Thematic Analysis of ISIL Messaging (Dr. Lawrence A. Kuznar, Indiana University – Purdue University, Fort Wayne & NSI & Mr. William H. Moon, Department of the Air Force)

Abstract. Thematic analysis was conducted on a corpus of 14 speeches by two key ISIL spokesmen (al ‘Adnani and al Baghdadi) to answer two questions: “What are the intangible factors that make ISIL so magnetic, inspirational, and deeply resonant with a specific, but large, portion of the Islamic population?” and “How durable is the organization versus the idea or ideology likely to be?”

The key themes that resonate with ISIL followers include: victory is destined and ordained, ISIL successes are evidence of their destined victory, victory can only be achieved through violence, rewards and honor will accrue to those who fight (especially in the hereafter), and the primary enemies are apostate Sunni, Shi’a, Americans, Westerners, Jews, and then all others.

These themes appear to resonate with disaffected young males, aggrieved Sunni, and an increasing number of active jihadists and provide ISIL with short-term durability. However, the rejection of their message by the vast majority of Muslims and their need to continue to achieve victory, along with discrepancies between their rhetoric and behavior indicates that ISIL may not be sustainable indefinitely as an organization, especially if effectively opposed. However, given the history of Sunni grievances in the region and the appeal of the Caliphate narrative, their ability to recruit is likely to endure.

Important takeaways

1. Violence is the message; it is the only way to establish justice
2. Victory and success are essential to maintain their appeal and attract support, although set-backs will likely be denied or claimed as a special case of victimization
3. According to ISIL, the Caliphate is ordained by God and therefore destined; it will not fail to be achieved
4. ISIL’s message is hopeful; it attracts people to build something tangible that ISIL has created, although through hatred and violence
5. ISIL’s message is deeply embedded in concepts fundamental to the Sunni Islam and difficult, although not impossible, to counter on an ideological level
6. Messages must be understood in the context of Salafist ideology as interpreted by ISIL in order to appreciate how these messages initially attract, and ultimately retain, ISIL supporters.
7. ISIL messaging has transparently laid out ISIL intentions; it should be taken seriously

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20 While military opposition is necessary to stem their expansion, effective requires that no one plays into their narrative and provides them with a Western, unbelieving enemy they can use to rally and expand their base among potential allies, Jihadist and otherwise.
8. ISIL speeches effectively bundle messages that will appeal to different audiences (potential foreign fighters in the West, young males in the Middle East, aggrieved Sunni in Iraq and Syria).

Introduction

This thematic analysis was conducted to answer two questions:

1. “What are the intangible factors that make ISIL so magnetic, inspirational, and deeply resonant with a specific, but large, portion of the Islamic population?” and
2. “How durable is the organization versus the idea or ideology likely to be?”

Magnetism: Key themes that resonate with their supporters include hope of regained honor by establishing a Caliphate, destined victory and success, their tangible successes are evidence of their destiny, and righteous and violent retribution.

Portion of the Islamic Population: However, ISIL has attracted approximately 15,000 foreign fighters, or a mere 0.005%, of the global Muslim population, so they are magnetic only to a minute fraction of their target population. However, their low success rate has given them enough fighters to accomplish their goals to date.

Durability: In the near-run (months and years), ISIL’s efforts to attract followers is sustainable. However, their ability to sustain their growth and expand indefinitely as an organization appears to be limited given the apparent lack of enthusiasm for their message throughout the Islamic world, coupled with the apparent need for them to sustain victories and rewards for their supporters. However, the movement they represent, to regain lost glory of Islam and address the grievances of Sunni through opposition to their enemies, is likely to endure because of Sunni grievances and appeal of the narrative.

The thematic analysis described in this paper identifies key themes that appeal to ISIL supporters, explains why some of these themes resonate with particular audiences, and identifies potential weaknesses in ISIL messaging. The paper is structured as follows: Description of the Data, Description of Theories and Methods, and Results.

Corpus of ISIL Messages: The Data

The corpus was composed of 14 speeches and other messages broadcast by ISIL spokesmen Abu Muhammed al-‘Adnani (seven speeches) and leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (seven speeches). The materials were initially collected in English translation off of the web, but for the sake of consistency, copies provided by the Open Source Center (OSC) were used.

Thematic Analysis: Theory and Method

A central problem in the interpretation of discourse is that no machine can read text like a human, but humans are inherently subjective, rendering their interpretations ungrounded and suspect. Furthermore, discourse is always interpreted in specific historical and cultural contexts, and a means for appreciating the meaning of discourse in context is essential, if any valid interpretation is possible.
The approach used in this study has been developed to overcome these limitations by rendering the interpretation of themes empirical and transparent, and therefore vulnerable to scientific tests (Fenstermacher, Kuznar & Yager, 2012). It limits subjectivity, strikes a balance by using humans to code and systematically capture cultural nuance, yet provides data amenable to quantitative analysis. These data are used to reveal how concepts relate in larger narratives that have meaning in a particular cultural context and that motivate behavior. It draws from the following theoretical perspectives: grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss, 2008), critical discourse theory (van Dijk, 2004; Fairclough, 2001), narrative analysis and framing theory (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980), and evolutionary biology (Tiger 1969; Atran 2003).

Finally, the approach employed in this study has been applied to studies of Afghan insurgent literature (Kuznar & Yager, 2012), anticipation of conflict between Indian and Pakistan (Kuznar, Yager, St. Clair & Stephenson, 2012), North Korean missile testing (Kuznar, 2013), trust as expressed in Iranian discourse (Kuznar & Yager, 2013), and violent actions initiated by Bashar al-Assad (Kuznar, Suedfeld, Morrison, Cross & Spitaletta, 2014). A number of commonalities in how people reveal their intentions through their discourse, discovered through these studies, informed this study and provided some a priori expectations.

Thematic analysis provides the basic method for identifying critical elements of language used in persuasive communication (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The following units of analysis are defined in this study.

**Themes** are words or phrases that convey a connotative meaning; the meaning is greater than the description implied by the word or phrase.

**Rhetorical Devices** are ways of using language to influence an audience. Examples include poetry, hyperbole, metaphor, symbolism, examples, logic, etc.

**Theme Associations** are correlated themes and rhetorical devices that reinforce one another and tend to co-occur, bolstering one another’s effects on the recipient.

All speeches were blind coded without identifying information to minimize bias. Culturally relevant themes and rhetorical devices were identified with associated specific language. Statistical analysis of the frequency and density of themes and rhetorical devices (# themes / 1000 words) were conducted to identify patterns in theme use and associations among themes. **Theme density** is a measure of common and presumably important themes. Some themes that have great impact may be mentioned less often and the analysis considers some of these as well.

**Results**

Results are based on measures of theme density and focus on the following: the overall message conveyed by the corpus, messaging specific to al ʿAdnani and al ʿBaghdadi, theme associations that resonate with potential audiences, and trends in messaging through time.
The Overall ISIL Message

Considering the corpus as a whole, the most densely noted themes (> 1 / 1000 words) express an explicitly violent Jihad against Infidels (kuffar, unbelievers) with the purpose of establishing a Caliphate for a true Ummah (community of believers). Some of these themes appear to address different aspects of ISIL’s messaging, including Religion, the Caliphate, the Fighters (Mujahideen), and Graphic Violence.21

Islamic religious themes of particular importance include: Destiny (God has ordained our movement), Tawhid (oneness of God), Minhaj (correct methodology or path based on Hadith and Sunnah), possessing Truth, and Forgiveness of sins.

Caliphate relevant themes include Destiny (the Caliphate is destined), History (historical precedents indicate this Caliphate is destined), and the establishment of Sharia law.

Fighter relevant themes include Destiny (the fight is destined), Honor, Overcoming hardships and Unity of a brotherhood.

Violence-related themes include frequent use of Graphic violent imagery (reference to dismemberment, blood, throat slitting), and the Humiliation of enemies.

Figurative Language (metaphor, symbolism), Graphic violence and Pejoratives (name calling, profanity) are liberally used to emphasize their message, more than in other terrorist and insurgent literatures we have analyzed.

ISIL enemies, listed in order of their density are: Infidels (kuffar), Shi’a, America, Tyrants (Tawaghiit, refers to dictatorial rulers in Middle East, but also carries Qur’anic connotations), Jews, Crusaders (a catch-all term for Western powers), and the Sunni Awakening Councils in Iraq. Other enemies are mentioned only very infrequently.

It is important to elaborate on the violence-related themes. ISIL’s world is strictly divided into two camps: the camp of Islam and faith and the camp of kufr (disbelief) and hypocrisy. From ISIL’s perspective, without Jihad fi sabiil Allah (struggle for the sake of Allah) and qitaal (fighting) and strict adherence to and enforcement of al-walaa’ (amity, allegiance, devotion) wal-baraa’ (enmity, disavowal), a significant component of al-‘Aqidah As-Salafiyyah (Salafi dogma/belief system), the kuffar (unbelievers) and hypocrites (munafiqoun) will never be defeated and the Khilafah (Caliphate) will not evolve.

In its simplest connotation, the phrase al-walaa’ wal-baraa’ means, on one hand, drawing near to what is pleasing to Allah (SWT22) and His Messenger (SWS) and, on the other hand, withdrawing from what is displeasing to Allah (SWT) and His Messenger (SWS). Although this concept rests upon or is nested in numerous other, often pan-Islamic tenets such as tawhidullah

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21 Actual theme codes used in the analysis are capitalized, and when necessary, explained parenthetically.
22 SWT Glorified and Exalted is He (Allah), Peace and Mercy upon Him (Prophet)
(the oneness of Allah) it is the interpretation and propagation of al-wala’ wal-baraa’ found in the ISIL message that al-Baghdadi and al-‘Adnani rationalize the use of extreme violence—they do not merely call for disassociation from that which is displeasing to Allah (SWT) and His Messenger (SWS) but instead to destroy that which is displeasing. Fellow Sunni Muslims are not exempt from finding themselves as labeled among al-baraa’. Additionally, the ISIL message clearly conveys that the kuffar and true believers cannot coexist here in this world and they will not share the afterlife; e.g., “A kafir and his killer will never gather in Hellfire” [Sahih Muslim].

All of these messages likely operate on multiple levels, meaningful to different audiences ISIL wishes to persuade. On a more superficial level, the sense of destiny, excitement, and meaningful belonging, punctuated with graphic imagery, is likely to resonate with young males, including those within the region, recent converts to radical Islam in the West, and even non-Muslims who may be looking for a meaningful cause. Similarly, their appeal to Sunni grievances potentially resonates with even Sunnis who are not particularly orthodox or not of the Salafist school of thought who feel that they have been oppressed by non-Sunnis or Sunnis working on behalf of Western interests.

On a deeper level, the appeal to broadly accepted Islamic principles (Tawhid, prophecy, Sunnah), combined with a reconstructed narrative of the return to the lost glory of the Caliphate, provides a deeper narrative that can resonate with religiously oriented Sunni, and initiates who may have been initially attracted by the more superficial message. ISIL’s message is also likely to resonate with Sunni in the region who may not be explicitly of the Salafist school, but whose worldview is impacted by Salafist ideas, considering the fact that the Sunni Muslims in the contested region are familiar with the “tenets/principles” (pan-Islamic) that serve as the foundation/premises of the ISIL’s particular Salafist argument.

It is important to point out that, while ISIL commits acts condemned by the vast majority of Muslims, more moderate Muslims have difficulty arguing against the broad principles in which ISIL cloaks their justifications; they are truisms of the faith. In this way, ISIL effectively engages in “moral outbidding,” in attempting to command the high ground in competing narratives within Islam.

The outgroups mentioned by ISIL provide insight into those they regard as their primary enemies, and perhaps into the order in which they might want to engage them. ISIL’s widespread use of “infidel” often refers to other Sunni who are seen as apostates and hypocrites, and they often refer to the Awakening Councils that initially struck back at AQI, the predecessor to ISIL. It appears that other Sunni “unbelievers” are the most immediate and proximate enemy they are concerned with fighting, unless those apostates repent and join ISIL’s jihad. Shi’a (often referred to pejoratively as Rejectionists, Rafidhah, and Safavids) are clearly their next priority as enemies. Americans are close behind Shi’a as ISIL’s enemies, followed by Jews (Israel), and the general category of Crusader.
**ISIL Authors: Adnani vs. Baghdadi**

Both al-‘Adnani and al-Baghdadi exhibit very similar use of themes. A Pearson’s $r$ of the theme density of the top 82 themes both authors employ is $r = 0.774$, and a Spearman’s rho of the ranking of these themes is $rho = 0.568$, both statistically significant at $p < .00001$ level.

Both authors assiduously reference Quranic and Hadith verse to justify and highlight their successes to emphasize their arguments.

However, there is a different emphasis in their messages. Al-‘Adnani emphasizes the destined violent Jihad against specific enemies such as unbelievers (kuffar), Shi’a and Americans, and makes more use of graphic and violent imagery.

Al-Baghdadi makes more appeals to foreign fighters, emphasizing that they have a duty to immigrate (hijrah) to the region to wage violent Jihad. This message is especially relevant to specific Hadith that stress how the waging of violent Jihad is an obligation, and failure to engage in violent Jihad is an indication of infidelity. Al Baghdadi’s more recent missives have stressed the need for patience.

**ISIL Theme Associations**

Themes are cultural elements, expressed through language, and people assemble them, much like bricks, to create a larger edifice, a narrative, that expresses a complex of meaning to an audience. The blind coding methodology permits a more objective and empirically traceable method for identifying the associated themes people use to influence others. The theme densities are analyzed with Principle Components Analysis to identify clusters of themes that reinforce one another. This analysis demonstrated that ISIL messengers densely pack each message with many themes meant to reinforce one another. The first component of the factor analysis indicated that the following themes were highly correlated.

This factor might be labeled “Violent Jihad Ordained for Victory.” It integrates a message of Hope that it is the absolute Truth that you, the Mujahideen, have an ordained (Religious Verse) Duty to pledge Allegiance to a Caliphate in the oneness of God (Tawhid) on the right path (Minhaaj) to wage Jihad against Tyrants in an apocalyptic battle (Judgment Day). The Jihad must be violent (Violent Confrontation); peace is not an option (Peace is Futile). You will need to be Patient and Sacrifice to Overcome hardships. In the end, your enemies (Infidels, Awakening Councils, false Scholars, Crusaders, Jews) will fear you and your strength. You will right Injustice and gain Honor. An underlying concept is that of al-walaa’ wal-baraa’ or allegiance and disavowal. This concept allows ISIL to flexibly define ingroups (true believers, or the true Ummah) distinct from outgroups (infidels, regardless of their professed religious affiliation), enabling ISIL to define anyone as an infidel and, therefore, permissible for killing, torture or enslavement.
This first factor ties together most of the themes essential to ISIL’s message, and illustrates how key elements of ISIL’s message are inextricably intertwined and must be understood as a whole.

**Trends through Time**

Trends in theme use over time can give clues to a speaker’s intentions and provide indicators and warnings. While the sample is small, there are some trends in the overall corpus, and especially in the rhetoric of al-‘Adnani and al-Baghdadi.

‘Adnani demonstrates a number of increasing trends in his discourse. The themes of Destiny, Victory, Caliphate and Shirk (polytheists, which includes Alawites; unbelieving Sunni; Shi’a; and potentially anyone who does not strictly adhere to the “correct path” [minhaaj] decreed by ISIL) are all statistically increasing, indicating that he is using these themes to impress upon followers that the Caliphate is competent and destined to defeat its enemies. Al-‘Adnani is also increasingly mentioning Christians and Americans, indicating that these are current and future enemies to be targeted.

Al-Baghdadi exhibits several increasing trends, including Caliphate, Destiny, Undefeatable, and Strength emphasizing that the Caliphate is religiously ordained and destined and strong. Interestingly, he exhibits a decreasing mention of foreign fighters, indicating that he may have a decreasing concern with attracting them.

**References**


recommendations. MS prepared for Strategic Multilayer Assessment, Office of the Secretary of Defense, Pentagon.


