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## Foreign Fighter Recruitment Messaging and the 'Islamic State'

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FOREIGN FIGHTER RECRUITMENT MESSAGING  
AND THE 'ISLAMIC STATE'

by

Jacob M. Nelson

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

Political Science

Approved:

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David Goetze  
Major Professor

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UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY  
Logan, Utah

2017

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## ABSTRACT

Foreign Fighter Recruitment Messaging and the ‘Islamic State’

by

Jacob M. Nelson, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2017

Major Professor: Dr. David Goetze

Department: Political Science

The most current general theory of ‘foreign fighters’ in civil conflicts suggests that insurgencies wishing to recruit fighters abroad generally send them propaganda messages that predicate their participation on the necessity to defend their common transnational identity. However, this ‘defensive mobilization’ model of foreign fighters did not seem to fit well with the Islamic State’s insurgency, as their objectives and behavior seemed much more aggressive than defensive, and consequently a ‘defensive mobilization’ message in their propaganda seemed unlikely. My alternative research hypothesis was that the Islamic State does not *primarily* use defensive narratives to attract foreign fighter recruits. Using content analysis of *Dabiq*, the Islamic State’s international recruitment magazine, I found evidence supporting my hypothesis. Instead of using primarily messages of defending a common group, I found that *Dabiq* distributed messages of their religious legitimacy, their religious and military superiority,

the inevitability of their victory, and the Muslim obligation and duty to emigrate and support the Islamic State to their potential foreign recruits.

This research could serve as a signpost for future work to improve our understanding of foreign fighter recruitment. I suggest a possible adjustment to the theory of foreign fighters; that individuals can be mobilized to conflicts abroad in any message consistent with narratives that serve to not only protect, but also grow and strengthen identity, allowing for the possibility for the use of narratives that mobilize them to non-defensive violence.

(61 Pages)

## PUBLIC ABSTRACT

## Foreign Fighter Recruitment Messaging and the 'Islamic State'

Jacob M. Nelson

The so called 'Islamic State,' an Islamic extremist organization which currently controls large swaths of territory in the Middle East, has attracted foreign fighters to its insurgency in tens of thousands. Until just recently, foreign fighters were not well researched or understood separately from local fighters. David Malet (2013) argues that insurgencies recruit foreign fighters by persuading them to defend a 'common group' against a threatening enemy. This 'defensive mobilization,' he believed, was critical to recruiting foreign fighters throughout history. After preliminary analysis, the Islamic State presented evidence contrary to this theory, and it seemed dubious that they would use defensive mobilization to recruit foreign fighters.

By analyzing at Islamic State's recruitment propaganda, this research found that the Islamic State did indeed break with Malet's understanding of foreign fighters. Interestingly, the Islamic State instead invoked the religious duty to conquer on behalf of a legitimate religious state and restore Islamic dominion over the world. These findings may serve to increase our understanding of the Islamic State in general and will likely cause us to make adjustments in how we understand foreign fighter recruitment to other civil conflicts.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank committee members, Drs. David Goetze, Jeannie Johnson and Scott Bates, for their support and assistance throughout various stages of this process. Likewise, Dr. Damon Cann also provided invaluable auxiliary assistance in developing the methodology for this research. These professors' involvement not only encouraged the development of my thesis, but they also increased my development as a student and scholar. I will always be indebted to them. I also thank Alan Cranney and Michaelene Munro, for helping me test different configurations of the content analysis for this research and establishing inter-coder reliability. They played no small role in this project's completion.

Lastly, I would like to express deep gratitude for my wife, Andrea, for her constant encouragement, patience, moral support, and for serving as a sounding board for my ideas. While working through this project, we've experienced challenging family circumstances, yet despite this, she has always maintained her unwavering support for me. I could not have done it without her.

Jacob Nelson

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

In 2013, David Malet published the first general theory on the recruitment of foreign fighters to civil conflicts, asserting that the central propaganda message which insurgencies throughout history have used to attract foreign fighters has always been one which frames their respective conflict as an existential threat to a shared transnational identity, and therefore calls upon their participation to defend their common group.<sup>1</sup> My research critically examines the validity of this model with regards to the insurgent group known as ‘Islamic State.’ Using the content of *Dabiq*, (the Islamic State’s propaganda magazine), I perform both a systematic and interpretive content analysis to identify the messages that the Islamic State uses to attract foreign fighters. My findings show that the Islamic State’s central propaganda message is inconsistent with Malet’s model. Most of the Islamic State’s recruitment messages analyzed in my research predicated foreign fighter participation on the need to establish an Islamic society or ‘caliphate’ based on supposedly uncorrupted tenets of Sharia law. In contrast, messages framing the conflict as ‘self-defense,’ as Malet’s theory would claim, do not play a central role in their message campaign.

These findings put the validity of Malet’s model of foreign fighters into question, and I propose that his theory be altered so that insurgent groups can incorporate the use of salient social identities to mobilize foreign fighters for any cause consistent with growing

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<sup>1</sup> David Malet, *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 5.

and strengthening their social identity, and need not be just for defensive causes. In other words, while defensive mobilization is certainly a common messaging method for attracting foreign fighters, it is possible that expectations associated with identity can potentially contain causes of violence that go beyond just self-preservation, and this would then be reflected in the messaging propaganda.

## CHAPTER II

## THEORY

Malet's theory is the starting point for my research, and so his work will be briefly introduced here. Restated in his own words, Malet's central claim in his book, *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts*, is that "recruiters [of foreign fighters] tell potential recruits that their common [group identity] is under existential threat and that their participation is necessary for the survival of their people and, ultimately, themselves."<sup>2</sup> His conclusion is inferred from four cases studies of civil conflicts involving the presence of foreign fighters; 1) the Texas Revolution (1835-1836), 2) the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), 3) the Israeli War of Independence (1947-1949), and 4) Afghanistan (1978-1992). For each conflict, Malet used unstructured content analysis to identify the dominant recruitment message(s) contained in large collections of recruitment propaganda directed at foreign recruits.<sup>3</sup>

In constructing his theory, Malet provides a few conceptual definitions. As the fathering scholar in identifying the concept of 'foreign fighters' as a singular type of phenomenon, he defines foreign fighters as "non-citizens of conflict states who join insurgencies during civil conflicts." He further clarifies that this definition excludes 1) militants participating in a foreign state's military that are ordered into the conflict, 2) foreigners who join a foreign state's military, and 3) employees of private security

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<sup>2</sup> Malet, *Foreign Fighters*, 5.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

companies.<sup>4</sup> These foreign fighters participate in ‘insurgencies’; a term which includes a wide array of scholarly definitions. Malet preferred to use Kalyvas’s definition, which defines insurgency as an “armed conflict within the boundaries of a recognized sovereign entity between parties subject to a common authority at the outset of hostilities.”<sup>5</sup> For my research, I modify this definition slightly, as a strict interpretation of this definition presents a problem in the case of the Islamic State. Specifically, Kalyvas limits his definition to conflicts that have only one common authority within recognized national boundaries, and having only two sides to a given conflict (one side being the recognized state, and the other, the insurgent group). In the case of Islamic State, the insurgent group fights many authorities, combats other competing insurgent groups like the PKK, the FSA or Al-Nusra, and are not limited by national boundaries. Still, the Islamic State’s conflict fits very well with the spirit or essence of an insurgency, in that they rebel against sovereign authority, and it would be a mistake to discount it from Malet’s model. For this study, I interpret the concept of ‘insurgency’ more broadly, as Salehyan does in his book *Rebels without Borders*, to potentially include civil conflicts that expand beyond national borders and against multiple groups,<sup>6</sup> so that the definition captures the Islamic State’s insurgency.

In his model, insurgencies appeal to transnational social identities to attract foreign recruits. He asserts that ‘transnational identity,’ is the principle means by which

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 8-9.

<sup>5</sup> Stathis N Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge [u.a.]: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Idean Salehyan, *Rebels without Borders Transnational Insurgencies in World Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).

foreign fighters associate themselves with the conflicts abroad. To define identity, Malet relies largely on the work of sociologist George Herbert Mead; stating that ‘identity’ is a person’s sense of themselves that they gain through learning the expectations of others through social interaction. Identities give a person a ‘role;’ or expected behavior in the context of a socially constructed narrative that they adhere to as member of that group, and this role guides all aspects of that person’s behavior.<sup>7</sup> They can take on a variety of forms, such as family, class, religion, or nationality, and a person can possess a variety of these identities all with varying degrees of saliency. These identities can be attached to the nation-state, but are commonly associated with social networks that defy national boundaries. Connor, for instance, notes that identities revolving around national citizenship very often are not as immediate and salient as other identities.<sup>8</sup> Malet asserts that salient *transnational* identities that feel collectively threatened are tantamount to the motivation of foreign fighters to involve themselves in conflicts outside of their state.<sup>9</sup>

The concept of identity is already ubiquitous within terrorist literature, and while the Islamic State may not meet all the defining features of a terrorist organization,<sup>10</sup> their ideology and tactics are extremely related to terrorism, both as shoot-off organization from Al-Qaeda, as well as a still frequently preferred tactic, especially in attacking the ‘far enemy,’ but also in other operational stages where conventional military strategy is

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<sup>7</sup> Alain Degenne and Michel Forsé, *Introducing social networks* (London; Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 1999), 6

<sup>8</sup> Walker Connor, *Ethnonationalism: The Quest for Understanding* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), 41, 49, 81-82

<sup>9</sup> Malet, *Foreign Fighters*, 20-24

<sup>10</sup> Audrey Kurth Cronin, “ISIS Is Not a Terrorist Group,” *Foreign Affairs*, January 14, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/isis-not-terrorist-group>.

unlikely to succeed at first. A 2005 international summit report on terrorism emphasized that “collective identity” was key to modeling terrorist behavior and psychology.<sup>11</sup>

Monroe and Kriedie also add that identity is important in explaining Islamic fundamentalism, and by extension, the Islamic state, stating that “acts which touch on personal ethics and politics emanate primarily from one’s sense of self in relation to others; this perspective effectively delineates the sets and domain of choice options perceived as available to an actor, both in an empirical and moral sense.” Further, they later state that “to pursue an action that deviates in any significant regard from [a pre-given sense of self] necessitates a personal shift in identity that can occur only at great psychological costs and upheaval for the actor.”<sup>12</sup>

Malet’s theory of defensive mobilization of foreign volunteers broke with the previous conventional wisdom that the mobilization of foreign fighters in civil conflicts abroad occurs in the same way that local recruits are mobilized. For these local recruits at least, scholars commonly accept Collier and Hoeffler’s<sup>13</sup> model to explain mobilization of militants, known as the “greed and grievance” model in the civil conflicts literature. Recruits are generally assumed to be rational and motivated by either prospect of gain, or remediation of some grievance, (or some combination of the two), which overcomes the deterrent high risk of personal injury, death, and possible economic hardship associated

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<sup>11</sup> “Addressing the Causes of Terrorism,” The Club de Madrid Series on Democracy and Terrorism (Madrid: Club de Madrid, 2005), <http://safe-democracy.org/docs/CdM-Series-on-Terrorism-Vol-1.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Kristen Renwick Monroe and Lina Haddad Kriedie, “The Perspective of Islamic Fundamentalists and the Limits of Rational Choice Theory,” *Political Psychology* 18, no. 1 (March 1, 1997): 19–43.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, “Greed and Grievance in Civil War,” *Oxford Economic Papers* 56, no. 4 (2004): 563–95.



with their participation. In other words, these models assume individual net pay-offs for participation.

With foreign fighters, however, Malet asserts that both ‘greed’ and ‘grievance’ explanations for the mobilization of foreign fighters are inadequate. With regard to ‘grievance,’ he asserts, foreign fighters generally do not have a personal stake in the conflict because it occurs outside their state of citizenship. On the other hand, with regard to ‘greed’ explanations, Malet demonstrates that insurgencies do not *primarily* attempt to attract foreign fighters by offering them prospects for enrichment. Recruiters, he observes, almost always warn their potential foreign recruits that their participation will bring them minimal if any personal benefit or compensation, and even in the case of the Texas Revolution, where recruits were promised large land grants for their participation, a majority of recruits did not accept their reward, preferring to return to their former homes. Instead of an economic appeal, Malet observes that the central message that recruiters direct at foreign fighters seems to be much more altruistic than economic.<sup>14</sup> This pattern certainly holds true for the Islamic State as well, where the organization specifically requests that foreign fighters not participate for the sake of loot, monetary compensation, the prospect for sex slaves, etc. In fact, the Islamic State warns recruits that it cannot guarantee that they can provide any of these benefits at all. Further, the Islamic State tells recruits that ‘martyrdom’ will be the most glorious possible outcome to their emigration and waging of jihad. It’s clear that the Islamic State does not assume that fighters will be mobilized by ‘greed’ either.

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<sup>14</sup> Malet, *Foreign Fighters*, 16-17.

Malet looks to prospect theory to explain why defensive mobilization is so effective for foreign fighters. Prospect theory presumes that collective action can be produced through persuading an audience that they will incur greater costs if they do not act. The original developers of prospect theory, Kahneman and Tversky, argue that people tend to be risk averse with respect to prospective gains and risk-acceptant with respect to prospective losses.<sup>15</sup> In political science, this theory is often applied to groups and assumes that a loss to a group's collective is felt by all of its members.<sup>16</sup> Following this line of reasoning, foreign fighters should be willing to assume greater risk to themselves on behalf of their group if their group collectively perceive themselves to be in the domain of loss.

Perhaps many people in the Islamic community feel themselves in the domain of loss, in the sense that they feel that their identity is threatened. At the same time, Muslim foreign fighters are increasingly being mobilized to fight as insurgents or as part of transnational terrorist networks. Data provided by Hegghammer, for example, reveals that recent Islamic insurgencies have increased their use of foreign fighters. Since 1980, as many as 30,000 foreign fighters have participated in Islamic insurgencies before the Islamic State. He attributes this spike in Muslim foreign fighters to the rise of the Pan-Islamic identity which began in the 1940s, became militant in the 1980s, and continues to reify itself in the present.<sup>17</sup> Fuller writes that many Muslims feel that their Islamic

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<sup>15</sup> Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, "Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk," *Econometrica* 47, no. 2 (March 1, 1979): 263–91, doi:10.2307/1914185.

<sup>16</sup> Jonathan Mercer, "Prospect Theory and Political Science," *Annual Review of Political Science* 8, no. 1 (June 2005): 1–21, doi:10.1146/annurev.polisci.8.082103.104911.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad," *International Security* 35, no. 3 (2010): 53–94.

identity is being oppressed, marginalized, or threatened, and therefore look to a Muslim “foreign legion” as an outlet to act on their frustration.<sup>18</sup> Heggehammer,<sup>19</sup> Fuller,<sup>20</sup> Malet,<sup>21</sup> and others like Ranstrop<sup>22</sup> seem to see this desire for a pan-Islamic fighting force as a *defensive* reaction to a perceived threat. For example, Malet cites an account given in the will of one of the July 7<sup>th</sup>, 2005 terrorist bombers in London, in which he states that “I am directly responsible for protecting and avenging my Muslim brothers and sisters. Until we feel security, you will be our targets.”<sup>23</sup> However, Malet also stresses that there is nothing particular to Islam that makes it more likely to produce foreign fighters. Any salient identity, he asserts, can be mobilized so long as it is able to frame the conflict as an existential threat to their relevant group.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Graham E Fuller, “The Future of Political Islam,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 2012, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2002-03-01/future-political-islam>.

<sup>19</sup> Heggehammer, “The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters.”

<sup>20</sup> Fuller, “The Future of Political Islam.”

<sup>21</sup> Malet, *Foreign Fighters*.

<sup>22</sup> In Russell D. Howard and Reid L. Sawyer, *Terrorism and Counterterrorism: Understanding the New Security Environment : Readings & Interpretations* (McGraw-Hill/Dushkin, 2004). 125-140.

<sup>23</sup> “Report of the Official Account of the Bombings in London on 7th July 2005” (London: House of Commons, 2006),

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/228837/1087.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/228837/1087.pdf).

<sup>24</sup> Malet, *Foreign Fighters*, 25.

## CHAPTER III

## THE ISLAMIC STATE: UNDERSTANDING THE CONFLICT

This section examines what the Islamic State organization is, what its objectives are, how it came into existence, how it attempts to attract foreign recruits, and the conditions that gave rise to this conflict. Throughout this discussion, we observe that transnational identity was important both for initiating the conflict as well as for attracting foreign fighters to the Islamic State. We also observe that the Islamic State is different from Al-Qaeda and other insurgencies, in that their objectives are seemingly less defensive and reactionary, and more instigating and aggressive.

The Islamic State traces its ancestry to the Jordanian born terrorist Abu Musab al Zarqawi. Zarqawi was born in Jordan, and those who knew him in his youth described him as a bully, thug, heavy drinker, bootlegger, and even a pimp;<sup>25</sup> and was arrested several times in his youth for drug-dealing and shoplifting among other things.<sup>26</sup> As he became an adult, he joined Tablighi Jamaat, a non-violent Islamic spiritual self-help organization, in an effort to turn himself away from his former life of crime. He had only been with this group for a few months when, in 1989, he was recruited into the Afghanistan insurgency against the Soviet Union, just as the Soviets were pulling out of

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<sup>25</sup> Mary Anne Weaver, "The Short, Violent Life of Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi," *The Atlantic*, August 2006, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2006/07/the-short-violent-life-of-abu-musab-al-zarqawi/304983/>.

<sup>26</sup> Jean-Charles Brisard and Damien Martinez, *Zarqawi: The New Face of Al-Qaeda* (New York: Other Press, 2005).

the region. Still, he trained and participated in the aftermath infighting of jihadists, creating connections and earning respect with other insurgents along the way.<sup>27</sup>

One of the important connections made was to Sheikh Abu Muhammad al Maqdisi, an important religious writer who championed a creed of opposing and overthrowing any government who does not enforce strict interpretations of Sharia law. According to a study performed by the Combatting Terrorism Center of the United States Military Academy, Maqdisi “is the key contemporary ideologue in the Jihadi intellectual universe.”<sup>28</sup> Maqdisi would become Zarqawi’s spiritual mentor and friend, and their relationship would influence Zarqawi’s thinking profoundly, and by consequence, the eventual ideological makeup of the Islamic State. They later returned to Jordan together and orchestrated several botched terrorist attacks against the government and that eventually led to their arrest.<sup>29</sup>

After his eventual release from prison, Zarqawi went to Herat, Afghanistan to start his terrorist group aimed at overthrowing the Jordanian government. Zarqawi inspired a following of recruits through an ideology characterized by anti-Shia and anti-state objectives and tying it to a Sunni Muslim identity.<sup>30</sup> While establishing his organization, his relationship with Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan was somewhat antagonistic and mired by differences of ideology and personality. As Stern

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<sup>27</sup> Jessica Stern and J. M Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror* (New York: Ecco Press, 2015).

<sup>28</sup> William Mcants, “Militant Ideology Atlas” (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, U.S. Military Academy, November 2006), <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/Atlas-ExecutiveReport.pdf>.

<sup>29</sup> Stern and Berger, *ISIS*, 15.

<sup>30</sup> Richard Barrett, “The Islamic State” (New York (N.Y.): The Soufan Group, November 2014), <http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/TSG-The-Islamic-State-Nov14.pdf>, 11.

and Berger describe it, “Bin Laden and his early followers were mostly members of an intellectual, educated elite, while Zarqawi was a barely educated ruffian with an attitude”<sup>31</sup> Later, Stern and Berger explain that Bin Laden’s Al-Qaeda saw themselves as a sort of ‘vanguard’ elite acting to protect and defend the global Muslim Ummah, while Zarqawi and later the ‘Islamic State’ had much more positive objectives.<sup>32</sup> Weaver also writes that from the beginning, Zarqawi openly disrespected and criticized Osama Bin Laden’s leadership and ideology, complaining that bin Laden was too focused on the ‘far enemy,’ killed fellow Muslims by fighting the Northern Alliance, opposed the targeted killing of Shias, and altogether was not serious enough about engaging in jihad. However, Osama Bin Laden conceded his presence and operations in Afghanistan, and also gave money to sponsor his organization. It wasn’t until the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan that Zarqawi worked together with Al-Qaeda and the Taliban to repel U.S. forces. Wounded from a U.S. airstrike, Zarqawi fled Afghanistan and into Iranian and Iraqi Kurdistan in 2002, where he joined Ansar al-Islam, a Kurdish jihadist organization.<sup>33</sup>

During Saddam Hussein’s regime in Iraq where Zarqawi had travelled, minority Sunni Muslims were favored while the majority group of Iraqi Shia’s were badly persecuted and denied political rights, especially after the Persian Gulf War in 1991. This persecution polarized Sunni and Shia identities away from each other, and would play a role in the insurgency and religious politics that followed the U.S. invasion.

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<sup>31</sup> Stern and Berger, *ISIS*, 16.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 53-74

<sup>33</sup> Weaver, “The Short, Violent Life of Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi.”

Shortly after 9/11, the Bush administration believed that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction and was collaborating with Al-Qaeda (in fact, citing Zarqawi's presence in Iraq as evidence of their collaboration). The U.S. invaded Iraq expecting that peaceful democracy would follow easily after Saddam was deposed from power. The reality was that sectarian tension and Sunni opposition to U.S. forces (especially the 100,000 Sunni Ba'athists removed from power) made peaceful democracy much more difficult than the Bush administration had planned. Zarqawi was very much a part of the chaos that ensued. Anticipating the U.S. invasion of Iraq, he decided to set up terrorist sleeper cells before the invasion, and by August 2003, his terrorists had already launched three major attacks in Iraq, 1) against the Jordanian embassy in Baghdad, 2) the United Nations headquarters in Baghdad, and 3) Imam Ali Mosque in Najaf, a particularly important Shia Shrine.<sup>34</sup>

Despite the tension that had existed previously between Zarqawi and Osama bin Laden, Zarqawi eventually pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda in 2004, and his group was rebranded as 'Al-Qaeda in Iraq' (AQI). His group served as Al-Qaeda's official branch in Iraq for the next ten years, but their alliance was more of a marriage of convenience than ideological agreement. The tension between the two would continue, and Zarqawi frequently disregarded the advice and warnings of Al-Qaeda's leadership.<sup>35</sup> In any case,

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<sup>34</sup> Barrett, "The Islamic State," 11.

<sup>35</sup> Aaron Zelin, "The War between ISIS and Al-Qaeda for Supremacy of the Global Jihadist Movement," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Research Notes, no. 20 (June 2014), [http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/ResearchNote\\_20\\_Zelin.pdf](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/ResearchNote_20_Zelin.pdf).

the international attention Zarqawi raised as part of AQI began attracting foreign fighters in large numbers.

Zarqawi was later killed in a U.S. airstrike in 2006 and was succeeded by Abu Hamza al Muhajir, who soon thereafter merged his organization with other local terrorist groups and renamed and reorganized themselves as the 'Islamic State of Iraq' (ISI), headed by Abu Omar al Baghdadi (not to be confused with Abu Bakr al Baghdadi).<sup>36</sup> The creation of the Islamic State of Iraq marked the beginning of the insurgent group's new strategy; that of conquering and controlling territory. They first attempted to seize territory in Iraq's rural Anbar province, an area mostly populated by Sunni tribes. However, their first attempts at governing the region were disastrous. The Islamic State of Iraq's extremely harsh implementations of Sharia law in Anbar led to hostile responses from the local Sunni tribes along with other Sunni militant organizations elsewhere in Iraq. As a result, this led to the consolidation of a strong Sunni-led counter-insurgency movement known as the "Sahwat" (Awakening),<sup>37</sup> which involved at least 90,000 Sunni volunteers.<sup>38</sup> By 2010, the combined military efforts of the Awakening, the U.S. military, and the Iraqi Security forces degraded and all but destroyed the Islamic State of Iraq,<sup>39</sup> killing both Muhajir and Baghdadi in the process.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Barrett, "The Islamic State," 11-12.

<sup>37</sup> Zelin, "The War between ISIS and Al-Qaeda for Supremacy of the Global Jihadist Movement," 3

<sup>38</sup> "Opinion: Who's to Blame for Iraq Crisis - CNN.com," accessed March 20, 2016, <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/06/12/opinion/pregent-harvey-northern-iraq-collapse/?c=&page=0>.

<sup>39</sup> Barrett, "The Islamic State," 12.

<sup>40</sup> "Al Qaeda's Two Top Iraq Leaders Killed in Raid," *Reuters*, April 19, 2010, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-violence-alqaeda-idUSTRE63I3CL20100419>.



Abu Bakr al Baghdadi subsequently succeeded the previous Baghdadi in May of 2010 and began to rebuild the insurgency.<sup>41</sup> Baghdadi is said to have been a quiet individual with a strong background in Islamic jurisprudence, and radicalized himself only after the U.S. invasion of Iraq. U.S. forces captured him with a group of other insurgents, and sent to Camp Bucca, a military detention facility. There, he met with several high and low profile jihadists and members of the former Ba'athist party associated with Saddam regime. These ties helped Abu Bakr to reinvigorate the Islamic State organization with jihadists and military expertise. When he was released, he called up a friend involved with al-Qaeda, who connected him with the Islamic State of Iraq's official spokesman, and joined the organization, then under the leadership of Abu Omar al-Baghdadi. Since academically trained religious scholars were rare to jihadist organizations, they quickly sent him to Syria to evade American capture, and was tasked to ensure the group's propaganda was consistent with their conservative brand of Islam, an experience for Baghdadi which likely played a large role in the successful development and reach of the late Islamic State's slick propaganda campaign.<sup>42</sup> After assuming command of the Islamic State of Iraq, he reorganized the organization's senior leadership with new personnel, many of them having spent several years with Baghdadi

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<sup>41</sup> Anthony Shadid, "Iraqi Insurgent Group Names New Leaders," *At War Blog*, May 16, 2010, <http://atwar.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/05/16/iraqi-insurgent-group-names-new-leaders/>.

<sup>42</sup> William McCants, "The Believer: How Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi Became Leader of the Islamic State," *The Brookings Institution*, September 15, 2015, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/essays/2015/thebeliever>.

in Camp Bucca, among them former Ba'athists who provided the Islamic State of Iraq with much needed military expertise.<sup>43</sup>

With the U.S. forces slowly withdrawing after the surge, the Islamic State of Iraq was able to spring back to life again under Baghdadi and began assassinating leaders of the Awakening, significantly weakening the Sunni led counter-insurgency. Between 2009 and 2013, at least 1,345 members of the Awakening had been killed by the Islamic State.<sup>44</sup> The democratic Iraqi government led by Maliki also did little to stop the campaign against the Awakening, probably pleased with the fact that the Islamic State was eliminating powerful Sunni leaders and third party military which might oppose them,<sup>45</sup> which weakened the Sunni identity's counter-narrative championed by the Awakening. Baghdadi also attacked Iraq regime targets through a vicious campaign of car bombs and other suicide bombings. The state of security gradually weakened until the city of Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, was captured by the Islamic State mid-2014, which consolidated the Islamic State's control over much of northern Iraq. Local Sunnis, embittered by their years of abused rights and representation in the new Iraqi government, were this time hesitant to respond to the Islamic State's series of military victories. While not wanting to live under the Islamic State, many Sunnis believe they

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<sup>43</sup> Stern and Berger, *ISIS*, 33-29.

<sup>44</sup> "War, Interrupted, Part I: The Roots of the Jihadist Resurgence in Iraq," *War on the Rocks*, November 5, 2014, <http://warontherocks.com/2014/11/war-interrupted-part-i-the-roots-of-the-jihadist-resurgence-in-iraq/>.

<sup>45</sup> Tim Arango, "Iraqi Sunnis Frustrated as Awakening Loses Clout," *The New York Times*, May 3, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/04/world/middleeast/04awakening.html>.

enjoy more rights under the caliphate than under the Shia majority government in Baghdad.<sup>46</sup>

Next door in Syria, a civil war triggered by the Arab Spring erupted in Syria against the government's military dictatorship led by Bashar al Assad, which provided new opportunities for the Islamic State of Iraq. Protests against corruption, inequality, and government injustice lead to the replacing of several former rulers throughout the Arab world, and these successful protests inspired discontented citizens in Syria to follow suit. Instead of stepping down, however, Bashar al Assad decided instead to shoot at protestors and crack down on those opposing the regime through capture, torture, and execution. Assad's action angered the Syrian population and civil war ensued.<sup>47</sup> Over time, the insurgent militants organized themselves into several rebel factions, each with a different vision for changing Syria. Notable among these groups are the Free Syrian Army, which represented Syria's liberal democratic interests, as well as Jabhat Al-Nusra, which represented Al-Qaeda.<sup>48</sup>

In April of 2013, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi released an audio message announcing a merger between the Islamic State and Al-Nusra, Al-Qaeda's affiliate in Syria. This was shortly followed by an Al-Qaeda ruling that no such merger had occurred. Al-Baghdadi subsequently rejected Al-Qaeda's ruling, and began recruiting members from Al-Nusra into the Islamic State of Iraq which led Al-Qaeda to officially disavow themselves from

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<sup>46</sup> David Ignatius, "How ISIS Spread in the Middle East," *The Atlantic*, October 29, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/10/how-isis-started-syria-iraq/412042/>.

<sup>47</sup> Stern and Berger, *ISIS*, 39-40.

<sup>48</sup> "Who's Who in the Syrian Civil War | Clarion Project," *ClarionProject.org*, May 7, 2014, <http://www.clarionproject.org/factsheet/whos-who-syrian-war>.

their organization in February of 2014. The merging of much of Al-Nusra to the Islamic State made it the most powerful insurgent in the region, and began rapidly amassing and controlling territory. Following these massive territorial gains in both Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State of Iraq was renamed as “The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham,” (ISIS) in June of 2014. At this time, they also declared the revival of the ‘caliphate;’ a symbolic gesture which as Barrett writes, “...was intended as a rallying call to all observant Muslims, but in particular those who shared the salafist/takfiri views expressed by The Islamic State, and so draw away support from like-minded groups in Syria, including al Nusra, that might compete for recruits and resources.”<sup>49</sup>

The declaration of the caliphate and massive territory grabs eventually began to attract foreign fighters to the organization in higher numbers than ever before. However, as shown previously, the strategy of attracting foreign fighters has always been central to the Islamic State’s success and strategy. A quantitative analysis performed by Reuvan Paz in 2005 showed that in a sample of 154 Arabs killed in the conflict of Iraq during a 6-month period (primarily from Zarqawi’s group), only 8 percent of those killed were local Iraqis, and the rest were foreign fighters with the majority (61%) from Saudi Arabia, and the rest from a variety of mostly Arab countries.<sup>50</sup> As the Islamic State stands now, foreign fighters continue to flood to the organization in relatively large numbers. The most recent published assessment, by “The Soufan Group” (TSG) in December of 2015,

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<sup>49</sup> Barrett, “The Islamic State.”

<sup>50</sup> Reuvan Paz, “Arab Volunteers Killed in Iraq: An Analysis,” *PRISM, Series of Global Jihad*, March 2005, No. 1/3.

estimates that somewhere between 27,000 and 31,000 foreign fighters have joined the Islamic State or other organizations in Syria from at least 86 countries since 2011.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> “Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq” (The Soufan Group, December 2015), [http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG\\_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf](http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf).

## CHAPTER IV

### RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

Based on our understanding of the conflict there is at least some initial reason to suspect that the Islamic State does not behave in ways that Malet's 'defensive mobilization' model expects. We know that the Islamic State is committed to restoring a caliphate in the Levant governed by 7<sup>th</sup> century interpretations of Sharia Law. They also set about 'purging' Islam of apostasy, which includes killing many fellow Sunni Muslims along with Shias who do not subscribe to their ideology, instead of focusing on direct, more obvious threats to their identity. They commit genocide against defenseless Yezidis. It becomes challenging to explain all this behavior as defensive. A first glance at these objectives suggests that the Islamic State is primarily positive and ideological rather than reactive or defensive, and one would assume that these objectives would carry over into the messages directed toward potential foreign fighter recruits, contradicting Malet's model. A simpler explanation would be that the Islamic State is not trying to defend a transnational identity at all, and does not frame the conflict to their potential foreign fighters as such either.

I hypothesize that the Islamic State does not frame the conflict to potential foreign fighters as one which threatens their transnational identity as Muslims, as Malet's theory would expect. As an alternative hypothesis, I suggest that the Islamic State instead frames the conflict as one predicated on the religious duty to support the creation of government stipulated by a 7<sup>th</sup> century interpretation of political Islam and Sharia law, which in this case, gives foreign fighters the duty to go on the offensive. In this, I suggest

that while it is likely that most insurgencies frame their respective conflicts to potential foreign fighters as predicated on the defense of some perceived common group, the mobilization to violence within a common identity can be predicated on anything consistent with their identity's narrative, not just its self-preservation.

## CHAPTER V

### ANALYZING THE PROPAGANDA

To test my hypothesis, I analyze a sample of Islamic State propaganda content directed at their potential foreign recruits. To my knowledge, Aaron Zelin is the only other scholar to have also used content analysis of Islamic State propaganda material in any similar systematic fashion. However, his analysis did not discriminate between material directed at foreign or local recruits and material from the rest of the Islamic State's entire information campaign. Zelin's analysis of a sample of one week's worth of propaganda (including reports, radio streams, notices, and videos) from April 18- April 24, 2015 demonstrates that Islamic State propaganda generally revolves around six topics; military, governance, da'wa (preaching), hisba (justice by Sharia law), promotion of the caliphate, and enemy attack. Recurrent themes emerge in which followers are portrayed "as winners, competent, and pious, while it casts its enemies as unjust and unbelievers."<sup>52</sup> He describes the content of these six topics as follows:

- *Military*: The Islamic State portrays itself as "always on the march," showing that there is constant progress and frequent success in battle. The nature of words is almost always offensive, rather than defensive. In referencing its enemies, the Islamic State uses derogatory language (such as Rafidah (for Shias), Crusaders,

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<sup>52</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, "Picture Or It Didn't Happen: A Snapshot of the Islamic State's Official Media Output," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 4 (July 21, 2015), <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/445>.



apostates, disbelievers, atheists, etc.), which serves to delegitimize the enemy but also to portray the Islamic State as true believers and representatives of the Muslim Ummah (community). Of the 123 media releases in Zelin's sample, nearly half of the releases were on this particular topic.

- *Governance, Promoting the Islamic Caliphate, and Hisbah:* Propaganda materials demonstrate the normalcy of life under the territory that it controls, and how the caliphate provides social services and infrastructure. They also demonstrate the principles of creating the good society which it tries to promote, and how it enforces Sharia law principles through strict moral policing activities.
- *Da'wah:* The Islamic State appears to use its propaganda to persuade Muslims to accept its own interpretation of Islam, and that the only true path for a Muslim is with the Islamic State.
- *Enemy Attack:* In some propaganda messages, the Islamic State reports on the enemy's attacks against "ordinary Muslims" and against the Islamic State's infrastructure. It frames the enemy as destructive and unjust, and that opponents of the Islamic State want to prevent Muslims from ever living in a prosperous society. This last category of topics is consistent with Malet's "self-defense" theme discussed earlier. However, only 9 of the 123 media releases collected by Zelin focused on this theme.

Hear, we observe that propaganda framing the conflict as a threat to a transnational identity is almost absent from Islamic State propaganda analyzed by Zelin. My analysis will differ somewhat from his to address this question of foreign fighters and

defensive mobilization more directly. While the Islamic State produces large quantities of propaganda material on a weekly basis, the published issues of *Dabiq*, the Islamic State's international propaganda magazine, was chosen as the propaganda content sample for my analysis. There are a few reasons for this:

1. The content of *Dabiq* is most likely written for a foreign audience. Each issue of *Dabiq* is translated from Arabic to English, French, German, Russian, and other European languages. The target audience is potential foreign recruits, rather than locals or those already recruited within the organization (with notable exceptions, which I mention later).
2. *Dabiq* is long-form propaganda content. Unlike twitter messages and most of its video productions, *Dabiq* is at liberty to elaborate extensively on their propaganda message, thereby giving greater leverage for analysis.
3. *Dabiq* consists of official propaganda media produced directly from the Al Hayat Media Center, (the Islamic State's propaganda organization). Other propaganda messages are often produced within their "wilayat" or local geographic areas, and often are released anonymously on twitter and other social media, making it difficult to ascertain whether the content originated from the core of their organization or not.

As of March of 2016, the Islamic State has produced 13 issues of its magazine over a two-year period. The magazine began printing shortly after the Islamic State declared a caliphate and conquered Mosul. Table 1 outlines the date, title, and number of

pages of each issue of the magazine. Only issues 2 through 13 were used in the sample. Issue 1 was used to test different configurations of this analysis, and so was removed from the final sample to prevent any bias in the final results. It is a rare opportunity to be able to analyze an entire population of content for analysis (with the exception of future issues) as I do here, and this increases the reliability that the results are a true representation of *Dabiq*.

Table 1: Issue Summary of *Dabiq*

Issue	Date	Issue Title	Number of Pages
1	5-Jul-14	The Return of the Khilifah	50
2	27-Jul-14	The Flood	44
3	10-Sep-14	A Call to Hijrah	42
4	11-Oct-14	The Failed Crusade	56
5	21-Nov-14	Remaining and Expanding	40
6	29-Dec-14	Al-Qa'idah in Waziristan: A Testimony from Within	63
7	12-Feb-15	From Hypocrisy to Apostasy: The Extinction of the Grayzone	82
8	30-Mar-15	Shariah Alone Will Rule Africa	68
9	21-May-15	They Plot and Allah Plots	79
10	13-Jul-15	The Law of Allah or the Laws of Men	79
11	9-Aug-15	From the Battles of Al-Ahzab to the War of Coalitions	66
12	18-Nov-15	Just Terror	66
13	19-Jan-16	The Rafidah from Ibn Saba? to the Dajjal	56

Following content analysis methods outlined by Lombard, Duch, and Bracken,<sup>53</sup> I analyzed *Dabiq* attempting to identify ‘recruitment messages’ used to determine whether

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<sup>53</sup> Matthew Lombard, Jennifer Snyder-Duch, and Cheryl Campanella Bracken, “Content Analysis in Mass Communication: Assessment and Reporting of Intercoder Reliability.,” *Human Communication Research* 28, no. 4 (2002): 587–604.

the Islamic State principally frames the foreign fighter participation as one predicated on group defense or not. Focusing on ‘recruitment messages’ has an advantage over identifying discussion topics or more general themes as Zelin does. I define this term as a message, obvious or subtle, used for persuading foreign recruits to join their fight. The analysis attempts to quantify how often specific, predetermined recruitment messages occur in throughout *Dabiq*.

To develop an index of possible recruitment messages to look for, a general application of Grounded Theory to identify and classify different categories of recruitment messages was applied. Through abroad preliminary analysis of Islamic State propaganda videos and the first issue of *Dabiq* approximately four distinct recruitment messages were classified. Remarkably, these four indices were different from the ‘conventional wisdom’ in the news cycle attempting to I came up with eight possible recruitment messages to look for in my sample. Each recruitment message was assigned a number, a title label, and a small descriptive explanation, as follows:

1. Superior and Victorious- Islam (as practiced by the Islamic State) is superior and will be inevitably victorious in conquering their enemies.
2. Utopianism- The Islamic State is a unique utopia for faithful Muslims.
3. A New World System- The Islamic State is attempting to replace western civilization with a political system centered on Islam.
4. Religious Duty- Obedience and submission to Allah is tantamount for salvation, requiring participation in the Islamic State.

5. Legitimacy- The Islamic State's practices follow the pure tenets of Islam, and is (alone) justified in its actions.
6. Muslim Defense- Muslims have been oppressed and/or existentially threatened, and the Islamic State fights to defend Muslims.
7. Thrill, Excitement, Adventure- Participating in the Islamic State's violence and other activities is an exciting, thrilling, and/or fulfilling experience.
8. Restoring Pride- The Islamic State is rescuing the Muslims from their former humiliation and restoring pride to Islam.

Additionally, for content that did not employ any of these recruitment messages, or that clearly did not direct their content at foreign fighters, codes 9 and 10 were used:

9. None apply- None of these themes apply very well, or there was no identifiable theme.
10. Not applicable target audience- The target audience was clearly not potential foreign fighters.

It could be argued that these indices are not exclusive or specific enough to be conclusive. For instance, does content emphasizing the Islamic State's legitimacy really play into a larger theme of defense (of legitimately defending their identity)? These possibilities are considered, and it represents one of the reasons why interpretive analysis must necessarily accompany the structured one, which I discuss in the section "Results," to interpret what the content really represents. However, even if this were the case, a refutation of Malet's theory only requires that defensive narrative, or any other narrative,

to be explicit. To qualify for each index of recruitment messages, the content's intentions must clearly indicate for the given recruitment message more than any other.

Using these recruitment messages, I carefully reviewed the content of every section or article of *Dabiq* chronologically, and identified the most dominant recruitment messages for every page of that section as given above. Both text and images were considered content of that page. For issues two and three (comprising of 86 pages or about 12% of the sample), a second nonprofessional coder was used to simply determine the inter-coder reliability of my content analysis. According to Lombard et al, a .80 inter-coder reliability statistic is a fairly moderate risk-criterion for determining reliability, and which I adopted. After analyzing issues two and three of *Dabiq*, the inter-coder reliability was calculated to be .79, with seemingly no pattern in the disagreements. While this reliability measurement falls just short of a .80 benchmark, I believe it is sufficiently close enough to .80 to proceed with the assumption of reliability.

After all of the pages of all the sections of *Dabiq* were coded, the results were summed together to find which recruitment messages were most frequent. In particular, I looked to find out how often *Dabiq* employed a "Muslim Defense" message in comparison to others. If Malet's theory is correct, we would expect this recruitment message to turn up significantly more often than all others. After the count data is taken, some interpretation of the content is then used together to illustrate what the overall message that the Islamic State is sending to attempt recruiting foreign fighters.

## CHAPTER VI

## THE RESULTS

As illustrated in figure 1, the results of my analysis revealed that “Legitimacy” was the most frequently dominant recruitment message, followed closely behind by “Superior and Victorious.” This data also reveals that the “Muslim Defense” recruitment message does not occur as frequently as we might expect, and is well behind the first two in frequency.

The actual distribution of recruitment messages varies across all issues of *Dabiq*, as demonstrated in Figure 2. Some issues have a distinctive “slant,” or central message, that biases individual issues toward a specific recruitment message. For example, in issue 5 titled “Remaining and Expanding” we see that almost the entire article was found

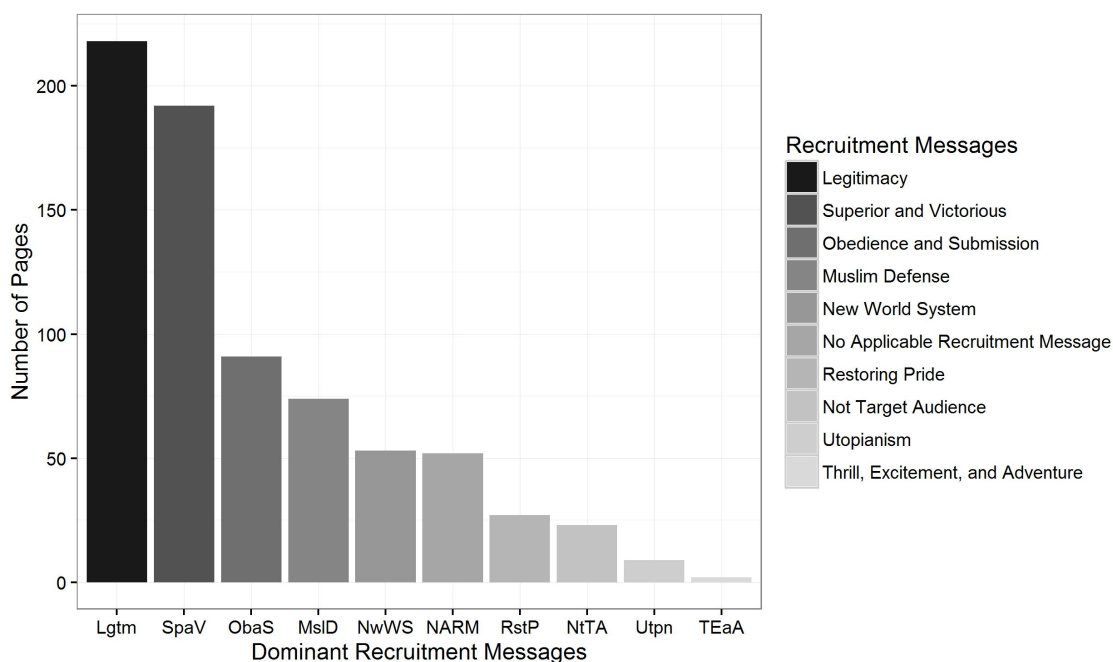


Figure 1: Distribution of Recruitment Messages in Dabiq

to have a “Superior and Victorious” message, which makes sense given its title. In this particular issue, the Islamic State elaborates to its readers on the progress of their conquests and the inevitability of their victory. In another example, we can observe that in issue 3 titled “A Call to Hijrah,” emphasizes the “Obedience and Submission” message. Here, the Islamic State stresses that obedience and submission to God requires that they perform Hijrah (emigration) to the Islamic State, expounding on the doctrine along the way.

When looking only at the distribution of recruitment messages, we only get a partial picture of the messages the Islamic State is sending to its recruits. A brief interpretive summary of the content is necessary to get an in-depth glance at the Islamic State’s recruitment efforts. By its own description, the name of the magazine for *Dabiq*... “...is taken from the area named Dabiq in the northern countryside of Halab (Aleppo) in Sham. This place was mentioned in a hadith describing some of the events of the Malahim (what is sometimes referred to as Armageddon in English). One of the greatest battles between the Muslims and the crusaders will take place near Dabiq.”<sup>54</sup>

What follows is a descriptive summary of how each recruitment message was used in *Dabiq*.

Legitimacy:

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<sup>54</sup> *Dabiq* Issue 1, 4



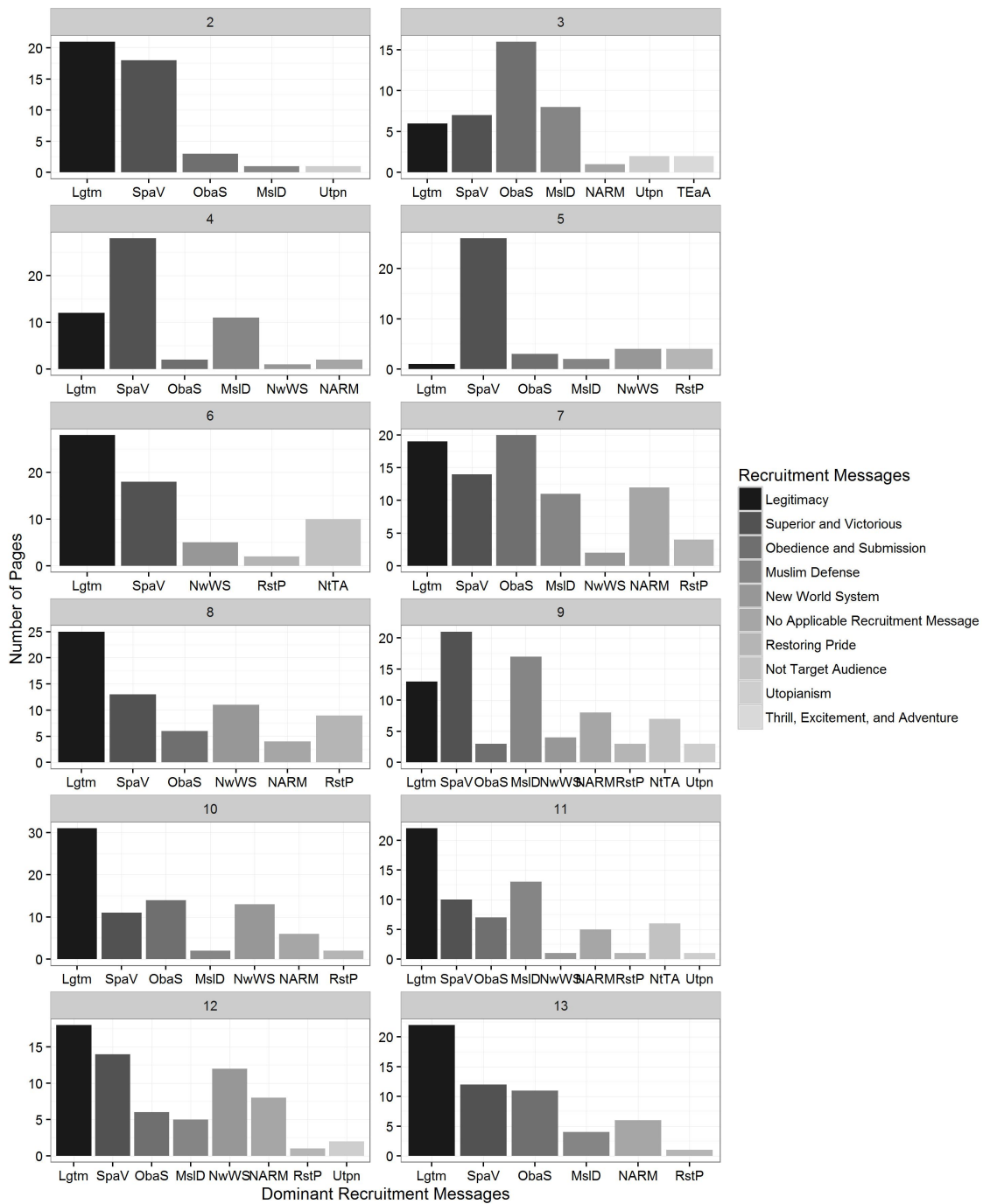


Figure 2: Distribution of Recruitment Messages Per Issue of Dabiq

In *Dabiq*, both the structured content analysis and interpretive analysis revealed that religious legitimacy is very important to how the Islamic State attempts to attract recruits. The Islamic State portrays itself in *Dabiq* as justified in its actions and the only religiously legitimate actor, even among other jihadist organizations. Surprisingly, the Islamic State makes frequent attacks against Al-Qaeda and its Syrian affiliate al-Nusra at least as much as it makes attacks the west, describing their current leadership as corrupt, stalling, and unwilling to do what is required, such as reacting to the necessity of purging Muslims (killing all Shias and fighting the Sunni “Awakening” and other ‘apostates’ claiming to be Muslim), and establishing a Caliphate based on a stricter interpretation of Sharia law. The Islamic State holds that Osama bin Laden is a true Imam (leader) and that his Al-Qaeda laid the groundwork by which Zarqawi could begin the caliphate project, but Al Qaeda has since been corrupted by apostasy.

One particular instance of written assault on Al-Nusra found in *Dabiq* is the performance of “Mubalah,” a religious debate referred to in Islamic Scripture used to settle religious differences. *Dabiq* reports how the debate proceeded between Al-Qaeda and Al-Nusra. Their account of the event attempts to demonstrate how the Islamic State was the clear victor, and observed that the Islamic State is conquering with greater power than Al-Nusra, this being a sign of God’s intervention.

As another example, issues 8-12 contain a series of articles titled “The Allies of Al-Qaeda” which continue to focus its attack on the legitimacy of Al-Qaeda and other

Islamic rebel organizations in Syria. In particular, they are quick to point out that Al-Qaeda's affiliates have allied with the enemies of God for the sake of fighting the Islamic State and Bashar Al-Assad. In one such article, an author writes;

The questions that every follower of the jihād claimants should ask are: Why did the leadership of the Jawlānī front [another name for Al-Nusra] ally with these factions against the Islamic State? What is the ruling of those who entered into different operations rooms and alliances with these and worse factions against the Islamic State? What is the ruling of those who have cooperated and coordinated with these and worse factions against the Islamic State? Why do these factions publically make blatant statements of jāhilī [ignorant] nationalism – many of their statements being kufr [acts of disbelief]– yet the Jawlānī front continues to ignore these mistakes and not denounce them publically (sometimes even defending them!) and instead focuses its media campaign against the Islamic State? Are the mistakes of the nationalists insignificant compared to the supposed “mistakes” of the Islamic State!<sup>55</sup>

The Islamic State therefore portrays itself as the only rightful organization to franchise jihad, and explicitly deposes of Al-Qaeda of that right. The likely reasons for this; to deter foreign recruits (potential and already participating) away from Al-Qaeda's various branches and to instead join the Islamic State. This is important because it reveals a special target audience of those already interested in performing jihad.

*Dabiq* also attempts to legitimize the Islamic State through scripture and doctrinal interpretations. Using scripture, long articles often expound on 1) the necessity for Muslim's to establish the Islamic State, 2) the true nature of Sharia law and the need to enforce it, and 3) the necessity to purge Islam of Shia's and other apostates (such as the 'Sahwat' Awakening). They frequently attempt to demonstrate that the Islamic State

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<sup>55</sup> *Dabiq* 8, 11

follows and enforces the pure tenets of Islam as revealed by the prophet Muhammad, and are religiously justified in their actions. As an example, a *Dabiq* author writes the following after discussing several scriptures justifying the practice of enslaving Yezidis:

Before Shaytān [Satan] reveals his doubts to the weak-minded and weak hearted, one should remember that enslaving the families of the kuffār [disbelievers] and taking their women as concubines is a firmly established aspect of the Sharī'ah that if one were to deny or mock, he would be denying or mocking the verses of the Qur'ān and the narrations of the Prophet...and thereby apostatizing from Islam.<sup>56</sup>

As *Dabiq* uses interpretations of doctrine to legitimize its actions, one can assume that they attempt to reach out to fundamentalist Muslims, even those already radicalized among other groups and organizations.

This interpretative analysis reinforces the results of the structured content analysis in that religious legitimacy plays a huge role in the Islamic State's recruitment efforts. The insurgent organization goes to extensive lengths to convince its foreign recruits that it is the long awaited, God-sanctioned authority to direct the affairs of faithful Muslims. Even when *Dabiq* used other recruitment messages, legitimacy was usually at least implicit in the content.

Superior and Victorious:

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<sup>56</sup> *Dabiq* 4, 17

The “Superior and Victorious” message was also extremely important to the Islamic State. *Dabiq* frequently portrays the Islamic State as the only party that wields the sanction and power of God. With this power, they are then able to make continual advances and are successfully expanding and holding territory. These messages are demonstrated in at least two ways. First, *Dabiq* frequently talks about their military success, either in defending previously held territory, or in taking new territory from their enemies. A *Dabiq* writer discusses holding the conquered city of Kobani in northern Syria:

The Americans claimed that this city wasn't a major focus for them, yet the bulk of the airstrikes that they've conducted across Iraq and Shām have been directed against the mujāhidīn fighting in ‘Ayn al-Islām [another name for Kobani], leading them to spend hundreds of millions of dollars on a fruitless endeavor that will only serve to delay the inevitable. In spite of the heavy bombardment and the mounting numbers of shuhadā' [martyrs], the mujahidin have refused to retreat. They continue to remain firm, having confidence in Allah's promise of victory for those who fight in His path.<sup>57</sup>

Second, *Dabiq* writers use prophecies, history, and doctrine to foretell their own victory. By referencing the Syrian town of Dabiq in the title of its magazine, it links the theme of this magazine to a prophesied final Armageddon battle in which a Muslim army defeats an army of Christians (the West). Altogether, the Islamic State portrays itself as unstoppable, a group of fighters armed with the power of God, ever victorious, patient, unyielding, confident, and determined. Implicitly, using this recruitment message also serve the theme of legitimacy. Just as the ancient Islamic empire made many converts by

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<sup>57</sup> *Dabiq* 5, 16

demonstrating its battle success and conquests, so these insurgents likewise try to use their victories as evidence that God is behind their army, and has promised them victory, even in resisting and defeating the powerful coalition forming to defeat them.

#### Obedience and Submission:

In *Dabiq*, frequent calls are made for potential recruits to repent and submit to the will of God, which by the Islamic State's logic, requires their allegiance and participation in the Islamic State. Pages using this theme also often include promises of forgiveness from sin through repentance (through joining the Islamic State), and stern warnings to those who delay or refuse repentance. An example in *Dabiq* is an excerpt of a speech made by Baghdadi himself:

We make a special call to the scholars, fuqaha' (experts in Islamic jurisprudence), and callers, especially the judges, as well as people with military, administrative, and service expertise, and medical doctors and engineers of all different specializations and fields. We call them and remind them to fear Allah, for their emigration is wajib 'ayni (an individual obligation), so that they can answer the dire need of the Muslims for them. People are ignorant of their religion and they thirst for those who can teach them and help them understand it.<sup>58</sup>

While perhaps occurring less frequently than other recruitment messages, this is the logical message that follows their message of legitimacy. They frame themselves as a legitimate authority over the worldwide community of faithful Muslims, and as a result,

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<sup>58</sup> *Dabiq* 1, 11

all are required to obey God and emigrate to and support the Islamic State, or else be condemned as apostates and killed by the Islamic State, or at the very least, incur the judgement of God in the after-life.

#### Muslim Defense:

Throughout *Dabiq*, the enemy is framed as evil, disbelieving, weak, out of favor with God, and trembling to the power of the Islamic State. However, in fewer instances *Dabiq* writers frame their enemies as aggressors or instigators of the conflict, as we might expect from Malet. Still, references in *Dabiq* allude to the West's constant interference in Muslim lands as a contributing motive to fight and participate with the Islamic State. They portray the enemy as never allowing Muslims to construct their caliphate and establish Sharia law, and attacks against the Islamic State are framed as attacks against Muslim interests. Articles justifying the many executions they perform are usually framed as killings of retribution against their victim's host countries, for not yielding their airstrikes against 'Muslims' (against targets of Islamic State). Issue 7 of *Dabiq*, for instance, justifies their decision to burn a captured Jordanian pilot alive:

In burning the crusader pilot alive and burying him under a pile of debris, the Islamic State carried out a just form of retaliation for his involvement in the crusader bombing campaign which continues to result in the killing of countless Muslims who, as a result of these airstrikes, are burned alive and buried under mountains of debris. This is not to even mention those Muslims – men, women, and children – who survive the airstrikes and are left injured and disabled, and in

many cases suffering from severe burns that cause them pain and anguish every minute of every day.<sup>59</sup>

However, this message of group defense was hardly the most dominant recruitment message across issues of *Dabiq*. In most instances, *Dabiq* framed their enemies as illegitimate leaders of the world due to their disbelief and their corrupt nature, and not necessarily threats. The Islamic State is also often framed as a safe haven from living in corrupt or sinful societies.

New World System:

This recruitment message attempted to find the instances where *Dabiq* framed the Islamic State as replacing western nationalism, democracy, or other political systems with one that is centered on Islam. The analysis found some infrequent instances of this recruitment message, especially in later issues. The term “nationalist” was also very frequently used as a derogatory term for many of their enemies, so this message was somewhat involved in the Islamic State’s overall recruitment message, if only implicitly. Usually this recruitment message was not coded due to its brevity on the page, and worked as a subtheme to the greater theme of legitimacy. A notable exception to this are explanations of the Islamic State’s use of the gold “dinar,” the Islamic State’s own minted currency:

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<sup>59</sup> *Dabiq* 7, 6



In an effort to disentangle the Ummah [global Muslim community] from the corrupt, interest-based global financial system, the Islamic State recently announced the minting of new currency based on the intrinsic values of gold, silver, and copper. This initiative is a significant step towards shifting the Ummah away from the usage of currencies that are no longer backed by any precious metals, and whose values are constantly manipulated by the central banks of their respective nations.<sup>60</sup>

#### No Applicable Recruitment Message / Not Target Audience:

There were several instances where either the page did not have a dominant recruitment message (even in context), or the coding scheme did not capture the recruitment message adequately. Most of the time, the situation was the former, where the page did not have an identifiable theme. For example, *Dabiq* will often announce their new video productions on a page without description, in which case there was no way to derive a message out of those particular pages. Very occasionally, and more so in later issues, an essay directed at those already recruited, giving them advice and instructions, is also included in *Dabiq*.

#### Other Recruitment Messages:

The other recruitment messages, such as “Restoring Pride,” “Utopianism,” and “Thrill, Excitement and Adventure” only turned up occasionally in *Dabiq* and are outlier messages in the sample. It is significant that these recruitment messages were coded so

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<sup>60</sup> *Dabiq* 5, 18

little in *Dabiq*, because it contradicts popular explanations for Islamic radicalization and the Islamic State among scholars and the media. For instance, Ferrero cites that Islamic radicalization is a reaction to failure and humiliation of Islamic society in general,<sup>61</sup> which would fit in with a “Restoring Pride” appeal. Another example comes from *Washington Post* Journalist Terrace McCoy, in which he states that the Islamic State recruits are motivated by the prospect for adventure and thrill, calling it a “Call of Duty” allure.<sup>62</sup> While all of these causes may still describe the motivation of these recruits, the analysis shows that the Islamic State does not emphasize these motivations to attract foreign fighters.

Altogether, both a structured and interpretive analysis of *Dabiq* reveals that the Islamic State does not attract recruits by primarily framing the conflict as predicated on the defense of the Muslim community, and instead emphasizes legitimacy, military and religious superiority over the world, and the necessity to support the Islamic State out of religious duty. This finding supports my research hypothesis that Malet’s model for defensive mobilization of foreign fighters does not apply to the Islamic State, and instead employs other recruitment messages to attract foreign recruits. The fact that asserting its legitimacy is the most important recruitment message says something about the Islamic State’s recruitment efforts. It serves to signal Islamic fundamentalists and extremists to come serve a long awaited religious authority to finally establish Sharia law in society to

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<sup>61</sup> Mario Ferrero, “Radicalization as a Reaction to Failure: An Economic Model of Islamic Extremism,” *Public Choice* 122, no. 1/2 (January 1, 2005): 199–220.

<sup>62</sup> Terrence McCoy, “The Islamic State’s ‘Call of Duty’ Allure,” *The Washington Post*, October 28, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/10/28/the-islamic-states-call-of-duty-allure/>.

its true extent, and assert Islamic power and might over the world. Such a message is inconsistent with the 'defensive mobilization' model of recruiting foreign fighters.

## CHAPTER VII

## WHAT MAKES THE ISLAMIC STATE SO DIFFERENT?

As mentioned previously, jihadist terrorist and insurgent group recruitment have traditionally employed defensive narratives. The results show, however, that the Islamic State may be adopting an “offensive jihad,” as opposed to a defensive one. Whether this represents a long-term shift in jihadist attitudes or a short-lived experiment in new recruitment strategies is still unclear. But the analysis makes clear that the Islamic State is qualitatively different from not only from most insurgencies, but also from most all jihadist organizations, including al-Qaeda.

The conclusion that the Islamic State does not employ messages of group defense to attract foreign fighters happens to be consistent with a very recent work published by Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger. They assert that one of the fundamental differences between Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State is that Al-Qaeda’s message is defensive, while the Islamic State is not. They write that the Islamic State’s messaging strategy shifted away from Al-Qaeda with the publication of the video production *The Clanging of Swords, Part 2*.

[This propaganda video] had...subtly dropped a key element of al Qaeda propaganda. In many ways, al-Qaeda’s ideology and strategy were explicitly predicated on assumption of weakness. In its worldview and favored ideological justifications, jihad was an act of defense, or at least that was the line they sold to the world. Self-defense was easier to rationalize—and sell—than an improbable vision of global domination. So al Qaeda’s recruitment materials and fund-raising activities brimmed over with talk of “the plight of Muslims,” steeped in pathos.

According to al Qaeda's ideologues, this urgent and existential danger was the entire reason for the organization's existence.<sup>63</sup>

Why does the Islamic State recruit foreign fighters so differently from other insurgencies? Noah Feldmen, writing a little less than a decade before the advent of the Islamic State, argued that the idea of 'Islamic statehood' has been slowly more popular among practicing Muslims since the idea of a caliphate was abolished by Turkey in 1924, and after traditional Islamic Statehood collapsed. Islam, unlike other world-wide religions, is both a way of life as well as a way to govern, and there are significant numbers of devout Muslims who desire to return to a religious way of running government. This is evident in the creation of states like Saudi Arabia and Iran, whose leaders gain political legitimacy by claiming to be "Islamic," who allege to organize their societies according to the rules and norms stipulated by Islam and Sharia law. Further evident is the increasing number of people using democratic institutions to vote for laws that follow the Sharia.

What happened, according to Feldmen, is that Islamic Statehood, as practiced by the Ottoman Empire, ultimately failed and fell under the weight of its backward looking views. Muslims looked to western styled political ideologies, like nationalism, secularism, fascism, democracy, socialism, and the like to replace their outmoded forms of statehood. However, their western experiment, tried for nearly a century for some, has likewise failed, and so a return to the conservative principles of Sharia and Islamic Statehood embedded in culture and religious tradition seems more prudent.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Stern and Berger, *ISIS*, 108.

<sup>64</sup> Noah Feldmen, *The Fall and Rise of the Islamic State* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008).

Of course, this is not to say that those who aspire to establish Islamic Sharia as a way to govern and establish society are attracted to the likes of the Islamic State, but it is conceivable that the Islamic State represents a viable realization of many Muslim's aspirations for Islamic Statehood. Such a narrative is consistent with the fact that the Islamic State expends most of its efforts in its recruitment messaging to support their legitimacy and their perceived strength and viability, religiously correct, and not co-opted by western ideas. Feldmen writes, "The Islamists' aims are both religious and worldly. To be sure, they seek to follow God's will. But they also explicitly say that they want to restore just government to the countries in which they live."<sup>65</sup> Likewise, Maha Azzam writes "the modern state...is perceived by Islamists, both moderate and radical, as having failed to deliver, in so far as it has left peoples and polities economically backward, politically weak, and subject to unjust government."<sup>66</sup> This is not to say that Islamists insurgencies generally recruit on the promise of rebuilding Islamic Statehood. Indeed, it seems apparent that many jihadist recruiters have framed their conflicts as predicated on the defense of the global Muslim community.<sup>67</sup> Perhaps, what the Islamic State represents is an experimental change of recruitment and overall strategy for Islamic insurgencies.

If aspirations for Islamic statehood based on Sharia law are indeed well embedded in the identities of significant numbers of faithful Muslims, then the Islamic State's messages of its legitimacy and ability to create one demonstrates the viability of recruiting foreign fighters based on any narratives consistent with the growing and

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>66</sup> Maha Azzam, "Islamism Revisited," *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 82, no. 6 (2006): 1119–32.

<sup>67</sup> Malet, *Foreign Fighters*. 24-25

strengthening identity. While it is common (and probably easier most of the time) to predicate foreign fighter participation on the defense of their transnational identity, other recruitment messages are shown to be sometimes viable as well, depending on the target transnational identity from which they recruit.

Even with this explanation, a puzzle remains. The narrative employed by the Islamic State in *Dabiq* is an especially religious one, but the majority of recruits to the Islamic State are not usually very religious before joining the Islamic State.<sup>68</sup> Why would the Islamic State employ deeply religious narratives to establish Islamic legitimacy and call upon recruits' religious duty, if the majority of recruits are at best only moderately religious? There must be an intervening variable that explains this disconnect.

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<sup>68</sup> Lorenzo Vidino and Seamus Hughes, "ISIS in America: From Retweets to Raqqa," *Program on Extremism, George Washington University*, December 2015.

## CHAPTER VII

## CONCLUSION

Malet asserted that insurgent groups who attempt to attract foreign fighters do so by framing their participation as predicated on the defense of their common group or identity, and that they do not attract foreign recruits on the basis of the prospect for gain. The analysis of *Dabiq*, from a variety of quantitative and interpretive approaches, provides evidence consistent with the view that, in its recruitment efforts, the Islamic State does not appeal to a prospect for material gain or recovery of personal grievance, nor does it attempt to mobilize foreign recruits on the basis of creating a common defense. This also distinguishes it from Al-Qaeda's brand of jihad, which traditionally predicated participation on the defense of the global Muslim community.

Instead, the Islamic State taps into the demand for a caliphate prevalent throughout the global Muslim community, especially among Islamic fundamentalists and Islamic extremists already radicalized. Identity is still important to the Islamic State, but identity is shown to mobilize individuals based on non-defensive narratives. This is evident in the type of message the Islamic State is pitching to recruits and the target audience, and is consistent with the observed fact that Islamic statehood is already a popular notion with many members of the Islamic community.

This conclusion moves the scant literature on foreign fighters in a new direction. We know that insurgencies attempt to attract foreign fighters on ideological narratives and altruistic motives connected to salient social identities, but recruitment messaging



need not be limited to narratives and motives related to the defense of their common identity. Recruitment messages can use identity to arouse foreign fighters to nationalism and nation-building. However, more research needs to be performed to explore the limits of identity in mobilizing causes to violence with respect to foreign fighters.

The results of this research also guides foreign policy in the region. I suggest here that the Islamic State is qualitatively different from other Islamic extremist insurgencies and terrorist organizations that frame the United States as leading a Western-led onslaught against Muslims, and instead is moving jihad in a whole new narrative direction. Whether this will be part of a broader trend in the future or not is still unclear, but fighting the Islamic State will require not just engaging in peaceful dialogue with Muslims nations and individuals, but also of delegitimizing the Islamic State and its ideology.

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