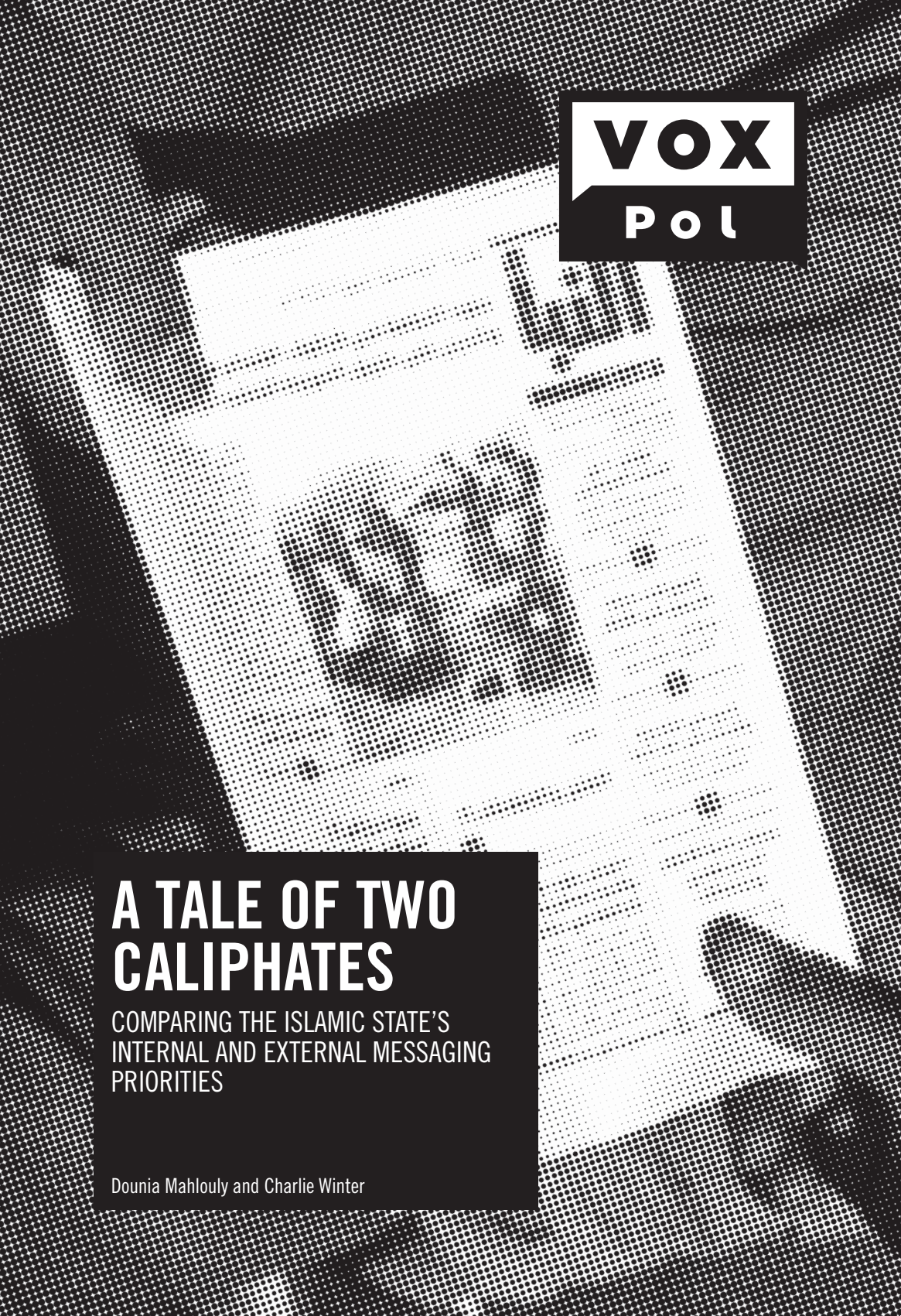

# A TALE OF TWO CALIPHATES

## COMPARING THE ISLAMIC STATE'S INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL MESSAGING PRIORITIES

Dounia Mahlouly and Charlie Winter

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## About the authors

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## OVERVIEW

In recent years, the media department of the self-proclaimed Islamic State has proven itself to be highly adept at strategic communication. While much research has gone into the group's digital and online capabilities, there remains a significant gap in the knowledge regarding its in-country propaganda operations and objectives.

In recognition of this, the following research paper approaches the issue from a different angle, attempting to better understand how and why the group communicates its brand through the lens of two publications – *al-Naba'*, its Arabic-language newspaper, which appears to be designed primarily for offline dissemination in the caliphate itself, and *Rumiyah*, its foreign-language electronic magazine, which has only ever appeared online. Using content analysis to identify and compare each publication's internal (local) and external (global) media priorities over the four-month period between September and December 2016, we develop an empirical evaluation of the group's recent forays into targeted outreach.

## KEY FINDINGS

The Islamic State's publication priorities at the end of 2016 were largely bifurcated—its propagandists seemed to want different responses from different audiences, and *Rumiyah* and *al-Naba'* were particularly demonstrative of this.

- Structurally, the publications bore only partial resemblance to each other, with *Rumiyah* privileging lengthier, more discursive ideological content and *al-Naba'* primarily tending to preference briefer tactical news items.
- The publications were also distinct thematically: *Rumiyah*'s content was significantly more abstract – that is, weighted towards

complex political, social and theological issues – than that of *al-Naba'*, which shed much more light on present-day military matters than anything else.

- *Al-Naba"*s conception of *jihad* was distinctly more pragmatic than that of *Rumiyah* – it focused on real-world concerns rather than ideology, something that could point towards the differing motivations of the Islamic State's in- and ex-theatre supporters.
- There were significant geographic discrepancies between the two publications, with *Rumiyah* spending more time discussing events and operations external to Syria and Iraq than *al-Naba'*. This was most apparent in the context of the battle for Mosul, which was entirely absent from the pages of *Rumiyah*, and regularly front-page news in *al-Naba'*.
- It appears that each publication was carefully tailored to suit its primary consumer audience – in *Rumiyah*'s case, this was the Islamic State's diffuse archipelago of global supporters, and in the context of *al-Naba'*, this was, and continues to be, its in-country rank-and-file.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

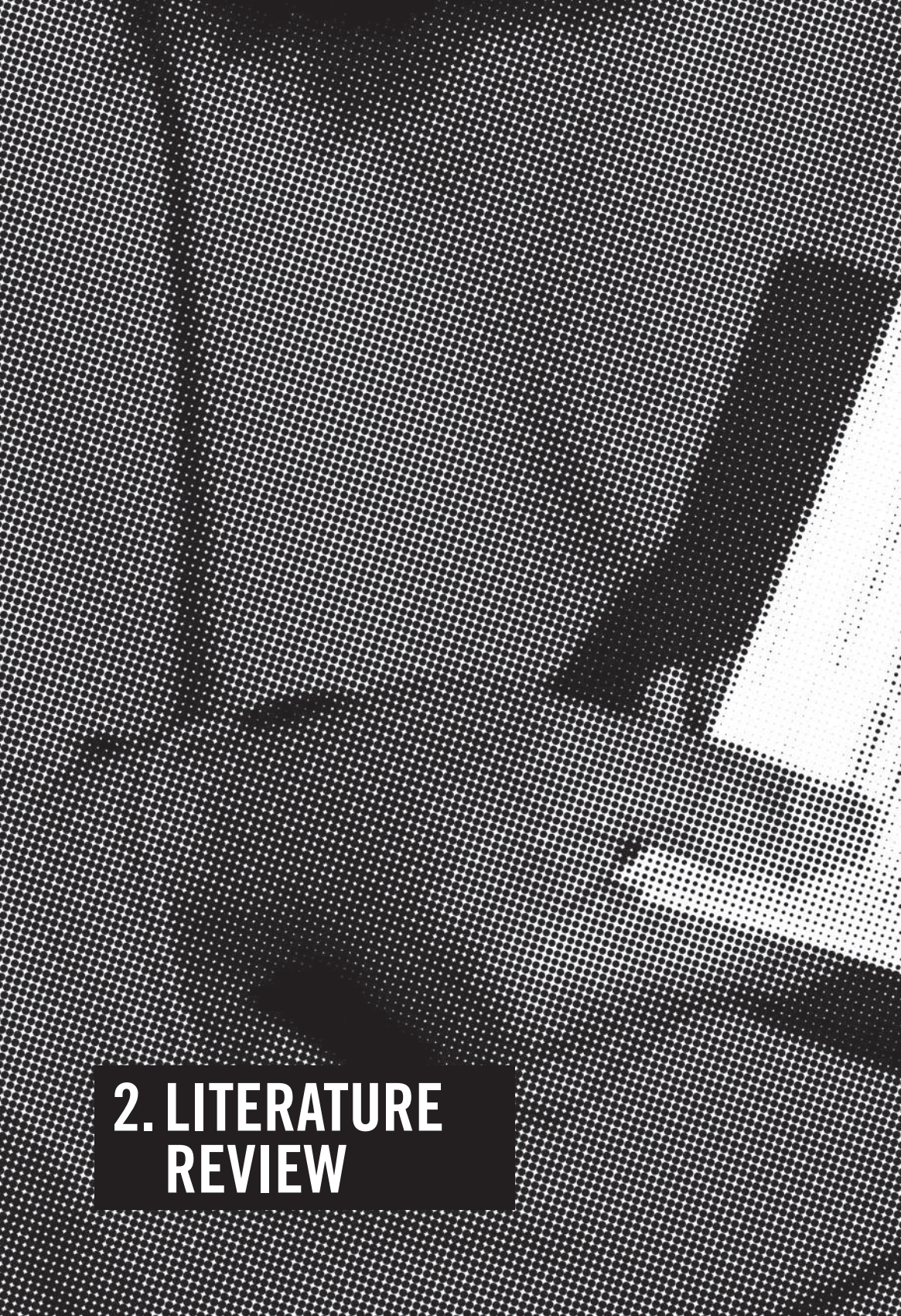
In recent years, the media department of the self-proclaimed Islamic State has proven itself to be highly adept at target audience segmentation. Since 2013, its strategists have expertly manipulated their global consumers, steering public opinion and prompting the emergence of misconceptions that continue to hobble counter-extremism policymaking today. For example, while conventional wisdom often holds that Islamic State media revolves around brutality, and brutality alone, the violent films for which it is famous form just a tiny part of its overall propaganda output (Zelin 2015; Winter 2015; Milton 2016). This is far from the only mistake made about its approach to media operations; accompanying it is the unfounded assumption that its propaganda is uniquely geared towards radicalising and recruiting would-be foreign fighters and lone-actor terrorists from *outside* Syria and Iraq (Frampton et al. 2017; Macnair and Frank 2017). In reality, between 2014 and 2017, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's propagandists were just as concerned with attaining and retaining the acquiescence of the people over whom they presided as they were about recruiting from abroad. To this end, they used in-theatre information operations to substitute the dominant news agenda for their own and to paint a picture of a glorious – and pious – utopia.

While it is possible to derive a very rough estimate of the caliphate's local public diplomacy through secondhand reporting, the intricacies of these operations remain elusive. Moreover, the group's Internet propaganda corpus, while abundant, cannot be used as a proxy for the totality of its local communications operations because it is not representative of the whole: traditional media products constitute but one portion of the organisation's overall propaganda arsenal. Besides conventional devices like video releases, audio bulletins, and written materials, it has also relied on performative propaganda – that is, things like public spectacles, interactions with roaming media officials, and sermons

in mosques – for offline influence operations in Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere, and there is no way to evaluate that through the use of open sources alone.

Recognising this, we approach the problem from a different angle, attempting to better understand how and why the Islamic State communicates in-theatre through the lens of two of its most important publications – *al-Naba'*, its Arabic-language newspaper, which appears to be designed primarily for offline dissemination in the caliphate itself, and *Rumiyah*, its foreign-language electronic magazine, which has only ever appeared online. Using content analysis to identify and compare each publication's internal (local) and external (global) media priorities over the four-month period between September and December 2016, we develop an empirical evaluation of how the group engages in target audience differentiation. Our analysis shows that, for all its attempts to appear monolithic, the operational essence of the caliphate varied according to location during the period in question: inside Iraq and Syria, it prioritised tactical, pragmatic, and integration-focused appeals over anything else, whereas, outside its 'borders', it was more conventionally terroristic in its outlook and operations, seeking instead to agitate, incite and instruct.

The report begins with a brief overview of the academic literature on strategic communication and the Islamic State, in which we highlight the relative absence of scholarship exploring the offline dimension of its media operations. After that, we set out our data collection and coding methodology before presenting the findings of our analysis, which compares the two datasets along three axes: structure, theme, and geography. We conclude by discussing our findings and looking at the implications of this study for practitioners and researchers alike.



# 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Since 2014, the Islamic State has faced unprecedented scrutiny from scholars, analysts, and journalists. Their accounts have focused on four areas – ideology, military tactics, external terrorism, and propaganda operations – the last of which we discuss in this brief review. Broadly speaking, the propaganda-focused literature is split between i) studies that examine online sympathiser communities and social networks; ii) archival studies that use thematic analysis to dissect the Islamic State's meta-narrative; and iii) studies that use content analysis to decipher specific propaganda genres, motifs, and media products.

In the context of the first cluster, which is focused on mapping social networks and dynamics, work by Carter et al. (2014), Klausen (2015), Berger and Morgan (2015) and Conway et al. (2017) has been particularly influential. Based on their studies, consensus has emerged that the Islamic State's online ecosystem is nebulous and ever-reconfiguring, and that, crucially, only a tiny minority of its Internet cheerleaders are likely to engage in terrorism-related activities. Further informed by contributions from Amarasingam (2015) and Stalinsky and Sosnow (2017), it has been made clear that the online Islamic State community is at once hierarchical and diffuse, and largely reliant on a strong sense of communal identity. While it is not 'responsible' for this dynamic, the Islamic State's official propaganda appears to serve as an ideological glue keeping this fluid network of networks together.

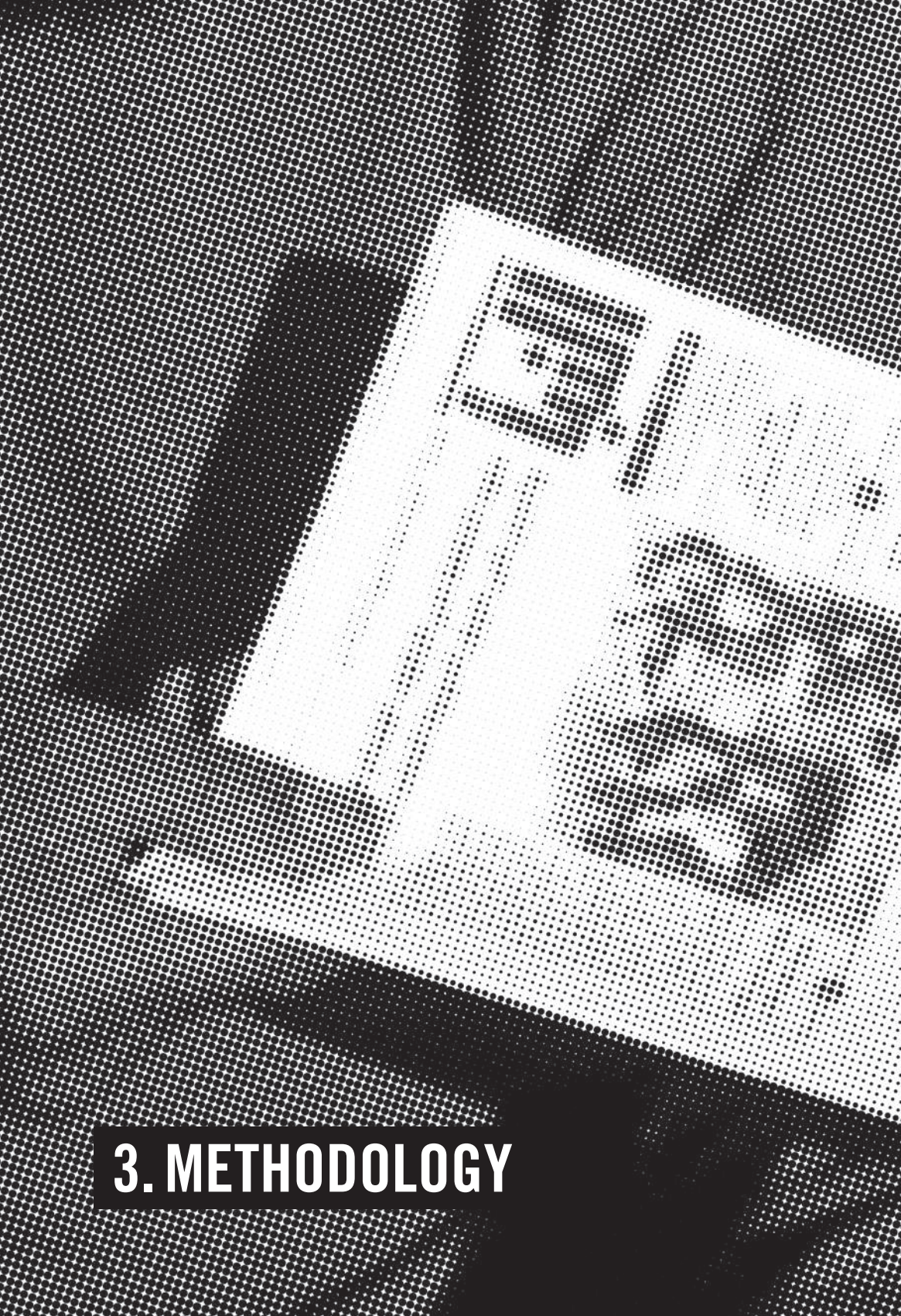
The second cluster – thematic explorations of the Islamic State narrative – is characterised by a handful of archive-based analyses. Zelin (2015) was the first to empirically evaluate the group's jihadist promise. Using a one-week snapshot of its media output collected from Twitter, he sets out the parameters of its appeal, demonstrating that its brand was not as monochromatic as much of the media coverage at the time of his data collection suggested. His exploration was added to by Winter (2015), who, in his analysis of the Islamic State media products gathered in the summer of 2015, comes to a comparable set of conclusions. Similarly, Milton (2016), who examines official visual media products released over the twenty months between January 2015 and August 2016, finds that the caliphate's

strategic narrative has long comprised more than war and brutality. He also notes that its communication operations contracted between 2014 and 2016, a finding that was corroborated by Conway et al. (2017) and Winter (2018), not to mention BBC Monitoring (2017) and the Global Coalition (2017).

The third cluster, which comprises multimodal explorations of individual media genres and products, builds on these broader works. Chouliaraki and Kissas (2018) take an aesthetic approach to categorising the appearance of violence in the Islamic State video propaganda, whereas Macnair and Frank (2017) use thematic analysis to decipher cultural meaning in AlHayat Media Center films. In each case, they are struck by the influence of Western motifs, both cultural and stylistic, a remark also made by Winkler et al. in their analysis of *Dabiq* – the organisation's English-language magazine – which is, in their view, a 'high-profile example of the medium of terrorism' (Winkler et al. 2016). For his part, Ingram (2016; 2017; 2018) has provided a number of excellent contributions to this part of the literature, among them a close content analysis of *Dabiq*, a comparative study between *Dabiq* and al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula's *Inspire* magazine, and an evaluation of *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*'s evolution between 2014 and 2017. Wignell et al. (2017) and Wignell, Tan and O'Halloran (2017) also adopt a longitudinal approach, examining aesthetic and thematic shifts in the Islamic State's English-language literary output since 2014. Focusing instead on French-language propaganda, Benraad (2017) and Roy (2017) use a close reading of the French-language magazine *Dar al-Islam* to decrypt how it constructs appeal among Muslims, again focusing on Western countries. Benraad argues that, on balance, its media output reflects European society more than anything else, framing Islam as a reaction to modernity. For his part, Roy also notes that its discourse is largely calibrated towards Westerners; he contends that Islamic religiosity is merely 'incantatory' to the organisation – that is, it is window dressing for a movement built on nihilist radicalism (Roy 2017, p. 44).

To sum up, while explorations of how the Islamic State positions itself globally abound, the local, in-theatre level is largely excluded in the academic literature. We therefore have little awareness of how

the caliphate idea has resonated inside Syria and Iraq. Only Stalinsky (2015) and Winter (2018), with their works on the Islamic State's domestic media dissemination infrastructure, and Winkler et al. (2016), with her brief visual analysis of internal and external infographics, investigate this aspect of the equation. Building on their efforts, this report seeks to enhance our understanding of the Islamic State's strategic communication operations, positing that the group communicates different things to different people depending on whether they are friends or enemies, and whether they are inside or outside its claimed territories.



# 3. METHODOLOGY

Our research design was developed on the basis that the Islamic State is a hybrid organisation which, as a result of situational exigency, 'must accomplish multiple objectives simultaneously' (Winkler et al. 2016, p.15). Hence, it is safe to assume that 'the group's producers purposefully craft their messages to reach intended target audiences' and that most, if not all, of its propaganda products have (at least) primary, secondary, and tertiary consumers (Winkler et al. 2016, p.15). Nowhere is this dynamic more evident than in the context of its written materials – specifically, its magazine *Rumiyah* and its newspaper *al-Naba'* – the first of which, we contend, is principally geared towards a territorially external audience, and the second of which is primarily calibrated at the local level. Before describing the methodology we used to decipher the priorities of each publication, it is first necessary to discuss their origins and positioning.

## 3.1 *RUMIYAH*

*Rumiyah* is the Islamic State's electronic magazine. In total, thirteen issues of it were released online between September 2016 and September 2017, when it went out of regular circulation. Its name, which refers to the city of Rome, echoes a speech made by a former leader of the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, in which he states that 'we [ISI] will not rest from our *jihad* except beneath the olive trees of *Rumiyah*', an eschatological reference intended to demarcate his group's strategic ambitions.[1] According to an article published in both *Rumiyah* and *al-Naba'* in early 2017, the magazine was the joint brainchild of United States-born propagandist Ahmad Abousamra, and Abu Muhammad al-Furqan, the late-Islamic State information minister.[2] Its goal was 'to expand the Islamic State's reach by releasing

1 This quotation appears on the first or second page of each issue of *Rumiyah*.

2 Islamic State, 2017. 'Among the believers are men: Shaykh Abu Sulayman ash-Shami'. *Rumiyah 8*, AlHayat Media Center, April, pp. 40–45; Islamic State, 2017. 'Abu Sulayman ash-Shami (may God rest his soul): between a desire for martyrdom and the obliteration of idols'. *Naba' 75*, Central Media Diwan, April, pp. 12–13.

one magazine in several languages, with each language's version being periodically released at the same time'.[3] While its structure and intent may have been carefully devised, the intricacies of its appearance and branding were likely to be a partial response to the organisation's shifting territorial circumstances (Wignell et al. 2017). When it was first published in September 2016, the group was on the cusp of defeat to Turkey-backed rebels in the Syrian town of Dabiq, the former namesake of its English-language magazine. *Rumiyah*'s appearance on the scene thus came as an uncannily lucky reprieve for the group's propagandists – had they left *Dabiq* magazine as it was, they would have risked continually reminding their various readerships of the Islamic State's failed apocalyptic promise.

At its peak, *Rumiyah* was simultaneously published on a monthly basis in eleven languages – English, French, German, Russian, Turkish, Urdu, Uyghur, Pashtu, Indonesian, Kurdish, and Bosnian. It varied in length, but was usually between thirty-five and fifty pages long, and its content – which was, barring a few notable differences, consistent across each language's edition – was highly varied, visually dynamic, and editorially sophisticated (Wignell et al. 2017). By the autumn of 2017, it had become apparent that those in charge of producing it were struggling – its quality had diminished linguistically, thematically, and visually. No new issues have been released since the autumn of 2017. Crucially, *Rumiyah* only ever appears to have been disseminated online: no evidence has emerged to suggest that it was ever printed or disseminated internally by the Islamic State, and there is usually ample documentation of this kind of activity (Winter 2018).

## 3.2 *AL-NABA'*

*Al-Naba'* is the Islamic State's official newspaper. While it is also published online, its primary audience, at least between 2015 and 2018, appears to have been civilians and combatants living inside the group's territories in Syria and Iraq. As attested to by more than one

3 Islamic State, 2017, 'Among the believers are men', p. 45.

hundred official propaganda photographs released since 2015 documenting its in-theatre distribution, it is regularly disseminated offline in print, sometimes prior to being published online.

**The Islamic State, 'Distributing pamphlets and *al-Naba'* newspaper in the village of al-Fadiliyyah', Ninawa Province Media Office, 7 February 2016.**

**The Islamic State, 'Distributing the weekly *al-Naba'* newspaper in the city of Tal'afar', Jazirah Province Media Office, 14 March 2017.**

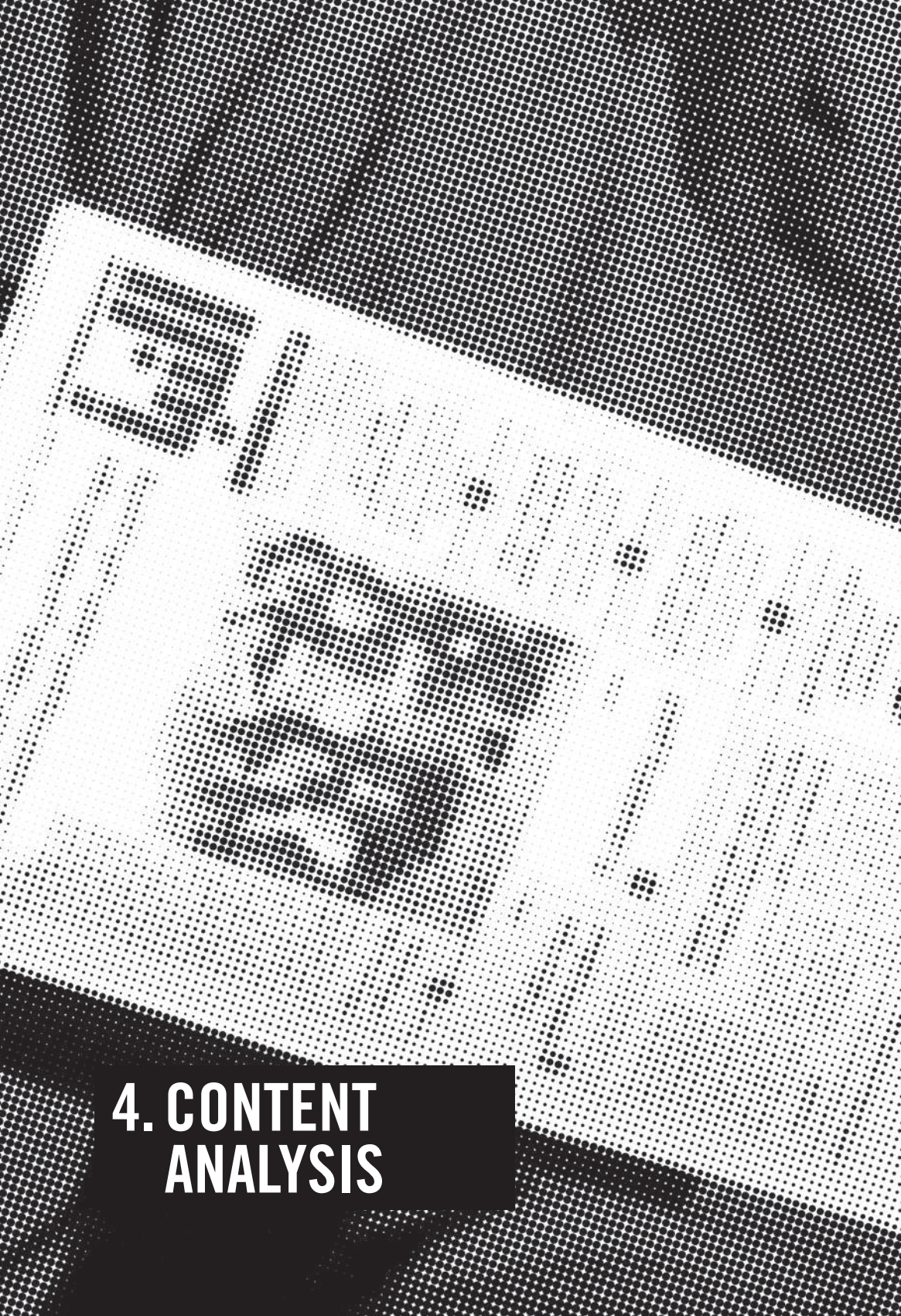
**The Islamic State, 'Aspect of the distribution of *al-Naba'* newspaper in the province', Furat Province Media Office, 1 March 2018.**

Having entered into regular circulation in its current manifestation in 2015 – offline from July (the first few issues were not numbered) and online since December – *al-Naba'* was, by the second week of June 2018, on its 135th edition. Apart from just three occasions, it has emerged like clockwork every week for more than two-and-a-half years. *Al-Naba"*s structure and form are meticulously consistent: for the most part written in standardised media Arabic, it always features a combination of short and long articles with two full-page infographics. Up until the 104th edition, it was sixteen pages long; subsequently, though, it was shortened to twelve pages.

*Al-Naba'* has existed in various forms since 2010, when it was first introduced by ISI, the Islamic State's predecessor.[4] Initially, it §was merely a loose collection of statements and news items published on an irregular basis. In 2011, though, it began to be circulated on a monthly basis. The following year, it was released as a 410-page report containing information on just over 4,500 ISI military operations. By 2013, after ISI had rebranded as the Islamic State in Iraq and ash-Sham (ISIS), its remit was expanded to include operational information on Syria as well as Iraq, and, in 2014, it began to emerge

4 Islamic State, 2015. '*Naba'*: the most important periods in the story of its development'. *Naba' 1*, Central Media Diwan, October, p. 2.

on a fortnightly basis. It was not until 2015 that it appeared in its current newspaper format, containing photographs, announcements, promotions, military updates, and political essays. Today, it has both offline and online audiences (Winter 2018). However, given its history and evolution, which predominantly sees it as a paper publication physically disseminated in-theatre, there can be little doubt that its primary readership is the internal, local one. This makes *al-Naba'* one of very few publicly available sources providing researchers with insight into the Islamic State's offline messaging strategy.



# 4. CONTENT ANALYSIS

To compare the two publications, we limited our analysis to the four-month period between September and December 2016. During this time, we downloaded all four issues of *Rumiyah* in all its languages and all sixteen editions of *al-Naba'* on the day of or day after their release. This particular timeframe was chosen because it allowed us to examine and compare the publications at a time of profound organisational change for the group. As well as the impending loss of the town of Dabiq at the time, it had just lost two of its most senior media strategists – the official spokesman, Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani, and the aforementioned information minister, al-Furqan. Moreover, two weeks after the second issue of *Rumiyah* came out, the offensive to recapture the city of Mosul was initiated by the Iraqi government and its allies. By focusing our efforts on these four months, we were thus able to empirically evaluate the theory that the loss of al-'Adnani and al-Furqan, the fall of Dabiq, and the onset of the battle for Mosul were a turning point in the Islamic State's strategic communication priorities (Gambhir 2016; Kadercan 2017; Lister 2017). Confining our study to these four months also meant that we could study how each publication reported on the same 'big' stories.

A comparison of the English-, French-, German- and Russian-language editions of *Rumiyah* revealed some discrepancies in content and structure. For example, some editions were occasionally found to contain content that was 'exclusive' to their specific linguistic audience. For the purpose of this project, though, we decided to refer only to the English-language version of the magazine. An in-depth analysis of it and the other-language editions will be covered in a future publication as a follow-up to this study.

Having compiled the two sets of publications, we needed to break them up into their smallest units of analysis. Rather than comparing them on a word-for-word basis, we opted to examine them based on distinct editorial 'events' – that is, individual articles, reports, interviews, and infographics. In total, there were seventy-three separate editorial events in the *Rumiyah* corpus (an average of eighteen in each edition) and 463 in *al-Naba'* (an average of twenty-nine in each issue). Images were not regarded as unique editorial events because, in almost all cases, they were featured as supporting evidence rather

than as singular media events. While it would be possible – desirable, even – to use multimodal visual analysis to unlock their implicit meanings, as Winkler et al. (2016) did in the context of *Dabiq*, doing so is beyond the scope of this particular project.

Each editorial event was coded according to its structural, thematic and geographic characteristics. The structural analysis was straightforward: items were classed according to form. In determining the thematic priorities of each event, we were guided by a close reading of the content and headline in question. The geographic analysis required examining each event with a view to tagging it with a code denoting the primary location to which it referred. If this was not possible, events were assigned the code 'Central'. We examined each event in isolation and implemented inter-coder reliability checks throughout the analysis: besides the authors of this paper, two other Arabic-speakers familiar with the jihadist lexicon were brought on to check both the coding schemata and its application. In all but sixteen cases, the two corpuses were coded consistently. The remaining sixteen were reconciled through discussion.

# 5. FINDINGS

As mentioned, our analysis operates along three axes: first, we examine the editorial structure of each publication; second, we explore their thematic priorities; and third, we investigate the geographic distribution of their content.

## 5.1 STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS

The content of both *Rumiyah* and *al-Naba'* ranged from short reports on military affairs to long accounts of early Islam and detailed essays about the role of women in 'Islamic' society. Much of the time, longer-form content appeared in translation in both *Rumiyah* and *al-Naba'*. After breaking each corpus down into editorial events, five distinct content types were immediately discernible – in alphabetical order:

1. **Essays:** Articles ranging from one to five pages in length that dealt with anything from military affairs and ideological matters to theological issues and eulogies of Islamic State 'heroes'. Essays appeared throughout Rumiyah, whereas in al-Naba', they were usually found on the third, ninth, fourteenth, and fifteenth pages.

2. **Infographics**: Colourful visualisations of operational data, religious advice, and logistical instructions. To borrow Adelman's (2018) words, they 'make voluminous data about complex social, cultural, and political phenomena accessible by condensing it and organising it into a comprehensible and digestible visual narrative'. Full-page infographics appeared at random in *Rumiyah*, whereas they were always featured on the second and last pages of *al-Naba'*.

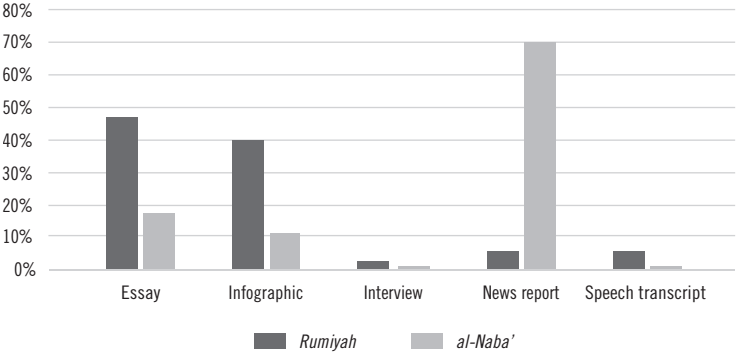
3. **Interviews**: Transcripts of conversations with officials from the Islamic State. While they were rare in both publications, interviews were particularly rich content, and focused on anything from military matters (specifically, in this case, the defence of Mosul) to religious governance (like, for example, religious policing in Sinai Province).

4. **News reports**: Short, current affairs briefs referring to specific events or developments either inside or outside the Islamic State. They were published individually in *al-Naba'* on a tactical basis, and as collections in *Rumiyah* on a more strategic basis. They pertained, almost uniquely, to military matters.

5. **Speech transcripts**: Statements from past and present Islamic State leaders. They appeared irregularly in each publication, either on an *ad hoc* basis after an official statement had been published or in order to delineate a desired response to a particular strategic challenge.

The *Rumiyah* corpus mainly comprised essays (47%) and infographics (40%). The remainder was made up of collections of news reports (5%), speech transcripts (5%), and interviews (3%). Its content was less factual than it was discussion-, argument- and opinion-based, a quality to which its glossy visual style corresponded. Judging by its form, *Rumiyah* appears to have be structured according to Western magazine editorial customs.

**Figure 1. Content type**




*Al-Naba'*, on the other hand, appears to have been structured to resemble a traditional Arabic-language newspaper. It primarily consisted of news reports (70%), with the remainder being made up of essays (17%), infographics (11%), interviews (1%), and speech

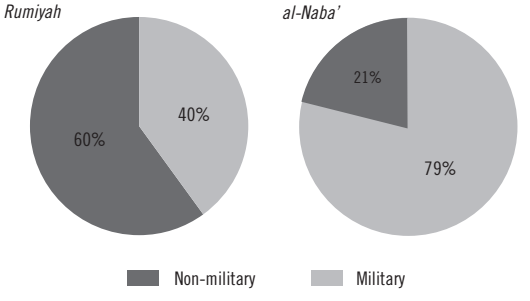
transcripts (1%). It contained relatively few images compared to *Rumiyah* and had, in general, a less sophisticated visual grammar.

Based on their respective structures, it is possible to infer a number of things about what *Rumiyah* and *al-Naba'* are intended to do. *Rumiyah*, which is characterised by lengthier, discursive content, performs a near-identical function to its predecessor, *Dabiq* – that is, it privileges conceptual content over current affairs and serves as a strategic repository for situating day-to-day news within the broader history and evolution of the Islamic State movement. By way of contrast, *al-Naba'*, which is more concise, regular and immediate in its editorial outlook, appears to be aimed at providing a more tactical commentary of matters pertaining to the group's present-day existence. Besides these structural discrepancies, our analysis also shows that much of the longer-form content is shared between each publication, further supporting the idea that these are substitute, not complementary, goods.

## 5.2 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

For this portion of the analysis, we separated *Rumiyah* and *al-Naba'*s editorial events into two groups: military and non-military. Events that fell into the former category alluded to specific aspects of the Islamic State's war effort, dealing with anything from current military affairs to defensive tactics. Events that fell into the latter category either did not mention the Islamic State's war effort at all or alluded to it only at a highly general and strategic level.

**Figure 2. *Rumiyah* and *al-Naba'* content analysis**



### 5.2.1 Military content

Military events in each corpus were assigned one of seven codes – in alphabetical order:

1. **Operations (terrorist)**: News reports providing details of Islamic State terrorist attacks. We define terrorism according to the definition adopted by the United States Department of State – that is, 'premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents' (US Department of State 2006). For that reason, only news reports regarding attacks against civilian targets were included in this category.

2. **Operations (defensive)**: News reports detailing the use of defensive tactics. Reports that specifically speak of counter-attacks, anti-aircraft facilities, and operations in which an encroaching enemy is repelled were included in this category.

3. **Operations (covert)**: News reports detailing the use of guerrilla tactics against military targets. Operations involving hidden improvised explosive devices, assassinations, booby-trapped houses, and infiltrative suicide tactics were included in this category.

4. **Operations (offensive)**: News reports detailing the use of conventional aggressive tactics. Reports on regular clashes, shaping operations, tactical raids, and strategic advances were included in this category.

5. **Military positioning**: Essays setting out the tactical and strategic agenda of the Islamic State's military effort. Items that explicitly refer to military tactics and strategic provisions were included here, but items that referred to the war effort more generally as part of a broader ideological discussion were not.

6. **Tactics and incitement**: Essays giving advice on how and why to perpetrate acts of terrorism outside Syria and Iraq. This category included theological arguments as to the necessity of killing

non-Muslim civilians and explicit discussions about and instructions for the use of specific tactics.

7. **Military statistics**: Infographics providing aggregated figures for tactical and strategic military operations.

A total of 40% of the *Rumiyah* corpus focused on military issues.

**Figure 3. Military content**

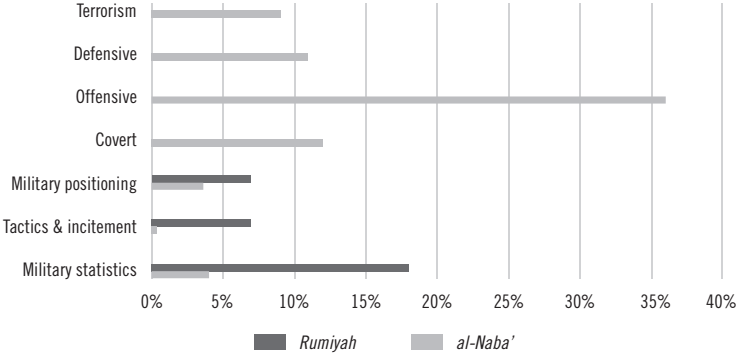
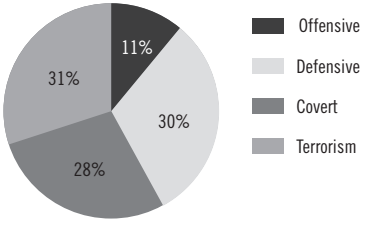



**Figure 4. Breakdown of military content in *Rumiyah***




The subcategory that most frequently appeared was military statistics (18%).[5] Most of the time, these events were infographics relating information about the Islamic State's conventional military operations, though two focused specifically on its use of terrorism in Iraq and Bangladesh.[6] At 7% of the *Rumiyah* corpus, the next most

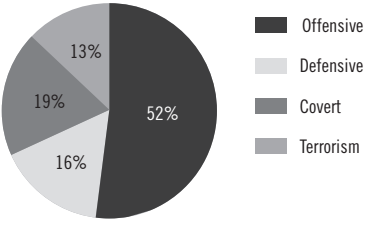
5 For example: Islamic State, 2017. 'The epic battles of Sirte'. *Rumiyah 4*, December, p. 13; Islamic State, 2017. 'Results of the military operations in Khurasan *wilayah*'. *Rumiyah 4,* December, p. 19.

6 Islamic State, 2017. 'Operations in Bengal'. *Rumiyah 2*, October, p. 7; Islamic State, 2017. 'Baghdad harvest'. *Rumiyah 2*, October, p. 34.

recurrent subcategory was military positioning. Besides an essay about a terrorist attack against the Kenyan police and an interview with the 'governor' of the Islamic State's Tripoli Province, these items mainly comprised 'best of' collections of news reports relating to the previous month's military activities.[7] In the news report subsection, 31% of references were to terrorist operations, whereas 30% related to defensive operations, 28% to covert operations, and 11% to offensive operations. There is further analysis of the geographic distribution of these reports in the next section. The remainder of the *Rumiyah* corpus's military content comprised tactics and incitement events, which included instructions on how to perpetrate knife and vehicular attacks as well as long-winded theological accounts encouraging brutal and indiscriminate violence against non-Muslims.[8]

In contrast to *Rumiyah*, the majority of the *al-Naba'* corpus was military in nature (79%). The largest proportion of this content – nine tenths of which was made up of individual news reports – focused on offensive operations (36%), with the remainder reporting on covert operations (13%), defensive operations (11%), and terrorist operations (9%). Four percent of the corpus comprised military statistics, while another 4% consisted of military positioning.[9] While it was, proportionally speaking, rare, *al-Naba"*s military

**Figure 5. Breakdown of military content in *al-Naba'***




7 Islamic State, 2017. 'Interview with the *wali* of Tarabulus'. *Rumiyah 4*, December, pp. 10-13; Islamic State, 2017, 'Military operations'. *Rumiyah 1*, September, pp. 22-26; Islamic State, 2017. 'Military and covert operations'. *Rumiyah 4*, December, pp. 34–37.

8 Islamic State, 2016. 'Just terror tactics – part 2'. *Rumiyah 3*, November, pp. 10-12; Islamic State, 2016. 'Just terror tactics'. *Rumiyah 2*, October, pp. 12–13; Islamic State, 2016. 'The *kafir*'s blood is *halal* for you, so shed it'. *Rumiyah 3*, November, pp. 34–36.

9 For example: Islamic State, 2017. 'The battles in the environs of Tadmur'. *Naba' 46*, September, p. 2; Islamic State, 2016. 'Hunting the *sahwat*'. *Naba' 50*, October, p. 12.

positioning content was particularly interesting. It featured essays and interviews relating primarily to defensive operations in and around Aleppo, the Qalamun Mountains, and Mosul. These accounts were surprisingly candid in their discussion of operational preparation and strategic priorities, and were seemingly geared towards buoying morale among the newspaper's readership.[10] Less than half of one percent of content dealt with tactics and incitement – specifically, this refers to two essays on the use of brutality against non-Muslims, which also appeared in *Rumiyah*.[11]

One of the most noteworthy distinctions between *Rumiyah* and *al-Naba'* is in regard to their respective coverage of the battle for Mosul, which was, as already mentioned, launched in October 2016. In *Rumiyah*, aside from a single infographic published in December, the city was not mentioned even once, even in the news reports section.[12] In *al-Naba'*, on the other hand, it was front-page news nine weeks in a row, and content pertaining to it made up 17% of the entire corpus. That the most important battle in the Islamic State's history to date was totally ignored by *Rumiyah* but thoroughly covered in *al-Naba'* indicates the divergent editorial priorities of the two publications.

Putting the specific case of Mosul to one side, though, there are multiple other distinctions between *Rumiyah* and *al-Naba'* when it comes to military content. For the former, military events tended to emphasise the ideological nature of the Islamic State war and reiterate the transnational reach of its cadres. This content was strategic in its orientation, geared more towards encouraging and facilitating the Islamic State's war than repositioning its territorial

10 For example: Islamic State, 2017. 'The apostates will see what the *mujahidin* have prepared for them after the failure of their campaign in Mosul'. *Naba' 55*, November, pp. 8–9.

11 Islamic State, 2017. 'Aggression and brutality against the *kuffar* in the *sirah* of the Prophet al-Mukhtar, peace be upon him'. *Naba' 46*, September, p. 13; Islamic State, 2017. 'Aggression and brutality against the *kuffar* in the *sirah* of the Rightly Guided Caliphs'. *Naba' 47*, September, p. 12.

12 Islamic State, 2017. 'Some losses of the *murtaddin* in the battle of Mosul'. *Rumiyah 4*, December, p. 38.

losses. The issue of defeat was usually avoided entirely. However, when that was not possible – for example, in the wake of its defeat in Sirte and, the following year, Mosul – it turned to eschatology, framing any such losses as *malahim*, episodes in the age-old war between Muslims and non-Muslims. A quintessential example of this came after the recapture of Dabiq, when *Rumiyah* featured an article conceding the loss as a tactical defeat while at the same time repositioning it as a necessary step towards the apocalypse – and, hence, a sign of the inevitability of ultimate victory in the war against the enemies of Islam. Through rhetorical tools like these, *Rumiyah*'s editors strove to deprive the Islamic State's war of its temporality. By way of contrast, *al-Naba'* was significantly more tactical in its outlook. Its primary focus was on reframing day-to-day events – both defeats and victories – as logical progressions in the caliphate's insurgent project. While it was by no means void of ideological content, the newspaper was weighed down with news reports aimed at cumulatively repositioning the Islamic State's military prospects in order to boost morale and maintain a sense of momentum among the readership. Losses, encroachments and infringements were almost always reframed through hyperactive reporting and tactical denialism.

### 5.2.2 Non-military content

Non-military editorial events were assigned one of ten codes:

1. **Victimhood**: News reports detailing the loss of civilian life and damage to civilian infrastructure inside the Islamic State.

2. **History**: Essays providing accounts of historic events deemed important by the Islamic State. Usually, these items conveyed an idealised representation of the Golden Age of Islam that conforms to the Islamic State's particular mode of government.

3. **Governance**: Infographics and interviews highlighting specific aspects of the caliphate's civilian bureaucracy. These ranged from accounts of education provision in Syria to religious policing in Egypt.

4. **Women**: Essays orientated towards female readers. They tended to deal with civilian matters and were usually instructional in their tone.

5. **Promotion**: Infographics advertising video releases from the Islamic State's official media offices.

6. **Eulogy**: Essays and infographics providing detailed biographical accounts of prominent martyrs. Some focused on deceased Islamic State leaders, whereas others told the story of 'regular' foreign fighters.

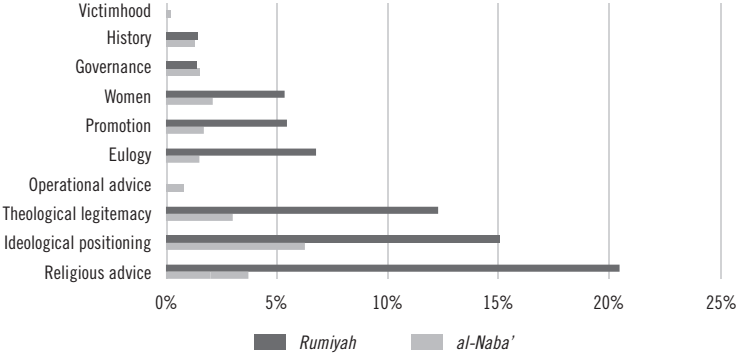
7. **Operational advice**: Essays – and, although there were none in either of our four-month corpuses, infographics – providing information on personal security.

8. **Theological legitimacy**: Essays on matters of jurisprudence through which the Islamic State attempted to assert its religious credentials.

9. **Ideological positioning**: Essays, interviews, and speech transcripts that positioned the organisation ideologically. These items took pride of place in both *al-Naba'* and *Rumiyah*.

10. **Religious texts and advice**: Infographics and essays focusing on specific matters in religion, often advising readers on how to become 'better' Muslims during times of war.

**Figure 6. Non-military content**



No less than 60% of *Rumiyah*'s content fell into the non-military category. The largest proportion comprised religious advice (21%) – primarily infographics about prayer and fasting.[13] Ideological positioning accounted for 15%. These events included long-winded essays deriding the Islamic State's enemies and undermining the legitimacy of its rivals, as well as articles setting out the parameters of its strategic vision.[14] Emphasising that any difficulties it faced were but transient episodes in its inevitably successful jihadist project, these events were seemingly intended to counter the narrative that the Islamic State was existentially challenged. Some 12% of the events focused on theological legitimacy, which involved anything from intellectual attacks against non-Islamic State religious scholars to detailed discussions around matters like *takfir*, *jama'ah*, and *riddah*.[15] The remaining non-military items were coded as eulogy (7%), promotion (5%), women (5%), governance (1%), and history (1%). The eulogy events lionised al-'Adnani and al-Furqan and celebrated the deaths of prominent foreign fighters and terrorists, whereas the women-orientated items comprised prescriptive accounts of how female Muslims should behave, emphasising, over the four months in question, the need to give to charity, morally support fighters, and remain in their homes.[16]

In contrast to *Rumiyah*, only 21% of the *al-Naba'* corpus was non-military. At 6% of the total number of editorial events,

13 For example: Islamic State, 2017. '*Dhikr*'. *Rumiyah 4*, December, p. 27.

14 For example: Islamic State, 2017. 'The weakest house is that of a spider'. *Rumiyah 3,* November, pp. 2-3.

15 Islamic State, 2013. 'The obligation of exposing wicked scholars'. *Rumiyah 3*, November, pp. 28-30; Islamic State, 2017. 'The religion of Islam and the *jama'ah* of the Muslims – part 1 and 2'. *Rumiyah 1*, September, pp. 4-8.

16 For example: Islamic State, 2017. 'The *shuhuda'* of Gulshan'. *Rumiyah 2*, October, pp. 8-11; Islamic State, 2017. 'O women, give charity'. *Rumiyah 1*, September, pp. 18-20; Islamic State, 2017. 'Stories of steadfastness from the lives of the *sahabiyyat*'. *Rumiyah 2*, October, pp. 28-30; Islamic State, 2017. 'Abide in your homes'. *Rumiyah 3*, November, pp. 40-41; Islamic State, 2017. 'Marrying widows is an established Sunnah'. *Rumiyah 4*, December, pp. 32-33.

ideological positioning articles were the most prominent of the newspaper's non-military content. Among other things, these materials included attacks against the Turkish government, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Syrian Opposition, as well as a series of editorial-style articles that resituated the previous week's events in the broader context of the Islamic State *jihad*.[17] Religious texts and advice appeared 4% of the time, with theological legitimacy materials occurring just 3% of the time. While they were proportionally less regular in the *al-Naba'* dataset, the eulogy-, women- and governance-orientated materials (each of which made up 2% of the corpus) performed a similar, albeit diluted, function to those in *Rumiyah* – indeed, many of them were straight translations that also appeared in the course of its pages. The final 3% was split between propaganda promotion and history, along with a single victimhood-themed news report about American airstrikes in Sirte.[18]

As the above analysis shows, the two publications differed significantly when it came to non-military content. Proportionally speaking, there was much more of it in *Rumiyah*, which meant significantly more time spent on theological, ideological and civilian issues. It seems that, in *Rumiyah*, the Islamic State was more preoccupied with setting out the parameters of its ideology and making theological arguments to legitimise its existence and actions than anything else. In *al-Naba'*, on the other hand, much of this was already taken for granted. Indeed, in general, its editors appeared less concerned with abstract content aimed at positioning *jihad* in the minds of their readership. To be sure, religious argument and ideological discussion were important foundations to *al-Naba'*, but this material always played second fiddle to its continuous stream of military-focused reportage.

17 For example: Islamic State, 2017. 'So kill the *mushrikin* wherever you find them'. *Naba' 48*, September, p. 3; Islamic State, 2017. 'Be patient, o *mujahidin*'. *Naba' 49*, October, p. 3.

18 Islamic State, 2017. 'American planes increases their bombardment after the failure of the Unity Government to win the battle of Sirte'. *Naba' 50*, October, p. 6.

## 5.3 GEOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS

For this portion of the analysis, we focused only on news reports in each publication. This involved geographically tagging each of *al-Naba"*s articles, and dissecting and tagging *Rumiyah*'s operational digest collections. The locational tags were arranged into three categories derived from leaked Islamic State legislative documents:

1. **Home *wilayat* (provincial affiliates)**: Relating to events or developments taking place inside or on the 'borders' of one of the Islamic State's provinces in Iraq or Syria.

2. **Distant *wilayat***: Relating to events or developments taking place inside or on the 'borders' of one of the Islamic State's provinces in Algeria, Afghanistan, the Caucasus, Egypt (the Sinai Peninsula only), Libya, Nigeria, Pakistan or Yemen.[19]

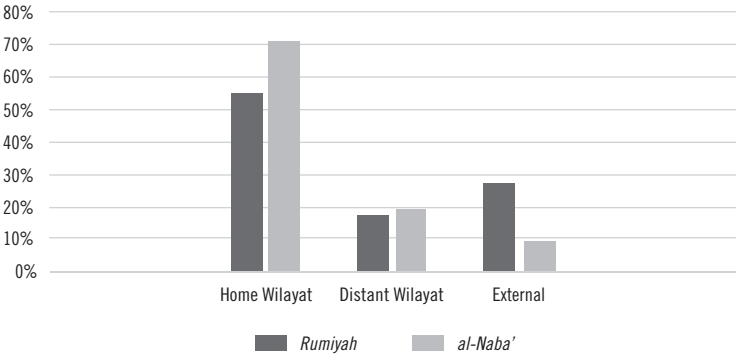
3. **External territories**: Relating to events or developments taking place outside the Islamic State's home or distant *wilayat*. This category is primarily related to covert and terrorist operations in places such as Bangladesh and Somalia, but also includes news reports about mainland Egypt, Germany, Russia, Sweden, Turkey, and the United States.

Of *Rumiyah*'s news reports, 55% related to operations in the Islamic State's home *wilayat*. Most of these items focused on conventional and covert military operations. The remaining 45% of its news reports were split between the distant *wilayat* (18%) and external territories (28%). That nearly half of all of *Rumiyah*'s operational digests were devoted to events taking place outside Syria and Iraq suggests that its editors were proactively trying to emphasise the international nature of the caliphate, perhaps hoping to demonstrate that it was

19 The distinction between Home and Distant *Wilayat* corresponds to the Islamic State's organisational oversight of its Syria- and Iraq-based affiliates compared with those elsewhere. See al-Tamimi (2017).

still in global ascendance even if it was taking a military battering in Syria and Iraq.

**Figure 7. Geographic distribution**




By way of contrast, no less than 71% of *al-Naba"*s news reports focused on operations inside the home *wilayat*, with 20% related to events in the distant *wilayat*, and only 9% focusing on external territories. In view of this, *al-Naba"*s coverage was demonstrably more caliphate-centric than *Rumiyah*'s. Not only did its editors spend much more time on news relating to the Islamic State heartlands in Syria and Iraq, news from the distant *wilayat* was privileged over that from external territories, too. Based on this, it would appear that the *al-Naba'* editors were shaping their content to be more regionally focused, thereby hoping to appeal more to their 'domestic' audience.

On balance, the Islamic State according to *Rumiyah* looks qualitatively different to the Islamic State according to *al-Naba'*. Because of the geographic distribution of its content, *Rumiyah* inevitably ended up spending more time discussing covert and terrorist operations than did *al-Naba'*. This is not necessarily just an upshot of its tendency to privilege news from outside Iraq and Syria; rather, it could perhaps be explained by the fact that the magazine's editors wanted to emphasise a *different* part of their organisation's military brand – namely, its terrorist endeavours. They privileged reports exaggerating the Islamic State's global reach to such an extent that it would appear they were attempting to exert a sort of peer pressure on

their readership – by focusing on the incidence of terrorism whenever and wherever possible, they amplified the number of attacks that were taking place, while at the same time drawing attention to all the places where attacks were not taking place. In so doing, they again ended up abstracting the idea of *jihad*, not limiting it to a single context or temporality and reminding their readers that it is, at least in theory, applicable everywhere and anywhere. The subtext of this was clear – it was an implied call-to-arms stating, 'Your ideological co-travellers are fighting for Islamic State and dying in its name all over the world – so, reader, why are you not?'

In the context of *al-Naba'*, the story was markedly different. Instead of focusing on news from the distant *wilayat* and external territories, its editors opted to concentrate on Syria and Iraq, apparently hoping to minimise the prospect of territorial defeat, thereby emphasising the strategic pain that the Islamic State was causing its adversaries. This was especially noticeable with regard to the battle for Mosul, during which the *al-Naba'* editors doubled down on their denialism, attempting to reposition the coalition-backed offensive as a strategic trap deliberately set by the group. Even outside of this context, they were insistent in their attempts to bolster the perception of momentum and aggressive potential in Syria and Iraq as the proto-state fell apart. In this way, as the territorial caliphate went on to haemorrhage over 2017 and 2018, they were able to embrace the losses it faced by simply declaring that they were necessary evils on the path towards ultimate victory.

# 6. CONCLUSION

This research paper has demonstrated that, at the end of 2016 at least, the Islamic State communicated in different ways with different people, depending on the location and political inclination of its target audience. Through comparative analysis of two of the organisation's periodicals – *al-Naba'*, which is primarily aimed at in-theatre consumers, and *Rumiyah*, which is geared towards supporters living outside its direct sphere of operations – we have shed light not only on how its propagandists think about influence in general, but also about how they understand and moderate the interplay between rational and ideological appeals in strategic communications in particular.

As our analysis shows, the two publications were distinct from each other in three ways: structurally, they bore only partial resemblance to each other, with *Rumiyah* privileging lengthier, more abstract content, and *al-Naba'* primarily devoting itself to shorter, more tactical news coverage; thematically, they were also distinct, with *Rumiyah*'s content being weighted towards political, social and theological issues, and *al-Naba'* tending to focus on military matters; and geographically, there were important discrepancies between the two publications, with *Rumiyah* spending significantly more time discussing events external to Syria and Iraq than did *al-Naba'*.

These differences suggest that *Rumiyah* was conceived to perform a qualitatively different function to that of *al-Naba'*. It, as an outward-facing electronic magazine, was distinctly more conceptual than its in-theatre counterpart. Through its pages, the Islamic State *jihad* was positioned as a rigorously demarcated theo-political doctrine and supporters were repeatedly told that knowledge in its foundational concepts was paramount. While this line of discourse also appeared in *al-Naba'*, it was heavily diluted – superseded even – by the newspaper's almost myopic focus on current affairs. Indeed, according to the pages of *al-Naba'*, the Islamic State *jihad* looked and felt markedly different: with occasional exceptions, it was positioned as a largely conventional war against largely conventional enemies – it was less global, and was driven more by practical concerns than anything else. To be sure, ideology was present in *al-Naba'*, but it always remained an atmospheric presence. Whereas *jihad* in

*Rumiyah* was characterised by theoretical idealism, in *al-Naba'* it was marked by real-world pragmatism.

Judging by these differences, it would appear that the propagandists were playing to two different crowds with these publications, framing the essential qualities of their organisation in different ways to different people. Whereas *Rumiyah* was principally a vehicle for ideological instruction and theoretical empowerment, *al-Naba'* was geared more towards tactical image management – that is, curating and maintaining the military brand of the Islamic State.

A number of implications arise from this analysis, which unambiguously demonstrates that the Islamic State is not a monolithic organisation. Indeed, the discrepancies we identify between *Rumiyah* and *al-Naba'* are but one facet of this phenomenon. The caliphate – and how the caliphate appears through the lens of its official propaganda – looks qualitatively different depending on the location, language, and political inclination of the 'consumer'. Inside the group's territories, its strategic communication operations are characterised by rational appeals – regular demonstrations of strength, stability, and status – that are first and foremost geared towards keeping local supporters interested and fighters engaged. Externally, though, its political project is positioned differently: the appeals are more abstract, and, indeed, its very existence as an organisation is not tied to the conflict in Syria and Iraq – in other words, ideology, not war-fighting, takes precedence.

This observation is highly relevant to policymakers. First, on the counter-terrorism side of the equation, it enables us to better understand how and why the Islamic State factors ideology into its propaganda. The group seemingly wants to create a buffer between itself and the real world by striving to re-theorise *jihad* in the minds of its consumers. If this is the case, it demands a different policy response from domestic counter-extremism and counter-terrorism practitioners. With regard to the other side of the equation – in-country counter-insurgency and stabilisation policymaking – our findings should serve as a word of caution to practitioners hoping to transplant foundational concepts of Western counter-extremism into Iraq and Syria. We have shown that even the Islamic State recognises that

its in-theatre fighters and supporters – former, current, or future – are driven as much by pragmatic concerns as they are by ideological fervour, if not more. Researchers would do well to test this thesis in the context of other forms of Islamic State propaganda, perhaps by comparing and contrasting foreign-language AlHayat Media Center videos with Arabic-language content released by the group's provincial media offices. For that reason, counter- and de-radicalisation efforts in the region should not focus on destabilising the ideological doctrine of *jihad* alone, but should also consider the rational and practical concerns of those still supporting and fighting for the group.

In any case, our analysis is but one step towards developing a better understanding of how and why insurgent and terrorist organisations communicate strategically. Propaganda – how it is conceived and to what end it actually operates – remains shrouded in mystique and conventional thinking. Cognisant of this, scholars would do well to redouble their efforts into meaningfully exploring how, why, and when propaganda works, not to mention determining just what it is that the word 'works' means when used in this context.

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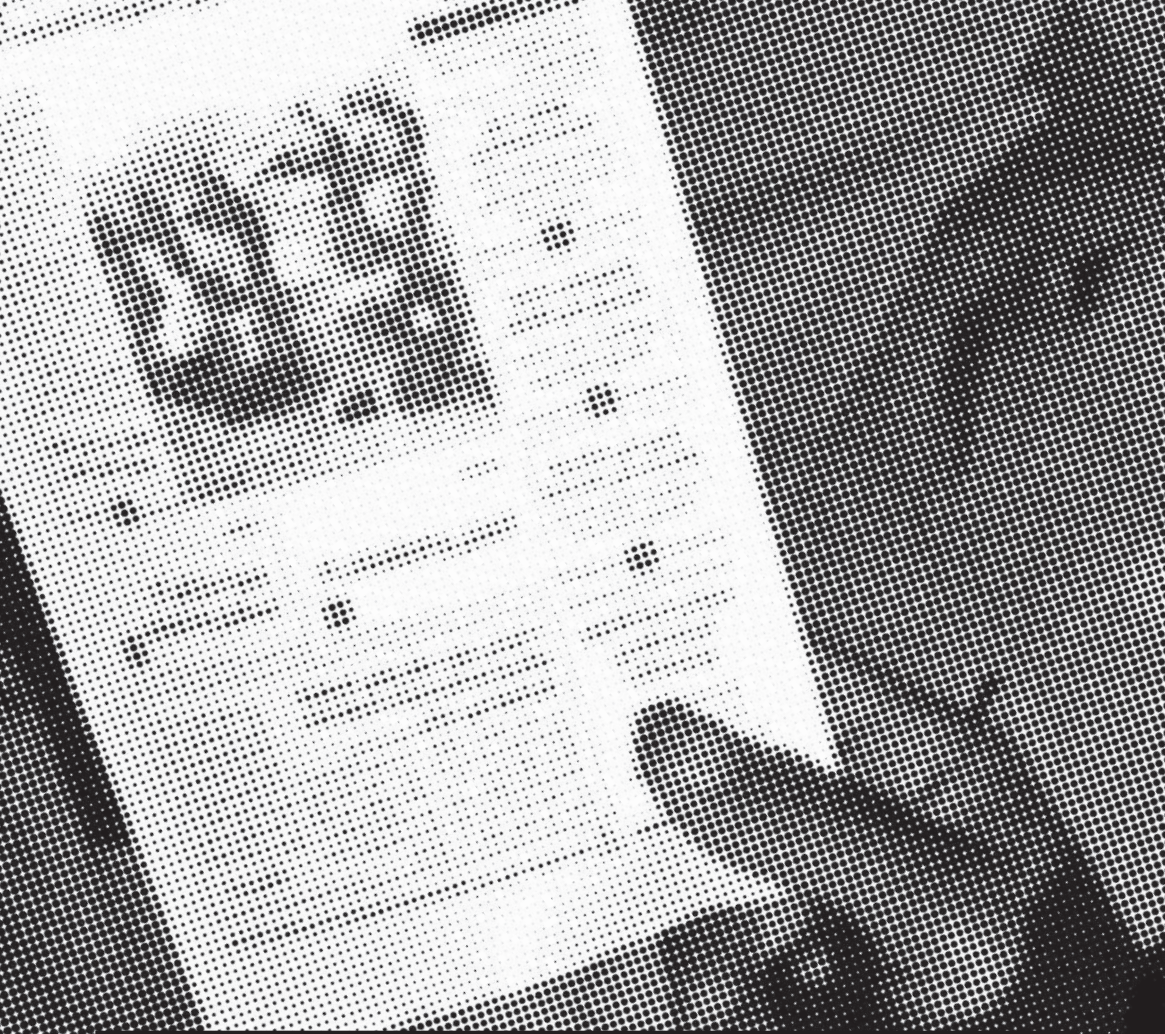

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