

## Quest for Immortality: An Analysis of ISIS's *Dabiq*

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The digital communication strategy of terrorist groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is an essential tool in recruiting new followers and for fomenting individual acts of violent extremism. Scholars have sought to understand how and why these publications prompt individuals to join such groups. This study explored this phenomenon using terror management theory as the theoretical lens for an analysis of 15 issues of *Dabiq* in an effort to discern how ISIS constructs death for its readers. The findings suggest a conceptualization of immortality promised to those who die in the name of Salafi jihadism.

*Keywords: ISIS, Dabiq, terror management theory, frames*

On reading the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) online publication *Dabiq*, one is struck by the focus on death. A significant portion of this emphasis is the death and destruction inflicted by ISIS on its enemies. Yet an equally significant focus is the death of followers of ISIS and Salafi jihadism. In fact, one particularly unsettling rhetorical device often found in violent Islamist messaging is the claim “We love death like you love life” (bin Laden, 2005; Marcus & Zilberdik, 2012). What does this statement mean for possible recruits to Islamist terrorism? What is the purpose of such a claim? And, how might this device appeal to a basic human need of potential recruits to ISIS and other groups? One perspective that holds promise for investigating these questions is terror management theory (TMT).

According to Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski (2015), TMT proposes that humankind's sentient awareness of our individual mortality creates an existential terror that motivates our quest for immortality. According to them, this existential quest is at the core of human behavior. Though scholarly research into TMT is quite extensive (e.g., Arndt, Landau, Vail, & Vess, 2013; Greenberg, 2012; Landau & Sullivan, 2015; Solomon et al., 2015), a smaller corpus of literature has articulated the meaningful applicability of TMT in understanding individual participation in violent extremism and terrorism (e.g., Abdollahi, 2013; Dewa, Ireland, & Ireland, 2014; Miller & Landau, 2008; Pyszczynski, Rothschild, Motyl, & Abdollahi, 2009). Of interest to this investigation is how TMT functions as a theoretical lens for investigating how death is constructed in online publications, such as ISIS's *Dabiq*.

Communication-grounded research of the communiqués and writings of terrorist organizations highlights frame analysis as a useful methodological approach for discerning how terror groups construct

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their narratives (Rogan, 2010, 2011, 2016; Rowland & Theye, 2008; Smith, 2004; Smith, Suedfeld, Conway, & Winter, 2008). For example, research into the self–other distinctions present in ISIS and al-Qaeda materials found a consistent pattern of the self characterized as morally righteous and heroic whereas the other is framed as aggressor and apostate (Mahood & Rane, 2017; Rogan, 2010, 2011).

This investigation sought to discern how ISIS conceptualizes death for its readers, as viewed through a TMT theoretical lens. This article begins with an overview of the quest for significance perspective as a foundation for proposing TMT as a potential theoretical framework for understanding how death is constructed in Salafi jihadist publications as part of their propaganda campaign, found specifically in ISIS's *Dabiq*. This is followed by a review of literature in which a frame analysis methodology has been used to investigate terrorist communication and which serves the methodological approach for this investigation. I articulate the research question, and explain the methodology used to investigate the documents. I then present findings and discuss their implications.

### **Quest for Significance**

The question of what motivates a person to engage in violent extremism has long vexed scholars. Over the years, researchers have advanced various explanations ranging from social, cultural, and material rewards (Bloom, 2005); humiliation and shame (Berko, 2007); economic and political repression (Krueger, 2007); strategic choice (Crenshaw, 1998) as an eschatological ideology (Rapoport, 1998); to psychopathology (Post, 1998). Alternatively, Kruglanski and colleagues (Kruglanski et al., 2013; Kruglanski, Chen, Dechesne, Fishman, & Orehek, 2009; Kruglanski et al., 2014; Kruglanski, Gelfand, & Gunaratna, 2012; Kruglanski & Orehek, 2011) proposed that individual pursuit for significance as bestowed by others is the unifying motive for violent extremism (Kruglanski et al., 2009; Kruglanski et al., 2014). In other words, the pursuit of personal significance is central to humankind's individual sense of meaning and purpose; it is a fundamental desire to be someone, to matter, to have meaning (Kruglanski & Orehek, 2011). According to them, being deemed worthy of being somebody, of being significant by other members of one's group, is the life-giving blood that enables one to achieve a sentiment of significance.

Kruglanski and colleagues (Kruglanski et al., 2013; Kruglanski, 2009; Kruglanski et al., 2014; Kruglanski et al., 2012) have used the quest for significance framework in their many investigations into possible motives for acts of violent extremism. For example, in their analysis of media artifacts documenting suicide terrorism by radical Islamists, Kruglanski et al. (2009) contended that quest for significance, in an effort to mitigate perceived significance loss, was a strong motivator for self-sacrifice. Additionally, in their investigation of members of the Sri Lankan Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam terrorist organization, they found that feelings of insignificance were positively correlated with willingness to engage in acts of violence (Kruglanski et al., 2013). Likewise, Jasko, LaFree, and Kruglanski (2017) reported in their investigation of 1,496 persons who committed ideologically grounded crimes in the United States that economic and social loss of significance were positive predictors of acts of violence. Findings from Webber and colleagues (2018) further supported the importance of personal significance as a motivation for violence and radicalization. Finally, in his research exploring why young men join al-Qaeda, Venhaus (2010) reported that "they want to understand who they are, why they matter, and what

their role in the world should be" (p. 8). In other words, they seek to feel significant and membership in al-Qaeda bestows on them a sense of meaning and purpose.

Based on their extensive research, Kruglanski and colleagues (2014; Kruglanski et al., 2012) contended that the quest for significance can be prompted in three ways: (1) through significance loss or humiliation, (2) through anticipated significance loss, and (3) through anticipated significance gain. Yet the prospect of dying with the belief that one's mortal existence meant nothing and one's life was of no value to humankind is thought to be the greatest threat to individual significance and the central premise of TMT (Becker, 1971, 1973; Kruglanski et al., 2012; Solomon et al., 2015).

### **Terror Management Theory**

TMT proposes that humans, similar to other creatures, possess an innate drive for self-preservation and survival (Arndt et al., 2013; Greenberg, 2012; Solomon et al., 2015). Unlike other animals, humans are equipped with the cognitive capacity to think about the past, present, and future, which inherently entails awareness of the inevitability of death. It is this cognitive awareness of our mortality that produces an existential fear, or terror. In other words, although human beings are cognitively capable of thinking conceptually and abstractly about the various issues in life that transcend mortal existence, it is this cognitive awareness about our mortality that reminds us of our basic animalistic nature and that produces potentially paralyzing terror (Greenberg, 2012; Landau & Sullivan, 2015). This fear generates a desire for immortality to transcend our own death and to ascribe meaning and value to our physical existence. It is every human's essential hope that the things we do and create will have lasting meaning and value, outliving our death. At the heart of TMT is Becker's (1971, 1973) articulation of humankind's existential dualism, search for meaning and quest for immortality.

### **Existential Dualism and Significance**

Becker (1971, 1973) argued that humans suffer from an existential dualism. On one level, humans are beings with physical bodies that are subject to the same vagaries of physicality and deterministic boundedness as all other animals, most profound of which is death. Yet humans also exist as sentient symbolic beings, possessing the ability to engage in thought and consciousness that transcends space and time. According to Becker, it is this symbolic dimension of the human condition that defines the self, or ego, and from which awareness of mortality derives.

According to Becker (1971, 1973), human consciousness of death gives rise to an existential terror of mortality. This fear of death is the basis for humankind's quest to know who one is, to justify him- or herself as being of value in the universe, to contribute to human existence, to be of unshakable meaning, and thus to be significant. Or as Becker (1971) effectively articulates, "to be of primary value, a heroic contributor to world-life—the heroic contributor to the destiny of man" [*sic*] (p. 76). It is this need for self-meaning that Becker contended reveals humankind's innate narcissism, "man's [*sic*] utter self-centeredness and pre-occupation, each person's feeling that he [*sic*] is *the one* in creation, that his [*sic*] life represents all life" (p. 77). Accordingly, the quest for self-meaning and value is a primal motive undergirding human

behavior in an effort to buffer against the anxiety of death. According to Becker (1971), in an effort to mitigate the terror of our existential conundrum, humans seek both literal and symbolic immortality.

Literal immortality is the belief that we will live on in some meaningful manner after our deaths, be it in heaven with those we love, in a state of reincarnation, or in a state of nirvana (Greenberg, 2012). Religious and spiritual belief systems provide the protocols for individual attainment of literal immortality. Comparatively, symbolic immortality denotes humankind's quest to be remembered in some meaningful, tangible manner by the things we accomplish in life (Arndt et al., 2013). This can include being a part of a cause or movement that is greater than the individual and that articulates as its aspiration the creation of some ideal state for human existence. In this way, individual anxiety about death is mitigated, and self-esteem is realized in accord with the proscriptions articulated in the prevailing group's values and beliefs.

Research on TMT has grown into a robust body of work (e.g., Arndt et al., 2013; Greenberg, 2012; Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997; Solomon et al., 2015). Taken together, this corpus of research has explored the hypothesis that mortality salience (MS) increases individual need for psychological buffering of that salience to create a sense of self-worth (i.e., significance), and thereby facilitates realization of symbolic and literal immortality (Greenberg, 2012; Juhl & Routledge, 2016; Landau & Sullivan, 2015). Of interest to this study is how TMT functions as a theoretical lens for exploring how death is framed in ISIS's *Dabiq* magazine and how such a perspective might help us to better understand the communication strategy of Salafi jihadist publications in appealing to readers' existential needs.

### ***Terror Management Theory and Terrorism***

According to Pyszczynski and colleagues (2009), a TMT perspective on terrorism proposes that when one group perceives itself threatened by another group, such that individual and collective significance is challenged, violence toward the offending group is a likely outcome. Perceived attacks, injustices, or humiliation toward a group undermine the anxiety buffering functionality of membership in the target group to provide members with a sufficiently valid sense of identity and self-importance, thereby heightening the existential threat to one's mortality (Borum, 2011; Richardson, 2006; Stern, 2003).

Though concrete attacks on an individual's property and physical being can ignite a sense of humiliation, symbolic slights to an individual's or a group's sense of value and meaning can be equally powerful, such that symbolic acts are functionally equivalent to physically attacking the individual or the group. Such symbolic acts need not be personally experienced to produce an individual sense of injustice. These reactions can be the result of an empathic response to perceived attacks on one's ingroup (Moghaddam, 2009). In other words, the perceived insult experienced by other members of one's group may be generalized to an attack on the group as a whole (Castano, Yzerbyt, Paladino, & Sacchi, 2002), thereby prompting feelings of collective humiliation and injustice, and prompting the quest for renewed significance (Moghaddam, 2009). Yet the desire to achieve significance is insufficient to explain radicalization into terrorism (Kruglanski et al., 2012; Kruglanski & Orehek, 2011). This quest must be matched with a violence-justifying belief system that provides the individual with significance for acting on behalf of a group and its ideology.

In their analysis of Salafi jihadist groups, Miller and Landau (2008) contended that such organizations provide individuals who lack mechanisms for acquiring and sustaining positive self-esteem with an avenue to realize an identity of significance. When the individual's primary social order fails to fulfill the needs for personal meaning and self-esteem, thereby buffering against the existential terror of mortality, the presence of alternative symbolic belief systems that do provide such support become havens for the disenfranchised. Membership in groups that espouse ideologies of power, moral superiority, and theological authority provides even the lowliest of persons with an imbued sense of meaning and significance (Miller & Landau, 2008). Personal symbolic and literal immortality are realized when individuals who have died in service to the group are revered as martyrs and who are said to have entered into the paradise of afterlife with God (see the juridical writings Ayman al-Zawahiri in Ibrahim, 2007, for examples of this concept). In the end, Salafist jihadi groups save the individual from insignificance by providing a conceptualization about death that transcends human mortality and elevates the disciple's status to that of hero. It is in this way that the individual achieves significance and immortality.

TMT offers a viable lens for investigating how death is constructed in *Dabiq*, to understand how the existential threat of death is mitigated with the promise of immortality. Investigating narratives in such documents can help us to understand the mechanisms by which ISIS constructs its mythic construction of death to proselytize recruits and motivate its followers to engage in violence.

### **Frames, Identity Construction, and Terrorism**

The concept of frames is commonly attributed to Gregory Bateson (1954/1972), who defined a frame as "a class or set of messages (or meaningful actions)" (p. 186), which provides clues about how an interaction should be defined and how communicative acts should be understood. For conflict scholars, frames are conceptualized as individual definitions for objects, persons, and/or events in the form of evaluative descriptors, such as adjectives and adverbs that actually proceed, follow, or bookend other linguistic cues, while framing is the process by which individuals assign such meaning (Donohue, Rogan, & Kaufmann, 2011; Gray, 2003; Watzlawick, Bavelas, & Jackson, 1967). Further, most conflict literature bifurcates frames into either negotiated definitions of meaning, which align most closely with Bateson's (1954/1972) original conceptualization, or as linguistic cues that function as representations of individual cognitive schemata (Dewulf, Gray, Putnam, & Bouwen, 2011; Putnam & Holmer, 1992). As linguistic cues, frames are the devices by which individuals articulate their conceptualizations of themselves, another party, the interaction, or some issue (Dewulf et al., 2011). Interactionally, frames are definitions negotiated by parties during the course of interaction (Dewulf et al., 2011). For this investigation, frames are conceptualized as linguistic cue devices that provide meaning and definition to other linguistic cues (Dewulf et al., 2011; Gray, 2003; Rogan, 2010; Watzlawick et al., 1967).

### **Identity Frames and Terrorism**

As symbolic communication (e.g., Matusitz, 2013; Myers & Stohl, 2010; Orehek, 2012), terrorism is a tactic most commonly associated with intergroup identity-oriented conflict. A key feature of such conflict is the propensity for parties to construct a signature ingroup identity that differentiates them from the outgroup (Myers & Stohl, 2010; Tajfel, 1982). As noted by Dewulf and colleagues (2011), opposing parties

of intergroup conflict constitute unique discursive communities who define themselves according to a corpus of idiosyncratic meanings that differentiate them from an "other." Such self-other characterization framing has been noted as central to acts of violence toward an other, including terrorism and genocide (Donohue, 2102; Smith, 2004; Stanton, 2004).

Investigations of terrorist organizations suggest that such groups engage in strategic message construction to frame themselves as virtuous and humanistic while dehumanizing and advocating hate toward their opposition (Jasko et al., 2017; Mahood & Rane, 2017; Rane, 2016). For example, Smith (2004) investigated the language of groups advocating radical social and political change around several key value orientations manifested in a group's rhetoric in an effort to distinguish between groups that engage in terrorism and those that do not. Smith (2004) found that relative to nonterror groups, terrorist organizations tend to attribute higher levels of dominance values to opponents while attributing high dominance, morality, and culture values to themselves. Similarly, Smith and colleagues (2008) found that terrorist groups described themselves using positive morality, religion, and aggression values, and that their language conveyed more power, ingroup affiliation, and achievement imagery, accompanied by lower levels of integrative complexity.

Monaci (2017) explored ISIS's *Dabiq* for its transmedia construction along three dimensions: (1) synergistic storytelling, (2) the art of world making, and (3) additive comprehension and engagement. She concluded that ISIS propaganda is a form of storytelling that serves a critical means for recruiting individuals to its cause by creating a heroic identity for the ingroup through its messaging. Mahood and Rane (2017) investigated the core narratives found in ISIS propaganda, including *Dabiq*, and concluded that ISIS material manifests a fundamentalist and violent interpretation of Islamist ideology in which the self is characterized as holy and heroic while the other is labeled as apostate.

Rogan (2010) explored texts authored by Ayman al-Zawahiri that focused on Islam's relationship with democracy. Rogan found that Zawahiri employed frames of moral and religious righteousness in representing the self while framing the other as an enemy to Islam. Rogan (2011) likewise investigated Osama bin Laden's 1996 and 1998 declarations of war against the United States. The study reported that bin Laden framed his ingroup identity as divinely sanctioned while comparatively framing the United States in a dehumanizing and demonizing manner. Finally, Rogan (2016) investigated Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's *Inspire* magazine for narrative frame construction of ingroup and outgroup membership. He reported that the texts framed the ingroup as the victim of an oppressive outgroup, but also as pure and honorable, whereas the outgroup was framed as tyrants and aggressors.

Rowland and Theye (2008) contended that religious terrorists draw their motivation from a tripartite mythic rhetorical structure that they label as DNA. Briefly, DNA denotes (1) denial of one's identity and existence by some other group, (2) negation of the identity of the oppressor group, and (3) affirmation of a renewed identity grounded in either the foundational history of the group or in some aspirational future state. According to them, religious terror groups frame their ingroup identity as being threatened by some outgroup, yet also as being emboldened in their quest for renewed significance, while likewise negating the identity of the outgroup.

As shown, identity frame construction for self and other is an essential feature of terrorist organizations' media campaigns, with self typically framed as moral, just, righteous, honorable, and heroic relative to other. Further, death and dying are also prominent themes found within their propaganda materials. Therefore, exploring how groups such as ISIS frame death for ingroup identity membership, as viewed through a TMT lens, might provide additional insight into their communication initiatives and possibly enhance our knowledge about individual radicalization into Salafi jihadist terrorist groups. As such, this study sought to explore how ISIS frames death as an identity for ingroup members relative to an outgroup.

### **Method**

#### ***Artifacts***

Since its inception, ISIS has used English language magazines as a crucial component of its propaganda strategy. *Dabiq* was the third in a series of four professionally designed publications produced by ISIS's Ministry of Media, Al Hayat Media Center that were published between June 2014 and September 2017 (Ingram, 2016, 2018). *Dabiq* was considered ISIS's flagship digital magazine published in English, as well as several other languages. It was designed as part of a multimodal communication campaign specifically targeting a Western non-Arabic-speaking population, particularly Muslims living in the West, to promote awareness and support, to incite domestic homegrown terrorism, and to recruit new members into its organization (Ingram, 2016, 2018). Its publication spans the period of ISIS's greatest success in conquering and controlling territory in Iraq and Syria. The name *Dabiq* is significant in that Dabiq is a location in Aleppo, northern Syria, where, in a historical battle in 1516, the Ottoman Turks defeated the Mamluk sultanate (Styszynski, 2014), and where the Prophet Muhammad stated that events leading to End Times would occur (Ingram, 2016). Though the magazine includes reports about ISIS's recent military campaigns, it also includes articles about the organization's ideology and ultimate goal of (re)creating the Islamic caliphate. Of particular interest to this study is its emphasis on the deaths of its members (Ingram, 2016, 2018; Wignell, Tan, O'Halloran, & Lange, 2017).

Copies of the 15 issues of *Dabiq* were obtained from the online repository of jihadist material at jihadology.net (Islamic State, 2014–2016). This site assures users that materials posted are complete, authentic, and free of potential defects. Each issue was published in English, which facilitated the subsequent analysis as no significant translation was required. However, it has been noted that jihadi publications, including *Dabiq*, are often characterized by the presence of transliterated Arabic words and terms (Colas, 2018; Vergani & Bliuc, 2018). According to Colas (2018), this presents a challenge to readers in making accurate interpretation decisions. In most cases the publishers of *Dabiq* do provide translations of such terms, though the translations may not be purely isomorphic with the original concept (Colas, 2018). According to Colas, reading *Dabiq* in English still necessitates implicit translation decisions by the reader. This study employed concordance analysis around key words to help in that translation when necessary.

Each issue is composed of a collection of authored articles, short editorial snippets, graphics, and visual images. The issues vary in length, ranging from 40 pages for Issue 5 to 82 pages for Issue 15. Each issue was downloaded in PDF format and converted to a .txt file. During the conversion process, research assistants cross-checked the original PDF document with the .txt file to ensure accuracy of file

content. Visual images and graphics were eliminated during file conversion because only written text was the focus for this investigation. These artifacts were chosen for their potential theoretical and practical focus on ISIS's articulation of humankind's existential dualism, rather than for a probabilistic value (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

### ***Analysis Procedure***

The analysis was a four-step process beginning with a computational generation of individual words, along with their frequency of occurrence within each of the texts. From this list a set of individual words denoting or related to death were identified. Concordance analyses were then generated for each of these words to establish the frame unit of analysis in each of the texts for which death frames were subsequently coded.

To begin, all 15 issues were analyzed using AntConc, a free application corpus analysis software package (Anthony, 2011) that enables the user to conduct word frequency, concordance, collocate, cluster, and lexical bundle analyses (Anthony, 2005). In an effort to identify potential words used to denote death, a basic word list and frequency analysis were computed across the aggregate text files for all 15 issues. Excluding articles, conjunctions, prepositions, numbers, and auxiliary verbs, this composite list consisted of 9,270 individual words and names.

A grounded theory approach, similar to that reported by Brummans and colleagues (2008) and Rogan (2011), involving a review of the aggregate list of 9,270 words was used to identify words that referenced death, dying, and post-death existence, including words used to describe persons who die (i.e., "martyr"). Coders reviewed the word-frequency list to identify words they deemed fit within their shared conceptualization of death. This review produced a list 14 root words (stems) that when paired with their various affixes found within the texts resulted in a set of 22 individual words that were deemed to be references about death. This list of 22 words was composed of the following: "angels," "dead," "death," "die" ("died," "dies"), "heaven," "hereafter," "hellfire," "kill" ("killing," "kills," "killed"), "martyr" ("martyred," "martyrdom"), "paradise," "resurrection," "shahid," "soul" ("souls"). The word *shahadah* was also included in this first round list based on Berko's (2007) discernment of its association with death and suicide terrorism. There was 100% agreement between two coders in generating this list of death-related words.

The third step in the analysis involved use of WMatrix (Rayson, 2008) to produce concordances for each of the 22 death-related words. Although the WMatrix default setting for concordance is 90 characters around the target word, a concordance setting of 160 characters was used, producing a listing of each target word bracketed by 80 characters on both sides. This enhanced setting was selected to adequately capture a complete thought expression within the text and thereby assure an adequate frame structure for each target word (Drake & Donohue, 1996).

The final step involved coding the frame around each word. Again, employing a grounded theory approach (Brummans et al., 2008; Rogan 2011), each concordance contextual occurrence for each target word was inductively coded for the frame used to describe the 22 death-related words. A four-part coding scheme was derived by two independent coders who inductively discerned how the key words were framed



across the set of concordances for all of the 22 target words. The four-part metric consisted of (1) tense: past, present, future; (2) target group: ingroup member denoting a devout Muslim, apostate Muslim, non-Muslim; (3) valence of post-death existence: positive and negative; and (4) valence of post-death label: positive and negative. These four categories were deemed to functionally capture and define the nature of death for ingroup and outgroup membership identity, as well as tapping into the two dimensions of literal and symbolic mortality. There was a 96% interrater agreement (Cohen's kappa,  $\kappa = .85$ ) between two coders for the tense frame; 95% agreement ( $\kappa = .84$ ) for the target group frame; 98% agreement ( $\kappa = .97$ ) for the valence of post-death existence frame; and 83% agreement ( $\kappa = .82$ ) for the valence of post-death label frame (Cohen, 1960). According to various sources (Brennan & Prediger, 1981; Fleiss, 1981), a kappa of .40 to .60 is considered fair, a kappa of .60 to .75 is good, and a kappa greater than .75 is excellent. These scores were deemed adequately high to be considered reliable. When differences in coding were recorded, a consensus code was established.

## Findings

### *Analysis of the Frame Structures*

Of the 22 target words selected for analysis, the words "soul," "killing," and "kills" failed to receive any codes concerning a possible post-death existence. Similarly, post-death contextualization of *shahadah* was proved too ambiguous for reliable coding. The following statements reflect the essential content of these four words across the 15 issues investigated.

The unfaltering mujahidin brought delight to the heart and soul of every muwahhid on the surface of the Earth through their unity and expanse. (Islamic State, 2014, November 21, p. 25)

Allah sends the pleasant breeze and it takes the soul of every person who has faith in his Heart. (Islamic State, 2014, September 10, p. 9)

Thereafter he spent 23 years apathetically killing his slaves, spilling their blood, taking their wealth, enslaving their women. (Islamic State, 2014, July 27, p. 26)

Therefore, if a mujahid kills a single man with a knife, it is the barbaric killing of the innocent. (Islamic State, 2014, September 10, p. 3)

How much more noble is his death when it is shahadah. (Islamic State, 2015, May 21, p. 11)

O Allah, protect me from being imprisoned, grant me shahadah on Your path. (Islamic State, 2014, December 29, p. 15)

The remaining 18 words were found to be contextualized within the narrative about death. Although the individual words primarily occurred independently, they also occasionally appeared together within a single frame structure.

Reviewing the findings according to each of the four coding categories reveals that 53% of the concordance frames were coded as past tense, 42% were coded as future tense, and 5% as were coded as present tense. Sixty-three percent were coded as ingroup focused and 32% were coded as outgroup/non-Muslim, and 5% were coded as outgroup apostate Muslim. Sixty percent made reference to a positive post-death existence, whereas 40% describe a negative post-death existence. Finally, 77% were coded as describing an honorific post-death reference compared with 23% for a dishonorable death state.

When analyzed for the three-way interaction of tense, group membership, and post-death condition, the most predominant frame is that in which ingroup members are assured a positive post-death existence. The general tenor of these references notes both paradise and immortality as a deserved outcome for devout believers of Islam who die fighting, as well as a select group of others whose deeds are deemed worthy. More broadly, there is the general assurance that God will reward Muslims on judgment day and that all Muslims must believe and do service to God to ensure the promised reward. In the case of literal immortality, the preponderance of frames presents this as a fact reserved for the righteous followers of Salafi jihadism, whereby God will resurrect those who have died in jihad to everlasting life in paradise. The reader is frequently challenged to question his or her devotion to living in the physical world in pursuit of earthly pleasures versus seeking God's favor of immortal company with jihadi comrades in paradise. A less frequent framing is devoted to praising historic ingroup members and honoring their immortal presence in heaven. In these ways, death for disciples of ISIS is constructed as positive and aspirational. These two frames structures are characterized by statements such as the following:

But they who believe and do righteous deeds—those are the companions of Paradise; they will abide therein eternally. (Islamic State, 2015, March 30, p. 4)

Allah says, "And do not say about those who are killed in the way of Allah, "They are dead." Rather, they are alive. (Islamic State, 2016, January 9, p. 7)

They would now continue their lifelong companionship in Paradise, after being resurrected together. (Islamic State, 2015, February 12, p. 49)

Rather, by Allah, it is as if we are resurrected, from death to life! (Islamic State, 2015, March 30, p. 35)

Allah has guaranteed the one who performs jihad in His path, having left his home, life even after death. (Islamic State, 2014, December 29, p. 6)

Have sincerity towards Allah, for it will lead to salvation in the worldly life and the Hereafter. (Islamic State, 2015, February 12, p. 9)

Comparatively, death for outgroup members is framed negatively, such that they are promised a death in which they will suffer inexorable pain and horror for their transgressions and nonbeliever status. Hell and hellfire are frequently used to characterize the immortal condition of non-Muslims. Jews and Christians are specifically characterized as the trumpeters of hell. Yet these same outgroups are also

promised an anguished earthly existence because of their failure to endorse Islam. Of particular noteworthiness, fellow Muslims who fail to embrace Salafi jihadist ideology and the consequent obligation for jihad are labeled as apostate and subject to the same fate as nonbelieving non-Muslims. Further, Muslims who die without having devotedly pledged themselves to God are said to die in a state of religious/spiritual ignorance (*jahiliyyah*) and are likewise damned to a negative post-death existence. In these ways, the texts construct a conceptualization of death for nonbelievers that is pain filled and without glory. These outgroup characterizations are captured by such statements as the following:

Allah knows the reality of their false claims, and our killed soldiers are in the gardens of Paradise while their dead soldiers are in the dungeons of Hellfire. (Islamic State, 2015, September 9, p. 38)

Allah will punish them with a painful punishment in this world and the Hereafter. (Islamic State, 2015, March 30, p. 52)

Whoever dies while not having a pledge of allegiance, dies a death of jahiliyyah. (Islamic State, 2014, November 21, p. 22)

Whoever parts from the Jamaah a handspan and dies, dies a death of jahiliyyah. (Islamic State, 2015, November 18, p. 23)

When we include post-death characterization framing in the analysis, we find that only ingroup members are promised a positive remembrance. While the bulk of these frames concern ingroup members who have already died, such framing offers similar symbolic immortality to those members who will die by following in their predecessors' footsteps. By its very nature, death is a negative phenomenon, yet within the texts it is reframed as a positive precursor to the wonderment of immortality, such that the most glorious form of death is that of a martyr who dies in the struggle of jihad. These textual references generally note that belief in God is key to attaining life after death. However, faith alone does not guarantee one eternal life in paradise. True immortality is reserved for those who die waging jihad, and in so doing, helping to bring about God's kingdom on Earth. For example, the following statements convey this sentiment:

One third will be killed; they will be the best martyrs with Allah. (Islamic State, 2014, July 5, p. 3)

This name is particularly fitting given that Yahya died not only as a Prophet of Allah, but also as a shahid, two statuses that remain alive even after death. (Islamic State, 2014, November 21, p. 7)

Jihad not only grants life on the larger scale of the Ummah, it also grants a fuller life of reward, so dedicate yourself to jihad in the path of Allah. (Islamic State, 2014, September 10, p. 31)

Wage jihad and be killed for Allah's sake. (Islamic State, 2016, April 13, p. 43)

### Discussion

As gleaned from this investigation, there exists an identity-focused framing of death within *Dabiq* that provides readers with an assurance of immortality for enacting violent jihad in support of Salafi jihadist ideology. Yet merely being a devout Salafi jihadist does not guarantee immortal existence in paradise. Only those individuals who die as a martyr will be chosen to receive the title of shahid and the rewards associated with immortality in paradise. This ingroup identity construction is consistent with broader theological conceptualizations of *shahada* reported by Berko (2007) and found in theologically grounded publications authored by Ayman al-Zawahiri (Ibrahim, 2007), and Sayyid Qutb (1964) explicating Salafist jurisprudence for jihad.

### *Theoretical and Practical Implications*

Construction of an identity frame that creates an affirming characterization of the ingroup while likewise dehumanizing and disaffirming the outgroup is an essential quality of intergroup conflict and a critical factor in motivating individuals in defense of the group (Bandura, 1998; Donohue, 2012; Tajfel, 1982). In *Dabiq*, ISIS constructs an ingroup identity in which violent jihad and self-sacrifice are the essential qualities of the true followers of Salafi jihadism. Dying for the group is defined as sacramental martyrdom in which one sanctifies the name of God (Bar, 2004; Frayman, 2006) and is therefore both sacrosanct and heroic. As noted by Crenshaw (2007), "Sacrifice for the cause is both personally redemptive and a mark of honor, a way of becoming a hero, and a part of an exalted elite" (p. 153).

Becker (1971, 1973) contended that the quest for heroic immortality is at the very core of humankind's struggle with our existential conundrum and functions as the ultimate motivation for individual pursuit for significance. Rowland and Theye (2008) argued that the third element of their tripartite DNA structure of terrorist rhetoric is espousal of a mythic age of heroic power and influence. This affirmation of ingroup identity by referencing the heroic glory days of Islam is clearly present in *Dabiq*. The authors of *Dabiq* invoke an identity-grounded death construction about the honor and glory of individuals who died as martyrs in historic conquests to create a similar death frame for those who will die for ISIS. In this way, ISIS is constructing a mythic narrative about death that promises memorialized heroic stature (symbolic immortality) and a life in eternal paradise (literal immortality).

As noted earlier, Kruglanski and colleagues (Kruglanski et al., 2012; Kruglanski & Orehek, 2011) contended that the quest to achieve significance, and the consequent promise of immortality, is a necessary but not sufficient condition for an individual to have to engage in violent extremism. The desire for personal value must be aligned with a means to realize the desired goal. Kruglanski et al. (2012) contended that a violence justifying ideology can offer the means by which an individual can attain meaningfulness by defending one's group as a sacred duty, and thereby be rewarded with glory and honor. According to Frayman (2006) Salafi jihadist interpretations of Islam provide a necessary ideological framework within which violence and terrorism are nurtured, accepted, and supported, especially enactments of suicidal terrorism. Similarly, Phares (2007) argued that Salafi jihadism provides the ideological jurisprudence for dying for Islamism and the literal and symbolic rewards for doing so. Similar to other religious doctrines, the promise of immortality is central to this belief system. Yet unlike other religions, the greatness of

immortality is reserved for those who die in the name of God. Interestingly, the root word (stem) "kill" and its various affixes were not found to be framed within a death contextualization used in this investigation. This finding suggests that killing for ISIS does not guarantee a positive death identity, but rather only dying for the group generates such immortality.

The premise that a purposively framed construction of death found in online publications might somehow resonate with a person's quest for significance—to be somebody, to mitigate the existential terror of human mortality—thereby facilitating participation in violent extremism (Kruglanski et al., 2013; Kruglanski et al., 2009; Kruglanski et al., 2014; Kruglanski et al., 2012) suggests that ISIS and other Salafi jihadist groups are employing a thoughtfully crafted and sophisticated media strategy. Thus, the phrase "We love death like you love life" (bin Laden, 2005; Marcus & Zilberdik, 2012) found within violent Islamist messages functions not merely as a trademark slogan but as an essential premise of Salafi jihadist ideology. Yet why join a terrorist organization to realize significance? Giles (2000) and Greenberg, Kosloff, Solomon, Cohen, and Landau (2010) have proposed that failure to achieve personal significance, in accord with socially positive means, may in fact prompt individuals to seek significance via antisocial pursuits. If this is the case, then it becomes critical that we seek to enhance our understanding of how the propaganda disseminated by terrorist organizations provides pathways that lead to the adoption of violent ideologies. Such knowledge is key to developing effective counterstrategies and narratives (Ganor, 2015).

#### ***Limitations and Direction for Future Research***

A computational concordance analysis of the documents facilitated the identification and assessment of the key words within the overarching frame structure of death and immortality, absent the potential coding error that likely would have occurred if human-based assessments had been conducted. Consequently, the findings generated reflect only those instances in which key words were couched within a limited frame structure set as part of the computational program of 160 characters. On one level, this particular analytic procedure limited the death frame identification to only those instances in which the words selected as potential markers of the overarching frame were identified. Expanding the breadth of applicable text for analysis via an in-depth interrogation of the documents could potentially provide a deeper and richer assessment of the implications of the immortality frame. Finally, although the documents were published in English, they may not accurately capture the authentic Arabic-based rhetorical reality of ISIS leadership because of nuances in meaning when crafted in English. As noted by Colas (2018), transliteration from one language to another creates special challenges for readers seeking precise interpretations of meaning between original language and translated text.

Future research should continue to explore the possible framing of terrorist statements and communiqués. Broader analyses inclusive of multiple authors could provide insight into broader trends and patterns that reflect an intentional ideological justification that functions as a key recruitment mechanism. Multiple document analysis could also potentially help generate a coherent and consistent pattern of recruiting frame repertoires across group documents.

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