Wilayat al-Qawkaz - The Islamic State in the North Caucasus. Frames, Strategies and Credibility of Radical Islamist Propaganda Videos

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Abstract

The growing influence of the terror organization "Islamic State in Iraq and Syria" (ISIS) on Russian speaking communities has come to fruition in the North Caucasus. ISIS has not only managed to attract individuals from the North Caucasus to join the jihad in Syria and Iraq, but further to establish the regional branch "Wilayat al-Qawkaz". Now, as a major international event in Russia 2018, the FIFA World Cup poses an attractive target for ISIS that has been threatened through ISIS's online channels. In order to reach different target groups, ISIS has produced several high-quality propaganda videos. According to Benford and Snow (2000), social movements perceive social phenomena differently and communicate their interpretation of reality by using frames. To sustain or increase the number of followers, ISIS spreads a narrative that identifies problems, proposes solutions and offers incentives to join. Benford and Snow describe this pattern as the three frame dimensions: diagnostic, prognostic and motivational frame. This research paper aims to highlight the strategies of ISIS's propaganda videos in the North Caucasus by identifying the main topics within the three frame dimensions. Based on the analysis of five propaganda videos, it points out the main frames addressing the oppression of Muslims as the problem, jihad as the solution, religious duty and rewards in this world and the next as the incentives. Considering that persuasion of propaganda is only effective with credible frames, it can be observed that this requires references to real events and more important the use of reputable speakers that can be religious or militant leaders, as well as ordinary but authentic jihadists. Taking the visual frame analysis into account, the visualization of violence and community plays a huge role to create credibility, offer identity and to claim relevance as a serious opponent.

Introduction

Radical Islamist terrorism is not a new phenomenon in Russia. The threat of radicalized individuals committing (suicide) attacks on behalf of terrorist organizations could be observed

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in contemporary Russian history in several regions across the country. The growing influence of the "Islamic State in Iraq and Syria" (ISIS) in countries of the former Soviet Union and its propaganda for jihad has come to fruition, causing many casualties in recent attacks. ISIS did not only manage to attract foreign fighters for its causes in Syria in Iraq, but was also able to install branches around the world. The establishment of the Wilayat al-Qawkaz, the North Caucasian branch of ISIS, is only one of them. The explosions in St. Petersburg in 2017, the bombing attack in Dagestan and a shooting in Nizhny Novgorod against security forces in 2016 were either considered by authorities to have a radical Islamist background or claimed by ISIS itself (see Lister et al. 2017; The Independent 2017; Zeit Online 2016; Kireev 2017). The upcoming events of the FIFA World Cup 2018 in Russia pose an attractive target for ISIS, which wants to make sure to attract international attention by creating the most possible damage. In fact, ISIS has already announced on affiliated media websites to commit attacks targeting the World Cup (see Payne 2017).

In order to carry out the threats, ISIS has to mobilize, recruit and radicalize new adherents. As one of the recruitment strategies, ISIS has been using new media technology and online channels to spread its ideology, for example by producing high-quality propaganda videos. This research paper aims to highlight the characteristics and strategies of ISIS's propaganda videos in the North Caucasus by identifying the main topics and interpretative frameworks. According to Benford and Snow (2000), social movements perceive social phenomena differently and communicate their interpretation of reality by using frames. In order to sustain or increase the number of followers, ISIS spreads a narrative that identifies problems, proposes solutions and offers incentives to join. Benford and Snow describe this pattern as the three frame dimensions; the diagnostic, prognostic and motivational frame which can facilitate in this context the categorization of ISIS's propaganda content.

The frame analysis is based on five Russian-speaking videos that were produced and published by Wilayat al-Qawkaz between 2015 and end of 2016. Taking into account the current state of research and prior review of the primary sources, themes which occurred as

the most relevant ones in the propaganda of the Wilayat al-Qawkaz will be analyzed within the frame analysis. Since ISIS needs to legitimatize its actions and existence in general, the discrimination and oppression of Muslims worldwide is a useful starting point and is communicated by ISIS as the main problem, the diagnostic frame. In this analysis, it will be called the "oppression frame". The narrative continues with the "jihad frame" (prognostic frame) since joining the jihad and fighting against "unbelievers" is considered by ISIS to be the solution or the path to the solution. Finally, the motivational frame is divided into the duty and reward frame while the duty frame seems to be significantly important as a push factor. Duty means especially the religious obligation for every Muslim to join the jihad and ISIS. The reward frame focuses on benefits that ISIS offers to potential recruits.

Since propaganda videos are the primary source of the analysis, the theoretical background is linked to the visual frame analysis. The striking use of contradictory images led to the consequence to take the violence frame and the community frame into account. The visualization of violence and community plays a huge role to create credibility, offer identity and to claim relevance as a serious opponent. Considering that persuasion of propaganda is only effective with credible frames, it can be observed that this requires references to real events and more important the use of reputable speakers that can be religious or militant leaders, as well as ordinary but authentic jihadists. Overall, the analysis shows the professional character of ISIS's propaganda videos with the main goals of recruiting adherents, threatening the world of "unbelievers" and occasionally updating other jihadist groups about the current situation in the North Caucasus.

First of all, this research paper intends to highlight the developments leading to the successful circulation of radical Islamist ideas in the North Caucasus. The reconstruction of historical events and consideration of local features will expose the pathway to the establishment of the Wilayat al-Qawkaz while analyzing the influence of ISIS's propaganda on North Caucasian fighters. This includes summarizing the existing information about North Caucasians fighting for ISIS in Syria and Iraq as well as the activities and strategies of the

local branch. The focus of this analysis also helps to explain the relevance of ISIS's propaganda videos and the particular frames. This requires outlining the theoretical background that is mainly based on the frame theory by Benford and Snow (2000). Based on their assumptions, publications dealing specifically with radical Islamist propaganda and reference to the work of Benford and Snow will be introduced. Especially the publications by Theine (2016) and Bernhardt (2016) had an impact on the methodological approach of this research paper. The transparent insight into the data selection, the categorization and operationalization of the frames as well as the benefits of a qualitative content analysis will be provided. The main part of the research paper will focus on the results of the frame analysis by examining the content, strategy and aim of every frame. The findings will give an overview about the variety of propaganda videos in the North Caucasus and explain the specific topics based on the local agenda.

The Pathway to ISIS in the North Caucasus

While ISIS has managed to recruit adherents all around the world, the organization also found fertile ground in the North Caucasus to establish one of its branches abroad. Radical Islam cannot be considered a new phenomenon in that region. The border opening after the fall of the Soviet Union enabled the appearance of new radical Islamic ideas, mainly from the Middle East, but also decades-long internal debates over the characteristics of Islam led to the dissemination of Wahhabism-Salafism (see Yarlykapov 2010: 138). The ideological basis of Wahhabism-Salafism is the idea of monotheism and the strict interpretation and implementation of the Qu'ran and the Sunna. Wahhabi-Salafis do not accept other viewpoints and consider Muslims who do not agree with them to be unbelievers. The jihad as the fight against unbelievers and alleged enemies of Islam is regarded to be compulsory for every Muslim and one of the main objectives of Wahhabism (see Yarlykapov 2010: 147f.). Even though the narratives of insurgent groups during the first Chechen War were primarily

dominated by secular national ideas, religious elements were added to the rhetoric because it helped to mobilize and provide an ideological basis for the movement. After the end of the Chechen War in 1996, a chaotic political, economic and social situation emerged. The local population was left alone with a disastrous economy, corruption and rising criminality (see Yemelianova 2001: 680). The traumatic experiences of the war sensitized the population to religious issues. The local government under Mashadov not only failed to bring armed groups that would not disappear with the end of the first Chechen War under control, but also familiarized the Chechen population with radical Islamist slogans. This eased radicalization processes that were fueled by ideological ideas based on Wahhabism (see Hughes 2011: 96ff.). The so-called jamaats, social and religious meeting points for Muslim communities, and in this context especially the youth-focused ones, experienced a greater influence of jihadist and extremist groups. In the 1990s, young imams who obtained theological or political education abroad and returned to the North Caucasus took over the lead in various jamaats (see Yarlykapov 2010: 142ff.). As a consequence, an increase of radical Islamist structures could be observed in the North Caucasus. These emerging radical Islamist movements had advantages that were attractive incentives especially for young Muslims.

> Highly egalitarian, disciplined and ideologically anchored Jihadist groups, operating as military brotherhoods, provided their members with a strong sense of identity and solidarity, with a stable income and ensured mutual protection in the case of attacks by outsiders" (Souleimanov 2015: 101).

Yarlykapov (2010) explains that young people in the North Caucasus are an important target group for extremist groups since they suffer especially from "corruption, the clan system, and economic problems and disorders" (Yarlykapov 2010: 149). Furthermore, their personal life in Russia might be affected by islamophobia, racism and nationalism.

Besides these internal conditions that facilitated successful radical Islamist networks in

the North Caucasus, other developments had an impact on the radicalization process as well. The participation of foreign Islamist fighters in the first Chechen War, the first transnational jihad in Afghanistan (1980-88) and new communication technologies further enabled the spread of radical Islamist ideas and made the globalization of jihadist networks possible.

In 1999, Mashadov's government became dependent on the personal and military strength of Islamists groups due to its weakness. Mashadov had to make political concessions, such as the appointment of Shamil Basayev, the leader of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, as the commander in chief of the military and the implementation of Sharia laws. Nevertheless, aiming at the establishment of a caliphate and the expansion of jihad in the entire North Caucasus, Wahhabi groups under Basayev invaded Dagestan. This was followed by the second invasion of Russian troops in Chechnya (see Hughes 2011: 100f.). While Mashadov launched guerrilla activities against the Russian military, Basayev started a terrorist wave that was primarily directed against Russian civilians (see ibid.: 105). These terrorist attacks, which were particularly symbolic and claimed many victims, included several attacks on the Moscow Subway, the hostage-taking of over 1,000 people in the Moscow Dubrovka Theatre with 130 casualties as well as the hostage-taking of over 1128 people in a school in Beslan in 2004. During the liberation of the school, up to 331 people were killed, including 186 children (see Pokalova 2015: 191ff.). Ever since Beslan, Basayev was considered as one of the most wanted terrorists in Russia and was finally executed in July 2006 by Russian security forces. His execution and the decision of his successor, Doku Umarov, not to attack civilian targets, led to a sharp decline of terrorist activities (see Schaefer 2011: 233f.).

However, in 2007, Umarov, who was involved as a commander in both Chechen Wars, proclaimed the Caucasus Emirate and thereby ended the era of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria. He intended to connect the local insurgent groups in a large umbrella organization, thus to be able to coordinate their activities better (see Steinberg 2014: 2f.). The ideological background of the Caucasus Emirate was based on Wahhabism and was characterized by a

high degree of intolerance towards other religions. It condemned secularism and urged a strict Islamic lifestyle of the local population (see Agaev 2013: 3f.). Although the Caucasus Emirate followed the ideological concept of an international jihad, the main focus was on attacking targets in Russia. The proclamation of the Caucasus Emirate enabled the unification of all regions to an overall North Caucasian movement (see Schaefer 2011: 240ff.).

Yet, the radical Islamist groups in the respective districts could act relatively autonomously and, by 2012, started to ignore the former guideline not to attack civilians which led to over 30 acts of terrorism including the two attacks on the Domodedovo airport and subway in Moscow (see Ratelle 2013: 6). End of 2013, two suicide bombings with more than 30 casualties raised doubts about the security situation at the Sochi Winter Olympics. In addition, Umarov announced further attacks and thereby found a sensitive point in the Russian leadership which had to demonstrate strength and the ability to provide security due to international attention. As a consequence, massive anti-terrorist missions and repressive measures followed in the North Caucasus that harmed not only radical groups but also the general population in that region (see Bundeszentrale fuer politische Bildung 2014). At the same time, Russia opened its borders prior to the Winter Olympics, enabling the departure of radicalized individuals. This created a short-term win-win situation: for jihadists who no longer saw any prospects for local activities in this repressive environment, the alternative of a jihad abroad seemed much more attractive. For Russia, however, this meant a smaller number of radical Islamists inside the country (see International Crisis Group 2016: ii).

As of 2014, there was a noticeable decline of terrorist activities in Russia, which can be attributed to effective counter-terrorism measures combined with the relocation of radical structures abroad. In 2014, the number of victims of radical Islamist violence fell by 41 percent and in 2015 even by 51 percent (see ibid.: 1). In addition to the outflow of radicalized individuals to Syria and Iraq, the Caucasus Emirate has been weakened by further drastic events within the organization. In particular, the death of Doku Umarov and the lack of charismatic successors led to discrepancies between the different jihadist groups (see

Anna Seib: Wilayat al-Qawkaz - The Islamic State in the North Caucasus

Falkowski 2014: 22). Therefore, the signs of a rapprochement with ISIS in the North Caucasus were already prevalent at the end of 2014, when for the first time Daghestanian groups pledged allegiance to ISIS. A statement by the Kavkaz Center, the main website of the Caucasus Emirate, in March 2014, explains the relationship with ISIS. While the idea to establish an Islamic state is widely approved, the methods used by ISIS are heavily criticized.

> (…) we DO NOT hate the ISIL. We believe that the very idea of the Islamic State is right! However, in our opinion, the methods of its implementation, the ideology of takfirism, leaving the battle against infidels and starting the battle against Muslims, violence and mass executions, undermine on the vine this idea and provoke hostility and hatred from the population of Levant, which not only promotes the idea of the ISIL, but on the contrary – leads to a collapse. (Kavkaz Center 2014).

With the assassination of Umarov's successor, Aliaskhab Kebekow, by Russian security forces in April 2015, the way was finally paved for an affiliation to ISIS. Chechen groups and other districts followed the example to pledge their allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Finally, on June 25, 2015, some commanders proclaimed the entire affiliation of the Caucasus Emirate to ISIS. The establishment of Wilayat al-Qawkaz under the leadership of the Dagestani Amir Aselderov is a consequence of this. Only a few groups have distanced themselves from this decision and have hold faith with the leftovers of the Caucasus Emirate (see International Crisis Group 2016: 2).

A special link between ISIS and jihadists in the North Caucasus lies in the common interest of fighting the Russian government and society. The fact that Russia supports the Assad regime and is involved in military actions against ISIS makes their hostility obvious. Furthermore, the oppression of Muslims as well as Islamic (or Islamist) structures in Russia itself is used by ISIS as a welcome legitimization. Since September 2014, Russia has been threatened consistently in messages of ISIS (see Hedenskog, Holmquist 2015: 2). In 2016,

there were a few attacks with radical Islamist background in Russia attacking mainly security forces (see Zeit Online 2016, see Kireev 2017). In published video messages, the assassins pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (see Dearden 2016). In 2017, especially the bombing attacks at the St. Petersburg subway and at a supermarket, caused many casualties and could therefore catch international attention (see Lister et al. 2017; The Independent 2017).

Mainly, the Wilayat al-Qawkaz has focused on its self-expression in several self-made videos. Regarding the high number of jihadists who have left the country, it can be assumed that the shortage of members posed a problem for the organization. Therefore, the current focus has been rather on recruiting new adherents and mobilizing lone perpetrators across Russia. However, it is likely that there will be a strengthening of radical Islamist activities, at the latest when the jihadists from Syria and Iraq return and make use of their ideological and military knowledge in the North Caucasus (see Hedenskog and Holmquist 2015: 2). While no exact statistics can be found on the adherents of ISIS, it can be assumed that the recruitment of foreign fighters is very successful, with up to 30,000 fighters of 100 different nationalities in 2015 (see The Soufan Group 2015: 5). Most fighters come from neighboring countries in the Middle East or North Africa, but also from the former Soviet Union. Depending on the source, the data on specific numbers vary, which are generally difficult to assess. The Soufan Group (2015), for example, assumes 4700 fighters from the former Soviet Union, identifying 2400 only from Russia. Official statistics from Russia even mention 5,000 to 7,000 Russian fighters in Syria and Iraq. This number largely consists of persons from the North Caucasus, especially from Chechnya and Dagestan (see ibid.: 14f.).

It can be observed that North Caucasian fighters occupy important positions at ISIS's organization in Syria. It is generally thought that ISIS assumes that the experience gained during the Chechen Wars and the successful conduction of guerrilla actions have made fighters from the North Caucasus particularly suitable for the preparation and implementation of military activities. Therefore, a larger number of Chechens can be identified within the

security services of ISIS (see International Crisis Group 2016: 13f.). In addition to militant actions, North Caucasians actively participate in the production of Russian-speaking ISIS propaganda and also play a role in the recruitment of new supporters (see International Crisis Group 2016: 14). To spread propaganda, different methods have been used, ranging from short tweets on Twitter to professional video productions. Especially for the production of propaganda in Russian-speaking regions, ISIS founded the media group "Furat Media", which either produces its own videos with Russian-speaking ISIS fighters or translates existing Arabic videos into Russian. Even print media such as the glossy magazine "Istok" belong to the propagandistic repertoire in which Russian-speaking fighters can spread ISIS's ideology. In social media channels, ISIS is mainly active on Twitter, Vkontakte and the messenger Telegram (see International Crisis Group 2016: 29, see Europol 2015). With the supply of new media, the range of options for radical Islamist organizations has increased significantly. The Internet enables fast, global and free information transfer that can reach an infinite number of recipients. Generally, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) (2012) names six functions the Internet can have in this context. In addition to propaganda, which also includes recruitment and mobilization measures, it is also used for fundraising, training, planning (internal communication), carrying out terrorist actions and most recently cyberattacks. Radical Islamist contributions often have overlapping functions (see UNODC 2012: 3).

Comparing the video productions of the Caucasus Emirate and ISIS, a clear development of the degree of professionalism can be observed. While the videos of the Caucasus Emirate are often characterized by low resolution and poor sound quality, the videos of Wilayat al-Qawkaz are far more professional and have the technical quality of modern film productions. In addition, the main motivation of the Caucasus Emirate to upload information on the Kavkaz Center website was "communicating insurgents' strategic objectives and ideology, advertising their grievances, and providing a source of daily news" (Ratelle; Sokirianskaia 2018: 125). Regarding the propaganda videos of the Wilayat al-

Qawkaz, Europol identifies the two key features of providing news about the various ISIS districts and recruiting new adherents (see Europol 2015: 10). The International Crisis Group published a revealing study on the connection of North Caucasian jihadists to ISIS and the attractiveness of the organization in this region. The outflow of North Caucasian fighters to the Middle East has several causes, including religious reasons, the desire for a caliphate, the search for identity, and welfare benefits. Push factors such as lack of prospects and repression in one's own country complete the range of causes (see International Crisis Group 2016: 24ff.). In particular, propaganda addresses these issues, concerns and longings in a concentrated manner and can thus contribute to strengthening the pull and push factors.

Ratelle and Sokirianskaia (2018) analyzed the impact of jihadist online propaganda on violent radicalization and extremist recruitment in Russia, mainly the North Caucasus. For this purpose, they conducted hundreds of interviews with former extremists, Muslim and governmental authorities, experts and the local population (see Ratelle; Sokirianskaia 2018: 118f.). ISIS's propaganda is successful in the North Caucasus since it addresses different target groups regardless of age, gender or ethnicity. On the basis of the interviews, especially young respondents recognized the appealing character of ISIS's videos. Furat Media, for example, has been able to create videos that attract the attention of young people by using well visualized emotional images of the jihad and Russian militants holding speeches. Like the videos, also ISIS's print media focuses on religion, jihad and the way of life in the caliphate. By portraying individuals who joined the jihad in Syria and Iraq, ISIS's propaganda tries to convince potential supporters to follow this path. While, on the other hand, it also shows the option to stay in Russia and commit domestic terrorist attacks (see ibid.: 131f.). Ratelle and Sokirianskaia (2018) point out that compared to the total population in Russia, ISIS's propaganda resonates especially within the Chechen community due to the traumatizing experiences made during the wars. ISIS uses the vulnerability of their target groups and knows which narrative could be specifically attractive. This strategy works, for example, also for the female audiences. To attract women, ISIS promises them to find love,

Anna Seib: Wilayat al-Qawkaz - The Islamic State in the North Caucasus

romance, but also sisterhood and emancipation. ISIS provides the chance to revolt against traditional views of the parents' generation or societal norms on the one hand and offers adventures and independence on the other. This narrative is naturally tempting for youths in general. Additionally, the use of pop-cultural elements, the portrayal of jihadist as popstars and heroes, and the use of popular social media platforms like Instagram, appeals to all young people (see ibid.: 140f.).

Theory and Methodology

In the field of radical Islamist propaganda, former research benefited from the theoretical considerations of the (visual) frame analysis that also provides the conceptualization for this research paper. First of all, the most recent publication by Theine (2016) analyzed content and images of German-speaking ISIS propaganda based on the framing approach of Benford and Snow in order to outline mainly recruitment strategies. Benford and Snow (2000) assume that social movements not only convey mobilizing ideas and values, but also produce and frame content according to their own interpretation of reality. The term "frame" is based on Goffman's definition of interpretive schemes that help to locate, perceive and identify an apparently unlimited number of concrete occurrences (Goffman 1977: 31). Framing therefore means to interpret events and situations and attach importance to them in order to mobilize as many supporters as possible (see Benford, Snow 1988: 198). The success of mobilization depends on the compatibility of individual attitudes with those of the social movement, also referred to as "frame alignment" (Snow; Rochford; Worden; Benford 1986: 464). This means „that some set of individual interests, values and beliefs and SMO[2] activities, goals, and ideology are congruent and complementary" (ibid.).

Benford and Snow (2000) describe how the perceived reality can be communicated through "collective action frames" (Benford and Snow 2000: 615) that are produced by social

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[2] Social movement organization

Anna Seib: Wilayat al-Qawkaz - The Islamic State in the North Caucasus

movements. The collective action frames consist of three main frame dimensions, which build on each other and sometimes overlap in practice. They are referred to as "diagnostic framing", "prognostic framing" and "motivational framing" (ibid.). Their combined advantage is the creation of a narrative that combines the identification of problems and enemies, the proposal of solutions and the reasons and incentives to engage in the movement (see Benford and Snow 2000: 613ff.). The narrative starts first with the diagnostic framing, which identifies problems and, in this regard, also the alleged culprit for the conflict. In addition to the identification of problems, social movements provide within the prognostic framing strategies and solutions that operate on the same level at which the problems are identified (see Benford, Snow 1988: 201). However, the combination of diagnostic and prognostic frames is not sufficient to mobilize new participants. Motivational frames have to be produced additionally, which state reasons why the support of the goals of the respective social movement is urgent and inevitable. In particular, when participation involves (high) costs for the individual, the incentives must be presented in a very convincing manner. These can appear in material or ideal appearance, which might fall in the categories of wealth, status or moral belief (see ibid.: 202). It can be assumed that the supply of material goods can certainly be an incentive given the high risk of terrorist actions. However, as new social movements tend to have a value-based focus, appealing to moral obligations of the potential target group might also be effective. In the context of an extremist religious group, therefore, the aspect of morality should also play a major role.

Theine (2016) focused his research on the three main frame dimensions, but specifies the frame categories after he identified the main issues used by ISIS. He defined five frames, namely "victim frame", "animosity frame" (diagnostic frame), "jihad frame" (prognostic frame) as well as "support frame" and "success frame" (motivational frame) (see Theine 2016: 47). The "victim frame" encompasses all content based on the world-wide discrimination against the Muslim way of life, while the "animosity frame" identifies the perpetrators responsible for islamophobia and discrimination. This includes not only western-liberal

forces, but also all Muslims who contradict the ideology of ISIS (see ibid.: 92). As a solution, ISIS offers the combat, more specifically the jihad. Therefore, Theine summarizes all aspects of jihad and the establishment of a caliphate in the "jihad frame" (see ibid.: 93). Finally, the combination of the "support frame" and the "success frame" represent the motivational frame. The "support frame" consists of all issues that highlight the "religious and moral duty" (ibid.: 93) of Muslims. The incentive is the establishment of a caliphate by living according to the rules of sharia law which alone is a guarantee for the entry into paradise in the afterlife (see ibid.: 93). Finally, within the framework of the "success frame", every successful outcome of ISIS's activities is justified with the approval of Allah, that they gained due to the strict interpretation of the Qur'an (see ibid.: 94).

Aiming to mobilize as many individuals as possible, framing can only be an effective tool when the created narrative has credibility that is not easily questioned by the recipients. Divided into consistency, empirical credibility and credibility of the speaker, these have a high significance for the success and the mobilization strength of frame content (see Benford, Snow 2000: 619). Consistency exists when the content and action of a social movement match. The more contradictory these are, the less resonant the frames will appear. Since the incurred confusion is an inconsistency for potential supporters, it provides less mobilization potential (see ibid.: 620). The empirical credibility, however, refers to the relationship between framing and "events in the world" (Benford, Snow 1988: 208). The recipient puts the narrative of the framing in relation to real events and facts and decides about the credibility based on this comparison. Ultimately, this means that recipients test the interpretation frameworks of social movements for their empirical evidence. However, this is a subjective test in which the definitive power over reality and evidence lies with the individual (see ibid.: 208). Finally, besides the content-related aspects, the credibility of speakers plays a significant role. Also in this case, credibility depends on the individual assessment of the recipient. However, some indicators can be identified in general that indicate a credible and thus convincing speaker. Wiktorowicz (2005) names reputation here, authenticity, spiritual

authority, knowledge, character and personality (Wiktorowicz 2005, in: Pisoiu 2013: 57). Depending on the focus and target group of the social movement, it can be assumed that the speaker's qualities are assessed differently in terms of perceived credibility (see Benford 1987: 166).

Mainly, the classic framing approach has included only the textual level in former research. With the increasing importance of media content, however, visual framing has established a new research direction that explicitly deals with the effects and functions of images (see Geise, Lobinger 2013: 9). Visual framing has the advantage of including all aspects of footage in the analysis, and thus has broader patterns of explanation compared to a purely textual focus (see Coleman 2010: 233). In addition, visual framing can highlight the symbolic and emotional nature of propaganda. Text-based content often fails to achieve the same expressiveness as images (see Coleman 2010: 235). Images are better remembered and have a greater impact on the perception of individuals. In addition, emotionally strong pictures, in particular of a negative nature, can generate a high level of attention of the recipient (see ibid.: 243). Another and perhaps the most significant advantage of image-based propaganda, is that images are doubted less than texts. Since recipients see the particular situation with their own eyes, they can relate directly to reality and consider what they have seen to be more credible than purely verbal or written statements (see Messaris; Abraham 2001: 216). Additionally, images require less cognitive effort, are more superficially processed by the recipient, and therefore less likely to be questioned (see Rodriguez; Dimitrova 2011: 50). Visual elements are hence predestined to create suitable interpretive frameworks based on the respective ideological background (see Messaris, Abraham 2001: 220). Especially in the context of recruitment strategies of radical Islamist movements, images can disseminate ideological concepts in a simple and vivid way. In general, it can be assumed that a tactical use and concatenation of images put the recipient in a certain mood, which can have a polarizing and mobilizing effect.

Anna Seib: Wilayat al-Qawkaz - The Islamic State in the North Caucasus

Bernhardt (2016) focused more on visual framing and examines ISIS's propaganda strategies based on a video analysis showing the way of life in the ISIS capital Raqqa. On the basis of four Arabic-language videos, she identified four frames (everyday life frame, community frame, religiosity frame and visual frame: mental and symbolic presence of ISIS), thereby analyzing the thematic setting and the visual realization by ISIS (see Bernhardt 2016: 159f.). In the community frame, for example, all motifs are summarized, that address the harmonic and peaceful coexistence in Raqqa (see ibid.: 159). The frame of religiosity, on the other hand, considers all motifs that emphasize the importance of religion, for example with scenes in mosques (see ibid.: 159). All frames taken together, ISIS intends to demonstrate that it can guarantee order, necessary supplies and solidarity on the basis of God-given rules (see ibid.: 162). The relevance of the results lies in the ability to show that ISIS is also able to produce content beyond violence and destruction. The emphasis on "civilian" frames is an important supplement to the analysis of ISIS's propaganda strategies and can give clues about the potential target group of recruitment (see ibid.: 161f.).

Furthermore, Winter (2015), for example, identified six themes that ISIS uses for different target groups and purposes. The main target groups are particularly potential and actual supporters, the local population in Syria and Iraq, international media and worldwide opponents. The narrative can focus on one target group, but most likely covers different intentions for various groups (see Winter 2015: 6f.). While "brutality" is the most well-known narrative, introducing "utopianism" seems to have high priority in ISIS's propaganda. Brutality as a narrative can proof strength and power to supporters, but mainly intends to spread fear within the public in the occupied region as well as in hostile countries. Other violent images deal with armed struggle and war in Syria and Iraq. Military actions, trainings and successful operations are shown in the "war" narrative to illustrate supremacy but also to convince the public of being a real state with a real army. ISIS offers the option to change sides by regretting one's past hostile attitudes towards the organization and being completely conform to the caliphate within the "mercy" narrative. The affiliation to ISIS is linked to

Anna Seib: Wilayat al-Qawkaz - The Islamic State in the North Caucasus

benefits supporters can expect. The "belonging" narrative seems to be particularly interesting for the target group of foreign supporters since it highlights the idea of brotherhood (or sisterhood), community and solidarity. Furthermore, it gives the target group a purpose and provides identity. Finally, the "utopianism" narrative shows the caliphate as the realization of an Islamic state that provides secure and stable living conditions with the strict interpretation of the Qu'ran as a guideline for society and politics. ISIS legitimizes its actions and brutality with the portrayal of an apocalyptical situation in which the so-called enemies of Islam have started a war against all Muslims. This war is understood as a fight between good and evil, between faithful Muslims and sinful unbelievers (see ibid.: 22ff.).

The findings of the theoretical background as well as the state of research serve as a basis for the construction of a methodological framework. The methodological approach is based on qualitative social research with the aim of presenting the analyzed material as structured as possible, while using interpretative measures. An in-depth case study on the North Caucasus will reveal narratives, strategies and goals of the radical Islamist propaganda videos of ISIS in this region. This is done by using a frame analysis that points out core themes, interpretive frameworks and strategic implementations. Accordingly, the research question aims to analyze how content within radical Islamist propaganda videos is framed and strategically used. The division of content into frame categories and the interpretation of their content reduce the variety of meaning (Flick 1991: 165) and thereby facilitate a (further) analysis of the material. The interpretativity (Lamnek 2010: 461) or, in other words, the interpretation of the communicated content, constitutes the basis of a qualitative content analysis. The content was divided into typologies, aiming for the creation of a category system (see Lamnek 2010: 462ff.). Such a methodological approach is particularly attractive for the analysis of research objects that have been considered under-researched. Therefore, qualitative content analysis is regarded as a suitable tool to examine case studies (see Mayring 2010: 23). The choice of categories was strongly influenced by findings from the current state of research and includes, in particular, the publications of Theine (2016), Bernhardt (2016)

and Winter (2015). In addition, region-specific research has influenced the selection, allowing categories to be modeled case-specifically after reviewing the study material. For intersubjective verifiability, the categories and codes have been transparently disclosed. The set of the categories is based on the premise of providing a complete picture of all relevant aspects. The categories should be clearly distinguishable and reflect one specific focus (see Roessler 2010: 101f.).

Figure 1: Categorization of the diagnostic, prognostic and motivational frames

Diagnostic Frame		Prognostic Frame	
Oppression Frame		Jihad Frame	
Violence and Discrimination against Muslims	Enemy Images	Fight against Enemies	Establishment of a Caliphate & Introduction of the Sharia

Motivational Frames	
Duty Frame	Reward Frame
Religious & Moral Duty	Secular & Religious Reward
Relevance of Apostasy	Orientation, Ideology, Meaning of Life

The diagnostic frame is represented by the oppression frame, in which two directions are particularly crucial. First, violence and discrimination against Muslims have been identified as the main problem that was expressed at a historical, political or social level. One advantage of the oppression frame for radical Islamist organizations is that it enables them to

Anna Seib: Wilayat al-Qawkaz - The Islamic State in the North Caucasus

present themselves as victims of external circumstances and legitimize their actions as a necessary evil. Furthermore, the origin of the problem must be connected to the definition of (alleged or real) perpetrators, namely the enemies and out-group. This may include abstract (states), collective (non-religious, "unbelievers") or individual (political, military or religious leaders) enemies. The jihad frame as the main prognostic frame articulates actions leading to a solution. Radical Islamist organizations offer jihad that can manifest itself in various forms, but is always understood as a militant combat against the "enemy." In this context, besides the destruction of the enemy and the corresponding way of lifestyle, the creation of a caliphate and the introduction of sharia was regarded as the main solution offered by ISIS. The motivational frame was split into the duty and reward frame. The intention has been to identify the main push and pull factors that can strategically promote mobilization and recruitment. The duty frame focuses in particular on the religious and moral duty. However, the range and characteristics of these can be different, but are specifically extreme in radical Islamist contexts. In order to mobilize for jihad, it must therefore be convincingly demonstrated that this is a duty for every Muslim. Thus, according to the logic of radical Islamist organizations, all Muslims who do not join jihad are on the same level as "unbelievers". Muslims who contradict ISIS' ideology are accused of apostasy. Particularly crucial here is the concept of takfir, which is practiced only by certain radical Islamist organizations and legitimizes the fight against other Muslims. The reward frame includes all factors that might be considered as advantages for individuals. For example, a secular reward can be the promise of wealth. A spiritual reward, on the other hand, can be paradise after a martyr's death. In addition, it was examined to what extent orientation and identity is offered as a positive incentive, which includes for example particular statements of recruited individuals who express a new meaning in life.

Anna Seib: Wilayat al-Qawkaz - The Islamic State in the North Caucasus

Figure 2: Categorization of visual frames

Visual Frames	
Violence Frame	Community Frame
Characterization of Victims and Perpetrators	Solidarity of the in-group, Identity, Philanthropy

The visual frames focus on two relevant areas that can have an impact on the transmission of content or emotions through visual representations. First of all, the characteristics and usage of depictions of violence were investigated while the construction of images of victims and perpetrators was considered as well. The community frame summarizes visual illustrations that meant to reinforce the meaning of the group. The visualization of friendship and aspects that demonstrate solidarity, such as family and fondness for children were reflected in the community frame.

The frame analysis is based on a total of five Russian-language videos, which do not exceed a length of 30 minutes. All videos were shot or released between the years 2015 and 2016. The sample of available and relevant videos can be found on the Jihadology[3] website. The exact amount of radical Islamist propaganda videos in the North Caucasus remains in the dark, due to the limited access for researchers in such spheres and the frequent deleting of these videos from public platforms used by ISIS. The validity of this research might be affected by the total sample's small number and lead to the lack of representativeness of the results. This demands further research filling the gap by taking additional videos into account. Nevertheless, the analyzed videos provide a large amount of content due to their length. Their selection was based on the concept of "purposeful sampling" (Patton 1990: 169) which encompasses several strategies that can lead to insightful results. In this context, intensity sampling (Patton 1990: 171) and maximum variation sampling (Patton 1990: 172) are used in particular. Intensity sampling takes into account those cases that contain meaningful

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[3] http://jihadology.net

Anna Seib: Wilayat al-Qawkaz - The Islamic State in the North Caucasus

information and that reflect intensely the phenomenon of interest. On the other hand, the maximum variation sampling pays attention to ensure that the selected cases pick up on a variety of aspects and thus enable a wide range of different findings (see Patton 1990: 169ff.).

Figure 3: Sampling of the propaganda videos

	Wilayat al-Qawkaz	Date	Length (min)
1	Message from the Mujahidin	September 2015	20:18
2	The Lone Wolf	November 2015	21:54
3	A Profit that will never perish	March 2016	12:31
4	The Disease and the Medicine	March 2016	26:32
5	Now, now the Fighting comes	December 2016	13:40

Frames and Strategies of ISIS's Propaganda Videos in the North Caucasus

Based on the methodological concept, the most relevant information for the analysis is chosen from the available primary sources. Every frame is examined on a systematic basis and put in relation to each other. The interpretation of the frames gives an insight into ISIS's worldview and intentions. More important, it reveals its strategies to influence and manipulate the target group. This leads to another advantage of the frame analysis. Knowing ISIS's topics, approaches and incentives, it is possible to assume the characteristics of the individuals assembling the target group and further which distinctive features of ISIS might be attractive for them.

Collective Action Frames

Beginning the analysis with the collective action frames by Benford and Snow, the propaganda is divided into the categories of oppression frame, jihad frame, duty frame and reward frame. The aim is to point out how ISIS frames problems, solutions and incentives in

the particular case of the North Caucasus. The accentuation of oppression and the identification of associated enemy images run like a thread through the examined radical Islamist propaganda videos. The focus of the Wilayat al-Qawkaz is the oppression of Muslims in the North Caucasus, which emanates mainly from Russia. Russia is considered to be the main enemy that is, within the oppression frame, consistently accused of immense crime and violence against Muslims. It can be observed that at many points in the videos, the narrative provides a simple worldview that is split in "good" and "evil" and focuses on the demonization of Russia and overall victimization of Muslims.

While there are videos of the Wilayat al-Qawkaz that are produced with less effort (no cuts, one image), some of the productions are strongly oriented towards the character of documentary movies. These were filmed with modern media technology and/or are a compilation of high quality film footage. The advantage of videos designed in a documentary way is the convincing visualization of historical and political events. This is particularly significant in the oppression frame, as it shows in a vivid and mostly emotional way how the enemy has threatened the Muslim community from the past until the present. Since recipients might perceive these videos as educational movies without questioning the messages, this makes it easy for the Wilayat al-Qawkaz to exploit some events in the past (that are not made up entirely) for its own ends. In particular, there are two videos in which, from the Tsarist Empire, the Soviet Union up until contemporary Russia under Putin, all stages of oppression are described in detail. The Wilayat al-Qawkaz accuses Russia of horrendous crimes, mentioning in particular high numbers of expulsions, persecutions and mass murders of Muslims (The Disease and the Medicine, The Lone Wolf). The severity of oppression is illustrated by dramatic and metaphorical language such as:

The history of the Caucasus consists of pages in which the heart is bleeding, they cry with pain and choke with tears (The Disease and the Medicine)

Anna Seib: Wilayat al-Qawkaz - The Islamic State in the North Caucasus

or

Russia, a land of history that has been soaked with the blood and suffering of innocent people since its foundation and until today (The Lone Wolf).

In addition to the "atrocities" in the North Caucasus, in which a strong reference to the two Chechen Wars is made, the Wilayat al-Qawkaz refers to the Russian activities in the Middle East. At first, the Afghanistan War is mentioned, that is perceived as "10 years of murder, cruelty, violence, bombing and tyranny" (The Lone Wolf). It continues with the current development and involvement of Russian troops in Syria. Russia is accused of being responsible for hundreds of thousands of victims as a result of supporting Assad and their own bombing (The Lone Wolf). In this context, however, the blame is not only put on the Russian leadership, but also on the Russian society that agrees with the political agenda of its government and therefore share the responsibility for the alleged crimes.

It is unimaginable that this is carried out only by a handful of politicians without the support of the army and the people. (...) Their people are direct participants in this bloodshed because their leadership could never have done their crimes without the consent of the people (The Lone Wolf).

Furthermore, the Wilayat al-Qawkaz adds an enemy image that is particularly distinctive for ISIS's ideology. It is about North Caucasians and Muslims who cooperate with Russian authorities and are therefore regarded as supporters of the system that is oppressing the Muslim community. This kind of person is called "Murtadd", which would translate to being an "apostate" and means, within an Islamic interpretation, people who abandoned the religious path of Islam (see Heffening 2012). Since they are accused of betraying Islam, Murtadds are on the same hierarchical position as Russians and infidels.

Anna Seib: Wilayat al-Qawkaz - The Islamic State in the North Caucasus

> They (apostates) were the reason for the division of Muslims and the loss of identity. Infidels, the enemies of Muslims, benefit from the spread of these sects and communities and have used them against Islam and Muslims (The Disease and the Medicine).

The characteristics and actions which define an apostate are kept relatively vague. However, by reference to the next statement, it can be assumed that it refers to any person who does not support the jihadists.

> They became Russian puppets - apostates who look like Muslims helping the Islam and call to it. So, they conquered the whole religion for their masters, the invaders. They are a disease and misfortune for you. Beware of them, oh inhabitants of the Caucasus. The point has come that the apostate leadership has begun sending their recruits to help killing mujaheddin (The Disease and the Medicine).

Finally, the "apostates" consist also of Sufi adherents, whose communities are considered by ISIS as sects that harm Islam by estrangement from monotheism (The Disease and the Medicine). After naming the perceived threats and the enemies causing these, Wilayat al-Qawkaz offers within the prognostic frame the solution, precisely the path to the solution, which is in this case joining the jihad. The jihad plays a central role and continues as a thematic focus continuously through the entire propaganda. This makes sense, since this frame is linked by announcing the aims strongly with the recruitment of new followers. Within the propaganda videos, the jihad is vividly illustrated and described. Explicit video excerpts of attacks, the presentation of weapons, and detailed descriptions of how individuals can commit effective attacks suggest that the mobilization of single perpetrators (lone wolves) and the recruitment of new jihadists can be identified as one of the key objectives of Wilayat

Anna Seib: Wilayat al-Qawkaz - The Islamic State in the North Caucasus

al-Qawkaz's propaganda videos. Being aware that joining the Wilayat or committing complex attacks may have many obstacles, it calls increasingly for "small" and local attacks.

> If they cannot join the jihad, then (...) the caliph said that a rope or a knife is perfectly adequate. And that's why brothers, you do not have to go somewhere, for example, do anything, if you cannot join us, because (...) Russia is huge and there are enough infidels (A Profit that will never perish).

Partially, various options are presented to participate in jihad, which is largely associated with the murder of "infidels ". In some sequences, Arabic-language sound recordings are integrated in the local propaganda and translated through subtitles into Russian. These messages reveal a special mercilessness against the "enemies".

> And if you cannot find a bomb or weapon, then ambush the American or French infidels or any of their allies. Hit his head with a stone or stab him. Crush him with his car or throw him down from heights. Choke or poison him. Show no weakness or mercy (Now, now the Fighting comes).

The target group is addressed directly and motivated to act quickly. Self-sufficiency and self-sacrifice are demanded from the potential assassins (The Lone Wolf). The appreciation of a human life is expectably low while the martyr's death is preferred over living in the secular world. Dying for Allah is considered as an honorable goal (Message from the Mujahidin). On the one hand, this can have a high impact on the potential target group, since it paradoxically creates a meaning of life or a purpose of the own existence. On the other hand, the fearlessness of death creates a threat scenario that makes Wilayat al-Qawkaz as a terrorist organization and its counteraction unpredictable (Message from the Mujahidin).

Anna Seib: Wilayat al-Qawkaz - The Islamic State in the North Caucasus

Referring to the enemy images of Wilayat al-Qawkaz, violent attacks in the name of jihad are addressed not only against infidels but also against so-called apostates. These are, as mentioned in the oppression frame, mostly Muslims working with (and therefore allegedly supporting) Russian institutions (Message from the Mujahidin). They make no distinction between locals and Russians, which increases the sphere of attack targets and scopes of jihad. In addition to the mobilization of single perpetrators, attacks of the Wilayat al-Qawkaz itself are proclaimed. In this context, the availability of adherents and the arsenal of weaponry are emphasized while the latter of which is also shown confidently in some scenes (Message from the Mujahidin; Now, now the Fighting comes). Quite surprisingly, the aims of jihad are kept vague. However, a few scenes indicate that it is sought to achieve Sharia law and an Islamic state, based on the model of Syria and Iraq (A Profit that will never perish).

Since the participation in radical Islamist activities is likely to entail high costs, the motivational frame is examined from two perspectives. While analyzing the videos in regard of possible incentives, the duty frame takes a much larger role than the reward frame. The duty frame is mostly based on the fear of Allah's punishment in case of not observing his rules. According to Wilayat al-Qawkaz, every Muslim is obliged to follow the path of jihad. This duty is linked to the (alleged) devastating situation of Muslims worldwide. On the one hand, it is said that Muslims suffer in bad conditions and would even work as slaves for infidels (Message from the Mujahidin). On the other hand, it is criticized that especially the youth is concerned only with secular and sinful activities (Message from the Mujahidin). The duty frame is highly connected to the oppression and jihad frame. Hence, one of the strategies is to compare leisure activities of the Muslim youth in the North Caucasus with those of the jihadists. In contrast to jihadists, this youth would not take their duty as Muslims seriously and do not support changing the oppressed situation of the Muslim community in the world.

And what is the Muslim youth nowadays concerned with? What are they doing while their fathers and brothers are killed, their mothers and sisters are raped? Where are the

Anna Seib: Wilayat al-Qawkaz - The Islamic State in the North Caucasus

men of this umma? Do you see them on the battlefields? Do you see them protecting this religion? Do you see them protecting the sisters' honor? No! (The Lone Wolf).

The impact of the duty frame seems even greater by using rhetorical questions, also because they work on an extreme emotional level. In summary, the duty frame works in particular by calling attention to the oppression of Muslims and, at the same time, by referring back to the jihad frame, showing the responsibility of young Muslims for the Islamic community. These duties are based on the affiliation to Islam, but also on the principles of masculinity and honor.

Compared to the duty frame, there are significantly fewer positive incentives in the propaganda videos that go beyond the end of oppression, freedom for Muslims, and greater influence of Islamic laws. In the case of Wilayat al-Qawkaz, the rewards are mostly vague and include, in particular, the terms "success" and "victory" that are essential in the context of Allah's support (The Disease and the Medicine; Message from the Mujahidin). Additionally, it turns out that the reward frame is based not only on the secular success of ISIS, but also on the approach that life after death is preferable to this world. This is again argued by references to Allah, who will meet the jihadists in the afterlife and reward them although it remains open in what manner (Now, now the Fighting comes). It has been difficult though to link specific sequences to the offer of identity and orientation. Nevertheless, the overall picture of the proposed solution, joining the jihad, in order to protect the alleged unity of Muslims, might contribute to influence the particular part of the target group seeking for a meaning of life. Belonging to an in-group is not specifically enhanced, but within the visual frame analysis, the community frame illustrates a relevant indicator showing its relevance (see next chapter). In conclusion, Wilayat al-Qawkaz's propaganda videos emphasize less individual benefits. The reward frame therefore largely refers to collective incentives and is closely linked to the goals mentioned in the jihad frame.

Violence and Community

The visualization of violence can be found especially in Wilayat al-Qawkaz's more professional video productions. While violence is shown in a high degree, there are two different appearances. The first one shows violence committed against Muslims, including children, women, families, and the elderly. In this case, close-ups are often chosen in which the faces of the victims are clearly visible. As a result, the horror of violence appears stronger and more personalized by showing individuals. In addition, war zones function as the settings in which showing destroyed cities and buildings dramatize the situation in a visually strong way (The Disease and the Medicine). The portrayal of victims from vulnerable populations, especially children, can trigger extreme feelings of compassion, but also anger and hatred. This visual strategy reinforces and visualizes the oppression frame and lead with the associated call to action to the jihad frame. This specific violence frame is addressed to the target group of potential supporters and sympathizers.

On the other hand, the visualization of violence serves as a demonstration of power and strength against enemies. In this context, executed or injured enemies are shown, which can be military as well as civilian targets. Furthermore, it is not unusual that apostates are in the focus since they are likely to be easily reached due to their geographical proximity in the North Caucasus compared with targets in Russia (Now, now the Fighting comes). Also from this perspective of violence, close-ups are increasingly used. Among the casualties are only young men, which arguably points out that ISIS generally, in contrast to its enemies, does not assault women, children and the elderly. Strategically, this tries to create moral superiority and threats towards worldwide enemies that are the target group of this narrative. In addition to random photo spreads of dead enemies, violent attacks are also added as short video clips. These scenes are related to the jihad frame (Now, now the Fighting comes). The visualization of violence serves here as a guideline to the process of killing, making murder legitimate and common means. Finally, the high amount of extremely violent scenes might aim to normalize violence and let the potential adherents become accustomed with it.

Anna Seib: Wilayat al-Qawkaz - The Islamic State in the North Caucasus

Along with the violence frame, Wilayat al-Qawkaz highlights the importance of the in-group within the community frame, showing two main characteristics. The first one is connected to the violence frame because it points out the strength, masculinity and the will to make use of heavy arms. The jihadists of Wilayat al-Qawkaz usually present themselves heavily armed and dressed in military uniform as it is shown in image 1. Six members of Wilayat al-Qawkaz pose in the woods in front of the ISIS flag with machine guns. In this sequence, the jihadists try to convince the audience to join the jihad in the North Caucasus or to commit attacks elsewhere in Russia. The combination of their appearance, showing them as actually involved in the jihad by carrying heavy arms, and their goal to make the audience follow their example, should be considered as an effective mobilization strategy.

Image 1: Jihadists as a collective entity

Source: A Profit that will never perish 02:50min

The following image (2) gives an insight to a highly symbolic moment. A group of young jihadists pledge their allegiance to ISIS and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. As they present themselves as the in-group, they swear the oath as a collective and, more symbolic, put their hands together while doing so. It is striking that some jihadists are smiling during this process even though the confession to a terrorist organization is obviously a serious matter. It can be

Anna Seib: Wilayat al-Qawkaz - The Islamic State in the North Caucasus

assumed that the regional group affiliation plays an important role in the identity of these individuals.

Image 2: Jihadists as a community

Source: Now, now the Fighting comes 05:47min

Image 3 reveals another characteristic of the community frame. Under the condition that the identification with the in-group is highly important to understand radicalization processes of individuals, ISIS manages to also show its "humane" face within the propaganda videos. Therefore, some sequences show the jihadists in their everyday life. Jihadists are sitting in a circle while preparing and drinking tea. Thus, ISIS affiliated groups can present themselves as fighting units, but also as a community where individuals can exchange their thoughts and beliefs.

Anna Seib: Wilayat al-Qawkaz - The Islamic State in the North Caucasus

Image 3: Jihadists in everyday life

Source: The Disease and the Medicine 17:30min

In addition, the attempt is being made to create a harmonic atmosphere in which jihadists can also live together with their family and children. Image 4 portrays a jihadist with two, potentially his own, children in an idyllic landscape. He smiles and seems to be a loving family man. These sequences are complementary to the violence and jihad frames in which mercilessness is demanded by all jihadists. In another scene, a member of Wilayat al-Qawkaz expresses this as follows:

> These unbelievers, Russians, tell you that we the mujahideen want to kill kids, blast schools, (...) these are lies against the mujahideen, so you will stir up hatred against us (...). Wallah, we do not intend to blow up. If we had wanted so, we would have blown up long ago. This is a crime for us. Allah forbids us to kill children, women, and the old. And we never commit such crimes (Message from the Mujahidin).

Image 4: Jihadist as the loving family man

Source: The Disease and the Medicine 10:37min

In conclusion, the community frame plays a strategic role, as it presents the supporters of ISIS as moral people and not just bloodthirsty fighters. It creates identity and is strengthened through a clear distinction to the out-group. Overall, visual frames let aspects of radical Islamist propaganda videos appear more credible since they have a strong influence on the strengthening of communicated content. It has been shown that while the visual frames can be classified into specific topics such as violence or community, they are always tied to the oppression, jihad or motivational frames. In particular, the visual frames have the ability to convey or intensify emotions that are useful tools within the three main frame dimensions. In the context of the oppression frame, for example, the visualization of violence is increasingly being used, which illustrates the brutality of the enemy that is also directed against defenseless groups of people. Finally, the oppression frame in connection with the violence frame tries to legitimize the own acts of violence against their enemies. The community frame, on the other hand, can support the motivational frame, especially the reward frame, by propagating a collective consciousness that may be attractive to potential supporters.

Anna Seib: Wilayat al-Qawkaz - The Islamic State in the North Caucasus

Credibility and Effectiveness

Considering the aspect of consistency, it was examined whether the frames themselves as well as related to the activities of Wilayat al-Qawkaz, respectively ISIS, were free of self-contradictions. At first, it must be stated that as soon as individuals accept the ideological framework and are vulnerable to propaganda, even irrational statements can be perceived as the truth (see Theine 2016: 53). In the case of Wilayat al-Qawkaz, it can be assumed that recipients perceive less contradiction when they are already receptive to radical Islamist ideology. ISIS's efforts to disseminate propaganda as historical facts in form of documentary films would have to work in particular if individuals have been already affected by discrimination and potentially have consumed sources of information that confirm their views. Also, in the context of the community frame and the strategy to present oneself positively, this can only succeed if individuals are not properly informed about ISIS's activities. For example, a jihadist of Wilayat al-Qawkaz assures that killing children, women, and the elderly is not one of the intentions (Message from the Mujahidin). This might be accurate so far in the North Caucasus, but it contradicts the general approach of ISIS. Theoretically, inconsistencies can be identified. Nevertheless, if the ideological framework has been accepted, these contradictions will, in all probability, not have a major impact on the mobilization strength of radical Islamist organizations because facts take a rather secondary position.

The analysis of empirical credibility requires to examine the frames in relation to realistic and reasonable facts. Since the closeness to reality of propaganda depends on the individual subjectivity of recipients, a sociological analysis can only attempt to compare the propaganda with historical and political facts. A comparison is possible with the oppression frame, since most efforts can be observed here referring to past and current events. To a large extent, Wilayat al-Qawkaz's argumentation is based on its own interpretation of the past and present. Due to the use of a documentary style, the video sequences can likely be perceived as

credible information. It can be assumed that thereby the biased content that is relevant in the oppression frame is perceived by the recipients as reality. Especially two of the five examined videos demonstrate the relevance of the reference to "reality" for the argumentation of ISIS. Both videos address in great detail the (alleged) historical and current oppression (The Lone Wolf; The Disease and the Medicine).

The historical part shown in the videos is divided into three phases that represent the period of the Tsarists Empire, the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation. Here, the argumentative strength lies in the presentation of data and numbers and becomes particularly apparent in the oppression frame by the reference to high numbers of Muslim victims who died in this context (The Lone Wolf; The Disease and the Medicine). Furthermore, there are also rhetorical techniques that are based on the linguistic "flourish" of content, which includes the choice of words that simplifies, dramatizes and visualizes the subjects. Examples would be expressions such as "bloodsucker", "bloodlust", "enslavement", "obliterating" or "annihilating" (The Lone Wolf). This rhetorical strategy with an extreme choice of words and an emphasis on an almost demonic enemy encourages the radicalization of vulnerable individuals who prefer a simple division of the world into good and evil.

Far more difficult is the analysis of empirical verifiability in the jihad frame. Since it is strongly linked to the oppression frame, the jihad frame is rather limited to draw the argumentative strength from the prognostic frame. The relation to reality is therefore less given in the context of the jihad frame, also because the argument is based more on Islamist beliefs. The same applies to the motivational frames, since these are likewise stronger based on Islamist rules, laws and beliefs than on a worldly comprehensible reality. In summary, there indeed exist links to reality, which play particularly a major role in the oppression frame. However, this reality is biased and framed as conforming to ISIS's ideology. Based on the thesis that visualized content is less questioned, visual frames additionally support the empirical credibility, which increases the likelihood that propaganda is perceived as reality.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of propaganda videos depends on the credibility of speakers. On the basis of the examined propaganda videos, three speaker types can be identified, which are potentially able to create credibility by their hierarchical position in the organization and/or by adequate personality traits. First of all, there are the "leaders", who can be divided into organizational and religious leaders. In the case of Wilayat al-Qawkaz, the choice of speakers is broad and focused not just on one or a few main characters. Considered as leaders are also representatives of local subgroups who play a leading role within the propaganda videos and who moderate further speech contributions. However, in this case it remains unclear what concrete background, with regard to the combat experience, the speakers feature. Most of these are relatively old speakers, so that recipients could perceive them as reputable jihadists.

Besides militant leaders, the choice of speakers includes also leaders with alleged religious authenticity. Occasionally, the boundaries between organizational and religious leaders blur. Powerful scenes are created such as in image 5, where the black-and-white shot shows a charismatic jihadist reciting a Nashid, while in the background a supposedly large number of armed jihadists with weapons and ISIS flags silently listen to it. The speaker combines religious and organizational elements through his singing and acting as an armed and uniformed jihadist. In addition, this awakens the association of an Islamist Che Guevara by his appearance as well as by the "revolutionary romanticism" generated from the Nashid.

Anna Seib: Wilayat al-Qawkaz - The Islamic State in the North Caucasus

Image 5: Charismatic jihadist leader

Source: The lone Wolf 14:55min

The last speaker type consists of "ordinary" jihadists. They play a significant role regarding the persuasive power of radical Islamist propaganda, as they are theoretically perceived by potentially new recruits at the same hierarchical level. Joining the jihad is the one step that would need to be done to become a part of the in-group. These jihadists are mostly young men who demonstrate themselves as strong-willed, armed and uniformed. They call for jihad and emphasize here the obligatory nature for every Muslim. The strength of credibility lies in the authenticity of the speakers. Ordinary jihadists can serve as role models, as they have already joined the jihad despite the risks and consequences. In summary, all three types of speakers can have an influence on the credibility of the frames. Hereby, not only the reputation of charismatic leaders is important, but also the presence of "normal" jihadists, with whom young people can initially identify more.

Conclusion and Outlook

In conclusion, the (visual) frame analysis facilitated identifying the characteristics of radical Islamist propaganda videos in the North Caucasus and pointed out the interpretative

Anna Seib: Wilayat al-Qawkaz - The Islamic State in the North Caucasus

framework of Wilayat al-Qawkaz, ISIS's North Caucasian branch. It has been discussed that the analyzed videos offer a variety of themes, perspectives and images that are framed based on ISIS's ideology. ISIS is able to attract individuals regardless of gender, ethnicity or age by disseminating well visualized narratives that address problems the target groups are affected by. It could be observed that the oppression and discrimination of Muslims are communicated as the main issue. In this context, the out-group of unbelievers, especially Russia and its allies, are held responsible for causing the devastating situation of Muslims in the North Caucasus and around the world. Therefore, the propaganda shows a strong and noble in-group opposing the perceived enemy as the "evil" and morally reprehensible out-group. It is intended to generate and increase the identification with the in-group. Wilayat al-Qawkaz offers group identity, orientation and ideology and seems to be, regarding the radicalized jihadists in the propaganda videos, especially attractive to the youth. Considering the ongoing devastating social and economic situation in the North Caucasus, it might be not surprising that extreme ideologies can spread and reach social groups without prospects. According to the Wilayat al-Qawkaz, only the jihad, as the combat against unbelievers and enemies of Islam, can change this situation and establish an Islamic state based on the strict interpretation of the Qu'ran. Jihad means not only to join ISIS, but includes basically every attempt to attack unbelievers in Russia or elsewhere. The analysis of the jihad frame reveals the extreme rhetoric that gives precise instructions for violent actions against mostly civilian goals. The speaking jihadists give advice about weapons that can be used and highlight the importance of not showing mercy against enemies.

The separation of the motivational frame into the duty frame and reward frame gives an insight into potential push and pull factors. The duty frame plays a significant role in recruiting new supporters, since radical Islamist propaganda relies on Muslims "becoming aware" of their duty to join jihad against opponents and unbelievers. The results of the marginally existing reward frame are quite surprising, since it was initially assumed that the participation in radical Islamist terrorist organizations is associated with significant costs and

Anna Seib: Wilayat al-Qawkaz - The Islamic State in the North Caucasus

should therefore presuppose attractive religious or material incentives. Nevertheless, even though it is not communicated verbally, the benefits of belonging to a collective that has a common purpose, are promoted within the visual community frame which shows the civil and human side of ISIS. It creates group identity and supports the image of a reliable in-group.

As opposed to this, the violence frame, that is linked to the oppression and jihad frame, propagates either the cruelty of the enemies or the own strength and mercilessness against them. The visually pleasing presentation makes the content look not only vivid, but also credible. The visualization of propaganda in form of videos is a phenomenon of modern organizations. The quality of the propaganda videos is striking and based on professional media technology and media competence. In the case of Wilayat al-Qawkaz, it was possible to monitor the media strategy to recruit new adherents by addressing regional problems. The propagandistic nature is hereby hidden in an appearing documentary form in order to impart the own interpretation of historical and political events.

No propaganda is effective if it is not believed by potential target groups. Therefore, the analysis of the credibility of the frames is particular important. The empirical credibility and the comparison of propaganda with reality could be best discussed within the oppression frame. The wars in Chechnya, Afghanistan and, most recently, in Syria were specifically referred to. Rhetorical means such as dramatic choice of words or the usage of numbers and dates emphasized vividly the content and more important increased the credibility. Furthermore, the choice of speakers has an influence on the credibility. Three different types of speakers could be identified within the propaganda videos. These are religious and militant leaders as well as ordinary but authentic jihadists. Besides the charisma of the leaders, it is likely that the attraction of ISIS is based on the jihadists on the lower hierarchical positions because they can be perceived as reachable role models.

While this study focused specifically on the North Caucasus, further research on radical Islamist propaganda videos can adopt the methodological approach of a frame analysis in order to realize a comparative case study. Research should pay more attention to East

Europe and Central Asia since ISIS tries to recruit in several post-Soviet regions such as the Balkans and states with a mainly Muslim population like Kyrgyzstan (see Bewarder; Flade 2015). Therefore, region-specific research must be carried out in order to develop suitable countermeasures and strategies. It is likely that radical Islamist organizations will continue to challenge modern societies and emanate a strong appeal to their target groups. This is currently of particular relevance due to the tense security situation in Russia prior to the FIFA World Cup. An in-depth analysis of ideologies, organizational structures and recruitment strategies of radical Islamist organizations can only be beneficial for the implementation of effective anti-terrorist measures.

Anna Seib: Wilayat al-Qawkaz - The Islamic State in the North Caucasus

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