

Deciphering the Siren Call of Militant Islamist Propaganda: Meaning, Credibility & Behavioural Change

This Research Paper explores how militant Islamists use propaganda to appeal to and radicalise supporters. It offers an alternative to the view that ideology is the key to understanding and countering the appeal of militant Islamism. Drawing on studies from the behavioural and social sciences, it analyses how strategies of meaning, credibility and behavioural change are deployed in militant Islamist propaganda citing a range of primary source materials – from the speeches and writings of charismatic figures like Abdullah Azzam, Osama bin Laden and Anwar al-Awlaki to messages released by the likes of al Qaeda, its affiliates and so-called “Islamic State”. This study particularly focuses on how such messaging leverages psychosocial forces and strategic factors to: (i.) provide its supporters with a *system of meaning* that shapes how they perceive the world, (ii.) demonstrate that it is a credible source of information and authority, and, (iii.) deploy pertinent behavioural levers designed to compel its audiences to legitimise and engage in violence. This Research Paper concludes by outlining some crucial lessons for understanding both the siren call of militant Islamist propaganda and counterterrorism strategic communications design.

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Introduction

First you will come to the Sirens who enchant all who come near them. If anyone unwarily draws in too close and hears the singing of the Sirens, his wife and children will never welcome him home again...

Circe to Ulysses in Book XII of Homer's *The Odyssey*.¹

We have not defeated the idea. We do not even understand the idea.

Comments by Major General Michael K. Nagata, then commander of American Special Forces Operations, regarding the war against so-called "Islamic State" (IS). Reported by the *New York Times* (28 December 2014).²

They [Muslims] need to hear how Islam will bring them justice and retribution. They want to hear how Islam can help them bring an end to occupation, how Islam can allow them to live in dignity under their own system of government, and ruled by their own people. They need to be empowered and encouraged. This is the message the Muslims are waiting to hear from our esteemed scholars.

Excerpt from Anwar Al-Awlaki's "The New Mardin Declaration", published in al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's *Inspire* magazine.³

It has been incessantly said that a battle against extremist ideology lies at the heart of the "Wars on Terror" that have come to define these first decades of the 21st century. In 2005, then U.S. President George W. Bush declared that "the murderous ideology of the Islamic radicals is the great challenge of our new century."⁴ A decade later, President Barack Obama offered his suggestions for where strategic efforts should be concentrated: "First, we have to confront squarely and honestly the twisted ideologies that these terrorist groups use to incite people to violence."⁵ In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on Brussels Airport, former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom Tony Blair stated "the threat is not simply the acts of violence; but the ideology of extremism that gives rise to them. Confront only the violence and fail to confront the ideology and we fail."⁶ He went on to add: "Regarding it instead as a much broader problem of ideology leads us into uncomfortable terrain because here, the challenge is not measured in thousands but in millions."⁷ Ideology undoubtedly plays an important role in the design and appeal of extremist propaganda. However, a disproportionate focus on ideology promises not only to misinform our understanding of how and why extremist propaganda appeals but how to counter it.

The purpose of this Research Paper is to explore how Sunni militant Islamists (i.e. Islamists who advocate/engage in violence as a tool for socio-political change) use propaganda to shape the perceptions, polarise the support and inspire followers to

¹ Homer, *The Odyssey*, Translated by Samuel Butler, Massachusetts Institute of Technology Internet Classics Archive, <http://classics.mit.edu/Homer/odyssey.12.xii.html>.

² E. Schmitt, "In battle to defang ISIS, U.S. targets its psychology", *The New York Times*, 28 December 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/29/us/politics/in-battle-to-defang-isis-us-targets-its-psychology-.html?_r=0.

³ A. Al-Awlaki, "The new Mardin declaration", *Inspire*, Issue 2, (2010), p. 39.

⁴ G.W. Bush, "President discusses War on Terror at National Endowment for democracy", *The White House*, 6 October 2005, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2005/10/20051006-3.html>.

⁵ B. Obama, "Remarks by the President in Closing of the Summit on Countering Violent Extremism", *The White House*, 18 February 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/02/18/remarks-president-closing-summit-countering-violent-extremism>.

⁶ T. Blair, "Tony Blair: We are at war with Islamist extremism", *The Office of Tony Blair*, 29 March 2016, <http://www.tonyblairoffice.org/news/entry/tony-blair-we-are-at-war-with-islamist-extremism/>.

⁷ Ibid.

engage in violence. It contributes to a growing body of scholarship devoted to understanding the strategic mechanics of propaganda as a communication, politico-military and psychological tool.⁸ This study adopts a multidisciplinary analytical frame of reference with a particular focus on the social and behavioural sciences. Kahneman's Nobel Prize winning research into "Automatic" (System 1) and "Deliberative" (System 2) thinking sits at the centre of this analytical approach because of the insights it provides into how the human mind tends to process information and make decisions. This study limits itself to focusing on the role of meaning, credibility and behavioural change in militant Islamist propaganda recognising that this constitutes a rather specific approach to the subject. It is also limited by its analytical top-down perspective, i.e. how militant Islamists seek to influence their audiences, with the hope that it may inform future research exploring the bottom-up dynamic, i.e. audience perceptions and influence⁹. To these ends, this three-part analysis draws upon an array of primary source materials particularly speeches and literature produced by militant Islamist figures – like Sayyid Qutb, Abdullah Azzam and Anwar Al-Awlaki – and groups like al Qaeda, its affiliates and IS.

The central theme throughout this paper is that the potential appeal of extremist propaganda is largely dependent on how such messaging is strategically designed to leverage psychosocial forces and strategic factors that are pertinent to its target audiences. Three interrelated factors – meaning, credibility and behavioural change – are thus crucial for understanding the mechanics of militant Islamist propaganda and are the focus of this analysis. This study begins by examining how extremist propaganda seeks to provide its audiences with a "competitive system of meaning" which acts as a lens through which supporters are compelled to perceive and judge the world. These powerful mental models – or perhaps more accurately a network of mental models – are designed to fundamentally shape its audiences' perceptions by strategically leveraging and interplaying identity, solution and crisis constructs via a combination of narratives and imagery.

Next, this study explores how militant Islamists use propaganda to present themselves as credible sources of information and authority. The first stream focuses on the powerful role of militant Islamist charismatic figures who emerge as not just messengers but the embodiment of their respective group's system of meaning. Arguing that three archetypal charismatic figures emerge from the militant Islamist milieu, Abdullah Azzam is the focus of a brief case study because his "warrior-scholar" image represents the perfect hybrid of the three ideal-types. Part 2 also considers how the 3Rs of effective messaging (reach, relevance and resonance) and manipulation of the say-do gap can also impact perceived credibility.

Finally, while militant Islamist messaging regularly deploys a variety of behavioural levers to reinforce its strategies of meaning and credibility, Part 3 focuses on how framing, reciprocity and social norming/proving are used in an effort to transform tacit supporters into active ones willing to engage in acts of political violence. Overall, what emerges from this three-part analysis is that the potency of militant Islamist

⁸ For example, E. Bernays, *Propaganda* (Brooklyn: Ig Publishing, 2005 [1928]); E. Bernays, *Crystallizing Public Opinion* (New York: Ig Publishing, 2011 [1923]); J. Ellul, *Propaganda: The formation of men's attitudes* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968); J. Stanley, *How propaganda works* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

⁹ Also, this Research Paper is not a synthesis of research into terrorist psychology despite it drawing upon this literature where appropriate. For a comprehensive analysis of this scholarship see J. Horgan, *The Psychology of Terrorism* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

propaganda rests on the cumulative effects of closely interrelated strategies of meaning and credibility augmented by the deployment of levers designed to provoke certain behaviours. A purposely broad and sweeping study, it offers the field a framework of principles for understanding important strategic mechanics in militant Islamist propaganda and some key lessons for counterterrorism strategic communications.

Meaning, Credibility & Behavioural Change

Individuals are not calculating automatons. Rather, people are malleable and emotional actors whose decision making is influenced by contextual cues, local social networks and social norms, and shared mental models. All of these play a role in determining what individuals perceive as desirable, possible, or even 'thinkable' for their lives.

Excerpt from *World Development Report 2015: Mind, Society, and Behaviour*.¹⁰

While many of the strategies of meaning, credibility and behavioural change examined here have been applied by advertisers, even if unknowingly, for decades, these strategies and levers have underpinned politico-military messaging for millennia.¹¹ Aristotle's treatise *Rhetoric*, which asserted that effective communication is reliant upon a speaker harnessing their credibility (*ethos*), the logic of one's argument (*logos*) and the audience's psychology (*pathos*) to effectively persuade listeners, demonstrates that the challenges associated with maximising message design and delivery are far from modern.¹² From Mao Tse-tung¹³ and Ho Chi Minh¹⁴ to Che Guevara¹⁵ and the Irish Republican Army,¹⁶ propaganda has typically been afforded a central role in the politico-military strategies of violent non-state political movements. Against enemies who typically benefit from resource, financial and technological advantages, violent non-state political actors see messaging as crucial for winning the "hearts and minds" of supporters, striking fear in enemies and compounding the effects of politico-military actions in the field. As Taber asserts in *War of the Flea*: "The guerrilla fighter is primarily a propagandist, an agitator, a disseminator of the revolutionary idea, who uses the struggle itself – the actual physical conflict – as an instrument of agitation."¹⁷ This central strategic principle of asymmetric warfare is broadly mirrored in the doctrines of highly influential Islamist strategists like Abu Musab Al-Suri¹⁸ and Abd Al-Aziz Al-Muqrin.¹⁹ By exploring the interplay of meaning, credibility and behavioural levers in militant Islamist propaganda, this study is essentially codifying strategic mechanics that are evident in the propaganda campaigns of a varied spectrum of violent non-state political groups and movements.

¹⁰ *World Development Report 2015: Mind, Society, and Behavior*, World Bank (Washington, DC, 2015), <http://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/Publications/WDR/WDR%202015/WDR-2015-Full-Report.pdf>.

¹¹ H. J. Ingram, "A Brief History of Propaganda During Conflict: Lessons for Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communications", *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7, no. 6 (2016), <https://icct.nl/publication/a-brief-history-of-propaganda-during-conflict-a-lesson-for-counter-terrorism-strategic-communications/>.

¹² Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 350 BC, Translated by W. Rhys Roberts, Massachusetts Institute of Technology Internet Classics Archive, <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/rhetoric.html>.

¹³ M. Tse-tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, Translated by Samuel B. Griffith (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

¹⁴ For more see H. C. Minh, *The selected works of Ho Chi Minh* (New York: Prism Key Press, 2011).

¹⁵ E. Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, (U.S.A.: B.N. Publishing, 2007).

¹⁶ *Handbook for volunteers of the Irish Republican Army: Notes on Guerrilla Warfare* (Boulder, Colorado: Paladin Press, 1985).

¹⁷ R. Taber, *War of the flea: The classic study of guerrilla warfare* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2002).

¹⁸ For more on Abu Musab Al-Suri see B. Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad* (London: Hurst, 2009).

¹⁹ For more on Abd Al-Aziz Al-Muqrin and his doctrine of insurgency see N. Cigar, *Al-Qa'ida's doctrine for insurgency: Abd Al-Aziz Al-Muqrin's "A practical course for guerrilla war"* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2008).

Automatic and Deliberative Thinking

It is useful to set the context for the three-part analysis by taking a step back and considering how humans tend to interpret information and make decisions. Kahneman's research in this field, for which he won the 2002 Nobel Prize in Economics, provides a useful and empirically based foundation for this study.²⁰ He argues that the mind is characterised by two systems of thinking: "System 1 operates automatically and quickly, with little or no effort and no sense of voluntary control."²¹ This is also referred to as "thinking fast" or "automatic thinking". In contrast, "System 2 allocates attention to the effortful mental activities that demand it, including complex computations. The operations of System 2 are often associated with the subjective experience of agency, choice, and concentration."²² System 2 is also referred to as "thinking slow" or "deliberative thinking". The characteristics of automatic and deliberative thinking are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Automatic and Deliberative Systems of Thinking

Automatic (System 1)	Deliberative (System 2)
Considers what automatically comes to mind (<i>narrow frame</i>)	Considers a broad set of relevant factors (<i>wide frame</i>)
Effortless	Effortful
Associative	Based on reasoning
Intuitive	Reflective

Source: *World Development Report 2015*²³

Kahneman argues that while both systems are continually operating and interacting with each other, it is System 1 that dominates: "The guiding ideas are (i) that most judgements and most choices are made intuitively; (ii) that the rules that govern intuition are generally similar to the rules of perception."²⁴ The following excerpt from *Thinking, Fast and Slow* captures the interaction of the two systems:

Systems 1 and 2 are both active whenever we are awake. System 1 runs automatically and System 2 is normally in a comfortable low-effort mode, in which only a fraction of its capacity is engaged. System 1 continuously generates suggestions for System 2: impressions, intuitions, intentions, and feelings. If endorsed by System 2, impressions and intuitions turn into beliefs, and impulses into voluntary actions. When all goes smoothly, which is most of the time, System 2 adopts the suggestions of System 1 with little or no modification. You generally believe impressions and act on your desires, and that is fine – usually.²⁵

Kahneman goes on to argue that, "When System 1 runs into difficulty, it calls on System 2 to support more detailed and specific processing that may solve the problem of the moment. System 2 is mobilized when a question arises for which System 1 does not

²⁰ For more see D. Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (London: Penguin, 2012); D. Kahneman, "Maps of bounded rationality: Psychology for behavioural economics", *The American Economic Review* 93(5) (2003), pp.1449-1475.

²¹ D. Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (2012), p.20.

²² D. Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (2012), p.21.

²³ *World Development Report 2015* (2015), p.6.

²⁴ D. Kahneman, "Maps of bounded rationality" (2003), p.1450.

²⁵ D. Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (2012) p.24.

offer an answer....”²⁶ System 2 may be called upon when problems emerge but it is System 1 that dominates what humans think and how they act most of the time. After all, System 2 is complex, reflective and effortful as well as time and energy consuming while System 1 tends to simplify using narrow “frames”, is reflexive, swift and more efficient in time and energy.

Other factors shape the operation and interaction of System 1 and 2 thinking. Mental models,²⁷ such as identity (e.g. gender, religion, race) and its often related ideology (e.g. worldviews, causal narratives), provide lenses through which oneself, others and the world are understood and decisions justified.²⁸ Broader social factors, such as social networks and social norms, may similarly impact upon how humans interpret the world and make decisions. Indeed, it is this social context that often influences what mental models will be activated when, how and with greater prominence than other mental models.²⁹ The World Bank’s *World Development Report 2015: Mind, Society, and Behavior* asserted that humans tend to think (1) automatically, (2) socially, and (3) via mental models which succinctly captures some key trends in the findings of the latest research in this field.³⁰

Systems 1 and 2 work efficiently and effectively most of the time but, like all systems, “bugs” can emerge that manifest as cognitive biases. Furthermore, these cognitive biases are more prone to occur under certain circumstances.³¹ For example, if the deliberative system is not triggered to assess the judgements of the automatic system, confirmation biases emerge due to information being interpreted in a manner that supports prior belief (e.g. mental models). In addition to social contexts rendering automatic thinking more susceptible to biases, research indicates that when under stress humans become even more reliant upon automatic thinking rendering the intervention of deliberative thinking harder to provoke.³² As this Research Paper soon explores, militant Islamist propaganda seems calibrated to drive both of these dynamics in its audiences, i.e. manipulate mental models and increase perceptions of crisis (i.e. stress).

The empirical research of Kahneman and others into the mind’s dual systems of thinking have triggered a renaissance in the field of economics most evident in the rise

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Mental models are essentially constructs within the mind that shape how the world is perceived and understood. As Norman argues, “In interacting with the environment, with others, and with the artifacts of technology, people form internal, mental models of themselves and of the things with which they are interacting. These models provide predictive and explanatory power for understanding the interaction” (D. Norman, “Some observations on mental models”, in D. Gentner and A. Stevens, eds., *Mental Models* (New York: Psychology Press, 1983), p.7).

²⁸ For examples see M. Baldwin, “Relational schemas and the processing of social information”, *Psychological Bulletin* 112, no.3, (1992), pp.461-484; A. Swidler, “Culture in action: Symbols and Strategies”, *American Sociological Review* 51, no. 2 (1986), pp.273-286; P. DiMaggio, “Culture and Cognition”, *Annual Review of Sociology* 23 (1997), pp.263-287. For analysis of the impact of heuristics, see P. Todd and G. Gigerenzer, “Precis of Simple heuristics that make us smart”, *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 23 (2000), pp.727-780.

²⁹ For more on the role of social norms and other social factors, see C. Sunstein, “Social norms and social rules”, *John M. Olin Law & Economics Working Paper No. 36 (2D Series)* (1995); E. Fehr and K. Hoff, “Introduction: Tastes, castes and culture: The influence of society on preferences”, *The Economic Journal* 121 (2011), pp.F396-F412.

³⁰ *World Development Report 2015* (2015).

³¹ Examples of cognitive biases include “cognitive dissonance”, “bandwagon effect” and “anchoring effect”.

³² For example, research by Mani, Mullainathan, Shafir and Zhao showed empirically that the stresses of poverty “...means coping not just with a shortfall of money, but also with a concurrent shortfall of cognitive resources. The poor, in this view, are less capable not because of inherent traits, but because the very context of poverty imposes load and impedes cognitive capacity” (A. Mani, S. Mullainathan, E. Shafir and J. Zhao, “Poverty impedes cognitive function”, *Science* 341(6149) (2013), p.980). While the link between poverty and extremism is weak, the broader point is important here: stresses impede cognitive function rendering people more inclined towards automatic thinking and the cognitive biases inherent to a stunted deliberative system.

of behavioural economics.³³ While neoclassical economics tended to see humans as essentially well-informed and rational economic automatons, behavioural economics recognises that humans tend to make decisions that are fundamentally shaped by the complex interplay of psychological and social forces, access to limited information and processes that are largely automatic rather than deliberative. In many respects, extremists and their supporters are often seen as either fanatics driven by zealous bloodlust, ideological automatons driven by a cold interpretation of jurisprudence or a hybrid of both. But those who are attracted to extremism are, of course, humans whose perceptions and judgements are shaped by a complex interplay of psychosocial forces, strategic considerations and thought processes dominated by automatic rather than deliberative thinking, social context/cues and mental models. Like its impact on economics and public policy,³⁴ the notions of fast and slow thinking may help to generate a more nuanced understanding of militant Islamism's siren call. While an in-depth analysis of Kahneman's work, not to mention other highly influential scholars in this field such as Sunstein and Thaler,³⁵ are tangential to this study's aims, the implications of this body of research for understanding how extremist propaganda appeals to supporters and shapes their behaviours is significant.

Before commencing the three-part analysis, it is important to stress that it would be erroneous to categorise messaging as either System 1 or 2 because, ultimately, how that information is processed depends on the individual. Rather, this analysis explores militant Islamist strategies of meaning, credibility and behavioural change as a means to consider how this messaging plays upon those aforementioned dynamics. What will emerge is that militant Islamist propaganda seems to be largely geared towards corraling automatic thinking in its audiences by manipulating mental models, driving cyclical processes of cognitive reinforcement, increasing perceptions of crisis and fuelling cognitive biases. This then primes its audiences for engagement with material that is largely geared towards more deliberative thinking – e.g. *fatwas* that lay out a jurisprudential case.³⁶ This has implications for credibility and behavioural change too which will be explored in Parts 2 and 3.

Part 1: Competitive System of Meaning

There is a growing body of literature devoted to examining the role of identity constructs in extremist propaganda and much of this scholarship has tended to link the manipulation of bi-polar in-group and out-group (Other) identities with efforts to radicalise audiences towards taking action in support of "the cause".³⁷ After all, while the term radicalisation is highly contested, the study of what drives individuals and groups to engage in politically motivated violence stretches well-beyond the 21st century and has often emphasised the role of identity constructs in these dynamics.³⁸

³³ *Freakonomics* has done much to popularise the research and methodology of behavioural economists, <http://freakonomics.com/>.

³⁴ The UK government's "Behavioural Insights Team" was established to reshape the implementation and design of policy in accordance with the latest research in behavioural economics. For more see D. Halpern, *Inside the nudge unit* (London: WH Allen, 2015).

³⁵ For example, R. Thaler and C. Sunstein, *Nudge* (London: Penguin, 2009).

³⁶ A. Azzam, "Defense of Muslim Lands", 1993, <https://islamfuture.files.wordpress.com/2009/11/defence-of-the-muslim-lands.pdf>.

³⁷ For example, A. Smith, "From words to actions", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 27, no. 5, (2004), pp. 409-437; M. Hafez, "Rationality, culture, and structure in the making of suicide bombers", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29, no. 2, (2006), pp. 165-185; T. Johnson, "The Taliban insurgency and analysis of *shabnamah*", *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 18, no.3 (2007), pp. 314-344.

³⁸ For example, J. Rabbie, "A behavioural interaction model", *Terrorism and Political Violence* 3, no. 4 (1991), pp. 134-163; M. Ruthven, *Fundamentalism: The search for meaning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); C. Kinnvall, "Globalization

This study contributes to both bodies of scholarship because strategically designed in-group identity, out-group identity (Other), solution and crisis constructs provide the fundamental building blocks of the “competitive systems of meaning” that this study argues is central to the allure of militant Islamist propaganda.³⁹

The Importance of Identity

Given the emphasis that studies of propaganda and radicalisation place on identity, it is important to begin by defining the term and understanding why it is so important. Identity is understood here as that package of values, rooted in a historical narrative, that is strategically constructed in response to a socio-historically specific reality. Identities are far more than just a name that one attaches to themselves and others, a sentiment captured in the centrality of values to this definition of identity. After all, values operate “...as a standard or criterion for guiding action, for developing and maintaining attitudes toward relevant objects or situations, for justifying one’s own and other’s actions and attitudes, for morally judging self and others, and for comparing self with others”.⁴⁰ Thus identity constructs tend to operate as mental models through which perceptions and understandings of oneself, others and the world more broadly are shaped and reshaped.

Identity is incessantly leveraged in militant Islamist propaganda which typically demands its supporters place primacy on their Muslim identity over all others (e.g. race or nation) and use this lens to understand themselves and their place in the world. This excerpt from *Inspire* reflects just how explicit appeals to identity can be in this messaging: “You have to decide what your identity is. This will help determine your future course of action. Do you [define] yourself according to your culture or your religion? What really takes more precedence in your heart?”⁴¹ The authors of the English-language magazine *Azan* by the “Taliban in Khurasan” are even more explicit about the role identities play in shaping how one sees the world demanding that its readers “take the secular lens off of their eyes and they must see the world through the eyes of the Shariah.”⁴² Broader psychosocial forces play a crucial role in identity construction processes. After all, identities are strategically constructed and reconstructed in response to these contextual factors. Consequently, a more nuanced understanding of how identity constructs are leveraged in militant Islamist propaganda requires a consideration of what *broadly* characterises “crisis” and “solution” constructs in this messaging.

The Crisis Construct

Perceptions of crisis may not only contribute to identity construction processes but tend to act as an important push factor behind why individuals support extremist

and religious nationalism: Self, identity, and the search for ontological security”, *Political Psychology* 25, no. 5 (2004), pp. 741–767.

³⁹ The conceptual frameworks featured here have been previously applied in publications such as H. Ingram, “An analysis of Islamic State’s *Dabiq* magazine”, *Australian Journal of Political Science* (2016)

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10361146.2016.1174188>; H. Ingram, “An analysis of *Inspire* & *Dabiq*: Lessons from AQAP and Islamic State’s propaganda war”, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* (2016), <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1057610X.2016.1212551>.

⁴⁰ M. Rokeach, *Beliefs, attitudes, and values* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1970), p.160.

⁴¹ S. Khan, “The Egyptian”, *Inspire*, Issue 5, (2011) p.45.

⁴² M. Qasim, “On the road to Khilafah”, *Azan*, Issue 1 (2013), p.17.

groups and engage in politically motivated violence (i.e. radicalise).⁴³ Crisis constructs in extremist propaganda tend to be characterised by three interrelated factors:

- (a) *The presence and influence of Others*: In- and out-group identity construction often occurs relationally. In other words, one comes to know what one is because of what one is not (and vice versa). Moreover, awareness of out-groups often triggers comparisons of values that can have deep implications for relative status and meaning. When Others are presented as barometers for the in-group's societal or even existential condition during times of in-group crises, differences in identity may be not only afforded negative attributes (e.g. bad or deviancy) but manifest as indicators of threat.

Militant Islamists often frame the Other as anyone who is not part of their narrowly defined in-group of Sunni Muslims. For example, IS considers those who are not IS-aligned Sunni Muslims as "filthy"⁴⁴ and "evil"⁴⁵ affronts to God suffering from "the fever and delusion caused by sin, superstition, and secularism [that has] numbed what is left of their minds and senses."⁴⁶ By using emotionally and jurisprudentially loaded labels like *kuffar* (disbelievers), *murtaddin* (abandoners of Islam) and *rafida* (derogatory reference to Shia) to describe specific out-group identities, IS propaganda exacerbates the Other's negative attributes and fuels anxieties associated with these constructs with implicit connotations justifying violence.

- (b) *Uncertainty*: Characterised by complexity, ambiguity, deficit knowledge and unpredictability,⁴⁷ a significant body of empirical research has linked feelings of uncertainty with support for extremism. For example, an empirical study showed that uncertainty surpassed "terror associated with mortality" as a contributing factor when it comes to "group identification and thus ideological conviction and other group identification-related phenomena."⁴⁸ In another study, Hogg and Adelman showed how uncertainty drives an urge within individuals for groups and constructs that will relieve that uncertainty.⁴⁹ Other research has revealed a positive correlation between uncertainty and not only in-group superiority, perceived threat and injustice but "favourable attitudes towards violence" perpetrated by in-group members against out-groups.⁵⁰ Put simply, uncertainty tends to create a need in people to alleviate it by supporting "all sorts of things that would give them a feeling of certainty."⁵¹ Three types of uncertainty levers tend to be applied in militant Islamist propaganda: theological/jurisprudential (e.g. the

⁴³ Regardless of semantics, whether framed as "grievances", "alienation", "marginalisation" or some other term, there is broad consensus in the field that underpinning politically motivated violence is typically an individual and/or collective sense that socio-political problems need to be addressed with drastic measures. For more see M. Crenshaw, "The logic of terrorism", *Origins of Terrorism*, ed. W. Reich (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Centre, 1998), pp. 7-24; E. Sprinzak, "The process of delegitimation", *Terrorism & Political Violence* 3, no.1 (1991), pp.50-68; R. Pape, *Dying to win* (Melbourne: Scribe, 2005).

⁴⁴ "Murtaddin repent in the thousands", *Dabiq*, Issue 1 (2014), p. 48.

⁴⁵ "Conspiracy theory shirk", *Dabiq*, Issue 9 (2015), p. 15.

⁴⁶ "Foreword", *Dabiq*, Issue 15 (2016), p. 4.

⁴⁷ H. Hermans and G. Dimaggio, "Self, identity, and globalization in times of uncertainty", *American Psychological Association* 11, no.1 (2007), p.34.

⁴⁸ M. Hogg, C. Meehan, and J. Farquharson, "The solace of radicalism", *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 46 (2010), p.758.

⁴⁹ M. Hogg & J. Adelman, "Uncertainty-Identity Theory: Extreme Groups, Radical Behavior, and Authoritarian Leadership", *Journal of Social Issues* 69, no. 3 (2013), pp. 436-454.

⁵⁰ B. Doosje, A. Loseman and K. Van den Bos, "Determinants of Radicalization of Islamic Youth in the Netherlands: Personal Uncertainty, Perceived Injustice, and Perceived Group Threat", *Journal of Social Issues* 69, no. 3 (2013), pp. 586-604.

⁵¹ J. Dewey, *The quest for certainty* (Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 2005), p.33.

dilution of 'true' Islam),⁵² socio-political (e.g. foreign influence or attacks upon Muslims)⁵³ and existential (e.g. purpose of life).⁵⁴ Throughout the 20th and 21st century, these three uncertainty levers have often been captured in narratives that lament the erosion of "true" Islam (i.e. the breakdown of tradition) to exacerbate perceptions of crisis.

- (c) *The breakdown of tradition*: This refers to the perception that historically rooted norms of belief and practice associated with the in-group identity are changing due to the influence or threat of Others. It often manifests as a potent indicator of the Other's devious influence and a catalyst of uncertainty. A utopian history narrative inevitably lies at the heart of these appeals as this historical ideal is contrasted with the present-day predicament. For example, the Caliphate is often used as a symbol of Islam's historical glory while, in contrast, the nation-state becomes emblematic of Islam's modern day decline.⁵⁵ Of course, there is no period of Islamic history more revered than that of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions. After all, the example of the *salafs* provides "a definite model of perfect historical action for mankind, not only for Muslims. All groups at any time and in any social and cultural environment are bound to go back to this model in order to achieve the spirit and the perfection shown by the Prophet, his companions, and the first generation of Muslims."⁵⁶

In militant Islamist messaging, the root cause of the modern crises afflicting Muslims is often framed as a product of deviating from the example of Islam's pioneers. Consequently, militant Islamist messaging will often declare that they are seeking to present their audiences with "the most accurate presentation of Islam as followed by the *Salaf as-Salih*"⁵⁷ or to ensure that the *ummah's* response to its enemies is based "upon the principles of the Ahlus Sunnah wal Jama'ah under the guidance of the righteous scholars."⁵⁸ Indeed, when the theological/jurisprudential, socio-political and existential uncertainty levers are applied in extremist narratives it is regularly done so with reference to idealised historical constructions.

Extremist propaganda leverages the Other, uncertainty and the breakdown of tradition in its narratives to fuel perceptions of crisis in its audiences. These broad categories

⁵² As will be explored in greater detail later, the "dilution" of Islam, especially by supposedly "moderate" Muslims, is frequently used to exacerbate uncertainty about the legitimacy of Islamic teachings. This example is taken from Anwar Al-Awlaki's appeal targeting American Muslims: "The Muslim community in America has been witnessing a gradual erosion and decline in core Islamic principles so today many of your Scholars and Islamic organisations are openly approving of Muslims serving in the US Army to kill Muslims, joining the FBI to spy against Muslims" (A. Al-Awlaki, *Message to the American People* (2010), <https://archive.org/details/AwlakiToUsa>).

⁵³ Attacks on the *ummah* (community of believers) are frequently highlighted in militant Islamist narratives to accentuate feelings of uncertainty, in this case uncertainty regarding collective safety. For example, Osama Bin Laden would frequently highlight violence against Muslims to justify al Qaeda's violence: "Every day, from east to west, our *umma* of 1200 million Muslims is being slaughtered, in Palestine, in Iraq, Somalia, Western Sudan, Kashmir, the Philippines, Bosnia, Chechnya, and Assam" (O. Bin Laden, "Nineteen Students, December 26 2001", *Messages to the World: The statements of Osama Bin Laden* (London: Verso, 2005), p.153).

⁵⁴ Having a worthy life and death is a common sentiment in militant Islamist propaganda and is often designed to play upon individual uncertainties regarding the purpose of their life. For example, a *Dabiq* article titled "Hijrah from hypocrisy to sincerity" asserts: "The modern day slavery of employment, work hours, wages, etc., is one that leaves the Muslim in a constant feeling of subjugation to a *kafir* master. He does not live the might and honor that every Muslim should live and experience", "Hijrah from hypocrisy to sincerity", *Dabiq*, Issue 3 (2014), p.29.

⁵⁵ For examples see A. Al-Baghdadi, "A message to the mujahidin and the Muslim ummah in the month of Ramadan", Al-Hayat Media Center, June 2014, <http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/documents/baghdadi-caliph.pdf>; O. Bin Laden, "Crusader wars November 3 2001", *Messages to the World: The statements of Osama Bin Laden* (London: Verso) 2005, pp.133-138; "Some precious gems", *Azan*, Issue 1 (2013), p.8.

⁵⁶ M. Arkoun, "Enduring myths and changing realities", *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 588 (2003), p. 22.

⁵⁷ "Letter from the editor", *Inspire*, Issue 1 (2010), p.2.

⁵⁸ "Editorial", *Azan*, Issue 1(2013), p.3.

encapsulate an extraordinarily diverse array of potential grievances and socio-political issues but it is the fundamental psychosocial dynamics captured in them that is most important. By tying devious out-group identities to uncertainty and the breakdown of tradition, extremist narratives create a self-reinforcing cycle of perceived crisis.

The term *jahiliyyah*, a reference to pre-Islam Arabia, is often used in this messaging to capture Islam's modern crises. It is an extraordinarily powerful concept because of its multidimensionality. It represents the deepest of crises (i.e. the absence of Islam) but also hope because it was from *jahiliyyah* that the Prophet Muhammad and his companions emerged to bring Islam to the world. However, *jahiliyyah* has an even deeper resonance in militant Islamist narratives thanks to Sayyid Qutb and his extraordinarily influential text *Milestones* [1964]. Largely written while imprisoned and tortured by the Nasser regime, Qutb re-models the notion of *jahiliyyah* for the modern world. In *Milestones* he argues that "any society is a *jahili* society which does not dedicate itself to submission to God alone, in its beliefs and ideas in its observances of worship, and in its legal regulations. According to this definition, all societies existing in the world today are *jahili*."⁵⁹ For Qutb, the modern *jahiliyyah* is even more abhorrent than earlier manifestations because it is "based on rebellion against God's sovereignty"⁶⁰ rather than mere ignorance. Qutb's *jahiliyyah* captures a breadth and depth of crisis so extreme that only extreme solutions have any chance of success: "We are also surrounded by *Jahiliyyah* today, which is of the same nature as it was during the first period of Islam, perhaps a little deeper. Our whole environment, people's beliefs and ideas, habits and art, rules and laws is *Jahiliyyah*...."⁶¹ The term is used ubiquitously in militant Islamist propaganda as charismatic figures, from Abdullah Azzam to Anwar Al-Awlaki, and groups from all corners of the world, leverage *jahiliyyah*'s symbolic, historical, theological and, given Qutb's posthumous charismatic appeal, personal facets to exacerbate perceived crises and stress the need for solutions.

The Solution Construct

As perceptions of crisis intensify, a need to alleviate that sense of crisis emerges in individuals and groups. Thus, the solution construct in extremist propaganda both contributes to in- and out-group identity construction processes and acts as the corollary "pulling" force to the "pushing" effect of crisis towards adoption of extremism and legitimization of violence. It follows that what characterises the solution construct is exactly the opposite to the crisis construct:

- (a) *Commitment to the in-group identity*: Typically imbued with positive and empowering attributes, fidelity to the in-group identity's values and support of its members is often framed as crucial to overcoming crises. The in-group identity is typically framed as Sunni Muslims, preferably those aligned with the group or at least with the group's narrow interpretation of Islam, and imbued with traits like honour, piety, courage and love. This polarisation of the values associated with in- and out-group identities becomes an important way to not only dichotomously distinguish between in- and out-groups but use these identity constructs as mental models through which to reinforce perceptions of crisis and the need for solutions. As Silke argues: "Social psychology has long appreciated that groups in conflict become extremely polarised in their views of each other. There is a pervasive tendency to

⁵⁹ S. Qutb, "Milestones", *SIME Journal*, USA (2005), p.75.

⁶⁰ Ibid p.5.

⁶¹ Ibid p.14.

show increased appreciation of the traits and characteristics of the in-group... and to denigrate the members of the out-group.”⁶²

Given that what constitutes “true” Islam and what it is to be Muslim is defined by the group’s messaging, militant Islamist propaganda demands that Muslims address their “identity predicament much like a midlife crisis”⁶³ by placing primacy on their Muslim identity and seeing the world through that black and white prism. The centrality of propaganda in the campaign strategies of militant Islamist groups reflects the importance of solidifying a carefully constructed system of meaning for their audiences to understand the world. This was echoed in Al-Awlaki’s belief in one of the most important goals of the Islamist movement: “We should develop the awareness of the Muslims of their true identity.”⁶⁴ Seen through that lens, the solution is framed as inherent to accepting the identity itself: engage in violent *jihad* against enemies as an expression of faith and a means to champion the group’s politico-military agenda. What is fundamental here is that while *jihad* may be grounded in ideological justifications it is framed as a politico-military imperative due to perceived crises (i.e. contextual factors). This core sentiment has been expressed in a variety of ways over the decades from Abdullah Azzam’s declaration that “Jihad is the obligation of a lifetime, just like salah and fasting”⁶⁵ and *Inspire* magazine’s statement that “all a Muslim needs to fight the kuffar is enough Iman [faith] and the simplest of tools.”⁶⁶ Ultimately, the values of the in-group identity must be expressed in action or they remain in the abstract. The Others values are evident in their crisis-fuelling actions and so the in-group must respond accordingly with their own actions.⁶⁷

- (b) *Certainty*: Simplicity, stability, understanding and predictability are the defining characteristics of certainty. Studies have shown that people will succumb to cognitive biases, adhere to extreme beliefs and engage in risky behaviour in pursuit of certainty.⁶⁸ In many respects, the quest for certainty in times of uncertainty is driven by a need for what Kinnvall calls “ontological security” which is “...a security of being, a sense of confidence and trust that the world is what it appears to be.”⁶⁹ While increasing uncertainty, militant Islamist propaganda also promises certainty to its supporters via commitment to the in-group identity, its ideology (inevitably framed as “true” Islam) and its socio-political agenda. As *Dabiq* states, uncertainty can be removed from the heart of any Muslim if they have “certainty in Allah’s promise” which is a sentiment that “should pulse in the heart of every mujahid.”⁷⁰ The black and white lens extremist propaganda offers its audiences helps to transform what is a complex, ambiguous and unpredictable modern world into one that is simple, stable, understandable and predictable.

⁶² A. Silke, “Retaliating against terrorism” in A. Silke, ed., *Terrorism, victims and society* (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2003), p.228.

⁶³ S. Khan, “Blended duality: Muslim and American?” *Inspire*, Issue 11 (2011) p.17.

⁶⁴ A. Al-Awlaki, *Battle of the Hearts and Minds* (2008), Author’s collection, p.23.

⁶⁵ A. Azzam, *Join the Caravan* (2nd Edition) (2001), Author’s collection, p.26.

⁶⁶ Y. Ibrahim, “Inspired by ‘Inspire’”, *Inspire*, Issue 11 (2013), p.19.

⁶⁷ This was a central theme of IS spokesman Abu Muhammad Al-Adnani’s “That they live by proof” speech. See A. Al-Adnani, “That they live by proof” (2016), *Al Hayat Media Centre*.

⁶⁸ For more see W. Swann, A. Gomez, D. Seyle, J. Morales and C. Huici, “Identity Fusion”, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 96, no.5 (2009), pp.995-1011; M. Hogg, A. Kruglanski, and K. Van den Bos, “Uncertainty and the roots of extremism”, *Journal of Social Issues* 69, no.3 (2013), pp. 407-418.

⁶⁹ C. Kinnvall, “Globalization and religious nationalism: Self, identity, and the search for ontological security”, *Political Psychology* 25, no. 5 (2004), p. 746.

⁷⁰ “The Islamic State before al-Malhamah”, *Dabiq*, Issue 3 (2014) pp.5.

- (c) *Reinforcement of traditions*: Reflecting the inherently antagonistic relationship between crisis and solution constructs, the protection and championing of threatened traditions is a crucial feature of extremist propaganda. Calls to return to the example of the Prophet Muhammad in order to overcome the modern *jahiliyyah* is an effort to appeal to traditions and return to an Islam that is universally applicable, uncompromising and politically active. As Anwar Al-Awlaki asserted: “We call for the Islam that was sent by Allah to Prophet Muhammad....”⁷¹ When Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi declared the establishment of IS’s so-called Caliphate he framed it as an opportunity to return to previous glories: “Raise your head high, for today – by Allah’s grace – you have a state and khilāfah, which will return your dignity, might, rights, and leadership. It is a state where the Arab and non-Arab, the white man and black man, the easterner and westerner are all brothers.”⁷² The reinforcement of traditions thus manifests as a bulwark to crisis-inducing Others and a celebration of the in-group and the solutions only it is capable of providing.

The overarching grand narrative of militant Islamist propaganda typically declares that “we are the champions and protectors of (appropriately aligned) Sunni Muslims (i.e. the in-group identity), everyone outside of this narrow category are enemies (i.e. out-group identities) responsible for the *ummah*’s crises, so support us and our solutions (i.e. the group’s politico-military agenda)”. Of course, the nuances of these identity, crisis and solution constructs will differ between groups but the fundamental dynamics described here are broadly similar.⁷³ Militant Islamists inevitably deploy an extraordinary variety of messaging designed to reinforce this central pitch to supporters. The extremist’s system of meaning through which supporters are compelled to perceive and understand the world does not exist in an abstract vacuum but is at once a product of and response to psychosocial forces, socio-historical context and strategic factors. For militant Islamist propagandists, the potential for their system of meaning to shape the perceptions and polarise the support of followers is heavily reliant upon creating self-perpetuating and compounding cycles using interconnected narratives.

Fuelling Propaganda’s Cyclically Reinforcing Dynamic

The varied interplay of identity, solution and crisis constructs in extremist narratives is designed to fuel propaganda’s cyclically reinforcing dynamics. As illustrated in Figure 1, the more that dichotomised in- and out-group identities are respectively imbued with positive and negative values so perceptions of crisis will become increasingly acute and the urgency of implementing solutions more desperate. In turn, as increased perceptions of Other-induced crises fuel the need for in-group generated solutions, so the bi-polarity between in- and out-group identities becomes starker. Consequently, these processes work to further augment propaganda’s “competitive system of meaning” via self-reinforcing and compounding cycles. Put simply, the more extreme one’s sense of crisis, the more extreme the required solutions, the more malevolent the Other, the more pure the in-group:

Self-uncertainty in conjunction with feelings that one’s cherished attitudes, values, and practices are under threat [i.e. the Other and

⁷¹ “Interview: Anwar al-Awlaki” *Al-Jazeera Online*, (2010)
<http://www.aljazeera.com/focus/2010/02/2010271074776870.html>.

⁷² A. Al-Baghdadi, “A message to the mujahidin”, June 2014, p.5.

⁷³ For example, while a common overarching goal amongst militant Islamist groups is the establishment of the Caliphate – typically framed as the ultimate means of championing the in-group (Muslims), its traditions and achieving certainty – how that is to be achieved and under what circumstances differs considerably between groups.

breakdown of tradition] forms a toxic and societally dangerous mix – an environment in which people identify with extreme groups that have radical agendas for action and may reject moderate groups with gradualist agendas.⁷⁴

The variety of messages that characterise the propaganda campaigns of militant Islamist groups reflects more than just an effort to appeal to the broadest possible spectrum of potential supporters. This variety of messaging also provides a diverse array of hooks that mean that if an individual is susceptible to a particular message (e.g. Muslim persecution) it renders them susceptible to others messages due to the deep interconnectedness of these narratives. To explore this variety, it is useful to consider three core narratives common in militant Islamist propaganda.

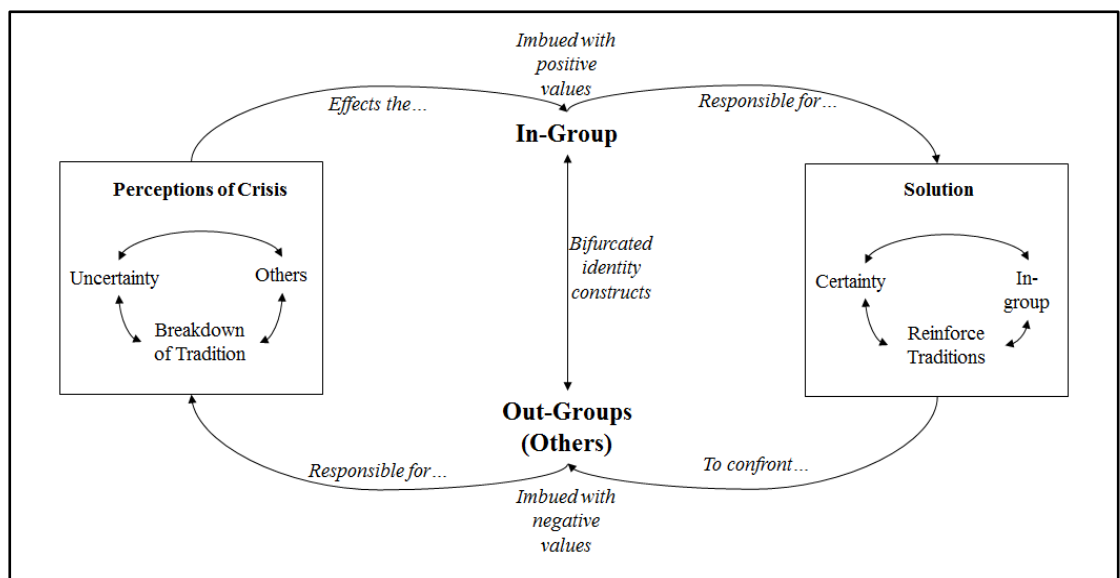


Figure 1: Propaganda's cyclically reinforcing dynamic

Three types of narratives are particularly important in fuelling propaganda's cyclically reinforcing dynamics and championing its system of meaning by sharpening and strengthening specific linkages between identity, solution and crisis constructs. Graphically illustrated in Figure 2, value-, dichotomy- and crisis-reinforcing narratives are used in militant Islamist propaganda to cumulatively and varyingly strengthen the overall system of meaning. Each type of narrative is designed to highlight and accentuate a different aspect of the interplay between in- and out-group identities, solution and crisis constructs. In doing so, it reinforces connections in the minds of its audiences, primes them for automatic thinking, shapes deliberative thinking and helps to increase susceptibility to cognitive biases based on pre-existing mental models.

⁷⁴ M. Hogg, C. Meehan and J. Farquharson, 'The solace of radicalism', *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 46 (2010), p.1065.

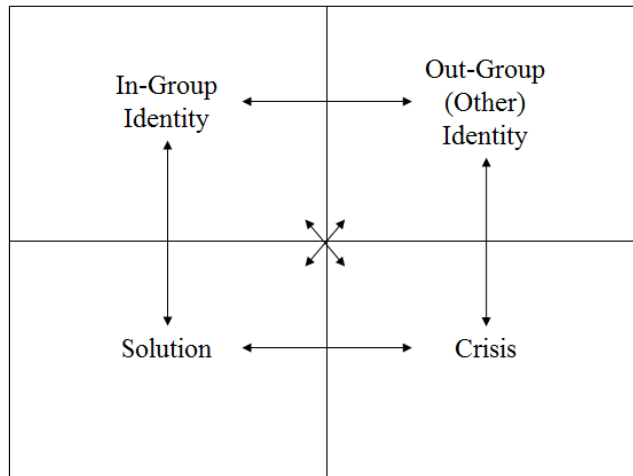


Figure 2: The value-, dichotomy- and crisis-reinforcing interplay

Value-reinforcing narratives: Represented by vertical arrows in Figure 2, value-reinforcing narratives tie the in-group with solutions and Others with crises. As the name suggests, the purpose of this type of messaging is to solidify the in-group's positive values and the out-group's negative attributes. For example, an article in *Dabiq's* fifteenth issue identified six reasons why IS hate and fight the West: three related to traits such as disbelief and permitting "the very things that Allah has prohibited while banning many of the things He has permitted"⁷⁵ while the remaining three relate to politico-military attacks on the global *ummah*.⁷⁶ This interplay of values and actions is a feature of not just how the negative values of Others are exacerbated but also how the in-group's positive values manifest in actions. Indeed, actions are the crucial means by which elites within the in-group identity are distinguished. Those who engage in *jihad* are the elites whilst martyrs are the elites within that elite. As Abdullah Azzam declared:

A small group: they are the ones who carry the convictions and ambitions. And an even smaller group from this small group, are the ones who flee from the worldly life in order to spread and act upon these ambitions. And an even smaller group from this elite group, are the ones who sacrifice their souls and their blood in order to bring victory to these ambitions and principles.⁷⁷

In a content analysis of *Azan*, *Inspire* and *Dabiq*, the most common type of narrative was that which tied the in-group identity with solutions.⁷⁸ Prioritising empowering narratives that encourage audiences to engage in action may be a strategically better option than risk overwhelming audience's with the Other's malevolence and complicity in crises. Put simply, militant Islamist propaganda tends to encourage rather than intimidate followers to take action. This finding mirrors Smith's analysis which argued that, "groups that view themselves as morally superior to others may be more likely to

⁷⁵ "Why we hate you and why we fight you", *Dabiq*, Issue 15 (2016), p.31.

⁷⁶ "Why we hate you and why we fight you", *Dabiq* issue 15 (2016), pp.30-33.

⁷⁷ A. Azzam, *Martyrs: The building blocks of nations* (2001), Author's collection.

⁷⁸ The following analyses identified how value-, dichotomy- and crisis-reinforcing narratives were prioritised across *Azan*, *Inspire* and *Dabiq* magazines: H. Ingram, "An analysis of the Taliban in Khurasan's *Azan* (issues 1-5)", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 38, no. 7 (2015), pp. 560-579; H. Ingram, "An analysis of Islamic State's *Dabiq* magazine", *Australian Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 3 (2016), pp. 458-477, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10361146.2016.1174188>; H. Ingram, "An analysis of *Inspire* and *Dabiq*: Lessons from AQAP and Islamic State's propaganda war", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* (2016), pp. 1-19, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1057610X.2016.1212551>.

engage in violence” and thus “when trying to predict whether a group will engage in terrorism, it may be more important to examine how the group describes itself – as opposed to how it describes its opponents.”⁷⁹

Dichotomy-reinforcing narratives: Represented by horizontal arrows in Figure 2, these narratives are designed to highlight the dualities between in- and out-group identities and solution and crisis constructs. The contrast between in- and out-group identities in this type of messaging is designed to elicit powerful psychological effects on its audiences:

The construction of self and other is therefore almost always a way to define superior and inferior beings. Superior are those on the inside... who represent purity, order, truth, beauty, good and right... while those on the outside are affected by pollution, falsity, ugliness, bad, and wrong....⁸⁰

These sentiments are captured in the following excerpt from Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi’s 2014 Mosul address:

O ummah of Islam, indeed the world today has been divided into two camps and two trenches, with no third camp present: The camp of Islam and faith, and the camp of kufr (disbelief) and hypocrisy – the camp of the Muslims and the mujahidin everywhere, and the camp of the jews, the crusaders, their allies, and with them the rest of the nations and religions of kufr, all being led by America and Russia, and being mobilized by the jews.⁸¹

The emphasis on values as a gauge of success (as opposed to material things) is a common theme in militant Islamist narratives. For example, as IS faces increasing pressures in the field, its former spokesman Abu Muhammad Al-Adnani reminded supporters that no matter the losses of personnel, territory or resources:

True defeat is the loss of willpower and desire to fight. America will be victorious and the mujahidin will be defeated in only one situation. We would be defeated and you victorious only if you were able to remove the Quran from the Muslims’ hearts. How impossible a feat!⁸²

Solution and crisis constructs are contrasted towards two aims. The first is to distinguish between solution and crisis as in the following from Qutb: “Islam cannot accept any mixing with Jahiliyyah, either in its concept or in the modes of living which are derived from this concept. Either Islam will remain or Jahiliyyah...”⁸³ When IS propagandists spoke of the “extinction of the grey zone” it was a direct reference to this incompatibility.⁸⁴ The second is to highlight how solutions can address crises. In “They shall by no means harm you but with a slight evil”, IS’s Al-Adnani declared:

⁷⁹ A. Smith, “From words to actions”, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 27, no. 5 (2004), p.431.

⁸⁰ C. Kinnvall, “Globalization and religious nationalism: Self, identity, and the search for ontological security”, *Political Psychology* 25, no. 5 (2004), p. 763.

⁸¹ A. Al-Baghdadi, “A message to the mujahidin”, June 2014, p.4.

⁸² A. Al-Adnani, “That they live by proof”, *Al Hayat Media Centre* (2016), p.5.

⁸³ S. Qutb, “Milestones”, p.116.

⁸⁴ “The extinction of the grayzone”, *Dabiq*, Issue 7 (2015), pp.54-66.

Enough humiliation in the squares, there is no coexistence and peace between you and the Rawafid (pejorative term for Shia).... if peaceful means really have retrieved or preserved dignity or ended falsehood the prophet peace and blessings be upon him wouldn't have shed one drop of blood, and Allah would have sufficed us the burden of jihad.⁸⁵

Crisis-reinforcing narratives: These narratives, represented by diagonal arrows in Figure 2, tend to tie treacherous in-group members with crises. These are particularly significant in militant Islamist propaganda because such messaging is often indicative of a group's *takfirist* tendencies (i.e. condemning fellow Muslims as apostates). Along with the rulers of Muslim majority countries, it is moderate Muslims that are often the sources of contempt in this type of messaging. For Qutb, such was the permeation of *jahili* forces in modern societies that "...what we consider to be Islamic culture, Islamic sources, Islamic philosophy and Islamic thought are also constructs of Jahiliyyah."⁸⁶ Militant Islamists will often frame both "hard" and "soft" counterterrorism as efforts to change Islam itself. As Al-Awlaki stated: "We call for the Islam that was sent by Allah to Prophet Muhammad, the Islam of jihad and sharia ruling. Any voice that calls for this Islam, they either kill the person or the character; they kill the person by murdering or jailing them, or they kill the character by distorting their image in the media."⁸⁷ In many respects, crisis-reinforcing narratives are shots fired in the "civil war" within Islam as competing systems of meaning clash over how their shared target audience (i.e. Sunni Muslims) should perceive the world. For militant Islamists, so-called moderate Muslims are "in reality a non-Muslim"⁸⁸ who are deemed most responsible for Islam's decline and the plight of the *ummah*:

Such people have had their religion diluted and, not surprisingly, are always amongst the first to speak out in any case where the mujahidin display their harshness towards crusaders, attempting to disguise their criticism towards the mujahidin as concern for the image of Islam.⁸⁹

Summary

For propaganda to be effectively deployed for strategic purposes it must contribute to shaping the perceptions and polarising the support of target audiences. Merely disseminating messages like a series of advertisements is unlikely to have the type of longer-term and psychologically deeper effect that imbues a supporter base with resilience to opponents and a greater sense of activism. As this analysis has shown, militant Islamist propaganda seeks to provide its audiences with a lens through which to understand the world. This "competitive system of meaning" inevitably manifests as an alternative perspective of the world compared to that of opponents. But this system of meaning manifests as more than just interconnected ideological contentions. Rather, carefully designed identity, solution and crisis constructs leverage psychosocial forces and strategic factors to shape the way audiences perceive themselves, others

⁸⁵ A. Al-Adnani, "They shall by no means harm you but with a slight evil", *Fursan Al-Balagh Media translation section*, 2013, p. 14, <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2013/07/shaykh-abc5ab-mue1b8a5ammad-al-e28098adnc481nc4ab-al-shc481mc4ab-22they-will-not-harm-you-except-for-some-annoyance22-en.pdf>.

⁸⁶ Ibid p.14.

⁸⁷ "Interview: Anwar al-Awlaki", 7 February 2010.

⁸⁸ A. Al-Awlaki, *Battle of the Hearts and Minds* (2008), p.8.

⁸⁹ "The burning of the murtadd pilot", *Dabiq*, Issue 7 (2015), p. 6.

and the world more broadly. This is because such constructs tend to act as mental models through which actions are rationalised and justified.⁹⁰

Part 2: Credibility

The perceived credibility of a source of information or authority can have a significant impact on how receptive an audience will be to a message and its messengers. Source credibility is a subject that has attracted studies from a range of disciplines including political science, social psychology and advertising.⁹¹ This research almost inevitably considers the issue of credibility within the context of its implications for persuasion and power. It follows that the complex dynamics of credibility are reliant upon not only the top-down forces of messenger, message and how both are strategically presented to audiences but bottom-up considerations relating to the audience's predispositions (e.g. self-validation potential).⁹²

This analysis focuses on how militant Islamist groups use propaganda to convince its audiences that they are a credible source of information and authority in three ways: (i.) by using messengers with carefully managed images and narratives to act as the face of the organisation and its propaganda, (ii.) by addressing the 3Rs of effective messaging (reach, relevance and resonance) as comprehensively as possible, and (iii.) manipulating their perceived say-do gap and that of their enemies.

Militant Islamist Charismatic Leadership

During times of acute crisis, particularly when the *ulema* (clergy) are perceived to be complicit with authorities deemed responsible for socio-political problems, leadership has often emerged from the *ummah* in Sunni-dominated societies. Charismatic figures have played a particularly prominent role in the *Sunni* militant Islamist milieu precisely because these movements have emerged not only on the fringes of but as opposition

⁹⁰ As the World Development Report contends: "Without mental models of the world, it would be impossible for people to make most decisions in daily life. And without *shared* mental models, it would be impossible in many cases for people to develop institutions, solve collective action problems, feel a sense of belonging and solidarity, or even understand one another", *World Development Report 2015* (2015), p.62.

⁹¹ Those interested in reading a cross-section of studies see J. French and B. Raven, "The bases of social power", in D. Cartwright, ed., *Studies in Social Power* (Ann Arbor (Michigan): Institute for Social Research, 1959), pp. 150-167; M. Nesler, H. Aguinis, B. Quigley, and J. Tedeschi, "The effect of credibility on perceived power", *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 23, no. 17 (1993), pp. 1407-1425; J. McCroskey and T. Jenson, "Image of mass media news sources", *Journal of Broadcasting* 19, vol. 2 (1975), pp. 169-180; D. Westerman, P. Spence and B. Van Der Heide, "A social network as information: The effect of system generated reports of connectedness on credibility on Twitter", *Computers in Human Behavior* 28 (2012), pp. 199-206.

⁹² For example, contrary to studies which contended that there was a positive relationship between high source credibility and high confidence and receptivity to a message, Clark and Evans' empirical findings supported their assertions that "these effects may be limited to situations in which the position of a message is initially perceived as proattitudinal. Furthermore, we hypothesized that an opposite relation should emerge when messages are viewed as counterattitudinal – greater self-validation when a message source is low rather than high in credibility"; J. Clark and A. Evans, "Source credibility and persuasion: The role of message position in self-validation", *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 40, no. 8 (2014), p. 1035. Hovland and Weiss' empirical study of "the effects of credibility of source on acquisition and retention of communication material" found the amount of "factual information learned" was the same whether the source was of "high" or "low" credibility and the level of retained learning remained similar after four weeks. However, subjects demonstrated a resistance to accepting information provided by the "untrustworthy source" although "if this resistance to acceptance diminishes with time while the content which itself provides the basis for the opinion is forgotten more slowly, there will be an increase after the communication in the extent of agreement with an untrustworthy source", C. Hovland and W. Weiss, "The influence of source credibility on communication effectiveness", *Public Opinion Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (1951), p. 650. For more empirical research on the triggering of confirmation biases see E. Dawson, T. Gilovich and D. Regan, "Motivated reasoning and performance on the Wason Selection Task", *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 28, no. 10 (2002), pp. 1379-1387; M. Rabin and J. Schrag, "First impressions matter: A model of confirmatory bias", *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* (February 1999), pp. 37-81.

to established religious and political authorities. In many respects, the modern evolution of radical and militant Islamism could be traced via the biographies of charismatic figures like Sayyid Qutb, Abdullah Azzam, Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi and Osama Bin Laden.⁹³ There is broad consensus in the field⁹⁴ that charismatic leaders forge emotion-based leader-follower bonds (i.e. charisma) by leveraging crises in communities of potential support, attributing those crises to enemies and presenting themselves (with varying degrees of subtlety) as symbols of the in-group identity and the one most capable of solving those crises.⁹⁵ Charismatic figures thus tend to emerge by leveraging many of the same psychosocial dynamics and strategic factors that propagandists seek to manipulate.

There are some fundamental attributes shared by almost all militant Islamist charismatic figures in the eyes of their supporters: piety, courage, humility and sacrifice. It is around these core attributes that each charismatic figure carefully crafts their image and narrative to maximise the appeal of both themselves as the messenger and the message itself. With access to modern communication technologies, the performance of the charismatic image and narrative can be planned, rehearsed and edited to achieve the desired result. The following excerpt from Wright's *The Looming Tower* tells how Bin Laden delivered a poem during celebrations for the marriage of his son and:

...wasn't satisfied with the result – knowing that the poem would be featured on the Arabic satellite channels and an al-Qaeda recruitment video – so he had the cameras set up again the following morning to record his recitation a second time. He even stationed a few supporters in front of him to cry out praise, as if there were hundreds still in the hall, instead of a handful of reporters and cameramen.⁹⁶

One of the most powerful ways in which militant Islamist charismatic figures seek to build up their own charisma is by drawing on the charismatic capital of preceding leaders. This is often achieved by drawing linkages between themselves and predecessors, using the image of revered ideologues in the presentation of their own image or directly citing the words of their predecessors. In doing so, militant Islamist charismatic leaders present themselves as part of a proud history of resistance which they are merely the contemporary heirs. This trend is a form of routinisation known as “transformative routinisation” or the “transformative charisma phenomenon” and it results in chains of charismatic leaders each of whom emerge, to varying degrees, by leveraging the charismatic capital of predecessors while also generating their own unique charismatic appeal.

⁹³ For analysis of militant Islamist charismatic leadership see E. Beevor, “Coercive radicalization: Charismatic authority and the internal strategies of ISIS and the Lord’s Resistance Army”, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* (2016), pp. 1-26; H. Ingram, *The charismatic leadership phenomenon in radical and militant Islamism* (Oxford: Routledge, 2013).

⁹⁴ Delving into the complex multidisciplinary field of charismatic leadership theory is tangential to the purpose of this Research Paper. For an analysis of psychoanalytical, self-concept, sociological symbolic and social formation approaches, see H. Ingram, *The charismatic leadership phenomenon in radical and militant Islamism* (2013), Chapter 1.

⁹⁵ Weber’s seminal work on leadership in *Economy and Society* profoundly influenced the field of charismatic leadership theory. In this work, Weber placed charismatic leadership within the context of three pure types of legitimate domination: (i.) Rational grounds, based on legal authority, (ii.) Traditional grounds, based on beliefs in customs, and (iii.) Charismatic grounds, emotional leader-follower bonds based on the perceived exceptionalism of the leader; M. Weber, *Economy and Society* (New York: Bedminster Press, 1968).

⁹⁶ L. Wright, *The Looming Tower* (London: Penguin, 2007), p. 334.

Three archetypal militant Islamist charismatic leaders have tended to emerge:

The spiritual guide/scholar: These are the holy scholars of holy war. Typically portraying the physical image of an Islamic scholar, spiritual guides tend to use their supposed jurisprudential expertise, often reflective of formal *sharia* training, to call upon supporters to engage in action and to authorise the group's politico-military agenda. Despite an image that is based on jurisprudential expertise, spiritual guides tend to portray themselves as distinct from and thus untarnished by the established *ulema* (clergy). Examples include the Indonesian Abu Bak'r Bashir and the Egyptian Omar Abdel Rahman.

The statesman/general: These are the senior political/military leaders of their organisations; the *sheikhs* who are the mobilisers and facilitators of *jihad*. While they may not always directly engage in military action (although they almost inevitably have a history of such engagement), their image is that of a fearless defender of Islam and the *ummah*. Those who want to stress the military dimension of their image will often wear khaki attire or carry a weapon. While their messaging will naturally contain references to *suras* and *hadiths*, without the jurisprudential expertise of the spiritual guide, the statesman/general tends to focus on strategically and emotionally powerful narratives. Prominent examples include Osama Bin Laden and the Chechen Shamil Basayev.

The field commander/warrior: Often younger than the aforementioned leaders, this charismatic figure, the *mujahid*, represents the field commander/warrior who not only calls people to *jihad* but fights in the field. While the sentiment underpinning the *sheikhs* could be captured in the phrase "do as I say", the *mujahid* is unequivocally "do as I do". With little jurisprudential expertise, the field commander/warrior's message will often echo the ideological and strategic contentions of more senior figures but stress actions in the field as the real world product of those values. Outside of the context of war, the *mujahid's* charisma often diminishes unless they are able to transition to one of the other ideal-types. The quintessential example of this charismatic figure is Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi.

These typologies are ideal-types because in reality militant Islamist charismatic figures often manifest as hybrids. Also, charismatic figures over time will evolve their image and narrative in response to strategic dynamics in order to maintain or maximise their charismatic appeal. For example, Bin Laden's charismatic image went through several distinct evolutionary phases over three decades. During the Afghan-Soviet war, Bin Laden portrayed the image of the *mujahid/sheikh* out in the field fighting with his fellow warriors but also managing and organising the war effort alongside his mentor Abdullah Azzam through *Makhtab al-Khadamat* (MAK). This charismatic image evolved outside of direct engagement in war through the 1990s via more prominent general/statesman traits. Indeed, Bin Laden would become the quintessential example of the *sheikh* (statesman/general) typology. However, one always felt that Bin Laden was aspiring towards his mentor's charismatic image; that of the "warrior-scholar". As the hybrid of the three archetypes and undoubtedly the most revered in the militant Islamist milieu, the "warrior-scholar" is an ideal case study to explore the dynamics of the charismatic leadership phenomenon.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ The leader who merges knowledge and action is highly revered in the militant Islamist milieu. It is telling that IS often refers to its leaders as *ash-Shaykh al-Mujahid*. The author thanks Charlie Winter for this observation.

Abdullah Azzam: Warrior-Scholar-Martyr⁹⁸

Few other individuals are more important for the evolution of modern militant Islamism than Abdullah Azzam. In life, Azzam's charismatic image was that of the warrior-scholar. With a doctorate in Islamic jurisprudence, Azzam's academic and professional career took him to universities across North Africa, the Middle East and South Asia.⁹⁹ These experiences both solidified his credentials as a *sharia* expert and allowed him to engage with the demographic of young tertiary educated but un- or underemployed that would fill the ranks of many militant Islamist groups regionally and foreign fighter units during the Afghan-Soviet war. The "scholar" dimension of Azzam's charismatic image was influenced by another factor. Before Azzam, the key ideologues of modern militant Islamism were laymen like Sayyid Qutb and Muhammad Faraj whose works, such as *Milestones* and *The Neglected Duty*, while popular, had been publicly discredited by *sharia* experts. Azzam's expertise brought jurisprudential legitimacy to militant Islamist thought. It was a message he delivered in an oratory style that was eloquent, passionate and direct.

Further enhancing Azzam's charismatic image was the fact that he actively participated in *jihad*. Azzam's message was not just talk, it manifested in his actions: "The love of *Jihaad* continues to dominate my life, Myself, My feelings, My heart and my senses."¹⁰⁰ Prior to the Afghan-Soviet war, Azzam was a member of the Palestinian resistance.¹⁰¹ However, as a biography by the now defunct *Azzam Publications* reminded audiences, Azzam would leave the resistance after being told "quite clearly and bluntly, 'This revolution has no religion behind it.'"¹⁰² But it was the Afghan-Soviet war that would make Azzam arguably the most significant figure of modern Islamist militancy. His involvement reflected his status as a "warrior-scholar". Azzam's fatwa *Defense of Muslims Lands*,¹⁰³ which received broad support by many prominent *ulema* of the time, was crucial for efforts to attract foreign fighters to Afghanistan because it framed defensive *jihad* as *fard 'ayn* (an individual obligation upon all capable Muslims). Other publications such as *Join the Caravan*¹⁰⁴ and *Caravan of Martyrs*, a series of obituaries for those killed in the Afghan-Soviet war, were crucial in boosting Azzam's charismatic appeal and attracting foreign fighters. Azzam's support of the war effort extended beyond propaganda production as he was, reflecting the *sheikh* typology, actively involved in recruitment, fundraising and resource acquisition as well as administration and management particularly through MAK.

Azzam's physical image reinforced his "warrior-scholar" reputation: "Azzam favoured long, flowing robes, as well as the black-and-white *kaffiyeh* of the Palestinians".¹⁰⁵

⁹⁸ For a more in-depth analysis of Abdullah Azzam's life and influence, see T. Hegghammer, "Abdullah Azzam and Palestine", *Welt des Islam* 53-3-4 (2013), pp. 353-387. Hegghammer's forthcoming biography of Abdullah Azzam promises to be the field's most comprehensive study to date.

⁹⁹ Abdullah Azzam reportedly received his Bachelor's Degree in sharia from Syria's Damascus University, his doctorate from Egypt's Al-Azhar University before accepting positions at Saudi Arabia's King Abdul Aziz University (where he worked alongside Sayyid Qutb's brother, Muhammad) and eventually the International Islamic University in Islamabad, Pakistan.

¹⁰⁰ A. Azzam, "The will of 'Abdullah Yusuf 'Azzam", 1986, <https://www.scribd.com/document/13150405/Will-of-Abdullah-Azzam>.

¹⁰¹ For an analysis of Azzam's experiences and influence in Palestine, see T. Hegghammer, "Abdullah Azzam and Palestine" (2013), pp. 353-387.

¹⁰² *Sheikh Abdullah Azzam*, Azzam Publications [defunct], Author's collection.

¹⁰³ A. Azzam, "Defense of Muslim Lands", 1993, <https://islamfuture.files.wordpress.com/2009/11/defence-of-the-muslim-lands.pdf>.

¹⁰⁴ A. Azzam, "Join the Caravan" (2nd Edition), 2010, <https://ebooks.worldofislam.info/ebooks/Jihad/Join%20the%20Caravan.pdf>.

¹⁰⁵ M. Weaver, *A portrait of Egypt: A journey through the world of Militant Islam* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Girouz, 2001), p.181.

Photographs of Azzam accompanying his publications were designed to reinforce his “warrior-scholar” image. For example, a series of photos that often accompanied his biography released by Azzam Publications would show the elderly man on the battlefield in one image and then Azzam speaking behind a lectern in another.¹⁰⁶ By merging jurisprudential credentials with direct engagement in military action, Azzam’s image could not have presented a starker contrast with elitist Islamic scholars or political leaders miles from the battlefield. Only death could elevate Azzam’s status any higher and, in death, “martyr” provided the final dimension to a powerful charismatic image. His posthumous charismatic appeal is testimony to his own words: “What is more beautiful than the writing of the *ummah*’s history with both the ink of a scholar and his blood....”¹⁰⁷

Azzam’s charismatic image epitomised the three central components of his message. First, Azzam contended that the true power of the *ummah* could only be unleashed if Muslims reject divisive *kufur* constructs, such as the nation-state, and unite transnationally. This required all Muslims to give primacy to their Muslim identity as the lens through which to understand the world because, according to Azzam, “unfortunately, when we think about Islam we think nationally. We fail to let our vision pass beyond geographic border that have been drawn up for us by the *kuffar*.”¹⁰⁸

Second, *jihad* was framed as the solution for the *ummah*’s malaise. As Azzam would often say: “*Jihad* and the rifle alone: no negotiations, no conferences and no dialogues.” He left his audiences with no doubt that extreme solutions were required to address the *ummah*’s extreme crisis:

So, the bloody tale of Bukhara, the narrative of mutilated Palestine, and blazing Eden, and enslaved peoples, the sorry stories of Spain, the terrible accounts of Eritrea, sore Bulgaria, the tragedy of Sudan, the devastated remnants of Lebanon, Somalia, Burma, Caucasia and its deep wounds, Uganda, Zanzibar, Indonesia, Nigeria. All these slaughters and tragedies are the best lessons for us. Will we take admonishment from the past before we lose the present? Or will history repeat itself over us while we swallow degradation, fall into oblivion as those before us did, and lose just as they lost?¹⁰⁹

In regards to *jihad*, Azzam was unequivocal: defensive *jihad* of Muslim lands is a compulsory and personal obligation upon all able-bodied Muslims (*jihad fard ‘ayn*) while offensive *jihad* was a collective obligation until sufficient numbers for success are attained. As Azzam declared in *Defense of Muslim Lands*:

...if the *kuffar* infringe upon a hand span of Muslim land, *jihad* becomes *fard ‘ayn* for its people and for those nearby. If they fail to repel the *kuffar* due to lack of resources or due to indolence, then the *fard ‘ayn* of *jihad* spreads to those behind, and carries on spreading in this process, until the *jihad* is *fard ‘ayn* upon the whole earth from East to the West.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ Sheikh Abdullah Azzam, Azzam Publications [defunct], Author’s collection.

¹⁰⁷ A. Azzam, “Martyrs: The building blocks of nations”, 2001, http://www.religioscope.com/info/doc/jihad/azzam_martyrs.htm.

¹⁰⁸ A. Azzam, “Defense of Muslim Lands”, p.18.

¹⁰⁹ A. Azzam, “Join the Caravan”, p.25.

¹¹⁰ A. Azzam, “Defense of Muslim Lands”, p. 8.

For Azzam, *jihad* was more than just a political or military tool: “iron is used for struggle, and Allah descended it in order to protect this religion, to preserve our values from being corrupted, and to prevent the foolish ones from toying with the concepts and the scales we hold dear.”¹¹¹ Azzam’s framing of *jihad* rendered the popular duality of *jihad al-akbar* (the greater jihad) and *jihad al-asghar* (the lesser jihad) as invalid: “the saying, ‘We have returned from the lesser *jihad* (battle) to the greater *jihad* (*jihad* of the soul)’ which people quote on the basis that it is a *hadith*, is in fact a false, fabricated *hadith* which has no basis.”¹¹² Instead Azzam argued that wherever *jihad* appears in the *Quran* it unequivocally refers to war.¹¹³ Militant Islamists have since championed the *fard ‘ayn* and *fard kifaya* duality as the legitimate distinction. Moreover, Azzam’s framing of *jihad* made it of equal importance to other compulsory obligations like *salah*, *zakat*, *hajj* and *sawm*. Azzam argued that “there is no difference between he who does not fight and he who does not pray, fast or pay *zakat*”¹¹⁴ even asserting that “neglecting *jihad* is worse in these days.”¹¹⁵

Third, Azzam was pivotal in elevating the martyr to the forefront of militant Islamist propaganda. While Azzam’s messages regarding the *ummah* and *jihad* stylistically reflected his expertise in Islamic jurisprudence, his martyr narratives presented a vivid image of battle, death and what was required for Islam to succeed:

History does not write its lines except with blood. Glory does not build its loft[y] edifice except with skulls, Honour and respect cannot be established except on foundations of cripples and corpses. Empires, distinguished peoples, states and societies cannot be established except with examples. Indeed those who think that they can change reality, or change societies, without blood, sacrifices and invalids, without pure, innocent souls, then they do not understand the essence of this Deen [religion] and they do not know the method of the best of the Messengers....¹¹⁶

Azzam’s eulogies for martyrs of the Afghan-Soviet war – characterised by often graphic photos and descriptions of battlefield miracles and scented bodies – transformed war into a cosmic struggle.

As projected by the transformative charisma phenomenon, Azzam built upon the legacies of preceding charismatic figures like the legendary “warrior-scholar” Ibn Taymiyyah – whose struggles against the Mongolian invasions remain a source of inspiration and historical comparison for many modern militant Islamists – and Sayyid Qutb. Indeed, Azzam considered both equivalents in many ways despite being separated by centuries. For example, Azzam said of Qutb that “you now do not find a group of Muslims on Earth except that [Qutb’s] books are with them, as they have been translated into almost every language.”¹¹⁷ The charismatic capital Azzam built upon was at least equal to that which he generated himself such was his profound impact on militant Islamism. For example, the notion that defensive *jihad* is *fard ‘ayn* has become

¹¹¹ A. Azzam, “The Scales of Allah”, 2008, p. 10, http://www.khilafahbooks.com/wp-content/ebook-download/english/aaqeedah2/the_scales_of_Allah_khilafahbooks_com.pdf.

¹¹² A. Azzam, “Join the Caravan”, pp. 26-27.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ A. Azzam, “The will of ‘Abdullah Yusuf ‘Azzam”, p. 2.

¹¹⁵ A. Azzam, “Defense of Muslim Lands”, p. 15.

¹¹⁶ A. Azzam, “Martyrs: The building blocks of nations”.

¹¹⁷ A. Azzam, “What goes around comes around”, Extracts from postings originally released by Azzam Publications, 2008, <http://www.ummah.com/forum/archive/index.php/t-180499.html>.

ubiquitous in the messaging of militant Islamist groups and he must take some credit. Azzam also had a significant instrumental impact on militant Islamist propaganda campaign strategies most notably reflected in his willingness to use all forms of multimedia formats and platforms to reach diverse and transnational audiences.¹¹⁸ While the notion of a transnational *ummah* predates Azzam, for modern audiences it was Azzam who energised the concept and actively sought to mobilise it during the Afghan-Soviet war; a legacy Bin Laden would champion as his life work. Of course, Azzam's charismatic image has inspired militant Islamist charismatic figures of all types. Perhaps his influence is best captured in the words of Osama Bin Laden: "Sheikh Abdullah Azzam was not an individual, but an entire nation by himself. Muslim women have proven themselves incapable of giving birth to a man like him after he was killed."

Summary

Charismatic leadership is a highly complex psychosocial phenomenon that is reliant on the interplay of a variety of factors for it to emerge and flourish. The militant Islamist milieu offers it fertile grounds because these movements emerge as revolts against traditional established Islamic authorities and political elites. This is further reinforced by the powerful effect of transformative charisma which results in chains of militant Islamist charismatic figures emerging by drawing upon the charismatic capital of predecessors. These charismatic figures have become the symbolic embodiment of their message and thus their group's system of meaning. These are tremendously powerful messengers and confronting them can be as strategically complex as countering the propaganda itself. Crude rhetorical or physical attacks against the charismatic leader may have a counterproductive effect and increase their charismatic appeal. Of course, charismatic leaders are not the only type of militant Islamist leader¹¹⁹ but their prevalence and impact is significant and an important consideration in the battle against extremist propaganda.

Reach, Relevance and Resonance

The importance of the 3Rs of effective messaging, i.e. reach (the ability of a message to access target audiences), relevance (the timeliness and significance within the context of immediate situational factors) and resonance (influence on audience perceptions typically by leveraging deeper identity and socio-historical factors), have been addressed in previous counter-terrorism strategic communications publications.¹²⁰ The instrumental effect of these factors is significant but so too is their impact on credibility. Berger's analyses of IS's use of social media, particularly Twitter, has shown empirically how mediums of communication manifest as more than just instruments of reach but crucial tools to maximise a message's relevance and resonance with target audiences.¹²¹ A message that is disseminated by and within social networks, whether

¹¹⁸ Predating *Inspire* or *Dabiq* by around two decades, Azzam's *Al-Jihad* magazine was the *Inspire* or *Dabiq* of its time.

¹¹⁹ Most notably, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi has been presented by IS as a Caliph. This renders his leadership legal-rational or traditional from a Weberian perspective. This fundamental difference in the leader-follower bonds are reflected in the nature of IS' appeals to supporters which emphasise engaging in action because the Caliph has stated to do so.

¹²⁰ A. Reed and H. Ingram, "Lessons from History for Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communications", *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7, no. 4 (2016), <https://www.icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/ICCT-Ingram-CTSC-June-2016-3.pdf>.

¹²¹ J.M. Berger and J. Morgan, "The ISIS Twitter Census: Defining and describing the population of ISIS supporters on Twitter", *The Brookings Project on US Relations with the Islamic World*, Analysis Paper 20, March 2015; J.M. Berger and H. Perez, "The Islamic State's diminishing return on Twitter: How suspensions are limiting the social networks of English-speaking ISIS supporters", *GW Program on Extremism*, Occasional Paper, February 2016, https://cchs.gwu.edu/sites/cchs.gwu.edu/files/downloads/Berger_Occasional%20Paper.pdf; J.M. Berger, "Keynote Address", *Vox-Pol Mid-Project Conference*, Dublin, 2016.

online or offline, can help to reinforce the appeal of the message, for one, because it is being transmitted by and between often like-minded peers. The perceived credibility of the message is potentially enhanced by this echo-chamber effect.¹²² In areas that it controls, IS uses censorship to create a real world echo chamber in an effort to seize a monopoly on credible information. As Winter asserts, “in areas where its political and military control is most absolute, the group is doing all it can to suffocate other channels of information and seize an information monopoly.”¹²³

The reach of a message in itself, the very fact that an actor has taken the time to develop a message and disseminate it to target audiences, can help to contribute to perceived credibility. Of course, this is further reinforced if the message is deemed to be relevant by being timely and drawing on pertinent contemporary events and issues. A message’s format (e.g. written or spoken word, moving or still images etc.) may not only contribute to its reach (e.g. interesting or pertinent communiques have a greater likelihood of being passed on) but its relevance and credibility. Empirical research, for example by Cummins and Chambers¹²⁴ and Lee et. al.¹²⁵, has found that higher production media (i.e. motion media) was deemed by subjects as more credible than low production media. Analysis of IS propaganda has often emphasised the prominence of still and moving imagery in its communiques¹²⁶ and the use of these formats may contribute to the message’s perceived credibility. While IS are not unique in this regard, militant Islamist groups have often used the latest technology to enhance the presentation of their messages (e.g. Azzam’s *Al-Jihad*), IS have helped to inspire other groups to step up their own efforts. One should of course be cautious not to disproportionately overstate the importance of production value but it can be another contributing factor in whether a message or messenger will be seen to be credible.

A message’s resonance may significantly affect whether it will be deemed credible by its audience. Resonance can be enhanced in a number of ways. For example, militant Islamist propagandists will often draw upon historical narratives and traditions to forge doctrinally, emotionally and symbolically powerful linkages with the present. Hussein has highlighted how Syria’s significance in Islamic doctrine and history has played a major role in efforts to attract foreign fighters from around the world.¹²⁷ Addressing specific audiences with carefully designed messaging is another means of maximising the appeal of messaging. Militant Islamist propaganda catering to females in the West, for example, has sparked important debate in the field about not just the role of women

¹²² These dynamics manifest when propaganda is disseminated through offline social networks. In an age without the internet, the spread of Qutb’s *Milestones* after his execution in 1966 reflects many of the same dynamics, if much slower. Similarly, as elaborated in “A Brief History of Propaganda During Conflict”, another example of this phenomenon occurring offline is the rapid spread of the Protestant Revolution in Europe.

¹²³ C. Winter, “ISIS’ offline propaganda strategy”, *Brookings Institute*, 31 March 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2016/03/31/isis-offline-propaganda-strategy/>.

¹²⁴ Cummins and Chambers found that viewers “viewed stories higher in production value as more credible than identical stories lower in technical quality”, R. Cummins and T. Chambers, “How production value impacts perceived technical quality, credibility, and economic value of video news”, *J&MC Quarterly* 88, no. 4 (2011), p.745.

¹²⁵ As Lee et al. asserted: “With high modality messages (motion media), participants agreed that the message had better production quality and was considered more believable. Most importantly, the authors found a veridicality effect. If an audience evaluates a story as well produced and believable, they tend to treat the story as credible. It seems that with motion media, the effects of the source cues wash out, leaving people to believe that because it *looks* and *talks* like the real thing (veridical), the credibility of the story increased, regardless of the source credibility”, H. Lee, S. Park, Y. Lee and G. Cameron, “Assessment of motion media on believability and credibility: An exploratory study”, *Public Relations Review* 36 (2010), pp. 311-312.

¹²⁶ For example, A. Zelin, “Picture or it didn’t happen: A snapshot of the Islamic State’s official media output”, *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 4 (2015), pp. 85-97.

¹²⁷ For more, see T. Hussein, “The virtues of Sham: The place of Syria in the Muslim sacral imagination”, *Syria Comment*, 8 September 2016, <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/virtues-sham-place-syria-muslim-sacral-imagination/>.

in terrorist groups but how those groups fashion propaganda to appeal to them.¹²⁸ Resonance can also be enhanced in subtler ways via, for instance, stylistics. Consider the stylistic differences between *Inspire* and *Dabiq* magazines – both of which are designed for English-speaking audiences. *Inspire*'s contents are typically written in colloquial English augmented by colourful imagery which gives one the sense that they are speaking to a well-informed peer or mentor. In contrast, *Dabiq* is typically more formal in its language and inundates its articles with excerpts from the Quran and *hadiths* which gives the reader the sense that *Dabiq*'s words are inherently credible if not foretold. These contrasting strategies are further reinforced by *Inspire*'s tendency to name the authors of its content which works to further personalise engagement with the material.¹²⁹ *Dabiq*, on the other hand, almost never identifies the authors of its content unless for strategic purpose (e.g. to identify the author's gender or their country of origin).¹³⁰

Say-Do Gap

Finally, the deployment of messaging that highlights how actions in the field are synchronised with their messages, while exacerbating their enemies' say-do gap, may have a significant effect on a group's credibility as both a source of information and a politico-military or jurisprudential authority. A central focus of IS's propaganda campaign is to highlight how its politico-military efforts in the field¹³¹ are effectively addressing the needs of local populations while the efforts of its opponents have floundered.¹³² It is for this reason that ISIS has often emphasised pragmatic appeals in its propaganda. While defeats in the field have forced IS to recalibrate this particular aspect of its propaganda messaging, the say-do gap principle remains an important factor in its strategic considerations. For example, a key theme in Wilayat al-Khayr's *Deter the enemy from harming your state*, released in August 2016, is that the established *ulema* are not only corrupted because they are complicit with disbelievers but because they do not transform their knowledge into action. As the voice over declares: "So let not their popularity delude you even if they have written and composed many books. For they have not abandoned the bosoms of the *tawaghit* and they have not marched forth in jihad. They spent their lives sitting in the boudoirs with women hunting for mistakes and errors of the mujahideen."¹³³

¹²⁸ For more, see K. Ingram, "More than 'Jihadi brides' and 'eye-candy': How Dabiq appeals to Western women", *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague, Perspectives*, 12 August 2016, <https://icct.nl/publication/more-than-jihadi-brides-and-eye-candy-how-dabiq-appeals-to-western-women/>; M. Bloom, *Bombshell: Women and Terrorism* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

¹²⁹ Rephrased speeches and publications by respected figures, most notably Anwar Al-Awlaki and Abu Musab Al-Suri, feature prominently in *Inspire*'s pages. However, content written by less well-known figures or even readers also appear in *Inspire*. For example, the author of an article titled "Dear American Muslim" is named as "Jonas the Rebel", underscoring *Inspire*'s more informal approach.

¹³⁰ For example, in *Dabiq*'s fifteenth issue, an article titled "How I came to Islam" identified the author as "Umm Khalid Al-Finlandiyyah" to highlight that the story was apparently written by a female convert from Finland, *Dabiq*, Issue 15 (2016), pp. 36-39.

¹³¹ For comprehensive analyses of IS's politico-military strategy, see C. Whiteside, "The Islamic State and the Return of Revolutionary Warfare", *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27, no. 5 (2016), pp.743-776; A. Zelin, "The Islamic State's territorial methodology", *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy Research Notes* 29, January 2016, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/ResearchNote29-Zelin.pdf>; C. Whiteside, "New masters of revolutionary warfare: The Islamic State Movement (2002-2016)", *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10, no. 4 (2016), <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/523/html>.

¹³² For detailed analyses of IS' online and offline propaganda campaigns between 2014-2016, see B. Price, D. Milton, M. al-'Ubaydi and N. Lahoud, "The group that calls itself a state: Understanding the evolution and challenges of the Islamic State", *Combating Terrorism Centre – West Point Military Academy* (2014), <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/CTC-The-Group-That-Calls-Itself-A-State-December20141.pdf>; A. Fernandez, "Here to stay and growing: Combating ISIS propaganda networks", *The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World*, October 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/IS-Propaganda-Web-English.pdf>; C. Winter, "ISIS' offline propaganda strategy".

¹³³ Wilayat Al-Khayr, "Deter the enemy from harming your state", (2016).

IS are far from unique in this regard as these dynamics have manifested in a range of different ways within the militant Islamist milieu. For example, Bin Laden's ascendancy as the face of "global *jiḥād*" from 1998 was significantly influenced by the credibility that was generated due to a combination of strategic manipulations of the media, terrorist attacks in Africa and the response of his enemies. On 22 February 1998, Bin Laden announced the establishment of the "World Islamic Front Against Jews and Crusaders" followed by a press conference in May and an interview with John Miller that same month.¹³⁴ Across these media events, Bin Laden presented himself as not only the image and voice of a transnational militant Islamist umbrella organisation but announced that the United States was his primary target. It seemed preposterous that a man living in a cave in Afghanistan had such a network let alone one capable of attacking history's mightiest military superpower. After all, this quietly spoken Saudi had been railing against the United States for many years. Soon after the dual US embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998, the United States launched Operation Infinite Reach – cruise missile strikes against targets in Afghanistan and Sudan.¹³⁵ In the Presidential address that followed, President Clinton referred to Bin Laden by name on several occasions and not only confirmed many of Bin Laden's outlandish claims but held him directly and personally responsible for supporting and directing a global network of militant Islamists. Bin Laden's preference for not confirming his involvement in such actions further boosted his status and charisma as a pious and humble organiser of *jiḥād*. By transforming words into action, a fact confirmed by his arch enemies, the credibility of Bin Laden and his organisation received a much needed boost that would propel both to the forefront of the transnational *jiḥād*.¹³⁶

Summary

Even a perfectly crafted message is unlikely to gain traction with audiences if its source is deemed to lack credibility. The messenger plays a crucial role in generating credibility for propaganda and militant Islamist charismatic figures have played a prominent role as the symbolic epitome of their message. Beyond the messenger, this analysis has explored how credibility can also be reinforced by the cumulative effect of a range of factors related to the 3Rs of effective messaging. It has also examined how the narrower an actor's perceived say-do gap seems the more likely that actor will be seen as a credible source of information and authority. With systems of meaning helping to fuel self-validation mechanisms in supporters, including who is deemed a credible source of information and authority, a variety of behavioural levers may be deployed to help to reinforce these dynamics. As Part 3 specifically examines, behavioural levers can also play a significant role in coaxing supporters to engage in violence.

¹³⁴ O. Bin Laden, "Jihad against Jews and Crusaders: World Islamic Front Statement", 23 February 1998, <http://fas.org/irp/world/para/docs/980223-fatwa.htm>; "Interview: Osama Bin Laden", PBS Frontline, May 1998, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/binladen/who/interview.html>.

¹³⁵ W. Clinton, "Address to the Nation by the President", 20 August 1998, <http://clinton6.nara.gov/1998/08/1998-08-20-president-address-to-the-nation.html>.

¹³⁶ This is also a pertinent example of how misguided counter-strategies can backfire and boost the profile and appeal of targets.

Part 3: Levers for behavioural change

Militant Islamist propaganda deploys an array of behavioural levers in a manner designed to have a multifaceted and cumulative impact on its audiences. Levers such as loss aversion, scarcity, sunk-cost effects, stereotyping, incentives, cognitive dissonance and others are prevalent in militant Islamist messaging. Moral disengagement mechanisms are also rife in militant Islamist propaganda and are broadly recognised in the field as being crucial for priming audiences to engage in violence.¹³⁷ For the sake of brevity, this analysis focuses on framing, reciprocity and social norming/social proofing within the specific context of how they are deployed to coax supporters into engaging in politically-motivated violence (e.g. terrorism).

Framing: War

Framing is used in militant Islamist propaganda to categorise or label events and issues as a means to shape how they are perceived. Framing plays an essential role in convincing “sceptical audiences to see the world in their [the terrorist’s] terms. An important aspect of the struggle between governments and terrorists concerns the definition of the conflict. Each side wishes to interpret the issues in terms of its own values.”¹³⁸ War is a powerful frame that is used extensively in militant Islamist messaging. It implies the most extreme of crises: the acute sense of uncertainty rooted in the possibility of a violent death, the destruction of the pure and benevolent in-group and its traditions at the hands of bloodlust-fuelled enemies (i.e. Others). Juergensmeyer argues that war provides:

an all-embracing view of the world that contains much more than the notion of forceful contestation. It points to a dichotomous opposition on an absolute scale. War suggests an all-or-nothing struggle against an enemy who is determined to destroy. No compromise is deemed possible. The very existence of the opponent is a threat....¹³⁹

Bin Laden was particularly adept at using war as a frame for fuelling perceptions of crisis with emotive appeals (“every single inch of our *umma*’s body is being stabbed by a spear, struck by a sword, or pierced by an arrow”¹⁴⁰), drawing upon misguided political rhetoric to highlight the nature of that war (“Bush left no room for the doubts or media opinion. He stated clearly that this war is a Crusader war. He said this in front of the whole world so as to emphasise this fact”¹⁴¹), tie the current war to historical conflicts (for example, by declaring that the US had caused “more murder and destruction in Baghdad than Hulagu the Tatar”¹⁴²) and using engagement in war as incumbent upon all true believers (“whoever fights them physically is a believer, whoever fights them verbally is a believer, and whoever fights them with his heart is a believer”¹⁴³). The war

¹³⁷ A. Bandura, “Moral disengagement in the perpetration of inhumanities”, *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 3 (1999), pp. 193-209.

¹³⁸ M. Crenshaw, “The subjective reality of the terrorist: ideological and psychological factors in terrorism”, in R. Slater and M. Stohl, eds., *Current perspectives on international terrorism* (London: Macmillan Press, 1988), pp. 12-46.

¹³⁹ M. Juergensmeyer, “Religious terror and global war”, in C. Calhoun, P. Price and A. Timmer, eds., *Understanding September 11* (New York: New Press, 2002), p. 31.

¹⁴⁰ O. Bin Laden, “Under Mullah Omar, April 9 2001”, *Messages to the World: The statements of Osama Bin Laden* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 96.

¹⁴¹ O. Bin Laden, “Crusader Wars, November 3 2001”, *Messages to the World: The statements of Osama Bin Laden* (London: Verso, 2005), pp. 135.

¹⁴² O. Bin Laden, “To the Allies of America, November 12 2002”, *Messages to the World: The statements of Osama Bin Laden* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 174.

¹⁴³ O. Bin Laden, “Nineteen Students, December 26 2001”, p. 155.

frame is important for not only psychologically priming supporters to engage in violence but placing their individual actions into a broader strategic, historical and cosmic context. *Dabiq* frames terrorist attacks in the West as not only divinely-sanctioned but strategically important for “flanking the crusaders on their own streets and bringing the war back to their own soil.”¹⁴⁴ *Inspire* not only offers operational guidance in its infamous “Open Source Jihad” section but the broader strategic context for lone wolf terrorism via excerpts from the writings of none other than Abu Musab Al-Suri.¹⁴⁵

Reciprocity: Extreme Violence

Responding in-kind to the actions of in- and out-group members means that reciprocity can be used both positively and negatively in communications. When used as a means to coax supporters to engage in violence, reciprocity (especially in conjunction with a war framing) is a means to justify actions that would be abhorrent and completely unjustifiable under other circumstances. This is most graphically illustrated in the gory images that feature in IS propaganda. Many of their bloody execution (e.g. beheading) and mutilation (e.g. amputation) videos are justified with reference to jurisprudence and this inevitably is an important element of varying prominence in all messages showing violence. However, some of IS’s most extreme depictions of violence are also presented as acts of reciprocity. A captured soldier being executed by being run over by a tank or captives being burned alive over a fire pit are shown as gruesome actions committed in-kind for identical actions committed by either the individual being executed or the group they represent.

Such messaging is often steeped in symbolism and emotive narratives. For example, Wilayat al-Khayr’s “Revelations of Satan” video showed the graphic execution of captured reporters. The method of execution for two victims was to place explosives into their laptop and camera. One victim lay face down on the laptop at a table while the other had the camera attached to their chest before the devices were detonated. The message seems clear: we use their tools of treachery that killed our people to kill them. Reciprocity is also an important mechanism for justifying attacks against civilian populations in the West:

Who elected these Crusader governments that wage war with Islam and Muslims? They are those so-called ‘civilians’. Who finances the budgets for the Crusader military and intelligence? Who pays the taxes to fund these things? Who supports those governments in their war against Muslims?¹⁴⁶

There is an added dimension to using reciprocity as a lever in propaganda because it can work as a baiting strategy designed to coax enemies into misguided counter-narrative responses. After all, if the violence being committed against the victim is the same as that perpetrated by the victim then counter-narratives that focus on the former while dismissing or ignoring the latter can act as an opportunity for waves of second- and third-order messaging. The burning to death of the captured Jordanian air force pilot in *Healing the Believer’s Chests* is a pertinent example. Reciprocity was a

¹⁴⁴ “Hijrah from hypocrisy to sincerity”, *Dabiq*, Issue 3 (2014), p. 4.

¹⁴⁵ A. Al-Suri, “The Jihadi Experiences: The most important enemy targets aimed at by the individual jihad”, *Inspire*, Issue 9 (2012), pp. 23-24.

¹⁴⁶ Wilayat Al-Khayr, “Deter the enemy from harming your state”, (2016).

central theme of this message and when global outrage was expressed about the execution, IS responded by highlighting the burning deaths of “their” civilians caused by the anti-IS air campaign and thus the hypocrisy of condemning one but not the other.¹⁴⁷ This underscores the importance of developing a nuanced understanding of militant Islamist propaganda strategies as the foundation for more effective counterterrorism strategic communication efforts.

Social Norming/Proofing: Membership, Violence and Martyrdom

For violent non-state political groups who operate on the extreme fringes of the political spectrum and society more broadly, social norming and proofing are vital tools for drawing in potential supporters and transforming tacit supporters into active ones. Messages that use social norming, particularly injunctive norms (i.e. how one should behave), are present in militant Islamist propaganda in a variety of guises. For a group like IS that demands supporters pledge allegiance to their so-called caliphate, both positive and negative social norm appeals are deployed:

...try in your location to organize bay'at (pledges of allegiance) to the Khalifah Ibrahim. Publicize them as much as possible.... Try to record these bay'at and then distribute them through all forms of media including the internet. It is necessary that bay'ah becomes so common to the average Muslim that he considers those holding back as grossly abnormal.¹⁴⁸

The biographies of militants are a powerful means to forge social norms within the clique, especially if those being profiled are members of the message's key target audience.¹⁴⁹ For instance, the eulogies of martyrs, typically framed as the elites of the elites within the militant Islamist milieu, are designed to provide supporters with aspirational stories. Empirical research has demonstrated that the quest for social status within one's collective, especially when material benefits are minimal or non-existent, can act as a tremendously powerful motivation for members.¹⁵⁰ Glorifying martyrdom narratives and eulogies contribute to what is perceived to be a scarce social status. Azzam's *Caravans of Martyrs* eulogies for foreign fighters killed during the Afghan-Soviet war were characterised by often graphic imagery of the martyr in life and death and emotional narratives that described how an average believer went from a normal life to a glorious death. These narratives are reinforced by regular reporting by militant Islamist groups of their politico-military activities – whether acts of terrorism, insurgency operations or governance activities – as a mechanism of social proofing. Such reporting of actions in the field augments the social norming narratives of militant Islamists by demonstrating social proof: these actions are really taking place, committed by real people who are having real effects.

¹⁴⁷ Related to this point, arguments of moral relativity play an essential role in militant Islamist propaganda. While space considerations will not allow an analysis here, it often plays a crucial role in reciprocity strategies.

¹⁴⁸ “Foreword”, *Dabiq*, Issue 2 (2014), p. 3.

¹⁴⁹ For example, militant Islamist English-language magazines have regular sections devoted to profiling members and glorifying martyrs. *Dabiq's* regular “Interview” and “Among the Believers are Men” sections are devoted to these purposes, as have been *Inspire's* “Jihadi Profiles” and “Shuhada” sections.

¹⁵⁰ See, for example, R. Willer, “Groups reward individual sacrifice: The status solution to the collective action problem”, *American Sociological Review* 74 (2009), pp. 23-43.

Summary

Framing, reciprocity and social norming/social proofing are powerful behavioural levers deployed in militant Islamist messaging as a means to drive supporters to engage in violence. Of course, it is important to recognise that not only are these levers used in a variety of ways but countless other levers are regularly deployed in this messaging. Nevertheless, the three examined here offer important insights into the variety of explicit and subtle ways in which militant Islamist messaging tries to influence supporter behaviour. What is most crucial to recognise from this analysis is that the potentially powerful appeal and effect of the behavioural levers used in this propaganda does not rest on one or even a handful of such levers but the cumulative effect of deploying a variety of levers *alongside* calculated strategies of meaning and credibility.

Conclusion: Lessons for counterterrorism strategic communications

"Come here," they sang, "renowned Ulysses, honour to the Achaean name, and listen to our two voices. No one ever sailed past us without staying to hear the enchanting sweetness of our song- and he who listens will go on his way not only charmed, but wise, for we know all the ills that the gods laid upon the Argives and Trojans before Troy, and can tell you everything that is going to happen over the whole world."

The Sirens' song Ulysses in Homer's *The Odyssey*.¹⁵¹

Meaning, credibility and behavioural change strategies play a crucial role in how militant Islamist propaganda seeks to shape the perceptions, polarise the support and transform tacit supporters into active ones. How a message is interpreted and its impact is dependent on the individual but it does appear that much of militant Islamist propaganda tends to strategically cater to automatic (System 1) thinking by manipulating mental models, increasing perceptions of crisis (i.e. stress), playing upon social context/cues and triggering cognitive biases in its audiences. It is within the context of a propaganda campaign dominated by this type of messaging that communiques which would tend to cater more to System 2 thinking, such as *fatwas*, are deployed. Ultimately, it is the cumulative effect of a diverse range of strategies and levers that is crucial for understanding the potential appeal of militant Islamist messaging. It is also worth noting that while militant Islamist propaganda was the focus of this study, the interplay of meaning, credibility and behavioural change are vital considerations in the design and implementation of messaging for not only violent non-state political groups but efforts to counter such propaganda too. This Research Paper's key findings seek to contribute to scholarly understandings of the strategic mechanics of militant Islamist propaganda and the development of more effective counterterrorism strategic communication message and campaign design. To these ends, the following lessons are particularly pertinent.¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ Homer, *The Odyssey*.

¹⁵² A more detailed delineation of the strategic-policy implications of this Research Paper's findings will be published in the follow-up Policy Brief.

Ideology plays an essential role in militant Islamist messaging but this role must be understood within its broader strategic and psychosocial context.

Disconnected from the socio-historical conditions within which they are produced, interpreted, afforded relevance and applied, ideologies are little more than a conglomeration of interconnected abstract concepts. The fundamental distinction between the diverse spectrum of adherents to any religious ideology, for example, is the varied application of selectively literalist interpretations of its sources (e.g. Bible, Torah, Quran and *hadiths*) and subjective judgements regarding the extent to which those concepts should be used to direct the private and public lives of individuals and collectives. What is deemed a legitimate interpretation of ideological sources will inevitably be subjective and contested precisely because those abstract concepts emerged and have been produced and reproduced in socio-historical contexts that fundamentally shape how humans interact with them. The Al-Awlaki quote that opens this Research Paper perfectly captures these dynamics:

They [Muslims] need to hear how Islam will bring them justice and retribution. They want to hear how Islam can help them bring an end to occupation, how Islam can allow them to live in dignity under their own system of government, and ruled by their own people. They need to be empowered and encouraged. This is the message the Muslims are waiting to hear from our esteemed scholars.¹⁵³

What this study has sought to highlight is how militant Islamist propaganda is both a product of and response to the psychosocial forces and strategic factors prevalent within a given socio-historical context. Ideologies are selectively drawn upon and used to fit this overarching strategic logic. It follows that an ideology-centric counterpropaganda campaign is fundamentally a “battle of abstractions” that is more likely to talk over the heads of most target audiences unless it is seen to directly address real world issues that are pertinent to that audience. A disproportionate focus on extremist ideology as the centre of gravity in the Wars on Terror, whether in the battle against militant Islamist propaganda or in counterterrorism efforts more broadly, represents a fundamental misunderstanding of this phenomenon. After all, the extent to which militant Islamist messaging is likely to appeal to audiences, let alone shape their perceptions, polarise their support or inspire them to engage in politically-motivated (let alone destructive) behaviour, will be largely dependent on whether that message provides a credible source of meaning through which behaviours can be legitimised. On the issue of credibility concerning Western governments seeking to tackle militant Islamism, non-Muslim messengers dictating what is “true” Islam risks hubristically feeding militant Islamist narratives and inadvertently de-legitimising those moderate Muslim voices so crucial to the fight against extremism.

Based on the findings of this study, Western counterterrorism strategic communication efforts would benefit from focusing on deploying a diversity of messaging designed to break the linkages at the heart of militant Islamist “competitive systems of meaning” (see Figure 3). Synchronised with actions in the field (e.g. CVE activities), this “linkage-centric” approach to counterterrorism strategic communications is designed to dislocate and disrupt the bonds between identity, solution and crisis constructs that militant Islamist propaganda seeks to forge. In doing so, such an approach inherently undermines the ideological contentions espoused by militant Islamists while avoiding a head-to-head confrontation on ideological grounds which is precisely what militant

¹⁵³ A. Al-Awlaki, “The new Mardin declaration”, *Inspire*, Issue 2 (2010), p. 39.

Islamists would want. The “linkage-centric” approach has the potential to be strategically potent in the sense that one of its key objectives is to highlight the say-do gap of militant Islamists (e.g. contributors to crises rather than alleviators of it) thus undermining their credibility as a source of information and authority. It also confronts those powerful psychosocial forces that are so central to the appeal of militant Islamist propaganda. For the messaging produced by such a campaign to be effective it would need to take into account many of the nuances examined in this study.

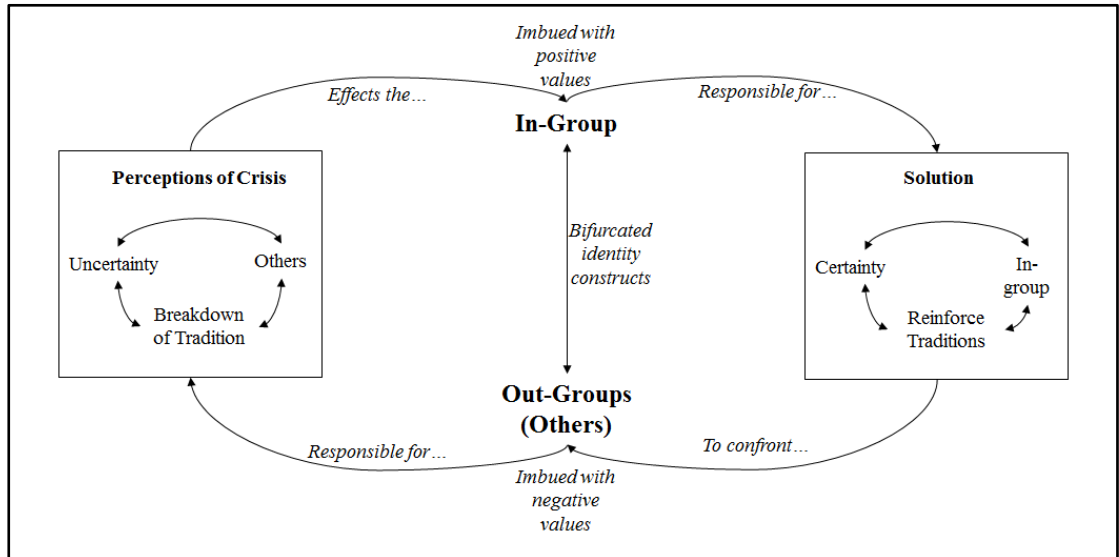


Figure 3: Propaganda's cyclically reinforcing dynamic

Understanding the roles and interactions of System 1 and 2 thinking will be essential for developing more effective counterterrorism strategic communications.

The dominance of System 1 thinking, the tendency for stresses to inhibit System 2 thinking and the role of mental models and social factors in these dynamics are important considerations that must be factored into counterterrorism strategic communication campaign and message design. While a fuller analysis of this body of research was not possible, it is important to consider a few key points:

First, it should be clear that a strategic communications approach that is based on merely providing information to target audiences on the assumption that “the facts will speak for themselves” is deeply flawed. At best, there is no guarantee that the “facts” will be interpreted as one wishes because it is falsely based on the assumption that a universal interpretation of that information exists. At worst, oppositional actors may use those “facts” to inform their own messaging to their own aims. In short, all messaging must be disseminated with a persuasive intent (even if done so with varying degrees of subtlety).

Second, counterterrorism strategic communication efforts must be calculating in their deployment of messaging that is likely to require target audiences to engage System 2 thinking. This is particularly important if the target audience is experiencing acute stresses (perceived or otherwise). Instead, most messaging should seek to cater to System 1 thinking as a means to maximise the chances of that communicate gaining traction broadly across that target audience. Dominant System 1 oriented messaging should be calibrated to act as a gateway for more System 2 oriented messaging.

Third, research suggests that stresses increase one's reliance on System 1 thinking and acts as a buffer for triggering System 2. From the perspective of message design, this finding reinforces the importance of designing simple messaging that leverages appropriate mental models, social factors and automatic thinking. However, it also underscores a point of broader significance. Crude political rhetoric and misguided counterterrorism initiatives that myopically target a particular community may do more than just reinforce the contentions in extremist narratives related to Muslim victimisation and persecution. They also contribute more broadly to perceptions of crisis that increase individual and collective susceptibility to extremism of all shades. Furthermore, constantly referencing individuals within a community by a single identity (e.g. Muslim) engages in framing that reinforces the primacy of that identity. The negative impact of these processes will likely be compounded because militant Islamist propaganda is calibrated (whether consciously or by chance) to leverage these dynamics.

Militant Islamist propaganda corrals automatic thinking and seeks to trigger and fuel cognitive biases.

Perhaps the most important finding to emerge from this study is that the ability of militant Islamist propaganda to appeal to and radicalise supporters is not based on any one strategy or factor but the cumulatively compounding effect of meaning, credibility and behavioural change strategies. Together, these strategies and levers work to direct automatic thinking and manipulate cognitive biases as a means to lure followers deeper and deeper into this psychological minefield.

Central to these strategic mechanics are “competitive systems of meaning” that provide audiences with an overarching lens through which perceptions are shaped. Composed of identity, solution and crisis constructs that act as mental models unto themselves, systems of meaning connect and mediate these mental models into a powerful overarching cognitive prism. The tight interplay of these constructs not only works to fuel the cyclically compounding dynamics of propaganda illustrated in Figure 3 but operates as hooks that drag audiences into the propaganda web. For instance, if a potential supporter is partial to one of those constructs, for example they may be a Muslim and/or experiencing acute perceptions of crisis, then this acts as a hook that renders one susceptible to the broader narrative. If one accepts a construct such as the group's definition of what it is to be a Muslim then it follows, at least according to the “logic” of such narratives, that one must accept the broader narrative.¹⁵⁴

The compounding effects of militant Islamist propaganda operate on multiple levels. The more one accepts the militant Islamist system of meaning then the more that lens shapes perceptions and dictates judgements often operating as a mechanism to trigger and fuel cognitive biases and automatic thinking. After all, the bipolar worldview championed in extremist propaganda already drastically limits the range of mental models deemed appropriate for an individual to draw upon which, in turn, greatly increases susceptibility to cognitive biases. Moreover, given militant Islamist narratives actively attempt to exacerbate perceptions of crisis, this may further increase its audience's reliance on System 1 thinking and further impede access to System 2 thinking. Additionally, militant Islamists deploy a variety of strategies to enhance the reach, relevance and resonance of its messaging, for example by using online and

¹⁵⁴ This works at an ideological level too: if one accepts, say, *tawhid* (oneness of God) then it logically follows that one should accept the oneness of the transnational *ummah*, the role of *jihad* in protecting that *ummah* and the sanctity of *tawhid* and thus the obligation to support the pursuit of a Caliphate.

offline social networks to disseminate messaging as a means to self-reinforce its credibility via the echo-chamber effect. While the third part of the analysis was devoted to exploring how framing, reciprocity and social norming/proofing were used in efforts to coax target audiences to engage in violence, it is clear that behavioural levers play an equally important role in meaning and credibility strategies too. The first stage of effectively confronting militant Islamist propaganda must be to avoid feeding the machines.

To avoid well-intentioned political rhetoric, media reporting and counterterrorism initiatives inadvertently reinforcing militant Islamist propaganda it will be important to take into consideration many of the findings in this study.

There are countless ways in which misguided responses to extremist propaganda and the terrorist threat more broadly can contribute to the appeal of extremists. After all, one of the most crucial principles of asymmetric warfare is for the weaker force to tempt the stronger one into strategic missteps which the weaker then manipulates to its advantage. For instance, Western politicians and architects of counterterrorism strategic communication efforts need to be conscious of not inadvertently reinforcing the bi-polar world view championed by militant Islamists. Humans are characterised by a multiplicity of identities and corresponding mental models. The strength of militant Islamist propaganda is that it stresses the primacy of one identity (i.e. Islam/Muslim) in order to convince audiences to see the world in black and white. Political rhetoric and counter-propaganda messages, including broader CVE activities, need to be conscious of not inadvertently contributing to these dynamics. For example, constant references to Muslims and Islam may contribute to framing all types of issues amongst those most susceptible to extremism *within* Muslim populations as fundamentally religious in nature thus reinforcing the proclamations of extremists (i.e. that everything is about religion). A strategically more appropriate approach would be to deploy messaging that is designed to trigger other identities and their corresponding mental models (e.g. gender, scholar, sportsperson) as part of the “linkage-centric” approach described earlier. Such a strategy helps to subtly counter the dichotomous worldview espoused by extremists whilst isolating such actors for what they are: fringe elements that are deeply unpopular amongst the overwhelming majority of Muslims. Put simply, black and white worldviews cannot be overcome with black and white but colour.

Also worth noting is the need to urgently review sensationalised media reporting of acts of terrorism. Often reinforced by ill-conceived political rhetoric, media reporting of terrorist incidences and terrorists themselves can work as a form of “social proofing” that inadvertently boosts the strategies of social norming/proofing deployed by militant Islamists. There is a significant body of research on suicide and mass shooter clustering in the wake of media reporting of such incidences and there seems to be much that is applicable from these studies.¹⁵⁵ Militant Islamist propaganda is purposely calibrated to take advantage of sensationalised reporting and rhetoric. However, the implementation of a framework of best practice for media reporting of terrorist plots and attacks, ideally developed in consultation with subject matter experts from a spectrum of appropriate fields, must have as its primary focus accurate and responsible reporting and not the guidance of government agencies.

¹⁵⁵ See, for example, A. Schmidtke, S. Schaller and I. Muller, “Imation [sic] of amok and amok-suicide”, *Kriz Dergisi* 10, no. 2 (2002), pp.49-60; S. Towers, A. Gomez-Lievano, M. Khan, A. Mubayi and C. Castillo-Chavez, “Contagion in mass killings and school shootings”, *PLoS ONE* 10, no. 7 (2015), pp. 1-12.

Final Remarks

The primary purpose of this Research Paper was to explore the interplay of meaning, credibility and behaviour change strategies in militant Islamist propaganda. Of course, this study has only been able to touch fleetingly upon the fields of research and concepts it has analysed while the nuances of the propaganda strategies deployed by specific militant Islamists will differ from group to group. There is much scope for future research. For example, future research could build upon the conceptual framework featured here and expand upon it with new theoretical, methodological and disciplinary approaches.¹⁵⁶ The conceptual framework could be applied to analyse primary source materials in other languages (e.g. Arabic, Dari) but also propaganda produced by other types of extremists (e.g. radical right-wing). A bottom-up analysis of audience perceptions and impact would also be a useful partner to this study. Nevertheless, the broad strategic mechanics identified and examined here have potentially significant repercussions for counterterrorism strategic communications efforts. The sirens of militant Islamism may never be completely silenced but effective counterterrorism strategic communications can go a long way towards dismantling their systems of meaning, undermining their claims of credibility and disabling behavioural levers designed to coax supporters towards action.

¹⁵⁶ For example, neuroscience could offer important insights into how the brain is affected by the phenomena examined here. Indeed, there is already a growing body of research in this area e.g. B. Schapiro and S. Ambrose, "On the origins of propaganda", in M. Grabowski, ed., *Neuroscience and Media* (New York: Routledge, 2015); M. Fitzduff, "What does neuroscience have to offer peacebuilders?", *Sustainable Security*, 12 September 2016, <https://sustainablesecurity.org/2016/09/12/what-does-neuroscience-have-to-offer-peacebuilders/>.

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Deciphering the siren call of militant Islamist propaganda: Meaning, credibility & behavioural change

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