

Weaponizing Narrative: How the Islamic State Tells its Story

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To all the boots on the ground

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
DEDICATION.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	v
Introduction.....	1
How the Islamic State Presents Time.....	5
Former Greatness: The Equilibrium of the Past and the Myths it Creates in the Present..	7
The Near-Past and Present: A Time of Disruption and Subjugation.....	16
The Future: A Return to Greatness.....	25
Conclusion.....	33
WORKS CITED.....	35

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1: Tranquility and Religious Teaching.....	8
2: Islamic Religious Instruction.....	9
3: A Reconstruction of Agency.....	10
4: The Jihadist Model Person.....	13
5: The Crusader Model Person.....	15
6: Islamic State Reporting.....	18
7: Western Narrative Perspective.....	20
8: Hostage Narrative Perspective.....	22
9: The Caliphate Declared.....	26
10: Healthcare in the Caliphate.....	27
11: Conquest of Dabiq.....	28
12: ISIS Expansion to Africa.....	30
13: <i>Dabiq</i> celebrates internationalist terrorist attacks.....	31

Introduction

United States government officials routinely call the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant the “so-called Islamic State” to undermine the group’s political legitimacy and combat its narrative of religious purity. Yet, when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared himself Caliph of the Muslim religion from one of the most storied mosques in ISIS-controlled Mosul, thousands of the faithful rallied in the streets. On July 5th, 2014, the Islamic State issued its first publication of *Dabiq* magazine entitled “The Return of the Khilafah” or Caliphate, displaying high-resolution photos of Jihadi fighters parading down the streets of Iraqi cities, waving the iconic black flags of the insurgent group. To thousands of Baghdadi’s followers, there was nothing “so-called” about their new state.

Dabiq’s narrative was what J.L. Austin might call “performative.” In other words, the publication’s story produced a new world rather than describing an existing one. David Herman calls this “the idea of narrative” with “its capacity to evoke worlds in which interpreters can... take up imaginative residence” (2012, 14). This essay ventures to understand how *Dabiq*’s narrative created a story world in which an insurgent group vilified by nearly every recognized state in the world could funnel human and material resources to their insurgency. I analyze the 15 publications of *Dabiq*, the online magazine created by the so-called Islamic State in order to highlight the narrative tools the insurgent group weaponized to garner international support for its aberrant brand of Islam. I choose this magazine because it is representative of the innovative media publications that radical jihadists have mastered, creating both admiration and widespread fear in the international community. Physical distance no longer separates impressionable minds from corrupting ideology. The Islamic State published the magazine in several languages, including English, which highlights its call for all Muslims to join in the creation of an

apocalyptic utopia. I limit my analysis of audience to potential western recruits who were either born or held long residences in European or North American countries. The Islamic State wished to radicalize these individuals into their story-world by urging them to take physical residence in its territory or conduct so-called “lone wolf” attacks in the West.

In the United States, we have the tendency to call the battle of ideas in the space of mass media “information warfare.” The United States Government has no official definition of information warfare, but the Congressional Research Service (CRS) tells congressional leaders that it is “typically conceptualized as the use and management of information to pursue a competitive advantage” (4). The CRS’s document describes the type of information deployed against the United States and its methods of delivery but lacks analysis on how the information is aggregated to become persuasive to certain populations. The battle of ideas is not based on the volleying of information back and forth across a digital medium but on dominating the structure by which humans rationalize information through the creation of coherent narrative. This essay places special emphasis on both the structure and form of the Islamic State story and its nexus with human interpretation and sense-making. As I hope to demonstrate, the Islamic State’s prowess in the domain of information warfare is its ability to create a coherent narrative.

To understand why certain information resonates with particular audiences and not others, we must first understand that the transmission of information through signs, such as language, is an interactional, subjective act. Different people may interpret the same language in various ways, according to their different experiences. Ferdinand de Saussure was one of the first to highlight the psychological creation of meaning in his *Course of General Linguistics*, pointing out that language is not merely an act of naming but the mutual construction of meaning between two or more parties. Key to our study here is what de Saussure deems “the linear nature of the

signifier” (de Saussure, 70). Signifiers, or words, form a chain of succession in which the speaker and interlocutor determine the meaning of a word by comparing it to other words that define it. One looks in the dictionary, at other words, in order to determine a definition. Extrapolated, there are an infinite set of words used to describe any other. Audiences differentially articulate the meaning of language based on their subjective perspective of an entire language system. Saussure’s analysis explains why some messages “make sense” to certain audiences and not others.

We evaluate the credibility of information through the same subjective process. Writing for the Central Intelligence Agency, Richards Heuer points out that trained intelligence professionals mediate information through a “complex mental processes that determines which information is attended to, how it is organized, and the meaning attributed to it” (4). The analyst builds her own mental process through the amalgamation of “past experience, education, cultural values, role requirements, and organizational norms” (4). Like Saussure’s theory of language, she interprets whether information “makes sense,” is true, or is worthwhile by comparing it to her knowledge of all other information available, usually packaged within cultural norms or existing narratives of history.

Narrative can package information in a persuasive manner because it incorporates the subjective and interactional aspects of conveying information through language and symbols. Stories imbed information within a cultural and contextual paradigm. As David Herman points out, “stories are found in every culture and subculture and can be viewed as a basic human strategy for coming to terms with time, process, and change” (2003, 2). By structuring information within a culturally conditioned paradigm, stories resonate with audiences more than isolated information devoid of context, however objectively correct that information is. The

various elements of storytelling provide the audience with context recognized as “intuitive.” For example, temporal structures of stories allow events to happen in order; for future events to happen as a result of previous ones. A causal link between events and conditions form. Character development usually follows the cultural expectation of that character’s place within society, so that a person generally acts in accordance to the audience’s expectations. The aspects of narrative provide a culturally developed intuition, allowing readers to accept the validity of information packaged within it.

Narratives that seek to persuade their audience, to make them believe its version of events is the true one, will likely incorporate another measure by which we evaluate the credibility of information: Ubiquity, which, in the world of information analysis, we call corroboration. *Dabiq*’s newsletter format fosters corroborative evidence through its multi-modal approach. Text and photographs act in performative interplay to create supporting evidence for the same sequence of events. While text allows its audience to imagine the world it creates, photographs offer a seemingly objective reproduction of the story world. As Roland Barthes states in “Rhetoric of the Image”, photographs offer a different signification to the viewer: “in the photograph... the relationship of signified to signifier is not one of “transformation” but of “recording” ... the scene is there, captured mechanically, not humanly” (44). Though the physical objects represented in the image are mechanically captured, the camera’s perspective, what it includes and excludes, can support the subjective argument of the narrator. *Dabiq* utilizes the purported objectivity of the photograph to support its story world. *Dabiq* creates its narrative weapons through this interplay of image, word, and icon.

I hope to demonstrate through the following analysis how *Dabiq* packages information within a narrative format to empower its information warfare effort. My first point of discussion,

and indeed the foundation of *Dabiq*'s story, is how the magazine presents temporality in its narrative. As you will see, *Dabiq*'s temporal structure is not merely a timeline of sequenced events: time and human condition blend together; the past, present, and future all influence each other, slipping through the boundaries of time to create a space reflective of its author's psychological perspective. To neatly categorize and segregate the narrative tools employed in *Dabiq* would do an injustice to its analysis, for every aspect of *Dabiq*'s narration is intimately intertwined and codependent. The conditions of the characters exist only because of the stories chronologically sequenced events, all of which are nested within the overarching temporal-conditional structure. My analysis will follow that structure, which *Dabiq* presents as a time of equilibrium, peace, and prosperity, followed by a period of victimization and disruption, and ending with a return to self-righteous equilibrium.

How the Islamic State Presents Time

David Herman defines narrative as “a sequentially organized representation of a sequence of events” (2003, 2) consisting of active subjects operating in distinct places with causal connectives between actions. These causal connectives follow a common trajectory through time: “an initial state of equilibrium, through a phase of disequilibrium, to an endpoint at which equilibrium is restored (on a different footing) because of intermediary events” (2003, 3). The narrative and cognitive power of the equilibrium – disruption -- equilibrium temporal structure has been studied in earlier contexts to explain human behavior. Sigmund Freud terms the phrase “death instinct” to explain the psychological inclination to return to a previous set of conditions. Freud stipulates that there exists, “perhaps of all organic life... a tendency innate in living organic matter impelling it toward the reinstatement of an earlier condition” (Freud, 29). While

not every story follows this exact trajectory, this temporality prevails in many foundational texts and notions of history. For example, Virgil's *Aeneid* narrates Rome's beginning as a reconstruction of the ravaged city of Troy. After the fall of Rome, historians labelled the western European common condition and time as the "Dark Ages." This disruption only ended with a rebirth, or the renaissance, in which western societies returned to the scientific and artistic achievements of before, on a new footing. Two examples among many, these stories show how potent the emotional urge to reinstate previous conditions can be.

The equilibrium – disruption -- equilibrium temporal model is foundational to the Islamic States narrative in *Dabiq*. Every narrative aspect of *Dabiq* nests within this overarching presentation of time; the narrator, characters, and the spatial dimensions of the Islamic State's story world all are defined and dependent upon it. The initial state portrayed in the magazine is the time in which Islamic societies led in the world in scientific achievements and the armies of the Prophet gained continual political power throughout the Middle East. The opposition to U.S. led coalition forces in Iraq and sympathy toward Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's resistance was, at least partially, fueled by this notion of past greatness. "For a thousand years," Joby Warrick writes in *Black Flags*, "the arid lands east of the Jordan River were part of Islamic empires, or caliphates, that at times extended from North Africa to the Balkans and encompassed all of the Arabian Peninsula and the Levant. The first caliphs, who were viewed as successors to the Prophet Muhammad, ruled from Damascus and Baghdad" (40). Sunni sympathy toward Zarqawi's insurgency was fueled by "a glorious past when Iraq was part of a mighty empire, and Baghdad was a global center of science and learning" (124). The perceived former greatness of Iraqi and Syrian society provided ample sense of former equilibrium to the population.

How can the past have such an imaginative hold on the present? How could the actions of thousands of Islamic State supporters be so influenced by events that occurred hundreds of years ago? To begin answering these questions, we would need to recognize the difference between history and remembering. Jay Winter writes that history is “a profession with rules about evidence, about publication, about peer review.” Remembering, however, is an imaginative reconstruction of past events, a “dynamic, shifting process, dependent on notions of the future as much as on images of the past” (4-5). Remembering a previous condition reflects a community’s current mental state and its projections for the future. By remembering, communities create myths living in the past that influence their communal present. For example, the notion of Roman greatness derived from the reconstruction of Troy’s once dominant political and military might. A malleable, ever-shifting image, the past becomes a space in which a population can explain the causes of their current condition and nostalgically hope for a better future.

Former Greatness: The Equilibrium of the Past and the Myths it Creates in the Present

Dabiq utilizes many narrators throughout its publications. The primary perspective for establishing a sense of former tranquility and greatness is what I call the religious authority narrator. This authority explains to the magazine’s readership events of the past, religious teachings, and demonstrates their usefulness in the present and future. Through the written word, photography, and icon, this narrator defines the past as a time of both peace and power.



Figure 1: Tranquility and Religious Teaching, *Dabiq* issue 1,3, and 8.¹

The figure above illustrates how the religious authority narrator combines teachings from the Koran and Hadith, written more than a thousand years ago, and pastoral images taken in the present to reconstruct a past defined by tranquility and peace. Each image displays a bountiful and fruitful earth, able to supply its human population with the resources it needs. A rising sun connotes a progressive message: that light will overtake darkness. These images do not merely denote the past, but interact with a communal sense of the present, one juxtaposing modern industrialism and technological advancement with a simple, natural, and self-sustaining past.

Utilizing this reconstructed world of the past, *Dabiq* justified its current, abhorrent battlefield tactics. Employing the retrospective religious narration to gain religious authority, ISIS media producers comment on various controversial stances the organization takes on religious issues. For instance, the group sought to combat the mainstream notion that Islam was a religion of peace. The religious authority narrator explained the group's stance by retroactively

¹ All images displayed in this essay were originally published in *Dabiq* magazine and generously provided to me by the Middle Eastern Media Research Institute (MEMRI).

narrating episodes outlined in the Koran and Hadith. The author claims that Allah’s messenger told the faithful that they should “fight those who do not believe in Allah or in the Last Day and who do not consider unlawful what Allah and His Messenger have made unlawful” (*Dabiq*, “From Hypocrisy to Apostasy”, 21). The figure below prominently displays the image of a medieval sword, once again publishing icons of the past. Islamic artistic designs decorate the sword, adding aesthetic value to a weapon of war. Coupled with quotations from the Hadith, *Dabiq*’s religious authority couples the myth of the Islamic Soldier in the past with the insurgent group’s much-criticized brutality on the battlefield in the present to instill in its readers the notion that battlefield violence led to greatness before and it could do so again.

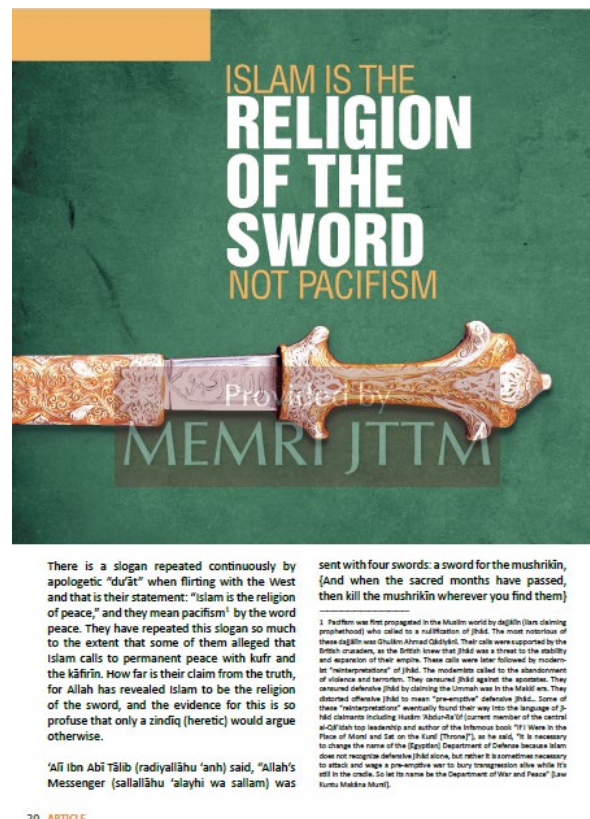


Figure 2: Islamic Religious Instruction, “From Hypocrisy to Apostasy,” 20.

Dabiq reconstructs a past that correlates power and agency. Tranquility, in this case, accompanies the brutal military conquests of the Prophet and his successors, conveying the notion that Muslim subjects had the ability to choose their futures and possessed sovereignty over their lives. In the figure below, four Islamic fighters wield the storied scimitar sword on horseback, galloping toward the viewer with intense ferocity. The words “from the pages of history” accompany the image with the title “The Expeditions, Battles, and Victories of Ramadan.” The photograph consists of men and horses, who exist in the present, utilizing not only technology but icons of the past claiming to be history. Remembering, however, is a more accurate word to describe this amalgamation of image, text, and icon. *Dabiq*’s religious narrator reimagines a version of the past that exists within contemporary, radical jihadist thought to create an omnipresent myth: The Jihadi soldier fighting to inflict his will on the exterior world – in this case the perspective of the viewer – therefore reclaiming his ability to choose his future and sustain himself without the influences of an exterior force.



Figure 3: A Reconstruction of Agency, “The Law of Allah,” 26.

By the creative remembrance of religious teaching in the past, *Dabiq*'s story demands influence in the present. An authoritative narrative perspective has the potential to widen or narrow a recruit's paradigm of acceptable behavior. Second- or third- generation western immigrants often begin the process of radicalization holding more “mainstream” views of acceptable Muslim behavior when first confronted with Islamic State ideology. Abu Huzayfah claimed that when he first started exploring the digital world of radical jihadist views, he avidly questioned their religious legitimacy. “How is the jihad, like, right?” he asked his online influencers, “how is killing accepted? How is suicide bombing accepted?” (Callimachi). Jesse Morton, an American-born recruiter for the Islamic State, explained to the *New York Times* how Islamic State religious doctrine manipulated pre-existing and accepted religious teachings to expand the paradigm of acceptable jihadist behavior to justify Islamic State tactics.

Morton claims that recruiters “utilize three primary principles that are part of the... Salafi jihadi” or the jihadi worldview based on writing in Quran or Hadith (Callimachi). The first principle is the *Tawheed al-hakkimiya*, or the teaching that there is only one God, Allah, and Muhammad is his messenger. Jihadists use this claim to assert that all jurisprudence, political authority, and justice in the world are under the sole dominion of God. Any secular imitation, like national governments, is heresy. Paying taxes to a government in Europe or North America is therefore like funding a false god in opposition to Allah. The second principle, *kufr bi taghut*, teaches that Muslims should reject false gods or idols. Jihadists use this teaching to build upon the previous principle, advocating that Muslims actively reject the political and social authority of secularism. The third principle, *al wala wal bara*, teaches that Muslims should have allegiance to one thing only: Islam. Jihadists coerce this teaching to signify that Muslims should love only God and other Muslims and possess a deep seeded hatred toward non-Muslims “for the sake of the global Muslim population” (Callimachi). Taken in totality, the manipulation of previously recognized religious teachings shifts the paradigm of behavior to not only include, but mandate, the use of violence toward religious ends. The perceived legitimacy of the teacher, such as the “religious narrative” depicted in this study is crucial for the potential recruit’s acceptance of the narrative. This is an important reason that Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi rose to such prominence after Zarqawi’s death, despite his inexperience on the battlefield. Baghdadi possessed religious and intellectual authority because of his experience studying and teaching religious law. A deviation from mainstream thought can be persuasive when it is accompanied by a narrator perceived as legitimate and by a wide variety of diverse, corroborating, narrative perspectives.

The virtues promoted in *Dabiq* promote certain character attributes and rebuke others. The story world produced by the Islamic State in *Dabiq* features two main characters whose

creation is based on historical and cultural attributes associated with Islamic history: the model jihadist and the invading crusader. These model persons possess a set of enduring traits that define their character. What Herman describes as “emotionologies” suggests readers draw on “models used to explain or predict how persons typically respond to particular kinds of situations,” (2012, 129) that Schank and Abelson would call “goals” and “roles.” Schank and Abelson’s description of personality traits within a character follow closely with their analysis on schemas and scripts that interpreters use to infer causal relationships between events. They are culturally produced activities, goals, and expectations assigned to certain characters.

Dabiq establishes the cultural foundation and codifies of the characteristics of the jihadist model. Multiple publications include “Advice for the Soldiers of the Islamic State” in them, in which the organization instills a professional and religious set of ethics that define the character model. The 6th installment of the magazine, entitled “Al-Qa’idah of Waziristan” contains the advice section and individual portrayals of model fighters. The magazine states that Islamic fighters should “beware of letting the affection you have towards a relative or loved one turn you away from aiding Allah’s religion,” and reminds the insurgents that Allah commands them to “not take My enemies and your enemies as allies” (*Dabiq*, “Al-Qa’idah of Waziristan). Other instructions include being patient with leadership, praying frequently, and conceding to the orders of higher-ranking fighters.



Figure 4: The Jihadist Model Person, “The Return of Khilafah,” 5.

As seen in Figure 4, *Dabiq* displays images of the jihadist model person shrouded in religious and jingoistic symbolism. The jihadi pictured above wears a shemagh covering his head and face, a security measure against foreign intelligence agencies and a symbol for the anonymity required for collective military action. The jihadi jettisons individuality in favor of collective action required by his state. A fire burns behind the astutely postured fighter, with what appear to be charred bodies beneath its flames, no doubt a reference to Zarqawi’s infamous statements that a fire has been lit in the prophesized battlefield of Dabiq. Such photographs correlate historical righteousness and jingoistic attributes to the jihadi model, summoning its readership to join its ranks.

Dabiq formulates the crusader model person by thoroughly grounding it in religious history, using the term “roman” synonymously with “crusader.” Issue 4, “The Failed Crusade,” defines for its readers the crusader model and its eventual destruction. “The romans will commit treachery by raising a cross and killing a Muslim,” the magazine reads, which will “lead up to the final, greatest, and bloodiest battle” (*Dabiq*, The Failed Crusade, 32). A high definition photograph of U.S. Army personnel carrying a casket with an American flag draped over it accompanies these passages. The image, coupled with text, creates the crusader model person as treacherous and doomed to defeat.

The magazine characterizes the cultural attributes of the crusader model by blending a historical image of the crusader and contemporary western values. In “A Call to Hijrah,” the magazine published an article entitled “Modern Day Slavery,” which reads “the modern day slavery of employment, work hours, wages, etc, is one that leaves the Muslim in a constant feeling of subjugation to a Kafir master” (29). Muslim existence is thus antithetical to western economic practices. Western political leaders also feature prominently within the magazine’s pages. The same publication highlights President Obama, stating that “[Obama’s] decisions... expose the hypocritical politics of America that only serve the interests of their Jewish ally, Israel, and their own capitalist gluttony” (35).



Figure 5: The Crusader Model Person, “The Failed Crusade,” 38.

In Figure 5, images depicting the crusader model in *Dabiq* contain dark and dull shading when compared to the colorful, vibrant pictures of the jihadist model. Mostly black, white, and grey, the images convey western leaders carrying somber or concerned faces, actively meddling in Middle Eastern affairs. *Dabiq* features President Obama in Israel wearing a Kippah, Russian President Vladimir Putin meeting with the Iranian Ayatollah, and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad alongside the former President of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. All the leaders depicted on the page represent threats to radical Sunni Islam and are presented plotting against the religion’s interests, reinforcing the historical notion of an invading crusader.

Dabiq explicitly calls its readers to choose between its two character models in its text. The 7th installment, entitled “From Hypocrisy to Apostasy: The Extinction of the Grayzone,” states that “the blessed operations of September 11th... manifested two camps before the world for mankind to choose between, a camp of Islam... and a camp of kufr – the crusader coalition”

(54). The story world promotes a clear dichotomy in society between two belligerent forces, inviting its readers to take residence and identify with the jihadist model.

The past, present, and future intersect throughout *Dabiq*'s story. Idolized, reimagined myths from the past carry forward in the present's communal memory and prophesize the future. By reconstructing the past, the Islamic State urges its readership forward into the story's future, beckoning it to reproduce the conditions of a mythologized past and making its present condition – disruption -- altogether intolerable. As we will see the in next section, *Dabiq*'s authors create a present sense of time littered with the bodies of subjugated Muslims, altogether opposite from the tranquil equilibrium of the past.

The Near-Past and Present: A Time of Disruption and Subjugation

Multiple narratives perspectives dictate the current condition of the Muslim world in *Dabiq*. The first and most prominent among them is what I call the “news reporter” narrator. This reporter perspective attributes guilt to American and other western secular states for its sense of disruption, mostly in the form of U.S. led violence toward Muslim people. Throughout its pages, the magazine shows graphic images of civilian casualties, including images of young children and infants, charred and killed by state-sponsored air strikes.² One such image, from “The Return of the Khilifar” issue of *Dabiq*, contains four photographs of mutilated children. A young girl, no more than 5 years of age, lays on a dirt covered cot in a green, fluffy dress stained with her own blood. Her eyes are shut, and her left leg is amputated, field dressed to prevent

² Throughout this section, I refer to images in *Dabiq* which display deceased or suffering human bodies. I choose not to publish them here. These images evoke a visceral, emotionally fraught response that I feel would be imprudent to subject upon the reader without his or her consent.

hemorrhaging. *Dabiq*'s authors soften the image's borders, depicting the child's body emerging through a fog of chaos. Below her lie an infant and a young boy. Though separate images, the faces of the children look toward the other. To the left, an infant lie with its brain exposed through its skull. The child's eyelids are barely open, its mouth gaping. To the infant's right, the young boy looks back with one eye open, gazing off to the image's border without seeing. The two children look dead yet are positioned as if they were gazing at each other longingly, unified in despair. The words "Regime Targets Ar-Raqqah" accompany these photographs, with a blood red color bordering the page and two red circles at the page's center, forming the icon of a target as seen through the scope of a rifle. While the photograph provides its readers a mechanical reproduction of destruction, the words and iconography convey *Dabiq*'s subjective assertions. The blending of image, word, and icon create a scene of insidious murder, senseless loss of life, and tragedy of monumental proportion.

Testimonials and photographs depicting revenge for western actions follow most of the previous images. These narrations include the execution of captured Jordanian pilots and western journalists. In the publication entitled "From Hypocrisy to Apostasy," *Dabiq* presents two photographs of Muadh Safi Yusuf al-Kasasibah, a Jordanian pilot. The most prominent photograph features the pilot in a black cage on the desert ground. Violent, swaying flames consume al-Kasasibah's body, which is black and charred. While standing, the pilot holds his head in his hands, as though collapsing in regret. Above the image of the pilot's burning corpse, the Islamic State superimposes a photograph of al-Kasasibah's face staring directly into the camera. He wears an orange prison uniform with the metal bars of the cage behind him, resembling a mug shot. Underneath the scene of the pilot's execution, *Dabiq* features two side-by-side images of charred children, one infant and another young boy. Both children gaze

upward with lifeless eyes. The words “The Murtado Pilot was killed in retaliation for airstrikes against Muslims” caption the children’s mutilated bodies. The sequence of photographs tells its own story, one of senseless tragedy followed by retribution and justice. In *Dabiq’s* story world, Muslim protagonists actively combat the forces that cause their state of subjugation, taking back their stolen agency.

Each publication contains near-simultaneous narration with an “Islamic State Reports” section, where the terrorist group describes its battlefield victories and political declarations as breaking news. This reporting narrative perspective indicates that the authors of *Dabiq* sought to create an alternate news source for its audience, combating the western narrative of the Caliphate.



Figure 6: Islamic State Reporting, “The Flood,” 13.

The reporting function of the magazine denotes a probabilistic relationship with the facts, but also the sentiment of shared experience within the text. The narrator experiences the events in unison with the magazine's audience, establishing a sense of community between narrator and reader. Like a news broadcaster, the presenter is not yet necessarily aware of the information's place within the wider narrative, its complexities or nuances. Herman says that simultaneous narration events are "presented in concert with tellers' and interpreters' attempts to comprehend the contours and boundaries of the narrated domain; inferences about the impact of characters' doings on the larger history of the story world remain tentative, probabilistic, open-ended" (2012, 72). The interpreter of the story possesses some doubt as to the narrator's understanding of the information and is potentially less likely to accept the narrator's conclusion. Yet, simultaneous narration also imbues the idea that both narrator and interpreter are experiencing the events at the same time, invoking the notion of shared experience between both parties.

Figure 6 contains four photographs alongside its printed news. The pictures display a cache of weapons captured by the Islamic State alongside an actively firing mortar system and tank. Yellow boundaries surround these photographs with white text embedded in the margins. The display of firing weapon systems instills a sense of ongoing action to the news article, reinforcing its narrative role as "breaking news" and simultaneous reporting. Blending a bright color scheme with the weapons of war denotes positive feelings toward the actions, promoting violence as a positive development for the magazine's readership. The report details the Islamic State's battle against the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, including information of villages involved in the fighting and the number of casualties on both sides. *Dabiq's* on the ground access and specific details regarding the battle add layers of legitimacy to the narrative voice.

There are two additional narrative perspectives that populate *Dabiq*. The first is what the magazine calls “in the Words of the Enemy,” what I call the “western narrative perspective,” which is a section of the magazine where the authors use quotations from western figures, such as U.S. government personnel, to highlight the developments of the Islamic State. For example, the second installment of *Dabiq*, entitled “The Flood,” includes statements from the late Senator John McCain. The authors quote McCain as saying, “ISIS, the most extreme, Islamist organization – radical terrorist organization – now controls at least 1/3 of Iraqi territory and is rapidly gaining more” (*Dabiq*, “The Flood,” 32). By using their declared enemy as the narrator of facts that benefit Islamic State interests, *Dabiq* authors increase the validity of their claims of rapid growth and territorial expansion. In this instance, the Islamic State was able to pick and choose certain quotes in counter-narratives that supported their assertions, as well as demonize western figures as being anti-Islam.

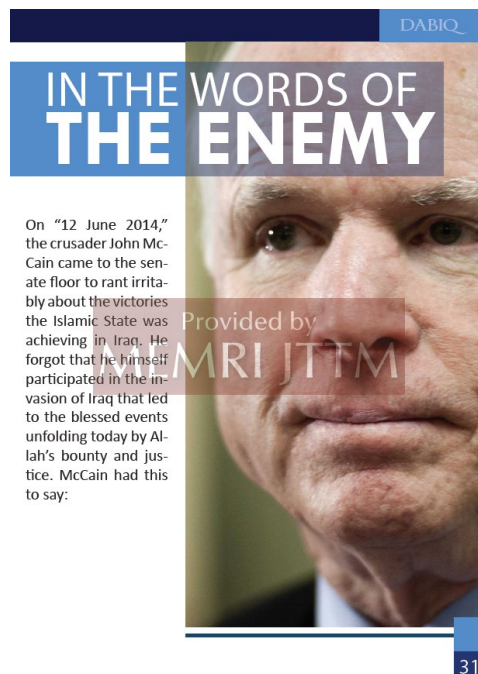


Figure 7: Western Narrative Perspective, “The Flood,” 31

By publishing a photograph of McCain whose face reflects the sentiment in his quoted words, *Dabiq* adds a layer of validity to its narrative voice. The publication claims that “[McCain] forgot that he himself participated in the invasion of Iraq” alongside a close-up image of McCain’s face. The senator presses his lips tightly together and stares off camera as if he is avoiding the viewer’s gaze. He appears regretful, even guilty. At 77 years old, McCain shows the signs of age, which allow *Dabiq* to present American domination as a withering force in the world. The quoted text, McCain’s picture, and the bolded words “The Enemy” implanted on the Senator’s forehead denote a withering American adversary, regretful for the past and anxious about the future.

The fourth and final narrative perspective employed by the authors of *Dabiq* is what I deem the “hostage narrative.” In these instances, always situated at the end of the magazine, the authors solicit testimony from western hostages in the custody of the Islamic State. We may assume that most of these accounts are coerced by Islamic State officials through the fear of violence. The victims are usually western journalists, whose security in Iraq and Syria is most dubious.

Figure 8 is an example of *Dabiq*’s hostage narrative perspective through the words of James Foley, an American journalist captured by the Islamic State in 2012 and executed in 2014. In the largest background image, Foley sits comfortably with sunglasses shielding his eyes and a helmet protecting his head. He looks off frame, possibly in an interview or merely engaged in a friendly conversation. A Nikon camera sling hangs lazily around his neck, reflecting the wealth of a western journalist carelessly wielding thousands of dollars’ worth of photography equipment into Iraq. His dress, relaxed demeanor, and personal sense of security all denote a western sophistication and lifestyle.

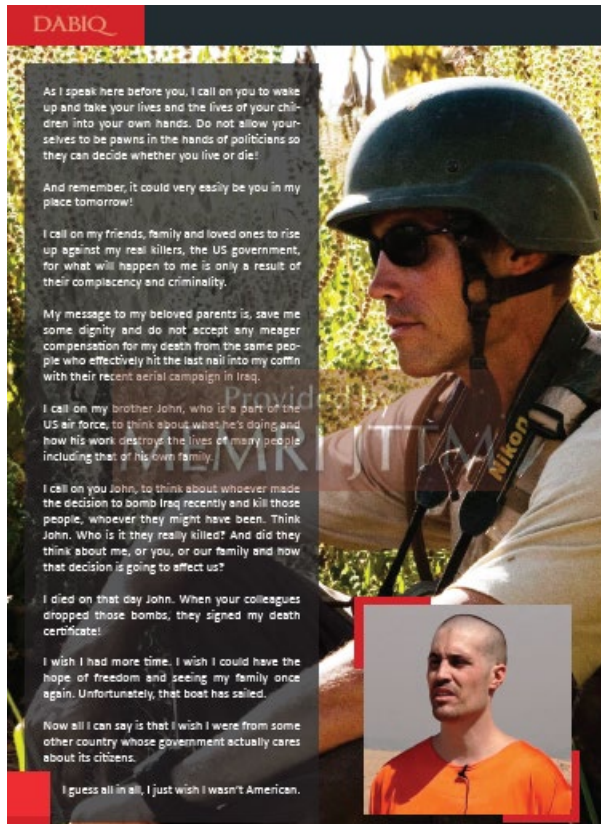


Figure 8: Hostage Narrative Perspective, “A Call to Hijrah,” 40.

In their second image of Foley, *Dabiq* presents the journalist without any sense of western security or confidence. His captures shaved his head and removed his clothes, replacing them with the ubiquitous orange uniform of a prisoner. His face is unshaven and his skin looks sickly and pail next to the former version of himself. The words “I just wish I wasn’t American” vertically coincide with Foley’s new image. The juxtaposition of Foley’s former self, comforted by western security, and the journalist’s new state emphasize the ephemeral nature of western luxury. By displaying the artificiality of Foley’s former security, *Dabiq* presents his new testimony as somehow more true or authentic, unencumbered by superficiality.

By establishing a binary between the insidious actions of western governments and the Islamic State's required retribution, *Dabiq* establishes causal propensity, or who is most likely to blame for its undesirable conditions. When confronted with competing narratives, story interpreters bring their own experience to bear and "pick the causal chain originating from the generally most causally active actor" (33). Interpreters place causal propensity on those actors known for causing similar changes in a state previously, drawing on their own subjective antecedents to a particular condition. By inundating its readership with the wrongdoing of the United States and its allies, the Islamic State establishes Western governments as the actor most likely to have caused its current state. Readers become aware not only that events are occurring over time, but why they are occurring and who is to blame. The information within the narrative gains persuasive power, allowing readers to accept the Islamic State's worldview.

Social scientists regularly use the term radicalization to discuss persons that accept the imaginary story world created by aberrant ideologies like the Islamic State's. King and Taylor describe the varying models of radicalization in the psychological community in their article entitled "The Radicalization of Homegrown Jihadists: A Review of Theoretical Models and Social Psychological Evidence." The authors discuss five radicalization models accepted in the academic community.³ Common among the various models is an initial stage of perceived disruption. For example, the FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin discussing radicalization, referenced now at Borum's Pathway, states that individuals "judge his or her [current] condition to be

³ Most conceptions of the potential western radical posit that second- and third-generations immigrants, born in European or Western countries, but with ethnic and historical ties elsewhere, are particularly vulnerable to cognitive manipulation. Ranging from academic publications to the New York Police Department's Intelligence Division, the models discuss the various stages subjects undergo in the radicalization process to become a devoted jihadist.

undesirable” (604). The potential jihadist makes this assessment on a relative basis, comparing their state of being with other persons or social groups.

Wiktorowic’s “Theory of Joining Extremist Groups” argues that the first stage of radicalization is a “cognitive opening” that often results from a personal crisis, such as “job loss, experiences with discrimination or victimization” (605). The NYPD echoes Wiktorowic by arguing that homegrown jihadists turn to radical Islam “in response to a personal crisis... such as losing a job, or the result of an ongoing situation, like discrimination or an identity crisis” (607). Each model depicted in this study describes a potential jihadist as someone who perceives themselves in a disrupted state, much like the narrative state *Dabiq* creates. King and Taylor rightly point out that the social perception of deprivation is a crucial distinction. In fact, most of the homegrown jihadists in Europe and the United States are from middle class backgrounds, not the subjects of economic deprivation. Instead, jihadists perceive themselves as deprived relative to another social group.

What makes *Dabiq*’s creation of a state of disruption persuasive in the minds of potential recruits is that the Islamic State and its readership exist in the same condition. Both parties are in a current state of disequilibrium, as opposed to the groups against whom they differentially articulate themselves. Furthermore, both *Dabiq* and the potential recruit differentially articulate their condition in relation to the same external actor: western secularism. *Dabiq* narrates a world in which the United States and secular, western governments are the cause of their disruption. For a second- or third- generation immigrant to western culture who feels either social discrimination or economic deprivation as a result of their ancestral heritage in an Arab or Muslim land, *Dabiq* shares a common enemy and relative social status. The recruit feels a sense of community in *Dabiq*’s narrative world.

The Future: A Return to Greatness

Dabiq's first publication, entitled "Return of the Khilafah" announces the return to perceived greatness. The declaration of the Caliphate invokes the previous state of equilibrium by exploiting the religious history of the Muslim faith, in which the Prophet and his successors possessed political dominion over large swaths of Middle East and North African territory. The magazine declares, "Muslims everywhere... you have a state and Khilafah, which will return your dignity, might, rights, and leadership (*Dabiq*, "Return of the Khilafah," 7). The images in Figure 9 utilize the notion of military expansion in Islamic history. Islamic State insurgents, in camouflage uniforms holding Kalashnikovs and a light machine gun, sit atop a U.S.-manufactured Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicle. The fighters smile broadly while holding up their index fingers, signifying their celebration of the one true god. Their vehicle traverses the streets of a newly occupied city, most likely Mosul. The images' objective denotation provides a reproduction of the Islamic State's military activity and its rampant occupation of new territory. Its cultural connotation, however, alludes to the rapid military expansion of the Prophet's armies. The movement signified by both image and text represents a progression toward future autonomy and a return to a glorious past.



Figure 9: The Caliphate Declared, “The Return of Khilafah,” 6-7.

The return of the Caliphate also meant a return to agency. As the West Point Counter Terrorism Center points out, roughly 50 percent of its media productions referenced the terrorist group’s ability to govern and provide public services for the local population (Milton, IV). The magazine emphasizes its governing competence to indicate that foreign influences no longer dominate the internal structure of Islamic societies.



Figure 10: Healthcare in the Caliphate, “They Plot and Allah Plots,” 24.

The magazine seeks to prove its autonomy by emphasizing its professionalized civil service. Figure 10 displays a photograph of an Islamic State doctor, dressed in medical scrubs, a surgical mask, and hair cap. The doctor looks down, as if attending to a patient or studying documents, hard at work providing medical care for the population. His scrubs are pressed and clean and the walls that surround him are the sanitary off-white of a professional hospital. *Dabiq* displays this picture because it presents an image of a professionalized medical discipline within its territory, combating the notion that the Islamic State possesses an amateur civil service. Emphasizing its ability to govern, *Dabiq* advocates a progressive message by returning to a previous condition: Islamic independence and self-governance.



Figure 11: Conquest of Dabiq, “A Call to Hijrah,” 16.

In Dabiq’s reinstatement of greatness, autonomy and sovereignty lead to social and cultural cohesion. Figure 11 displays multiple images depicting collective action. The most prominent picture illustrates a group of men and women in a circle, each with their hand extended to the circle’s center. Above this picture, *Dabiq* illustrates new recruits volunteering for service. Above that, the faithful receive religious instruction. Taken in totality, these pictures present the image of the faithful volunteering to act collectively to end their undesirable conditions of life and thriving under the religious guidance of the state. If the United States and other secular governments are the actors responsible for their collective disruption, the Islamic State encompasses the actors responsible for a return to self-reliance through the caliphate.

The magazine designs both spatial and temporal expansion outside of Iraq and Syria in subsequent publications. Notably, the 8th installment of *Dabiq* highlights the transnational growth of the organization into Africa. The edition entitled “Shar’iah Alone will Rule Africa,” emphasizes the group’s growing presence on the African continent, including Nigeria and Libya. The two images in Figure 12 appear in sequential order in the publication. The image to the left of Islamic State fighters on horseback denotes movement from the bottom left to the upper right, signifying progressive expansion.⁴ *Dabiq*’s iconography incorporates both the past and the future. The fighters travel on horses, brandishing the curved scimitar sword of the Prophet’s armies and waving the Islamic State flag of the present. The reader sees the future of Islamic State expansion in the image to the right, as West African fighters pose for a photograph in front of makeshift military trucks. Mostly masked, the fighters gaze directly into the camera, in line as if staged for a formal military ceremony. Combined, the two images create a scene in which the Islamic State expands to new territories and populations, bringing with them the order and discipline of their fighting prowess. The authors create an inclusive story world devoid of traditional barriers of exclusion. Only Islam connects them.

⁴ As Roger Ebert points out, “the future seems to live on the right, the past of the left... top is dominant over the bottom” (How to Read a Movie).



Figure 12: ISIS Expansion to Africa, “Shari’ah Alone will Rule Africa,” 12-14.

When the Islamic State began losing territory to coalition forces, the magazine’s sense of progression changed to reflect the organization’s growing losses, but in a positive light. Later publications highlighted the sacrifice of Islamists who died fighting United States influence. The magazine’s 13th installment entitled “The Rafidah,” begins with “as the American-led crusaders continue waging war against the Khilafah, more and more Muslims continue demonstrating their willingness to sacrifice everything” (*Dabiq*, “The Rafidah,” 3) in commemoration of the “lone wolf” attackers in Tunisia, Yemen, and California. The narrative shift to suicide attacks in the west reflects a change in battlefield tactics for the jihadist group. Unsuccessful military operations and territorial losses prompted the magazine to promote and celebrate isolated attacks in the west. The Islamic State continued its internationally expansive narrative while changing tactics.



Figure 13: *Dabiq* celebrates internationalist terrorist attacks, “Shari’ah Alone will Rule Africa,” 17.

The Islamic State’s full embrace of the word terror indicates an ever-increasing spatial and temporal narrative. Unlike the limits of a state, violent terrorism does not recognize the legitimacy of national boundaries. Figure 13 presents *Dabiq*’s readers with three images of international terror. The most prominent is of four men carrying the bloodstained body of a terror victim. The wounded man’s legs and feet flail wildly and helplessly as onlookers stare, debilitated, into the chaos. The four men work rapidly to save the wounded victim, yet their faces convey anxiety. They have no plan; the men did not foresee this event or prepare for its consequences. The scene conveys a population debilitated, confused, and unprepared for the violence that met it. Celebrating its attacks in Tunisia, Yemen, and California, *Dabiq* implicitly argues that their violent terrorism is omnipresent, able to exist in any unexpected society. The group’s radical influence, as opposed to their physical caliphate, will envelope the globe.

Dabiq surrounds its martyrs with iconography when depicted in the publication. Figure 13's two remaining images are portraits of Islamic State fighters who died in the act of terror. The men are clean, well dressed, comfortable; both have a subtle and gentle smile in the prepared photograph. As one fighter gazes directly into the portrait, the other offers stylistic variety by looking outside the picture's frame, as if answering a friendly question. The fighters' informal demeanor softens the photograph's professional format, which is strikingly similar to official U.S. Military portraits. The Islamic State flag hangs in the background. These portraits differ from other photographs of Islamic State fighters in *Dabiq* in significant ways: whereas fighters are usually depicted in black or camouflage uniforms, the martyrs wear softly colored, casual clothing. Insurgents commonly scour into the camera, determined soldiers on the battlefield, yet these men carry gentle smiles that belie any violent intention. By presenting their martyrs through professionalized yet relaxed portraits, *Dabiq* offers its followers an expansion of their personal sense of time. Whereas in life the faithful struggle, in death they are at peace.

By remembering their martyrs in such a fashion, *Dabiq* grants its readers the narrative goal of its overarching temporality: a promise of peace, imaged in the past and hoped for in the future. *Dabiq*'s return to greatness signifies an end to the subjugation and the beginning of something both old and new. The magazine remembers the political, cultural, and technological domination of before and creates it anew through its able interplay of word, image, and icon. Clearly, *Dabiq* offers more than information; its culturally entrenched narrative offers a worldview, a cosmology, of a just civilization struck by hard times, challenged by a powerful foe but on the verge of a rising sun.

Conclusion

The narrative forms employed by the Islamic state are both nested and mutually supportive. The performative interplay of image, text, and icon create a world in which temporal structure of the story world is the result of model characters who act to change the current state of being, progressing the story in time and expanding its environment. Taken in totality, the narrative invites its readers to join the story world at every turn, both by traveling to Islamic State territory and working on its behalf in western nations. The Islamic State fighters and their sympathizers abroad both make sense of this story-world and the physical world through the narrative.

This essay examines the formal narrative techniques employed by the Islamic State through *Dabiq* while the group retained large swaths of territory in Iraq and Syria. It is equally important to combat such radical stories with counter-narratives, focused attempts at defeating jihadist ideologies. One of my hopes in conducting this study is to highlight the importance of creating a counter-narrative that possesses a coherent, nested structure rather than simply “information,” or various unconnected, objectively true, facts. Launching a barrage of incongruous information at a structured narrative is akin to trying to kill a Rhino with a firing line of BB guns. The facts will ricochet off the walls of the narrative, unable to impact or change the prevailing structure.

Richards Heuer led the Central Intelligence Agency’s Directorate of Intelligence before writing *Psychology of Intelligence Analysis*, a book read by the agency’s intelligence analysts. In the book, he states that “because of limits in human mental capacity... the mind cannot cope directly with the complexity of the world. Rather, we construct a simplified mental model of reality and then work with this model” (3). Heuer suggests in his book that intelligence analysts

often fail to foresee significant changes because it does not fit into their previously constructed, simplified, model of the world. I suggest in this paper that the model Heuer refers to is narrative. Information compatible with an existing narrative resonates emotionally while competing information is either discarded or considered untrue.

Combating narrative requires narrative, not isolated information. “Information warfare” is misnomer that suggests Twitter handles, hashtags, and Facebook posts substitute for the need to create a world model, steeped in cultural and social context, in which accurate information can be received and apprehended. As I write this essay, U.S.-led Coalition forces have successfully removed the Islamic State from its last territorial strongholds in Iraq and Syria. These battlefield victories significantly damage the insurgent group’s radical story world that was always dependent on territorial ownership for its narrative legitimacy. Yet, worldviews often escape shrapnel and refuse to diminish after dust settles on the battlefield. As we continue to combat the radical story world that jihadists create, we would do well to construct an equally compelling, wholistic narrative to defeat radicalism in both physical and digital battlefields.

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