

Presenting the Glossy Look of Warfare in Cyberspace – The Islamic State’s Magazine Dabiq

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Abstract:

Since Ramadān 1435 (June/July 2014), the so-called ‘Islamic State’ (dawlat al-is-lāmiyya, IS), the ‘State of the Caliphate’ (dawlat al-khilāfa), publishes a periodic magazine entitled Dabiq. This glossy outlet, produced and distributed by al-Hayāt, one of the movement’s media organizations, is widely disseminated on the Internet and forms part of IS’s advancement in the field of the media. Published in English and other European languages, it allows the movement to spread its messages to an international audience. This article analyzes and evaluates four issues of Dabiq published in English between June and October 2014. It argues that three aspects are crucial for framing the ideological justification of the movement’s warfare and help to rally support for their state-building project: the development and establishment of images of the enemy, the notion of ‘strangeness,’ and the call for emigration. Within this framework, the magazine intertwines textual and visual accounts of the movement’s physical and virtual battlefields and mediates these to a non-Arab speaking public. Thus, Dabiq is – chronologically, technologically, and ideologically – the most recent and very well elaborated attempt of the Islamic State at winning support among the broadest public possible on a global level. The article concludes that the magazine at large and the abovementioned aspects reflect both the ideological structure of the movement and its current situation in Iraq and Syria. Utilizing derogative images of their enemies helps the Islamic State both to maintain its claim for legitimacy and to position their adherents and opponents within a dichotomous ideological framework. On this basis, it calls its followers to immigrate to the land of the two rivers and the Levant in order to support the establishment of an Islamic State and eradicate nation state borders.

Keywords:

conflict, jihad, Islam, media studies

Introduction

Dabiq is issued as a periodical according to the Islamic calendar. Its first issue appeared in Ramadān 1435, No. 2 dated from Ramadān, No. 3 from Shawwāl, and No. 4 of Dūl Hijja 1435.¹ The length of the issues at hand varies between 42 and 56 pages. It can be described a magazine that attempts to strengthen the pillars of this Jihadist state-building project by providing its audience with religious teachings, news on social and political affairs as well as on organizational and military developments. Taken together, the issues under consideration present a consistent pattern of the movement’s world view and strategy in accordance with the aim of previous and subsequent publications issued by the Islamic State² and its predecessors both in Arabic and other languages. What is remarkably new about *Dabiq* though is its scope: The magazine is produced for and directed at the movement’s international and English-speaking audience that supposedly comprises potential followers as well as those activists who cannot speak and/or understand Arabic well enough to comprehend the meaning of the movement’s other media outlets. Interestingly though, the magazine includes a whole range of theological terminology in the broadest sense which is not translated from Arabic. It thus remains questionable to which extent the textual messages are understandable for the movement’s non-Arab audiences and to which extent visualizations can bridge this knowledge gap.

To a large extent, every issue so far follows a standard composition: A graphically elaborate front page provides the theme of the lead article of the respective issue (Fig. 1).



Fig.1: Cover designs of *Dabiq* issues 1-4.

It is followed by a content page that introduces the subsequent articles. Furthermore, each issue contains a foreword which is followed by an article introducing the cover story, a section named “Islamic State Reports” which probably replaces a publication with the same name,³ a lengthy feature of the cover story itself, a section devoted to “The Islamic State in the words of the enemy,” and a concluding section with varying topics. Beside this standardized structural composition which bears strong resemblance to Western periodicals, *Dabiq* reflects the Islamic States’ professionalism in utilizing latest media and communication in order to spread their messages widely. Moreover, the interdigitation of glossy visualizations and text, of the sacred and the profane, of religion and politics, and of accounts of the delightful living in the Islamic State and of the atrocities perpetrated by the movement to reach its goals is altogether essential to the magazine’s style and structure.

However, these parameters might also be crucial to the magazine’s attractiveness to its readership. Nevertheless, further empirical research needs to be done to shed light on the questions of who reads this magazine for which reasons and to which extent the reading affects its audience - a group of people of which some might follow the Islamic State’s call for support and engage in Syria or Iraq as the “foreign fighters” whose numbers surpass the Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s (Neumann 2015). It is not only that the issue of “radicalization on the Internet” and the media strategies of Jihadist movements⁴ require further research on the motivational factors to join IS’s ranks and the social environment of people who do so (cf. Carter et al. 2014; Malik and Gani 2014; Heinke and Raudszus 2015). Also, the term “foreign fighters” itself bears a certain vagueness as it comprises all people who emigrate their home countries towards the Islamic State to partake in its evolution on various levels such as civil, humanitarian, religious, and military services and so on and so forth. It is due to these uncertainties that this article does not attempt to scrutinize the extent to which *Dabiq* affects its targeted audience. This article rather focuses on the offerings which the Islamic State makes its English-speaking readership on an ideological and ‘ideographical’ level.

While bound to the formalities of an electronically published periodical, content-wise it comprises the whole spectrum of Jihadist media production through “narrative-rich depictions of typically goal-oriented violence [...] and narrative-light displays of ostentatious destruction and killing” (Cottee 2014). In this regard, *Dabiq* resembles the magazine *Inspire* which has been issued by *al-Qā’ida on the Arabian Peninsula* (AQAP) to “recruit independent individuals in the West to carry out “lone wolf” missions in their home countries” (Sivek 2013:586; cf. Kovensky 2014). In contrast, *Dabiq* attempts to attract its readership by offering “an overall religious, military, and political vision” (Gambhir 2014:1) through a combination of highly instructive textual elaborations on the movement’s creed with mere celebrations of its glorious achievements. While the movement’s self-glorification is overwhelmingly discernible in the magazine, one also finds rare confessions of obstacles in this state-building project which are meant to underline the urgent need for all Muslims to embark to the ‘caliphate’ that “requires the allotment of many resources” (*Dabiq* 3:34). More frequently than these rare critical acknowledgements, one finds citations from various Jihadi fighters and ideologues as well as accounts of their enemies such as Senator John McCain and President Barack Obama on the situation in Iraq and Syria which serve to textually enhance their failures and portray them as being caught in the Jihadist’s trap.

Despite its glossy look, *Dabiq* strictly follows the Jihadist narrative which derives its dynamic and plausibility as an alternative model mainly from its dichotomous, aggressive world view. It attempts to gain legitimacy by re-connecting to the religio-cultural heritage and a favorable past, a glorious early Islamic history, and frames its self-perception in terms of an apocalyptic battle between good and evil. Consequently, the title of the magazine is derived from a *hadīth* that serves to frame the movement’s self-understanding in eschatological terms (Fraser 2014). It predicts the victory of a Muslim force against the Byzantines in “an area in the northern countryside near Aleppo” (*Dabiq* 1:4) leading to a severe defeat of Christian forces⁵ and replicates Abū Mus‘ab al-Zarqawi’s anticipation of Jihadist advancement to Syria where the spark lit in Iraq “burns the crusader armies in Dābiq” (Zarqawi 2004b).

It is not the mere belief in the implementation of utopian and eschatological promises which both seem to inspire the Jihadi-Salafi arena in general (Paz 2009) and can be considered a driving force for adherents of the Islamic State in particular as they are reflected and constantly reiterated in the movement's textual and visual media (Günther 2014, 2015).⁶ Feeding the sense of the apocalypse is a crucial part of their creed and is meant to strengthen the movement in portraying itself as a vanguard (*tali'a*) of strangers (*ghurabā'*) which awaits the fall of dominant political and social orders worldwide eager to restore Islam's glory on their ruins. It fulfills divinely ordained duties by establishing an Islamic State, a "marvel of history that has only come about to pave the way for al-Malhamah al-Kubrā (the grand battle prior to the hour)" (Dabiq 2:6) which will take place in the Levant (Dabiq 3:9; cf. Filiu 2012; Cook 2008:126-149). Thus, these people - "the best of Allah's slaves" (Dabiq 3:11) - will establish a new world by partaking in an imminent apocalyptic battle in Syria and the neighboring countries and by destroying the currently existing world.

Portraying itself first and foremost as a vanguard driven by eschatological expectations implies to resound less with the "major motivational resources of public order - fear of death, family ties, the necessity to negotiate" (Scheffler 2003:43-44). On the contrary, the Islamic State also strives to be considered "a reality that everyone can see" (Dabiq 2:6) and even goes so far as to claim to be "large enough and serious enough for any politician to deal with" (Dabiq 4:55), hence opening the door for negotiations. Taken at face value, these notions are indeed contradicting and present one of the several ambivalences which contemporary Jihadist movements face.⁷ Beneath the surface though, apocalyptic and utopian expectations supposedly serve as driving forces for IS's adherents, yet the movement's commitment to the "innerworldly eschatology of Sunni mainstream Islam, that is [...] the conviction that it is the duty of Muslims to establish a just world order here on earth" (Scheffler 2003:47) is given far greater weight in their communicative outlets.

In the subsequent sections, I shall focus on the narratives which frame the establishment of such a world order. I will scrutinize three aspects which

seem crucial for framing the ideological justification of the movement's warfare, help to rally support for this state-building project, and are closely related to these functional aspects of the movement's ideological framework: the development and establishment of images of the enemy, the notion of 'strangeness,' and the call for emigration.

These narratives derive their argumentative power from being linked to historical precedents as well as from being constantly reproduced, re-iterated and re-framed. They help to support and justify the physical warfare of adherents and fighters of the Islamic State on the ground and concurrently serve as a means of psychological warfare as they denounce and belittle the movement's opponents. These motifs and themes represent a continually repeated commitment to unifying the Sunni community, establishing a societal model grounded in 'proper' Islamic beliefs and improving the life of their main audience (i.e. Sunni Muslims). In order to achieve these goals and establish an Islamic State, key motifs and themes moreover mirror the extent to which the movement continuously contests several opposing social, political and religious authorities, institutions, structures, and subsequent drivers of identity.

Furthering Images of the Enemy

Similar to its predecessors, the Islamic States understands the world as being "divided into two camps [...] the camp of Islam and faith, and the camp of kufr (disbelief) and hypocrisy [...] all being led by America and Russia, and being mobilized by the Jews" (Dabiq 1:10). While the former consists of few people who are qualified as following the lead of their pious ancestors, hence constituting the adherents to "absolute truth" (Dabiq 2:5), their many opponents would follow "complete falsehood" (Dabiq 2:5). Generally speaking, approaching the world within a binary logic and dividing it in "them" and "us" might be a widespread notion among neo-traditionalist movements which uphold intergroup biases in order to strengthen in-group coherences. More specifically, it serves a strategic purpose as it allows both to present adherents and opponents as fairly homogenous groups and to identify the position of every individual and collective accordingly.

The Islamic State identifies itself, its institutions and adherents as being of the same essence as the Muslim *umma*. Hence, this state which represents a societal model inspired and driven by divinely revealed commandments and the belief to act according to the ideal of the first Muslim community in Medina scheme is understood to be the only effective corrective of the present and the only way for the Muslim community to fulfill its expectations of salvation.⁸ This notion is the basis for the movement's claim of hegemony over the Muslim community and includes a denial of the freedom of choice for all men (Dabiq 2:5-11), hence strictly rejecting opposing worldviews.

The Islamic State conveys its opponents on the political stage, that is the governments in Baghdad and Damascus as well as their respective institutions and allies, as fairly homogenous entities. To frame the movement's relationship to these opponents in collective terms not only helps to reduce the complexities of reality and the differences between the various political and religious actors but also serves to somehow 'dehumanize' these people in order to belittle their concepts and ideas as well as to limit an identification of fighters and adherents with fellow citizens. Consequently, while the effects of Western politics and economies (the 'far enemy') constitute an important reference for its ideological framework, the movement's media focuses on enemies that are 'near' in spatial and cultural terms. This is not only due to the Islamic State partaking in a fierce conflict about Syrian and Iraqi soil but also because it is engaged in disputes about the nature of Muslim societies, the role of religion in the operation of all spheres of life, and about the rightful religious practice that leads to salvation.

Within this primarily ideological conflict, fellow Muslims - Sunni and Shi'i alike - are those who understand the meanings and the theological basis of the Islamic State's ideology, who know which symbols and semantics the movement uses to persuade its audiences, and who have the skills to unmask those attempts. Thus, military forces may be of tactical relevance but in the long run the strategic commitment of an ideology is decisive - rather than military victories. The attempt to strengthen the distanced relationship to other segments of the society in turn includes drawing par-

ticular images of those regarded as enemies, a typecasting meant to reduce and condense those depicted to their essentials (Günther 2014).

Both the Syrian and the Iraqi government are addressed with and framed in confessionalist and derogative terms such as *nusayrī* for the Syrian ‘Alawīte⁹ government and *rāfidī* and *safawī* for its Iraqi counterpart. As much as this terminology suggests a differentiation between the two by recognizing their historical evolution, it also homogenizes both factions under the rubric of general accusations against Shi‘ite Muslims as being heretics and traitors that are deeply rooted in Islamic history (see Ende 1990:221-222). This notion is on the one hand inspired by earlier Sunni polemical writings against Shi‘i doctrines (see i.a. al-Jamil 2010, Steinberg 2011), hence reiterating widespread sentiments that resonate well with those who are culturally affiliated. On the other hand, it draws on various books and pamphlets that were published throughout the Middle East since the Iranian revolution of 1979 (Ende 1990:226). While questions about who can legitimately claim for religious interpretations of the world and about the theological justification of power structures are most prominent motifs in these publications, they are also closely linked to questions of economic competition in the region which is reverberated in recent public evocations of an advancing ‘Shi‘ite crescent’ (cf. ICG 2005; Hatina 2011:216).

Consequently, referring to the regime of Bashar al-Asad as *nusayrī* denounces it as merely an esoteric extremist sect which is supported by Iran and its allies eager to suppress the Sunni majority in the country. The relationship of these enemies of ‘true’ Islam is visualized in Fig. 2 which appeared in a three-page-article in *Dabiq* 4 under the title “The Crusade serving Iran and Russia” (Dabiq 4: 38-40). Taking up on an audio-message by late Abū Hamza al-Muhājir (al-Muhājir 2006), until his death in 2010 *wazīr al-harb* (‘secretary of war’) to the ‘Islamic State of Iraq’ (*dawlat al-‘Irāq al-islāmiyya*, ISI), the article reverberates the advent of a ‘Shi‘ite crescent’ since the US-led military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. Muhājir addressed al-Asad as Syria’s *rāfidī-nusayrī* tyrant (*tāghiyatibā al-rāfidī al-nusayrī*) who opened his country to the “ancient Persian empire” (*al-imbarāturiyya al-fārsiyya al-qadīma*) in collaboration with Hasan Nasrallāh who is

derided as “the agent of the Anti-Christ” (*al-‘amīl al-dajjāl*) *nasr al-lāt*, that is the advocate of one of the polytheist goddesses in Mecca before the advent of Islam.



Fig. 2: Bashar al-Asad meeting with Hizbullāh leader Hasan Nasrallāh (left) and Iranian president Mahmūd AHmadinejād (right) at Damascus 2010, Photo: AP; reprinted in Dabiq 4:38.

In this regard, medieval Sunni polemics against the Nusayriyya by clerics such as ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī (d.1037) and Taqī al-Dīn Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) still affect, as Friedman (2005:349) points out, the ‘Alawīte’s image in Middle Eastern societies and provide the justification for their dismissal as heretics and the call for *takfīr*.¹⁰ Interestingly, none of these sources is explicitly referred to in the four issues of *Dabiq* under scrutiny (to the knowledge of this author neither in other issues up to n° 10). Neither do the authors of the magazine attempt to elaborate on theological justifications of their position towards the ‘Alawites as a religious group that go beyond attributing them as “filthy” (Dabiq 2:42). This suggests that the audience of the magazine either is expected to be familiar with theological debates and historical developments surrounding this notion or that a differentiation of this approach which is full of presuppositions is deemed too complicated to fit into a rather simple dichotomous worldview.

In a more general manner, the pejorative appellation *rāfidī* (rejectionist, renegade, pl. *rawāfid*) has been widely used among Sunni critics of Shi‘i doctrine.¹¹ Employed to frame historical disputes over authority over the Muslim *umma*, it is used by modern Sunni religio-political movements to uphold the notion of an everlasting enmity between the two sects as opposed to attempts for re-conciliation or rapprochement (*taqrīb*). In *Dabiq*, as in other media outlets of the Islamic State and its predecessors, it is mostly used interchangeably with or in relation to the term *safawī*. The latter formally refers to the Safavid dynasty which ruled Persia between 1501 and 1722, established the Twelver school of Shi‘ite Islam as the state religion and claimed a religio-political protectorate over the entire Shi‘ite community. Its application by the Islamic State links the term to a combination of historical and present events by pointing to the relationship between Shi‘ite political actors in Baghdad and the Iranian government. This insinuates that Baghdad [“the safawi dogs of the crusaders” (Dabiq 4:18)] and its “safawi army” (Dabiq 2:26) would be controlled by “the safawis in Tehran” (Dabiq 2:26).

Identifying Iran as a “Safawi State” (*dawla safawiyya*) and the Iraqi and Syrian governments as its acolytes resonates well with apprehensions among secular and religious Sunni circles in the Middle East towards an advancement of a ‘Shi‘ite crescent.’ It reframes an allegedly continued conspiracy of the Shi‘a against Sunnis in contemporary terms which is also illustrated by referring to Iraqi Shi‘ite politicians as “descendants of Ibn al-‘Alqamī” (*ahfād Ibn al-‘Alqamī*).¹² Furthermore, this narrative serves strategic considerations on part of the Islamic State as it both strengthens their polemics against Shi‘ite Muslims as potential religious and political troublemakers and fosters their attempts at filling the void left unattended by the governments by offering Sunnis in Iraq and Syria a sociopolitical perspective.

Being Strangers as a Noble Trait

Just like other publications of the Islamic State and its predecessors, *Dabiq* frames the participants of this project also as ‘strangers’ (*ghurabā*, sing. *gharīb*) in their societies and consequentially calls for their psychological

and physical withdrawal from their immediate environment. It draws upon a *hadīth* that considers Islam as having begun as “something strange and it will return to being something strange as it began, so glad tidings to the strangers” (Dabiq 3:6; cf. Muslim 145). To include this dogma in their ideological framework is not an invention of jihadist movements. Riexinger (2015:5-6) identifies this *hadīth* as a motto of the Wahhabiyya and states that it also inspired several revivalist movements both in Islamic history and contemporary times but that its use is not limited to puritan circles. The latter, however, have been referring to this *hadīth* and the notion of being strangers as a means of self-stylization to express their unease with their environment and to clarify their position towards those who fail to fulfill the commandment to *tawhīd*, that is to obey and follow the divine order and its representatives by following idols and falling prey to heresy.¹³ When Arab volunteers joined the battle against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s, “the term *al-ghuraba*, or ‘strangers,’ was illustrative of the Arab-Afghan community in Afghanistan, many of whom were fugitives and estranged from their homelands” (Lia 2008:250). The concept thus comprises both a physical and spiritual state and process of alienation from someone’s homeland and/or their immediate environment. One of these men, the Jordanian Ahmad Fadīl Nazzāl al-Halayla who was later known by his *nome de guerre* Abū Mus’ab al-Zarqawi, also broke up from his hometown and went to Afghanistan in 1989 to fight alongside other Arabs. He then took up the pseudonym of Abū Muhammad al-Gharīb and allegedly kept on preferring this name to the one he later became famous with (Maysara al-Gharīb 2007:6; Lia 2008:251). Some years later, he transferred the concept to the battlefields in Iraq when he addressed his followers in an audio message and explained that “a stranger [is someone who] breaks off from his family and tribe” (Dabiq 3:6; Zarqawi 2005b).

Choosing this alias expresses one of the paradoxes Jihadist movements struggle within their public appearance: On the one hand, their ideological concepts need to attract a broad public in order to ensure the latter’s support and enable the movements to bring about social and political changes according to their ideology. On the other hand, their ideas need to be ex-

clusive to a certain extent in order to ensure their coherence and immunize them against external criticism. The latter often implies belittling ‘the masses’ who are referred to as “a hundred camels amongst which you almost can’t find any that are fit for riding” (Dabiq 2:9) as opposed to the few righteous believers “who agreed with and followed the truth” (Dabiq 2:9).



**Fig. 3: Images illustrating an article in Dabiq 3 entitled
“Those who break off from their tribes.”**

Consequently, the authors of Dabiq notice a “widespread ignorance amongst the people” (Dabiq 2:10) due to a plenty of choices and lack of a clear guidance. The Islamic State and its fighters (Fig. 3) thus embody an antithesis to these developments which the small group of believers would fight according to the paradigmatic action of historical role-models such as the prophet Muhammad, the *sahāba*, and other biblical prophets. They would have warned their people and punish them pursuant to God’s commandments and thus be identified as ‘strangers’ to their immediate environment. Portraying the Islamic State as their successors, this approach not only serves to legitimize the movement as *the* institution which is willing, able, and obliged to lead the people with clear advice, calls for saving their subjects from punishments both on earth and in the hereafter, and fulfills divinely obtained commandments in order to rectify people’s wrongdoings. It also helps the movement to address its recipients by way of calling on their religious affiliation and affirming a sense of social selectivity and exclusiveness.

This sense is particularly emphasized by the notion of a vanguard (*tali'a*). Perceiving themselves in this way to a certain extent 'disburdens' the actors of the liabilities towards their societies. It also superelevates, so to speak, the meaning of their thinking and action because their voluntary separation - be it physical or psychological - from their immediate environment and even from the majority of a given society must not lead to exasperation or weakness. Rather, this dissociation is considered a sign of strength and volition with subsequent struggles being regarded as spiritual tests (cf. Fishman 2006:21). A separation of this kind, a *reservatio mentalis* towards their immediate environment, furthermore implies a dismissal of generally accepted moral constraints. It allows justifying actions such as bomb attacks against civilians which would be condemned by the public.¹⁴ Hence it may limit the ideology's attractiveness to outsiders or potential followers as much as it might help to broaden the appeal of the Islamic State in the face of otherwise despicable action. It might seem obvious to compare this notion of a vanguard to other social-revolutionary movements of the 19th and 20th century (both leftist and right wing) which applied similar paradigms to their thinking and action.¹⁵ The concept of a vanguard and Marxist-Leninist theories of social struggle also inspired Sayyid Qutb (see i.a. Calvert 2010) whose ideological influence on contemporary Jihadist movements cannot be overestimated. His ideas also gleam through in the Islamic State's perception of the world and its own position therein although there are no direct references to the *jābiliyya* or other of Qutb's concepts. Contrary to leftist secular movements and groups, the acceptance or rejection of religious norms, values, and beliefs in particular here affects conflicts around sovereignty and the organization of a society. It is not immanent principles of rule and governance but rather the reference to a transcendent order that determines the legitimacy of the vanguard's code of conduct. Therefore, obedience to or rejection of the Islamic State do not relate to a sociopolitical movement in the first place but rather to an entity that represents divine will.

To the opinion of this author, this ideological operation is crucial to understand the movement's ambivalent position towards its own establishment as a 'mass phenomenon'. The Islamic State thus oscillates to some extent

between its self-perception as an avant-garde which entails a high grade of inner cohesion by a strong segregation from the outside and the need to establish a movement on a broad basis with popular support that would satisfy the requirement of an Islamic body politic because it is willing to make compromises. Over the course of their evolution, Zarqawi and his group as well as their successors have been seemingly considering radical ideas and a commitment to an unrestrained vanguard more valuable than the attractiveness of a popular movement. However, they refer to themselves as a marginalized, elitist movement of “poor strangers” (Dabiq 3:5) with a social-revolutionary agenda and thus consider themselves strangers in their own societies. Hence, internal coherence and ideological immunization as well as attractiveness and persuasiveness to external actors are all strongly dependent on a successful mediation of their ideas, norms, values, and beliefs. Furthermore, a successful call for support of or participation in their movement has been a viable need and the Islamic State uses *Dabiq* (among other textual and audio-visual publications) as a communicative means to long out to their audience.

The Emigration to the Battlefield

Using several communicative platforms such as social media, Youtube channels, and Internet forums, the Islamic State disseminates various audio-visual media to call its audience for support. In order to grant success to its state-building project, the movement demands the emigration (*hijra*) of its audience from their countries of origin to the nascent Islamic State which requires not only a spiritual, but also a practical commitment to the evolution of this project. To give special attention to this issue again aims at strengthening the notion that current developments are linked to early Islamic history. In this sense, those people who partake in the progression of the Islamic State stand in line of continuity with their pious ancestors (*al-salaf al-salih*), that is the people who followed the prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina leaving their home town in order to establish a divinely ordained order.

Interestingly though, this topic only became prominent to global Jihadism since the ‘Islamic State of Iraq’ had been announced in late 2006. Neither

Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi and his *al-tawhīd wa-l-jihād*-group who affiliated himself with al-Qā'ida in 2004, nor al-Qā'ida under the leadership of Usāma Bin Lādin insistently called their audiences for emigrating to the battlefields in Iraq, Afghanistan, Chechnya or elsewhere in order to establish a political order based on religious norms, values, and beliefs. Zarqawi for instance only rarely highlighted the call for an emigration of Muslim fighters to the battlefields in the land of the two rivers (Zarqawi 2005a) although he addressed Mujāhidīn in Iraq (and his followers in particular) as *muhājirūn* (emigrants) and *ansār* (supporters). After its establishment in October 2006, ISI's first 'Commander of the faithful' (*amīr al-mu'minīn*) Abū 'Umar al-Baghdādī and Abū Hamza al-Muhājir in their audio messages frequently referred to the motif of emigration to the extent that al-Baghdādī considered "the basis of this religion the oath of allegiance and the emigration and the Jihād" (Baghdadi 2007). This citation densely expresses that ISI was grounded in the fervor of its adherents and their commitment to its visionary, utopian prospect based on their belief in ISI as an institution establishing a divinely ordained world order. This system favors 'true' Muslims who commit themselves to "listen to and obey" (*fi sam' wa-tā'a*) their leader and swear an oath of allegiance (*bay'a*), leave their countries of origin behind them and fight for the establishment of this order.

It is this motif that is constantly reiterated as "first priority" (Dabiq 2:3) for the adherents of the Islamic State who would have little more in common than their belief in the righteousness of this project (Dabiq 3:5-6). Consequently, the reader not only frequently encounters the motif of *hijra* in all issues of *Dabiq* at hand, the theme also prominently features the magazine's first and third issue whose cover stories are entitled "From Hijrah to Khalifah" and "A call to Hijrah." Reducing the complex reality and putting it into simple terms, the first article develops a fairly straight line of five phases from emigration over community building, destabilizing of opposing political, social and religious powers to a stabilization of the respective group and a proclamation of a caliphate. Framing the whole process, the concepts of emigration and caliphate are presented as re-emergence of their idealized antetypes in (early) Islamic history. Moreover, they present

a linkage to Zarqawi and his group who would “strive for the re-establishment of the caliphate on earth” (Zarqawi 2004c) and prospected the “dusk of the State of the Quran” (*fajr dawlat al-Qur’an*) (Zarqawi 2004a).

Providing an overview of events after the toppling of Saddam Hussein in 2003, the article openly admits that Zarqawi, “by using methods that led to maximum chaos and targeting apostates of all different backgrounds” (Dabiq 1:37) sought to prevent the government in Baghdad and its allies from stabilizing the country. The text mentions that these methods resulted in a civil war with “Rafidi militias seeking revenge against Ahl us-Sunna” (Dabiq 1:37, cf. ICG 2008), yet it does not reflect upon the fact that Zarqawi and his group were not able or willing to act according to their promises. When they fueled xenophobia and sectarianism (cf. Inglehart *et al* 2006; Haddad 2011), they were not at all capable to protect those who they considered their subjects (i.e. Iraqi Sunni Muslims) and their actions even fostered the establishment of tribal militias fighting against al-Qā’ida in Iraq (Benraad 2011). By putting it as being tested by God, previous statements of al-Muhājir and Abū ‘Umar al-Baghdādī disconnected the movement’s strategic and military failures from its prospected final victory (al-Muhājir 2008; Abu ‘Umar al-Baghdādī 2008) - in a way of argumentative self-immunization of ISI’s ideology. In line with this, the article portrays the serious backlash that the group experienced on the hands of their opponents in 2005/2006 as a “test decreed by Allah [...] [in order to] solidify the newborn Islamic State and prepare it for greater responsibilities” (Dabiq 1:39).¹⁶ Hence being pushed to seek new alliances among other Jihadist groups and the broader populace, the group began to wave the black flag and utilize the euphonic and culturally resonating title of ‘Khilafa’ for its state-building project. This was not used as a means of internal stabilization by providing a unifying vision, but rather to employ communicative measures which could also pave the way for ISI to gradually fill physical and psychological voids being left unvalued by the central government in the Western areas of Iraq. Furthermore, it provided the movement with an instrument that would enable it to effectively communicate with a broader public and concurrently broadening its appeal to a tremendous reservoir of culturally resonating textual and visual signs (Günther 2014,2015).

The movement sincerely needed to combine as many measures and techniques as possible to attract more followers to their state-building project. It is this notion that determines the second article, “A call to hijrah” (Dabiq 3:24-34) which addresses potential followers among Muslims worldwide. Other than the article in Dabiq 1, this feature tries to appeal to different audiences on different levels which can be boiled down to a spiritual and an emotional motivation. On the spiritual level, the article repeatedly refers to the Islamic State as the institution which takes responsibility for fulfilling God’s commandments on earth “while relying on Allah alone” (Dabiq 3:27) and appeals to every Muslim to consider the covenant between them and God. It argues that particularly professionals, intellectuals and students - those whose expertise the movement seeks for the most - “should now make [their] number one priority to repent and answer the call to hijrah” (Dabiq 3:26) which includes a physical and mental break off from their social surroundings in order to conduct a “Hijrah from hypocrisy to sincerity” (Dabiq 3:25).



Fig. 4: Photograph of textbooks and a notepad representing the professionals, intellectuals and students among Muslims in Western countries, Dabiq 3:26.

In a similar manner, the article calls Muslims to join the ‘caliphate’ as their life among Non-Muslims, that is non-believers/apostates, and their contact with a lifestyle which is not according to the societal model and code of conduct of the Islamic State would be weakening each individual’s strength

of belief (Dabiq 3:32). This notion reifies a strict rejection of free choice or free will among the people and reiterates the identification of the Muslim community with the Islamic State as well as the supposed role of this state in securing its subject's salvation.

On an emotional level, the article points to the lack of “might and honor that every Muslim should live and experience” (Dabiq 3:29) as well as to social disintegration of Muslims in Western societies. The feature takes up on the case of a martyr of the movement who is said to have felt a “sentimental death” (Dabiq 3:28) when being confronted with reports about people suffering in the Islamic and Arab world. As he took measures into his own hands and died for the Jihadist cause, the article tries to appeal to others who may experience the same feelings and condition calling that “there is no solution for it except by taking the first step towards jihād - hijrah” (Dabiq 3:28). By taking this step, Muslims would be granted the chance to escape “modern day slavery” (Dabiq 3:29).



Fig. 5: Photograph of metropolitan environment depicting “modern day slavery.” Dabiq 3:29.

Fig. 5 visualizes the environment in their home countries where they live in anonymity in large cities and their identity as a Muslim would be constantly suppressed by their employer, their “kāfir master” (Dabiq 3:29), and their spiritual needs would be obscured by the worldly affairs that surrounded them. The Islamic State therefore offers them a combination of spiritual

custody and material care (*dunyā*) all of which is dependent on God's will and the obedience of the people towards His order. In this sense, successfully waging a war against 'the enemies of Islam' promises "the noblest income" (Dabiq 3:29), that is booty and spoils of war, and transcends the legitimization of those partaking in warfare as Mujāhidīn would deserve wealth more than their opponents and put it to good use in order to worship God or fulfill their religious duties (cf. Dabiq 4:10-13).

Conclusion

With its glossy look, *Dabiq* is a medium issued to widen the scope of public communication of the Islamic State. It is designed to appeal to segments of non-Arab societies that, due to language barriers, might not have been in the reach for the movement's ideological teachings. Although this leads to a differentiation of its messages and a pluralization of its adherents, the Islamic State and its media organization claim to neither let their claim for hegemony over the Muslim *umma* nor their strict and rigid way of interpreting the scriptures and implementing a divinely ordained societal model be compromised by these developments. In this sense, *Dabiq* both concisely reflects the ideological framework of the Islamic State and mirrors its current situation in Iraq and Syria.

The three aspects that were identified in this article as key to the movement's ideological structure are strongly related to its current situation. The Islamic State maintains and further develops textual and visual images of its enemies which have been in use in earlier days or were designed by their predecessors. Framing their religious, political, and social opponents in derogative terms and the struggles for hegemony and power within a dichotomous worldview allows the movement to sustain and further deepen sectarian strife and political divisions which are part of its military and political success since the beginning of 2014. Moreover, belittling their various opponents helps to support the claim for legitimate statehood which is structurally linked to the notion of strangeness and the call for emigration. The notion of a vanguard of strangers who are willing and able to use every means necessary to accomplish their mission can be a decisive feature in

the attempt to realize a societal model inspired by Islamic traditions on the territory of two sovereign nation states. Against the backdrop of the 'Arab Spring' and the apparent failure of many governments in the Middle East, the Islamic State is able to offer an alternative to secular political systems. The narrative that the movement presents in *Dabiq* derives its cogency both from its link to a favorable past and its supposed confirmation through the IS's resistance against global powers as well as its ability to take up state-like functions which have been left unfulfilled by the Iraqi and Syrian governments. *Dabiq* calls Muslims worldwide to leave their home countries, break off from their social networks, and join the community of the Islamic State. This call comprises notions of adventure and promises to undo defamations. Both promises are important to the individual and collective consciousness and the prospect of a life that leads to the fulfillment of salvation expectations. It is this composition that enables the Islamic State to provide those people with answers to their questions and needs who might feel deprived of the achievements and benefits of a globalized world.

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Notes

¹ See all the magazine's issues at The Islamic State's Magazine 2014.

² I will refer to the movement as *Islamic State* or IS in this article. Although the movement changed its title in June 2014 to *dawlat al-Islām (Islamic State, IS)* and also refers to itself as *dawlat al-khilāfa* (State of the Caliphate), particularly in the Anglo-American academe it is still referred to by using its former title *dawlat al-islāmiyya fi-l-'Irāq wa-l-Shām* (The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria/the Levant, ISIS/ISIL). However, the variety of terms that refer to the Islamic State in Arabic ranges from the above mentioned over *tanzīm al-dawlaal-islāmiyya* (Organisation of the Islamic State) to the colloquial abbreviation *dā'ish* which mostly carries a derogatory meaning and is rejected by the Islamic State.

³ See Islamic State Report 2014.

⁴ See i.a. Klausen 2015; Hegghammer 2014; Armbrorst 2013; Torres Soriano 2012; Awan 2007a,b, 2011; Awan et al. 2011; Kimmage and Ridolfo 2007; Rogan 2007a,b; CTC n.d.; ISCR n.d.; FFI n.d.

⁵ Muslim 18/21-22.

⁶ It should be clear that despite these tendencies - which can be observed in the publications of a broad variety of fundamentalist revolutionary groups with a religious inspiration - 'apocalypticism' (like 'terrorism') as epistemological terms do not suffice to thoroughly understand attractiveness, thought and action of this Jihadist state-building project.

⁷ Among those ambivalences is their ever recurring insistence on their superiority over the ‘nonbelievers’ while they constantly warn their potential supporters to intermingle with the latter out of fear from having their belief weakened (Dabiq 3:32; cf. Zizek 2014).

⁸ Consequently, this means that the code of conduct enacted by the ‘Islamic State’ is the only way to fulfil expectations of salvation. Hence it must also be implemented forcefully.

⁹ The self-appellation as ‘Alawī is a modern redefinition of this Shi‘ite congregation. See Seale 1990:9.

¹⁰ Beyond Ibn Taymiyya’s *fatāwa* examined by Friedman (2005) see i.a. ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī 1999. For modern accounts see i.a. Abū Mus‘ab al-Sūrī 2000.

¹¹ For the evolution of the term has originally been used in intra-Shiite polemics see Kohlberg 1979.

¹² This legend refers to the siege of Abbasid Baghdad to a Mongol army in 1258, which was allegedly facilitated by the Shi‘ite vesir Ibn ‘Alqamī who opened the city’s doors to the Mongols. In linking this historical event to the present, Jihadist narratives purport Shi‘ite politicians both in exile and Iraq would have opened Iraq to American and multinational forces as well as to Iran’s influence in 2003. This is frequently to be found in publications of the ‘Islamic State’ and its predecessors, hence receives no reference to singular documents here.

¹³ See i.a. Abū Mus‘ab al-Sūrī (‘Umar ‘Abd al-Hakīm) who in 1999 founded the *al-Ghuraba Center for Islamic and Media Studies* (Lia 2008:272). Another example can be found in the person of Sayyid Qutb who used the image of the stranger in his poets as a way to express his feelings of dissociation with his environment but also with himself (see Calvert 2010).

¹⁴ And, intriguingly, considered unnecessary by the group itself if the circumstances were different and they would reach a utopian (or at least idealized) situation where they would “find the state of Islamic affairs that existed in the generations of the saḥābah, who were taught by the prophet Muhammad [...] For there was no baathism, secularism, liberalism, democracy or anything that would contradict the essence of tawḥīd.,” that is nothing which would distract people from obeying God in a “proper” way.

¹⁵ Among the manifold accounts on leftist groups inspired by Marxist-Leninist theories of revolutionary struggle see i.a. Elter 2008:140-144; Weissbrod 1981; Schwartz 2009:95-104. For the NSDAP in Germany and their approach of leading the masses as a vanguard see i.a. Campbell 1998.

¹⁶ Interestingly, ISI's withdrawal from its previous strongholds in Western Iraq here is presented as a reaction to the establishment of the Sahawāt. To the contrary, al-Muhājir had presented the Sahawāt a reaction to the establishment of ISI in one of his speeches (al-Muhajir 2008).