Nine Bullets for the Traitors, One for the Enemy: The Slogans and Strategy behind the Islamic State's Campaign to Defeat the Sunni Awakening (2006-2017)

Author: Craig Whiteside[*]

The Islamic State is infamous for its sophisticated media campaigns, such as the one that inspired a large-scale migration of supporters to its so-called caliphate. Much less attention has been paid to its propaganda targeting local audiences, which tends to be more difficult to access and decipher. This case study examines a decade-long campaign to poison the use of the term "Sahwa" (Awakening), as part of a larger effort to discredit and delegitimize all future Sunni rivals of the Islamic State in the areas of its core caliphate and non-contiguous affiliates. Using primary sources, this paper traces the development of a strategy that skillfully integrated a long and patient campaign of subversion and terror operations with a consistent information campaign that reduced local support for Sahwa rivals and fueled the rise of the Islamic State's caliphate. This information campaign displayed a skillful manipulation of emotional scripts – particularly that of the race traitor – to reshape identity construct among Sunni Iraqis, one that found strong appeal during a period of increased sectarian tensions after 2010. This paper builds on the work of International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT) research scholars on the importance of in-group manipulation in extremist messaging as part of the larger Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communications Project.

ICCT International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague

[*] Views expressed are those of the author and not a reflection of any official view or policy of the U.S. Naval War College, or anyone else.

Introduction

A critical factor in the rise of the Islamic State movement since 2003 has been its ability to draw from its raw constituency: rural Sunnis with a conservative or Islamist bent. Specifically in Iraq where the movement first began to expand, the Sunni community fragmented after the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime as parallel formations of armed political coalitions formed with disparate goals. The gradual dominance by 2006 of one of these groups, known at the time as al-Qa'ida in Iraq but already evolving into a slightly broader coalition that would become the Islamic State of Iraq, inspired a growing reaction from dissident Sunni elites who feared a permanent loss of power to this hegemonic proto-caliphate in their midst.[1] The most visible representation of this rebellion was a Sunni tribally led political movement called the Awakening, or Sahwa in Arabic. This paper examines the influence campaign, from the creation of the Islamic State of Iraq in October 2006 to the present period, which supported the effort to defeat the Sahwa in order to firm up public support for the establishment of an Islamic State in the region.

The essence of this successful information campaign was the propagandists' adept use of identity deconstruction and reconstruction in their varied propaganda materials. The Islamic State movement prioritized the vilification of its Sunni political rivals, particularly the Sahwa coalition, as traitors to their people and collaborators with an oppressive (and foreign influenced) government. This campaign was largely abetted (unintentionally) by an Iraqi governing coalition that reinforced this narrative by clumsily harassing Prime Minister Nuri al Maliki's Sunni political rivals and his suppression of popular protests in Anbar in 2012-3.[2] This information campaign had a significant impact on the Islamic State's success in 2014, by supporting claims by the group that it was the sole protector of Sunni Iraqis. This vision was designed to stand in stark contrast with the Sunni elites of the Iraqi Islamic Party, as well as the leaders of the Sahwa, whose failure to govern effectively as part of the Maliki government coalition became a well-accepted perception. The story about the impact of this information campaign has not been told, despite the attention the Islamic State media department has received. It is a remarkable story: how an insurgent group lost its base of public support and the safety of its sanctuaries, made significant course corrections, and knit together an integrated campaign to win it back.

I used press releases from the Islamic State movement, as well as captured documents archived by the U.S. government, to trace the evolution of the counter-Sahwa campaign from its rocky inception to its expansion into theaters outside of Iraq, including Syria and Egypt – in fact anywhere that tribally affiliated Sunnis challenged the Islamic State. Evidence for the evolution of the influence campaign can be gleaned through the study of how the group talked about the Sahwa over a significant period of time, both in its strategic documents and leadership speeches, which revealed the shifts in strategy in dealing with unsupportive Sunni elites.

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[1] Peter Devlin, "State of the Insurgency in al-Anbar," *The Washington Post*, February 2, 2007, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/02/02/AR2007020201197.html, taken from the intelligence assessment written August 17, 2006, http://media.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/documents/marines_iraq_document_020707.pdf.
[2] Kirk Sowell argued that the political roots of a broad Sunni insurgency were fueled by "expansive Sunni demands" out of proportion to their political power, combined with a Shia reluctance to accommodate any of the demands. This led to a massacre of Sunni protesters in Huwija, Kirkuk; see Kirk Sowell, "Iraq's Second Sunni Insurgency," *Hudson Institute*, August 9, 2014, https://www.hudson.org/research/10505-iraq-s-second-sunni-insurgency.

In discussing the people, ideas, and organization that eventually became what we know today as ISIS, ISIL, "Daesh," and the Islamic State, I use the term Islamic State movement to describe the arc of the Salafi jihadi organization that Abu Musab al-Zarqawi founded in Iraq between 2002-4, before changing the name to al-Qa'ida in Mesopotamia (a.k.a. AQI). This same group joined (and dominated) a larger Salafi jihadi front called the Mujahidin Shura Council (MSC) in 2006, which in turn formed the basis for yet another merger of similar groups – once again dominated by the former AQI – calling itself the Islamic State of Iraq in October of that year. Expansion in Syria in 2011 led to its eventual designation as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, and later simply the Islamic State upon the declaration of a caliphate and the acceptance of allegiance from other Salafi jihadi groups around the world. I feel that it is essential to trace the long evolution of this group as a continuous, if not linear, movement in order to examine the long-term impacts of its various campaigns – particularly those that transcend organizational milestones and name changes. Too often, studies of the Islamic State phenomena pay little attention to its links to the past, wishing it away with phrases like "rising from the ashes/remnants," and the like.[3] Recent scholarship on the Islamic State's history, especially by Fishman and Hashim, support the longitudinal approach I used in this case study to trace the influences and impact of the decade-long operations and information campaign against the Sahwa.[4]

The paper is organized as follows: the initial section briefly explains the origins of the Sahwa, and then covers in greater detail how the Islamic State movement reacted to the revolt. The next part describes the evolution of the propaganda campaign and how the leaders integrated it into their politico-military plan to eliminate key tribal nodes that held the Sahwa together. The Islamic State's subsequent development of a carrot and stick approach included offering repentance to elements of the larger anti-Islamic State coalition, and killing those that refused to pledge allegiance. The final section relates how the Islamic State, with one eye still on its tribal foes in Iraq, used effective strategic communications aimed at delegitimizing its Sunni rivals in Syria and Egypt by tarring them with the Sahwa or 'race traitor' brush.

Background

The *Sahwa* was the name given to a grassroots tribal mobilization based in Anbar province that announced its opposition to al-Qa'ida in Iraq on September 14, 2006.[5] Starting with a small coalition of tribal leaders led by a minor figure named Abu Risha al-Sittar, the coalition built on previous efforts to limit the growing power of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's Salafi-jihadi group, which had formed in Iraq from a core of fighters that slipped out of Afghanistan in 2002. The group, then known as al-Qa'ida in Iraq, had suppressed an early tribal uprising against them in the border area of al-Qaim and a second effort in the Anbari provincial capital of Ramadi. The third effort under the leadership of Abu Risha gained ground after U.S. forces in Ramadi supported it militarily

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[3] The U.S. Army published observations of the battle for Mosul in 2017 and describes the transition this way: "al Qaeda in Iraq was defeated as an organization, but U.S. plans to battle insurgents in Mosul never materialized and the insurgency reemerged as the Islamic State of Iraq," see Mosul Study Group, "What the Battle of Mosul Teaches the Force," *U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command*, No. 17-24 U (Ft. Eustis, September 2017): 4.

[4] See Brian Fishman, *The Master Plan: ISIS, al-Qa'ida, and the Jihadi Strategy for Final Victory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016) and Ahmed Hashim, *The Caliphate at War: Operational Realities and Innovations of the Islamic State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[5] Sheikh Ahmad Bezia Fteikhan al-Rishawi, "Interview 3," in *Al-Anbar Awakening, Vol II: Iraqi Perspectives*, eds. Gary Montgomery and Timothy McWilliams (Quantico: Marine Corps University Press, 2009), 46.

and financially in 2006, and the loose coalition of anti-al-Qa'ida groups spread to the important city of Fallujah by the following spring.[6]

This period of the Iraq war was a pivotal moment for others reasons as well. U.S. President George W. Bush was considering a change in strategy in Iraq, and an influential study group was recommending a reduction in forces and a change in their mission from combat to advising.[7] The summer of 2006 was also a heady time for the Mujahidin Shura Council, the political front consisting of several small Salafi-jihadi groups that joined to work with al-Qa'ida in Iraq with the goal of establishing an Islamic state. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi had just been killed by an airstrike, and its elected leader Abu Abdallah al-Baghdadi quietly disappeared.[8] The Shura Council decided this was the time to enact Zarqawi's vision and declare a proto-caliphate, which the new leaders would call the Islamic State of Iraq in an October video release.[9] Its designation of an Emir al-Mu'minim (commander of the faithful) – an ambitious designation that was historically reserved for Islamic caliphs and independent emirs – set the opening gambit for a very eventful period to come.[10] Within a year, the Islamic State's brief flirtation with domination of many important Sunni areas in Iraq was over. In a classic example of the ebb and flow of warfare, a coalition of rival resistance groups joined together with the Awakening tribal mobilization to resist the Islamic State, and together they drove the "men of the state" out of their hard-won sanctuaries.

There are many reasons this coalition came together to fight the Islamic State, including tribal dynamics and power, money, revenge, exhaustion, and politics.[11] The combination of these factors led to the fracturing of Islamic State's early popular base, with devastating consequences. The Islamic State lost its ability to hide from counterinsurgent forces and keep their clandestine networks operating successfully, and its fighters were killed or deserted the besieged organization in droves.[12] To stabilize the situation and avoid collapse, the leaders of the Islamic State took a step back and analyzed their position carefully. To win, they realized they had to refocus their effort on regaining support from the Sunni community, and these efforts would be at the expense of their war on the occupiers and the government. The key to success would be the ability to redefine the Sunni identity in Iraq in a manner supportive of the Islamic State, and exclusive of its Sahwa challengers. By 2010, the Islamic State's strategy was beginning to see results. The Awakening struggled to maintain its coherence, beset by the Islamic State's quiet campaign to kill its leaders, a hostile and suspicious government ally, and internal tribal divisions.[13] By 2013 it was a spent force, ripe for co-option as the return

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[6] For details on Ramadi see: Michael Silverman, *How Iraqi Tribes and American Troops reclaimed al-Anbar and defeated Al-Qa'ida in Iraq* (Havertown: Casemate Publishers, 2011); and on Fallujah: Daniel R. Green and William F. Mullen III, *Fallujah Redux: The Anbar Awakening and the Struggle with Al-Qa'ida* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2014).

[7] James A. Baker, III, and Lee H. Hamilton, *Iraqi Study Group Report* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 70-77.

[8] In reality, Abu Abdallah al-Baghdadi - also known as Abu Ali al-Anbari - had been captured by the British SAS in Yusifiyah, south of Baghdad, and was in a coalition jail – unbeknownst to his captors. He was released from jail in 2012 and led the expansion into Syria after Haji Bakr's death before being killed in 2016 by U.S. special operations forces. For more details, see Craig Whiteside, "Pedigree of Terror: The Myth of the Ba'ath in the Islamic State," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 3 (June 2017).

[9] Muharib al Jubouri, "The Announcement of the Establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq," Media Council of the Mujahidin Shura Council in Iraq, al-Fajr Media Center, 15 October, 2006.

[10] Nibras Kazimi, "The Caliphate Attempted," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 7, no.1 (July 2008), https://www.hudson.org/research/7162-current-trends-in-islamist-ideology-volume-7.

[11] Allen Newton, "The Awakening Movement: A Narrative-level Study of Mobilization," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 28, no. 2 (March 2017), 267-290, https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2016.1233641.

[12] Anonymous, "Analysis of State of ISI," *CTC at West Point*, Document NMEC-2007-612449 (2007) https://ctc.usma.edu/harmony-program/analysis-of-the-state-of-isi-original-language-2/.

[13] Myriam Benraad argued in 2011 that the Sahwa's failure was largely attributed to the loss of the U.S. as an economic benefactor, especially after it transferred responsibility to an Iraqi government that had no intention of following through with promises of incorporation into the security services. "These developments appear to have served al-Qaeda's (sic) objectives in the end;" see "Iraq's Tribal 'Sahwa': Its Rise and Fall," *Middle East Policy Council* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2011), https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4967.2011.00477.x.

of the Islamic State in Sunni areas of Anbar and elsewhere could be witnessed. In the next section, I will briefly describe the rise and fall of the Awakening, mostly from the perspective of the Islamic State movement.

The Rise of the Sahwa

> The tribesmen are among the most important mainstays of the Jihad. These tribes have been very supportive of the Jihad and its men. Be that as it may, we warn the tribes that any tribe, party, or association that has been proven to collaborate with the Crusaders and their apostate lackeys – by God, we will target them just like we target the Crusaders, we will eradicate them and disperse them to the winds. There are only two camps – the camp of truth and its followers, and the camp of falsehood and its Shi'ites. You must choose in which of the two trenches you lie. What befell some of the traitors at Al-Qaim is the best proof of this.
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> Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, Sep 2005 [14]

The Islamic State movement adheres to a distinct ideology that derives from the Salafi-jihadi trend. Its early leaders had witnessed political infighting and factionalism in Afghanistan, and had been students of the veterans of other jihadist struggles in Egypt and Syria.[15] Lessons from the Syrian uprising in the 1970s, brilliantly captured in an influential document written by Abu Musab al-Suri, were critical of the resistance's big tent approach against the regime of Hafez al-Assad.[16] Nonetheless, as a group founded by non-Iraqis, Tawhid wal-Jihad, and its later designation al-Qa'ida in Iraq, had to work carefully with its resistance rivals in the Sunni areas of Iraq as they jockeyed for increased power. Some of this had to do with the fact that the other groups, including the 1920s Revolution Brigade, Islamic Army of Iraq, and the Mujahidin Army, were well-armed and dominated by military veterans from the now disbanded Iraqi Army.[17] The respect and consideration the Islamic State showed to other Sunni resistance groups did not carry over to their relationship with the Sunni tribal structure of Anbar, Salahidin, Diyala, and Northern Babil provinces.

The power of tribes in Iraq waxed and waned for centuries as modern state-building projects have sought to utilize the power of these social constructs to exercise control over populations and territory.[18] According to Baram, Saddam Hussein and the Ba'ath party originally thought to eliminate the tribal structure as a potential rival when they first took power in 1968, but decades later decided to socialize tribal leaders instead and make them into "docile tools in the service of the regime." Baram called the socialist party's treatment of the tribes as an outdated remnant of feudalism a "widespread mistake," one that was rectified with a new set of policies that instead coopted the tribes and weakened their ability to confront the state.[19] Years later, another highly ideological

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[14] Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, "Leader of Al-Qa'ida in Iraq Al-Zarqawi Declares 'Total War' on Shi'ites, States that the Sunni Women of Tel'afar Had 'Their Wombs Filled with the Sperm of the Crusaders'," al-Qa'ida in Iraq Media Battalion (September 14, 2005), downloaded by MEMRI, available from the Haverford al-Qa'ida statements collection.
[15] Mustafa Hamid and Leah Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst & Co., 2015), 177-206.
[16] Abu Musab al-Suri, "Lessons learned from the Jihad Ordeal in Syria," *CTC West Point*, Document #AFGP-2002-600080, 2002, https://ctc.usma.edu/harmony-program/lessons-learned-from-the-jihad-ordeal-in-syria-original-language-2/
[17] Ahmed Hashim, *The Caliphate at War*, 60-64; Ahmed Hashim, "The Insurgency in Iraq," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 14, no. 3 (August 2006), https://doi.org/10.1080/09592310410001676880.
[18] Lin Todd, "Iraq Tribal Study – Al Anbar Governorate: The Albu Fahd Tribe, the Albu Mahal Tribe and the Albu Issa Tribe," *Global Resources Group*, June 18, 2006.
[19] Amatzia Baram, "Neo-Tribalism in Iraq: Saddam Hussein's Tribal Policies 1991-96," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 29, no. 1 (February 1997), 1-2.

group working in the rural Iraqi countryside would make the same error, with similar results and a future change of heart.[20]

The Islamic State movement had been relatively dismissive of the tribes in its early period, and largely viewed it as a hindrance to its recruitment strategies of the large numbers of underemployed young men who might be inclined to fight with al-Qa'ida and later the Islamic State of Iraq. As such, it aggressively targeted sheikhs who did not cooperate with its local emirs.[21] The movement's future caliphate project would have no role for tribal chieftains, who were considered ideologically and religiously suspect, with the tribal structure a likely source of future challengers.[22] For the rising Iraqi leadership of the group, which was no stranger to local political dynamics, the tribal uprisings and resistance to Saddam's regime in the previous decade were seen as a real possibility of things to come.[23]

Events soon reinforced the leaders' existing suspicion about the tribes. After failing in his group's initial experiments to form a political coalition to control the population of Fallujah in 2004, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi focused the group's efforts in the Anbari border region of al-Qaim.[24] An uprising there by the Albu Mahal clan became an early and unwelcome example of tribal resistance that was addressed by the group's leader in September 2005, in a speech that for the most part focused on the intensifying sectarian battles in Tel Afar and elsewhere.[25] Calling out the Iraqi Defense Minister Sadoun al-Dulaimi, Zarqawi referred to him as "Abu Righal al-Dulaimi" and accused him of trying to divide the tribes from the jihadis. The Abu Righal name-calling was a reference to an early traitor in Islam who rebelled against Mohammad, and the implication that Sunni collaborators working with Americans and Iraqi Shi'a were the same contemptuous traitors the good people of Islam had seen in the past. Zarqawi's focus in the speech on his Shi'a rivals, who unlike the Sunni collaborators were never going to be a part of the future Islamic State, almost obscured the comments about those trying to steal the tribes away.[26]

Zarqawi's next explicit tribal reference, in April 2006, warned tribes to be wary of "the highway robbers," a popular reference to certain Anbari tribes that preyed on the black market smuggling routes between Iraq and the Levant. Ironically, this early insult belied the group's own efforts to regulate and tax commerce in Iraq as part of its own resource generation, and revealed some of the tensions growing between the competing social networks.[27] It also foreshadowed the unlikely rise of a minor tribal sheikh, Abu Risha al-Sittar, who even his own Sahwa partners admitted was a real "highway robber". Abu Risha was the tribal leader who would became the bane of the newly formed Mujahidin Shura Council and its dream of ruling Anbar province outright in 2006.

As the Salafi jihadi movement's influence and control grew, its local leaders began a campaign to intimidate tribal sheikhs contesting their power, which included an increase

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[20] Ambassador Jacob Rosen urged me to revisit and further explain the parallels between Saddam's relationship with the tribes and the Islamic State's similar mistakes.

[21] Norman Cigar, Al-Qaida, *The Tribes, and the Government: Lessons and Prospects for Iraq's Unstable Triangle*, (Quantico: Marine Corps University Press, September 2011), 23.

[22] Cigar, 30-31.

[23] Youssef Ibrahim, "Iraq reportedly cracks down on clan that tried a coup," *The New York Times*, June 20, 1995.

[24] Truls Tønnenson, "Training on a Battlefield: Iraq as a Training Ground for Global Jihadists," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20, no.4 (October 2008), 546-547, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546550802257242.

[25] William Knarr, Al-Sahawa: An Awakening in Al Qaim, *Combatting Terrorism Exchange*, 3:2 (May 2013), 5-30.

[26] The Dulaimi tribe is the largest and possibly the most prestigious of the Sunni tribal confederations. This reference was derived from the speech by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi cited earlier and dated September 15, 2005.

[27] Benjamin Bahney, Howard J. Shatz, Carroll Ganier, Renny McPherson, Barbara Sude, *An Economic Analysis of the Financial Records of al-Qa'ida in Iraq* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2010), 31-44.

in the killings of tribal authorities. The killing of an influential Ramadi Sheikh named Khalid 'Araq al-Ataymi – who had discussed the creation of a group called the Anbar Revolutionaries, and the placing of his severed head in the center of Ramadi, failed to deter the more stubborn tribal Sheiks.[28] In September of 2006, Abu Risha and a few tribal leaders in the Ramadi area formed the "Anbar Salvation Council" and called their growing rebellion the "Awakening" or Sahwa movement, an explicit call for fellow tribes to "wake up" and recognize the threat to tribal tradition and autonomy. The use of these somewhat nebulous terms – salvation and awakening – and their implied tie to saving the tribal traditions so intertwined with Arab identity would frustrate the propagandists of the Islamic State media department for some time to come.[29]

Identity, Propaganda and the Sahwa

Identity movements – groups with membership based on racial, ethnic, or sectarian characteristics – rely on exclusivity to bolster legitimacy in their collective drive to accumulate political power.[30] The International Center for Counter Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT) Strategic Communications Program has a series of papers that investigates how extremist movements carefully integrate identity related themes into messaging for specific reasons. Berger's "Extremist Construction of Identity" notes that an extremist group "enhances its own legitimacy at the expense of the out-group," and its actions reflect this escalation with actions of the in-group ranging from discrimination to extermination of the out-group.[31]

Ingram's "Strategic Logic of the Linkage Based Approach to Combatting Militant Islamist Propaganda" argues that Islamist groups messaging can be divided into two distinct categories: pragmatic choice issues that reflect rational needs and perceived benefits directly resulting from in-group membership, and identity choice themes related to the need for strong in-group membership and the dangers of a lack of commitment.[32] Commonly, the group has used crisis narratives to convince prospective supporters of the exigency of choosing the Islamic State to ensure the identity group's future survival – specifically the threat of political and economic dominance by an Iranian influenced and Shi'a dominated government and its likely effect on ordinary Sunnis.

Since an important element of the Salafi-jihadi narrative embraced by the Islamic State is the concept of *al-wala' wa-l-bara'*, or association (with the in-group) and disassociation (with those of the out-group), identity choice messaging finds a very receptive audience in those predisposed to or taught the importance of *al-wala' wa-l-bara'*.[33] As Ingram notes, "those that are not accepting of the crisis are condemned as traitors."[34]

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[28] Montgomery and McWilliams, *Al-Anbar Awakening*, 55.

[29] Newton, "The Awakening Movement"; Martha Cottam and Joe Huseby, *Confronting Al-Qa'ida: The Sunni Awakening and American Strategy in Al-Anbar* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016), 94-113; Nicholas Kramer, "Waking up to the truth about the Sunni Awakening," *War on the Rocks*, November 23, 2016. "Awakening" could also be a subtle mimic of the Islamic Awakening in nearby Saudi Arabia, which had some credibility in Islamist circles. The Islamic State had to be careful with smearing a term like the Sahwa, and this could be the source of their hesitancy. See Stéphane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

[30] J.M. Berger, "Extremist Construction of Identity: How Escalating Demands for Legitimacy Shape and Define In-Group and Out-Group Dynamics," *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 8, no. 7 (2017), 3.

[31] J.M. Berger, 4.

[32] Haroro Ingram, "The Strategic Logic of the "Linkage-Based" Approach to Combating Militant Islamist Propaganda: Conceptual and Empirical Foundations," *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 8, no. 6 (2017), 6.

[33] Shiraz Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea* (London: Hurst and Co., 2016), 111-134.

[34] Ingram, p. 17.

Early in the Iraq war, the Islamic State's early movement made a name for itself as a group that not only targeted important Shi'a targets, but also used identity choice messaging to create a strong distinction between the two sects in a country that had recently been run by a regime ethos of a secular multi-ethnic state.[35] Criticized by his al-Qa'ida parent organization for an attack on the Imam Ali shrine in 2003, Zarqawi dismissed the rebuke as unrealistic and counter to the only strategy that could work against a strengthening Shi'a dominated state.[36] He also correctly predicted that the Iraqi government would have to employ a small number of Sunni collaborators to secure power. Zarqawi argued that the only solution would be a clear and distinct divide between the Shi'a and Sunni in Iraq. His successors (Abu Umar and Abu Hamza, 2006-2010, Abu Bakr since) faithfully continued this policy, while expanding it to their affiliates in Syria and Afghanistan.

To provide a daily reminder of this division between Muslim sects, the media department of the Islamic State movement from the very beginning used the propagandists' tried and true technique of name-calling. This is the "practice of shortcutting discussion by giving an idea a bad label, to make us reject and condemn an idea w/o examining evidence."[37] Name calling was universally used in all Islamic State media projects to the point where uninformed readers might have trouble recognizing the referenced target at times, due to a pointed refusal to ever refer to opponents by their preferred name. The media releases referred to Iraqi Shi'a as "rejectionists" (rafida), meaning they had rejected the venerated companions and successors to the prophet in favor of their champion Ali. Later the media organ added "Safawi" in discussing this group, to gently remind Iraqis that the current Iranian influence replicated the occupation of Iraq by the Safavid Persian dynasty – one that influentially moved Iran away from Sunni Islam to a Shi'a practice. Sunni Muslims who collaborated with the Americans or Iraqi governments against a legitimately sanctioned jihad were called "apostates" (murtadin). Christians and Western powers were called "crusaders" and "cross worshippers," the Yazidi were "devil worshippers," the house of Saud called "Salul" (after Ibn Salul, a rival of Mohammad whose conversion to Islam was considered in bad faith), and the Iraqi Army was called the "pagan" guards. The two major Shi'a militant groups, Sadr's Mahdi militia and the Badr Corps, were coded as al-Dajjal (the Devil's) Army and Ghadr (Treachery) Corps, respectively, in the daily and eventually monthly operational summaries that the media department introduced in 2007.[38]

While this name-calling might seem juvenile, the group took this genre of propaganda very seriously and incorporated it at all levels. In fact, it cleverly ties into a long tradition of pre-Islamic traditional slam-poetry, called hija', where tribes would insult each other in songs and chants. During the Abbasid caliphate, poets used this genre to insult each other as well, leading to its occasional regulation by political leaders, worried that it could get out of hand.[39] Creswell and Haykel include it as a subset of jihadi culture where the enemy is "relentlessly vilified" in a genre outside of more formal literary venues.[40] This ancient practice, replicated in the modern era according to observers of the Arab

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[35] Fanar Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity*," (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).
[36] Zarqawi Letter, Captured and released by the Coalition Provisional Authority and archived by the U.S. Department of State (February 2004). Available at https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/nea/rls/31694.htm.
[37] Alfred McClung Lee, "The Analysis of Propaganda: A Clinical Summary," *American Journal of Sociology* 51, no. 2 (September 1945), 126-135.
[38] Craig Whiteside, The Smiling Scented Men: The Political Worldview of the Islamic State of Iraq (2003-2013), (PhD diss., Washington State University, 2014).
[39] Rina Drory, "The Abbasid Construction of the Jahiliyya: Cultural Authority in the Making," *Studia Islamica*, no. 83 (1996), 33-49.
[40] Robyn Creswell and Bernard Haykel, "Poetry in Jihadi Culture," in *Jihadi Culture: The Art and Social Practices of Militant Islamists,* ed. Thomas Hegghammer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 27-28.

Spring uprisings, serve to distinguish friend from foe and serve what Berger and Ingram conceptualize as the basic justification for extremist violence.[41]

Founder Abu Musab al-Zarqawi hailed from the Bani Hassan tribe of Jordan and instinctually understood the power of this cultural propaganda style. Zarqawi frequently interspersed Islamic poetry and Koranic verses into his leadership speeches, spoke in the high style of classical Arabic, and frequently used rhyme prose.[42] In one of his last speeches, called "Has the Story of Al-Rafidah Reached Thee?", he stipulated the two conditions upon which he would work with Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army to defeat the Americans – a resistance dream team, so to speak. First, the Sadrists had to redeem their honor by finding the weapons they had allegedly surrendered to the Americans, a reference to Iraqi Shi'a support for the 2003 invasion. Here Zarqawi claims the Shi'a of Iraq as a whole had dishonored themselves by accepting an infidel occupation. Second, that only Shi'a fighters who knew their fathers could join his alliance.[43] Zarqawi was riffing here from his frequent rants against the Shi'a doctrine of temporary marriage, an institution called *mut'ah,* which he found abhorrent. Zarqawi was inferring that most Shi'a are bastards, and therefore are not worthy of fighting the occupation under his righteous banner. In either case, he was pretending to set the bar of cooperation very high while insulting his resistance rivals.[44]

The consistency of name calling the various enemies of the Islamic State cannot be overemphasized; the media department – which has acted as the continuity of a movement that has changed in significant ways since the founding – has used these techniques since the first official releases in 2004.[45] The only disruption to this pattern by the movement that I can observe relates to how it approached, and publically discussed, the topic of in-group defection and fracturing as exemplified by the Awakening movement. A good explanation of the disruption of the consistent pattern of name calling and the confusion in relation to the Sahwa is possibly best described in the field of psychology with the concept of cognitive dissonance.

In its original public declaration in September 2006, the Awakening movement unequivocally embraced both the very ethos of the Sunni tribal society, and surprisingly, reconciliation with the Americans and the Shi'a state. This abrupt turn, and dramatic change of viewpoint toward an unpopular occupational force and a government that had upended the historical Sunni rule of the country, was an immediate and existential threat to any Islamic State dream of Sunni unity and in-group coherence.[46] Once Sunnis could be found both in the resistance and in the government, Islamic State identity appeals would fall flat, and give lie to the crisis that Ingram argues is central to identity messaging. A foundering in-group identity, and the injection of confusion into what should be a simple process of individual self-identification, leads to a reduction in

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[41] Elliott Colla, "In Praise of Insult: Slogan Genres, Slogan Repertoires and Innovation," *Review of Middle East Studies* 47, no. 1 (Summer 2013), 37-48.

[42] Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, "Message to the Fighters of Jihad in Iraq on September 11, 2004 from the Sheikh and Commander of Slaughterers," Media Committee of Al-Qa'ida in Mesopotamia, posted on multiple Islamist websites on Sep 14, 2004.

[43] Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, "Has the Story of Al-Rafidah Reached Thee?," audiotape published by the Media Council of the Mujahidin Shura Council on June 1,2006 and posted on the Islamic Renewal Organization website.

[44] Zarqawi's widow must have heard these rants at home, and included the "sons of mut'ah" slur in her personal and publicized eulogy of her husband, "Umm Muhammad, A Letter from the Wife of Abu-Mus'ab al-Zarqawi to the Whole World," July 6, 2006, Media Commission of The Mujahidin Shura Council in Iraq, posted to the Islamic Renewal Organization website.

[45] For a history of the Islamic State movement's media department, see Craig Whiteside, "Lighting the Path: the Evolution of the Islamic State Media Enterprise (2003-2016)," *The International Center for Counter Terrorism – The Hague* 7, no. 11 (2016). https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/ICCT-Whiteside-Lighting-the-Path-the-Evolution-of-the-Islamic-State-Media-Enterprise-2003-2016-Nov2016.pdf.

[46] For a detailed examination of political worldview of all the actors involved in the Awakening, see Martha Cottam and Joe Huseby, *Confronting Al-Qaeda* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

legitimacy that Berger argues is the driving force justifying in-group hostility and violence towards the out-group. To put this simply, defection of Sunnis to the perceived enemy would make the Islamic State movement's campaign of terror and insurgency hard to justify to its own fighters, as well as to its extensive local and global support network.

Denial, Anger, and Acceptance

Zarqawi's death in the summer of 2006 spared him from having to deal with an organized rebellion against his movement, something he might have been poorly equipped to do as a Jordanian leading a majority Iraqi movement by this time in the group's lifecycle. Zarqawi's appointed successor in al-Qa'ida in Iraq, Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, was an Egyptian veteran of the larger jihadist movement. A preferred choice by the Al-Qa'ida Central leadership. He too was not an ideal figure to take over the larger political project of a caliphate in Iraq, especially considering the Iraqi character of the group by 2006. In a September speech that the Mujahidin Shura Council released close to the Anbar Salvation Council's formation by Abu Risha al-Sittar, Abu Hamza neglected to mention the Sahwa at all.[47] Considering the careful attention the group paid to its Sunni base, it is hard to believe that Abu Hamza and his advisors were ignorant of the coming storm. The group was still more concerned about its fraught relationship with the large Sunni resistant groups that refused to join the Salafi coalition's banner. Subsequently, the Mujahidin Shura Council chose to ignore the Awakening's founding and hoped to curb it in other ways.

This decision to publically ignore the Sahwa while addressing it in a covert manner followed existing policy, as demonstrated by the May 2006 assassination of an al-Qaim Sunni tribal leader, Osama al-Jad'an, who had fought al-Qa'ida in 2005-6 in an early version of the Awakening.[48] The Mujahidin Shura Council's press release merely mentioned that the man "had sold his religion and crossed his limit in harming jihad and the mujahidin. This just penalty will be the punishment to all those who betray their religion and their people and conspire against jihad and its people."[49] For the remainder of 2006, despite heavy fighting between the new Islamic State and the nascent Sahwa coalition in Anbar province, not one claim was made of the killing of an Awakening member. Instead, the claims were made disingenuously against the "apostate policemen" of Ramadi (which were mostly Sahwa at the time), or simply omitted from the voluminous daily operational summaries of Mujahidin Shura Council activities.[50]

Instead of contesting the rise of the Sahwa in public, the movement expressed a new a tribal commitment with a timing that does not seem coincidental.[51] As part of its

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[47] Abu Hamza al Muhajir, "Soon will their multitude be put to flight, and they will show their backs," audio message, *Media Division of the Mujahidin Shura Council*, September 7, 2006.

[48] The ABCNews Investigative Unit, "Iraqi Tribes Assist in Arresting Zarqawi's Foreign Fighters," *ABC News*, January 27, 2006, https://abcnews.go.com/International/story?id=1549643&page=1.

[49] Media commission of the Mujahidin Shura Council, "Assassination of Usama al-Jad'an," posted on the Global News Network, May 29, 2006.

[50] I could find no reports of Islamic State of Iraq attacks in late 2006 that described targeting Awakening forces, which at the time were claiming large victories against their Islamic State foes; for example, see Ministry of Information, Islamic State of Iraq, "Islamic State of Iraq claims harvest of 39 operations in al-Anbar state, 3-17 December," al-Fajr Media, December 22, 2006.

[51] The continued use of the term Al-Qa'ida in Iraq by the U.S. government and almost all analysts (probably out of familiarity) has had a large role in confusing most people about the lineage of the group. The term al-Qa'ida in Iraq was not used by the group after its dissolution into the Islamic State of Iraq in October 2006. In fact, it complained in correspondence with other insurgent groups that its rightful name was the Islamic State, and a refusal to call them by their proper name was petty and insulting. The other groups knew better and refused to acknowledge that the group had established an Islamic State, which had important theological implications. The U.S. government continued to

declaration of the new Islamic State of Iraq in October of 2006, the Mujahidin Shura Council released a video narrated by newly appointed spokesman Muharib al-Jubouri announcing the Hilf (Alliance) of the Mutayyabin (scented ones). Jubouri was a well-known Iraqi religious professor from an influential tribe who joined the new Islamic State at its founding.[52] The video contains a reenactment of a pre-Islamic tribal ceremony belonging to the Prophet Muhammad's Quraysh tribe, a celebration of tribal unity. The newly appointed emir of the Islamic State, Abu Umar al-Husayni al-Qurayshi al-Baghdadi, gave his first speech just before the end of 2006 in which he celebrated and explained the new Islamic State.[53] Instead of going into great detail about the founding of an Islamic State, no small event in the wider context of the Iraq war, or lauding the religious credentials of its leaders, Abu Umar instead went into great detail about two matters: the numbers of factions that had rallied to the Mujahidin Shura Council in order to establish the Islamic State, and the tribal elements who had joined the Islamic State and were now represented in its Shura council, for the first time. In his words:

> The manifest prize and the great harvest took place when some 70 percent of Sunni tribal chieftains in the Land of the Two Rivers hastened to join Hilf al-Mutayyabin and bless the oaths of allegiance made to the state of Islam and Muslims. Hence, I thank and hold in high esteem my brothers the tribal chieftains of Al-Dulaym, Al-Jubur, Al-Ubayd, Zawba, Qays, Azzah, Tayy, Al-Janabiyin, Al-Lihyaliyin, Al-Mashahidah, Al-Dayniyah, Bani-Zayd, Al-Mujamma, Bani-Shammar, 'Inizah, Al-Sumayda, Al-Nu'aym, Khazraj, Bani-Luhayb, Al-Bu-Hayyat, Bani-Hamdan, Al-Sa'dun, Al-Ghanim, Al -Sa'idah, Al-Ma'adid, Al-Karabilah, Al-Salman, and Al-Kubaysat.[54]

This emphasis on tribal support, as well as Abu Umar's exaggerated claim of wave of support from breakaway factions of Ansar al-Sunnah, Mujahidin Army, the Islamic Army, and 1920 Revolution Brigade, was most likely a large-scale bluff designed to discredit any notion that there was a widespread rebellion against the newly anointed Islamic State.[55] Events would soon prove that Abu Umar was not truthful in this description of tribal support for the Islamic State movement.

Stumped by the Sahwa

After some consultation between Abu Umar, and other senior leadership, including emir of Baghdad Jarrah al-Shami and Minister of War Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, Islamic State's ministry of information released a statement in February 2007 about their new operation called al-Karamah (Dignity).[56] The plan was designed to counter the newly announced U.S. "surge plan," which the leadership viewed as a serious challenge, and their press release noted "the traitors of the Sunnis, out of betrayal, may God bring

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shame to them, want to see this new plan succeed and the government rescued from collapse to protect their own positions and seats." This brief reference and use of the term "rescue" was a way to specifically tie the Anbar Rescue Council and its "awakening" to a government that allowed the ethnic cleansing of Sunnis in Baghdad, and to contrast this with Islamic State claims to champion Sunni across Iraq.[57]

By March 2007 the spread of the Awakening out of Ramadi into other Anbari towns forced the Islamic State on the back foot. Searching for a term to describe their attacks on Sunni tribesmen and former resistance members in Fallujah, its media department tried using the term "the Albu Risha police."[58] In early April, the media officials tried a different tack in reporting an attack on:

> [T]he apostate Abdallah al-Jubouri ... [who] leads a group of agents and spies in the province, who convinced themselves to throw themselves into the arms of the Jews and Crusaders. He was the former Diyala governor, who was removed by his Crusader and Safavid masters, and is now licking their shoes and bowing in worship to them once more. He heads the council of illusions, which is believed only by him and others around him, who are equally fooled, the so-called The Diyala Rescue Front, which is one of the tumors needing to be removed from the body of this Mahdi nation.[59]

In the same month, Islamic State of Iraq claims of other attacks on "police forces" in Ramadi, the Sahwa stronghold, labeled the victims simply as "apostates."[60]

By May 2007, the officials of the media department were stepping up a campaign of vitriol in response to U.S. claims that attacks in Anbar were lower, as well as appearances on Arab media by Awakening figures. They called the Sahwa the "Al-Anbar Infidels" and "a group of road bandits not capable of fighting the mujahidin, especially after their American masters tried and failed during the last four years." The Americans were hiding behind "wicked mobsters" and lacked the courage to fight the Islamic State's fighters "face to face." According to the same release, the Islamic State was preparing a new plan to bleed the U.S. in a long war, with the help of the "free honorable tribes."[61] Starting in early June, the Islamic State for the first time, began to openly claim attacks on "Rescue Council apostate" police.[62]

Desperate to tie their former in-group members to the out-group, in June the Islamic State released what they said was proof of a "Magi" (Iranian) conspiracy to defeat the Sunnis for good. The statement quoted from the transcript of an alleged "Iranian"/Shi'a militia conference that praised the "Kilab (dogs) of Anbar" (Sahwa) for "keeping al-Qa'ida busy in side-fights," while the Islamic Terror Army (rival group Islamic Army of Iraq) and the al-Qa'ida terror gangs are busy fighting among themselves according to what was planned."[63] Most likely an invention of the media department, this revelation fell flat,

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[57] Ministry of Information, Islamic State of Iraq, "Victory from Allah and Speedy Help," *Al Fajr Media Center*, February 6, 2007.

[58] Ministry of Information, Islamic State of Iraq, "Harvest of Operations in Al-Fallujah, 6-26 March," *al-Fajr Media Center*, April 9, 2007.

[59] Ministry of Information, Islamic State of Iraq, "Attack on Abdallah al-Jubouri," *al-Fajr Media Center*, April 11, 2007.

[60] Ministry of Information, Islamic State of Iraq, "Ten attacks in various parts of Iraq," *al-Fajr Media Center*, April 27, 2007.

[61] Ministry of Information, Islamic State of Iraq, "The Ministry of War in The Islamic State of Iraq Replies to the Comments by the Marines Commander in Al-Anbar," *al-Fajr Media*, May 1, 2007.

[62] Ministry of Information, Islamic State of Iraq, "for a harvest of 15 operations carried out in the city of Al-Fallujah and its surroundings, including Al-Anbar Province, 30 May to 6 June 2007," *al-Fajr Media*, June 7, 2007.

[63] Ministry of Information, Islamic State of Iraq, "This is the Way the Magis Conspire against the Sunnis," *al-Fajr Media*, June 18, 2007.

even with an audience primed to believe in Shi'a conspiracies. The Islamic State never mentioned the document again, and there are no media reports of any such event. If anything, this faux controversy symbolized the complete confusion of both the media department and the upper leadership in all things related to the Sahwa. After this disappointment, the Islamic State media department went quiet on the subject of the Sahwa, and left any response up to the emir himself.

To the rank and file, the confusion over what to do about Sunnis fighting the Islamic State was a very large problem, one that was increasing with time. Abu Umar warned his soldiers in July about the dilemma: "To our soldiers, I say: two traits are the objects of our affection, respect and appreciation, even if some of them fight us. They are the mujahidin groups and Sunni tribes. Do not blame any community for its crime against another, even if they shed our blood and stabbed our honor. Face injustice with justice and welfare, hatred with kindness and distance with nearness."[64] This suspiciously sounds like hearts and minds rhetoric heard from U.S. military leaders at the time, an ironic turn of events to be sure. The media department picked up this theme in August of 2007, trying to explain to supporters why Sunnis would pick up weapons against their brothers, blaming "hateful members of the Ba'ath who are promoting the return of the Godless Ba'ath," vengeful relatives, gangs and thieves, ambitious tribal sheikhs of "undecided tribes," corrupted jihadists interested in money, and members of the Islamic Party (Muslim Brotherhood) taking advantage of the situation.[65] The solution was simple:

> Those examples and others are the nucleus of this 'militia' or these 'salvation committees' and they should be treated as decided by the Islamic clerics as an abstaining group that must be fought and form jihad against so that the religion will be all for God. Forming jihad against them and carrying out the verdict of God on them is an [sic] most important duty at this time, those that have entered into atheism and apostasy in many ways.[66]

After weeks of not mentioning the Sahwa, the Islamic State's media department felt compelled to address the issue when General David Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker discussed American sponsorship of the Sahwa in the U.S. congressional hearings on Iraq. In a release mentioning and quoting both Americans, the Islamic State made a critique of the U.S. strategy of relying on the Sahwa that might have resonated with members of the American political opposition (and in fact might have accurately depicted their future downfall):

> In fact, the phenomenon of arming the tribes is a direct reflection of the American failure and confusion. On one hand, they talk about fighting the rejectionist [Shi'a] militia, and on the other hand they create tribal militias whose loyalties are changeable, who are moving on unstable grounds, and whose fate is tied up to the continuation or the departure of the Crusader occupation. The phenomenon of collaboration and treachery is not new in Islamic history. Events always offer evidence of the connection between the fates of these traitors and their masters. History is filled with examples of such people. The fact that the Crusader enemy turned to the mercenaries and

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[64] Abu Umar al Baghdadi, ""if ye desist from wrong, it will be best for you," *Al-Furqan Media Productions*, July 8, 2007.
[65] This example of blaming its problems on the defunct Ba'ath was actually a long-running theme seen in Islamic State media products and strategic communications, and gives lie to continual attempts to describe the group's success as a function of Ba'ath infiltration, which has always been much more limited than the conventional wisdom attributes. For more on this side topic, see my article "Pedigree of Terror: The Myth of the Ba'ath Influence in the Islamic State movement (2003-2016)" in *Perspectives on Terrorism* (2017).
[66] Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, ""if ye desist from wrong, it will be best for you," *Al-Furqan Media Productions*, July 8, 2007.

some of the gangs to establish these apostate militias is evidence of the desperate and confused state of affair it is in. These projects are short-lived, their structures are fragile, and they are destined to end, God willing, at the hands of the mujahidin. The elimination of the head of apostasy and hypocrisy 'Sattar al-Bazi' is the best proof of that.[67]

"Sattar al-Bazi" was a reference to the Awakening founder Abu Risha al-Sattar, and the unusual reference of "Bazi" a boast highlighting that the group had killed Abu Risha's father (Bazi) years earlier and was now celebrating the assassination of his son, the founder of the traitorous Awakening. After a year of failure, the Islamic State could finally claim its first real success against the Sahwa men.

Killing the Sahwa Brand

… (growing up) I drank the water of the Euphrates, and ate its dates…
Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, Emir of the Islamic State of Iraq (2010) [68]

The killing of Abu Risha should have been bigger news, but the Islamic State's triumph was robbed from them by an obvious reality: the Sahwa had driven the jihadi group out of its core areas and killed hundreds of their foot soldiers and many of their leaders. The Islamic State of Iraq admitted this truth in several statements and in its eulogies of fallen commanders, including several killed by the Sahwa and one killed by the U.S. special operations task force when the Sahwa flushed him from deep cover.[69] No amount of information operations could change the perception that the group had somehow failed to gain widespread support for its nascent Islamic State. The only way they could prove to their adversaries that they still had fight left in them was to conduct operations and publicize them in their periodic operational summaries to prove their relevance.

The killing of Abu Risha, on the first day of Ramadan, was the start of a deliberate campaign targeting key Sahwa leaders. The Islamic State celebrated by bragging that its patient operatives had spent a month planning the elimination of the leader of the Sahwa, proving that there was no one they could not touch. Deriding the slain coalition leader as "the imam of atheism and apostasy, Abd-al-Sattar Abu-Rishah, the head of the so-called Al-Anbar Salvation Council, and one of the dogs of the bearer of the cross, Bush," the press release promised that although he was one of the first to fall, he would not be the last:

> In this regard, we announce the formation of 'Special Security Committees' to hunt down and assassinate tribal prominent figures, who collaborated with the enemy and tarnished the reputation of their pristine tribes, by cooperating with the soldiers of the cross and the Safavid government of Al-Maliki. We shall publish the names of these collaborators and traitors from among the tribal chiefs, to expose them to our blessed tribes. We apologize for not providing the details of this courageous operation for security reasons, and for the sake of protecting the lives of our sons from our blessed

[67] Ministry of Information, Islamic State of Iraq, "The Petraeus-Crocker Report and the American Defeat," *al-Fajr Media*, September 18, 2007.
[68] Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, "The Religious and Political Crime of the Election and Our Duty Toward It," *al Furqan Media Productions*, February 12, 2010.
[69] Ministry of Information, Islamic State of Iraq, "Marytrdom of Abu Usamah al-Tunisi," posted on the *Al-Buraq Islamic Network*, October 1, 2007.

tribes, who had participated successfully in this blessed operation, either by providing information, or logistic support.[70]

And so was born an assassination campaign of tribal leaders that lasted until late 2013, with thousands of leaders, men, and their families killed by these "special security committees."[71] What followed in the next two months were prominent claimed attacks on Sahwa and affiliated Sons of Iraq leaders in north of Baghdad in Saladin, in Baghdad (Dora), and south of Baghdad in the towns of Latifiyah, Radwaniyah, Karaghul, and Yusifiyah.[72] Some of those operations targeted key leaders, while some were massacres of dozens of tribesmen. By November the media department had fallen into the habit of calling their targets the "Sahwa council" or "so-called Sahwa."[73] Occasionally the media would add "gloomy" or "poisoned" as an adjective for the councils, or had fun with names for the group like "the Front for Rescuing the Americans," the "Apostate Consciousness Council," and the "Committee to Destroy Anbar."[74] Despite this, it is clear that the Islamic State never came up with a consistent appellation to use against their Sunni cousins and brothers, and decided to just use Sahwa.[75] In addition to foregoing a more pejorative term for the collaborators, the group followed the example of the killing of Abu Risha by changing policy and claiming all of its Sunni tribal assassinations in public statements, a risky move. If al-Qa'ida Central was upset over the targeting of Shi'a mosques and pilgrims, what would they say about the killings of respected Sunni tribal leaders? In the end, this decision to be transparent (in this issue) follows the media department's general philosophy of framing the group's image as people who are exactly who they say they are. And so, going forward they have regularly claimed the killings of Sahwa chiefs and members throughout Iraq, since 2007 to the present, despite a significant risk to popularity and perceived legitimacy.[76]

In October of 2007, emir of the group Abu Umar tried to put the Sahwa influenced setback into perspective in his speech celebrating the first anniversary of the founding of the Islamic State of Iraq. According to Abu Umar, the "soldiers of the State of Islam" were facing over 300,000 U.S. soldiers and contractors, 300,000 Iraqi policemen and 280,000 soldiers, as well as:

> [M]ore than 70,000 agents of the Awakening councils and several thousands of the traitors of the so-called honest resistance...We are fighting one of the fiercest and longest battles of Islam today, in which there have been many sacrifices and distinct ranks and in which your sons have proven that they are truly the soldiers of God and knights of Islam. We give you glad tidings today about the situation of the State of Islam in Iraq. Praise be to God, it is going from good to better, contrary to what the enemies of God are trying to show to the world to influence the mujahidin by saying that districts are falling into

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[70] Ministry of Information, Islamic State of Iraq, "the assassination of Abd-al-Sattar Abu-Risha, who was killed on the first day of Ramadan, 13 September," *al-Fajr Media*, September 14, 2007.

[71] To understand the tremendous depth and breadth of this elimination campaign, see Craig Whiteside, "The Islamic State and the Return of Revolutionary Warfare," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27, no. 5 (2016), 743-776.

[72] The Sons of Iraq were technically part of a reconciliation program outside of the Anbar Tribes, and had a similar makeup and function. The U.S. also called them the Concerned Local Citizens. For the claim see: Ministry of Information, Islamic State of Iraq, attack claims on "Sahwa" from October 9,15,17, 23 and November 13, 17, and 23, 2007, *al-Fajr Media*. For the description of the Sons of Iraq, see Najim Abed Al-Jabouri and Sterling Jensen, "The Iraqi and AQI Roles in the Sunni Awakening," *Prism* 2, no. 1 (December 2012).

[73] Ministry of Information, Islamic State of Iraq, attack claims on "Sahwa councils in Southern Baghdad," *al-Fajr Media*, December 3 and 6, 2007.

[74] Craig Whiteside, "The Smiling, Scented Men," 125.

[75] Ministry of Information, Islamic State of Iraq, attack claims on "Baghdad" and "Baghdad and Diyala," *al-Fajr Media*, November 22 and December 14, 2007.

[76] I argued this was one of six principles underlying the Islamic State approach to influence operations. See Whiteside, "Lighting the Path," 22-3. This has much to do with narrowing the say-do gap, as proposed by Haroro J Ingram, "Three Traits of the Islamic State's Information Warfare," *The RUSI Journal* 159, no. 6 (2014), 4-11.

the hands of the apostates, including the traitorous agents and relapsing, defeated ones. I can say that the apostasy of some tribal chieftains and those allied with them is almost confined to some tribes of Al-Dulaym and a faction from Al-Jubur. I say some. Otherwise, who killed al-Rishawi? It was one of his cousins who shed his blood to please God, show loyalty to the religion of God, and disavow false gods. It is enough honor to the Al-Jubur that Muharib al-Juburi [the deceased ISI spokesman] is one of them. He is one of the founders of the State of Islam. The State of Islam has the upper hand. In Kirkuk, the lions of the state stood with its honorable tribes in the face of the criminal acts of the secular Peshmerga, which covet the genuine monotheist Arabs. They have disrupted their plans and foiled their plots. The State of Islam then had the word there after our weak presence before the declaration of the state.[77]

The emphasis on the good tribes, and their stand against the traitorous tribes and the "secular" Peshmerga was supposedly turning the tide back in the Islamic State's favor. Several weeks later, in a late December 2007 speech, Abu Umar imparted his solution to the in-group problem described in section "Identity, Propaganda and the Sahwa" of this paper:

I address you today and say sacrifice the apostates of the Awakening and may God accept your sacrifices. They have become agents of the cross and knights against the mujahidin. They have violated honor, plundered money, and sought to reap the fruit of the martyrs' blood. So, do not miss this great honor.[78]

An Offer to Repent

The decision to openly target Sahwa tribal and former resistance leaders and men was a difficult one since the targets, unlike the police and Army, were uniformly Sunni. This fact, when publicly admitted in monthly provincial operational statements, naturally contradicts Zarqawi's crisis narrative that focused on a new Shi'a domination of a traditionally Sunni-run state since the Abbasid caliphate. Furthermore, from a strategic perspective, Abu Umar's articulation of the forces arrayed against the Islamic State was not exaggerated, and at some point, the group needed to add more forces than it was subtracting from its force-ratio calculus. While certain avowed apostates would be untouchable, the pragmatic decision was made to offer an olive branch to those that might reconsider their alliance with the Americans and the Iraqi government.

The leader's decision to focus on Sunni in-group reformation at the expense of other strategic priorities can be explained once again by referring to Berger and Ingram's identity construction and political violence frameworks. According to Berger, support for escalation against the out-group becomes problematic as perceptions of legitimacy for violent acts decreases. From Ingram, the crisis has to be clearly tied to the actions of the out-group for messaging to be effective. In-group defection and collaboration with the out-group naturally casts doubt on the roots of the crisis. The danger of Zarqawi's high-risk strategy of creating a national sense of association and dissociation through

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[77] Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, "For the Scum Disappears Like Froth Cast Out," audio recording, *Al-Furqan Media*, December 4, 2007.
[78] Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, "Lowly with the believers, Mighty against the rejecters," audio recording, *Al-Furqan Media*, December 22, 2007.

unrelenting and provocative terrorist acts was always that the Islamic State might be blamed as the real source of the crisis.

Abu Umar and Abu Hamza's solution to this immense problem was to take steps to convince Sunnis that were ambivalent or loosely committed to collaboration with the government that the Islamic State could be a successful competitor for the future governance of Iraq, especially once the United States and its powerful military was out of the picture. Following this milestone, recruits would begin to flow into the organization once again. Key to this would be pressuring tribal leaders who swung to the government to collaboration, or letting them face the consequences. For those that doubted the power of the Islamic State to fulfill its threats, the newly formed tribal engagement office would administer successive warnings to tribal leaders before alerting the security detachments charged with providing a real sense of consequences for those who failed to pledge allegiance to Abu Umar and Abu Hamza.[79]

This general strategy, initially implemented in 2007 as described above, was not articulated and publically disseminated until late 2009 when an anonymous member of the group published a 55-page document titled *The Strategy to Improve the Political Position of the Islamic State*.[80] Much like the bumper sticker slogans of U.S. national security strategies, this milestone document used the slogan "nine bullets for the apostate, one for the crusader" to communicate its essence.[81] By "apostate" the authors of the strategy (also known as the "Fallujah" document) were alluding to Sunnis who were forsaking their duty to fight the infidels and their proxy forces.

From an information perspective, the narrative to support the strategy implementation went something like this: some tribal leaders misled their tribes, causing them to apostatize for money; take the offer to repent, and you will be forgiven. This message had already been used since the early years of the war against Sunnis that had joined the police and army, as well as the Islamic State's rival Islamists - the Muslim Brotherhood branch in Iraq known as the Iraqi Islamic Party. This approach had limited success in the past, yet nevertheless the group began to publicize the offer in releases heralding individual or group repentance. This invitation to repent was also extended to the fighters of other resistance groups who had fought the American and Iraqi government before turning their weapons against the Islamic State of Iraq.[82]

This careful differentiation between their Islamist rivals, former resistance allies, and Sunni tribal elements as in-group defectors was remarkably different from how the Islamic State lumped its enemies together in one large category. For example, the media

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79 The Islamic State established a tribal office in 2009 that specifically managed relations with the tribes. An example of the work of that office is: Abu Khaldun, "Synopsis of the Relations Committee in Baghdad's Southern Belt," *NDU CRRC*, Document AQ PMPR-D-001–717 (2009). That office still exists, as seen in this video: The Islamic State, "The Structure of the Caliphate," *al Furqan Media*, July 6, 2016, available at Aaron Zelin's Jihadology website, http://jihadology.net/2016/07/06/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-the-structure-of-the-caliphate/.
80 Islamic State of Iraq, "Strategy to Improve the Political Position of the Islamic State," (late 2009), provided to the author by researcher Hassan Hassan and translated in its entirety by Anas Elallame from the Middlebury Institute for International Studies, Monterey, CA. Mohammad Hafez shared his thoughts with me on the document as well.
81 The phrase is an adaptation from a quote from jihadi ideologue Abdullah Azzam, who allegedly wrote "if you want to liberate a land, place in your gun ten bullets: nine for the traitors and one for the enemy," as seen in a billboard in Tel Afar, Iraq during the caliphate period (2014-2017); see Aymenn al-Tamimi, "The Islamic State Billboards and Murals of Tel Afar and Mosul," *Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi blog*, January 7, 2015 http://www.aymennjawad.org/2015/01/the-islamic-state-billboards-and-murals-of-tel; thanks to @FollwrOfDeen (Twitter) for the tip/reminder.
82 Various invitations to repent were extended through statements by the Ministry of Information of the Islamic State of Iraq: for the Islamic Party, see: Ministry of Information, Islamic State of Iraq, Operational Claim, al-Fajr Media, January 31, 2007; for the Kirkuk police, see: Ministry of Information, Islamic State of Iraq, Operational Claim, al-Fajr Media, February 17, 2007; for the Salah al Din police, see: Ministry of Information, Islamic State of Iraq, Operational Claim, al-Fajr Media, October 19, 2007; for the apostates in Baghdad see: Ministry of Information, Islamic State of Iraq, Operational Claim, al-Fajr Media, October 24, 2007.

department talked about the Shi'a population in general as belonging to either Sadr's Mahdi army or the Badr Corps – the *Dajjal* (Devil) Army and the *Ghadr* (Treacherous) corps, respectively. This simplification included large-scale fabrication regarding its attack claims on Shi'a civilians, which up until 2007 were disingenuously described as militia combatants.[83] This extensive differentiation of the in-group and the blurring of the out-group supports the ideas from Berger and Ingram that the focus on defining the in-group is the key foundation for extremist influence campaigns. In contrast, the out-group becomes a fuzzy "other."

First Defector… and First Extremist

> I, the humble servant and the chief judge of the State, went along [to negotiate a dispute between the Islamic State and a tribe], only to find out that the wali of Salah al-Din had made an agreement with this tribe that they would attack the police station only with the permission of the tribe. So, it turns out that in reality, the Islamic State is the party that pledged allegiance to the tribe, not the other way around…
>
> - Abu Sulayman al-Utaybi (2007) [84]

To say that the decision to offer repentance to the Sahwa (and others) was controversial in the summer of 2007 would be a drastic understatement. These acts of betrayal were a clear apostasy according to the Salafi jihadi ethos, and could not be forgiven easily, if at all. The leadership's decision to do so was not unopposed, and the record of that opposition would have serious ramifications for the group for years to come.

Abu Sulayman al-Utaybi was a Saudi Islamic studies scholar in training who emigrated and joined al-Qa'ida in Iraq in 2006, and was appointed to the "first cabinet" as the head of the sharia committee. In this position, Abu Sulayman acted as a chief justice responsible for the religious practice of the organization as a whole. Unlike many of the crucial strategic decisions in the history of the movement, we have access to the details of the counter-Sahwa policy battle thanks to a letter that Abu Sulayman wrote to al-Qa'ida leadership in Pakistan about his general disagreements with his new bosses, Abu Umar and Abu Hamza, and almost every important policy they instituted.

Fishman called Abu Sulayman "the First Defector," and incorporated Abu Sulayman's critiques into a larger analysis of the Islamic State movement, with the appropriate caveats.[85] Other analysts seem to accept Abu Sulayman's commentary on the group at face value, including descriptions of Abu Hamza's fixation on the apocalypse, the media department's reliance on old footage for new products, the extortion of Sunni businessmen, and an uninspiring emir (Abu Umar). Much of the reporting on Abu Sulayman's letter came from mentions of the letter and copies of several replies from al-Qa'ida's top leaders, which was found in the possession of the Islamic State's information minister in 2008 by U.S. forces.[86] Al-Qa'ida leaked Abu Sulayman's full 2007 critique in

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[83] Craig Whiteside, "A case for terrorism as genocide in an era of weakened states," *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict: Pathways toward terrorism and genocide* 8, no.3 (2015).

[84] Abu Sulayman al-Utaybi, letter to al-Qa'ida leadership (dated April-May 2007), posted on *Ana al-Muslim network*, November 24, 2013.

[85] According to Fishman, "It is impossible to know whether Abu Sulyaman's concerns were accurate, exaggerated, or manipulated by an intelligence service," see "The First Defector: Abu Sulayman al-Utaybi, the Islamic State, and al-Qa`ida," *CTC Sentinel* 8, no. 10 (October 2015).

[86] Bill Roggio, Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, Tony Badran, "Intercepted Letters from al-Qa'ida Leaders Shed Light on State of Network in Iraq," *The Long War Journal*, Foundation for Defense of Democracies (September 12, 2008).

late 2013 after the falling out between the Islamic State and al-Qa'ida, with the purpose of retroactively discrediting the group's founders.[87]

Abu Sulayman's letter reveals some honest and fair critiques, but there are many problems with accepting his opinions uncritically, as many do. First, Abu Sulayman was an outsider with a brief tenure with the group – spending only five months in his high level position.[88] His criticism of highly politically connected leaders in the Islamic State, including deputy emir Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Falahi, spokesman Muharib al-Jubouri, and information minister Khaled al-Mashadani, combined with his savaging of Abu Umar and Abu Hamza make Abu Sulayman sound like a political naïf.[89] He implied that al-Falahi and al-Jubouri, a noted Iraqi Salafi scholar who probably taught Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, did not adhere to "our thought nor to our method," corrupting the Islamic State "from the inside, intellectually, methodologically, and ethically."[90]

His critiques of the establishment of the Islamic State and the theological implications of having two emirs – he insisted the Taliban's Mullah Umar was the true leader of the Islamic ummah – coupled with his description of the new Islamic State flag as an "innovation," make it hard to believe that he signed on to be the first sharia judge of a "state" he did not believe in. According to his own letter, in the short time he was there he angered Abu Umar for his remarks concerning the flag – the same flag that is today recognizable around the world – and was rebuked by Abu Hamza for playing roving ombudsman. A frustrated Abu Hamza had to order Abu Sulayman to only investigate cases given to him as chief judge.[91]

Bemoaning the demise of the Islamic State of Iraq in the tough times of mid-2007, much of which was due to the rise of the Sahwa, Abu Sulayman references the failure of a Ramadi counterattack as a wasted effort made in haste. In reality, it was a very soundly planned and executed special operation that could have short-circuited the Sahwa's efforts to establish itself in the spring of 2007, according to reporter Ann Tyson, who interviewed U.S. military members outside of Ramadi who intervened to prevent the attack. Luckily for the Sahwa, a random U.S. patrol compromised the Islamic State assault force in its final position outside of the city in what is known as the Battle of Donkey Island. Tyson's account of this battle describes it as a fierce fight against a well-trained group of fighters, and a very near thing.[92] The failure of this operation crippled the group's hope of staying in the city where they had anchored their nascent Islamic State, but my research on this planned infiltration of Ramadi leads me to believe that the

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[87] Abu Sulayman al-Utaybi letter; it was also translated to social media in smaller bits, see Anonymous, "This is the message written by Abu Sulayman al-Utaybi who was the Highest Judge in #ISI to AQC," tweets compiled to a *Justpaste.it* site, https://justpaste.it/fhsu.

[88] According to analyst @Mr0rangeTracker, there were chat board rumors after his dismissal that Abu Sulayman had been a Saudi plant. These are most likely false rationalizations, considering he was killed in a drone strike in Pakistan after rejoining al-Qa'ida. It is obvious from his letter that he was more al-Qa'ida than he was Islamic State, and an early sign of the future split.

[89] Muharhib al-Jubouri was eulogized by Abu Umar as one of the founders of the state of Islam in Iraq, and was a highly regarded member of the Iraqi Salafi underground movement before 2003. He led a group to join the new Islamic State of Iraq and became its first spokesman. His sermons and speeches were staples of ISI propaganda in the lean years, even after his 2007 killing. Khaled al-Mashadani was influential enough to be considered for the first emir of the Islamic State, and passed over for Abu Umar. Instead he was appointed to the influential position of information emir. The media department Abu Sulayman criticized produced over one thousand unique media releases in 2007, an exceptional achievement for any terrorist group that was only surpassed by its own, more recent record. For more on Jubouri and al-Mashadani and analysis of output from 2007, see Whiteside, "Smiling, Scented Men," (2014); for more analysis, see Aaron Zelin, "Picture Or It Didn't Happen: A Snapshot of the Islamic State's Official Media Output," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no.4 (2015).

[90] Abu Sulayman al-Utaybi letter.

[91] Abu Sulayman al-Utaybi letter.

[92] Ann Scott Tyson, "A Deadly Clash at Donkey Island," *Washington Post*, August 19, 2007, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/08/18/AR2007081801270.html.

decision to try to regain the city from the lightly armed and untrained Sahwa was a reasonable one, subject like all operations to the whims of combat.[93]

All of this discussion of Abu Sulayman's critique is missing, as all previous analyses, the element that is most important to this investigation of the counter-Sahwa campaign: Abu Sulayman's palpable disgust of the Islamic State's plan to reconcile with Sunni tribes and resistance members. According to Abu Sulayman, the most important failing of the policy was "the matter of the amnesty granted to the criminals of the tribes who went back and formed the Awakenings, despite the fact that the brothers knew their guile and their deceitful plan, and so such people should not have been granted amnesty."[94] Abu Sulayman felt so strongly about this position that he admits in his famous letter to personally burning three Sunni men alive, in retaliation for the killing of three Islamic State fighters by some tribal fighters.[95] Abu Sulayman contrasted his actions by sarcastically quoting deputy emir al-Falahi as saying "al-Qa'ida's manhaj (method) will disappear and the wasati (middle path) manhaj will remain." Abu Sulayman cynically commented on this by asking, "what middle path is he talking about? Unfortunately, it's these compromises made by our brothers that we are seeing today."[96]

Confident in his critique, Abu Sulayman attached a CD of the video of his brutal burning of the Sahwa men – a foreshadowing of today's media releases and particularly the burning of the Jordanian pilot in 2015[97] – with his letter to al-Qa'ida. While never publicly released by the Islamic State media department, his video made the rounds of early social media in 2007.[98] This most likely was the last straw for the chief sharia judge, and quite possibly a mistaken attempt to influence the policy battle in his favor. Abu Sulayman might have been the "first defector," but he could also be fairly described as the "first extremist."

It is reasonable to assume that the Islamic State could not offer repentance for what is in essence a religious violation of a duty to commit jihad, against infidel armies, on Muslim territory, without the support of its chief cleric. On the important issue of reconciliation with the tribes and the resistance, the leadership tandem of Abu Umar and Abu Hamza overruled their sharia chief Abu Sulayman's objections, no small matter in a religiously oriented militant organization. Shortly before the killing of Abu Risha al-Sittar, and a public offer of repentance, the Islamic State quietly fired Abu Sulayman in a brief media statement,[99] and allowed him to leave for Pakistan, where he told his story to an al-Qa'ida leadership team already frantic about the crisis in Iraq and lacking regular

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[93] An account from the Islamic State of Iraq about the "Battle of Life" as it was called by the group is informative in this regard. See Mu'awiyah al-Qahtani, "The Biography of the Brave Leader and Lion of Epic Battles: Jarrah al-Shami, May God Rest Him in Peace," posted on the *Ana al-Muslim Network* (Arabic), August 26, 2012. I plan on publishing more on this raid and other special operations by the group in a future publication titled: The Dark Side of Special: Islamic State's Special Operations (2007-2013), pending revision.

[94] Roggio, et al., (2008).

[95] Abu Sulayman al-Utaybi letter; the tribe had attacked the Islamic State fighters in retaliation for an attack on a local police station manned by tribal members, possibly related to the Sahwa. Abu Sulayman did not approve of the negotiations by the provincial emir, who according to Abu Umar had the right to make these decisions in his province.

[96] Abu Sulayman al-Utaybi letter.

[97] Suleiman al-Khalidi, "Islamic State shows burning of hostage, Jordan vows 'earth-shaking' response," *Reuters* February 3, 2015, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-killing-islamic-state-shows-burning-of-hostage-jordan-vows-earth-shaking-response-idUSKBN0L71XE20150203.

[98] Abu Sulayman al-Utyabi letter; thanks to @Mr0rangeTracker on Twitter for bringing the burning of the three Sahwa men to my attention, and Fanar Haddad who watched the video and confirmed its existence (never officially released by the ISI but nonetheless posted as captured footage on the web).

[99] Interestingly, in the same notice the Islamic State of Iraq appointed Dr. Muhammad al-Badri as the education minister prior to the new school year (2007-8). It is highly likely that this is the future caliph, whose full name is Dr. Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim Ali Muhammad al-Badri al-Samarrai. The curriculum of the Islamic State would have required a religiously trained person to guide it.

communication with their star franchise.[100] This communication gap had grown so large that Osama Bin Laden heard of the establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq and the selection of Abu Umar to be the first emir of the Islamic State through online pronouncements.[101]

There is an interesting counterfactual here: if the Islamic State had followed Abu Sulayman's advice on how to deal with the Sahwa, it would likely have resulted in a vicious death spiral wherein its local Sunni support base would have collapsed. This would in turn have deprived foreigners connected to Islamic State of sanctuary, forcing them to flee. Prime Minister Maliki's sectarian acts that inflamed the Sunni community would have had no armed and organized support and would probably eventually have died down, like many of the protest movements of the Arab Spring. Al-Qa'ida's reaction might have been to disassociate itself from the group, something already contemplated by the senior leadership for other reasons, all related to extremist behavior.[102] Instead, the Islamic State's leaders took their own counsel over a stranger's and slowly righted a sinking ship.

The Carrot and the Stick

From a handbill found in Madain (South of Baghdad):

> *We announce our establishment of the Al-Sadiq Corps in which we will fight all heretics and infidels, after our armed companies have achieved success in their training exercises. – Abu Umar al Baghdadi*
>
> *Fight those adjacent to you of the disbelievers and let them find in you harshness [Quranic verse].*
>
> *Al Qurtubi says: The Lord taught them how to perform the duty of jihad. It should start with those very close to the community and so on and so forth. This is how the prophet did it with the Arabs.*
>
> *[Pictures of Sahwa members with US officers, with caption]: The Descendants of Treason*
>
> *If the Occupation Forces cannot protect themselves….?*
>
> *[Drawing of a pistol pointed at picture of Abu Risha with President Bush and a knife across Abu Risha, with caption]: Was Bush able to protect him?*
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> *[pictures of "lions of Jihad," with caption]: True believers fighting for the cause of God* [103]

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[100] Ministry of Information, Islamic State of Iraq, "The dismissal of Abu-Sulayman al-Utaybi and his replacement with Abu Is Haq al-Juburi," statement posted on *World News Network*, August 25, 2007. Abu Sulayman was killed in a drone strike in Pakistan in 2008, see William McCants, "Death of a Sulayman," *Jihadica* website, May 13, 2008, http://www.jihadica.com/death-of-a-sulayman/.

[101] Roggio, et al., (2008).

[102] Adam Gadahn, "Letter from Adam Gadahn," 2012, *CTC USMA*, Document SOCOM-2012-0000004, https://ctc.usma.edu/harmony-program/letter-from-adam-gadahn-original-language-2/.

[103] Islamic State of Iraq, "Handbill found in Madain Area," unknown date (est. 2007-2010), *Conflict Records Research Center*, National Defense University, Document # CRRC AQ-MCOP-D-001-877.

The Islamic State of Iraq offered its first public invitation to repent to the Sahwa during an eventful Ramadan, one that began with the killing of Sahwa founder Abu Risha in September 2007. Emir Abu Umar made the offer himself, and celebrated the Islamic State's stated priorities for this particular Ramadan: jihad and forgiveness.[104] Abu Umar repeated the offer in May of 2008, with deputy Abu Hamza al-Muhajir offering repentance in April 2009 for those who approached the Islamic State before its security officials found them.[105] This invitation to repent apostasy – specifically collaboration with an infidel/apostate government – became a staple of IS strategic communications for the next six years, even after Abu Umar and Abu Hamza were killed in a joint special operations raid in 2010. Spokesman Mohammad al-Adnani reinforced the continuity of the carrot and stick approach in his first official speech in August of 2011, warning the recalcitrant among the Sahwa:

> Why do you refuse? How long would you live in fear? No one among you dares to leave his house, travel, or even sleep peacefully in his own home. When will you enjoy peace again? How long are you going to stay alert day and night? Do you think we will go away? Do you think we will cease to exist or get bored? No! We will remain … please hurry up, as we still hope you repent to God. That's why we do not kill you except your chiefs and those whom we despair of their repentance.[106]

The former Zarqawi-era fighter turned media man reminded Sunni Iraqis in February 2012 that the Sahwa had been treated poorly by the Maliki government of Iraq, with large numbers of its constituents "expelled, arrested, humiliated." The offer to repent was an honest one, he claimed, and better than what the Shi'a government could ever match now that they had gotten what they needed from the gullible tribal chiefs.[107]

As for the newly appointed emir of the Islamic State, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi deliberately waited two years to make his first statement in the summer of 2012. His online absence was defended by the media organization as a necessary one, as the Islamic State built a foundation for a more aggressive irregular warfare campaign.[108] With the commencement of the Islamic State's "Breaking the Walls" campaign, and the United States military out of Iraq, Abu Bakr broke his silence as the tempo began to pick up by August of that year. Like his spokesman, he did not forget the Sahwa in his very first speech:

> [A]s for those who were misled by chieftains and members of our tribes and thus sided with the ranks of the Crusader United States and became servants and stooges of the Safavid government, I tell them that I swear to God you will not be harmed if you follow the truth and support the religion of God,

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[104] Abu Umar al Baghdadi, "They plan and Allah plans," audio message, *Al-Furqan Media*, September 2007.

[105] Abu Umar al Baghdadi, "Solid Cement Structure," audio message, *Al-Furqan Media*, May 2008; Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, "The Second Audio Interview With Shaykh Abu Hamzah Al-Muhajir, May God Protect Him," audio message, *Al-Furqan Media*, April 20, 2009.

[106] Although this was his first speech as spokesman, he had been working in the media department since his 2009 release from Camp Bucca; Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, "The State of Islam Will Remain Safe," audio message, *Al-Fajr Media*, August 7, 2011.

[107] Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, "Iraq, Iraq, O Sunni people," audio tape, Al-Furqan Media, posted on *Ansar al-Mujahidin Network*, February 24, 2012.

[108] An Islamic State Shura council member remarked that the decision not to make leadership statements after 2010 was deliberate and temporary (lasting two years), see Abu Ubaydah Abd-al-Hakim al-Iraqi, "Press conference with a member of the Islamic State of Iraq's Shura Council," *Jihadist Media Elite* and *Al Furqan Media*, posted on Ana al-Muslim Network, April 11, 2011.

just as you fought against it. Thus, repent and reform your mind because God will forgive you and replace your sins with good.[109]

The consistency of the anti-Sahwa campaign is remarkable. Two new leaders, one at the top of the organization and the other the chief spokesman, both with extensive time in the movement (2005 and 2002 respectively), made their public introduction to a growing global community and managed to stay on message about the Sahwa, despite a general opinion at the time that the group was struggling.

The Counter-Sahwa Campaign Spreads to Syria and Sinai

The advantage the Islamic State had when it moved into Syria (in the guise of its Jabhat al-Nusra franchise) in 2011 was that it had just spent eight years in a similar environment, with competing groups from around the political spectrum vying for power and control of areas.[110] By the summer of 2013, researcher Aaron Zelin noted that many of the Islamic State's "online supporters are paranoid about a Sahwa movement emerging in Syria." This idea seemed to be fueled by fighting between western-backed resistance groups and the Islamic State in Raqqa.[111] Pieter Van Ostaeyen also described the infighting as possibly "the first signs of a Syrian Sahwa or uprising."[112]

Mohammad al-Adnani seemed to agree, and worked to link the Sahwa in both theaters in a January 2014 speech addressing audiences in Iraq and Syria: "The Remnants of the Sahwa in Iraq was and still is a poisonous dagger in the side of Ahl al-Sunnah [community]… to make it busy in Anbar and Saladin and preventing them from marching to Baghdad." To galvanize potential supporters interested in joining the Islamic State, al-Adnani once again called Iraqi Sahwa, police, and soldiers to repent. He asked the tribes to prevent sons from joining government security forces, and for the tribes to give allegiance to the Islamic State. For the Syrian people he stated that they should "take a lesson from what happened in the arena of Iraq… I swear it is similar to the plot in Iraq, tit for tat … they are the Sahwa, we know it, and know its nature… and they are today showing hostility in Al-Sham, with the same sponsors, supporters and financers, and even with the same names."[113] The fact that Adnani was a Syrian, with extensive experience in the Iraq front, helped the Islamic State's message seem more credible.

Extensive use by the Islamic State of the Sahwa term in Syria eventually spread to the Sinai region as well, where the Islamic State's rural insurgency against the Egyptian government has run into the same tribal friction it saw in Iraq in 2006. In the spring of 2017, some of the Islamic State's Wilayat Sinai fighters came into conflict with members of the Tarabin tribe, with dead fighters on both sides. In the press release explaining its side of the story, the Islamic State relied on its tried and tested Sahwa playbook in dealing

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[109] Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, "But Allah Will Not Allow But That His Light Should Be Perfected," *Al Furqan Media*, audio statement posted on Hanin Network Forums, July 22 2012.
[110] Charles Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qa'ida, The Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 51-55 and 119 – 125.
[111] Aaron Zelin, "Al-Qa'ida in Syria: A Closer Look at ISIS (Part II)," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy* (September 11, 2013).
[112] Pieter Van Ostaeyen, "Syria's Sahwa, A Battle of Confusion," *Brown Moses blog*, January 12, 2014, http://brown-moses.blogspot.com/2014/01/syrias-sahwa-battle-of-confusion.html.
[113] Mohammad al-Adnani, "The scout doesn't lie to his people," *Fursan al-Balagh Media Translation Department Presents*, available on jihadology.net, January 7, 2014, https://jihadology.net/2014/01/07/al-furqan-media-presents-a-new-audio-message-from-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-shams-shaykh-abu-mu%E1%B8%A5ammad-al-adnani-the-leader-doesnt-say-his-people-are-lying/.

with a confrontational tribe. The tribe took offense to being called a Sahwa tribe, asking the Wilayat Sinai media office not to use the term. The response, which the central media office most likely edited carefully on behalf of their subordinate office, displayed great continuity with the past anti-Sahwa campaigns and demonstrated what the organization has learned about the manipulation of in-group dynamics:

> [W]e clarify and make clear that the term 'Sahwat of Tarabin' does not mean that all the families of the Tarabin are Sahwat, just as when we say Tawaghit of the Arabs, not all Arabs are Tawaghit, and mushrikin of the Quraysh does not mean all Quraysh are mushrikin [hypocrites]. But heeding the desire of our brothers, we will call this apostate fighting group and who so comes under their banner by the name of 'Sahwat of the fugitive Mousa al-Dalah.' We clarify and explain that the Muslims from the Tarabin tribe are our people and brothers … we remind them (of efforts of leaders) from the wilaya in striving to forgive … what happened regarding the al-Da'isi family (and) the killing of one of the soldiers of the wilaya and the wounding of another. The wilaya bore responsibility for pursuing (the matter) before the Shari'i judiciary in subjecting the al-Da'isi family to the law and their compliance with the rule of God Almighty. We clarify and explain that we know that these people are not the seniors of the tribe but rather the despicable pariahs adopted by the Jews and apostate army as tools to implement their plans and determined to destroy the Caliphate project such that they have even handed over the sons of their tribe from the Muslim populace to subject them to evil torture, and they have stood in the rank of the army as spies. The tribe rejects them and their deeds, and the tribe has come to know that we do not aggress in fighting anyone and that this apostate group are the ones who began attacking the men of the al-Hisba (religious enforcement police) and opening fire on them. Lastly, we clarify and explain that we only fight the one who has fought us, the one who has stood in their ranks, and those who have been supporters. God Almighty ordered us to accept the repentance of the one who has repented before gaining power over him, and God will turn in give forgiveness to the one who has repented. Indeed, God is forgiving, merciful.[114]

Instead of targeting the entire tribe, this message shows a deliberate attempt to carefully separate the tribe from individual members or families that have attacked the Islamic State forces in Sinai, while still using the Sahwa term as an insult, and as a deterrent to others in the tribe that might join the fight. The message displays a very careful in-group manipulation, as well as an offer of repentance for those that have strayed. Those that refuse the Islamic State's offer to settle the dispute in good faith, which appeals to most tribal norms of negotiation, can now be safely associated with the out-group. Finally, the tribe's resistance to being labeled as Sahwa in 2017 is striking, and displays a general knowledge of the negative connotation the term has gained since 2007, one of disdain for those who collaborate with an unpopular government. This would seem to apply very well in the Sinai, and certainly in Syria after Assad's horrendous crimes against civilian populations. What used to be applicable to the Iraqi context has now spread to other

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[114] Wilayat Sinai (Islamic State), "Specimen 38Z: Statement distributed in Sinai area,(May 2017)," *Aymenn al-Tamimi's Archive of Islamic State Administrative Documents*, http://www.aymennjawad.org/2015/01/archive-of-islamic-state-administrative-documents; The incidents discussed in this document can be confirmed in this media report: Mada Egypt, "The Sinai State claims responsibility for the killing of members of the Tarabin tribe in northern Sinai in a suicide attack," April 24, 2017
https://www.madamasr.com/ar/2017/04/27/news/u/%D9%88%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%B3%D9%8A%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D9%8A%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%86-%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%A4%D9%88%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%AA%D9%87-%D8%B9%D9%86-%D9%85%D9%82%D8%AA%D9%84-%D8%A3%D9%81/.

regions, where the central government is unpopular and unable to control the monopoly of the legitimate use of force in certain territory.

Conclusion

There is a perception that propaganda, like the Islamic State's videos or sophisticated social media outreach, is powerful enough to change behavior with words alone. This case study rejects this simplistic notion, and affirms that an effective information campaign needs to be of a significant duration to have effect, must be integrated into actual operations that are transparent to the target audience, and must rely on the skillful in-group manipulation described by Berger and Ingram in order to establish a strong basis of legitimacy that justifies the use of violence. The Islamic State was very successful with its counter-Sahwa campaign in realizing real effects on a significant plurality of Iraqi tribal leaders who were powerless to limit their influence on the men and women of the tribe. It would be a mistake to dismiss this lesson because of the collapse of the caliphate in 2017. The proximate cause for this defeat was not a tribal uprising against an unpopular Islamic State, similar to the one in 2006-7, but the combination of a powerful intervention by the United States-led coalition, and the genuine desire of the Iraqi government to take back its territory from the Islamic State. The local tribes played a very restrained role in the Islamic State defeat this time around.[115]

The Islamic State media department is exceptional not because it skillfully presents propaganda on social media platforms, but because it has a good grasp of today's information environment. The group's media team tailors different messages to different groups in what is called narrowcasting, with credible messages that its audience is already primed to receive. The group's leadership has no desire to win the hearts and minds of a global audience. Instead, its expertise is in having its provincial media departments delivering a localized message that generates interest to potential supporters, concerning issues they care about such as land disputes, community policing, and tribal relations. At the same time, the group runs a centrally coordinated "national" campaign to shape larger opinions. The information campaign to demonize the Sahwa term, and its secondary effect of reinforcing cultural norms prejudiced against collaboration with non-Islamic partners and/or the specter of Iranian influence, seems to have been largely successful. The best proof of this to date is the lack of any viable Sunni partner willing to risk working with the Iraqi government, a situation that might be just as true in Syria in regards to the Assad regime.

While future Sunni defections from its tribal base is a danger the Islamic State is fully aware of, and worked hard to prevent since 2007, it is not the group's only vulnerability.[116] The Abu Sulayman extremism problem has not gone away with the establishment of the caliphate, and in fact, has probably gotten worse. In 2017 Cole Bunzel reported on the extraordinary story of how Caliph Ibrahim (Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi) had to come out of seclusion to replace some of the members of the Islamic State's Delegated Committee after they passed a religious ruling declaring those who had failed to properly support the caliphate in its time of need to be apostates. The religious and

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[115] In his recent book, Carter Malkasian's retrospective take on the Sahwa movement led him to believe that tribal support for the Islamic State in 2007, and maybe even in 2015, is generally underestimated, Carter Malkasian, *Illusions of Victory: The Anbar Awakening and the Rise of the Islamic State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[116] Military officials often focus on the Islamic State's desire to control territory as a vulnerability, but fail to realize that it is also a strength for insurgents that want to influence large populations and establish legitimacy for governance. These two issues are better examples of center of gravity vulnerabilities from a Clausewitzian perspective.

political implications of passing judgment on millions of Muslims are highly problematic, essentially initiating what Bunzel called an endless chain of takfir.[117] Unfortunately, the caliph understood this as well and wisely rescinded the letter, making it clear that the original ruling was mistaken in an unusual mea culpa. [118] This episode is highly reminiscent of Abu Sulayman's stubborn and foolish resistance to any reconciliation with Sunnis who had collaborated with the government in 2007 and his subsequent removal, and demonstrates that the Islamic State has a persistent problem with extremists in its own ranks. Scholar Mohammad Hafez warned about this hard-wired jihadist pathology in 2007, and again in late 2017. [119] Certainly, if Abu Bakr ever loses control of the Delegated Committee to these extremists, it will be the end of the movement.[120]

Finally, I would hope that the findings of this article lead to a reexamination of our understanding of "AQI's" defeat in 2007-8. The research presented here led me to an alternate conclusion, which is that rhetoric calling the defeat anything other than temporary is misleading, and at times deliberately so. This mistake seems to be replicated today with politicians attempting to claim credit for yet another defeat of the Islamic State, a claim no more convincing today than the ones made in 2007, or even 2011. The story of the Islamic State movement is much more continuous and fluid then descriptions of a group that "collapsed," and an Islamic State that rose out of its "remnants." What seems clear is that the group suffered an immense setback, but made some appropriate adjustments in order to continue the momentum it had in 2006 toward a caliphate. The group's leadership made smart strategic decisions and capitalized on major opportunities after 2011 to reenergize its supporters and increase the tempo of military operations. All of this was supported by a careful yet aggressive media campaign that had a series of minor objectives, like demonizing Sunni collaborators and terrorizing the Shi'a government, which supported a larger political goal of attracting more supporters on the ground in Iraq and Syria. The grouped turned its eyes toward a larger, global campaign in 2014, once a caliphate was in reach.

While instructive to understand this in the aftermath of the catastrophe of the establishment of an Islamist caliphate in the heart of the Middle East, it is more important for us to grasp these lessons of the recent past in time to understand the ways in which the Islamic State will strive to survive its recent caliphate collapse. While our collective fascination remains with its global ambitions and its foreign fighter migrations, the Islamic State will be reconsolidating its local support in Sunni communities in the Levant and Mesopotamia, while trying to manage its relations with its global affiliates in a time of declining revenue. The group is consolidating in Sunni areas of the Levant and Mesopotamia that are under governed, poorly ruled, and under resourced. The lack of serious reconciliation efforts and reconstruction funding for destroyed cities like Mosul or Raqqa, and the dearth of Sunni actors that can rival the Islamic State in much of these areas – make the job of those charged with preventing yet another resurgence of the jihadis a tough one indeed.

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[117] By this Cole Bunzel means that instead of declaring takfir on Muslims who apostasize, the takfir would also apply to those who tolerate those who commit apostasy. Simple knowledge of someone who is an apostate without the appropriate action leads to this "endless chain of takfir."

[118] Cole Bunzel, "Caliphate in Disarray: Theological Turmoil in the Islamic State," *Jihadica*, October 3, 2017, http://www.jihadica.com/caliphate-in-disarray/, and Cole Bunzel, "A House Divided: Origins and Persistence of the Islamic State's Ideological Divide," *Jihadica*, June 5, 2018, at http://www.jihadica.com/a-house-divided/.

[119] Mohammad Hafez, "Al-Qa'ida Losing Ground in Iraq," *CTC Sentinel* 1, no. 1 (Dec 2007), https://ctc.usma.edu/al-qaida-losing-ground-in-iraq/ and Mohammed M. Hafez, "Fratricidal Jihadists: Why Islamist Keep Losing their Civil Wars," *Middle East Policy* 25, no. 2 (Summer 2018), 86-99.

[120] Adam Hoffman made the point to me that Abu Sulayman's ideas were similar to those of the contemporary extremists, known as Hazimis, in the movement. Cole's work above goes into great detail on the modern divide.

Acknowledgements

Acknowledgements

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About the Author

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Craig Whiteside

Dr. Craig Whiteside is an Associate Fellow at ICCT and an Associate Professor of National Security Affairs at the Naval War College Monterey, teaching at the Naval Postgraduate School.

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