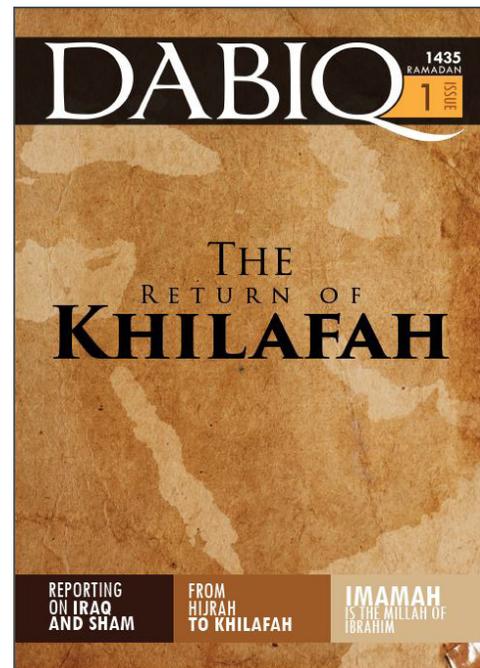


DABIQ: THE STRATEGIC MESSAGING OF THE ISLAMIC STATE

The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham's (ISIS) assault on the city of Mosul on June 10, 2014 demonstrated its formidable military strength. ISIS's activities across Iraq and Syria also reveal that the organization is engaged in governance programs, ranging from Shari'a courts to aid distribution and law enforcement.¹ These efforts underscore ISIS's desire to erect a functional Caliphate within the boundaries of its controlled territory. That effort requires political and religious control in addition to military victory, and ISIS has a vision for how the Caliphate will form. ISIS has begun to explain its grand strategy to achieve this end through extensive public outreach, including a digital magazine series entitled *Dabiq*.² This backgrounder will examine the contents of the first issue of *Dabiq* in detail, explaining the significance of this strategic messaging approach by ISIS in conjunction with the announcement of a Caliphate.

ISIS's political, military, and religious programs reflect what ISIS seeks to accomplish. Some of the richest sources of information on these three linked efforts derive from ISIS's own publications. ISIS's reports and magazines reveal how ISIS frames and justifies its activities to particular audiences. The intended audiences are noteworthy: a number of ISIS's new periodicals are published and promoted primarily in English, with translations into other languages, such as French, German, Russian, and Arabic, released alongside. Two of the organization's recent long-form English-language publications, both entitled *Dabiq*, lend particular insight into ISIS's claim to religious authority on the basis of political control. Both also explain how ISIS relates these programs to the requirement for military control. Released digitally on July 5, 2014, a month after the fall of Mosul, the first *Dabiq* installment provides English-language readers with battlefield updates, administrative reporting, and religious commentary. A second edition, released on July 27, 2014, follows the same format. The main effort of this outreach campaign appears to be the explanation for the Caliphate's propriety and existence.

This backgrounder will focus primarily upon the content of the first *Dabiq* magazine, which carefully narrates the practical ideology upon which the Islamic State is founded. Through this analysis of ISIS's own propaganda, the holistic state-building project of the Islamic State becomes visible. The magazine was distributed digitally primarily in English and other European languages, and the content carefully builds off a basic set of Islamic religious concepts. As such, it is likely that the magazine aims to communicate both to enemies and to potential ISIS supporters in the Western world. The target audience and



Cover of *Dabiq* magazine's first issue.

essential message of the *Dabiq* series differs significantly from the Western-language messaging campaign of al-Qaeda. Begun in 2010, al-Qaeda's English-language magazine *Inspire* does articulate religious justification. However, *Inspire* specifically focuses on encouraging lone-wolf Western-based terrorists to attack the West. *Inspire* serves more as a how-to guide for individual attacks than an articulation of an overall religious, military, and political vision. By contrast, ISIS's *Dabiq* series is

farther-reaching, laying out the religious underpinning of the Caliphate and encouraging all believing Muslims to support ISIS and emigrate from their homes to the Islamic State.

The magazine's significance thus lies not only in its content, but in its very existence. ISIS's consolidation of the Islamic State depends on the formation of a strong base of supporters. *Dabiq* demonstrates that ISIS is looking not only to nearby areas for support, but is undertaking a global outreach strategy to recruit immigrants to build its state. ISIS's prioritization of this task is evidenced by the sophistication and production value of the magazine, requiring ISIS's outreach "department" to assemble fifty and forty-four page publications within the span of a few weeks. The publications, in fact, generally reflect facts on the ground within a few days of their publication, indicating a short timeline to publication. ISIS has dedicated significant resources to this effort, as seen in the extensive campaign by ISIS supporters to distribute the publication online, and to launch an international publicity and persuasion tool while ISIS attacks continue.

The first and second editions of *Dabiq* further demonstrate that ISIS is not simply a military or terrorist organization. ISIS has established political institutions, and has reasoned through religious argumentation to support these institutions. In both editions of *Dabiq*, ISIS takes great care to ensure that its religious justification is robust. This justification is also retrospective, explaining the correctness of the ISIS Caliphate after it had been announced. ISIS's global expansion likely depends on its ability to wrest religious authority from rival organizations such as al-Qaeda by demonstrating that its own methodology is both more successful and more justified. Some of the language in the publication mirrors that of other prominent jihadists, such

as Abu Bakr Naji and Abu Mus'ab al-Suri, along with Zarqawi mentor Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi.³ This need to persuade jihadists and to piggyback on other prominent theorists makes religious justification a critical requirement for ISIS rather than a core source of strength.

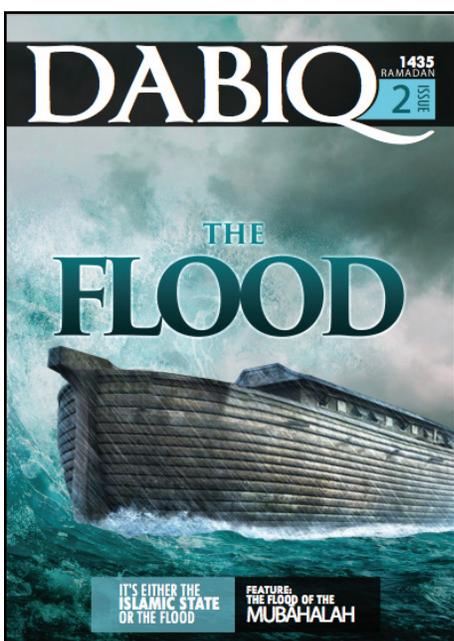
ISIS's media strategy has adapted to prioritize this religious requirement in the aftermath of its June 2014 offensive. In the month before the invasion of Mosul, ISIS's English-language military reporting came through the *Islamic State News* (ISN) magazine, first released on May 31, 2014, and its English-language political reporting came through the *Islamic State Report* (ISR), first released on June 3, 2014.⁴ Each series published a few short issues until July 5, 2014, when *Dabiq* apparently combined both ISN and ISR, adding additional religious commentary. The new magazine brings together ISIS's military, governance, and religious activities into one united outreach effort. This change reflects an effort by the group to integrate military and governance actions to support a coherent religious vision.

As ISIS recruits followers from around the globe, including English speakers, it needs to not only publicize its victories, but also to frame those successes as inevitable results of God's approval. By doing so in *Dabiq*, ISIS seeks to attract supporters to the Islamic State, accelerating the group's consolidation of control in Iraq and Syria. ISIS also uses *Dabiq* to frame and publicize its grand strategy in a way that directly challenges other jihadi groups, and threatens enemies in the West. For these reasons, ISIS is investing energy to circulate an English-language propaganda campaign of considerable magnitude.

Dabiq articulates the ISIS vision in a more comprehensive way than could be gleaned by simply tracking military offensives. The magazine illuminates how ISIS consolidates its power, justifies its authority, sequences its military strategy, and argues against opposition groups. These concepts are communicated in a thoughtful and remarkably public manner. *Dabiq* demonstrates that ISIS is not a shadowy terrorist cell; rather, it is a proto-state that is testing out the best ways to get the world's attention, and broader support from the Muslim community abroad. Though ISIS is far from achieving this latter task, it is worth examining *Dabiq* as a successful recruitment and propaganda tool. It will be important for U.S. policymakers to be aware of this propaganda campaign within the spectrum of ISIS activities in order to develop means to counter it.

SIGNIFICANCE OF DABIQ'S TITLE

The title of the *Dabiq* magazine series has symbolic meaning. *Dabiq* is a small town in northern Aleppo, Syria, where, according to a well-known hadith about Armageddon, Muslims and "Rome" (generally interpreted to mean the West) will clash.⁵ The location also has parallel historical significance as the site of a decisive battle in 1516 between the Ottomans and the



Cover of the magazine's second issue, released June 27, 2014.

Mamluks, which led to Ottoman victory and the consolidation of the last recognized Islamic Caliphate.⁶ To reiterate the location's importance, both the first and second editions of the magazine's table of contents are preceded by a quote from al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) founder Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, saying that "The spark has been lit here in Iraq, and its heart will continue to intensify — by Allah's permission — until it burns the crusader armies in Dabiq." This prominent quotation of ISIS's founder was likely chosen to emphasize ISIS's independence from other jihadist groups, particularly al-Qaeda (AQ). As will be explained here, ISIS's current effort to establish legitimacy could be challenged by al-Qaeda's core leadership and from al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra (JN). Quoting Zarqawi, rather than Osama bin Laden or another AQ leader, underscores ISIS's desire to frame itself as an independent organization religiously superior to AQ or JN.

The battle in Dabiq, Syria that the magazine's title recalls is another manifestation of ISIS's ideological synergy with al-Qaeda. But ISIS and al-Qaeda may have divergent grand strategies. While AQ's grand strategy does include an eventual, apocalyptic clash between Islamic forces and Westerners, the organization currently believes itself to be at an earlier phase in its plan. Rather than all-out battle with infidels, AQ's current strategic stage involves executing spectacular terrorist attacks on the West.⁷ Mary Habeck, a scholar focusing on al-Qaeda, explains that AQ's grand strategy begins with a period of ideological recruitment and warfare preparation. After these initial steps come attacks on Western forces and "apostate rulers" within Muslim countries. Eventually Shari'a law will be introduced, an act that would force central governments to engage in a "protracted guerilla war" with jihadists, as is currently seen in places like Yemen, Somalia, and the Sinai. After some

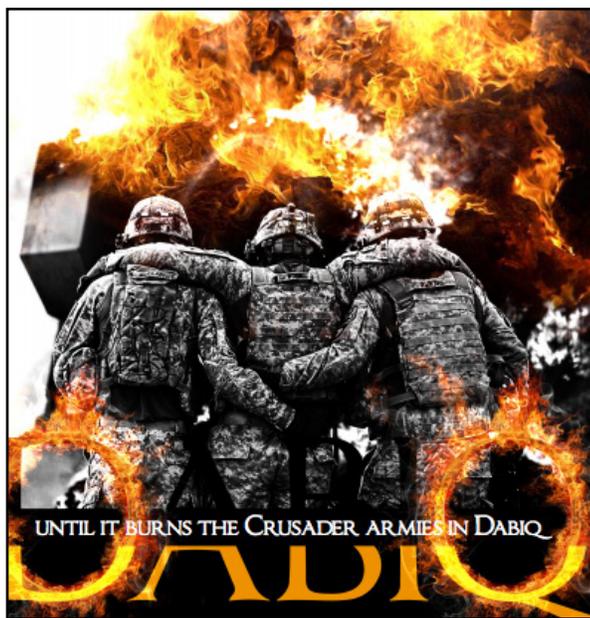


Areas claimed to be recently seized by ISIS. (Box added for emphasis by ISW.)

time, al-Qaeda would set up institutions across broad swaths of land, replacing existing governments and unifying its member groups. The Caliphate would be established, a step that would lead to an "all out war with the unbelievers until the end of time." While AQ's final stage matches the imagery of *Dabiq*, the organization sees itself as many steps away from reaching that point. *Dabiq* exposes how ISIS rejects AQ's strategic sequencing, and has followed a different set of steps to establish its Caliphate. It is still unclear how al-Qaeda will respond to ISIS's Caliphate declaration and assertions of superiority. As long as ISIS's military victories continue, it is difficult for AQ to persuasively argue against the group's methods.

Naming a main propaganda effort after a forecasted battle in Dabiq, Syria implies that ISIS wants to be seen as the jihadist group that will lead the Muslim community into worldwide domination. A literal interpretation of the Dabiq battle history would see ISIS wait for the West to initiate combat, giving ISIS time to build capacity and grow until the West cannot tolerate ISIS's existence. A future battle in Dabiq is referenced multiple times in the periodical, indicating that it may actually become a rallying cry for the new Caliphate. ISIS seized the actual town of Dabiq in early August 2014, reportedly spurring its fighters on by telling them they were part of a "triumphant religious battle."⁸ The apocalyptic narrative that occurs in these texts is not unique to ISIS, but compared to AQ the Islamic State speaks of these battles as though they are imminent and is setting the conditions to fight them. The apocalyptic nature of the vision that ISIS lays out in *Dabiq* is also apparent in the second issue of the magazine, titled "The Flood." It references the story of Noah and the Ark, arguing that the new caliphate is the "ark" and that everyone who does not join will be wiped out in the "flood."

Importantly, the Dabiq motif does not answer how ISIS will operate in the medium term. ISIS could attempt continuous expansion and recruitment until a final clash with "Rome," or



ISIS uses photos of American soldiers engulfed in flames in order to motivate its supporters.

it could simply carve out a de facto state and gain strength until the West attacks. Both routes would fit into a plan ending in a decisive battle. Future study of ISIS's messaging and military activities should look to determine whether there is a point at which ISIS would halt expansion, perhaps because of military overmatch, and instead focus on consolidation.

CALIPHATE CONSOLIDATION THROUGH HIJRAH

ISIS gives strong indications of its plans to control its newly gained territory at the start of both editions of *Dabiq*. The first edition begins with flashy graphics featuring excerpts of ISIS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani and ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's announcements of the Caliphate on June 29, 2014 and July 1, 2014 respectively.⁹ Both men emphasized the global nature of the Caliphate in their speeches. Baghdadi in particular had called on all able Muslims to perform *hijrah*, or emigration, to the Islamic State. *Dabiq* republishes this request in bold lettering, including Baghdadi's claim that *hijrah* was particularly obligatory for "doctors, engineers, scholars and specialists." It is significant that Baghdadi called for non-militant individuals to emigrate to the Islamic State, and that this request is reiterated among the first pages of *Dabiq*. ISIS wants to operate as a functional state with a population of like-minded people.¹⁰ This goal could be reached by persuading

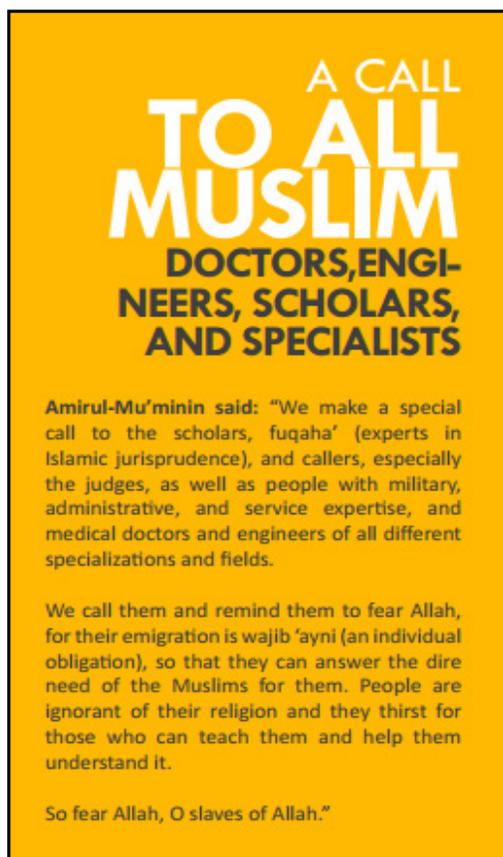
local inhabitants, or by encouraging international supporters to move in and replace the killed and displaced citizens of Iraq and Syria. So far we have seen both approaches in ISIS-held territory, with ISIS attempting to win over local clans in Mosul, and with foreign fighters' families moving into Raqqa.¹¹ Calls for *hijrah* such as those seen in *Dabiq* are manifestations of the latter method.

A renewed call for emigration was published in the forward of the second installment of *Dabiq*, affirming that *hijrah* to the Islamic State is a literal requirement for all Muslims, not just a symbolic request. The self-proclaimed "*Dabiq* team," communicating "the position of the Islamic State leadership," clarifies that even non-specialists are obliged to rush to the Caliphate as a first priority. Readers are told to bring their "parents, siblings, spouses, and children," and that "There are homes here for you and your families." This summons indicates that ISIS plans to repopulate its territory as a way to establish sustainable control. With a strong base of supporters in place, the organization will likely look to strengthen itself militarily and to expand governance measures, bolstering the sustainability of its new state.

It is important to note that ISIS's call for emigration does not assume all will repent and join the Caliphate. In fact, the first edition of *Dabiq* publishes quotes from Baghdadi's July 1 speech that emphasize the increasing gulf between believers and non-believers. As ISIS makes gains in Iraq and Syria, Baghdadi claims the world is ever more "divided into two camps ... the camp of Islam and faith, and the camp of kufr [disbelief] and hypocrisy." Because ISIS offers an initial chance for repentance, its messaging toward the West is both encouraging for possible supporters and threatening for definite adversaries.

The second edition of *Dabiq* asks readers who cannot perform *hijrah* to take steps that would encourage others to emigrate. Specifically, individuals are told to organize local *bayat*, or allegiance pledges. ISIS tells followers to publicize the pledges "as much as possible. Gather people in the *masjid* [mosques], Islamic centers, and Islamic organizations, for example, and make public announcements of *bayah*. Try to record these bayat and then distribute them through all forms of media including the Internet." The magazine explicitly states the motivation behind this request, explaining that publicized bayat pledges intimidate the *kuffar*, or infidels. More importantly, the pledges normalize loyalty to ISIS, helping to encourage others to follow suit. *Dabiq* argues that bayat should become "so common to the average Muslim that he considers those holding back as grossly abnormal. This effort ... will encourage Islamic groups to abandon their partisanship and also announce their bayah." This assertion reveals that for ISIS, non-Arabic outreach is part of a concrete strategy to establish authority and garner local support.

Dabiq's request that international supporters perform *hijrah*, rather than form remote attack cells in their own countries, shows a caliphate-centric foreign policy for ISIS. In this approach, ISIS draws all potential forms of strength to the



Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's call for skilled Muslims to join the Caliphate.

homeland, focusing on gaining, controlling, and governing territory that expands its current rump state. This approach is markedly different from that of al-Qaeda's central leadership, which oversees a global network of semi-independent groups that will join together in the far future. ISIS seems intent to succeed in Iraq and Syria before pursuing contiguous expansion.

Involvement in other world conflicts is tied to the expansion of the Islamic State, as shown by a discussion of Gaza in the second edition of *Dabiq*. In the magazine's foreword, ISIS argues that other Arab nations have only offered "empty, dry, and hypocritical words of condemnation and condolences" about the fighting between Israelis and Palestinians. In contrast, ISIS claims that it will "do everything within its means to continue striking down every apostate who stands as an obstacle on its path toward Palestine ... its actions speak louder than its words and it is only a matter of time and patience before it reaches Palestine." ISIS thus reveals a determination to remain focused on its current offensives in Iraq and Syria, pushing toward Jerusalem only as a continuation of its immediate goals proximate to the territory it controls. The organization refuses to make overreaching promises in *Dabiq*, and indicates a preference that military successes precede political posturing. Thus, it seems unlikely that ISIS will become involved in global struggles involving other religious or jihadist groups. Rather, ISIS will focus on its own progress in order to attract followers through religious justification and to continue making military gains stretching outwards from its current areas of control.

TRIBAL OUTREACH

Advancement on the home front requires not only the support of foreign fighters, but also the cooperation of local groups. In *Dabiq*, ISIS seeks to demonstrate that it can win the allegiance of popular tribal leaders in Iraq and Syria, both in order to persuade other groups, and to retain control of territory. To initiate and maintain tribal relationships in Syria's Aleppo *Wilayat*, or governorate, ISIS set up a public affairs office. An ISIS tribal affairs representative works underneath the *Wilayat*'s head of Public Relations, indicating that the group has a sophisticated, hierarchical infrastructure set up to interact with different local groups. This hierarchy may be replicated by other ISIS governorates, especially as ISIS deals with influential tribes to facilitate its offensives in Iraq.

Dabiq describes a meeting between the ISIS Aleppo tribal affairs representative and various tribes in Syria's Aleppo province, showing English language readers the types of messages that are attractive to Iraqi and Syrian tribes. Much of the content included in this "Tribal Update," had previously been released in Arabic in a larger report on ISIS's activities in Aleppo province.¹² This indicates that ISIS does not expect *Dabiq*'s audience to peruse ISIS's Arabic media channels. This section of *Dabiq* is likely included in the magazine to project local success via photographs and names of tribes that have pledged *bayat*. The

list of meetings with the Abu Khamis, Banu Sa'id, al-'Awn, al-Ghanim, and Bu Batush tribes gives the impression that ISIS is gaining local support. Very little information is publicly available about the tribes, indicating that at least for *Dabiq*'s readers, this article most likely serves propaganda purposes.

Republishing discussion points in *Dabiq* gives ISIS a chance to publicize the benefits of the Islamic State. The magazine relates the events of a large tribal meeting in Aleppo, which began with ISIS's representative enumerating the group's many military victories, and by reiterating that ISIS has not a local, but a global mission. The representative denied rumors that ISIS is harsh or that it retreats and abandons civilians in its areas of control. Instead, he explained to his tribal audience that the Islamic State would enforce property rights, provide security, distribute aid, and ensure the availability of food and goods for civilians. ISW has assessed that ISIS is able to provide these services in parts of its areas of control, particularly in Raqqa and Aleppo.¹³ In fact, creating law enforcement forces and providing aid to civilians are key ways that ISIS establishes territorial control and citizen dependency and trust.

The *Dabiq* article goes on to explain that in return for ISIS's aid, the representative asked for the tribe's cooperation in both military and governance matters. Militarily, ISIS requested monetary aid, fighters, weapons, and the surrender and repentance of any opposed to the Islamic State. Politically, ISIS asked that tribal leaders collect *zakat*, or charity tax, for Aleppo's *Wilayat* office, and also prepare lists of "orphans, widows and the needy" for charity distribution. ISIS's representative requested a pledge of *bayat*, which "several of the tribal elders and dignitaries" gave at the end of the meeting. The *bayat* pledge, made directly to Baghdadi, helps ISIS to claim that it enjoys local support in Iraq and Syria.

These expressions of support have become increasingly important, as ISIS has faced off with tribes in areas such as al-Alam and Zawiya, while negotiating with others tribes in Deir-e-Zour province.¹⁴ It is unclear how much sway tribes in Syria actually have, especially given the country's ongoing civil war. Even in Iraq, where the tribal Awakening played a significant role in the 2007 degradation of ISIS (then al-Qaeda in Iraq), tribal control is uneven.¹⁵ Regardless, *Dabiq* shows ISIS is using tribal pledges and negotiations as a way to project local support. By broadcasting accounts of tribal cooperation through its magazine, ISIS emphasizes its successful control of conquered areas, and its ability to win over civilians.

FEATURE #1: THE UNION OF POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY

Twelve pages of *Dabiq* are devoted to explaining the basis of the authority of Caliph Ibrahim, formerly known as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. This key feature, titled "The Concept of Imamah," outlines why Baghdadi is the absolute ruler of all Muslims on

both political and religious matters, and why the present Islamic State is the true *imamah*, or manifestation of leadership.

The article's religious argument is painstakingly crafted. Throughout *Dabiq*, ISIS takes care to use only either Quranic verses or hadiths from the major and most trusted collections. This effort is notable because of variation in the authenticity of Islamic hadiths. In the centuries after Islam's establishment, thousands of hadiths were falsely written, attributing fabricated words and teachings to the Prophet. In response to the resulting uncertainty, Islamic scholars rigorously rated all hadiths by the reliability of their *isnad*, or chain of transmission ("A said to me, on authority of B, from C, that the Prophet said...").¹⁶ Each individual in the chain was scrutinized on multiple queries: for example, whether they were a good Muslim, whether they could have interacted with the individuals listed, or whether they had ever spoken badly of authentic scholars. The two highest-rated authors, Imam Bukhari and Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj, were known as the *sahihain*, or "two sound ones," and were considered "second in importance only to the Quran."¹⁷ *Dabiq* almost exclusively uses hadiths from the *sahihain*.

The concerted effort in *Dabiq* to cite only the most reliable material¹⁸ is paired with a meticulously laid-out argumentative sequence. Each well-known verse or lesson proves a point in a logical progression that identifies the Islamic State as the true Caliphate, and Baghdadi as a ruler with complete religious and political power. The labor required to construct such an argument indicates the extreme importance with which ISIS views justifying its rule via a solid body of religious material. ISIS is not willing to risk religious challenge by opponents. While critics might challenge ISIS's interpretation of hadith, they cannot challenge the actual content with which ISIS justifies its authority. That insight, along with the length and centrality of this first feature, supports the conclusion that *Dabiq* was released primarily as a tool to justify religious authority.

ISIS's assertion of religious authority in *Dabiq* is often defined in contrast to other jihadist groups, particularly al-Qaeda. "The Concept of Imamah" section of *Dabiq* begins with the acknowledgement that older jihadist groups originally revived the spirit of the religious *millah*, or community, in the hearts of young Muslims. But those same groups are then criticized in the article for eventually becoming "ragged" and attempting to undo their own work. Al-Qaeda is not explicitly named as an example, but based on the strong philosophical disagreements explained below, it is likely that ISIS is referring to AQ.

The article first explains ISIS had to "revive" the *millah*, and uses hadiths from al-Bukhari and al-Muslim, as well as Quranic verse, to assert that a proper leader's role "includes both political and religious leadership equally." This process is consistent with the actions of Baghdadi, whose first public appearance was while delivering a sermon in ISIS-held Mosul. More broadly, the marriage of the political and religious is repeatedly demonstrated in ISIS's areas of control. As was delineated in an ISW report on ISIS governance in ar-Raqqa,

the Islamic State undertakes political tasks such as aid provision and infrastructure projects, in addition to the religious tasks of administering shari'a courts and religious schools.¹⁹

After the assertion of joint political-religious control, *Dabiq* provides historical examples explaining why Muslims had come to accept an incorrect separation between religion and state. At the conclusion of this account, ISIS argues that leadership "in religious affairs cannot be properly established unless the people of truth first achieve comprehensive political imamah over the lands and the people." This statement gives crucial insight into what ISIS sees as the source of its power. In the ISIS vision, as communicated through *Dabiq*, controlling territory and implementing governance are prerequisites to the establishment of religious authority. This sequence is in direct conflict with al-Qaeda's grand strategy, in which local and emigrant guerilla-fighting jihadists first impose religious Shari'a law, and then engage in military combat with the central government, eventually reaching a point where they are able to establish governance institutions.²⁰ ISIS's in-depth, hadith-quoting refutation of al-Qaeda's view implies that al-Qaeda's clerics have deviated from the "true" path that ISIS follows. This is also clear from the statement that "Imamah" is from the *millah* of Ibrahim." Although literally meaning "the path of Abraham" (i.e., Abrahamic faith), Michael W. S. Ryan of the Jamestown Foundation points out that "Millah Ibrahim" was the title of a tract by jihadi scholar, ISIS opponent, and current al-Qaeda supporter Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi.²¹ Thus this argumentation directly addresses Maqdisi's followers in an attempt to persuade them through religious reasoning.

The deviation is stressed further by a later reference to Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's predecessor, as the "emir al-mumineen," or leader of the faithful. ISIS's leaders claim that Abu Omar al-Baghdadi never pledged *bay'at* to Osama bin Laden, thus retaining the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) as a separate organization from al-Qaeda that could eventually claim to create the true state for all Muslims. Al-Qaeda leaders refute this assertion, accusing Baghdadi of breaking *bay'at* and rendering his organization illegitimate.²² This tension is acknowledged in *Dabiq's* description of Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, which emphasizes the continuity between the Islamic State of Iraq and the "true" Caliphate of today.

The feature coalescing religion and politics concludes with a reiteration of the Islamic State's exclusive legitimacy. Readers are warned that "it is not fitting for anyone ... to seek to demolish" the work done so far, and rivals are told that ISIS will "strike the neck of anyone — whoever he may be — that attempts to usurp his [Baghdadi's] leadership." Importantly, the last section includes an indication of what ISIS understands as the source of its legitimacy. The article argues that the Islamic State is "unquestionable" because "Allah has blessed it with victory, consolidation and establishing the religion." Action precedes authority in this philosophy: Baghdadi is the Caliph because of his military victories; the victories did not come because Baghdadi



Dabiq lays out how Muslims should move on a “prophetic methodology” to achieve the Caliphate.

was the caliph. The legitimacy of the Caliphate hangs on military victory and consolidation success, as proof of God’s approval. This insight is key for policymakers and military planners looking to achieve nonlinear effects on ISIS. If ISIS was dealt a series of military defeats and was thus denied the ability to consolidate its hold, its efforts to establish itself as the single true caliphate would be undermined. In this weakened state, rival groups might be able to further push back the Islamic State.

THE ISLAMIC STATE IN THE WORDS OF THE ENEMY

Immediately after “The Concept of Imamah,” *Dabiq* reports on “The Islamic State in the Words of the Enemy,” quoting two well-known members of the American foreign policy community. Names, titles, and photos of both individuals — who are referred to as “American crusaders” — are included. The re-published quotes, from a May 2014 blog post, focus on the military strength, reach, and governance capabilities of ISIS.²³ Specifically, *Dabiq* republishes assertions claiming that ISIS is a physical “reality on the ground ... from al-Raqqah in Syria to Fallujah in Iraq,” capable of providing services and administering justice. *Dabiq* echoes that ISIS has a “multi-ethnic army,” and emphasizes in bolded text the declaration that ISIS is a “de facto state that is a safe haven,” that is “more akin in organization and power to the Taliban of the late 1990’s than Al Qaeda.”

This section is likely meant both to intimidate Western scholars, and to demonstrate to ISIS’s followers that their achievements

are garnering international attention. However, the key takeaway from the first edition of “The Islamic State in the Words of the Enemy” is that ISIS has validated the selected quotes, and finds them significant enough to project back to its global following. The primary theme of this quoted material is repeated throughout *Dabiq*: that ISIS is a “state actor” with physical presence, governance capabilities, and global appeal.

The second edition of *Dabiq* includes the same section, this time with a photo and quote of Senator John McCain. ISIS levels personal insults, such as the claim that the Senator “rant[ed] irritably,” as well as political critiques. McCain’s quote, which is similar in content to the blog post quoted in *Dabiq* I, is prefaced with a note that the Senator “forgot that he himself participated in the invasion of Iraq that led to the blessed events unfolding today.” With that taunt, *Dabiq* demonstrates that ISIS’s leaders are paying attention to current American debates about whether to take action in Iraq. English language publications thus serve the dual purpose of encouraging potential supporters and to mock adversaries.

FEATURE #2: ZARQAWI’S CALIPHATE PLAN

Dabiq’s second feature lays out ISIS’s strategy for the establishment of the Caliphate. The plan is both informative of its own accord, and also reveals how ISIS uses its military actions to justify its superiority over other groups. ISIS’s own rhetoric on its strategy, as presented in *Dabiq*, provides valuable insight on how ISIS may approach interactions with other jihadist forces.



Zarqawi's plan to establish the Caliphate.

The article outlines Zarqawi's plan for Iraq in the early 2000's, explaining how it laid the ground work for the current ISIS offensive. According to *Dabiq*, Zarqawi's plan includes five steps: *hijrah* (emigration), *jama'ah* (congregation), *destabilize taghut* (idolatry), *tamkin* (consolidation), and *khalifah* (caliphate). The article explains that ISIS's original incarnation, al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), completed the first three steps as it became the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). This past progression both sets conditions and serves as a model for the current establishment of the Caliphate.

The article in *Dabiq* begins with a review of Zarqawi's experience fighting communists in Afghanistan, in order to portray ISIS

as an inheritor of the jihadist legacy. *Dabiq* claims that jihad against communists in Afghanistan brought together "parties with different backgrounds" against a common enemy, a situation explicitly compared to the current Syrian conflict. For the Afghanistan case, "nationalism" and weapons outreach is blamed for the eventual defeat of the Taliban, a possible warning for jihadist groups fighting in Syria today.

Dabiq frames Zarqawi as one of the "bridges upon which the jihad would pass over toward the awaited Khalifah." Thus Zarqawi, instead of al-Qaeda's leader, is portrayed as the inheritor of the historic caliphate mission. This view is rooted in Zarqawi's time in Afghanistan, where the Jordanian jihadist became close to Osama bin Laden, but was "careful not to submit to [bin Laden's] authority."²⁴ Zarqawi operated in territory distinct from bin Laden, overseeing a training camp in western Afghanistan, near Herat, while bin Laden remained in the east. As noted in the "Political and Religious Authority" section, this separation between Zarqawi and bin Laden is crucial. It is the basis by which ISIS asserts itself as an independent organization with sole claim to the global jihadist movement. After this key period in Afghanistan, Zarqawi spent time in Iraqi Kurdistan, and by 2003 was leading a large terrorist network in Iraq.²⁵ This group would eventually become al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).

Descriptions of Zarqawi's operations in Iraq demonstrate the remarkable extent to which all of AQI's activities were framed within a larger, long-term Caliphate vision. *Dabiq* gives textured explanations of 1) how foreign fighters were called to safe havens in Afghanistan and Kurdistan (Zarqawi's first base in Iraq),²⁶ 2) how Iraqi security forces were intentionally kept in a reactive posture via disruptive, coordinated, and spectacular attacks, 3) how government authority was degraded in Sunni areas, particularly through the fanning of sectarian divisions, and finally, 4) how a swift offensive allowed for the creation of ISI and a territory in which the organization could operate.

Dabiq's explanation is validated by historical reality, and by intercepted communications from Zarqawi himself. In February 2004, the U.S. obtained a letter from Zarqawi to al-Qaeda's leaders, explaining his initial plan for jihad in Iraq. Zarqawi declared his intention to target Iraqi Security Forces "strongly ... before the [security] situation is consolidated."²⁷ He also defended his rationale for targeting Shi'a populations over others, explaining that if AQI succeeds "in dragging them into the arena of sectarian war, it will become possible to awaken the inattentive Sunnis as they feel imminent danger and annihilating death at the hand of these Sabeans [a derogatory reference]." Sectarian conflict with Shi'a would likely radicalize Sunnis and recruit them to the AQI cause, a phenomenon that Zarqawi realized and intentionally fostered from the start of his operations in Iraq.

These five steps (emigration, congregation, destabilization, consolidation, and caliphate) are presented as a plan that informed both Zarqawi's actions and Baghdadi's creation

of the current caliphate. *Dabiq*'s language alternates between retrospective review ("he strived to create as much chaos as possible," "all this led to the gradual collapse") and forward-looking prescription ("these attacks will compel apostate forces," "the next step would be to fill the vacuum"). This duality reiterates ISIS's explicit claim that Zarqawi's plan "has always been the roadmap toward Khalifah for the mujahidin." *Dabiq* argues that the Caliphate strategy was not invented after the fact to describe events, but rather is an independent artifact that is deeply rooted in ISIS's history. This distinction is key for ISIS as it attempts to project historical legitimacy and authority. Just as *Dabiq*'s first feature uses hadiths to justify ISIS's institutional sequencing, this military feature uses historical examples to justify ISIS's campaign sequencing. Both articles imply that ISIS's actions have been fully intentional, and part of an overarching, divinely-rooted strategy. ISIS's assertion of intentionality is especially striking because of its adaptability to failure. In the feature about Zarqawi's Caliphate Plan, *Dabiq* frames AQI's defeat in 2011 as a "test decreed by Allah," part of a divine plan to "solidify" believers and root out the "weak-hearted." AQI's reputation was not permanently damaged by failing to complete the Caliphate strategy; rather, it was able to retreat and initiate the plan again.

ISIS may have also included prescriptive language in *Dabiq* for instructional purposes, encouraging supporting groups to grow in power and eventually join the Islamic Caliphate. This outward-looking interpretation is supported by the fact that flexibility is built into the steps as they are described. For example, after the prescription of *hijrah* and *jama'ah*, *Dabiq* notes that if land is not available for a base of operations, then "the place can be formed through long campaigns of *nikayah* (injury) attacks carried out by underground *mujahid* cells." The Iraq-specific aspects of Zarqawi's plan are also omitted from the prescriptive generalization, indicating that the steps could be adjusted for other locations that do not have, for example, a Sunni-Shi'a divide.

Dabiq's historical review of Zarqawi's strategy projects strength, and contrasts ISIS's correct path with the deviance of its opponents. *Dabiq* refers to ISI's territory under Zarqawi as being "in the heart of the Muslim world just a stone's throw away from *Makkah* (Mecca), *al-Madinah* (Medina), and *Bayt al-Maqdis* (Jerusalem)." ISIS's territory today is similar in location to historically held ISI terrain, with the same proximity to holy sites. The explicit reference to these shrines in Saudi Arabia and Israel indicate an ISI (and now ISIS) desire to control religiously significant areas in the Middle East.²⁸ Both Saudi Arabia and Israel have powerful, well-trained armies. To signal an intention to take those forces on is both a show of confidence and a way to animate supporters.

Because ISIS's military strategy has been relatively successful thus far, the group is able to portray opponents as inadequate or deviant for pursuing a less-fruitful path. A number of enemy organizations are criticized this way. ISIS accuses al-Qaeda of

being "frozen in the phase of *nikayah* attacks, almost considering the attainment of power to be taboo or destructive." As a result, AQ remains in the third step of establishing a Caliphate ("destabilize *taghut*"), while ISIS moves forward as the true victorious authority. This framing fits with ISIS's overarching critique of AQ: that the organization has neglected its duty to work toward the establishment of a Caliphate.

ISIS criticizes Islamic political parties such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas in *Dabiq* for falling into a "deviant methodology" after the death of older jihadi leaders. Former Egyptian President and member of the Muslim Brotherhood Mohammed Morsi and Hamas leader former Palestinian National Authority Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh are explicitly blamed for considering idolatrous regimes to be a "new hope" for the Muslim community. These political leaders are accused of abandoning Shari'a "fundamentals" in an effort to gain popularity. As a result they brought "indecision and fear ... [and filled] the road with obstacles that only serve the *tawaghit* (infidels)." This condemnation of Morsi and Haniyeh, and the political Islamism that they represent, indicates that ISIS is not likely willing to coexist with Islamic leaders in the region. By failing to adopt ISIS's radical theology, Egyptian and Palestinian leaders are identified as deviant, and thus open to attack. Condemning Islamic political parties will make it difficult for ISIS to form alliances with other Islamic groups if it grows in the Middle East. If ISIS refuses to interact with any organization or leader it deems impure, then it will likely have to pursue military, rather than political forms of expansion in the region.

The final enemy group referenced in this feature of *Dabiq* is the Syrian opposition, including Jabhat al-Nusra (JN). On January 7, 2014, ISIS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani released an audio statement criticizing the Syrian opposition and JN for undertaking a counter-offensive against ISIS in Aleppo and Idlib. Adnani accused opposition fighters of being *sahwa*, or Awakening members, who were "plotting against jihad in the Levant with the same machinations they plotted in Iraq ten years ago."²⁹ Adnani claimed that the "same godfathers, supporters, and suppliers" supporting the Syrian opposition had helped Iraqi Sunni tribes turn the tide against AQI in 2007 and 2009. This comparison is repeated in *Dabiq*. Forces opposing ISIS in Syria are blamed for having "financial, political, and 'scholarly'" support from malicious outside backers. However, *Dabiq* claims that in this recent conflict, Syrian opposition forces were quickly defeated, allowing ISIS to claim areas larger than many legal states.

The article concludes by claiming that because of recent military victories, none can claim "any excuse to resist the authority of the imam." Once again, military activities strengthen both political and religious authority. After a reminder that all have an obligation to pledge allegiance to Baghdadi, the feature on the Caliphate strategy ends with a request for the protection of the Islamic Caliphate "until its

legions fight the crusader armies who will gather near *Dabiq*.” This repeated, forward-looking reference to *Dabiq* demonstrates how ISIS’s rhetoric now explicitly includes an epic confrontation with the West as part of its long-term vision.

REPORTS OF MILITARY VICTORY

Dabiq categorizes military events as “News,” in recognition of the formerly standalone *Islamic State News*, which had focused on military reporting. The placement of this section at the end of the magazine highlights the importance of ISIS’s ongoing military mission. While the information included is not exclusively about ISIS’s activities (for example, graphic photos of children injured by Assad regime airstrikes in ar-Raqqah help paint Syrian forces as cruel persecutors), most of the section is presented in the form of updates on current ISIS offensives.

The *Dabiq* updates focus on military exploits, such as rocket attacks, town seizures, and clashes with Iraqi security forces. The section also includes news on successful Shari‘a law enforcement. Taken together, the accounts reinforce ISIS’s narrative of military success and growing strength. The current ISIS campaign is portrayed as active on multiple fronts. Namely, Abu Kamal, Udham, Hawija, Qaim, Ana, Rawa, and Rutba are all listed as under ISIS control, and the Qamishli Air Base as under contention. At the time of *Dabiq*’s release, and in the weeks after, ISW assessed that Udham was under ISF control.³⁰ If the city was actually contested, then this report may indicate that the Iraqi government is underreporting engagement with ISIS forces. Alternatively, the disparity may reveal ISIS’s willingness to exaggerate or lie about military advances in order to maintain the perception of success.

The military updates in *Dabiq* are organized by Wilayat, with each summary demonstrating a distinct writing style. For example, the Kirkuk Wilayat’s update is terse and specific (“The mujahidin have completely liberated the district of Hawija, less than 50km south of the city of Kirkuk.”), while the Anbar Wilayat update is lengthy and abstract (“As the campaign of Asadullah al-Bilawai

pushes forward, the mujahidin of the Islamic State continue to liberate more and more territory, consolidate their gains and win the support of the masses...”). This variance indicates that separate individuals may be responsible for reporting on each area, a sign of a robust and coordinated campaign-wide information collection structure.

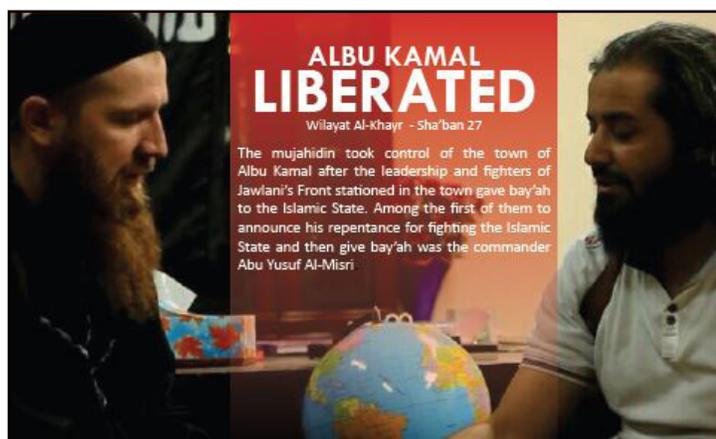
The Wilayat-based structure is repeated immediately after in a standardized tally of the opposition forces that have repented and pledged allegiance to Baghdadi. Under Wilayat headers, *Dabiq* reports the repentance of an army captain, local government members, and some “police and sahwat” members in Muqdadiyah, and of “hundreds” of Ministry of Defense and Interior workers in Tikrit. The remaining updates repeat the standardized phrase “members of the army, police and sahwat” to describe defectors. Specifically, 800 are listed for Suleiman Beg, 320 for Ramadi, 600 for southeast Tikrit, and 200 for Baiji. Because each of these towns are at the frontlines of ongoing ISIS offensives, their publication in *Dabiq* is likely intended to assure supporters of ISIS’s continuing momentum and persuasiveness in every city where the group is fighting.

ISIS’s decision to conclude *Dabiq* with a situational report on battle victories and repentances indicates a prioritization of military reporting. This ordering is congruent with a Caliphate vision in which religious authority is based upon military success and the ability to retain control in held territories. Ending the periodical with reports of victory also encourages ISIS’s supporters, a goal consistent with the propaganda functions that ISIS’s publications have played in the past.

CONCLUSION

Dabiq is a time-intensive, comprehensive form of literary outreach to the Islamic State’s potential fighters and future residents, as well as to its enemies. The magazine is not simply propaganda. Rather, it is an outward-looking articulation of ISIS’s Caliphate vision. ISIS is investing significant resources to explain why it is religiously justified and superior to rival organizations. This wartime effort is a key part of convincing followers of the ultimate solidity and victory of the Islamic State. As ISIS forms and publishes religious, military, and political arguments, artifacts like *Dabiq* provide invaluable insight on the internal interactions of ISIS’s three axes of effort.

The division and evolution of *Dabiq*’s article topics over time may allow analysts to track ISIS’s changing priorities, while a study of ISIS’s changing justifications of authority could aid in the formation of a counterstrategy to undermine the organization. Most significantly, *Dabiq* indicates how ISIS will shape its global strategy. As ISIS grows in power and consolidates territorial control, getting ahead of the



ISIS boasts about military victory at the Iraq-Syria border.

organization's intentions using tools like *Dabiq* will be vital. A counter-strategy to halt ISIS's territorial consolidation will need to account for these revealed interactions between ISIS's military, political, and religious operations. And if ISIS successfully retains a *de facto* state in the long term, then the international community will need a nuanced understanding of its new, strengthening adversary in the Middle East.

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