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Dabiq: The Apocalypse and Irregular Warfare in the Islamic State

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Dabiq: The Apocalypse and Irregular Warfare in the Islamic State

Since its inception, the Islamic State (IS) has relied strongly on apocalyptic imagery and symbolism in both its recruitment efforts and information operations. The group's eschatological outlook, focused on the coming apocalypse in the Levant, is centered on the Syrian village of Dabiq. Its main global propaganda online magazine is named after this village.

The first issue of Dabiq was uploaded to the Internet in July 2014. Al-Hayat Media Center, whose self-stated purpose is to "convey the message of the Islamic State in different languages with the aim of unifying the Muslims under one flag,"¹ produces and distributes the online magazine. Dabiq is inspired by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's (AQAP) online magazine "Inspire."

Western media and analysts have favorably reviewed Dabiq, at least in terms of its presentation. For instance the Clarion Project, "an independently funded, non-profit organization dedicated to exposing the dangers of Islamic extremism," describes it as "a glossy propaganda magazine aimed at recruiting jihadists from the West" which is "sophisticated, slick, beautifully produced and printed in several languages including English."² Five issues of Dabiq have been published thus far.

The publication is named after a village in the northern Aleppo countryside. The village's location is mentioned in a hadith (saying of the Prophet Mohammed) that deals with "the Last Hour":

Abu Huraira reported Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him) as saying: The Last Hour would not come until the Romans would land at al-A'maq or in Dabiq. An army consisting of the best (soldiers) of the people of the earth at that time will come from Medina (to counteract them). When they will arrange themselves in ranks, the Romans would say: Do not stand between us and those (Muslims) who took prisoners from amongst us...³



Source: <http://www.clarionproject.org/news/islamic-state-isis-isil-propaganda-magazine-dabiq>



Abu Musab al-Zarqawi
Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abu_Musab_al-Zarqawi

In 1516, an important battle occurred at this site. Having recently taken over Istanbul, the Ottoman Empire's janissary-led army marched south into modern-day Syria, which at the time was part of the declining Mamluk Empire. The Ottomans, led by Sultan Selim I, defeated the Mamluks on the fields of Dabiq (Marj Dabiq). This victory marked the start of an Ottoman imperial project that lasted until World War I. It did not, however, turn out to be the prelude to the prophesied Final Hour.

Zarqawi And The Apocalypse

The Islamic State's apocalypticism can be traced to the musings of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in the 2000s. A leader of the anti-American jihadi in Iraq, al-Zarqawi spun a yarn that wove eschatological symbolism into standard Salafi-jihadi doctrine.⁴ His timing could hardly have been better, given the effects of the Iraq War on the apocalyptic genre, as described by Jean-Pierre Filiu:

The Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in March 2003 changed the very nature of apocalyptic propaganda in Islamic nations. What had developed fifteen years

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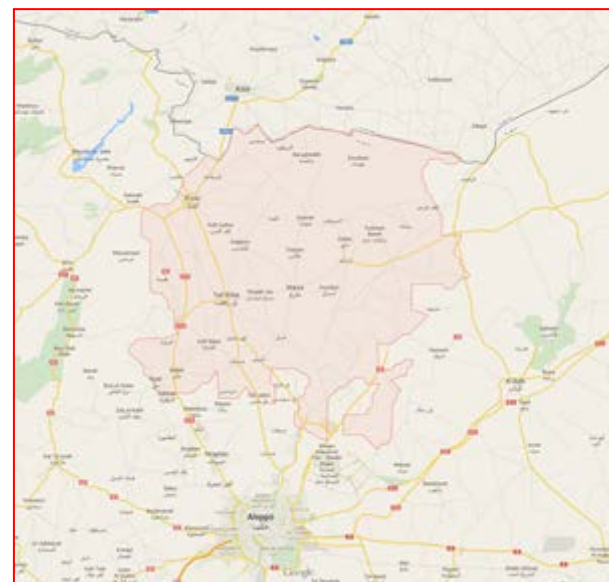
earlier as an anti-Semitic species of fiction now became an obsessive style of paranoid interpretation, an irrational technique for making sense of a world in which hostile and infidel forces ran wild... flooding retail book outlets from Casablanca to Djakarta and providing a new and disturbing index of social perceptions and anxieties in the Islamic world.”⁵

Apocalyptic and Salafi-jihadi pamphleteering increased after the events of 9/11 and subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. However, al-Qaeda’s leading Salafi-jihadi ideologues exhibited minimal interest in apocalyptic speculation and self-proclaimed experts on the Final Hour refrained from calling for armed jihad. There was little convergence between these two “schools,” until al-Zarqawi began incorporating apocalyptic symbolism into his jihadism. As David Cook explains:

Through his writings, al-Zarqawi pioneered the identification of U.S. forces with the Byzantines, and positioned himself as one who was fighting on behalf of the entire Muslim community in the apocalyptic wars (for which he used the classical term *malahim*)... Apocalyptic traditions for al-Zarqawi supplied the framework for a landscape of warfare enabling him to portray the conflict as an absolute life or death scenario.⁶

By aligning core tenets of apocalypticism and Salafi-jihadism, al-Zarqawi laid the foundations for the Islamic State’s irregular warfare doctrine. Dabiq has come to symbolize this synthesis, and every issue of the online magazine takes as its epigraph a saying of al-Zarqawi: “The spark has been lit here in Iraq, and its heat will continue to intensify - by Allah’s permission - until it burns the crusader armies in Dabiq.”

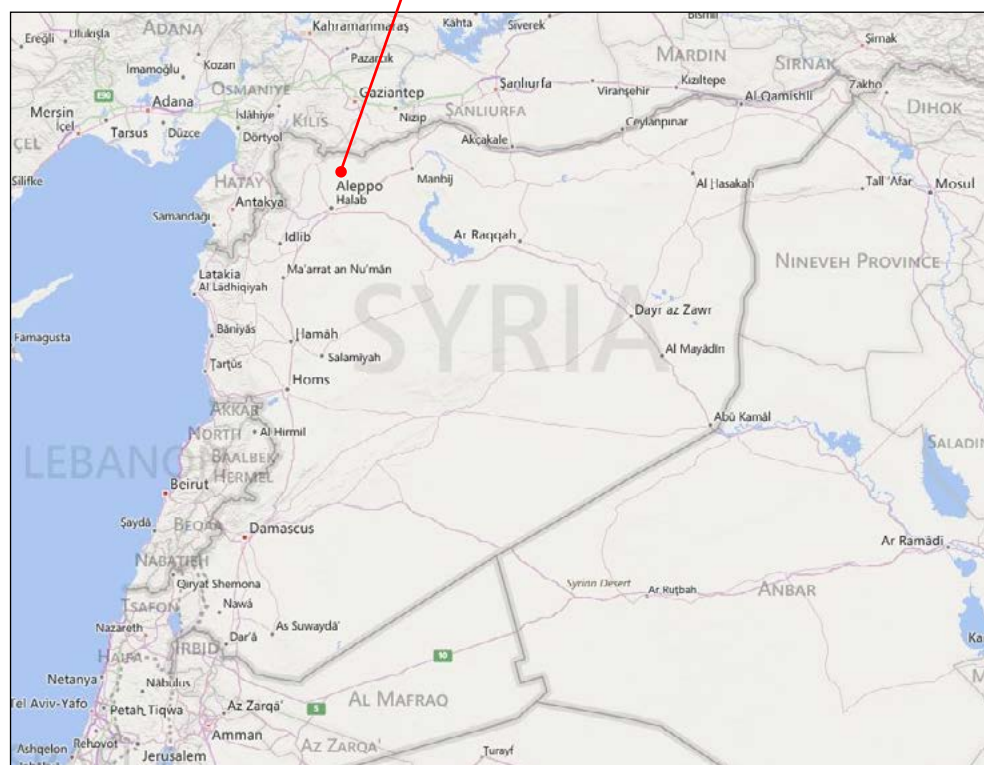
(Below) The village of Dabiq. Source: Google maps & Bing maps.



Dabiq And The Islamic State

The village of Dabiq is located in ‘Azaz District (Aleppo Province), on a fertile plain to the north of the city of Aleppo near the Turkish border (pictured top-right). This part of Syria is more uniformly Sunni than most other parts of the country.⁷ This fact, combined with easy access to fighters and weapons via Turkey, allowed locals to quickly arm themselves and fight government forces during the country’s 2011 “Arab Spring.” By 2013, a plethora of Sunni battalions and brigades dotted ‘Azaz District, most prominent among them the Tawhid Brigades, based in the town of Marea (Mari’).

In April 2013, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared that his Islamic State of Iraq was merging with the Syrian jihadi group Jabhat al-Nusra to become the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS aka ISIL). The Syrian province of Raqqa, whose capital had been seized by a coalition of rebel forces the month before, became the group’s Syrian sanctuary. The parched northeast of Aleppo Province (districts of Manbij, Jarablus, ‘Ain al-Arab⁸ and al-Bab) bordering Raqqa also became IS territory, as did pockets of rural Idlib and Aleppo to the west.



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The Islamic State's desire to exert full hegemony over other rebels created significant friction in areas where the groups overlapped. Tensions boiled over in December 2013 and the following month rebel battalions worked in tandem to chase the IS out of Idlib and western Aleppo province. Hajji Bakr, the one-time Iraqi Army colonel considered by many to be the IS's mastermind, was killed during fighting in the town of Tel Rifaat, some 10 miles southwest of Dabiq.

During the next six months, IS fighters consolidated control over Raqqa and directed their attention to provinces along the border of Syria and Iraq (Hasakah and Deir Ezzour in Syria, al-Anbar and Nineveh in Iraq). In late January they chased other rebel groups out of Raqqa Province. In the spring they launched an offensive that expelled Jabhat al-Nusra from Dayr az Zawr Province. At the same time, they seized a string of cities along the Euphrates from Iraqi Security Forces in al-Anbar. Finally, in June 2014 they strong-armed Iraqi military and security out of Mosul, Iraq's second largest city and the capital of Nineveh Province. It was in this context that in June/July 2014 the group announced the establishment of a Caliphate in the territory under its control, rebranding itself as "the Islamic State."

In mid-August 2014, the group launched a counteroffensive to retake 'Azaz District in Aleppo, using some of the high-grade weapons and equipment seized from Mosul. Entering from the east through the town of Akhtarin, they retook the eastern half of the district within days, including Dabiq.⁹ At the time of writing, the IS remains in control of the eastern half of 'Azaz District. The IS offensive was commanded by Hassan Aboud, leader of the Dawoud Brigade.¹⁰ Aboud had joined the IS one month before the offensive, in July 2014. After pledging allegiance to IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, he and his followers left their base in Idlib and headed east toward Raqqa in a large convoy. According to one report, Aboud offered up kidnapped American journalist James Foley to the IS as a "token of allegiance."¹¹ The IS posted its first beheading video, of Foley's execution, within days of retaking Dabiq and surrounding villages.



Hassan Aboud

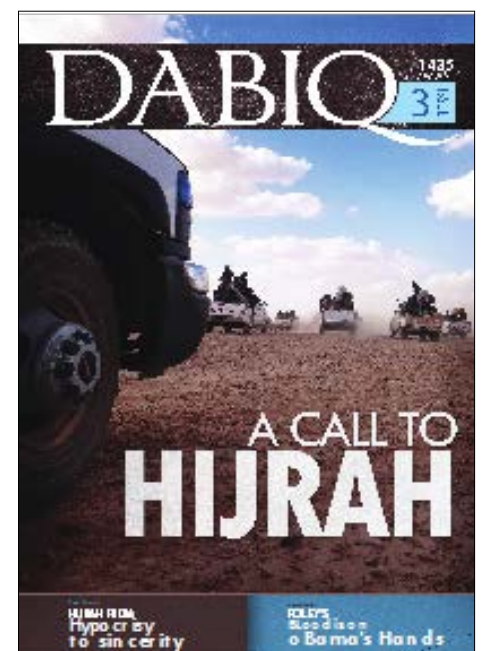
Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0akvuT7wqJ4> (screenshot)

Events over the past three years in Syria have likely increased the appeal of apocalyptic narratives not only among Syrians but also those seeking to join the Syrian jihad. Sham, an Arabic name referring to both Syria and the Levant (hence the confusion of whether to call the group ISIS or ISIL) is the land of al-Malahim, or epic battles. Dabiq is not the only apocalyptic landmark in Syria and harnessing the symbolism of these sites is a key source of strength for rebel groups. As the third issue of Dabiq notes,

Allah's messenger (sallallāhu 'alayhi wa sallam) has informed of battles that will occur in places within Shām and its vicinity, such as al-Ghūtah, Damascus, Dābiq (or al-A'māq), the Euphrates River, and Constantinople (which is near Shām), as well as Baytul-Maqdis (Jerusalem), the gate of Lod, Lake Tiberius, the Jordan River, Mount Sinai, and so on.¹²

Encouraging migration (hijrah) to territories under their control has become a prime preoccupation for the IS, and apocalyptic imagery is often used in these efforts. Indeed the idea that increased emigration to Syria and the approximation of the Final Hour reinforce one another – more emigration brings the hour closer, which brings in more emigration – is central to the group's recruitment strategy.

In this way, the IS signals to potential recruits that joining them in Syria entails becoming a protagonist in the final chapter of human history. Their sales pitch includes several "proofs" to show that the countdown has indeed begun, including "the revival of slavery," the forming of a coalition to fight the Muslims, and the declaration of the Caliphate.



Source: <http://media.clarionproject.org/files/09-2014/isis-isil-islamic-state-magazine-Issue-3-the-call-to-hijrah.pdf>

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Apocalyptic Narratives And Irregular Warfare

The apocalyptic scenario serves a key role in the IS's information operations. By interpreting current events through an eschatological framework, the group seeks to strip contemporary conflict in the Levant of its socio-political context. By casting the conflict as purely religious, it furthermore seeks to leverage its comparative advantage over national armies, whose wars are given meaning by politics and the national interest rather than religion and the apocalypse.

The IS contextualizes and justifies its own behavior in apocalyptic terms, as illustrated by this observation on the group's enslavement of thousands of Iraqi women from the Yazidi faith:

... as we approach al-Malhamah al-Kubrā (the greatest battle before the Hour) – whenever its time comes by Allah's decree – it is interesting to note that slavery has been mentioned as one of the signs of the Hour as well as one of the causes behind al-Malhamah al-Kubrā.¹³

The slaughter, kidnapping and forced conversions of thousands of Yazidis prompted the return of American bombers over the skies of Iraq in August 2014. Thus far, the group's most direct provocation toward Western governments has been the slaying of their citizens on video (two British, three American). Not until the most recent of these videos, though, which also featured the simultaneous beheading of over a dozen captive Syrian government fighters/supporters, were apocalyptic themes included. The 17 November propaganda video, in which the death and beheading of Peter/Abdul Rahman Kassig is confirmed, ends with IS executioner "Jihadi John" standing in front of what appears to be a superimposed image of Dabiq¹⁴ and telling US President Barack Obama: "Your forces will return, greater in number than they were before. You will return and your proxies will not benefit you.... And here we are, burying the first American Crusader in Dabiq and eagerly awaiting for the remainder of your armies to arrive."

A video published around the same time, titled "Wait. We are also waiting," features three men (German, French and British) sitting on someone's terrace in Dabiq. The jihadists take turns threatening Western governments, politicians and militaries, while repeatedly goading them to come to Sham and especially to Dabiq.¹⁵ Of the outcome of the battle they have no doubt, as was made clear to them by the group's spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani in a September 2014 speech:¹⁶ "O soldiers of the Islamic State, be ready for the final campaign of the crusaders. Yes, by Allah's will, it will be the final one. Thereafter, we will raid them by Allah's permission and they will not raid us."

Thus does the IS set up a scenario in which an American ground invasion is viewed as a response to broader apocalyptic forces that the group understands better than anyone, while the absence of American ground intervention is attributed to the IS's success in instilling fear in the hearts of its adversaries.

Conclusion

Dabiq has developed into a symbolic spiritual-apocalyptic center for the IS. The group's al-Furqan Media often starts and ends its gruesome videos with a reading of Zarqawi's Dabiq quote and what has become an iconic image for the group, of a man holding the IS flag and walking across a hill, allegedly overlooking Dabiq.

The IS's apocalyptic narratives serve many functions and are central to their doctrine. These narratives also resonate with other non-state fighting groups in the region, including the IS's Shi'a adversaries in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon. An apocalyptic dynamic has not yet fully taken root in the Levant, but the threat is there. Operating in such an environment poses great challenges to national armies, hence the fundamental importance of properly understanding this key element of IS's irregular warfare.

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Endnotes

1. Dabiq, Issue 3, p. 43.
2. "The Islamic State's (ISIS, ISIL) Magazine," The Clarion Project, 10 September 2014. <http://www.clarionproject.org/news/islamic-state-isis-isil-propaganda-magazine-dabiq> (accessed 19 December 2014).
3. Sahiih Muslim, Book 41, Number 6924. Available at: <http://www.usc.edu/org/cmje/religious-texts/hadith/muslim/041-smt.php> (accessed 19 December 2014).
4. For more on the apocalyptic genre, see: David Cook. *Contemporary Muslim apocalyptic literature*. Syracuse University Press, 2008 and Jean-Pierre Filiu. *Apocalypse in Islam*. University of California Press, 2011. The radical apocalyptic genre espouses a paranoid and virulently anti-Jewish viewpoint, often drawing selectively from the Quran and Hadith as well as from Christian Zionism, right-wing anti-Semitism and conspiracy theorists. The Bermuda Triangle, Nostradamus and flying saucers often feature prominently in these "theories."
5. Filiu, p. 121.
6. David Cook. "Iraq as the focus for apocalyptic scenarios," CTC Sentinel, 15 October 2008. <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/iraq-as-the-focus-for-apocalyptic-scenarios> (accessed 19 December 2014).
7. A notable exception is the Shi'a towns of Nubl and Zahra, located in the southwestern corner of 'Azaz District. Sunni rebels have repeatedly attacked and besieged the towns throughout the conflict, but have been unable to overrun them. In addition, Kurdish-majority pockets could be found to the west (Afrin) and northeast ('Ain al-Arab/Kobani).
8. At the time, the Kurdish parts of 'Ain al-Arab, more famously known as Kobani, were in the hands of local Kurdish forces.
9. IS fighters used tactical surprise to overwhelm rebel defenses. A large IS convoy from al-Bab appeared headed to the government-held Kuweiris Airport but turned suddenly and attacked points surrounding Akhtarín, which the IS had been harassing for several months. See: Abdullah Suleiman Ali, "Islamic State takes Akhtarín," al-Safir (translation via al-Monitor), 14 August 2014. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2014/08/syria-aleppo-islamic-state-operation-control-border-towns.html> (accessed 19 December 2014).
10. Hassan Aboud hails from the town of Sarmin, just east of the provincial capital Idlib and next to Binnish, the hometown of Syrian IS leader Abu Mohammed al-Adnani. His Dawoud (David) Brigade was originally part of the Suqur al-Sham battalions, which in turn became an integral part of the Islamic Front. Aboud had a falling out with Suqur leader Ahmed Issa al-Shaykh and the groups parted ways. He allegedly named his brigade after Dawoud al-Shaykh, brother of the Suqur al-Sham leader. His IS-affiliated force allegedly changed its name to the Jalut (Goliath) Army.
11. Erin Banco, "James Foley Allegedly Used as Token of Allegiance by Group That Joined ISIS," International Business Times, 20 August 2014. <http://www.ibtimes.com/james-foley-allegedly-used-token-allegiance-group-joined-isis-1664272> (accessed 19 December 2014).
12. Dabiq, Issue 3, p. 9.
13. Dabiq, Issue 4, p. 15.
14. It is fairly easy to tell from the video and also has been claimed by experts: Richard Spencer, "Does Jihadi John have a body double?" The Telegraph, 23 November 2014. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/islamic-state/11248957/Does-Jihadi-John-have-a-body-double.html> (accessed 19 December 2014).
15. Pro-IS pamphleteers hold that the battle in Dabiq will begin when 80 countries (flags) come together to fight them. At the moment they count slightly over 60 in the anti-IS coalition.
16. An English-language translation of the speech is available at: <https://pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com/2014/09/25/abu-muhammad-al-adnani-ash-shami-indeed-your-lord-is-ever-watchful/> (accessed 19 December 2014).

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Author Background

Lucas Winter is an analyst on the Middle East for the Foreign Military Studies Office (FMSO) at Fort Leavenworth, KS. FMSO conducts open-source and foreign collaborative research, focusing on the foreign perspectives of understudied and unconsidered defense and security issues. His specific research expertise includes Yemen's Huthi Movement and the microdynamics of the Syrian conflict. He has an M.A. in International Relations from Johns Hopkins SAIS and was an Arabic Language Flagship Fellow in Damascus, Syria in 2006-2007. He has published extensively in professional and academic journals and presented on various topics in both professional military education and academic settings.

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