

Filtering Meta-Narratives: From Global to Local

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The Islamic State (IS, also known as ISIS, ISIL, and Daesh) provides an unprecedented amount of documentation on its own nature and the messages it hopes will inspire others to join in IS territory or to conduct terrorist attacks in one's home country.

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This paper hopes to shed light on the ways IS transforms its broader meta-narratives into a local message. It will examine three of IS's meta-narratives and provide two case studies on how IS filters these ideas to a local context; in particular, looking at Tunisia and Saudi Arabia. This filtering allows IS to shape its message based on local ideas and conditions that will resonate most strongly in a particular location. It also illustrates the elasticity in IS's ideas, giving insights into why it has become so potent at recruiting individuals from all backgrounds, cultures, and regions of the world.

Top Meta-Narratives

In its messaging, the Islamic State deploys four overarching arguments: 1) the war against Islam, 2) winning [on the battlefield], 3) the caliphate state-building project, and 4) the imminent apocalypse.

First, the Islamic State contends that its leaders and members are the only people truly following the original interpretation and practice of Islam from the time of the Muslim prophet Muhammad and the *sahaba* (Muhammad's companions). Therefore, IS is protecting Islam from a series of enemies that are attempting to destroy it. In no particular order, IS claims these groups of entities are un-Islamic and must be fought to preserve Islam: *rawafidh* (a derogatory term for Shi'a); *nusayris* (a derogatory term for Alawites); *taghut* (tyrants), a term to describe Sunni leaders, whom they view as apostates; *munafiqin* (hypocrites), a term to describe Muslims that do not live up to their religion in the eyes of IS; *murtadin* (apostates), those who have left Islam (since IS has a very narrow definition of Islam, this encompasses many ordinary Muslims); and *sahawat* (awakening), a term that originally referred to the tribal awakening in Iraq against IS's predecessor organization last decade. Further, it has taken on the symbol of any Sunni insurgent faction that goes against IS on the battlefield: *silibiyyin* (crusaders), a reference to Western countries; and *sahyuniyyin* (Zionists), a reference to Israel.

Secondly, the Islamic State displays itself in its propaganda as always winning battles and never admitting when there have been setbacks. Part of this argument is imbued through the slogan it has used, *baqiya wa tatamaddad* (remaining and expanding). The idea originated from a speech by Abu 'Umar al-Baghdadi, the leader after the announcement of IS of Iraq (ISI) in October 2006.

In Abu 'Umar's April 17, 2007, speech, which assessed ISI's *jihad* (religious military struggle) after four years of fighting the Americans in Iraq, he concluded with a series of statements that started with *baqiya* that began by saying *wa ina dawla al-islam baqiya* (verily, the Islamic State remains).¹ The exact words were later cited by ISI's official spokesman, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, in an Aug. 7, 2011, speech to attempt to convince the troops to remain positive since ISI had been weakened so greatly by the tribal awakening and the American military surge of troops in the prior four years.² From that point on, the term *baqiya* became a rallying cry for its fighters and supporters. The Islamic State and its supporters only later added the term *tatamaddad* after ISI's successor entities, ISIS and IS, began to retake territory in 2013–2014.

The state-building project of IS began to come more into focus after the leader of IS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, formally announced the caliphate in his July 2, 2014, speech to usher in Ramadan for that year.³ In it, he said, "We make a special call to the 'ulama (religious scholars), *fuqaha* (experts in Islamic jurisprudence), and *da'i* (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 God, for their emigration is *wajib 'ayni* (an individual obligation), so that they can answer the dire need of the Muslims for them."⁴ This call to service highlighted how IS began to bureaucratize and systematize its state-building infrastructure, which it would then show off in its media to illustrate how it was taking care of the affairs of IS and daily lives of its *ri'aya* (subjects).⁵

Lastly, the Islamic State has pushed the idea and importance of the coming apocalypse. One of its main points is related to one of the end-times battles between good and evil (Muslims and the unbelievers) that will take place at Dabiq, a city in northern Syria. IS hopes that the West—or in their vernacular, the crusaders—takes the bait and fight them there to prove the truth of the prophecy. This battle, according to IS, will then bring about the events that will lead to the Day of Judgment where Muslims will be victorious. IS

has even named its English-language magazine after the town of Dabiq. Many of the end-times prophecies are supposed to play out in Syria and the Levant in general, which gives them extra potency.⁶

Since some of these arguments are more relevant to IS's core territory in Iraq and Syria, not all of these messages are fully relevant when distilled for other local audiences for recruitment and inspiration. For instance, IS's governing capabilities are really only on display in Libya, while the apocalyptic messages also have resonance in Afghanistan and Yemen. That said, the war-against-Islam angle works in all cases, allowing IS to discuss its winning under multiple circumstances rather than in a traditional military sense only.

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Messaging in Tunisia

The first two talking points of IS's messaging can be applied to Tunisia. In the Islamic State's first video message directed at Tunisia in mid-December 2014, Abu Muhammad al-Tunisi, a Tunisian foreign fighter based in al-Raqqa, Syria, explained how the *murtadin* leaders of Tunisia oppress Muslims.⁷ This perception is a result of state policies going back to Tunisia's independence when the first president of country, Habib Bourguiba, made a series of legal reforms that pushed Islam to private life. In 1963, he even drank orange juice on live television during Ramadan, the holiest month of the year for Muslims, in which they fast from dawn until dusk. IS, along with many other Islamists, believe that Bourguiba and his successor, Zayn al-'Abidin Bin 'Ali, destroyed and distorted Islam.

In the aftermath of the Sousse beach attack in mid-July 2015, Muhammad al-Baji Qa'id al-Sibsi, the current Tunisian president and leader of the conservative secular party Nida Tunis, said that

Tunisia would never become an Islamic state. In response, an IS-fronted media foundation, Ajnad al-Khilafah bi-Ifriqiyah, retorted by saying, “Those who try to substitute earthly laws for the *shari’a* (Islamic law) are unbelievers who must be killed, illustrating that IS does not take such words lightly.”⁸ Similarly, IS takes issue with the mainstream Islamist political party al-Nahdah, which it sees as giving up on implementing *shari’a* and, therefore, betraying its origins and true aims. The Islamic State also views this giving up as a process of the Christians and Jews co-opting them. It has also argued that this proves that democracy is not a proper vehicle for making true change in society that will bring Islam back to glory; instead one must undertake *jihād*. As Abu Mus’ab al-Tunisi noted in a late January 2016 video message, IS Tunisian members will return and rule Tunisia with *shari’a*.⁹

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Lastly, the Islamic State even goes after Al-Qaeda and its branch in that region, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghrib (AQIM). It has argued that AQIM has hidden the truth of caliphate and no longer truly follows *shari’a*.¹⁰ All this highlights how—depending on the particular party or faction and even level of religiosity of engagement in prior terrorism—all elements together, according to IS, are conspiring against Islam in an ultimate war.

While the Islamic State has not taken over territory in Tunisia, it has been involved in the deadliest terrorist attacks in the country’s history and is part of the “we are winning” narrative. IS unsuccessfully attempted to conquer the town of Bin Gardan, which is close to the Libyan border to try to make a territorial strip that stretches from there to Sabratha, Libya, a town on the other side of the border. Sabratha is also where IS has based one of its training camps, which includes a number of Tunisian foreign fighters in Libya.

Besides the recent attempted takeover of Bin Gardan, IS has taken responsibility for the

assassination of two Tunisian leftist politicians who were assassinated in early and mid-2013. It also was involved in the 2015 spectacular attacks at the Bardo Museum in Tunis and a beach resort in Sousse, along with smaller, less-reported attacks in the interior of the country on the Tunisian military and police.¹¹ In addition to the Islamic State’s perceived successes, Tunisians represent the highest number per capita of foreign nationals fighting with IS in Iraq/Syria and Libya, up to 6,000 in the former and up to 2,000 in the latter. This showcases the potential projection of power back into Tunisia if IS attempted to exert more activity there.

Messaging in Saudi Arabia

Like Tunisia, Saudi Arabia lies next to a country in which there is an active war zone—Libya for Tunisia and Yemen for Saudi Arabia. Similarly, the first two IS narratives are applicable in this case. Regarding the war against Islam, IS has much to say about Saudi Arabia. Although Saudi Arabia is known for its austere interpretations of Islam, through the teachings of Muhammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahab, IS still views Saudi as directing a war against “true” Islam.¹² On the political front, the Islamic State argues that Saudi’s involvement in the coalition bombing campaign in Iraq and Syria against IS exemplifies how Saudi Arabia is fighting Islam not only intellectually but also militarily.¹³

In terms of religious arguments, in a video message in mid-December 2015, a Saudi member of IS based in Anbar province, Iraq, claimed that Saudi Arabia had strayed away from implementing the *hudud* (fixed Quranic and Hadith penalties) within *shari’a*.¹⁴ Moreover, IS called out Saudi Arabia for its hypocrisy in the ways it talks about and relates to Shi’a. On the one hand, Saudi Arabia describes the Huthis in Yemen, a Zaydi Shi’a revivalist movement, as infidels, while on the other, it calls for respect and unity with the Shi’a of eastern Saudi Arabia.¹⁵ Further, IS explains that Saudi Arabia accommodates the practice of Shi’a Islam and the practice of *ashura* within its own borders. IS does this to undermine Saudi Arabia’s Islamic legitimacy and to illustrate that it is the only true bearer of Islam.

Likewise, IS criticizes the interfaith efforts that were started under King ‘Abd al ‘Aziz, which contravenes the Salafi ideas of *al-wala’ wa-l-bara’* (loyalty [to the Muslims] and disavowal [of the unbelievers]).¹⁶ Lastly, IS directs its ire at average Muslims from Saudi Arabia—calling them out for a lack of manliness or tribal pride—explaining that in the land of the revelations of Islam, the people are asleep and not fighting for Islam while European Muslims are joining up in droves and helping out the inchoate caliphate.¹⁷ From all of this, IS argues that it is the true heir of the legacy of the original Saudi Islamic State founded with Wahab in the late 18th century.¹⁸

To remedy these issues, IS has since the fall of 2014 conducted what it describes as qualitative military operations against Shi’a, Saudi security forces, and Westerners inside Saudi Arabia. These operations allow it to claim that it is winning on the battlefield because it is opening up the battle and forcing the Saudi state to choose sides. Further, this highlights Saudi hypocrisies related to its public practice and implementation of Islam. By mid-February 2016, according to an IS-front media group, al-Yaqin Media Center, IS conducted nine attacks inside Saudi Arabia.¹⁹ The majority of those targets were against Saudi Shi’a.²⁰

In addition to its attacks inside of Saudi Arabia, IS members from Saudi Arabia based in Iraq, Libya, Sinai Peninsula, Syria, and Yemen—which encompass a few thousand individuals—boast about how they are training to come back home and return the land of the two holy places of Islam (Mecca and Medina) to show intent and also as a way to motivate others to join with the cause and fight against the *taghut* Saudi government.

Conclusion

Showing how the Islamic State manipulates its broader meta-narratives to local environments highlights its flexibility—ways it is able to appeal to those in many locations by focusing on both general ideas with which people are familiar as well as societal debates and ideas people have been exposed to in a particular locale. While this paper only provided examples from Tunisia and Saudi Arabia, this could be equally applied to countries from France, Bosnia, Somalia, Afghanistan, and Malaysia to China. It shows not only the potency with which the Islamic State pushes its messaging but also how effectively it has packaged it to varying audiences with completely different histories and backgrounds.

1 Abu ‘Umar al-Baghdadi, “Hasad al-sinayn bi-dawla al-muwahidin,” al-Furqan Media, April 17, 2007

2 Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, “Ina dawlat al-islam baqiya,” al-Furqan Media, Aug. 7, 2011

3 To see the evolution and history in IS’s state-building enterprise, see Aaron Y. Zelin, “Experts weigh in (part 3): Is ISIS good at governing?,” Brookings Institution, Feb. 9, 2016. <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/markaz/posts/2016/02/09-experts-weigh-in-isis-governance-zelin-mccants>

4 Abu Bakr al-Hussayni al-Qurayshi al-Baghdadi, “Risalat ila al-mujahidin wa-l-ummah al-islamiyyah fi shuhri ramadan,” al-Furqan Media, July 2, 2014

5 For more on how IS governs, see Aaron Y. Zelin, “The Islamic State’s Territorial Methodology,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Research Notes 29, January 2016. <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-islamic-states-territorial-methodology>

6 For more on the apocalyptic ideas and messaging that IS uses, see William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State*, New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2015

7 The Islamic State, “Risala ila ahl tunis,” al-Itisam Media, Dec. 17, 2014

8 Ajnad al-Khilafah bi-Ifiqiyyah Media Foundation, “Hadha biyyan li-l-nas”

9 The Islamic State, “Bilad al-maghrib al-islami: mardin al-jadidah,” Wilayat al-Barakah Media Office, Jan. 21, 2016

10 The Islamic State, “al-Haqq bi-l-rakab,” Wilayat al-Jaza’ir Media Office, Jan. 20, 2016; The Islamic State, “Alaykum ya bini qawmi: risala,” Wilayat Hims Media Office, Jan. 20, 2016

11 The Islamic State, “al-Amaliyat al-amaniyyah fi tunis,” al-Naba newsletter, Issue #7, Nov. 28, 2015

12 For more on comparing the ideology of Saudi Arabia and IS, see Cole Bunzel, “The Kingdom and the Caliphate: Duel of the Islamic States,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Feb. 18, 2016. <http://carnegieendowment.org/2016/02/18/kingdom-and-caliphate-duel-of-islamic-states/iu4w>

13 The Islamic State, “Qal ini ‘ala bayyinah min rabi,” Wilayat Salah al-Din Media Office, Dec. 16, 2015

14 The Islamic State, “Ikhraju al-mushrikin min al-jazirah al-arab,” Wilayat al-Anbar Media Office, Dec. 17, 2015

15 The Islamic State, “Aal al-salut: al-wala’ wa-l-bara’,” Wilayat al-Janub Media Office, Dec. 17, 2015

16 The Islamic State, “al-Bakhr al-khabithah fi bilad al-haramayn al-asirah,” Wilayat al-Khayr Media Office, Dec. 19, 2015

17 Ibid

18 The Islamic State, “Wa-ina ghadan al-nadharahu qarib,” Wilayat al-Barakah Media Office, Dec. 18, 2015

19 The Islamic State, “Amaliyat al-dawlah al-islamiyyah fi bilad al-haramayn hata 5-7-1437 H,” al-Yaqin Media Center, Feb. 16, 2016

20 For more on why IS chooses to target Saudi Shi’a, see Aaron Y. Zelin, “The Islamic State’s Saudi Chess Match,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Watch 2432, June 2, 2015. <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-islamic-states-saudi-chess-match>