How the Islamic State Weaponizes Imitation in Its Propaganda

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In the first months after the proclamation of its 'caliphate', the Islamic State (IS) executed by beheading local inhabitants, soldiers, as well as Western hostages. James Foley, Steven Sotloff, David Haines, Hervé Gourdel, Alan Henning, and Peter Kassig—the lives of all these men ended in the Syrian desert while being clothed in orange jumpsuits. By dressing its to-be-executed hostages as such, IS reminds its audiences of how the United States humiliates Muslim prisoners at Guantánamo (Richey & Edwards 2019). They mirror the way in which the US violates the human dignity of their captives. What IS communicates through this archetypical form of *aggressive imitation* is that the US's claims to human rights and moral superiority are nothing but a façade. Aggressive imitation, here, is not just a justification for IS's violence but also, fundamentally, an expression of its worldview—of restoring Muslim honour by avenging the humiliation Muslims have suffered, in Guantánamo and elsewhere.

Imitation in Human and International Relations

The ability, (unconscious) willingness, and tendency of human beings to imitate "constitutes the fundamental structure of human existence" (Brighi 2019:126). In his work *Les lois sociales* (1898), French sociologist Gabriel Tarde demonstrates how imitation shapes human society and relations. Most human beings, Tarde argues, "are forever imitating someone else" unless they themselves create an innovation, "an event that rarely happens" (1898:23-4). As such, imitation is not a premeditated strategy but rather a structural but 'spontaneous' feature of human social life. Indeed, René Girard (2000:310) writes, "no existence is free from imitation".

In *The Light that Failed*, political scientists Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes develop a theory of imitation to explain (at least in part) why the West would be "losing the fight for democracy". Once the Soviet model was obliterated after the fall of the USSR, former Soviet Russia and Eastern Europe became subjects of a liberal 'imitation imperative'. In the authors' view, 1989 was the first year of the Age of Imitation. Although the imitation imperative may be declared dead by now, imitation still plays a peculiar role in international politics, as it is now strategically employed for the purposes of former imitators. Given the omnipresence of imitation in human relations, this is unsurprising.

Putin's Russia, however, takes the strategic use of imitation to a new level. Instead of just renouncing and rebelling against the imitation imperative, as in the case of Eastern Europe, Russia began weaponizing its imitative strategy. Russia instrumentalized imitation against the very states it had (superficially) imitated for years. In recent days, we have seen painful examples of such aggressive imitation. Initially justifying Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, President Putin invoked (supposed threats of imminent) 'genocide' of the Russian-speaking minority in Eastern Ukraine. We see a mirror, here, of NATO's justification of its intervention in Kosovo. Russia's assault on Kyiv, symbolically, commenced "with the destruction of the television tower just as NATO attacked the television tower in Belgrade in 1999" (Krastev 2022). By imitating rhetoric and foreign policy actions, Russia seeks to hold up a mirror, to undermine and prove the hypocrisy of the West and its foreign policy (Krastev & Holmes 2019:90). As such, aggressive imitation is employed by Russia to "justify one's own aggressive acts" (ibid.:13).

Islamic State and Aggressive Imitation

Krastev and Holmes present aggressive imitation as an overarching logic or paradigm of Russian foreign policy towards the West. They develop their argument in explicit reference to a specific geographical and historical context—that is, Russia in the post-Cold War era. As a consequence, the authors do not thoroughly engage with the subject at hand in a theoretical manner, but rather express their theoretical argument about the nature, implications, and dynamics of aggressive imitation implicitly and always in direct relation to historical examples of Russian state behavior.

Following Tarde's diagnosis of imitation as an inherent quality of humankind, the post-1989 'Age of Imitation' should not be regarded as a deviance or peculiarity of the first post-Cold War decades. Rather, there may have been various ages of imitation—that is, historical periods in which one state (block) or empire mimics the (probably more successful) model of another. In any case, imitative dynamics and mechanisms can be potentially valid as well in contexts other than the one in which Krastev and Holmes formulated them.

This article clarifies the concept of aggressive imitation theoretically and applies it to Islamic State propaganda. For IS, as for Russia, the West is an enemy that must be opposed fiercely. Both entities, moreover, can be conceptualized as challengers of the global status quo as far as the international state order is concerned (Ahram 2017). It is, therefore, interesting to see whether both actors also employ similar (discursive) strategies. Instead of a foreign policy paradigm, aggressive imitation is reconceptualized as a propaganda device. The actor employing this strategy, whether Russia or IS, demonstrates the hypocrisy or 'hidden' malign character of its opponent—both to justify its own acts and to express its sense of deprivation. Together with other tools, aggressive imitation enables IS to communicate its worldview to its target audience.

On the one hand, this article enriches our understanding of the strategic logic of IS's propaganda efforts by exploring the previously unexplored: the role, relevance, and forms of aggressive imitation in IS propaganda. Krastev and Holmes have not theorized the idea of aggressive imitation thoroughly; it is an idea that is developed (rather loosely) by reference to Russian imitative practice. Therefore, on the other hand, this article also contributes to the further crystallization of the theory and offers a novel application thereof, as a propaganda device. It seeks to fulfill this dual purpose by analyzing one particular product of IS's propaganda machine: *Dabiq*, its English-language glossy magazine. The analysis entails an in-depth close-reading analysis of the various instances of aggressive imitation, arriving at a better understanding by deconstructing and (re)situating them in the appropriate context.

The Islamic State's Propaganda Machine, *Dabiq*, and the West

The fact that IS "puts its most talented commanders into the media department" is an illustration of the importance it attaches to propaganda (Whiteside 2016:23). Over the years, IS has designed "a complex propaganda system unprecedented in the history of terrorist organizations" (Baele 2020:2).

The Contours of Islamic State Propaganda: Its Message, Means, and Methods

IS's ideological message is not highly original. As argued by Laghmari (2020:52), it can be "situated within the large and diverse family of Islamism". IS's message follows Sayyid Qutb's diagnosis of the modern world as resembling pre-Islamic *jahiliyyah*, "caused by all those outside its narrow in-group" (Ingram 2016:460). IS claims that "none of the states in the international system" implements *shari'a*—which therefore, in the eyes of IS, constitutes *tawāghīt* (idolatrous) regimes that must be fought (thus applying Ibn Taymiyyah's *takfir*) (Laghmari 2020:52). Having divided the world into two camps—the camp of 'true' (that is, IS-aligned) Muslims and the camp of *kufr* (idolators)—IS calls upon the former to fight not only the West, which is presented (as does Qutb) as "the prime 'civilizational enemy'", but especially other jihadi groups (ibid.:59). Since IS claims to represent "a unified identity of oppressed Muslims around the world" in its caliphate, portraying itself as "the sole holder of legitimate violence in the Islamic world", obliterating other jihadi groups and militias is vital to IS's campaign (ibid.:76).

Ingram (2018:14) identifies 'boom-bust' dynamics in IS propaganda—that is, IS adjusts its propaganda to the status of its politico-military campaign. The most dominant themes in IS's (externally oriented) propaganda message thus vary in salience across time.

Apocalyptic utopianism is the idea that Muslims can live a pious and harmonious life in IS's "functioning and thriving state where public services are robust, food is plentiful, and the economy is growing" (Gartenstein-Ross et al. 2016:21). Because of IS's territorial diminishment, this first narrative is much less important today but still relevant for this analysis of aggressive imitation, as it is concerned with the period between 2014 and 2017, during which IS constituted a powerful territorial 'state-like' actor. Second, IS builds its caliphate upon the *manhaj* (methodology) of Prophet Muhammad, by imitating the *salaf al-salih* (the first three Muslim generations) and restoring a medieval conception of *shari'a* (Ingram 2016:460). Third, to project its strength and self-proclaimed supremacy (Winter 2015:22), IS demonstrates *brutal violence*. Fourth, IS presents itself as the defender of oppressed (Sunni) Muslims worldwide, who are "victims of their enemies' evil actions" (*victimhood*) (Baele, Coan & Boyd 2020:110). Therefore, it has to "exact revenge on behalf of Sunni Muslims against the Crusader-Shi'ite-Zionist conspiracy allegedly mounted against them" (Winter 2015:22). The fifth key narrative in IS propaganda is *sowing discord*. Through its propaganda, IS seeks to achieve the demise of its jihadist adversaries "by creating, highlighting, and exploiting divisions in their ranks" (Gartenstein-Ross et al. 2016:19). Moreover, IS seeks to incite sectarian conflicts "to present itself as the vanguard and protector of Sunnis across the world" (ibid.:21). IS also aims to "eliminate the grayzone", which consists of Muslims in the West, forcing them to choose the side of the 'camp of Islam' against the 'camp of *kufr*'" (Ingram 2016:469). Sixth and last, IS "has to prove to local militants that it possesses superior jihadist credentials and is stronger militarily" than its jihadi competitors (*discrediting the competition*) (Winter 2015:17).

With regard to the strategic logic underpinning IS's propaganda, Ingram (2020:21) states that IS's full-spectrum propaganda seeks to "compound the "effects" of IS's words and deeds while seeking to diminish the "effects" of its enemies' words and deeds". Importantly, IS's "words and deeds"—its propaganda efforts and politico-military campaign—are deeply interlinked. The latter forms IS's "competitive system of control", which is "the politico-military apparatus IS uses to outcompete adversaries for territory and support" (ibid.:22). The former constitute IS's "competitive system of meaning", which provides its audiences "a lens through which to perceive the conflict, its actors, and indeed the world more broadly" (ibid.:24). As such, IS propaganda functions as a "'force multiplier' for IS's system of control and a 'force nullifier' against its enemy's system of control" (ibid.:25). Moreover, IS propaganda can be characterized as a crisis-solution narrative (Baele, Coan & Boyd 2020:94). On the one hand, IS propaganda emphasizes "the severity of an allegedly ongoing crisis" (that is, the state of the world as modern *jahiliyyah*, caused by the camp of *kufr*). On the other hand, subsequently, IS presents itself as the solution to this crisis.

The rationale of IS's propaganda machine is "to shape the perceptions and polarize the support of target audiences" (Ingram 2018:4). It does so in two distinct ways. Firstly, IS makes rational-choice appeals to so-called pragmatic factors (e.g., the security and livelihood of its target audiences), thus exploiting a 'logic of consequence' (Ingram 2015:729). In doing so, IS compels its audiences to make "cost-benefit decisions contrasting IS's politico-military agenda with alternatives" (Ingram 2020:25). Secondly, IS also makes identity-choice appeals to so-called perceptual factors (relating to the identity of the target audience), thus exploiting a 'logic of appropriateness' (Ingram 2015:729). In doing so, IS connects "bipolar in-group and out-group identities to solution and crisis constructs" (Ingram 2020:26). Taken together, these two forms of propagandic messaging may result in self-reinforcing cycles. After all, "the more IS is seen as the champion and protector of Muslims" (identity-choice), "the more IS's politico-military agenda will be seen as a preferable alternative" (rational-choice) (ibid.:27).

The Significance of Dabiq in IS's Propaganda System

Dabiq resembles—or better, co-shapes—the general rationale of IS's propaganda. Articles in *Dabiq*, on the one hand, "increase perceptions of crisis and tie these to enemies" and, on the other, frame IS as "champions of true Sunni Muslims and the only hope for solving enemy-induced crises" (Ingram 2018:12). As such, Ingram observes (2016:472), the 'competitive system of meaning' developed in *Dabiq* "portrays a lethally bipolar world in the midst of a cosmic war leading to Armageddon." The magazine's name—referring to a small Syrian town featuring in "disputed *hadith* prophesying an 'end of time battle' occurring on the plains surrounding Dabiq" (Barton 2019:141)—has thus not been chosen haphazardly. Importantly, however, as Ingram (2016:365) found, *Dabiq* is less preoccupied with attaching out-groups to the crisis; rather, it is focused "on how IS are [sic] confronting its enemies and solving crises". It can thus be argued that "when IS complains, it is generally in order to garner support for its violent actions" (Baele,

Coan & Boyd 2020:109).

Dabiq's meaning system is structured along a number of themes. In their 'thematic network analysis' (of *Dabiq*'s first thirteen issues), Droogan and Peattie (2017:595-9) identify eighty-two "unique themes" in *Dabiq*, which they subsequently employed to construct thematic networks of its contents. These networks consist of basic themes, organizing themes ("grouping together basic themes centred on shared issues") and global themes (arising "from commonality amongst organising themes") (ibid.). Within the thematic network of each *Dabiq*, the global theme is 'Islam is at War'. One level lower, the organizing themes are 'Religion', 'Enemies', 'Call to Arms' and 'Building the Caliphate'. The basic themes, then, are divided over these various organizing themes and differ per *Dabiq*. The global theme and organizing themes, however, do remain constant, although their relative significance changes (in response to shifting politico-military circumstances). They reveal a thematic landscape, characterized by "both consistency and variation in *Dabiq*'s thematic focus" (2017:614), consisting of four phases. In the first phase (issues one and two), *Dabiq* focuses on the organizing theme 'Building the Caliphate', "asserting religious and functional legitimacy of [its] caliphate-building project" (ibid.:618). The second phase dedicates more attention to anti-Western basic themes instead of caliphate-building. Issues five up to eight, constituting the third phase, do not demonstrate unambiguous trends. The last and fourth phase "exhibit[s] a strong focus on out-groups and the Islamic State's purported enemies" (ibid.).

Many of the themes *Dabiq* addressed suit the narratives identified previously, such as utopianism, belonging, and jihad (Barton 2019:148-57). There are also deviations, however. The successes IS enjoyed on the battlefield (in its politico-military campaign) in 2014-15, when *Dabiq* was first published, are translated into its propaganda efforts in *Dabiq*. Notably, given the large territories the organization had conquered in this period, *Dabiq* attaches more prominence to *hijra* (ibid.:152). Another important difference is that the 'utilization of victimization' (Baele, Coan & Boyd 2020:109) is less prominent in *Dabiq*. In line with Ingram's statement above that *Dabiq* invests little in establishing ties between out-groups and the crisis it depicts, Colas (2016:179) observes that "Muslim victimhood is relatively rare in *Dabiq*".

The question of what strategic objectives IS pursued through *Dabiq* is closely linked to which audiences are targeted. As is the case with much scholarship and public discourse on IS's general propaganda, it is often assumed that, primarily, "the magazine serves a function of recruiting and inspiring Western Muslims" (Droogan & Peattie 2017:617). Although, again, recruitment certainly is an objective of IS, one is unable to explain much of *Dabiq*'s contents from this exclusive perspective. Notably, the 'Call for Arms' organizing theme is "generally less pervasive" in *Dabiq* (ibid.). Therefore, as Colas (2016:178-9) proposed, we should not only include 'recruitable' Western Muslims ("would-be members") in *Dabiq*'s target audience, but also two other groups: Western policy-makers and "marginal members" ("who realize that life in the Islamic State is less blissful than they had expected"). Towards these target audiences, it is argued, IS pursues three key strategic objectives. First, Colas frames *Dabiq* as a "tool to set group boundaries" (ibid.), i.e., to shape the in-group's identity and delineate it from 'Others' who must be fought. Second, *Dabiq* is intended to "change Western policies" towards IS (ibid.). Third, *Dabiq* contributes to the legitimization of "their occupation and expansion in Iraq and Syria" and the militant actions it carried out (from) there (Ubayasiri 2019:133). Indeed, as Droogan and Peattie (2017:617) conclude firmly, "*Dabiq*'s primary function is ultimately to provide the Islamic State with legitimacy both within and beyond its borders, and recruitment is only one of many benefits that accompany this legitimacy".

Dabiq, the West, and Aggressive Imitation

Imitating another entity requires the imitator (that is, IS) to have a certain (mental) image or representation of the to-be-imitated entity (that is, the West). The role and significance of the West in IS propaganda and *Dabiq*, however, should not be overstated. It is not the West but local enemies that are the main objects in IS propaganda (Pokalova 2019:278).

As identified in Colas' content analysis (2016:175), *Dabiq* engages in two broad ways with the West. Firstly, *Dabiq* describes IS's (non-military) "interaction with the West" (to which fifteen percent of all *Dabiq* pages is dedicated), entailing articles "written to criticize the West or to urge Western policy changes toward" IS (ibid.:176),

for instance, quotations of Western experts or political leaders. Secondly, *Dabiq* demonstrates "military activities against the West" (to which four percent of all *Dabiq* pages is dedicated), entailing articles celebrating or urging attacks against the West (ibid.).

Although less than one may expect in a West-oriented English-language magazine, still, almost twenty percent of all pages in *Dabiq* thus deals with 'the West' in one way or another. The image of the West that emerges from *Dabiq* is unsurprisingly negative. The West is presented "as a coherent, loathsome entity" that is "guilty of two major, intertwined and intentional mischiefs", which are violence towards in-group members and "the animation of a large-scale, covert plot against Islam" (Baele, Bettiza, Boyd & Coan 2019:900-1). However, the West is not only portrayed as an enemy because of how it acts, but "because of what/who it is: a deeply sinful, uncivilized, entity that is corrupt and corrupting of anyone who comes in contact with it" (ibid.:908).

The hypothesis that IS imitates the entity it so despises (albeit aggressively) is provocative, to say the least. It is, therefore, unsurprising that the idea of imitation by IS of the West is virtually absent in academic literature on IS propaganda and *Dabiq*. Imitation or mimicry does appear in such scholarship, but in different contexts. For example, the observation that IS propagandists are "more strategic plagiarists than geniuses" (mimicking "some of the major trends in propaganda developed before them") (Baele 2020:6) and that IS itself is imitated by other jihadi groups aspiring for similar successes (ibid.:15-6). Contributions that come somewhat closer to Krastev and Holmes's conceptualization of (aggressive) imitation are scarce. Zywietz and Beese (2020:108) describe and apply various forms of 'appropriation' to IS, which entail various "'re'-processes", such as resituating, repurposing and recontextualizing certain practices, artefacts, or formats. Conoscenti (2016:240) looks at 'memetic activity' in IS's communicative strategies in *Dabiq*; i.e., he explores "the presence of exogenous elements [NATO PsyOps] in ISIS communicative strategy and narrative". While Conoscenti (2016) focuses on imitative communicative methods, this article analyzes how imitation itself conveys IS's propaganda message.

Aggressive Imitation: From Foreign Policy Paradigm to Propaganda Device

Krastev and Holmes's Post-1989 Age of Imitation

Formulated through the theoretical lens of Krastev and Holmes, 1989 "heralded the onset of a thirty-year Age of Imitation" (2019:5). With the fall of the USSR and communism, liberalism—supported by a "Western-dominated unipolar order" (ibid.)—became the dominant moral ideal in Europe. Ultimately, the absence of a "plausible alternative" to the Cold War victor "became a stimulus to revolt" against it (ibid.).

Eastern Europe wished to return to 'normality', in a Havelian sense, through sincere "reform-by-imitation" of the West (ibid.:26). This voluntary decision of countries such as Poland and Hungary entailed a number of unforeseen implications. First, it implied their acknowledgement of the moral superiority of the imitated over the imitators and that representatives of imitated states "could legitimately claim a right to monitor and evaluate the progress of imitating countries on an ongoing basis" (ibid.:8). As such, Eastern Europe's initially desired "adaptation to foreign standards" was ultimately "experienced as non-consensual and imposed" (ibid.:73-4). Second, the Western model (especially in terms of its values) was not static. The Eastern Europeans felt betrayed when they found out that the Western 'normality' they sought to imitate had rapidly changed. This shows how Girard's memetic desire can indeed breed conflict and tension, since the model became "an obstacle to the self-esteem and self-realization of the imitator" (ibid.:11-2).

Liberalism as a morally superior model, and the resulting imitation imperative, is not only rejected but actually inverted (ibid.:44). Today, it is Eastern Europe that presents itself as the 'real Europe' to which Western Europe, "having lost their cultural identities", should return (ibid.:40). As such, the Age of Liberal Imitation is over, "but the Age of Illiberal Imitation may have just begun" (ibid.:185-6).

Aggressive Imitation: The Archetypical Case of Post-Cold War Russia

While Eastern Europe was sincere in its hope "for a wholesale liberal makeover" (ibid.:25), Russia was not. Its

politics of imitation can be divided into three phases, of which aggressive imitation is the last one. During the 1990s, the first phase, the Kremlin responded to the dominance of Western liberalism with a simulation of democracy. Simulating democracy was "a way of appearing agreeable to, and ingratiating its leaders with, the dominant powers" (ibid.:91) and, as such, helped the regime "survive a turbulent and stressful decade" (ibid.:79). With Putin's ascension to the presidency in 2000, the second phase commenced, in which the simulation of democratic elections served as an unwritten social contract to "persuade Russian citizens that there were no viable alternatives to the current wielders of state power" (ibid.).

In 2011-12, facing large-scale nation-wide protests, this legitimizing façade became unsustainable (ibid.:109, 114). Instead of domestically imitating the Western democratic model for the regime's legitimization, Russia "shifted to a strategy of selective mirroring or violent parody of Western foreign policy behaviour" (ibid.:79). The authors have not developed a clear-cut, straightforward definition but rather "a flexibly articulated and admittedly speculative" conception of (aggressive) imitation (ibid.:13). Krastev and Holmes develop their concept in direct reference to the archetypical case of post-1989 Russia. Therefore, this article first briefly discusses this original context. Subsequently, then, a definition is formulated that can be applied in other contexts as well, paving the way for the analysis of aggressive imitation as a propaganda tool in *Dabiq*.

Aggressive imitation is described as a "resentment-fuelled policy of violent parody, a style of imitation that is brazenly hostile and intentionally provocative" (ibid.:14-5). Although the West lectured the world about its morally superior values, in the meantime, it would just be pursuing its own "selfish geopolitical interests" (ibid.). By performing certain acts or speech that aggressively imitate the opponent's behavior, Putin's Russia (implicitly, not explicitly) "holds up a mirror" and "aims to unmask the Age of Imitation as an Age of Western Hypocrisy" (ibid.:125). It thus seeks to delegitimize (the normative foundations of) "the Western-dominated international order by exposing its fundamental hypocrisy" (ibid.:114-5). Importantly, the objective was "less to achieve a strategic advantage than to change the mental state and self-image of the Main Enemy" (ibid.:129). Russia would be "convinced that the survival [and legitimation] of the regime depends on undermining the global hegemony of the liberal West" (ibid.:123). Aggressive imitation does not just provide regime legitimation (although this is its overarching logic), it also legitimizes the pursuit of Russia's imperial ambitions "by clothing its own violent actions in an idealistic rhetoric borrowed verbatim" (ibid.:125) from the West (e.g., hijacking genocide or self-determination discourses). The authors' characterization of Russian aggressive imitation as non-strategic/non-instrumental is problematic and contradictory, since aggressive imitation (although not exclusively) indeed serves as an instrument to fulfil certain (strategic) purposes (e.g. regime legitimation).

Operationalizing Aggressive Imitation as Propaganda Device

The notion of states copying stronger and more successful states has been uttered by various IR scholars, such as Waltz (1979) and Mearsheimer (2001). Krastev and Holmes have further developed this idea and added a peculiar form of reversed imitation. Academic engagement with their imitation theory, and their concept of aggressive imitation in particular, has been limited. So far, its application has been restricted to cases that fall strictly within the original theory's context (Lukyanov & Soloviev 2019; Horler 2021; Granath 2021). This article is intended to explore the wider applicability of their theoretical concept. From the analysis of aggressive imitation in *Dabiq*, new insights are derived and thus the original concept is elaborated, possibly with novel objectives, forms, and characterizations. The narrow operationalization of aggressive imitation as a Russian foreign policy paradigm is complemented by an understanding of aggressive imitation as propaganda device that may be employed by other actors in other contexts as well.

Initially, this enterprise requires a more universalist, thus minimalist definition of aggressive imitation, stripped of all features too specific to Russia's post-1989 context. Compared to the archetypical case of Russia, a number of features therefore need to be left out. 'Pedagogical', 'ironic', and 'sarcastic' are not included, since these features are connected to Russia's specific historical experience of having been subjected to a perceived 'imitation imperative'. Aggressive imitation can thus be operationalized as follows for the purpose of its analysis in *Dabiq*: *Aggressive imitation entails physical and discursive acts (speech) which consciously and intentionally imitate or mirror the opponent's behavior (similarly, both physical and discursive) in a hostile, provocative, (usually) implicit and*

strategic manner.

Whereas aggressive imitation is conscious, intentional, hostile, and (often) strategic, unconscious imitation is part of the human condition, as Gabriel Tarde demonstrated. Described by Krastev and Holmes as "ordinary learning" (2019:8, 187), this form of imitation entails unconscious, non-intentional, and non-hostile borrowing and may occur for various reasons, such as the proven success or omnipresence of a model. This is not to say that the behavior itself is not intentional or conscious; rather, it is to say that the act of imitating (or borrowing from) the model is not. The quintessential example of such (unconscious) borrowing in *Dabiq* is how IS copies multiple elements of the Westphalian conception of statehood (Bloem & Oosterveld 2017). Here, the imitated model is absent, whereas in instances of aggressive imitation, the model is present in the text's (extra)linguistic reality.

Methodological Reflections: Data Selection, Analysis, and Epistemological Foundations

Dabiq is IS's most West-oriented propaganda, which regularly fetched international headlines and shaped Western policymakers' and general publics' understandings of IS (Anfinson 2019). The fifteen issues of *Dabiq*, spanning from July 2014 to July 2016, include the period in which IS was at its territorial peak—IS's apex in terms of "its aspirations to statehood" (Kaneva & Stanton 2020:6). As Krastev and Holmes's conception of aggressive imitation presumes the desire and ability on the part of the imitator to challenge international order (represented by the imitated), it is thus most appropriate to focus on *Dabiq*.

There are various limitations that must be accounted for, however. First, *Dabiq* concerns *official* IS propaganda, thus excluding organicpropaganda, "products created by unaffiliated supporters", which also play an important role in IS's propaganda machine (Milton 2020:5). Second, similarly, only online and no offline propaganda is included in the analysis, which may result in availability bias (Winter & Ingram 2018). Third, *Dabiq* is an English-language source of IS propaganda; no Arabic, French, or Turkish versions are analyzed. Lastly, "its accessibility", Colas (2016:175) rightly states, may give *Dabiq* "too much credit (or blame)". After all, *Dabiq* is "but one part of [IS's] larger strategy" and message, and thus "should not be read as the sole, or even the major, propaganda tool" (Droogan & Peattie 2017:592). These limitations skew our perspective on IS propaganda and the role aggressive imitation (possibly) plays therein—probably to a Western-centric view, which must be borne in mind and prevent us from drawing sweeping conclusions. Although we thus must not overemphasize "*Dabiq*'s strategic value over its propaganda value", it still represents "a significant vehicle for the spread of [IS's] ideas" (ibid.).

Often, as in the archetypical case of Russia, aggressive imitation is implicit rather than openly and explicitly expressed. For instance, President Putin does not make explicit his mockery of NATO's "hypocritical" justification of its intervention in Kosovo (or, for that matter, Libya). As such, the practice of aggressive imitation cannot always be easily identified from the 'linguistic reality' conveyed by the plain text. Rather, one has to explore the data's 'extralinguistic reality'. In other words, we need to bring into the analysis what is not made explicit in the text itself (that is, often, the behavior of the imitated that the imitator seeks to imitate). Identifying and understanding aggressive imitation therefore requires recontextualization, i.e., the reconstruction of the historical and contemporary context of the text. Employing this 'reconstructive approach' to the data, aggressive imitation is thus identified by reconstructing what lies behind the words and imagery IS uses, by drawing in context in all its forms.

Aggressive imitation must be distinguished from 'mundane' unconscious imitation, which is neither intentioned as imitation nor hostile. Therefore, in the first analytical stage, unconscious imitation is briefly discussed, after which aggressive imitation in *Dabiq* will be analyzed, using a reconstructive approach to explore the text's 'extralinguistic reality'.

Unconscious and Aggressive Imitation in *Dabiq*

Unconscious Imitation: Westphalian Statehood in Dabiq

Remarkably, IS (unconsciously) imitates the very fundaments of the 'crusader' states it fights. Although IS "presents the caliphate as a preferable alternative" (Gartenstein-Ross et al. 2016:21), it actually adopts "many of the trappings

of Westphalian statehood" (Bloem & Oosterveld 2017:9). To an important extent, IS is conditioned by the structural realities of the contemporary international system to shape and build its Islamic state in a distinctly modern (and 'Western') way. By quoting various (Western) journalists and analysts in its column *In the Words of the Enemy*, *Dabiq* reflexively portrays IS as a full-fledged, functioning state in the Westphalian sense (Hynek & Strnad 2020:96). In the words of John Cantlie, "many journalists and scholars in the West are now agreeing" that IS "is a genuine state" (*Dabiq* 12:47). Three features form the fundamental basis of the modern (historically Western) state system: monopoly of legitimate violence, governance ("the capacity of modern states to intervene in their societies"), and (recognition of) sovereignty (Spruyt 2002:128).

In *Dabiq*, these features are imitated unconsciously but rather extensively. First of all, IS both claims and demonstrates how it possesses the monopoly of legitimate violence in the territories it controls (e.g., *Dabiq* 3:12), which broadly serves two purposes. On the one hand, IS offers the territories' inhabitants some (twisted conception of) 'stability' and 'order', which often lacked before (e.g., *Dabiq* 12:48). On the other hand, IS also exerts its power through the (demonstrative) use of such (excessive) violence.

Moreover, IS extensively demonstrates its capacity to govern the conquered territories. Why "liberate a village, town or city", *Dabiq* wonders, "only to abandon its residents and ignore their needs" (*Dabiq* 4:27)? IS, as such, "fights to defend the Muslims, liberate their lands, and bring an end to the *tawāghīt*, while simultaneously seeking to guide and nurture those under its authority and ensure that both their religious and social needs are met" (*Dabiq* 3:16). Consequently, IS aims to show how it provides basic government services. By establishing a state, IS does not just return the Muslim's "dignity, might, rights and leadership" (*Dabiq* 1:7) but also, fundamentally, IS provides a place with "everything that you need to live and work here, so what are you waiting for?" (*Dabiq* 9:26). This suits IS's first central narrative, 'apocalyptic utopianism', and also serves to promote *hijra* (and recruitment) (Gartenstein-Ross et al. 2016:21). It is, however, difficult to establish conclusively that IS's governance should be characterized as unconscious imitation of the Westphalian model. It may also be an expression of the prophetic *manhaj* IS claims to implement.

Lastly, IS warns the US and other 'crusader' states "not to get involved in the Islamic State's internal and external affairs" (*Dabiq* 4:48). As such, IS appeals to one of the core principles underpinning the Westphalian system that has dominated interstate relations since its conception in the seventeenth century: the principle of sovereignty and, consequently, non-interference. For this principle to fully function, it is necessary for all states in the system to recognize the others' sovereignty—something IS also explicitly desires (*Dabiq* 8:65; *Dabiq* 12:48-50). They, for instance, refer to American IR scholar Stephen Walt explaining "it often took years before [new states] were recognized by other states" (*Dabiq* 12:48). In addition, Cantlie writes that IS "is not some bunch of guerrillas or gangster"; instead, "they must be considered large and serious enough for any politician to deal with" (*Dabiq* 4:55).

Paradoxically, IS itself recognizes the sovereignty of neither the *taghut* regimes in the Middle East nor the crusader states elsewhere—pledging not to "stop until we drive the last nail in the coffin of the Sykes-Picot conspiracy" (*Dabiq* 5:33). Thus, although IS claims to be a caliphate on a sixth-century basis, in reality, it presented itself (and desired to be recognized) as a rather modern state with a Westphalian fundament.

The Extralinguistic Reality of Islamic State's Aggressive Imitation

An important part of IS's aggressive imitation—imitation of violence—takes place against the background of "crusader airstrikes" (*Dabiq* 4:9; *Dabiq* 7:5; *Dabiq* 12:2, 28; *Dabiq* 14:4, 7; *Dabiq* 15:28, 32). For instance, in one of *Dabiq*'s advertisements for an IS video called *The Reality of the American Raid*, (drawn) beheadings of three prisoners are pictured with warplanes and helicopters in the background (*Dabiq* 12:58). *Dabiq* highlights various instances in which American or coalition forces would be responsible for (deliberately) killing Muslim families, "under the broad definition of "collateral damage"" (*Dabiq* 3:3). For instance, in September 2014, "the crusaders trailed a caravan of vehicles transporting the families (women and children) of Islamic State soldiers" (*Dabiq 4*:49). After noticing that they were being followed by "US warplanes and drones", they "took shelter in nearby houses", which were then "struck down by the crusader jets" (ibid.). Next, the charred and incinerated remnants of at least three children and three women are shown to the reader.

It is not just victims wounded or killed in airstrikes conducted against IS-controlled territories in Iraq and Syria between 2014 and 2016 that are presented in *Dabiq* as justification for IS's imitation of Western violence. The same, notably, goes for Muslims slaughtered or humiliated in earlier days and other locations, which connects to IS's propaganda narrative of victimhood and its quest to restore the Muslim's power and dignity (most prominently, by establishing a caliphate). For instance, *Dabiq* refers to how "the US had killed women, children and the elderly, during its direct occupation of Iraq" (*Dabiq* 3:3) and the "many Muslims from Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, Yemen, Libya and other Muslim countries [who] are currently prisoners of the US government" (*Dabiq* 3:39).

This should be seen as the extralinguistic reality that IS aggressively seeks to imitate when it imitates the West's violence against it. It is a constitutive element of its worldview (mostly part of the crisis narrative IS aims to expound) and, as such, the justifying (imitative) logic of IS's actions.

Imitation of Violence at Home

IS's internal aggressive imitation of violence (that is, violence perpetrated within IS-controlled territories) is twofold. On the one hand, it comprises the idea that IS can and should kill Western citizens in response to their governments' actions. By "terrorizing, massacring, and humiliating the enemies of Allah" (*Dabiq* 11:28), IS does nothing more than (aggressively) imitating (the results of) its Western enemy's conduct. As such, "we", Cantlie writes, "are also victims of our government's foreign policy" (*Dabiq* 3:39). On the other hand, this category of aggressive imitation entails punishing "them with an equal punishment" (*Dabiq* 12:8), which they explicitly (claim to) borrow from Qur'anic doctrine (*qisas*) and the *salaf al-salih* (*Dabiq* 7:7). This phenomenon mostly features in IS's videos, of which we find an advertisement in *Dabiq* that states "[i]f you punish, punish as you were punished", showing a prisoner (supposedly a tank driver) about to be driven over by a tank (*Dabiq* 12:58).

Two of the most prominent examples of IS's aggressive imitation of (Western) violence are the executions of James Foley and Steven Sotloff. Cloaked in orange jumpsuits, the Western journalists are beheaded by a man in black. The beheadings are (sometimes explicitly) justified as retribution and retaliation for the aforementioned Western violence (*Dabiq* 3:4, 37; *Dabiq* 4:51; *Dabiq* 5:32). Although the execution method is (obviously) not imitative, such executions may still be seen as (indirect) imitation of Western violence against Muslims. Rather than directly imitating Western modes of violence, IS imitates its outcomes here—according to the logic, as noted above, that "as the West kills our citizens, we kill theirs". As such, Cantlie writes, these executed men—referring, here, to Foley, Sotloff, Haines and Henning—"are four foolish policy victims" (*Dabiq* 4:53), "which all US citizens are responsible for as they are represented by the government they have elected" (*Dabiq* 4:47).

The orange jumpsuit IS puts its to-be-executed prisoners on is one of the most illuminative illustrations of its attempt to aggressively imitate the violence perpetrated by the West, according to IS, against ordinary Muslims. With this tool of "rhetorical resistance" (Richey & Edwards 2019:167), IS reminds its audiences of how the US humiliated Muslim prisoners at Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib. Importantly, aggressive imitation, here, is not just a direct justification for IS's violence but also, fundamentally, an expression of its worldview—of restoring Muslim honor by avenging the humiliation Muslims have suffered. Moreover, Richey and Edwards (2019:177) point to the activating capability of this "rhetorical resistance", as "a visual call to action to entice young men throughout the world to support the Islamic State, either by joining the group directly or by giving their lives in global suicide attacks".

In the sixth edition of *Dabiq*, published late December 2014, IS announces that "an apostate pilot flying for the crusader alliance was captured by the Islamic State after his plane was shot down" (*Dabiq* 6:34). Muath al-Kasasbeh, a Jordanian fighter pilot, was executed barely two months after his capture (*Dabiq* 7:5-8). In this case, as opposed to the orange jumpsuits as a tool of "rhetorical resistance", the mode of violence is actually imitative—its result, that is, rather than the method by which the execution was performed. In accordance with the second aspect of IS's aggressive imitation of violence internally, IS punishes the Jordanian *murtadd* (apostate) such as he and the coalition of *taghut* and crusaders have 'punished the Muslims' with airstrikes. Al-Kasasbeh was thus burned alive, after which the fire was extinguished by the dumping of rubble and debris over his dead body. Various pictures of burnt Muslims are displayed (as a result of "crusader airstrikes", according to IS). Moreover, they explicitly state that by

burning the crusader pilot alive and burying him under a pile of debris, the Islamic State carried out a just form of retaliation for his involvement in the crusader bombing campaign which continues to result in the killing of countless Muslims who, as a result of these airstrikes, are burned alive and buried under mountains of debris. (*Dabiq* 7:6)

To conclude, the life of Jordanian pilot Al-Kasasbeh was ended by IS in the same way as were the lives of "countless Muslims" by the "crusader bombing campaigns". This constitutes one of the most defining instances of aggressive imitation in *Dabiq*.

Imitation of Violence Abroad

Besides imitating Western violence internally, which thus serves the purpose of revenge and retribution, IS does so externally, too. Again, they do so explicitly against the background of Western airstrikes. "For nearly two years", it is noted in *Dabiq*, "Muslims in the lands of the *Khilāfah* have watched their beloved brothers, sisters, and children being relentlessly bombed by crusader warplanes", but now "[t]he yearning for revenge has taken seed […] and the fruits are ready for harvest" (*Dabiq* 14:4). Quoting IS spokesman Al-Adnani (e.g., *Dabiq* 4:9; *Dabiq* 5:37), *Dabiq* frequently calls on its readership to "attack, kill, and terrorize the crusaders on their own streets and in their own homes" (*Dabiq* 7:37)—to bring "the war back to their own soil" (*Dabiq* 6:4). In such calls to violence, IS pursues a responsive or, indeed, imitative logic:

[W]ill you leave the American, the Frenchman, or any of their allies walk safely upon the earth while the armies of the crusaders strike the lands of the Muslims not differentiating between a civilian and fighter? […] Will you leave the disbeliever to sleep safely at home while the Muslim women and children shiver with fear of the roars of the crusader airplanes above their heads day and night? (*Dabiq* 4:9)

This logic is formulated more explicitly in *Dabiq*'s last issue as IS explains that "we fight you to stop you from killing our men, women, and children […] and to take revenge" (*Dabiq* 15:32). As such, IS's external (terrorist) violence can be seen as merely imitating what 'the enemy does to our people': returning it to theirs, i.e., "just as they kill, they will be killed" (*Dabiq* 12:27). However, "even if [the West] were to stop bombing us, imprisoning us, torturing us, vilifying us, and usurping our lands" (*Dabiq* 15:33), IS will only cease its violence against the West but will not stop hating it. Thus, until "the crusaders end their hostilities, […] the just terror will continue to strike them to the core of their deadened hearts" (*Dabiq* 12:3).

The key term IS employs in describing and giving meaning to its 'external' violence is 'just terror', which is only first mentioned in *Dabiq* in the title of its twelfth issue. Centered around the November 2015 Paris attacks (and, to a lesser extent, the downing of a Russian civilian airplane in the Sinai Desert), IS (explicitly) presents terror as a just (defensive) response to these states' military actions. Indeed, as such, IS claims that Russia and France "destroyed their homes with their own hands through their hostilities towards Islam, the Muslims, and the Muslim body of the *Khilāfah*" (*Dabiq* 12:2). This, again, emphasizes the responsive idea behind IS's imitative killing of Western citizens "on the very streets that they presumptively walk in safety" (*Dabiq* 6:3): "Just as they terrify the Muslims in the lands of Islam, so should you terrify the disbelievers in their homelands. But unlike them, your terror shall be just, an equitable response to their crimes against Islam and the Muslim nation" (*Dabiq* 15:2).

Other examples of just terror—although often not called as such but justified in similar terms—are multiple in *Dabiq*, such as attacks in Sydney, in a Tunisian hotel, in the US, Israel, France and Germany (*Dabiq* 6:3; *Dabiq* 7:40-1; *Dabiq* 12:3; *Dabiq* 15:30, 43, 45): "And so revenge was exacted upon those who felt safe in the cockpits of their jets […] as they cowardly bombarded the Muslims of the *Khilāfah*" (*Dabiq* 12:2).

Discursive Imitation

When *Dabiq* describes IS's operations—both terrorist attacks abroad and actions in territories it has conquered or seeks to conquer in the Middle East—it employs a statist vocabulary, resembling how anti-terrorist operations and other military actions are described in Western media. For instance, *Dabiq* speaks of "sending a mission" of "security units", "security cells", or the "soldiers of the Caliphate" to conduct "security operations" "in [the West's] very

strongholds" (e.g., *Dabiq* 1:40; *Dabiq* 12:25; *Dabiq* 13:15-19; *Dabiq* 15:42-3).

By phrasing their violence in this manner, IS equalizes their violence with that of the West—as the violence of a state. This fits the observation that the organization wants to present itself and be recognized as—and, thus, imitates—a modern (Westphalian) state.

Format Imitation

On a more meta-level, finally, IS has adopted Western media formats. Zywietz and Beese (2020:114-5) define such formats as "basic physical norms or technical standards of information encoding". In *Dabiq*, multiple instances of IS's imitation, or appropriation, of such formats can be identified—to begin with, of course, the format of a magazine itself. Moreover, IS regularly includes advertisements in-between its *Dabiq* articles to showcase its latest videos, including some 'Must Watch' recommendations (e.g., *Dabiq* 10:35; *Dabiq* 11:31; *Dabiq* 12:58; *Dabiq* 13:13). In addition, all *Dabiq* issues include an extensive section of brief news reports (resembling press agency reports). These reports detail the state of affairs in the caliphate and the progress on the battlefield. Interestingly, the nature of these reports changes throughout *Dabiq*. From the first to the eleventh issue (that is, roughly, from July 2014 to September 2015), this section is called *Islamic State Reports*, focusing not only on its "security operations" but also on state-building. From the twelfth issue onward, this section is focused exclusively on IS's military operations.

Other examples worth mentioning are the prominent role of interviews (e.g., with IS militants or leaders of one of the *wilāyāt*), a table of contents, a foreword, a feature article, and a column (either by John Cantlie, a guest author, or the regular *In the Words of the Enemy* column). In *Dabiq*'s eleventh issue, a poster of two prisoners who are "for sale" is included, mimicking the well-known 'Wanted' poster. In the subsequent issue, the Norwegian and Chinese prisoners are executed "after being abandoned by the *kafir* nations and organizations" (*Dabiq* 12:64). Moreover, lastly, an example outside of *Dabiq*, to which reference is made in the magazine, is Cantlie's role as "TV correspondent" (*Dabiq* 7:80) or as a pundit in IS's videos (Zywietz & Beese 2020:111-2).

As Zywietz and Beese observe, these formats are "not epistemically neutral" (ibid.). Some of the above instances are clearly intended as a mocking parody of Western media formats—most of all, Cantlie's role as reporter and commentator but also the 'Must Watch' video recommendations and the 'Wanted' posters. It is overexaggerated to argue that these examples of aggressive imitation only acquire meaning because they mock the Western model through imitation. Through them, notably, the fundamentals of IS's worldview are expressed. It is, however, right to state that IS's "own ideational contents" conveyed through these appropriated "visual patterns and motifs, codes and metaphors" become "fully meaningful and rhetorically effective only in dialectical contrast with the design vehicles" (ibid.:112).

Reflecting on Aggressive Imitation in *Dabiq*

Aggressive Imitation Fits Islamic State Propaganda's Logic and Message

Through aggressive imitation, IS demonstrates brutal violence (illustrated by the various executions discussed), its commitment to the prophetic *manhaj* (e.g., deriving 'punish them as you were punished' from the *qisas* doctrine), *jihad* (illustrated by their urge to and celebration of terror attacks; justified by a responsive, 'imitative' logic), and victimhood—some core pillars of IS's system of meaning. It fits, moreover, in *Dabiq*'s (overarching) global theme of 'Islam is at War'. Since this analysis is concerned with IS's imitation of the West as the enemy, it is mostly the war against the 'crusaders' that comes to the fore. One of the two "mischiefs" which the West, according to IS, is guilty of—violence against in-group members (Muslims)—fundamentally underpins IS's aggressive imitation of Western violence.

Moving from the content to the strategic level, aggressive imitation in *Dabiq* captures IS's entire crisis-solution narrative. This can be illustrated with the quintessential case of aggressive imitation in *Dabiq*: the orange jumpsuit. By imitating the US's treatment of prisoners in Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib, IS draws the audience's attention to the West's crimes against the *ummah* (crisis). Subsequently, IS uses this outfit on (Western) to-be-executed prisoners

and thus imitates and avenges these offenses (solution). Similarly, IS imitatively executes a coalition fighter pilot—(co)responsible for the "enemy-induced" crisis (Ingram 2018:12)—by burning and burying him under debris.

As such, aggressive imitation as a propaganda device should be seen as identity-choice rather than rational-choice messaging. Through aggressive imitation (of violence), IS attaches "bi-polar in-group and out-group identities" (the *ummah* and the 'crusaders'/*taghut*, respectively) to "solution and crisis constructs" (Ingram 2020:26). Ingram (2016:469) distinguishes between various types of identity-choice messaging (either value-reinforcing, dichotomy-reinforcing, or crisis-reinforcing). Since IS polarizes between imitated and imitator, aggressive imitation in *Dabiq* may be classified as dichotomy-reinforcing messaging, which is dominant in IS's propaganda (ibid.).

In line with Ingram's observation that IS propaganda is defined by a 'boom-bust' dynamic (2018:14), it is found that later *Dabiq* issues (especially the last five)—that is, when IS's territorial power is reduced drastically—contain more instances of aggressive imitation than do their predecessors. This is contrary to what was hypothesized pre-analysis: that IS will perform more aggressive imitation when it has greater (state-like) abilities to challenge international order. This finding fits the thematic picture emerging from existing scholarship, notably, that *Dabiq*'s fourth phase (from the ninth issue onwards) "exhibit[s] a strong focus on out-groups and the Islamic State's purported enemies" (Droogan & Peattie 2017:618). To conclude, the fact that aggressive imitation features more frequently in later *Dabiq* issues suggests that the phenomenon should be tied to IS's terror activities rather than its (proto-)statehood.

Comparing Aggressive Imitation in Dabiq to the Russian Archetype

Quantitatively, however, aggressive imitation is not so prominent in *Dabiq*. Throughout the 613 pages analyzed, a few dozen instances of aggressive imitation were identified. Some insights from existing scholarship explain, at least in part, this quantitative insignificance, although it does fit IS's overarching strategic and content logic of a crisis-solution narrative. The self-recognition of the (aggressive) imitator's victimhood or at least its subordinate or inferior status is inherent in the concept of aggressive imitation. However, although one of the core narratives of IS's larger propaganda system, victimhood is not so prominent in *Dabiq*, which would "undermine their narrative of triumph" (Colas 2016:179). Instead, *Dabiq* is focused on resolving crises rather than blaming them on various out-groups. Moreover, whereas for Russia, the West is the main enemy, for IS, local jihadi competitors are (Colas 2016:175; Pokalova 2019:278).

To offer explanations for all deviations from the operationalization, we also need the archetype of aggressive imitation, upon which my operationalization of the concept is based. There are various obvious differences between both case studies. Whereas IS ultimately hopes to conquer and subdue the entire world, for instance, Russia does not seek to export its ideology or model (Krastev & Holmes 2019:131).

An important deviance is that aggressive imitation in *Dabiq* is frequently explicit rather than implicit—directly referring to the imitated 'extralinguistic' reality, e.g., Western airstrikes. Undeniably, Russia is—today perhaps was—part of international society, as it still conforms to some of the basic principles underpinning that society. It notably shares (or shared) some conception of international order and stability with the adversaries it aggressively imitates. IS, by contrast, lives in an ideological world that has much less common ground with the prevalent Western international order. It, for instance, does not share with the West the discourse of self-determination, the prevention of genocide, or international law—which it regards as *kufr* concepts. Thus, it is much more difficult for IS to aggressively imitate its Western enemy in a subtle, implicit manner than it is for Russia. It therefore resorts to the explicit imitation of the most significant contact point between IS and the West: violence.

Whereas Russian aggressive imitation can be classified as symmetric—it directly copies certain Western speech and actions (of which examples have been provided before)—IS's version is clearly asymmetric. That is, IS does not imitate Western acts (such as airstrikes) one-on-one, symmetrically. It is not a full-fledged state that disposes of such capabilities. Instead, out of practical necessity, it has to resort to asymmetric imitation of the outcomes rather than the means of such violence: just terror. Such outcomes of IS's imitative violence may be symmetric (e.g., Al-Kasasbeh's fate) but are often similarly asymmetric (e.g., beheading, suicide attacks)—only imitative in the sense that "just as they kill, they will be killed" (*Dabiq* 12:27).

Conclusions, Reflections, and Limitations

Crystallization and Theorization of Aggressive Imitation

The novel operationalization of aggressive imitation as a propaganda device constitutes an important reframing, enabling more universal application of the concept. In order for it to be applicable in other contexts than Russia's specific historical experience, Krastev and Holmes's original concept was reduced to a minimalist definition. This definition captures the broad idea of (implicitly rather than explicitly) imitating the acts and/or speech of one's adversary in a hostile and provocative way, often in order to ridicule or express discontent with that adversary and to legitimize oneself and one's actions.

In the subsequent analysis of aggressive imitation in *Dabiq*, however, it proved that certain underlying assumptions did not work well. It was found that even the minimalist operationalization is still rather statist as it presumes the ability and willingness of the imitator to perform its aggressive imitation in an implicit, direct, and symmetric manner. Indeed, a non-state like IS neither possesses the means to directly and symmetrically imitate Western state violence against it, nor does it have sufficient ideological overlap to aggressively imitate the West implicitly (as does Russia). Moreover, the analysis has shed light on the relationship between revenge and aggressive imitation. Krastev and Holmes list "revenge and vindication" as one of the objectives of Russian aggressive imitation. This is true for IS as well. It does not mean, however, that the two should be equated. Indeed, all aggressive imitation is revengeful, but not all revenge is aggressive imitation. The salience of the latter lies in the fact that it seeks to exert revenge by imitating what the other has done to you, even if done so asymmetrically. Aggressive imitation is (meaningfully) revengeful, to an important degree, not (only) because the imitator has struck back against the enemy, but because the enemy is attacked in the same way as it had the imitator.

Despite successfully developing aggressive imitation as a universally applicable theoretical concept, this is not to say that applying this concept to other contexts than Russia's is always analytically fruitful and useful. Although this analysis did offer new perspectives on IS's violence, aggressive imitation cannot be regarded as a prominent propaganda device in *Dabiq*. So far, the explanations of this relative quantitative insignificance have been based on *Dabiq*, as it focuses on solutions rather than crises and local jihadi competitors rather than the West. For IS, the West is not the main enemy as it is for Russia—implying that IS, apart from not being able to, perhaps also does not want to extensively imitate the West (aggressively). Explanations based on the concept and its origins are as important—even more important to reflect on the applicability of the concept to other contexts. The concept, notably, stems from the imitative practice of a former imitator (Russia) that now seeks to avenge the entities it formerly was forced to imitate in the post-1989 imitation imperative. Russia's response to its historical experience as an (involuntary) imitator was resentful and revengeful, and aggressive imitation provided a logical and suitable method to vent its frustration and to legitimize its assertive and aggressive posture in the Putin era. Although it is difficult to decisively pinpoint why a certain theoretical concept may suit better with particular cases than with others, it is important to have raised the question and formulated a tentative explanation. This question may further be explored by, for instance, researching aggressive imitation in case studies in which the West is perceived as the central enemy (e.g., terror group Al-Qaeda) or case studies that share a similar experience of forced 'imitation', which—given the extensive history of Western imperialism and colonialism—are numerous.

Extent, Objectives, and Forms of Aggressive Imitation in Dabiq

From this article, a multifaceted picture of aggressive imitation in *Dabiq* has emerged. It thus concerns not only the imitation of violence, but also the imitation of commonly known formats (e.g., Cantlie as "TV correspondent") and discourse (e.g., describing its military operations).

While for Russia aggressive imitation is a (costly) goal in itself (without direct positive benefits), for IS it is not. Whereas Russia (strategically) needs aggressive imitation to legitimize its regime and foreign policy, for IS, aggressive imitation is a vehicle for expressing its (legitimizing) worldview. As such, IS employs aggressive imitation to tell its own, fundamentally ideological 'positive' story (with its caliphate at the center of the Muslim resistance and restoring of dignity) as opposed to the empty and non-ideological 'negative' Russian message, merely seeking to

discredit its adversary. IS's aggressive imitation is thus forward-looking—offering a solution to the crisis the *ummah* would endure—while Russia's is backward-looking, to the humiliation it supposedly suffered from Western post-USSR behavior.

Although its strategic value should thus not be overstated over its expressive value, there still may be some instrumental intentions behind IS's aggressive imitation—its imitative violence, in particular. First, although aggressive imitation itself thus is not *the* legitimizing factor, it does carry IS's worldview as legitimizing IS's violence. Since *Dabiq*'s "primary function" is to provide IS "with legitimacy both within and beyond its borders" (Droogan & Peattie 2017:617), it is only logical that its aggressive imitation contributes to that, as well. Second, aggressive imitation in *Dabiq* should be seen as dichotomy-reinforcing (identity-choice) messaging. By contrasting it with the menacing and to-be-fought out-group, IS thus strengthens its in-group identity, which contributes to mobilization, recruitment, and group-bonding. It may polarize Western Muslims (further) from their home societies and influence them to perform *hijrah* to IS's caliphate. Third, by clearly presenting its violence as merely mirroring what offenses the West would commit against it, IS may aim to convince the West that its violence against them will stop when the West ceases operations. Indeed, they say so rather explicitly (*Dabiq* 12:3). This observation suits Colas' conclusion that *Dabiq* is also intended to "change Western policies" towards it (2016:178-9). Lastly, another aim of IS propaganda is "demoralization and intimidation" and provoking the outrage of international publics (Winter 2015:4, 33), to which its aggressive imitation has obviously contributed as well.

Limitations and Avenues for Further Research

Finally, a possible Western bias should be accounted for given this article's exclusive focus on IS's aggressive imitation of and towards the West. Although the findings suggested a quantitative insignificance but qualitative suitability of aggressive imitation in IS's larger propaganda machine, the importance of the West to IS and its system of meaning shall not be overstated. During *Dabiq*'s publication period, it is, first and foremost, the local battlefield that receives IS's priority.

Relatedly, only English-language IS propaganda has been analyzed. However, to more accurately qualify the significance of aggressive imitation as a propaganda device in IS's competitive system of meaning, it is also necessary to analyze propaganda materials in the language of IS's primary (Arabic-speaking) readership. A particularly interesting branch of sources for this enterprise would be IS's videos. Throughout *Dabiq*, various references are made (in both advertisements and articles) to its videos. For instance, to conclude, in October 2018 (when IS was *de facto* defeated as a territorial power), IS released a video to "lift the spirits of its media warriors and to encourage them to continue their campaign of information warfare against the West" (Milton 2020:1-2). In the video, IS complains that "[i]n the digital world, America beguiled the people for so many years" and that IS "has utilized the same tools to confront their lies, expose their weakness, and destroy their falsehood" (ibid.). As such, by offering additional examples in different (language) contexts, analyzing IS's videos can help us complete the preliminary understanding of aggressive imitation in IS's propaganda that arises from this article.

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