

The Themes and Peculiarities of the Islamic State's Propaganda

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Social and Applied Sciences  
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

In

Human Security and Peacebuilding

Royal Roads University  
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April 2023



Niall Nemecek, 2023

THE THEMES AND PECULIARITIES OF THE ISLAMIC STATE'S PROPAGANDA

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# THE THEMES AND PECULIARITIES OF THE ISLAMIC STATE’S PROPAGANDA

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### **Abstract**

The propaganda of the Islamic State utilizes a number of complex themes in order to radicalize and recruit adherents to the organization which has been demonstrably unique compared to other ostensibly similar extremist groups. In a content analysis, the primary sources of the Islamic State's publications were studied to determine the nature of the major themes and the frequency of this use. Once identified, interviews were conducted with professionals involved in de-radicalization or counterterrorism efforts to ascertain the impact on individuals from those overarching themes. Further, Coalition Information-Related Capabilities doctrine was used as an analytical framework to analyze the Islamic State's implementation of propaganda, as well as to help feed recommendations to counter Islamic State narratives. This study's findings suggest that while there are numerous factors that can lead to radicalization from the Islamic State's propaganda, there are a number of pathways to mitigate the efficacy of the identified themes.

Keywords: Islamic State, propaganda, radicalization, violent extremism

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### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank my thesis supervisor, Dr. Lauryn Oates, for her incredible effort in keeping me focused on the end goal. I sincerely appreciate the time and energy she put into this project and ensuring that I was held to the highest standards of academic rigour. As well, thank you to my thesis committee member, Haval Ahmad. His subject matter expertise was beyond reproach, and I thoroughly appreciated his kind words on where things went right, and incisive suggestions on where things could be improved.

Next, I would like to thank the incredible teammates I have had the pleasure of working with who inspire me daily to be the best military professional I can. I am very fortunate to have learned from, and been inspired by soldiers and officers of all ranks throughout my career.

I would not be where I am without the love and support of my family. My mom and dad, Ian and Carollynne, have always been there for me. My partner, Christine, provides no shortage of love and encouragement. Her savvy intellect and professional skills always drive me to be the best version of myself. I would also like to acknowledge my brother Kyle, and my son Lazlo. Between the two, I have a torch to carry on, and a reason to build a bright future worth defending.

This study is dedicated to all the victims of senseless aggression. For those fighting against violent extremist groups, for those fighting against Russia's illegal and unprovoked aggression in Ukraine, and those fighting in conflicts elsewhere, I wish you swift and decisive victories.

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### **List of Definitions**

*Jihad* – “Struggle” or “striving”, generally in a positive context. In classical Islamic law, it refers to armed conflict against unbelievers.

*Kufr* – Infidel, pagan or denier.

*Mujahadin* – Individuals who engage in *jihad*; fighters.

*Murtadd* – Apostate. Someone who has gone away from the faith.

*Rafidah* – Rejectors. The term in IS usage is broadly used as a slur against Shi’as.

*Sahwat* – Historically, mobilizations of Sunni Muslims against proto-IS elements in the Second Gulf War. The term in IS usage is broadly used as a slur against non-supportive Sunnis.

*Takfir* – Excommunication from Islam.

*Wilayah* – Province, or governorate. An administrative subdivision.



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## INTRODUCTION

While jihadism and Islamic extremism have been inseparable from the geopolitical realities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, those simple descriptors do very little to delineate and properly encompass the wide variety of ideologies that ostensibly fall under the same umbrella. While putatively similar, the difference in beliefs, behaviours, and practices between extremist groups such as *Al-Qaeda* (القاعدة), *Kata'ib Sayyad al-Shuhadda* (كتائب سيد الشهداء), *Abu Sayyaf* (جماعة أبو سياف), *Niru-ye Qods* (نیروی قدس), and *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham* (هيئة تحرير الشام) can be considered exceedingly divergent, to the point where extremist organizations often come into violent conflict with each other over ideological and doctrinal differences. While *Al-Qaeda* has historically been the most well-known extremist organization due to its planning and execution of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks on the United States and subsequent publicized rhetoric, it has more recently been rivalled and arguably eclipsed in public prominence by the Islamic State since 2014. The Islamic State (IS), otherwise known as *The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant* or *The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria* (ISIL/ISIS) (الدولة الإسلامية) as well as Daesh (داعش), has cemented its reputation as a pernicious spectre throughout the world. While its territorial ambitions were thwarted in 2017 with the fall of its self-styled Caliphate, the ideology, and particularities of the IS have become an enormous export, with many disparate and geographically dispersed groups swearing allegiance. The purpose of this study will be to investigate the specific themes found in IS messaging and how they are leveraged to maximum effectiveness. Further to this, there are a number of peculiarities which may not be entirely unique to IS, however, they have been uniquely exploited by IS and will be studied within this

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paper, including the use of historical and religious imagery, the subversion of gender roles, and the exploitation of unstable political situations. Overall, this study aims to highlight the link between the themes of the Islamic State's messaging and the extent to which this makes their messaging effective. It is anticipated that this study will be of interest to the research community seeking to better understand the machinations of IS and to stakeholders with an interest in stability operations and deradicalization.

### **Problem Statement**

There is evidence that we may have reached a crossroads where the liberal world order developed over the past 70 years is eroding under both internal and external pressures. This is now accepted by many decision-makers in democratic countries, as evidenced by a recent speech by Canada's Deputy Prime Minister: "...it was a relief and a vindication to imagine the entire world peacefully marching together towards global liberal democracy. It is dispiriting and frightening to accept that it is not so" (Freeland, 2022). Given the evidence of the causal links between human security and open societies that feature, for instance, liberal culture, democratic electoral systems, freedom of information and expression (Albright et al, 2017, p. 14), it is clear that extremism, fundamentalism, and illiberalism are threats to human security. IS's professed goal is to create a singular Caliphate to unite all Muslims under their theocratic rule (*Dabiq* Issue

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#1, 2014, p. 41)<sup>1</sup>. Despite the fact that IS’s attempted Caliphate was dismantled, the ideology and their values clearly persist and multiply (Cordesman, 2019, p. 29). This continues to result in violence, political instability, and international isolation, which have led to loss of life, increased poverty, and have lowered human development outcomes in areas affected by IS’s operations. The consequences have proven corrosive to human security, and provide some validation to the notion that there are violent forces pushing against the liberalizing trend. IS routinely utilizes brutal methods and tactics to further its war aims and ideological goal, at the direct expense of those civilians who live within their areas of influence (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2022, p. 16). Given the cost in lives and freedoms, and the threat IS represents to human security, this research seeks to unearth part of what made IS rise to power over a relatively short period of time, by better understanding its communication and influence activities. Specifically, this study will contribute analysis that identifies the key messages within IS’s ideology that are utilized to radicalize new believers and to identify the modes by which those messages are effectively transmitted.

The actions of IS during the past decade have been difficult to accurately study, due to its nexus at overlapping problems such as extremism, fragile states, and active conflict. However, understanding the dissemination of IS’s ideology – in order to disrupt it – is an important topic to study. The intent of this thesis is to assist with shaping predictive analysis of IS’s pernicious ideology within the context of the wider Coalition operations, with a view for dissemination to

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<sup>1</sup> *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* are two publications that will be examined frequently in this study. They were publications intended to promote radicalization and support to IS, and were published into many different languages.

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other researchers as well as professionals and institutions involved in countering violent extremism and radicalization.

### **Purpose of Study**

While IS is a relatively new actor among violent extremist organizations, as an organization they have also managed to dominate the information space and utilize the internet and social media in particular to great effect when it comes to not only recruitment, but also by influencing other groups, within a relatively quick period of time. While the practice of Islamic extremist groups declaring allegiance to one another is not novel, there have been a number of high-profile allegiance declarations to IS in a short period of time (Lederer, 2016); perhaps most notably the West African jihadist group *Boko Haram*<sup>2</sup> (جماعة أهل السنة للدعوة والجهاد). This utilization of digital technology and information operations has enabled a greater accessibility for consumption when it comes to IS's ideology, and the droves of Western citizens who flocked to the self-proclaimed Caliphate when it existed from 2014 to the fall of Raqqa in 2017<sup>3</sup>, was a testament to just that. Further, while the territorial gains of IS have been substantively reversed, the ideology and the violence it advocates is still a threat to both the human security of people living in communities where IS is operating, as well as further afield. For instance, on 26 August 2021, the *Islamic State – Khorasan Province* (ISIL-KP/IS-K) (الدولة الإسلامية - ولاية خراسان)

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<sup>2</sup> *Boko Haram* and IS have since gone their separate ways and have reverted back to violent power struggles, but the IS threat in West Africa persists and continues to destabilize the region.

<sup>3</sup> IS's self-proclaimed Caliphate was destroyed decisively in 2019, but the fall of Raqqa in 2017 was a major turning point where Western-born citizens and other foreigners stopped emigrating en masse compared to the years previous.

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conducted a brutally effective suicide attack in Kabul, Afghanistan which killed nearly 200 individuals, including both US military and Afghan civilians (CNN, 2021).

One unique aspect of IS's ideology is how its messages are being effectively disseminated and maintained. Many Internally Displaced People (IDP) camps within northeast Syria and northwest Iraq are severely overcrowded and human misery is rampant. By example, the *Al-Hawl* (الْهَوْل) IDP camp in northeast Syria contains nearly 70 000 individuals, and is known to be one of many sites where the ideology of IS effectively permeates and is spread among residents. For instance, Vianna de Azevedo (2020) describes how the IDP camp and prison system there act as an incubator of radicalization and indoctrination. Interestingly, with a large percentage of IDPs in that camp being female (Vale, 2019, p. 2), there is a gendered aspect that factors into the propagation of IS's unique radicalization. While the suppression of women's autonomy and rights is central to the doctrine of jihadist groups, women who are members of these groups play a key role in fostering commitment and belief among adherents to the group's ideology (CODEXTER, 2016, p. 8). While there has been media coverage that provides snapshots into this aspect, there appears to be a dearth of academic research on the role women play specifically in the propagation of IS's ideology. This study will therefore attempt to also uncover the gendered aspects of how IS's message is spread, recognizing the diverse roles women perform in the movement, from victims of abuse and violence to unwitting accomplices, to being the ones who incite male relatives to holy war.

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In October 2019, Türkiye<sup>4</sup> launched Operation PEACE SPRING into northeast Syria ostensibly to disrupt Kurdish terrorists. While this not only caused a major rift between Türkiye and its NATO allies, the operation also highlighted the enormous impact of disunity between NATO members and how it can be exploited by IS. This trend of Turkish interventions that are increasingly antithetical to the stated goals of Türkiye's military alliances is a worrisome one and will likely not abate in the near future. This only serves to increase the likelihood of a significant impact on human security in the region through immediate conflict as well as the follow-on effects from the resulting migration, economic disruptions, and instability. It also provides an opportunity for IS to exploit conflicts between others to further their own messaging and take advantage of chaotic political environments where there is weak state authority and legitimacy.

As IS is a relative newcomer compared to other extremist groups, it would be beneficial to stay cognizant of the conditions in which they were able to evolve from the initial jihadist group *Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad* founded by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi<sup>5</sup> (أَبُو مُصْعَبِ الزَّرْقَاوِي). This thesis will study the content of IS's main propaganda messages to assist the identification of vulnerabilities that may lead to the spread of IS's ideology; therefore, woven throughout is the inclusion of historical background that may help anticipate future events.

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<sup>4</sup> On 26 May 2022, The Republic of Turkey officially changed its English name to the Republic of Türkiye, matching its Turkish spelling. Where possible, the updated spelling will be reflected here.

<sup>5</sup> Al-Zarqawi was a Jordanian jihadist who rose to notoriety during the Second Gulf War due to his targeting of US Military personnel as well as Shi'a Muslims within Iraq. In 2004, *Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad* declared allegiance to *Al-Qaeda*, and in 2006 became known as *Al-Qaeda in Iraq* or the *Islamic State in Iraq*. This organization can be considered the major progenitor that IS would evolve out of.

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### **Research Question**

The intent of this content analysis is to examine the utilization of varying themes of IS messaging. The central research question for this study is: What specific messages are utilized most often by IS in their communication materials? Once those hallmarks are identified, is it possible to assess who would be the most susceptible target audience as well as assess how and where can IS's ideological spread and radicalization be predicted? Qualitative data via interviews was collected to provide insight into intangible concepts that may lead individuals to be radicalized and explain the success of violent extremist organizations.

### **DESK REVIEW**

This section reviews some of the key sources that informed my contextual understanding and background on the character, content, and employment of IS messaging, and informed my analysis of the narratives commonly used by IS. As recruitment and radicalization messages are intended for wide public consumption, viable examples were accessible to assist me to understand this phenomenon. For the desk review, two distinct types of sources were utilized. First were the primary sources, which are IS's publications of *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* which are explicitly designed to promote and recruit members to the organization. With the distinctly explicit character of IS messaging, this review placed great emphasis on IS's own literature as a primary source, given the enormous resources they have invested into their publications for the purposes of recruitment and radicalization. From July 2014 to July 2016, IS published 15 issues

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of the magazine *Dabiq* (دابِق), and from September 2016 to September 2017, 13 issues of the magazine *Rumiyah* (رومِية).

The other category of sources relied on for this literature review included academic articles that have analyzed IS messaging through a myriad of lenses such as social media, gender, historical trends, among others. In addition to those sources, there are a number of extant articles and studies that pertain to the real-world effects of IS's ideology manifesting itself across four distinct regions: The Middle East (to include Iraq, Syria and Türkiye), West Africa (to include Nigeria, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso), Afghanistan, and Western countries (specifically those that saw large-scale emigration of recruits to IS's proto-state starting in 2014). A number of publications were used to further buttress the analysis presented, including works tracking IS financing, rational-choice theory, the critical importance of IS information warfare, and the allure that IS had on foreign adherents and fighters who joined the *Khilafah*. With a relatively broad repertoire of publications focusing on specific aspects of IS's *modus operandi*, the synthesis of number of important works was able to provide a strong foundation for the subsequent analysis put forward in this study. The desk review discusses findings from the sources related to the following key themes which consistently recurred as explicit motivators contained within IS's literature: the use of religious and historical themes, the role of women and children, and the role of exploitation of chaotic situations.



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### The Role of Religious and Historical Themes

There are various themes evident within IS’s messaging that appeal to religious tenets and beliefs as well as tap into the legacies of historical events and their outcomes. These are often utilized in an intentionally distorted manner with the intention of fomenting grievance and initiating a call to action to restore honour lost from these slights. *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* are two magazines that IS published from 2014 to 2017, published in a variety of languages including English, Arabic, German and French. From the very first page of any issue of the magazine, the intent is evident; to provide a self-proclaimed divine right of the organization to exist through confederating the vision of IS’s present and future by alluding to past historical and religious grievances. By misrepresenting past struggles and laments, IS seeks to inflame its prospective recruits with vitriol which can be harnessed to extremely violent ends. For instance, *Dabiq* Issue #1 is entitled “The Return of *Khilafah*.” *Khilafah* (خِلَافَة) is the Arabic word often transliterated into English as “Caliphate,” the concept of a geographic entity with the purpose of providing a spiritual leader for Muslims in succession to the Prophet Muhammed (Hawting, 2000, p. 12)<sup>6</sup>.

Within the first pages of *Dabiq* Issue #1, the incarnation of a *Khilafah* is initially sold as an

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<sup>6</sup> The leader of the *Khilafah* is known as the *Khalifah* (transliterated into “caliph” in English), and in the Sunni tradition, the Prophet Muhammed’s father-in-law, Abu Bakr, is considered the first caliph and founder of the Rashidun Caliphate (الْخِلَافَةُ الرَّاشِدَةُ). While there was initially a distinction made between the division of powers of a caliph and a king (Madelung, 1997, p. 5), over time the role was typically absorbed into the political rulers of the day or as a political repudiation. This is evidenced by the declaration of the Shi’a Fatimid Caliphate (الخلافة الفاطمية) rejecting the religious authority of the Sunni Abbasid Caliphate (الْخِلَافَةُ الْعَبَّاسِيَّة) by the founding of Cairo in 969 AD (Lewis, 2003, p. 83), to the eventual absorption of the title of caliph into the hereditary succession of the Ottoman Empire after the defeat of the Mamluk Sultanate (سلطنة المماليك) in 1517 AD. However, even this absorption was not as immediate, as the Ottoman sultans only began to use the title of caliph in earnest during the years of imperial decline in the 1700 and 1800s, as the Ottoman Empire was viewed as an ascendant world power from 1453 to 1683 with no requirement for a historically loaded title (Winter, 1992, p. 30).

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idyllic one to its readers. In a speech excerpt, the first caliph of IS and former leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (أَبُو بَكْرٍ الْبَغْدَادِي), had this to say:

O Muslims everywhere, glad tidings to you and expect good. Raise your head high, for today – by Allah’s grace – you have a state and a *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. It is a *Khilafah* that gathered the Caucasian, Indian, Chinese, Shami, Iraqi, Yemeni, Egyptian, Maghribi, American, French, German, and Australian. Allah brought their hearts together, and thus, they became brothers by His grace, loving each other for the sake of Allah, standing in a single trench, defending and guarding each other, and sacrificing themselves for one another. Their blood mixed and became one, under a single flag and goal, in one pavilion, enjoying this blessing, the blessing of faithful brotherhood. If kings were to taste this blessing, they would abandon their kingdoms and fight over this grace. So all praise and thanks are due to Allah. (*Dabiq* Issue #1, 2014, p. 7)

When taken at face value, it is a message promoting unity, which attempts to relate IS’s vision of a Caliphate to historical precedents, while promoting a sense of community well-being and common identity (Hermansah, 2020, p. 134). It also appeals to a return to a righteous past that has been lost in modernity. In 1924, the reforms of the founder of modern-day Türkiye, Mustafa Kamâl Atatürk, abolished the Ottoman Caliphate. Without a viable successor, the institution of the Caliphate writ large ceased to exist, based on the argument that it was a purely political organism, and not necessary to Islam as a religious function (Sadiq, 1989). IS’s perception of the

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*Khilafah* is entirely the inverse: that Islam in fact depends on the existence of a Caliphate. For instance, in *Dabiq* Issue #2, it is stated that “O Allah, if it is a state of Islam... that performs *jihad* against your enemies... grant it authority in the land, and make it a *Khilafah* upon the prophetic methodology” (2014, p. 20).

The incorporation of themes utilised in a pseudo-historical fashion is a major theme found in IS messaging. The misuse and intentional obfuscation of historical events to incite extreme behaviour as a justification for avenging past wrongs is not unique to IS, though it takes on a magnified importance when used by IS. Describing a type of *Weltpolitik* behind this manipulation of history, Timothy Snyder, who developed the idea of the politics of eternity, describes it as “a masquerade of history... free of any real concern for facts. Its mood is a longing for past events that never really happened during epochs, that were, in fact, disastrous” (2016, p. 121). He further describes it as a “misty courtyard of illegible monuments to national victimhood” where every reference to the past is “an attack by some external enemy on the purity of the nation” (2016, p. 121). Given that the institution of *Khilafah* has not been invoked or preserved by any major Islamic nation over several crucial instances of world history (1517 – the 1690s and 1924 – present), IS has taken a major historical grievance and is the first to utilize it as a rallying cry, appealing to a sense of victimhood among its target audience. While perceiving the end of the Caliphate as a grievance for the *ummah* is not new – it is a well documented narrative found in Islamic writing from throughout the 20th century – IS has taken it to new heights. For instance, within *Dabiq* issues #1, 4, 5, 8 – 10, and 12, the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916, where French and British diplomats secretly divided the Middle East into its

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modern borders, is mentioned 13 times. This agreement is utilized as a rallying cry in response to historical injustice against the Muslims of the Levant and to propagate a story of victimization that needs to be rectified by the return of the *Khilafah*:

After demolishing the Syrian/Iraqi border set up by the crusaders to divide and disunite the Muslims, and carve up their lands in order to consolidate their control of the region, the *mujahidin* of the *Khilafah* delivered yet another blow to nationalism and the Sykes-Picot-inspired borders that define it. The establishment of a new *wilayah*, *Wilayah al-Furat*, was announced this month by the Islamic State in an effort to eliminate any remaining traces of the *kufri*, nationalistic borders from the hearts of the Muslims. (*Dabiq* Issue #4, 2014, p. 18)

As if to assuage any doubt as to their perceptions concerning the colonial machinations of Britain and France upon the Middle East nearly a century prior, in *Dabiq* Issue #5 it states: "And this blessed march will not stop until we drive the last nail in the coffin of the Sykes-Picot conspiracy. And the march of the *mujahidin* will continue until they reach Rome" (2014, p. 33).

This pseudo-historical invocation is echoed in the language which is constantly utilized throughout the pages of *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*. Any figure associated with western influence, whether diplomatic or military, is often referred to as "crusader", while the West in general is referred to as "Rome" in reference to the Roman Republic and later Empire. However, even this usage is incorrect, as the fall of the Western Roman Empire on September 4<sup>th</sup>, 476 AD as pinpointed by Edward Gibbon (2003, p. 640) preceded the first time the Prophet Muhammed began preaching his message in 612 AD (Armstrong, 2002, p. 4) by 164 years. Further, while the

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Byzantine Empire continued in the tradition of referring to themselves as “Romans,” (Komnene, 2009, p. 9), the word *Rumiyah* specifically refers to the city of Rome, in modern-day Italy.

During the series of wars between both the Abbasid and Fatimid Caliphates between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Byzantine Empire saw extremely limited success in retaking territories that were taken during the expansion of the Rashidun Caliphate. This culminated in military defeats which contributed to outsized decisive political ramifications at Manzikert<sup>7</sup> in 1071 and Myriokephalon<sup>8</sup> in 1176 against the Seljuk Turks which contributed to the Byzantine Empire’s permanent withdrawal of any lands east of Anatolia (Haldon, 2001, p. 144).

This invocation to a revisionist historical perception of events, while incorrect, nevertheless provides a powerful motivator as a religious interpretation of modern events through the lens of the past, which hits a psychological nerve. The names of the publications themselves, *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*, are entirely symbolic and eschatological. *Dabiq* is a small town in Syria with relatively little strategic import, though it has an outsized spiritual role. Within the *Sahih Muslim*<sup>9</sup>, *Dabiq* is referenced as the location where two armies, one Muslim and the other Roman, will meet in battle and trigger the Last Hour (Muslim, 41:9, p. 1727). This concept is akin to the Judaeo-Christian concept of Armageddon; a location wherein a pitched battle will trigger an apocalypse in which the righteous will receive their final reward, the wicked will be punished, and the world will burn. On October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2016, when IS was driven out of *Dabiq* by

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<sup>7</sup> Ματζιέρτη, modern-day Malâzgird, Türkiye.

<sup>8</sup> Μυριοκέφαλος, modern-day Beyşehir Gölü, Türkiye.

<sup>9</sup> The *Sahih Muslim* is one of the major collections of *hadith*, which are believed by the majority of Muslims to be the records concerning the speech, actions, and approvals of the Prophet Muhammed.

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Syrian rebel forces, it had lost its ability to invoke that specific invocation of an impending apocalypse. However, IS possesses a remarkable capability to adapt its messaging to the fluctuating circumstances, and changed its narrative from a triumphalist perspective to one of prolonged determination (Murariu, 2019, p. 26) when presented with this military setback. In selecting *Rumiyah* as the name of *Dabiq*’s successor, another specific reference is made to the *Sahih Muslim*: “Then you would attack *Rumiyah* and Allah will enable you to conquer it, then you would attack *ad-Dajjal*<sup>10</sup> (الدَّجَال) and Allah will enable you to conquer him... *ad-Dajjal* would appear after *Rumiyah* would be conquered” (Muslim, 41:12, p. 1729).

However, despite the often-effective tactic of revisionist history, there are some parallels in the historical record that work against IS’s victim narrative and use of the politics of eternity. First, the Byzantine Empire (the Romans) began to despise and eventually fight against Latin Crusaders, describing them in 1153 AD as “nursed and nourished by manifold wickedness” (Komnene, 2009, p. 30) which is near identical to IS’s description of Western Crusaders (*Rumiyah* Issue #3, 2016, p. 14). Second, and perhaps far more ironically, is that while IS utilizes the iconography of Rome as the symbolic and physical location of struggle to ignite a fiery apocalyptic scenario, the iconography of Rome (whether as seat of the Empire or of the Roman Catholic Church) also plays a very similar symbolic role as the *Whore of Babylon* (Porter, 2001 p. 65) in the Book of Revelation. As part of the Christian eschatological tradition, the earthly forces of evil are nearly identical in both the Christian and Muslim apocalyptic consciousness.

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<sup>10</sup> The *ad-Dajjal* in Islamic eschatology is a figure closely akin to the *Antichrist* in Christian eschatology, a wicked deceiver and a false messiah intent on corruption.

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There is a clear nuance to the historical reality of these terms and what they have represented over time. However, according to IS messaging, Rome and Crusaders are one in the same: foreign and wicked enemies who need to be destroyed. These themes exemplify the sense of an external attack from aggressors onto the self-proclaimed innocent, in both a geopolitical and personal perspective. Despite these inconsistencies from a historical perspective, the change in messaging represents a shift in how IS chose to stylize its narrative, shifting from a revelatory and ultimate tone to one of continual earthly struggle.

In contrast to the idyllic description of the *Khilafah* and the unity of brotherhood in the opening pages of *Dabiq* Issue #1, the first iteration of its successor publication opens with “Stand and die upon that for which your brothers died. The people of falsehood constantly attempt to make the deaths of righteous men and their slayings by the enemies of Islam... into a sign foretelling the breaking of the *mujahadin*” (*Rumiyah* Issue #1, 2016, p. 2). This is a distinct shift that weaves in the apocalyptic and righteous imagery from before, but now begins to include explicit incitements to suicidal actions as a means to their own ends. Across all of *Rumiyah*’s issues, one of the most prevalent messaging threads was that any setback to the *Khilafah* and IS’s operations was a divine gift to ensure those who remained were the righteous (Ingram, 2018, p. 22). Accompanying this new messaging thread of acceptance of loss is the tacit implication that the struggle will persist over time. In a transcribed speech by Abul-Hasan Al-Muhajir, he states “a [community], whose young and old race towards death and destroy themselves cheaply in Allah’s cause, will never be defeated” (*Rumiyah* Issue #9, 2017, p. 30) and continues “if we lose a city, an area or a town, it is simply a trial and a purification of the [congregation]... so that

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Allah may choose from His slaves whomever He wills” (p. 33). In the acceptance of whatever casualties are required, there is a distinct connection back to the apocalyptic writings referred to in *Dabiq*, which was subsequently promoted in *Rumiyah*. When taking the concept of the *Khilafah* and the perception of historical victimhood together, the apocalyptic narrative becomes clearer in its provenance. Apocalyptic discourse often appears in religions that had to subvert the pre-existing political entities during the formative years of those belief systems. In a modern context, the application of apocalyptic rhetoric is nearly always present in groups that are disenfranchised, that wish for an alternate reality, or that perceive themselves as underdogs (Carey, 2005, p. 42). In the gulfs between the desire for a *Khilafah*, acceptance of loss, and seeking retribution for historical grievances, there exists an emphasis on a distinct lack of satisfaction with the realities of the status quo and an individual’s personal lived experience. It is the sense of hopelessness that IS exploits in its messaging to recruit the most committed jihadists (Murariu, 2019, p. 26) with the aim to incite them to increased levels of violence. This is also a peculiarity of IS messaging that does not appear to be replicated in other comparable extremist groups. Compared to IS's incitement to be unconcerned by sustaining unconditional losses, an interview with Adam Yahiyeh Gadahn in the *Al-Qaeda* publication *Resurgence* offers insight into that group’s (relatively) more tempered approach to *jihad*. When asked if the dissolution of the border between Iraq and Syria in 2014 was a net positive, Gadahn responds:

...it is little more than a fig leaf... the obstacles to Islamic unity which the “Islamic State” faction is guilty of creating and consolidating are much greater in number. These include... spilling the blood of Muslims without right, displaying fanatical partisanship,



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[and] engaging in the tribal-factional warfare of the pre-Islamic time of ignorance. (2015, p. 53)

To solidify the depths to which rival extremist groups despise IS, the interview also contains a passage referring to the decapitation of Alan Henning, who was captured by IS in Syria while delivering supplies as a humanitarian aid worker. *Al-Qaeda* viewed this act as anti-jihadist, anti-Islamic and perhaps most incredulously, states that *Jahbat Al-Nusra* (جبهة النصرة) attempted to have Mr. Henning released from IS into their custody in order to spare his life (p. 45).

In analysing the central religious and historical themes utilized as radicalization and recruiting tools within IS messaging, it quickly becomes evident that these concepts are misrepresented to the point of fabrication in many cases (Ford, 2016, p. 24). IS itself seemed to grasp this lack of veracity and twisting of concepts to the point wherein articles such as “*Kill the Imams of Kufr in the West*” (Dabiq #14, 2016, p. 8) and “*The Murtadd Brotherhood*” (p. 28 – 41) which focus on the alleged invalidation of any Islamic interpretation aside from that of IS-approved scholars begin to spike in their frequency. This strategy of delegitimizing alternative religious interpretations and promoting violence towards those who state them provides a circular reasoning to commit atrocities (Zgryziewicz, 2016, p. 22) against Muslims which further distinguishes the message to prospective IS adherents from other extremist groups. The frequency of this rhetoric seeking to undermine religiously based opposition continues with an increasing frequency on the pages of *Rumiyah*. Articles that discuss how to identify warning signs of the “traits of evil scholars” begin to explicitly define concerns with those other religious

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leaders who would divert people from Allah's path and youth from *jihad* (*Rumiyah* Issue #5, 2017, p. 27). This is an extremely important development; however, the increased prevalence of these articles suggests a fear on the part of IS in response to the efficacy of counter-narrative strategies (Azani, 2021, p. 19) and confirms the relevance of employing them against IS radicalization attempts and messaging. Further, given the need for constant self-mythologization to ensure effective delivery of the messages, IS's rejection of other theological sources becomes critical (Winter, 2017, p. 12). Winter (2017, p. 13) has observed that the publication and propagation of IS's propaganda can also serve the dual function, for an adherent, as an act of deep religious significance by being "central to the expansion of the *ummah*", connecting it to a historical thread that "'Islamic' information warfare can be traced as far back as the time of the Prophet Muhammed". Taken in concert with the vociferous attacks made on Islamic scholars who disapprove of IS theology, made in IS publications, this points to the centrality for IS of including an emphasis on theological arguments, to assure their position as theologically superior to their competitors.

The emphasis on revisionist history and loosely religious concepts used as a central tenet for IS recruitment and radicalization appears to be a strategy that responds to a particular target audience that is particularly receptive to this kind of messaging: those with an interest in religion, but a lack of formal religious education.<sup>11</sup> This appears to hold true in historically held locations

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<sup>11</sup> A commonality of jihadist groups is that they often appear completely immune to any form of religious criticism. Groups such as IS, *Boko Haram*, *Al-Qaeda*, and the Taliban routinely ignore the opinion of Islamic scholars, including very conservative ones, to justify their own ends and maintain the sanctity of their own interpretation. This phenomenon has been succinctly expressed by the notorious former leader

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like Iraq and Syria (Zgryziewicz, 2016, p. 43), newer foothold locations such as Mali in West Africa (Théroux-Bénoni, 2016, p. 4), as well as seemingly incongruous places to recruit Sunni extremists like Shi'a Iran (Kadivar, 2022, p. 82).

### **The Role of Women and Children**

The portrayal of women, and their roles, plays a complex role in IS messaging, and one which has evolved over time, depending on the geopolitical realities. While suffering as a means to purification is a common theme referenced by religious extremists, there is a unique level of suffering experienced by women when it comes to a number of restrictions on their personal and sexual freedoms, reproductive rights, education, and economic opportunities. This implies that women are expected to suffer disproportionately and in gendered ways. Afghanistan under the first Taliban regime is often cited as one of the countries where the treatment of females ranks among the most severe and oppressive in the world, with edicts that prohibited women from most forms of employment, attending school, making noise when they walked or from laughing outside, windows being painted over so they will not be seen at home, and not being permitted outside without a male escort (Ellis, 2000, p. 63). Groups like *Al-Qaeda* have no issue with this treatment, with claims in their literature indicating that the allegations of misogyny and discrimination directed at the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan are either deliberate exaggerations or malicious fabrications (Resurgence Issue #2, 2015, p. 35). Within IS's literature, the tone

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of *Al-Qaeda*, Usama bin Laden: "no official scholar's juridical decrees have any value as far as I'm concerned" (bin Laden, 2005, p. 141).

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towards women differs and has evolved with time. Within the earlier issues of *Dabiq*, women are rarely mentioned. When they are, it is either in reference to Muslim women being raped by Coalition forces to stoke aggression against external forces (*Dabiq* Issue #3, 2014, p. 3), or non-Muslim women referred to as property to be enslaved and raped for sexual gratification (*Dabiq* Issue #7, p. 7). The common position espoused in the early stages of IS literature is that women are generally only inherently valuable as property to be possessed, though women who truly believe in the cause should be protected from external infidel forces, and those who do not truly believe are not truly Muslim women and can therefore be brutalized. However, later starting with *Dabiq* Issue #8 to Issue #15, which roughly corresponds with IS's high water mark in terms of territorial control in Iraq and Syria, lengthy articles authored by women become a staple, and appear to be used as a messaging tool to clarify expected behaviours of wives and women within the *Khilafah*. There are a variety of topics that arise ranging from almost romantic creation myths on the twin halves of men and women (*Dabiq* Issue #8, 2015, p. 32), to pragmatic advice on mourning for *mujahidin* husbands who died fighting in combat (*Dabiq* Issue #13, 2016, p. 24). Then, articles appear that justify the differential treatment of Muslim and non-Muslim women, which are horrific in their callousness. For instance, one article presents its reasoning differentiating how Yazidi sex slaves are gifts from Allah and different than prostitutes because the repeated rape of slaves is a noble way to have them convert to Islam (*Dabiq* Issue #9, 2015, p. 48-49). However, despite the rhetoric that reaches abhorrent levels of indifference towards the personal suffering of others, this form of messaging may have been largely effective in encouraging the radicalization of women to join IS, as evidenced by some unprecedented statistics. As of October 2016, women comprised approximately 12% of all western recruits,

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35% of French recruits, and one in seven western militants within Syria and Iraq (CODEXTER, 2016, p. 2).

While there was an initial tendency to refer to women who transited to join IS in somewhat reductive terms such as “jihadi bride” or portray them as passive victims (The Carter Center, 2017, p. 1), this does not accurately encompass the totality of female involvement within IS's network, including in propaganda efforts. As radicalization is a highly complex subject which has a number of pathways which can be effective or ineffective depending on the person targeted for recruitment and their profile, it is difficult to establish a single overarching narrative which can accurately explain the draw of IS to so many women. In a cross-section of a number of female IS adherents, it quickly became evident that radicalization occurred across a number of backgrounds and markers such as affluence, education, age, or family background (de Leede, 2018, p. 48).

As the fortunes of the IS's self-proclaimed Caliphate shifted, their literature relating to women shifted tone from previously being largely religiously based to more pragmatic concordant with other tonal shifts between *Dabiq* to *Rumiyah*. In *Rumiyah* Issues #5 to 13, a segment entitled “Sisters” appears, each issue with a unique take on the expectations from women towards the movement. However, there is a common thread that connects back to the pragmatic nature of *Rumiyah* in comparison to *Dabiq*: avoid luxury and opulence (*Rumiyah* Issue #8, 2017, p. 16), and that the birth of more Muslims is the highest aspiration of a woman within the Caliphate (*Rumiyah* Issue #9, 2017, p. 18). Compared to the literature of other jihadist groups, such as *Al-Qaeda's Resurgence*, the writing directed at women attempts to extol them as

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mothers to empower them to independently make the choice to take up the uniquely restrictive place within the Caliphate. With phrases such as “The woman is a shepherd in her husband’s house and is responsible for her flock; it is a tremendous task and an enormous trust that has been placed on her,” “the mother’s uprightness is the reason for her children’s reform” and “The mother should cultivate within her children that this *dunya* is a place of journey and that the Hereafter is the place of permanent settlement” (*Rumiyah* Issue #9, 2017, p. 19), the intended goal is clear: women are critical to the perpetuation of IS's messaging and ideology insofar as they are able to produce more children and radicalize them from infancy.

In an analytic study of word use and association concerning women within various sources of jihadist literature, it was found that in *Al-Qaeda* and *IS* publications the words “wife” and “mother” were utilized at an extremely similar frequency: 80% to 86%, and 60% to 56% respectively (Llorent-Bedmar et al, 2021, p. 432). This is largely in line with the stated expectations of women within jihadist ideologies. In reference to the issues of *Rumiyah*, there was a clear message that a woman’s singular purpose in the Caliphate was that of marriage and child rearing. However, with the fortunes of IS's self-styled Caliphate having severely waned in 2017 after the insurmountable pressure of a coalition of convenience involving Kurdish forces, Iranian-backed Iraqi Shi’a Militia Groups (SMGs) and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) supported by Coalition airpower and special operations forces, the employment of women has abruptly changed tack and altered course.

As the losses of IS fighters mounted from 2015 onward, the women who travelled to the Caliphate to become wives to the *mujahidin* and mothers to the next generation of IS adherents

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found themselves on shifting sands. In a change that distinctly rebuked the narrative that women who willingly joined the Caliphate were solely passive victims of deception, women quickly surged to fill roles vacated by recently deceased males in the organization. While women were originally barred from large scale decision making from the centralized Caliphate, as the geopolitical realities changed, women increasingly took up positions of enforcement of the movement and became more recalcitrant in their beliefs. This group of female zealots is referred to as the *muhajirat*. While this term was initially applied specifically to western female migrants to the Caliphate, it has since mutated into a far broader category with wider acceptance criteria to include women from Muslim countries (Hussein, 2019, p. 81). There are a number of notable manifestations of the ostensibly powerful women within IS, with perhaps the *Al-Khansaa Brigade* (لواء الخنساء) as the most notorious example. The *Al-Khansaa Brigade* is considered an arm of IS's morality police, and there are multiple instances recorded of their enforcement being accompanied by punishments of extreme brutality such as disfiguring other women with acid or using spiked torture devices on publicly breastfeeding mothers (Perešin, 2015, p. 502).

While the fall of the Caliphate has driven some women to seek forgiveness for their support of IS and their actions from 2014 to the present, there are considerable numbers of women who are currently held in IDP camps such as *Al-Hawl* (الهُؤْل) who have become exceedingly recalcitrant and even more dogged in their beliefs and are using the opportunity to continue the spread of IS messaging among the nearly 60 000 camp occupants (Saleh, 2021 p. 2), of whom 93% are women and children. Further to this, it has been reported that the women are not only continuing to spread the ideology of IS, but continuing the draconian measures of the

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*Al-Khansaa Brigade*, including retaliatory killings and beheadings against those who are perceived to work against IS's aims (Savage, 2022).

Though the involvement of women as active participants in terrorism is not an unprecedented concept, as evidenced by Chechnya's *Black Widows* (чёрная вдова), West Africa's *Boko Haram*, and the *Al-Aqsa's Martyrs Brigade* (كتائب شهداء الأقصى), it is still a novel one which tends to challenge the overarching narrative and ideology of many jihadist groups (Perešin, 2015, p. 497). However, as seen previously, IS maintains a strong capability to warp what would seem to be agreed upon doctrine and twist it to their own pragmatic purposes. As the insult and humiliation of pseudo-historical slights was weaponized to incur thousands to join the Caliphate, so too is the pseudo-empowerment of women weaponized to spur men to action. In February 2018, IS's *al-Hayat* Media Center, the creative arm behind all of IS's propaganda including *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*, released installment #7 of its "Inside the Caliphate" video series. While the previous six videos were largely correlated to the final issues of *Rumiyah* which ended its run in late 2017, the seventh was extremely noteworthy due to its profile of a female fighter. In this vignette, the female fighter was portrayed as "a chaste *mujahid* woman journeying to *Allah* with the garments of purity and faith... seeking revenge for her religion and for the honour of her sisters" (Inside the Caliphate #7, 2018). This was an extreme departure from previous depictions, and had struck a psychological nerve which forced male fighters into action through shame (Vale, 2019, p. 5).

To compound this idea of incitement to action through emasculation, there have also been a number of intercepted messages on Telegram from known female IS supporters in Europe to



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each other who insultingly referred to males who did not fight as less than masculine and unworthy of being treated as such (Criezis, 2020, p. 70). To take this even further, in 2019 there were a number of field human intelligence reports collected from inside *Al-Hawl* and *Al-Roj* IDP camps which relayed a common theme that female supporters of IS were refusing to have sex with males if they believed they were not attempting to advance the ideology far enough. While the claim concerning withholding of sex would be difficult to verify past anecdotal evidence, the circumstantial evidence from elsewhere points to the likelihood of its veracity.<sup>12</sup> In IS's perpetual *jihād*, humiliation via emasculation has been recognized as a crucial tool to drive men to violence, with sex and emotional connection being used as an incentive.

The role of children within IS is one that is largely connected to the role of women. As the purpose of women within the ideology of IS is largely to satisfy the sexual needs through marriage of the *mujahadin* and to procreate, the purpose thrust onto the children is to serve as a generation of adherents who have been inculcated from birth and have access to no other competing philosophies. Child soldiers have been a feature of violent conflict in many times and places throughout history conflict, but the history of child soldiers in Iraq is especially

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<sup>12</sup> In line with IS's habit of perverting historical and cultural legacies to their own ends, while unlikely a conscious connection, they have drawn from the historical precedent of women withholding sex from men to further war aims. In 410 BC, Aristophanes wrote the comedic play *Lysistrata*, which centers on the eponymous title character leading every Athenian woman in a sex strike against their husbands to end the ongoing Peloponnesian War. At the Acropolis, the temple dedicated to Pallas Athena, the women prepare sacrifices and take a sacred vow to uphold until peace is declared: "I will not allow a lover or a husband - to approach me in a state of erection. And I will live in unsullied chastity - wearing my saffron gown and sexiest make-up - to inflame my husband's ardour" (Aristophanes, 2002, p. 148). During the war between Athens and the Delian League against Sparta and her allies, sex was satirically recognized as a crucial tool to psychologically and emotionally deprive those prolonging the war. Intentional or not, the inverse can be observed with IS.

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pernicious, where its long history makes it a deeply institutionalized practice (Morris, 2020, p. 1578). Under the Ba'athist regime of Saddam Hussein, a number of paramilitary organizations for children were federally operated in order to train a cadre of children ages ten and up. Dating back to 1975, *Futuwah* (فتوة) was an initiative to train boys and girls in defense of the Iraqi state (Child Soldiers International, 2001, p. 1). Innocuously named after the Arabic word that invokes a sense of youthful chivalry, the child soldiers of this initiative would go on to be used as chaff during the Iran-Iraq War from 1980-1988 and the First Gulf War of 1990-1991. After Iraq's military defeat to the U.S-led Coalition in the First Gulf War, another child soldier indoctrination organization was stood up, this one called the *Ashbal Saddam* (أشبال صدام), or the Lion Cubs of Saddam. This organization continued the indoctrination of its predecessor, but added new levels of depravity and cruelty with the stated goal of inuring children as young as five (Morris, 2020, p. 1581) to violence through exposure to animal torture, violence, and public executions (Singer, 2003). While the group's purpose and even its name, *Ashbal*, was not unique to Iraq, the intergenerational awareness of child soldier training programs was quickly adopted by IS who appear to have simply repurposed those pre-existing structures to suit their own ends.

From 2014 to 2017, largely corresponding with the height of the Caliphate's territorial integrity, IS implemented the *Ashbal al-Khalifah* (أشبال الخلافة), or the Lion Cubs of the Caliphate. The purpose of the organization remained the same, training and radicalizing child soldiers but keeping in line with IS's general *modus operandi*, the severity and brutality of the expected actions of the children were far more than its Ba'athist forerunner. While the incorporation of child soldiers is extremely egregious from a moral standpoint, it is also a powerful deterrent to

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the possibility of peace and stability after hostilities cease in a region. For a generation of young children who only know brutality in the service of IS, there is an enormous latent danger with two major thrusts: First, that the exposure and experience of violence and trauma on these children will risk manifesting into antisocial and extremist behaviour when they grow to adulthood. Secondly, there is an absence of coherent and effective efforts at reintegration programs which would be able to mitigate those major concerns. Given the incredible severity of IS's ideology coupled with life experiences that are largely violence-based, it is extremely likely that without dedicated and tailored deradicalization programs, these recruits will re-commit acts of violence as well as attempt to perpetuate the only ideology they have ever known (Sédrak, 2021, p. 3). The other major concern of this initiative is its transmissibility. While the *Ashbal al-Khalifah* took its origins from Ba'athist Iraq, its manifestations have now been witnessed in other areas under IS's influence including Kazakhstan (Uncovering the Enemy Within, 2015), Indonesia (Soloway, 2016) and West Africa (The Empowerment Generation, 2022). This is IS's end goal of transmitting its message to children. In IS's desire for perpetual and eternal *jihād*, there is an innate understanding that messaging vectors must be emotionally charged, viral in their capability to spread, and ideally aimed at those with the least capacity to repel incongruent ideas. Children have an acute susceptibility to violent behaviour becoming normalized in their minds and are extremely difficult to deprogramme after the fact, which is knowledge that IS is deliberately attempting to exploit.

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### Exploitation of Events and Rivalries

IS's messaging often focuses on geopolitical machinations and regional instability. By referencing the perception of nations failing to adequately protect their citizens, there is a strong theme of IS attempting to profit from the chaos of security situations in various regions. Due to IS's extreme *weltpolitik* and propensity for violence and cruelty, no government of any country has publicly declared support for the group. To the contrary, since 2014 with the formation of the U.S-led Combined Joint Task Force - Operation INHERENT RESOLVE (CJTF-OIR), 85 nations and entities have signed on as partners to the Global Coalition to defeat IS, including organizations and alliances such as the Arab League, the European Union and NATO, and an extremely diverse cross-section of countries that includes the U.S, Canada, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Qatar and Türkiye among nearly 70 others (The Global Coalition, 2022). However, even this does not encompass the totality of those nations that sought to defeat IS via military power. Owing to a predominantly adversarial relationship with other nations (Putin, 2015) that often culminates in attempts to undercut or disrupt geopolitical relations (Meyer, 2011), Russia stood up its own security tripartite against IS with Iran and Syria. Initially, the *raison d'être* of this alliance had a stated war aim of propping up the regime of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad (بَشَّارُ الْأَسَدِ) which was in grave danger of falling to the pressures of IS's military advance towards Damascus combined with the belligerents of the Syrian Civil War (Grajewski, 2021, p. 2). By 2018, Russia had broadened its scope in the region to encompass some limited cooperation with Israel which manifested in some attempts at battlefield deconfliction between Israeli and Iranian forces operating in Syria. However, this was generally ineffective and led to an added layer of

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convoluted geopolitics on an already oversaturated battle space (Grajewski, 2021, p. 4). Outside of the scope of clandestine state support which is, by nature, extremely difficult to corroborate, the patchwork of supranational geopolitics is the genesis for much of the state support which allows IS to recruit and reconstitute. Lacking a centralized and coherent solution to the widespread human security indicators which contribute to IS recruitment, the conditions remain in place which make recruitment to an extremist group preferable to life in civil society. While IS was able to exploit a power vacuum as during the Syrian Civil War and founded their self-styled Caliphate (Lister, 2015, p. 149), even after the widespread loss of territory and the reworked strategy of decentralized cells, IS was and still is able to exploit the gaps and seams of superimposed overlapping boundaries from varying levels of national and multinational entities who are not effectively unified in their efforts. At a regional level, IS has perhaps gained the most from countries that pursued a policy of neutrality or non-action against IS. This was evident from how the group was able to exploit its relationship with the Republic of Türkiye.

With the reforms of Mustafa Kamâl Atatürk in 1924, Türkiye became an expressly secular country (Lepeska, 2015). Despite that historical precedent for a Muslim-majority country, in recent years the government of Türkiye has regressed in its commitment to secularism trending towards a new form of hyper-nationalism intertwined with Islamist policies (Göl, 2017, p. 961). Despite the Turkish Government's adoption of increasingly Islamist policies, IS views the country as completely antithetical to their ideology and goals. Between 11 May 2013 to 1 January 2017, a number of IS attacks were carried out in Türkiye, with the casualties consisting of nearly 300 killed (International Crisis Group, 2020). Within the pages of

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*Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*, much of the chastisement focuses on Türkiye’s secularism and its alliances with Western countries. In an article detailing IS’s exploits during the Syrian Civil War, *Ahrar al-Sham* (حركة أحرار الشام الإسلامية) is identified as meeting with “their *murtadd* allies - Turkey, Qatar and *Al-Salul*<sup>13</sup>” (*Dabiq* Issue #9, 2015, p. 36). In subsequent issues, it is stated that Türkiye is “a member of the crusader NATO alliance” (*Dabiq* Issue #11, 2015, p. 6), and the hopes of IS towards the country are explicitly stated in a prayer: “We ask Allah to support the *muhjahidin* of the Islamic State against the agents of the *tawaghit* and the crusaders until the banner of the *Khilafah* is raised high above Istanbul and Vatican City” (p. 9). IS has routinely utilized pseudo-historical concepts in its narrative, and its unequivocal connection between Istanbul<sup>14</sup> and the Vatican City has a clear indictment contained within it.

Yet despite IS’s position towards Türkiye, since approximately 2014, there have been a number of claims made accusing Türkiye of actively supporting IS covertly. One of the most

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<sup>13</sup> *Al-Salul* is a pejorative term for *Al-Su’ud* (آل سُعود), the Saudi Royal Family. It is likely derived from a reference to Abd Allah ibn Ubayy ibn Salul (عبد الله بن أبي بن سلول), who was a Yathribi chieftain during the time of the Prophet. Ibn Ubayy ostensibly became a Muslim convert; however he was viewed as someone who was treacherous due to a number of real or perceived conflicts with the Prophet Muhammed. He was labelled *al-Munafiq* (منافق), “the Hypocrite”, and also “Leader of the Munafiqun.” Hypocrite in this sense is defined as someone who is outwardly Muslim, but secretly works against the religion. With this slur, IS draws the connection between those they see as treacherous hypocrites of the past and present. In Arabic, shifting consonants or vowels to make references to similarly pronounced words is a frequently observed and highly nuanced way to create insults and contemptuous puns, like the term IS itself.

<sup>14</sup> By selecting the city name of Istanbul, and not the capital of Ankara, IS makes a deliberate symbolic, historical, and religious connection. Istanbul was the seat of the Ottoman Empire, which invokes the spectre of what is likely the most powerful Muslim empire to have existed. Concurrent to the publication run of *Dabiq*, the *al-Hayat* Media Center also ran *Konstantiniyye* (القسطنطينية), or “Constantinople”, which was a Turkish language publication. This was discontinued and its Türkiye-specific content was amalgamated into *Rumiyah*’s publication run.

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prominent of these claims was the allegation that Türkiye was purchasing oil from IS in order to support the organization financially (Tsvetkova, 2015). These allegations were vehemently denied by Ankara, and subsequent investigation on the part of U.S and British counter-terrorism agencies found that no direct link could be found, and that any oil purchased from IS would have to have been laundered through corrupt merchants or black marketeers (Szubin, 2015). As oil is both one of the most ubiquitous and most strategic commodities in the modern age, claims of this sort became very common and were generally launched among predictably partisan lines: Russia accused Türkiye, Iran accused Türkiye and Iraq (PressTV, 2015), Iraq accused Türkiye (RT, 2015), and Israel accused Türkiye (Sputnik, 2016).<sup>15</sup> The veracity of these claims are extremely difficult to verify, and given the dynamic situation, it is likely that the definitive answer will be near impossible to uncover. It is conceivable that Türkiye's National Intelligence Organization (Millî İstihbarat Teşkilatı) engaged at points in time with agents in some capacity as the group mutated from one of its original iterations of *Al-Qaeda in Iraq* (القاعدة في العراق), to present-day IS in some search of pragmatic ends. However, given the death toll of Turkish citizens from conflict with IS since 2013 and the clear disdain of Türkiye reflected in IS's publications, it is unlikely those shadow interactions would have been centrally controlled or deliberately planned. However, the overstated importance slaved to the oil racketeering allegations and other such accusations of direct Turkish state support to IS largely worked against a unified effort between states against the extremist group. This infighting between nations provided IS an ability to exploit the disunity and another theme to disseminate to their adherents. Given IS's capacity to

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<sup>15</sup> PressTV, Russia Today, and Sputnik are all state sponsored media entities of the countries of Iran and Russia, respectively, and are known to lack credible reporting and analysis.

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ruthlessly exploit precarious security situations and its propensity to capitalize on grievance and pseudo-historical themes, Türkiye's conflict with the Kurds has and still provides an avenue for recruitment, radicalization and destabilization of the region which may further empower IS's ability to persist (Lindgaard, 2020, p. 14)

The current iteration of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict has been largely predicated on Türkiye's *casus belli* of the eradication of the militant Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan / PKK) which was founded in 1978. Over time, the war aims of the PKK have shifted from one of full autonomy for a Kurdish state within Türkiye and neighbouring countries to increased recognition of minority rights within the existing Turkish state (Leduc, 2015), though entrenched views in favour of both positions have taken hold among PKK members. Based on violent conflict that has persisted over generations at this point and the resultant levels of mutual distrust that have been routinely aggravated in recent years, Türkiye and the Kurds<sup>16</sup> are emotionally recalcitrant in their perceptions of one another which provides a level of emotional charge and hostility which can be leveraged and exploited (BMI, 2021, p. 46). A level of mutual disdain which has spalled over decades culminated in 2016 with Türkiye embarking on a series of five military operations with stated objectives against Kurdish military groups in neighbouring Syria and Iraq. The four initial incursions were Operation EUPHRATES

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<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that the Kurds are not a monolithic entity. Within any ethnic group, there are a number of disparate opinions, valuations and perceptions which determine how individuals and local groups act which may differ from other, closely related individuals or groups. There are nearly 30 million Kurds inhabiting Türkiye, Syria, Iran and Iraq, and a cursory glance at the number of Kurdish organizations and political parties demonstrates at least 40 entities exist.



THE THEMES AND PECULIARITIES OF THE ISLAMIC STATE’S PROPAGANDA SHIELD from August 24th, 2016 to March 29th, 2017, Operation OLIVE BRANCH from January 20th, 2018 to August 9th, 2019, Operation PEACE SPRING from October 9th to November 25th, 2019, and Operation SPRING SHIELD from February 27th to March 6th, 2020. On April 17th 2022, Operation CLAW-LOCK was initiated and is ongoing as of the time of writing. Previous to this, IS's mention of the Kurds or the PKK was largely relegated to battle reports and conceivably falsified, or in some cases exaggerated, reports of swift and decisive victory over Kurdish fights (*Dabiq* Issue #13, 2016, p. 7; *Dabiq* Issue #14, 2016, p. 22; *Dabiq* Issue #15, 2016, p. 72). In the wake of Türkiye’s increased aggression towards Kurdish groups and its incursions into northeast Syria, IS was quick to celebrate:

“Today, the old discords are being renewed within the ranks of the enemies of Allah. The Crusaders of the West oppose the Crusaders of the East and their *murtadd* allies oppose one another. The Turks oppose the Kurds, the *Sahwat* of Turkey oppose the *Sahwat* of Jordan, the *Rafidah* oppose the Kurds of Iraq, the Kurds of the west oppose the Kurds of the east, and the *Nusayriyyah* oppose the Kurds of *Sham*. ‘You think they are together but their hearts are in disagreement. That is because they are a people who do not reason.’<sup>17</sup>”  
(*Rumiyah* Issue #3, 2016, p. 26).

Demonstrating their rapid capacity to exploit messaging themes, IS hammers home the message of foreign disunity and lack of reason with the implicit contrast of the harmony of the *Khilafah*.

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<sup>17</sup> This is a verse from the *Surah Al-Hashr Ayat 14* (The 59th chapter of the *Qu’ran*): “لَا يُقَاتِلُونَكُمْ جَمِيعًا إِلَّا فِي - ”قُرَى مُحَصَّنَةٍ أَوْ مِنْ وَرَاءِ جُدُرٍ بَأْسُهُمْ بَيْنَهُمْ شَدِيدٌ تَحْسَبُهُمْ جَمِيعًا وَقُلُوبُهُمْ شَتَّىٰ ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ قَوْمٌ لَا يَعْقِلُونَ” - “They will not fight you all except within fortified cities or from behind walls. Their violence among themselves is severe. You think they are together, but their hearts are diverse. That is because they are a people who do not reason.”

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Not content to leave the message as one without a tangible call to action associated with it, IS continually reinforces the notion of the Turkish and Kurdish conflict as a gift from Allah throughout the run of *Rumiyah*, and provides an extremely salient example of what they wish to enact: “Then legions of its soldiers will enter the land of Turkey, making therein new *wilayat* in which the *shari'ah* of Allah will be established and the idols of Ataturk, democracy, secularism, Sufism, and the *murtadd* Brotherhood will be removed. And none of that is difficult for Allah” (*Rumiyah* Issue #6, 2016, p. 20). This is a strikingly similar message to the statement concerning the conquest of Istanbul and the Vatican City as stated in *Dabiq* Issue #9, however, this later statement takes the sentiment farther by specifically listing the alleged evils of Türkiye.

While the strategic goal of Türkiye is to completely neutralize the perceived Kurdish threat, the operational-level aim of Türkiye's military operations is to prevent border porousness between Iraq, Türkiye, and Syria, and to deny Kurdish or Kurdish-allied forces a contiguous land corridor in the region (Çevik, 2022, p. 3). The follow-on effect that this singular focus on the destruction of Kurdish capability in the region has for IS is an increased freedom of movement and the ability to exploit the security situation, both in a physical and symbolic sense. Türkiye's desire to decisively defeat the Kurds is so profound that Turkish forces have refused to support Kurdish forces as they requested military assistance against IS as early as 2014 (Siccardi, 2021, p. 8). In the period of time since Türkiye has carried out its military incursions against the Kurds in northeast Syria and northwest Iraq, Kurdish forces have been forced to reallocate and reposition their personnel. Two major tasks that Kurdish forces have been conducting were counter-IS operations as well as detainment of IS fighters who were taken alive, so the critical

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impact to these operations comes as a clear choice as the Kurdish fighters face an existential threat from Türkiye. Taking advantage of the chaos that has been sown, IS adherents are beginning to leverage their internal resources, as well as exploit messaging networks of foreign supporters in an attempt to liberate their comrades currently imprisoned by Kurdish forces (Thakkar, 2022, p. 18). Despite the fall of its self-proclaimed *Khilafah* and the setbacks IS has suffered, the organization demonstrated its capability to surge again and again, with a notable example in January 2022 with the battle of *Al-Hasakah* (أَلْحَسَكَة). In a surprisingly complex<sup>18</sup> attack, IS forces assaulted the town of *Al-Hasakah* in an attempt to conduct a large-scale prison break which held approximately 5000 IS supporters, including several high-ranking personnel (Levy, 2022, p. 2). The battle itself was a tactical defeat for IS, however, it was indicative of the larger trend since the fall of the *Khilafah* concerning IS's strategy of adapting to the shifting realities while not compromising their fervent beliefs.

Even though Iraq and Syria have an explicitly stated strategic and historical importance for IS, the exploitation of strife amongst regional powers is an extremely convenient and ubiquitous vector for IS messaging. In Central Asia, IS's arm in Afghanistan, IS-K, has conducted a number of high profile attacks against Coalition or Taliban forces with substantial casualty numbers.<sup>19</sup> As the tone from *Dabiq* to *Rumiyah* shifted from divine revelation to

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<sup>18</sup> During the execution of the battle, IS utilized multiple axes of advance as well as layered and synchronized effects between suicide attacks for initial shock and then infantry to occupy buildings and hold ground. Once SDF soldiers were committed, IS utilized lone wolf attacks throughout the SDF's depth in an attempt to disrupt communication and divert enemy reinforcements from their main objective, *al-Sina'a* Prison (سجن الصناعة).

<sup>19</sup> It is generally quite difficult to confirm casualty numbers, but estimates of Afghan civilians caused by IS-K from the fall of Kabul on August 15th, 2021 to early 2023 are approximately 2100.

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prolonged attrition and determination, so did the apparatuses of IS messaging after the thirteenth and final issue of *Rumiyah*. As of 2022, IS continues to publish two notable publications pertinent to the region of Afghanistan and surrounding areas: the Arabic language newsletter *al-Naba* (النبا), and the English-language publication *Voice of Khurasan*.<sup>20</sup> *Al-Naba* has been IS's newsletter since 2014, and was only briefly disrupted when the *Khilafah* fell. With the exportation of IS's ideology to other regions, the messaging vectors follow quickly. Within Afghanistan alone, IS's centralized media office celebrated IS-K's attacks against Coalition forces and the Taliban (*al-Naba* Issue #305, 2021, p. 12), discussed the redoubled efforts to have the Taliban fall to IS-K (*al-Naba* Issue #339, 2022, p. 3), and began to publish videos speaking of Afghan and Pakistani unity under IS-K against the Taliban and other rival extremist groups (O Lions of the Tribe!, 2022). Of serious concern, however, is the development trend of the messaging and recruitment vectors out of Afghanistan and Pakistan that are very similar to those from eight years prior in Iraq and Syria. When IS began, their publications were exclusively in Arabic to represent their assessed span of influence. As time progressed, the publications were refined and translated in various languages. As of February 2022, IS-K began to publish in foreign languages (Webber, 2022) in an attempt to reach a similar audience as IS did from 2014 onwards. As of early 2023, these have included Arabic, Pashto, Dari, Urdu, Balochi, Uzbek, Turkmen, English, and Tajik.

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<sup>20</sup> *Khurasan*, or *Khorasan* is the name of a historical region which encompassed parts of Afghanistan, Iran, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. It is derived from a Persian word meaning “where the sun arrives from”. In this case IS-K is referring to the *wilayat Khorasani*, the eastern wilayat which encompasses Afghanistan and Pakistan.

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### Summary

In its use of messaging for the purpose of radicalization and recruitment, IS routinely attempts to invoke a myriad of emotionally charged, intangible concepts in order to cast a wide net for those who are susceptible. In the repeated iteration and reiteration of notions such as “*murtadd*,” the hypocrite Muslim, righteous sacrifice, and the *Khilafah*, there are consistently communicated categories of what an individual can aspire to be as a member of IS. These attempts at prescribed purpose possess a gendered dimension as well: men will give their lives for the *Khilafah*, and women will give their bodies. With many of the religious interpretations concerning direction of behaviour or historical grievances which are designed to instigate outrage and serve as a call to action, there is a sense that those most susceptible would be those who have heard of these ideas, but are not familiar with the ideas in their proper context: in essence, adherents of IS know enough religious and historical concepts “to be dangerous” in that this limited knowledge and its culturally familiar points of reference can be tapped into and exploited. The common underlying theme is one of idyllic belonging and the sense of *ummah*, perceived as absent in their own surroundings, thus appealing to these notions can take advantage of an emotional void. However, the hydra-like adaptability of the messaging turned it from recruitment based on an ideal vision to entrenchment based on pragmatic conditions within both the *Khilafah*, and its successor rump states and colonies. While IS is not necessarily unique among jihadist groups in promulgating their messaging through the use of high-quality publications and videos (Winter, 2015, p. 44), the uniqueness lies in its specific messaging, and the inclusion of a message based on the promise of a larger utopian state (Winter, 2015, p. 43).

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IS also demonstrates a deeper understanding of messages that will appeal to as many demographic segments in their target populations as possible. For example, while *Al-Qaeda's* videos tend to focus on sermons and speeches, IS's content focuses on a mix of hyper-violent brutality interspersed with idyllic invitations to a community (Byman, 2016, p. 147). Buttressing this, IS also understands the importance of employing supporters with greater technological savvy, which enables a rapid dissemination mechanism around the world (Byman, 2016, p. 147). Dominance of social media also provides a critical tool to the effective delivery of IS messaging. Utilization of social media platforms provides a rapid and widespread dissemination tool, while simultaneously acting as an inflow for fundraising opportunities by identifying sympathetic accounts and networks. (FATF, 2015, p. 24). The deliberate choice to invest heavily in information operations and use of social media is an important distinction as compared to other terrorist organizations. The adaptability of the message and IS's deliberate ability to vector onto specific audiences demonstrates a command of the information environment, and its opportunities, rarely seen. The exploitation of broken power structures or pre-existing rivalries is less a tool of radicalization than a mechanism of delivery, however, it accelerates the spread of IS's recruitment messages.

Another common theme is the utilization of messaging surrounding successful violence committed by IS as an incitement to more violence. This encourages IS self-promotion as a vector of radicalization, whether by invoking the wrongs of history, faith, or culture, or as a call to join an organization that is able to subvert pre-existing nation states and alliances. One of the limitations of this desk review was that there is a lack of evidence which can explicitly account

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for the quantitative efficacy of IS's propaganda. A small-scale study of the social media ecosystem in Egypt found that the savvy use of high-quality materials and messaging applications made the themes more accessible to a wider audience, which encouraged those who were already sympathetic to IS to support or join the group (Marcellino et al, 2017, p. 51). Given that much of IS's propaganda is shared via channels where the metadata or transmission patterns are difficult to track (secure messaging application, physical copies), further study is required into specifically defining how much a net positive IS's propaganda provides to recruiting efforts.

By utilizing a number of seemingly disparate yet interconnected grievances, IS is capable of propagating their narrative effectively even when military setbacks occur, while still capitalizing on their successes where possible. The layering of these effects allows for effective use of a positive feedback loop by ensuring that both successes and grievances can be exploited as motivators regardless of real-world results or veracity.

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## METHODOLOGY

### Research Methods

The methodology selected for this study was a content analysis of IS's messaging and themes. Methods of collection included a literature review of primary sources as well as semi-structured interviews of key informants (KIIs). The specific research questions are as follows:

Type	Inquiry
Central Question	What specific messages are utilized most often by IS in their communication materials?
Sub-Question I	What are the major hallmarks of the IS ideology as it is communicated?
Sub-Question II	What are the most effective vectors for disrupting IS messaging and radicalization tactics?

Within the findings, the US Army doctrine of Inform and Influence Activities (IIA) was used as an analytic framework to determine how themes and narratives within IS's messaging can be employed against individuals. This enabled an understanding of the implementation across the different information dimensions and means of transmission at a macro level.

Interviews were then leveraged to gain insight into the micro-level of how the implementation of themes manifests into behaviours and actions. By utilizing interviews as a means to gather qualitative data, the intention was to ascertain the human dimension of the conflict from the



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accounts of those with on-the-ground experience interacting with individuals affected by IS recruitment efforts.

Owing to IS's relative newness, there is a somewhat novel body of research concerning the examination of the uniqueness of IS as an ideology and how this is used to draw adherents. The explicit purpose of these interviews was to gain new information concerning the practical implementation of IS's messaging and which themes resonate in observing IS adherents. Because of the sensitivity of the topic, a lack of motivation on the part of some of the IDP population to support scholarly inquiry into the behaviour of IS, as well as the related risk of inaccurate responses, the interviewees were those NGO staff working within IDP camps or involved in local deradicalization efforts. While the focus of this study was primarily on the effects of those living within the realm of IS influence, ancillary attention was also paid to deradicalization efforts outside of IS areas, as radicalization also occurs via the internet and through other remote means. Respondents were selected who had firsthand knowledge of these ongoing issues. Further, the interviews utilized a semi-structured format. Understanding that the respondents were intended to be from a wide variety of fields, the insight provided would enable an understanding of personal motivators on the efficacy of IS messaging. As the overarching research design of this study relied on content analysis, flexibility was a key component required to answer the research questions, and the method of semi-structured interviews best accommodated this.

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### **Data Collection Methods**

From November 2021 to September 2022, content from primary and secondary sources was reviewed and analyzed from a variety of sources to identify the efficacy of IS messaging by region and the major content themes. From July 2022 to October 2022, a series of interviews were conducted with subject matter experts and those involved in de-radicalization or disruption of IS messaging. The initial requests for participation in semi-structured interviews were sent to 15 individuals who broadly fell into the following professional profiles: academics involved in studying conflict and/or conflict and gender, people working in de-radicalization programs, IDP camp workers, and security and intelligence professionals involved in anti-IS operations. Of the 15 requests sent out, 11 participants agreed to participate. Due to unforeseen demands on the respondents or scheduling conflicts, nine of the 11 were subsequently interviewed. Due to the varied nature of the work and the locations of those involved, all interviews took place digitally, utilizing video conferencing services such as MS Teams or Google Meet.

The ethical review for this research project was accepted in May 2022 by the Research Ethics Board at Royal Roads University. Once participants agreed to the interviews, they were provided with the informed consent forms which all participants acknowledged and signed. The median interview time was approximately 50 minutes, with the shortest being 35 minutes and the longest being 80 minutes. Participants were given the choice to participate anonymously or have their assessments and opinions attributed to them. Owing to the relatively sensitive nature of their work, the majority opted for anonymity and were assigned an alphanumeric indicator. The

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two individuals who chose to be credited were Faisal Saeed Al-Mutar (Participant #8), an Iraqi-born human rights activist who founded the non-profit Ideas Without Borders, and Sheikh Navaid Aziz (Participant #9), Director of Religious and Social Services at the Islamic Information Society of Calgary and an instructor at the Al-Maghrib Institute. In the following section, the participants will be identified by alphanumeric indicator, participant number, or by name specifically when attributing statements to Faisal Al-Mutar and Navaid Aziz. Participants #1 and 2 were academics (A1, A2). Both were published authors and lecturers who are involved with the study of women in conflict zones and insurgencies, as well as the impact of radicalization on civil societies. Participants #3, 4 and 5 were NGO employees (C1, C2, C3). Participants #3 and #4 were aid workers employed within the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Human Affairs who had spent time within IDP camps in Northwest Iraq and Northeast Syria. Participant #5 was involved with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent. Participant #6 (S1) was an American civilian intelligence professional working within the US Department of Defense and Participant #7 (S2) was a British military intelligence professional working within CJTF-OIR. The objective of the interviews was to discover common themes in IS propaganda and recruitment methods as well as have the participants identify which messages were most effective, per their professional lenses. Semi-structured interviews allowed enough flexibility to provide the respondents freedom to expand upon answers or raise new considerations while administering the interviews consistently such that the interview transcripts could be easily analysed as a data set. With the exceptions of Faisal Al-Mutar and Sheikh Navaid Aziz, all names have been withheld and were not shared with anyone other than the researcher.

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### **Limitations**

One of the two major limitations to this study was the scope of respondents. IS adherents, IDPs living under IS influence, and former IS adherents were not able to be interviewed for this due to a myriad of factors. However, the breakdown of respondents was consciously chosen to attempt to mitigate this specific limitation. When it came to the collection of qualitative data, the selection of respondents was judicious as the number of respondents was necessarily limited due to the choice of a long form interview as the data collection method. A balance was struck between ensuring a variety and depth of opinions were shared and managing the number of respondents within the scope and available time frame. The number of interview transcripts, nine, still allowed for a sufficient amount of data to identify common themes. The second major limitation is the availability of information from sources that may hold security clearance level which prohibit them from being utilized in a public forum. There is a large body of literature on the themes of extremism ranging from analysis at the strategic level to micro-tactical level, but which are unavailable for sharing at the unclassified level. Great effort was taken to find corroborating sources at the unclassified level with regards to assessments made concerning the efficacy of IS messaging threads and vectors. Another identified limitation was the number of languages in which IS propaganda was disseminated. While the vast majority of the analyzed materials for this study were in English, there are a number of publications in Arabic only that may provide a different take or present different themes. However, a mitigation to this concern is the fact that IS had an internal media arm, which controlled the narratives centrally, and

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published them in different languages. This allows for an analysis which can include messaging intended for a wide swath of cultures and ethnicities.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Due to the severity of IS's impact on human security, a number of ethical considerations were taken into account. This project was subject to an ethical review process from Royal Roads University where the interview instruments were reviewed to ensure there was minimal risk or harm to the respondents. Prior to the interviews, all respondents were provided an informed consent document which ensured each participant was informed that they could stop the interview and have their data retracted prior to analysis and inclusion in the study if they so wished. All respondents were selected based on their personal choice to declare, either publicly or through trusted private networks, their endeavours towards de-radicalization, NGO work or anti-IS operations. Unless an individual had made their specialization and desire to publicly discuss IS known prior to the interview, they were not sought out by the author. All respondents were given the choice to remain anonymous or be credited.

## FINDINGS

### Overview

This chapter describes key themes that emerged from the interviews, with supporting examples of the data. The participants were able to utilize their real-world observations in their specific fields and professions. A key finding, pointed to by all nine respondents, is how radicalization and recruitment messaging rely on specific characteristics in the environment to be effective, characteristics that will be described in this chapter. The most common characteristics or experiences to be successfully exploited as listed by all participants were: sense of community (or lack thereof), humiliation and retribution, religious and historical (mis)interpretation, perceived or actual discrimination against Muslims, and exploitation of chaotic situations. Further, of those discrete themes identified, two (humiliation and retribution, and discrimination against Muslims) aligned with those that emerged from the desk review, but added further details related to personal psychology, behavioural choices, and decision-making among IS adherents.

### Foundational Indicators of Propaganda Exploitation

#### *Religious and Historical Interpretations*

IS's utilization of religious explanation based on their specific ideological bias and pseudo-historical interpretation is a consistent theme raised by participants, and one that was consistently identified as an underlying foundation which allows other messages to gain effectiveness (Participants A2, C2, C3, S1, S2). However, participants suggested that IS was

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delineating between audiences, drawing on religious interpretations with audiences for whom it was more likely to be effective. For instance, for Iraqi and Syrian born adherents of IS, religious incitement and fervour was observed to be less important than real-world grievances or pragmatic reasoning, such as protection from sectarian violence or financial motivations from lack of legitimate opportunities (Participants C1, C2, C3, S1). For those foreign adherents who had travelled to IS territory, there was generally more emphasis placed on religious belief and their perception of what IS could provide from a spiritual perspective (Participant A2), for example, a far greater emphasis on concepts like righteousness and salvation with the *Khilafah* were observed in foreign adherents. This was taken even further by way of a thought experiment with specific reference to the cognitive dissonance adherents who travelled long distances to the Caliphate would have had to overcome:

Think about how many steps someone needs to take to join IS, how many hurdles and obstacles along their way, and how many opportunities they would have had to stop before they got there. Those ones are the 'true believers' without a doubt" (Faisal Al-Mutar, interview, 12 August 2022).

Some respondents indicated that historical grievances were an important part of the equation, insofar as those being radicalized had a comparable frame of reference in their own lives to link it to: for example, those who grew up during the Iran-Iraq War or the Gulf War would be more susceptible to rhetoric surrounding Persians or Crusaders (Participants C3, S1, S2). From his perspective as an imam, Navaid Aziz indicated that the majority of those who had been

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radicalized by IS, and with whom he had personal experience, had a desire to profess belief in Islam but lacked a desire to fully understand the meaning or the context of what the scriptures and adherence to the religion entailed (Navaid Aziz, interview, 8 October 2022). As well, he noticed this was a major differentiator between those Canadians who eventually joined IS and those who remained within the same Islamic community. Faisal Al-Mutar noted this also with regards to those Iraqi and Syrian adherents to IS, and stated that more often than not, those who were persuaded to join IS on religious grounds generally had less formal education than those who joined for pragmatic reasons such as protection from sectarian violence and from other violent elements within jurisdictions with limited civil order and security.

### *Discrimination Against Muslims*

The theme of discrimination against Muslims as a point of incitement to join IS was a common observation of the majority of participants, however, the unique variations of this theme are dependent on the individual adherent's or group of adherents' experience. The nature of the discrimination in question varied depending on the geographic provenance of those who experienced it. Speaking in regard to several young individuals from Calgary who joined IS, Navaid Aziz stated that while there were a number of aggravating mental health factors present in each of the members' stories, a sense of alienation due to being Muslim was common to all. At the time, there was a discussion surrounding the integration or exclusion of Muslim Canadians in the political and public discourse in Canada, and a number of Muslim Canadians felt specifically targeted concerning the wedge issues in the lead-up to the 2015 federal election.



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Questions surrounding whether or not Zunera Ishaq should be allowed to wear a *niqab*<sup>21</sup> during her oath of citizenship, whether or not there was any merit to the proposed “Barbaric Cultural Practices Hotline,”<sup>22</sup> and whether or not Canada was becoming less tolerant to Muslims were all discussed and observed at various points either during or after the radicalization of these young Canadians (Navaid Aziz, interview, 8 October 2022). Navaid Aziz brought up the specific variables found in this particular case study, and the youth who were members of the 8th and 8th Mosque in Calgary who were radicalized, but this observed trend was not unique to Canada as Muslim respondents in the United States and the United Kingdom also reported similar concerns and stories (Participant A2). The general sense expressed by those who went on to become IS adherents with whom Aziz had been in contact was that Muslims living in Western countries were, by virtue of their faith, outsiders with no avenue to gain a sense of belonging.

Within Iraq and Syria, a sense of discrimination against Muslims was also a theme, though was framed differently from the experience of Western Muslims. In the wake of the Second Gulf War and during the Syrian Civil War, there was an observed sentiment that the Arab countries, the overwhelmingly majority of whose populations are Muslim, were perpetually targeted by imperial forces, such as Iran, the United States and/or Russia (Participants C1, S2).

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<sup>21</sup> The *niqab* (نقاب) is a type of garment worn by some Muslim women which covers the face, leaving a narrow opening for the eyes.

<sup>22</sup> This was a proposed hotline by then-Prime Minister Stephen Harper and the Conservative Party. It was designed to report instances of supposed barbaric cultural practices, such as honour killings, female genital mutilation, and child marriage. All these practices were already illegal in Canada, so the controversy surrounding the hotline was that it intentionally painted minority groups with innate suspicion.

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This sense of discrimination at a geo-political level served IS as the fodder of a call for action and a rallying cry. With the call to the *Khilafah*, IS was able to exploit both types of discrimination, whether of Muslims who were minorities in Western societies or Muslims in Muslim-majority societies who perceived discrimination towards Muslim states by outside forces, with the same appeal to a sense of victimhood based in a sense of discrimination.

### *Sense of Community*

All participants indicated that a sense of community among target audiences was a critical factor to the success of IS messaging. The concepts of *ummah* and *Khilafah* as frequently invoked in IS's literature were often the first features mentioned in terms of what makes IS's messaging unique from other extremist groups. Participants C2, C3, S1, S2 and Navaid Aziz all spoke to the importance of the vision presented in the messaging content, and how the notion of a collective space appeals to those who are currently disenfranchised with their current surroundings. In analyzing the initial gains of IS momentum from 2014 to 2015, the most distinctive feature of their success in dominating the information environment was the unified vision of a *Khilafah*, which was largely unprecedented, when compared to similar organizations' efforts (Navaid Aziz, interview, 8 October 2022). The invocation of the *Khilafah* and the belief in its promise was so powerful to some IS adherents, that the disparity between the myth and the on-the-ground reality was observed as one of the most common elements of dissatisfaction for those who eventually disavowed IS (Participants A2, C1). While IS is not unique in either their aim to foster a sense of community nor in their messaging seeking to portray their target

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audience's community as wicked and corrupt, the group demonstrated an innate grasp of how to ruthlessly cultivate and then exploit these perceptions, taking advantage of the psychological vulnerability of their target audience (Participants A1, C3, S1, S2). Besides the importance of an *ummah* in the *Khilafah*, a sense of urgency also helped drive record numbers of local adherents as well as foreigners who travelled to Syria (Faisal Al-Mutar, interview, 12 August 2022). The sense of community was compelling to a multinational audience, as evidenced by discussions with Iraqi and Syrian adherents who identified it as a reason for joining IS (Participants A2, C1, C2), with adherents from Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan (Participant C3), and adherents from Canada (Navaid Aziz, interview, 8 October 2022) stating the same thing.

### ***Humiliation and Retribution***

While humiliation and the desire for retribution are difficult emotions to measure, it is established that humiliation as an emotion can be a powerful catalyst for violent and extremist behaviour (Torres, 2010, p. 201). Collective humiliation as a radicalization tool has been observed throughout Iraq's recent history, but IS formulated and pursued a distinct objective of exploiting the collective psychological consequences of past grievances in order to recruit adherents (Faisal Al-Mutar, interview, 12 August 2022). This appeal to a shared sense of societal-level humiliation was also reflected in observations of Afghan IS-K adherents (Participant S2), in IS adherents in Mali (Participant S1), and in Canadians who travelled to the *Khilafah* (Navaid Aziz, interview, 8 October 2022). Respondents noted that IS messaging is informed by the group's awareness of the specific strategy of tapping into feelings of collective

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humiliation and grievance, as supported by the inclusion of specific humiliations to do with religion (Participants A2, C1), history (Participant C3), gender (Participant A1), or ethnicity (Faisal Al-Mutar, 12 August interview, 2022). Multiple participants stated that IS's method of exploiting any grievance that it could as a radicalization method was a major factor in their success across a wide variety of geopolitical and cultural locations. Further, it was identified that IS would exploit grievances to attract recruits to join the cause, but then often commit the same action that the messaging condemned, promoting accusations of hypocrisy. An example that was frequently given was the economic motivation for single men to join the Caliphate and have a better standard of living than in other regions. Once they arrived, some men found themselves, instead, living in unhygienic accommodations and with minimal financial compensation. (Participants A1, C2, S2). This was further identified as a cyclical form of humiliation at the hands of IS (Participants C3, S2), which was subsequently utilized to spur those disenfranchised individuals into acts to reclaim their status in the eyes of the group.

### *Exploitation of Chaotic Situations*

This theme was assessed as the least personal of the five major themes identified, but the majority of participants suggested that societal or cultural conflict was an important factor alongside a vacuum of leadership. These conditions can be exploited by IS to drive adherents from being receptive to their messaging themes to acting on them. For those participants who had direct experience and interaction with either imprisoned IS adherents or de-radicalized adherents, the regional instability of Iraq and Syria was cited as clearly making individuals more

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susceptible to joining a violent extremist group like IS (Participants A1, C1, C3, S1, S2). A perception of weak or failing power structures in one’s political environment also appeared to be a catalyst for moving adherents from belief to action (Participant C2). Along a similar vein, it was stated that specifically in IS’s case, “nothing brings success more than success” (Faisal Al-Mutar, interview, 12 August 2022). Furthering this notion of the attractive qualities of victory and being on the winning team, it was agreed that as success begets success, failure begets more failure, which contributes to the observations that some IS adherents were actively seeking to speed up the fall of failing geo-political structures – such as the Syrian Arab Republic during the ongoing civil war or the *Al-Anbar* (محافظة الأنبار) and *Nineveh* (محافظة نينوى) Governorates in Iraq – to further their own aims (Faisal Al-Mutar, interview, 12 August 2022). This theme also went beyond power structures in decline as a result of kinetic conflict or violent actions. There were a number of similar observations that popular movements such as the Arab Spring created enough upheaval that extremists intentionally sought to exploit the disruption in a manner completely antithetical to the intended anti-authoritarian aims of these popular protests (Navaid Aziz, interview, 8 October 2022). This observation emerged from discussions of one of the research participants with some individuals who were previously held in IDP camps in northeast Syria and northwest Iraq (Participant C2). The general consensus among respondents was that power vacuums could create conditions that helped drive individuals towards extremist ideology and ultimately, extremist actions (Participants A2, C3, S1, S2).

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### **Summary**

Participants identified several themes that were commonly observed across a number of locations where the influence of IS messaging was present. These themes pointed towards how broader concepts like the historical grievances outlined in the desk review can resonate at the individual level into personal concepts like retribution which are then used to drive radicalized adherents to action. While there was a clear consensus that there is no silver bullet for anti-radicalization nor inoculation from violent ideology, the generally agreed upon sentiment was that a sense of alienation and lack of belonging is a major indicator of susceptibility to extremist messages. Other drivers, such as vengeance for historical wrongs or fear of emasculation and shame clearly had an amplifying effect, though it's difficult to measure this effect with precision. The implications of the findings point towards the importance of understanding the conceptual themes that can be exploited as well as incorporating social and behavioural change models into predicting the efficacy of radicalization efforts when it comes to the consumption of IS's propaganda.

## **DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The interviews with the participants uncovered a number of findings that allowed for synthesis into distinct themes. Keeping in mind that there are many variables that can contribute to radicalization, and a lot of variances among how individuals become radicalized, the themes

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identified do point to some common messaging themes IS has utilized and can be expected to continue to utilize going forward. As a number of themes interweave, none arose as the singular explanatory factor as an indicator for radicalization susceptibility, but all were closely linked.

This is similar to more in-depth research on the sequential steps of radicalization, and how the path is not linear, but rather it follows a set of complex pathways (Jensen et al, 2020, p. 1077). It should also be reinforced that there are a number of academic models that attempt to precisely define pathways to radicalization, but many of them exhibit overlapping themes and assumptions (Shapiro & Crooks, 2022) which supports the need for a holistic view of messaging themes. IS propaganda and messaging is extremely unique in comparison to its contemporaries, and should the skill in which IS controls the information space be adopted by other extremist organizations, this would represent a grave security concern. As such, the discussion section will analyze themes identified in the desk review in concert with the information from the semi-structured interviews.

### *Use of Religious and Historical Themes and Interpretations*

Between IS's own literature analysed in the desk review, and the interviews with the participants providing detailed observations on IS adherents, it became apparent that there is a distinct link between perceived or real outrage by Muslims on a macro-cultural level as a driver towards violent personal behaviour by IS adherents. It was noted by multiple participants that grievances in the form of a historical or religious slight, such as recent wars or the colonial history of the Middle East, which are enough to foment an adverse emotional reaction in an

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individual was an important indicator of susceptibility to IS messaging. Faisal Al-Mutar agreed with this fulsomely, but only challenged this concept to reiterate that for those who joined IS out of security reasons, it was unlikely that they would be motivated by historical references (Faisal Al-Mutar, interview, 12 August 2022). This is an important observation as it provides insight into which values an individual possesses that can be subsequently used as a trigger for radicalization. As radicalization will generally lead to anti-social behaviour, theories of social and behavioural change such as normative social behaviour and those that privilege conformity are not quite adequate to explain this particular instance.

Utilizing the lens of the decision-theoretic model of collective behaviour, personal valuations like religious or moral beliefs and normative expectations may often be non-social, and can be viewed as the overarching catalyst for behavioural change, with the choice to act on them not influenced by the individual's community or social expectations of conformity (Petit, 2019, p. 11). With observed instances of an individual's personal values becoming so important as to override their sense of communal normative behaviour, this should be identified as a potential driver of radicalization which would require direct intervention from religious and community leaders and members in order to reframe or contextualize the sense of grievance from religious or historical slights. As the personal values of an individual can be extremely hard to determine accurately, this speaks to the importance of having honest conversations with at-risk individuals concerning possible aggravating factors. Navaid Aziz identified a clear role for imams and other religious leaders to counsel individuals wherever possible to ensure that they feel trust towards their communities, have compassion and have the capacity to honestly self-



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reflect (Navaid Aziz, interview, 8 October 2022). The change process from social to anti-social behaviour can be extremely personal, so it is critically important that gradual changes in an individual's behaviour over time are not ignored.

### *Discrimination Against Muslims*

Both perceived and real discriminatory practices against Muslims proved to be a consistent indicator of an individual's susceptibility to extremist messaging. Between geopolitical conflicts in the Middle East involving non-regional powers, policies, or rhetoric from Western governments intentionally ostracizing Muslims, or acts of anti-Muslim violence against individuals, there is no shortage of examples that disillusioned individuals can grasp in order to justify their perception of discrimination. This was a common theme in the literature analysed as part of the desk review, as well as during the interviews. In certain instances, specifically within Western contexts, feeling alienated from society due to their Islamic faith was the single greatest catalyst to trigger an individual's radicalization and emigration to IS's Caliphate (Navaid Aziz, interview, 8 October 2022). Related to this finding is that in some observed instances, counterterrorism approaches such as reliance on "terrorist profiles" lead to racial profiling, which may undercut the stated goal of public safety (Horgan, 2008, p. 84), in fact further ostracizing and alienating Muslims at risk of radicalization. IS propaganda has been effective at recognizing and tapping into this feeling of alienation.

While countries like Canada and the US claim the image of inclusive societies of "immigrant nations" in reality, newcomers from various cultures and religions can receive

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unequal levels of welcome and acceptance. The event of September 11th, 2001 in particular catalyzed an enormous shift in political and civil discourse in the years that followed, with impacts on Muslim communities within Western countries. Latent effects of that were seen in the 8th and 8th Mosque followers from Calgary who joined IS because of their perception of anti-Islamic sentiment in Canada. The emotional charge of discrimination was routinely utilized by IS within their literature, and routinely identified as a driver for adherents who were interviewed after their capture or reintegration. Another observed aspect of this is the importance of resilience to adversity among newcomers in western societies. An assessed level of integration cannot be used as the sole metric to determine susceptibility to radicalization (Rahimi & Graumans, 2016, p. 49), an individual's level of resilience is also an important measure of their protection against in concert with focusing on creating a welcoming community (UK Home Office, 2011, p. 24). Reinforcing education that leads to better civil discourse and utilizing more inclusive language with regards to integration of newcomers is crucial to mitigate this sense of discrimination as a driver. The emphasis on discrimination within IS's literature as well as examples of those radicalized demonstrates the level to which Muslim communities are crucial to the support and success of anti-radicalization efforts, and that any attempts towards bridge building and collaborative effort that reduce instances and perceptions of discrimination are worthwhile endeavours.

### *Sense of Community*

This theme relates to the sense of being alienated from an individual's broader community due to being a member of the Muslim-minority in a non-Muslim majority society,

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but also includes the sense of belonging in reference to *ummah* and *Khilafah*, for Muslims in both the West and in Muslim-majority societies. Given the pull that these seemingly utopian concepts can have, social identity theory provides some insight into this motivating factor. As an individual formulates their social identity, one of the processes is in-group positivity, defined as “the positive emotions and self-esteem produced by group affiliation” (Aghabi et al, 2017, p. 6). IS was able to inspire immigration to the Caliphate due to their success in creating a collective identity for those who joined. This provided adherents or prospective adherents with both a communal sense of belonging as well as a sense of superiority and self-esteem as a member of the semi-exclusive organization. This ties in with the previously mentioned theme of discrimination, especially for foreign-born IS adherents who travelled, as it provided them a sense of positive belonging, as well as escaping the negative connotations they perceived with their identity as a Muslim minority member in a non-Muslim majority society. This further supports the observation that policies that promote inclusion within civil society and that aim at building stronger community bonds between members of differing faiths and ethnicities may undermine IS recruitment efforts.

### ***Humiliation and Retribution***

As a powerful psychological motivator, a sense of humiliation can often be a precursor to antisocial and extreme behaviour. Amin Maalouf noted that “We have only to review the events of the last few years to see that any human community that feels humiliated or fears for its existence will tend to produce killers” (1998, p. 28). He further states that those same individuals

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will “commit the most dreadful atrocities in the belief that they are right to do so” (1998, p. 28).

As evidenced by the interviews shedding light on the different channels through which humiliation can be inflicted, IS also used emotionally charged and accusatory messages, which triggered a sense of humiliation, as a central pillar of their literature. The desk review uncovered how an undercurrent of humiliation and the accusation of shame featured in IS messaging, tapping into religious and historical grievances, such as the emasculation of men by women who withheld sex or acted as soldiers in place of the weaker men.

Faisal Al-Mutar referred often to the collective humiliation of the Iraqi and Syrian citizens who were consistently under threat or displaced from their homes due to years of conflict, and how that was routinely used as a plank holding up IS's other messaging threads such as community. Another consideration regarding humiliation is that the term is usually confounded and is an amalgamation of a number of other separate negative emotions, such as trauma, pain, guilt, and shame (Lindner, 2001, p. 16). This further compounds the difficulty in mitigating or addressing the underlying emotions. Without some capacity to actively work through or mediate disputes, negative emotions which contribute to humiliation will fester over time. Humiliation also has the added difficulty of being present at both the individual level, as well as the community level, meaning that geopolitical events can cause major impact to an individual's likelihood of becoming radicalized.

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While this may seem daunting, it also demonstrates an opportunity for military planners within areas of operations, as well as policymakers to ensure that a holistic view is incorporated towards their objectives to minimize follow-on risk of imposing a sense of humiliation.

### *Exploitation of Chaotic Situations*

In a way, this theme represents the sum total of the previous four themes. Without the stability of housing, infrastructure, day to day security, and civil society, there is no shortage in the supply of adherents to violent extremist organizations to be found even excluding ideological or psychological considerations. There were some gaps identified from the respondents concerning the specific reasoning as to what drove individuals to join IS or other extremist organizations out of power vacuums and chaotic situations. The analysis of IS exploitation of events and rivalries identified in the desk review pointed towards a continuous reinforcement that IS's enemies were too disorganized and petty to offer meaningful resistance to the group and as such, turned this into a message of strength and determination for external audiences. Faisal Al-Mutar's assessment of this was similar, with his perception that the major benefit to IS came from its ability to capitalize on disorganized enemies, and then, through its propaganda arm, aggrandize and exaggerate its small skirmish wins into momentous, divine victories. Furthering this, Faisal Al-Mutar also stated that for some adherents, it was simply a matter of allegiance for the purpose of gaining protection from another violent organization. Some of the other participants viewed the lack of social structure within regions controlled or threatened by IS as a

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warning sign that normalized violent behaviour has been accepted, especially among children. It is understood that lack of civic structure and power vacuums can lead to major instability within a region, as evidenced by the progressively scaling violence of organizations which led to the creation of IS. Further research would be required to determine whether the majority of individuals who joined IS because they were living in chaotic situations did so from ideological motivation, or rather, as a form of self-preservation.

### **Coalition Information-Related Capabilities Doctrine as an Analytical Framework**

While IS has a centralized media center with clear organizational and strategic capability in terms of message transmission, they have not published or disseminated any documents or doctrine that demonstrates what they assess as their metrics for success and how to repeat those effects. The high quality of their productions, as well as the themes previously discussed are routinely identified as major points which yield effective results and are utilized by IS repeatedly. However, this study's findings were not able to effectively parse the effectiveness of each of the identified themes from the desk review or findings, in terms of quantifying what percentage of recruits and adherents to IS would have been swayed by each individual theme. To fill that information gap, it is helpful to view IS's information operations capability under the lens of Coalition information-related capabilities (IRCs). Given that IS's messaging is specifically designed to modify the behaviour of individuals and increase support of the organization, the US Army's doctrine on Inform and Influence Activities (IIA) is a pertinent

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analogue to assess and infer the sequence of steps. By comparing IS's messaging themes and techniques against the utilized doctrine of IIA, greater understanding of the mechanisms with a view to disrupt the message can begin to occur.

IIA doctrine is defined as “the integration of designated information-related capabilities in order to synchronize themes, messages, and action with operations to inform US and global audiences, influence foreign audiences, and affect adversary and enemy decision making” (Department of the Army, 2013, p. 11). Of those three objectives presented within IIA doctrine, IS mirrors and attempts to enact all of them. As demonstrated with examples from the desk review, IS's literature and media productions routinely attempt to inform global audiences as to the strength and intent of IS, to influence foreign audiences to become IS supporters or adherents, and to affect the morale and resolve of those forces conducting anti-IS operations.

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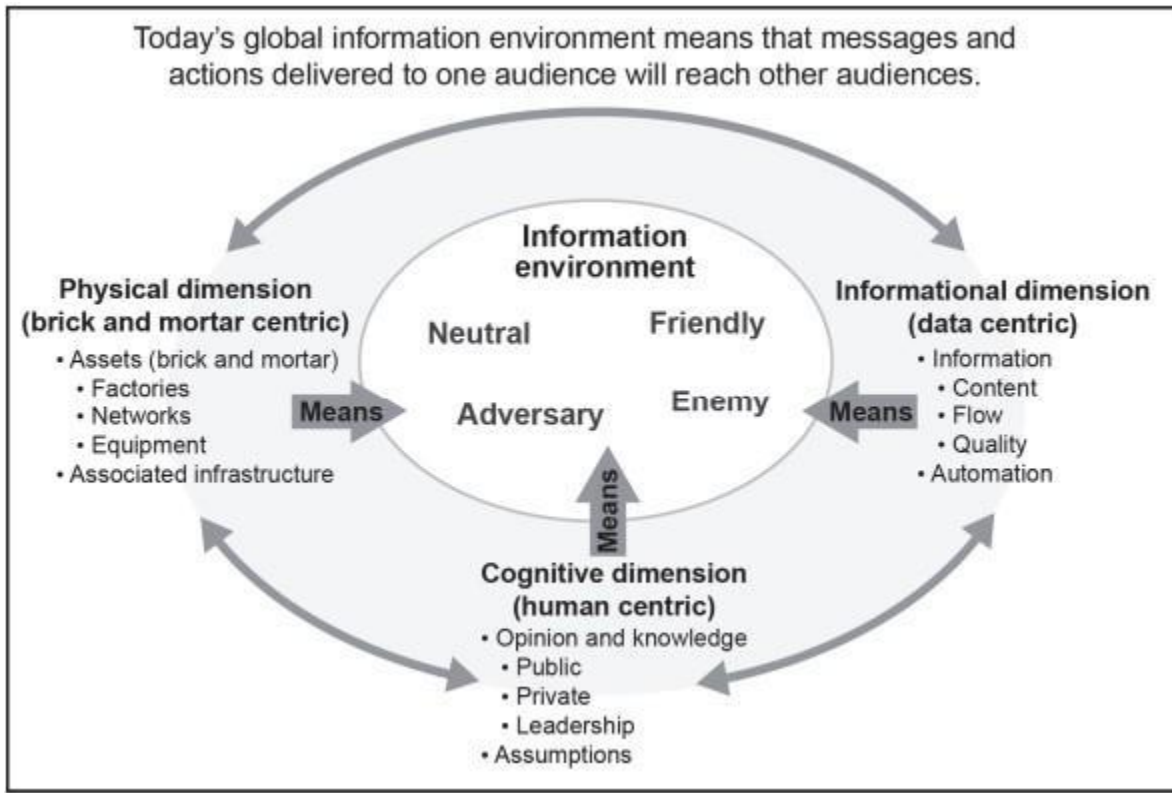


Figure 1: **Information Environment** (Department of the Army, 2013, p. 19)

In the identified dimensions of the information environment (physical, informational, and cognitive), IS has demonstrated a strong comprehension of how to exploit and layer their messages and themes, and Figure 1 serves to illustrate the sequence of IS's messaging. In identifying the physical mediums that their messages can be transmitted over, IS uses certain mechanisms for mass global communications (internet videos, Twitter accounts from adherents, publications, etc.), and more focused messaging for specific locales (i.e IS-K’s literature in various regional languages). This simultaneously increases both the efficacy of the messaging at the micro-level by targeting specific groups, while increasing the size of the dragnet which can capture foreign-born adherents and reach those who may be susceptible to less specific



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messages. In their understanding of the informational dimension, IS ensures that the data flow is constantly radiating, that communication and dissemination are uninterrupted,<sup>23</sup> and that there is no shortage of text to read and imagery to consume in order to flood both digital bandwidth as well as mental bandwidth. Tying these two dimensions together yields the results in the cognitive dimension, where individuals become radicalized and then become IS adherents and supporters through the consumption of messaging deliberately intended to shape perception and influence behaviour. The presence and psychological pull of the aforementioned themes manifests within the cognitive dimension, and the effectiveness of IS's propaganda efforts demonstrates an intuitive understanding of the information environment and of information operations doctrine. They have conducted an excellent case of an enabled information campaign; propagating themes and messages, accompanied by visceral images, which allows for easy and accessible consumption.

Within the doctrine itself, IS's messaging finds a strong analogue of implementation within the framework of IIA's targeting methodologies, specifically Decide (which targets to engage), Detect (the targets), Deliver (the message) and Assess (D3A)<sup>24</sup>. While it is unlikely that IS consciously mimicked this methodology, each function can be identified in IS's information operations. For the initial Decide stage, IS identifies a number of tangible and intangible themes which will enable a decision point as to the target audience of that specific theme or narrative.

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<sup>23</sup> With the notable exception of the immediate aftermath of the fall of Raqqa and the *Khilafah*.

<sup>24</sup> These stages are defined as: *Decide*: what target audiences are we going to send a message? *Detect*: which intelligence collection assets will find the target? *Deliver*: was the asset able to deliver the message as intended? *Assess*: how effective was the message received?

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These can be encapsulated in larger publications such as *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* or other mechanisms of smaller, more focused propaganda such as *al-Naba* or various videos. This also benefits from being scalable, meaning that it can easily shift to focus on specific locations or larger regions and global contexts. Once the priorities have been set with regards to the intended audience, then IS's centralized media apparatus can craft narratives in order to bring a desired effect to bear. An example for this stage would be the desire of IS to exploit anti-colonial sentiments in order to recruit adherents, so the intended audience are those who would be susceptible to messages of historical victimization at the hands of colonial powers. This leads to the next stage: Detect.

The central question IS planners ask is where is the target audience located and how can they be identified? In some instances, the nature of the publications (i.e. *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*) will not lend themselves to supporting the Detect stage due to their intended function of widespread promulgation and consumption. In others, IS can focus on specific clusters of networks or individuals to identify which method of transmission would yield the most effective ones (Klausen, 2015, p. 10). This can be done either actively or passively, for example, either monitoring social media or messaging applications for sympathetic individuals, or creating accounts to create discourse which can then drive identification of target audience clusters. This is the stage where social media can truly provide the modern effect that gives IS messaging its distinct edge. Applications like WhatsApp, Twitter, and especially Telegram enable quick and effective connectivity with like-minded or curious individuals, with a pipeline for content funneled directly into a device. While the larger corporations such as Facebook and Twitter

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routinely take IS content down as it breaches their terms of service, Telegram was slower to take down public pro-IS channels, and lacks the ability to monitor encrypted private channels (Feldstein & Gordon, 2021). It has been one of the most effective tools to quickly identify sympathetic individuals or communities, and to provide a constant source of IS messaging to disparate audiences on a global stage (Yayla & Speckhard, 2017).

The third stage is Deliver, and this focuses on the choice of delivery mechanism, whether it is a publication, video, or in-person recruiter. While many of the themes and narratives are centrally controlled, this is where local cells can tweak and personalize the delivery of the message to ensure that their regional knowledge is incorporated into the success of the overall message delivery. The final stage is Assess, which is the determination of whether the message was successful in its aims. IS's specific methods of performance and methods of effectiveness are not known, but it can be inferred from examples. For instance, IS's repeated messaging to women yielded a considerable influx of female adherents to the organization, including from Western countries. Outcomes like this are likely to have been assessed as extremely effective due to the recruitment and radicalization of women, further evidenced by the repeated re-engagement of this theme throughout the run of *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*, as well as other publications or mediums.

IS's effectiveness in the information environment is apparent, and creates a perception of an inexorable extremist group that shows no sign of abating (Fitton-Brown, 2020, p. 5), even after the fall of the *Khilafah*. Research also indicates that despite the territorial losses, IS

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continues their trend of adaptation to trial new insurgent techniques, and that while the *Khilafah's* physical manifestation may have been a generational event, the persistent export of IS's ideology is still a clear and present danger (Clarke, 2019, p. 158) . However, applying IIA doctrine to IS's themes and messaging offers an analytical framework to identify systems and features of the IS propaganda machine, which may better facilitate disruption. Coalition IIA is a robust apparatus, and is easily able to bring together a number of allied nations to support anti-IS propaganda both globally, and within specific targeted areas. Further, by viewing IS's media presence as an adversarial IIA operation, it provides an actionable way forward by way of counter-IIA doctrine in order to disrupt IS's messaging on the three dimensions of the information environment.

### **Recommendations**

Drawing from my analysis of this study's findings, the following recommendations are proposed, to identify aggravating factors that may continue to be exploited by IS propaganda efforts, as well as recommendations on how such efforts may be combatted. One set of recommendations are directed at policymakers in both civil and military contexts, and another set of recommendations are directed at researchers.

#### ***Recommendations for Civilian Policy-Makers***

1. Within the Western context, ensuring that the newcomer experience is a positive one is critical to preventing foreign-born citizens from being targeted by IS recruiters. Ensuring a smooth

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transition from one location to the next is crucial to ensuring that liberal values are more attractive than extremist ones. Understanding the impact of IS's "us" versus "them" rhetoric in political discourse can lead towards better comprehension of how it can be taken to a seemingly logical conclusion for newly radicalized members. Exploitation of lack of a sense of community and lack of resilience (Rahimi & Graumas, 2016, p. 49) is critical to radicalization efforts and IS has redoubled its efforts on this front to ensure a level of disharmony. In the Western context, wedge issues such as specific pejorative mention of Muslims or Islamic culture in political discourse serve to undercut a collective sense of community which can be leveraged by those with nefarious intent. Programs such as Alberta's Newcomers Integration grants providing settlement, language and community support to newcomers or Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada's settlement services must ensure that funding is accessible as well as consistent over fiscal years. Municipal governments should mirror similar programs wherever possible, in order to foster a multi-layered approach to inclusion to provide a net positive newcomer experience. The importance of focusing on community connections, language training, and employment and education opportunities cannot be understated.

**2.** Disruption of radicalization before it occurs is critical to successful mitigation of the consequences of radicalization. IS and other extremist groups prey on people who feel a lack of belonging and lack of purpose. Routinely applying concepts such as inclusion, respect, and tolerance to policies within institutions and communities, from micro-level workplaces to macro-level municipalities or provinces, could insulate at-risk individuals from experiencing emotions such as loneliness or alienation, which can be avenues to radicalization. Understanding that there

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are a number of pathways to radicalization, there are also a number of off-ramps along the way.

Access to social and mental health services should be considered the first line of defence in regard to “pre-deradicalization” and disruption of extremist messaging vectors. Assuming that law enforcement or military resources are best suited to deal with extremist recruits means an implicit acceptance that intervention can only occur once the individual has either already committed a serious crime or is about to commit one imminently. Given the plight of those already in detainment as an example, the overall cost to society is lower with proactive, rather than reactive plans to disrupt radicalization. Investment in preventative or first-line mental health services, such as confidential hotlines and one-on-one in person or online interviews, should be increased wherever possible. By providing an avenue for individuals to self-select, or to have resources that community members, religious leaders, or school administrators can refer to, the likelihood of alienation leading to radicalization decreases. This is also not a recommendation unique to Islamic or religious extremism; alt-right or “incel”-based violence often has similar roots in alienation, and accessible mental health services focused on providing an early buttress to disillusioned individuals would reduce the likelihood of anti-social behaviour occurring.

**3.** Local religious and community leaders must be empowered to lead change at all stages of the disruption and deradicalization process. Countering violent extremism (CVE) is a critical function that imams and religious leaders can operate as first-line support, and funding for programs promoting strong community bonds and accurately contextualizing religious tenets should be provided wherever possible. Vilifying or treating members of different religions or cultures does a disservice to the strengthening of civil society and often exacerbates

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vulnerabilities or predispositions of those in their communities to messaging of extremism and violence. Local imams and religious leaders should strive to increase religious literacy within their communities wherever possible, and not shy away in discussing difficult or misunderstood theological and philosophical concepts. Utilizing a holistic view of faith and religious tenets within community classes allows for greater context of different ideas such as the *Khilafah*, *ummah*, *jihad*, and *takfir* and makes those concepts less susceptible to being exploited by radical elements. A strong framework for this can be found within the publications of the Canadian Practitioners Network for the Prevention of Radicalization and Extremist Violence, specifically with regard to tangible implementation strategies (Brouillette-Alarie et al, 2019, p. 24). Sheikh Navaid Aziz is also intimately involved on this front, and provided a fulsome view of CVE. He stated that while although CVE can at times run into the problem space of profiling certain demographics writ large, he reinforced his view that imams are frontline workers in the prevention space, and often provide the sense of community which can be lacking for those in danger of being radicalized (Navaid Aziz, interview, 08 October 2022). It has been noted that integration in a Western society would not negate grievances such as geopolitical events which originate elsewhere (Mullins, 2012, p. 129), so investment into fostering integration and building resilience must be viewed as a complementary solution rather than a definitive one.

4. Governments and policymakers must take responsibility for their citizens regardless of whether or not it is politically popular. It was and remains to be a dereliction of duty for countries to refuse to repatriate their radicalized or insurgent citizens from IDP camps, as evidenced by the increasing recalcitrance of foreign IS adherents who languish within the camps

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and their ability to contact communities in their home countries via social media and messaging apps to spread IS's ideology. Further, in United Nations Security Council Resolutions 2178 and 2396, it is proscribed that countries must repatriate their foreign fighters (Harris-Hogan et al, 2021, p. 19). Allowing them to remain only serves to entrench the belief of their convictions while maintaining a nucleus of true believers in close proximity to one another. Citizens are the responsibility of the countries to which they hold citizenship, and abandoning citizens who joined IS in the name of political expediency only serves to aggravate the latent threat of the next generation of IS adherents (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Repatriation of captured IS combatants needs to occur as swiftly as possible to reverse radicalization, as well as to avoid the possibility of prison breaks which would reintroduce fighters and supporters into IS cells. Further, a recognition that children are extremely vulnerable to violent and antisocial ideologies must be incorporated at all stages of the planning process of anti-radicalization. If children are raised in or are taken by their parents into a society where violence is normalized, it is much more difficult to reverse the impacts of exposure to norms that sanction violent behaviour, compared to adults. This phenomenon was observed in the Nazi war machine of the Second World War, where those officers holding the junior ranks of *Obersturmführer* and *Oberleutnant* were observed to be the most fanatical in their devotion to the Nazi Party, owing largely to their younger age at the time of recruitment (Neitzel, 2011, p. 315). Great effort and priority must be placed on extricating foreign national children from circumstances where they can be radicalized as the latent effect of children who have been raised to believe in an extremist ideology is a large indicator for massive future destabilization within a society.



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### *Recommendations for Military Decision-Makers*

5. In line with IIA doctrine, utilization of the D3A (Decide, Detect, Deliver, Assess) targeting methodology in the delivery of Coalition influence activities can provide an effective way to counter IS's narratives. IIA planners should not focus on the "perfect" counter-narrative themes or messages. IS has demonstrated the success of broadcasting extremely generalized themes in tandem with targeted messages for specific audiences. By utilizing D3A, counter-narratives can be delivered to the chosen audience during a selected time and location window, with a follow-on assessment to either shift gears or re-engage. While IS's operation is different to adversarial conventional militaries, Coalition IIA doctrine is flexible and robust enough to provide effective methods of non-lethal targeting and information operations.

6. Gender based analysis needs to be routinely applied to operational planning, combat estimates and the stated war aims in conflict. The perception should be challenged that women involved in IS are strictly passive victims or individuals beholden to the men in their lives. Women in IS have their own political motivations and have in many cases proven to be just as capable to be incited towards violence and extremism as men. By discounting women as drivers of radicalization, policies will fail to comprehensively respond to radicalization causes. Using the IS-specific example of women who took up the roles of enforcing behaviours and standards or providing incitement to conflict, policymakers should be wary that radicalization can occur from anyone, not just male adherents.

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**7.** Routine incorporation and integration of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 must be made within all stages of the operational planning process, to ensure that stated war aims are holistic and reduce the threat of latent tensions festering after the fact. During anti-IS operations, liberation of Yazidi and other female sex slaves was neither a deliberate nor a dynamic objective during Coalition operations. Because of this, IS was able to subject many thousands of women and girls to traumatic sexual assault, physical abuse and injury, and deprive them of their dignity and freedom, as well as to gain nearly 125 million CAD through ransom and sale of sex slaves (Hutchinson, 2020, p. 382), funds that were invested in furthering their military objectives. The consequences of not accurately implementing and transposing the information gathered during the intelligence preparation of the environment can have an enormous financial and pragmatic impact to the efficacy of the adversary's ability to conduct operations.

**8.** Information operations and influence activities need to be given high priority within planning processes at all stages of a military campaign; especially so within an asymmetric or unconventional context. Follow-on effects of disruption from military operations by Coalition forces to areas under IS control need to be fully understood and accounted for. As a formation or task force conducts offensive operations within its boundaries, the bow shock will cause a variety of negative effects for the population as well as the adversaries targeted. If the sole emphasis is on the immediate kinetic objective of the operation, there is an extremely high likelihood that IS will seize the opportunity to use the event in its propaganda, to recruit new adherents disaffected by the impacts of the operation which allows for extremist ideology to take hold in the wake of kinetic action. In the planning and execution of operations, all objectives,

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from immediate to subsequent to final, should have a holistic view of the stability and sustainability of regions after military operations occur to prevent the likelihood of destabilization and follow-on conflict after the fact. Callousness and indifference among military planners towards civilians and non-combatants as well as the long-term outlook of infrastructure and liveability after conflict ends in an area of operations must be avoided at all costs. This disinterest can lead to major grievances on the part of the affected population which can undercut a short-term military victory over the long-term. As such, specific standards of care must be upheld when executing operations to ensure that the risk of needlessly exacerbating tensions between Coalition forces and either the host nation's government or the local populace is mitigated as much as possible. The belligerent notion of "*Vae Victis*" should not be considered acceptable in any modern military context, and after kinetic operations are complete or limited in scope, peacebuilding by way of thorough reconstruction and security preservation under the Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC) function in the region affected must follow as the subsequent phase of the same operation.

**9.** When operating in a combined joint environment, there must be a strong emphasis on coordination and deconfliction of operational push and pull factors. Ensuring that operations within a specific boundary set are properly coordinated will work to mitigate the exploitation of gaps and seams between unit or element boundaries. Further, the effect on the periphery of an area of operations must be understood as well. With the nature of asymmetric conflict rapidly changing from a localized to a global one, kinetic operations are not sufficient to eradicate

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ideologies, and the requirements on military planners must encapsulate the transmissibility of virulent belief systems like IS's wherever applicable.

### *Recommendations for Researchers*

**10.** While there is an innate comprehension that various factors such as poverty or violence breed other problems, there was a lack of literature that was able to definitively determine if there was one root quantitative cause that had an outsized or decisive impact in comparison to other factors. Previous research into this has yielded similar conclusions, such as “No one permissive condition or even combination of permissive conditions is thought to have sufficient power to predict the emergence of terrorism on its own” (Noricks, 2009, p. 42). If possible, research should be focused on analyzing the impact of specific human security indicators in comparison to one another. This is taken a step further by Claude Berrebi who writes: “Given the evidence, it is not realistic to put much stock in ‘root-cause’ explanations of terrorism, although the factors in question may indeed be contributors to the beginning, maintaining and ending of terrorism” (2009, p. 192). He further states that when developing counter-terrorism strategies, the assumption should be made that the conscious decision to commit terrorism is a rational one accompanied by a cost-benefit decision (2009, p. 193). Understanding the success of radicalization can vary greatly from individual to individual based on their personal values, and the limited literature on whether any specific human security indicator had impacts on whether any specific theme or message demonstrated a likelihood of being the most effective tool of radicalization. Many sources referenced cultural and societal conditions but generally only in

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providing context for someone who eventually became radicalized. A quantitative analysis of foreign ISIS fighters identified that economic conditions were not a decisive factor in recruitment, but supported the observation that isolation and lack of integration induces some to become radicalized (Benmelech & Klor, 2016, p. 11). It is possible that radicalization is solely a psychological decision with community factors providing a lack of options otherwise, but any attempt at a deliberate analysis of which societal factors tend to be greater risk factors than others would be beneficial.

### **Conclusion**

IS has an extremely modern and effective information warfare capacity to broadcast its vision and values to a wide audience. The themes that emerged in this study helped illuminate the specific mechanisms that make IS's messaging effective. For example, while aspects like the utilization of nebulous historical and religious themes do not on their own have the ability to necessarily sway an individual who is already versed in Islamic religious scholarship or Quranic precepts, those who only had a rudimentary understanding of Islamic history and Quranic precepts were demonstrated to have an increased receptivity due to their tendency to fill the gaps with their own interpretations. This distinction allowed for insight into how to disrupt IS messaging by suggesting that specific approaches to education about Islam have the potential to act as an antidote to extremist interpretations. The perversions of Islamic theology which are utilized by IS also speaks to the importance of the relationship between the believer and their

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imam and religious community, and how the nature and content of religious guidance can be a strong indicator towards whether or not an individual will be susceptible to radicalization. The major underlying themes present in IS's literature were identified and corroborated with interview respondents who provided insight into the real-world effect of many of those themes.

Respondents discussed many of the themes found in IS's literature that were also covered in the literature reviewed for this study. These include the experience of humiliation and the desire for retribution, emotions that can often be exploited with calls to action that allude to past events and their associated narratives. These narratives can be used to tap into the emotional charge that they trigger, and they have the advantage of being widely prevalent in Muslim societies. This allows for a domination of the information environment that utilizes a multi-pronged attack on the physical, informational, and cognitive dimensions. Countries such as Afghanistan and Mali, with their recent or ongoing violent conflicts, religiously divided societies, and widespread poverty, have populations who are extremely susceptible to the use of these powerful psychological motivators (Piazza, 2008, p. 483). The severe vulnerability to radicalization presented by populations living in, or having recently experienced, crisis is often overlooked from a preventative measures standpoint, and so is less understood as a variable in radicalization. As evidenced by the tens of thousands of recalcitrant and vociferous IS adherents currently held in IDP camps throughout Iraq and Syria, the cost of deradicalization efforts in terms of resources and time after the fact is exponentially higher than preventative deradicalization, with a lower percentage chance of success. While the road to radicalization is highly variable and there are many atypical cases, there are a number of ways which have

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become evident to mitigate radicalization, by focusing on ensuring positive connections such as religious community, the newcomer experience, feelings of inclusivity and ensuring interfaith and intercultural relationships are upheld.

IS's pernicious ideology is not ground-breaking in its claims, but it is unique in terms of its efficacy and severity. Its scope is well documented at all stages of its trajectory to date, from the height of its self-styled *Khilafah*, to the present where IS cells exist in strength from West Africa to Central Asia. The analysis of IS's literature, review of the published literature, and my own data uncovered complex and overlapping themes. The identification of key themes in IS's narrative and its messaging allows for a theoretical basis to assist a focused effort to identify, disrupt and neutralize the content of IS's messaging. However, messaging is only part of the equation, as the existing perceptions of those populations vulnerable to IS recruitment, as well as the social, political, and economic conditions in which they live, need to also be better understood in terms of how they may play a role in making people more susceptible to IS messaging. Close analysis of IS messaging is one step towards preventing individuals from following the path of radicalization, and also by assisting those who have already joined IS in returning to civil society.

As the specific values and motivators of humans vary greatly from individual to individual, there is no silver bullet that can end the pernicious ideologies of violent extremism once and for all. However, by understanding the motivations of those vulnerable to radicalization, who live under the shadow of movements like IS, the threats from these

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ideologies, including the great harms they bring to their own adherents, can be better understood, and therefore, better mitigated. By applying a number of lenses to these motivations, whether they involve historical and religious grievance, humiliation and retribution, or feelings of alienation as a Muslim, we can aim to better predict and neutralize grievances where possible, and disrupt messaging vectors which seek to drive vulnerable populations to violence and inhumanity. Regrettably, extremist ideology and violent action may never be eradicated. However, in better understanding what drives people to embrace such ideology, we can strive towards geopolitical power structures where human security is strengthened, and a more robust sense of community emerges to prevent and disrupt the machinations of violent extremists.



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