

**The Fading Siren Call: How the Islamic State's  
Territorial Decline Has Reshaped its Propaganda  
Content**

**by**

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## **Abstract**

Given that the Islamic State's propaganda was heavily rooted in notions of military victory, territorial expansion, and utopian statehood, this thesis asks how the group changed its messaging content when it was faced with extensive territorial losses. Using qualitative and quantitative methods, it tracks changes in the thematic and narrative content the Islamic State's two flagship English-language magazines, *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*. It finds that the group's propaganda changed substantially, particularly in content related to the promotion of home-grown terrorism and its self-declared 'Caliphate'. Utilizing novel theoretical frameworks, this study assesses how changes in the Islamic State's propaganda undermined its effectiveness as a tool for radicalization and recruitment. The thesis finds strong evidence to suggest the Islamic State's propaganda has become less effective at tapping into critical drivers of radicalization.

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## List of Acronyms

CCIC	Clash of Civilizations and Ideological Conflict
HGT	Home-grown Terrorism
MBB	Martyrdom, Brotherhood, and Belonging.
MT	Military and Terrorism.
SBEG	State-building, Expansion, and Governance.
SRT	Scripture, Religion and Theology.
VB	Violence and Brutality.

## Glossary

Hijrah	The term used to describe the journey from Mecca to Medina by the Prophet and his Companions in 622 C.E. In the lexicon of the Islamic State, however, this term is used to describe the process of travelling to the Islamic State's Caliphate.
Jahiliyya	A pre-Islamic state of ignorance referring to the times before Mohammad received God's revelations. In the content of the modern Islamist movement, this term is used to denote a government system, ideology, or institution based on un-Islamic principles. Islamists and jihadists often use the concept of jahiliyya to justify the overthrow, by peaceful or violent means, of secular governments.
Kuffar/Kufr	Disbelief/disbelievers. Used to describe those who willfully refuse to accept the word of God.
Murtadd/Murtaddin	Apostate/apostates. Those who have renounced or been excommunicated from their religion.
Rafida	Rejecters. A derogatory term applied to Shi'a Muslims.
Bay'ah	A pledge of loyalty or allegiance to a group or leader.
Iman	Faith or Belief.
Takfir	Pronouncement that an individual is an unbeliever and no longer Muslim. Because Islam forbids the killing of other Muslims, takfir is used within the lexicon of contemporary jihadist groups to sanction violence against enemy groups, such as opposing political organizations or different religious sects. By declaring one an apostate, the jihadists argue, that individual is no longer subject to the protections afforded to fellow Muslims and thus can be justifiably killed.
Ummah	A concept used within the Islamic faith to denote the Muslim community or Muslim 'nation'.

# Chapter 1.

## Introduction

In the summer of 2014, the Islamic State catapulted itself into the international limelight. The group seized huge swathes of territory in the deserts of Iraq and Syria, released horrific videos of its fighters carrying out beheadings and mass executions, seized the mantle of jihadi leadership from Al Qaeda, and declared itself to be the architects of a global, pan-Islamic Caliphate. While the causes of the Islamic State's rise are manifold, intertwined with seemingly distant events such as the spread of Islamism in the 1970s and the advent of modern, transnational jihadism during the Soviet-Afghan War, the immediate roots of the group's rise lay largely in the political wreckage of postwar Iraq. In addition to the violence of the invasion and occupation itself, the American intervention inverted the Saddam Hussein-era political power balance, stripping Sunnis of their disproportionate political influence and handing the reins of power over to the previously marginalized Shi'a. In doing so, the American intervention provoked resentment amongst many Sunnis, creating a security vacuum and a dysfunctional state in the process. These conditions lay the groundwork for Sunni and Shi'a extremists to mobilize, exploit and channel Iraqi citizens' wide-ranging grievances into sectarian violence, driving the country into civil war in the mid-2000s. While civil strife deescalated following the American troop "surge", a combination factors, including the deep fractures caused by civil war, the sectarian policies of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, and the neighboring Syrian Civil War provided the environment for Islamic State to recover and evolve from its decimated predecessor organization, Al Qaeda in Iraq.<sup>1</sup> These conditions set the stage for the Islamic

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<sup>1</sup> Emma Sky. "Iraq, From Surge to Sovereignty." *Foreign Affairs*. March/April 2011. Accessed February 18, 2018. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2011-03-01/iraq-surge-sovereignty>.

State's subsequent *blitzkrieg* across the region, where it killed thousands and seized a chunk of territory roughly the size of Great Britain.<sup>2</sup>

In many ways, the Islamic State is both a product and a symptom of the Middle East's history and contemporary political circumstances. Sectarianism, a divisive force that has waxed and waned in its salience throughout the region's history, has not only been both amplified by the Islamic State's targeted violence, but was also key cause of its rise, as ISIS tapped into sectarian animosities and a sense of Sunni victimhood to garner support. The group has also has exploited the region's tribal and colonial history, playing local tribes off one another and drawing on the transnational tribal relationships that emerged after the imposition of the Sykes-Picot borders to expand and entrench its state.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the environment of fear, insecurity, and poor governance that the Islamic State's has magnified, was also a key cause of its rise. The governance vacuum left by recent and ongoing wars, and the conditions of desperation in much of Iraq and Syria's Sunni heartland, were critical factors in making the Islamic State's imposition of brutal (but comparatively effective) governance tolerable to a portion the region's disaffected Sunnis.<sup>4</sup> Because the group is so deeply intertwined to the Middle East's history and contemporary politics, its impact is felt most acutely by those in the region. The lion's share of the costs of the Islamic State's violence—both human and economic—will be borne by the people and governments of the Middle East, as will the burden of rebuilding the destruction it has left in its wake.

However, the Islamic State is not solely a regional phenomenon, but a transnational one. While its rise was principally driven by division and conflict in Iraq and Syria, its notoriety, political sway, and revolutionary impact on the modern jihadist movement are owed largely to its ability to globalize its cause. The Islamic State has attracted recruits from 80 countries and inspired or orchestrated attacks on five

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<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Bahney, and Patrick B. Johnston. "ISIS Could Rise Again." *Foreign Affairs*. December 15<sup>th</sup> 2017. Accessed February 18, 2018. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-12-15/isis-could-rise-again>.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan. *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*. (New York, Regan Arts, 2015), 200-209.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 222-225.

continents.<sup>5</sup> According to 2017 estimates from the Soufan Group, over 40,000 foreign fighters travelled to Iraq and Syria to join the Islamic State, with thousands of those fighters coming from advanced industrialized countries within the European Union and North America, more than any other terrorist group in recent history.<sup>6</sup> The fact that a small but significant minority of Western Muslims and recent converts to Islam have elected to travel thousands of miles to engage in gruesome violence has forced scholars and policy-makers to look further into the causes of radicalization and the drivers of terrorism. While these causes are incompletely understood, stemming from a complex and varying array of social, psychological, political and economic factors, most scholars agree the Islamic State's professionalized propaganda campaign played an integral role in its unique ability to tap into the various elements of the radicalization process and channel Western Muslims towards their cause of jihad.<sup>7</sup>

The Islamic State, as Winter notes, “has revolutionized many aspects of insurgent strategic communications, and, indeed, propaganda more generally”.<sup>8</sup> While extremist groups and other jihadist organizations had employed propaganda before, these efforts never approached the quantity, quality and professionalism displayed by the Islamic State. During its peak, the Islamic State's media apparatus produced thousands of individual media products each month, ranging from simple items, such as tweets and images, to professionally-edited videos and full-length magazines. As Milton has illustrated using leaked internal documents, the Islamic State relied on a highly sophisticated and

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<sup>5</sup> Seth G. Jones, James Dobbins, Daniel Byman, Christopher S. Chivvis, Ben Connable, Jeffrey Martini, Eric Robinson, Nathan Chandler, *Rolling Back the Islamic State*. (Santa Monica, California: RAND Corporation, 2017), 176.  
[https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1912.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1912.html)

<sup>6</sup> Richard Barrett, *Beyond The Caliphate: Foreign Fighters And The Threat Of Returnees*, (The Soufan Center, 2017), 7, 12-13.  
<http://thesoufancenter.org/research/beyond-caliphate/>

<sup>7</sup> Haroro J. Ingram, “An analysis of Islamic State's Dabiq magazine”, *Australian Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 3, 2016: 459, DOI: 10.1080/10361146.2016.1174188; Charlie Winter “Apocalypse, later: a longitudinal study of the Islamic State brand”, *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 35, no.1, (2018) 103-121, DOI: 10.1080/15295036.2017.1393094

<sup>8</sup> Winter, *Apocalypse, later*, 105.

advanced bureaucracy to create this vast array of media products.<sup>9</sup> The centralized, bureaucratic nature of Islamic State media production, which at its height, included dozens of regional bureaus, allowed the group to both target its messaging to specific regional audiences and maintain consistent objectives, ideology, and overarching narratives throughout a wide range of media platforms and products.<sup>10</sup>

While the Islamic State's media apparatus has allowed it to distribute and produce a vast array of media products, it is the content of those products that are regarded as the key drivers of its recruitment success in the West. In one of the strongest early works on the Islamic State, Stern and Berger argue that the group derives its appeal from an intoxicating narrative of strength, victory, and Islamic revanchism, which allows the group to portray itself as recapturing Islam's former glory. At the center of this narrative is the group's claim to have resurrected the Caliphate, an accomplishment previously viewed by jihadists as a distant objective, not an attainable, short-term goal.<sup>11</sup> As a result, the Islamic State portrayed itself as powerful, victorious and expansionary, a message that stood in stark contrast to the ideological foundations and propaganda of previous terrorist groups.

Prior to the rise of the Islamic State, terrorism scholars often operated from the assumption that terrorists' propaganda was fundamentally rooted in projecting their communities' weakness, oppression, and victimization. As Joanne Wright shows, groups like the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) and the German Red Army Faction used the perceived victimization of their target communities as the justification for their tactics and violence.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Al Qaeda explicitly predicated its ideology and vanguard strategy on an assumption of weakness, focusing heavily on the plight of Muslims and justifying

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<sup>9</sup> Daniel Milton, *Communication Breakdown: Unraveling the Islamic State's Media Efforts* (Combatting Terrorism Center at Westpoint. 2016), 5-11.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 5-11.

<sup>11</sup> William F. McCants. *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State*. (New York, St. Martin's Press, 2015), 9.

<sup>12</sup> Joanne Wright. *Terrorist Propaganda: The Red Army Faction and the Provisional IRA, 1968-86*. (Basingstoke: Macmillan 1991), 81-82.

attacks on Western civilians on the basis of the West's dramatic military advantage.<sup>13</sup> Although the Islamic State's messaging incorporates notions of Islamic victimhood, its early propaganda moved beyond merely pointing out this victimization, instead offering a means of overcoming it. Rather than a narrative of humiliation, the Islamic State's early propaganda was premised on restoration, victory and strength.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, the ways in which the Islamic State wove its Caliphate-building project into its propaganda allowed it to produce a message that, in many ways, was tailor-made to address the issues scholars view as key drivers of radicalization among Western Muslims. Its state-building project instilled its messaging with a romanticized depiction of a group embarking on a project of historic proportions, presenting their primary target audience of often aimless and alienated young men with the image that Islamic State membership offered them the opportunity to inject purpose and meaning into their lives. It beckoned them to "be a part of something" larger than themselves.<sup>15</sup> In contrast to other, elite vanguard-style movements, the Islamic State accepted anyone willing to embrace their ultra-radical jihadist ideology, offering a sense of community, identity, and a set of ready-made in-group values and out-group enemies. Ultimately, the group was able present its audience with a message that underscored the problems facing the Muslim *Ummah* while simultaneously offering its Caliphate as a powerful and symbolically resonant solution.<sup>16</sup>

However, since the early works on the Islamic State and its propaganda were published, many of the topics and themes central to its early messaging campaign have been seemingly delegitimized by events on the ground. Over the last several years, the group lost vast portions of its territory and has suffered numerous military defeats. The mounting challenges facing the Islamic State on the ground raise a number of important questions regarding the content and efficacy of its propaganda. For instance, how does a

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<sup>13</sup> Fawaz Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global*, (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2009), 144-146.

<sup>14</sup> Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, (Harper Collins, London, 2015), 117.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 73.

<sup>16</sup> Ingram, An analysis of Islamic State's Dabiq magazine, 458-477.

group whose motto is “enduring and expanding” justify its shrinking territory? How does a group rationalize its military defeats after premising its legitimacy on a storyline of ‘victory’?<sup>17</sup> How does an organization that prophesized an apocalyptic battle in the town of Dabiq react to losing control of the town in a minor skirmish? These questions underlie the three main research questions this thesis seeks to answer:

1. Does the Islamic State’s propaganda change over time?
2. If the Islamic State’s propaganda does change, to what extent are these changes driven by its territorial losses?
3. And, if the Islamic State’s messaging has changed, has it had a detrimental impact on the ability of its propaganda to contribute to the radicalization and recruitment of Western Muslims?

In an effort to answer these questions, this thesis examines twenty issues from the Islamic State’s premier English-language magazines, *Dabiq*, and its re-titled replacement, *Rumiyah*, two media products intended to recruit and radicalize Western Muslims.<sup>18</sup> To answer the first two questions, this study employs quantitative and qualitative methods to track changes in the narrative and thematic content of the Islamic State’s magazines over time. Tracking these changes over time allows the researcher to identify correlational relationships between the decline in the Islamic State’s territorial holdings and shifts in its propaganda’s content. Through this analysis, this study finds that the Islamic State’s propaganda undergoes dramatic qualitative and quantitative changes over the course of the sample. Interpreting these findings by examining the correlations between the Islamic State’s territorial holdings and quantitative and qualitative findings of this study, this thesis argues that many of the major changes in the group’s messaging have in fact been driven by the territorial decline of the Islamic State’s Caliphate.

The third question posed by this thesis—how do these changes impact the radicalizing and recruitment efficacy of the Islamic State’s propaganda—is both methodologically and empirically challenging. As will be elaborated upon later in this thesis, evaluating how propaganda impacts radicalization is difficult, as the radicalization

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<sup>17</sup> Zelin, Aaron. “Picture or it Didn’t Happen: A Snapshot of the Islamic State’s Official Media Output”. *Perspectives on Terrorism*. 9, no. 4, (2015): 1; Charlie Winter, *Documenting the Virtual ‘Caliphate’*. (Quilliam Foundation, 2015), 30.

<sup>18</sup> Ingram, An analysis of Islamic State’s Dabiq magazine, 459.

process itself is incompletely understood. However, in an age where violent groups across the ideological spectrum are increasingly following the path of Islamic State and developing their own sophisticated propaganda operations, understanding how propaganda impacts the radicalization process, and how this propaganda is influenced by those groups' external circumstances, is increasingly important.<sup>19</sup> In an effort to understand how the changes in the group's messaging may impact the efficacy of its propaganda, this study develops and employs two analytical frameworks. These frameworks were developed by drawing on insights from studies of radicalization, propaganda and social movements to create an empirical and theoretical basis to evaluate the Islamic State's propaganda. While the conclusions drawn from this analysis are suggestive rather than definitive, this study argues that the changes in the Islamic State's propaganda have had a detrimental effect on its ability to address key elements of the radicalization process and employ core methods of persuasion, reducing its effectiveness as a tool for recruiting and radicalizing Western Muslims.

## **Contributions of the Project**

In addition to contributing to a more complete understanding of the Islamic State and its propaganda campaign, this project can contribute to the wider academic and policy literature on extremist propaganda, counter-terrorism, and radicalization in several ways. First, this study offers unique insights into the impact of external circumstances on extremist groups' messaging. While studies conducted by Winter and Droogan and Peattie have examined thematic changes in propaganda over time, and Ingram and Sivek have worked to understand how propaganda taps into elements of the radicalization process, they have not connected these findings to the external circumstances facing the organizations they analyze. To the author's knowledge, this is the first study that has attempted to systematically examine how changes in an extremist group's external circumstances have influenced the effectiveness of its propaganda. In doing so, this study contributes to the emergent body of literature on extremist propaganda, which, as Winter and Conway have argued, has too often been confined to descriptive studies that treat propaganda as synchronous, rather than reflective of the dynamic and changing needs of

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<sup>19</sup> Winter, *Apocalypse*, later, 105.

groups that produce it.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, it provides insights into how terrorist groups use and adapt their messaging as a means of achieving their organizational and political goals, an important foundation to better understand terrorist group behavior and their use of strategic communications.

Developing a clearer understanding of how terrorist groups adapt their messaging can also have useful counterterrorism and counter-messaging implications. First, understanding how terrorist groups adapt their messaging when faced with external challenges, such as tougher counter-terrorism measures, can provide insights for counterterrorism practitioners seeking to avoid inadvertently feeding into the narratives propagated by terrorist groups. Second, a better understanding of how terrorist groups adapt their propaganda in the face of adversity can provide the foundations for more effective counter-narratives that identify and exploit the inconsistencies and contradictions that are likely to emerge when terrorist groups adapt their messaging, providing insights for the creation of counter-narratives that better undermine the credibility and appeal of terrorists' propaganda.

Additionally, this study can provide new avenues in the study of the radicalization process. Conducting an in-depth quantitative and qualitative examination of a media product designed to recruit and radicalize a movement's sympathizers highlights the topics and themes that terrorist groups *themselves* view as important to communicate to prospective radicals, which can in turn provide insights to scholars seeking to better understand the radicalization process. Moreover, examining how the group changes its messaging—what elements they keep and what elements they discard—may provide further insights into what terrorist groups view as contributors to their recruitment success.

## **Outline of Thesis**

This thesis proceeds as follows. Chapter Two outlines the quantitative and qualitative methods employed in this study. It explains how the contents of the Islamic State's magazines were classified thematically and how the thematic categories were

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 105; Maura Conway. "Determining the Role of the Internet in Violent Extremism and Terrorism: Six Suggestions for Progressing Research", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 40, no. 1 (2017): 78, DOI: 10.1080/1057610X.2016.1157408.

developed. It also outlines the quantitative and qualitative analytical components of the thesis. This chapter explains the use of bivariate linear regression analysis to quantitatively track thematic changes over the course of the sample, describes the thematic and narrative analysis components of this study, and explains how the quantitative and qualitative portions of the study complement one another. Finally, it describes how the data was collected, and the limitations of the process. Chapter Three explains how this study examines the relationship between the Islamic State's territorial control and its messaging content. Chapter Four overviews the relevant literature for this project and outlines the study's two analytical frameworks, which are used to evaluate changes in the persuasiveness and radicalizing efficacy of the Islamic State's propaganda. This chapter outlines the theoretical and empirical literature on radicalization, identifying four key factors in the radicalization and explaining their incorporation into this study's 'radicalization framework'. It also reviews a collection of literature on extremist group propaganda and Social Movement Theory, which provide insights into important techniques of persuasion employed in propaganda and social movement messaging campaigns more broadly. It draws three key elements from this literature to include in the 'propaganda framework'. Chapter Five contains the study's quantitative findings and the first phase of thematic qualitative analysis, examining the seven thematic categories constructed for this study. Chapter Six comprises the second phase of narrative-based qualitative analysis, examining three core narratives that cut across several of the study's thematic categories. Chapter Seven applies the analytical frameworks to the study's findings to determine if changes in the Islamic State's propaganda have impacted its radicalizing and recruitment efficacy. Finally, Chapter Eight concludes the thesis.

## Chapter 2. Methodology

### Section Overview

To understand how the content and thematic narratives of the Islamic State's English-language propaganda have changed in response to the group's political and military setbacks, a novel approach employing both quantitative and qualitative methods was utilized. The following section outlines the materials examined in this study and the methods employed.

### Materials Analyzed

Because the aim of this study is to investigate how the content and thematic narratives of Islamic State propaganda evolve over time, it was imperative that the content analyzed was produced directly by official agencies of the Islamic State and not by unaffiliated supporters or non-members. As a result, two of the Islamic State's English-language magazines were selected for analysis: *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*. These magazines are produced by the Islamic State's official media arm, Al-Hayat Media Center.<sup>21</sup> The magazines were obtained from jihadology.net, a website run by scholar Aaron Zelin that provides jihadi primary source material to researchers. For this study, all 15 issues of *Dabiq* and the first 5 issues of *Rumiyah* were selected for analysis.<sup>22</sup> Issues of *Dabiq* are generally between 40 and 80 pages in length, whereas *Rumiyah* is shorter, closer to the 40-page mark. The issues were released in chronological order (*Dabiq* 1-15 followed by

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<sup>21</sup> Julian Droogan and Shane Peattie. "Mapping the Thematic Landscape of *Dabiq* Magazine." *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 71, no. 6 (2017): 592. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2017.1303443>.

<sup>22</sup> *Dabiq* is the name of the town near the Syrian-Turkish border where ISIS claims an Apocalyptic battle between the forces of Islam and the forces of "Rome"—represented in ISIS' mythology as a vague coalition of Western forces—will take place. The *Dabiq* prophecy is drawn from *Sahih Muslim*, a collection of hadith, and forms an important component of ISIS' mythology and worldview. *Rumiyah* is the Anglicized-Arabic word for Rome. *Dabiq* was discontinued and *Rumiyah* was introduced in its place shortly before the Islamic State lost control over the town of *Dabiq* in October 2016.

*Rumiyah* 1-5) and encompass a date range of July 5th, 2014 to January 6th, 2017. Overall 20 individual issues, amounting to 1124 pages of content, were analyzed for this study.

## **Categorization Process**

In order to track trends and changes in the content of *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*, this study categorizes the two magazines' contents by thematic category. For the purposes of this study "item" is the catch-all term used to describe distinct, individual pieces of content, such as a magazine article or a short, advertisement-like piece. Each item is categorized into one of the seven thematic categories outlined below. These categories were developed through a combination of the author's own preliminary research and analysis of prominent scholars' work on ISIS propaganda.<sup>23</sup> The categories outlined below represent the dominant themes in ISIS' propaganda and serve as the major taxonomic categories for this study. The table below provides the titles and descriptions of the categories used in this study.

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<sup>23</sup>For examples, see: Haroro, J Ingram. "An Analysis of Inspire and Dabiq: Lessons from AQAP and Islamic State's Propaganda War." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40, no. 5 (2017): 357–75, DOI: 10.1080/1057610X.2016.1212551; McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, 1-145; Stern and Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, 1-371; Milton, 5-11; Zelin, *Picture or it Didn't Happen*, 1; Winter, *Documenting the Virtual Caliphate*, 30.

**Table 1: Thematic Categorization Framework**

<p><b>State-building, Expansion, and Governance (SBEG)</b></p>	<p>Content that emphasizes the construction, territorial expansion, governance, or administration of ISIS’ self-proclaimed caliphate, such as the provision of services, the imposition of law and order or the construction of government institutions.<sup>24</sup></p>
<p><b>Violence and Brutality (VB)</b></p>	<p>Content that features gratuitous violence and gore, such as beheadings, executions, or images of ISIS’ slain members or opponents.</p>
<p><b>Clash of Civilizations and Ideological Conflict (CCIC)</b></p>	<p>Enemy-focused content that addresses on the Islamic State’s military and ideological foes. This category includes other societies, figures, political actors or social groups whose values, ideas, practices, or in some cases existence, are at odds with ISIS’ millenarian vision. This category will be used to classify content on the Islamic State’s four major military and ideological enemies, outlined below:</p> <p><b>Western Enemies:</b> Content that addresses the Clash of Civilizations-style conflict between the Islamic State’s vision of Islam and Western countries and ‘Western values’, often symbolized by social liberalism, democracy and Christianity.</p> <p><b>Sectarian Enemies:</b> Content that focusing on minority Islamic sects, such as the Shi’a or Alawites.</p> <p><b>“Taghut” Enemies:</b> Content that emphasizes the clash between ISIS and its vision of Islamic society, and Sunni countries, rulers, or political parties who they view as oppressive, ‘un-Islamic’, and therefore illegitimate. In the lexicon of contemporary Sunni jihadist groups, the term “taghut” is used to describe oppressive governments of Muslim-majority countries that are alleged to rule by ‘un-Islamic’ laws, so the title of this sub-category was chosen to reflect this terminology. ISIS uses the term “taghut” to describe the governments many Muslim majority states, such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt.</p>

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<sup>24</sup> One of the areas of ambiguity between categories that arose during the trial coding process was content that discussed the expansion of ISIS’ caliphate. As ISIS uses military means to conquer territory to expand its ‘caliphate’, these thematic categories often overlap. To address this ambiguity, the following rule was developed: Content that discusses the expansion of ISIS’ self-proclaimed Caliphate in broad or conceptual terms, such as items that announce new “*wilayah*”, or speak to the group’s long-term territorial ambitions—such as the establishment of a “global Caliphate”—will be included in the “State-building, Expansion and Governance” category. Items that address the practical expansion of ISIS’ caliphate by describing specific military operations to capture of new territory will be classified within “Military & Terrorism” category.

	<p><b>“Jihad Claimants”</b>: Content where ISIS accuses other jihadist groups of failing to work towards a ‘true’ Islamic civilization. Examples include ISIS’ accusations that the Taliban is a “nationalist” organization for containing their operations within Afghanistan, or accusations that Al Qaeda is succumbing to “pragmatism” and failing to implement ‘true’ Islamic governance.</p>
<p><b>Martyrdom, Brotherhood, and Belonging (MBB)</b></p>	<p>Content that works to cultivate a sense of jihadi community or ‘brotherhood’, including, <i>inter alia</i>, glorifying martyrs, telling personal, humanizing stories about ISIS members, and emphasizing the sense of meaning and purpose the readers of ISIS propaganda will find through jihad. The items in this category will often utilize social incentives and emotional appeals to attract prospective recruits and sympathizers to the Islamic State.</p>
<p><b>Military &amp; Terrorism (MT)</b></p>	<p>Content that depicts or discusses topics related ISIS’ military or terrorism-related activities, such as conventional military operations, ISIS-led or coordinated terrorist attacks, and lone-wolf attacks.</p>
<p><b>Scripture, Religion &amp; Theology (SRT)</b></p>	<p>Content where the primary topic or mode of argumentation is theological. This includes content where the authors discuss or present arguments on religious doctrine, as well as content where the authors rely primarily on scriptural or theological evidence (such passages from the Qur’an, Hadith, or opinions from historic Islamic scholars). For instance, if an item that relies on scriptural passages to persuade the reader that waging jihad is a religious duty and failing to do so is a sin, it will be included in this category. Conversely, an item that works to persuade the reader to wage jihad by emphasizing its material or social benefits, such as the sense of brotherhood and community they will find by joining ISIS, it will be classified in the “Martyrdom, Brotherhood and Belonging” category.<sup>25</sup></p>

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<sup>25</sup> Because the Islamic State’s *raison d’être* is to create a state governed by an interpretation of religious law, one could argue that all of its propaganda is, to a certain degree, religiously based. For example, military operations could be viewed as “jihad” and state-building could be viewed as the resurrection of the religious institution of the Caliphate. The decision to classify content within the Scripture, Religion & Theology category on the basis of the mode of argumentation, method of persuasion, and type of evidence used was made to avoid this conflict.

Other	Content that cannot be accurately categorized into one of the above categories. <sup>26</sup>
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## Coding Procedure

The content in ISIS' two English-language propaganda magazines (*Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*) often contain complex and nuanced written pieces that touch upon or intertwine two or more of the thematic categories outlined above. As a result, categorizing the contents of *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* thematically will inevitably require the researcher to make analytical judgement calls when conducting the categorization or 'coding' process. To address the challenges posed by quantitatively categorizing complex, narrative content, this study employs a "rules-based coding procedure" to maximize consistency of the process and limit the potential for bias. The coding procedure was developed through a trial coding process where a sample of three issues of *Dabiq* (Issues 1, 8, and 14) were quantitatively categorized using the thematic categories outlined above. In this study, each item is classified by its *predominant* theme and placed in one of the seven thematic categories. This method is similar to the methods employed by other scholars conducting thematic analyses of extremist propaganda who have also classified items by their predominant theme.<sup>27</sup> The predominant theme is determined through qualitative analysis of each item by considering the following parameters:

- The main topic, argument or 'point' of the item.

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<sup>26</sup> This category was used almost exclusively to classify advertisements for other Islamic State media products, such as videos, as these items could not be accurately categorized without analyzing their content in its entirety, which is beyond the scope of this project.

<sup>27</sup> Haroro J. "Ingram, An Analysis of the Taliban in Khurasan's Azan (Issues 1–5)", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 38, no. 7, (2015): 560-579, DOI: 10.1080/1057610X.2015.1022093; Douglas Wilbur, "Propaganda's Place in Strategic Communication: The Case of ISIL's *Dabiq* Magazine, *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 11, no. 3, (2017): 209-223; Winter, *Apocalypse*, later, 103-121.

- The type of evidence used (see Scripture, Religion & Theology category above).
- The title.
- The content of the images (if any) that accompany the item.

Once an item was classified into one of the seven thematic categories, the length of each item (number of pages) was recorded. While some studies use the “item” as a unit of analysis, this study weights each item by its length. Given that the length of items in *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* can range between one and fifteen pages, this method gives a more accurate representation of the proportion of a magazine’s content dedicated to a particular theme. Once all the items in an issue were categorized thematically, the number of pages for each item classified in a given thematic category were added together. This produced a total number of pages per category, which was then divided by the number of pages in the given issue to determine the proportion of each issue dedicated to each of the seven themes. These proportional values were then analyzed using regression analysis.

## **Quantitative Component: Linear Regression Analysis**

Given that the premise of this project is to determine how ISIS’ messaging changes in response to its political and military challenges, this study uses bivariate linear regression analysis to track changes in ISIS’ messaging over time. To help determine if there is a relationship between ISIS’ territorial losses and the thematic content of its English-language e-magazines, and if so, what the relationship is, this study uses the statistical analysis program “R” to run a bivariate linear regression on this study’s quantitative data. This linear regression allows the researcher to examine the changes in the magazines’ content over the course of the sample, as it graphs the changes in the proportion of an issue’s thematic content over time, producing a p-value that indicates whether or not the changes observed in the data are statistically significant. Time is represented by issue number, as the issues of the sample are organized chronologically by their release date. The sample spans July 5<sup>th</sup> 2014 to January 6<sup>th</sup> 2017, during which the Islamic State lost approximately one-third of its territory according to conservative estimates. As a result, time acts as a proxy for territorial decline in this study. If a statistically significant relationship is found through the regression analysis, defined as p-

value of less than 0.01, it will be considered evidence of a correlational relationship between the Islamic State's propaganda content and its territorial decline. The contents of each thematic category will then be analyzed qualitatively, providing a more holistic picture of the relationship between the Islamic State's territorial control and its messaging content.<sup>28</sup>

## Qualitative Analysis

While the quantitative component of this study provides a macro-level picture of the trends and shifts in the magazines' content, the process of categorization needed to produce such aggregate data inherently results in the simplification of thematic and narrative content, obscuring important details and nuances contained in *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*. To address this problem, this study employs a qualitative analytical component designed to provide a granular-level assessment of the thematic and narrative content of the two magazines.

The qualitative component of this study uses an interpretivist approach to content analysis, an approach that is utilized by communications scholars, sociologists and anthropologists and frequently employed by other scholars studying extremist group

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<sup>28</sup> While the  $R^2$  values are provided in Chapter 5 as a statistical measure of the explanatory power of the variables examined in this study, they are not discussed at length due to the study's extensive and more substantive qualitative analysis. The purpose of the  $R^2$  value is to measure the proportion of the variance explained by the independent variable—in this case, how well the changes in the proportion of thematic content are explained by an increase in time (a proxy for territorial decline). As a result, the qualitative analysis offered by this study, which explicitly examines the relationship between the Islamic State's territorial decline and its thematic content, provides a more substantive and nuanced exploration of this relationship.

propaganda.<sup>29</sup> This approach is well-suited to the type of qualitative analysis required by this study, as it allows the researcher to draw out important characteristics from a text such as its creation of meaning, mechanisms of persuasion, historical and religious allusions, and appeals to different identity groups, all of which are critical to obtaining a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of propaganda. The goal of the qualitative component of this study is to understand not only *which* themes are being addressed, but also *how* and *why* those themes are addressed. More specifically, the aims of the discourse analysis were two-fold: first to draw out important themes and narratives that are either within or cut across the seven thematic categories outlined above. Second, to understand how these themes and narratives have shifted over time and in response to ISIS' changing military and political circumstances. To do so, each thematic category is analyzed qualitatively to draw out more nuanced changes obscured by the quantitative categorization. Furthermore, it provides qualitative analysis of three important and pervasive "narratives" within the Islamic State's messaging content that are found across multiple thematic categories: the 'narrative of victory', the '*hijrah* and home-grown terrorism narrative', and the 'Apocalypse narrative'.

## Data Collection and Analysis: A Four Phase Process

The data collection and analysis for this study was divided into four phases. First, a trial run was conducted to ensure the thematic categories accurately represented the magazines content. Three issues of *Dabiq* (1, 8 and 14) were examined in their entirety and categorized into a draft version of the "Thematic Categorization Framework". Following this trial run, the "Other" category was added to the Thematic Classification

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<sup>29</sup>Tore Bjørgo. "Extreme Nationalism and Violent Discourses in Scandinavia: 'the Resistance', 'traitors', and 'foreign Invaders.'" *Terrorism and Political Violence* 7, no. 1 (1995): 182–220. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546559508427289>; Brandon Colas. "What Does Dabiq Do? ISIS Hermeneutics and Organizational Fractures within Dabiq Magazine." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40, no. 3 (March 4, 2017): 173–90. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2016.1184062>; Ingram, An Analysis of Islamic State's Dabiq Magazine, 458–77; Xander Kirke. "Violence and Political Myth: Radicalizing Believers in the Pages of Inspire Magazine." *International Political Sociology* 9, (2015): 283-298, DOI: 10.1111/ips.12098; Susan Currie Sivek. "Packaging Inspiration: Al Qaeda's Digital Magazine Inspire in the Self-Radicalization Process." *Journal of Communication*, 7 (2013): 584-606, DOI: 1932–8036/20130005.

Framework. During the second phase each issue was read, itemized, and quantitatively categorized into the seven categories of the Thematic Categorization Framework, resulting in an enumerative portrayal of the thematic contents of all 20 issues. Throughout this process the issues were read with reference to major ISIS-related events in order to illuminate changes in the magazines' content over time and draw correlations between events on the ground and changes in their content. In addition, major sub-themes and important narratives were noted. During this phase, particular attention to was also paid to understanding the style of argument used by the authors, the kinds of evidence and methods of persuasion they used to attract sympathizers and recruits.

In the third phase each item was re-examined to ensure that its categorization accurately reflected the item's dominant theme, that it followed the "Coding Procedure", and that no other coding errors were made. In addition, a list of important sub-themes and narratives was formulated for each item examined. Finally, in the fourth phase the lists of sub-themes and narratives for each item was examined and consolidated to provide a list of the most pervasive sub-themes and narratives and those with particular importance to this study's research questions. This resulted in a manageable, but more nuanced depiction of the magazines' content than the quantitative component of the study.

## **Limitations**

In addition to the inherent limitations of this study caused by the categorization process, another limitation also stems from the materials examined. First, *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* are English-language media products geared towards a Western audience. Thus, the findings in this study are not likely to be representative of the Islamic State's messaging in its entirety, as the organization produces content in a variety of different languages and likely tailors its messaging to particular regional audiences. Furthermore, while important, influential, and implicated in several terrorist attacks, *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* only represent one weapon in the Islamic State's communications arsenal. As a result, this study should not be understood to be representative of the group's communications and recruitment strategy in its entirety, as content disseminated through different online

media, ranging from full-length production videos to Twitter direct messages (DMs), may be employed to target different audiences or address different topics.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Droogan, and Peattie, Mapping the Thematic Landscape of Dabiq Magazine, 592-593.

## Chapter 3. Connecting ISIS' Territorial Control to Its Propaganda: The Creation of Analytical Groupings

To identify relationships between the Islamic State's propaganda content and its territorial holdings, this study breaks the twenty issues of the sample into three broad analytical groupings (AGs). These groupings serve two purposes. First, they denote different phases of the Islamic State's territorial control. The first grouping, AG1, encompasses the period containing the group's peak territorial holdings and its greatest period of territorial expansion. The second grouping encompasses the early stages of the group's territorial decline where it still enjoyed some military success, and the third grouping contains the period where the group had very limited military success and had lost over one-third of its territory. Second, these groupings situate thematically similar issues of *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* chronologically within the aforementioned phases of ISIS' territorial control. The goal is to facilitate analysis of the relationship between qualitative trends in the group's messaging content and its territorial holdings over the course of the sample. In effect, the groupings serve as an analytical shorthand to connect changes in the Islamic State's messaging content to its circumstances on the ground in Iraq and Syria. The intent of the analytical groupings is not to create rigid, reified categories, but rather to develop tools that facilitate qualitative analysis and avoid the repetition that would stem from continually referencing specific territorial gains and losses. The placement of an issue in one of the three analytical groupings is not intended to signify that its contents are dramatically different than those of other issues, but rather to indicate that broader qualitative changes are underway in the group's messaging during that period, as will be illustrated during the qualitative analysis components of this study.

To situate the group's magazines' within the different phases of ISIS' territorial control, this study draws on open source data, as well as geospatial analysis and quantitative territorial estimates from IHS Conflict Monitor.<sup>31</sup> Unless otherwise stated, estimates of the Islamic State's territorial holdings are derived from IHS Conflict Monitor data, as they provide the only semi-annual, numeric estimates of the Islamic State's

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<sup>31</sup> IHS Conflict Monitor is a wing of IHS Markit, an information and analysis firm that provides data and analysis on the Islamic State and Syrian Civil War.

territorial holdings and have been also been used by other scholars studying the Islamic State. Because IHS began tracking the Islamic State's holdings in 2015, the aggregate estimates of the group's territorial decline are likely conservative, as they begin after the group's territorial peak. Other estimates, such as those by the RAND Corporation, place the Islamic State's domestic territorial zenith in Iraq and Syria in the fall of 2014 at 105,869km<sup>2</sup>, declining to 45,377km<sup>2</sup> by the winter of 2017, a contraction of 57% compared to IHS' 34%.<sup>32</sup> However, because the dates of the RAND are less precise and they do not provide semi-annual updates on the Islamic State's territorial control, IHS Conflict Monitor data was selected for this study.

The following section provides an overview of the Islamic State's territorial gains and losses during the period encompassed by each analytical grouping and outlines which issues of *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* fall within each of the three groupings.

### **Analytical Grouping One: The Establishment and Expansion of the Caliphate**

#### **Dabiq Issues 1-5 (July 5th 2014 – November 21st 2014)**

#### **Territorial Holdings: Greater Than or Equal to 91,531km<sup>2</sup>**

The first analytical grouping corresponds with the Islamic State's greatest period of domestic and foreign territorial expansion. In the months leading up to the release of the first issue of *Dabiq* on July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2014, ISIS was riding a wave of success and expanding its state rapidly. The group, which had captured the Syrian city of Raqqa in January 2014, began its rapid advance into Iraq that June, seizing the country's second city, Mosul, on June 10<sup>th</sup> and Tikrit the following day.<sup>33</sup> In Iraq, the group also captured significant portions of the Nineveh, Al-Anbar and Saladin governorates, the city of Fallujah, and portions of Ramadi leading up to the release of its first issue of *Dabiq*. On the Syrian side of the border, the group seized control of portions of Deir Ezzor province, which allowed it to

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<sup>32</sup> Jones et al, 84-85, 100-101.

<sup>33</sup> Fazel Hawramy, "Isis Militants Seize Central Iraqi City of Tikrit", The Guardian, June 11<sup>th</sup> 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/11/isis-militants-seize-control-iraqi-city-tikrit>.

capture several strategic border crossings and the towns of Abu Kamal and al-Qaim.<sup>34</sup> Thus, when the first issue of *Dabiq* was released on July 5<sup>th</sup> 2014, the group has already amassed considerable territory and begun the construction of its state.

Following the release of the first issue of *Dabiq*, ISIS continued its territorial expansion, extending its control into Iraq's Nineveh, Al-Anbar and Saladin governorates, along with sections of Syria's al-Raqqqa, Deir-Ezzor and Al-Hasakah provinces. In Iraq, ISIS gained control over the towns of Sinjar, Wana, and Zumar.<sup>35</sup> In August, following the release of *Dabiq* Issue 2, ISIS captured the strategically important Mosul Dam, and in Syria, it expanded its control and influence along the internal border between the Hama and Homs provinces, stretching its territorial control from the Iraqi-Syrian border deeper into central Syria.<sup>36</sup> In the fall of 2014, the group advanced on the Syrian-Turkish border town of Kobane and seizing several villages in the surrounding area, as well gaining control over the Iraqi town of Hit.<sup>37</sup> While precise dates are unknown due to lack of available information and the dynamic nature of the war against the Islamic State,

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<sup>34</sup> Ali Abdallah Suleiman. "ISIS Announces Islamic Caliphate, Changes Name.", *Al-Monitor*, June 30, 2014. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2014/06/iraq-syria-isis-announcement-islamic-caliphate-name-change.html>; Martin Chulov. "Isis Insurgents Seize Control of Iraqi City of Mosul." *The Guardian*, June 10, 2014, sec. World news. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/10/iraq-sunni-insurgents-islamic-militants-seize-control-mosul>.

<sup>35</sup> "ISIL Captures Anbar Province Town in Iraq, Kills 19 Police." Al-Jazeera, December 13<sup>th</sup>, 2014. <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/12/13/isil-al-wafa-attack.html>; "Syria Retakes Homs Gas Field from Hardline Group." *Reuters*, July 27, 2014. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-gasfield/syria-retakes-homs-gas-field-from-hardline-group-idUSKBN0FW0HO20140727>.

<sup>36</sup> Filkins, Dexter. "A Bigger Problem Than ISIS?" *The New Yorker*, December 26, 2016. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/01/02/a-bigger-problem-than-isis>; "IS Fighters Seize Syria Airbase." *BBC News*, August 24, 2014. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28918792>.

<sup>37</sup> "Islamic State Steps up Attack on Syrian Town of Kobane", *BBC News*, October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2014. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29474879>.

estimates by RAND Corporation place the Islamic State's peak territorial holdings in the fall of 2014 at 105, 869 km<sup>2</sup>.<sup>38</sup>

In addition to ISIS' domestic gains in Iraq and Syria, AG1 also saw the acquisition of several *wilayah* outside of Iraq and the Levant. The group officially announced that it had accepted *bay'ah* from groups in the Arabian Peninsula, Yemen, Sinai Peninsula, Libya, and Algeria and established *wilayah* in those regions, the first major global expansion of their Caliphate.<sup>39</sup> Overall, AG1 can be characterized as the Islamic State's greatest period of success, as the group accrued a string of military victories, captured vast portions of Iraqi and Syrian territory and placed millions of people under their control. As will be demonstrated in the following sections, this period of victory, success and expansion on the ground is reflected both quantitatively and qualitatively in the Islamic State's messaging content.

### **Analytical Grouping Two: The Beginning of the Caliphate's Decline**

#### **Dabiq Issues 6-13 (December 29th 2014 - 12th 2015 – January 19th 2016)**

#### **Territorial Holdings: 14.8% Decline (91,531km<sup>2</sup> January 2015 – 78,000km<sup>2</sup> January 2016)**

In contrast to AG1, which contained (and was preceded by) a period of significant territorial expansion, AG2 features a moderate decline in the group's aggregate territorial holdings, but also includes the seizure of several key pieces of territory and population centers.<sup>40</sup> As a result, this period was neither an overwhelming success for to ISIS' military campaign and state-building project, nor a dramatic failure.

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<sup>38</sup> "Department of Defense Press Briefing by Colonel Dillon via Teleconference from Baghdad." *U.S. Department Of Defense*. October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2017. <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1345953/department-of-defense-press-briefing-by-colonel-dillon-via-teleconference-from/>; Jones et al, xii.

<sup>39</sup> "Dabiq Team, "Foreword", *Dabiq Issue 5: Remaining and Expanding*, November 21<sup>st</sup>, 2014.

<sup>40</sup> Zack Beauchamp, "Map: ISIS Has Lost 9.4 Percent of Its Territory This Year", *Vox*, July 30<sup>th</sup> 2015, <https://www.vox.com/2015/7/30/9069705/isis-map-10-percent>.

During this period, ISIS' Caliphate contracts domestically but expands globally. At the beginning of the AG2, the Islamic State advances to within 32km of Ramadi, but is pushed out of Kobane, a town on the Syrian-Turkish border. The Islamic State's loss in Kobane marks the first major deployment of U.S. airpower in the fight against ISIS and the most significant halt in the group's advance since its rise in the summer of 2014.<sup>41</sup> The group is also forced out of the Iraqi city of Tikrit in early April.<sup>42</sup> However, in the interval between the release of Issue 8 and 9 (March 30<sup>th</sup> to May 21<sup>st</sup> 2015), ISIS makes several important domestic territorial gains, including the capture of Syria's Yarmouk Palestinian Refugee camp in Damascus, Ramadi, the capital of Iraq's al-Anbar governorate, and the Syrian town of Palmyra.<sup>43</sup> These victories give ISIS control over or within substantial urban population centers, marking significant military and territorial victories. However, despite these specific territorial seizures, ISIS' aggregate territorial control in Iraq and Syria dropped by 8,500km<sup>2</sup>, or 9.4% by June 29<sup>th</sup>, largely due to defeats suffered to Kurdish forces in Northern Syria.<sup>44</sup>

Furthermore, from July to mid-November, the international coalition ramps up its airstrikes and ISIS suffers a series of territorial setbacks. In Syria, ISIS loses control over Al-Hasakah to Syrian regime and YPG forces. In Iraq, ISIS loses 10 villages near Kirkuk,

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<sup>41</sup> "Key Events in Battle for Kobane." *BBC News*, June 25, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29688108>.

<sup>42</sup> "Iraq Forces, Pushing ISIS Out of Tikrit, Give Few Thanks for U.S. Airstrikes", *The New York Times*, April 2<sup>nd</sup> 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/03/world/middleeast/isis-forces-pushed-out-of-tikrit.html>.

<sup>43</sup> Anne Barnard, "Islamic State Seizes Palestinian Refugee Camp in Syria", *The New York Times*, April 4<sup>th</sup> 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/05/world/middleeast/islamic-state-seizes-palestinian-refugee-camp-in-syria.html>; "Palmyra: Historic Syrian City Falls under Control of Isis", *The Guardian*, May 21<sup>st</sup> 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/20/syrian-city-of-palmyra-falls-under-control-of-isis>.

<sup>44</sup> Hugo Foster, "Mapping Militant Activity in Iraq and Syria." July 21<sup>st</sup>, 2015, <http://janes.ihs.com.proxy.lib.sfu.ca/Janes/Display/jir11983-jir-2015>.

the city of Sinjar, and strategic highway access to Iraqi Kurdish forces.<sup>45</sup> Following the release of *Dabiq* Issue 12, ISIS was pushed out of Ramadi, which, being a major urban center, represents a significant blow to the group's state-building project.<sup>46</sup>

Overall, during the period encompassed by AG2, the Islamic State's overall territorial holdings in Iraq and Syria decrease by 14.8%, but the period also included several substantial seizures of land in large population centers, like Ramadi, or in the case of Yarmouk Refugee Camp on the outskirts of the Syrian capital. In contrast to AG1, where the Islamic State's expansion was rapid and relatively unhindered, in AG2 the group was engaged in contested, back-and-forth fighting. This increasingly intense fighting, which took place on multiple fronts, illustrated the limits of the Islamic State's military strength and its declining ability to consolidate its gains and continue waging a multi-front war under the duress of coalition airstrikes.<sup>47</sup>

### **Analytical Grouping Three: The Continuing Decline**

**Dabiq Issues 14 & 15, Rumiya Issues 1-5 (April 13th 2016 – January 6th 2017)**

**Territorial Holdings AG3: Decline of 19.2% (78,000km<sup>2</sup> January 2016 – 60,400km<sup>2</sup> January 2017)**

**Territorial Holdings Total: Decline of 34.0% (91,531km<sup>2</sup> January 5th 2015 - 60,400km<sup>2</sup> January 9th 2017)**

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<sup>45</sup> "Report: ISIS Ousted From Syrian City of Hasakah", *Newsweek*, July 30<sup>th</sup>, 2015. <http://www.newsweek.com/hasakah-isis-kurds-assadhasakah-cityal-hasakahsyriaisislamic-601758>; "Kurds Take 10 Villages from Islamic State in North Iraq." *Reuters*, August 26<sup>th</sup>, 2015. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-kurds/kurds-take-10-villages-from-islamic-state-in-north-iraq-idUSKCN0QV00O20150826>.

<sup>46</sup> Laris Karklis and Tim Meko. "The Rise and Fall of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria." *Washington Post*, October 17<sup>th</sup> 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/world/rise-and-fall-of-isis/>.

<sup>47</sup> "Islamic State's Caliphate Shrinks by 14 Percent in 2015", *IHS Online Newsroom*, December 21<sup>st</sup>, 2015, <http://news.ihsmarket.com/press-release/aerospace-defense-security/islamic-states-caliphate-shrinks-14-percent-2015>.

While ISIS sustained notable net territorial losses during AG2 at 14.8%, they also managed several significant territorial conquests. However, during the period encompassed by AG3, the Islamic State suffers a series of successive territorial losses with few territorial gains or state-building successes to offset them. From January 2016, the end of AG2, to October 2016, the group loses an additional 16% of its Caliphate's territory. In Iraq, the group loses control of territories between Mosul and Tikrit, as well as regions to the west and north west of Ramadi. This territory includes a traditional stronghold on Sunni jihadists in Iraq, the city of Fallujah. In Syria, ISIS is ousted from a large swathe of territory near the Iraqi border south of al-Hasakah, the city of Palmyra and territory surrounding it, and regions in Syria's north-west along the Turkish border and near the town of Manbij, including the towns of Jarablus and Azaz.<sup>48</sup> By October 3<sup>rd</sup>, ISIS' territorial losses had reached 27.7% of its January 2015 holdings.

Following the release of the *Rumiyah* Issue 2 on October 4<sup>th</sup> 2016, ISIS loses the town of Dabiq, a significant symbolic blow to group, as Dabiq was heavily emphasized in its eschatology. In addition, the Iraqi government forces begin their assault on ISIS' Iraqi capital of Mosul. Through mid-October and November, Iraqi government forces retake a series of villages and capture a substantial swathe of ISIS-held territory south of Mosul and Syrian rebels capture numerous villages east of ISIS-held al-Bab. While ISIS does manage one significant victory, the recapture Palmyra from the Syrian regime on December 11<sup>th</sup> 2016, their net territorial losses continue to mount. By January 9<sup>th</sup>, three days after the release of *Rumiyah* Issue 5 (the final issue examined in this study) ISIS' domestic territorial holdings are placed at 60,400 km<sup>2</sup>, a loss of 34% from January 2015.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> "Islamic State Caliphate Shrinks by 16 Percent in 2016", *IHS Online Newsroom*, October 9<sup>th</sup> 2016. <http://news.ihsmarket.com/press-release/aerospace-defense-security/islamic-state-caliphate-shrinks-16-percent-2016-ihs-market->

<sup>49</sup> "Islamic State Lost Almost a Quarter of Its Territory in 2016, IHS Markit Says", *IHS Online Newsroom*, January 18<sup>th</sup>, 2017. <http://news.ihsmarket.com/press-release/aerospace-defense-security/islamic-state-lost-almost-quarter-its-territory-2016-ihs-ma>.

## Chapter 4. Literature Review & Propaganda and Radicalization Frameworks - Developing the Analytical Tools

Examining the relationship between the Islamic State's territorial control and its propaganda content is useful in its own right, as it provides insight into how the organization 'thinks', evolves, and responds to adversity. However, understanding how these changes impact the propaganda's efficacy as a tool for radicalizing and recruiting prospective members provides a far more substantive contribution to our understanding of the Islamic State's propaganda, and the connection between propaganda and radicalization more broadly. To do so, this study develops and employs two analytical frameworks. The rationale for the creation and use of these frameworks is outlined below.

Evaluating the efficacy of the Islamic State's propaganda is a complex and challenging process. For example, assessing *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*'s effectiveness using data such as the number of English-speaking foreign fighters joining ISIS, or the number of terror attacks committed by English-speaking ISIS sympathizers would be highly unreliable as these figures are subject to a host of interfering factors, such as improved state security techniques or increased travel restrictions, let alone our ability to know what propaganda these individuals have consumed.<sup>50</sup> In addition, while some scholars have identified correlations between the messages in ISIS' propaganda and the attacks carried out by ISIS sympathizers, using these correlations as measurement tools would also be highly unreliable, as we cannot know if the sympathizers' actions were inspired by the group's propaganda.<sup>51</sup>

Furthermore, there is a lack of existing scholarly research examining the role of propaganda in radicalization. As scholars like Sageman and Aly have identified, there is a dearth of empirical research investigating the relationship between the internet and

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<sup>50</sup> Conway, "Determining the Role of the Internet in Violent Extremism and Terrorism: Six Suggestions for Progressing Research", 91.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 91.

political violence.<sup>52</sup> While researchers have found, as Stern points out, “so many examples of extremists who have been influenced by “preachers of hate” and Internet propaganda”, and studies have shown a link between online engagement with extremist groups and offline participation, there is a lack of empirical evidence demonstrating causal links between the consumption of extremist propaganda and radicalization, and furthermore, how propaganda facilitates that radicalization.<sup>53</sup>

Due to unreliability of using foreign fighter or terrorist attack statistics, as well as gaps in the existing literature, this study has developed two novel theoretical frameworks to analyze the efficacy of the Islamic State’s propaganda: a ‘radicalization framework and a ‘propaganda framework’ (see Table 2 below). These frameworks draw on insights and analytical tools from studies of the radicalization process, the sub-field of extremist propaganda, and studies of social movements, allowing the researcher to use existing scholarly knowledge to make inferences and evaluate changes in the efficacy of the Islamic State’s propaganda. The radicalization framework was developed by reviewing the theoretical and empirical literature on the radicalization process, and drawing out factors within that process that scholars have deemed important to radicalization. Due to the focus of this study, the framework draws primarily on literature examining the radicalization process of Islamist radicals. Similarly, the propaganda framework draws on insights and analytical tools from the scholarly literature on extremist movement propaganda and social movements, identifying key messaging strategies employed by these movements to create persuasive messages and facilitate collective action. Because radicalization hinges on an individual aligning their values, identity, worldview, and ultimately actions with those of an extremist movement, and propaganda is the “deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior” in a way that furthers the ends of the propagandist, using frameworks derived from these bodies of literature provides a

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<sup>52</sup> Anne Aly “Brothers, Believers, Brave Mujahideen: Focusing Attention on the Audience of Violent Jihadist Preachers”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 40, no. 1 (2017): 62-76.

<sup>53</sup> Jessica Stern, “Response to Marc Sageman’s ‘The Stagnation in Terrorism Research,’” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no. 4 (2014): 607–613; Aly, Brothers, Believers, Brave Mujahideen: Focusing Attention on the Audience of Violent Jihadist Preachers, 62-63.

means of evaluating how changes in Islamic State propaganda may impact its capacity contribute to radicalization and persuade recruits to engage in collective action.<sup>54</sup>

Evaluating the efficacy of the Islamic State's propaganda using these two frameworks is limited by several factors. First, it is constrained by the incomplete scholarly understandings of the relationship between propaganda and radicalization. Second, it is limited by the specific criteria used in the frameworks, which represent a selection, rather than an exhaustive accounting, of critical factors in the processes of radicalization and persuasion. Third, due to the scope of this thesis, and the challenges and danger inherent in such a process, this study does not collect individual-level data, such as interview testimony from former or prospective Islamic State members describing the appeal of ISIS' propaganda. As a result, this study cannot draw definitive conclusions regarding the radicalizing efficacy of the group's propaganda. Instead, it aims to make inferences and generate limited but valuable insights into the radicalizing and recruitment potential of the Islamic State's propaganda. In doing so, it contributes to existing scholarship by linking instructive findings from radicalization studies to scholarship on extremist propaganda.

Furthermore, this study provides a foundation for future empirical studies to test the veracity of existing scholarly knowledge on the relationship between radicalization and propaganda. By evaluating the Islamic State's propaganda using these analytical frameworks, this study illustrates what we would *expect to find*, based on the existing scholarship, when collecting individual-level data on the changing efficacy of the Islamic State's propaganda. This provides a useful foundation for theory testing and a means of evaluating and advancing the state of scholarship on radicalization and propaganda, as future empirical studies can confirm, falsify or complicate the conclusions drawn from this framework-based analysis. Given the increasing pervasiveness of online extremist propaganda, and the lack of scholarship assessing its efficacy, working toward a better understanding of the interplay between an extremist movement's propaganda, its external circumstances, and the effectiveness of its messaging, can yield useful insights for both scholars and counter-terrorism and counter-messaging practitioners.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Wilbur, *Propaganda's Place in Strategic Communication*, 209

<sup>55</sup> Conway, 82.

The table below provides an overview of the criteria in each framework. Following this study’s content analysis in Chapter 5 and 6, the two analytical frameworks will be applied to the findings in Chapter 7. The following components of this chapter will provide an overview of relevant scholarship, outline the theoretical contributions and empirical findings that underlie the individual criteria of each framework, and explain how the criteria will be applied to the findings of this study.

**Table 2: Analytical Frameworks**

Radicalization Framework	Propaganda Framework
Belonging and Community	Collective Action Framing & Crisis-Solution Constructs
Sense of Purpose and Meaning	Reinforcement of In-and-Out Groups
Victimization and Discrimination	Credibility
Threat to Islam and Muslims	

## The Radicalization Process

To gain insight into the Islamic State’s propaganda, it is important to understand the array of forces that contribute to an individual’s decision to join an extremist movement. In short, it is critical to understand the radicalization process. The literature on radicalization has advanced substantially from the early studies that depicted terrorists as ‘deranged’ and categorically different than the population at large. Rather, following the path-breaking work of scholars like John Horgan, contemporary studies focus on understanding the “pathways” not “profiles” of terrorists. That is, current scholarship focuses on understanding how social, psychological and structural factors influence an individual’s radicalization, rather than searching for specific personality traits that predispose people to violence.<sup>56</sup> While many studies have examined the role structural forces in driving terrorism, such as James A. Piazza’s Large-N studies on state failure,

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<sup>56</sup> John Horgan, “From Profiles to Pathways and Roots to Routes: Perspectives from Psychology on Radicalization into Terrorism,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 618, (2008): 80-94, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40375777>.

poverty, minority economic discrimination, most contemporary scholarship looks to social and psychological factors to elucidate the radicalization process.<sup>57</sup> While they do not discount the important role played by structural forces like poverty, unemployment and political marginalization, scholars examining this process see structural factors as insufficient in explaining radicalization. Simply put, while many people are systemically disadvantaged, few radicalize. Thus, factors beyond structural marginalization must play a role in driving individuals towards violent extremism.<sup>58</sup>

In shifting their focus from large scale political and socio-economic factors, scholars of terrorism investigate how the interplay between complex individual psychological forces, such as existential angst, identity crises, alienation, and the search for belonging, purpose and meaning, have interacted with broader social forces, like perceptions of communal discrimination and the breakdown of tradition, to turn the cogs of radicalization. Despite significant research over the last several decades, scholars have been unable to fully explain why some individuals radicalize, adopting extremist worldviews and joining terrorist groups, while others, subject to many of the same factors, do not. To approach an answer to the question “what causes radicalization?”, scholars have conceptualized radicalization as a “process”, or for some, a “puzzle”.<sup>59</sup> In this view, radicalization, is not a single event suited to a parsimonious explanation. Rather, it is the culmination of many processes that involves rendering an individual susceptible to radical ideas, exposing them to those ideas, creating an alignment between their worldview,

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<sup>57</sup> James A. Piazza, “Incubators of Terror: Do Failed States Promote Transnational Terrorism?”, *International Studies Quarterly* 52 (2008): 469-488; Piazza, James A. “Poverty, Minority Economic Discrimination, and Domestic Terrorism”, *Journal of Peace Research* 48, no. 3, (2011): 339-353.

<sup>58</sup> Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen. “Violent Radicalization in Europe: What We Know and What We Do Not Know.” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 33, no. 9 (2010); 809.

<sup>59</sup> Michael King and Donald M. Taylor. “The Radicalization of Homegrown Jihadists: A Review of Theoretical Models and Social Psychological Evidence.” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 23, no. 4 (2011): 602-622, DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2011.587064; Mohammed Hafez and Creighton Mullins. “The Radicalization Puzzle: A Theoretical Synthesis of Empirical Approaches to Homegrown Extremism.” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, no. 11 (2015): 961-964, DOI: 10.1080/1057610X.2015.1051375.

identity, and values and those of a radical movement, and ultimately, the opportunity to join a movement.

## Conceptualizing Radicalization

Scholars differ on how exactly the process (or processes) of radicalization take place. In many theoretical models, radicalization is conceptualized as a largely progressive, linear process, where a prospective radical moves, step-by-step, closer to radicalization. This view is encapsulated by the metaphor of a “staircase” in Moghaddam’s “Staircase to Terrorism”. Moghaddam’s staircase sees radicalization as beginning with the perception of poor material conditions and unfair treatment, which cause frustration and moral engagement, which then solidifies categorical or “us vs. them” thinking, prior to the final step of a radical carrying out a violent act.<sup>60</sup> Wiktorowicz’ model, which is derived from his own ethnographic research on a radical Islamist group, follows a similar linear, progressive trajectory. He asserts that individuals must first experience a “cognitive opening” where they become willing to consider radical viewpoints, be “religious seeking”, and achieve “frame alignment”, where the ideology of a radical group resonates with their worldview, before they decide to join a radical group. After joining a group, they undergo a process of socialization, which deepens their ideological convictions, and in some cases, conditions them for violence.<sup>61</sup> Both of these models emphasize the importance of “catalyst events”, such as real or perceived discrimination or personal crises, as initiators of the radicalization process. The importance of catalyst events in radicalization is supported by other scholars such as Borum and Silke.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> R. B. Lygre, Eid, J., Larsson, G. And Ranstorp, M. “Terrorism as a process: A critical review of Moghaddam’s “Staircase to Terrorism”. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, 52 (2011): 609–616. DOI:10.1111/j.1467-9450.2011.00918.x.

<sup>61</sup> Quintan Wiktorowicz. “Joining the Cause: Al-Muhajiroun and Radical Islam”. *Rhodes College*. (2003): 1-29.

<sup>62</sup> Andrew Silke. “Holy Warriors: Exploring the Psychological Processes of Jihadi Radicalization.” *European Journal of Criminology* 5, no. 1 (2008): 113-117. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477370807084226>; Randy Borum. "Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories." *Journal of Strategic Security* 4, no. 4 (2012): 7-36. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.4.4.1>.

In contrast to these linear, progressive models, other scholars have posited that radicalization is a concurrent process, not a sequential one. Models like Sageman's "Four Prongs" model and Hafez and Mullins' "Radicalization Puzzle", contend that radicalization is the result of the interplay between cognitive and external factors. Sageman argues that three cognitive and one situational factor are critical to the radicalization process. The cognitive factors are "moral outrage", the adoption of the radical group's ideological "frame" and the resonance of that frame with personal experience. The situational factor is the interaction with like-minded people through social networks. Sageman argues "moral outrage" is caused by perceptions of injustice, citing the example that the 2003 invasion of Iraq became the primary recruiting vehicle for violent Islamist extremists. As a prospective radical's sense of moral outrage becomes intertwined with a radical ideological frame and begins to resonate with their own experiences, often of discrimination or marginalization, their interpretation of events is simultaneously validated by other radicalized people in their social network, creating an echo chamber that reinforces the cognitive elements of the process.<sup>63</sup> Similarly, Hafez and Mullins see radicalization as the interaction between four elements: *grievances*, ranging from economic and cultural marginalization to personal disaffection, *networks* made up of friends or kin, where extreme beliefs are diffused and intertwined in dynamics of peer pressure and group think, *ideologies*, which provide master narratives, incorporating personal and collective grievances into a broader critique of the status quo, and *enabling environments*, such as the internet or terrorist training camps where individuals can deepen their commitment to their emergent extreme beliefs.<sup>64</sup>

Despite their differences in their conceptualization of radicalization, these four models share several important commonalities. First, various catalyst events are integral to each model, rendering the individual susceptible to the lure of extremist beliefs and ideology. Second, each model suggests that a critical component of the radicalization process involves aligning one's personal beliefs and ideas with those of the radical group, illustrating the potential for propaganda, which can facilitate "us vs. them" thinking and offer "master narratives" or ideological "frames", to play a contributing role in radicalization.

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<sup>63</sup> King, and. Taylor, 608.

<sup>64</sup> Hafez and Mullins, 961.

Furthermore, these models indicate that radical ideas, through a variety of pathways, such as resonance with personal experience or through group-think and peer pressure, come to be viewed as ‘solutions’ to individuals’ crises or correct interpretations of the world and world events, aligning the radical “frame” with an individuals’ values and identity. The four criteria of the radicalization framework utilized in this study fall within these two categories of “catalysts” and “solutions” that undergird the radicalization process. While exposure to extremist propaganda alone is unlikely to cause radicalization, by tapping into key drivers of radicalization, extremist messaging can contribute to or stimulate various aspects of the radicalization process by accentuating catalysts and offering ‘solutions’. The following section will explain the importance of the four criteria to the radicalization process, situate them in the scholarship, and describe how they will be evaluated in Chapter 7 of this thesis.

## **The Catalysts**

Throughout the literature, the initiation of the radicalization process is widely viewed conceptually—and supported empirically—as beginning with a crisis.<sup>65</sup> This initial crisis phase, described as a “cognitive opening” by Wiktorowicz, occurs when an event or ongoing process “shake[s] certainty in previously accepted beliefs and render[s] an individual more receptive to the possibility of alternative views and perspectives”.<sup>66</sup> These crises can be triggered by external factors, such as job loss or perceptions of a political injustice, as well as idiosyncratic personal issues, such as the death of a loved one or feelings of isolation from community. Furthermore, these crises do not need to be single events, but can also develop over time. For example, many scholars argue that, for Western Muslims, a ‘crisis of self’ often stems from a tension between the individual’s Western identity and cultural surroundings and one’s ethnic and religious heritage, resulting in feelings of deep uncertainty about their identity and intense feelings of non-belonging. Radicalism driven by identity-crises is particularly acute amongst second and third generation immigrants, who are often more disconnected from their ethnic and religious roots and social networks. However, as the disproportionately high number of non-immigrant Muslim converts that join radical Islamist groups attests, crises of self-

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<sup>65</sup> King and Taylor, 602–22.

<sup>66</sup> Neumann, Peter, “Recruitment and Mobilisation for the Islamist Militant Movement in Europe”, *King’s College London* (2007): 67; King and Taylor, 605-607.

identity acting as catalysts for radicalization are not exclusive to immigrant Muslims.<sup>67</sup> Two catalysts of identity or internal “crisis” that are viewed as key contributors to Islamist radicalization within the scholarship are feelings of victimization and discrimination, and political grievances, often manifested as a perception of ‘threat’ to Islam itself.

### **Victimization and Discrimination**

In studies of radicalization amongst Western Muslims, feelings of victimization and discrimination are widely seen as catalysts of crisis that render individuals susceptible to radical answers. Theoretical models of the radicalization process by Borum, Moghaddam, Wiktorowicz and Sageman all explicitly or implicitly include some form of discrimination in the early stages of their models, seeing discrimination as one of several possible forces that can initiate the radicalization process. Discrimination is divided into two major forms: socio-political and economic.<sup>68</sup>

Socio-political forms of discrimination such as racism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, and exclusion from national culture are consistently found to contribute to cognitive openings.<sup>69</sup> Hafez and Mullins argue that actions such as headscarf bans, or cartoons of the Prophet Mohammad, contribute to feelings of victimization and exclusion for many Western Muslims, especially when paired with broader xenophobic sentiments in the national politics of Western countries.<sup>70</sup> When analyzing the responses of Western Muslims to two sets of Pew survey data, Victoroff et al find, that when young Muslims perceive high-levels of discrimination against their Muslim co-religionists in the West, it is significantly associated with the belief that suicide bombing is justified.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, in their

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid, King and Taylor, 611-612; Lorenzo Vidino, Francesco Marone, Eva Entenmann. *Fear Thy Neighbor: Radicalization and Jihadist Attacks in the West*, (International Center for Counter-terrorism, 2017), 16.

<sup>68</sup> King and Taylor, 605.

<sup>69</sup> Hafez, and Mullins, 961-964.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 692-693.

<sup>71</sup> Jeff Victoroff, Janice R. Adelman, and Miriam Matthews, “Psychological Factors Associated with Support for Suicide Bombing in the Muslim Diaspora,” *Political Psychology* 33 no. 6 (2012): 799, DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-9221.2012.00913.x

studies, Sirseldoudi, Neumann and Wiktorowicz all find that experiences of discrimination contributed to individuals' identity crises and decision to embrace radical Islam.<sup>72</sup> For example, Neumann argues that exclusion from national culture can be a powerful trigger of radicalization for Western Muslims. He cites an interview with a French Muslim radical who explains, "I am a French Muslim... a republican who doesn't see any contradiction with the principles of my religion... [Yet] I am [still] regarded with suspicion", which prevented him from integrating and drove his radicalization.<sup>73</sup> Radical Islamist groups are able to capitalize on feelings of marginalization to facilitate recruitment. In an interview with Wiktorowicz, a recruiter for the radical Islamist group *Al Muhajiroun*, illustrates the importance of racism in increasing Western Muslims' susceptibility to radical messages. He states, "If there is no racism in the West, there is no conflict of identity. People, when they suffer in the West, it makes them *think*. If there is no discrimination or racism, I think it would be very difficult for us".<sup>74</sup> As victims of discrimination, questions over one's identity become more acute and individuals begin to question the justness of Western society, rendering them more susceptible to radical narratives or ideologies that provide simplistic and certain explanations for their mistreatment and place blame at the feet of Western governments and culture.

Economic marginalization is also found to contribute to the feelings of victimization that renders individuals more receptive to extremist ideologies. However, most scholars do not find that straightforward economic metrics, such as wealth or unemployment, to be strong indicators of radicalization potential. Rather, following Gurr's path-breaking work *Why Men Rebel*, most scholars argue that "relative deprivation"—the perception that an individual or their identity group is unfairly deprived of opportunities for advancement—is a key contributor to the early stages of radicalization.<sup>75</sup> As King and Taylor argue, "personal relative deprivation has been linked to more inward-oriented emotions, such as

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<sup>72</sup> Matenia Sirseldoudi. "The Meaning of Religion and Identity for the Violent Radicalisation of the Turkish Diaspora in Germany." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 24, no. 5 (2012): 816, DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2011.644105; Neumann, 4; Wiktorowicz, *Joining the Cause*, 1-29.

<sup>73</sup> Neumann, 67.

<sup>74</sup> Wiktorowicz, *Joining the Cause*, 16.

<sup>75</sup> Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1970), 24.

decreased self-esteem, delinquency, and depression, whereas group-based relative deprivation has been found to be a stronger predictor of collective action and prejudice toward other groups".<sup>76</sup> Perceptions of relative deprivation contributing to radical Islamism was also found to be an important factor in a study by Buijs, Demant, and Hamdy. These scholars compared the worldviews of democratically active Moroccan youth in the Netherlands with other Dutch-Moroccan youth involved with branches of the *Salafi* movement, including "radical groups espousing violent views".<sup>77</sup> They found that when discussing the socioeconomic and political situation of Muslims in the Netherlands, the democratically active groups focused on the prospect of affecting positive change, whereas the radical groups stressed their structural exclusion, suggesting strong perceptions of discrimination within national systems is a contributing factor to individuals' decisions to join radical groups.<sup>78</sup>

Given the importance attributed to perceptions of victimization and discrimination in theoretical models and empirical studies, extremist propaganda that taps into these emotions and provides ideological frames that connect these feelings to a broader ideological struggle can become a "powerful sense-making device" for those who feel marginalized and disaffected.<sup>79</sup> As a result, this study will qualitatively examine how changes in the Islamic State's propaganda impact its ability to exploit perceptions of victimization, by highlighting injustices such as racism, political, social and economic exclusion, and xenophobia facing Western Muslims. Doing so will serve as an important indicator of their propaganda's ability to create "frames" that resonate with their target audience and facilitate "frame alignment", contributing to the embrace of the Islamic State's radical worldview. As will be elaborated upon in Chapter 7, this study finds, somewhat unexpectedly, that the Islamic State makes a restrained effort to highlight racism, political exclusion and other forms individual-level victimization and discrimination

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<sup>76</sup> King and Taylor, 609.

<sup>77</sup> Dalgaard-Nielsen, 809.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 809.

<sup>79</sup> Neumann, 70.

facing Muslims, focusing far more on the threats facing 'Islam' and a whole. As a result, its ability to tap into these catalysts remains relatively unchanged across the sample.

### **Threat to Islam and Muslims**

In addition to feelings of personal discrimination or discrimination against one's self or national community, scholars also find that the perception of threat to the religion of Islam or the broader Muslim *Ummah* to be a driver on Western Muslims' radicalization. As Dalgaard-Neilson explains, the notion of "threat" is critical to radical Islamists' worldview, stating: "Militant Islamism is centered on a narrative, which claims that Islam and Muslims are constantly attacked and humiliated by the West, Israel, and corrupt local regimes in Muslim countries. It claims that in order to return to a society of peace, harmony, and social justice, Muslims need to unite and stand up for their faith".<sup>80</sup> Thus, those who experience "frame alignment" with the radical Islamist 'master narrative' are more likely to willing to engage in violence or join a radical group.<sup>81</sup>

The logic behind "threat" as a catalyst for radicalization is two-fold. First, for those with lower levels of ideological familiarity or commitment to the movement, exposure to the threats facing Muslims, or the injustices perpetrated against them, can trigger a sense of "moral shock" and a greater willingness entertain radical Islamist ideas. For example, scholars have found that, for some, exposure to images of "mutilated children killed in conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine" have combined with other factors to facilitate cognitive openings.<sup>82</sup> For those more deeply committed to a transnational Islamist identity, similar threats can be a catalyst for action, pushing prospective radicals towards violent groups in defense of their "brothers" and "sisters".<sup>83</sup> At an ideological level, the linkage between the threat to Islam and recruitment into jihad is famously exemplified by Abdallah Azzam's concept of "defensive jihad", which framed the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as a threat to the religion itself, therefore making it obligatory for Muslims to fight against the Soviet threat. As Sageman points out, Azzam's notion of "defensive jihad" was

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<sup>80</sup> Dalgaard-Neilson, 798.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 798.

<sup>82</sup> Wiktorowicz, *Joining the Cause*, 17.

<sup>83</sup> Dalgaard-Neilson, 802.

instrumental in driving the recruitment of the so-called “Afghan Arabs” that fought against the Soviets during the Soviet-Afghan War.<sup>84</sup> Similarly, King and Taylor cite reports from American intelligence agencies that found the “invasion of Iraq” became the primary recruiting tool for Islamist extremists in the mid-2000s.<sup>85</sup> At an individual level, Slootman and Tillie’s study of Dutch Muslims finds that only those that expressed strong feelings of both marginalization and a sense that Islam is being threatened exhibited a willingness to use violence as a solution to those ills.<sup>86</sup> When interviewing Muslim radicals in the Netherlands, they also find that “perceived injustices committed against Muslims in conflict areas such as Afghanistan or the Palestinian territories” to be salient contributors to radicalization, particularly among those who took up intellectual leadership roles within the group.<sup>87</sup>

However, threats do not have to be explicitly violent, but rather can come in the form of cultural degeneration or the breakdown of tradition. For example, Dawson and Amarasingam find that, in their sample of Syrian jihadist foreign fighters, the interviewees consistently cited the immorality of Western culture and its degradation of Islam as reasons for joining, such as through the proliferation of perceived ills like pornography and adultery. They also find that, in addition to defending Muslims from “western armies”, their respondents explained they wanted to defend “Muslims in their lands” from the un-Islamic laws instituted by the governments that rule over it.<sup>88</sup> Likewise, in his examination of the transnational *Salafist* movement, Sageman notes that perceptions of Islam’s decline into “decadence”, and the notion that Muslims were taking up “all forms of impious thought and behavior [and] corrupting true Islamic life” have become crucial aspects of the *Salafist*

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<sup>84</sup> Marc Sageman. *Understanding terror networks*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004): 2-3.

<sup>85</sup> King and Taylor, 608.

<sup>86</sup> Jean Tillie, Marieke Slootman Meindert Fennema. “Why Some Muslims Become Radicals An Amsterdam Case Study”, *Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies University of Amsterdam* (2007): 20.

<sup>87</sup> Dalgaard-Nielsen, 807.

<sup>88</sup> Lorne L. Dawson and Amarnath Amarasingam. “Talking to Foreign Fighters: Insights into the Motivations for Hijrah to Syria and Iraq”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, (2016): 11. DOI: 10.1080/1057610X.2016.1274216

movement's appeal in settings where Muslims are minorities, such as India or the West.<sup>89</sup> Thus, when a perceived threat to Muslims or Islam resonates with an individual, it can contribute to their radicalization.

To evaluate the Islamic State's propaganda, this study poses two guiding questions: First, "does the Islamic State maintain the narrative that Islam is under threat?" and second, "will these threats resonate with the group's target audience?". This study finds that the Islamic State's messaging utilizes a wide range of different 'threats' to portray Islam and the *Ummah* as endangered, ranging from military intervention to secular and liberal culture. As a result, it is largely able to maintain the narrative that Islam and Muslims are under threat across the sample. However, in the final quarter of the sample, the group refrains from emphasizing the detrimental effects life in the West purportedly has on a Muslim's piety and faith, a previously important facet of its messaging campaign. As a result, it the group's narrative of threat may become less resonant for certain segments of its target audience who feel a sense of conflict between their religious beliefs and Western society.

## **The 'Solutions'**

Because the process of radicalization often begins with a cognitive opening, where a prospective radical opens themselves up to new ideas due to some form of moral or identity crisis, finding resolutions to those problems through radicalism is an important "pull factor" that can contribute to radicalization. As Kinnvall argues, extremist movements can "provide answers to those in need" as they "supply particularly powerful stories and beliefs because of their ability to convey a picture of security, stability, and simple answers".<sup>90</sup> In doing so, these movements can help resolve crises of identity and provide moral clarity. Where discrimination and threat can produce feelings of uncertainty, alienation and frustration, extremist movements can offer community, stability and clarity of purpose.

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<sup>89</sup> Sageman, 5-6.

<sup>90</sup> Kinnvall, Catarina. "Globalization and Religious Nationalism: Self, Identity, and the Search for Ontological Security." *Political Psychology* 25, no. 5 (2004): 742, DOI: 0162-895X

## Identity, Belonging and Community

One of the key drivers of radicalization identified in the literature is the search for identity, belonging and community. While many pathways to radicalization have been found in empirical studies and theorized in conceptual models, issues related to identity are almost invariably shown to be central to the Islamist radicalization of Western Muslims. For example, literature reviews conducted by Dalgaard-Nielsen, Silke, and King and Taylor all find identity to be a central facet of the empirical and theoretical scholarship on the radicalization process.<sup>91</sup> Issues related to one's identity—an "identity crisis"—are key in facilitating cognitive openings and rendering an individual open to radical ideas, a key precursor to engagement in extremist violence.<sup>92</sup> While there are many factors that can produce a 'crisis of self' in Western Muslims, a tension between an individual's Western identity and cultural surroundings, and one's ethnic and religious heritage, is frequently found to be a key factor. When an individual becomes unable to manage their dual identity, it can result in deep uncertainty about who they are and produce intense feelings of non-belonging.<sup>93</sup> Wilner and Jehanne Dubouloz argue that radicalization "is one way disenfranchised Western Muslim youths have gone about reasserting their religious identity within non-Muslim contexts", explaining that it allows individuals "to recast and rationalise their sense of exclusion, replacing missing interpersonal ties and re-establishing a sense of belonging".<sup>94</sup> As Sageman finds, crises of identity are often brought on by experiences of social marginalization and alienation, noting that that 78% of Al Qaeda recruits had been cut off from their social and cultural origins and were far from their friends and family at the time of joining the group.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Dalgaard-Nielsen, 799; King, and Taylor, 609; Silke, 102.

<sup>92</sup> Wiktorowicz, *Joining the Cause*, 1-29.

<sup>93</sup> Silke, 102.

<sup>94</sup> Alex S. Wilner & Claire-Jehanne Dubouloz. "Homegrown terrorism and transformative learning: an interdisciplinary approach to understanding radicalization", *Global Change, Peace & Security* 22 no. 1, (2010): 41, DOI: 10.1080/14781150903487956

<sup>95</sup> Sageman, 92.

Membership in a radical group can help ‘resolve’ crises of identity and problems of social isolation in two ways. First, joining a radical group can connect individuals to immediate, interpersonal communities, allowing them to attach themselves to a new social network composed of the group’s members. Becoming a member of a radical group can generate a powerful sense of belonging, as one gains membership to a new community made up of like-minded individuals with shared values. As one Islamist radical interviewed by Neumann explains, “people haven’t come to appreciate... what it means to find a family again”, underscoring how radicalization can serve as an avenue to community for those who feel excluded and alienated.<sup>96</sup> Second, attaching oneself to the cause of an extremist movement also offers an individual membership into a broader religious or political “imaginary global community”, with its own history, symbols, and mythology.<sup>97</sup> In this way, extremist groups, offer “potential recruits ‘identities of empowerment’, which allow them to reconstruct their sense of self and gain new confidence” by linking their own, individual identity to the larger community represented by the group, even without interpersonal connection.<sup>98</sup> The rise of lone-wolf or ‘inspired’ terrorism in recent years illustrates the potential power that membership within ‘imagined’ extremist communities can have in shaping behavior and contributing to violent action.<sup>99</sup> Furthermore, these forms of community need not be mutually exclusive. As Sageman explains, individuals that are members of friend or kinship networks that find jihad collectively often develop social identities “in which the feeling of belonging to the global jihad can be grafted on to the sense of belonging... [provided by] the now religiously and politically activated clique”, linking one’s interpersonal network to the ‘imagined community’ of transnational jihad.<sup>100</sup>

Because of their exclusivist nature, radical Islamist groups are particularly well suited to providing the kind identity and sense of belonging that can mitigate feelings of

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<sup>96</sup> Neumann, 74.

<sup>97</sup> Dalgaard-Nielsen, 799.

<sup>98</sup> Neumann, pg. 68.

<sup>99</sup> Gabriel Weimann. "Lone Wolves in Cyberspace." *Journal of Terrorism Research* 3, no. 2 (2012): 75-90, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.15664/jtr.405>

<sup>100</sup> Sageman, 156.

uncertainty and identity crisis. Drawing on psychological findings in support of the “uncertainty-identity theory”, Michael Hogg argues, “categorizing one-self and others as members of a group effectively reduces self-uncertainty because it provides a consensually validated social identity that describes and prescribes who one is and how one should behave”. Groups that are highly entitative—that is, groups that have clear boundaries between members and non-members and share common goals—are best equipped to resolve feelings of uncertainty and provide strong, encompassing identities.<sup>101</sup> As a result, radical Islamist groups such as the Islamic State, with their clear-cut division between members and non-members can provide the strong sense of identity and communal belonging that is sought out by prospective radicals.

Because of the important role ‘finding a place to belong’, plays in the resolution of identity crises and social alienation—key factors in the process of radicalization—the Islamic State’s propaganda content will be evaluated on the basis of two factors. First, how effectively its messaging is able to present Islamic State membership as an avenue to immediate, interpersonal community, and second, how it conveys ISIS membership as a means of attaching oneself to a broader imagined community. As will be discussed in Chapter 7, this study finds the group’s ability to offer membership to an imagined community of *mujahedeen* remains strong and consistent throughout the sample, but its ability to offer interpersonal community declines as it simultaneously reduces its Caliphate-related content while increasing its promotion of home-grown terrorism, effectively telling its audience to act alone rather than join its Caliphal community.

### **Sense of Purpose and Meaning**

While finding a community of belonging is regarded by terrorism scholars as one of the most important pathways of radicalization, it struggles to explain those individuals who radicalize despite being well-integrated into community networks, and those who do not face the kinds of marginalization and discrimination that can catalyze identity crises. This phenomenon is exemplified by disproportionate number of Western, Christian converts to Islam that join jihadist groups, whose search for identity is unlikely to be precipitated by discrimination, and the substantial portion of radicals who join extremist

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<sup>101</sup> Hogg, Michael A. Hogg. “From Uncertainty to Extremism: Social Categorization and Identity Processes.” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 23, no. 5 (2014), 339. DOI: 10.1177/0963721414540168.

groups as part of unit with their close, kinship network.<sup>102</sup> To explain these cases, and provide additional nuance and power to identity-based explanations for radicalization, scholars have argued that another important factor in radicalization is the search for existential certainty and greater purpose. As Cottee and Hayward explain, terrorism “offers a solution, however partial and ultimately self-destructive, to subjective feelings of existential frustration. What is meant here by “existential frustration” is radical dissatisfaction regarding one’s moral existence in the world—an emotional state marked by the feeling that one’s life is meaningless, directionless, boring, banal, uneventful, anodyne, soulless, aimless, passive, [and] cowardly”.<sup>103</sup>

For many, life as a terrorist has an “intensity and purpose that life outside of the organization noticeably lack[s]” and can resolve the existential issues raised by feelings of meaninglessness and banality. As a former IRA member interviewed by Silke explains, being part of the movement offered an “action-packed existence” and caused everything he did, “however trivial, [to] seem meaningful”.<sup>104</sup> Omar Hammami, an American who joined the Somali terror group Al Shabaab, provides a vivid description of how membership within a terror group can transform a banal life into one filled with excitement and meaning, explaining:

“I have become a Somali you could say. I hear bullets, I dodge mortars, I hear nasheeds [Islamic songs] and play soccer. Sometimes I live in the bush with camels, sometimes I live the five-star life. Sometimes I walk for miles in the terrible heat with no water, sometimes I ride in extremely slick cars. Sometimes I’m chased by the enemy, sometimes I chase him! I have hatred, I have love. It’s the best life on earth!”

Hammami’s explanation illustrates how, for some, radicalization and membership within a terror group can be a form of escape and a means of finding “place and

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<sup>102</sup> Edwin Bakker. “Jihadi Terrorists in Europe, their Characteristics and the Circumstances in which they Joined the Jihad: an Exploratory Study”, *Netherlands Institute of International Relations* (2006): 42; Sageman, 102.

<sup>103</sup> Simon Cottee and Keith Hayward. “Terrorist (E)Motives: The Existential Attractions of Terrorism” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol 34, No 12 (2011): 979, DOI: 10.1080/1057610X.2011.621116.

<sup>104</sup> Silke, 116-117.

purpose”.<sup>105</sup> Roy’s recent work on the Islamic State, *“Jihad and Death”*, places similar emphasis on the role of existential meaning and excitement, arguing that jihad’s appeal stems from its appropriation of youth culture and its ability to offer empowering new identities to recruits. Roy argues that the ISIS offers its members an exhilarating new life where recruits can ride “in four-wheel drive vehicles, hair and flags blowing in the wind [with] guns raised”, turning “young losers from destitute suburbs” into “handsome” and desirable young men, sending “plenty of young girls on Facebook... into raptures”.<sup>106</sup> The overarching theory of Roy’s work is that the rise of transnational jihadism in the West stems from an “Islamization of radicalism”, as opposed to a radicalization of Islam.<sup>107</sup> While many scholars, such as Dawson and Amarasingam, would dispute the very limited role Roy attributes to religion and religious belief in the radicalization process, Roy’s work underscores how simply becoming a ‘radical’ can inject purpose and meaning into the lives of prospective militants.

In addition to finding meaning through the excitement and adventure of terrorism, scholars also argue that the combination of intense, if scripturally misguided, religious devotion, and a sense of pursuing a shared mission, can also attract Western Muslims into radical groups. During their interviews with jihadist foreign fighters in Syria, Dawson and Amarasingam found that fighters joined the jihad as part of a “quest for self-fulfillment”.<sup>108</sup> They find that for some, hearing about local foreign fighters attaining martyrdom made “living a mundane life of... university, work, [and] making money” seem disconcerting, whereas others claimed the “Western way of life” did not produce happiness and made them feel that they were “chasing life” and life was “running away”. In contrast, radical Islam offered them “a complete way of life”. For one Protestant convert to Islam, the search for meaning was precipitated the perceived “hypocrisy” of Western, Christian life, creating a feeling that “things never seemed to fit together”.<sup>109</sup> Across their sample,

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<sup>105</sup> Cottee and Hayward, 971.

<sup>106</sup> Olivier Roy, *Jihad and Death: The Global Appeal of Islamic State*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 2017), 51.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid, 8, 41.

<sup>108</sup> Dawson and Amarasingam, 8-9.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid, 8-9,12.

the authors find that, “religious ideology plays a central and constitutive role in their [the jihadists’] identity and their sense of purpose in life”.<sup>110</sup> The search for purpose was also deemed critical to radicalization in Wiktorowicz study of *Al Muhajiroun* members, stating that virtually “all of the members who were interviewed recalled a point in their lives where they felt they had no purpose in life and lacked a sense of belonging. The key for the process of joining is that these individuals felt as though neither their parents’ version of Islam nor the secular culture of Britain offered an answer”.<sup>111</sup> These studies illustrate the central role that finding purpose can play in radicalization.

The acquisition of meaning through radicalism is due, in large part, to the ability to attach oneself to a cause larger than themselves. By offering members a “grand narrative” through which to view the world, Cottee and Hayward argue that radicals obtain, “the feeling that one is an active participant in a cosmic battle to defend the sacred” and that by defending the sacred, “one experiences something larger than him or herself, a meaning that gloriously soars above and renders insignificant one’s own often frivolous and banal personal concerns”.<sup>112</sup> Studies of Palestinian suicide bombers produce similar findings, as soon-to-be martyrs are often lionized as heroes of the community and seen as part of “the resistance”, further enhancing the sense of purpose gleaned from their actions and providing them with the feeling that they are fighting for a noble and just cause.<sup>113</sup>

Evaluating the ability to the Islamic State’s propaganda to convey purpose and meaning poses a number of inherent challenges. First and foremost, meaning is individually subjective. One fighter’s ‘higher calling’ may be devoid of emotional resonance for another. Similarly, what makes the message of a radical group meaningful is unlikely to be a single component of its messaging, but rather the comprehensive package of its ideas, values, actions and objectives, which interact with external factors such as one’s kinship networks and personal history. Thus, we cannot determine through an examination

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>111</sup> Wiktorowicz, *Joining the Cause*, 17.

<sup>112</sup> Cottee and Hayward, 973.

<sup>113</sup> Silke, 116.

of the Islamic State's messaging content how its ability to offer meaning to *individual* prospective radicals changes over time. However, we can examine and evaluate the number of ways through which the group is able to offer meaning to its audience and the number of 'reservoirs of meaning' its messaging is capable of tapping into. By offering a multifaceted message that taps into a range of different 'reservoirs of meaning', a group's propaganda will contain a greater array of resonant content, allowing it to connect with and appeal to a wider audience of prospective radicals. In Chapter 7, this thesis argues that throughout the sample, the Islamic State remains capable of presenting itself as an avenue to a meaningful and purposeful existence, by continuing to glorify martyrdom and encourage its followers to embrace its puritanical religious worldview and fight the enemies of Islam. However, in the latter stages of the sample, the Islamic State reduces or alters its messaging content on symbolically rich topics, such as its Caliphate and the Apocalypse. In doing so, its propaganda is less capable of tapping into historic and religiously symbolic reservoirs of meaning, narrowing the range of resonant messages it can convey to prospective members, and as a result, likely reducing the range of recruits it appeals to.

## **Radicalization Framework: Conclusion**

Because one of the main roles of extremist group propaganda is to contribute to the radicalization and recruitment of prospective radicals, understanding how the radicalization process is conceptualized, and examining how the group taps into key elements of that process is critical to achieving a fuller understanding of the efficacy of extremist propaganda. The four aforementioned criteria of the 'radicalization framework' act as lenses to understand and qualitatively analyze how, and how effectively, the Islamic State uses the content of its magazines to initiate or contribute to the process of radicalization in prospective recruits. The following section will examine the scholarly literature on extremist movement propaganda, offering insights into how radical groups utilize various messaging strategies and techniques of persuasion that allows their propaganda to resonate with their intended audience.

## Extremist Movement Propaganda

For any political or social movement, communicating their group's message and attracting supporters are critical elements to success. One of the ways these movements disseminate their messages and encourage collective action is through propaganda. Propaganda, according to Jowett and O'Donnell, is the "deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist."<sup>114</sup> It is also, as Wilbur argues, a form of strategic communication. Strategic communication has four pillars: it is deliberate, goal oriented, transpires in the public sphere, and disseminated on behalf of an organization or movement. Propaganda while often distinguished from other forms of strategic communication, such as marketing, advertising, and public relations for its promotion of unethical goals on behalf of nefarious organizations, shares the same four constituent elements.<sup>115</sup>

Until recently, the study of terrorist propaganda focused primarily on "propaganda by the deed". Propaganda by the deed is used to describe high-profile, symbolic violence where the act of violence itself, at least in theory, conveys the group's intended message and mobilizes people of their behalf.<sup>116</sup> The instrumental purpose behind "propaganda by the deed" was in large part due to the constraints terrorist movements faced with regards to communications technologies. Largely incapable of operating their own newspapers, radio stations or television channels given their clandestine nature, to effectively disseminate their message to a substantial audience, terrorist groups needed to use the mass media. As Bruce Hoffman explains, "the advent of ... modern, international terrorism occurred on July 22, 1968" when Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) hijacked an Israeli El Al flight on route from Rome to Tel Aviv. This act dramatically departed from previous terrorist conduct as its use of symbolism was aimed at targeting a

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<sup>114</sup> G.S. Jowett and O'Donnell, V. *Propaganda and persuasion*, (Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2015), 6.

<sup>115</sup> Wilbur, 211-212.

<sup>116</sup> Gordon McCormick. "Terrorist Decision Making." *Annual Review of Political Science* 6 (2003): 476, doi: 10.1146/annurev.polisci.6.121901.085601.

broader international audience, a shift made possible by TV and air transport.<sup>117</sup> Accordingly, the academic work on the 'propaganda' of terrorist groups largely focused on how terrorist groups utilize the propaganda value of their violent deeds and construct their actions for mass-media compatibility. For example works by Bueno De Mesquita and Dickson, Bolt, and O'Hair all examine how terrorist groups use their violence itself as a form of political communication.<sup>118</sup>

However, advancements in communications technologies, chiefly the internet and social media, have reshaped the communications landscape, and with it, the opportunities for terrorists and other extremist movements to directly engage with and disseminate their messages to their followers. Jihadist groups and some far-right movements were early adopters of the new communications technologies, intermittently releasing videos on the internet and creating online forums for their followers.<sup>119</sup> However, in recent years, partly driven by the rise of the Islamic State and its highly sophisticated and productive propaganda apparatus, which makes far greater use of social media and produces content with higher production quality than any of its predecessors, scholarship on terrorist propaganda beyond 'propaganda of the deed' has increased.<sup>120</sup>

While recent scholarship on terrorist propaganda is limited in several regards, chiefly its overwhelming focus on jihadist groups and shortage of comparative studies, a substantial array of work on a wide range of topics has been produced. Like the scholarship on radicalization, the literature on extremist propaganda is interdisciplinary.

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<sup>117</sup> Cristina Archetti. *Understanding Terrorism in the Age of Global Media*. (London, Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013): 95.

<sup>118</sup> Ethan Bueno De Mesquita and Eric S. Dickson. "The Propaganda of the Deed: Terrorism, Counterterrorism, and Mobilization." *American Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 2 (2007): 364-81; Neville Bolt: "Propaganda of the Deed and the Irish Republican Brotherhood." *The RUSI Journal* 153, no. 1 (2008): 48-54; Dan O'Hair. *Terrorism: Communication and Rhetorical Perspectives / Edited by H. Dan O'Hair [and Others]*. (Hampton Press, 2008).

<sup>119</sup> Stern and Berger, 103.

<sup>120</sup> Anne Aly, Stuart Macdonald, Lee Jarvis & Thomas M. Chen. "Introduction to the Special Issue: Terrorist Online Propaganda and Radicalization," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40 no. 1 (2017): 1-2, DOI: 10.1080/1057610X.2016.1157402.

Several scholars, such as Snow and Byrd and Page, Challita and Harris have used insights and theoretical frameworks from Social Movement Theory to analyze the statements and propaganda of terrorist movements.<sup>121</sup> Gambir and Novenario have examined the military strategies of terrorist groups' through their published propaganda content and Skillicorn and Reid and Houck, Repke, and Conway have used measures of integrative complexity to examine how terrorist groups use language to shape audience perceptions in terrorist e-magazines.<sup>122</sup> In a similar fashion to this study, scholars like Ingram and Sivek have also applied insights from the literature on radicalization to examine the ability of terrorist groups to target elements of the radicalization process in their messaging.<sup>123</sup> The following component of the thesis will outline the three aforementioned criteria of the 'propaganda framework. These three criteria are regarded within the scholarship on extremist propaganda, and scholarship of social movements more broadly, as key elements in producing persuasive messaging content. The roles played by collective action frames, in-and-out-groups, and credibility within extremist propaganda will be discussed below.

## The Master Narrative

One of the central facets of scholarly analyses of extremist propaganda is the examination of a movement's "master narrative". For the purposes of this study, master

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<sup>121</sup> Michael Page, Lara Challita, and Alistair Harris. "Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula: Framing Narratives and Prescriptions," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 23, no. 2 (2011): 150-72, DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2010.526039

<sup>122</sup> D.B. Skillicorn and E.F Reid. "Language use in the Jihadist magazines inspire and Azan" *Security Informatics* 3, no. 9, (2014): 1-16, <http://www.security-informatics.com/content/3/1/9>; Shannon C. Houck, Meredith A. Repke & Lucian Gideon Conway III "Understanding what makes terrorist groups' propaganda effective: an integrative complexity analysis of ISIL and Al Qaeda," *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism* 12 no. 2, (2017): 105-118; Harleen Gambhir. "Dabiq: The strategic messaging of the Islamic State," *Institute for the Study of War*, August 15<sup>th</sup> 2014, <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/dabiq-strategic-messaging-islamic-state>; Celine Marie I. Novenario. "Differentiating Al Qaeda and the Islamic State Through Strategies Publicized in Jihadist Magazines", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 39 no. 11 (2016): 953-967.

<sup>123</sup> Ingram, An Analysis of Inspire and Dabiq, 357-375; Sivek, 584-606.

narratives can be understood as the foundation on which other aspects of a movement's propaganda—its collective action frames, credibility, and in-and-out group identity constructs—are built upon. These narratives, Hafez and Mullins explain, provide a story “about the world and one's place in it”. They frame “personal and collective grievances into broader political critiques of the status quo”, “demonize enemies and justify violence against them”, as well as incentivize commitment and sacrifice by “promising heroic redemption”.<sup>124</sup> These overarching values and ideologically rooted ‘stories’ have been variously described within the scholarship on as “political myths”, “competitive systems of meaning” or simply, “narratives”, but they all intend to describe a “concise statement of what [an actor] is doing, why, and how that links to a positive vision of the future”.<sup>125</sup> The “master narrative” also provides a bridge connecting elements of the radicalization process to the techniques of propaganda. These narratives claim to explain an individual's victimization and sense of threat, while also offering them a meaningful identity as part of a broader ideological community, providing a foundation from which extremist movements can utilize the techniques of propaganda to encourage the changes in values, identification, and ideology that are integral to radicalization.<sup>126</sup>

As Kirke argues, master narratives, or as he labels them, “political myths”, serve two main purposes with extremist group propaganda: cognitive functions and integrative functions. The cognitive function of a master narrative is that it “provides a way of ordering and simplifying the complexities of social and political life”, while the integrative function, “constructs and sustains... ‘identificatory poles’ or particular common points of reference through which individuals, groups, and the relationships between them become understood”.<sup>127</sup> In short, they provide lenses to view the world and categorize the individuals and communities within it.

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<sup>124</sup> Hafez and Mullins, 961.

<sup>125</sup> Archetti, 126; Kirke, 283-298; Ingram, *An Analysis of the Taliban in Khurasan's Azan*, pg. 560.

<sup>126</sup> Ingram, *An Analysis of the Taliban in Khurasan's Azan*, 560-562.

<sup>127</sup> Kirke, 292.

The key cognitive function of a master narrative is that it acts as a simplifying device, providing a sense of order, certainty and clarity about the world. As Kirke explains, these narratives act as “instrument[s] of chaos control” by providing “cognitive lenses through which people can interpret and make sense of political events”.<sup>128</sup> Within the literature on extremist propaganda, the ability to provide certainty is viewed as integral to the success of a movement’s messaging campaign. Because uncertainty inducing crises—personal, moral, identity or otherwise—are frequently catalysts of the radicalization process, narratives that provide certainty in the face of these crises are perceived as effective remedies by some individual to their problems. Ingram argues that “to alleviate or avoid uncertainty, individuals tend to seek out environments and other individuals (i.e., collectives) that provide stability and meaning”, and that the role of uncertainty “as a driver of identity construction, particularly [one] that leads to strong commitment to ingroup collectives and even radical ideologies, is well-established in the scholarly field”.<sup>129</sup> This argument is also supported by the findings of social psychology studies testing the “uncertainty-identity theory”, which posits that feelings of uncertainty can cause individuals to strongly embrace ideologies or groups that provide stability and clarity.<sup>130</sup> Thus, if an extremist movement can provide clear, unambiguous resolutions to a prospective radical’s crisis or sense of uncertainty within its master narrative, it will be more effective at facilitating the process of radicalization.

The second function of the master narrative is “integrative”, as it contributes to the formation of collective or identities and engenders individuals who buy into the narrative with a sense of affiliation with (and belonging to) a larger community. To do so, these movements often hark back to a romanticized version of the past and use it as a template for the imagined future they aim to create. Propagandists within extremist movements, and within social and political movements more generally, often do this by drawing on “symbols, memories, myths, and heritage” in an attempt to trace the “genealogy of an identity group back to a specific place, time, [or] ancestor in order to derive an ideological

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid, 286.

<sup>129</sup> Ingram, *An Analysis of the Taliban in Khurasan's Azan*, 562.

<sup>130</sup> Michael A. Hogg, and Janice Adelman. “Uncertainty–Identity Theory: Extreme Groups, Radical Behavior, and Authoritarian Leadership.” *Journal of Social Issues* 69, no. 3 (2013): 436–54. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12023>.

lineage and to provide a guide for future actions”.<sup>131</sup> This narrative is often built by drawing on “chosen glories” and “chosen traumas”, allowing the group to connect themselves to the history of a particular national or religious history and legitimize their claims to be representatives of that group.<sup>132</sup> For example, in his study of Scandinavian nationalist and Neo-Nazi movements, Tore Bjørgo demonstrates how these movements seek to connect themselves to Norse or Viking mythology while co-opting popular national symbols “to establish themselves as the new 'resistance movement', fighting 'foreign invaders' and present-day 'national traitors'”.<sup>133</sup> As a result of the master narrative’s appeal to a larger history and community, individuals that connect themselves to the movements espousing these narratives can “construct their identities as individuals and simultaneously as members of a community”.<sup>134</sup>

For most radical Islamist groups, the master narrative is centered on the notion that the Islamic world has fallen prey to the ills of colonialism, nationalism, modernization, and secularism, resulting in a “breakdown of tradition” that undermines the *Ummah*’s strength, honor and dynamism. As a result, the messaging content of these groups often centers on topics that reinforce the sense of humiliation and crisis that has befallen Islam while presenting the roots of the crisis as deviation “from the example of Islam’s pioneers”.<sup>135</sup> To do articulate this message of catastrophe, present a path to resolve it, and motivate their audience to take part in the solution, these groups make ample use of “collective action frames” or “crisis-solution constructs” in their propaganda.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Kinvall, 756.

<sup>132</sup> Kinvall, 756.

<sup>133</sup> Bjørgo, 182–220.

<sup>134</sup> Kirke, 287.

<sup>135</sup> Haroro J. Ingram, *Deciphering the Siren Call of Militant Islamist Propaganda: Meaning Credibility and Behavioral Change*, (The Hague: International Center For Counterterrorism, 2016), 11.

<sup>136</sup> David Snow and Scott Byrd. “Ideology, Framing Processes, and Islamic Terrorist Movements.” *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (2007): 119–36. <https://doi.org/10.17813/maiq.12.2.5717148712w21410>.

## Collective Action Framing & Crisis-Solution Constructs

Collective Action Framing, an analytical tool stemming from Social Movement Theory, is often used broadly in the study of social movements, as well as within studies of extremist propaganda. Collective action frames have been used to study the messaging of a wide range of social movements, from Ingram and Page, Challita, and Harris' studies of the Taliban and Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), to works on the gay and lesbian and American welfare rights movements.<sup>137</sup> As Snow and Byrd explain, collective action frames "refer to action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that call forth and legitimate social movement activities and campaigns".<sup>138</sup> Collective action framing is broken down into three constituent frames: *diagnostic* frames, *prognostic* frames, and *motivational* frames. Diagnostic frames outline the myriad problems facing the target for mobilization with the intent of inducing or amplifying a sense of crisis. Prognostic frames offer the group or movement's solution to the crises described in the diagnostic frames, and motivational frames intend to persuade the mobilization target into action, often by drawing on values, emotions or ideas salient to their audience.<sup>139</sup> Because of the important role played by perceptions of crisis and the search for solutions in the radicalization process, collective action frames, or "crisis-solution constructs" provide an important lens with which to examine and evaluate extremist group's propaganda.<sup>140</sup>

Diagnostic framing highlights a movement's perceived problem with the status quo. They aim to underscore the problematic aspects of social life or the political system that need to be repaired or overhauled. Furthermore, diagnostic frames "provide answers to

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<sup>137</sup> Ingram, An Analysis of the Taliban in Khurasan's Azan, 560-579; Page, Challita, and Harris, 150-72; Eric Swank, and Breanne Fahs. "Resources, Social Networks, and Collective Action Frames of College Students Who Join the Gay and Lesbian Rights Movement." *Journal of Homosexuality* 59, no. 1 (2012): 67-89; Ellen Reese and Garnett Newcombe. "Income Rights, Mothers' Rights, or Workers' Rights? Collective Action Frames, Organizational Ideologies, and the American Welfare Rights Movement." *Social Problems* 50, no. 2 (2003): 294-318.

<sup>138</sup> Snow and Byrd, 133.

<sup>139</sup> Ingram, An Analysis of the Taliban in Khurasan's Azan, 560-561.

<sup>140</sup> Ingram, Deciphering the Siren Call, 14.

the questions of “What is or went wrong?” and “Who or what is to blame?”.<sup>141</sup> They also aim to take facts of life that were previously viewed as “misfortunes or unpleasant but tolerable”, and turn them into “intolerable injustices or abominations” that demand transformation, thereby inducing a sense of crisis. Within the Norwegian far-right movement analyzed by Bjørgo, the ‘problem’ is a “Muslim invasion” of Norway through unchecked immigration that will eventually lead to a civil war. For this group, the blame rests on the country’s political leaders or “national traitors” who have allowed immigration to go unchecked.<sup>142</sup>

For radical Islamist groups, the diagnosis of the problems facing the *Ummah* are manifold. For example, in a 1998 announcement, Osama Bin Laden attributed the *Ummah*’s problems to the Western far-enemy, underscoring the grievances such as the ‘occupation’ of Islamic holy sites, the havoc wrought by the “crusader-Zionist alliance”, and the one-million Iraqis that died due to actions linked to the Gulf War.<sup>143</sup> In Page, Challita, and Harris’ study of AQAP propaganda, the authors find that the group’s diagnostic frames seek to connect domestic and global issues, highlighting the “illegitimacy and manifest failings of the [Yemeni] Salih regime”, while linking those failings to the West’s support for the Salih regime and “Western aggression on Muslims worldwide”. Doing so causes a “hybridization” of their message and portrays the problems of Yemenis (their target audience) as intrinsically linked to the global *Ummah*, a common messaging strategy employed by transnational Islamists.<sup>144</sup> In addition to the illegitimacy of domestic regimes and Western oppression, radical Islamists often emphasize the moral collapse of society, which they attribute to factors like materialism, secularism, nationalism and democracy.<sup>145</sup> By inducing or amplifying a sense of crisis, a messaging campaign’s diagnostic frames lay the groundwork for the movement’s solution.

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<sup>141</sup> Snow and Byrd, 124.

<sup>142</sup> Bjørgo’, 182-220.

<sup>143</sup> Snow and Byrd, 125.

<sup>144</sup> Page, Challita and Harris, 155.

<sup>145</sup> Snow and Byrd, 124-126.

Prognostic framing articulates a movement's solution, or at very least, its "plan of attack" to address the problems they have diagnosed. As Benford and Snow explain, it addresses the "Leninesque question of what is to be done".<sup>146</sup> Prognostic framing is key to understanding the link between radicalization and extremist propaganda. Because it offers solutions to perceived problems, prognostic framing can also be effective at tapping into elements of the radicalization process. As discussed above, in much of the literature on the radicalization process, radicalization "is framed as the consequence of identity construction" and that perceptions of crisis "tend to induce a need in individuals and groups for a 'solution'", which can be found through "commitment to the in-group, the strengthening of traditions and certainty".<sup>147</sup> Through the use of prognostic frames, extremist movements can provide their audience with clear, certain solutions to the sense of crisis they induce or amplify through their diagnostic frames, ultimately contributing to a sense that commitment to the movement can resolve the crises and uncertainty befalling the prospective radical.<sup>148</sup> Furthermore, working towards a perceived solution to grand and influential problem can infuse an individual's existence with purpose and meaning.<sup>149</sup>

Another important element of prognostic framing for extremist or social movements is to distinguish their proposed solution from that of other movements within the same milieu. By engaging in what Benford labels "frame disputes", actors that "share an overarching goal, disagreements frequently erupt within and among movement organizations regarding specific objectives, strategies and tactics".<sup>150</sup> Because these movements rarely provide unique diagnoses to the problems facing their target audience, and therefore share overarching goals, the answers a movement provides sets them apart from similar movements. For example, within the radical Islamist milieu, Al Qaeda differed

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<sup>146</sup> Robert Benford and David Snow. "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment." *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000): 616, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/223459>.

<sup>147</sup> Ingram, *An Analysis of the Taliban in Khurasan's Azan*, 561

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid*, 561; Ingram, *An analysis of Islamic State's Dabiq magazine*, 463.

<sup>149</sup> Ingram, *An analysis of Islamic State's Dabiq magazine*, 472.

<sup>150</sup> Robert Benford. "Frame Disputes within the Nuclear Disarmament Movement." *Social Forces* 71, no. 3 (1993): 677-701.

from previous jihadist groups by collapsing the “distinctions between national and transnational, offensive and defensive war, [and the] “near enemy and “far enemy””, effectively “globalizing jihad” and presenting previously distinct struggles as intertwined, offering a novel and untested “plan of attack” to address Islam’s problems. As we shall see, the Islamic State ‘disputes’ the strategies and tactics adopted by other jihadists in their ultimately shared pursuit of Islamic governance.<sup>151</sup>

Prognostic framing is particularly relevant to examining the propaganda of the Islamic State, as it is arguably the only group within the transnational jihadist universe to offer a tangible political solution to the diagnosed problems of the *Ummah*—the Caliphate. As Charlie Winter points out, “Arguably the greatest political marketing innovation of the Islamic State was its recognition that, in order to create a sustainably appealing brand, it had to do more than simply criticize the status quo, which is what likeminded rivals (e.g. al-Qa’ida) had been doing for decades”.<sup>152</sup> Dalgaard-Neilson concurs, noting in her literature review, which was published prior to the Islamic State’s rise, that jihadist groups offered “no real constructive political program”, focusing primarily on demonizing the West and only providing vague and distant allusions to a future Caliphate.<sup>153</sup> The ability of the Islamic State to present a concrete political solution, as opposed a pathway to a distant one, is vital to situate the findings of this study, as this study finds that as the Islamic State loses territory, the proportion of its Caliphate-focused content plummets, hindering its ability to present the prognostic frames widely seen by early observers as the bedrock of its appeal.

The final task of collective action framing is to provide motivational frames, which function as a “call to arms” and a “rationale for engaging in ameliorative collective action”.<sup>154</sup> These frames serve two important, interrelated functions. First, to persuade and

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<sup>151</sup> Roxanne Leslie Euben and Muhammad Qasim Zaman. *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought: Texts and Contexts from Al-Banna to Bin Laden / Edited and Introduced by Roxanne L. Euben and Muhammad Qasim Zaman*. (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2009): 425-426.

<sup>152</sup> Winter, *Apocalypse*, later, 112.

<sup>153</sup> Dalgaard-Neilson, 801.

<sup>154</sup> Benford and Snow, 617.

mobilize the movements target to act in pursuit of their proposed solution, and second, to address collective action problems and avoid free-riding.<sup>155</sup> To persuade their audience to act, movements will draw upon resonant values, ideas, and emotions that are intertwined with the diagnostic and prognostic frames. As Wiktorowicz points out in his book *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*, one of the “most critical dimensions of the framing process for movement mobilization is frame resonance”.<sup>156</sup> When a movement’s mobilization frame (or frames) “draws upon indigenous cultural symbols, language, and identities, [they are] more likely to reverberate with constituents”, thus enhancing the message’s mobilization potential.<sup>157</sup> Using these motivational frames, action is often imbued with sentiments such as glory, purpose, duty and heroism, and, for religiously-linked political movements, these frames frequently center on religious obligation or a sense of duty to the broader community. For example, during the Iranian Revolution, resistance against the Shah’s regime was portrayed by the Islamist factions as the “equivalent of holy war” in order to elevate the movement’s cause and attempt to overcome the fears that prevented ordinary people from joining the movement.<sup>158</sup> Promises of elevating status and reconstituting one’s identity, as well as “divine rewards” are also common motivation frames utilized by extremist and social movements to induce participation and convince their followers to engage with, rather than free-ride off of, their movement.<sup>159</sup>

In this study, the Islamic State’s propaganda will be evaluated on its ability to employ the three constituent components of collective action framing. Changes in its propaganda will be evaluated by examining the group’s capacity to develop and sustain resonant crisis-solution constructs using diagnostic and prognostic framing, as well as its ability to offer motivational frames that are likely to resonate with their target audience. This study finds that the group is initially highly successful at employing the three

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid, 617.

<sup>156</sup> Quintan Wiktorowicz. *Islamic Activism A Social Movement Theory Approach*. (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2003), 16.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>158</sup> Snow and Byrd, 129.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid, 129.

constituent collective actions frames, highlighting problems of irreligiousness, oppression and disorder within the Muslim world, and offering a solution in the form the Caliphate. It also offers a range of frames aimed at motivating its followers through religious and earthly enticements, such as the obligations of *hijrah* and *jihad*, and promises of glory and heroism. However, over the course of the sample, the group's ability to utilize collective action framing deteriorates.<sup>160</sup> While its diagnostic frames remain steady, the dramatic reduction in the group's Caliphate-based content renders it far less capable of presenting distinct, concrete political solutions. Furthermore, the reduced emphasis on the *hijrah*, and the powerful religious symbolism and sense of obligation that it is connected to, reduces the resonance of the group's motivational framing.

### **Reinforcement of In-and-Out Groups**

The construction of in-group identity is closely linked to a movement's "master narrative" or "political myth". Through the adoption of common symbols, histories, and traditions, extremist and social movements lay claim to communal identities. Through the process of defining in-group identity, movements will invariably create out-groups. As Kinnvall argues, creating an in-group identity "involves a process of establishing and confirming certain identity traits in yourself [and your community]" and the juxtaposition of [those traits] to others". The more inclusionary beliefs are for in-group members, she argues, "the more exclusionary they tend to be for individuals or groups not included in the definition of these beliefs".<sup>161</sup> For most exclusionary or extremist movements, the formation of bifurcated identities is used to elevate members of the in-group while devaluing those outside it. Members of the in-group represent "purity, order, truth, beauty, good and right... while those on the outside are affected by pollution, falsity, ugliness, bad, and wrong".<sup>162</sup>

The attribution of positive and negative values to in-and-out groups members has long been appreciated to be an important and effective means of mobilizing people

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<sup>160</sup> "Hijrah", Oxford Islamic Studies Online, 2018,  
<http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e841>.

<sup>161</sup> Kinnvall, 763.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid, 763.

towards violence. For example, in several models of the radicalization, the “solidification of categorical thinking” about one’s own group and enemy groups, and “stereotyping and demonizing the enemy” are seen as integral steps in the radicalization process.<sup>163</sup> Furthermore, studies such as those examining anti-Jewish Nazi propaganda, or the construction of oppositional Hutu and Tutsi identities in radio propaganda prior to the Rwandan Genocide, underscore the important role propaganda can play in constructing and reinforcing polarized identities to facilitate violence.<sup>164</sup>

However, the development of in-and-out group identities is also crucial to the earlier stages of radicalization, prior to the actual use of violence. As discussed earlier, issues of identity are at the heart of radicalization. Identity crisis and feelings of non-belonging and meaninglessness are key components to the “puzzle” of radicalization, encouraging cognitive openings and increasing receptiveness to new, possibly extreme, ideas. As a result, extremist movements that can offer “identities of empowerment” in their propaganda are more likely to contribute to the radicalization process and draw in recruits.<sup>165</sup> Through the creation of bifurcated identities in their propaganda, extremist groups are able to build highly entitative ‘imagined communities’ with clear boundaries, which offer certainty by creating a strong sense of both individual and communal identity. In creating these ‘imagined communities’ extremist movements forge both ‘I’ identities (ex. I am a *mujahid*), and ‘We’ identities, (ex. We are the defenders of Islam), blending individual and communal identities together and reinforcing their strength.<sup>166</sup> As Hogg and Adelman argue, these kinds of identities are most appealing to prospective radicals undergoing identity crises, as exclusionary, well-defined “groups and identities are better suited than others to self-uncertainty reduction through self-categorization”, especially if they have “clear boundaries and membership criteria”, and “prescriptive attitudinal and

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<sup>163</sup> King and Taylor, 603.

<sup>164</sup> Elizabeth Baisley. "Genocide and Constructions of Hutu and Tutsi in Radio Propaganda." *Race & Class* 55, no. 3 (2014): 38-59; Bytwerk, Randall L. "The Argument for Genocide in Nazi Propaganda." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 91, no. 1 (2005): 37-62.

<sup>165</sup> Ingram, An analysis of Islamic State’s Dabiq magazine, 463.

<sup>166</sup> Hogg, 339.

behavioral attributes grounded in a relatively homogenous world view".<sup>167</sup> Thus, the presentation of rigid in-and-out groups not only presents the prospective radical with the opportunity for individual and in-group identity, but it can also act as an "anxiety-controlling mechanism" thereby contributing to a sense that the crisis and uncertainty that often drives radicalization can be resolved through membership in an extremist movement.<sup>168</sup>

In-and out group identities are also linked to extremist movements' use of collective action frames, presenting the extremist movement as those with the solution to the in-group's problems and the out-group as the source of those problems. In their propaganda, as Ingram explains, these movements follow a broadly similar mantra: "we are the epitome of the ingroup identity, the ingroup's crises are due to malevolent Others, so support us because we are your champions and protectors who will confront our enemies and restore the ingroup's glory with our political agenda".<sup>169</sup> Thus, extremist movements' messaging intertwines the group's "crisis-solution constructs" with its depictions of in-group and out-group identity, binding the movement's proposed diagnoses and solutions to community and enemy identities.

In doing so, these movements engage their audience with both the "logic of consequences" and the "logic of appropriateness", getting them to ask both 'what action is rational?' but, more importantly, 'what would a person with my identity do?'.<sup>170</sup> As insights from behavioral economics have shown, humans tend to think using two "systems". As Kahneman's Nobel Prize-winning research argues, humans interpret information using either "System 1" thinking, which is largely effortless, intuitive, based on association, and considers information that automatically comes to mind, and "System 2" thinking, which is effortful, deliberative, reflective, and based on reasoning. While both systems operate continually and simultaneously, System 1 dominates. System 1 provides "impressions, intuitions, intentions, and feelings" to System 2, and if endorsed by System

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<sup>167</sup> Hogg, and Adelman, 436-454.

<sup>168</sup> Kinvall, 746.

<sup>169</sup> Ingram, An Analysis of Inspire and Dabiq, 360.

<sup>170</sup> Ingram, An Analysis of the Taliban in Khurasan's Azan, 566, cited from: 42. J. March and C. Heath, A Primer on Decision Making (New York: Free Press, 1994).

2, “impressions and intuitions turn into beliefs” and create impulses for voluntary action. Identity and ideological factors, such as a race, religion or worldview, can play an important role in shaping the associations and intuitions generated by System 1.<sup>171</sup> As a result, how an extremist group cultivates a sense of in-group identity in its messaging will play an important role in determining how effective a group’s messaging is in persuading prospective radicals to join its movement and adopt its radical worldviews.

To evaluate how the Islamic State’s messaging changes with regards to its in-and-out group identity construction, this study will qualitatively examine two primary factors: content dedicated to in-group and out-group content, and the group’s maintenance of highly entitative identity categories. Because of the importance attributed to relationally reinforcing identity by providing both ‘we’ and ‘they’ identities, and the role of categorical, entitative identities in appealing to prospective radicals, these factors were deemed most important for evaluation. For example, if the group’s propaganda shifted to focus exclusively on in-group characteristics, ignoring its foes, this would be considered a reduction in its ability to appeal to prospective radicals on the basis of in-and-out group identity constructs. Similarly, if, for example, the group moderated its stance on religious minorities, as Al Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate has done, this would be considered a reduction in the entitativity of its in-group identity, thus reducing its appeal to certainty-seeking prospective radicals.<sup>172</sup> This study finds that the Islamic State’s messaging retains a strong, highly entitative in-group identity throughout the sample. It cultivates this in-group identity through a variety of means, such as appealing to Islamic tradition through prevalent content on Islamic scripture and history, underscoring shared group values such as piety and the desire for martyrdom. Furthermore, the group consistently commemorates martyrdom by providing eulogies for its ‘exemplary’ members, which it uses to highlight the shared values and traits of its members. It also reinforces in-group identity relationally through the demonization of enemy out-groups, such as the West, Shi’a Muslims, and Sunni Muslims that reject its ultra-radical ideology. Although this study

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<sup>171</sup> Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 3-6.

<sup>172</sup> Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi. “Druze Clues.” *Foreign Affairs*, October 5, 2015. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2015-10-05/druze-clues>.

finds that the kinds of enemies the Islamic State focuses on to bolster its in-and-out group identities varies across the sample and across the study's seven thematic categories, the group does not soften the boundaries between in-and-out groups, retaining its highly entitative in-group identity and continuing the process of reinforcing it relationally.<sup>173</sup>

## **Credibility**

One of the key elements of successful propaganda is the establishing the credibility of the message. Because the intent of propaganda is to persuade, a propagandist must demonstrate the veracity and authenticity of the message, narrative or "frame" to their intended audience. Simply put, a propagandist must be able to convince their audience that their message is worth believing. As Benford and Snow explain, the "credibility of any framing is a function of three factors: frame consistency, empirical credibility, and credibility of the frame articulators or claimsmakers".<sup>174</sup> First, the *consistency* of a "frame" or message refers to the congruency between the movement's stated beliefs and claims, and its actions. Thus, a message's credibility can be damaged in two ways: through contradictions between stated beliefs or claims, or by the perception of contradictions between the messages and actions of a movement, what Ingram labels the "Say-Do Gap".<sup>175</sup> For example, in a study of radical anti-abortion group, Johnson finds that inconsistencies between the group's non-violent self-portrayal and their violent tactics damaged their prospects of gaining wider support.<sup>176</sup>

Second, the "*empirical credibility*" of a frame relates to the "fit" between the group or movement's message and the events in the world it aims to explain. The claims made by the message do not need to be factually true or even "generally believable", but rather

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<sup>173</sup> Towards the end of the sample, the group's out-group reinforcement primarily occurred within the SRT category, whereas throughout the beginning and middle of the sample, out-group content was largely concentrated in the CCIC category.

<sup>174</sup> Benford and Snow, 619.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid, 619-620; Ingram, *Deciphering the Siren Call*, 27.

<sup>176</sup> Johnson, Victoria L. *Operation Rescue, Vocabularies of Motive, and Tactical Action: A Study of Movement Framing in the Practice of Quasi-Nonviolence*. JAI Press, Inc., 1997.

they must be believable to a “segment of prospective or actual adherents”.<sup>177</sup> Effectively, empirical credibility is connected to the plausibility of the ‘diagnosis’ and the ‘prognosis’ the movement offers its audience through its collective action frames. Thus, in the context of radical Islamist messaging, groups that can make the case that one’s “own sense of alienation and personal crisis can be attributed to the same forces that are causing the suffering of Muslims everywhere else” and that they are all part of “the same struggle” can establish powerful, resonant narratives and enhance their empirical credibility.<sup>178</sup>

The third facet of a message’s credibility is the credibility of the “frame articulator”. This factor, as Wiktorowicz argues, is particularly salient in the Sunni Muslim context. Because there is no formal hierarchy capable of “establishing a clerical caste akin to the Catholic Church”, sacred authority in Sunni Islam is largely based on “the decentralized, informal recognition of the expertise and character of religious scholars” and movements.<sup>179</sup> As a result of this structure of religious authority, groups and movements operate within a “competitive religious marketplace of ideas” where they must engage in “framing contests” to assert and bolster their claims to be rightful interpreters of scripture. Aly builds on this conception of Islamic authority and links it to online radicalization processes, arguing that the internet has further decentralized religious authority and provides a platform for radical “opinion leaders” to speak ‘on behalf of Islam’, garner status and elicit trust from their audience, and contribute to individuals’ adoption of extremist versions of Islam.<sup>180</sup>

To establish their authority, actors operating in this competitive marketplace of “sacred authority” utilize a processes of “*crediting*” and “*discrediting*”, whereby they seek to bolster their own credentials and invalidate competing claims, particularly those of

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<sup>177</sup> Benford and Snow, 620.

<sup>178</sup> Neumann, 70.

<sup>179</sup> Quintan Wiktorowicz. "Framing Jihad: Intramovement Framing Contests and Al-Qaeda's Struggle for Sacred Authority." *International Review of Social History* 49 (2004): 168.

<sup>180</sup> Anne Aly. “An Audience Focussed Approach to Examining Religious Extremism Online”. *Australian Journal of Communication* 39, no. 1 (2012): 1-16.

competitors who are vying for a similar constituency of believers.<sup>181</sup> Within this framing contest, Wiktorowicz argues that movements typically use four tactics: *vilification* and *exaltation* and *credentialing* and *decredentialing*.<sup>182</sup> Vilification involves character assassinations and name-calling, through which a group attempts to erode their target's credibility through negative connotation or symbolism, whereas exaltation emphasizes the positive attributes of the movement itself.<sup>183</sup> Within the context of the Islamic State's messaging, terms such as "palace scholar", or "jihad claimant" are used to denigrate competing Sunni group's by portraying their claims to authority as corrupt or manufactured, whereas terms like "mujahedeen" and "Khalifah [Caliph]" are used to reinforce the legitimacy of the Islamic State's fighters and leadership. Credentialing and decredentialing are strategies used elevate or invalidate the knowledge, character, or logic of the movement or its competitors. Ways of employing these tactics include the provision of scriptural rulings, such as *fatwas*, where the messenger displays their command of scripture, as well as providing evidence of good or bad character of their or their competitors members, such as highlighting the target's noble deeds or corrupt behaviors.

Within these framing contests, the *perception* of veracity and credibility, rather than the actual truth value of the message, is what matters. Because the vast majority of Muslims, including prospective radicals, do not have the requisite knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence to weigh the scriptural evidence marshalled by the various movements engaged in a framing contest, the perception of a message and messenger's credibility is of greatest importance.<sup>184</sup> As a result, propaganda that can powerfully convey the credibility of the messenger and make strong claims that 'prove' or demonstrate the 'truthfulness' of its message is more likely to be successful in recruiting and contributing to the radicalization of its audience.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Wiktorowicz, *Framing Jihad*, 161-162.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid*, 162.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid*, 165-166.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid*, 162.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid*, 164.

To evaluate the credibility of the Islamic State's propaganda, this study will examine its three primary facets of message credibility outlined by Benford and Snow— frame consistency, empirical credibility, and credibility of the frame articulators— and analyze the group's use of the four tactics identified by Wiktorowicz, vilification and exaltation and credentialing and decredentialing. This study finds that, due to the changes in its thematic and narrative content brought on by territorial losses and changing tactical goals, the Islamic State's messaging credibility declines due to frame inconsistency and a widening "Say-Do Gap" between its stated claims and events on the ground.

## **Chapter 5. Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis: Examining the Thematic Content of Dabiq and Rumiya**

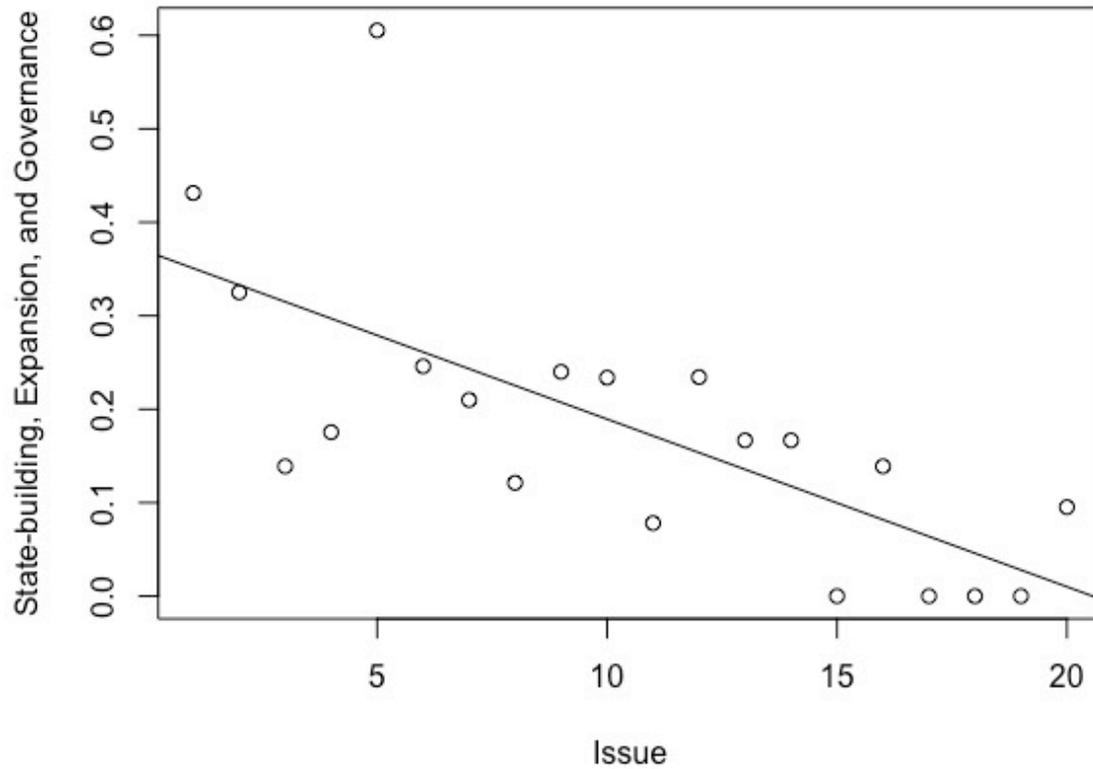
The following section presents the quantitative and qualitative findings of this study. It will proceed as follows. For each of the seven thematic categories, it will provide the reader with a graph that depicts the results of the bivariate linear regression run on that thematic category's quantitative data and analyze that data determine if it exhibited a statistically significant trend. Then, the contents of that category will be qualitatively examined across the sample, drawing out and analyzing important trends and changes that are pertinent to answering this study's three research questions. For the State-building, Expansion and Governance (SBEG), Clash of Civilizations and Ideological Conflict (CCIC), and Scripture, Religion and Theology (SRT) categories, the categories that exhibit the most substantial qualitative changes over the course of the sample, analysis will be split into the study's three analytical groupings to allow for thorough examination of the important thematic shifts identified in this study.

Through its quantitative and qualitative analysis of *Dabiq* and *Rumiya*'s thematic content, this study identifies several key changes in the Islamic State's propaganda. Quantitatively, two categories exhibit statistically significant changes within the sample. The SBEG category exhibits a significant quantitative decline while the Military and Terrorism (MT) category, exhibits a significant rise, which, as will be explained below, appear to be driven by the Islamic State's domestic territorial decline. The "Other" category also exhibits a statistically significant increase, but as will be discussed, this increase appears to be the result of editorial decisions unconnected to the Islamic State's territorial losses.

Qualitatively, there are several overarching trends that correspond with this study's analytical groupings. First, AG1 is characterized by its Caliphate-centric content. This grouping contains the greatest proportion of SBEG content and dedicates much of its SRT and MT content to legitimizing the Caliphate and illustrating the Islamic State's military-led expansion. Furthermore, within AG1, the authors dedicate a considerable amount of

content to promoting the “*hijrah*”, the act of travelling to the Islamic State, and cultivating their ‘narrative of victory’. In AG2, the group’s thematic content diversifies, with a greater proportion of content dedicated to the CCIC and MBB categories, while still retaining a substantial amount of content addressing religious and Caliphate-related topics. Moreover, while AG1 focused primarily on the Caliphate, AG2 exhibits a greater focus on the Islamic State’s enemies. Finally, AG3 is characterized by a narrowing of thematic diversity and a major shift away from the Caliphate-related content, which previously occupied the center of the group’s messaging campaign. During this period, the Islamic State’s magazines’ exhibit very low levels of SBEG content and the group begins downplaying the importance of *hijrah*, an act previously imbued with the utmost value. Instead, ISIS begins to encourage its audience to commit acts of home-grown terror, a fundamental shift in the form of collective action promoted using its propaganda. Through the analysis of this study’s quantitative and qualitative findings, this section demonstrates that there is a preponderance of evidence linking the shifts in the Islamic State thematic content to the collapse of its self-declared Caliphate.

## State-building, Expansion and Governance



**Figure 1: Proportion of SBEG Content By Issue**

**Adjusted R-squared: 0.4651**

**p-value: 0.0005553**

**AG1: 33.52%**

**AG2: 19.12%**

**AG3: 5.73%**

Figure 1 illustrates the result of the linear regression run on the contents of the State-building, Expansion and Governance (SBEG) category. The results of the

regression demonstrate that, over the course of the 20 issues examined, the SBEG category exhibits a strong, statistically significant decline. The greatest proportion of SBEG content is found in *Dabiq* Issue 5, at 60.5%, with the lowest levels found in *Dabiq* Issue 15 and *Rumiyah* Issues, 1, 2 and 3 at 0%. The high-SBEG content at the beginning of the sample correlates with high levels of Islamic State territorial control and expansion in Iraq and Syria, the construction and consolidation of governance structures, and its territorial expansion abroad. However, throughout AG2 and AG3, the proportion of SBEG content declines alongside the Islamic State's territorial holdings, suggesting that the group has revised its messaging strategy to accommodate its mounting territorial losses and the collapse of its Caliphate. The following section will analyze SBEG category's content in each of the three analytical groupings and discuss important shifts within that content. In short, this section shows that one of the ways the Islamic State has attempted to adjust its messaging to accommodate the collapse of its Caliphate is to simply avoid talking about it.

## **Analytical Grouping 1**

In AG1, the establishment and development of the Islamic State's Caliphate is central to its messaging content. The content within the AG1's SBEG category strives to demonstrate to its audience that the Islamic State truly is a "state" and back up its claims to be resurrecting the Islamic Caliphate. SBEG content in this analytical grouping stresses the creation of bureaucratic institutions and administrative structures alongside the harsh enforcement of the group's interpretation of Shari'ah law, creating an image of a state that provides for its 'true' Muslim citizens and ruthlessly cracks down on those who break with its interpretation of Shari'ah. Within this category, three primary themes emerge: *Governance and Stateliness*, *Law and Order*, and *Expansion*. The Governance and Stateliness theme underscores the creation of the Islamic State's institutions of governance, the Expansion theme highlights the growth of their Caliphate's territorial holdings and the Law and Order theme is used to demonstrate the group's strict adherence to a harsh, *Salafist* interpretation of Shari'ah and the group's restoration of order.

## **Governance & Stateliness**

During AG1, the authors work to bolster the Islamic State's Caliphate-building credentials by illustrating the benefits the creation of their 'utopian' Caliphate brings to its citizens. The authors highlight ISIS' elderly care services, its street cleaning road construction, provision of food to the needy, religious educational services, and the bustling market places that have developed under their rule.<sup>186</sup> In addition, the group displays newly created Islamic State-run tax collection systems, which allegedly redistribute wealth to orphans, as well as other forms of health and childcare. Descriptions of these services are often accompanied by images that portray the Islamic State as a benevolent service provider.<sup>187</sup> The intent is clear—to illustrate to their audience that they have resurrected the Caliphate and are in the process of building an Islamic 'utopia'.

## **Law & Order**

Where the Governance & Stateliness content seeks to depict the benefits ISIS' Caliphate provides its citizens, the Law & Order sub-theme portrays the group's steadfast enforcement of its theocratic legal regime. To demonstrate ISIS' commitment to enforcing this regime, the authors provide ample content that illustrates both their crackdown on products and activities deemed *haram*, as well as vicious punishments for behaviours they deem contradictory to the principles of Islam. Images and descriptions of ISIS members burning of drugs and cigarettes and Islamic State police forces apprehending alleged drug traffickers—activities deemed *haram* by ISIS—are prevalent throughout AG1. In addition, content depicting the application of brutal punishments and executions of alleged criminals is present throughout the five issues. The group displays images of an allegedly adulterous woman being stoned and the execution of "highway robbers" or opposition

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<sup>186</sup> Dabiq Team, "Da'wah and Hisbah in the Islamic State." *Dabiq Issue 3: The Call to Hijrah*, September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2014, 16-17; Dabiq Team, "A Window into the Islamic State." *Dabiq Issue 4: The Failed Crusade*, October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2014, 27-29.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid, 18-19; Dabiq Team, "The Currency Of The Khilafah," *Dabiq Issue 2: The Flood*, July 27<sup>th</sup> 2014, 38; Dabiq Team, "News: Caring for the Orphans", *Dabiq Issue 2: The Flood*, July 27<sup>th</sup>, 2014, 38.

militants.<sup>188</sup> These actions are portrayed as the enforcement of *hadd* (Qur'anic punishment) to signal ISIS' commitment to rigidly enforcing a puritanical version of Shari'ah.<sup>189</sup> The intent of ISIS' law and order messaging is not only to reinforce the audience's perception of ISIS' statehood, but to demonstrate the group's steadfast commitment to enforcing Islamic laws, developing the group's image as scriptural literalists and setting them apart from other jihadist groups, who, they later argue, 'betray Islam' by only enforcing select Islamic laws.<sup>190</sup>

### **Expansion**

Within AG1, the Islamic State's expansion is a frequent refrain in the group's messaging content. While this theme is often emphasized within the group's Military and Terrorism (MT) content, which describe specific military operations that contribute to the Caliphate's expanding borders, the group also emphasizes its domestic and international expansion with its SBEG content. Domestically, the group often relies on the regular installment "*In The Words of the Enemy*", which frequently repurposes the analysis of Western analysts to reinforce the Islamic State's image as an expansionary state-like force. For example, in *Dabiq* Issue 1, the group cites the analysis of Douglas A. Ollivant, former Director for Iraq at the US National Security Council, and Brian Fishman former Director of Research for the Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point, who describe the Islamic State's territorial control as growing, and stretching "in a long ellipse roughly from al-Raqqah in Syria to Fallujah in Iraq" with "many other non-contiguous "islands" of control in both Iraq and Syria".<sup>191</sup> These articles serve not only to highlight the group's growing

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<sup>188</sup> Dabiq Team, "News," *Dabiq Issue 2: The Flood*, July 27<sup>th</sup>, 2014, 33-41; Dabiq Team, "News," *Dabiq Issue 1: The Return of the Khilafah*, July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2014, 45; Dabiq Team, "Daw'ah and Hisbah in the Islamic State", 16-17; Dabiq Team, "Remaining and Expanding" *Dabiq Issue 5: Remaining and Expanding*, November 21<sup>st</sup>, 2014, 23.

<sup>189</sup> "Hadd", Oxford Islamic Studies Online, 2017.  
<http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e757>.

<sup>190</sup> Dabiq Team, "The Allies of Al-Qa'idah in Yemen," *Dabiq Issue 12: Just Terror*, November 18<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 5-8.

<sup>191</sup> Dabiq Team, "In the Words of the Enemy," *Dabiq Issue 1: The Return of the Khilafah*, July 5<sup>th</sup> 2015, 32-33.

territorial control, but bolsters the credibility of the Islamic State's messaging. By showing their audience that even those hostile to their group are staggered by its success, it makes their own messaging appear less like propaganda and more like a clear-eyed assessment of a rising military and political power.<sup>192</sup>

The group also stresses the growth of its Caliphate globally. In *Dabiq* Issue 5: *Remaining and Expanding*, which as the title suggests, heavily emphasizes the theme of expansion, the group details the accession of five new *wilayah* to the Islamic State from regions across the Middle East and North Africa. They portray the addition of these new 'provinces' of the Islamic State as evidence of the group's nascent global Caliphate and the beginning of Islam's expansion to the "eastern and Western extents" of the earth.<sup>193</sup> Through the provision of this type of content, the Islamic State's propaganda cultivates its image as a group with momentum, whose rapid and remarkable growth will not be slowed.

### ***Jahiliyya, Humiliation & The Restoration of Muslim Pride***

Throughout AG1, the Islamic State employs "diagnostic" and "prognostic framing" to highlight the problems of "*jahiliyya*" and "humiliation" facing the Ummah and present their Caliphate as the solution.<sup>194</sup> The group's juxtaposition of Muslim humiliation with themes of restoring the *Ummah's* pride is notable within AG1 as it situates the Caliphate at the center of ISIS' "crisis and solution constructs" and frames the Islamic State as a solution to the problems facing Islam.<sup>195</sup> This framing undergoes significant changes over the duration of the sample as the group's ability to frame their Caliphate as a means of rectifying the tribulations of the *Ummah* deteriorates alongside the territorial integrity of their state.

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<sup>192</sup> Dabiq Team, "In The Words of the Enemy", *Dabiq Issue 4: The Failed Crusade*, October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2014, 46.

<sup>193</sup> Dabiq Team, "Remaining and Expanding", 20-33.

<sup>194</sup> Benford and Snow, 615-617; Dabiq Team, "Khilafah Declared", *Dabiq Issue 1: The Return of the Khilafah*, July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2014, 6-9.

<sup>195</sup> The phrase "crisis and solution constructs" is borrowed from Haroro J. Ingram's work. See Ingram, *An Analysis of Islamic State's Dabiq Magazine*, 458.

In ISIS' telling, secularism, nationalism, democracy, life under *taghut* regimes, and irreligiousness have robbed the Muslim *Ummah* of their "dignity, might, rights, and leadership". Muslims have been "drowning in oceans of disgrace, being nursed on the milk of humiliation, and being ruled by the vilest of all people", but "the time has come for them to rise".<sup>196</sup> For ISIS, the restoration of the Caliphate allows the *Ummah* to "wake up from its sleep, remove the garments of dishonor, and shake of the dust of humiliation and disgrace" as the "dawn of honor has emerged anew". Like other jihadists groups, ISIS views the purported breakdown of Islamic values as a key source of the *Ummah's* humiliation and weakness, a humiliation that can only be rectified through the expansion and consolidation of its Caliphate.

In addition to presenting the resurrection of the Caliphate as a restoration of pride for the *Ummah* at large, ISIS presents it as an avenue for Muslims to re-establish their individual dignity, arguing that the "modern day slavery of employment, work hours, wages... is one that leaves the Muslim in a constant feeling of subjugation to a *kāfir* master".<sup>197</sup> In this condition, they assert, a Muslim "does not live the might and honor that every Muslim should live and experience".<sup>198</sup> But under the Caliphate, "the Muslim will walk everywhere as a master, having honor, being revered, with his head raised high and his dignity preserved".<sup>199</sup> By expressing themes of *jahiliyya*, humiliation and restoration of pride, ISIS connects the establishment of the Caliphate to a range of problems facing Muslims—as both individuals and as a collective—and poses its establishment and expansion as the solution.

## Analytical Grouping Two

While the quantitative findings of this study show that the proportion of SBEG content drops from AG1 to AG2, AG2's thematic content remains qualitatively similar to that of the first grouping, with a focus on exhibiting the Islamic State's governance and

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<sup>196</sup> Dabiq Team, "Khilafah Declared", 6-9.

<sup>197</sup> Dabiq Team, "Hijrah From Hypocrisy to Sincerity", *Dabiq Issue 3, A Call to Hijrah*, September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2014, 29.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid*, 29.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid*, 29.

services alongside its legal regime. While the proportion of SBEG content drops in AG2, a drop that coincides with ISIS' reduced territorial holdings, the group has not yet sought to distance itself completely from its Caliphate-related messaging, as the proportion of SBEG content still averages nearly one-fifth of the magazines' content during this period, and the group maintains a utopian depiction of its state. As a result, it is unclear if decline in SBEG content during AG2 is a broader strategic shift in the group's messaging, driven by their growing reticence to address their shrinking state, or if the reduction is simply the result of the Islamic State's propagandists producing a more diverse thematic narrative in AG2, as opposed to the SRT and SBEG-dominated AG1.

### ***Utopia, Governance & Stateliness***

Like AG1, the group emphasizes *Governance* and *Stateliness* to demonstrate the successes of their state-building project. These sub-themes are evident in articles such as "*The Return of the Golden Dinar*", which promotes ISIS' new domestic currency, and "*Healthcare in the Khilafah*", which not only seeks to flaunt the Islamic State's healthcare system by highlighting the complex operations it performs and number of treatments it has provided, but also discusses the Islamic State's development of two medical colleges in Raqqa and Mosul. While a smaller proportion of content is dedicated to SBEG-themes, the group's propaganda continues to stress the importance of ISIS' self-declared Caliphate. Using captured British journalist John Cantlie as the accredited author, ISIS works to frame themselves as a "country" not a "terrorist organization", arguing that a "mere 'organization' would not have tanks and artillery pieces, an army of soldiers tens of thousands strong... their own currency, primary schools for the young, and a functioning court system".<sup>200</sup>

For ISIS, the emphasis on their burgeoning state serves a two-fold purpose and addresses two audiences throughout AG2. First, some of the content appears to be geared towards a non-sympathetic Western audience, aiming both to inflate their own stature and state-building credibility to dissuade further military intervention, even arguing

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<sup>200</sup> Dabiq Team, "Paradigm Shift," *Dabiq Issue 8: Shari'ah Alone Shall Rule Africa*, March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 64-67.

the West should consider a “truce” with the Islamic State.<sup>201</sup> Second, the combination of ISIS’ continued emphasis on their state and the increased enemy-focus of AG2, differentiates the Islamic State from other jihadist groups that have captured territory. Rival jihadist groups have rarely invested comparable resources into their fledgling states, nor achieved such impressive results, a fact which ISIS uses to portray itself as superior and more committed to the creation of an Islamic Caliphate than its competitors, bolstering its credibility amongst its sympathetic, jihadi audience.<sup>202</sup> Articles like “*The Law of Allah and the Laws of Men*” serve to chastise ISIS’ competitor groups for their failure to govern, simultaneously elevating ISIS while delegitimizing its rivals, enhancing their message’s credibility and the perceived validity of their solution constructs. Like in AG1, the group continues to emphasize their foreign expansion, discussing successes such as a series of new *bay’ah* from jihadists in the Caucasus region and Boko Haram, feeding into the group’s image of momentum, strength and success.<sup>203</sup>

### **Law & Order**

Like the Governance and Stateliness theme, the Law & Order sub-theme is less pervasive in AG2 but its content remains qualitatively similar. ISIS’ messaging continues to accentuate the brutal enforcement of order and puritanical *hudud* punishments, highlighting its delivery of lashes for *zinā* (unlawful sexual intercourse), its amputation of the hands of thieves, and even its members throwing homosexuals from rooftops.<sup>204</sup> In line with the greater enemy-focus of AG2, ISIS also juxtaposes its own enforcement

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid, 64-67. In this article, the group argues that the West should consider a “truce” with the Islamic State and that a “military solution” alone will be unable to eliminate the group.

<sup>202</sup> McCants, 53-69.

<sup>203</sup> Dabiq Team, “Wilayat Khurasan And the Bay’ay From Qawqaz,” *Dabiq Issue 7: From Hypocrisy to Apostasy*, February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 33-37; Dabiq Team, “The Bay’ah From West Africa,” *Dabiq Issue 8, Shari’ah Alone Will Rule Africa*, March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 14-16; Dabiq Team, “The Qawqazi Caravan Gains Pace,” *Dabiq Issue 10: The Law of Allah or the Laws of Men*, July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 36-37.

<sup>204</sup> Dabiq Team, “Clamping Down of Sexual Deviance,” *Dabiq Issue 7: From Hypocrisy to Apostasy*, February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 42; Dabiq Team, “The Law of Allah and the Laws of Men,” *Dabiq Issue 10: The Law of Allah and the Laws of Men*, July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 60-61.

of Shari'ah punishments with the failure of its enemies to do so. The group specifically highlights the decisions by Al Qaeda's Syrian and Yemeni affiliates to share power with other political groups and their refrain from rigidly enforcing the *hudud*.<sup>205</sup> In doing so, the group employs a two-fold strategy. They juxtapose their own political success and willingness to enforce punishments, with the inability or unwillingness of their rivals to do so, indicating that the way to revitalizing Islamic power is not through pragmatism but zealotry. This strategy fits within a broader thematic trend within AG2, where ISIS' increased focus on its enemies simultaneously allows it to bolster its own jihadist credentials while denigrating the religious and political credentials of its enemies.

Despite quantitative reductions in the amount of SBEG content in AG2, the themes expressed in the *Dabiq* during this period remain similar. This finding indicates that, despite the group's territorial losses during this period, the Islamic State's state remains central to its crisis-solution constructs and messaging strategy.

### **Analytical Grouping 3**

In AG3 the Islamic State quantitatively and qualitatively transitions its messaging away from the Caliphate-centric content of AG1 and the more thematically diverse content of AG2. Instead, it focuses narrowly on MT and SRT content that works to obfuscate and rationalize the group's failures. This shift is demonstrated in part by a sharp reduction in SBEG content, with four of the seven issues in AG3 exhibiting no SBEG content whatsoever. As discussed in Chapter 3, AG3 contains the Islamic State's greatest period of territorial loss, and unlike AG2, the group has very few territorial conquests that can offset or deflect from these net losses. This correlation between the drop in SBEG content and territorial control suggests that as the Islamic State loses territory and its state-building project becomes increasingly imperiled, one of the ways it adapts its messaging strategy is simply by shifting its focus away from its failed state-building project, and using content in other thematic categories (chiefly the MT and SRT categories) to rationalize and justify its failures.

The reduction in SBEG content in AG3 is stark, with only 5 SBEG-classified items in analytical grouping's seven issues, fewer than the number of SBEG items contained in

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid, 66-69.

several individual issues of *Dabiq* in AG1. Furthermore, AG3's SBEG content demonstrates a disproportionate focus on the establishment of territorial nodes and administrative systems outside of Iraq and Syria than previous analytical groupings. For instance, an article in *Dabiq* Issue 14 interviews the "Amir" of ISIS' cell inside Bangladesh and *Rumiyah* Issue 5 interviews the "Amir of Hisbah" in ISIS' Sinai *wilayah*.<sup>206</sup> Only two SBEG items are related to the group's domestic theatre, with one presenting an interview with the "Amir" of ISIS' "Central Office For Investigating Grievances", and the other citing Ban Ki Moon's description of the Islamic State's expansion and state-building successes. The quantitative reduction and shifting geographic focus of the group's SBEG content correlates with a period of greater territorial decline. As a result, these findings suggest that the group's territorial losses are not only forcing it to reduce its overall SBEG content, but also to focus their SBEG content on regions where the collapse of ISIS' state is less pronounced.

## Section Conclusion

The precipitous decline in SBEG content in the Islamic State's messaging from AG1 to AG3 underscores the way the group's propaganda has fundamentally changed as its territorial losses mount. The group—which calls itself the *Islamic State*—has gone from placing the creation of their state at the center of its messaging content, to rarely addressing it at all. The group's unwillingness to discuss its state has taken away its core distinguishing feature—its Caliphate—and rendered it unable to tap into sentiments such as the restoration of Muslim pride and dignity as it did in AG1. It has also forced the group to dramatically alter its 'narrative of victory', as will be discussed later in this thesis, and refocus its messaging on promoting home-grown terrorism instead of Caliphal development. Furthermore, as will be discussed in Chapter 7, the group's declining ability to portray its 'utopian' Islamic Caliphate as a solution to the various crises of humiliation and victimization facing the *Ummah* largely undermines its original crisis-solution constructs, damaging the persuasiveness of its messaging. Without the ability to evoke romanticized and heroic notions of Caliphal resurrection, as it did in its earlier propaganda,

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<sup>206</sup> Dabiq Team, "Interview with the Amir of the Khilafah's Soliders in Bengal," *Dabiq Issue 14: The Murtadd Brotherhood*, April 13<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 58-66; Rumiyah Team, "Interview with the Amir of Hisbah in Sinai," *Rumiyah Issue 5*, January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2017, 12-15.

the Islamic State's magazines' shift to offer content that focuses on sustaining a declining enterprise, rather than championing the creation of a revolutionary new one.

## Violence and Brutality

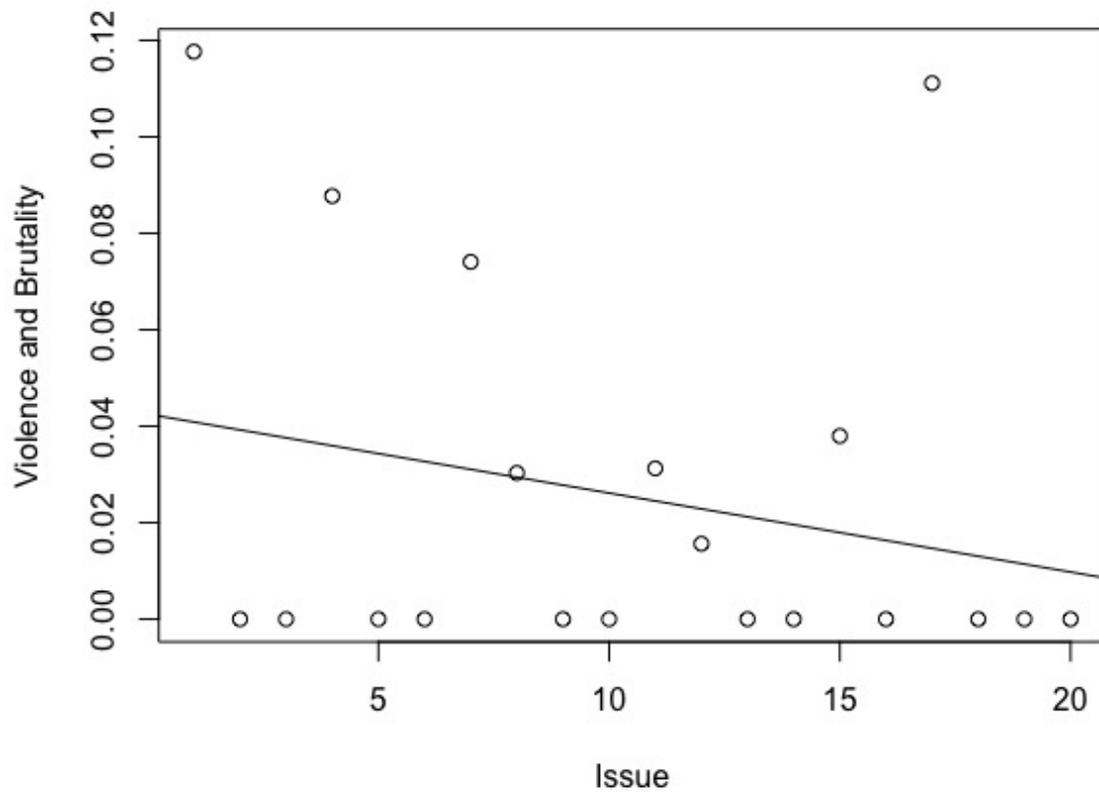


Figure 2: Proportion of VB Content By Issue

Adjusted R-squared: 0.007045

p-value: 0.3008

AG1: 4.11%

AG2: 1.89%

**AG3: 2.12%**

Figure 2 illustrates the proportion of Violence and Brutality (VB) content in *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* over time. The graph shows that, over the course of the sample, there is no statistically significant upward or downward trend in the proportion of VB content in *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*. This study also finds that VB content accounts for a small proportion of *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*'s thematic content, with the average proportion across the 20 issues examined being 2.5%.

While the low levels of VB content found in this study may be attributable in part to the method of categorization employed, which grouped content by an item's dominant theme, it is consistent with the findings of other studies examining the thematic content of ISIS propaganda. Because this study categorized content by an item's dominant theme, items that contained violent language or imagery, but whose content was focused *primarily* on another theme, would be categorized accordingly. For example, articles that portray images of ISIS delivering *huddud*—a form of Shari'ah-derived punishment that includes stoning and execution—would often be categorized as SBEG content, as the text of the item and the group's use of images highlighted ISIS' harsh system of governance and imposition of legal order, core components of the SBEG category. However, the low-levels of violent VB content found in this study are similar to other studies that have examined the contents of ISIS' propaganda, such as Winter's 2015 study, which found 2.13% of the content examined fell within the study's "Brutality" category.<sup>207</sup>

Furthermore, because there is no statistically significant increase or decrease in the proportion of VB content over the course of the sample, the data suggests that ISIS has not attempted to alter the VB content of its propaganda in response to its territorial and military setbacks. This suggests that ISIS has not attempted to offset its loses by either increasing the amount of VB content in its magazines as a means of attracting recruits by portraying ISIS membership as an avenue for extreme violence. Conversely, the data suggests that the group has not attempted to soften its image and appeal to a wider audience by eliminating its VB content altogether. These findings indicate that,

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<sup>207</sup> Winter, *Documenting the Virtual Caliphate*, 21.

contrary to the popular depictions of Islamic State propaganda as violent and gore-filled, gratuitous depictions of violence make up a relatively small proportion of the group's messaging content.

## Clash of Civilizations and Ideological Conflict

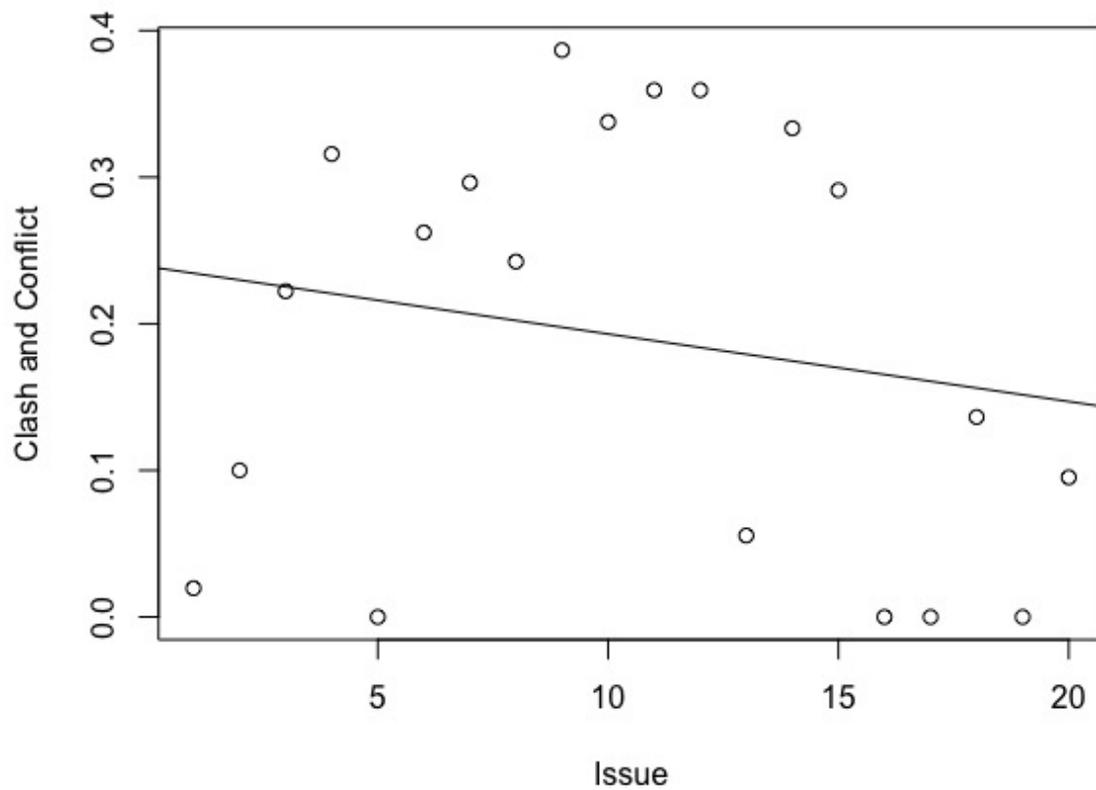


Figure 3: Proportion of CCIC Content By Issue

Adjusted R-squared: -0.0179

p-value: 0.4252

AG1: 13.15%

**AG2: 28.75%**

**AG3: 12.23%**

The above figure shows the results of the linear regression run on the contents of the Clash of Civilizations and Ideological Conflict category (CCIC). The results of the regression show there is not a statistically significant upwards or downwards trend in the CCIC content within the sample. However, quantitative analysis does find that through the middle of the sample, there is a higher proportion of CCIC content as a greater number of content items are dedicated to demonizing or discrediting the Islamic State's enemies. More specifically, this spike in CCIC content is primary driven by the fact that the Islamic State dedicates more content to denigrating the West and its jihadist competitors in *Dabiq* Issues 6-15 than it does at the beginning and end of the sample.

## **Analytical Grouping 1**

### ***Discrediting Enemies, Anti-Western Foreign Policy & Hostage Policy***

Overall, the content of AG1 is largely focused on the Islamic State itself, rather than its enemies. The majority of content within the grouping is centered on topics such as demonstrating the success of ISIS' burgeoning state-building project and its narrative of victory, legitimizing both its state and its actions on theological grounds, and presenting ISIS as a source of Islamic religious authority. As a result, the five issues in this grouping have less enemy-focused, CCIC content than the issues in AG2.<sup>208</sup>

However, where group does employ CCIC-themed content in AG1, it focuses primarily on anti-Western themes. This content, while ostensibly discussing the Islamic State's enemies, is often used to cultivate an image of the Islamic State's strength and geopolitical power in opposition to the West. One of the ways the Islamic State's authors seek to demonize the West is through discussions of Western, primarily American and British, hostage policy, portraying Western countries as immoral for their unwillingness to pay ransoms for ISIS-held prisoners like James Foley and Steven Sotloff. They use

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<sup>208</sup> In AG1, the first five issues, the average proportion of CCIC content is 13.2%, whereas the average proportion for the full sample of 20 issues 19.1%.

discussions of hostage policy as a platform to decry militaristic Western foreign policy in the Middle East, ultimately framing the beheadings of Foley and Sotloff as the fault of the U.S. government, not the Islamic State. This theme is expressed using three Islamic State hostages, American journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff and British journalist John Cantlie, each of whom are attributed with authorship of items featured in *Dabiq*. In these pieces, Foley, Sotloff and Cantlie (or Islamic State writers posing as these men) use their platform to decry and discourage Western military intervention in the Muslim world and against the Islamic State. For example, in the article attributed to Foley, the author writes that intervention against ISIS is a continuation of the American “onslaught on Muslim lands” and argues against American intervention against ISIS, stating that American citizens will inevitably “pay the price of their [government’s] crimes”.<sup>209</sup> Cantlie’s articles also portray the Islamic State as militarily powerful and Western intervention as the recipe for a doomed quagmire.<sup>210</sup> While, as Colas has suggested, articles like those attributed to Foley and Sotloff may be geared towards a non-sympathetic, Western audiences given their focus on Western military and hostage policy and use of emotionally-charged rhetoric. However, they also serve to build the Islamic State’s image as a rising power and a threat to the U.S. government, which plays into the group’s broader themes of strength and Islamic revanchism.<sup>211</sup> Similarly, after the U.S. expands its aerial campaign against the Islamic State into Syria, the group ramps up its use of CCIC content and anti-Western themes, titling the following issue “*The Failed Crusade*”, an allusion connecting contemporary Western intervention to the Christian Crusades of the Medieval Period.<sup>212</sup> Moreover, articles like “*Indeed Your Lord is Ever Watchful*”, which is ostensibly directed

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<sup>209</sup> Dabiq Team, “Foley’s Blood is on Obama’s Hands,” *Dabiq Issue 3: The Call to Hijrah*, September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2014, 37-40.

<sup>210</sup> Dabiq Team, “Hard Talk: The Real Story Behind My Videos” *Dabiq Issue 4: The Failed Crusade*, October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2014, 52-55; Dabiq Team, Foley’s Blood is on Obama’s Hands, 37-40.

<sup>211</sup> Colas, 172-173.

<sup>212</sup>In *Dabiq Issue 4* the proportion of CCIC content increases to 31.6% owing largely to content addressing the American intervention and anti-ISIS coalition; Craig Whitlock. “U.S. Begins Airstrikes against Islamic State in Syria.” *Washington Post*, September 23, 2014, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-begins-airstrikes-against-islamic-state-in-syria/2014/09/22/8b677e26-42b3-11e4-b437-1a7368204804\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-begins-airstrikes-against-islamic-state-in-syria/2014/09/22/8b677e26-42b3-11e4-b437-1a7368204804_story.html).

to an American audience, frames the American intervention against the Islamic State as a clash between the West and Islam, the beginning of the Islamic State's usurpation of global power, and the return to Islamic dominance of world affairs. This framing illustrates how content aimed at the group's enemies is often used relationally to foster favourable perceptions of the Islamic State itself in the eyes of the group's target audience.<sup>213</sup> While the group does touch upon its other regional enemies, in articles like "*Reflections on The Final Crusade*", such as the Iran, Russia, and the coalition's "proxies" like the Kurds and the Free Syrian Army, the primary focus of AG1's CCIC content is the United States and the broader Western world.<sup>214</sup>

## **Analytical Grouping 2**

### ***Discrediting Competing Jihadist & Islamist Groups***

In AG2, the Islamic State's CCIC content shifts its focus substantially, moving away from anti-Western content and towards content aimed at discrediting its jihadist competitors.<sup>215</sup> While the group does address various jihadist factions, the principal focus

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<sup>213</sup> Dabiq Team, "Indeed Your Lord is Ever Watchful", *Dabiq Issue 3: The Call to Hijrah*, September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2014, 6-9.

<sup>214</sup> Dabiq Team, "Reflections the Final Crusade," *"Dabiq Issue 4: The Failed Crusade*, October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2014, 32-44.

<sup>215</sup> Between Dabiq Issues 6 and 14 (AG2), 13 CCIC content items were focused on ISIS' jihadi competitors, 6 displayed a predominately anti-Western focus, 2 items focused on sectarianism, 6 on *taghut* regimes, and 8 did not fall within the above categories.

of its messaging is Al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate.<sup>216</sup> The nature and timing of the rise in content criticizing ISIS' jihadist competitors shows how the group has engaged in an "intramovement framing contest" or form of "non-price competition" to increase its market share of prospective foreign fighters.<sup>217</sup> By undermining the credibility of other organizations, ISIS aims to steer potential recruits away from its rivals and into its own ranks through the processes of vilification and "decreditinging".<sup>218</sup>

To compete for additional market share, the primary focus of ISIS' messaging is on Al Qaeda, its main jihadist competitor both globally and in Syria. Articles such as "*The Allies of Al Qai'dah in Sham*" a lengthy, multi-part installment in *Dabiq* Issues 8 through 12, work to discredit Al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate by highlighting its willingness to work with more moderate Islamist or secular-nationalist groups in Syria's civil war. These articles frame Al Qaeda's alliance-building with groups ISIS considers to be "apostates" as an indicator of Al Qaeda's insufficient commitment to the creation of a 'true' Islamic Caliphate and its willingness to put political pragmatism ahead of the religion.<sup>219</sup> Through its content on "jihad claimants" and their allies—a term the authors use to underscore the alleged illegitimacy of rival group's claims to be waging jihad—ISIS frames the prospect of joining

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<sup>216</sup> Al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, led by Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, has adopted various names including Al Nusra Front, Jabhat Al Nusra and, after it announced its split from Al Qaeda Central in July, 2016, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham. However, most terrorism analysts regard this alleged split from Al Qaeda Central as part of a rebranding strategy to attract greater support from Syrian Sunnis, rather than a major change in the relationship between al-Jolani's organization and Al Qaeda Central. As a result, for the purposes of clarity, it will be referred to in this thesis as Al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate; Colin P Clarke. "The Moderate Face of Al Qaeda." *Foreign Affairs*. October 24<sup>th</sup>, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-10-24/moderate-face-al-qaeda>; Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Thomas Joscelyn. "Rebranding Terror." *Foreign Affairs*. August 28<sup>th</sup>, 2016. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2016-08-28/rebranding-terror>.

<sup>217</sup> For an example of "non-price competition" between competing religious factions see: Peter T Leeson and Jacob W. Russ. "Witch Trials." *The Economic Journal*, (2017): 1-40. <https://doi.org/10.1111/eoj.12498>.

<sup>218</sup> Wiktorowicz, *Framing Jihad*, 159-77.

<sup>219</sup> Dabiq Team, "The Allies of Al-Qa'idah in Sham," *Dabiq Issue 8: Shari'ah Alone Will Rule Africa*, March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 7-11; Dabiq Team, "In the Words of the Enemy," *Dabiq Issue 9: They Plot and Allah Plots*, May 21<sup>st</sup>, 2015, 60-61.

a jihadist group other than ISIS, or one with comparatively moderate Islamist allies, as tantamount to apostasy, vilifying its opponents and exalting its own organization.<sup>220</sup> In doing so, they undermine the authority and Islamic credentials of their main competitors and reinforce their own image as the ‘purest’ jihadi group.

Furthermore, as this analysis reveals, this component of the Islamic State’s messaging strategy is not only directed at Western Muslims and Muslim converts in the West, who most scholars regard as the primary audience of *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*, but also towards active English-speaking foreign fighters who are already active members of ISIS’ competitor jihadist factions in Syria. In *Dabiq* Issues 10 and 12, ISIS explicitly calls on these fighters to mutiny from their current organizations, kill as many of other members as possible, and join ISIS.<sup>221</sup> In a similar fashion, ISIS also seeks to highlight fissures between Al Qaeda and its affiliates to encourage those affiliates, or factions within them, to defect from Al Qaeda and pledge *bay’ah* to the Islamic State. For example, in Issue 12, *Dabiq* interviews a Somali jihadist who calls on other Somali jihadists to pledge allegiance to ISIS and argues that much of Al Shabaab’s rank and file are perplexed by the leadership’s decision to remain with the poorly led Al Qaeda instead of giving *bay’ah* to the Islamic State.<sup>222</sup> Taken together, the nature and timing of the increasing in “jihad claimant” messaging content suggests that ISIS may be using its propaganda to sow discord within enemy ranks and attract a greater influx of foreign fighters to reinvigorate its slowing global and domestic expansion.

### ***Sectarianism and Taghut Governments***

Throughout AG2 and the wider sample, the authors dedicate comparatively few items to addressing *taghut* regimes and sectarianism. For example, with the exception of *Dabiq* Issue 13, which contains several articles about Iran and is titled “*The Rafidāh*”—a

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<sup>220</sup> Dabiq Team, “The Allies of Al Qai’dah in Sham Part II,” *Dabiq Issue 9: They Plot and Allah Plots*, May 21<sup>st</sup>, 2015, 6-7.

<sup>221</sup> Dabiq Team, The Law of Allah and the Laws of Men 64; Dabiq Team, “The Allies of Al-Qa’idah in Sham: The End,” *Dabiq Issue 12: Just Terror*, November 18<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 16.

<sup>222</sup> Dabiq Team, “An Interview with Abū Mūharib As-Sūmali,” *Dabiq Issue 10: The Law of Allah and the Laws of Men*, July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 60-63.

derogatory term applied to Shi'a Muslims for their 'rejection' of Abu Bakr as the first Caliph—sectarian content receives relatively little attention when compared to ISIS' Western and jihadist enemies. The low-levels of sectarian-related content may be the result of ISIS primary target audience. Content addressing the West and other jihadist groups may be more likely to resonate with the ISIS' sympathetic English-speaking, Western audience, as their lives in Western countries and likely engagement with the online jihadi community would likely make these groups more relatable enemies for ISIS to mobilize their supporters against.

Similarly, there is a relatively low proportion of content addressing Sunni Muslim governments. Articles like "*The Libyan Arena*" and the "*The Flags of Jahiliyya*" are aimed at delegitimizing and discrediting Sunni Muslim governments throughout the region, portraying them as lackeys of the West that rule by "manmade laws" instead of Shari'ah.<sup>223</sup> These articles serve as platform to portray the world as hostile to Islam, diagnosing one of the myriad crises facing Islam and reinforcing the 'justness' of the Islamic State's cause. However, like the sectarianism content, they are less likely to resonate with the Islamic State's intended audience as readily as anti-Western or "jihad claimant" content, potentially explaining the lesser emphasis on *taghut* themes within this sample.

### ***Anti-Western Content***

Throughout the middle ten issues of the sample, there is a notable correlation between the Islamic State's directed or inspired terror attacks abroad and increases in its anti-Western CCIC content.<sup>224</sup> *Dabiq* Issues 7, 12 and 15, which followed the Charlie Hebdo attacks (Issue 7), the November 15<sup>th</sup> Paris Attacks and the downing of a Russian passenger jet (Issue 12), and attacks in Orlando, Dhaka, Magnanville, Nice, and Normandy (France), and Würzburg and Ansbach (Germany) (Issue 15), each feature multiple anti-Western CCIC content items that criticize facets of the West like its

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<sup>223</sup> Dabiq Team, "The Libyan Arena," *Dabiq Issue 8: Shari'ah Alone Will Rule Africa*, March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 25-27; Dabiq Team, "The Flags of Jahiliyya," *Dabiq Issue 9: They Plot And Allah Plots*, May 21<sup>st</sup>, 2015, 20-23.

<sup>224</sup> While *Dabiq* Issue 15 is included in AG3 and not AG2, it is included here to avoid breaking up discussion of the correlation between increases in anti-Western CCIC content and Islamic State-linked terror attacks.

Christianity, democracy and secular-liberal culture.<sup>225</sup> The timing and content of these items suggest that ISIS may be capitalizing on the publicity and anti-Muslim sentiments created by their own terrorist attacks.

The group also uses these attacks to reinforce its in-and-out group framing and portray the West and Islam as incompatible. Articles such as “*The Extinction of the Grayzone*” and “*Why We Hate You and Why We Fight You*” seek to cultivate hard divisions between Muslims and Westerners and Islam and Western culture.<sup>226</sup> Given that the primary audience of ISIS’ English-language magazines is Western Muslims sympathetic to ISIS’ cause, the timing and persistent use of in-and-out-group framing in these items may be intended to capitalize on the anti-Muslim sentiments created by ISIS’ own attacks to harden divisions between their sympathetic audience members and the Western societies in which they live, contributing to the categorical, ‘us vs. them’ thinking critical in the radicalization process.

### **Analytical Grouping 3**

In AG3, the main qualitative shift in the Islamic State’s CCIC content is the shift away from content on its jihadist enemies, who were the primary focus of the group’s CCIC content in AG2. One factor that may contribute to this shift is the contraction of the group’s state and its increased focus on promoting home-grown terrorism, reducing ISIS’ leverage to criticize competing jihadist organizations. In contrast to the CCIC articles in the middle of the sample, the final seven issues do not contain any CCIC content items aimed at

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<sup>225</sup> Dabiq Team, “The Extinction of the Grayzone,” *Dabiq Issue 7: From Hypocrisy to Apostasy*, February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 54-57; Dabiq Team, “The Anger Factory,” *Dabiq Issue 7: From Hypocrisy to Apostasy*, February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 76-82; Dabiq Team, “Foreword,” *Dabiq Issue 12: Just Terror*, November 18<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 2-4; Dabiq Team, “You Think They Are Together But Their Hearts Are Divided,” *Dabiq Issue 12: Just Terror*, November 18<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 43-46; Dabiq Team, “The Fitrah of Mankind,” *Dabiq Issue 15: Breaking The Cross*, July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2016, 20-25; Dabiq Team, “Why We Hate You And Why We Fight You,” *Dabiq Issue 15: Breaking The Cross*, July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2016, 30-33.

<sup>226</sup> Dabiq Team, *The Extinction of the Grayzone*, 54-67; Dabiq Team, *Why We Hate You and Why We Fight You*, 30-33.

discrediting competing jihadist organizations.<sup>227</sup> While ISIS used a variety of means to criticize its competitors, including their political and military ineffectiveness, their failure to adopt ultra-hardline interpretations of scripture, and their ‘corrupt’ associations with *taghut* regimes, the core theme of ISIS’ criticism is their failure to implement Shari’ah and work towards building a Caliphate.<sup>228</sup> However, as ISIS’ territory contracts and its messaging shifts away from its original *raison d’être* of state-building to focus on insurgent-style military operations and home-grown terrorism—the very techniques ISIS accused its competitors of wrongly focusing on to the detriment of their state-building—the group has less credibility in claiming to be operating with superior jihadi methodology. Thus, the decline of ISIS’ state—and its willingness to discuss it in its propaganda—may play a role in the group’s shifting focus away from “jihad claimant” content.

A second, interlinked factor is ISIS’ shift away from encouraging foreign fighters to join ISIS in its domestic Caliphate and its increased emphasis on the importance of committing acts of terror at home. Because of this shift, ISIS may have less of a need to dissuade prospective foreign fighters from joining alternative jihadist groups and encouraging defections, as the group has reduced its *hijrah* advocacy and increased its emphasis on attacking civilians in the “nations of Kuffar” (see Chapter 6 for further analysis). As a result, content aimed at discrediting ISIS’ jihadist competitors in order to steer prospective recruits away from rival organizations may have been deprioritized by the group, as its messaging is increasingly focusing on promoting terrorism operations outside of its Caliphate.

Similar to AG2, AG3 also exhibits a low proportion of sectarian and *taghut* content. While AG3 does not contain any content items that are predominantly sectarian-themed, the group does dedicate several items to Erdogan and the Turkish government following the launch of Operation Euphrates Shield and the loss of the town of Dabiq. The group works to demonize Turkey in the eyes of their followers and encourage attacks against it

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<sup>227</sup> Of the ten CCIC items in the final seven issues examined, seven focus are anti-Western in nature, three focus on *taghut* regimes, and one focuses on sectarianism.

<sup>228</sup> Dabiq Team, “The Allies of Al-Qa’idah in Sham,” *Dabiq Issue 8: Shari’ah Alone Will Rule Africa*, March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 7-11. Dabiq Team, *In the Words of the Enemy*, 60-67; Dabiq Team, *The Allies of Al-Qa’idah in Yemen*, 5-7.

by portraying it as corrupting Islam, as a participant in the creation of the American “New World Order”, and highlighting their “crimes” against Muslims and the jihadist movement.<sup>229</sup> The group’s focus on Turkey is likely driven by the launch of the Turkish government’s military campaign against ISIS and the group’s desire to rally internal support against Turkey and mobilize their supporters to commit acts of terror inside the country, as they call for in *Rumiyah* Issue 3.<sup>230</sup> These anti-Turkish items provide an avenue for the group to maintain its narrative that Islam and Muslims are threatened by un-Islamic, *taghut* regimes. Similarly, in *Dabiq* Issue 14, *The Murtadd Brotherhood*, the group dedicates its feature piece to portraying the Muslim Brotherhood as a “cancer” on Islam, reinforcing the sense of crisis and perception that ‘true’ Islam is under attack from within, which is key to its overall narrative and crisis-solution constructs.

The anti-Western content in AG3 exhibits a peculiar distribution, with CCIC anti-Western content concentrated in the first two issues of the grouping (*Dabiq* Issue 14 and 15) and absent in the remaining five issues (*Rumiyah* 1-5). In particular, *Dabiq* Issue 15 contains five content items and a strong emphasis on anti-Western content, with several articles working to demonize Christianity as well as Western political systems and secular and liberal social and cultural norms.<sup>231</sup> However, the drop in the volume of anti-Western CCIC content is the result of changes in the way ISIS is delivering its anti-Western content, and the resultant categorization in this study, rather than absence of the content altogether. The CCIC category was designed to capture messaging content focusing on ISIS’ enemies, those whose political ideas, systems, religions or very existence are at odds with ISIS’ millenarian vision. As a result, Clash of Civilizations-style content that ISIS directs at the West was frequently classified in this category. However, with shifts in ISIS’ overall messaging strategy and an increased emphasis on promoting home-grown terrorism, similar anti-Western content migrates into other categories. For example, the “*Just Terror*” series, MT-classified articles that provide Do-It-Yourself advice for

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<sup>229</sup> Rumiyah Team, “The Weakest House Is That Of The Spider,” *Rumiyah Issue 3*, November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 2-3; Rumiyah Team, “Crimes of Turkey” *Rumiyah Issue 5*, January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2017, 19.

<sup>230</sup> Rumiyah Team, *The Weakest House Is That Of The Spider*, 3.

<sup>231</sup> Dabiq Team, *Why We Hate You and Why We Fight You*, 30-33; Dabiq Team, *The Fitrah Of Mankind And The Near Extinction Of The Western Woman*, 20-25.

prospective lone-wolf attackers, and SRT articles like “*The Kafir’s Blood is Halal For You, So Shed It*”, which provides scriptural arguments to justify killing ‘non-Muslims’, express similar anti-Western sentiments but were classified in different categories according to this study’s system of categorization. As a result, the absence of anti-Western content in the CCIC category should not be interpreted as the group attributing lesser importance to anti-Western content, but rather a shift in the way that content is being conveyed. This change reflects the increased emphasis the Islamic State is placing on home-grown terrorism, as content attacking the West and its political and cultural values is now chiefly expressed in military and scriptural content designed to mobilize ISIS supporters to action.

## **Section Conclusion**

While the CCIC category does exhibit substantial change over the course of the sample, it assumes lesser importance towards the end of the sample as the Islamic State’s messaging strategy changes. As the group begins to place greater strategic emphasis on operating beyond the territorial confines of its self-declared Caliphate, content addressing its domestic theatre—jihad claimant, sectarian and taghut content—receives less focus as the group places greater importance on operations abroad. Similarly, the absence of anti-Western CCIC content in the latter five issues of the sample reflects a further militarization of the group’s anti-Western ideas, as it increasingly works to promote and facilitate home-grown terrorism. Thus, while the CCIC content does not exhibit a statistically significant linear decline over the course of the sample, the group does demonstrate a qualitative shift in the category’s focus, moving away from the “jihad claimant” content that proliferated throughout the middle of the sample and linking its anti-Western content directly to terroristic action against the West.

# Martyrdom, Brotherhood, and Belonging

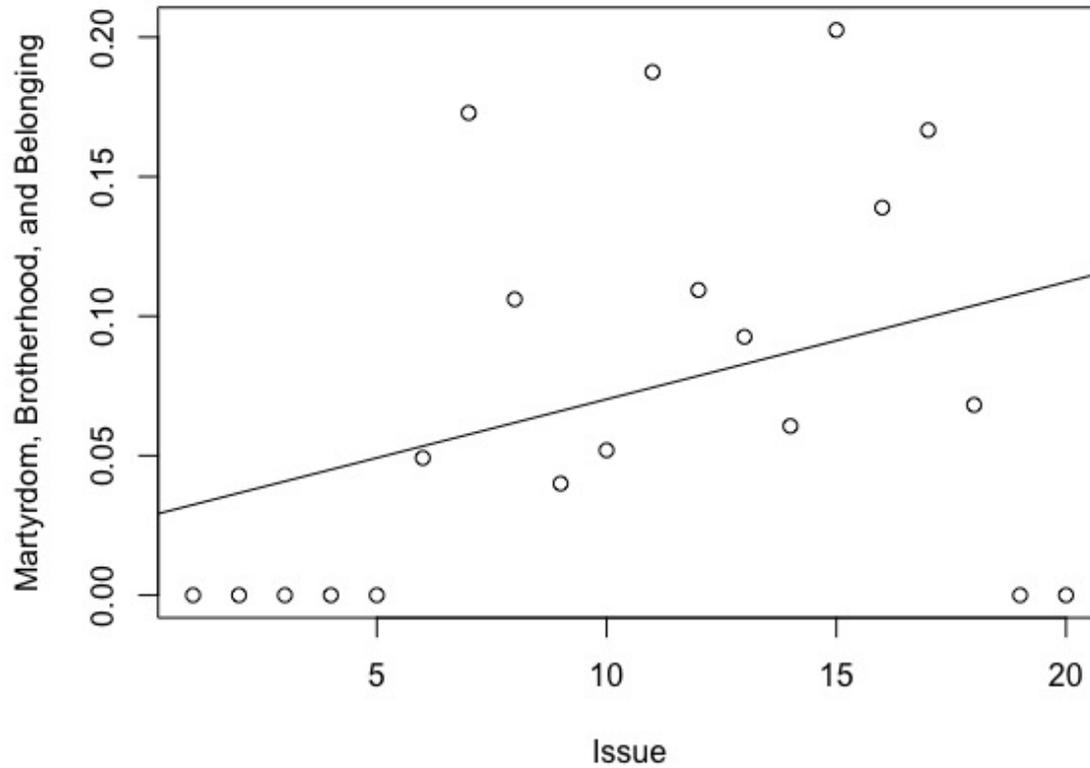


Figure 4: Proportion of MBB Content By Issue

Adjusted R-squared: 0.07441

p-value: 0.1293

AG1: 0%

AG2: 10.12%

AG3: 9.10%

Figure 4 depicts the results of the linear regression run on the contents of the Martyrdom, Brotherhood and Belonging (MBB) category. This study finds no statistically significant increases or decreases in MBB content over the duration of the study. It also finds that MBB content makes up a small proportion of *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*'s overall content, with an average of 7.2% across the 20 issues examined, with Issue 15 exhibiting the greatest proportion at 20.3% and seven issues containing no MBB content.

Because the data does not show an increase or decrease in MBB content over the course of the issues examined, it suggests that ISIS has not sought to alter the proportion of MBB content in its propaganda to address its territorial, military and political setbacks. For the first 5 issues, the proportion of MBB content in *Dabiq* remains at 0 before increasing to 4.9% in Issue 6 and remaining above 0 until Issues 4 and 5 of *Rumiyah*, the last two magazines examined in this study. The absence of MBB content in the early issues of *Dabiq* can be partially explained by the fact that one of the magazine's reoccurring installments *Among the Believers Are Men*, was not introduced until *Dabiq* Issue 7.<sup>232</sup> Because this installment is routinely classified in the MBB category for its glorification and eulogizing of ISIS' martyrs, its absence is largely responsible for the lack of MBB content in Issues 1-5.

While the levels of MBB content found in the sample is relatively modest when compared to the SRT, CCIC and SBEG categories, it serves an important function within the group's messaging strategy. The common thread running through the MBB content of the sample is the portrayal of the Islamic State's inspired or home-grown attackers as part of a larger 'imagined community' of jihadists. Regular installments like *Among the Believers are Men*, and individual articles such as "*The Good Example Of Abū Basīr Al-Ifriqī*" provide the audience with eulogies of martyred Islamic State fighters by presenting their deeds as glorious contributions to the *Ummah*'s cause. These articles also serve to create a 'model' jihadist profile by selecting a range of Islamic State fighters from around the world and describing the slain fighter's life story, path to jihad, and personal traits. The group consistently portrays these fighters as religiously devout and committed to the cause of jihad, while emphasizing their shared grievances, such as the state of irreligiosity

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<sup>232</sup> Dabiq Team, "Among the Believers Are Men," *Dabiq* Issue 7: From Hypocrisy to Apostasy, February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 46-49.

facing the world. Ultimately, the group presents its fighters, regardless of their national differences or upbringing, as members of a global jihadist community. In doing so, they present a model for in-group identity based on shared values and personal characteristics, while also signaling to prospective jihadists that they have an opportunity to be lionized within the jihadi community by joining the Islamic State.<sup>233</sup>

While this study does not find a significant trend in MBB content over time or in relation to the group's territorial decline, there is a notable correlation between spikes in MBB content and major terrorist attacks carried out by ISIS or ISIS-linked attackers. The three issues with the highest proportion of MBB content were preceded by major ISIS-directed or inspired terrorist attacks. *Dabiq* Issue 7, the issue with the third highest MBB proportion, was preceded by the January 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015 attacks in France, including the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting. The issue features articles glorifying Amedy Coulibaly, one of the perpetrators who was killed carrying out the January 7<sup>th</sup> attacks, as well as an interview with Abdelhamid Abaaoud, future ring-leader of the November 2015 Paris Attacks.<sup>234</sup> *Dabiq* Issue 12, the issue with the second highest proportion of MBB content, was immediately preceded by the November 2015 Paris Attacks. This issue features two *Amongst the Believers are Men* articles glorifying ISIS' martyrs and an autobiographical account of a jihadi who left Europe in search of a place to 'belong' as a Muslim, ultimately finding a sense of community and purpose in ISIS' Caliphate.<sup>235</sup> The issue with the highest proportion of MBB content in the sample, *Dabiq* Issue 15, was also preceded by a string of major ISIS-led or inspired terrorist attacks. The issue was preceded by the Orlando Nightclub Shooting, the Bastille Day attack in Nice, France, a shooting at a Christian Bakery in Dhaka, Bangladesh, as well as a series of smaller attacks in France and

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<sup>233</sup> Dabiq Team, "Among the Believers Are Men," *Dabiq Issue 8: Shari'ah Alone will Rule Africa*, March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 30-31; Dabiq Team, "The Good Example Of Abū Basīr Al-Ifrīqī," *Dabiq Issue 7: From Hypocrisy to Apostasy*, February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 68-71; Dabiq Team, "Interview With Abū 'Umar Al-Baljīkī," *Dabiq Issue 7: From Hypocrisy to Apostasy*, February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 72-75.

<sup>234</sup> Dabiq Team, *The Good Example Of Abū Basīr Al-Ifrīqī*, 68-71; Dabiq Team, *Interview With Abū 'Umar Al-Baljīkī*, 72-75.

<sup>235</sup> Dabiq Team "Amongst the Believers are Men," *Dabiq Issue 12: Just Terror*, November 18<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 55-58; Dabiq Team, "O You Who Have Believed, Protect Yourselves and Your Families From Fire," *Dabiq Issue 12: Just Terror*, November 18<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 34-36.

Germany. While definitive conclusions cannot be drawn from these correlations, they suggest ISIS may deliberately increase the MBB content in its magazines following successful terrorist operations. This may be an attempt to leverage the additional publicity created by large-scale terrorist operations for recruitment purposes. By increasing the volume of content that glorifies martyrs and develops a sense of jihadi community, the Islamic State may be working to entice readers to join the group.

Given the importance terrorism scholars attribute to sentiments such as belonging, purpose, heroism and community in driving the social and psychological processes of radicalization—the sentiments the MBB category was designed to capture—the relatively low-levels of MBB content in *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* are surprising, especially considering the scholarly community’s view of these magazines as tools for radicalization and recruitment.<sup>236</sup> However, several factors may help explain the low-level of MBB content found in the sample. First, content classified in the MBB category is not the only means through which the Islamic State presents a sense of belonging and community to its audience. Throughout much of the sample, the Islamic State presents its Caliphate as the realization of a utopian Islamic community, where ‘true’ Muslims will be welcomed, regardless of their differences, and can become a part of the group’s glorious project of Caliphal revival. As a result, much of the content classified in the SBEG category also serves, both explicitly and implicitly, to present audience members with the opportunity to belong and the chance to attach themselves to a cause larger than themselves.<sup>237</sup>

Second, the group may see the e-magazine platform as one component of a multifaceted recruitment and radicalization strategy. Given the plethora of social and interactive media platforms that the Islamic State utilizes, such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, as well as encrypted messaging apps like Telegram, it is possible the group tailors its message to suit the medium.<sup>238</sup> The most pervasive content in *Dabiq* and

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<sup>236</sup> Ingram, *An Analysis of Inspire and Dabiq: Lessons from AQAP and Islamic State’s Propaganda War*, 1-2.

<sup>237</sup> Dabiq Team, *Khilafah Declared*, 6-11.

<sup>238</sup> Rebecca Tan. “Russia Wants to Stop Terrorists by Banning Their App of Choice. Good Luck.” *Vox*, June 30, 2017. <https://www.vox.com/world/2017/6/30/15886506/terrorism-isis-telegram-social-media-russia-pavel-durov-twitter>.

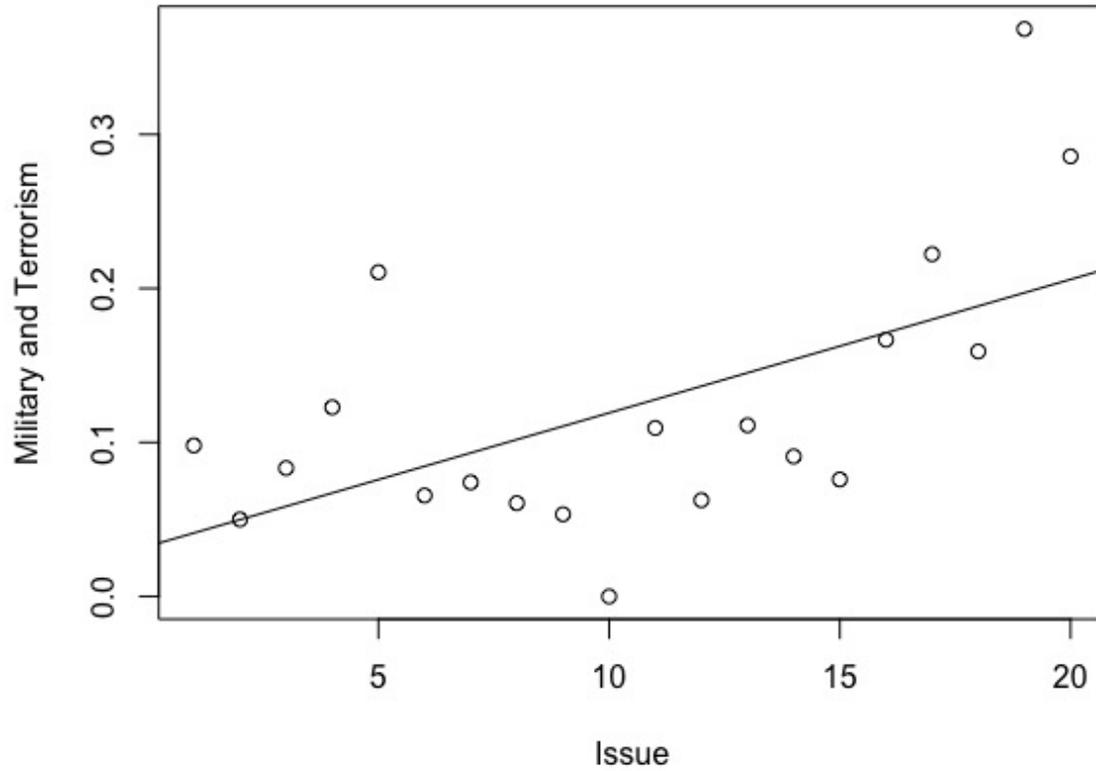
*Rumiyah*—complex and nuanced written pieces conveying information about the Islamic State’s religious and political ideas—are well suited to a text-based e-magazine format. Likewise, MBB-style content, which seeks to cultivate emotional sensations of belonging and community, may be better suited to social media platforms where ISIS recruiters and propagandists can establish a greater degree of intimacy and a greater personal connection with prospective recruits. Thus, the relatively low-levels of MBB content found in this study highlights the importance of conducting comparative studies of ISIS propaganda across different media platforms. These studies, as scholars like Conway have suggested, could contribute to a greater understanding of ISIS propaganda by determining if the group’s choice of medium influences its message and if the group tailors its thematic content to suit different media platforms.<sup>239</sup> Such studies could help illuminate ISIS’ intentions with its English-language e-magazines, determining if their intended use is more akin to an ideological treatise, a radicalization tool, or a combination of both.

Finally, while no evidence of such a trend was found in this sample, broader tactical shifts in the Islamic State’s propaganda that emerge at the end of the sample may cause the group to increase the proportion of MBB-style content in future issues. As described in greater detail below in Chapter 6, the Islamic State’s messaging strategy transitions from promoting *hijrah*, travelling from one’s homeland to the Islamic State’s Caliphate to join the Islamic State, to encouraging its followers to commit acts terrorism in their home countries on behalf of the Islamic State. As the group reorients its messaging to serve these tactical ends, it may be inclined to increase the amount of content its dedicates to cultivating a sense of ‘imagined’ jihadist community as a means of encouraging its audience members to commit acts of home-grown terrorism. Future studies of Islamic State propaganda should examine the group’s thematic content for such trends.

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<sup>239</sup> Conway, 85.

## Military and Terrorism



**Figure 5: Proportion of MT Content By Issue**

**Adjusted R-squared: 0.2919**

**p-value: 0.008173**

**AG1: 11.29%**

**AG2: 6.71%**

**AG3: 19.56%**

Figure 5 illustrates the results of the linear regression run on the contents of Military and Terrorism (MT) category. This study finds a statistically significant increase in MT

content over the duration of the sample, showing an inverse correlation between ISIS' MT content and its territorial holdings. On average, the MT category contained 12.5% of the magazines' content, with the highest proportion found in *Rumiyah* Issue 4 at 36.8% and the lowest proportion found in *Dabiq* Issue 10 with 0%. This section will first provide a qualitative overview of the category's content before analyzing and explaining the rise MT content over the course of the sample.

The Military and Terrorism category is one of the most thematically homogenous categories in the study. A large proportion of the content classified in this category comes in the form of journalistic-style 'news reports' on Islamic State operations, recounting the events of individual battles or terrorist attacks and invariably frame them as successes. These articles serve to provide the Islamic State's audience with updates on the state of military operations in the Caliphate and in the group's other theatres of operation. They often feature 'action shots' of Islamic State fighters engaged in battle, raising their flag over newly conquered territory, in addition to images of slain enemies and destroyed planes or tanks, demonstrating evidence of the group's military victories and providing a visceral depiction of the group's strength and success.<sup>240</sup> Similarly, following major terrorist operations outside of the Caliphate, the Islamic State often includes content detailing the attack and framing it as part of a wider, global war against the "Crusaders", "Rafidah", or other 'enemies of Islam'.<sup>241</sup> While these articles do not feature the same, detailed arguments demonizing ISIS' enemies as CCIC or SRT items do, they serve to reinforce the rigid in-and-out groups rooted in the group's exclusionary ideology, highlight the myriad of enemies facing those who have embraced ISIS' version of Islam, and demonstrate the group's ability to defend Muslims against Islam's foes. With the notable exception of the "*Just Terror Tactics*" and "military infographics" installments that emerge in the final five issues of the sample (discussed below), the thematic content of the MT category remains qualitatively similar throughout the sample.

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<sup>240</sup> Dabiq Team, "Military Conquests In Nīnawā And Ar-Raqqah," *Dabiq Issue 3: The Call to Hijrah*, September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2014, 18-22.

<sup>241</sup> Dabiq Team, "Foreword," *Dabiq Issue 10: The Law of Allah and the Laws of Men*, July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 3-4.

Despite this qualitative similarity, the quantitative proportion of content dedicated to the MT theme demonstrates a statistically significant increase, an increase that coincides with the Islamic State's rising military and territorial losses. Given both the importance of ISIS' military operations in expanding its Caliphate, and the value it places on maintaining its 'narrative of victory', the magazines' increased focus on MT content during a period of defeat and military setback seems counterintuitive. On the surface, it seems rational that the group would want to avoid thematic content that highlights its failures. However, qualitatively examining the MT content of the two magazines illuminates how the rise in MT content is indicative of an important shift in ISIS' messaging strategy. Two main factors illustrate the importance of the relationship between the increase in ISIS' MT content and its territorial and military losses. First, the format and structure of ISIS' MT items, and second, the introduction of Do-It-Yourself (DIY) terrorism content and 'military infographics'.

The structure and format of one of the Islamic State's main, reoccurring MT articles helps explain the correlation between the Islamic State's territorial losses and the increase in MT content. In installments like "*Islamic State Reports*" "*A Selection of Military Operations By The Islamic State*" or "*Operations*"—differing titles for the main, highly similar MT installments in *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*—the group typically selects a series of actions from across their various *wilayah* that depict their military successes and ignore or gloss over their losses.<sup>242</sup> These reoccurring installments do not provide aggregate evaluations of the group's territorial holdings or the status of their military operations and are explicit in the fact that they provide a "selection", rather than a comprehensive picture of the group's conquests and operations. This format of providing a "selection" of operations, rather than a comprehensive assessment was initially intended to aggrandize the group's military capabilities, as the authors open the installments by claiming that the operations discussed "are merely a selection of the numerous operations which the

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<sup>242</sup> While these installments have different titles, the overall style, format, structure and content remains very similar, with the authors discussing select military or terrorist operations across the group's various *wilayah* and in other theatres of operation outside ISIS control, such as Europe or South Asia.

Islamic State has conducted on various fronts across many regions”, indicating that their string of victories extended beyond what is included in individual articles.<sup>243</sup>

However, when the group's territorial losses increase, this format allows ISIS' propagandists to sustain the group's image as victorious and successful by providing a decontextualized assessment of the status of the group's military operations. The authors can intentionally select successful military and terrorist operations from across their *wilayah* and ignore the growing number of operations where the Islamic State or its affiliates have faced setbacks or defeats. This allows the group to obfuscate or ignore their aggregate territorial and military losses and demonstrate to their audience that they are still 'victorious' without dramatically altering the structure, format and content of the installment. Furthermore, the “selection of military operations” format of the articles does not provide the necessary context for the reader to understand the strategic or tactical importance of a selected operation. For example, the authors' description of ISIS' seizure of Sirte, a Libyan city of 80,000, and the capture of the small Syrian hamlet of Hammadat, are formatted and framed in the same way. Because the group does not provide information regarding the size or strategic importance of the regions they capture, the magazines' format allows the authors to portray a small, negligible operation as a 'victory' without acknowledging its unimportance in the grand scheme of the Islamic State's war.<sup>244</sup>

Overall, the structure and format of the military operations articles are particularly well-suited to the Islamic State's messaging requirements during periods of military and territorial decline. This structure allows the group to sustain its narrative of victory by ignoring its defeats and choosing an unrepresentative selection of successful operations. Furthermore, the non-comprehensive format of the articles allows its propagandists to avoid addressing the group's aggregate territorial losses while maintaining consistency in the format and content of the magazine. The cohesion between the structure of the group's

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<sup>243</sup> Dabiq Team, “A Selection of Military Operations Across the Islamic State,” *Dabiq Issue 11: The Battle of Al-Azhan and the War of Coalitions*, September 9<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 28.

<sup>244</sup> Rumiyah Team, “O Women, Give Charity,” *Rumiyah Issue 1*, September 5<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 23.

“operations” articles and its messaging needs during periods of territorial decline and military defeat can help explain the rise in MT over the duration of the sample.

A second contributing factor to the increase in the proportion of MT articles over the course of the sample is the introduction of two new, additional MT items in *Rumiyah*, “*Just Terror Tactics*” and ‘military infographics’, which appear in the last five issues of the sample. These two installments not only contribute quantitatively to the increased proportion of MT content, but signify a qualitative shift in ISIS’ messaging. The *Just Terror* installments are aimed at facilitating acts of home-grown terrorism in the West, whereas the military infographics contribute to a broader shift in ISIS’ messaging to ‘redefine’ victory as they face mounting domestic setbacks.

*Just Terror Tactics* is a reoccurring series of articles introduced in *Rumiyah* Issue 2 that provides practical advice for ISIS sympathizers to carry out lone-wolf-style terrorist attacks. The articles include advice for supporters to effectively use weapons like knives or vehicles to attack civilians in public spaces.<sup>245</sup> The introduction of this type of ‘DIY terrorism’ article marks a dramatic shift in the Islamic State’s messaging content, as it signifies a transition from the early issues of *Dabiq*, which focused heavily on promoting ISIS’ Caliphate-building project and encouraging *hijrah*, to a focus on inspiring and facilitating acts of home-grown terrorism. For the Islamic State—a group that repeatedly sought to discredit competing jihadist groups for their unwillingness to pursue a territorial Caliphate—to revamp its messaging strategy to promote lone-wolf-style attacks provides strong evidence to suggest that the group’s military and territorial setbacks have driven these qualitative changes in its messaging content. The significance of this shift is further underscored by the fact that scholars comparing Al Qaeda and Islamic State propaganda during the early stages of the Islamic State’s rise often utilized absence of DIY content in its messaging to distinguish its strategy and political aims from that of Al Qaeda.<sup>246</sup> Ultimately, the introduction of the *Just Terror Tactics* series suggests that the Islamic State is actively attempting to adapt its messaging to accommodate its worsening domestic

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<sup>245</sup> Rumiyah Team, “Just Terror Tactics,” *Rumiyah Issue 2*, October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 12-13; Rumiyah Team, “Just Terror Tactics,” *Rumiyah Issue 3*, November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 10-12.

<sup>246</sup> Novenario, 959.

circumstances by encouraging its audience to take up arms on its behalf and attack its foreign enemies.

In contrast to the “*Just Terror Tactics*” articles, which seeks to adjust the Islamic State’s messaging content to compensate for its losses by promoting acts of terror, the introduction of the ‘military infographics’ installment seeks to redefine ISIS’ domestic losses as victories. The ‘military infographics’ are a series of single or partial-page infographics that depict the ‘statistics of victory’ from Islamic State military operations, such as the numbers of enemies killed or the number of “Ishtishhadi [martyrdom] operations” that ISIS launched during a particular battle.<sup>247</sup> For example, to demonstrate the ‘success’ of their operation in Palmyra against the Syrian government, the group uses an infographic to highlight the number of Syrian Regime soldiers it has killed and the number of vehicles and weapons it has destroyed, despite the fact that regime forces ousted the Islamic State from the town during that operation.<sup>248</sup> In doing so, these infographics serve to ‘redefine’ of victory for ISIS. Where in AG1 and AG2, the group portrayed ‘victory’ as the rapid expansion and consolidation of its state, in the final five issues of the sample it frames the killing of its opponents and destruction of their property as a victory, even though it is losing territory in these battles.

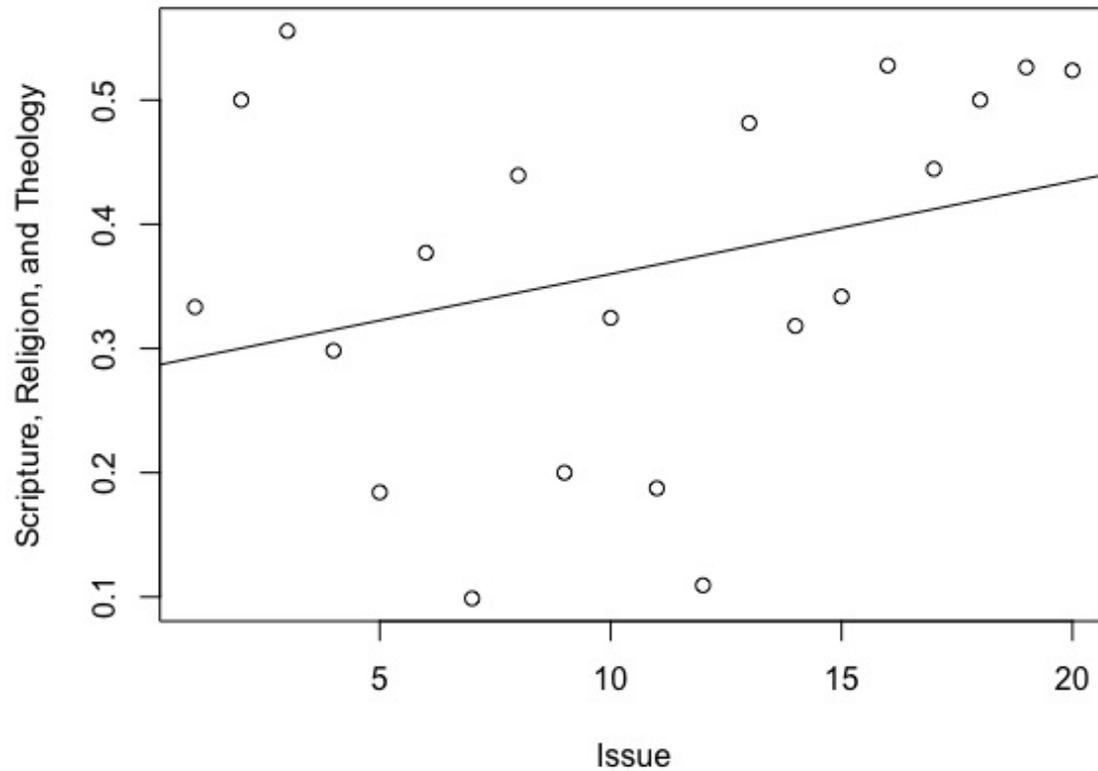
Ultimately, the MT category exhibits both a quantitative rise and qualitative shifts that suggest the Islamic State is adapting its propaganda to accommodate for its declining state. The introduction of content that promotes terror attacks abroad and the proliferation of content that can be used to mask ISIS’ domestic setbacks shows that the group’s messaging is shifting to maintain its image of success in the face of its state-building failures.

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<sup>247</sup> Rumiyah Team, “Baghdad Harvest,” *Rumiyah Issue 2*, October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 35.

<sup>248</sup> Rumiyah Team, “Battles Around Tadmur,” *Rumiyah Issue 2*, October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 36.

## Scripture, Religion, and Theology



**Figure 6: Proportion of SRT Content By Issue**

**Adjusted R-squared: 0.03913**

**p-value: 0.1995**

**AG1: 37.43%**

**AG2: 27.73%**

**AG3: 45.46%**

Figure 6 depicts the results of a linear regression plotting the proportion of Scripture, Religion and Theology (SRT) content over the course of the sample. While the

SRT category does not display a linear increase or decline, the proportion of SRT content consistently makes up a large percentage of the magazines' content. The high proportion of SRT content displayed in ISIS' English-language propaganda shows that the group sees great value in portraying itself as 'deeply Islamic' to an English-speaking, Western audience. A great deal of the content within this category aims to bolster the Islamic State's religious credentials by either justifying its own actions using scriptural arguments, or by discrediting other Islamists, jihadist groups, or the governments of Muslim-majority countries on religious grounds. This content illustrates that the Islamic State is actively competing for "sacred authority" within an intramovement "framing contest", as described by Wiktorowicz.<sup>249</sup> The pervasiveness of this religious-centric content illustrates that the Islamic State aims to build its credibility by portraying itself as the only legitimate source of Islamic knowledge and authority. Furthermore, the group's scriptural content allows it both to elevate its cause, portraying its actions as the realization of scripture, as well as cultivate a sense of in-group identity by providing a set of shared values for its active members and prospective members to embrace.

Over the course of the sample, there are three main trends within the qualitative data. In AG1, a large proportion of the issues' SRT content is dedicated towards situating and legitimizing the concept of the Caliphate within Islamic scripture and Islamic religious history. In AG2, following a broader trend within the sample, the group draws on its SRT content to demonize and discredit its enemies, relationally reinforcing its own image as a credible source of Islamic authority. In the final analytical grouping, the Islamic State's SRT content shifts to accommodate the Islamic State's domestic territorial and military losses, such as by using scripture to encourage "patience and steadfastness" in the face of adversity, or by providing scriptural justifications for home-grown terrorism.

## **Analytical Grouping One**

Throughout AG1, ISIS uses its SRT content to establish itself as a source of religious authority, present its own interpretation of Islam as correct, and portray its state as the realization of the Prophetic Caliphate. In addition, to bolster its own religious credentials, cultivate the notion of Islamic authority, and present its interpretation of

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<sup>249</sup> Wiktorowicz, *Framing Jihad*, 159.

scripture as truthful, AG1's SRT content features items justifying ISIS' actions through the citation of scripture and interpretations by revered Islamic scholars. The group uses this content as a means of legitimizing its most reprehensible actions, which serves both cultivate an image of religious authority and present its horrific behavior as synonymous with Islam.

### ***The Caliphate***

While ISIS seeks to legitimize its state by providing a series of worldly justifications for its existence, such as its competency in administrative matters and delivery of swift justice, it also employs scriptural evidence to portray its state as a religiously ordained Caliphate. A core facet of portrayal is the idea that the integration of religious and political leadership is fundamental to the correct practice of Islam. In *Dabiq* Issue 1, the authors introduce concept of "*imamah*", citing the example of the prophet and messenger Ibrahim (Abraham), who Allah made not only the religious "leader [imam] of mankind" but its leader "in political affairs".<sup>250</sup> ISIS uses this scriptural precedent to frame their Caliphate as a realization of the political arrangement envisioned by Allah.<sup>251</sup> Similarly, the group cites a passage from the hadith which states "there is no Islam except with jama'ah [community], and no jama'ah without imarah (leadership), and no imarah except with ta'ah (obedience)", implying that obedience to their state and leader is necessary for 'true' Islam to be implemented.<sup>252</sup> In addition to using scripture to legitimize their state directly, the authors also draw on Islam's holy texts to provide religious credibility to other aspects of their state and political messaging. For example, the group provides several content items framing the *hijrah* as a religious obligation or to portray the expansion of their state as the fulfillment of scripture, illustrating that the group's messaging during AG1 displays a Caliphate-centric focus, even beyond the SBEG category.<sup>253</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> Dabiq Team, "The Concept of Imamah (Leadership) is from the Millah of Ibrahim," *Dabiq* Issue 1: The Return of the Khilafah, July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2014, 21-23

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid*, 21-23.

<sup>252</sup> Dabiq Team, "Wisdom," *Dabiq* Issue 1: *The Return of the Khilafah*, July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2014, 30.

<sup>253</sup> Dabiq Team, *Remaining and Expanding*, 20-21.

The Islamic State also aims to bolster its religious credibility by justifying its various forms of violence through scripture. This content allows the Islamic State to cultivate an image as ‘authentically Islamic’ and as a source of jurisprudential authority. Throughout AG1, the group features several articles dedicated to substantiating its actions with scripture. In “*The Revival of Slavery Before the Hour*” ISIS draws on various scriptural passages in an attempt to justify their horrific enslavement of Yazidis and their use as sex slaves. In “*My Provision Was Placed For Me In The Shade Of My Spear*” ISIS provides extensive scriptural evidence to claim that its seizure of *ghanīmah* (war booty; the ‘spoils of war’) is legitimate within Islam.<sup>254</sup> Both articles underscore the group’s interest in framing its actions—from the most reprehensible to the more mundane—as sanctioned by Islam, a core feature of ISIS’ messaging strategy throughout the sample.

In addition to articles specifically dedicated to justifying actions many would find objectionable or un-Islamic, the Islamic State uses scripture to justify their broader political goals and motivate their audience to engage in collective action. For example, in *Hijrah from Hypocrisy to Sincerity*, which encourages the audience to travel to the Caliphate, the authors quote upwards of twenty passages from the Qur’an and Sunnah to reinforce the validity of their claims and frame *hijrah* to the Islamic State as a religious duty.<sup>255</sup> The frequency with which the group draws on scripture, as evidenced by the high proportion of content classified within the SRT category, demonstrates the importance the group places on both being perceived as a credible authority on religious and theological matters.

## **Analytical Grouping Two**

In AG2, while the group does continue to promote *hijrah* and jihad through their SRT content, the focus of their religious content shifts away from their Caliphate, placing greater emphasis on two main topics: discrediting their enemies and continuing to persuade its readership that the Islamic State’s actions—from its violence to its destruction

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<sup>254</sup> Dabiq Team, “My Provision Was Placed For Me In The Shade Of My Spear,” *Dabiq Issue 4: The Failed Crusade*, October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2014, 10-13.

<sup>255</sup> Dabiq Team, *Hijrah from Hypocrisy to Sincerity*, 25-34.

of historical artifacts—are in line with Islamic teachings.<sup>256</sup> In other words, the group continues to portray their actions as sanctioned by Islam, as they did in AG1, but becomes increasingly focused on presenting violence and brutality as inherently Islamic. These qualitative shifts do not appear to be immediately connected to changes in the Islamic State’s territorial holdings, but they have important ramifications for understanding how the group reinforces its credibility and demonizes its enemies.

AG2 features a series of articles where ISIS issues *fatwas*, provides jurisprudential rulings and opinions and works to legitimize its behavior through Islamic scripture. The subject matter of the group’s religious justifications varies widely, encompassing *fatwas* claiming long-time Taliban leader and “commander of the faithful”, Mullah Omar, cannot be a legitimate Caliph, to scriptural passages aimed at persuading ISIS supporters of the virtues of “*ribāʾ*”, an Islamic concept which ISIS uses to describe the act of defending the frontiers of its Caliphate.<sup>257</sup>

However, a significant portion of SRT content is intended to portray the ‘correct’ implementation of Shari’ah as deeply brutal. A striking example of this strategy is found in the article “*The Burning of the Murtadd Pilot*”. In this article, ISIS seeks to scripturally legitimize the immolation of a captured Jordanian pilot by engaging in the *qiyas* process—the deduction of legal prescriptions from the Qur’an or Sunnah by analogic reasoning. The group bases this reasoning on a passage from the Qur’an which states one should punish an enemy with the equivalent of that with which they were harmed.<sup>258</sup> Thus, the authors argue, because the pilot dropped bombs on Muslims, causing fire, burning the pilot alive was not an act of savagery, but a scripturally legitimate form of punishment.<sup>259</sup> In a similar fashion, the group also attempts to justify other vicious behaviors, such as its policy of

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<sup>256</sup> Dabiq Team, “Perfecting One’s Islam, Iman, Hijrah, and Jihād,” *Dabiq Issue 9: They Plot and Allah Plots*, May 21<sup>st</sup>, 2015, 38-39.

<sup>257</sup> Dabiq Team, “The Virtues of Ribat,” *Dabiq Issue 9: They Plot and Allah Plots*, May 21<sup>st</sup>, 2015, 8-13.

<sup>258</sup> “Qiyas,” Oxford Islamic Studies Online.  
<http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e1936>.

<sup>259</sup> Dabiq Team, “The Burning of The Murtadd Pilot,” *Dabiq Issue 7: From Hypocrisy to Apostasy*, February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 5-8.

sexually enslaving women it considers to be non-Muslim, by drawing on a series of scriptural passages that it argues endorse enslavement.<sup>260</sup>

While ISIS' jurisprudential arguments are widely condemned, their strategy of providing scriptural support for their actions has several important impacts on their propaganda and the credibility of their messaging. First, substantiating heinous acts of violence allows ISIS to burnish its credentials as scriptural literalists and sources ultra-radical *Salafist* authority. Through the act of producing religious arguments that support its violence, it not only signals to its authority to its audience, but it can also "vilify" and "decredental" those who oppose its actions. For example, group often cites statements of condemnation by opposition religious figures, and then portrays them as lackeys of 'un-Islamic' states, or makes a series of counter-arguments to 'debunk' their detractors arguments and frame their own as correct, building up their perceived credibility. This strategy is used in articles justifying specific acts of violence, like the burning of the Jordanian pilot, as well as to justify the group's use of terrorism and killing of non-Muslims more generally.<sup>261</sup> Second, by arguing its brutality is sanctioned by scripture, ISIS contributes to its self-declared messaging project of portraying Islam as "the religion of the sword not pacifism".<sup>262</sup> Thus, these scriptural justifications serve not only to legitimize ISIS' violence, but portray *Islam* as violent. As scholars like Colas have suggested, *Dabiq's* secondary or tertiary audience is non-sympathetic Westerners, thus, this kind of content is likely aimed in part at fueling Islamophobic discourse in the West, which in turn can contribute to the resonance of their Clash of Civilizations-style ideology.<sup>263</sup>

In addition to using SRT content to justify their own actions and bolster their credibility, within AG2 the authors also use scriptural and religious arguments to impugn

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<sup>260</sup> Dabiq Team, "Slave Girls or Prostitutes?," *Dabiq Issue 9: They Plot and Allah Plots*, May 21<sup>st</sup>, 2015, 44-49.

<sup>261</sup> Dabiq Team, The Burning of The Murtadd Pilot, 5-8; Dabiq Team, Slave Girls or Prostitutes?, 44-49; Dabiq Team, "Islam is the Religion of the Sword not Pacifism," *Dabiq Issue 7: From Hypocrisy to Apostasy*, February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 20-24.

<sup>262</sup> Dabiq Team, Islam is the Religion of the Sword Not Pacifism, 20-24; Dabiq Team, The Extinction of the Grayzone, 54-67.

<sup>263</sup> Colas, 173; Wiktorowicz, *Joining the Cause*, 3.

the actions of ISIS' enemies. As described above, AG2 demonstrates a greater focus on the Islamic State's enemies than the other two groupings. While most enemy-focused content during AG2 is classified in the CCIC category, the grouping's SRT content also displays a greater focus on ISIS' foes, as the authors use scripture and theological arguments to denigrate and discredit their foes. For example, in the article *Ir'ja: The Most Dangerous Bid'ah* [Innovation], the authors use dozens of scriptural passages to accuse competing militant Islamist factions and Muslim-majority governments of "deviant innovation that has diluted the religion", such as blending Islam with nationalist or democratic elements, or being too lenient with their definitions of apostasy.<sup>264</sup> Similarly, the authors criticize Al Qaeda for their failure to declare *takfir* on entire religious sects that ISIS considers to be apostates, such as the Shi'a or Druze, or on entire classes of people, such as all members of Muslim-majority countries' security services. Similar to the group's CCIC content, these articles serve to vilify Al Qaeda and ISIS' other rivals as pragmatic political actors that are willing to deviate from scripture to achieve their own objectives, while framing ISIS as steadfastly committed to implementing the 'true' interpretation of Shari'ah, regardless of the costs.<sup>265</sup>

Using its SRT content, the group also attacks "misleading scholars" and the "bewitching media" for their role in propagating a 'false' version of Islam, discusses the purportedly corrosive effects of life outside the Islamic State on a Muslim's faith, and provides a range of articles on explaining their ultra-conservative positions on issues such as marriage and the role of women. In doing so, the Islamic State not only vilifies and "decredentials" its enemies, but provides a set of shared values and shared enemies that

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<sup>264</sup> Dabiq Team, "Ir'ja: The Most Dangerous Bid'ah," *Dabiq Issue 8, Shari'ah Alone Shall Rule Africa*, March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 39-56.

<sup>265</sup> Dabiq Team, "The Qa'idah Of Adh-Dhawahiri, Al-Harari, And An-Nadhari, And The Absent Yemeni Wisdom By Abū Maysarah Ash-Shāmi *Dabiq Issue 6: Al-Qa'idah of Waziristan*, December 29<sup>th</sup>, 2014, 17-24.

contributes to the construction and reinforcement of rigid in-and-out group identities and to the perception that the traditions of 'true' Islam are under attack.<sup>266</sup>

### Analytical Grouping Three

The content of the SRT category in AG3 focuses on four main topics: the Islamic State's narrative of victory, enemy-focused content, apolitical or 'educational' religious content, and jihad promotion. While the changes to the group's victory narrative is a core feature of the SRT category within this grouping, as the authors draw heavily on scripture to encourage perseverance and "steadfastness" as ISIS faces increasing adversity, this theme will not be discussed here as an entire section is dedicated to analyzing the 'victory narrative' later in this thesis.

Like the previous analytical groupings, ISIS continues to use scriptural content to discredit or delegitimize its enemies. The authors maintain their position that the Islamic State's austere, radical form of Islam is the sole interpretation of the religion, and that Islam must be free of the impurities like "democracy, nationalism, and manmade laws" in order to be practiced without 'hypocrisy'.<sup>267</sup> The group also dedicates several items to discrediting "evil scholars" for "concealing the truth" and "averting the people" by pursuing worldly gain and toying the line for 'un-Islamic' regimes. AG3 also includes similar messaging on issues such as *takfir*, seeking to frame other jihadists as straying from scripture for their unwillingness to declare *takfir* and kill apostates. In doing so, the authors sustain their ongoing messaging strategy of portraying the Islamic State as the only true, uncorrupted source of Islamic authority and opinion, ultimately maintaining the group's

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<sup>266</sup> Dabiq Team, "Misleading Scholars and Bewitching Media," *Dabiq Issue 6: Al Qa'idah of Waziristan*, December 29<sup>th</sup>, 2014, 38-39; Dabiq Team, "Twin Halves of the Muhajirin," *Dabiq Issue 8: Shar'iah Alone Will Rule Africa*, March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 32-37; Dabiq Team, "Who Are the True Scholars," *Dabiq Issue 11: From The Battle of Al Azhab to the War of Coalitions*, September 9<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 36-37; Dabiq Team, "A Jihad Without Fighting," *Dabiq Issue 11: From The Battle of Al Azhab to the War of Coalitions*, September 9<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 40-45.

<sup>267</sup> Rumiyyah Team, "The Religion of Islam and the Jama'ah of the Muslims," *Rumiyyah Issue 1*, September 5<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 4-8.

image of religious credibility to their ultra-hardline audience over the duration of the sample.<sup>268</sup>

While the group's enemy-focused SRT content remains similar, AG3 differs from the other two groupings due to the introduction of a substantial volume of apolitical religious content. Throughout the previous issues examined in this study, the content of Islamic State's SRT category contained items that, while religious in nature, had clear implications for the group's political ideology, state-building project, or military and terrorist actions. In AG3 however, the group introduces a far greater amount of SRT content addressing topics with little direct impact on their politics. The grouping includes pieces that discuss topic like appropriate etiquette for fasting during *Dhul-Hijjah* (a Muslim holiday) or when it is permissible for women to leave their homes, in addition to scriptural passages encouraging "good character", sincerity, and other forms of piety with no overt connection to their political objectives. While the group does not offer an explanation for this sudden uptick in apolitical religious content, the timing of the increase—when the Islamic State's territorial setbacks are mounting and their state-building project is increasingly imperiled—suggests that it may be an attempt by ISIS' propagandists to deflect attention away from the group's political failings by further emphasizing their religious credentials. This interpretation would fit with the group's shifting strategic aims, as they transition from a state-like entity towards a the more conventional transnational terrorist model, as they begin operating more like a territorially decentralized terrorist and insurgent group, rather than a quasi-state.<sup>269</sup> Alternatively, the apolitical content, which often comes in the form of advertisement-style items or short statements solely containing scriptural passages without additional analysis or interpretation, may simply be easier to produce. As scholars like Winter and Milton have shown, the volume and quality of the group's propaganda output is linked to their territorial holdings, thus, the increase of

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<sup>268</sup> Rumiyah Team, "Traits of the Evil Scholars," *Rumiyah Issue 5*, January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2017, 26-28; Dabiq Team, "Do They Not Then Reflect on The Qur'an," *Dabiq Issue 14: The Murtadd Brotherhood*, April 13<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 18-19.

<sup>269</sup> Michael P Dempsey. "How ISIS' Strategy Is Evolving." *Foreign Affairs*, January 18, 2018. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2018-01-18/how-isis-strategy-evolving>.

relatively simple, easy to produce content may be a product of the group's diminishing resources and loss of territorial safe havens for media production.<sup>270</sup>

The last major component of AG3's SRT category is jihad promotion content, or content that using scripture and faith-based reasoning to encourage jihad. Continuing an ongoing component of their recruitment strategy, the group also frames jihad as a religious obligation and argues that those who refrain from jihad are hypocrites (*nifaa*).<sup>271</sup> Furthermore, a significant portion of the jihad promotion content within AG3's SRT category is intended to promote acts on home-grown terrorism, which falls in line with the broader *hijrah*-to-HGT shift in the group's messaging in AG3 (see Chapter 6). Articles such as "*Collateral Carnage*", "*Brutality and Severity Towards the Kufir*", and "*The Kafir's Blood is Halal For You So Shed It*" make scriptural arguments to encourage and justify the killing of Westerners and non-Muslims, including civilians. For example, the group argues that while the deliberate killing of non-Muslim children is prohibited, "if they are killed or wounded due to them being intermingled with the men, then there is nothing wrong with killing them" and that Allah has "ordered that they [the disbelievers] be slain wherever they may be – on or off the battlefield". Through the inclusion of these kinds of SRT articles, the Islamic State is promoting home-grown terrorism by repeatedly providing its audience with scriptural arguments illustrating both the legitimacy and obligation its audience has to kill non-Muslims.<sup>272</sup> The fact that these articles emerge during a period where the group's territorial losses are mounting, and their messaging is downplaying the importance of performing *hijrah* to and underscoring the benefits of attacking ISIS' enemies at home provides strong evidence to suggest that the group's territorial and military defeats are driving this qualitative and tactical shift in their messaging.

In addition to promoting home-grown terrorism, a portion of the SRT content of AG3 appears to be directed internally at active Islamic State members. Articles like

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<sup>270</sup> Winter, *Apocalypse, Later*, 108; Milton, 21.

<sup>271</sup> Rumiyah Team, "A Treatise on Hypocrisy and the Hypocrites (By Ibn Taymiyyah)," *Rumiyah Issue 4*, December 7<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 20-21.

<sup>272</sup> Rumiyah Team, "Collateral Carnage," *Rumiyah Issue 5*, January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2017, 7; Rumiyah Team, "Brutality and Severity Towards the Kufir," *Rumiyah Issue 2*, October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 22-25; Rumiyah Team, "The Kafir's Blood is Halal For You So Shed It," *Rumiyah Issue 1*, September 5<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 34-36

*“Indeed Allah Has Blessed Me”* and *“The Partisanship of Jahiliyya”* encourage martyrdom on the battlefield and warn their audience that fighting for impure Islamic causes, such as ethnic, national or tribal affiliation, will drive them into a state of *jahiliyya*. These articles are seemingly aimed at encouraging members of the Islamic State to die on the battlefield and discouraging them from defecting to competing militant groups active in the region.<sup>273</sup> This messaging content is likely an attempt by the group to draw on its jihadi religious credentials to preserve their organization’s integrity during a period of increasing tribulations.

In AG3, the SRT category serves as a vehicle for conveying aspects of the Islamic State’s new messaging strategy and continuing to promote pre-existing themes that suit the group’s increasingly troubled circumstances. The group continues to work at burnishing its image as a source of Islamic authority while simultaneously drawing selectively from scripture to promote its shifting strategic goals of home-grown terrorism promotion and organizational survival.

## **Section Conclusion**

While the Islamic State’s SRT content does not demonstrate a statistically significant quantitative change over the course of the sample, it undergoes substantial qualitative changes. First, the group’s content transitions from its initial emphasis on legitimizing and promoting the Islamic State’s Caliphate, to largely ignoring the Caliphate in favor of vilifying its enemies, proliferating apolitical religious messages, and providing scriptural arguments to encourage home-grown terrorism. As this shift correlates with a decline in the Islamic State’s territorial holdings, it provides evidence to suggest that the group’s tribulations on the ground are driving it to alter its messaging content. However, as evidenced by both the volume of its SRT content and the topics it addresses, the group is able to compete for “sacred authority” by demonstrating its own religious credentials and vilifying and discrediting its rivals. This suggests the group has been largely able to maintain the religious credibility it has developed amongst its hardline audience, as well

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<sup>273</sup> Rumiyah Team, “Indeed Allah has Blessed Me,” *Rumiyah Issue 5*, January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2017, 22.

as sustain the clear-cut, in-and-out group identity constructs that underwrite much of its propaganda.

## Other

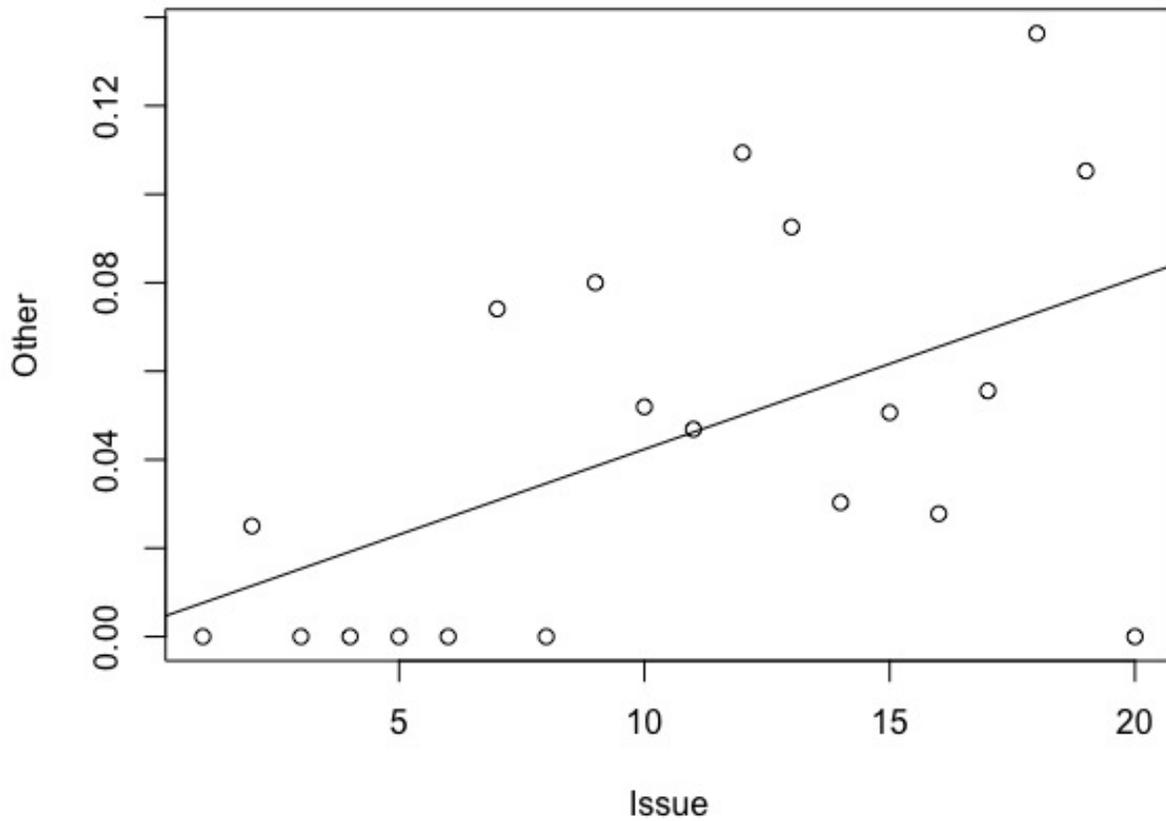


Figure 7: Proportion of Other Content By Issue

Adjusted R-squared: 0.2371

p-value: 0.01708

AG1: 0.50%

AG2: 5.69%

AG3: 5.80%

Figure 7 depicts the proportion of Other content in the 20 issues analyzed in this study. It does find a statistically significant increase in the proportion of Other content over the duration of the sample, but this increase does not appear to be linked to the Islamic State's territorial decline. The average proportion of Other content in the sample was found to be 4.4%, with the highest proportion, 13.6%, found in *Rumiyah* Issue 4 and the lowest proportion, 0%, found in 7 issues (*Dabiq* Issues 1, 3-6, 8 and *Rumiyah* Issue 5).

While there are notable qualitative changes in the 'Other' content over the course of the sample, they appear to be driven by developments in the magazines' editorial style, rather than as a response to the group's territorial setbacks. As explained in the methods section, the Other category classifies content that cannot be accurately included in any of the other six categories. In practice, two main kinds of content were included in this category: advertisements for other Islamic State media products, such as internet videos or social media apps, and articles containing transcribed excerpts from ISIS' leaders' speeches. On several occasions, these collective of excerpts were too thematically diverse to be accurately classified in any of the other six thematic categories. Furthermore, the higher proportion of Other content exhibited towards the end of the sample is the result of the introduction of various advertisements, which did not appear in ISIS' magazines until *Dabiq* Issue 7. This shift has no observable relationship to the group's territorial losses or impacts on the magazines' efficacy as tools for radicalization and recruitment.

## **Chapter 6. Qualitative Analysis Part Two - Narrative Analysis - Examining Cross-Cutting Narratives**

In order to provide a fuller picture of the qualitative changes in the Islamic State's propaganda, the following section examines three important 'narratives' that cut across this study's thematic categories: the 'victory narrative', the '*hijrah* and home-grown terrorism narrative', and the 'Apocalypse narrative'. Because each of these narratives are not confined to specific thematic categories, and each exhibit important qualitative changes over the course of the sample, they are examined separately to allow for detailed analysis. Each narrative focuses on a specific topic or overarching theme and are comprised of a range of sub-themes which the Islamic State's propagandists have woven together to shape the audiences' perceptions or to persuade them to engage in collective action behalf of the Islamic State.

### **The Victory Narrative**

In the early literature on the Islamic State's messaging, the group's 'narrative of victory' was both heavily emphasized and accredited with much of its recruitment success. As both the early scholarship and this study find, the narrative of victory as projected in the early issues of *Dabiq* present the Islamic State as a strong, unstoppable, and expansionary force whose momentum and righteous cause will allow it to defeat its enemies and succeed in establishing a global Islamic Caliphate. In these early issues, the group portrays their victory—the creation of the Caliphate—as inevitable and imminent, stressing the power of its own forces and the ease with which it defeats its enemies. The Islamic State's propagandists make use of group's remarkable real-world successes, such as its rapid territorial expansion, development of bureaucratic and administrative systems, and ability to defeat numerically and technologically superior enemies, to support their claims of global expansion and construct their victory narrative. In short, the group uses its real-world successes as evidence to support its quixotic claims. To build this narrative, the group draws on Islamic scripture, selecting passages to wield as supporting evidence for its claims to be a strong, burgeoning power on a path to inevitable victory. The result is a self-reinforcing narrative where the Islamic State's 'narrative of victory' is supported by evidence and arguments from both its military and political successes and its

interpretations of Islamic scripture, creating ‘harmony’ between its earthly victories and its claims to be fulfilling a heavenly mandate.

However, as the group’s territorial and military losses increase and its ability to develop and consolidate its state are diminished, so too is its ability to sustain its original narrative of victory. As the group begins to suffer an increasing number of defeats, it transitions to a ‘post-victory’ narrative, where the group revises its original victory narrative to reinterpret, justify or rationalize its defeats and its inability to live up to its own grandiose claims.<sup>274</sup> The term ‘post-victory’ was chosen to highlight the fact that the Islamic State never admits defeat, but rather reframes events to portray them as part of their path to inevitable success. In contrast to the initial phase of the Islamic State’s victory narrative, which blended state-building, military and scriptural justifications for its success, the post-victory phase relies almost exclusively on scriptural and theological evidence and argument. As the group’s earthly successes dwindle and its state’s expansion turns to contraction, its propagandists rely far more on scriptural and faith-based content and reasoning to sustain their revised post-victory narrative.

Using the three analytical groupings developed for this study, this section will examine the sub-themes that constitute the ‘victory’ and ‘post-victory’ phases of this narrative and analyze how the group transitions from one phase to the other. The findings of this qualitative examination illustrate that the Islamic State’s territorial losses have forced it to dramatically alter the content of its narrative of victory, narrowing the its thematic breadth and reshaping its message to facilitate organizational survival rather than expansion. Later, this study will argue that the dramatic shift in the group’s narrative of victory damages the group’s messaging credibility and likely limits the persuasiveness of its propaganda.

## **Analytical Grouping 1**

In the early issues of *Dabiq*, the victory narrative is one of the most pervasive narratives utilized in the Islamic State’s propaganda, cutting across several of this study’s different thematic categories. Despite the thematic diversity of this narrative, its core

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<sup>274</sup> Dabiq Team, “Until It Burns the Crusader Armies in Dabiq,” *Dabiq Issue 1: The Return of the Khilafah*, July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2014, 4-5.

premise remains unchanged: the Islamic State is winning. Within AG1, an aura of victory and success is presented across thematic categories as the group's propagandists emphasize their earthly successes, underscoring their succession of military victories and the rapid development and expansion of their state, as well as their religious 'victories', such as the enforcement of Shari'ah and their claim to have revived the Prophetic Caliphate. While the Islamic State's narrative of victory undergoes a significant transformation over the duration of the sample, and the group's definition of what it means to be 'victorious' changes over time, in AG1, victory is framed as the military-led expansion of the Islamic State's Caliphate. While there are many facets to the group's victory narrative over the duration of the study, in AG1, the narrative can be summarized into three key sub-themes: *expansion*, *certainty*, and *strength*.

### ***Expansion***

AG1 encompasses period during which the Islamic State's military and territorial expansion were most successful. These successes are reflected in the magazine's narrative content, as expansion is a core sub-theme of the victory narrative during this period. Within AG1, the group heavily emphasizes their expansion within the Iraqi-Syrian theatre and beyond, citing both real examples of the establishment of new *wilayah* or 'provinces', as well as aggrandized prognostications, such as the claim that "The flag of Khilāfah... will expand until it covers all eastern and western extents of the Earth... even if America and its coalition despise such...".<sup>275</sup> Several reoccurring installments also serve to reinforce the notion of the Islamic State's expansion. The installments "*Islamic State Reports*", which recounts the group's *blitzkrieg*-like military victories, and "*In the Words of the Enemy*", where the group cites enemy political figures and analysts stressing ISIS' rapidly territorial growth, both serve to bolster the group's storyline of expansion and success.<sup>276</sup>

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<sup>275</sup> Dabiq Team, "Foreword," *Dabiq Issue 5: Remaining and Expanding*, November 21<sup>st</sup>, 2014; Dabiq Team, "Islamic State Reports," *Dabiq Issue 3, A Call to Hijrah*, September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2014, 18.

<sup>276</sup> Dabiq Team, "In the Words of the Enemy," *Dabiq Issue 2: The Flood*, July 27<sup>th</sup>, 2014, 31.

As alluded to in the analysis of the group’s SBEG content, the authors call attention to the domestic territorial expansion of the Caliphate and the string of military successes that have enabled that growth. The Military and Terrorism (MT) category is dominated by items that champion ISIS’ “liberation” of towns like Tal Afar, Hawija and Al-Ad’him, and their “conquest” of new region’s in Iraq’s Nineveh governorate. Within these pieces, the authors emphasize the rapidity and ease with which the group attains its military successes, infusing their portrayal of victory with a sense of momentum and inevitability.<sup>277</sup>

The authors also underscore the group’s foreign expansion by calling attention to the development of new “*wilayah*” across the Middle East. For example, the authors frame the Islamic State’s expansion into the “Arabian Peninsula, Yemen, Sinai, Libya, and Algeria” through the establishment of *wilayah* as a victory for Islam against the “Christians, Jews, mushrikīn [those who reject monotheism], and apostates”.<sup>278</sup> When discussing their expansion into foreign theatres, the group’s authors are not only providing real-world evidence of their state’s growth and their organization’s victories, but they also connect these successes to their quixotic aspirations, framing them as part of the process to establish “Allah’s Sharī’ah on the [entire] Earth”.<sup>279</sup> By blending of real-world evidence of their success with their scripturally-derived claims, the authors portray ISIS as not only victorious, but fulfilling the scriptural prophecy of resurrecting the Caliphate. Furthermore, by demonstrating a “fit” between the group’s claims and real-world events, these content items to serve to reinforce the narrative’s “empirical credibility”—its plausibility in the eyes of its target audience—and enhance its persuasive power.<sup>280</sup>

### ***Certainty***

While the expansion sub-theme underscores the development of the Islamic State’s self-proclaimed global Caliphate, the certainty sub-theme asserts that the success

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<sup>277</sup> Dabiq Team, “The Fight For Wilayat Al-Anbar,” *Dabiq Issue 5: Remaining and Expanding*, November 21<sup>st</sup>, 2014, 10.

<sup>278</sup> Dabiq Team, “Remaining and Expanding,” *Dabiq Issue 5: Remaining and Expanding*, November 21<sup>st</sup>, 2014, 22, 33.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid*, 22, 33.

<sup>280</sup> Benford and Snow, 619.

of their Caliphate project is inevitable. This theme is most often employed through the use of scriptural passages or appeals to faith that support the Islamic State's claims of certain victory. For example, an article discussing Islamic State's declaration of the Caliphate, claims that the revival of the Caliphate demonstrates that "Triumph looms on the horizon" and that the "signs of victory have appeared".<sup>281</sup> The Islamic State's official spokesman Abu Mohammad al-Adani channels the same sentiment, exclaiming: "Allah will give you [Muslims] victory. Indeed, Allah will give you victory... we will guarantee you – by Allah's permission – constant victory and consolidation" and adds that the Islamic State's victory "is His [Allah's] promise to us; He is glorified and He does not fail in His promise".<sup>282</sup> By linking the Islamic States victory to a "promise" from Allah, the authors appeal to their audience's religious faith portraying ISIS' victory as inevitable and willed by Allah. Moreover, to bolster the sense of inevitability, the group repeatedly references 'prophetic' passages from hadith which discuss the expansion of Muslim power throughout the world.<sup>283</sup> Through these references, the group, portrays their own military successes and territorial expansion as the fulfillment of prophecy, reinforcing the notion of their 'certain' victory.

Although the group primarily supports their claims of certain victory using scriptural or theological justifications in AG1, the authors also use the Islamic State's real-world military victories and territorial expansion to justify their claims and portray the group as unstoppable. For example, in *Dabiq* Issue 5, the authors argue American bombing raids on ISIS positions in Kobane are a "fruitless endeavor that will only serve to delay the inevitable". The authors substantiate their assertions by highlighting the "impotence" of their enemies and noting how quickly the "mujāhidīn... overwhelmed the resistance put up

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<sup>281</sup> Dabiq Team, *Khilafah Declared*, 9.

<sup>282</sup> Dabiq Team, "Excerpts From "Indeed Your Lord Is Ever Watchful" By The Official Spokesman For The Islamic State," *Dabiq Issue 4: The Failed Crusade*, October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2014, 7.

<sup>283</sup> Several examples of the group's reference to the prophecy include: Dabiq Team, "Until it Burns the Crusader Armies in Dabiq," *Dabiq Issue 1: The Return of the Khilafah*, July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2014, 3-5; Dabiq Team, "Allah's Messenger," *Dabiq Issue 2: The Flood*, July 27<sup>th</sup>, 2014, 44; Dabiq Team, "The Islamic Before Al-Malhamah," *Dabiq Issue 3: The Call to Hijrah*, September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2014, 9; Dabiq Team, "Allah's Messenger," *Dabiq Issue 4: The Failed Crusade*, October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2014, 56.

by the PKK/YPG” forces in the early stages of the battle.<sup>284</sup> Ultimately, using a combination of earthly and heavenly justifications for victory, the authors create a self-reinforcing narrative where the Islamic State’s victory is framed as inevitable and guided by Allah.

### **Strength**

To bolster its narrative of victory during AG1, the Islamic State’s propagandists routinely portray the group as colossally powerful, not just for an extremist group, but on the global stage. For example, speaking of their own success the group claims that “As the mujahidin of the Islamic State swept through Iraq claiming one victory after another, it became clear to both friend and foe that this was not just a random series of victories”, but rather the rise of a new military and political powerhouse.<sup>285</sup> The group articulates this theme of ‘strength’ in two main ways. On one hand, it emphasizes concomitant displays of enemy weakness and Islamic State power. For instance, in *Dabiq* Issue 2, it boasts of fighting three enemies simultaneously—Kurdish forces, the Syrian regime, and other Islamist militant factions—and describing their losses as a ‘humiliation’.<sup>286</sup> On the other hand, the authors work to reinforce the Islamic State’s perception of strength by stressing their ability to triumph in the face of adversity, stating, despite “what the Islamic State faces [in the form of] economic, military, political, and media war, and despite all the different parties united against it – from the new al-Qā’idah leadership in Khurāsān, to the safawis in Tehran, and all the way to the crusaders in Washington – it advances from victory to victory”.<sup>287</sup>

Furthermore, in AG1, the group routinely inflates its own strength in order to claim it can rival American power. For example, in *Dabiq* Issues 3 and 4, the authors argue that President Obama’s decision to launch airstrikes against ISIS would “ultimately bring about

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<sup>284</sup> Dabiq Team, “The Fight of Ayn- Al-Islam,” *Dabiq Issue 5: Remaining and Expanding*, November 21<sup>st</sup>, 2014, 15.

<sup>285</sup> Dabiq Team, “Murtaddin Repent in the Thousands,” *Dabiq Issue 1: The Return of the Khilafah*, July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2014, 48.

<sup>286</sup> Dabiq Team, “The Fight Against the PKK,” *Dabiq Issue 2: The Flood*, July 27<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 13.

<sup>287</sup> Dabiq Team, “The Proper Creed of The Mujahidin,” *Dabiq Issue 2: The Flood*, July 27<sup>th</sup>, 2014, 26.

the complete collapse of the modern American empire” and that the American-led anti-ISIS campaign “will be [their] final campaign”.<sup>288</sup> These passages illustrate how the Islamic State’s use of the strength sub-theme links its real-world successes to its quixotic aspirations, seeking to portray those aspirations as less far-fetched than they may initially appear. Furthermore, these passages are key to illustrating changes in the Islamic State’s victory narrative, as, in the later stages of the sample, the group reverses its messaging to portray merely *surviving* in battle against its many enemies as a form of ‘victory’.

Within AG1, the Islamic State’s victory narrative—and the sub-themes that support it—are diverse and supported by variety of different kinds of evidence and justification. The authors employ scriptural justifications alongside descriptions of military successes and territorial expansion to construct a multifaceted narrative that cuts across multiple thematic categories. The breadth and multidimensional nature of the group’s victory narrative during AG1 is distinct, as the thematic range and kinds supporting evidence used by the authors narrows considerably as the group sustains territorial and military losses.

## Analytical Grouping Two

Like AG1, the Islamic State’s narrative of victory is both pervasive and diverse. The core sub-themes of Certainty, Strength and Expansion remain prevalent throughout the issues’ propaganda content. For example, the group continues to portray their success as certain in articles like “*And Allah is the Best of Plotters*”, which argues that the Islamic State’s victory is preordained by Allah and ISIS’ enemies are “inherently weak” as they are “part of the weak plot of Shaytān [the Devil]”.<sup>289</sup> The group also features content that illustrates their strength and territorial expansion. Domestically, the authors highlight events such as their capture of the cities of Bījī and Ramadi, territory in Iraq’s Anbar Province, and the Yarmūk Palestinian Refugee Camp in Syria in order to reinforce the perception of ISIS as an expansionary state, despite losing 14.8% of its territory during

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<sup>288</sup> Dabiq Team, “Foreword,” *Dabiq Issue 3: The Call to Hijrah*, September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2014, 4; Dabiq Team, “Excerpts From “Indeed Your Lord Is Ever Watchful” By The Official Spokesman For The Islamic State,” *Dabiq Issue 4: The Failed Crusade*, October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2014, 5.

<sup>289</sup> Dabiq Team, “And Allah is the Best of Plotters,” *Dabiq Issue 10: They Plot and Allah Plots*, July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 50-59.

this period.<sup>290</sup> Similarly, ISIS' reoccurring military operations installments provide a decontextualized, victory-centric portrayal of the group's actions, almost exclusively discussing the Islamic State's successful military and terrorist operations without providing an overarching view of the relevance of these actions, or an aggregate assessment of the group's territorial holdings, ultimately obscuring the group's losses and emphasizing its successes. As a result, discussions of the group's military operations, despite often being portrayed within the magazines as 'news', serve to reinforce ISIS' victory narrative, even as the group becomes increasingly mired in back-and-forth conflict and begins to register significant defeats.

Outside of ISIS' self-declared Caliphate, the issues of *Dabiq* contained in AG2 also serve to reinforce the notion of expansion, such as by framing of Boko Haram's *bay'ah* to Baghdadi as a "tremendous cause of celebration" and underscoring Boko Haram's own expansion within West Africa.<sup>291</sup> Furthermore, the group continues to cite Western political analysts and policy-makers in "*In The Words of The Enemy*", continuing to bolster the credibility of ISIS' claims of military strength and political success. For example, in AG2 the authors quote Chuck Hagel, former American Secretary of Defense, who claims the U.S. has never seen an organization "so well-organized, so well-trained, so well-funded, so strategic", effectively using the U.S. government's analysis to feed perceptions of the Islamic State's power and prospects for continued success and adding to the "empirical credibility" of their message.

While there are many narrative and thematic continuities between AG1 and AG2, AG2 marks an important shift in ISIS' propaganda content as the group introduces several 'post-victory' sub-themes. As outlined above, 'post-victory' sub-themes are themes that the Islamic State's propagandists employ to sustain their narrative of victory despite significant or accumulating defeats. While the Islamic State loses an estimated 14.8% percent of its territory during AG2, this period also contains some significant territorial, political and military victories, such as the seizure of Ramadi and Palmyra, the *bay'ah* from

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<sup>290</sup> Dabiq Team, "Action in the New Wilayat," *Dabiq Issue 6: Al-Qa'idah of Waziristan*, December 29<sup>th</sup>, 2014, 32; Dabiq Team, "The Yarmuk Camp," *Dabiq Issue 9: They Plot And Allah Plots*, May 21<sup>st</sup>, 2015, 34-36; Dabiq Team, "Harvesting the Sahwah," *Dabiq Issue 9: They Plot And Allah Plots*, May 21<sup>st</sup>, 2015, 31-32.

<sup>291</sup> Dabiq Team, *The Bay'ah From West Africa*, 14-16.

Boko Haram, and a series of terrorist attacks in both the West and the Middle East. As a result, a full-scale revision of the victory narrative would be unwarranted. However, AG2 does see the emergence of several sub-themes that later become cornerstones of the Islamic State's 'post-victory narrative'. In AG2, the authors begin to employ the 'Patience & Steadfastness', 'Underdog' and 'Framing Defeat as Victory' sub-themes. While not pervasive within AG2, these sub-themes illustrate a transition phase between ISIS' victory and post-victory narratives and demonstrate a connection between the group's defeats and its use of post-victory themes within its propaganda.

### ***Patience & Steadfastness***

The Patience & Steadfastness sub-theme is one of the cornerstones of the Islamic State's post-victory narrative and it becomes pervasive towards the end of the sample (AG3). This sub-theme centers on the notion that ISIS' defeats are temporary and that perseverance and unwavering faith in the cause will ultimately lead the Islamic State through its 'momentary challenges' to victory. While this theme is not pervasive in AG2, it is present in several issues following particular Islamic State defeats. One illustrative example found in Issue 11 compares the Islamic State's current circumstances—as a small force fighting a numerically superior coalition of enemies—to the Prophet's historic Battle of Al-Ahzāb (the Battle of the Trench). The authors argue that with “patience they [the Prophet and his companions] endured in the face of war, fear, hunger, and weather”, eventually leading to the “Muslims' victory”. This article, which was released following a string of defeats to Kurdish forces in Northern Syria and the entrance of Turkish airpower into the anti-ISIS coalition, also calls on the Islamic State's followers to attack Kurdish organizations in Europe or communities in coalition member countries, illustrating a connection between ISIS' defeats and the use of 'post-victory' sub-themes. Furthermore, using this historical allegory, the authors aim assuage their audience's concerns, arguing that the Islamic State will not succumb to superior forces, but that the “Khilafah” will “endure with inherent resolve”.<sup>292</sup> The emergence of the Patience & Steadfastness sub-theme during AG2, where the group's losses are comparatively mild and partially offset

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<sup>292</sup> Dabiq Team, “From The Battle of Azhab to the War of Coalitions,” *Dabiq Issue 11: From The Battle of Azhab to the War of Coalitions*, September 9<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 46.

by the seizure of important towns, illustrates the value the Islamic State places on maintaining its narrative of victory.

### ***The Defeat as Victory Frame & The Underdog Theme***

One of the first major defeats the Islamic State faced was in the Syrian Kurdish town of Kobane in January of 2015. While this defeat came during a period where the group was advancing on other fronts, the authors still employed two key components of the post-victory narrative—the ‘Defeat as Victory Frame’ and the ‘Underdog’ sub-theme—to justify their defeat to their audience. The Defeat as Victory frame is a messaging strategy where ISIS reframes their own losses to portray them as exhibitions of strength and fortitude. The Underdog sub-theme is where ISIS emphasizes the size and power of their enemy relative to their own forces to portray the group’s ability to simply engage in the battle as remarkable. Following their loss in Kobane, ISIS employs both of these messaging strategies. In an installment of “*In the Words of the Enemy*”, the Islamic State cites a variety of Western news sources to highlight how the fight in Kobane should not be viewed as a loss for ISIS, but as a demonstration of its impressive strength and staying power. They cite Western commentators that that portray the Islamic State’s ability to “hold on for months”, despite American aerial bombardment, as a remarkable feat of military strength, and others who note that the attacks on Kobane “consumed 75 percent of the nearly 1,000 airstrikes carried out by allied planes”, allowing the group to expand into other parts of Iraq and Syria during the battle.<sup>293</sup> By highlighting the superiority of enemy American airpower and their own ability to endure in an asymmetrical battle, the authors reframe their loss as a victory. While these sub-themes and frames are not pervasive throughout AG2, they demonstrate that the group uses these sub-themes in response to military and territorial setbacks, providing strong evidence that the group’s use of similar post-victory sub-themes in AG3 is driven by the Islamic State’s mounting losses.

### **Analytical Grouping 3**

As ISIS’ territorial, political and military losses increase, so does ISIS’ use of the ‘post-victory’ sub-themes. The ‘post-victory’ sub-themes that began to emerge in AG2

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<sup>293</sup> Dabiq Team, “In The Words of the Enemy,” *Dabiq Issue 7: From Hypocrisy to Apostasy*, February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 53.

become increasingly diverse and pervasive in AG3 as the group's domestic territorial losses more than double from 14.8% in January 2016 to 34.0% in January 2017. With mounting losses, the Islamic State's propaganda content becomes increasingly focused on reframing or obfuscating their defeats to sustain and reconstruct their narrative of victory, project an aura of success, and overshadow their setbacks. In contrast to issues in AG1 and the majority of AG2, where the victory narrative was found across thematic categories and emphasized the Islamic State's rapid expansion and superior military strength, in AG3, the group's post-victory narrative is almost solely propagated using scriptural and theological arguments and evidence. In short, to reframe their *earthly* defeats as successes, the Islamic State increasingly relies on *heavenly* arguments.

The Islamic State's propagandists make use of a wide variety of sub-themes to construct their post-victory narrative and deflect from their losses. While AG2 contained three primary post-victory sub-themes—the Underdog sub-theme, 'Framing Defeat as Victory', and Patience and Steadfastness—which emerged intermittently throughout the grouping, the diversity within the post-victory narrative increases substantially in AG3. As a result, the sub-themes will be analyzed in two sections. The first section will address the sub-thematic 'pillars' and major messaging strategies used in the post-victory narrative in AG3; those sub-themes and framings that are most pervasive and central to the Islamic State's narrative content. This section will address the 'Victory Through Faith and Divine Intervention', and 'Patience and Steadfastness' sub-themes, along with the 'Redefining Victory and Decontextualizing Success' messaging strategy the group employs throughout the analytical grouping. The second section will provide readers with an additional table containing a range of the less pervasive post-victory sub-themes with a condensed analysis of each sub-theme. Due to its length and the wide range of post-victory themes noted during analysis, this section will be included at the end of the thesis in Annex A.

### ***Victory Through Faith & Divine Intervention***

The 'Victory Through Faith' and 'Divine Intervention' sub-themes are both premised on the notion that the Islamic State's members can reverse its current tribulations by deepening their faith. Through this faith-based reasoning, the Islamic State's propagandists make two concomitant arguments—that increasing one's faith will increase the Islamic State's strength, as faith itself is construed as a weapon and a force

multiplier, and that by deepening their faith, the Islamic State’s fighters can generate divine intervention on their behalf.

Using the Victory Through Faith sub-theme, the authors aim to convince their audience that the group’s material disadvantages and the observable evidence of their decline are irrelevant to the ultimate outcome of their war. Rather, according to this portrayal, the only determining factor in the Islamic State’s success or failure is its members’ adherence to Islam. For example, ISIS’ propagandists argue that “we must all realize that the condition for victory is following the Prophet. If this adherence is present, victory shall come, and if it is absent, there shall be no victory”.<sup>294</sup> As is common through AG3, the group supports their claim that they will achieve ‘victory through faith’ by drawing on scriptural or theological evidence, in this case supporting their claims with a statement from medieval Islamic theologian Ibn Qayyim, who stated “victory and complete support is only for the people of complete iman [faith]”.<sup>295</sup>

In contrast to the group’s use of the victory narrative in AG1, which stressed—alongside claims of the Islamic State’s divine support—their military strength, the authors now portray faith as the sole path to victory, arguing:

“Muslims are only supported because of their enemy’s disobedience to Allah. If it were not for that, we would have no power against them. Our numbers are not like their numbers. Our equipment is not like their equipment. If we were equal to them in committing sin, they would have favor over us in might, and if we do not defeat them due to our virtue, we will not overcome them by our might.”<sup>296</sup>

Through this faith-based framing, the authors work to dissociate their claims of inevitable victory from the observable decline of their organization and state. The group acknowledges that they lack the material means to achieve victory, while simultaneously portraying their “numbers” and “equipment” as irrelevant.<sup>297</sup> In doing so, the group aims to

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<sup>294</sup> Rumiyah Team, “Paths to Victory,” *Rumiyah Issue 2*, October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 18.

<sup>295</sup> *Ibid*, 18.

<sup>296</sup> Rumiyah Team, “This is What Allah and His Messenger Promised Us: A Speech By Abu Bakr Husayni Al-Baghdadi,” *Rumiyah Issue 3*, November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 7.

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

persuade its audience to continue to believe in the Islamic State's cause, despite mounting evidence that the group's aim of creating an Islamic State are becoming increasingly unattainable.

Variations of the 'Victory Through Faith' sub-theme are incorporated into many items across the analytical grouping, both woven into more thematically diverse content and as the central theme of individual items. For example, an installment of *Among the Believers Are Men* which glorifies a slain British foreign fighter, integrates the sub-theme into a eulogy, claiming that "he had he had full conviction that victory does not rely on numbers or the power of one's weapons, but rather, in the correctness of one's 'aqidah [Islamic creed]".<sup>298</sup> The authors also use this sub-theme as central premise of their articles, such as in "*Jihad Through Du'a*", which portrays du'a, a theological concept defined by ISIS as "complete love and complete humility towards Allah", as another method to wage jihad on behalf the Islamic State.<sup>299</sup> Despite the varying uses of the sub-theme, the core rationale of the argument—that the deepening individual faith will help the Islamic State attain victory—remains constant within the grouping.

In conjunction with the Victory Through Faith sub-theme, the Islamic State offers their audience the promise of a divine intervention on behalf of their cause, effectively indicating to their readers that 'Allah will save us'. Like with Victory Through Faith, the group uses scriptural and theological evidence and faith-based reasoning to persuade their readers that Allah will intervene and lead them to victory. For example, using allegorical comparison, the Islamic State draws parallels between their current circumstances and those of the Prophet and his Companions in the Battle of Badr. The authors argue that during the battle, when the Muslims were out-numbered, they made du'a to Allah and "Allah reinforced them with one thousand angels" casting terror into "the hearts of the mushrikīn", and guiding the Prophet's forces to victory.<sup>300</sup> Through this comparison, the authors suggest that through the du'a of their followers, the Islamic State

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<sup>298</sup> Rumiya Team, "Among the Believers Are Men, Abu 'Abdillah Al-Brittani," *Rumiya Issue 3*, November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 15.

<sup>299</sup> Rumiya Team, "Jihad Through Du'a," *Rumiya Issue 3*, November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 32-35.

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.* 33.

will be able to summon divine intervention in a fashion akin to the Prophet and the Sahabah in the Battle of Badr.<sup>301</sup> In contrast to AG1 and large portions of AG2, where the group's victory narrative draws on content from the SBEG, MT and SRT categories and was supported by both scriptural passages and tangible evidence of the group's successes, the narrative in AG3 relies heavily on scriptural evidence and faith-based reasoning, actively working to dissociate the group's claims of victory from their circumstances on the ground.

### ***Patience & Steadfastness***

One of the thematic pillars of AG3 is Patience and Steadfastness. While the Patience and Steadfastness sub-theme emerges in AG2, it proliferates in AG3. This sub-theme is highly pervasive in *Rumiyah* Issues 2-4. For instance, in a transcribed speech by the group's official spokesman in Issue 4, variations on the terms "patience" and "steadfast" can be found a dozen times on a single page.<sup>302</sup> Several articles, such as "*Glad Tidings of the Imminent Victory to the Patient* and *Stories of Steadfastness from the Lives of the Sahabiyyat* [female companions of the Prophet]", are also dedicated to the sub-theme.<sup>303</sup> Like in AG2, the authors use this sub-theme to present ISIS' mounting defeats as momentary tribulations on their path to victory. This sub-theme also appears to be intended for two distinct audiences: active members of the Islamic State, who the authors encourage to remain committed to the cause, and prospective Islamic State members, where the authors seek to assuage potential concerns about the collapse or defeat of the organization.

At its most basic, the Patience and Steadfastness sub-theme is used to persuade ISIS' audience that resilience in the face of adversity is part of a Muslims' duty to Allah, and that their resilience will lead the Islamic State to victory. The authors frame their

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<sup>301</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>302</sup> Rumiyah Team, "You Will Remember What I Have Told You: A Speech By The Official Spokesman of the Islamic State Abul Hasan Al-Mjuahir," *Rumiyah Issue 4*, December 7<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 4.

<sup>303</sup> Rumiyah Team, "Glad Tidings of Imminent Victory to the Patient," *Rumiyah Issue 2*, October 4<sup>th</sup> 2016, 26-27; Rumiyah Team, "Stories of Steadfastness from the Lives of the Sahabiyyat," *Rumiyah Issue 2*, October 4<sup>th</sup> 2016, 28-30.

current state of military defeats as a temporary setback, stating, “O you who believe, be patient, outlast [your enemy] in patience, perform ribat, and fear Allah that you may succeed”.<sup>304</sup> The authors also portray patience and steadfastness as both a good deed and a religious obligation, stating that “having patience during war and being steadfast when the battle rages are among the best deeds according to Allah” and that “each Muslim must be careful in fulfilling his covenant to Allah by being steadfast...until Allah grants them victory or he dies seeking that victory”.<sup>305</sup> These basic facets of the sub-theme undergird the Islamic State’s post-victory narrative, as it allows the group to portray continuing their fight as both a path to political victory and individual righteousness.

To depict patience and steadfastness as an effective path to victory at a time when the Islamic State is facing mounting losses, the group’s authors draw on scriptural accounts of the Prophet’s own military history. They portray the early expansion of Islam as the result of the Muslims’ ability to endure in the face of adversity to the exclusion of other factors. In articles like *Stories of Victory After Patience*, the group recounts a series of events from the Qur’an where Muslim forces were able to achieve victory through a combination of undying faith and resilience. The authors recount the Battle of Yarmuk where “the Romans mobilized 240,000 fighters” against 40,000 Muslim soldiers. The authors claim that “the patience and steadfastness of the Muslims reached the point that, despite their many wounds, they pledged to fight to the death”. After this display of “patience and steadfastness, Allah bestowed upon them victory and consolidation, and the Romans became weak and fled in defeat without turning to look back”.<sup>306</sup> The authors also stress the role of patience and steadfastness in several of the Prophet’s other victories against numerically superior forces, such as the Battles of Al-Azhāb, Yamamah, and Qadisiyyah. Ultimately, the authors call on their fighters to follow the example of patience exercised by the Prophet, stating, “O, soldiers of the Khilafah in Mosul, Halab, Sirte, and other wilayat of the Islamic State, you must be patient, and you must surpass

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<sup>304</sup> Rumiya Team, “The Virtue of Ribat,” *Rumiya Issue 4*, December 7<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 26.

<sup>305</sup> Rumiya Team, “The Pledge to Fight to the Death,” *Rumiya Issue 4*, December 7<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 24-25.

<sup>306</sup> Rumiya Team, “Stories of Victory After Patience,” *Rumiya Issue 4*, December 7<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 28-30.

the enemy in patience. Indeed, victory requires but an hour of patience”.<sup>307</sup> The use of these historical comparisons and the Patience and Steadfastness sub-theme to portray the Islamic State as the weaker party in an asymmetrical battle demonstrates a key shift in ISIS’ narrative of victory. In AG1, the group sought to portray itself as powerful enough to take on its broad array of enemies—the “al-Qā’idah leadership in Khurāsān”, “the safawis in Tehran” and “the crusaders in Washington”—and reign victorious, but by AG3 the group portrays itself as an underdog whose victory is assured by faith and patience alone, rather than a rising military and political power.<sup>308</sup> By the dint of their own military losses, the Islamic State has been forced to reframe itself from future great power to a small community of embattled faithful.

### ***Redefining Victory and Decontextualizing Success***

In AG3, as the group’s territorial and military losses accumulate, the Islamic State’s propagandists utilize a variety of strategies to ‘redefine’ victory or decontextualize the group’s success. The group alters both the kinds of items present in their magazines, and the messages within them, to obfuscate their setbacks or spin them to portray them as victories. For instance, it introduces new military infographics, eliminates the previous staple installment “*In the Words of the Enemy*”, and cleverly discusses their military operations in such a way that avoids addressing their overall military setbacks and inflates their increasingly infrequent successes. As noted in the Military and Terrorism section above, the final five issues of the sample, the introduction of a new, infographic feature serves to redefine the group’s abject losses as victories. For instance, statistics of slain “rafidi” enemies and downed drones are used to sustain the Islamic State’s image of success and military power, despite the fact that these statistics are drawn from a series of battles fought during the Iraqi army’s advance on Mosul where the Islamic State accrued substantial territorial losses.<sup>309</sup> Likewise, the group uses the existing structure of their military operations installments to obfuscate their losses and selectively chose operations that cultivate an image of military success. The use and introduction of these two

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<sup>307</sup> Ibid, 28-30.

<sup>308</sup> Dabiq Team, The Proper Creed of The Mujahidin, 26

<sup>309</sup> Rumiya Team, “Rafidi Losses in Diljah Wilayah,” *Rumiya Issue 2*, October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 26.

installments illustrates both the substantial qualitative changes in the group's messaging content, as well as the value the Islamic State places on maintaining its narrative of victory.

Additionally, in the last five issues of the sample, the group removes the installment "*In the Words of the Enemy*", which was featured in each of the group's previous 15 issues. This installment was used to burnish the Islamic State's victory narrative by illustrating that even those fighting against the Islamic State were astounded by their success, expansion and state-building achievements. However, when the group's decline quickens in AG3, the authors remove this installment, likely because the analysts and news sources they once cited, such as the *New York Times*, had increasingly begun to write about the group's demise.<sup>310</sup> The removal of the installment eliminated an important asset to the group's victory narrative, as well as the credibility of their political and military messaging campaign. During AG1 and AG2, the analysis the group cited in *In the Words of the Enemy* largely matched the sentiments expressed through its own propaganda content, as both described ISIS as expansionary, militarily effective, organizationally sophisticated, and adept at state-building. However, the removal of the installment reduced the group's capacity to 'show' their audience the veracity of their claims, damaging both the credibility of their messaging and illustrating the connection between the Islamic State's territorial decline and shifts in its magazines' content.

Over the course of the sample, the Islamic State's narrative of victory undergoes a stunning reversal. It shifts from a thematically diverse narrative that framed ISIS as a revanchist power that, by virtue of its military strength, state-building success and religious devotion, would restore Islamic glory, to a 'post-victory' narrative primarily focused on obfuscating the group's losses or justifying them as part of divine plan. The major qualitative shifts in the group's narrative of victory provides one of the clearest illustrations

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<sup>310</sup> Examples of articles published by the New York Times during the period leading up to the release of Rumiya Issue 1: Michael S. Schmidt and Eric Schmitt, "As ISIS Loosens Grip, U.S. and Iraq Prepare for Grinding Insurgency," *The New York Times*, July 25, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/26/world/middleeast/isis-iraq-insurgency.html>; Eric Schmitt, "Caliphate in Peril, More ISIS Fighters May Take Mayhem to Europe," *The New York Times*, September 18<sup>th</sup>, 2016 <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/18/us/politics/caliphate-in-peril-more-isis-fighters-may-take-mayhem-to-europe.html>; Eric Schmitt, Rukmini Callamachi, Anne Barnard, "Spokesman's Death Will Have Islamic State Turning to Its 'Deep Bench'," *The New York Times*, September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/01/world/middleeast/syria-isis-adnani.html>.

of the impacts the Islamic State's territorial losses have had on its propaganda, not only because of the changes' correlation with events on the ground, but because of how closely the group comes, through themes like "Divine Intervention", to openly admitting it is in trouble. Ultimately, the Islamic State's defeats on the ground have imperiled its message of victory.

## Motivational Framing: The *Hijrah* and Home-Grown Terrorism Frames

The term *hijrah* typically refers to "refers to the migration of Muhammad and his Companions from Mecca to Medina in 622 C.E.". However, to cultivate its image of religious righteousness, the Islamic State has repurposed the term to describe the process of a Muslim journeying from the lands of "dārul-kufr" (lands governed by non-Islamic laws) to its self-declared Caliphate in the lands of "dārul- Islām" (lands where Shari'ah has been implemented).<sup>311</sup> In the Islamic State's propaganda, the *hijrah* narrative or "motivational frame" is strongly emphasized throughout the early issues of *Dabiq*, with an issue, *Dabiq* Issue 3, *A Call the Hijrah*, dedicated to the topic. However, the strong emphasis on the *hijrah* present in AG1 is not permanent. Towards the end of the sample, the group's motivational framing undergoes a reversal, from aggressively promoting the *hijrah* and portraying it as the "number one priority", to downplaying its importance, and instead, encouraging its followers engage in acts of home-grown terrorism.<sup>312</sup> In downplaying *hijrah* and directing its followers to attack at home, the group is effectively downplaying the importance of expanding and defending its Caliphate—the *raison d'être* of its messaging during AG1 and AG2—and initiating a fundamental shift in the forms of collective action it calls upon its audience to engage in.

Furthermore, this qualitative shift from *hijrah* to home-grown terrorism (HGT) promotion correlates with the Islamic State's territorial decline. The group promotes *hijrah* during periods of relative success (AG1 and AG2), but once its Caliphate has shrunk

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<sup>311</sup> "Hijrah," Oxford Islamic Studies Online, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e841>; Dabiq Team, *The Twin Halves of the Muhajirin*, 32.

<sup>312</sup> Dabiq Team, *Hijrah From Hypocrisy to Sincerity*, 26 .

significantly (AG3), it reverses its message. The combination of the timing and kinds of content that underlie this shift suggest that the group's territorial losses have pushed them not only to alter their propaganda content, fundamentally change its recruitment strategy and the forms of collective action it calls on its audience to engage in. Below, this section tracks and qualitatively analyzes this shift in ISIS' messaging content through the study's three analytical groupings, illustrating how the magazines' content transitions from a *hijrah*-focused narrative in AG1 and AG2, to one focused increasingly on promoting home-grown terrorism (HGT) in AG3.

## Analytical Grouping One

### *Hijrah*

Within AG1, the Islamic State's authors use two main methods of persuasion to convince their readers to perform the *hijrah*: religious obligations and worldly incentives. Throughout AG1, the authors primarily focus on underscoring the religious value of performing *hijrah*. Using a range of scriptural passages and theological claims, the authors argue that those who intentionally forego the *hijrah* are committing a dire act of "hypocrisy"—a powerful religious motivator within hardline and literalist strands of Islam, which equate "hypocrisy with unbelief (*kufir*)" and condemn "hypocrites to hellfire".<sup>313</sup> Further, they argue that those who fail to carry out the *hijrah* (or fail to pledge *bay'ah*) will die a death of *jahiliyya*.<sup>314</sup> The authors also argue, quoting from a hadith, that "hijrah wipes out all previous sins", a potentially powerful motivator for the group's target audience, as many Western Islamist radicals have been found to have criminal histories or troubled pasts.<sup>315</sup> The group also claims that a "life of jihad is not possible until you pack and move to the Khilafah" and cite scripture to argue that those who perform *hijrah* are "best people on earth", but those who refuse to will be hated by Allah and cast into the hellfire "together

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<sup>313</sup> Dabiq Team, *Hijrah from Hypocrisy to Sincerity*, 26; "Hypocrite," Oxford Islamic Studies Online, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e910>.

<sup>314</sup> Dabiq Team, "Foreword," *Dabiq Issue 2: The Flood*, July 27<sup>th</sup>, 2014, 3-4.

<sup>315</sup> Dabiq Team, "Hijrah and Forgiveness," *Dabiq Issue 3: The Call to Hijrah*, September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2014, 23-24; Lorenzo Vidino and Seamus Hughes, *Isis In America: From Retweets To Raqqa*, (Washington, DC: The George Washington University Program on Extremism, 2015), 16.

with the apes and swine”, ultimately portraying the performance of *hijrah* as a supreme act of religiosity, while refusing to do so as a dire sin.<sup>316</sup>

While ISIS primarily uses scriptural and theological arguments to promote the *hijrah*, they also blend religious and worldly incentives in their effort to promote the *hijrah*. On several occasions, the group discusses the financial incentives available to those who join the Islamic State, telling its audience not to worry “about money or accommodations for yourself and your family”, and explaining that there “are plenty of homes and resources to cover you and your family”.<sup>317</sup> The authors also present *hijrah* and *jihad* as avenues for Muslims to make their mark on history and bolster their piety, claiming: “You can be a major contributor towards the liberation of Makkah, Madīnah, and al-Quds. Would you not like to reach Judgment Day with these grand deeds in your scales[?]”<sup>318</sup>. They also present the *hijrah* as an escape from the “modern day slavery” of the Western wage labour, forcing the Muslim to live with “constant feelings of subjugation to a kāfir master”, unable to experience the “might and honor that every Muslim should live and experience”.<sup>319</sup> For ISIS, *hijrah* and *jihad* “not only grants life on the larger scale of the *Ummah*, it also grants a fuller life on the scale of the individual”.<sup>320</sup> Ultimately, in AG1, the authors use a range of persuasive mechanisms to motivate their audience to perform *hijrah*, working to convince them of the benefits of joining in the construction of the Islamic State and the severe drawbacks of failing to do so.

### ***Home-Grown Terrorism***

In AG1, the Home-Grown Terrorism (HGT) frame—content promoting or demonstrating ISIS members carrying out terrorist attacks in their home countries—receives limited attention from the authors. During this stage, HGT is mentioned

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<sup>316</sup> Dabiq Team, *Hijrah From Hypocrisy to Sincerity*, 42.

<sup>317</sup> Dabiq Team, *Hijrah From Hypocrisy to Sincerity*, 33; Dabiq Team, “Foreword,” *Dabiq Issue 2: The Flood*, July 27<sup>th</sup>, 2014, 3-4.

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid*, 3-4.

<sup>319</sup> Dabiq Team, *Hijrah From Hypocrisy to Sincerity*, 29.

<sup>320</sup> *Ibid*, 31.

infrequently as the group's messaging strategy is geared towards promoting in-group focused content, such as promoting the *hijrah*—and by extension—developing their Caliphate. Because of this focus on domestic, in-group content, ISIS' messaging develops an implicit 'value hierarchy' where *hijrah* and attention to ISIS' domestic affairs take precedence over its foreign operations. While the Islamic State does call on their supporters to “kill a disbelieving American or European – especially the spiteful and filthy French – or an Australian, or a Canadian, or any other disbeliever from the disbelievers waging war...against the Islamic State”, they refer to the *hijrah* as the “number one priority”, illustrating the group's hierarchy of preferences.<sup>321</sup> For example, the group titles an article “*There Is No Life Without Jihād And There is No Jihād Without Hijrah*”, drawing an intrinsic link between waging jihad and performing *hijrah*. In the article, the authors emphasize the detrimental effects remaining amongst “bad company” in the West has on a Muslim's faith, illustrating that in AG1, the Islamic State values *hijrah* over home-grown terrorism.<sup>322</sup> Additionally, AG1 contains far more content advocating for the *hijrah*, even dedicating an issue to its promotion, whereas the promotion of HGT is primarily confined to two articles in Issue 4 and Issue 5.<sup>323</sup> The positioning of the *hijrah* and home-grown terrorism within ISIS' 'value hierarchy' during AG1 is important, as it acts as an indicator for changes in ISIS' messaging over time.

## Analytical Grouping 2

While AG2 has a greater focus on the Islamic State's enemies and home-grown terror attacks than AG1, the contents of both analytical groupings demonstrate that the Islamic State continues to place greater value on the performance of *hijrah* than the orchestration of home-grown acts of terror. Importantly, these messaging tactics illustrate

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<sup>321</sup> Ibid, 26, Dabiq Team, “Indeed Your Lord is Ever Watchful”, 9.

<sup>322</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>323</sup> Dabiq Issue 3 is titled “A Call to Hijrah” and features several items devoted to its promotion; Dabiq Team, “Excerpts From “Indeed Your Lord Is Ever Watchful’ By The Official Spokesman For The Islamic State”, 9; Dabiq Team, “If I Were The Us President Today... (John Cantlie)” *Dabiq Issue 5: Remaining and Expanding*, November 21<sup>st</sup>, 2014, 38.

how the Islamic State is still committed to its state-building project and intent on encouraging its audience to join the Caliphate.

Throughout AG2, ISIS' propagandists continue to place considerable emphasis on the performance of *hijrah*, maintaining the hierarchy between *hijrah* and HGT developed in AG1. In AG2, pieces like “*Abandon the Lands of Shirk [Idolatry; Polytheism]*” and “*Perfecting One’s Islam, Iman, Hijrah and Jihad*” are featured in *Dabiq* to convey the importance of performing the *hijrah*.<sup>324</sup> Like in AG1, the group continues to rely primarily on methods of religious persuasion to convince its audience members to travel to the Caliphate, however, the authors place greater emphasis on the damaging effects living in the West allegedly has on a Muslim’s *iman* (faith) than the pieces in AG1 did. The authors continue to argue that *hijrah* is obligatory, and “everyone who lives amongst the mushrikīn [those that deviate from monotheism] while being able to perform *hijrah*...is wronging himself and committing sin”.<sup>325</sup> The authors also reason that if a Muslim continues to live in the West and “one’s children and grandchildren don’t fall into kufr, they are under the constant threat of fornication, sodomy, drugs, and alcohol. If they don’t fall into sin, they will forget the language of the Qur’ān – Arabic”, framing life in the West as a threat to one’s Muslim identity and religious practice. The group even offers religious advice on how those who want to join the Islamic State, but feel bound by the duties of filial piety, can remain dutiful to their parents while also fulfilling their “obligation” to perform *hijrah*, illustrating ISIS’ continuing commitment to promoting the *hijrah*.<sup>326</sup>

Moreover, within AG2, the group maintains a clear hierarchy between the performance of *hijrah* and home-grown terror attacks, stating: “Either one performs *hijrah* to the wilāyāt of the Khilāfah or, *if he is unable to do so*, he must attack the crusaders, their allies, the Rāfidah, the tawāghīt, and their apostate forces, wherever he might be with any means available to him” (emphasis added). In *Dabiq* Issue 9, the group also illustrates their preference for *hijrah* over HGT by stating “Many of those who attained shahādah

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<sup>324</sup> Dabiq Team, “Abandon the Lands of Shirk,” *Dabiq Issue 8: Shari’ah Alone Shall Rule Africa*, March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 28-29.

<sup>325</sup> Dabiq Team, *The Twins Halves of the Muhajirin*, 32-33.

<sup>326</sup> Dabiq Team, “Tawhid and Our Duty to Our Parents,” *Dabiq Issue 10: The Law of Allah and the Laws of Men*, July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 14-17.

fighting the crusaders in their own lands had first taken steps to make hijrah to the lands of jihād. These preparatory steps were enough to demonstrate their sincerity, so they were granted shahādah without facing the difficulties of hijrah”.<sup>327</sup> By clearly defining its preference for *hijrah* over HGT, the group illustrates that despite its moderate territorial losses and a growing coalition against them, they remain committed to their state-building project during AG2.

However, the group’s stated preference for its followers to perform *hijrah* over launching home-grown terror attacks does not dissuade it from aggrandizing these attacks when they take place. AG2 features content that glorifies home-grown terror attacks in places such as Yemen, Tunisia, France, Denmark, and Australia.<sup>328</sup> For example, the group uses advertisement-like features, such as the piece titled “*Join The Caravan of Islamic State Knights in the Lands of the Crusaders*”, which featured pictures of some of the group’s most prominent “inspired” attackers in the West, to promote HGT.<sup>329</sup> Furthermore, following the attacks on *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris, the authors claim it is an “obligation” for Muslims to kill those who mock the Prophet, both supporting the actions of the attackers and calling on their supporters to commit more.<sup>330</sup>

The Islamic State also demonstrates a willingness to embrace any attacker that kills on their behalf, even those who have previously held values antithetical to their own. For example, Man Haron Monis, who carried out an attack on a Sydney Café, was a mentally unstable Shi’a refugee from Iran with a serious criminal history who ‘converted’ by pledging allegiance to ISIS. Yet, ISIS accepted his *bay’ah* and lionized him for his

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<sup>327</sup> Dabiq Team, “Foreword,” *Dabiq Issue 9: They Plot and Allah Plots*, May 21<sup>st</sup>, 2015, 4.

<sup>328</sup> Dabiq Team, “Soldiers of Terror,” *Dabiq Issue 8: Shari’ah Alone Shall Rule Africa*, March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 17-19; Dabiq Team, “Major Operations in Libya and Sinai,” *Dabiq Issue 7: From Hypocrisy to Apostasy*, February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 40-41; Dabiq Team, The Good Example of Abu Basir Al-Ifriqi, 68-71.

<sup>329</sup> Dabiq Team, “Join the Caravan of the Islamic State: Knights in the Lands of the Crusaders,” *Dabiq Issue:10: The Laws of Allah and The Laws of Men*, July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 3-4.

<sup>330</sup> Dabiq Team, The Extinction of the Grayzone, 58-60.

actions, despite considering Shi'a to be apostates.<sup>331</sup> In addition to endorsing his actions, accepting Monis' *bay'ah* and aggrandizing him as one of ISIS' own conveys to other followers that attacking on behalf of the group is an avenue to fame and recognition within the jihadi community, further incentivizing attacks. Thus, while the value hierarchy of ISIS' propaganda content has not shifted with regards to *hijrah* and HGT, the group's willingness to whole-heartedly endorse acts of home-grown terror provides an important foundation for the group to pivot its messaging away from its *hijrah* and Caliphate-centric focus and reorient its value hierarchy in AG3.

### Analytical Grouping Three

In AG3, the group's value hierarchy shifts to favor of home-grown terrorism over *hijrah* promotion. While the group does not completely abandon the notion of *hijrah*, they redefine the parameters of what the act entails, develop new HGT-focused content, and increase its volume. In addition, the group ignores its previous claims about the detrimental effects of life outside the Caliphate on one's faith, instead focusing on the potential to strike the "kuffar" in their homelands through acts of terror. Overall, an analysis of the group's messaging content in AG3 underlines a transition from the Caliphate-centric, *hijrah* narrative aimed at achieving the Islamic State's stated political objectives, to an HGT-focused narrative, which sets aside the group's state-building objectives in favour of inspiring ISIS' audience to take up arms at home.

The *hijrah*-to-HGT transition is evidenced, in part, by the changes in the way the group uses the term *hijrah* over the course of the sample. From AG1 to AG3, the meaning of "*hijrah*" progressively changes to denote a broader geographic area and wider range of actions. In AG1, the notion of *hijrah* is connected to the group's domestic Caliphate in Iraq and Syria. Articles like "*The Islamic State Before Al-Malhamah*"<sup>332</sup> and *Hijrah to Sham is*

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<sup>331</sup> Michael Quinn and Ben Safi. "Man Haron Monis: Fringe Figure Whose Crime Record and Erratic Behaviour Made Him Notorious." *The Guardian*, December 15, 2014, sec. Australia news. <http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2014/dec/15/man-haron-monis-sydney-siege-suspect>.

<sup>332</sup> The term al-Malhamah al-Kubrā, "the grand [Apocalyptic] battle prior to the Hour", is the term used in the Islamic State's lexicon is to denote the battle between the Muslims and the Romans that will usher in the Apocalypse. This prophecy is described in the *Sahih Muslim* and is said to take place near the town of Dabiq.

from *The Millah* [Religious Community] of *Ibrahim*”, specifically connect the process of *hijrah* to the group’s domestic Caliphate and encourage *hijrah* there. For example, the group cites Ibn Taymiyyah’s claim that “the best of the people on the earth in the end of times will be those who keep to the land of Ibrāhīm’s *hijrah*, which is Shām [modern day Syria]”, connecting *hijrah* directly to their domestic territory and portraying it as a path to individual greatness and the fulfillment of the prophecy at the center of their eschatology.<sup>333</sup> However, while the group primarily discusses the process of *hijrah* in reference to their domestic territory, as it begins to develop foreign *wilayah*, it presents those regions as alternative, secondary destinations for *hijrah*. For example, noting in *Dabiq* Issue 8 that “Libya has become an ideal land of *hijrah* for those who find difficulty making their way to Shām, particularly those of our brothers and sisters in Africa”.<sup>334</sup> The group further expands the geographic scope of *hijrah* in AG3, claiming that *hijrah* is wherever “the kuffar and the murtaddin are fought, whether that means the fight is in Iraq or Sham, or whether the fight is *somewhere else*” (emphasis added). ISIS broadens its definition to include not only its foreign *wilayah*, but “outposts of the Khilafah in the East and the West”, a reference to the group’s cells in countries where they do not hold territory. This broadening of the original definition is significant because it divorces the concept of *hijrah* from its original usage in the Islamic State’s lexicon—travelling from *dārul-kufr* to *dārul-Islām*. Instead, in AG3, the group begins utilizing the term to denote anywhere with an Islamic State presence.<sup>335</sup> The group’s willingness to divorce the concept of *hijrah* from territory governed by Shari’ah at a time when its territorial losses are substantial and increasing suggests ISIS is revising its messaging strategy to cope with its declining Caliphate and working to avoid contradicting its earlier messaging, which framed a failure to perform *hijrah* as a mortal sin.

In addition to the changing their usage of the term *hijrah*, the Islamic State’s propagandists begin to encourage their followers to wage jihad at home instead of travelling to ISIS-held lands, reversing their earlier messaging that framed home-grown terrorism as an act of secondary importance. In a eulogy for an Australian foreign fighter

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<sup>333</sup> Dabiq Team, *The Islamic State Before Al-Malhamah*, 5-11.

<sup>334</sup> Dabiq Team, *The Libyan Arena*, 26.

<sup>335</sup> Dabiq Team, *The Twin Halves of the Muhajirin*, 32.

killed in Syria, the authors do not call for their audience members to travel to the Caliphate, but instead state: “The Khilafah has called for you to mobilize from your dens to alleviate the pain afflicting the hearts of the Muslims by striking the kuffar *in their homelands*”, adding that in His wisdom, Allah “has scattered you around the earth and in the various lands of the Crusaders” to facilitate attacks against ISIS’ enemies (emphasis added).<sup>336</sup> They also stress that “Those Muslims residing in the West, in particular, have an opportunity to terrorize the Crusaders themselves as well as the imams of kufr allied to the Crusaders”, underscoring the benefits of staying in the West as opposed to travelling to ISIS’ declining Caliphate.<sup>337</sup> While the group does not explicitly call upon their followers to refrain from undertaking the *hijrah*, they claim that those who have not performed *hijrah* “have been blessed with the opportunity to serve a much greater purpose than dwelling among Muslims and waging jihad on the outer edges of the land of Islam”, effectively downplaying the value of fighting on ISIS’ domestic front and emphasizing the importance of striking the enemy “where it hurts them most”.<sup>338</sup> Moreover, the group also works to incentivize home-grown attacks by claiming that one can get “the reward for *hijrah* without actually performing it” if they display “steadfastness in jihad” and “sincerity” in their intentions.<sup>339</sup>

These passages show the substantial shift in ISIS’ value hierarchy that occurs over the course of the sample. In AG1 and AG2 the group claimed that “there is no life without jihād and there is no jihād without *hijrah*”, portrayed home-grown attacks as an option only for those “unable” to travel to the Caliphate, and argued that living in “dārul-kufr” was damaging to the faith of even the most pious Muslims. But in AG3, the group reverses its messaging, highlighting the operational benefits of remaining in the West and actively encouraging its followers to wage jihad from home, downplaying the benefits of travelling

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<sup>336</sup> Rumiya Team, “Among the Believers Are Men: Abu Mansur al-Muhjir,” *Rumiya Issue 1*, September 5<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 17.

<sup>337</sup> Rumiya Team, *The Religion of Islam and the Jama’ah of Muslims*, 16.

<sup>338</sup> Dabiq Team, “Words of Sincere Advice From an American Convert in the Islamic State To the Former Christian Who Accepted Islam,” *Dabiq Issue 15: Breaking the Cross*, July 21<sup>st</sup>, 2016, 28.

<sup>339</sup> Rumiya Team, “The Shuhuda of the Gulshan Attack,” *Rumiya Issue 2*, October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 11.

to the Caliphate's frontlines, and ignoring their previous arguments about the negative effects of living in 'un-Islamic' countries. These changes illustrate a shift in both the group's messaging strategy and the kinds of actions they aim to elicit from their audience through their propaganda.

Another component to the Islamic State's HGT promotion strategy in AG3 is their use scripture to justify attacks on civilians and incentivize their audience to wage jihad at home. In the article "*The Kafir's Blood Is Halal For You So Shed It*", the authors cite scriptural passages and Islamic theologians in an attempt to justify the killing of non-Muslim civilians, claiming "So when the sacred months have passed, then kill the mushrikīn wherever you find them and take them, surround them, and wait for them at every outpost (At-Tawbah 5)". They also cite Hanafi scholar al-Kashani who claims "The principle is that it is permissible to kill anyone from amongst the people who are at war (with the Muslims), whether they fight or do not fight".<sup>340</sup> The authors apply this argument to the circumstances of home-grown terrorism by arguing that because the governments in Western, democratic countries "come into power via the blessings of the constituency of their citizenry", the civilians of those countries are part of their government's war effort against the Islamic State, and thus permissible targets for violence.<sup>341</sup>

Finally, one of the core elements of the ISIS' transition from its *hijrah* narrative to its home-grown terrorism narrative is evidenced by the introduction of the group's *Just Terror Tactics* installment. This installment is a reoccurring series of articles that provide logistical advice for the group's followers to carry out acts terror at home. The *Just Terror* series, introduced in *Rumiyah* Issue 2, provides detailed advice on how to most effectively carry out knife, truck ramming, and arson attacks. The authors cover topics such as how to choose a victim for a stabbing attack, what vehicles are most effective for mowing down crowds of people, how to block the emergency exits of buildings targeted for arson attacks,

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<sup>340</sup> Rumiyah Team, "The Kafir's Blood Is Halal For You So Shed It," *Rumiyah Issue 1*, September 5<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 34-36.

<sup>341</sup> Rumiyah Team, The Shuhada of the Gulshan Attack, 8.

and how to effectively claim an attack in the name of the Islamic State.<sup>342</sup> When placed in the context of the Islamic State's territorial losses and its increased focus on inspiring acts of home-grown terror, the introduction of the *Just Terror* series in AG3 provides yet another piece of evidence suggesting that the Islamic State's depleting Caliphate has fundamentally altered its messaging content and strategy.

## Conclusion

When analyzed over the course of this sample, the reversal of Islamic State's *hijrah* and HGT narratives demonstrate a fundamental shift in both the Islamic State's messaging content and the kinds of behaviors it aims to prompt from its audience. In addition to providing powerful evidence to suggest that the Islamic State's messaging content has been dramatically altered by its territorial decline, these changes may also have a substantial impact on the efficacy of the group's propaganda as a tool for radicalization and recruitment. As will be discussed later in this thesis, the Islamic State's pivot towards a home-grown terrorism-focused narrative reduces the kinds of material and psychological incentives the group is able to offer prospective recruits and renders it less capable of endowing Islamic State membership with the same sense of meaning and purpose that the highly symbolic *hijrah* narrative offered, likely reducing the propaganda's persuasiveness and resonance.

## Delaying The Apocalypse: Changes in the Islamic State's Apocalyptic Narrative

A key facet of the Islamic State's millenarian ideology is its Apocalyptic narrative, which weaves together several Islamic end-times prophecies. While the group does not dedicate the same volume of content to its eschatology as it does to other facets of its messaging strategy, such as its military or state-building ventures, the Apocalyptic prophecy occupies a central component of the group's ideology and propaganda, as evidenced by that fact that the group has named its flagship e-magazine after the town of

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<sup>342</sup> Rumiyah Team, "Just Terror Tactics," *Rumiyah Issue 2*, October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 12-13; Rumiyah Team, "Just Terror Tactics," *Rumiyah Issue 3*, November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 11; Rumiyah Team, "Just Terror Tactics," *Rumiyah Issue 5*, January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2017, 10.

Dabiq, the purported setting for the final battle Apocalyptic battle before “The Hour”.<sup>343</sup> Throughout the first 15 issues of the sample, the group selectively strings together several prophecies to build its Apocalyptic narrative around the Dabiq prophecy. However, immediately prior to the loss of the town of Dabiq, the group shifts its messaging away from the Dabiq prophecy, refocusing on prophetic hadith that emphasize the Muslim conquest of Rome. In the Islamic State’s eschatology, the Muslim conquest of Rome comes after the Muslims and Romans’ battle in Dabiq in the series of events leading up to the end times. Therefore, by refocusing their messaging on Rome, the group portrays the final Apocalyptic battle as distant by focusing on a later stage of the prophecy. This allows the group to downplay the significance of Dabiq prior to their loss of the town and prepare their audience for the absence of their much vaunted battle between the “Romans” and “Muslims” at Dabiq.

An examination of the group’s Apocalyptic narrative is important to this study for three reasons. First, the narrative shifts alongside changes in the Islamic State’s territorial holdings, allowing this study to demonstrate the relationship between territorial changes and the Islamic State’s messaging content. Second, the Apocalypse narrative and the loss of the town of Dabiq is key to understanding the discontinuation of the *Dabiq* e-magazine and the introduction of its replacement, *Rumiyah*. Third, the changes in the Apocalypse narrative over the course of the sample fit with a broader trend with the Islamic State’s messaging content where the group changes its propaganda content obfuscate its failures and hide its inability to live up to past claims.

## The Formation of the Narrative

In the first article of *Dabiq*’s first issue, the authors explain the “Dabiq prophecy”. The authors state:

This place [Dabiq] was mentioned in a hadith describing some of the events of the Malahim (what is sometimes referred to as Armageddon in English). One of the greatest battles between the Muslims and the crusaders will take place near Dabiq. Abu Hurayrah reported that Allah’s Messenger (sallallahu ‘alayhi wa sallam) said [here follows the hadith], “The Hour will not be established until the Romans land at al-A’maq or Dabiq (two places near each other in the northern countryside of Halab [Aleppo]). Then an

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<sup>343</sup> Dabiq Team, Until it Burns the Crusader Armies in Dabiq, 3-5.

army from al-Madinah of the best people on the earth at that time will leave for them...[and] will fight them. Then one third of them will flee; Allah will never forgive them. One third will be killed; they will be the best martyrs with Allah. And one third will conquer them; they will never be afflicted with fitnah. Then they will conquer Constantinople.”<sup>344</sup>

The hadith continues, describing how Shaytan (Satan) leads the Muslim armies back to Sham with false promises of the messiah, causing “Isa ibn Maryam” (Jesus) to descend to earth at the white minaret in Eastern Damascus and defeat Satan, who arrives in the form of the “Dajjal” (Antichrist).<sup>345</sup> This prophecy was first circulated in the early eighth century, AD when the Umayyad Caliphate attempted to conquer Constantinople, the seat of the Christian Byzantine (or eastern Roman) Empire, but today, ISIS regards the “Romans” as various member states of the “crusader coalition”, such as Turkey, the United States, and the broad anti-ISIS coalition.<sup>346</sup> Throughout the first 15 issues, the group blends the Dabiq prophecy with others found in various hadith. Because the events of the various prophecies do not precisely align with one another, the group is intentionally vague about how the Apocalypse will ultimately be fulfilled, selectively emphasizing elements of the various prophecies when they can draw plausible links between the prophecies and events on the ground. Below, the group’s framing of their Apocalyptic narrative is aligned with the study’s three analytical groupings to demonstrate how the narrative evolves over time and in relation to the group’s changing territorial circumstances.

## Analytical Grouping 1

The Dabiq prophecy is featured with regularity in AG1. Each of the five issues of *Dabiq* in AG1, and all 15 issues of *Dabiq* more broadly, open with a quote from Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the founder of ISIS’ progenitor organizations Al Qaeda in Iraq, speaking of a “spark” that has been lit in Iraq that will eventually “burn the crusader armies in Dabiq”, a reference to the prophecy.<sup>347</sup> In addition, the Dabiq prophecy is a central component of

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<sup>344</sup> Ibid. 3-5.

<sup>345</sup> Ibid, 3-5.

<sup>346</sup> McCants, 103.

<sup>347</sup> Dabiq Team, “Contents,” *Dabiq Issue 1: The Return of the Khilafah*, July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2014, pg. 2.

one or more articles in *Dabiq* Issue 1, 3, and 4. These articles routinely play upon the similarities between ISIS' state-building project and military advance and aspects of various the supposedly prophetic hadith, generating the perception that ISIS is fulfilling the prophecy and ushering in *al-Malhamah al-Kubra*—the great, Apocalyptic battle between the forces of Islam and the “crusaders”.<sup>348</sup> The first article of the first issue of *Dabiq*, *Until it Burns the Crusader Armies in Dabiq*, cites the prophecy and explains the historical role the area will play in the “battles leading up to the conquests of Constantinople, then Rome”.<sup>349</sup> Moreover, the content within AG1 seeks to cultivate a perception of the prophecies' imminent fulfillment by linking the text to events on the ground. For instance, when the group conquers the town of Dabiq, they cite the full-text of the Dabiq prophecy, and in the article “*The Revival of Slavery Before the Hour*”, the authors note that the Prophet mentioned “that one of the signs of the Hour was that “the slave girl gives birth to her master”, framing the group's conquest of Dabiq and resurrection of slavery as steps towards fulfilling the prophecy. Additionally, ISIS suggests that the influx of foreign fighters to Syria (Sham) is a sign that the Apocalypse will occur “shortly”, citing a prophecy where groups of Muslims “left their tribes”, or home countries, “rallied together with an imām”—the Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi—and gathered “in the land of malāhim [Sham] shortly before the occurrence of al-Malhamah al-Kubrā”.<sup>350</sup> Thus, while the group never provides a specific timeline for the occurrence of the ‘final battle’, it repeatedly draws attention to the components of prophetic hadith that it appears to be fulfilling and ignores or overlooks those that it does not, framing the “Hour” as quickly approaching.

Furthermore, it is important to note that the resurrection of the Caliphate is itself a component of the group's eschatology. As one hadith, claims, “if you see that the Khilāfah has come to the Holy Land [Sham]... The Hour will be closer that day to the people than this hand of mine from your head”.<sup>351</sup> As a result, the group's state-building content is also

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<sup>348</sup> Dabiq Team, *The Islamic State Before Al-Malhamah*, 5-11.

<sup>349</sup> Dabiq Team, *Until it Burns The Crusader Armies in Dabiq*, 3-5.

<sup>350</sup> Dabiq Team, “The Liberation of Dabiq,” *Dabiq Issue 3, A Call to Hijrah*, September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2014,15; Dabiq Team, *The Islamic State Before Al-Malhamah*,11.

<sup>351</sup> Dabiq Team, *Paradigm Shift*, 68.

indirectly contributing to the perception that the Islamic State is fulfilling an Apocalyptic prophecy.

### **Analytical Grouping 2 and Analytical Grouping 3 (*Dabiq* Issues 6-15): Prior to the Loss of Dabiq**

Within AG2 and the early issues of AG3, prior to the loss of Dabiq, the Islamic State's messaging content continues to portray the fulfillment of the prophecy as imminent and draw parallels between real-world events and elements of the prophetic hadith. Like in AG1, the authors are cautious to not provide a date for the "The Hour", but prior to the loss of Dabiq, the authors routinely reference the prophecy using language that emphasizes its imminent approach. The group references the prophecy by stating that we are "approaching the Hour and the ground is being prepared for the final battle of al-Malhamah" and warns its followers that as "the signs of the Hour approach, a Muslim should ignore the confusion spread by the callers to Hellfire", illustrating how the Islamic State's messaging is intended to convince its readers of the impending Apocalypse.<sup>352</sup>

In addition, to referencing the approach of "al-Malhamah", the group's authors draw parallels between events on the ground and the prophecy.<sup>353</sup> Following the Islamic State's capture of the Yarmūk Refugee camp, a Palestinian camp that lies on the outskirts of Damascus, the authors portray the conquest as an advance towards Damascus, "the future stronghold of the believers during the Malāhim".<sup>354</sup> The group uses a similar tactic of likening real-world events to the prophetic hadith in a *Dabiq* Issue 12 article discussing the divisions in the ad-hoc anti-ISIS coalition. The authors rhetorically ask the audience:

"So are these events precursors to the prophesized truce between the Muslims and the Romans? Will the West abandon its support of the Rāfidah [Shi'a], the murtadd tawāghīt [Muslim-majority states under 'un-Islamic' rule], and the Jewish state? And will the intervention of Russia in favor of

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<sup>352</sup> Dabiq Team, *Interview with the Amir of the Khilafah's Soldiers in Bengal*, 65; Dabiq Team, "The Rāfidah: From Ibn Saba' To The Dajjal," *Dabiq Issue 13: The Rāfidah: From Ibn Saba' To The Dajjal The Rafidah*, January 19<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 45.

<sup>353</sup> Dabiq Team, *Paradigm Shift*, 68.

<sup>354</sup> Dabiq Team, "An Interview With the Amir of the Yarmuk Camp Region," *Dabiq Issue 9, They Plot and Allah Plots*, May 21<sup>st</sup>, 2015, 70.

Iran in Shām and Iraq lead the West into a truce with the Khilāfah? All one can say is that Allah knows best.”

This passage illustrates how, through AG2 when the group’s hold on the town of Dabiq remained firm, the authors repeatedly drew connections between the Islamic State’s circumstances and the select elements of the prophecy to stoke excitement among their followers for its impending fulfillment.<sup>355</sup>

Even in the final (fifteenth) issue of *Dabiq*, which was released less than a month before Operation Euphrates Shield began—the Turkish-led military operation that ousted ISIS from the town of Dabiq—the authors still emphasized the similarities between ISIS’ present circumstances and the prophecy. In the article “*Contemplate the Creation*” the authors link the signs of the prophecy in the present day to creationism, arguing that the similarities between the prophecy and the current events are too great to have been produced through “mere chaos” and therefore must reflect divine creation. The authors argue that the assembling of Muslim forces in the Levant, “the battle between the Muslims and the Jews” and the “Muslims and the Romans”, as well as “the revival of the Caliphate”, were all “signs foretold by the Prophet through revelation” and the “[a]ll the factors were laid down precisely”, by Allah who “prepared the Earth for the bloodiest battle before the Hour”<sup>356</sup>. By drawing this connection, the Islamic State effectively links their belief in divine creation with the prophecy, illustrating the importance they attribute to its fulfillment.

### **Analytical Grouping Three: The Loss of Dabiq and The *Dabiq*-to-*Rumiyah* Transition**

However, following the release of *Dabiq* Issue 15 on July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2016, the Islamic State replaced its flagship e-magazine *Dabiq* with *Rumiyah* (Rome), a magazine that is on average shorter, but retains largely similar content and format to its predecessor. While the first issue of *Rumiyah* does not contain an explanation for the discontinuation and replacement of *Dabiq*, the magazine’s title, content and the timing of the switch suggest

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<sup>355</sup> Dabiq Team, You Think They Are Together But Their Hearts Are Divided, 47.

<sup>356</sup> Dabiq Team, “Contemplate the Creation,” *Dabiq Issue 15, Breaking the Cross*, July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2016, 13.

that it was designed to shift the Islamic State’s messaging away from the Dabiq-centered portion of the prophecy in advance of the group’s loss of the town.

Less than a month after the release after *Dabiq* Issue 15, the Turkish government launched Operation Euphrates Shield (August 24<sup>th</sup>, 2016), a military operation to create a security zone along the Syrian-Turkish border by eliminating Kurdish-militant and Islamic State presence from the border region containing Dabiq. Two months later, this operation would be responsible for seizing Dabiq from the Islamic State. The operation began in late August with Turkish forces pushing the Islamic State out of the town of Jarablus, which also lies alongside the Syrian-Turkish border, roughly 80km from Dabiq. Two weeks later, on September 5<sup>th</sup>, the Islamic State released its first issue of *Rumiyah*. While the magazine retains a similar format and much of the same content as *Dabiq*, it lacks the famous quote from Abu Musab Zarqawi that references the “spark” that will eventually burn “the Crusader armies in Dabiq”, instead featuring a quote from a different former leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq, stating that the group will not rest from its jihad “except beneath the olive trees of Rumiyah”.<sup>357</sup> The authors offer no explanation for the change in title and do not include any explicit references to the Apocalypse or Dabiq, only to the conquering of Constantinople and Rome.<sup>358</sup>

While not explicitly stated, retitling their flagship e-magazine “*Rumiyah*” allows the Islamic State to extend the timeline of their impending apocalypse. Rather than emphasizing the visceral elements of the prophetic hadith that take place in Sham and align with the group’s current circumstances—the arrival of the “Romans” in Dabiq—the group refocuses on the conquering of Rome, which purportedly occurs after a series of additional events, including the Muslims defeat of the Romans in Dabiq, Jesus’ slaying of the Dajjal (anti-Christ), and the conquest of Constantinople. By refocusing on the most

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<sup>357</sup> Rumiyah Team, “Contents,” *Rumiyah Issue 1*, September 5<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 1.

<sup>358</sup> The second issue of *Rumiyah* only references the Dabiq component prophecy in a footnote, which states that the conquest of Constantinople “comes after very many martyrs and wounds” during the battle at Dabiq. In the Islamic State’s eschatology, there Muslim forces conquer Constantinople twice.

distant event in their eschatological narrative, the group is effectively delaying the Apocalypse they will ultimately fail to initiate when they lose control over Dabiq.<sup>359</sup>

The Islamic State's intent in refocusing its Apocalyptic narrative is made clear in *Rumiyah* Issue 3, the first issue following the loss of the town of Dabiq. In Issue 3, the Islamic State explains that their loss of Dabiq was not in fact the prophesized "Major Malhamah of Dabiq", despite bearing some resemblance to the prophecy as Turkish-backed forces—the country containing the former Eastern capital (Constantinople) of the Islamic State's prophesized Roman enemy—were the ones to seize the town from ISIS. Rather, the group claims in their article "*Towards the Major Malhamah of Dabiq*", the battle of October 16<sup>th</sup> was "the minor battle of Dabiq...[that] will inevitably lead to the Major Malhamah of Dabiq, even if a withdrawal were to precede it by Allah's decree". Neither the "minor battle" nor the withdrawal were previously mentioned in the group's Apocalyptic narrative, nor are they mentioned in any of the major End Times prophecies cited by the Islamic State or other jihadist groups.<sup>360</sup>

Furthermore, the group reverses its Apocalyptic messaging strategy. Rather than emphasizing the similarities between present circumstances and the prophetic hadith, the authors highlight the unfulfilled elements of the various prophetic hadith they draw from and reference other hadith about "The Hour" that were previously absent or downplayed in their Apocalyptic narrative. For instance, they underline the absence of a truce between the Muslims and crusaders and the Romans betrayal of that truce prior to the "minor battle of Dabiq" and integrate additional hadith that include events that have ostensibly not occurred, such as the conquest of Jerusalem and the spread of disease "that afflicts sheep".<sup>361</sup> The combination of highlighting unfulfilled components of their prophecies and

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<sup>359</sup> Dabiq Team, Reflections on the Final Crusade, 33-35.

<sup>360</sup> Rumiyah Team, "Towards the Major Malhamah of Dabiq," *Rumiyah Issue 3*, November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 26; McCants, 161-181; Liz Sly, and Zakaria Zakaria. "The Apocalypse Is off for Now: ISIS Flees Village Where It Prophesied Doomsday Battle." *Washington Post*, October 16, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/apocalypse-postponed-isis-flees-the-village-where-it-prophesied-doomsday-battle/2016/10/16/752f4654-93b3-11e6-9cae-2a3574e296a6\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/apocalypse-postponed-isis-flees-the-village-where-it-prophesied-doomsday-battle/2016/10/16/752f4654-93b3-11e6-9cae-2a3574e296a6_story.html).

<sup>361</sup> Rumiyah Team, Towards the Major Malhamah of Dabiq, 24-26.

refocusing the fulfillment of the prophecy on the conquering of Rome, rather than Dabiq, all suggest that the group is working to extend the timeline of the prophecy to explain the absence of the “Major Malhamah” in Dabiq to its audience. For the remainder of the sample, the Islamic State’s Apocalyptic messaging content maintains this revised strategy. The group avoids comparisons between contemporary events and their various Apocalyptic prophecies, making only vague references to a distant “Hour”, separating themselves from their much touted Apocalypse, a stark contrast from their earlier messaging.

While the Islamic State does not explicitly address the discontinuation of *Dabiq* and the introduction of *Rumiyah* or the refocusing of its Apocalypse narrative on Rome, nor have any internal documents been released that illuminate the alteration of the group’s narrative, the timing of events surrounding the group’s loss of Dabiq, and the major changes to its messaging content, provide strong evidence to suggest that the loss of Dabiq drove the revision of the group’s Apocalypse narrative and the introduction of “*Rumiyah*”, highlighting the relationship between the Islamic State’s territorial control and its messaging content. Furthermore, retitling their flagship magazine and the alterations to their Apocalyptic narrative also fall within the broader pattern of organizational survival exhibited within the Islamic State’s propaganda. By changing their Apocalypse narrative, ISIS works to prove that their underlying eschatology, ideology and interpretation of Islam remains credible, and in turn, sustain the “idea” of the Islamic State and the continued existence of the organization. Changes in the Islamic State’s apocalyptic narrative may also damage the credibility of the group’s messaging and hinder their capacity to draw in prospective radicals, as will be discussed later in this thesis.

## **Chapter 7. Applying the Propaganda and Radicalization Frameworks - Evaluating the Impact of Changes in the Islamic State's Messaging Content**

The following section applies the propaganda and radicalization frameworks to the findings derived from this study's content analysis. As outlined when introducing the analytical frameworks, this study cannot make definitive claims about the radicalizing efficacy of the Islamic State's propaganda, due to the absence of individual-level data and the incomplete scholarly understandings of the relationship between propaganda and radicalization. Instead, it draws on existing scholarship to make inferences about the likely impacts that changes in ISIS' propaganda have had on the propaganda's radicalizing and recruitment efficacy and provides a foundation for future empirical studies to evaluate the state of scholarly knowledge on the relationship between propaganda and radicalization. This analysis finds that, overall, the shifts in the group's messaging content damages its ability to tap into key elements of the radicalization process and employ persuasive techniques deemed critical to a message's persuasion. The qualitative and quantitative changes in the groups messaging hinder its ability to effectively utilize collective action framing, maintain credibility, and offer a sense of purpose and community to prospective recruits. The Islamic State's messaging content does maintain a narrative that Islam is under threat throughout the sample, but it changes the forms of 'threat' that it emphasizes within its messaging, potentially impacting its resonance with the group's Western Muslim target audience. Finally, this analysis does not find that changes in the group's messaging content to have significant impacts on the group's ability to appeal to prospective recruits on the basis of Muslim discrimination and victimization or in-and-out group identity.

### **Collective Action Framing and Crisis-Solution Constructs**

A movement's ability to effectively employ collective action framing is regarded by scholars of extremist propaganda and social movements as critical to the persuasiveness and resonance of its message. Furthermore, the crisis-solution constructs that comprise collective action frames have important ramifications for propaganda's radicalization potential, as the certainty, perception of solutions, and over-simplified worldview presented through extremist movements' propaganda narratives can alleviate the sense

of “crisis” that often contributes to radicalization.<sup>362</sup> Over the course of the sample, the Islamic State’s ability to effectively employ collective action frames declines substantially, as the group becomes increasingly unable or unwilling to present its Caliphate as the solution to its diagnosed problems. Because the Islamic State’s Caliphate was the central hub of its crisis-solution constructs, providing answers to everything from historic humiliation of the *Ummah* and the growing irreligiosity of Muslims, to poor governance and oppressive *taghut* regimes, the dramatic quantitative decline and qualitative changes in the group’s SBEG-content and its reticence to address questions of governance severely undercut its collective action framing. In turn, the loss of the Islamic State’s ‘solution’ changes its diagnostic and motivational framing strategy.

### **Diagnostic and Prognostic Framing**

The fundamental purpose of collective action framing is for a movement to diagnose the problems or crises befalling its target community and provide answers to those problems. As Benford and Snow explain, diagnostic frames ask the questions ‘what is the problem?’ and ‘who is to blame?’, whereas prognostic frames provide answers to the question “what is to be done?”.<sup>363</sup> Throughout the majority of the sample, the Islamic State’s answer to the question “what is to be done?” was invariably centered on the creation, expansion and consolidation of its so-called Caliphate. The Caliphate solves problems of irreligiosity and deviation from the faith by providing the only state where a Muslim can experience life under ‘true’ Islamic governance. A strong, expansionary, and militaristic Caliphate provides the answer to West’s military and political domination of Muslims. It symbolizes the revival of Muslim pride after centuries of subordination, oppression, and deviation from Islam through nationalism, secularism, and democracy. The Caliphate is the solution to racism and xenophobia, as it offers an inclusive community, where anyone, regardless of their race, ethnicity, background or homeland, will be accepted if they submit to the ‘true’ form of Islam.<sup>364</sup> It offers respite from the ‘poisonous’ innovations of scripture espoused by “evil scholars” and *taghut*

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<sup>362</sup>. Ingram, An Analysis of the Taliban in Khurasan's Azan, 562-567.

<sup>363</sup> Benford and Snow, 615-617.

<sup>364</sup> Dabiq Team, Khilafah Declared, 6-8.

governments.<sup>365</sup> It provides a place away from the materialism and temptations of Western life that damage a Muslim's *iman* and it provides a safe haven for Sunnis oppressed by the region's Shi'a governments and militias.<sup>366</sup> In short, the Islamic State's sees the Caliphate as a panacea for the contemporary and historic problems of Islam and Muslims.

Because of the Caliphate's centrality to the Islamic State's crisis-solution constructs, the dramatic drop in SBEG content renders the group's messaging increasingly incapable of providing effective prognostic frames. In short, because Islamic State made the Caliphate their 'solution' to the ills of the *Ummah*, its inability or unwillingness to include it in their messaging renders their propaganda short on answers. In AG3, only five SBEG items are included in the grouping's seven issues. These items primarily focus on territories outside of ISIS' established Iraqi-Syrian Caliphate, or describe the functions of minor bureaucratic entities within the Islamic State.<sup>367</sup> As a result, the group is unable to convey the same, powerful message as the SBEG items in AG1 and AG2 did, where the Caliphate was framed as a real "country"—a concrete political alternative to the existing options of life in the secular, liberal West or under the 'un-Islamic' regimes of the Muslim world.<sup>368</sup> Without content emphasizing their domestic Caliphate, the group's messaging no longer contains any prognostic frames that offer a viable political solution to the problems the Islamic State has diagnosed, ultimately contributing to a breakdown of the group's original crisis-solution constructs.

Given this breakdown caused by the messaging's shift away from the Caliphate, the group's prognostic frames increasingly focus on military and terrorism-related content,

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<sup>365</sup> Dabiq Team, "Kill the Imams of Kufr," *Dabiq Issue 13: The Rafi'dah From Ibn Saba' to the Dajjal*, January 19<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 6-8.

<sup>366</sup> Dabiq Team, *Hijrah from Hypocrisy to Sincerity*, 29; Dabiq Team, "Tal Afar Liberated," *Dabiq Issue 1: The Return of the Khilafah*, July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2014, 16.

<sup>367</sup> Dabiq Team, Interview with the Amir of the Khilafah's Soldiers in Bengal, 58-66; Rumiyah Team, "Interview with the Amir for the Central Office For Investigating Grievances," *Rumiyah Issue 1*, September 5<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 10-12; Rumiyah Team, Interview with the Amir of Hisbah in Sinai, 12-15; Dabiq Team, "The Birth of Two New Wilayat," *Dabiq Issue 4: The Failed Crusade*, October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2014, 18-20; Dabiq Team, *A Window into the Islamic State*, 27-29.

<sup>368</sup> Dabiq Team, "Paradigm Shift Part II," *Dabiq Issue 12: Just Terror*, November 18<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 47.

providing its audience with a “plan of attack” rather than a concrete solution to Islam’s problems.<sup>369</sup> The change is evidenced by the quantitative rise in military and terrorism-related content (MT) at the end of the sample, and the introduction of new MT installments, such as the *Just Terror* series promoting home-grown terrorism. The changes in the Islamic State’s prognostic framing strategy has two important impacts. First, it refocuses the Islamic State’s prognostic framing on criticizing and attacking the existing state of affairs, instead of demonstrating the group’s proposed resolution. Rather than emphasizing the importance of building a state free from the *Ummah*’s ills, restoring its pride, and allowing ‘true’ Muslims to fully experience the practice of their religion, the Islamic State’s messaging shifts to stress its attacks on the purported ‘enemies of Islam’, effectively ignoring its own solution in favor of critiquing the status quo.

The second impact of the Islamic State’s shifting prognostic framing strategy is that it loses the defining feature that set it apart from other jihadist groups. As Benford and Snow explain, in addition to proposing solutions, prognostic frames allow a movement to distinguish themselves from other movement’s claiming to speak on behalf of the same community. They do this by offering different answers to shared problems and by refuting the “logic and efficacy” of the answers offered by their competitors.<sup>370</sup> By refocusing its prognostic framing on insurgent-style military operations and terrorism, the Islamic State loses the defining feature of its messaging and political platform that set it apart from competing jihadist groups like Al Qaeda.<sup>371</sup> While the Islamic State’s jihadist competitors provide similar diagnoses to the problems of the *Ummah* in their English-language propaganda, including irreligiosity, oppressive and un-Islamic governments, Western militarism, and historic humiliation, none of them have been able to provide concrete political solutions to those problems. In the place of political solutions, they have all focused their prognostic frames primarily on terrorist and military operations against the *Ummah*’s purported enemies.<sup>372</sup> By doing the same, the Islamic State’s ‘brand’ loses the

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<sup>369</sup> Benford and Snow, 616.

<sup>370</sup> Benford and Snow, 617.

<sup>371</sup> Stern and Berger, 112-115.

<sup>372</sup> Ingram, An Analysis of the Taliban in Khurasan’s Azan, 562-567; Page, Challita, and Harris, 154-158; Dalgaard-Nielsen, 801.

unique appeal of its state, which scholars argued to be a key element in its unprecedented initial recruitment success.<sup>373</sup>

How do these changes impact the efficacy of Islamic State's e-magazines as tools for radicalization and recruitment? Because of the wide array of pathways to radicalization, and the limits of scholarly understanding of both the radicalization process and the relationship between propaganda and radicalization, this study cannot make deterministic claims about the impacts of these messaging shifts on the effectiveness of the Islamic State's messaging. However, as discussed earlier, clear crisis-solution constructs within a movement's messaging are regarded as key components of its persuasiveness. Likewise, the interplay between perceptions of crisis and a movement's proffered solutions are viewed as a key factor in the radicalization process, as they provide certainty, a simplified worldview, and answers to the complex and multifaceted crises that play a critical role in radicalization.<sup>374</sup> Thus, the breakdown of the Islamic State's central crisis-solution constructs suggests that the group's messaging has become less persuasive and less capable of providing resolutions to the perceived crises that drive radicalization.

Furthermore, the Islamic State's shift towards military and terrorism-related content renders it less capable of distinguishing itself from other jihadist groups, which could have a negative impact of its recruitment capabilities. Without propaganda promoting the defining feature of its movement—its state—the group may be less capable of competing with other jihadist groups over a limited supply of prospective recruits. Ultimately, examining the changes in the Islamic State's crisis-solution constructs suggest that the group's English-language magazines have become less effective tools for radicalization and recruitment over the course of the sample.

## **Motivational Frames**

Changes in the Islamic State's crisis-solution constructs also have an impact on its 'motivational frames'; the messages used by a movement to convince its target audience to engage in collective action. These frames draw on resonant symbols, values

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<sup>373</sup> Winter, *Apocalypse, Later*, 112; Stern and Berger, 112-115.

<sup>374</sup> Ingram, *An Analysis of Inspire and Dabiq*, 359-360.

and ideas to encourage the movement's sympathizers to act on their behalf.<sup>375</sup> Within the Islamic State's English-language propaganda, the group employs two main motivational frames: the *hijrah* frame and the home-grown terrorism frame. As discussed in Chapter 6 of this study, over the course of the sample, the group progressively shifts its messaging from its clear preference for the performance of *hijrah* over acts of home-grown terror, to the reverse, the promotion of home-grown terrorism over *hijrah*. This shift coincides with the Islamic State's territorial losses and the quantitative reduction in SBEG content.

By reorienting its emphasis from the *hijrah* frame to home-grown terrorism frame, the Islamic State becomes unable to tap into several important motivators offered by the *hijrah* frame. Through its use of the *hijrah* frame, the Islamic State's messaging presented an array of religious and worldly incentives for joining the Islamic State. On the religious front, the group portrayed the *hijrah* as both a religious obligation and an action that wiped away one's previous sins. It offered prospective radicals the chance to move to a state free from religious persecution, become immersed in a community of like-minded believers, and to place themselves in a setting that was both rich with Islamic history, and the site where a new, equally glorious history was being written.<sup>376</sup> It also threatened a death of hypocrisy and *jahiliyya* for those who refused to undertake the *hijrah*.<sup>377</sup> The *hijrah* frame also promised the Islamic State's audience a range of worldly incentives, such as community, access to free housing, wives and sex-slaves, adventure, escape from the ills of Western society and the monotonous life of wage labor, freedom from racial or religious persecution or discrimination, the chance at heroism and martyrdom, and the opportunity to be a participating member in Islam's glorious Caliphal revival.<sup>378</sup> In short, through its use of *hijrah* frame, the Islamic State was able to offer prospective recruits a wide array of

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<sup>375</sup> Benford and Snow, pg. 617.

<sup>376</sup> Dabiq Team, *Hijrah From Hypocrisy to Sincerity*, 25-34.

<sup>377</sup> Dabiq Team, "Foreword," *Dabiq Issue 2: The Flood*, July 27<sup>th</sup>, 2014, 3-4.

<sup>378</sup> Dabiq Team, *Hijrah From Hypocrisy to Sincerity*, 25-34; Dabiq Team, "Foreword," *Dabiq Issue 2: The Flood*, July 27<sup>th</sup>, 2014, 3-4; Dabiq Team, *Slave Girls or Prostitutes*, 44-49; Dabiq Team, "Wala and Bara Versus American Racism," *Dabiq Issue 11: The Battle of Al Azzah and the War of Coalitions*, September 9<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 18-20; Dabiq Team, *The Twins Halves of the Muhajirin*, 32-37.

benefits and incorporate them into both the *Ummah's* imagined community and the real-world community of the Caliphate.

After its messaging shifts towards the home-grown terrorism frame however, the group offers fewer incentives for collective action. The group does retain the ability to offer several important motivational incentives, such as membership to the 'imagined Ummah', the glorification that comes with martyrdom for the cause, and the opportunity to wage jihad against 'Islam's enemies'. Moreover, the group works to retain some of the religious motivators it ascribed to the performance of *hijrah* by redefining the term to include all territories where the 'enemies of Islam' are fought. Its authors also develop scriptural arguments to claim that home-grown terrorism offers the same religious benefits as performing the *hijrah*, despite portraying the *hijrah* as superior in its early issues.<sup>379</sup> However, the group loses the ability to present many of the Caliphate-specific benefits that come with travelling to and fighting on behalf of its state. Without travelling to the state, the group's messaging does not offer its followers escapism and adventure, respite from racism, or the ability to be absorbed in a community comprised of the 'truly' faithful. Similarly, in its promotion of home-grown terrorism, the Islamic State's messaging does not (or is unable to) draw on the same historic and religious symbols that saturated its *hijrah* frames. For example, simply the use of the term *hijrah* to denote the travelling to the Islamic State's Caliphate evokes the powerful symbolism of Mohammad and his companions travelling from Mecca to Medina and establishing a model Muslim community there.<sup>380</sup> The location of the Islamic State's Caliphate also carries substantial symbolic weight, due to the important role played by the lands of "Sham" in Islamic history, theology and eschatology.<sup>381</sup> Moreover, the group frames the restoration of the Caliphate and the ushering in of the Apocalypse as the fulfillment of Islamic prophecies, powerful symbolic objectives that it is unable to tap into following its shift from the *hijrah* to home-grown terrorism motivational frame.

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<sup>379</sup> Dabiq Team, *Wala and Bara Versus American Racism*, 18-20.

<sup>380</sup> The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, "Hijrah," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Hijrah-Islam>.

<sup>381</sup> McCants, 99.

As a result of the changes in the Islamic State's motivational frames, the group's messaging offers fewer incentives for prospective members to engage in collective action. As the scholarship on radicalization shows, the process of radicalization is highly variable and does not stem from any single factor or shared "profile", but rather it is an individualized process where a variety of "pathways" can lead individuals into radical movements. Therefore, we cannot claim that the group's messaging content will be less persuasive and a less effective tool for radicalization for *all* prospective radicals, however, restricting the range of proffered incentives on offer within its motivational frames suggests that the group's propaganda will resonate with a narrower band of potential recruits. Specifically, those motivated by factors such as alienation and isolation that may have been attracted to the Islamic State's *hijrah* framing due to its presentation of community and acceptance, are unlikely to be as susceptible to a message encouraging them to undertake the alienating act of lone-wolf terrorism. Similarly, the home-grown terrorism frame is unlikely to resonate with those motivated by a sense of escapism, adventure, or a specific political grievance, such as fighting the Assad regime in Syria, a key motive for many Islamist foreign fighters in Syria.<sup>382</sup> However, the Islamic State's home-grown terrorism frames may still resonate with those prospective radicals who are motivated by factors such as militaristic Western foreign policy or religious and racial discrimination, as well as those who have embraced the group's radical interpretation of scripture, which obligates the killing "kufr". As a result, that the motivational frames employed by the group in the later stages of this sample are unlikely to resonate with as wide an audience as the motivational frames presented in the group's earlier propaganda, likely having a negative impact on the effectiveness of the Islamic State's propaganda.

Future studies examining the motivations of Islamic State foreign fighters should work to assess the salience of the group's diagnostic, prognostic and motivational frames in fighters' motivations to join the Islamic State. Establishing a clearer understanding of the role played by the Islamic State's collective action frames in radicalization and recruitment will not only enhance our understanding of the radicalization process and propaganda's role in it, but also contribute more broadly to the literature on Social Movement Theory, deepening links between the sub-fields.

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<sup>382</sup> Dawson and Amarasingam, 5.

Furthermore, the findings of this study raise questions about the role played by perceptions of success, momentum, and victory in extremist propaganda's recruitment of prospective radicals. As this study has shown, the Islamic State consistently worked to saturate its messaging content with a narrative of victory that portrayed the organization as powerful and actively achieving its political goals. When the events on the ground began to shift such that the Islamic State could not credibly continue its victory narrative using its original sub-themes, it employed an array of new, 'post-victory', sub-themes in an effort to maintain its storyline of victory. The considerable emphasis placed on maintaining the victory narrative, rather than transitioning towards a more typical jihadist narrative premised on victimhood, could indicate that the group's image of strength and success was an important factor in its recruitment success. Future scholarship on the Islamic State, and extremist movement propaganda more broadly, should investigate the role perceptions of success, victory, strength, and momentum play in attracting prospective radicals to extremist movements. One potentially instructive avenue for future research on this subject would be interviews with Islamic State defectors, who may be more willing to earnestly discuss the Islamic State's appeal than active group members or committed ideologues.

## **Credibility**

As discussed in the literature review, the credibility of a propagandist and their message are critical elements to its persuasiveness. This study finds that, over the course of the sample, changes in the Islamic State's thematic and narrative content undermine the group's "frame consistency" damaging the overall credibility of its messaging. More specifically, it finds that the group's frame consistency on issues relating to military and political affairs to be more variable and inconsistent than its messaging on religious issues. This analysis of the Islamic State's messaging demonstrates that the group reversed its stated preferences or message on several core features of its propaganda, specifically its state-building and the *hijrah* messaging, and its victory and Apocalypse narratives.

## Religious Credibility

As evidenced by the high proportion of SRT content found across the sample, and the frequency with which the group draws on scripture to situate or justify its actions, cultivating the perception of religious authority is a clear priority within the Islamic State's messaging. As a result, with the notable exception of the changes in its Apocalyptic narrative (discussed below), the Islamic State is consistently able to reinforce its religious credibility and claims on "sacred authority". By engaging in "framing contests" with its religious competitors, the group is able to simultaneously reinforce its own claims on religious authority while refuting or impugning those made by its opponents. Throughout the sample, the group makes effective use of the four basic framing strategies outlined by Wiktorowicz—exaltation, vilification, credentialing, and decredentialing—to bolster its image of religious credibility.

Vilification and exaltation are strategies through which actors engaged in intramovement framing contests compete over claims to sacred authority. These strategies center on elevating the moral character and image of one's own movement while denigrating competing movements. To 'exalt' its own religious credentials, the group makes frequent use of religiously or historically symbolic language to associate itself with powerful Islamic imagery. Its basic lexicon frequently includes terms such "hijrah", "mujahedeen" and "Caliphate", reinforcing its own image of purveyors of sacred authority. Conversely, the group refers to competing jihadist groups as "jihad claimants", implying that the Islamic State holds the only authentic claim on jihad, and labels competing scholars using terms like *nifaq* (hypocrites) or "palace scholars" to vilify them as corrupted by state power.<sup>383</sup> The group backs up these superficial assertions through content items that provide evidence for their allegations. For example, the multi-part series "*The Allies of Al-Qa'idah in Sham*" uses secular-nationalist, democratic, or moderate Islamist allies of Al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate to portray them as hypocritical and uncommitted to jihad, and articles such as "*The Traits of Evil Scholars*" to argue that members of the religious establishment throughout the Middle East distort religious law on behalf of the state and

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<sup>383</sup> Dabiq Team, Kill the Imams of Kufr, 6-8.

for their own personal gain.<sup>384</sup> While the specific enemies the group focuses on shifts throughout the sample, it consistently uses vilification and exaltation to buttress its religious credibility.

The group also effectively utilizes the strategies of credentialing and decredentialing to advance its claims on sacred authority. As Wiktorowicz explains, a movement's claims on sacred authority do not need to hold up to the scrutiny of religious experts, as the average Muslim lacks the capacity to critically evaluate scriptural arguments. Instead, these claims need to reinforce the *perception* of a movement's credibility in the eyes of its target audience. Through its extensive use religious (SRT) content, which averages over one-third of the magazines' content over the course of the sample, the Islamic State is able to effectively create and sustain a perception of religious authority. For example, through content detailing scriptural justifications for its own actions, from the seizure of "*ghanīmah*" (war booty) and rules about marrying deceased fighters' widows, to the killing of non-Muslims and the enslavement of Yazidi women, the group cultivates the perception that all of its actions are derived directly from Islamic scripture. While the reader may not appreciate the nuances of the jurisprudential arguments made by the Islamic State's authors, the sheer volume of religious content, and the emphatic certainty with which religious opinions are conveyed, are likely to bolster the group's image of theological credibility, especially amongst a certainty-seeking audience of prospective radicals.

The Islamic State also builds its credibility and claims on sacred authority relationally, by discrediting its opponents. As described in the SRT section, the group continues to discredit or "decredential" its various enemies across the sample. It accuses its enemies of deviating from the 'true' path of Islam for their 'innovations' (interpretations) of scripture, impugns those who tolerate or embrace democratic political systems or other religious groups, demonizes scholars who argue that jihad is non-violent, and frequently engages, through its magazine content, in theological debates with its jihadist rivals on

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<sup>384</sup> Dabiq Team, "The Allies of Al-Qa'idah in Sham," *Dabiq Issue 8: Shari'ah Alone will Rule Africa*, March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 7-11; Rumiya Team, The Traits of Evil Scholars, 26-28.

issues such as the application of *takfir*.<sup>385</sup> These articles serve a two-fold purpose. First, they allow the Islamic State to refute and discredit its competitors claims, while portraying its own as scripturally justified, and second, it presents its rivals, such as Al Qaeda or prominent regime scholars, as deviating from scripture for reasons of political pragmatism.<sup>386</sup> As a result, the group both degrades the religious credibility of its opponents, while simultaneously bolstering its own image of credibility.

The one facet of the group's religious messaging that may weaken its religious credibility is its Apocalyptic narrative. As discussed in Chapter 6, when Turkey launched Operation Euphrates Shield to clear the border area containing the town of Dabiq, the Islamic State abruptly shifted its Apocalyptic messaging to downplay the significance of Dabiq and refocus on a different prophetic hadith involving the Muslim conquest of Rome, concomitantly replacing *Dabiq* with *Rumiyah*. While this certainly impacted the Islamic State's frame consistency, its impact on the credibility of the group's messaging likely depends on the audience members' commitment to ISIS' Apocalyptic eschatology. While, on one hand, interviews with Islamic State recruiters have indicated that their use of Apocalyptic rhetoric was a highly effective recruitment tactic, on the other, scholarship on other Apocalyptic movements find that when Apocalyptic prophecies go unfulfilled, it can counterintuitively harden the resolve of the prophecy's adherents.<sup>387</sup> Thus, while the group's revisions to its Apocalyptic narrative may undermine its credibility amongst those members of its audience who did not strongly commit themselves to the group's eschatology and were attracted to the group for other reasons, it could conversely strengthen the resolve of hardline believers.

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<sup>385</sup> Dabiq Team, *Ijrā the Most Dangerous Bid'ah*, 39-56; Dabiq Team, "The Allies of Al Qa'idah in Sham Part III," *Dabiq Issue 10: The Laws of Allah and the Laws on Men*, July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 6-13; Dabiq Team, *Al-Qa'idah of Waziristan, The Qā'Idah Of Adh-DhawāHirī, Al-Hararī, And An-Nadhārī, And The Absent Yemenī Wisdom*, 16-25.; Dabiq Team, *Kill the Imams of Kufr*, 6-9.

<sup>386</sup> Dabiq Team, *The Qā'Idah Of Adh-DhawāHirī, Al-Hararī, And An-Nadhārī, And The Absent Yemenī Wisdom*, 16-25.

<sup>387</sup> See for example: Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken, and Stanley Schachter. *When Prophecy Fails* (Mansfield Centre, Connecticut, Martino Fine Books, 2009) 1-253; Alexandra Stein, *Terror, Love and Brainwashing: Attachment in Cults and Totalitarian Systems*. (London; New York: Routledge, 2016).

## Political and Military Credibility

While the group largely manages to maintain the credibility of its religious messaging across the sample, the group's frame inconsistency and the widening "Say-Do Gap" between its messaging and events on the ground damage the credibility of its messaging on political and military issues. One of the clearest examples of the Islamic State's frame inconsistency and widening Say-Do Gap is seen in the major changes to its narrative of victory. Throughout AG1 and the majority of AG2, the group's victory narrative centered themes of expansion, strength and certainty. While certainly inflated, the Islamic State's sub-themes largely matched the events on the ground. Its Caliphate was expanding rapidly, it was defeating larger, better armed forces with ease, and as a result, its quixotic claims of certain victory were made more believable to the Islamic State's target audience.

However, as the group's territorial losses mounted, its narrative reversed. Where its military victories were initially framed as evidence of Allah's blessing, the group inverted its message and portrayed divine intervention as the only way to overcome their conventional military disadvantage.<sup>388</sup> The group initially claimed that Allah had promised them "constant victory and consolidation" and that they were going to "bring about the complete collapse of the modern American empire", but it shifted its message to emphasize the importance of "patience and steadfastness" while framing their fighters' ability to withstand enemy attacks as a victory in itself.<sup>389</sup> These messaging reversals demonstrate a decline in the group's frame consistency over the course of the sample. Furthermore, while the group does refashion its victory narrative to suit events on the ground, employing 'post-victory' themes such as 'patience and steadfastness' during periods of increasing territorial and military losses, these losses contribute to a widening

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<sup>388</sup> Rumiyah Team, Glad Tidings of Imminent Victory Come to the Patient, 27.

<sup>389</sup> Dabiq Team, Excerpts From "Indeed Your Lord Is Ever Watchful" By The Official Spokesman For The Islamic State, 6-9; Rumiyah Team, "This is What Allah and His Messenger Promised Us: A Speech By Abu Bakr Husayni Al-Baghdadi," *Rumiyah Issue 3*, November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 4; Rumiyah Team, "A Message From East Africa," *Rumiyah Issue 2*, October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 3.

“Say-Do Gap” between the group’s initial claims of rapid expansion and “constant” victory, and their present circumstances of shrinking power and control.

The credibility of the Islamic State’s messaging also suffers due to the changes in its state-building related content. This occurs in two ways. First, the group’s downplaying of the importance of *hijrah* and promotion of home-grown terrorism in its place, and second, through its reduced emphasis on building its Caliphate. As described in Chapter 6, the Islamic State’s reverses the form of collective action it advocates through its *hijrah* and home-grown terrorism narratives. In AG1 and AG2, the group refers to the performance of *hijrah* as the “number one priority” and explains that home-grown attacks should only be carried out by those unable to perform *hijrah*. However, within AG3, when the group’s Caliphate has shrunk substantially, its messaging content conveys the opposite message, downplaying the importance of fighting on the “outer edges of Islam” [the Caliphate] and championing the benefits of being able to attack their enemies “where it hurts them most”.<sup>390</sup> Through their promotion of home-grown terrorism, the group is effectively calling on its followers to act in opposition to its previous warnings about the damaging impacts Western life has on a Muslim’s faith, calling on them to stay in the ‘corrupting West’ instead of travelling to the ‘lands of Islam’. As a result, these qualitative changes significantly impact the Islamic State’s frame consistency, as the group not only reverses its message, but advocates that its audience perform an action they previously framed as both damaging and irreligious.

Moreover, the group’s downplaying of *hijrah* has additional negative impacts on the group’s frame consistency. As detailed above in the SBEG and CCIC portions of this study, throughout AG1 and AG2, the Islamic State consistently places strong emphasis on the importance of state-building, portraying competing groups’ refusal to state-build or weak and ineffective enforcement of Shari’ah as hypocritical and antithetical to the goals of a ‘true’ jihadist organization. Even its criticism of Al Qaeda, which professes the same long-term strategic goal as the Islamic State—the creation of a global Islamic Caliphate—is chastised for its tactical shortcomings, such as building coalitions, progressively implementing harsh *hudud* punishments, and waiting for more suitable circumstances to

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<sup>390</sup> Dabiq Team, “Words of Sincere Advice From an American Convert in the Islamic State To the Former Christian Who Accepted Islam”, 28.

state-build.<sup>391</sup> However, in AG3, as the Islamic State's territory begins to decline, their messaging shifts away from content related to its Caliphate, as shown by both the decline in its SBEG content and its downplaying of its *hijrah* narrative. By encouraging its followers to launch attacks at home instead of travelling to help build and defend its Caliphate, the group is effectively promoting a tactic that impedes the fulfillment of its stated strategic objective of state-building by asking recruits to attack at home, rather than come and defend their endangered and collapsing state. While the group does not openly disavow the defense, preservation and expansion of its Caliphate as a long-term goal, this shift highlights the group's growing frame inconsistency in AG3, as the group repeatedly criticized its rivals for their "pragmatic" and uncommitted tactical approaches to state-building, before themselves adopting an approach they once denigrated as inferior.<sup>392</sup>

## Impacts on Radicalization and Recruitment Potential

Examining the Islamic State's messaging over the course of the sample suggests that changes in the group's position on several key components of its message—the *hijrah* and state-building, and its Apocalypse and victory narratives—have had damaging impacts on the overall credibility of the group's message. The decline in the group's credibility, chiefly through frame inconsistency, is likely to have a negative impact on the group's ability to contribute to the radicalization and recruitment of its audience members.

However, two important caveats must first be addressed. First, an individual's perception of the credibility of a group's messaging is largely subjective. What one member of the Islamic State's audience may see as hypocrisy and severely damaging to the group's overall image may be irrelevant to another. Second, although the credibility of the message and the messenger is an important element of "frame alignment", it is one of many factors involved. As described in the literature review, the radicalization process is the result of the interplay between an array of forces ranging from perceptions of crisis to peer pressure. As a result, changes in perceptions of a group or message's credibility

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<sup>391</sup> Dabiq Team, "In The Words of the Enemy," *Dabiq Issue 10: The Law of Allah or the Laws of Men*, July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2014, 66-69; Dabiq Team, *The Law of Allah or the Laws of Men*, 50-64.

<sup>392</sup> Dabiq Team, *The Allies of Al-Qa'idah in Yemen*, 5-8.

should not be seen as certain inhibitors of radicalization and recruitment, as other perceived benefits of joining may outweigh a decline in the group's credibility. However, given the important role of frame alignment in the process of radicalization, and the significant weight attributed to credibility by scholars of social movements in creating persuasive messaging, the growing frame inconsistency and Say-Do Gap within the Islamic State's messaging is likely to negatively impact the effectiveness of its propaganda. These changes in credibility are most likely to effect those who were motivated by the group's Caliphate and 'victory' messaging, which early works on the Islamic State argued to be key factors in the initial success of the Islamic State's messaging.<sup>393</sup> As a result, these substantial changes in the Islamic State's qualitative content are likely to render its magazines less persuasive to certain segments of its target audience, thereby making it less effective at contributing to radicalization and recruitment overall. Future studies that obtain individual-level data on Islamic State or other jihadist foreign fighters should work to determine the role played by ISIS' perceived credibility in the persuasiveness of its messaging. Empirical findings that can elucidate the role of messaging credibility in the radicalization and recruitment process will go a long way in furthering scholarly knowledge of the relationship between propaganda and radicalization.

## **Reinforcement of In-and-Out Groups**

The Islamic State's ability to construct and reinforce in-and-out group identity demonstrates little qualitative change across the sample. As a result, these findings suggest that the ability of the Islamic State's messaging content to contribute to the radicalization and recruitment process on the basis on in-and-out group identity constructs has remained consistent.

Throughout the twenty issues analyzed, the group outlines and bolsters its highly entitative in-group identity by creating rigid boundaries between in-and-out group members. For the Islamic State, the delineation between in-and-out groups is simple. Those who embrace the Islamic State's puritanical interpretation of Islam are assigned an in-group identity, and those who reject it, including other Sunni Muslims, and even other *Salafis*, are classified into various degrading out-group categories. Sunni Muslims that

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<sup>393</sup> Stern and Berger, 107, 112, 117; Winter, *Apocalypse, Later*, 112.

oppose the Islamic State's interpretation of Islam are given labels such as "apostates" or *munafiqin* (hypocrites) to distinguish them from the 'true' Muslims—members and supporters of the Islamic State. Similarly, other religious groups in the Middle East, such as Shiites, Yazidis and Druze, are considered apostates, or in the case of the Yazidis, "devil worshippers".<sup>394</sup> Other religious groups that figure into the Islamic State's worldview, such as atheists, Christians, Jews and Hindus are also excluded from in-group membership, with the notable exception of converts who have joined the Islamic State.<sup>395</sup> While employed across the sample, the broader 'us vs. them' ideological framework behind the Islamic State's rigid identity categories is aptly demonstrated in the article "*The Extinction of the Grayzone*", which explains that the world is divided into "two camps", those "with Islam"—supporters and members of the Islamic State—and those "with the crusade"—everyone else.<sup>396</sup>

Through its messaging content, the group illustrates and enforces the rigid in-and-out group categories it has constructed in several ways. To construct and reify in-group identity, the Islamic State uses a variety messaging strategies. One of the clearest examples of the group's in-group identity construction are found in items classified in the Martyrdom, Brotherhood and Belonging (MBB) category. For example, the regular installment "*Among The Believers Are Men*" eulogizes slain Islamic State fighters, and in doing so, allows the group to project the idealized characteristics of an in-group member, such as intense piety, intelligence, kindness, bravery, warrior spirit, willingness to sacrifice, and ideological commitment.<sup>397</sup> In addition, the group often includes articles about Islamic history, such as the repeat installment "*From the Pages of History*", which allows ISIS to

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<sup>394</sup> Dabiq Team, *The Revival of Slavery Before the Hour*, 14; Dabiq Team, *The Extinction of the Grayzone*, 54-66; Dabiq Team, "Who Were the Safawiyyah?", *Dabiq Issue 13: The Rafi'dah: From Ibn Saba to the Dajjal*, January 19<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 10-14.

<sup>395</sup> Dabiq Team, "How I Came to Islam By Umm Khalid al-Finlandiyyah," *Dabiq Issue 15: Breaking the Cross*, July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2016, 36-39.

<sup>396</sup> Dabiq Team, *The Extinction of the Grayzone*, 54-66.

<sup>397</sup> Dabiq Team, "Among the Believers Are Men," *Dabiq Issue 7: From Hypocrisy to Apostasy*, February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 46-49.

situate its own group identity within the lineage of Islamic heroes.<sup>398</sup> Once introduced, the Islamic State maintains these installments for the duration of the sample.

Moreover, much of the group's SRT content provides a set of shared, in-group values for the Islamic State's own Muslim "*jama'ah*" (group or community). For instance, the reoccurring installment "*Hikmah*" (wisdom), offers religiously-based mantras to the reader, creating prescriptive rules for in-group members to follow. Mantras like "*Walā and Barā*", which the Islamic State interprets to mean, "love for the sake of Allah and hate for the sake of Allah", stipulates in-group members "love" other Muslims and "hate" those who oppose their version of Islam.<sup>399</sup> By offering a series of group-endorsed interpretations, mantras, and rulings on scripture, the Islamic State continues to provide its audience with an anthology of its religious doctrine across the sample, which can be adopted and embraced by prospective members, effectively allowing them to become a member of the Islamic State's in-group.

The Islamic State's messaging also frequently makes use of out-group framing, which serves both to denigrate its enemies and to reinforce in-group identity relationally. While the specific out-groups the Islamic State's focuses on varies, and its out-group content cuts across multiple thematic categories, the group continues to zealously

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<sup>398</sup> Dabiq Team, "From the Pages of History," *Dabiq Issue 7: From Hypocrisy to Apostasy*, February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 17-19; Dabiq Team, "From the Pages of History: The Response to the Call of the Prophet," *Dabiq Issue 15: Breaking the Cross*, July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2016, 14-19.

<sup>399</sup> The Islamic State's interpretation of *walā* and *barā* is similar to the traditional *Salafi* interpretation of the concept, but with increased emphasis on the violent connotations that can be derived from the concept. As scholar of Islamic movements Joas Wagemakers explains, *walā* and *barā* "refers to "the undivided loyalty (*wala'*) Muslims should show to God, Islam and their co-religionists over all other things on one hand and the disavowal (*bara'*) they must show to anything deemed un-Islamic on the other. In the Islamic State's usage, as explained above, the definition "un-Islamic" is nearly all-encompassing, excluding all but those groups, beliefs, and actions explicitly endorsed by the Islamic State. Furthermore, for the Islamic State, true "disavowal" almost invariably requires the use of violence against those deemed un-Islamic.

Dabiq Team, "Walā and Barā," *Dabiq Issue 10: The Law of Allah and the Laws of Men*, July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 38-39; Wagemakers, Joas. "Framing The "Threat To Islam": Al-Wala' Wa Al-Bara' In Salafi Discourse." *Arab Studies Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (2008): 3.

demonize and vilify its enemies across the sample. Through its CCIC content, which, as explained in the methods section, classifies out-group or enemy-related content, the group highlights the areas where its ideology and values clash with those of its enemies. For example, by accusing the Taliban of “nationalism”, and therefore placing it in conflict with ‘true’ Islam, the Islamic State both classifies the Taliban as an out-group, and reinforces the superiority of its own, in-group values.<sup>400</sup> The group employs a similar strategy in anti-Western articles such as “*Why We Hate You and Why We Fight You*”, as well as its anti-Shi’a and anti-*taghut* content. However, in AG3 the group’s out-group content more frequently appears within the MT and SRT categories, as it seeks to encourage attacks against Westerners (MT) and shifts its focus from “jihad claimants” to religious scholars (SRT).<sup>401</sup> As a result, the group retains its ability to present its audience with a vision of a world divided into clear ‘us vs. them’ identity categories and sustains the highly entitative in-group identity it has constructed throughout the sample, despite shifting the enemies it focuses on to relationally reinforce that identity.

Due to the range of psychological factors outlined in the literature review, propaganda that conveys a movement’s highly entitative identity constructs, and makes appeals to its target audience on the basis of shared identity, is more likely to be persuasive, facilitate “frame alignment”, and contribute to the radicalization and recruitment process. While there is no consensus on the precise role of identity group constructs within the literature, they are almost unanimously regarded as integral facets of the radicalization process.<sup>402</sup> As a result, the Islamic State’s maintenance of its highly entitative identity categories, and sustained ability to make appeals on the basis of that shared identity, suggests its capacity to contribute to the radicalization and recruitment

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<sup>400</sup> Dabiq Team, “A Fatwā for Khurasan,” *Dabiq Issue 10: The Law of Allah and the Laws of Men*, July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 18-25.

<sup>401</sup> For examples of the Islamic State’s focus on jihadist out-groups in the middle of the sample (AG2), see “*The Allies of Al-Qa’idah in Sham*”, Parts 1-5 in *Dabiq* Issues 8-12. For examples of the Islamic State’s focus on scholars and media figures towards the end of the sample (AG3), see *Dabiq* Issue 14: The Murtadd Brotherhood, *Kill the Imams of Kufr in the West*, 8-17; *Rumiyah* Issue 1: *The Wicked Scholars Are Cursed*, pg. 28-30; *Rumiyah* Issue 3: *The Obligation of Exposing Wicked Scholars*, 28-31; *Rumiyah* Issue 4, *A Treatise on Hypocrisy and Hypocrites*, pg. 20-21, *Rumiyah* Issue 5, *Traits of Evil Scholars*, pg. 26-29.

<sup>402</sup> King and Taylor, 602-622; Dalgaard-Nielsen, 797-814.

through its in-and-out group identity constructs has not changed, despite significant quantitative and qualitative shifts in its messaging throughout the sample.

## Belonging and Community

For extremist propaganda to be effective at drawing in prospective radicals, it must be able to offer prospective members a sense of belonging and a place within its community. These sentiments are often channeled to prospective radicals through interpersonal networks, such as kinship ties or in-person recruitment by members of established radical groups.<sup>403</sup> However, as the rise of lone-wolf or “inspired” acts of terrorism and the growing body of research on online extremist propaganda have shown, these sentiments do not have to be presented in person for individuals to radicalize, but can be primarily or entirely offered through membership in an ‘imagined’ ideological community.<sup>404</sup> Over the course of the sample, the Islamic State retains the ability to offer its recruits a sense of ‘imagined community’, but as its Caliphate recedes, its messaging lacks the capacity to offer its audience membership in its real, Caliphal community, likely narrowing its appeal to prospective radicals.

By virtue of its state and substantial territorial control, the Islamic State’s early magazine content was uniquely capable of blending the appeals of both immediate, interpersonal community and imagined community. By presenting its target audience with what it depicted as a functioning, Islamic utopia, the group’s messaging both beckoned its audience to become a member of its Caliphal community, while simultaneously offering them membership into an imagined community of heroic *mujahedeen*. Joining the Caliphal community was presented as a way to alleviate the feelings of cultural anxiety that, they argued, dominated the lives of Muslims in the irreligious societies outside of “dārul- Islām”, as well as a respite from the other ills Western life.<sup>405</sup> Through the use of its ‘Utopia,

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<sup>403</sup> Sageman, 137-174.

<sup>404</sup> Gartenstein-Ross, Daveed. "Lone Wolves No More." *Foreign Affairs*. March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-kingdom/2017-03-27/lone-wolves-no-more>; Conway, 77-81.

<sup>405</sup> Dabiq Team, “And As For The Blessing Of Your Lord, Then Mention It,” *Dabiq Issue 12: Just Terror*, November 18<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 29-32.

Governance & Stateliness' and 'Law & Order' sub-themes, the Islamic State's propaganda was able to show its followers a real society that they could belong to and help build if they embraced the Islamic State's ideology, values and performed *hijrah*. As described above in the analysis of the group's in-and-out group constructions, the group's propaganda also offered its audience a comprehensive set of religious, political and social values to embrace and oppose, allowing them to attach themselves to both the immediate Caliphal community, and the broader 'imagined *Ummah*', by joining the Islamic State.

However, as the Islamic State's territory declined throughout the sample, its messaging shifted away from its vivid depictions of Caliphal community, it became largely unable to offer its audience a pathway to real, interpersonal community. Instead, the Islamic State emphasized aspects of its messaging that enticed its audience to become members of its imagined *Ummah*, shifting its message to downplay the prospect of joining the Caliphate, and building up the group's image as a vanguard delegating authority on behalf of that imagined community.<sup>406</sup> For example, in its promotion of home-grown terrorism through the installment "*Just Terror*", which emerges in the last five issues of the sample, the Islamic State repeatedly emphasizes the importance of declaring one's membership to the Islamic State during or prior to an attack, and continues to lionize those attack on their behalf outside of the Caliphate.<sup>407</sup> Through its theological content, the group also continues to cultivate a sense shared community and values that can be embraced from a distance, rather than acquired by physically travelling to its state. For example, it introduced new, apolitical content that provides advice on various prayers or scriptural verses, and rules for how to best celebrate Islamic holidays. It also advertises its various online apps, such as those to learn Arabic as a means of more effectively engaging with

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<sup>406</sup> Kirke, 287.

<sup>407</sup> Rumiyah Team, "Just Terror Tactics," *Rumiyah Issue 2*, October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 12; Rumiyah Team, "Just Terror Tactics," *Rumiyah Issue 3*, November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 10-12; Rumiyah Team, Among the Believers Are Men: Abu Abdillah Al-Brittani, 14-15; Rumiyah Team, Among the Believers Are Men: Abu Mansur Al-Muhajir, 14-17.

the Qur'an.<sup>408</sup> This content serves the purpose of cultivating imagined community, as it allows provides advice or tools for individuals to deepen their commitment to the cause, without being present in the group's physical state. These shifts in the direction and content of the Islamic State's messaging suggest that it is aiming to reposition itself as the decentralized source jihadist authority, rather than as a territorially bounded state. In doing so, the group sustains or improves its ability to offer a sense of imagined community to its followers, but simultaneously declines in its ability to offer its followers physical and interpersonal community.

While impact of these changes on the efficacy of the Islamic State's magazines as contributors to radicalization and recruitment is largely dependent on the specific forces attracting a prospective radical towards ISIS' brand of extremism, these shifts demonstrate that the group's messaging offers fewer avenues for prospective members to find belonging and community with the Islamic State. Where the early stages of the Islamic State's propaganda offered recruits membership to both immediate and imagined communities through its state-building content, *hijrah* narratives, and the opportunity to attack on their behalf if they were unable to perform *hijrah*, the latter issues of the magazine increasingly encourage sympathizers to stay home and become members of the group's imagined community alone. The significant number of home-grown attacks perpetrated on behalf of the Islamic State suggest that appeals on the basis of imagined community through a decentralized, Do-It-Yourself approach to jihad are appealing to some of the Islamic State's followers.<sup>409</sup> However, the important role attributed to the search interpersonal community by scholars of radicalization suggests that the Islamic State's inability to offer a sense of immediate community will result in narrowing of its messaging's appeal, negatively impacting its radicalization and recruitment potential. While further research needs to be conducted to draw more definitive and nuanced conclusions, available evidence on the drivers of radicalization, suggest that without the

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<sup>408</sup> Rumiyah Team, "Recommended Deeds and Etiquette Therein," *Rumiyah Issue 1*, September 5<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 21; Rumiyah Team, "The Fire," *Rumiyah Issue 2*, October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 21; Rumiyah Team "Alphabet Teacher," *Rumiyah Issue 2*, October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 31.

<sup>409</sup> Vidino and Hughes, ix; Mendelsohn, Barak. "ISIS' Lone-Wolf Strategy." *Foreign Affairs*. August, 25<sup>th</sup>, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2016-08-25/isis-lone-wolf-strategy>.

pathway to belonging and community represented by its Caliphate, the Islamic State's capacity to draw in members will decline.

## **Sense of Purpose and Meaning**

One of the consistent findings of research on radicalization is that the process of joining a radical group is often driven, completely or partially, by a search for greater meaning and purpose in one's life. While scholars of radicalization still struggle to pin down these nebulous concepts, and the kinds of meaning individuals find through membership in a radical group varies widely, a key, overarching motivator is the ability to attach oneself to a cause greater than themselves. Scholars find, that in doing so, radicals can achieve feelings of happiness, excitement, power and agency. In this way, radicalization is part of a greater identity project, where the individual refashions their own identity into one they find more desirable and purposeful.<sup>410</sup> While only a limited amount of research on Islamist radicals has been conducted, these studies find that the desire to attach oneself to a greater cause was a shared characteristic amongst Islamic State and other jihadist group members.<sup>411</sup>

While, in the latter stages of the sample, the Islamic State's propaganda continues to offer its audience the prospect of finding purpose by embracing its religious ideology, fighting the 'enemies of Islam', and achieving martyrdom for its cause, these messages lack the aura of historic significance conveyed in its earlier, Caliphate-focused content. Furthermore, these messages lack uniqueness, as other jihadist groups offer the same incentives of religiosity, martyrdom and conflict, lessening the Islamic State's ability to compete within the marketplace of prospective recruits. As a result, their propaganda's narrowing thematic diversity and the reduced emphasis on Caliphate-focused content significantly diminishes the number of symbolic 'reservoirs of meaning' the Islamic State is able to draw on in its propaganda.

The existence of the Islamic State's Caliphate, and the group's vivid historically and religiously situated depiction of it in their propaganda, allowed it to effectively draw on

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<sup>410</sup> Cottee, and Hayward, 979.

<sup>411</sup> Dawson and Amarasingam, 10-12; Vidino and Hughes, 30.

many powerful theological and historical symbols in its messaging, as well as offer the same incentives of ‘glorious martyrdom’, religious devotion, and the opportunity to ‘fight Islam’s enemies’ that it emphasized towards the end of the sample. The Caliphate represented a restoration of pride after centuries of Muslim humiliation, as well as the realization, rather than simply the pursuit of, the ultimate goal of *Salafi* jihadi groups—the creation of an Islamic state.<sup>412</sup> The creation of the state itself, in addition to its location in the deserts of Sham, and its incorporation of the town of Dabiq, were all framed as the fulfillment of Islamic prophecies, adding additional resonance to the group’s messaging content.<sup>413</sup> Ultimately, through its resurrection of the Caliphate, the Islamic State could offer its audience a chance to be a part of a glorious and historic moment in the history of Islam, providing a unique and powerful avenue to a purposeful existence. By dramatically reducing its Caliphate-related content, and shifting its messaging to present itself as the decentralized leader of an imagined jihadist community, the Islamic State’s messaging is no longer able to draw on these powerful reservoirs of meaning. As a result, the group’s propaganda and the end of the sample is unlikely to have the same emotional resonance with as wide a swathe of potential recruits as its earlier messaging content.

Furthermore, while existing research on jihadist foreign fighters remains limited, there is some evidence to suggest state-building and the implementation of Islamic law are salient factors in individuals’ decision to join jihadist groups. A large proportion of evidence from studies using both interviews and open source data indicates the process of joining a radical group to be comprised of factors such as the quest for meaning, identity-searching, religious motivations and personal or even romantic ties.<sup>414</sup> However, studies like Dawson and Amarasingam’s and Vidino and Hughes’ have shown that some Western foreign fighters have attributed their joining specifically to motivations such as the “establishment of the khilafah”, “protecting Muslims lands”, bringing back the “law of Allah”, or their desire to escape the Western “system”, illustrating that, at least for some, participation in foreign conflicts and state-building were salient drivers of their joining

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<sup>412</sup> Danforth, Nick. "The Myth of the Caliphate." *Foreign Affairs*, November 19<sup>th</sup> 2014, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2014-11-19/myth-caliphate>.

<sup>413</sup> Dabiq Team, *The Islamic State Before Al-Malhamah*, 9.

<sup>414</sup> Dawson and Amarasingam, 10-12; Vidino and Hughes, 30.

process.<sup>415</sup> For these kinds of recruits, a message increasingly centered on individual religious devotion and Do-It-Yourself terrorism is unlikely to be as powerful a motivating force as the Islamic State's original, Caliphate-focused message. However, for the tentative conclusions drawn in this thesis to be viewed as definitive, more individual-level studies examining the salience of ISIS' Caliphate in the radicalization and recruitment process need to be conducted.

## **Victimization and Discrimination**

Theoretical models and empirical studies of Islamist radicalization in the West consistently find experiences or perceptions of individual-level victimization and discrimination, such as through socio-economic marginalization, racism or xenophobia, to be powerful catalysts in the radicalization process. As described in the literature review, these catalysts are widely found to play a role in the "cognitive opening" of potential radicals, where their feelings of ostracism and inequity result in an increased willingness to entertain radical ideologies. As a result, extremist propaganda that can unearth or exploit these feelings may be more likely to contribute to its audience's willingness to consider extreme ideas. However, when qualitatively assessing the Islamic State's English-language magazines, this study finds that the group infrequently addresses issues of individual-level discrimination, and often actively works to downplay the possible impact of socio-economic factors on the radicalization and recruitment process of its members. Because of the group's limited focus on these issues, the ability of its propaganda to harness feelings of discrimination and victimization to drive radicalization and recruitment does not shift significantly across the sample.

When the group does address racial or xenophobic forms of discrimination, it generally does so positively rather than negatively, that is, presenting its Caliphate as multi-ethnic and multi-racial utopia, rather than focusing on criticizing discrimination in the West.<sup>416</sup> While brief allusions to discrimination were noted throughout the sample, of the twenty issues examined, only one article was explicitly dedicated to the issue of racism and no other items were focused on other forms of discrimination Muslims face in the

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<sup>415</sup> Ibid, 10-12; Ibid, 30.

<sup>416</sup> Dabiq Team, *Khilafah Declared*, pg. 6-9.

West, such as economic or political marginalization.<sup>417</sup> The reason for the group's relatively limited attention to issues of individual-level discrimination, despite its importance in the radicalization process, likely stems from its ideology and objectives. Ideologically, the only identity characteristic the Islamic State regards as salient is one's religious affiliation. As the group explains, a "Muslim's loyalty is determined, not by his skin color, his tribal affiliation, or his last name, but by his faith" and that Muslims should "Love for the sake of Allah, hate for the sake of Allah".<sup>418</sup> Resultantly, other identities are regarded as irrelevant and 'true' Muslims should not focus on issues of racial or ethnic discrimination, but rather on the host of problems facing Islam and Muslims. Furthermore, throughout most of the sample, a key objective of the Islamic State's messaging was to encourage its followers to perform *hijrah*, thus offering a clear solution to issues of discrimination—embrace the Islamic State's ideology and travel to the Caliphate. While the group may seek to increase its focus on various forms of discrimination and oppression in the West as a means of encouraging Western Muslims to engage in home-grown terrorism, no evidence for such a shift was found in this sample.

Moreover, the group works to downplay the role of social and economic factors in its members' decision to join the Islamic State. The group often emphasizes the "middle-class" or wealthy upbringing of its recruits and describes them as well-integrated into society and well-liked within their kinship networks. Rather than harnessing feelings of victimization and discrimination, the group actively works to refute them as important factors in their recruits' process of 'finding Islam', at times even directly addressing and working to counter their fighters' depiction in Western media reports as "disturbed loners" with poor social standing.<sup>419</sup> Furthermore, rather than emphasizing the hardships Muslims face in the West, the Islamic State's propagandists portray life outside the Caliphate as comfortable and convenient, but unfulfilling and degrading to one's faith.<sup>420</sup> Thus, instead of attributing their fighters' process of joining the Islamic State as complex and stemming in part from feelings of marginalization, discrimination and alienation, as the literature

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<sup>417</sup> Dabiq Team, *Wala and Bara versus American Racism*, 18-20.

<sup>418</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

<sup>419</sup> Dabiq Team, *If I Were The U.S. President Today*, 38.

<sup>420</sup> Dabiq Team, *How I Came to Islam By Umm Khalid al-Finlandiyyah*, 36-39.

suggests, the group invariably portrays their fighters' decision to join as a choice driven by overwhelming religious devotion.<sup>421</sup>

Thus, the group rarely attempts to highlight the forms of individual-level discrimination and victimization facing Western Muslims, focusing instead on the incompatibility between the West and Islam. To the extent it does focus on discrimination in its propaganda, the Islamic State portrayed joining its 'utopian' and multiracial Caliphate as the solution to these ills. As a result, the group's ability to contribute to radicalization by tapping into sentiments of victimhood is more likely to be hindered by the broader breakdown of its Caliphate-centric crisis-solution constructs, rather shifts in its very limited content addressing discrimination and victimization.

## **Threat to Islam and Muslims**

Over the course of the sample, the Islamic State maintains the ability to present Islam and Muslims as threatened. However, towards the end of the sample, content highlighting the threats posed to Islam and individual Muslims' faith by life in Western society is largely absent, potentially making the group's messaging less salient for its intended audience.

While the specific 'threats' facing the religion vary between issues, the Islamic State's messaging content succeeds in maintaining the narrative that Islam and Muslims are under threat throughout the sample. For example, in all three analytical groupings, the group contains content highlighting the killing of Muslims by Western or Muslim-majority governments through their military interventions, the breakdown of Islamic religious tradition, and the corrosive effects "evil scholars" have had on the practice of Islam. To highlight the killing of Muslims, the group pens articles about coalition airstrikes and shows images of children killed by bombings or enemy militants. It also exemplifies the "crimes" individual countries—even if they are Muslim-majority states—have committed against

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<sup>421</sup> Rumiya Team, *The Shuhada of the Gulshan Attack*, 8-11; Dabiq Team, *If I Were The U.S. President Today*, 38.

Islam.<sup>422</sup> The breakdown of tradition is underscored through content items outlining factors such as Islam’s division and partisanship, modernizing reinterpretations of scripture, the embrace of a “pacifist” version of Islam, changing moral and social values, and the rising “hypocrisy” of Muslims, who claim to be Islamic but whose actions or beliefs do not reflect their faith (according to ISIS).<sup>423</sup> Likewise the group continually portrays Islam as ‘threatened from within’ by scholars and other claimants on religious authority who manipulate the religion and mislead Muslims for their personal benefit or the benefit of various *taghut* regimes.<sup>424</sup>

However, as the group shifts its tactical focus from drawing recruits to their Caliphate to promoting home-grown terrorism, its messaging content refrains from emphasizing the damaging impacts living in the West has on a Muslim’s faith. This marks a significant qualitative shift, as underscoring the threat posed by Western life on one’s faith was a core facet of the group’s *hijrah* frame and a key motivator to the group used to encourage *hijrah*. Throughout the first three quarters of the sample, the Islamic State’s propaganda did not portray the active discrimination and marginalization facing Muslims as the reason they should reject Western society, but rather it focused on what it sees as the fundamental incompatibility between Islam and the West. Rather than portraying the *faults* of Western society—its racism, xenophobia and socio-economic discrimination—as the problem facing Western Muslims, the group frames the West’s *fundamental values*, such as liberalism, tolerance, secularism and democracy, as corrosive to Muslims’ faith. For example, the group repeatedly rails against free speech, linking freedom of speech to the ability to mock the Prophet, thereby framing one of the cornerstones of Western

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<sup>422</sup> Dabiq Team, “Foreword,” *Dabiq Issue 3: The Call to Hijrah*, September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2014, 3; Dabiq Team, *The Burning of the Murtadd Pilot*, 6; Rumiya Team, *The Crimes Of Turkey*, 19.

<sup>423</sup> Dabiq Team, “Foreword,” *Dabiq Issue 4: The Failed Crusade*, October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2014, 3; Dabiq Team, *Islam is the Religion of the Sword not Pacifism*, 20-24; Dabiq Team, *The Extinction of the Grayzone*, 54-66; Dabiq Team, *The Fitrah of Mankind and the Near Extinction of the Western Woman*, 20-25; Rumiya Team, *A Treatise on Hypocrisy and the Hypocrites*, 20-21.

<sup>424</sup> Dabiq Team, “Its Either the Islamic State or the Flood,” *Dabiq Issue 2: The Flood*, July 27<sup>th</sup>, 2014, 5-11; Dabiq Team, *Misleading Scholars and Bewitching Media*, 38-39; Rumiya Team, *The Traits of Evil Scholars*, 26-28.

liberalism as antithetical to Islam.<sup>425</sup> Its messaging also contains numerous articles framing cultural issues in the West, including gay and women’s rights, secular, scientific education, issues of moral laxity, such as sexual promiscuity, drugs, alcohol and gangs, and simply living in the company of non-Muslims, as the true threat facing Muslims in the West.<sup>426</sup>

However, when the group shifts its focus away from *hijrah* in the final five issues of the sample, it ignores the ‘poisonous’ effects life in “Dar al-Kufr” has on a Muslim’s faith, with no content items focusing on this issue. While the group makes passing mentions to the “corruption” of the West, these assertions are no longer connected to the group’s previous argument that “bad company” is destructive to one’s faith.<sup>427</sup> While the group’s rationale for doing so likely stems from the fact that underscoring the detrimental effects of Western life would undermine its new tactical goal of promoting home-grown terrorism instead of *hijrah*, this shift could have a substantial impact on the resonance of the Islamic State’s message. Because *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* are the group’s flagship English-language magazines, geared towards a Western audience, refraining from highlighting the ‘threat’ posed by Western life on Islam and individual Muslims’ faith steers the group’s messaging away from topics that are most likely to resonate with Western Muslims or converts. While definitive conclusions cannot be drawn without individual-level data from Islamic State recruits, studies of radicalization have repeatedly found that feelings of conflict between one’s religious and cultural values—whether long-held or recently adopted—and Western society, to be key factors in catalyzing Islamist radicalization.<sup>428</sup> Thus, while the Islamic State’s messaging still succeeds in portraying Islam as threatened through other means, its refrain from highlighting detrimental impacts of Western life on may render its

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<sup>425</sup> Dabiq Team, *The Anger Factory*, 76; Dabiq Team, *Extinction of the Grayzone*, 58-62.

<sup>426</sup> Dabiq Team, *O You Who Have Believed, Protect Yourself And Your Families From Fire*, 33-35; Dabiq Team, *And As For The Blessing Of Your Lord, Then Mention It*, 29-32; Dabiq Team, “*Hijrah From Hypocrisy to Sincerity*,” *Dabiq Issue 3: The Call to Hijrah*, 32.

<sup>427</sup> Rumiyah Team, *Among the Believers Are Men: Abu Abdillah Al-Brittani*, 14-15; Dabiq Team, *Hijrah From Hypocrisy to Sincerity*, 32.

<sup>428</sup> Dawson and Amarasingam, 11-12; Wiktorowicz, *Joining the Cause*, 16-17; Dalgaard-Nielsen, 800-801.

propaganda less capable of appealing its target audience, thereby reducing its efficacy of as a contributor to radicalization and recruitment. Future empirical studies can build on the tentative findings produced in this thesis by examining the role of the Islamic State's propaganda in eliciting or exploiting feelings of cultural alienation and threat to Islam, and determining how important those messages were driving the actions of Islamic State foreign fighters.

## Chapter 8. Conclusion

This thesis has argued that the Islamic State's territorial losses have driven considerable changes in the thematic and narrative content of its propaganda. Quantitative declines in the proportion of content allocated to the group's state-building project and increases in content dedicated to its terrorist and insurgent-style military operations have coincided with major qualitative shifts in its messaging. The Islamic State has shifted from producing a thematically diverse 'narrative of victory', which framed the group as a rising power on a path to certain victory, to a narrative centered on theological appeals for resilience, patience and divine intervention. The magazines' motivational frames have also been repurposed, transitioning from their original role of encouraging the audience to join in the Islamic State's self-proclaimed historic Caliphal revival, to serving as a scriptural justifications and operational guidelines that promote Islamic State-branded home-grown terrorism. The battle claimed to initiate the group's much vaunted Apocalypse has been delayed and downplayed, and its discussions of religion have become increasingly divorced from its stated political ambitions.

Moreover, through an evaluation of these findings, this thesis argues that the changes in the group's messaging content are likely to damage the ability of their English-language magazines to contribute to radicalization and facilitate recruitment. The group's Caliphate, initially portrayed as a panacea for the ills of the *Ummah*, is strikingly absent in the group's crisis-solution constructs later in the sample, rendering its messaging both heavy on problems and light on answers, and lacking the distinguishing feature that set the Islamic State's message apart from its competitors. Without their state at the center of their propaganda, the group's unique ability to infuse their message with purpose and meaning, using the deep historical and religious symbolism of the Caliphate and the *hijrah*, has also declined. While the group retains the ability to offer affiliation with an imagined community of *mujahedeen*, its messaging no longer vividly depicts the opportunity for membership in its 'utopian' Caliphal community. The shrinking of ISIS' state is also likely to damage the credibility of its messaging, as this territorial recession has shown the group's initial claims of strength, certain success, and expansion to have been misguided or patently false.

What lessons can be drawn from this study? First and foremost, this study shows the importance of situating extremist propaganda within the context in which it is produced. Many studies examining terrorist groups' propaganda do so descriptively, synchronously and without regard for shifts in external circumstances. While these studies are critical to understanding a group's fundamental ideological pillars, its target audience, how it differs from its competitors, and its media and military strategies, this thesis has shown that many of these factors can shift over time and in accordance with circumstance.<sup>429</sup> To deepen our understanding of terrorists' propaganda, it is critical to recognize that there is not a hard division between the 'real world' where a terrorist group operates, and the distorted and self-serving version of the world it constructs in its propaganda. Rather, propaganda is topical, tactical, and closely linked to the shifting objectives and necessities of its producer. Given the importance of the relationship between circumstance and message identified here, future work on terrorist propaganda should make greater use of longitudinal studies that account not only for changes within the propaganda itself, but changes in the operating environment and goals of the group that produces it.

A greater appreciation and understanding of the relationship between real-world circumstances and extremist movements' propaganda can have important counterterrorism implications. First, as evidenced by the transition from *hijrah* to home-grown terrorism motivational frames, shifting external circumstances can change the form of collective action endorsed and actively facilitated by extremist groups. By changing its messaging, the group sought to alter the kind of threat it posed. While the Islamic State's increased promotion of home-grown terrorism does not appear to have a marked impact on the actual number of home-grown attacks in the West, it illustrates the importance of understanding how terrorist groups respond to external pressures through their

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<sup>429</sup> Novenario, 953-967; Manuel R Torres Soriano. "Jihadist Propaganda and Its Audiences: A Change of Course?" *Perspectives on Terrorism* 1, no. 2 (2010): 1-3; Samantha Mahood & Halim Rane, "Islamist narratives in ISIS recruitment propaganda," *The Journal of International Communication*, 23, no. 1 (2017): 15-35 DOI: 10.1080/1057610X.2015.1022093; Carl J. Ciovacco, "The Contours of Al Qaeda's Media Strategy", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 32, no. 10, (2009): 853-875, DOI: 10.1080/10576100903182377

messaging.<sup>430</sup> By altering its messaging, a group facing increasing challenges in one theatre can create new and potentially unanticipated dangers in another.

In addition, this study can offer lessons for counter-terrorism practitioners on the interplay between extremist narratives and hard-power counter-terrorism operations. While the conclusions gleaned from this study's evaluation of the radicalizing and recruitment efficacy of the Islamic State's propaganda are not definitive, they suggest that the group's territorial losses have undermined key components of its message. Because many of the appealing elements of the Islamic State's soft-power messaging were intrinsically linked to its own hard-power expansion, a refutation of those real-world, hard-power successes has also damaged its soft-power appeal. When the group's themes of victory, strength, and Caliphal expansion were met with the sustained combination of airstrikes and local ground forces, the group was forced to relinquish much of its Caliphate and the messaging content centered upon it, illustrating an important and under-studied link between hard-power operations and extremist's soft-power narratives.

However, the Islamic State's message of strength and success was unique to both jihadists and terrorist group's more broadly, who often center their 'brand' and propaganda on sentiments of victimhood and oppression. Similar hard-power operations against a group whose allure is centered on victimization may bolster, rather than undermine, their appeal, further amplifying the risks posed by excessive military force and collateral damage. As a result, this study serves as a lesson for policy-makers and counter-terrorism officials to not only consider the impact their operations will have on the physical threat posed by terrorists, but also to evaluate the relationship between their military operations and their enemy's propaganda narratives, as the misplaced use of hard-power may inadvertently strengthen a terror group's soft-power.

Furthermore, a greater focus on the relationship between the propaganda and real-world challenges of extremist groups provides fertile ground for the development of targeted and more effective counter-narratives. As this study shows, when the circumstances on the ground begin to conflict with its objectives and its message, the Islamic State is willing to change. As its Caliphate receded, the group altered many of its previous claims and messaging topics. While, on one hand, the ability to change its

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<sup>430</sup> Jones et al, xv.

messaging illustrates the Islamic State's ability to adapt and evolve, it also provides fodder for counter-messaging campaigns to frame the group as hypocritical, inconsistent and pragmatic. For a religious extremist group like the Islamic State, whose brand is centered upon its zealotry and steadfast ideological commitment, counter-messages that can illustrate the group's pragmatism and political astuteness can tarnish its image and damage its credibility. These kinds of messaging campaigns could be particularly effective against the Islamic State, as it habitually criticized its enemies for their willingness to put political and organizational considerations before Islam, allowing counter-messaging campaigners to use the group's own words against it. An added benefit of this style of counter-messaging is that it does not necessarily require practitioners to refute the theological arguments presented by extremists, which may not resonate with a target audience lacking jurisprudential knowledge. Rather, it simply requires using the jihadists' own words and claims against them.

However, while the findings of this study identify opportunities to undermine a group's credibility through counter-messaging, it also highlights the importance extremist group's themselves attribute to credibility, and the potential challenges it could hold for counter-messaging campaigns. In its magazine content, the Islamic State worked extensively to generate the perception of credibility, frequently employing detailed religious rulings, utilizing framing techniques like "vilification" and "decrediting," and even citing Western political analysis to reinforce its expansionary military and state-building claims. Given the level of content the group dedicates to bolstering its image of credibility to its audience, counter-narratives and counter-messaging efforts aimed at dissuading that audience from engaging with the Islamic State or other radical groups will also need to demonstrate their credentials and cultivate a sense of legitimacy. While many counter-extremism programs, such as the UK's *Prevent* program, contain operational components where practitioners work to refute theological arguments of jihadist groups, these campaigns will likely struggle to dissuade prospective radicals if they cannot demonstrate and cultivate credibility of their own.<sup>431</sup> As explained earlier, without the

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<sup>431</sup> Caitlin Mastroe, "Evaluating CVE: Understanding the Recent Changes to the United Kingdom's Implementation of *Prevent*," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10, no. 2, (2016): 52.

jurisprudential knowledge to evaluate scriptural claims, individuals often utilize perceptions of credibility to make decisions on who to believe.

As a result, this study lends credence to the arguments of scholars that have articulated the importance of establishing (or feigning) credibility within government-led counter-messaging campaigns. As scholars like Sorenson have identified, governments, especially Western governments like the United States, lack credibility in the minds of many Muslims, especially those likely to be susceptible to anti-Western jihadist propaganda. Sorenson argues that a potential solution to government's credibility crisis is the use of covert, online, counter-messaging operations, allowing campaigners to avoid association with states seen as illegitimate or hostile and pose as credible sources. He also highlights the potential to incorporate controverting opinions of Islamic scholars revered within the jihadist movement, such as Ibn Taymiyya's rejection of *takfir*, which would put the jihadist message in conflict with the historic Islamic figures they often use to legitimize it.<sup>432</sup>

Additionally, studies like that of Jousse, Bucerius, and Thompson's analysis of Al Shabaab recruitment from Canadian-Somali communities have found that Muslim communities themselves can develop powerful counter-narratives that undercut the credibility and "mythic elements" contained in militant Islamist narratives. These communities' own experiences with recruitment gave them 'insider knowledge' about life within Al Shabaab and the legitimacy to detract from it, ultimately diminishing Al Shabaab's appeal.<sup>433</sup> Their study illustrates that 'credibility' does not only come from scholarly and theological knowledge, but also communal respect and shared experience. Taken together, the counter-messaging applications of this study—exploiting inconsistencies and contradictions in a group's own messaging—and the insights of other scholar's findings on the use of technology and local communities to establish messaging credibility, could have a positive impact on the effectiveness of counter-messaging and counter-narrative campaigns. Because of the decentralized nature of "sacred authority" in Islam, extremists

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<sup>432</sup> David S. Sorenson, "Priming Strategic Communications: Countering the Appeal of ISIS." *Parameters: Journal of the US Army War College*. 44, no. 3 (2014): 25.

<sup>433</sup> Paul Jousse, Sandra M. Bucerius, and Sara K. Thompson. "Narratives and Counternarratives: Somali-Canadians on Recruitment as Foreign Fighters to Al-Shabaab." *British Journal Of Criminology* 55, no. 4 (2015): 811-32.

rely heavily on undermining other religious authorities' perceptions of credibility by demonstrating their supposed 'hypocrisy'. Counter-messaging campaigns ought to do the same to extremists.

Lastly, the findings of this study can offer potentially instructive new avenues within the study of the radicalization process, and in addition, it underscores the importance of generating greater dialogue and exchange between scholars of radicalization and extremist propaganda. This study, like the sub-fields of radicalization and extremist propaganda more broadly, suffers from a deficit of empirical data on the causes of Islamist radicalization and an incomplete understanding of the causal relationship between online messaging and radicalization. Online propaganda is widely viewed as important to radicalization, but precisely how important, and what aspects of the radicalization process it is most impactful, is debated and uncertain.<sup>434</sup> While this study has sought to mitigate these problems by developing analytical frameworks based on existing theoretical and empirical data across disciplines, the ability to draw directly from scholarship and empirical evidence examining the relationship between propaganda and radicalization would allow for the generation of clearer and more definitive insights. As a result, this author supports the concerns of scholars like Aly and Sageman who have highlighted the challenges posed by terrorism studies' empirical deficit.<sup>435</sup> Through its framework-based analysis, this thesis has helped to create a foundation for theory testing and advancing scholarly knowledge on radicalization and propaganda, facilitating future studies that aim to address the field's empirical deficit.

However, this study also illustrates the potential to generate new and potentially instructive avenues for research on radicalization by using the findings of propaganda studies to inform radicalization research. Studies like this one, as well as those by scholars like Ingram and Sivek, have drawn on insights from radicalization scholarship in their analyses of terror groups' propaganda. However, reversing this direction, and having radicalization scholars draw on insights from extremist propaganda studies, may also prove useful.

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<sup>434</sup> Aly, *Brothers, Believers, Brave Mujahideen*, 62-76,

<sup>435</sup> *Ibid*, 62-63,

This study finds that several key elements of the Islamic State's propaganda have been understudied by scholars of radicalization, presenting new areas for empirical research. For example, this study has shown how the Islamic State works diligently to construct and maintain its 'narrative of victory'. Terrorism observers have often assumed that weakening a terrorist group, such as by eliminating its capacity to strike, will reduce "the 'bandwagon' effect" generated by the "excitement about joining a "successful" resistance movement" and resultantly, decrease the group's recruitment success.<sup>436</sup> However, studies of radicalization have not assessed the role played by the "bandwagon effect" or individuals' perceptions of a group's prestige or potential for 'victory', in their decision to join those organizations. Radicalization scholars are also keen to point out the importance of achieving purpose and meaning by fighting for a cause greater than oneself, but more analysis could be conducted on how perceptions of a group's success influence prospective radicals' view of group membership as an avenue towards creating that all-important purposeful existence. In other words, does a radical group convince individuals to join their movement simply by outlining the benefits of 'fighting the good fight', or by convincing them it is actually winning?

Empirical studies that interview former or active radicals may be able to shed light on the role played by these factors. For example, working to determine why individuals joined the Islamic State over other active jihadist groups could yield insights into the role the 'bandwagon effect' plays in pulling prospective radicals into the movement. Moreover, studies like Bjørgo and Horgan's work "*Leaving Terrorism Behind*", that examine the causes of disillusionment within former radicals could help to determine if a group's outright failure or limited success influenced their decision to exit the group, potentially providing insight into their decision to join in the first place.<sup>437</sup>

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<sup>436</sup> James Blake and Brooks Tigner, "Islamic State Returnees Pose Threat to Europe", Janes by HIS Markit, 2017, [http://www.janes.com/images/assets/032/69032/Islamic\\_State\\_returnees\\_pose\\_threat\\_to\\_Europe.pdf](http://www.janes.com/images/assets/032/69032/Islamic_State_returnees_pose_threat_to_Europe.pdf).

<sup>437</sup> Tore Bjørgo and John Horgan. *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and Collective Disengagement*. (Routledge, New York, 2008).

Furthermore, in highlighting the importance placed on creating and sustaining credibility by radical groups, this study suggests that examinations of radicalization should work to evaluate the role of an organization's credibility in facilitating the embrace of radical values and worldviews. As this thesis' literature review points out, scholars examining extremist propaganda and social movements view credibility as a key component of the resonance and persuasiveness of a group's message. While credibility has at times been acknowledged by scholars of radicalization, such as Wiktorowicz, who argued that "credibility of the messenger is a necessary prerequisite for frame alignment", it has received relatively little attention in analyses and empirical studies of the radicalization process.<sup>438</sup> Hofmann and Dawson have highlighted a similar short-coming within the radicalization research, noting that studies have overlooked the role of "charismatic authority", which like credibility, provides organizations or individuals with authority, legitimacy and 'soft-power', potentially allowing them to wield that power to persuade their audience to engage in collective action.<sup>439</sup> Studies that employ an interview process similar to that described above, where scholars interview active or former radicals and elicit explanations as to why they joined one jihadist group over another, and how they perceive the credibility of other groups on a range of issues (ex. implementing Shari'ah, *takfir*, suicide bombing) could provide insights into what common factors give jihadists their perception of credibility within their recruitment audiences. This kind of analysis could also yield further insights into the construction of targeted counter-narratives.

However, when approaching the problems posed by the Islamic State and other jihadist groups, from generating foreign fighters to inspiring home-grown attacks, it is important to recognize that the application of more effective counter-terrorism and counter-messaging campaigns are not comprehensive and permanent solutions, but interim fixes. While the Islamic State has been largely defeated in Iraq and Syria, the proximate causes of its rise are manifold, complex and remain largely unaddressed, as they are rooted in the history and socio-political environments of both the West and the Middle East. The roots of the Islamic State's rise and transnational appeal range from state failure, sectarian

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<sup>438</sup> Wiktorowicz, *Framing Jihad*, 164.

<sup>439</sup> David C. Hofmann and Lorne L. Dawson, "The Neglected Role of Charismatic Authority in the Study of Terrorist Groups and Radicalization," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 37, no. 4, (2014): 348-368, DOI: 10.1080/1057610X.2014.879436.

power struggles, and anger over foreign intervention, to anomie, discrimination and the failures of Western governments to foster integration and social acceptance. These multifaceted problems cannot be solved through enhanced counter-terrorism and counter-messaging campaigns that aim to prevent or dissuade Western radicals from joining jihadist groups. Sustainable solutions are far more complex.

In the Middle East, taking steps towards reducing the threat posed by jihadism will revolve around the creation and implementation of more inclusive and effective systems of governance. These systems must address the local-level grievances that caused a substantial number of Iraqi and Syrian Sunnis to see the Islamic State as a 'lesser evil' when compared with ruling governments.<sup>440</sup> Civil war and insurgency will have to be halted and demands for autonomy and recognition among different religious and ethnic groups will need to be balanced with increased inclusion in the political process, improved security, better service provision, and reduced corruption, all key factors that facilitated the Islamic State's expansion.<sup>441</sup> As the rise of the Islamic State from the ashes of Al Qaeda in Iraq has shown, preventing jihadism inevitably requires political solutions, not simply military and counter-terrorism ones.<sup>442</sup> Unfortunately, the environment of fear and division, and the economic and social tolls created by the Islamic State's violence and ongoing civil conflict in Iraq and Syria, are likely to render these already difficult-to-implement changes even more challenging. Implementing elements of a political solution, such as creating a viable post-war state in Syria and addressing feelings of Sunni victimhood and disaffection in Iraq, will likely pose a greater challenge than rolling back the Islamic State's territory and vanquishing it militarily. However, finding an answer to

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<sup>440</sup> Weiss and Hassan, 222-225.

<sup>441</sup> John R. Allen and Michael E. O'Hanlon, "Economics Could be the Key to Ending the Syrian Civil War", *Brookings Institution*, August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/08/09/economics-could-be-the-key-to-ending-the-syrian-civil-war/>

<sup>442</sup> Emma Sky. "New Hope for Iraq?" *Foreign Affairs*. April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2018. Accessed April 8, 2018. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2018-04-05/new-hope-iraq>; John R. Allen and Michael E. O'Hanlon, "Economics Could be the Key to Ending the Syrian Civil War", *Brookings Institution*, August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/08/09/economics-could-be-the-key-to-ending-the-syrian-civil-war/>

these daunting political questions is crucial in ensuring that the Islamic State does not stage a second resurgence.

In the West, challenging political and social questions will also need to be addressed to combat the appeal of jihadism. The rise of the Islamic State, and Al Qaeda before it, has dangerously intertwined Islamist militancy with issues of immigration, integration, religious freedom, and multiculturalism, further damaging often fraught relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in the West. One of the outcomes of this linkage has been xenophobic reactions that have created a tension between many countries' stated national values, and the deeply-held national identities of many of their citizens, which are perceived to be under threat. The 'securitization of Islam' has also increased tension by heaping suspicion and surveillance on Western Muslims, who have become associated with the violence of extremists. As a result, many Western Muslims have come to be seen as a security risk.<sup>443</sup> These tensions not only produce conflicts between the liberal values espoused by most Western states, and the practice and implementation of those values, but they also run the risk of amplifying many of the forces that undergird the Islamic State's appeal in the West, such as discrimination, identity crisis, and a sense of non-belonging. While no country will completely eliminate the threat posed by jihadist groups and inspired home-grown attackers, a key component of sustainable and long-term solutions lays in addressing failures of integration and producing inclusive political environments and national identities.

However, in the interim, as jihadist and other extremist groups become increasingly adept at wielding words as well as weapons, studies of their ever-more sophisticated messaging campaigns will assume greater importance in understanding and preventing their violence. As the Islamic State has emphatically shown us, the primeval appeals of war, violence, glory and agency, and the existential search for purpose, place and belonging, can push young men to orchestrate terror attacks against people they have never met, or abandon their Western homelands to fight and die in a country they have never been. What we have yet to fully grasp, however, is what role the propaganda of groups like the Islamic State plays in harnessing these powerful motivations, and how their ability to connect to these motives changes when the organizations' themselves face

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<sup>443</sup> Liz Fekete, "Anti-Muslim Racism and the European Security State", *Race and Class*, 46, no. 1 (2004) 5.

existential crises. By working to bridge the gap between real-world events and the distorted version of that reality constructed in the Islamic State's propaganda, this study has sought to provide answers to these questions, and in doing so, contribute in a small way to preventing the pain and destruction caused by violent extremism.

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## Appendix A

In addition to several pervasive thematic ‘pillars’ and messaging techniques, AG3 also contains an array of important but less pervasive post-victory sub-themes. While they differ, these sub-themes are all heavily reliant on faith-based reasoning and aim to either reinterpret or rationalize ISIS’ defeats in a way that allows the group to sustain its narrative of victory. An examination of several important but less prominent sub-themes is contained in the table below.

Victory Through Purification	<p>One of the methods that the Islamic State’s propagandists employ to maintain their narrative of victory is to argue that the group’s setbacks are a temporary process of purification that eliminates those of impure faith, rendering the group stronger and preparing it for future success. For example, in the article “Glad Tidings of Imminent Victory Come to the Patient”, the group states:</p> <p>“It should be clear then that after the trials and tribulations, the believing muwahhid stands solid, by his Lord’s permission, and that the munafiq and anyone with weak iman will fall. Thereafter, only the pure will remain. These are those whose cores have been cleansed and clarified of any impurities and filth of the dunya. Then, at that time only, the voice of truth will rise in their souls, and the answer will come to them, descending upon them in all its coolness and tranquility. “O! Verily the victory of Allah is near” (Al-Baqarah 214). Indeed such victory and conquest is near, as we find</p>
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	<p>the wind of our blessed Khilafah blowing from east to west, despite the claims of the enemy<sup>444</sup>.</p> <p>By employing the cleansing sub-theme, the Islamic State's propagandists provide their audience with a lens to interpret the group's struggles, portraying their setbacks as process that will infuse the organization with long-term strength, rather than prevent it from achieving victory.</p>
<p>Obedience &amp; The Obligation of Jihad</p>	<p>During AG3, there is a proliferation of content that seeks to encourage deference to authority and portray jihad as both a religious obligation. These sub-themes appear to be intended to dissuade mutinies or desertion, suggesting the articles are aimed primarily at the group's internal audience.</p> <p>For example, the authors cite a passage from a collection of hadith which states "The command for obedience is regarding every emir, whether or not he is the Khalifah", suggesting the group is trying to discourage infighting by reaffirming the notion that ISIS' members must obey all of their superiors, not just Baghdadi.<sup>445</sup></p> <p>In addition, the authors also appear to gear their messages at preventing their fighters from abandoning ISIS' jihad, citing a series of passages from the hadith that encourage</p>

<sup>444</sup> Rumiya Team, Glad Tidings of Imminent Victory Come to the Patient, 27.

<sup>445</sup> Rumiya Team, Paths to Victory, 20-23

	<p>obedience and discourage division and desertion. For example, the magazine includes a passage that states “Whoever leaves obedience, splits from the Jama’ah [community], and then dies, dies a jahili [ignorant] death”, suggesting that those fighters who abandon ISIS’ community (Jama’ah) will die a death of un-Islamic ignorance, which is seen by conservative Islamists as antithetical to their goals.<sup>446</sup> Similar warnings against the abandonment of jihad are issued in the articles like “A Treatise on Hypocrisy and Hypocrites”, where the authors, citing recognized medieval warrior-scholar Ibn Taymiyyah to portray deserters as “munafiqin” [hypocrites; traitors] filled with “cowardice and stinginess” for abandoning jihad.<sup>447</sup> Similarly, in “A Pledge to Fight to the Death”, after drawing on several hadith, the group also rules that “it is not permissible for any person who has made a pledge to fight to the death to break that pledge, and it is an even greater crime to do so in hard times for the mujahidin”.<sup>448</sup> By producing an array of scripturally-backed content that incentivizes obedience and disincentivizes dissent and the abandonment of jihad, the author’s appear to be directing their messaging at an active internal audience to quell disillusionment and maintain order in their ranks. Because of the nature of this messaging content, and the fact that it proliferates in AG3 when ISIS is facing its most serious military and territorial setbacks, it suggests ISIS’ setbacks</p>
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<sup>446</sup> “Jahiliyyah”, Oxford Islamic Studies Online, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e1157>; Rumiyah Team, “The Muslim Jama’ah,” *Rumiyah Issue 3*, November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 19.

<sup>447</sup> Rumiyah Team, A Treatise on Hypocrisy and Hypocrites, 20-21.

<sup>448</sup> Rumiyah Team, A Pledge to Fight to the Death, 25.

	<p>has pushed them to utilize their e-magazine as a tool to aid in organizational survival.</p>
<p>Gratitude</p>	<p>One of the sub-themes that emerges in AG3 is ‘Gratitude’, underscoring the “blessing” that the Caliphate has given the Ummah. Rhetorically, the authors ask their audience:</p> <p>“How difficult was the subjugation, the fitnah, and the affliction on the muwahhid mujahid before the blessing of the Jama’ah [community]! There were no schools in which his children could study, no scholars from whom he could seek knowledge, no courts where he could litigate... no dwellings in which he could live in peace and security”</p> <p>The authors juxtapose their portrayal of the Caliphate with life outside the Islamic State, claiming that their fighters would be residing “among the apostate policemen, judges, informants, spies, soldiers, and other murtaddin [hypocrites]”.<sup>449</sup> This passage underscores how the Islamic State seeks to cultivate a sense of gratitude for their state, which by this period has shrunk by over 30%. Similar sentiments of gratitude for the Caliphate are emphasized in Dabiq Issue 15 in an interview with a Finnish female Muslim convert and member of ISIS, who argues that despite “difficulties and hardship” one will face to become a part of the Islamic State, it will be “worth it” and they will “gratitude” towards Allah for allowing them to be apart of the Islamic</p>

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<sup>449</sup> Rumiya Team, The Religion of Allah and The Jama’ah of Muslims, 14-16.

	<p>State's Caliphate<sup>450</sup>. While the authors do not explicitly link the sub-theme of gratitude to their contracting state, the timing of the sub-theme's emergence—in AG3 when the group has lost significant portions of its territory—suggests it is intended to reinvigorate belief and excitement in the Islamic State's cause.</p>
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<sup>450</sup> Dabiq Team, How I Came to Islam by Umm Khalid al-Finlandiyya, 36-39.