

Impact on Media and Public Perception:
(file:///C:/Users/Netcom/Downloads/2019agendachapterWantaX.pdf**, pp.12)**
- This emotional appeal is particularly effective among young and impressionable individuals, offering them a sense of purpose and belonging.

- The narrative of martyrdom is reinforced by promises of afterlife rewards, making it psychologically compelling for those vulnerable to radicalization.

3. The "In-Group vs. Out-Group" Narrative Characteristics:
- ISIS constructs a binary worldview, positioning itself as the defender of "true Islam" against perceived enemies, including Western powers, Shia Muslims, Kurds, and other groups.

- This narrative is reinforced through symbolic imagery, derogatory language, and accusations against Western interventions.

Impact on Media and Public Perception:
- By fostering an "us vs. them" mentality, ISIS strengthens group identity and loyalty, making recruitment efforts more effective.

- The demonization of outsiders justifies acts of violence, portraying them as necessary defensive measures against those deemed enemies of Islam.

4. The Glorification of the Caliphate and State-Building Characteristics:
- ISIS presents its so-called caliphate as a utopian Islamic state, claiming to provide stability, law, and prosperity.

- Propaganda materials depict ISIS-run territories as well-functioning societies, free from corruption and oppression.

Impact on Media and Public Perception:
- This narrative appeals to Muslims disillusioned by political corruption, war, or social instability, offering them an alternative vision of governance.

- It serves as both a recruitment tool and a means of maintaining morale among existing members by reinforcing the illusion of a successful state.

5. Victimization and the Defense of Islam Characteristics:
- ISIS portrays itself as the protector of Muslims worldwide, claiming to defend them against Western oppression and regional adversaries such as Iran or the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

- Propaganda frequently includes visuals and narratives depicting Muslim suffering, framing ISIS's actions as defensive rather than offensive.

Impact on Media and Public Perception:
- This narrative fosters a sense of solidarity and collective identity, making ISIS appear as a necessary force for Muslim self-defense.

- By portraying its violent actions as responses to aggression, ISIS seeks to justify its attacks and attract sympathy from broader audiences. (https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/11039769.pdf, pp.6)

F. Terrorist Activities and Counter-Terrorism Efforts in Southern Kurdistan

Although the global war on terrorism was officially declared after the September 11, 2001, attacks, terrorist activities had already been occurring in Southern Kurdistan, prompting counter-terrorism efforts. High-ranking Kurdish officials were among the victims of these early attacks, which underscored the persistent threat posed by extremist groups in the region.

Seven months before the 9/11 attacks, on February 18, 2001, a targeted assassination was carried out in Erbil against Franso Hariri, a prominent member of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (PDK). The attack on his convoy resulted in his death, alongside multiple explosions that took place near the Ministry of Interior and the headquarters of PDK forces in Erbil .(https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/241220161.)

Shortly after the September 11 attacks, on September 23, 2001, the Ansar al-Islam terrorist group launched an assault on a Peshmerga unit in the village of Kheli Hama. The confrontation lasted for three hours, during which twelve Ansar al-Islam militants were killed. However, the attack resulted in the deaths of 43 Peshmerga fighters, some of whom were taken captive. The bodies of the fallen Peshmerga were brutally mutilated, with some being decapitated and others having their noses, ears, tongues, or eyes removed. Around the same period, a terrorist attack targeted then-Prime Minister Dr.Barham Salih of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), resulting in the deaths of several of his security guards. (https://kurdsatnews.com/ckb/report/8108.)

Following the Kheli Hama attack, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) engaged in negotiations with Ansar al-Islam in an attempt to de-escalate tensions. Shawkat Haji Mushir, a key Kurdish official who had previously held discussions with the group's leaders, arranged another meeting on the night of February 8-9, 2003, in the village of Gameshtapa, Sharazoor. Accompanied by Sardar Ghafoor and Hukmat Haji Othman, Shawkat Haji Mushir sought to reach an understanding with the extremist group. However, the meeting ended in a deadly ambush, as all three Kurdish representatives were executed by Ansar al-Islam. (https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/sanctions/1267/aq_san ctions_list/summaries/entity/ansar-al-islam.)
The escalation of terrorist activities culminated in a coordinated attack on February 1, 2004, when two simultaneous explosions targeted the PDK and PUK headquarters in Erbil. The attack claimed the lives of several high-ranking officials from both parties, including Sami Abdulrahman, Sa'd Abdulla, Shawkat Sheikh Yazdeen, and Shakhawan Abbas, along with multiple government officials. This tragic event prompted the Kurdistan Regional Government to implement a more comprehensive counter-terrorism strategy, significantly reducing the frequency of large-scale terrorist attacks in the region. (https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/010220251.)

Despite enhanced security measures, sporadic attacks continued to occur. On August 23, 2018, a car bomb detonated on the Erbil-Kirkuk road near Hawler Technical Institute. Fortunately, the explosion did not result in any casualties. However, just a month later, on September 29, 2018, a group of terrorists carried out coordinated explosions outside the Erbil *Asayish* (security) headquarters before launching an armed assault using grenades and firearms. The attack resulted in the deaths of seven individuals, most of whom were employees of the Ministry of Interior. These incidents highlight the persistent security threats faced by the Kurdistan Region and the ongoing efforts of the KRG to combat terrorism through strategic countermeasures.

G. The establishment of Counter Terrorism Agency (CTA) of Kurdistan

In the Kurdistan Region, in addition to established counter-terrorism laws, multiple security agencies actively work to combat terrorism and extremist activities. These include the *Dzha* (Counter-Terror) Agency, the *Asayish* (Security) Agency, the *Parastin* (Protection) Agency, and various intelligence and security departments dedicated to counter-terrorism efforts.

The Counter-Terrorism Agency plays a crucial role in preventing and combating terrorism and radicalization in the region. One of its primary responsibilities is conducting public awareness campaigns aimed at educating citizens about the threats posed by terrorism, the recruitment tactics employed by extremist organizations such as ISIS, and effective strategies for identifying and responding to signs of radicalization. (https://euaa.europa.eu/country-guidance-iraq-2024/23-kurdistan-regional-government-krgauthorities#:~:text=The%20KRG%20authorities%20compr ise%20both,security%20actors%20of%20the%20KRG.)

These awareness campaigns often include:

1. **Educational Programs**: The CTA may collaborate with schools, universities, and community organizations to teach people, especially young people, about the risks of extremist ideologies and radicalization. These programs often focus on promoting critical thinking, tolerance, and the values of peace and coexistence.(Atran, S. 2016. Youth: Countering Extremism and Promoting Peace. World Bank.)

Public Awareness Campaigns: These campaigns are often disseminated through media outlets (TV, radio, social media, and billboards) to raise awareness of terrorist threats and how

the public can stay vigilant. They also educate citizens on how to report suspicious activities and behavior that may be linked to terrorism.(https://gov.krd/ocia-en/activities/news-and-press-releases/2024/december/unoct-delegation-commits-to-strengthening-counter-terrorism-efforts-with-krg.

2. **Collaborations with International Partners**: The CTA often works with international partners, including intelligence agencies and NGOs, to share knowledge and resources for better counterterrorism efforts. These partnerships help in developing effective campaigns based on global best practices.(https://govkrd.bcdn.net/OtherEntities/Office%20of% 20the%20Coordinator%20for%20International%20A dvocacy/English/Publications/Reports/2023/Kurdista n%20Regional.pdf.)

3. **De-radicalization Programs**: Part of the CTA's efforts may include initiatives aimed at rehabilitating individuals who have been radicalized. These programs work on providing psychological and social support to help them reintegrate into society.(https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/a_new_approach_epub. pdf.)

III. THEORITOCAL FRAMEWORK

A. Kurdish Media

Since the publication of the first Kurdish newspaper in 1898, Kurdish media has played a significant role in shaping various aspects of life, including political, social, and economic developments. However, despite its long history, Kurdish media has often struggled to report events in a structured and professional manner. A notable example of this challenge was its coverage of the war against ISIS.

Following ISIS's capture of Mosul and other areas in Iraq, Kurdish media played a counterproductive role by inadvertently amplifying the terrorist organization's strength and resilience. When ISIS launched an offensive on Kurdish territories on August 7, 2014, it swiftly took control of Makhmur, a strategically important town located just 40 kilometers from Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Media coverage contributed to widespread fear and uncertainty, leading to the evacuation of approximately 90% of Erbil's population. This incident illustrates how Kurdish media, instead of providing accurate and strategic reporting, exacerbated public panic.

Furthermore, during multiple battles between Peshmerga forces and ISIS militants, Kurdish media's presence on the frontlines had unintended consequences. Journalists frequently conducted interviews with Peshmerga fighters from active trenches, inadvertently disclosing sensitive information about troop positions and movements. This lack of operational security enabled ISIS to obtain intelligence that was later used to launch targeted mortar strikes against Peshmerga forces. Additionally, militants exploited details from media reports to plant mines along Peshmerga supply routes and adjust their strategies in response to anticipated Kurdish counteroffensives. In some cases, Kurdish media outlets directly revealed plans for upcoming Peshmerga operations, allowing ISIS to prepare defensive measures in advance.

These instances highlight the urgent need for Kurdish media to adopt more responsible and strategic reporting practices, particularly in conflict situations. By prioritizing operational security and minimizing the dissemination of sensitive battlefield information, Kurdish media can play a more constructive role in supporting national security efforts while keeping the public informed.

B. Framing ISIS:The Kurdish Media's Unintended Narrative

Framing theory posits that media outlets influence public perception by selecting and emphasizing certain aspects of an event while omitting others, thereby shaping how audiences interpret reality. (Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm. Journal of Communication, 43(4), 51-58) In the context of ISIS warfare coverage in Iraq, Kurdish media often framed the group as an existential threat, focusing on its brutality, military capabilities, and territorial expansion. While such framing was intended to highlight the severity of the crisis and rally support for military action, it also inadvertently contributed to ISIS's own propaganda by reinforcing its image as a powerful and fearsome entity.

A key aspect of this framing was the extensive coverage of ISIS's atrocities, including mass executions, beheadings, and attacks on civilians. While exposing these war crimes was crucial, continuously displaying graphic imagery and narrating ISIS's terror tactics in detail played into the group's psychological warfare strategy. ISIS relied heavily on media attention to instill fear and establish itself as a dominant force in the region. (Ingram, H. J. (2016). The Strategic Logic of Islamic State Information Operations. Australian Journal of International Affairs, 70(6), 641-662.) Kurdish media, by repeatedly showcasing ISIS's violent acts, may have unintentionally amplified this effect.

Moreover, the portrayal of ISIS as a well-organized and technologically advanced group—often highlighting its use of social media for recruitment, its financial resources, and its military tactics—added to the perception of its invincibility. Research on terrorist media strategies suggests that groups like ISIS seek to be framed as powerful actors to intimidate enemies and attract recruits. (Winter, C. (2015). The Virtual Caliphate: Understanding Islamic State's Propaganda Strategy. Quilliam Foundation.) Kurdish media's focus on ISIS's successes, even when intended to warn the public, contributed to the group's self-image as an unstoppable force.

C. Agenda-Setting: The Overemphasis on ISIS's Activities

Agenda-setting theory explains how media influences what the public perceives as the most important issues by repeatedly covering specific topics. (McCombs, M. E., & Shaw, D. L. (1972). The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media. Public Opinion Quarterly, 36(2), 176-187.) During the war against ISIS, Kurdish media set the news agenda heavily around the group's attacks, territorial gains, and ideological messaging. This constant coverage ensured that ISIS remained at the center of public discourse, sometimes at the expense of alternative

narratives such as Kurdish military successes, humanitarian responses, or efforts to rebuild liberated areas.

By prioritizing ISIS-related news, Kurdish media may have unknowingly provided the group with the visibility it sought. Terrorist organizations thrive on media attention, as it legitimizes their existence and extends their reach beyond the battlefield.(Nacos, B. L. (2002). Mass-Mediated Terrorism: The Central Role of the Media in Terrorism and Counterterrorism. Rowman & Littlefield.) Even when media coverage was overwhelmingly negative, the sheer volume of reports ensured that ISIS remained a dominant topic in Kurdish public discourse. This level of attention played into ISIS's strategic objectives by reinforcing its presence in the collective consciousness of the Kurdish audience.

Furthermore, the urgency-driven nature of news coverage meant that media outlets frequently used dramatic headlines and sensationalist language to attract viewership. Terms such as "ISIS advances," "ISIS threat," and "unstoppable ISIS" appeared frequently in Kurdish news reports. While intended to convey the seriousness of the situation, such language may have contributed to a sense of inevitability regarding ISIS's presence and influence. Agenda-setting theory suggests that when an issue is persistently covered, audiences begin to perceive it as the most significant concern, often overshadowing other equally critical developments.(Ibid 2014)

IV. METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

A. Method

This study employs content analysis, a widely used research method in the fields of communication, media studies, and social sciences. Content analysis is a systematic and reproducible technique that involves summarizing specific words, themes, or elements within media content. The fundamental process includes categorizing similar data under key concepts and themes, followed by an interpretative analysis. By classifying, categorizing, and examining the media content of Kurdish news outlets during the ISIS conflict in Iraq, this study aims to provide insights into how Kurdish media framed and represented ISIS.

B. Data Collection Process

The data for this study were sourced from the media content of Six major Kurdish news channels in the Kurdistan Region, covering the period from June 2014 to June 2018. The research sought to identify the genre, themes, and structural patterns of Kurdish media coverage related to ISIS activities in Iraq, with a particular focus on the Kurdistan Region. Relevant materials, including feature stories, documentary news items, interviews, and reports, were collected from the social media platforms of these Kurdish news channels. The data collection process was conducted between June and July 2018.

C. Data Analysis

A total of 1,636 media items from major Kurdish news channels aired in the Kurdistan Region about ISIS and 1455 items of contents published on various platforms belong to ISIS were categorized and analyzed according to various thematic classifications. The data were evaluated using the content analysis method, following a structured approach that involved classification, description, and interpretation according to the research objectives. Content analysis progresses through systematic classification and detailed examination of collected data, allowing for an objective assessment of media representation and framing techniques used in the coverage of ISIS-related events.

D. Results

Table (1)
Themes of Media Content on Social Media Platforms Used by ISIS

Type of the Propaganda	Repetition	Percentage
Online Presence	124	8.52
Videos	12	0.82
Magazines and Publications	4	0.27
Messages of Martyrdom	1275	87.62
Infiltration of Communities	18	1.23
Narratives of Victimhood	9	0.61
Appealing to Religious Extremism	13	0.89
Total	1455	100%

This table examines the thematic focus of ISIS's media strategies, identifying different types of propaganda used for dissemination. The dataset includes **1,455 instances** of propaganda materials:

- **Messages of martyrdom dominate the content, comprising 87.62% (1,275 instances).** This overwhelming percentage suggests that ISIS's media strategy heavily relies on narratives of sacrifice, glorifying individuals who die for the cause to inspire further recruitment.
- **Online presence accounts for 8.52% (124 instances),** reflecting ISIS's efforts to maintain visibility and reach through digital platforms.
- **Videos make up 0.82% (12 instances),** indicating a limited but notable use of audiovisual content for persuasion and recruitment.
- **Magazines and publications represent 0.27% (4 instances),** showing a minimal reliance on print or digital periodicals for propaganda.
- **Infiltration of communities accounts for 1.23% (18 instances),** suggesting that ISIS uses media content to subtly integrate into different societal structures.
- **Appealing to religious extremism comprises 0.89% (13 instances),** reinforcing ISIS's ideological foundation through religious rhetoric.
- **Narratives of victimhood constitute 0.61% (9 instances),** portraying ISIS and its supporters as oppressed to gain sympathy and legitimacy.

The significant focus on martyrdom messaging indicates that ISIS primarily employs emotional and psychological tactics to radicalize individuals and sustain its recruitment efforts.

Table (2)
Messages of Media Content on Social Media Platforms Used by ISIS

Terrorism	Repetition	%
Introducing the terrorist groups	51	16.88
Indicating the strength of the terrorist group	88	29.13
Showing the terrorist works and activities	93	30.79
Spreading fear and panic among people	32	10.59
Terrorist attacks and acts	18	5.96
Terrorist fearlessness and perseverance	9	2.98
Introducing the leaders of the terrorist groups esp. ISIL	11	3.64
Total	302	100

This table categorizes the key messages conveyed through ISIS-affiliated media content, highlighting their role in propaganda and recruitment. The dataset consists of **302 instances** of media messages, categorized as follows:

- **Depiction of terrorist activities** constitutes the largest proportion, with **30.79% (93 messages)** showcasing the group's operations and attacks. This suggests a strategic effort to project an image of power and activity.
- **Indicating the strength of the terrorist group** accounts for **29.13% (88 messages)**, reinforcing ISIS's military capabilities and resilience.
- **Introducing terrorist groups** comprises **16.88% (51 messages),** which serves to familiarize audiences with ISIS's structure, mission, and ideology.
- **Spreading fear and panic** represents **10.59% (32 messages)**, illustrating ISIS's deliberate attempt to instill terror among both local populations and international audiences.
- **Terrorist attacks and acts** make up **5.96% (18 messages)**, focusing specifically on violent operations.
- **Introducing ISIS leaders** constitutes **3.64% (11 messages)**, suggesting an effort to legitimize and personalize ISIS leadership.
- **Emphasizing terrorist fearlessness and perseverance** accounts for **2.98% (9 messages)**, portraying ISIS members as unwavering in their mission.

This classification reveals that ISIS primarily uses media content to establish dominance, instill fear, and reinforce its operational success, rather than solely focusing on ideological justification.

Table (3)
Genres of Media Content on ISIS Published by Kurdish News Channels

Type of the production	Repetition	Percentage
TV Spots	36	2.20
Feature Stories	31	1.89
Documentaries	10	0.611
Photos	358	21.88
News item text	1102	67.35
Interviews	70	4.27
Op-ed Articles	29	1.77
Total	1636	100

This table categorizes the types of media content published by Kurdish news channels on social media platforms in relation to ISIS. The dataset includes **1,636** pieces of media content, categorized as follows:

- **News item texts** constituted the largest proportion, comprising **67.35% (1,102 items)**. This dominance suggests a strong preference for textual news reporting in Kurdish media coverage.
- **Photos** were the second most prevalent media type, accounting for **21.88% (358 items)**. The significant presence of images indicates an emphasis on visual storytelling.
- **Interviews** represented **4.27% (70 items)**, suggesting a moderate engagement with firsthand accounts or expert opinions.
- **TV spots (2.20%)**, **feature stories (1.89%)**, **op-ed articles (1.77%)**, and **documentaries (0.61%)** made up smaller portions, indicating a lesser reliance on long-form and analytical content.

This distribution suggests that Kurdish media focused primarily on direct news dissemination and visual documentation rather than in-depth investigative or opinion-based journalism.

Table (4)
Timing of Media Content Publication (Kairos)

Production Type	Repetition	Percentage
Morning	365	22.31
Noontime	475	29.03
Night	796	48.65
total	1636	100

This table examines the distribution of media content based on the time of publication, revealing strategic choices in media dissemination:

- **Nighttime publications dominated** with **48.65% (796 items)**, reflecting a strategy to maximize audience engagement during peak viewing hours.
- **Noontime publications accounted for 29.03% (475 items)**, indicating that midday updates were also a significant aspect of the media coverage.
- **Morning publications comprised 22.31% (365 items)**, the lowest percentage, suggesting that early-day news production was less prioritized.

These findings imply that Kurdish news channels aimed to align their publishing schedules with audience behavior, focusing on nighttime as the most effective period for news circulation.

Table (5)
Media Content Formats

Production Type	Repetition	Percentage
Picture	1636	55.34
Video	218	7.37
Text	1102	37.28
Total	2956	100

The dataset identifies three primary media formats, totaling **2,956 items**:

- **Pictures accounted for the majority (55.34%, 1,636 items)**, highlighting the role of imagery in media representation.

- **Text-based content represented 37.28% (1,102 items)**, reinforcing the prominence of written news.

- **Videos constituted only 7.37% (218 items)**, indicating a relatively limited use of video journalism.

The substantial reliance on pictures and text over videos suggests logistical or resource-related constraints in video production or a strategic preference for more easily consumable content.

Table (6)
Sources of Media Production

Sources	Repetition	Percentage
Local	272	78.54
Foreign	1285	16.62
Both	79	4.82
Total	1636	100

This table examines the origins of the media content:

- **Local sources accounted for 78.54% (272 items)**, indicating a strong reliance on domestic news gathering.

- **Foreign sources contributed 16.62% (1,285 items)**, reflecting the use of international reports.

- **A combination of both local and foreign sources made up 4.82% (79 items)**.

This distribution suggests that Kurdish media relied heavily on indigenous reporting while integrating foreign perspectives to some extent.

Table (7)
Gender Representation in Media Content on ISIS

Genders	Repetition	٪
Male	794	99.12
Female	7	0.87
Total	801	100

The dataset highlights a significant gender imbalance:

- **Males constituted 99.12% (794 items)** of represented figures.

- **Females accounted for only 0.87% (7 items)**.

This overwhelming disparity suggests that Kurdish media narratives on ISIS were predominantly male-centered, possibly reflecting gendered roles within the conflict and reporting practices.

Table (8)
Character Representation in Media Content

Figures	Repetition	٪
Popular Figures	109	16.87
Community Figures	25	3.86
Military Figures	512	79.25
Total	646	100

This table classifies figures depicted in media reports:

- **Military figures dominated the representation (79.25%, 512 items)**.

- **Popular figures (16.87%, 109 items)** and **community figures (3.86%, 25 items)** were less frequently featured.

The heavy focus on military figures underscores the framing of ISIS-related news within a security and defense-oriented discourse.

Table (9)
Identity and Socio-Cultural Backgrounds of Figures

Type of the figures	Repetition	٪
Known	320	49.53
Unknown	159	24.16
Local	58	16.87
International	109	8.97
Total	646	100

The dataset categorizes figures appearing in the media based on their level of recognition:

- **Known figures comprised 49.53% (320 items)**.

- **Unknown individuals accounted for 24.16% (159 items)**.

- **Local figures represented 16.87% (58 items)**.

- **International figures constituted 8.97% (109 items)**.

The predominance of known figures suggests a preference for authoritative or recognizable sources in media portrayals of ISIS.

Table (10)
Thematic Focus of Media Coverage

Scenario and the content	repetition	٪
Local issues	97	5.92
International issues	167	10.2
Terrorism	249	15.22
Military issues	758	46.33

Convenience issues	365	22.31
Total	1636	100

The dataset categorizes the main themes covered in Kurdish media reporting:

- **Military issues dominated the discourse (46.33%, 758 items)**, indicating a focus on battlefield developments and security concerns.

- **Convenience issues (22.31%, 365 items)** and **terrorism-related content (15.22%, 249 items)** were also significant.

- **International issues accounted for 10.2% (167 items)**.

- **Local issues were the least covered theme (5.92%, 97 items)**.

This thematic distribution suggests that Kurdish media framed ISIS primarily as a military threat, with limited emphasis on localized sociopolitical dynamics.

CONCLUSION

Through the lens of framing theory and agenda-setting, it is evident that Kurdish media, while aiming to inform the public and counter ISIS's threats, may have inadvertently played a role in spreading the group's propaganda. By framing ISIS as a dominant force and setting the media agenda around its activities, Kurdish media reinforced the fear and psychological impact that ISIS sought to instill. This analysis highlights the importance of strategic media framing and responsible reporting in conflict situations to ensure that coverage does not unintentionally serve the enemy's objectives.

ISIS's propaganda strategy is a sophisticated blend of coercion (violence, intimidation) and emotional manipulation (martyrdom, glorification, victimization). These elements work together to control perceptions, inspire recruits, and reinforce ideological narratives. Through strategic media dissemination, ISIS amplifies its influence, ensuring that its messages reach both sympathizers and adversaries. Understanding these tactics is crucial for counterterrorism efforts, as they reveal the mechanisms through which extremist groups sustain their operations and expand their reach.

Kurdish media played a vital role in exposing ISIS's atrocities, informing the public, and rallying support for military efforts. However, through the lens of framing theory and agenda-setting, it is clear that the way ISIS was covered sometimes aligned with the group's own propaganda objectives. By emphasizing ISIS's power and repeatedly setting the media agenda around its activities, Kurdish news outlets—often unknowingly—helped spread the same messages that ISIS wanted to promote. This analysis highlights the importance of strategic media framing and agenda-setting, especially in times of war, to ensure that coverage does not unintentionally serve the enemy's interests.

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