

Cultivating Collective Identity Online: An Analysis of Pro-Islamic State Discourse on Twitter

by

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Abstract

Social movements around the world have begun to harness new tools in the repertoire of political contention: social media. Social scientists have begun to investigate the relationship between social media and mobilization, yet the majority of the literature is focused on how these tools are used to co-ordinate protest activities in the physical world. Despite increasing acknowledgement of collective identity as a mobilizing force, social movement theorists have mostly emphasized social media's informational and organizational functions. This thesis focuses on the ideational function of social media by examining mechanisms of collective identity cultivation therein, and posits that social media not only affect mobilization in the physical world, but constitute a space for mobilization itself. I present an analysis of the pro-Islamic State (IS) discourse on Twitter, highlighting three particular socio-linguistic identity-building mechanisms: indexicality, positioning, and intertextuality. I show that hashtags and hyperlinks are elements of a new digital toolbox which can be used to bolster collective identity creation and movement solidarity.

Keywords: Collective identity; Islamic State; social movement theory; social media; Twitter

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to Shane Tuckey and Marianela Pita, for their unending support.

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List of Acronyms

AQ	Al Qaeda
IS	Islamic State
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
JN	Jabhat Al Nusra
SNS	Social Networking Sites

Glossary

Contentious Collective Action	An act executed collectively by a group of people with shared interests who lack regular access to institutions, and who act in order to advance those interests or fundamentally challenge a perceived opponent or authority
Securitization	The process by which an actor declares something to be a security threat, and persuades an audience that unusual or extraordinary measures are required in order to reduce that threat
Social Media	Websites, software and applications that enable users to share information and create and maintain social relationships
Social Movement	A series of “collective challenges, based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities” (Tarrow 2011, 9)
Social Networking Site	A website specifically designed to enable the creation of personal social networks

Screen Capture of Pro-IS Tweet



Screen capture of a tweet by user “Muslimah” expressing solidarity for the online Pro-IS movement

Creator of image: unknown

Chapter 1.

Introduction

Social Media and Contentious Collective Action

In the first decade of the new millennium, social movements around the world began to harness new tools in the repertoire of political contention: social media. This trend has been gaining momentum, and by 2009 social media moved to the forefront of several political protest movements. These included the G20 London Summit protests, the parliamentary election protests in Moldova and the protests against presidential election results in Iran (Segerberg & Bennett 2011, 197). The Arab Spring, which began in the following year of 2010, sparked a massive interest in the relationship between social media and mobilization as revolutionary stories from Tunisia, Egypt and other Middle Eastern countries unfolded across Facebook and Twitter. According to one survey, ninety percent of Tunisians and Egyptians who participated in the Arab Spring in March of 2011 reported using Facebook as a platform to organize protests and spread awareness (Huang 2011). That there is a connection between protests and social media has become popular knowledge as protesters have consciously sought to harness social media in support of contentious collective action. As Tarrow writes, “from using the Internet to diffuse information and propaganda to employing it to bring people to international sites of protest over great distances, the Internet has rapidly become a basic tool of movement organizers and has given rise to enormous excitement among both activists and publicists” (2011, 137). Although he acknowledges that “it may be reductive to regard [the Internet] as simply vehicles for “message transmission,”” social movement scholars still struggle to fully understand the nature of this relationship.

Several studies have emerged to explore this relationship, but most scholarship on social media and contentious collective action has focused on the way people use social media to organize rallies and spread news – in other words, the information-sharing

and organizational functions. As Carty writes, “the digital revolution has greatly expanded the parameters within which groups and individuals can voice concerns, share information, and organize protest activities” (Carty 2015, 82). In other words, social media are framed as tools which support contentious collective action. However, this instrumentalist way of framing social media only reveals part of its relationship to mobilization, and has two major limitations. The first limitation pertains to our understanding of contentious collective action. In social movement theory, contentious collective action refers to actions conducted by co-operative actors in pursuit of a shared goal which challenges a perceived opponent or authority. Tarrow writes that:

Collective action can take many forms – brief or sustained, institutionalized or disruptive, humdrum or dramatic... collective action becomes contentious when it is used by people who lack regular access to representative institutions, who act in the name of new or unaccepted claims, and who behave in ways that fundamentally challenge others or authorities...Contentious collective action serves as the basis for social movements (2011, 7).

Implicit in this approach is the notion that whatever phenomena occur in the digital milieu only warrant the attention of social movement theorists inasmuch as they affect contentious activities in the physical world. As such, it fails to consider that online activities can constitute a form of contentious collective action in and of itself. The second limitation is that this focus fails to account for the ideational functions of social media that support mobilization. More specifically, it fails to consider the role of collective identity in supporting social movements. In other words, this approach frames social media strictly as a set of tools which support physical forms of contentious collective action – such as the demonstration in Tahrir Square of Cairo in February of 2011.

In order to deepen our understanding of the relationship between social media and mobilization, scholars of social movements must respond to these limitations. Firstly, we must reframe our understanding of online communications not as fundamentally distinct from, but rather a natural extension of human communication. Communications scholars and anthropologists are increasingly calling for the dissolution of the ontological distinction between online and offline reality (Boelstorff et al. 2012; Slater 2002; Postill 2012). This is not to say, however, that these new ways of communication do not in turn influence the way that we communicate; indeed they do. Rather the point is to enable a shift from

thinking of social media strictly as tools, to also considering them as a space where collective identities can be constituted and where collective action can take place. This in turn allows for the possibility that a social movement can exist online. Tarrow defines a social movement as "collective challenges, based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities" (Tarrow 2011, 9). The four common characteristics of social movements are thus collective challenge, common purpose, social solidarity and sustained interaction. This thesis will argue that the online community of IS supporters exhibits each of these characteristics, and thus that this phenomenon constitutes a social movement.

If we accept this premise, then the study of a social movement as it exists online presents us with a unique opportunity to address the second shortcoming. Namely, it enables a closer examination of the role of collective identity in supporting social movements and how collective identity is actually constructed. This is because the interactions and relationships between movement participants and the discourse they produce are made concrete and accessible through text and images that are produced and shared in the public space of social media. This discourse can then be analyzed to better understand processes of collective identity construction, for it is "through the study of language usage (discourse analysis and conversation analysis) [that] we can explore the *mechanisms* by which *identity* claims are achieved" [emphasis added] (Barker & Galasiński 2001, 61). Social movement theorists recognize that collective identity matters for mobilization because it gives people "the sense of shared experiences and values that connects individuals to movements and gives participants a sense of collective agency" (Staggenborg 2012, 24). Carty's recently (2015) published book, *Social Movements and New Technology*, is a step forward with regards to examining the role of new information technologies and social media in the context of social movements. She acknowledges the ideational function of social media, stating that social media enable "actors to share grievances, accelerate social movement activity, decentralize mobilization efforts, facilitate recruitment efforts through virtual forms of *collective identity*, and hold authorities accountable for their responses to protest" [emphasis added] (Carty 2015, 5). The question remains, however, precisely *how* social media supports the cultivation of collective identity and social movement solidarity. This thesis seeks to address this question in an analysis of the discourse produced by the online pro-Islamic State

movement, which from 2014 onward has captured global headlines for its strong presence across social media platforms.

A Brief History of IS

In order to understand the online pro-IS movement, it is necessary to provide some historical context on the militant organization known as Islamic State (IS). IS has undergone a dramatic transformation during its rise to prominence, evolving from a small militant cell affiliated with Al Qaeda (AQ) to the sprawling and resilient proto-state it is today. IS first emerged in the context of a severely weakened Iraq after the United States deposed Saddam Hussein and assumed control in 2003¹. The two primary policy decisions that laid the foundation for the formation of IS were the dissolution of the Iraqi army and the restructuring of Iraq's government. The American decision to dismantle the Iraqi army created a security vacuum which was never successfully filled during their eight-year occupation. An International Crisis Group report accurately predicted that the move to disband the Iraqi army would "heighten the risk that the Sunni population [would] be further alienated, that the military [would] be perceived as a prolongation of, rather than a substitute for, the occupation and that, far from helping to forge a new collective national identity, [the military would] become an arena for renewed internal political, sectarian and ethnic conflict" (ICG 2003). In restructuring the Iraqi state, the United States initiated a process of "De-Baathification," removing all senior members of the Baath party from all organs of the state in order to preclude the emergence of any remaining loyalists of Saddam Hussein. Under Hussein, Iraq had been primarily governed by the Sunni minority, yet after the US interfered and new elections were held, a new predominantly Shiite government emerged – a dramatic reversal that stoked sectarian tensions. These two policy decisions fostered the formation of IS by rendering hundreds of thousands of militarily trained Iraqis suddenly unemployed without recourse, undermining security so dramatically that normal economic and social activities were disrupted, and fostering widespread anger towards the U.S. (Pfiffner 2010, 75). The invasive foreign policy decisions of the US thus served as a basis upon which a sense of shared grievance among Sunni Iraqis emerged. Yet it was not only Sunni Iraqis who regarded the U.S. with distrust;

¹ For more on U.S. involvement in Iraq following the fall of Saddam Hussein, see Diamond's *Squandered Victory*

as Diamond writes, “the Shiites in Iraq were embittered by the failure of the United States to come to their aid when they rose up after the Gulf War—partly at the urging of President George H.W. Bush himself—in an effort to overthrow Saddam. This left many (if not most) Shiites feeling that the United States could not be trusted, while the Sunnis now feared a U.S. effort to strip them of their power and privilege” (2005, 23). As such, a public opinion poll in October of 2003 revealed that approximately 60% of Iraqis considered the U.S.-led coalition to be “occupying powers” and only 15% considered them to be “liberating forces” (2005, 12).

It was in this volatile climate of 2004 that AQ established a branch in Iraq and for the next seven years, Iraq was embroiled in insurgent warfare. AQ’s new branch was one of several Sunni militant groups which fought against the Shiite-led government and the Americans who protected it. Militias on both sides of the sectarian divide participated in the violence, contributing to the complexity of the conflict. As AQ’s new branch became better established and increased its number of operations, it came to be known by the name Islamic State in Iraq (ISI). Over time, ISI grew in numbers and recognition as it continued to target American occupying forces. The insurgent warfare continued, and after eight years of occupation President Obama announced the full withdrawal of American troops from Iraq. The American withdrawal and the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011 presented a moment of tremendous opportunity for the group to expand its territory of operations. However, ISI’s expansion into Syria created a rift between the leadership of the group and its parent AQ, which already had a representative in Syria called Jabhat Al-Nusra (JN). The leader of ISI, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, ignored directives from AQ and even tried to subsume JN under his authority in 2013 (Mendelsohn 2014). The tension caused by this expansion ultimately resulted in ISI’s split from AQ and its transformation into the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), or simply Islamic State (IS). Finally, in June of 2014 IS formally declared the establishment of an Islamic caliphate with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as its caliph, the first of its kind since Mustafa Kemal Atatürk abolished the Ottoman caliphate in 1924 (Mandaville 2014, 67). The institution of the caliphate has played various roles throughout history. Although historically the caliph has represented the political and religious successor to the prophet, the institution does not represent the same kind of authoritative centre that, for example, the Catholic Church has in the Pope. As one analyst writes, the caliphate is “a political or religious idea whose relevance has waxed and waned

according to circumstance” (Danforth 2014). The declaration of a new caliphate is thus highly controversial because the assertion that the self-styled caliph holds political and religious authority for all Muslims is paradoxically a newer way of thinking of the caliphate. In this way, IS engages historical concepts from Islam, and re-imagines them, while claiming a sort of historical authenticity and purity. The activities of IS have expanded from conducting guerrilla attacks against the American military presence to include governance, policing and the provision of some social services across territories under its control (See Figure 1.1 below)

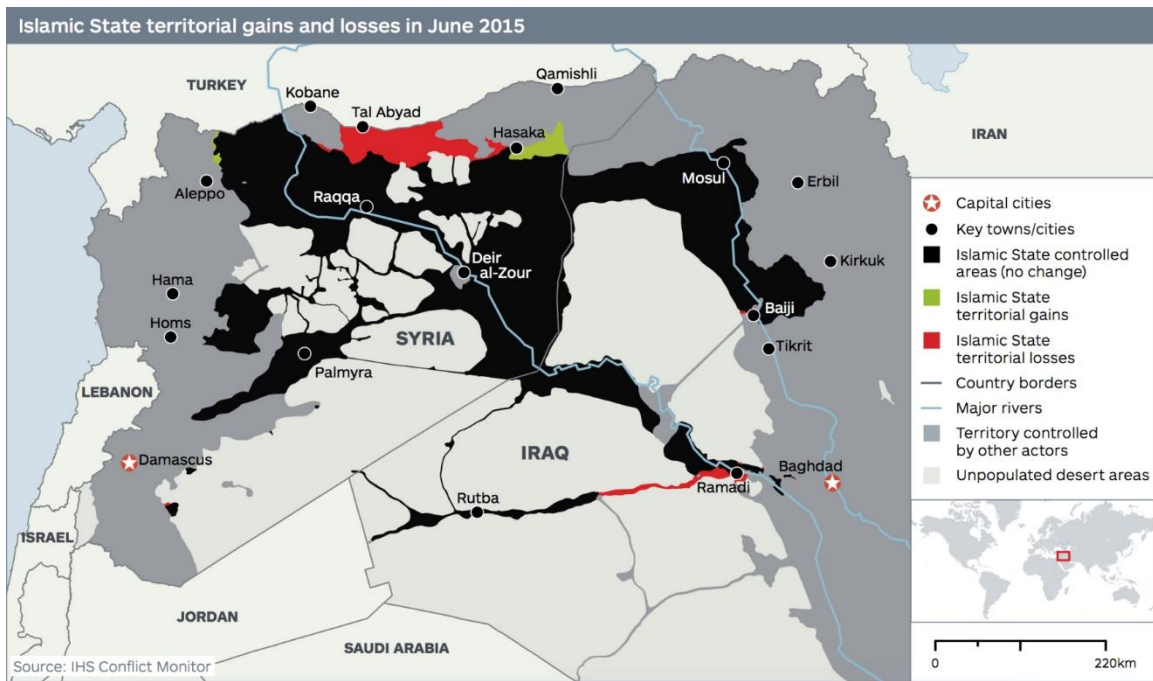


Figure 1.1 Map of Islamic State controlled territories in June 2015
 Source: IHS Risk Analysis Firm, as cited in Groll 2015.

IS now has an ideology (See Appendix A), sense of solidarity and shared purpose in expanding its reach and influence. Part of their official strategy has been to use social media as a way of spreading that ideology and reaching out to potential recruits, and the organization has developed sophisticated media strategies to that end.

IS on Social Media

In the course of its rise to prominence, IS became increasingly active on social media. The official media branch of IS, al-Furqan, began using social media as a means of disseminating propaganda videos. YouTube, for example, became the host of videos depicting the beheading of British, American and Japanese journalists who were taken captive by IS. These videos were provocative not just because of the brutality of the means of execution, and not just because the victims were non-combatant civilians, but also because these executions were performed by a British national named Mohammed Emwazi who soon became known to the world by his nickname “Jihadi John”. Indeed an important part of the project of IS has been to actively seek out recruits from the powerful countries whose governments so deeply oppose it, most likely in order to provoke military intervention and draw them into the conflict. Social media has provided the means to disseminate propaganda videos which feature new Western recruits encouraging Muslims in their home countries to join the cause. They have also served as a crucial platform for the recruitment process itself. Their success in this endeavour has inspired renewed fear of “homegrown terrorism” and radicalization in Europe and North America, and has contributed to the deepening securitization of social networking sites (SNS). While estimates of the number of foreign fighters in the ranks of IS vary, one report places the number between two and three thousand as of September 2014, most of which are believed to be American, French, Belgian and German (Byman & Shapiro 2014, 3). For Western governments, the fact that so many North Americans and Europeans have shifted their loyalties from their home nations to IS jeopardizes the primacy of national identity and raises questions about the collective identity that replaces it for supporters of IS. For many participants in the movement, their stake in the outcome of IS’s political project has been established only after connecting to the movement in the digital milieu. A significant portion of these supporters make life-altering decisions, such as religious conversion and in some extreme cases, emigrating and taking up arms. Therefore it is not just the group’s official activity on social media that has been cause for concern among its political opponents, but rather the incredibly dynamic community of supporters that have assembled in virtual space from across the globe in support of IS.

The Online Pro-IS Social Movement

While IS is best understood as a militant organization, I argue that the online community of IS supporters and their activity on social media constitute a social movement. Thus, while IS itself may not be a social movement, there is a pro-Islamic State social movement which assembles and acts collectively in the digital milieu. This argument is premised on the understanding that online activity can constitute contentious collective action in and of itself, and further argue that the online pro-IS community comprises a social movement as defined by Tarrow. He writes that:

Contentious politics occurs when ordinary people – often in alliance with more influential citizens and with changes in public mood – join forces in confrontation with elites, authorities, and opponents...When backed by well-structured social networks and galvanized by culturally resonant, action-oriented symbols, contentious politics leads to sustained interaction with opponents – to social movements (Tarrow 2011, 6).

Social media have enabled ordinary people who support IS to create a well-structured network of affiliation, confront authorities and ideological opponents and assert their shared beliefs in a sustained and public way. The online pro-IS community has created action-oriented symbols that draw on diverse sources to create new meanings that support their online collective action in a sustained fashion. Although this movement does support the militant organization known as IS, it is a distinct phenomenon from the organization itself. This thesis seeks to examine only the online element of this movement in order to investigate how collective identity is cultivated online, and whether social media influences this process.

The online pro-IS movement is active on various SNS, comprises members who sign in from every continent, and produces a vast quantity of online material reaffirming its strong and well-defined collective identity. A report titled “The ISIS Twitter Census” conservatively estimates that 46,000 pro-IS Twitter accounts were active between September and December 2014 (Berger & Morgan 2015, 2). The same study further reveals that almost one in five pro-IS Twitter accounts had English as the primary language, a number which includes both those seeking to promote the movement among English speakers and those who have responded to these efforts. It is with this self-organizing, English-speaking pro-IS Twitter community that this study is concerned. This

thesis will provide empirical evidence showing that IS supporters' use of Twitter cultivates a collective identity and promotes movement solidarity. This evidence comes in the form of a discourse analysis of user-generated pro-IS material sampled from Twitter.

I argue that activity on social media can constitute an act of contentious collective action in and of itself. As Shirky writes, social media have enabled “a remarkable increase in our ability to share, to cooperate with one another, and to take collective action, all outside the framework of traditional institutions and organizations” (2008, 21). I argue that social media constitute digital spaces where people can challenge elites, authorities or other perceived opponents and also where people can collectively affirm new sets of values. I further argue that social media support social movements because they support the formation of collective identity through communication. The immediacy and interconnectedness of the digital milieu support this collective identity formation by amplifying the effects of three socio-linguistic mechanisms of identity formation: indexicality, positioning, and intertextuality. These concepts are derived from discourse studies, and are based on the idea that identity is both relational and performative. This means that identity is not something a person *has*, but rather something that a person *enacts*. This understanding of identity as discursive-performative allows for the idea that people enact multiple identities, some of which are more complex than others. For example, the same person may at different times or in different social situations enact their identity as a woman, a professional athlete, or even “a morning person.” Indexicality refers to how people “index” themselves under certain identity categories, whether through their behaviour or through their language. Positioning refers to how people describe their identity in relation to other identity categories. Intertextuality refers to the way that people draw on a multitude of established cultural “texts” in order to invoke associations that define one’s identity. These three functions are used both in the construction of individual identity, as well as in the construction of collective identity.

While these functions in and of themselves are not specific to computer mediated communication, I contend that the internet as a social space amplifies the effects of these functions, and offers new modes of intertextuality. On Twitter, these new modes of intertextuality include the use of hashtags and embedded hyperlinks. When these intertextual functions are activated for the purpose of generating movement solidarity, the

immediacy, hyper-connectedness and multimodality that characterize SNS are galvanized for one common purpose. SNS strengthen the effects of these functions and enable users from geographically removed circumstances to develop a surprising level of intimacy. As in the case of IS, this intimacy is not just between individuals, but connects individuals to a shared sense of purpose and a collective identity which fosters social movement solidarity. Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983) describes the importance of the technology of written language in creating a sense of collective identity, both in the earlier "imagined communities" of religious identity, and in the later "imagined communities" of nations. He writes that "the sacred silent [written] languages were the media through which the great global [religious] communities of the past were imagined" (Anderson, 1983; 32). He also describes how the invention of the printing press played a critical role in enabling the collective imagining of national identity (1983; 40-55). In particular, he explains how newspapers were a new technology that facilitated the creation of a sense of connection with a community, yet a community so great in size that one could never expect to know each member individually:

The obsolescence of the newspaper on the morrow of its printing...creates this extraordinary mass ceremony: the almost precisely simultaneous consumption ('imagining') of the newspaper-as-fiction. [This mass ceremony] is performed in silent privacy, in the lair of the skull. Yet each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion...What more vivid figure for the secular, historically clocked, imagined community can be envisioned? (Anderson 1983; 53)

I would like to propose that social media represent a technological innovation which, like the printing press, enable the imagining of communities in similar ways. Using a particular hashtag, for example, immediately connects a Twitter user to the entire body of discourse that comprises that hashtag, and to every user who has used it. When these functions are consciously harnessed to promote a sense of solidarity and cohesion, the effect can be powerful. SNS thus support mobilization not just because of their informational and organizational functions, but because they constitute a space that allows for the cultivation of collective identity and movement solidarity.

Limitations

It is important to acknowledge that although communications technologies facilitate the creation of “imagined communities,” in order to do so effectively, they must be ostensibly linked to the physical world. As Anderson (1983) writes, “the newspaper reader, observing exact replicas of his own paper being consumed by his subway, barbershop, or residential neighbours, is continually reassured that the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life” (53). Similarly, for the online pro-IS movement to maintain its sense of cohesion, it must reassure its members of its tangible existence as well. This linkage from the online to the offline is crucial, and the online pro-IS movement could not exist without them. This study, however, seeks to focus exclusively on the *discursive* processes that shape identity in the digital milieu. As such, the findings of this study do not reflect how the offline, corporeal experiences of IS supporters influence their identity. Additionally, this study does not seek to demonstrate change in collective identity over time. Given the practical constraints of resources and time, this thesis presents an analysis of the pro-IS discourse on Twitter at a given time. Data was collected over the month of May 2015, and analyzed in order to highlight discursive processes of identity cultivation at work.

Outline of Thesis

This thesis will proceed in the following manner. Chapter 2 begins by defining social movements, and proceeds to argue how the online pro-IS community and its activity on social media fits that definition. Accepting that online activity can constitute contentious collective action and that social movements can exist online enables us to fill a gap in the literature of social movements. This literature now acknowledges the importance of collective identity but has yet to account for processes of collective identity formation in support of a social movement. If we accept that social movements can exist on social media, then we are presented with a unique opportunity to examine these processes by analyzing the discourse produced. Johnston writes that “texts give insight into the shape of a group’s communicative behaviors, or its discourse. Discourse, simply stated, is what is said in a group, how it’s said, and how it’s interpreted. While it is diverse and multifaceted, it is also the connective tissue of a group’s collective existence. In this broad sense, the

totality of a group's words and meanings can itself be understood as a text performed by the participants" (2014, 78). This approach also begins to address the gap in literature surrounding social media and mobilization, which as yet has largely emphasized the informational and organizational functions of social media, ignoring its ideational functions.

Chapter 3 provides an overview of the methodological approach of the study. It begins by explaining the reasoning behind using Twitter as the point of entry into the online pro-IS movement, which spans across several SNS. Twitter is the ideal point of entry to the online pro-IS movement because of the high level of activity by movement members and the vast quantity of data which is publicly available. It then proceeds by detailing the method and tools used to collect data. The chapter concludes by outlining the analytic framework applied to the data, consisting in a focus on the three identity building mechanisms of indexicality, positioning and intertextuality. The design of this framework is based on the ideas and recommendations of discourse scholars Barker and Galasinski (2001), Gee (2005) and De Fina (2011).

Chapter 4 presents an analysis of pro-IS identity on Twitter in two sections, using the framework described in Chapter 3 to examine how collective identity is created in the digital milieu. The first of these sections introduces and describes the collective identity of the movement – the “Baqiyah Family,” its values, and how it constructs the opponent against which the movement acts collectively. This section also acknowledges the movement’s self-proclaimed links to Islam while placing it within the greater context of Islamist movements. The second section of Chapter 4 provides a detailed analysis of how the specific features of Twitter have enabled the construction of this collective identity. The features analyzed include visual features such as profile pictures and emoticons, usernames and account names, as well as the location and biography features of the Twitter profile. The analysis shows how each feature has functioned to foster collective identity through the three mechanisms of indexicality, positioning and intertextuality.

Chapter 5 argues that the securitization of cyberspace has expanded from concerns about the infiltration of digitally-managed critical infrastructures (such as financial institutions) to the framing of social media as a threat to both individual and national security. This threat is described in terms of home-grown terrorism and

radicalization. Because of the recruitment activity by IS and another anti-nationalist militant organizations on social media, and the speech acts by powerful state actors such as the United States, private American-owned social media companies are increasingly responding to these pressures by developing new policies specifically designed to reduce access to their services by terrorists and terrorist-affiliated users. In particular, Twitter began a policy of targeted mass suspensions of pro-IS accounts in the fall of 2014. This policy, I argue, actually bolsters the cohesion of the movement because it enables what Tarrow describes as “injustice framing” (Tarrow 2011, 145). Members of the movement frame these suspensions as unjust on the basis that their perceived opponent – Western cultural codes, embodied by the United States – claims to protect universal free speech and argues that these suspensions constitute a violation of the universality of free speech. The politicization of certain speech acts on social media and the ongoing policy of targeted suspensions has helped transform the act of maintaining a network of pro-IS affiliation and expressing solidarity on social media into a cycle of sustained contentious collective action.

Chapter 6 highlights two features of social media which constitute new forms of intertextuality, specifically hashtags and hyperlinks. Hashtags – which emerged specifically in the context of social media – and hyperlinks – which are a function of the internet in general – each enable users to generate new meanings by creating new relationships between texts. This chapter demonstrates how online pro-IS movement has developed movement-specific ways of using these functions to advance their shared interests, and presents two key findings. The first key finding is that hashtags constitute a space where the boundary of the collective “baqiyah” identity is both reaffirmed among insiders and contested between insiders and outsiders of the movement. The second key finding reframes the information sharing function of hyperlinks as a performance of collective identity and movement solidarity. In other words, the intertextual function of hyperlinks used to share information about the movement transform the act of sharing these links into indexes of membership in the movement.

Chapter 7 concludes with the idea that identity-work done in the digital milieu is deeply connected with the offline world, both shaping and being shaped by external forces, but also that the internet constitutes “a postmodern space of transformation, in which the

subject of communication is transformed within the process of communicating” (Slater 2002, 533).

Chapter 2.

Literature Review

This chapter will begin by providing a review of social movement theory's engagement with the role of identity in movements. Since the "cultural" turn in the 1990's, scholars have increasingly acknowledged that collective identity is important for mobilization, yet struggle to move past this acknowledgment into an analysis of processes behind collective identity construction. The chapter proceeds by describing the emergent branch of theory called "new social movement theory," which attempts to integrate considerations of identity with insights from other branches. Next, the chapter offers a brief review of the literature surrounding social media and mobilization, which tends to emphasize the organizational and informational functions of SNS over ideational functions such as collective identity creation and emotion work. The following section highlights studies of identity on social media from outside the body of social movement theory in order to indicate the potential benefit of using the analytic tools developed by anthropologists and communications scholars for the purposes of better theorizing the role of collective identity in mobilization. The chapter concludes by describing Tarrow's four characteristics of social movements and applying this framework to the online pro-IS community.

Framing and Collective Identity Theory

Following the "cultural" turn in the social sciences, social movement theorists in the 1980's and 90's shifted their focus "from structural factors to the framing, the discourse, and the emotions in collective action" (Tarrow 2011, 25). This branch of social movement theory inherited insights from anthropology, social psychology, and cultural history and is referred to as framing and collective identity theory. These insights included an emphasis on the importance of meaning – or semiotics – and on the role of framing. One of the strongest influences on this branch of social movement theory was Michel Foucault, whose work highlighted the importance of identity and discourse in examining movements (Ibid, 26). Staggenborg writes that collective identity can best be understood as "the sense

of shared experiences and values that connects individuals to movements and gives participants a sense of collective agency” (2012, 24). Proponents of this framework furthered the idea that social movements cannot be understood without examining how they maintain solidarity, a key component of which is collective identity.

Although social scientists have increasingly acknowledged that identity is a factor in mobilization, “too often collective identity has been invoked simply to fill the gaps left by structuralist, state-centered, or rational choice models, in the process reproducing the very dichotomies the concept is supposed to challenge” (Polletta & Jasper 2001, 298). In other words, the treatment of identity by most social movement theorists has been inconsistent, often presenting identity in opposition to material, institutional or structural influences on mobilization. In order to better formulate the role of identity in mobilization, social movement theorists need to examine the “tools and raw materials of identity work” in order to understand precisely how collective identities are constructed, and to move beyond simple assertions of their “constructedness” (Polletta & Jasper 2001, 299). Only by satisfying this “how” question can proponents of collective identity theory begin to address the comparative “why” questions.

New Social Movement Theory

Social movement theorists today agree upon a need to integrate the disparate strands of social movement theory which each emphasize different influences on mobilization (Beuchler 2012; Melucci 1996; Tarrow 2011; Staggenborg 2012; Carty 2015). Staggenborg (2012) writes that social movement theorists “continue to grapple with how best to integrate culture and politics, emotions and interests, macro-level changes and micro-level interactions” (27). Theories that attempt to weave together strands from these various branches are referred to as “new social movement theory” (Staggenborg 2012, 23). Another feature of new social movement theory is its attempt to incorporate visual analysis of social movements, particularly in how visual experience contributes to the ideational and emotional aspect of movements (Doerr et al 2013). In representing its parent schools of thought, new social movement theory currently posits that the intersecting elements of social movements are (1) political opportunities and constraints, (2) cultural artifacts and frames, and (3) networks and organizations (Tarrow 2011, 121).

Mobilization occurs when these elements are leveraged in particular ways. While efforts to integrate these contributions vary, Staggenborg differentiates new social movement theory by its focus on “how movements create new cultural forms and identities.... [and the] ongoing creation of movement identities and movement cultures that sustain social movements” (2012, 28). The component of movements that this thesis is concerned with is that which encompasses the creation of these new cultural forms and identities: movement solidarity. Solidarity describes the sense of mutual support, shared purpose and cohesion of a group of people, and an examination of solidarity helps to explain both why a movement has emerged and how it is sustained.

The current literature on new social movement theory posits that movement solidarity is achieved through three processes: (1) cultural framing, (2) identity construction, and (3) emotion work (Tarrow 2011, 143). This study aims to focus in on these processes as they occur on SNS, with an emphasis on collective identity construction. Falling under the constructivist/cultural turn in the social sciences, new social movement theorists have furthered the notion of identity not as essential but as a socially constructed phenomenon, as “a constructed set of boundary mechanisms that define who ‘we’ are, who ‘they’ are, and the locations of the borders between them” (Tarrow 2011, 143). As Tarrow writes, social movements “define, crystallize and construct collective identities” (2011, 143). However, new social movement theorists have yet to fully explain the process through which identities are actually constructed.

Social Media and Mobilization

Despite increasing scholarly attention to the relationship between social media and politics, scholars remain divided in how they understand that relationship. These divisions arise from the different epistemologies that underpin academic disciplines. Most scholars of contentious politics are only interested in social media participation inasmuch as it correlates with contentious collective action in the “real world” (Chan 2014; Enjolras et al. 2012; Aday et al. 2010; Hua et al. 2013; Turner 2011). For example, Chan (2014) examines whether participation on a movement’s Facebook page influenced the likelihood of a subject’s participation in demonstrations in the physical world. Reflecting a positivist stance, these studies are underpinned by the notion that online activity does not and

cannot constitute political activity in and of itself. Interpretivist scholars have noted that because of this assumption, these positivist studies tend to focus on how social media can support a movement's organizational and informational needs (Segeberg & Bennett 2011; Van De Donk et al 2004). In other words, they tend to emphasize that "new ICTs [information and communication technologies] broaden the parameters of organization because the obstacles to grassroots mobilization are lowered and are facilitated... New technology allows organizers to reach a critical mass quickly and cheaply" (Carty 2015, 29). Some scholars attempt to integrate this instrumentalist view of social media with an acknowledgement of its ideational functions. One such study argues that social media had a catalyzing effect on the Tunisian revolution in 2010 because it allowed participants to share information at a low cost which encourage potential "free riders" (Breuer et al. 2014, 1). Although this study does acknowledge that social media provided "emotional mobilization" by allowing participants to share emotionally evocative material, it does not go further to examine the mechanisms of framing and collective identity at work. Thus, studies that examine the relationship between social media and mobilization tend only to show interest in how online behaviour influences participation in "offline" contentious collective acts.

In contrast, scholars from more interpretivist leanings such as anthropologists and communications theorists are studying sociality in virtual worlds and increasingly arguing for the dissolution of the conceptual distinction between online and offline communications (Boelstorff et al. 2012; Slater 2002; Postill 2012). These scholars argue that online activity is human activity that merits study in and of itself and that it is a natural extension of the way people communicate. Indeed, anthropologists argue that "humanity is not one iota more mediated by the rise of the digital...[and digital anthropology] fails when we fall victim to a broader and romanticized discourse that presupposes a greater authenticity or reality to the predigital" (Horst & Miller 2012, 3-4). Thus, online activity can also be a natural extension of contentious political behaviour. Postill writes that:

It is only very recently that the term *digital politics* has begun to acquire currency. This appears to signal the birth of an interdisciplinary field that studies both the digitization of traditional politics as well as the rise of new forms of political life originating in the digital world, such as WikiLeaks or the Anonymous movement (Postill 2012, 165).

Few scholars of social movements espouse this view, but two in particular stand out. One recent study in the form of a critical discourse analysis argues that social media can in fact “provide citizens in repressed countries opportunities to participate in communication discourse... [and that] the internet has the potential to be a multivocal platform for silenced and marginalized groups to have their voices heard” (Shirazi 2013, 43). Another social movement scholar who embraces this view is Carty, who writes that “the rise of digital technology and social media also deeply affects contentious politics as well as the organization of and participation in social movements” (Carty 2015, 3). Embracing the integrative approach of new social movement theory, she writes that the purpose of her book is to “explore how new Web 2.0 technologies enable, facilitate, and encourage social movement activity by allowing individual actors to share grievances, accelerate social movement activity, decentralize mobilization efforts, facilitate recruitment efforts through virtual forms of *collective identity*, and hold authorities accountable for their responses to protest activity” [emphasis added] (Carty 2015, 5). In reference to a particular case of contentious collective action through which a Saudi woman protested the law prohibiting women from driving, Carty writes that “social media was essential in not only spreading her message but also in gaining support for her cause and creating collective identity, if only virtually” (2015, 48). Carty thus acknowledges that collective identity can be created online, but does not provide an in-depth analysis of this process. The works of Shirazi and Carty demonstrate the importance of examining online social reality – and politics – in its own rite, and the need to integrate theories of identity construction with theories of social movements in the context of new communications technologies.

Social Media and Identity

The epistemological tension in the literature connecting social media to contentious politics is also present in the literature surrounding social media and identity. The body of scholarship surrounding SNS and identity tends to implicitly – and problematically – frame identity as a predefined “thing”. Sauter (2013) writes that:

Contemporary scholarship that addresses *identity and selfhood on SNSs* largely relies on a cause and effect-based approach which asserts that new media technologies are either beneficial or detrimental to the ways in which people act, communicate, work, socialise, govern and are governed. It

tends to overemphasise the capacity for technologies to revolutionise ways of doing things and to generalise how people use them... *Both of these views presume that a person's identity is a pre-existing reality that can be expressed, enhanced or impaired by its engagement with online tools.* [emphasis added] (Sauter 2013, 825).

Sauter here argues that whether they characterize social media as “beneficial” or “detrimental”, these views reflect an understanding of identity that is rigid, fixed, and acted upon. This positivist framework thus holds identity as it exists on SNS in perpetual comparison to the more “authentic” identity of users in their lives offline. This approach is problematic because it presents an inaccurate and simplified understanding of identity. Insights about identity drawn from more interpretivist disciplines suggest more fruitful ways of examining identity on social media.

Discourse theorists agree that language is not a system that represents or reflects a “transcendental signified”, or an objectively “true” reality, but rather is a relational system that *constitutes* social reality. In other words, “there is nothing outside of the text [there is no outside-text; *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*]” (Derrida 1998, 1825). Thus identities, as part of social reality, are “discursive-performative in the sense that they are best described as *constructed through discursive practice* which enacts or produces that which it names through citation and reiteration of norms or conventions” [emphasis added] (Barker & Galasinski 2001, 28). According to this view, it is through language that identity comes into existence via the performative act of speech or writing. One limitation of this theory of identity is that it fails to account for non-verbal or non-communicative experiences which have a bearing on the formation of collective identity. For example, experiences such as physical coercion can have a galvanizing effect on an individual's sense of solidarity and collective identity with others who have experienced the same. Although communication is not the sole experience through which identities emerge, it yet remains an integral part of socialization processes and institutional experiences which also shape collective identity. This study thus operates on the following definition of collective identity:

Collective identity describes imagined as well as concrete communities, [involving] an act of perception and construction as well as the discovery of pre-existing bonds, interests, and boundaries. It is fluid and relational, emerging out of interactions with a number of different audiences (bystanders, allies, opponents, news media, state authorities), rather than fixed. It channels words and actions, enabling some claims and deeds but

delegitimizing others. It provides categories by which individuals divide up and make sense of the world. (Polletta & Jasper 2001, 298).

Discourse analysis – with its interpretivist approach – is therefore the ideal method of inquiry because it is “through the study of language usage (discourse analysis and conversation analysis) [that] we can explore the *mechanisms* by which identity claims are achieved” [emphasis added] (Barker & Galasiński 2001, 61). Despite this, it is only recently that identity has been recognized as an independent field of inquiry in discourse analysis (De Fina 2011, 263).

Anthropologists and communications scholars have studied identity in virtual spaces according to the interpretivist paradigm. These scholars offer tremendous insight into understanding identity. In presenting their model of virtual identity formation, Koles and Nagy write that “similarly to real-life identity development, virtual identity construction can be described as a cyclical and continuously iterative process, simultaneously influenced by a variety of individual and global or community-based factors within certain environment-specific realities” (Koles & Nagy, 2014, 280). Slater writes that new media constitute a space where identity and relationships can be explored in four new ways:

First, one can perform whatever identity one chooses... second, one can create entirely new identities that are impossible or inconceivable in offline worlds... third, because all presences online are textual they are also self-evidently performances... [fourth and] finally, this is carried out by ‘cyborg’ or ‘hybrid’ identities: they are defined not by a fixed and monadic individualization, but rather by fluidity and interconnection. Cyberspace appeared as the site of a sociology of the future, in which identities are mobile, fluid and openly experienced as performative rather than authentic. (Slater 2002, 536).

Slater’s insights into what new media reveals about identity are rich and informative. However, those who adopt and apply this approach tend to focus on the individual as a unit of analysis, and in general do not engage with the question of *collective* identity and how it pertains to contentious politics and mobilization. For example, Greenhow and Robelia examine how high school students from low-income families use SNS for both informal learning and identity formation (Greenhow & Robelia 2009). In another example, van Dijck examines how the respective structures of Facebook and LinkedIn influence how users present their identities (van Dijck 2013). These studies provide important insight

into identity and social media, yet do not attempt to analyze the subject in the context of social movements.

While this nuanced examination of identity undertaken by these scholars has yet to be wholly integrated and accepted into new social movement theory, Carty's effort at doing so is laudable. Drawing on Benford (1993) she writes that "[the] key to forging collective identity and articulating shared meanings is the way organizers "frame" their issues to resonate with potential recruits and to build solidarity by linking participants' grievances to mainstream beliefs and values" (Carty 2015, 24). Her approach emphasizes how particular individuals – organizers of a movement – actively shape a collective narrative in order to frame an issue. However, it also allows for how participants actively engage in the process, meaning participants both shape and are shaped by the movement frame. This acknowledgment of both top-down and bottom-up forces – structure and agency – accurately reflects the complexity of communal meaning creation. However, Carty focuses more on framing and does not provide a detailed examination of the mechanisms of collective identity formation specific to social media.

Synthesizing Approaches

This study aims to synthesize the nuanced understanding of identity offered by discourse studies, anthropology and communications studies with the emerging body of new social movement theory. As yet, studies of social media espousing an interpretivist understanding of identity tend not to link their findings to the political, instead focusing on individual processes of self-representation (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009; Van Dijck, 2013; Siibak, A., Forsman, M., & Hernwall, P. 2012). Similarly, studies that do connect social media with theories of contentious politics tend to focus on its organizational and informational functions (Breuer et al. 2014); if identity is acknowledged at all, mechanisms of formation are not illuminated. Through the method of discourse analysis, this study aims to provide empirical evidence of the mechanisms of identity creation for positivists of social movement theory, while adequately conveying the complexity of identity as theorized by interpretivists. The findings of this study also constitute a case study of value in testing notions of identity established in the field of discourse studies.

Four Characteristics of Social Movements

This section will lay the foundation for the argument that the online pro-Islamic State community and their contentious collective acts on social media constitute a social movement based on Tarrow's four empirical properties of social movements. This framework is useful because it integrates different elements of social movements from across the literature. Varying definitions of social movements have been coloured by the normative lenses through which scholars have examined them. Tarrow writes that early theorists of social movements "focused on the three facets of movements that they feared the most: extremism, deprivation, and violence" (2011, 8). In other words, social movements were associated with disruption and a negative impact on societies. In contrast, more modern movements such as the women's rights movement and the environmental movement lend a connotation of progress and positivity to the concept. These associations led theorists to focus on certain kinds of social movements which ultimately impeded our understanding of what social movements are and how they function. In seeking a more objective definition, Tarrow proposes that social movements:

are better defined as collective challenges, based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities. This definition has four empirical properties: collective challenge, common purpose, social solidarity, and sustained interaction (2011, 9).

This definition broadens the criteria for movements from earlier conceptions, which understood social movements to be in opposition to a state by necessity. As Staggenborg writes, "the targets of movement claims are often government authorities but may also be other types of authorities, such as business owners or religious leaders (Tilly and Wood, 2009: 4). Certainly, not all social movements target the state" (2012, 6). This broader definition of social movements is useful for this study because it integrates disparate conceptions of social movement theory from across disciplines. This integration is important for scholars to continue to engage with the question of what constitutes a "new" social movement – a topic of ongoing debate in the literature.

Collective Challenge

The first characteristic of social movements described by Tarrow is collective challenge, another term for contentious collective action. These challenges are usually presented through “disruptive direct action against elites, authorities, other groups, or cultural codes. Most often public in nature, disruption can also take the form of coordinated personal resistance or the collective affirmation of new values” (Melucci, 1996 as cited in Tarrow 2011, 9). In other words, collective challenge can take many forms. As Tarrow writes, collective challenges “can also be symbolized by slogans, forms of dress or music, graffiti, or renaming of familiar objects with new or different symbols” (2011, 10). This suggests that the act of reciting a slogan, or the visual presentation of symbols (both activities that are possible on social media) can constitute a contentious collective act. The defining characteristic of collective challenges is that they are intended to disrupt the activities of others, launch protest against cultural codes or structures, or affirm a new set of shared values. Staggenborg, acknowledging this, writes “not all social movements target the state,” and indeed this is the case with the online pro-IS movement (2012, 6). This represents an important expansion from earlier conceptions of social movements from the political process branch of theory, which focused on social movements as phenomena defined by their relationship to state structures (Tilly 1978 as cited in Tarrow 2011, 27).

The online pro-IS movement collectively challenges the military and political opponents of the militant organization, but the greater opponent against which the online movement rallies is a cultural code. Wiktorowicz writes that “an important component of most Islamic movement diagnostic frames is they blame the spread of Western values and practices for a wide variety of social ills... The argument is that the true path to development and success is outlined in the sources of Islam” (2004, 16-17). Indeed, some Islamic movements “go a step further and argue that this process of cultural imperialism is a conscious Western strategy to weaken Muslim societies for economic, political, and military purposes” (Wiktorowicz 2004, 17). The online pro-IS movement is one such case. Members collectively challenge perceived Western cultural codes by asserting their presence on social media and using it as a space to denounce the ideas of others and affirm their own set of shared values which, although derived from Islamic tradition, are innovative and specific to the movement. Chapter 5 will present a detailed account of how

specific behaviours on Twitter, namely the maintenance of the network of affiliation among movement members, and the practice of conducting “shoutouts” have come to constitute contentious collective actions.

Common Purpose

The second requisite characteristic of movements is a common purpose. As Tarrow writes, the underlying reason for which people act collectively is “to mount common claims against opponents, authorities, or elites” (2011, 11). In other words, people must feel that there is a reason for participating in a movement because of the risks they are exposing themselves to. For members of the pro-IS movement, this risk varies depending on their level of participation in the movement. For those who seek only to participate in online forms of contentious collective action, this risk includes facing ostracism and account suspension (a topic to which I will return in Chapter 5). For those who also seek to participate in offline forms of contentious action in the name of IS the risks are far greater. Whether peacefully protesting against the Western system of representative democracy (such as the “Stay Muslim Don’t Vote” protests in London earlier this year), engaging in violent forms of contentious action, or actually seeking to immigrate to IS-held territory, these people risk possible detention by national security agencies depending on the nature of their actions and the legal framework of their country of residence.

Rationalist scholars of social movements argue that these risks create what is termed the collective action problem. The collective action problem refers to the idea that “rational, self-interested individuals will not act to achieve their common or group interests” (Olson 1971, 2). In other words, if we understand potential participants in movements to be rational, self-interested actors, they will likely be unwilling to participate in a movement at personal risk if they may benefit from the success of the movement regardless of direct contribution to it. The problem with this framework is that it assumes that actors are consistently rational and that the purpose for taking action is a form of material gain. Johnston comments on the deep roots of this framework, noting that even “the term collective action is usually used with the presumption of rationality behind the action” (2014, 30). This rational-actor framework fails to address the role of emotions and identity

as mobilizing forces, and in turn, that the common purpose for which people mobilize may not necessarily be material or rational, but instead ideational (Tarrow 2011, 25).

Although individuals may join social movements for varied personal reasons, they yet must share a common purpose. This purpose, however, need not be rational in nature; indeed, this is the case for the pro-IS movement. Their common purpose is ideological in nature, and is framed in terms of religious identity. As stated earlier, contentious collective action may take the form of challenging a perceived opponent, power structure, or cultural code, or it may take the form of the assertion of a set of shared values (Tarrow 2011, 9). Members of the online pro-IS movement both challenge a perceived opponent *and* assert a new set of values. The movement has constructed a multifaceted opponent, including non-Muslims, Muslims who disagree with their ideology, as well as Western cultural codes through a narrative surrounding freedom of speech (the construction of the “Other” will be detailed in Chapter 4). The pro-IS movement also asserts a set of specific beliefs and values which are illustrated in a document titled “This is Our Aqeedah,” which I discovered in the data collection process (see Appendix for full text). Aqeedah is an Arabic word that historically refers to the beliefs or convictions of Muslims, but technically can be used to describe a belief system in general. Members of the pro-IS movement are dedicated to promoting these values (which we will return to in Chapter 4) and see this as a spiritual duty and a fundamental common purpose.

Social Solidarity & Identity

The third requisite characteristic of social movements is social solidarity. This characteristic, closely related to common purpose, reflects the ideational and emotional reasons for which people participate in social movements. Common purpose may be the “common denominator” of movements, but “it is participants’ *recognition* of their common interests that translates the potential for a movement into action” (Tarrow 2011, 11). When fostered, this recognition becomes a sense of solidarity. Actors may in fact share a common interest, grievance or purpose, yet without a sense of solidarity, they are less likely to mobilize for that common purpose. Poletta and Jasper write that “the development of group pride [or solidarity] is a form of identity work. Identity talk within movements may be aimed not only at building solidarity but also changing selves and relationships in ways

that extend beyond the movement” (2001, 296). Ultimately, without a sense of social solidarity and collective identity, a social movement cannot emerge. As Tarrow writes, “leaders can create a social movement only when they tap into and expand deep rooted feelings of solidarity or *identity*. This is almost certainly why nationalism and ethnicity or *religion* have been more reliable bases of movement organization in the past” [emphasis added] (2011, 11).

The online pro-IS movement shares a strong sense of solidarity that is based on a shared sense of religious identity, specifically an Islamic identity. This identity is sometimes referred to as the “global ummah”. The term “ummah,” has “longstanding universalist connotations referring to the world community of Islam” and this universality can be operationalized for the purpose of promoting solidarity for a particular movement (Mandaville 2007, 23). The online pro-IS movement may thus be described as an Islamic movement, yet it is important to note that these movements are themselves diverse and that the movement in question represents a radical and divergent example. Wiktorowicz writes that:

Islamic movements are embroiled in struggles over meaning and values. While a great deal of research has focused upon politicized movements that seek to create an Islamic state, the core imperative of Islamic movements is a desire to create a society governed and guided by the *shari’a* (Islamic law)... most Islamic struggles are waged through society and cultural discourse rather than state institutions or government decision-making bodies (2004, 16).

Indeed this description aligns with observations of the online pro-IS movement. Although members of this movement do support the formation of this new Islamic State, this political goal is distinct from the goal of producing meaning and promoting the values of the movement through discourse. It is this latter goal to which members of the online movement can contribute. The online pro-IS movement thus shares properties of Islamic movements as theorized by Wiktorowicz, yet it is also distinct in its particularities. Based on Mandaville’s definition of radical Islamism, proponents of IS can be described as such because their movement is characterized by “(1) a vision of Islamic political order that rejects the legitimacy of the modern sovereign nation-state and seeks to establish a pan-Islamic polity or renewed caliphate; and/or (2) an emphasis on violent struggle (jihad) as

the primary or even the exclusively legitimate method for the pursuit of political change” (2007, 239).

Sustained Interaction

The fourth requisite characteristic of social movements is sustained interaction. This characteristic serves to distinguish sporadic acts of contention from a cohesive, sustained movement. As Tarrow writes, “it is only by sustaining collective action against antagonists that a contentious episode becomes a social movement. Common purposes, collective identities, and identifiable challenges help movements to do this; but unless they can maintain their challenge, movements will evaporate into the kind of individualistic resentment that James Scott calls “resistance” (1985)” (12). I refer to this kind of sustained interaction as a cycle of contention. For supporters of IS, social media has served as a platform for sustained interaction with their perceived opponents. As noted in the introduction, supporters of IS have been active on social media since the group began to rise to prominence as a contender in the Syrian civil war, and continues to do so to this day. Chapter 5 of this thesis aims to show that through the campaign of mass targeted suspensions, the administration of Twitter has enabled members of the pro-IS movement to engage in what Tarrow calls “injustice framing” – the idea that the collective actors are mobilizing to pursue justice for being wronged (145). Twitter can thus be understood as an actor who embodies the greater set of Western cultural codes against which the pro-IS movement rallies. I will argue that this in turn has enabled a cycle of suspension and new account creation that itself constitutes the basis of a cycle of contention.

Conclusion

Although I argue that social movements can exist in the digital milieu, I do not argue that social movements can exist *exclusively* online. Rather, I argue that the digital milieu presents a natural extension of both human communications and political behaviours, including contentious collective action and social movements. In other words, the grievances or common claims that unite actors to mobilize collectively may originate in the physical world, but these grievances may be voiced in the digital milieu by using SNS as platforms upon which to create networks of affiliation and collective identity. As Tarrow

writes, “rather than displacing traditional organizations, access to the Internet combines with personal networks and organizations in recruiting people to take part in demonstrations” (2011, 138). Online participation in contentious collective action may have far-reaching effects which cannot be measured exclusively in terms of participation in offline acts of contention; this kind of activity can influence an individual’s sense of identity regardless of whether they participate in other acts of contention. Because of the ease of information exchange granted by access to the internet, users can foster social relationships with individuals with whom interactions would otherwise be impossible. This interconnectivity allows for new ways to connect socially and to act collectively. Although this study focuses on the online element of the pro-IS movement, it seeks to acknowledge important linkages to “offline” realities. By accepting that online activity can constitute contentious collective action, we are presented with a unique opportunity to analyze processes of collective identity construction in the context of a social movement.

Chapter 3.

Methodology

This chapter provides a detailed overview of the methodological approach to addressing the question of how collective identity is cultivated on social media. I begin by justifying the choice of focusing on Twitter as an appropriate entry point to the pro-IS discourse. It then proceeds by explaining the steps involved in collecting and managing data. The chapter concludes by describing the process of doing discourse analysis, justifying it as an appropriate method of inquiry for the research question, and describes the analytic framework applied to the data.

Establishing the Source

In order to examine the discourse being produced by English-speaking supporters of the Islamic State online, several social media platforms presented themselves as possible entry points. Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are some of the most popular social media sites, attracting users from around the world including supporters of IS. Each site, however, has different features that influence how it is used, so the first step was to identify which entry point was most appropriate. My primary source for data collection in this project was Twitter. The primary reason for this is that in the earliest stages of planning this project, it became clear that Islamic State propagandists and supporters were becoming renowned for their activity on Twitter in particular; in other words, it is a site that is rich in data relevant to my study. As Johnston writes, the collective identity of a social movement “arises from the density and frequency of relations that can be conceptualized as multiple microperformances of identity in the sense that doing things together reaffirms what we are together” (2014, 92). Thus, the high level of pro-IS users and frequency with which they interact makes Twitter the ideal starting point to examine this social movement’s collective identity. In a report titled “The ISIS Twitter Census,” Berger and Morgan write that from September through December 2014, an estimated 46,000 Twitter accounts were used by Islamic State supporters in several languages (Berger & Morgan 2015, 2). Another reason for the choice of Twitter as a source of data is that unlike other

social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter is structured such that users' tweets are publicly available. On Facebook, messages can be sent privately between "friends", and users can restrict access to their profiles to only friends. On Twitter, the content produced by users is freely available, satisfying both logistical and ethical concerns as no interaction with members of the pro-IS community is necessary to obtain it. Additionally, the fact that tweets are public by default has implications for intended audience as well.

It is important at this point to consider the implications of analyzing solely English language data. Of the 46,000 pro-IS Twitter accounts cited by Berger and Morgan, one in five selected English as their primary language when using Twitter, meaning that for the time period of the study there were approximately 9200 English primary Twitter accounts that were pro-Islamic State, suggesting a wealth of English language data (Berger & Morgan 2015, 3). However, this focus also imposes limitations on the claims that can be made based on this data. Any conclusions drawn by this study reflect only identity-building mechanisms in the English language, suggesting one avenue for further studies to examine and compare identity-building processes across different languages. It is very likely that specific meanings that have been constructed in the English language by IS supporters are unique to the language, because each language renders an entire body of cultural knowledge accessible to its speakers. A focus on the English language may indeed be an asset, as it may offer new ways of expressing similar ideas because of the cultural products that are available to express them, and it also may mean that entirely novel ideas are created that are English-specific. This could only be verified, however, in a comparative linguistic study. Another implication of this scope condition is that claims based on this data cannot soundly be applied to the entire movement as a whole – in other words, supporters of IS may have individual, corporeal experiences which more significantly contribute to their support for the movement and which are not reflected in this study. Rather, the findings of this study pertain only to the discursive experiences of the English-speaking segment of the pro-IS movement on Twitter.

Although Twitter is the optimal entry point to pro-IS discourse for the above reasons, it is important to also recognize that it represents only one of many highly integrated platforms through which the group promotes its shared values and expresses solidarity. Twitter is what is referred to as a "microblogging site", which means that users

can only post – or “tweet” – up to 140 characters. The brevity imposed on users by this maximum character limit encourages users to share links to external websites and embed images (sometimes images which contain text) in order to “say more” with less. As such, I embarked on the study with a hypothesis that different web sites were being used to perform different functions, all of which contribute to a network of solidarity. I remained receptive to this notion by exploring links embedded in tweets. While I was not able to explore every link due to the practical limitations when dealing with such vast volumes of data, I explored and sampled those links which pertained explicitly to the collective identity and values of IS supporters. These data were sampled only if they promoted IS, attempted to explain its ideology, or invoked group solidarity. These external data were ranged from WordPress blogs and documents uploaded to the website JustPaste.it, to photo reports and videos on websites like Dump.To and SendVid.

The “securitized” atmosphere on Twitter and the influence of suspension on group identity in will be detailed in Chapter 5, but I draw attention to it here because this phenomenon also influenced my method of data collection. The process of archiving tweets using qualitative analysis called NVivo was not only necessary for organizational purposes, but also because of the frequency with which pro-IS accounts are suspended, and in turn created to replace those suspended. This recurring cycle of suspension means that user profiles and the data therein are only accessible temporarily. Twitter administrators began mass suspensions of pro-IS accounts in the fall of 2014, a policy which greatly influences – but has in no way destroyed – the group’s culture on Twitter. In addition to Twitter’s own efforts, cyber activists who oppose the Islamic State actively seek out pro-IS accounts and report them to the site administrators in order to inhibit the group’s online activity and reach. The result is that the majority of the accounts that I sampled have now been suspended, meaning their profile pages and tweets are no longer accessible. Social effects of this activism aside, these activities presented a logistical challenge that archiving with NVivo remedied. NVivo is also capable of archiving webpages other than Twitter as portable document files (PDFs), a function which proved very useful in archiving visual data.

Building the Corpus of Data

Having established Twitter as an appropriate starting point and source for my data, the next step in conducting this research was to build a corpus of data. I allotted a period of four weeks for data collection, determining that this would allow me to collect a sufficient quantity of data and also to obtain sufficiently representative data. To begin my search for pro-Islamic State users, I created a research-dedicated Twitter account and proceeded by using the “search” function to look for tweets pertaining to “Islamic State”. This produced a feed of the most recent tweets – arranged in reverse chronology – containing that keyword. I read through the feed until I identified a tweet that seemed to exhibit a pro-Islamic State stance, and then clicked on that account to bring up the profile. I then evaluated whether there was sufficient evidence to reasonably conclude that the account was pro-Islamic State using a set of criteria. These criteria were developed by immersing myself in data rather than strictly dictating in advance what would be included and what would not; I needed first to learn more about what it means to be pro-IS and how people express it. As Mautner writes, “For qualitative projects, attempts at random sampling are generally not appropriate” (Mautner 2008, 35). My method of collecting data was therefore driven by two principles: pro-IS attitude, and richness of data.

Authenticating the pro-IS stance of an account was a multi-step process (see Figure 3.1). I began evaluating each account by looking for explicit statements of solidarity and support, as many users proudly state their support for IS. If present, this made the decision to include them in the sample easy. However, many users were less explicit, sometimes even claiming not to be affiliated with any group. While this may seem like an instant disqualifier, this disclaimer often stood in stark contrast to the messages and images produced by these users, and can be understood as an attempt to avoid account suspension. In such cases, I evaluated them to be pro-IS if a sufficient combination of the following criteria were met: (1) they had profile pictures or tweeted images or videos that symbolized support, (2) their tweets reflected support of IS, (3) they provided links to external web sites where IS propaganda or other pro-IS material was posted, and (4) they followed and were followed by a significant number of other pro-IS accounts. This method of verification incorporates recommendations made by Berger and Morgan in their 2014 study of Islamic State supporters on Twitter. In establishing whether an account was pro-

IS or not, they emphasized the importance of whether a user was being “followed” by other pro-IS users (Berger & Morgan 2015, 40). For my study, this principle was used in conjunction with analyzing the content tweeted. However, determining whether “tweets reflect a pro-IS stance” was not always clear-cut. In cases of uncertainty – at any point in the flow chart – I performed background research where necessary to understand the data. In each evaluation, if there was insufficient evidence of support for IS I removed the account from consideration.

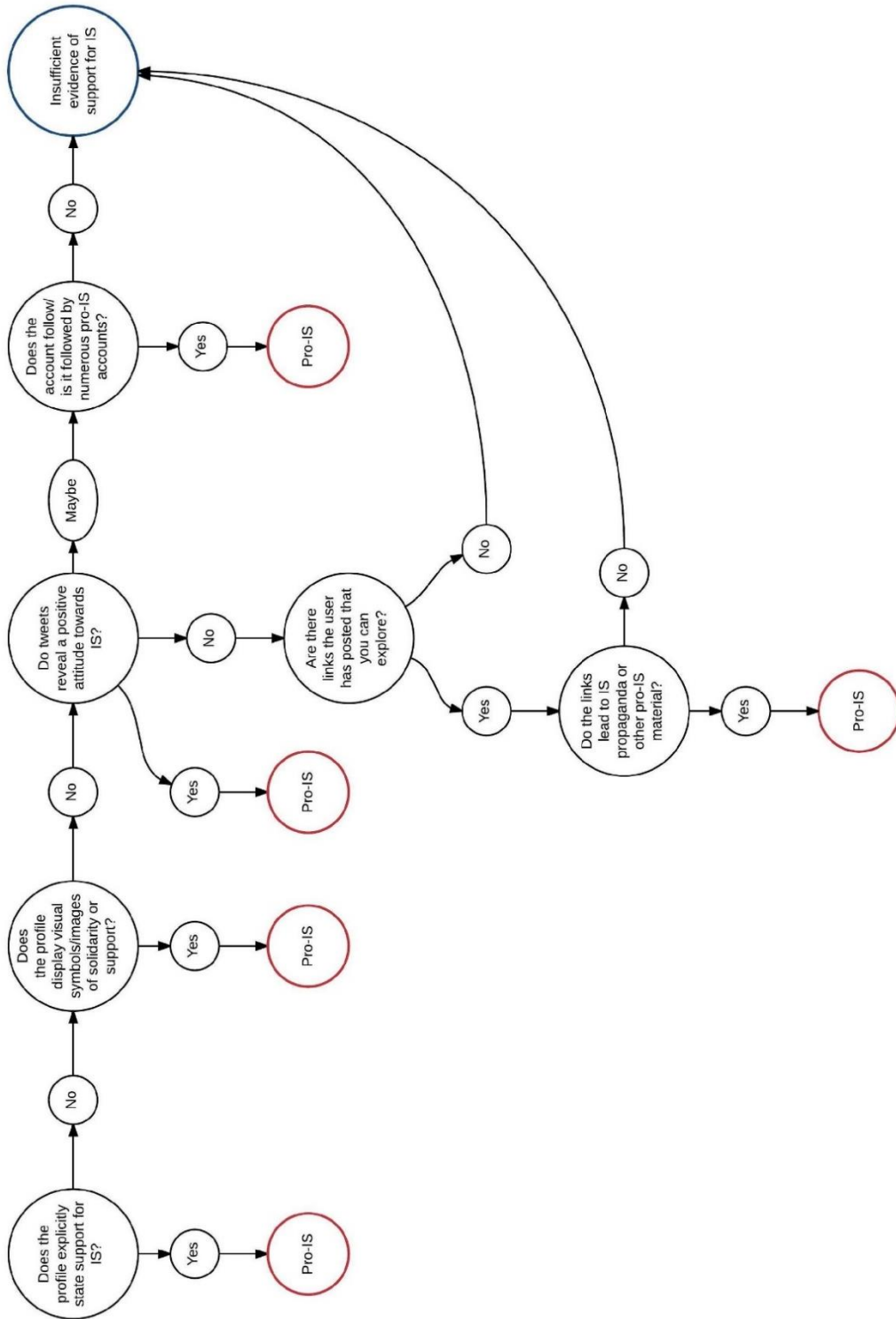


Figure 3.1 Decision-making flow chart for data selection

It must also be acknowledged that there is the possibility of “false positives” – accounts inaccurately assessed to be pro-IS. Berger and Morgan explain the inevitability of this limitation in their own study, stating that if done properly it would be impossible to identify seemingly pro-IS accounts which are actually administered by anti-IS intelligence operatives (Berger & Morgan 2014, 7). Similarly, the same report assessed a massive and widespread use of “bots” by the movement, meaning accounts that were programmed to send out automated postings according to a schedule (Berger & Morgan 2014, 9). While such an account could indeed be accurately coded as pro-IS, its contents would be more general and repetitive in nature. This does not, however, preclude such an account from consideration, as ultimately the bots are administered by members of the movement, and its tweets still contribute to the reproduction and dissemination of the discourse. These possible limitations were, unfortunately, unavoidable.

While it was crucial to establish sufficient evidence of support for IS before sampling from an account, another principle that led my collection efforts was the richness of the data. In other words, where data was not rich enough as defined by relevance to my research question – expressing, negotiating, or asserting identity and solidarity to IS – I opted to exclude it. In the case that there was sufficient evidence that an account was pro-IS, and the data was sufficiently rich, I extracted a sample of tweets from the account using NVivo. NVivo has a web extension called NCapture that allows users to extract tweets and their metadata directly from a user’s page. The extension also offers researchers the option to include or exclude “retweets”, meaning if included, the sample would comprise tweets composed by potentially many users, rather than solely the owner of the profile page. For the purposes of my study, I chose to include retweets, because the very function of choosing to retweet a message or a link has meaning of its own and implications for how collective identity and solidarity is strengthened (Zappavigna 2012, 36).

After extracting, I then imported the data to NVivo, where they formed sets of tweets that were organized and titled according to the profile page from which they were extracted. Each set, when viewed individually, comprised a spreadsheet including all of the metadata for each tweet sampled. The amount of information affixed to each tweet is impressive, including the username, whether the tweet was retweeted, even the location

co-ordinates of some (unprotected) tweets. All of this information and more is extracted with NCapture.

I proceeded to identify new potential accounts for sampling by exploring the “Following” and “Followers” lists of accounts that I had evaluated to be pro-IS. In this way, I exploited the user-created network of affiliation among group members, emulating the “snowball sampling” method used in sociology. This method is favoured in situations where a comprehensive population listing of the group is unavailable and researchers are not capable of compiling one. As Henry writes, snowball sampling is a method often used in the study of groups which are secretive or participate in illicit activities (1990; 9). This makes it particularly helpful in the context of studying IS which has been widely categorized as a terrorist group, a reality which precludes direct contact with members of the movement for concerns related to both ethics and security.

By following this procedure, I amassed 327 sets of tweets, representing 327 pro-IS accounts. However, because I opted to include retweets, each dataset included tweets composed by multiple – potentially pro-IS – users. Thus, the real number of pro-IS accounts whose tweets are included in the master corpus of all tweets is much higher than 327. It is also important to note that not every single tweet sampled necessarily expresses solidarity for IS. This is because the NCapture simply captures up to 100 of the most recent tweets from a user’s profile, and even a user who strongly supports IS may not express that sentiment in every single tweet that they compose. Because of this, I had to immerse myself in the data and through interpretive analysis hone in on those tweets which strengthened solidarity. During the process of identifying pro-IS accounts, it also became clear that certain hashtags were crucial to the group’s collective identity, and to expand my collection efforts I used Twitter’s search function and extracted sets of tweets organized by those hashtags. In addition to the 327 account-based sets, I also collected sets of tweets for four important hashtags: (1) #baqiya (a label that IS supporters use to describe themselves) (2) #Khilafah (the Arabic word for caliphate) (3) #dieinyourrage (a rallying cry that members use, directed towards all who oppose the movement) and (4) #RFTM (the tag for an e-book that the group released called “Resources For The Mujahideen). In total, I collected over 67,000 tweets.

Of all the metadata captured for each tweet, I chose to consider for analysis only the elements over which users have the ability to express themselves. These features include: (1) the username, (2) the account name, (3) the tweet, (4) the user's self-described location (not to be confused with computationally recorded location coordinates), (5) a web link (if provided), and (6) the user's biography (See Figure 3.2).



Figure 3.2 The anatomy of a Twitter profile

Discourse scholars and social movement scholars alike are increasingly calling for researchers to consider visual data. For this study, it would constitute a serious shortcoming not to consider the visual experience of using Twitter. So, in addition to harvesting tweets as datasets (comprising textual information) I also collected visual elements of the discourse using two tools. The first way to do so was through NCapture, which, apart from enabling the extraction of tweets as datasets, also enables the archiving of web pages as portable document files (PDFs). Doing so preserves important visual elements of a user's profile page such as the profile picture and background image. This method was also used for archiving web pages external to Twitter. The second tool I used to capture images is Windows Snipping Tool. This simple but extremely useful tool allows a user to select a rectangular region on their screen and save it as an image file. This was the method I used to archive images that users tweeted which invoked group solidarity or

expressed shared values. Although I endeavoured to capture visual data which was representative of the discourse, my collection efforts favoured a more extensive harvest of textual data; the visual data is thus best understood as complementary to the textual data.

Doing Discourse Analysis

Having amassed a significant corpus of tweets, web pages and images, I then explored the data in NVivo to identify patterns and important themes. One useful tool I used to begin this exploration process is NVivo's word frequency analysis. This analysis generates a list of the most frequently occurring words in a set of data, and allows researchers to input parameters such as a minimum character length and whether to group words with common stems. Results can be viewed in a table, as well as a word cloud in which results are assembled such that the size of the text for a word is determined by its frequency. This proved to be a very useful tool for identifying important themes and key words, and also in comparing the presence of these themes across different selections of data from within the master corpus. In one experiment, I selected 359 tweets which strongly exhibited pro-IS stance and generated a word cloud to visualize verbal themes (See Figure 3.3).

Barker and Galasinski (2001) as well as De Fina (2011), and is largely grounded in the discipline of systemic functional linguistics. The three core mechanisms of identity-creation that this framework focuses on are indexicality, positioning, and intertextuality.

Indexicality can be understood as the system of associations between symbols, their associated meanings, and further, the social categories or identities invoked by using a given symbol (De Fina 2011, 269). Indices may be linguistic or non-linguistic. For example, a person may *index* themselves as “educated” through their accent or choice of vocabulary in speech, but they may also do so through their choice of clothing, their body language, or by employing – consciously or not – any number of symbols which are associated with being “an educated person”. In doing so, the subject engages with an existing system of meaning, strengthening some associations and undermining others either directly or through simple omission. This means that social categories and identities are constantly being enacted and renegotiated as people invoke these associations (De Fina 2011, 269). This concept most closely aligns with what systemic functional linguistics calls the ideational function of language, in that it refers to how subjects understand themselves (Barker & Galasinski 2001, 68).

Positioning refers to how subjects enact social relationships through communication. Subjects *position* themselves through communication with others in order to invoke, describe or refute relationships and authority. Subjects often describe their identity in opposition to another, and this is relationally established by positioning. For example, if trying to enlist someone’s help, a subject will likely position themselves as humbly beneath the person whose help they seek, perhaps by using a softer tone of voice or a more formal register. Systemic functional linguistics refers to this as the interpersonal function of language (Barker & Galasinski 2001, 68).

Intertextuality refers to how texts engage with an established universe of other texts, as well as their associated meanings in order to create new meaning. No text exists in a vacuum, and the specific choices a subject makes when relating to existing texts or cultural products has a defining impact on the meaning created. There are many ways that people can invoke meanings from other texts. Sometimes it is blatant, as when an author cites the work of another, but other times it is more subtle. In many cases, we are

able to understand references to texts we may never have read simply because we are familiar with how that text is understood by others. We may even be able to understand such invoked meanings without being aware of its origin. For supporters of the Islamic State, there is a shared repertoire of cultural knowledge that revolves heavily – but not exclusively – around Islam and a particular interpretation thereof. Members of the online movement perform their affiliation and solidarity by engaging with these existing texts, and also by making new associations between these texts and those that pertain directly to their personal lived experiences and popular culture. Systemic functional linguistics refers to this as the textual function of language, through which “language forges links with the presumed extra-linguistic conditions of its occurrence as well as with other texts” (Barker & Galasinski 2001, 68).

Although these three mechanisms of identity construction come from discourse studies and systemic functional linguistics, it is important to note that they are analogous to other non-linguistic or non-discursive mechanisms of identity expression, such as behavioural and visual expressions. For example, police badges are physical items which visually *index* identity and also establish a power relationship, placing the wearer in a *position* of authority. Additionally, a study by Bailey and Kelly reveals the importance of body language in establishing power relationships; their findings suggest that women in particular may be able to change the way they are perceived in terms of power and identity by changing their body language (2015, 317). The clothes that we wear, the way that we carry ourselves, even the brands that we choose to buy can indicate something about the way we perceive ourselves and can influence the way others perceive us by drawing on a shared body of cultural knowledge from which we can infer those intended meanings. In other words, it is important to acknowledge that power and identity can be expressed in non-linguistic, non-verbal terms. The three linguistic mechanisms that this study focuses on – *indexicality*, *positioning* and *intertextuality* – are robust choices for the analysis of identity because there are analogous non-linguistic mechanisms of identity work.

Each of these discursive functions can be framed as a question to ask of the data: How do members of the online movement *index* themselves as members? How do members of the online movement *position* themselves in relation to one another? How do they *position* themselves in relation to non-members? In other words, how do they

construct the “Other”? How do members draw *intertextually* on shared repertoires of knowledge and what is the effect of doing so? For each of these questions, I sought to answer how conditions that are specific to the online environment are influencing these identity-building functions of communication.

It is important to note that these three features of discourse do not operate on independent planes, but rather their functions are intrinsically entwined. For example, a Twitter user may *index* membership in the pro-IS community by using the identity label “muhajirah” to describe herself, but this label also functions to socially *position* the speaker among those who occupy that same social category – reaffirming a sense of social connection. This effect of positionality does not derive from the denotation of the word “muhajirah”, but rather from the social interactions – documented through other *texts* – between those who bear it as a label and those who do not. Technically, “muhajirah” refers to anyone who performs “hijra” or migration for the sake of Allah, but for supporters of IS, “hijra” specifically means immigrating to IS held territory, thus the label has acquired particular meaning for this movement. Additionally, an individual may index their identity by using labels, but may also do so *through* positioning and intertextuality when such behaviours become recognized as a performance of membership or solidarity. For example, a pro-IS Twitter user may position themselves against opponents of IS without using immediately recognizable identity labels, yet doing so effectively signals their identity to those who share that view. Thus, these functions interact in complex ways to create webs of meaning. The data and findings presented in Chapter 4 will illustrate this complexity in greater detail.

Chapter 4.

Analysis of Pro-IS Identity on Twitter

The chapter will proceed as follows. The first section begins with a description of the access point into the pro-IS collective identity: the lexical identity index “Baqiyah”. I will then justify this selection and explain how I analyzed the term’s significance and meaning. This section then proceeds to situate the movement within the greater context of Islamist movements to explain how Islam can and has been used for the purpose of mobilization. Though the pro-IS movement draws upon Islamic texts and traditions in the construction of its collective identity, it differs significantly from other Islamist movements. The specific values of the movement and how the movement constructs its “Other” – the opponent against whom the movement acts – are described at the end of this section. The second section of this chapter will offer an analysis of how the different features specific to Twitter are involved in the process of constructing identity for the pro-IS movement. The analysis of these features will be presented in the following order: (1) usernames and account names, (2) visual elements of the discourse including profile pictures and emoticons, (3) location and (4) biographies. The roles of indexicality, positionality and intertextuality in cultivating identity are highlighted in the analysis of each of these features.

Section A – Introduction to the Baqiyah Family Identity

It became clear early in the data collection process that among pro-IS Twitter users, there is one word which is more central to their collective identity than any other: Baqiyah. A frequency analysis including varied spellings of this term calculated 2098 occurrences within the body of tweets². An Arabic word, direct translations of Baqiyah – “remaining,” or “enduring” – shed little light as to the meaning it has to the community, yet its significance cannot be denied. Treated as a loan word, English-speaking Twitter users who support the Islamic State use it in various forms to express solidarity – as an abstract

² Varied spellings include but are not limited to “baqiya”, “baqiyah”, “baqiyafamily”, and “baqiyahfamily”. Results exclude occurrences within images and data from sites other than Twitter.

noun, an adjective, and a declaration in their usernames, tweets, and user biographies. Pro-IS Twitter users express affection and solidarity for their “Baqiyah Family.” Users describe themselves collectively as a family, and refer to each other using familial labels. For example, users refer to each other in English as “brother” or “sister” and in Arabic “akhi” or “ukhti” as a default. This practice – of invoking a metaphorically familial relationship – is not exclusive to this discourse; it is common among diverse discourses, both religious and non-religious. The effect, however, is the same: by employing the familial metaphor, the bonds of affiliation are strengthened and a greater degree of intimacy is invoked. In order to understand how this collective identity has been constructed and the role of social media in this process, we must first understand the meaning of “baqiyah”.

A first step to understanding its meaning is to examine what words and phrases the term co-occurs with in the body of data. Examining co-occurring terms provides context and can offer greater insight into the meaning of a term. To visualize these co-occurrences, I generated a word tree with NVivo based on the results of the frequency analysis for both “baqiya” and “baqiyah.” Essentially, this word tree is an interactive visualization tool for exploring relationships between the key term and co-occurring words – both those that immediately precede the key word, and those that immediately follow it. The key word sits at the centre of the tree, and co-occurring words are arranged into branches grouped together by co-occurrence (thus emulating the branches of a tree). The size of the font for each branch of the word tree represents the frequency with which it co-occurred with the key term. NVivo also allows researchers to toggle the number of context words included in the tree, an option which provides greater or less detail as desired. The most frequently co-occurring terms for “baqiya” can be viewed below (See Figure 4.1).



Figure 4.1 Representation of 6 most co-occurring terms in word tree for “baqiya”

This diagram shows how the term is used in different ways. In the interactive diagram, when the sequence “Notice → New” is clicked on, the tree highlights the terms on the other side of the tree which followed the sequence most frequently in the data. In this case, the most frequently co-occurring words tended to form sentences such as “Notice new baqiya shoutout accounts.” Here, the word “baqiya” takes the form of an adjective that modifies the noun “accounts.” The word “shoutout” is also used as an adjective that modifies the same noun. The prevalence of this co-occurrence reflects the significance of the practice of “shoutouts,” such that some members of the community create Twitter accounts that are dedicated exclusively to the practice. The sole function of such accounts is to create and maintain a list of followers who are members of the community so that new accounts and other important information can be shared as quickly as possible. Their tweets are thus simple, usually only including new usernames for their followers to follow and possibly a simple declaration of solidarity – hence, “shoutout.”

The significance of the high co-occurrence of the numeral 2 can also be explained by this practice. Because of their high level of activity and the fact that their purpose is to create as large a sub-network of social affiliation as possible, these dedicated shoutout accounts get suspended by Twitter administration very quickly. As such, when members of the community create a new one to replace the most recently suspended, they generally use the same name, but modify it with a numeral suffix to indicate how many previous iterations of that same account have been suspended. At the time of my data collection, the biggest Baqiyah shoutout account was in its twenty-second incarnation, and it was suspended and recreated several more times over the period of collection. The high level of activity on this account explains the high level of co-occurrence between baqiya and the numeral 2. I will return to the significance of shoutouts in Chapter 5, but for now, to better explain the meaning of baqiya, we must proceed to examine other co-occurring terms.

The relationship between “Dawlatul → Islam” and “baqiya” reflects a different function being performed by the same word. This term, translated as “state of Islam” or “[the] Islamic State” most frequently occurred with “baqiya → watamadad bi’ithnillah” to form a complete sentence of Arabic words represented with the Latin alphabet: “Dawlatul Islam baqiya wa tamadad bi’ithnillah” (See Figure 4.2). It is this phrase which is at the

heart of the meaning of the term “Baqiyah”, and at the heart of the community’s collective identity. Put together, this phrase means “The Islamic State is remaining and expanding, [by the] permission of Allah”. This phrase has become a widely accepted (although informal) slogan for members of the pro-IS movement, and “Baqiyah” has become a metonym for it. When individuals use the sole word “Baqiyah,” they invoke the meaning of the entire phrase and express solidarity with those who share their views.



Figure 4.2 The image above shows the slogan “Dowlatul Islam <3 BAQIYAH! Biidnillah”, originally tweeted by UmmHussainBritaniya, and retweeted by both Amal and 1s0a1r0a1h0.

The above image shows a retweeted statement featuring use of the metonym “Baqiyah!” By retweeting this message, the user Amal @BintRose endorses and spreads this message, effectively performing an act of solidarity. This term is the primary lexical label that pro-IS Twitter users employ to *index* membership within the movement.

As described in Chapter 3, a person may index their identity by referring to themselves with such labels, yet identity can also be indexed in other ways. Intertextuality and positionality are two functions of language through which people can index membership in a collective identity. This one word, Baqiyah, is in fact emblematic of how all three mechanisms of identity-creation described in Chapter 3 function together to create meaning. Stating the word “Baqiyah” has indeed become an essential signifier – or *index* – of membership in the community, but that is in part because of the shared repertoire of knowledge that members are expected to be familiar with in order to understand it, as the word itself invokes the meaning of an entire phrase. The term thus became a key thread in the fabric of *intertextual* references made by the group. It is used as a tag, both literally as a hashtag, and figuratively as an indication of membership, that people use to create affiliation. It was incorporated into usernames and account names, stated as a declaration of affiliation in tweets, and also embedded in numerous images (See Figure 4.3).



Figure 4.3 A frequently occurring image containing the word “Baqiya”

The figure above actually visually *positions* “baqiya” different subjects: the speaker is larger, and those being spoken to are smaller and appear to be running in fear. Invoking the term *baqiya* immediately places the speaker or author in opposition to all those outside of the pro-IS movement. The slogan itself also draws upon other “texts” or discourses in order to invoke this meaning. For example, although used by English-speakers, it draws upon meaning constructed in the Arabic language. More specifically, understanding the meaning invoked by this phrase requires an understanding of a meaning of the Islamic term “*bi’ithnillah*”. Although often used colloquially to simply convey support on the part of the speaker, it technically means “by the permission of god” or “with god’s permission,” thus to faithful Muslims, this suggests that the phrase being spoken is not only endorsed by the speaker, but also by the divine. By drawing on this multitude of texts, the term also functions to *position* those who use it above those who are opposed to the Islamic State because it invokes the meaning of divine right.

Mobilizing for Islam

Before proceeding to examine the unique contributions of social media to the collective identity of the pro-IS movement, one must consider how and why it has been so successful in using Islam to confer legitimacy on its activities – at least in the eyes of its supporters. One of the reasons IS has garnered so much attention and inspired such controversy is because of its call for solidarity among all Muslims – a “global ummah”. Members of this movement perceive themselves first and foremost as Muslims. The number one most frequent root word in the body of Twitter data is “Islam” and various forms of the word, occurring 26,386 times (excluding images with text embedded). Faith

is at the core of the group's collective identity, and it is a foundational value. How that faith is performed and understood, however, is unique to the ideology of the pro-IS community. The particular brand of Islam imposed by IS is deeply intolerant towards both non-Muslims as well as others who identify as Muslim, such as the Shia. IS has used the name of Islam to legitimize the reinstatement of sexual slavery, forced religious conversion, executions and other corporal punishments among other human rights violations. While Islam is clearly a fundamental element to the collective identity of IS supporters, it is beyond the purview of this study to engage with the debate surrounding IS's legitimacy in terms of Islam. Therefore, where this thesis refers to subjects of the study as "Muslim", it does so based on how members of the pro-IS movement perceive and describe themselves. However, it is necessary to place the online pro-IS movement within the greater context of political Islam in general.

The pro-IS movement draws heavily upon traditional Islamic texts – the Quran, the Sunnah and Hadiths – to describe their values and justify their actions, yet these actions are at odds with a multitude of other manifestations of political Islam. The diversity of political Islam, and the blowback IS faces in trying to assert its supremacy over all other forms makes more sense upon examining historical sources of authority in Islam. Unlike the Catholic Church for example, Islam does not have a centralized authority. In other words, there is "no single source toward which Muslims can turn in order to know definitively where their religion stands on any given issue" (Mandaville 2007, 305). Indeed, even the historical title "Caliph" and the institution of the Caliphate – which IS has attempted to re-establish – did not historically denote a centralized, absolute ruler who represents God on earth. Indeed, "throughout the classical period, the Islamic Empire became divided into many principalities and kingdoms ruled by different emirs, sultans, or caliphs that at times were in military conflict with each other. But the Shari'a remained the transcendent symbol of unity, and the jurists, as its articulators and protectors, stayed above the petty political and military conflicts and struggles for power" (Fadl 2005, 34). Thus, "the impossibility of identifying a single locus of religious authority in the Muslim world also does not mean that it is not possible to discuss religious authority in Islam in considerable detail. There is indeed a commonly recognized set of social actors and institutions associated with Islamic authority" (Mandaville 2007, 305). Traditionally, authority in Islam was reserved for the

ulama – the class of scholars dedicated to studying Islamic law. Referring to the ulama as jurists, Abou El Fadl writes that:

In the precolonial age, particularly from the ninth to the eighteenth centuries, jurists played the most pivotal role in providing authority in Islam. Although there was a long tradition of plurality of opinions within the juristic class and a practice of disputation and disagreement, juristic institutions provided the power of definition in Islam; collectively the juristic class determined what was orthodox and legitimate within the religion (Abou El Fadl 2005, 29-30).

Although these institutions may have given the impression of a unified class of authoritative actors, intense training in the tradition of Islamic hermeneutics and scholarly debate resulted in a dynamic practice of producing Islamic law and a diverse array of Islamic jurisprudential schools. In other words, rather than a centralized authority, the ulama represented a class of “keepers and curators of a divine authority”, yet these scholars did not share a unified vision of Islamic law (Mandaville 2007, 305).

Another source of misconception about Islamic law stems from a failure to recognize that it differs significantly from state-issued laws. Islamic law is produced by individual jurists who, though traditionally rigorously trained in particular methodologies, are still understood to be subject to human error. As such, their *fatawa* – their rulings in matters of Islamic law – are not irrefutable. Islamic laws are thus not enforceable and binding in the same sense as secular state laws, which within the framework of the nation-state are both rigid and binding. Rather, “the decision to accept or reject a fatwa [Islamic legal opinion] is entirely up to each individual Muslim” (Abou El Fadl 2005, 29). IS, however, claims that there is only one acceptable reading of the Quran, to be decided by the leadership of IS and to be codified into one strict set of binding and enforceable laws. In this way, IS contradicts itself: while claiming to uphold traditional Islamic practices and values, it in fact offers radical interpretation of the Quran which would not functionally survive the traditions of Islamic legal debate among scholars (Ibid).

In earlier historical contexts, Islamic legal jurists produced a multitude of interpretations which were bolstered by a well-defined methodological tradition of textual interpretation. However, this lack of an authoritative centre which produced such a rich and diverse scholarly tradition is also what makes it possible for people to exploit Islam for political

purposes. Abou El Fadl argues that European colonial expansion in the eighteenth century caused a vacuum of power in Islam by gradually diminishing the status of jurists in society and privileging Western forms of education (Abou El Fadl 2005 35). This resulted in a growing population of Western-educated professionals who, when the popularity of Islam as a mobilizing force returned years later, lacked the juristic training that had been fostered and protected by the ulama during the precolonial era (Abou El Fadl 2005, 27). Islam has served as a mobilizing factor for centuries, but after the effects of colonialism on the Islamic juristic tradition, we have seen the rise of what Abou El Fadl terms “authoritarian readings” of Islamic texts, which claim to be objectively truthful (Abou El Fadl 2001, 7). Thus, without an authoritative central figure, or a strong and independent institution where the ulama function as a regulating force, various politicized interpretations of Islam have emerged, some radical and others not. Although violent Islamists – such as IS – represent only a small minority and are denounced by mainstream Muslims and even Islamists, there are “important lines of connection and continuity with major Islamist thinkers and movements” (Mandaville 2014, 332). In practice, IS harnesses traditional Islamic ideas and modifies or innovates upon them. However, new practices enforced by IS which break from the mainstream are then presented as a return to the traditional.

Shared Values

A key to understanding the collective “baqiya” identity is understanding the shared values of the movement. These values serve as positioning devices because members of the movement position themselves against non-members by highlighting differences in shared values. A key piece of data used to understand the shared values of the pro-IS movement is a document entitled “This Is Our Aqeedah”. Presumably, a movement organizer posted this document on the text-hosting domain “JustPaste.It,” and began sharing hyperlinks to the page through the pro-IS Twitter network (which is how I discovered it). This document explicitly details the beliefs of the pro-IS movement in 19 articles (See Appendix A). This document reflects the shared values of the group, and also gives insight into how members position themselves against non-members. Two core values of the group, other than faith, include a dedication to “truth”, and personal sacrifice. The value of truth is embedded throughout the document, such as under article 15 which states that “We believe in treating with love the pious scholars who are *truthful* and to be

humble before them, and to discard from them their mistakes and shortcomings” [emphasis added]. Article 9 of the same document reflects the underlying sense of duty and personal sacrifice that is so integral to the movement: “We believe that *jihad fi sabilillah* (fighting in the path of Allah) is an obligation upon every single Muslim since the fall of the caliphate in Andalusia (modern day Spain) in the effort to liberate occupied Muslim lands... it is made *wajib* (obligatory) upon every single Muslim”. The document also reflects the value of personal sacrifice in article 16, which states that “We hold that those who preceded us in (leaving for) *jihad*, they are those who are honored, and it is our responsibility to support (taking care and be of service to) the families of the *mujahideen* and their properties.”

The two values of truth and personal sacrifice are also reflected in the Twitter data. The word “truth” – or its Arabic version, “haqq” – occurs 3466 times in the corpus of Twitter data. The concept of sacrifice, in various manifestations, also carries a strong presence in the data, whether explicitly through the motif of martyrdom, or more subtly. Both of these values make perfect sense for a social movement. People who perceive themselves as protectors of truth can *feel good* about their commitment to the movement, a powerful and necessary component of movement solidarity as theorized by Tarrow (2011). Tarrow writes that for movement solidarity to emerge, there must be a confluence of identity construction, framing, and emotion work (2011, 143). Upholding “truth” as a value falls under that emotion work because it makes people feel good, and it also fulfills some of the identity and framing work as it enables movement proponents to *position* themselves above their opponents on moral grounds; their enemies are by implication liars or dishonest. Similarly, people who value personal sacrifice will more easily be persuaded to act in the name of a greater cause, regardless of what that cause is. Believing that all of one’s loss has been for a higher purpose gives followers both consolation and a sense of self-righteousness. These values are reflected in how members of the movement describe themselves and *position* themselves against non-members.

Constructing the “Other”

An integral element of a social movement is a perceived opponent or power structure against which the movement rallies. As Johnston writes, social movement

research has confirmed ongoing social construction of collective identity on these two planes: internal to the movement among members, and external to the movement, among opponents, politicians, potential adherents, and bystander publics" (2014, 89). These perceived outsiders are also constructed through indexicality, positioning and intertextuality. The document "This Is Our Aqeedah" was also helpful in examining how the "Other" is constructed. Because members of the movement perceive themselves as Muslims above all else, outsiders are most often labeled – or *indexed* – in faith-based terms. The most prominent of all of these labels is "*kafir/kuffar*," which is Arabic for "infidel/s," occurring 4522 times in the Twitter data³. According to "This Is Our Aqeedah," the pro-IS movement believes that:

secularism in its various forms and doctrines, such as nationalism, socialism and communism, is tantamount to *kufr*, it cancels one's *shahadat* and pulls the people away from the religion of Islam. And we believe anyone who is affiliated and participates in any political party/activity, such as the Ad-Dailamiy party, Al-Hasyimiy, and others has become an apostate. This is because these acts replace the law of Allah ta'ala, and handover the loyalty and power of the *ummah* to the enemies of Alla ta'ala such as the Crusaders, and the Shi'a Rafidhah.

This excerpt, taken from article 7 of the document, demonstrates that enemies are broadly indexed as *kuffar*. The index "Crusaders" invokes powerful historical meaning which suggests that Western modes of governance represent a form of neo-Imperialism. Other faith-based labels are used to convey such nuanced meanings as "*murtadeen*" to signify people who once were Muslim – or once were supporters of IS – but became infidels – or rescinded support for the movement. While the pro-IS movement draws these labels intertextually from other Islamic discourses, it is the particular way that IS claims the authority to determine whether one is a "true" Muslim and the associations with such a status as *kuffar* that is more unique to the movement. In other words, other Islamic discourses do not claim the authority to determine the authenticity and validity of an individual's faith, nor do they so vehemently denounce non-believers as "filthy," "liars" and "criminals" by default. The values of truth and sacrifice, so important to the pro-IS movement become frames through which the other is perceived as diametrically

³ Including variations such as *Kafir, Kuffar, Kaafiroon, Kuff[s]*, and searched for in Master Corpus – Twitter User Feed Extracts

oppositional: the enemies of IS are the *kuffar*, and the *kuffar* are enemies because they are unfaithful, untruthful, and selfish. By using these labels in a particular way, the meaning of the terms shift and take on connotations specific to the group. When ethnically-based slurs are used over faith-based ones, the transgression implied is the same. The most widely used ethnic insult in the Twitter discourse is “coconut,” a metaphor implying that, while “brown on the outside,” the subject is “white on the inside.” This perceived ethnic-misalignment can be interpreted as inauthenticity, or a dishonesty of identity – a violation of truth. This manner in which certain values are used as positioning devices is reflected in each customizable element of pro-IS user profiles.

Section B – Analysis of Twitter Features

Like most SNS, Twitter allows its users to personalize their online identity by filling out fields to create a “user profile”. In creating this profile, users can textually construct an identity of the self by choosing a username of their own invention, providing their location (in their own words), writing a short biography of up to 160 characters and providing a hyperlink to any other web site or page. These features are explicitly designed to allow users to present themselves as they choose, allowing the opportunity for creative responses. Users are also able to upload a profile picture and a background picture to visually enhance their persona as desired. Members of the online pro-IS movement have embraced each of these features as an opportunity to express solidarity and connect their personalized identity with – or even subsume it under – that of the movement as a whole.

This section will present an analysis of how certain features of Twitter have enabled the construction of the collective “Baqiyah Family” identity. It begins by presenting an analysis of usernames and account names, highlighting naming conventions that the movement has developed in order to index membership. The second subsection presents an analysis of visual elements of the pro-IS discourse on Twitter, including use of the flag of IS, profile and background pictures, emoticons, and images of violence. The third and fourth subsections provide an analysis of how pro-IS Twitter users have personalized the “Location” and “Biography” features of their profiles in ways that contribute to solidarity and collective identity. The choices that pro-IS users have made in the context of each of these features of Twitter contribute to the construction of their shared identity by engaging

indexicality, positioning and intertextuality, and each section explains how these mechanisms function to that end.

Username and Account Names

The data reflects that pro-IS Twitter users often chose usernames and account names that index them as part of the “baqiya” community. This connection could be achieved in several ways. One such way is through the use of identity labels. For example, twenty four different accounts in the sample contained the word “baqiya” in their username, and fifteen accounts contained it in their account name. Other examples of usernames and account names that explicitly show affiliation to the group incorporate some variation of the words “Islamic State” (whether in English or the Arabic “dalwatul Islam”) or the words “caliphate” or “Khilafa” (See Table 4.1).

Table 4.1 Explicitly Pro-IS User and Account Names

<i>Account Name (Username)</i>
Caliphatemani (@WorldWarWitnes)
DAWLATIL ISLAM (@hadhamaawaadna)
GREAT IS NATION (@GreatISNation55)
iislamicstate (@jihadis_islam)
IslamicKilafah (@IslamicKilafah)
IslamicState (@IslamicStateII)
islamicstatepk1 (@islamicstatepk1)
khilafah bro (@khilafah_001)
Khilafah Revived (@KhilafahRevivd)
PROPHET'S KHILAFAH (@BattarEng)
State Of Islam (@DawlaState)
State Of Islam (@Oooh_Baqiyaa)
The Great Khilafah (@khlifa121)
Rising Khilafah (@AllahPromised)
The State Remains (@EnrageTheKuffar)
The State Remains (@ObamaSayBaqiyah)
age of KHILAFAH (@Age_Of_Khilafah)
Black Flags (@MakeDuaForDowla)

Each of the individual users who created these accounts chose literally to *name* themselves after the Islamic State. Rather than provide their real name, or even create an

individualized online persona, for these pro-IS Twitter users, the identity of the individual is subsumed under the identity of the group.

For those pro-IS users who did opt to personalize their online persona, there is a sort of nomenclature used to generate “noms de guerre” for both men and women. Of the 327 Twitter accounts sampled, 55 ostensibly male personas and 39 ostensibly female personals used this nomenclature. The formula, while not strictly adhered to, is as follows:

Abu (male)/Umm (female) + Islamic (or other name) + Nationality signifier

This formula actually derives from the Arabic naming custom of “kunya” (Schimmel 1990, 1). “Abu” is Arabic for “father [of]” while “Umm” is Arabic for “mother [of]”. While the kunya is a type of teknonym in which the name of an adult is taken in part from that of their eldest child, it is also used metaphorically. An example of a username in the data that adheres to this nomenclature is “Abu Hurayra Al-Hindi” which indicates a male persona with the use of “Abu”. However, rather than “Hurayra” indicating the name of this user’s child, “Hurayra” actually means “kitten”. In this case, the teknonym is used metaphorically to say that the user is “Father of a kitten”. Finally, he indicates that he is from India. An example of a female version in the data is “UmmHussainBritaniyah”, which translates to “Mother of Hussain, [the] British”. While there is no way to verify whether the names indicated in the nomenclature reflect the names these people use in the physical world, data from both tweets and supplementary sources indicate that members of the community are highly discouraged from doing so. This creates an opportunity for users to construct their online identity in a way that strengthens affiliation with the movement.

Because members avoid using their real names, they often draw intertextually on the repertoire of Islamic historical knowledge in creating these personas. For example, the name “Ibrahim” – which is also the name of a prophet in Islam – is included in 12 different account names. It is true that Quranic names have become common in Islamic societies and does not always signify that the bearer of such a name is religious. However, the significance of *choosing* an Islamic name, a name from a well-defined history of shared belief, has the effect of strengthening an individual’s affiliation to that tradition, and in this case, to the particular community that holds that tradition – at least in name – as one of its defining characteristics. By using this nomenclature, users convey that they come from

diverse backgrounds, yet are united by this shared practice of renaming, affirmatively positioning themselves as members of the movement. As mentioned above, this use of the extended familial metaphor is a way of invoking an intimacy and a familiarity which strengthens bonds of affiliation between users who often do not know each other outside of Twitter, yet its formality reinforces an air of respect. Each time a user employs this nomenclature, they not only provide information about themselves as individuals, but they also index membership in the community which has developed this specific way of constructing individual identity and connecting it with the collective.

One user, in a creative twist on the nomenclature, named himself “Ibn Kitab al Twittari,” which translates as “Son of [the] Book, [from or of] Twitter”. The first part of his name, “Ibn Kitab” likely signifies the user’s dedication to the Quran. However in this example, rather than describing his country of origin, this user cleverly adapts the convention to convey that he is actually *from* Twitter in an analogous way, suggesting that his online identity – the one which actively participates in the pro-IS movement – was born *online*. Although this is a unique example rather than a trend, the underlying idea that important identity work occurs online resonates throughout the data.

Gendered Naming Conventions

It also became clear that there were patterns in how male identities versus female usernames and account names were constructed in the pro-IS Twitter community. While not all pro-IS accounts presented a clearly gendered persona, most did, and though it is outside the scope of this study to confirm whether a user’s online gender conforms to the gender they enact offline, we can still learn about gender differences based on these presentations. A key characteristic of the pro-IS male persona is militancy – most apparently-male accounts described themselves as warriors or soldiers and emphasize men’s martial roles in IS, a trend which became apparent in usernames and account names such as “Silent Bomber (@InService2Godd),” “Shooter Khan (@Shooter_Khann),” “The Wounded Archer (@Ajnad_Khilafa15),” “Abukhattab muhajir (@caliphateknight)” and “Colonel Shaami (@ColShamii).” No such pattern in usernames emerged among ostensibly female personas; rather, the only trend among them was to choose usernames drawn from Islamic history, namely the wives of the prophet Muhammed. The most

commonly selected in the data were Khadija, Aysha, and Zaynab, who were Muhammed's first, second or third (disputed), and fifth wife, respectively.

There is also a strong pattern in the usernames of apparently male personas portraying themselves metaphorically as lions or wolves, and apparently female personas occasionally portray themselves as lionesses and sometimes as birds. While this motif has a stronger visual than textual presence in the data, some examples include the usernames "Younglion7778 (@younglion7778)" and "Wolfe (@Lone__Wolfe)". The label of "lone wolf" implies that the user is a lone military operative in a foreign land – whether literally or figuratively. By describing themselves as lions, users invoke a sense of might and strength. It is important to note, however, that this is not a novel use of lions to symbolize and invoke such traits. In fact, it is significant to the modern history of Syria. The family name of the incumbent president of Syria, "Assad," actually means "lion" in Arabic. However, it was Bashar's father who consciously changed the family name from "Wahhash" – meaning "wild thing" or "savage" – to "Assad" in 1927, reflecting the upward social transition the family underwent with Ali Sulayman as the patriarch (Seale 1988, 6). To be sure, lions are widely regarded as powerful, dominant creatures, but this historical context reveals that there is a possible greater symbolic meaning to this trend among IS supporters. In a sense this trend represents a symbolic re-appropriation of this metaphor of dominance from one of IS's biggest and most immediate opponents, Bashar al Assad. Further examples of this motif will be presented in the following section which is dedicated to visual elements of the discourse.

Visual Elements of the Discourse

The experience offered by social media is not exclusively textual, but rather incorporates rich visual and sometimes auditory and video elements. To better understand how collective identity is used to support movement solidarity, these non-textual elements must be incorporated in the analysis. As Doerr writes:

If images and symbols are an important resource for protest actors to express themselves, it makes good sense to consider their impact on collective identities and emotions as well as their role in framing and representing protest and in the mobilization of resources (Doerr et al. 2012, xvii).

Despite the important role that visual elements of discourse can play in galvanizing social movements, “systematic analyses of the visual or an integration of visual analyses within broader frameworks is still rare [in studies of social movements]” (Doerr et al. 2012, xi). As mentioned earlier, Twitter users can select a profile picture and a background picture, and embed emoticons, images and videos in tweets themselves. Images and videos serve communicative functions just as much as text does, and that includes the three mechanisms of identity-building. Visuals can *index*, or “mark [individuals’] affiliation with a collective and [serve] to identify their *position* in political conflicts” [emphasis added] (Doer et al. 2012, xiii). Visual materials produced by social movements also function intertextually, as they “tap into the shared visual knowledge of the society they are rooted in. They use and reinterpret a pre-existing imaginary to voice critique and to form a collective actor” (Ibid). This section will thus be dedicated to an analysis of how pro-IS Twitter users used visual elements of the SNS to construct identity and express solidarity.

The Flag of IS

One of the most prominent visual elements of the pro-IS discourse on Twitter is images of the flag of IS. This was a popular choice across all pro-IS users, and manifested as profile pictures, background pictures, and was often embedded in tweets (See Figure 4.4). As a symbol of the political project, it makes sense that this would be the most common choice. It is the simplest, most direct visual way for a user to declare their allegiance. The flag’s design comprises significant visual elements that draw intertextually on Islamic history. The black background is a reference to the black standard flown by Muhammad, and the Arabic text on the flag is the Shahada – the declaration known to all Muslims that “there is no god but Allah; [and] Muhammad is the messenger of Allah”. The round symbol in the center is meant to represent the personal seal of the prophet Muhammad. Each of these elements draw on foundational concepts from Islam; in other words, they are so universally Islamic that despite the multitude of ways Islam is practiced, they are potentially recognizable and in some way relatable to all Muslims. These symbols thus serve to position the Islamic State’s political agenda as a universally Islamic one (an assertion which is widely rejected by Muslims who do not support its cause). In doing so, IS attempts to strengthen a sense of collective identity that transcends national borders. This concept of a global community of Muslims, which in Arabic is called the “*ummah*,” offers “Western Muslims who experience their dual identity as confusing and

destabilizing... a matrix of meaning that permits them to derive a clearer sense of purpose and worldview” (Mandaville 2014, 351). Those who are receptive to the narrative that IS offers thus place their identity as Muslim – and their identity as pro-IS –above their national identity.



Figure 4.4 Snapshot of a tweet with an embedded image of the IS Flag and a sword

IS versus Nationalism

The way that movement supporters use and describe the flag provides a glimpse into the group’s vexed relationship with the concept of nationalism. IS rejects nationalism on the surface, instead promoting the idea that the world should be united under their version of Islam. Nationalism is understood by the pro-IS community as a divisive force that creates discord among Muslims, and one that is rooted in a secular Western paradigm. This thinking falls under Mandaville’s description of radical Islamism, which he characterizes by “a vision of Islamic political order that rejects the legitimacy of the modern sovereign nation-state and seeks to establish a pan-Islamic polity or renewed caliphate” (2007, 239). Supporters of IS describe their own project as one of unification, with the intention of uniting all Muslims around the world, the “global ummah.” For example, one user tweeted:

"IF [the Islamic Front] is nationalistic. JAN [Jabhat al-Nusra] wants Syria instead of uniting Muslims lands. The #IS wants to unite the whole ummah under the khilafah."

In this tweet, the user *positions* IS as superior to two other rival groups on the basis that the Islamic Front, and Jabhat al-Nusra are “nationalistic” and focus only on Syria. In contrast, this user argues that IS’s project is much grander than a national project could ever be.

For IS supporters, the entire concept of nationhood is irrevocably bound up with the neo-colonial establishment of nations in the Middle East, a symbol of foreign powers re-imagining vast spaces to serve their own interests. Yet despite this, IS supporters find themselves trapped by a discourse which places legitimacy in the language of nationhood or statehood. The result is that while the majority of IS supporters openly denounce nationalism and affiliation to any state, mostly they find themselves asserting the legitimacy of IS through nationalistic terms. For example, one user tweeted: "Like it or not it's [Islamic State is] not a group it's a country 🇵🇸". Another tweeted: "ISIS is not a group, ISIS is a islamic nation with they citizen then apply the law of sharia(alquran n hadihs)" [sic]. The very fact that the name of the project is “Islamic State,” or in Arabic “Dawlatul Islam” (the state of Islam) reflects this tension. The discourse surrounding the flag which is so widely used reflects this tension. In the image below, a user calls upon his audience to “drop the nationalistic flags & raise the banners of tawheed” (See Figure 4.5).



Figure 4.5 Snapshot of a tweet with embedded image promoting IS flag

Despite the user’s rejection of “nationalist flags,” he also calls for his audience to fly the flag of “tawheed”. Tawheed (also sometimes written tawhid) is an Islamic concept

referring to the unity, singularity, and peerlessness of god. It also refers to believing in Allah alone as the one true god, and is a basic precept shared by all Muslims. By referring to their flag as the banner of tawheed, IS supporters make it problematic for faithful Muslims to reject that flag. While the user here tries to distinguish between the “flag” and “banner,” inherently there is only a subtle difference in the meanings of those two words. The word “flag” *is* in truth more closely associated with the function of representing a country, yet here, the “banner” being called upon to replace it represents IS, a nascent *state*. This tension is not one that is acknowledged by IS supporters. The flag is ubiquitous in the Twitter community and effectively signals – or indexes – support and contributes to movement solidarity.

Profile and Background Pictures

There were strong trends in the types of profile and background pictures chosen by pro-IS Twitter users. As mentioned above, the majority of pro-IS users promote images of the flag of IS, whether by tweeting it amongst themselves or incorporating it as an element in their profile or background pictures. However, other trends among pro-IS users, such as the tendency to use animal images for profile pictures fell into gender categories. This section will be dedicated to describing the gendered differences in the pro-IS discourse which first became apparent in the way users visually represent themselves. It should be noted, however, that these trends often extend beyond the profiles and backgrounds into the textual part of the discourse.

Gender Differences

While the flag was prevalent across all pro-IS users, other visual choices revealed gendered differences in the portrayal of pro-IS stance and identity. These trends do more than enforce gender expectations though; they contribute to group solidarity because of the sets of shared practices and expectations that are specific to the group’s presence on social media. When a female supporter of IS chooses to construct her individual identity in line with these trends, she not only performs her femininity, but also her place in the community that defines femininity in that way (and vice versa, for men).

Visual Trends Among Pro-IS Males

There are three prominent visual trends that are specific to the profile pictures and backgrounds of apparently male accounts: (1) self-portraits of the user brandishing a weapon, (2) photographs or illustrations of lions or wolves, and (3) adaptations from popular video game concept art. For example, the profile picture of Abu Hurayra Al-Hindi – whose name I used as an example of the nomenclature at work – depicts a man brandishing a weapon (See Figure 4.6).



Figure 4.6 Profile picture of Abu Hurayra Al-Hindi

While it cannot be verified that the man in the photograph is in fact the user who administers the account, it is a well-established practice on social media that a user's profile picture is, by default, a picture of the person to whom the account belongs. Thus whether or not the man depicted truly is the user of the account, he is meant to represent that user. The man's face is concealed, and he holds a firearm at the ready – clearly, this profile picture is meant to convey that the user is a soldier for IS. This visual representation of militancy adds to the sense of the users' online presence as somehow militant, as well – this user not only fights on the battlefield, but also fights for the cause *online*.

The second trend is users' choice of images of animals – specifically lions and wolves – to represent themselves. A typical choice is exemplified in the profile picture below (See Figure 4.7).



Figure 4.7 Profile picture of Ashiq-Abu

The example above is a highly typical profile picture for male-presented pro-IS Twitter accounts. We can reasonably infer that the user is male, or at least that the user wishes to identify as male, because of his choice of name, which includes “Abu” – the Arabic word for “father”. Here, the lion is showing signs of aggression, but this varies across the data. Lions were often chosen as both profile pictures, and background pictures. In the example above, the background picture is of a photograph of the IS flag. By using a photograph of an animal which represents strength, power, and dominance, the user is able to convey that message without sharing personal information that could reveal the identity by which they are known in the physical world. Less common than lions, but still a significant trend, is the choice of representing oneself as a wolf (see Figure 4.8).



Figure 4.8 Profile picture of nightwalker/lonewolf

Wolves, or “lone wolves” are often chosen by users who claim to reside outside of IS-held territory. The same term is used to describe lone military operatives, but it is likely that some of these Twitter users simply use this metaphor whether they plan to conduct an actual attack or not. Like the example of the lion above, this photograph depicts a wolf in a state of aggression, reflecting this user’s aggression towards his surroundings.

The third trend among male-presented pro-IS accounts is the use of adapted art work from popular video games. Sometimes this trend emerges as a profile picture or a background image on a user’s profile page, but it is also common to simply share new versions of these adaptations by embedding them in tweets. The two most popular games adapted for the discourse by pro-IS users are Call of Duty and the Assassin’s Creed series. Combat features heavily in both of these games, but call of duty simulates more modern warfare, while Assassin’s Creed explores different historical periods, meaning that combat style is restricted by the technological limitations of the time. Typically, a screen shot or the concept art of a character from one of these games is adapted to bear the flag of IS (See Figure 4.9).



Figure 4.9 Comparison of original artwork for Call of Duty 3 to pro-IS adaptation

The image above shows a comparison of the original artwork for Call of Duty 3, “Black Ops,” to a pro-IS adaptation of that same work, in which the flag of IS hovers in front of the soldier depicted. The artist who adapted it thus drew intertextually on an existing work to tailor the associated meanings to the particular interests of pro-IS Twitter users. This trend is part of a greater media strategy by al-Furqan, the official media branch of IS, to appeal to young men who play these video games. Based on the prevalence of user-generated material such as this, the strategy has been successful – it is not just al-Furqan who generates this content, but young pro-IS men on Twitter – and other SNS– who embrace this framework as a way of understanding their affiliation with IS. By intertextually drawing upon these modern products of popular culture, IS is framed as both current and “cool.” It speaks to their generation’s advanced technological literacy and a

youthful desire for purpose, all in an exciting yet familiar package that both glorifies and naturalizes violence.

These three trends among accounts that project a male identity reveal that the pro-IS online community has well-established notions of masculinity. In this subculture, males are encouraged to project strength, militancy, and even aggression. The movement expects these performances of masculinity as indexes of membership and support from males.

Visual Trends Among Pro-IS Females

The visual expressions of femininity by pro-IS Twitter users are starkly different. The most common visual trends for expressing femininity through profile and background pictures were: (1) apparently genuine portraits of the user wearing a niqab (often accompanied by floral images), (2) images of either lionesses or birds, and (3) images containing quotations from the Quran or hadiths. Each of these motifs occurred as profile pictures as well as background pictures, with varying combinations.

The first trend is of women apparently posting genuine pictures of themselves wearing a niqab, the only appropriate form of dress for a woman according to IS. As mentioned before, although these alleged self-portraits cannot be verified as real photographs of the users who present them as profile pictures, these choices are at least meant to represent the user. A common pairing in the data is such a portrait as a profile picture, with a photograph of flowers and/or the flag of IS as a background picture (See Figure 4.10).

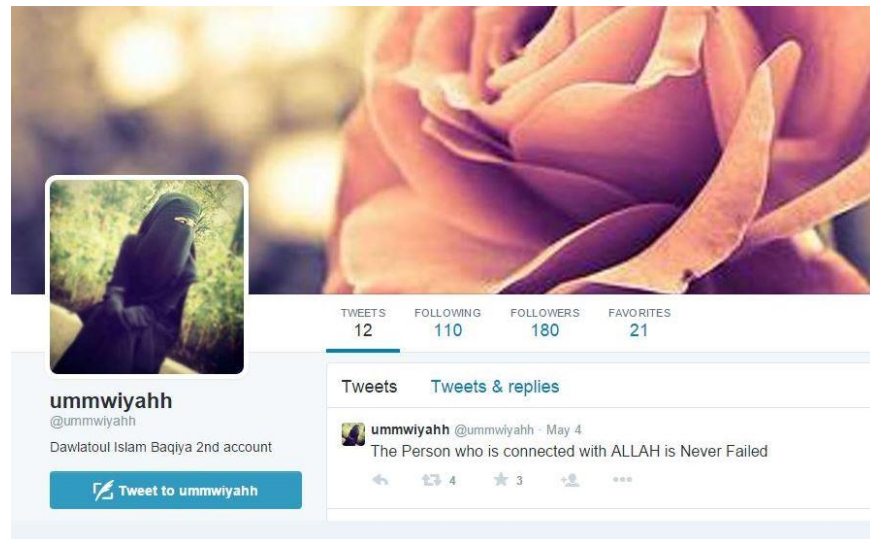


Figure 4.10 Profile and background picture of ummwiyahh

This profile picture, like many others, shows the female subject dressed in appropriately modest attire (the niqab) and in a resting position – here seated, apparently in front of a garden or some plants. Other portraits do show women standing or walking, but usually not in particularly active roles, and not often aggressive or in a combat stance like many male portraits. The background above, a large image of a rose, is also common, and reinforces the symbolism of flowers as feminine.

Another example of a female profile and background combination shows that the extended metaphor of males as lions extends to females as lionesses (See Figure 4.11)

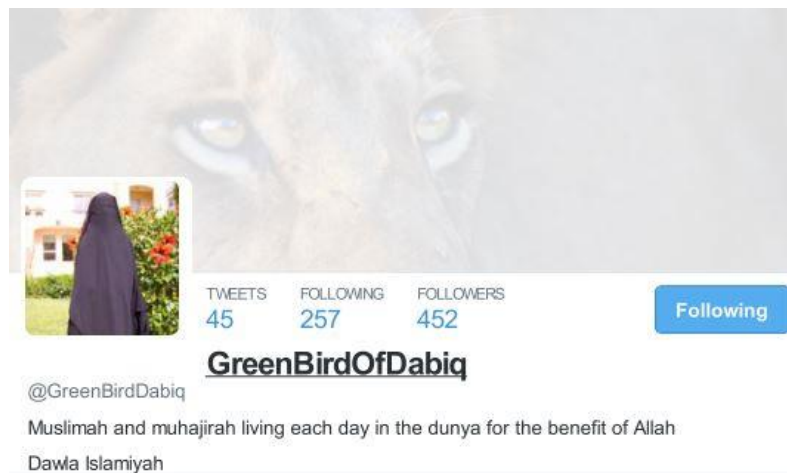


Figure 4.11 Profile and background pictures of GreenBirdOfDabiq

In the above figure, the user chose a picture of a lioness as a background, yet uses textual imagery to refer to herself as a bird in her username. “GreenBirdOfDabiq” is a reference to an important Islamic text, hadith Qudsi 27. A hadith is a collection of “reports or traditions containing the statements made by Prophet Muhammad; eyewitness accounts of his actions as well as his endorsement and approval of other people’s actions; transmitted by his Companions, they collectively define his Sunnah, or exemplary conduct” (Lawrence 2006, 202). This hadith states that the souls of martyrs “are in the insides of green birds having lanterns suspended from the Throne, roaming freely in Paradise where they please.”⁴ In Islamic eschatology “Dabiq,” is a possible location where a world-ending battle is prophesied to take place, and it is also the title of the official propaganda magazine of IS. The user has thus drawn from a repertoire of knowledge to create a name with intertextual meaning, a name which conveys religious knowledge and affirms her affiliation with IS by incorporating the name of their propaganda magazine into her own personal username. Her profile picture demonstrates her modesty, while the background image of the lioness suggests strength. Other users chose to use actual images of birds in their backgrounds or profile pictures. While these images could be intertextual references to the same hadith, the trend could also simply indicate a shared perception of birds as feminine.

⁴ <http://hadithqudsi.sacredhadith.com/hadith-qudsi-27/>

The third visual trend that is more common among pro-IS females than males is the posting of images which contain text, specifically Islamic quotations. These quotations tend to encourage worship, patience, and sacrifice. Because these quotations come from Islamic texts, they are general in that they do not pertain to the exclusive views or policies of IS, but rather promote a positive message, virtue or basic tenet of Islam (See Figure 4.12).



Figure 4.12 Profile picture of female account with embedded text

The profile picture above is of a cloudy sky, with a heart symbol and text superimposed on top. The text reads “la ilaha illa’allah,” which translated from Arabic means “there is no god but God”. The heart surrounding the text suggests the user’s love for this belief. For all Muslims, regardless of sect, this is a shared belief at the core of their faith. This trend in particular extends beyond profile pictures and backgrounds – often female users of the pro-IS community seem to dedicate their account to this function of providing encouraging spiritual messages, but as images rather than solely text. The overall effect of this trend is that the majority of pro-IS women, while highly present on social media, tend to serve the movement as bastions of virtue and faith. Male users also often tweet Islamic quotations, but among female users it is far more common to refrain from posting messages that promote militancy, or even discuss specific political matters. Instead, their tweets tend to remain at a higher, conceptual level, and provide reminders of virtues as stated in the Quran. To every trend, however, there is an exception.

Feminist Jihad

While the majority of female users projected an identity centred around modesty and piety as described above, there is a segment of the discourse promoting what is

termed “feminist jihad.” Martyrdom is an integral part of the pro-IS discourse, and the possibility of attaining martyrdom affects the social status of the living. Men tweet about the desire to become martyrs, and even children are sometimes described as future martyrs. Some women who support IS are claiming a right to participate in martial combat; during the data collection period of this study, an image of a wedding certificate stipulating a bride’s right to perform a martyrdom operation was circulating the internet⁵. Without this clause, the woman’s husband would have the legal right to prohibit his wife from doing so. However, rather than indicating this woman’s desire to actually sacrifice her life in battle, claiming this right likely represents her desire to assert agency and have at least the perceived chance at attaining this subculture’s highest honour which is usually reserved for men. While still adhering to other prescriptions of femininity – most importantly, modesty by wearing the niqab – these women assert that they have just as much right as men to sacrifice their lives (See Figure 4.13).



Figure 4.13 Profile picture and background of Umm Abdurrahman

The profile above, belonging to Umm Abdurrahman, exemplifies this segment of the discourse. Her profile picture depicts a woman garbed in a niqab, with the following words superimposed: “I seek nothing from this life but shahaadi, the things and people of this dunya are but a test for me”. There are two Arabic words here that are essential to understanding the meaning of this statement. The first term, “shahaadi,” is the feminine form of the word for “martyr,” but spelled in such a way that reflects a Levantine accent. The second term, “dunya” represents the material, physical world. The background image

⁵ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-wedding-certificate-shows-jihadi-bride-demanding-right-to-be-a-suicide-bomber-as-condition-of-getting-married-10250346.html>

shows both the flag of IS and a clip of ammunition. Despite her desire to engage in combat, this user does not reject other important elements of femininity as prescribed by the pro-IS community. She still seeks to present herself as feminine by naming herself “Umm” and choosing an image of a woman as her profile picture (regardless of whether it is really the user). She asserts her faith and her allegiance to IS, and also demonstrates appropriate modesty through the use of a niqab. Another example of women expressing the desire to “die in jihad” is the image below, which was embedded in a tweet by a pro-IS user (See Figure 4.14).

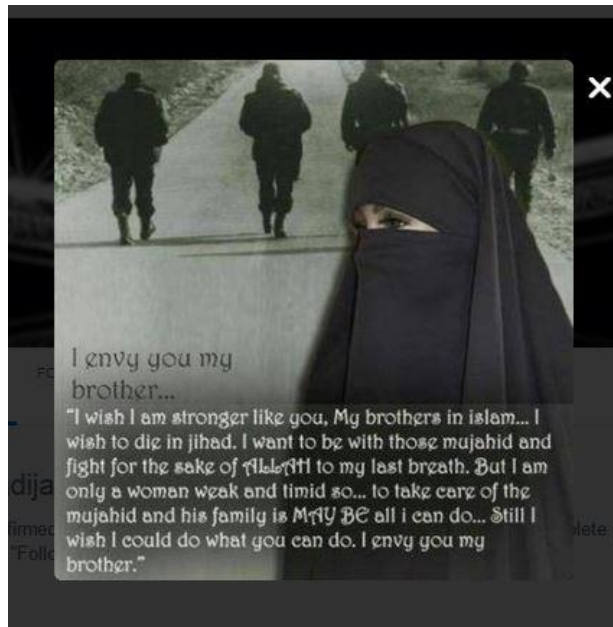


Figure 4.14 Image with text describing feminist jihad

The text embedded in the image conveys the complexity of the feminist jihad segment of the discourse. The words are in quotation marks, as if to suggest that the woman depicted spoke them. Although the text conveys a desire to participate in militant jihad, the apparently female speaker is rather self-deprecating, saying “I am only a woman weak and timid”. While it is not possible to verify whether these words were truly spoken or written by a woman, they do reflect the existing sub-discourse of feminist jihad. Here, the speaker’s language *positions* herself as humble, weak and timid, but still expresses a desire to do more than “take care of the mujahid and his family [which] MAY BE all [she] can do”. The words are addressed to an unknown man who is respectfully, yet intimately referred to as “brother”. By performing such humility and modesty, this supposed female

speaker can express that she “want[s] to be with those mujahid and fight for the sake of ALLAH to [her] last breath” without completely undermining what it means to be a woman who supports IS. In this way, she and other pro-IS women are asserting their agency within the existing ideological framework.

Other images in the discourse suggest that this “right” to jihad has been granted. (See Figure 4.15).



Figure 4.15 Propaganda images that suggest IS empowers women

The image above was posted by a pro-IS user, and seems to frame IS as an administration that seeks to empower and encourage women to be active, fly aircraft, and even participate in combat. In reality, none of these photographs are given context or explanation, and there is no way to verify who the women are, where and when the photos were taken. As such, it is important to consider the possibility that these Twitter accounts may be products of IS’s propaganda machine. Whether or not IS truly has allowed women to participate in combat, it appears that some are fighting for their right to do so, and despite the fact that these women challenge one dominant gender norm, they do so in a way that reinforces their commitment to IS. In other words, they are self-advocating in a way that still allows them to index themselves as part of the “Baqiyah” family and reaffirms their position within the movement.

Emoticons

Another visual element of the discourse that the pro-IS movement has used to express solidarity is the emoticon. Emoticons are “stylized textual representations, predominately graphological realizations of facial expression” (Zappavigna 2012, 71). Emoticons are not exclusive to Twitter, and different social media platforms and mobile phones offer slightly different emoticons and often provide a diverse array that go beyond representations of facial expression. These include objects, animals and even place symbols. My analysis of the pro-IS discourse on Twitter supports Zappavigna’s argument that emoticons have emerged not to clarify meaning that requires paralinguistic cues (like facial expression), but rather that they play an important role in supporting affiliation and strengthening interpersonal connection (Ibid).

Many emoticons emerged in the data, each contributing to unique meaning created by its relation to the accompanying text. Some emoticons, such as the heart or smiling face, lend a sense of affection to accompanying text (See Figure 4.16).



Figure 4.16 Example of heart emoticon in use

In the above tweet, the user brackets her text with hearts, giving the impression that she feels love for the one she addresses – in this case, Allah. Although the user here addresses her tweet to Allah, the tweet is also indirectly addressed to all of her followers, and is thus a semi-public performance of her love for god. The heart emoticons help to *index* her as feminine and pious. While here the heart seems to be directed toward god, in other cases people use this emoticon to express affection to one another.

Other emoticons, such as the gun or bomb, tend to give a much more negative impression, connoting violence or the threat of violence (See Figure 4.17). Meaning is created by how these emoticons are paired with text, other emoticons and images. This means that the same emoticon can have different meanings depending on these pairings.



Figure 4.17 Example of emoticons used in threatening context

The tweet above is addressed to “spies,” meaning users who create seemingly pro-IS accounts in order to infiltrate the community. This tweet uses text and emoticons to send a clear message that “spies” – i.e. non-members of the movement – will not be tolerated, and suggests that their failure is inevitable. Paired with this text, the laughing emoticon adds a sense of boastfulness to the statement. Similarly, the emoticon of a smiling face wearing sunglasses is usually used to convey a sense of smugness or “coolness”, but does not always seem as menacing as it does here where it is paired with emoticons of weapons. While each of these emoticons thus performs a communicative function, it is the last emoticon in the message that is by far most important emoticon used by the group to express solidarity.

This emoticon, representing a hand with the index finger extended upward, existed before the online pro-IS movement. It is one of a series of hand gestures depicted by various emoticons, and Twitter offers two versions of this particular gesture (See Figure 4.18).



Figure 4.18 Emoticons used to represent Tahwid

Without context, these emoticons seem to simply represent the common hand gesture for representing the number one (according to North American customs) and a pointing finger. However, in 2014 this hand gesture became increasingly popular among fighters of IS to display in photographs, and became an unequivocal symbol of support for the group (Zelinsky 2014). As Zelinsky explains, when IS supporters “hold up a single index finger on their right hands, they are alluding to tawhid, the belief in the oneness of God and a key component of the Muslim religion” (Zelinsky 2014). However, in the context of IS,

tawhid comes to represent not only dedication to monotheism, but also a rejection of all who do not share the specific ideology of IS (Ibid). It represents how members of the online movement *position* themselves against non-members. This emoticon has been used by IS supporters in every textual field on Twitter – usernames, biographies, tweets, and locations. This emoticon has thus become a symbol by which individual members of the movement “mark their affiliation with a collective” (Doerr et al. 2013, xii). Every occurrence of that emoticon in the corpus of data is an expression of solidarity and support for IS, whereas in other contexts the symbol would have likely only been used to represent the number one. The meaning of this emoticon is thus *intertextual* in how it draws upon Islamic discourse and knowledge of current events in order to create meaning.

Images of Violence

A final visual trend in the discourse that merits analysis is the plethora of gruesome and disturbingly violent photographs. These images are most often shared as embedded images in tweets, but occasionally they are also incorporated as profile or background pictures. Even more often, users tweet links to external websites where these images can be seen as part of a photo report (a tactic used if the user is avoiding suspension). Certainly, these images serve to shock. Outsiders balk at the insouciance of IS supporters towards both acts and images of atrocious violence. However, these images serve to do more than simply shock; they function to position proponents of IS against opponents by drawing intertextually on pre-established concepts. I identify three overarching types of these gory images, each of which serve different communicative functions that contribute to group solidarity: (1) smiling martyrs, (2) demonstrations of punishment and (3) dead children.

The first of these three trends is that of posting images of dead IS soldiers who seem to be smiling. This “smiling martyrs” trend, although grotesque, serves three main functions. The first of these is to communicate to other soldiers that there is not fear, but joy in death. It reminds them of the rewards they have been promised in the afterlife, and reinforces their conviction that sacrificing life in the “dunya” is worthwhile. In other words, it encourages solidarity and reaffirms the social bond among soldiers. The second function that is it shapes how social status is achieved among proponents of IS because it contributes to the general veneration of martyrs. Because it reinforces the value of

sacrifice so strongly, those seeking to gain social status describe themselves using the language of martyrdom and sacrifice. The third function of smiling martyrs is to send a message to enemy armies that soldiers of IS are fearless in order to intimidate opponents.

The second trend tends to come from the official media branch of IS, al-Furqan: photo and video records of public executions and punishments. These are the photographs and videos which have earned the most Western media attention – an indication of the effectiveness of their strategy. These types of images serve three main functions. The first function pertains to how IS seeks to position itself against others; by brazenly advertising these acts of corporal punishment, IS openly rejects Western sensibilities and asserts itself unapologetically as different. The second function is that by making these executions and punishments public, the military expresses its power and stifles dissent from within. The third function is that by using punishments described in the Quran, the military draws legitimacy from religion. Drawing on the well-established authority of Islam gives supporters confidence and strengthens overall support for the leadership of IS.

The third and arguably most disturbing trend in the visual discourse is images of dead children. The trend contributes to group cohesion because these visuals are always accompanied by text attributing the deaths to opponents of IS – whether Assad’s barrel bombs, US drone strikes or the indiscretion of another faction on the ground. In other words, these images create a shared sense of outrage and serve to *position* supporters of IS against their opponents. While the violence depicted in videos and photographs of executions and other corporal punishment is (in the eyes of IS supporters) justified by the Quran, violence against children is more universally abhorrent.

These three types of violent imagery that have a strong presence in the pro-IS discourse thus serve important functions in identity work, particularly in how they *position* the movement against others.

Location

Another feature of Twitter that users personalize to express solidarity is the Location function. Users are allowed to describe, in their own words, their location. This

feature can serve to position users both literally, in terms of physical place, and figuratively, in terms of identity. The place names that people choose to describe a location in fact reveals something about their perception of that place, and in turn their self-perception. Many users in the data describe their location as “Islamic State,” “Dawlatul Islam” or “Khilafah” to indicate that they reside within IS-held territory (See Table 2). It is not the fact that these people claim to reside within IS-held territory that marks them as pro-IS, but rather the language that they use to describe it. Each of these labels carries with it implicit support for IS, even where not accompanied by explicit expressions of allegiance or affiliation.

Table 4.2 Frequency of pro-IS Place Names as User Location

Place name in Location field	Frequency (# of users)	Examples
Islamic State	10	Islamic State Raqa, Islamic State Islamic State[Lover]
Dawla[tul Islamiya]	12	sham, dawlah Building Al-Dawla! Takbir!! Dawlatul Islam
Khilafah	7	Al Raqqah, Syria, Khilafah KHILAFAH home of the lions. khilafah

Other than the labels described above, the biggest trend among supporters of IS is describing one’s location as either “Dar al Islam” or “Dar al Kufr”. This way of conceptualizing place is an adaptation of a place-naming convention in the Islamic tradition. Dar al Islam means “the abode of Islam, or the recognized Muslim world, which is also *dar as-salam*, or the abode of peace” (Lawrence 2006, 201). In contrast Dar al Kufr, a non-traditional term which 22 different users employed to describe their location, means “the abode of infidels”. The aforementioned document “This Is Our Aqeedah” explains that “We believe that when a country or state is engulfed in the glorification of *kufr*, and what dominates in it are the laws based on *kufr* and not the laws of Islam, then these countries and states are *dar al-kufr* (land of disbelief).” Other users incorporate the concept of living among *kuffar* into their Locations in more creative ways, such as “kaafirville/murtadistan,” “Living in Kuffar nightmares” and “some kuff place”. Proponents of IS thus conceptualize space in a binary: a person can either reside within Dar al Islam – which, in the context of

this social movement, means within IS-held territory – or Dar al Kufr, comprising the entire rest of the world. The very statement that a user resides in Dar al Kufr implies a desire to immigrate to Dar al Islam, because these labels inherently *position* Dar al Islam as superior. If a person truly believes they live in “the abode of infidels,” why wouldn’t they want to go to a place where they can live among those who share their beliefs and perhaps lead a more spiritually fulfilling life? I do not suggest that such a desire would necessarily come to fruition, but rather point to the significance of the performance of this desire: by conceptualizing space in this binary, the boundaries of the shared identity become more rigid.

Another commonly occurring Location term is “dunya,” which is an Islamic term referring to “the material world”. By using this term, the 18 users who included it in their Location indicate that they share the requisite Islamic knowledge to be part of the movement, however it is also possible that non-members of the movement use this term simply to indicate their faith in Islam. This Location index is a performance of faith because reflected in the use of this term is its inherent oppositional relationship to “akhira,” the spiritual realm. In Islam, the dunya and all earthly experiences are considered lowly and obsession with it can lead to evil, while akhira and more specifically “Jannah” – “heaven” – are on a higher level, and are to be actively sought by Muslims. This choice of Twitter Location holds a specific implication for soldiers of IS. Much like how Dar al Kufr implies a desire to immigrate to IS-held territory, using the label dunya is a way for soldiers to remind themselves that their current state is not what they are fighting for, but rather its opposite – akhira, which according to IS can be achieved through martyrdom. For non-soldiers the effect does not invoke the value of martyrdom, but it does reaffirm the shared value of faith embodied in this label and thus strengthen affiliation within the community.

Other uses of the location feature reveal how the digital milieu is itself conceived of as a distinct space. One user actually describes their location as “Dar ul Twitter,” interestingly not the same user who named himself “Ibn Katib al Twittari.” Such a choice suggests that the persona, as it appears, can only exist in the online environment. Indeed, the online environment allows users to control access to different parts of their identity, or different personas. For example, one trend is that rather than describing one’s physical location, sometimes users fill in the location field with details of *other* digital spaces where

they can be found. For example, one user filled the field with the text, “kik:shaykh.anwar”. Kik is a Canadian instant messaging platform for mobile phones which is based on usernames rather than telephone numbers. This feature allows users to remain more anonymous, making it appealing for those concerned about being monitored. Another secure mobile messaging application used by the group is Surespot, which is encrypted to protect users’ privacy and also is not linked to an email account or telephone number. As such, pro-IS Twitter users who give these account names on alternate channels likely reserve conversations which reveal their offline identity or other protected information for those platforms. Sometimes users fill their Location field with an account to another social media platform, not for the reason of indicating a more secure channel, but simply to indicate where else on the internet they may be found.

These uses of the Location feature reflects how digital channels of communication are conceived of in spatial terms. Twitter and other social media platforms are social spaces where users can explore different identities. Slater writes that:

To study the Internet as culture means regarding it as a social space in its own right, rather than as a complex object used within other, contextualizing spaces. It means looking at the forms of communication, sociality and identity that are produced within this social space and how they are sustained using the resources available within the online setting (Slater 2002, 533).

The fact that pro-IS users are describing digital sites in spatial terms – such as Ibn Katib al Twittari – supports Slater’s statement. The internet and social media are not simply tools used in social projects, but constitute “a postmodern space of transformation, in which the subject of communication is transformed within the process of communicating” (Slater 2002, 534). These subjectivities which are cultivated online are certainly linked to offline realities, but originated and are sustained in the online setting.

Biography

The last customizable feature of a user’s profile page that I will discuss is the biography. The biography feature is intended to allow users to describe themselves in 160 characters or less. While users can choose to write whatever they want in this text field, most take the opportunity to describe themselves and their beliefs. As such, this feature

is an excellent glimpse into how individuals view themselves and connect to a larger, shared identity. An examination of these user “Bios” reveals how the shared values of truth and sacrifice are used to *position* members of the movement against non-members.

The concept of “truth” or the Arabic version “haqq” occurs in 57 different user Bios. These occurrences demonstrate how the concept of truth has been used as a device to position proponents of IS against their perceived enemies. One user’s Bio reads:

20 y/o student who consulted the primary sources on twitter about the M-E objectively. I ended up supporting the Khilafah after the truth became clear.

This user identifies as a student with an interest in the Middle East, and illustrates a respect for good research practices by alluding to “primary sources” and objectivity. He writes that it is upon this basis of objectivity that “the truth became clear.” The user thus suggests that supporting “the Khilafah” is a logical conclusion, reached through a method of rigorous investigation. Another user Bio reads:

Living among the kuffar currently. Pro-Islam Pro-Khilafah Pro-TRUTH

In this Bio, the user communicates first that she is living among *kuffar*, immediately positioning herself as different from those in her environment by using this identity label. She then lists three things that she supports: Islam, the Caliphate, and “truth”. The structure of listing these values, coupled with the final value, truth, being capitalized, gives the sense of building meaning as the reader continues: the Bio culminates in the ultimate value of TRUTH. This reveals a paradigm in which these values are not only compatible, but mutually constitutive. To her, a “truthful” existence means supporting Islam, and also supporting the Caliphate. A final example crystallizes how perceived “truth” can be a linchpin of identity:

Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?

Phrased as a question, this Bio removes culpability on the part of the pro-IS user who wrote it; it implies that the reader has decided that they must be enemies, and this is merely as a result of the user telling the “truth”. These Bios illustrate how IS supporters value truth, and use it as a device to position themselves above their opponents.

The concept of sacrifice – both in the form of literal martyrdom, as well as other forms of sacrifice – was also represented in users’ Bios. While many pro-IS users write about martyrdom or sacrifice in their Bios, the concept of noble sacrifice is reflected most through a unique convention of the movement. Pro-IS users often include in their biographies the ordinal number that signifies the number of times that user has been suspended. This convention was widely used among members of the movement (See Table 4.3).

Table 4.3 Examples of Twitter User Bios Indicating Ordinal Status of Current Account

#12account . A message to the filthy #kuffars We'll not leave #TheSocialMedia / Abandon DMs
#13 Account surespot : stanza01 kik : hexxertz
17th acc/ #Blockistan
#17acc / Abandon DMs
#26th account
3rd account ~Brothers NO unnecessary DMs~
#7 Spreading Haq Even Disbelievers . Hypocrites. Apostates Dislike It Previous @abuazad6 Kashmir a Lost Heritage Occupied By India Since 27th Oct. 1997
#83 account
#Baqiyah ۞ □ •4thAccount
11Th Acc: Here I Rise Again Resistance Till Exsistance.
2nd account. Baaqiyah!!! I'm lovin it! not a umm yet ^^ ,

In the pro-IS online discourse, suspension from Twitter is framed as a kind of noble sacrifice that proponents of IS endure, and as a general rule, the more suspensions a user has experienced, the higher their social status in the online movement. This pattern in the user Bios shows how suspension is a powerful tool of positioning and framing. The next chapter of this thesis will further explain the meaning of account suspension and how it serves both to position members of the movement against non-members and thus

contributes to the construction of collective identity, as well as how it is used as a framing device in support of social movement solidarity.

Conclusion

Each of the customizable features of Twitter represent an opportunity for users to assert a new set of values and challenge perceived opponents, reaffirm commitment to a common purpose, and express solidarity in a sustained and public way. These are the four characteristics of social movements defined by Tarrow and described in Chapter 2. Pro-IS users index membership in the movement through the use of textual labels – such as Baqiyah – as well as visual symbols – such as the flag of IS, or the emoticon for tahweed. These symbols and labels can then be embedded in the various elements of their profile pages, enabling “fellow [members] to identify the orientation of a [user] and thus to define them as allies” (Doerr et al. 2013, xiii). Additionally, because the online pro-IS movement has developed such specific conventions – such as producing a username according to a nomenclature, choosing a certain kind of profile picture, describing one’s location in relation to IS-held territory, and wearing one’s history of suspension as a badge – each of these practices has become an index of membership. As Tarrow writes, “people identify with movements by words, forms of dress or address, and private behaviour that signify their collective purpose” (2011, 10). Each of the behaviours described in this chapter are ways that people can identify with movements on Twitter. These indexes also serve to position members against non-members, and both draw on and inform repertoires of shared cultural knowledge through processes of intertextuality.

Chapter 5.

Securitization, Suspension and Injustice Framing

This chapter will argue that Twitter’s targeted suspension campaign against pro-IS users is both a reflection and a continuation of the ongoing securitization of cyberspace in general, and social media in particular. Although this policy of targeted mass suspensions has played an important role in limiting the reach of the movement, it has also provided the online pro-IS movement with the materials to perform what Tarrow calls “injustice framing,” a process by which social movements galvanize support for their common purpose (2011, 143). It has also transformed the very act of participating on social media as a supporter of IS into an act of political resistance; in other words, it has enabled a cycle of contention and *sustained interaction* – one of Tarrow’s four empirical properties of social movements described in Chapter 2.

The chapter begins with a definition of securitization, and proceeds to argue that in response to the increasing securitization of cyberspace, private social media companies like Twitter have created specific policies in order to mitigate the perceived threats presented by social media, namely homegrown terrorism and radicalization. The chapter proceeds by providing an analysis of targeted mass suspensions have influenced the pro-IS discourse on Twitter, paying particular attention to narratives surrounding “freedom of speech” that positions the movement against the constructed opponent – Western cultural codes as embodied by key actors. The following two sections demonstrate that injustice framing is flexible in that it allows for members of the movement to avoid or embrace suspension, without compromising their membership and their perceived commitment to the movement. The final section describes the use of the practice of “shoutouts” in order to overcome – indeed, in order to collectively challenge – the policy of suspension levied against the movement.

Securitization Theory

Securitization theory posits that security threats are not objective and universal, but rather subjectively constructed by powerful actors. In order to effectively construct a threat – or *securitize* an issue – an actor must persuade an audience of two things: firstly, that a threat exists, and secondly that particular and often extraordinary measures are required to counteract that threat. This act of persuasion is often referred to as a “speech act”. Balzacq defines securitization as:

an articulated assemblage of practices whereby heuristic artefacts (metaphors, policy tools, image repertoires, analogies, stereotypes, emotions, etc.) are contextually mobilized by a securitizing actor, who works to prompt an audience to build a coherent network of implications (feelings, sensations thoughts, and intuitions), about the critical vulnerability of a referent object, that concurs with the securitizing actor’s reasons for choices and actions, by investing the referent subject with such an aura of unprecedented threatening complexion that a customized policy must be undertaken immediately to block its development. (2011, 3).

The actors who have framed social media as a threat to national and individual security are numerous, but the process began with the securitization of cyberspace undertaken by states to protect their national infrastructures such as financial institutions. Hjarlmarsson (2013) argues that the United States government has securitized cyberspace through a number of speech acts. One such speech act is President Obama’s press release of 2009 which states:

Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups have spoken of their desire to unleash a cyber attack on our country -- attacks that are harder to detect and harder to defend against. Indeed, in today's world, acts of terror could come not only from a few extremists in suicide vests but from a few key strokes on the computer -- a weapon of mass disruption... it's now clear this cyber threat is one of the most serious economic and national security challenges we face as a nation. (The White House 2009)

This speech act declares cyberspace to be a security threat in terms of terrorism. The EU, US, and Canada have all constructed IS as a threat to their respective national security interests, not just because the actions of the militant group threaten their interests in the region of the Middle East, but also because the online activities perpetrated by the group threaten the “heart of the state” as Buzan describes it:

Tracing the essence of the state to the social level gives us a major clue about how to approach the idea of national security. If the heart of the state resides in the idea of it held in the minds of the population, then that idea itself becomes a major object of national security. (Buzan 1983, 39).

In other words, it is in part because IS's online activity is dedicated to undermining the authority and credibility not just of Western states, but of statehood itself (as described in the Chapter 4 discussion of IS versus nationalism) that it is constructed as a threat. In recent years, mass media have contributed to the deepening securitization of cyberspace by shifting the attention from potential threats to infrastructure, to social and ideological threats which can occur on social media. This kind of threat posed by social media is framed as radicalization and home-grown terrorism (Thompson 2011). It is true that IS actively engages in recruitment activities on social media, but the way that mass media have engaged with and continue to reproduce these narratives reaffirms the threat of social media to the security of individuals, families and the state. The continued reproduction of these stories dangerously incites fear among consumers of mass media based on the notion that it remains unknown to the public precisely who is at risk of radicalization by exposure to social media.

Private enterprises that own SNS are increasingly pressured to respond to these perceived threats with their own policies to promote corporate social responsibility and reduce the impression that they are somehow complicit in these threatening activities. One Forbes article boldly states that "American companies like Twitter, Facebook, Google, Apple, Microsoft and Yahoo and other popular services, including YouTube, WhatsApp, Skype, Tumblr and Instagram are facilitating global jihad" (Carmin & Stalinsky 2015). These companies are thus pressured to respond to these statements with policies specifically designed to minimize the use of their products by terrorists. Twitter has developed a specific clause under their "Abusive Behaviour Policy," which states that "users may not make threats of violence or promote violence, including threatening or promoting terrorism".⁶ This policy thus provides grounds for account suspension if a user is seen to be promoting a terrorist group. Thus, because IS has been declared a terrorist group by authoritative actors, any Twitter user who expresses sympathy or solidarity for IS or even who appears to be affiliated with the group has been subject to suspension

⁶ <https://support.twitter.com/articles/20169997>

under this newer provision. Indeed, starting in September of 2014 Twitter began suspending large numbers of pro-IS accounts (Berger & Morgan 2015, 3). The approach of this suspension campaign differs to the standard approach of Twitter suspensions, which penalizes individually abusive behaviours. Although it is true that many pro-IS accounts do engage in abusive behaviours which violate the standard policy, the campaign mass suspensions specifically targeting pro-IS accounts was more preventative in nature. In addition to Twitter's administrative actions, cyber activists who oppose the Islamic State have actively sought out pro-IS Twitter accounts to report them for suspension.

Berger and Morgan (2015) acknowledge the importance of these suspensions, stating that "neutering ISIS's ability to use Twitter to broadcast its message outside of its core audience has numerous potential benefits in reducing the organization's ability to manipulate public opinion and attract new recruits" and indeed their data suggests that these suspensions have limited the network's ability to grow and spread (56). However, they also raise three concerns over the policy of preventative mass suspensions of pro-IS accounts (53). The first concern is whether or not it is ethical to suppress political speech regardless of how "repugnant" it may be. The second concern is that mass suspensions may actually destroy valuable sources of intelligence - in other words, does the value of the knowledge we can glean from studying these tweets outweigh the social harm that allowing them may cause? The third and final concern is whether or not these suspensions actually achieve the desired effect, which is undermining the integrity and reach of the pro-IS movement. Berger and Morgan conclude that the suspensions campaign has achieved its primary goal of limiting the pro-IS network's ability to grow and spread, and do not recommend eradication of the pro-IS network on Twitter because they advocate for its value as a source of intelligence (56). They do not address their first concern, but this study finds this concern of whether this policy of mass targeted suspensions is ethical serves as the basis of a process Tarrow calls "injustice framing" (Tarrow 2011, 145). The campaign may have reduced the reach of pro-IS discourse, but it certainly has not weakened the solidarity among pro-IS users; these suspensions have instead bolstered the community's sense of solidarity and self-perception as an oppressed group.

This policy of mass targeted suspensions has influenced the discourse produced by the group and their online behaviour in very particular ways. One result of this expanded suspension policy is that it has politicized the act of creating new accounts and maintaining the network of affiliation among pro-IS users. In other words, it has transformed the act of maintaining the pro-IS network into a contentious collective action in itself and has enabled an ongoing cycle of contention. Thus, this policy has allowed an online social movement to emerge. This securitization of Twitter affects users on two levels.

The first and more far-reaching effect of securitization is that a user's online behaviour may affect their experience in the physical world if their online behaviour draws the attention and concern of the national intelligence agency in the country where they reside. For the average Twitter user, there is little reason other than personal preference not to use one's real name as a username, to post an authentic portrait as a profile picture, and to provide details about one's unique identity in the "Bio" text field. While the potential anonymity afforded by internet affiliation is exploited by most users of social media, it is more often used to enhance one's image by highlighting certain aspects of one's identity, and de-emphasizing others to create a sort of "compromise between self-revelation and conformity to what [one] feels is expected" (Greenhow & Robelia 2009, 131). In contrast, for Twitter users who support the Islamic State – whether living in North America, Europe, or elsewhere – it is important that one's online identity cannot be traced to one's identity in the physical world in order to avoid being monitored or possibly detained by national security agencies. Similarly, for pro-IS Twitter users residing within IS-held territory, it is imperative not to provide detailed information about their location, for the purpose of protecting military information. In essence, community members are advised to express less individuality inasmuch as it can be linked to their offline personhood (See Figure 4.19). The second level of securitization pertains to how a user's online behaviour can affect their online experience – if they are perceived to be part of the pro-IS community, their account can be suspended. The fact that Twitter monitors user content for violations of its policies and encourage users to report violations as well means that the online experiences of users is being controlled and restricted in particular ways.



Figure 5.1 Snapshot of a tweet with “Rules of Media Concealment” for Pro-IS users

One result of this securitization is that more so than the average Twitter user, pro-IS community members are far more likely to draw intertextually on a shared body of cultural knowledge in order to describe their personal identity, in profile pictures, usernames, biographies, and even textually in tweets. While pragmatically based in security concerns, this set of adapted behaviour has the effect of strengthening an individual user's solidarity with the group. Each time a member performs these behaviours, his or her connection to the group is strengthened, his or her solidarity is *performed*. To be sure, many millions of users create accounts with creative nick-names rather than using the name that institutions in their country would recognize. However for supporters of IS, their bond of solidarity with the online social movement is reaffirmed when their online identities are constructed by drawing on a shared repertoire of knowledge.

Another result of this securitization is a renewed effort on the part of pro-IS Twitter users in maintaining their network of affiliation. Twitter enables proponents of IS to maintain a network of affiliation through its “Follow” mechanism. This mechanism reinforces group solidarity by its very nature, but it also enables the dissemination of messages of support and affection which foster solidarity. It is worthy of note that for a

discourse so imbued with violence towards outsiders, the words “love” and “support” (and their stemmed variations) occur 1582 and 5605 times in the corpus of tweets, respectively. The affection, support and sense of belonging provided by the pro-IS community is one of the reasons users cite to explain their support, such as umm_Asiyah7 who tweeted:

No racism we all love each other for the sake of Allah while we don't even know each other 🙏#whywelovekhilafah

Sharing these types of messages and dutifully maintaining affiliative relationships on Twitter strengthen the movement’s internally perceived cohesion and performs the “emotion work” necessary for movement solidarity (Tarrow 2011, 143). In other words, users share these kinds of messages because they *feel good*, and reaffirm a sense of social solidarity within the movement.

I argue that the very act of maintaining the network of affiliation, participating in this cycle of suspension and new account creation, constitutes a form of contentious collective action. As Tarrow writes:

“The irreducible act that lies at the base of all social movements, protests, rebellions, riots, strike waves, and revolutions is *contentious collective action*. Collective action can take many forms – brief or sustained, institutionalized or disruptive, humdrum or dramatic... collective action becomes contentious when it is used by people who lack regular access to representative institutions, who act in the name of new or unaccepted claims, and who behave in ways that fundamentally challenge others or authorities” (Tarrow 2011, 7).

IS supporters place themselves in a perpetual opposition to the “West” in general, their own governments, non-Muslims, and anyone who does not support IS. Because the grievance of IS supporters is generalized and transnational in nature, there is no accessible political institution through which they may formally participate. Instead, Twitter becomes a public channel through which the movement acts collectively against the perceived “Other”.

Positioning Through Suspension

These targeted suspensions also feed into a larger narrative about the perceived “Other”, the “West”, as deeply hypocritical, specifically with regards to the notion of freedom of speech. In January of this year, two gunmen opened fire in the office of French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo in response to cartoons of the prophet Muhammad. It is widely held in the Islamic faith that visual representations, and especially satirical representations of the prophet are forbidden. While these two assailants claimed affiliation with Al Qaeda in Yemen and not IS, their actions reignited a debate about free speech, and an outpouring of solidarity with the victims of the attack turned into a symbolic stand in the name of free speech. This event seemed to have inspired both the organization of a “Draw the Prophet Muhammed” cartoon contest in Garland, Texas five months later, and the violent response by two young American men who claimed affiliation with IS. Unfortunately, these events are framed as a symbolic struggle between “Western” cultural codes (such as freedom of speech) and perceived “Islamic” values, a narrative which has dangerous polarizing effects.

For members of the online pro-IS movement, these events provide fodder for the narrative of the hypocritical, untruthful “Other”; if the “West” truly believed in universal freedom of speech, “we” as a community would not be specifically targeted for suspension on Twitter. Account suspension thus carries significant meaning for the group and its identity: it reaffirms the group’s sense of shared oppression, an important contributing factor to the rise of a social movement as posited by collective behaviour theorists. This re-frames the way that the group perceives their online activity, as well. If their perceived oppressors suspend them in an attempt to stifle their online presence, then creating new accounts, maintaining their network of affiliation and proliferating more of their own discourse online becomes a new form of political resistance. Social movement theorists call this “injustice framing.” As Tarrow writes, “inscribing grievances in frames that identify an injustice, attribute the responsibility for it to others, and proposing solutions to it is a central activity of social movements” (Tarrow 2011, 145).

This perception of the hypocritical “Other” in the discussion on freedom of speech is reflected throughout the data. This narrative, centred on the notion of free speech,

enables pro-IS users to choose between two acceptable attitudes toward suspension without compromising their membership in the movement. In other words, depending on how this narrative is adapted – or framed – pro-IS users may avoid or embrace suspension with equal legitimacy in the eyes of their compatriots. In other words, a user can still effectively *position* themselves within the movement whether they avoid or embrace suspension. Regardless of a user’s choice of frame, the pro-IS Twitter community accepts the risk suspension as a part of their online reality.

Avoiding Suspension

For those who take measures to avoid suspension on Twitter, such as outwardly denouncing affiliation to IS, the flexibility of injustice framing allows users to frame themselves as victims. For example, one user of the name “BaqiyaWitness,” tweeted the following message:

Freedom of Speech is Indeed a Lie... Previous account suspended even though I have not tweeted for weeks together... <http://t.co/dNoruMSINP>

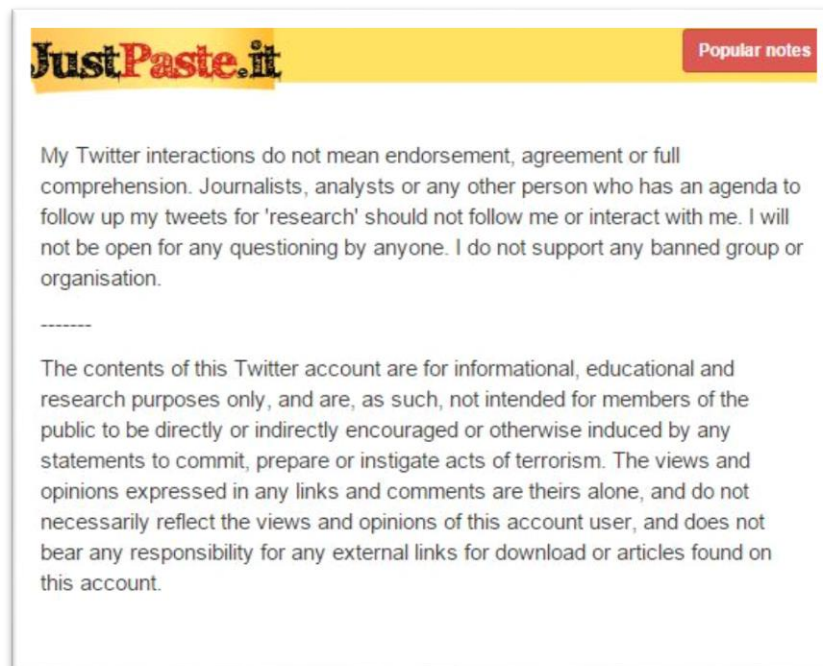
The user’s name itself is a clear index of membership in the online pro-IS movement because it invokes pro-IS solidarity with the word “Baqiya”. The second part of the username, “Witness”, also indexes the user as an observer of something important, and invokes a connotation of objectivity and a value of truth. The user ascribes dishonesty as a trait to those who claim to protect freedom of speech, positioning him or herself as a victim and a witness to that dishonesty – the user suggests that they did not deserve that suspension with the qualifying clause “even though I have not tweeted for weeks together”. Of course, the user fails to here consider whether it was the quality of their tweets that earned their suspension. The intertextual hyperlink embedded in the tweet simply leads to a suspended account page as evidence of the previous account’s suspension. In this tweet, the user engages values in order to position himself – a victim, who values honesty – against the administrators of Twitter, who claim to value freedom of speech but are alleged liars.

Although many members of the community initially embrace suspension, even openly provoking Twitter administrators with an air of bravado, many later change their

online behaviours to avoid suspension. In this way, account suspension seems to represent a rite of passage. Most commonly, tactics for avoiding suspension involve a disclaimer in the user's biography, stating that the user is not affiliated with any group, and that their retweets do not represent endorsement of the content being retweeted. One user, "baltimore_op_is" states in their biography:

This is my Nr 5. DOESN'T THE FREEDOM OF SPEECH APPLY FOR MUSLIMS? Not affiliated to any group. Disclaimer: <https://t.co/5Oft8KCJ1o>

The user indicates that the account to which this biography pertains is their fifth, meaning they have been suspended four times. The user then expresses their frustration with the perceived hypocrisy in protecting universal free speech by asking the reader a question, phrased in such a way that that it is difficult to disagree. The question is emphasized with capitalization. The user then proceeds to disclaim any affiliation with a group, even providing a link to a lengthier body of text hosted on JustPaste.it:



For research purposes, this disclaimer may at first appear to be sufficient grounds for exclusion in the study. However, by analyzing the user's tweets (which included links to IS propaganda), attitudes and their highly connected position in the network of pro-IS

users, it became clear that this user, like many other pro-IS users, was simply seeking to avoid further suspension.

By framing suspension as an offence perpetrated against innocent victims, users attempting to avoid suspension are able to do so without losing social standing. In the example below, @iKhanHaripur2 uses humour and the metaphor of suspension as a massacre to justify the celebration of avoiding suspension (See Figure 4.22).



Figure 5.2 Snapshot of tweet showing humour to respond to suspension

In the above tweet, the three photographs of the polar bear stitched together make it look as though the polar bear was dancing at the time the photos were taken. The textual part of the tweet accompanying the photos says “whoever survived the suspension massacre yesterday,” suggesting that those who were not suspended – or perhaps those who were suspended but have already created new accounts – would be dancing in a celebration. Here suspension is framed as a “massacre,” a word imbued with a sense of barbarity and injustice. By framing it in this way, users permit themselves and each other to celebrate escaping suspension – they position themselves as victims of a violent act of injustice.

Pro-IS users who play an important role in the official Islamic State militant organization – such as recruiters and those who facilitate immigration to IS-held territory – must remain accessible to their potential recruits, yet must avoid behaviours that can earn them suspension. Thus, recruiters for IS would most likely not outwardly state their

position on their Twitter profiles, but rather would reveal it only through other channels of direct messaging. Because the data for this study comprises only publicly available tweets and no interaction with members of the movement took place, I could not reasonable verify which nor how many pro-IS users in the data acted as recruiters. However, I was able to identify one such user, “@Abdul_Aliy_4” (See Figure 4.23). Rather than through my usual method of data collection, I found this user’s Twitter profile in an e-book that another user had provided a link to in a tweet. The e-book, a simple document called “Hijra to the Islamic State,” includes an in-depth four part chapter providing detailed advice for those considering immigration to Islamic State authored by this Twitter user.

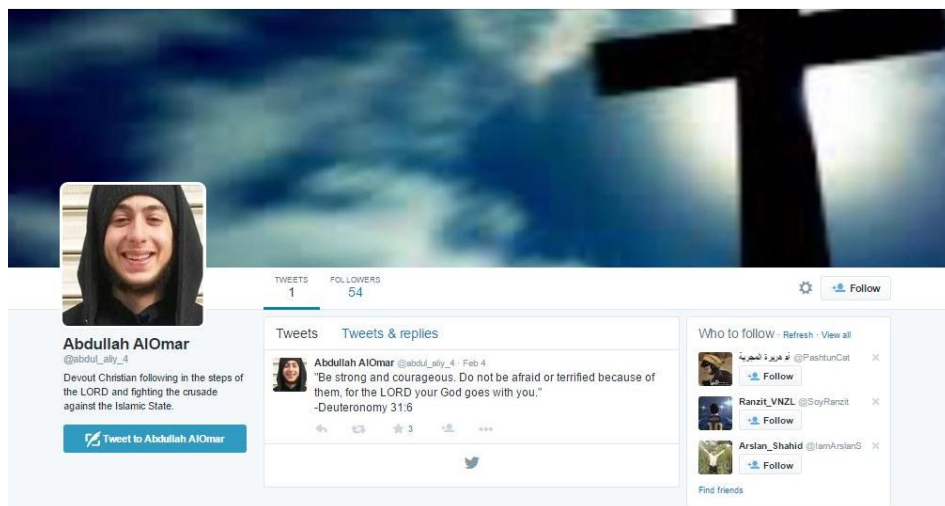


Figure 5.3 Twitter profile of the author of “Indepth: Hijrah Advice Section” of e-book “Hijrah to the Islamic State”

Because of this user’s important role as a point of access for potential recruits, he constructed a Twitter identity that is in direct opposition to the group he is actually faithful to in order to avoid suspension. In his biography, he describes himself as a “Devout Christian following in the steps of the LORD and fighting the crusade against the Islamic State.” The e-book reassures its readers that “if brother Abdul_Aliy_4’s account is suspended on Twitter, he will make a later one called Abdul_Aliy_5, Abdul_Aliy_6, Abdul_Aliy_7 etc. so you can find him again easily.” However, it appears that the alias has provided sufficient cover to avoid suspension as the account is still live at the time of this writing, appearing with the same sole tweet of a biblical quotation and the same images displayed as profile picture and background image. For figures such as Abdul_Aliy_4,

avoiding suspension is functionally necessary and therefore tactics such as disavowal of faith and affiliation are accepted.

Embracing Suspension

While many pro-IS users showed signs of avoiding suspensions, another widespread attitude among supporters of IS on Twitter is that suspension is a noble sacrifice that should be embraced. From this perspective, the moral superiority and group cohesion of the pro-IS community is re-affirmed through their own suspension. For this reason, many members of the online pro-IS movement intentionally draw attention to themselves and invite suspension, seeing it as an affirmation of their place in the community, even a rite of passage. One user, “BosnianWitness2” retweeted one of their own tweets, saying:

RT @BosnianWitness2: For the first time I have been banned on twitter. I have now my baqiya reputation. Please share my account!

The user explicitly states that being “banned on twitter,” or suspended, endows a user with a “baqiya reputation”. In other words, through suspension, this user will now be recognized by other members of the pro-IS Twitter community as part of their “Baqiyah Family”.

Another one of the more striking examples of users framing suspension from Twitter as a kind of noble sacrifice was provided by the user with the name “baaqiyah acct” (See Figure 4.20).



Figure 5.4 A snapshot of the profile summary for @archer_v1 showing martyrdom as a metaphor for suspension

This user’s biography, which states “My prev account got e-martyr,” links the notion of Twitter suspension to the concept of martyrdom through metaphor. Literal martyrdom, the practice of willingly sacrificing one’s life for a perceived religious cause, is a core tenet of being a soldier of the Islamic State. By using this metaphor, this user indicates – albeit in a light-hearted and humorous tone – that the sacrifice involved in participating in the online movement is also meaningful. This user may not be a true martyr, but at least he can experience “electronic-martyrdom” by sacrificing his multiple accounts. To be clear, in no way do I mean to suggest here that the group considers Twitter suspension as significant a sacrifice of giving one’s life. Rather, I argue simply that there is something in common between the two – the notion of sacrifice – that make this joke possible.

The above example is not the sole use of humour to elicit a sense of solidarity and common purpose. Many pro-IS users respond to suspension with humour, contributing to an air of bravado and demonstrating that suspension does not break their spirit, but instead emboldens them. This use of humour is often bound up with the extended metaphor of suspension from Twitter and persistent creation of new accounts as a battle (See Figure 4.21).



Figure 5.5 Snapshot of tweet with embedded image using humour to belittle suspension

The image macro above creates a simile comparing pro-IS users returning from Twitter suspension to heavily armed soldiers marching into battle with confidence. The text of the tweet that accompanies the image is a rallying cry, emphasized in capital letters. The text labels the opponents as “kaffers” (infidels) and frames them as cowardly for “hiding in their holes”, and finishes with a rallying cry “LETS CHAISE THEM TO THE FIRE!!” [sic]. The text and image thus work together to create a clear sense of positionality between the “kaffers” and the followers of @20Baqiya: cowards hiding in holes versus proud, determined soldiers. By framing the relationship this way, the message creates the effect of increased confidence and determination within the pro-IS movement.

This air of bravado is pervasive in the discourse produced by the group. Another tweet by the user “dawla107” shows how some members seem to invite further suspensions:

Allahu Akber I got suspended twice today ohh #kuffars I will not leave
#TheSocialMedia
#DieinyourRage <http://t.co/xyTAXcvlGU>

The user indexes him or herself as a faithful Muslim by beginning the tweet with a declaration: “God is great”. The user then reports having been suspended twice on the day of the tweet, but sends a clear message that this will not deter further activity.

Emulating a formal register to add authority to the statement, the user shifts the intended audience of the tweet by addressing those who suspended him with the words “ohh #kuffars” (we will return to the meaning of hashtags shortly, but for now we will focus on the meaning of the words themselves). The word *kuffar* is the plural form of the Arabic word for “infidel,” “apostate” or “non-believer,” but is here treated as a loan word to the English language with the addition of the suffix “s” to indicate plural status. The word used to describe those being addressed contrasts sharply with the user’s own performance of identity as a faithful Muslim. By choosing this particular word the user positions those who suspended the account as beneath him or herself, and qualifies it in terms of faith. The user then declares “I will not leave #TheSocialMedia.” The tweet serves to demonstrate that regardless of the number of suspensions this user will experience, he or she will not give up their presence on social media. The tweet concludes with a third hashtag – “#DieinyourRage” – that functions as an exclamatory oath addressed to those same “#kuffars”. This statement, another very frequently occurring phrase in the data, is intentionally provocative and to meant incite an emotional and possibly behavioural response; to express a hope that someone “die in rage” on the basis of being non-religious violates Twitter’s Abusive Behaviour policy, which prohibits users who “make threats or promote violence against a person or group on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, age, or disability.”⁷

By using this phrase, at least when explicitly addressing *kuffar*, pro-IS users risk suspension – a user seeking to avoid suspension would not use such a provocative statement. The tweet thus embodies an air of defiance and bravado common in the pro-IS Twitter community.

In summary, some users embrace suspension as a form of performed sacrifice, while others avoid it and save face by re-framing it as an attack against innocents. Regardless of how an individual in the movement chooses to frame suspension, on the surface it remains an important part of the discourse and its mass suspensions against pro-IS Twitter accounts persist. Although framed as an act of oppression, suspension

⁷ <https://support.twitter.com/articles/20169997>

strengthens group cohesion, and gives proponents of IS renewed purpose: overcoming suspension as an act of political resistance.

Shoutouts

Whether pro-IS Twitter users embrace suspension or try to avoid it, as a community one of their primary goals is to maintain their network of affiliation which is so frequently interrupted by suspensions. This is achieved through the practice of performing shoutouts, as described in the beginning of chapter 4. When a user creates a new account or seeks to become affiliated with the pro-IS community, they will request a shoutout. These requests are explicit, such as this one:

Suspended.
Pls give me a shoutout ya ikhwaan.
Jzk khair -) <http://t.co/xOhGGn3R7W>

It only requires that one other member of the community see the request, whether it is an official shoutout account administered by a user that Tarrow would describe as a “movement organizer” or whether it is any average member of the online movement. The request is met when a user who views that request retweets it. The tweet below is an example of a shoutout, posted by “_2SimplyGhuraba”:

Baqiyah Family
A Big Shoutout for Ukhti Fillah
@UmmHussain_IS
@UmmHussain_IS
@UmmHussain_IS
Welcome back Ukhti ♥♥♥

Addressing her followers as “Baqiyah Family,” the user gives an explicit “shoutout” to “Ukhti Fillah”. She indicates that this user, whose handle is @UmmHussain_IS, should be welcomed by the community, reinforcing the sense of affiliation by referring to her as “Ukhti,” which is Arabic for “my sister”. She concludes the tweet with an affectionate “Welcome back Ukhti,” warmly emphasized with three emoticons of hearts. Such a shoutout is likely to be retweeted by those who view it in order to disseminate the username of this member.

If a user observes another user's tweet and wishes to share that tweet with their own followers, she can achieve this with a simple click of the "retweet" button. Retweeting enters the original message – and its author – into the news feeds of every user who follows the retweeter. Each of those recipients is then impelled to retweet the message, and the chain of dissemination branches ever outward. Retweeting thus facilitates the rapid dissemination and reproduction of messages, making it a common response to these shoutout requests. As Zappavigna writes, "the emergent convention [of retweeting] allows the retweeter to display a stance toward the retweeted text and project it as inherently valuable to the community" (2012, 36). Naturally, the more followers a user has, the greater reach their tweets have. However, pro-IS accounts with the most followers are also the most likely to be identified quickly by Twitter administration for suspension. This is why there is such a fast turnover of designated shoutout accounts, and it is also why every member of the movement participates in shoutouts. It is much easier to break a network if the group's affiliation depends upon a few linchpin nodes rather than if every node is interconnected. Thus the practice of participating in "baqiya" shoutouts functions to firmly *position* a user within that network and bridge the affiliative gaps created by those who oppose IS.

Conclusion

In response to the campaign of mass targeted suspensions, proponents of IS perceive this duty of performing shoutouts and maintaining the network of affiliation as an act of political resistance – indeed, a contentious collective action – against their perceived oppressors. The act of shouting-out thus reaffirms an individual's commitment to the group and sense of social solidarity, and also constitutes a challenge against the administration of Twitter and the Western cultural codes that the movement opposes.

Chapter 6.

Intertextuality

Chapters 4 and 5 have illustrated that the three mechanisms of identity construction operationalized by this study – indexicality, positioning and intertextuality – work together in complex ways through language and images in the creation of collective identity. This holds true both in more traditional forms of human communication and in new digitized forms of communication. However, scholars continue to debate whether new communications technologies have changed the way that human communicate. Increasingly, communications and discourse scholars are examining whether and how digital communications can cultivate social solidarity. As Trester writes:

Linguists have long used the concept of intertextuality to make sense of relationships among texts and, more recently, to understand the web of social texts created online. For example, Baym (2006) draws from a two-year ethnographic study of an online discussion group centered around soap operas to demonstrate that the ‘solidarity of computer-mediated groups can be enhanced through references to common knowledge’ in the form of well-known cultural texts and to ‘the group’s previous discourse’ (2006, under ‘Humor and the Establishment of Group Solidarity and Identity in CMC’) (Trester in Tannen & Trester 2013, 137).

This chapter is dedicated to examining intertextual features of social media which are unique to the online experience, and how they contribute to collective identity construction. I contend that there are new forms of intertextuality that are specific to the online milieu, namely hashtags and hyperlinks. These functions facilitate the creation of new relationships between “texts” which fosters collective identity and movement solidarity.

Hashtags

One of the most fascinating elements of discourse on social media is the hashtag. In literal terms, a hashtag is a sequence of letters – sometimes including numbers – in a posting with a number symbol affixed as a prefix. Users can search for these tags, and social media platforms will provide a consolidated list of all posts containing the hashtag

of interest. Hashtags “set up an attributive relationship between the tweet as a tagged token and the label as its type” (Zappavigna 2012, 84). An important characteristic of hashtags is that they are user-generated; any user can create a hashtag, but doing so does not necessarily ensure that other users will also use that hashtag. Their use, however, “presupposes a virtual community of interested listeners who may or may not align with the values expressed together with the tag” (Zappavigna 2012, 85). Thus, it is through social processes of users – rather than top-down decisions by the site administrators – that a hashtag gains currency. Hashtags are intertextual because when a user tags a word in their tweet – or on their Facebook post, or Instagram photo caption, or on any social media site – they enter their posting into the conversation about that tagged theme, linking their tweet to a pre-existing discourse. Each new tagged post contributes to the shaping of that discourse.

Because of the threat of suspension described in Chapter 5, pro-IS Twitter users warn each other against certain behaviours, and this advice extends to one’s use of hashtags. For example, one user warns:

Expect suspension when participating in mass hashtags. Regularly
change @@@ Stay safe. #Baqiyah

Because of their very nature, hashtags create a consolidated list of users with a shared interest. If that interest is explicitly pro-IS, it makes it easier for Twitter’s administrators to identify and suspend pro-IS accounts that violate their terms of use. The user also advises their audience here to change their handle or username, which on Twitter is preceded by the @ symbol. Interestingly, despite the user’s warning against participating in mass hashtags, the user addresses this tweet to the audience that follows the hashtag #Baqiyah. This reflects the tenuous relationship the group has with hashtags: they are useful tools to create affiliation, yet if they become *too* representative of the community, they will likely be impeded by site administrators or even just other Twitter users who are opposed to IS.

Zappavigna posits two main functions of hashtagging: (1) the creation of what she terms “ambient affiliation,” and (2) personal reflective processes related to the formation of online identities (Zappavigna 2012, 87). In support of Zappavigna’s assessment, I

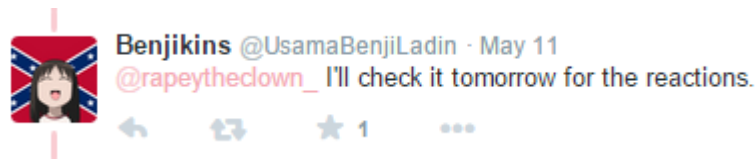
contend that in the case of the online pro-IS movement hashtags constitute a virtual space where in-group and out-group identity boundaries are contested. In particular, the hashtags #ISIS, #IS, #IslamicState, and #Baqiya (and variations) represent digital places where users negotiate, assert, and refute meanings.

After identifying the term “Baqiya” as an important index of membership in the pro-IS movement, I searched for the term as a hashtag and sampled some tweets from that feed. I was surprised to find that this feed included not only staunchly pro-IS material, but also some images and messages that, at first, seemed to be unrelated. Upon closer inspection, I realized that these were actually efforts on the part of anti-IS Twitter users to offend and provoke those who originally conceived the hashtag (See Figure 4.24).

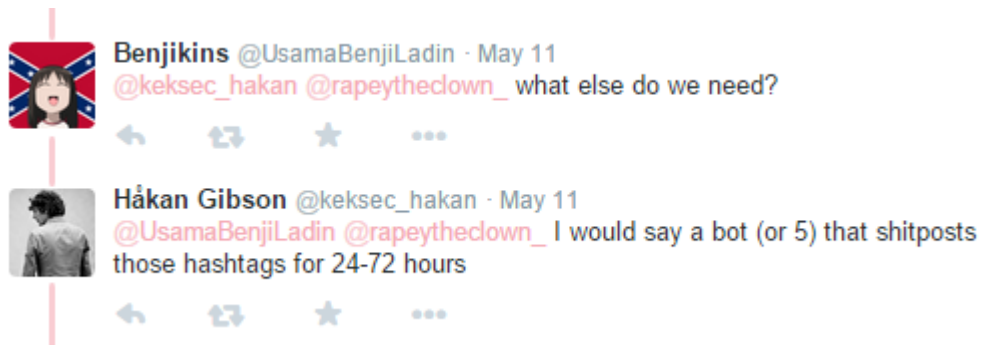


Figure 6.1 Screen capture of a tweet meant to provoke pro-IS users

The tweet depicted in Figure 8 at first may not make sense. The “we” implicit in the possessive pronoun “our” apparently refers to Americans, a meaning we can draw by the use of the embedded image of the American flag. It is thus intertextual in that the actual text can only be understood because it is linked to the embedded image. The user seems to be boastfully implying that the United States has completed some sort of goal, and intertextually links his message with the hashtags #IslamicState, #IS, #ISIS and #baqiya. The comments on the tweet clarify the intended meaning:



Here, the user who posted the tweet explains that he intends to check back on the tweet the following day to see if it has provoked any reactions. Several comments from other users follow.



Several comments down in the conversation, the same user addresses others who had commented and asks “what else do we need?” The user @keksec_hakan replies with a revealing suggestion. A “bot” is a program that is designed to perform a specific function – such as posting tweets – automatically. This user suggests a bot that is programmed to automatically post tweets that are offensive with the designated hashtags. Given that IS is strongly opposed to the United States both culturally and politically, it becomes clear that the intention of the tweet was to provoke and offend those who created the hashtag #baqiya.

Another example of an anti-IS Twitter user engaging with seemingly pro-IS hashtags is provided by @SeriousSlav (See Figures 4.25). This tweet is intertextual on three levels. Firstly, it contains four hashtags - #IslamicState, #IS, #ISIS and #baqiya – which intertextually links it to those four discourses. Secondly, the text in the tweet, “This is our hashtag now”, is connected to the image; the text describes the function *performed* by the image, which is to claim semiotic power over the hashtag #baqiya. We know that the user is referring to #baqiya specifically because it is the only hashtag that has been bolded. Lastly, the tweet is intertextual in that the image itself draws upon popular culture surrounding the meaning of what it is to be American. The flag, the hamburger and

the gun named “Freedom” are clearly representative of the United States. Even the motif of a scantily clad girl – wearing an American flag bikini – eating a hamburger intertextually refers to a trope in advertising started by the American fast food chain Carls Jr. The artist of the image is not specified.



Figure 6.2 Snapshot of the tweet and full size version of the image embedded

While the above example shows how users struggle for semiotic authority over one hashtag, sometimes meaning is contested by creating oppositional hashtags. For example, some who oppose IS seek to undermine its legitimacy by refusing to call it by its own name, instead referring to it as “Daesh”. This label is actually a transliteration of an Arabic acronym, derived from essentially the same words used to make the acronym ISIS in English – ‘al-dawla al-islamyya fii-il-l’raq wa-ash shaam’ (Guthrie 2015). This word thus represents:

a challenge to their legitimacy: a dismissal of their aspirations to define Islamic practice, to be ‘a state for all Muslims’ and – crucially – as a refusal to acknowledge and address them as such. They want to be addressed as exactly what they claim to be, by people so in awe of them that they use the pompous, long and delusional name created by the group, not some funny-sounding made-up word. And here is the very simple key point that has been overlooked in all the anglophone press coverage I’ve seen: in Arabic, acronyms are not anything like as widely used as they are in English, and so arabophones are not as used to hearing them as anglophones are. Thus, the creation and use of a title that stands out as a nonsense neologism for an organisation like this one is inherently funny, disrespectful, and ultimately threatening of the organisation’s status. (Guthrie 2015)

The label “Daesh” has become one of several popular hashtags used by Twitter users who oppose IS. Another popular hashtag which functions in much the same way is #NotInMyName, used by Muslims to reject the notion that IS acts in the name of Islam or on behalf of Muslims. These hashtags were often paired with explicitly pro-IS hashtags like #baqiyah in order to bring these challenges to the attention of IS supporters.

The oppositional relationship between such hashtags is so widely recognized that some users have even represented this tension visually. The image macro posted by user “DIE. In. Ur. Rage” depicts the relationship between two hashtags, each of which represent opposing attitudes towards IS (See Figure 4.26).



Figure 6.3 Pro-IS version of “Batman Slapping Robin” Internet Meme

The characters depicted are Batman and Robin of DC Comics, but the above image is actually a version of a widespread internet meme referred to as “Batman Slapping Robin,” or alternatively, “My Parents Are Dead,” after the earliest known parody of the comic book excerpt.⁸ Internet memes are cultural products that are shared, become massively popular, and are “remixed” by users and deployed for social bonding (Zappavigna 2012,

⁸ <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/my-parents-are-dead-batman-slapping-robin>

101). The above meme falls under the category of image macro – the image remains the same, and users change to text to create new meanings, often humorous (Ibid). Image macros lend themselves to the purposes of social movement solidarity because they enable actors to present their political ideas in familiar packages. Doerr, Mattoni and Teune write that:

Protesters who articulate their goals without using imagery that is familiar, expected and compatible with the mainstream experience are likely to be marginalized. Attaining visibility through counter-hegemonic images that recall, but at the same time subvert, hegemonic discourses is a major challenge for social movement actors and, in particular, for discriminated groups who have different experiences to the majority (Doerr, Mattoni and Teune 2013, xvi)

Image macros enable proponents of social movements to express their solidarity in a way that may be more appealing because it is “familiar, expected and compatible with the mainstream experience.” They draw on popular culture, yet the meaning of the image macro is dependent upon the textual innovation unique to each new manifestation of that meme.

In this version of “Batman Slapping Robin, a pro-IS Twitter user has adapted the meme to express the oppositional relationship between those who support IS and those who oppose it. Robin is depicted as saying “Not in my na[me],” which is a slogan and a hashtag used by Muslims who reject IS and its claim to authority based in Islam, thus Robin represents Muslims who oppose IS. Batman, representing an IS supporter, then interrupts Robin with a slap and shouts “BAQIYAH”. In the tweet accompanying this embedded image, the user writes links the post to the hashtag #MoreIslamicThanIS, which is one of the most prominent anti-IS hashtags on Twitter. This posting thus intertextually draws on internet subcultures surrounding the production of memes, the American comic book tradition, and knowledge of both the pro and anti-IS online social movements. Only by understanding each of these strands can one understand the complex meaning of the posting as whole. The overall effect is a strong assertion of the superiority of those who support IS: IS is depicted by Batman – the older, stronger, and dominant of the two – putting Robin – the younger, less powerful student – in his place.

These hashtags then, rather than directly classifying content by the theme implied, become a virtual space where the meaning of those words is negotiated by those who support and those who oppose IS. The meaning of #baqiya is thus challenged, re-appropriated, refuted and reaffirmed through the practice of hashtagging.

Despite risking suspension, some pro-IS users take a similar approach to their opponents and intentionally embed a “trending” or highly popular hashtag that ostensibly has nothing to do with the content of their tweet. Rather than attempting to re-appropriate the meaning of these hashtags though, this behaviour can better be understood as “piggy-backing”; these unrelated hashtags are selected exclusively in order to dramatically increase the viewership of a tweet. In effect, these pro-IS tweets are addressed to perceived outsiders. For example, one pro-IS user with the handle “K_H_O99908274” tweeted:

WE ARE EVERYWHERE
From #Netherlands #Amsterdam Central
#ISIS #IslamicState #psgr Srebrenica
#Zoolander2 #naheffing <http://t.co/aQZb2LaTqG>

In this tweet, the user asserts the presence of IS supporters around the world with a simple declaration “WE ARE EVERYWHERE,” capitalized for emphasis. The hashtags #ISIS and #IslamicState both link the tweet to the topic of IS as well as reflect the “we” invoked by the author. However, the other hashtags do not relate to the subject matter of the tweet at all, and instead are included in order to increase the readership of the tweet. The hashtags #Netherlands, #Amsterdam, #psgr and #naheffing connect this tweet with others about Netherlands, and the discussions regarding tax policy that were taking place in a small Dutch town at the time – a topic which clearly has nothing to do with the affirmation of solidarity, but does increase the readership of the tweet dramatically. Similarly, the hashtag #Zoolander2 refers to an American movie that was being promoted at the time of data collection and was receiving considerable attention, but certainly has nothing to do with the message of the tweet. By including these hashtags, this declaration, “WE ARE EVERYWHERE,” is directed towards an implied, ambient audience of those unrelated hashtags – anyone interested in the Netherlands or Zoolander 2 would view this tweet. Ultimately though, this is not a widespread tactic, as only a few examples emerged in the data.

Hashtags thus have multiple functions. Not only are they a way for users to indicate the subject matter of their tweets, but they can also constitute a place where the boundaries of collective identity are contested and renegotiated. Additionally, they can be exploited to increase viewership of a tweet if a user “piggybacks” onto a trending hashtag, even if the subject matter is unrelated to the theme indicated in that hashtag. This method was used by both pro- and anti-IS Twitter users. These observations provide further evidence to support Johnston’s claim that “social movement research has confirmed ongoing social construction of collective identity on these two planes: internal to the movement among members, and external to the movement, among opponents, politicians, potential adherents, and bystander publics” (2014, 89).

Hyperlinks

Another important intertextual element of the discourse that is unique to the digital milieu is the use of hyperlinks. Twitter serves the pro-IS movement as a hub through which users share links to *other* websites which are better suited to storing large quantities of data, especially audio and video data. A word frequency analysis of the Twitter data reveals that `http` is the second most occurring word (or sequence of letters), appearing over 23,000 times across tweets, Biographies, and Locations. HTTP stands for hypertext transfer protocol, and is the foundation of data communication on the internet. Its high frequency indicates the number of hyperlinks embedded in the data, demonstrating how important connectivity with other websites and materials is to the discourse. These hyperlinks can lead to other Twitter pages, external websites, or they can also lead to elements of web pages including multimedia content like videos, images, and audio recordings. Hyperlinks thus create a literal connection between texts, a form of intertextuality that is specific to the digital milieu. This capability influences semiotic processes, and in turn, the co-creation of collective identity.

Proponents of IS use hyperlinks to share and build bodies of common knowledge that are distributed across different digital spaces. It also influences the way that Twitter users write their tweets; rather than re-stating an idea that they wish to comment on, tweets often include a link to the original material and text that evaluates the content linked. For example, the tweet: “How beautiful <http://t.co/pKUfL8CIZ7>” cannot be understood

without clicking on the link to the content being evaluated. The meaning is created by the relationship between the text and content that the hyperlink leads to. Twitter's maximum character limit of 140 thus encourages brevity, and the use of hyperlinks allows users to refer to other texts in an abbreviated fashion that also encourages their followers to explore these materials first-hand. Understanding the Twitter discourse thus necessitates this kind of engagement. An exploration of the links that pro-IS Twitter users embedded in their tweets revealed that different websites are used for different purposes by the online pro-IS movement, each of which contribute to the movement in a different way.

One of the most linked-to sites in the data is JustPaste.It, which is a website that allows users to share text, images and videos. For example, one user, "dawla113" posted the following tweet with a link to a JustPaste.It page:

@casaouia_oum // English Text speech of Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi,
and Arabic audio tape <http://t.co/sMPqSKdNRY>

Although the content of the webpage linked has since been removed, the tweet indicates that the text and audio file of a speech by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi could be accessed via the link. Pro-IS Twitter accounts often post tweets which endorse content that is linked to on JustPaste.It such as the document entitled "This is our Aqeedah." The contents of the document, far too lengthy to comprise a Twitter user's Bio, detail the explicit beliefs of IS supporters. Other important JustPaste.It documents sampled include "Lies Against ISIS" and "This is the land of the Caliphate," the romantic account of one man's journey to Syria to join IS. Sometimes, these JustPaste.It pages included links to yet other sources where entire e-books could be downloaded. The most notable of these were "How to Survive in the West," "A Brief Guide to Islamic State 2015," and of course, the catch-all manual, "Resources For The Mujahideen" which was advertised on Twitter with the hashtag #RFTM. I collected vast quantities of data from JustPaste.It, the study of which could comprise an entire other project. It became clear that Twitter serves the online movement as a hub where links to in-group members are shared.

Other websites favoured by the pro-IS community are SendVid, Dump.To, Archive.org, and independent blogs based on WordPress or other blog engines. SendVid is used exclusively for sharing videos, while Dump.To more closely resembles JustPaste.It

and is used to create documents that often have photographs embedded to create “photo reports” of news. Archive.org is the site where different audio and pdf versions of the “Daily News Bulletin Officially for the Soldiers of the Islamic State” are posted. Here, users can access this daily news bulletin in several different languages, including German, French, Arabic, English, and Dutch. Lastly, several pro-IS blogs are prominently featured among the links in the corpus of data. The most notable of these that are still live at the time of this writing include “AnsaruKhilafah⁹” (Supporters of the Caliphate) and “Al-Khilafah Aridat¹⁰” (the Caliphate has Returned). Each of these websites provides news that is heavily biased in favour of IS, if not official propaganda. By sharing information, the group builds a repertoire of shared knowledge, and expressing one’s familiarity with that knowledge becomes a performance of membership in the community.

However, the significance of hyperlinks is not just in facilitating the sharing of information. The act of sharing certain hyperlinks to pro-IS material can be understood as a performance which indexes pro-IS identity in and of itself. Supporters of IS understand this act of sharing and promotion as an act of resistance because the domains which host the material actively seek to remove posts by supporters of IS. Thus, it is not just the nature of the content being shared, but their very persistence in sharing it which has meaning.

Conclusion

The use of hashtags and hyperlinks in the ways described in this chapter have become imbued with new meaning that is specific to the movement. Rather than simply acts of sharing information and organizing group discussions, these behaviours have come to constitute performances of collective identity in themselves. As Johnston writes, collective identity “arises from the density and the frequency of relations that can be conceptualized as multiple microperformances of identity in the sense that doing things together reaffirms what we are together. If a movement is defined as a network of relations, a strong collective identity means that members are highly interconnected and their

⁹ <https://ansarukhilafah.wordpress.com/>

¹⁰ <https://alkhilafaharidat.wordpress.com/>

“identity performances” are frequent” (2014, 92). Members of the online pro-IS movement have socially developed movement-specific conventions for using these features in order to create “identity artifacts or markers [which are] affirmed continually and densely by small performances of who members are” (Ibid). The result of these ongoing daily processes is a strong sense of cohesion among members who share a sense of collective identity as members of the “Baqiyah Family”.

Chapter 7.

Conclusion

This study set out to address the question of how social media can be used to support social movement solidarity and the cultivation of collective identity. Although social movement theory acknowledges the importance of collective identity, as yet it fails to examine closely how collective identity and solidarity are created. Another shortcoming of this literature is its limited treatment of social media, which emphasizes its information sharing and organizational functions but fails to consider its ideational functions, such as its role in fostering collective identity. This thesis has sought to begin to address these gaps. The success and vitality of the online pro-IS movement stands as a testament to the importance of studying both collective identity and social media, as diverse members from around the world have united in digital space and under one shared identity in support of a radical transnational social movement. These ideational forces of solidarity and collective identity are what unify members from across the globe and sustain the momentum of movements through time. This thesis supports the idea that identity-work done in the digital milieu is deeply connected with the offline world, both shaping and being shaped by external forces, but also that the internet constitutes “a postmodern space of transformation, in which the subject of communication is transformed within the process of communicating” (Slater 2002, 533). I have operated on the basis that social media act as an extension of the natural way that humans communicate and therefore a natural way that movements cultivate collective identity. The online pro-IS movement should thus be understood as a separate phenomenon from the militant organization, yet one that supports it and is deeply integrated with its ideology and physical reality. By assembling in an online space, actors can maintain a level of anonymity which insulates them from consequences of political dissent in the physical world. However, this does not mean that their online behaviour has no effect on the physical world or the movement at large. Social networking sites, specifically Twitter, constitute a space where supporters of IS can assemble, reinforce shared values, and perform acts of solidarity as well as their collective identity. Thus the “baqiya” identity does not, indeed cannot exist solely online, but certain conventions for expressing solidarity and enacting this identity *do*.

My findings show that each customizable feature of the Twitter profile is an opportunity to associate oneself with a greater collective identity, and over time, the pro-IS movement has developed cultural conventions for performing solidarity and for enacting the “baqiya” identity that are specific to Twitter. Users *index* themselves as part of the movement by using lexical labels like “baqiya,” or “mujahideen,” but they also index membership in the movement by *positioning* themselves against the “other”, and by drawing *intertextually* on a shared repertoire of cultural knowledge. Each of these identity-building functions is at work in the choices users make in customizing their Twitter profiles, whether selecting a username or in how one chooses to describe their location. After enough like-minded users adhere to certain conventions, these choices, such as describing one’s location as “Darul Kufr,” become *indexes* of “baqiya” identity in and of themselves. Twitter thus serves not only as tool for sharing information, but as a space where new cultural forms and meanings which sustain movements emerge. As Tarrow writes, “it is only by sustaining collective action against antagonists that a contentious episode becomes a social movement. Common purposes, collective identities, and identifiable challenges help movements to do this; but unless they can maintain their challenge, movements will evaporate” (Tarrow 2011, 12). By participating in social media activity, supporters of IS can engage in sustained collective action, reaffirm their common purposes and identity, and perpetually position themselves against an antagonistic Other.

I have also argued that the digital milieu offers two novel forms of intertextuality which can be harnessed to support collective identity formation for a movement: hashtags and hyperlinks. This discourse analysis demonstrates that hashtags are not only a way for users to collectively create meaningful categories to indicate the subject matter of their tweets, but also constitute a site where the boundaries of collective identity are contested. Members of the pro-IS movement often discourage each other from creating mass hashtags that clearly denote support for IS because it makes suspension from Twitter more likely. As such, the hashtags that do intrinsically index a user as pro-IS rarely became very popular, yet a few examples emerged in the data such as #whywelovekhilafah and #RTFM (which was employed to direct users to the e-book “Resources For The Mujahideen”). More often, supporters of IS engage hashtags that project intrinsic anti-IS stance – such as #notinmyname, or #moreislamictthanisis – not to endorse the sentiment, but as a means of addressing that ambient audience in outward

refutation and reassertion of pro-IS sentiment. Twitter users who oppose IS also use explicitly pro-IS hashtags – such as #baqiya – in order to undermine, challenge or in some cases deliberately offend the pro-IS community. Additionally, supporters of IS “piggyback” onto trending hashtags in order to increase their ambient audience. In other words, some pro-IS Twitter users compose staunchly pro-IS tweets, and then tag that tweet with extremely popular yet completely unrelated hashtags. This is a deliberate tactic to capture the attention of perceived outsiders and one way in which the movement uses hashtags to position themselves against others.

Hyperlinks too play a crucial role in the creation of a shared repertoire of cultural knowledge, and enable users to disseminate information and affirmations of solidarity both rapidly and with vast reach. By linking users directly to an object of commentary, recipients of a tweet are able to go directly to the source and users are able to simply offer their brief commentary. This strengthens cohesion because as long as users have access to the internet, they may all theoretically have access to the same website or source of information, eliminating the need for a chain of dissemination through which information can become distorted. Information is shared and distributed across different types of websites through links, such that different websites perform different functions for the pro-IS movement: Twitter serves as the site of resistance, as well as a hub of both affiliation and the dissemination of links to other supporting websites. While JustPaste.It is a repository for documents, advice and stories from fellow supporters of IS, soldiers of IS may access their daily news bulletin through Archive.org and civilian supporters may read the latest speeches written by Abu Bakr al Baghdadi on AnsaruKhilafah.Wordpress.com. SendVid and DumpTo are excellent sources of the latest pro-IS videos. While YouTube monitors the content being posted more closely to limit the reach of propaganda, these sites are less searchable and a user needs to know the specific URL for the video being searched, which can be obtained through the network of affiliation on Twitter. The very act of sharing these resources through links is thus a way to index support for IS, and through sharing users reaffirm their identity as a member of the “baqiya family”.

My findings indicate the powerful effect of restricting the online behaviour of a unified group – in this case, the body of Twitter users who support the Islamic State. By specifically targeting pro-IS Twitter users for suspension, the administrators of Twitter play

an important role in limiting the reach of this movement and its ability to spread propaganda and hate speech. However, they also unwittingly strengthened the internal cohesion and resolve of this online movement, galvanizing a sense of shared injustice. This has transformed the act of participating in SNS like Twitter from a simple social activity to an act of political resistance in the minds of pro-IS movement members, centred on a narrative of freedom of speech. Thus, private companies like Twitter must be aware of the effects of their policies. Clearly, the suspensions levelled at pro-IS accounts was founded in a sense of social responsibility and do limit the group's exposure, yet this policy has failed to successfully undermine the pro-IS movement's *sense of solidarity* because it provides the group with an injustice frame and politicizes the act of creating new accounts in response to suspensions. I contend that the approach taken by self-organizing anti-IS activists is more effective in undermining solidarity, wherein users assemble on Twitter at the same time for "hackathons", a form of collective online action in which users contest the assertions made by pro-IS users. By embracing the idea that online behaviour can constitute contentious collective action, this approach does not feed into IS's narrative of victimization – its injustice framing – and instead challenges it.

One of the main scope limitations of this thesis was the inability to make claims about the offline segment of the pro-IS movement. The logistical, security and ethical challenges precluded such a consideration for this study. However, future studies of contentious collective action and social media could examine a movement's online and offline components, not in order to make claims about how online activity influences offline activity, but rather to examine each in their own rite for their potential to constitute contentious collective action. As access to the internet and social media increases globally and these technologies approach ubiquity, they will without a doubt be used for political purposes both formal and informal – in "normal" processes and disruptive acts of contention. For this reason, social movement theorists must strive to break down the ontological barrier between the online and the offline. Only then can we better understand the effects of these technologies.

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Appendix.

“This Is Our Aqeedah”

The following text has been directly copied from a web page hosted by JustPaste.it. The beliefs outlined therein represent the self-proclaimed beliefs of supporters of Islamic State:

Indeed, the people have made many false accusations which were unfounded and were blatant lies about our aqeedah. They accused us of making takfeer on all Muslims in general, and they accused us of justifying the blood and properties of Muslims, and they accused us of forcing the people to join the State using the sword (violence). To address these statements, this is our explanation to deny their accusations, so that there is no longer any reason for them to spread lies and doubt about us.

FIRST

We believe and we enforce the destruction and annihilation of all forms of shirk , and the prohibition of anything that leads the people into shirk. Imam Muslim has narrated in Saheeh Abi Al-Hayyaj Al-Asadiy, he has said, has been said to me by Ali radiyallahu anhu, remember that I will be sending you as Rasululllah sallallaahu alaihi wa sallam has sent me, “Do not leave the sculptures unless you destroy it, and do not leave the graves to be worshiped and glorified unless you destroy it. “

SECOND

We believe that the Rafidha (Shi’a) are a group of shirk and apostasy, they are also a group that are opposed to the complete implementation of the Islamic Shari’a law.

THIRD

We believe the practitioners of witchcraft are apostates and have become infidels and it is an obligation for us to kill them, and their repentance is not accepted in the courts (of dunya). Omar bin Khatthab radiyallahu anhu has said: “The punishment for a magician (one who deals in witchcraft) is to decapitate (slaughter) them with the sword”.

FOURTH

We do not make takfeer on the Muslims that pray facing the qibla because of their sins, such as adultery, drinking khamr and stealing, as long as they do not claim it is halal for them to be doing so. Our belief in faith is the middle path (tawasuth), between khawarij who areghuluw (excessive in the matters of religion) and between ahlu irja who aremufrithin (people who are careless and lax or give tAonod mthuocshe twolheora pnrcoef)e.ss the syahadatain and reveal to us his Islam, and do not perform any act that takes them out of the fold of Islam, then we treat them as we treat the Muslims. And we leave what is in his inner heart to Allah.

And we belief that there are two categories of kufr, namely kufr akbar and kufr ashgar, and that the denial of the truth could be caused by one’s belief, words, or actions. As for

making takfeer on someone personally, this depends on the fulfillment of syuruth (requirements) and the absence of mawani' (instances that prevent takfeer).

FIFTH

We believe that tahaakum (referring to someone for judgement) is done only to the Shari'a of Allah ta'ala in every case of complaint arbitrated in the courts of the Islamic State. As for tahaakum to laws of the tawaghit , such as man-made laws, tribal laws and others, this negates one's Islam and leads to disbelief (nawaqidul Islam). Allah ta'ala says, "And whoever does not judge by what Allah has revealed – then it is those who are the disbelievers" (Al-Maidah 5:44)

SIXTH

We believe in humbling ourselves before the Prophet Muhammad sallallaahu alaihi wa sallam, and that it is haram to ignore his words. And it is haram to make takfeer upon those who have earned the highest of degrees and the noblest of positions, of which are the four rightly-guided caliphs (Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman & Ali), the sahabah (companions of the Prophet sallallaahu alaihi wa sallam), and members of his household.

Allah said "Indeed, We have sent you as a witness and a bringer of good tidings and a warner. That you [people] may believe in Allah and His Messenger and honor him and respect the Prophet and exalt Allah morning and afternoon." (Al-Fath 48:8-9)

The Prophet sallallaahu alaihi wa sallam recited this ayat (verse) to his companions: "Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah ; and those with him are forceful against the disbelievers, merciful among themselves. You see them bowing and prostrating [in prayer], seeking bounty from Allah and [His] pleasure. Their mark is on their faces from the trace of prostration. That is their description in the Torah. And their description in the Gospel is as a plant which produces its offshoots and strengthens them so they grow firm and stand upon their stalks, delighting the sowers – so that Allah may enrage by them the disbelievers. Allah has promised those who believe and do righteous deeds among them forgiveness and a great reward." (Al-Fath 48:29)

SEVENTH

We believe that secularism in its various forms and doctrines, such as nationalism, socialism and communism, is tantamount to kufr, it cancels one's shahadat and pulls the people away from the religion of Islam. And we believe anyone who is affiliated and participates in any political party/activity, such as the Ad-Dailamiy party, Al-Hasyimiy, and others has become an apostate. This is because these acts replace the law of Allah ta'ala, and handover the loyalty and power of ummah to the enemies of Allah ta'ala such as the Crusaders, and the Shi'a Rafidhah.

Allah ta'ala says about the state of the person who agrees to replace even only one matter that is part of the law of Allah ta'ala, "And indeed do the devils inspire their allies [among men] to dispute with you. And if you were to obey them -in one matter only-, indeed, you would be mushrikeen." (Al-An'am 6A:s1 w21e) believe that the ideology of the al-Islamiy party (a political party in Iraq) is of kufr and apostasy, there is no difference in this party, though the name is Islamiy, to all other ideologies of kufr and apostasy, such as the Ja'fariy

'Alawiy party. And the leaders of their party are all apostates, there is no difference between those who are in the government/parliament or those in the party branches. But we do not make takfeer generally on all who are in the party, as long as there is no hujjah (argument/explanation) delivered to them.

EIGHTH

We believe those who defend the infidel/apostate rulers are also apostates, as are those who help them (rulers) with any type of defense or aid, such as clothing, food, medicine or anything else that can strengthen their position. So, his actions (helping apostate rulers) thus, will become the justification/reason for us to shed his blood (due to his apostasy).

NINTH

We believe that jihad fi sabilillah (fighting in the path of Allah) is an obligation upon every single Muslim since the fall of the caliphate in Andalusia (modern day Spain) in the effort to liberate occupied Muslim lands. And that the obligation of jihad is one that is constant, to be performed under the commands of a righteous leader or even one that is a fajir (sinner), and the biggest sin after kufr (disbelief in Allah) is to reject or hinder jihad fi sabilillah at a time when it is made wajib (obligatory) upon every single Muslim.

Imam Ibnu Hazm rahimahullah said: "There is not a sin after (the sin of) kufr which is worse, than the sin of one who prevents jihad against the disbelievers when it is commanded by Islam, and that is the hindering of the Muslims to perform jihad against the disbelievers with the excuse that a Muslim may be a fasiq (venial sinner), though this (character of a fasiq) is not considered as a justification (to prevent j ihad)."

TENTH

We believe that when a country or a state is engulfed in the glorification of kufr, and what dominates in it are the laws based on kufr and not the laws of Islam, then these countries and states are dar al-kufr (land of disbelief). However, we do not declare takfeer upon every citizen that reside in that country or state since the Muslim countries of today are ruled by the laws of the taghut (tyrants) and disbelief, we are convinced of the kufr and apostasy of the rulers of these lands and their military forces. And to fight them is more obligatory than to fight the leaders of the cross (Crusaders), and we give warnings and reminders that we will fight the forces (whose apostasy and loyalty to the disbelievers are clear) that fight the Islamic State of Iraq, even if they call themselves with the names of the Arabs or Islam.

We advise and warn them, so they will not have to ransom sheep for their rulers, as that is only what they are worthy of, in the effort to rid Iraq of the Crusader powers.

ELEVENTH

We believe that it is an obligation to oppose the police and the military of the taghut and apostate governments, and what they have established in the form of corporations/firms such as oil companies and others. And we believe in the necessity of destroying and eliminating the agencies, boards and establishments that are clear to us will be means by which the taghut will rely on to maintain their grip on power.

TWELFTH

We believe that those from the ahlul kitab (people of the Book) and others besides them, from the Sabians and those who are in the territory of the Islamic State today are of ahlul harbi (people against whom fighting is enjoined) and that there is no option of dzimma for them. This is because they have violated the treaty that they previously made with the Islamic State, and if they want peace and avoid fighting then they are obliged to enter into a new treaty with the Islamic State and to agree on the regulations and rules until their terms come to end.

THIRTEENTH

We believe that members of other jama'at (group) of jihad who are fighting in various fronts are our brothers in religion, and we will never consider them as kafirs (disbelievers) or asfajirs (sinners), unless they delve into vice and deviate from the obligations of the religion in these times, because we consider them as brothers under the same banner (the banner of la ilaha illallah).

FOURTEENTH

Every group or individual who are allied with the rulers whom we are in war with, we consider them as those who are uncommitted towards us, the Islamic State. Rather, they are of evil and we reject them. Therefore, it is a matter of great concern in dealing with the rulers when making treaties/agreements without the permission of the Islamic State.

FIFTEENTH

We believe in treating with love the pious scholars who are truthful and to be humble before them, and to discard from them their mistakes and shortcomings, and to expose those who are supporting the plans of the taghut, or pretending and spreading falsehood about the religion of Allah.

SIXTEENTH

We hold that those who preceded us in (leaving for) jihad , they are those who are honored, and it is our responsibility to support (taking care and be of service to) the families of themujahideen and their properties.

SEVENTEENTH

We believe in the obligation to release the captives and the oppressed from amongst the Muslims from the hands of the kufar (disbelievers), by means of war or ransom. Rasulallah sallallahu alaihi wa sallam said: "Free the captives", and thus it is an obligation upon us to treat fairly the prisoners whether they are from the disbelievers or from the martyrs.

Rasulallah sallallahu alaihi wa sallam said: "Whoever provides for a fighter in the cause of Allah has actually fought, and whoever takes care of the family of a fighter has actually fought."

EIGHTEENTH

We believe in the obligation of providing the proper understanding and teaching the ummah regarding the matters of the religion, and when they have gained something from

it, then it is for them a benefit in the dunya and the hereafter. And we make obligatory the seeking of beneficial worldly knowledge (such as science) which the ummah wishes and requires. And what is other than that is permissible, as long it does not deviate from the divine knowledge of revelation.

NINETEENTH

We believe it is forbidden those things that leads to heinous acts and the evil that it pulls into, such as the satellite channels (that perpetuate indecency and vileness). And it is obligatory for the women what has been commanded upon them from revelation, that is to cover themselves modestly as prescribed by the shariah. And it is obligatory for them to protect themselves from ikhtilat (free mixing between non-mahrams) so that they may safeguard their chastity.

Allah ta'ala said: "Indeed, those who like that immorality should be spread [or publicized] among those who have believed will have a painful punishment in this world and the hereafter. And Allah knows and you do not know ." (An-Nur 24:19)

And lastly, all praise be to Allah, the Lord of the worlds, and Allah is fully in control over His affairs, but most men know not.