Countering Islamic State Messaging Through "Linkage-Based" Analysis

The Islamic State's recent losses on the battlefield, including significant casualties within its media and propaganda division, offer a unique opportunity to inject competing and alternative messages into the information space. This paper proposes that the content of such messages should be guided by a linkage-based analysis of existing Islamic State messaging. A linkage-based analysis of a top-level 2017 audio message by Islamic State spokesperson Abu Hasan al Muhajir offers several potential insights into crafting effective content for competing and alternative messages. A comparison of the 2017 work to earlier Islamic State messaging also reveals specific opportunities to undermine the credibility of the organisation's broader propaganda programme by highlighting the organisation's repeated failure to follow through on its extravagantly promised commitment to achieving its stated goals.

About the Author

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About ICCT

The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT) is an independent think and do tank providing multidisciplinary policy advice and practical, solution-oriented implementation support on prevention and the rule of law, two vital pillars of effective counter-terrorism. ICCT's work focuses on themes at the intersection of countering violent extremism and criminal justice sector responses, as well as human rights-related aspects of counter-terrorism. The major project areas concern countering violent extremism, rule of law, foreign fighters, country and regional analysis, rehabilitation, civil society engagement and victims' voices. Functioning as a nucleus within the international counter-terrorism network, ICCT connects experts, policymakers, civil society actors and practitioners from different fields by providing a platform for productive collaboration, practical analysis, and exchange of experiences and expertise, with the ultimate aim of identifying innovative and comprehensive approaches to preventing and countering terrorism.

1.   Introduction

This paper recommends strategies to counter so-called Islamic State (IS) propaganda by analysing a recent leadership message using a framework developed by the Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communications Project (CTSC) at the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism—The Hague.

Using the same framework, the paper will also compare a 2017 IS leadership message to a previously analysed 2011 message, in order to assess changes in the group's tactical and ideological orientation.

The two messages analysed were:

- "The Islamic State Will Remain Safe". August 2011. Abu Muhammad Al Adnani.[1]
- "Be Patient, For Indeed the Promise of God is Truth". April 2017. Abu Hasan al Muhajir.[2]

At the time of the 2011 speech, Adnani was the spokesman for the Islamic State in Iraq, an earlier stage in the evolution of the mature IS organisation. After Adnani's death in 2016, Abu Hasan al Muhajir became spokesman for IS. Adnani's speech was chosen as a strong early specimen of his work, allowing for the consideration of how possible counter-terrorism communication strategies might have played out in light of subsequent events.[3] Al Muhajir's speech was chosen because it was the most recent statement from IS available at the time that the writing of this paper began, with the intention of exploiting the latest material in order to inform current and future counter-terrorism communications strategies.

The framework breaks extremist messaging down into a set of linked concepts designed to reinforce in-group and out-group boundaries, as well as perceptions of crisis. After analysis, counter-terrorism communications are proposed to dissolve key linkages found in IS texts and replace them with strategic alternatives.

This is a particularly crucial juncture for such efforts, due to the substantial setbacks recently suffered by IS,[4] and the decimation of its propaganda operations,[5] including the devastating loss of access to most major social media platforms.[6] These events have created a significant vacuum that can be filled with alternative messaging.

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[1] A. M. Al Adnani, "The Islamic State Will Remain Safe", The Islamic State Organisation, August 2011. A version of the speech is available at https://scholarship.tricolib.brynmawr.edu/bitstream/handle/10066/15267/ADN20110807.pdf?sequence=1.

[2] A. H. al-Muhājir, "So Be Patient. Indeed, The Promise Of God Is Truth", Audio Recording, Al Furqan Media (Islamic State Official), 4 April 2017, http://jihadology.net/2017/04/04/new-audio-message-from-the-islamic-states-abu-al-%E1%B8%A5asan-al-muhajir-so-be-patient-indeed-the-promise-of-god-is-truth/. English translation provided by Islamic State.

[3] J.M. Berger, "Deconstruction of Identity Concepts in Islamic State Propaganda", Europol Public Information via the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism—The Hague, 9 June 2017, https://icct.nl/publication/deconstruction-of-identity-concepts-in-islamic-state-propaganda/.

[4] C. Bunzel, "The Islamic State Will Survive", Foreign Policy, 10 July 2017, http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/07/10/what-comes-after-isis-islamic-state-mosul-iraq-syria/#bunzel.

[5] D. Leffler, "The US-Led Coalition Is Steadily Decimating ISIS's Propaganda Operation", Task and Purpose, 28 July 2017, http://taskandpurpose.com/coalition-isis-propaganda-media/.

[6] S. Larson, "Twitter suspends 377,000 accounts for pro-terrorism content", CNN.com, 21 March 2017, http://money.cnn.com/2017/03/21/technology/twitter-bans-terrorism-accounts/index.html; J.M. Berger and H. Perez, "The Islamic State's Diminishing Returns on Twitter: How Suspensions are Limiting the Social Networks of English-speaking ISIS Supporters", Occasional Paper, George Washington University, February 2016, http://mediarelations.gwu.edu/twitter-account-suspensions-help-curbing-isis-rhetoric-online.

Countering Islamic State Messaging Through "Linkage-Based" Analysis

This approach is derived from a series of papers published by the CTSC Project in 2016 and 2017, including the following key texts:

- A "Linkage-Based" Approach to Combating Militant Islamist Propaganda: A Two-Tiered Framework for Practitioners (Ingram, 2016)
- The Strategic Logic of the "Linkage-Based" Approach to Combating Militant Islamist Propaganda: Conceptual and Empirical Foundations (Ingram, 2017)
- Extremist Construction of Identity: How Escalating Demands for Legitimacy Shape and Define In-Group and Out-Group Dynamics (Berger, 2017)
- Deconstruction of Identity Concepts in Islamic State Propaganda (Berger, 2017)

2.   Framework for Analysis

In April 2017, IS issued an audio lecture by its spokesman Abu Hassan al Muhahir. The message, titled "Be Patient, For Indeed the Promise of God is Truth", ran 36 minutes and 29 seconds.[7]

The title is a Quranic reference,[8] and the theme of patience is omnipresent, positioning the work as a response to IS's declining military and political position. The word "patient" or "patience" appears 13 times in the text, excluding the title. Variations on the word "steadfast" appear nine times, and variations on "perseverant" appear six times, in addition to other synonyms.

In virtually every context, these terms are directed to supporters of IS, reassuring them that current setbacks are only temporary and that they will be rewarded for their continued loyalty, a theme that is repeated in many different forms and variations.

Muhajir's speech proceeds to describe the qualities and practices of IS's "in-groups" and "out-groups", following the identity framework discussed in the previously cited ICCT research papers (where a more robust explanation of terms and concepts can be found). The framework is briefly summarised below, and includes the following definitions in this paper.[9]

- **Extremism:** A spectrum of beliefs in which an in-group's success is inseparable from negative acts against an out-group. Negative acts can include verbal attacks and diminishment, discriminatory behaviour, or violence.
- **Radicalisation into extremism**: The escalation of an in-group's extremist orientation through the endorsement of increasingly harmful actions against an out-group or groups (usually correlating to the adoption of increasingly negative views of the same).
- **Extremist In-Group:** The adherents of an extremist movement, in this case, IS.

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[7] Abū al-Hasan al-Muhājir, "So Be Patient. Indeed, The Promise Of God Is Truth" (2017).

[8] The Quran, Ar-Rûm, 30.60, et al.

[9] J.M. Berger, "Extremist Construction of Identity: How Escalating Demands for Legitimacy Shape and Define In-Group and Out-Group Dynamics", The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague 8, no. 7 (2017); H. Tajfel and J.C. Turner, "The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior", American Psychological Association, 2004.

- **Eligible In-Group:** The identity collective from which an extremist movement seeks to recruit, in this case, Sunni Muslims.
- **Out-Group:** An identity collective that is excluded from membership in the Eligible In-Group. As discussed below, IS makes reference to multiple out-groups.

In extremist ideology and propaganda, a Crisis-Identity Construct spells out the relationships among these groups. The Out-Group (or Out-Groups) is deemed responsible for precipitating a crisis that afflicts the Eligible In-Group. The Extremist In-Group argues that the Eligible In-Group must join the Extremist In-Group in order to access a solution to the crisis (see Figure 1).
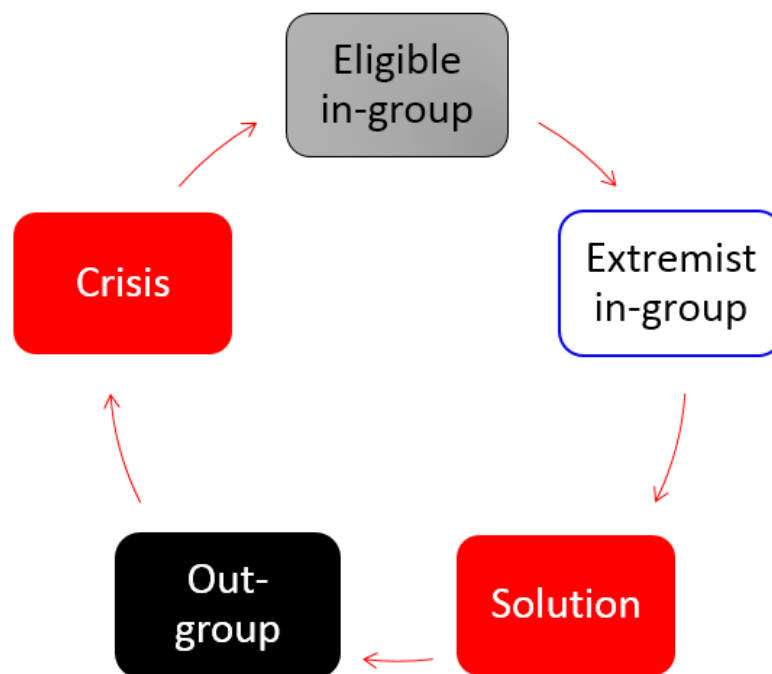

Figure 1: Crisis-Identity Construct: Propagandists link each group to a crisis and a solution.

In-groups and out-groups are defined in propaganda and extremist ideology by linking each group to the following descriptive characteristics:

- Beliefs
- Traits
- Practices
    - Past behaviour
    - Current behaviour
    - Expected future behaviour

Together, these linkages comprise a harmonised "system of meaning", which extremist propagandists advance to members of the eligible in-group in order to shape their perceptions of the world and encourage the adoption of extremist ideologies and membership in extremist organisations.[10]

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[10] H. J. Ingram, "A "Linkage-Based" Approach to Combating Militant Islamist Propaganda: A Two-Tiered Framework for Practitioners", The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague 7, no. 6 (2016).
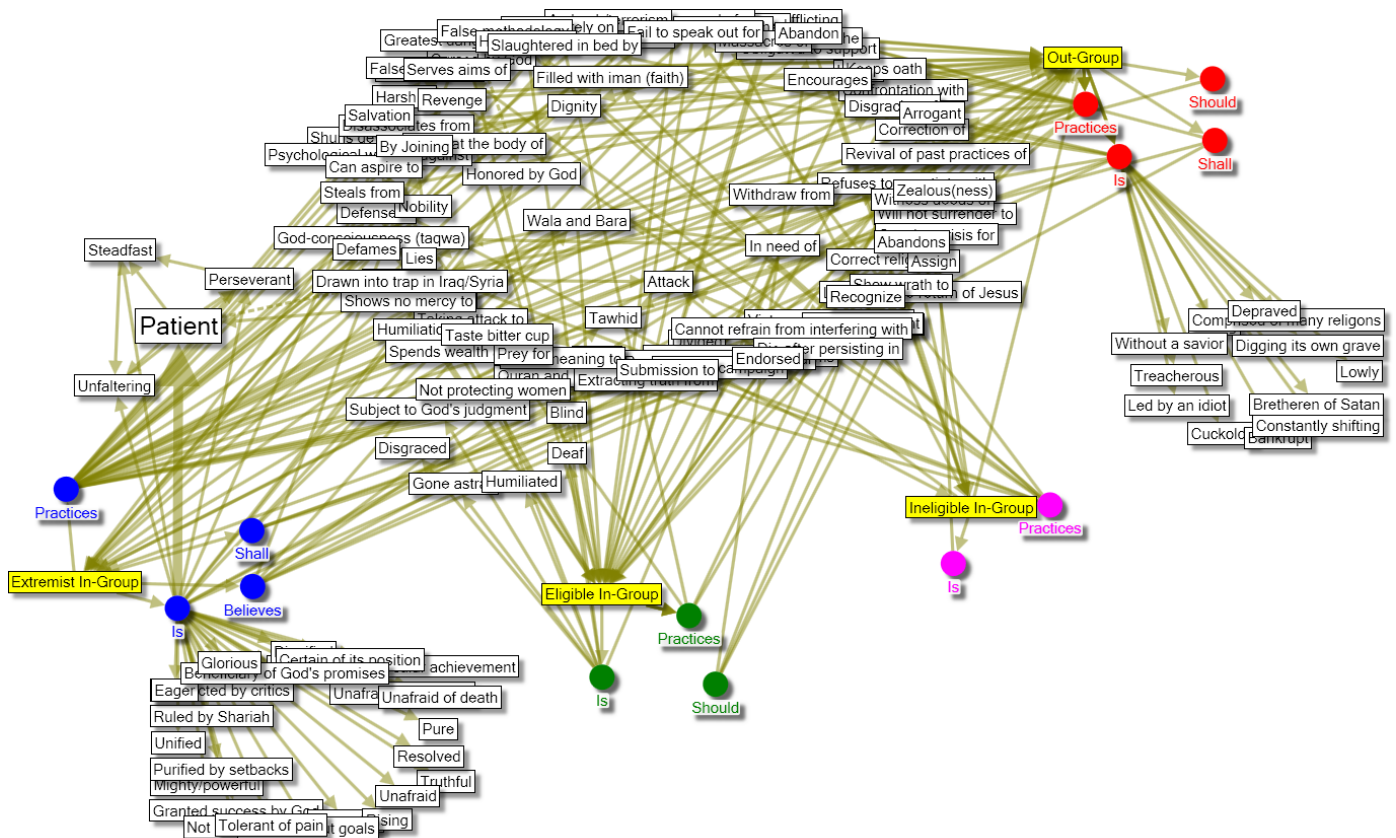
Figure 2: Conceptual linkages in "Be Patient, For Indeed the Promise of Allah is True". Subsets of this graph with more readable detail are featured below. All linkage visualisations were created using NodeXL.[11]

3. Linkage-Based Analysis of the Text

A previous paper in this series analysed "The Islamic State Will Remain", an August 2011 speech by Abu Muhammad al Adnani, a gifted orator who was an effective spokesman for IS until his death in August 2016.[12]

In 2011, the organisation (then known as the Islamic State of Iraq) faced significant setbacks due to a coalition military pressure coordinated with local Sunni tribes that had turned against it (the Sunni Awakening, or in Arabic, the *sahwat*).

While Muhajir's speech, released in April 2017, also came during a period of retrenchment, the situation facing IS today is far more complex than it was in 2011, and this is reflected in a speech that is substantially more complex than Adnani's, despite

[11] M. Smith, A. Ceni, N. Milic-Frayling, B. Shneiderman, E. Mendes Rodrigues, J. Leskovec and C. Dunne, "NodeXL: a free and open network overview, discovery and exploration add-in for Excel 2007/2010/2013/2016", http://nodexl.codeplex.com/, the Social Media Research Foundation, 2010, http://www.smrfoundation.org.
[12] C. Kube and A. Johnson, "U.S. Says It Killed Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, ISIS' Second-in-Command", *NBC News,* 12 September 2016, http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-terror/u-s-says-it-killed-abu-muhammad-al-adnani-isis-n647066.

being of relatively comparable length. Figures 3 and 4 display the relative conceptual density of the linkages drawn in each of the two speeches.
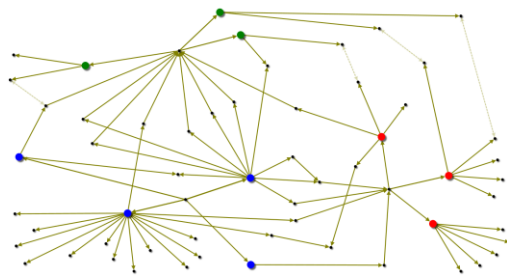
Figure 3: A map of linked concepts in Abu Muhammad al Adnani's 2011 speech.
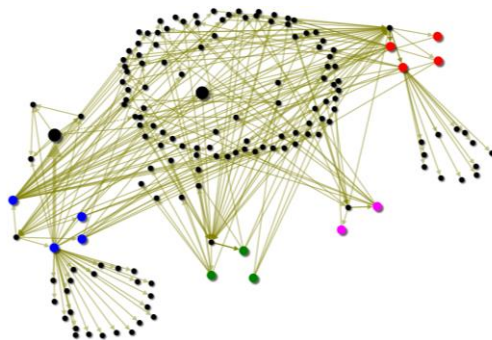
Figure 4: A map of linked concepts in Abu Hasan al Muhajir's 2017 speech.

The disparity here is likely driven by several factors. First, each ideologue has a different personality and intellect, and Muhajir may simply describe issues in a more complex manner than Adnani.

Second, Muhajir spends a substantial amount of time discussing a social identity group that Adnani mentioned less prominently – members of the Eligible In-Group (Sunni Muslims) who have turned against the Extremist In-Group (IS). This new grouping includes, for instance, Sunni Muslim clerics and scholars who have ruled against the group's interests.

For purposes of this paper, this grouping will be described as the Ineligible In-Group, meaning people on the cusp of Out-Group classification, who must affirmatively change their ways to become fully eligible for membership the Extremist In-Group. Members of the Ineligible In-Group are passing from the Eligible In-Group into the Out-Group.

For instance, members of the Sunni Awakening, or *sahwat*, are former Ineligible In-Group members who have been assigned to the Out-Group. This category is more important for Muhajir than Adnani, whose speech attempted to recruit the *sahwat* back into the fold with a promise of forgiveness.[13] Because of this theme, Adnani took pains not to segregate the *sahwat* from the Eligible In-Group. Muhajir also offered forgiveness to the repentant, but with much less emphasis, and a greater focus on condemnation.

Third, the increased complexity of Muhajir's speech may reflect an intensifying radicalisation of the IS's ideology. As discussed in "Extremist Construction of Identity", a group that is becoming more extreme may construct more elaborate descriptions of

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[13] Abu Muhammad Al Adnani, "The Islamic State Will Remain Safe" (2011).

in-group and out-group identities. As these descriptions are fleshed out, particularly with regard to Out-Groups, a movement's ideological and propaganda texts naturally become more complex as they become more extreme, because the extremist group must provide new ideological justifications for the escalation of its posture.[14]

Fourth, the actual situation of IS was much different in 2017 than in 2011. While the Islamic State in Iraq had been pushed back by the U.S. troop surge and a Sunni backlash to its hyperviolent tactics, the United States was beginning to withdraw from the country,[15] leaving a fractured social landscape and escalating sectarian tensions, opening the door to Islamic State in Iraq's resurgence.[16] In the intervening time, the group has expanded around the world. It instituted full governance for a significant period of time, including a range of practices relevant to this group identity, and fought a yearlong war against a multinational coalition.[17] Perhaps most importantly, the organisation claimed the mantle of an Islamic caliphate, a substantial shift in its group identity which corresponded to a seismic shift in its demand for legitimacy.[18]

Finally, a caveat should be noted regarding the interpretative reading of the texts using this analytical technique, which is somewhat subjective and may vary even when, as in this case, the analysis is carried out by the same author. Efforts were made to minimise this effect, and it is unlikely that this factor alone can explain the significant scope of the difference between the two texts.

Brief Overview of Content

"Be Patient, For Indeed the Promise of God is Truth" directly addresses the military losses of IS from 2016 through mid-2017. It opens with scriptural references to the importance of keeping faith through hardship and the prerogative of God to decide how events unfold until the eventual inevitability of victory. The themes of patience and perseverance run through the entire speech, with injunctions to supporters not to soften or lessen their efforts.

Muhajir repeatedly states that history is repeating itself, using this frame to link the fighters of IS to various general and specific figures in Islamic history. He cites a continuum of troubles to beset the global Muslim community (the *ummah*), but argues that the existence of IS, as defender of the *ummah*, distinguishes the past troubles from the present. While IS had experienced setbacks, he argues that its enemies have paid a steep price, which will become steeper, both in terms of military entanglements and terrorism.

Muhajir indulges in some general religious commentary, with specific reference to *wala* and *bara*, Arabic terms for loyalty and enmity respectively, a religious principle that has often been featured in jihadist propaganda.[19] He also emphasises the rewards of the afterlife, a fairly standard jihadist trope, describing a "profitable transaction" in which

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[14] J.M. Berger, "Extremist Construction of Identity" (2017).

[15] J. Logan, "Last U.S. troops leave Iraq, ending war", *Reuters*, 17 December 2011, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-withdrawal-idUSTRE7BH03320111218.

[16] J. Stern and J.M. Berger, *ISIS: The state of terror* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015), p. 29.

[17] Y. Ritzen, "The Rise and Fall of ISIL", *Al Jazeera*, 22 July 2017, http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2015/02/rise-fall-isil-150212075706347.html.

[18] J.M. Berger, "Gambling on the Caliphate", *INTELWIRE*, 29 June 2014, http://news.intelwire.com/2014/06/gambling-on-caliphate.html.

[19] N. Lahoud, *The Jihadis' path to self-destruction* (London: Hurst & Co., 2010), p. 49, 198.

IS supporters "sell their lives cheaply" in exchange for eternal life. The speech concludes with calls for terrorist attacks and insurgent activity around the globe.

As with Adnani's 2011 speech, the biggest part of the message is devoted to providing descriptions of the identity groups that make up its ideological framework, including the Extremist In-Group, the Eligible In-Group and the Out-Group. In addition, Muhajir spends a significant amount of time discussing the Ineligible In-Group, meaning members of the Eligible In-Group, as described above, who he believes have aligned themselves with the Out-Group and are at risk of expulsion from the Eligible In-Group.

Extremist In-Group Description

Muhajir spends the bulk of his speech describing the characteristics of the Extremist In-Group, which likely reflects a belief that IS's existing adherents require encouragement and reinforcement as the organisation loses its hold[20] on the territorial caliphate declared in June 2014.[21] Under the framework, these descriptions can be broken down into beliefs, traits and practices.

Beliefs

Muhajir spends relatively little time on IS's beliefs, but the ones he cites are significant. In addition to fairly generic content regarding the promises of God in the afterlife, he cites beliefs in two principles as key to the Extremist In-Group's ideology. Both of these principles have various interpretations across the range of Islamic scholarship, as well as very specific interpretations within jihadist ideology. Both concepts were loosely referenced by Adnani in his 2011 speech. Muhajir spends more time discussing them.

The first is *tawhid*, or monotheism, a belief in the indivisible oneness of God, which can be extrapolated into a "rejection of legal, class, social, political, racial, national, territorial, genetic, and economic distinctions" and general political unity among Muslims.[22] Importantly, this concept provides a divine mandate linking the Eligible In-Group to the Extremist In-Group.

The second concept is *wala* and *bara* (loyalty and enmity), which functions "as a tool of 'in-group' control", which is broadly interpreted by jihadists to mean that Muslims are required to stand together loyally (*wala*) and fight outsider and outside influences (*bara*), across spiritual, emotional and physical dimensions.[23] According to Maher, *wala* and *bara* "should be thought of as occupying opposing ends of a spectrum where, by definition, the closer an individual draws to one end, the further they move away from the other".[24]

As with IS's interpretation of *tawhid*, this concept provides crucial reinforcement to the necessity of in-group definition while additionally stipulating the necessity of out-group definition. The concept resonates with other jihadist beliefs, which constitute the

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[20] C. Dwyer, "Iraqi Forces Launch Assault On Last Remaining ISIS Stronghold In Mosul", *NPR*, 18 June 2017, http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/06/18/533420319/iraqi-forces-launch-assault-on-last-remaining-isis-stronghold-in-mosul.
[21] A. M. al Adnani, "This is the Promise of God", Audio Recording, Al Furqan Media (Islamic State Official), 29 June 2014, http://jihadology.net/2014/06/29/al-furqan-media-presents-a-new-audio-message-from-the-islamic-states-shaykh-abu-mu%E1%B8%A5ammad-al-adnani-al-shami-this-is-the-promise-of-god/.
[22] J. L. Esposito, ed. *The Oxford dictionary of Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e2356.
[23] S. Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism: The history of an idea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 111-142.
[24] Ibid., p. 113.

content of jihadist ideology,[25] but *wala* and *bara* is best understood within the identity-construction framework as a structural reinforcement. As Tajfel notes, the "process of categorization" involved in adopting in-groups and out-groups "may set the stage for the seeds of negativity".[26] By arguing the necessity of *wala* and *bara*, IS and other jihadist groups are arguing that the process of categorisation must be undertaken as a religious mandate.
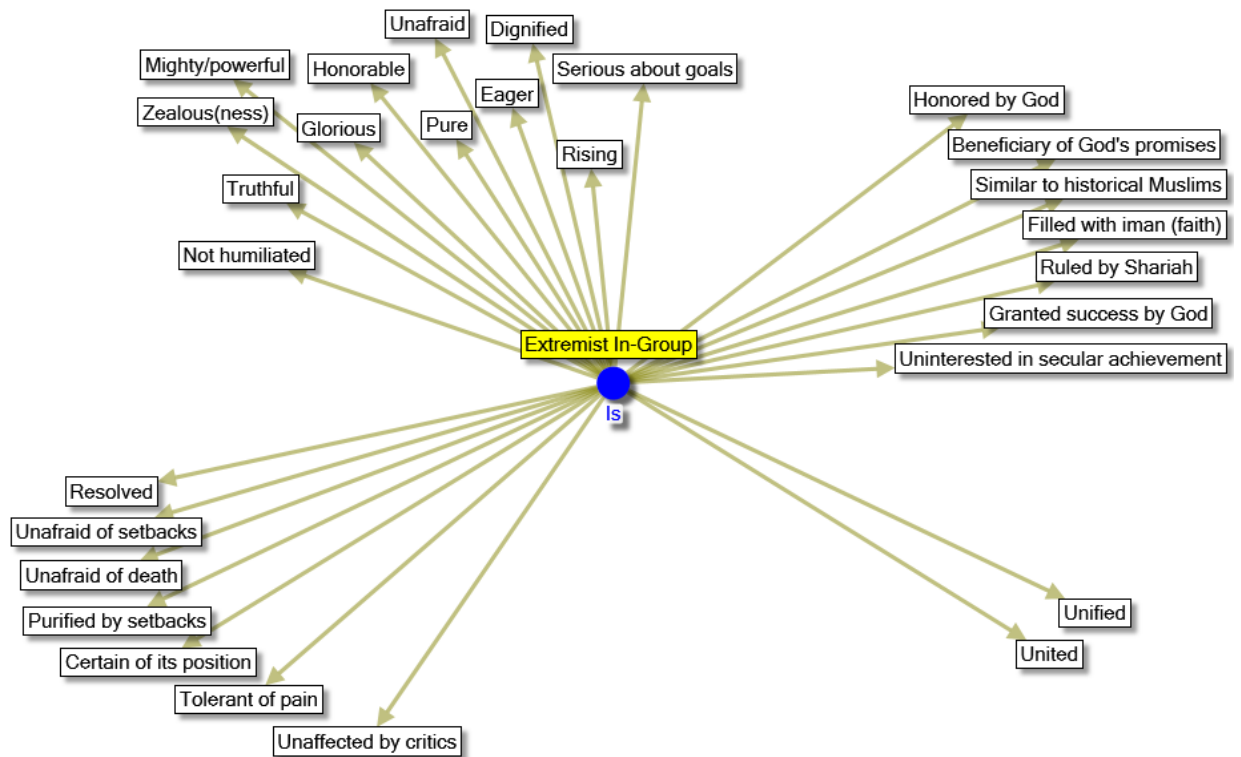

Figure 5: Traits of IS and its adherents, according to Abu Hassan al Muhajir.

Traits

A significant portion of Muhajir's speech is devoted to describing the traits of IS and its adherents. These break down into four categories:

- General traits, such as courage, dignity, truthfulness and honour
- Resilience and patience, traits tied to surviving the current significant pressures on the survival of the organisation
- Unity, related to resilience, traits that serve as a denial of and a caution against divisions within the ranks of the Extremist In-Group
- Religious, mostly differentiated from beliefs in that they describe not general principles but instead the privileged status of the Extremist In-Group

In the overall graph of the text (*Figure* 2), traits are mostly "pendants" – nodes featuring only one link, which "hang" from the Extremist In-Group and do not connect to other

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[25] Ibid., p. 114.
[26] H. Tajfel, *Human groups and social categories: Studies in social psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 132-133, 141, 147.

groups. However, as will be discussed below, some pendants link to opposite or resonant traits connected to other groups.
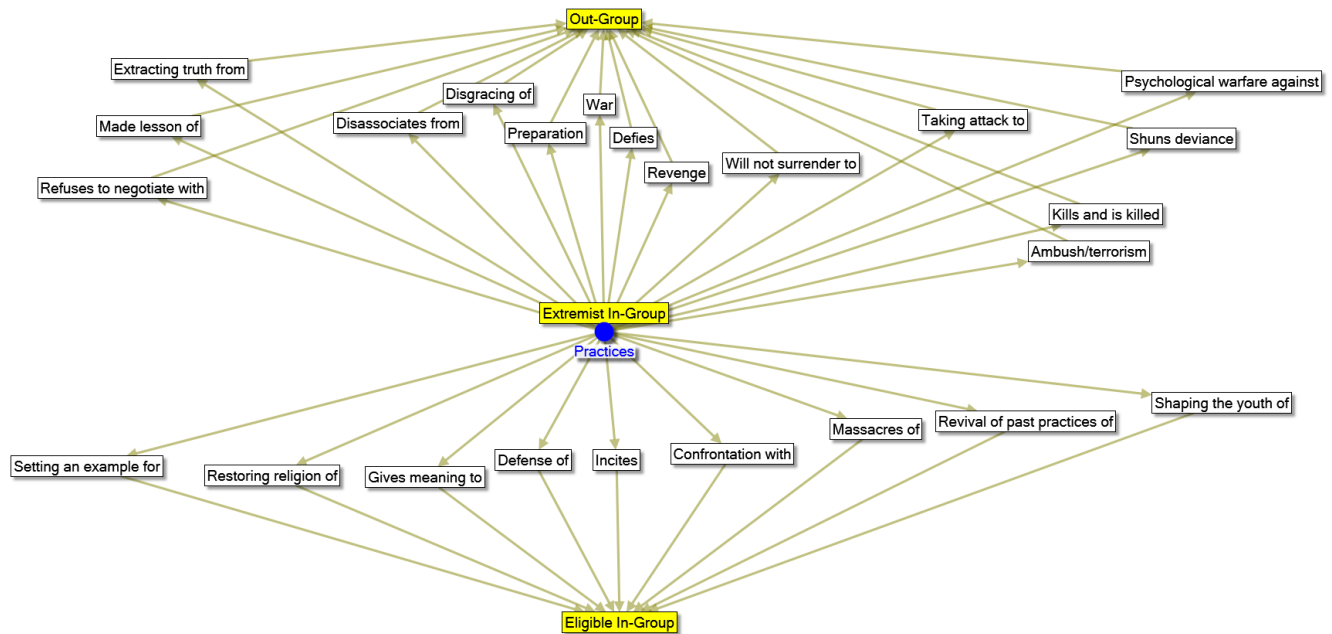

Figure 6: Practices of the extremist in-group that impact the out-group and eligible in-group

Practices

Muhajir more robustly defines IS's Out-Groups than Adnani did in 2011. While Adnani mentioned a variety of out-group types, his primary focus was on Shi'a Muslims, especially in Iraq. [27] Muhajir addresses a wider and less focused Out-Group conglomerate, led primarily by the United States, but encompassing Shi'a Muslims, Gulf countries, the *sahwat* and others. Reflecting IS's expanded global focus on terrorism, Muhajir emphasises causing fear and incremental damage (political, economic and psychological) to the out-group.

With respect to the Eligible In-Group, Muhajir takes a sterner tone than Adnani. While Adnani primarily focused on Extremist In-Group practices that were unreservedly positive toward the Eligible In-Group (defending and protecting), Muhajir's language includes a more prescriptive and authoritative role, including a responsibility to "confront" and "incite" the Eligible In-Group, as well as "refining the zeal of [its] youth". Muhajir bluntly states that IS "continues to drag the Muslims [Eligible In-Group] back to their religion in chains".
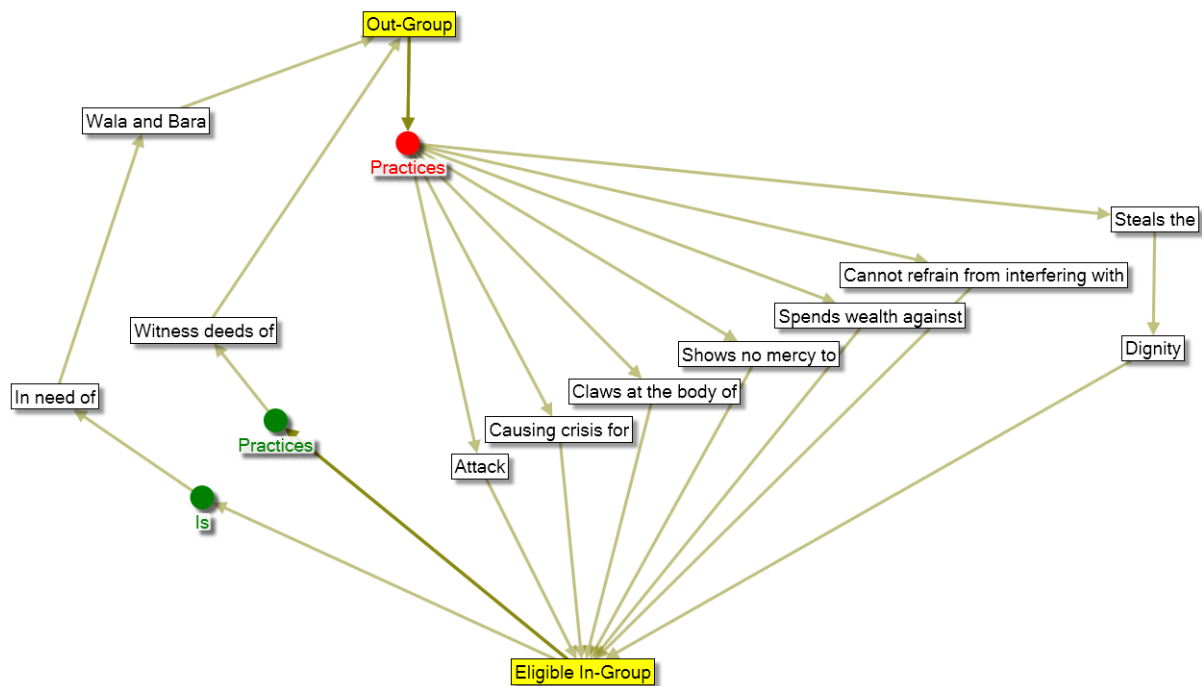
Figure 7: Interactions between the Out-Group and the Eligible In-Group

Other Group Descriptions

Muhajir's description of the traits of the Out-Group and Eligible In-Group are fairly standard. The Out-Group is multifaceted, including both Shi'a and "crusader" foes (meaning America and Europe). It is described as treacherous, depraved, inconsistent, and polytheistic (in contrast to the *tawhid* of the Extremist In-Group). Relative to Adnani, Muhajir introduces some new traits, including "cuckolded", an interesting echo of alt-right terminology, [28] and "led by an idiot", a reference to the outcome of the U.S. presidential election.

The Eligible In-Group descriptions include such standard jihadist tropes as "humiliated", but here, again, Muhajir takes a strongly judgmental tone. Sunni Muslims, in his view, are not adequately supportive of IS. They are "deaf" and "blind" to their obligations. They are "disgraced" and have "gone astray," and they have failed to protect "the chaste women" of the community.

The Out-Group's precipitation of a crisis against the Eligible In-Group is described in familiar terms, including a flat assertion of crisis, and detailed claims regarding economic and psychological harm to the Eligible In-Group.

More interestingly, Muhajir notes connections from the Eligible In-Group back to the Out-Group, with two dimensions. First, he notes that the Eligible In-Group is lacking in *wala* and *bara* with respect to the Out-Group, judging that members of the former are

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[28] D. Weigel, "'Cuckservative' — the conservative insult of the month, explained", *Washington Post*, 29 July 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/07/29/cuckservative-the-conservative-insult-of-the-month-explained/?utm_term=.664c68eb0062.

not adequately hostile to and exclusive of the latter. Second, he notes that the Eligible In-Group is witness to the nefarious deeds of the Out-Group. Rather than selling the Out-Group's threat through his own credibility, Muhajiir urges members of the Eligible In-Group (particularly in Syria) to recall what they have seen the Out-Group do.

4.   Risk Factors for Escalating Extremism

There are broad changes to IS's message as viewed through the prism of these two speeches. As previously noted, Muhajir's 2017 message is considerably more complex than Adnani's 2011 speech.

In many ways, this simply reflects the shift in the complexity of the organisation, as noted in Section 3. However, a comparison of the two speeches suggests there is a risk that IS could evolve in the near term into an even more extreme and violent iteration of its ideology, as unimaginable as that prospect might seem. The following risk factors, detailed in "Extremist Construction of Identity",[29] are currently in play:

Filling in the Identity

Extremist identity constructs are a framework to be filled with information. As IS fills its history with Extremist-In-Group-bolstering milestones such as the capture of Mosul and establishment of the caliphate, it also accumulates data to flesh out the Out-Group description and to characterise the severity of the Out-Group threat. Since 2011, IS has established a history densely packed with events which can be deployed to further solidify and complexify its ideology. For instance, Muhajir cites specific battles between the Extremist In-Group and the Out-Group (such as Bab and Aleppo) and describes atrocities committed by the Out-Group in each, including some directed at the Eligible In-Group. He uses these data points to further demonise various Out-Groups and amplify the threat they present.

While rising complexity does not always correlate to increasingly extreme views, complexity with regard to descriptions of the Out-Group are especially telling, as well the expansion of links that describe how the Extremist In-Group and Eligible In-Group interact with the Out-Group.

Challenge to Legitimacy

IS's rapid growth and recruitment success were, to some extent, predicated on its remarkable military success and its establishment of an unparalleled proto-state in defiance of substantial opposition from regional and global powers. Today, IS has lost a substantial portion of its territory, which not only undercuts its victory-based narrative but also frees people under its control to criticise the group's governance and undercut its claims about the utopian health of the caliphate.

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[29] J.M. Berger, "Extremist Construction of Identity" (2017).

With its capture of Mosul in June 2014 and the subsequent declaration of the caliphate,[30] IS staked out a significant and compelling claim to legitimacy that was intertwined with (although not fully dependent on) its military and political success. With the foundations of that claim under severe pressure, the organisation and its ideologues are required to craft more elaborate justifications of its legitimacy.[31] When additional justifications are crafted, they can pull an extremist group into an even more violent and exclusive posture, as can be seen by Muhajir's increasingly vituperative condemnations of the Ineligible In-Group. Muhajir does not, in this speech directly address the question of how the loss of territory affects IS's claim to legitimacy. However, previous IS releases addressed the issue, and it is likely to be addressed further in the future, as the situation on the ground develops.[32]

Fluidity of Group Definitions

Periods of in-group and out-group scaling are also particularly volatile moments in the evolution of an extremist movement. Any time that an identity-based movement redefines its in-groups and out-groups, it opens the door to a change in its level of radicalisation, for better or worse, but often for worse.[33]

In Muhajir's speech, this is reflected in an expanded focus on a wider range of Out-Groups and the increasing classification of Eligible In-Group members as Ineligible due to their collusion with the Out-Group and/or their opposition to the Extremist In-Group. Importantly, Ineligible In-Group members arguably present the most obvious and serious challenge to IS's legitimacy, meaning that the fluidity of group definition here is closely tied to a second escalating factor.

Among other things, this could point to a shifting target set in which IS increases the pace and frequency of attacks on Ineligible In-Group members (such as "evil scholars") in an effort to further polarise the Eligible In-Group. Ultimately, this trend, if unchecked, could expand the Out-Group to any member of the Eligible In-Group who does not support the Extremist In-Group.

This may be foreshadowed in Muhajir's specific attacks on other jihadists whose beliefs, traits and practices are very similar to those of the Extremist In-Group, but who oppose the Extremist In-Group – "those who refer to themselves as fronts, committees, and movements, and who have a different condition, state, and appearance each day just as a chameleon has colors". Other jihadist groups in Syria, including al Qaeda and its current and former affiliates, have long been in conflict with IS, but they are accorded special prominence in this speech.

Competing jihadist groups have greater ideological affinities to the Extremist In-Group than the Eligible In-Group does, but their opposition to the former places them on the cusp of Ineligibility and unqualified assignation to the Out-Group. The contrast between the rhetoric of IS and al Qaeda is notable here. Al Qaeda opposes IS and its activities,

[30] M. Bradley, "ISIS Declares New Islamist Caliphate", *Wall Street Journal*, 29 June 2014, https://www.wsj.com/articles/isis-declares-new-islamist-caliphate-1404065263.

[31] J.M. Berger, "Extremist Construction of Identity" (2017).

[32] J. Warrick and S. Mekhennet, "Inside ISIS: Quietly preparing for the loss of the 'caliphate'", *Washington Post*, 12 July 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/inside-isis-quietly-preparing-for-the-loss-of-the-caliphate/2016/07/12/9a1a8a02-454b-11e6-8856-f26de2537a9d_story.html?utm_term=.1907c1aefe65.

[33] J.M. Berger, "Extremist Construction of Identity" (2017).

but leaves the door open for an eventual rapprochement,[34] albeit under terms that render the prospect far more notional than realistic.

5.   Counter-Messaging Examples

The complexity of Muhajir's message offers a number of opportunities for counter-messaging through linkage-analysis. By identifying linked concepts, counter-terrorism strategic communications personnel can seek to dissolve linkages created in extremist propaganda and create new linkages to promote alternative or contradicting messages.

To counteract a successful propaganda and recruitment campaign, it is logical to begin by undermining the messages that made the group successful in the first place. These counter-messages will not, of course, sway the most-hardened adherents, but they can reduce the appeal of IS to people who are less engaged with members of the group and its continuing stream of propaganda. The following section examines some potential avenues for counter-terrorism strategic communications based on linkage-analysis. It is not intended to be a comprehensive list of possible themes, but rather a starting point for the development of a specific campaign.

Undermining Clusters of Concepts

Pragmatically speaking, a good counter-message should undermine more than one linkage created in extremist propaganda. In this paper, this is represented by links that intersect with more than one group, and multiple links that feature related points.

Links between the Extremist In-Group and the Eligible In-Group are particularly important to recruitment, since they connect the extremists (in this case, IS) to ordinary people within the wider identity group (in this case, Sunni Muslims). Undermining links such as "IS defends Sunnis" are critical to countering the group's appeal.

For additional value, counter-terrorism communications can target clusters of related themes, such as those found in Muhajir's speech (Figure 9).
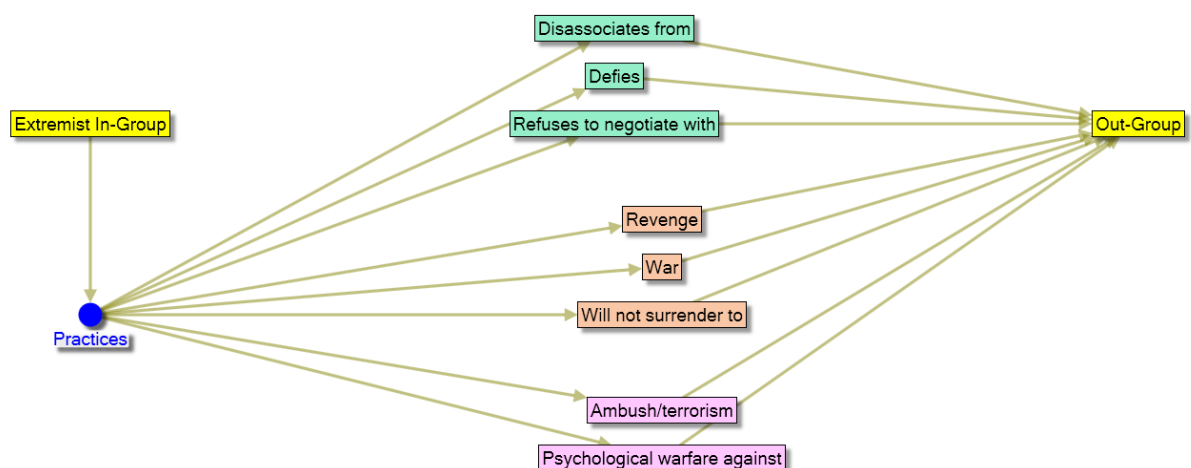

Figure 9: Extremist practices coloured by related content

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[34] "Al Qaeda chief tells jihadist fighters in Syria: Unite or die", *Reuters*, 8 May 2016, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-qaeda-idUSKCN0XZ0OA.

The first cluster relates to IS practices regarding separation from the Out-Group. These can be counter-programmed with messaging that emphasises evidence of IS collusion with the Assad regime, for instance, or with arguments that IS practices empower the Out-Group, for instance, by creating instability that increases Iranian influence in Iraq.

The second cluster emphasises open war with the Out-Group, and a refusal to surrender. Counter-messages could focus on the group's diminished capacity to wage war and hold territory, or instances in which the group has been seen to retreat or surrender, such as its 2016 move to abandon the town of Dabiq without a significant fight.[35] Since Dabiq figured prominently in IS propaganda, due to the fact it was featured in an apocalyptic prophecy about a penultimate battle, it would be effective to contrast statements from prior propaganda releases with the group's actual conduct.

Figure 10: In a November 2014 video, Mohammed Emwazi stated that the IS's soldiers were waiting in Dabiq for the "crusader armies" to arrive. Instead of waiting, IS abandoned the town with little resistance.

Such messaging targets a key vulnerability in any propaganda program – the "say-do" gap.[36] Incongruities between an organisation's message and its actions can be effectively exploited in propaganda. The say-do gap is a favourite target of jihadist propaganda against the West, so it is likely to be an effective element in counter-messaging to the jihadists' audience as well.

The third cluster relates to the shift in IS tactics, from a primary focus on insurgency and local issues in 2011 to a primary focus on terrorism, psychological warfare and global targets in 2017. Messaging targeting this cluster could focus on how terrorism as a tool reflects weakness, or contrast the focus on terrorism with earlier propaganda statements citing the IS's success and military power as evidence of its righteous cause and correct strategy.

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[35] "ISIS suffers huge symbolic loss in Dabiq, Syria, to Turkey-backed rebels", *CBS News*, 16 October 2016, http://www.cbsnews.com/news/isis-suffers-huge-symbolic-loss-dabiq-syria-turkey-backed-rebels/.
[36] 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).

It is important to note that messaging and strategic considerations are different realms. An emphasis on IS failures in messaging is utilitarian and should highlight disparities between the organisation's claims and its ground reality, along with changes and inconsistencies in its communications positions over time relative to its strategic positions. Officials and analysts outside the realm of communications obviously need to consider a wider range of real-world factors in assessing threats and policies.
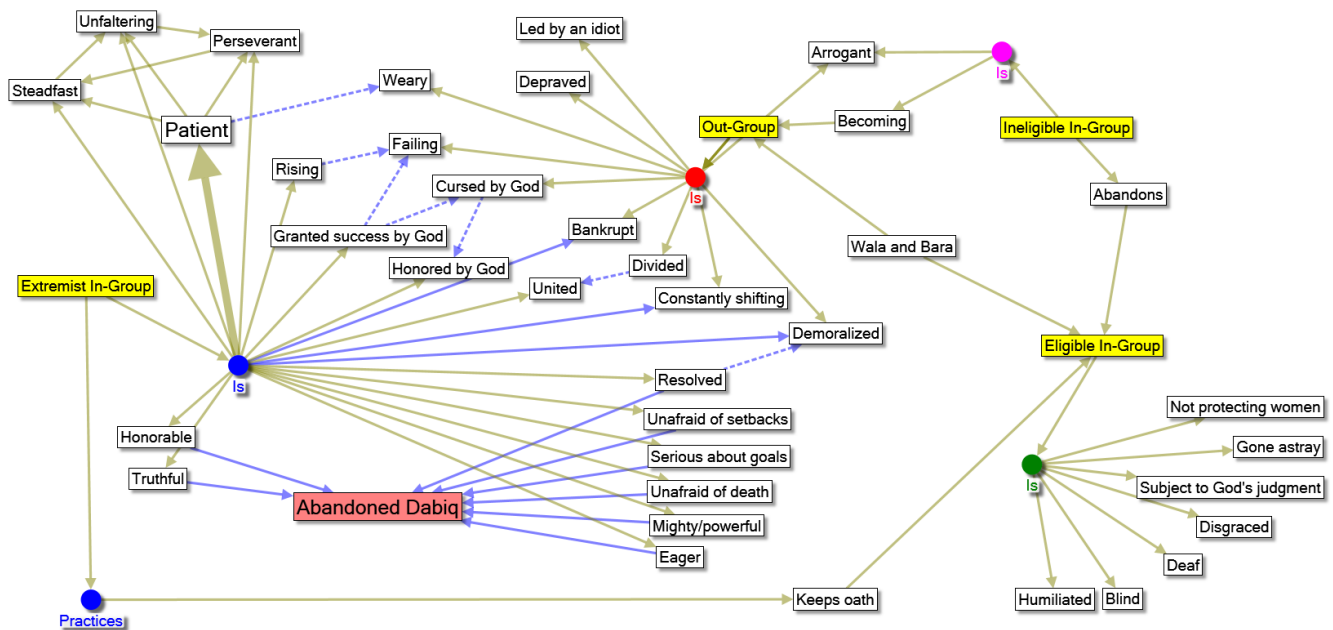

Figure 11: Vulnerable linkages in the IS's descriptions of group traits. An enlarged image is included at the end of this paper. Blue lines indicate new linkages that can be created by strategic counter-terrorism communications campaigns.

Undermining Descriptions of Traits

IS's description of its own traits is also vulnerable, especially as they resonate with or reflect traits attributed to other groups. The criticisms that extremists level against their enemies are often the traits that they find most repulsive. By flipping the narrative, it is possible to counter an extremist group's talking points by associating it with the qualities that represent the opposite of its own cherished ideals.

At the most basic level, Muhajir argues IS is "rising", while its Out-Groups are "failing". The group's current situation provides ample material to mount a message focused on its failures.

Relatedly, Muhajir makes specific claims that can be rebutted regarding IS war practices. Here, again, Dabiq provides a particularly useful example, although not the only one available. Despite previous IS claims regarding its desire and resolve to "fight the Crusaders in Dabiq", its retreat from the town can be used as a narrative to counter Muhajir's claims that IS is "resolved," "unafraid of setbacks", "serious about goals", "unafraid of death", "mighty", and "eager" to fight, replacing those linkages with parallel concepts the organisation has associated with the Out-Group, such as "weary", "demoralized", and "constantly shifting".

Referencing past claims about Dabiq also undercuts Muhajir's assertion that the group is "honorable" and "truthful," while casting doubt on whether its other unrelated claims can be trusted. Undermining previous claims is not only useful with respect to current claims, it undermines the value of adversary propaganda generally.

While IS supporters have offered a rebuttal outlining its reasons for abandoning Dabiq, their arguments for leaving are (unsurprisingly) far less compelling than the argument for fighting there.[37] Hardened adherents are entirely capable of rationalising the cognitive dissonance, but recruits who are not yet fully radicalised are likely to be more open to interpreting these events and claims in a negative light.

Highlighting Negative Context of Links

Another potential approach could highlight negative elements of an extremist message that could be counter-productive. In his April 2017 speech, Muhajir adopts a much stricter tone toward the Eligible In-Group compared to Adnani in 2011. Muhajir criticises the Eligible In-Group for having "gone astray", and for its inability to protect the honour of its women. He says the Eligible In-Group is "blind", "deaf" and "disgraced" – all categories that assign blame to the Eligible In-Group, as opposed to classic jihadi motifs such as "humiliated" and "oppressed". Highlighting and carefully framing attacks on the Eligible In-Group may help drive a wedge between the Extremist In-Group and the Eligible In-Group.
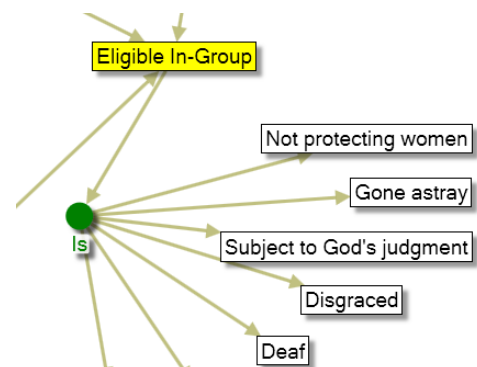
Figure 22: Traits of the Eligible In-Group described in Muhajir's April 2017 speech.

Another potential counter-terrorism communications focus in the same space could highlight Muhajir's increased focus on the Ineligible In-Group, which stipulates that members of the Eligible In-Group risk are "subject to God's judgment" and risk being reassigned to the Out-Group if the Extremist In-Group deems their actions offensive. Paired with the judgmental language noted above, Muhajir is issuing an implicit threat to the Eligible In-Group, which could be made explicit in counter-messaging.

6. Conclusion

The messaging themes discussed in this paper are only a starting point for the design of counter-terrorism communications. By charting additional works of IS propaganda over time, counter-terrorism communications practitioners can develop increasingly sophisticated models for the design of messaging campaigns.

These models are not silver bullets. No single messaging approach is likely to counter the multifaceted strands of ideology and propaganda contained in IS's voluminous output. Rather, these models should be part of a long-term campaign to undermine the effectiveness of IS propaganda.

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[37] A. Barnard, "After Losses in Syria and Iraq, ISIS Moves the Goal Posts", *New York Times*. 18 October 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/19/world/middleeast/islamic-state-syria-iraq.html?_r=0; C. Bunzel, *Twitter.com*, 14 October 2016. https://twitter.com/colebunzel/status/786985610645037056.

The steps to implement such a campaign include:

1. Undermine the extremist organisation's most effective recruitment arguments by dissolving links that bridge between the Eligible In-Group and the Extremist In-Group or the Out-Group.
2. Use elements of the extremist organisation's critique of Out-Groups to describe the Extremist In-Group.
3. Pair elements of the Extremist In-Group's self-description with elements of its description of Out-Groups, then flip the narrative.
4. Highlight elements of the extremist organisation's message that reflect a desire to change or control the Eligible In-Group, or are otherwise hostile, judgmental or implicitly threatening.
5. Highlight the Extremist In-Group's effort to reassign a member of the Eligible In-Group to the Out-Group through the transitional category of the Ineligible In-Group.
6. Highlight the extremist organisation's "say-do" gap by accentuating inconsistencies within individual messages and in its body of messaging over time.
7. Undermine the broader credibility of the extremist organisation's propaganda programme by deploying the elements above in a coordinated and sustained manner.

By undermining specific messages that resonate with target audiences, as well as undermining the credibility of the general corpus of IS propaganda, a messaging campaign can broadly diminish the group's recruiting and messaging effectiveness.

Figure 11 Enlargement
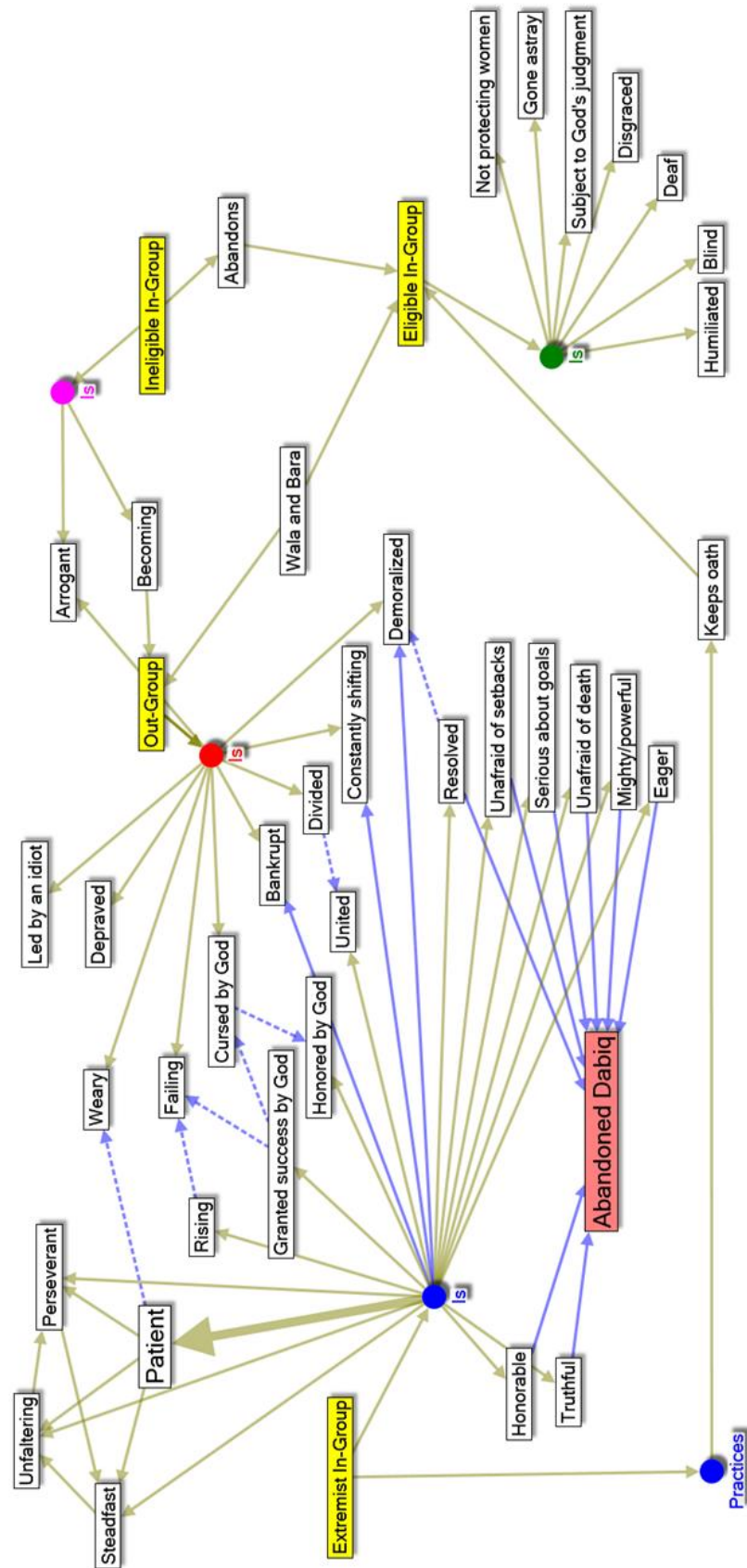
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Countering Islamic State Messaging Through "Linkage-Based" Analysis

J.M. Berger
August 2017

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