

'Remaining and Expanding': An Iconographical Reading of ISIS's Geopolitical Imagination

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Abstract

This study aims at investigating *Dabiq* front covers as an example of popular geopolitics through which ISIS visualizes its geopolitical imagination. Employing iconographical references, ISIS, the 'stateless' Islamic State, attempts to move out of the conceptual frame of traditional geopolitics with its insistence on physical space. Accordingly, *Dabiq* magazine is not a mere call for Hijrah, Jihad, or establishing a Khilafah, rather it is a domain where geopolitical imagination can be infused and circulated. This calls for the importance of studying *Dabiq* through the lens of critical geopolitics. The paper draws on political iconography (Panofsky, 1970, 1982; Muller, 2011) and resemiotization (Iedema 2003) to investigate ISIS's geopolitical ideology with its workings of identification, social affiliation and in-groupness as well as disidentification, out-groupness and otherness. It is found that ISIS, as a non-state actor, utilizes the covers of *Dabiq* to convey its geopolitical imagination that it strives to realize. The analysis reveals that in the process of iconographical resemiotization, actual contexts and original meanings of the iconographical patterns are concealed and backgrounded. New meanings of Khilafah, Hijrah and Jihad are then instantiated to serve ISIS's geopolitical agenda.

Keywords: ISIS, *Dabiq*, geopolitics, popular geopolitics, geopolitical imagination, iconography, resemiotization

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1. Introduction

Since declaring their new Caliphate in June 2014, the Islamic state of Iraq and Syria, (hereafter ISIS) enacts horrendous acts of violence and poses a sequence of geopolitical challenges to regional stability (Isakhan, 2015; Kilcullen, 2016; Shahab & Isakhan, 2018). The argument of the article relates to ISIS's geopolitical agenda at the time the magazine was used. *Dabiq* is one of two official online magazines produced by ISIS. There were 15 issues of *Dabiq* published; the last one was on July 31, 2016. *Dabiq* was replaced by *Rumiyah* (Rome) magazine. The first issue of *Rumiyah* was published in September 5, 2016 and issue 13 was published on September 9, 2017, no issues have appeared since (Wignell et al., 2016, 2017a, 2017b; O'Halloran et al., 2016a). However, the current paper narrows its scope by focusing only on *Dabiq* for the analysis.

ISIS employs *Dabiq* for the purposes of propaganda and recruitment. It is an influential ideological power through which ISIS can disseminate its vision and views to various parts of the world. Significantly, *Dabiq* is written in English, which means that, as a medium of propaganda, it has a very specific set of circulations, audiences, and agendas that it is entangled in the Western society. Studying *Dabiq* is considerably significant to understand more about ISIS, their ideology, their goals and how they justify and legitimize their actions. The analysis focuses particularly on the covers of *Dabiq* for they are significant in a world where so much media consumption is achieved through digital platforms. As a digital selling point, online magazines covers play an essential role in defining

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and sustaining a media brand (Bereznak, 2018). Rendering the theme of the whole magazine clearer for the readers, the covers of *Dabiq* introduce ISIS's ideology that is infused into the magazine as a whole.

The expansion of ISIS is not only geographical but also ideological. ISIS resorts to *Dabiq*, its then official magazine, to conflate itself with early Islamic iconographies: khilafah (caliphate), tawhid (monotheism), manhaj (truth-seeking), hijrah (migration), jama'ah (community) and jihad. However, ISIS has its own interpretation of these concepts. There are multiple interpretations of 'jihad.' It can be interpreted as the internal struggle to be a good Muslim at one end of the scale and a religious obligation to conduct war against non-believers at the other end of the scale, which is the interpretation propagated by ISIS. The interpretation used by ISIS is a jihadist Salafist. ISIS is not just Salafist, which suggests its practices are an extension of Islam, but rather it is a particularist entity with its own interpretive practices as they believe they are commanded by God to impose Islamic rule on humanity and that they have a duty to either enslave or kill those who do not follow them. Importantly, 'Salafist' is not a synonym for violent or radical jihadist. Furthermore, ISIS's interpretation treats tawhid as an extreme monotheism: God (Allah) is one and indivisible. Under this interpretation Trinitarian Christians would be considered polytheists and therefore killing Christians becomes a fair game.

The current paper is concerned with addressing the geopolitical ideology of ISIS in terms of how this ideology is visualized in the covers of *Dabiq*. From a strict geopolitical perspective, ISIS can be described as a non-state

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armed actor (NSAA), in spite of propagating itself as a legitimate global state that went to great pains to conquer and expand physical territory (see Yesiltas & Kardas, 2018 for more on non-states' geopolitics). NSAAs refer to non-state organizations that have the power and resources to develop systematic violent actions. They are identified as "the central protagonists of regime instability, political disorder, violent conflict giving the way to serve insecurity and violence" (Yesiltas & Kardas, 2018, p.4).

Most of the research on ISIS focuses on its ideology (Al Tamimi, 2014; Zelin, 2014), picks apart its social media presence (Maggioni & Magri, 2015; Winter, 2015; Klausen, 2012), and reads its propaganda as a way of understanding its appeal (Hassan & Weiss, 2015). However, there are few works concerned with the visualization of ideologies (see Wignell et al., 2016; Wignell et al., 2017b; Zelin, 2015), in general, and geopolitical ideologies, in particular, (Yesiltas & Kardas, 2018, pp. 97-118; Kardas & Yesiltas, 2018; Hughes, 2007). In seeking to bridge such a gap, this paper attempts to push critical geopolitics further into the intersections where the visual iconography of images and the geopolitical imagination of a non-state actor meet. It investigates how the covers of *Dabiq* offer ISIS a spatial realm through which it can practice its geopolitical aspirations.

2. Methodology

Seeking to devise a distinctive framework for visual analysis, Lister & Wells (2001) call for a more intuitive application of visual analysis since taking written or spoken language as a model would condone the special properties of the visual medium. Iconography, in its investigation

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of pictorial convention, “allow[s] us to start from noticing things about images rather than about written language and then seeking to apply linguistic concepts to images” (Lister & Wells, 2001, p.71). Iconography, therefore, allows for the analysis of images as distinctive genre with unique features and not as an imitating version of the verbal texts. This notion forms the methodological strategy carried in this paper and which aims at incorporating an iconographical resemiotization of visuals. The analysis draws on Iedema’s (2003) resemiotization and Muller’s (2011, pp. 283-297) political iconography which further developed Panofsky’s (1982). Muller describes iconography as an “inter-disciplinary comparative method [...] based on the critical analysis of visual and textual sources” (Muller 2011, p. 289).

2.1 Data Collection

Dabiq covers are downloaded from Jihadology.net. Jihadology is a personal webpage by Aaron Y. Zelin, a known terrorism researcher affiliated to The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Zelin’s webpage provides safe pdfs of ISIS’s magazines.

3. Geopolitics and Geopolitical Imagination

The term ‘geopolitics’ was coined by the Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjelln in 1899 to draw a link between geographical knowledge and the political aims of nations and states (Ó Tuathail & Agnew ٢٠٠٣, p. 457). However, this ‘classical’ geopolitical perspective is concerned with the ‘permanent realities’ of the earth, such as the location of populations

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and resources, borders between states, the topography and climate of neighbouring and so on (Hughes, 2007, p. 979; O'Tuathail 1996, p. 17). The contemporary approach of 'critical geopolitics' shifts the attention from geographical realities and examines how international politics is 'imagined' spatially or geographically (Sharp 2005, p.357). From a critical perspective, geopolitics is divided into 'formal geopolitics', which is concerned with the theorizing of academic commentators, 'practical geopolitics', which is related to political leaders and 'popular geopolitics', which is most commonly related to media artifacts where power, ideology and identity are constituted and circulated (Ó Tuathail, 2005, p. 68). As such, geopolitics is not only the workings of statecraft rather geopolitical ideologies are infused in popular cultures as well. Geopolitics extends outside the realm of the state to the domain of magazines, news reports, cartoons, movies and other types of social activities (see Power & Crampton, 2005). Many scholars have explored geopolitics in various kinds of popular cultures like movies (Dodds 2003; 2006), comics (Dittmer 2005; 2007), and magazines (Sharp 2000).

Geopolitical discourse is employed by officials and leaders to constitute and represent world affairs (O' Tuathail, 2002; Muller, 2008). Having a geopolitical vision, Klinke argues, enables groups to 'claim' that they "perceive a deeper layer of reality – to see the world as it really is". Critically, geopolitics is a form of discourse which is able to produce and circulate spatial representations of global politics. It is a "tag that lends authority to politicians, journalists and academics" (Klinke, 2009, para 1). Correspondingly, examining geographical representations helps to reflect

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on people's understanding of the world which differs for a host of reasons: religious, ethnic, political, and so on (Dodds, 2007; Klinke, 2009).

Geopolitical imagination, as argued by Daniels (2011, p. 182), is “a powerful ingredient of many kinds of knowledge and communication, within and beyond geography as an academic subject, as a way of envisioning the world, experiencing and reshaping it too.” Geopolitical imagination is a psychological strategy that is employed through media tools and technology of media as well as psychological knowledge against rivals (Kurecic, 2015, p. 5). Accordingly, geopolitics is considerably affected by linguistic devices, including metaphors, as well as visual symbols.

Throughout human history, geographical imagining of distant and different Others justifies and provides the logic behind launching wars (Morrissey, 2014). Creating a geopolitical imagined proposition, the United States propagandized that the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq was connected to the 11 September 2001 attacks. This geopolitical linkage helped the administration to persuade the citizens and the international community that invading Iraq is an inevitable step to win the War on Terror (Foster, Megoran, & Dunn, 2017). Another example of the use of geopolitical imagination to redefine world order, according to Dodds (2007, p. 30), is George W Bush's phrase 'axis of evil' which describes the trio of Iran, Iraq and North Korea. Such a phrase, Dodds argues, provided a “geographical template of the world.”

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Geopolitical imagination can be visually investigated. Visuals are powerful geopolitical framing devices because, according to Wischmann (1987, p. 70), they are “capable of not only obscuring issues but [also] of overwhelming facts” (as cited in Rodriguez & Dimitrova 2011, p. 50). Geopolitical imaginaries are sustained by different visual sources; maps, images and symbols. Culcasi (2016) traces how Palestinian Jordanians spatially imagine Palestinian territory through cartoons, maps, shellacked tree trunks, and artwork. She contends that these material expressions of territorial identity establish “geopolitical acts of remembering and resistance” (Culcasi, 2016, p. 85).

4. Geopolitical Imagination from an Iconographical Perspective

Muller (2011) perceives iconography as both a method and approach to examine visuals. Iconography is a qualitative method of visual content analysis which relates visuals to their cultural and social context. It links currently circulating images with previous images stored in an iconic memory ((Liebhart, 2016). In this regard, iconographical analysis is significant since “images circulating in the political orbit always feature historical and actual linkages and references” (Liebhart, 2016, p. 64). The importance and uniqueness of iconography as a method lies in its ‘bifocal’ perspective, “focusing on the visual aspects of contemporary problems in politics, society, and culture, reflected in the lens of thorough historical comparison” (Muller, 2011, p. 285).

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Panofsky (1982, pp. 40-41) divides iconographical analysis into three steps: representational, iconographical and iconological. However, this division is only on the theoretical level, applying iconography is an integrated process with no different or separate stages (Eberlein, 2008, p. 179 cited in Muller, 2011). Representational meaning is concerned with the surface analysis of image objects; it is more or less like verbal denotation. As for iconographical symbolism, it deals with the ideas or concepts expressed in a given image. Relying on iconographical symbolism as an analytical tool is meant to “ascertain those underlying principles which reveal the basic attitude of a notion, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion” (Panofsky’s, 1970, p. 55). Meanwhile, iconological symbolism tackles the interpretation of the meaning revealed by the iconographical references. It reveals the “intrinsic meaning or content constituting the world of ‘symbolical’ values” (Panofsky 1982, p. 40). Muller calls iconology a ‘forensic’ approach that is similar to a “detective story, in which various threads are woven together” (2011, p. 286). As such, both the iconographical and iconological levels resemble verbal connotation in tracing the signification beyond the visual objects.

Invoking different associations, the two notions of geopolitical imagination and iconography may seem unrelated at the first glance. However, drawing on the assumption that geopolitics is operated within not only immediate social/political milieu in which geopolitical discourses circulate and are engaged with (O’Tuathail & Agnew, 1992) but are also related to kind of historical and ideological background. To this end, examining iconography helps in revealing the deep histories of meaning-

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making process of *Dabiq* covers and informs ISIS's use of imagery (i.e. the days of the Prophet Muhammad, the Abbasids, etc).

O'Tuathail & Agnew (1992) contend that a discursive analysis of geopolitics should consider the political and social contexts in which geopolitical power is infused. Correspondingly, iconographical analysis is used in the current study to examine the visualization of ISIS's geopolitical dynamics in a way that relates them to their social context. As explained previously, iconological analysis functions through context. Muller (2011, p. 285) argues that "iconology comes last as the third step, and is based on thorough research of visual and textual sources and their verbal condensation in the form of a contextualized interpretation." She stresses that iconological analysis answers the question: "What information do the studied visuals convey about the social, political, and cultural context in which they were produced and perceived?" From this specific point, the study finds that integrating the iconological stage of analysis with Iedema's (2003) notion of resemiotization would be significant. Since tracing the context of the presented social event and finding how it is resemiotized and translated to a new meaning help further in revealing the ideology behind it, which is the task of the iconological analysis.

5. Resemiotization

Resemiotization is introduced within the discipline of social semiotics (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006, Iedema, 2003). Interconnected with the iconological stage of analysis, Iedema's (2003) resemiotization identifies

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the process of how socially mediated and constructed meanings become historicized, recontextualized, and mobilized in social practices. As such, resemiotization is “about how meaning making shifts from context to context, from practice to practice, or from one stage of a practice to the next” (p. 41). Leppanen et al. (2014, p.6) point out that resemiotization is a significant semiotic resources for identity performance and useful analytical tool in understanding complex social media practices.

The notion of resemiotization is meant to serve as an analytical tool for tracing how semiotics are translated and investigating why these semiotics (rather than others) are mobilized to function within certain contexts (Iedema, 2003, p. 29). In other words, the process of resemiotization is meant to provide answers to the questions of “how, why, and which meanings become recontextualized” under certain conditions. (Iedema, 2003, p. 40).

6. Analysis

ISIS, the ‘stateless’ Islamic State, feels the urge to establish to itself as a territory even if it is imagined. *Dabiq* then offers ISIS the spatial dimensions of constructing an imaginary territorial entity. ISIS’s geopolitical ideologies are embedded in the name of their magazine ‘*Dabiq*’ itself. *Dabiq* is named after a small village in northern Syria, near the Turkish border. However, the village of Dabiq, according to a ‘radical’ reading of an Islamic Tradition, is where the Romans¹ finally meet the

Per Abu Huraira. Quran/Hadith study site: The ,٦٩٢٤ Hadith ,٩ .Chap ,٤١ .Sahih-Muslim Hadith, Vol ١ .Only Quran

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Muslim armies in a confrontation 'between good and evil', and where the Muslims finally win and destroy the Romans (Fraser, 2014). As such, the title '*Dabiq*' stands as a spatial iconographical reference that considerably relates the magazine to ISIS's geopolitical ambition. Emphasising the geopolitical implication of the title, both the first and second editions of the magazine's table of contents are preceded by a quote from Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the founder of al-Qaeda in Iraq, stating "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".

The covers follow a structure that is consistently repeated. At the top of the cover is placed the name of the magazine '*Dabiq*' and information about the magazine number, its periodicity and the issue date. Interestingly, the dates on the cover use the Hijri Lunar calendar. Using this dating system has symbolic significance since it refers to the Hijrah of the prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina, which, in turn, adds emphasis on ISIS's agenda of making its new recruits leaving their homelands to join it.

In the middle of the cover comes a heading with different colours that highlight the main topic to appear inside the magazine. The most salient element is the visual object. The bottom of the cover includes two or three titles of the most prominent articles inside the magazine which carry the theme of the issue as well. The analysis is divided into four sections that deal with the various iconographies deployed by ISIS to convey its geopolitical agenda.

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6.1 Spatial Iconographies

ISIS's geopolitical agenda is addressed in the first issue of *Dabiq*, 'The Return of Khilafah' which is, as its title suggests, an iconographical reference to the declaration of the Caliphate. The colour pallet of the cover consists of dark brown and beige which is iconographically related to the old Islamic manuscripts. However, the most significant iconographical reference is the backgrounded map of the Arabian Peninsula. The cover depicts a map of the Arabian Peninsula without the borders separating the states and without the names of the states themselves, which, in turn, emphasises the geopolitical aspirations of ISIS to rule the Peninsula as one 'kingdom of God' without borders.

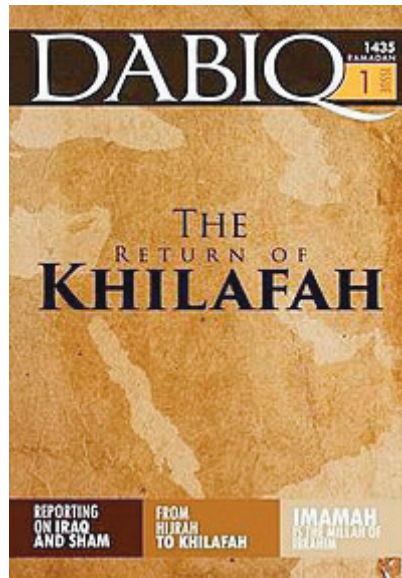


Figure 1 A screen shot of *Dabiq* first issue

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Acting as powerful geopolitical tools, maps help in reflecting and expressing geographic knowledge, political agendas, and social stereotypes (Culcasi, 2006). The map acts as an iconographical reference which carries iconic status. Wood & Fels (1992, p. 117) put it “[i]conicity is the indispensable quality of the map. It is the source and principle of the map’s analogy to objects, places, relations, and events”. The map is resemiotized here as a spatial metaphor, representing ISIS’s aspirations for establishing Islamic khilafah. It visualizes the notion of ‘Ummah’ (global Muslim Community); one of the most prominent elements of ISIS’s geopolitical agenda, through which ISIS seeks to redraw the map of the Middle East.

The geopolitical procedures of the declaration of the establishment of the Khilafah as a territorial entity are represented in the covers of the two subsequent issues entitled ‘*The Flood*’ and ‘*A Call to Hijrah*’, establishing a sequencing of ‘how to’ pattern. The covers provide the methods, or in other words, the procedures that have to be conducted in order to re-establish the Khilafah. Migration is the central theme of these procedures.

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Figure 2 A screen shot of *Dabiq* second and third issues

The second issue of *Dabiq*, 'The Flood,' uses the iconographical reference of the story of Noah to convey an ideological positioning. Interestingly, the image on the cover is from a promotional poster for the epic movie Noah. The poster is resemiotized in the cover of *Dabiq* to serve ISIS's propaganda purposes and to appeal to the Western would-be recruits. The intended communicative purpose of the movie poster is then backgrounded and a new purpose, reporting ISIS's agenda on migration, is foregrounded in the process of resemiotization. The most salient visual element in the cover is that of Noah's ark, which is contextualized by the accompanying word 'the flood'. The ark establishes a religious iconographical reference. Comparing their enemy to those who rejected

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Noah's prophecy, ISIS offers their readers a choice between destruction and repentance with caption highlighting such a theme: "It's Either the Islamic State or the Flood".

The third issue of *Dabiq*, 'The Call to Hijrah' expands the theme of the second issue making it clearer to the readers. It is concerned with the jihadists' call to Muslims worldwide to move to Iraq and Syria to join the new Islamic Caliphate. Iconography is highlighted in the cover through the term 'Hijrah' which is the Arabic equivalent for 'migration.' Strictly, it is migration to Muslim lands, whereas, in ISIS's interpretation, it is migration to the new Caliphate. The word 'Hijrah' is anglicized rather than being translated which further stresses its iconographical orientations. It takes its iconography from recalling the journey of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions from Mecca to Medina in 622 C.E., invoking religious nostalgia. Accordingly, resemiotizing the journey of the Prophet Muhammad is another instance of discharging process where the original religious meaning is de-committed for the sake of interpersonally recharging ISIS's new offered story of Jihadi Hijrah (for more discussion on commitment and instantiation of meaning see Hood, 2008; Martin, 2008)..

The second cover depicts fighters of ISIS who are carried on trucks. The participants are depicted with less detail and have softer focus. Besides, no vector connects the people depicted together, which can be translated to what Kress & van Leeuwen (2006) refer to as 'locative circumstance.' Locative circumstance images mainly describe an event or a setting without focusing on the participants included. Iconising the Hijrah as an event

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is the central theme of the current example. The diagonal lines leading to the truck wheels and the blurry sands suggest motion and movement associated with the Hijrah notion. The dominating desert sands recall the iconographical reference of early Islamic Hijrah.

Figures 1 and 2 are examples of religious iconographies. However, resemiotizing them in the covers of *Dabiq* online magazine enacts a new translation which deprives them of their historical and religious significance. ISIS twists the classical meaning of Khilafah and pious Caliphs and employs it as a vehicle for imposing its geopolitical agenda. Hijrah becomes a call for new recruits all over the world to immigrate to ISIS's controlled territories to fight alongside it and to become a member of their imagined Ummah. In the process of resemiotization, Prophet Muhammad's divinely commanded Hijrah, which was not required unless there is a threat facing the small community of Muslims at that time, is encountered. Hijrah becomes a pre-requisite for ISIS's territorial expansion through military involvement.

The tenth issue of *Dabiq* is called 'The Laws of Allah or the Laws of Men'. ISIS's black flag occupies most of the cover representing a powerful spatial resource of iconography.

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Figure 3 A screen shot of *Dabiq* tenth issue

Alvano (2013) points out that in Jihadi propaganda, political symbols are often combined to create symbolic representations. The black flag is traced back to the beginning of Islam. It was the battle flag of the Prophet Muhammad. The flag regained prominence in the 8th century with its use by the leader of the Abbasid revolution, Abu Muslim, who led a revolt against the Umayyad clan and its Caliphate. Since then, as stated by Alvano, the image of the black flag has been used as a symbol of religious revolt and battle, which tells a lot about why ISIS has chosen this particular colour of flag. The flag takes its iconographical significance also from the scripture inscribed on it: “there is no god but Allah. Muhammad is the messenger of Allah”. The black writing and the white circle are meant to represent the seal of the Prophet Muhammad (Kovács, 2015, p55).

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Flags, in general, act as geopolitical symbols which indicate territorial sovereignty and nationalism. The depicted black flag of ISIS can be then perceived as a 'bonding icon' (see Martin & Stenglin, 2007) of social affiliation, ideological belonging and in-groupness; the realms through which ISIS can construct its geopolitical imagination. The designing of an independent flag reflects ISIS's ambition to signal that it is a sovereign state, not a mere radical group or even an organization. The flag is resemiotized here to enable the viewer to interpret the flag as a spatial icon for ISIS's domination instead of being ancient religious mythical flag that goes back to early Islam.

The geopolitical consequences of the declaration of the establishment of the Khilafah as a territorial entity are presented in the covers of the fourth issue and fifth issues.

6.2 Resemiotizing Religious Icons: Instantiations of Decommitment

The territorial logic driving the NSAAs revolves around two underlying perspectives: conception of territoriality and tactics of territoriality (Jabareen, 2015, p. 51). The conception of territoriality indicates how non-state actors conceive territoriality and develop discourses of it similar to state-centric geopolitical discourse. As for the tactical dimension, it refers to the military and political means employed to achieve the conceived territoriality (Elden, 2009; Vollaard, 2009 as cited in Yesiltas & Kardas, 2018, p. 13).

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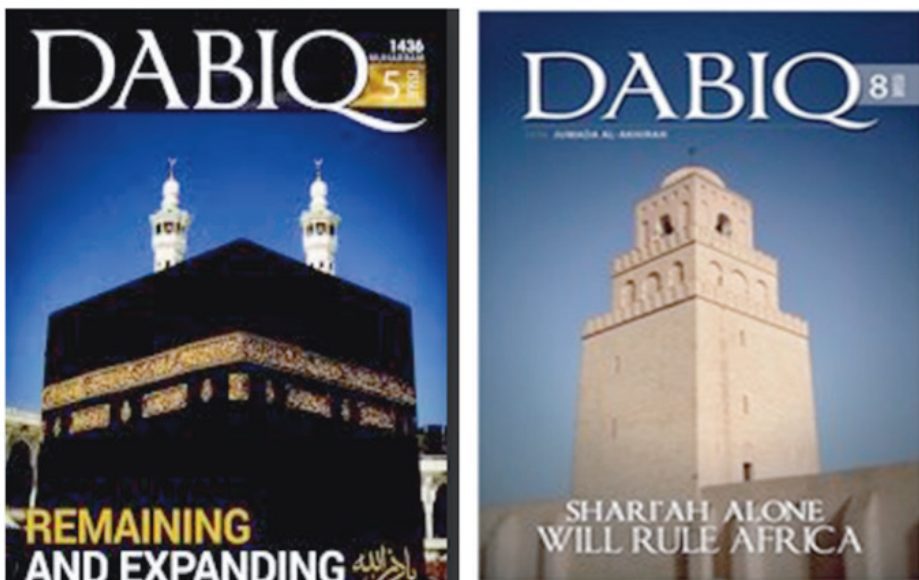


Figure 4 A screen shot of *Dabiq* fifth and eighth issues

In the case of *Dabiq*, ISIS conveys its conception of territoriality to construct a space of identity in relation to their apocalyptic vision. They employ religious attributes in the covers of *Dabiq* to convey this vision. As Agnew (2006, p.185) notes “religion and geopolitics have always had ties of one sort or another”. Depicting the Ka’aba, ISIS is conferred with the attributes of being the focal point of Islamic worship, and the ‘House of God.’ The resemiotization of the Ka’aba, the Holy Direction, visualizes ISIS’s geopolitical ambition to become the main reference for all Muslims. Tunisia’s Great Mosque of Kairouan, displayed in the cover of the eighth issue, represents the oldest Islamic place of prayer in North Africa. The mosque is perceived also as one of the holiest sites in Islam after Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem (Brockman, 2011). The mosque stands, then, as a spatial attribute of Africa on which ISIS seeks to tighten its grip.

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Resemiotized in the covers of *Dabiq*, the powerful religious significance of the Ka'aba and the Mosque of Kairouan is reduced to mere visual quotes through which ISIS infuses its geopolitical ambition to expand its territorial control. It can be then argued that resemitotizing such religious icons on the covers of *Dabiq* makes them undergo backgrounding or 'automatization' process (Halliday, 1982), which in turn foregrounds ISIS's representation. This means that "the foregrounding of one [semiotic] is often accompanied (or achieved) by the backgrounding or 'automatization' of other semiotics, to the point where they appear so normal and natural" (Iedema, 2003, p. 40).

The notions of Khilafah, Hijrah, Jihad and territorial expansion expressed in the previous examples operate within the tenet of 'physical separation' characterizing ISIS's agenda, which aims to separate new recruits from their families and homelands. However, ISIS's geopolitical thought aims to separate as well the recruits ideologically from existing social norms and laws. This relates to ISIS's religious and political iconoclastic ideologies (see Shahab & Isakhan, 2018) which are exemplified in issues 4 and 15 of *Dabiq*.

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Figure 5 A screen shot of Dabiq fourth and fifteenth issues

The fourth cover depicts the ISIS's black flag flying in front of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, hoisted atop an Egyptian obelisk that occupies the centre of the piazza. Considering the composed visuals, the first cover assumes its iconography from intertextual 'binary juxtaposition'. The opposing iconographies of St. Peter's square, the token of the Vatican, the ancient obelisk, representing Egypt, and ISIS's black flag display the group's geopolitical ambitions of world conquest. Such a theme is shown in the gloss provided by ISIS's deceased spokesperson Muhammad al-Adnani: "We will conquer your Rome, break your crosses, and enslave your women, by the permission of Allah, the Exalted." Bringing three different

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spatial domains altogether; St. Peter's square, the ancient Egyptian obelisk carrying the ISIS black flag, *Dabiq* frames its geopolitical ideology as a continuation of a battle of civilizations. It visually reinforces ISIS's agenda of destroying cultural and religious diversity. The obelisk originally came from Egypt but has been in Rome for nearly 2000 years and in its present location since 1586. However, the obelisk is resemiotized here as the best location to sue to display the ISIS's flag prominently.

A clear act of iconoclasm, which is an ISIS's trademark, is visually committed in the covers of *Dabiq* against these iconic iconographies. The action of breaking the cross in the cover of issue 15 is another example of iconoclastic actions against religious icons. ISIS's black flag has a strong interpersonal significance that if the flag is part of an image, the rest of the image is connected to ISIS and the value of tawhid is conflated with whatever other values are represented (Wignell et al., 2016, p. 13). Accordingly, the binary juxtaposition between the cross and ISIS's black flag hints at breaking the cross and killing Christians are a sign of tawhid.

6.4 Resemiotization as a Process of Otherization

Geopolitical imagination enacts a process of Otherization (Routledge, 1996) which involves the creation of Us Vs. Them dichotomy (Dodds, 2007; Morrissey, 2014). In a study of the iconisation employed by ISIS in *Dabiq* magazine, Wignell et al. (2016) propose that ISIS's vision of an idealised world is built according to a re-imagining of the earlier Islamic principles and practices. "This world is actively and violently opposed to an anti-world of 'near' and 'far' enemies: the world of kufr: a world

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populated by apostate Muslims, idol-worshippers, Crusaders and Jews” (p.18). In Otherizing its enemies, ISIS distinguishes between far and near enemies. ‘Far Enemy’ refers to the Western world: The United States, its Western allies and Israel (Burke, 2004, p.19). As for the notion of ‘Near Enemy,’ it refers to secular Arab regimes considered apostate by jihadists (Byman, 2003, 146). ISIS claims the necessity of ‘purifying’ the Islamic community by getting rid of Shia and other religious minorities as well as rival jihadist groups, such as Al Qaeda and Muslim Brotherhood (see *Dabiq* issue 14). The Islamic State’s long list of near enemies includes the Iraqi Shia, Hezbollah, the Yazidis and the Kurds in Iraq and Syria (Byman & Williams, 2015). The covers from issue 11 till 14 are devoted to visualizing ISIS’s far and near opponents.



Figure 6 A screen shot of *Dabiq* eleventh and thirteenth issues

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The cover of issue 11 makes an iconographical reference to the Battle of al Ahzab (the Parties) in 627CE. The historical battle, when the Jews plotted with various Arab tribes to attack al-Medina to besiege Muhammad and his Companions, is resemiotized to stand as an analogy for the new 'crusader' coalition for Iraq and Syria 'Operation Inherent Resolve.' The cover depicts Erdogan and Obama as representatives of the 'new Ahzab'.

The cover of issue 13 focuses on the near enemy. It is entitled 'The Rafidah: From Ibn Saba' to the Dajjal'. The Shia is dysphemistically described with the 'derogatory' word 'rafidah' (rejecters). Ibn Saba', the founder of Shia sectarianism, is mentioned in the title in reference to ISIS's claim that Shia Islam was introduced by Jews pretending to be Muslims so as to triggering sectarian strife and dividing the Muslim world. Ibn Saba' was claimed to be a Jewish convert to Islam whose reverence for Prophet Muhammad's cousin Ali bin Abi Talib is regarded by Salafist Muslims as a Judaizing heretic threatening to undermine Khilafah (Anthony, 2012). The term Dajjal is mentioned as well to support ISIS's interpretation that Shia *mahdi*, the 'Hidden Imam', is actually the 'Antichrist,' or the *Dajjal*. The resemiotization of Al-Ahzab battle, Ibn Saba' and Dajjal's iconographies creates an Us vs. Them dichotomy, rationalizes the logics of ISIS's committed violence and frames its geopolitical imagination of geographical expansions by presenting itself as the defender of Islam.

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Conclusion

Images are traditionally 'read' through decoding the semiotic choices employed within the image frame. However, exploring what goes beyond the frame of the image would be significant in the process of ideological visual analysis. This particular point signals the importance of applying an approach that helps in freeing the visuals from the narrow scope of context: social event or institutional perspective, and takes them to an extended social context that goes beyond these contextual parameters. In doing so, the study investigates ISIS's geopolitical imagination from a visual critical approach, adopting Muller's (2011) political iconography and Iedema's (2003) model of resemiotization. The study highlights the importance of integrating these two models together since while applying iconography dissolves the image from the narrow scope of immediate context (e.g social and institutional contexts) and relates it to different cultures and human experiences, resemiotization examines the new instantiated meaning unfolded in this process. The study then shows that applying each tool of the integrated framework adds new layer of meaning to the interpretation process of the covers visuals. This, in turn, digs more into ISIS's geopolitical ideologies manifested in the covers of its magazine *Dabiq*.

It is found that ISIS's geopolitical imagination considerably pivots around visualizing the concepts of Khilafah (Caliphate), Hijrah (migration) and Ummah (Muslim community) to construct social affiliation, in-groupness and identification. The analysis yields that much of the

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meaning of the analyzed covers comes from resemiotizing iconographical references; the borderless map, the ark, the holy Ka'aba, St. Peter's Basilica, the Egyptian obelisk, the black flag, Al Ahzab Battle, Ibn Saba and Dajjal. In the process of resemiotization, actual contexts and original meaning of these iconographical patterns are concealed and backgrounded. In this regard, new meanings of Khilafah, Hijrah and Jihad are instantiated in the process of resemiotization to serve ISIS's geopolitical agenda

The study at hand marks the need for examining terrorists' instrumentalization of visuals which helps in revealing their political vision and conveying their geopolitical thought. As for the adopted methodological approach, the findings of this study have significant implication for future research directions. That is, it is shown that an iconographical reading, which considers the model of resemiotization together, may have the potential to shed further insights for analysing geopolitical ideologies. However, the empirical data in support of the analysis consists of 10 covers of the magazine *Dabiq*. More data are acquired to learn if the interpretative patterns identified by the applied analytical framework are consistent with other visual texts inside the magazine or elsewhere, e.g. in the Internet.

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