

LESS TERRITORY, MORE TERROR: THE EVOLUTION OF BRUTALITY IN
ISLAMIC STATE PROPAGANDA

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Precis: IS rapidly garnered global attention and intensified its media wing following Al-Baghdadi's declaration of the Caliphate in 2014. IS propaganda's grotesqueness, as seen in its sleekly produced execution videos and sensationally violent Western-centric magazines, *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*, simultaneously attracted followers and horrified the world. Since 2014, IS expanded its territorial presence and, with these gains, IS propaganda has evolved, including its use of brutality. I attempt to answer why IS propaganda—specifically its emphasis on brutality—has varied by analyzing the relation between major territorial gains and losses of IS and level of brutality in *Dabiq*, *Rumiyah*, and propaganda videos between 2014-2018. Through my analysis of *Dabiq*, *Rumiyah*, IS propaganda videos and comparisons with contemporary territorial changes, I posit and demonstrate that IS propaganda is less dependent on brutality when IS territory is increasing and stable and therefore more brutal when IS shrinks and loses swaths of key territory.

Brutality is a common aspect of revolutions. From the French Revolution's Reign of Terror, to the FLN's brutal execution tactics and to the Islamic State's (IS) current bloody campaigns, terrorism and brutality has played a key role in gaining attention, either in support of or in opposition to a terrorist organization's goals, intimidating opponents, and winning over recruits. It is hard to understand the motivations behind terrorists' actions as they often result in intense opposition. However, there is a method to the horror. As New York Times journalist David Carr stated, "ISIS seems to understand that the same forces that carried the Ice Bucket Challenge's message of uplift ... can be used to spread fear and terror as well."¹ In a 1984 book on religion and terror, terrorism expert David C. Rapport stated that terrorism is "a crime for the sake of publicity. When a bomb explodes, people take notice; the event attracts more attention than a thousand speeches or pictures."² Terrorist groups understand this better than anybody else. Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, bin Laden's second in command and Al-Qaeda's (AQ) current leader, stated in 2005 that "[m]ore than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media. We are in a media battle in a race for the hearts and minds of our *umma*."³ IS, likely because of its affiliation with AQ prior to 2014, has become an expert at gaining publicity and has in many ways surpassed AQ's expertise. For IS, as with any other terrorist group, public condemnations

of terrorist actions on the media more often help their cause than hinder it. Any publicity that shows IS successfully carrying out its operations and expanding territorially, no matter how disturbing and horrifying, is good publicity for IS. While many media sources, politicians, and viewers think that openly displaying the brutality of terrorist actions on the media may dissuade potential recruits, they forget that many IS recruits are attracted to, not repelled by, IS' exciting and ferocious opposition to the West as shown in their gory executions and vitriolic rhetoric.

IS propagandists understand the power of violence but realize that violence cannot be the foundation of their propaganda, and its use must be calculated. In IS propaganda, violence is often surpassed by many other more virtuous themes. Many authors which this study references, like Julian Droogan, argue that IS members are just as, if not more so, attracted by the religious devoutness that IS preaches as they are by its sensational violence. It is common in IS propaganda to see the contrast of virtue and terror that is so common in most revolutions. This contrast is exemplified in IS's magazines, *Rumiyah* and *Dabiq*, which often juxtapose brutality with innocence, mercy, and family. IS propaganda ranges from images portraying jihadists as family men who hold kittens, play with children, and call for mercy for hostages, only to immediately be followed by horrific images of beheadings by knives, firing squads, and other methods of executions carried out in front of large crowds of men and children.

Why and when does IS use brutality?

IS propaganda from 2014 is much different than IS propaganda of 2018, and the purpose of this study is to find out when and why these changes occur. The question this study addresses is how has IS propaganda evolved over time, especially in its use of brutality and terror? The main sub-questions are how have territorial gains, losses, and overall stability in the Islamic State

affected the prevalence of brutality, violence, and terror in its propaganda? What factors influence the frequency and graphicness of IS brutality in their propaganda? The argument of this study is that when IS is more stable, controls more territory, and has less opposition, all of which are connected, its propaganda depends more on expansive utopian themed propaganda and less on violence, brutality, and terrorism. On the other hand, when the group loses large swaths of key territory, the brutality in its propaganda increases dramatically. Territorial losses are often caused by, but not contingent on, a dramatic increase in anti-IS coalition airstrikes.

This study argues that the causation of an increase in brutality is because IS propaganda, in times of large territorial losses, is a double-edged sword used to dissuade further attacks and to attract media attention and recruits. Additionally, these brutal acts give confidence to potential IS supporters because of the media attention they attract and because they make IS appear stronger on the ground than it is. IS understands this and often employs these tactics as a distraction to compensate for weak territorial stability. When media coverage, both in the West and the Middle East, focuses more on IS's horrific executions and less on how IS is being defeated, IS's territorial losses take a back seat in the news.

Methodology

The methodology of this study is looking at different issues of *Dabiq*, *Rumiyah*, and propaganda videos from 2014 to 2018 and analyzing the variation throughout time in the themes of violence. Most videos and all issues of the magazine are found on The Clarion Project's and Jihadology's websites. The Clarion Project is a non-profit organization whose mission is to "[deliver] news, expert analysis, videos, and unique perspectives about radical Islam, while giving a platform to moderate Muslims and human rights activists to speak out against

extremism.”⁴ Jihadology is managed by Aaron Zelin, who has done extensive research on many Sunni Arab jihadist groups, including IS. I focus on the prevalence of violence, brutality, and terrorism in each magazine issue and match an issue’s release with prominent videos that were released around the same time. Additionally, this study concentrates on if thematic changes of video releases match up with thematic changes in magazine releases.

The independent variables are territorial expansion and losses. Changes in the levels of IS media portrayals of violence, terrorism, and vividness of brutality are the dependent variables. Other dependent variables that this study considers and discounts as chief causes of an increase in violence are the passage of time (i.e. violence either steadily increase or decreases with time) and anti-IS coalition airstrikes. Loss of territory causing a rise in brutality is difficult to measure as many themes are common throughout all issues and IS territory is constantly in flux. However, this study measures how the quantity, graphic nature, and patterns of violence and brutality change with key territorial gains and losses that happened within three months before the issues’ release dates, as publication time must be considered. This study will measure the prevalence of brutality and terror using a scale from one to ten, with ten being the most brutal and one being the least (see figure 3 on p. 11). Factors that contribute to a higher number are the graphic nature of the images, the stages of the executions that are shown, the prevalence of terrorism in the articles in terms of operations and encouragement, and methods of execution (refer to endnote 5 for more detailed coding methodology).⁵

The theory that loss of territory and decreased stability leads to more dependence on violent and brutal methods is based off what has happened to other armed revolutionary and terrorist groups like Hamas, Hezbollah, and the FLN. These groups formed as terrorist organizations who carried out attacks on fellow Muslims, Western organizations, and settlers to

gain or regain territory. However, as their violence increased, the support and opposition for their cause grew. As each groups' support grew and their legitimacy increased, both internationally and locally, their organization diversified their methods, often becoming more organized, diplomatic, and less dependent on terrorism. While most countries still consider groups like Hamas and Hezbollah as terrorist organizations, each of these groups are recognized as political entities and parties that provide benefits, including medical and other humanitarian support, diplomatic solutions to issues, and non-terrorist methods in pushing their political agenda. The FLN, although brutality sprouted up in the face of opposition, became the ruling political party in Algeria. Hezbollah, which started out as a group whose main objective was to regain Israeli occupied territory, has now become a political party in Lebanon which provides humanitarian aid and depends less on violence than previously, even having diplomatic ties with some European nations. Although IS's experiment as a state with territory lasted much less time than these other groups, this study illustrates a similar pattern in IS. A difficulty with this study is that IS's hold on territory was extremely short, lasting only three to four years. Will this have been enough time to see a dramatic change in their propaganda? Additionally, if there is a dramatic shift, is the loss of territory really the main cause of the shift in violence?

Research on how territory has affected IS propaganda has been done before, but not by many. This is in large part because everything in this study has occurred within the past five years. Many authors have studied the psychological effects, strategies, and ideology behind IS's horrific propaganda, but not many have focused on the variation throughout time of IS propaganda and its connection to territory. Charlie Winter, an expert on terrorism, insurgency, and offline strategic communications, has researched IS propaganda extensively. In 2018, he carried out a study on how IS strategies have evolved from their inception until now. Winter's study

illustrates the drastic difference between IS media of early 2015, around when IS, at least territorially, was at its peak, and in 2017, when IS's territory had shrunk to almost nothing. This effectively illustrates how IS territory and media are connected causally; themes and content shift depending on IS's threats, territory, and battle outcomes. Watkins (2006) carried out a similar study where he argued that "[t]here appears to be a strong correlation between territorial losses inflicted on the Islamic State by an international coalition and the group's increasingly global campaign of terrorism."⁶ He concentrates mainly on how calls for terrorism, not necessarily brutality in propaganda, have increased with losses of territory.

Other authors, either focusing on the evolution of IS propaganda or the loss of territory, but not both, have carried out studies that help explain the exact changes of *Dabiq* and/or online videos.

Droogan (2017) analyzes thirteen out of the fifteen *Dabiq* issues "[t]hrough formal qualitative analysis... to better understand its structure, evolution and intended audiences."⁷ His methodology for measuring the evolutions is worth emulating to some extent in my study.

Droogan organizes each theme mentioned into a legend, producing over fifty different themes that have appeared in the *Dabiq* magazines, including an "expanding territory" theme. He then carries out an analysis of each issue looking for changes in the prevalence of these themes and structure. He argues that violence, while an integral part of IS propaganda, is neither the most common nor the most important part of *Dabiq*. Even though he focuses less on the territorial side, blending his study with other studies on the changes in ISIS territory is useful for my study.

Background of the Islamic State

IS was founded by Jordanian radical Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in 1999 under the name *Jamaat al-Tawhid wa-al-Jihad* (Organization of Monotheism and Jihad) and went through four

different name changes before it officially became the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) in 2013 under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.⁸ During the American invasion and occupation of Iraq in the early 2000s, Zarqawi pledged allegiance to AQ in Iraq to fight the American led occupation. The alliance between AQ and the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) groups lasted, at least nominally, until 2014. However, between 2006 and 2014, tensions arose between Zarqawi, his successors, and AQ top brass, Bin Laden and Zawahiri, “because Zarqawi felt that the only way to save the *umma* (global Islamic community) from itself was through purging it, whereas... al-Zawahiri, believed that Muslims were not the problem, but that instead the “apostate” institutions needed to be changed.”⁹ What Zarqawi meant by “purging” was ridding Iraq and Syria of enemies of pure Islam by any means necessary: Shias, Kurds, Yazidis, Sufis, “apostates,” and Western organizations.

Part of this purge was his dedication to, not only brutally executing hostages (even non-combatants), but filming these executions and sending them to Western news outlets, including the beheading of American journalist Nicholas Berg in 2004. Zawahiri thought Zarqawi’s methods were too brutal. Zawahiri warned Zarqawi of a potential falling out from supporters saying that “[a]mong the things which the feelings of the Muslim populace who love and support you will never find palatable... are the scenes of slaughtering the hostages.”¹⁰

However, ISI’s brutality had served them well in both attracting publicity and supporters and they eventually saw brutality as something more important than their ties with AQ. Between 2006 and 2013, ISI’s brutal tactics were complimented by large territorial gains in Iraq through their AQ allies, Jebhat al-Nusra (JAN), who started dominating many rebel-held territories in Syria. In April 2013, ISI claimed that JAN was its Syrian breakoff and that the new group would

now be called ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria/Sham). JAN immediately rejected these claims and allied themselves with AQ, creating more tension between the two groups.¹¹

These differing ideological, strategic, territorial, and doctrinal attitudes led to the official split of the group and are what came to define the Islamic State (IS) as we know today. Although the split between the two groups was already made a year prior, the alliance lasted somewhat nominally until 2014 when AQ officially and publicly disaffiliated itself from ISI, condemning ISI's extremism and saying that AQ "is not responsible for their [ISI's] actions."¹² It almost seems comical that AQ sees IS as too extreme, especially since al-Qaeda is the same group responsible for the murder of thousands of people on September 11th. However, ISI's methods that they saw as integral to their cause were extremely hard for AQ to reconcile, especially ISI's more ferocious and aggressive position towards apostate Muslims.

2013- July 2014

2013 was the year that the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) changed its name to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). As mentioned above, this name change was originally with the plan of combining forces with JAN who had begun to gain a foothold in many parts of Syria. The name change shows that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, ISIS's new leader, wanted his state to expand across the border into Syria and, even without the help of other Jihadist groups, ISIS was successful in doing this. Most fighting was against Syrian rebel groups, including JAN and other Jihadist groups. Now, ISIS was not only an insurgency threat to Iraq, but also a threat to all other jihadist groups who were unwilling to adhere to ISIS' brutal and strict methods. It was between August and December 2013 that ISIS started conquering major cities in Syria, including areas of

Syria's biggest city, Aleppo, and complete control of Raqqa, Syria's sixth largest city. Raqqa was IS's proclaimed capital and also the heart of IS's media center, Al-Hayat.

Accompanying ISIS' large territorial gains was its social media presence, with its first Twitter account being created in October, after they had started gaining ground in one of Syria's largest cities, Raqqa.¹³ At this point, ISIS's social media presence brought them greater publicity. Within the following year, ISIS gained control of other major cities in Iraq and Syria. Among the larger cities they conquered were Fallujah in central Iraq in January 2014, and the northern cities of Mosul, Iraq's largest city, and Tal Afar in June 2014. The conquests of these cities came to play a major role in their first release of *Dabiq*. It was also in June 2014 that al-Baghdadi changed the official name from the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) to just the Islamic State (IS) and declared the Caliphate and call for *jihad*, stating that "Allah likes us to kill his enemies, and make jihad in his sake."¹⁴

July-December 2014 and creation of *Dabiq*

Dabiq was first released in July 2014, a month after Baghdadi's declaration of the caliphate in Mosul Iraq. While violence is a major part of the magazine, there are many other themes that are prevalent and necessary to understand. Droogan argues that a focus on violence is unhealthy for those trying to understand IS's propaganda tactics as it "obscures a more complex reality... the focus on brutality and apparent reveling in savagery is balanced in *Dabiq*... with a corresponding emphasis on utopianism and also its opposite quality, 'mercy'."¹⁵ However, the purpose of this study is to determine what role horrific violence played and why it changed from issue to issue, especially in response to territorial losses.

The audience of *Dabiq* is not solely IS supporters. Colas argues that there are two other groups who are targeted more by *Dabiq* than Arabic speaking Muslims; “English-speaking second generation Muslims or converts, Western policymakers, and a third group of current or would be members of IS who are not integrating with the organization

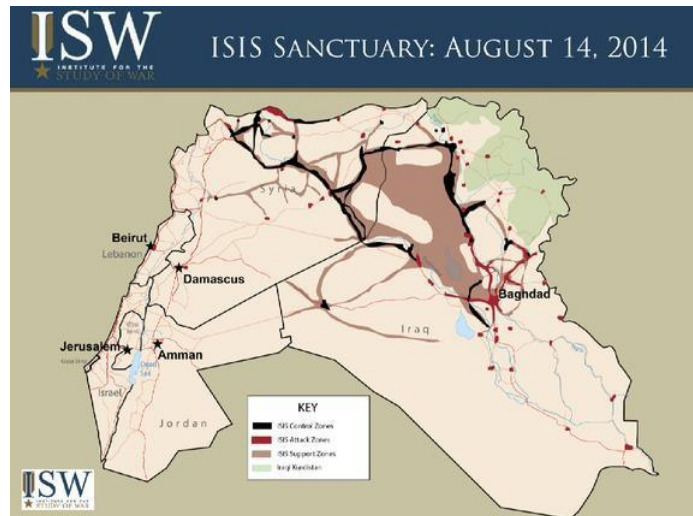


Figure 1 Institute for the Study of War, accessed April 5, 2018, Black represents ISIS control zones
<http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISIS%20Map%20AUG%208.pdf>

itself.”¹⁶ Keeping these three groups of people in mind— second-generation Muslims or converts, Western policymakers, and sedentary, fence-sitting IS supporters— is important in better understanding the content, reasons for publication, and overarching themes of IS propaganda. Droogan also corroborates with Colas’ argument stating that *Dabiq*’s main goal is “to justify [IS’s] actions[,] religious authenticity... and [to] taunt its enemies.”¹⁷ While IS would love to have many of its Western supporters join its physical caliphate, it understands its limits. Therefore, “[w]hile assuring Western Muslims a place in its Caliphate, *Dabiq* legitimises ‘lone wolf’ terrorism as acts of reciprocity for Western violence against Muslims.... and bringing the war back to their own soil...”¹⁸ Essentially, *Dabiq*’s main purposes are to intimidate Western nations who are fighting against it, and to exhort and instruct Muslims in the West who want to be a part of the IS Caliphate to carry out attacks on their own.

The connection between IS’s territorial status and themes of its propaganda are apparent when looking at *Dabiq*’s name and timing of their first issue’s release. The city of Dabiq, after which the magazine is named, is in northern Syria next to the Turkish border. In Islamic

eschatology, Dabiq's capturing by the Islamic State is seen in multiple hadiths as part of the "Islamic apocalyptic prophecies as the site of an end-of-times showdown between Muslims and their "Roman" enemies."¹⁹ This apocalyptic event precedes the end of the wicked world and the beginning of the reign of peace.

The first issue of *Dabiq*, titled "The Return of the *Khilafa*" was released in July 2014, after IS had expanded rapidly in both Iraq and Syria and while the IS offensive against Dabiq was underway, one month before they officially

captured the city in August 2014. It was apparent, at least to IS leadership, that Dabiq would soon be theirs as they titled their brand-new magazine *Dabiq* without having official control over it. This was a confident

move by IS as they were making the hold on Dabiq an integral part of both their propaganda and religious ethos. Many Muslims saw this as a fulfilment of prophecy further legitimizing IS' claims. Once they had conquered Dabiq, losing it would mean losing the foundation of their main propaganda and publication' legitimacy. A quote by Zarqawi is in the front cover of each ISIS

Figure 3.

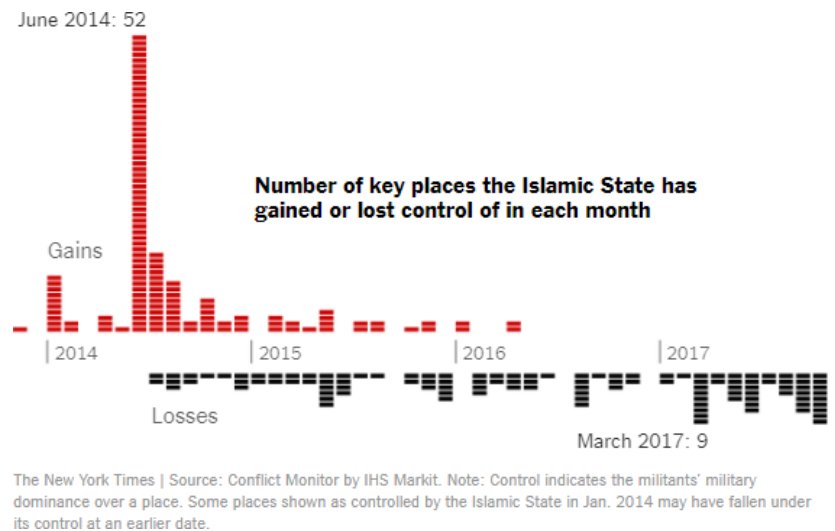
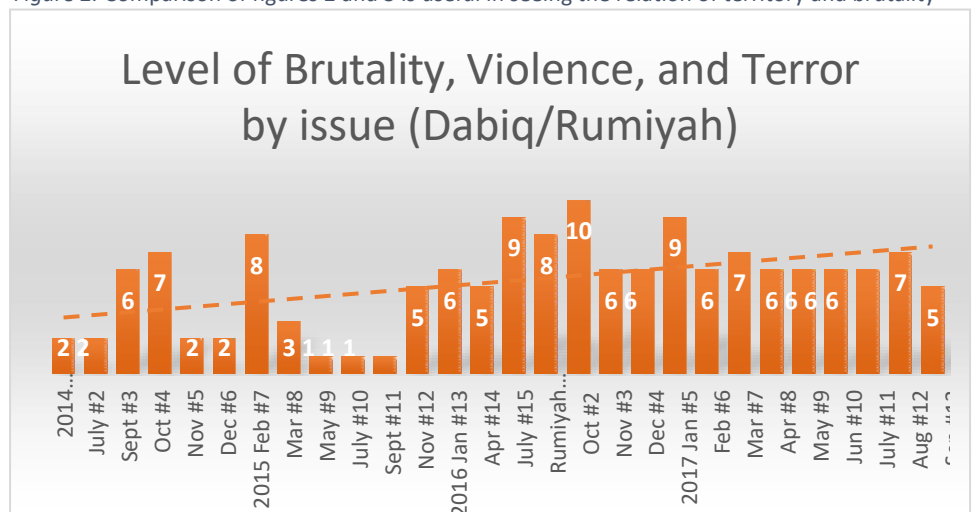


Figure 2. Comparison of figures 2 and 3 is useful in seeing the relation of territory and brutality



issue stating: “[t]he spark has been lit here in Iraq, and its heat will continue to intensify – by Allah’s permission – until it burns the crusader armies in Dābiq.”²⁰

An analysis of the first two *Dabiq* issues reveals how territorial gains caused propaganda to be less brutal and terror oriented. At the point of release of the two earliest issues of *Dabiq*, both of which were released in July 2014, IS had somewhat of a stable core of territory which it had conquered with relative ease and, in June 2014, had its most successful month, at least territorially (see figure 2). This rapid expansion was in large part because the international anti-IS coalition had not yet got involved in combatting IS.

Not only had they established their capital in the sixth largest city in Syria, Raqqa (where their propaganda media wing, Al-Hayat Media Center, was based out of), but they had established control of territories that transcended the Iraqi and Syrian borders, including border crossings between Syria and Iraq that were a lifeline to their recruiting, movement, and economy. Making a state that transcended these borders was seen as “an erasure of the infamous Sykes-Picot line... a founding act for the Islamic State” and a snub to all Western powers.²¹ This destruction of borders legitimized one of IS’s goals as a Caliphate, which was to divide the world “based on creed [of] The Islamic State and the World after Sykes-Picot...”²²

The cities that they now had under their control ranged from northern Syria to central Iraq. Not only were these cities major population centers, but they were also places where IS could take control of the natural resources, like oil, a major dam in Mosul, and gain more financial stability. As IS territory was continuing to expand faster than it had ever expended, no key territories had been lost before July 2014 (figure 2).

This stability shows in the first two *Dabiq* issues as they only reached a two out of ten on the brutality scale, the second lowest scores of all *Dabiq* issues (figure 3). The first two issues are not void of violence, as they show plenty of corpses of both IS martyrs and opposition forces alike.

However, these images illustrate warfare, not terror or brutality. For example, the images of a stoning show a large group of men holding rocks, about to

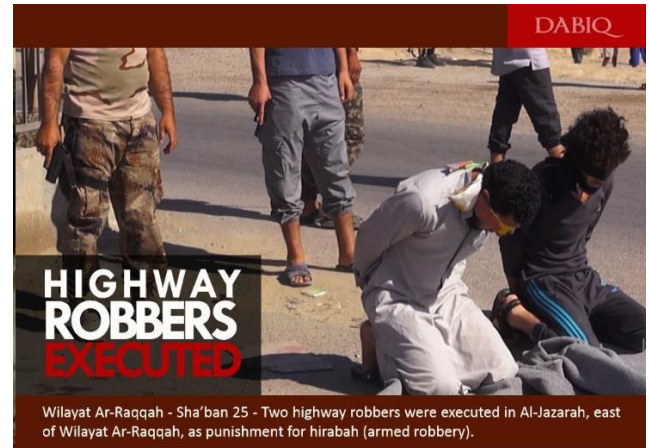


Figure 4 Dabiq 1, July 2014. While disturbing, nothing graphic or brutal is shown in the executions in issues 1 and 2. <https://clarionproject.org/docs/isis-isis-islamic-state-magazine-Issue-1-the-return-of-khilafah.pdf>.

stone a woman, but do not show the adulteress or any part of the stoning itself.²³ Another example of how IS restrained from brutality in propaganda in the first issues is that they do not show the brutal executions that Zarqawi became so famous for. These issues show how criminals are arrested and blindfolded with armed IS members next to them and with captions explaining that they were executed (figure 4). However, the images do not show the actual execution of the victims. No images of brutality, torture, or beheadings that are meant to intimidate, invoke sensational emotions of violence, or to paint IS as an organization run by bloodshed and terror are shown. Rather, these images are used to promote IS's sense of justice.

Droogan argues that the main purpose of the first two issues is to emphasize “state-building, expansion, legitimate leadership and religion.”²⁴ Violence or brutality are not mentioned in either of his descriptive analyses of the themes and content of these *Dabiq* issues.²⁵ IS, at least in these two issues, sees advertising of their territorial expansion and legitimizing their religious claims as a better way of gaining publicity than illustrating their brutality.

August- October 2014

The latter half of 2014 was a pivotal time for IS both territorially and publicity-wise. In August 2014 they officially expelled opposition forces out of Dabiq, where the “final battle between infidels and Muslims will take place... prior to the Day of Judgment.”²⁶ This symbolic event further validated both their claims as legitimate successors to the Islamic caliphate and the eschatological title of their magazine. At the same time in July 2014, Western forces, led by the US, state militias, and para-militias, were increasing efforts to expel IS from major cities, or to stop them while they were at the doorstep of other major cities, like Erbil. Coalition airstrikes officially began in August 2014 and, for the first time, IS lost key territory (figure 2).

Overall, IS territory was still expanding but the slowed advancement, loss in territory, and rise in IS casualties, facilitated by coalition airstrikes, resulted in brutal IS propaganda videos and magazine issues. Three especially horrific videos released during September and October shocked Europe and the US. These videos were the grisly beheadings of two aid workers, one British and one American, and a British journalist, all of whom had been held by IS. These videos were not the highly edited videos that IS had previously released, like the *Clanging of Swords* series, but more closely resembled the vintage-Zarqawi, straightforward, and uncut videos emphasizing the brutality that IS exhibited when it feels threatened. “These beheadings became instant international news, prompted justified outrage in

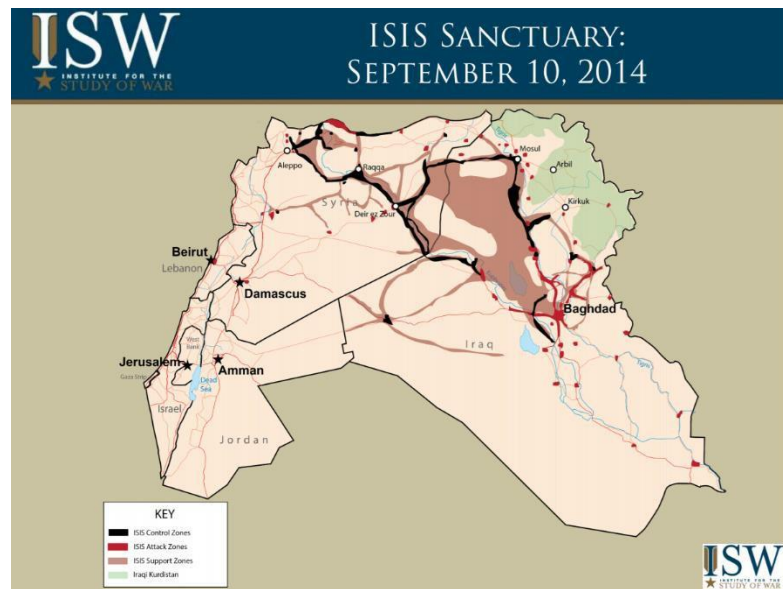


Figure 5 Source: Institute for the Study of War, <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISIS%20Map%20SEPT%2010.14.pdf>.

the West, and led to an intensified air campaign against the IS's positions in Syria and Iraq."²⁷

However, this is partly what opportunist IS wanted as more indiscriminate killing from coalition airstrikes would embitter more Muslims against the Western coalition and ultimately fuel more recruitment and, more importantly, increase publicity.

As IS territory became more contested, IS emphasized the amount of violence in both videos (as seen above) and in *Dabiq*. Again, it is important to note that one of the main audiences of *Dabiq* and videos are Western media outlets, lawmakers, and second-generation Muslims, not potential recruits.²⁸ This is why a loss of key territory is often responded to by more terror as much of their propaganda is directed at non-Muslims and Western media. This simultaneous increase in territory and foreign intervention that occurred in August and September of 2014 produced an increase of anti-Western sentiment in IS propaganda while maintaining a steady dose of state building that was seen in previous issues.

During the last five months of 2014, IS released five more issues, the highest quantity of issues ever released in a five-month period for both *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*. While IS's overall territory was still expanding during this period, they were also losing major territories, including the loss of a major northern Syrian-Iraqi border crossing of Rabia in October 2014 and swaths of less important territory, most of which was desert, in southern Iraq in August.²⁹ Videos showing ISIS territory daily from 2013-2016 show how large amounts of territory were lost in Iraq from August to September 2014.³⁰

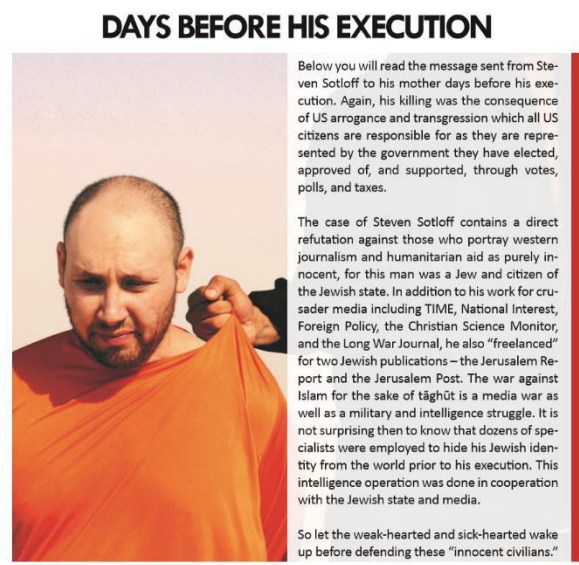


Figure 6 *Dabiq* 4, October 2014, 47. This image is shown with the letter the Sotloff sent to his mother, days before his execution. A few pages later, the aftermath of the execution is shown. <https://clarionproject.org/docs/islamic-state-isis-magazine-issue-4-the-failed-crusade.pdf>.

The loss of territory caused by increased foreign intervention explains the sharp rise in violence in *Dabiq* during the September and October 2014 issues. These issues reached a six and a seven on the brutality scale (figure 3) compared to a two rating for issues one and two. Page two of issue #3 shows an image of James Foley, an American journalist whose execution video had been released a few weeks earlier, in an orange jumpsuit with a knife to his throat. This about-to-die imagery is disturbing as it shows Foley's terror and the last second of his life. The remainder of the issue has eight pages dedicated to the justification of the publicly shared execution.

While the images of Foley's execution avoided showing anything graphic in nature in *Dabiq*'s September issue, it is the first issue to show a severed head (although not Foley's). However, the execution in the October issue of American journalist Steven Sotloff did show various stages of the execution, including horrific, close-up images of Sotloff's severed head resting on his body. Issues three and four showed more graphic images than previously seen in the first two issues: a distant shot of a human head, numerous stages of executions by firing squad, more close-up images of corpses of both IS militants and *al-kafiruun* (apostates, both Muslim and non-Muslim), and multiple stages of the executions of the hostages.³¹

This rapid shift from images and themes of warfare to sensationally violent images can be explained, at least partially, by the loss in territory. Both Foley's and Sotloff's executions' coverage in *Dabiq* were accompanied by testimonies of each of the hostages that were given days or hours before their deaths. Both testimonies explicitly condemned the airstrikes, which had led to major IS territorial losses, and accused Obama of murdering innocent Muslims. Additionally, Sotloff's testimony illustrates IS's attempt to justify their brutality. *Dabiq* shows Sotloff's last letter to his family where he pleads for his life and states that the reason for IS killing innocent people, like himself, is "because the US government is interfering yet again in

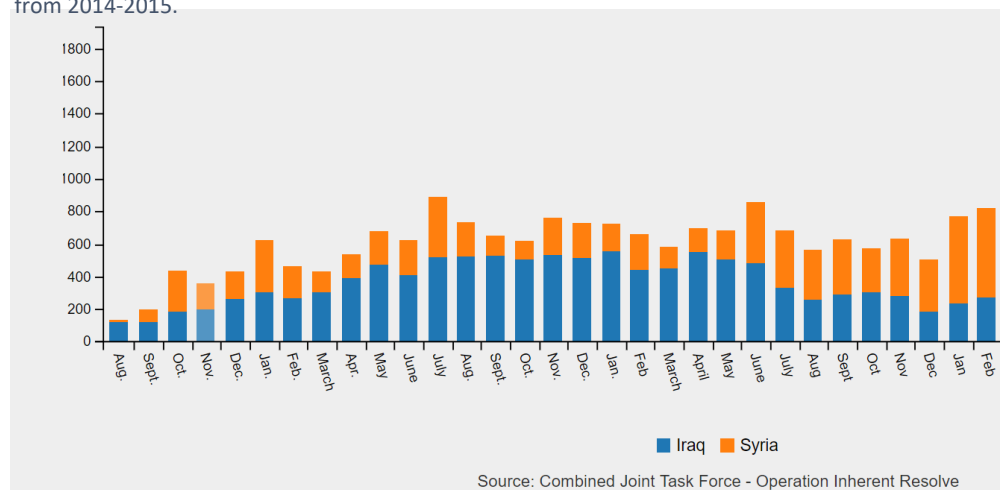
the affairs of the Islamic State. As for me being a journalist, they [IS] know this. I've repeatedly told them this, but like they always say, do US airstrikes differentiate between those who are armed and those who are unarmed? Likewise they don't."³²

These testimonies, while still acknowledging the horrific, inhumane, and brutal methods of IS propaganda, explain some of IS's frustrations and logic. They are retaliating against what they see as equally unjust and brutal tactics from the West. The narrative that the US government's airstrikes kill indiscriminately provides justification for IS and their supporters of their brutal tactics. However, brutal tactics are not always employed unless these airstrikes result in major losses of territory. The causal connection between territory and terror is emphasized as IS dated Sotloff's execution video to "specific U.S. military actions that... [broke] the siege of Amerli -- a northern Iraqi town..."³³

Like Foley's and Sotloff's statements, the executioner references American airstrikes as the specific reason for the execution of an innocent prisoner. The executioner, after Sotloff gives his final words condemning US foreign policy, states that "I'm back, Obama, and I'm back because of your arrogant foreign policy towards the Islamic State, because of your insistence on continuing your bombings and on Mosul Dam, despite our serious warnings. So just as your missiles continue to strike our people, our knife will continue to strike the necks of your people."³⁴

It is important to note that at this point in the study, it looked like brutality may be

Figure 7 "War Data," Airwars, accessed March 20, 2018, <https://airwars.org/data/>. Data begins on Aug 2014; illustrates the number of airstrikes carried out by CJTF in Iraq (blue) and Syria (orange) from 2014-2015.



more tied to anti-IS airstrikes than the loss of territory. However, these airstrikes, which caused territorial losses, increased steadily over the next four years while IS brutality still fluctuated dramatically, including extremely low periods of brutality during and after high airstrike months (see figure 7). There is no long-term correlation between brutality and US airstrikes. This could be because airstrikes were not always precise against IS when IS operated in larger cities, as most inhabitants were non-combatants. So, while figure 7 illustrates that hundreds of airstrikes were carried out monthly, a higher rate of airstrikes does not always correlate with a higher rate of territorial losses, as coalition forces may not have been as effective at eliminating IS forces due to the political, diplomatic, and military consequences of collateral damage.

November 2014- December 2014

The end of 2014 and beginning of 2015 was again marked by increased territorial gains for IS. In November 2014 IS gained allies in the Sinai Peninsula, Libya, Yemen, Algeria, and Saudi Arabia.³⁵ IS-held areas in these countries became an extension, or “provinces”, of the Caliphate heartland in Iraq and Syria. In a matter of months, IS had gone from a self-proclaimed state in parts of Iraq and Syria to a multi-continental Caliphate with provinces in North Africa, the Levant, the Arabian Peninsula, Afghanistan and South Asia.

These gains in large swaths of territory armed IS with more cyber content to use in its propaganda. The novelty of having an actual caliphate was rendered even more miraculous by IS’s ability, within a matter of months, to gain affiliates from other legitimate Islamist terrorist organizations from different continents. IS was not exaggerating these claims that the West had been caught completely by surprise. Western media sources were in shock and stated in December 2014 that “the Islamic State controlled one-third of Iraq and one-third of Syria — a

land mass roughly equal to the area of Great Britain — where the extremist group ruled over upward of 9 million people.”³⁶ Despite these airstrikes, IS’s international territorial gains proved vital to IS momentum and stability. At the end of 2014, IS propaganda was mainly focused on territorial expansion and brutality dipped.

In their November 2014 *Dabiq* issue (which was the same month they gained land and territory in Sinai, Libya, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen) titled “Remaining and Expanding”, IS propaganda was again relatively tame. *Dabiq* #5 (Nov) and #6 (Dec) attained only a two out of ten on the brutality scale. Again, this dip in brutality in issues #5 and #6 happened while airstrikes increased. In November’s issue, there was one non-graphic picture of an execution and the rest of the pages were filled with happy images of IS conquering new cities, celebrating with the local inhabitants, and granting mercy to Kurdish villagers who gave *bay’ah* (oath of allegiance) to IS leaders.³⁷ The relative lack of brutal imagery and violence was also prevalent in the December issue too. The horrific, brutal, and sensational violence in issues two and three practically disappeared for a period of months after IS territory increased during late 2014.

January- August 2015

At the beginning of 2015, coalition airstrikes against IS rose dramatically. January alone saw a doubling of December 2014’s airstrikes in Syria and also a large increase of the airstrikes

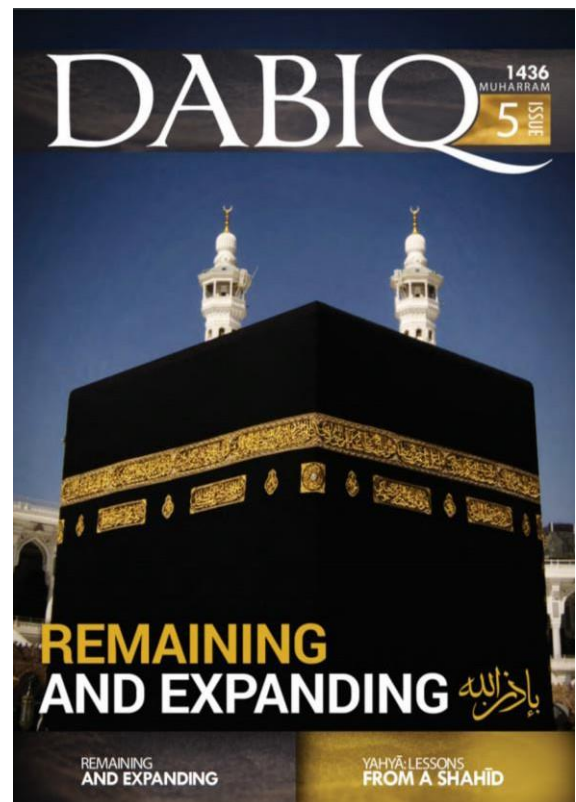


Figure 8 Dabiq 5, November 2014,
<https://clarionproject.org/docs/isis-isis-islamic-state-magazine-issue-5-remaining-and-expanding.pdf>.

in Iraq (figure 7).³⁸ Although IS territory was steadily expanding throughout the first half of 2015, coalition airstrikes managed to weaken IS's territorial holds on major parts of Sinjar, Iraq and Syria, including, with the help of the Kurds, Kobane in northern Syria.³⁹

In February, the month after coalition airstrikes reached their highest point and IS lost Kobane, IS released its most graphic video and *Dabiq* issue to date, reaching an eight on the brutality scale. The seventh issue released mid-February, titled "From Hypocrisy to Apostasy: The Extinction of the Grayzone," featured, among many other brutal images, images of the burning of Jordanian pilot who had been captured in late 2014, Muath al-Kasesbeh, multiple stages of the beheading of a Japanese private military chief executive, Haruna Yukawa, the stoning of an adulteress, and images of Egyptian Coptic Christians awaiting their execution.⁴⁰

The sensational violence in the seventh issue is linked to the loss of key territories like Kobane and Mount Sinjar caused by the drastic increase of anti-IS airstrikes. The targeted audience was now not only Western nations but also neighboring Jordan who had stepped up their role in fighting. The *Dabiq* issue was preceded by the sleekly edited, highly choreographed, and horrific burning of Muath video called "A Message to Jordan". Additionally, more scenes of Muath's immolation were released at the end of February. The theme of issue seven is summarized by an article in *Dabiq*'s seventh issue:

There is a slogan repeated continuously by apologetic "du'āt" when flirting with the West and that is their statement: "Islam is the religion of peace," and they mean pacifism by the word peace. They have repeated this slogan so much to the extent that some of them alleged that Islam calls to permanent peace with kufr and the kāfirīn. How far is their claim from the truth, for Allah has revealed Islam to be the religion of the sword, and the evidence for this is so profuse that only a zindīq (heretic) would argue otherwise.⁴¹



Figure 9. *Dabiq* 7, February 2015, 67. Issue 7 was the most brutal issue and featured images of the burning of a Jordanian pilot, Muath al-Kasasibah.

In Spring 2015, even with the increased airstrikes, IS gained large swaths of territory in Iraq and Syria, including major population hubs in Ramadi, Iraq and Palmyra, Syria.⁴² IS also gained allies in sub-Saharan Africa in Boko Haram in Nigeria in March, and in Yemen. Of all of these territories, Yemen and Nigeria were especially influential. Yemen's civil war facilitated IS's influence to have a strong foothold in Yemen and they proved this by killing 160+, including soldiers, in just a four day period in March.⁴³ Boko Haram's territory, which was now considered a province of the Islamic State, was the size of Belgium.⁴⁴ However, airstrikes by the anti-IS coalition, Kurdish, and Iraqi forces dealt IS major losses as well. The coalition managed to force IS out of major Iraqi cities, like al-Alam⁴⁵ and Tikrit in March 2015.⁴⁶ Despite these losses, IS seemed to be at its peak. Overall, airstrikes had slightly decreased from their previous high point in January and IS's insurgency neared its height.⁴⁷ "Bolstered by a combination of government neglect, careful planning, brutal tactics, and clever recruitment, the Islamic state had the manpower, money, and territory to make a credible claim to be a state."⁴⁸ Major territorial gains included areas in Syria like additional areas in Palmyra, areas outside of Aleppo, and other areas on the Lebanese-Syrian border.

It is no coincidence that, during this time of IS high point, IS's propaganda was remarkably less violent than any previous issue, even though airstrikes were still increasing. Most of issues eight (released in March) and nine (released in May) were focused on pleas to Muslims to make the *hijra* (migration) to IS territory to join the Caliphate. There were almost zero graphic scenes of brutality as seen in the previous issues, although issue eight disturbingly showed that children were now being used as executioners. These two issues were the least violent issues that *Dabiq* ever released, reaching a one on the brutality scale. In issue nine, IS even acknowledged that the crusader armies had expelled them from Tikrit but stated that their

territorial gains in other parts of the Middle East and other continents proved that territorially, the Islamic State was perfectly fine. These claims come when IS, as stated previously, was at its strongest point. IS and Western leaders alike knew that IS had surprised the world.

The West and its allies have, once again, been caught completely by surprise as they now find themselves fighting not just one enemy in Iraq and Shām, but now an international army of mujāhidīn numbering hundreds of thousands in different countries, whole continents apart. It's taken the coalition the best part of a year to put together a campaign against the Islamic State that is only now seeing a Shia mob supported by coalition aircraft make moves against Tikrit, but that's old news before it's even begun. Why focus on Tikrit when the Middle East, Africa, and Asia are now on fire?⁴⁹

In a study comparing IS media at its height in 2015 and its less impressive media in 2017, an expert on the Islamic State, Charlie Winter, argued that mid-2015 showed a surprising decline in brutality, with “just five percent of the organization’s Warfare propaganda was “characteristically” brutal.”⁵⁰ This decline in violence is likely a mixture of two things: IS’s desire to patronize the

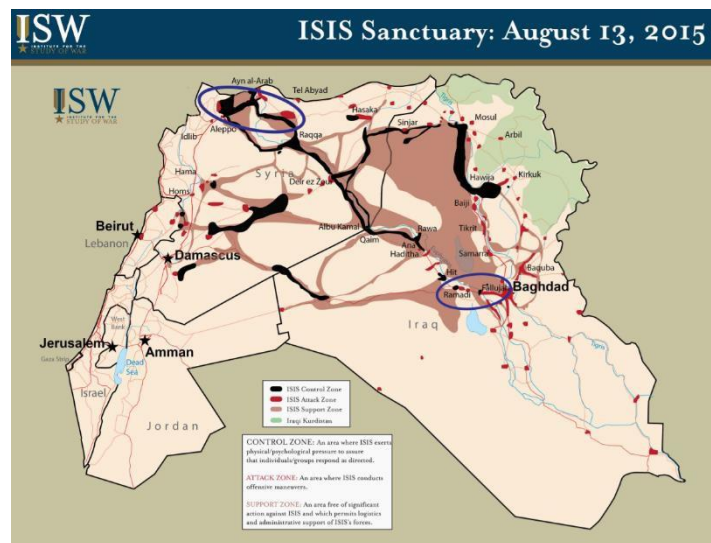


Figure 10, IS territory around the height of their insurgency. All black and brown areas are either controlled or supported by IS. Source: Institute for the Study of War, accessed 15 Apr 2018, <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISIS%20Sanctuary%2070812-01.pdf>

West and prove its legitimacy to other Muslims through its emphasis on territorial gains, and simply because expanding territory is propaganda-worthy news. This increase in territory makes for less space available for pages of horrific violence. Essentially territorial gains seem to be a higher priority on IS’s recruiting list and violence is not as powerful of a recruiting tool.

August 2015- August 2016

This decline in brutality would not endure. During the latter half of 2015, opposition against IS increased dramatically. It was in the late summer of 2015 that IS propaganda began its decline as it began to lose its momentum and high productivity.⁵¹

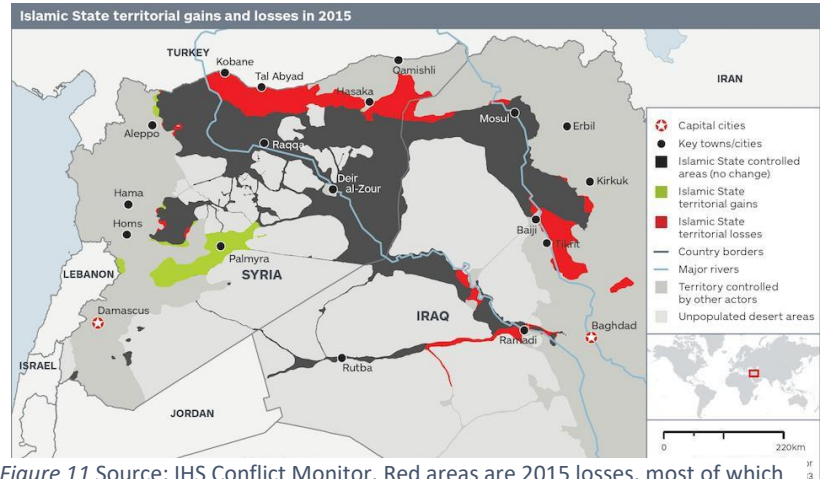


Figure 11 Source: IHS Conflict Monitor. Red areas are 2015 losses, most of which came in the latter half of 2015. <http://www.businessinsider.com/map-how-much-territory-isis-lost-2015-12>.

This decline was quite rapid and is manifested in the frequency *Dabiq* releases during this time period. At IS's height in October 2014 to July 2015, IS released seven issues of *Dabiq*. However, IS only managed to release three issues in between August 2015 and March 2016. Much of this was due to loss of funds that came from the territorial holdings that they lost. "In 2015, leaked administrative documents from [IS] headquarters in Raqqa announced the group would be cutting the salaries of all fighters by 50 percent. The publicity from these losses undercuts the Islamic State's claims of functioning as a state, instead making it seem more like other jihadi groups."⁵²

As seen by these leaked administrative documents, consistently losing territory was a huge blow to the Islamic State's narrative that they are an unstoppable, divinely guided force. Much of the content in their previous propaganda was dedicated to the miraculous gains in territory and how this was a sign that the Islamic State could not be stopped. At this point in 2015, IS began to look like less like a state and more like any other militant jihadist group, "albeit an exceptionally violent one."⁵³ Three major groups, the Kurds, the US-led coalition, and

the Iraqi government, started gaining momentum in the fight against IS including key areas in the northern Iraqi province Nineveh.

Between summer 2015 and spring 2016, IS propaganda, in the face of rapid territorial losses, started to change more of its focus to lone-wolf attacks and glorification of international terrorism abroad. This focus would become even more prevalent throughout *Rumiyah*. The title of the November 2015 issue, which was released at the beginning of IS's territorial decline, was titled "Just Terror". All four issues released between November 2015 and July 2016 relied heavily on successful international terrorist attacks that had received global attention: Paris (November 2015), San Bernadino (December 2015), Belgium (March 2016), and Orlando (June 2016). Each of these four issues' first articles showed pages praising the attackers.

The first two of these issues released during this time period, while not extremely graphic or brutal in terms of the images, show how much IS's propaganda shifted away from territorial expansion within the Middle East towards a focus on the encouragement for more attacks like those carried out in Paris and San Bernadino. Issue 13 states that the "nightmare on France has only just begun"⁵⁴ alluding to IS's shift away from territorial expansion towards international terrorism. This shift from building a state in previous issues, which were heavily dominated by the ideas of utopia in the Middle East, to now showing how IS can operate outside of the Middle East by reigning with terror, was just the beginning of IS's attempts to compensate for territorial losses by showing their



Terror strikes again in America and Europe

FOREWORD

"Do they not see that they are tried once or twice every year? Yet they turn not in repentance, and they take no heed?" (At-Tawbah 126).

After the attacks in Orlando (USA), Dhaka (Ban-

what entails both their welfare in the worldly life and their salvation in the Hereafter. They wage war against their Creator, His word, His law, His Messenger, and His slaves. And they shamelessly confess their disbelief in His wisdom, mercy, and justice, by thinking that the Lord ﷻ would abandon His religion and His slaves to the tyranny of His enemies and their evilness. And despite their wretched condition of ignorance and arrogance, we take this occasion of multiple massacres inflicted upon their citizens and interests to call

Figure 12 Dabiq 15, July 2016, 4. Excerpt from *Dabiq's* most violent issue. These images praised the attacks at the Orlando nightclub and others in Europe.

ability to operate outside of the borders of its crumbling state.

The last issue of *Dabiq* titled “Break the Cross”, was released in July 2016 and was the most brutal *Dabiq* issue ever released, reaching a nine on the brutality scale. It was released months after IS had, in “March 2016[,] lost roughly 22 percent of the territory in Iraq and Syria [that] it controlled in January 2015, with over one-third of those losses coming over the past three months.”⁵⁵ IS, again released images of James Foley’s execution which were more graphic. This execution was done a year and a half earlier. Re-releasing images shows how IS, during times of decline, began recycling some of its propaganda. The last page of the last *Dabiq* issue contained a large, high-quality, and extremely horrifying image of a beheading which, in terms of its graphicness and sensationalism, no previous printed IS propaganda had ever contained. The image showed a beheading within a second after the head had been severed, the body still on its knees and the head falling to the ground. There was almost a desperate defense of IS’s brutality in *Dabiq*’s final issue where they stated that “[t]he gist of the matter is that there is indeed a rhyme to our terrorism, warfare, ruthlessness, and brutality. As much as some liberal journalist would like you to believe that we do what we do because we’re simply monsters with no logic behind our course of action, the fact is that we continue to wage – and escalate – a calculated war that the West thought it had ended several years ago”⁵⁶

Included among these territorial losses was IS’s loss of Dabiq. This was a huge blow to IS, not only territorially, but because of what Dabiq, both the city and the magazine, had meant to IS’s religious legitimacy, propaganda strategy, and territory. Droogan, an expert on IS propaganda, especially *Dabiq*, stated in 2017 that IS’s rapid territorial losses, not just in Dabiq, but in the other parts in Iraq and Syria

have been reflected through shifts in the group’s communications strategy... [T]he October 2016 loss of the township of Dabiq to Turkish-backed forces presented a

symbolic blow to the Islamic State’s conceptualisation of itself as an agent of divine prophesy, which may mean a discontinuation or rebranding of the Dabiq title.⁵⁷

In an article titled “Losing Territory and Lashing Out: Islamic State and International Terror,” Watkins (2016) reiterated the importance of the loss of Dabiq stating that “[t]he loss of territory also hurts the group by undercutting a prophecy—attributed to the prophet Muhammad and utilized by the Islamic State—that a final battle between infidels and Muslims will take place in the Syrian [town] of Dabiq [and] Losing ground to non-Western forces undermines the Islamic State’s narrative.”⁵⁸

The loss of Dabiq to a non-Western force (it was the Turkish and Free Syrian armies who recaptured it) was bigger than just losing its main magazine’s namesake. The loss of Dabiq had meant so much to IS’ eschatological narrative and resulted in a “substantial thematic rearrangement...away from the millenarian “utopia” towards military denialism.”⁵⁹ However,

this shift was nothing new and was not unique to the mid 2016s. The narratives of terrorism and utopianism had already been in a tug-of-war while IS’s territory fluctuated between 2014 to mid-2016, just on a smaller scale. This change in theme in IS propaganda followed a pattern, one that had a strong connection with major territorial gains and losses, since *Dabiq* began. At the end of the year, the IHS Markit, a UK based analytics company, stated that the “Islamic State Lost Almost a Quarter of Its Territory in 2016”⁶⁰, with some other places saying it lost one-third of its

territory.⁶¹ However IS propaganda was here to stay despite its rapid loss in territory. It is hard to imagine how IS could continue to release high-quality propaganda videos and magazine issues

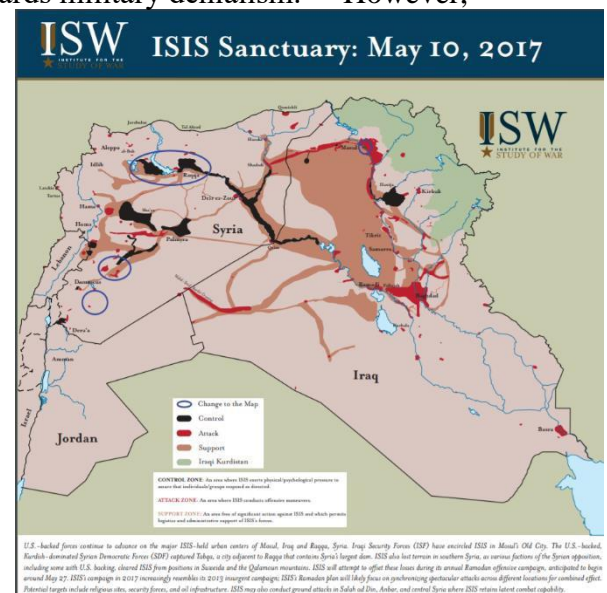


Figure 13 Institute for the Study of War, <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Sanctuary%20Map%2010%20MAY.pdf>

more disturbing than the previous ones, especially when their territory was more unstable than it had been in years, which, seemingly, should have also led to a decline in their online presence and production machine. However, as IS territory was shrinking than it ever had been in the end of 2016, IS released some of its most horrific, sensationalist, and high-quality videos.

Sept 2016- February 2018, Release of *Rumiyah*

Despite the losses of key territory in 2016 and 2017, IS' hold on Raqqa allowed IS to make its presence known despite its dwindling territory by "producing hundreds of propaganda products a month for a virtual audience that seemed to be increasingly disengaged."⁶² The reason for the disengagement is likely twofold. First, the reversal of momentum hurt IS's image, and secondly, quality of IS propaganda took a major toll after the loss of Dabiq. In the face of decreasing territory, IS increased the quantity of their publication, although not quality, and released a *Rumiyah* issue 12 months in a row, with the last issue being released in September 2017. However, since IS lost Dabiq, *Dabiq* needed a name and narrative change. They pulled out a title that still instilled religious fervor, militant jihad, and anti-Western sentiments, *Rumiyah*. *Rumiyah* literally means "Rome" or "Roman" and is another apocalyptic battle that will take place between Muslims and the infidels before the end of time that will bring to the fall of Rome, the heart of the West. Each issue's front cover now had a quote about the takeover of Rome instead of Dabiq: "O muwahhidin, rejoice, for by Allah, we will not rest from our jihad except beneath the olive trees of Rumiyah (Rome)."⁶³ *Rumiyah* is far shorter, narrower in scope, and weaker than *Dabiq*, both production and content-wise. *Rumiyah* issues lacked the "fire and brimstone" apocalyptic narrative of Dabiq... [and] unifying theme of other Isis [sic] propaganda

tools...”⁶⁴ This rapid decrease in quality in *Rumiyah* “suggests that the terror organization may be struggling to find its feet in the face of unrelenting airstrikes and Turkish, Kurdish and Iraqi army offensives.”⁶⁵

What *Rumiyah* lacked in legitimacy, territory, and “fire and brimstone,” IS tried to compensate with “more explicit focus on anti-Western propaganda” and brutality in their first two issues. ⁶⁶ While their territory was disappearing at an incredibly high rate at the end of 2016, IS figured out ways to write articles, and to film and photograph sensationally brutal videos, images, that far superseded any *Dabiq* issue. Additionally, they began to include “kill counts” (see figure 16) in every issue that showed how successful their terrorist and military operations had been. For example, issues 1 and 2 of *Rumiyah* were more heavily focused on brutality than any magazine issue ever released and emphasized how even children should be involved in learning about how to terrorize the West.

The images of executions in these two issues were more detailed and brutal than ever seen before. Issue #1 included a horrific, front-view, still image of a point-blank execution by gun, showing the bullet enter the face of the hostage.⁶⁷ Issue #2 alone, which was the most brutal and only issue to reach a ten out of ten on the brutality scale, included close-up, mid-beheading photos and showed how executions were done on a larger scale, including images of 10 severed heads on 10 bodies. This issue, by far, is the most horrific to date. IS now wrote more explicit articles about how to carry out lone wolf attacks, including the best knives, targets, and tactics and charts

Figure 14 *Rumiyah* 1, 11/16, Blood themed imagery, as seen below, became prevalent beginning with *Rumiyah*. This theme continued throughout all *Rumiyah* issues and was not common in *Dabiq*.



illustrating kill counts, and proper and horrific Islamic punishments for certain crimes.⁶⁸ There is an advertisement for a children's alphabet game in which, while learning the letters of the alphabet, the child hijacks a plane and then chooses to carry out an attack either on Russia, the US, France, or UK.⁶⁹ Issue one can be summarized by the final article titled "The Kafir's Blood is Halal For You, So Shed It"⁷⁰ and issue two can be summarized by its cover, a bloodied sword (figure 15).⁷¹



Figure 15 Cover page of *Rumiyah* 2. As can be seen by the cover, this issue was heavily focused on brutality. This was the most violent issue out of all *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* issues, released just a month after the loss of *Dabiq* to Turkish and FSA forces. <http://clarionproject.org/wp-content/uploads/Rumiyh-ISIS-Magazine-2nd-issue.pdf>

The brutality in videos was also higher than ever before. Every previous video release was followed by comments from Western media outlets and policymakers wondering how IS can become more brutal. However, as their territory declined more rapidly than ever at the end of 2016 and beginning of 2017, IS' brutality still, somehow, managed to increase.

IS knew that losing its media presence in addition to its territory would be detrimental to its foreign support and its whole organization. In December, two days before Christmas, IS released another burning video, this time of two Turkish soldiers. However, this video was much more disturbing and symbolic than the burning of the Jordanian pilot in 2015. "The Turkish pilots are presented as "dogs", through linguistic attribution (reference to "dogs") and through visual association (dragged on a leash), while their burned, disfigured bodies have lost all

attributes of humanity. By reducing human to canine life and then to matter, this trope evokes archaic Arab symbolisms of impurity and miasma.”⁷²

Again, IS provides their loss in territory as justification for their brutality, especially key losses like Dabiq, stating that the West has been just as brutal to Muslims and equating those who oppose IS, even fellow Muslims, as dogs. In the video they show images of civilian casualties caused by Western nations. “It is specifically the cut from civilian casualties to the burning scene that situates the prisoners’ death into a visual arrangement of sectarian argumentative causality: “your” war against “us” leads to “your” death as just punishment, as retaliation.”⁷³ IS continues to show, as they showed since the foundation of their organization, Western policymakers who oppose IS and take IS territory will only result in more horrific deaths of anti-IS coalition members and international terror.

Surprisingly, the pattern of increased brutality in terms of executions, at least in their magazines, declined slightly after issue #2. However, encouragement for lone-wolf terrorism was at its highest point. Issues 3-13, apart from issue #5, lacked the brutal, up-close, and grotesque executions that previous *Rumiyah* and *Dabiq* issues so commonly had. This is likely because *Rumiyah* relied “heavily on recycled material,” with almost every issue include an image or article that was found in a

previous issue.⁷⁴ IS, desperate for reinforcing content, even pulled out images of Nicholas Berg’s execution in issue 5, which occurred 13 years earlier. Despite the decrease in brutality, *Rumiyah* issues desperately attempted to appear brutal, using blood-themed articles, showing even more



Figure 16 *Rumiyah* 11, p. 53, 07/17, an example of the kill counts used in every *Rumiyah* issue. Kill counts like this were used for terrorist attacks and battles.

detailed methods for carrying out terrorist attacks, and providing advice on how to carry out jihad in one's own neighborhood. Even children were now seen as potential attackers, executioners, and *mujahidin*.

One of the biggest losses was IS's loss of its capital, Raqqa. The battle started in June 2017 and Raqqa was fully "liberated" in October 2017. This is a major blow from which *Rumiyah* still has not been able to recover as Raqqa was the media headquarters. As IS lost its most important city, Raqqa, its brutality was even further illustrated in videos. The propaganda videos released during and after the Battle of Raqqa are unlike any other IS videos. Videos released in

August 2017, show children as young as 10 carrying out filmed beheadings or videos of American children claiming that they have joined the Islamic State. One of the most recent execution videos, released in October 2017, after Raqqa was lost, again, was more brutal than previous videos. In this October video, "ISIS hangs victims from their ankles before slaughtering them like cattle."⁷⁵ Despite the increase in violence, IS's "supranational presence had contracted to be but a shadow of its former self."⁷⁶

Since IS major territorial decline began, IS territory has practically disappeared, with the exception of a few small pockets of desert land in southeastern Syria. Still, they have managed to release propaganda videos through Al-Hayat Media Center. Their most recent videos have been remarkably more brutal than their predecessors. "Answer the Call," released in February 2018,



Figure 17 *Rumiyah* Issue #5, pg. 5, 01/2017. Despite decrease in brutal images (e.g. executions), an emphasis on international terror increases in *Rumiyah*.

was a high quality, sleekly-edited and sensational collage of different beheadings, immolations, mixed with voice-overs calling for terrorism. It is IS's most brutal video to date, as it had shots of about fifteen different beheadings, all of which were filmed in slow-motion, crunched into a two-and-a-half-minute long video. The final shot is a slow-motion scene showing a shot of about eight different decapitated heads rolling across the ground.⁷⁷ There is no mention of IS's utopian ideology that drove previous propaganda issues at IS's height.

Looking to the Future

IS territory may almost be gone, but their media presence is not. By analyzing IS propaganda side-by-side its territorial gains and losses in mid-2014s to early 2018, I argue that territory and level of brutality in propaganda are connected. Territorial gains boosted IS morale, legitimacy, finances, and threatened the West. At the Islamic State's height in mid-2015, its propaganda was the least brutal it had ever been. The next closest period of least violent issues, in terms of non-violent images, was during the first two issues of *Dabiq* in July 2014 when IS territory began to expand rapidly across into Syria without formidable opposition. During the mid-2015 IS completely restrained from releasing images of horrific executions. These "tame" issues were followed by some of IS's most graphic issues to date during IS's rapid decline. When brutality was not present, IS propaganda was filled with and dependent on utopian ideologies and religious pleas for Muslims to join the expanding Caliphate.

IS's territory was most brutal following major territorial losses as these losses destroyed IS's utopian narrative upon which it relied heavily at the peak of its power. "This narrative is increasingly threatened by territorial losses, which destabilize the foundations of the caliphate."⁷⁸ The reason for this connection between brutality, terrorism and territory is because much of ISIS

propaganda is more directed at Western non-Muslims than it is at Muslims. As IS feels increasingly stable, they use their stability and territorial gains to mock Western politicians and policymakers. A fully functional state is the best weapon and propaganda IS can throw at the West and the best validation it can use in gaining recruits. Essentially, sensational brutality is an effective publicity tool but not as effective as showing that their forces are capable of dominating their opponents militarily. However, when IS starts losing territory, they feel the need to “lash out,” as Watkins stated, with brutality and terror.⁷⁹ This is done to compensate for and distract their opponents and supporters from their losses on the ground.

This realization is not only related to IS. In engaging in any war with any group, an increase in brutality is likely to occur as the group becomes less stable. There is likely not a way to prevent this brutality, but there are ways to prevent terrorism. It is important for the public and policymakers that wish to see an end to the Islamic State and any other terrorist organization to realize that this pattern of increased brutality and terrorism during key territorial losses- and vice versa- has been consistent through the past four years. Each *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* issue and propaganda video became progressively violent during this time period as IS territory decreased. As IS as an actual state with actual territory is almost destroyed territorially, IS as a grassroots organization is not going away anytime soon. Calls for international terrorist attacks will likely increase, despite a major decrease in IS territory.

It is even more important for news agencies to realize that they have much control of how much of an impact IS brutality can have. IS knows that an increase of brutality often leads to news agencies giving more airtime to clips of their videos and less airtime discussing how IS is being defeated on the ground. Because of this pattern, IS makes calculated decisions when to increase its brutality in hopes to divert attention away from the fact that their caliphate is

declining rapidly. Using foreign media to disseminate their propaganda has proved an effective tool. News agencies, like IS, know that news about violence attracts more viewers. People are simultaneously horrified and drawn to IS propaganda videos and news agencies, while not trying to recruit for IS, overemphasize IS brutality on the news. For example, despite ISIS propaganda having been characteristically low in the mid-2015s, there was a “disproportionate emphasis placed upon it [ISIS’ brutality] by the media.”⁸⁰

If the media focused less on brutality by decreasing an emphasis on it and concentrated more on IS’s losses, IS’s media strategy could be crippled and their legitimacy compromised. News agencies who spend hours publicly illustrating IS’s brutality are facilitating IS recruitment and aiding their overall cause more than they are hindering it. Many people who get interested in the brutal side of IS are often introduced to IS’s propaganda videos via news coverage. This is not to say that news agencies should not cover terrorist attacks or executions. Rather, news agencies should focus on informing the public about the threats, deaths, and locations of terrorist attacks and executions and move on, instead of describing and/or showing in detail, for hours at time, IS propaganda and terrorist attacks.

As IS propaganda increasingly calls for both domestic and international terrorist operations and Western media increasingly covers these attacks, it may appear that IS is winning and stronger than it has ever been. However, just like a wild animal gets more violent as it is cornered, IS’s last days may be some of its most violent, publicized, and horrific. Increased brutality is a necessary evil that will precede the complete defeat of IS, if this defeat is ever possible. Lastly, news agencies can either focus more briefly on informing the public of what happened, or they can do IS’s bidding by giving IS exactly what they want, more publicity about

how they are succeeding rather than more publicity about how IS, as a state, is almost non-existent.

¹ David Carr, "With Videos of Killings, ISIS Sends Medieval Message by Modern Methods," *New York Times*, September 7, 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/08/business/media/with-videos-of-killings-isis-hones-social-media-as-a-weapon.html?mcubz=0&_r=0

² Simon Cotee, "ISIS and the Logic of Shock: Why Each Islamic State Video is More Horrifying Than the Last," *The Atlantic*, February 6, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/02/isis-and-the-logic-of-shock-jordan-video/385252/>

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