

The R2P Advantage: Daesh's 'Responsibility to Protect' (R2P) Propaganda

Dr. Haroro J. Ingram

June 2023



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The scale of the Syrian civil war's devastation is difficult to comprehend with over half a million [dead](#) or missing and millions [displaced](#). Meanwhile, despite over a [decade](#) of war crimes and crimes against humanity [committed](#) by Bashar al-Assad's [regime](#), it appears that regional [relations](#) with Syria are normalizing as [promises](#) by the international community to hold the [regime](#) accountable remain unfulfilled. The war in Syria has become the bloodiest [reminder](#), although sadly one of many, of the [failings](#) of the '[Responsibility to Protect](#)' (R2P) doctrine to prevent mass atrocities. It is a failure that the Islamic State has sought to exploit by presenting itself as the global R2P champion of the world's Muslims.

Given the [devastation](#) that the Islamic State has wrought all over the world, it may be surprising to learn that its propagandists see R2P as an area of strategic advantage in the information theater. Yet R2P appeals have been a major [theme](#) in the movement's propaganda since its formative years under Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Policymakers and practitioners would benefit from understanding *how* the Islamic State leverages R2P claims in its propaganda, and *why* the group sees it as a strategic advantage. It is an exercise that promises practitioners an uncomfortable reckoning with the altruistic drivers of violent extremism, the symbolic and practical power of say-do gaps, and the competitive forces central to the 21st century information theater.



Figure 1. Syrians inspect the rubble of destroyed buildings following a Syrian government airstrike in Aleppo, Syria on 19 March 2014 © AP Photo/Aleppo Media Center AMC.

Defense of Muslim Lands

Two decades before ‘Responsibility to Protect’ (R2P) was unanimously [adopted](#) in the 2005 UN World Summit as an [obligation](#) of states to protect populations from mass atrocities, [Abdullah Azzam](#) penned [Defense of Muslim Lands](#) justifying the Afghan-Soviet war as a defensive *jihad*. His *fatwa* argued that defensive jihad is an individual obligation (*farḍ al-‘ayn*, فرض العين) and offensive jihad is a collective obligation (*farḍ al-kifāya*, فرض الكفاية). As Azzam [declared](#),

...if the kuffar infringe upon a hand span of Muslim land, jihad becomes *farḍ ‘ayn* [an individual obligation] for its people and for those nearby. If they fail to repel the kuffar due to lack of resources or due to indolence, then the *farḍ ‘ayn* of jihad spreads to those behind, and carries on spreading in this process, until the jihad is *farḍ ‘ayn* upon the whole earth from the East to the West.

The fatwa proved jurisprudentially transformative by essentially elevating defensive jihad to the status of Islam’s pillars and strategically transformative by remodeling the global *ummah* from a largely rhetorical device into a practical imperative.

That the *Defense of Muslim Lands* was broadly accepted by senior religious scholars at the time gave it jurisprudential credibility. That it inspired waves of foreign fighters to travel to Afghanistan in [numbers](#) that were unprecedented until the Islamic State three decades later, reinforced its practicability. All of this was further enhanced by Abdullah Azzam’s profile as a warrior-scholar and his skills as a propagandist. Azzam had fashioned, for all intents and purposes, the fundamental principles of a jihadist R2P doctrine, and his mentee, Osama Bin Laden, would play a central role in stretching both the conditions of what constitutes a defensive jihad and its implications for the use of violence. His al-Qaida would become the global jihad’s flagship by launching and [justifying](#) attacks in the homelands of its enemies framed as acts of a just defensive war: “For we only killed Russians

after they invaded Afghanistan and Chechnya, we only killed Europeans after they invaded Afghanistan and Iraq, and we only killed Americans in New York after they supported Jews in Palestine and invaded the Arabian Peninsula.” In turn, the Islamic State has embraced and expanded its use of R2P claims as a powerful, multifaceted propaganda tool.



Figure 2. Merged image of Azzam (left) and bin Laden (right) circulated on social media.

Daesh as Global R2P Champions

The Islamic State’s propagandists leverage R2P claims in ways that shift with its strategic calculations. Given the perceived failings of the international community to protect Syrians, it is perhaps unsurprising that the war in Syria has been the focal point of the Islamic State’s R2P narratives. In an infamous 2013 [speech](#) to announce the Islamic State of Iraq had formally extended its operations into Syria, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi justified his actions by declaring that “when the situation in al-Sham reached to the shedding of blood and violating of honors, and people of al-Sham called for help and the people of earth abandoned them, we were obliged to rise up to support them.” After the Islamic State established its caliphate, the group’s R2P narratives argued that the West and its allies, dissatisfied with merely perpetrating or impotently witnessing crimes against Muslims, were now attacking the *ummah*’s only source of protection. In 2016, then-spokesman Abu Muhammed Al-Adnani [said](#) in his final speech: “Where are the Kafir West’s alleged defense of ‘civilians’ and protection of ‘human rights’ and ‘freedom’? Indeed the false and deceiving mask of nobility has fallen, showing its ugly face under the Nusayri barrels of death, destruction, and gas.”



Figure 3. Former Islamic State spokesman Abu Mohammad al-Adnani.

Since reverting back to an insurgency on the run, if one operating on a global scale, the Islamic State has continued its R2P appeals. More recently, the editorial leading the 392nd issue of *An-Naba* magazine was devoted to condemning the Arab League for readmitting the Assad regime, mocking the impotence of Western influence in the region, and reminding readers of the Islamic State's consistency of word and action. Published on May 25, 2023, the article repeatedly laments the predictability of Assad's acceptance by regional leaders and reminds its audience that "[a]ll the Arab tyrants are nothing but a copy of another Bashar who is waiting for the appropriate circumstances to bring out the butcher inside him. All of them, when their thrones are in danger, become like Bashar." The article goes further by declaring that, "the return of the Nusayri tyrant to official forums is an explicit declaration to every Arab tyrant that he can commit whatever crimes and massacres he wants, without worrying about the consequences to his political future." This reality, according to the anonymous author, leads to a simple conclusion: jihad is the only solution, and the Islamic State is still the only genuine source of protection for Muslims.

The Islamic State's R2P appeals are not limited to Syria. The Islamic State's global reach via its network of affiliates has enabled it to showcase R2P credentials in other parts of the world too. For example, in a *An-Naba* editorial titled "Why do you say that which you do not do?" (issue 369), the Islamic State declares that the [attack](#) by its [Khorasan province](#) on Kabul's Longan Hotel, which is frequented by Chinese nationals, was in response to China's persecution of Uyghurs. Framing the attack as an example of the Islamic State delivering on its threats, it condemned "tyrants" for either ignoring the suffering of Muslim Uyghurs or, even worse, allying with their oppressors. The article highlighted the group's global reach stating: "Soldiers in Sham threatened China years before and these threats were followed through today by its soldiers in Khorasan."



Figure 4. Aftermath of attack on Kabul's Longan Hotel on December 13, 2022 by the Islamic State. © AP Photo/Siddiqullah Khan.

Multifaceted Propaganda Tool

The Islamic State leverages R2P claims in its propaganda in four distinct but interrelated ways. First and foremost, as the previous examples show, the group presents itself as the *protector* of the global *ummah*. Second, the Islamic State uses R2P claims to flex its *ordained* jurisprudential credibility when legitimizing its use of violence. Third, R2P narratives provide the group's propagandists with an opportunity to highlight the Islamic State's narrow *say-do gap* while exposing the wide say-do gap of its adversaries. Fourth, R2P propaganda creates opportunities for the group's propagandists to argue that its most egregious brutalities – from burning a Jordanian pilot alive to performing bloody executions in a slaughterhouse – are acts of reciprocity.

All these elements combine into propaganda that is driven by a cyclically self-reinforcing dynamic. The Islamic State compels its audiences to see a bipolar world of clashing forces of good and evil which demands that the Islamic State protects its own, ordains righteous action, reciprocates with vengeance, and demonstrates its trustworthiness and legitimacy by merging what it says with what it does. Those four elements are designed to create juxtapositions between the Islamic State and its adversaries which it claims are responsible for attacking its people and engaging in unjust actions against innocents masked by hypocritical claims of wanting to protect them. The messenger matters too. While the West's R2P discourse is characterized by policy and academic works debating technical minutiae from thousands of miles away, the Islamic State puts forward its warrior-scholars to deliver their calls for action. Little wonder that the group thinks it has a strategic advantage in this battleground of the information war.

Easy Lies & Difficult Truths

The Islamic State's claims about its role as a protector of Muslims are absurd. Wherever it has appeared, the group has wreaked havoc on the lives of locals. No community has suffered more at

the hands of the Islamic State than the Sunni Muslims it claims to champion and protect. These are the easy lies at the heart of the group's R2P propaganda that can be easily refuted with fact-based, persuasively oriented [messaging](#). This is the low-hanging fruit that strategic communications professionals with even the most rudimentary training should be capable of exploiting. The broader challenge is not so simple.

Some difficult truths also underpin the Islamic State's R2P appeals. Altruistic motivations do, at times, contribute to why people join violent extremist groups. Consequently, those groups will try to exploit those drivers in their propaganda and recruitment efforts. Also, the [gap](#) between Western rhetoric and real-world action on human rights, the rule of law, genocide protection, and [promises](#) to local allies has too often fallen short. The Islamic State tries to exploit such tensions in its R2P appeals. In an increasingly competitive information theater, humanitarian crises need to be seen as "opportunities to protect" that policymakers and practitioners can then leverage to outcompete state and non-state adversaries for the moral and semantic high ground.