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Radicalization Through Images: Extremist Propaganda in IS's Dabiq Magazine

Abstract

This article analyzes the images used in the fifteen issues of the English-language edition of Dabiq as a propaganda tool of the Islamic State (IS) between 2014 and 2016. To this end, a proprietary methodology was developed to facilitate the analysis of the images as constructions of narratives of collective identity, victimization, the organization's power, and its legitimacy as a state—all of which contribute to ideological radicalization and the symbolic legitimization of violence. Using ATLAS.ti software, a qualitative exploratory study was conducted with original manual coding of each photograph featured in the magazine, systematically categorizing the visual frames according to Entman's (1993) framing approach that predominated throughout its publications. Unlike previous studies that primarily emphasized utopian representations of the caliphate, the findings suggest a more pronounced predominance of images associated with its military capabilities.

This indicates that the photographic propaganda used in Dabiq largely focuses on glorifying the organization's military power and portraying its enemies through ridicule and dehumanization, thereby contributing to the normalization and legitimization of violence and potentially reinforcing narratives conducive to radicalization.

Keywords: IS, Dabiq, propaganda, ideological radicalization, visual frames.

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1. Introduction

As Cottee (2023, pp. 12–14) explains, just like terrorism, the term “radicalization” has multiple meanings; however, through an analysis of 50 studies on the subject, he explains that while anyone can be radicalized, he understands it to be a complex, multifaceted process and describes it as the accumulation of choices over time, involving both states and the individual’s “vulnerability.”

As Entman (1993, p. 2) points out, contemporary propaganda involves selecting certain aspects of perceived reality and making them more prominent in a text so that a causal, moral, and/or treatment-oriented interpretation is facilitated. Similarly, Bunzel (2015) notes that Islamic State (IS) was “founded by al-Qaeda in Iraq at a time when Iraq’s Sunni insurgency was rapidly losing momentum.” However, IS benefited from the political instability that arose following the Arab Spring, using it to expand regionally and establish a jihadist state in Iraq, where its radical rhetoric intensified and which would later expand, especially after the war in Syria in 2011 (Hoffman & Zeidel, 2021).

However, to achieve its expansion in the region, it was important to develop a media strategy. As part of this, IS expanded its target audience and began publishing English-language editions aimed at Western audiences, through magazines such as Dabiq (later Rumiya) (Milton, 2020, as cited in Qi, 2024).

Adapting to Western culture, IS selected images for Dabiq that projected narratives of victimization, heroism, and governance, using contemporary marketing tools as a soft power strategy to build a positive and idealized image of the “caliphate” and strengthen its legitimacy (Fahmy, 2020; Venkatesh et al., 2020; Kruglova, 2020; Archambault and Veilleux-Lepage, 2020, as cited in Qi, 2024).

According to Entman (2004, as cited in Winkler et al., 2021), photography is not neutral; it is possible to shape public perception through politics, emotions, and ideology (Goffman, 1974; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Scheufele, 1999, as cited in Winkler et al., 2021). In the case of IS, the magazine Dabiq served as a propaganda tool aimed at projecting an image of community, power, victimization, and legitimacy.

Therefore, this article analyzes how visual propaganda contributes to processes of ideological radicalization toward violent extremism through the images published in the fifteen issues of the Islamic State’s magazine Dabiq, published from 2014 to 2016 (Fahmy, 2020, pp. 264–265).

Rather than focusing on textual narratives, the study examines how visual elements construct meanings, reinforce ideological messages, and legitimize violence. The main theoretical framework is Robert Entman’s framing theory, which allows for the analysis of how images select, emphasize, and organize reality to shape audience interpretation.

From this perspective, the images published in Dabiq may contribute to ideological radicalization by visually framing collective identity, victimization, heroism, and existential threat, thereby creating symbolic narratives that normalize violence and strengthen extremist legitimacy.

2. Theoretical Framework

This research uses Robert M. Entman's framing theory to analyze propaganda. Entman notes that "framing essentially involves selection and salience" (1993, p. 53). Framing consists of selecting certain aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in communication. Frames can perform four principal functions: defining problems, diagnosing causes, making moral judgments, and suggesting remedies or treatments (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

Framing works by highlighting certain facts and giving them greater prominence. This is achieved through techniques such as repetition, strategic placement, or association with familiar symbols, which makes some elements more memorable while others fall outside the recipient's field of attention. In this way, framing directly influences the interpretation and processing of information (Entman, 1993, pp. 53–54). It possesses great persuasive power, as it is less intrusive than text; for this reason, it functions as a propaganda tool that allows for the construction of dominant narratives (Fahmy, 2020, p. 268).

Images are more effective than text at conveying messages, as they capture attention more effectively, amplify emotions, and reinforce narratives in a more visceral and memorable way, thereby influencing political attitudes (Baele et al., 2019, pp. 1–3). Furthermore, they help process complex realities and influence what is perceived as real (El Damanhoury & Winkler, 2018, p. 4). This persuasive power is rooted in the "betrayal of photography," where images construct a seemingly authentic representation of reality and legitimize war and conflict (Anfinson, 2021, p. 722).

IS propaganda relies heavily on visual framing to attract and maintain audience attention, reinforce its narratives, and preserve its credibility even in the face of leadership losses (Winkler et al., 2021, pp. 3, 9). According to Ellul, propaganda becomes more effective when it normalizes its ideology to the point where individuals obey impulses external to themselves (1962, as cited in Winter, 2020, p. 669). Thus, IS propaganda becomes a comprehensive strategy of radicalization.

Moreover, a study on IS videos notes that its visual propaganda was constructed using techniques of "abjection, shock, and horror," displaying violent and explicit scenes to generate adrenaline, erode empathy, and normalize suffering, thereby driving processes of radicalization (Venkatesh et al., 2020, pp. 1754, 1768). Another research paper asserts that these videos sought to intimidate adversaries, recruit sympathizers, and reinforce the group's narrative, revealing a new dimension of digital terrorism based on psychological, rhetorical, and theological strategies (2024:3; Fahmy, 2020:260).

3. Methodology

For the qualitative analysis of the images from the 15 issues of Dabiq, ATLAS.ti software was used. The analysis was divided into three groups: Dabiq 1–5, Dabiq 6–10, and Dabiq 11–15. In addition, a custom methodology was developed to analyze visual framing, involving the creation of specific codes.

The codes were based on five themes: utopia, images that portray the Caliphate as an ideal and prosperous society; governance and the state, images that project IS as a legitimate state with military capabilities, territorial control, and the ability to enforce order and coercion; martyrdom and heroism, images in which children and fighters are martyred, and leaders or fighters are glorified as heroes; enemy, images that expose or show the enemy as defeated; and victimization, where the consequences of the enemy's actions are presented.

Although the analysis focused on images and visual framing, the texts and captions were also analyzed to better understand and code them.

The theme of “Utopia” includes the following tags: `UTOPIAN_CHILDHOOD`, which portrays happy children at the center of the Caliphate; `COLLECTIVE_IDENTITY`, which projects an image of community and camaraderie; and `CALIPHATE_UTOPIA`, which depicts an idealized Caliphate with abundant markets, a happy society, and even doctors.

Under “Governance and State” are: `CALIPHATE_GOVERNANCE`, related to the exercise of control, the monopoly on violence, and military capability; `RELIGIOUS_AUTHORITY` and `RELIGIOUS_SYMBOLS`, linked to ideological imposition and religious imagery accompanied by narratives rooted in religion; `STATE_SYMBOLS`, such as IS emblems, flags, uniforms, and images of the coins created by IS; and `EXPLOITED_CHILDREN`, which reflects the use of minors within propaganda narratives, for example, to expose the enemy, construct a utopian image of the Caliphate, and portray children as the future of IS by showing them carrying weapons, wearing uniforms, and/or being trained as combatants.

The “Martyrdom and Heroism” category includes: `MARTYRDOM_CHILDREN` and `MARTYRDOM_ADULTS`, which refer to images of the martyrdom of civilians; `MARTYRDOM_HERO` and `HEROIC_FIGURE`, images intended to show martyred fighters in order to glorify them, portray a heroic image of a significant figure in IS history, or present dramatized scenes such as men on horseback with curved swords; and `FIGHTER_GLORIFICATION`, focused on the idealization of fighters.

The “Enemy” theme includes: `DEFEAT_THE_ENEMY`, which features images of the adversary being destroyed or weakened; `DEHUMANIZATION_OF_THE_ENEMY`, in which the enemy is depicted in a violent manner and stripped of individuality, whether dead or about to be executed;

and EXPOSURE_OF_THE_ENEMY, images that give a face to the enemy to identify or reveal their location.

Finally, under “Victimization,” there is the code VICTIMIZATION, which is used to identify depictions in which IS shows casualties or destruction resulting from enemy attacks.

The decision to create the codes in capital letters was made in order to facilitate the coding process in the software and to make the codes easier to identify.

4. Dabiq as a Visual Propaganda Device

Through Dabiq, IS expanded the international reach of its propaganda by publishing content in multiple languages, promoting a narrative aimed at influencing potential Western sympathizers and guiding them toward radicalization, while also dehumanizing and identifying its enemies (Fahmy, 2020, pp. 264–265). Likewise, Dabiq functions as a competitive system of meanings that shapes perceptions, fosters polarization, and seeks to mobilize its supporters (Ingram, 2017, p. 358).

On the other hand, gore content, characterized by the depiction of extreme violence and explicit suffering, was used by IS to amplify its propaganda and exploit fascination with the macabre, horror, and evil. Prolonged exposure to grotesque imagery can produce desensitization and encourage aggressive behavior. In this regard, a study on the visual content of Dabiq noted that its use of gore differed from most IS audiovisual productions, as it was primarily directed toward “Anglophone Muslims, especially those with Wahhabi and Salafi inclinations,” with the purpose of persuading them to join IS. Therefore, brutal images were employed in a calculated and strategic manner to generate impact on the target audience (Lakomy, 2019, pp. 146, 149, 157, 158).

5. Visual Framing of Collective Identity and Otherness

Propaganda contributes to the binary construction of otherness, framed as “us versus them,” in which IS presents itself as the legitimate defender of Islam, while anyone opposing the organization is portrayed as evil, unbelieving, and destined to fail (Qi, 2024:54).

This narrative is further legitimized through historical and contemporary experiences of Muslim communities, fostering a collective identity among IS followers and justifying the organization's hostile actions (Qi, 2024, Discussion section:1).

In fact, Milton (2020, cited in Qi, 2024:12) analyzed IS propaganda through 1,700 images, noting that the organization deliberately selected visuals representing both itself and its enemies, portraying the latter through violent imagery designed to capture the reader's attention.

IS's propaganda strategy is also embedded within the broader debate regarding the relationship between Islam and terrorism. In this regard, Qi (2024:4) refers to the essay by Graeme Wood (2015), who argues that IS's position on what it portrays as the "true Islam" generated extensive debate between those who agree with this interpretation and those who completely reject it. This discussion is particularly relevant because IS employed religious narratives as a mechanism for ideological legitimation and identity construction among its followers.

According to Qi (Makdisi & John, 1985; Mutahhari, 2014, as cited in Qi, 2024, Discussion section:6), the frequent emphasis on themes such as Islamic law and violent jihad contributed to IS's theological justification, which became one of the ideological foundations of the organization.

Although the central message remained consistent, the intensity with which certain themes were emphasized varied, particularly regarding religious narratives and the identification of the enemy, especially in Dabiq, the group's official English-language magazine (Colas, 2016a, as cited in Qi, 2024, Discussion section:9).

However, over time IS propaganda evolved from broad, generalized messages to propaganda content directed at specific audiences. In other words, the organization developed an understanding of its Western audience, allowing English-language videos to become an effective recruitment tool through the exploitation of frustrations and ideological inclinations (Cotte & Cunliffe, 2020, as cited in Qi, 2024, Literature Review section:13).

Indeed, by using English-language videos that appealed to identity, religion, and injustice, the group managed to reach a broader audience and generate a much greater impact (Qi, 2024, Literature Review section:11). This enabled IS to connect with individuals experiencing feelings of exclusion, identity crisis, or alienation, thereby reinforcing a collective identity grounded in religious and political belonging (Coolsaet, 2016; Roy, 2016, as cited in Qi, 2024, Discussion section: 22).

In other words, IS's religious foundation facilitated the construction of a narrative that projected and legitimized what the organization portrayed as the "true and correct" interpretation of Islam. At the same time, this narrative was reinforced through historical references to conflicts involving Muslims. Furthermore, by employing discursive strategies and propaganda techniques designed to evoke feelings of resentment, injustice, otherness, and identity, IS was able to expand regionally through its radical discourse. However, another technique that contributed to the organization's rapid growth was the use of imagery alluding to victimization and existential threat.

6. Visual Framing of Victimization and Existential Threat

Likewise, IS used the magazine Dabiq as a propaganda tool to disseminate its political and ideological strategy, challenge other jihadist groups, and threaten its Western enemies (Gambhir, 2014, p. 2). In

its early editions, the magazine reinforced a binary vision of the world divided between believers and unbelievers, projecting a sense of threat toward its adversaries while conveying legitimacy and belonging to its sympathizers (Gambhir, 2014, p. 4).

This duality between images of horror directed at enemies and utopian promises offered to supporters functioned as a mechanism for legitimizing violence, which the organization portrayed as a necessary means to achieve a sacred purpose (Venkatesh et al., 2020, as cited in Qi, 2024, IS Propaganda's Thematic and Tactical Development section: 1).

Themes such as "victimization, cruelty, utopianism, martyrdom, and apocalypse" also appeared prominently (Johnston, 2022; Lakomy, 2020; Price & Mooney, 2022; Winter, 2015, as cited in Qi, 2024, IS Propaganda's Thematic and Tactical Development section:2). These elements sought to construct a constant perception of threat and conflict, reinforcing emotional narratives capable of justifying extremist violence.

This can be observed in discursive examples in which, instead of referring to "Christians," the magazine employs language such as "cross worshippers" or "barbarians" (Rasoulkolamaki et al., 2025, "Sameness and Negative Diversity" section).

According to Rasoulkolamaki et al. (2025, p. 379), the magazine employs a discursive framework in which Muslims are portrayed as "victims" of oppression, while IS presents itself as the protector of the Islamic community. In this way, the violent actions carried out by the organization are interpreted as a justified response to the systematic victimization imposed by the "others."

Beyond the victimization depicted in its imagery, the organization also sought to generate emotional identification among individuals experiencing feelings of exclusion, alienation, or displacement, potentially facilitating recruitment processes.

Likewise, according to Cottee (2023, p. 13), radicalization does not necessarily stem from pathological differences, but also from factors such as anger, alienation, isolation, and the search for community. In this sense, IS propaganda exploited feelings of exclusion and displacement in order to attract individuals vulnerable to violent extremism.

Similarly, Cottee (2023, p. 15) discusses the vulnerability and impressionability of some Western IS recruits, underscoring the potential role of propaganda within broader processes of radicalization.

In other words, IS employed not only language that enabled readers to easily identify who the "alienated" groups were and who the "protectors" of Islam were, but also narratives of victimization and existential threat. In this way, the organization legitimized violence while simultaneously generating a sense of belonging among individuals susceptible to radicalization processes.

7. Visual Framing of Heroism and Martyrdom

A study on Dabiq indicated that IS identity was centered on projecting confidence and a divine path, in which hijrah (migration) and jihad (holy war or military self-sacrifice) were presented as obligations of the true Muslim and the only path toward salvation and eternal happiness. Themes such as “Virtues of Martyrdom,” “Obligatory Jihad,” and “Fear of God” reinforced the idea of sacrifice as something urgent and necessary (Hooker, 2015, pp. 58, 75, 86).

Herbers describes IS propaganda as a cult of death that glorifies both the deaths of its enemies and the martyrdom of its own members. Through images of death, IS transformed martyrs into propaganda tools and reinforced a narrative in which dying under the will of God acquired symbolic value. The abundance of martyr images in Dabiq demonstrates the organization's need to make them visible and publicly recognized (pp. 34, 38, 41).

In Dabiq, martyrs were portrayed through imagery distanced from gore and explicitly violent scenes. Bodies were shown intact, with wounds covered and peaceful facial expressions. Some altered images even included a glow resembling a Christian saint's aureole, symbolizing the mujahidin regarded as shahids by Allah. Thus, rather than shocking the reader, these images sought to familiarize audiences with martyrdom, transform it into a source of inspiration, and reinforce the idealization of the martyr figure (Lakomy, 2019, p. 159).

Regarding heroism, IS employed strategies of nomination and individualization in Dabiq, highlighting fighters through their names and personal stories in order to generate recognition, closeness, and empathy, as illustrated by the case of a soldier who died while helping another fighter (Rasoulkolamaki et al., 2025, pp. 883–884). This contrasts with the representation of its adversaries as collective, passive, and inferior actors (Rasoulkolamaki et al., 2025, p. 382; Rasoulkolamaki & Kaur, 2021, p. 656).

Likewise, Dabiq is filled with images of warriors dressed in black, carrying IS flags, riding horses, and wielding swords, accompanied by texts portraying them as brave knights. This medieval Islamic aesthetic associates jihadists with an ancient and pure form of warfare, evoking courage and commitment. The visual framing communicates the heroism of martyrdom and projects a powerful image of courageous fighters in order to attract more followers (Toguslu, 2019, p. 116).

IS also tends to frame the responsibility for resolving crises as belonging to men, promoting the idea that they must mobilize to protect their sisters, thereby constructing the figure of the hero as a necessary defender and associating mobilization with masculinity (Ingram, 2023, pp. 345–346). Furthermore, the organization instrumentalizes the image of children by portraying them as future warriors through depictions of military training and soldiers acting as paternal figures (Kaczowski, 2019, pp. 31–32).

In this way, IS employs visual and textual framing devices to reinforce its image of heroism. The organization presents itself as the ingroup capable of providing solutions and as the sole defender of Sunni Muslims, while the enemy outgroup is represented as responsible for both the crisis and its continuation (Ingram, 2023, p. 340; Kaczkowski, 2019, p. 26).

8. Visual Framing of Governance and the Caliphate Utopia

Through visual framing, IS portrayed the Caliphate in Dabiq as a utopian and ideal state-society in which Islam was practiced perfectly. Through images of well-supplied markets, united communities, clean streets, aid to those in need, and medical services, the group constructed the image of the Caliphate as a stable, prosperous, and fully religious state. Likewise, the representation of farmers and zakat collectors reinforced the idea of a devout and supportive Muslim community (Baele et al., 2019, p. 11; Toguslu, 2019, p. 109).

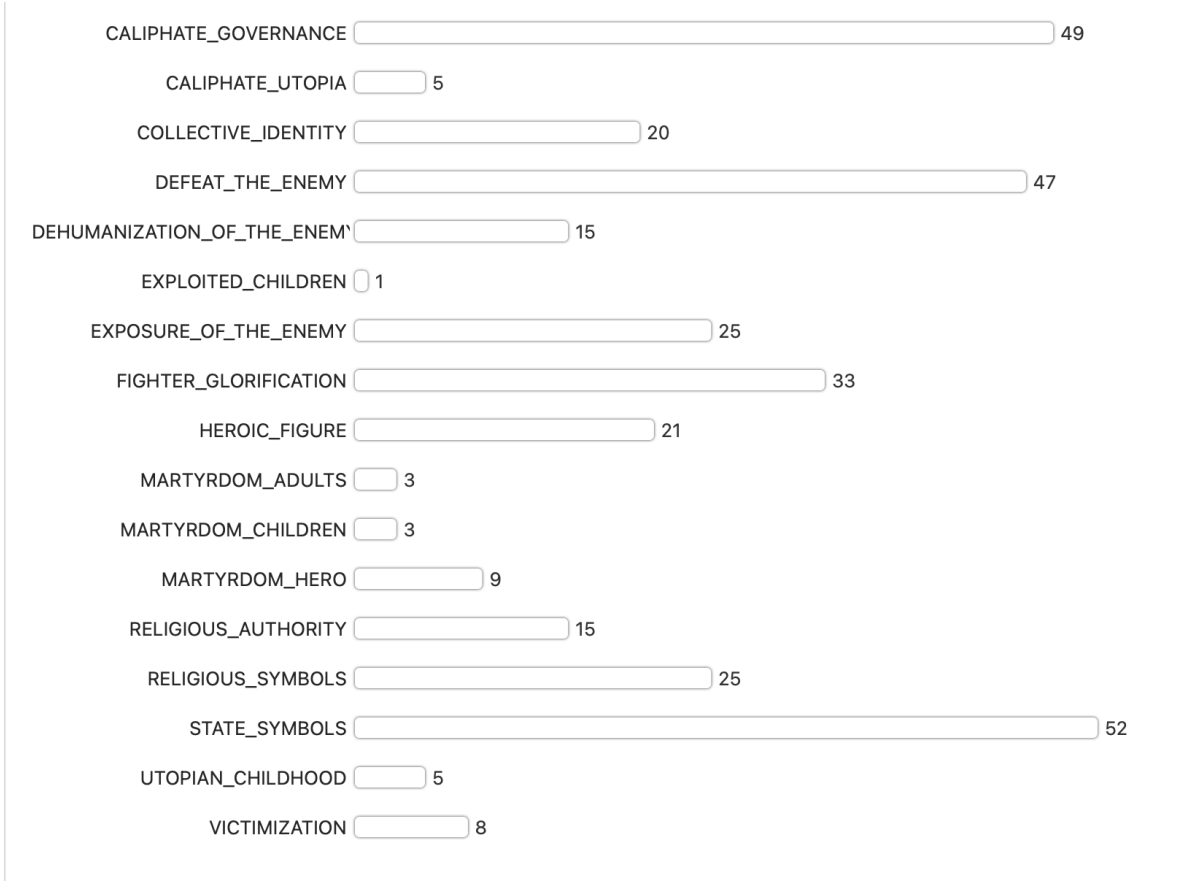
The appeal of the Islamic State's utopian propaganda also stemmed from the fact that it offered an ideological alternative to the status quo, grounded in millenarian foundations and associated with redemption and empowerment (Anfinson, 2021, p. 722). This governance framing was central to IS's global appeal, as Dabiq depicted the Islamic State as a functional, stable, and legitimate state with institutions, order, and control over the population, even though in practice its governance was far from effective (Anfinson, 2021, p. 732).

The images published in Dabiq were used to portray IS as a legitimate state possessing territory, population, governance, and international support. This visual framing sought to attract foreign recruits and reinforce the idea of the Caliphate as a sovereign project and a global Muslim community (Anfinson, 2021, pp. 720, 725–727).

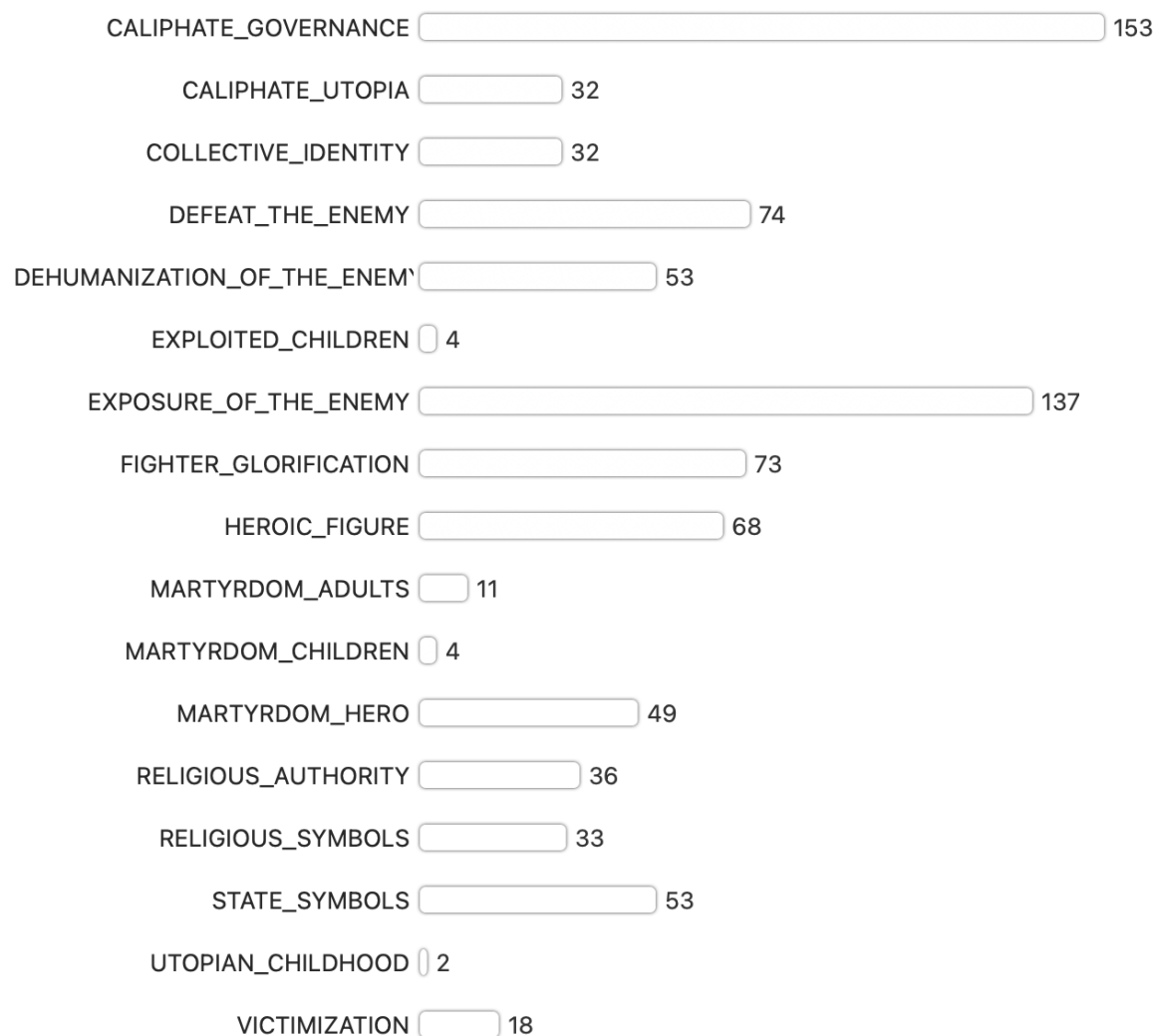
Likewise, Dabiq functioned as a strategy for constructing the idea of a total Muslim society by drawing upon religious and political concepts of Islam to legitimize IS and the Caliphate as an ideal society. Based on the idea that “There is no Islam except with jama’ah (community), and no jama’ah except with imarah (leadership), and no imarah except ta’ah (obedience),” IS argued that Islam could only fully exist within a unified community. Consequently, Muslims were portrayed as having a religious obligation to join the Caliphate and accept its leadership (Anfinson, 2021, p. 120; Toguslu, 2019, p. 109).

9. Results

Figure 1. Analysis with Atlas.ti Dabiq 1-5

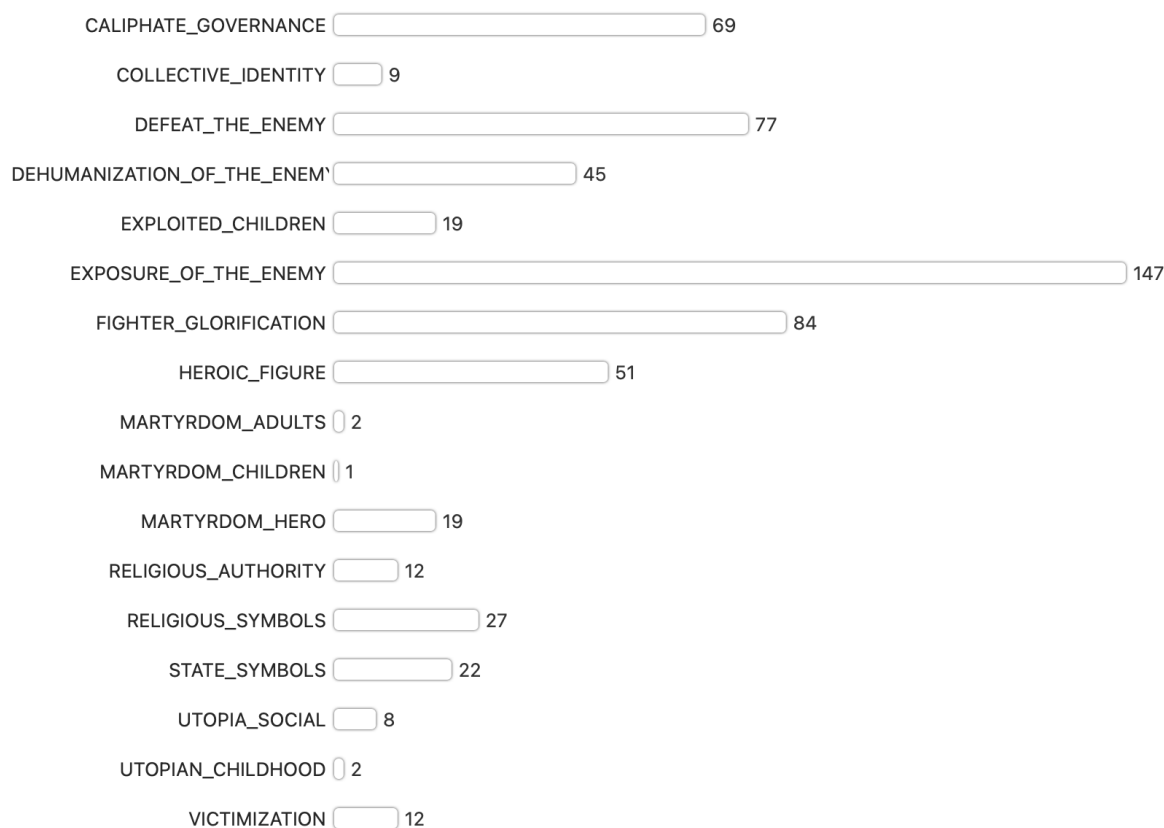


Within this group, the most predominant codes were STATE_SYMBOLS, followed by CALIPHATE_GOVERNANCE and DEFEAT_THE_ENEMY. In contrast, the least recurrent codes were EXPLOITED_CHILDREN, MARTYRDOM_CHILDREN, and MARTYRDOM_ADULTS.

Figure 2. Analysis with Atlas.ti Dabiq 6-10

Source: Own elaboration

Across volumes 6–10, the most prominent codes were CALIPHATE_GOVERNANCE, EXPOSURE_OF_THE_ENEMY, and DEFEAT_THE_ENEMY. The least frequent codes were UTOPIAN_CHILDHOOD, MARTYRDOM_CHILDREN, and EXPLOITED_CHILDREN.

Figure 3. Analysis with Atlas.ti Dabiq 11-15

Source: Own elaboration

The most predominant code across volumes 11–15 was EXPOSURE_OF_THE_ENEMY, followed by FIGHTER_GLORIFICATION and DEFEAT_THE_ENEMY. The least predominant codes were MARTYRDOM_ADULTS, UTOPIAN_CHILDHOOD, and MARTYRDOM_CHILDREN.

10. Discussion

In the Dabiq 1–5 group, unlike the other two groups, a large number of images were coded as STATE_SYMBOLS, with a high prominence of flags bearing the IS emblem. In addition, more images related to CALIPHATE_GOVERNANCE were identified, depicting tanks, weapons, and aircraft in order to emphasize the group's military capability. This suggests that, during its early stages, IS sought to project an image of state legitimacy.

Another observation across all 15 volumes of Dabiq is that the weapons most frequently displayed were AK-47 rifles, turning this weapon into part of IS propaganda and the aesthetic identity of the mujahid.

Regarding the utopia of the Caliphate, unlike what was argued by Toguslu (2019, p. 109), only a very limited number of images related to services or welfare were identified, such as doctors, abundant markets, the restoration of electricity, or aid to those in need. Instead, symbolic and natural landscapes predominated, including mountains, trees, eagles, and temples, often accompanied by narratives or verses from the Quran in order to construct an idealized vision of the Caliphate. Likewise, within the utopian image of community, representations of camaraderie among mujahidin were more recurrent than depictions of crowds or broader communal populations.

With regard to images denoting religious authority, there was a high prominence of leaders considered important by IS accompanied by texts glorifying them. Particularly in Dabiq 11–15, there was an increase in images portraying IS members destroying temples or enemy religious symbols. Moreover, these later volumes included representations of leaders of the Catholic religion; in fact, the cover of the final volume depicts a man destroying a cross.

One highly recurrent religious symbol was the Quran, with numerous images showing people reading it, especially mujahidin. Likewise, in most volumes, individuals, leaders, mujahidin, and even children are depicted raising their index finger, a symbol meaning “There is no god but Allah,” which was appropriated by IS as part of its propaganda (Skoler, 2014).

Regarding images of instrumentalized children, these were more frequent in Dabiq 6–10 and 11–15, where children appeared carrying weapons, wearing IS uniforms, undergoing military training, or accompanied by a mujahid acting as a parental figure. These images were accompanied by texts presenting the training of children and the path of the mujahid as a divine duty, while also portraying children as the future of IS and the Caliphate.

In contrast, in Dabiq 1–5 the instrumentalization of children primarily occurred through martyrdom imagery, depicting deceased minors in order to appeal to the emotions of the viewer; this type of image disappeared in later volumes. The accompanying texts referred to them as *shahid* (martyrs) and framed their deaths as the result of enemy attacks. Regarding the martyrdom of adult civilians, the images were scarce and depicted bodies with peaceful expressions and clean wounds, reducing the grotesque impact.

Most martyrdom-related images portrayed mujahidin killed in combat or suicide operations. Although some included blood, the majority consisted of photographs showing them alive and smiling, accompanied by texts glorifying their sacrifice and idealizing their fate before God. These images functioned as a strategy of individualization by giving the martyr a face, name, and personal story in order to generate empathy and encourage recruitment.

Regarding heroic figures, dramatized scenes of medieval warriors on horseback carrying curved swords were identified, as noted by Toguslu (2019, p. 116). This heroic construction also included prominent IS leaders and idealized martyrs.

Regarding fighter glorification, representations of armed mujahidin posing or firing weapons were extremely frequent. Across all issues, images of heroic martyrdom, heroic jihad, and fighter glorification were consistently present. Both the images and accompanying texts included repeated calls for hijrah (migration) and jihad (holy war or military self-sacrifice), urging foreigners to join IS and participate in jihad as mujahidin (Hooker, 2015, pp. 58, 75, 86).

As for images portraying the defeat of the enemy, the most common scenes depicted temples or spaces destroyed following IS attacks, corpses of enemy fighters or civilians, and images displayed to “subjugated” populations in territories under IS control.

Regarding the dehumanization of the enemy, many images portrayed the bodies of killed fighters without visible faces, placed inside bags or surrounded by large amounts of blood, accompanied by texts expressing ridicule and hatred. Generally, their names were not mentioned, thereby stripping them of individuality.

Regarding dehumanization, this was particularly evident in the representation of hostages, mainly journalists and public figures, who were depicted wearing orange prisoner-style clothing, with shaved heads, beaten, and restrained by hooded individuals holding knives to their necks. Subsequently, some images portrayed them with signs reading “prisoner for sale” in order to demand ransom payments, and later they appeared either about to be executed or in the process of execution through shootings or beheadings.

It was observed that in each analyzed Dabiq group (1–5, 6–10, and 11–15) there was at least one image depicting a beheading. Nevertheless, the level of visual violence progressively increased in each issue, with the later images being the most graphic and grotesque.

Regarding the exposure of the enemy, two main categories were identified: Westerners, such as government leaders, journalists, and military forces, and traitors, represented by leaders of countries such as Saudi Arabia or members of groups such as Al-Qaeda. Although they belonged to Islam, they were portrayed as apostates or traitors. These images increased considerably over time, with a strong presence in Dabiq 6–10 and an even greater presence in Dabiq 11–15.

Finally, victimization predominated in Dabiq 1–5, where children, civilians, and destruction attributed to enemies were frequently depicted. In later volumes, IS focused more on projecting power and emphasizing the weakness of its enemies; therefore, Dabiq 11–15 presented a marked absence of these elements.

11. Conclusion

This study examined the visual propaganda published across the fifteen issues of *Dabiq* through Robert M. Entman's framing theory and a qualitative visual analysis conducted with ATLAS.ti. By systematically examining the visual frames associated with utopia, governance and statehood, martyrdom and heroism, the representation of the enemy, and victimization, the research provides a comprehensive account of how IS used photographic imagery to construct and reinforce its ideological narratives. The findings indicate that visual propaganda in *Dabiq* should not be understood merely as an aesthetic complement to textual discourse, but as an integral component of the organization's broader communication strategy, through which political legitimacy, collective identity, military strength, victimhood, and the moral justification of violence were visually constructed.

One of the main contributions of this study lies in identifying the evolution of these visual frames throughout the publication of *Dabiq*. The analysis reveals that the magazine did not maintain a static visual strategy between 2014 and 2016. In the earlier issues, images associated with state symbols, governance, victimization, and the construction of the Caliphate as a political and territorial entity were particularly prominent. These representations contributed to portraying IS not only as an armed organization, but also as a governing actor capable of exercising territorial control, enforcing authority, and providing the symbolic attributes associated with statehood. As the publication evolved, however, the visual emphasis increasingly shifted toward military capability, the exposure and defeat of enemies, and the glorification of fighters. This transformation suggests that *Dabiq*'s visual communication adapted to the changing political and military circumstances faced by IS.

A particularly relevant finding concerns the representation of the Caliphate as a utopian project. While previous research has emphasized images of prosperity, social welfare, community, public services, and everyday life as important components of IS propaganda, the present analysis found these representations to be comparatively limited. Instead, the visual construction of the Caliphate relied more heavily on symbols of authority, military power, territorial control, religious legitimacy, and collective identity. Consequently, the findings qualify the idea that *Dabiq* predominantly projected an idealized image of everyday life under the Caliphate. The visual legitimacy of IS appears to have been constructed not only through promises of a prosperous Islamic society, but also, and more prominently, through demonstrations of coercive capacity, religious authority, military strength, and the ability to defeat its adversaries. This constitutes one of the principal empirical contributions of the study.

The analysis also reveals an important asymmetry in the visual construction of the in-group and the out-group. IS fighters, leaders, and martyrs were frequently individualized through photographs, names, personal stories, and narratives of sacrifice, courage, and religious commitment. Such

representations provided members of the organization with recognizable identities and presented them as heroic figures whose actions embodied the values promoted by IS. Conversely, enemies were frequently represented through processes of dehumanization, humiliation, anonymity, and physical defeat. Corpses, prisoners, hostages, and defeated adversaries were often stripped of individuality or presented primarily as symbols of the weakness and moral inferiority of the out-group. The simultaneous individualization and glorification of the in-group and the dehumanization of the out-group therefore emerge as complementary visual mechanisms through which *Dabiq* reinforced a binary worldview based on belonging, exclusion, moral superiority, and antagonism.

The findings further demonstrate that violence itself was framed differently depending on the identity of those represented. The deaths of IS members were generally associated with martyrdom, heroism, sacrifice, and religious transcendence, whereas violence against adversaries was more frequently connected to humiliation, punishment, defeat, and dehumanization. Similarly, images of civilian victimization were particularly visible in the earlier issues and were used to attribute responsibility for Muslim suffering to IS's enemies. Taken together, these different representations contributed to constructing a moral framework in which violence committed by the organization could be presented as legitimate, necessary, defensive, or divinely sanctioned, while violence attributed to its adversaries reinforced narratives of injustice and existential threat.

These findings are relevant to the study of radicalization, although the relationship must be interpreted with methodological caution. The research does not demonstrate that exposure to particular images directly causes individual radicalization, nor does it measure audience reception or behavioral change. Rather, it identifies visual mechanisms capable of supporting narratives associated with radicalization processes. By reinforcing collective identity, establishing clear distinctions between the in-group and the out-group, legitimizing violence, glorifying fighters and martyrs, constructing narratives of victimization, and dehumanizing adversaries, the images analyzed create a symbolic environment potentially conducive to the acceptance of extremist interpretations and violent action. In this sense, the contribution of the study is not to establish a causal relationship between images and radicalization, but to identify and systematically analyze the visual frames through which extremist propaganda may contribute to broader processes of ideological socialization, legitimization of violence, and mobilization.

More broadly, the study contributes to the literature on extremist propaganda by demonstrating the analytical value of examining visual content longitudinally rather than treating an organization's propaganda as a homogeneous body of material. The comparison of the three publication periods, *Dabiq* 1–5, 6–10, and 11–15, shows that visual framing changed alongside IS's strategic circumstances. This suggests that extremist visual propaganda can function as an adaptive communication system in which images are selected and emphasized according to changing organizational priorities, military

conditions, and political narratives. Visual propaganda should therefore be analyzed not only in terms of what it represents, but also in terms of how those representations evolve over time.

The study nevertheless has limitations. As a qualitative analysis of the content produced by IS, it examines the messages constructed by the organization rather than their reception by audiences. Consequently, no direct causal inference can be made regarding the effect of individual images on radicalization, recruitment, or mobilization. Future research could address this limitation by combining visual content analysis with audience studies, interviews, experimental approaches, or analyses of individuals who consumed extremist propaganda. Comparative research involving other IS publications, such as *Rumiyah*, or propaganda produced by other jihadist organizations could also determine whether the visual patterns identified in *Dabiq* represent distinctive features of IS communication or broader characteristics of contemporary jihadist propaganda.

Ultimately, the analysis demonstrates that the visual dimension of *Dabiq* was not secondary to its ideological message. Images constituted a central mechanism through which IS represented itself, its political project, its fighters, its victims, and its enemies. The principal contribution of this article is therefore to show that IS's visual propaganda combined different and evolving frames of state legitimacy, military power, heroism, victimization, collective identity, and enemy dehumanization, while adapting their relative prominence to the organization's changing strategic circumstances. By identifying these patterns across the complete corpus of *Dabiq*, the study provides a more nuanced understanding of how extremist organizations use visual communication to construct legitimacy, normalize violence, and create symbolic narratives potentially conducive to ideological radicalization.

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