ESCHATOLOGICAL THEMES IN ISLAMIC STATE PROPAGANDA

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Abstract: This paper will focus on an important but otherwise underresearched change which gradually occurred in the propaganda efforts of Islamic State – namely its transition from an emphasis on eschatological immediacy to one of generational struggle, whilst pointing to the propaganda magazines Dabiq and Rumiyah. By making an effective use of modern communication strategies and eschatological themes, the movement signals its total commitment to its worldview and to the challenge it represents for all those outside of it.

Keywords: Islamic State, propaganda, eschatology, radicalism

1. Introduction

This paper aims to present the decisive changes which gradually occurred in the propaganda efforts of Islamic State since its great successes in 2014 to its territorial collapse in Syria and Iraq, focusing on its transition from an emphasis on eschatological immediacy to one of generational struggle. This will be accomplished by tracking the nature of some of the most important eschatological themes in the movement's propaganda, particularly those which can be identified in the online propaganda magazines Dabiq and Rumiyah. It will also be shown that these depictions represent the movement's portrayal of the resilience of its ideas, contributing to a change in its overall tone of its propaganda efforts. From the immediacy of a conflict in the settlement of Dabiq, the struggle is moved to the background, with the promised but distant conquest of Rome being a prerequisite for the fulfilment of an eschatological scenario and the movement's final victory.

From the beginning of its spectacular rise to power in parts of Syria and Iraq, Islamic State has been approached in specialist literature with a clear focus on the importance of eschatology. Such perspectives can be encountered in the works authored by McCants (2015), Flannery (2016), Segrest (2016), and Winter (2018). Moreover, the propaganda efforts of the movement – particularly in the digital space – have also been addressed, with the works of Ingram (2016) on the *Dabiq* magazine and Bröckling et al (2018) on the *Rumiyah* magazine being useful in this regard. Moreover, the recent works written by Welch (2018), which focuses on the major themes identified in *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*, as well as the work by Macnair and Frank (2018), which analyses the meaning of individual words in *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah,* are also relevant for our purposes here.

Nonetheless, if a growing number of authors have discussed either the major themes in Islamic State propaganda, or the way in which eschatology is mixed with utopia with regards to Islamic States, there is no work to date which has focussed in more detail on the changing depictions of eschatological themes themselves in the conceptual universe found in the movement's propaganda – which is demonstrated by the movement's choice of name which replaces *Dabiq*, that is, *Rumiyah*. Specifically, this is linked to the evolution from the triumphalism and intensity of Dabiq to the

underlying message of endurance and patience which is found in Rumiyah. It is for this reason, as well as for their potential for spreading the movement's message, that the magazines *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* have been chosen in this paper. Lastly, they are representative of Islamic State's totalizing vision, and are thus important elements for understanding the movement's own self-understanding and its stated mission.

2. Islamic State, Propaganda, Eschatology

Before moving on, it is necessary to state from the onset that Islamic State has consistently made use of eschatological traditions that have been part of Islam from its very early stages. Indeed, there have been countless heterodoxies which employed eschatological themes and apocalyptic symbolism. Such groups either prevailed to some extent in their struggle on the political centre of their day or remained at the margins of society, often committed to various degrees of disobedience. The movements who were most successful could even go on to form dynasties, as was possible in the case of the Abbasid Revolution and in that of a number of premodern Mahdist movements across the Islamic world.

However, where Islamic State differs from its precursors and even from contemporary, rival Salafi-Jihadist organisations is in its ability to combine eschatological themes with mass-communication strategies and a truly global presence via social media and other digital mediums. It is through the study of such mediums that Islamic State's persistent implementation of eschatological themes into a concerted propaganda effort as well as – to an extent – in its grand strategy, becomes evident. As its core lands have remained to this day centred around the nations of Syria and Iraq, the movement has made heavy use of any narrative advantage which could help it position itself as a chosen group fighting in a sacred scenario.

In his work – which deals with an analysis of the first nine issues of the *Dabiq* – Ingram (2016: 2) argues that the magazine "offers its readership a powerful 'competitive systems of meaning', that is, an alternative perspective of the world" which influences support and fuels radicalisation. Indeed, the importance of communication an alternative view of the world compared to everyone else cannot be understated, particularly when eschatological themes are concerned – something which becomes apparent already in the name choice of the magazine.

The Syrian town of Dabiq has had a surprisingly important historical role, considering its small size and lack of real strategic value. Thus, it was the site of a decisive battle in 1516, when the Ottoman Empire swept into Mamluk Syria, beginning its domination of the Middle East for almost three centuries. More importantly, the town of Dabiq has long been part of Muslim eschatological tradition, since it is seen as one of two possible places – alongside the valley of Amaq – where a Muslim army would confront a "Roman" one in a battle which would precede the coming of Last Hour. Moreover, it would precede the arrival of another important force, namely, the *Dajjal*. The figure of the *Dajjal* – which is encountered on occasion in Islamic State propaganda, including the magazines *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* – stands out as the great adversary in Muslim eschatology, essentially an anti-messiah supposed to be defeated by a returning Jesus, as mentioned in a *hadith*:

> The Last Hour would not come until the Romans would land at al-A'maq or in Dabiq. An army consisting of the best (soldiers) of the people of the earth at that time will come from Medina (to counteract them). [...] They will then fight and a third (part) of the army

would run away, whom Allah will never forgive. A third (part of the army). which would be constituted of excellent martyrs in Allah's eye, would be killed and the third who would never be put to trial would win and they would be conquerors of Constantinople. And as they would be busy in distributing the spoils of war (amongst themselves) after hanging their swords by the olive trees, the Satan would cry: The Dajjal has taken your place among your family. They would then come out, but it would be of no avail. And when they would come to Syria, he would come out while they would be still preparing themselves for battle drawing up the ranks. Certainly, the time of prayer shall come and then Jesus (peace be upon him) son of Mary would descend and would lead them in prayer. (Muslim 41:9)

Consequently, when Dabiq was taken by forces belonging to Islamic State the movement was provided with yet more ammunition for its propaganda efforts and with a new layer to its eschatological vision. As Islamic State's black banner flew above the town – and as the movement portrayed itself as a chosen group – it was perhaps a logical step that the use of eschatological symbols would be dominated by a feeling of clear and immediate action. This formed an important part of Islamic State propaganda efforts, as demonstrated in a speech by Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, a senior figure in the movement's leadership circles and often encountered in its propaganda material:

> So unsheathe your swords and take out your spears. Be firm and do not weaken or soften. It will either be victory through which Allah will honour Islam and the Muslims or shahādah by which we will meet Allah having been excused, and indeed, we see victory only two bows' length away or even closer. As for the near-term, by Allah's power and strength, this crusade will be broken, and we will have thereafter – by Allah's permission – a meeting in al-Quds and an appointment in Rome, prior to which the crusader armies will be defeated in Dābiq." (Adnani 2015)

The movement can thus depict its followers as part of a great endeavour, a chosen minority in a struggle against an impure majority, which must be rescued from its "ignorance" by abandoning its false views and accepting the truth represented by Islamic State. Accordingly, the world itself can be divided into two conflicting camps, with neutrality towards their struggle impossible. Thus, humanity is either part of Islam according to the views of Islamic State, or part of *kufr* (disbelief), regardless of their current religious affiliation, as proclaimed by Baghdadi himself:

> O Ummah of Islam, indeed the world today has been divided into two camps and two trenches, with no third camp present: The camp of Islam and faith, and the camp of kufr (disbelief) and hypocrisy – the camp of the Muslims and the mujahidin everywhere, and the camp of the jews, the crusaders, their allies, and with them the rest of the nations and religions of kufr, all being led by America and Russia, and being mobilized by the jews. (Dabiq 2014: 10)

Presenting itself as a chosen community that maintains the sole link to the purity and truth of what is proper Islam and the prophetic *manhaj* [methodology], Islamic State offers a totalistic perspective regarding the rest of mankind – a fact which can be repeatedly encountered in various movements, in premodern as well as modern contexts (Murariu 2017a). Thus, as during the Flood which destroyed all those undeserving of life amongst humanity, only the members of a group possessing divine insight were spared. This situation is due to repeat itself in the corrupt times of the present, when the Ummah has apparently abandoned the path of truth in favour of *shirk*:

> "Indeed, the people today are like a hundred camels amongst which you almost can't find any that are fit for riding. This makes the situation of the people today similar to the

situation of the prophets with their people in the past, since those who truly understand the da'wah of the prophets today are very few. As a result we no longer find the state of Islamic affairs that existed in the generations of the sahābah, who were taught by the Prophet Muhammad […] nor in the generations of the rightly guided khulafā' […], nor in the generations of those who lived during the jihād against Persia and Rome, the conquests of Shām, Iraq and Khurasān, and the emergence of Muslim reign and its expansion to Al-Andalus in the west during the era of the Umawiyyīn, nor in the generations in which the scholars competed with and debated one another freely – as did their followers who came after them – in areas of furū' (fiqh issues), after the fundamental issues had become established amongst the people in their state of affairs. For there was no baathism, secularism, liberalism, democracy or anything else that would contradict the essence of tawhīd." (Al Kinani 2014: 10)

The existence of these essential contradictions – which distract or prevent the affirmation and implementation of *tawhid* within the great Muslim community – makes it mandatory for the movement to extend its war vision to all neutrals. Thus, in the seventh issue of *Dabiq*, its authors focus on the "extinction of the grayzone" and, once more, the definitive separation of the world into two camps. This is not only a natural process, but something that is divinely ordained and ultimately decisive, since it precedes the Last Hour:

"As the world progresses towards al-Malhamah al-Kubrā [the battle before the Last Hour], the option to stand on the sidelines as a mere observer is being lost. As those with hearts diseased by hypocrisy and bid'ah are driven towards the camp of kufr, those with a mustard seed of sincerity and Sunnah are driven towards the camp of īmān. Muslims in the crusader countries will find themselves driven to abandon their homes for a place to live in the Khilāfah, as the crusaders increase persecution against Muslims living in Western lands so as to force them into a tolerable sect of apostasy in the name of "Islam" before forcing them into blatant Christianity and democracy." (Dabiq 2015: 66)

The dangers of the many counterideological factors apparently surrounding the global Muslim community were augmented by the "final crusade" launched by the West against Islamic State in its core territories. As Adnani threatened, this would be the last time when "crusaders" would be able to attack Muslims, with the victory of the latter assured, even if were to take generations:

"We will conquer your Rome, break your crosses, and enslave your women, by the permission of Allah, the Exalted. This is His promise to us; He is glorified and He does not fail in His promise. If we do not reach that time, then our children and grandchildren will reach it, and they will sell your sons as slaves at the slave market." (al-Adnani 2014)

The military advances of 2014 and early 2015, coming after a patient period of consolidating strength, had been nothing short of spectacular. Nonetheless, the euphoria of victory had to quickly give way to the realities of combat as an increasingly effective international coalition severely affected Islamic State's military machine and robbed it of its territories. Still, even the face of overwhelming odds, the movement took refuge in its totalistic vision, arguing that it is its utter devotion to the creed and its principles which will lead it to victory over the material enemy. In other words, the ideal of the conquest of Rome remained, yet its outlook would change in a subtle, but important way.

The choice made to replace *Dabiq* with *Rumiyah* in 2016 – when the settlement of Dabiq was clearly in the danger of falling to the Turkish-backed forces in the north of Syria – thus represented an essential change in the overall strategy of Islamic State propaganda. Even more importantly, it moved the setting of an eschatological confrontation from a clearly defined foreground into an ultimately more nebulous background. This acknowledgement is reinforced by a focus on endurance and on continuing the struggle, with the following quote appearing on the cover of every issue of Rumiyah: "O muwahhidin, rejoice, for by Allah, we will not rest from our jihad except beneath the olive trees of Rumiyah (Rome)". (al-Muhajir 2016: 1)

It is not surprising that Islamic State showed its trademark ability to adapt long before the signs of its military defeat became truly evident on the ground, turning away from the triumphalist imagery and eschatological immediacy of *Dabiq* and towards the comparatively grim determination of *Rumiyah*. In fact, the very name of Rumiyah (Rome) clearly shows that Islamic State wishes to maintain a focus on eschatology and on the future appearance – and thus clear danger – of the *Dajjal* figure. This is the case due to the possibility to link the term to a *hadith* in which Muhammad is said to have proclaimed:

> "You will attack Arabia and Allah will enable you to conquer it, then you would attack Persia and He would make you to conquer it. Then you would attack Rome and Allah will enable you to conquer it, then you would attack the Dajjal and Allah will enable you to conquer him." (Muslim 41:12).

The message, then, is one of eternal struggle and eternal conflict, the outcome of which is determined by Allah alone – with Islamic State nonetheless expecting to be victorious by virtue of its total commitment to its own vision, the only vision which matters. Along with its return to insurgency in Syria and Iraq, the movement can seek to recruit – in the long-term – the most committed among the jihadist fighters, who have become disillusioned with the loss of the other groups' independence, as well as from local pools of sympathizers. Moreover, while Islamic State managed to overshadow al-Qaeda and its offshoots during its period of expansion, it also suffered greatly under the military onslaught of its many enemies. At the same time, both movements have attempted to ultimately make use of the Muslim diaspora in the West, so that the war might be fought throughout the Western world and thus confound and weaken the 'far enemy'. It is too early to determine if al-Qaeda's temporary strategy of mostly refraining from high-profile international attacks will truly bring it the success it requires to reclaim its leadership of the global jihad movement.

3. Conclusion – Implications of Islamic State's Propaganda Shift

Despite often displaying the inflexibility which characterizes totalist movements, Islamic State has proven sufficiently pragmatic in the change of its grand narrative, as well as in the change of its tactics. Thus, even as it shifted its focus from more imminent eschatological themes and expanding an ideal caliphate, the movement's ideologues have signaled its willingness and ability to wage a continuous, generational war by sheer staying power. Moreover, the movement focuses on the idea of a total commitment to its worldview and its ultimate ideological aims, which may be defined as a militant variant of renovative totalism.

The experiences of the past years have impressed upon the leaders of Islamic State the need for a new approach to its narrative of 'remaining and expanding', with

the 'remaining' part of the slogan steadily replacing that of 'expanding'. Moreover, other important changes will likely be seen in the transformation of its approach to an international presence and to its influence on the ground in general. Thus, it was especially during the peak of its expansion that Islamic State accepted oaths of loyalty from various Jihadist groups around the globe, with some of them being elevated to the rank of a *wilayah*. The premise of the *wilayah* rests on the apparent ability of local fighters pledged to Islamic State to ensure governance and military dominance. (Franco 2017: 30) Even when this was not ultimately the case, the portrayal in its media of forces loyal to Islamic State operating in nations far from its centre of power, such as Central Africa or Southeast Asia, serves as a much-needed propaganda boost. It is likely that Islamic State will end up shifting from the current, centralised system of *wilayahs* to a much looser network made out of divisions, which could prove more resilient to counter-terrorist tactics, as well as enabling a wider platform its propaganda, as well as for its dissemination. (Franco 2017: 35)

The severe degrading of Islamic State's capabilities in the Middle East will increase the importance of showing strength outside of its core regions, such as in the Southeast Asia, Northern or sub-Saharan Africa, where, despite setbacks, it still maintains a presence. Certainly, there is the possibility that the movement will be fatally weakened by its scattering across the world. However, it is also possible that this might actually serve Islamic State in the long run, by bringing tradecraft and battle-hardened operatives into contact with local sympathisers.

Indeed, as the lessons of fighting in densely populated urban environments take hold this may ultimately contribute to a shift in its future focus, even as it continues the fight in its core regions. One possible strategy may be an increased focus towards the West and particularly on expanding its influence in their Muslim enclaves, thus hoping to exploit existing social tensions and divisions. In this respect, Islamic State will likely attempt to set the stage for a low-intensity conflict in preparation for their long desired universal conflict, where all will be forced to choose a side between the movement and its enemies. Moreover, further successful attacks in the name of Islamic State will only put further strain on the tension between liberty and security already troubling contemporary Western democracies (Murariu 2017b: 77-92). The human and material losses aside, this would represent a political blow to its targets and strengthen its claim of continued relevance.

Maintaining relevance will be sought by these means and by insisting on the timeless and necessary struggle which must precede the eschatological events bringing about the movement's final victory. Moreover, by portraying its struggle in such terms before the public – which includes both followers and enemies – Islamic State seeks to maintain the aura of dread associated with its image, as well as offer an argument for its current battlefield setbacks and for its presumed future relevance. Thus, by making an effective use of modern communication strategies and eschatological themes, the movement signals its total commitment to its worldview and to the challenge it represents for all those outside of it.

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