Sectarianization and Jihad in the Syrian Conflict:

A Comparative Discourse Analysis of the Relations and Interactions of the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra towards the Shia and Alawite Communities of Syria

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Abstract

Syria has been afflicted by a civil war for a little more than a decade, with the hostilities still ongoing to this very day. What started in 2011 as but one link in the chain of Arab Spring protests, in this particular case out of disaffection towards the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad, has escalated to a multisided conflict which shows no promise of ending any time soon. As a result of the civil strife which permeated the country, Syria ended up being the perfect breeding ground for several jihadist elements to rise and establish themselves as major non-state actors of the conflict. Most prominently among these elements belong the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra, who have managed to expand their presence as the rightful bannermen of jihad sectarian conflict throughout vast expanses of territory within, but not exclusively to, Syria. The objective of this research is to analyze the discourse that both these groups use in their publications in order to explain and justify the reasoning behind their strategies of targeting Syria's religious groups. Additionally, a comparison is conducted to discover how the two groups' rhetoric coincides and differs. The main findings show that the two groups both use two distinct forms of targetive discourse. One that justifies the targeting of specific religious communities and groups based on specific reasons, and one which is based on a more exclusionary tactic of enemizing anyone who does not conform to the groups' strict interpretations of Islam. However, the two groups differ in the level of depth that their discourse goes into when providing this reasoning of targeting. Furthermore, the two groups do not refrain from slandering and discrediting each other in their publications, in order to legitimize themselves as the rightly guided Muslims waging jihad against the enemies of Islam.

Key Words: *Jihadism, Syria, Civil War, Sectarianization, Sectarianism, Islamic State, Jabhat al-Nusra, Discourse*

Contents

Note on Transliteration

For this research, I have mainly used the same transliteration system as used by the Oxford Dictionary of Islam when converting religious terms and concepts deriving from Arabic, with the exception of quoted phrases taken from the primary sources used. Specifically, different spelling may appear when quoting passages from different primary sources, such as in the case of the word *mujahidin,* alternatively spelled as *mujahideen*, but also between transliterated terms and quoted passages of the primary source material. Finally, Arabic terms included in this text will be italicized, except for cases that they are part of quotes taken from primary sources, or cases of non-technical terms such as 'Quran', 'jihad', and 'Shariah'.

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction of the Topic

Since the turn of the century, Islamist militancy has been a prevalent threat in the Middle East region, but also to the worldwide community. Terrorist groups of Sunni[1] jihadi ideologies that have risen in the last two decades, some even earlier than that, have been a cause for concern for the wider international community, with a plethora of confirmed attacks against Western targets, and an even more aggressive and constant presence in the Middle East, and Saharan and sub-Saharan Africa.[2] The unrest and turmoil present in the region in recent years has facilitated and enabled the growth and empowerment of such groups which feed off poverty and the intense sectarian divisions of the region for their own interest and benefit.[3]

However, within territories of the Middle East in which such groups operate and exercise control, the threat levels are much higher in comparison to the West, with the danger and fear of the groups' actions echoing in the civilian population's everyday lives. Particularly, in Syria since the beginning of the current conflict in 2011, such Sunni jihadist groups were able to grow and gain significant control and strength due to the tumultuous conditions of the country, which has served as a breeding ground for radical elements to emerge. Of all the groups that have risen in recent years, one such group stands out from the rest in terms of power, organization, influence and control. This group has come to be known as ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham[4]), also known as ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant[5]), the Islamic State (IS), or

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[1] The largest branch of the Muslim community, numbering at 85 percent at least of the world's 1.2 billion Muslims. The name is derived from the Sunnah, the exemplary behavior of the Prophet Muhammad, and the first generation of Muslims. All Muslims are guided by the Sunnah, but Sunnis stress it.

[2] Charles Lister, "Profiling the Islamic State," November 2014, p.1, 4.

[3] "Timeline: The Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State," Wilson Center, October 28, 2019, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-the-rise-spread-and-fall-the-islamic-state; Lister, "Profiling the Islamic State," p.1.

[4] Al-Sham is the traditional designation of the region covered by Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel/Palestine.

[5] Today, Levant is used as loosely covering the same area as al-Sham, however, the Levant is used to also designate the coastal areas of the Eastern Mediterranean, running from southern Greece to northern Egypt.

Daesh.[6] While the names ISIS, ISIL, and IS have become the more commonly used titles for the group in the international community, they are mostly used by Western sources, whereas in the Middle East the group is commonly known as Daesh. This paper will consistently use the name the Islamic State (IS) when referring to the particular group, which is the title the group itself settled on for its name.

During the last decade, this group has succeeded in controlling at one period of time significant expanses of territory in both Iraq and Syria, and in establishing a caliphate which exerted control over its territories through a combination of brutal violence and administrative functions and structures. Within the territories controlled by IS, anyone who does not follow its radical interpretation of Islam and Shariah[7] law are targeted as enemies, causing civilians in these areas to live in a constant state of fear, brutality and danger.[8]

Another group that had managed to rise and grow its strength and presence in Syria since the conflict has begun is the one originally known as Jabhat al-Nusra[9]. The group has since been renamed twice, first adopting the name Jabhat Fath al-Sham[10], and later being renamed once more to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham[11], after merging with other jihadist elements of the region.[12] For the purpose of this paper, the name Jabhat al-Nusra will be consistently used when referring to

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[6] "Mass Violence and Genocide by the Islamic State/Daesh in Iraq and Syria," University of Minnesota, College of Liberal Arts Holocaust and Genocide Studies, accessed December 29, 2021, https://cla.umn.edu/chgs/holocaust-genocide-education/resource-guides/mass-violence-and-genocide-islamic-statedaesh; Luna Shamieh and Zoltán Szenes, "The Rise of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)," AARMS – Academic and Applied Research in Military and Public Management Science, 2015, p.367-368; Lister, "Profiling the Islamic State," p.26-27.
Daesh is used to refer to ISIS in the Arab world and it refers to the Arabic acronym of the name "Al-Dawla AlIslamiya fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham", which means the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham.
[7] God's eternal and immutable will for humanity, as expressed in the Quran and Muhammad's example (Sunnah), considered binding for all believers; ideal Islamic law.
[8] Lister, "Profiling the Islamic State," p.26-27; "Timeline"; Shamieh and Szenes, "The Rise of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)," p.371-372.
[9] Charles Lister, "Profiling Jabhat Al-Nusra," *The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World*, July 2016, p.5.
Also known as Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham min Mujahidi al-Sham fi Sahat al-Jihad, or The Support Front to the People of the Levant by the Mujahideen of the Levant on the Fields of Jihad, or simply Jabhat al-Nusra, and Al-Nusra Front.
[10] Translates to Front for the Conquest of the Levant.
[11] Name of a secular nature which translates to Organization for the Liberation of the Levant, or Levant Liberation Committee.
[12] Jasmin Seijbel, "The War for Supremacy of the Jihadist Movement: Intra-Movement Rivalry in Jihadist Media, 2011-2016" (Erasmus University Rotterdam, 2017), p.4.

this group, as it was the name by which the group went during this research's relevant time period, and the name under which the group's publications were published. Similar to the Islamic State, Jabhat al-Nusra has played an active role in the Syrian civil war, engaged in a jihad against the Assad regime, while benefitting from the explosive conditions and increasing its control.[13]

But what exactly is it that drives these two groups' actions? What is the reasoning behind their strategy of targeting within the areas of their influence? Are we to believe that it is as random as "You are either with us, or against us"? Or is there more to that?

1.2 Research Question and Context Information

The scope of this thesis will be to research how IS and Jabhat al-Nusra justify their relations with Syria's religious communities through their discourse. Before this, the different ways in which the two groups interact with certain actors and groups within the state of Syria will be reviewed in order to gain some understanding of what the two groups' real actions are with these communities, before proceeding to analyzing how they justify these actions in their rhetoric. Specifically, the research will take into consideration what relations and interactions the two groups maintain with the Shia[14] and Alawite[15] religious communities of Syria.

In the part examining the case of the Alawite community, the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad will be included as well, since these two jihadist groups perceive the regime to be of an Alawite religious disposition, even though the regime itself follows a more secular composition. Subsequently, a comparison will be conducted between the discourse of IS and Jabhat al-Nusra, in order to provide a detailed and nuanced picture of how each group justifies its relations and interactions with Syria's religious and social elements. This research will attempt to

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[13] Lister, "Profiling Jabhat Al-Nusra," p.11.

[14] The followers or party of Ali,who believe that Muhammad's religious leadership, spiritual authority, and divine guidance were passed on to his descendants, beginning with his son-in-law and cousin, Ali ibn Abi Talib, his daughter, Fatimah, and their sons, Hasan and Husayn. There are three main branches of Shiis today: the Zaydis (see Zaydiyyah), the Ismailis (Seveners), and the Ithna Asharis (Twelvers or Imamis).

[15] Secretive Shia school of thought located in a mountain range in northwestern Syria. Believe in the absolute oneness of God and that God appeared on earth seven times in human form with Ali as the last manifestation. Interpret the Quran and hadith allegorically, emphasizing good and evil, symbolized by light and darkness.

follow the branch of the realist theory known as post-realism, while also utilizing the concepts of sectarianization and othering. These two concepts will be further discussed and explained in the 'Theoretical Approach' segment of this research.

The specific topic of jihadism has always fascinated me due to the fact that religious diversity has been exploited by such radical jihadist groups, with the aim of pursuing their interests, consolidating power and justifying their actions. Furthermore, I have always found jihadist terrorism an interesting, socially relevant, and current topic, whose effect does not contain itself within the region of the Middle East, but casts a shadow all across the world. My specific interest that this research will focus on is all the different ways that the jihadist terrorist groups in question interact with different parts of the state of Syria, not only limited to cases of conflict and violence, while examining how the terrorist groups justify their interactions and stance, through the lens of sectarianization.

While in latest years, the media coverage that such groups are receiving has significantly waned, it is important that they remain academically and socially relevant, as a resurgence is never out of the question. After all, the Islamic State has been declared defeated territorially and in name only, as the truth is that it has reverted back to an underground way of organization which is precisely how it began in the first place. Therefore, I believe that the world is not completely free of the danger that such radical jihadist elements pose, and only by understanding what drives them and distinguishes them from each other will we be able to address this issue at a more decisive level.

Main Question

> What type of discourse is used by the two groups in order to justify these relations and interactions, specifically with the Shia and Alawite communities, and what is the reasoning behind it?

Sub-questions

1. What are the origins of the two jihadist groups, and what were their roles in the conflict?

2. What were the reasons and conditions leading to the Syrian civil war?

3. What are the relations and interactions of the two groups with Syria's governing authority and religious groups?

1.3 Theoretical Framework

This research will attempt to use the realist theory in order to examine the general methods of operation and action of the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra, as well as their objectives and goals. Specifically, a branch of the realist theory, known as post-realism, will be used.

The traditional realist theory suggests that politics is a field of conflict among actors (mainly nation-states) pursuing power in an anarchic international political system where there is no supernational central authority. States, which are the central actors in this system, act rationally, seeking out power in order to ensure their self-preservation and to pursue their national interests. However, even though the traditional realist theory, which places states at the center of international politics, does acknowledge that other actors such as individuals and organizations do exist, supports that they have limited power.[16]

While post-realism, which is a branch of traditional realism, does not oppose the idea that states are central actors of the international system, it does include non-state actors as significant components of global politics. Therefore, the post-realist theory will be more suitable in

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[16] Francis A Beer and Robert Hariman, "Realism, Post-Realism and ISIS," in *Realism in Practice: An Appraisal*, 2018, p.16-18, https://www.e-ir.info/2018/01/17/realism-post-realism-and-isis/; Sandrina Antunes and Isabel Camisão, "Realism," in *International Relations Theory*, 2018, p.15, https://www.e-ir.info/2018/02/27/introducing-realism-in-international-relations-theory/.

approaching this research question as it will allow non-state actors within the state of Syria to be taken into consideration. Such non-state actors include religious authorities, civilian community groups, as well as the jihadist terrorist groups IS and Jabhat al-Nusra, the former of which has been classified by Beer and Hariman as a "multidimensional, quasi-state/national actor".[17]

In combination with this theoretical approach, the concept of sectarianization will be utilized to examine how IS and Jabhat al-Nusra use identity and ideology to promote their interests, produce power and, more specifically, justify their targeting of the different actors and demographic groups within their controlled territories in Syria.

Before proceeding to sectarianization, however, it is essential to explain sectarianism, a concept that is often interlinked with sectarianization. Sectarianism, as defined by Ussama Makdisi, is a concept of "politics and representation based on a language of religious equality", and then again described as "the deployment of religious heritage as a primary marker of modern political identity".[18] While other, more limiting definitions exist, which may give the impression that sectarianism is accompanied by hostile or violent relations, it is commonly used in scholarly discourse as a notion utilized for analyzing and explaining "social and political arrangements that intersect with other designations such as religious, communal, ethnic, nationalist, partisan, clannish and familial".[19]

Now moving on to sectarianization, it is a term generally described as a "political tool" through which identity is used "to produce power".[20] More specifically described, it is "an active process shaped by political actors operating within specific contexts, pursuing political goals that involve the mobilization of popular sentiments around particular identity markers".[21] Furthermore, it is a concept that includes, but is not limited to the process of "institutionalization of identity politics or to the empowerment of sect-centric actors", as well as the "reactions to

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[17] Beer and Hariman, "Realism, Post-Realism and ISIS," p.17.

[18] Ussama Makdisi, "Religion as the Site of the Colonial Encounter," in *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon*, 2000, p.6-7.

[19] Dick Douwes, "Religion and Citizenship in Lebanon and Syria," Working Paper, p.1.

[20] Hillary S. Wiesner, "What Is Sectarianization?," Carnegie Corporation of New York, July 6, 2020, https://www.carnegie.org/topics/topic-articles/arab-region-transitions/political-sectarianization-middle-east-and-beyond/.

[21] Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel, "The Sectarianization Thesis: A Social Theory of Sectarianism," in *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*, 2017, p.3.

these events and the dynamics and processes that they set in motion".[22] Specifically, this process can take the form of non-state actors fueling from sectarian relations in order to construct their identity, pursue their interests and promote their motives and ideologies.[23] As will be examined at a later point of this research, both the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra promote and enforce their own radical Sunni Islam ideology which enemizes anyone who does not abide to it, namely anyone not belonging to the Sunni Muslim sect, but also Sunnis who do not adhere to their form of Shariah.[24] For this reason, the concept of sectarianization can prove useful in its application to the case of the tactics and reasoning of the two jihadist groups in question.

Finally, and in tandem with the concept of sectarianization, the framework of othering will be consulted in order to examine the ways in which the two groups construct their identity, and by extension, exploit a difference (or multiple differences) in other religious communities "so as to create an in-group and an out-group".[25] This hierarchical classification is utilized to set apart this research's in-groups, namely the two jihadist groups, from the out-groups, meaning the targeted religious communities.

1.4 Sources

For the analytical part of the interactions and relations of IS and Jabhat al-Nusra during their years of operation in Syria, sources used will include relevant books, articles, online journals, and reports. These sources will be of both primary and secondary nature.

Primary sources will include the online magazines and propaganda mediums published by the two groups themselves. The online magazine of IS is named *'Dabiq'*[26], while the Jabhat al-Nusra

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[22] Fanar Haddad, "Pre-2003 Iraq: Sectarian Relations Before 'Sectarianization,'" in *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*, 2017, p.120, https://www.academia.edu/33381491/Pre_2003_Iraq_Sectarian_Relations_Before_Sectarianization.

[23] Haddad, p.121.

[24] Shamieh and Szenes, "The Rise of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)," p.369.

[25] Jean-François Stazak, "Other/Otherness," in *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, 2009, p.43.

[26] Name of town in northern Syria. Believed by IS to be the location of the final battle between the Muslims and the unbelievers before the apocalypse takes place.

magazine is titled *'Al-Risalah'*[27], and these two publications will be used to acquire insight on how the groups themselves justify the targeting of demographic groups in their discourse. It is important to note that there is an inequality when it comes to the amount of publications by the two groups, with the Islamic State publishing fifteen issues for Dabiq between 2014-2016, while Al-Risalah has published a mere four issues of Al-Risalah, between 2015-2017. Moreover, transcripts of joint hearings of the U.S. Committee on Foreign Affairs regarding abuses against religious minorities in Syria will be used to gain a detailed and factual report on the actions committed by the two jihadist groups against population segments of the country.

These sources will need to be analyzed through a critical lens in order to determine their appropriateness and utility for this research. Specifically, the purpose that these sources were created will need to be taken into account, as well as the historical context of the specific time that they are being written. Additionally, the use of religious references to Islamic texts, along with the use of terms in Arabic, by the two groups in their publications means that care must be taken in order to ensure that the meaning and understanding attained from these sources matches the one intended by the two groups when developing the sources.

1.4.1   Nature of sources and expected challenges

As outlined previously, an array of literature will be utilized for the purposes of this research. Sources will include, but will not be limited to reports concerning abuses of religious freedoms within the state of Syria, academic texts and news journals outlining the operation of IS and Jabhat al-Nusra within their controlled territories, and books explaining the rise of such multidimensional actors through the lens of the post-realist theory. Primary literature utilized by this research includes mainly transcripts of hearings of the U.S. Department of State concerning abuses against religious minorities in Syria, as well as issues of Dabiq and Al-Risalah, the online magazines published by the terrorist groups themselves.

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[27] Translates to "the Message" (oral/written). Could also mean literary/scholarly form of a wide range of fields, including theology, grammar, and law.

Care must be taken when examining sources regarding the factuality of the information provided. In order to overcome the risk of acquiring inaccurate or biased information, or misinterpreting the information available, sources must be vetted in regard of who the authors are in terms of credibility, ideology, and access to accurate information, and the information included in these sources must be checked for factual accuracy by cross-referencing between the array of available literature, in order for the data to be corroborated as factual, or contradicted and dismissed, by other available sources.

Furthermore, the scope and purpose that sources were created must be taken into consideration, including who the intended audience was, in order to understand the reasoning behind the creation of said sources. While analyzing the primary source material, it was evident that the two groups tend to be explicit and clear as to the purpose of their writing, and the intended audience. This is something that was taken into regard when analyzing sections addressed to the groups' existing fighters with the purpose of raising morale and offering guidelines of the proper practice of Islam, sections intended to mobilize, inspire, and recruit hopeful initiates to the jihadi cause, and sections addressing the two groups' enemies and targets, offering clear information as to why they are in their crosshairs. Finally, it was important to be mindful of the fact that the two groups published these magazines during their years of operation and involvement in a multisided conflict, during which time they had their own unique following base

1.5 Literature Review

At this point, I shall provide a survey of the secondary sources utilized in order to acquire relevant factual information on the two terrorist groups, as well as to outline where the current research will be based on, in regard to the already existing relevant scholarly literature. These sources will be divided into two categories. The first category will cover sources deriving from scholarly publications on the specific research topic, while the second will cover reports, journalistic pieces, and sources created by thinktank institutes.

Falling into the category of scholarly publications, sources used for the theoretical aspect of the research include, but are not restricted to, Francis A. Beer and Robert Hariman's chapter "*Realism, Post-Realism and ISIS*" from the book "*Realism in Practice: An Appraisal*" by Davide Orsi, J R Avgustin, and Max Nurnus, the chapter "*Introduction: The Practice of Realism in International Relations*" of the same book, by Orsi, Avgustin, and Nurnus themselves, and Ibtissam Klait's "*Realism explains the rise of ISIS and the response of the two super powers*". Additionally, the sources used for the application of sectarianization in the case of relations of the two jihadist groups with different actors and groups are the chapters "*The Sectarianization Thesis: A Social Theory of Sectarianism*" and "*Pre-2003 Iraq: Sectarian Relations Before 'Sectarianization'*", from the book "*Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*". The aforementioned sources serve to provide information on how post-realism can be applied to explain the rise and operation of the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra, and how the concept of sectarianization can interpret how religious and sectarian identity is used by the two groups in their rationale behind the targeting of religious groups. Additional academic sources include Charles Lister's "*Profiling the Islamic State*" and "*Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*", and Jasmin Seijbel's thesis, titled "*The War for Supremacy of the Jihadist Movement: Intra-movement rivalry in jihadist media, 2011-2016*".

Another source of the same category that has offered useful data for this research is the online article "*Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant*" by Britannica which outlines the terrorist group's varied relations with the governing authorities of Syria. Specifically, it mentions that in Syria the group has been recorded to have been fighting "both government forces and rebel factions". The article also mentions of simultaneous confrontations with the pro-Assad regime Syrian forces, highlighting a belligerent disposition of the jihadist group against the government of Syria.[28]

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[28] "Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant | History, Leadership, & Facts | Britannica," Britannica, October 28, 2021, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Islamic-State-in-Iraq-and-the-Levant.

1.5.1   Position of Research in Academic Discourse

Jihadist terrorist groups such as IS and Jabhat al-Nusra have been in the spotlight of the international stage for a substantial part of the 21st century. Specifically, the actions and operation of the two groups in question mainly threaten the everyday lives of people living in the Middle East, namely in Syria, whose unstable and explosive climate, which was a result of the state's internal civil war, has allowed IS and Jabhat al-Nusra to consolidate power and solidify their control over territories of the country, for the better part of the 2010s decade, during which the two groups were responsible for numerous attacks in the region.[29] For minority ethnic and religious groups who were forced to live under Islamic State or Jabhat al-Nusra rule, fear of being a target of the groups' brutal enforcements was always present, mostly based on specific criteria which the terrorist groups deemed as unacceptable.[30]

This research, therefore, takes its place among similar discourse concerning Islamist terrorism in the Middle East, by focusing on IS and Jabhat al-Nusra, two groups which were able to emerge within the region and actively participate in Syria's civil war, exploiting the turmoil and tumultuous conditions in order to increase their power and control. Specifically, this paper will attempt to shed light on the rationale that the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra have been following in their discourse in order to justify their relations and interactions with the Shia and Alawite religious communities in Syria, as well as the Alawite perceived government of Assad, and to construct the grounds on which these relations are based on. Moreover, a comparison between the two groups' discourse will hope to create a nuanced account as to how and why the rationale of the groups in question may be similar or differ, given the fact that both these groups, during their early stages, maintained links and friendly relations with each other, sharing similar ideologies and goals, before becoming rivals engaged in conflict with one another.

While scholarly research has already been conducted based on the discourse used by the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra, along with comparative analyses of these discourses, no discourse analysis has yet been completed to specifically investigate the two groups' discourse regarding the relations and interactions with Syria's government and population groups. Instead,

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[29] Shamieh and Szenes, "The Rise of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)," p.364.
[30] Shamieh and Szenes, p.369.

past research has studied the two groups' discourse used when targeting each other in cases of intra-movement rivalry. Therefore, for the sake of not repeating existing research or contributing to academic overpopulation, this research aims to assess and explore the discourse that the two groups use to base their interactions and relations with the political regime and specific population segments of Syria.

1.6 Innovative Aspects

Since the start of the Syrian civil war and the emergence of the region's most prominent jihadist terrorist groups into the spotlight of the international community, a plethora of literature has been created, varying from NGO and thinktank reports, journalistic coverage and academic publications. This vast literature has researched aspects of the groups such as the conditions and reasons for their rise and consolidation of power, their administrative and organizational structure in territories that they control, or the actions implemented by the international community with the scope of defeating these terrorist groups and eliminating the threat they posed to the stability and security of the region, as well as of the rest of the world.

What this research aspires to accomplish is to offer a well-rounded and detailed picture of what the reasoning and justification is behind the interactions and relations of IS and Jabhat al-Nusra towards the government, and the Shia and Alawite communities of Syria. As constructed by the groups themselves, this reasoning can often be nuanced concerning the targeting of the demographic groups in question. Furthermore, this research hopes to provide a classification of how the two jihadist groups use their radical ideology in order to rank in hierarchical order their targeted religious groups.

While research has been done before concerning the different demographic groups targeted by the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra, as well as research on their ideological justification of their actions, this project will progress towards offering a detailed categorization of how the two terrorist groups promote the targeting of groups through their ideological discourse, how this targeting rhetoric is actually followed through and realized in the actions of IS and Jabhat al-Nusra, and how the groups' justification can be related to the phenomenon of

sectarianization. Furthermore, this research aims to discover how and why the two groups may differ or share similarities in their targeting discourse, while considering the fact that the two groups evolved in their first stages with maintained relations and links to each other, before advancing to a state of rivalry and conflict.

1.7 Methodology and expected challenges

For the purpose of this research, a comparative analysis will be conducted between the discourse of the two jihadist groups, in order to offer a complete picture on the ideological justifications used by the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra when targeting and interacting with different groups and actors within Syria, and how and why the rhetoric of the two groups may be similar or different. In order for this comparison to come to fruition, a qualitative and textual analysis method of research will be utilized. Mainly, a discourse analysis of the primary sources stated above will be carried out with the aim of acquiring data on the different ways the two groups use their publications to justify how and why they interact in the way they do with the governing authorities and demographic segments of the population in their controlled territories in Syria. The scope of this discourse analysis will be to examine how the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra use language in their methods of communication, by investigating the contextual meaning of their discourse. Moreover, this information will contribute to the reasoning behind the groups' justification for their stance towards each group or actor, which is why reports on the religious freedoms' abuses in Syria, reports on the terrorist groups' military actions, as well as academic and news articles on their rise and operation, will be cross-referenced with IS's and Jabhat al-Nusra's own online magazines, Dabiq and Al-Risalah, in order to gain insight on how through their discourse, the two jihadist groups justify these abuses through the use of ideology and sectarian rhetoric.[31]

Specifically, the secondary literature will serve as the foundations for this research, as it will be used to gain information on how the two groups interact with the different components of

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[31] "Discourse Examples and Definition," Literary Devices, accessed January 26, 2022, https://literarydevices.com/discourse/; "Discourse Analysis | A Step-by-Step Guide with Examples," Scribbr, June 19, 2020, https://www.scribbr.com/methodology/discourse-analysis/.

Syria. Subsequently, the online magazines published by the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra, which for the purpose of this research qualify as primary sources, will be analyzed in parallel with the secondary literature in order to provide a picture of how the groups justify their stance towards the government regime and the population segments of Syria. Issues of the online magazines offer information on how the groups themselves construct the rationale behind the targeting of different actors and groups, and how this targeting is justified through their use of religious ideology.

A challenge that may arise when considering specifically the primary literature of Dabiq and Al-Risalah is the use by IS and Jabhat al-Nusra of religious references to Islamic texts, along with the use of terms in Arabic. A parallel cross-referencing was conducted in order to ensure that the data garnered is not misinterpreted or overlooked. Additionally, for the use of the Arabic language throughout the magazine, context was taken into careful consideration in order to be able to reach the appropriate translation and interpretation, as intended by the two groups themselves. The result of this was a glossary containing concepts and terms used by the two groups, where their meaning is defined, but also how the groups themselves may use it differently in their publications.

2   The Rise of the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra in the Syrian Civil War

When it comes to the rise and operation of the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra, significant research has already been conducted in terms of profiling the two groups' origins, actions and evolution. The same can be said for analytical research concerning the Syrian civil war. Therefore, so as not to contribute to theoretical overpopulation, this paper will not be delving analytically in depth in these issues. However, it will briefly provide basic and concise information on these topics, so as to create a historiographical framework of the main protagonists, as well as the geopolitical theater that serves as the backdrop for this research.

2.1 The Emergence of the two Jihadist Movements

Before moving to the rise of each group individually, it is important to mention where the two groups derive their ideologies from. In other words, it is important to understand where the groups gained their ideological inspiration. For one, the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra use terms and concepts in their ideologies taken from classical Islamic law and Islamic scripture, which they formulate into a strict and unique Salafi Sunni ideology, with jihad as a central component. Apart from this though, one cannot examine militant jihadist ideology without including the Islamist thinker, Sayyid Qutb. Specifically, Qutb in his book '*Milestones*' has laid the foundation for the version of Sunni Islam that has influenced the majority of jihadi groups, with the idea of "transnational jihad" at its centre.[32] It is from this foundation that the two groups of this research are influenced and inspired by, specifically from the *takfir* ideology, and the concept of ignorant societies and "ungodly", *taghut* regimes.[33] Finally, '*Milestones*' has

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[32] Saer El-Jaichi, "Ignorance or Sovereignty: The de-Territorialization of Jihad in Sayyid Qutb's Theo-Political Vision," in *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 2022, p.112, https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2021.1875655.
[33] Ibid, p.112–13.

contributed to igniting within such groups the goal of a global spread of Islam through the means of jihad, in which the rule and belief of Allah is the only one.[34]

2.1.1   The Islamic State

The origins of what has come to be known as the Islamic State can be connected to al-Qaeda, who is considered to have set the stage for all jihadist groups to have followed since. Charles Lister's work on the subject has offered an extensive report on the group's rise and origins. Tracing back to 1999, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who is the founder of the Islamic State group, was released from prison in Jordan, and then moved to Afghanistan with the goal of reaching out to al-Qaeda.[35] With al-Qaeda's support, Zarqawi established a jihadi group out of a training camp in the Kandahar province.[36] Following the 9/11 attacks, the US-led invasion of Afghanistan forced Zarqawi and his followers to flee the country, and eventually relocate to Iraq. Following the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, and during the Iraq War, Zarqawi and his militant group made their bones in the stage of jihadism through numerous strategic attacks as part of the insurgent elements of Iraq.[37] During this time and up until his death in 2006, Zarqawi promoted an anti-Shia rhetoric amongst his group's ranks, declaring that the Shia must be eradicated in order for victory to be achieved on any other front.[38]

It was in 2004 that Zarqawi pledged an oath of allegiance to al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden, and establishing for his group the title 'Al-Qaeda in Iraq' (AQI).[39] However, that does not mean that there were no tensions between the two elements. AQI's propensity for brutality against, and mass targeting of Shia civilians caused a rift between Zarqawi and al-Qaeda, with the latter promoting the fighting be directed towards apostate regimes. Be that as it may, as early as this point, the central al-Qaeda leadership encouraged Zarqawi to lay the groundwork for the

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[34] Ibid, p.113.

[35] Lister, "Profiling the Islamic State," p.6; Shamieh and Szenes, "The Rise of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)," p.366.

[36] Lister, "Profiling the Islamic State," p.6.

[37] Ibid, p.7.

[38] Ibid, p.7.

[39] Lister, p.8; Shamieh and Szenes, "The Rise of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)," p.366.

establishment of an Islamic State in Iraq. After the death of Zarqawi in 2006, and under new leadership, the group not only endured losing its founder, but even officially announced the establishment of the prophesized Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), while absorbing other Iraq-based insurgent elements.[40] Throughout the remaining years of that decade, the relationship between al-Qaeda and ISI had gradually been eroded.

Through a chain of turbulent events, ISI succeeded in seizing control of territory in Iraq, as well as consolidating power and support. In other words, the group in every step of the way acted like a rational non-state actor, pursuing its interests with any means necessary, something that agrees with the framework of the post-realist theory. Shifting its headquarters to Mosul, the group morphed into an organization of central, national-level leadership, with bureaucratic structure.[41] In 2010, following the death of the group's then leader, the reins were seized by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi who then began his campaign to grant religious legitimacy to the organization.[42] With the eruption of the war in Syria, the group looked to expand its operations in the neighboring country, while also significantly increasing its influence in Sunni areas of Iraq.

With the Syrian war catching his attention, Baghdadi sent Abu Muhammad al-Julani, one of his operations officers there in 2011 to establish what would later come to be known as Jabhat al-Nusra.[43] While the creation of this ISI subordinate was prompted by Baghdadi himself, Jabhat al-Nusra insisted on operating differently while declaring that it was its own entity with no affiliation to either, ISI or al-Qaeda. As a reaction, in 2013 Baghdadi publicly announced that Jabhat al-Nusra was an offshoot of ISI and therefore operated under the umbrella of the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). This declaration was rejected by Julani, leading to contestation between the two entities, with ISIS establishing its presence in Syria through a force of "former Jabhat al-Nusra foreign fighters".[44]

With ISIS's expansion into and along the Syrian border, Baghdadi publicly announced the establishment of the caliphate in 2014, with him at the top of the ladder in the position of

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[40] Lister, "Profiling the Islamic State," p.8; Shamieh and Szenes, "The Rise of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)," 366.

[41] Lister, "Profiling the Islamic State," p.10.

[42] Lister, p.11.

[43] Lister, p.12; Shamieh and Szenes, "The Rise of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)," p.367.

[44] Lister, "Profiling the Islamic State," p.13.

Caliph. With this act, ISIS was able to assert its status as a jihadist entity not to be ignored, and succeeded in attracting considerable numbers of young, jihadi hopefuls from around the world.[45] In the height of its power, from 2011 onwards, and especially in 2014, ISIS was able to conquer and control large areas of territory within Iraq and Syria, including Raqqa, Aleppo and Mosul, as well as substantial economic and military resources. These resources included petroleum fields, and hydroelectric and thermal power plants, as well as advanced weapons systems and vehicles.[46] This drastic expansion, along with the group's indiscriminate terror attacks across the globe, have been the means through which ISIS has been pursuing its goals.
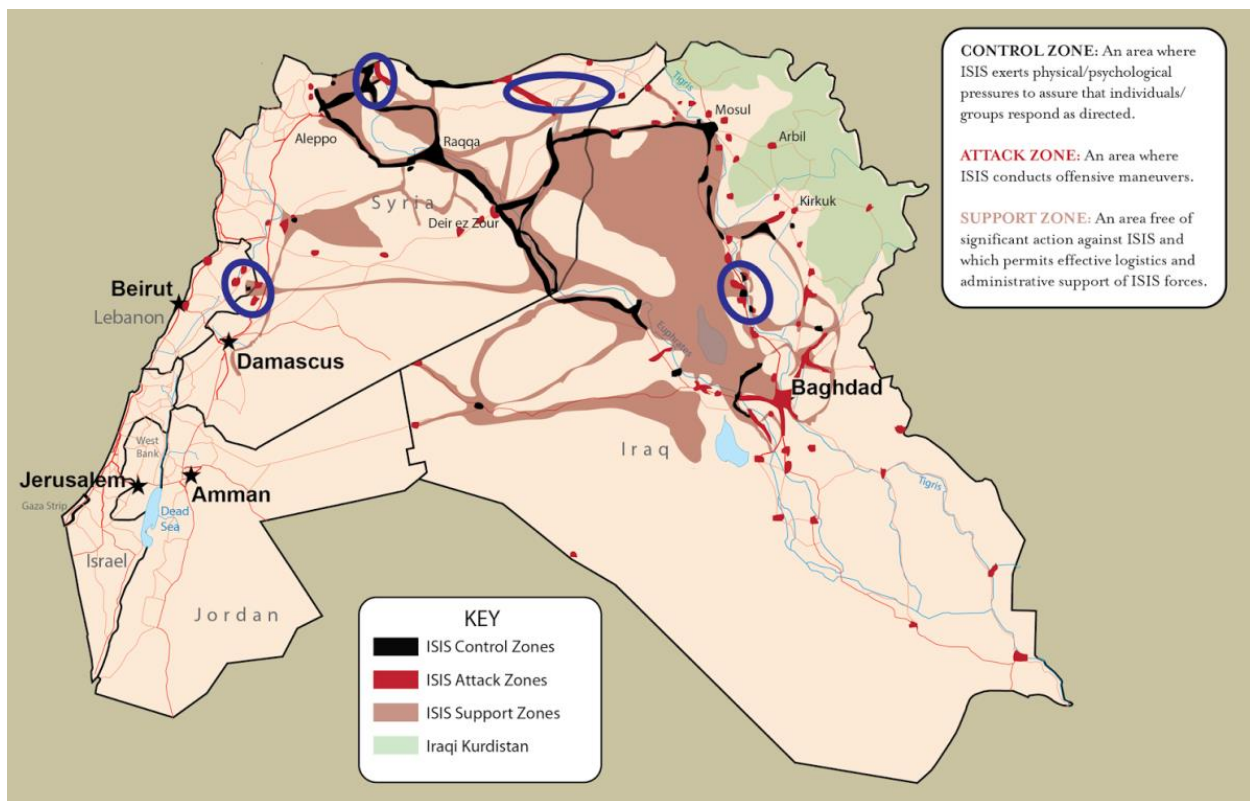
ISIS Sanctuary Map, by the Institute for the Study of War, March 4, 2015

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[45] Lister, p.14.
[46] Ibid, p.15, 16.

2.1.2 Jabhat al-Nusra

Just as the Islamic State's formation is linked to al-Qaeda, Jabhat al-Nusra has its roots in al-Qaeda but also the ISIS group itself. As the revolution in Syria in 2011 was escalating into nation-wide conflict, the Syrian regime began to commit indiscriminate violence in an effort to suppress popular dissent and armed resistance. It was at this point that ISI decided to expand into Syria, sending Abu Muhammad al-Julani into the country in order to establish a Syrian wing of the group.[47] Upon arrival, along with a small group of collaborators and seasoned jihadis, Julani began to reach out to existing AQI and ISI networks. With its establishment, this wing took on the name Jabhat al-Nusra which, as it denotes, was a "front" to support and defend the repressed Sunni community "from its Alawite and Shia enemies", Alawite in this case referring to the Assad regime.[48]

With the public announcement of the group's establishment in January 2012, Julani declared war against the Assad regime and called for the introduction of Islamic Shariah law in the country's governing system. Despite the brutal nature of the group's early attacks, causing fear within Syria that ISI was now involved in the conflict, Jabhat al-Nusra desired to emphasize its "Syrian focus", and its revolutionary disposition.[49] During this time, Jabhat al-Nusra was steadily expanding its ranks by recruiting fighters, while also establishing connections and alliances with Syrian armed opposition groups. Through these actions, as well as the nature of its operations, Jabhat al-Nusra was able to establish itself within the insurgency front of the conflict with the goal of removing Assad from power.[50]

Up until 2012, the group was still practically a part of ISI in terms of structural organization, but Jabhat al-Nusra was beginning to increase in power and was drifting further and further away from ISI command. As a result, Baghdadi contacted Julani and urged him to publicly announce Jabhat al-Nusra's links to ISI, something that Julani rejected. In April 2013,

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[47] Lister, "Profiling Jabhat Al-Nusra," p.13; Jennifer Cafarella, "Jabhat Al-Nusra in Syria: An Islamic Emirate for Al-Qaeda," *Institute for the Study of War*, December 2014, p.11.
[48] Lister, "Profiling Jabhat Al-Nusra," p.9, 10.
[49] Lister, p.10, 11; Cafarella, "Jabhat Al-Nusra in Syria: An Islamic Emirate for Al-Qaeda," p.11.
[50] Lister, "Profiling Jabhat Al-Nusra," p.11; Cafarella, "Jabhat Al-Nusra in Syria: An Islamic Emirate for Al-Qaeda," p.11.

as a reaction to this, Baghdadi publicly announced Jabhat al-Nusra's affiliation to ISI, and that it was now part of the expanded ISIS project. Julani immediately refused to submit to the authority of ISI, now known as ISIS, and instead renewed Jabhat al-Nusra's pledge of allegiance to al-Qaeda. However, after this, a significant number of Jabhat al-Nusra's foreign fighters had left the group to join ISIS, which is what provided the latter group with boots on Syria's ground.[51]

After this split, Jabhat al-Nusra continued to strengthen its connections with jihadi elements and opposition groups. These connections, in combination with al-Qaeda seasoned fighters arriving in Syria to bolster the group's ranks, Jabhat al-Nusra succeeded in ensuring "jihadi credibility" while also differentiating itself from its now competitor, ISIS.[52] By 2014, ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra were drawn into a state of conflict and competition for the title of authentic jihadist bannermen in Syria. Al-Qaeda had retained its support for Jabhat al-Nusra, and had even severed all organizational ties to ISIS.[53] By this point in time, Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS had gone into a campaign of discrediting and slandering each other, while Jabhat al-Nusra preserved its role as an invaluable member of the armed revolutionary opposition in Syria.[54]

In 2014, and after al-Qaeda's leadership's behest, Jabhat al-Nusra established a "new Sharia court system" in Syria, within the territories the group now controlled, namely in Idlib, Hama, and Aleppo.[55] Despite these close ties with al-Qaeda, by 2016, Julani was already considering a separation from the group's organizational umbrella, while pursuing a deeper integration of Jabhat al-Nusra within the oppositional front.[56] While no official statements were made public by the two groups concerning Jabhat al-Nusra's defection, in the following years, al-Qaeda would consider the group to be its own independent entity, which renamed itself to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).[57]

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[51] Lister, "Profiling Jabhat Al-Nusra," p.13.
[52] Ibid, p.14.
[53] Ibid, p.14.
[54] Ibid, p.15, 16.
[55] Ibid, p.17, 18.
[56] Ibid, p.19, 20.
[57] Center for Strategic and International Studies, "Backgrounder: Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham," October 4, 2018, p.1, 2.

Map from '*Why Syria's war is concentrated in the north*', by The Economist, September 15, 2016

2.2 The Outbreak of Civil Strife in Syria

For someone to understand the conflict that has engulfed Syria for the past eleven years, one must understand the geopolitical, social and religious conditions of the country's historical background. While it is not the aim of this research to provide a detailed picture of the Syrian civil war and the reasons for its eruption, an attempt will be made to offer a brief description of the state and conditions of the conflict.

Firstly though, a description of the ethnic and religious composition of Syria's population must be provided. While its majority is comprised by Sunni Muslims, which amount to 74% of the population, Syria is a host of numerous minority groups. Such groups are the Shia, which comprise around 13%, Christians which make up 10% of the population, Kurds at approximately 9%, and the Druze community which, along with other groups, amounts to around 3%. When it comes to the Shia community, its majority is made up of Alawites, to which the Assad family belongs to.[58] The central part of Syria, including Aleppo and Damascus, the country's largest cities, are occupied largely by the Sunni community, while the Shia population is mostly located in Hama, and the country's Alawite population can mostly be found in rural areas of western Syria.[59]

Now proceeding to the conflict, itself, it is important to mention that widespread public discontent has been present in the country, even before the war began. Mainly due to economic inequality, high unemployment, corruption, and absence of political freedom, the conditions of anger and dissent of the population towards the four-decade long Assad family dynasty were already in place like a stack of dominoes waiting for a nudge.[60] As a reaction, the regime became even more repressive towards the people, using new ways, mostly illegitimate, to eliminate any form of opposition.

In 2011, as a wave of uprisings against oppressive regimes began to form the previous year and gain momentum in several Middle Eastern states, Syria took its place amongst one of the counties entangled in the Arab Spring. Demonstrations calling for democratic rule quickly escalated into armed conflict between the Syrian regime and the insurgent forces of opposition.[61] However, it was not long before this unrest took a complex sectarian nature, fueling from the country's long-standing religious divisions. While a first look could reduce the situation to a clear-cut conflict between the mostly Alawite regime forces and a Shia-led coalition of

[58] David S. Sorenson, *Syria in Ruins: The Dynamics of the Syrian Civil War*, 2016, p.9, 10; "United Nations Human Rights Council Universal Periodic Review of Member-State Syria" (Jubilee Campaign USA, Inc., n.d.).

[59] Sorenson, *Syria in Ruins: The Dynamics of the Syrian Civil War*, p.10, 11.

[60] Sorenson, p.21; "Why Has the Syrian War Lasted 11 Years?," BBC News, March 15, 2022.

[61] Maximilian Lakitsch, "Islam in the Syrian War: Spotting the Various Dimensions of Religion in Conflict," *Department of Comparative Political and Legal Studies (Institute of Legal Foundations), University of Graz*, August 3, 2018, p.1; Zachary Laub, "Syria's Civil War: The Descent Into Horror," Council on Foreign Relations, March 17, 2021, https://www.cfr.org/article/syrias-civil-war.

minorities against the disaffected Sunni opposition, a more detailed examination reveals the complexity of reality.[62] Certainly, religious identity has been a factor in the separation of sides in the conflict, but it has not been the sole criterion. If one takes a closer look to the composition of the involved parties, it is evident that there is a multireligious aspect to them, with many Sunnis supporting the regime, and Alawites, Christians and other minorities joining the opposition.[63]

Additionally, the civil war has provided jihadist elements with conditions that enabled them to take an active role in the conflict, while promoting their own radical interpretations of Islam, and presenting it as a responsibility to pursue armed action. The groups most prominent in the struggle are the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra, which both declared war against the Assad regime, while also enemizing anyone who does not follow their versions of Islam.[64] Apart from the already mentioned factions, external powers have taken an active role in the Syrian civil war on both sides of the conflict. The United States, for instance, along with NATO have taken a stand towards the removal of Assad from power, a goal shared by Saudi Arabia as well.[65] Russia, on the other hand, has sided with the Syrian government during the fight, due to economic ties with the Assad regime.[66] Similarly, Iran has also come to its ally, the Syrian regime's aid, and even bolstered the regime forces by deploying and backing Shia-led militia groups.[67]

The turbulent conditions preceding and during the conflict, as well as the multireligious and multisectarian composition of Syria's population, have been critical factors in creating the groundwork on which the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra have established themselves as participating actors. The two groups were able to feed off the sectarian tensions present, combined with Syria's financial inequality and state of conflict, in order to assert and embed themselves within the country's civil war as major actors promoting their own agenda. During their campaign, the two groups have been responsible for brutal crimes and abuses against Syria's demographic groups.

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[62] Lakitsch, "Islam in the Syrian War: Spotting the Various Dimensions of Religion in Conflict," p.1; Ted Galen Carpenter, "Tangled Web: The Syrian Civil War and Its Implications," in *Mediterranean Quarterly*, 2013, p.3.
[63] Lakitsch, "Islam in the Syrian War: Spotting the Various Dimensions of Religion in Conflict," p.1.
[64] Lakitsch, p.2; Laub, "Syria's Civil War: The Descent Into Horror."
[65] Carpenter, "Tangled Web: The Syrian Civil War and Its Implications," p.4.
[66] Ibid, p.7–10.
[67] Ibid, p.4, 5.

3 Relations and Interactions with Syria's Religious Communities and the Political Regime

The following chapter shall review the relations and interactions that the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra maintained with the political and social components of Syria during their years of operation. The information outlined here will be of a factual and statistical nature concerning the two groups' actions towards Syria's regime and military, and the religious communities of the population. What it will not dwell on is the justification behind these actions, as that will be analyzed at a later chapter.

3.1 Relations with the Religious Communities of Syria's Population

When it comes to the relations and interactions of the two groups towards and against the different religious communities of Syria, various sources deriving from thinktanks, as well as reports and journalistic articles were utilized to shed light on abuses committed by IS and Jabhat al-Nusra against these population groups. Furthermore, these sources were able to provide information on the two jihadist organizations' imposed rules and regulations on these groups, and information regarding the targeting of, and action against, segments of the civilian population. These demographic portions of the population include ethnic and religious minority groups such as the Shia, the Yazidis, the Druze, and the Christians, but also civilians belonging to the same sect as IS and Jabhat al-Nusra, the Sunnis, living in territories of Syria under the two groups' control.

Firstly, for the case of the Islamic State, the UN Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, titled "*Rule of Terror: Living under ISIS in Syria*", was used to gather information on the group's various atrocities and crimes committed against the civilian population of the Syrian territory that the group controlled. Specifically, the report highlights that the group is responsible for attacks which resulted in mass civilian casualties, as well as actions such as forced evictions, imprisonment, lashings, and amputations,

with the latter two being a common punishment for offences such as saying "something that ISIS considered to be blasphemous", smoking cigarettes or theft. Furthermore, the report states that the terrorist group enforced upon the civilian population of its controlled territories harsh restrictions upon basic human and religious rights and freedoms, while resorting to public corporal punishments against anyone who would not follow strictly its form of Islamic law. Additionally, as is mentioned in this report, Christians within IS controlled territories in Syria were forced to pay a *jizyah* protection tax, convert to Islam, or flee in order to avoid the risk of being killed. Finally, the report refers to the destruction and desecration, committed by IS, of both Shia and Sunni religious shrines and mosques that were declared to be deviating from Islam or considered idolatrous.[68]

Another relevant source further reveals the Islamic State's strict and brutal treatment of specific minority groups. The BBC News online article "*Syria crisis: ISIS imposes rules on Christians in Raqqa*" corroborates the claims made by the previously mentioned source regarding the terrorist group's stance against Christians within the state of Syria. Specifically, the article reports that Christians in Raqqa are forced to pay a protection tax known as *jizyah*, convert to Islam and accept the conditions set by IS, or risk being killed.[69]

In addition, the article "*The Islamic State Is Targeting Syria's Alawite Heartland -- and Russia*", corroborating information offered by other sources, sheds light on the violent and brutal acts committed by the terrorist group against ethnic and religious groups of Syria, by reporting on the Islamic State's suicide bombing attacks in the Alawite predominant areas of Tartus and Jableh in Syria. Furthermore, Balanche states that the intention of IS with the targeting of this group is to inflame tensions between Sunnis and Alawites in Syria, while simultaneously attempting to emerge as "the leader of the fight against the [Assad secular, Alawite] regime".[70]

Another source which provided useful and relevant information of this matter was Emily Hawley's article "*ISIS Crimes Against the Shia: The Islamic State's Genocide Against Shia*

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[68] UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), "Rule of Terror: Living under ISIS in Syria," Refworld, November 14, 2014, https://www.refworld.org/docid/5469b2e14.html.

[69] "Syria Crisis: ISIS Imposes Rules on Christians in Raqqa," BBC News, February 27, 2014, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26366197.

[70] Fabrice Balanche, "The Islamic State Is Targeting Syria's Alawite Heartland -- and Russia," The Washington Institute, May 24, 2016, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/islamic-state-targeting-syrias-alawite-heartland-and-russia.

Muslims". Hawley states that one of the terrorist group's defining traits is its prioritization of its "near" enemy, the Shias. This religious group is deemed by the Islamic State to be "apostate" and "polytheist", meaning that they have deviated from the group's approved form of Islam. After the toppling of Saddam Hussein's Sunni Ba'athist regime, as Hawley mentions, the Sunni population of Iraq was marginalized. IS therefore used a rhetoric of revenge against the Shia, justifying its violent attacks against them. This justification also exists in the core of the Islamic State's magazine and propaganda machine, *'Dabiq'*. Specifically, the magazine's 13th issue explains the concept of *takfir*, which is the "disavowal of unbelievers", providing therefore the group's grounds for the systematic killing of Shia Muslims. Finally, the article includes in the Islamic State's record of atrocities attacks and crimes committed against Sunni communities, the same sect which the terrorist group belongs to. This targeting often takes the form of punishments and killings of Sunni civilians that were declared by the group to be polytheist because of their "unacceptable prayer methods".[71]

Furthermore, the Counter Extremist Project report on "*ISIS's Persecution of Religions*" "explores the ideological justifications" for the group's targeting of religious groups. Moreover, IS's actions against religious minorities have been classified as "war crimes, crimes against humanity, and acts of genocide". The report then declares that the elimination of "those who do not subscribe to [IS's] perverse ideology" is found at the core of the group's ideology. Specifically, the Islamic State rejects any religion that differs from their own extreme version of Sunni Islam. As listed and highlighted by the report, religious groups which are targeted by the terrorist group include Yazidis, Christians, Shia Muslims, Sufis, and apostates (Muslims who, according to IS, do not follow their form of Islam). Additionally, the report states that IS is responsible for the torture, rape, kidnapping, and execution of Christians in Iraq and Syria, where, in both states, the group imposes the previously mentioned *jizyah* protection tax, but adds that this tax is nothing but a deceptive method of extorting Christians "with no regard of their protection or religious freedom". Subsequently, the report refers to the way that IS justifies the targeting of Shia Muslims, labelling them as "Rafidah" ("rejecters") that adhere to a "false form of Islam" since they have rejected the first two successors of the Islamic prophet Muhammad. Furthermore, the report sheds light on the targeting of the Syrian Alawites, an off-shoot branch

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[71] Emily Hawley, "ISIS Crimes Against the Shia: The Islamic State's Genocide Against Shia Muslims," Genocide Studies International, March 2018, p.160–81.

of Shia Islam, who are considered by the Islamic State to be "infidels" or "apostates". The terrorist group associates the Alawite population with the Assad regime, and is responsible for the killing of thousands of Alawites, including soldiers of the Syrian regime, as well as civilians accused of collaborating with the government. Subsequently, the "mystical Islamic practice" known as Sufism is referenced, which is deemed by IS to be idolatrous. On the grounds of this characterization, the terrorist group has carried out the destruction of Sufi shrines, tombs, mosques and religious sites, along with the targeting "for arrest or execution" of Sufi leaders. In addition, the report dwells into the group's regular classification and accusation of thousands of civilians and opposition soldiers of apostasy. In this concept, anyone who does not abide by IS's strict laws is deemed an apostate and sentenced to death. Finally, this report outlines the terrorist group's use of its online propaganda media, especially the magazine Dabiq, in order to "target, demonize, and incite violence against" the religious groups mentioned.[72]

Finally, for the case of Jabhat al-Nusra's treatment of religious minorities in Syria, a set of annual International Religious Freedom Reports were used to gather factual information on the group's stance and actions. In general, these reports corroborate and support one another in offering a picture of abuse and harsh treatment by Jabhat al-Nusra against any religious group that did not follow its strict rules and its version of Islamic law. Specifically, the reports outline a violent streak of Jabhat al-Nusra against members of religious minority groups, with actions such as killings, arrests, torture, kidnappings, and systematic destruction of religious sites. The religious groups in question include Shia Muslims, Alawites, Druze, Christians, and even Sunni Muslims. The grounds of justification for these actions include in the case of attacks against Shia Muslims to be "reactions to the government's massacres of Sunnis", in the case of Druze and Christians, attacks are committed on the grounds of them being labelled as "infidels" or supporters of the Assad regime, and in the case of Alawites, the attacks were justified by Jabhat al-Nusra's belief that "government policy favored Alawites". Furthermore, Jabhat al-Nusra is reported to have engaged in indoctrination campaigns of children and youth in the areas they controlled with their strict "Salafi-jihadi interpretation of Islam". In these territories, whoever deviated from this version of Islam was targeted for arrest and killing, while Druze, Alawite and Christian civilians were forced to convert to Islam, or risk being detained and killed. Moreover,

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[72] "ISIS's Persecution of Religions," May 2017, https://www.counterextremism.com/content/isiss-persecution-religions.

Jabhat al-Nusra, as stated in these reports, had established Shariah courts and councils which replaced governmental courts, in order to impose its own Islamic laws and regulations more prolifically.[73]

After reviewing these sources, it is evident that they commonly reflect in agreement the harsh treatment and violent stance that IS and Jabhat al-Nusra follow against Syria's different ethnic and religious groups. Specifically, as is highlighted in the sources, the two groups actively commit violent attacks and crimes against Shia Muslims, Christians, Yazidis, Alawites and even Sunnis within the territories they controlled. Finally, any civilian who does not follow the two jihadist groups' strict rules and regulations, and does not abide by their harsh restrictions on religious rights, risks punishment which can include forced displacement, lashing, amputation, and even public execution.

3.2 Relations with Syria's Regime and Armed Forces

At this point, I will refer to the relations and interactions between the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra towards the governing authorities in Syria. Firstly, an article by Matthew Levitt posted by The Washington Post, titled "*The Assad Regime's Business Model for Supporting the Islamic State*", clearly highlights the complex relation that Syria's governing authority maintains with IS. Specifically, Levitt states that the Assad regime has been assisting, tolerating, enabling and facilitating the continued survival of the Islamic State, with the goal of painting "all of the Syrian opposition as "terrorists"". The Syrian government has been focusing its military efforts against

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[73] United States Department of State, "2014 Report on International Religious Freedom - Syria" (United States Department of State, October 14, 2015), https://www.refworld.org/docid/5621054415.html; United States Department of State, "Syria 2015 International Religious Freedom Report" (United States Department of State), accessed January 16, 2022, https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/256501.pdf; United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), "USCIRF Annual Report 2016 - Tier 1: USCIRF-Recommended Countries of Particular Concern (CPC) - Syria," May 2, 2016, https://www.refworld.org/docid/57307cec15.html; United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), "USCIRF Annual Report 2017 - Tier 1: USCIRF-Recommended Countries of Particular Concern (CPC) - Syria," April 26, 2017, https://www.refworld.org/docid/59072f4913.html; United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), "USCIRF Annual Report 2018 - Tier 1: USCIRF-Recommended Countries of Particular Concern (CPC) - Syria," April 25, 2018, https://www.refworld.org/docid/5b278ef50.html; United States Department of State, "Syria 2019 International Religious Freedom Report" (United States Department of State, 2019).

the opposing rebel groups such as the FSA, while ignoring, or even assisting IS. Additionally, in 2011 the Syrian regime began releasing imprisoned radical Islamist terrorists, among which were some of IS's and Jabhat al-Nusra's future senior members. The reason behind this tactic was the Assad regime's fear of "a continued peaceful revolution", with the answer being to create a military and extreme alternative in the form of an Islamic terrorist opposition group. Also, as the article mentions, the Syrian regime has refrained on occasion from attacking IS, while colluding with the terrorist group in order to encourage IS to "attack moderate rebels rather than the group", and to take actions favorable to the Assad administration's interests. Finally, Levitt reports that there have been on-going business dealings between the Assad government and the Islamic State, as the regime have been purchasing oil from the group, further adding to the group's funds.[74]

Moreover, another source with helpful insight on this matter is the report by Willem Theo Oosterveld and Willem Bloem, titled "*The Rise and Fall of ISIS: From Evitability to Inevitability*", published for the Hague Centre for Strategic Studies. As the report clarifies, the instability in Syria after the Arab Spring revolutions enabled IS to spread into Syria by exploiting a natural division between the country's "Sunni majority and the Shia Alawite-led minorities that had ruled" Syria under the al-Assad family dynasty. The source then proceeds to reveal that the group's rise in Syria was "partly the result of a deliberate strategy by President Bashar al-Assad to sow division among his opponents", and to ensure that the conflict in Syria was perceived to be between the 'legitimate' government and "Islamic extremists". Moreover, the Syrian regime is stated to have been a "key economic partner" for IS, buying oil from the group at discounted prices. Lastly, the report refers to the terrorist group as having an "unspoken non-aggression pact with the Syrian government army".[75]

Finally, for the case of Jabhat al-Nusra, as outlined in the Council on Foreign Relations' article "*Syria's Civil War: The Descent Into Horror*", Jabhat al-Nusra is one of the jihadist groups that "eclipsed opposition forces fighting for a democratic and pluralistic Syria", taking an

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[74] Matthew Levitt, "The Assad Regime's Business Model for Supporting the Islamic State," The Washington Institute, September 26, 2021, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/assad-regimes-business-model-supporting-islamic-state.

[75] Willem Theo Oosterveld and Willem Bloem, "The Rise and Fall of ISIS: From Evitability to Inevitability" (The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2017).

active role in the conflict by waging a jihad against the Assad regime and its armed forces. Additionally, as mentioned by previously included sources, figures of Jabhat al-Nusra's leadership were among the militant prisoners released from prison in 2011 by the regime with the goal of separating clearly the two sides of the conflict while painting all opposition forces as radical jihadist terrorist groups and presenting the regime as the only legitimate force fighting in the civil war.[76]

The examination of this bundle of sources reveals a complex and multi-faceted relationship between the Islamic State and the Assad Syrian regime. In the case of the group's relations with the Syrian governing authority, the terrorist group is cited to dispose a hostile stance towards the Assad regime forces, evident by the offensive campaigns to capture key cities within the country, while at the same time maintaining relatively collaborative relations. While not being on friendly terms, IS and the Syrian regime share a colluding relationship of shared interests and enablement, based on a pursuit of interests by both sides. However, the sources used were able to provide a clear picture of hostility between Jabhat al-Nusra and the Syrian regime. Since the beginning of the civil war, Jabhat al-Nusra has emerged as an armed opposition group engaged in a military campaign against the Assad regime. In the next chapter, the discourse of both groups will be analyzed in order to examine how they justify these interactions based on religious criteria.

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[76] Laub, "Syria's Civil War: The Descent Into Horror"; United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), "USCIRF Annual Report 2016 - Tier 1: USCIRF-Recommended Countries of Particular Concern (CPC) - Syria"; United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), "USCIRF Annual Report 2017 - Tier 1: USCIRF-Recommended Countries of Particular Concern (CPC) - Syria."

4   Comparative Discourse Analysis of the Two Groups' Rationale Used in Targeting Syria's Components

4.1 Transliteration

Before proceeding to the analysis of the two groups' discourse, I will offer a selection of definitions to transliterated terms and concepts deriving from Islamic law, as used in Arabic by IS and Jabhat al-Nusra in their publications. As these terms and concepts are mentioned frequently in the primary source material, it is important to gain a universally accepted understanding to their meaning, as well as any differences in the way the terms are used by the two groups. The terms mostly used by the two groups are the following: *kafir*[77], *murtadd*[78], *takfir*[79], *shirk*[80], rafidah[81], *taghut*[82], *bidah*[83], and jihad[84]. A complete collection of all terms encountered is provided as an appendix, in the form of a glossary.

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[77] Defined as "unbeliever" or "disbeliever", it is used by the jihadist groups for Muslims who do not adhere to their strict interpretations of the Quran. Its plural form is "kuffar" and the verb for disbelief is "kufr".

[78] Used to name those who are guilty of apostasy, meaning they have renounced their religion. Singular for "murtaddin".

[79] The act of excommunicating someone from Islam, after pronouncing someone to be a *kafir*. The two groups, and mainly IS, use this concept to justify violence against Muslims who deviate from their interpretation of Islam.

[80] Associating someone with God, or attributing divine traits to someone other than God, therefore deviating from monotheism. The name for those who commit practices of polytheism and idolatry, is "mushrikun", or alternatively "mushrikeen" or "mushrikin".

[81] Used by the two groups to refer to the Shia sect. Translates to "rejectors". Spelled "Rafidah" by the two groups.

[82] Translates to false god or idol. Applied by the two groups to tyrannical rulers or regimes who arrogate God's absolute power and use it to oppress people, while ruling not in accordance with Shariah law. Singular form of "tawaghit".

[83] Innovation. Any modification of accepted religious belief or practice. Carries a negative connotation.

[84] Complex term with multiple definitions, depending on context. It can be used to "express a struggle against one's evil inclinations, an exertion to convert unbelievers, or a struggle for the moral betterment of the Islamic community". Used by the two groups to refer to the duty or obligation to fight those deemed as non-Muslims and apostates, via means of violence.

4.2 Analysis of the Two Jihadist Groups' Discourse

Throughout their years of operation in Syria, the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra have utilized rhetoric revolving around religious characteristics when justifying the reasoning upon which their relations with different communities and groups are based. While both groups follow and enforce a radical version of Islam, the grounds for their targeting of religious communities of Syria's population and the political regime, and the levels of extremity of their actions towards them differ at a nuanced level. While sources such as human rights reports outline which groups and communities are being targeted by the two jihadist groups and in what ways, the groups' own magazine publications shed light to the reasoning that they employ when interacting with Syria's political and social components. Whether addressing their fighters and hopeful initiates, or their enemies, the two groups do not refrain from explaining at every turn who is declared an enemy and therefore deemed worthy for targeting, and for what reasons.

What is interesting to note is that the two groups in their discourse use two distinct ways when it comes to their relations with Syria's communities and regime. Firstly, they employ a strategy for specific targeting based on characteristics of religious communities, and secondly, they follow a more general and exclusionary strategy of targeting. By the second, it is meant that both groups reconcile the targeting of religious groups on the grounds of not conforming to their version of Islam. This means that whoever deviates from their interpretation is deemed as not an actual or true Muslim. The constant use of religious identity in both these ways in order to construct the frame of targeting is evidence for how the two groups fuel from the religious and sectarian tensions of Syria with the goal of pursuing their interests and enforcing their ideology.

Jabhat al-Nusra in their online magazine, titled 'Al-Risalah', frequently use the term "Muslims" or "Muslim" throughout their issues in contrast to anyone who does not abide by their form of Islam; the right way of Islam.[85] After reading their publications, one can understand that when they use the words "Muslims" or "Muslim" they are referring to Sunni Muslims, specifically those who follow their strict version of Shariah. By making such use of this characterization, while excluding everyone else from this category, Jabhat al-Nusra make it clear that in their

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[85] Jabhat al-Nusra, "Al-Risalah No.1," July 2015, p.5, 23, 24, 26, 27, 28, 30, 38, 39, 42; Jabhat al-Nusra, "Al-Risalah No.2," October 2015, p.3, 7, 12, 15, 16, 17, 18.

point of view and ideology, the only real and authentic Muslims are those who follow their form of Sunni Islam, while everyone else is, at the very least, deviating from the right path of Islam.

The Islamic State on the other hand makes use of an even more exclusionary form of categorization, in which the title of Muslim is even more rare and difficult to attain. Specifically, the group employs the '*takfir*' ideology, through which they can declare someone to be an unbeliever (*kafir*) or an apostate (*murtadd*), followed by excommunication from Islam.[86] This practice allows IS to sanction violence against Muslims who deviate from their strict interpretation of Islam.[87] While IS is aware that Jabhat al-Nusra and other jihadist groups accuse them of being too extreme because in part of their application of *takfir*, they do themselves mention in their publications, although scarcely, that their use of *takfir* is directed at '*murtaddin*', meaning apostates, and '*taghut*', literally translating to "false god or idol", but in this case referring to totalitarian regimes who "arrogate God's absolute power and use it to oppress people", while ruling not in accordance to Shariah law.[88] By clarifying in which instances they employ *takfir*, the group declares that they use this method only against those who have deviated from the right path of Islam and oppressive regimes such as the Assad government in Syria.

The use of this distinction by the two groups between Muslims and non-Muslims also reveals the concept of othering, used in order to accentuate a difference and create "an in-group and an out-group"[89]. Through this, the two groups can establish themselves as the dominant group with the power to justify the enemization of religious groups on the grounds of inferiority and religious deviation. The fact that this classification is based on religious criteria, allows this concept to be applied in complement to the framework of sectarianization, as the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra portray themselves as the ones following the right version of Islam, in contrast to every other Islamic sect.

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[86] Islamic State, "Dabiq No.1," July 2014, p.24, 39.

[87] "Oxford Dictionary of Islam - Oxford Reference," accessed April 18, 2022, https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195125580.001.0001/acref-9780195125580.

[88] Islamic State, "Dabiq No.1," p.27; "Oxford Dictionary of Islam - Oxford Reference."

[89] Stazak, "Other/Otherness," p.43.

4.3 Justification of the Two Groups for General Targeting of Syria's Religious Communities

4.3.1 Justification of Jabhat al-Nusra for General Targeting of Religious Groups

When comparing the discourse of the two groups, Jabhat al-Nusra appears to be the more moderate, or more accurately, the least extreme amongst the two, and that is also how the group promotes itself. That however is not to say that it is a moderate group in and of itself. More on the actions of both groups will follow at a later stage. For now, it is important to note that Jabhat al-Nusra recurringly discredits and condemns the Islamic State for their extreme ideology and actions, while presenting themselves as following "the correct and 'moderate' path".[90] Through their words, the group discredits and labels IS as extremists, while at the same time promoting themselves as the advocates of the right version of Islam; in their own words, the real Muslims following Allah's 'middle path'.[91] Once again, Jabhat al-Nusra uses a lens of religion to construct their identity, and to pinpoint who their enemies are and for what religious reasons.

Additionally, Jabhat al-Nusra appears to prefer, at least in theory, the conversion of "apostate" Muslims that have deviated from the right path back to their correct version, instead of excommunicating and executing them. As they state, "Allah would be more pleased" if they called "an ignorant individual back to Islam, or from being a sinner to Mujahid", instead of declaring him an apostate and killing him, in other words, instead of exercising IS's *takfir* ideology.[92] This statement made by the group can be acknowledged as mostly accurate, since, as seen in the previous chapter, in the case of the Druze and Christian communities in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra offers the choice of converting to Islam, or pay a tax to avoid the displacement or lethal persecution. Referenced in Al-Risalah on more than one instance, Jabhat al-Nusra would prefer inviting apostates and unbelievers "to Islam and they would become Muslims, rather than (simply) slaughtering them in such ways", referring to IS's extreme ways, once more

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[90] Jabhat al-Nusra, "Al-Risalah No.2," p.13.
[91] Ibid, p.3.
[92] Ibid, p.18.

condemning them and painting them as the extremists of the spectrum.[93] As is stated explicitly by the group itself, "IS is a blessing in disguise for the Muslim Ummah[94]", since they have offered a more radical actor on the spectrum, allowing Jabhat al-Nusra to present themselves as the legitimate Muslim jihadis who follow in the right path of Islam.[95]

That being said, Jabhat al-Nusra do let their extreme side show in their publications, while not as extreme as IS perhaps, but extreme, nonetheless. Even though they preach about showing mercy and inviting those who have deviated from Islam (their accepted version) to join the fold, their issues belie an exclusionary and radical streak of targeting those regarded as non-Muslims. As noted in their second issue, jihad is the way to solve the Muslim community's suffering due to the Shariah undergoing changes through "oppression and distance from the religion".[96] Following the Shariah, as they interpret it, Jabhat al-Nusra fighters wage jihad "against the people until they testify that there is none worthy of worship except Allah".[97] In simpler terms, all must accept and follow Islam, the 'right' version of Islam, or be forced to do so through jihad. Moreover, this issue states that all people are servants of Allah, either through "love" and "obedience", or "through compulsion", meaning through forceful ways.[98] When taking this statement into account, one can spot a difference from their previous words of "inviting" those who have deviated to join Islam. The use of wording here, specifically the use of the word "compulsion" paints a more extreme and brutal method of leading people into espousing the group's interpretation of Islam. In other words, while Jabhat al-Nusra promotes a merciful method of operation, their actions show that they are still intolerant of any deviation from their form of Islam, and that they are not against using force to get people in line.

This is even more evident in a section of the same issue in which a description is offered regarding a case brought in front of a "Shari'ah court" of Jabhat al-Nusra, on July 16th, 2015. In this segment, two prisoners (possibly Sunni), are tried by the group's fighters/judges on the

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[93] Ibid, p.93.
[94] Muslim community. A fundamental concept in Islam, expressing the essential unity and theoretical equality of Muslims from diverse cultural and geographical settings.
[95] Jabhat al-Nusra, "Al-Risalah No.2," p.13.
[96] Ibid, p.65.
[97] Ibid, p.65.
[98] Ibid, p.65.

charges of openly cursing Allah, "an act of kufr".[99] These two men were "arrested and imprisoned for two weeks" and, during their trial, were "sentenced to one hundred and fifty lashes"[100]. As emphasized in the text, repentance is an important factor in the process of joining the fold of Islam again, the correct Islam. While this account notes that the prisoners were "treated with mercy", it also states that "should they commit such an act of *kufr* again, they would face execution".[101] Furthermore, the publication adds that "vetting out Islamic justice [notice the choice of the word "justice" rather than punishment] is not something we should enjoy", and that it is a necessary action for the "benefit of both the perpetrator(s) and society".[102] Specifically, the purpose of such punishment is to lead to "atonement for having sinned", and to act as a deterrent for the community, while serving as "a reminder of the consequences that come with violating the laws of Allah".[103] In this instance of passing out judgement and justice, it would seem that the jihadi fighters in their infinite wisdom are qualified to judge the two men for the crime of deviating from the group's Islam, and to pass out a sentence of punishment. This account reveals a clear case of a forceful and violent integration and correction of deviation from their version of Islam.[104]

After the two men were tried, punished, and embraced by the crowd, the trial takes an even more intense form of justice when the turn comes for a "regime soldier" to be judged. The soldier belonging to the Alawite regime was captured two months earlier, and from the three men tried that day, he was the only one to be blindfolded. As the magazine declares, all three prisoners "had violated the laws of Allah".[105] The two men by committing an act of *kufr*, and through it deviating from Jabhat al-Nusra's right path of Islam, and the regime soldier by being a "Nusayri"[106] (Alawite) and an apostate. The case of the specific trial will be investigated again and in more depth at a later stage of this paper, when researching Jabhat al-Nusra's specific

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[99] Ibid, p.79.
[100] Ibid, p.80.
[101] Ibid, p.79-80.
[102] Ibid, p.80.
[103] Ibid, p.80.
[104] Ibid, p.79-80.
[105] Ibid, p.79.
[106] Derogatory name used by the two groups to refer to the Alawite sect. Secretive Shii school of thought located in a mountain range in northwestern Syria. Believe in the absolute oneness of God and that God appeared on earth seven times in human form with Ali as the last manifestation. Interpret the Quran and hadith allegorically, emphasizing good and evil, symbolized by light and darkness

targeting of the Assad regime and the Alawite community in Syria.[107] For now, it is important to note the various ways in which the group incorporates religion as the core of their ideology, identity, and targetive framework.

In the first issue of Al-Risalah, a segment titled "Khilafa One Year On" continues to walk in line with Jabhat al-Nusra's discourse of discrediting the extremists of the Islamic State, while shedding light on some of the groups Jabhat al-Nusra itself targets. Once again, the *takfir* methodology employed by IS is mentioned, and as is stated, it is used against whoever opposes them. Specifically, the magazine issue declares that "ISIS makes takfir on the Muslims and kills them", while committing atrocious acts on the Muslim community.[108] From Jabhat al-Nusra's words, one can infer that the group abstains from such extreme treatment towards Muslims, and as they mention, prefer to incorporate Muslims that have deviated from their form of Islam, rather than targeting them for elimination.

As previously covered in the case brought in front of the group's Shariah court, Jabhat al-Nusra appears to promote the practice of guiding Muslims who have diverged from their interpretation of Islam back into the fold of acceptable religious practice and belief. This guidance often takes the form of physical punishment, which includes public lashing, before the guilty parties are embraced back into Islam. However, as the group states, if they deviate again, the punishment shall be of the capital nature.

4.3.2 Justification of the Islamic State for General Targeting of Religious Groups

Moving on to the Islamic State, a more extreme, violent and absolute form of targeting is evident, and from their choice of words in the issues of their published magazine, 'Dabiq', one can observe that their list of enemies and targets leaves very few out of the pot of guilt. Throughout the issues of Dabiq, and especially in issue 13, there is a constant and dense presence of words like "tāghūt", "murtaddīn", "kuffār", and "mushrikīn".[109] These words refer to

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[107] Jabhat al-Nusra, "Al-Risalah No.2," p.79-82.
[108] Jabhat al-Nusra, "Al-Risalah No.1," p.23.
[109] Islamic State, "Dabiq No.13," January 2016, p.7, 8, 11, 12, 14, 17, 19, 23, 29.

oppressive regimes, apostates, disbelievers, and polytheists, respectively.[110] According to IS, Allah has commanded them to "kill the mushrikīn wherever you find them".[111] In the *mushrikun* category falls anyone who commits the sin of *shirk*, meaning whoever associates divine attributes to anyone other than Allah, therefore deviating from monotheism. While sharing the disapproval of polytheism with Jabhat al-Nusra, IS's statement reveals that they are not supporters of the so-called middle path. In other words, they do not follow a strategy of bringing those who deviate from their Islam into the fold, but advocate the elimination of these "impure" disbelievers.[112] Once again, the Islamic State, assuming the 'superior' role of the in-group acts in line with the concept of othering, through which the group identifies a difference in the out-groups, in this case those who deviate from monotheism, and uses that difference to justify violence towards them.

Throughout the same issue, the jihadist group mentions military operations and hostile actions against such categories, not only in Syria, but in the broader Middle Eastern region. While the focus of this research is Syria, the rhetoric used by IS sheds light on the reasoning behind the targeting of such groups. After all, both IS and Jabhat al-Nusra focus, not on nationality and ethnicity, but on religious beliefs when deciding who the enemies and who the real Muslims are, once again revealing how literally the groups walk in line with the concept of sectarianization.

The magazine includes references to attacks "on the kuffār"[113], conflict with "apostate" armies[114], and operations against apostate factions "in all their colors"[115]. Regarding this last phrase, the Islamic State clarifies and declares that they do not "differentiate between those murtaddīn who shamelessly ally with the disbelievers against the Muslims" while portraying themselves as seculars, "and those murtaddīn who do so using false pretexts" while trying to maintain "Islamic" image.[116] In other words, IS is suggesting that it is capable and qualified to sniff out apostates and deviants who pass themselves as Muslim, and in that case, pass out

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[110] "Oxford Dictionary of Islam - Oxford Reference."
[111] Islamic State, "Dabiq No.13," p.8.
[112] Ibid, p.12.
[113] Ibid, p.3.
[114] Ibid, p.5.
[115] Ibid, p.14.
[116] Ibid, p.14.

punishments comparable to apostates "who shamelessly ally with the disbelievers against the Muslims", referring here to the Assad regime and their allies, with the magazine even reporting on cases of executing "apostates for supporting and colluding with the nusayrī regime".[117] Therefore, elimination and violence is the group's go-to course of action, be it against the Syrian government and army, or the civilian population that may not abide to the jihadist group's beliefs. Similar to this motif of violence against those deemed apostates, the magazine's very first issue praises the determination to wage "war on any Sunni tribe, party, or assembly that would support the crusaders [Western forces]".[118] In this early case of targetive rhetoric, the magazine does not use any labels such as 'apostates' or '*kuffar*', but blatantly reveals that even members of the group's own Islamic sect (Sunni) will be prosecuted if they step out of IS's strict line of religion.

4.4 Justification of the Two Groups for Specific Targeting of the Alawite and Shia Sects

Moving on to the strategy used by the two groups for specific targeting of religious communities and Syria's regime, this research will focus on the Alawite and Shia communities of Syria, the former in which the Assad regime falls into in terms of religious orientation.

4.4.1 Jabhat al-Nusra's Justification for Targeting the Alawite Community and Regime

In the previously mentioned section "Khilafa One Year One" of the first Al-Risalah issue, Jabhat al-Nusra introduces for the first time in their discourse another title to label one of their targets. That title is "Nusayris", which was briefly mentioned before when covering the Al-Risalah section "All Cases Are Judged According to Qur'an and Sunnah", and it is a derogatory term

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[117] Islamic State, p.14; Islamic State, "Dabiq No.2," July 2014, p.33.
[118] Islamic State, "Dabiq No.1," p.37.

used to refer to the Alawite community of Syria, as well as the Assad regime. While the Assad regime portrays itself as a secular government[119], Jabhat al-Nusra bases its hostility towards it on the group's perception of the government being Alawite. This perception is based on the fact that the Assad family is mostly Alawite, while key positions in the regime military are held by Alawite officers.[120]

At this point, no explanation is offered regarding why the Alawites of Syria, whether from the civilian population or the political regime, are targeted. Knowing that Alawites are an off-shoot of the Shia Muslim sect[121], which is the prioritized enemy of IS, and one of the top prioritized enemies of Jabhat al-Nusra, one can deduce that this hostile and hateful disposition towards the Shia spills over by extent to the Alawites too. However, in the second issue of Al-Risalah, in the segment of the Shariah court trial, Jabhat al-Nusra offers a more detailed justification why they target this specific religious group. Specifically, they clarify that "the Nusayris (Alawites) are Kuffar"[122], meaning that they are disbelievers and deniers of Islam[123]. Additionally, they are described to be "greater disbelievers than the Jews and Christians […] [and] most of the mushrikeen (polytheists")", and to be causing great harm to the Muslim community.[124]

As is stated in the magazine, the soldier, even though of the Alawite sect, is not undeserving of mercy, and since this particular group advocates the way of mercy, he is therefore allowed to pray before his sentence, something that the "extremists" of IS do not adhere to.[125] At this point, there is a "clear distinction" between the extremists and the rightful *mujahidin*.[126] When his number comes up, the regime soldier is transported to a Turkish border town where his sentence to be executed would be carried out. As is clarified once more, the crime of the soldier

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[119] Seijbel, "The War for Supremacy of the Jihadist Movement: Intra-Movement Rivalry in Jihadist Media, 2011-2016," p.42, 51; Syria Untold, "How the Assad Regime Feigns 'Secularism' While Strengthening Conservatism," January 14, 2022, https://syriauntold.com/2022/01/14/how-the-assad-regime-feigns-secularism-while-strengthening-conservatism/.

[120] Seijbel, "The War for Supremacy of the Jihadist Movement: Intra-Movement Rivalry in Jihadist Media, 2011-2016," p.51.

[121] "Oxford Dictionary of Islam - Oxford Reference."

[122] Jabhat al-Nusra, "Al-Risalah No.2," p.81.

[123] "Oxford Dictionary of Islam - Oxford Reference."

[124] Jabhat al-Nusra, "Al-Risalah No.2," p.81.

[125] Ibid, p.79.

[126] Ibid, p.79.

is being an Alawite and belonging to a regime that is *kafir* and commits *shirk*, and the punishment for such a crime is death, as decided by the jihadi fighters who are "the implementers of Allah's laws on this Earth".[127]

While the explicit characterizations used by the group's publication mostly encompass all of the Alawite community, the issue then moves on to an accusation directed specifically at the Assad regime. According to Jabhat al-Nusra, the Syrian government is "a Nusayri regime that commits major shirk, which is a nullifier of Islam".[128] *Shirk* translates to, and is defined as idolatry and polytheism, and more specifically, as associating "someone or something with God, that is, putting someone or something in the place of God, thus deviating from monotheism".[129] According to the jihadist group, the "Nusayri regime['s]" commitment of *shirk* is their belief revolving around the idea that "Ali (Ra) is God incarnate".[130] As mentioned before, Jabhat al-Nusra advocates that "there is none worthy of worship except Allah"[131], and therefore attributing any traits of divinity to anyone other than Allah is a sin that must be eradicated. This, in combination with the perception of the jihadist group that the "tyrannical Bashar regime"[132], or alternatively, the "oppressive Alawi regime of Bashar Al-Assad"[133] is responsible for the perpetual oppression and mistreatment of the (Sunni) Muslims of Syria[134] explains the reasoning behind Jabhat al-Nusra's hateful and hostile determination which drives them against the Syrian regime. As the second issue of the magazine declares, it is their goal to "raise the deen of Allah" in Syria, and in order to accomplish this, they are driven by "duty" to remove the "agents of tyranny" of the Assad regime, and through this to cleanse and purify the land of "shirk" and "kufr rulings".[135]

To sum up this two-fold justification behind the group's unbending enemization of the Syrian government and its "nusayri army"[136], the grounds on which it is based on are, firstly, its

[127] Ibid, p.81.
[128] Ibid, p.81.
[129] "Oxford Dictionary of Islam - Oxford Reference."
[130] Jabhat al-Nusra, "Al-Risalah No.2," p.82.
[131] Ibid, p.65.
[132] Jabhat al-Nusra, "Al-Risalah No.1," p.37.
[133] Jabhat al-Nusra, "Al-Risalah No.4," January 2017, p.8.
[134] Jabhat al-Nusra, "Al-Risalah No.2," p.81, 91; Jabhat al-Nusra, "Al-Risalah No.4," p.4, 29.
[135] Jabhat al-Nusra, "Al-Risalah No.2," p.48, 49.
[136] Jabhat al-Nusra, "Al-Risalah No.1," p.41.

religious disposition accompanied by the major sins of *shirk* and *kufr*, and secondly, the alleged long-lasting oppression and atrocities committed against the (Sunni) Muslims of Syria. As the magazine consistently reminds the readers of Al-Risalah, it is "the duty of every Muslim to remove kufr from their lands", and the Assad regime is, after all, a force of "tyranny", "oppression", and "aggression".[137] More interestingly, the use of the latter part in their reasoning suggests that the group's conflict against the Assad regime and his "filthy goons"[138] is a combination of revenge, retaliation and justice for the suffering that the Muslims of Syria have endured. What it is not portrayed to be however is unjustified, pre-emptive and unprovoked. In other words, Jabhat al-Nusra portrays itself to be the party that has stepped up during the Muslim community's hour of need to protect and defend its members from the brutality of the disbelievers.

4.4.2   Jabhat al-Nusra's Justification for Targeting Syria's Shia Community

Proceeding to the groups' near enemy, Jabhat al-Nusra outlines a level of threat that the Muslims face from the Shia. If the Muslims "do not take action against the enemies of Allah", in this case the "treacherous Rafidha [sic]", they will be the next to face their aggression.[139] Once more, Jabhat al-Nusra, through its discourse, constructs a narrative in which they are not the aggressors, but in fact are the ones acting defensively. Their actions are more accurately described as reactions to the oppression that the 'real' Muslims have been facing from this sinful sect. While Al-Risalah does not dwell as deeply or as explicitly as Dabiq in the reasoning behind the targeting of the Shia, it does keep reminding its readers that the Shia are a sect guilty of apostasy, being disbelievers, and associating with polytheists.[140]

Going through Jabhat al-Nusra's magazine, it is evident that while the targetive discourse concerning the Shia is present, it is scarce and infrequent when compared to their rhetoric of general targeting. However, that is not the case for when it comes to the severity of their rhetoric

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[137] Jabhat al-Nusra, "Al-Risalah No.2," p.48, 92; Jabhat al-Nusra, "Al-Risalah No.4," p.29.
[138] Jabhat al-Nusra, "Al-Risalah No.3," July 2016, p.9.
[139] Jabhat al-Nusra, "Al-Risalah No.2," p.53.
[140] Jabhat al-Nusra, "Al-Risalah No.3," p.6; Jabhat al-Nusra, "Al-Risalah No.2," p.41, 42.

against the Shia. In other words, the group's publications succeed in concisely labeling the Shia sect as an aggressive and deviant force of heretics, which threatens the Muslim community in its entirety. That being said, the jihadist group does reveal that the Shia sect does not rank first in its list of prioritized targets. As the fourth issue states in critical tone, IS has "resorted to fighting the Shī'ah over fighting the invaders", revealing with this that Jabhat al-Nusra perceives the military forces of Western states present in the region as a more urgent threat than the Shia.[141] Be that as it may, Jabhat al-Nusra still retains a belligerent disposition towards Syria's Shia community, as is evident by the group's carried out attacks against Shia minorities in northern Syria.[142]

4.4.3   The Islamic State's Justification for Targeting the Alawite Community and Regime

Moving on to the case of the Islamic State's discourse for targeting the Alawite community of Syria, the religious identity of the community only comes up when the jihadist group writes about its war with the Assad regime. As previously mentioned, IS perceives the Syrian government to be of Alawite religious disposition, even though the regime itself is mostly secular in composition. It is therefore keeping with this narrative that the group's magazine often reports on actions taken against the regime forces, but always including the Nusayri label as part of this discourse. For instance, the third issue of Dabiq reports on the group's "fighting against the nusayrī apostates", "execution of nusayrī soldiers", and killing of Nusayri officers, with the use of graphic and explicit images of these incidents.[143] It is important to observe that the label 'Nusayri' always being present when referring to the regime in these reports is possibly due to the heavy emphasis that is put on religion when the group constructs the grounds on which they target their enemies. They are waging war against the *taghut* and *kafir* Assad regime[144], but IS

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[141] Jabhat al-Nusra, "Al-Risalah No.4," p.32.

[142] United States Department of State, "Syria 2015 International Religious Freedom Report," p.9.

[143] Islamic State, "Dabiq No.3," August 2014, p.20–22.

[144] Islamic State, "Dabiq No.13," p.14; Islamic State, "Dabiq No.4," September 2014, p.38; Islamic State, "Dabiq No.9," June 2015, p.19.

certainly does not wish for the readers of its magazine to forget that this regime is guilty of being Alawite.

However, there are also cases in which the group mentions attacks on the Alawites of Syria, referring solely to their religious beliefs, while not mentioning any affiliation to the political regime. In these cases, one can infer that IS is laying the groundwork for targeting the Alawite community of Syria's civilian population, as is evident in a segment of Dabiq's thirteenth issue titled "A Selection of Military Operations Conducted by the Islamic State". In this segment, the group informs of an attack in the city of Homs, in which the target was "a group of Nusayriyyah" in an Alawite neighborhood, which resulted in the death of "30 murtaddīn" and the wounding of 100 other civilians.[145] The choice of labelling the targets of this attack as *murtaddin* reveals once more the association of the Alawite community with the crime of apostacy.

In addition, the magazine's seventh issue declares that the presence of the jihadist group has created the opportunity for every Muslim to "wage jihād against […] the Nusayriyyah" among other groups.[146] In other words, the Islamic State reveals that for anyone who has the will to take part in the group's jihad, the Alawites are fair game for targeting. Finally, in its ninth issue, the group reveals that the Alawites are one of the groups, which include the Shia as well, "whom the Muslims pronounce takfīr upon"[147], and with whom the Islamic State is "deeply engaged in a war against"[148]. As mentioned previously, *takfir* is a method employed by IS to excommunicate and declare someone as not belonging to the Islamic religion, and therefore justifying their targeting for elimination. However, an evident contradiction can be noticed with this argument, concerning IS's perception of the Alawite and Shia sects as deviant groups that have no affiliation, nor have they ever had any affiliation with the religion of Islam. Therefore, the question must be asked, how are these groups excommunicated from a religion in which they were never supposedly a part of? In a carefully crafted and airtight rhetoric of reasoning, it is interesting to observe the presence of such an inconsistency.

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[145] Islamic State, "Dabiq No.13," p.17.
[146] Islamic State, "Dabiq No.7," February 2015, p.61, 62.
[147] Islamic State, "Dabiq No.9," p.60.
[148] Islamic State, "Dabiq No.10," July 2015, p.53.

4.4.4   The Islamic State's Justification for Targeting the Shia Community of Syria

When it comes to the strategy of specific targeting of groups, the 13th issue of Dabiq has proved to be crucial in revealing the reasoning behind the Islamic State's actions against their worst and prioritized enemy, the Shia. In this issue, the group dedicates a fourteen page segment going into detail why the Shia are hated and targeted the way that they are. The jihadist group however refers to them as "the Rāfidah"[149], which translates to "rejectors", meaning that they are "rejectors of the caliphates of the first two successors of the Islamic prophet Muhammad: Abū Bakr and ʿUmar"[150]. The segment opens by explaining that the Rafida are the worst of "the followers of deviant desires".[151] They "hate Islam" and they "fake Islam" in order to "spread their deviance" and "inflict harm upon" the Islamic people.[152] The use of such wording reveals the proclivity of IS for such hatred against this religious group, which explains why the group is so relentless in their targeting of the Shia.

During this part of their magazine, the group explain in detail what deviances the Shia are guilty of, and they compare them to the Jews who "hate Christianity" and "spread their deviance".[153] According to IS, the 'Rafidah' distort the Quran, and wish death upon the believers (Muslims) by saying "May sām be upon you", *sām* meaning "death", as defined by the magazine.[154] Furthermore, the Shia "consider the blood of all Muslims to be halāl", something that hints at a perceived hostility and aggression towards the Sunni Muslims, which further adds to the jihadist groups rhetoric of justified, retaliatory jihad against their enemies.[155] The issue then states that the religion of the Rafida ("Shiism") was "nothing but a plot" by the "heretical hypocrite" Abdullāh Ibn Saba'[156], or alternatively Abd Allah ibn Saba, who is attributed to have been the "enigmatic alleged founder of Shii Islam", and who is believed to be responsible for

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[149] Islamic State, "Dabiq No.13," p.32-45.
[150] "Oxford Dictionary of Islam - Oxford Reference."
[151] Islamic State, "Dabiq No.13," p.33.
[152] Ibid, p.33.
[153] Ibid, p.33.
[154] Ibid, p.33.
[155] Ibid, p.33.
[156] Ibid, p.33.

"extremist ideas of Ali's divinity and divine appointment"[157]. According to the jihadist magazine, Ibn Saba "hated Islam and desired to deviate the Muslims and corrupt their religion" by incorporating innovative heresies and deviancies such as attributing divine traits to ʿAlī Ibn Abī Tālib, something that is considered to be *shirk*.[158] In addition to this, Ibn Saba desired to "create strife amongst the Muslim ranks, inciting against the righteous" Caliph, and to "spread falsehood" and deviation amongst Islam.[159] These accusations denote to the sect of Shiism being created as a result of a conspiracy with the goal of harming and corrupting "the pure religion", meaning the form of Sunni Islam that IS abide by. Therefore, the Shia Muslims of today are regarded as the descendants, successors and byproduct of those original deviants whose aim, inherently, was to hurt the Muslims of the only true religion, as IS portrays it.

Subsequently, the segment on the Rafida declares that the sect of Shiism resulted from "Ibn Saba's fitnah", which means conflict, strife, dissension and disorder[160], leading eventually to an increase in the incorporated "heresies, kufr, and wickedness".[161] Moreover, it is explained that the Rafida were titled as such ("the rejecters") partly because they rejected the imamate ("religio-political leadership")[162], of the first three caliphs of Islam, considered by the Sunnis to be the "rightly guided" leaders, they rejected the companions of Muhammad ("Sahābah"), the Sunnah, as well as "the Qur'an and the religion of Islam".[163] This last allegation paints the Shia to be a total deviation and abomination of the true version of Islam, by their own choice, as they actively rejected all those components of IS's true Islam. After all, the group accuses the Shia of following religious beliefs with "no prophetic basis", meaning that they are not "mentioned in the Qur'ān and the Sunnah".[164]

IS, in its segment on why the Shia are the targeted enemy that they are, mentions that they are a group of "extreme ignorance and deviance", repeating once more accusations made before, but additionally, the jihadist group declares that the Shia are *murtaddin*, "both their

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[157] "Oxford Dictionary of Islam - Oxford Reference."
[158] Islamic State, "Dabiq No.13," p.33.
[159] Ibid, p.33.
[160] "Oxford Dictionary of Islam - Oxford Reference."
[161] Islamic State, "Dabiq No.13," p.34.
[162] Ibid, p.34.
[163] "Oxford Dictionary of Islam - Oxford Reference."
[164] Islamic State, "Dabiq No.13," p.35.

leaders and laymen".[165] With this statement, no person of the Shia Islam faith is spared from being labeled and targeted as an apostate. As stated, the Shia are guilty of *shirk* and apostasy - the first of which also includes practices such as "grave-worship" - and "have nothing to do with Islam at all".[166] Therefore, they are not real Muslims, according to the Islamic State's ideology, and guilty of committing polytheist practices, something that, according to the group's version of Islam, is unacceptable. Privy and accessories to these crimes however, according to IS, are all Shia Muslims without exception, which explains the indiscriminate outlook of hatred that the jihadist group harbors for all members of the sect of Shiism, no matter how devout and committed to their beliefs they are.

As the justification for the enemization of the Rafida proceeds, IS moves on to the practice of *takfir*, which, as mentioned before, is the act of declaring someone an apostate and excommunicating them from Islam. The magazine adds that "the imams of the Salaf [referring to the first three generations of the Muslim community][167] pronounced takfir upon the Rāfidah", ascribing this way a historical trace from the past to this practice, perhaps attempting to legitimize it too in the process.[168] 'If our "pious ancestors" did it, then we are permitted and compelled to do it as well'.[169]

In this point of the Rafida segment, the reader is enlightened with a detailed account on the prevalent "reasons for pronouncing takfir" on the Shia. Firstly, as is stated in the text, from all "deviant sects", meaning those that do not conform to the jihadist groups standards of Islam, the Shia are "the sect most famous for grave-worship".[170] This being part of the sinful act of *shirk*, meaning polytheism, the Islamic State sentences all Shia guilty of apostasy, "both their leaders and laymen".[171] "If this were their only kufr," IS declares, "it would be more than sufficient to declare them all apostates", meaning that the sin of *shirk* is enough to make any

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[165] Ibid, p.35.
[166] Ibid, p.35.
[167] "Oxford Dictionary of Islam - Oxford Reference."
[168] Islamic State, "Dabiq No.13," p.36.
[169] "Oxford Dictionary of Islam - Oxford Reference."
[170] Islamic State, "Dabiq No.13," p.36.
[171] Ibid, p.36.

group qualify as a deviance in need of correction and elimination.[172] This way, the jihadist magazine offers us a ranking of the faults of the Shia, with polytheism at number one.

However, the 'crimes' of the Shia do not stop here, as the reasons for being targeted are "several". The second reason that IS offers is the allegation that "the Rāfidah make takfir of the majority of the Sahābah [companions/followers of Prophet Muhammad][173]", as well as harbor feelings of hatred towards them.[174] As the magazine issue explains, whoever believes that Muhammad's followers "became fāsiqīn or murtaddīn", *fasiqin* defined as those who violate or deviate from Islam[175], meaning that they have violated Islamic law or apostatized, have "thereby disbelieved in Allah", and have deviated from "the very basis of the religion [Islam]".[176] Adding to this, the Shia are accused to be "a creed that dictates the collapse of the religion", a choice of wording which denotes that the Shia are not just a deviation from the religion of Islam, but also striving to destroy it.[177] Hidden within this phrase is perhaps a hint of the prementioned portrayal that these jihadist groups wage a just jihad as retaliation for the animosity they face from their targets.

Similar to this reasoning, the third and fourth points given by the Islamic State note that the Shia had "emphasized their hatred and takfir of the best and most famous Sahābah", as well as defamed the wife of Prophet Muhammad, Aishah, "and her chastity".[178] As the group claims, these actions prove that the Shia cannot be faithful Muslims if they curse "the wives of the Prophet and the best of his companions".[179] Moreover, as a result of this, IS accuses the Shia of the crimes of apostasy, *kufr*, and "denying the Qur'ān".[180] These accusations weigh heavy on the image that the jihadist group has painted the Shia sect with. By adding further to the list of crimes that the Shia are guilty of (allegedly), and labelling them as a sect that besmirches the companions and wives of Muhammad, IS is able to add a severity to the degree of the sect's

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[172] Ibid, p.36.
[173] "Oxford Dictionary of Islam - Oxford Reference."
[174] Islamic State, "Dabiq No.13," p.36.
[175] "Fasiq - WordSense Dictionary," accessed May 14, 2022, https://www.wordsense.eu/fasiq/; Emil Shehadeh, *True Islam: Lost in Translation: Digital Full-Colour Edition*, 2020, p.134.
[176] Islamic State, "Dabiq No.13," p.36.
[177] Ibid, p.36.
[178] Ibid, p.37.
[179] Ibid, p.37.
[180] Ibid, p.37.

deviance, presenting them as a more urgent threat that must be neutralized. A threat that denies and opposes fundamental truths, according to IS, of the religion of Islam.

For their final point of this list of reasons against the Shia, IS declares that the sect harbors "fanatical love of the "twelve" imams", and even attributes them with traits of divinity.[181] This aligns fully with their first major reason for targeting the Shia, which was the sin of *shirk* (polytheism). Similar to Jabhat al-Nusra, IS supports that only Allah can be worshiped as a god, and no one else. Therefore, by assigning mystical attributes to these twelve imams, the Shia deviate intensely from the path of IS's Islam, and manage to land themselves within the category of apostasy, an adequate justification for targeting the group. Additionally, the jihadist group elaborates that the "various forms of kufr" committed by the Shia are "numerous", one of which is the innovation of "new deviances", something that would induct the Shia into the categorization of mubtadi, meaning that they are guilty of incorporating unlawful deviances.[182] Ending this part of the segment, IS accuses the Shia of supporting "the crusaders" (meaning the Americans, and Western states in general), and the apostates in a war "against Islam [...] and the Muslims".[183] Once more, the group reverts back to previous accusations of their enemies drawing first blood against them, something that would once again put the Islamic State in the position of a defensive actor, simply waging "just terror"[184] and fighting back against forces that initiated the aggression towards the Muslim community.

To sum up IS's detailed explanation of why the Shia are the enemies that they are and why they are the group's priority target, clear-cut reasons stand out. As the jihadist group so vigorously outlines, the Shia are a grave-worshiping, deviant sect which commits *shirk* by attributing divine affinities to persons other than Allah, as well as defaming, cursing and besmirching the exalted companions and spouses of Prophet Muhammad, therefore being guilty of *kufr*, apostasy and denial of the Quran. According to IS, these crimes are enough to qualify the Shia sect as an enemy to the Muslim community that must be neutralized, as the jihadist

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[181] Ibid, p.37.
[182] Ibid, p.37.
[183] Ibid, p.37.
[184] Islamic State, p.47; Islamic State, "Dabiq No.15," July 2016, p.7.

magazine describes, skillfully creating a sense of urgency of the threat that Shiism poses to Islam.

After listing the reasons for the Shia being targeted, IS moves on to debunk claims by the "jihad claimants" of the Shia being "ignorant Muslims" which should be allowed the benefit of the doubt.[185] Firstly, to explain who the Islamic State means when mentioning the jihad claimants, after examining the context in which this title is used, the conclusion has been reached that it refers to other jihadist groups who, by IS's standards and ideology, fall short in the version of Islam and Shariah that they follow and promote, and that they are not true believers of Islam. Now going back to the Shia, the magazine expands on two points used by the jihad claimants when attempting to defend and excuse the sect "due to ignorance", and how IS disproves these claims.[186]

Initially, the Islamic State reports that these jihad claimants excuse the Shia and oppose the employment of the *takfir* tactic against them on the grounds of them being ignorant. Instead, these groups of false jihad, as IS views them, implore that they should be invited to join their version of Islam rather than be killed, since the war that these jihadist groups are engaged in "is only against America".[187] Such a claim is not shared by IS, as they support that "Shiism is the immediate danger and real challenge", something that denotes how the group recognizes the Shia sect as its priority target, in sense of proximity and urgency.[188] In an attempt to defend against the argument of the claimants, IS states that anyone who "worships anything or anyone besides Allah, […] cannot be considered a Muslim", the characterization 'Muslim' once again used to refer to those who follow IS's "true" form of Islam.[189] A hint of exclusionary rhetoric can be spotted in this, as the group once again differentiates between those who follow their Islam, and their targets, meaning those who do not.

To seal this first point off, the magazine segment references Ibn Abī Butayn's criticization of those who give the benefit of the doubt to "Rāfidī laymen".[190] Ibn Abī Butayn,

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[185] Islamic State, "Dabiq No.13," p.37.
[186] Ibid, p.37.
[187] Ibid, p.37.
[188] Ibid, p.41.
[189] Ibid, p.37.
[190] Ibid, p.37.

otherwise known as Abdullah Ibn Abdur-Rahman Abaa Butayn, was a 13th century scholar who is here cited saying that excusing the Shia "due to ignorance with regards to their cursing of" Mohammad's companions and wives is an act worthy of condemnation by everyone.[191] The Islamic State uses this point in a similar manner to condemn the Shia, as well as those who excuse them the sin of cursing the Sahabah and the sin of "major shirk".[192] In other words, the jihadist group supports that the Shia sect's acts of cursing their revered and exalted figures is an unforgivable misconduct, and whoever excuses them on the grounds of ignorance must also be condemned and shunned.

Moving on to their second point, the group attempts to debunk "the claim that some scholars did not make takfīr of all the Rāfidah".[193] In the process of doing this, IS makes a differentiation between the titles 'Rafidah' and 'Shia', with the latter being described as a "more general" label, "as it includes those who preferred 'Alī" to the first caliphs of Islam "while still recognizing the[ir] Khilāfah", as opposed to the Rafida who, according to the group, actively disputed the first caliphs of Islam after Mohammad.[194] As the magazine clarifies, this distinction between Rafida and Shia is now "extinct"[195], which is partly why this research uses both terms throughout. However, the highlight of this argument is presented when the IS magazine states that the "contemporary" Shia "have been Rāfidized", the sect's title used creatively here as a verb to mean that they have become a sect "engaged in cursing the Sahābah after already imitating the Rāfidah in grave worship".[196] In an ingenious choice of wording here, the jihadist group implicitly paints the Shia, all the Shia, of the modern era as one and the same with the early Rafida who were heavily engaged in major sins such as polytheism, and cursing and defying the successive leadership of Islam after prophet Mohammad's death.

As part of the same argument, the magazine issue states that "no Rāfidī layman [is] innocent of apostasy", creating a frame of non-exclusionary targeting that marks every single person of the Shia sect as a member of "a religion of blatant kufr", and an enemy of the group's

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[191] Ibid, p.37–38.
[192] Ibid, p.38.
[193] Ibid, p.38.
[194] Ibid, p.38.
[195] Ibid, p.38.
[196] Ibid, p.38.

version of Islam.[197] Furthermore, the jihadist publication mentions that, as part of a century-old "ruling", *takfīr* has been declared on the Shia who themselves have declared "takfīr of the majority of the Saḥābah", letting slip once more a defensive and retaliatory nature in IS's actions.[198] The use of the word 'ruling' is revealing here, as it denotes an authoritative decision, which carries judicial and definitive implications. Therefore, in an indirect way, IS provides a form of legitimacy to this practice of excommunicating the Shia from the religion of Islam and declaring them as disbelievers. Finally, the magazine segment declares that in order to claim that the Shia are in fact "Muslims", the "select words of a few scholars" were twisted, which, according to the group, is a "perversion of the truth", in this case, referring to their truth when it comes to the appropriate version of Islam.[199] Once again, the jihadist group, in a crafty manner of discourse, is able to portray themselves as the bannermen for the one true Islam, while marking anyone who deviates from it as an outcast who believes in a false form of religion.

Subsequently, but still part of the same segment, the magazine continues to expand on the rhetoric of IS when it comes to the Shia sect's qualification as apostate and religiously false. Specifically, as is mentioned, the Shia sect, and namely the "Twelver Shī'ah" is "one of the mubtadi sects", meaning that they are a sect that commits bid'a".[200] *Bidah* is defined as "any modification of accepted religious belief or practice", and in the way that the group uses it, it carries the negative connotation of implementing any new unlawful and deviant innovations.[201] These innovations are stated to include the cursing of Muhammad's companions, and first caliphs of the Muslim community, a sin that the whole of the Shia sect has already been tagged with in this issue. The cursing of these figures by the Shia is based on, as the Islamic State cites in this segment, the fact that "they consider them to be kuffār".[202] Accompanying this sin, the magazine adds that the Twelver Shia are also guilty of considering "the Qur'ān to have been distorted", indicating that they are even guilty of disputing and defying the scripture of the Islamic religion.[203] No list of accusations would be complete though without the repetition of the

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[197] Ibid, p.38.
[198] Ibid, p.38.
[199] Ibid, p.38.
[200] Ibid, p.39.
[201] "Oxford Dictionary of Islam - Oxford Reference."
[202] Islamic State, "Dabiq No.13," p.39.
[203] Ibid, p.39.

major sin of *shirk*. Once more, IS criticizes and condemns the Shia's claim of the "infallibility of the twelve imāms and that these imāms have reached a level that neither a prophet nor angel has reached".[204]

Furthermore, at this point, IS criticizes the prementioned jihad claimants for their condemnation and disapproval of the group's attacks on "the laymen of the Shī'ah", and of the spilling of "inviolable blood" of Shia "commoners".[205] Again, the preference of other jihadist groups of inviting and guiding these laymen to the 'right' version of Islam is brought up, but is countered by IS who states that the Shia are "a greater obstacle and more dangerous enemy than the Americans", and are even accused of being guilty of most of the *mujahidin* killed. While the reference to the Americans is placed here because the segment includes the case of Iraq, the segment as a whole is still valuable in offering insight of the reasoning of IS for targeting the Shia sect "wherever they are to be found".[206]

"Shiism is the immediate danger and real challenge", "the close and dangerous enemy" the magazine declares, quoting from a letter to Osama bin Laden by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.[207] They are "the insurmountable obstacle, the lurking snake, the scorpion of deception and malice, the prowling enemy, the deadly poison".[208] The choice of characterizations used here for the "evil Rāfidah"[209] almost makes it sound like they are this malicious wickedness which plagues the Muslim world and the Islamic State is the force of good that fights to eliminate them and save the Islamic community in the process. Granted, these labels are not prototypical of the magazine's writers, but their use as quotes gets their point across quite clearly. After all, the Shia are a sect of religion "that does not agree with Islam", and a group of "treachery and treason throughout history and the ages".[210] "History" and "ages" suggests here a long lasting nature of the sect's alleged deviancy and crimes, and whose "war is directed against" the Sunni who IS is only fighting back to protect.[211]

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[204] Ibid, p.39.
[205] Ibid, p.39.
[206] Ibid, p.45.
[207] Ibid, p.41–42.
[208] Ibid, p.41.
[209] Ibid, p.53.
[210] Ibid, p.41.
[211] Ibid, p.41.

Continuing to derive from al-Zarqawi's words, the magazine states that "the Rāfidah are a people of treachery and cowardice", replacing 'treason' here for 'cowardice', who "only assail the weak" and "the helpless".[212] Similar to previous accusations, IS places the Shia in the position of the aggressor against the defenseless. What is interesting though is the use of the word 'people' when referring to the sect. This word choice possibly aims to create an inclusive, general categorization, since, after all, the Islamic State advocates that no Shia members must be safe from persecution due to their attributed guilt which they all share. In a similar fashion with a previously mentioned point, IS assigns the Shia sect in its entirety with an offensive stance when stating that they "have declared a hidden war against the Muslims".[213] 'Muslims' is again used to clearly define the two sides of this 'war', the true, pious Muslims who follow IS's form of Islam, and the Shia who do not qualify as part of the Islamic religion. Comparing once more the Shia to the Americans, the magazine supports that while they are both major enemies of the Islamic community, the Shia are "more severely dangerous and more murderous" towards the Islamic people.[214] In its discourse, the jihadist group paints a clear picture of who their number one threat is, but in reality, their words reveal who their number one target is.

Moving on to more definitional issues, the magazine provides a clarification between two distinct forms of *kuffar*. These two terms are "aslī kuffār" and "murtadd kuffār".[215] The first one, as explained by a footnote in the magazine, refers to disbelievers who have never had anything "to do with Islam", such as people of Jewish and Christian faith.[216] The second form of *kuffar* however, refers to disbelievers who were once Muslims and then changed religion, making them *murtaddin* or apostates. Part of this term is also the case of disbelievers "who mix "Islam" with kufr and shirk".[217] The Shia, accompanied by the Alawites, are classified in the *murtadd* subgroup of disbelievers, not because they were "once really a Muslim [sic]", but because they are "pagan apostates" who practice polytheism and are guilty of rejecting the one 'true' Islam, while portraying themselves as part of the Islamic religion, something that IS absolutely

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212 Ibid, p.42.
213 Ibid, p.42.
214 Ibid, p.42.
215 Ibid, p.42.
216 Ibid, p.42.
217 Ibid, p.42.

denies.[218] Connecting this with the practice of *takfir*, the Islamic State states that the "filthy" blood of the Shia is "obligatory to spill", the word 'obligatory' providing an absolute and definitive nature to the act of targeting the Shia.[219] It is therefore considered an obligation, or even a definite must.

Continuing with the theme of definitions, the Islamic State clarifies that "declaring the Rāfidah to be apostates" does not necessitate that they were once part of Islam, always referring to the group's version.[220] In fact, the Shia are labelled by the magazine as "a people of apostasy", again the use of the word 'people' giving a general and inclusive nature which does not excuse any person who belongs to the Shia sect.[221] As the group reminds, the "ruling of apostasy" upon the Shia sect in its entirety has also been the "verdict" of Sunni scholars that lived centuries ago.[222] The jihadist group masterfully chooses the words it uses to give legitimacy and gravity to this belligerent stance against the Shia. The addition of the word 'verdict' hints at this declaration of apostasy upon the Shia being similar to a judicial decision in a criminal case. After all, as the segment keeps reminding its readers, lest they forget, the Shia have "never truly been Muslim".[223]

Moreover, the magazine expands on the "ruling of apostasy" which "dictates that the Rāfidah are to be treated with the sword".[224] This efficiently hits the nail for IS, since they have found exactly the solution to their problem/enemy that they have been pushing for. Only now they have a historical justification provided by alleged verdicts that trace back centuries. However, the magazine distinguishes here between two types of 'swords', since, same as everything else they preach, there is a specific reasoning behind everything, and a specific appropriate course of action to be followed. The swords are that "against riddah", which translates to apostasy, and that "against kufr aslī", whose explanation was provided by the magazine earlier.[225]

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[218] Ibid, p.42.
[219] Ibid, p.42.
[220] Ibid, p.42.
[221] Ibid, p.43.
[222] Ibid, p.43.
[223] Ibid, p.43.
[224] Ibid, p.43.
[225] Ibid, p.43.

As previously mentioned, IS places the Shia in the 'murtadd kuffar' category, not the 'aslī kuffar' one. In their explanation of their choice of sword against the Shia, they explain that the sword against riddah must be used, and then proceed to offer a series of guidelines for how to deal with *murtaddin*. To briefly outline these, *murtaddin* (apostates) can be killed after being taken prisoner, even if they repent, they are not given the option to pay *jizya* (protection tax) to be declared as non-Muslims under protection by law, they "cannot be released for ransom" or "as clemency", "murtadd men cannot be enslaved", and *murtaddin* "can be forced back into Islam".[226] Conveniently for IS, this sword is the stricter from the two, as the sword against *kuffar asliyyin* states the opposite of these guidelines. Concluding this lesson on which sword the Shia must be put to, the magazine pronounces that "the fact that the Rāfidah are apostates necessitates more severity when applying the sword of jihād to their filthy necks".[227] The word 'fact' provides an indisputability to this statement by the group, and the word 'necessitates' suggests that there is no other possible course of action when dealing with the Shia. Severe elimination is the only way, and the only appropriate sentence of the Shia for their alleged crimes and sins.

The extensive segment on the Rafida does not end here though. In the last two-page part, the Islamic State proceeds to list in detail the crimes that the Shia have allegedly committed against the Sunni community. Firstly, the magazine accuses the Shia sect of being involved "in almost every conspiracy launched against Islam".[228] It is interesting to note how the magazine here refers to conspiracies against Islam, hinting at the general religion of it in its totality, and marking the Shia as longtime enemies of the Islamic religion. Subsequently, it is mentioned that the Shia are responsible for the majority of "episodes of evil, fitnah [conflict, chaos, disorder], and corruption" across different eras.[229] IS does not shy away from attributing to the Shia a century-spanning role of aggression and animosity against the Islamic community. The group attempts to substantiate its points by citing al-Zarqawi once again, who in turn quotes the Quran by using the words "they [IS referring to the Shia] are the enemy […]. May Allah destroy them; how are they deluded?"[230] Here, a clear assignment of roles on who the enemy is and who the

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[226] Ibid, p.43.
[227] Ibid, p.43.
[228] Ibid, p.44.
[229] Ibid, p.44.
[230] Ibid, p.44.

force of Islam's defense can be observed. Continuing further with the words of al-Zarqawi, the magazine presents the Shia sect as this party of "malice and deception" guilty of numerous "treacheries" against the Muslims.[231]

However, this is only "a part of their evil", as the magazine now attacks the Shia in their very core and disposition. There is hostility and malevolence "in their chests […] which can be found in no other people's hearts".[232] IS attempts to besmirch the Shia sect in its entirety by attributing this undisputable evil nature present in their core. They are in favor of the Muslims' demise, proceeds the magazine, as any harm that befalls the Muslims "is a celebration and joy for the Rāfidah'".[233] Not only does the Islamic State accuse the sect of Shiism of waging a direct war against Islam, but also of waging a war-by-proxy by supporting and siding with other enemies of the Muslim people through the ages. "They supported the Nusayri regime in Shām" and have therefore sided with the jihadist group's *taghut* enemy (Assad regime).[234] Interestingly enough though, the magazine segment reports that the Shia "will ultimately unite with [other enemies of the jihadist group] under the banner of the Dajjal".[235] Dajjal in Islam represents the Antichrist[236], and with this accusation of the Shia inevitably allying with the Devil, IS once again paints a picture of two clearly distinct sides in this raging war: the forces of evil which includes the Shia, on one side, and the powers of good, represented by the Islamic State who fights to protect Islam.

The magazine does not forget to conclude this segment by summing up all the knowledge that the jihadist group so eloquently bestowed upon the readers of its publications. Concisely, the Shia, according to IS, are a sect guilty of apostasy, "worship of the dead", cursing of Mohammad's companions and first caliphs of Islam, and the sin of polytheism.[237] Ergo, the jihadist group naturally passes out the verdict that the entire sect, laymen and scholars alike, "must be killed wherever they are to be found", as the only possible solution against this enemy

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[231] Ibid, p.44.
[232] Ibid, p.44.
[233] Ibid, p.44.
[234] Ibid, p.44.
[235] Ibid, p.44.
[236] "Oxford Dictionary of Islam - Oxford Reference."
[237] Islamic State, "Dabiq No.13," p.45.

is complete eradication.[238] Finally, the magazine section takes one last shot at the so called jihad claimants, who condemn IS's violent actions against the Shia. Specifically, the Islamic State publication compares the jihad claimants to the Shia sect on account of both of them spreading "strife" and "dissent" amongst the Muslim community.[239]

4.5 Comparison

When examining the publications of the two groups, one can discover early on ways in which the two groups coincide or differ in terms of their targetive discourse. The most fundamental similarity that the two groups share is the fact that they both base the targeting of Syria's social groups on specific religious characteristics, as opposed to ethnicity or nationality. The targeting of Syria's Shia and Alawite communities, as is explained by IS and Jabhat al-Nusra, is based on traits deriving from their religious identity and beliefs. After looking into the significance that the two groups place upon their ideology, religious ideology to be exact, when constructing their identity, it can only be inferred that religion would also be the defining factor when deciding their targets.

Another similarity that the two groups share is that they both appear to be following two distinct forms of targeting, as seen in their discourse. These forms are one of specific targeting directed at specific religious groups, and another more general type which is based on exclusion. Specifically, the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra target specific groups such as the Shia and Alawites, and at the same time target anyone who is excluded from their own ideological framework, meaning anyone who does not abide by their strict interpretations of Islam. Additionally, the two jihadist groups regularly make differentiations between the labels 'Muslim' and 'non-Muslim'. Regarding the former term, IS and Jabhat al-Nusra only consider as Muslims those belonging to the Sunni sect, and specifically those who conform to their own version of Sunni Islam. By exclusion, when it comes to the latter label of non-Muslim, the two groups regard anyone and everyone else to not belong to the religion of Islam.

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[238] Ibid, p.45.
[239] Ibid, p.45.

Through the analysis of the two groups' discourse, it is also evident that the same Islamic law and religious terms and concepts play a crucial part for IS and Jabhat al-Nusra. Terms such as *kafir*, *murtad*, *mushrikun*, and *taghut* are central for the ideology of the groups, although applied in different degrees of intensity and strictness. The two groups share common targeted enemies, but rank them differently in their order of priority.

That being said, despite their striking similarities and commonalities, IS and Jabhat al-Nusra differ in a number of ways when it comes to ideology and targetive framework. First and foremost, from the two groups, Jabhat al-Nusra seems to be the least radical, without meaning that it is not radical in and of itself. On the spectrum of extremity, IS wins the prize for most brutal and indiscriminate when it comes to who its targets are and what its actions are towards them. The concept of *takfir* is mostly used by IS, or at least used more openly, with the purpose of choosing their targets allegedly guilty of apostasy, whereas the term 'Muslim' is a much more exclusive label.

Leading to the next difference, as seen in their publications, the two groups do not share common practices when dealing with targets accused of deviating from Islam. As the magazines confess, the main difference of the two groups when punishing apostates is that Jabhat al-Nusra mostly follows a one-strike policy where it will vet out physical punishment or, as they call it, justice, and if the accused step out of line again they will then be executed. As the group itself claims, reconverting Muslims who deviate from Islam is their preferred practice before resorting to capital punishment. The Islamic State, however, is quicker to skip straight to the sentence of execution when serving its own justice to those that do wrong.

Another important difference between the two groups is that they focus on and prioritize different targeted groups. This can possibly be explained by referring back to the origins and creation of each group. As seen earlier, the Islamic State, who designates the Shia as their main enemies, originated from Iraq, a country whose population is predominantly Shia. Jabhat al-Nusra on the other hand, while it still places the Shia high on their list of targets, is more focused on the Alawite community and political regime, and the Western states' military forces found in the region. As mentioned previously, Jabhat al-Nusra was created specifically in Syria with the main purpose of waging jihad against the Alawite perceived Assad regime. The group's presence

can be viewed to be concentrated in more urban areas in close proximity to territories with heavy presence of regime forces.

Looking at the two groups in terms of geographical location and origins of creation, one can deduce why the two groups differ in terms of who their targets are, but also why their discourse is focused on different groups. For instance, IS goes into much more depth and in more frequency when explaining why the Shia are their main targets. Alternatively, Jabhat al-Nusra chooses to explain more emphatically why the Alawites, and by extension the Assad regime, are targeted so fiercely as enemies.

5 Conclusion

The Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra are two jihadist groups that are closely interconnected with each other, but at the same time unique. Emerging in the Middle East region sometime after the turn of the millennium, both these Sunni Islamist groups came into existence under the jihadi umbrella of al-Qaeda, before breaking ties and following their own path of terror and jihad. The Islamic State first emerged in Iraq under the name 'Al-Qaeda in Iraq', with the purpose of fighting the state's Shia population, but also rising up against apostate regimes. The group's brutality and focus towards Iraq's Shia civilian population contributed to rising tensions between the subordinate AQI and al-Qaeda. AQI spend the next few years laying the groundwork for the establishment of an 'Islamic State in Iraq', but also one that would attain a transnational capacity, with the aim of encompassing the worldwide Muslim community. It was at this point that AQI was renamed to Islamic State in Iraq.

As part of the group's expansive ambitions, a new Syrian branch was created after the country was plunged into chaos and conflict. The spark of the Arab Spring revolutions spread to Syria where numerous actors became engaged in a complex civil war against the tyrannical Assad dynasty. The Islamic State in Iraq, now evolving into the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, had now expanded in Syria with the creation of Jabhat al-Nusra, a subgroup created with the objective of waging jihad against the *taghut* regime of the Alawite Assad family. As it would seem however, the insistence of this new group to operate differently from its group of origin, as well as Jabhat al-Nusra's proclamation that it was its own independent entity caused a rift between the two, which would later evolve into a bitter rivalry. ISIS, having lost now its Syrian branch, sought to launch another expansive campaign into Syria, something that it had achieved successfully. It was from this point on that the group came to be known simply as the Islamic State.

The two groups proceeded to formulate into unique organizations with different priorities, goals and ideological doctrines, as they gradually and rationally consolidated power, territory and support. While they both committed brutal acts of violence against anyone who would not submit to their own interpretations of Islam, it was IS that would emerge as the most radical of the two. During the past decade, both groups targeted, mostly through violent methods,

the population groups present in Syria, based on religious criteria. Alawites, Shia, Druze, Christians, and even Sunnis were living in a state of danger and fear, as the two groups relentlessly persecuted, executed or forcibly displaced anyone they deemed as deviants, heretics, and non-Muslims. To accompany their brutal actions, the two groups published a number of online magazines during their time of operation, with the aim of promoting their ideology to a global level, to attract hopeful initiates, and to incite fear in the Western states they so passionately despised. The Islamic State was responsible for publishing 'Dabiq', and Jabhat al-Nusra was responsible for publishing 'Al-Risalah', and it was through these magazines that the two groups constructed a complex discourse upon which they based the grounds of reasoning for the targeting of their enemies.

After a careful and critical analysis of these publications, a set of findings were discovered, which shed light on the reasoning behind why the two groups do what they do, and to who they do it to. Most importantly, both groups construct two separate forms of targetive discourse based on religious characteristics. The first form is of specific nature, meaning that through their rhetoric they create the reasoning behind the targeting of specific religious groups, based on specific religious traits. The other form of discourse is of a general and exclusionary nature, meaning that, by rule of elimination, the groups target as enemies any and all who do not abide by their specific interpretation of Sunni Islam. In both methods, the groups exploit the sectarian tensions of Syria, and the region in general, in order to construct their identity and ideology, and to name their targets. Moreover, they engage heavily in creating a differentiation between a superior group, that of the Muslim community, and an 'other' group, that which does not belong to the religion of Islam. What is also interesting is that both groups create, in a crafty way, a framework in which they are placed in the role of defender and protector of the Muslim community, while their targets are portrayed as the aggressors seeking the destruction of Islam.

Additionally, both the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra include in their discourse terms and concepts deriving from Islamic law and theological texts, which are central to their argumentation of who their targets are and for what reasons. Terms such as 'Muslim' and 'non-Muslim' are used by the two groups to create a clear differentiation between those they consider to be real Muslims, meaning those who follow their strict versions of Sunni Islam, and those they dismiss as non-Muslims, meaning anyone who deviates from their Sunni Islam, even members of

the Sunni sect themselves. Specifically, the concept of *kufr* is employed against Sunni Muslims who deviate from the groups' interpretation of Islam, but also against members of other Islamic sects. The concept of *takfir* is combined as an extension to this, where those who are deemed by the two groups to be apostates or disbelievers, or to have deviated from the right path of Islam are excommunicated from the Islamic religion and targeted for elimination.

However, from the two groups the Islamic State is the one who is more open and apparent in its use of the *takfir* tactic, and more extreme and brutal in their follow through against their targets. Jabhat al-Nusra, on the other hand, portrays itself to prefer a more moderate method when dealing with Muslims who have deviated from Islam. Specifically, the group declares that, unlike IS, it prefers to invite apostates back to the right version of Islam. However, if they were to deviate again, they would be dealt with on grounds of elimination. In other words, from the two groups, the Islamic State is more inclined to proceed to executing apostates without considering reconversion to Islam, whereas Jabhat al-Nusra proposes that it allows one strike before executing an apostate.

Finally, through their discourse, the two groups create a different classification of priority among their targets. The Islamic State, for instance, places the Shia at the top of their list as their number one, near enemy. Jabhat al-Nusra, on the other hand, prioritizes the *taghut* Assad regime of Syria along with the Alawite population of the country. The reason for these differences can possibly be found in the origins of the two groups, in terms of geography and purpose for creation. When looking into the case of IS, one can conclude that the reason the group is so fierce in its targeting of the Shia is due to the fact that it first appeared in Iraq, whose population was predominantly Shia. Alternatively, Jabhat al-Nusra was created in Syria, which is predominantly Sunni in composition with a ruling regime perceived to belong to the Alawite sect, with the purpose of fighting against the tyrannical regime of the Alawite Assad family. Therefore, it is only logical that this led to the group focusing their efforts on fighting the regime and Alawite sect of Syria, before any of their other targets.

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Appendix I: Glossary of Arabic Terms and Concepts

The terms included are transliterated in the style of the system used by the Oxford Dictionary of Islam, except for any terms that were encountered only in quoted passages from the primary sources.

Alim – Scholar/Protector of knowledge of Islam. Singular of ulama

Ahlus Sunnah/Ahl al-Sunna – Sunni Islam and its adherents

Akhirah – Afterlife

Alawis/Alawites - Secretive Shii school of thought located in a mountain range in northwestern Syria. Believe in the absolute oneness of God and that God appeared on earth seven times in human form with Ali as the last manifestation. Interpret the Quran and hadith allegorically, emphasizing good and evil, symbolized by light and darkness

Al-Haqq – Truth/Right. Also, one of the names of God

Al-Sirat al-Mustaqim – The straight path. The right way of Islam. Used in the Quran to describe proper conduct and correct religious belief and practice

Al-Wala' wal-Bara' – Concept associated particularly with modern Salafi Islam. It literally means "loyalty and disavowal", which signifies loving and hating for the sake of Allah

Amir al-Muhmineen – Commander of the Faithful. Religious title given to the highest religious leader in the land, currently claimed by the leader of the Islamic State

Apostasy – Abandonment/renunciation of Islam by a Muslim. See Riddah

Aqidah – Islamic creed or articles of faith

Awliya – Islamic saints

Bara'ah – To become free

Bay'ah – Oath of allegiance to a leader

Bidah – Innovation. Any modification of accepted religious belief or practice. Based on the hadith "Any manner or way which someone invents in this religion such that that manner or way is not part of this religion is to be rejected," the term has a negative connotation in Islam

Da'wah – Invitation/call to embrace Islam. Calling others to the religion of Islam. Mission

Dajjal – Antichrist

Dawlah – State. Used by Jabhat a-Nusra to refer to ISIS

Dhalimoon – Polytheists/Wrong-doers/Someone who goes against the commands of Allah. Committer of Dhulm

Dhimmi – Non-Muslim under protection of Muslim law

Druze – Millenarian offshoot of Ismaili Shiism

Dunya – The temporal, earthly world

Fard al-Ayn – In Islamic law, refers to legal obligations that must be performed by each individual Muslim, including prayer, charity, fasting, and pilgrimage

Fasiqin – Violators of Islam

Fatwah – Authoritative legal opinion given by a mufti (legal scholar) in response to a question posed by an individual or a court of law

Fitnah – Heretical uprising (resulting in religious schism). Trials/temptations/tribulations. Conflict/strife/sedition/dissension. Can be used to discredit the actions of opponents or to accuse another of causing dissension/division in the ranks (especially of the broader Islamic community or community of jihad). Chaos, total disorder. The Islamic law is aimed to prevent fitnah

Fitra – The state of purity and innocence in which Muslims believe all humans to be born, or the ability to choose or reject God's guidance. Belief that everyone is born Muslim.

Fussaq – Major sinners. See fasiq – Someone who violates the Islamic law

Hajj – The annual pilgrimage to Mecca during the month of Dhu al-Hijjah

Hijrah – Muhammad's migration from Mecca to Medina. Migration to the Islamic world with the purpose of jihad

Ibadah – Worship/service/servitude/Acts of devotion. The religious duties of worship incumbent on all Muslims when they come of age and are of sound body and mind

Iblis – Devil

Ijma – Consensus/agreement. Used as a recognized source of Sunni law

Ilah – What deserves worship. God

Imamiyyah – Twelver Shia

Iman – Faith in the metaphysical aspects of Islam. Also, the general word for belief

Istishhadi/Inghimasi – Martyrdom. Suicide attack fighters

Izzah – Honor

Jaahil – Ignorant. See jahiliyyah

Jahiliyyah – Pre-Islamic period, or "ignorance" of monotheism and divine law. In current use, refers to secular modernity. The domination of humans over humans, rather than submission of humans to God (Sayyid Qutb). Any government system, ideology, or institution based on values other than those referring to God. Radical groups justify militant actions against secular regimes in terms of jihad against jahiliyyah

Jannah - Heaven

Jibril – Archangel. Gabriel

Jihad – From the Arabic root meaning "to strive", "to exert", "to fight"; exact meaning depends on context. May express a struggle against one's evil inclinations, an exertion to convert unbelievers, or a struggle for the moral betterment of the Islamic community. Today often used without any religious connotation, with a meaning more or less equivalent to the English word crusade (as in "a crusade against drugs"). If used in a religious context, the adjective Islamic or holy is added. Jihad is the only legal warfare in Islam, and it is carefully controlled in Islamic law. It must be called by a duly constituted state authority, it must be preceded by a call to Islam

or treaty, noncombatants must not be attacked, and so on. To justify the struggle against their coreligionists, extremists branded them unbelievers for their neglect in adhering to and enforcing a particular interpretation of Islam. Contemporary thinking about jihad offers a wide spectrum of views, including radicals who promote a violent jihad against Muslim and non-Muslim rulers

Jizyah – Poll tax levied on non-Muslims as a form of tribute

Kafir – Unbeliever. Those who actively reject divine revelation. Applied by jihadist groups to Muslims who did not adhere to their strict interpretations of the Quran

Karamah/Kiramaat/Karamat – (1) Grace. Refers to charismatic gifts or the capacity to perform miracles, as evidenced by the temporary suspension of natural order through divine intervention. (2) Miracles. Supernatural wonders/miracles performed by Muslim saints

Khawarij/Khariji/Kharijites – Early sectarian group in Islam, neither Sunni nor Shii, although they originally supported Ali's leadership on the basis of his wisdom and piety (They mention this quite a bit as if referring to a specific group existing today). The Ibadi Muslims of Oman are the heirs of the Khawarij, and are very close to Sunni Islam

Khilafa/Khalifah – Caliph/Caliphate. Term adopted by dynastic rulers of the Muslim world, referring to the successor to the Prophet Muhammad as the political-military ruler of Muslim community. It is not a spiritual office, but the institution was imbued with political and religious symbolism, particularly regarding the unity of the Muslim community. Institution or public office governing a territory under Islamic rule. The person who holds this office carries the title of caliph and is considered a politico-religious successor to the Islamic prophet Muhammad and a leader of the entire Muslim world. Khalifah used interchangeably with the word imam for the political head of the Sunni Muslim state

Khulafa – First 4 caliphs after Muhammad. "Rightly guided" (Rashidun) according to Sunni

Kuffar Asliyyin – Kuffar who have nothing to do with Islam

Kuffar/Kafir – Disbelievers/deniers/rejecters of Allah/Islam

Kufr – Disbelief. Also means "ingratitude," the willful refusal to appreciate the benefits that God has bestowed. Pervasive influence of the West is sometimes viewed as a cause of kufr

Mahdi – Messianic figure said to appear in the end of times to rid the world of evil

Mu'ahid – Non-Muslim citizen of an Islamic state. Guaranteed protection

Mubtadi – Committing bid'a. Innovating new unlawful deviances

Mufassirin – Scholars (explaining the Quran)

Muhajir – Person who has emigrated to the Islamic world (with the purpose of jihad)

Mujahada – Struggle with the carnal self. Effort in worshiping Allah

Mujahidin – Islamic guerillas who engage in jihad. Those who struggle on behalf of Islam

Munafiq – Hypocrite. One who displays Islam outwardly, but inwardly is a disbeliever. A polemical term applied to Muslims who possess weak faith or who profess Islam while secretly working against it

Murjiis – Postponers. Theological school that emerged in the eighth century as a reaction to the extreme puritanism of the Kharijis (Khawarij). Believed in postponing judgment on believers who committed grave sins. Emphasized promise, hope, and respite granted by God rather than threat and punishment

Murtaddin – Apostates – Kuffar who were once Muslim/Who mix Islam with shirk. Those who have renounced their religion. According to classical Islamic law, a murtadd is subject to the death penalty or banishment

Musalim – Used by jihadist groups to refer to non-Muslims who pay a protection tax and have submitted to the Muslims

Mushrikun – Those who associate other things with God. Persons or societies who ascribe divinity to objects and beings other than or along with God. Committers of shirk. Idolaters/rejecters/polytheists

Muwahhidin – Monotheists

Nifaaq – Hypocrisy

Nusayris/Nusayriyyah – Derogatory term used by the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra to refer to the Alawite sect. Secretive Shii school of thought located in a mountain range in northwestern

Syria. Believe in the absolute oneness of God and that God appeared on earth seven times in human form with Ali as the last manifestation. Interpret the Quran and hadith allegorically, emphasizing good and evil, symbolized by light and darkness

Qisaas – Retaliation/Retribution (in kind)

Rafida – Rejectors. Shia. Rejectors of the caliphates of the first two successors of the Islamic prophet Muhammad: Abū Bakr and ʿUmar

Rawafidh/Rawafid – Extreme disbelieving sect of the Shia (according to jihadist groups). Rejectionists. Those who refuse. Derogatory term historically applied by the Sunnis to describe the Shia, who refused to accept the early caliphate of Abu Bakr, Umar, and Uthman as legitimate

Ribat – Fort or stronghold. Used by jihadist groups to describe frontier guarding

Riddah – Apostasy. Abandonment of Islam. Retrogression/reversion

Sahaba – Companions/followers of Muhammad

Sahawat – 'Awakening' movements. Used by ISIS referring to movements/groups, discrediting them on the grounds of not following Islam, and not accepting the legitimacy of its Khilafa

Salaf – Predecessors or ancestors. Usually used in the sense of "pious ancestors", especially the first three generations of the Muslim community, who are considered to have lived the normative experience of Islam. The first (three) generations of Muslims

Shahadah – Testimony of faith. Martyrdom

Shariah – God's eternal and immutable will for humanity, as expressed in the Quran and Muhammad's example (Sunnah), considered binding for all believers; ideal Islamic law

Shayatin – Evil spirits. Devils. Shaytan – Satan

Shii/Shia Islam - Shii Muslims, the followers or party of Ali, believe that Muhammad's religious leadership, spiritual authority, and divine guidance were passed on to his descendants, beginning with his son-in-law and cousin, Ali ibn Abi Talib, his daughter, Fatimah, and their sons, Hasan and Husayn. The defining event of Shiism was the martyrdom of Husayn, his male family members, and many companions at Karbala (Iraq) in 681 by the Umayyads, granting an element

of passion and pathos to Shiism. There are three main branches of Shiis today: the Zaydis (see Zaydiyyah), the Ismailis (Seveners), and the Ithna Asharis (Twelvers or Imamis)

Shirk – Association. Theological term referring to the association of someone or something with God, that is, putting someone or something in the place of God, thus deviating from monotheism. Idolatry/polytheism. Attributing to someone divine attributes, that only Allah should have. Associating someone or something with Allah

Shubuhat/Shubha – Benefit of the doubt. The region in between the obvious states halal and haram, either due to conflicting evidence or due to doubtful in the application of the evidence on a particular matter. Sophism. In Islamic law, an illicit act that seems like a licit one. Often used by jurists to reduce severity of punishment in criminal cases

Shuhada/Shaheed – Martyr

Sunnah – Established custom, normative precedent, conduct, and cumulative tradition, typically based on Muhammad's example. Based on Muhammad's exemplary behavior

Sunni Islam – The Sunnis are the largest branch of the Muslim community, at least 85 percent of the world's 1.2 billion Muslims. The name is derived from the Sunnah, the exemplary behavior of the Prophet Muhammad, and the first generation of Muslims. All Muslims are guided by the Sunnah, but Sunnis stress it, as well as consensus (ijma; the full name of Sunnis is Ahl al-Sunnah wa'l-Ijma, people of the Sunnah and consensus). The other branch of Islam, the Shiis, are guided as well by the wisdom of Muhammad's descendants, but through his son-in-law Ali

Taghut – False god/Idol. Also applied to tyrannical rulers who arrogate God's absolute power and use it to oppress people. Singular of tawaghit.

Takfir – Excommunication from Islam. Accusation of being apostate. Pronouncement that someone is an unbeliever (kafir) and no longer Muslim. Used in the modern era for sanctioning violence against Muslims who deviate from jihadist groups' strict interpretations of Islam

Taqiyah – Precautionary denial of religious belief in the face of potential persecution. Concealment or denial of religious belief and practice in the face of persecution

Tawhid – The defining doctrine of Islam. It declares absolute monotheism—the unity and uniqueness of God as creator and sustainer of the universe

Twelvers/Ithna Asharis – Also known as Twelvers, since they recognize twelve imams, and Imamis, due to their belief in the necessity of an imam for establishment of an ideal Muslim community. Largest subdivision within Shii Islam. Ithna ashar means twelve in Arabic

Ulama – Men of knowledge. Plural of alim

Ummah – Muslim community. A fundamental concept in Islam, expressing the essential unity and theoretical equality of Muslims from diverse cultural and geographical settings

Wajib – In Islamic jurisprudence, an obligatory act, with failure to perform it being sinful

Wali – Authority/custodian

Wilayah – Province

Zandaqah – Holding views contrary to Islam. Modernly used for atheists and secularists

Zaydiyyah – Sect of Shia (in Yemen)