Abstract: This article examines the "framing" strategies employed by the Islamic State in espousing the group’s salafist-takfiri doctrine, which includes the call for both defensive and offensive jihad. An analysis of the written documents, official statements and social media messaging issued by the Islamic State reveals three main framing strategies upon which the organization grounds its security claims. First, diagnostic frames are intended to highlight the threats that exist to its extreme vision of Islam. Second, prognostic frames offer prescriptions for meeting those threats. And, third, motivational frames are designed to mobilize active support for the Islamic State and its doctrine. This means that ultimate victory over the Islamic State requires that moderate Sunni Muslim religious and political elites offer both a credible counter-narrative that debunks the doctrinal vision of the Islamic State and an alternative doctrinal narrative that addresses the hopes, needs and concerns of young Muslims.

The Islamic State has been very successful in pursuing its doctrinal objectives. Through the careful construction of images and messages which carry deep cultural and historical resonance for young, techno-savvy Muslims, the Islamic State maps out diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational “framing” strategies. These strategies are designed to convince its target audience—both inside and outside its self-proclaimed caliphate—that the Islamic State’s salafist-takfiri doctrine justifies both defensive and offensive jihad. While a robust, well-coordinated military response accompanied by an effective counter-terrorism strategy is essential in the war against the Islamic State, ultimate victory will require moderate Sunni Muslim religious and political elites to offer both a credible counter-narrative that undermines the doctrinal vision of the Islamic State and an alternative Islamic-based narrative for achieving meaningful socio-economic and political change.

This essay proceeds as follows: 1) a short history of the Islamic State and a brief description of its doctrine, 2) an analysis of the Islamic State’s efforts to frame its claims regarding threats, prescriptions for meeting those threats, and the call to action in language that resonates with key target audiences, and 3) suggestions for countering and defeating the threat posed by the Islamic State.
A Brief History of the Islamic State

Although a detailed presentation of the history of the Islamic State is well beyond the scope of this article, a brief summary of the organization’s doctrine and development is crucial in order to gain a deeper understanding of how the Islamic State frames its security claims. The organization which today calls itself the Islamic State traces its roots to the violence and chaos that wracked Iraq in the years following Saddam Hussein’s fall.¹ The brainchild of the Jordanian-born criminal-turned-militant Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the Jama’at al-Tawhid w'al-Jihad (or Party of Monotheism and Jihad, as it initially branded itself) quickly set itself apart from al-Qaeda. This was accomplished by directing large-scale terrorist operations against the Shi’a population of Iraq, designed to stir up a sectarian hornet’s nest inside post-Saddam Iraq.

Zarqawi’s group was ideologically unique in that it subscribed to a very severe and literal interpretation of Wahhabism, the ultra-conservative Sunni doctrine, the roots of which can be traced back to the eighteenth century in what is today Saudi Arabia.² Specifically, Zarqawi combined salafist doctrine (the desire to return Islamic society to the “perfect state” in which it existed during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad) with an advocacy for the practice of takfir (branding those who do not subscribe to salafist principles as infidels worthy of death).³ That salafist-takfiri worldview continues to serve as the doctrinal core of the Islamic State’s vision today.

The extent to which even fellow jihadists consider the Islamic State’s doctrine to be beyond the pale is evidenced by the historically rocky relationship between the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. Twice since 2005 al Qaeda has attempted to curb what it views to be the reckless excesses of the Islamic State’s strategies, tactics and goals, only to be rebuffed by the renegade group’s leadership. In 2005 Osama Bin Laden’s top lieutenant, Ayman al-Zawahiri, penned a letter in which he reminded Zarqawi, who by that time had pledged allegiance to Bin Laden and renamed his group al Qaeda in Iraq, that achieving al Qaeda’s two major immediate-term goals—the expulsion of U.S. forces and the creation of an Islamic emirate in Iraq—was largely dependent upon “popular support from the Muslim masses in Iraq, and the

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