

Narrative & Conflict Monograph Series

Constance Quinlan. *The Story of the Caliphate: Understanding the Islamic State through Narrative Analysis*.

Abstract

In the summer of 2014, the Islamic State catapulted into the international spotlight with its gruesome execution videos and savvy use of social media. Ever since, the United States and its allies have struggled to clearly articulate both the nature of the threat posed by the Islamic State and a coherent strategy for managing it. The author argues that the United States can do neither effectively without first understanding the Islamic State's strategic narrative. First, this paper describes the evolution of the Islamic State. Second, it defines strategic narrative in the context of doctrine, literary narrative, and propaganda, along with methods of interpretation. Third, this paper presents a theme-based content analysis of the Islamic State's official magazine, *Dabiq*, arguing that it advances the Islamic State's strategic narrative by promoting the following five themes: Islamic legitimacy, statehood, belonging, righteousness, and engagement. Finally, this paper concludes by summarizing the Islamic State's strategic narrative and offering insights as to how an understanding of it could influence US policy and strategy.

Discussion

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Introduction

Constance Quinlan's monograph "The Story of the Caliphate: Understanding the Islamic State through Narrative Analysis" is a useful introduction to the Islamic State and *Dabiq*, particularly for those unfamiliar with the group and its glossy propaganda magazine. The

monograph intertwines a history of the Islamic State (IS)¹ with a thematic analysis of the contents of *Dabiq*, and has the intended goal of contributing to U.S. policy and strategy by explication of five key themes underlying what Quinlan refers to as the Islamic State's "strategic narrative".

Overall, the attention paid to this combination of history and theme highlights distinctions from the (arguably) better-known (and more extensively studied) Al Qaeda, especially for readers prone to conflate the two organization's ideology and goals. Quinlan points out that IS's relationship with Al Qaeda is more than simply evolutionary. But, the degree to which U.S. policy and strategy demonstrate any such conflation is never made clear; rather it is assumed. Her analysis rests on combining the ideology and goals of IS as "strategy" and their representation in *Dabiq* as "narrative"; however, a firmer theoretical foundation for "strategic narrative" could sharpen the incisiveness of the analysis and better inform U.S. strategy and policy.

Contribution

Few efforts exist to engage with the entire corpus of *Dabiq* and elicit insights from that body of materials.² In her comprehensive treatment of each issue and task of cataloguing individual articles and their contents, Quinlan identifies five themes: legitimacy, statehood, belonging, righteousness and engagement. In the context of this analysis, these five themes serve to emphasize the role of governance played by the Islamic State. Legitimacy cultivates the will of the people; statehood demonstrates Islamic State governing competence; belonging fosters population identity; righteousness reinforces legitimacy and justifies methods; and engagement reinforces the efficacy of statehood efforts.

Connecting these themes with IS history, Quinlan presents IS as more than a violent group focused on short term expressions of political goals (i.e., terrorists), but rather an organization aspiring to be the politico-religious state governing all Muslims. Quinlan's analysis frequently references U.S. Army doctrine, usefully framing the statehood theme in familiar terms (to some readers) and helps dispel assumptions (presumably by those readers familiar with U.S. Army doctrine) of IS solely as a terrorist group—assumptions that are not cited, referenced or otherwise established. The ill-defined "Western strategic narrative", used as a strawman in the latter half of the thesis, similarly depends on under-examined assumptions, and points to opportunities for deeper engagement with the principles of narrative.

¹ As the monograph points out, the Islamic State organization is known by many names and acronyms (e.g., ISIS, ISIL, Daesh). The response follows the monograph's form for consistency.

² The monograph covers 13 (of 15) issues; the last two presumably issued after data collection completed.

Lost Opportunities and Future Considerations

Greater attention to applicable theories of narrative would have allowed this argument to better distinguish *narrative analysis* from the *thematic analysis* conducted here. Invoking the concept of “strategic narrative” alone warrants a deeper engagement with Freedman’s *The Transformation of Strategic Affairs* (2006) than is provided, as well as the work in international relations (IR) extending this concept.³ Perhaps more importantly, the fields of communication and psychology offer theoretical and applied studies of narrative that would strengthen the monograph’s foundation, sharpen the analysis, and amplify the utility of its conclusions.⁴

The monograph invokes H. Porter Abbott’s cautionary principles of reader action and interpretation, but does not establish a link between Abbott’s literary and single-text-based approach and the broad, multi-form narrative field under study (consisting of multiple articles, multiple *Dabiq* issues, the IS “strategic narrative” and the history of IS).⁵ Missing this link limits efforts to reveal the narrative system’s rhetorical power and the *process* by which narrative shapes understanding and perpetuates ideology.⁶ The monograph discusses what topics and what ideas are contained in *Dabiq*, but the monograph is unable to answer questions about the appeal, the internal logic and the relationship between personal narratives, organizational narratives and cultural

³ See for example: Miskimmon, A., O’Loughlin, B., & Roselle, L. (2014). *Strategic narratives: Communication power and the new world order*. Routledge; Roselle, L., Miskimmon, A., & O’Loughlin, B. (2014). Strategic narrative: A new means to understand soft power. *Media, War & Conflict*, 7(1), 70-84; for deeper theoretical treatment of epistemological issues see: Suganami, H. (2008). Narrative explanation and international relations: Back to basics. *Millennium-Journal of International Studies*, 37(2), 327-356.

⁴ See for example: (rhetoric) Fisher, W. R. (1984). Narration as a human communication paradigm: The case of public moral argument. *Communications Monographs*, 51(1), 1-22; (organizational communication & ideology) Mumby, D. K. (1987). The political function of narrative in organizations. *Communications Monographs*, 54(2), 113-127; (psychology) Polkinghorne, D. E. (1988). *Narrative knowing and the human sciences*. Suny Press; (strategic communication) Halverson, J., Corman, S., & Goodall, H. L. (2011). *Master narratives of Islamist extremism*. Palgrave MacMillan.

⁵ ‘Underreading’ and ‘overreading’ are principles to be wary of during the interpretive process, rather than analytic methods; similarly ‘gaps’ and ‘cruxes’ reveal meaning by offering opportunities for the reader to interrogate the gap, whereas the monograph argues articles from *Dabiq* fill in gaps in the under-defined strategic narrative. More precise definitional work establishing the cultural and cognitive role played by a strategic narrative and the relationship between narrative-as-text (e.g., *Dabiq* articles) and narrative-as-sense-making would unlock the utility of Abbott’s principles.

⁶ For brief, cogent insights into social functions of ideology: Trethewey, A, S.R. Corman, and H.L. Goodall, Jr. "Out of their heads and into their conversation: Countering extremist ideology." *Arizona State University Consortium for Strategic Communication* (2009).

narratives — insights that would help shape U.S. strategy, policy and the means to disrupt the narratives' operation.

Quinlan is right when she points out that the narrative turn of the social sciences has only recently manifested in the fields of IR and political science. However, there is ample theory available from literary studies, narratology, psychology and communication to help engage with narrative in this complex context. To that end, this response concludes with some suggestions. First, defining a story as a sequence of actions involving an agent(s) and a conclusion, and defining a narrative as a system of such stories, strategically disengages narrative from pejorative connotations (“just a story”) and simultaneously opens up avenues of analysis.⁷

Second, defining a narrative as a system allows for considering multiple scales of narrative material revealing connections between personal narratives, organizational narratives and cultural narratives. Thinking of narrative as a system allows for analysis to focus on elements of the system operating within a narrative landscape: recurring story patterns shaping expectations of interpretation and comprehension; characters and archetypes representing societal values; and the relationship of structural components (such as conflict/desire, progressing and complicating actions, resolution) constructing values and meaning.⁸ Last, narrative is composed of a dual logic: it draws its power from both *what is told* (content) and *how it is told* (form).⁹ Addressing the form, along with the content, opens opportunities to fully understand narrative's functions and processes (and disrupt them if appropriate).

These deeper explorations of narrative components are more than ivory tower, academic trivialities. A sophisticated theoretical foundation for understanding narrative allows for nuanced identification of components, meaning-making structures and how the narratives execute their own form of logic, aesthetic appeal and ideological function. Combined with the thematic analysis incorporated in this monograph, such additional insights would be better able to inform U.S. strategy and policy vis-à-vis the Islamic State.

⁷ See for example: Corman, S. R. (2011). Understanding the role of narrative in extremist strategic communication. *Countering Violent Extremism: Scientific Methods and Strategies*, 36.

⁸ For more on narrative landscapes and scales of narratives see: Bernardi, D. L., et.al. (2012). *Narrative landmines: Rumors, Islamist extremism, and the struggle for strategic influence*. Rutgers University Press.

⁹ Ruston, S. W. (2016). “More than Just a Story: Narrative Insights into Comprehension, Ideology, and Decision Making”. In *Modeling Sociocultural Influences on Decision Making: Understanding Conflict, Enabling Stability* (pp. 27-42). CRC Press.

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Today most anyone with access to the news is familiar with the Islamic State and its gruesome tactics. More savvy news consumers will be familiar with the group's apocalyptic vision and its call on others to take up arms and either join ISIS or conduct lone-wolf attacks in support of the Islamic State. In this extremely well written and researched paper, the author argues that the United States cannot accurately understand the threat posed by ISIS nor will it be able to develop an effective strategy to defeat the organization unless it can first understand the group's strategic narrative – how it messages to both its followers and its enemies. In this, I believe the author is correct.

In the paper itself, the author conducts narrative analysis using the Islamic State's magazine, *Dabiq* (the name of which comes from the city where an apocalyptic battle is foretold to take place). In addition to describing the Islamic State and defining strategic narrative in the context of doctrine, literary narrative, and propaganda, the paper uses a theme-based content analysis approach to get at the narrative projected by *Dabiq*. The five themes identified by the author are Islamic legitimacy, statehood, belonging, righteousness, and engagement.

This paper argues that the Islamic State uses *Dabiq* magazine to convey its strategic narrative to a Western audience of potential supporters (I would add an international audience, since ISIS is seeking recruits from all over the world, not just the "West"). The author argues that the strategic narrative tells a story of the Islamic State that attempts to influence the opinions of its targeted audience by aggressively defending the actions of the Islamic State, directly attacking the policies of its enemies, and presenting the declared caliphate as a desirable place to live and work.

In this, one has to admit they have had more than a modicum of success. The story of itself that *Dabiq* tells is one of an ideologically pure organization fighting to correctly implement the world's universal religion, that of Islam, a faith that has fallen victim to hypocrisy, ignorance, and the lure of secularism. The author states that it "tells this story using an attention-getting medium, as prescribed by Goebbels, and the narrative concept of repetition," an interesting thesis to say the least. "It repeats motifs such as the Islamic State flag and key Islamic words and phrases to immerse readers in the specific language of the story."

Finally, it repeats five themes to reinforce the above goals of the strategic narrative: (1) the legitimacy of the Islamic State within Islam, (2) its status as a functioning state, (3) the sense of belonging it communicates to followers regardless of origin, (4) the righteousness of its actions, and (5) its level of engagement with its citizens, enemies, and the world at large. These themes are arrived at by the author using a word count

program that lists the most frequently used words that are relevant to the topic. This to me is a real strength of the paper, since it is more than qualitatively interpretive, but actually has supporting evidence about the themes *Dabiq* is trying to message. Finally, this paper concludes by summarizing the Islamic State's strategic narrative and offering insights as to how an understanding of it could influence U.S. policy and strategy.