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**"The Divergent Paths of Jihad: Comparing Violence Against Civilians Perpetrated by the
Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra in the Syrian Civil War"**

An Honors Thesis

Presented to
The Faculty of the Politics Department of
Bates College

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts

By

Abigail Katherine Frost
Lewiston, Maine
April 1, 2020

Acknowledgements

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List of Abbreviations

AIS- Islamic Salvation Army

AQ- Al Qaeda

AQI- Al Qaeda in Iraq

FIS- Front Islamic de Salut

FSA- Free Syrian Army

FTO- Foreign Terrorist Organization

GIA- Groupe Islamique Armé

GTD- Global Terrorism Database

LTTE- Liberation Tigers of the Tamil Eelam

IRA- Irish Republican Army

IS- Islamic State

JAS- Sunni Group for Proselytization and Jihad

JN- Jabhat al-Nusra

MENA- Middle East and North Africa region

TTP- Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan

Abstract

Why does the Islamic State (IS) target and kill more civilians in Syria than Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), another influential jihadist organization embedded in the Syrian Civil War that - like IS - once identified as a formal al Qaeda (AQ) affiliate? Spanning from 2011 to 2018, IS has consistently targeted and killed a significantly larger proportion of civilians in Syria compared to JN. This study poses that the discrepancy in target behavior displayed by these jihadist groups with similar origin stories, group size, and region of operation is effectively explained by a schism in the jihadist ideological model that has divided Salafi militant organizations. While IS and JN pursue a basic goal of transforming the regional political order into a jihadist vision of sharia-based government, they disagree on what approach best promotes this goal in Syria. JN adheres to the traditional AQ-promoted agenda of long-term pragmatism, which is focused on attracting popular support from local Sunni Muslims by portraying JN as a nationalist insurgency fighting the Assad regime. In contrast, IS broke from AQ in 2014 by enacting a short-term approach to jihad, aimed at launching a hyper-violent offensive to capture a territorial Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. By comparatively analyzing the English-language online magazines of each group, this study seeks to distinguish the divergent worldviews of IS and JN, which has informed their violent targeting of civilians in the Syrian conflict.

INTRODUCTION

At the onset of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, millions of civilians were caught in constant airstrikes perpetrated by the incumbent Assad regime forces. On the ground, non-combatants were bombarded by retaliatory crossfire committed by radical Islamist groups and moderate secular militias that at times collaborated to fulfill their shared objective to defeat the Assad government. Amid this turmoil, in early 2014 another war was declared in Syria. The Salafi jihadist Al Qaeda (AQ) affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) declared its opposition to a former AQ offshoot, the Islamic State (IS), a Salafi jihadist organization that had deployed its forces beyond the borders of the group's original location in Iraq and began capturing territory in Syria.¹

After declaring war on the Islamic State, JN primarily played a defensive role against the group. However, infighting between the groups escalated over oil fields in the Deir ez-Zour governate in eastern Syria during the summer of 2014.² Ultimately, JN withdrew from the region bordering Iraq, after footage from IS offensives showed mass executions of Iraqis who resisted the territorial expansion of IS.³ In August of 2014, IS implemented its severe tactics against the al-Sheitat tribe, a group that lives in the Deir ez-Zour governate, and belongs to the Sunni sect of Islam that IS claims to represent. After some of the al-Sheitat men staged an insurrection in retaliation for the IS execution of a fellow tribesman, IS punished the group by rounding up all 700 al-Sheitat men, and beheading, crucifying, and shooting each individual.⁴ In total, 100

¹ Mara Revkin. "The legal foundations of the Islamic State." *The Brookings Project on US Relations with the Islamic World* 23 (2016) 8.

² Lister, Charles R. *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic state and the evolution of an insurgency*. Oxford University Press, 2016. 242.

³ Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 242.

⁴ Patel, David Siddhartha. "ISIS in Iraq: What we get wrong and why 2015 is not 2007 redux." *Middle East Brief* 87 (2015): 4.

fighters and 600 civilians died in this mass killing, which was filmed by the group and posted on IS media platforms.⁵

As IS launched its brutal offensive in Syria, allied anti-Assad militia groups including JN maintained territorial strongholds in the northwest provinces of Latakia, Hama, Idlib, and western Aleppo.⁶ In July of 2014, a recording was leaked of JN leader Abu Mohammad al-Jolani discussing a plan to implement sharia law in Syria under the jurisdiction of emirates, or Islamic political provinces. Even an informal suggestion that JN would independently implement religious law over regions in Syria sparked an outcry from moderate factions of the Syrian opposition. These local militias had joined forces with JN because the group utilized its AQ-sponsored military capabilities against the Assad regime rather than citizens and prioritized the coalition agenda to weaken the Syrian Army. Under the pressure of concerned allies, JN publicly released a statement which clarified that the group never announced “an independent emirate, or the meaning of a state, or anything close to that” and that an emirate could not be established without the endorsement of “jihadi factions or the local leaders of the country, or the people of influence and of course, with the scholars inside and outside the country.”⁷ It was later confirmed by a source in JN’s inner circles that Jolani “focused on jihad for the sake of jihad,” and despite the leaked soundbite, he ultimately believed that “no Islamic State or caliphate will ever endure in the current international order.”⁸

Between July and August of 2014, IS and JN had publicly released content from their respective media wings regarding their role in the Syrian Civil war. While IS portrayed the group as a dominant enforcer of sharia law through the mass slaughter of the al-Sheitat tribe, JN used

⁵ Patel, "ISIS in Iraq: What we get wrong and why 2015 is not 2007 redux." 4.

⁶ Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 186.

⁷ Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 244.

⁸ Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 244.

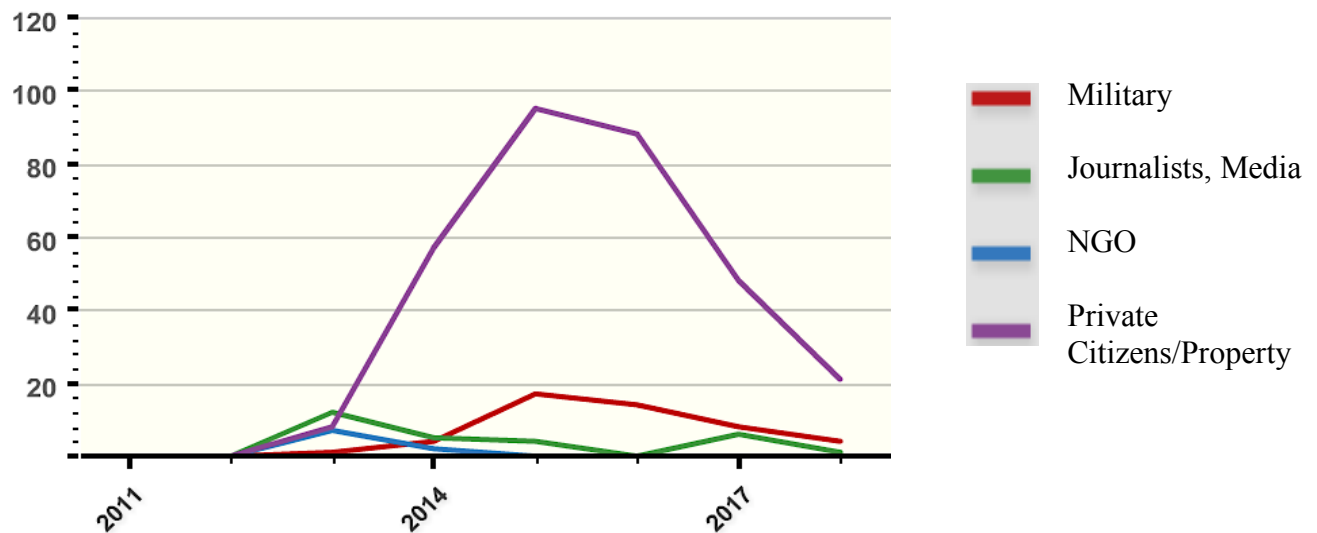
its platform to assert its stance that sharia law would not be unilaterally implemented by the group against any civilians without multilateral consent from parties in the Syrian opposition movement. Ultimately, the two groups openly demonstrated two opposing models of legitimate Salafi jihadist behavior in the Syrian civil war- either as religiously endowed actors with the authority to dominate civilians, or pragmatic operatives that can be trusted by the Sunni Syrian community.

The previous pages have laid out an anecdotal description of how the two most influential Salafi jihadist actors in the Syrian civil war have either enabled or constrained their violence against civilians. This study will now turn to a more systematic investigation of IS and JN have exhibited different rates of targeting non-combatants over time by using the Global Terrorism Database (GTD). As indicated by the trendlines in Graph 1 and Graph 2, both groups reached the highest incidence of attacking civilians between the years of 2015 and 2016. However, IS's amount of attacks during this time period were almost double that of JN. The highest total attacks perpetrated by IS against civilians in a month-long time frame added to a sum of 95 incidents, while JN peaked at a total of approximately 53 incidents. Although these groups have been rendered as "ostensibly similar" Sunni terrorist groups in the same conflict, why have they evolved to conduct significantly different rates of civilian targeting over the course of the Syrian civil war?⁹ This thesis will analyze English-language jihadist magazines to argue that a divergence in organizational approaches to Salafi jihadist ideology has informed the trends of civilian targeting reflected in the graphs generated through the GTD.

⁹ Chapman, Geoffrey. "Islamic State and Al-Nusra: Exploring determinants of chemical weapons usage patterns." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 6 (2017): 112.

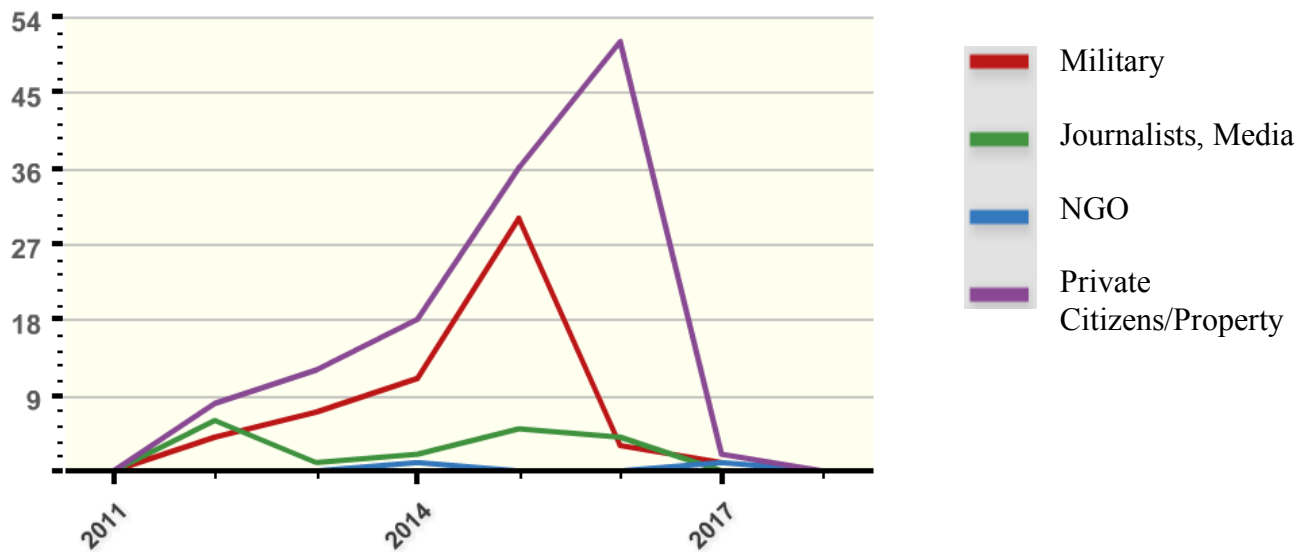
Graph 1

Rate of Attack Incidents in Syria by the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (2011-2018)¹⁰



Graph 2

Rate of Attack Incidents by Jabhat Al Nusra (2011-2018)¹¹



¹⁰ "National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START)," University of Maryland. (2019). The Global Terrorism Database™

¹¹ University of Maryland, *The Global Terrorism Database*.

The GTD features a running list of 190,000 terrorist attacks from 1970 through 2018.¹² All incidents on the GTD must apply to the following three stipulations: First, “the incident must be intentional,” second, “the incident must entail some level of violence or immediate threat of violence, including property violence, as well as violence against people,” and last, “perpetrators of the incidents must be sub-national actors. The database does not include acts of state terrorism.”¹³

Each graph was created on the “Advanced Search” feature of the GTD, which enables researchers to create a dataset of attacks based on the criterion of time period, region, country, perpetrator group, weapon type, attack type, target type, and rate of casualties. Both IS and JN were selected as perpetrator groups, and the country category was narrowed to Syria. The trendlines in each graph reflect the incidence of attacks perpetrated by IS and JN from the beginning of the civil war in 2011 to the most recent year-long rates documented by the GTD in 2018. The weapon, attack, and casualty fields were selected for most inclusive range available. The target types selected to reflect civilian attack rates include the journalists or the media, private citizens and property, tourists, and non-governmental organizations. Military attacks are included in the graph to contextualize the combatant versus non-combatant targeting practices of each militant group. To be clear, the main dependent variable for the study is the proportion of all attacks carried out by IS and JN against civilian targets according to the coding criteria.

Finally, the GTD enables researchers to widen and narrow their definitions of terrorism by including or excluding three criterion: criterion I “establishes that the included incidents “must be aimed at attaining a political, economic, religious, or social goal”...criterion II requires

¹² The Global Terrorism Database, 2019

¹³ *The Global Terrorism Database Codebook*, University of Maryland. October 2019. 10.

that “each attack must have evidence of intention to coerce, intimidate, or convey some other message to a larger audience (or audiences) than the immediate victims”... criterion III stipulates that “the action must be outside of legitimate warfare activities.”¹⁴ These criteria were used to filter the incidents of this study to ensure that all incidents perpetrated by IS and JN were undoubtedly terror attacks.

An appropriate introductory case study of IS and JN’s strategic ideological divergences and degrees of violence against the general public is exemplified in the groups’ use or non-use of chemical weapons. Chemical weapons are an especially politicized tool of coercion in the Syrian civil war. The Assad regime has repeatedly used chemical weapons against non-combatant civilians in Syria, despite international condemnation. In August of 2013, the UN Security Council convened meetings to address chemical warfare attacks by the Syrian army on the city of Damascus, that killed up to 1,000 people who were largely local non-combatants.¹⁵ Almost five years later, the Human Rights Watch documented 85 incidents in which the Assad regime used chemical warfare during the civil war, despite international pressure to cease deploying such weapons.¹⁶

As the Syrian Army has taken measures of extreme force to maintain political power during the duration of the war, jihadist opposition forces such as IS and JN appear at face value to harbor similar theological justifications and practical capabilities to use chemical weapons as a defensive strategy against pro-regime forces. Both groups have been the targets of Assad’s chemical weapons deployment and have gained control over regime stores of chlorine and sarin. However, both IS and JN have different organizational principles which inform the ultimate

¹⁴*The Global Terrorism Database Codebook*, University of Maryland. October 2019. 10.

¹⁵ Daryl Kimball and Kelsey Davenport, "Timeline of Syrian Chemical Weapons Activity, 2012-2018." *Arms Control Association* (2018). 3.

¹⁶ Kimball and Davenport, *Timeline*, 14.

incentive -or lack thereof- for a militant group to capitalize on the latent public fear triggered by weapons of mass destruction used by the government, and to signal collective intent to match the Assad regime's brutal tactics against the civilian population to obtain power. The principles that divide IS and JN are directly related to their approach to gaining legitimacy in Syria and amongst jihadist sympathizers across the globe. While IS adheres to tactics of extreme force to achieve an Islamic State in the short term, JN adheres to the AQ ideology that an Islamic State should be pursued through a gradual strategy of integrating into local communities, while cultivating public support for Islamic governance.

IS declared the establishment of an Islamic State across Iraq and Syria in April of 2014, and has leveraged violence against Shia, religious minorities, and Sunni tribes that are perceived to not be strictly committed to the highly conservative IS brand of Islam. IS used "unending hostility towards *kufir* (apostate regimes) and *takfiri* (excommunicated Muslims)" to legitimize its authority to establish sharia law and monopolize force over the civilians in its territory.¹⁷ IS has routinely used violence against the public as an essential tool to promote its interests and is not operationally constrained by the status of local or international approval due to its brutal approach to seizing territorial power. IS has integrated chemical weapons into its arsenal and has routinely employed them: from 2014 to 2017, conflict monitoring groups have recorded 71 instances of IS chemical weapon use.¹⁸

On the other hand, no international bodies that oversee conflict zones have confirmed that JN has used chemical warfare during the civil war, even as a method of defense against the incumbent Assad regime.¹⁹ JN embraces AQ strategist Abu Mus'ab al Suri's theory that Sunni

¹⁷ Chapman, "Islamic State and Al-Nusra: Exploring determinants of chemical weapons usage patterns." 115.

¹⁸ Chapman, "Islamic State and Al-Nusra: Exploring determinants of chemical weapons usage patterns." 112.

¹⁹ Ibid., 112

jihadists can only establish an Islamic State in the long term, by first obtaining a base of popular support from the Muslim community.²⁰ As a result, JN's on-the-ground presence in Syria has starkly contrasted that of IS, as its leaders have attempted to avoid mass casualty violence against civilians, and exhibited efforts to legitimize the organization as capable of allying with a variety of Sunni opposition groups in the civil war. By achieving influence through alliances with local insurgents and not violently enforcing authority over the region, JN aims to gradually integrate itself into the opposition as a pragmatic alternative to the brutal rule of the Assad regime or IS. Unlike IS, which views chemical weapons as a useful tool to incorporate into its ultraviolent proto-state operations, JN conversely applies organizational sanctions on violence that could harm scores of Sunni non-combatants that JN claims to defend. Thus, the contrary messaging of these jihadist groups as either aggressive or pragmatic actors in the conflict acts to enable or constrict their collective ability to use weapons of mass destruction in Syria. If JN embraced this force, they would alienate the local allies that they claim to represent.

This dynamic between IS and JN's divergent views on establishing an Islamic State, defining a Muslim constituency, and determining the costs or benefits of frequent civilian targeting is consistent beyond the topic of chemical warfare. Years before the initiation of the Syrian civil war, two camps began to emerge in the Salafi jihadist landscape with distinct ingroups, outgroups, prioritized objectives, and plans of action that has been most clearly manifested in Syria. Currently these groups are at war, ideologically and practically, over the role of Salafi jihadists in civil conflict. This schism reached its apex in Syria, and the escalation of infighting created significant ripple effects beyond the Middle East, dividing like-minded followers across the globe and informing their identification with jihad.

²⁰ Ibid., 115.

Justification of the Study

Syria has been recently described as “the center of the world for jihadist militancy.”²¹ When the nation broke out in civil war in 2011, there were a diverse range of secular nationalists and Islamist-minded insurgent groups that sought to confront the Assad Regime. However, as the conflict continued throughout the 2010’s, the field of opposition militias began to winnow. Within several years, Salafi jihadist factions emerged as increasingly more influential, organized, and superior actors fighting against Syrian incumbent forces.²² Of these actors, undoubtedly the most infamous militant organization is IS (also known as The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, and the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant), a group that operates in Iraq and Syria, and has established the main base of its claimed territorial proto-state in the northern Syrian city of Raqqa. Another less globally well-known Salafi-jihadist group is JN (which was renamed Jabhat Fatah al-Sham in July of 2016, again renamed Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in January of 2017), a group that operates exclusively in Syria and has “arguably established an even more sustainable presence in Syria than IS.”²³ Both of these organizations have been designated by the US as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTO’s).

The US designated IS’s early predecessor, Al Qaeda in Iraq, as an FTO in late 2004, after the group’s leader Abu Musab Zarqawi agreed to make a loose affiliation with AQ.²⁴ AQ was then led by Osama bin Laden, the mastermind of the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks on the US World Trade Center. AQ leaders pursued this alliance based on the rationale that by

²¹ Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 1.

²² Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 3.

²³ Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 3.

²⁴ Ahmed S. Hasim. "The Islamic State: From al-Qaeda Affiliate to Caliphate." *Middle East Policy* 21, no. 4 (2014): 70.

partnering with Zarqawi's group, they would be able to direct and assist in attacks on US troops stationed in Iraq, who represented AQ's top target in the Middle East.²⁵ However, within months of this affiliation, AQI escalated its rate of attacks on local civilians, churches, and Shias in Iraq, to the dismay of AQ leaders, who expected that Zawahiri's attacks would be explicitly conducted against Western and US-led combatants in Iraq.²⁶

JN was labeled as a terrorist organization by the US State Department in December of 2012, when it was confirmed that the group was a Syrian-based offshoot of IS. This designation was confirmed months after JN had begun coalition building with other rebel factions in Syria. Notably, in response to this categorization, a broad coalition of insurgent groups across the nation released statements in protest, declaring "We are all Jabhat al-Nusra."²⁷ Even the moderate Free Syrian Army (FSA), an opposition group that was provided arms assistance by the US a year later claimed that members affiliated with JN comprised 7.5-9% of their group membership.²⁸

The vociferous backlash of Syrian opposition groups to the US classification of JN as an FTO indicates how rapidly the organization led by Jolani horizontally consolidated support amongst rebel factions in the region. This approach to achieving influence in the region was starkly pragmatic and long-term compared to the rapid method of top-down dominance used by the IS, that has been mainly characterized by enforcing rule over local rebel groups rather than remaining open to power sharing schemes. IS operationalizes a black and white ideological lens in which the ingroup is explicitly composed of those who have abdicated to the authority of the proto-state, and the outgroup is literally any actor that does not pledge allegiance to the group. In

²⁵ Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 265.

²⁶ Hasim, "The Islamic State from AQ affiliate," 2.

²⁷ Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 101

²⁸ Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 101

contrast, JN firmly distinguishes itself from IS by promoting a grey-scale ideological lens, which communicates a flexibility and openness to pursue a broad coalition of jihadist-inspired Sunni constituents that do not seek an immediate Islamic caliphate, but rather prioritize the fall of the Assad regime as the first essential step to restoring righteous Islamic rule to the region.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Post-World War II Rates of Violence Against Civilians

Global patterns of oppositional dynamics and targeted violence have marked a change in the landscape of conflict dynamics in recent decades. In the post-Cold War era, intrastate civil wars have become far more common than interstate conflicts between nations, civilians have increasingly become targets of armed groups in civil war, and the proportion of private civilian casualties in conflict are increasing.²⁹ This basic trend is described by Kaldor, who states: “At the beginning of the twentieth century, 85–90 percent of casualties in war were military... By the late 1990s, the proportions of a hundred years ago have been almost exactly reversed, so that nowadays approximately 80 percent of all casualties in wars are civilian.”³⁰ In an effort to understand the increasing incidence and lethality of intrastate conflict in recent decades, most political scholars in the mid to late 20th century focused on retrospectively examining the socio-political tensions that produce the outbreak of conflict, rather than determining the violent targeting practices that occurred during periods of war.³¹ It is critical for the academic community to examine how and why different parties in a conflict rationalize, sanction, or restrain their combatant members’ use of violence against civilian targets during protracted conflicts. This research will offer insights into how the nuanced frameworks of group rationale

²⁹ Newman, Edward, "The ‘new wars’ debate: A historical perspective is needed." *Security dialogue* 35, no. 2 (2004): 175.

³⁰ Mary Kaldor and Robin Luckham, "Global transformations and new conflicts." *Ids Bulletin* 32, no. 2 (2001): 57.

³¹ S.N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006. 35.

regarding violent action are instrumental in directing the behavior of politically-motivated terrorist groups.

The Assumed Irrationality of Violence Against Civilians

One of the puzzles of civilian targeting, and the reason why some scholars have attributed these atrocities to irrational logic, is that the random killing of non-combatants is largely counterproductive for an armed group in the conditions of civil war.³² If civilians are murdered regardless of their willingness to cooperate with an armed militia, then local non-combatants will have no incentive to swap their political leanings or increase their support of the antagonizing group within the context of a civil war, in which two or more oppositional actors are involved.³³ Kalyvas' examines violence in civil war through the lens of a dual actor scenario, in which an incumbent state army and an insurgent militia behave with a certain rationale based on this classification. For example, he poses that an insurgent militia will typically lack intelligence about the population compared to the government and is more likely to kill unselectively because rebels do not have the information to separate friend from foe in certain contested regions.³⁴ However, this dual system does not explain how two insurgent groups that contest the same regime and operate in the same security environment differ in their rates of violence against civilians.

The killing of civilians, especially by terrorist groups, is often labeled as "indiscriminate," implying that the lethal actions are entirely random and senseless.³⁵ Armed parties in a conflict, whether they be state or non-state actors, frequently label large cohorts of

³² Kalyvas, Stathis N, "The paradox of terrorism in civil war." *The Journal of Ethics* 8, no. 1 (2004): 105.

³³ Kalyvas, "The paradox of terrorism in civil war." 104.

³⁴ Ibid., 124

³⁵ Charles JM. Drake, "The role of ideology in terrorists' target selection." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 10, no. 2 (1998): 53

people as existential enemies that should be subjected to harm or elimination. Kalyvas classifies indiscriminate violence as an incident when “individuals are targeted solely on the basis of their membership in a group perceived to be connected with the opposition and irrespective of their individual actions (groups may be based on ties of kinship, location, class, ethnicity, etc.).”³⁶ Yet, Drake posits that when groups are targeted based on the status of their identity rather than their actions, violence is not entirely random, because people are still consciously targeted by violent groups as a designated outgroup deserving of violence.³⁷ For example, during the Algerian Rebellion of 1954, the National Liberation Front insurgency viewed all attacks against Europeans as legitimate, because their ultimate aim was to repel all European colonial enterprises from the region.³⁸ Even if the criteria for a legitimate target is as broad as “Europeans,” violence was not randomly perpetrated.³⁹

Rational Violence Against Civilians

Valentino indicates that the more recent literature concerning violence against civilians in the 21st century that was “once assumed to be a tragic, if virtually inevitable side effect of wars, is now understood to play a central part in the deliberate strategies of belligerent groups.”⁴⁰ Gagnon accordingly stated in 1994 that “The current major conflicts taking place along ethnic lines throughout the world have as their main causes not ancient hatreds, but rather the purposeful actions of political actors who actively create violent conflict.”⁴¹ Therefore, violence does not occur randomly: atrocities involving civilians are not senseless nor are the killing of noncombatants simply collateral consequences of greater warfare. Furthermore, in dictatorial

³⁶ Kalyvas, “The paradox of terrorism in civil war.” 101.

³⁷ Drake, “The role of ideology in terrorists’ target selection.” 53.

³⁸ Drake, “The role of ideology in terrorists’ target selection.” 60.

³⁹ Ibid., 60.

⁴⁰ Valentino, “Why we Kill: The Political Science of Political Violence Against Civilians.” 91.

⁴¹ Valentino, “Why we Kill: The Political Science of Political Violence Against Civilians.” 93.

regimes where political dissent is forcefully repressed, opposition groups are generally more likely to resort to terrorist tactics to protest the government.⁴² Yet, when groups are both fighting in the same conflict environment against authoritarian states, what explains their divergent targeting tactics? Armed groups participate in conflict within a constrained set of conditions and objectives that structure their rational behavior. Following this logic of actor rationality, political violence scholars have highlighted economic, organizational and political factors as the dominant structures that determine the varying patterns of insurgent violence.

Violence Against Civilians by Non-State Groups

Rebel groups embedded in intrastate conflict are more operationally constrained than the governments they oppose. In the international political status quo, the state monopolizes the military resources of the nation as a coercive mechanism to induce civilian compliance in conflict. In contrast, insurgencies are operationally weak compared to the incumbent and often rely on a “unique relationship” with civilians to survive.⁴³ Valentino argues, “much more than regular military forces in conventional wars, insurgent organizations must rely directly on local civilian populations for supplies, intelligence, shelter, and recruits.”⁴⁴ This strategy may be particularly attractive when the insurgency draws on an especially large base of civilian supporters. Because non-state groups tend to rely on on-the-ground local communities to materially support their operations, these insurgents must consider if the violence that they perpetrate against civilians will weaken their local approval and will thereby threaten the survival of the group. In the case of the Real Irish Republican Army (IRA), their choice to plant a bomb in Omagh, Northern Ireland in 1998 that killed twenty-nine people was ultimately

⁴² Deniz Aksoy, David B. Carter, and Joseph Wright, "Terrorism in dictatorships." *The Journal of Politics* 74, no. 3 (2012): 810.

⁴³ Valentino, "Why we Kill: The Political Science of Political Violence Against Civilians." 94.

⁴⁴ Valentino, "Why we Kill: The Political Science of Political Violence Against Civilians" 94.

detrimental to the group, because it triggered intense outrage amongst the local population and caused the group to sink into political obscurity over the following years, as the Real IRA conducting only three attacks between 2003 to 2008.⁴⁵

Other authors view violence against private citizens as a limited strategy that can only ever work as a short-term tactic in war. Killing civilians can be used as a mechanism of intimidation to compel cooperation, but it can also strengthen resolve for populations to fight against the repressive military force.⁴⁶ Furthermore, violence aimed at the annihilation of non-combatants based on their ethnic group affiliation rather than their political behavior has also been found to be ineffective “at least in the long run.”⁴⁷ However, other scholars emphasize that civilians will tolerate the presence of terrorist groups that are prone to indiscriminate violence when their own government is not only politically repressing the population, but is concurrently violating norms of human security by attacking the national populous.⁴⁸ Callaway and Harrelson-Stephens pose when the British government increasingly breached human rights norms against Irish separatists in the 1970’s, local support for the non-state terrorist IRA significantly increased.⁴⁹ These findings indicate that when analyzing civilian support for terrorist activity, researchers must take into account the temporal patterns of regime abuses against civilians that produce incentives for the public to support or tolerate a sometimes volatile insurgency that postures as a protector of the people. In fact, incidents of state brutality against civilians can

⁴⁵ Jacob N. Shapiro, *The terrorist's dilemma: Managing violent covert organizations*. Princeton University Press, 2013.13.

⁴⁶ Valentino, "Why we Kill: The Political Science of Political Violence Against Civilians." 98.

⁴⁷ Valentino, "Why we Kill: The Political Science of Political Violence Against Civilians." 68.

⁴⁸ Callaway, and Harrelson-Stephens, "Toward a theory of terrorism: Human security as a determinant of terrorism." 698.

⁴⁹ Callaway and Harrelson-Stephens, "Toward a theory of terrorism: Human security as a determinant of terrorism." 697.

constitute a means of advantageous comparison for a terrorist group, allowing the group to justify violent actions as a means of “defending” its people against the aggression of the state.⁵⁰

Explanations for Insurgent Violence Against Civilians

Recent literature on civil wars in the early 20th century have stated that violence perpetrated against private citizens is part of a rational set of strategic choices that are uniquely presented within the circumstances of warfare. One such argument holds that the dynamics of territorial contestation that occur in war determine rates of violence against non-combatants.⁵¹ In his groundbreaking 2006 study, “The Logic of Violence in Civil War,” Kalyvas posed that violence against non-combatants is perpetrated through the dual strategies of selective violence, in which non-combatants are attacked by the insurgency or the incumbency based on intelligence about their collaboration with the enemy group, and indiscriminate violence, in which people are assaulted solely based on their ethnic or racial identity.⁵² Kalyvas argues that the more restrained use of selective violence against members of the opposition is more likely to occur in the territorial zones controlled by one armed group, which enforces the singular authority to gather accurate information about political dissent in the insurgent group’s region of domination. Yet, in high conflict areas where combatant groups lack credible informative sources, non-combatant residents are more likely to be indiscriminately killed due to the lack of certainty that military groups have about their connection to the enemy. Therefore, Kalyvas delineates a landscape of conflict in which the extent of territorial control determines the restraint that militias will demonstrate when using force against the public. The state-building campaign of IS

⁵⁰ Albert Bandura, "The role of selective moral disengagement in terrorism and counterterrorism." 2004. 8.

⁵¹ Laia Balcells, "Rivalry and revenge: Violence against civilians in conventional civil wars." *International Studies Quarterly* 54, no. 2 (2010): 291.

⁵² Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006. 15.

resulted in increased brutality in IS-dominated areas, which serves to contradict this theory. This thesis will expose how IS instrumentally framed “violence as hastening a new millennium,” to justify unprecedented norms of violence in their jihadist community.⁵³ While IS and JN use similar radical Islamist frameworks to ground the legitimacy of their respective campaigns, their ideological differences notably foreground the pathways of their different collective rationales concerning violence.

To account for the variation in violence against combatant targets versus violence against ordinary civilians, many authors examine the different organizational factors of a group that detail the methods of communication -or lack thereof- between key leaders of a movement and the many followers that fight for their cause. When there are disruptions in communication from the authority figures at the top of the hierarchy to those on the front lines that do their bidding, the principal-agent theory is evident. This logic posits that a limited group of “principal” elites are highly committed to an organization and are actively formulating strategies to ensure long-term group viability, whereas lower-level “agent” members pursue short-term goals in combat and are likely to exit the group and integrate back into society.⁵⁴ Therefore, due to a lack of commitment to group goals, a decentralized collective of low-level fighters in the group are less intrinsically incentivized to consider long-term ideological interests of the group and practice restraint with violence in conflict. This theory, however, does not discount the reality that ideology is strategically operationalized by elites to garner a unique low-level profile of group targeting. This paper will delineate the instrumental elements of IS and JN ideologies that

⁵³ Alia Brahim, "Ideology and Terrorism." *The Oxford Handbook of Terrorism* (2019): 298.

⁵⁴ Max Abrahms and Philip BK Potter, "Explaining terrorism: Leadership deficits and militant group tactics." *International Organization* 69, no. 2 (2015): 317.

critically distinguish the divergent agendas of Islamist social movements operating in the same geographical arena of Syria.

By analyzing insurgent dynamics in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), Potter and Abrahms found that non-state groups are also susceptible to coordination-based principal-agent deficiencies that leads to violent actions that are not sanctioned by elites. First, senior leaders of the organization that are veterans of militant combat “have personally observed the strategic fallout of indiscriminate bloodshed” resulting in a reluctance to use indiscriminate violence as a strategic tactic, especially due to their leadership focus on the long-term goals of the organization.⁵⁵ This choice is exemplified by AQ founder Osama bin Laden, who promoted the 9/11 attacks of American civilians abroad, yet admonished civilian targeting conducted by low-level AQ affiliate soldiers in Muslim-majority countries.⁵⁶ Second, lower-level members lack the means to participate in militarized, calculated attacks, and are more likely to pursue “soft” targets with little protection.⁵⁷ Furthermore, the incentives of ingroup competition amongst low-level fighters seeking hierarchical status within the organization make them willing to prove their commitment to the organization through killing civilians when other means of battlefield activity are limited to higher-level operatives.⁵⁸ Therefore, when a militant group lacks a strong communication network, or is dispersed across a wide region, subordinate members often have limited strategic insight into the operational disadvantages of attacking civilians.

Other principal-agent theories apply specifically to terrorism and are elevated to examining how inter-group dynamics relate to the rates of violence against civilians. Abrahms,

⁵⁵ Abrahms and Potter, "Explaining terrorism: Leadership deficits and militant group tactics." 316.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 316.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 316.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 316.

Ward, and Kennedy focused more specifically on the violent behaviors of prominent longstanding “principal” organizations in comparison to the behaviors of their “agent” entities that are later established as affiliates to the original group. The results of their study, which evaluated key terrorist groups and their affiliates between 1998 to 2005, found that affiliate groups are significantly more likely to commit violence against civilians compared to the parent group.⁵⁹ They account for this difference by noting that younger groups have a “liability of newness” and are more likely to fail than well-established terror groups.⁶⁰ Therefore, nascent affiliate groups are found to be more likely to target civilians because killing non-combatants is linked to increasing terrorist recruitment and prolonging group survival, rather than achieving group goals. On the other hand, mature organizations are far more likely to exercise restraint concerning violence against civilians, because killing non-combatants is proven to impede the ultimate goals of the group that older organizations fixate on after ensuring basic security.⁶¹ Although the authors argue that parent and affiliate classifications are central to group propensity to commit violence against civilians, their study does not compare the nuances in ideology or rates of lethality between affiliate groups. However, they notably pose that “affiliates are indeed even more indiscriminate when their network relationship to the parent is weaker.”⁶² Thus, this study indicates the imperative to research the principal ideological continuities or discontinuities between parent groups and their affiliates over time, and if changes in group relationships affect patterns in violent targeting.

⁵⁹ Max Abrahms, Matthew Ward, and Ryan Kennedy, "Explaining Civilian Attacks: Terrorist Networks, Principal-Agent Problems and Target Selection." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 12, no. 1 (2018). 23.

⁶⁰ Abrahms, Ward and Kennedy, "Explaining Civilian Attacks: Terrorist Networks, Principal-Agent Problems and Target Selection." 27.

⁶¹ Ibid., 40.

⁶² Ibid., 40.

Rather than emphasizing the organizational attributes of insurgencies as the root cause of principal-agent dilemmas, other scholars argue that the economic assets of an armed group correlate with the likelihood that low-ranking operatives in a militia will perpetrate random violent behaviors unrelated to group goals. Jeremy Weinstein argues that the variation of violence against civilians by armed actors is rooted in the “initial endowments” of armed groups that present a principal-agent problem for some well-financed insurgents. Weinstein poses that groups that are initially economically endowed will attract recruits that seek mainly pecuniary benefits from their participation, and are less committed to self-sanctioning their violence towards non-combatants out of concern that the force they use will impede the group objectives.⁶³ The economic argument suggests that socially endowed groups that attract members dedicated to the ideological goals of the collective are more likely to be selective about who they attack, and are more likely to discern if violence serves the strategic goals of the group.⁶⁴ However, Weinstein does not account for powerful ingroup dynamics of socialization that occur upon entry and membership within the group, that may impact a member’s level of investment in ideological goals.⁶⁵ Furthermore, Stanton argues that there is little evidence since 1989 to prove the correlation between the availability of contraband to rebel groups and their propensity to use violent, “destabilizing” tactics against civilians.⁶⁶

Some authors argue that armed groups rationally choose to use violence against civilians as a means to achieving a desired political end for the collective. The scholarly resolve that violence against civilians is an instrumental tool for non-state groups is an underpinning notion

⁶³ Jeremy M. Weinstein, *Inside rebellion: The politics of insurgent violence*. Cambridge University Press, 2006. 172.

⁶⁴ Weinstein, *Inside rebellion: The politics of insurgent violence*. 172.

⁶⁵ Weinstein, *Inside rebellion: The politics of insurgent violence*. 172.

⁶⁶ Jessica Stanton, *Strategies of violence and restraint in civil war*. Columbia University, 2009. 114.

of terrorism studies, that were advanced by the work of Crenshaw in the second half of the twentieth century. Writing in 1990, Crenshaw defined terrorist violence as a “expression of political strategy... a willful choice made by an organization for political and strategic reasons, rather than the unintended outcome of psychological or social factors.”⁶⁷ While not all civilian targeting is classified as terrorism, the strategic approach of non-state actors to gain political concessions through violence against non-combatant targets is commonly categorized as terrorist violence.⁶⁸ Furthermore, terrorism is also designed to render a significant psychological impact by inducing fear in an audience that witnesses an attack but is not the direct physical target.⁶⁹

Walter and Kydd provide one of the most referenced categorizations of strategic terrorist tactics, that are intended to coerce a specific policy concession from a political regime. Strategic theorists traditionally define five desired outcomes vis-a-vis the state that terrorists seek by attacking civilians: attrition, to reduce the state’s will to fight; provocation, to trigger an excessively brutal government reaction; intimidation, by instilling fear in the population; spoiling, to disrupt peace processes deemed unfavorable for terrorist goals; and outbidding, to convince publics that the terrorist group is an authentic threat to the status quo regime.⁷⁰ This perspective implies that terrorist groups are “preference-based,” meaning they choose to use violence against civilians when targeting populations is considered as the optimal form of resistance to achieve policy goals. Strategic terrorist scholars seek to explain terrorist behavior

⁶⁷ Martha Crenshaw, "The logic of terrorism: Terrorist behavior as a product of choice." *Terrorism and counter terrorism* 2, no. 1 (1998): 61.

⁶⁸ Luis De la Calle, and Ignacio Sánchez-Cuenca, "What we talk about when we talk about terrorism." *Politics & Society* 39, no. 3 (2011): 457.

⁶⁹ Bruce Hoffman and Gordon H. McCormick, "Terrorism, Signaling, and Suicide Attack." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 27, no. 4 (2004): 269.

⁷⁰ Andrew H. Kydd and Barbara F. Walter., "The strategies of terrorism." *International security* 31, no. 1 (2006): 51.

by adopting these tactics as explanatory factors regarding the occurrence of terrorism.⁷¹ Rather than fully discounting strategic goals that foreground terrorist decision-making, this paper approaches violence against civilians from a broader lens, seeking to locate the collective belief systems that sanction purposeful acts of political violence.

Other authors argue that the strategy of outbidding, which involves demonstrating a “groups capabilities, commitment, and intentions relative to other groups” in order to compete in the same social movement.⁷² Hamming argues that the escalating competition of Salafi-jihadist groups AQ and IS, two groups that hold influence in the Middle Eastern arena of conflict and compete for like-minded jihadist fighters, have altered each group’s “strategic decision of which enemies to attack.”⁷³ Hamming states that shifts in targeting patterns are predominantly perpetrated by the clash between AQ and IS, a tension evident by the fact that “since 2014, almost not a single magazine, statement or speech has been published by AQ or IS without mentioning the other, explicitly or implicitly condemning the other.”⁷⁴

Hamming poses that similar social movements, such as AQ and IS that fall under the Salafi-jihadist sect of insurgent groups mutually arrange their “enemy hierarchy” to challenge the rising success of other Salafi-jihadist groups that compete with them for potential recruits.⁷⁵ Hamming suggests that in the past IS has hybridized its message to encourage attacks on “near enemy” targets in the Middle East and “far enemy” targets in the West. In contrast, AQ has “adopted a new strategy to win the hearts and minds of Muslims” by distancing itself from excessive attacks in the Middle East, while maintaining its posture as a long-standing advocate

⁷¹ Gordon H. McCormick, "Terrorist decision making." *Annual Review of Political Science* 6, no. 1 (2003): 482.

⁷² Tore Refslund Hamming, "Jihadi competition and political preferences." *Perspectives on terrorism* 11, no. 6 (2017): 65.

⁷³ Hamming, "Jihadi competition and political preferences." 65.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 65.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 65.

for prioritizing attacks against the West.⁷⁶ Hamming views these rhetorical shifts in group priorities as not constituent of the evolution of group ideology, but solely reducible to the process of group outbidding. However, this paper will consider how group ideology is not simply superficially generated by initial competition between organizations, but rather is imbued with a deeper group investment in beliefs regarding the correct means to achieving an Islamic social and political order in the Middle East.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 77

THEORY

The formulaic assumption of many of the preceding scholars is that “whatever differences in rhetoric, groups and their members respond similarly to such incentives and thus ideological differences are irrelevant.”⁷⁷ Yet, particularly in the case of terrorist violence by non-state actors that explicitly aim to achieve a political goal, the ideological orientation of the political movement critically shapes the reasoning, justification, and perpetration of violence. While some scholars focus on the varying territorial, economic, and strategic mechanisms that limit and structure the actions of insurgent organizations, others investigate how ideas either incentivize or restrict the violent behaviors of goal-oriented militant organizations. This thesis adopts the latter approach, by comparing the English language publications of two Salafi jihadist groups embedded in the Syrian civil war, to determine if the unique ideological profiles of militant organizations influence their targeting behaviors.

Sanin and Wood define ideology as a set of ideas that comprise the identity of an armed group based on four distinctive components of their mission.⁷⁸ Ideology delineates the ingroup, underlines grievances that the organization wishes to address, identifies the desired outcome of the movement, and finally states a program of action that varies in clarity between groups.⁷⁹ This structure presents a dual instrumental and normative framework for non-state militant groups that delimit the extent to which they use violence against varying military or non-combatant targets to achieve a collective goal.

⁷⁷ Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín and Elisabeth Jean Wood, "Ideology in civil war: Instrumental adoption and beyond." *Journal of Peace Research* 51, no. 2 (2014): 215.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 215.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 215.

Ideology is instrumental to the survival of insurgent groups because it addresses the “five stylized facts” of non-state actors’ circumstances in a civil war. These facts summarize the collective action problems of groups that oppose the political status-quo. Non-state groups are categorically alienated from coordinated state military institutions and lack the communication infrastructure commanded by the regime armies, often forcing them to rely on assistance from local civilians. In addition, specifically clandestine terrorist organizations experience communication deficiencies due to their covert tactics, attract operatives with a diverse range of incentives to fight. In the purely instrumental sense, an insurgent group with a rational operational strategy would develop a “weak program” of ideology that is tailored to address these challenges.⁸⁰ Ideology is thus meticulously crafted by elite members to increase the ideational cohesion vertically, across organizational hierarchies and laterally, across geographically distant affiliates.⁸¹ By enhancing group coordination around explicit grievances, goals, and actions of redress, leaders can avoid ingroup friction in decision-making and can operate more efficiently under a united goal.

Sanin and Wood further that ideology influences group behavior not only because it generates cohesion, but because it functions to instill normative structures in the group that later influence that group’s path dependency.⁸² They pose “ideology implies particular skills, routines, institutions, and rules of thumb,” such as the restrictions that Marxist insurgent groups place on the sexual activities of their operatives, that influence members and non-members alike.⁸³ The rules delineated by ideology also structure the repertoire of violence that groups use. For example, while the Liberation Tigers of the Tamil Eelam (LTTE) often practiced tactics of

⁸⁰ Ibid., 217.

⁸¹ Ibid., 219.

⁸² Ibid., 220.

⁸³ Ibid., 220.

indiscriminate violence against civilians, LTTE militants rarely committed sexual assault against non-combatant victims, which is typically common in atrocities that occur during sectarian wars. Furthermore, the group regulated marriages of their members through ideological reasonings which suggests that the group followed a strict ideological code that served to regulate the sexual behavior of their members.⁸⁴

However, in regard to categorizing ideology, most terrorism scholars resort to very broad classifications that do not expose the ideological nuances between groups within the same category that can incentivize or restrain violence against civilians. Piazza poses that active terrorist groups in Iraq between 1968 and 2005 have been viewed by the international and academic community as components of religiously-oriented, particularly violent, “Islamist” wave of terrorism. However, the goal structure of these groups vary greatly and result in widely varying levels of lethality against “soft” civilian targets.⁸⁵ Three notably different terrorist sects were operating in Iraq during this time period: Sunni militant groups affiliated with AQ, non-AQ Sunni militias, and Shi’ite armed groups.⁸⁶ While the latter two groups had specifically state-oriented goals of replacing the Iraqi government, AQ affiliates were oriented around more transformative goals of embarking on a violent global resistance against all ethnic populations and state regimes that varyingly contrasted their concept of Islamic ideological purity.⁸⁷ Due to their wide range of targets and radical agenda of ethnic cleansing, groups affiliated with AQ were responsible for four times the amount of Islamist terrorist attacks in Iraq than non-affiliate

⁸⁴ Elisabeth Jean Wood, "Armed groups and sexual violence: When is wartime rape rare?." *Politics & Society* 37, no. 1 (2009): 131.

⁸⁵ James A. Piazza, "Is Islamist terrorism more dangerous?: An empirical study of group ideology, organization, and goal structure." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 21, no. 1 (2009): 65.

⁸⁶ Piazza, "Is Islamist terrorism more dangerous?: An empirical study of group ideology, organization, and goal structure." 72.

⁸⁷ Piazza, "Is Islamist terrorism more dangerous?: An empirical study of group ideology, organization, and goal structure." 76.

groups that followed more pragmatic anti-regime agendas that were designed to attack the military assets of the Iraqi state.⁸⁸ The transformative or state-oriented goals of religious terrorist groups that significantly correlate with their lethality provides an incentive to investigate how the progressive diversification of Salafi jihadist ideology interacted with the state upheavals of the Arab Spring.

Political scholars have posed that intensity and orientation of group ideology increases the likelihood that groups will perpetrate violence against civilians. Through researching the micro-foundations of insurgencies that include guerilla and terrorist organizations, Gates concludes “even for the most blatant loot-seeking groups, ethnicity and ideology...play a role in the pattern of compliance and enforcement for the rebel army.”⁸⁹ Furthermore, he argues that if a group has a “homogenous” ideology that is perceived to be contrary from societal norms, the structure of group rewards will extend beyond pecuniary benefits to more immaterial returns of ingroup approval.⁹⁰ The motives of low-level action in ethno-nationalist and/or religious movements become reliant on individual interpretations of the reasonings evil and good espoused by the ideology, rather than the long-term strategy of the group.⁹¹ In addition, members of organizations with ideological homogeneity seek rewards not limited to the explicit monetary funds doled out by organizational leaders, but rather the immaterial achievement of social glorification within the group.⁹² When the benefit structure of a group is motivated by subjective, non-pecuniary rewards rather than an objective means to a materialistic goal, the rationale of

⁸⁸ Ibid., 74.

⁸⁹ Scott Gates, "Recruitment and allegiance: The microfoundations of rebellion." *Journal of Conflict resolution* 46, no. 1 (2002): 113.

⁹⁰ Gates, "Recruitment and allegiance: The microfoundations of rebellion, 113.

⁹¹ Ibid., 115.

⁹² Ibid., 114.

fighters to kill or maim will likely be less controlled than a group that is not motivated by a radical ideology.

Ideology functions according to three principles that make it a tool of socialization that is rhetorically and operationally impactful for a political movement. Ideology is realized at a group level, is historically-rooted, and is manifested in tangible organizational structures. Therefore, it is actualized by a collective rather than a single group leader, is related to culturally revered narratives of the past rather than entirely new interpretations of the world and is implemented in institutional norms rather than merely abstract concepts.

While group leaders and propaganda creators are the main delegates that transmit ideology, the concepts they promote evolve into a creed that becomes a centrifugal force of group identity. Althusser more explicitly describes ideology as an “apparatus” that systemically represents an “imagined” perspective of the world for group members.⁹³ He argues that ideology does not reflect to people the “real condition of their existence,” but is rather the “imaginary relation” that people have to the “real relations in which they live.” Within a group setting, personal belief systems are externally validated by like-minded group members, serving to reinforce conviction in the worldview.⁹⁴ An organizational creed enables an individual to identify with an external collective, and to meaningfully strengthen membership within the group through active commitment to the ideology.

Group leaders also link ideology to a glorified historical era or community that serves as a model for a desired social order that the group seeks to achieve, a reference point for group action, and for violent groups, a source of justification for forceful conduct. This reality evolves

⁹³ Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, eds. *Literary theory: an anthology*. “Louis Althusser,” John Wiley & Sons, 2017. 695.

⁹⁴ Rivkin and Ryan, *Literary theory: an anthology*. 695.

in a pattern of path dependency, as ideology is cultivated based on the precedent of a legitimated structure and preserves institutional credibility by continuing to reproduce within historically established boundaries. An example of ideological path dependency is the rational decision that many groups make to motivate combatants through a historically relevant ideology. For example, jihadist fighters reference passages in sacred Islamic texts such as the Qur'an and the Hadith about violent Muslim armies who defended their faith against an external enemy. By alluding to the righteous symbols of Islamic defense that are preserved in a faith-based history, these groups justify their violence as a modern iteration of spiritually noble defense. When a historically-derived narrative resonates with recruits and attracts public support, an organization is incentivized to adhere to a creed that models a glorified era.

While ideology does not portray “reality,” it is manifested in actions that structure the real world. Althusser states that all people are “endowed” with ideas, but ideas are physically fulfilled by the reality that all conscious subjects “act according to their ideas,” which are implemented into material practice.⁹⁵ Ideology informs action-based communal customs that comprise the structural elements of the group organization and mobilization. The LTTE's organizational ban on sexual assault, the degrees to which Islamist groups enforce sharia law, and martyrdom rituals that celebrate attacks committed by self-sacrificing group operatives are prime examples of how the ethical orientations of organizations shape group activities.

Scholars who study the mobilization of violent groups have often peripheralized ideology as having a secondary role in the cause of violence. For example, Weinstein argues that group economic endowments- or lack thereof- serve to attract recruits with varying levels of investment in group goals. Well-endowed groups attract opportunistic recruits who seek predominantly

⁹⁵ Rivkin and Ryan, *Literary theory: an anthology*. 695.

pecuniary rewards and will “damage civilians” without considering ideological consequences.⁹⁶ However, groups with few resources generally attract members that are motivated by group objectives rather than financial gains. A strong group commitment to organizational ideals will encourage militia members to use violence selectively to achieve their ends.⁹⁷ Thus, Weinstein contends that group *financing* is the key independent variable that ultimately determines the extent of the organization’s ideological motives and operational calculations informed by collective beliefs.

Unlike Weinstein, other scholars choose to entirely reject ideology as a factor in the causative chain of violence. Prominent mid-twentieth century scholar of philosophy, Hannah Arendt, has famously disassociated ideology as a central motive behind the choice to commit atrocities against ordinary people in her “Banality of Evil” thesis. After witnessing the trial of Adolf Eichmann, one of the leading Nazi coordinators of the Holocaust, Arendt resolved that Eichmann was driven to oversee the killing of millions of civilians because of his desire to advance his career in the Nazi Party. Arendt observed that Eichmann did not exhibit abnormal psychological tendencies that could explain his investment in the implementation of the “Final Solution.” Instead, she argued that the commander simply exhibited the basic human need to perform his job, which dulled his sensitivity to the atrocities he was perpetrating.⁹⁸ She stated, Eichmann “had no motives at all. He ...never realized what he was doing.”⁹⁹ Arendt implied that Eichmann was not primarily motivated to kill ordinary people by the masses due to his conscious

⁹⁶ Weinstein, *Inside rebellion: The politics of insurgent violence*. 622.

⁹⁷ Weinstein, *Inside rebellion: The politics of insurgent violence*. 622.

⁹⁸ Stephen S. Reicher, Alexander Haslam, and Rakshi Rath. "Making a virtue of evil: A five-step social identity model of the development of collective hate." *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 2, no. 3 (2008): 1314.

⁹⁹ Hannah Arendt, *Hannah Arendt: critical essays*. Suny Press, 1994. 287.

beliefs. She neglected the ideological socialization of the Nazi Party as any explanatory variable of Eichmann's deliberate construction of death camps for civilians across Nazi-held territory.

The entrenchment of ideology in the framework of politically-minded organizations has been questioned in academia. Collier and Hofeller discuss modern ideology as merely a surface-level "window wash" that is operationalized by political elites to capture support from a targeted domestic or international audience.¹⁰⁰ Moreover, Collier sought to minimize the political repercussions of ideological rhetoric by leaders of armed groups by using the "chocolate eater metaphor."¹⁰¹ The metaphor contends that if a person claims they are not a chocolate eater, yet continues to indulge in chocolate, their behavior becomes fact, and objectively renders their rhetorical testament to be false.¹⁰² This scenario can be equated to a plausible incident in a civil war, when elite rhetoric does not align with group action. For example, a militia representative could release a statement alleging his group did not execute an attack that killed civilians, even when there is a plethora of evidence against this claim. Therefore, many critics of ideological causation resolve that the "hard" facts of action override "soft" ideas as key explanatory factors for violence in a conflict environment.¹⁰³

However, Sanin and Wood question this theory by stating that the chocolate eater metaphor has not reached its logical completion. They state, "if as a result of advertising a person comes not only to value that image highly, then this will affect his chocolate eating practices."¹⁰⁴ This conclusive element is central to William Sewell's perspective that ideology, like all social structures, is "dual" in character, meaning that although ideologies are subject to "human

¹⁰⁰ Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, "Greed and grievance in civil war." In *Journal of Conflict Resolution*. 2001. 8.

¹⁰¹ Sanin and Wood, "Ideology in civil war: Instrumental adoption and beyond." 214.

¹⁰² Paul Collier, "Doing well out of war." In *conference on economic agendas in civil wars, London*, vol. 26, p. 27. 1999. 2.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 214.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 214.

volition” largely implemented by elite preferences, “ideological action is shaped by preexisting ideological (and other) realities” of social construction.¹⁰⁵ By rendering ideology as a subcategory of social structures, Sewell contends that ideology is conditionally based on the constraints and enablers of pre-established social institutions.¹⁰⁶

Ideology is an instrumental tool that is used to an extent by most non-violent and violent political movements to mobilize a group united by a collective interest. However, the establishment of intensive ingroup socialization is especially pertinent to groups that use violence as a strategy to achieve their objectives. Forty years of social psychology research has established that most humans are exposed to social sanctions against violence during developmental years of childhood which solidifies an aversion to violence for the average person with no notable psychological abnormalities.¹⁰⁷ These findings apply to members of terrorist groups, as studies have consistently proven that terrorists have psychological profiles comparable to those of the general public. Even the large majority of people who harbor radical ideas or beliefs do not resort to violence to further their political preferences.¹⁰⁸ Therefore, powerful social forces and bonds are required to disengage moral conditioning during human childhood development that discourages violence.¹⁰⁹

Bandura states that violence against innocent civilians is categorically more challenging for insurgent perpetrators to justify than violence against those who are directly employed by the state in a military, administrative, or governance capacity.¹¹⁰ The latter targeting strategy has

¹⁰⁵ Sewell, "Ideologies and social revolutions: Reflections on the French case." 60.

¹⁰⁶ Sewell, "Ideologies and social revolutions: Reflections on the French case." 60. 60.

¹⁰⁷ Randy Borum, "Understanding terrorist psychology." In *The psychology of counter-terrorism*, pp. 20. Routledge, 2010.

¹⁰⁸ Borum, "Understanding terrorist psychology." 42.

¹⁰⁹ Bandura, "The role of selective moral disengagement in terrorism and counterterrorism" 3.

¹¹⁰ Bandura, "The role of selective moral disengagement in terrorism and counterterrorism" 3.

been traditionally employed by scores of insurgent militias spanning countless geographies and time periods. For example, the Provisional Irish Republican Army paramilitary group against British officials and forces at the beginning of the Troubles in 1970. One PIRA member stated, “We regard all people who support the armed forces of the British Government in any way as legitimate targets.”¹¹¹ The Irish separatists thus categorized any individual who was perceived as a collaborator with the “British war machine” as an enemy that was worthy of attack.¹¹² Yet, the killing of unarmed combatants cannot be easily rationalized as a defensive tactic, due to a general lack of evidence of a victim’s affiliation with enemy operations.

The common unjustifiable status of violence against civilians rather than state-affiliated targets motivates the question, how can people come to celebrate acts of inhumanity against non-combatants?¹¹³ Militant groups face the challenge of deciding when to use violence, which can function to deter the threat of people supporting the opposition, or can backfire on the perpetrators by alienating potential supporters.¹¹⁴ According to Drake, ideology provides four instrumental and normative principles that define “motive and framework for action” for groups that employ organized violence.¹¹⁵ These four critical steps include identifying an ingroup constituency, delineating a set of grievances-which include the labelling of an outgroup, prioritizing objectives that the group intends to pursue, and determining a program of action. When the glorification of a “good” ingroup is starkly contrasted with the demonization of an “evil” outgroup, the strategic use of violence becomes collectively rationalized.

¹¹¹ Drake, "The role of ideology in terrorists' target selection." 62.

¹¹² Drake, "The role of ideology in terrorists' target selection." 64.

¹¹³ Reicher et.al., "Making a virtue of evil: A five-step social identity model of the development of collective hate." 1312.

¹¹⁴ Weinstein, *Inside rebellion: The politics of insurgent violence*. 44.

¹¹⁵ Drake "The role of ideology in terrorists' target selection." 55.

First, ideology delineates an ingroup that is worthy of preserving, which informs the self-identification of members. Isolated, cult-like groups, such as commonly insulated terrorist groups, are perceived as organizations that deliberately operationalize a creed designed to nullify a member's sense of individual identity and personal agency. However, Reicher makes an opposing argument: that the social psychology of group identity facilitates a re-constituted "self-realization" in the context of group membership.¹¹⁶ One of the common conditions of non-state group membership makes ideology particularly pertinent to an independent armed group. Sanin and Wood argue that "supporters (of a non-state group) are generally a heterogeneous group," that hail from a range of socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds.¹¹⁷ Unlike national armies, non-state groups do not uniformly conscript from a specific cohort of the population, and their members have a greater diversity of social experiences.¹¹⁸ Ideology therefore operates as a cohesive tool for a group that seeks to expeditiously build a sense of community that increases individual commitment to the collective.

A set of ideologically-inspired narratives, practices, and conduct are used to assimilate members, which progressively lead to self-categorization within the ingroup. Ideological immersion is notably more potent amongst terrorist groups that traditionally operate as clandestine actors in isolated camps in order to survive against a state incumbent that exercises a disproportionate amount of control over the security and intelligence environment. Chaliand and Blin characterize these conditions as that of a sect, a group they describe as a "miniature world-introverted, paranoid, and potentially suicidal."¹¹⁹ In this scenario, members who only have

¹¹⁶ Reicher et. Al., "Making a virtue of evil: A five-step social identity model of the development of collective hate." 1329.

¹¹⁷ Sanin and Wood, "Ideology in civil war: Instrumental adoption and beyond." 218.

¹¹⁸ Sanin and Wood, "Ideology in civil war: Instrumental adoption and beyond." 218.

¹¹⁹ Gérard Chaliand, and Arnaud Blin, eds. *The history of terrorism: From antiquity to ISIS*. University of California Press, 2016. 371.

access to ingroup interaction will be further entrenched in the singular worldview of ingroup means and ends. Through the conditioning of a collective worldview, the social sanctions of killing can be progressively dismantled from personal rationales during assimilation.

The second function of ideology is the presentation of challenges that a group wishes to confront.¹²⁰ All effective political movements that are fixated on topics as diverse as climate change, disenfranchisement, or unionization commonly exhibit non-violent dissent towards a cohort of people, if not complete passiveness to those who are not group members. However, groups that pursue violence present challenges to group goals with an entrenched dimension of animosity towards a sector of the population. In other words, their challenges are defined as a set of “grievances.” An intense fixation on grievance in the group narrative leads to ideological framing that mobilizes outgroup hate.¹²¹ Organizations that challenge the political status quo view people they perceive to be associated to a greater or lesser extent with the opposition to be the root cause of their unfavorable circumstances. This labeling is all based on ingroup perception, rather than a measure of a targeted individual’s complicity with the sociopolitical order. In the circumstances of mass violence against civilians, outgroups are subjected to violence based on their group membership, rather than their complicity in the political order. This principle was evident in the Holocaust, when “Jews, gypsies and homosexuals were killed by the Nazis simply because they were Jews or gypsies or homosexuals.”¹²²

Grievances attribute blame on others for the political circumstances of the ingroup. Not all political movements malign an outgroup, which leads Reicher to resolve that the ideological

¹²⁰ Sanin and Wood, "Ideology in civil war: Instrumental adoption and beyond." 215.

¹²¹ Reicher et. Al., "Making a virtue of evil: A five-step social identity model of the development of collective hate." 1325.

¹²² Reicher et. Al., "Making a virtue of evil: A five-step social identity model of the development of collective hate." 1325.

characterization of an outgroup as an existential threat is what ultimately mobilizes violent strategies.¹²³ Ideology exploits a basic narrative of outgroup threat, that serves to justify the violent attacks perpetrated by the ingroup. For example, hardline leaders of the Hutu Power movement in Rwanda during the 1990's justified mass violence against Tutsi civilians through the ideological argument that a united Hutu nation could not be achieved if Tutsis existed in Rwandan society.¹²⁴

Third, ideology identifies the desired outcome of the movement, which is often informed by an inspirational historical narrative that groups aspire to fulfill. Bandura argues that “people do not ordinarily engage in reprehensible conduct until they have justified to themselves the morality of their actions.”¹²⁵ Some terrorist groups that perpetrate violence against civilians collectively aim to entirely upend the current social order and intend to restore the world to a state of “purity,” in which an entire cohort of “unbelievers,” has been successfully eliminated. The delineation of an “ends” can empower the “means” of violent collective action for a group that envisions a better world without the outgroup. Therefore, as the pursuit of an exclusive social order is reinforced, violence is framed as a legitimate method to exterminate a population in the quest for a righteous goal.

The prioritization of group objectives is an essential aspect of ideology that can lead to the general categorizations of violent groups under the same motive, and thus fail to predict the different strategies that “ideologically similar” groups will pursue. For example, Drake describes the activities of the Red Brigades of Italy and the Red Army Faction of West Germany, two terrorist groups that were generally categorized as “communist” militias because they both

¹²³ Reicher et. Al., "Making a virtue of evil: A five-step social identity model of the development of collective hate." 1331.

¹²⁴ Sanin and Wood, "Ideology in civil war: Instrumental adoption and beyond." 217.

¹²⁵ Bandura, "The role of selective moral disengagement in terrorism and counterterrorism." 2.

sought to overthrow the capitalist governments of Western Europe in the 1970's and 1980's.¹²⁶

While the Italian Red Brigades prioritized the overthrow of the Italian government, the West German Red Army Faction had a more anarchistic worldview, and prioritized the demise of the entire imperialist world order.¹²⁷ As a result, the Red Army Faction attacked high-profile targets, such as American journalists, that would garner them more exposure on the world stage that they sought to influence.¹²⁸ In contrast, the Red Brigades deliberately killed Italian police officers and government agents as a symbolic means to convey their dissent to the capitalist state.¹²⁹

Last, ideology prescribes a program of action that varies in clarity between groups.¹³⁰ As a collective agenda is concretized, the hierarchy of desired targets is also defined as a crucial pathway to efficiently achieving group goals. This program of action both incorporates the decision to use violence, and conversely the decision to restrict the use of violence to achieve group goals.¹³¹ In relation to the respective groups of this study, ingroup and outgroup labeling informs targeting priorities and plans of action. Furthermore, as violent means become interpolated into group tactics, and killing of specific groups is collectively rewarded, a cyclical dynamic takes place. Reicher states that "killing not only becomes acceptable (or 'natural') when it can be celebrated as the right thing to do."¹³² As killing of the outgroup becomes increasingly valued within a collective plan of action, moral disengagement not only neutralizes a member's psychosocial feedback to violence, but also promotes brutality as a positive action that enhances an actor's belonging in the ingroup.

¹²⁶ Drake, "The role of ideology in terrorists' target selection." 71.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 71.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 72.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 73.

¹³⁰ Sanin and Wood, "Ideology in civil war: Instrumental adoption and beyond." 217.

¹³¹ Sanin and Wood, "Ideology in civil war: Instrumental adoption and beyond." 217.

¹³² Reicher, "Making a virtue of evil: A five-step social identity model of the development of collective hate." 1337.

The following theory captures how four essential structures of ideology can be cast in a narrative framing that incentivizes violence over restraint. This method of socialization is especially instrumental for terrorist groups that incorporate civilian targeting in their operations. As previously mentioned, the killing of non-combatants involves a more intense violation of social sanctions against killing ordinary people, who are not actively complicit with the political order. Ideological narratives that repetitively dehumanize a whole cohort of combatants based on their political, racial or religious identity enable violent actors to easily defile masses according to general social categorizations, which is far easier than obtaining concrete evidence of a specific victim's opposition to the group.¹³³

Ideology shapes how members cohere to a group and morally disengage from perpetrating violent acts. In addition, ideology is not a static phenomenon, and an organization's changing commitment or departure from a certain belief system can be a critical mechanism that shapes the fluctuating patterns of Sunni jihadist violence in conflict.¹³⁴ This thesis will highlight how insurgent organizations emphasize or de-emphasize certain themes in the realm of Salafi jihadist thought over time to adapt to the complex conflict environment in the Syrian civil war.

The Ideas Salafi Jihadist Groups Share

Salafism is an interpretation of Islam that was first instituted as a distinguished school of Islamic thought and daily practice in the 14th century by Islamic scholar Ibn Taymiyya.¹³⁵ This ultraconservative sect of Sunni Islam holds that "the Qur'an and the Sunna (the Traditions of the Prophet) are the only legitimate sources of law, they aspire to demonstrate the tenets of the first

¹³³ Bandura, "The role of selective moral disengagement in terrorism and counterterrorism." 3.

¹³⁴ Kai M. Thaler, "Ideology and violence in civil wars: Theory and evidence from Mozambique and Angola." *Civil Wars* 14, no. 4 (2012): 546.

¹³⁵ Eli Alshech, "The doctrinal crisis within the Salafi-Jihadi ranks and the emergence of Neo-Takfirism: A historical and doctrinal analysis." *Islamic law and Society* 21, no. 4 (2014): 421.

generations of Muslims in their daily conduct, they aim to rid Muslim societies of any non-Islamic influences, and deem it obligatory to defend this way of life from the intrusions of other religious, political, or military forces.”¹³⁶ Salafism emerged as a militaristic socio-political movement in the 18th century that began its most contemporary iteration in the late 1980’s jihad resistance against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Foundational leaders of AQ such as Osama bin Laden met and formed a coherent Islamist militant agenda against Western “invaders” which included hegemonic non-Muslim regions such as the Soviet Union, North America, and Europe.

All Salafi jihadist groups share the ideological objective of establishing an Islamic political order.¹³⁷ Also known as a “Caliphate,” this governing body is referred to as a “state,” which is a territorial dominion ruled by a Muslim authority figure that is traditionally known as a *caliph*.¹³⁸ Organizations in this faction follow the radical Islamist conviction that sharia law is the only legitimate justice system and should guide the identity of government.¹³⁹ There is a deeper ideological notion that an *Ummah*, or a utopian community of faithful Muslims will live within the boundaries of the Caliphate, adhere to sharia law, and emulate the lifestyle of the Prophet Muhammad, in fulfillment of Allah’s wishes.¹⁴⁰ Despite this consensus on an ultimate goal of Salafi jihadists, the following study will decisively demonstrate how Salafi jihadist groups divide over the legitimacy of establishing an Islamic community in the near future, or later, once a broader coalition of Muslims have given support to the rule of a caliph.

¹³⁶ Alschech, "The doctrinal crisis within the Salafi-Jihadi ranks and the emergence of Neo-Takfirism: A historical and doctrinal analysis." 421.

¹³⁷ John A. Turner, *Religious Ideology and the Roots of the Global Jihad: Salafi Jihadism and International Order*. Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 134.

¹³⁸ McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State*. 9.

¹⁴⁰ Turner. *Religious Ideology and the Roots of the Global Jihad: Salafi Jihadism and International Order*. 28.

The resurgence of Salafi-jihadism in the modern era represents an overarching movement of religious imaginaries in the Middle East and North African (MENA) region, that resist the influence of European neocolonial practices, democracy, and globalism in predominantly Muslim countries.¹⁴¹ In recent decades, Western ideals have transformed the political status quo in the MENA to increasingly secular modernist norms that have “reduced the role of Islam in its textual, judicial and liturgical forms, in the everyday life of the regions’ communities.”¹⁴² This political reformation in the MENA has often led to tyrannical governance, repression of the public, and bloody sectarian divides over the uncertain future of power brokerage in the region. The most radical Islamic sects in the region believe that restoring the Middle East to its former geopolitical prowess requires a complete reversion to the glorified days of the first three generations of Muslims. For Salafi jihadists the only religiously legitimate means to re-claiming Islamic political dominance in the region is through *jihad*.

Jihad is a faith-based concept that promotes “divinely sanctioned warfare with the objective of either expanding Islam or defending it.”¹⁴³ In Arabic, the word is most literally translated into “striving” or exerting oneself, on the faith-based imperative of the Qur’an.¹⁴⁴ Jihad is split into two imperatives: offensive jihad (*fard kif-faya*), which is the collective obligation of Muslims to fight upon the request of an Islamic sovereign; defensive jihad (*fard-ayn*) is the individual duty of all able-bodied Muslims to defend all threatened Muslim communities, even in the absence of authoritative orders of Islamic public officials.¹⁴⁵ The vast

¹⁴¹ HM, Sanjeev Kumar, "ISIS and the Sectarian Political Ontology: Radical Islam, Violent Jihadism and the Claims for Revival of the Caliphate." *India Quarterly* 74, no. 2 (2018): 120.

¹⁴² Kumar, "ISIS and the Sectarian Political Ontology: Radical Islam, Violent Jihadism and the Claims for Revival of the Caliphate." 120.

¹⁴³ David Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*. Vol. 4. Cambridge, UK., Cambridge University Press, 2007. x.

¹⁴⁴ Gerhard Böwering. Patricia Crone, Mahan Mirza, and Inc ebrary. *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2013. 1.

¹⁴⁵ Brahimi, "Ideology and Terrorism." 300.

majority of the global Muslim community considers jihad to be interpreted as an exclusively spiritual, non-violent endeavor. Even the minority of Muslims who interpret defensive jihad as a call to arms believe that there is a significant support amongst the worldwide Muslim community to militarily protect the faith from an actor that is broadly acknowledged as a direct threat to the religion.¹⁴⁶ Salafi jihadists represent a small radical sect of Sunni Muslim thought, which holds that Western political, economic, and military intrusions on predominantly Muslim countries in the MENA have warranted an imperative for every Muslim to take up arms against those they perceive to threaten the institution of fundamentalist Islamic states.¹⁴⁷ Furthermore, Salafi jihadists share common grievances towards regime leaders who are self-identifying Muslims, yet are perceived to employ secular governance structures that do not adhere to the laws instituted by the Prophet Muhammad at the dawn of Islam.

The argument that was the catalyst for modern jihad was a written by Abdullah Azzam, who promoted jihad as a legitimate defense of Muslim lands in Afghanistan against invading Soviet Forces, and argued that jihad was as obligatory as the main pillars of Islam in the modern era.¹⁴⁸ Up to 20,000 fighters motivated by Azzam's declaration flocked to Afghanistan and organized militant training camps in the region, many of which joined the ranks of AQ and its affiliates.¹⁴⁹ Azzam's contemporary use of the Islamic precedent of jihad to galvanize fighters in a pan-Islamic movement, is a precedent-setting example of how concepts derived from Islamic scripture are rhetorically manipulated by jihadist leaders to sanction violence.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁶ Gerhard Böwering, et. Al., *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought*. 3.

¹⁴⁷ Brahimi., "Ideology and Terrorism." 300.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 301.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 301.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 301.

What Divides Salafi Jihadist Groups

All Salafi jihadist groups refer to an ideational program based on ultra-conservative interpretations of Islamic scripture. These Islamist groups also believe that violent tactics are theologically legitimate based on their shared aspirations to establish an Islamic political order. Despite these similarities, the spectrum of stances within this ideological category “lead to differences in the targeting patterns of terrorist groups- even between groups which have superficially similar but distinct ideologies.”¹⁵¹ Therefore, Salafi jihadists behave differently depending on the stances they have regarding the controversies in their belief system.

One of the central debates between Salafi jihadist groups, at times triggering group infighting, factional splits, and even the declaration of war of one group upon another, is their philosophies on how to justifiably achieve the establishment of an Islamic state. All Salafi-jihadist organizations lie at the extreme end of the spectrum of Islamic theology. Those that are regarded as the ‘moderate’ actors in this faction adhere to the Qur’an, which explicitly states that the caliphate can only be pragmatically established with the consensus and unity of the transnational Muslim community. More radical sects like IS believe that it is the imperative of jihad to establish a territorial Islamic State that represents and collectivizes the *Ummah* as soon as possible. Their method does not prioritize the condition of widespread Muslim agreement and voluntary engagement with the territorial caliphate.¹⁵² The subset of jihadist groups that quickly declare territorial establishment of an Islamic State also fixate on the apocalyptic concept of the “end of times” that expands the fanatic imagination of the organization.¹⁵³ These modern-day

¹⁵¹ Drake, The role of ideology in terrorists’ target selection.” 78.

¹⁵² Kumar, “ISIS and the Sectarian Political Ontology: Radical Islam, Violent Jihadism and the Claims for Revival of the Caliphate.” 132.

¹⁵³ Vaughan Phillips, “The Islamic State’s strategy: bureaucratizing the apocalypse through strategic communications.” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40, no. 9 (2017): 738.

stances date back to centuries-long sectarian divisions within Islam, that are distinctively invoked by IS and JN to legitimize their role in the civil war.

While all of these groups prioritize violent jihad, and struggle against those who they render enemies of their fundamentalist form of Islam, they argue about who qualifies as an eligible target. The central focus of this eligibility criterion is the concept of *takfir*, or the Islamic practice of identifying and excommunicating current Muslims as infidels within the religion.¹⁵⁴ The legally-based principle of *takfir* is highly condemned within mainstream Islam, even amongst the most conservative sects.¹⁵⁵ The act of labeling certain Muslims as *kufir*- or religiously impure individuals- is one of the most egregious condemnations amongst militant Salafi-jihadist groups. People who are labeled as major unbelievers are thus deemed to be unworthy of living within the bounds of the Islamic State that these organizations ultimately uphold as the final sacred goal of the collective.¹⁵⁶ The proclamation of *takfir* is thus weaponized to explicitly delineate boundaries between group members and those who don't belong in the community of righteous Muslims, and operationally serves to justify the killing of the outgroup based on ancient, sacred principles.¹⁵⁷

The organizational division between the JN and IS is foregrounded by a series of intra-factional ideological divides in the Salafi jihadist camp that occurred before the civil war and exist beyond the borders of Syria. The split between these groups is most comprehensively explained as a division between organizations like JN that profess a commitment to AQ's

¹⁵⁴ Christina Hartmann, "Who does (not) belong to the jihadis' umma? A comparison of IS's and al Qaida's use of takfir to exclude people from the Muslim community." *Journal for Deradicalization* 13 (2017): 213.

¹⁵⁵ Hartmann, "Who does (not) belong to the jihadis' umma? A comparison of IS's and al Qaida's use of takfir to exclude people from the Muslim community." 219.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 214.

¹⁵⁷ Kumar, "ISIS and the Sectarian Political Ontology: Radical Islam, Violent Jihadism and the Claims for Revival of the Caliphate." 132.

“moderate” interpretation of jihad, and groups like IS that have adopted more extreme visions regarding the purpose of jihad. A comprehensive way to illustrate the full history of this schism is to detail the ideology of AQ, which for decades has represented the “hub” of traditional Salafi jihadist thought and practices that affiliated “spoke” groups such as JN have sought to directly replicate. After establishing the context of Salafi jihadist norms practiced by AQ, deviance from this ideology demonstrated by radical groups like IS can be better defined and analyzed.

AQ is a transnational non-state terrorist organization that aims to create a collective identity around the Salafi jihadist ideology, which is a belief system that espouses “respect for the sacred texts in their most literal form and an absolute commitment to jihad.”¹⁵⁸ While AQ does not prioritize state-building projects, it does aspire to be the vanguard of the Muslim community, by appealing to the “hearts and minds” of fellow Muslims to achieve their endorsement and to unite the global Muslim community under the same initiative of pursuing Global jihad in resistance to Western forces¹⁵⁹ To signify AQ’s commitment to leading the unification process amongst the populations in Muslim countries in the Middle East and North Africa, the successor to bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri released a communique instructing AQ forces to refrain from targeting ordinary non-Muslim populations such as Christians, Sikhs, and Hindus.¹⁶⁰ Furthermore, Zawahiri refrained from insinuating that these groups were undeserving of living in an *Ummah*, and even stated “we are keen to live with them in a peaceful manner after an Islamic state is established.”¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁸ Turner, *Religious Ideology and the Roots of the Global Jihad: Salafi Jihadism and International Order*. 119.

¹⁵⁹ Turner, *Religious Ideology and the Roots of the Global Jihad: Salafi Jihadism and International Order*. 129.

¹⁶⁰ Seth G. Jones, *A persistent threat: The evolution of Al Qaeda and other Salafi jihadists*. Rand Corporation, 2014. 19.

¹⁶¹ Jones, *A persistent threat: The evolution of Al Qaeda and other Salafi jihadists*, 19.

The AQ brand of Salafi jihadism rests on a platform characterized by reliance on literal interpretations of the Qur'an and aspirations to unite the Muslim diaspora under a consensus for establishment of the *Ummah*. The organization predominantly avoids declaring *takfir* on Muslims living in the Islamic world that do not work directly for "apostate" Muslim governments. In an attempt to not alienate public support from the movement, AQ has made efforts to avoid rhetorically condemning and physically attacking citizens of Middle Eastern nations who are not employed by state security forces. AQ is mainly fixated on committing atrocities abroad against the Western "far enemy," such as the infamous attacks upon the US World Trade Center on September 11th, 2001. However, the group believes that avoiding mass casualty attacks against civilians in the Middle East is essential to attract Muslim public support that will prolong the viability of the group.

AQ is an increasingly decentralized organization that has pursued a hybrid "glocal" strategy.¹⁶² AQ central prioritizes globalized aspirations to target the "far enemy," or the "head of (international) disbelief, America and its ally Israel."¹⁶³ It also endorses local militant groups that attack local governments that have instituted laws inspired by American values, such as secular government and democratic elections.¹⁶⁴ To promote AQ's goal of gaining notoriety as leader of a global radical Islamist movement, the group made concerted efforts to affiliate with jihadist groups abroad that were fighting against state regimes perceived to be manipulated by Western secular powers.¹⁶⁵ These far-flung branches of AQ have often proved to be liabilities for AQ's brand, as their beliefs have evolved separately from the tenets of AQ central and their targeting patterns have decoupled with AQ's agenda to ensure long-term organizational viability.

¹⁶² Turner, *Religious Ideology and the Roots of the Global Jihad: Salafi Jihadism and International Order*. 123.

¹⁶³ Jones, *A persistent threat: The evolution of Al Qa'ida and other Salafi jihadists*, 14.

¹⁶⁴ Jones, *A persistent threat: The evolution of Al Qa'ida and other Salafi jihadists*. 14.

¹⁶⁵ Turner, *Religious Ideology and the Roots of the Global Jihad: Salafi Jihadism and International Order*. 130.

Several of these groups that have historically been linked to AQ now align closely with an ultra-extremist brand of jihad- Neo-Takfirism.¹⁶⁶

The Origins of Neo-Takfiri Ideology

Groups that adopt Neo-Takfiri thought have taken the ideational leap to identify all those who do not ascribe to their puritanical belief system as *kufir* (infidels) and worthy of death.¹⁶⁷ More specifically, Neo-Takfiris ascribe to the zero-sum conviction that any non-combatant that does not support their dominant rule by sharia law is an enemy of the group and a heretical Muslim. This ideology contrasts the conviction of most Salafi-jihadists that violence to establish the Islamic State can only be justified within the legal principles of jihad. Neo-Takfiris instead consider their extreme adherence to Islamic piety as validation that they are the “chosen people” who can rely on their basic internal instincts rather than external legal reasoning to determine who is classified as an infidel.¹⁶⁸

The pursuit of *takfir* is not a uniquely modern endeavor. In the seventh century, the historically notorious Khawarij sect excommunicated and killed Muslims that they deemed as heretics.¹⁶⁹ This ancient sect acted to “establish pure Islam and induce among people a kind of fear of god.”¹⁷⁰ Currently, most mainstream Salafi-jihadist groups condemn excessive *takfir*, and accuse Neo-Takfiri groups of enacting a modern form of Khawarij-style indiscriminate

¹⁶⁶ Alshech, "The doctrinal crisis within the Salafi-Jihadi ranks and the emergence of Neo-Takfirism: A historical and doctrinal analysis." 422.

¹⁶⁷ Alshech, "The doctrinal crisis within the Salafi-Jihadi ranks and the emergence of Neo-Takfirism: A historical and doctrinal analysis." 422.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 433.

¹⁶⁹ Sajjan M. Gohel, "Deciphering Ayman Al-Zawahiri and Al-Qaeda's Strategic and Ideological Imperatives." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 1 (2017): 61.

¹⁷⁰ Kumar, "ISIS and the Sectarian Political Ontology: Radical Islam, Violent Jihadism and the Claims for Revival of the Caliphate." 124.

brutality.¹⁷¹ AQ's most current leader al-Zawahiri, joined prominent Salafi scholars in condemning the Islamic State's Neo-Takfiri practices by equating them to the "Kharijites."¹⁷²

Modern Neo-Takfiri movements have been inspired by 20th century Muslim Brotherhood scholar Sayyid Qutb, who promoted two key interpretations of jihad that diverge from preceding theorists. First, Qutb reasoned that not only state regimes could be accused of apostasy, but any civilians that were governed by such regimes could also be categorized as infidels.¹⁷³ Second, Qutb emphasized that targeting the "near enemy," classified as non-believing regimes and people in the Middle East and North Africa, should be the first target of jihadist groups.¹⁷⁴ This prioritization of warfare in the Middle East clashes with AQ's belief that waging a war against the "far enemy" on American soil should be the first objective of jihad. By declaring the world order to be in a state of *jahiliyah*, or as ignorant as societies prior to the dawn of Islam, Qutb argued that Muslims must wage an "offensive" jihad against all who did not actively support the return of the radical Islamist establishment of regional dominance.¹⁷⁵ According to Zenn and Pieri, takfirism serves to justify "clear and direct paths to brutal violence directed against Muslims who refuse to recognize the legitimacy of the (aggressor's) movement."¹⁷⁶

The immediate extermination of the "near enemy" is viewed by *takfiri* ideologues as a means of violent societal purification and transformation that will foreground a second immediate goal: a near-future state-building project that will fulfill Islamic scriptural predictions

¹⁷¹ Gohel, "Deciphering Ayman Al-Zawahiri and Al-Qaeda's Strategic and Ideological Imperatives." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 1 (2017): 61.

¹⁷² Cole Bunzel, "Ideological Infighting in the Islamic State." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13, no. 1 (2019): 12.

¹⁷³ Alshech, "The doctrinal crisis within the Salafi-Jihadi ranks and the emergence of Neo-Takfirism: A historical and doctrinal analysis." 422.

¹⁷⁴ Alshech, "The doctrinal crisis within the Salafi-Jihadi ranks and the emergence of Neo-Takfirism: A historical and doctrinal analysis." 422.

¹⁷⁵ Jacob Zenn and Zacharias Pieri. "How much Takfir is too much Takfir? The evolution of Boko Haram's factionalization." *Journal for Deradicalization* 11 (2017): 288.

¹⁷⁶ Zenn and Pieri, "How much Takfir is too much Takfir? The evolution of Boko Haram's factionalization." 289.

exhorting a utopian Islamic State modeled after Muhammad's Medina caliphate will be established in the modern era. Furthermore, the creation of the utopia, referred to in Islamic sacred scripts as the *Ummah* is also predicted to trigger an anti-Islam Crusader versus Muslim battle that will culminate in the "end of times" or the apocalypse. Excommunicating other Muslims through the declaration of *takfir* is strongly discouraged in the Hadith, which is a sacred collection of the Prophet Muhammad's teachings. The Hadith stipulates that the Prophet Muhammad once said, "when a man calls his brother an unbeliever, it returns at least to one of them," which is followed by the warning that "either the accuser is as claimed, or the charge will turn against the accuser."¹⁷⁷

As Neo-Takfiri groups operate with the goal of establishing dominant Islamic rule over territory, a noticeable pattern of organizational isolation and avoidance of regional jihadist affiliates emerges. Particularly isolated Salafi jihadist organizations that repeatedly declare *takfir*, commit widespread ethnic cleansing, and aim to immediately declare an Islamic caliphate. These groups have been categorized by Anthony Celso as constructing an entirely new phase of terrorist norms separate from AQ. Celso argues that an emergent "fifth wave" of Islamist terrorist groups, constitutes a new installment to David Rappoport's four wave theory of modern terrorism trends, which are categorized into cycles of anarchist, colonial, left-revolutionary, and Islamist sequences.¹⁷⁸ He argues that this "fifth wave" Islamist groups are ideologically and behaviorally distinct from the rationale of AQ, which represents the precursory "fourth wave" of terrorist ideology. Celso's theory underlines the central argument of this thesis that AQ has a specific pragmatic ideology that is distinctively different from its more assertive affiliates.

¹⁷⁷ Zenn and Pieri, "How much Takfir is too much Takfir? The evolution of Boko Haram's factionalization." 287.

¹⁷⁸ Anthony Celso, "Boko Haram and the Islamic State: Fifth Wave Islamist Terror Groups." *Orbis* 59, no. 2 (2015): 252.

However, this paper examines the ideological nuances between groups that are often classified under Rappaport's general typology that "prescribe different strategies and institutions."¹⁷⁹ The distinctions between "fourth wave" factions of Salafi jihadists that align with AQ's ideological program and the "fifth wave" Neo-Takfiri groups that are particularly brutal and isolated, are thrown into relief by the following schisms between Salafi jihadist movements in Algeria, the Sahel region, and Iraq.

The Algerian experience

Salafi jihadist groups that led an Islamist rebellion against the secular Algerian state in the 1990's exemplified how ideational goals of an organization prompts an expansion or limitation of potential non-combatant targets for Islamist militias. Thousands of fighters originating from Algeria fought abroad in Afghanistan under the banner of violent jihad, with the goal of defending Muslim lands against external Soviet forces in the 1980's.¹⁸⁰ Upon returning to North Africa, veteran Algerian Islamist militants who were deeply dedicated to ensuring that Muslim nations instituted fundamentalist Islamic governance were dismayed by the ruling regime of their nation that did not govern under a strict code of Islamic law. The newly established Islamist political party Front Islamic de Salut (FIS) claimed multiple victories in the 1992 elections. Yet when the FIS was subsequently repressed from political participation by the Algerian state, the nation plummeted into civil war between armed jihadist factions and the government.¹⁸¹ The operationally experienced jihadists who fought in Afghanistan several years

¹⁷⁹ Sanin and Wood, "Ideology in civil war: Instrumental adoption and beyond." 217.

¹⁸⁰ Peter Pham, "Foreign influences and shifting horizons: the ongoing evolution of al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb." *Orbis* 55, no. 2 (2011): 241.

¹⁸¹ Pham, "Foreign influences and shifting horizons: the ongoing evolution of al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb." 242.

earlier led the militarized Islamist insurgency against the Algerian state under the organizational name *Groupe Islamique Armé* (GIA).

When the FIS refrained from launching violent jihad against government forces in protest to the blocked election results, the GIA independently intervened to dominate the Algerian insurgency, by distinguishing itself with a virulent, extremist interpretation of jihad. Rather than just naming the state forces as enemies, the GIA adopted a *takfiri* ideology, which not only targets the state regime as a threat to Islamic jihad, but also labeled non-Salafi civilians as infidels or *kuffar*, and ideologically legitimized these passive “non-believers” as worthy targets of violence.¹⁸²

In 1993, the GIA expanded its attacks beyond “military personnel and government officials to include intellectuals, journalists, tourists, and civilians.”¹⁸³ From 1992 to 1998, the number of Islamist attacks in Algeria against foreigners, intellectuals, and journalists, the majority of which are attributed to the GIA, totaled 365 incidents.¹⁸⁴ In comparison, the rate of violent incidents perpetrated by the GIA-dominant insurgency against government officials, police, and security forces amounted to 246 incidents.¹⁸⁵ There has been some speculation that the Algerian state infiltrated the GIA ranks or framed the Islamists to blame them for these deaths, but sources in Algeria who bore witness to the conflict state otherwise. The emir (commander in chief) of the al-Rahman militia that divorced from the GIA in 1995 attested that the group massacred families of Laarba militia members that abandoned the GIA during the conflict. Furthermore, former GIA emir Hassan Hattab stated that he broke with the GIA due to

¹⁸² Celso, "Boko Haram and the Islamic State: Fifth Wave Islamist Terror Groups." *Orbis* 59, no. 2 (2015): 255.

¹⁸³ Mohammed M. Hafez, "Armed Islamist movements and political violence in Algeria." *The Middle East Journal* (2000): 578.

¹⁸⁴ Hafez, "Armed Islamist movements and political violence in Algeria." 585.

¹⁸⁵ Hafez, "Armed Islamist movements and political violence in Algeria." 585.

their “spilling of the blood of (Algeria), looting its property, and kidnapping its women.”¹⁸⁶ In September of 1995, the GIA released a statement that it would rape and kill anyone who opposed it.¹⁸⁷

It became especially clear that *takfiri* ideology was a grounding element of GIA operations in 1997. The GIA issued a statement declaring that “the infidelism (*kufir*) and apostasy of this hypocrite nation...will not hurt us at all...all the kidnappings and slaughter, the massacres, the displacement of people, the burnings, and the kidnappings...are an offering to God.”¹⁸⁸ As a consequence of the “bloody massacres of civilians” that the GIA was widely believed to have committed, public support for the broader jihadist movement weakened.¹⁸⁹

In opposition to the GIA’s exploitation of Islamist ideology to justify violence against non-combatant targets, and in an attempt to recover support from former civilians that once voted for an Islamic party, the FIS formally established the Islamic Salvation Army (AIS) in 1994.¹⁹⁰ The AIS charter blatantly opposed the GIA’s ultraviolent campaign that monopolized the jihadi resistance movement and sought to discredit all other rebel factions.¹⁹¹ In addition, the AIS emphasized that it would only render state employees as *kufir*, and justifiable targets of attack, if they continued to work for the government. The differences between these two jihadist groups prompted the GIA to declare war against the AIS in January of 1996.¹⁹² In an effort to attract moderate Islamist fighters to AIS ranks, the militia’s leaders emphasized the divergent ideologies that led to the different targeting patterns of the two groups. In one open letter by

¹⁸⁶ Hafez, “Armed Islamist movements and political violence in Algeria.” 589.

¹⁸⁷ Bowering et. Al., *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought*. 120.

¹⁸⁸ Hafez, “Armed Islamist movements and political violence in Algeria.” 590.

¹⁸⁹ Guido Steinberg, and Isabelle Werenfels, “Between the ‘near’ and the ‘far’ enemy: Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.” *Mediterranean Politics* 12, no. 3 (2007): 408.

¹⁹⁰ 578.

¹⁹¹ Hafez, “Armed Islamist movements and political violence in Algeria.” 579.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 582.

Madani Mezraq, the AIS emir, warned Algerian jihadists to be wary of the GIA's interpretation of jihad as a limitless tool of violence, that aimlessly excommunicated non-combatants and justified the murder of the "old, women, or children."¹⁹³

Boko Haram

Boko Haram has been over-generalized as an existing product of the trans-nationalization of AQ's anti-Western ideology, because the Salafi-jihadist organization initially followed the AQ agenda by targeting exclusively Western entities and local state "apostate" governments in the Sahel. Boko Haram began as the Nigerian Taliban, which was founded in the 1990's by Muhammed Ali, who networked with Bin Laden to achieve a three million dollar sponsorship from AQ to establish a jihadist organization in North Africa.¹⁹⁴ In the early 2000's, the Nigerian Taliban promoted AQ's anti-Western strategy by aiding their plans to conduct attacks on exclusively Western targets in Nigeria, several of which were intercepted by counterterrorism agencies in 2003.¹⁹⁵ When Ali was killed in 2003 by Nigerian State forces, jihadist Mohammad Yusuf took command of the group, and made efforts to transform the movement into one that not only sought to perpetrate attacks against Westerners in Nigeria, but also an organization that targeted the Nigerian government for its complicity in Western political influence.¹⁹⁶ To emphasize his ideological orientation, Yusuf labeled the Nigerian government *taghut*, translated in Arabic as tyrant or oppressor, and condemned individuals who worked for the state, but never declared *takfir* against ordinary Nigerian Muslims.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 583.

¹⁹⁴ Zenn and Pieri, "How much Takfir is too much Takfir? The evolution of Boko Haram's factionalization." 290.

¹⁹⁵ Zenn and Pieri, "How much Takfir is too much Takfir? The evolution of Boko Haram's factionalization." 291.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 292.

Yusuf's threats of militant action against the state resulted in him being targeted and killed by the Nigerian army July of 2009. His successor, Abubakar Shekau, re-branded the groups as *Jamaat Ahl as-Sunnah Lid dawa wa al-Jihad* (Sunni Group for Proselytization and Jihad) or "JAS." Shekau's JAS adopted a far more expansive approach to declaring *takfir*. Shekau declared that "jihad after 2010 was obligatory, and that not actively joining his jihad was tantamount to apostasy."¹⁹⁷ In January of 2012, Shekau ordered a devastating terrorist attack in the ethnically diverse city of Kano that killed 185 civilians.¹⁹⁸ Boko Haram's spokesperson later clarified the group's willingness to attack any religious identity, if that individual "collaborated in arresting or killing us even if he is a Muslim."¹⁹⁹ The group's increase in *takfiri* rhetoric, heightened rates of violence against innocent civilians, and "undisguised ambition" to establish an Islamic governing province in Nigeria contradicted bin Laden's approaches to jihad.

In 2012, Shekau proclaimed "Shiites are infidels! Whoever follows democracy is a disbeliever! My brothers, there is no rest, go out, kill, slay! That's religion."²⁰⁰ According to the GTD, approximately half of attacks between 2012 to 2014 were directed against civilians, while less than a quarter attacked militia forces.²⁰¹ This violence did not even spare Sunni Muslims and parallels the rate of violence against civilians perpetrated by the Islamic State.²⁰² Shekau demanded that Muslim "vigilantes" repent and threatened "even if you don't do anything to us we will kill you."²⁰³

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 294.

¹⁹⁸ John-Peter Pham, *Boko Haram's evolving threat*. Washington, WA: Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2012. 5.

¹⁹⁹ Luca Raineri, and Alice Martini. "ISIS and Al-Qaeda as Strategies and Political Imaginaries in Africa: A Comparison between Boko Haram and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb." *Civil Wars* 19, no. 4 (2017): 425.

²⁰⁰ Raineri and Martini, "ISIS and Al-Qaeda as Strategies and Political Imaginaries in Africa: A Comparison between Boko Haram and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb." 437.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 437

²⁰² Ibid., 437.

²⁰³ Ibid., 437.

To oppose Shekau's indiscriminate approach to violence, *Ansarul al-Muslimin fi Biladis Sudan* (Vanguard of Muslims in Black Africa) was formed.²⁰⁴ The militant organization avoided rhetorically branding any local Nigerian Muslims that did not resist the rule of the state regime. This group expressed loyalty to AQ and was formed to contest affiliates of the Islamic State in Nigeria, such as Shekau's brutal movement.²⁰⁵

Al Qaeda in Iraq

In 2003, a Jordanian jihadist named Abu Musab al-Zarqawi took advantage of the political power vacuum that culminated in Iraq after the US invasion and the toppling of Saddam's Sunni regime by establishing a predecessor militant group to IS in the country.²⁰⁶ In September of 2004, Zarqawi pledged his group's allegiance to AQ, and his group was christened Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) based on the understanding that al-Zarqawi would wage jihad against American forces in the region.²⁰⁷ AQI was of particular interest to AQ, because it is the territorial location of the former Abbasid Caliphate, which all Salafi-jihadists collectively pursue to recreate. If AQ could claim credit for orchestrating the exodus of Western military influence from the region, the group could prove its capacity to target the "far enemy" American forces, ground legitimacy amongst the Salafi-jihadist community, and demonstrate its capability on the international stage.²⁰⁸

Yet, Zarqawi had greater ambitions to ignite a sectarian conflict between Shia and Sunni Muslims in the region, and to establish an Islamic State as soon as possible in Iraq. He felt that the ultimate means to establish a utopic Islamic territory was through purging captured land of

²⁰⁴ Zenn and Pieri, "How much Takfir is too much Takfir? The evolution of Boko Haram's factionalization." 295.

²⁰⁵ Zenn and Pieri, "How much Takfir is too much Takfir? The evolution of Boko Haram's factionalization." 296.

²⁰⁶ Kumar, "ISIS and the Sectarian Political Ontology: Radical Islam, Violent Jihadism and the Claims for Revival of the Caliphate." 128.

²⁰⁷ Kumar, "ISIS and the Sectarian Political Ontology: Radical Islam, Violent Jihadism and the Claims for Revival of the Caliphate." 128.

²⁰⁸ Turner, *Religious Ideology and the Roots of the Global Jihad: Salafi Jihadism and International Order*. 130.

any “unbelieving” residents. Whereas top AQ officials believed that the ordinary citizens were not the problem, but that Western institutions in the region needed to be uprooted and replaced with fundamental Islamic institutions.²⁰⁹

To the dismay of AQ, under Zarqawi’s instruction AQI began killing Shia Muslims and any Sunni tribes that stood in their way of establishing a sharia-based Islamic dominion in Iraqi territory. In response to AQI’s broad declarations of *takfir* and perpetrations of violence against civilians, prominent Salafi-jihadist Abu Muhammad Al Maqdisi wrote an open letter to Zarqawi “Al-Zarqawi-Support and Advice, Hopes and Pains,” in which he stated: “He (Zarqawi) must exercise the utmost care not to shed the blood of Muslims, even if they are sinners. He must be cognizant of the obvious distinction between war in the original abode of *kufir* (i.e. lands that have never been under Islamic rule), whose dwellers are-mostly infidels, and a war in which the renewed abode of *kufir* (i.e. Muslim lands that were once subject to sharia rule but are no longer so) whose dwellers are mostly adherents of Islam.”²¹⁰

While arguing that the image of the Salafi-jihadist movement is tarnished globally when AQI targets noncombatant Iraqi Shia, al-Maqdisi also emphasized that declaring that all Muslims living under apostate regimes are infidels has “nothing to do with Islamic political thought.”²¹¹ Zarqawi’s efforts to establish an Islamic State in Iraq eventually “turned Sunni leaders...and led to his betrayal and death.”²¹² Al Zarqawi responded with an inflammatory voice message in 2005, in which he claimed that the Shia initiated the battles between his AQI, and that when the

²⁰⁹ Aaron Y. Zelin, “The war between ISIS and al-Qaeda for supremacy of the global jihadist movement.” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy* 20, no. 1 (2014): 3.

²¹⁰ Alshech, “The doctrinal crisis within the Salafi-Jihadi ranks and the emergence of Neo-Takfirism: A historical and doctrinal analysis.” 426.

²¹¹ Alshech, “The doctrinal crisis within the Salafi-Jihadi ranks and the emergence of Neo-Takfirism: A historical and doctrinal analysis.” 427.

²¹² Bowering, *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought*. 165.

US recruited Iraqi people to contribute to militias and infrastructures that countered jihadist movements, “people responded to their call, betrayed their religion, and relinquished their divine reward...they have committed apostasy and allied with the Crusaders.”²¹³

The emergent fault lines between more moderate Salafi-jihadists and ultraconservative Neo-Takfiri sects are evident in the evolution of radical Islamic groups dispersed across the MENA. There are overarching commonalities between radical groups across the region that aspire to establish immediate rule over territory, frequently declare *takfir*, and commit higher rates of violence against civilians compared to their attacks on secular state forces in the region. Groups that adhere to this unforgiving brand of Islamic rule consistently clash rhetorically and militarily with ‘moderate’ factions in the Salafi jihadist movement that aim to stabilize the image of their sect as a viable, and pragmatic Islamic militia. With this reliable public image, Salafi jihadists believe that their brand can establish a “balanced” caliphate with popular support. By staging these decades-long divides in the Salafi-jihadist community, the following study will contextualize the current dynamics between JN and IS in the Syrian civil war by comparing their respective English-language magazines.

²¹³ Alshech, "The doctrinal crisis within the Salafi-Jihadi ranks and the emergence of Neo-Takfirism: A historical and doctrinal analysis." 427.

CONTENT ANALYSIS

The essential schism between IS and JN is evidenced through how these jihadist groups use ideology as a tool to justify their violence and structure a counternarrative against actors that oppose their behavior. Both insurgencies justify their involvement in the Syrian civil war by rhetorically pinpointing their role in the conflict. JN portrays itself as a mediator: a pragmatic group that contrasts the reckless airstrike, chemical weapon, and explosive device campaigns of the Assad Regime and IS. On the other hand, IS portrays itself as a purist actor that is rightfully claiming dominance over all independent actors in the security environment. The actions of IS are rationalized on the premise of preserving the caliphate and expanding the current version of IS-implemented sharia law. The roles that these groups claim to fulfill in the civil war is realized through their strategic use of force. In other words, JN makes an argument for Syrian supporters by portraying its violence as calculated and controlled: selectively directed against IS, Iranian, Hezbollah, and Syrian state forces that militarily oppose JN in the civil war. In contrast, IS frames violence as the primary and most effective means to offensively achieve the territorial establishment of a prophesied caliphate. Any actor who challenges the imperative of IS to maximize territorial expansion is thus categorized as an existential threat to the mission of the group, and a worthy target.

According to Abrahms and Potter, highly centralized terrorist groups “should be less likely to attack civilians when leaders publicly oppose this practice, though the ability to impose this preference should be conditional on their (operational) strength.”²¹⁴ JN’s behavior has been

²¹⁴ Abrahms and Potter, "Explaining terrorism: Leadership deficits and militant group tactics." *International Organization* 69, no. 2 (2015): 318.

consistent with this claim. After the nascent organization killed hundreds of civilians in Damascus in 2012, JN deliberately restrained its mass casualty attacks as it accumulated influence in northwest Syria. Contrary to this pattern, IS progressively integrated violence into its public propaganda releases as it gained operational strength in Iraq and swept through Syria. A content analysis of IS and JN magazine articles offers crucial insights into each group's distinctive ideological approach to Salafi jihadism. These stances motivate an instrumental utility for using violence against civilians in the case of IS, or an imperative to limit excessive violence for JN.

The online publication format offers a unique insight into the worldview of a Salafi jihadist group. A 2018 report by the U.S. Army War and College Press that analyzed English language online magazines produced by multiple jihadist groups states that these publications “promote a specific jihadi culture, to be embraced in total by followers of the particular group in question in order to achieve its desired utopian vision.”²¹⁵ Furthermore, magazines produced by the official media wings of each militia deliver a coherent narrative to a global audience of potential supporters, and thus capture the precise ideational perspective that the group seeks to project. This media source is thus preferable to online radical Islamist chat forums that are interrupted by conflicting discussions between a milieu of participants with varying commitment to the organization.²¹⁶ These long-form issues encapsulate a collective worldview that clipped statements from leadership cannot convey.

²¹⁵ Bunker, Robert J., and P. Bunker Ligouri. 2018. “Radical Islamist English-language online magazines: Research guide, strategic insights, and policy response.” US Army War College. Retrieved from <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=1381>, 3.

²¹⁶ Bunker and Bunker “Radical Islamist English-language online magazines: Research guide, strategic insights, and policy response.” 1.

The English-language magazines that will be analyzed in this study are the IS publications *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*, and the JN magazine *Al-Risalah*. IS began publishing *Dabiq* in July of 2014, soon after Baghdadi announced the establishment of the caliphate.²¹⁷ The magazine is named after a town in Syria that is symbolically significant to IS, because it is the location where an “End of Days” battle is prophesied to occur between Christians and Muslims. In mid 2016 IS lost control over the town of *Dabiq*, prompting their media wing to christen the magazine “*Rumiyah*,” the ancient Arabic term for Rome. This rebranding represents the group’s effort to internationalize attacks against “Crusaders” abroad as the group lost its territorial stronghold in Syria.²¹⁸ JN’s magazine *Al-Risalah* is simply titled after the Arabic word for “a letter.” The latter publication has been released in four installments between July of 2015 to January of 2017. To accurately compare the content produced by each group, two *Dabiq* and two *Rumiyah* magazines produced by IS were selected to temporally correspond to the same time periods of the JN magazine releases. It is important to note that these publications are distributed to predominantly English-speaking supporters abroad rather than operatives in Syria. However, the format of publications that were released along a similar timeline, written for similar audiences, and are produced by the official media wings of both groups make these magazines ideal comparative mediums of propaganda for an ideologically-focused study.

Methods of Content Analysis

The content analysis methods of this study are influenced by Ingram’s comparative study of the IS magazine *Dabiq* and the AQ magazine *Inspire*. Ingram’s research uses narrative analysis to examine articles, statements, and advertisements in both of these publications, with

²¹⁷ Bunker and Bunker “Radical Islamist English-language online magazines: Research guide, strategic insights, and policy response.” 26.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 26.

the objective of determining how each group “radicalizes” their readership. Taking into account JN’s affinity for AQ’s model of jihad, along with the group’s shared ideological opposition to IS’s establishment of the caliphate, this research serves as a thematically appropriate method of analysis for this thesis. Ingram argues that the nuances within each group’s messaging “acts as a ‘lens’ through which to shape their supporter’s perceptions, polarize their support, and, ultimately, convince(s) them to mobilize.”²¹⁹ Drawing upon the theory that ideology is manifested in structures and action, this analysis notes the differences in “competitive systems of meaning” established by group magazines, and relates texts to the ultimate decision-making processes of violent groups.²²⁰

This study will follow Ingram’s relational construction of ingroup, outgroup, solution, and crisis themes through the use of value-, dichotomy-, and crisis- reinforcing narratives.²²¹ The “values” narrative characterizes the ingroup as a positive solution-oriented movement, or the outgroup as a negatively portrayed key perpetrator of the crisis. This category of articles reinforces that either the ingroup is imbued with good qualities, or the outgroup is laden with undesirable traits. The “dichotomy” narrative stages deep contrasts between group values and final tangible outcomes. This category either presents “good” ingroup values in reference to the “bad” outgroup values, or stages how the ingroup’s solution creates a sense of certainty for the community. The “crisis” narrative ties those within the ingroup who are perceived to not be faithful to the ideology as traitors. This classification is one that directly relates to the topics that drive a wedge between groups such as IS and JN that belong to the greater Salafi-jihadist camp

²¹⁹ Ingram, Haroro J. “An Analysis of Inspire and Dabiq: Lessons from AQAP and the Islamic State’s Propoganda War.” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 40, no.5 2017, pp 358.


²²⁰ Ingram, “An Analysis of Inspire and Dabiq: Lessons from AQAP and the Islamic State’s Propoganda War.” 358.

²²¹ Ingram, “An Analysis of Inspire and Dabiq: Lessons from AQAP and the Islamic State’s Propoganda War.” 359.

yet view each other as misguided actors that threaten the whole sect with their unique ideological stances. Articles that fixated on plotted attacks, battle tactics, weapons, and group-instituted governance are classified as “Operational.”

These magazines encapsulate the “image” that IS and JN seek to emulate for current and potential supporters. By contrasting these common mediums of magazine propaganda, the ideological schism between these two actors is evident in their visions of the duty of Salafi jihadists in the Syrian civil war. These divergent representations of IS in *Dabiq* or *Rumiyah* and JN in *Al-Risalah* apply to the implications of ideology presented by Sanin and Wood in their extension of the chocolate eater metaphor: that if an entity externally projects a certain self-image, the behaviors they advertise will affect their engagement with the specific practices in question, such as eating chocolate.²²² Thus, if the magazines adhere to a coherent messaging strategy, the military operations they publicize will mirror to the specific practices that they rhetorically defend as “legitimate” jihadist behavior in the Syrian civil war.

Table 1.

Issue # (Group)	Title	Release Date
Al-Risalah Issue 1 (JN)²²³ 	“Al-Risalah”	July 2015

²²² Sanin and Wood, "Ideology in civil war: Instrumental adoption and beyond." 214.

²²³ “New issue of the magazine: Al-Risalah #1” *jihadology.net*. Posted by Aaron Y. Zelin, July 4, 2015

<p>Al-Risalah Issue 2 (JN)²²⁴</p> 	<p>“Victory Loves Preparation”</p>	<p>October 2015</p>
<p>Al-Risalah Issue 3 (JN)²²⁵</p> 	<p>“Has the Time Not Come?”</p>	<p>August 2016</p>
<p>Al-Risalah Issue 4 (JN)²²⁶</p> 	<p>“The Balanced Nation”</p>	<p>January 2017</p>
<p>Dabiq Issue 10 (IS)²²⁷</p> 	<p>“The Law of Allah or the Laws of Men”</p>	<p>July 2015</p>

²²⁴ “New issue of the magazine: Al-Risalah #2” *jihadology.net*. Posted by Aaron Y. Zelin, October 25, 2015

²²⁵ “New issue of the magazine: Al-Risalah #3” *jihadology.net*. Posted by Aaron Y. Zelin, August 1, 2016.

²²⁶ “New issue of the magazine: Al-Risalah #4” *jihadology.net*. Posted by Aaron Y. Zelin, January 10, 2017

²²⁷ “New release of the Islamic State’s Magazine: Dabiq #10” *jihadology.net*. Posted by Aaron Y. Zelin, July 13, 2015

<i>Dabiq</i> Issue 12 (IS)²²⁸ 	“Just Terror”	November 2015
<i>Rumiyah</i> Issue 2 (IS)²²⁹ 	“Muharram”	October 2016
<i>Rumiyah</i> Issue 5 (IS)²³⁰ 	“Rabi al-Akhir”	January 2017

²²⁸ “New release of the Islamic State’s Magazine: Dabiq #12” *jihadology.net*. Posted by Aaron Y. Zelin, November 18th, 2015

²²⁹ “New release of the Islamic State’s Magazine: ‘Rome #2’” *jihadology.net*. Posted by Aaron Y. Zelin, October 4, 2016.

²³⁰ “New release of the Islamic State’s Magazine: Rome #5” *jihadology.net* Posted by Aaron Y. Zelin, January 6, 2017.

Results

Articles

Table 2 presents the results of the narrative analysis of *Al-Risalah*, *Dabiq*, and *Rumiyah* according to Ingram's classifications. The sample of selected magazines from the media outlets of JN and IS coincidentally featured the same number of articles: 51 in total for each group respectively. Content from *Al-Risalah* weighs heavily on the value-reinforcing narrative of In-group-Solution messaging, which is the focus of 45% of the publication's articles. The second-most frequent topic is the crisis-reinforcing narrative of In-group/Perception of Crisis, which ranks at 16% of articles. In contrast, themes in *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* are more dispersed, with the most common topic being related to the In-group/Perception of Crisis narrative at 25%, which is closely followed by Operational articles at 22%.

Statements and Advertisements

Unlike articles, the rate of statement and advertisements are not equal across the sample issues produced by JN and IS media wings. While a total of 38 short-form items were incorporated into the pages of the *Al-Risalah* sample, *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* selections collectively featured 29 statements and ads. The content profile of statements and advertisements in *Al-Risalah* is similar to the publication's article composition. The In-group/Solution messaging as the most common at 37%, succeeded by 24% of statements and ads related to In-group/Perception of crisis. Last, the narrow majority of statements and ads in *Rumiyah* and *Dabiq* are Operational and make up 51% of category content. A distant second is In-group/Solution content which is a mere 13% of statements and ads.

Overview

Articles, statements, and advertisements coded as “values” narratives feature a primary focus on descriptions of the attributes of the internal organization, and how these demonstrated values guide the political movement to success. For example, an article that fixates on the virtuous qualities of faith, honor, and integrity that an individual can manifest through joining the organization would be categorized as an In-group/Solution messaging tactic. Martyrdom articles are a quintessential example of how jihadist groups imply that membership and dedication to the ingroup is interconnected to righteousness. On a collective scale, *Al-Risalah* articles rely on interpretations from a range of Islamic scholars that encourage each reader to value their “individual duty” to jihad by joining or donating to JN. IS publications explicate a set of divine “laws of Allah” implemented by IS authorities that the group renders as superior to the “laws of men” followed by groups that refuse to recognize IS as a legitimate government.²³¹ Thus, items that focus on the negative values of the outgroup suggest detrimental qualities that make the actor in question an existential threat. Ads of President Obama with photo editing that demonizes his visage would fall into this category.

Items in the sample coded as “dichotomy” narratives explicitly reference tangible breakdowns in tradition related to the activities of the outgroup, and the ways in which ingroup values could restore tradition, or a physical ingroup solution provides a final solution to the crisis. It is important to note that the In-group/Out-group dichotomization does not include IS and JN’s attacks upon other Salafi jihadists, and rather fixates on Shia sects, the Assad regime, Western forces, and other groups that do not adhere to Sunni Islam. For example, a segment that

²³¹ Dabiq, Issue 10, page 40.

details a group-member's former life experiences suffering under a non-Muslim government, and then transitions to describe the individual's sense of belonging after migrating to join the ranks of the jihadist organization would be classified under the In-group/Out-group category. Items coded as Solution/Perception of crisis reference a specific long-established grievance shared amongst the ingroup, and a clear-cut argument for how an organizational plan of action directly solves the dilemma in question. Items in this category stage a crisis such as the "improper" implementation of sharia law, women's use of birth control, and laxity in punishing perceived enemies to Sunni Islam. Following an argument for the crisis, the article must also contain a contrasting segment that demonstrates an ingroup answer to the issue. IS particularly relies on the authoritative operations of the caliphate to exemplify ways in which the implementation of ultraconservative sharia law addresses outgroup practices that they perceive to be misguided.

Items classified as crisis-narratives feature an organization's argument to Salafi-jihadists that their membership forms the legitimate embodiment of the movement, and that oppositional groups in the sect exhibit behaviors that are detrimental to the entire movement. For IS, this messaging frames AQ, JN, and other radical Islamists in the Syrian civil war as infidels that are unwilling to submit to true sharia law because they will not recognize IS as a caliphate. JN segments present a counternarrative by framing IS as ultraviolent actors that illegitimately established an Islamic State without widespread Muslim consensus. Finally, Operational items exhibited straightforward demonstrations of jihadist warfare, tactics, and governance.

Table 2.

Item Type	Primary Focus	<i>Al-Risalah</i> number (%)	<i>Dabiq/Rumiyah</i> number (%)
Article	In-group/Solution	(23) 45%	(10) 20%
	Other/Perceptions of Crisis	(4) 8%	(3) 6%
	In-group/Other	(5) 10%	(4) 8%
	Solution/Perception of Crisis	(4) 8%	(10) 20%
	In-group/Perception of Crisis	(8) 16%	(13) 25%
	Operational	(7) 13%	(11) 22%
	Total Articles	(51)	(51)
Advertisement/ Statements	In-group/Solution	(14) 37%	(4) 13%
	Other/Perceptions of Crisis	(7) 18%	(3) 10%
	In-group/Other	(1) 3%	(3) 10%
	Solution/Perception of Crisis		(2) 7%
	In-group/Perception of Crisis	(9) 24%	(2) 7%
	Operational	(7) 18%	(15) 51%
	Total Ads/Statements	(38)	(29)

The sample of English-language magazines produced by IS and JN are comparable in their high-caliber written and visual segments. The issues are similar to the format of a magazine that could be found on any metropolitan newsstand in the world. Six of the eight issues analyzed feature a front page with a table of contents except the issues of *Rumiyah*, which incorporate both segments on the first page. Each installment features a Letter from the Editor or a Foreword that stages the group's initial message for supporters. Every magazine in the sample also incorporates interview segments with operatives from allied organizations.

These pieces function to demonstrate each group's connectivity to a trans-national camp of militants that share their ideological vision for the Salafi-jihadist movement. In addition, each

magazine features one to three martyrdom, or *Shuhada* articles. These segments typically follow the same rhetorical formula across all installments from IS and JN. They describe the militant's basic origin story, their daily attention to Islamic scripture, which signals their status as a "good Muslim," and the details of their suicide operation. A tone of glorification finalizes the legacy of each deceased operative, upholding them as an immortalized figure in the group, and an individual who achieved the paradise of afterlife, known as *Jannah* through jihad. It is important to note that the martyrdom mission segments in the sample killed members of opposition forces during battle, rather than civilians. However, martyrdom narratives are an essential example of how these organizations celebrate violence against combatants and morally disengage members from using force during military engagement. In regard to segments that self-report violence against non-combatants, multiple articles from IS's issues of *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* feature dispatches about attacks against civilians conducted by operatives in countries ranging from Bangladesh, Tunisia, France, and the US. Therefore, unlike JN's resistance to publicizing any reports of violence against civilians, IS pursues international notoriety by encouraging its English readership network to kill citizens abroad.

The pages of each magazine feature poignant photographs and graphic designs that signify the professionalism of each organization's media wings. Statements are foregrounded by images that reinforce the tone of each short message. Images of armed militants are used to signal the operational capacity of the group, and photos of fighters celebrating a battlefield victory in Syria promise rewards to prospective foreign fighters. Advertisements, though concise, are informative and compelling. Items range from scriptural quotes that rationalize the conduct of the organization, to segments that promote other web productions from the media wing, to provocative images that vilify the perceived outgroup. In JN's case, these ads feature the faces of

prominent leaders of enemy forces, such as Obama, Assad, Putin, Baghdadi, and Hassan Nasrallah, the Leader of Hezbollah, edited in shadows or flames that convey their demonized status. In contrast, IS ads are less likely to name prominent actors for targeting, and more commonly feature images of a general, unnamed population that they deem apostates. Notably, many images that accompany the written content of *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* include anonymous captives being held at gunpoint or being beheaded.²³² These ultraviolent images thus sanction violence against an undefined outgroup, that is not constrained by religious or national identity. Rather, it deems anyone who challenges the authority of the caliphate as worthy of death.

The Caliphate

The textual analysis will begin with considering how IS and JN address the broadest, and most fundamental debate amongst Salafi jihadists in their publications- the appropriate timing to declare a caliphate. The structural realization of these group's ideologies is the prioritization of establishing a caliphate in the immediate short term, or the long term. The implications of this stance directly inform the organizational decision to declare or to not declare an Islamic state, which informs a group's basic self-concept regarding its authority to monopolize the use of force against civilians.

IS places the utmost value on proving its legitimacy as a caliphate. The group's media wing operationalizes propaganda of the word and deed to erase any doubt among radical Islamists that Baghdadi's group has fully implemented a precise style of governance that was practiced by the first generations of Muslims. Therefore, by referencing the territorialization of the caliphate, IS argues that all actions perpetrated by the organization manifests perfect Islamic

²³² Dabiq, Issue 2, 64.

rule. Consequently, any Muslim or non-Muslim that does not vehemently support the dominance of the Islamic State is rendered as an existential threat to the group's "ideal" brand of Islam.

IS relies on an ideological lens that communicates a bipolar worldview for its followers: demonstrate dedication to the insular caliphate or be rendered as an enemy worthy of death. This stance is reflected in the strategic placement of references from Islamic scripture and images of executions perpetrated by IS against unidentified prisoners. For example, an article in *Rumiyah* titled "Brutality and Severity towards the Kuffar" is framed with two images of beheadings of men who are simply labeled as the *mushkrin*- the Arabic term for polytheist. The article itself details the ways Abu Bakr Siddiq, the Prophet Muhammad's top political advisor, dealt with Arab tribes that defied the Prophet's rule. The passage states that Siddiq,

"...remained determined to fight the murtaddin who resisted a single, clear-cut law of Islam... He went out, seeking any of those murtaddin from the dispersed, defeated army, and made examples of them, exacting vengeance on them..." "So he spent one month, seeking revenge for the Muslims who were living amongst these tribes when the tribes apostatized. Some of them he burned with fire; others he smashed with stones; others he threw from atop the highest mountains."²³³

The article finishes with a stark conclusion for its readership by stating, "Whoever wishes to follow them (the murtaddin, or apostates) will be guided and saved. And whoever wants to follow another path, then Allah will leave him to what he chose of deviant methodologies and deviating sects."²³⁴ In order for the caliphate to maintain an image of sanctified supremacy, it must demand obedience to the state and exert the right to condemn all deviant groups. As evidenced in Table 2, 20% of articles from *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* present the dichotomized narrative of Solution/Perception of Crisis while 8% of JN's *Al-Risalah* articles reference this

²³³ Rumiyah, Issue 2, 24.

²³⁴ Rumiyah, Issue 2, 24.

topic. This discrepancy is due to IS's claim to have already founded a "solution" through its state-building measures. Therefore, when territory is seized, sharia is implemented, and the land is cleansed of "impure" populations through violence, IS demonstrates its organizational prowess.

In contrast, JN uses its media platform to frame the group as a locally-focused jihadist organization that espouses the immediate goal of defeating the Assad regime on behalf of the Sunni Syrian population. In fact, JN does not exercise a drastically-polarized "us vs. them" approach to the conflict and adopts the attitude that like-minded groups in the opposition have to cooperate to win the Syrian civil war. In fact, in the first issue of *Al-Risalah*, an announcement confirms JN's merger with groups under the Jaish al-Fath umbrella organization that subsumes other Sunni jihadist groups.²³⁵ In the Editor's Note, JN's leader Jolani states, the groups in Jaish al Fath "are all Muslims, even if they differ somewhat with us. There are some groups which have some mistakes, we overlook these mistakes, we overlook these mistakes, because of the enormous severity of the battle,"²³⁶ These groups coordinated in August of 2016 to capture the Assad-held city of Aleppo. It has been reported that Syrian forces repelled the insurgents with chlorine attacks.²³⁷

Articles in JN's publications utilize sacred passages from the Qur'an and the Hadith to reinforce the importance of a Muslim's obligation to embark on "individual jihad," a tenet that Salafi jihadists consider as a religious imperative equivalent to that of fasting during Ramadan. To encourage readers to join the ranks in Syria, the pages of *Al-Risalah* utilize a quote from the

²³⁵ *Al-Risalah*, Issue 1, 5.

²³⁶ *Al-Risalah*, Issue 1, 5.

²³⁷ Thomas. Joscelyn, "Jihadists and other rebels claim to have broken through siege of Aleppo." *The Long War Journal*. Foundation for Defense of Democracies, 7 Aug. 2016.

Messenger of Allah, which states, “standing in the ranks of the army in the battlefield is better to Allah than the worship of sixty years.”²³⁸ Furthermore, the rhetoric applied to justify JN’s jihad is based on the defense of the common Muslim. One passage states:

“enemies of Allah have invaded, divided up and looted Muslim wealth and land, and the honor of women, children and elderly are violated in the most unthinkable and despicable of ways. Our scholars and heroes are slandered, jailed and murdered ruthlessly, and so much more. And Allah alone knows the true extent, and to Him alone do we complain and seek assistance.”²³⁹

In contrast to IS, and in alignment with the messaging of AQ, JN presents itself as a viable vanguard of the Muslim community. In doing so, its ingroup and outgroup boundaries are not established in reference to a fixed structure of authority, like an Islamic state. Indeed, JN’s boundaries of inclusion are certainly more permeable, because the organization has measured its viability on the status of popular support amongst local Sunnis who oppose the Assad regime. JN’s immediate goal is to integrate amongst the population, rather than to sort out the obedient from the disobedient. This approach is best described by a Chechen fighter stationed in northern Syria who was interviewed by *Al-Risalah*:

“The mujahid is like a fish and the people are like the sea, and the wider the sea, the easier it is for the mujahid to swim. As more people love the mujahideen, there are more opportunities for the mujahideen. But as soon as the mujahideen feel that they have power, they begin to act as though they are the true masters of the world and that all others are their slaves. They show great disrespect and harshness towards the weak Muslims, something our Prophet didn’t even do to the mushkreen of his time.”²⁴⁰

In this interview, the fighter describes the Maoist-style insurgent approach of gaining popular support that is upheld by most insurgent non-state groups. In order to maximize a local

²³⁸ Al-Risalah, Issue 1, 20.

²³⁹ Al-Risalah, Issue 1, 20.

²⁴⁰ Al-Risalah Issue 2, 38.

coalition of “hearts and minds,” JN constrained its use of mass-casualty attacks against civilians, and in fact presented itself as a protector of Syrians. As one ad in *Al-Risalah* states, “The Khalifa Should be the Shield of the Ummah not the Sword Against it.”²⁴¹ Therefore, JN presents itself as a foil to IS, and suggests that its brand of Islamic rule would be in the true interest of the Muslim community. Table 2 reflects how JN relies mostly on articles, statements, and advertisements in *Al-Risalah* to portray itself as a value-oriented ingroup that looks externally, to unify more Muslims under an eventual Islamic political order.

Takfir

The sample publications of IS’s *Rumiyah* and *Dabiq* present a dichotomized worldview to readership of a righteous insular caliphate, and an external world teeming with a diverse field of infidels that must be eliminated for IS to realize its ultimate social order. IS utilizes symbolic language to infer that violence is the ultimate way to address grievances. One excerpt from *Rumiyah* states, “After the trials and tribulations, only the pure will remain. These are those whose cores have been cleansed and clarified of any impurities and filth of the *dunya*” (the temporal world).²⁴²

Another symbol of ethnic cleansing that IS operationalizes is fire. Multiple articles written by IS propagandists focus on IS’s rationale for killing captives with fire, after radical Islamist groups condemned IS’s burning alive of a Jordanian pilot in January of 2015.²⁴³ One article from *Rumiyah* that is titled “The Flames of Justice,” IS uses another scriptural example of Muhammad’s comrade Saddiq, who “burned those who resisted the zakat (Islamic State taxes)...(and) killed *murtadd* captives- whose apostasy was of a severe nature- in the worst of

²⁴¹ Al-Risalah, Issue 1, 33.

²⁴² Rumiyah, Issue 2, 26.

²⁴³ Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 327.

ways in order to terrorize and disperse the remaining murtaddin.”²⁴⁴ The conclusion of the article is accompanied by an image of a burned corpse of an anonymous captive, and quotes Allah, stating, “Indeed, those who disbelieve in Our verses- We will drive them into a fire. Every time their skins are roasted through, we will replace them with other skins so that they may taste the punishment.”²⁴⁵ Therefore, IS uses propaganda to legitimate ethnic cleansing as a righteous means of establishing a true Islamic State.

The frequent declaration of *takfir*, which implies labelling people as *kufir* apostates worthy of execution, is a rhetorical tool that IS uses to cultivate a polarized worldview for its membership. An article in *Dabiq* poses a rebuttal to AQ’s “Guidelines for Jihadi Action” that were stipulated by Zawahiri, which states that “deviant sects, (such as the Druze, Sufis, and Shia) should not be fought,” as long as these groups do not fight Sunni jihadist organizations.²⁴⁶ IS brought this policy into debate when JN’s leader Jolani appeared on the Arab news network Al-Jazeera in 2015 to state that his group would not harm Druze civilians under the regions of his control.²⁴⁷ IS seized this announcement as a clear example that JN was willing to blur the lines of who constituted the enemy in Salafi-jihadist practice.

The teachings of the 14th century Islamic Scholar Ibn Taymiyyah were selected by IS to describe Sunni Muslims that refuse to use force against Druze civilians. The quote states, “The *kufir* of these people (the Druze) is a matter over which the Muslims do not differ. Rather whoever doubts their *kufir* is a *kāfir* like them.”²⁴⁸ In other words, the pages of *Dabiq* render JN’s inclination to constrain violence against civilians as a move so traitorous to the Salafi-jihadist

²⁴⁴ Rumiyah, Issue 5, 16.

²⁴⁵ Rumiyah, Issue 5, 18.

²⁴⁶ *Dabiq*, Issue 1, 8.

²⁴⁷ *Dabiq*, Issue 1, 8.

²⁴⁸ *Dabiq*, Issue 1, page 8.

camp, that JN is also a collective of apostates worthy of death. This animosity is communicated in the term that IS media uses to describe the coalition of Sunni Syrian groups that refuse to pledge allegiance to the caliphate. IS refers to these organizations, including JN, as the “Sahwat,” which is the Arab word for “collaborators” that are “the worst of the worst.”²⁴⁹ As evidenced in Table 2, a quarter of the articles from IS’s publication sample detail the deviousness of other jihadis operating in Syria, that IS blames as the perpetrators of discord in the Salafi jihadist camp.

While IS makes the rhetorical argument that a unified Islamic community is achieved by expunging Muslim and non-Muslim “near enemy” actors from the Middle East, JN stages itself as a desirable foil to this extremism. In response to IS practices of excommunication, JN mirrors the traditional Salafi-jihadist ideology by interviewing an AQ operative working on behalf of JN in Syria. He states:

“Al Qaeda is an organization along with the Taliban...all of us as Mujhahideen, distance ourselves greatly from the takfir (extremism) methodology and ideology. We see the Ummah as one, and in a very precarious state. So we are trying to bring to the Muslim Ummah into a new age of Islamic honor, and not differentiate and feel that those that don’t come up with the ‘standard’ of certain people are kuffar and/or apostates. We look at everything Islamically and try to act accordingly.”²⁵⁰

²⁴⁹ Robert J. Bunker, and P. Bunker Ligouri. 2018. Radical Islamist English-language online magazines: Research guide, strategic insights, and policy pesponse. US Army War College. Retrieved from <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=1381>. 185.

²⁵⁰ AllRisalah, Issue 2, 18.

Therefore, JN stages itself as a unifying actor that does not claim the authority to delineate strict ingroup outgroup identities to achieve their objective. In fact, JN uses the historically significant “Kharwajj” term used by traditional Salafi-jihadist groups to describe contemporary

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Image 1 From Al-Risalah Issue 3 pg 12-13.

ultraviolent groups that mirror the behavior of the extremist sect during Muhammad’s rule. One advertisement in *Al-Risalah* features an armed operative artistically splashed with bright paint, across which block lettering declares, “Jihad is Beautiful. It liberates the oppressed and helps the needy. Don’t let its beauty be spoilt by the extremism of the Khwarij.”²⁵¹ JN continually presents the Perception of Crisis narrative within the Salafi- jihadist camp as one that is defined by IS’s excessive use of violence. In one article titled, “This Is Al Qaeda, or Have They Forgotten?” JN emphasizes the ways IS has drifted from the pragmatic path for jihad set by Zawahiri. In reference to AQ, the article states,

Their methodology was not that of making takfir upon those who differ with them, with doubtful evidences, and after that sending cars filled with explosives and armed men who plunge in their houses! And their methodology was not that of killing women and children of the disbelievers on purpose!²⁵²

²⁵¹ Al-Risalah, Issue 3, 12-13.

²⁵² Al-Risalah, Issue 1, 28.

In the same manner that IS presents an argument to its readership that there is a crisis amongst Salafi-jihadists due to a resistance against perpetrating violence against non-combatants in Syria, JN relies on the argument that IS exhibits an unrestrained brutality that threatens the public. Furthermore, JN also presents itself as a practical and careful organization in contrast to the relentless warfare tactics used by the Assad regime. An article regarding claims of IS's use of chemical weapons against civilians in *Al-Risalah* captures JN's effort to frame both IS and Assad as equally threatening actors towards Syrians. Underscored with images of incapacitated civilian victims, the segment claims that IS abandoned "defending Muslims from Bashar's soldiers... and instead directed their arrows toward innocent Muslims."²⁵³



Image 2 from: Dabiq Issue 10, pg 65.

By implying that IS has no qualms using chemical weapons that are characteristic of the Assad regime, JN suggests that IS and the Syrian government are both complicit in targeting civilians.

Operations

IS and JN's divergent stances on the caliphate and *takfir* culminate in their different organizational plans of military action and governance. One of the most glaring differences between the thematic content of IS and JN publications is their frequency of articles, statements,

²⁵³ *Al-Risalah*, Issue 2, 56.

and advertisements relating to their organizational operations. The sample of IS magazines dedicate 22% of its articles and 51% of its statements and advertisements to operational content. In contrast, only 13% of articles and 18% of the statements and advertisements in *Al-Risalah* focus on JN's operational capacity.

This discrepancy signals the investment that IS has in crafting its identity as a jihadist organization that designs and employs the highest caliber terror tactics. IS proves this group-upheld value to its readership by providing detailed instructional articles on the ideal methods for attacking civilians abroad. Both issues of *Rumiyah* feature a column titled “Just Terror Tactics,” which describe how Molotov cocktails and small knives can “bring untold misery to the enemies of Allah.”²⁵⁴ While IS suggests its expertise in violent tactics to attract audiences, it grounds this image with repeated advertisements for its “Ten Videos Selected From the *Wilayat* (provinces) of The Islamic State.” The page-long ads feature ten screenshots accompanied with titles that communicate the purpose of each operational video produced by IS's Al Hayat media platform. A majority of the images in the sample advertisements signal that the video is related to battlefield operations. Integrated amongst promotions for warfare footage are several photos that feature unidentified captives in prison jumpsuits either held at gunpoint or at the blade of a knife to signify their upcoming capital punishment. These images communicate IS's strict dedication to implementing sharia law against enemies and subjects who violate their principles of ingroup supremacy. In these highly communicative excerpts, IS normalizes violence for their ingroup via their instructional articles and through their deeds in the caliphate.

IS's offensive military strategies explicitly sanction violence against individuals in their custody, but against collectives they intend to conquer. An article in *Rumiyah* titled “Collateral

²⁵⁴ *Rumiyah*, Issue 2, 12; *Rumiyah*, Issue 5, 8.

Damage” makes the case for how IS operatives can choose the timing of their attacks to justify their killing of non-combatant *kufir* women and children.

“As for kafir women and children who do not fight or otherwise partake in hostilities, then the principle stands that they should not be deliberately killed, meaning that one should not single them out for targeting. However, when they are not distinctly isolated from the kafir men or when they are not easily distinguishable from them, then their collateral killing is a justified part of the jihad against the kuffar... the best practice when conducting raids is to start during the night or at the break of dawn, before the sun rises, while the enemy is asleep. At such a time, it is very likely to enter buildings where no light shines and an adult male is not easily distinguishable from women and children. Indeed, it is from the Sunnah of Allah to attack His enemies while they are asleep, whether at night or during the day... ‘The Prophet ...was asked about the people of an area who were raided at night, with their women and children being killed and wounded. He said, ‘They are from them.’”²⁵⁵

As demonstrated in this paragraph, IS presents the best methods for its operatives to religiously rationalize violence against women and children, under the conditions of their indistinguishability during a nighttime attack. This captures the group’s stance that operatives should deliberately plan their attacks to maximize violence against civilians that they view as apostates. IS’s ingroup policy of ethnic cleansing based on a premise of religious authority is highly apparent in this segment.

JN’s operational segments predominantly feature their military engagement on the front lines of the Syrian conflict. For example, one article in *Al-Risalah* describes JN’s battle with IS for the city of Aleppo.²⁵⁶ Another operational segment details the Jaish al-Fath coalition’s victory over Assad regime forces in the Idlib town of Jisr al-Shughour during the spring of 2015.²⁵⁷ This

²⁵⁵ Rumiya, Issue 2, 6.

²⁵⁶ Al-Risalah, Issue 2, 62.

²⁵⁷ Al-Risalah, Issue 1, 10.

event marked the “near-total strategic defeat upon the regime” in the Idlib governate and demonstrated the “value of close multi-group cooperation in the battle against the regime.”²⁵⁸

The 2015 to 2016 publication period of the magazines produced by JN align with the timeline of the group’s shared governance alongside other Sunni opposition forces of Idlib. In the second installment of *Al-Risalah*, JN demonstrates their organization’s “moderate” implementation of sharia in contrast to IS, by detailing the whipping of two criminals, and the execution of a regime soldier who had been captured while fleeing the battle of Jisr al-Shughour. The article is prefaced by stating that the penalized individuals in question “were neither abused or sworn at, in fact, they were treated with mercy.”²⁵⁹ The article highlights steps of religious due process, as a head judge oversaw the punishment and allowed the prisoners to pray before their sentence, steps that the segment claims IS would condemn.

JN’s single article from the sample magazines that references sharia is a testament to the balance that the organization attempts to strike in appealing to its readership. While JN intends to cast itself as a true Salafi jihadist group that will implement sharia when it has established political viability in a region, it also relies on a power-sharing dynamic with more moderate Islamic groups that have enabled JN to succeed. JN’s ideological motive to conduct jihadism through integration rather than aggression has resulted in the group’s continuous attempts to avoid a local reputation as an excessively violent or power-hungry organization. While this public image does not entirely curb JN’s violence against civilians, it directly factors into the

²⁵⁸ Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 349.

²⁵⁹ *Al-Risalah*, Issue 2, 80.

group's calculated strategy to monitor its violent conduct. In contrast to IS, excessive force used by JN can be more organizationally detrimental than instrumental.

Al-Risalah, *Dabiq*, and *Rumiyah* are vessels for the collective worldviews that IS and JN aim to propagate. The pages of these magazines feature a diverse range of content from theological arguments, to news reels, to meticulously designed propaganda that add varying dimensions to the respective worldviews that each group values to function. In sum, these segments are integrated to form a coherent "motive and framework for action" for the respective readership of each publication.

A dichotomized ideological lens is reinforced across all items from *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*. Ingroups and outgroups are strictly delineated in reference to an individual's eligibility to live in the territorialized caliphate that the group prioritized as their objective. While swaths of non-Sunni groups are wholly deemed as impure due to their religion, a further cohort of Sunni Muslims are excommunicated due to their lack of explicit support for the autonomous rule of IS. IS deliberately makes a case for its religious authority to use force by selecting ultraviolent segments of Islamic scripture that illustrate methods of force used by the first generations of Islamic governance. By cultivating a righteous self-image in association with religious tradition, IS operationalizes language of purification to socially sanction members violent "cleansing" amongst its membership. IS finally endorses violent means to a glorified end by example, through a plethora of media content that depicts violence against unidentifiable groups of prisoners.

JN's convictions that integration is the immediate objective of jihad are imbued in the narrative of *Al-Risalah*. Its pages communicate the prioritization of unity over division by highlighting the value of cooperative practices for the readership. The organization's

reinforcement of coalition-building is paired with a message that the group's essential imperative is to protect the common Sunni Muslim in Syria, and to incentivize rather than impel popular support. JN invokes religious references to stage current circumstances of the Muslim communities in the Middle East as dire, and leverages its role as a "protector" in contrast to the brutal campaigns of the Assad regime and IS. JN has crafted a public image based on qualities of pragmatism, trustworthiness, and controlled violence. Therefore, as evident in the operational section, the group has an objective to illustrate its implementation of sharia law as merciful, controlled, and directed against a specified group of wrong-doers.

CONCLUSION

This thesis explicates how the nuances in Salafi jihadist ideology result in organizational discrepancies regarding civilian targeting in the Syrian civil war. While multiple studies have comparatively analyzed the contents of IS's *Dabiq* and AQ's *Inspire* publications, no studies have explicitly contrasted the propaganda of the two prominent and antagonistic jihadist groups in Syria: IS and JN.²⁶⁰ By examining publications from JN's *Al-Risalah* and IS's *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* with a specific focus on group values and polarizing messaging that mobilizes operatives from each organization, this research poses that ideology is not a superficial façade created on a whim by group leaders. Rather, ideology is an autonomous apparatus that operates beyond the agency of one key leader. It is resolved that collectively espoused beliefs attract fighters with immaterial incentives, institute rituals that form intra-group bonds, and determine whether violence against non-combatants promotes or impedes trajectories of group legitimacy in a conflict.

By analyzing the publications of IS and JN, this thesis determines that two Salafi jihadist groups embedded in the same conflict are capable of adopting entirely divergent ideological models. The dispute between jihadists who seek to immediately establish caliphate and those who prioritize defeating the Assad regime critically shapes the experience of Syrians today. This

²⁶⁰ For insights regarding the psychological appeals in *Dabiq* and *Inspire* issues, read "The language of new terrorism: Differences in psychological dimensions of communication in *Dabiq* and *Inspire*." By Matteo Vergani and Ana-Maria Bliuc. For research that examines the differences in how *Dabiq* and *Inspire* frame the ingroup versus the outgroup, read "Representing the West and "non-believers" in the online jihadist magazines *Dabiq* and *Inspire*." By Nuria Lorenzo-Dus, Anina Kinzel, and Luke Walker.

distinction determines whether a group like IS views civilians as subjects that must obey group authority at the penalty of death, or, in JN's view, "hearts and minds" that can be gradually persuaded to provide support. With this information, counterterrorism experts can predict the current threats that each group poses to non-combatants in Syria and construct effective counternarratives that employ persuasive tactics used to radicalize members.

By 2018, IS lost the majority of its territory to the multitude of actors that it opposed in Syria. JN has retained territory in Idlib under the coalition name Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, and has claimed to cut ties with AQ, although most terrorism experts suspect this divorce is a strategic move to disincentivize Western counterterrorism airstrikes against the militia. With or without a current territorial presence, the ideologies of each group have circulated through Syria, and have captured the attention of jihadist sympathizers across the globe. The psychological influence of each group in Syria cannot be ignored or instantaneously eliminated by counterterrorism experts. However, the radicalization activities of these organizations can be effectively combated through international action and counter messaging strategies.

JN has put nine years into building relationships with militias and citizens on the ground in Syria. As long as the international community continues to falter on a resolution to end the Assad regime's relentless attacks against civilians, radical Islamist groups such as JN will continue to exploit a logic of advantageous comparison to frame their organization as a viable political movement. After years of Syrian Army airstrikes and chemical attacks on the population have precipitated few united measures from global powerbrokers to end the conflict, many civilians may come to view groups like JN as the only revolutionary militia in Syria that can institute law and order.²⁶¹ The West should do more than order airstrikes to undermine the

²⁶¹ Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 393.

operational capability of JN or rely on ceasefires to mitigate their military engagement with Assad. The past several years has proven that the group can survive counterterrorism operations and maintain strongholds in pockets of northwestern Syria. Instead, Western political leaders must commit to investing in moderate competitors that can attract revolutionary fighters who do not subscribe to a radical Islamist agenda, yet currently support JN due to the group's dedication of firepower to the Syrian opposition. By fostering a secular nationalist organization with military and humanitarian resources, international actors can erode the leverage that JN uses to frame the group as a temperate actor in relation to Assad.²⁶²

While IS has lost the physical manifestation of a utopian caliphate, its resurgence is possible with the intensification of sectarian divisions in the Middle East, especially between Sunni and Shia Muslims. As long as the group can proliferate a convincing image of an Islamically "pure" organization that is capable of restoring a sense of belonging for politically disenfranchised Sunni Muslims in the Middle East, the group can sustain a radicalized following. Effective counter messaging strategies would highlight the rhetorical disparities between IS's promised paradise-like state, and the ultimately repressive regime that the group implemented in the mid 2010's.²⁶³ This strategy would dispel the IS covenant that a dichotomized world of good and evil will result in state of Islamic prosperity.

A valuable extension of this research would reach beyond the borders of Syria, to explore the ideologies of AQ-inspired Salafi jihadist groups that operate across the globe. One such organization is Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), an organization that, much like JN, is affiliated

²⁶²Charles Lister "Al-Qaida's complex balancing act in Syria." *Perspectives on terrorism* 11, no. 6 (2017): 129.

²⁶³ Ingram, "An Analysis of Inspire and Dabiq: Lessons from AQAP and the Islamic State's Propoganda War." 571.

with AQ, focuses on attacking the Pakistani government, and is comprised of local militias.²⁶⁴

By approaching this TTP's propaganda through an ideological lens of ingroup, outgroup, prioritized objective, and goal distinctions, terrorism scholars can continue to elucidate how groups in different security environments interpret the role of jihad. Results could be compared to the ideological profiles of radical Islamist organizations that have emerged since the 1980's to create a comprehensive study on the evolution of Salafi jihadist thought and fracturing of the camp over time.

²⁶⁴ Mapping Militant Organizations "Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan." Stanford University. Last modified June 2018. https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/tehrrik-i-taliban-pakistan#text_block_19701

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List of Arabic Terms

1. bay'at- an oath of allegiance.
2. dunya- the temporal world, the test leading to Paradise.
3. emir- leader of Islamic emirate.
4. jahiliyah- ignorant societies prior to first generations of Muslims.
5. Jannah- Muslim paradise, similar to concept of heaven.
6. Jawlānī front - JN (led by Abu Mohammed al-Jolani).
7. khilafiah- term for Islamic Caliphate.
8. Khawaarij- term for brutal Muslim sect that existed in Prophet Muhammad's era.
9. kufr- community of unbelievers.
10. hadd (Hudud) - enforcement of Shariah law, including whipping, mutilation, execution penalties.
11. mushrkin- polytheist.
12. murtadd- an apostate, one who has abandoned Islam.
13. Sawhat- IS term for Syrian opposition coalition that includes the JN, the Free Syrian Army and Ahrar al-Sham, among smaller allied groups.
14. Shām- Syria.
15. Shuhada- martyrdom.
16. Taghut- tyrant or oppressor.
17. takfir- the labeling of fellow Muslims as unbelievers.
18. Ummah- Muslim community.
19. wilayat- regional province.
20. zakat- religious tax.

Appendix A

Graphs

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