“AMONG THE BELIEVERS ARE MEN” THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS-NATIONALIST
IDENTITY AND RELIGIOUS LITERACY IN ISLAMIC STATE
RECRUITMENT EFFORTS IN THE WEST

By

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

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This research explores two facets of Islamic State recruitment efforts. First, it examines the role of religious-national identity in the Islamic State’s attempt to appeal to alienated and marginalized Muslims living in Western societies; and second, it explores the relationship between an individual’s level of religious literacy/knowledge and the proclivity to join the Islamic State and/or engage in extremist behaviors. I have conducted this research using a mixed-methods approach to test theoretically grounded expectations about the quantitative and qualitative attributes of religious-national content found in the Islamic State’s English-language magazine *Dabiq*; as well as various hypotheses pertaining to the relationship between religious literacy and the potentially extreme and violent behaviors of Islamic State recruits. This research provides a theoretical framework for understanding these phenomena, as well as empirical data that allows for testing previously unproven assumptions about ISIS recruits.
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DEDICATION

To all those who bravely question and doubt the dogmas of our day
1.1. Introduction

Shamima Begum was only 15 years old when she left her east London home in 2015 to join the Islamic State in Syria. Begum, now 19 and pregnant, was recently discovered in a Syrian refugee camp after she apparently escaped from Baghuz, one of the Islamic State’s last strongholds (BBC, 2019). When she left in 2015, Shamima was joined on her journey to Syria by two other fellow schoolgirls, Kadiza Sultana, 16, and Amira Abase, 15. Shamima is attempting to return to her home in Britain, but she and her family are facing political difficulties. Her case is not helped by the fact that she claims to be unapologetic and without regret for her decision to join the Islamic State (Smith A., 2019). The reemergence of Begum has once again reignited the debates and discussions surrounding the broader issue of Westerners becoming radicalized and either joining or pledging allegiance to extremist organizations like the Islamic State. What could drive a seemingly normal 15-year-old British schoolgirl to leave her affluent Western home to join the ranks of a violent and brutal organization like ISIS is a question that continues to vex policymakers and researchers alike. This research aims to contribute to our understanding of this troubling phenomenon.

This dissertation examines two facets of Islamic State recruiting efforts: first, the role of religious-national identity in the Islamic State’s recruitment strategy in the West; second, the relationship between individual religious literacy/knowledge and the proclivity to join and/or engage in extremist activity on behalf of the Islamic State.

The first study in this dissertation examines how/if ISIS makes religious-national identity appeals in its attempt to recruit marginalized Western Muslims. Addressing the rise and influence
of ISIS has been a top priority for the international community since at least 2014. Shortly after its founding, the Islamic State took control of large swaths of territory in both Iraq and Syria, largely due to a sizable and well-armed army made up of thousands of Syrian and Iraqi recruits, as well as thousands of foreign fighters from dozens of different countries—including many modern and affluent Western states. This fact begs the question, why would an individual living in a modern and affluent Western society feel compelled to join ISIS and its quest for a Caliphate? There have been several recent studies that have sought to answer this question, and all provide varying explanations for the relative success that ISIS has had recruiting in the West, such as cultural marginalization and alienation, lack of professional opportunities, and discrimination of Muslims by way of cultural attitudes and policy. While the important variables these studies point to are interesting and worth our attention, these studies do not address a vital question: of all the groups these individuals could have joined to fulfill their respective psychological needs, or to address individual identity needs and issues, why did they choose ISIS? Why didn’t these individuals choose instead to become more active in their local mosque, or a local community center in order to find meaning, belonging, and purpose?

I explore these questions by building a theoretical framework for understanding how social identity and the need for ontological security play a key role in ISIS’ recruitment strategies. I argue that the Islamic State makes deliberate efforts to appeal to recruits who meet a specific profile—an individual who feels alienated and marginalized, who has a weak sense of national identity, and who feels that they have been discriminated against specifically because of his/her Muslim heritage. I argue that the Islamic State’s leaders understand that national and religious identities are psychologically potent, and when combined into a single religious-national identity, the potency of this identity is compounded. ISIS’ leadership understands this; thus, I argue that the
Islamic State deliberately and strategically markets itself to potential Western recruits by promising to provide a viable and vibrant religious-national identity for otherwise alienated and marginalized individuals. Group membership provides these individuals with a sense of purpose and direction, a strong and meaningful religious and national identity, as well as secular and spiritual rewards in this life and in the life to come.

One of the greatest tools in the Islamic State’s recruiting arsenal is its online propaganda magazines. These are professionally-produced online periodicals that have been published regularly since 2014. To test my argument, I conducted a systematic image and textual content analysis of the Islamic State’s English-language online magazine Dabiq. Over 250 pages of the magazine were analyzed and coded for written and image religious-national content that resulted in significant findings.

The second study explores the role of religious literacy/knowledge in the cognitive processes of Islamic State recruits. There is conventional wisdom around acts of religiously-motivated terrorism—particularly around the phenomenon of Islamist terrorism—that those individuals who commit acts of terror in the name of religion are very likely religious novices or even completely irreligious. In other words, the assumption is that acts of religious terror are largely committed and claimed by individuals or groups that are only using religion as a pretext in the pursuit of non-religious geo-political goals. While there have been many media reports, and some academic studies, that have at least addressed the correlation between levels of religious literacy and ISIS recruitment, there is an absence of empirically-driven studies within the literature that have adequately examined and tested this assumption. This study aims to empirically examine the assumed, yet unproven, correlation between low levels of religious literacy/knowledge and the individuals who join or claim allegiance to ISIS and act violently on its behalf.
Using openly available data from various media sources, I built a biographical dataset of 300 individuals of Western origin who have attempted to join ISIS, successfully joined ISIS, and/or participated in an actual act of terror in the name of ISIS. By collecting key biographical information on these individuals, I was able to make an estimate of likely levels of religious literacy/knowledge of 216 Islamic State recruits. Some of these key biographical data-points included: training and education, religious activity and participation, personal statements and views, and the quality of any religious education or training the individual has received. This dataset, while imperfect, allowed for more empirical testing of the heretofore untested assumption around the relationship between religious literacy/knowledge and susceptibility to joining a group such as ISIS and engaging in extremist behaviors.

Beyond filling a gap in ISIS literature, this research promises to provide further and more compelling evidence for both domestic and international policy-makers to address integration and inclusion of potentially marginalized groups, as well as issues surrounding susceptible populations of religiously-illiterate individuals.

1.2. Structure

In the next chapter, I provide a literature review covering the link between various aspects of religion (i.e. belief, practice, doctrine) and violent acts, specifically terrorism. This literature review serves to place this study within the broader religious terrorism literature. Chapter Three provides a brief history of the Islamic State, and reviews some of the studies that have examined ISIS recruitment efforts in the West. Chapter Four is the first study of the dissertation, and provides a review of pertinent literature, a theoretical framework for the role of religious-national identity in ISIS recruitment in the West, and an analysis of Dabiq—the Islamic State’s English-language
digital magazine. Chapter Five covers the second study of the dissertation examining the role of religious literacy in ISIS recruitment, which includes a case study and analysis of a biographical dataset of Western ISIS recruits that was specifically built for this research. And finally, Chapter Six summarizes general findings and conclusions and will address possible short-comings of this research, as well as future directions.
CHAPTER TWO
RELIGION & TERRORISM

2.1. Introduction

How best to categorize the Islamic State has been a central sticking point for those studying the group—is it simply a “terror organization, or is it an “army of terror,” a “proto-religious-state,” a group of “thugs,” a “militant organization,” a “death cult,” or some combination of all of these? While defining what the Islamic State is will be addressed in this dissertation, what is almost universally undisputed is that the Islamic State is associated with the phenomenon of jihadist / Islamist extremism, and that the group uses terrorism as a tactic. With this baseline understanding of the group, this chapter will lay the foundation for studying the ISIS phenomenon by exploring the literature/s around terrorism, religion, and the relationship between them. This will help in placing this dissertation within the broader literature and will serve as the wider lens through which I am studying these questions around the Islamic State.

2.2. Terrorism

Defining terrorism has proven to be difficult, as it is a concept that has evolved and taken on different meanings for different people throughout modern history. Some researchers have argued that the term “terrorism” has taken on its own discourse with unique “terms, assumptions, labels, categories and narratives” all aimed at explaining terrorism; but the overarching problem is that “terrorism” and its meaning has largely been politicized and skewed for sensational effect by the media and politicians (see, e.g., Jackson, 2007; Mueller, 2005; Poole, 2002; Trust, 1997; Burke, 2004; Crenshaw M., 1995). In his seminal book, Inside Terrorism, Bruce Hoffman dedicates the entire first chapter to discussing the difficulty in defining “terrorism” for many of the same reasons.
outlined by those studies mentioned above. Hoffman delves deep into the history of terrorism, stemming back to the French Revolution; and from this historical and contemporary analysis of the rhetoric surrounding terrorism, Hoffman eventually arrives at a conceptual definition. For Hoffman, if an act is to be considered terrorism it must first, have political aims; second, be violent in nature; third, be designed to have psychological consequences beyond the immediate victims; and fourth, be conducted by a non-state organization with an identifiable chain of command (Hoffman, 2006). Or, as Hoffman more succinctly defines it, terrorism is “the deliberate creation and exploitation of fear through violence or the threat of violence in the pursuit of political change” (pg. 43). These criteria and the subsequent definition of terrorism outlined by Hoffman will serve as the operational definition for this study.

2.3. What Makes a Terrorist?

One top-down approach to understanding the roots of terrorism examines the relationship between economic and educational variables and terrorism. Conventional wisdom about terrorism seems to say that terrorists are almost always poor, disenfranchised, uneducated individuals who feel they have nothing to live for. However, there is ample research that shows that this conventional wisdom is fundamentally flawed. In a study examining the causal connection between poverty, education, and terrorism, Krueger and Maleckova examined public opinion and economic data from Palestinian and Lebanese population samples and found a very weak relationship between poverty or education and participation in terrorism. Their data indicate that terrorists “are at least as likely to come from economically advantaged families and have a relatively high level of education as to come from the ranks of the economically disadvantaged and uneducated” (Krueger & Maleckova, 2003). Additional studies support Krueger’s and
Maleckova’s findings that education and economic standing of terrorists is very similar to the standings of the surrounding populations (e.g., Ehrlich, 2002; Haddad & Khashan, 2002; Atran, 2003; Piazza, 2006).

Another top-down approach looks at the structural elements of society that contribute to terrorism. One study in this vein argues that structural explanations for terrorism are the most common, as they are easiest to operationalize, especially compared to those who, for example, look at psychology to explain terrorism. The study found three primary structural factors to be the primary causal mechanisms of terrorism: the level of modernization of a given society, the geographic location of said society, and the type of political system that exists within the society. These structures consist of several sub-structures that ultimately combine into a nebulous web that serves as the baseline for a structural causal model for explaining the emergence of terrorism within a given society (Ross, 1993).

2.3.1. Top-Down Approaches: Gender Roles and Patriarchal Explanation

One of the more intriguing explanations for the origins of terror is found in Robin Morgan’s book *The Demon Lover: Roots of Terrorism* (2001), wherein Morgan examines terrorism largely through a feminist lens that is informed by the perspective of women and gender conflicts. Through interviews and personal interaction with women from various groups that live in a world overshadowed by terrorism, as well as an historical analysis, Morgan ultimately concludes that the roots of terrorism are to be found in the world’s long history of abusive, patriarchal societies that seek power by means of violence and sexual domination. While Morgan’s definition of terrorism is far broader than the one being considered for this study, her work provides a unique, and often overlooked perspective on the possible root causes of terrorism.
2.3.2. Bottom-Up Approaches: Psychological Explanations

One of the primary bottom-up approaches to understanding and explaining terrorism is the psychological approach. In a different article, Crenshaw, while an advocate of psychological explanations for terrorism, warns that any psychological explanation of terrorism must consider multiple levels of analysis. Crenshaw argues that researchers must consider the psychological dynamics and relationships that exist between individuals and groups, as well as the relationship between individuals, groups, and society. Crenshaw also admonishes researchers to avoid attributing terrorism to psychological disorders or “irrationality,” as she perceives a general lack of empirical evidence to support these attributions (Crenshaw M., 2000). As mentioned, Crenshaw’s concerns about attributing terrorism to psychological disorders largely stems from the abundant studies done during the 1970s and 1980s which were very quick to assume that all terrorists were psychopaths or verifiably insane (e.g., Hacker, 1976; Cooper, 1977; Taylor, 1988).

More recently, despite Crenshaw’s admonition, there have been several studies that have attributed terrorism and its roots to the shared psychological disorders of those who participate in terrorism. One such study examined and compared two samples of Christian and Muslim terrorists, respectively. The researchers examined the psychological commonalities between the two samples of terrorists and found support for their hypothesis wherein they predicted they would find little behavioral or psychological differences between equally zealous Muslim and Christian believers. They found that a person with certain personality and psychological characteristics in a particular context will likely lead to similar behavioral results as those of a person with similar characteristics and context, regardless of some of the peripheral details of the person or context. In regard to the samples of Muslim and Christian terrorists this meant that, though these groups held significantly different religious beliefs, at least in terms of specific doctrine, their shared psychological
pathologies in an environment of “hate and fear” led to similar behavioral results, i.e. acts of terror (Schbley, 2006).

Fathali Moghaddam provides another psychological explanation for terror by using a metaphor of a narrowing staircase to explain how individuals become terrorists. In this theory, there is a staircase that consists of five different levels, and each level progressively takes an individual closer to the fifth level—which is joining and actively participating with a terrorist organization. All levels exist in the context of an individual “feeling deprived or unfairly treated,” and each level is a different step in the process of an individual trying to cope with these feelings of inequity. With each progressing level along the staircase, the individual feels progressively more desperate, until finally reaching the fifth level where the only option seems to be to violently lash out against “the other” via a terrorist organization that has been legitimized in their mind through their ascension of the narrowing staircase (Moghaddam, 2005).

2.4. Religion

Religion is another concept which has been variously defined without universal consensus on its meaning. Lyden (1995) argues that religion is difficult to define as a balance must be struck, wherein the definition is broad enough to include everything that could conceivably be considered religion, but also not so broad that it loses its meaning entirely.

Schleiermacher, writing in the mid-19th century, describes religion as a “feeling of ultimate dependence” wherein humans feel completely dependent on supernatural phenomenon (Schleiermacher, 1976). Like Schleiermacher, Rudolf Otto saw religion as a connection between dependent humans and the “the holy”; but Otto considers religion to be more than feeling, rather, it is an experience which includes a wide range of religious emotions of need, belonging, fear,
love, and even hate (Otto, 1950). Marx and Engels famously called religion the “opium of the people,” which obviously implies that religion is merely a drug of sorts that is given to people so that they can obtain a sense of happiness, fulfillment, and hope (Marx & Engels, 1978). Marx and Engels did not consider religion to be the cause of the oppression experienced by the exploited working class; rather, they considered the emergence of religion to be a byproduct of the inequalities produced by the capitalist system. Sigmund Freud considered religion to be nothing more than a neurosis which stems from the human need for an omniscient parent figure who watches over and protects. Freud considered religion not only to be an irrational illusion or psychological projection but damaging and unhealthy (Freud, 1933).

Significant thinkers in the twentieth century have equally weighed in on the conceptual definition of religion. Jean-Paul Sartre, a prominent existentialist thinker, viewed religion as nothing more than a human creation designed to avoid responsibility for what happens in the world. Sartre argues that if we can come to realize that God does not exist, and that religion is merely a pretext, then humans can finally take full responsibility for our own moral and immoral actions (Sartre, 1957). Paul Tillich, a prominent theologian in the early twentieth-century, argues that religion is the manifestation of human’s “ultimate concern,” meaning, what humans value most. He argues that religion is pervasive, in that everyone has some ultimate concern, therefore, everyone has a religion. But his argument is that not all religions are equally valid, as some ultimate concerns are better and more correct than others (Tillich, 1957).

Beyond the more philosophical or theological understandings of religion, religious studies, as a social science, largely defines religions as “groups of people who share beliefs in supernatural phenomena” (Cragun, 2013, pg. 21). Given the interests of this research, the more practical the
conception of religion, the better; therefore, understanding religion to be a group built around shared beliefs in the supernatural provides a sufficiently clear definition.

2.5. The Relationship Between Religion and Terrorism: Does Religion Really Matter?

For many, the salience of religion today is an undisputed fact. There are certainly individuals, especially in the western world, who have claimed that the importance and influence of religion has been, and will continue to be, in decline as secular societies and science continue to advance (Bloom, 1992; Berger, 1999). Events occur on a daily basis, however, that refute these claims and remind us that religion permeates and influences every aspect of human affairs—from the smallest local levels to the international political system. Religion becomes especially germane when examining the religious elements of conflict and violence. According to a Pew Research Center study, as of 2013, more than one-quarter of the world’s countries suffer from high levels of social hostilities involving religion (Pew Research Center, 2015).

Several studies argue that the religious beliefs of an individual who commits an act of terror are ultimately unimportant. In one large study, for example, Robert Pape documented all suicide bombings from the years 1980 to 2003. In his study of over 300 such suicide attacks, he determined that “there is little connection between suicide terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism, or any one of the world’s religions” (Pape, 2005). Pape concluded that it was primarily geopolitical conflict and socio-economic issues that served as the primary catalysts behind the actions of suicide bombers, rather than religious conviction or belief. There are several studies that have drawn similar conclusions to those of Pape, where they found that what was conventionally believed to be a religiously-motivated violent conflict actually had other more empirically supported causal explanations than religion, though religion did play a role (Barnes, 2005; Schbley, 2006). Even
scholars who emphasize the role of religion in certain terrorist acts also recognize that it is not always the primary explanatory variable, even in a conflict that is perceived to be overtly religious in nature. Just as Gregg’s definition outlines, it is not enough that religion is used as justification for an act of terror to be considered religiously-motivated—the goals must actually be overtly religious.

Mark Juergensmeyer concedes that there are situations where religious terrorism or violence can actually be justified or explained by other means; however, he emphasizes that there are many situations where “religion often provides the mores and symbols that make possible bloodshed—even catastrophic acts of terrorism” (Juergensmeyer, 2001).

Like Juergensmeyer, there have been many researchers who have shown that religion has played, and will continue to play, a significant role in world affairs, including terrorism and political violence. For example, there were several case studies done of the major world religions, and the findings among the various researchers argued that the supposed secularization movement currently growing throughout the world has actually strengthened religiosity and its role in world affairs (Berger, 1999; Cesari, 2005). In his seminal work, Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence, Mark Juergensmeyer, mentioned above, argues that the end of the Cold War left a vacuum of moral leadership. He argues that because there was no capitalism or communism to fight for, the state was left devoid of a moral impetus with which it could inspire its citizens. The primary consequence of this vacuum, Juergensmeyer argues, is a turn to religious movements and zealotry—movements that inevitably create friction and conflict in the fight for moral supremacy (Juergensmeyer, 2001).

In a similar vein, in his case study of Aum Shinrikyo in Japan, Ian Reader argues that understanding the linkage between violence and religion is indispensable in understanding many
acts of terror, including the Tokyo subway sarin attacks of 1995 committed by Aum Shinrikyo. Reader argues that we can only fully understand the intentions and motivations of this group when we understand their interpretations of specific Buddhist beliefs regarding the end of the world (Reader, 2000). Here is an example that falls squarely into the definition of religiously-motivated terrorism, as the actions of Aum Shinrikyo were based in religious belief and text and were motivated by the overtly religious goal of bringing about the end of the world.

As has been mentioned above, the vast majority of researchers examining religiously-motivated terrorism concede that religion is not, and cannot be, the only explanatory variable when attempting to fully understand religious terror, even when that terrorism holds clear religious goals and thereby falls under the definition of religiously-motivated terrorism being used in this study. However, for many researchers, religion is the common denominator that penetrates and attaches itself to all causal variables, even if religion is only loosely attached to an act of terror. One such study that illustrates this perspective is Jessica Stern’s work *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill* (2003). In this study, Stern looks exclusively at conflicts that include some religious element and utilizes personal interviews and historical analysis to make her argument. Stern identifies five specific “grievances” that contribute to an individual’s decision to join a religiously-motivated terrorist organization. These grievances are: alienation, that is, alienation from mainstream society; humiliation, which occurs when a group feels economically, militarily, or culturally humiliated to the point of a desire to retaliate against those who are responsible for the humiliation; demographics, where population shifts cause friction between competing religious traditions; history, where certain interpretations of historical events can be highly influential in causing severe grievances between groups; and territory, which typically comes into consideration when there are lands that have sacred significance for two or more competing religious traditions.
Stern illustrates how there may be many different explanatory variables for the occurrence of religious terrorism, however, from her perspective, underlying all of these variables is the common denominator: religion.

2.5.1. Religious Belief and Support for Terrorism

Ample research has examined the relationship between religious belief and practice, and support for terrorism. The research positing a link between religious belief and violence arguably began to accelerate with the much discussed, and often reviled, work of Samuel Huntington. His primary argument is that the root of practically all current and future conflict stems from the tensions between the Muslim World and the West, or more specifically, that the religious difference and friction between Islam and Christianity are the underlying causes of violence and conflict in the world (Huntington, 1993; 1996). In recent years among many public intellectuals, there has been strong support for this notion put forward by Huntington that religious belief and faith were the root causes of terrorism and religious violence (e.g., Lewis, 1990; Laquer, 1999; Dawkins, 2003; Harris, 2005; Mendelsohn, 2005). However, there have been several empirical studies that show, largely through the use of survey data, that these assertions about the relationship between religious belief and activity and support for violence and terrorism are not entirely sound (e.g., Tessler & Nachtwey, 1998; Tessler & Robbins, 2007; Ginges, Hansen, & Norenzaya, 2009). One such study conducted a large-scale public opinion survey in Pakistan, which measured the relationship between three different elements of religiosity—religious practice, support for political Islam, and “jihadism”—and support for militant terrorist organizations. The findings of the study showed that there was a very weak relationship between religious practice, support for political Islam, and support for militant groups. However, the study did find that those Pakistanis who indicated in the survey that they believed that jihad could be both an internal, pious struggle
for righteousness, and an external militarized struggle, were more supportive of terrorist groups and their actions (Fair, Malhotra, & Shapiro, 2012).

2.5.2. Religious Doctrine and Terrorism

While there have been many studies dedicated to understanding the relationship between religiosity and support for terrorism, perhaps most significant to the current study and research question is the literature surrounding the relationship between religious doctrine and terrorism, or doctrinal justifications for terrorism. Terrorists often justify their actions by citing certain doctrinal foundations that purportedly validate their violent acts. Human history is replete with examples of civilizations and societies invoking divinely inspired revelation or doctrine to justify violent overthrow of rival kingdoms, the desecration of the holy sites of rival religious traditions, and many other violent acts. Doctrinal justifications for violent acts seem to be lacking legitimacy, especially to many in modern society. Many modern researchers have sought to explain why or how religious doctrine and dogma have been, and continue to be, utilized to justify terrible acts of violence.

In his highly influential book *Violence and the Sacred*, French anthropologist René Girard explores how humans have used the sacred to justify violence throughout human history. Girard argues that violence is endemic to societies and individual nature, and that religion developed as a means of turning the internal violence of communities outward toward what Girard terms to be the “other” or the “scapegoat.” By turning violent acts outward toward the scapegoat, humans defend themselves “against their own violence,” and their religious traditions serve to legitimize violent actions, as humans can then perceive these violent acts to be “holy” and legal as “opposed to a violence that is unjust, illegal, and illegitimate” (Girard, 1977).
Thus, religion and doctrine have been used to appease the natural human desire for violence by justifying and legitimizing a society that has turned its internal violence outward toward a scapegoat. James Williams makes a similar argument by examining the history of violence that has been justified specifically by biblical text. His argument, couched in Girard’s scapegoat concept, is that biblical text, rather than providing justification for violent actions in the name of religion, actually illustrates the fact that humans, and not God, are the sources of violent actions, and that the Bible actually illustrates God’s love in the face of this pervasive human-caused violence (Williams, 1991).

Girard and Williams represent elements of the broader literature surrounding religious doctrine and violence, but within the more specific literature on religious terrorism, there is an overarching and complex puzzle that seems to be addressed by practically each respective study that explores the relationship between doctrine and terrorism. This puzzle is understanding the dynamics that exist in the acts of terror that are couched in, and justified by, religious doctrine that seemingly deems such violent actions to be a divine duty or sacramental act that is upheld and sustained by holy text and endorsed by ecclesiastical authority. Many researchers may disregard religious doctrine as unimportant or insignificant, but there are ample studies that show that “sacred terrorists find their rationale in the past, either in divine instructions transmitted long ago or in interpretations of precedents from found periods of the parent religion” (Rapoport, 1984). Those who commit acts of terror or violence in the name of their religion do not believe themselves to be “terrorists,” rather, they are, from their own perspective and that of their supporters, simply performing a kind of pious and holy duty that they feel justified in doing because of specific doctrinal precepts of their religion (Abdel-Khalek, 2004). It seems intuitive, and even obvious, that within each religious tradition there are elements of the doctrine that could potentially support
an act of terror or violence, as well as doctrine that would condemn and decry such acts (Dalacoura, 2002).

One of the primary doctrinal tenets that seems to feed religious violence and terrorism in multiple religious traditions is a strong millennialist or apocalyptic belief. One example of the influence of apocalyptic beliefs, as outlined in Bruce Hoffman’s article “Holy Terror: The Implications of Terrorism Motivated by a Religious Imperative,” is the Christian white-supremacist group that believed God would punish and end the world if “Aryan Nation” members did not do all that they could to “build a new, all-white nation” as “scripture demands it” (Hoffman, 1995).

In examining these questions, one must also consider the differences that exist between religious traditions and recognize those unique elements that could arguably make certain religious traditions more prone to committing acts of violence and terror. James Johnson argues that in many modern societies, the notion of waging war on a religious premise is deemed to be an antiquated idea that has lost both its luster and legitimacy. However, wars waged with a perceived religious purpose still have wide support from believers in certain religious movements (Johnson, 1997; see also Al-Khattar, 2003). Many of these religious movements that may be more prone to religiously-motivated violence and terror are those that have sought to return to core “fundamentalist” doctrinal understandings or interpretations of their respective religious tradition. For example, an analysis of Sunni fundamentalists in Egypt and Syria found that much of the justification for religious violence among these fundamentalists was the perceived perversion of core Islamic doctrines and the need to correct these perversions by necessarily violent means (Sivan, 1985). Finding the relationship between religious fundamentalism and its adherents’ desire to eradicate
the world of what they perceive to be perverted forms of sacred doctrines has been the task of many researchers (e.g., Esposito, 2003; Rogersa, et al., 2007; Pratt, 2010).
3.1. ISIS: A Brief History

The story behind the rise of ISIS arguably begins on March 20, 2003, when President George W. Bush announced the United States’ invasion of Iraq. The initial campaign was over relatively quickly, as expected, when Saddam Hussein’s government collapsed in early April of 2003. What would prove to be a pivotal moment in the rise of the Islamic State came in May 2003 when Paul Bremer, the Bush-appointed head of the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq, disbanded the Iraqi military and fired all members of the ruling Ba’ath Party from all governmental positions (Stern & Berger, 2016). This decision left more than 100,000 Sunni Ba’athists unemployed, angry, and armed (Otterman, 2005)—a combination that would prove to be instrumental in the rise, and subsequent staying power, of ISIS.

The group that served as the pre-cursor to ISIS was al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). AQI held ties to the Bin Laden led al-Qaeda, but the founding father and key figure for AQI was not Bin Laden, rather a man named Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (Weiss & Hassan, 2015). Zarqawi was a Jordanian who hailed from the Bani Hassan tribe that resided on the East Bank of the Jordan River. Early on, al-Zarqawi proved to be an unpromising student and only ever became semiliterate. He became radicalized through the mentorship of several influential religious leaders, including a man named Abdullah Azzam. Through the influence of Azzam and other extremist Islamic thinkers, Zarqawi eventually became convinced of the doctrine found in contemporary Salafism which advocates for a return to the theological purity of the teachings and traditions of the Prophet Muhammad. Beyond advocating for a return to theological purity, Zarqawi fiercely believed that “Muslims had both an
individual and a communal obligation to expel conquering or occupying armies from their sacred lands” (Weiss & Hassan, 2015).

These rigid beliefs were reflected in the brutal tactics of AQI from 2004 until the death of al-Zarqawi in 2006. Terror attacks within Iraq rose exponentially during this time consisting of car bombings, mass shootings, and a highly disturbing string of public beheadings, all committed by AQI. Zarqawi was eventually killed by a U.S. air strike in the summer of 2006, but his legacy and influence would persist. Only months after his death, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) was formed, though it experienced relatively limited success and influence, largely due to the Sunni Awakening in Iraq’s al-Anbar province (Cottam, Huseby, & Baltodano, 2016).

Just seven years after the death of Zarqawi and the creation of ISI, a civil war was raging in Syria between the Assad regime and Syrian rebels seeking to overthrow it. In the spring of 2013, ISI, now under the leadership of a man named Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (recognized by his followers as the Caliph Ibrahim) announced that ISI would henceforth be known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Later that same year, ISIS announced their campaign to establish control over physical territory in both Iraq and Syria; and in 2014, ISIS announced the reestablishment of the Caliphate. In the months following the announcement, the Islamic State was able to take control of a significant amount of territory, including key cities, such as Raqqa in Syria, and Mosul, Iraq’s second largest city (McCants, 2015). The peak of ISIS’s success, however, has come and gone as the groups influence and power has been in relative decline over the past year especially.

At its peak the Islamic State controlled nearly one third of Iraqi territory, but after a series of key victories for Iraqi forces, the Iraqi government officially declared victory over ISIS in December of 2017 (Simon, 2018). This declared victory, however, may be premature in some
sense; though ISIS has lost territorial control in Iraq and Syria, it continues to carry out operations and attacks in both countries, throughout the region, and internationally.

3.2. Who Joins ISIS?

Estimates of the size of the Islamic State’s fighting force have varied widely, ranging from 20,000 to as many as 100,000 fighters (RT.com, 2014; White J., 2014). As of December 2015, more reliable accounts based on more concrete data estimated the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria had recruited approximately 30,000 fighters from 85 different countries to join their cause. And of those 30,000 recruits, it is estimated that approximately 5,000 have come from Western states (Schmitt & Sengupta, 2015), including: most members of the European Union, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (Benmelech & Klor, 2016). In addition to those individuals who have physically relocated to Syria or Iraq in order to join the Islamic State’s “army of terror,” ISIS has claimed responsibility for inspiring and directing several recent terror attacks in Western states, most of which were carried out largely by radicalized Westerners. Over a dozen such attacks have occurred since 2014 and have claimed the lives of hundreds and injured thousands (Yourish, Watkins, Giratikanon, & Lee, 2016). Why do these individuals, especially those from the West, choose to join ISIS? The immediate threats posed by ISIS makes this question highly salient, but perhaps the threats stemming from the underlying societal issues that an examination of this question could reveal are even more meaningful than the immediate threats themselves. Several recent studies have explored this and related questions over the past few years, and conclusions are somewhat general and address variables that are not granular enough to address the question of individual-level decision-making.

The Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) at West Point produced a report based on a trove of recently obtained ISIS documents that contain personal and demographic information for
thousands of ISIS recruits during 2013 and 2014 (Dodwell, Milton, & Rassler, 2016). NBC News covered the release of the report and summarized many of the highlights. For example, the report found that most of the recruits did not indicate a desire to be martyrs or suicide bombers, as only 12 percent of recruits “ticked the box for martyrdom” (Engel, Smith, & Connor, 2016). Several experts explain that this seemingly low number of volunteers for martyrdom is not necessarily a reflection of devotion, but rather, it reflects “how ISIS marketed itself to the world and the kind of future it envisioned” (2016). In other words, perhaps the desire to live in the glory of the actual Caliphate is stronger in recruits than is the desire to die on its behalf.

The report further finds that the age-range, familial status, and education levels vary among recruits, though there are several general patterns that could be identified. The average age of enlistees was 26 or 27 years old, but some recruits were under the age of 15, and the oldest recruit was 70 years old. More than 60 percent of the fighters were single, but 30 percent reported being married, and “they had more than 2,000 children between them” (Engel, Smith, & Connor, 2016). The CTC report also shows that these recruits were not uneducated, as conventional wisdom might indicate; rather, the documents show that nearly 60 percent of the enlistees had a high school education or higher (Dodwell, Milton, & Rassler, 2016). The CTC report also looked at religious education data where they found that only 1.2 percent of recruits attended a religious institution, such as a madrassa. However, just over one hundred individuals reported studying religion or sharia at an educational institution, but not an explicitly religious one.

The data also show several distinct moments where recruiting numbers peaked, and each of those moments appears to coincide with statements or actions that would potentially inspire and motivate more recruits to the Islamic State’s cause. One peak came in 2013 after the group rebranded itself and officially became the Islamic State. And the second surge, which was
significantly larger than the 2013 influx of recruits, came in July 2014 when the Islamic State had recently captured key cities and territory, and after Baghdadi’s announcement that ISIS was “establishing a caliphate with dominion over the world’s Muslims” (Engel, Smith, & Connor, 2016).

Richard Barrett (2014) conducted one of the first major studies of foreign fighters in Syria, and while Barrett looked at other Islamist groups in addition to the Islamic State, he found several common threads between recruits. Barrett finds that recruits are almost always young [15-29 years old], militarily inexperienced, “disaffected, aimless and lacking a sense of identity or belonging…who are seeking a greater sense of purpose and meaning in their lives” (Barrett, pg. 18). In addition to feeling disenfranchised and alienated, these individuals might also feel compelled by the somewhat romanticized prospect of becoming a martyr in an anciently prophesied battle against the “infidels,” or simply against those who attack Muslims and Islam (pg. 18). In fact, he argues that these individuals may be simply thrill seekers who are searching out opportunities for adventure and escape from their current condition. Based on his analysis of social media posts, specifically tweets, Barrett ultimately concludes that the motivations of these Western recruits are largely a mixed bag, in that they have various motivations and no single variable that explains their decision to which we can point.

Unlike Barrett, Katherine Leggiero (2015) focuses exclusively on ISIS’ strategies for garnering the favor of Western recruits, and more specifically, policies and strategies for countering ISIS’ recruiting efforts. Leggiero covers a wide range of possible explanations for ISIS recruiting efforts in the West (i.e. social media use, identity politics, etc.), but her conclusions read more like a long list of potential possibilities that have been proposed, rather than an analysis of what the most important variables actually are. Leggiero, like Barret, also asserts that those
individuals who join ISIS feel excluded and alienated in Western societies and may join ISIS to find a sense of purpose and identity (Leggiero, pg. 17).

Benmelech and Klor (2016) are also asking why people from around the world are joining ISIS and claim to have conducted the first “systematic” analysis of the link between ISIS foreign fighters and economic, political and social variables. Through their analysis of state-level economic, political and social data, they come to two primary conclusions: first, that poor economic conditions do not account for Westerners deciding to join ISIS, nor do political conditions; and second, that Western recruits are driven by ideology and “difficulty of assimilation into homogenous Western countries” (pg. 1). An issue with Benmelech and Klor’s analysis is the state-level data they use. These state-level data sets are not granular enough to account for pockets of underprivileged neighborhoods in these Western countries where Muslim populations are often highly concentrated. Concluding that country-level income inequality data, or even a country’s GDP, and the number of ISIS recruits are positively correlated is ultimately unhelpful, as this does not account for community or individual-level conditions. Despite those shortcomings, however, Benmelech and Klor appear to concur with the near consensus among researchers examining this question that Western recruits have not been fully integrated into their respective Western societies, and thus feel alienated and excluded; and this alienation can occur for multiple reasons, including: national origin, racial or ethnic background, and/or religious identity (e.g., Adida, Laitin, & Valfort, 2016; Block, 2016; Brown, 2014; Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2014).

A report from a group of researchers at Quantum Communications (2015), a Lebanon-based communications agency, attempts to address the “why” questions surrounding ISIS recruits, rather than the “who, when and how” (pg. 3). Using a psycho-contextual analytical technique, the researchers conduct an in-depth analysis of interviews conducted with a sample of ISIS recruits.
The report similarly concludes that Western individuals who choose to join ISIS typically feel alienated and marginalized and are seeking something to fill psychological needs for identity and belonging. The report develops a typology of “seekers” to categorize recruits by motivations for joining ISIS. There are nine seeker categories, one of which is the “identity seekers,” or those who “need the structure, rules, and perspective that come from belonging to a group, because belonging defines them, their role, their friends, and their interaction with society. They often feel like outsiders in their initial unfamiliar/unintelligible environment and seek to identify with another group” (pg. 5). And of those recruits who were categorized as identity seekers, 63% came from Western countries (pg. 10).

The findings from the studies outlined above are relatively well-established. It is generally accepted that Western ISIS recruits typically feel alienated and marginalized in their respective Western societies and are often seeking out some greater fulfillment and purpose in life, in addition to an identity to which they can attach themselves. What these studies, and the body of work around these questions, fail to fully explore is why these individuals specifically choose ISIS to fulfill their identity needs as opposed to another group or community. Why is ISIS and its message particularly resonant with these individuals? It is my contention that the Islamic State makes a unique appeal to these marginalized Westerners by providing them with a religious-national identity that fulfills all their ontological needs, and that because these potential recruits are lacking in religious literacy/knowledge they are ill-equipped to critically question religious-national message of the Islamic State. This argument is explored and tested in the following chapters.
CHAPTER FOUR
RELIGIOUS-NATIONALISM & THE ISLAMIC STATE

4.1. Introduction

As has been discussed, our understanding of what exactly draws recruits to the Islamic State is not sufficiently robust or granular. We know that ISIS has successfully recruited thousands of Westerners, and that these individuals often feel alienated and marginalized within their respective Western communities; but why do they choose ISIS, as opposed to another organization that could, theoretically, fulfill some or all of the same needs? This chapter begins by building a theoretical framework for understanding how the Islamic State has built a religious-national identity, and how it has subsequently used this compounded identity in its attempts to recruit individuals in the West. Within the theoretical framework I have also developed a series of expected characteristics/behaviors of religious-national groups and individuals, which will be tested and explored in the analysis. After the theoretical framework, the results of the analysis of religious-national content in the Islamic State’s digital magazine, Dabiq, will be discussed and concluded on. The analysis will be followed by an exploration of the expected behaviors of religious-nationalists, and how well the characteristics and behaviors of the Islamic State align with those expected of religious-nationalists. Finally, the chapter will end with a general conclusions and discussion section.

4.2. Social Identity Theory

Humans have daily encounters with vast amounts of information, and in order to effectively filter and process this information, humanity has evolved to possess several cognitive tools to aid that process. One of these tools is categorization (Brown, 2000), which allows us to quickly, and
often unconsciously, place what we observe into cognitive categories so that we can efficiently understand what we are observing. A natural consequence of this is the innate process of categorizing ourselves and others into different groups. A group, from a social perspective, can be defined as a “collection of people who are perceived to belong together and are dependent on one another” (Cottam et. al., 2016, pg. 507). One of the issues that emerges from categorizing ourselves and others into groups are the innate biases we carry, and our inability to avoid subjectivity in our categorization. Thus, we tend to accentuate differences between groups/categories and then attach subjective meaning to those differences.

The process of categorizing oneself and others into groups fulfills certain psychological needs that must be met for every individual. As social animals, humans have a psychological need to place themselves within larger human society, as this placement serves as a key element to individual identity, or what Tajfel (1974) describes as our social identity. Social identity is that aspect of an individual’s self-concept and self-worth that derives from his/her membership in certain social groups. Beyond simply identifying with a particular group, individuals will constantly compare their own in-group with relevant out-groups in hopes of deriving positive comparisons and, consequently, a more positive self-image (Turner, Brown, & Tajfel, 1979). Members of groups will constantly strive for a positive self-image, and if their current group is not providing that through positive comparisons with relevant out-groups, it is possible that group members will attempt to find a different group that will more meaningfully provide for his/her psychological needs for a positive self-image.
4.3. Nations & National Identity

One of the most important group identities that humans have created, and that we categorize ourselves and others into, are national groups or nations. A “nation,” as a social concept, lacks a clear and conclusive definition. The nation has been variously described as an “imagined” (Anderson, 1983) and an “abstract” community (James, 1996). Thus, the nation is considered by many to be a community that exists in the abstract, rather than an objectively observable entity. While a nation may be imagined, or exist only in the abstract, the attachment the community collectively feels is tangibly real, and is based on shared aspects of identity, such as language, culture, religion, or ethnicity (Lamy, et. al., 2019, pg. 406).

One key difference between nations and other groups is a strong desire for a physical territory where the nation can establish a homeland, to which members can flock and find solidarity. The term “nation” is often used synonymously with the concept of a “state” or “country,” but the existence of a nation is not necessarily contingent upon the group being sovereign over geographic territory, nor is an official governing body necessary for a nation’s existence. What is necessary to be considered a nation, however, is a collective desire for these things—sovereignty, territory, and centralized leadership (White G., 2007). Given that, national groups will operate with the desire to establish and obtain physical territory, which is often land that has historical or even spiritual meaning to the collective national group. Controlling sovereign territory provides a nation with legitimacy in the eyes of other groups, as well as a level of autonomy necessary for national self-determination to take root and flourish.

The concept of nationalism has enjoyed a very wide breadth and depth of attention from all social science disciplines. The earliest attempts to address and define nationalism conceived it to be a specific political ideology (e.g. Hayes, 1931; Kellas, 1991; Smith A., 1979, 1983. This
understanding of nationalism has come under intense scrutiny and has been widely rejected, as a conception of “nationalism as an ideology has no specific substantive content” (Cottam & Cottam, 2001, pg. 8). For several decades, a “functionalist” conception of nationalism, beginning with Hayes (1931), and further reiterated by prominent works by Deutsch (1966), Gellner (1983), and Anderson (1983) dominated our understanding of nationalism. A functionalist conception of nationalism largely focuses on the developmental-historical understanding of the phenomenon, where the emergence of nationalism is understood to be a transition from more traditional society to a more modern one, characterized by the emergence of mass politics. While this historically based understanding of nationalism can be helpful in some ways, there are shortcomings in terms of focusing purely on events and not sufficiently tying this theoretical framework to actual political behavior (Cottam & Cottam, 2001).

Emerson defines nationalism (Emerson, 1960) as a strong identity attachment to a national community. Cottam and Cottam further clarify Emerson’s definition of nationalism by describing it as “a modern-day behavioral manifestation of identity community attachments” (2000). In other words, nationalism is an intense attachment to a community of people who collectively feel a strong shared past and an equally strong sense of a collective future. The intense attachment between members of a national group is not necessarily to one another, but to the community itself; this shared social identity, built around the national community, is what binds these individuals together as a group. A shared collective identity serves as the life-blood of a nation, for without it, a nation cannot sustain itself, much less come into existence in the first place. Understanding the psychological variables of identity that create nationalism and nationalistic behaviors allows for a certain level of predictability or, at least, reliable assumptions about how nationalistic actors will behave. A psychologically-based conception of nationalism as an identity attachment allows for
an analysis of this political concept in a behaviorally relevant way. Unlike many of the conceptions of nationalism addressed above, Emerson and Cottam & Cottam’s conception of nationalism sufficiently ties a theoretical framework to actual political behavior.

4.4. Religious Identity

As outlined above, a religion is a group built around shared beliefs in the supernatural. Attachment to a religious community can, like all attachments to social groups, provide its members with a positive and meaningful self-image. Religious identity, however, carries qualities that are unique to religious practice and belief (Ysseldyk, Matheson, & Anisman, 2010). Attachment to a religious group brings an inherent belief system that can have, not just temporal, but eternal ramifications. Beyond having eternal ramifications, one’s religious belief is couched in the idea that one’s own belief system actually holds the truth about matters of eternal consequence (Stark, 2001; Wellman & Tokuno, 2004). The depth of meaning one can draw from identifying with a religious group can create particularly strong bonds between members (Cameron, 2004), as these shared supernatural beliefs bind members to a sense of moral and behavioral solidarity (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992). Juergensmeyer explains that a shared religion can form a bond among a community much like ethnicity, culture, or language can, but the differentiating component of religion from these other bonding variables is the ideological element that can serve as a primary motivator of political action and activism. Where nationalism provides the communal attachment, religion provides an eternally significant ideology around which the community can rally and unify on an even deeper level (Juergensmeyer, 1996).

Religious identity, like national identity, is also concerned with territory and establishing a geographic and defined physical homeland. This territory is not necessarily referring to large
swaths of land considered holy or sacred by a given religious group, though it can be; rather, religions can be territorially defined by creating bounded places such as churches, synagogues, temples, and mosques, where within these “territories”, a collective solidarity is shared by all who reside within its borders (Haynes, 1997). Religious groups are further bound together by a shared belief-system in the supernatural: be it a shared belief in God, a shared holy text, or a shared belief in what happens into the eternities. Thus, religious groups, like nations, are bound together by a shared communal past and destiny but are additionally bound by a collective belief in their understanding of the divine. The similarities between these two identity-signifiers (religion and nation) makes them ripe for compatibility as a composite identity, as each fulfills self-reinforcing aspects of what a group can provide for its members in terms of psychological need. This composite identity that emerges can be described as religious-nationalism.

4.5. Religious-Nationalism and the Islamic State: A Theoretical Framework

Explanations for the rise of ISIS are as numerous and varied as the number of individuals studying this international phenomenon. Stern and Berger point out that any explanation for the rise of ISIS must necessarily be multidimensional, as there is no complete single explanation (2016). Some will inevitably attribute its rise to competition for access to oil and natural gas pipelines, while others could blame the United States government for evangelizing democracy while ignoring basic civil and political rights (e.g. Carothers, 2002; Zakaria, 1997). Stern and Berger further explain that the rise of ISIS has also been viewed by some as nothing more than “untamed Wahabism” (2016; Kirkpatrick, 2014). Again, while there might be some validity to each of these points, none can be the only explanation for the rise of the Islamic State.
Though several books and articles have been written on religious-nationalism (RN), the concept has arguably not been adequately defined. Both religion and nationalism have received ample attention in terms of conceptualization, but the occurrence of religious-nationalism has received significantly less scrutiny. Juergensmeyer (2001) argues that religious-nationalism occurs when religious and political ideologies are “intertwined.” This description is insufficient, and a more specific exploration of RN, particularly in the context of Islam and ISIS, is required.

Juergensmeyer (1993) suggests that religion and nationalism have historically been competitors—vying for supremacy over the individual identities of a given society. While this tension between nationalists and religionists has occurred throughout a variety of societies, this tension has been particularly true within many Muslim societies. The Middle East, for example, has suffered intense, decades-long conflict largely rising out of contention between Arab nationalists and Islamists (Esposito, 2016). This dichotomy rises out of one group’s desire to emphasize the establishment of a secular national identity for a stronger society, while the other wants to emphasize the religious identity as a communal guide—equally damaged and threatened identities among practically all Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East. One major contributor to these weak identities, and national identity in particular, is the colonial history of the region that has plagued these societies in recent centuries.

Given the colonial history of the Middle East, and the arbitrarily drawn state borders that resulted from the region’s colonial past, individuals there have been far less-likely to hold strong identities tied to the state, which has resulted in a dearth or a void of strong secular-national identities within the region. This situation directly contributed to weakened and damaged identities is one of the primary catalysts behind the rise of the Islamic State and its ability to recruit both among those living in the Middle East, as well as those in the West.
For purposes of this paper, the colonial era of most interest here is the division of Arab territories after the fall of the Ottoman Empire following World War I through the end of Middle East colonialism after World War II. According to Nasr, the colonial era ended in the late 1940’s, following World War II, when Britain and France began to withdraw from their colonial territories (Nasr, 1999). Nasr states that “the emergence of Muslim states involved negotiated withdrawals of colonial powers” (1999). One example of these negotiations is the creation of Afghanistan (not technically part of the Middle East, but a Muslim state that resulted from this process), which was formed purely as a buffer state between British India and Czarist Russia. By the 1970s, most Muslim territories had gained independence from their respective colonial powers and were either functioning as independent states or as a part of an independent non-Muslim state. Though technically free from colonial rule, colonialism’s influence persisted as it greatly influenced the shaping of the political systems, economies, ideologies, and societies of these newly emerging Muslim states. There were some within these societies who welcomed colonial influences as they had become enamored with the West and Western institutions. However, these individuals largely consisted of the wealthy kings and aristocrats that would also become the enemies of Islamic extremists, as they were perceived to be the embodiment of the evils and corrupt nature of Western modernity and lifestyle (Zakaria, 2001).

This post-colonial period presented the Muslim world with this new conception of territorial states, a concept wholly foreign to them in the premodern era. In fact, while “Muslims were conscious of ethnic, linguistic, and regional differences among them,” up to that point they had been politically unified under the caliphate, which was ruled in the name of Islam and included no conception of political territories or borders (Nasr, 1999). In many ways, these newly created
territorial states undermined the Islamic principle of *ummah* (broader Islamic community), a concept that “calls Muslims not only to unite across national boundaries but to place Islam above all other political allegiances in their everyday lives” (Nasr, 1999). But rather than focusing on Islamic identity and building the Islamic community, new, “democratic,” and entirely secular governments were installed and upheld by former colonial powers. The issue was, however, that “behind their democratic parliamentary facades, problems with authoritarianism, legitimacy, and limited political participation plagued most Muslim countries” in the Middle East (Esposito, 2016, pg. 198).

The resulting Middle East is now unable to move beyond its colonial past. Because of this colonial influence, we see a Middle East being torn apart by newly created territorial states grappling with the ethnic and sectarian realities of the region. Additionally, we see the emergence of new, but weak, national identities clashing with the predominant Islamic identity and the principle of *ummah*. Kumaraswamy contends that the overarching consequence of the Middle East’s colonial past and the introduction of new and arbitrarily formed territorial states is a widespread “identity crisis in the Middle East” (Kumaraswamy, 2006).

Kumaraswamy states:

More than democratic deficit, most countries of the Middle East suffer from the fundamental problem over their national identity. More than three-quarters of a century after the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire from which most of them emerged, these states have been unable to define, project, and maintain a national identity that is both inclusive and representative. None of the countries of the Middle East is homogeneous; they consist of numerous ethnic, religious, cultural, and linguistic minorities. Yet they have not succeeded in evolving a national identity that reflects their heterogeneity. Countries of the Middle East are internally diverse and, hence, a narrow exclusive national identity could not be imposed from above.

The identity crisis that persists in the Middle East leaves individuals with a psychological void that will perpetually remain until it is filled. As outlined above, social identity theory suggests
that we all, as social animals, have a psychological need for a positive self-image, sense of belonging, and meaning (1978). One of the necessary variables in a positive self-image is membership in a group and subsequent positive comparisons between one’s in-group and relevant out-groups. The identity crisis in the Middle East, “precipitated by a sense of failure, loss of identity, and lack of self-esteem” (Esposito, 2016, pg. 196), led directly to a resurgence in an alternative identity—Islam. Esposito argues that in the wake of Western colonialism, Middle East Muslims sought to “root individual and national self-identity more indigenously in an Islamic tradition that had once been a dominant world power and civilization and thus embarked on a quest for identity and authenticity, manifested in a nostalgia for a past golden age of Islam” (pgs. 197-198). As a state/secular-based national group identity was not fulfilling psychological needs, these individuals sought out a different group, or different aspect of their own identity, in order to establish a positive self-identity via group membership.

Kinnvall (2004) argues that the globalizing of economics, politics, communication, and general human interaction, is causing greater ontological insecurity among societies and individuals throughout the world. Ontological security refers to one’s sense of self, and the order and biographical continuity in one’s own life, where order leads to trust in others and one’s surroundings and thus allows an individual to “maintain a sense of psychological well-being and avoid existential anxiety” (Giddens, 1991, pgs. 38-39). Kinnvall points out that in an ever-changing world it is increasingly difficult for individuals to maintain ontological security and avoid existential anxiety about one’s own sense of self and place in society. A variety of events can violate or undermine an individual’s sense of ontological security such as forced migration (Bauman, 2001) or a disrupted and tumultuous homelife (Dupuis & Thorns, 1998). These kinds of events disrupt an individual’s personal narrative, each making it more difficult for a given
individual to say: “this is who I am, and this is where I belong.” Ultimately, in response to whatever happens to a given individual, “there exists in humans a powerful drive to maintain the sense of one’s identity, a sense of continuity that allays fear of changing too fast or being changed against one’s will by outside forces” (Sigel, 1989, pg. 495). In other words, humans have an innate desire for ontological security and will stop at nothing to establish and maintain it.

There is no question that the colonial history of the Middle East, and the subsequent sectarian violence that has resulted from it, has translated into weak identities and a generalized lack of ontological security for those with national origins in the region. Many in the Middle East sought to reestablish their identities through their religion, Islam, while others also sought fulfillment in other aspects of identity by relocating and migrating to different countries in entirely different regions of the world. According to Zimmermann (1995), millions of immigrants from Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East have come to establish a life in a variety of European countries since World War II, largely due to displacement after the war, the subsequent decolonization of the region, and labor migration from the 1950s to the 1970s. Since the 1970s, many of the Muslims who have relocated to Europe have established stable Muslim communities that continue to grow throughout the region, especially as these communities produce second and third generation Europeans. Recent conflicts in the Middle East have rapidly increased the number of Muslims seeking asylum in Europe, and a 2017 Pew Research Center report estimates that there are nearly 26 million Muslims living in the European Union (EU), making up nearly 5% of the EU’s total population (Pew Research Center, 2017).

Though these Muslim communities are now made up of multi-generational Europeans, many have found it difficult to find full acceptance within these European countries and to fully integrate into a variety of Western societies. A large 2017 report produced by the EU Agency for
Fundamental Rights (FRA) found that widespread discrimination and prejudice against Muslims is still rampant in many European countries today. The report’s data consists of nearly 10,527 Muslim survey-takers currently living in the EU. Some of the report’s key findings were: nearly one in three Muslim respondents suffered discrimination when looking for employment; one in four have been harassed for their immigrant background, and nearly half reported suffering six or more incidents in the preceding year alone; one in three respondents experienced discrimination and/or harassment for wearing visible religious clothing or symbols; half of all respondents reported discrimination when looking for housing, work or healthcare due to their name, skin color and/or physical appearance (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2017).

Muslims in the Middle East suffered attacks on their identity via colonialism and its long-lasting consequences. And those Muslims who came to the West with already weak and fragile social identities have found it equally if not more difficult to establish strong social/national identities within their new Western homes. But the discrimination they experience is multifaceted and does not just damage their sense of national identity, as they are not only discriminated against for being immigrants, but also for being Muslim. Being attacked on both identity fronts creates an environment where establishing any sense of ontological security is nearly impossible, resulting in large populations of disenfranchised and alienated Muslims who are seeking a positive self/group image, as well as meaning and direction.

Several Western states have become hotbeds for producing disenfranchised Muslims who, because of their poor self-image and weak self-identities, have sought out more extreme ways of finding group solidarity and fulfillment. For example, two of the most recent major terror attacks to occur in the West, in Paris [2015] and Brussels [2016], while claimed by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria were actually planned and executed by alienated Westerners who now claim/ed
allegiance to the Islamic State. The Paris attacks were masterminded by a Belgian man named Abdelhamid Abaaoud who was born into a mildly observant Muslim family but eventually became radicalized (Graham, 2015). Abaaoud and the vast majority of radicalized Belgian Muslims come from Molenbeek, a neighborhood of approximately 100,000 residents in northwestern Brussels. Molenbeek is “densely populated, [with] large immigrant populations, [a] very high unemployment [rate], inadequate government services, [and] is isolated from the central city and corridors of power” (Graham, 2015).

NPR conducted several interviews with residents of Molenbeek in order to determine how a particular neighborhood could be uniquely susceptible to the allure of ISIS and Islamic radicalism. One individual they spoke to was Ibrahim Ouassari, a first-generation Belgian whose parents came to Europe from Morocco. In the interview, Ibrahim describes his experience of crossing “the canal” for the first time to go to the Brussels City Center when he was sixteen years old. The canal, Ibrahim explains, is a symbolic and psychological border that separates the largely Muslim Molenbeek from the rest of the city. It was on that trip to the City Center that Ibrahim felt discriminated against for the first time when someone refused to serve him in coffee shop and told him “you’re not Belgian” (Block, 2016). Ibrahim says, “It is like you’re not really a Belgian guy…It’s a little bit like schizophrenia because in my mind I feel like [a] Belgian guy. The other guy, he tell[s] me, no, you are not. So what am I?” (Block, 2016).

Ibrahim represents a class of individuals who are confused, disenfranchised, and hopeless in terms of future prospects for a quality life. Ibrahim’s question “what am I?” illustrates the confusion that can come from a weak or even non-existent social or national identity. Ibrahim thought he was Belgian, but because of prejudice and marginalization, he now seems unsure of his national identity. Many Muslims around the world, in the Middle East and beyond, feel a weak
national identity or connection to the state in which they reside, largely because these states/societies isolate and marginalize Muslim communities, just like Belgians have done in Molenbeek. The plights of these disenfranchised and marginalized Muslims living in Western countries is similar to, and even a result of, the colonial Middle East, where both groups feel a weak connection to their respective home countries and, as a result, hold a poor self-image of their national group and themselves as individuals. The compounding threat to the ontological security of Muslims in the West, however, is the discrimination they experience specifically because of their religious beliefs.

4.5.1. Religious-National Identity

This scenario can only be described as an identity-crisis, as the consequences of this multifaceted identity void found among many Muslims living in the West has often translated into violent and tragic outcomes. When times are particularly difficult, as they are for Muslims in the West, and ontological security is threatened and existential anxiety abounds, individuals are most attracted to groups/causes that provide a clear ideological blueprint and plan of action that includes clearly defined enemies and clear ideological goals (Staub, 1989). Kinnvall (2004) points out that the groups that have historically been the best at providing a clear plan and goals are national groups and religious groups as “both national and religious identity make claims to a monolithic and abstract identity—that is, to one stable identity that answers to the need for” ontological security (pg. 758; see also Kinnvall, 2002). Both religious and national identities provide members with a unified and, especially within religious identity, a universal understanding of self and purpose. For Giddens (1991), ontological security entails an ability to answer fundamental questions of existence, and both religious and national identity “supply existential answers to
individuals...[by] providing a picture of totality, unity, and wholeness” (Kinnvall, 2004, p. 759). Religious identity especially can provide its members with a clear understanding of the somewhat cliché questions around existence: Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going? In answering these existential questions, religion removes the psychological toll that these questions, and others, can take on an individual, and also removes the need to intellectually grapple with the meaning of the questions and how they might be resolved (Mol, 1976). Both religious and national identities have the advantage of being deeply rooted in historical events and mythology, thus providing groups members with a common and unbroken thread between the group’s current status, its own past, and its future. These two groups can be an incredibly stabilizing force, having withstood the tests of time, in some cases millennia, while the world around it has seen unrelenting change and chaos, religious and national identities remain relatively constant and grounded.

The power of these two identities makes them rise to the top of the identity hierarchy, especially in times of crisis and confusion. In some cases, a fusing of these two identities can occur, creating a composite identity that wields the power of both religious and national group identification. This composite religious-national identity is considered by some to be an intertwining of religious and political ideologies (Juergensmeyer, 2001), while others, like Friedland (2001), suggest that religious-nationalism emerges as national identities are “suffused with religious narrative and myth, symbolism and ritual” (pg. 129). Xypolia (2011) argues that religious nationalism occurs when religious practice and belief becomes politicized or vice versa, while Spohn (2003) conceives of religious nationalism as the co-evolutionary process of two identities that tend to influence and borrow from one another.

As both religions and nations are conceptually defined by individuals collectively identifying with and attaching themselves to a specific religious or national community, religious-
nationalism is a convergence of these identities, wherein members of the community perceive their attachment and identity to one of the communities as necessarily, or implicitly, an attachment to the other; and that for a religious-nationalist, this fused identity between religion and nation is his/her primary and most important social identity. This dual attachment and identity, with both communities fused and unified into a single entity, serves to fulfill all aspects of an individual’s ontological security, particularly for marginalized Muslims living in the West. A religious-national identity and group attachment provides these individuals with a physical-national homeland they can call their own, where their religious identity is not just respected but serves as the very ideological foundation for the nation itself.

The current state of Muslims living in the West seemingly creates an opportune moment for a group with a strong, compelling ideology to enter the scene and fulfill ontological security needs with an identity that these individuals could adopt. The Islamic State seems to have seized such an opportunity as we witness its very real ability to recruit and maintain support from individuals from all around the world. Again, the rise of the Islamic State is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, but perhaps one foundationally important aspect of the group’s rise to power is its ability to fill the social and national identity voids felt by many Muslims living in the West. The Islamic State has been cunningly and deliberately effective in projecting a religious-nationalist identity to its followers and potential recruits, and as a result, the Islamic State has been very effective in recruiting many thousands of disenfranchised Muslims in the West who elected to join IS over other groups. The Islamic State promises to fulfill all ontological security needs of these individuals by providing them with a physical Muslim homeland to which they can go to escape the Western societies that rejected them because of their national origins and their religion. As Gerges (2016) argues, “the group’s rhetoric is anchored not in novelty but in identity politics
whose main articulating pole is religious” (pg. 24). What certainly sets ISIS apart from other groups is that it has successfully secured physical territory for establishing a homeland for a Muslim nation, where religion serves as the primary motivator and unifier of the national identity. Religion has often been an element within many ethnic or cultural nationalist movements, but in the case of ISIS, religion is the transcendent and intrinsic ingredient for the social identity that is shared among its members.

This religious-national identity promises Islamic State members a clear role in the world, and more importantly, an eternally significant role in the defense of Islam and the destruction of its enemies. What strengthens the convictions of ISIS followers, and ultimately their shared identity, is a belief that they are part of a movement that will be responsible for bringing about the end of days. Indeed, the religious-national identity held by members of the Islamic State are couched in their belief that they were foreordained to usher in the apocalypse and the end of days as the servants and warriors of Allah and defenders of Islam (Wood, 2015). Whether ISIS should be considered a religious-nationalist movement is a potentially contentious point, but it is clear that the Islamic State’s leadership wants their followers to believe that it is, and that one of their primary goals is to inculcate within its members, and potential recruits, a strong religious-national identity that is based in, and strengthened by, 1,400-year-old Quranic prophecies, and the principles and teachings of Islam as interpreted by the group. Given all of this, one can see how ISIS’ message, and the religious-nationalist identity it provides, would be appealing to an individual living in a place like Molenbeek or so many other marginalized Muslim communities in the West, where opportunities are scarce, and feelings of alienation and marginalization abound. The call of the “Caliph” can be particularly resonant with these individuals when he proclaimed at the founding of the Islamic State “Rush O Muslims to your state! Yes, it is your state. Rush,
because Syria is not for the Syrians, and Iraq is not for the Iraqis” (BBC, 2014). In this statement, Baghdadi, the “Caliph,” at once denounces alternative national identities, and calls all Muslims to join ISIS in the cause of establishing a religious-political nation, a Caliphate—a truly “Islamic” State.

4.5.2. Religious-Nationalists: Patterns of Behavior and Attitudes

A nationalist is an individual who holds his or her national identity above all others (i.e. religious, ethnic, racial, etc.). A nationalist not only holds their national identity above all others, but this identity leads to an intense loyalty that can predispose a given nation to stereotype, engage in conflict, develop in-group bias, and other predictably divisive patterns of behavior (Searle-White, 2001).

From a psychological perspective, nationalism is necessarily tied to the concept of categorization outlined above. Nationalism, or national identity, is contingent upon how we perceive or categorize ourselves, and how we perceive and categorize others. One category we ascribe to ourselves and others is nationality; and as outlined above, there exist several variables that contribute to how these groups or national identities can be delineated, including ethnicity, religion, location, race, language, culture and common history—all are characteristics that can be used to categorize oneself and others into certain national categories (Searle-White, 2001).

The process of categorization, and the subsequent in-group/out-group dynamics that emerge, produces several predictable patterns of behavior and attitudes that will reliably follow. Nations, like other groups, also can behave in a patterned and predictable way, especially when nationalist influence is at play. A series of six patterns that characterize nation-states and
nationalists have been identified and outlined by Cottam and Cottam (2000) in *Nationalism and Politics*. They identify several patterns of nation-states and nationalists, including the following:

1. Nationalists tend to be more sensitive than non-nationalists to threats to the nation-state, and the image through which they view the threatener is extreme and in highly simplified stereotypical terms (pg. 3);

2. Nationalists, particularly nationalistic leaders, are very sensitive to opportunities to advance their country’s influence and are more likely than non-nationalists to seriously consider the option to expand state influence at the expense of others (pg. 3);

3. There will be a greater tendency among nationalists to be deeply concerned with the objective of gathering together communities existing outside the borders of the state whom they regard as a part of their national community (pg. 4);

4. Nationalists are more concerned with their country’s prestige and dignity than are non-nationalists, and nationalists are willing to take action to rectify perceived affronts. Additionally, there is more likelihood that the public of a nation-state will be susceptible to grandeur interests and will therefore want to see national prestige and status enhanced and recognized globally (pg. 4);

5. Leaders of nationalists are better able to make effective appeals to citizens to make great sacrifices to enhance the power of the state; the public is more willing to serve in the military and have a more intense commitment to the defense of the state (pg. 4);

6. Nationalists are more likely to grant leaders considerable freedom to take risks in defending the country’s interests. However, leaders who fail will be punished by nationalistic people. They will not grant those leaders the freedom to accept defeats or the loss of face (pg. 4).
Using Cottam and Cottam’s framework as a baseline for establishing national and nationalist characteristics and patterns of behavior and using the understanding of religious-nationalism outline above, there are patterns of behaviors and particular characteristics that can be identified within religious-nationalist groups, and among religious-nationalists themselves. These characteristics are:

1. Religious-nationalists are more sensitive than non-religious-nationalists to threats to the religious-national state/group and will prioritize the identification of enemies using religious-political stereotypes and identifiers.

2. Religious-nationalists (RN) and RN leaders will go to great lengths to religiously justify the group’s existence, its goals, and the actions of the group by making appeals to religious texts, group-specific interpretation of religious principles, and faithful interpretation of historical precedent.

3. Religious-nationalists consider political and religious leadership to be one in the same, where there is no division of responsibilities or domain between secular and spiritual leadership and decisions. Religious-nationalists will grant their leadership considerable freedom to act in defense of the religious nation. Religious-nationalists will emphasize obedience to religious-national leadership.

4. Religious-nationalists and RN leaders are very concerned with obtaining and securing physical lands for the establishment of a religious nation-state, and with gathering their religious-national community within the geographic borders of the religious state.
5. Religious-nationalists are highly concerned with the prestige of their religious state and will often hold an inflated view of their own state’s global status and will show a greater influence than non-religious-nationalists to act, violently if necessary, to rectify perceived affronts against the nation, and will work to expand the group’s influence and status at the expense of others.

6. Religious-nationalists and their leaders will attempt to make appeals to members of the nation and potential recruits by emphasizing group solidarity and unity through promises of identity and purpose and will call on members and potential recruits to make personal sacrifices, and even to commit violent acts if necessary, on behalf of the religious nation and its goals.

These six expected behaviors and characteristics of religious-nationalist groups and individuals will be analyzed and tested using data gathered from a textual and image content analysis of Islamic State magazine *Dabiq* in order to address whether ISIS can be considered a religious-nationalist movement, and if so, how the group uses RN identity appeals in its recruitment efforts, particularly in the West.

### 4.6. Design

The purpose of this study is to determine the following: first, to determine if it the Islamic State can justifiably be considered a religious-national group/movement; second, if the Islamic state is a religious-national group/movement, how does the group use religious-national identity appeals among its group members and among potential recruits in the West? In order to address both points, data will be gathered through a systematic textual and image content analysis of
Dabiq, the Islamic State’s primary English-language publication from 2014-2016, and one of the most compelling primary sources for providing insight into the group’s use of religious-national identity appeals in its recruitment strategy in the West. Using Neuendorf’s (2002) guidebook as the methodological foundation, at least a sample of textual content from every issue of the magazine will be organized, coded, and analyzed, as will all images from every issue.

4.6.1. Why Dabiq?

Dabiq is certainly not the only recruiting and propaganda resource at the Islamic State’s disposal, nor is it even the primary resource for potential recruits. It is, however, a comprehensive synthesis of the Islamic State’s ideology, goals, justifications, and motivations that can be found in any of the group’s other recruiting and propaganda content; be it videos, blogposts, or chatroom discussions, Dabiq represents the full spectrum of this content.

Since its inception and subsequent peak of power in 2014, the Islamic State has since been largely demoralized, particularly in terms of its territorial control and influence. As Dabiq was written and produced from 2014 to 2016, it uniquely represents both the Islamic State’s initial recruiting and messaging efforts, as well as its ideological and strategic focus at the height of its power, achievement, and resources. This is important as the goal of this project is to determine how/if ISIS uses religious-nationalist identity appeals in its recruitment efforts and messaging, and an analysis of Dabiq provides the most accurate representation of the group’s foundational vision and goals, which may be distinct from later publications that were more reactionary and haphazard than content produced at the inception of the Caliphate.

Finally, one of the major talking points for Western analysts examining the ISIS issue is attempting to determine the underlying motivations of the group—be they political, religious, or
otherwise. *Dabiq* is essentially a multi-volume manifesto that outlines, in painstaking and often graphic detail, the group’s intentions and motivations from its own point of view. Therefore, a direct analysis of *Dabiq* allows for an examination of the group’s worldview, in its own words and style, rather than, as so many have attempted to do, ascribing more abstract intentions and motivations to the group. Or put another way, this project wants to take the group at its word rather than projecting other unfalsifiable, even wishful, motivations onto the group.

4.6.2 Analysis of Textual Content

The unit of analysis for textual content is a single paragraph within *Dabiq*, and each observation of religious-national content within each respective unit will be individually coded (see Appendix C for the full Textual Content Analysis Codebook). As outlined above, religious-nationalism emerges out of a compounding of religious and national identities, where a religious identity and national identity are so intertwined that they are perceived to be one in the same; where to identify as one is necessarily to identify as the other. Therefore, RN content is any content that reflects this combined identity by: [1] Identifying the group’s enemy of the “other” and using language that pits the Caliphate against the “other”; [2] providing or emphasizing religious justifications for the religious-national cause; [3] conflating political and religious leadership wherein both are viewed to be one in the same; [4] referencing holy/religious lands or territory that are claimed by the nation; and [5] promises of identity and fulfillment to be found in the religious-national identity of the group.

The first variable in the coding process for the textual content is the assigned identification number to each unit of analysis, which is determined by the issue number of the magazine and the paragraph/section number being identified. This is an administrative variable for tracking and
identification purposes so that data can be systematically retrieved, reviewed and analyzed. Other administrative variables will include the issue title, issue date, page number, the name of the article in which the unit is found, and the type of article (i.e. news, commentary, report, religious message, etc.).

Of each unit of analysis, it will be asked if there is RN content present, to which a simple Yes [1] or No [2] response will be recorded for two purposes: first, to record the proportion of units that contain religious nationalist content versus those that do not; and second, to indicate whether to ask further questions about the unit itself. Within each unit of analysis all individual observations of RN content will be identified and numbered, and will then be placed into one of five possible categories:

- **Category 1 - The Caliphate versus the Other:** Language that divides the world along religious lines, between those of the faith and those who oppose it. Observations in this category also include language that identifies/blames/condemns/denounces the “other” (language that can identify the other include the following: crusaders, apostates, secularists, etc.), including explicitly named “other” nations or states. Observations in this category also include when language that positions the Caliphate as culturally and militarily superior to other states is used, or when life in the Caliphate is conveyed as joyful and fulfilling. Finally, observations in this category also include instances where language identifies and magnifies threats made by the “other” toward the Caliphate.

- **Category 2 - Religious Justifications:** Observations in this category include language that claims Allah’s approval and support of ISIS’s actions and goals, promises of eternal reward for service to the Caliphate, references and calls to join the *Jihad*, quotations from the
Qur’an, the Hadith, or other respected Islamic leaders that purportedly support the actions and goals of IS.

- **Category 3 - Theocratic Leadership:** Observations in this category include any language which calls for obedience to the Caliph/IS leadership, makes claims about the divine calling of the Caliph, or in any way conflates religious and political leadership.

- **Category 4 - Holy Lands/Territory:** References or claims to holy lands or territory significant to or ruled by the Caliphate

- **Category 5 - Religious National Identity:** Language which explicitly conflates nationalist and religious identity. Observations could also include references to the flag of the Caliphate or other nationalist symbols. Observations could also include references to the *Ummah*, the Islamic community as defined by IS, or calls for unity and sacrifice for the Caliphate, as well as any promises of identity and fulfillment within the Caliphate for those who choose to join.

Once an observation is identified and placed into one of the five main categories, the observation will be assigned to one of several subcategories, the number of which varies from one category to another. These sub-categories are more detailed and will provide more specific information on the content of each observation. There are 23 total subcategories, and for details on any of these, please reference the codebook in Appendix C.

Additionally, an analysis covering general findings and trends within the magazine will identify key events associated with and leading up to the release of the issues being analyzed. Key events might include major ISIS military victories, major military defeats, successful terror attacks carried out in the Middle East, or successful terror attacks carried out in the West. Associating key
events with the content of the magazines can provide important insight into how ISIS responds to these events in terms of content and how their messaging strategies might change based on key failures and/or successes of the group.

4.6.3. Analysis of Image Content

Analysis of Image Content will follow the codebook found in Appendix D. The unit of analysis for image content will be a single image. Images include cover pages, background images, computer generated graphics, and photographs. All images will be assigned an identification number that combines the corresponding issue number, and an image number. This is an administrative variable that will enable easy tracking and analysis. The type of image will then be categorized as a photograph or graphic.

Following these administrative variables, of each image it will be asked if religious nationalist content is present. If yes, then the image content will be categorized into one of eight possible categories:

- **Category 1 - IS Flag:** Any image containing the flag of ISIS.
- **Category 2 - Military Strength:** Images containing any military vehicles, weapons, missiles, artillery, soldiers, or any other object that might represent military power and capabilities. These would also include images of dead “enemy” soldiers.
- **Category 3 - Religious Activity:** Images showing individuals praying, reading the Qur’an, or engaged in any other religious activity.
- **Category 4 - Religious Symbols/Imagery:** Pictures of the Qur’an, Mosques, or any other image that would be considered religious symbols.
• **Category 5 - IS Leadership:** Images of ISIS religious or military leadership

• **Category 6 - Rejoicing/Happiness/Content Citizens of the Caliphate:** Images of the joyous and satisfying lifestyle that the Caliphate provides its citizens.

• **Category 7 - Acts of the Enemy or the “Other”:** Images of the death and destruction caused by the enemies of the Caliphate. This includes images of dead ISIS fighters or citizens of the Caliphate, or images intended to convey Muslims being the target of enemy attacks.

• **Category 8 - Unity/Brotherhood/Comradery:** Images attempting to convey comradery and brotherhood among those who fight for the Caliphate together. Images meant to convey unity and oneness among citizens of the Caliphate.

As with written content, it is possible that an image is assigned to more than one category. The goal here is to discern how imagery is being used to strengthen the religious-national identity of the Caliphate through the display of images such as the flag, military strength, and the “joyful” and contented lives that citizens of the Caliphate enjoy. Images will also be analyzed in conjunction with the textual content of the article in which they are located to determine how the written and visual contents mutually support one another in ISIS’s overall messaging strategy. Like textual content, image content will be analyzed within the context of important events at the time of publication. Like the written content, the images that are used and the make-up of RN content will provide important insights into ISIS’ overall messaging aims and its strategic use of religious nationalist content.
4.7. Results: Textual and Image Content Analysis of Dabiq

4.7.1. Introduction

This section of the chapter will consist of an overview of the general findings of the study and an analysis of the results, which will cover each of the expected characteristics outlined above and whether they are supported by the data, followed by an analysis based on the framework for understanding general patterns and characteristics of RN groups and leaders.

The data gathering for this project was far more taxing, both emotionally and physically, than I had ever anticipated. I ignorantly assumed that I had been sufficiently exposed to the violent rhetoric and actions of the Islamic State to be unphased by the content I would find through the in-depth analysis of Dabiq. I can, without hesitation, say that I was far from prepared for the dark and very often disturbing content I discovered over the course of this project. I eventually was inoculated to the point where I could compartmentalize what I was seeing and reading and not allow the content to adversely affect my mood psyche, but this was only after countless hours of collecting and coding data. If nothing else, the adverse psychological affects this content had on me personally speaks to its potency and effectiveness in getting its message across, making clear the motivations, intentions, and goals of the Islamic State, and the disturbing and violent lengths the group is willing to go in order to accomplish its religious nationalist objectives.

The first general observation that stands out is the obvious quality of work and expertise necessary to produce a publication the caliber of Dabiq. It is obvious that this magazine is not the work of under-resourced and un-qualified amateurs; rather, this is clearly the work of skilled and experienced professionals whose skill-set could seemingly qualify for work at any number of first-rate publications produced in the West. Of all the pages I read and analyzed, I rarely, if ever, encountered a grammatical error or a punctuation or citation out of place. But beyond the technical
precision of the magazine, what was so striking and impressive is the artistic layout and use of engaging graphics and stunning (if disturbing) photographs. Most pages are impressive to look at and what I can only describe as beautiful at times. All of this coalesces to form a publication that will, if nothing else, impress readers by its obvious quality and serve as a legitimizer of the Islamic State’s resources, capabilities, and resolve.

4.7.2. Textual Content Analysis: Results

The results of the textual content analysis show that Dabiq, and subsequently ISIS propaganda generally, is replete with religious nationalist content, messaging, and identity appeals. When I explain this project to people, I am inevitably asked if I was required to frequent Islamic State websites, chatrooms, or social media pages. I can definitively say that I have never visited an IS website or social media page and that all ISIS materials were downloaded via a third party, the Clarion Project, a non-profit organization that claims to “educate the public about the dangers of radical Islam” (Clarion Project, 2019). The organization has made several PDF versions of ISIS publications available on its website, including all issues of Dabiq, and all issues that were analyzed in this project were downloaded from this source.

For this project, in terms of textual content, I analyzed 251 pages of Dabiq, which included three complete issues of Dabiq (Issues 1 [26 pages], 7 [83 pages], and 15 [82 pages], respectively), and five randomly selected pages from each of the remaining twelve issues [72 pages] (see Figure 1). As outlined above, each issue was segmented into individual units of analysis, and observations were coded within each. In total, I analyzed and coded 1,204 units of analysis, resulting in a total of 2,809 individual observations of religious-national content, which averages out to be 11.19 observations per page, and 2.33 observations per unit of analysis. The results show that Islamic
State propaganda is replete with RN content as 936 (78%) of 1,204 units analyzed contained at least one observation of RN content.

Figure 1. Textual Analysis Observations by Category and % of Total, n=2,809

Figure 1 shows that of the 2,809 observations, 812 (29%) observations are Category 1 (The Caliphate versus the “Other”), 933 (33%) are Category 2 (Religious Justification), 292 (10%) are Category 3 (Theocratic Leadership), 191 (7%) are Category 4 (Holy Lands/Territory), and 581 (21%) observations are Category 5 (Religious National Identity). Below, I will briefly cover the results of individual categories, and a more robust analysis of these results will be discussed in the subsequent sections of this chapter.
Category 1: The Caliphate versus the “Other”: As outlined in the theoretical framework section of this chapter, identifying and blaming an “other,” or an enemy, is imperative for building a strong and positive social identity around a given group. By identifying a clear adversary, group members can make positive comparisons between themselves and members of the enemy outgroup and are subsequently provided with meaning and purpose vis a vis the outgroup and goals to eradicate it.

Category 1 observations were the second most frequent RN content observed (see Figure 1), but most significant, as shown in Figure 2, is that of the 812 Category 1 observations, 645 (80%) met the requirements for Sub-category 3 classification by explicitly identifying, blaming, and/or condemning the “other”/the perceived enemies of the Caliphate. These results strongly support the
expected characteristics and behaviors of RN groups and individuals, as ISIS places a great deal of emphasis on clearly identifying an enemy/outgroup to which blame and condemnation can be ascribed. Furthermore, the identities ascribed to the “other” by ISIS are a combination of religious-political identities, and the group goes to great lengths to clearly delineate and emphasis the “us” versus “them” dynamic.

**Category 2: Religious Justification:** Many have attempted to dissociate Islam the religion from the ISIS phenomenon, and Islamist terrorism generally, arguing that the goals of IS are overtly political and that religion is only used as a pretext for the group’s actions. While there is certainly merit to this argument, as the religious ideals and interpretations of ISIS do not represent the vast majority of the world’s Muslims, it is my contention that ignoring the overtly religious aspects of the Islamic State is detrimental to gaining a full understanding of the group’s ideals, motivations and goals. Thus, in its attempt to use religious-nationalist identity appeals with potential recruits, ISIS will go to great lengths to religiously justify its ideals and actions by frequent appeals to Allah, religious principles (such as *jihad*), and Islamic scripture and other holy texts (such as the *Hadith*). These assumptions are supported by the results, as Category 2 (Religious Justification) observations were the most frequently identified of all five categories, making up 33% of all RN observations.
Of the 933 Category 2 observations, unlike in Category 1, the subcategories are more evenly represented. As shown in Figure 1, sub-categories 1 (claims of Allah’s approval), 2 (appeals to religious principles), and 4 (quotations from the Quran), are relatively equally represented at 28%, 24%, and 28% of all Category 2 observations, respectively. These results show significant appeals to religious justification for the group’s ideals and actions, and further demonstrate how the Islamic State’s consciously uses religious-national identity appeals to accomplish its goals.

**Category 3: Theocratic Leadership:** Category 3 observations (Theocratic Leadership) made up only 10% of all observations, however, the observations from this category do demonstrate that ISIS declares theocratic leadership should reign over both religious and political realms, and that it is the only legitimate source of authority, as described by Islamic principle and doctrine. The distinction between secular and religious leadership is resoundingly condemned by
the group, and the legitimacy and divine calling of the Caliph (a religious-political leader) is frequently emphasized and explicitly demanded.

Furthermore, there are several observations that were recorded under Category 1 that could have also justifiably been considered Category 3 observations. For example, many of the instances where the “other” is being explicitly identified within the text as *murtad*, *taghut*, secular, or *sahwat*, *Dabiq* writers are attempting to identify those actors who defy the will of Allah by separating religious and political leadership as the “other”. In other words, the frequency of observations from this category may be attributable to some of the more subjective aspects of content analysis. Again, this aspect of IS messaging will be more fully explored in subsequent sections of this chapter.

*Category 4: Holy Lands/Territory:* As outlined above, one would expect a religious-national movement to behave much like a secular nationalist group by placing great emphasis on its desire for territory or proclaimed entitlement to certain territory that the group considers important, sacred, and rightfully belonging to them. Category 4 observations accounted for only 7% of all observations, the lowest of any of the five categories.

As with Category 3 observations, a possible explanation for the relatively low frequency of Category 4 observations has to do with the structure of the codebook. For example, there are frequent references to the Caliphate itself, which ultimately could be interpreted as referring to Holy Lands or Territory, as the Caliphate is, by definition, the territory controlled by the Islamic State. That being said, most references to the Caliphate were categorized either in Category 1, or in Category 5, but could have justifiably been included in Category 4. Additionally, while any references to the principle of *hijrah* (the religious obligation to physically join the Caliphate) could also have justifiably been coded into Category 4, I instead opted to include those observations in Category 2, as invoking *hijrah* is an explicit appeal to a religious principle. When considering
these possible discrepancies, in addition to the observations that were actually ascribed to Category 4, there is no question that ISIS places a great emphasis on its holy lands and holds the maintenance of its territory as vital to the very existence of the Caliphate. However, an emphasis on physical lands pales in comparison to other aspects of the religious-national identity that the Islamic State chooses to more frequently and more robustly emphasize.

Figure 4. Textual Category 5 (Religious-National Identity) – Sub-categories, n=581

Category 5: Religious-National Identity: As shown in Figure 4, of the total number of RN observations, 581 (21%) were Category 5 (Religious-Nationalist Identity). While all of these categories represent different aspects of RN identity, this category is for observations that are overtly religious-nationalist, such as: content that explicitly calls for unity and sacrifice around the flag or “banner” of the Islamic State, references to the IS community and comradery, calls for sacrifice and a willingness to carry out violent acts on behalf of the Caliphate, or promises of a
religious-national identity upon joining or pledging allegiance to the group. Category 5 observations were the third most represented of all categories, and of those observations, a significant majority (58%) contained key terms that reference the collective communal identity of the group were used; terms such as ummah, mujhadin, and believers. The second most common Category 5 observations (19%) were those that emphasized or called individuals to actions aimed at protecting and defending the community, through violent acts of terror, or even sacrificing one’s life on behalf of the RN community. Again, these terms and their significance vis a vis the characteristics and patterns of behavior of religious-nationalists will be more fully explored below.

4.7.3. Image Content Analysis: Results

The Image Content analysis covers all fifteen issues of Dabiq in their entirety, as coding for images was less time-consuming, and in terms of volume, there were significantly fewer images relative to text within the magazine. As shown in Figure 5, all images from all fifteen issues of Dabiq were given unique identifying numbers, coded and categorized, totaling 918 pages and a total of 1,347 images (average of 1.54 per page).
Images were often clustered together where one would find several continuous pages with collages of images, and then several pages worth of text where images only appeared sporadically. This analysis explored how and why specific types of images were used, particularly in conjunction with the textual content. The results show that 1,133 (84%) of the 1,347 images analyzed contained RN content, thus providing significant general support for the expected characteristics of RN groups. This rate of RN content is slightly higher than was found in the textual content analysis, where 78% of units contained RN observations, but the quantity of RN content would place both totals in the same quartile, thus showing a relatively consistent use of RN content throughout all issues of the magazine.

**Category 1: The Black Standard: The Banner of ISIS**

Of all symbolic images for a national
community there are few more important than the group’s flag or banner. National flags are intentionally designed to reflect the group identity, its values, and group solidarity and connection (Eriksen & Jenkins, 2007). National flags are often given protective status and are thought to symbolize and place the superordinate importance of the group over individual group members. The important symbolism of national flags is demonstrated by the act of flag burning, which has become a common practice throughout the world, as flags are widely held to be important and even sacred symbols for a wide variety of groups, especially national groups (Welch, 2000).

The black flag of the Islamic State has become a familiar symbol of the group. The flag essentially contains three elements: first, the black base is said to emulate the “Black Standard” flown by the prophet Muhammad (Cook, 2002); second, a white circle with black letters toward the center of the flag which reads “Muhammad, messenger of Allah,” a relatively common symbol called the “seal of Muhammad,” which is thought to be a replica of the actual seal used by the prophet in his letters and important correspondence (Muir, 2004); and third, in bold white script above the seal of Muhammad, is the common Shahada, or Islamic creed, “There is no God but Allah.” The flag, and its various elements, have all been commonly used by Islamic extremist groups for decades, but this variation on a theme serves as an important symbol for the Islamic State and its religious-national identity. As such an important symbol it was thought that there would be copious use of its image throughout Islamic State propaganda, including Dabiq. While the image of the flag is used throughout the magazine, the frequency of its appearance was not as expected. Of the 1,347 images analyzed, only 183 (16%) contained at least one image of the flag. The results do show that the use of the image of the flag dropped precipitously over time; but this trend, and the possible explanation for it, will be discussed below.
Categories 3 & 4: Religious Symbols and Activity: As shown in Figure G, the Category 3 (Religious Activity) and Category 4 (Religious Symbols), were, respectively, the second and third least represented categories in the analysis, as only 58 images (5%) contained depictions of religious activity (such as praying or reading religious texts), and only 84 images (7%) contained religious symbols (such as the Quran, a mosque, or the Kaaba). It was assumed that, as with the textual content, the magazine would be replete with explicitly religious images. This, however, was not shown in the analysis. As will be discussed below, the Islamic State goes to great lengths to make every aspect of activity engaged in by the Caliphate or its citizens to be a religious one, and if that is the case, perhaps many more images would have been categorized as such.

Categories 2, 6, 8, and 9: Group Strength: Of the 1,347 images analyzed, only 94 (8%) depicted the rejoicing of citizens of the Caliphate, 122 (11%) depicted unity and comradery, and only 42 images (4%) focused on the territory or land that the group considers important or significant. What was highly emphasized throughout all issues of the magazine, however, was military strength, the second most frequently observed category. 484 images (43%) contained observations aimed at demonstrating the military might and will of the Islamic State. These types of images included large caravans of vehicles with mounted weapons on them, groups of IS soldiers posing with their weapons and contraband, images of military assets acquired through the defeat of the group’s enemies, and many more.

Category 7: The “Other”: The textual analysis demonstrated the Islamic State’s emphasis on identifying and blaming the enemies of the group, and the image content analysis further attests to this assumed behavior of a RN group. Images that explicitly identified the “other” and/or the other’s actions were the most commonly used RN images at a count of 516, or 46% of all images.
4.7.4. General Trends and Key Events

As outlined above, of the 1,204 units examined in the textual analysis, 936 (78%) contained at least one observation of religious-nationalist content. There was, however, variability between issues in terms of percentage of units of analysis containing RN content; for example, in Issue 13 only 35% of units contained RN content, whereas 91% of units in Issue 1 contained RN content. The variability here could be explained by the sample size, as only five pages of Issue 13 were analyzed while Issue 1 was analyzed in its entirety. This variability due to sample size bares out when comparing the average percentage of units containing RN content in issues analyzed in their entirety (84%), versus those issues only partially analyzed (67%). This does present a potential problem if attempting to establish general trends in the use of RN content throughout all 15 Issues, but when controlling for the three issues analyzed in their entirety, there is a general trend that emerges as shown in Figure 6.

![Figure 6. Percent of units with RN observation/s by Complete Issues & Clustered Groups](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Complete Issues</th>
<th>Cluster of 4 (Complete Excluded)</th>
<th>Cluster of 5 (Complete Included)</th>
<th>Cluster of 3 (Complete Included)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>72.6</td>
<td>76.31</td>
<td>78.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>87.09</td>
<td>73.52</td>
<td>76.23</td>
<td>74.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>73.61</td>
<td>54.31</td>
<td>58.17</td>
<td>77.16</td>
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<td>57.08</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

% of units containing RN obs
As shown in Figure 6, when looking at the proportion of units containing RN content in clustered groups of issues, we see a similar pattern emerge. In all cluster variations there is a relatively consistent occurrence of RN content as a percentage of total units of analysis in issues 1-9 and then a general downward trend in issues 10-15. In fact, in all variations there is a 18 to 21-point drop between the first cluster/issue and the final cluster/issue in terms of the percentage of units containing RN content.

![Figure 7. Frequency of RN Observations Per Page](image-url)
As shown in Figures 7 and 8, the pattern of decreased occurrence, or at least more sporadic, of RN content is also evident when looking at the frequency of RN observations per page analyzed. The Figure 7 shows the frequency per page for all fifteen issues, and Figure 8 shows the average frequency for per page in clustered groupings of issues.

However, this pattern does not appear in the same way when examining image content (Figure 9 and Figure 10). The proportion of image units containing RN content remains relatively consistent throughout all fifteen issues of *Dabiq*, as do the average percentages of clustered groupings of Issues.

*Figure 8. Average Frequency of RN Obs. per Page (Clustered Issues)*
While the overall percentage of image units containing RN content did not significantly decrease over time, the types of religious-national images certainly show a shift in emphasis that does speak to the general decrease in RN content found in the textual analysis. For example, though
the percentage of image units containing RN content remained relatively constant, certain categories showed marked increases, while others saw relative, if not precipitous, decline. As show in Figures 11, 12, 13, and 14, as time progressed the percentage of images portraying rejoicing and unity among the citizens of the caliphate saw a downward trend over the fifteen issues, as did images of religious activity and symbols. Though images intended to convey military strength and capability were the second most prominent and common images throughout all fifteen issues, even this category saw a downward trend (Figure 15).

![Figure 11. % of Image Units Portraying Rejoicing](image1)

![Figure 12. % of Image Units Portraying Unity](image2)

![Figure 13. % of Image Units Portraying Religious Activity](image3)

![Figure 14. % of Image Units Portraying Religious Symbols](image4)
Perhaps most telling of those image categories that saw the greatest decline were images containing the black flag of the caliphate (Figure 16). While the flag was not as prominently featured in the magazine as expected, if the flag maintained the presence and prominence witnessed in the first two issues of *Dabiq* it would have been a significant feature throughout the magazine. In the first two issues alone, there were 48 images containing the black flag of ISIS (totaling 94 individual flags) making up 36% and 35% of all images in each issue, respectively. In the final two issues of the magazine, however, only 12 images portrayed the flag, making up 5% and 9% of issue images, respectively.

Figure 15. % of Image Units Portraying Military Strength
The downward trend of these categories is offset by an increased focus on other image categories, specifically images that identify the “other” or the enemies of the caliphate and/or images of the death and destruction perceived to be caused by the group’s enemies. As shown below in Figure 17, though each magazine usually had a primary theme or topic it covered, the identification of the enemy (Category 7) maintained a consistent upward trend throughout the fifteen issues.

Figure 16. Image Content Flag Count and % of Images Containing Flag
In ten of the fifteen issues, at least 45% of all images were dedicated to identifying the enemy/acts of the enemy, and in Issue 14 nearly 70% of all images were Category 7 observations. This same trend toward an even greater focus on identifying the “other” can also be seen in the textual content analysis. When looking specifically at textual content observations from Category 1 - Sub-category 3 (Identification/Blaming of the “other” or Perceived Enemies), for example, the upward trend of this type of RN content continues, as shown in Figure 18.

*Figure 17. Percent of Image Units Containing Category 7 Content (ID of Enemy or “Other”)*
In order to understand why this relative decline in RN content over time is occurring, and why the shift in the Islamic State’s messaging emphasis moved away from a focus on religious and national symbols and even more heavily toward identifying the enemy, we must place these changing trends in their proper context of events. While ISIS as a group has existed in some form for the past fifteen years or so, its official start as a proto-state began in 2014, which is also the year the group peaked in terms of territorial control and influence—at one point controlling territory approximately the size of Great Britain, with an estimated 10 million people living within its controlled territory (BBC, 2018). The group experienced major military success throughout much of 2014, but the group’s power and influence began to wane beginning in 2015 as it experienced several major defeats at the hands of coalition forces, first in Kobani, Syria in January, and then in Tikrit, Iraq in March (Rowen & McNiff, 2019). Throughout 2015, there were a handful of victories and major defeats for the Islamic State, but that year marked the start of the downward
trajectory in terms of territorial control and military capacity/resources that continues today, where
the Islamic State finds itself stripped of nearly 99% of the territory it once held (Callimachi R.,
2018).

The data indicate a general drop in overall religious-national content in Dabiq, but a
marked increase in emphasis on identifying and blaming the enemies of the Islamic State. This
shift appears to begin in earnest between Issues 7 and 9 of Dabiq, which correlates with the relative
decline of the Islamic State outlined above, as these issues were released between February and
May of 2015, respectively. This change in messaging and overall emphasis on the religious-
national identity of the group and its goals does not fundamentally transform, rather, it moves from
calling on potential recruits to perform hijrah and physically join Islamic State force in Iraq and
Syria, to a call for demonstrating one’s allegiance to the Caliphate by staying and conducting acts
of terror in the West. The overarching identity appeals in this evolving approach is not taking an
entirely new direction; rather, it is simply repackaging the same religious-national identity
promised to those who physically join the Islamic State and promising it to those who exist outside
of the borders of the Caliphate. The promise of fulfilling an individual’s need for ontological
security is still in full force, as promises of identity, fulfillment, and purpose can still be obtained
by those who remain in the West. The identity is earned, however, by pledging one’s allegiance to
the Caliphate, and then is vicariously bestowed through the violent acts that one commits in the
name of the Islamic State. Though performing hijrah was at one point declared to be a requirement
of all worthy Muslims, the message now is that a legitimate substitute for physically joining the
Islamic State is committing an act of terror in the land of the “crusaders.”

It is not coincidental that some of the most significant terror attacks claimed by ISIS and
carried out in the West occurred from January 2015 through July 2016 (when the last issue of
*Dabiq* was released), during which time the Islamic State’s messaging was in flux. According to one report there were at least 21 major terror attacks carried out in Europe and North America during this time-frame, including the Paris attacks in November 2015, the Brussels airport bombings in March 2016, and the attack on French National Day festivities in Nice, France in July 2016 (Lister; et-al., 2018).

The first issue of *Dabiq* was released in July of 2014. The focus of the early issues largely center on establishing the religious and political legitimacy of the Caliphate, emphasizing a call to all “believers” to perform *hijrah* and physically join the Islamic State in its fight against the “crusaders” and in establishing a truly Muslim state, the happy and joyful experience of citizens living within the territory of the Caliphate, and the military capacity and accomplishments of the Islamic State. But as outlined above, this messaging begins to shift as the power of the Islamic State begins to diminish. There is a distinct evolution in magazine content, both textual and visual, that draws a stark comparison between early and later issues of *Dabiq*. For example, early issues are replete with full articles that highlight, in glorified and often hyperbolic terms, the major military victories of the Caliphate in Iraq and Syria. The group is eager to tout the defeat of its enemies, and especially instances where entire provinces or cities were taken under the control of the Caliphate. But as time progresses, and as coalition forces begin to chip away at the Islamic State’s territory and resources, the articles start focusing more on individual acts of terror and small-scale victories. The first full article in Issue 1 of *Dabiq*, titled “The Return of Khilafah,” proudly proclaims the establishment of the Caliphate and discusses key military victories that have contributed directly to the creation of what they believe to be a brand-new sovereign Muslim nation. These bold proclamations are accompanied by dozens of images, as seen in Figure 19, depicting large caravans of Humvees or machine-gun mounted armored vehicles, all filled with
well-armed black-clad mujahidin, holy warriors of Allah, and atop every vehicle and in every hand, we see the black banner of the Islamic State proudly waving.

Figure 19. Images of Islamic State Military Caravans

The photos project an image of a grand Islamic army sweeping over the Middle East and taking the land that is believed to rightfully belong to the “true believers” of Islam. In stark contrast to this, much of the final issue of Dabiq, released nearly two years later, also dedicates several articles to highlighting the operational victories of the group, but rather than discussing the conquest of a city, or other large-scale military victories, Dabiq’s writers are touting a car bomb “operation” that killed or injured dozens of people, or the assassination of a Christian priest in Egypt. Images of flag-baring caravans, so prominent in the first issue of the magazine, are rare in later issues and are largely replaced by images of dead “crusaders,” the aftermath of a car bomb attack, and mourning Westerners left in the wake of an act of terror claimed by the Islamic State.
As the group’s power progressively decreased, the goals of the group began to shift from a call to physically join Islamic State forces in Iraq and Syria to conducting acts of terrorism in the West. This shift did not result in a lessening of focus on the religious-national identity, rather, there was a shift in focus demonstrated by the group’s decision to promise potential Western recruits that their identity needs could still be met by pledging allegiance to the Caliphate and conducting acts of terror in the West. Every issue of the magazine contains articles that highlight an individual who has made the ultimate sacrifice and has become a martyr for the cause of the Islamic State. There is an ongoing series in most issues called “Among the Believers Are Men,” in which an individual who has died while fighting for the Islamic State is profiled and glorified. Early issues exclusively focus on those who have performed hijrah and have physically migrated to Iraq or Syria. In later issues, however, there are several profiles in this series that highlight individuals who never even physically joined ISIS in Iraq or Syria but died while committing an act of terror in the West on behalf of the Caliphate. This shift demonstrates the Islamic State’s conscious decision to show potential recruits that the glory and purpose one might find in joining the Islamic State can also be found by remaining in Western states and attacking the “crusaders” from within.

The change in emphasis is further illustrated through a comparison of other articles in early issues versus later ones. For example, in the first issue of Dabiq, in an article titled “The World Has Divided into Two Camps,” a speech that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi gave at the founding of the Islamic State is quoted at length. In that speech he, now infamously, says “rush O Muslims to your state. Yes, it is your state. Rush, because Syria is not for the Syrians, and Iraq is not for the Iraqis” (Dabiq 1, pg. 11). He further says “The State is a State for all Muslims. The land is for the Muslims, all the Muslims…hijrah to the land of Islam is obligatory” (pg. 11). In these quotes the Caliph is
clearly stating that physically joining the Caliphate is a religious obligation of all Muslims who wish to be counted among the true believers of Islam.

There are several examples that demonstrate how ISIS moved away from this message, one of which comes from Issue 7 in an article outlining various groups that have pledged allegiance to the Caliphate. In one section of the article the authors specifically address “the soldiers of Allah present in the lands of kufr (Europe and the disbelieving West)...to target the crusaders in their own lands and wherever they are found...whether an explosive device, a bullet, a knife, a car, a rock, or even a boot or a fist” (Dabiq 7, pg. 37) (Dabiq). This evolution is further illustrated by an article in Issue 15 of Dabiq. Released in July of 2016, this issue contains an article titled “Words of Sincere Advice: From an American Convert in the Islamic State to the Former Christian Who Accepted Islam.” The author of the article, an unnamed American convert to the ISIS interpretation of Islam, makes appeals to religious-national identity by declaring unity around the Caliphate to be a religious duty and by declaring the Caliph the only legitimate Imam (leader) of the Islamic community (Dabiq 15, pg. 27). But rather than emphasizing the religious duty of all Muslims to perform hijrah, the author instead says the following to those loyal to the Islamic State living in the West: “know that you have been blessed with the opportunity to serve a much greater purpose than dwelling among Muslims and waging jihad on the outer edges of the land of Islam. Indeed, you are behind enemy lines, able to strike them where it hurts them most” (pg. 28). He further says that if these Western “crusaders” “have shut the door of hijrah...then open the door of jihad in theirs. If one of you wishes and strives to reach the lands of the Islamic State, then each of us wishes to be in your place to make examples of the Crusaders, day and night, scaring them and terrorizing them, until every neighbor fears his neighbor” (pg. 28).
These two different directives appear to be mutually exclusive. In one instance it is an absolute obligation for every Muslim to physically join the Caliphate, and in the next instance those living in Western states are to be envied, as they have a golden opportunity to strike the enemies of the Caliphate “where it hurts them most.” This demonstrates how the identity appeals used by the Islamic State can adapt to the needs of the group. After major gains in 2014, the Islamic State’s power began to decline in early 2015, and by July of 2016, the month the final issue of Dabiq was published, the Islamic State had lost more than 45% of its territory in Syria and 20% of its territory in Iraq (Feffer, 2017). In response to its relative decline, ISIS still found a way to manipulate its religious-national identity by promising solidarity with the group, and the personal meaning that one can derive from group membership, not by physical joining the Caliphate, but by committing acts of terror in Western states, and its primary tool for instilling a sense of solidarity with the group among Western recruits is more explicit and frequent identification and denunciation of the group’s enemies. This change in messaging strategy explains the relative decline of certain RN content in both the image and textual analyses and the subsequent higher frequency and presence other types RN observations.


4.8.1. Religious-Nationalist Patterns / Characteristics: 1

- Religious-nationalists are more sensitive than non-religious-nationalists to threats to the religious-national state/group and will prioritize the identification of enemies using religious-political stereotypes and identifiers.
This expected behavioral pattern and characteristic of religious-nationalist groups and individuals is largely based on Social Identity Theory and our understanding of categorization and the in-group versus out-group dynamic discussed previously. In terms of group dynamics, members of the in-group will likely hold overly simplistic images or stereotypes of the out-group, and this can often result in a heightened, almost paranoid, sense that the out-group’s intentions are sinister, threatening, and destructive (Gurin; et. al., 1999). Identifying a clear enemy for the group can encourage group cohesion and unity, as the group collectively acts to protect itself from outside enemies who would wish to them harm.

As discussed above, this expected behavioral pattern and characteristic of RN individuals and groups is supported by the analysis, as RN observations identifying the other were the highest among all image observations, and second highest among textual observations. How religious-nationalist groups and individuals identify their enemies is distinct from secular-nationalists in that the enemy images or othering identities will be made along religious-political lines. The declared enemies of ISIS are almost innumerable, as they perceive anyone who does not subscribe to their particular interpretation of Islam as an enemy of the Caliphate that must be destroyed or at least purged from the territory of the Islamic State. According to some, this list of enemies includes, but is not limited to, the United States, the West and Western influence, Shia Muslims, moderate Sunni Muslims, and the governments of Iraq and Syria (McCants, 2015). Within ISIS propaganda, however, the identification of the enemy becomes much more nuanced and granular. While these broader groups would certainly be considered enemies of the Caliphate, the Islamic State uses a variety of religious-political terms to identify the “other.”
For example, through the textual analysis of *Dabiq*, I identified at least 21 different terms or identities used by the Islamic State to identify the collective “other” or enemies of the Caliphate (Table 1).

*Table 1. Enemy / “Other” – Identifiers used in Dabiq*

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<th>Religious</th>
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<th>Religious-Political</th>
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As shown in Table 1, of the 21 identities for the “other”, there are nine that could be considered explicitly religious, two are strictly political, and 10 are a combined religious-political identifier. The fact that the Islamic State is identifying its enemies along both political and religious lines speaks to the religious-national lens through which the group views itself and its enemies. For ISIS, it is not just fighting against non-Muslims and Muslim apostates, but also against those entities they view as the political embodiment of their religious enemies. Using Adobe Acrobat Pro, a word count analysis of all fifteen issues of *Dabiq* shows that the religious-political enemy identifiers are by far the most prominent throughout the magazine. The analysis shows that the above terms appear a combined 3,744 times, which equates to a frequency rate of 4.07 enemy identifications per page. Figure 20 shows the five most commonly used enemy identifiers, all of which fall under the religious-political identity category.
Crusader is the second most common of all enemy-identifiers, and it has clear religious-political connotations. The term hearkens back to the medieval religious wars fought between the armies of Islam and the armies of the “Christian West” (Esposito, 2016, pg. 63). Crusader, within the context of Dabiq and other IS propaganda, is a term that has not changed significantly, as they still use it as a blanket term for all individuals or armies that originate from majority-Christian Western states, such as the “American crusaders” from the United States (Dabiq 1, pg. 32). The terms Kufir / Kufir, Apostle / Murtadd / Murtaddin, Rafidah, and Taghut / Tawaghit, are all religious concepts or principles, unique to Islam itself, that the Islamic State has ascribed to political entities. Kufir is an “unbeliever” or “one who purposefully rejects Islam in both faith and practice” (Esposito, 2016, pg. 321). While the term “apostate” is frequently used, the Islamic synonym of Murtadd, or Murtaddin, or “one who has renounced” Islam (Esposito, 2003) is also used, and these synonymous terms are the most frequently used enemy identifier for any Muslim
who does not interpret Islam in the same way as the Islamic State. *Rafidah* is literally translated as a “rejector” (Kohlberg, 1979), but in a contemporary context, the term is used by the Islamic State as a derogatory identifier of Shia Muslims who “reject” those who Sunnis consider to be the legitimate successors of the prophet Muhammad. *Taghut* is a “Quranic term for false god or idol. Also applied to tyrannical rulers who arrogate God’s absolute power and use it to oppress people” (Esposito, J., 2003). Though uniquely religious terms, *Dabiq*’s writers very frequently combine all of them with political concepts to create religious-political identifiers. Throughout the magazine, one can find frequent references to “*murtadd* governments,” the “*Kufri* [or] *taghut* regimes” of Qatar, Jordan, or Egypt, and the “*Rafidah* of Iran.” These examples show how the Islamic State ascribes these explicitly religious adjectives to political actors and entities. These terms are also frequently attached to certain political leaders, such as references to the “*taghut* Barack Obama,” or the “*taghut* president” of Somalia. Issue 9 includes a large half-page photo of President Obama standing with the King of Saudi Arabia and the caption reads “The crusader Obama and his taghut ally Salman Ibn’ Albdil-Aziz” (Dabiq 9, pg. 53). One can also find instances where these enemy identifiers are compounded, such as references to “the *rafidah taghut* ‘ayatollah’ Khomeini.” By heavily emphasizing religious-political enemy identifiers the Islamic State is strategically constructing, and conveying to potential Western recruits, an enemy that not only subjugates, alienates, and marginalizes Muslims specifically for being Muslim, but an enemy who uses its own religious identity— “Crusader-Christians,” “Jewish-Zionists,” etc. to justify unrestrained and violent political action against Muslim populations and Islam as a whole.

The desire to reach and appeal to Western recruits is evident in the prevalence of religious-political identifiers that are specific to Western political actors. For example, the second and third most frequent enemy identifiers—crusader and *kufr / kufir*—are identities that would only be
ascribed to political entities that are not, and never were, majority-Muslim. The goal behind emphasizing Western enemies is to either plant or exacerbate a sense of alienation or marginalization in these potential Western recruits. *Dabiq*’s writers accomplish this by frequently placing substantial emphasis on the “persecution from the crusader governments and citizens” (*Dabiq* 7., pg. 62), and assuring “Muslims living in Western lands” that this “persecution will only increase” until they are forced “into a tolerable sect of apostasy,” and then ultimately “into blatant Christianity and democracy” (pg. 66). Potential recruits are further assured that they are the victims of persecution precisely *because* they are Muslim, and that the religions and *kufr* governments of the West will continue to gather “against the Muslims just as the beasts gather to feed upon their prey” (pg. 75).

In an article titled “Why We Hate You & Why We Fight You,” the article’s author expresses frustration with the reaction to the mass murder and domestic terror attack on an Orlando nightclub in June 2016, which the author refers to as “the blessed attack on a sodomite, Crusader nightclub by the mujahid Omar Mateen” (*Dabiq* 15, pg. 30). The article states that this act was indeed a hate crime, as “Muslims undoubtedly hate liberalist sodomites,” and it was “most definitely” an act of terror. But the author vehemently disputes the assumption that the attack on the nightclub, or any other terror attack claimed by the Islamic State, is nothing more than a senseless act of violence. The author bemoans this “tired claim” that the actions of the Islamic State “who have repeatedly stated their goals, intentions, and motivations” are senseless and unjustified. The author then declares that it is “important for us to clarify to the West in unequivocal terms—yet again—why we hate you and why we fight you” (pg. 31). The rest of the article is dedicated to outlining for its readers, six distinct reasons which ostensibly justify the “hatred” the Islamic State has for its enemies.
The first reason outlined is because Westerners “are disbelievers” who “reject the oneness of Allah” (pg. 31). The author appears to be using the term Westerners synonymously with Christianity, as part of the rejection of the oneness of Allah by the West is due to the claim of Christianity that Allah has a son. The author justifies this hatred using a surah (chapter/verse) from the Quran which states: “There has been an excellent example for you in Abraham and those with him when they said to their people ‘Verily, we are free from you and whatever you worship other than Allah. We have rejected you, and there has risen, between us and you, enmity and hatred forever until you believe in Allah alone’” (Quran 60:4; see also Haleem, 2004). This strategy will be more fully explored below, but the author frequently uses Quranic scriptures to lend religious legitimacy to his argument. The second reason is because “your secular, liberal societies permit the very things that Allah has prohibited while banning many of the things He has permitted” (pg. 32). The author lists gay rights, alcohol, drugs, fornication, gambling and usury as some of those “filthy sins and vices” that permeate the West, along with “your Christianity and atheism—and all the depravity and corruption they entail.” The third reason speaks specifically to “the atheist fringe” and outlines the group’s hatred for them because of their rejection of god’s existence. The fourth and fifth reasons are for the West’s “crimes against Islam,” and their crimes against “Muslims.” Crimes against Islam include mocking of the faith, insulting the Prophet, burning the Quran, and for the vilification of Shariah laws. The crimes against Muslims outlined by the author include the bombing, maiming, oppressing and torturing “our people [Muslims] around the world,” and for the general killing of Muslim men, women, and children for simply “calling to the truth” of Islam. The sixth and final reason for the Islamic State’s hatred of its enemies is because of the West’s invasion of Muslim lands. The author declares “as long as there is an inch of territory left for us to claim, jihad will continue to be a personal obligation of every single Muslim” (pg. 32).
This article serves the dual purpose of clearly identifying the group’s enemies for potential recruits and followers, and why the group must “hate” them, and “fight” them. It then further provides followers with a “noble” purpose and mission to “fight off [the West’s] influence and protect mankind from its misguided concepts and its deviant way of life” (pg. 32).

The act of identifying the “other” and the enemies of ISIS is further illustrated in the feature article in Issue 7 of *Dabiq*, which is titled, “The Extinction of the Grayzone.” The general theme of this issue, as its name suggests, is to distinctly and definitively outline how the Islamic State views the world as divided into two camps: the “camp of Islam,” and “a camp of kufr—the crusader coalition” (*Dabiq* 7., pg. 54). The thesis of the article is that anyone attempting to exist within the so-called “grayzone” between Islam and the rest of the world will soon find that neutrality is not an option. Those in the gray zone are Muslims who have not fully embraced ISIS’s interpretation of Islam—particularly those Muslims living in Western lands— and those Muslims who are sympathetic to the idea of peaceful coexistence with the West. Very telling is the image chosen to depict those who have chosen the wrong side of the “grayzone;” the image on the cover is of two Muslim men in traditional clothing standing alongside other demonstrators holding signs reading “Je Suis Charlie,” in the wake of the terror attack on the headquarters of French satirical magazine, Charlie Hebdo. *Dabiq*’s writers want all Muslims to believe they have a choice to make; to choose the Islamic State or to choose the path of apostasy that will lead “toward the gates of Hellfire designated for the murtaddin” (pg. 60). The men in the photo holding the “Je Suis Charlie” signs have, according to the Islamic State, chosen the road to apostasy and destruction, and *Dabiq*’s writers are trying to clearly convey to potential recruits what awaits those who choose the “wrong” side.
The article attempts to set a religious and historical precedent for drawing distinct divisions between Islam and the rest of the world by claiming that the Prophet was the first to denounce the gray-zone when he introduced the message of Islam and set about dividing the world into the ummah (the global community of Islam), and the “hypocrites” (pg. 55). Hearkening back to the example of the Prophet, the Islamic State wants its potential recruits to understand that Allah paved the way for the rise of a new Caliphate, that will serve to “further bring division to the world and destroy the grayzone everywhere” (pg. 58).

As demonstrated by the textual and image content found in Dabiq, the Islamic State follows the expected behaviors of a religious-nationalist group by placing a strong emphasis on identifying the “other” or the enemies of their religious-national group along explicitly religious-political lines. The Islamic State’s strategy is to drive deeper wedges between marginalized and alienated Muslims and the Western societies in which they reside. It does this by clearly defining the enemies of the Caliphate using various religious-political identifiers and by emphasizing the persecution that Muslims have experienced at the hands of these enemies. All of this serves the ultimate goal of further damaging the ontological security of potential recruits and convincing them that allegiance to the Islamic State is the one-stop solution to fulfilling all of his/her ontological and psychological needs.

4.8.2. Religious-Nationalist Patterns / Characteristics: 2

- Religious-nationalists (RN), and RN leaders will go to great lengths to religiously justify the group’s existence, its goals, and the actions of the group by making appeals to religious texts, group-specific interpretation of religious principles, and faithful interpretation of historical precedent.
In September 2014, U.S. President Barack Obama made a statement on the expanded role that the United States would play in the fight against the Islamic State. In that speech, President Obama stated that he wanted to make two things clear to the American public: first, that ISIS is not Islamic; and second, that ISIS is certainly not a state (Obama, 2016). Ample attention has been given to the first point in the President’s statement, as it has been a contentious topic of debate between those who concur with his assertion—that ISIS is not Islamic—and others who argue that ISIS is “very Islamic” (Wood, 2015). One must recognize that there are political and strategic motivations for individuals, like President Obama, to avoid making this connection between ISIS and the Islamic faith, at least publicly. Making this connection can indeed lead to heightened levels of xenophobia and can also serve to legitimize the Islamic foundations that are broadly rejected by most of the world’s Muslims, but that ISIS claims for itself. With that recognition in mind, I argue that the religious variables cannot be ignored, and that our understanding of ISIS is contingent upon understanding how it uses (and abuses) Islam to justify its actions. It should go without saying, however, that I condemn the assertion that the Islamic faith is the singular cause of ISIS’ rise, or that the Islamic State somehow represents the values of all Muslims world-wide; but with that understanding, I do argue that it is erroneous, and detrimental to our studies, to assume that ISIS draws nothing from certain Islamic doctrines, beliefs, and historical narratives.

The desire of the broader Islamic community to dissociate itself from the extremism of ISIS is a commonly observed phenomenon in practically every religious community. Close to all Christians, for example, are quick to dissociate themselves from the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), an organization that draws inspiration from Biblical text, Christian history, and which claims to uphold and defend Christian morality and values (Perlmutter, 1999). Most within the Mormon
community are eager to distance themselves from the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints—the polygamist sect led by Warren Jeffs, who is currently serving a life-sentence in prison on two felony counts of child sexual assault (Carlisle, 2018). After a string of terror attacks against abortion clinics in the mid-1980s carried out by individuals with ties to the “Christian Identity” group, a prominent Catholic Cardinal “speaking on behalf of the nation’s Roman Catholic Bishops…condemned the recent wave of abortion-clinic bombings and called them ‘dangerous, ill-considered, and deplorable’” (Maclean, 1985). And more recently, in response to the genocide of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar at the hands of the Buddhist majority, the Dalai Lama said “They [Myanmar Buddhists] should remember, Buddha, in such circumstances, would have definitely helped those poor Muslims” (Westcott & George, 2017).

No one disputes the fact that the subjects of these examples each represent very small minorities within the larger body of their respective religious communities, but to assume the KKK draws no inspiration from Christianity, or that abortion-clinic bombers draw no inspiration from the generally-accepted Christian opposition to abortion, or that Warren Jeffs and his cult draw no inspiration from broader Mormon theology and history, is detrimental to fully understanding these groups, their goals, their motivations, and their ideals. Such is also the case with the Islamic State and Islam.

Salafi Islam: Theological Foundations of ISIS: The theological roots of the Islamic State can be found, like most jihadist groups, in Salafism (Wahhabism). Salafism is a branch of Islam born out of Saudi Arabia that could accurately be described as a fundamentalist interpretation of the faith. At the core of Salafi beliefs is a perceived need to return “to a pure and authentic Islam” (Stern & Berger, 2015, pg. 268) based primarily “on a narrow, strict and obsolete textualist reading of the Islamic doctrine” (Gerges, 2016, pg. 27). The motivation behind this desire to return to a
pure interpretation and ideation of Islam is couched in the assumption that current iterations of the faith have been perverted or altered, and that Salafi Islam’s ultraconservative interpretation is the only legitimate reflection of “the pristine, pure, unadulterated message of the Prophet” (Esposito, 2016, pg. 223). Within Salafi Islam, there is no tolerance for deviation from the “correct” interpretation of the faith, thus they are wholly intolerant of all non-Muslim faiths and consider any Muslim who does not share the Salafi interpretation of Islam to be a hypocrite and an apostate.

According to ISIS, Religion is their Foundation: One could identify several overarching themes of ISIS messaging and propaganda based on a content analysis of Dabiq. One of the most prominent themes I have identified through this analysis is that the Islamic State is desperate to establish and prove the religious legitimacy of the group’s founding, its goals, and its methods. There are examples throughout the magazine that demonstrate the group’s desire to place the religious message front and center in the minds of its followers and of the outside world. The Islamic State’s desire to make this about religion is encapsulated by this quote from Issue 15 of Dabiq, which states that “even if you [the Islamic State’s enemies] were to stop bombing us, imprisoning us, torturing us, vilifying us, and usurping our lands, we would continue to hate you because our primary reason for hating you will not cease to exist until you embrace Islam” (Dabiq 15, pg. 33). According to this excerpt, while geopolitical considerations do influence and motivate the actions of the Islamic State, all of these exist on the periphery of the group’s primary motivation, which is to further their religious agenda and to convert or subjugate the world to their own narrow and fundamentalist interpretation of Islam. As mentioned above, there is substantial debate around what is motivating ISIS and whether the religious justifications are purely pretexts for the group’s underlying geopolitical goals. While this debate is important, one cannot simply
ignore or disregard what the group is actually saying about its own motivations which, as this analysis demonstrates, are undeniably and explicitly religiously founded.

*Islamic State Apologetics: Establishing Religious Legitimacy:* In order to establish its religious legitimacy, the writers of *Dabiq* go to great lengths to provide scriptural, experiential, and historical examples that support their religious arguments that are seemingly linear and logical in their structure. This action results in much of the magazine reading like an apologetic work one might find in Christian, Mormon, or Jewish apologetic literatures. Apologetics, in a religious context, is the practice of defending one’s religious faith through argumentation, reasoning, and discourse (Richardson, 2012). The analysis shows that *Dabiq*’s writers, in apologetic fashion, are anxiously engaged in providing well-cited and thoroughly researched (biased as they are) arguments for the religious positions of the Islamic State. In fact, they are apparently so confident in their interpretations of Islam that they call upon everyone to “Learn your religion! Read the Qur’an, reflect upon it, and practice it” (*Dabiq* 7, pg. 51). The writers of *Dabiq* are trying to convey a sense of inevitability to readers in that if one actually reads the Quran and understands it correctly, and if one “does not accept any matter without evidence” (pg. 69), then one will inevitably see that the “truth is clear” and conclude that the Caliphate is the only legitimate manifestation of Islam, and that the Islamic State’s interpretation of the faith is singularly correct and sanctioned by Allah.

One key to apologetic work is establishing one’s arguments in the accepted religious texts of the faith. The Islamic State clearly does this in their attempt to religiously justify the group, first by frequently citing Quranic *surahs*, passages from the Hadith, and other Islamic religious authorities throughout all issues of *Dabiq*. As discussed above, more Category 2 observations (Religious Justification) were identified in the analysis than any other category—of the 2,809 RN
observations, 933 (33%) were Category 2. And as shown in Figure 21, of those 933 observations, 403 (43%) were either quotes from the Quran, the Hadith, or other generally accepted Islamic religious authorities, which comes to a frequency rate of 1.60 per page.

![Figure 21. Textual Content – Category 2 (Religious Justification) – Sub-Categories, n=933](image)

This frequency rate does not quite fully reflect the volume of appeals to scripture and other religious texts one finds in *Dabiq*, as some articles in the magazine are explicitly religious and others are simple reports or news-related. The frequency of religious articles can also speak to this focus on religious justifications of the group. In all, the analysis included 112 different articles, 36 of which were classified as explicitly “religious” (see Figure 22).
The religious articles made up 100 of the 251 total pages analyzed, and in those 100 pages, there were 227 observations from sub-categories 4, 5, or 6 (quotes from the Quran, Hadith, religious authority). Within religious articles, therefore, the frequency rate of appeals to religious text is 2.27 per page, significantly higher than the frequency in the magazine overall. This tells us that when *Dabiq*’s writers are attempting to specifically address religious issues or topics, they are taking special care to use copious amounts of references to these generally-accepted sacred texts in order to bolster the legitimacy of their arguments.

When specifically examining citations directly from the Quran (excluding quotes from the Hadith and other religious authority), we can see a distinct upward trend in usage (see Figure 23.). This upward trend indicates that with the passage of time, as *Dabiq*’s writers continued to use religious text to justify their arguments, they place an increasingly important emphasis on using citations from the foundational text of the religion, which one can safely assume would provide the greatest amount of legitimacy for the claims being made. Of the 251 pages included in the
textual analysis for this study I was able to identify the use of at least 21 (see Appendix 1 for a full list) different surahs (Chapters) from the Quran, resulting in 260 total observations where the Quran was quoted directly. Using Adobe Acrobat Pro, I conducted a search of all 918 pages of Dabiq looking for individual citations of the 21 Surahs I identified and found 637 total citations. My goal was to find a rough estimate for the total number of times the Quran is quoted in Dabiq, but unfortunately, this figure of 637 observations would not be an accurate reflection of total use. The reason being there are 114 Surahs in the Quran, and I only identified 21, so it is entirely possible that other Surahs were used in the more than 600 pages that were not included in the textual analysis. With that understanding, the minimum number of Quranic citations in Dabiq is still substantial (637 – at least 0.69 observations per page), and still telling in terms of the Islamic State’s desire to religiously legitimize their movement.

Figure 23. Percent of Category 2 - Sub-Cat. 4 Obs. (Quotes from Quran)
Whether or not Dabiq’s writers are correctly interpreting the quotes used from any of these sources, or if they are accurately placing these quotes within their proper context, is certainly debatable and outside the realm of my expertise. But what is undeniably observable is that the Islamic State has gone to great lengths to justify their religious claims by using seemingly well-reasoned and well-researched arguments, laced with an abundant number of quotes from the Quran, the Hadith and other sources in order to support those claims.

Appeals to Allah and Claims of His Approval: Beyond appeals to religious text and quotes, the Islamic State frequently jumps past any mortal mediator and makes direct appeals and references to Allah and His sanction of the Caliphate and the actions of ISIS. Of all sub-categories within Category 2 in the textual analysis, those observations where claims of Allah’s approval and support were made were the most frequent. Of the 933 Category 2 observations, 254 (27%) were sub-category 1 observations (claims of Allah’s approval). This stands to reason, because when it comes to making religious justifications for the actions and goals of a given religious-nationalist movement, there is no higher authority, and no more important stamp of approval, than God’s.

In order to be categorized in the analysis, any reference to Allah needed to be a direct assertion of His approval/support of the Islamic State and its actions. And given those parameters, there were 254 observations in this sub-category. Outside of the parameters of the codebook, however, there were many other instances where “Allah” appears in Dabiq, but these are frequently cases where the authors are either praising or supplicating, but not explicitly claiming His approval, and were therefore excluded from the analysis. The sheer volume of appearances of “Allah” in general, however, is also indicative of the desire to religiously justify the group and its actions. I performed a word count search of the term “Allah” in all 913 pages of Dabiq and found
that it appears 3,002 times, at a rate of 3.27 instances per page. As shown in Figure E, when compared to total counts of other key terms found in *Dabiq*, Allah has by far the most appearances.

![Figure 24. Total Counts of Key Terms in Dabiq](image)

By so frequently invoking Allah, *Dabiq*'s writers are appealing to the approval of the ultimate authority, not only on earth, but in the universe—not only for now, but for eternity. By making the pinnacle of religious figures such a focus in the magazine, the Islamic State not only promises potential recruits a religious-national identity that will fulfill their ontological needs, they can also convince recruits that joining ISIS is what God wants and commands them to do. ISIS recruits are relentlessly reminded in *Dabiq* to “have sincerity towards Allah,” as there is no greater honor than dying in the fight to defend Him and His will, and in return, those who join ISIS are assured that this “will lead to salvation in the worldly life and the Hereafter” (*Dabiq* 7, pg. 10).
In the closing pages of the final issue of *Dabiq*, there is possibly the most disturbing image contained in the magazine, which is significant given the large quantity of deeply upsetting images throughout the fifteen issues. The photo is large, roughly one third of the page, and depicts a man clad in black pants and a black shirt, brown baseball cap, sunglasses, and brown loafers. The man’s face is grimacing, as if he has just done something strenuous that required a large amount of effort. The strenuous activity he just engaged in was the beheading of another man using a massive and medieval looking sword, now stained with the victim’s blood. We know the photo was captured immediately following the act, as the victim’s body is still kneeling with the torso erect, blood gushing from what was once a human neck, and the blindfolded head lying on the ground at the victim’s knees. In the background is a large crowd of attentive, though seemingly unfazed onlookers, including many children, most using an outstretched hand to shield their eyes from the glare of the setting sun. The caption of this photo reads “The sword is part of Allah’s law” (*Dabiq* 15, pg. 80). Allah is further invoked on the same page containing this image and declares that the Islamic State’s actions are done “not for racism, secular nationalism, or political lies, but to make the word of Allah supreme” (*Dabiq* 15, pg. 80). All of this leaves little doubt that the Islamic State is heavily invested in making religious justifications for its religious-nationalist goals and actions, and that claiming Allah’s approval is of primary importance in these justifications.

*Religious Principles and Religious Acts*: This expected pattern or characteristic of religious-nationalist individuals and groups is further demonstrated by the Islamic State’s consistent appeals to Islamic religious principles, and their attempt to make every act carried out by the Islamic State and its followers to be religiously founded and motivated. By religious principle, I mean some behavioral or attitudinal expectation that is dictated by religious doctrine, precedent, and/or practice. If every act is framed as a religious one, no matter how disturbing and
despicable, then all actions taken by ISIS, its leaders, and its followers will be perceived by adherents as approved by God, and therefore permissible, if not blatantly encouraged. The second most common Category 2 (Religious Justifications) observations were those that reference Islamic religious principles. Of the 933 total Category 2 observations, 223 (24%) were those that referenced religious principles. These religious principles are usually referenced when Dabiq’s writers want followers and potential recruits to actively do something. For example, when the magazine states that ISIS is “waging jihad with their lives and wealth against the disbelievers” (Dabiq 5, pg. 12), or when Dabiq’s writers “call upon every Muslim in every place to perform hijrah to the Islamic State” (Dabiq 9, pg. 54), they are using these religious principles to compel and justify action.

In the analysis, I identified at least ten different principles that would be generally accepted by the world’s Muslims, though certainly interpreted in varying ways. A word count for all ten principles was performed, and as shown in Figure 25, there were references to these ten principles at least 1,728 times across the fifteen issues of the magazine, which comes out to nearly two (1.89) references per page. The most frequently referenced principle is jihad [768], followed by hijrah [293], bay’ah [193], and takfir [144]. Jihad is a concept that has become familiar to the world, as it is the primary principle of Islam that is most closely associated with Islamist extremism. Jihad literally means “to strive or struggle” (Esposito, 2016, pg. 321) and can refer to both internal or external striving and struggling. The internal struggle is the battle within individual Muslims to reject sin and embrace the commandments of Allah, and the external struggle is often thought of as violent action taken against the enemies of Islam. Hijrah is the principle ISIS uses to call individuals to physically join the Caliphate, but the historical meaning of the term refers to the Prophet Muhammad’s migration from Mecca to Medina in order to escape the enemies of Islam.
(Esposito, 2003). Bay‘ah refers to pledging obedience to the Caliph and will be discussed below, and takfir is the “pronouncement that someone is an unbeliever and no longer Muslim” (Esposito, 2003).

Figure 25. Total Number of Invocations of Religious Principles, n=1,728

The fact that these are the four most referenced religious principles in Dabiq tells the group’s narrative all by itself and further demonstrates how the group emphasizes the religious justifications for its actions. All true followers of Allah are called on to “wage jihad” against the enemies of the Caliphate—identified through the principle of takfir. One can wage jihad by performing hijrah and joining the ranks of the Caliphate and pledging bay‘ah to the Caliph. Dabiq’s readers are led to believe that if one does all of this, then he will enjoy a purpose of eternal consequence, direction and meaning in life, and an identity tied to an actual Muslim homeland.
And because this narrative is laced with religious principles, it carries the weight of religious authority and ultimately God’s approval.

*Slavery as Religious Act and Obligation:* The above-mentioned principles have been discussed at length by anyone studying the ISIS phenomenon, especially jihad, but as the final example of how IS aligns with the expected religious-nationalist behavior of establishing religious legitimacy for the group, I will draw on an example from *Dabiq* that fully demonstrates the Islamic State’s efforts to engrain religious justifications for literally *everything* the group does. In late 2014, the Islamic State overtook the region of northern Iraq which was home to tens of thousands of Yazidis, an ethnic and religious minority from the northern Mesopotamia region (Jalabi, 2014). According to some senior UN officials, the killing or expulsion of thousands of Yazidis at the hands of the Islamic State amounted to nothing less than genocide (Araf, 2014). In addition to the thousands killed or expunged from their homes, it is estimated that since late 2014, nearly 7,000 Yazidi women and girls have been taken as sex slaves by the Islamic State (Doucet, 2018).

In the wake of the Islamic State’s actions against the Yazidis of northern Iraq, *Dabiq* published an article in its fourth issue titled “The Revival of Slavery Before the Hour.” As the title suggests, the article’s author is making an argument and religious rationalization for the genocidal actions taken against the “Yazidi devil worshippers,” including the enslavement of Yazidi women and young girls taken as concubines for IS leaders and soldiers. The author claims that if the Islamic State had not taken these violent actions against the Yazidis, then they would have to answer for this on “Judgement Day”, because Allah has commanded Muslims, as quoted in the Quran, to “kill the mushrikin [idol worshipers/polytheists] wherever you find them, and capture them, and besiege them” (*Dabiq* 4, pg. 14). Again, by citing the Quran, identifying the Yazidis as
enemies along religious lines, and by framing violent actions against them as a religious responsibility, the Islamic State is building the religious foundation for its actions.

The author continues his argument by assuring Dabiq’s readers that the group has tasked “Shari‘ah students” to meticulously research what Islamic law says about what should be done with groups like the Yazidis, and whether they should be considered a purely idol worshipping group or a Muslim group that has apostatized, as Shariah would dictate different consequences depending on that determination. The Islamic State’s religious “scholars” ultimately deemed the Yazidis to be a purely idol-worshipping group and not apostate Muslims, ostensibly basing their conclusions on the precedent set by the “fiqaha”—the seven Islamic scholars who are said to be the primary compilers of the Hadith in 8th century Medina (Zahra, 2012). This is significant, as the author claims that the fiqaha determined that the women and children of groups not of the book (i.e. Jews, Christians, and Muslims), like the Yazidis, must be enslaved as required by Shariah law and the precedent set by the Prophet himself. This point is further highlighted in an article in Issue 9 titled “Slave-Girls or Prostitutes?” purportedly authored by a female member of the Islamic State named Umm Sumayyah Al-Muhajirah. In the article, the author claims that the enslavement of Yazidi women by the Islamic State “is a witness to our Prophet’s raiding of the kuffar. He would kill their men and enslave their children and women. The raids of the beloved Prophet convey this to us” (Dabiq 9, pg. 45). And beyond the precedent set by the Prophet, the author claims that Allah Himself “has opened the lands for [the Islamic State] to kill the fighters of the kuffar, [and capture] their women and enslave their children” (pg. 46). The author of “The Revival of Slavery” boldly admonishes Dabiq readers to “remember that enslaving the families of kuffar and taking their women as concubines is a firmly established aspect of the Shari‘ah that if one were to deny or mock, he would be denying or mocking the verses of the Qur’an and the narrations of the Prophet,
and thereby apostatizing from Islam” (Dabiq 4, pg. 17). There is not only a religious precedent for taking sexual slaves, according to the Islamic State, but to deny this practice is to literally apostatize from the faith. The claims made in these articles are ostensibly backed by religious authority, as these two relatively short articles contained at least 32 different citations from the Quran, the Hadith, or other accepted authority to make their claims as religiously legitimate as possible.

The practice of taking women and children as sexual slaves is given further religious credence by tying the practice to the Islamic principle of *khum*—giving one-fifth of certain items as a type of tithe or religious tax to Islamic authorities (Esposito, 2016, pg. 213). It has been reported that IS soldiers would “strip the victims naked and categorize them before trading them in ‘slave bazaars’ and shipping them to other provinces” (Dearden, 2015); but before slaves were bought and sold at these “bazaars,” IS leaders would be sure to honor Islamic law by sending “one-fifth of the slaves…to the Islamic State’s authority to be divided as khums” (Dabiq 4, pg. 15). In addition to honoring the principle of *khum*, those who actually received or purchased a Yazidi sex slave would treat the actual rape of these victims as a religious act. In several harrowing interviews with Yazidi girls who had escaped from their ISIS captors, Rukmini Callimachi of *The New York Times* (2018) confirmed that these girls’ “owners” would perform religious rituals, such as praying and washing, just before raping them. ISIS has integrated rape into its religious theology, thus providing followers and perpetrators of this practice with the eternal weight of religious justification for their actions.

All of this provides ample evidence to say that the Islamic State aligns with this expected behavior and characteristic of a religious-nationalist group, as *Dabiq*’s writers clearly go to great
lengths to outline the religious narratives, doctrines, and principles that serve as the foundation of the goals, actions, and ideals of their religious-national group.

4.8.3. Religious-Nationalist Patterns / Characteristics: 3

- Religious-nationalists consider political and religious leadership to be one in the same, where there is no division of responsibilities or domain between secular and spiritual leadership and their decisions. Religious-nationalists will grant their leadership considerable freedom to act in defense of the religious nation and will emphasize the need for obedience to their leaders.

As a religious-national identity entails the compounding of two powerful identities, it also entails the compounding of leadership. One of the primary criticisms that is lobbied against the rest of the world by the Islamic State is the practice of separating religious and secular leadership and governance. *Dabiq*’s writers say that separating “between religion and state grants supreme authority to [the]whims and desires” of legislators who are voted into power; according to the Islamic State, however, “legislation is not but for Allah” (*Dabiq* 15, pg. 32). In other words, when secular societies legislate, they are taking from Allah a privilege that is uniquely and rightfully His, which is to dictate the laws, rules, and norms that govern society and guide behavior.

As discussed above, RN observations specifically focused on leadership were not as highly represented as others in purely numeric terms. The specific content of those 292 observations, however, certainly demonstrates how the Islamic State does align with this expected characteristic of a religious-nationalist group. *Dabiq*’s writers spend the entirety of the first issue setting the foundation for the legitimacy of the Caliphate and then building a theological and historical
narrative that supports the idea of establishing the Caliphate under theocratic governance as the only acceptable model for society.

In the first pages of Issue 1, the newly declared “Amirul-Mu’minin” [commander of the faithful], Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, is quoted declaring “O Muslims everywhere, glad tiding to you and expect good. Raise your head high, for today – by Allah’s grace – you have a state and Khilafah, which will return your dignity, might, rights and leadership” (Dabiq 1, pg. 7). Following this opening declaration, there are a series of articles that lay out the theological foundations of, and requirement for, the establishment of a Caliphate, led by a Caliph. The first article introduces the concept of the Imamah (leadership) within Islam. The group is claiming to be reestablishing the true millah or path of leadership that was forged originally by ancient leaders in Islam. Like other Salafi movements, the Islamic State looks at ancient examples as the correct framework or model that modern Muslim society should look to as an example. The Islamic State makes the case for a model of leadership that was created by Allah, set in place anciently, had been lost, but is now revived and restored through the Caliphate.

The article is then broken into different sections, each discussing different roles or responsibilities of the Imamah. The first describes the political responsibilities of leadership, the second covers the religious role, and the third part outlines how Allah has dictated that these dual political and religious roles should be combined under a single leader. The articles author states that “the Muslim Ummah (nation) should strive to be united behind a single imam (leader), fighting under his banner and empowering him to guard the landmarks of this religion and implement the Shari’ah (law) of Allah” (Dabiq 1, pg. 24). The author once again rails against the influence of secularization that has led to the “separating between religion and state, and between the Shari’ah and governance, and treating the Qur’an as a book of chanting and recitation rather than a book of
governance, legislation, and enforcement” (pg. 24). The final section of the article claims that the Islamic State is the “true Imamah” and is the entity “that most emulates the millah of Ibrahim” (pg. 26). According to Dabiq’s writers, ISIS has corrected this segmenting of religious and political leadership by combining these roles once more in a single imam, the Caliph of the Islamic State.

After establishing the historical and doctrinal precedent for restoring the correct form of leadership, Dabiq’s writers are consistent in their calls to obedience to the newly instated Caliph. This is often reflected in frequent invocations of the Islamic principle of bay’ah, which is an “oath of allegiance to a leader” (Esposito, 2003). The term appears 193 times in Dabiq and beginning with the second issue there is at least one article in each issue that is fully dedicated to outlining the various groups, tribes, or leaders that have given bay’ah to the Caliph. These articles often include photos, like those in Figure 26, of men placing their hands together in a type of unified huddle, with captions that read “brothers giving formal bay’ah”.

Figure 26. Images of Groups Giving “Bay’ah” to the Caliph
These articles are intended to convey to readers that a domino effect is spreading across the world, and that they need to get on the Caliphate train like all of these other groups or suffer the consequences. What is fascinating about the principle of *bay’ah* is the emphasis on obedience to the Caliph specifically, and not necessarily obedience to Allah or Islam. This appears to be a strategic decision on the part of the Islamic State, as they encourage recruits to pledge allegiance to the Caliph, while simultaneously building a religious narrative that equates obedience to the Caliph with obedience to Allah. For example, in Issue 15, it is stated that Allah has commanded all Muslims to a “single group of Muslims and their single leader, around whom they unite and fulfill Allah’s command” (Dabiq 15, pg. 27). After this statement a surah from the Quran is quoted on the same page, which declares: “O you who believe, obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority amongst you (Quran, An-Nisa 59). In one of the articles outlining the various groups that have pledged *bay’ah* to the Caliph, a leader whose tribe has recently committed to obey the leader of the Islamic State was quoted saying: “We pledged allegiance because there is no cure for differing other than the Khilafah…[and] our rallying under one leader is harder on the enemies of Allah than a thousand victories on the battlefield” (Dabiq 7, pg. 36). All of this is to say that if one obeys the Caliph, then he is ultimately obeying Allah.

The analysis demonstrates the Islamic State’s alignment with this expected characteristic of a religious-nationalist group. There is a clear message that the Islamic State is outlining regarding leadership: First, that legitimate leadership oversees both political and religious matters in theocratic society; and second, that obedience to theocratic leadership is vital for one’s survival and spiritual life, and that deviation from this model is a wholesale rejection of God’s will for humankind.
4.8.4. Religious-Nationalist Patterns / Characteristics: 4

- Religious-nationalists and RN leaders are very concerned with obtaining and securing physical lands for the establishment of a religious nation-state, and with gathering their religious-national community within the geographic borders of the religious state.

There is no question that one of the primary objectives of the Islamic State has been to obtain and control territory. While ISIS has lost nearly all of the territory it once held, the Islamic State’s ability to obtain and control territory over an extended amount of time is the primary distinguishing attribute that sets it apart from other jihadist groups and movements. In the summer of 2014, the Islamic State announced the establishment of a Caliphate, which is essentially a geographic area over which the Caliph—Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in this case—is the sovereign and rightful successor to the Prophet Muhammad (Aslan, 2011). ISIS considers the land it had captured in Iraq and Syria to literally be a modern Islamic empire, and the estimated 10 million people living within its borders to be citizens of a fully functional Muslim nation (Johnson, H., 2016). The reluctance of other jihadist groups to actualize their collectively shared goal of establishing a truly Muslim homeland is one of the criticisms that Dabiq’s writers lobby against their fellow Islamist extremists. The Islamic State claims that other jihadist groups have been “frozen” in the phase of attacking their enemies without the added goal of taking land and establishing an Islamic homeland (Dabiq 1, pg. 38). With the establishment of the Caliphate, however, the Islamic State claims that “this new condition opens the path for the complete unification of all Muslim peoples and lands under the single authority of the Khalifah” (Dabiq 1, pg. 21).

In terms of the desire to gather the religious-national community within the borders of a designated homeland, the Islamic State has certainly made explicit efforts to do just that. ISIS’s
leadership has made numerous appeals to the broader Muslim community, such as Baghdadi’s invitation to Muslims to “rush to your state!”. In addition to this explicit invitation, speaking in May of 2015, the Caliph was quoted saying “there is no might nor honor nor safety nor rights for you except in the shade of the caliphate” (Bajekal, 2015). As outlined above, the call to every Muslim is to perform hijrah and physically relocate to a new home within the borders of the Caliphate. As discussed above, hijrah was the second most frequently referenced religious principle [293] after jihad. While hijrah became less emphasized by the group over time, as ISIS began to lose territory and power, the underlying desire to gather the community together is a relatively consistent message throughout all issues of the magazine, but especially in earlier issues.

The Islamic State’s desire to gather together those considered to be part of the religious-national community is further highlighted by the very existence of Dabiq itself, and the group’s use of a variety of other propaganda products in a variety of different languages. In addition to Dabiq, ISIS has been a prolific producer of a wide range of propaganda using social media, online digital magazines, well-produced videos, and even music. And in order to reach the broadest number of group members as possible, in addition to English-language products like Dabiq, the Islamic State has also produced propaganda in Arabic, French, German, and Turkish. The use of a variety of different languages speaks to the Islamic State’s desire to truly gather everyone from its religious-national community, regardless of where they might be and what language they might speak.

The content of the propaganda can vary, depending on what one is looking at. Some have argued that the strategy of the Islamic State to couple messages of hate and violence with other more positive themes is aimed at appealing to a wider spectrum of ideals held by potential supporters (Winter & Bach-Lombardo, 2016). Winter and Bach-Lombardo contend that “on a
daily basis, the group parades images of civilian life, ruminates upon the concept of mercy, and highlights visceral camaraderie allegedly felt among its members” (2016). They further note that ISIS expends huge amounts of resources to build this “composite narrative” for a wide range of audiences as they build their message for the broader Muslim community, but also as a general declaration for the world.

While my analysis does support some aspects of Winter and Bach-Lombardo’s arguments, their claim to a balance in messaging is overstated. Yes, there are certainly images used in ISIS propaganda aimed at demonstrating the happy and contented lives of citizens living in the Caliphate, but these types of images and messages are severely outnumbered by brutal images of dead enemies of the Caliphate and/or demonstrations of the military might of the group. In the image analysis, I found that of the 1,347 total images in Dabiq, 258 (19%) depicted rejoicing happy citizens, unity among citizens of the Caliphate, or the actual land considered important or belonging to the Caliphate. While not the most dominant types of images, the copious reference to *hijrah*, as well as a variety of statements calling all Muslims to unify “under the banner of the unified *Khilafah* (Caliphate) and not the banners of divided emirates and disparate parties” (Dabiq 7, pg. 34); the analysis provides more than sufficient evidence to suggest that the Islamic State does in fact align with the expected RN characteristic of emphasizing the establishment of a physical homeland for the religious-national group, and by attempting to gather the RN community within the borders of said homeland.
4.8.5. Religious-Nationalist Patterns / Characteristics: 5

- Religious-nationalists are highly concerned with the prestige of their religious state and will often hold an inflated view of their own global status and will show a greater interest than non-religious-nationalists to act, violently if necessary, to rectify perceived affronts against the nation, and will act to expand the group’s influence and status at the expense of others.

Reading a large amount of ISIS propaganda could understandably lead one to conclude that the Islamic State feels like a child who desperately wants to be taken seriously by the adults in the room. *Dabiq*’s writers frequently lament how the world has failed to give the Islamic State credit where they believe credit is due. The declared goals of ISIS are clearly ambitious, and the fact that they established a society that they considered to be the pinnacle of civilization speaks volumes about the group’s desires for prestige and status in the world. Some have argued that the Islamic State’s lofty ambitions were couched in a desire to recapture the glory of the last Caliphate—the Ottoman Empire (Haltiwanger, 2014). The Ottoman Caliphate stood for more than 400 years until its demise following the end of World War I (Quataert, 2005), but for centuries it had been the pride of the Muslim world.

In its quest to re-establish the glory of the Caliphate and cement its status as a legitimate and important global entity, the Islamic State did become a highly-funded and relatively sophisticated military power. Estimates of the size of ISIS’s army have varied between 20,000 and 200,000, but the most reliable estimates from the U.S. intelligence community suggest the Islamic State’s fighting force reached somewhere between 20,000 and 35,000 fighters (Michaels, 2016). To give some perspective, there are several small countries around the world, Hungary and
Uruguay for example, that have approximately the same number of troops in their respective militaries (Haltiwanger, 2014). ISIS also boasts an impressive stash of conventional weapons—ranging from large artillery such as the M198 howitzer and the M1 Abrams tanks (Gibbons-Neff, 2014) to advanced surface-to-air missile systems (Semple & Schmitt, 2014). ISIS has heavily emphasized the demonstration of military capacity and prowess in its propaganda materials as well. More than 40 percent of all images in Dabiq depicted the group’s military strength in one way or another. These images included large caravans of armored vehicles, heavily armed ISIS fighters, piles of dead enemy soldiers, and captured military equipment, such as missiles, tanks, artillery, and even fighter jets. In addition to the images, several articles in each issue were dedicated to reporting on the group’s recent military victories or terror attacks that successfully cause a continued “state of alert, terror, fear and loss of security” (Dabiq 7, pg. 37) among the group’s enemies.

From an economic perspective, ISIS finances were disturbingly strong at the group’s peak of power—at one point taking in an estimated $2 million per day just from extortion and taxation alone (Almukhtar, 2015). In addition to taxation and extortion—their largest resources of capital—ISIS also received income from crime, dealing drugs, oil sales (Leigh, 2014), kidnapping ransoms, the sale of antiquities and artifacts (Giovanni, Goodman, & Sharkov, 2014), and personal donations (Rogin, 2014). All of this resulted in an estimated $2 to $3 billion in total assets, easily making it, for a time, the world’s best funded terror organization (Johnston, Bahney, & Shatz, 2014).

In addition to the projection of military and economic strength, the Islamic State’s bid for legitimacy was helped by the fact that the group successfully, to varying degrees, conquered and maintained a semi-sovereign proto-state in the heart of the Middle East. Beyond simply declaring
a state, ISIS did things that states are expected to do: providing law enforcement, sanitation, healthcare, infrastructure repair, collecting taxes, and issuing birth certificates (Callimachi, R., 2018). To convey the “progress” made after the Islamic State’s take-over of certain regions of Iraq and Syria and the establishment of a new proto-state, many photos in Dabiq (ex. in Figure 27) depict clean and modern looking medical facilities, robust and bustling markets, seemingly happy gatherings of people enjoying large amounts of food, senior centers taking care of the elderly, and before and after pictures of a street destitute and covered in rubble in one photo, and the same street now cleaned and covered in contented citizens of the Caliphate in the other. As one would expect of a religious-nationalist actor, all of this is aimed at the Islamic State’s desire to be taken seriously, and to establish their perceived prestige and accomplishments.

Figure 27. Photos Depicting the Accomplishments of the Islamic State
As discussed above, the Islamic State has been vocal in its denunciation of the world—specifically for disregarding the Islamic State and its accomplishments. In order to rectify these affronts to the group, ISIS has embraced a number of violent and brutal tactics to demonstrate its ability to inflict pain and create fear among its enemies and to demonstrate its willingness to do anything, no matter how violent or disturbing, to secure its power and status in the world.

One way the Islamic State has done this is through a full embrace of terrorism as a tactic and as a title. It is commonly assumed that most groups that are identified as terror organizations will not embrace the label of terror or terrorists. In fact, most would explicitly reject this label and instead adopt the moniker of freedom fighter or rebel, as these are labels that indicate a nobler or more worthy cause. Terrorism, on the other hand, implies a brutality, senselessness, and a morally corrupt targeting of innocent people. The Islamic State, however, fully embraces the terror label, unlike most groups that use similar tactics. In the Foreword of *Dabiq* 12, titled “Just Terror,” the writers quote the Quran which says: “They thought that their fortress would protect them from Allah; but Allah came upon them from where they had not expected, and He cast terror into their hearts” (*Dabiq* 12, pg. 3). As the title of the issue suggests, the Islamic State is making the case for terrorism as a justified tactic that is sanctioned by Allah Himself. Throughout the fifteen issues of *Dabiq*, there are at least 163 instances where the Islamic State embraces the terror label or proudly claims to be “terrorizing the enemies of Allah” (*Dabiq* 6, pg. 26). One example comes from Issue 12 which states: “the soldiers of Khilafah continue to rise [and] by Allah’s grace will continue to terrorize the crusaders and their allies until the rule of Allah is established on the earth” (*Dabiq* 12, pg. 41). ISIS bases its justification for violent acts of terrorism in the idea of reciprocity, in that they are simply reciprocating the terror that they claim has been inflicted on Muslims around the world at the hands of the “other”. In a particularly graphic image in Issue 4 we see a pile of mangled
and bloody bodies of women and children said to be killed by a “crusader” airstrike. On the page with the image the author states that “the crusaders justify such action for themselves – alone – under the pretense of ‘collateral damage’ while denouncing others for ‘terrorism’ (Dabiq 4, pg. 49). The Islamic State views their acts of terror as a blow for blow exchange with its enemies, and not an unfair or senseless act that unjustifiably targets innocent people. Dabiq’s writers claim that there is no innocent blood that is shed “that isn’t backed up by clear evidence of what he did to deserve his blood being shed” (Dabiq 7, pg. 14). When justifying the execution of a Western journalist, Dabiq’s writers claim that “his killing was the consequence of US arrogance and transgression which all US citizens are responsible for as they are represented by the government they have elected, approved of, and supported, through votes, polls, and taxes” (Dabiq 7, pg. 35)

In other words, if there are victims of a terror attack, execution, or other act of violence carried out by the Islamic State then, in their eyes, the victims are not innocent, but are, at least, enablers and tacit supporters of their “crusader governments.”

The brutal tactics used by the Islamic State have become well-known throughout the world. To say that ISIS leaders have taken every opportunity to expand their influence at the expense of others is a gross understatement as they are apparently willing to do anything, no matter how heinous, in order to further the goals of the group and to rectify perceived wrongs. In addition to embracing the terrorist label, the Islamic State has gone to great lengths to publicize their brutal actions, possibly the most high-profile being the kidnapping and public beheadings of largely Western journalists. These beheadings are believed to be a tactic used in hopes of unnerving enemy combatants and civilians and deterring foreign powers from committing forces to fight against the Islamic State (Porter, 2014). This practice began with the founding father of ISIS, Zarqawi, when he beheaded American businessman Nicholas Berg in 2004. More recently, in 2014,
photojournalist James Foley was beheaded on camera after reading a statement demanding that President Obama halt air strikes against the Islamic State (Callimachi R., 2014). In the video, Foley’s “tormentor speaks…warning President Barack Obama that attacks on ISIS would result in the spilling of American Blood” (Stern & Berger, 2016). The Islamic State’s emphasis on these executions is further demonstrated by Issue 3 of *Dabiq*, wherein one finds a full-page photo of James Foley kneeling in an orange jumpsuit, a knife to his throat, his face clenched by the hand of a black-clad ISIS soldier. Photos of terrified Western captives in orange jumpsuits are a common image throughout *Dabiq*. The most graphic of these, however, is likely a photo of American-Israeli journalist Steven Sotloff. The photo showing the severed head of Sotloff is accompanied by a textbox which reads “Sotloff was executed in retaliation for the numerous Muslims killed in Iraq by the US. American airstrikes similarly killed the Muslim families on September 15th after Sotloff’s death” (Dabiq 4, pg. 51). Again, this photo, with its accompanying caption, encapsulates the Islamic State’s desire to demonstrate its strength and resolve in its attempts to rectify the wrongs that have been done against it, and to establish itself as a legitimate state actor.

Beyond the high-profile abductions, beheadings, and terror attacks carried out against Westerners, it would be remiss to not also discuss the thousands of other, mostly Muslim, lives that have been lost at the hands of the Islamic State. In the last few years alone, many thousands of Iraqis and Syrians have lost their lives at the hands of ISIS militants. A report produced by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights found that, as of October 2015, in less than two years, nearly 19,000 civilians had been killed in Iraq in ISIS-related violence, with more than 36,000 wounded. In addition to the casualties, more than 3.2 million people have been internally displaced while an estimated 7,500 women and children are being held as sex and labor slaves (Hussein & Kubis, 2015). In the relatively recent nine-month battle to retake Mosul,
the largest Iraqi city to be controlled by ISIS, it is estimated that 9,000–11,000 civilians were killed in this battle alone. ISIS soldiers demonstrated little regard for civilian safety, as they used civilians as human shields, indiscriminately booby-trapped civilian buildings, and armed at least 700 car bombs in Mosul alone. And of the several thousand civilian lives lost, at least 800 of them died in execution-style killings conducted by the Islamic State (Oakford, 2018).

The accounts of these horrific acts, coupled with the sheer number of lives lost, wounded, or displaced at the hands of ISIS, are clear indications that the Islamic State is all too willing to do anything to expand the group’s influence, power, and status at the expense of others. The well-publicized beheadings, the indiscriminate killing of civilians, and the embrace of terror are all clear examples of the Islamic State’s alignment with this expected religious-nationalist behavior and characteristic.


- Religious-nationalists and their leaders will attempt to make appeals to members of the nation and potential recruits by emphasizing group solidarity and unity through promises of identity and purpose.

An underlying assumption of this study is that the Islamic State is actively attempting to market itself as a religious-nationalist movement that can provide its group members with a strong religious-national identity and purpose. All the categories in the textual analysis speak to RN in some way, as all are considered elements of religious-nationalism. Category 5, however, consisted of those observations which specifically reference group unity, identity, and solidarity around the RN group. As shown above, Category 5 observations made up nearly 21 percent (20.68) of all RN
observations, the third highest of the five categories. And of those Category 5 observations, nearly 60 percent (58.00), or 337 observations, were uses of, or references to, community-identifiers such as *ummah*, *mujahidin*, believers, Muslim nation, brother, and sister. As shown in Figure 28, a total word count for each of these community-identifiers across the fifteen issues of *Dabiq* shows 1,743 uses (1.90 per page), with brother/s/hood being the most commonly used identifier, followed by *mujahidin*, *ummah*, believers, sister/s/hood, and Muslim nation.

![Figure 28. Total Count of Community-Identifier Terms, n=1,743](image)

*Mujahidin*: The frequent use of these terms throughout *Dabiq* certainly speaks to this religious-national characteristic, as the Islamic State is attempting to build solidarity around these religiously-based community-identifiers. *Mujahidin*, the most frequently used community-identifier, is “the plural of mujahid, ‘one who engages in jihad’”—often translated as “warriors of
God” (Esposito, 2016, pg. 332). Upon joining or pledging his allegiance to the Islamic State, new recruits are not just another soldier fighting in another army, but they are “cheerful warriors”, engaged in an eternally significant battle between the “believers” and supporters of Allah, and His enemies. To demonstrate to potential recruits the glory and weight of importance that comes with being a true mujahid, Dabiq’s writers include several photos like those in Figure 29 showing majestic figures on horseback, triumphantly carrying the banner of the Islamic State, with photo captions that read: “The mujahidin of the Islamic State continue to liberate” or “The mujahidin gain further momentum in their war against the armies of kufr.”

Figure 29. Photos Portraying the Mujahid in Dabiq
The use of these images, coupled with their captions, is a clear attempt to hearken back to the great sword-wielding armies that fought behind the leadership of the Prophet himself and draw a parallel between those armies and the army of the Islamic State. By drawing this parallel through visual and textual cues, *Dabiq*’s writers are attempting to convey to its readers the supposed glory, honor, and purpose that comes with fighting as a “warrior of Allah” in the army of His Caliphate.

*Brother/s/hood:* Brotherhood, the second most frequent community-identifier, implies a familial connection to fellow members of the Islamic State that goes beyond the religious or the national/group connection. *Dabiq*’s writers boldly declare that all Muslims who are loyal to the Islamic State are “our people and brothers wherever they may be” (*Dabiq* 3, pg. 15). This implied familial connection one can have through joining the Islamic State transcends international borders, as family ties do, and can bind loyal members of the Islamic State together “wherever they may be.” *Dabiq*’s writers declare that “Islam is a brotherhood, making each believer a brother” (*Dabiq* 15, pg. 29). Thus, joining the Islamic State does not just mean one receives a religious-national identity and a purpose, but one is receiving a presumably loyal family of like-minded Muslim brothers and sisters.

*Sister:* While not as common as the use of brother or brotherhood, the community-identifier of “sister” appears over 100 times in *Dabiq*. The majority of ISIS recruits have been men, but there have been a substantial number of women, including Westerners, who have willingly joined the ranks of the Islamic State. Beginning in the seventh issue of *Dabiq* there is a recurring series of articles titled “To Our Sisters” or “For Women.” These are articles written by both men and women, ostensibly, and are specifically intended to address the female readership. One of the articles focuses on the loyalty of demonstrated by the wife of Abu Basir, an ISIS fighter who performed *hijrah* and then was killed in combat. In the article, women are admonished to support
their husbands, fathers, and sons in their fight for the Islamic State and are promised blessings for doing so, and punishment for failing to. These articles also stress the importance of women’s obedience to men, as they claim that “Men are in charge of women by [right of] what Allah has given one over the other” (Dabiq 15, pg. 23). But women are assured that they will be honored and respected for their “chastity, modesty, and piety” and for their service and support of the Islamic State. Though disenfranchised males are the primary targets of the Islamic State’s messaging strategy, they are attempting to do their due diligence in making identity appeals to both men and women. To modern and Western sensitivities, it is difficult to see this appeal, but there are, however, women who have identified with this messaging enough to pick up and join the Islamic State. They operate under the assumption that Western women are enslaved to “hedonistic addictions and heathenish doctrines” (pg. 25), and that the Islamic State will provide them with the direction and purpose they need and desire.

**Ummah:** The final community-identifier I will discuss is the *ummah*, which Esposito (2016) defines as the “Muslim community.” A fundamental concept in Islam, expressing the essential unity and theoretical equality of Muslims from diverse cultural and geographical settings” (pg. 347). It likely goes without saying that the Islamic State holds a less inclusive understanding of *ummah*, but they also use it as a reference to the Muslim community. Granted, the “true” *ummah* or Muslim community as defined by the Islamic State is limited to those Muslims who share the groups worldview and interpretation of Islamic doctrine and principles.

In *Dabiq* the writers translate *ummah* to mean “nation”. The *ummah* and a national community share similar traits, so much so that a valid argument could be made that these terms are distinct without any real difference. The *ummah*, like a nation, is a community/group that transcends international borders and is made up of people who share a common heritage, language,
religion, and identity, and who consider themselves to be historically bound and connected into the future.

If the ummah could be considered a religious-national identity in and of itself, why can membership in it not fully satisfy so many Muslims living in the West? One could argue that membership in the ummah, or the transcendental Muslim community, can provide group members with the meaning and ontological security they need. The difference, however, is that the ummah is a community that truly only exists in the abstract, or in fragmented communities throughout the world. What the Islamic State provides as a religious-nationalist movement, that the ummah cannot provide for group members, is a tangible physical homeland and theocratic leadership and guidance. In other words, the Islamic State would be considered by some to be a physical manifestation of the ummah that can have tangible and perceivable victories over real enemies of the group. To be part of the ummah is to simply be Muslim in the abstract. To be part of the Islamic State is to be Muslim in action—to be a citizen of a state, a contributor to a tangible Muslim society, and a warrior for Allah.

Based on the evidence provided here, there is ample reason to believe that the Islamic State also aligns with this expected characteristic and behavior of a religious-national group, as ISIS uses abundant community-identity appeals as a promise to potential recruits of group solidarity and unity.

4.9. Conclusions

The results of the textual and image content analysis of Dabiq showed strong support for concluding that the Islamic State does exhibit the behaviors and characteristics of a religious-nationalist movement, and that its propaganda materials are replete with RN content that are
reflection of the group’s RN goals and aspirations. This classification of the Islamic State provides a solid framework for understanding what the group is, its goals, and its ideals. The fact that ISIS has been described or understood in such varying ways has led to misguided or unfounded assumptions about the group that have made combatting the group so difficult and confounding for the West, especially in ideological terms. Understanding the RN appeals that ISIS is making to recruits in the West can provide policy-makers a more solid framework for understanding how these appeals can be curbed and/or preempted. Those Muslims living in the West who feel threatened and alienated because of their faith tradition are going to seek out ways of securing their ontological security. And unless Western societies can reform to address the ontological needs of these individuals, then groups, like ISIS, offering strong RN identities that provide meaning, purpose, and validation will continue to attract these individuals into extreme ideologies and violent actions.
CHAPTER FIVE
RELIGIOUS LITERACY OF ISIS RECRUITS

5.1. Introduction

Chapter Four explored the connection between religious-nationalism and the Islamic State’s propaganda efforts and identity appeals, and how these RN elements attract potential recruits from the West. This chapter addresses a second aspect of ISIS recruitment efforts that has gone largely untested—the relationship between IS recruits and religious literacy (RL) or religious knowledge. It is commonly assumed that the rank and file of the Islamic State’s fighting force is filled with individuals who are, at best, religious novices, and at worst, completely and willfully ignorant of their religion. Through an analysis of biographical data of confirmed IS recruits and a case study, this chapter explores and tests whether these assumptions about Western ISIS recruits are founded, and whether individual levels of RL correlate to more violent behaviors. This study is closely connected to the religious-nationalism study of Chapter Four, which explores how/why the Islamic State’s message and promise of identity resonates with Western recruits; this study examines how/if lacking religious literacy can affect the decision making process and make someone more or less likely to join a group like ISIS once they encounter the group’s message and identity appeals.

The first section of the chapter is a review of the RL literature and provides a basic definition of the concept of religious literacy. This is followed by a theoretical framework for why or how religious literacy is an important influencing variable in an individual’s decision to join a group like the Islamic State. The design of the study is then outlined, which consists of an analysis of a biographical dataset of ISIS recruits and a case study of the Western IS terrorists who
conducted the 2015 Paris attack. After which, the results of the analysis will be provided and discussed, and conclusions will be drawn pertaining to the hypotheses of the study.

5.2. Religious Literacy

The most widely read and recognized work on religious literacy is Stephen Prothero’s book *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—And Doesn’t* (2008). Prothero contends that Americans are, generally speaking, religiously illiterate. Prothero describes religious literacy as the “ability to understand and use in one’s day-to-day life the basic building blocks of religious traditions—key terms, symbols, doctrines, practices, sayings, characters, metaphors and narratives” (Prothero, 2008). Prothero contends that religious illiteracy has diverse and severe consequences, especially when a society is fiercely religious, yet overtly ignorant of religious belief, practices, and history. Some of these consequences include mass deception by religious leaders, misunderstanding or misinterpreting the actions and intentions of other states or cultures, and an ignorance of one’s own culture and history. Prothero’s primary concern is that these issues stemming from religious illiteracy can contribute to poor policies that damage intercultural relationships and exacerbate existing conflicts.

The Harvard Divinity School’s *Religious Literacy Project* (RLP) is aimed at increasing religious literacy and improving religious education. The director of the RLP, Diane Moore, defines religious literacy as understanding the history, texts, beliefs, and practices of the world’s religions, while emphasizing the vital need to also understand how these religions are shaped and changed by the particular historical or cultural context of the religion itself (Moore, 2007). In regards to the study of religious literacy, the RLP emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between *devotional expression*, being one’s normative religious beliefs, and the *study of religion*,
which is the objective study of the diverse range of varying normative claims (Moore, 2015). This distinction is important as it helps researchers avoid equating valid normative religious assertions and beliefs with universal truths about a given religious tradition.

The RLP has several initiatives aimed at gathering religious literacy data from all over the world. As stated above, the study of religious literacy has been somewhat limited, thus, valuable data has been largely absent. Consequently, Prothero and others have mostly utilized anecdotal experience and limited public opinion data to study religious literacy. But in 2010, the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, inspired by the assertions of Prothero, conducted a large study assessing individual levels of religious literacy, or religious knowledge as they call it, of the American public. They conducted their study by administering a survey to a sample of over 3,000 Americans, which included questions that gauged the survey-taker’s level of religiosity and belief, as well as a 32-question portion that tested his/her level of religious knowledge. The test included questions on the Bible, elements of Christianity, Judaism, Mormonism, and other world religions, while also testing knowledge of the role of religion in public life, and the definitions of some key religious concepts (Pew, 2010).

The study showed that, on average, Americans answered 16 of the 32 questions correctly, with atheists and agnostics performing higher than any other group surveyed. Among those who claimed a religious affiliation, Jews and Mormons performed the best. Some findings pertinent to this study showed that those with higher levels of education tended to answer more questions correctly on average than those with lower levels of education. Also, those who claimed a higher level of religious commitment performed slightly better than those who claimed a low religious commitment. A final interesting finding showed that those who considered holy texts to be the
literal word of God answered fewer questions correctly than those who do not believe that holy texts are the literal word of God.

Variables that are potential correlates to religious literacy—intelligence and education—and their relationship to religious belief and practice have been explored through several studies. For example, Zukerman et. al performed a meta-analysis of over 63 different studies that showed a negative relationship between intelligence and religiosity. The authors estimate that religious believers have, on average, an IQ that is 6-8 points lower than the average non-believer (2013). The authors, however, are quick to recognize that the real difficulty lies in determining the direction of the causal relationship between intelligence and religiosity. In other words, the data do not show whether an individual is more intelligent because he/she is less religious, or if he/she is less religious because of higher intelligence. Zukerman et. al do not, however, shy away from providing three potential explanations for the negative relationship: first, intelligent people are non-conformists, thus, are less inclined to adopt religious dogma; second, intelligent people have analytical minds that undermine religious belief; and third, intelligence provides the same psychological benefits of religion, without the religious belief system.

Others have also attempted to provide explanations for the negative relationship between religiosity and intelligence. For example, Galen and Kloet show that intelligent individuals more often exhibit the openness to experience personality trait than do highly religious individuals (2011), and Shenhav, Rand, and Greene show that this personality trait is directly associated with a greater disbelief in God and religion (2011).

The relationship between education and religiosity has also been addressed in several studies, and the results vary widely. Philip Schwadel (2011) finds a positive relationship between education and certain aspects of religiosity. For example, Schwadel finds that education may
decrease a proclivity for religious dogma, but it does not negatively affect belief in God or an afterlife. He further finds that education positively affects religious activity and an increased desire to include religion in one’s daily life. And while further education may cause an individual to switch religious affiliations, it does not seem to make an individual more likely to disaffiliate from religion entirely. Schwadel warns, however, that this relationship is complex and cannot be removed from its context, nor can it be overly simplified.

Additional studies have shown a positive relationship between education and religiosity, but, like Schwadel, there are several caveats that must be considered. Sacerdote and Glaeser (2001) find a positive relationship between education and religiosity, but only within certain countries and cultures, and only considering certain aspects of religiosity. For example, they find that education may increase greater religious participation for social reasons, while simultaneously weakening a belief in God. Albrecht and Heaton (1984) also find a positive relationship between education and religiosity, but they stress the need to look at individual denominations when determining a relationship, due to the fact that national data show a negative relationship, while data examined within certain denominations show the inverse to be true. The authors specifically cite Mormonism as a prime example of this, where the most highly educated are the most regular church attenders, while the least educated are the most infrequent attenders. The findings from studies on the relationship between education and religiosity are seemingly a mixed bag, where various studies have found respective positive and negative relationships, while other studies have found entirely mixed results (e.g. Gross & Simmons, 2009; Forum, 2008).

Any literature on religious literacy or religious knowledge within political science is sparse. In fact, to the best of my knowledge, an examination of religious literacy and its relationship to political or religious violence has only been very recently explored (Francis & Van Eck Duymaer,
But even Francis and Van Eck Duymaer focus primarily on what they deem to be religiously illiterate policies rather than looking at the religious literacy of individual extremists. Even outside of political science, however, religious literacy has been a relatively understudied topic, as researchers have devoted more attention to beliefs and religiosity and less attention to what people actually know about religion.

The first significant foray into the question of religious literacy by political scientists was a 1963 study examining how certain interpretations of Christianity contribute to continued anti-Semitic attitudes and behaviors. The study measured levels of religious knowledge and religiosity through surveys and interviews while also considering anecdotal experiences and observing intergroup dynamics (Glock & Stark, 1963).

The efforts to more fully understand RL and its impact on society have been admirable, but where they have fallen short, thus far, is linking religious literacy to certain behavioral tendencies. Knowing how religiously literate individuals are is not inherently valuable information, but how RL might affect behavior, especially violent behavior, would be extremely valuable information.

5.2.1. ISIS and Religious Literacy

A leak of a large trove of Islamic State documents in 2016 revealed a large amount of interesting information about incoming IS recruits, as the documents were largely entry forms filled out by those crossing the Turkey-Syria border. It was widely reported that IS recruits largely possessed a “poor grasp of faith.” According to an AP report, incoming recruits were asked to assess themselves in terms of their knowledge of Islam and its teachings. The documents show that 70% of recruits indicated having a “basic” knowledge of Shariah, which was the lowest
possible choice (Batrawy, Dodds, & Hinnant, 2016). Other reports surfaced that revealed ISIS recruits caught and detained on their way to join the Islamic State in the UK were found carrying copies of the books “The Koran for Dummies” and “Islam for Dummies” (Rosenbaum, 2016). Other reports, citing the CTC study discussed earlier, claim that the “vast majority” of ISIS militants “had no formal religious education and had not adhered to Islam for their entire lives” (Dearden, 2016).

These reports represent a consensus belief that those who choose to join ISIS are largely religiously illiterate. One issue with basing this assumption on these data is that they are self-reported. In other words, these individuals are self-assessing their knowledge and understanding of Islam. While their self-assessment may be accurate, an assessment by a third party is necessary for drawing more accurate conclusions.

5.3. Theoretical Framework

Decision-making is a complex process where an individual “chooses a preferred option or a course of actions from among a set of alternatives on the basis of given criteria or strategies” (Wang & Ruhe, 2007). Humans make countless decisions every day; while some decisions are conscious and deliberate, others happen automatically. The complexities of the world and the sheer volume of stimuli that humans encounter on a daily basis requires the use of cognitive short-cuts for processing information and making decisions. These short-cuts serve as filters through which the new information we are constantly encountering is processed and refined. The filtering process consists of testing new data that enters our mind against our existing understanding of the world, which is based on the information that we have processed and internalized. Our understanding of the world is multidimensional and potentially complex, depending on the individual.
information we have stored is laced with emotions and beliefs, past experiences and memories, as well as the knowledge we have gained through experience and intellectual pursuits (Plous, 1993). The new data that enter our minds are tested against and filtered through our existing cache of information and experience, and these caches, depending on the individual, can either be well-informed, complex, and nuanced, or they can be very simple and binary. The complexity or simplicity of one’s information cache can be very impactful, especially when it comes to making important decisions.

The filtering process of new information as it pertains to decision-making will be more impactful for certain decisions than for others. Obviously, important decisions (i.e. who to marry, where to attend college, etc.) will require a more robust use of one’s past experiences and stored information than will deciding what to eat or what clothing to wear. It stands to reason that an important decision will be heavily influenced by the quality and complexity of an individual’s accrued information, past experiences, and general understanding of the world. One segment of an individual’s information bank that is particularly salient to this study is religious belief, practice, and experience, which serves as one of the cognitive filters in the decision-making process, particularly for those decisions pertaining to religion. For example, if a person is confronted with new information that could potentially affect or alter her religious beliefs, she will test and filter the new information through her existing information cache of religious experience, knowledge, and the beliefs that have been born out of those. And how she responds to new information directly reflects the quantity and quality of available information, memories, and experiences, as the new information is filtered and processed through this information and she will decide, consciously or unconsciously, whether to incorporate or reject the new information (Wyer & Albarracin, 2005).
Unfortunately, as much of the research on religious literacy demonstrates, most individuals are making religious decisions based on limited and low-quality religious information.

Religious beliefs are especially informed by past experience, memories, and meanings, as the vast majority of individuals who claim a religious belief claim the tradition in which they were raised (Argyle, 1997). This fact illustrates the unique problem that most individuals face when making religiously-centered decisions. As religious belief is largely ascribed, rather than chosen, the quality and complexity of the information that informs individual religious belief is often one-dimensional or uncritical. Consequently, when facing a religious decision, the filter through which new religious information is processed is questionable, thus making the individual more susceptible to errors of judgement regarding the religious decision. Consider the following example: How well would an 8-year-old elementary school student cognitively process a question about advanced calculus or quantum physics, if the most advanced mathematical information stored in their mind consists only of multiplication and division? Given that the elementary student was not even aware that advanced calculus or quantum physics existed prior to the question being asked, how could they conceivably respond? I argue that just as the elementary student lacks an adequate bank of quality information for filtering and processing calculus and physics, a typical ISIS recruit will likely lack the necessary bank of quality religious information for filtering and processing the Islamic State’s religiously-based messaging and propaganda, resulting in more extreme and less moderated decisions regarding the group.

Consider the case of Olfa Hamrouni of Tunisia. Olfa’s two daughters, Ghofran and Rahma, decided to join ISIS in 2015, and were eventually captured in Libya by anti-ISIS forces. Before joining the Islamic State, Ghofran and Rahma began listening to a “local preacher at a prayer tent” in their impoverished neighborhood, and the daughters quickly began to sympathize with the
preacher and his message. He was telling his small congregation of followers that it was a religious obligation to be fighting and dying in places like Syria and Iraq. Olfa laments that Ghofran and Rahma “didn’t know enough about their faith to know any better.” She says that her daughters knew the very basic tenets of prayer and fasting during Ramadan, but their understanding of Islam stopped there (Fadel, 2016). In the case of Ghofran and Rahma, one is led to ask if a more complex, nuanced, and quality cache of religious information in the minds of these two girls could have changed or moderated their decision to join ISIS?

When Ghofran and Rahma were listening to their preacher, they were confronted with new religious information and ideas that coincided with an interpretation of Islam that was new to them. This new information was tested against and filtered through their respective caches of religious information and experience. But as the assertion made by their mother suggests, Ghofran and Rahma were not sufficiently literate in their religion to critically assess the validity of the preacher’s interpretation of Islam. Having a higher level of religious literacy could have moderated their choices by providing them with the tools and information needed for questioning this violent interpretation of their faith.

Imagine a counter-factual situation where Ghofran and Rahma were religiously literate, rather than illiterate, through receiving a faithful, but thorough and relatively objective education about Islam that included its history, its holy texts (the Quran and the Hadith), and its practices, as well as an education about the social, cultural and historical context of contemporary Islam with its various interpretations. They then hear the preacher call them to *jihad* and to sacrifice their lives in Syria. His words are filtered and processed through their respective religiously literate minds, but rather than quickly passing through with approval, Ghofran and Rahma have the tools to recognize that his message is but one interpretation of the faith, and that it holds several
contradictory tenets that other interpretations of Islam would dispute. They would know, for example, that while the preacher is citing certain surahs from the Quran to incite violence, there are also several surahs that explicitly forbid the behavior that the preacher is advocating. They would also recognize that there are multiple interpretations of the principle of *jihad*, and that violent external *jihad* is not necessarily condoned or supported by all the world’s Muslims. Higher respective levels of religious literacy would have enabled Ghofran and Rahma to question the validity of the preacher’s claims and would have consequently moderated their decision to accept his message and join ISIS. Now, it is not my contention that higher levels of religious literacy will guarantee that a person will not join ISIS; however, I do contend that higher levels of religious literacy provides individuals with the tools they need to critically assess and process new religious information and messaging.

To review, a religiously literate person views religion with a nuanced and historically contingent perspective and recognizes the various normative theological assertions and internal diversity of all religious traditions. A religiously illiterate person, conversely, perceives religion to be rigid, absolute, and ahistorical. A perception that ultimately affects behavior by not allowing for effective filtering and processing of new information. Drawing on the conceptual definitions of religious literacy put forward by Prothero and Moore, in this study, I define religious literacy as: the ability to use and understand the holy texts, key terms, symbols, doctrines, practices, sayings, characters, metaphors and narratives of various religious normative claims in a contextually/culturally/historically appropriate way.
5.3.1. Hypotheses

Given the role of quality information in the decision-making process, it is my contention that higher levels of religious literacy will lead to more thoughtful and moderated religious decisions, given that a religiously literate person considers absolutes, ahistorical assumptions, and an expectation of religious uniformity to be, at least, problematic and questionable. Conversely, another underlying theoretical assumption of this paper contends lower levels of individual religious literacy will lead to more dogmatic, extreme, and dangerous religious decisions. These assumptions can be tested by looking at Western individuals who have joined or pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (i.e. individuals who, as outlined above, are widely assumed to have low levels of religious literacy). These assumptions lead to the hypotheses of the study:

- **Hypothesis 1 (H1):** A majority of ISIS recruits examined in this study will be considered likely to have a “low” level of religious literacy.
- **Hypothesis 2 (H2):** Individual level of religious literacy will be a statistically significant predictor of a subject’s decision to physically join ISIS in Syria or Iraq or not.
- **Hypothesis 3 (H3):** Individual level of religious literacy will be a statistically significant predictor of a subject’s participation in an attempted or actual terror attack.

5.4. Design

I will begin with the case study, which consists of an in-depth analysis of all the fourteen suspects involved in the 2015 Paris Terror Attack and the 2016 Brussels bombings, both of which were claimed by the Islamic State. These attacks were chosen due their relatively recent occurrence, as well as the wide publicity they received, and due to the fact that the perpetrators fit
the profile of the ISIS recruits that are of interest to this study (i.e. Muslims from Western polities of Near Eastern descent). Additionally, these attacks were high-profile enough that sufficient biographical information for these individuals exists, thus allowing for a case study to be performed. Of each subject, the questions outlined in the RL codebook will be asked, but instead of simply ascribing a numeric value to a dataset, a more robust and detailed analysis of these subjects will reveal patterns that exist between the subjects that speak to the exploration of the relationship between individual levels of RL and the decision to join the Islamic State.

The ideal scenario for data-gathering would be to survey current and former ISIS members from the West and measure his/her level of religious literacy by asking them specific religious knowledge questions. While such a study is not outside the realm of possibilities, this study will employ a different approach by using proxy variables to determine what a given ISIS recruit’s level of religious literacy likely is. Using publicly available information, I built a dataset of biographical information for 300 Western individuals who are known to have joined or pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. Based on seven specific key-indicators, the likely level of religious literacy of each subject was determined and recorded. This dataset does not allow for a statistical analysis of the relationship between level of religious literacy (IV) and joining ISIS (DV), as there is no variability in the DV among subjects as they are all known to have joined or pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. The dataset did allow for statistical analyses assessing the relationship between relative levels of religious literacy and an individual’s proclivity toward more extreme actions, such as physically attempting to join the Islamic State in Iraq or Syria, and/or participating in an attempted or actual terror attack. The statistical analysis will be accompanied by a case study examining levels of religious literacy in the terrorists involved in ISIS attacks in Paris and Belgium.
The subjects for the biographical dataset were drawn from several open-source media reports on Westerners who are known to have either joined or pledged allegiance to ISIS (e.g. BBC, 2016, 2017; Berlinger, 2015; Engel, et. al., 2016; Hong, et. al. 2016; Sperry, 2017). The dataset was built by applying a thirty-question codebook to each of the 300 individuals examined. There was no limit to the number of sources used to ascertain the data, however, it was not possible to determine a likely level of religious literacy for some individuals due to limited biographical data pertaining to key indicators or RL.

The codebook included various demographic variables (i.e. name, age, gender, national heritage, etc.). The names of individuals will be necessary for the data collecting process, once the collecting is completed, however, all individual names will be redacted or deidentified within the dataset. In addition to demographic questions, the codebook asks if the subject has engaged in more extreme behaviors. The full range of variables and explanations for their inclusion can be seen in the complete codebook in the Appendix B. There are seven variables that pertain to religious literacy/knowledge, and they address levels of secular education, religious education, and viewpoints on religious pluralism and tolerance.

For example, it will be asked what level of secular education the subject has attained, as well as the specific subject/degree the individual studied. Secular education can potentially be correlated with religious literacy, but not in all fields of study. Subjects in the social sciences, and especially subjects such as religious studies would positively correlate with religious literacy more than would engineering, physics, or other STEM subjects. This is not to say that someone who studied engineering or mathematics is implicitly less religiously literate than someone who studied comparative religions, but I am inferring that the likelihood of a subject who studied anthropology
or sociology, for example, would have a greater exposure to ideas and information that speak directly to religious literacy/knowledge than would someone who studied physics or engineering.

In addition to secular education, data on specific religious education was recorded. Specific religious education, such as instruction in seminary or even ecclesiastical degrees is arguably the variable that speaks most directly to religious literacy. Again, I recognize that these are imperfect proxy measures, but the assumption that someone with an advanced degree in religious studies, or who has taken extra-curricular courses in Islamic history, is more likely to be religiously literate than someone who did not is a reasonable assumption to make. Not only because of the actual knowledge gained from this religious education, but the fact that an individual would pursue educational opportunities such as these, again speaks to his/her interests and priorities overall—a fact which also lends itself toward higher levels of religious literacy.

Finally, of each subject it was asked if the subject had professed, privately or publicly, views or ideas that would be indicative of a lower level of religious literacy (i.e. a black and white view of Islam, infallibility of Islamic or ISIS leadership, etc.). These data taken together will provide a sound basis for assessing the probable levels of religious literacy/knowledge of the individuals being examined. The cumulative value of these seven responses will determine the level of religious literacy that will be ascribed to each subject. If a subject’s data align with two or fewer RL variables, then they would be considered likely to have a “low” level of religious literacy. Subjects aligning with three to five of the RL variables will be considered likely to have a “moderate” level of religious literacy, and those who align with six to seven will be considered “highly” likely to be religiously literate.
5.5. Case Study: Religious Literacy of ISIS Terrorists in Paris and Belgium

5.5.1. Case Background

Since the group’s creation, the Islamic State has carried out at least 143 terror attacks in 29 countries, with an estimated death toll of over 2,000 lives (Lister et al, 2018). The deadliest attacks did not occur in the West, however, there have been several high-profile and deadly attacks in Western countries that have taken place within the past few years. Two of the most significant of these ISIS attacks took place in Paris, France in 2015, and Brussels, Belgium in 2016. A cell of ISIS terrorists operating out of Belgium claimed responsibility for both attacks and was made up largely of Western Muslims of descent. The November 2015 attacks in Paris consisted of a series of coordinated bombings and gun attacks that killed 130 people and wounded 494 (CNN, 2018). The attacks began with a series of suicide bombs at the Stade de France stadium, where a soccer match between France and Germany was taking place, and were closely followed by a series of assault rifle attacks on a busy restaurant and shopping hub, and the Bataclan concert hall (BBC, 2015). The Brussels attacks took place in March of 2016 and consisted of coordinated bombings of the main terminal of the Zaventem international airport, and the Maelbeek metro station in the center of the city (BBC, 2016). In all, 32 people were killed in the attacks, and 340 people were injured.

5.5.2. The Attackers

Between the two attacks, there were fourteen individuals directly responsible or involved. There were several other possible accomplices in addition to these fourteen, but they will not be included in the analysis. While all fourteen are from the same ISIS terror cell, only two of the fourteen were directly involved in both the Paris and Brussels attacks. Only 13 of the attackers
will be included in the analysis, as one of the Paris suicide bombers has yet to be positively identified. The remainder of this section will examine the thirteen attackers in turn and will estimate the likely level of religious literacy of each. There have been several profiles done on these individuals, but none has specifically attempted to address the question of the attackers’ respective levels of religious literacy or knowledge. In order to avoid redundant citations throughout these thirteen profiles, as there is a large amount of overlap, I will list all of the sources consulted here. In the case of direct quotes, however, in text citations will be used (Profile References: Buchanan & Park, 2018; BBC, 2015, 2016; Borger, J., 2015; Borger, et. al., 2016; Bronstein, Robertson, & Krever, 2015; Brugis, 2015; Chan & Schreuer, 2015; Chrisafis, 2015; CNN, 2018; Davis, 2016; Gardham, 2016; Gaudichet & Jackson, 2016; Halliday & Bucks, 2015; Faiola, 2015; Farmer, 2016; Finnigan, 2015; Higgins & Freytas-Tamura, 2015; McDonnell & Kirschbaum, 2016; Rubin, 2016; Srivastava, P., & Brunsden, 2016; Young & AP, 2015)

5.5.3. *Abdelhamid Abaaoud*

Abaaoud was a Belgian citizen of Moroccan descent. He is alleged to be the primary organizer and “mastermind” of the November 2015 gun and bomb attacks in Paris. He was killed shortly after the Paris attacks in a hideout in Saint-Denis, France at the age of 28. He was one of the nine fellow attackers who at least attempted to join in the Islamic State in Syria and is believed to have actually fought in Syria for several months. Abaaoud was known to French officials after he was linked to a series of thwarted terror attacks on a high-speed train and a Paris church. In a lengthy interview published in Issue 7 of *Dabiq*, he boasted about recruiting and planning future attacks right under the noses of “crusader” intelligence services in Europe and relished in his role in “terrorizing the crusaders waging war against the Muslims” (*Dabiq* 7, pg. 73).
Like so many Islamic State recruits from Belgium, Abaaoud was raised in the Molenbeek neighborhood in Brussels—the community discussed previously that has become a hotbed of Islamist extremism in Europe. Abaaoud has been described as having a normal and happy childhood, and even attended a prestigious Brussels Catholic high school, Saint-Pierre d’Uccle. Though much of Molenbeek was impoverished, Abaaoud’s family would be considered by most to be middle-class, as his father owned a retail store and the family lived in a relatively comfortable home. His happy childhood and his time at the high school was apparently short-lived; he dropped out at a relatively young age, left his home and family, and was subsequently involved in a variety of criminal and drug activities, some of which landed him a jail term in 2011. According to several sources, including some family members, Abaaoud showed far more interest in his drug and criminal activities than he ever did in Islam. Like so many other young radicalized Muslims, Abaaoud’s most concentrated exposure to Islamist extremism came while he was incarcerated with already radicalized influencers—some of whom would go on to also participate in the 2015 Paris attack. It is believed that he joined ISIS as early as late 2013, and that he returned to Europe to conduct terror operations in late 2014.

After joining the Islamic State, Abaaoud made a name for himself within the group through his brutality and seeming indifference to human life and violent commitment to the group’s cause. He was featured in a variety of ISIS propaganda videos, including a now infamous clip of Abaaoud, smile on his face, driving a large truck toward a mass grave with a large quantity of mutilated bodies in tow.

The biographical data on Abaaoud suggests that he had only a tangential connection to the faith through most of his adolescent years. And when Islam seemingly became influential in his life, it was only an extreme Salafi interpretation that he was exposed to while serving a jail sentence
in his early to mid-twenties for criminal and drug activities that would be considered contrary to the behavioral expectations of the faith. In terms of secular education, Abaaoud dropped out of school prior to completing even his high school education (and by some accounts he failed-out), and there is no evidence to suggest that he had an interest in academic or intellectual pursuits after dropping out. Through various personal statements in ISIS propaganda videos, as well as interviews with *Dabiq*, we know that Abaaoud held an absolutist, black and white view of the world’s religions, and that he considered the ISIS interpretation of Islam to be absolutely correct and all others to be absolutely wrong. The evidence suggests that Abaaoud, though highly regarded within the Islamic State, and a leader of an entire ISIS terrorist cell, possessed a low level of religious literacy. Conclusion: Estimated level of RL: *Low*.

5.5.4. Ahmad Al Mohammad

Al-Mohammad was one of the bombers who detonated a suicide vest outside of the national stadium in Paris. Al-Mohammad’s real identity is uncertain as he entered France through Greece by posing as a Syrian refugee, using a fake name and papers in order gain passage through Europe until his arrival in France. According to his fake Syrian passport, he would have been 25 years old at the time of his death. The limited amount of information on this individual makes estimating his likely level of religious literacy impossible. Conclusion: Estimated level of RL: *NA*.

5.5.5. Bilal Hadfi

Hadfi was also one of the suicide attackers who detonated a bomb outside of the national stadium. According to his mother, Hadfi left home under false pretenses approximately 9 months prior to the attacks and had not contacted his family since his disappearance. During that time, he
had apparently left for Syria to join the Islamic State, and then returned to Europe with other ISIS terrorists with plans of executing an attack.

At 20 years old at the time of the attack, Hadfi was the youngest of the Paris attackers. His family members claim that he was nice and normal boy, but that his radicalization began after Hadfi “grew disaffected by discrimination in Belgium” (Young & AP, 2015). Hadfi lived in Brussels but was a French citizen of Moroccan descent. His family, like many other immigrant families, lived in low-income housing in Neder-Over-Heembeek neighborhood in Brussels—a neighborhood known for its sizable and poor immigrant population. According to some reports, Hadfi was a bit of a loner, reserved and quiet, with few friends and associates; his career goals were limited to becoming a truck or lorry driver. Many who knew him were surprised that he would be involved in such an attack, as he was not very religious growing up, and was far more interested in soccer than he was in Islam.

He was a high school graduate and had enrolled in courses at a college in Brussels studying Information Technology but had apparently not attended classes in the 9 months leading up to the attack. Teachers at Hadfi’s college apparently reported concerns about Hadfi’s “cheering” of the Charlie Hebdo attacks on Facebook and other social media sites, but these concerns never reached the proper authorities. Hadfi’s brother later reported that the death of their father was taken particularly harshly by Bilal, and that after that his studies started to suffer, he began to smoke marijuana, and started to associate with a questionable crowd of Islamist extremists. His behaviors and attitudes seemed to also be transforming into more rigid perspectives, as some teachers reported that he would make homophobic remarks in class, and that he would frequently denounce the school’s tolerance for behaviors and beliefs that ran contrary to his own.
The data on Hadfi shows an individual who was young, moderately educated, and largely irreligious until only months before participating in these attacks. He fits the profile of an underprivileged son of Muslim immigrants who was increasingly feeling like an outsider and thus sought out solidarity with those who could provide him with an identity and a purpose. There is no evidence that shows he was an active learner in terms of faith, and there is no indication that he sought to augment his understanding of Islam, other than what he learned from radicalized associates. All of this taken together suggests that Hadfi was operating with a low level of religious literacy. Conclusion: Estimated level of RL: Low.

5.5.6. Chakib Akrouh

Akrouh was 25 when he killed himself and two others, including Abaaoud discussed above, by detonating a bomb during a police raid of the apartment where the three were hiding shortly after the November Paris attack. He was born in Belgium, and like many of the others, was of Moroccan descent and lived in the Molenbeek neighborhood of Brussels. Based on his circumstances, we can assume his story is very similar to the others from Molenbeek, but there was not enough data to determine his likely level of religious literacy. Conclusion: Estimated level of RL: NA.

5.5.7. Foued Mohamed-Aggad

Mohamed-Aggad was a 23-year-old of Moroccan descent who was raised in a small town outside of the French city of Strasbourg. He is said to be from La Meinau, which is a district of Strasbourg known for its high unemployment and crime rates, much like Molenbeek in Brussels. Like many of his fellow attackers, Mohamed-Aggad traveled to Syria to join the Islamic State, and
subsequently returned to Europe to conduct terrorist attacks. He was said to be known to the police in Strasbourg for his participation in petty crimes, and he was apparently unemployed at the time of his departure for Syria.

According to his father, Mohamed-Aggad was a calm child who was born, raised, and educated in France. Thus, his decision to join the Islamic State came as a shock to his family. He was also not known to be particularly religious and was often involved in activities that conflict with Islamic principles. Ironically enough, the group of young men with whom Mohamed-Aggad planned his venture to Syria would gather in a shisha bar across the German border near Strasbourg, where they would smoke, consume drugs and alcohol, and solicit women.

The data for Mohamed-Aggad is not as robust as some of the other attackers, but there is enough information to show that his behaviors, attitudes, lack of education and training all point to a lower level of religious literacy. Conclusion: Estimated level of RL: Low.

5.5.8. Ibrahim Abdeslam and Salah Abdeslam

Ibrahim Abdeslam was 31, a French citizen living in Molenbeek, and participated in the attack in Paris with his brother Salah. He was killed when he detonated a suicide vest near a café on Boulevard Voltaire in Paris. Abdeslam attempted to journey to Syria in early 2015 but was deported back to Brussels by Turkish authorities. Ibrahim owned a bar in Molenbeek and was widely known to be a “big” smoker and a “big” drinker by locals who knew him. According to a man who rented an apartment above Abdeslam’s bar, Ibrahim never went to the mosque and was far more interested in soccer, clubbing, and women than he was in Islam. According to a police report, the bar that Abdeslam owned was shut down by police just weeks before the attacks for drug dealing.
Abdeslam’s behaviors and lifestyle clearly do not align with the behavioral expectations of faithful Muslims, and there is no evidence to suggest that he attended religious services or actively engaged in learning about his faith tradition. Furthermore, there is no evidence of secondary education or higher education that would have introduced Abdeslam to ideas or information that a religiously literate person would necessarily encounter. Conclusion: Estimated level of RL: Low.

Salah Abdeslam’s story is very similar to his brother’s. He was a French citizen living in Molenbeek, as he managed his older brother’s bar, where he was widely known to have participated in the same drug and alcohol activities as his brother. Salah was 26 at the time of his capture and is the lone survivor of all the attackers. He managed to evade authorities for nearly four months but was eventually caught in Molenbeek following a police raid on his suspected location. The extent of his religious zealotry and devotion is even more questionable than most of his fellow attackers. He was reportedly not as interested as the others in the tenets of radical Islam and was always more interested in smoking marijuana, clubbing, and playing video games than he was in the ideals of jihad. He chose not to grow a beard, which is almost a rite of passage for many jihadists. He also never attempted to go to Syria, and it is possible that he had never even prayed in a mosque before, let alone become familiar with the broader theology and history of Islam. Salah was by all accounts not an exceptional student but eventually did complete a technical degree and worked as a mechanic for the Belgian state railway.

Like his brother, Salah was supposed to be killed as a “martyr” along with his fellow attackers, but in yet another display of his lack of enthusiasm for the cause, he fled the scene before detonating a suicide vest and called local friends to come retrieve him from the crime scenes before he could be identified. According to Salah’s girlfriend, he began to embrace the jihadist message in 2014, when his friend, Abdelhamid Abaaoud, went to Syria and began his fight on behalf of the
Islamic State. Around this time, Salah became increasingly involved in petty crimes around Molenbeek and became further interested in the activities and ideals of his radicalized associates. All of this, as with his brother, indicates that Salah’s only substantive exposure to Islam was through already radicalized associates. Conclusion: Estimated level of RL: Low.

5.5.9. Ibrahim el-Bakraoui and Khalid el-Bakraoui

Ibrahim el-Bakraoui was a Belgian citizen of Moroccan descent, raised in Laeken—a neighborhood in northern Brussels. Ibrahim el-Bakraoui died at the age of 29 when he detonated a suicide bomb in the Brussels airport, while his younger brother, Khalid, 26, was responsible for one of the bombs at the exploded at the Maalbeek metro station in the Brussels city center. Like many of the other attackers, both Ibrahim and Khalid had been in serious trouble with the law prior to the Brussels attacks. Ibrahim was part of an attempted robbery where he exchanged gunfire with police—an act that landed him a ten-year prison sentence. His brother Khalid was sent to prison for five years for his participation in an armed car-jacking.

Ibrahim and Khalid’s parents immigrated to Europe from Morocco; their father worked as a butcher and was reportedly devoutly Muslim. It is thought that neither Ibrahim nor Khalid were known to have ties to Islamist terrorism prior to the Brussels attacks. However, Turkish officials have claimed that they detained and ultimately deported Ibrahim in July 2015 after he was captured in a southern Turkish city, known to be a common point of entry for those seeking to enter Syria and join the Islamic State.

There is no evidence to suggest that either Ibrahim or Khalid were active practitioners of their faith, nor is there any evidence to suggest any interest in practicing Islam, let alone becoming religiously literate. Conclusion: Estimated level of RL: Low.
5.5.10. Ismael Omar Mostefai

Mostefai, a 29-year-old man of Algerian descent, was last known to have lived in Chartres, France before he detonated a suicide vest after firing on Bataclan concertgoers in the 2015 Paris attack. Chartres is approximately 50 miles from Paris; and far from a setting like Molenbeek, Chartres is a tourist destination and represents the quintessential French village. Residents of the village were shocked when they discovered that a former resident was one of the Paris attackers, and many wondered how someone from the so-called Catholic capital of France could have been involved in such an act.

Before moving to Chartres, Mostefai’s family lived in the Paris suburb of Courcouronnes, which is a lower to middle-class neighborhood. Childhood friends described Mostefai as completely normal, a soccer fan, and not particularly religious. He and his family would occasionally attend the local mosque, but none were consistently active in the local faith community. Others reported, however, that Mostefai and his father were fairly regular attenders of Friday prayer services, but that were the only two from the family to attend mosque on a regularly basis. Mostefai and his family moved to Chartres during his adolescence. Shortly after the attacks, officials in Chartres claimed that in his mid-twenties Mostefai began his journey toward complete radicalization through interactions with key figures at a mosque on the outskirts of Chartres. Officials at the mosque denied the connection but had only been at the Mosque for the past two years at the time of the attacks, and officials claim that the radicalization occurred before their time. His early radicalization is supported by the fact that he had been red-flagged by authorities as a possible danger as early as 2010. Like the other attackers, Mostefai was involved in petty criminal activity, had a difficult time holding down steady work, and made the attack in Paris his
first major foray into terrorist activity. And like many of the others, Mostefai spent several months in Syria from 2013-2014, and returned to Europe with the objective of planning and executing terror attacks.

Though there are mixed reports on Mostefai’s level of religious activity, the evidence shows a similar pattern that we have seen with many of the other attackers. Mostefai was introduced to extremist strands of Islam only a few years prior to taking part in the attacks and was only mildly religious during his formative years. There is no evidence to suggest that he took an active interest in his faith prior to his radicalization, and there is no evidence that shows an intellectual or academic interest in the study of his religious faith or any other related discipline. His involvement in petty criminal activity further demonstrates his lack of interest in living by the precepts of Islam and its teachings. Conclusion: Estimated level of RL: Low.

5.5.11. Mohamed Abrini

Abrini is one of the two attackers who took an active role in both the Brussels and the Paris attacks, though he is most prominently associated with the attack in Brussels. He is also the lone survivor of those who participated in the Brussels attack and is currently in custody. Abrini is a Belgian citizen of Moroccan descent, grew up in Molenbeek, and was a close friend to Salah and Ibrahim Abdeslam. Like the lone survivor of the Paris attacks, Salah Abdeslam, Abrini survived after electing to not commit suicide as he fled the scene shortly after the initial blasts were detonated at the Brussels airport. He was 31 years old when he was apprehended by authorities in the spring of 2016, and like so many of his fellow attackers, he is believed to have gone to Syria for a length of time along with his brother who was killed while fighting for the Islamic State in 2014.
Abrini was also heavily involved in local crime, making a name for himself as a prolific thief and burglar. He was also a worldly individual who indulged in drugs and alcohol, developed a gambling habit, and was known to be far more interested in Manchester United soccer than he was in Islam. Abrini’s biography parallels that of many of his fellow attackers, and his likely level of religious literacy is similar as well. Conclusion: Estimated level of RL: Low.

5.5.12. Najim Laachraoui

Laachraoui was killed in the Brussels airport attack at the age of 24 when he detonated a bomb that he had made himself. He was not known to authorities prior to the attack, but fit the pattern seen among his fellow attackers by becoming radicalized, going to Syria, and returning to commit acts of terror. He grew up on Schaerbeek, a mostly middle-class Brussels neighborhood that is known for its history of racism and prejudice toward minority populations. He attended a Catholic high school and enrolled in the university studying electrical engineering. Unfortunately, Laachraoui put his electrical engineering education to sinister use by becoming one of the Islamic State’s most prolific bomb builders in Europe. According to a New York Times report, Laachraoui “was no doubt a prized recruit [for the Islamic State]: an educated European who radicalized all but invisibly, not in prison, but while in the classrooms of good schools and university study groups” (Rubin, 2016).

Laachraoui was born in Morocco in 1991 but was brought to Belgium at a young age and raised in Europe. According to many who knew him at a young age, while his radical tendencies were not evident to those around him, he was having a visible struggle with his faith and determining precisely what role Islam would play in his life. A religion teacher at Laachraoui’s Catholic high school stated that an 18-year-old Laachraoui wrote several papers on various aspects
of Islam and Islamic history for the course, including: slavery of non-Muslims, stoning, and punishments for various sins as outline by Shariah law. In the papers, however, Laachraoui takes a more moderate and defensive position, by recognizing that the Islamic community has not taken official steps to abolish practices like slavery and stoning, and expressed a desire for “‘each person to gain his true freedom, and be sensitive to those who do not have freedom or from whom it has been taken away.’” (this is a quote from one of Laachraoui’s high school essays, as quoted by Rubin, 2016). According to this same religion teacher, by the end of his senior year, Laachraoui began to dress in more traditional clothing favored by Salafist Muslims, made a go at growing a beard, and refused to shake the hands of female classmates. Laachraouri was a good student in high school, and as stated above, eventually enrolled in university courses, but dropped out after a year.

In 2013, Laachraoui met Khalid Zerkani—a well-known radical street preacher who has successfully recruited as many as 50 young men to the jihadist cause. It was shortly after meeting Zerkani that Laachraoui disappeared and purportedly went to Syria, losing all contact with family and friends. Laachraoui’s case is an interesting one, as he was well-educated and well-positioned to make a promising life for himself, unlike many of his fellow attackers who had few options in life. Given his interest in Islam from a young age and given his academic pursuits in both secular and religious realms, we can safely conclude that Laachraouri’s level of religious literacy was at least moderate, especially compared to his fellow attackers. Conclusion: Estimated level of RL: Moderate.
5.5.13. Samy Amimour

Aminour was born and raised in France by French-Algerian parents and was living in northern Paris during the time leading up to the attacks. Aminour was known to authorities prior to the attacks, as he was added to a potential terrorist watch list after an attempt to travel to Yemen as early as 2012. At the time of the attacks, there was an international warrant out for his arrest after he went missing in 2013 and was suspected of joining the Islamic State in Syria. He was 28 when he detonated a suicide vest after taking part in the attack on the Bataclan.

Aminour reappeared in Paris a few months prior to the attacks and, according to some close friends and associates, had “undergone a radical transformation in appearance” (Farmer, 2016). Aminour had traded in his western-style clothing for a full and untrimmed beard and a very traditional long white robe. Prior to this change, many who knew him described him as good-natured and very normal. Aminour did not grow up in a practicing-Muslim home, as his mother, a dedicated feminist, worked for an organization dedicated to upholding liberal values and promoting multicultural inclusion. As mentioned above, many who witnessed his change were shocked precisely because Aminour was someone who “dressed like everyone else, played football, [and] hung out” (Brugis, 2015). In stark contrast to the other attackers, however, Aminour never participated in petty criminal activity; he held a good paying and steady job as a bus driver—a job which is far more secure and well-paying than the jobs practically any young person in Molenbeek could hope to have. Additionally, Aminour was described by many who knew him as intelligent, and he even completed a college degree; in terms of religious practice, Aminour became independently religious despite his parents, and even prior to becoming radicalized was seen regularly attending and praying at the local mosque.
Amimour’s case presents some interesting departures from the narratives of his fellow attackers that have been so similar. Amimour was relatively well-educated, economically secure, raised in a secular and principled home, and eventually became religiously devout prior to his radicalization. The sum of these facts taken indicate a moderate level of religious literacy. Conclusion: Estimated level of RL: Moderate.

5.5.14. Conclusions

Of the thirteen individuals analyzed in this case study there was enough biographical data for eleven to conclude regarding their likely levels of religious literacy. Of those eleven, 9 were categorized as likely to possess a low level of religious literacy, 2 were considered likely to possess a moderate level of religious literacy, and none were considered likely to possess a high level of religious literacy. These findings suggest that the commonly held assumptions about many ISIS recruits not being sufficiently religiously literate to make an informed decision to be correct assumptions. The commonalities between these thirteen individuals is undeniable, and there is unquestionably a typical profile that most of them met. Most were young, uneducated, and un- or underemployed; most were involved in petty or even serious criminal activity prior to the attacks; and most were intellectually irreligious and behaviorally uncommitted to the expectations of practicing and believing Muslims. Most had few future prospects, and most were positioned to feel alienated and ostracized by their Western communities. Almost all the attackers only became interested in Islam in the few years or months leading up to the attacks, and for most, this radicalized interpretation of Islam was their first and only foray into their religious faith. Ultimately, these individuals made prime recruitment targets as they were desperate for more meaning and purpose in their lives, and they clearly lacked the intellectual ability to adequately
question the religious ideology that they were encountering. Ultimately, in the case of the Paris and Brussels terrorists, lower levels of religious literacy appear to be highly correlated with the activities of this Islamic State terror cell.

5.6. Results: Analysis of Biographical Data of Western ISIS Recruits

In terms of demographic information and findings of the case study, as well as the analysis of the ISIS recruit dataset built for this study, the data largely align with demographic findings of other studies examining ISIS recruits, many of which are discussed above in Chapter Three. Data for the 300 subjects examined in the analysis shows a group that is young (86 percent under the age of 35 when they joined ISIS), largely male (85%), and unemployed or working as a laborer or a student (73%). In terms of education, 3% had a college degree, 16% attended some college, and 29% were high school graduates only. And of those who attended at least some college, only 3% of them were in a field of study that would directly correlate with religious literacy (i.e. Islamic studies, religious studies, anthropology, sociology, etc.). In terms of religiosity (Table 2), the majority of subjects (60%) were, at most, only “somewhat religious” throughout most of their lives, while only 67 (22%) were categorized as either “religious” or “highly religious.” In terms of additional religious education or training, only 21 (7%) were found to have received or participated in additional and specific religious training, such as a study group at a local Mosque, or attending a religious seminary.
Table 2. Summary of Level of Religiosity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Religiosity</th>
<th>Freq.</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anti-Religious</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Religious</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>23.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Religious</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>36.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highly Religious</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Sufficient Data</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>18.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>n=300</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An assessment of the seven variables pertaining to religious literacy of the 216 subjects for whom enough data was found is outlined in Table 9, and shows that 161 (75%) subjects were considered likely possessing low levels of religious literacy, while 48 (22%) would likely be moderately religiously literate, and only 7 (3%) were considered likely to hold a high level of religious literacy.

Table 3. Summary of Individual Levels of Religious Literacy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Religious Literacy</th>
<th>Freq.</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low Religious Literacy</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>74.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate Religious Lit.</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Religious Literacy</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>38.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>n=216</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Thus, Hypothesis 1 (H1), that a majority of subjects would be considered likely to possess a low level of religious literacy, is supported by the results of the analysis. While these findings do not run contrary to what has already been generally assumed of the religious literacy of Islamic State recruits, this study provides further and more concrete evidence for a previously untested assumption. But beyond testing this baseline assumption, this study also seeks to understand how/if lower levels of religious literacy do in fact translate to more extreme religious decisions. Which leads us to the testing of H2 and H3.

In order to test Hypothesis 2 (H2) and Hypothesis 3 (H3) of this study, a multivariate logistic regression was performed as both dependent variables are dichotomous (i.e. physically join/not physically join; terror attack/no terror attack). Those subjects for whom there was insufficient biographical data to determine religious literacy were excluded from the analysis, leaving an n=216.

The results (Table 4) of the multivariate logistic regressions do not support H2, as RL was not a statistically significant predictor of physically joining the Islamic State; but the results do support H3, as RL was a statistically significant predictor of participating in terror attack, and the direction of the relationship confirms that higher a subject’s level of RL, the less likely they were to participate in an act of terror. Included in the multivariate regression were other possible explanatory variables, such as individual levels of education and religiosity, both of which were statistically significant predictors of ISIS recruits attempting to physically join the Islamic State; while religiosity, in addition to religious literacy, was also a significant predictor of participation in a terror attack. The direction of the relationship, however, differs between RL and religiosity, as higher levels of religiosity appear to increase the probability that a subject will participate in a
terror attack. In other words, the subject with a low RL and a higher level of religiosity is the most likely to participate in an act of terror.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>DV: Physically Join ISIS</th>
<th></th>
<th>DV: Participate in Terror Attack</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coef.</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>Sig.(P&gt;</td>
<td>z</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Religious Literacy</td>
<td>-.484</td>
<td>.489</td>
<td>.322</td>
<td>-.862</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Education</td>
<td>1.463</td>
<td>.262</td>
<td>.000***</td>
<td>-.060</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Religiosity</td>
<td>1.290</td>
<td>.293</td>
<td>.000***</td>
<td>.444</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-2.940</td>
<td>.623</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>-.658</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n=216</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*P&lt;0.05, **P&lt;0.01, ***P&lt;0.001</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In terms of percentages, of the 288 subjects for whom there was enough data to determine whether they attempted to physically join the Islamic State and if they participated in a terror act/plot, 195 (67%) attempted to physically go to Iraq or Syria, while 147 (51%) were involved in a terror act/plot. If examining only those subjects for whom there is an estimated level of religious literacy, we see a similar story, where 160 (74%) of the 216 subjects attempted to physically join, while only 103 (48%) were involved in a terror plot. Furthermore, when looking exclusively at those 161 individuals who possess a low level of religious literacy, we see that 117 (73%) attempted to physically join, while 85 (53%) were involved in a terror attack/plot. All of this suggests that ISIS recruits are much more willing to physically join the Islamic State than they are to participate in an act of terror.
5.7. Conclusions and Discussion

While the results of this study show that ISIS recruits are generally religiously illiterate, we must avoid conflating religious literacy with belief and commitment. We encounter evidence everyday which suggests that people are prone to hold unfounded or ill-informed beliefs on a wide variety of subjects. The Pew survey on religious knowledge, discussed above, demonstrates this fact nicely, as it found that the groups that scored the highest in terms of religious knowledge were also the most irreligious (i.e. atheists and agnostics). The lowest religious knowledge scores, conversely, generally belonged to the most religious groups and those who ascribed to the most fundamentalist beliefs and practices, such as considering scripture to be the infallible and literal word of God. In other words, religious knowledge/literacy is not a prerequisite for religious belief and practice, even extreme religious belief and practice.

Many have tried to equate ISIS recruits’ general lack of religious literacy to a lack of religious devotion or motivation in what they do. They assume that because an ISIS recruit has only recently become interested in Islam (or a particular extremist interpretation of Islam) that he/she cannot possibly hold religious beliefs that compel them to action. The underlying logic of this assertion does not follow, as rigid and devoted beliefs and a history of religious practice can be mutually exclusive, especially among religious extremists. Just because someone has not been a devoted practitioner of a given religion his whole life does not mean he cannot hold, or quickly develop, a rigid belief system around that religion, uninformed though it may be.

With that understanding in mind, the findings of this research provide further empirical evidence for the commonly held assumption that ISIS recruits are religiously illiterate. By operationalizing biographical data on these recruits, this study built a measure for estimating the likely religious literacy of a given ISIS recruit. There are, of course, several potential issues with
this measure, as it uses proxy data for ascertaining a level of religious literacy that would only be conclusively determinable by administering an assessment directly to the subjects that tests for various aspects of RL (i.e. knowledge and understanding of religious doctrines, principles, practices, texts, etc.). The methods used for this study, however, produced reliable and statistically significant results that do provide more concrete evidence for this assumption.

While most (75%) subjects were found to likely have a low level of religious literacy, the role of RL as a predictor of certain extreme behavior is still somewhat uncertain. While it is not a reliable predictor of one’s decision to physically join ISIS, it was a significant predictor of terrorist activity. The fact that religiosity was a significant predictor of physically joining the Islamic State and participating in a terror attack provides a possible explanation for why RL was not significant for the former outcome variable. Perhaps more religiously engaged recruits were drawn to the Islamic State for more doctrinal or theological reasons, and they viewed going to the Islamic State as a religious obligation or imperative. Conversely, it is possible that those who were not as high in terms of religiosity and were low in RL were more satisfied by the thought of simply committing a violent act in solidarity with the group and were, perhaps, more excited by the prospect of killing than they were committed to the religious imperative of going to Iraq or Syria. To determine precisely why RL is a significant predictor of terrorism but not physically going to the Islamic State is not discernable from this data and would require an additional study. But this is, perhaps, a possible explanation for the difference between these outcomes.

Furthermore, there is the question of which of these outcome variables is more extreme than the other. As outlined above, the findings show that ISIS recruits are generally far more willing to physically join the Islamic State than they are to participate in an act of terror. This, in and of itself, suggests that ISIS recruits perceive participation in an act of terror to be more extreme
than going to Iraq or Syria. This stands to reason, as joining the Islamic State can be motivated by a desire to *live* in the Caliphate, while participation in an act of terror is an almost assured death for those who engage in such activity. All of this is to say that religious literacy reliably plays some role in making recruits more susceptible to ISIS messaging generally; and that recruit who is, or becomes, highly religious yet is religiously illiterate is the most susceptible to the most extreme behaviors.
6.1. Summary

When I began my graduate studies in August of 2014, the Islamic State was still a largely unknown entity. It was understood that this new Islamist-extremist group had evolved out of the Zarqawi-led AQI, and that this group had recently declared a Caliphate in Iraq and Syria, but what that group would become was unforeseen at that time. As the so-called Islamic State began to grow in power and influence, the world started to pay attention. Of particular interest to the Western world were the Islamic State’s recruitment efforts in the West. Not only was the group attracting Western recruits, but it was doing so at an alarming rate and with a disturbing amount of success. Beyond the sheer volume of Western recruits being lured to the Caliphate, the threat of ISIS became all too real when the group claimed responsibility for several high-profile and deadly attacks beginning in 2015. What was most disturbing about these attacks, however, was not just ISIS proving capable of operating internationally, but that those who carried out the attacks were home-grown terrorists—born and raised in the West, yet loyal to the Islamic State and its deadly mission.

I watched the growth of the Islamic State unfold in real time, and subsequently followed the various theories and new studies aimed at determining how and why Westerners were joining the Islamic State. Many of these studies looked at a variety of different variables, yet all seemed to come to similar conclusions: that Western ISIS recruits were largely loners, alienated from society, unemployed, uneducated, and irreligious Muslim young men in need of purpose, direction, belonging, and excitement. While I did not fundamentally disagree with any of these assertions, two primary issues or gaps in our understanding of these assertions became clear to
me. First, while it was largely assumed that ISIS recruits were irreligious and uninformed about Islam, this assumption had not been empirically tested in a meaningful way. And second, while it stands to reason that many Western Muslims might be feeling alienated and ostracized, and that they would be seeking meaning, direction, and purpose in their lives, why did they choose the Islamic State to fulfill their needs, and not simply elect to become more active in their local mosque or in a community group? In other words, what made the Islamic State so different and appealing that Westerners were willing to join such an extreme and violent organization? Out of these underlying questions were born several small projects, largely done for graduate seminars, that ultimately coalesced into this dissertation.

The first question was addressed by exploring the research around religious literacy, determining what attributes would be common to a religiously literate person, and then testing those attributes against a sample of ISIS recruits to see if the assumption held water. I addressed the second question by first developing a theoretical framework for understanding how/why the Islamic State and its message resonates with Western recruits, and then testing that framework by analyzing the identity appeals in Islamic State propaganda materials to see if the assumptions of the theory held.

These two studies have contributed to filling the empirical and theoretical gaps in our understanding of the Islamic State and its recruitment efforts in the West. The studies have demonstrated that marginalized Muslims living in the West feel existentially threatened and that their ontological security is under attack by Western society because they are Muslim, and because they are national outsiders. In order to ensure their ontological security, these Western Muslims seek out groups that offers an identity that fulfills the dual role of repairing their damaged self-image as a Muslim and as a national outsider and providing them with meaning,
purpose, and direction. Thus, a religious-national identity is most potent and impactful among these individuals, and that is precisely what the Islamic State offers. ISIS ensures recruits that by joining the ranks of the Caliphate they will not only be ensured a religious-national identity that is built on Islamic solidarity but will also be given access to a physical Muslim homeland that will grant them meaning and purpose of eternal consequence not in spite of their religious identity, but because of it.

The evidence of the Islamic State’s attempt to exploit the appeals of a religious-national identity is found throughout the Islamic State’s English-language magazine, *Dabiq*. Within *Dabiq*, there is a substantial amount of religious-national content, all of which speaks to the identity appeals that potential Western recruits find so attractive. Within *Dabiq*, the Islamic State desperately attempts to establish the religious and political legitimacy of the group by building a theological justification for their existence and by attempting to project an image of military power, capacity, and will.

The second study of the dissertation shows that as these Western recruits are confronted with the new religious-national messaging from sources like *Dabiq*, they lack the cognitive tools and quality information necessary for adequately processing the new information. ISIS recruits are sorely lacking religious literacy and, as such, are more susceptible to unquestioningly accepting the religious-national message being projected by the Islamic State. These recruits, though largely irreligious prior to their exposure to ISIS messaging, can become quick believers and highly devoted to the group and its underlying extremist-religious ideology. An ISIS recruit who possesses a low level of religious literacy but is religiously devoted and believing is a highly dangerous individual who is more prone to engaging in extremist activities, such as terrorism and violence, than is someone with a higher level of religious literacy and lower levels of religiosity.
6.2. Potential Shortcomings & Future Directions

In exploring the literature around religious-nationalism, I was unable to find any kind of measure or method for identifying religious-national content; thus, I developed my own analytic method for identifying it in Dabiq. I would like to expand the use of the method and codebook to see how well it travels to other propaganda materials of other religious-national groups. Additionally, I would like to see how this method can apply to other types of propaganda materials such as music, audio/podcast material, and videos. In addition to testing the RN content analysis codebook, it would also be beneficial to conduct analyses of other suspected RN groups in terms of the expected characteristics/behaviors of RN individuals and groups that I developed for this research. Testing these assumptions across a wider range of groups and individuals will provide further evidence for the validity, or lack of it, of the assumptions.

Determining how to measure religious literacy proved to be one of the more difficult tasks and, admittedly, what I ended with was not what I had originally envisioned for this project, nor is it where I wish to stop. As would be the case for any study attempting to examine ISIS recruits, the best resources for data-gathering would be the subjects themselves. Given the logistical and practical barriers to gathering information directly from ISIS recruits/group members, I was relegated to using open-source data rather than speaking to subjects directly.

As I was attempting to develop a measure of religious literacy, I reached out to Diane Moore at Harvard Divinity School. Through several emails, she informed me that the Religious Literacy Project, which she leads, had not developed an actual assessment for measuring individual levels of religious literacy. My original goals for this project included the development of such an assessment, but this will have to be relegated to a later study. Based on various indicator variables, this study only assesses the likely or probable level of RL of a given
individual, rather than the actual level. I believe these proxy variables do accurately capture likely levels of RL, however, a direct assessment would be preferable. Developing such an assessment would require a collaborative and multi-disciplinary effort that was, unfortunately, outside the realm of possibility for this dissertation. The religious knowledge survey developed by Pew could have sufficed as an adequate measure for this study, however, I did not feel that the survey fully captured or addressed all aspects of religious literacy, as my conceptualization of RL goes beyond knowing facts about various religious traditions. While facts are part of the calculous, RL includes broader understandings of religion that enter the realm of general psychological dispositions and attitudes, as well as beliefs and biases. All of which would need to be integrated into the assessment/measure of individual religious literacy.

6.3. Conclusion

Beyond filling gaps in the research around ISIS, this dissertation engages in theory-building that helps us to better frame our understanding of this phenomenon. We know the general profile of an average ISIS recruit, but building theories that cut a step below our surface-level observations is vital to understanding and identifying the underlying causes and psychological appeals that are driving these individuals to do what they do. Through the development of this theoretical framework, with its subsequent empirical findings, this dissertation lends greater credibility to the voices who are calling for broader integration and acceptance in the West and for those advocates of societies that are devoted to upholding the ideals of a tolerance and pluralism. Western policy-makers and citizens must do more to ensure that minority groups and individuals become fully integrated and accepted into Western society—not conditionally, but as they are. Greater integration and acceptance will help to
combat the threats to ontological security that so many of these individuals currently feel. If Western societies can successfully fulfill the ontological security needs of its citizens—religious minority populations included—then the perceived need to join an extremist group for fulfillment will be combatted as well. Additionally, ensuring the religious literacy of a society is also an oft-overlooked imperative for policy-makers, educators, civic-leaders, ecclesiastical authorities, and parents. A religiously literate society will be much better equipped to combat religious extremism. As societies and individuals become more well-versed in the various religious traditions throughout this world, they will be more-likely to accept and tolerate the existence of various normative religious claims, and less-likely to embrace dogmas that encourage rigidity and absolutist ideas about religious belief and practice. It is my hope that this dissertation provides an empirically-grounded perspective that compounds the great work and research on the Islamic State that has already done. It is also my hope and belief that through greater understanding and knowledge of the ISIS phenomenon, we will be further enabled to combat harmful ideas through positive societal change and policy and through the promotion of ideas that help, build, and sustain human society, rather than harm and destroy it.
REFERENCES


Appendix A: Identified Surahs

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Table 5. Identified Surahs

Appendix B: Religious Literacy Codebook

1. Name of Individual

Explanation: It may be that case studies of individuals come out of this analysis, however, the names of the individuals included in this study will be redacted and deidentified in the dataset.

2. Individual ID number

Explanation: Administrative variable for tracking and identification of the individual being examined, assigning ID numbers to each individual also allows for deidentification of each individual.

3. Age

Explanation: Basic demographic variable for identifying possible correlates between age groups and the dependent variable.

4. Gender

   1. Male
   2. Female
   3. NA

Explanation: Basic demographic variable for identifying possible correlates between gender and the dependent variable.
5. Is this individual a citizen of a Western country? Or, has this individual lived in a Western country for more than 5 years?
   1. Yes
   2. No
   3. NA

Explanation: As this study is specifically looking at Westerners who have joined/claimed allegiance to ISIS it is of interest to know if the citizenship status of these individuals.

6. Has this individual physically or ideologically joined ISIS?
   1. Yes
   2. No
   3. NA

Explanation: This variable is more for purposes of analysis, as it is already a known and verified fact that all of the individuals in this analysis have, at some point, either joined and/or pledged allegiance to ISIS.

7. Did this individual attempt to physically join ISIS in Iraq and/or Syria?
   1. Yes
   2. No
   3. NA

Explanation: This variable may provide insight into the motivations, dedication, and actual goals of the individual being examined.

8. If yes to 6, was this individual successful?
   1. Yes
   2. No
   3. NA

Explanation: Many individuals from Western states who attempted to join ISIS were unsuccessful, and most were arrested before they could successfully flee to Iraq or Syria.

9. Individual’s country of origin?

Explanation: While these individuals are known to be citizens or residents of Western countries, it is important to know whether or not his/her country of origin is in the West or not.
10. Ethnic/National heritage?

Explanation: While these individuals may have been born and raised in a Western country he/she may have some affinity or connection with a different country that may be relevant to his/her motivation to joining/pledging allegiance to ISIS.

11. When did the individual first join/profess allegiance to ISIS? (Month/Year)

Explanation: This variable allows us to know when the individual formally joined/pledged allegiance to ISIS.

12. Religious affiliation prior to joining ISIS

1. Islam
2. Christian
3. Hindu
4. Jewish
5. None
6. Other
7. NA

Explanation: It may be assumed that all of these individuals were practicing Muslims prior to their affiliation with ISIS, but this variable allows us to know for certain what their religious affiliation is rather than to simply assume.

13. Was this individual ever involved in a terrorist attack?

1. Yes
2. No
3. NA

Explanation: Not all of these individuals have been explicitly involved in an actual act of terror. Some may have committed other crimes related to his/her ISIS involvement, but were never actually involved in an act of terror.

14. If Yes to 12,

1. For which attack/s is this individual known?

2. Did the attack take place in the West?

1. Yes
2. No
3. Where did the attack take place?

1. Country
2. City

Explanation: This variable allows us to see where these individuals have been active, and whether they committed domestic acts of terror in the name of ISIS.

15. What was the individual’s primary source of information on ISIS during the recruitment process?

1. Online publications (Dabiq, Rumiayah, etc.)
2. Online videos
3. Chatrooms
4. Friends/associates/family
5. NA

Explanation: This variable speaks to the reach of ISIS propaganda and how effective/ineffective certain proselyting tools are at reaching and convincing potential recruits.

16. Level of secular education attained by this individual

1. Graduate school
2. College graduate
3. Some college
4. High School graduate
5. Other
6. NA

Explanation: The aim of this analysis is to ascertain an estimate for the respective levels of religious literacy of these individual ISIS members. While not explicitly religious education, secular education may correlate with religious knowledge/literacy. Knowing that an individual has some level of secular education in addition to religious education would make the probability of higher levels of religious literacy to be more likely.

17. If the individual did attend at least some college, did he/she study or receive their degree in history, religious studies, sociology, anthropology, Islamic studies, Middle East studies, or theology?

1. Yes
2. No
3. NA

Explanation: This variable also speaks to the question of religious literacy. In addition to general secular education, it would be more likely that an individual who has specifically studied one of the above subjects would be more likely to have higher levels of religious literacy.
18. Did this individual receive his/her education in the West?

1. Yes
2. No
3. NA

Explanation: This variable may speak to the quality of the secular education the individual received, while also speaking to whether the education was truly secular, or if there were religious influences or affiliations.

19. If Yes, which school/university?

Explanation: This variable may speak to the quality of the secular education the individual received, while also speaking to whether the education was truly secular, or if there were religious influences or affiliations.

20. Career/job of this individual?

Explanation: Employment opportunities, or the lack thereof, are often cited as motivation for many Westerners to join ISIS. This variable will provide insight into the career paths of each of the individuals examined in this study.

21. Did this individual receive any religious training/education prior to joining ISIS?

1. Yes
2. No
3. NA

Explanation: This dichotomous variable is one of the more important variables, as this will be examined as one of the key independent or explanatory variables for why individuals join ISIS, or why some individuals may be more susceptible to ISIS propaganda than others.

22. If Yes to 20, what kind of religious training/education did the individual receive?

1. Degree in Islamic or religious studies
2. Clerical or ecclesiastical training/degree
3. Extra circular studies at a Mosque or religious seminary
4. Attended a religious madrassa or religiously affiliated school
5. Other (explain)

Explanation: While an individual may have received some kind of religious training/education, not all religious training/education is equal. In terms of religious literacy, having a degree in religious or Islamic studies from a university is qualitatively different than having received courses on the Qur’an in a Mosque from an Imam who is known to harbor extremist or
radicalized views of Islam. This variable will allow for parsing out these differences and determining what these differences might mean.

23. Are there any individuals (i.e. religious leaders, parents, associates, friends) who have a relationship with the individual who are known to harbor extremist, radical, or Islamist views or to be sympathetic to any Islamist organization that has used terrorism as a tactic?

1. Yes
2. No

Explanation: Influential authority figures can have a major impact and influence on an individual’s thought processes and decision-making, knowing this will provide some insight into whether the seeds for radicalization were planted even before the individual was introduced to ISIS or ISIS ideology.

24. If yes, explain:

1. Religious Leader
2. Parent
3. Associate
4. Friend
5. Sibling
6. Other family member

Explanation: This variable applies specificity to the previous question in order to determine where extremist views/ideologies may have been coming from.

25. Prior to joining ISIS, did this individual engage in activities/behaviors that would not be in line with behavioral expectations as outlined by Islamic practice, doctrine, and culture?

1. Yes
2. No
3. NA

Explanation: Religiosity and religious literacy are often conflated with one another in media and even in other academic work. In that researchers and journalists will point to a lack of religiosity, or a lack of observance of the basic tenets of Islam specifically as an indicator that individuals lacking in religious observance somehow lack a sound understanding of the religion itself. This variable allows us to see what the relationship between religiosity and religious literacy may be. As it may be the case that low levels of religiosity are correlated with low levels of religious literacy, but the opposite may be true as well.
26. On average, what has been the individual’s level of religiosity during his/her adult years?

1. Highly religious (Always: Firm belief in God, daily prayer, reading religious text, attending religious meetings, considers religious beliefs to be exceptional or uniquely true, etc. Also, observes religious dictates in all other behavioral aspects: abstains from alcohol, sex outside of marriage, consuming other barred food or drink items)
2. Religious (Regularly: prays, reads religious text, attends religious meetings and mostly adheres to religious behavioral standards)
3. Somewhat religious (occasionally: prays, reads religious text, attends religious meetings, but largely ignores
4. Not religious (perhaps identifies with a religion, but does little to nothing to live the life of a practicing religious person)
5. Unreligious (Is openly opposed/hostile toward religion/religious practice, advocates for secularization)
6. NA

Explanation: This variable will be based on the openly available biographical information of the individual and will be assessed based on that information. It may be the case that there is not enough information available, but that is admittedly to the discretion of the data collector. This variable gives a more detailed understanding of the level of religiosity or religious activity of the individual being examined.

27. Has the individual professed a black and white understanding/view of Islam? (i.e. Islam is the one true religion, and everyone should live by its doctrine and teaching)

1. Yes
2. No
3. NA

Explanation: One of the key indicators of a religiously literate person is his/her ability to recognize other religious traditions and beliefs as legitimate and historically contingent as their own.

28. Prior to joining ISIS, did this individual either publicly or privately express discontent with the policies, laws, culture, etc. of the country in which they resided?

1. Yes
2. No
3. NA

Explanation: This variable will provide insight into other possible motivations an individual may have had to join ISIS. The decision to join ISIS is far from a single variable calculus and knowing other motivations that interact with levels of religious literacy well help to more fully understand why these recruits make the decisions they do.
29. If yes to 27, what discontent was expressed? Mark all that apply.

1. Discrimination against Muslims
2. Lack of educational/career opportunities
3. Lack of recognition for Islamic law and practice
4. Etc.

Explanation: This variable provides more specific data as a follow up to question 27.

30. Prior to joining ISIS did the individual advocate for the implementation of Islamic or Sharia law?

1. Yes
2. No
3. NA

Explanation: This variable again speaks to previously held beliefs that may have influenced this individual to join ISIS.

31. Has this individual referenced or expressed, privately or publicly, religious justifications/motivations/reasons for joining ISIS and acting in the name of ISIS?

1. Yes
2. No
3. NA

Explanation: As previously stated, the decision to join ISIS is certainly a multi-variate one, this variable, however, will track how many used religious justifications for joining ISIS. Religious belief is often skirted or ignored, and this is a variable which speaks directly to the question of the religious influences in deciding to join ISIS. There is, of course, the question of how sincere or jaded these religious justifications might be, but to speculate on alternative motives would be secondary to what this individual has actually said and done.

32. Was this individual politically active prior to joining ISIS?

1. Yes
2. No
3. NA

Appendix C: Textual Content Codebook

1. What is the unit ID?

Explanation: Each unit of analysis will be assigned a unique unit identification number which is determined by the magazine, issue number of the magazine, and the paragraph/section number.
This is an administrative variable for tracking and identification purposes so that data can be systematically retrieved, reviewed and analyzed.

2. Which magazine is being examined?
   
   a. Dabiq  
   b. Rumiyah

Explanation: Administrative variable for tracking and identification of the source material for each unit and subsequent observations.

3. Issue Title

Explanation: Administrative variable, but also could also provide insight into the primary thrust of the messaging goals of a given issue of Dabiq or Rumiyah.

4. Issue Date

Explanation: Administrative variable, but also provides us with the necessary information to fully answer question 5.

5. Key Events Associated with and Leading up to the Release of This Issue

   1. ISIS military victory  
   2. Major Military Defeat  
   3. Successful Terror Attack in the West  
   4. Etc.

Explanation: The purpose of this variable is to later go back and examine news sources and other databases to correlate key events and activities with the content and messaging of a given issue of Dabiq or Rumiyah.

6. Page Number

Explanation: Another administrative variable for quickly referencing a given unit of analysis or specific observation.

7. Name of the Article in which the unit exists

Explanation: Another administrative variable that may also provide insight into the primary messaging goals of the article.
8. Type of Article:

1. News
2. Commentary
3. Report
4. Religious

Explanation: This question provides an administrative variable as well as insight into the balance of articles within a given issue of Dabiq and/or Rumiyah relative to other issues.

9. Is there Religious Nationalist content present?

1. Yes
2. No

Explanation: This is a simple yes or no response to (1) record the proportion of units that contain religious nationalist content to those that do not; (2) indicate whether questions 10 and 11 should be asked of the unit.

- Religious Nationalist content: Religious nationalism is the compounding of religious and national identities, where a religious identity and national identity are so intertwined that they are perceived to be one in the same; where to identify as one, is necessarily to identify as the other. Religious nationalist content is any content which reflects this combined identity, which includes language that pits the Caliphate against the “other”, religious justifications for a nationalist cause, conflation of political and religious leadership wherein both are viewed to be one in the same, reference to holy religious lands or territory that are claimed by the nation, and promises of identity and fulfillment to be found in an identity which combines religious and nationalist identities.

*For each observation, answer the following questions:*

10. What is the observation number?

Explanation: Administrative variable where each individual observation within each unit will be individually identified and numbered.

11. Which Category most accurately describes the Religious Nationalist content in this observation?

1. The Caliphate versus the Other
2. Religious Justifications
3. Theocratic Leadership
4. Holy Lands/Territory
5. Religious National Identity
Explanation: This question provides the primary data points for this entire analysis. Here we will be able to record the quantity of religious nationalist observations and content, as well as the type or category of content.

- The Caliphate versus the Other: Language that divides the world along religious lines, between those of the faith, and those who oppose it. Observations in this category also include language that identifies/blames/condemns/denounces the “other” (language that can identify the other include: crusaders, apostates, secularists, ETC), including “other” nations or states. Observations in this category include language that positions the Caliphate as culturally and militarily superior to other states, and life in the Caliphate to be joyful and fulfilling. Finally, observations in this category include those that identify and magnify threats made by the “other” toward the Caliphate.

- Religious Justifications: Observations in this category include language that claims Allah’s approval and support of IS’ actions and goals, promises of eternal reward for service to the Caliphate, references and calls to join the Jihad, quotations from the Qur’an, the Hadith, or other respected Islamic leaders that purportedly support the actions and goals of IS.

- Theocratic Leadership: Observations in this category include any language which calls for obedience to the Caliph/IS leadership, makes claims about the divine calling of the Caliph, or in any way conflates religious and political leadership.

- Holy Lands/Territory: References or claims to holy lands or territory significant to or ruled by the Caliphate

- Religious National Identity: Language which explicitly conflates nationalist and religious identity. Observations could also include references to the flag of the Caliphate or other nationalist symbols. References to the Ummah, or the Islamic community as defined by IS, calls for unity and sacrifice for the Caliphate, and promises of identity and fulfillment within the Caliphate.

i. If 1. Which of the following subcategories most applies?
   1. Denouncing other nations/states
   2. Positioning the Caliphate as superior to other groups/nations/states
   3. Identification/Blaming/Condemnation of the “other”, or “enemies” of the Caliphate
   4. Threats to the Caliphate from enemies of the Caliphate
   5. Highlighting the prestige and accomplishments of the Caliphate
   6. How much better to live in the Caliphate than in other places
   7. Military strength and capabilities

ii. If 2. Which of the following subcategories most applies?
   1. Claims of Allah’s approval and support of IS’ actions and goals
   2. Reference to Jihad and calls to join
   3. Promises of eternal reward for service to the Caliphate
4. Quotations from the Qur’an that purportedly support or validate IS actions and goals
5. Quotations from the Hadith that purportedly support or validate IS actions and goals
6. Quotations from other Islamic leaders that purportedly support of validate IS actions and goals

iii. If 3. Which of the following subcategories most applies?

1. Call to obedience to the Caliph/IS Leadership
2. Claims to the divine calling of the Caliph
3. Conflation of religious and political leadership

iv. If 4. Which of the following subcategories most applies?

1. References to holy lands or territory significant to, or ruled by, the Caliphate
2. Call to gather within the borders of the Caliphate

v. If 5. Which of the following subcategories most applies?

1. Reference to the flag of the Caliphate
2. Reference to the Ummah, or the Islamic community as defined by IS
3. Calls for unity around the Caliphate/Flag/Islamic identity
4. Calls for sacrifice on behalf of the Caliphate
5. Promises of identity and fulfillment

Keyword/Phrase Search

Explanation: This is simply a frequency count of key words and phrases that would reflect religious nationalist content and messaging. (Key Words: Allah, crusaders, enemy, Islam, Jihad,

Appendix D: Image Content Codebook

1. What is the Image ID Number?

Explanation: This is an administrative variable for tracking and analysis purposes. Each image will be assigned an image ID number, which includes a (D) Dabiq or an (R) Rumiyah, then an issue number, then an image number.

2. Type of Image

1. Photograph
2. Graphic
Explanation: This is an administrative variable for tracking the ratio of photographs to computer generated graphics.

3. Is there Religious Nationalist content present?
   
   1. Yes
   2. No

Explanation: This variable will allow for quantifying the frequency of religious nationalist content in the form of images. A “Yes” response will include anything from the below list.  

*If yes, then continue to answer question 4*

4. What Religious Nationalist content is present/represented?
   
   1. IS Flag
      i. Any image containing the flag of ISIS.
   2. Military Strength
      i. Images containing any military vehicles, weapons, missiles, artillery, soldiers, or any other object that might represent military power and capabilities. These would also include images of dead “enemy” soldiers.
   3. Religious activity
      i. Images showing individuals praying, reading the Qur’an, or engaged in any other religious activity.
   4. Religious symbols/imagery
      i. Pictures of the Qur’an, Mosques, or any other image that would be considered religious symbols
   5. IS Leadership
      i. Images of ISIS religious or military leadership
   6. Rejoicing/happy/content citizens of the Caliphate
      i. Images of the joyous and satisfying lifestyle that the Caliphate provides its citizens.
   7. Acts of the enemy or the “other”
      i. Images of the death and destruction caused by the enemies of the Caliphate. This includes images of dead ISIS fighters or citizens of the Caliphate, or images intended to convey Muslims being the target of enemy attacks.
   8. Unity/Brotherhood/Comradery
      i. Images attempting to convey comradery and brotherhood among those who fight for the Caliphate together. Images meant to convey