

The Islamic State's use of muslim rhetoric for communication

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Abstract

The present essay concerns analysis of communication and propaganda strategies of ISIS organization that enable to expand influences of the organization in the Middle East and Africa and encourage different militants in the world to join the new caliphate. The research demonstrates that jihadist propaganda relies on particular stylistic devices based on concepts of the liturgical sermon (ar. *khutba*) and the Arabic rhetoric (ar. *balagha*). The analysis also shows that effective indoctrination campaign increases terrorist threats in the region and affects the worldwide stability.

Keywords: ISIS, Islam, jihadism, rhetoric, communication

Introduction

Growing threats and worldwide influences of the organization *Ad-Dawla al-Islamiyya fi al-Iraq wa ash-Sham* (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant – ISIS) rely on two major factors: failures of Al-Qaeda's activities and effective propaganda and communication strategy headed by ISIS's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

After the death of Osama bin Laden and other Al-Qaida's leaders like Anwar Awlaki or Abu Yahia al-Libi the new commander Ayman al-Zawahiri tried to consolidate all insurgents and sympathized with the Arab Spring that defined new challenges for the jihadist movement. However, failures of the transition process in post-revolutionary countries and overthrow of Islamist representatives by secular and military forces deepened the crisis among jihadists who expected other results and goals.

ISIS responded to insurgents' hopes and offered new concept of jihad and implementation of extremist ideas as well as establishment of the historic caliphate. Successful military combats, support of Sunni minorities as well as terror campaign and brutal executions as well as control of large parts of Syria and Iraq reinforced the position of ISIS and defined new forms of jihad in the Middle East.

Moreover, political activities of other jihadist groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda have decreased because Al-Zawahiri's militants could not boast of similar actions. The spokesman of ISIS Abu Mohammad al-Adnani issued the manifesto *Ma kana hada manhajuna wa lan yakuna* (It was not our way and it won't be), which criticizes Al-Qaida Central and defines final separation between old jihadists and ISIS fighters (Nasr 2014). Al-Adnani states that the leader betrayed insurgents, who fight every day in battlefields of Iraq or Syria. Furthermore, Al-Zawahiri distorted basic ideas of jihad, which gathered different militants in the world. The message also glorifies jihad heroes like Osama bin Laden or Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and condemns the current leader of cooperation with infidels and secularists. Al-Adnani also declares that Al-Zawahiri resigned from jihad and implementation of sharia law. He tries to involve the organization in current political and social processes in the Arab and Muslim world by creation of wide *Umma*

based on different religious and social trends, including secular forces. ISIS encourages its supporters to continue the fight and return to the roots of jihad.

Furthermore, the success of Al-Baghdadi's policy was confronted with appropriate communication and propaganda methods that reinforced ideological and operational capacities of the organization and weakened the rival jihadist groups. The communication strategy reflects application of liturgical sermons (ar. *khutba*) and Arabic rhetoric (ar. *balagha*) in media presentations and ideological manifestos.

Discussion

1. Traditional Muslim rhetoric as communication

Khutba is one of the oldest narrative and oratory forms in the Arab and Muslim world. It is presented in mosques during Friday's prayer or on special occasions of feasts and holidays. Furthermore, the basic patterns of the sermon are a short prayer, some verses of the Quran or religious invocations. Afterwards, the orator called *khatib* goes to the a podium (ar. *minbar*) to welcome the congregation. (Horannisian & Sabagh, 1999). His oration composed of two fragments. The first usually refers to religious invocations and religious citations such as *bismi-Allahi ar-rahmani ar-rahim* (In the name of God the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful), *as-salatu wa as-salamu ala an-nabiyyi* (Prayer and peace be upon the Prophet), also "Peace be upon those who follow the right way," or "I seek protection in Allah from the accursed Satan." The first passage also includes the introduction of the main subjects elaborated in the speech. The religious invocations are always followed by the expression: *wa ba'd* (and then; afterwards), which indicates separation between passages in the speech. The second part is delivered after a short break and it usually concerns religious, moral and social questions based on four main sources such as the Quran, hadiths (stories, statements and report attributed to the Prophet Mohammad) as well as fragments of classic poetry or citations of noble personalities from the history of Muslim empires (Mahdi 2008; Gafney, 1994).

The concept of *khutba* also regards some rhetorical features. Muslim scholars underline that *balagha* is very important in the sermon but they usually focus on general ideas concerning sophisticated style and precise words without further studies on the subject. However, Jones (2012) suggests that derivative noun *khutaba* identifies public address delivered in pure classic Arabic that involves advanced stylistic and linguistic techniques included in *balagha*. In fact, *khutab* also served as an important linguistic field in the studies of classic philologists such as Al-Jahiz (d. 869), Abd al-Qahir al-Jurjani (d. 1078), As-Sakkaki (d. 1229) or Ibn al-Athir (d. 1239). The particular rhetorical concepts were based on examples of sermons presented by dignified religious personalities in Arab-Muslim Empire. (Hinkel, 2002).

The Arabic rhetoric includes three main categories such as *ilm al-ma'ani* (study of meaning- semantics), *bayan* (beautiful lucid expression) and *badi* (good style, ornamental expressions). The first category *ilm al-ma'ani* plays an important role in sermons because it concerns different forms of narration and compositions. For instance, *ijaz* (concision) reflects briefness and condensation of words and sentences in order to express and precise the main ideas presented in orations. *Ittab* is an opposite term regarding application of additional descriptions and evidences of the main subject. *Ilm al-ma'ani* also includes *khavar* (informative and affirmative utterances) and *insha* (performative emotional utterances) based on imperative, prohibition or interrogative and vocative sentences. *Al-Ma'ani* also focuses on clear, lucid words and sentences, which express different semantic features of particular meanings. The use of tropes (metaphor, repetition, antithese), as in the Aristotelian tradition is pervasive, but one feature stands out: *iqtibas*, which concerns appeal to Quranic verses and application of religious style in the discourse different in order to diversify the style and authenticate message of the speech (Abdul-Raof, 2006).

It should be pointed out that religious discourse was often politicized in the history of Muslim empires although advices of Muslim scholars who reminded that orations should focus on theological and social messages regarding moral values such as piety, dignity, justice or good behavior. Ethical principals should be confronted with opposite meanings that prevent believers of sinful life and bad behavior. Theologians also stated that sermons should refer to religious obligations, ceremonies, commemorations and holidays that need deep explanations and active teaching campaign (Rashdi, 2014; Jones, 2012). Unfortunately, different religious leaders ignored the principals and combined them with political slogans, demands and goals. They usually applied opposite images regarding glorification of particular organizations or parties and damnation of political opponents (Lewis, 1988). The same strategy is implemented by modern Islamist movements, including jihadist groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIS. They often use the structure of *khutba* or *balagha* and present political messages in the second part of the speech. However, the following examples show that Al-Baghdadi's orations have wider and stronger influences on the present jihadist scene. Besides, the organization disposes of various communication channels such as controlled mosques, regular sermons, journals, Internet websites, video services or official forums and social media like Facebook or Twitter.

2. The Islamic State's use of traditional muslim rhetoric

Domination of ISIS in the region was finally determined after the announcement of the caliphate by Al-Baghdadi, who delivered a symbolic sermon in the main mosque in Mosul, Iraq during the Ramadan 2014. Al-Baghdadi respects all conventions and etiquettes regarding non-verbal and narration concepts of *khutba*. Contrary to previous jihadist leaders, the sermon is presented in the mosque in liturgical podium above the auditorium. The *khatib* wears sacral clothes and stands up at the first step of speech and then sits down during other parts of the discourse. He also avoids loud voices, chaotic gestures or reactions and he uses sometimes index fingers to precise or underlines some questions. Moreover, the audience is composed of wide audience living in the region (Jones, 2012).

Apart from personal skills, the orator follows strict narration and stylistic devices of *khutba* and *balagha*. He starts his speech with religious invocations and citations and after a short break he refers to main subjects. Al-Baghdadi preserves liturgical style of the sermon and reigns from direct, impudent political slogans and statements. For example, he focuses on Ramadan ceremonies and spiritual values of the holy month, which absolves from all sins and rehabilitates human souls. His opinions are followed by application of the rhetorical *iqtibas* based on appropriate argumentations from the Quran or hadiths. Furthermore, Ramadan is confronted with specific concept of jihad described by Al-Baghdadi as scarified efforts facilitating defeat of enemies and implementation of Islam values. ISIS leader compares jihad to the quranic vision of the paradise that includes cool rivers, flower gardens or orchards. The rhetorical comparison *tashbih* is combined with *ma'ani* including meanings popularized in the Muslim philosophy and regular debate. It concerns positive epithets like *izz* (honor), *karama* (dignity) or *salwan* (solace) attributed to jihad activities. Al-Baghdadi also refers to the current issues regarding the caliphate, which is the result of Allah's will and plans. He applies once again *iqtibas* and appeals to the *aya* (fragment) 33 from surat An-Nur in the Quran: "Allah has promised those who have believed among you and done righteous deeds that He will surely grant them succession [to authority] upon the earth just as He granted it to those before them (...)" (As-Sadi, 2012; Ali, 2007).

The ISIS leader states that he listens and obeys Allah's orders. He expects the same allegiance from his followers. Al-Baghdadi also stresses: "The Book (The Quran) calms down and the sword conquers. Your mujahideen brothers have been rewarded the victory and the conquest. After long years of jihad and patience Allah The Almighty enabled to establish a caliphate and appoint its Imam." (Mortada, 2014).

The metaphorical sense of the phrase: „The Book (The Quran) calms down and the sword conquers” describes the policy of the caliphate that requires peaceful and preaching activities based on the Quran as well as violent fights with opponents relying on the symbolic sword.

The fragment also contains of *ma’ani* reflecting particular words: *manna* (to reward), *nasr* (victory), *fath* (conquest) or *sabr* (patience). They conserve quranic and archaic character and can be replaced by modern, more popular equivalents. However, Al-Baghdadi expresses theological and noble style of the speech that enable to emphasis the contemporary message concerning ISIS philosophy.

The narration of the speech and the rhetorical devices justify ISIS policy in the region, authorize and glorify the new Islamic state and they emerge its influences and power in the region. The liturgical style also enables to cover political messages, violent implementation of Sharia laws or terrorist campaign conducted in controlled regions.

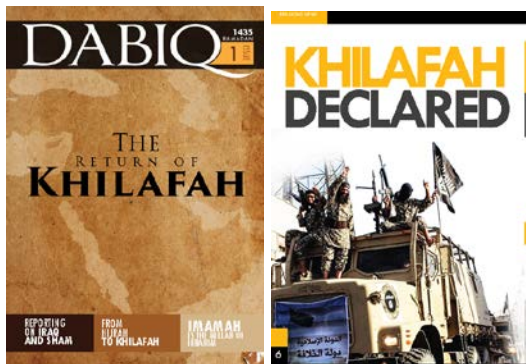
The high quality of Al-Baghdadi’s discourse is evident in confrontation with other jihadist movements like Boko Haram, which deformed regulations of the liturgical discourse.

The organization usually emphasizes violent gestures and brutal behaviors of insurgents. The manifestos include casual speeches in local dialects as well as English sentences underlining political and social questions condemning Western influences in the region. The declarations are also delivered in ironic and chaotic style, sometimes making fun of the West and local authorities. For example, Abubakar Shekau refers to the kidnapping of Nigerian schoolgirls and he states with laughing voice that he will sell them in local market. (Thorin, 2014: 28-29).

Al-Baghdadi’s followers also started massive media campaign that targets a young, Western audience and encourages foreign volunteers to join the Islamic State in the Middle East or to carry out terrorist attacks in their own countries.

ISIS publishes an English version of magazine called *Dabiq*¹. The name refers to the historic Battle of Marj Dabiq near Aleppo in Syria. In 1516 the Ottoman army conquered most of the Middle East, which encompassed the entire region of Syria and built the new Empire.

Dabiq became an important communication and motivational platform for Islamist extremists around the world. Instead of long theological and political discussions, the magazine contains short messages based on suggestive graphics and provocative pictures similar to the tabloid press or comics.



Cover and one of the pages from *Dabiq* magazine presenting main headlines elaborated in the publication, including policy and strategy of the new caliphate.

The magazine usually includes photos illustrating ISIS successful offensives and campaigns in Syria and Iraq, images of wounded Iraqi soldiers among fires and explosions as well as

victorious parades of militants in controlled cities or harvest campaign and distribution of food and water. Other pictures show brutal executions of Shia prisoners, representatives of Christian and Yazidi communities or some colorful and sophisticated graphics showing destroyed shrines. The pictures are followed by symbolic sentences such as: *Khalifa declared, A new era has arrived or: It's either the Islamic state of the flood*. ISIS also applies some euphemistic words and sentences already known in radical Islamist propaganda. For example, different opponents are usually called *salibiyyun* (crusaders), *taghut* (a devil, a Satan) or *kuffar* (sinners) and *murtaddun* (apostates). The style of the magazine was adopted by Western militants sympathizing with the Islamic State. They created various forums and profiles in social medias and started to present sophisticated photos and graphics illustrating their support to Al-Baghdadi.

In fact, ISIS massive campaign decreased propaganda capacities of rival jihadist groups like An-Nusra Front. The indoctrination is usually limited to traditional jihadist websites such as *Shabakat al-Jihad al-Alam* (Worldwide Jihad Network- www.shabakataljihad.com) or *Shabakat Ansar al-Mujahidin* (Mujahideen Followers Network- www.as-ansar.com). However, the websites are often blocked or suspended and they do not target wide audience like You-tube channels, English publications or Twitter and Facebook profiles coordinated by ISIS militants.

Conclusion

The research demonstrates that communication and propaganda techniques of ISIS rely on sermon's structure and some rhetorical devices. They justify ISIS policy in the region, glorify the new Islamic state and emerge its influences and power in the region.

However, the propaganda methods also regard two channels of communication: traditional, liturgical speeches addressed to the local audience as well as modern forms of communication such as Internet forums or sophisticated journals that affect Western audience attracted by emotional photos, graphics and slogans.

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Note

The PDF version of the *Dabiq* magazine is available in some jihadist websites and forums that indicate achieve materials including different manifestos, journals and books.

See: https://ia802500.us.archive.org/24/items/dbq01_desktop_en/dbq01_desktop_en.pdf (accessed 16.07.2014).