In today’s field of modern narratives, the ones linked to extremism are becoming more noticeable with the rise of new terrorist groups creating and shaping them. One of these groups, the Islamic State – systematically tries to recruit Muslims through their propaganda magazine *Dabiq*. Using the narratives from this discourse as an example, the purpose of the article here is to bring attention to the process of recruiting an audience for a terrorist cause.

Since early 2014, the terrorist group now known as the Islamic State (IS), has consistently stayed in the public eye. As their violent rampage has spread across the world, touching several countries in the West recently, the Islamic State is no longer a threat limited to its self-proclaimed “caliphate”.

Beyond this physical danger IS presents, the battle to further recruit more members continues in their wide selection of propaganda productions. One of these, is their highly sophisticated magazine, Dabiq. By studying the contents of this magazine, one will find that the Islamic State conveys several different narratives to their audience. In this article I intend to sum up the three dominant ones in order to show how narratives can create unity between IS and their readers, and also more importantly, how they can attract new recruits to the Islamic State. Dabiq – sleek recruitment

*Dabiq* is one of the Islamic State’s most important productions today. The name of the magazine originates from the Syrian town, where it is foretold by Islamic prophecies that a grand battle will happen before Armageddon. Beyond its apocalyptic-inspired name, the magazine has in two years been released in 15 different editions, which today circulate freely online.

With a sleek design and well written articles in English, *Dabiq* reflects being targeted for the West. As the content stretches from deep religious discussions to direct calls to action, it is also clear that the magazine is meant to recruit Muslim readers. Additionally, it is obvious that *Dabiq* predominantly wants to recruit men, as the content for women is very limited. In the rush to both expand and protect their caliphate, the target male audience is primarily encouraged to travel to Iraq and Syria to join IS. Performing attacks in the West is only an alternative for those unable to make this journey.

Based on my study of the 12 first editions of the magazine, three narratives may help in this travel-related recruitment process: *polarization*, the glorious warriors, and doomsday approaching. I will describe each of these further.

**Narrative one: Polarization**

Polarization is one of the most prominent narrative themes in *Dabiq*. Within this narrative the difference between “us” and “them” becomes defined, in other words – the Islamic...
State in contrast to their numerous enemies. Because IS strives to recruit Muslim readers, a shared faith is the strongest link between them and their target audience. With Islam having the power to overcome individual differences such as ethnicity, status, and education-level, it works as a unifier even outside of the discourse. Still, in this particular narrative, a common faith is important because it works to exclude the enemy, or rather “them” from being a part of “us”. Throughout the history of propaganda, bonding through a shared enemy is nothing unique. In the study of Hitler’s rhetoric in already in 1939, Burke pointed out that unifying against an enemy is the best way to strengthen group bonds and to create an alliance. From right-wing movements to general Islamist propaganda, polarization is a powerful tool, and continues to be as the Islamic State picks up where Al-Qa’ida’s golden era left off.

Post the 9/11 attacks, Al-Qa’ida leader Osama Bin Laden, and former US president George W. Bush relied heavily on polarization-rhetoric which Dabiq uses to fuel the aggression towards America. To exemplify some of this ongoing hatred towards this nation, president Barack Obama is presented with these following words in the third issue of Dabiq: “So while genocide is committed by the Maliki, Asadi, and Israeli forces against the Muslims via systematic massacres, chemical warfare, rape, and starvation by siege, Obama watches with euphoria.” Portrayed as an accomplice to mass-murder, happy to see Muslims die, Obama becomes the ultimate enemy, a puppet-master to the other leaders and regimes mentioned.

In just a few words, one can see that this narrative not only includes the enemies of the Islamic State, but also the oppressed Muslim population in the Middle East. The “us” that is created between the Muslim readers and IS, is therefore based on more than a shared religion, it is also built on a foundation of suffering and threats from enemies both East and West. Yet the oppressed Muslims do not just live in these war-ridden countries. Dabiq also touches the topic of being mistreated and discriminated in the Western society. In the ninth issue of the magazine, the leader of the Islamic State, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, proclaims:

And if the Crusaders today have begun to trouble the Muslims who continue to live in the lands of the cross by monitoring them, arresting them, and questioning them, then soon they will begin to displace them and take them away either dead, imprisoned, or homeless. They will not leave anyone amongst them except one who apostatizes from his religion and follows is merely the spearhead in this war. It is but the war of the people of faith against the people of kufr, so march forth to your war O Muslims.

With words like these, the Muslim audience becomes confronted with a choice: empathize with the victimized people of your religion, or the enemy that hates them and murders them. The narrative is simple – this is a story about a people that are under threat and facing persecution wherever they are because of their religion. As a result, the only way out of this situation, and back to regaining power, is to fight back, as told by the IS-leader in the above quote. But this fight requires blood – which brings us to the next narrative: the warrior themed one.

Narrative two: The glorious warriors

The story of the glorious past and its warrior forefathers is another dominant narrative to be found in Dabiq. Whereas the polarization narrative unites the readers and IS through religion and a threatening enemy, the ancient history that is presented in the propaganda magazine serves to create a common Muslim heritage – and a violent one too. For instance, several prophets are mentioned in a war-context in Dabiq, everyone from Abraham to the most noble one, Muhammed. As these prophets are surrounded with words of honor, duty and fierce battles, the narrative that takes shape brings the reader into a prehistoric setting where the forefathers are the main characters. To illustrate this, the next quote has to
do with Muhammed’s role in Islam, as told by IS-leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi:8

Your Prophet (sallallāhu ‘alayhi wa sal-lam) was dispatched with the sword as a mercy to the creation. He was ordered with war until Allah is worshipped alone. (...) He himself left to fight and took part in dozens of battles. He never for a day grew tired of war ... His companions after him and their followers carried on similarly.

This example is a common one when it comes to how the Muslim forefathers are presented. Here, Muhammed is strictly limited to his role as an ultimate warrior. While Dabiq ignores the prophet’s softer, merciful side, this narrative oriented towards the past becomes a selective one. In a true jihad-salafi spirit, the magazine also relies heavily on hadiths and verses from the Quran in this one-sided reflection of Islam’s history.

Using these authentic scriptural sources, the Muslim reader is forced to recognize a less peaceful and tolerant side of his or her religion, and more than that – also become inspired by it. While this may not appeal to all Muslim readers, there is a certain strength in selectivity. For one, the religious connection that supports the polarization narrative becomes reinforced with details of the holy heritage. Second, the violent side here also supports the Islamic State’s actions today, further legitimizing their cause. Therefore, even if this narrative is tied to the past, it is of relevance today as it is meant to be recreated by the readers before the approach of doomsday. This brings us to the last dominant narrative: the apocalyptic one.

Narrative three: Doomsday is approaching

Dabiq’s focus on the Armageddon creates a narrative about the world ending and paradise awaiting for the “true” Muslims. Going back to the symbolic name of the magazine, “the final battle” happening in Dabiq, is more than just a prophecy. At a more detailed level, one will find that both the plot and the characters within this doomsday story create an exciting and thrilling future event that certain readers can find appealing.

To summarize the story: the battle in Dabiq will be a battle between the Romans and the Muslims according to the hadiths the magazine refers to. While the Romans referenced to the Christians in the Roman Empire in the past, in today’s context with the Islamic State shaping the narrative, America has been given this role as an enemy. In this classical battle between good and evil, religious characters such as the Mahdi, the Dajjal and prophet Isa (Jesus) interfere. Although Dabiq is sparse about the details of who each of them are, what is revealed, is their roles in the grand battle. As the story unfolds in the first issue, the Dajjal, a figure described as an Antichrist, will purposely try to lure the Muslims in a trap after the first great battle has finished. To prevent the Muslims from harm, prophet Isa will descend from heaven and lead them in the next battle against this false Messiah.

The Mahdi will also like Isa, help the Muslims in this narrative, as he is the figure who shall bring justice to earth and end oppression. As most great stories go, they are nothing without helpers and obstacles along the way. Hence these characters add life to an otherwise tragic story about death awaiting the entire world. This way of portraying the apocalypse, where fantasy-elements cross with a potential real battle between the Islamic State and US, has its own appeal. Not only is the promise of adventure attractive, but the God-given victory can also be a strong motivator for some. Beyond this, the Muslim readers are told through the two other narratives that they need to be on the “good” side, and that good Muslims imitate their warrior-forefathers. This fight that the magazine promotes, is an excellent opportunity for future recruits to do just that – take part in what is “right”, and put an end to injustice once and for all. While this battle may be the focal point in the narrative, what happens after it is just as important. The Muslims fighting with IS, will also be rewarded with eternal life in paradise when the pleasant breeze sweeps the world, leaving
behind all non-believers. This hope for salvation, nonetheless the feeling of belonging to a saved sect, are also important factors in understanding how Muslim readers of Dabiq can be attracted to joining the Islamic State.

Connected and involved: Seeing oneself within the story

After going through each main narrative in Dabiq, it is further necessary to emphasize their relation to each other in order to understand their appeal on a larger, more connected basis. Because even if the narratives can be separated thematically, the fight between good and evil exists in all of them in some form. In polarization it is there in the differences between “us” and “them”, in the warrior forefathers narrative, similar battles were being fought in the early days of Islam, and in the apocalypse narrative, a new battle is approaching.

If one extracts the different appeals behind the Islamic State based on such narratives, one will find that potential recruits are bribed with being included in a unique community, a new identity as a warrior (and later martyr), and even a sense of meaning in life, through religion. In order to reap these rewards, the Muslim readers of Dabiq have to choose sides, as the narrative demands from them.

This may be a simple choice for some, as the magazine portrays an attack on the Islamic State to be an attack on all Muslims too. Therefore, one must either be on the side of IS and the Muslims, or against them. This painting of the world in black and white is what the magazine refers to “the extinction of the grayzone”, where neutrality is nonexistent. If the individual readers begin to accept this rhetoric and view on the world, they will already be one step closer in taking part in the actual narrative, by recruiting themselves to the Islamic State and the coming battles. While certain narratives are tied to the text, and the text only – the ones in Dabiq are different. The narratives here have an open casting call for any potential recruit who wants to join them in finishing the story.

Notes

1. This article is largely based on my master-thesis where both the rhetoric of Dabiq and the narratives existing within this particular discourse are presented in much further detail.
2. These narratives are in my master-thesis related to the dominant themes in Dabiq: polarization, warrior-identity, and the promise of paradise. Polarization is found in 105 articles, warrior-identity in 87, and the promise of paradise in 47 out of 182 articles. This article extracts only certain parts of the themes which are able to function as a story, and not the whole theme in general.
4. See issue 3 and 4 of Dabiq.
5. Dabiq #3, p. 35.
6. Although leaders of Muslim regimes such as Assad and Maliki are mentioned in this quote, both of them are considered to have illegitimate claims to power by IS, and the terrorists have declared them to be non-Muslims, known as the act of takfir. Both leaders are also Shia followers of Islam, a sect which IS systematically tries to destroy. See Rajan, 2015, p.163-164 for more.
7. Dabiq #9, p.54.
8. Dabiq #9, p.52-53.
9. The jihad-salaf movement is briefly explained as wanting to recreate the early years of Islam with the use of military means and violence. See Meijer (2013) for further readings.
10. See Dabiq #4 for more details about America and the doomsday prophecies.
11. According to IS, the Dajjal is a Shia Muslim. Read more in Dabiq #11.
12. See Dabiq #3, p.10 for more.
13. See Dabiq #7.

References
