

# VALDAI DISCUSSION CLUB REPORT



**Valdai** | Discussion  
Club

[www.valdaiclub.com](http://www.valdaiclub.com)

## ISIS AS PORTRAYED BY FOREIGN MEDIA AND MASS CULTURE

# Authors

---

**Sergey G. Davydov**

Deputy Dean, Associate Professor,  
Faculty of Communications, Media and Design,  
National Research University  
Higher School of Economics

**Oleg N. Kashirskih**

Associate Professor,  
Academic Head of the Educational Programme  
«Integrated Communications», Faculty of  
Communications, Media and Design, National  
Research University Higher School of  
Economics

**Olga S. Logunova**

Associate Professor,  
Faculty of Social Sciences, National Research  
University Higher School of Economics

**Elena S. Pronkina**

Postgraduate Student,  
Department of Socio-Cultural Studies,  
Russian State University for the Humanities

**Nikita Y. Savin**

Lecturer, Postgraduate Student,  
Faculty of Social Sciences, National Research  
University Higher School of Economics

*The authors thank  
for his significant contribution  
to this report and the research as a whole*

**Andrey Bystritskiy**

Chairman of the Board,  
Foundation for Development and Support of  
the Valdai Discussion Club;  
Dean, Faculty of Communications,  
Media and Design, National Research  
University Higher School of Economics

# 1. Methods

This report is based on ISIS<sup>1</sup>, AS PORTRAYED BY FOREIGN MEDIA AND MASS CULTURE, a research commissioned by the Foundation for Development and Support of the Valdai Discussion Club.

The research is aimed at identifying the technique whereby foreign printed media and works of fiction portray the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) aka the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

The research project consists of two main parts:

- *Analysing foreign printed media publications on ISIS;*
- *Analysing foreign feature films and TV series focusing on modern-day Islamic terrorism.*

The authors used the following methodology: Content analysis, Sztompka literary analysis, and frame analysis.

Content analysis was used for reviewing three US newspapers (The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, and USA Today), three UK newspapers (The Guardian, The Daily Telegraph, and The Financial Times), one Turkish newspaper (Hurriyet Online), one UAE newspaper (The Gulf), one Indian newspaper (The Hindustan Times), and one Chinese newspaper (The Asia Times). Only English-language texts were analysed. The above are the leading media outlets in terms of audience outreach in their respective countries.

The analysis covered publications dating from June 29, 2014 (when ISIS declared the

establishment of a “caliphate” on Iraqi and Syrian territories under its control) to November 30, 2015. To select the articles, the authors used the keywords ISIS, or ISIL, or Daesh, or Da’ish in Factiva, with each newspaper yielding 100 publications.

The selection was based on a list arranged in accordance with publication dates, from which similar texts were dropped. The first text to be analysed was picked up at random, with each subsequent text selected in increments calculated as a ratio of the number of publications to 100. The sample included 876 articles. For more detail on the sample, see Table 1.

Let us indicate certain specifics of the Asian sample.

In relation to Hurriyet Online, Factiva only yielded website references within the October 4, 2015 to November 30, 2015 timeframe. Asia Times is not indexed in the Factiva system, thus compelling the authors to select articles from its website by using its search engine.

While encoding the sample, several publications were dropped as inconsistent with the central theme.

Data was processed by a team of nine encoders briefed in two stages (about three hours in all).

The disciplines of philosophy, psychology, art history, cultural anthropology, and sociology have a long-standing tradition of analysing texts from feature films and TV series. Cinema sociology emerged in the early 20th century as a reaction to the fascination evoked in all walks of life by motion pictures.

We have selected Western films and TV series produced during the last few years, all of them focusing on the Islamic terrorist threat. Usually the movies are not dedicated to ISIS as such, but certain associations and parallels are easily perceived.

<sup>1</sup> ISIS – the organisation prohibited in Russia. – **Ed. note.**

Table 1. Sample details of the newspapers analysed

Nº	NEWSPAPER	COUNTRY	NUMBER OF PUBLICATIONS IN THE SAMPLE
1	The New York Times	USA	100
2	The Wall Street Journal	USA	98
3	USA Today	USA	100
4	The Guardian	UK	100
5	The Financial Times	UK	100
6	The Daily Telegraph	UK	97
7	Hurriyet Online	Turkey	100
8	The Gulf	UAE	17
9	Hindustan Times	India	100
10	Asia Times	Hong Kong	64

Our analysis was based on the Sztompka method that implies step-by-step consideration of the following principal elements:

1. *The characters*
2. *The actions*
3. *Social interactions*
4. *Culture*
5. *Context*

This report analyses “Tyrant” (US TV series 2014–2015) and “Four Lions” (2010, UK-France, directed by Christopher Morris).

Before passing to frame analysis of both media and literary texts, it should be emphasised that the relationship between news media and terrorism is defined

as extremely important and capable of becoming the “oxygen of terrorism.” A crucial question helping to understand this relationship is what rhetorical and symbolic tools are used by the media to cover terrorism.

Norris (Norris, 2003) notes that the inevitability of mass media covering terrorist attacks allows terrorism to be constantly in the news and to expand its media presence. The emancipation of rhetoric in treating terrorism influences, either the degree of its demonisation, or of its glorification, can gradually form rhetoric bias and media stereotypes with regard to the coverage of terrorism/terrorists, which influences public views and public politics. As Norris says, terrorism framing methods are generally restricted by the social culture of frame-makers, and this is a decisive factor influencing the public/political agenda.

More specifically, the following frames can be identified:

1. *Terrorism is treated on the basis of the globalisation frame rather than the clash-of-civilisations frame (Rojecki 2005). The war on terror frame is a pivot for covering the US foreign policy and processes in the rest of the world (Reese, Lewis 2009).*
  2. *Media coverage may differ depending on whether an outlet is national or international. The same events can be described in both local and international reference frames (local versus foreign coverage).*
  3. *The fact that media is run by different cultural or political organisations can divide framing into “administrative” and “patriotic.” The former, such as CNN, focuses on military and strategic subjects, while the latter, such as Al Jazeera, cover the humanitarian consequences of military operations (Jasperson and El-Kikhia 2003).*
  4. *Researchers also note the difference in frames between US and UK media arising from different news management processes (Semetko et al. 1991). They remark on the “pragmatic” frame of US media, as distinct from the more “social” UK frame. While US news programming is oriented toward the actual values shared by the audience, the UK media is more traditional. These distinctions are due to the institutional structure of media-politics interaction, including the degree of (de)ideologisation, standards of journalism and perception of “objectivity,” the economic status of an audience, and other factors. The British media is characterised by an emphasis on diplomatic solutions and the predomination*
- of the thematic frame, whilst the US media is dominated by the episodic frame and a bias for military solutions (Papacharissi, Oliveira 2008).*
5. *It is possible to identify a terrorism-related “US fear culture” frame creating a correlation between Muslims and Islam as a whole and Al-Qaeda in particular. Demonising the Other<sup>2</sup> is enhanced by religious propaganda setting Christian America in opposition to Muslim terrorists. This frame is based on an identity gap between West and East, a frequent target of identity politics in national political struggles.*
  6. *From a technological point of view, we can identify thematic and episodic frames on terrorism (Iyengar, 1991). The episodic frame focuses on isolated events or individual actions without contextual elaboration. The thematic frame considers events in a broad context and compares them with other events, persons, or groups. Thematic framing is aimed at understanding events as consequences of some general trends or tendencies in society, trends rooted in social, political, or cultural backgrounds. Using episodic framing in covering terrorism is accompanied with more emotion and accordingly greater bias for “identity politics” stereotypes. Conversely, a more contextual and analytical perspective on terrorist actions directs the audience to reflect critically on the government’s role in preventing terrorism and minimises the significance of the emotional and personalised aspect of terrorism.*

---

<sup>2</sup> Suggest quotation marks and remove capital letter to “other”.

## 2. Content Analysis of Media Publications

Our content analysis shows that thematic frames dominate 62% of selected texts and the episodic frames 38% of texts. In other words, ISIS is directly related to the key subject in most publications. This indicator varies from one media outlet to another: the highest proportion of dominant thematic frames can be found in The Gulf (82%), USA

Today (74%) and The Guardian (72%). The lowest proportion is in Hurriyet Online (42%) and Hindustan Times (37%).

The genre aspect of publications depends primarily on media format and editorial policies. The genre specifics distinguishing the ten editions considered in this research are reflected in Table 2.

Table 2. Genres of publications (per media outlet, %)

Nº	MEDIA OUTLET	NEWS/ NEWS STORY	ANALYTICAL ARTICLE	INTERVIEW	DISCUSSION (SEVERAL PARTICIPANTS)	COLUMN	OTHER
1	The New York Times	34	54	1	2	5	5
2	USA Today	36	28	0	11	11	14
3	The Wall Street Journal	42	49	2	2	3	2
4	The Guardian	33	49	1	4	3	11
5	The Financial Times	42	40	0	1	10	7
6	The Daily Telegraph	58	29	2	0	6	5
7	Hurriyet Online	65	27	4	0	5	1
8	Asia Times	27	28	0	2	44	0
9	The Gulf	35	65	0	0	0	0
10	Hindustan Times	73	16	4	1	8	0
<b>GRAND TOTAL</b>		<b>46</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>5</b>

Most often the themes under study occur in news stories and news (46%). As a rule, these are short items representing prompt reactions to events and conveying the first-known facts. The share of analytical articles is 36%. Each

article is a detailed text that includes an analysis, assessment, event history, and often opinions contributed by one or several experts. At 9%, columns are in third place. Other genres account for 10%.

Table 3. Intentions (per outlet), %

№	ИЗДАНИЕ	INFORMATIONAL/ EDUCATIONAL	INDUCING	WARNING OF A THREAT	REFLECTIVE	CONFRONTATION	PACIFICATION	SELF-JUSTIFICATION	JUSTIFICATION	CRITICISM	SELF-CRITICISM
1	The New York Times	43	7	8	56	7	4	3	0	4	5
2	USA Today	47	11	1	44	1	1	2	0	10	9
3	The Wall Street Journal	61	20	29	55	5	1	0	0	20	2
4	The Guardian	52	22	26	66	13	0	0	5	24	5
5	The Financial Times	42	2	5	61	1	1	0	1	6	0
6	The Daily Telegraph	66	7	6	30	2	0	0	0	2	6
7	Hurriyet Online	66	13	27	32	21	3	2	1	13	5
8	Asia Times	30	6	13	72	17	3	0	2	23	2
9	The Gulf	47	0	18	65	0	0	0	0	0	0
10	Hindustan Times	82	15	23	30	13	1	2	0	8	2
<b>GRAND TOTAL</b>		<b>55</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>4</b>

Specific genres that characterise various individual media outlets are as follows. The highest proportion of news (73%) has been registered in the Hindustan Times, and the lowest one (27%) in Asia Times, the latter focusing on column-writing (44%). More than a half of contributions to The Gulf (65%) and The New York Times (54%) belong to the analytical genre. The Wall Street Journal and The Guardian each carry 49% of analytical articles. The lowest proportion of analysis (16%) is found in the Hindustan Times which, as we said, relies on the news format. Discussion interviews (with several participants) are more frequent in USA Today

(11%). Interviews are few and far between (2% or 14 out of 876 contributions), with Hurriyet Online and Hindustan Times accounting for 8 out of 14 interviews.

The news format is more frequent in Asian (57%) than UK (44%) or US (37%) media. Although US and UK media demonstrate a higher share of analysis (44% and 39%, respectively) than the Asian outlets (26%), the latter account for 15% of columns, or 9% more than in the West.

Our analysis of textual intentions is based on an internet analysis methodology developed by a team of authors under Tatyana Ushakova and Natalya Pavlova (Word in Action, 2000). We

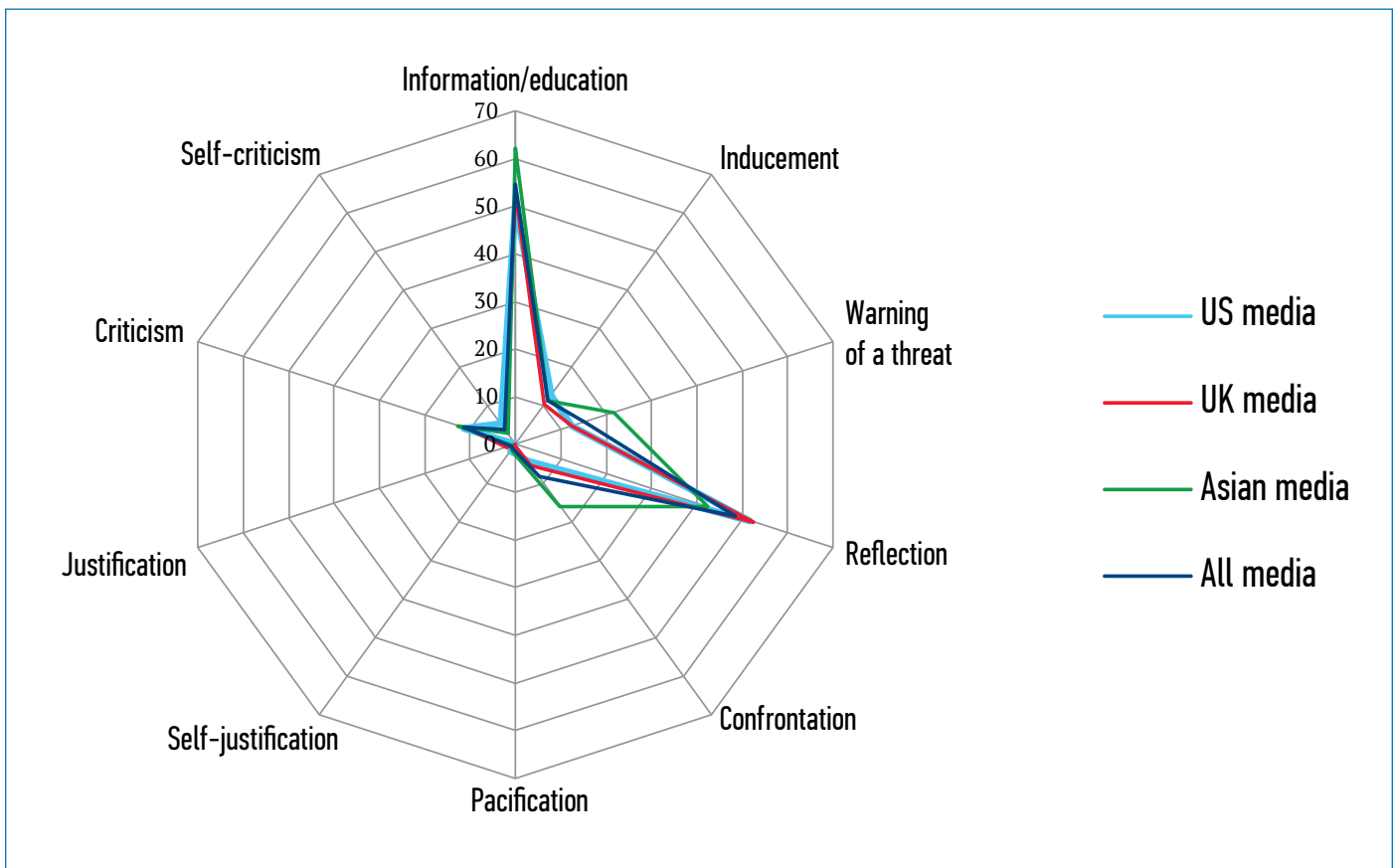


Figure 1. Intentions (per groups of outlets), %

narrowed down their list of 27 intentions to 10 and used them on an encryption assignment. The encoders were not required to identify all intentions in a text: it was enough to name the main one. At the same time, the search was not restricted to just one intention and in some cases two or even three codes figuring on the list were recorded.

Based on Table 3 and Figure 1, we can conclude that the two main intentions characteristic of all publications are informational/educational (55%) and reflective (49%). The highest proportion of informative publications is found in Hindustan Times (82%), Hurriyet Online (66%), and The Daily Telegraph (66%). This seems quite logical, given the high percentage of news in the said outlets. The lowest proportion of articles with

informational/educational intention (30%) was registered in Asia Times.

The other 8 intentions can be divided into 2 equal parts. The first part includes intentions occurring in 8–15% of the texts: warning of a threat, inducement, criticism and confrontation. The other part includes self-criticism, pacification, self-justification and justification. These occur least frequently: self-criticism is found in 4% of texts, and the other three in 1% of texts each.

Our analysis of intentions makes it possible to divide all outlets into two groups: 1) media clearly focusing on information/education and reflection while covering ISIS; 2) media, where these two intentions prevail, but there are many others as well. The former group includes The New York Times,



USA Today, The Financial Times, The Daily Telegraph, and The Gulf, the latter – The Wall Street Journal, The Guardian, Hurriyet Online, Hindustan Times, and Asia Times. Three of the four Asian outlets are in the second group, something that identifies them as more informational than the Western outlets.

Journalistic texts are characterised by the use of various binary opposites. Our content analysis shows that the binary opposites in ISIS publications are rather variable.

The most pronounced opposites are the ones not specified on the civilisational, religious, or moral principle. The case in point is “we” – “the enemies” occurring in 28% of articles. Its use is most characteristic of USA

Today (51%), The Daily Telegraph (37%) and Asia Times (34%).

The next most frequent case is about debates on conflict resolution methods: “military interference” vs. “diplomatic interference.” One in every ten reports carries these opposites, with Hurriyet Online (24%), The Wall Street Journal (23%) and The Guardian (19%) leading. An almost as frequent opposite is “moderates” – “radicals” that occurs rather evenly in The Wall Street Journal (20%) and the New York Times (18%).

The “victim” – “aggressor” opposite is more characteristic of The New York Times (17%), Asia Times (16%), The Gulf (12%), and USA Today (10%).

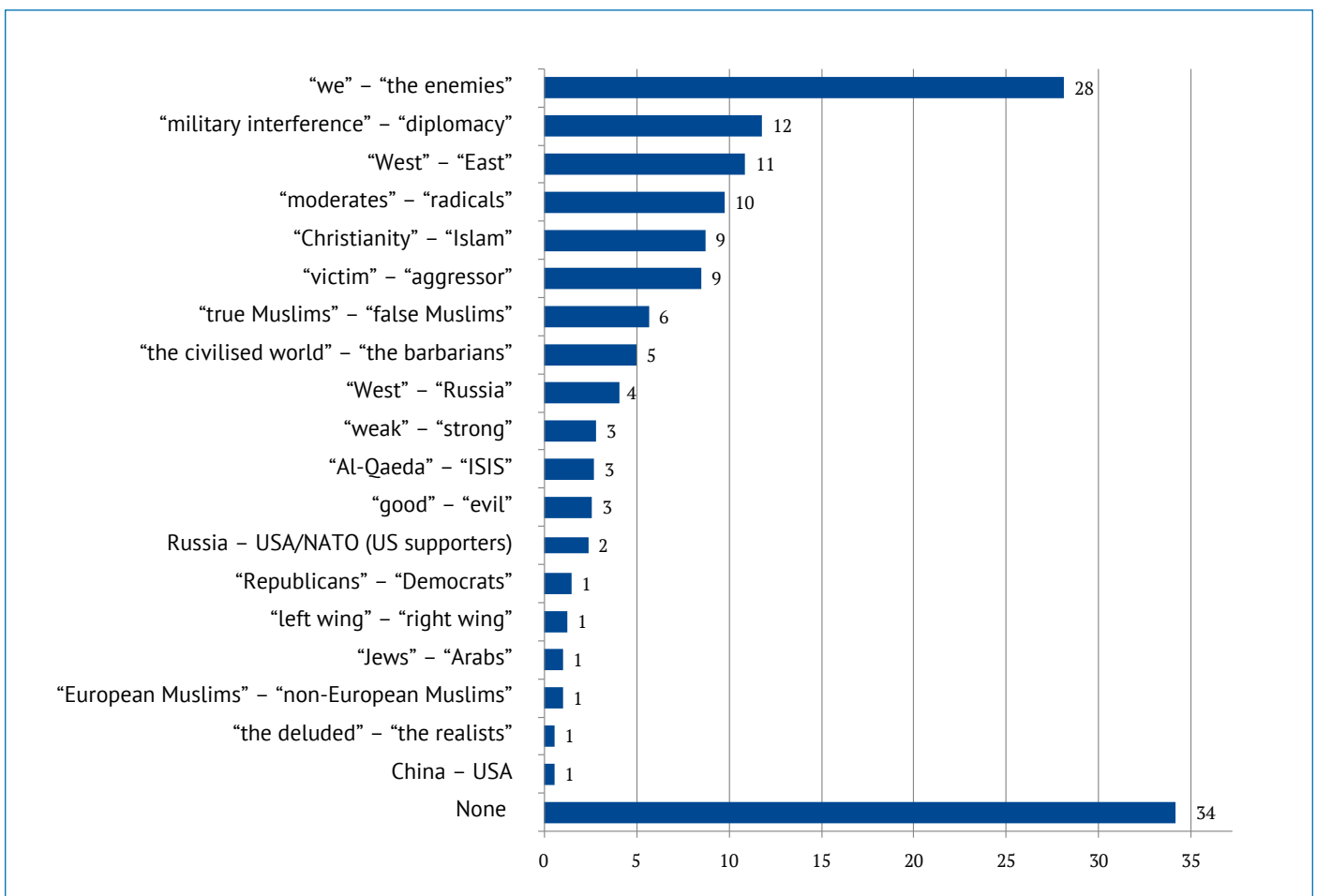


Figure 2. Frequency of binary opposites, %

“Christianity” vs. “Islam” is frequently the focus of ISIS discourse in The Wall Street Journal (22%) and The Guardian (20%); the average indicator in the sample is 9%. Asia Times alone is active in using the “Russia” – “USA, NATO (US supporters)” opposite occurring in 20% of its articles.

Let us emphasise that one in every three analysed texts lacks binary opposites.

So-called sustainable codifiers were used to fix the mentions of countries and persons.

For these, there were preset codes, but it proved impossible to embrace the entire variety offered by the texts. Therefore, lists of codes for these points were posted in the Internet and the encoders were given the right to replenish the list with new codes in real time during the encoding process.

In all, the mentions of 140 countries were fixed, with an average of 4.8 countries mentioned per one text. This proves that the ISIS problem is viewed within a very broad international

*Table 4. Twenty most frequently mentioned countries in the ISIS context*

Nº	COUNTRY	NUMBER OF MENTIONS	% OF TEXTS WITH MENTIONS
1	USA	568	64
2	Syria	516	59
3	Iraq	464	53
4	UK	224	25
5	Turkey	204	23
6	Russia	184	21
7	France	150	17
8	Iran	139	16
9	Afghanistan	128	15
10	Saudi Arabia	119	13
11	India	95	11
12	Egypt	85	10
13	Libya	79	9
14	Pakistan	72	8
15	Germany	66	7
16	China	62	7
17	Israel	60	7
18	Jordan	56	6
19	Yemen	54	6
20	Lebanon	53	6

context. To note: ISIS has not been encoded as a separate state, nor is it taken into account in these calculations.

Seventeen countries included in the top 20 in terms of frequencies of mention are located in Europe and/or Asia. The three exceptions include the USA that tops the list, as well as Egypt and Libya, two North African countries.

More than half of encoded articles mention three countries: USA (64%), Syria (59%), and Iraq (53%). The United States is most often

mentioned in American newspapers, where it expectably occurs in 83–90% of publications. Syria's indicators are at the same level in all groups of outlets, while Iraq is mentioned 10% more frequently in US newspapers.

The frequency of mention indicators characterising the second threesome of countries that includes Turkey, UK, and Russia are more than 50% lower. The UK is mentioned twice as frequently by British media and Russia by Asian media.

*Table 5. Top twenty of the most frequently mentioned persons in the context of ISIS*

Nº	PERSON	NUMBER OF MENTIONS	% OF TEXTS WITH MENTIONS
1	Barack Obama	263	30
2	Bashar al-Assad	140	16
3	Vladimir Putin	83	9
4	David Cameron	74	8
5	Recep Tayyip Erdogan	51	6
6	Saddam Hussein	44	5
7	George Bush	43	5
8	John Kerry	38	4
9	François Hollande	37	4
10	Hillary Clinton	33	4
11	James Foley	31	4
12	Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi	30	3
13	Angela Merkel	26	3
14	Ahmet Davutoglu	26	3
15	Donald Trump	24	3
16	Sergey Lavrov	23	3
17	Nouri al-Maliki	23	3
18	Jeb Bush	21	2
19	Haider al-Abadi	20	2
20	Osama bin Laden	20	2

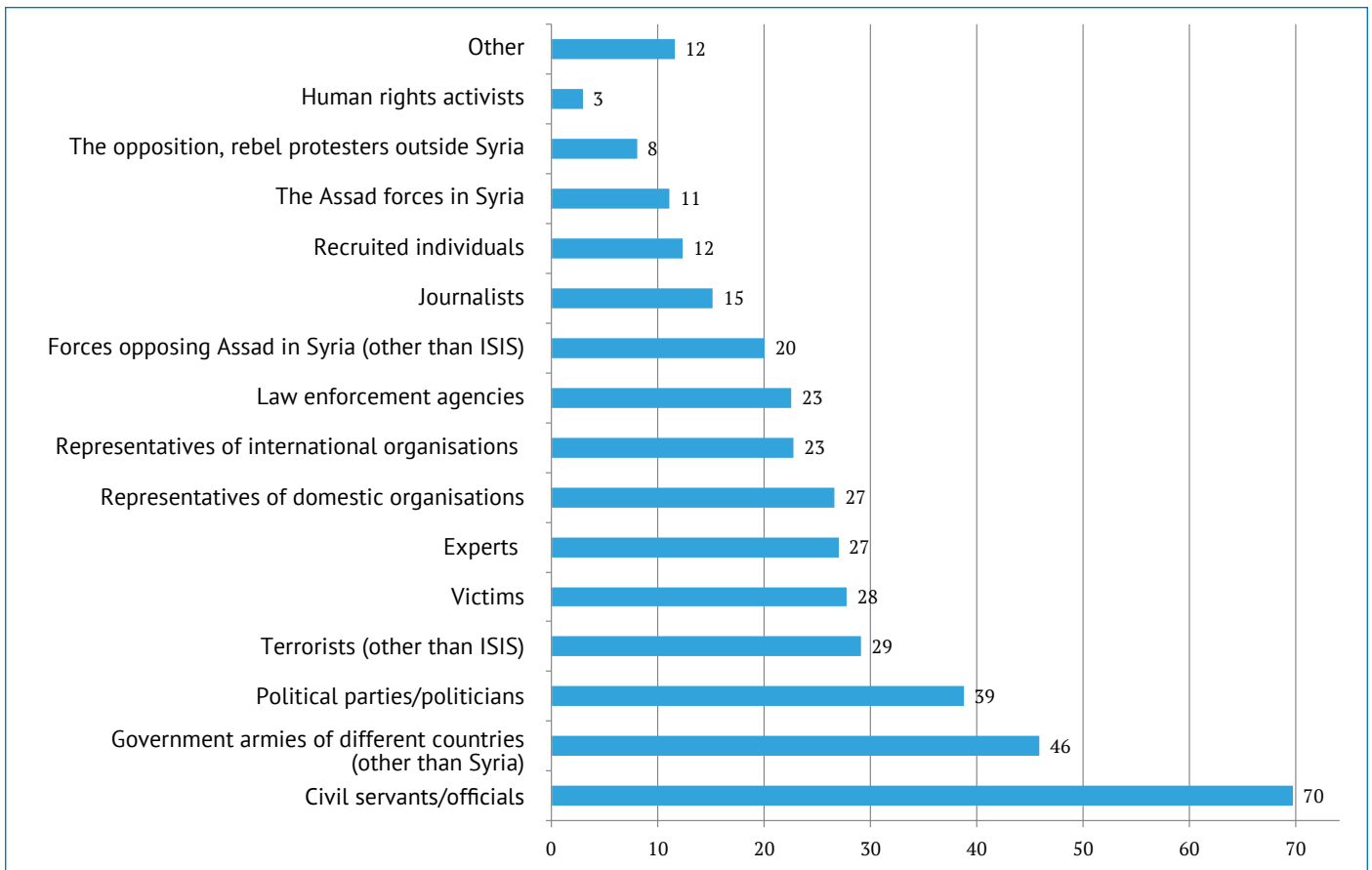


Figure 3. The mentioned groups (%)

A total of 1,840 different persons were found in the selected texts, accounting for 3,810 mentions. The top twenty of most frequently mentioned persons are shown in Table 5, which includes newsmakers mentioned at least 20 times in the texts. Topping the list is US President Barack Obama, whose name occurs in 30% of the texts. The top five slots are filled by country leaders: Bashar al-Assad (Syria, second from the top, 16%), Vladimir Putin (Russia, 9%), David Cameron (UK, 8%), and Recep Tayyip Erdogan (Turkey, 6%).

The only man representing ISIS in the top twenty is Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the unrecognised state, who is in 12th place. The texts mention him 30 times, 78.7% less frequently than the current Syrian president,

Bashar al-Assad, and 33.4% less frequently than the late Saddam Hussein. His name occurs most frequently in Asia Times (9), The Wall Street Journal (6), and The New York Times (5). There is no mention of al-Baghdadi in The Guardian and The Gulf issues selected for the sample. Thus, we can state a high level of ISIS impersonality in the world mass media. Unlike Number One Terrorist Osama bin Laden, who continues, despite his death, to appear in media publications, al-Baghdadi has failed to become a popular newsmaker and remains in the background even in debates about the organisation he heads. ISIS is represented in the media through its actions rather than utterances of its leader.

Social groups represented in the texts fall into two opposite categories – the terrorists

and those opposed to them. The terrorists are only in fourth place in terms of the frequency of mentions, occurring in 29% of the articles. This is a more or less evenly distributed indicator, the only exception being The New York Times which mentions them in one of every two articles.

Most often, the narrative is about representatives of various government bodies, with the lead assigned to certain civil servants and officials, who are mentioned in 70% of cases. The Wall Street Journal and Asia Times include them in the overwhelming majority of their publications (91% and 94%, respectively). Government armies of different countries are second in terms of popularity, occurring in almost a half of the publications. Political parties play an important role as well, being mentioned in about 40% or articles and most often in the British press.

A large number of publications write about victims of terrorist attacks, who are

mentioned by one in every four articles, with the US media leading in terms of frequency.

One-half of all publications (47%) are dedicated to the fight against ISIS, including antiterrorist campaigns, cyberattacks, etc. It is the discourse related to antiterrorist activities, security measures, and prevention of threats that takes up most of the publications. This is characteristic of all the media outlets we have analysed and particularly of The Wall Street Journal (65%) and Asia Times (61%).

A second most important theme (33%) is of reflective nature, analysing public reactions to events in Syria and US policy towards Syria. The Gulf covers this subject 66.7% less frequently (12%) than on average all other outlets. On the contrary, the group that devotes almost half of their publications to it includes The Wall Street Journal (50%), The New York Times (43%), and The Guardian (46%).

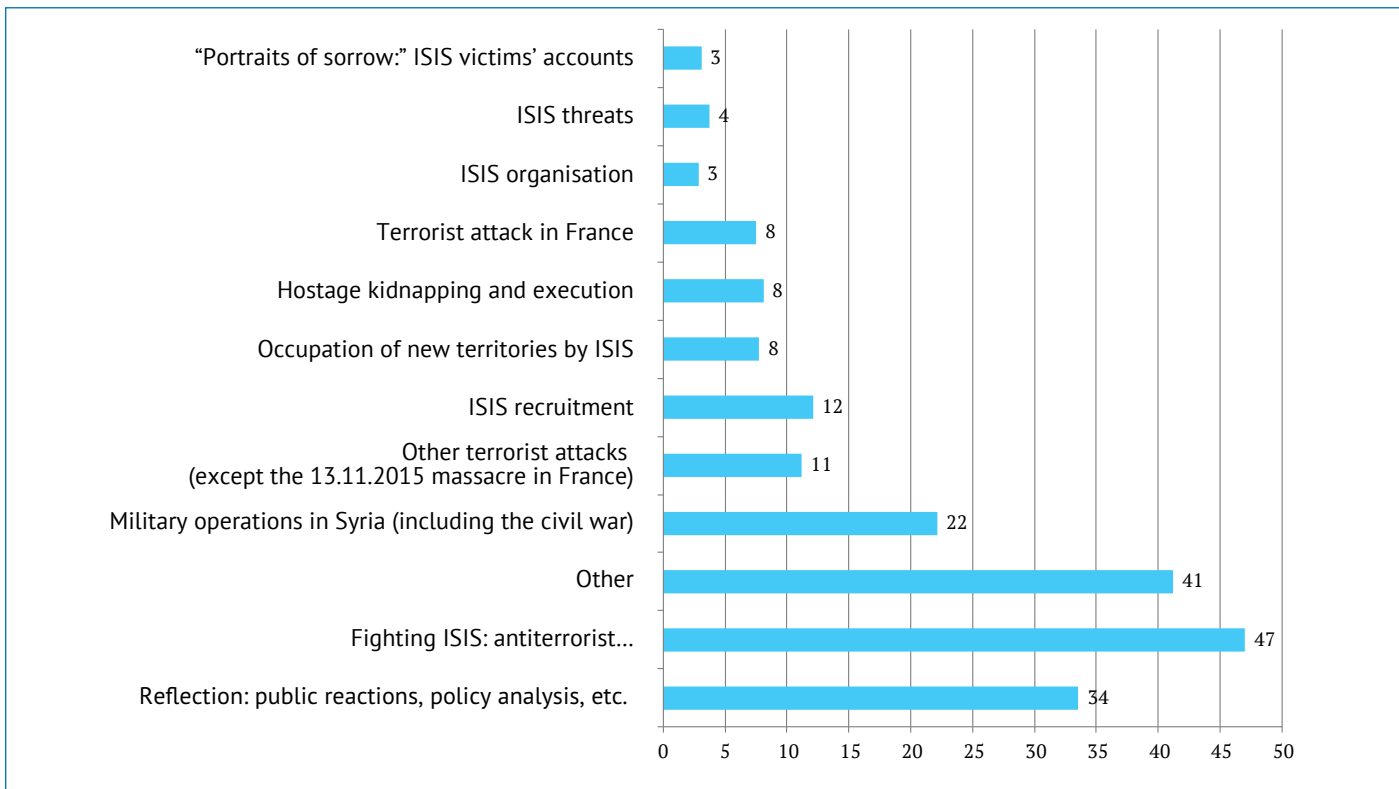


Figure 4. Key themes, %

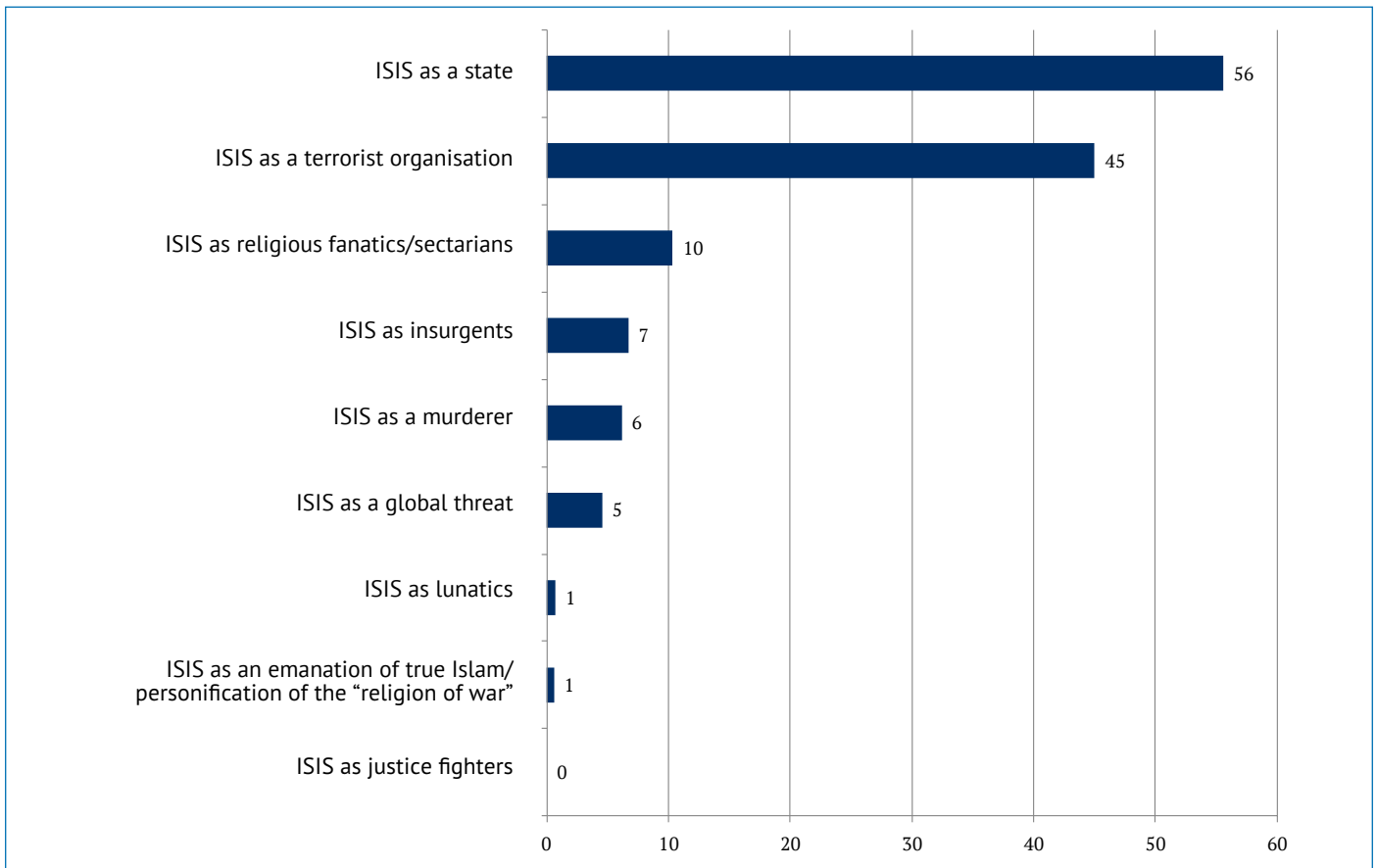


Figure 5. ISIS image, %

Approximately one in every five publications is dedicated to military operations in Syria (22%), with two outlets – The Wall Street Journal (43%) and Asia Times (48%) – following the developments particularly closely.

An important part of the texts (10% each outlet) is devoted to ISIS recruitment, kidnappings, execution of hostages, ISIS organisation, and various terrorist attacks (except terrorist outrages in France).

Thus, the key themes are the antiterrorist struggle and reflections on ISIS as a phenomenon. It is clear that the media keep a watchful eye on terrorist attacks and other actions committed by terrorists, paying much less interest to the Islamic State as such.

Characteristically, discussions of ISIS problems are most often held in the political

context. In some way or other, politics is mentioned in 75% of the publications (49% of attribution cases). Next follows the social sphere (44%), culture (21%), and economy (12%).

More often than not, contributors describe ISIS as a state (56%). This is true of all media outlets we have analysed and particularly of USA Today (74%). A very popular image (45%) is that of a terrorist organisation; most often it occurs in The New York Times (59%), The Wall Street Journal (69%), and The Daily Telegraph (66%).

These discourses heavily intersect. As is evident from Figure 5, other attribution types are encountered much less frequently. It is worth noting the representation of ISIS as religious fanatics, which occurs in one of every ten publications.

Representing ISIS as a global threat is infrequent (5% of the publications), with

Asian media – Asia Times (16%) and The Gulf (12%) – concentrating on this aspect more often than others.

In covering ISIS activities, one in every four articles on average focuses on its terrorist attacks. Most remarkable in this sense are The New York Times (35%), The Wall Street Journal (43%), The Daily Telegraph (42%), and Hurriyet Online (43%).

One in every five reports regards ISIS actions as military operations. Writing in this vein twice as often as on average are The Wall Street Journal (38%) and The Gulf (35%).

Thus, we can again see the dual image of the Islamic State whose activities are interpreted as either military, or terrorist. There are some other interpretations as well, but they are not widespread. Moreover, half of the articles do not cover ISIS activities at all.

To consider the time aspect<sup>3</sup> of ISIS discourse, we should identify certain stages in its operations within the overall period covered by our analysis. There are six stages:

1. 29.06–18.08.2014: Proclamation of the caliphate to James Foley’s execution (a GlobalPost photojournalist beheaded in revenge for US air strikes at ISIS positions in Iraq. This was the first demonstrative execution performed by ISIS).
2. 19.08–30.09.2014: The Foley execution to the Kobani massacre.
3. 01.10.2014–08.01.2015: The Kobani massacre to the first terrorist attack in Europe (on January 9, two days after Al Qaeda’s Charlie Hebdo attack, ISIS militants took hostages near the Vincennes Gate in Paris).
4. 09.01–29.09.2015: The First terrorist attack in Europe to Russia’s military operation in Syria.
5. 30.09–13.11.2015: Russia’s military operation in Syria to the November terrorist attacks in Paris.
6. 14.11–30.11.2015: The November terrorist attacks in Paris.

Table 6. Description of terrorist actions (%)

	Action as a terrorist attack	Action as a military operation	Action as a breach of law	Action as a play/show/form of actionism, etc.	Action as retribution	Action as a protest	None
US MEDIA	33	24	7	3	2	1	44
UK MEDIA	26	21	5	3	1	1	53
ASIAN MEDIA	27	18	1	2	0	0	61
ALL MEDIA	28	21	5	3	1	1	52

<sup>3</sup> In this context, we skip Hurriyet Online publications because they only refer to the last two periods of analysis.

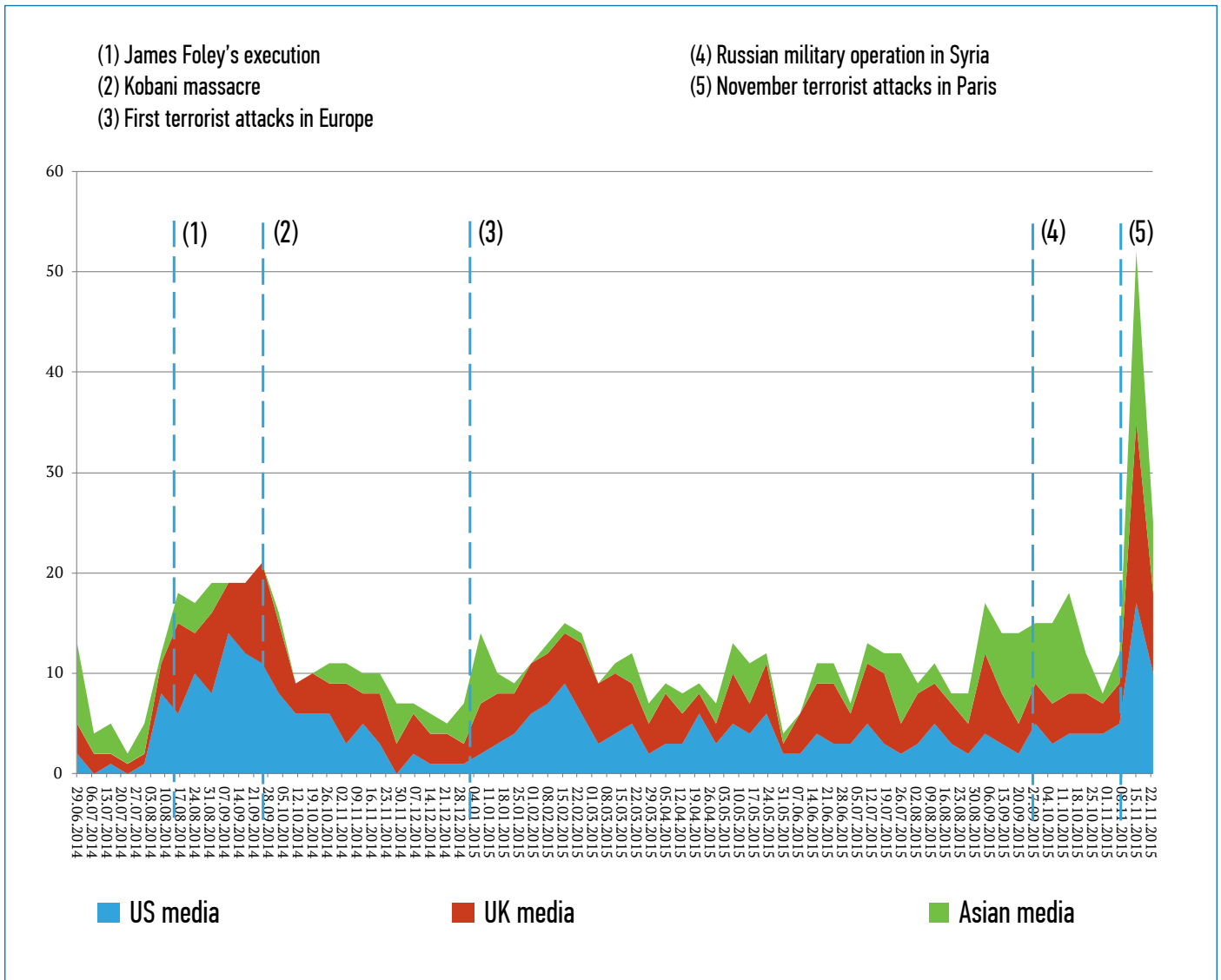


Figure 6. Publication dynamics (9 media outlets)

The above periods vary in duration. The longest of them (#4) takes 263 days, or a little more than a half of the analysed period. The shortest period, #6, spans 16 days in November 2015, when terrorist attacks occurred in Paris, France.

Media in different countries were not equally concerned with the subject of ISIS. Data in Figure 6 shows that the media were least interested in ISIS during the first stage: a surge of publications caused by the proclamation of a caliphate was followed by a lull. James Foley's execution changed the situation and

Stage Two was marked by stably high Western interest. Stage Three saw a gradual reduction in the number of publications. The first terrorist attacks in Paris led to a surge of interest that vacillated more or less stably throughout Stage Four. No fundamental change was brought about by the start of Russian military operations in Syria. But Stage 6 saw a sharp increase in the number of publications in both Western and Eastern media, with its peak 150% higher than a similar upsurge recorded after the Kobani massacre.



## 3. Sample Analysis of Mass Culture Products

### 3.1. *Tyrant*

*Tyrant* is an American drama TV series directed by Gideon Raff from Israel. It focuses on a dictator's son, Bassam al-Fayeed, from the (fictional) Middle Eastern country of Abuddin. He emigrated to the United States as a young man, became a successful doctor, and returned to his fictional home country of Abuddin as an adult for his nephew's wedding. The sudden death of Khaled (Bassam's father) brings up the issue of the ruler's inheritance. Bassam's elder brother, Jamal, becomes the heir, and Bassam decides to stay home and tries to use his influence in order to redirect a violent conflict to a peaceful course, preventing his brother from starting a bloodbath.

The series is clearly set in a traditional Islamic frame, which can be defined as a "tale of war and terror." This frame is evocative of the "culture of fear" and constructs a correlation between Muslims (notably, the army and the secret services of the dictator) and violence as a pervasive political practice. This correlation is not unconditional, but identifiable. The "culture of fear" is shown in scenes of terror unleashed by the "dictatorial regime" against its own people, such as murder scenes involving adults and children and scenes with sexual violence. These scenes fit perfectly into perceptions of the traditional neglect of women's rights in Muslim culture.

The stark contrast between the values of American and Arab societies acts as a continuation of the traditional frame. For example, the American family clearly has more pluralistic values, such as conjugal fidelity and the closeness of parents with their children, values with which the authors of the series clearly sympathise. That these values are publicly professed and demonstrated, however, only serves to emphasise the family's spirit

of inner freedom. Compared to it, silent hierarchy in a Muslim family looks something that belongs to an inferior civilisation.

However, the series tends to focus on causes, as well as consequences. These attempts occasionally replace the "war and terror" frame with the one of "globalisation." One of the main characters of the series – Abuddin's authoritarian ruler Jamal – is motivated not so much by internal circumstances, such as the authoritarian culture in his family and his country, but more by external circumstances represented by the characters' motives within the context of a tough international situation and difficult relations with individual countries, such as the United States and China.

The binary opposition does not follow the Christianity-Islam line, but rather a line of either the presence or absence of a commitment to universal values. In the series, the Muslims vary in their degree of commitment to the ideals of a fair society: the chief of the secret service, who is not particularly good at following Muslim rites, is depicted in stark contrast to a religious member of the resistance movement. However, the demonstration of the symbolic language of the "democratically-minded" Muslims is strongly reminiscent of the presidential debates in the United States and clearly oversimplifies things. This contrasting of stereotypes seems to follow a line of "politicians vs. ordinary citizens" as well as the "guardians of the totalitarian regime vs. resistance movement members."

Individual representatives of the United States and Arab countries aren't demonised along the Christianity-Islam line, either. The US diplomatic corps are shown as cynical opportunists who act based not on principles, but only in their own selfish interests. Causal

links behind the protagonists' moves are largely contextualised. For example, crimes perpetrated by the dictator, such as using chemical weapons against his own people, are rather the logical result of the evolution of the authoritarian system, which makes him resort to state terrorism.

Power is a central theme of the series, represented in the postmodern tradition, where the discourse on power relations in politics goes beyond politics *sui generis*. Politics here are a continuation of interpersonal relationships in an authoritarian state, the value of which forms the context which defines the thinking and the actions of the characters across all spheres.

The writers of the series insist that the caliphate, or Islamic radicalism, is, as the classics put it, the "last stage" of the totalitarian regime in the Middle East. We believe this is one of the main themes of the series. The evolution of authoritarianism in Abuddin makes everyone decide with whom they side : democracy or Islamic fundamentalism. There is no land in between. Lazy authoritarianism with its half-hearted measures is forced to choose a side. Anyone who remains on the sidelines will die. Notably, in the last episodes, characters who look the weakest and most vulnerable initially, suddenly show a great deal of willpower in fighting the circumstances, which seem insurmountable, personified by Ahmed (Jamal's son), his wife Nusrat and Bassam's son Sammy. Conversely, the characters who were the epitome of confidence and composure throughout the series (Ihab Rashid and Samira) lose their grasp of what's happening around them, and lose themselves in the process as well.

In general, the characters' portrayal is critical of them and serves to get across to viewers the main message of how the

destructive power of lies can undermine totalitarian systems. Like rust, lies corrode relationships – not only inside the ruling family, but also throughout the entire country, where the wife of Jamal's son Ahmed kills her husband's father not only because he has raped her, but also because she has learned that the totalitarian leader does not intend to resign. It's symbolic: violence in politics is identified with sexual violence.

Hence, the focus on sexual freedom in the narrative about Abuddin's authoritarian regime: A homosexual and a raped woman are portrayed as the two most outstanding fighters against injustice and cruelty.

The set-off between we and they, our guys and strangers is certainly present in the series. It makes use of a simple and easy-to-grasp style to designate its likes and dislikes. This opposition, however, cannot be referred to as traditional. The series avoids the Christian/Muslim or the American/non-American context. Bassam and his family don't interact with the outside world in Abuddin through the prism of American values vs. Middle Eastern values, but rather of authoritarian vs. universal values, which transcend nationality and religion. In general, Bassam is, in a certain way, a symbol of the inevitable and increasing integration of both worlds. This integration doesn't follow geographical lines, but cultural and political ones. Bassam easily finds common language with ordinary people in Abuddin. However, he will never be able to do so with General Tariq. They have a visceral aversion for one another. The integration is unavoidable, but it involves cultural and political self-determination.

In general, the series is not particularly notable for its stylistic novelty or complexity, and this prevents it from decisively breaking away from the traditional frame. The main

conflicts between the brothers' different worldviews as representatives of different cultures (a dictator and a reformer) and between an authoritarian government and the opposition are shown in well-known binary opposites. These juxtapositions fit perfectly with the traditional frame of the Muslim authoritarian/totalitarian state and leave no doubt as to with whom the authors' sympathies lie.

However, the main idea of the series, that in effect totalitarianism has no nationality or religion reduces the influence of clichés and stereotypes regarding Islam, which are typical of traditional frames. The series tries to distance itself from determinism and unmotivated generalisations. The dictator's son wants to open a boutique in London and complains to his father in a fit of open-heartedness that they see only blood, violence, and revenge in their country. People are not born dictators; people become dictators. Islamic radicalism, the authors claim, is born amid authoritarianism as the most effective form of resistance. A mosque is a place where the victims of chemical attacks perpetrated by the dictator are remembered and is the only alternative to the totalitarian rule in the Middle East.

### 3.2. *Four Lions*

The Franco-British film *Four Lions*, directed by the well-known satirist Christopher Morris, tells the story of British Muslims who are set on becoming terrorists. The genre of this film gravitates toward tragicomedy and is interspersed with elements of being a pseudo-documentary. The narrative focuses on the daily life of a small group of Muslims who dream about committing a high-profile

terrorist act, but something always gets in their way.

Laughter is the best known and the easiest way to conquer fear. Terrorism is known to feed on social fear. In this sense, humour and satire represent culturological weapons, which both deconstruct and desacralise the image of terrorism. Absurdity is an important part of the fictional world depicted in the film. Even death is no exception and becomes a specific object of ridicule. In the world of the *Four Lions*, the links between things are methodically broken and each element becomes its opposite. It's a world of chaos. This chaos culminates in a marathon, whose participants dress as various media characters and represents a variation of Bakhtin's carnival with the inversion of binary opposites.

A customary for modern media culture frame, linking Islam to war, terror and fear, is present in the film. However, it is there only to be debunked and deconstructed. This frame becomes the object of a game played by the film director. First of all, the film does not attempt to equate Islam with terrorism. Muslim characters live by diametrically opposing views. Some are conscious proponents of terror, while others reject violence, death, etc. One of the terrorists is an ethnic Briton, which underscores the idea that national identity and terrorism are not correlated. Terrorism can be multicultural as well.

Violence as a practice is also an object of ridicule. Terrorist acts claim civilian lives, however, the terrorists themselves also fall prey to violence. I'm not referring to the sacrificing of one's own life as being an act of terror. The members of this terrorist group communicate with each other in terms of violence, ranging from humiliation to manipulation, on a daily basis. In one scene, a member of the group accidentally kills himself. This death

undermines the very essence of terrorism as ideology-driven violence and goes to show that violence is utterly senseless to the point of being absurd.

Speaking about opposing values, it's important to bear in mind that the terrorist group members are European Muslims who live in an unusual cultural context. The director focuses on the clash of value systems, rather than their opposition, and proceeds to assess the impact of their coexistence in multicultural reality. In this situation, drawing a dividing line between values is virtually a sham. First of all, the integrity of the value system that binds the terrorist group members is called into question. It appears that not all of them understand the real meaning of their actions or are willing to stick to the idea of terror to the end.

The film shows the social tensions that cause the suffering of the people coming from different cultural communities. The existence of certain cultural contradictions is acknowledged. However, instead of the usual appeal to the frame of fear and violence, the director takes his image of terrorism and puts it in the frame of absurdity. Terrorism is deprived of the importance that it claims and becomes a hollow structure, virtually a form without content. Whether this absurdity is the result of the dead end that took shape over the course of a culture's natural evolution, or is just another way of comprehending reality and responding to the challenges of civilisation is a question that hardly has an unequivocal answer.

The film uses a wide variety of contexts and raises issues of political, social, religious, and cultural, in the broader sense of the term, nature. Its central themes explore migration problems, the Islamisation of Europe, the clash of cultures, and the loss of identity. The key goal of the main characters is to locate the enemy and, by doing so, preserve their identity.

The enemy image is shown to maximum scale yet is not defined: Jews, gays, and pharmacies, all become synonymous words. However, the "us and them" dichotomy exists only at the level of recitation. When a mosque becomes the target of a terrorist act, the line dividing these oppositions becomes blurred.

The values underlying the story include references to religious images of Islam and elements of Western mass culture. The Western culture images prevail on a symbolic level. The narrative goes from arguments about the nature of terrorism to reflections about the destiny of European civilisation. Terrorist characters exist within this culture and are its active consumers. They sing Western songs, use a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle suit, and even preach their bits of moral wisdom using the story of Simba from *The Lion King*. Meanwhile, the British Special Forces mistakenly perform a symbolic execution of a runner dressed as a Wookiee from the *Star Wars*, a cult movie in the West, as if passing on a guilty verdict to their own culture. The music in the film is unassuming. However, it adds to the symbolic description of the clash of two cultures: Oriental tunes give way to popular Western songs. The form of the film fully complements its ideological message, offering the viewer a bizarre mix of various genres and formats.

The number four has a separate symbolic meaning here. It is truly a signature number for European culture. References to the number four permeate the fabric of the film. There are allusions to four Beatles, four Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, etc. Four lions in this film are essentially four lion cubs, four creatures of Western civilisation seeking to win back the kingdom and its lost status. *Four Lions* is a provocation, a challenge and an attempt to reflect freely on a subject that doesn't easily lend itself to free reflection.

## 4. Conclusions

---

1. *There is a political consensus in the leading world mass media on how to cover the ISIS activities. It is generally believed that the Islamic State is an enemy that should be destroyed. There are no positive publications about ISIS (where, for example, militants are portrayed as fighters for a righteous cause).*
2. *Media publications dedicated to the Islamic State are dominated by this thematic frame, which is a sign of a high public importance of this subject. One can observe the approximation of ISIS and totalitarianism frames and a parallel divergence of the ISIS and Islam frames.*
3. *The ISIS discourse is marked by duality. It is characterised as both a state and a terrorist organisation. The armed struggle against ISIS is interpreted as both a military conflict and an antiterrorist operation. Although ISIS has managed to introduce some confusion into the media discourse by imposing the term “state” and the accompanying verbal constructions, media describe it primarily as a terrorist organisation. The important thing is that ISIS has failed to present its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, as a conquering hero. Any mentions of the Islamic State are highly impersonal.*
4. *Mass media frames dedicated to ISIS generally fit in with the analysed mass culture frames dedicated to Islamic terrorism, which have been created over the last 5 to 7 years.*
5. *Publications on ISIS activities are characterised by a high level of reflection. A large number of texts are surcharged with various historical and cultural contexts (from 9/11 to Al-Qaeda to George Orwell). But it is only the ISIS phenomenon that is subjected to reflection, with the media showing only a weak interest in the ISIS organisation, its origins, etc.*

***The media image of ISIS is a complex and controversial transnational construct formed on an intersection of traditional and modern frames resulting from information efforts made by both ISIS and the antiterrorist coalition states. Basically, we are witnessing attempts to describe a fundamentally new socio-political phenomenon with the help of an outmoded media language that makes it impossible to convey the essence of the ISIS phenomenon***

***in authentic terms. Obviously, an intensive validation in describing this phenomenon by symbolic means is in progress, validation accompanied by changes in the traditional frames used to cover radical Islam. In this context, works of fiction generally demonstrate greater ingenuity and freshness of the language than traditional media, which are hamstrung by the inertia of the composite news management process.***

## 5. Bibliography

1. Baudrillard J. *The Spirit of Terrorism and Requiem for the Twin Towers*. London, New York: Verso, 2012.
2. Borah P. 2011. "Conceptual Issues in Framing Theory: A Systematic Examination of a Decade's Literature", *Journal of Communication*, 61.
3. Castels M. (2009): *Communication Power*. Oxford University Press.
4. Cronin A. 2015. "ISIS Is Not a Terrorist Group", *Foreign Affairs*, March-April.
5. Entman, R.M. 1993. "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm." *Journal of Communication* 43:51–68.
6. Gitlin T. 1980. *The Whole World is Watching*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
7. Jasperson, A.E., and M.O. El-Kikhia. 2003. "CNN and al Jazeera's Media Coverage of America's War in Afghanistan." In *Framing Terrorism: The News Media, the Government, and the Public*, ed. P. Norris, M. Kern, and M. Just, 113–32. New York: Routledge.
8. Lakoff G. (2008) *The Political Mind: Why You Can't Understand 21st-century Politics with an 18th-century Brain*. New York: Viking.
9. McCormick, G. H. (2003): *Terrorist decision making*. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 6: 473-507.
10. Nelson, Thomas E., Rosalee A. Clawson, and Zoe Oxley. 1997. "Media Framing of a Civil Liberties Controversy and Its Effect on Tolerance." *American Political Science Review* 91 (3): 567–84.
11. Norris, P., M. Kern, and M. Just. 2003. "Framing Terrorism." In *Framing Terrorism: The News Media, the Government, and the Public*, ed. P. Norris, M. Kern, and M. Just, 3–26. New York: Routledge.
12. Papacharissi Z, Oliveira F. 2008. "News Frames Terrorism: A Comparative Analysis of Frames Employed in Terrorism Coverage in U.S. and U.K. Newspapers", *The International Journal of Press and Politics*, 13:1.
13. Reese S., Lewis S. 2009. "Framing the War on Terror: The Internalization of Policy in US Press", *Journalism*, 10:6.
14. Rojecki A. 2005. "Media Discourse and Global Terrorism", *Political Communication*, 22:1.
15. Scheufele D. 1999. "Framing as a Theory of Media Effects", *Journal of Communication*, 49:1.
16. Schoeneborn D. and Scherer A. G. (2010): *Communication as Constitutive of Terrorist Organizations*. IOU Working Paper No. 104.
17. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228193996\\_Communication\\_as\\_Constitutive\\_of\\_Terrorist\\_Organizations](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228193996_Communication_as_Constitutive_of_Terrorist_Organizations)
18. Semetko, H., J. G. Blumler, M. Gurevitch, and D. H. Weaver. 1991. *The Formation of Campaign Agendas*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
19. Weis M., Khasan H., *Islamskoe gosudarstvo: Armiya terrora [Islamic State: An Army of Terror]*, Moscow, Alpina Publishers, 2015.
20. Gofman I., "Analiz freimov: essay ob organizatsii povsednevnogo opyta" [Analyzing Frames: An Essay on the Organization of Everyday Experience], Moscow, Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences, 2003.
21. Davydov S.G., Seliverstova N.V., "Predstavleniya ob obshchestve v sovremennykh televizionnykh serialakh" [Perceptions of Society in Present-Day TV Series], *Medi@lmanac*, 2007, No. 2, pp. 22–36.
22. Zhizhek S., *Dobro pozhalovat' v pustynyu realnogo [Welcome to the Desert of Reality]*, Moscow, Pragmatika Kultury Foundation, 2002.
23. Kastels M., *Informatsionnaya epokha: ekonomika, obshchestvo i kultura [Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture]*, Moscow, NRU-HSE, 2000.
24. Kin D., *Demokratiya i dekadans media [Democracy and Media Decadence]*, Moscow, HSE Publishers, 2015.
25. Makluyen M., *Ponimaniye media [Understanding the Media]*, Moscow, 2003; 2010 (3rd edition), Chapter 29.
26. *Slovo v deystvii. Internet-analiz politicheskogo diskursa [Word in Action. Internet Analysis of Political Discourse]*, Eds. T.N. Ushakova, N.D. Pavlova, St. Petersburg, Aletheya, 2000.
27. *Sotsiologiya i kinematograf [Sociology and Cinema]*, M.I. Zhabsky (ed.), Moscow, 2012.
28. Sztompka P., *Vizualnaya sotsiologiya [Visual Sociology]*, Moscow, Logos, 2007.



## #Valdaiclub

 Valdai Club

 Valdai International Discussion Club

[www.valdaiclub.com](http://www.valdaiclub.com)

[valdai@valdaiclub.com](mailto:valdai@valdaiclub.com)

ISBN 978-5-906757-26-5

