

ISIS' Clash of Civilizations: Constructing the 'West' in Terrorist Propaganda

“Today we are upon the doorstep for a new era, a turning point for the map of the region, rather the world. Today we witness the end of the lie called Western civilization and the rise of the Islamic giant. [...] The region is changing into one that threatens civilization with destruction, meaning the civilization of shirk and kufr, the civilization of usury and prostitution, the civilization of humiliation and subjugation” (*Dabiq* #4)

“It becomes important for us to clarify to the West in unequivocal terms – yet again – why we hate you and why we fight you” (*Dabiq* #15)

As exemplified by the above quotes, the vast and multifaceted propaganda produced by the self-proclaimed “Islamic State” (IS) regularly mentions the “West” and identifies it as an enemy that “Muslims” should resist and fight against.¹ Yet who and what defines the West IS refers to, what harm does IS claim the West is doing, and what does IS argue ought to be done with/to the West as a response, remains unclear. This is so for two reasons. First, IS uses many overlapping labels to name its enemies, simultaneously promoting a dichotomous worldview (“believers” vs. “disbelievers”, “Muslims” vs. “non-Muslims”) and depicting a complex environment where numerous enemies co-exist (“Crusaders”, “apostate regimes”, “evil scholars”, the Shi’a, the US, etc.). Second, the few available studies focusing on IS’ take on the West, such as Hegghammer and Nesser’s (2015) analysis of IS’ commitment to attack it, tend to conflate the West with other related categories or individual countries. The present paper attempts to disentangle these confluences in order to investigate the importance of the West in IS discourse, and more generally to evaluate the extent to which the group advances the thesis of a civilizational clash. In other words, we clarify the specific position given by IS to the West as a discrete civilizational category in its propaganda, which allows us to assess the group’s commitment to reifying and exacerbating tensions along civilizational fault-lines (as distinct from religious, sectarian, or national ones).

This investigation takes place against the backdrop of, and directly contributes to, two interwoven discussions exploring the “uses of the West” (Hellmann & Herborth 2017; also Bonnett 2004; Browning & Lehti 2010) as a category and discourse in international politics. First, we are interested in exploring how IS’ use of the West (re-)produces a view of the world defined in civilizational terms and marked by contemporary forms of “civilizational politics” (Bettiza 2014; also Hall & Jackson 2007). Namely, the idea that civilizations and their relations – especially understood in conflictual terms – *matter* in today’s international system. We do so not only on the tail of Samuel Huntington’s (1993; 1996) “clash of civilizations” thesis and the many interventions aimed at endorsing or refuting it, but also with the intent to examine how IS might be turning the idea of a clash between the West and Islam into a *social fact* through a propaganda that shapes the very actions and practices it exhorts its followers to perform on the world stage. As IS writes, when referring to its conflict against the West, “this is the clash of encampments – civilizations – that many saw coming, as it is found in Allah’s signs throughout history and current events” (*Dabiq* #15). While attempts to polarize and incite violence along the West/“Muslim world” fault line are certainly not the exclusive preserve of IS and of Islamist actors more broadly,² a focus on IS is nevertheless particularly warranted because of the extraordinary reach and breadth of the group’s

¹ We use the present tense throughout the article as the group still emits propaganda, even though the quantitative importance of this activity has shrunk. For extensive accounts on the scale and multidimensional character of IS’ propaganda, read for example Winter 2015, Whiteside 2016, Milton 2016, or Baele, Boyd & Coan 2018. Also, we use here quotation marks to hint at the adoption of highly contested civilizational categories by IS when it talks about the “West” or “Westerners” and of “Muslims” and the “Muslim world”. However we drop the use of quotation marks throughout the rest of the article for stylistic purposes.

² The clash of civilizations narratives between the West and Islam are explicitly endorsed and reproduced by the “counter-Jihad” movements in Europe and North America (Lee 2016; Anders Breivik’s “Compendium” is a clear example), as well as among the “alt-Right” and in the Trump administration’s rhetoric (Hirsh 20116).

propaganda as well as its significant impact on today's security environment. In brief, what is at stake here is the role of the communications disseminated by an organization which has represented in the past years the main terrorist threat for Americans and Europeans, in supporting and fulfilling through language and images, and the potential structuring of its followers' behavior, the Huntingtonian prophecy of clashing civilizations.

Second, the article advances knowledge on the linguistic and visual processes at play in the construction of exclusive, antagonistic identities, especially those based on large-scale imagined communities such as civilizations. The goal here is to study IS' conceptualization of the West through the prism of the various approaches that help to better understand how such identities are presented, come to be endorsed, and in some case lead to violence. We do so, in particular, by further situating IS' propaganda in relation to several "Occidental" (Buruma & Margalit 2005) narratives already present in the Salafi-jihadist tradition. Albeit not fully coherent at times, IS' antagonistic construction of the West nonetheless clearly homogenizes it as a fundamentally sinful, a-religious entity actively sustaining the alleged state of ignorance (*jahiliyyah*) of the Muslim world and taking part in the direct aggression and covert oppression of Muslims.

Analyzing and evaluating IS' contribution to civilizational politics through radicalizing language has significant practical benefits. A granular understanding of how IS makes use of the West in its propaganda indeed enhances our ability to contextualize the ways other violent groups across the ideological spectrum use the concept, and to infer the practical implications of these uses for security and intelligence practitioners.

We proceed in three main steps. First, we briefly contextualize our effort within the two aforementioned interlocking discussions. We identify IS' use of the West as a powerful radicalizing voice, both in the context of today's highly salient civilizational politics, and as a new instance of extremist discourses of exclusive identity construction and "othering" that draw on and resonate with established discourses and beliefs. Second, we briefly detail our multi-methods approach, which consists of a combination of three quantitative tools (linguistic network analysis, dictionary-based content analysis, visual analysis) and extensive qualitative illustrations of IS' prose and imagery. Third, we present our findings, advancing the discussions on the clash of civilizations and exclusive identities by systematically answering the three questions raised in the opening lines of the paper: who is the West IS refers to, what harm does IS claim the West is doing, and what does IS argue ought to be done with/to the West. Overall, we claim that IS presents a blurred image of the West as one of the many enemy outgroups castigated by the organization, yet a very particular one which is, first and foremost, defined by its *uncivilized* status and, second, by its oppression of Muslims which it carries out in two specific ways – covert religious-political conspiracy, and direct aggressions – calling for rejection and retaliation.

Radicalizing Uses of the West and Civilizations

1. IS' civilizational politics: Re-defining the West, enacting the "clash"

IS' use of the West does not take place in an international vacuum of meaning. Rather, it constitutes yet another avatar of what Bettiza (2014) labels "civilizational talk", that is, the increasing salience of political discourses centered on the idea that civilizations exist and their relations matter in world politics. While the notion of a "clash" between the West and the "Muslim world" was initially put forward by the Princeton-based scholar Bernard Lewis (1990), the claim that international affairs and conflicts have to be understood along civilizational fault-lines was fully elaborated and popularized by Samuel Huntington (1993; 1996) as a new paradigm for explaining international relations in the aftermath of the end of the Cold War. As Huntington (1993: 22) notoriously argued on the pages of *Foreign Affairs*:

"It is my hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future."

This theory has proven to be extremely controversial, to say the least. Scholars from multiple traditions – including realists (e.g. Walt 1997), liberals (e.g. Sen 2006), Marxists (e.g. Halliday 2002), post-colonialists (e.g. Said 2001), and empiricists (e.g. Henderson & Tucker 2001; Fox 2002; Chiozza 2002) – have consistently and powerfully questioned whether civilizations mattered or even existed at all, often critiquing and rejecting the view that contemporary conflicts would be chiefly driven by civilizational, cultural and religious differences. Others, from a historical sociological perspective, have lamented Huntington’s simplistic, narrow, and one-sided approach to civilizations. Drawing on the complex tradition of civilizational analysis, such scholars have argued that, rather than fixed, bounded, monoliths, civilizations are heterogeneous, porous, and changing entities, whose encounters and interactions go well beyond those defined by conflict to include processes of learning, borrowing, or hybridization (e.g. Puchala 1997; Katzenstein 2010; Hobson 2004).

Yet in spite of this sustained criticism, events like those of 9/11 and complex globalizing processes leading to the broadening of political identifications and actor-hood beyond those of the nation-state, have ensured that civilizational imaginaries in general and “clash of the civilizations” narratives in particular would continue “to resonate widely in public discourses and policy circles around the world” (Bettiza 2014: 5). As a result, greater attention has been given as of late, not solely to proving that Huntington was wrong – whether by questioning or deconstructing his use and understanding of civilizations – but rather, paraphrasing Alexander Wendt (1992), to exploring how civilizational categories and clashes are often “what people make of them”. Indeed, as Hall observes (2007: 199), “the concept of civilization is being used” in world politics today and, along the way, it is becoming a “significant carrier of knowledge and of thereby attendant preferences and policies”. In other words, civilizational talk does not only reflect what political actors think, it more importantly produces powerful “civilizational imaginaries” (Bettiza 2014) that shape people’s worldviews, political preferences, and eventually actions (see also Browning & Lehti 2010: 20-22; Williams & Neumann 2000: 362).

Whether we like it or not, civilizations are “frames of reference” (Petito 2011) that are increasingly mobilized by international political actors for a variety of purposes. Indeed, the notion of impeding civilizational clashes, or the specular desire to deter such conflicts by promoting better dialogue and understanding between the West and Muslims, has come to structure in multiple ways how contemporary world politics is being discussed and acted upon. This has been noticeable, for instance, in relation to various UN initiatives focused on promoting and institutionalizing inter-civilizational “dialogues” or “alliances” (Esposito & Voll 2000, Bettiza 2014b, Haynes 2017, Balci 2009),³ or in the context of America’s “War on Terror” and its broader security strategy – be it in relation to Bush’s democracy promotion agenda in the “broader” Middle East, Obama’s attempt to re-engage with Muslims around the world (most symbolically captured by his 2009 speech in Cairo), or Trump’s (in)famous “Muslim ban” (e.g. Salter 2002; Adib-Moghaddam 2011; Mullin 2013; Bettiza 2015; Haynes 2017b). The international system thus increasingly appears in the thralls of particular forms of “civilizational politics” (Bettiza 2014) where the two most relevant entities are supposed to be the West and the Muslim world. In this context, it is crucial to establish whether and how IS’ propaganda is further alighting this type of politics in significant ways both through the production of specific discourses and images as well as by calling on its adherents and potential followers to perform particular actions on the world stage as a response to this “reality”.

2. IS’ “Occidentalism”: Othering the West, essentializing its negative identity

Along with a new enunciation of the clash thesis, IS’ specific use of the West category in its propaganda should simultaneously be understood as a particular instance of a linguistic construction of a highly exclusive collective social identity. As Herborth and Hellmann (2017: 3) note, the concept of the West provides “a way of drawing boundaries, establishing differences, and demarcating political and social spaces, [... gaining...] significance only in contradistinction”. As such, what is important is not simply “what the West is but what it, the word, *does*, and how it is being used” (Herborth & Hellmann 2017: 4). Following this line of argument, what

³ For the intellectual roots of these initiatives, see Dallmayr (2002); Forst & Ahmed (2005); Dallmayr & Manoochehri (2007).

IS *does* by entering the civilizational repertoire and using the West label in its propaganda, is to construct and disseminate a particular perception of who its friends and enemies are. In short, it engages in a process of large-scale “othering” similar to dynamics from the Cold War (e.g. Campbell 1992) or the “war on terror” (e.g. Krebs & Lobasz 2007; O’Reilly 2007).

Two central linguistic processes are at play in exclusionary identity constructions like these. First is the *reification and homogenization* of both the “ingroup” and its “outgroup”. Their presentation as highly uniform entities that possess traits that are inherent and fundamental to them, which can never be altered (naturalization) and have always existed as they exist now (eternalization) (Reicher & Hopkins 2001). The heterogeneity and hybridity of the social fabric are erased in favor of exclusive, sharply distinct group identities that fuel radicalization.⁴ Second is the *construction of a dichotomous moral worldview*, whereby the outgroup is typically essentialized in negative ways (e.g. coward, weak, deceitful) and the ingroup is positively depicted (e.g. brave, strong, morally superior).⁵

Speeches that reify groups and emphasize their homogeneity, while simultaneously exaggerating negative traits for the outgroup and positive ones for the ingroup, tend to shape public perceptions towards more radical understandings of a situation, more extreme policy preferences, and potentially more violent behaviors. “The idea that the enemy shares a bad essence can make sense of the impulse to attack all of them, without regard for age, gender, or civilian status”, McCauley and Moskaleiko explain (2008: 428), before continuing: “a group’s essence is understood to be stable over historical time and immutable for the individual group member. If the essence is bad, there is nothing to be done” – apart from killing them. The lethality of such linguistic moves has been documented in some of the most dramatic cases of political violence, for instance in the case of the Holocaust (Essner 1995, Pegelow 2006 on the Holocaust) or the Rwandan genocide (e.g. Kellow & Steeves 1998, Chege 1996, Straus 2007). We suggest that IS’ efforts to use the West category – alongside other ones – might well be a new instance of this type of discursive strategy, which we propose to document. Just like the “Jew” or “Tutsi” labels, the West is a group name that can be used to assign sharply exclusive self- and other-identities, thereby shaping biased perceptions, fostering belonging and rejection, and prompting radical action.

Essentialized and reified negative group portrayals are even more effective when coupled with a third linguistic process, their *integration into “mythic narratives”* (Halverson, Goodall & Corman 2011: 16), that is, storylines that resonate with the ingroup’s culture and its folk knowledge about the outgroup, wherein the latter occupies the role of an archetypally nefarious actor despicable because of its actions as much as its essence. Nazi propaganda for example integrated its negative portrayal of the Jews into a complex plot involving already existing stories such as the “Versailles betrayal” and then-widespread beliefs in racial hierarchy; radical Hutu speeches tapped into longstanding pseudo-historical claims on the origins of the Tusti and Hutus wherein the former were understood to be “foreigners” who actively undermined “local” Hutus. In the context of IS’ propaganda, we expect “Occidentalism” themes and tropes to provide an already existing and fertile intellectual ground, a set of background mythic narratives, for IS to recycle and re-deploy in order to “other” the West in ways that are intelligible, highly resonant to its audience, and attribute blame for a range of problems.⁶ Buruma and Margalit (2005: 5) define Occidentalism, a concept which purposely mirrors Edward Said’s notion of “Orientalism”, as “the dehumanizing picture of the West painted by its enemies”. Such picture thrives on juxtaposing, as Aydin (2007: 92) summarizes it, themes of profound native spirituality versus shallow and mechanistic Western rationalism; authentic moral tradition versus technological and inhuman modernity; cultural uniqueness versus the homogenizing forces of industrial capitalism; heroic, idealized common folk

⁴ We understand radicalization here as the “change in beliefs, feelings, and behaviors in directions that increasingly justify intergroup violence and demand sacrifice in defense of the ingroup” (McCauley & Moskaleiko 2008: 416).

⁵ This presentation of groups accentuates two well-known phenomena of intergroup relations first exposed by Tajfel’s experiments in the early 1970s (Tajfel et al. 1971; Tajfel & Turner 1978): when their group affiliation is made salient, individuals tend to exaggerate similarities and ignore differences within both their group and their outgroup (homogeneity effect), and tend to reward their ingroup over outgroup members (favoritism/derogation effect).

⁶ Ole Waever (2017: 51) observes: “it is not only the West that has used images of the ‘Orient’ for its own identity purposes; others have used the ‘West’ for their identity construction, too”.

versus cowardly and calculating bourgeoisie; and, finally, religious purity versus idolatrous materialism.⁷ We therefore explore how IS' construction of the West in its propaganda relates to and resonates with particular, context-specific, and pre-existing Occidentalistic mythic narratives that present the West as an *uncivilized*, nefarious "other" circulating within Muslim milieus at large and among the Salafi-jihadist galaxy in particular.

It is now known that the words, images and symbols contained in IS propaganda were selected cautiously and subjected to strict standards seeking to harmonize the message across its many "media offices", while tailoring it for particular audiences (e.g. Milton 2016; Baele, Boyd & Coan 2018). We therefore posit that the group's civilizational talk and its use of the West label is not a random component of this message. Rather, we assume that it was to a large extent intended to shape individual and group identities, to model reified perceptions of enmity, threat and insecurity, to polarize opinions, and spur a range of action including – but not confined to – violent attacks. We hypothesize that IS' Occidentalistic use of the West constructs a homogenous, reified, negative Western identity in order to actively turn the clash of civilizations thesis into a self-fulfilling prophecy by tapping into background mythical narratives prevalent in radical Muslim or Islamist culture.

Analyzing the West in IS' Propaganda: A Multi-Methods Approach

To study IS' civilizational talk, we opt for a "reconstructive approach" of the West, that is, an approach that details the uses of the concept as well as its foreseen "performative consequences [...] in political practice" (Herborth & Hellmann 2017: 6; 7). To organize the inquiry and cover the various dimensions of IS' civilizational talk, we subdivide it into three questions: 1) *who/what exactly constitutes the West IS refers to?* 2) *What does the West do?* 3) *What ought to be done to the West as a response?* These three questions, tackled gradually, correspond to how the West appears in three major components of IS' "ethos of conflict":⁸ its "societal beliefs delegitimizing the opponent", its "societal beliefs of ingroup victimization", and its "prescriptions for social action" (Bar-Tal & Halperin 2012). This three-dimensional approach enables us to examine the multiple ways through which IS constructs a homogenous, negative, West in view of radicalizing its audience.

Specifically, we study a corpus of 25 Western-facing English-language IS propaganda magazines – *Dabiq* 1-15 and *Rumiyah* 1-10 (the former ran from July 2014 to July 2016, the latter replacing it from September 2016). By focusing on this corpus, we knowingly restrict our analysis to one very specific dimension of IS' presentation of the West and its relations to the Islamic world: its depiction to a potentially sympathetic audience presumably living *in* the place depicted as the West, and thus to a certain extent at least partially Western. While Middle-East populations are chiefly targeted by other IS publications in Arabic, *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* (as well as other similar outlets such as the French-language *Dar-al-Islam*) are clearly aimed at a readership who lives in the West (a fact reflected by their production by the specialized *al-Hayat Media Centre*). Far from a negligible part of IS' propaganda, this mirror image of the West shown to the West constitutes an important component in the group's overall information operations strategy, aiming to "offer its readership a powerful 'competitive system of meaning' [...] through which it shapes its readership's perceptions, polarises their support, and drives their radicalisation" (Ingram 2016: 2). These magazines provide potential sympathizers with an accessible prose presenting a mix of news from Iraq and Syria, entry-level theological discussions, ideologically-driven analyses

⁷ Buruma and Margalit (2005) suggest that Occidentalistic ideas constitute a particular type of anti-Western discourse found all over the world, whose origins can also be traced to European counter-Enlightenment and Romantic thought. As such, Occidentalism is not uniquely or originally an Islamic or Muslim discourse. Also, critiques of the West in the non-West in general and in Islamic and Muslim political thought in particular, take multiple forms that cannot be reduced solely to Occidentalism. Some do endorse a paradigm that stresses civilizational difference but nonetheless emphasizes the importance of dialogue, understanding, respect and learning across cultural and religious lines (e.g. Dallmayr & Manoochchri 2007; Kayaoğlu 2012). Others do not gesture towards any notion of civilizational difference, rather critiquing the West and its international practices on the basis of certain universalist assumptions inspired by liberal, Marxist, or anti-colonial thought instead (Aydin 2007; Buck-Morss 2003).

⁸ The concept of "ethos of conflict", originally coined by Bar-Tal (2000), refers to the societal beliefs and cognitions shared by a group experiencing conflict, "through which society members evaluate their experiences, events, and new information" (Bar-Tal & Halperin 2012: 41)

of world affairs, direct critiques of enemies and eulogies of IS members, as well as everyday advice (women's matters, practical tips on how to carry out "just terror" tactics, etc.). This prose is well-formatted and consistently supported by images, to the point where the text seems to support and frame the image rather than the other way round.⁹ Importantly, these magazines are widely circulated online and constitute a central node in IS' rich, multi-format propaganda, containing several indications of outputs available in other formats to direct the reader towards more specific propaganda according to his/her preferences ("Top 10 videos" produced by IS' provinces, new book being released, new app for *al-Bayan* Radio, etc.).

In practice, we combine quantitative content analysis methods with extensive qualitative illustrations, taking stock of recent calls to break the qualitative/quantitative schism in International Relations and security studies (e.g. Bennett, Elman & Owen 2014; Barkin & Sjoberg 2015), and more specifically responding to Bennett's call to combine quantitative and qualitative content analyses (2015). Quantitative content analysis methods excel at highlighting the most central and important themes of a corpus, at mapping and weighing its recurring claims, and at identifying its key formal characteristics, in a way that avoids biases, preconceptions and "cherry-picking". Qualitative interpretation offers "deep dives" in the textual content, allowing for more nuance. Our analysis combines the respective strengths of the two approaches, completing the qualitative interpretation of the magazines (based on relevant quotes from *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*, pertinent examples of images and, when relevant, excerpts from prominent figures of the Salafi-jihadist movement at large),¹⁰ with tailored quantitative efforts to further elaborate and strengthen this interpretation.

More specifically, our quantitative analysis rests on three techniques, thereby offering an example of a multi-methods approach. Two focus on language, one on images. First, we conducted a series of computer-assisted dictionary-based content analyses of the language of the two magazines (the full, unsegmented corpus totals 577,668 words in total). Dictionary-based approaches analyze the frequency in a corpus of specific keywords grouped in thematically coherent sets (dictionaries), allowing the researcher to measure the saliency of theoretically relevant lexical fields and trace their chronological evolutions.¹¹ This approach allows us to assess the real importance and evolution of IS' civilizational talk and more specifically its usage of the West and associated categories.

Second, we executed a series of linguistic network analyses of the same text corpus. Network analysis applied to language produces what is sometimes called "semantic networks", and is usually based on the idea that regularly co-occurring words in a corpus tend to share a common meaning or represent a common theme: the closer two words tend to appear in sentences and paragraphs, the more meaningful the association between the two will be in terms of the construction of ideas and arguments conveyed by the text (e.g. Young 1996; Steyvers & Tenenbaum 2005; McNamara 2011). This association can be further evaluated by combining pure co-occurrence network analysis with semantic parsing work, which locates the grammatical relationships connecting words in the texts (for example, locating the subjects of verbs, or the adjectives accompanying a given noun). Here we use pure co-occurrence networks but also at various points replicate the method recently developed and used by Baele, Coan and Boyd to analyze general trends in IS propaganda (2017; 2018), which combines semantic parsing through Python's Natural Language ToolKit with network visualization through GEPHI. This network approach allows us to evaluate and visualize how words related to the West connect with each other as well as with words that construct the meaning of other themes – for example words associated with Islam, civilizations or the "caliphate".

Third, we operated a coding-based visual analysis of the 1931 images contained in *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* magazines, using and further refining the database and codebook used in recent work on IS' "visual style" (Baele,

⁹ On the primacy of images in IS' communications, read for example Winter 2015b; Winter 2017; Zelin 2015.

¹⁰ This combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to gain a full(er) perception of the corpus is inspired by Hart's metaphor (2001): working qualitatively is akin to sightseeing a city with a car, while working quantitatively is like watching this city from a helicopter – each provide unique yet limited views that are best combined.

¹¹ For examples of dictionary-based analyses of political texts, see Baele & Sterck 2014 (on immigration), Rooduijn & Pauwels 2011 (on populism), or Laver & Garry 2000 (on policy positions).

Boyd & Coan 2018), enabling a tailored study of the content of the images that participates in IS' construction of the West. While Steele (2017) showed the importance of the "aesthetic" visual representations of the West in the West, our effort documents the way pictures contribute to a IS' "Occidental" construction of the West. In Baele, Boyd and Coan's existing database (2018), each image is linked to one of eight prominent narratives of Salafi-jihadism, themselves classed in two prominent master frames: "crisis"-constructing images and "solution"-constructing images. Remarkably, this coding reveals that images depicting IS as the provider of the solution to the perceived crisis have consistently been dominant, reflecting IS' preference (until *Rumiyah*) to picture their "ingroup" at the detriment of visual depictions of their enemies. By far the most important visual crisis-constructing narrative was that of a large-scale plot against Islam involving foreign powers, "fake" Islamic clerics, Jews and "apostate" regimes, which is depicted in no less than 202 pictures. For the current project, we further refined this "plot" narrative category by further distinguishing between plot images containing "Western" and non-"Western" actors. Two experts in IS propaganda independently coded the plot images.

Fulfilling the Clash: IS and the "Othering" of the West

1. Who/what/where is the West?

A first, necessary step when interrogating IS' use of the West is to establish a clear mapping of what, or who, or where, it claims the West to be. A straightforward search on IS' mentions of the term West would offer only a small and distorted piece of the puzzle. At times IS talks about the West without explicitly naming it,¹² or talks about West or Western in non-civilizational terms to denote geographical directions. Other times it refers to several of its most identifiable components – for example states like the US or the UK, or individuals like Obama or Cameron – without identifying them as Western, in which case it is important to establish whether IS discusses these components for their own sake or as specific instances or exemplars of the West or some other entity. It is thus crucial to map IS' use of the West category within a broader galaxy of related labels participating in the group's construction of "otherness" – as Waever notes, the West label is only mobilized when it "appears useful and meaningful to invoke 'the West' as opposed to other available unifying categories" (2017: 38). As figure 1 below illustrates, in our corpus the West appears alongside a myriad of related outgroups – this multiplicity of enemies is actually a notable characteristic of the group's propaganda. The West label appears to co-occur more frequently and closely with religious outgroup entities like "Christians", "Jews" or "Kuffar", more than with categories representing non-IS aligned Islamic movements (e.g. "Nusayri", "Rafidi", "Safawi": far-left of the graph) or powers actively involved in Syria and Iraq's battlefields (e.g. "PKK", "Iran", "Crusaders", "Factions", "Russia": bottom of the graph). The West's isolated position demonstrates that it is employed in a very particular way that touches on the lexical field of religiousness or morality and which is clearly distinct from IS' discussions on seemingly related/overlapping groups such as "crusaders" or America, a point further examined below.

¹² This echoes Schlag's analysis of NATO's "Western" identity (2017), which is highly salient yet without any linguistic support in term of potential uses of the West label in the organization's official documents.

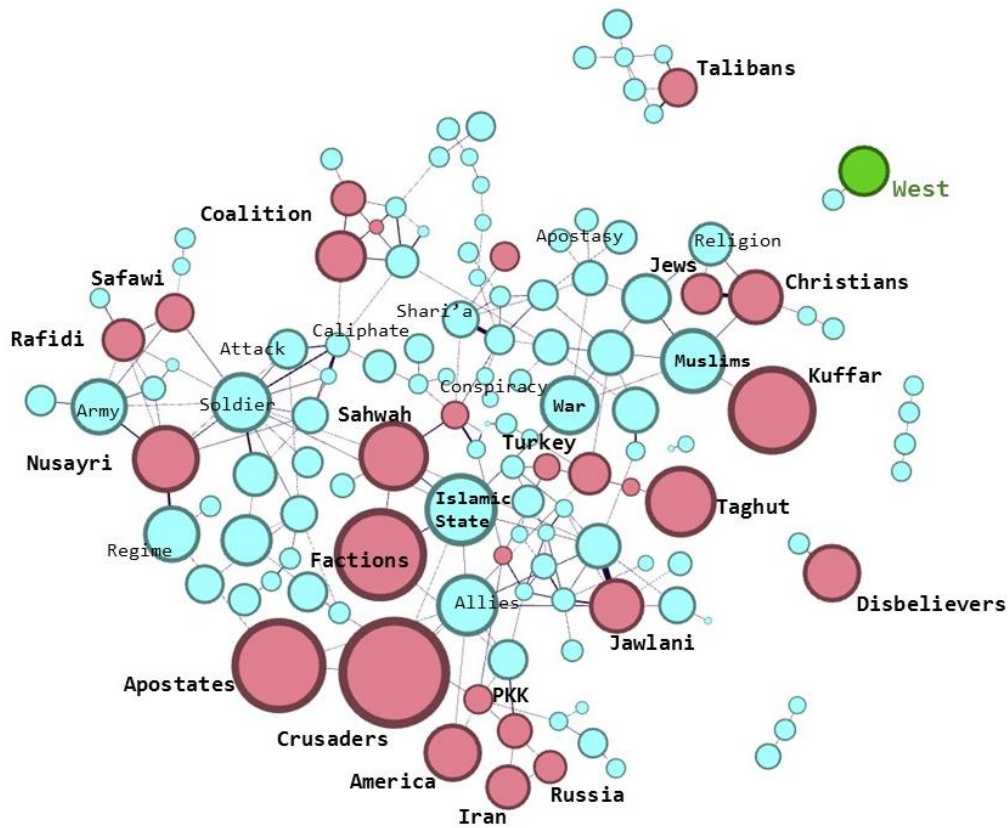


Figure 1: Co-occurrence network graph representing outgroups labels (in red) used in IS' *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* magazines, with their most frequent co-occurring nouns (blue). Size of nodes represents frequency. The closer the distance between two nodes, the closer their labels tend to appear in the text.

In this landscape populated by multiple enemies, the concept of the West is used (in a civilizational way, i.e. not indicating a particular geography) 129 times in the corpus (204 times when the adjective “Western” is included). While this is four times less than the related concept of “crusader” (804 noun and adjective occurrences), it is nonetheless a salient and recurring outgroup label. While the size of the West node in figure 1 reveals that it is not a marginal concept, figure 2 below shows that West label is used more than related ones like “Europe” (53 occurrences) or individual Western states like the UK (29 occurrences of “UK”, “United Kingdom” and “[Great] Britain” together) or France (36 occurrences). This graph also allows us to observe that the West is given far more importance in the period of time corresponding to IS' stabilization at a near-maximal territorial reach, than during both its “boom” (at the time of *Dabiq* #1-4) and “bust” (*Rumiyah*).

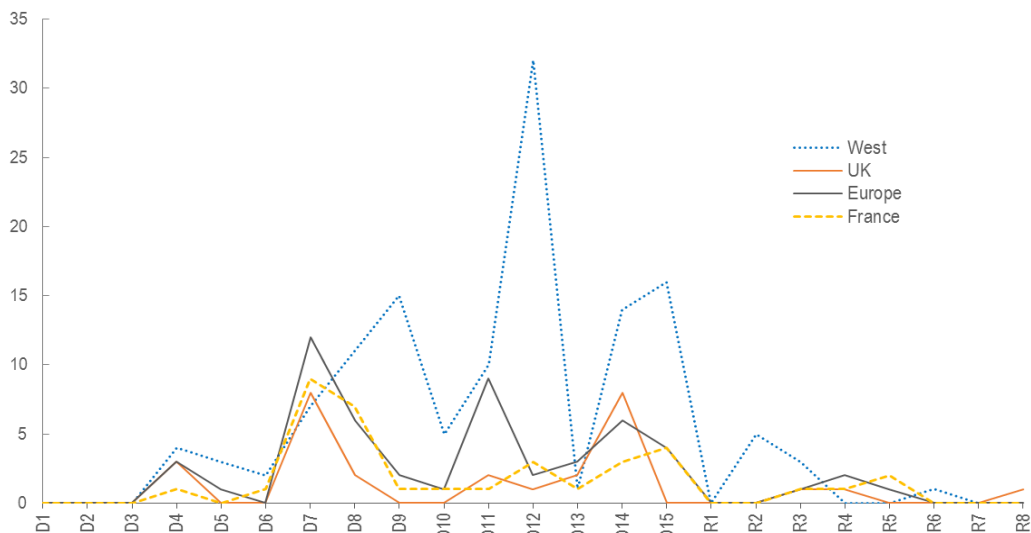


Figure 2: Occurrences of the “West”, “Europe”, “UK” and “France” labels across *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* magazines.

From this quantitative overview, there are two ways to qualitatively study how IS distinguishes the West from these other concepts and actors. The first is to examine the categorical boundaries of the West and its neighboring categories (i.e. which actors are included and which are not). The second is to survey the specific way the West is referred to (i.e. what its essence is).

When exploring, first, the categorical boundaries of the West and its neighboring categories, it is important to note that IS never precisely and explicitly specifies these. Yet, through our analysis, we can nonetheless approximate what the contours of this category are. A closer qualitative look at the sentences making up the network points to the idea that the West broadly corresponds to the Transatlantic partnership: Europe and the US are included, but Russia and other non-Islamic powers are excluded. All of them, however, are united within the eternalizing umbrella label of “crusader”, meaning that the West is a specific subcategory of the “crusaders”.

In *Dabiq* #7 for example, Japan is repeatedly labeled as a “crusader” yet situated out of the West,¹³ while Iran and Russia are many times said to be longstanding rivals of the West: *Dabiq* #4 for instance claims that “Persia and Russia [...] are two powers who for centuries were at war with the West”, and defines “Western interests” against those of “the Persian Crescent and Russian influence in the region”. The West is thus said to have its own coherent interests that clash with those of other big political actors engaged in the contemporary “crusade”. *Rumiyah* #3 indeed states that “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” (our emphasis). Similarly, *Dabiq* #12 notes that “the divided *crusaders of the East and West* thought themselves safe in their jets as they cowardly bombarded the Muslims of the Khilafah” (our emphasis). This relationship between the West and “crusader” categories is further examined below.

Second, when examining the specific way the West is referred to, we attempt to tease out what constitutes – according to IS – the essential and natural characteristics of the West. The result of this approach is very clear: the West is unambiguously identified as the major civilizational enemy, characterized by its fundamentally sinful character, against which IS must stand. IS offers a homogenous, Occidentalist, depiction of a highly negative West, articulating a powerful radicalizing ‘civilizational talk’. *Dabiq* #4 for example proclaims: “today we are upon the doorstep for a new era, a turning point for the map of the region, rather the world. Today we witness the end of the lie called western civilization and the rise of the Islamic giant”.¹⁴ This use of civilizational talk by IS, as well as its use of the West category, is quite remarkable. Indeed while the Salafi-jihadi tradition has always conceptualized – and oscillated between – the “nearby” and “faraway” enemies, the faraway enemy has in recent times overwhelmingly been identified as either the US or the “crusaders”. Both terms arguably relate to the West, yet they do not tap directly into the civilizational clash discourse. Waeber for example notes that Bin Laden never used the West label (2017: 52).

As figure 1 seemed to suggest, in general IS uses the concept of the West to depict a polity whose members – largely identified with North American and European states and peoples – are characterized by a common highly sinful nature. A qualitative reading of the magazines reveals that IS presents the West as sliding down the slippery slope initiated by “secularization” and the concomitant “sexual revolution”, which supposedly opened the gates for a whole range of behaviors and policies seen as deeply immoral. *Dabiq* #12 for example observes that “the kuffar of the West worship and obey [...] both their animalistic and deviant desires”, and elsewhere laments about “the countless Muslim youth in the West who get themselves tangled into drugs , alcohol , gangs , promiscuity , and other vices and social illnesses”. *Dabiq* #7 summarizes: “with the advent of

¹³ For example: “The unwise Prime Minister at the time Junichiro Koizumi committed to providing logistical support for the Western crusaders. What kind of interests did he expect to achieve for Japan in joining a crusade against Muslims?”; “The arrogance of this Japanese government a government in a line of governments enslaved by the West since the Second World War.”

¹⁴ This endorsement of the civilization clash narrative is not just present in official propaganda. It was for instance echoed by the imprisoned IS fighters interviewed by the Israeli television at the end of 2014; one of them, evoking Western recruits, argued: “Anti-Western forces have joined ISIS along the way, and anti-European states’ forces, those are bad regimes. [...] we fight [...] against Christians, against Jews, and against all those who oppose Islam, mostly against Western states and European states” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rSs1uc2OZkM>).

the sexual revolution five decades ago, the West was plunged into a downward spiral of sexual deviance and immorality. With it came a whole slew of sexually transmitted diseases including the as yet incurable AIDS as men and women let their lusts overwhelm their judgment and lead them to engage in fornication and experiment with a myriad of shaytani methods of fulfilling their desires”. The West recurrently co-occurs with negative adjectives denoting sins, such as “deviant”, “animalistic”, “brutal”, or “gross”. Visual imagery is from time to time used to reinforce this linguistic construction (illustration 1 below).



Illustration 1: Example of a visual illustration of the West engaging in sinful practices (*Dabiq* #15).

This Occidentalist discourse, which “others” the West as a civilization characterized by a sinful essence, directly taps into and resonates with an important mythic narrative of Salafi-jihadism initially developed by Sayyeed Qutb in his 1965 opus magnum *Milestones (Ma’alim fi’l-Tariq)*. In Qutb’s book, the central nefarious faraway entity was not chiefly America but the West (referred to as the “Western world”, “Western culture”, the “Western system” or “Western civilization”). To be sure Qutb’s (1951) first critique of the non-Islamic world famously concentrated on America. Yet in his the later more systematic and much longer *Milestones*, he unequivocally targeted the West, explaining that the only genuine civilization is the “Islamic society” – the West being presented as *uncivilized* and characterized by mere human morals and even “animalistic values” (Qutb 2006 [1965]). For Qutb, the West is defined by its sinful nature and its primitive materialistic and pleasure-seeking approach to life, which led to the development of a highly immoral yet simultaneously very powerful society.¹⁵ While IS neither directly refers to Qutb nor openly acknowledges his influence, due to particular ideological and theological reasons (see Laghmari 2018), the group’s identification of the West as an important faraway enemy despised for its essence and the kind of civilization it *is* (i.e. sinful, primate, material, etc.) nonetheless evokes this well-known mythical narrative of radical Islamism first articulated by the Egyptian thinker. As such, IS’ discourse marks a notable departure from Bin Laden’s identification of America as the chief referent faraway enemy hated mostly for its actions and what it *does* militarily and politically (i.e. occupies and intervenes in Muslim lands, cf. below), not for its essence and what it *is*.

Yet IS defines the West not simply as *being* sinful, but also as actively *sinning*, so to speak. This nuance is crucial, as it allows the group to claim that the entity directly threatens “pure” Muslims. Here the line is thin between who/what the West is and what it does (cf. below), because IS does not merely assign sinful traits to the West as an outgroup, it also presents this sinful nature as a dynamic, expanding practice that actively endangers Islam. This again echoes Qutb, for whom the West’s sinful nature was the root cause of the modern state of ignorance (*jahiliyyah*) plaguing the Arab world. According to him, the West’s sinning ethos and primitiveness were soaking to the Muslim community, corrupting political elites and preventing it from developing its own civilization based on true Islam. Muslims were forced to abandon “the divine guidance of the Quran in favor of foreign atheism (or self-deifying) systems created by mere men”, only to enter a phase of corruption, sin and idolatry (*shirk*) akin to the one that supposedly prevailed before Muhammad (Halverson,

¹⁵ These claims were already central Qutb’s 1951 pamphlet on America, where he characterized it as the “peak of advancement and the depth of primitiveness”, a country whose “unmatched productivity” left “no ability to advance in the field of human values”. Individuals – including “the American temptress” – disregard higher values to seek maximum wealth and “the largest possible share of pleasures”, thereby engaging in “overwhelming lust for the sensual pleasure”. This “primitiveness” even “reminds one of the days when man lived in jungles and caves”. Qutb later transferred this diagnosis of America as a place governed by “sex, materialism and decadence” to the West.

Goodall & Corman 2011: 42). Qutb described this percolation of sin from the West to the Muslim world as almost irresistible, with “exponents of Islam who are defeated before this filth in which *jahiliyyah* is steeped, even to the extent that they search for resemblances to Islam among this rubbish heap of the West” (Qutb 2006 [1965]). The West is therefore not Christian, but rather characterized by a lack of any religiosity – it is “only nominally, even hypocritically, Christian” (Halverson, Goodall & Corman 2011: 118).

IS makes this argument its own and, furthermore, presents “Western” sinful practices as the single most important, primary reason why the West should be avoided or confronted with violence. No less than the first four of the six reasons listed in the “Why we hate you” manifesto published in *Dabiq* #15 relate to these sinful practices characterizing the “deviant” and “perverted” Western society, which is said to “indulge in all manner of devilish practices”, to “support gay rights, to allow alcohol, drugs, fornication, gambling, and usury”. The article makes clear that this is the foundational matrix from which the more direct aggressions carried out by the West (cf. below) develop. As it is argued:

“What’s important to understand here is that although some might argue that your foreign policies are the extent of what drives our hatred, this particular reason for hating you is secondary. [...] The fact is, even if you were to stop bombing us, imprisoning us, torturing us, vilifying us, and usurping our lands, we would continue to hate you because our primary reason for hating you will not cease to exist until you embrace Islam”.

In a Qutbian vein, the West’s sinful practices are regularly presented in *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* as spreading outwards from the West to Islam, akin to an aggressively expanding cancer, representing a fundamental threat for the purity of Islamic faith. Facing such a negative outgroup who threatens to corrupt the very foundations of the ingroup, IS thus presents itself as the antithesis of this “rotten” Western society:

“In the midst of this widespread affront to the fitrah (natural human disposition), the Islamic State continues its efforts against these deeds of misguidance which Western Civilization regards as a part of their values by implementing the rulings of Allah on those who practice any form of sexual deviancy or transgression. This was demonstrated recently in Wilayat ArRaqqa,¹⁶ where the Islamic State carried out the hadd¹⁷ on a man found guilty of engaging in sodomy. He was taken to the top of a building and thrown off, as was one of the traditions of the noble companion Abu Bakr as-Siddiq (radiyallahu anh) with those who committed this filthy deed” (*Dabiq* #7)

“It is the implementation of Allah's rulings and the adherence to His guidance, bi idhnillah, that will protect the Muslims from treading the same rotten course that the West has chosen to pursue” (*Dabiq* #7)

The group claims to be the only entity capable in stopping this expansion of Western sin, restoring the dignity of Muslims, protecting the purity of Islam, and putting contemporary *jahiliyyah* to an end. It presents itself as engaged in “efforts against these deeds of misguidance which Western Civilization regards as part of their values” (*Dabiq* #7). IS further argues it can transform the Muslim community (*ummah*) back “into one that threatens civilization with destruction, meaning the civilization of shirk and kufr, the civilization of usury and prostitution, the civilization of humiliation and subjugation” (*Dabiq* #4). The resemblance with Qutb’s questioning of the West’ civilizational status is striking.

This narrative serves a distinct purpose in terms of radicalization strategy. When presented to a European or American audience, such a depiction of the West sharpens group differences and erases the possibility of holding multiple identities at once, thereby encouraging Western Muslims who feel disenfranchised by their society to think that they can neither practice their faith nor live happily in a Western country. It seeks to convince them that they are worth more than the loathsome society where they live. IS magazines explicitly exploit this feeling, crucially providing potential sympathizers with a positive identity that contrasts with the supposedly homogenous negative identity characterizing the society they happen to live in. The following quotes from *Dabiq* #12 display this strategy:

¹⁶ The Raqqa “Province”.

¹⁷ Punishment based on sharia.

“The Muslim in the West is in a constant struggle. His fitrah¹⁸ is at war with the deviant drifts of the kuffar¹⁹ surrounding him. The battle to preserve his fitrah and faith knows no ceasefire. If he wants to preserve what mustard seed of faith he has been blessed with, he must exhaust himself to the utmost so as to remain just a Muslim, never mind a Mu’min²⁰ striving for jihad. If he abandons the struggle or briefly falters, he will quickly find himself an apostate.”

“This is the case most Muslims have experienced while living in the West. He feels himself a stranger and is in constant search for a land in which he can practice his Islam more fully.”

“The countless Muslim youth in the West who get themselves tangled into drugs, alcohol, gangs, promiscuity, and other vices and social illnesses over which any decent Muslim family would weep for its children.”

In sum, while IS does not clearly spell out which countries precisely constitute the West, leaving its categorical membership vague, it nonetheless recurrently evokes the West and homogenizes it as a coherent entity defined by a highly negative essence. Surely, to depict the West as plagued by a crisis of values is not uncommon among non-Western Occidental discourses on the West (Buruma & Margalit 2005; also Herboth & Hellmann 2017: 3). However IS localizes, so to speak, such narrative by claiming that the West’s depraved nature percolates the Islamic community to the point of constituting a fundamental threat, in an argument that directly echoes the Qutbian mythic narrative of Islam facing Western-induced *jahiliyyah*.

2. *What harm does the West do?*

IS does not only present the West as a coherent, loathsome entity. Mobilizing mythic narratives to their full extent, the group also details what the West supposedly does beyond its largely unintentional corruption of Islam, adding depth to the simple outgrouping of the West as an “other” and thereby constituting an even more compelling “push” factor of radicalization (Ingram 2016).

The West portrayed by IS does not engage in any positive action; on the contrary, it is presented as guilty of two major, intertwined and intentional mischiefs: on the one hand, an overt violent aggression toward Muslims, and, on the other hand, the animation of a large-scale, covert plot against Islam. While the first claim directly taps into a highly widespread narrative among Salafi-jihadist groups (and beyond) amply deployed by al-Qaeda in recent years, the second constitutes a largely original argument that reinterprets particular Qutbian themes.

Direct aggression toward Muslims. IS claims members of the West and their allies engage in direct acts of aggression against Muslims – bombings, killings, beatings, assassinations, etc. Although the direct aggression toward Muslims by these actors is surprisingly rare in the imagery selected in the magazines (only 40 out of 1931 images, most showing dead children or dismembered/scorched individuals), this claim nonetheless constitutes a recurring theme in language, directly tapping into and resonating with a prominent mythic narrative of Salafi-jihadism holding that foreign powers invade, “desecrate and destroy Muslim land and cities, killing many in the process” (Halverson, Goodall & Corman 2011: 107). This violence directed at Muslims within and beyond the Middle East, together with the occupation of lands deemed holy by them in Saudi Arabia and Jerusalem, for example, constituted the pivotal theme of Bin Laden’s 1996 *Declaration of Jihad against Americans*; Muslims, he argued, were “massacred”, “jailed”, or “killed” in pursuit of the “occupation of the land of the two sanctuaries” (Bin Laden 1996), a claim reasserted many times over the ensuing years.²¹ Such a

¹⁸ Way of life or being which is in line with Islam.

¹⁹ Unbelievers.

²⁰ Faithful believer.

²¹ In his CNN interview one year later he denounced “the oppression and aggression the Muslims are suffering from the Judeo-crusading alliance”, singling out Muslim children having “their heads cut off, [...] children whose members have been amputated, [...] children who died in Iraq” (Bin Laden 1997). This was again the prominent justification backing the notorious “World Islamic Front Statement Urging Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders” in 1998, and in his 2002 interview with Al-Jazeera, he mentioned 19 times violence made to Muslim “children”, rhetorically asking and answering “who has been getting killed in our countries for decades? More than 1 million children died in Iraq and others are still dying” (Bin Laden 2002).

consistent and repeated framing in Islamist discourses of the West and the US as aggressors has contributed to successfully entrench “the perception of a ‘war on Islam’”, Leuprecht and colleagues (2009: 27) have observed, “among substantive sections of Muslim populations in both the West and other parts of the world”.

IS repeats this line of argument. *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* articles regularly mention the killing of Muslims, chiefly through airstrikes. In the aforementioned article “Why we hate you”, published in *Dabiq* #15, reasons 5 and 6 clearly refer to this aspect:

“5. We hate you for your crimes against the Muslims; your drones and fighter jets bomb, kill, and maim our people around the world, and your puppets in the usurped lands of the Muslims oppress, torture, and wage war against anyone who calls to the truth. As such, we fight you to stop you from killing our men, women, and children, to liberate those of them whom you imprison and torture, and to take revenge for the countless Muslims who’ve suffered as a result of your deeds.”

“6. We hate you for invading our lands and fight you to repel you and drive you out. As long as there is an inch of territory left for us to reclaim, jihad will continue to be a personal obligation on every single Muslim.”

However, when talking about direct violence, IS tends to identify the aggressor as the “crusaders” or the “crusader coalition”. For example, *Dabiq* #14 claims that “Muslims in the lands of the Khilafah have watched their beloved brothers, sisters, and children being relentlessly bombed by crusader warplanes. The scenes of carnage, of blood and limbs scattered in the streets, have become commonplace for the believers”, while *Rumiyah* #2 notes that “as the aircrafts and drones of the Crusader coalition continue to bomb and terrorize the Muslims of Iraq, Sham, Libya, and other wilayat of the Khilafah, their Muslim brothers and sisters all over the world read the news with aching pain”.²² As explained, some members of the “crusader coalition” are to be found in the West, and are sometimes referred as such. *Dabiq* #7 argues that “it’s Western governments’ heavy-handed tactics that generate the growing anger that will reduce Western nations to ashes”, and *Rumiyah* #6 highlights the violence that “we see today in these current rounds of the mujahidin’s war with all the nations of shirk and kufr – at the head of which are the Crusader nations of the West”. The “crusaders” term is thus mostly used not to define a specifically Western or even Christian army, but rather to connote a more general category of foreign invaders/colonizers.

IS’ preference for the concept of “crusaders” when it comes to describing the direct aggression of Muslims clearly appears in figure 4 below, which shows the difference between the verbs most commonly associated with the “West” versus the crusader “coalition” as subjects: in contrast to the latter, the former never appears as the subject of violent verbs such as “bomb”, “expel”, “degrade”, “fight”, “launch” or “target”. This lexical specialization allows IS to reflect the reality of the field where strikes are also carried out by Russia, which is categorized – as noted earlier – as an Western actor. More importantly, it allows IS to present today’s attacks as the latest avatar of a millennial war between Muslims and their “crusading” enemies, thereby eternalizing both the ingroup and the outgroup as well as the current state of war. *Dabiq* #8 explains that these aggressions have to be understood in the historical pattern of the “the West [having] a thousand year war with Islam”, a claim directly echoing both Bin Laden²³ and Qutb.²⁴ This mythic narrative was simply too salient already not to be tapped into, and too established to distort it by introducing the West too prominently in it.

²² This quote is attributed to John Cantlie – a British journalist kidnapped by IS in 2012. In a sad twist in the tale, several *Dabiq* magazines contain chronicles on the West allegedly written by John Cantlie, meaning that a Westerner participates (most likely under duress) in the construction of the West in IS Western-facing propaganda.

²³ Although Bin Laden’s depiction of the “crusades” implies their Christian character. As he for example claimed, “this is a recurring war. The original crusade brought Richard [the Lionhearted] from Britain, Louis from France, and Barbarus from Germany. Today the crusading countries rushed as soon as Bush raised the cross. They accepted the rule of the cross” (2002).

²⁴ Contrarily to Bin Laden, Qutb claimed that the “crusading spirit” (2006 [1965]: 177) was an irreligious, “senseless, irrational and violent” enterprise that “has since then remained latent within the European mind, in the thinking of every European man woman through history” (Halverson, Goodall & Corman 2011: 116-117).

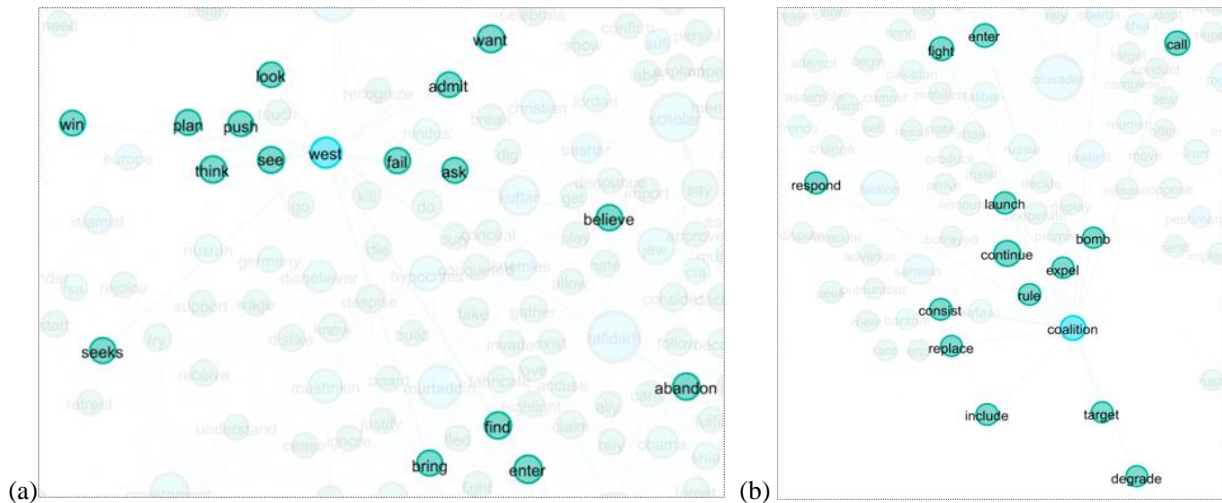


Figure 3: Networks of the verbs whose subject is the West (a) versus those whose subject is the “coalition” (b).

By reasserting this mythic narrative, IS clearly seeks to prompt an “awakening” among target audiences (Ingram 2016), that is, to incite anger, revenge and retaliation for the killing of innocent and vulnerable members of the ingroup (in line with Pedahzur, Perliger & Weinberg’s 2003 “altruism” explanation of terrorism). The direct aggression toward Muslims indeed regularly appears as one of the main motivations put forward by “Western” IS fighters in their testimonies (interestingly, undistinguishable from the narratives advanced by those who joined other factions of the conflict, including ones fighting IS).²⁵

Indirect corruption of Islam and covert oppression of Muslims. The second mischief depicted by IS relates to a more covert and more specific involvement of the West in Muslims’ lives. One of the most salient – and original – arguments articulated by IS refers to the presence of a wide-ranging, complex plot against Muslims and Islam, involving all enemy outgroups, among which the West is said to play a key role. The saliency in *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* of the conspiratorial lexical field – words like “deceit(-ful, -fully)”, “plot(-ting)”, “hid(-den)”, “conspiracy”, “lies (liars, lying)” – orients the reader towards a grand unseen political game targeting Muslims and Islam. IS presents an incredibly wide and complex network of individuals (e.g. presidents, prominent clerics) and groups (e.g. states, insurgent groups, religions) plotting together at all levels against Muslims and Islam, in a way akin to conspiracy theorizing.²⁶ Overall, this plot has two interlocking dimensions, one political and one spiritual/religious, and in each the West occupies a specific role.

The *political* dimension sketches a situation where Western leaders (as well as, but to a much lesser extent, Russians), manipulate, subvert or control the “apostate” (*murtadd*) and religiously “transgressive” “idolatrous” (*taghut*)²⁷ state leaders and governments across the Middle East, regularly referred to as the “puppets” of their “Western masters”. This claim alone is not highly original. It once again taps into mythic narratives of Salafi-jihadism stressing the corruption of Arab regimes and societies by non-Muslim ones. Proponents of such narrative have often used outgroup labels implying some kind of covert alliance (e.g. Bin Laden’s “Judeo-crusading alliance”, “Crusader-Zionist alliance” or “Judeo-Christian coalition”) or even at times directly mentioned a conspiracy (for instance Bin Laden’s evocation of the “conspiracy between the Americans and their allies” (1996)). IS, however, offers a distinct and novel conspiratorial tone, depicting at great length these deleterious interactions between non-Muslim leaders who are overwhelmingly “Western” and their Arab

²⁵ See, among many other examples, those of the Dutch al-Nusra fighter “Yilmaz” who argues that “the American government, the American lobby, is waging this crusade against Muslims, all around the world, they have always been our enemy” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6LCpzIslZMs>); or that of the American-born Al-Nusra recruit “Ibn Zubeyr” who claims that “we have 9/11 every day in the Muslim land” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x4sYDtV-ftM>).

²⁶ Conspiracy theories “provides a frame of interpretation for public events” (Oliver & Wood 2014: 953) which explains social and political events with unseen, intentional, and malevolent forces in a ways that offers a “wonderfully unified accounts of all the data at hand” (Sunstein & Vermeule 2008).

²⁷ For a comprehensive explanation and genealogy of the concept in Islamic thought and among Salafi-Jihadi groups, read Laghmari 2018.

counterparts. The West is said to conspire through various means to maintain the region in a state of poverty and submission, thereby maximizing its commercial, energetic and security interests. The following quotes illustrate this political dimension:

“[...] the Muslim tyrannies the West fawns over, protects, and is bribed by” (*Dabiq* #11)

“The Libyan resources are a concern for the kafir West due to their reliance upon Libya for a number of years especially with regards to oil and gas” (*Dabiq* #13)

“The enemies of the religion rely mainly on Zahran Allush, who works to execute the plans of the West and its puppets in the Gulf” (*Dabiq* #8)

Just like the “crusade”, this political plot is reified through various linguistic and visual strategies of eternalization. For example, illustration 2 below juxtaposes a meeting between Obama and Ibn Saud with the one between T.E. Lawrence and Faisal happening a century before, in order to present the former as a mere re-enactment of the latter. A caption supports this claim, noting: “the apostates of today are no different than the apostates of yesterday”. Another frequent eternalization of the political plot orchestrated by the West is the group’s insistence on the secret nature and contemporary impact of the Sykes-Picot agreement.²⁸



Illustration 2: Visual eternalization of anti-Muslim political plot (*Dabiq* #9 – Caption of the below image: “Faysal Ibn al-Husayn poses with his crusader masters. The apostates of today are no different than the apostates of yesterday”)

The second dimension of the plot is *religious* and encompasses the West’s efforts to corrupt Islam by modernizing it or more broadly promoting “deviant” interpretations of the Quran that match its interests. This is an original step-up from the aforementioned Qutbian interpretation of Western sin slowly percolating into Islamic societies. Western elites are here said to deliberately and instrumentally try to transform Islam into a faith that promotes peace and docile behavior so that Muslims abstain from rebelling against the West’s direct aggressions and political plot. As *Dabiq* #7 summarizes, “there is a slogan repeated continuously by apologetic du’at when flirting with the West and that is their statement: Islam is the religion of peace”. This claim is reasserted many times, including in the “Why we hate you” article from *Dabiq* #15: “the apostate imams in the West will adhere to the same tired cliché in order to avoid a backlash from the disbelieving societies in which they’ve chosen to reside”. Such a moderate, peaceful Islam, is now preached by this “new breed of scholars” that are “the West’s very own imams of kufr” (*Dabiq* #14). As *Dabiq* #13 among others argues, even the Wahhabi Sunnis are part of that plot, because the Saudi regime is an important member of the political conspiracy: “the palace scholars of the Saudi regime from their Grand Mufti Abdul-Aziz Al ash-Shaykh to the minions who spread deceitful pro-taghut propaganda atop the pulpits of their kingdom are at the forefront”. The following quote from *Rumiyah* #9 elaborates the outcomes of this plot, connecting it to the political one and the direct violence experienced by Muslims:

“At a time when Muslims are being killed in the east and in the west – men, women, children, and the elderly altogether – and when the mushrikin and murtaddin are deploying all manner of destructive

²⁸ Perhaps the clearest example of this narrative is IS’ video “The End of Sykes-Picot”, released by their Al-Hayat Media Centre in June 2014. For a general reflection on the “Sykes-Picot curse”, see Wright 2016.

weaponry against them, raining devastation on their villages and towns, the evil scholars, the preachers of misguidance, and the tawaghit of the democratic parties are busy weeping over every mushrik struck by the hands of the mujahidin and disavowing themselves of every attack carried out against their Crusader allies, claiming that Islam does not permit such deeds and accusing those who carry them out of tarnishing the religion's image. Their sinful tongues and filthy pens even go so far as to give those harbi (belligerent) kuffar protection with respect to their blood and their wealth, and to defame the noble muwahhidin, who carried out Allah's judgment on the mushrikin²⁹ and, through their blessed deeds – not just their words – revived shar'i rulings which the tawaghit³⁰ and their allies endeavored to either wipe out or replace”

The presentation of a large-scale religious plot animated at a distance by the West to render Muslims docile connects very well with the mythic narrative, already prevalent in Salafi-jihadist thought, that many Muslims are actually hypocrites (*munafiqin*), “insincere insiders who go along with the group when it benefits them, but are quick to disrupt it for their own benefit when it suits them” (Halverson, Goodall & Corman 2011: 58). While Muslim populations and the *taghut* governments of Arab states have long been referred to as hypocrites, Islamic clerics only clearly started to be denounced as such more recently by groups like al-Qaeda or scholars like al-Maqdisi (e.g. 1984)³¹ for their complicit role in the corrosion of Islam's purity. As Halverson, Goodall and Corman rightly observe (2011: 65), the utilization of the hypocrites narrative “provides fodder for both conspiracy theories and internal acts of violence”. IS has picked up this narrative and accentuated it to an unprecedented level. The group repeatedly depicts Muslim clerics with a wide range of terms denoting their complicity with the West: they are “wicked”, “corrupt”, “evil”, “deviant”, “sinful”, or “of kufr”. In other words, the West has actively transferred its sins to imams, who then propagate them within the *ummah*.

In terms of imagery, over 200 images directly illustrate this two-dimensional plot in *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*, very often with captions to make sure the reader gets the message. In fact, this plot to keep Muslims and Islam in a state of subjection constitutes a highly prominent crisis narrative visually put forward in the magazines, and the main way through which the West is visually represented. Sometimes, one picture provides an isolated snapshot on one aspect of this network (as with illustrations 3 below; illustration 2 above is another clear example), sometimes several pictures collated within the same page powerfully offer a wider perspective. For example, *Dabiq* #10 contains a series of cascading images where Zahran Allouch (then Jaysh al-Islam leader and prominent Islamic Front commander) is first said to be an ally of Al-Qaeda, then Daniel Rubinstein (at that time US special envoy to Syria) is presented both at once as a Jew and as an ally of Zahran Allouch, then the Jews and Israel are shown as the protectors of the Druzes, and finally al-Jawlani (leader of Tahrir al-Sham, but at that time commander of the al-Nusra Front, otherwise known as al-Qaeda in Syria) is pictured in an Al-Jazeera interview where he supposedly said that he would not harm Druzes. In seven collated pictures, the Jews, Israel, the US, Al-Qaeda, the Islamic Front and the Druzes – no less – are directly connected, acting together against the Islamic State. Once again, in this particular structure the West occupies the distant yet crucial role of the ultimate organizer maintaining “puppet” “apostate” regimes in the Middle-East, backing “apostate” factions and supporting “fake scholars” conveying a moderate version of Islam.



Illustration 3: Two examples of images representing Western leaders plotting with “fake” Muslim leaders or clerics (left: *Dabiq* #14 – Caption: “The murtadd Hisham Kabbani with the taghut Charles”. Right: *Dabiq* #11 cover page)

²⁹ Those who commit *shirk*.

³⁰ Plural of *taghut*.

³¹ Who himself eventually came to be accused, paradoxically, of hypocrisy by IS.

Figure 5 below shows that such a visual exploitation of the conspiracy theme by IS editors boomed as the organization reached its peak as well as in its latest phase (although not to the same intensity), and reveals the three interwoven layers of the plot: exclusively “hypocrite” Muslims (e.g. Abu Qatada with al-Maqdisi), mixed “crusader”/“hypocrites” (e.g. Putin with Assad), mixed “West”/“hypocrites” (which is a subset of the previous class) and exclusively “West” (e.g. Obama with Cameron and Hollande). The parallel trajectories of these layers evidences their interdependence.

Figure 4: Chronological evolution of visual representations of anti-Muslim/Islam plots in *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* magazines. **RE-RUN THIS GRAPH WITH THE West / “CRUSADERS” DISTINCTION.**

In contrast to claims about the violence unleashed by Western “crusaders” against Muslims, this linguistic and visual conspiratorial framing aims less to directly inspire retaliation than to offer a background unifying worldview promoting distrust and resentment against the West and Islamic leaders, against which acts by the “Crusaders” are more fully appraised and understood. We see here how the power of IS’ propaganda rests in its ability to move beyond straightforward antagonistic ingroup/outgroup rhetoric and link these groups together in a complex network that seeks to fully explain the universe of socio-political events that matter to its potential audience – from inequalities in Europe or racism in the US, to the Syria-Iraq conflict or authoritarian rule across the Middle-East. The group builds on conspiracy theories’ power to erode trust in legitimate authorities (Einstein & Glick 2015) and to fuel group polarization (Sunstein & Vermeule 2008: 13) by providing a unifying causal explanation for a whole range of frustrations and negative events (Stempel et al. 2007: 353) and a clear identification of who ought to be blamed (Sunstein & Vermeule 2008:10). The magazines go as far as explicitly suggesting which emotions and feelings the reader should experience in reaction to this narrative. *Dabiq* #7 for example suggest that “Muslims are getting angrier and angrier about how the West arrogantly pushes and shoves its principles and beliefs on the rest of the world”, while *Dabiq* #12 asks “how can Muslims living in the West who claim to have surrendered themselves to Allah, completely accepting His rule alone, stand idly as these imams of kufr continue to spread their poison from atop their pulpits?”.

In sum, unlike certain scholarship which argues that the problems that Islamists have with the West are chiefly driven by aggressive foreign intervention (e.g. Gerges 1999; Esposito 2007), our analysis of IS’ anti-Western propaganda reveals a more complex picture. When emphasizing the problems connected with what the West actively *does* to Muslims, these go beyond direct intervention to include a large-scale political and religious conspiracy. It does not end there. As already emphasized, the West is presented as an enemy because of its actions, but also and especially because of what/who it *is*: a deeply sinful, *uncivilized*, entity which is corrupt and corrupting of anyone who comes in contact with it. In this sense, in contrast to al-Qaeda and more faithful to its Qutbian heritage than it would admit, IS very much endorses and reproduces a Huntingtonian view of civilizational clashes as a confrontation driven primarily by value and cultural differences, not just by conflicting geopolitical or economic interests, which are here attributed to the West only in an indirect way. In this way, IS truly embraces – and through its discourses and actions reproduces and fulfills on the world political stage – Huntington’s prediction.

3. *What should be done to the West?*

IS explicitly directs its actual and potential followers towards two main courses of actions which correspond to the dual problem of its sinful character and evil actions. Readers and viewers of IS propaganda are invited either to leave the West and migrate to the “caliphate”, or to attack the West directly. Figure 6 below, which represents the networks of verbs having the West as object, reflects this double solution, comprising the “leave” and “target” verbs alongside other ones whose subjects are probably not Muslims but outgroups (“lead”, “back”). The respective saliency of these two options has fluctuated over time, echoing the group’s situation on the ground and therefore the shifts in its strategy.

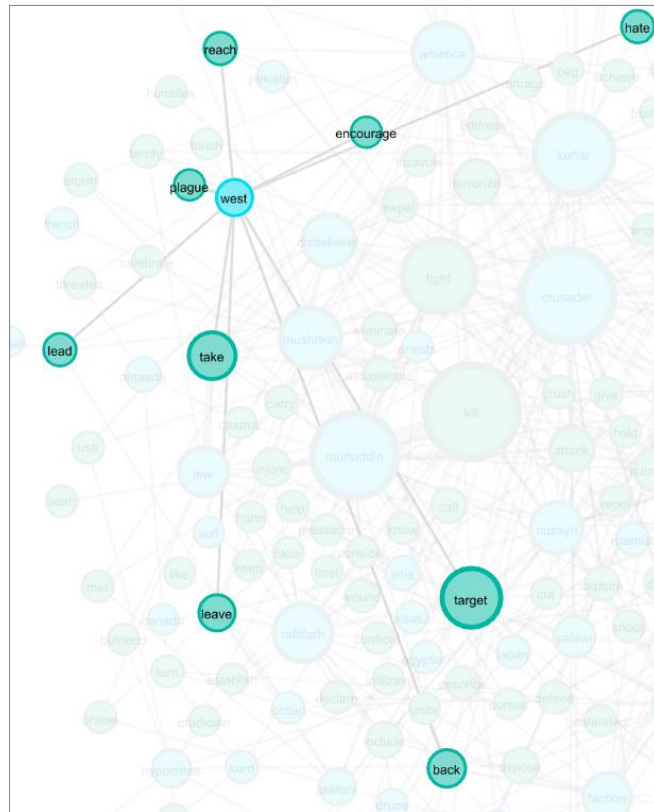


Figure 5: Network of the West as object of verbs (note: distances between nodes represent the specificity of the link uniting them; for example, “target” is further from the West than “plague” because many other entities are “targeted” yet only the West is “plagued”, meaning that this verb will not be pulled towards other nouns)

Leaving the West to join the caliphate. As a response to Western sinfulness and corruption, IS exhorts Western Muslims to perform *hijrah*, that is to migrate out of *Dar al-Kufr* (the land of disbelief) to live in its antithetic *Dar al-Islam* (the land of Islam, i.e. the proclaimed “caliphate”). *Dabiq* #3, titled “A Call to Hijrah”, explains: Muslims “know that the only way for a man claiming a mustard seed of faith in his heart to preserve his faith would be to leave the West. Before, such an idea might have sounded impossible for some, but now there is a Khilafah prepared to accept every Muslim and Muslimah into its lands and do all it can within its power to protect them while relying on Allah alone”. Five months later in February 2015, an entire section of *Dabiq* #7 attempts to further sharpen the opposition between *Dar al-Kufr* and *Dar al-Islam*, famously claiming the “extinction of the grey zone” and reasserting that *hijrah* is the logical decision for Muslims living in the West who are otherwise being forced into a “sect of apostasy in the name of Islam before [... being forced...] into blatant Christianity and democracy”:

“Muslims in the West will quickly find themselves between one of two choices, they either apostatize and adopt the kufri religion propagated by Bush, Obama, Blair, Cameron, Sarkozy, and Hollande in the name of Islam so as to live amongst the kuffar without hardship, or they perform hijrah to the Islamic State and thereby escape persecution from the crusader governments and citizens”

In contrast to the fundamentally sinful West, the “caliphate” is depicted as a place devoid of sin and where faith and being a “proper” Muslim, ultimately, trumps all other identities: “it is a state where the Arab and non-Arab, the white man and black man, the easterner and westerner are all brothers” (*Dabiq* #1). Only “defeatist Muslims” can therefore decide to “reside in the lands of kufr under the authority of the crusaders themselves, with no intention of making hijrah to those lands in which the word of Allah is the highest” (*Dabiq* #7). The magazines regularly feature reports – including images – of harsh punishments against the individuals who engage in Western practices (e.g. “sodomy”, “apostasy”) within IS territory (cf. quote p.10). The organization thereby presents itself as being intransigent in its commitment to stop the spread of Western deviance, in other words as the only place devoid of *jahiliyyah*.

In terms of language, the *hijrah* solution heavily featured in *Dabiq* #8-15 (as well as in *Dabiq* #3, due to its special report on the topic), and is much less frequent in *Rumiyah* (at the exception of #4), as evidenced in figure 7 below. This decline denotes IS’ strategic shift towards favoring the second option – direct violence within the West – in their propaganda, a decision which is chiefly explained by the organization’s gradual loss of territory and most importantly its control of the Turkish border towards the end of summer 2016, making it much harder for Westerners to effectively join the utopian *dar*.

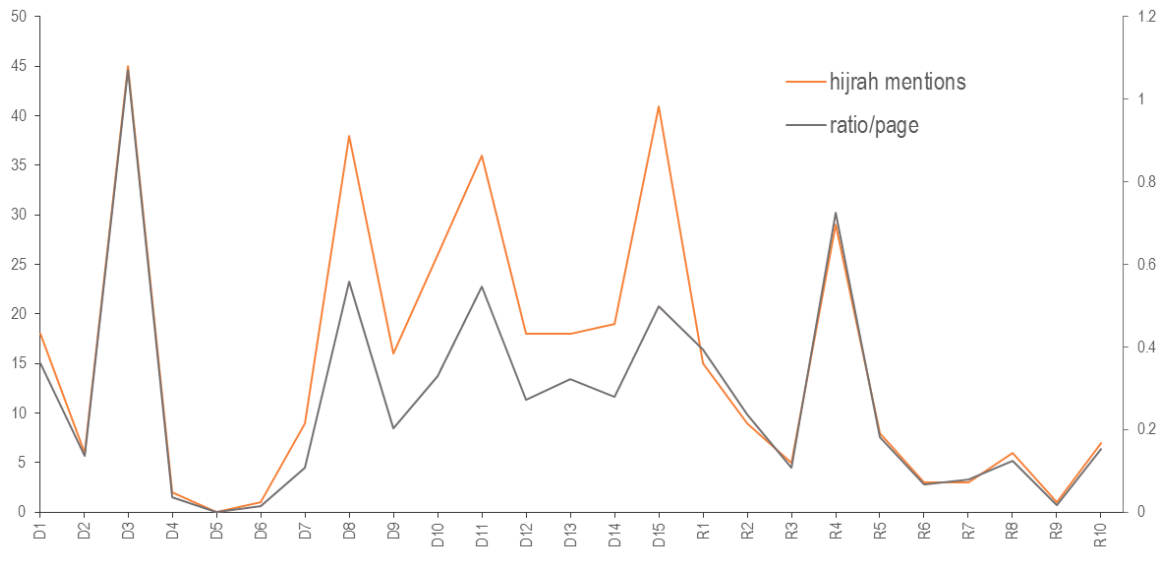


Figure 6: Number of times the term “hijrah” is mentioned in *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*, in absolute terms (left axis, orange line) and as per page ratio (right-hand axis, grey line).

Attacking the West. Launched at that specific moment, *Rumiyah* largely abandons the call to *hijrah* and vividly encourages its readers to carry out attacks against the “crusaders” and the *kuffar*, chiefly but not only in the West. The regular “Just Terror” column of the first issues of *Rumiyah* epitomized this strategy, justifying indiscriminate killing in *Dar al-Kufr* and offering advice on how best to proceed (e.g. which truck and crowds to favor for vehicle attacks, which knife to choose for one-to-one strikes). Followers, actual and potential, are asked to “strike the Crusader citizens and interests wherever they are found in the West” (*Rumiyah* #2). Coexisting with the *hijrah* option, harangues to attack the West already existed in *Dabiq*. For example, *Dabiq* #7 “renew[ed] the call to the muwahhidin in Europe and the disbelieving West and everywhere else, to target the crusaders in their own lands and wherever they are found [...] whether with an explosive device, a bullet, a knife, a car, a rock, or even a boot or a fist”.

The news section of both *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* regularly highlighted examples of such attacks, used as exemplary behaviors to be emulated:

“There will be others who follow the examples set by Man Haron Monis and Numan Haider in Australia, Martin Couture-Rouleau and Michael Zehaf-Bibeau in Canada, Zale Thompson in America, and Bertrand Nzohabonayo in France, and all that the West will be able to do is to anxiously await the next round of slaughter” (*Dabiq* #6)

“Let them follow the example of the lions who have preceded them by striking the Crusader citizens and interests wherever they are found in the West – as was ordered by Shaykh Abu Muhammad al-‘Adnani in several official addresses – especially as the Crusaders continue to wage war against Islam and the Muslims, never hesitating to commit more atrocities against the men, women, and children of the Khilafah” (*Rumiyah* #2)

“With their blood they incited, instructed, and demonstrated practically for other Muslims how one can attain Allah’s pleasure and escape His wrath while stationed in the garrisons of the open war arena against the Crusader West” (*Rumiyah* #10)

As we see from these examples, the violent option is chiefly advocated against the West as a prominent subcategory of the “crusaders”, and thus framed as a tit-for-tat retaliation for the harm suffered by Muslims in

the “crusade”, more than as a solution to get rid of the West as the matrix of sinful practices and *jahiliyyah*. It nonetheless remains that for the group, “those Muslims residing in the West, in particular, have an opportunity to terrorize the Crusaders themselves as well as the imams of kufr allied to the Crusaders [...because...] one should not downplay the importance of targeting and eliminating the imams of kufr in the West, doing so in support of Allah’s religion” (*Rumiyyah* #2).

Conclusions

Huntington’s civilizations are, for certain actors in world politics, alive and kicking. As shown in this paper, IS – the most lethal and successful terrorist organization of recent years – repeatedly and explicitly engaged in civilizational talk to radicalize its audiences and encourage violence, thereby fulfilling the clash prophecy. As *Dabiq* #15 unambiguously claims, the world is marked by “the clash of encampments – civilization – [...] found in Allah’s signs throughout history and current events”.

In this paper we detailed how the group’s propaganda incites its actual and potential followers to undertake, produce and reproduce through discourse, images, and practices, this world where civilizational differences and conflicts matter. More precisely, we showed how IS’ constructs a homogenous, exclusively negative, civilizational Western “other” that resonates with, yet differs from, already existing Occidentalist mythic narratives of Islamist-jihadism involving “Crusaders”, America, and corrupt Arab regimes. In particular, IS’ detailed depiction of a complex plot involving all IS’ numerous enemies and coordinated at a distance by Western powers, adds an original layer to its construction of the West as an essentially sinful entity whose members play a central role in the “crusade”.

Such a use of the West and civilizations constitutes a powerful linguistic and visual leverage for the radicalization of those living in the US and Europe who already feel disenfranchised from their society. It also has important consequences in terms of security, as one of the two solutions advocated by IS – emigration to the “Caliphate” – became almost impossible to practically implement from the summer 2016, leaving direct attacks as the only possibility.

As IS’ influence fades, it remains to be seen how IS’ civilizational talk might be picked up and further accentuated by other groups within the much broader Salafi-jihadist movement and beyond, a tradition that had more recently divided the world according to other lines of categorization. It also remains to be studied, perhaps more importantly, what impact IS’ civilizational talk had on perceptions of a “clash” within the West itself – as it takes two to make a “clash”, surely IS’ propaganda not only sought to influence potential sympathizers but also tried to radicalize its opponents, polarizing perspectives on both sides of the “clash” they wished to create. Maybe this is where their biggest “success” actually lies: beyond the direct recruitment and inspiration of attacks, the group may well have shaped long-lasting perceptions in the “West” that a clash with the “Muslim world” is inevitable.

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