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ARTICLE

## An analysis of Islamic State's *Dabiq* magazine

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### ABSTRACT

This article analyses *Dabiq* magazine to explore the strategic logic of Islamic State (IS) appeals to English-speaking Muslims. It offers the field a conceptual framework through which to analyse IS's communications strategy and a top-down empirical study of *Dabiq*'s contents. This paper argues that *Dabiq* appeals to its audiences by strategically designing in-group identity, Other, solution and crisis constructs which it leverages via value-, crisis- and dichotomy-reinforcing narratives. By fusing identity- and rational-choice appeals, IS provides its audiences with a powerful 'competitive system of meaning' that is designed to shape its readership's perceptions, polarise their support and drive their radicalisation.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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### KEYWORDS

*Dabiq*; Islamic State; ISIS; ISIL; propaganda

A major security issue for many Western nations concerns the flow of foreign fighters to the Middle East and the threat posed by home-grown, Islamist-inspired terrorists. Current estimates suggest that between 20,000 and 30,000 foreign fighters have travelled to Syria and Iraq between 2011 and 2014 (United Nations Security Council 2015). Given that between 10,000 and 20,000 foreign fighters are estimated to have travelled to Muslim lands between 1980 and 2010 (Hegghammer 2010: 53), the current wave of foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq represents 'the largest mobilization of foreign fighters in Muslim majority countries since 1945' (Neumann 2015). About 20 per cent of the current surge of foreign fighters are Westerners: most are believed to have joined Islamic State (IS) and Australians have often outnumbered many of their Western counterparts on a per capita basis (Abbott 2015; Neumann 2015; United Nations Security Council 2015). Indeed, the number of foreign fighters who have travelled to support IS has reportedly doubled over the 18 months since June 2014 (see The Soufan Group 2015) despite IS losing 12,800 km<sup>2</sup> in that same period (IHS Conflict Monitor 2015).

Meanwhile, IS-inspired home-grown terrorist plots and attacks seem to have spiked in many of these same Western nations, including in Australia which saw a third of all its terrorism-related arrests since 2001 occurring in a six month period beginning in late 2014 (Abbott 2015). A study of Islamist-inspired 'home grown' terrorism plots in Western nations between January 2011 to June 2015 found that 30 of 69 plots had an IS connection with 26 of those 30 occurring between July 2014 and June 2015

(Hegghammer and Nesser 2015: 19). Moreover, IS connected plots were almost twice as likely to be executed as non-IS connected plots despite most of those operatives not having met or communicated directly with IS members (Hegghammer and Nesser 2015: 19–20). A crucial factor behind these trends in the West and the swell of IS-inspired foreign fighters from the West is the seemingly magnetic appeal of IS's strategic communications campaign. A key component of that campaign has been *Dabiq* magazine.

This article analyses nine issues of *Dabiq* magazine as a means to explore the strategic logic of IS's communications campaign targeting Western Muslims. It applies an interpretive framework for analysing radical narratives to examine how *Dabiq*'s architects strategically design in-group, Other, crisis and solution constructs and leverages these via value-, dichotomy- and crisis-reinforcing narratives. Moreover, this study draws on a multidisciplinary conceptualisation of the radicalisation process (Ingram 2013: 63–74) to explore how *Dabiq*'s contents seek to radicalise its readership by triggering 'awakenings', driving the process of 'cyclical cognitive reinforcement' and legitimising political violence. *Dabiq*'s *raison d'être* is ultimately to convince its readers to support IS's caliphate by either travelling to IS-controlled lands or engaging in acts of domestic terrorism. This article argues that *Dabiq* is designed to achieve this in two interrelated ways. First, *Dabiq* offers its readership a powerful 'competitive system of meaning', that is, an alternative perspective of the world compared to that presented by its opponents, that acts as the 'lens' through which it shapes its readership's perceptions, polarises their support, and drives their radicalisation. Second, *Dabiq*'s architects deploy a diverse array of messaging that fuses rational- and identity-choice appeals as a means to ensure its message and broader 'system of meaning' resonates with a broad and diverse spectrum of potential supporters.

### Deciphering IS's 'strategic communications' campaign

IS's 'strategic communications' campaign, that is, its multidimensional communications strategy, has captured the world's media attention with its trademark slick production, gore and use of social media. Analyses of IS's communications strategy have tended to focus heavily on these three factors. From major publications by Weiss and Hassan (2015), Hall (2015), Stern and Berger (2015) and Al-'Ubaydi et al. (2014) to countless shorter analytical pieces (e.g., Farwell 2014; Fisher and Prucha 2014; Friis 2015), the appeal of IS's messaging has been largely explained by pointing to its professional production, graphic violence and effective use of social media. This article diverges from these trends in the current literature to explore *Dabiq*'s strategic logic via an examination of how its messages seek to shape its reader's perceptions and radicalise them to support IS's cause. In doing so, it contributes to two sets of scholarship: examinations of *Dabiq* magazine and studies of IS's 'strategic communications' (i.e., media, propaganda) campaign more broadly.

For example, Ryan (2014) and Gambhir (2014) analysed the structure and contents of early issues of *Dabiq* as a means to explore its strategy. Both emphasised the potency of its messaging with Gambhir arguing that *Dabiq* represents more than mere propaganda but 'an outward-looking articulation of Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham Caliphate vision' (2014: 10). Echoing these sentiments, Ryan (2014) asserted that 'the Islamic State is attempting to appeal over the heads of other communities to disaffected youth and

motivated young professionals'. This article is similarly interested in the strategy that drives *Dabiq's* contents. However it diverges from these studies by applying a unique conceptual framework to explore how *Dabiq* appeals to its readership via identity, crisis and solution constructs that are interplayed in narratives designed to leverage powerful psychosocial forces and shape supporter decision-making processes. Moreover, this study contributes to broader analyses of IS's communications strategy. For example, research by Fernandez (2015), Winter (2015) and Zelin (2015) have identified a varied array of themes that characterise IS's messaging. The diversity of themes in *Dabiq's* contents broadly augments their findings. As will be explored, the analytical approach adopted by this article also builds on the approaches introduced in previous analyses (Ingram 2014, 2015a).

### **IS's worldview**

IS's central ideological tenets are captured in its framing of (i) Islam as a perfect and timeless guide for all aspects of life, (ii) *jihad* as a Muslim obligation and *the* means to advance the 'true' Islam and protect the 'true' *ummah*, (iii) its *manhaj* (methodology) as replicating that of the Prophet Muhammad and the *salafs* implying that IS's politico-military successes (e.g., IS's caliphate) are a product of that fidelity, and (iv) current events as precursors to Armageddon (see Al-'Ubaydi et al. 2014; Bunzel 2015; McCants 2015; Wood 2015). IS's ideology is built on the legacy of modern Islamist ideologues like Sayyid Qutb and Abdullah Azzam whose influence is broadly evident in IS's belief that Islam is a perfect, timeless and all-encompassing guide for individual and collective life that must not be compromised by man-made ideologies. Echoing Azzam, IS's ideology frames *jihad* in defence of Muslim lands as an individual obligation (*fard 'ayn*) incumbent upon all able-bodied Muslims. Reflecting Qutb, IS have adopted the term *jahiliyah* (for more, see Calvert 2010), a reference to the malevolence and ignorance of pre-Islam Arabia, to describe the modern world. Indeed, *jahiliyyah* and *jihad* are important concepts in IS's worldview with the former capturing the depth of crisis afflicting all 'true' Muslims while the later represents the solution to that crisis. The urgency with which IS compels its supporters to confront the modern *jahiliyyah* with *jihad* is exponentially exacerbated by IS's *takfiri* proclivities, that is, its condemnation of other Muslims as apostates.

For IS, the world is sharply divided between true Muslims, that is, IS-aligned Sunnis, and literally everybody else. From IS's perspective, the world is steeped in a state of *jahiliyyah* caused by all those outside its narrow in-group. However, unlike the *jahiliyyah* of pre-Islam Arabia which emerged from ignorance, the modern *jahiliyyah* IS confronts is worse because it is a product of not just mere choice but a vicious contempt for the divine. Such a dire predicament can only be solved by waging *jihad* against those malevolent forces of disbelief including, or perhaps especially, those from within Islam. It is here that IS's *takfirist* drive emerges: Islam itself must be purged of co-religionists that are deemed non-Muslim. The simultaneous purification of *jahili* elements from Islam and the world more broadly requires *jihad* but also a sanctuary from that *jahiliyyah* in the form of the Caliphate. In short, IS-aligned Sunnis must unify under the Caliphate to fulfil the prophecies preceding the coming apocalypse. IS's politico-military goal – to establish and govern its caliphate in accordance with the *manhaj* of the Prophet and *salafs* – is inextricably tied to these ideological tenets. While IS's ideology fuels its strategy,

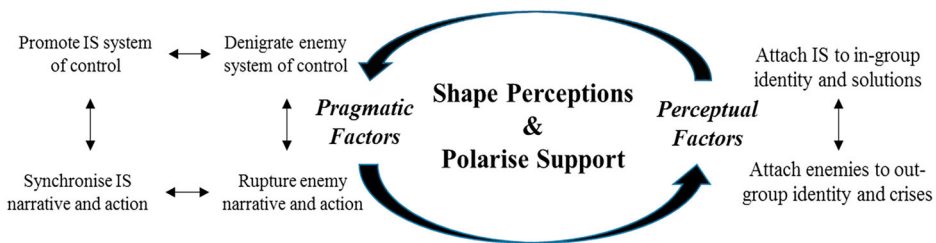
IS's politico-military strategy is the product of that ideology. This analysis examines how IS uses *Dabiq* to 'sell' this vision to English-speaking audiences, especially in the West.

### **Shape perceptions, polarise support**

The overarching purpose of IS's IO campaign is to shape its audience's perceptions in line with its worldview, polarise their support and mobilise them towards action by leveraging a combination of pragmatic and perceptual factors in its messaging (Ingram 2015a). This strategic trait is not unique to IS. In fact, it is broadly echoed in Tse-Tung's (2000 [1937]) *On Guerrilla Warfare*, the Irish Republican Army's (1985 [c.1950s]) *Handbook for Volunteers*, Guevara's (2007 [1961]) *Guerrilla Warfare* and al-Muqrin's (2009 [2003]) 'A Practical Course for Guerrilla War'. These pioneers of modern insurgency thinking universally agree that propaganda messaging should be used to promote the insurgency's politico-military apparatus *and* generate popular support for 'the cause'. After all, modern insurgencies seek to implement both their own politico-military apparatus – that is, what Fall (1998) describes as a 'competitive system of control' – and an alternative agenda or 'cause' – that is, a 'competitive system of meaning' designed to act as the 'lens' through which its audiences perceive the conflict.

Figure 1 graphically represents the overarching strategic logic of IS's strategic communications campaign. Recognising that effectively shaping audience perceptions and polarising their support will be crucial in mobilising supporters towards action, IS communicates leverage two sets of factors. IS's appeals to pragmatic factors are designed to promote its 'system of control' and synchronise its messaging with politico-military actions in the field. It also seeks to denigrate the 'systems of control' of IS's enemies and rupture the link between its enemies' narratives and their politico-military actions. By drawing on pragmatic factors in its communiques, IS are imploring its audiences to make rational-choice decisions based on a cost-benefit analysis of options (also see March and Heath 1994).

In addition to rational-choice appeals, IS communicates leverage identity-choice appeals. IS's appeals to perceptual factors draw upon in-group identity, out-group identity (Other), solution and crisis constructs as a means to coax its audience into making what March and Heath (1994) describe as 'logic of appropriateness' decisions, that is, choices made in accordance with one's identity. Reflecting a strategic logic common to the communication strategies of charismatic leaders and other radical groups (see Ingram 2013; 2015b), IS uses this type of messaging to frame itself as the champion and protector of



**Figure 1.** The strategic logic of IS's propaganda campaign.

the in-group identity (Sunni Muslims), IS's enemies as malevolent Others responsible for in-group perceptions of crisis and, thus, IS as the bearers of solutions. After all, identities play an essential role as cognitive prisms through which individuals and groups interpret the world. Attaching solution and crisis constructs to respective in- and out-group identities further enhances these perceptual qualities, especially during times of crisis.

By drawing upon pragmatic and perceptual factors, IS's messaging seeks to appeal to the broadest spectrum of potential supporter motivations *and* mutually boost the resonance of identity- and rational-choice appeals. The more audiences perceive IS's 'system of control' as more effective than its enemies, the more likely IS's appeals to perceptual factors will resonate (and vice versa). Moreover, IS shapes its messaging dependent on the target audience tending to emphasise pragmatic factors in communiques targeting local audiences and perceptual factors when targeting transnational audiences. Given *Dabiq* primarily targets transnational audiences, it is necessary to expand upon the perceptual dimension of this model.

### ***An interpretive framework for radical narrative analysis***

The interpretive framework for radical narrative analysis facilitates an examination of how radical narratives strategically design in-group identity, solution, out-group identity (Other) and crisis constructs and interplays these via value-, dichotomy- and crisis reinforcing narratives to drive its readership's radicalisation. This analysis thus contributes to scholarship that analyses how radical narratives seek to leverage identity constructs as a means to radicalise their audiences towards support of 'the cause' and engagement in politically motivated violence (e.g., Ingram 2013; Johnson 2007; Smith 2004). This study also builds on and contributes to radicalisation literature that argues identity construction processes play a central role in not only driving individuals towards extremism and extremist groups but engagement in politically motivated violence (e.g., Kinnvall 2004; Rabbie 1991; Ruthven 2004; Silke 2003a). It is pertinent to begin by defining 'identity', 'crisis' and 'solution'.

For the purposes of this study, 'identity' is defined as that package of values, rooted in an historical narrative, strategically constructed in response to a socio-historically specific reality (Ingram 2013: 51). Values play a central role in this definition reflecting the cognitive role identity constructs tend to play as 'lenses' through which actors and events are perceived, meaning generated and actions legitimised. As Rokeach (1970: 160) argues, values act 'as a standard or criterion for guiding action, for developing and maintaining attitudes towards relevant objects or situations, for justifying one's own and other's actions and attitudes, for morally judging self and others, and for comparing self with others'. Another important feature of this approach is the role of psychological and sociological (i.e., psychosocial) factors in the strategic construction of identities (see Hall 1992: 273–316; Martin 1995: 5–20; Sen 1999). Building on this notion, two sets of psychosocial factors play major roles in identity construction processes during radicalisation.

Perceptions of crisis – characterised by the Other (out-group identity), breakdown of tradition and uncertainty – constitute the first set of factors and are a crucial psychosocial driver of radicalisation. Reflecting the often relational nature of identity construction processes, the Other triggers comparisons of inter-identity values that often have implications for in-group meaning and status (see Curle 1972; Hermans and Dimaggio 2007: 31–61;

Silke 2003b: 228). Just as one may develop what one is by what one is not, the Other tends to act as a barometer for the state of the in-group and, particularly during times of in-group crisis, a source of threat. This often emerges due to the second factor, the breakdown of tradition, which refers to the perception that historically rooted norms of belief and practice associated with the in-group identity are changing due to the influence (i.e., threat) of Others (see Guth 1996; Turner and Virick 2008; Wieviorka 2004). These two factors often act as catalysts of the third factor: uncertainty. Characterised by complexity, ambiguity, deficit knowledge and unpredictability (Hermans and Dimaggio 2007: 34), uncertainty's role in identity construction processes, especially leading to individual commitment to extremist ideologies and groups, is empirically well established (e.g., Doosje et al. 2013; Hogg et al. 2010). The combination of Others, eroding traditions and uncertainty that constitute perceptions of crisis act as the 'pushing' forces of radicalisation.

Perceptions of crisis tend to induce a need in individuals and groups for a 'solution' – characterised by commitment to the in-group, the strengthening of traditions and certainty – that acts as 'pulling' forces during radicalisation. The duality underpinning solution and crisis constructs captures their simultaneous 'pushing' and 'pulling' effects during radicalisation. For example, to alleviate feelings of uncertainty, individuals and groups will search for solutions that promise certainty, which this study argues is characterised by simplicity, stability, understanding and predictability. This contention is strongly supported by empirical studies that have shown individuals exhibit a variety of confirmation biases and a proclivity towards extremist ideologies and groups when facing uncertainty (e.g., Hogg et al. 2013; Swann et al. 2009). Similarly, to confront a threatening Other deemed responsible for the perceived breakdown of tradition, individuals and groups may turn to solutions that promise to confront the Other and strengthen the in-group and its traditions (e.g., Ingram 2013; Kinnvall 2004; Silke 2003a). Powerful dualities between in-group and out-group identities and solution and crisis constructs lie at the heart of the radicalisation process. To appreciate how and why radical narratives play upon these constructs, it is necessary to briefly outline their role in the radicalisation process.

The approach to radicalisation adopted in this article builds on the legacy of scholars such as Crenshaw (1998), Pape (2005), Silke (2003a) and Sprinzak (1991) who argue that radicalisation is a process of escalating phases characterised by certain factors and signatures that reflect ideological, psychological and political changes (see McCauley and Moskaleiko 2008; Rabbie 1991; Ruthven 2004). This study conceptualises radicalisation as the process by which an individual or collective increasingly adheres to a selectively literalist interpretation of an identity narrative (e.g., an ideology), a response triggered and catalysed by perceptions of crisis which *can* lead to the legitimisation of and engagement in violence against perceived Others as a solution to that crisis (Ingram 2013: 65). It follows that the radicalisation process is characterised by cognitive and perceptual transitions – which trigger and are triggered by changes to ideological beliefs and political attitudes – that are inherent to the adoption of increasingly bifurcated in- and out-group identities. As identities help to provide the lenses through which individuals and groups perceive the world, develop meaning and legitimise actions, increasingly rigid and dichotomised identities shape and are shaped by perceptions of crisis and solution constructs. For those that reach the latter stages of radicalisation, violence manifests as the product of a de-legitimisation of incumbent authorities and a perceived need to defend the in-group (see Bartlett and Miller 2012; Juergensmeyer 1997; Sprinzak 1991).

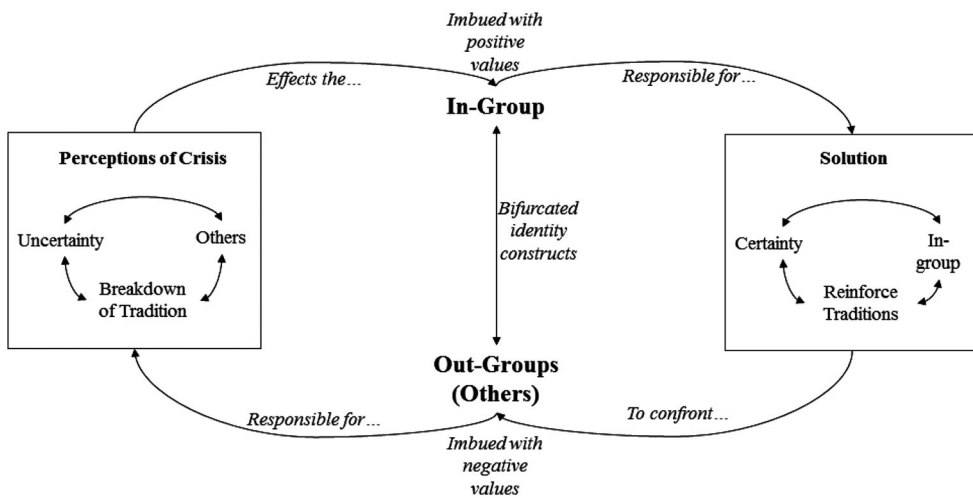
While beyond the scope and necessity of this study to delve into the nuances of the ‘Cognitive Awakening, Opening and Shaping’, ‘Cyclical Cognitive Reinforcement’ and the ‘Violence Legitimation and Mobilisation’ stages of the radicalisation model adopted here (see Ingram 2013: 63–74; 2015b: 562–67), the role of ‘awakenings’, ‘cyclical cognitive reinforcement’ and the ‘violence threshold’ are focus points of the *Dabiq* analysis and require elaboration.

**Awakenings**

The radicalisation process may be triggered or catalysed by a ‘cognitive awakening’ that deeply effects the individual and creates a ‘cognitive opening’ in which the individual is primed to contemplate their identity and its broader personal and even socio-political implications (see Ingram 2013: 66–68; Wiktorowicz 2006). Awakenings can be triggered by seemingly unremarkable occurrences or what Iborra (2005: 92) describes as a ‘turning point’: ‘a subjective perception of an experience that entails a change in the developmental direction of the person’. Typically the awakening will be caused by one or a combination of the Other, the breakdown of tradition or uncertainty. Radical narratives seek to trigger such awakenings in their readership often by presenting emotive stories of the awakening experiences of its own members (e.g., Ingram 2015b: 573–74).

**Cyclical cognitive reinforcement**

A crucial psychosocial dynamic of the radicalisation process is ‘cyclical cognitive reinforcement’ (CCR) (Ingram 2013: 54–55). As represented in Figure 2, CCR refers to the process by which increasingly bipolar in- and out-group identities act as the cognitive prisms through which perceptions of crisis are exacerbated which, in turn, drives the construction of increasingly bifurcated identities. When the Other is deemed responsible for uncertainty and the breakdown of tradition, the in-group manifests as an existential (via



**Figure 2.** Cyclical cognitive reinforcement.



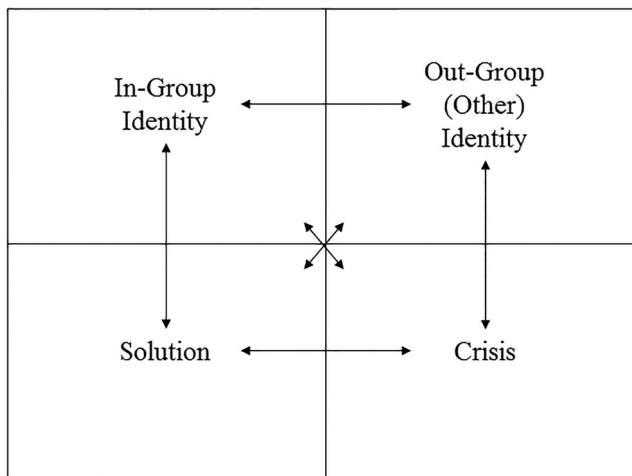
an explanatory narrative) and physical (via a collective of likeminded individuals) sanctuary from this malaise. As Hogg and Adelman (2013: 437) argue:

[S]ome types of groups and identities are better suited than others to self-uncertainty reduction through self-categorization – specifically, distinctive and well-structured groups that have clear boundaries and membership criteria, and consensual and prescriptive attitudinal behavioural attributes grounded in a relatively homogenous world view. To reduce self-uncertainty people seek these groups out, or try to transform pre-existing membership groups to have these attributes. It is but a short step from here to the popular notion of ‘extremism’.

As perceptions of crisis become increasingly acute and attached to supposedly complicit Others, this shapes both out-group identity construction by the in-group (‘identity production’, Figure 2) and in-group identity construction by the in-group (‘identity formation’, Figure 2). As Silke (2003b: 228) argues, ‘social psychology has long appreciated that groups in conflict become extremely polarised in their view of each other’. Bipolarised perceptions of the world thus work to simultaneously solidify the link between the out-group and crisis and the imperative to implement the in-group’s solution. As Hogg et al. (2010: 1065) assert:

[S]elf-uncertainty in conjunction with feelings that one’s cherished attitudes, values, and practices are under threat [i.e. the Other and breakdown of tradition] forms a toxic and socially dangerous mix – an environment in which people identify with extreme groups that have radical agendas for action and may reject moderate groups with gradualist agendas.

One of the key ways radical narratives attempt to trigger and fuel CCR processes in its readership is by variously leveraging strategically designed in-group, Other, crisis and solution constructs. Represented by vertical arrows (Figure 3), value-reinforcing messages tie the in-group to solutions and the Other to perceptions of crisis. This type of messaging buttresses the innate positive traits and actions of the in-group and the negative traits and actions of out-groups. Represented by horizontal arrows (Figure 3), dichotomy-reinforcing messages tend to highlight the contrast between the values of in- and out-groups or



**Figure 3.** The value-, dichotomy- and crisis-reinforcing interplay.

solution and crisis constructs. This type of messaging is typically designed to generate psychological, existential and socio-political anxieties in the readership whilst highlighting dualities as representative of clear-cut options facing the readership (i.e., in-group or Other, solution or crisis). Finally, crisis-reinforcing messages (Figure 3), tie the in-group to crisis and the Other to victory. These messages are often highly emotive and typically seek to underscore how the treachery of supposed in-group members are linked to in-group crises. While value-, dichotomy- and crisis-reinforcing dynamics often emerge, for example, during interactions between in-and out-group members, radical narratives are calibrated to strategically design and variously interplay these key constructs as a means to catalyse CCR and drive its readership's radicalisation towards violence.

### **The violence threshold**

This final strategic and psychological stage of the radicalisation process is characterised by the legitimisation of and mobilisation for engagement in violence such as terrorism (see Bartlett and Miller 2012; Crenshaw 1998; Sprinzak 1991). Crossing the 'violence threshold' signals an extreme bifurcation of in- and out-group identities – the former is pure and superior and the latter filthy and evil – while gravely acute perceptions of crisis now merely highlight the urgency with which a more radical solution must be imposed: violence against Others. Two crucial signatures of crossing the violence threshold are particularly pertinent for the *Dabiq* case study. Firstly, self-perceptions of in-group superiority may be a crucial precursor for militant violence. As Smith (2004: 431) argues, 'when trying to predict whether a group will engage in terrorism, it may be more important to examine how the group describes itself – as opposed to how it describes its opponents'. Secondly, a war narrative is a powerful mechanism to legitimise violence, motivate operatives and morally disengage from targets. As Juergensmeyer (2002: 31) asserts: 'War suggests an all-or-nothing struggle against an enemy who is determined to destroy. No compromise is deemed possible. The very existence of the opponent is a threat ...' Identifying these trends in *Dabiq* will be important for exploring how it coaxes its audience over the violence threshold.

### **Islamic State's *Dabiq* (issues 1–9)**

In the months preceding *Dabiq*'s inaugural release in July 2014, IS published three issues of *Islamic State News* (May–June 2014) and four issues of *Islamic State Report* (June 2014) with contents dominated by photographic reports. *Dabiq*'s architects explained the rationale for adopting a larger format:

After a review of some of the comments received on the first issues of Islamic State News and Islamic State Report, AlHayat Media Center decided to carry on the effort ... into a periodical magazine focusing on issues of *tawhid* [oneness of God], *manhaj* [methodology], *hijrah* [migration], *jihad* [combat], and *jama'ah* [organisation]. (*Dabiq* 2014a: 3)

*Dabiq* is a location in Aleppo, northern Syria, where the Prophet Muhammad stated that events leading to End Times would occur (see *Dabiq* 2014a: 4–5). Each issue opens with the following Abu Musab al-Zarqawi quote (*Dabiq* 2014a: 2): 'The spark has been lit here in Iraq, and its heat will continue to intensify – by Allah's permission – until it burns the

crusader armies in Dabiq.’ With its title and this opening quote, *Dabiq* plunges its readers into a world of acute crisis requiring a choice between the forces of purity or evil before the first article even appears.

### Methodology

This case study features two interrelated streams of analysis. The first examines how *Dabiq*’s architects have strategically designed in-group identity, Other, crisis and solution constructs and leverages these via value-, dichotomy- and crisis-reinforcing messaging. The second explores the different narrative approaches used in *Dabiq* to shape the perceptions, polarise the support and, ultimately, radicalise its readership. This analysis particularly focuses on how *Dabiq*’s messaging attempts to trigger awakenings, drive CCR processes and coax its readers over the violence threshold. To these ends, quantitative analysis was used to assess how *Dabiq*’s architects prioritised value-, dichotomy- and crisis-reinforcing narratives while qualitative narrative analysis was applied to analyse the nuances of *Dabiq*’s messaging.

This analysis began by distinguishing between three types of *Dabiq* items:

- *Articles*: Longer written pieces, typically one to several pages long accompanied by pertinent images, that focus on issues, events, jurisprudential opinions or a combination of these in an historical or contemporary context.
- *Statements*: Short written pieces, typically several sentences to three paragraphs in length, that often feature excerpts from works by prominent historical and contemporary figures (e.g., speeches or written publications) or descriptions of photographic reports.
- *Advertisements*: Identical in format and style to advertisements in any magazine, these items typically contain short statements or excerpts from Islamic texts accompanied by colorful imagery.

Distinct criteria were established to assess whether items in *Dabiq* were primarily designed to communicate a value-, dichotomy- or crisis-reinforcing message. Table 1 contains the criteria that were used to evaluate the ‘primary focus’ of an item and the broader context for that ‘primary focus’. For example, an item that constructed the in-group identity with positive and empowering values (e.g., bravery) and linked that construct to solutions (or vice versa) would be categorised as in-group/solution and thus a

**Table 1.** Primary focus criteria for *Dabiq* items.

Primary focus	Criteria
In-group identity construction	The item attaches values and/or an historical narrative to construct the in-group identity
Other (Out-Group) identity construction	The item attaches values and/or an historical narrative to construct the Other identity
Solution construction	The item leverages <i>certainty</i> , the reinforcement of tradition, and supporting the in-group and/or confronting the Other to construct a solution
Perception of crisis construction	The item leverages <i>uncertainty</i> , the breakdown of tradition, and the Other to shape perceptions of crisis
Operational guidance	The item provides operational guidance pertaining to engagement in or support of violence against the Other

value-reinforcing message. Alternatively, if an item contrasted an in-group identity imbued with positive values (e.g., benevolence) with an out-group identity imbued with negative values (e.g., barbarity) that item would be deemed in-group/Other and categorised as a dichotomy-reinforcing message.

Each item was assessed based solely on how the *explicitly stated content* related to the criteria outlined in Table 1. A more subjective method based on what could be *implied* from an item’s message could result in any item being designated to almost any category. For example, an item that focused primarily on constructing the in-group identity as virtuous and responsible for implementing solutions could be subjectively interpreted as *implying* that the Other is evil and responsible for crises. Consequently, rather than a clear in-group/solution assessment, such an item could be arbitrarily assessed in any number of ways. Thus coding decisions focused only on the dominant linkages explicitly articulated in each item. If no clear ‘primary focus’ was identifiable, typically due to a lengthy article covering a broad range of issues, then the item was categorised as ‘combination’. Three items were identified as ‘administrative’ and not included in the analysed data set. One hundred and sixty-four items across nine issues of *Dabiq* were categorised based on this coding methodology, totals calculated and percentages generated.

**Results**

Table 2 contains the first set of results as a measure of item type by primary focus. Articles (57.93 per cent) are the most common type of item in *Dabiq* followed by statements (39.63 per cent) and advertisements (2.44 per cent). Articles were closely balanced between solution/crisis (28.421 per cent), in-group/solution (25.263 per cent) and in-group/Other (21.053 per cent). Solution/crisis (56.92 per cent) was the most prevalent form of statement messaging while most ads were devoted to in-group/solution messaging (75 per cent).

**Table 2.** Breakdown by primary focus and item type, *Dabiq* issues 1–9.

<i>Dabiq</i> magazine, issues 1–9			
Item type	Total number (%)	Primary focus	Number (%)
Article	95 (57.93)	In-group/solution	24 (25.263)
		Other/perceptions of crisis	11 (11.579)
		In-group/other	20 (21.053)
		Solution/perceptions of crisis	27 (28.421)
		In-group/perceptions of crisis	9 (9.474)
		Combination	4 (4.210)
		Operational	–
		Statement	65 (39.63)
		Other/perceptions of crisis	6 (9.23)
		In-group/other	6 (9.23)
		Solution/perceptions of crisis	37 (56.92)
		In-group/perceptions of crisis	–
		Combination	–
		Operational	–
Ad	4 (2.44)	In-group/solution	3 (75)
		Other/perceptions of crisis	–
		In-group/other	–
		Solution/perceptions of crisis	–
		In-group/perceptions of crisis	1 (25)
		Combination	–
		Operational	–

The second set of results (Table 3) is based on a breakdown of value-, dichotomy- and crisis-reinforcing categories by primary focus across all items. Over half of *Dabiq*'s contents are devoted to dichotomy-reinforcing messages (54.88 per cent) followed by value-reinforcing appeals (36.58 per cent). Across all of *Dabiq*'s contents, solution/crisis (39.024 per cent) and in-group/solution (26.219 per cent) messages were the two most common categories.

### Analysis

How *Dabiq*'s architects prioritise value-, dichotomy- and crisis-reinforcing messages provides important insights into the strategic logic of its appeals to Western Muslims. Articles are a particularly important barometer because they contain *Dabiq*'s lengthiest and most detailed analysis and are the most prevalent (57.93 per cent) item type. *Dabiq*'s articles are dominated by solution/crisis (28.421 per cent), in-group/solution (25.263 per cent) and in-group/Other (21.053 per cent) narratives. This emulates the pattern of prioritisation across all *Dabiq*'s items: solution/crisis (39.024 per cent), in-group/solution (26.219 per cent) and in-group/Other (15.854 per cent). The overarching dominance of dichotomy-reinforcing articles (49.474 per cent) – that is, the total of in-group/Other and solution/crisis articles – closely mirrors the overall dominance of dichotomy-reinforcing items (54.88 per cent) with value-reinforcing narratives (36.58 per cent), particularly in-group/solution messaging (26.219 per cent), playing a crucial augmenting role.

From a strategic logic perspective, these findings suggest that *Dabiq*'s architects are prioritising rational-choice appeals, reflected in the dominance of dichotomy-reinforcing messages juxtaposing IS's solution and crisis constructs, reinforced by identity-choice appeals tied to in-group/solution and in-group/Other narratives. Most solution/crisis items are featured in *Dabiq*'s regular 'Islamic State Reports' section which promotes how IS's politico-military actions are confronting the Other (i.e., IS's enemies) and addressing Sunni perceptions of crisis. Equally significant is the augmenting role of in-group/solution messaging designed to bind and empower Western Muslims towards either acts of 'lone wolf' terrorism in the West or traveling to IS's Caliphate. These patterns across nine issues reflect a strategic rationale that fuses rational- and identity-choice appeals: a potent mix for not just shaping perceptions and polarising support but driving radicalisation. After all, the more that rational-choice decisions are processed through identity lenses, and vice versa, the more urgent commitment to the constructed in-group (i.e., IS) and its politico-military agenda (i.e., violence against Others) will become.

**Table 3.** Breakdown of categorisations by primary focus, *Dabiq* (issues 1–9).

<i>Dabiq</i> magazine, issues 1–9			
Categorisation	Number (%)	Primary focus	Number (%)
Value-reinforcing	60 (36.58)	In-group/solution	43 (26.219)
		Other/perceptions of crisis	17 (10.366)
Dichotomy-reinforcing	90 (54.88)	In-group/other	26 (15.854)
		Solution/perceptions of crisis	64 (39.024)
Crisis-reinforcing	10 (6.10)	In-group/perceptions of crisis	10 (6.098)
Other	4 (2.44)	Combination	4 (2.439)
		Operational	–

### **Value-reinforcing messaging**

Over 70 per cent of *Dabiq*'s value-reinforcing messaging is in-group/solution focused. These items incessantly remind its readers that IS are the champions of Sunni Muslims, defeaters of Sunni enemies and the bearers of a divinely ordained solution:

Raise your head high, for today – by Allah's grace – you have a state and Khilafah, which will return your dignity, might, rights, and leadership. It is a state where the Arab and non-Arab, the white man and black man, the easterner and westerner are all brothers. (*Dabiq* 2014b: 7)

IS calls for its supporters to place primacy on their Sunni Muslim identity by emphasising the core values that bind the in-group: 'It is the kinship between us and the people, for our scales ... are divine, our laws are Quranic, and our judgements are upon the prophetic tradition' (*Dabiq* 2015a: 3). *Dabiq* promises its readers that commitment to the in-group and its values is the mechanism for solving individual and collective crises. For example, at an individual level, *Dabiq* declares that commitment to Islam will extinguish uncertainty but requires of Muslims a 'certainty in Allah's promise' (*Dabiq* 2014c: 4) and 'this certainty is the one that should pulse in the heart of every mujahid ...' (*Dabiq* 2014c: 5; 2014d: 3). Moreover, *Dabiq*'s messaging uses IS's tangible socio-political successes as a mechanism to empower this narrative:

The revival of the Khilafah gave each individual Muslim a concrete and tangible entity to satisfy his natural desire for belonging to something greater. The satisfaction of this desire brought life back to the zeal latent in Muslims' hearts ... . (*Dabiq* 2015c: 57)

IS frames its socio-political agenda as the product of its role as champions and protectors of Sunnis: 'for what good is there in liberating a city only to leave its inhabitants steeped in misguidance and misery, suffering from ignorance and disunity, and disconnected from the Book of Allah and the Sunnah of His Messenger' (*Dabiq* 2014e: 17).

IS dehumanises and demonises anyone who is not an IS-aligned Sunni Muslim. In *Dabiq*, Others are imbued with attributes such as 'arrogance, envy, anger, and desire' (*Dabiq* 2014f: 29) and described as 'filthy' (*Dabiq* 2014g: 48) and 'evil' (*Dabiq* 2015d: 15). IS also uses socio-culturally 'loaded' terms such as: *kufir* (disbeliever), *safawi* (a derogatory term for Shia), *murtaddin* (one who abandon's Islam) and apostate *sahwah* (Awakening participants), which are derogatory and have jurisprudential connotations justifying violence. *Dabiq* uses the term *jahiliyyah* to describe the crises afflicting Sunni Muslims (see 2015e: 20–23) to highlight Other-generated uncertainty and broken traditions and imply that IS are leading Islam's modern resurgence. Yet, only 10.366 per cent of *Dabiq*'s items are Other/crisis. This reflects a pattern in *Dabiq* whereby the Other is rarely linked to crises without IS simultaneously describing how it supports Sunnis and seeks to alleviate their crises.

### **Dichotomy-reinforcing messaging**

The dominance of dichotomy-reinforcing items in *Dabiq* epitomises the fusion of identity- and rational-choice appeals that characterises IS's broader IO campaign (Ingram 2015a). 15.854 per cent of *Dabiq*'s contents are in-group/Other messaging that contrast the bipolarity of in- and out-group identities. As Baghdadi declared:

[T]he world today has been divided into two camps and two trenches, with no third camp present: The camp of Islam and faith, and the camp of *kufur* (disbelief) and hypocrisy – the camp of the Muslims and the mujahidin everywhere, and the camp of the jews, the crusaders, their allies, and with them the rest of the nations and religions of *kufur*, all being led by America and Russia, and being mobilized by the jews. (*Dabiq* 2014b: 10)

*Dabiq* often refers to this bifurcation of the world as the destruction or extinction of the ‘grayzone’ (e.g., see *Dabiq* 2015c) and demands that its readers ‘choose to be from one of the two camps’ (*Dabiq* 2014h: 12; *Dabiq* 2015b: 14). Solution/crisis messages augment this narrative by framing IS’s solution and crisis constructs as products of dichotomous in- and out-group’s values. As IS’s chief spokesman, Shaykh Abu Muhammad al-‘Adnani, proclaimed:

The time has come for the Ummah of Muhammad ... to wake up from its sleep, remove the garments of dishonour, and shake off the dust of humiliation and disgrace, for the era of lamenting and moaning has gone, and the dawn of honor has emerged anew. The sun of jihad has risen. The glad tidings of good are shining. Triumph looms on the horizon. The signs of victory have appeared. (*Dabiq* 2014b: 9)

Solution/crisis items also have a functional role as a means to demonstrate how IS’s politico-military actions in the field are *tangibly* addressing Sunni needs. For example, *Dabiq*’s ‘Islamic State Reports’ section uses largely rational-choice appeals to promote IS’s ‘system of control’ and denigrate its enemies’ politico-military efforts. This section contains articles and statements covering the full gamut of IS’s politico-military efforts from military operations (*Dabiq* 2015f: 17–19), economic (*Dabiq* 2014i: 18–19) and infrastructure developments (*Dabiq* 2014j: 27–29) to social welfare (*Dabiq* 2014k: 38), healthcare programs (*Dabiq* 2015g: 24–26) and the apparent lies and failings of its enemies (*Dabiq* 2015h: 32). As *Dabiq* assures its readers:

In the midst of a raging war with multiple fronts and numerous enemies, life goes on in the Islamic State. The soldiers of Allah do not liberate a village, town or city, only to abandon its residents and ignore their needs. (*Dabiq* 2014j: 27)

### **Crisis-reinforcing messaging**

Constituting 6.098 per cent of *Dabiq*’s contents, crisis-reinforcing messages reflect IS’s most explicit *takfirist* proclamations. IS condemn a diverse array of Sunni groups as traitors including Syrian opposition forces (*Dabiq* 2015i: 6–7) and the Afghan Taliban (*Dabiq* 2015j: 61–62). Al-Qaeda represents IS’s most significant ‘Sunni enemy’ because, in many respects, both are competing for the same constituencies, that is, Sunnis (e.g., *Dabiq* 2014l: 40–55). Indeed *Dabiq* condemns any Muslim who criticises IS, especially clerics, as sell-outs responsible for Islam’s modern decline:

Such people have had their religion diluted and, not surprisingly, are always amongst the first to speak out in any case where the mujahidin display their harshness towards crusaders, attempting to disguise their criticism towards the mujahidin as concern for the image of Islam. (*Dabiq* 2015k: 6)

*Dabiq* warns its readers of articulate Muslim clerics by citing a *hadith* in which the Prophet Muhammad was asked: ‘... “What is this that you fear for your *Ummah* more than the Dajjal [Anti-christ]?” He responded, “The misleading imams”’ (*Dabiq* 2014m: 38).

*Dabiq's* crisis-reinforcing narratives appear to be designed to both increase perceptions of crisis and prime its readership for dismissing criticisms of IS.

### ***IS's 'competitive system of meaning'***

*Dabiq's* 'competitive system of meaning' portrays a lethally bi-polar world in the midst of a cosmic war leading to Armageddon. Through this 'lens', *Dabiq's* readers are bombarded with identity- and rational-choice appeals that demand Sunni Muslims join IS:

As the world progresses towards al-Malhamah al-Kubra [the battle preceding Armageddon], the option to stand on the sidelines as a mere observer is being lost. As those with hearts diseased by hypocrisy and *bid'ah* are driven towards the camp of *kufir*, those with a mustard seed of sincerity and Sunnah are driven towards the camp of *iman*. (*Dabiq* 2015c: 66)

While *Dabiq's* imagery is eye-catching, its stylistic approach is crucial as a means to shape its readerships' perceptions. Central to *Dabiq's* stylistics is its extensive use of direct quotations from *suras*, *hadiths* and prominent Islamist figures. This strategy is used so extensively that the author's words often play a secondary role in *Dabiq* articles. For example, an article titled 'The Islamic State before al-Malhamah' (*Dabiq* 2014c: 5–11) appeals for foreigners to migrate to IS's Caliphate. Beginning with Zarqawi's declaration 'that there is no real jihad in Iraq except with the presence of the muhajirin [migrants] ...' (*Dabiq* 2014c: 5), the article literally reads as a series of quotations from speeches and *hadiths*. This style has the effect of portraying *Dabiq's* narrative as inherently legitimate because its wording is taken directly from revered sources. This article concludes by briefly examining specific mechanisms used in *Dabiq* to radicalise its readers.

### ***Awakenings***

Three types of 'awakening' triggers are particularly prominent in *Dabiq*. First, eschatological triggers are used to remind *Dabiq's* readership of Armageddon and IS's role as the 21st Century's Noah (Al-Kinani 2014: 5–11). Second, *Dabiq* draws on jurisprudential triggers, for instance, to frame *jihad* as an individual obligation for all Muslims (e.g., *Dabiq* 2015l: 54). Third, *Dabiq* uses triggers designed specifically for Western audiences such as existential anxieties associated with the banality of Western life:

The modern day slavery of employment, work hours, wages, etc., is one that leaves the Muslim in a constant feeling of subjugation to a *kafir* master. He does not live the might and honor that every Muslim should live and experience. (*Dabiq* 2014n: 29)

The implications are obvious: IS offers a life of excitement and profound meaning. A message reinforced via articles that profile the experiences of its foreign fighters (e.g., *Dabiq* 2015m: 62).

### ***Cyclical cognitive reinforcement***

*Dabiq's* contents are designed to catalyse CCR processes in its readership. At a macro-level, every issue combines value-, dichotomy- and crisis-reinforcing narratives as a means to drive CCR processes. At a micro-level, each item is designed to uniquely



leverage different aspects of the CCR dynamic. ‘The flood of the Mubalahah’ (*Dabiq* 2014f: 20–30) is an excellent example of an article that fuses identity- and rational-choice appeals to trigger the ‘cognitive domino’ effect of CCR processes. It describes the *mubalahah* (imploring Allah to curse the deceitful party) al-Adnani declared between IS and Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) in March 2014 in response to accusations from JN that IS are extremists. Al-Adnani reportedly re-affirmed the *mubalahah* a month later stating:

O Allah, if this is a state of *khawarij* [an extremist sect], then break its back, kills its leaders, make its flag fall, and guide its soldiers to the truth. O Allah, and if it is a state of Islam that rules by Your book and the tradition of Your prophet, and performs jihad against your enemies, then keep it firm, strengthen it, support it, grant it authority in the land, and make it a khilafah upon the prophetic methodology. (*Dabiq* 2014f: 20)

The article then features several pages of quotations detailing *mubalahah*’s technicalities (*Dabiq* 2014f: 21–23) before contrasting IS and JN’s respective fortunes. The picture *Dabiq* paints is irrefutable: while JN experienced defeats and were exposed as hypocrites, IS enjoyed a series of extraordinary victories across Syria and Iraq which culminated in the establishment of its Caliphate (*Dabiq* 2014f: 26). Using the *mubalahah* declaration for identity-choice appeals and its politico-military successes (e.g., IS’s caliphate) to leverage rational-choice appeals, this article unambiguously ties IS to divinely ordained solutions and frames its enemies as divinely condemned Others destined to languish.

### **The violence threshold**

While *Dabiq* does not provide its readership with explicit operational advice, its message unequivocally demands that every Muslim engages in violence against Islam’s enemies:

This is the order of the Khalifah . . . . Either ones performs *hijrah* to the *wilayah* of the Khalifah or, if he is unable to do so, he must attack the crusaders, their allies, the Rafidah, the *tawaghit*, and their apostate forces, wherever he might be with any means available to him . . . . He should attack after declaring his *bay’ah* to the Khalifah, so as not to die a death in *Jahiliyyah*. (*Dabiq* 2015f: 54)

*Dabiq* primes its readership for *specific* appeals to engage in violence by framing IS-aligned Sunnis as superior and plunging the world into a state of war. While assuring Western Muslims a place in its Caliphate, *Dabiq* legitimises ‘lone wolf’ terrorism as acts of reciprocity for Western violence against Muslims and strategically important as a way of ‘. . . flanking the crusaders on their own streets and bringing the war back to their own soil’ (e.g., *Dabiq* 2014o: 4). Violence is thus framed as an act of redemption and empowerment (e.g., *Dabiq* 2014n: 28). These narratives seek to align identity- and rational-choice decision-making as a means to rapidly radicalise its readership towards engagement in violence:

The seriousness and attention given to the commands of Allah and the need to fulfil them, as well as the sense of urgency and haste in fulfilling them is a means of strength that can push a Muslim beyond hesitation and cause him to carry out the most difficult tasks in the path of Allah. (*Dabiq* 2014p: 9)

## Conclusion

This study offers the field a conceptual framework through which to analyse IS's communications strategy and a top-down empirical analysis of *Dabiq* magazine. Two key findings emerged. Firstly, *Dabiq* prioritises dichotomy-reinforcing messages (54.88 per cent), particularly solution/crisis narratives (39.024 per cent), with in-group/solution items (26.219 per cent) playing an augmenting role. The strategic logic that can be inferred here is that *Dabiq* uses dichotomy-reinforcing messages to leverage both rational-choice (via solution/crisis narratives) and identity-choice (via in-group/Other narratives) appeals. This is reinforced by empowering in-group/solution narratives that emphasize Sunni superiority and the urgent imperative of helping IS to implement its solution.

Secondly, the architects of *Dabiq* seek to maximise the resonance of its message through a litany of closely interconnected macro- and micro-level levers. In doing so, *Dabiq* provides its readership with a potent 'competitive system of meaning' that is designed to act as the lens through which to perceive the world. The mutually reinforcing narratives within and across *Dabiq*'s issues plunge its readers into a bi-polar world, characterised by cosmic war and on the verge of End Times, that demands Sunnis choose between the forces of good or evil. Through this lens, becoming a foreign fighter or lone wolf terrorist is obligatory for any true Sunni based on identity- and rational-choice reasoning. While anecdotal evidence suggests *Dabiq* is resonating with some Western Muslims, a corollary to this article's top-down perspective is a bottom-up analysis empirically examining audience perceptions of *Dabiq*'s contents.

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## Notes on contributor

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