

**HOW DO TERRORIST ORGANIZATIONS
IDEOLOGICALLY CHANGE AND ADAPT?
COMPARATIVE EXAMINATION OF DAESH-CORE
AND DAESH-AFGHANISTAN**



İSMAİL YONSUZ

ÖZYEĞİN UNIVERSITY

AUGUST, 2025

**HOW DO TERRORIST ORGANIZATIONS
IDEOLOGICALLY CHANGE AND ADAPT?
COMPARATIVE EXAMINATION OF DAESH-CORE
AND DAESH-AFGHANISTAN**

**by
İsmail Yonsuz**

Thesis
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in
International Relations and Globalization

Advisor: Prof. Deniz Sert
Co-advisor: Dr. Samarjit Ghosh

Graduate School of Social Sciences
Özyeğin University
İstanbul

August, 2025

**HOW DO TERRORIST ORGANIZATIONS
IDEOLOGICALLY CHANGE AND ADAPT?
COMPARATIVE EXAMINATION OF DAESH-CORE
AND DAESH-AFGHANISTAN**

Approved by:

Prof. Deniz Sert, Advisor

Department of International Relations

Özyeğin University

Assoc. Prof. Behlül Özkan

Department of International Relations

Özyeğin University

Asst. Prof. Ali Murat Kurşun

Department of International Relations

Marmara University

Approval Date: August 1, 2025

To My Family,



DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis and that this is the true copy of my thesis, including the final revisions, approved by my thesis committee. All data and information have been obtained, produced, and presented in accordance with the rules of research ethics and principles of academic honesty. As required by these rules, to the best of my knowledge I have acknowledged ideas, thoughts, and any copyrighted material in accordance with the standard referencing rules. I certify that any part of this thesis has not been submitted for a degree or diploma in another educational institution.

İsmail Yonsuz

ABSTRACT

DAESH continues to maintain its presence in different parts of the world, especially in the Middle East, South Asia and Africa. What enables DAESH to still continue its existence in many parts of the world? What is the role of ideology here? Does DAESH consider its ideology as sacred and sacrosanct or employ it rationally? In this thesis, I attempt to answer the question “how do terrorist organizations ideologically change and adapt” through case-study of DAESH. Although it is studied vastly in the literature, few have analyzed DAESH ideology towards various regions. Therefore, I examine “how ideology helps DAESH to adapt and change itself in different regions” using rational actor perspective. I also try to answer the question “does DAESH-Core’s ideological discourse differ from DAESH-Afghanistan’s, if yes, how”. Furthermore, I venture to uncover the question “how this differentiation influences DAESH’s strategies and tactics in two regions.” To answer these questions, I analyze fifty-seven issues of online propaganda magazines (Dabiq, Rumiya and Voice of Khurasan) published by DAESH affiliated media centers. I use discourse and content analysis to examine magazines. I employ a lexicon, created through utilizing sources that form the basis of DAESH ideology to conduct text analysis. To conclude, I argue that DAESH applies different strategies and tactics toward Syria-Iraq and Afghanistan, uses different ideological cues via its online propaganda magazines and it may be considered as a “rational actor”.

Keywords: DAESH, ideology, terror, terrorism, rational actor

ÖZET

DEAŞ, Ortadoğu, Güney Asya ve Afrika başta olmak üzere, dünyanın farklı bölgelerinde varlığını sürdürmektedir. DEAŞ'ın dünyanın birçok yerinde varlığını sürdürmesini sağlayan nedir? İdeolojinin buradaki rolü nedir? DEAŞ, ideolojisini kutsal ve dokunulmaz olarak mı görüyor yoksa ideolojiyi rasyonel bir şekilde mi kullanıyor? Bu tezde, terör örgütlerinin ideolojik olarak nasıl değiştiği ve uyum sağladığı sorusuna DEAŞ terör örgütü üzerinden cevap bulmaya çalışıyorum. DEAŞ ideolojisi literatürde çok çalışılmış olmasına rağmen, söz konusu ideolojinin farklı bölgelere yönelik analizini yapan çalışma sayısı oldukça azdır. Bu nedenle, DEAŞ ideolojisinin, DEAŞ'ın farklı bölgelerde kendini uyarlayabilmesine ve değiştirebilmesine yardımcı olduğunu rasyonel aktör perspektifini kullanarak inceliyorum. Tezde ayrıca, DEAŞ'ın Suriye ve Irak'taki ideolojik söyleminin Afganistan'daki ideolojik söyleminden farklı olup olmadığı, eğer öyleyse nasıl olduğu sorusuna cevap vermeye çalışıyorum. Bahse konu farklılaşmanın DEAŞ'ın iki bölgedeki strateji ve taktiklerini nasıl etkilediği sorusunu açıklamaya çalışıyorum. Bu soruları yanıtlamak için, DEAŞ iltisaklı medya kuruluşları tarafından yayımlanan çevrimiçi propaganda dergilerinin (Dabık, Rumiya ve Horasan'ın Sesi) elli yedi sayısını inceliyorum. Dergileri söylem ve içerik analizini kullanarak analiz ediyorum. Metin analizi yapılırken DEAŞ ideolojisinin temelini oluşturan kaynaklardan faydalanılarak oluşturulan bir sözlükten yararlanıyorum. Neticede, DEAŞ'ın Suriye ve Irak (DEAŞ-Merkez) ile Afganistan'a (DEAŞ-Afganistan) yönelik farklı stratejiler uyguladığını, çevrimiçi propaganda metinleri aracılığıyla farklı ideolojik işaretler kullandığını ve “rasyonel bir aktör” olarak değerlendirilebileceğini ileri sürüyorum.

Anahtar Kelimeler: DEAŞ, ideoloji, terör, terörizm, rasyonel aktör

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express my deepest gratitude to my advisors, Dr. Samarjit Ghosh and Prof. Deniz Sert for their advice, guidance, and criticism regarding the thesis.

I would like to thank my thesis committee members for their advice and kind help.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my family for their support.



TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY	iv
ABSTRACT.....	v
ÖZET	vi
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	vii
LIST OF TABLES.....	x
LIST OF FIGURES	xi
LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS	xii
1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE	8
2.1 Key Concepts	8
2.1.1 Terror and Terrorism	8
2.1.2 Core Components of Terrorism	12
2.1.2.1 Ideology	12
2.1.2.2 Organization.....	14
2.1.2.3 Violence	16
2.2 Overview of Theoretical Framework and Literature	18
2.2.1 Rationalist Explanations of War and Conflict	18
2.2.2 Rational Actor Perspective	20
3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY	23
3.1 Research Design	23
3.2 Data Sources and Collection Procedures	24
3.3 Ethics Declaration.....	25
4. HISTORY OF DAESH.....	26
4.1 Origins and Al-Qaeda	26
4.2 Breakaway From al-Qaeda and Transformation into DAESH	27
4.3 Declaration of State and Governance	28
4.4 Territorial Decline and Rise of Affiliates	28
5. IDEOLOGY OF DAESH	30
5.1 Functions of Ideology	30
5.2 Ideology as a Pillar of Change and Adaptation	30

5.3 Core Concepts of DAESH Ideology	31
5.4 Analytical Framework and Lexicon	36
6. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION	41
6.1 Analysis	41
6.2 Discussion.....	54
7. CONCLUSION.....	60
REFERENCES	65



LIST OF TABLES

Table 5.1 Lexicon of DAESH Ideology.....	36
---	----



LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 6.1 Top 20 Concepts in Dabiq (Count).....	44
Figure 6.2 Top 20 Concepts in Dabiq (Frequency)	45
Figure 6.3 Top 20 Concepts in Rumiya (Count).....	46
Figure 6.4 Top 20 Concepts in Rumiya (Frequency).....	47
Figure 6.5 Top 20 Concepts in Voice of Khurasan (Count)	49
Figure 6.6 Top 20 Concepts in Voice of Khurasan (Frequency)	52



LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

DAESH: Al-Dawla al-Islamiya fil Iraq wa al-Sham

AQ: Al-Qaeda

DAESH-Core: Acronym used in this thesis to describe central leadership and command structure of DAESH in Iraq and Syria

DAESH-Afghanistan: Affiliate of DAESH-Core, also referred as so-called DAESH Khorasan Province

Jabhat Al-Nusra: Al-Qaeda affiliated group in the Syrian civil war. Renamed Fatah as-Sham in 2016 and merged into Tahrir as-Sham in 2017

ETA: Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (Basque Homeland and Liberty)

IRA: Irish Republican Army

UN: United Nations

JTWJ: Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad

ISI: “Islamic State of Iraq”

IS: “Islamic State”

TTP: Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan

1. INTRODUCTION

As the world has increasingly globalized, the nature of war and conflict has fundamentally changed. Globalization has not only accelerated the exchange of goods, information, and people but has also transformed conventional notions of security. The concept of war has evolved beyond conventional interstate conflicts to embrace new types of war waged by both state and non-state actors (Kaldor, 2012). This transformation has also influenced how terrorism is conceptualized, particularly with the growing link between religion and violent extremism. Religious narratives, often decontextualized and instrumentalized, have increasingly been used to justify political violence. One of the most prominent examples of this is DAESH.

DAESH is a terrorist organization which emerged as a local branch of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, aiming to establish a state through violent instruments. Its ideology is based on extreme and inaccurate interpretations of Islam. Although there are several terrorist groups that share similar ideological roots, DAESH stands out from other terrorist organizations due to its extreme ideological stance and operational capacity through affiliates and networks in different parts of the world. DAESH has also distinguished itself from other terrorist organizations in terms of territoriality. Unlike other groups, such as Al-Qaeda, DAESH successfully captured and controlled significant territories, particularly in Iraq and Syria. While many terrorist organizations, including Al-Qaeda under Osama bin Laden, have expressed desire to establish a state (Bunzel, 2015), they have not achieved the same level of territorial control as DAESH did.

DAESH declared its so-called state on the 29th of June 2014. At its peak, it displayed its capability and the scope of its threat by seizing 40% of Iraq and a third of Syria (Wilson Center, 2019). This has brought DAESH, especially its online propaganda

in captured territories, to the center of constant debates in the media, academia, and policy circles. To disseminate ideological propaganda and mobilize its global support network, DAESH has been publishing materials including execution recordings, documentaries, infographics and online magazines (Lakomy, 2019). Among these publications, Dabiq, Rumiya, and Voice of Khurasan stand out. Through these magazines, the group has systematically promoted its core ideological concepts. These frequently include messages for the audience to trigger various types of behaviors. Some seek to introduce DAESH's ideology to potential supporters. Some are released for persuading Muslim users to join DAESH directly or support its objectives by planning lone terrorist attacks. They also illustrate DAESH's efforts to interpret global developments by responding to regional threats and legitimizing its strategy.

DAESH's ideology is often presented as a cohesive and uniform worldview that is applicable to every region. However, only few have examined DAESH ideology in terms of different regions. Existing academic literature reveals that DAESH's regional affiliates often reinterpret or selectively emphasize ideological elements in response to local conditions and strategic needs. For example, DAESH affiliates in Libya adopted more different ideological themes than DAESH-Core, in compliance with tribal dynamics and post-Qaddafi power balance (Zelin, 2020). Similarly, DAESH's propaganda in Afghanistan, while drawing on central themes, strategically adapts its propaganda to regional political and military realities by both using anti-state and sectarian narratives (Ingram, Whiteside, & Winter, 2020). These findings exhibit the necessity of analyzing DAESH's ideological discourse through a regional lens, as regional dynamics significantly influence how its core doctrine is expressed and operationalized. Therefore, it would be worth examining DAESH's ideology toward different regions to better

understand the principles underlying its politics of violence. How does DAESH's rhetoric blur the lines between religious and political parameters? Is the ideology of DAESH consistent and undifferentiated? What allows DAESH to still maintain its presence in many parts of the world? What role does ideology play here? Does DAESH regard its ideology as solemn and inviolable or use it rationally? The answers to these queries might provide novel insights into DAESH's rationale. They could also assist in unveiling current limits for potential attacks, which is essential for formulating a viable counterterrorism strategy.

A venture to investigate the impact of words in DAESH's texts gives the opportunity to comprehend the core elements of DAESH ideology. Indeed, several essential phrases and images that embody basic principles can show significant components of ideology. For instance, the word "jihad" is used in conjunction with words like "crusader," "zionist invasion," or "duty" that have rich connotations (Hellmich, 2005). In this regard, magazines have been among the most sophisticated DAESH propaganda materials available online. As pointed out by Ingram, DAESH has employed online magazines as a vital ingredient of its ideological propaganda (Ingram, 2018).

In this thesis, I seek to find out how terrorist organizations ideologically change and adapt through case-study of DAESH.¹ Due to gap in the literature regarding DAESH ideology towards various regions, I examine “how ideology helps DAESH to adapt and

¹ Before formulating this thesis and its research questions, I had the opportunity to read the magazines published by DAESH. Based on these readings, I observed how DAESH—often portrayed in the media as a group of radical and irrational Islamists—constructs and articulates its ideological discourse in a remarkably rational manner, often in compliance with on-the-ground political and military realities. Based on the literature review, I also noticed a significant gap in comparative studies that examine DAESH's discourse across different regions. All of this led me to reflect on the idea that DAESH's use of extreme violence does not necessarily imply that the organization is irrational.

change itself in different regions” by employing the rational actor perspective. I also try to answer the question “does DAESH-Core’s ideological discourse differ from DAESH-Afghanistan’s (so-called “Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), if yes, how”. In connection with that, I strive to uncover the question “how this differentiation influences DAESH’s strategies and tactics in two regions.” To answer these questions, I analyzed fifty-seven issues of online propaganda magazines (Dabiq, Rumiya and Voice of Khurasan) published by DAESH affiliated media centers. I used discourse and content analysis to analyze magazines. I used a lexicon created by employing sources that form the basis of DAESH ideology to conduct text analysis. To conclude, I argue that DAESH applies different strategies toward Syria-Iraq and Afghanistan, employ different ideological cues via its online propaganda texts and it may be considered as a “rational actor”.

This study offers a multi-layered contribution to the existing body of knowledge, spanning theoretical, disciplinary, and broader scholarly domains. First, it advances the literature on rational theories and ideology by demonstrating that ideological narratives—often perceived as rigid or doctrinaire—can, in fact, be instrumentalized by terrorist actors like DAESH in rational and adaptive ways. While previous applications of rational perspectives in terrorism studies have largely focused on tactics, recruitment, or target selection, this thesis extends its application to the realm of ideological discourse. By showing that DAESH’s ideological terms evolve in response to shifting political and military contexts, the thesis reframes ideology not as static belief but as a strategic asset subject to recalibration.

Second, the study contributes to terrorism studies by providing a comparative, longitudinal analysis of DAESH’s propaganda across different operational

environments—Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan—through Dabiq, Rumiya, and Voice of Khurasan. Unlike many studies that treat DAESH's ideology as monolithic or unchanging, this research reveals how DAESH adapts its messaging and priorities across space and time while retaining core ideological tenets. The use of a lexicon-based approach to trace ideological concepts across texts adds methodological novelty, enabling a more systematic and granular understanding of how ideology functions in DAESH's strategic recalibration.

Finally, the thesis contributes to the broader field of international relations by offering an empirically grounded case study of how non-state violent actors use ideology as a strategic and rational tool. It underscores how groups like DAESH attempt to construct authority, legitimacy, and international relevance through ideological projection. This has implications for understanding non-traditional actors in global politics, how they navigate power asymmetries, and how they reconfigure traditional notions of sovereignty, legitimacy, and governance through ideology. By examining ideology as both a strategic and mobilizational tool, the study bridges between realist and constructivist perspectives. The findings contribute to both theoretical debates on security and terrorism studies and practical counter-terrorism efforts by highlighting the role of ideology in shaping terrorist strategies and tactics and vice versa.

While various theoretical frameworks such as critical theories including post-colonialism can contribute valuable insights on ideological change and adaptation of terrorist groups, I use rational actor perspective to analyse DAESH's ideological evolution. For instance, post-colonial and critical approaches emphasize historical grievances, structural inequalities, and identity formation and help us understand radicalization. However, rational actor perspective is particularly suited to this study's

objective which is to demonstrate how DAESH strategically employs and adapts its ideology in response to changing political and military conditions. Nonetheless, insights offered by critical approaches can be complementary in future research to further analysis of DAESH ideology within broader historical and discursive structures.

It can be also raised that magazines analysed in this thesis primarily reflect DAESH's external media strategy rather than genuine ideological transformation. Indeed, these publications are means designed to influence and recruit and thus may prioritize propaganda messages. However, we cannot definitively know whether this change and adaptation is merely part of a media strategy, as DAESH is a non-state actor and there is no access to primary sources such as its internal communications or decision-making records. On the other hand, it is possible to identify ideological components of DAESH by examining these magazines. By conducting a close textual analysis of the language, terms, and framing used across these magazines, it becomes possible to trace patterns of continuity and change in the group's ideology.

This thesis consists of seven chapters, each contributing to a comprehensive examination of how terrorist organizations ideologically change and adapt, with a particular focus on DAESH-Core and DAESH-Afghanistan. The first chapter introduces the research questions, objectives, and the significance of the study. The second chapter presents the theoretical framework and relevant literature, beginning with key concepts such as terror, terrorism, and the core components of terrorism—ideology, organization, and violence—and then explores rationalist perspectives on war, conflict, and terrorism, with emphasis on the rational actor perspective. The third chapter outlines the research design and methodology, elaborating the content and discourse analysis as well as the sources and procedures for data collection.

The fourth chapter provides a historical overview of DAESH, tracing its roots in Al Qaeda, its breakaway, the declaration of state, and its territorial decline alongside the rise of regional affiliates. Chapter five focuses on the ideology of DAESH, examining its functions, role in adaptation, major ideologues, core concepts, and the analytical framework supported by a lexicon. The sixth chapter presents the main analysis and discussion, comparing ideological discourses across DAESH-Core and its Afghan affiliate to uncover regional variations and strategic implications. The final chapter concludes the thesis by summarizing key findings, discussing their relevance for future counter-terrorism strategies.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

2.1 Key Concepts

2.1.1 *Terror and Terrorism*

Terrorism is one of the most widely used terms in the political sphere, however, there is still no international consensus about its meaning. “Terror” and “terrorism” have different meanings although they are used interchangeably in daily politics. Terror is defined as “extreme fear, or violent action that causes fear.”² It is usually intentionally generated to manipulate or control people to disrupt everyday life and beget submission through fear. Terror became prominent during the Reign of Terror (1793–1794) in Revolutionary France, where the state used institutionalized violence to eliminate political opponents. In her analysis of totalitarian regimes, Hannah Arendt portrays terror as a mechanism of total control designed to eradicate the distinction between private and public life (Arendt, 1951). Rather than being simply fear, terror operates as a calculated strategy to extinguish dissent and individual freedom.

Terrorism, on the other hand, is a complex and contested term, with no universally agreed definition. It is defined as “violent action or threats designed to cause fear among ordinary people in order to achieve political aims.”³ It is the calculated use of illegal violence or threat of violence against civilians, societies or governments to realize political, religious, or social aims. The concept has long been debated within academic

² Cambridge Dictionary. (n.d.). Terror. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org>

³ Cambridge Dictionary. (n.d.). Terrorism. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org>

circles. In their seminal study, Schmid and Jongman identified 100 different definitions of terrorism used by scholars and states. Their study shows that most definitions include fundamental elements such as use of violence, political motivation, and the targeting of civilians although ideological and normative biases are still embedded in how terrorism is perceived (Schmid & Jongman, 2005). Schmid later described terrorism as "an anxiety-inspiring method of repeated violent action employed by clandestine individuals, groups or state actors, for personal, criminal or political reasons" (Schmid, 2011). Even though it is comprehensive, this definition remains broad and vague since it includes acts of war and insurgency.

Many scholars argue that definitions of terrorism are often politically motivated. Some define it as politically motivated violence by small groups (Rubenstein, 1988), covert violence by a group for political ends (Laqueur, 2001) and war maintained on victims to create fear for political purposes (Combs, 2017). Jackson asserts that "terrorist" label is most often used to delegitimize political opponents by arguing that conventional definitions of terrorism echo bias and often exclude state terrorism from consideration (Jackson, 2005). This criticism demonstrates how power dynamics fundamentally shape the conceptual framework through which terrorism is constructed, defined, and applied.

Since terrorism necessitates lucidity, some scholars have come up with typological approaches. Bruce Hoffman argues that terrorism does not only aim for violence but also for sending messages. He underlines that terrorist acts are designed to terrorize broader audience rather than the immediate victims (Hoffman, 2006). This supports the argument that terrorism operates as a type of asymmetric warfare, where relatively weak parties use fear, symbolic violence and media to challenge stronger actors. In this sense, terrorism becomes a deliberate method of amplifying limited resources to

achieve disproportionate gain and impact. David Rapoport, from a historical standpoint, purports that terrorism occurs in cyclical "waves," each triggered by distinct ideological motivations—namely anarchist, anti-colonial, leftist, and religious. These waves, he argues, are affected by global political developments and eventually decline as new ideological paradigms come to the fore (Rapoport, 2022). Walter Laqueur distinguishes between religious, nationalist, left-wing, right-wing, and state-sponsored terrorism, contending that the nature of terrorist violence is considerably influenced by motivations (Laqueur, 1999). These classifications help scholars to understand the ways in which terrorism transforms across various ideological, historical, and geographical contexts.

More recent literature challenges the assumption that terrorism is a fixed and objective term. Some scholars argue that terrorism is a social construct, emerging through discursive practices (Hülsse & Spencer, 2008) and institutional frameworks (Asad, 2007; Stampnitzky, 2013). Constructivist notions highlight that definition of terrorism is constantly negotiated and shaped by cultural, political, and historical forces.

Legal definitions, such as those adopted by the UN (United Nations) or national governments, also shape academic studies. Despite attempts of the UN, member states have not yet agreed on a common definition of terrorism. National definitions vary widely across jurisdictions, reflecting each state's legal traditions, political sensitivities and security priorities.

Since terrorism lacks a universally agreed definition, there are ongoing debates concerning its application. Some contend that it is selectively used to undercut opposition movements while state-sponsored violence is overlooked (Jackson, Smyth, & Gunning, 2011). For instance, while acts like sabotage or attacks on government buildings by political opponents could sometimes be labelled as terrorism by state authorities,

systematic and prolonged acts of violence such as ethnic cleansing, forced displacement or indiscriminate military campaigns perpetrated by states are often put forward as matters of national security or self-defense. A notable case is Israel's continuous violence against Palestinians. Israel's repeated military assaults on civilian areas, expansion of illegal settlements, and displacement of Palestinians are categorized as self-defense in mainstream Western political discourse. Therefore, terrorism is a contested concept which is best summarized in the well-known saying: One man's terrorist is the other man's freedom fighter (Bessner & Stauch, 2010; Heymann, 2002).

Since conceptualization of terrorism varies vastly across theoretical stances and political contexts, it is crucial to refrain from conceptual vagueness to conduct a solid analysis. To address ambiguity, Bueno de Mesquita defines terrorism as "violence aimed at influencing government policy by targeting individuals who lack the authority to enact such changes." The primary goal is to create fear among the population, thereby pressuring political leaders to adopt policies favorable to the terrorists' aims (De Mesquita, 2003). De Mesquita's definition is relatively useful as it avoids assigning normative judgments to terrorism, allowing it to be analytically distinguished from other forms of political violence although it confines the concept to a very narrow framework. Building on this, within the scope and limits of this study, terrorism can be defined as "the strategic and illegitimate use of violence or the threat of violence by states, non-state actors or lone actors, designed to cause psychological impacts beyond the immediate victim, targeting civilians or symbolic structures, intended to achieve political, economic, religious, or social goals by instilling fear, coercing adversaries, or mobilizing supporters." Drawing from this definition, at least three core components of terrorism can be detected: violence, organization, and ideology.

2.1.2 Core Components of Terrorism

2.1.2.1 Ideology

In this section, I will provide a brief overview of ideology and its importance for terrorist organizations, reserving a more detailed discussion for the fifth section, where I examine ideology specifically in the context of DAESH. As noted earlier, goals of terrorism often fall into social, political, or religious categories— each of which is reinforced by ideology. Ideology thus serves as a unifying framework that embraces and gives meaning to these objectives. Examining a group's ideological foundations ensures a more profound insight into its political, social, or religious motivations that drive its use of terrorism, as well as the strategic objectives it seeks to achieve through such violence.

Ideology is a foundational yet deeply contested concept within the social sciences. It is defined as “a set of beliefs or principles, especially one on which a political system, party, or organization is based.”⁴ Broadly speaking, it refers to a structured set of beliefs, values, and ideas that shapes how individuals and groups interpret the world and guide their actions within it (Eagleton, 1991; Freeden, 2003; Van Dijk, 1998). It serves multiple functions, ranging from a mechanism of social control to source of identity and mobilization. Ideology forms the foundation of a terrorist group's identity and guides its behavior. It does not only provide moral, religious, or political justification for violence, but also shapes the group's strategic goals, and defines both enemies and allies. Ideology also plays a crucial role in transforming grievances into coherent narratives and serves to recruit, mobilize, and sustain support.

⁴ Cambridge Dictionary. (n.d.). Ideology. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org>

Classical Marxist theory renders ideology mainly as a tool of dominance the ruling classes employ to maintain power (Marx & Engels, 1846). In this view, ideology sustains the status quo and conceals material circumstances. However, more contemporary studies provide a less deterministic view. For instance, Michael Freeden defines ideology as a set of political concepts arranged in a specific structure. He underlines that ideologies are inconstant, contentious, and context dependent (Freeden, 1996). According to Terry Eagleton, ideology is a set of concepts and behaviors that people use to make sense of their social reality rather than being fundamentally incorrect or deceptive (Eagleton, 1991).

In terrorism studies, ideology is frequently regarded as a central explanatory variable for understanding the motives and trajectories of terrorist organizations. Bruce Hoffman argues that terrorism is a deliberate creation and exploitation of fear through violence to achieve political end and it is an inherently ideological act (Hoffman, 2006). Likewise, Martha Crenshaw highlights that although structural conditions and grievances play a role, ideology gives meaning to these grievances and justifies violence as a necessary course of action (Crenshaw, 1992). The well-known "wave theory" proposed by David Rapoport further connects ideology to the evolution of terrorism throughout the history. He argues that each wave of modern terrorism—the anarchist, anti-colonial, leftist, and religious—has been urged by a prevailing ideology which influenced tactics, targets, and organizational structures of terrorist groups (Rapoport, 2004). As observed in groups like Al-Qaeda and DAESH, ideology in the current wave is frequently linked to religious principles (Gerges, 2011; Hegghammer, 2010). Recent studies have also pointed out adaptive and strategic functions of ideology. As Thomas Hegghammer and Peter Neumann underline, extremist ideologies are not constant; they evolve in response

to local contexts, strategic calculations, and internal factional strifes (Hegghammer, 2014; Neumann, 2013). Terrorist organizations can use this to justify strategic modifications and attract potential recruits.

Ideology also interacts with other factors—such as identity, trauma, and social networks—to strengthen commitment of individuals to violence. John Horgan examines how psychological variables, including the pursuit of significance and belonging, are steered through ideological narratives (Horgan, 2005). Similarly, Marc Sageman contends that ideology becomes prominent in the context of group dynamics and social spheres, where individuals collectively adopt ideological principles and behave in accordance with them (Sageman, 2004).

Therefore, ideology in the context of terrorism should not be viewed merely as a static set of beliefs or doctrines. Rather, it operates as a dynamic and multifaceted instrument that enables terrorist groups to recruit fighters, construct identity and justify violence. Consequently, a comprehensive understanding of ideology is essential for analyzing terrorist organizations.

2.1.2.2 Organization

The organizational aspect of terrorism is important for comprehending how terrorist groups operate and survive. Organization is defined as “a group that work together in an organized way for a shared purpose.”⁵ In other words, an organization is any structured group with rules, roles, and a shared objective. Organizational structure of a terrorist group shapes its strategic capabilities, resilience, and ability to project power.

⁵ Cambridge Dictionary. (n.d.). Organization. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org>

It contains leadership hierarchy, communication systems, recruitment mechanisms, and modes of internal governance. This structure can vary considerably, ranging from highly centralized to more decentralized. For instance, Al-Qaeda under Osama bin Laden adopted a relatively centralized organizational structure. In contrast, DAESH has evolved into a more decentralized and networked structure, particularly after its territorial defeat in Iraq and Syria, allowing for greater operational flexibility and regional autonomy.

Since bureaucratic and hierarchical models were the main focus of early organizational theory in political science and sociology (Weber, 1978), contemporary terrorism literature distinguishes between hierarchical, networked and franchise models. Bruce Hoffman asserts that traditional terrorist groups like IRA (Irish Republican Army) or ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna [Basque Homeland and Liberty]) were centralized and hierarchical, whereas organizations such as Al-Qaeda and DAESH transformed into decentralized groups (Hoffman, 2006). Decentralized structure allows for both top-down command and autonomous local cells, enhancing survivability and ideological dissemination (Sageman, 2004; Bousquet, 2009). Organizational structure also shapes strategic decisions. Kydd and Walter, for instance, argue that terrorist violence is a form of costly signaling, a rational strategy by weaker actors to demonstrate strength to states and audiences (Kydd & Walter, 2006). This strategy depends heavily on how well an organization can coordinate violence and continue internal discipline. In a similar vein, Cronin underlines how organizational life cycles—from formation to decline—are vital for understanding terrorist group trajectories, including how some disband, fragment, or transform into political actors (Cronin, 2006). Studies on social movement theory and organizational sociology highlight the importance of internal culture and identity on continuation of terrorist groups. Wiktorowicz and Horgan observe that terrorist groups

often use intentional indoctrination, rituals, and in-group norms to retain cohesion and prevent dissidence (Wiktorowicz, 2005; Horgan, 2005).

Organizational structure determines various behaviours and capabilities of terrorist groups. First, it influences recruitment strategies, defining how terrorist group appeals to potential fighters and integrates them into its ranks. Second, it affects tactical capabilities, as more centralized groups may perform more coordinated and notable operations, while decentralized groups can be more agile and conduct localized attacks with high operational resilience. Third, organizational structure influences internal cohesion, as highly hierarchical groups may retain ideological discipline but risk dissolution if leadership is eliminated, whereas networked organizations may maintain ideological continuity even amid decapitation of leadership. Finally, organizational structure shows group's resilience, determining how well it can adapt to fluctuant local, regional and international realities and pressures.

2.1.2.3 Violence

Violence is the most visible and distinguishing feature of terrorism. It is defined as “actions that are intended or likely to hurt people or cause damage.”⁶ Within the context of terrorism, violence serves various purposes: to create fear, to force governments, to attract media attention, and to signal power. It is also a symbolic form of communication intended to intensify ideological messages. Scholars have long debated the role of violence in social life. Hannah Arendt, for example, distinguishes violence from power, arguing that the former occurs when the latter is lacking (Arendt, 1970). Frantz Fanon,

⁶ Cambridge Dictionary. (n.d.). Violence. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org>

on the other hand, states that violence is a necessary means for decolonization, particularly in contexts of racial and systemic oppression (Fanon, 1963).

In terrorism studies, violence is regarded as both instrumental and expressive. As Crenshaw states, it serves rational objectives such as coercing governments, provoking reactions, or gaining publicity (Crenshaw, 1981). Yet, violence also communicates ideology and group identity. This is what Juergensmeyer refers as "performance violence," highlighting the way attacks are designed to cause terror, generate divine meanings, and depict cosmic struggle (Juergensmeyer, 2000). The form of violence—be it suicide bombing, assassination, or mass casualty attacks—has an impact both on public perception and states. For example, Pape contends that suicide terrorism is a calculated strategy employed primarily against states to acquire compromises (Pape, 2005). Further, Kilcullen emphasizes how irregular types of violence cloud the lines between terrorism, insurgency, and criminality, particularly in vulnerable or failed states (Kilcullen, 2009).

Since organizational structure determines operational capacity and violence serves as the primary method of action, ideology fulfills multiple functions for terrorist groups. It not only provides moral and strategic justification for violence but also operates to bind members, shapes group identity, and ensures continuity. Most importantly, ideology enables terrorist organizations to adapt to internal and external shifts like leadership change, territorial loss or evolving political landscapes, thus playing an important role in their resilience and longevity.

Although majority of studies on terrorism often classifies terrorist organizations based on their primary motivations—such as religious, political, ethno-nationalist, or ideological—I refrain from adopting such rigid typologies. The rationale is twofold. First, these classifications tend to oversimplify the complex motivations behind terrorist

violence. Terrorist organizations like Al-Qaeda and DAESH are frequently categorized as religious terrorist groups due to their misuse of Islamic rhetoric and symbolism (Moghadam, 2006; Hafez, 2016). However, a closer analysis reveals that their objectives extend beyond utterly religious domain. Both groups actively pursue political goals, such as establishment of a state, and social objectives including restructure of societal norms and imposition of divine laws (Gerges, 2016; Lia, 2016). As such, reducing terrorist organizations to a single and uniform category risks overlooking complex and evolving nature of their strategies and ideologies. Such reductionist approaches also do not align with the objectives of this study.

2.2 Overview of Theoretical Framework and Literature

2.2.1 Rationalist Explanations of War and Conflict

Realist theories have long been central to understanding war and conflict in international relations. They perceive conflict as a deliberate strategy that actors pursue in the presence of uncertainty, incentives, and constraints rather than an irrational blast of emotion or hatred. Therefore, realist approaches are backbone of rationalist explanations of war and conflict.

One of the foundational contributions to the rationalist explanation of war comes from Fearon, who emphasizes that war is a failure of bargaining between rational actors (Fearon, 1995). He argues that rational actors may resort to violence when certain conditions prevent possibility of reaching a peaceful settlement. First, he underlines that information asymmetries can lead to conflicts when actors are unable to credibly reveal their capabilities or intentions. Second, he asserts that commitment problems can cause conflicts when parties cannot guarantee to uphold an agreement in the future, especially

under conditions of shifting power dynamics or incentives, which may make war a rational choice. Third, Fearon states that issue indivisibility can provoke conflict since perception that certain issues such as territories, identity or sacred values cannot be divided or compromised may hinder a mutually acceptable agreement. This approach has shaped the empirical and theoretical literature on both inter-state and intra-state conflicts. This framework, when applied to civil wars and insurgencies, helps explain why non-state actors might prefer violence despite high risks and costs. For example, a rebel group may start a conflict because it lacks trust in the state's willingness to implement reforms, or because it overstates its capabilities and chances of victory due to poor information. Such logic can extend into the study of terrorism as well.

Building on this approach, rationalist approaches do not address terrorist violence as the derivative of irrational hatred or fanaticism, but as a strategic tool used by weaker actors to achieve political objectives. This notion presents terrorism as a tool to accomplish gains under conditions of asymmetry. In his seminal work, Robert Pape argues that even extreme tactics like suicide bombings are motivated by rational calculations (Pape, 2003). Analyzing data from 188 suicide attacks between 1980 and 2001, he finds that these acts are not random or ideologically incoherent, but deliberate strategies designed to cause damage. Similarly, Kydd and Walter conceptualize terrorism as a form of costly signalling in asymmetric conflicts (Kydd & Walter, 2006). This strategic logic is also present in theory of outbidding where Mia Bloom claims that terrorist groups escalate violence to exhibit ideological superiority and attract supporters (Bloom, 2005). This is particularly salient in the Middle Eastern context, where multiple terrorist groups compete for legitimacy, resources, and fighters. Expanding the scope, Max Abrahms provides a rationalist but non-instrumental account of terrorism by

emphasizing the role of social benefits (Abrahms, 2008). He maintains that individuals frequently join terrorist groups for non-political reasons—such as friendship, protection, or identity. Nevertheless, these decisions are still rational in the sense that individuals are pursuing benefits, be they tangible or intangible.

2.2.2 Rational Actor Perspective

No theoretical approach can completely explain complexities of social phenomena, and each framework has inherent limitations. This applies to the case of DAESH as well. However, rational actor perspective can offer a useful lens through which to analyze DAESH's ideological transformation and adaptive behaviors.

The rationalist tradition, while initially developed to explain state behavior and interstate war, may provide a valuable stance for understanding the ideological posture and adaptive strategies of terrorist organizations. Far from being a rigid group, DAESH has demonstrated a high degree of ideological adaptability and strategic innovation, particularly in response to shifting political and military contexts.

From the rationalist perspective, actors are assumed to act in ways that maximize their gains, selecting strategies that yield the highest possible benefits (Nalbandov, 2017). In the case of terrorist organizations, this assumption seems plausible as these groups act in compliance with their objectives aimed at ensuring most beneficial outcome. However, the central debate stems from how the notion of “benefit” is conceptualized. It is a widespread tendency to equate benefit with concrete and immediate outcomes, yet realities often diverge from this. For instance, DAESH's aggressive territorial expansion in Syria triggered a significant international military response. While this may appear irrational calculation of power balance, it could alternatively be interpreted as a rational venture by DAESH to secure resources such as oil fields and territorial expansion.

DAESH's use of terror as an instrument to instill fear can also be read from rational lenses since it serves DAESH's broader strategic aims by increasing its visibility and psychological impact. It has also repeatedly conducted violence such as public execution of Western hostages or destruction of cultural heritage sites not only to create a mood of fear, but also show strength to states, rival groups and potential recruits. Some can argue that these actions are performed by a group of irrational lunatics. However, though they seem illogical and brutal, they serve rational objectives such as bolstering legitimacy, media attention and deterrence. Similarly, its coordinated attacks abroad, such as the 2015 Paris attacks, while inviting military retaliation, widened its ideological reach and demonstrated operational capability. Therefore, the rational actor perspective requires a more nuanced understanding of "benefit," one that involves both tangible and intangible elements, as well as short-term and long-term gains.

Furthermore, the rationalist assessment of success tends to focus narrowly on whether political objectives are achieved (Wiktorowicz & Kaltenthaler, 2016). This view is binary and overlooks gradual progress toward those goals. A more useful concept is "tactical rationality," which underlines strategic gains that may not immediately fulfil long-term objectives but contribute to their eventual realization (Nalbandov, 2017). For instance, while DAESH has not succeeded in eliminating Western political and military influence in the Middle East—one of its stated long-term objectives—it has arguably influenced policies of countries that claim strategic interests in the region. DAESH's capacity for strategic adjustment also supports the rational actor perspective. Its shifts—severing ties with Al-Qaeda, reconfiguring its organizational structure and adopting an affiliate-based organization—manifest calculated actions following internal and external changes.

As a result, rational actor perspective provides a robust framework for analyzing DAESH's behavior, including its ideological evolution. These approaches reveal that even seemingly fanatical and doctrinal actions can be instrumental and adaptive. Rational actor perspective allows us to understand how and why terrorist organizations like DAESH change and adapt by instrumentalizing their ideological narratives in pursuit of strategic goals. This insight is crucial for developing more effective counterterrorism strategies that address not only tangible assets of DAESH, but also rational incentives embedded in its ideological extremism.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

I use a mixed-method approach in this study, combining content and discourse analysis to examine ideological change and adaptation in the case of DAESH. Content analysis, as defined by Krippendorff, is “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts to the contexts of their use” (Krippendorff, 2013; Fairclough, 1995). These methods are particularly effective in examining how meaning is produced, contested, and transformed in political and militant discourses. As ideological narratives are central to strategies, identity construction and operational decisions of terrorist organizations (Jackson, 2005; Gunning & Jackson, 2011), analyzing their propaganda texts offers significant understanding of internal logic and adaptive strategies. While discourse analysis concentrates on the contextual aspects of propaganda, content analysis enables us to identify recurring concepts and the evolution of themes over time (Schreier, 2012; Gee, 2011). I concentrate on four key questions that shape the analysis. First, I focus on ideological change and adaptation of terrorist groups by answering the question of how terrorist organizations ideologically change and adapt. Second, I demonstrate regional adaptation by answering how ideology helps DAESH adapt and change in different regions. Third, I try to detect distinct discourses by answering whether DAESH-Core’s ideological discourse differ from that of DEASH-Afghanistan, and if yes, how. Lastly, I show the impact of this variation by answering how ideological differentiation influences DAESH’s strategies and tactics in two regions.

To address these questions, I adopt content analysis to systematically catalog and quantify ideological concepts in DAESH’s propaganda magazines, alongside discourse analysis to interpret the language, narratives, and meaning behind those themes. Content

analysis is appropriate for capturing what ideological content is present and how its frequency or emphasis shifts over time or across contexts, whereas discourse analysis is used to understand how that content is conveyed and presented.

3.2 Data Sources and Collection Procedures

The empirical data consists of online propaganda magazines published by DAESH affiliated media centers (Al Hayat Media Center and Al Azaim Foundation). I selected these magazines to cover different time periods and contexts. Specifically, the dataset includes 28 issues from DAESH's central media publications (Dabiq and Rumiyah magazines) as well as 29 issues of Voice of Khurasan magazine published by DAESH-Afghanistan. These publications span from 2014 to 2017 for Dabiq and Rumiyah and 2022–2025 for Voice of Khurasan.

I obtained all the issues through open-source research (e.g., online archives). I have carefully reviewed each issue in its original language (English for Dabiq, Rumiyah, and Voice of Khurasan). I chose all magazines due to their richness in terms of ideological content and their central role in DAESH propaganda. In other words, they are chosen for their centrality in disseminating DAESH's ideological narratives and targeting both global and regional audiences. Using the complete set of available issues for each publication ensures comprehensive understanding of ideological concepts, capturing any change in themes over time rather than a small sample that might miss significant variations.

Magazines collectively provide a longitudinal and cross-sectional view of DAESH ideology. Dabiq and Rumiyah were published in English and addressed both regional and international audience, reflecting DAESH's messaging during and after its period of governance in Iraq and Syria. Voice of Khurasan, on the other hand, is published by DAESH-Afghanistan and represents the propaganda of an affiliate operating in South

and Central Asia. It allows to examine how core DAESH ideology is maintained or adapted in a different theatre under different circumstances. The diversity of this dataset—across regions and time frames—provides a robust basis for analysis.

I also employ a lexicon developed from both primary and secondary sources that constitute the ideological foundations of DAESH—such as classical texts of Islamic scholars, relevant literature and DAESH’s own doctrinal statements. This lexicon provides predefined ideological categories that are applied deductively to identify emerging themes within DAESH ideological propaganda across time and space. I will provide a detailed explanation of this lexicon in the fifth section, following an overview of the ideological foundations of DAESH.

3.3 Ethics Declaration

This research does not involve human participants, sensitive personal data, or experimental interventions. It relies exclusively on publicly available textual sources, propaganda magazines produced by DAESH. I analyzed all the data within the framework of content and discourse analysis. Research requires no ethical approval; hence, I conduct this study in line with the ethical standards of Özyeğin University and the broader principles of academic integrity. I acknowledge potential ethical implications of analyzing terrorist propaganda materials and I have taken measures to ensure that such content is used merely for scholarly analysis, in a manner that does not endorse or legitimize violent ideologies.

4. HISTORY OF DAESH

4.1 Origins and Al-Qaeda

DAESH's ideological roots can be traced back to the Salafi notion that emerged in the late 20th century, particularly among transnational terrorist movements. A key trailblazer was Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian militant who established Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (JTWJ) in the late 1990s. Although ideologically aligned with al-Qaeda, Zarqawi's group adopted extreme sectarianism and brutality, particularly against Shi'a Muslims. In 2004, Zarqawi pledged allegiance to Osama bin Laden, redefined his group as Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). AQI sought to trigger a sectarian civil war and destabilize Iraq and create an environment conducive to its aspirations of establishing state (Gerges, 2016). After the invasion of Iraq by US, AQI orchestrated high-profile attacks against notable targets including UN headquarters, the Jordanian embassy in Baghdad, and the Imam Ali Mosque—a prominent Shiite shrine in Najaf.⁷ Zarqawi's intense use of violence (Stern & Berger, 2015) coupled with US strategy of de-Baathification which intentionally excluded Sunni population from political and administrative sphere further undermined state legitimacy and triggered sectarian tensions (Jacoby & Neggaz, 2018).

⁷ AP News (2023). Officials commemorate 20th anniversary of deadly attack on UN headquarters in Iraq. <https://apnews.com/article/5aadf09a55ce752139c4b005f90d5b89>; BBC (2003). Jordan embassy blast inquiry. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3134145.stm; CNN (2003). Najaf bombing kills Shiite leader, followers say. <https://edition.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/meast/08/29/sprj.iq.najaf/index.html>.

4.2 Breakaway From al-Qaeda and Transformation into DAESH

After Zarqawi's death in a US airstrike in 2006,⁸ Abu Hamza al Muhajir replaced him as a leader. AQI transformed into so-called "Islamic State of Iraq (ISI)." This marked the beginning of DAESH's state-building aspirations. The group attempted to establish substitute governing structures in Iraq's Sunni-majority provinces, aiming to replace state authority with its own administrative and judicial systems. By doing so, it attempted to legitimize its presence, exert control over local populations, and form the basis for a proto-state aligned with its ideological and strategic objectives. However, its heavy-handed tactics alienated local Sunni populations and tribal leaders. The U.S.-backed Sunni forces significantly weakened the group by 2010. The group's top leadership was killed in a 2010 raid, and it was considered that group was nearly removed (McCants, 2015; Stern & Berger, 2015).

By the time U.S. forces withdrew from Iraq in 2011, the country remained deeply unstable and had not transitioned into a full-fledged functioning state. The outbreak of Syrian Civil War in 2011 provided the group with a strategic opportunity. Under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, it expanded into Syria, forming Jabhat al-Nusra as a Syrian affiliate. In 2013, Baghdadi announced the merger of so-called "Islamic State of Iraq (ISI)" and Jabhat al-Nusra, creating DAESH. However, this move was rejected by Jabhat al-Nusra and Al-Qaeda's central command. A violent split occurred, with DAESH aggressively asserting its dominance in east of Syria and launching a military campaign across north of Iraq (Weiss & Hassan, 2015).

⁸ The Guardian (2006). Zarqawi died 52 minutes after air strike, US says. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/jun/12/iraq.usa>

4.3 Declaration of State and Governance

In June 2014, DAESH captured Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city, and declared establishment of a state with Baghdadi as so-called Caliph Ibrahim. The group renamed itself simply as "Islamic State" (IS). At its peak, DAESH controlled a large size of territories, spanning Iraq and Syria. It implemented brutal laws, established bureaucratic structures, and published propaganda materials to attract foreign fighters. Its governance structures included health, education, taxation, and judicial services, though supported by violence and repression (Revkin, 2016).

4.4 Territorial Decline and Rise of Affiliates

From 2015 onward, DAESH faced sustained military campaigns by Iraq, Syria and international coalitions. Key cities like Ramadi, Fallujah, and Mosul were retaken by 2017, and by March 2019, DAESH lost its last territory in Baghuz, Syria. Despite its loss of territorial control, DAESH maintained sleeper cells and returned to insurgency tactics. Territorial decline diminished its administrative capacity but not its ideological appeal or operational capability (Ingram, 2016).

Following its territorial defeat in Iraq and Syria, DAESH reframed itself as a decentralized global insurgency. Affiliates emerged or strengthened in many regions including South Asia and Africa. These affiliates operate with varying degrees of coordination with DAESH-Core and share its ideological commitments.

One of its affiliates, DAESH-Afghanistan was founded in 2014 primarily by renegades from Al-Qaeda, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Taliban fighters from Afghanistan and Pakistan (Giustozzi, 2023). From its inception, DAESH-Afghanistan quickly showed an extreme sectarian violence and positioned itself rival to both Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaeda. Over the course of time, group attracts foreign fighters from

Central Asia and expanded its operations across Afghanistan, Pakistan, and into Iran, Central Asia, and even Russia. Despite counterterrorism pressures and decapitation of its leaders, it has proven resilience and continued to conduct high profile attacks such as 2021 Kabul airport bombing, 2024 Kerman twin bombings in Iran, and the March 2024 concert hall massacre near Moscow.⁹ Currently, leadership of the group remains unclear since its former leader Sanaullah Ghafari was killed in 2023 by the Taliban (Kędzierski, 2024).



⁹ International Le Monde (2023). Taliban kills mastermind behind 2021 Kabul airport bombing. https://www.lemonde.fr/en/united-states/article/2023/04/26/taliban-kills-mastermind-behind-2021-kabul-airport-bombing_6024378_133.html; Al Jazeera (2024). Iran identifies suspected bomb-maker behind twin blasts, arrests 35 people. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/11/iran-identifies-suspected-bomb-maker-behind-twin-blasts-arrests-35-people>; Al Jazeera (2024). Moscow concert hall attack: Why is ISIL targeting Russia? <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/3/23/moscow-concert-hall-attack-why-is-isil-targeting>

5. IDEOLOGY OF DAESH

5.1 Functions of Ideology

Ideology plays a multi-dimensional and foundational role in the operation of terrorist organizations like DAESH. It provides normative and justificatory basis that enables such organizations to pursue violence, recruit members, and sustain internal cohesion. As Bruce Hoffman states, ideology is central to survival and appeal of terrorist organizations because it offers a moral rationale for violence and draws distinction between in-groups and out-groups (Hoffman, 2017). Similarly, Moghadam points out that ideology functions as both a strategic asset and a social signifier, shaping tactical choices and justifying brutality against defined enemies (Moghadam, 2008).

In DAESH's case, ideology fulfils several functions. First, it legitimizes violence by presenting it within a sacred narrative and articulating it as a religious obligation. Second, it enables mobilization by framing *jihad* as an individual duty, thus appeals to potential recruits. Third, ideology provides a means for sustaining organizational coherence through shared principles and enemy construction, especially during periods of territorial loss. These functions demonstrate ideology's central role in DAESH's strategic calculation and adaptation.

5.2 Ideology as a Pillar of Change and Adaptation

Ideology is not a static phenomenon, rather, it serves as a tool of change and adaptation. Terrorist groups, particularly DAESH, have demonstrated ability to recalibrate its ideological discourse in response to changing political and military conditions. This adaptation conforms to rational actor perspective (Kydd & Walter, 2006). DAESH's ideological reconfiguration, ranging from state-building rhetoric in

Dabiq to revenge narratives in Voice of Khurasan—exemplify this pragmatic use of belief system.

DAESH's discourse evolved significantly following its territorial collapse in Iraq and Syria. While early propaganda focused heavily on themes of governance, law, and expansion, later messaging shifted toward vengeance, resistance, and martyrdom. As Ingram argues, DAESH uses strategic messaging to harvest legitimacy and psychological resilience among its followers, using ideology not only to justify actions but to shape perceptions and morale (Ingram, 2016). Thus, ideology becomes not only pillar of DAESH's identity but also of its ability to adapt across time and space.

5.3 Core Concepts of DAESH Ideology

Ideological foundations of DAESH are shaped by a constellation of classical and contemporary jihadist thinkers. Among the earliest and most foundational is Ibn Taymiyyah (1263–1328), a Hanbali scholar whose legal and theological views on *takfir* (excommunication) and armed rebellion against unjust rulers laid the groundwork for DAESH's ideology. His fatwas legitimizing resistance against Mongol rulers are frequently cited by DAESH to justify rebellion and violence against contemporary regional Muslim governments (Bonner, 2006). DAESH also draws significantly from both Wahhabi and Qutbist traditions. Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703–1792), who is another prominent thinker and founder of Wahhabi movement, underlined *tawhid* (God's oneness) and condemned and denounced *shirk* (polytheism) and *bid'a* (innovation). His emphasis on *iman* (belief) and *kufir* (disbelief) formed the basis for expansion of *takfir*, which DAESH radicalized to justify violence against Muslims and non-Muslims alike (Commins, 2006). Core tenets of Wahhabi doctrine such as *tawhid*, *shirk*, *bid'a* and *hudud* (prescribed punishments) are of fundamental importance in

DAESH ideology. Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966), a leading figure in the Muslim Brotherhood, has also influenced DAESH’s ideology. DAESH frequently interprets his ideas according to its own worldview. His most influential work, *Milestones*, has become the cornerstone of what is now referred to as Qutbism, a term denoting his ideological contributions to modern Islamist thought (Qutb, 1989; Calvert, 2010; Khatab, 2006). DAESH’s emphasis on *shari‘a* and endorsement of offensive *jihad* reflect deep connections with Qutbist ideology. Abul A‘la Mawdudi, an influential thinker, introduced political-theological concept of *hakimiyyah* (sovereignty), highlighting the idea that sovereignty belongs only to God and that secular systems are non-Islamic (Nasr, 1996). DAESH often reinterprets Mawdudi’s views according to its own worldview. Muhammad al-Faraj’s emphasis on *jihad*, elevating it to a personal obligation and prioritizing it over other religious duties further radicalized the concept (Gerges, 2016). Abdullah Azzam portrayed *jihad* as a duty for all Muslims in occupied lands, providing basis for DAESH’s recruitment and calls for *hijrah* (migration) (Hegghammer, 2010). Usama bin Laden inherited this legacy and framed the West as the “far enemy”, a narrative DAESH echoed and instrumentalized (Lia, 2008). Abu Musab al-Zarqawi featured extreme sectarianism and violence, targeting Shia Muslims (Fishman, 2016). Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, one of the most influential ideologues of DAESH, provided ideological foundations for rejecting democracy and endorsing *takfir* of Muslim rulers. Though he later distanced himself from DAESH, his writings continue to shape its worldview (Wagemakers, 2012). Turki al-Bin‘ali, a Bahraini cleric and DAESH’s chief religious advisor, authored numerous treatises that systematized DAESH’s worldview, particularly its application of *takfir* and *istishhad* (martyrdom operations) (Bunzel, 2015).

At this point, it is useful to address some of the concepts most often exploited by DAESH. In this section, I will focus on most used terms, while a more comprehensive set of concepts will be provided in the lexicon (see Table 5.1). The word *jihad* which refers to the human struggle to promote what is right and to prevent what is wrong,¹⁰ holds a multifaceted meaning within Islamic thought. In Islamic terminology, *jihad* is defined as striving to learn and live according to religious rules, teaching these to others, promoting moral virtue and preventing wrongdoing, struggling both internally against the self and externally against adversaries. This conceptualization is strongly supported by scholarly literature. For instance, Neale shows how premodern Sufi hagiographies portray *jihad* not only as a military endeavor but as deeply embedded in spiritual devotion (Neale, 2022). Asma Afsaruddin, in her comprehensive study, states that classical Islamic sources support multiple forms of *jihad*, many of which revolve around non-violent resistance and ethical striving rather than physical confrontation (Afsaruddin, 2013). Contemporary scholars like Muhammad Al-Atawneh further demonstrate how reformist Islamic thinkers reinterpret *jihad* as a means of societal development, spiritual discipline, and resistance to injustice through peaceful means (Al-Atawneh, 2007). These academic perspectives affirm that *jihad* is not a monolithic or exclusively militant concept.

The term *shirk* (polytheism) is defined as association of God with other deities.¹¹ Theologically, it implies attributing divine qualities or powers to anyone or anything other than Allah. DAESH adopts the most extreme interpretation of *shirk* and promotes that those who engage in acts of *shirk* must be eliminated. This view is the basis of its

¹⁰ Jihad. (n.d.). In Encyclopædia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com>

¹¹ Shirk (n.d.). In Encyclopædia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com>

deliberate targeting of Sufi and Shia communities, as well as their tombs and shrines. The concept *bid'a* is defined as any innovation that has no roots in the traditional practice of the Muslim community.¹² It refers in Islamic theology to any practice or belief introduced into religious life that lacks basis in the Qur'an or the actions, omissions, and approvals of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions (the Sunnah). As Calder explains, *bid'a* has historically been understood within Islamic jurisprudence as a departure from mainstream tradition, but not necessarily an act that means disbelief (Calder, 1993). Mainstream Islamic scholars generally evaluate *bid'a* to be blameworthy or sinful yet not cause for excommunication. However, DAESH embraces a much more radical stance by interpreting it as a form of apostasy, thereby justifying the use of *takfir* and legitimizing violence (Cook, 2001).

The term *hijrah* refers to migration undertaken for the sake of preserving one's faith.¹³ Traditionally, it represents a spiritual and physical departure from non-Islamic places to lands where Islamic practice can thrive (Peters, 1994). DAESH redefined *hijrah* as a core religious duty, framing it as an act of allegiance to its so-called caliphate. In Islamic tradition, *bay'ah* refers to a formal pledge of allegiance made by individuals to a leader, typically a caliph or a ruler.¹⁴ Historically rooted in early Islamic community, it was given to show commitment to the emerging Muslim political system. Over time, it became a symbolic and legal mechanism for legitimizing authority in Islamic political thought (Crone & Hinds, 1986). DAESH revived and radicalized the concept of *bay'ah* to serve its objectives. Following the declaration of its so-called caliphate in 2014,

¹² Bid'a (n.d.). In Encyclopædia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com>

¹³ Hijrah (n.d.). In Encyclopædia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com>

¹⁴ Bay'ah (n.d.). In Encyclopædia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com>

DAESH demanded *bay'ah* to its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, portraying it as a religious obligation for all Muslims. It articulated repudiation or deferral as rebellion or hypocrisy.

In Islamic theology, *taghut* refers to anything or anyone that usurps the legitimate sovereignty of God,¹⁵ whether through false worship, unjust authority, or deviation from divine guidance. DAESH has used the concept to delegitimize modern political systems, secular governments, and even rival Islamic authorities.

In Islamic thought, terms such as *kafir* (unbeliever), *kufir* (disbelief), *murtadd* (apostate) and *mushrik* (polytheist) form the foundation for distinguishing between those are inside and outside of the faith. *Kafir* (plural: *kafirin* or *kuffar*) implies one who knowingly rejects or denies the truth of Islam.¹⁶ *Kufir*, derived from the same root, refers to disbelief.¹⁷ *Murtadd* (plural: *murtaddin*) is someone who has left Islam after professing it—apostasy that classical scholars often deemed punishable under specific conditions.¹⁸ *Mushrik* (plural: *mushrikun*) identifies one who associates partners with God, considered as irredeemable transgression if not repented.

These concepts are not merely theological; they are discursively operationalized by DAESH to frame political, social, and military agendas. As Wiktorowicz demonstrates, such concepts are reinterpreted to build a narrative of divine legitimacy and existential struggle (Wiktorowicz, 2005).

¹⁵ Taghut. In Oxford Reference.

¹⁶ Kafir (n.d.). In Encyclopædia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com>

¹⁷ Kufir. In Oxford Reference.

¹⁸ Murtad. In Oxford Reference.

5.4 Analytical Framework and Lexicon

This study adopts a lexicon to systematically trace ideological continuities and adaptations within the propaganda magazines of DAESH. Lexicon allows for close textual scrutiny by identifying and interpreting key ideological terms repeatedly employed in DAESH's narratives. It is developed deductively through engaging with studies on Islamic thought and existing academic studies, inductively through DAESH's publications. Lexicon serves not only as a coding tool but also as a window into DAESH's ideological architecture. By tracking the use, frequency, and context of key terms, this study illuminates how DAESH adapts itself different environments while retaining its core principles.

Table 5.1 *Lexicon of DAESH Ideology*

Concept	Definition	Function in DAESH Ideology	Operational Implication
Kufr	Disbelief in or rejection of the oneness of God and Islamic truth	Used to distinguish between enemies and friends and create a dual understanding of world	Grounds religious justifications for mass violence
Kafir	An individual who denies or rejects the core tenets of Islam	Label for enemies of Islam, justifying their targeting	Used to target non-Muslims and moderate Muslims alike
Kuffar	General term for disbelievers	Used to dehumanize and delegitimize all opponents	Facilitates indiscriminate violence against civilians
Kafirin	Plural of kafir; commonly used to describe disbelievers	Label for enemies of Islam, justifying their targeting	Used to target non-Muslims and moderate Muslims alike
Murtad	Apostate; someone who renounces Islam after accepting it	Used to delegitimize regional states and rival groups	Applied to justify killings of other Muslims DAESH deems apostate

Murtaddin	Plural of murtad; refers to apostates—those who leave Islam after professing it	Justifies execution of Muslims who deviate from DAESH ideology	Justifies intra-Muslim executions and purges
Da’wah	The act of inviting others to embrace Islam through preaching or teaching	Used as both recruitment and justification for outreach and jihad	Framed as an entry point to jihad and allegiance
Shirk	Association of partners with God	Main tool for legitimizing violence against others	Instrumental in takfir and justification of mass violence
Mushrik	One who commits shirk, associating partners with Allah	Legitimizes violence against others	Enables targeting of those labelled as polytheists
Mushrikun	Plural of mushrik; refers to polytheists or those guilty of shirk	Broadly applied to justify attacks on Muslim sects and minorities	Enables targeting of those labelled as polytheists
Dar al-Kufr	Abode of disbelief; lands not governed by Islamic law	Justifies conquest and rejection of modern nation-states	Mobilizes support for global conquest narrative
Darü'l Sulh	Abode of truce	Tool for inciting hijrah	Vital for recruitment of foreign fighters
Dar al-Islam	Abode of Islam; territories under Islamic governance	Distinguishes DAESH territory from enemy zones	Sets ideological boundary for warfare and expansion; vital for recruitment of foreign fighters
Dar al-Harb	Abode of war; territories opposed to or not ruled by Islamic law	Rhetorical frame for global jihad and military campaigns	Legitimizes attacks beyond immediate borders
Jihad	Struggle or striving in the path of God; includes military, spiritual, and social forms	Primary justification for armed struggle and martyrdom	Sanctions military and suicide operations
Takfir	Excommunication; declaring someone an unbeliever or apostate	Used expansively to declare rivals and governments as apostates	Facilitates ideological purity through lethal exclusion
Tawhid	Absolute oneness and uniqueness of God in all aspects	Foundational principle; underpins all other beliefs	Central doctrine for all religious messaging

Al-wala' wal-bara'	Loyalty to believers and disavowal of disbelievers	Defines loyalty within the group and hostility toward outsiders	Justifies strict internal loyalty and brutality against outsiders
Hudud	Fixed punishments in Islamic law for crimes like theft or adultery	Implemented to instill fear and control, performing legitimization	Used to display legitimization and demonstrate state-like functions
Jahiliyya	Ignorance of divine guidance; used to describe un-Islamic systems	Delegitimizes secularism and Western-style governance	Narrative for overthrowing existing regimes
Hakimiyya	Sovereignty belongs to God alone, not humans or man-made laws	Mandates rejection of democracy and secular law	Justify its extremist governance
Shari'a	Divine law revealed in Islam; includes ethical and legal guidance	Used to assert legitimacy of DAESH's rule	Validates governance
Istishhad	Martyrdom; often refers to suicide operations in jihadist ideology	Glorifies suicide attacks as religiously mandated	Promotes and rewards martyrdom as divine service
Shahid	A martyr; one who dies in the path of God, especially in jihad	Symbol of ultimate devotion and sacrifice	Used to glorify suicide attackers and inspire recruits
Shuhada	Plural of shahid; martyrs in Islamic tradition	Used collectively to sanctify DAESH's dead fighters	Builds a heroic narrative around fallen members
Hijrah	Migration for religious purposes, especially to Islamic lands	Essential for recruitment and symbolic of loyalty	Encourages foreign fighter migration to DAESH territory
Muhajir	An individual who migrates for religious reasons (hijrah)	Essential for recruitment and symbolic of loyalty	Incite recruitment of foreign fighter movement
Muhajirin	Plural of muhajir; religious migrants to DAESH territory	Essential for recruitment and symbolic of loyalty	Incite recruitment of foreign fighter movement
Bay'ah	Oath of allegiance to a leader, traditionally a caliph	Central to internal unity and command structure	Ensures command loyalty and deters defection
Khilafah	Islamic Caliphate; a unified political-religious state under Shari'a	Core political goal of DAESH propaganda	Legitimizes statehood and religious authority
Khalifah	Caliph; the leader of the Islamic State claiming religious and political authority	Personification of DAESH's claimed authority	Used to centralize control and demand allegiance

Taghut	False deity or tyrant; anyone who usurps God's authority	Framework to identify and attack rival authorities	Tool for mass excommunication and justification of attacks on regional states
Tawaghit	Plural of taghut; false gods or tyrannical rulers	Framework to identify and attack rival authorities	Tool for mass excommunication and justification of attacks on regional states
Mujahid	Individual who fights in the cause of Allah	Ideal Muslim archetype in DAESH narratives	Used in recruitment and legitimization of armed jihad
Mujahidin	Plural of mujahid; those who engage in jihad	Heroes of DAESH propaganda; active defenders of the faith	Mobilizes fighters and glorifies armed resistance
Imamah	Leadership or authority, especially over the Muslim community	Justifies political leadership under divine mandate	Supports DAESH's claim to rule as successors to prophetic tradition
Jama'ah	Community or group of Muslims united in faith and leadership	Reinforces communal obedience and ideological cohesion	Deters dissent by appealing to collective unity
Ummah	Global community of Muslims	Used to foster a sense of universal belonging and urgency	Appeals to Muslim solidarity across national borders
Rafidi	Derogatory term for Shi'a Muslims; implies rejection of true Islam	Demonizes Shi'a sects as heretical enemies	Justifies sectarian violence
Rafidah	Plural of Rafidi; pejorative for Shi'a Muslims	Central to anti-Shi'a propaganda	Frames intra-Muslim violence as a religious obligation
Muwahhid	One who practices tawhid (monotheism) purely	Moral ideal of pure Islamic believer	Used to distinguish true believers from apostates
Muwahhidin	Plural of muwahhid; pure monotheists	Idealized group identity of DAESH members	Used to distinguish true believers from apostates
Nifaq	Hypocrisy; pretending to be a believer while hiding disbelief	Used to discredit political opponents or religious moderates	Enables takfir against "internal traitors"
Munafiq	Hypocrite; one who pretends to be Muslim but harbors disbelief	Delegitimizes Muslims not aligned with DAESH	Justifies targeting of so-called false Muslims

Munafiqin	Plural of munafiq; hypocrites	Broadens the enemy category within the Muslim world	Supports intra-faith purges and executions
Fitnah	Trial, discord, or temptation; often used to describe destabilizing influences	Justifies suppression of dissent and deviation	Grounds violent crackdowns as protective measures
Ribat	Guarding the frontiers of Islam; spiritual and physical vigilance	Instrumental for protection of captured territories	Encourages martyrdom and frontier warfare
Bid'ah	Religious innovation; practice not rooted in authentic Islam	Delegitimizes rival sects and religious authorities	Used to justify elimination of non-Salafi practices
Qital	Armed combat or killing in the path of Allah	Distinct from general jihad; emphasizes physical violence	Used to frame military operations as sacred acts

Note. This lexicon presents 49 core ideological concepts that underpin DAESH's worldview. Each entry includes a definition, its function within DAESH's ideological framework, and the operational implications of how the group applies the concept in practice.

6. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

DAESH's propaganda magazines—Dabiq, Rumiya, and Voice of Khurasan—hold considerable ideological significance, functioning as strategic means to further the group's narratives. To illustrate this, I examined a total of 57 issues including 1,508 pages from Dabiq and Rumiya and 1,527 pages from Voice of Khurasan, amounting to a combined total of 3,035 pages. The scope and scale of this dataset are significant for several reasons. First, this extensive textual base ensures a high degree of representativeness and longitudinal depth, allowing the study to trace systematic patterns of ideological adaptation across different time periods and regional contexts. Second, working with a large, full-text dataset enables a rigorous application of the lexicon-based method, which requires a wide sample to identify recurring key terms, shifts in frequency, and evolving usage across publications. The size of the dataset enhances the credibility of both the content and discourse analysis. Finally, few studies in the literature engage with DAESH's propaganda in such systematic, comparative, and comprehensive fashion. Most existing works either focus on specific regions or singular publications. This thesis, by contrast, provides a cross-regional and cross-temporal analysis based on a robust empirical foundation, offering new insights into the strategic use of ideology by DAESH.

6.1 Analysis

Dabiq is named after a town in northern Syria that, according to a hadith frequently cited by DAESH, is prophesied to be the site of an apocalyptic battle between Muslim and Crusader forces. This reference is visibly featured in early issues of the magazine through a quotation from Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi. He proclaimed in a sermon that "the spark has been lit here in Iraq, and its heat will continue to intensify until it burns

the crusader armies in Dabiq.”¹⁹ DAESH has been employing the hadith for a couple of strategic purposes. First, it creates a sense of religious obligation among potential recruits and helps DAESH to recruit fighters seeking meaning and identity. Second, it helps DAESH to position itself not just as a political entity but as the executor of divine will and advance its legitimacy. Finally, it helps DAESH craft a Manichaean worldview in which the world is divided into camps of belief and unbelief, with no neutral space.

First issue of Dabiq opens with a symbolic map encompassing the Middle East, Türkiye, parts of Africa, and Central Asia. Released after the declaration of the state on June 29, 2014, it was not indicative of actual territorial control but rather an ideological demonstration of DAESH’s aspirations. The map signified the group’s aim to dismantle modern nation-state boundaries—particularly those imposed by the Sykes-Picot Agreement—and to restore the Khilafah.

Following the group’s loss of the actual town of Dabiq in 2016, DAESH launched Rumiyah, the Arabic name for Rome. This has indicated a shift from a local territorial focus to a more transnational outlook of challenging Western hegemony, with Rome symbolizing the heart of Christendom and Western civilization. This represents a deliberate shift in the group’s ideological narrative and geopolitical messaging in compliance with changing realities on the ground after loss of Dabiq. Across various issues of Rumiyah, DAESH repeatedly cites Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, Zarqawi’s successor, pronouncing: “O *muwahhidin*, rejoice, for by Allah we will not rest from our

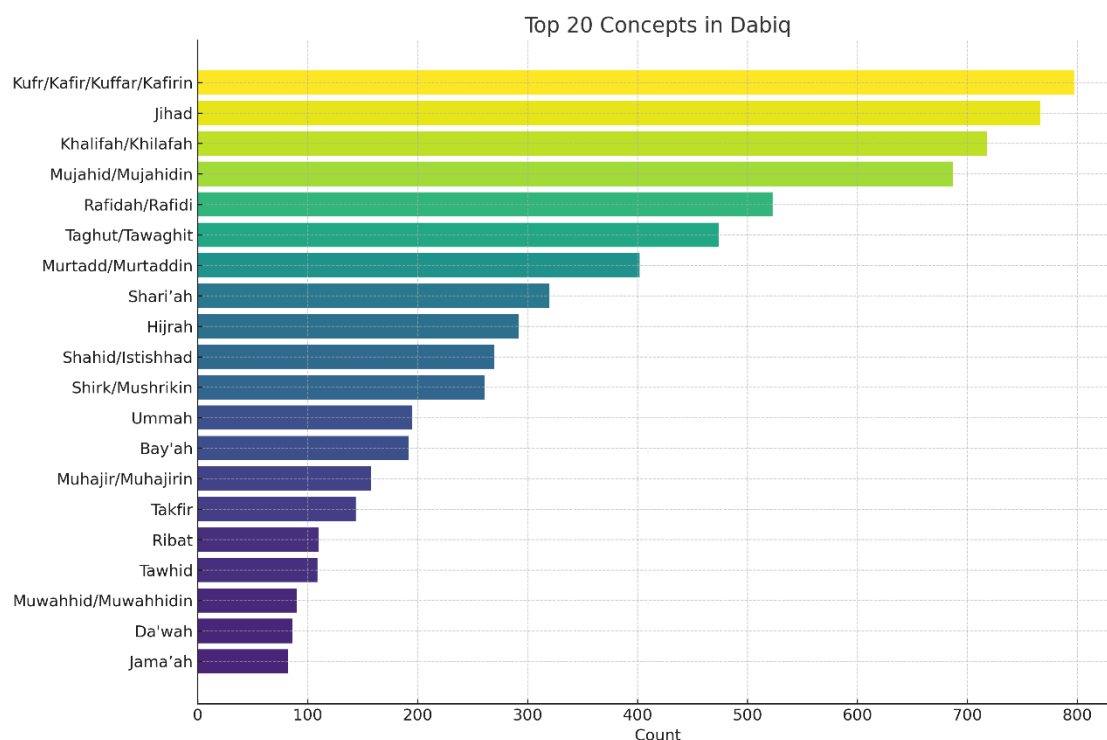
¹⁹ Sermon appears in all issues of Dabiq.

jihad except beneath the olive trees of Rumiya (Rome),”²⁰ recalling the historical memory of the conquest of ancient Rome to justify their violent extremism.

Voice of Khurasan—published by DAESH-Afghanistan refers to the historical region of Khurasan, which spans parts of present-day Afghanistan, Iran, and Central Asia. In early Islamic history, Khurasan holds a significant place as nucleus of Islamic reemergence and expansion. By using this name, DAESH links its local presence to an Islamic historical narrative. Through these titles, DAESH constructs a historical and religious lineage that legitimizes their violent campaigns and expands their ideological appeal across both time and space. The shift from Dabiq and Rumiya to Voice of Khurasan shows DAESH’s adaptation to regional dynamics. After its defeat in Iraq and Syria, DAESH restructured itself into a network of affiliates, each given symbolic autonomy but tied to a common ideological framework.

²⁰ It appears in all issues of Rumiya.

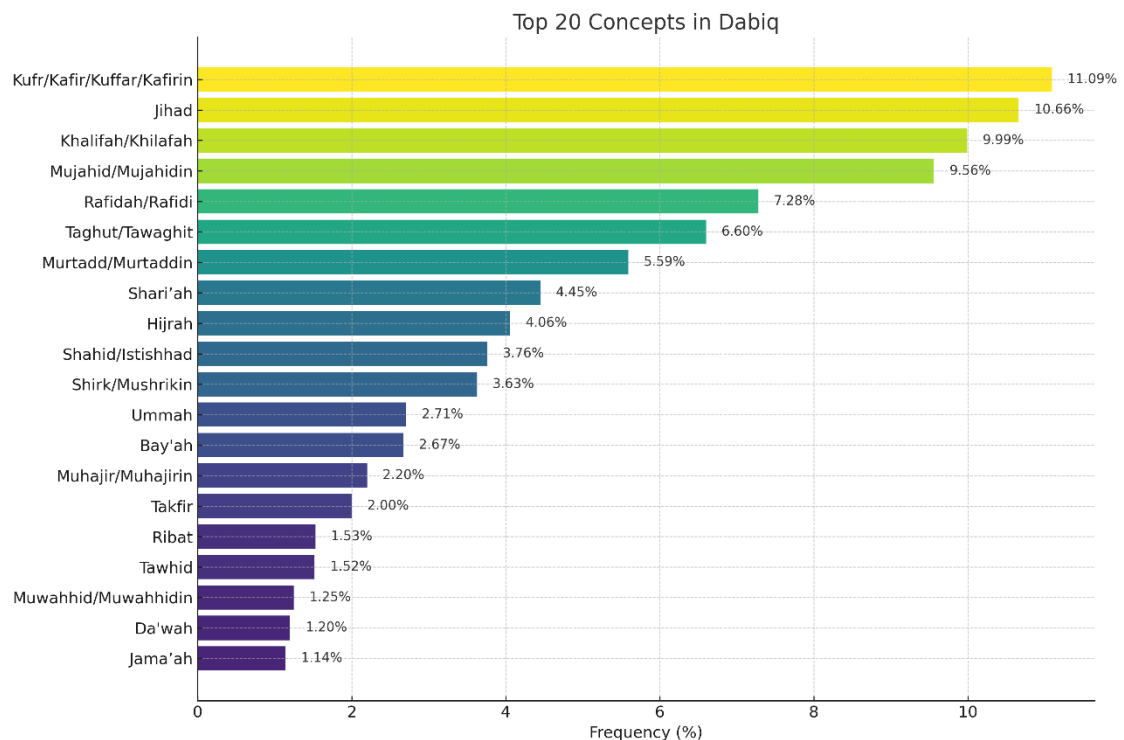
Figure 6.1 *Top 20 Concepts in Dabiq (Count)*



Note. The figure is based on analysis of the total count of 49 terms included in the lexicon. The numbers corresponding to each bar indicate how many times that specific term appeared across all issues of Dabiq.

The most frequently occurring terms in three magazines are *kufr* (disbelief), *kafir* (disbeliever), *kuffar* (disbelievers) and *kafirin* (disbelievers) (see all figures). The repeated usage of unbelief-related words serves to reduce complex political, religious, and sectarian dimensions into a binary dichotomy: believers versus disbelievers. It helps DAESH to dehumanize opponents, remove any ethical constraints on violence and make all parties opposing DAESH ideology as legitimate targets. It also reflects DAESH's heavy reliance on *takfir*, the practice of declaring other Muslims apostates. They reveal DAESH's reliance on binary identity construction. Constant reference to unbelief divides world into two opposing camps: pure monotheists and a mass of disbelievers.

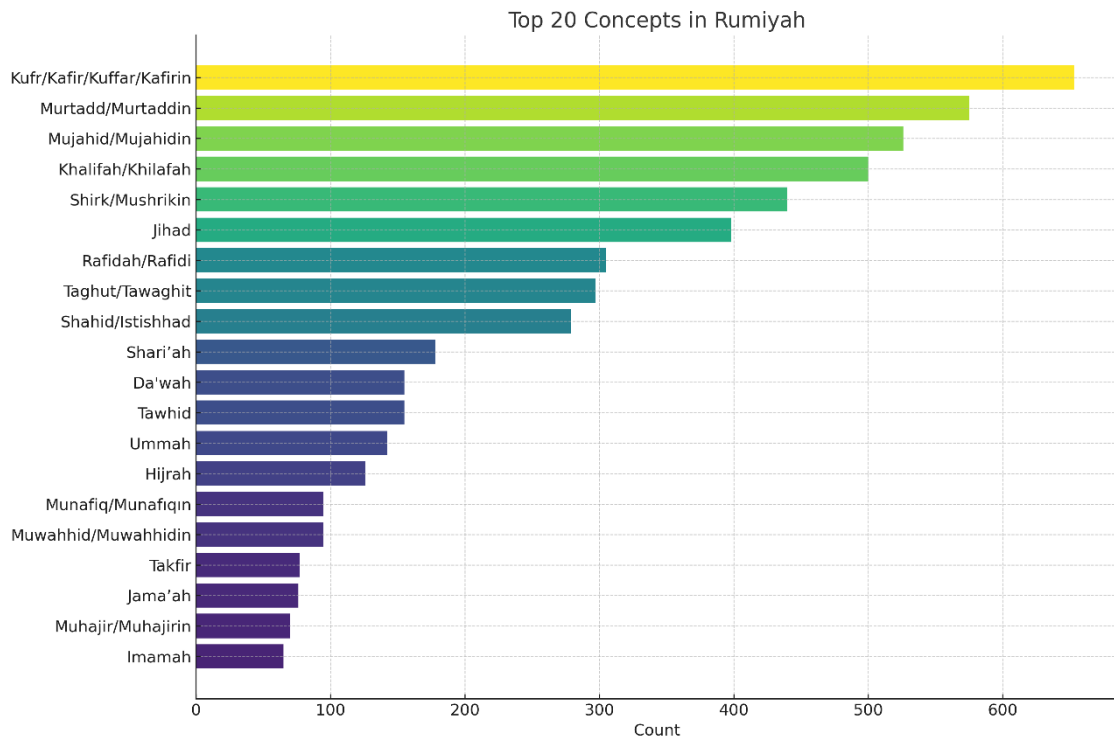
Figure 6.2 *Top 20 Concepts in Dabiq (Frequency)*



Note. The figure is based on analysis of the total frequency of 49 terms included in the lexicon. The percentage next to each concept indicates its proportion within the total of 7,186 term occurrences found in Dabiq.

Similarly, terms such as *jihad* (struggle or striving), *mujahid* (one who engages in jihad), *mujahidin* (those who engage in jihad), *shahid* (martyr) and *istishhad* (martyrdom) appear in three magazines (see all figures). DAESH underscores the glorification of armed struggle and martyrdom by employing these concepts. They help DAESH to justify its violence and radicalize potential fighters and encourage their direct participation in violence. In Voice of Khurasan, the frequent pairing of national identifiers such as Tajik, Uzbek, Pakistani, and Afghan with the term *mujahidin* suggests a deliberate emphasis on DAESH's expanding recruitment efforts across these national groups. Terms *shahid* and *istishhad* employed by DAESH to link act of dying in battle or suicide operations with eternal reward, reinforcing a culture of glorified self-sacrifice.

Figure 6.3 *Top 20 Concepts in Rumiyah (Count)*

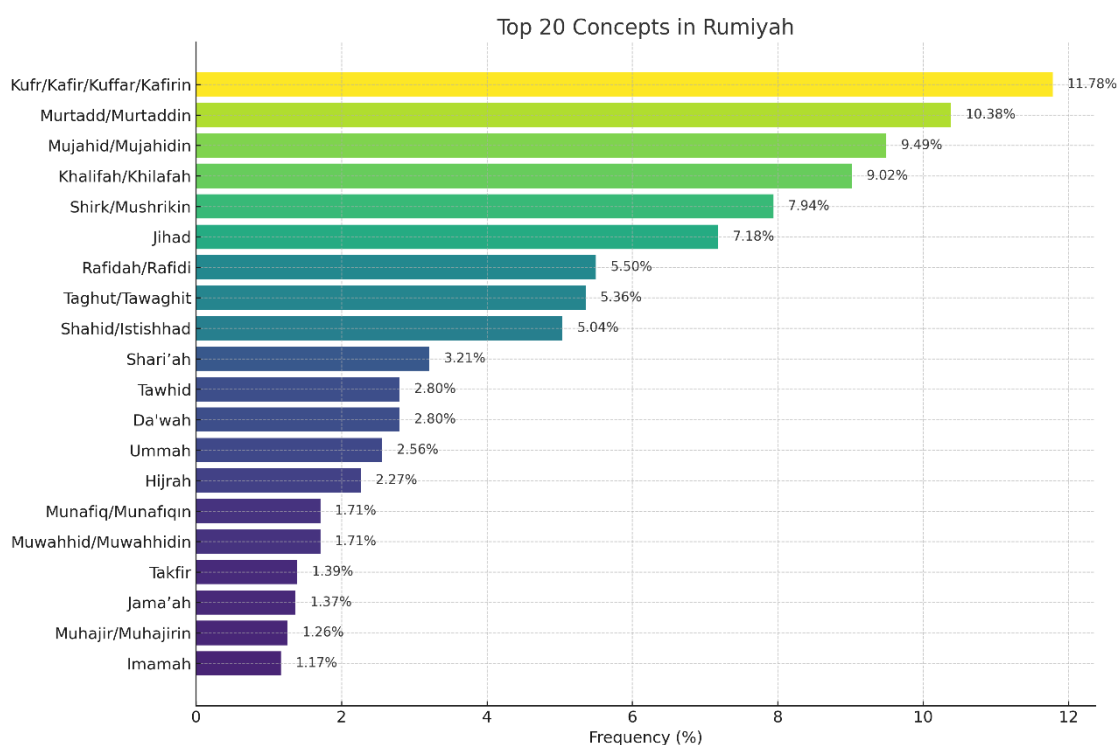


Note. The figure is based on analysis of the total count of 49 terms included in the lexicon. The numbers corresponding to each bar indicate how many times that specific term appeared across all issues of Rumiyah.

Terms such as *khilafah* (caliphate), *khalifah* (caliph) and *shari'a* (Islamic law) appears across three magazines (see all figures). They indicate DAESH's enduring commitment to establishing a state governed by divine law. In Dabiq, the terms *khalifah* and *khilafah* served as fundamental pillars of legitimacy as a result of territorial expansion and declaration of state in 2014. As the group lost territory, Rumiyah retained the terms but redefined the caliphate less as a political entity and more as a global obligation for all Muslims. Similarly, terms have been used symbolically in Voice of Khurasan, using it to assert ideological superiority over regional rivals such as the Taliban, rather than as a state-building blueprint. *Shari'ah* follows a similar pattern. In Dabiq, it legitimizes DAESH's governance and implementation of *hudud* (fixed punishments for certain crimes), portraying the group as an executor of divine justice. In Rumiyah and Voice of

Khurasan, with administrative functions no longer feasible, *shari'ah* is reframed as a personal obligation and legal justification for violence. In contrast, the concept of *bay'ah* (allegiance) appears predominantly in Dabiq (see Figure 6.1), where it is emphasized as a crucial mechanism for asserting the caliph's authority and unifying global jihadist groups under DAESH leadership. However, in Rumiya and Voice of Khurasan, *bay'ah* is notably absent (see Figures 6.3 and 6.5), reflecting the group's strategic shift following the collapse of its central leadership. As DAESH lost its territorial control, *bay'ah* has become less relevant in its discourse.

Figure 6.4 *Top 20 Concepts in Rumiya (Frequency)*



Note. The figure is based on analysis of the total frequency of 49 terms included in the lexicon. The percentage next to each concept indicates its proportion within the total of 5,541 term occurrences found in Rumiya.

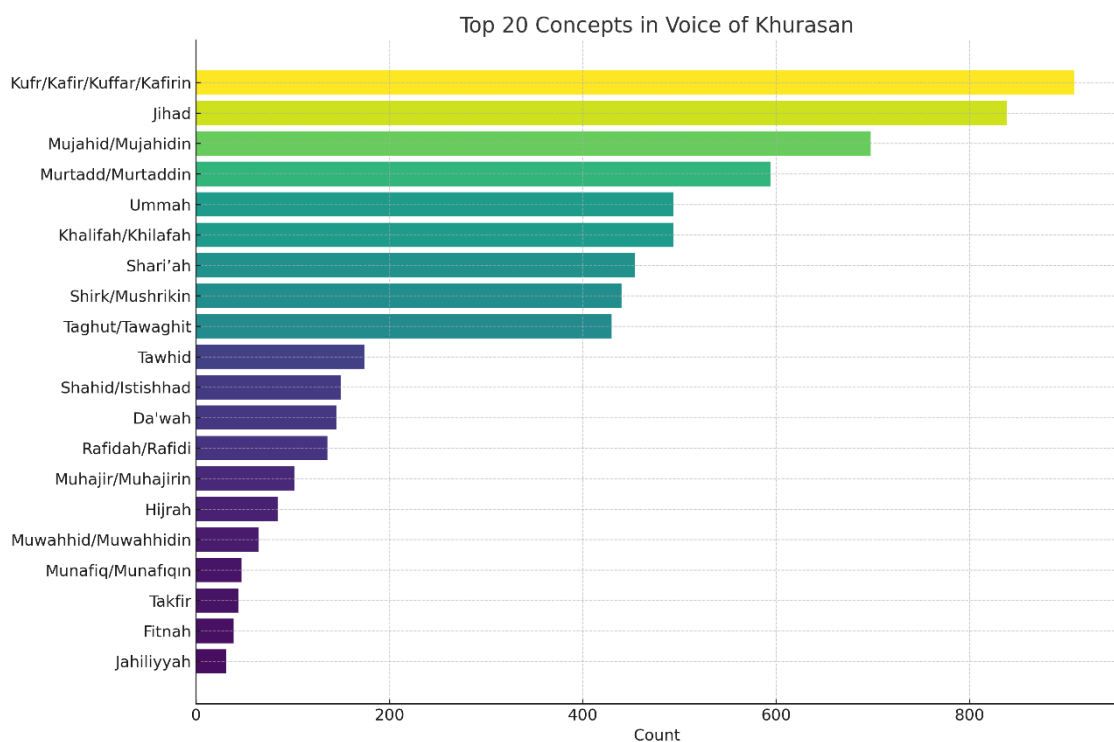
In Dabiq and Rumiya, terms *rafidah* and *rafidi*—derogatory terms for Shi'a Muslims—is used prominently to construct a sectarian narrative that frames the war in Iraq and Syria as a cosmic struggle between Sunni Islam and apostate Shi'ism. Iran,

Hezbollah, Houthis and the Assad regime are labeled as *rafidah* forces, and the concept is deployed to incite hatred and justify mass violence against Shi'a civilians and militias. Similarly, DAESH has used concepts of *murtad* (apostate) and *murtaddin* (apostates) to target Sunni rivals such as the Free Syrian Army and Muslim Brotherhood, countries such as Iraq, Türkiye, Egypt, Qatar, Jordan, tribal leaders and anyone perceived as collaborating with “crusader” forces or rejecting DAESH’s authority such as the terrorist organization PKK/PYD/YPG. In the last issues of Rumiya, DAESH has also started to label Taliban, Afghanistan, Pakistan as *murtaddin*. In Voice of Khurasan, these concepts are again prominent but play more localized roles. The term *murtadd* is frequently used to vilify Taliban, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and rival terrorist groups, portraying them as apostates for their nationalist goals, engagement with democracy, or failure to implement true *shari’ah*. The *rafidah* label is employed to target Iran and the Hazara community in Afghanistan, reinforcing anti-Shi’a sectarianism. In this context, both terms are used to justify sectarian violence, solidify DAESH’s position as the only legitimate Islamic actor in the region, and delegitimize both state and insurgent rivals.

The terms *shirk* (polytheism) and *mushrikin* (polytheists) are also consistently used across Dabiq, Rumiya, and Voice of Khurasan (see all figures) to label DAESH’s enemies—ranging from Shia Muslims and secular leaders to rival groups—as violators of monotheism, thus justifying *takfir* and violence. In Dabiq, these terms support DAESH’s state-building narrative, while Voice of Khurasan applies them to regional adversaries like Taliban and Pakistan. For instance, Taliban has been consistently labelled in Voice of Khurasan as “guardian of *shirk*.” In Dabiq, DAESH continuously publish its attacks on tombs and shrines which it labels as indication of *shirk*. These publications serve both ideological and strategic purposes. Attacks are presented as enforcing *tawhid*

and exterminating innovations (*bid'ah*) from Islam. First, it helps DAESH to assert its legitimacy against rivals such as Taliban or Al-Qaeda who do not prioritize such destruction. Second, targeting shrines—especially Shia or Sufi—provokes sectarian violence and helps DAESH to destabilize state authority and regional stability and recruit more fighters.

Figure 6.5 *Top 20 Concepts in Voice of Khurasan (Count)*



Note. The figure is based on analysis of the total count of 49 terms included in the lexicon. The numbers corresponding to each bar indicate how many times that specific term appeared across all issues of *Voice of Khurasan*.

Terms *taghut* (false god or tyrannical ruler) and *tawaghit* (false gods or tyrannical rulers) consistently appear across *Dabiq*, *Rumiyah*, and *Voice of Khurasan* (see all figures). Their repeated reappearance demonstrates DAESH's strategy to delegitimize secular and rival regional countries and justify rebellion against systems deemed un-Islamic. In *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*, these terms are primarily directed at Western governments, Arab regimes, and international institutions, defining them as false deities

that usurp the sovereignty of God. This articulation serves to justify armed resistance not only against non-Muslims but also against Muslim rulers who do not implement DAESH's version of *shari'a*. For instance, Mohamed Morsi, the former president of Egypt and a figure associated with moderate Islam, has been repeatedly labelled as *taghut* in Dabiq and Rumiya. By using this term, DAESH presents Morsi not merely as a political opponent but as a symbol of apostasy and an illegitimate ruler. This rhetorical strategy serves to delegitimize democracy, nationalism and secularism and reinforce DAESH's binary worldview, which rejects any political system not based on their interpretation of Islamic law. In Voice of Khurasan, the term is regionalized and repurposed for sectarian rivalry and regional delegitimization. It is frequently used to denounce Taliban, Pakistani government, and Iranian-backed actors, portraying them as hypocritical regimes that have abandoned true Islam. China, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have been also labelled as *taghut* regimes in Voice of Khurasan. Across all three publications, the concept remains ideologically rigid but rhetorically flexible, allowing DAESH to maintain ideological consistency while adapting its propaganda to diverse strategic environments and target audiences.

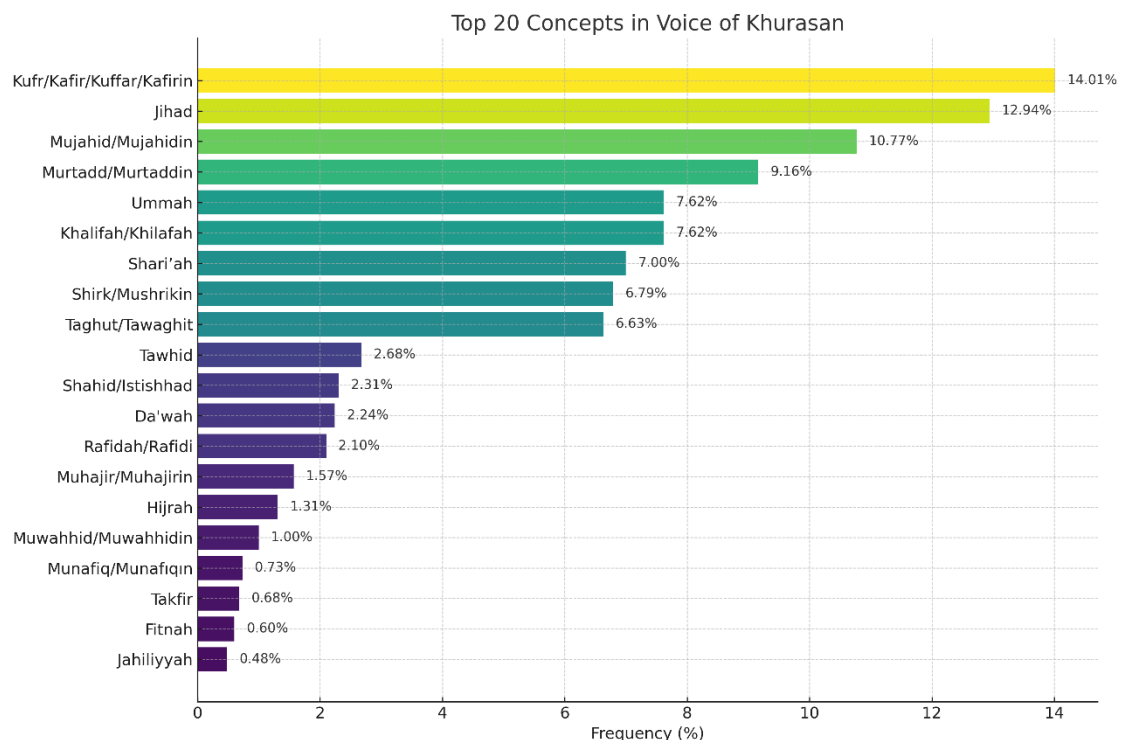
The concepts of *hijrah* (migration), *muhajir* (migrant), and *muhajirin* (migrants) appear consistently in Dabiq, Rumiya, and Voice of Khurasan (see all figures), reflecting DAESH's ongoing attempt to sacralize migration to its territories as both a religious obligation and a parade into the ranks of the mujahidin. In contrast, the concept of *ribat* (guarding frontiers), which appears prominently in Dabiq but is largely absent in the later magazines, underscores a shift in DAESH's strategic emphasis from territorial defence and consolidation to decentralized and mobile insurgency.

In Dabiq, *hijrah* is portrayed as a divine duty. The term is used extensively to legitimize the act of moving to territories controlled by DAESH, urging Muslims—especially from the West—to participate the caliphate. Closely related are the terms *muhajir* and *muhajirin*, used to describe those who perform *hijrah*. The repeated appearance of these terms serves DAESH to recruit fighters. In Rumiya, these concepts are still present but used with less strategic weight. As DAESH began losing territory, Rumiya increasingly emphasized action over migration. While *hijrah* remains an ideal, the focus shifts to localized operations and instructing sympathizers to “stay where you are” and carry out attacks in Western countries. The *muhajirin* are still glorified, but their role becomes more symbolic than practical. In Voice of Khurasan, *hijrah* and *muhajirin* are recalibrated in conformity with regional dynamics. The magazine calls on Muslims, particularly in South and Central Asia, to migrate to the Khurasan front, portraying it as the new arena for *jihad* after the fall of the caliphate in Syria and Iraq. In one of issues of Voice of Khurasan, it is emphasized that “door of *hijrah* to the central *Khilafah* in Iraq and Sham was closed, so the *muhajirin* from India, Bangladesh, and China started making *hijrah* to Khurasan.” It is also stated that “On this basis, the Tajiks, Uzbeks, Uyghurs, and sincere slaves of Allah from different races, languages, and colors migrated to the land of Khurasan.” This illustrates DAESH’s effort to relocate the narrative of emigration from the Middle East to Afghanistan, ensuring ideological continuity even as geographic priorities shift.

In contrast, the concept of *ribat*, which refers to guarding the frontlines in defense of Islam, is prominent in Dabiq (see Figure 6.1) but largely absent in Rumiya and Voice of Khurasan (see Figures 6.3 and 6.5). In Dabiq, *ribat* is tied to the vision of state-building and territorial consolidation, particularly in Iraq and Syria. Fighters are encouraged to

defend DAESH's borders as a sacred duty, echoing of early Islamic frontier wars. However, as DAESH lost control over fixed territory, the practicality and symbolic value of *ribat* diminished. The fading of *ribat* reflects a pragmatic adaptation to territorial loss and shifting political and military realities.

Figure 6.6 *Top 20 Concepts in Voice of Khurasan (Frequency)*



Note. The figure is based on analysis of the total frequency of 49 terms included in the lexicon. The percentage next to each concept indicates its proportion within the total of 6,482 term occurrences found in Rumiyyah.

The concepts of *tawhid* (monotheism), *muwahhid* (monotheist), *muwahhidin* (monotheists) and *takfir* (excommunication) appear consistently across Dabiq, Rumiyyah, and Voice of Khurasan (see all figures), though their function and emphasis evolve over time. In Dabiq and Rumiyyah, *tawhid* serve as an all-encompassing doctrine that promotes other concepts, while *muwahhidin* are portrayed as the pure monotheists who uphold this vision. *Takfir* is used systematically to declare Shia, secular rulers, and rival Islamist groups as apostates. In Voice of Khurasan, the concepts are redirected toward local

dynamics—*tawhid* and *muwahhidin* affirm DAESH's religious legitimacy over groups like Taliban, while *takfir* is implicitly applied to delegitimize these rivals. Across all three, these terms are not only theological tokens, but strategic tools used to construct identity, justify violence, and assert ideological superiority.

The concepts of *da'wah* (call) and *jama'ah* (Islamic community) appear across Dabiq and Rumiya (see Figures 6.1 and 6.3) as part of DAESH's effort to present itself as the legitimate Islamic community, not just a militant group. In Dabiq and Rumiya, *da'wah* emphasizes the caliphate's religious duty to guide Muslims and legitimize its governance, while *jama'ah* reinforces DAESH as the only true Islamic collective. Though less frequent than other terms, both concepts help position DAESH as a comprehensive religious-political authority. The concept of *ummah* (global community of Muslims) appears in all three magazines but is narrowly defined—only those who support DAESH are seen as part of the true Muslim community.

The appearance of *munaḥiq* (hypocrite) and *munaḥiqin* (hypocrites) in Rumiya and Voice of Khurasan (see Figures 6.3 and 6.5), but not in Dabiq (see Figure 6.1), reflects DAESH's shift from targeting external enemies to preserving internal loyalty. In Rumiya, the term is used to condemn Muslims who reject DAESH's ideology, portraying them as traitors. In Voice of Khurasan, it targets rivals like the Taliban, accusing them of hypocrisy for compromising with democracy.

The concept of *imamah* (leadership) appears in Dabiq (the term appeared 49 times in the magazine although it is not seen in the Figure 6.1) and Rumiya to legitimize DAESH's claim to global Islamic leadership, especially under Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. In Dabiq, it supports the caliphate's political authority, while Rumiya reaffirms this claim despite territorial losses. Its absence in Voice of Khurasan reflects that focus moves from

global leadership to local insurgency, prioritizing regional legitimacy. The appearance of *fitnah* (strife or conflict) in Voice of Khurasan (see Figure 6.5), but not in Dabiq or Rumiyah (see Figures 6.1 and 6.3), reflects DAESH's focus on local dynamics in the Khurasan region. It used to portray rivals like the Taliban and regional systems as sources of division (*fitnah*).

6.2 Discussion

DAESH continues to operate in many parts of the world through a network of affiliates spanning regions such as Africa, South Asia and Central Asia. These affiliates still share same ideological principles with DAESH-Core although it lost its territories in Syria and Iraq. What sustains DAESH's appeal across these diverse regions even after its defeat? Ideology plays a central role in explaining this. DAESH pursue political, social and religious objectives underpinned by ideology. It serves as a unifying framework that binds these objectives. It not solely justifies violence but also informs strategy, legitimizes authority and strengthens collective identity. DAESH defines enemies, justifies its actions, offers an alternative governance system through its ideology. This ideological vision provides both a source of inspiration and a basis for action aimed at acquiring tangible and intangible benefits. Ideology also functions as a mechanism of social control, identity formation and recruitment, ensuring unification of groups in different regions under the banner of DAESH. Ideology serves as a significant tool to transform structural conditions and grievances such as political marginalization, sectarian conflict or foreign occupation into narratives of resistance, as well. Therefore, it triggers mobilization of new recruits and maintains survival of DAESH. Taken together, these factors help explain how DAESH has managed to sustain its presence across various regions.

Although ideology plays a significant role in DAESH's presence around the world, it also changes and adapts. Ideology, as a dynamic term, serves not only as a source of legitimacy and identity but also as a strategic instrument of change and adaptation. DAESH's ideology has evolved over time, shaped by changing political, military and regional dynamics. The findings above demonstrate how DAESH's ideological discourse has undergone significant adaptation in response to changing political and military realities in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan. Since emphasis on central themes such as *kufr*, *jihad*, *khalifah*, *taghut*, *murtadd*, *hijrah*, *shirk* and *rafidah* has continued across magazines, their meanings and attributes have shifted significantly over time. These shifts correspond closely with the transforming political and military realities.

This adaptation aligns with rational actor perspective, which interprets ideological shifts as calculated responses to changing conditions. This perspective offers us a valuable point of view to examine DAESH's ideological transformation and adaptive behavior. It does not consider terrorist violence as offspring of irrational hatred or fanaticism, but as a strategic instrument employed by weak actors to advance its interests. DAESH acts in accordance with its goals intended to acquire the most beneficial outcome. Here benefits include both tangible and intangible components as well as short-term and long-term profits. For example, DAESH's sustained attacks against state institutions, security forces and civilians—including high-profile operations in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan—although brutal, are often guided by rational objectives. These include efforts to enhance legitimacy, attract media attention, provoke enemies and deter rival groups. DAESH's ability to reframe its ideological discourse—shifting from state-building rhetoric in Dabiq to the insurgent narratives in Voice of Khurasan—also indicates its strategic and pragmatic use of ideology as a tool for endurance. This

evolution can be interpreted not as an abandonment of core beliefs but as a strategic recalibration to maximize survival, legitimacy, and recruitment under shifting conditions.

In the early phases of territorial expansion in Iraq and Syria, the emphasis on terms like *khilafah*, *shari'ah*, *ribat*, and *bay'ah* illustrates the group's need to consolidate power, attract fighters, and legitimize governance. This was consistent with DAESH's control of key cities like Mosul, where it established courts, police, and tax systems. Its 2014 conquest of Sinjar and genocidal campaign against the Yazidis also aligned with this discourse, where labeling opponents as *kuffar*, *rafidah*, or *murtaddin* eliminated moral constraints on violence. Emphasis on terms such as *rafidah*, *rafidi* and *shirk* has helped DAESH to justify sectarian violence. For instance, DAESH's attacks on shrines, tombs, burial sites of saints, and other religious sites demonstrate how its ideological propaganda aligns with on-the-ground realities and how it strategically leverages such actions to reinforce ideological narratives and political objectives.

Following its territorial setbacks after 2016, DAESH responded by launching *Rumiyah*, signaling a shift from state-building to global insurgency. *Rumiyah* reflects DAESH's ideological adaptation in response to territorial decline marking a shift from the state-building narrative to an insurgent-focused discourse. *Rumiyah* aimed to sustain global outreach and inspire lone-actor attacks. While maintaining core ideological themes like *takfir*, *shirk*, and *jihad*, the magazine prioritized operational guidance and sectarian instigation, especially against Shia and Sufi communities.

The emergence of *Voice of Khurasan* demonstrates DAESH's further strategic adaptation. After its defeat in Syria and Iraq, the organization redirected its ideological and operational efforts to Afghanistan, where a new affiliate— DAESH Afghanistan—harnessed regional grievances and rivalries. The continued use of terms like *taghut* and

murtaddin shows DAESH's localized sectarian logic, targeting groups such as Taliban, Pakistani security forces, and local Shi'a communities.

DAESH's ideological adaptations demonstrates its calculated decisions to survive in the face of resource constraints and territorial loss. Variation in concepts across *Dabiq*, *Rumiyah*, and *Voice of Khurasan* suggests that DAESH's flexible strategies are ground in cost-benefit calculation. The core objective, which is establishing and legitimizing a state, remains constant, while the rhetoric adjusts according to time, space and audience. DAESH's capacity for strategic modification also supports the rational actor perspective. Its shifts—severing ties with Al-Qaeda, reconfiguring its organizational structure and adopting an affiliate-based organization—show calculated actions as a result of internal and external changes. DAESH's bureaucratic governance in captured territories, use of local loyalty pledges (*bay'ah*), and propaganda also illustrate this. Even the sectarian violence committed by DAESH makes sense from a rationalist perspective. Applying Fearon's issue indivisibility and commitment problem, DAESH's framing of Shi'a Muslims as apostates may not only reflect genuine theological positions but also serve a strategic purpose: to delegitimize rival political actors (e.g., Iraqi government), and consolidate Sunni identity. Therefore, DAESH's ideology is a strategic asset that can be used flexibly to recruit, justify, provoke, and outbid rather than a fixed doctrine.

The ideological transformations identified in this thesis—traced through DAESH's propaganda magazines—are not merely discursive but reflect tangible changes in the group's strategic behavior and on the ground realities. A comparative analysis of DAESH's attacks reveals a clear alignment between its evolving ideological rhetoric and its shifting operational focus.

For instance, in *Dabiq* (2014–2016), which corresponds to DAESH’s territorial peak in Iraq and Syria, the propaganda emphasized state-building, migration and legitimacy. This ideological discourse aligned with DAESH’s ground strategy: it governed territory, collected taxes, imposed sharia, and carried out mass violence to assert control. The frequent targeting of governments and rival terrorist groups in this period, particularly in Mosul, Raqqa, and Deir ez-Zor, reflected the ideological insistence on takfir.

By contrast, *Rumiyah* (2016–2017) emerged as DAESH began to lose territorial control. Here, the discourse shifted to decentralized violence, promoting suicide operations and lone-wolf attacks. This was reflected on the ground through attacks like the 2016 Berlin Christmas Market attack and the 2017 London Bridge stabbing, which were inspired by calls in *Rumiyah* for low-cost, high-impact operations against civilian “crusader” targets. Ideologically, this marked a shift from state-building to sustaining relevance through global terrorist violence—a strategic recalibration supported by the changing military and political conditions.

In *Voice of Khurasan* (2020–present), DAESH’s discourse becomes distinctly localized, with emphasis on ethno-sectarian framing, murtad regimes, and the targeting of Shia Muslims and Taliban authorities. This aligns with its operational posture in Afghanistan and Central Asia, where DAESH-Afghanistan has conducted high-profile attacks such as the August 2021 Kabul Airport bombing, the March 2024 Moscow concert hall attack and regular attacks on Shia Hazara communities in Kabul and Mazar-i-Sharif.

These examples illustrate that the shifts in ideological emphasis documented in the magazines are not merely propagandistic or stylistic changes but are in fact tightly interwoven with DAESH’s strategic adaptations to evolving geopolitical and military

contexts. Thus, the findings of this thesis are empirically supported by the group's operational conduct across regions and periods.

In summary, DAESH's ideological discourse reveals both solidity and flexibility in application. The group has adeptly recalibrated its ideology to resonate with distinct political environments: projecting statehood in Iraq and Syria, encouraging lone-wolf attacks in the West, and mobilizing sectarian insurgency in Afghanistan. These shifts illustrate how a terrorist organization can act rationally—not by moderating its goals, but by reframing its ideology to survive and expand in the face of changing political realities.

7. CONCLUSION

This thesis examines how DAESH has ideologically adapted and changed across time and space, focusing on a comparative analysis of magazines—Dabiq, Rumiya, and Voice of Khurasan. By analyzing the frequency and framing of key ideological concepts, the study has shown that DAESH's discourse is marked by both theological rigidity and strategic flexibility. Rational actor perspective has been central to this analysis since its application shows that these ideological shifts are not inconsistent but calculated adaptations to evolving political realities in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan.

The early issues of Dabiq represent DAESH's attempt to construct a state-centric vision rooted in duality, religious obligation, sectarianism and anti-Westernism. The group's reliance on terms like *khilafah*, *shari'ah*, *ribat*, and *bay'ah* illustrates its strategy of legitimizing its authority and governance during its territorial peak. Following military setbacks and the loss of Dabiq in 2016, DAESH recalibrated its ideological messaging through Rumiya, emphasizing decentralized violence, individual duty, and ideological purity over centralized leadership. Although core concepts have appeared in Rumiya, they attribute a shift from state-building to global insurgency.

Voice of Khurasan represents DAESH's strategic relocation to Afghanistan and its adaptation to a new geopolitical environment. Here, DAESH applies its core concepts such as *jihad*, *takfir*, *tawhid*, *murtadd*, and *taghut* to a local context, targeting rivals such as Taliban, Pakistan and Shi'a communities. The prominence of terms like *fitnah*, absent in earlier publications, further reflects DAESH's rhetorical shift toward delegitimizing Islamist competitors and monopolizing the claim to religious legitimacy in South and Central Asia.

From the rational actor perspective, these shifts illustrate DAESH's pragmatic approach to ideological communication. Rather than softening its core tenets, it meticulously reassesses and reconfigures them to suit changing dynamics, audiences and operational capacities. Whether calling for *hijrah* to a territorial state, inciting decentralized attacks in the West, or mobilizing insurgents in Afghanistan, DAESH continuously tailors its message to maximize influence and survival.

The ideological shifts examined in this thesis—analyzed through DAESH's propaganda magazines—reflect not only discursive changes but also concrete transformations in the group's strategic behavior and battlefield tactics. A comparative look at DAESH's attacks shows a clear correspondence between its evolving rhetoric and operational priorities.

For example, *Dabiq* (2014–2016), produced during DAESH's territorial zenith in Iraq and Syria, emphasized themes like state-building, migration and legitimacy. This mirrored its on-the-ground strategy: administering territory, enforcing sharia, collecting taxes, and targeting rival groups and governments—particularly in cities like Mosul, Raqqa, and Deir ez-Zor—consistent with its emphasis on takfir.

In contrast, *Rumiyah* (2016–2017) emerged during DAESH's territorial decline and promoted decentralized violence, encouraging suicide attacks and lone-wolf operations. This ideological pivot was reflected in attacks such as the 2016 Berlin Christmas Market and the 2017 London Bridge incident, aligning with the magazine's calls for low-cost, high-impact operations against civilian targets in the West.

Since 2020, *Voice of Khurasan* presents a localized and regionally tailored discourse, focusing on sectarianism, opposition to murtad regimes, and hostility toward the Taliban. These themes align with DAESH's operational focus in Afghanistan and

Central Asia, as seen in the 2021 Kabul Airport bombing, the 2024 Moscow concert hall attack and continued violence against Shia Hazara populations in cities like Kabul and Mazar-i-Sharif.

Together, these cases illustrate that the ideological changes identified in the magazines are not propagandistic but closely tied to DAESH's strategic recalibrations in response to shifting political and military contexts. This alignment reinforces the empirical validity of the thesis findings across regions and timeframes.

This study has shown that ideological adaptation is central to DAESH's resilience. Its ability to retain a coherent ideological framework while dynamically adjusting its narrative to new political and military conditions underscores the importance of treating DAESH as a rational actor. Understanding this adaptive capability is essential not only for interpreting DAESH's past actions but also for anticipating its future direction across different regions.

This insight is significant in terms of effective counterterrorism strategies that can go beyond targeting DAESH's physical infrastructure and address the rational incentives embedded in its evolving ideological extremism. As demonstrated throughout the thesis, DAESH's persistence does not only result from its operational capacity but of its strategic use of ideology as a flexible and adaptive tool. The group's ability to adapt its core concepts in response to shifting political and military realities allows it to maintain coherence and appeal across diverse contexts. Following counterterrorism efforts must account for this ideological fluidity. It is not enough to dismantle DAESH's physical networks; it is also essential to dismantle the discursive frameworks that sustain them. Effective strategies should include counter-narratives and policies that address root causes such as sectarian conflict, political exclusion, and weak governance.

This thesis offers a significant contribution to rationalist theories and ideology literature, terrorism studies, and international relations. First, it enriches rationalist approaches by showing that ideology is used by DAESH in strategic, adaptive ways. Unlike much of the literature that applies rational actor perspectives to tactics, recruitment or target selection, this study extends the lens to ideological discourse, framing ideology as a flexible tool shaped by political and military conditions.

Second, it contributes to terrorism studies through a comparative, longitudinal analysis of DAESH's propaganda across Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, using Dabiq, Rumiyah, and Voice of Khurasan. This approach reveals ideological continuity and adaptation across time and space, challenging views of DAESH's ideology as monolithic. The lexicon-based method also adds analytical depth by systematically tracing concept usage across texts.

Finally, the study advances international relations literature by examining how non-state actors like DAESH engage in discursive statecraft to assert legitimacy and authority. It offers insights into how violent groups reshape concepts like sovereignty and governance through ideological projection. By bridging rationalist and constructivist insights, the thesis informs both academic debates and policy discussions on the role of ideology in shaping terrorist strategies and responses.

Similarly, rising populism and xenophobia in Western countries have been providing fertile ground for grievances which can be exploited by DAESH. Populist rhetorics alienating Muslim communities offers ground for DAESH propaganda. In other words, these exclusionary discourses are not only socially corrosive but also counterproductive as it solidifies the "clash of civilizations" narrative that groups like DAESH deliberately promotes. Concurrently, the rise of violent far-right extremism itself

has increasingly become conducive to terrorism. DAESH often instrumentalizes attacks conducted by far-right terrorists such as mosque shootings and anti-Muslim riots as evidence of Western hostility. This creates a mutually reinforcing cycle of radicalization, where DAESH and far-right terrorism legitimize and feed off each other's rhetoric and violence. In light of these dynamics, counterterrorism efforts must adopt a comprehensive approach that goes beyond conventional security measures, which must address social and political conditions that enable radicalization, Islamophobia and xenophobia.

Looking ahead, DAESH seems to further evolve into a decentralized network of affiliates, leaning heavily on asymmetric warfare, insurgency, and propaganda designed to inspire lone actors. While capture of sizeable territories and the re-establishment of a state may be unlikely in the near term, the ideological principles that support them remain intact and highly adaptive. This picture is exacerbated by several current regional and international crises such as Israel's ongoing violence against Palestinians and its attacks on Iran. These provide DAESH and its affiliates with a potent grievance narrative that can be used to attract fighters and legitimize violence. Similarly, growing instability in the Sahel, political uncertainty in Afghanistan, fragile regimes in Iraq and Syria, and vulnerable governance structures across parts of Africa and Central Asia create fertile ground for DAESH to reassert itself.

Given these considerations, it becomes imperative to underscore the necessity for more sophisticated and impactful counterterrorism strategies merging with traditional and novel methods. Finally, arguments that I underline in this thesis do not seek to justify violence of DAESH, rather, it represents a necessary first step toward eliminating the threat.

REFERENCES

- Abrahms, M. (2008). What terrorists really want: Terrorist motives and counterterrorism strategy. *International Security*, 32(4), 78–105.
<https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2008.32.4.78>
- Afsaruddin, A. (2013). *Striving in the path of God: Jihad and martyrdom in Islamic thought*. Oxford University Press.
- Al-Atawneh, M. (2007). Jihad in contemporary Muslim thought. *The Muslim World*, 97(3), 427–448.
- Al Jazeera (2024). Iran identifies suspected bomb-maker behind twin blasts, arrests 35 people. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/11/iran-identifies-suspected-bomb-maker-behind-twin-blasts-arrests-35-people>
- Al Jazeera (2024). Moscow concert hall attack: Why is ISIL targeting Russia? <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/3/23/moscow-concert-hall-attack-why-is-isil-targeting>
- AP News (2023). Officials commemorate 20th anniversary of deadly attack on UN headquarters in Iraq.
<https://apnews.com/article/5aadf09a55ce752139c4b005f90d5b89>
- Arendt, H. (1951). *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Penguin Books.
- Arendt, H. (1970). *On violence*. Harcourt, Brace & World.
- Asad, T. (2007). *On suicide bombing*. Columbia University Press.
- BBC (2003). Jordan embassy blast inquiry.
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3134145.stm
- Bessner, D., & Stauch, M. (2010). Karl Heinzen and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Terror. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 22(2), 143–176.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09546550903445209>

Bloom, M. (2005). *Dying to kill: The allure of suicide terror*. Columbia University Press.

Bonner, M. (2006). *Jihad in Islamic History: Doctrines and Practice*. Princeton University Press.

Bousquet, A. (2009). *The scientific way of warfare: Order and chaos on the battlefields of modernity*. Columbia University Press.

Bunzel, C. (2015). *From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State*. Brookings Institution.

Calder, N. (1993). Bid'a and the Shari'a. In *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition. Brill.

Calvert, J. (2010). *Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islamism*. Columbia University Press.

CNN (2003). Najaf bombing kills Shiite leader, followers say. <https://edition.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/meast/08/29/sprj.irq.najaf/index.html>

Combs, C. (2017). *Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century*. Routledge.

Commins, D. (2006). *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia*. I.B. Tauris.

Cook, D. (2001). *Understanding Jihad*. University of California Press.

Crenshaw, M. (1991). How terrorism declines. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 3(1), 69–87. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546559108427093>

Crone, P., & Hinds, M. (1986). *God's Caliph: Religious authority in the first centuries of Islam*. Cambridge University Press.

Cronin, A. K. (2006). How Al-Qaida Ends: The Decline and Demise of Terrorist Groups. *International Security*, 31(1), 7–48. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4137538>

De Mesquita, B. B. (2003). *Principles of International Politics: People's Power*,

- Preferences, and Perceptions*. Washington, DC: CQ Press.
- Eagleton, T. (1991). *Ideology: An introduction*. Verso
- Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. Routledge.
- Fanon, F. (1963). *The wretched of the earth*. Grove Press.
- Fearon, J. D. (1995). Rationalist explanations for war. *International Organization*, 49(3), 379–414. [doi:10.1017/S0020818300033324](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300033324)
- Fishman, B. (2016). *The Master Plan: ISIS, al-Qaeda, and the Jihadi Strategy for Final Victory*. Yale University Press.
- Freeden, M. (2003). *Ideology: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press.
- Freeden, M. (1996). *Ideologies and political theory: A conceptual approach*. Oxford University Press.
- Gee, J. P. (2011). *How to Do Discourse Analysis: A Toolkit*. Routledge
- Gerges, F. A. (2011). *The rise and fall of Al-Qaeda*. Oxford University Press
- Gerges, F. A. (2016). *ISIS: A history*. Princeton University Press.
- Giustozzi, A. (2023). *The Islamic State in Khorasan: Afghanistan, Pakistan and the New Central Asian Jihad*. Oxford University Press.
- Gunning, J., & Jackson, R. (2011). What's so “religious” about “religious terrorism”? *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 4(3), 369–388. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2011.623405>
- Hafez, M. & Mullins, C. (2015). The Radicalization Puzzle: A Theoretical Synthesis of Empirical Approaches to Homegrown Extremism. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 38(11), 958–975. [10.1080/1057610X.2015.1051375](https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2015.1051375).
- Hegghammer, T. (2010). The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the

- Globalization of Jihad. *International Security*, 35(3), 53–94.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40981252>
- Hegghammer, T. (2014). Interpersonal trust on jihadi internet forums. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 8(4), 26–41.
- Hellmich, C. (2005). Al-Qaeda: Terrorists, Hypocrites, Fundamentalists? The View from Within. *Third World Quarterly*, 26(1), 39–54.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3993762>
- Heymann, P. (2002). Dealing with Terrorism: An Overview. *International Security*, 26, 24–38. [10.1162/016228801753399691](https://doi.org/10.1162/016228801753399691)
- Hoffman, B. (2006). *Inside Terrorism*. Columbia University Press.
- Horgan, J. (2005). *The psychology of terrorism*. Routledge.
- Hülse, R., & Spencer, A. (2008). The Metaphor of Terror: Terrorism Studies and the Constructivist Turn. *Security Dialogue*, 39(6), 571–592.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/26299817>
- Ingram, H. J. (2018, March). Islamic State’s English-language magazines, 2014–2017: Trends & implications for CT-CVE strategic communications (ICCT Research Paper). *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism*.
<https://icct.nl/publication/islamic-states-english-language-magazines-2014-2017-trends-implications-for-ct-cve-strategic-communications/>
- Ingram, H. J., Whiteside, C., & Winter, C. (2020). *The ISIS Reader: Milestone Texts of the Islamic State Movement*. Oxford University Press.
- Ingram, H. J. (2016). An analysis of Islamic State’s Dabiq magazine. *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 70(5), 1–25.
- Ingram, H. J. (2016). The strategic logic of Islamic State information operations.

Australian Journal of International Affairs, 70(6), 729–752.

International Centre for Counter-Terrorism. (2023). ICCT Snapshot: Islamic State Khorasan Province. ICCT. <https://icct.nl/publication/icct-snapshot-islamic-state-khorasan-province>

International Le Monde (2023). Taliban kills mastermind behind 2021 Kabul airport bombing. https://www.lemonde.fr/en/united-states/article/2023/04/26/taliban-kills-mastermind-behind-2021-kabul-airport-bombing_6024378_133.html

Jackson, R. (2005). *Writing the war on terrorism: Language, politics and counter-terrorism*. Manchester University Press.

Jackson, R., Smyth, M. B., & Gunning, J. (2011). *Critical Terrorism Studies: A New Research Agenda*. Routledge.

Jacoby, T., & Neggaz, N. (2018). Sectarianism in Iraq: the role of the coalition provisional authority. *Critical Studies on Terrorism*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2018.1487178>

Juergensmeyer, M. (2000). *Terror in the mind of God: The global rise of religious violence*. University of California Press.

Kaldor, M. (2012). *New and old wars: Organized violence in a global era*. Stanford University Press.

Kędziński, M. A. (2024). On the margins of the terrorist attack in Krasnogorsk: Examples of financing for the Islamic State–Khorasan Province. *Internal Security Review*, 31(16), 347–381. <https://doi.org/10.4467/20801335pbw.24.029.20806>

Kilcullen, D. (2009). *The accidental guerrilla: Fighting small wars in the midst of a big one*. Oxford University Press.

Krippendorff, K. (2013). *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*. SAGE

- Kydd, A. H., & Walter, B. F. (2006). The strategies of terrorism. *International Security*, 31(1), 49–80. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/isec.2006.31.1.49>
- Lakomy, M. (2019). Recruitment and Incitement to Violence in the Islamic State's Online Propaganda: Comparative Analysis of Dabiq and Rumiyah. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 44(7), 565–580. DOI: 10.1080/1057610X.2019.1568008
- Laqueur, W. (2001). *A History of Terrorism*. Routledge.
- Laqueur, W. (1999). *The new terrorism: Fanaticism and the arms of mass destruction*. Oxford University Press.
- Lia, B. (2016). Understanding jihadi proto-states. In R. Gunaratna, M. Woodward, & A. H. A. Amin (Eds.), *Civilization and terrorism: The reshaping of global conflict* (pp. 91–109). Routledge.
- Lia, B. (2008). *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of al-Qaida Strategist Abu Mus'ab al-Suri*. Columbia University Press.
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1970). *The German ideology* (C. J. Arthur, Ed.). International Publishers. (Original work published 1846)
- McCants, W. (2015). *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State*. St. Martin's Press
- Moghadam, A. (2006). Suicide Terrorism, Occupation, and the Globalization of Martyrdom: A Critique of *Dying to Win*. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 29(8), 707–729. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100600561907>
- Moghadam, A. (2008). *The Globalization of Martyrdom: Al Qaeda, Salafi Jihad, and the Diffusion of Suicide Attacks*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Nalbandov, R. (2017). Irrational rationality of terrorism. *ASPJ Africa and Francophonie*. 8(4), 25–45.

- Nasr, S. V. R. (1996). *Mawdudi and the Making of Islamic Revivalism*. Oxford University Press.
- Neale, H. S. (2022). *Sufi warrior saints: Stories of Sufi jihad from Muslim hagiography*. I.B. Tauris.
- Neumann, P. R. (2013). *Radicalized: New jihadists and the threat to the West*. I.B. Tauris.
- Pape, R. A. (2005). *Dying to win: The strategic logic of suicide terrorism*. Random House.
- Pape, R. A. (2003). The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism. *American Political Science Review*, 97(3), 343–361. [doi:10.1017/S000305540300073X](https://doi.org/10.1017/S000305540300073X)
- Peters, R. (1994). *Jihad in classical and modern Islam*. Markus Wiener Publishers.
- Rapoport, D. C. (2022). *Waves of Global Terrorism: From 1879 to the Present*. Columbia University Press
- Rapoport, D. C. (2004). The four waves of modern terrorism. In A. Cronin & J. Ludes (Eds.), *Attacking terrorism: Elements of a grand strategy* (pp. 46–73). Georgetown University Press.
- Revkin, M. R. (2016). The Legal Foundations of the Islamic State. *Brookings Institution*.
- Rubenstein, R. (1988). *Alchemists Of Revolution: Terrorism in the Modern World*. New York : Basic Books.
- Sageman, M. (2004). *Understanding terror networks*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Khatab, S. (2006). *The power of sovereignty: The political and ideological philosophy of Sayyid Qutb*. Routledge.
- Sayyid Qutb (1989). *Milestones*. Angel Book House.
- Schmid, A. P., & Jongman, A. J. (2005). *Political terrorism: A new guide to actors, authors, concepts, data bases, theories, and literature*. Routledge.

- Schmid, A. P. (2011). The definition of terrorism. In A. P. Schmid (Ed.), *The Routledge handbook of terrorism research* (pp. 39–157). Routledge.
- Schreier, M. (2012). *Qualitative Content Analysis in Practice*. SAGE.
- Stampnitzky, L. (2013). *Disciplining terrorism: How experts invented “terrorism”*. Cambridge University Press.
- Stern, J., & Berger, J. M. (2015). *ISIS: The State of Terror*. HarperCollins.
- The Guardian (2006). Zarqawi died 52 minutes after air strike, US says.
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/jun/12/iraq.usa>
- Van Dijk, T. A. (1998). *Ideology: A Multidisciplinary Approach*. SAGE.
- Wagemakers, J. (2012). *A Quietist Jihadi: The Ideology and Influence of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi*. Cambridge University Press.
- Weber, M. (1978). *Economy and society: An outline of interpretive sociology* (G. Roth & C. Wittich, Eds.). University of California Press.
- Weiss, M., & Hassan, H. (2015). *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*. Regan Arts.
- Wiktorowicz, Q. (2005). *Radical Islam rising: Muslim extremism in the West*. Rowman & Littlefield
- Wiktorowicz, Q., & Kaltenthaler, K. (2016). The Rationality of Radical Islam. *Political Science Quarterly*, 131(2), 421–448. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45175745>
- Wiktorowicz, Q. (2005). *A genealogy of radical Islam*. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 28(2), 75–97. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100590905057>
- Wilson Center (2019). Timeline: the Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State.
- Zelin, A. Y. (2020). *Your Sons Are at Your Service: Tunisia's Missionaries of Jihad*. Columbia University Press.