Capitalizing on the Koran to fuel online violent radicalization: A taxonomy of Koranic references in ISIS’s *Dabiq*

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\textbf{ABSTRACT}

The current study set out to investigate to what extent ISIS is bolstering its jihadist ideology on a ‘cut-and-paste’ or ‘cherry-picked’ version of Islam in their renowned online propaganda magazine *Dabiq*. The main objective was to examine in a systematic and quantitative way to what extent ISIS utilizes the Koran in an atomistic, truncated and tailored manner to bolster its religious legitimacy. A total of 15 issues of *Dabiq* and 700 Koranic references were scrutinized. By means of a quantitative analysis we developed an innovative taxonomy of Koranic chapters and verses (i.e. surahs and ayat, respectively) on the basis of their appearance in *Dabiq*. Our large-scale data analysis provide consistent empirical evidence for severe decontextualization practices of the Koran in three ways: (1) a thin, Medinan-dominated religious layer, (2) ayah mutilation, and (3) clustered versus exclusive mentions. Limitations and implications for future research, policy makers and CVE initiatives are discussed.

1. Introduction

Words have power—especially those supposed to be coming from a ‘god’—and jihadis understand that. Once again, the power of religious words has become very apparent worldwide through a number of vicious terrorist attacks inspired and justified by the ‘word of God’ (Hassan, 2017). Internet-based communication technologies have brought about the emergence of radical virtual communities intent on preaching their own version of Islamic Gospel, laying the foundation for a global doctrine known as *Electronic Jihad* (Rudner, 2017). This phenomenon is thought to have a multiplier effect on global jihadism, triggering both actual acts of terrorism and (online) violent radicalization (Reinares et al., 2017). ISIS is one of the key organisations waging such an *Electronic Jihad*, reaching and mobilizing unprecedented numbers of active supporters to its Caliphate ambition (Neumann, 2015) and interpretation of a Salafi-jihadist ideology which is more rigorist and brutal than any of its predecessors (Bunzel, 2015). As a result, both Academia and organisations set up to counter violent extremism (CVE) have shifted their attention to understanding and curtailing the online circulation of jihadist material. Surprisingly, however, the exact ideology which permeates online realms remains mostly unexplored. This study aims to bridge this gap. We set out to investigate the extent to which ISIS has been basing its jihadist ideology on a ‘cut-and-paste’ or ‘cherry picked’ version of Islam (e.g. Rashid, 2017) in *Dabiq*, its online propaganda publication. Our main objective was to determine through systematic and quantitative analysis whether—and if so, to what extent—ISIS has been using the Koran, the most revered text in the Islamic tradition, in an atomistic, truncated and tailored manner to strengthen its religious legitimacy. We
did not devote much attention to the ways ISIS propaganda is actually circulated online (cf. Gendron, 2017) or to its actual influence on its target audiences (e.g. Aly, 2016; Von Behr et al., 2013). Rather, we focused on the message, specifically its Koranic elements as ideological backbone of the jihadist doctrine.

1.1. The Koran as terrorist recruiting tool

So far, only a few studies have taken a systematic look at the way extremist preachers or jihad-oriented media use Islamic scripture. As part of a first qualitative analysis, Holbrook (2010) studied Koranic references in thirty Islamist propaganda documents from different time periods, including modern adaptations of medieval works (e.g. ibn Taymiyyah), Afghanistan invasion-era books (e.g. Abdullah Azzam) and post-9/11 media (i.e. As-Sahab by Al-Qaeda). The focus was on those ayat (Koranic verses) which said sources actually quoted that explicitly promote acts of violence and fighting. Holbrook’s (2010) study concludes that Islamist narratives advanced by al-Qaeda and older Salafi-jihadist sources are based on a greatly de-contextualized and politically tailored interpretation of the Koran, which paradoxically violates the strict Salafist requirement of respect for the sacred texts in their most literal form. As Holbrook’s findings (2010) were based on a limited sample and a mostly qualitative method focused on propaganda material from al-Qaeda, one of ISIS’s major opponents, one cannot assume that ISIS communiqués follow the same Koranic referencing practices.

Rather than examining those specific Koranic verses or chapters ISIS referred to, Wagemakers (2015) studied how the organisation claims legitimacy based on Islamic traditions such as the Caliph, the Caliphathe and specifically Bay’ah [the pledge of allegiance to a ruler or Caliph]. Wagemakers (2015) examined what the concept of Bay’ah to ‘Caliph’ Abu Bakr al-Baghdaoui is to ISIS ideologues and pro-ISIS scholars, as well as how other radical Salafi jihadist critics respond to that.

A recent report by the Tony Blair Foundation (El-Badawy et al., 2015) examined references to Islamic scripture as well as various moral and traditional concepts of the jihad ideology. El-Badawy et al. (2015) studied a much broader sample, including both Al-Qaeda and ISIS media sources. Here, a first attempt was made to quantify Koranic references. One finding was that Koranic citations outnumbered hadith (reports describing the words, actions, or habits of the Islamic prophet Muhammad) references or other citations of Islamic scholarship. Somewhat in line with the Holbrook’s findings (2010), the most prevalent surah (i.e. chapter) appeared to be al-Baqarah in 15.6% of the cases. Furthermore, jihadists seem to refer 10% of the time to surah Al ‘Imran, 7.2% to an-Nisa’, and 6.9% to al-Anfal. Remarkably, in contrast to Holbrook’s findings, surah at-Tawbah is only referred to 5.9% of the time.

This discrepancy could be due to the different sampling methods as well as a varying focus on either surah (i.e. chapter) or ayah (i.e. verse). Hence, our study on Koranic references will (1) examine both references at ayah and surah levels, and (2) concentrate on a single propaganda outlet by one Salafi-jihadist group only.

This brings us to this study’s objective: to examine in quantitative terms whether ISIS’s religious foundation is a ‘cut-and-paste Islam’, that is, whether it uses Islamic scriptures in an atomistic, truncated and tailored manner. Our main research question is twofold. Based on previous studies the dominant ideological and Koranic foundations of ISIS’s jihadist doctrine remain under-explored. RQ1 aspires to bridge this gap in the literature:

RQ1: What are the dominant Koranic references in ISIS’s jihadist doctrine disseminated online?

There is only a limited understanding of how ISIS exactly cuts, pastes and specifically merges parts of Koranic chapters to flesh out and support its Salafi-jihadist ideology. Therefore we looked at the way Koranic chapters are bundled together in ISIS propaganda:

RQ2: How are the different Koranic chapters related to one another, based on their co-occurrences in Dabiq?

2. Method

To determine whether ISIS’s ideological foundation can be said to be Islam ‘per se’ or just a cut-and-paste version of it, we explored the prevalence and extent of decontextualization of Koranic references in ISIS’s former flagship propaganda outlet ‘Dabiq’. Specifically, we concentrated on the Koranic references in fifteen issues of Dabiq. We studied (1) the frequencies of Koranic citations, i.e. surahs and ayat (respectively chapters and paragraphs/verses in the Koran), and (2) the extent to which the citations are related to one another, based on their co-appearance in Dabiq articles.

Focusing on ISIL and Dabiq is meaningful for two reasons. First, unlike other global jihadist groups, ISIS is known for its total adherence to, and uncompromising interpretation of the Salafi-jihadi ideology (Bunzel, 2015). An impressive and unprecedented online media and propaganda machine, it is also the most prevalent Salafi jihadist organization in mainstream media and on many (geo-)political agendas (Conway, 2017). In other words, investigating ISIS’s strict interpretation of that ideology might reveal new patterns and insights when it comes to the use of religious texts for terrorist purposes.

Second, at the time of writing the Dabiq series was made up of exactly fifteen issues. Every publication was officially and centrally distributed through al-Hayāt Media Centre, the leading media branch of ISIS’s central leadership (Winter, 2015) between July 2014 and July 2016. In September 2016 ISIS stopped publishing Dabiq, replacing it with a rebranded propaganda publication called Rumiyah (Wignell et al., 2017). This enabled us to analyze the entire Dabiq corpus. Furthermore, Dabiq remains one of the richest sources for ISIS’s body of thought and ideology, especially in its glory days (Gambhir, 2014; Ingram, 2016). All issues of the publication are available online through publicly accessible websites such as Jihadology.net (Zelin, 2016) and pietervanaostaeyen.com (Van Ostaeyen, 2017), both popular-science weblogs on jihadism. We focused on Koranic citations only because previous studies
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