THE SMILING, SCENTED MEN: THE POLITICAL WORLDVIEW
OF THE ISLAMIC STATE OF IRAQ, 2003-2013

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

    The members of the Committee appointed to examine the dissertation of CRAIG ANDREW WHITESIDE find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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Political psychologists have identified patterns in the use of cognitive categorization for the structuring of the political worldview of foreign policy decision makers. This dissertation uses a mixed methods approach to investigate the political worldview of the Islamic State of Iraq since 2003 and to validate the use of Image Theory for a non-state actor for the purpose of explaining their strategic targeting. Discourse analysis is used to examine almost 3,000 messages from the group for clues to other group images. Social Identity Theory is presented as an intervening variable to explore how sectarian language is used to reinforce and sustain images of other groups, as well as identify threats to the group’s own base support. Hypotheses based on both theories were tested and evidence found to support the impact of social competition and the necessity of group survival on the process of image creation and maintenance over a ten-year period. The dissertation expands on the findings and discusses ways that social competition and demographic changes are impacting societies in the Middle East and South Asia, as well as around the world. The conclusion presents practical policy advice for communities facing these challenges in order to prevent the spiral effects seen in the Iraq case study.
Keywords: Image Theory, Social Identity Theory, Islamic State, IS, ISIS, ISIL, Iraq, sectarian violence, terrorism, insurgency.
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DEDICATION

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of my research, I saw his name on a claimed attack by the Islamic State of Iraq. Luckily, he survived, but his driver did not. I always admired his sense of duty toward his people and worried about his safety. If Iraq is to survive, it will need brave men and women like SMK, who is a credit to his tribe and his people.
Preface

In October 2006 a group of men staged a reenactment of a pre-Islamic ritual for the benefit of a movie camera. Dressed in white robes, the different men – each representing a different insurgent group in Iraq, dipped their hand in a bowl of scented oil to seal a pact among them. The ceremony was done to emphasize feelings of unity and trust, and to showcase their ties to the ancient ways of the Sunni Arab tribes. They called their new compact the Alliance of the Mutayyabin – which translates as the scented ones. The days later the Mujahideen Shura Council announced that the Islamic State of Iraq was born.

This sense of uniqueness, duty, and blessing pervaded the thoughts, actions, and words of a group that believed their work to be blessed and sanctioned by the Devine being. As such, if they were fortunate enough to be killed in battle against the infidels and apostates, then they ascend to an even higher level of honor. Published eulogies of their fighters claimed that the dead had smiles on their face, and smelled of musk long after they died.
Chapter 1- Introduction

The Ashura of 2013 marked the tenth year of the return of the Shiite religious celebration commemorating the death of the Prophet’s grandson, Hussein. This year’s Ashura was like the others since 2003, with massive bombs wreaking their havoc upon the unsuspecting pilgrims. Forty-seven were killed in three different attacks on the holiday, including one on the main pilgrimage route to Karbala from Baghdad. Two roadside bombs exploded near a hospitality tent on the highway, killing ten and wounding 25. Haider Fadhel was cooking for pilgrims when the bombs went off, wounding his nearby brother. “We didn’t think that we would be a target…all we do is feed people and provide water for them. Is this reason to kill us?” After ten years of similar bombings, Haider knew exactly why he was targeted and by who.

Haider and his brother were lucky not to be in Diyala province north of Baghdad, where a bigger catastrophe occurred at a reenactment of the drama of Hussein’s slaughter in the 7th century outside of Karbala. One witness said the suicide bomber detonated his vest at the exact moment of the climactic death scene, and “I saw those who were acting out the death had died in reality. They were on the ground covered with blood” (Ghazi, 2013, Nov 14). These are not instrumental bombings designed to achieve a concrete result, but an assault on the very essence of another group’s identity.

Haider’s question is a good one, one that has preoccupied me for over seven years. I had witnessed the pilgrims during my own time in Iraq in the chaotic days of 2007 as they walked the highway to Karbala mindless of the threat, and I wondered about their religious dedication in the midst of a civil war that pitted one sect against the other. I struggled with the impossibility of trying to protect such an indefensible target from terrorists, and pondered why anyone would kill
innocents like the hardscrabble men, women, and children who walked for days to mourn their lost Imam.

The purpose of this dissertation is to try and answer Haider’s question. Why would a group specifically select pilgrims as a target, bypassing critical infrastructure or military targets? In order to develop a framework of explanation for this phenomenon, I investigated the strategic decision making of a small group of armed actors to explain how they determine the priority of targets to attack to achieve their overarching goals. A major difficulty in this type of investigation is the impossibility of interviewing the leadership of a group of this type in order to examine their decision making process. Fortunately, the group I studied was a prolific producer of written records and press releases that allow some insight into the cognitive process of strategic decision-making. Political psychology has many different frameworks that assist in understanding both cognitive patterns and group political behavior, to include violence.

The Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS) executed the attacks described above. Formerly known as Al Qaeda in Iraq, this organization rose to the fore in 2003 among a wide spectrum of capable insurgent groups fighting against a foreign occupation of Iraq and stood out because of their superior planning, leadership, communication skills, and unrelenting and shocking brutality. The group known as the Islamic State today began in 2003 under the leadership of Abu Musab Zarqawi, who took refuge in Iraq after being dislodged from Afghanistan. At the time, Zarqawi collected a small group of true believers and awaited the coming invasion with a preternatural instinct for future opportunity.

This critical time, the spring of 2003, provides a useful start to a case study that began with a drastic change in the political fortunes of the Sunni and Shia of Iraq. The Sunni minority, which had dominated the political elite since Iraq’s independence, now faced a role reversal with
the Shia majority sure to take power as a consequence of the American invasion. Shia groups would end up dominating the future democratic process due to their heightened sense of sectarian identity following the post-Gulf War uprising against Saddam. Saddam’s government, while dominated by Tikriti Sunnis, was still a secular government that was an equal opportunity oppressor. Despite that, the uprising occurred in the Shia southland and the harsh measures used and damage resulting to Shia religious sites had fueled this identity salience.

Iraq as a Case Study

The chaos following the fall of Saddam and the power vacuum that followed created a perfect laboratory for a quasi-experiment in-group formation and political violence as local politics was unfrozen from the status quo. Many groups began to work together, groups that saw a future in creating a new state in Iraq. Other groups rose up to contest this change in power for a plethora of reasons, and Zarqawi’s group became the most highly visible and capable extremist group in Iraq. The Sunni group chose the name Tawhid and Jihad (TwJ), which translates as ‘monotheism and the struggle’, a fitting name for the philosophy they would try to introduce to the people of Iraq. Their rise to prominence led to their acceptance as an Al Qaeda affiliate and a series of organizational growth, culminating in the establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq in 2006. For simplicity, when discussing this group in general, I will refer to the group as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI).¹

The ISI’s worldview was shaken by the abrupt image change concerning a historic social rival (Shia) that threatened the group’s status as a member of the dominant social group within Islam. The perception of a new threat, both existential and to their identity as the leaders of Islam, from a formerly weak and submissive foe, was a strong factor in ISI’s choice to utilize

¹ TwJ became AQI, which later joined the Mujahideen Shura Council (MSC), and later became the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). ISI changed their name in 2013 to the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham/the Levant (ISIS) to legitimize their expansion into Syria, and even more recently to the Islamic State (2014).
violence against Shia symbolic targets from 2003 to 2012. Zarqawi’s group consistently targeted the Shia, unaffected by any outside pressure, until the group was challenged by members of their own social group in the form of the Sunni Awakening movement. This internal challenge, which threatened their very survival, is the only factor that impacted their strategic targeting choices during this period.

The ISI attacked Shia symbolic targets in the hopes of provoking a sectarian war; the inevitable Shia counterattacks would eventually mobilize fellow Sunnis to belatedly join their cause. This line of reasoning stands in contravention of the facts and is a post-facto justification of ISI’s strategy that avoids an in-depth analysis of the decisions the group made that led to their strategic targeting rationale. The true impetus for the targeting of symbolic Shia targets stems from the group categorization of Shia Iraqis, not as possible allies against the occupation, but as dependents of an historic enemy – the Shia nation. Operating on the far edge of Salafist\(^3\) and takfirist\(^4\) dogma, ISI felt the need to create or force a positive image for the Sunni nation at large in contrast to the Shia nation that had gained the very seat of Abbasid power in 2003. Devastating ISI attacks on the very symbols of Shia identity make it clear the importance of images and social competition to the group’s thinking. This cognitive pattern of decision-making survived challenges from otherwise sympathetic movement leaders horrified by the attacks on Shia symbols and innocent Muslims, and was only impacted by serious defections from their own social identity group.

**Islamic State of Iraq’s Targeting Methodology**

\(^3\) The Salafist movement is a sect of Sunni Islam that ascribes to a strict, pure, and literal interpretation of the original teachings of the first Muslims.

\(^4\) Takfir is the declaration that another Muslim is an apostate, or turned away from Islam. In certain interpretations, it could lead to execution.
It is difficult to analyze a group like ISI for several reasons. One, the group has had most of its leadership decimated in the conflict in Iraq. Interviews are out of the question, there are translation issues, and the group is currently involved in an operational campaign in both Iraq and Syria. The only empirical data available is what the group has written in internal documents, their press releases from a very professional media department, and their claimed attack events. To understand what the content of their communications tells us about ISI’s decision making, I use a theoretical framework from political psychology called Image Theory to look at group categorization and Social Identity Theory from social psychology to examine dynamics of group competition in Iraq. I argue that a drastic change in image categorization, compounded by increased social competition by rival ethnic/sectarian groups, increased the propensity for symbolic violence by the group experiencing the change in cognitive categorization.

To uncover the leadership of ISI’s cognitive process in selection of targeting strategy, I conducted a content analysis of a wide assortment of available ISI documents. I used qualitative and quantitative techniques to analyze ISI’s political worldview according to Image Theory, and four hypotheses derived from applying Social Identity Theory as an intervening variable to explain symbolic violence. I coded the communications using elements of both theories to evaluate my hypotheses and to utilize specific data about pilgrim attacks in Iraq to identify trends that support my thesis.

My research identified 36 captured ISI documents from U.S. Government sources and 2,852 press releases from various collections (Haverford College, Global Terror Alert, and jihadist outlets that posted al Furqan and al Fajr Media items) in order to conduct a content analysis. The captured internal documents allow me to see what ISI’s leadership and management echelon writes for internal consumption. The press releases are the second category
of communication for analysis, consisting of strategic messaging to a variety of audiences. These messages are carefully vetted and crafted for those specific audiences, and since strategic messaging attempts to persuade, my assumption is that ISI often presents a true insight into their worldview that we can learn a great deal from. The case study ends in 2013, when the group officially acknowledged its secret expansion into Syria – which introduces too many new variables to confidently continue with this particular investigation. This is not to say that ISI has not maintained similar strategies, communications, or sectarian influenced actions in Syria to date. As I shall elucidate in the next chapter, the group’s allegedly hostile takeover of the Syrian Salafist resistance movement is a good place to end this particular case study and to project some of its findings into a preliminary assessment of ISI’s operations in Syria.

In addition to communications, I have created a database of Shia pilgrim attacks from the Iraqi Body Count dataset. This organization runs a website that tracks the deaths in Iraq due to political violence and is based on morgue reports and multiple press accounts. The highly politicized attention paid to pilgrim attacks in Iraqi news results in a high degree of fidelity of the data to the benefit of this investigation. This advantage compares favorably to the difficulty of determining other factors involved in the Iraqi Body Count database, such as whether the victim is Shia or Sunni or the reason for attack. For this study, pilgrim victims can be reliably assumed to be Shia and attacked because of the highly visible sectarian activity they were participating in.

Overall, the data I have collected is reasonably comprehensive, with an estimated 90% of all press releases ISI has distributed. The modern era has allowed virtual freedom of communication for groups that are hunted like Al Qaeda, and attempts to shut down outlets have been frustrated due to endless proliferation and the ease of creating websites. Similarly, the pilgrim attack database is even more reliable than the press releases. Iraqi Body Count has
refined their process over time and is viewed by Iraq watchers as the standard for unbiased casualty counts. Understanding that in war there is still a fog of uncertainty, and that pilgrim attacks could be under counted or over counted by accident, I still feel that of the various tracking tags assigned to victims in the database, pilgrim identification has the highest reliability.

Coding the communications according to indicators of Image Theory and Social Identity Theory, I hope to confirm four change hypotheses I derived from the theoretical framework of the model I selected. First, that image change increases attention paid to a newly important rival group, which can be measured by the target of official communications. Second, this increased attention leads to increased social competition for positive image comparison. I measure the use of symbolic language and event scripts in communications to measure this trend. Third, increased competition leads to an increase in attacks on the opposing group’s special symbols, measured by the level of pilgrim attacks in this case study. Fourth, the strategy of targeting will remain unchanged unless there is a shift in attention from the out-group to an even more threatening in-group defection problem. I measure indicators for this last hypothesis by examining any shifts in targeted communications and attacks on Shia symbols versus Sunni defectors in the Awakening movement.

Finally, there are some additional insights I hope to achieve in this investigation. What happens to the group’s strategy when the leadership is targeted with a decapitation strategy by its foes? Consistency in strategy would support a cognitive explanation, as past research into image change and the cognitive process both highlight the difficulty of changing patterns of thought based on new information. Once a strategy has been chosen by any group, information that runs counter to prevailing beliefs is often discounted and confusing to evaluate. Also, is there any difference between public communication and private communication in strategy making and
group social competition? By examining both private internal documents and public press releases, I should be able to elicit any change in image and evaluate any impact on strategy determination. Lastly, what causes a group like ISI to choose extreme violence in their social competition compared to other social groups in similar situations of image change and the loss of group prestige? Furthermore, why would ISI treat putative allies like the Sunni tribes as bad as their enemies, or worse? While these additional questions are important, they are not the focus of this dissertation but possibilities for future research.

The changes seen in Iraq between the fortunes of the Shia and Sunni communities are not simply isolated to this particular country. While Iraq’s history is unique, a rising Sunni and Shia sectarian identity affects all countries in the region and across the world. The conversion of the civil war in Syria, from a rebellion against Assad to a multinational effort of Shia groups aiding Assad against Syrian Sunni groups aided by Sunni countries and non-state actors like ISI, is an important reason why this research has value to policy makers. Al Qaeda’s affiliate has aggressively maneuvered to co-opt the Salafist groups among the anti-Assad coalition and has even feuded with some groups over preeminence. The group has learned some hard lessons after their defeat in Iraq, but brings an unchanged worldview that makes it likely to be an important player in Syria. At the same time, there are multiple vulnerabilities in their approach that were painfully exposed to the world during the Iraq War, which I hope to make clear in the analysis chapter. My research can assist policymakers in accurately weighing the risk of allowing the Syrian opposition to become dominated by the ISIS in the pursuit of regime change in Damascus. In addition to regional applications, there are lessons here that can be applied in a limited fashion to other sectarian/ethnic conflicts where social identity becomes extremely salient.
Summary of Chapters

This work consists of six chapters. Chapter 2 consists of a review of the theoretical literature behind Image and Social Identity Theories to provide the framework I use to analyze the communications. Chapter 3 introduces the historical background of the case study in order to evaluate the validity of the hypotheses presented in the introduction. The case study centers on the Islamic State of Iraq’s targeting of Shia pilgrims from 2003 to 2012. Chapter 4 records the research process and findings, and explains in depth the methodology I used for the content analysis of the internal and external communications of ISI from 2003-2013. Justification for the method and a detailed explanation of what indicators match the hypotheses are included in this portion. I discuss the implications of the findings in Chapter 5 and analyze their impact on the case study. In Chapter 6, I summarize learning points from the study, present limitations and application to other situations, and discuss future implications. For those interested in further examination of my methodology, the coding book and my database of pilgrim attacks will be included as an appendix.
Chapter 2 – Theoretical Framework

The purpose of this dissertation is to examine the critical factors that influence the Islamic State’s continuing war on the Shia populace. Someone could be forgiven for accepting this type of violence as following a natural law, such as gravity. Yet it is a very worthwhile question. We accept this conflict as a given, as the “way things are,” without questioning thoroughly why it exists and what other possible alternatives could have been. There are excellent reasons to puzzle over ISI’s deliberate attacks on Shia civilians. The Koran forbids the killing of fellow Muslims, and there is no doubt that Shia pilgrims are devout and observant co-religionists, however one feels about sectarian differences. Furthermore, senior members of the Sunni religious community have forbidden the killing of Shia civilians in Iraq. ISI’s own spiritual advisor publicly rebuked the strategy (Wagemakers, 2009), and no less an authority than Al Qaeda’s operational commander, Ayman al Zawahiri, questioned Zarqawi’s strategy of attacking Shia civilians (Zawahiri, 2005). These serious interventions were unable to short-circuit a strategy that was unpopular and arguably a failure by mid-2007, when the civil war began to abate. Nonetheless, it is a strategy that continues to day.

After Iraq’s regime change in 2003, the abrupt collapse of law and order and the failure of Coalition forces to quickly rebuild a functioning government spawned a series of parallel conflicts: attacks on the occupation forces, attacks on the interim Iraqi government and their security forces, struggles for power in each political group, an assassination campaign against former Ba’athists, and violent criminal competition. Other areas, like the Kurdish areas in the north of Iraq, were relatively peaceful. Amidst this wide spectrum of inter-communal relations, the phenomena most difficult to explain are ISI’s attacks on the Shia civilian populace. This Iraq case study has value because it allows us to isolate several factors for consideration about what
might have caused ISI’s leadership to make the decisions that it did in 2003, and their consistency in supporting this strategy through success and failure. I chose ISI because it was a group that dominated every other faction involved in the Iraq War, an impressive accomplishment during the Hobbesian environment that was post-invasion Iraq. ISI’s miraculous resurgence in 2013 as the lead threat to Iraqi stability, and greater stability in the Middle East, only confirms this choice.

Part I – Theories that Could Explain the Case

There are several different theoretical frameworks that could be used to understand the civil war in Iraq. Fearon (1995) described three possible explanations to understanding civil war: that people are by nature irrational and conflict results from that lack of rationality; that elites instigate conflict for their own good, rarely paying the consequences; and that war is a rational process by two parties who both believe they can gain more than they lose. The study of the Islamic State of Iraq challenges easy categorization.

Sectarianism

The invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent demise of Saddam Hussein’s regime provided us with a tabula rasa to observe important factors about Iraqi society, culture, history, and politics as they transformed to a new regime. There was a change in government, the level of involvement of religion in politics, new external influences, and some new freedoms. The uniqueness of this event fails to register with many observers, who continue to advance explanations that maintain continuity with the past. One example is the reliance on sectarianism, the divide between Sunni and Shia Iraqis, as a cause for the civil war. When the United States and others removed strongman Saddam (a Sunni), they unwittingly unleashed the tensions that had existed between the two sects for some fourteen hundred years. The reasoning is that only a
dictator could keep such tensions at bay. This logic ignores the fact that Arab Iraqis share the same ethnicity, religion, sense of nationalism, and a distinct culture that developed during the Ottoman Empire (Visser, 2009). Sunni and Shia had intermarried and lived in mixed communities for centuries, and even changed sects due to economic necessity (Nakash, 2003).

**Simple Power Politics**

Setting aside naked sectarianism as the cause of conflict, it is possible that the rationale for ISI to attack the Shia was purely rational in nature and part of a larger political struggle for power and economic gain. The power vacuum that existed in Iraq in 2003 would support this argument, and preliminary election results in 2004 highlighted the role religious parties played in politics, seen by many Iraqis to be a worrisome development. This changed over time, however, and by 2010 a majority of Iraqi Sunnis and Shias voted for a Shia (Alawi) for Prime Minister in a failed attempt to change the party in power. Furthermore, ISI has no intention of sharing power with either Shia political parties or rival Sunni groups, nor has it diverted any of its fund raising and extortion efforts from its prolific car bombing campaigns. This intuitive argument falls short of explaining ISI’s war on the Shia.

The conflict that developed into the Iraqi Civil War of 2003 to the present (with periods of peace interspersed) was not something that was predetermined by primordial forces and unstoppable. Multi-sectarian and ethnic cooperation could have prevented conflict and facilitated a short and uneventful occupation by the United States. Instead, one actor with outsized ambitions and the determination to see them through was successful in rising to the fore over a dozen major actors. That actor was Islamic State of Iraq, and its leader a man named Ahmad Fadil al Kahalayeh, better known by his nom de guerre Abu Musab al Zarqawi. To gain a better understanding of this civil war, we need to understand how ISI’s leadership thought and

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5 As told to the author by a local city council chair, south of Baghdad, in Spring 2007.
created the strategy that exists to this day. The only way to do this is to approach the study from a theoretical framework that allows us to reconstruct ISI’s political worldview.

**Background**

Abu Musab al Zarqawi founded the group that became the Islamic State in 2002 and named it Tawhid wal Jihad (TwJ), which was similar to his group ‘Tawhid’ (monotheism) in Jordan. Zarqawi was a Jordanian jihadist who fled from Afghanistan after the American invasion in 2001. He traveled through Iran, barely escaping capture by their secret police, and found safe haven with a Kurdish Salafist group named Ansar al Islam (Raphaeli, 2005) in the north of Iraq. As the invasion of Iraq became imminent, Zarqawi prepared his group to take advantage of the chaotic aftermath. His experiences in Afghanistan, both in the training camps and his escape from the Americans, would be strongly influential in the group formation.

New group formation is highly influenced by the original leadership and a large part of this formation has to do with the collective identity of the group. What role does the group hold in society? Abdelal et al.’s (2006) concept of identity consists of norms (rules), a social purpose (goals), relational comparisons (others), and cognitive models (worldview). Stone and Young (2009, p. 238) used this concept of identity to formulate four assumptions about groups. First, an identity consists of a set of beliefs that are shared by people who are considered to be part of a distinct group. Second, they share a core concept, such as being “Sunni,” a name that all in that group claim. Third, individuals in the group have similar beliefs about their core identity and stipulations of group membership. Finally, the best way to determine affiliation with a group is through speech (since we cannot read brain patterns). Although speech can be unclear or deliberately deceptive, actions are influenced by too many other variables to be completely reliable indicators of group identity.
The Islamic State of Iraq has a distinct identity that fits the concept described by Abdelal et al. Like any group, it has a hierarchy of identities that it is a subset of, including Arab, Muslim, Sunni, and Salafist identities. Zarqawi, a Jordanian by birth who had developed very conservative religious views at a Salafist mosque, had fought in the jihad in Afghanistan in the late 1980’s and returned to continue that jihad against Jordan’s rulers. He was imprisoned shortly after his return Jordan after a failed plot, an experience that allowed Zarqawi to develop his Salafist viewpoint while forming the network that would eventually become his organization (Husayn, 2005). Released on an amnesty, Zarqawi made his way to Afghanistan but did not join the Al Qaeda organization. When founded, TwJ did not have an Iraqi identity and was almost completely foreign in makeup, made up of a core of loyal Jordanians from Zarqawi’s hometown of Zarqa. The lack of Ba’athist influence on the group allows us to eliminate explanations of ISI’s behavior as rooted in Saddam’s Iraq. TwJ was new on the scene and had little roots in Iraq other than their support base. Thus, the leadership was able to create strategies based on their political worldview without bias or path dependency.

Our ability to understand the influences on ISI’s decision making rely on a theoretical framework derived in the field of foreign policy decision-making analysis. One assumption I make is that although Zarqawi had a large influence on the group as its founder, it is still a group of like-minded individuals that share an identity and core beliefs. Therefore, we can avoid intensive investigation into personality, ideology, and attitudes of any key member and focus on a shared group political worldview. The purpose of focusing on cognitive aspects in this case is to flush out the political worldview of ISI and place the Shia within that spectrum.

The Cognitive Perspective

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6 Just speaking of ISI; obviously the indigenous Sunni insurgent groups had varying degrees of Ba’athist heritage, depending on their level of Salafist influence. The Ba’ath as a secular organization frowned upon over-religious members, although the growing popularity of Salafist groups in the 1990s in Iraq gained many Ba’athist defectors.
The study of cognitive belief systems was pioneered by Leites (1951) to investigate the Soviet Politburo’s negotiating styles and tactics for political use. This initial effort had a large impact on the development of a research field that was responsive to decision maker needs and influential in the formulation of well-formed foreign policy. Snyder et al. (1954) found a strong relationship between belief systems, perceptions, and decision-making (Holsti, 1962). Snyder, Bruch, and Sapin advocated opening the so-called “black box” of decision making and analyzing the different factors influencing leaders and organizations (1962). George (1969) developed a technique called the Operational Code to develop an understanding of an individual’s political universe, which he divided into philosophical and instrumental beliefs. George coded speech using a technique called “verbs in context” to produce standardized scores for a multitude of indicators in both of his categories. Although helpful in understanding parts of the decision maker’s belief system, the technique does not explain how these beliefs translate into actual decisions.

Richard Cottam (1977) saw foreign policy decision-making as a choice among alternatives by individuals predisposed to make certain choices but making them within the context of a worldview (p. 62). This was an important development as it acknowledged the interaction between individual agency and the influence of environment. A decision maker might have certain predispositions, but has to “impose organization on the social environment in order to manage its complexities” (R. Cottam and M. Cottam, 2001, p. 88). To accomplish this, individuals rely on categories to integrate new information with previously interpreted information for ease in processing. Vertzburger (1990) called humans “cognitive misers,” a term that best explains this process. Boulding (1959) and Jervis (1970) both investigated “images” as
descriptions of that categorization process, with Cottam (1977) and Herrmann (1985) developing a more formal framework called Image Theory.

Alexander et al. (2005) described Image Theory as “strategic decision making that identifies primary judgments guiding international images, or stereotypes, and the selection of international policies” (p. 28). According to Herrmann (2003), these stereotypes fill in missing information to assist in decision-making. In addition to making decisions easier to make, images also fulfill an emotional need to deal with cognitive dissonance. Cottam (1977) noted when threat and opportunity became more intense, reliance on stereotypes increase in order to seek a “harmonious balance” between feelings about an “other group” and relative capabilities (Hermann, 2003, 295). Herrmann, Voss, Schooler, and Ciarrochi’s (1997) experiments based on Cottam’s concept found that increased affect led to an increased reliance on images for decision making.

There is a disagreement among scholars as to whether an increased reliance on images applied only to leaders or to followers as well. Snyder (1991) argued that leaders were manipulative and used images as myths to incite their followers, casting doubt on whether leaders with access to better analysis and facts actually use stereotypes. Morgenthalau (1973) felt the opposite, believing that leaders needed a “cognitive disguise (called ideology) in order to shelter self-image from realities of politics” (Herrmann, 2003, p. 297). Fearon and Laitin (2000) commented on a parallel question, whether ethnic conflict is instigated by elites or perpetuated by the actions of normal people who participate in sectarian struggles. Both of these sets of questions have not been adequately addressed in the literature and require additional research. In this particular case study, Zarqawi’s influence over group decision making was thought to be
very strong; however, there is no evidence to support any claim that he was either an elite or
trying to manipulate sectarian identity for political purpose.

Efforts to improve the theoretical framework of Image Theory found an association
between images and strategic choices (M. Cottam, 1994). Certain images were associated with
emotions; the enemy image (a category where high threat opposing groups are placed) was
paired with feelings of anger, envy, and fear. A degenerate image (indecisive culture) of another
group frequently observed emotional reactions of disgust, contempt, and anger (Herrmann, 2003,
p. 299). Important for my investigation into the ISI, Herrmann argues that images retard learning
patterns due to bias. Instead of a Bayesian updating model, where decisions change based on
updated information, “images fueled by emotion…may persevere or change independently of
change in the objective situation.” This could explain the longevity of ISI’s strategy of targeting
Shia and Shia pilgrims in particular. As Jervis wrote, “actors engage in a selective and biased
search for information, recognize confirmatory information, not see or discount counter
information, and remain prisoners of their preconceptions” (as cited in Hermann, 2003, p. 300).

Development of a political worldview

Image theory is based on cognition, which is the acquisition, organization, and utilization
of knowledge. This process includes perception, memory, attention, problem solving, language,
thinking, and imagery (M. Cottam, 1986, p. 6). Interaction with the surrounding environment is
an important factor in this sense. The process includes receiving a stimulus, categorizing it,
confirming fit, and an evaluating the context in terms of threat or opportunity (p. 27). Cottam’s
research using original survey results found that U.S. policymakers used up to seven categories
to organize their worldview. Those categories contain event scripts (historical perspective),
response alternatives (previously developed courses of action), and ideal type members of each
category (p. 40-41). Martha Cottam (1994) expanded Richard Cottam’s original Image Theory framework (1977) and Herrmann et al. subsequent refinements (1985) to present the following ideal types (images): Enemy, Ally, Barbarian, Imperialist, Colonial client, Rogue, and Degenerate. They fall roughly into three categories: an image of the self and those whose interests are perceived to be co-aligned, bystanders with separate and independent interests, and those with opposing interests. These varying degrees of motivation were cataloged along with the subject’s level of capability and relative culture to flush out the ideal type or image of a particular group.

In this next section, I would like to trace the specific evolution of the categories in Image Theory. Here is Richard Cottam’s original typology of Image Theory, a mostly inductive approach based on a case study of the British in Egypt:

Table 2.1 *The Original Categories of Image Theory*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>R Cottam (1977)</th>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th>Capability</th>
<th>Threat</th>
<th>Culture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enemy</td>
<td>motivated, evil, highly aggressive</td>
<td>similar</td>
<td>extreme</td>
<td>similar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allies of Enemy</td>
<td>part of monolithic hierarchical enemy decision structure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutrals</td>
<td>Easily duped or secret agents of enemy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allied</td>
<td>defensive, benign</td>
<td>optimistic</td>
<td>threat exists</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colonial</td>
<td>Exploitation</td>
<td>High, hidden hand</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>superior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imperial</td>
<td>Those cooperating are responsible</td>
<td>low due to immaturity</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>low, need help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complex</td>
<td>Complex policies, defensive in nature</td>
<td></td>
<td>small</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Herrmann’s Image Theory consisted of seven categories:

Table 2.2. R. Herrmann’s Revised Image Theory Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>R. Herrmann (1985)</th>
<th>Capability</th>
<th>Style/Decision</th>
<th>Threat</th>
<th>Culture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enemy</td>
<td>Equal</td>
<td>Small Elite</td>
<td>Threat</td>
<td>Equal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbarian</td>
<td>Superior</td>
<td>Small Elite</td>
<td>Threat</td>
<td>Inferior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degenerate</td>
<td>Superior</td>
<td>A Few Groups</td>
<td>Threat</td>
<td>Superior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ally</td>
<td>Inferior</td>
<td>Small Elite</td>
<td>Opportunity</td>
<td>Inferior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependent Ally</td>
<td>Superior/Equal</td>
<td>Confused/Differentiated</td>
<td>Opportunity</td>
<td>Weak Willed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child</td>
<td>Equal</td>
<td>Many Groups</td>
<td>Threat</td>
<td>Equal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satellite</td>
<td>Inferior</td>
<td>Many Groups</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Equal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Changes in the international system after the Cold War eliminated the perceived need for categories like satellite. Martha Cottam’s revised Image Theory categories reflected an international system with a single hegemon, a unique situation rarely seen in the modern era:

Table 2.3. M. Cottam’s Image Theory Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>M. Cottam (2005)</th>
<th>Capability</th>
<th>Style/Decision</th>
<th>Threat</th>
<th>Culture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enemy</td>
<td>Equal</td>
<td>Small Elite</td>
<td>Threat</td>
<td>Equal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbarian</td>
<td>Superior</td>
<td>Small Elite</td>
<td>Threat</td>
<td>Inferior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imperialist</td>
<td>Superior</td>
<td>A Few Groups</td>
<td>Threat</td>
<td>Superior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colonial</td>
<td>Inferior</td>
<td>Small Elite</td>
<td>Opportunity</td>
<td>Inferior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degenerate</td>
<td>Superior/Equal</td>
<td>Confused/Differentiated</td>
<td>Opportunity</td>
<td>Weak Willed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rogue</td>
<td>Inferior</td>
<td>Small Elite</td>
<td>Threat</td>
<td>Inferior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ally</td>
<td>Equal</td>
<td>Many Groups</td>
<td>Threat</td>
<td>Equal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Inferior</td>
<td>Many Groups</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Equal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Enemy image is a constant fixture in the development of the theoretical framework for Image Theory. The Enemy is the most consistent type of category, the polar opposite image of the self-image. They are always equal in capability (otherwise the subject would not elevate the
object to such a high status; this also enhances the subject’s own inflated sense of capabilities). The Barbarian image and Degenerate are consistent with historical patterns of strong nations with inferior culture or countries that are declining in power. The Ally and Neutral are common categories that fit well into the self-image versus enemy image paradigm. The categories that defy easy formulation are inferior capability nations. Cottam developed the rogue image for nations like North Korea or Iraq that were clearly inferior in capability but still threatening to the object nation, due to the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and increased delivery capability. Suddenly, weaker nations could pose a threat to stronger ones. The Colonial image, in contrast, is a constant – a weak state that is subject to manipulation by stronger states.

Cottam (2005) developed a matrix that elaborates on the taxonomy of varying degrees of culture, capability, and intentions. Although there are 27 different image possibilities, the object can only have 5-7 images for simplicity in cognitive processing of information. Cottam highlighted seven images that are used frequently by decision makers (see Table 2.3 above), but pointed out that it was possible that other images could be in use. I adapted her chart specifically for the Islamic State of Iraq below (see Table 2.4). Unused image possibilities are labeled with a capital letter. The Imperialist, Enemy, Barbarian, Degenerate, Rogue, Neutral, Colonial, and Ally are presented in accordance with their characteristics. For example, the Barbarian has inferior culture but superior capability and has harmful intentions.

In examining the theoretical framework of Image Theory, there is only one image that has a perceived superior culture. Groups would have difficulty admitting that anyone is superior in this aspect, whether it was true or not. Also, both the Ally and Neutral image have similar characteristics, only differing by type of intention toward the object nation. They have equal capability and culture; otherwise they would fall into one of the inferior categories. Three of the
images fall into the inferior culture category, demonstrating the propensity for the object nation to look down on other cultures as inferior.

Table 2.4. Image Theory Possible Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Harmful Intentions</th>
<th></th>
<th>Culture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Capability</td>
<td>Superior</td>
<td>Equal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Imperialist/Degenerate</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Enemy/Degenerate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>D</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benign Intentions</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Capability</td>
<td>Superior</td>
<td>Equal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>L</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Helpful Intentions</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Capability</td>
<td>Superior</td>
<td>Equal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Q</td>
<td>Ally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S</td>
<td>T</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From: Cottam (2005)

In applying Image Theory to decision makers in the United States, Cottam’s eight categories (see bolded images in Table 2.4) adequately represent a comprehensive worldview. Cottam’s original (1994) and subsequent research (2001) supported this finding. If one applies Image Theory to a specific region, however, there are other possibilities for images that actors use. Cottam acknowledges this possibility, but does not find evidence for it in the cases she examined – mostly in Latin America. My investigation into ISI’s worldview encouraged me to use Cottam’s typology in a slightly different way, by exploring images from a group level in a context different from the hegemonic point of view of the United States following the Cold War.

**ISI’s Projected Political Worldview**

The Middle East has bi-polar rivalries that resemble Cottam’s original typology of Cold War images. Nasr (2006) identified Saudi Arabia and Iran as dueling would-be hegemons striving for dominance in the Middle East. This natural rivalry is analogous to the Soviet-U.S.
rivalry during the Cold War. In developing ISI’s worldview according to Image Theory, different categories need to be activated and deleted from Cottam’s current taxonomy. First, the Dependent of the Enemy category, which was an original category in Image Theory in use during the Cold War to describe the enemy image’s satellite, is once again relevant to categorize weaker affiliated nations/groups that support either the Saudis or Iranians (see category “C” in Table 2.4 above). The Dependent of the Enemy has inferior culture, equal capability (due to the protection from their benefactor), and harmful intentions. Second, the Barbarian image will also require dependents in reference to countries among the Saudi alliance that are Sunni (and therefore have equal culture) but have harmful intentions toward Salafist groups like ISI and are declining, decadent powers.

Correspondingly, according to Image Theory, it is likely that some categories will drop out for cognitive simplicity since experiments have identified the use of only seven (plus or minus two) categories per worldview. What categories would likely drop out? The imperialist image does not fit into ISI’s worldview, as their belief in cultural superiority is strong. The neutral image also does not fit into their rigid interpretation of the concept of a world divided into two: the house of Islam (dar al-Islam) and the house at war (dar al-harb) (Khadduri, 1955). I added one image category, “Patrona,” to fill the need for a category with higher capability for units that serve in a supervisory or inspirational role. Patron is Spanish language slang for “the boss,” and Patrona is the declension of the word in the feminine gender. ISI pledged allegiance to AQC in 2004, necessitating this type of category. Below is a table that depicts a possible ISI worldview:
Table 2.5 *Projected Al Qaeda Image Categories according to Image Theory*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Harmful Intentions</th>
<th>Superior</th>
<th>Equal</th>
<th>Culture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Superior</td>
<td>Not Possible</td>
<td>Dep of Barbarian</td>
<td>Barbarian/Degen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capability</td>
<td>Equal</td>
<td>Not Possible</td>
<td>Enemy/Degenerate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inferior</td>
<td>Not Possible</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benign Intentions</td>
<td>Superior</td>
<td>Equal</td>
<td>Culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not Possible</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capability</td>
<td>Equal</td>
<td>Not Possible</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inferior</td>
<td>Not Possible</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helpful Intentions</td>
<td>Superior</td>
<td>Equal</td>
<td>Culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not Possible</td>
<td>Patrona</td>
<td>H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capability</td>
<td>Equal</td>
<td>Not Possible</td>
<td>Ally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inferior</td>
<td>Not Possible</td>
<td>Colonial/Dependent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I hope to demonstrate in this investigation that Image Theory is a powerful tool in explaining ISI’s conflict with Shia Muslims. Cottam has produced a rigorous and parsimonious theory that has been validated in several experiments and inductive investigations. It is a very slight modification to produce additional categories that have either been used in the past or just haven’t existed before because of the low “n” problem in international relations. My plan is to explore the ability of Image Theory to adapt to different international relationships in different regions. Applying the theoretical framework to a non-state actor, and one that is an enemy of the United States, provides the opportunity to further test the theory.

**Image Change**

One other area of Image Theory that this case study will test is a further exploration of image change. A fundamental postulate of the theory is that image change is difficult and highly resisted in the cognitive process due to cognitive dissonance. An often-discussed example of the difficulty of image change is the United States’ slow response and adaptation to the demise of
the Soviet Union. Senior administration officials admit it took a year before they were able to revise their perception of what had been their enemy image. Alexander, Brewer and Herrmann (1999) experimented with affect and images and found that increased affect had a correlation with a higher use of stereotyping and related policy choices. Cottam and Cottam (2001) identified associated emotions with different images, as indicated previously in this chapter. Finally, M. Cottam and McCoy (1998) examined image change after the Cold War ended. They found that the image change involved the use of temporary images to filter information that was tactical instead of strategic until a long-term image could be reliably constructed from new event scripts. Images toward other countries, particularly in South America, remained unchanged even though the threat of Soviet influence among dependent image nations had disappeared.

Since the image change involved with the demise of the Soviet Union was a removal of a threat (the only challenge to United States’ hegemony in fact), the reduction in affect makes image change appear to be a benign factor in conflict. What if the image change was reversed, and instead the object becomes a threat for the first time? One example is the Islamic Revolution in 1979, where U.S. ally Iran suddenly becomes associated with a rogue image – with low culture and capability, but harmful intentions and a threat to regional stability. Is there a related association between images and policies after a drastic image change? I believe that there is and will explore that belief by examining empirical evidence in the ISI case study.

When the United States removed Saddam Hussein from power in 2003, the Shia in Iraq had the most to gain politically and economically from the change. This sudden change in power dynamics in a historic Sunni Arab capital was a shock to many, especially groups like the ISI. While Al Qaeda’s leaders were more focused on the far threat (U.S.) and urged their affiliate in Iraq to do the same, Zarqawi’s ISI chose to prioritize attacking the Shia at times over the
occupation forces (Felter, 2007). Having recently arrived from the battlefield in Afghanistan and aware of the factional politics involved in regime change, Zarqawi viewed the Shia not only as a new and distinct threat to Sunni hegemony in the Muslim world, but also as a group that was about to gain significant capability in their assumption of the policing powers of the Iraqi state. This dual shift of intentions and capability should also increase the use of images and associated policy choices as the previous research found concerning affect. My plan in this dissertation is to investigate any association of image change with policy choices, particularly the ISI penchant for pilgrim attacks.

**Social Identity Theory**

The cognitive process of categorizing a group into a spectrum of friendly ideal types on one end and enemy types on the other, with variations within and in between poles, is helpful to understand the origination of intragroup relationships. Images rely on past experiences stored within these categories to continue their perpetuation into the future with a minimum of disturbance. Experimental research on images by Herrmann (1997) and others have established relationships between affect and image use, and Cottam and Cottam (2001) found associations between certain images and emotions. One area that needs further investigation is the association between images and policy choice. Is there any relationship between policy maker’s images of other groups/countries and certain policy choices? And does the social competition for a positive comparison to other groups instigate extreme violence as a policy?

The field of social psychology contains a concept called Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) that provides a theoretical framework to understand why social groups compete and the environment in which each individual exists (Turner, 1996). Paralleling Image Theory, the Social Identity framework explains the categorization of people into various
groups, which helps “structure the social environment according to certain cognitive principles.” This includes the “accentuation of perceived (or judged) differences between items classified as belonging to different categories…which results in certain general features of stereotyping” (Tajfel, 1978, p. 62). Tajfel and others conducted experiments to test the theory and discovered that anytime there was a situation of ‘us versus them’, attitudes shifted from a psychological perspective to a sociological one. Even random group assignment produced eventual in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination (Turner, 1978).

For humans to process the complex world around them social categorization is an early imperative; once the object categorized other humans into groups, Tajfel and Turner found that groups competed with each other for a positive social identity in comparison with a rival group. “Social categories… contribute positively or negatively to this self-image; this contribution to an individual’s social identity is dependent on, and assessed by means of, social comparisons… Therefore, in-group value to social identity is dependent on means of positively valued distinctiveness” (Turner, 1978, p. 105). According to this theory, a driving force behind group behavior is the desire to achieve a better self-image than another group, particularly a rival group that is in close competition in a variety of ways.

The social identity is derived from the knowledge than an individual belongs to a certain group. There is a positive value to this and an emotional component that is attached to the membership. As a member of the group, individual characteristics and beliefs are sublimated (Tajfel, 1982). Zimbardo (1969) called this deindividuation, where the individual submerges into a larger collectivity. For instance, allegiance to a group requires individual values to be subordinated at times to the perceived values of the larger group. This process could allow for
non-violent individuals to accept the use of violence if it is called for or becomes a norm of the group.

The individual tie to the group makes relative social comparisons important to every member. The status of the in-group and the out-group can at times be an overarching concern, outweighing morality, economic, and personal considerations. Furthermore, controversy and social change motivates group members to seek opportunity to change the relative balance of social comparison. As Tajfel learned from his experiments and theorizing, “it will be obvious that a combination of illegitimacy and instability (in status relations between groups) would become a powerful incitement for attempts to change the intergroup status quo or to resist such changes on the part of groups which see themselves threatened by them” (Tajfel, 1978, p. 52). Furthermore, “perceived illegitimacy of intergroup relationship is thus socially and psychologically the accepted and acceptable lever for social change…” (Tajfel, 1978, p. 76).

When an individual identity association is shared and strongly valued across a group, this is called a collective identity (Klandermans, 2014). This identity becomes “politically relevant when people who share a specific identity take part in political action on behalf of the collective” (p. 2). Previously, Klandermans argued that people participated in political protest for three reasons: identity, instrumentality, and ideology (2003), which relates to the different possibilities (including combinations) of reasons why ISI attacks Iraqi Shia civilians. This dissertation presents evidence that of Klandermans’ three reasons for participation in political action, identity is most important for the group under study, ISI. The instrumentality of attacking Shia civilians is questionable, as witnessed by the critiques of otherwise sympathetic leaders in the Salafist community. Salafist ideology also did not inspire these attacks on the Shia, although it is
possible that these actions have become part of a new Salafist-jihadist ideology because of their replication in Iraq by the successors to Zarqawi as well as in other regions like Pakistan.

**Social Identity and Conflict**

Social Identity as a concept has been used in other situations to explain conflict between closely competing identity groups. Cairns (1982) studied the conflict in Northern Ireland and applied Social Identity Theory to try to explain what others call the “irrational” activity of both sides, particularly the use of symbols and parades that perpetually stirred conflict with little gain for the effort. Social categorization was evident by the available identity cues that each side used to recognize a member of the other group: names, schools attended, home, appearance and speech. There is no racial difference between the two groups in conflict in Northern Ireland; any differences must be socially constructed. Not only did the author find the Protestant (majority) group highly confident in their group’s superiority, he also found that the minority group made deliberate attempts to value a unique and positive heritage (Celtic pride) and frowned on participation in sports the Protestant group found popular (nominally British sports like soccer or rugby).

An interesting parallel between Ireland and Iraq is that according to Cairns, the Protestants in the 1970s were worried about their future as the majority. Cairns explains the Orange parades were an “unnecessary demonstration of power that displayed insecurity with their social identity” (p. 291), and he cited Turner and Brown (1978) who found that a good example of an “insecure relationship” between groups is one where the “subordinate group was itself previously dominant (p. 293).” The Protestant Irish watched the growing political power and felt the demographic pressure of a rising Catholic population with alarm. Those groups with a strong attachment to their social identity (in this case a mix of religious and national identities)
will react immediately to the faltering social comparison to the rival group. An insecure relationship in this context is a frequent indicator and precursor to violence.

I believe that the type of social competition described in the Irish case is an example of the opportunity for strident groups to use symbolic violence against the fundamental elements of the opponent group’s identity. If the categorization (or in this case, the re-categorization) of Iraqi Shia into the image of the dependent of the enemy acts as an explanatory or independent variable, the concepts of social categorization and social competition found within Social Identity theory act as an intervening variable in an ethnic conflict model. The response variable in this model is the physical attack on targets of Shia identity. This image change model provides a framework to help us understand the type and intensity of competition between the Sunni and Shia Iraqis – specifically from the Sunni perspective using the Islamic State of Iraq (Islamic State of Iraq) as the level of analysis.

In the next chapter, I will present the case study of the Islamic State of Iraq and Shia pilgrims, from 2003 to 2012, and the methodology for research into various databases that capture the actions of the ISI. I will explain the assumptions made for the study and examine alternative theories that could explain pilgrim attacks in the case study.
Chapter 3 – The Case Study

Sometime in the fall of 2013, the media wing of the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham released a video that was mostly obscured by the atrocities committed weekly in nearby Syria’s civil war. Despite the gradual rise in violent attacks in Iraq and a strong increase in the number of car bombs (Lewis, 2013), the highways of Anbar were safe enough for the normal economic activity of a modern nation. In the opening scene of the video, armed men calmly flag down several commercial trucks coming from Syria, and the drivers were told to dismount. A large man with a handsome face, long black beard, and flowing khaki clothes directed the conversation with the drivers, which devolved into a long and animated quiz on how a Sunni Muslim would pray. The ordeal was openly filmed, and only the interrogator had his face uncovered. The drivers, who quickly realized that this had become more than a random traffic stop, tried hard to convince their interrogator that they were Sunni. One passed the test and was separated from the others. The other three were lined up along the highway and shot with an AK-47 at close range by the unmasked man. His name is Abu Wahib, and at the time he was the emir of Anbar governorate for the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (Van Ostaeyen, 2013).

Since the publication of the video, many observers have compared Abu Wahib to the founder of ISI, Abu Musab al Zarqawi, who had been known to his supporters as the “Sheik of the Slaughterers” (Raphaeli, 2005). In the video, Abu Wahib was nonchalant about exposing his identity on camera and coldly goes about the business of execution. He appeared comfortable about his decision and was emotionless during the act of killing. Most unnerving to viewers used to a modern state where capital crimes do not occur in broad daylight, Abu Wahib was unhurried, unconcerned that government forces might interrupt his interrogation.
It is possible that Abu Wahib’s execution of the Alawite drivers served a larger purpose on behalf of ISIS, such as instilling fear and terror, disrupting resupply flowing to Syria on behalf of the Assad regime, and/or providing evidence of the Iraqi government’s failure to control territory. The logic of insurgency requires many seemingly random acts and tragedies like this one to create its grand quilt of effects. This being said, I believe it was released with a single purpose in mind, something that emanates from the very essence of the organization. Abu Wahib executed the truck drivers because they were Shia, a group ISIS considers to be the enemy, and the killing served to reinforce the narrative that ISIS has returned stronger and more committed than before to reclaiming Iraq and the greater Levant (al Sham) for Salafist (Sunni) Islam. The legacy of Zarqawi continues on.

The Islamic State is back and it has its swagger back as well. After hard years of hiding and struggle, running from comfortable sanctuaries thanks to the Sunni “traitors” among them, the Islamic State is returning to prominence as the leader of the fight against those who have strayed from the true path of Islam. Abu Wahib’s prominence in the video from August 2013 was new for an organization that had retreated to the shadows. According to several sources, Abu Wahib is an ISI fighter who had been captured in 2007 and sentenced to death by the Iraqi government for committing terrorist acts, but was freed in the mass prison breaks that ISIS executed all over Iraq in 2012 (Abbas, 2014, Jan 5). When ISIS took over Fallujah in January 2014, Abu Wahib was prominently featured on jihadi social media in dramatic battle scenes while wearing captured Iraqi SWAT equipment. Iraq observer Kirk Sowell described Abu

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7 Bilad al sham refers to the province of greater Syria after the Muslim conquest, including Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan.
8 After the loss of Abu Musab al Zarqawi and later Abu Omar al Baghdadi and Abu Hamza al Muhajir, the organization became very secretive about its leadership. Little is known about the current leader, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, whose various biographies and even detainment history is disputed.
Wahib as looking like “he had just crawled out of hell” (2014), and by escaping death row, in some ways he had. The ghost of Zarqawi is back.

The Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham is indeed back from the dead. Pronouncements of its demise were not premature and in fact accurate at the time they were made (Wing, 2008). The organization was decimated by American and Iraqi special operations forces from 2006-2010, particularly its leadership. The ability for the Islamic State to conduct operations was severely restrained. The recruiting pipeline of potential martyrs had dried up (ISIS, 2014). Funding was low and the attacks by fellow Sunnis of the Awakening (Sahwa) movement had truly rocked their very foundations and self-image, as well as the idea that they were the vanguard of the Sunni nation against all enemies. To understand how the group developed and maintained a consistent strategy throughout good times and bad, a short history of the organization is necessary.

**Part I - The “Return” of the Islamic State**

**Background**

Ahmad Fadil al Khalayilah, known better as Abu Musab al Zarqawi, founded the group Tawhid wal Jihad\(^9\) (TwJ) in Northern Iraq in the spring/summer of 2002 while working with an Iraqi Kurdish group with a shared Salafist ideology named Ansar al Islam (Husayn, 2005). Zarqawi had escaped to Iraq through Iran after the American invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. In early 2002, Zarqawi made the trip into Iran where members of the Sunni minority that were part of a pan-Islamic Salafist network sheltered him. Barely escaping the Iranian secret police in transit, Zarqawi crossed into northern Iraq and established his own training camp right under the nose of a Saddam Hussein regime that was more focused on an American invasion than the ever-

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\(^9\) Tawhid wal Jihad translates as Monotheism and Struggle. Monotheism, while a core principle of several religions, is a focus for Salafist groups that believe that any modification or innovation of the original religious practices of Islam is apostasy and should be sanctioned.
growing Salafist strain growing in Iraq. He wisely did not return to his native Jordan, where he was wanted for activities against the monarchy.

Arriving safely in Iraq and out of the reach of the Jordanian government, Zarqawi began putting together a terror network that spanned Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Germany, and Spain. The logistical heart of the network was Syria, where western intelligence services say he had Assad regime training, funds, and support (Brisard, 2005). Originally intending on running operations in Jordan and even Europe, the American invasion of Iraq in the spring of 2003 changed Zarqawi’s focus and gave him an opportunity to take his revenge upon the country that uprooted his commune of followers from their idyllic Islamic life in Afghanistan. From an organizational standpoint, this opportunity was an unexpected gift and accelerated all of Zarqawi’s plans dramatically.

The original core of TwJ was a tight-knit cohort of experienced jihadists from various countries in the Levant that Zarqawi personally vetted and recruited (Husayn 2005). Zarqawi spent time in Syria during 2002 building an extension of the network to be able to strike at Jordan. The coming American led invasion made it easy for Zarqawi to shift the flow of operations in the opposite direction, back into Iraq. Using local Salafist networks among the Iraqis, Zarqawi’s group co-opted the many foreign jihadists streaming into the country to fight the Americans, and eventually became infamous for its martyr (suicide bombing) operations (Hafez, 2007).

The invasion of Iraq in 2003 spawned many resistance groups of all types and flavors. There were former regime elements fighting to regain lost power, Iraqi nationalist groups fighting for honor against occupation, Ba’athists fighting for lost political power, and Islamists fighting for their religion (Hafez, 2007). TwJ was none of these. They were foreigners with
extensive jihadist experience with a very solid battle plan. While the other groups started slow and local, targeting the Americans and their coalition forces, Zarqawi’s group thought on a totally different level. Their ambitions, even years in retrospect, are almost breathtaking.

TwJ’s coming out party was in August 2003, just five months after the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime in Baghdad. Zarqawi hit the United Nations’ compound in Baghdad with a car bomb that killed the Secretary-General’s representative Sergio de Mello\textsuperscript{10}, effectively ending the United Nations’ participation in the reconstruction of Iraq (Benson, 2004). It is impossible to understate the political consequences of this loss to the United States and its efforts to secure legitimacy for the Iraq project. Days later a huge truck bomb filled with military ordinance went off in the holy Shia city of Najaf, killing prestigious Iraqi Shia cleric Mohammed Bakir Hakim and 125 of his followers at the revered Imam Ali shrine. No one claimed responsibility at the time (CNN, 2003).

One of the suicide bombers responsible for the Hakim bombing was Yassin Jerad, an Iraqi whose daughter was Zarqawi’s second wife (Hafez, 2007; Husayn, 2005). The targeting of Shia Muslim civilians and clerics at the burial place of one of the companions of the prophet was shocking new development. The act was widely condemned by Sunnis and denied by an Al Qaeda Central media representative (BBC, 2003), and America was blamed by many Iraqis for trying to divide the two sects to facilitate occupation (Rosen 2006). Just six months later in early 2004, TwJ struck Shia civilians again during the Ashura pilgrimage, slaughtering 271 pilgrims in two spectacular operations in Kadzimiyah (Baghdad) and Karbala during the Shia special mourning period for the grandson of the prophet (Schanzer, 2004). By then it was becoming clear who the culprits were, despite no one claiming credit for the attacks. Then, in April of

\textsuperscript{10} Zarqawi’s goals were twofold: to eject the United Nations from Iraq and to avenge the loss of East Timor. de Mello had been the U.N. administrator in East Timor prior to his appointment to Iraq, and supervised its independence from Muslim Indonesia. Historical event scripts always influenced Zarqawi’s targeting.
2004, Zarqawi belatedly claimed responsibility for the Hakim and U.N. attacks in an audio recording released to the internet. Confirmed authentic by the CIA, the news article mentioned that Zarqawi was “especially hostile toward the Shiite majority, calling them ‘idolaters’ and traitors who allied themselves with ‘the enemies of Islam to seize control over Sunni Iraq’ ” (Benson, 2004).

At this time, flushed with success and prominence, Zarqawi decided to swear allegiance (bayah) to Al Qaeda, something he had declined to do in Afghanistan in the late 1990s when approached by Osama bin Ladin (Husayn, 2005). After the fall of Afghanistan in 2001, Al Qaeda Central was struggling to regain relevance in leadership of the worldwide jihad, and despite reservations about Zarqawi’s Shia strategy, accepted Zarqawi’s offer in the hopes that they could control the independent emir. In October 2004, TwJ became Al Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers (Qaeda al jihad fi bilad al Rafidayn) and became known in the west as Al Qaeda in Iraq (CTC, 2006). This merger occurred after a long and contentious negotiations that ISI admitted was touch and go. When the famous second battle for Fallujah occurred, Zarqawi’s group fought under the Al Qaeda banner.

In late 2005, Zarqawi publically declared war on the Iraqi Shia, formalizing what had been a one-sided shadow war by a terrorist group against a civilian populace (Zarqawi, 2005, Sep 16). AQI’s attacks on the Shia were relentless, culminating in the demolition of the Golden Dome of Samarra in 2006. The third most prominent Shia Shrine in Iraq and the tomb of the 10th and 11th Imams of Shia Islam, the mosque was infiltrated by Zarqawi’s men and stacked

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11 This is not to understate the role of Shia militias targeting Sunni civilians; however, both sides targeted each other’s civilians – usually vulnerable ones in mixed sectarian areas. In an ironic twist, civil war in this case meant killing each other’s civilians, not warring against each other. With the exception of some small units, little effort went into targeting “combatants” on each side. This was because of the nature of insurgency and excellent operational security on both sides. Shias knew Shia rivals best, and ISI knew their Sunni rivals better than the opposing sect. Targets of opportunity became civilians who lived in the wrong areas.
with explosives (Shea, 2007). The detonation is widely and correctly described as having instigated widespread Shia retaliation against civilian Sunni that led to the deaths of thousands and open civil war.

To be sure, ISI was not singly focused on Shia civilians, demonstrating proficiency in their strikes against the Shia dominated security forces and looked for opportunities to strike Americans when possible. This became very difficult due to increased force protection measures taken by the Americans as the security forces began to take a larger role in securing their own country. Nonetheless, two different operations targeting stationary and vulnerable American patrols a year apart in the Yousifiyah area south of Baghdad were successful in kidnapping, torturing, and killing American soldiers, something only one other group was able to do.12 In the second attack, two of the soldiers were secretly buried and not recovered until 2008 in the Jurf ah Sahkr area by Sunni American allies that were able to gain control of the area from ISI13.

This brief review of ISI’s activities demonstrates their desire to hit the hardest targets and make an impact, compared to rival insurgent groups that sniped, bombed, and otherwise harassed coalition and Iraqi security forces. Their pipeline of suicide bombers from Syria, industrial production of car bombs, high-level assassinations, and daring raids were the hallmarks of an ambitious and competent group. Clearly adaptive to the increasing capability of the rising Iraqi government, the group acknowledged criticism from Al Qaeda Central that ISI had failed to connect with the Iraqi public and so moved to incorporate more Iraqis into the leadership. In January 2006, the leadership of AQI formed a front called the Mujahideen Shura Council (MSC) with some other Iraqi insurgent groups in order to give the group more credibility with Iraqis, and Zarqawi simultaneously lowered his media presence (Fishman, 2011). Several months after

12 In 2007, Qais Kazali’s Special Group (later Asaib ahl al Haq) captured and executed four American paratroopers in Karbala.
13 Author’s observation, Iraq 2007.
Zarqawi’s death in June 2006, the group seemingly accepted the guidance of Al Qaeda Central (Zawahiri, 2005) and changed the name of the front to the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). An Iraqi named Omar al Baghdadi had been named to lead the MSC in early 2006, and became the political leader of the Islamic State - signifying the transition of the group to mostly Iraqi in character. Abu Hamza al Muhajir, an Al Qaeda veteran from Egypt, had succeeded Zarqawi as the leader of AQI in June 2006 and later became the military commander of the ISI. Al Qaeda Central’s advice to make the organization more Iraqi in nature was helped by the fact that U.S. special operations forces were decimating the upper levels of ISI leadership. By 2010, 34 of 42 top leaders in ISI had been killed or captured by the coalition (Fishman, 2011).

The ISI, regardless of the nationality of its leadership, had always maintained a Salafist ideology. Salafism is a school of thought originated as a reaction against western influence and advocated a return to the ideals of early Islam – the salaf – and seeks to return to the traditions of the devout ancestors (Kepel, 2002). While Salafists view various aspects of Shia practice with disdain and are highly critical of Shia religious “innovations” (Rahman, 2000), most Salafist groups do not attack Shia civilians and many embrace non-violent means of spreading their faith.

In completing a brief summary of the group’s activities over the last decade, I would be remiss not to mention the ground-breaking media arm of ISI, Al Furqan, which became very prolific in claiming credit for attacks, arguing on behalf of its strategy, recruiting, and eulogizing fallen fighters. Zarqawi, upset with hostile coverage by the satellite TV stations, turned toward internet sites where a self-select audience was more receptive. Marc Lynch called this cyber-jihad (2006). ISI became notorious for its “kill” videos, featuring Abu Musab al Zarqawi beheading western captives. While controversial, the group’s media outreach was a huge improvement over previous jihadist failures in Algeria and Syria (CTC, 2006), and the
momentum of the group seemed to attract a steady stream of foreign fighters from Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Syria, and Libya among other places. By 2013, the video starring social media celebrity Abu Wahib demonstrated the technical advances and widespread popularity of the Al Furqan media organ – a tribute to the leadership’s vision for the ISI.

Factors Driving ISI Strategy

In early 2003, Zarqawi and the tight nucleus of the future ISI categorized the Iraqi Shia as a group that posed a threat to their own highly developed and valued identity as part of the dominant culture (Sunni) in Islam. In order for the group to achieve its overarching goal of establishing the future caliphate, Zarqawi felt the Shia must be eliminated as the near threat to the ISI. The group discounted any calculus indicating that the elimination of the Shia was an unrealistic goal (Zarqawi, 2004, July 5). ISI’s pursuit of a genocidal campaign of Shia Iraqis was less of a reasoned idea and more of a pathology, a deviation or fetish that obscured a reasonable calculus of ways and means. Before I conducted research to examine this explanation, I looked at several different alternative possibilities to my thesis that could have influenced ISI’s overall campaign strategy in Iraq.

There are four possible factors that influenced ISI strategy of attacking Shia civilians and pilgrims. While elements of each of these four might be present (necessary) in influencing ISI’s strategy to some degree, they are not sufficient to cause it. The four possibilities are: 1) that ISI is driven to target Shia civilians because of primordial sectarian hatred that is common to the area; 2) that ISI is driven by a desire to kill Shia civilians in a battle for political power and resources; 3) that it is a religious duty to kill Shia according to the principles of jihad; and 4) that

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14 My colleague Karl Walling made this observation after listening to my presentation at the Naval Postgraduate School, January 2014.
attacking the Shia will incite retaliation on the Sunni community, thereby rallying them to the Islamic State. The next section of the paper will analyze the arguments for each possibility.

**Sectarian Motives**

The first possibility is that ISI was simply operating within the context of Iraqi sectarianism. To some degree, sectarian differences have always been an underlying current in the Iraqi cultural fabric. Iraq’s Shia have been overshadowed by the Sunni since the beginning of Islam, with just a few exceptions. Other than two Safavid periods and the Mongol Occupation, the Sunni Abbasid and Turkish Sunni Ottomans dominated Iraq through 1920 (Momen, 1985). Sunni regimes, starting with the monarchy imposed by the British after 1920, administered Iraq up until the 2003 invasion with just one short exception. Furthermore, Sunni Arabs were the majority in Iraq for most of its recent history, with demographics in southern Iraq changing slowly over the last two centuries to make the Shia more populous (Nakash, 2003).

Haddad (2011) called the struggle between Sunni and Shia communities in Iraq the “contested cultural ownership of the nation,” where the sectarian identity is linked to national identity (p. 32). One of the more impressive examples of scholarship to come out of the conflict to date, Haddad argued that Iraqis believed in the concept of an Iraqi nation that others tend to dismiss as a product of the Sykes-Picot agreement. Visser (2009) argued that the Ottoman Empire administered Iraq in three distinct political areas: Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra; the three wilayets (regions) correspondingly developed a single, shared Iraqi national identity and culture including history, art, literature, and dialect. This cohesive identity predated the Sykes-Picot agreement and possibly influenced its formulation. These analytical insights make it difficult to
attribute ISI’s attacks on the Shia to simply the primordial influence of the ancient Sunni-Shia conflict, and instead points toward a struggle for cultural ownership of a national identity.\textsuperscript{15}

ISI started as a foreign fighter movement that thrived with the support of local sympathetic Iraqis. The group shared an Arab and Sunni identity with its allies and supporters, but not the Iraqi national identity. The leadership of the group, which was mostly from the Levant (bilad al sham), did not have a history of anti-Shia sentiment prior to 2003, with the possible exception of their flight from Afghanistan. Zarqawi did observe that Shia Afghans had assisted the U.S. invasion, and saw a similar dynamic occurring in Iraq (Husayn, 2005). Zarqawi’s native Jordan is overwhelmingly Sunni Arab (92%) with the remainder Christian, and has a negligible Shia population (CIA, 2014). So while sectarian identity does play an obvious role in ISI’s targeting of Shia civilians, there is little evidence that the cause is environmental in nature.

**Financial Motives**

If environment factors do not contribute significantly to ISI’s strategic development, it stands to reason that financial incentives might. This possibility is frequently overlooked when dealing with ideological organizations that conduct terrorism. Metelits (2010) argued that insurgent groups vary the use of violence against civilians based on the existence of rivals for resource extraction. Certainly groups like ISI must raise funds for their operations, and insurgent groups can be quite inventive in this regard. Several studies have pointed out how local insurgent groups in Iraq extorted American contractors conducting reconstruction for money to fund operations against the occupation and government (Williams, 2009). Attacks on Shia pilgrims could be a large source of foreign fund raising for ISI, from sympathetic Salafists in the

\textsuperscript{15}I am differentiating between the historical rivalry between Sunni and Shia in Iraq, which did include occasional conflict, and what Haddad calls banal sectarianism. ISI, which was foreign at the start of the case study, cannot share this perspective.
Gulf region that agree on a common enemy, Iran, and see Shia Iraqis as a proxy for the Persians. Some political science experiments show that appeals to fear increase financial contributions to political campaigns, so there is a possibility that financial reasons do influence ISI’s strategy of attacking the Shia (Miller & Krosnick, 2004).

There are several arguments against this motive playing a key part in Shia targeting. Bahney, et al. (2013) investigated ISI member’s financial motivations for joining and remaining a part of the group in a study of compensation, based on the Combatting Terrorism Center’s Sinjar captured documents. They found that ISI members were not motivated by compensation and were paid less than other insurgent groups, indicating a more ideological bent for group membership. There are very few appeals for financial help in ISI’s highly functioning social media outreach, and it is hard to see where substantial outside assistance is needed to conduct their very efficient suicide operations – with the exception of the martyrs that are almost exclusively foreign – as the materials are easily procured locally and are inexpensive in Iraq (Gordon & Trainor, 2006, p. 505). Furthermore, ISI operations have not gravitated toward lucrative criminal enterprises like the Baiji oil refineries or gaining control of oil production in Kirkuk or southern Iraq. ISI has maintained fairly stable sanctuaries in the belts north and south of Baghdad (Diyala and the Sunni Triangle, and Yousifiyah, Jurfa Sakhr, and Owesat respectively) as well as Mosul and other areas of Ninewa province (Knights, 2008). The “belts” are not rich areas but excellent farmland with limited access that provided sanctuaries for ISI

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16 The Sinjar collection was a intelligence hoard of ISI administrative documents captured on a Special Operations raid in Sinjar (near the Syrian border) in October 2007 and released by the Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point, NY. See Felter and Fishman (2007).

17 I witnessed Iraqi civilians digging up 120mm mortar rounds (25) as late as 2007 hidden in the Medina Division’s old ammunition supply point, most likely to sell to insurgents.
ISIS now controls most of Mosul as of 2014, and ISI acts more like an organized crime syndicate raising money through extortion activities (al Tamimi, 2014). Steven Metz (2007) argued, “insurgency is no longer a ‘stand-alone’ conflict, it is ‘nested’ within deeper and broader struggles. It is still about power (as it was in the Cold War), but it is also about economics, services, and social identity” (p. 12). Nonetheless, most of the evidence that exists points toward the ISI to be an ideologically driven organization that strives for independence from sponsors and is mostly self-funded through local extortion and tax extraction in areas they control. Indeed, this organization has expended significant amounts of resources to attack Shia civilians with little observable financial gain. I do acknowledge that this is still a possibility for further research.

**Ideological Motives**

If sectarian and financial incentives do not drive ISI’s behavior, then it is possible that their religious ideology has a strong influence in the formulation of ISI strategy. Apart from sectarian differences, ISI’s interpretation of stipulations from the Koran could be the inspiration for their strategic choices. Certainly ISI justified many of their actions with religious quotations, and Zarqawi liberally used them in his public speeches and press releases. ISI’s declaration of the Shia as non-Muslims certainly reinforced any categorization of the Iraqi Shia as the dependent of the enemy, but the literature on jihad as a religious duty has a very clear and detailed process for declaring someone an apostate, called takfir. The word takfir is derived from the word kufr, which means impiety (Kepel, 2002, p. 31). ISI were often called “takfirists”

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18 A common rumor in the “belt” south of Baghdad was that ISI owned the fish farms near Iskandariyah, a lucrative source of insurgent financing. Indeed, that area was not pacified even after the Awakening movement cleared most of the southern belt of ISI in 2007-8.
by Shia Iraqis and Sunni alike, meaning that they had taken upon themselves the right to excommunicate other Muslims, a serious and controversial undertaking.

Al Qaeda Central’s leadership, while sympathetic to ISI’s outlook on the Shia, did not agree with ISI’s jihad against the Shia and asked them to refocus on forcing the Americans out of Iraq. Ahman Zawahiri (2005) agreed with Zarqawi that the Shia and Sunni could not coexist in the long run, but to attack them now would overly diversify the effort against the Americans. In addition to the pushback from his superiors, Zarqawi had to weather the public criticism of his former partner, religious mentor, and fellow jihadist inmate in Jordan’s prison system, Abu Muhammad Maqdisi. Maqdisi, who had returned to Jordan and was back in jail, publicly criticized Zarqawi for indiscriminate attacks on civilians (including Shia), in contravention of Islamic law (Wagemakers, 2009). Zarqawi’s response, more wistful and sad than angry, was that his friend Maqdisi was out of touch with the facts on the ground (Zarqawi, 2005).

**Strategic Motives**

If sectarian, financial, or religious ideology is not significant enough to cause ISI’s behavior, than the last and most difficult factor that competes with my explanation is one based on a strategic rationale. Many observers believe (Hafez 2007; Fishman 2006, among many others) that ISI pursued a Shia strategy in order to provoke a “blowback,” where Shia militias would attack Sunni civilians in revenge and this pressure would in turn cause Sunnis to join ISI. Shia militias had to be an inviting target for provocation, as they had already conducted a visible campaign to eliminate former Ba’athist enemies on behalf of their Iranian sponsors immediately after the 2003 invasion. Since most of the Ba’athists were Sunnis, the perception became early on that this militia campaign was driven by sectarian motives. Rallying Sunnis to the ISI should have therefore been a simple task as the community was under assault by a revengeful Shia

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19 Author’s observations, 2006-7.
government. Abu Musab al Zarqawi made his case to Al Qaeda Central about his strategy to start a sectarian war with the Iraqi Shia (2004):

> Our fighting against the Shi’a is the way to drag the [Islamic] nation into the battle. We speak here in some detail. We have said before that the Shi’a have put on the uniforms of the Iraqi army, police, and security forces and have raised the banner of preserving the homeland and the citizen. Under this banner, they have begun to liquidate the Sunnis under the pretext that they are saboteurs, remnants of the Ba’th, and terrorists spreading evil in the land. With strong media guidance from the Governing Council and the Americans, they have been able to come between the Sunni masses and the mujahidin. I give an example that brings the matter close to home in the area called the Sunni Triangle -- if this is the right name for it. The army and police have begun to deploy in those areas and are growing stronger day by day. They have put chiefs [drawn] from among Sunni agents and the people of the land in charge. In other words, this army and police may be linked to the inhabitants of this area by kinship, blood, and honor. In truth, this area is the base from which we set out and to which we return. When the Americans disappear from these areas – and they have begun to do so – and these agents, who are linked by destiny to the people of the land, take their place, what will our situation be?

If we fight them {and we must fight them}, we will confront one of two things. Either:

1 – We fight them, and this is difficult because of the gap that will emerge between us and the people of the land. How can we fight their cousins and their sons and under what pretext after the Americans, who hold the reins of power from their rear bases, pull back? The real sons of this land will decide the matter through experience. Democracy is coming, and there will be no excuse thereafter.

2 – We pack our bags and search for another land, as is the sad, recurrent story in the arenas of jihad, because our enemy is growing stronger and his intelligence data are increasing day by day. By the Lord of the Ka’ba, [this] is suffocation and then wearing down the roads. People follow the religion of their kings. Their hearts are with you and their swords are with Bani Umayya (the Umayyads), i.e., with power, victory, and security. God have mercy.

Thus the narrative that explains the ISI’s attacks on Shia civilian targets is this: Zarqawi drafted a deliberate strategy in the early half of 2003 designed to provoke Shia retaliation against the Iraqi Sunnis that would spiral into civil war. This rationale gained popularity after the 2006 Samarra mosque bombing, which unleashed visible and extensive retaliation by Shia militias on Sunni civilians (Cerny, 2006). Zarqawi’s words are often pointed to as definitive proof of this strategy, despite the fact that this statement was made in early 2004, sometime after the bombing campaign began. Is this statement a post-facto rationalization of the road Zarqawi chose in 2003 of attacking the Shia populace, or is it a reflection of a brilliant strategic calculus designed to unite the Sunni Ummah?
Doug Ollivant (2011) credited the eventual decrease in violence in 2007 to the completion of a dual ethnic cleansing campaign by both Sunni and Shia, particularly in the mixed city of Baghdad. Observers who place blame on ISI for the outbreak of open civil war in Iraq are correct to say that ISI’s vicious targeting of Shia civilians, pilgrims, and holy places has indeed caused a significant portion of the violence. Hafez (2007) and Hashim (2005) argued that ISI differed from nationalist insurgent groups by their overall goal. Some groups focused on getting the infidel occupier out, some focused on disrupting the Shia government, and groups like the ISI wanted to destroy everything about the status quo and start over. Instigating a civil war would be one way to facilitate or even accelerate total state collapse by enlisting more parties to the fight, assuming ISI had the strength to end up on top. This argument, that ISI attacked Shia civilians in order to provoke a civil war, relies on two assumptions.

First, that we should take Zarqawi’s defense of his strategy at face value. After not claiming early attacks on Shia civilians (from August 2003 through the Ashura Attacks in January 2004), Zarqawi announced responsibility belatedly at the same time he was negotiating with AQC to join the now famous jihadist coalition. Stung by criticism that his strategy was easily mistaken for nihilistic violence, Zarqawi articulated instead that TwJ’s strategy aimed at provoking a civil war with the Shia. Most observers credit Zarqawi with the successful execution of the ways and means of the strategy, but do not acknowledge that the ultimate goal of the strategy – the unification of the Sunni ummah - was a complete failure. Instead, this explanation falls under what Fischoff (1982) called hindsight bias, a cognitive heuristic that allows people to use what we know now to attribute the cause of a particular outcome. In this case, the argument is that Zarqawi was attacking Shia civilians and this caused a civil war, so therefore the strategy was successful. But the civil war was not the ends but the means for a
Sunni unification that never happened. In fact, it was unraveling as early as 2005 as evidenced by both Sunni tribal uprisings in Al Qaim and the Sunni Islamist party’s participation in the elections.

Second, if ISI was interested in developing a strategy to provoke a civil war, then process tracing should produce some elements of that deliberation in documents and statements early in the group’s formation in order to justify a “rational” strategy targeting Iraqi Shia. It would have to be manifested early in the conflict because the first documented strike at the Shia took place in August 2003 (the Al Hakim suicide bombing in Najaf). Not only did this attack kill a major Shia cleric and over one hundred followers (see previous description earlier in the chapter) but it took place at the most famous Shia Shrine of all – Imam Ali – who was one of the rashidun (original companions of the prophet). Even two years later, it is something that obviously bothers Zawahiri when he writes Zarqawi to ask him to modify his strategy on the Shia (2005, July):

We must repeat what we mentioned previously, that the majority of Muslims don't comprehend this and possibly could not even imagine it. For that reason, many of your Muslim admirers amongst the common folk are wondering about your attacks on the Shia. The sharpness of this questioning increases when the attacks are on one of their mosques, and it increases more when the attacks are on the mausoleum of Imam Ali Bin Abi Talib, may God honor him. My opinion is that this matter won't be acceptable to the Muslim populace however much you have tried to explain it, and aversion to this will continue. Indeed, questions will circulate among mujahedeen circles and their opinion makers about the correctness of this conflict with the Shia at this time. Is it something that is unavoidable? Or, is it something can be put off until the force of the mujahed movement in Iraq gets stronger? And if some of the operations were necessary for self-defense, were all of the operations necessary? Or, were there some operations that weren't called for? And is the opening of another front now in addition to the front against the Americans and the government a wise decision? Or, does this conflict with the Shia lift the burden from the Americans by diverting the mujahedeen to the Shia, while the Americans continue to control matters from afar? And if the attacks on Shia leaders were necessary to put a stop to their plans, then why were there attacks on ordinary Shia? Won't this lead to reinforcing false ideas in their minds, even as it is incumbent on us to preach the call of Islam to them and explain and communicate to guide them to the truth? And can the mujahedeen kill all of the Shia in Iraq? Has any Islamic state in history ever tried that? And why kill ordinary Shia considering that they are forgiven because of their ignorance? And what loss will befall us if we did not attack the Shia? And do the brothers forget that we have more than one hundred prisoners - many of whom are from the leadership who are wanted in their countries - in the custody of the Iranians? And even if we attack the Shia out of necessity, then why do you announce this matter and make it public, which compels the Iranians to take counter measures? And do the brothers forget that both we and the Iranians need to refrain from harming each other at this time in which the Americans are targeting us?
Here Zawahiri sternly but carefully rebuked Zarqawi for the mistake of attacking Hakim at the sacred tomb of Imam Ali in Najaf. Both Sunni and Shia Muslims revere Ali as one of the rashidun, the four right-guided companions of the prophet Mohammed. Zarqawi was following the Salafist view that tomb worship is haram (forbidden) for Muslims and an example of the deviation of the Iraqi Shia. The rest of the paragraph in Zawahiri’s letter lays out a very convincing case that Zarqawi’s strategy is unrealistic and unachievable. Zawahiri seems to share a similar disdain for the Shia or at least portray sympathy for Zarqawi’s zeal for attacking them, but questioned whether the timing indicated the opportunity that Zarqawi felt existed for crushing the Shia before they became too powerful.

The critical communication above between leader and led exposed a fundamental disagreement between Al Qaeda and their Iraqi franchise. Osama Bin Ladin, in a statement celebrating the recruitment of TwJ its establishment as an affiliate, set forth his vision of an organization that would lead all Iraqi Muslims against the infidel in late December 2004:

> The Iraqi who wages Jihad against the infidel Americans or against the apostate ‘Allawi government is our brother and ally – whether he is Persian, Kurdish, or Turkmen. [In contrast], the Iraqi who joins this apostate government and fights the Jihad warriors and those resisting the [foreign] occupation is considered an apostate and an infidel, even if he belongs to the [ancient] Arab tribes of Rabi’a or Mudar (Hegghammer, 2005, p. 84)

Bin Ladin was saying that Shia who fought the infidel were brothers, and Sunni who joined the apostate regime were fair targets for the jihad. These marching orders were too late, as Zarqawi was unable or unwilling to change his mind about the Shia threat. While it is impossible to determine if the Awakening movement of Sunni tribes against ISI was influenced by a distaste for the attacks on Shia civilians, and was more likely inspired by a belated realization that ISI was a danger to the tribal way of life, it is clear that many Iraqi insurgent groups steered well clear of ISI as time went on. In the important month of May 2007, Salafist leaning groups Islamic Army of Iraq, the Mujahidin Army, and Ansar al
Sunna Sharia Council announced the formation of a rival front to the Islamic State called the Jihad and Reform front. According to the Congressional Research Service, the new front desired to disassociate their groups from ISI’s “indiscriminate targeting of Iraqi civilians” (Blanchard, 2007, p. 10).

There are several reasons that Zarqawi was able to convince his fellow members of TwJ to strike Shia civilians and pilgrims despite that fact that it was not driven by Salafist doctrine nor required by Al Qaeda Central. First, unlike Zawahiri who lived safely in Sunni dominated Pakistan, Zarqawi was operating in an Iraq that was quickly transforming into a Shia dominated democracy that was extremely hostile to the organization. Just weeks after the fall of Saddam, the shock of a tidal wave of Shia pilgrims flooding the highways of Iraq during the Arba’een\(^{20}\) celebration in Karbala would make it clear to Zarqawi that Sunni dominance was history. Second, Zarqawi’s successful escape from Afghanistan and organizational activity in Iraq and Syria in 2002 established him as the undisputed leader of TwJ. Zarqawi’s hand selection of the early group of associates and the creation of a paramilitary organization created a group dynamic that emphasized obedience to the emir of the group. This would allow him great flexibility in developing new norms for the organization.

A charismatic man with leadership skills developed in the Jordanian prison system, Zarqawi tapped into the historical event script of the periodical Sunni pogroms against the Shia just like Adolph Hitler tapped into a historical suspicion of Jews in Germany and convinced his fellow Germans to accede to Hitler’s worldview despite it not being completely their own. The only evidence I have to support this assertion is that several leadership transitions after Zarqawi, the organization maintains the same political worldview

\(^{20}\) Arba’een celebrates the end of the forty day mourning period for the death of Hussein, which begins with Ashura.
to this day. Abu Wahib demonstrated the power of this legacy in the story that began this chapter.

Lastly, by the time Al Qaeda and Zarqawi joined forces in 2004, the new ISI was already committed in mind and deed to their strategy and there would be no turning back. The strike at the most famous mosque of Shia Islam in August 2003 was deliberately planned and executed by ISI. Ahman Zawahiri knew that ISI was responsible, and that it was an indicator that his subordinate was deviating from the vision of AQC to attack an enemy of questionable categorization by focusing on the Shia. Zawahiri’s lament that ISI would lose funding, recruits, and support for their effort due to a poorly chosen strategy fell on deaf ears. Zarqawi’s ISI did not have a realistic strategy, which is defined as a calculation balancing ways, means, risks and goals (Bartlett, Holman & Somes, 2000). Instead, ISI had a vision of a region led by Salafist Sunnis who have restored Sunni Islam to its rightful place. This vision itself was formed by their categorization of the Iraqi Shia as a threat to their goals and a group that can be cowed by Sunni superiority, the latter perception holding a strong place in Sunni cultural underlying assumptions. This focus on the end state, instead of a measured calculation of ways, means, and mitigation of risks, are what drove ISI to make attacking Iraqi Shia civilians the cornerstone of their targeting strategy. An examination of ISI documents and statements will demonstrate that Image and Social Identity Theories are best able to explain why ISI originally chose to target the Shia in Iraq, and why they continue to do so today.

**Part II - The Case for Images and Social Identity**

As discussed in Chapter 2, images are the product of a cognitive function that an individual uses to simplify a very complex world. The result is the creation of a spectrum or political worldview that allows a decision maker to put members of other groups into a context
that is recognizable and minimizes an exhaustive process of information collection and synthesis.

Groups fall into general categories of enemy, friend, or neutral, with some variation within each group depending on three main factors: capability, intentions, and culture. Regardless of the number of possible categories (there are 27 possible mathematical possibilities, but only a few realistic images that fit an overinflated self-image and negatively biased images of others), experimental work on Image Theory found that the typical worldview would consist of seven images, plus or minus two.

My projection of ISI’s worldview is that it consists of a set of binary images that are either friendly or hostile. ISI has no neutral groups, due to a ‘you are with us or against us’ mentality. The images with harmful intentions are the Barbarian image (Arab Monarchies) which have a superior capability but inferior culture; the Degenerate image (United States), which is similar to the Barbarian image in that it has superior capability, but the culture is weak-willed and the leadership differentiated and confused; an Enemy image (Iran) with relatively equal capability and culture; a Dependent of the Enemy image (Iraqi Shias) that has inferior capability and culture but are under the protection of a very capable Enemy Image; and Dependents of the Barbarian image (Iraqi Sunni Sahwa), which has inferior capability and equal culture but is protected by the superior capabilities of their sponsors from nearby Sunni “apostate” regimes, and to a lesser extent, the U.S. The images in the friendly category are the Patrona image (AQC), which is the parent organization for ISI and has more capability, equal culture, and helpful intentions; the Ally image (Ansar al Sunnah – Salafist jihadists) with equal capability and culture; and the Colonial image (other Sunni insurgent groups) which have inferior capability (and therefore need the leadership of ISI) and have a somewhat mixed evaluation of culture (equal for other Salafist groups and inferior for Baathist groups). This
worldview consists of eight images, which serves to simplify decision-making about the environment around the object group.

Table 3.1 - ISI World View

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Image</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Capability</th>
<th>Culture</th>
<th>Intentions</th>
<th>Threat/Opportunity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Barbarian</td>
<td>Arab Monarchies</td>
<td>Superior</td>
<td>Inferior</td>
<td>Harmful</td>
<td>Threat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degenerate</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Superior</td>
<td>Weak-willed</td>
<td>Harmful</td>
<td>Opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patrona</td>
<td>Al Qaeda Central</td>
<td>Superior</td>
<td>Equal</td>
<td>Helpful</td>
<td>Opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enemy</td>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>Equal</td>
<td>Equal</td>
<td>Harmful</td>
<td>Threat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependent of Enemy</td>
<td>Arab Monarchies</td>
<td>Equal*</td>
<td>Inferior</td>
<td>Harmful</td>
<td>Opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependent of Barbarian</td>
<td>Iraqi Sahwa</td>
<td>Equal</td>
<td>Inferior</td>
<td>Harmful</td>
<td>Opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ally</td>
<td>Ansar al Sunnah</td>
<td>Equal</td>
<td>Equal</td>
<td>Helpful</td>
<td>Opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependent/Colonial Dependent</td>
<td>Iraqi Insurgent Groups</td>
<td>Inferior</td>
<td>Equal/Inferior</td>
<td>Helpful</td>
<td>Opportunity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*This would be lower but the Dependent of the Enemy is protected by stronger powers and therefore has an artificially elevated perception of capability.

Herrmann and Fischerkeller (1995) argued that too often the study of images is focused on the enemy image, such as how the United States viewed the Soviet Union during the Cold War and vice versa. Instead, the study of foreign policy decision-making has many examples of images that differ between capability, culture, and motivation (fear of threat or interested in opportunity for gain). The description of the projected worldview of the ISI as listed above supports Herrmann and Fischerkeller’s argument of the use of images beyond just the enemy. In this case, Iran’s strong capabilities discourage direct confrontation by ISI. But the opportunity of defeating other groups with harmful intentions, as well as co-opting friendly but weaker groups, is the mindset that drives ISI’s behavior against friend and foe alike.

Although it is important to understand ISI’s worldview in totality, a focal point of this study is to focus on one particular image dyad, that of ISI’s self-image and their image of the
Iraqi Shia as the Dependent of the Enemy. Using a database compiled of ISI statements, this research attempts to verify my assumptions about ISI’s worldview and examine how that worldview frames ISI’s strategic choices on how to treat their various “others.”

**ISI images**

**Self-Image.** Every evaluation of another group is based on the self-image of the subject group, since these evaluations are relative comparisons. Cottam (1986) described images as the “perception of their general international position vis-a-vis the policy maker’s state” (p. 51). The ISI viewed itself in the heroic sense, a warrior caste of men that live up to very high standards of honor, commitment, and courage, and their self-image evoked similar themes of the Japanese samurai’s fierce dedication to a code and the Spartan tradition of living and fighting in austere conditions with few belongings. Their code was derived from Salafist beliefs and a longing to return to a past when Islam was the dominant power in the region. Their own capabilities are viewed as powerful (more than they are in reality) despite the technology of the enemy, thanks to divine intervention and support. The early leaders of the organization were highly trained veterans of the Afghan jihad who were ready to teach their Iraqi hosts how to create a powerful insurgent group. Zarqawi himself cultivated the aura of “the stranger,” al ghareeb in Arabic (Fishman, 2006), which was manifested itself in a fierce sense of independence. The ghareeb mystique became a group characteristic and fueled their alienation from other Sunni insurgent groups and even Al Qaeda Central.

ISI strived to establish a group culture rooted in values and beliefs from the early days of Islam, unadulterated by humans and therefore superior to any other. Their rigid interpretation of their religion and its history gave them justification for a variety of methods that rival groups consider out of the norm, and at the same time simplifies their decision-making by limiting the
number of options. Their intentions are pure, an uncorrupted version of what the prophet envisioned for Islam before its corruption by greedy rulers and foreign culture.

**Iraqi Shia (Dependent of the Enemy).** ISI’s image of the Iraqi Shia is highly shaped by the historic social competition between the dominant Sunni sect and the submissive but secretive Shia who have waited centuries to finally upset the balance of power within their shared Islamic culture. Shia capabilities have always been weaker than ISI’s fellow Sunnis in Iraq, and only thanks to subversion and the interference of infidels were they able to capture a historic Sunni capital that dates to the early days of Islam. This is a wrong that must be corrected, and will be due to the hollow foundations of the new Iraqi government. The lower evaluation of capability has a caveat; as a proxy for the larger Shia nation and the enemy Iran, there is a limited opportunity to attack this dependent of the enemy while still vulnerable and not under the protection of its more capable ally.

According to the ISI, Arab Sunni have tolerated the creeping culture of the Iraqi Shia for too long. When the Shia were weak, their innovations and modifications of true Islam could be overlooked as simply misguided. Various rulers of Iraq instituted occasional pogroms against the Shia in Iraq, but they were infrequent and short in duration. In fact, the Sunni Ottomans took action against Sunni Wahhabi raids of Karbala early in the 19th century in response to complaints from both Shia and Sunni Iraqis. The collapse of Saddam’s regime enabled the explosion of a visible Shia identity – from the flags and pictures of Hussein in Baghdad and the south to the ostentatious rites of the Ashura passion play – and this abomination of the original practices of Islam are proof positive to the ISI of the apostasy of the Shia Iraqis.

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21 The Ottoman Turks seemed to alternate between defending the Shia from attack by outsiders (like the Wahabbis) and suppressing any possible Shia independence movement. This at times led them to attack the holy shrines as well.
The intentions of the Iraqi Shia are clear to ISI if they are hidden from those that cannot see; the Iraqi Shia mean to upset the natural order of society in the Gulf world at the behest of their Shia brethren around the world. The dominance of Sunni Islam, so vital to the identity of a Salafist group, is at risk. While the Americans presence allowed the Shia, and thereby their allies the Iranians, to gain strength - there was an opportunity to strike the Dependent of the Enemy now before it was too late. Zarqawi’s ISI felt that the Shia were a greater danger to the goal of a Sunni caliphate than any factor, to include the presence of the most powerful military in the world in Iraq. This opportunity needed to be acted on by a bold group that was confident in their abilities, but also courageous enough to do what must be done, to do the things weaker men cannot do.

Like other insurgent groups in Iraq, ISI targeted the Iraqi Government and its security forces as illegitimate creations of the occupation. This was not the ISI’s only focus; almost completely alone among insurgent groups in Iraq, ISI targets Iraqi Shia civilians by conducting suicide attacks in Shia areas, against Shia mosques and religious heritage sites, and against Shia pilgrimages. There are several reasons for this.

First, the ISI categorized the Iraqi Shia as the Dependent of the Enemy instead of as a possible ally against the infidel early in 2003. The cognitive categorization of the Shia as the Dependent of the Enemy with equal capabilities and low culture and an opportunity to be defeated before they gain strength was a strong factor in the development of ISI’s strategy. One of ISI’s very first acts was to strike the Shia cleric returning from exile, Imam Hakim, in Najaf at the Imam Ali shrine in August of 2003. This devastating attack shocked the Muslim Ummah, and predated any communication or reference of a strategy designed to provoke the Shia into a
sectarian civil war. ISI was striking vulnerable, existential, and unsuspecting enemies and warning them of the conflict that was to follow.

Second, the importance of social identity to this group is very high. They are members of the dominant group within their most important identity, that of a Sunni Muslim. Their goal is to establish an Islamic caliphate in the region (and eventually the world), and this can include the Shia. However, the Sunni Arab identity must be acknowledged as superior over their rival Shia sect, a group dominated by non-Arabs. To do this, Shia religious symbols and practices must be attacked and devalued in the eyes of the Islamic world. Nothing better exemplifies this need to strike at the Shia identity than ISI’s relentless decade long bombing campaign of the Ashura pilgrimage.

One area that must be investigated is why ISI views Iraqi Shia culture as low, compared to their perception of Persian culture as relatively equal to theirs. Both groups are Shia, but the Iranians have a history as a great civilization and empire, created the first modern Islamic country, is a recognized leader in the Islamic world, and has been virulently anti-American since 1979. The Iraqi Shia were most likely Sunnis who ‘converted’ during times of low identity salience due to economic benefits and tribal influence, and therefore are turncoats who have forsaken the Sunnah. Despite the suspicion of most Iraqi Sunnis after 2003 that various Shia political groups were Iranian proxies, the Sunni still distinguish between their compatriots and their Iranian neighbors. Like many ethnic struggles worldwide, it is the near threat that is the one that is most feared.

Part III – Social Identity and Image Reinforcement

Historical Background of Ashura
Shia Islam has a passion play named Ashura, or “tenth” in Arabic. Ashura commemorates the death of Imam Hussein in 680 CE on the tenth day of the month of Muharram at the hands of the Caliph Yazid, near Karbala in what is now Iraq. The Sunni-Shia schism was cemented after this incident, and the anniversary of Hussein’s death has significant cultural, political and religious influences on Islam (Momen, 1985).

Ashura has always been an important date for many countries with a significant Shia population. Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Pakistan, Lebanon, Bahrain, and India all celebrate Ashura as a public holiday. Ashura has become even more prominent to the world after the fall of the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein in 2003 (Nasr, 2006). Hussein had banned the observance after the Iranian Revolution in order to support his vision of a secular, Pan-Arabic Iraq (Haddad, 2011). After 2003, the Shia were free to observe the remembrance of Hussein with no restrictions at the tomb of the martyr in Karbala, Iraq. The event has now become one of the largest peaceful demonstrations in the world.

Shia means “partisan” in Arabic, and has become an identification term of the group of Muslims that are the followers of Ali Ibn Abi Talib, who was the cousin and son-in-law of the prophet Mohammed. The Shia believe that Ali should have been chosen as the direct successor to Mohammed over fellow companion Abu Bakr since he was a member of the Ahl al Bayt, the Prophet’s household. Ali ended up deferring to Abu Bakr and later Uthman, who preceded Ali as Caliph (Momen 1985).

Ali eventually became Caliph but was assassinated in the fifth year of his reign. Ali’s son Hussein became a target of the rival Umayyad clan, a powerful group from Syria. Hussein tried to escape the Umayyads to his power base in Kufa from Medina but was surrounded by Yazid’s Army in the desert outside of Karbala, Iraq. Unable to reach water, after several days
the small numbers under Hussein met their end defiantly by attacking the larger force. Hussein was beheaded and his head returned to Damascus for display. Hussein’s burial site became a popular pilgrimage site for the Shiat Ali (partisans of Ali) who believed that Ali and later Hussein were illegitimately denied the leadership of Islam (Momen, 1985).

The legacy of Hussein is the fight for moral principles over brute force (Nasr 2006). Despite his tragic death, Hussein is not a victim but a hero willing to battle against all odds. This sets up the dual conflict in Shia attitudes, from serene acceptance and passivity (inspired by Ali) to the righteous fight to restore history to its correct path (inspired by Hussein) (Moghadam, 2012). Today in Iraqi Shia houses, the obligatory picture of Hussein on the family wall depicts this tension as it is either flanked by the pictures of defiant Sadrists or by the quietist factions of Ayatollah Sistani.

To contrast the Shia narrative with the Sunni one, Ahl as Sunnah are the people of tradition and consensus, the middle way or the “high” way (Moosa, 2000). Even the name evokes the confidence of the Sunni that their ideology is the truth. The Sunni have dominated Islam since the death of Mohammed, and their Caliphs were long time rulers of the Islamic world. Islam spread quickly to its high-water boundaries across Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia thanks to this group. They were relentless in hunting down Shia rivals for the Caliphate and were responsible for the demise of many of the first 12 imams of Twelver Shiism. An early influential Islamic jurisprudence school called the Hanbali called the Shia “the enemy within.” The Hanbali School inspired early pogroms urging the Shia rafidis (rejectionists) to “convert to Islam” (Nasr 2006).

One historical event that often appears in ISI’s propaganda against the Shia is the fall of Baghdad to the Mongols in 1258. Ibn al Qami had been an advisor to the Sunni Caliph and was
angry about Sunni pogroms of the Shia in Karkh (Baghdad). According to both Shia and Sunni legend, al Qami encouraged the Mongols to sack of Baghdad, which ended the Arab Sunni Caliphate for good (Momen 1985, Hairi 1968). Sunnis have not forgotten this act of betrayal, and Saddam’s last radio address chided those that assisted the invading coalition as the modern al Qami (Nasr, 2006, p. 82). Zarqawi, no fan of Saddam, would pick up on this theme almost immediately.

**The Modern Ashura Pilgrimage - Iraq 2004**

The return of the observance of Ashura\(^2\) under the American occupation of Iraq was portrayed as one of the benefits of the transition to democracy (Rosen, 2006). For the greater Sunni Ummah (nation), the downfall of an Iraqi Sunni regime that had managed to stay atop the Shia majority for decades was a mixed blessing. On one hand, Saddam had threatened Sunni regimes with his invasion of Kuwait in 1990, an act that frightened his Sunni neighbors enough to solicit the military assistance of the United States. On the other hand, the possibility of the Shia dominating such an important Arab country could disrupt the balance of power in Islam, long dominated by the Sunni.

The Iran-Iraq War in the 1980’s had a significant effect upon Iraqi internal politics. Saddam had ruthlessly oppressed any (Sunni or Shia) challenges to his rise to and solidification of power in the late 1970s. Some Iraqi Shias fled to Iran, where they were supported by the Islamic regime in Tehran. While many of these exiles fought against Saddam in the Badr Brigades during the Iran-Iraq War, the Iraqi Shias who remained in Iraq and fought in the Army

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\(^2\) According to Hayder al-Khoei from Chatham House, the celebration of Ashura was severely suppressed under Hussein’s regime. Videos contrast the emptiness of Karbala prior to 2003 (including visible members of Saddam’s intelligence service patrolling the grounds) with what is called the largest peaceful gathering of people in the world today (personal correspondence with author, April, 2014).
remained true to their country and did not entertain the entreaties of Shia brotherhood from Iran (Nasr 2006).

Following the 1991 Gulf War and Saddam’s ejection from Kuwait, the Kurdish and Shia uprisings against Saddam’s regime inspired a strong Ba’athist response. Saddam’s forces put down both rebellions in a ruthless manner, which helped, reinforce a Shia identity separate from the Tikriti\(^{23}\) dominated regime. An apocryphal story that became legend has it that Iraqi Army tanks of the Republican Guard had signs saying “after today, no more Shia\(^{24}\)” (Packer, 2005, p. 423). The suffering resonated with the Shias, with Saddam as the modern day Yazid and all Shias as living symbols of Hussein (Jarjoura, 2004). Once the Saddam regime fell, the Ashura pilgrimage would be an opportunity to demonstrate both defiance and triumph over tyranny. More importantly, the pilgrimage would demonstrate the political and symbolic power of the martyrdom in the context of Iraqi politics (Rosen, 2006).

During the Ashura pilgrimage in 2004, following the fall of Saddam, Zarqawi sent his suicide bombers to target the first complete Shia pilgrimage season and killed hundreds in both Kadhimiyah (Baghdad) and Karbala (Rosen 2006; Shadid 2012). At the end of the forty days of mourning (called Arbae’en), the pilgrims shrugged off the bombings and made their way to Karbala shouting “I weep and beat my chest for Hussein.” The pilgrimage highlights the bond between Shia and sadness, navigating the past as the Shia Imams are killed off until the last Imam, or the Mahdi, disappeared. The Shia tolerated and survived the unfair regimes from the Umayyad all the way to Saddam. The Shia are victims but will eventually rise against the tyrant

\(^{23}\) Tikrit was Saddam’s hometown.

\(^{24}\) Once the roles were reversed, Zarqawi claimed that the new Shia slogan was “Vengeance, vengeance, from Tikrit to Al Anbar” (2004).
in the end. “Every day is Ashura, and everyplace is Karbala” is the symbolic chant of the pilgrims (Jarjoura, 2004).

**Investigation into the Prevalence of Pilgrim Attacks**

The Iraq Body Count is a website that tracks Iraqi deaths following the 2003 invasion. The website has a database that captures the date, location, type of attack, target, number killed, and corroborating news sources. The database facilitates a fascinating look into the myriad of conflicts that occur just below the surface of understanding. There are assassinations and kidnappings, roadside bombs and errant mortars. Fortunately for this research, the database assiduously tracks when the victims were pilgrims, due to the political nature of the attack and its news value to the international media that report in Iraq.

I sorted the database and removed deaths that were caused by coalition forces (accidental or attacks on insurgents). I then segregated all pilgrim deaths from the others in order to analyze insurgent attacks on pilgrims. The assumption is that Sunni insurgents conducted all pilgrim attacks. The sample set was then narrowed to the forty days of mourning between Ashura and Arba’en when pilgrim activity was highest, along with five days before and after to account for pilgrims walking and busing to and from pilgrimage destinations, for a total of fifty days.

According to Image Theory, early Sunni extremist attacks on Shia targets (based on the Rogue image) would be present but they are not an imperative. The rogue has low capability and low threat to the Sunnis, so Sunnis insurgents and extremists would prioritize other more important targets during the early years of the resistance. In 2005, a series of elections put a Shia-led government in charge of Iraq for the first time in history. The increase in threat to Sunni power and the gradual image change of the Iraqi Shia from Rogue to Dependent of the

25 The company that documents Iraqi casualties is a UK group called Conflict Casualties Monitor. The website can be found at [http://www.iraqbodycount.org/](http://www.iraqbodycount.org/)
Enemy created an emergency for Arab Sunnis afraid their government had been turned over to an historic enemy with severe grievances.

It is difficult to cull Shia versus Sunni responsibility for attacks from the majority of the data, but my assumption about Sunni responsibility for pilgrim attacks is solid. The Ashura pilgrimage is the signature event of Shia Islam and an attack on Ashura is an attack on the Shia identity. To measure this quantitatively using the database described above, I use insurgent attacks as the unit of analysis and pilgrim deaths as the response variable. Based on the application of Image Theory and Social Identity Theory to this case, I hypothesized that the rate of attack on pilgrims increased after the 2005 Ashura, despite increasing security measures taken to protect pilgrims. Here are the results of my analysis:

Table 3.2 – Comparison of Pilgrim Attacks to Non Pilgrim Attacks during Pilgrim Season

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ashura Period (ends)</th>
<th>Pilgrim Deaths</th>
<th>Pilgrim Attacks</th>
<th>Non Pilgrim Deaths</th>
<th>Non Pilgrim Attacks</th>
<th>Total Attacks</th>
<th>Total Deaths</th>
<th>% Pilgrim Deaths</th>
<th>% Pilgrim Attacks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>809</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>997</td>
<td>18.86%</td>
<td>2.44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1535</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>286</td>
<td>1597</td>
<td>3.88%</td>
<td>4.20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2425</td>
<td>563</td>
<td>576</td>
<td>2470</td>
<td>1.82%</td>
<td>2.26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>338</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>4279</td>
<td>987</td>
<td>1024</td>
<td>4617</td>
<td>7.32%</td>
<td>3.61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1448</td>
<td>537</td>
<td>548</td>
<td>1557</td>
<td>7.00%</td>
<td>2.01%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>508</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>223</td>
<td>634</td>
<td>19.87%</td>
<td>5.38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>337</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>493</td>
<td>31.64%</td>
<td>10.49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>358</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>472</td>
<td>24.15%</td>
<td>6.59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>488</td>
<td>242</td>
<td>266</td>
<td>667</td>
<td>26.84%</td>
<td>9.02%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This trend of attacks during each 50-day Ashura period rose in general to a peak in 2007 (the height of violence in Iraq) then receded to a consistent level from 2009-2012. An analysis of pilgrim attacks and deaths as a percentage of overall attacks and deaths reveals a much more significant increase in the targeting of pilgrims. For the most part this confirms my hypothesis, although there is a bit of a lag. I would suspect that Sunni infighting between the Awakening tribes and ISI/ISI created enough of a distraction to delay large increases until 2009.
Interestingly enough, pilgrim attacks remain high throughout the study; in the last three years (2010-2012), almost a quarter of all documented civilian deaths in Iraq during each Ashura time period are pilgrims. Consequently, this is an important indicator substantiating the notion that those worried that the Islamic State is in the process of making a comeback.

![Figure 3.1](image.png)

**Figure 3.1 - Comparison of Pilgrim Attacks to Overall Deaths during Pilgrim Season**

The graph on Figure 3.1 does not seem to indicate a significant number of pilgrim deaths compared to the normal population. This is because of the outbreak of civil war from 2006-7 between Shia and Sunni groups targeting the other civilians. This contradicts my argument, as the consequences of ISI attacks on Shia civilians seem to have achieved its goals of provoking a civil war. Instead, this is a consequence, not proof of causation. That the ISI succeeded does not mean that this was their strategy from the start, nor does it prove that this is a rational strategy instead of a pathological one. This graph merely demonstrates that pilgrim deaths – a not insignificant number during the peak of the civil war – are overshadowed by other deaths during the civil war.
Figure 3.2 – Pilgrim Deaths during Pilgrim Season as a Percentage of Total Deaths

The graph on Figure 3.2 shows that outside of the civil war, pilgrim deaths are significant, particularly in two important periods. During the very first Ashura (2004) the number of pilgrim deaths were high due to the devastating attacks in Kadzimiyah and Karbala by ISI on an unsuspecting Shia populace. This act, prior to any kind of talk by ISI about their desire to provoke a civil war, demonstrated the core of their strategy of attacking the Shia identity. After the civil war abates in 2008-9, pilgrim deaths again became a higher percentage of overall deaths as the ISI strategy continues unchanged, despite the deaths of Zarqawi in 2006 and Abu Omar al Baghdadi and Abu Hamza al Muhajir in 2010.
Because there is a possibility that the use of car bombs can have large variation in the number of casualties, Figure 3.3 graphs the percentage of pilgrim attacks using single events as the unit of analysis. Again, pilgrim attacks are a larger proportion of overall attacks after the civil war. This could indicate that ISI was weak after Coalition and Iraqi special operations forces’ targeting of key leaders and nodes, and as a result targeted pilgrims as a soft and easy target. However, as the Iraqi state gained capability, more and more effort went into defending pilgrims due to the political nature of the attacks and the criticism that the government could not protect its own citizens from massacre. Furthermore, ISI was preoccupied with the threat of the Awakening amongst Sunni tribes in their sanctuaries, an existential threat far greater than the special operations missions. Despite these two significant factors, pilgrim attacks remained a significant part of ISI’s strategy.

There is one other factor that supports my assertion that pilgrim attacks are a significant element of ISI strategy. ISI was a small group in the larger resistance movement to the Iraqi government and the occupation. Despite this, ISI claimed credit for 88% of the suicide attacks that were officially claimed in a press release (349/395), which itself was 22% of all suicide
attacks from 2003 to 2010 (Seifert & McCauley, 2014). ISI’s superior media arm, logistics excellence, public advocacy for suicide bombing, and far-reaching recruitment network bringing in foreign jihadists made them the monopoly for suicide bombing in Iraq (Fishman, 2006). If you consider that the other insurgent groups focused mostly on conventional guerilla attacks on the coalition and Iraqi Security Forces, then the percentage of pilgrim attacks conducted by ISI must be very high. I can only conclude that pilgrim attacks are a very significant percentage of overall ISI attacks. The exact percentage is truly unknown, since the ability to determine the attacker from the Iraqi Body Count database is impossible. I can only assume that Shia pilgrims are killed by Sunni groups, and that based on evidence that the culprit is indeed ISI. Interestingly, you will not find this evidence in ISI press releases, since they have never claimed a single pilgrim death.

This descriptive analysis of pilgrim attacks leads to the heart of my research questions about why ISI has maintained this consistent strategy of targeting pilgrims. Strategy is the development of the goals you want to achieve, and the ways and means to get there while managing risk and environmental challenges (Bartlett et al., 2000). If Hafez is right that the Salafist jihadist groups like ISIS (ISI) desire a demolition of the current political landscape of the entire region to accommodate a new political order based on Salafism and sharia, then it is possible that ISI attacks Shia pilgrims in order to provoke a backlash that will enlist the rest of their fellow Sunni’s in a war against the Shia. Natural Sunni superiority, once mobilized from their sleepiness, would provide the means to be successful in the creation of a new state.

To be successful in this strategy would require a strong information campaign from the start to justify attacks on the Shia populace; buy in by the leadership of Al Qaeda Central for political top-cover; religious justification by Salafist clerics and select mainstream Sunni clerics;
and a vigorous outreach to the Iraqi Sunni community to explain the coming struggle, the
necessity for it, and how best to mobilize. As the research results will show, not one of these
critical ways and means for the strategy were attempted or accomplished. In fact, all three
groups became intensely opposed to ISI’s strategy and this resulted in ISI’s relative demise after
2008. Nonetheless, the pilgrim attacks continue. I argue that the cognitive categorization process
and the desire to achieve a superior social identity over a cultural rival are the true cause for this
failed strategy.

**Part IV - Research Methodology**

Political psychology has produced several methods of identifying personality,
motivations, and beliefs through the analysis of verbal statements. Starting with Holsti’s (1962)
analysis of John Foster Dulles’ statements to reconstruct his belief system and his images of the
Soviet Union, their capability, and intentions, there is a history of research that has produced
valuable insights for academics and policy makers alike. Cottam (1986) researched the political
worldview of State Department officials using survey techniques to support her findings that
validated the number of images and types of images used to formulate U.S. foreign policy (as
depicted in Chapter 2). For this dissertation, I analyze captured ISI documents from the
Harmony Collection from West Point’s Combating Terrorism Center\(^{26}\) as well as ISI press
releases from 2003 to 2012, and coded them with questions derived from a model using Image
Theory as the dependent variable and Social Identity Theory as an intervening variable to answer
several research questions below.

The best source to elicit ISI’s strategy development is through the use of captured
documents (written under the assumption of privacy) as well as press releases. According to
Brian Fishman, “ISI leadership statements are still a useful way of understanding the group’s

\(^{26}\) The CTC’s Harmony program can be found at [http://www.ctc.usma.edu/programs-resources/harmony-program](http://www.ctc.usma.edu/programs-resources/harmony-program)
strategic direction. In recent years, leadership statements have been key indicators of the group’s focus on targeting Christians and its renewed effort to attack Shi’a in Iraq” (2011, p. 3). Some public statements are deceptive in nature and do not provide evidence of the actual cognitive process. Statements that are emotional in nature, without premeditation or calculation, do provide insight and are used in certain techniques like Leadership Trait Analysis (Hermann, 2005; Preston, 2001). Since interviews of ISI members are rare, the ability to use spontaneous statements is limited. Nonetheless, ISI was a prolific media savvy organization that set the standard for the use of propaganda to rally the like-minded, recruit new members, and demoralize Coalition governments into losing the motivation to stay in Iraq and fight. There is more than enough evidence to determine whether my hypotheses about ISI are correct as well as to answer several other questions about the group.

Hypothesis Testing, Theory Building, and Other Questions

The Iraqi case study puts into context the four hypotheses that I test in my research into ISI’s cognitive process of strategy development.

H1: If there is an Image change (rapid and drastic in this case), then there will be an observable increase in attention paid to the newly competitive out-group. I believe that the leadership of TWJ, prior to the 2003 invasion, originally saw the Iraqi Shia as a rogue group (low capability, low culture, harmful intentions) that easily could be ignored or put in their place if necessary. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the rapid fall of the Hussein government, as well as the unforeseen dismantling of the Sunni leadership and bureaucracy, led to the image change and a new, rapid re-categorization of Iraqi Shias. I believe the new image became that of the Dependent of the Enemy (equal capability, low culture, threat), with an opportunity present for ISI to exploit the uncertain environment after the fall of Saddam. This will be measured by
coding for message subject and target to determine if there is increased attention provided to the out-group.

**H2: If a group increases attention to the out-group, then there will be an increased use of symbolic language in order to frame the competition between groups and manipulate perceptions in favor of the in-group.** This can be measured by coding the data for sectarian references and event scripts (historical references that reinforce the narrative). ISI references to the out-group as “Persian” or “rejectionists” attempts to undermine the view of Shia as Arabs (a possible shared identity with ISI) and Muslims (another shared identity) in order to justify actions against the out-group. This hypothesis relies on previous research by Simcox (2012) who conducted a descriptive content analysis of ISI statements and determined that two of the top 10 words in the statements were sectarian in nature (apostate and Safavid), with the remainder being operational terms related to the type of operation (explosive devices, etc.) and other targets like the “Army,” “criminals,” and “police.”

**H3: If there is increased group competition for social dominance, then attacks will increase on symbolic targets highly related to the identity of the out-group.** Insurgent groups naturally target the government and security forces of those they are trying to depose. Attacks on symbols of the identity of the other group, whether they are supportive of the government or not, are more indicative of identity conflict than attacks focused on attaining power. The descriptive data analysis provided about pilgrim attacks provides some evidence for this hypothesis. Coding of statements for increased claims of sectarian based attacks would provide additional evidence in support of this idea.

**H4: If there is any significant in-group defection, then this becomes an existential threat to the group’s identity and will absorb the attention of the group leadership and lead to a shift to
an in group focus. Coding the communication for the purpose or target of the message, as well any language dedicated to the defecting group will validate this hypothesis from the Social Identity framework. These groups are newly categorized as Dependents of the Barbarian (Sunnis who have lost their way and upon direction from their Saudi and Gulf sponsors, allied with the United States). Also, an analysis of attacks upon the defecting group (the Sahwa/Awakening) can be accomplished using the Iraqi Body Count database in a similar manner as pilgrim attacks. Due to the political nature of ISI attacks on the Sahwa, they are frequently annotated in the database as such, although this is not as reliable as the pilgrim attacks that are highly distinguishable due to route, timing, and activity.

In addition to testing the four hypotheses above, I code ISI communications for indicators of the operational elements of image theory (indicators of capability, culture, intentions, and decision-making) in order to verify the worldview of ISI (see Table 3.1 above). Using Cottam’s (2005) original matrix (see Table 2.4 Image Theory Possible Categories), I proposed a tailored matrix of possible ISI worldviews in Table 2.5 in Chapter 2. Coding the communications allows us to validate this worldview and contribute to an expansion of the use of image theory in different regions and contexts.

Finally, there are additional research questions that need to be answered about the ISI. At any given time, ISI targeted the occupation forces, the Iraqi government, Shia civilians, Sunni Awakening members, and Shia pilgrims. What do they claim credit for, and why? An examination of their press releases can answer those questions. Why do they claim credit for some acts and not others? The Hakim bombing in August 2003 was widely credited to ISI, and was executed by Zarqawi’s father in law (Hafez, 2007), but was initially denied by AQC and
unclaimed for some time before Zarqawi took credit. What is it about the ISI’s Shia strategy that prevents them from claiming credit for their attacks?

Is there a pattern to ISI press releases? What accounts for the sizable gaps where they did not make releases? Also, what differences are there between their press releases and their internal communications concerning strategy toward Shia pilgrims? How does ISI respond to criticism of their strategy? Lastly, what explains the resiliency of ISI’s Shia civilian strategy, lasting long beyond Zarqawi’s death and the other ISI emirs? A possible answer is cognitive dissonance, which would suggest that once a cognitive category is chosen, all future evidence is interpreted with a bias to support the chosen strategy despite obvious shortcomings, in order to maintain cognitive consistency and reduce psychological stress and doubt.

This chapter presented a detailed case study to use image theory and social identity theory to fully understand ISI’s worldview and the strategic choices it makes to deal with threats and opportunities within their environment. Chapter 4 will present the results of the coding of the collection of ISI press releases and captured documents in order to test the hypotheses presented in this chapter.
Chapter 4 - Results

Over the course of this project, I accumulated, organized, read, and analyzed 2,888 communications authored by the group that has become the Islamic State in Iraq. This was difficult at times, particularly because of the sheer volume of products they produced and their dutiful recording of the destruction of so many human beings. Reading the statements was not always onerous, despite their macabre nature; the spokesmen were often sarcastic and humorous, deriding their opponents with skill and cleverness. They exploited the clumsy nature of their governing opponents as only an agile, small insurgent group can do. In the end, I came away with what I believe to be a deep understanding of the group’s history (as they see it), ideology, how they viewed their own progress in the ebb and flow of warfare, their attitudes toward life and death, and the types of events that provoked raw emotions – anger, hurt, jubilation, and vindication. Most importantly, I believe that this research design enabled me to gain an appreciation for and communicate the political worldview of the group known as the Islamic State. This chapter portrays my findings from this research.

To begin, the organization named the Islamic State today has evolved into a very different organization since its origins in Iraq before the invasion of 2003. Some scholars distinguish Zarqawi’s Tawhid wal Jihad/Al Qaeda in Iraq from the Mujahideen Shura Council/Islamic State of Iraq, going so far as to call them different groups (Fishman, 2011, p. 4). Certainly this was a pivotal year with many leadership and organizational changes that are well documented. My initial research influenced me to look at the group as a single entity with evolutionary, not revolutionary change. As such, I chose to analyze the group’s communications since 2003 in order to investigate the group’s initial image of Shia Iraqis, in order to properly measure any change over time. In retrospect, I feel that this decision was the correct one. There
was an overwhelming amount of evidence pointing toward the validity of examining the group as one continuous entity, based on consistency in the group’s leadership, ideology, worldview, and media production – regardless of the phase of development of the group or their changing goals.

Part I - General Results

The Level of Analysis Problem

Before it even claimed to be a group, Tawhid wal Jihad began as a very small cohort of individuals who shared an ideological perspective that was highly influenced by its founder, the Jordanian veteran jihadist Abu Musab al Zarqawi. There is still a lot to be learned about the group in its early days, as the group did not claim its early attacks in late summer 2003 and used silence effectively to confuse and pit the Americans, Shia militias, and Sunni insurgent groups against each other in a fruitless blame game for their attacks. Their amazing success was too enticing to forgo credit, and by February of 2004 Zarqawi brought the group public and retroactively claimed the earlier attacks (the UN and Hakim bombing). Subsequent communication of the group’s goals and objectives accelerated as they joined Al Qaeda as its Iraq franchise, a move designed to increase the status of the group for external and local recruiting purposes (Karam, 2007, p. 99).

ISI’s rise to prominence among resistance groups was fueled by their foreign leadership cadre that had deep levels of experience in bomb making and operational security, compared to their Iraqi contemporaries that had to start from scratch in 2003. Tawhid wal Jihad (TwJ) was also able to coopt the stream of foreign fighters coming into Iraq to fight the Americans and worked to find shelter and safety for these immigrants. This had an effect on the reputation of the group however. Zarqawi’s strategy, as laid out to his future superiors in Al Qaeda in his February 2004 letter, had created a reputation as being a group of foreign fighters insensitive to Iraqi
dynamics and the perpetrator of cruel and possibly unnecessary attacks on Shia civilians. This unease, in a highly nationalistic population, rose to crisis levels in 2006 as the group began to lose ground with the Iraqi Sunni that supported the group in the rural areas surrounding Baghdad (Fishman, 2011, p. 9). Some of this was exacerbated by Al Qaeda in Iraq’s (AQI) campaign to frustrate Sunni participation in the 2005 election, a result that severely backfired on Iraqi Sunnis, who were now even more shut out of their share of power in the Iraqi government. Sunni frustration with a non-native AQI motivated the group to move toward an organizational framework that incorporated Iraqis into visible leadership roles in the organization. The Mujahideen Shura Council (MSC) was formed after AQI efforts to recruit other Iraqi insurgent groups into the organization had failed. In a rare accommodation, AQI merged with several like-minded Salafist groups into the MSC, which was led by an Iraqi member of AQI named Abu Omar al Baghdadi.27 AQI, operating under the Shura Council, was still led by Zarqawi and later by Abu Hamza al Muhajir, an Egyptian. Notably, one of the sharia experts that joined with AQI under the MSC was Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, the current leader of the Islamic State (van Ostaeyen, 2013).

This organization lasted less than a year, most likely because their recruiting efforts were less than successful. Less than a dozen groups joined, out of hundreds of nationalist Iraqi resistance groups, although some sub-units of other organizations defected to the MSC. After the

27 He originally signed communications as Abdallah Rashid al Baghdadi, but changed his name to Abu Omar al Qureshi al Baghdadi, most likely to highlight a tie to one of the Rashidun (Omar was one of the companions of the prophet and the 2nd successor to Mohammed), the Baghdadi part was to highlight Iraqi roots compared to Zarqawi, and the Qureshi part was a claim to lineage from Mohammed, which would legitimize future claims to be a Caliph. My research found multiple incidents of group members changing their noms de guerre based on symbolism or to honor another fighter, or possibly after a new child. Abu Omar was not a distinguished leader of the organization prior to assuming control of the Mujahideen Shura Council, and for a long time the United States military thought he was a fake front man to cover for al Qaeda foreign fighters who really ran the organization. This turns out to have been false; from my analysis of the documents, Abu Omar was the overall political leader of the merged organization and Abu Hamza, the veteran Egyptian al Qaeda member who took over from Zarqawi, was the military commander. This arrangement seemed to work well for the two, but since 2010, Abu Bakr, the successor to these two leaders, ran the entire organization alone. Abu Bakr is the current Caliph of the Islamic State.
death of Zarqawi in the summer of 2006, the MSC declared the creation of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) and created a state organization that strove to control and administer territory in the next phase of a growing insurgency (Fishman, 2011, p. 9). This move was inspired by their failure to gain more Iraqi support among Sunnis, and by advice given to the group by their superiors at Al Qaeda Central. Criticized for such a preemptive move by Iraqi resistance groups, the Islamic State of Iraq devoted a part of their strategic communications towards defending both their new name and the construct of an Islamic State. Interestingly, despite their abhorrence for borders (especially those constructed by the Western powers after 1918 as part of the Sykes-Picot Agreement), they included Iraq in their name to continue their effort to become more attractive to their Iraqi supporters. The group kept the name the Islamic State of Iraq from 2006-2013, when it changed to the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham to celebrate effective control of large sections of Syria, a vindication for the organization and its claim of statehood.

During this history, the consistency in messaging from the various public relations divisions is uniquely strong. While other aspects of the organization changed over time, there was little change in overarching worldview, communication patterns, sectarian language, targeting, or style of the media organs that have spoken for these groups. This led me to conclude that the core ideals of this group and its organizational DNA have remained unchanged since 2002. Even the group’s transition from an insurgent group to a state-like apparatus in 2006, an important distinction for its external relations with other groups, was hardly noticeable as Al Qaeda’s media organization simply changed names one day and continued operations fluidly.  

The new Islamic State remained sensitive about the name change for some time. Groups refusing to pledge allegiance to the new Islamic State often called it Al Qaeda in Iraq on purpose, leading to public rebukes by the Ministry of Information of the State. Internal communications (later captured) revealed similar complaints to other insurgent group leaders. My analysis is that other groups called the ISI – “AQI” – in order to justify their reluctance to “follow Islamic law” by joining the true Islamic State, a state they considered to be illegitimate and possibly a foreign-based entity trying to establish itself inside of Iraq. More importantly for this discussion, it is an indicator of how rival insurgent groups viewed the ISI – as a front name for Al Qaeda in Iraq. Certainly there are large elements
Furthermore, continuity of the leadership, which gave strong guidance on what could and couldn’t be said by the media outlet, has remained remarkably steady. Zarqawi (TwJ/AQI/MSC) was followed by the dual-headed leadership team of Abu Omar and Abu Hamza (AQI/MSC/ISI), which transitioned in 2010 to Abu Bakr (MSC/ISI/ISIS/IS), with membership eras noted in parentheses. The overlap of leaders in each of the organization’s transitions tells one story; the communications of the organization reinforces this overlap and is a study in consistency.

In looking at the Islamic State of Iraq’s communications, I found significant evidence to support a long-term view of the group as being ideologically one unbroken evolution. ISI operations were exclusively named for past TwJ/AQI martyrs and key leaders. The Omar Brigade, responsible for the assassination campaign against Shia militias, kept its name during the transition from AQI to the ISI, and in the future all newly created assassination units would be assigned to the brigade (MSC, 24 Jul 2006). ISI eulogies cover the earliest days of TwJ, featuring martyrs who were killed at the famous Rawa foreign fighter camp by the invading US forces in 2003 (Telegraph, 2003). The Martyr series, which lasted for years, used a numbering system started under AQI and remained sequential regardless of name changes (MSC, 26 Jan 2006). None of these communications discriminate or designate these heroes as belonging to any different organization than TwJ/AQI, and presents strong evidence of the organization as one continuous lineage.

Coding Communications

If we can gain a high level of understanding of the ISI through its voluminous press releases, then why would they expose operational secrets and increase the risk to the organization and its members? An organization that lost over 75% of its key leadership by 2010 of truth in this perception. The Islamic State often wrote eulogies and named campaigns after fallen heroes; I found no evidence of them choosing anyone not a member of TwJ or AQI to venerate.
had to consistently balance much needed exposure and recruiting concerns with worry about operational risk. Releasing details about tactics, techniques, procedures, personalities, home countries, targets, and strategy could be helpful to their quite capable opponents. Why did ISI choose such an aggressive and open strategic communications posture?

The primary goal of most Iraqi resistance organizations was to force the occupation to leave Iraq. This event alone could fulfill jihad requirements and allow them to put down arms and negotiate power sharing with the government, something that eventually happened for a majority of groups during the Awakening movement. These goals were minimalistic in comparison to the ISI, which strove to control territory and establish state functions in order to fulfill their ideological goals of the formation of a Caliphate free from non-Islamic influence. The Iraqi government, formed outside of sharia law and created by the “crusaders” had to be toppled for success to be achieved. The ISI was a revolutionary organization in nature, and not just in a regional sense. For the Caliphate to succeed, ISI needed to upset the current world order, and this drove a hyperactive media strategy that would achieve three main objectives.

First, it would bring outside money to the organization. This funding from rich donors horrified by the prospect of a Shia dominated Iraq would support the purchase of vehicles and bomb material from within Iraq as well as money needed for bribing officials and security forces to facilitate operations and release detained group members. Second, the group’s prolific suicide bombing campaign required a steady stream of motivated but untrained foreign fighters that were indoctrinated, properly prepared, and given simple tasks as part of complex assaults such as to drive an armor plated vehicle loaded with explosives to the front gate of a security complex. The subsequent waves of bombers and attackers were usually able to penetrate the

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29 The ISI admitted this practice in several statements and justified the use of bribes on numerous instances, for utilitarian reasons as well as to point out the corruptness of their enemy.
chaos and breach the defenses. Many of the statements made by the Islamic State of Iraq served the purpose of recruiting future jihadists from the Sunni Ummah by posting on internet websites messages that glorified martyrdom and the benefit of suicide operations in the larger campaign against the Crusaders.

Finally, the prolific media campaign sought to bolster the image of the Islamic State as the premier insurgent group in Iraq and recruit entire insurgent groups, or even brigades belonging to other groups, to their banner. This would serve their overall goals of removing the occupiers, collapsing the puppet government, and installing an Islamic State over all of Iraq (and later, what used to be the ancient Muslim world). To understand what role the Islamic State’s strategic messaging was used for, I made up some simple categories that related to the purpose of each message.

**Purpose of Messaging**

My initial research into ISI statements gave me an idea of how to construct a series of options that accurately indicated the purpose of each communication. The purpose of this investigation was to determine how the organization communicated to different audiences. The overwhelming majority of ISI public communications served to *celebrate* a successful attack on a military target, usually in the form of an operational report. Other categories included *defense*, when the group countered public criticism for civilian casualties, having members captured, or accusations the group considered false. These messages were sometimes emotional in nature and exposed an accurate representation of the group’s image of other groups. During the research, I added the category of *attack*, where the group would single out an adversary (and sometimes an ally) for specific criticism. *Recruitment* was a category for messages that had a singular focus of enticing foreign fighters from the Ummah to travel to Iraq. *Eulogies* often were a form of subtle
recruitment, but I kept this as a separate category since the ISI carried on an extensive series that remembered their martyrs. These messages were usually very forthcoming about the history of the organization and the many places foreign fighters, who made up the majority of martyrs, came from. The admin category was for messages containing coordinating instructions for group members, such as the religious observance of holidays – simple administration tasks that normal states communicate daily. Two other categories were apology and internal critique, and both had very limited examples during the coding process.

The category that was the best source for material that produced indicators of ISI images was strategy communications. Often authored by the top leadership, these messages were lengthy - often an hour long video or audio, or twenty-plus pages of written statement - and expanded in detail as to the strategy and rationale for their attacks.

Message Targets

Once the purpose of the message was recorded, the next step was to determine the target(s) of the message. Celebrations were simple to code as they usually identified plainly which enemy was the target of a military operation. If a suicide car bomb targeted an American convoy, the U.S. was annotated as the target. The Islamic State maintained a lockstep consistency in its descriptions of the other actors in their worldview, calling the U.S. “crusaders;” the Iraqi Government “apostate,” “rejectionist,” or “Safavid;” and the Mahdi militia “dajjal (Satan’s) Army” or “imposter army.” After coding hundreds of messages, it became very clear who the target of the message was. More difficult was analyzing discussions of complicated issues like Sunni traitors, which were often camouflaged due to sensitivities about their fracturing base.
The number of actors in the Islamic State worldview was larger than I anticipated. I originally expected targets like the ones mentioned above, as well as well-known actors: the Sahwa, al Qaeda Central, Sunni Insurgent groups, Sunni Apostate Leaders, and Kurds. I eventually had to add categories for Sunni Collaborators, who turned out to be targeted quite frequently. Message targets were also dependent on multiple factors, such as location and time. For example, the Kurds and the Awakening only operated in certain locations, and American targets became harder to hit after 2005-6, while the Awakening movement (proper) did not start until 2006.

Analyzing target selection by ISI messaging is not a clear indicator of their strategy due to the multiple variables present. As I learned from coding the messages, each message applies to a particular time and place, and to talk of a war in Iraq is to understand that, more than most wars, the Iraq war was many wars in one. From the Islamic State’s perspective, there was a war against the crusader, a war against the government and its security forces, a war against Shia militias that harassed innocent Sunnis, a war against Sunni politicians, and a war against Sunni traitors. Often, these wars overlapped, particularly once the Americans began advising and conducting joint operations with Iraqi forces or Awakening tribal groups.

Target selection can tell us a number of things however. Resource allocation (assigning means) plays a large element in strategic decision-making, and the amount of car bombs allocated to particular targets can give us some indication of the target worth to ISI. Combined with internal communications and the strategic rationale put forth in their strategy communications, a somewhat coherent picture emerges.

The overwhelming majority of targets in ISI messaging would fall under classic insurgent behavior. Primary targets were military in nature, and extend to all levels of the government,
from judges and prosecutors to public health officials. Police and auxiliaries extend government control into the public sphere and are legitimate targets, although the Iraqi public was heavily against attacks on local police. Even election officials and poll workers, nominally civilians, participate in a democratic system that the group is trying to subvert and are therefore reasonable, if not legal, targets for the insurgents. Enemy militias, sanctioned by the state, are also fair game for attacks.

Insurgent groups have attacked purely civilian targets in the past, so the Islamic State’s campaign could have historical precedence. Bombs targeting civilians undermine government promises of security and therefore have long been a part of insurgent campaigns. ISI car bomb campaigns, a regular occurrence in Iraq since 2003, have accomplished just that – a severe frustration with the government’s ability to prevent random acts of terror. Beyond this façade of normality are some twists that make this campaign different than others however. The Islamic State elaborated on many occasions their rationale for why Iraqi Shia are apostates and therefore legitimate targets of jihad. Worse than unbelievers, they have deviated from the true path. The rhetoric is harsh sometimes, particularly from Abu Musab al Zarqawi, who devoted many communications to this subject. The Islamic State perpetrated 88% of claimed suicide bombings (Seifert & McCauley, 2014, p. 810) and maintained the monopoly over incoming foreign fighters, who made up the highest percentage of perpetrators. Despite the fact that most observers surmise that ISI was responsible for the majority of attacks on civilians, my analysis of their targeting found a dearth of claims for these attacks. Symbolic attacks, like the Samarra mosque bombing in February of 2006 that ignited a surge of civilian killings on both sides of the Sunni-Shia divide, went unclaimed by all insurgent groups. ISI denied responsibility multiple times, blaming the United States and others for conducting a false flag operation.
Analysis of the ISI targeting over time, and comparing it to their messaging, assists in flushing this mystery out.

**Sectarian Content**

The role of social identity is an important factor in the creation and maintenance of an actor’s political worldview. To highlight differences between the Islamic State and its adversaries, their messaging was full of sectarian language. No unfriendly actor was ever called by their actual name, but by a code word instead. The United States was the crusaders, and the Iraqi government was the apostate government. But whereas the code for the United States highlighted its aggression against Muslims, a common Islamic State talking point to be sure, their Muslim enemies were subjected to much more insulting language. Using the term apostate, one of the nicer terms used by the Islamic State, called into question the target’s ties to Islam and therefore waived any protections Islam would provide to fellow Muslims. The Islamic State also used historical event scripts as analogies to current events in order to justify their actions and paint adversaries in a poor light. These event scripts were coded as part of the research to identify their primary purpose and frequency of use. Interestingly, sectarian references in internal communications were largely absent, indicating that the name-calling primarily serves a priming function for external audiences.

**Strategy Identification**

In addition to coding for sectarian language, I examined messages to see if they had clues to specific rationales for certain targets, specifically whether the Islamic State claimed civilian attacks and explained why it was done. Competing theories about why civilian attacks were undertaken were also investigated; I looked for references to a “blowback” rationale or acknowledgement that civilian attacks were driven by financial requirements to please backers.
abroad. All of these declarations were rare if present ever for reasons I will discuss later in this dissertation.

**Identification of Worldview**

The heart of this project was to construct the worldview of the Islamic State of Iraq using the framework of Image Theory. Each target mentioned or referenced in Islamic State communications was coded based on evaluations of capability, culture, intentions, decision-making, and opportunity. Images of the group, either in contrast to the target or extolling the group for sympathetic audiences, were also recorded. Finally, was there evidence of image confusion, mixed messages based on conflicting information that threatened the group’s pre-existing image of another?

An overview of the some very general observations about how each category factored in determining the worldview of the Islamic State follows below.

**Capability:** was frequently included in all types of communications. Celebrations can point to either how strong the enemy is or how weak they are, depending on the ISI image of the target. For example, the high military and economic capabilities of the United States were often referenced in order to boost the self-image of ISI’s own capability. In contrast, the Iraqi Government was often depicted as incompetent and incapable of fighting, a nod to the inevitability of success for the ISI. Some strategy communications went into depth about the capabilities of various other actors to justify tactics and strategy.

One noticeable gap in the operationalization of the capability portion of Image Theory is the absence of the impact of media. While military strength and economic power were frequently referenced in the messaging (particularly after the 2008 economic crisis), the power of the opponent’s media was a source of frustration for the ISI, and media should be included as one of
the components of capability. The ISI perceived the media to be controlled by their opponents and conspired to hide ISI accomplishments and amplify criticisms. Many defense communications by the ISI were directed to this strong media bias against the ISI. The western perspective of media is that it is part of free speech and relatively unbiased; the ISI’s perspective is that the media is part of the power structure of their opponents. Ironically, this included media companies from the Middle East, like al Jazeera, which found itself the target of physical attacks by the ISI.

**Culture:** this aspect was referenced in almost every communication, especially through the use of code words and insults in even the shortest communication. These evaluations took the form of judgments on the religious nature of another actor, usually to justify attacks or discredit the other’s actions. Christianity itself was not a reason for disdain as much as it was a characteristic of the occupiers of a Muslim land, a clear-cut rationale for jihad. The worst critique was that Christians inappropriately worshipped the cross instead of God. To the ISI Salafist ideology, being an apostate or rejectionist was worse than cross worshipping since these people had been exposed to the correct path and turned away. Most statements kept derogatory references to a minimum (they were almost always present), but some – Zarqawi’s are the worst – were page long historical denunciations and attacks on the cultural depravity of the Shia sect. The ISI’s view of themselves as the Sunni champions pitted against a manipulative enemy seeking to abscond with their heritage was usually communicated in this category in every type of messaging.

**Intentions:** required the ISI leadership to project their interpretations of what another actor’s actions were trying to accomplish. This category assisted most in determining whether the ISI thought the group was an enemy or friend, regardless of its evaluation of capability or
culture. Often the ISI tied real events to actor’s intentions as long as it fit preexisting attitudes. These interpretations were clear with rare exceptions. Some actors needed little explanation, such as the United States – who was in Iraq in order to extract resources and set up a puppet government that would either help Israel or support future conversion to Christianity. These obvious themes of western intentions were infrequently mentioned, most likely because the narrative is well known in the Middle East. On the other hand, more controversial interpretations of other actors, like the Shia being apostates subject to takfir, or Awakening members that supported the crusaders and were legitimate targets of jihad, required lengthy and frequent inclusion in ISI messaging.

**Decision Making:** was not a frequently addressed component of an ISI image of another actor. Democracies (both the United States, its allies in the Coalition, and the budding democracy in Iraq) were easy targets for criticism in this component of images. Not only was democracy a false religion where the rule of people were substituted for the rule of God, but its perceived inefficiencies made for an easy contrast to the simplicity of what life would be like under the Islamic State. Shia groups were also frequently mentioned due to the importance of Imams in Shia political life. Inclusion of the decision-making component was strongly associated with election seasons, when the ISI strove to limit Sunni participation in Iraqi elections.

**New Threat/Opportunity:** was rarely present in communications unless there were recent changes in the ISI image of another actor. This happens infrequently because of the deeply rooted cognitive beliefs the group maintains of the other actors in its worldview. The advent of Sunni tribes that formed the Awakening movement to fight the ISI was viewed as a new threat, but also an opportunity: the group offered repentance and apologies were made for “mistakes made.” Repentance has remained the de facto ISI policy toward Awakening members,
supposedly regardless of culpability in the death of ISI fighters in the past; this policy is reinforced by an aggressive assassination campaign that provides a visible alternative for Awakening members of the consequences of choosing incorrectly. This dynamic was similar to Zarqawi’s view of the rise of Shia power, which was viewed as both an existential threat to Sunnis and an opportunity to strike quickly before they gained power.

**Image Confusion:** was extremely rare in both internal and external communications. ISI images remained consistent for the ten-year period, with one major exception. The Awakening movement challenged ISI views towards Sunni tribes, a group that prior to 2006 was idealized by the ISI. The ISI leaders obviously struggled with explanations of why Sunni tribes would turn on them despite sharing the same social identity, especially after ISI’s highly publicized demonization of their Shia rivals. Image confusion was prevalent for about a two-year period (2007-2009), until a new image could be constructed and reliably used by the group. This image construction will be discussed more in Chapter 5.

Overall, I found very few communications that failed to provide some kind of clue as to how the ISI viewed others using one of Image Theory’s components or highlighting the social identity conflict between ISI and its Shia enemies. ISI’s use of communications was prolific, timely, and expansive at times – which allows us to gain a good understanding of the ISI’s worldview.

**PART II – Type and Target of ISI Messaging**

Table 4.1 – Category of Messages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>#</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Press Releases:</td>
<td>2852</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Captured Docs:</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>2888</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The majority of the documents analyzed in the study were press releases that were deliberately released by the organization for public consumption by its supporters and enemies alike. There were only 36 captured documents available for analysis at the time of the research; more should be available in the future. Some of these documents were very insightful due to their candid nature, and others were administrative and gave more insight to organizational behavior than clues that would be helpful in ascertaining the ISI worldview.

Figure 4.1: Message Type (n=2888)

Most of the messages were celebrations of ISI military actions, which boost self-image capability and serve a secondary role of recruiting those from the Sunni Ummah that want to join a winning organization. These messages were often brief and to the point, with a minimum of sectarian language and usually truthful based on cross-checking with news headlines and the Iraqi Body Count database. The next most frequent type of message was strategy communication. There was one apology and one internal critique (captured message). See Table 4.2 below:
Table 4.2 – Message Type by number

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>#</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Celebrate</td>
<td>2452</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy Comm</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eulogy</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defense</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attack</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admin</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruitment</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apology</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal Critique</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>2888</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each message was coded for targets of the message and there were almost always multiple targets per message. Target order within the message was not considered important as many multiple target messages were chronologically ordered and therefore random. While many messages had multiple targets, few had more than two or three as can be noted in Table 4.3 below. Six was the most any one message had, and those messages were strategic communications that could be up to twenty pages long with in depth discussions about multiple groups.
The ISI addressed 22 different groups in their messaging. The Iraqi Government and security forces were the most frequent subject of their messages, followed closely by the United States. Non-governmental actors like the Shia militias and the Sunni Awakening forces were close behind. The Sunni Ummah was targeted for recruitment purposes and to bolster the image of the ISI among its idealized group. Iraqi Shia (civilians) and Sunni collaborators rounded out the most popular messaging targets. The rest were minor players that made infrequent appearances. An odd target was the media writ large, a highly diverse target that ISI nonetheless amalgamated into a single group with a hostile view of the Islamic State. A group that was missing from this list was their superiors in the Al Qaeda organization: Al Qaeda Central.
PART III - The Worldview of the Islamic State of Iraq

According to Cottam, “cognitive images play a role in all stages of policy making, from influencing the choice of strategy to processing information as the strategy is implemented” (1994, p. 18). The analysis of ISI statements according to Image Theory’s characteristics provides a clear view of where each group fits into the political worldview or spectrum, how important that other group is to evolving strategy, and a justification for actions. The results are as follows:

**Iraqi Government and Security Forces**

The Islamic State viewed the Iraqi government and security forces consistently as monolithic parts of one entity. The ISI’s overall goal was not one of power sharing or even regime change, but a complete transformation of the society from a secular one to one supportive of Islamic governance. Therefore it made little difference in their communication to address separate parts of this particular group other than for simple clarification in operational reports. The tone in which sub-groups like ministries or police are discussed makes it clear that they are interchangeable gears of a larger machine.

**Capability.** The capabilities of the group were evaluated somewhere between poor and dismal. Underpaid, poorly led, and created under fire due to the short sighted policies of the American proconsul during the first year of the occupation, the security forces were singled out as apostates who failed to recognize their duty to perform jihad against a clear cut infidel occupier (MSC, 2006, Mar 15). The government they worked for consisted of opportunists that jockeyed for positions of power in an illegitimate government. Without US support, this group would collapse in a short period of time due to sheer incompetence (Abu Omar, 2009, Jul 7). Regardless of
training or funding, this group could not compete in the long run with the experienced and 
dedicated jihadists facing them.

Frustration at the lengthy stay of American forces that propped up the security forces 
often manifested itself in a mocking tone toward Iraqi Security forces’ performance, particularly 
once the US stepped back from active combat. References to their propensity to run from the 
dedicated mujahedeen were frequent, as were tales of small numbers of ISI fighters that routed 
etire battalions (ISI, 27 Aug 2012). Many later attacks (2010-2013) were filmed to show the 
weakness of the security forces, to include the execution of humiliated captives. These were done 
in an effort to prove the superiority of the Islamic State.

**Culture.** Unlike the US forces, which were capable despite their weak culture, the Iraqi 
government and security forces were considered weak mostly due to their inferior culture. 
Regardless of sect, Iraqis joining the government, contracting for the crusaders, or working for or 
in the police or army were legitimate targets for the fighters of the ISI (AQI, 2005, Sep 15). 
While other insurgent groups often eschewed attacking these groups because they were fellow 
Muslims, the ISI clearly saw them as targets that forfeited any protection Islam afforded them. 
Their decision to work with infidels against the “real” Muslims required them to be killed, very 
often without the ability to repent.

At first glance, it might seem like the ISI would group the Iraqi Government and security 
forces with Iraqi Shia and Shia militias, but in examining the documents it is clear that they 
maintained separate images for these groups for multiple reasons. While all three groups shared 
similar characteristics, there were important differences between them. First, the apostate 
government and its ignorance of sharia principles of governance made anyone associated with it 
a legitimate target. Sunnis also participated in the government, so broadly assigning Shia
characteristics, while simplistic and therefore enticing, would prevent the ISI from isolating and targeting Sunni collaborators that worked in the government. One reason for the ISI’s relentless targeting of Sunni collaborators was because they prevented the ISI from making the claim to be the defenders of all Sunnis from a Shia government. This need to maintain separate images from the Iraqi Government and other Shia elements was exacerbated by the later development of the Sunni Awakening.

**Intentions.** The Iraqi government was designed to further Iranian interests at the expense of Sunni Iraqis, something ISI called the “Safavid project.” All decisions were made to serve this end and the government fooled collaborators into believing that positions in the government were worth enough to betray race and religion (ISI, 2007, Aug 27). This legitimized ISI targeting of any person affiliated with the government, regardless of position.

**Decision Making.** The ISI was less concerned about the Iraqi government’s attachment to democracy than their betrayal of religious principles in working with infidels and adhering to a foreign sponsored constitution written as an alternative to Sharia law. Another ISI critique was that decision-making was not made by the figures nominally in charge, but by Iranian decision makers or Shia clerics behind the scenes (AQI, 2005, Dec 8). One of these decisions included the transformation of the Ministry of Interior into a Badr Corps organ that was dedicated to the ethnic cleansing of Sunnis. Because of this “decision,” the ISI “responded” by targeting the Ministry of Interior heavily in their campaigns in order to protect Sunni Iraqis (Abu Sulaiman, 2005, Mar 11). This is an example of how ISI leveraged sectarian tensions to justify their strategic targeting.

**Overall.** The government and security forces were assessed as harmful to the ISIs goals and vision, with weak capabilities and a low culture – which encouraged the use of violence
toward members of the group. This is in contrast to a variety of other insurgent groups that often refrained from targeting Iraqis when possible. The Iraq government/security forces were categorized as a “dependent of the enemy,” with relatively equal capability and inferior culture. This capability was raised from its normal low level by intensive sponsorship of American military forces, while they were present. After 2011, this evaluation of capability began to drop with the departure of American advisors, which might have shifted the ISI image of this group into the “rogue” image. Actions taken against groups that have the rogue image are often one of increased violence as the actor senses the opportunity to eliminate the threat. Large-scale massacres of Iraqi security forces in the summer of 2014 could be manifestations of an image change by the ISI.

**United States**

**Capability.** The capability of the United States was rated consistently as high. The ISI were painfully aware of and respected the military might of the United States, occasionally referring to them as the most powerful empire the world has ever seen (Abu Omar, 2009, Mar 17). By playing up the strengths of the United States, the group was also conducting some self-congratulatory praise. The inference was if the United States was so powerful, and the Islamic State could not only defeat individual units but survive over the long term- even control territory – then IS was truly a capable organization that had a bright future. Unusual for this particular type of image, where high capability should have a deterrent effect, ISI did not shy away from confrontation - something the group claimed with pride and as an example for others to follow. In contrast, other insurgent groups had much lower profiles and attacked Coalition forces much more surreptitiously.
The ISI understood early on that the United States faced tremendous limitations in occupying a foreign country and exploited these vulnerabilities well, particularly with the support of an Iraqi population primed to be antagonistic towards foreign interference. In fact, ISI knew that the most dangerous capability of the United States would be its ability to train an army and police force capable of frustrating future goals (Zarqawi, 2004, Feb 12). This capability strongly influenced ISI future targeting toward joint patrols and bases in key areas they wanted to control.

Realizing that power is more than military might, the ISI commented on the costs of the United States to fight an extended insurgency and inflated these impacts to an unrealistic level. Imagining that they were bankrupting the United States, the ISI anticipated an early withdrawal for American forces and a general retreat from the area – something that fit into the strategic goals of their parent organization, al Qaeda. They cited western academics like Joseph Stiglitz and his long term cost estimates, demonstrating a strong familiarity with the dialogue occurring within their enemies’ camp (Abu Omar, 2009, Jul 7). The economic crisis of 2008 was cited as a great sign of the decline of the United States, giving hope for a future for the Islamic State despite its own hard times after 2007 (Abu Hamza, 2009, Apr 21).

Interestingly, the soft power qualities of the United States frustrated the commentators and leadership of the Islamic State to a great degree. The all-powerful and encompassing media dominated not only western discourse, but Middle Eastern media outlets as well. This dominance allowed the United States to downplay their own struggles in Iraq, “blackout” coverage of Islamic State success, and encourage media criticism of the foreign fighter nature of the ISI and its relentless attacks on civilian targets (Unknown -Harmony Collection, 2007). The battle for positive press is a war that the ISI never won, despite a growing sophistication and emphasis on
their media capabilities. ISI perceptions of the power of the media were vague and conspiratorial in nature, failing to differentiate between US media and local media. The ISI viewed all media as hostile to the intentions of the ISI and worked hard to develop methods for their fan base to access media outside or conventional forms (ISI, 4 May 2008).

**Culture.** There are not many groups or states in the world that would consider the United States to have an inferior culture. In fact, one could argue that al Qaeda’s existence is a manifestation of a growing backlash against a powerful culture that was too involved in the Middle East, spreading western values and decadence into a traditional culture. But its powerful attraction does not translate into a powerful evaluation by the ISI. Fear of cultural subversion by an inferior, secular culture is a better description of why ISI rates U.S. culture as inferior. Errors made by the US in attacking Iraq without a plan or appropriate resources to prevent the resultant chaos that followed, primed the early leaders of the group to think of the US as a powerful giant that was poorly led and unable to execute a rational strategy. The United States’ demonstration of competence during the invasion of Iraq was less about cultural excellence than a demonstration of the weakness of the secular/apostate “criminal” regime of Saddam Hussein (Zarqawi, 2004, Feb 12).

Religion, the most important characteristic of culture for ISI, was evaluated as low since the crusaders worshipped an inanimate object (the cross) instead of the divine being (AQI, 2005, May 1). This made the United States a polytheist nation, a violation of Tawhid – the most important ethos to this jihadist group. Other than this frequent observation, there was no deeper discussion of the religious beliefs of the United States or its western allies, unlike the treatment of Iraqi Shia. The United States was a country of infidels who were to be fought in accordance with long standing religious requirements. People assisting the crusaders were not performing
their religious duties and were subject to attack as apostates through their association with the United States.

A lack of willpower and determination were characteristics of US culture that were targeted for exploitation, and event scripts like the US abandonment of Vietnam were used as an analogy to what would eventually happen in Iraq (Zarqawi, 2006, Dec 28). Although this interpretation could be a misreading of the United States involvement in Vietnam, the ISI viewed the fifteen year long war in a way that fit their image of the United States as weak-willed and a bully that if stood up to, would always back down (Zawahiri, 2005, July). This lack of conviction compared poorly to a group that was willing to fight to the death for jihad, and impacted on the low evaluation of US culture.

**Intentions.** The perceived plan of the United States was to dominate Iraq in order to plunder its abundant natural resources, but that plan went awry quickly due to the actions of a group willing to defend Muslims. In a clever plot to salvage their efforts, the new plan was for the United States to work with the ever-present network of traitors to establish a puppet state in the heart of the Middle East (Abu Omar, 2009, Jul 7). The clever Iranians, who hijacked the US plan through the manipulation of the Iraqi Shia and Shia militias to gain true sway over the apostate government of Iraq, foiled this plan (Abu Omar, 2007, Sep 8). Twice fooled, the US was working hard to camouflage its eventual exit while people were distracted by the advent of the Awakening movement, which was less clever than lucky (ISI, 2007, Dec 23). The Islamic State would eventually defeat US goals, a fact that was obvious to all except those under the influence of western media propaganda.

In addition to the US attraction to Iraq’s national resources, there was a concern that an enduring US presence in the region would lead to pressure on Muslims to convert to Christianity
(Zarqawi, 2006, Dec 28). This was not based on events or incidents, but rather on a shared underlying assumption that proselytization was a hidden agenda of the crusader forces. Ejecting them from Iraq would remove a threat to the future of the Caliphate, and not just a military one. The corrupting effect of the US on Iraqi Shia, and especially on Sunni tribesmen, was an unstated example of this fear (ISI, 2011, Aug 30).

**Decision Making.** According to the Islamic State, the US suffered from a reliance on democracy, a decision making structure that is not known to be efficient in waging long wars in foreign countries for limited objectives. This limitation was turned into a critique of democracy as a whole for deferring to the wishes of man instead of the divine (al Adnani, 2012, Jan 25). Worse, the US actively exported this dangerous system into Iraq where it had seductively attracted Sunni traitors in addition to the Iraqi Shia most likely to benefit from one person – one vote. President George W. Bush was a favorite target of ISI messaging, which called him the “fool” or “dog” of Rome, which was an analogous reference to another empire that was “defeated” by Islamic armies (MSC, 2006, Sep 11). ISI viewed a democracy run by Bush as a dictatorship. This projection conflicted with the frequent ISI inclusion of anti-war statements by members of the American political elite in messaging (Zarqawi, 2005, Jun 7). Contradictions are inherent in images, particularly if it assists in supporting previously constructed images.

**Overall.** The ISI saw the United States in the Degenerate image - a powerful state, poorly led, in pursuit of corrupt objectives, and capable of influencing other actors to follow their stead. The inferior culture of the US, and the perception that the power was easily frustrated and deterred from pursuing foreign policy objectives that were difficult to achieve – coupled with a dispersed power structure in a Madisonian democracy - was what made such a powerful country vulnerable to the determination and faultless goals of the mujahideen.
Shia Militias

This group neatly captures both Moqtada al Sadr’s Mahdi Army and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq’s (ISCI) Badr Brigade. The image of this group had boundary issues since Badr alumni were incorporated into the Iraqi Security forces, particularly the national police, and were sometimes conflated (by all parties involved) with the Iraqi government and security forces. Attacks on large groups of Shia civilians were also sometimes misleadingly called attacks on Shia Militias, particularly if the target was in proximity of a Shia militia headquarters in heavily populated Shia areas (MSC, 2006, Jul 20). This problem obscured one of my research objectives, which was to document when ISI claimed sectarian attacks on Shia civilians. I will address this issue of deception further in Chapter 5. Aside from the blurring of Shia militia groups to occasionally mean Shia Iraqi civilians, the ISI viewed the militia groups as legitimate targets and its Omar Brigade reported assassinations of both groups interchangeably in its periodic reports.

**Capability.** Abu Musab al Zarqawi created the Omar Brigade in 2005 in order to combat the growing power of Shia militias and to protect Sunnis from militia sectarian cleansing operations employed in Baghdad and other mixed towns (AQI, 2005, Sep 18). The ISI did not comment on their capability, but the frequency of ISI attacks on this target would indicate that the perception of the group was higher than most, due to the damage they were inflicting on Sunni communities. Militias had the attention of the ISI leadership, and the ISI had to neutralize these militias if it was to gain credibility among the Sunni population.

**Culture.** Evaluation of Shia militia culture was similar to the evaluation of the Iraqi Shia, which was low (see below). The ISI had standard code names that were always used for the Badr brigade, called the “treacherous corps,” and the Mahdi Militia, called the “Dajjal” or Satan’s army.
**Intentions.** For the ISI, the Shia militia exemplified the Iraqi government’s policy of cleansing Sunni areas, especially historic ones like Samarra, Diyala, and the many mixed areas of Baghdad (ISI, 2007, Jun 8). According to the ISI, this was an example of the Shia tendency for employing taqiyyah, or dissimulation. The government pretended to be inclusive of all sects, but secretly used these sanctioned militias to kidnap and kill innocent Sunnis. Efforts to combat this group were therefore of key importance to the ISI. After the Samarra bombing of 2006, Shia militia efforts to protect pilgrims and shrines from attack made them an even bigger and easier target for ISI car bombs and suicide bombers.

**Decision Making.** Militia leadership figures were puppets for Iranian control by Quds Force (Iranian paramilitary) leaders operating in Iraq (Abu Omar, 2008, Apr 15). ISI often verbally attacked the Shia cleric Ali Sistani and accused the highly regarded and non-political religious leader of mainstream Shias as the true leader of Shia militias, an attack that was untrue (Zarqawi, 2006, Dec 28). Sistani often called for restraint by Shia militias against retaliation for ISI attacks on Shia civilians, an action that frustrated Zarqawi considerably and inspired several long public rants against Sistani. It is possible that it irritated Zarqawi because it frustrated his plans for an all-out war, but I think it is more likely that it fit Zarqawi’s image of the Shia as liars (taqiyyah) who said one thing and did another. Further, this made ISI’s campaign against the Shia look unreasonable.

**Overall.** Shia militias were rated as equal in capability, lower in culture, and represented a growing threat to the ISI’s Sunni base.

*Sahwa*
The Sahwa image was restricted to Sunni tribesmen from various parts of Iraq that fought against the ISI from 2005\textsuperscript{30} on. The image is different from Sunni politicians and the (Sunni) Association of Muslim Scholars, which were viewed separately as a political class with different capabilities and intentions than the Sahwa or Awakening movement.

**Capability.** ISI evaluation of Sahwa capabilities was rarely recorded. Despite the fact that many were untrained Sunni farmers with weapons that most likely suffered in comparison with trained and experienced jihadists and resistance fighters, there was little to no discussion of capability. Any extensive critique of the Awakening forces was probably hard for the ISI to conduct since they shared the same social identity and recruiting base. Critiquing the warrior skills of fellow Sunni tribesmen, especially ones the ISI hoped to eventually resolve differences with in order to face the true enemy, could reflect poorly on the ISI. This became more important as the organization transitioned over time to becoming more Iraqi. Many ISI messages would critique Awakening leaders but carefully excuse the tribes they belonged to – noble ones who had “contributed” many sons to the resistance and the “state” (Abu Omar, 2007, Dec 05). Evaluation of Awakening capability by the ISI is therefore a bit difficult to determine. On the one hand, Awakening knowledge of ISI personnel and structure gave them a huge advantage early on as ISI members were hunted down and killed or captured in 2006-7. On the other hand, they were the most vulnerable to the ISI counter-attack for the same reason. Contrary to the narrative that the Sahwa was categorically abandoned by the central government, ISI statements frequently mention attacks against joint Iraqi/Awakening checkpoints and patrols through 2013 – which give some weight to a claim that at the local level (town, city, province), security forces were united against the ISI’s campaign to reclaim core areas. This joint effort gives support to an

\textsuperscript{30} I include the 2005 al Qaim uprising by the albu Mahal tribe, even though it was unrelated to the formal Awakening movement. The image was identical for many reasons.
evaluation of the Sahwa capability as equal in status to the ISI, due to the increased capabilities of their sponsors.

**Culture.** The shared ethnic, religious, and cultural background of the ISI and the Sahwa made this a difficult characteristic to evaluate. For the same reasons listed above, there were little ISI could do to criticize the Sahwa movement from a cultural standpoint. Their consistent message was that this group was a traitor to the religion and had sold their religion for money. While damning, this criticism was as far as ISI could go.

If the ISI communicated any angst, especially at the cognitive level concerning image confusion, it was over their betrayal by the Sahwa. In strategic communications to the public, usually by senior leadership, there is a long period of questioning how the situation could have come to this. There are apologies, expressions of humility, admissions of error, and requests for forgiveness. Repentance was offered to the Sahwa frequently, and evidence of abandonment by the US and Iraqi government are offered as a rationale for a reunification. Interestingly, similar offers of repentance to Shia militias are not genuine like the Sahwa and made with an obvious wink and nod to those in on the joke: if you know your father, you can repent. Zarqawi himself said this, and his inference was that the sons of mu’ta marriage, the temporary pleasure marriage arrangement the Shia condone, could not be sure of parentage (MSC, 2006, July 24).

Interestingly, repentances were often manifested in the strategic communications – which was most likely geared toward convincing the general Sunni Ummah worldwide that policies toward other Sunni were fair (Abu Hamza, 2006, Sep 28). At the same time, in the ISI celebratory releases (periodic operational summaries), careful effort was made to document the steady progress through assassinations and ambushes of Awakening councils as part of the ISI
campaign to reclaim historic sanctuaries (ISI, 2007, Jun 8 b). This dichotomy is telling and indicates the influence of social identity and in-group threats to a cohesive identity.

**Intentions.** The Sahwa movement, according to the ISI, was a misguided attempt to reconcile with the Iraqi government in order to assist the US in extracting itself from its Iraq fiasco, while at the same time assisting the Iraqi government in its Safavid project to ethnically cleanse portions of Diyala (ISI, 2007, Apr 11). This was a disingenuous presentation of the Sahwa’s intentions, and due to this obvious disconnect, very little effort was made to deeply explain why the Sahwa would be interested in either outcome – except for financial reasons. The ISI did focus on the Sahwa’s killing of sacred mujahideen, probably as a justification for their public assassination campaign of popular Awakening leaders.

**Decision Making.** There was an obvious reluctance by the ISI to delve into the leadership of an organization that the ISI refused to admit existed until they could no longer deny the obvious. The secretive nature of the Awakening leadership, with its local proxies in Iraq representing more powerful tribal leaders abroad that had fled the violence, also contributed to a lack of discussion of this aspect by the ISI. At most, ISI would infrequently describe the movement as the result of a conspiracy inspired by apostate Sunni governments to protect their crusader masters (AQI, 2005, Jun 6).

**Overall.** The ISI image of the Sahwa was the most complicated image to construct from an outsider perspective. The ISI was very aware of the movement early on due to the high threat it posed to the popular base that ISI relied on. ISI addressed these threats immediately, warning about what would happen to Sunni tribes that stepped out of line. A previous attempt by a Sunni tribe to fight al Qaeda, the albu Mahal in 2005 in al Qaim, was singled out by Zarqawi in communiqués to emphasize that Sunni traitors would be crushed (2005, Sep 14). The rise of the
Awakening in Ramadi in 2006 went unmentioned for a very long time and was referred to using euphemisms like tribal police or apostate guard and could only be identified by looking at target locations – which were tribal areas. Once the movement had metastasized and became an open secret in Iraq, however, ISI was quick to treat the Sahwa as a threat with equal culture and a low capability.

**Sunni Collaborators**

This group consisted of a very small but prominent group of Sunni politicians and clerics that cooperated with other Iraqis in the democratic process of governance, primarily the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP) and the Association of Muslim Scholars (AMS). The ISI had a different image of the group referred to as Sunni Collaborators than it did the Sahwa or Sunni Insurgent Groups.

**Capability.** There were no mentions of a capability for the group, which might have led to a perceived lack of legitimacy for a group that was highly critical of the occupation, but also participated by serving in positions of authority within the government. Any economic power the group might have had would have been due to the sponsorship of Sunni apostate governments, whom the ISI perceived to be behind this group’s efforts (Zarqawi, 2004, Jan 7). According to ISI, the AMS was associated with one of the Sunni insurgent groups (1920’s Brigade), a sometime rival of the ISI and a group that went over to the Awakening in 2007 (ISI, 2007, Sep 24).

**Culture.** Advocating a Sunni Islamic perspective alone did nothing for the group in the eyes of the ISI. The ISI viewed all collaboration with the government as a betrayal of religious principles. That Sunni Arabs would collaborate with ‘Shia Persians’ was simply an aggravating factor. As a result, the Islamic Party (called the Satanic Party in all communications) was singled
out for invective more frequently than would be expected for such a small group. AMS fatwas regretting civilian casualties of the ISI and their sympathy to Shia Iraqis would often draw quick and sharp rebukes (Abu Usaid, 2005, Oct 5). The ISI admitted killings of members of both sub-groups frequently, justifying the killings as attacks on collaborators and traitors (ISI, 2007, May 21).

**Intentions.** Just like their discussions about the Sahwa, the ISI were careful to avoid discussion why Sunni Islamists would work with the government or oppose the killing of Iraqi Shia. The ISI castigated the group as joining, for “inexplicable” reasons, their enemies as they “dance to the screams of the Sunnis” (ISI, 2010, Feb 12). The groups were weak enough to curry favor with the Shia administration in order to seek personal advancement and power. This resulted in a low evaluation of culture.

**Decision Making.** Sunni collaborators were considered puppets of outside powers that preferred working through the democratic process than establishing an Islamic government by force in Iraq. The Islamic Party’s connotation of being an extension of the Muslim Brotherhood brought with it the history of the competition between groups in the Sunni community at large and encouraged the ISI to move aggressively to crush this challenge for the loyalty of Sunnis sympathetic to both Salafists and the Muslim Brotherhood movements. ISI frequently commented on the Brotherhood as a bad influence on events in Palestine, Syria, and Egypt, which reinforced their perspective that only Salafi jihadists could be successful in the battle against the West (Abu Omar, 2008, Feb 21).

**Overall.** The Sunni Collaborators were assessed as a threat to the ISI, who viewed their collaboration as an opportunity to target and kill their rivals under the rationale of the elimination of traitors. As Islamists they would be considered equal in culture (if not ideologically confused),
but ISI’s low evaluation on capability, combined with their lack of a powerful sponsor in Iraq, combines to form a rogue image.

**Iraqi Shia**

This group consisted of Iraqi civilians, not affiliated with the government or militias, and included Shia pilgrims to various shrines in central and south-central Iraq. Coding attacks and messaging on this group was difficult because of the ISI broad brush that often depicted the Iraqi government, security forces, and militias as Shia as well, even though Sunnis are part of some of those organizations. ISI celebratory messages (operational summaries) rarely mentioned Iraqi Shia as targets, usually referring to vague targets as Shia militia targets. Cross checking these claimed attacks with news reports often revealed significant civilian casualties in the attacks. Unless the ISI claimed an attack on Shia civilian targets, I coded the attack as they claimed – against Shia militia. This deliberate obfuscation by ISI led to an undercount in Iraqi Shia targeting by my estimates.

If Iraqi Shia were rarely mentioned as targets in the operations reports, they appeared in many ISI senior leader strategy communications. This effort seemed to be post-facto justifications for their targeting of Iraqi Shias, which, as mentioned above, they rarely claimed in their operational reports. The rhetoric toward Iraqi Shia was extreme and justified a genocidal campaign that was oddly unclaimed while at the same time, extolled as necessary for the survival of the Sunnis in Iraq.

One example of this is the Samarra bombing. Despite a strong consensus among observers that the ISI commissioned the attack, and the fact that the Iraqi government executed one of the perpetrators – a Tunisian who was allegedly a member of ISI – the bombing was never claimed. In fact, they denied it in multiple messages (MSC, 2006, Feb 23 and Jun 30).
Acknowledging that their rhetoric justified such acts in general, they nonetheless denied responsibility and claimed it was a plot by Iran and the Iraqi government to incite violence against Sunnis. In fact, most controversial bombings that killed large numbers of Iraqi Shia were left unclaimed or outright denied by the ISI. The 2004 Ashura attack, where 178 Shia pilgrims were killed and over 500 wounded in Baghdad and Karbala in simultaneous car bombings, was never claimed by ISI.

**Capability.** ISI evaluated the Iraqi Shia capability as low, although they had significant protection from both the United States, the Iraqi government, and Iran.

**Culture.** Like the Iraqi government/security forces and Shia militias, the culture of Iraqi Shia was evaluated by ISI as low. Zarqawi commented frequently about the Iraqi Shia in extremely disparaging terms, to include long passages about mu’ta marriage, a Shia practice legitimizing short-term marriages, and even the Shia proclivity for anal sex. The purpose of producing these messages was to demonize Shia religious practices and their “deviations” from the Sunni way, while dehumanizing the Iraqi Shia for targeting purposes. The ISI attitude left little doubt that the Iraqi Shia themselves were not true Muslims and deserved to be killed in ISI mass bombings (Zarqawi, 2006, Dec 28).

**Intentions.** The Iraqi Shia supported the Iraqi government and security forces and formed the popular base for the militia groups that were so horrific against Sunnis in and around Baghdad’s mixed neighborhoods. According to ISI, they walked American tanks into this country and validated the Salafi view of the Shia as the perpetual fifth column of Islam (MSC, 2006, Sep 1).

**Decision Making.** Iraqi Shia decision making was described in the same terms as Shia militias or Iran.
Overall. ISI evaluation of Shia Iraqis was low capability, low culture, with harmful intentions.

Sunni Insurgent Groups

There were a variety of Sunni insurgent groups of varying ideologies that were independent of the ISI during the resistance to the occupation of Iraq. The ISI made countless efforts to attract many of these groups under the condition that it would fight under the banner of Zarqawi’s early groups and later for the ISI. The group had limited success and used the formation of the Mujahideen Shura Council to trumpet the unification of the resistance (Abu Masayrah, 2006, Jan 18). This effort failed to garner more than a half dozen of more than dozens of groups and none of the larger confederations. This rift grew larger during the Awakening movement, when tribal affiliations attracted several large insurgent groups to put down their arms and fight the ISI. Thus the ISI image of Sunni insurgent groups, a diverse group to begin with, changed over time. In reality, the Awakening consisted of a sorting of insurgents who wanted to continue the fight (and defected to ISI) and those that joined their Sunni tribes and reconciled with the government (ISI, 2007, May 22). Thus the image of Sunni insurgent groups faded over time as the group shrank significantly – with the notable exception of Ansar al Sunnah. Ansar was a Salafist group closely aligned with ISI (its predecessor Ansar al Islam helped Zarqawi get established in Iraq in 2002-3) that nonetheless maintained its independence and even skirmished with ISI on numerous occasions according to the captured ISI documents (Abu Omar, 2007, Apr 3). All of this paints a picture where the ISI, despite its prominence and fame, could not reconcile with like-minded insurgents due to its imperious and hardline approach to putative allies.
**Capability.** Zarqawi and his core supporters, many of them veterans of previous jihadist movements, looked down on the fair weather attitude of the local Iraqi insurgent groups. Zarqawi criticized their reliance on roadside bombs and their frequent absence from the battlefield (Zarqawi, 2004, Feb 12). This superiority often translated into arrogance among ISI fighters, who were frequently reprimanded by their own leadership for killing rival insurgents for petty reasons (Unknown – Harmony Collection, 2006-7). At the same time, Sunni insurgent groups were adhering (if not completely dedicated) to the constant ISI insistence that jihad against the foreign invaders was a mandatory duty for Muslims.

**Culture.** The ISI viewed different insurgent groups with a complex evaluation of culture due to its heterogeneity; Ba’athist groups were looked down upon for their secular nature and past hostility to Islamists, while Islamist and Salafist groups were considered equals in culture. ISI expressed a great deal of frustration with the Sunni Ummah (worldwide) for failing to take up jihad against the crusader, so they gave credit to the local “ansar” fighters from Iraq for performing the correct religious duty, unlike those who “stayed home.”

**Intentions.** The wide spectrum of goals for the different insurgent groups made it difficult for ISI to simplify. The common goal of ejecting the United States formed the boundaries of the group and helped give form to the image. Subsequent goals were what differentiated all insurgent groups and made IS disdainful of the majority of them, most of which had nationalist goals. Interestingly, the Shia militia group – the Mahdi Army – a nationalist group that fought the United States and made frequent overtures to the Sunni resistance community, was shunned by ISI because of their sectarian character. Zarqawi pushed back on the group’s overtures as two-faced and insincere, and eventually made impossible demands on
the Mahdi Army for reconciliation, preventing them from working together. This is decision is strong evidence for the impact of images on strategy making.

ISI was adamant that these other insurgent groups had mistaken ideologies and goals and could not be worked with seriously unless they lowered their banners and joined the under the banner of Tawhid, and later that of the Islamic State. Zarqawi ascribed the problem to the effects of the secular Ba’athist regime, feeling that it would take a decade for a real Islamic spirit to infuse Iraqi groups who suffered under the stifling nature of the Saddam regime (Zarqawi, 2004, Feb 12). ISI’s view of the other groups was normally paternal in tone and sympathetic, while other times ISI fighters mete out strict justice to insurgents that crossed them.

Quite a few times, ISI caught insurgents who were exploiting the security gaps and kidnapping and extorted locals while claiming to be part of the ISI, and proudly announced their executions in accordance with their Sharia courts (ISI, 2007, 30 June). This served a twofold purpose: trying to protect their reputation in the community, and performing functions of the state – policing. Whether these members were actually ISI members or not is unknowable, but ISI claimed in internal documents that they had harsh discipline for members who violated their code.

**Decision Making.** Evaluation of group leadership focused on criticism of the Ba’athist groups for relying on corrupt leadership from the past. ISI was highly wary of Ba’athist infiltration and strongly indoctrinated incoming members and made them renounce former Ba’athist beliefs (Bennett, 2014, p. 20). They were respectful of differences that groups like Ansar al Sunnah had with the ISI, and praised the leadership of this group frequently for their ideological purity and pre-invasion jihadist activities (Abu Omar, 2007, Apr 17).
Overall. ISI viewed other Sunni insurgent groups in the dependent image due to their inferior capabilities but equal culture. ISI expected these groups to eventually join the state, but refused to make any changes that might encourage these groups to fight with the ISI. Once the Islamic State was established, these groups would see the strength and goodness of life in the state and join. When the opposite happened, and the creation of the state turned away groups who openly criticized the move, open warfare with some groups broke out and the image of this group began to split apart, submerged into other groups.

Sunni Apostate Leaders

ISI saw the Apostate Leaders as consisting of the corrupt Sunni monarchs and autocrats in the Muslim world who failed to govern properly under Sharia law (AQI, 2005, Oct 3). While there are quite a few of these states, ISI targeted Egypt, UAE, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia by name. These leaders had battled Islamists for decades and worked to undermine the group’s appeal in the Sunni Ummah as well as actively assisted the United States in the overthrow of an Arab government. That Islamists hated the Saddam regime anyways was rarely mentioned. Syria was not included in this group as it had a Shia leader and therefore was in another category reserved for non-Sunni Arab regimes. Syria had actively supported ISI’s foreign fighter smuggling network in Damascus and provided ISI with a sanctuary. Attacks in Syria or open criticism of the regime would invite a crackdown with serious consequences for the future of the group, and ISI’s attitude toward Syria lasted until the 2011 uprisings against Assad, which offered great opportunity for expansion for the Islamic State.

Capability. These groups had established military forces and excellent intelligence services that tracked the members of the ISI very well. ISI rarely commented on their capabilities, but stayed clear of openly undermining these states – with the exception of Jordan,
which attracted attention by Zarqawi because of his Jordanian roots. The bombings of prestigious hotels in Amman caused many unintended civilian casualties and turned out to be a serious public relations blunder for Zarqawi (AQI, 2005, Nov 10). The famous wedding bombing in Amman effectively shut down ISI efforts to export their success in Iraq before conditions were conducive to armed movements elsewhere. Overall, the ISI rated the capabilities of this group as high.

**Culture.** The ISI had low evaluations of culture for this group due to their corruption and un-Islamic practices. Their support for the United States and a Shia Iraqi government was pointed to often as a sign of obvious error. Saudis who joined the ISI for martyr operations would sometimes get upset at the disparagement of the Saudi government within the organization, and the abuse Saudis were subjected to about their government was noted in a eulogy about a Emirati suicide bomber who habitually cursed the royal family in front of Saudis as a form of hazing (MSC, 2006, Mar 14). The desire to attack these countries predates the Iraq war itself, and was an original motivation of Zarqawi when he left Afghanistan in 2002.

**Intentions.** According to ISI, the apostate governments were crucial in throwing the United States a lifeline to keep it from being defeated by the jihadists (AQI, 2005, Oct 3). Certainly the Shia had the most to gain, but the actions of these governments against the Sunnis in Iraq were driven by their corruption and by their self-interest. Jordan’s facilitation of plots against the ISI, in the form of the Awakening movement for one example, was further proof of aggression.

**Decision Making.** This group is made up of autocratic leaders who have no legitimacy (Abu Omar, 2009, Jan 10). Despite a strong hold on power and direct control of military and
intelligence services, ISI senses that these governments will topple easily if the ISI can succeed in Iraq and eventually export their revolution to these countries.

**Overall.** The image of this group was the Barbarian image. Inferior and corrupt culture balanced by a very strong capability. While the ISI saw an opportunity to fight the United States, who they saw in the Degenerate Image and felt were uncommitted and would leave if pressed hard, ISI noticeably refrained from confronting the Apostate governments openly (with the one exception noted) and patiently waited for the future to do so.

**Iran**

This seemingly clear-cut category had boundary issues due to the predilection of ISI to label anything Shia as Persian or Safavid. Iran was actually mentioned infrequently in ISI communications, where the focus was usually a variety of Iranian proxies: Badr Corps, the Mahdi Militia, and the Iraqi government and security forces. Iranian Quds Forces were supposedly targeted several times, as were Iranian pilgrims to the famous Iraqi shrines during the Ashura season. But for the most part, despite its demonization of all things Shia as Persian, Iran did not figure highly in the ISI communications.

**Capability.** There was no discussion of Iranian capability. Al Qaeda rebuked Zarqawi for his rhetoric and attacks on Shia in 2005, reminding him that Iran had Al Qaeda families under house arrest and ISI attacks on Shia Iraqis could engender retaliation (Zawahiri, 2005, July). While this had no effect on ISI’s attack patterns or communications, this is most likely the reason that Iran was rarely singled out in ISI messaging. Iran’s dominance in Iraq after 2003, exemplified by their infiltration of the Iraqi Ministry of Interior and their sponsorship of Badr Corps and several rogue Mahdi Militia groups meant Iran’s capability was rated as equal by ISI,
if not slightly more powerful. Their capability and willingness to use it makes Iran one of the few groups in the region that effectively constrained the activities of ISI.

**Culture.** Iran was an Islamic Republic and the standard bearer of Shia Islam in the world. Although the ISI had strong feelings of disgust for the Shia sect, Iran’s leadership of the struggle against the West and support for Palestinian causes earned a silent but begrudging respect from ISI. Iranian culture was attacked often by ISI along with the Shia sect in general, but most of this was directed specifically at Iraqi Shias – most likely because they had forsaken the true path of Sunni Islam or had converted recently for financial reasons (Abu Omar, 2007, Sep 8).

**Intentions.** The ISI saw Iran as the primary threat to their ability to establish a caliphate in the Middle East. The United States would eventually leave; it just wanted to leave on its own timeline to save face. Iran on the other hand, had no intention of leaving and would continue supporting its proxies in Iraq unless met with catastrophic defeat. Iran had already forcibly converted their Sunni population into a Shia one centuries ago, abused their own Sunni minority, and converted many Sunni Iraqis into Shia during the Safavid invasions (Abu Omar, 2007, Sep 8). The Badr Corps assassinations of (predominantly Sunni) Iraqi Air Force officers in the immediate post-invasion Iraq, as payback for their attacks during the Iran-Iraq war, infuriated ISI even though they had no love for Ba’athists (Zarqawi, 2005, Sep 14). Iranians were also holding the Bin Laden family hostage and were supporting the Assad regime in their abuse of Syrian Sunnis after 2011 (Zawahiri, 2005, July; Adnani, 2012, Feb 24).

**Decision Making.** Iranian decision-making was corrupted by the wilayat al faqih concept, where religious leaders influenced the decisions of politicians. ISI disparaged this mostly because Shia religious leaders supposedly followed incorrect doctrine (Zarqawi, 2005, Jul 21).
**Overall.** The ISI image of Iran was one of equal capability and equal culture, falling into the classic enemy image. Too strong to take on openly, like the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, ISI felt free to attack Iranian proxies in Iraq as well as Shia civilians without retribution as long as they did not attack inside Iran. Although it was well within their capabilities, ISI did not claim a single attack inside of Iran during the observation period.

**Other Actors**

Kurds were a frequently mentioned and targeted group but had thinly detailed image construction. The Iraqi Kurds are mostly Sunni, which is one problem ISI had to overcome when discussing their image. Zarqawi dismissed this by claiming that “Islam’s voice has gone out among them.” They were allies to the Shia and the Americans, and were advised by Jews. (Zarqawi, 2004, Feb 12) The historic figure Saladin, a Kurd, was revered by the ISI, but his descendants were thought to have failed his legacy (Abu Omar, 2007, Sep 8). The secular nature of their politics, including the Marxist influence of a major political party, was further evidence of Kurdish cultural weakness. This said, there was remarkably little said about the Kurds concerning their capability and the Kurds were singled out for commentary infrequently in comparison with the number of attacks on Kurdish targets in Northern Iraq, particularly in Mosul. The Sunni-Kurdish rivalry for Kirkuk was not mentioned at all. The ISI image of Kurds was the dependent of the enemy.

Sunni Ummah and Sunni tribes were “other” groups that fit so closely into the ISI self-image that it was impossible to distinguish any image differentiation. ISI’s relationship with these groups was not always friendly, but ISI understood how important both groups were to their success that there was never any confusion about where the groups fit into the political worldview. The members of these groups frequently interacted, assisted, and sometimes became
members of ISI’s group. This permeability led these groups to be viewed similarly to the ISI’s self-image (see below).

Israel was mentioned only 51 times in ten years, mostly in feeble attempts to gain public support – noticeably when ISI were at a low point in popularity. Israel was mentioned in the classic enemy image: equal capability, equal culture, and harmful intentions. Attacks on Israel were aspirational and in the realm of possibility, once the near enemies had been defeated. The remaining targets were mentioned only in single digit occurrences: media, Christians, criminals, communists, Yazidi, private security companies, Russia, and the United Nations. All of them were described in the rogue image: weak capability, low culture, and harmful intentions. ISI targeted these groups for attack when possible without fear of retaliation or consequence. As an example, the Yazidi, who ISI accused of being devil worshippers, reportedly stoned a woman who converted to Islam. ISI singled the Yazidi village where it occurred for an overwhelming retribution. ISI bombs, built into fuel tankers, killed almost 800 and wounded 1500 in Yazidi villages in August of 2007 – a sad but common example of the type of action taken against groups in the rogue image (Reuters, 2007, Sep 9).

**ISI Self Image**

**Culture.** ISI perception of their own culture is more idealized and heroic than most other groups. All groups extol their own virtues, and establish favorable comparisons with others according to Social Identity Theory – but ISI is on a whole different level. Their motives extend beyond simple identity bolstering however; the organization must sell itself to the Sunni Ummah to gain recruits and fundraise. Since the recruits are allowed to leave the organization if they are unhappy, ISI is honest about their views and life as a jihadist. Since they recruit one person at a
time, their messaging prioritizes descriptions of the cultural traits of the group that all members seem to share.

ISI members are courageous, the “lions of Tawhid,” who frequently fight all odds and come away unscathed thanks to providence. They have brought purity to Iraq after years of impurity thanks to the Ba‘ath (Abu Omar, 2007, Apr 17). Members strive to fight the infidels and apostates, protect the Sunni of Iraq and the honor of their women, and to free the prisoners. The motto is victory, jihad or death. They will never retreat or quit as long as there is “blood flows through our veins and our eyes can see” (Zarqawi, 2006, Apr 25).

The group culture is greatly impacted by their religious beliefs. Their unique interpretations of Islam, quite different from even other Salafist groups, are widely held within the organization because of the heavy indoctrination that occurs when joining the group. Group members must renounce past allegiances and swear total obedience to their new emir (Bennett, 2014, p. 20). They proudly follow no law but Allah and consider democracy to be a heresy akin to putting human judgment alongside Allah’s clearly written law. The fighters were humble in that respect, declining responsibility for any particular brilliance or cleverness, and instead noting it was the will of Allah.

ISI culture transcends any sense of nationalism, a byproduct of its founding by career jihadists with experience in Afghanistan living in multi-national communities. Originally almost exclusively foreign fighters, the group eventually transformed into an Iraqi dominated organization reliant on some experienced foreign jihadists, as well as foreigners who still conduct the majority of suicide bombings (Felter & Fishman, 2007). ISI bristled at criticism about their foreign fighter population in a milieu of Iraqi nationalism. “Any Muslim is our brother, even from the Philippines. A Devil Worshipper is our enemy, even if Iraqi” (Abu Omar,
This common defense was an attempt to protect the group from the frequent criticism that it kills Muslims – both deliberately and from overly spectacular attacks that produced unnecessary collateral damage.

The individual member, particularly a fighter, is a knight with gentlemanly qualities: courage, self-sacrifice, principled, devout and prayerful, and a true friend to his fellow mujahedeen. These qualities translate beyond life; when killed in action or martyred, ISI reported these fighters smelled like musk (containing the base notes of perfume/cologne) and were smiling when recovered on the battlefield (Zarqawi, 2005, Mar 9). Zarqawi was described in a posthumous eulogy as having a gracious smile (ISI, 2007, Nov 18). These efforts to humanize jihadists are meant to appeal to the everyday man in order to bridge the gap between jihadist heroes and future recruits.

Like any organization, ISI sought to stand out as special. To sanctify the transition of the MSC into the Islamic State of Iraq, the group chose the imagery of pre-Islamic Arabia by calling it the Alliance of Mutayyabin (the scented ones.) This was a reference to the practice of tribal leaders who shared a scented bowl of oil and dipped their hands in it to signify agreement to come together against a common threat. The soon to be Islamic State of Iraq was announced as the Alliance of Mutayyabin using this very imagery in a video that reenacted the ancient ceremony (MSC, 2006, Oct 12). This video demonstrated the importance of history to their perception of legitimacy, as well as their veneration of the original generations who established Islam in the Arabian Peninsula. The group followed up three days later with the announcement of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI, 2006, Oct 15).

**Capability.** The group’s sense of cultural superiority over others, specifically over groups that are nominally Islamic in name - but according to ISI, not in practice – impacts their
view of their own capability as well. In the same way that the United States’ preeminent military power facilitates an active role around the world, the ISI’s belief in divine guidance gives them a confident outlook on what they can achieve. Being guided by Allah helps the ISI in achieving policy goals as well as access to an inexhaustible supply of heroes (AQI, 2005, May 10). ISI’s enemies cannot stand up to the Muslims and there is no target that cannot be hit (AQI, 2005, Feb 26 and Nov 10). They have rubbed the United States’ face in the dirt (MSC, 2006, Mar 17), killed the Shia cleric Hakim – “the returning pharaoh” (AQI, 1 Dec 05), and crushed the Badr and Mahdi militias (Abu Omar, 2007, Dec 5). Fighting in multiple directions has been difficult, but even the unexpected rise of Sunni traitors among the Awakening councils has not stopped the ISI. “Look at the Awakening Councils we have abducted in cities and everywhere else” (Abu Omar, 2010, Feb 13). The excellence which is reflected in the many tactical successes of the group comes from an instrumental belief that the “world only respects the strong” (Abu Omar, 2007, Apr 17).

**Intentions.** The intentions of the group were unknown prior to early 2004 and were only speculated at by the media and governments. The lack of statements claiming the early attacks – Hakim, Sergio de Mello, the first Ashura attack in 2004 – allowed conspiracies to develop and prompted Al Qaeda Central to deny that any group affiliated with them conducted the attacks. Strengthened and confident in their ability to survive an environment where powerful U.S. forces looked impotent to stop the group, Zarqawi changed course and produced a prolific media campaign to proclaim the ISI intentions.

According to the ISI, their enemies could expect “nothing from us but violence” (AQI, 2004, Nov 5). The jihad would continue until victory or martyrdom (Abu Dajana & Zarqawi, 2004, May 17). There would be no discussions and no retreat (AQI, 2005, Apr 12; TWJ, 2004,

A summary of the self-image is highly influenced by the founding group leader’s proclamation and clarification of the base ideology, which has been supported by each of the successive leaders. ISI’s righteousness and religious purpose influences a set of instrumental beliefs that include an inflexible doctrine, unwillingness to compromise, faith in future victory, and a reliance on the psychological effects of violence to achieve policy goals.

**Part IV – Hypothesis Test Results**

*H1: If there is an Image change, then there will be an observable increase in attention paid to the newly competitive out-group.*

![Figure 4.2](image-url)

**Figure 4.2** – Analysis of four groups plus one super group in communication targets/year

This chart examines four groups: The United States, Iraqi Government and Security Forces, Shia Militias, and Iraqi Shia (civilians). There is also one group I named Super Shia that looked at the Shia as a whole community. There were no group communications in 2003, and during 2004-5
the United States is the target of a slight majority of attacks. Attacks against Shia are credited to TwJ/AQI by most analysts at the time, but none except the Hakim attack was claimed, and this is reflected by a very low rate of claimed attacks against Shia targets. Shia militia attacks are also strangely low until 2006. The Super Shia category indicates that the largest share of attention (in the form of communications) has shifted from the United States to the Shia dominated government and security forces, as well as Shia militias of all types by 2006.

**H2: If a group increases attention to the out-group, then there will be an increased use of symbolic language in order to frame the competition between groups and manipulate perceptions in favor of the in-group.**

![Proportion of Sectarian Messaging by Year](image)

**Figure 4.3 – Analysis of sectarian content of messages**

All ISI messaging had sectarian references to the Shia as apostates in an effort to prime the Sunni Ummah to the belief that the Shia were not considered true Muslims and therefore legitimate
This chart excluded routine sectarian references and focused on advanced sectarian code words that focused on Shia rejection of the rashidun, Shia practices considered heretical by Sunni jurisprudence, ethnic background, and ties to historical traitors of the past. Sectarian content increased over time (2006 and 2007 proportions were low due to the large number of press releases focused on attacks instead of strategy communications), and increased significantly after 2010. This increase is most likely due to lingering feelings of bitterness after the ISI defeat at the hands of the Awakening and their allies, and ISI’s need to recruit disenchanted Sunnis back to their banner once the Iraqi government failed to fulfill promises of equal treatment for Sunnis. The chart below gives a count of the type of sectarian language that was coded and number of times they appeared in communications.

Table 4.4: Sectarian Language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sectarian Language</th>
<th># Docs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>safawi</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rejectionists</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ibn al Qami</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rafida</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magi</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mu'ta</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rawafid</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>batini</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sabean</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Common sectarian references included the “pagan” army for the Iraqi Army, the “treacherous corps” for the Badr Corps, al Dajjal (Satan’s) Army for the Mahdi Militia, and apostates for the Iraqi government. While denigrating, these terms were also prevalent in every ISI communiqué and therefore unnecessary to code. I coded sectarian references above and beyond the normal ones. The ISI had fun with names for the Awakening as well: “The Front for Rescuing the Americans” instead of Anbar Rescue Council, the “Apostate Consciousness Council,” and the “Committee to Destroy Anbar” were popular. Before deciding to acknowledge the Awakening movement, the ISI used euphemisms like “tribal police” or “Abu Risha police” when describing their attacks.
In addition to sectarian language, many messages contained historical event scripts to reinforce group images. These event scripts fell into seven general categories, and I included examples of each below:

**History of Treachery:** Ibn al Qami, who allegedly conspired to assist Hulugu in sacking Baghdad in the 14th century; the Safavid/Persian conversion from Sunni Islam to Shia; the Shia as the killers of Omar and Uthman, two of the early rightly guided caliphs (rashidun); Ibn Taymiyah’s warning that this sect denies the truth.

**Altered Religion:** Shi’ism was started by a Jew; Shi’ism’s superstitions, reverence for graven images, posturing, self-flagellation, weeping; belief in infallible imams; plans to switch the kiblah (niche in mosques that directs prayers) from facing Mecca to Karbala.

**Hatred of Sunni:** Insults of Aisha (Mohammed’s wife) and the rashidun (for usurping Ali); Avenging Hussein “or so they say;” Shia sectarian cleansing in Tal Afar, Samarra, Baghdad.

**Sunni Superiority over Shia:** the Sunni won many victories while outnumbered; the Fatimid’s were not defeated by words; the Sunni were able to overcome infighting (Battle of Uhud) to defeat infidels.

**Population Changes:** Shia in Iraq only 50-70 years; Basra was always a Sunni city; Persian invasions forcibly converted Sunnis.

**Shia History of Defeat:** “Expect what your grandparents suffered from our grandparents.”

**Shocking Betrayals:** Sunni who denounce Samarra worshipped idol “event” (bombing in February 2006) were fake Sunni for sympathizing with Shia; Kurds used to be Muslim heroes but have lost the faith – now Shia allies.
**H3:** If there is increased group competition for social dominance, then attacks will increase on symbolic targets highly related to the identity of the out-group.

Figure 4.4 – Changes in message targets from 2008-2012

Following the initial public outcry against the ISI (then TwJ) after the Hakim bombing at the Imam Ali shrine, which Zarqawi claimed, and after the Ashura bombings of 2004 which he did not, ISI refused to claim attacks on Shia civilian targets. As discussed above, most attacks on pure Shia civilian targets - especially by suicide bombing – were thought to be conducted by ISI. I did not code them as attacks on Iraqi Shia if ISI did not claim it however. Investigations of large-scale civilian deaths in the database were consistently camouflaged by ISI as attacks on Shia militia headquarters or outright denied in messaging. Nonetheless, after 2010 this policy seemed to change and attacks on Shia civilians were claimed in higher numbers than in the past (see Figure 4.5 below). Still, the numbers are very low compared to the number of Shia civilian attacks over the same time period, which leads to several unanswered questions that will be addressed in Chapter 5.
Figure 4.5 – Iraqi Shia message targets

H4: If there is any significant in-group defection, then this becomes an existential threat to the group’s identity and will absorb the attention of the group leadership and lead to a shift to an in-group focus.

Figure 4.6 – Sahwa and Sunni Collaborator message targets
ISI surprisingly targeted potential Sunni traitors from the beginning. Zarqawi kept a close eye on rumors of Sunni tribes cutting deals with the apostate government and warned them in messages of the consequences. The earliest tribal uprising (al Qaim, 2005) was mentioned by Zarqawi before the American forces even understood what was happening in the far western border town. Despite the fact that the Awakening began in 2006, there is no increase in claimed attacks and especially messaging to the Sunni Awakening movement until mid-2007 when it exploded in multiple Sunni areas. Some of this has to do with the Sahwa having the initiative in hunting down ISI fighters, and the rest is an indicator of the denial that ISI was wrestling with during the first half of 2007 – when they refused to admit there was a Sunni uprising against their presence.

In the post-Surge period, Sunni traitors were the subject of more messages (claimed attacks, appeals for repentance, apologies, and internal messaging) than Shia militias and civilians (see Fig 4.7 below).

![Figure 4.7 –Total Shia versus Total Sunni message targets](image)

Figure 4.7 –Total Shia versus Total Sunni message targets
Conclusion

There was evidence confirming each of the four hypotheses that were developed in Chapter 3. The weakest set of evidence was for Hypothesis 3, which predicted an increase of attacks on symbolic targets as a manifestation of the social competition between Shia and Sunni. With the exception of the early Hakim attack, claimed months after the fact, the ISI avoided claiming overtly sectarian targets for deniability purposes. For example, they never claimed the famous Samarra bombing of 2006 and in fact denied involvement in multiple messages that defended the organization. This trend changed after 2010, when for unknown reasons, there was a distinctive rise in message targeting of Shia Iraqis and claims of sectarian attacks on civilian targets – a change from previous policy. Reasons for this will be discussed in the next chapter.
Chapter 5 – Discussion

In the previous chapter, I presented the findings of my research on ISI strategic communications in order to construct and relate the group’s political worldview, and also evaluated four hypotheses. In this chapter, I present the political worldview of the ISI in accordance with the framework of Image Theory, discuss how Social Identity Theory interacts with category formation and maintenance, and tie the ISI worldview to their strategy formation. In Part I of this chapter, I will discuss the ISI’s individual images of particular groups and how they fit into an overall worldview. In Part II, I will relate the unique impact that Social Identity plays in the ISI’s worldview and the impact it has on their strategy. Finally, in Part III, I will review the ISI strategy and tactics and examine how the cognitive process impacts and influences the security dilemmas of small groups of ordinary actors in the sectarian drama.

Part I – Image Theory and the Islamic State of Iraq

Many of the ISI statements over the past decade reveal pieces that, when put together using the Image Theory framework, allow the investigator to determine the overall worldview of the group. Table 5.1 below lists the individual images discussed in Chapter 4 into a cohesive spectrum. Column one is the group as defined by the ISI. Column two lists the projected worldview described in the case study discussion in Chapter 3, and column three lists the actual image according to the comprehensive examination of the data (for an example of the database, see Appendix C). Columns four through seven contain the qualitative coding of the individual characteristics of each image from the statements in the database, as explained in detail in Chapter 4.
Table 5.1 – Political Worldview of the Islamic State of Iraq (2003-2013)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Projected Image</th>
<th>Actual Image</th>
<th>Capability</th>
<th>Culture</th>
<th>Intentions</th>
<th>Threat/Opportunity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iraq Government &amp; Security Forces</td>
<td>Dependent of Enemy</td>
<td>Dependent of Enemy</td>
<td>equal</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>harmful</td>
<td>threat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2003-2011)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq Government &amp; Security Forces</td>
<td>Dependent of Enemy</td>
<td>Rogue</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>harmful</td>
<td>threat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2012-present)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Degenerate</td>
<td>Degenerate</td>
<td>Superior</td>
<td>weak-willed</td>
<td>harmful</td>
<td>opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shia Militias</td>
<td>Dependent of Enemy (Iran)</td>
<td>Dependent of Enemy (Iran)</td>
<td>equal</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>harmful</td>
<td>threat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sahwa</td>
<td>Dependent of Barbarian</td>
<td>Dependent of Barbarian</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>equal</td>
<td>harmful</td>
<td>opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunni Collaborators</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>Dependent of Barbarian</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>equal</td>
<td>harmful</td>
<td>opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shia Iraqi</td>
<td>Dependent of Enemy</td>
<td>Rogue</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>harmful</td>
<td>opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunni Insurgent Groups</td>
<td>Colonial/Dependent</td>
<td>Colonial/Dependent</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>equal to inferior</td>
<td>friendly</td>
<td>opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunni Apostate Leaders</td>
<td>Barbarian</td>
<td>Barbarian</td>
<td>Superior</td>
<td>inferior</td>
<td>harmful</td>
<td>threat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ansar al Sunnah</td>
<td>Ally</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>Enemy</td>
<td>Enemy</td>
<td>equal</td>
<td>equal</td>
<td>harmful</td>
<td>threat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kurds</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>Dependent of Enemy</td>
<td>equal</td>
<td>equal</td>
<td>harmful</td>
<td>threat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al Qaeda Central</td>
<td>Patrona</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Overall Worldview.** The ISI worldview had seven ideal image types. Those ideal types were mostly hostile due to the ideological rigidity of the ISI and their inability to compromise their ideals for possible alliances. Trends included a lower evaluation of other cultures because of a chauvinistic attitude towards their Islamic beliefs and the desire to dominate interactions with others who had a lower capability (Rayburn, 2014). The ideal types were: Enemy,
Dependent of the Enemy, Barbarian, Degenerate, and Dependent of the Barbarian, Colonial/Dependent, and Rogue. Seven images fit well within the predicted range of ideal types for a single actor.

**Iraqi Government and Security Forces.** This was a completely new image for all of the players in Iraq. The image of the Iraqi Government had to be created from scratch as it was different from the previous government in attitude, ideology, political mechanisms, and dominated by a different religious sect. The Iraqi Governing Council was considered by some to be illegitimate as it was allegedly collaborating with the occupiers. For ISI, this group easily fit into the Dependent of the Enemy image as Iranian proxies (and to a lesser extent, the United States).

Eulogies of suicide bombers indicate different opinions about striking the government versus striking the occupiers. As martyr operations were voluntary in nature, members had input into choosing their mission. Better indoctrinated members would choose to follow the lead of the ISI leadership and hit Iraqi targets in order to validate and reinforce the image of the Shia as formed. Zarqawi encouraged this, due to calculations that the United States would eventually tire and leave. He considered the enemy that would be left behind, one that spoke the language and could spot the foreign accents of many of ISI’s fighters, to be the true threat to the successful accomplishment of organizational goals.

Once the United States left, the extensive capability that crippled the ISI after 2006 with its ferocious Special Operations campaign was gone. During this time period, only 8 of the groups’ 42 top leaders were at large according to the commander of U.S. forces in Iraq, General Odierno (BBC, 2010, June 4). The rest had been killed or captured. At this point, the U.S. presence was already lowered and disengaged from day to day fighting. By the end of 2011, no
troops remained in Iraq for combat purposes and the Iraqi Army’s capability dropped drastically. Without airpower and air mobility assets, the isolated Iraqi Army checkpoints around the country were easy targets for a revived ISI under Abu Bakr. At this point, the ISI image of the Iraqi Government and Security Forces dropped to a rogue image due to the lowered capability and loss of an active sponsor. Indications of this image change were an increase in bold operations, the serial executions of captured Iraqi security force personnel that were filmed and made into propaganda films, and a shift in policy toward claiming sectarian targets. By 2011, my data shows a significant increase in ISI claims of open sectarian targeting of the Iraqi Shia population, shrines, and cultural symbols. I will discuss this further in Part II.

**United States.** Despite a large power differential between the United States and the ISI, attacks were made against the United States due to perceived vulnerabilities, aptly described by Zarqawi in his early letter to Zawahiri. The United States’ inability to control population areas and develop effective informants in the population led to an easy series of targets for the ISI, with the goal of frustrating the United States and pushing them out of the country. The Islamic State leadership had a low view of the American’s culture and believed that if pushed, the United States would leave rather hastily - a miscalculation that cost many ISI members their lives. But it was a similar mistake to the one the United States made when gauging the North Vietnamese will to fight in 1965. This misjudgment almost destroyed the organization, especially once the Awakening movement forced the ISI out of sanctuaries and into the open, further exposing them to SOF targeting.

**Shia Militias.** This group was more capable than the government and its security forces due to its flexibility to work outside the rule of law, something ISI recognized as an advantage. The militias’ strong support from Iran, including combat advisors, funding, and armament made
them a worthy foe. While Shia militia attacks on ISI members were extremely rare, the militia
did target Sunni males for extrajudicial killings and ethnically cleansed significant parts of
Baghdad (Ollivant, 2011). Although difficult to determine from the existing data, it is likely that
Shia militias killed more Sunnis than Sunni extremists killed Shiites. If indeed the ISI was trying
to provoke a civil war to rally Sunni Iraqis behind their group, their inability to protect the Sunni
population made this strategy a failure. Sunnis quickly realized that ISI was likely to victimize
them as much as the militias, which was most likely the moment that ISI lost public support in
the Sunni Ummah. Targeting the Shia militias was a priority for ISI, although they exaggerated
their success to a large degree by misidentifying many of their targets as militia targets in their
messaging. Either way, the ISI respected the power of the militias and treated them as a
dangerous enemy.

**Sahwa and Sunni Collaborators.** These groups, although distinctly different in the ISI
worldview, shared a similar image: the Dependent of the Barbarian. These Sunnis had a low
capability and harmful intentions, and were sponsored by the Sunni Apostate Leaders and
directed to support the United States in an effort to balance against the increase in power Iran
was achieving in the region. Culturally this group was from the Sunni elite and Sunni tribes,
which gave them an equal evaluation despite “selling their religion for money” (Abu Omar,
2008, Sep 9). ISI saw an opportunity to dominate both groups, a requirement for their success no
less important than crippling the Iraqi puppet government. The Sunni politicians could be
eliminated easily since they had no militias protecting them and were on less than friendly terms
with a government run by Maliki. In fact, Maliki’s persecution of these very same leaders must
have been humorous to Abu Omar and Abu Bakr, who wanted them dead. The ISI knew that if
they were successful, they would have to deal with these Sunni leaders in an environment where eliminating them would be impossible due to Sunni public opinion.

The Sahwa were different as they came from the Sunni tribes ISI recruited from, and many were former resistance members that had fought the Americans but had decided that there were bigger enemies in Iraq. As Arab tribes are known to do, they wisely recalculated their interests and changed sides. Dumping the extremist ISI in exchange for United States support against an encroaching Iranian backed Shia government was a bargain, as the Sahwa leadership in Jordan realized that the ISI’s goals of a Caliphate meant the end of tribal influence in the Sunni Arab areas. The ISI, which saw the Awakening in the Rogue image, saw the opportunity to crush their rivals and wasted no time doing so.

**Iraqi Shia.** Despite their numerical superiority, ISI saw the Iraqi Shia in the rogue image with low capability, low culture, and harmful intentions. ISI’s first strikes were directed specifically at Iraqi Shia civilians when they struck Hakim outside of Imam Hussein Mosque. One could argue that Hakim was a Badr official and therefore a militia target, not a civilian one, but Zarqawi made no such claim. Not only was this the opening strike of the war for TwJ, it is clear that the Hakim attack was a symbolic swipe at the symbol of Shia power. ISI plans for the Shia were clear: “expect what your grandparents suffered at the hands of our grandparents” (Abu Hamza, 2006, Sep 7). This is the inclusion of historical event scripts into the image shaping process and aimed at both an internal audience and external one. As this image is a crucial portion of the ISI worldview, I will cover it more in Part II.

**Sunni Insurgent Groups:** The ISI saw Sunni Insurgent Groups as future members of the Islamic State, much like a corporation eyes smaller companies that can help the company grow. As experienced jihadists, the initial group members had a sense of superiority over locals who
had grown up in a police state and were inexperienced at subterfuge and covert operations. That skill tended to reside in the Shia community, where secrecy was necessary to survive in the Sunni dominated Ba’athist regime. TWJ and later AQI dominated the resistance in the execution of high visibility attacks, had an extensive logistics and recruiting network from outside of Iraq that set them apart, and had no qualms about attacking Iraqi security forces or Shia civilians. This failed to win over the other resistance groups, exacerbating the relationship over time. ISI dealt with these groups as an adult would children (hence the dependent image), chiding them on ideological faults, their timidity and caution, and their nine to five mentality of fighting. It is impossible to tell with the current level of data that I have the reasons that more resistance groups failed to rally under the ISI banner. The few captured documents that address the conflict among resistance groups seem to indicate a strong level of arrogance in the ISI. This temperament problem, their foreign leadership, and reputation for violence and strict ideology most likely made it a hard sell for most insurgent groups.

The ISI had physical conflicts with the 1920s brigade in Amiriyah, the Mujahedeen Army, and Ansar al Sunnah according to the documents in the Harmony Collection. One letter between ISI and another leader admitted to the killing of a dozen Mujahedeen Army insurgents due to disagreements that got out of control as well as suspicions that the group was considering defecting to the Awakening movement (ISI Ministry of Defense: NMEC-2007—636973, 2007, May 22). This harsh attitude, in the Sunni tribal society where ISI flourished, made too many enemies. Many insurgent groups were tribally based, and ironically also had relatives in the security forces. ISI’s multi-layered targeting rationale meant that when local police were targeted in Sunni areas, they were most likely aggravating one or many tribes. Many of the tribes that
joined the Awakening tribes relate incidents just like this as their trigger to turn on the ISI (Knarr, 2013, p. 5).

**Sunni Apostate Leaders.** The leaders of these powerful countries in the Sunni world, including Mubarak, Abdullah of Jordan, and Abdullah ibn Abdil-Aziz of Saudi Arabia run powerful Armies and security services and pretend to be Islamic, but according to ISI they are apostates who have sold their religion to work with the infidel. In Egypt’s case, their peace treaty with Israel is a perfect example of this kind of behavior. With strong capability and weak culture, they pose a threat to the organization but are too weak to project strength. Instead, they have supported the United States in the occupation from afar, and supported the Sunni Islamic Party and the Awakening against ISI. ISI’s foray into international attacks failed spectacularly in Jordan, and they backed away from such unpopular attacks in Sunni countries. Instead, they are biding their time. If the Shia are the near enemy and the United States is the far enemy, the Sunni Apostate leaders are the mid-enemy that will be dealt with next.

**Ansar al Sunnah.** I assumed that the ISI image of Ansar al Sunnah, a Salafist group that assisted Zarqawi in 2002, would be the ally image. There was little evidence of this in the data. Ansar al Sunnah, despite similarities in ideology and strategy, had a love-hate relationship with the ISI. There were instances of jointly sponsored suicide attacks, but for the most part there was more evidence of conflict and incompatibility – to include physical attacks on each other. ISI viewed Ansar instead as just another Sunni Insurgent Group that should be joining the “state” but refused out of childish obstinacy.

**Iran.** This was an example in the worldview of the classic enemy image. ISI treated Iran with respect as a powerful country with influence all over the region. Iran had reach into Iraq through their sponsorship of Shia militias, and could easily counter any direct attack on Iranian
interests with force. Unrestricted by rules like the United States, Iran’s aggressive meddling in Iraqi politics and their own assassination program against former Ba’athist officials earned the respect of the ISI. Iran’s policy of keeping Bin Ladin family members under house arrest, a fact Zawahiri reminded Zarqawi about in his critique of attacks on Shia Iraqis, provided a strong deterrent to any ISI sponsored attacks by Sunni dissidents in Iran (ISI, 2010, Mar 26; Zawahiri, 2005, July). Although ISI rhetoric against Iraqi Shia as being Persian and Iranian was harsh, there were little references to the actual country other than their influence over the current Iraqi government. The ISI reluctance to discuss Iran extensively reflects their perceptions of Iran’s substantial power and prestige in the region as a rival Islamic state that is hostile to the West.

**Kurds.** This group was not included in the initial projection of the ISI worldview but ended up being a frequent target of ISI messaging and attacks. The Kurdish image was somewhat similar to the Iranian. ISI viewed the Kurds with equal capability and equal culture (the majority of Kurds are Sunni), but looked down on the Kurdish alliance with the United States, the Kurdish secular attitude, and the strong Marxist presence in the Kurdish Workers’ Party (PKK). The ISI did have Kurdish ties; there were Kurdish Salafists in their ranks and the group traced their origins to the Kurdish area, where they were able to grow away from the watchful eye of the Saddam regime. The Kurds were attacked fairly frequently due to their robust presence in contested areas, but the amount of derogatory rhetoric directed at the group was minimal compared to any Shia group.

**Al Qaeda Central (AQC).** Surprisingly, there was no image of AQC in the documents in the database. First, the group might have been hesitant to discuss their nominal superior in messaging in great detail. None of the ISI captured documents addressed AQC, although there are Harmony documents from AQC that comment on their view of ISI, which tended to be
critical of their franchise tarnishing efforts. There was just not enough data to code this image. ISI’s recent break with AQC could shed light on why there is little discussion of AQC in ISI messaging. Other than obligatory references to “their Sheik,” it is probable that AQC had little to no influence in ISI’s daily operations. The United States’ efforts to find Bin Ladin kept AQC from communicating freely with their franchises. Abu Bakr, the current Caliph, was far enough removed from the original pledge of bayah (allegiance) that the conflict over control of the al Nusra Front ended whatever tenuous relationship that existed between the supposed headquarters and the ISI (@wikibaghdadi, 2014, Jan 14). The original group had significant ties to Al Qaeda and a cadre of experienced jihadists from the headquarters to help, but that influence has receded over time as the organization has become more Iraqi.

**Template of a Generic Worldview**

The worldviews discussed above fit the template I produced using Image Theory possibilities for the ISI (see Table 5.2 below). The standard images Cottam (2005) developed remain: Enemy, Ally, Degenerate, Rogue, and Barbarian. I modified Colonial/Dependent based on different culture and intentions, but the image is the same. I added three images: Dependent of the Enemy (returned from the Cold War days), Dependent of the Barbarian, and Patrona. The Imperialist image dropped out as there is no image of a culture that is superior in any way to ISI’s self-image. That left nine image options in the worldview of the ISI, of which I was able to confirm seven. The Ally image is still a possible image although highly unlikely to develop now that the Islamic State has become the Caliphate – and therefore by doctrine, without peers. The announcement of the establishment of the Caliphate would also preclude the use of the Patrona image (Al Arabiya, 2014, June 29). By proclaiming the Caliphate, the Islamic State proclaimed

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32 According to the Islamic State, Abu Bakr never renewed the bayah to AQC after the deaths of Abu Omar and Abu Hamza. This legitimized their disobedience of Zawahiri in the Nusra Front spat and also freed them to proclaim the Caliphate in 2014.
Abu Bakr to be the leader of all Muslims in the world, and therefore would invalidate any image with superior capabilities.

Table 5.2 – Images (and potential Images) of the Islamic State of Iraq

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Harmful Intentions</th>
<th>Superior</th>
<th>Equal</th>
<th>Inferior</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Capability</td>
<td>Not Possible</td>
<td>Dep of Barbarian</td>
<td>Barbarian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Equal</td>
<td>Enemy/Degenerate</td>
<td>Dep of Enemy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inferior</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Rogue</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benign Intentions</th>
<th>Superior</th>
<th>Equal</th>
<th>Inferior</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Capability</td>
<td>Not Possible</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Equal</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inferior</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>G</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Helpful Intentions</th>
<th>Superior</th>
<th>Equal</th>
<th>Inferior</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Capability</td>
<td>Not Possible</td>
<td>Patrona</td>
<td>H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Equal</td>
<td>Ally</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inferior</td>
<td>Colonial/Dependent</td>
<td>J</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Group Dynamics and Image Creation**

Group images for the Iraqi Shia, the Iraqi Government, and Shia militias did not exist in 2003 in the same way that they do now. Abu Musab al Zarqawi was able to establish group norms and influence the creation of its ideology, which helped feed image creation and adaptation for the subjects of the ISI worldview. This process was done through creating and sharing a vision for the organization by its founder.

According to Peter Senge, a shared vision “is not an idea…it is…a force in people’s hearts” (1990, p. 206). Zarqawi was able to convince the members of the organization to buy into his vision of the organization as the center of Salafist resistance to the occupation and the future rulers of all of Iraq and the Levant. This end state influenced the worldview significantly. The
expansive goals of the organization would be resisted by most other groups, therefore aligning them against TwJ.

Zarqawi was able to convince group members through effective leadership and management techniques. First, he had a measure of charisma, as evidenced by his stature in Jordanian prisons that drew people to him and his rise to the leadership of TwJ (Husayn, 2005). Zarqawi took an active role in leading the organization and was wounded several times, demonstrating a willingness to sacrifice along with the other group members (BBC, 2005, May 25). Due to communications limitations on the group during their expansion phase, Zarqawi’s messages were directed as much to his fighters as they were to the Sunni Ummah or external audiences. In these communications, he shaped the images of hostile groups with sectarian language, historical event scripts, inflammatory accusations of rape and torture, and appeals to pride and the desire to bolster the group self-image. Finally, Zarqawi was a clear-eyed decision maker that understood the cold calculations that military leaders must make about life and death. One of the organization’s first attacks, the suicide car bombing directed at Hakim at the Imam Ali Shrine, was executed by Zarqawi’s father-in law (Hafez, 2007, 254). These early steps set precedence and legacies for future members to absorb during indoctrination and training.

The image for the Iraqi Shia, which influenced the image for the Iraqi Government and Shia militias as well, was created in 2003 by members who had recently experienced the chaotic transition of power in Afghanistan. Zarqawi and his jihadists appreciated not only the increased freedom of operations they would have, but also the limitations the United States would face as a thinly manned occupation force. To create the image, the early founders of the ISI were forced to rely on ideological teachings about the Shia, historical event scripts, and the elements of social competition in accordance with Tajfel’s Social Identity Theory. The dominance of Sunni culture
in Islam and in the locality of Iraq was challenged by a long standing minority that had risen to become the dominant power, thanks to the meddling of neighbors and outsiders. Fanar Haddad called this the challenge to cultural ownership of Iraq, and used the concept of Staatsvolk to explain the general Sunni reaction to this loss of status (2011, p. 145). The struggle for cultural supremacy within a state, particularly when the political status quo is upset, is better understood when the Social Identity framework is used to explain actions and outcomes. I will discuss more of this in Part II.

Image creation for the Shia required the group’s leadership to be heavily involved in the shaping of group norms throughout the organization. Early and frequent leadership statements needed to sketch out the rationale for considering the Shia as an enemy, and what to do about the Shia as a matter of policy. This was the idea behind measuring an increase in attention to the Iraqi Shia as a whole (see Hypothesis 1 (H1) testing in Chapter 4). Zarqawi referred to the Shia in over half (8) of his first 15 statements and used high levels of sectarian language in doing so. His letter to Zawahiri, during negotiations to become an al Qaeda franchise, makes the case not only for the image of the Shia as an enemy, but an existential one that had to be eliminated preemptively before they gained the state’s right to enforce the monopoly of the use of force (Zarqawi, 2004, Feb 12). Zarqawi’s fifteenth statement in the database declared “total war” on the Shiites for their treatment of Sunnis in Tel Afar (2005, Sep 16). This is pure theater, and unconvincing theater at that. By 2005, Zarqawi’s TwJ/AQI had killed thousands of Shia, many of them civilians, to include the Ashura pilgrimage of 2004.
The return of the Ashura rituals in 2004\(^{33}\), banned under Saddam as sectarian displays, was met by a Zarqawi group determined to shape the creation of the image of Iraqi Shias (and in this case, the Iraqi Government) as subservient and un-Islamic. This is social identity competition in the creation and propagation of images. A counter-argument could be made that Zarqawi never claimed the Ashura bombings that slaughtered over 150 people in near simultaneous bombs at two shrines (Kadhimiyyah in Baghdad and Karbala), and therefore should not be blamed on the ISI. The attribution of sectarian attacks, or lack thereof, will be discussed in Part II as well.

**Image Theory for the Practitioner**

The use of a theoretical framework to investigate the political worldview of an actor has practical benefits for policymakers. As the results of my research demonstrate, I was unable to accurately predict the Islamic State of Iraq’s worldview despite a substantial amount of preliminary research prior to coding. The communications (both private and public) were revealing as to the group’s attitude toward other groups and perceptions of threat, opportunity, intentions, and individual characteristics of other groups.

The Islamic State had a very few allies, a small number of dependents, and a long list of enemies. They jealously guarded their role as the vanguard of the Sunni race, and harshly dealt with challengers within their identity group. This description of the ISI worldview points to vulnerabilities that could be exploited by an opponent. Their harsh treatment of the Sunni tribes led to a backlash that was adroitly leveraged by the leadership team of the United States, but arguably this took too long to occur. An understanding of the ISI’s fragile identity base and their

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\(^{33}\) Ashura 2003 was not celebrated as it fell before the 2003 invasion and Saddam had long standing restrictions on the observance; the Shia celebrated Arba‘e’en 2003, the end of the forty-day mourning period for Hussein, in a rousing pilgrimage. Ashura 2004 was the first full celebration and it was marred by Zarqawi’s strikes.
over commitment to fighting all of its enemies at once could have primed the United States to look at grooming Sunni tribes at an earlier date.

The understanding of the self-image would also have helped practitioners in Iraq at an early date. The monolithic and wildly incorrect idea of all Sunni resistance groups being Ba’athist holdouts was highly detrimental to strategic planning in 2003, as was the idea that Shia Iraqis would be completely accepting of the invasion and occupation. The United States enabling of the Iranian government to infiltrate and exercise control over large parts of the internal security portfolio of the Iraqi government is a problem that has not yet reached its full potential. For a people that have seen endless war for the last thirty-five years, it is unfortunate for me to conclude that there is more war in their future. If policymakers could have developed an accurate political worldview of the different actors involved in the Iraqi drama after 2003, better decisions could have been made and a better peace achieved.

**Part II – Social Identity Theory and the Islamic State of Iraq**

The first hypothesis measured the change in attention that the ISI gave their new Shia rivals in their messaging, which included in this particular case the reporting of a significant amount of physical attacks. These attacks provoked a crisis of criticism from erstwhile allies among insurgent groups, members of the Sunni Ummah, al Qaeda leadership, the press, Sunni Clerics, and even Zarqawi’s mentor and inspiration for the founding of TwJ – Abu Muhammed al Maqdisi. At this point, the organization could have backed away from their strategy and reverted to just attacking American targets and even strictly Iraqi military targets. For reasons that are largely influenced by the image creation itself and the perception of threat or opportunity from the Shia groups, Zarqawi and his leadership council chose not to do so. As the theoretical framework of Image Theory suggests, images are difficult to change due to cognitive consistency
principles that underlie image creation. Information contrary to strongly held images will be filtered and interpreted in a way more acceptable to reception. Critiques of the strategy were countered by Zarqawi as unrealistic and removed from the actual situation.

This filtering seems to be the role that Social Identity Theory plays in conjunction with Image Theory in a social conflict model. Faced with public betrayals by highly valued voices in the Sunni community, Zarqawi and his media council increased their rhetoric about the evils of the Shia and their faith’s departure from the true practice of Islam. Inflammatory rhetoric increased, exemplified by Zarqawi’s declaration of war on all Shia in revenge for the Sunni women of Tel Afar, who allegedly had the “sperm of crusaders” and rafidites in their wombs (2005, 16 Sep). The increase in symbolic language (H2) and an increase in attacks on sectarian symbols (H3) in an effort to discredit the foe become a necessary staple in ISI communications in order to defend the group from criticism while justifying attacks on a despicable enemy.

Despite doubling down on the Shia strategy, factors involved in the social competition explained by Social Identity Theory impact ISI messaging visibly. At first, ISI decided not to claim any attacks at all. Upon attaining success, they retroactively claimed the controversial attack on Hakim. They never claimed the Ashura bombings of 2004, which was their first strike at defenseless pilgrims of the opposite sect. Several early bombings that supposedly aimed at military targets missed their mark and produced large amounts of collateral damage, including school children on a bus in Basra (Roberts, 2004, April 24). ISI claimed these attacks (see Table 5.3 below) but did not mention the collateral damage and indicated they were against military targets. Realizing that this was not helping their public support among Iraqis, they eventually stopped claiming anything that targeted civilians or killed them in large numbers.

Table 5.3 – High Casualty Events in Iraq (2003-2013) and ISI claims
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Target</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Killed/ Wounded</th>
<th>Claimed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>29-Aug-03</td>
<td>Mohammed Baqir al Hakim</td>
<td>Friday prayers</td>
<td>Imam Ali Mosque, Karbala</td>
<td>car bomb</td>
<td>k125</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-Mar-04</td>
<td>Pilgrims</td>
<td>Ashura</td>
<td>Kadhimiya, Karbala</td>
<td>car bombs, mortars, gunfire</td>
<td>k158</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-Apr-04</td>
<td>Police stations (children civcias)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Basra</td>
<td>5 car bombs</td>
<td>k74 w160</td>
<td>Yes*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-Sep-04</td>
<td>Coalition patrol (massive civcias)</td>
<td>Baghdad</td>
<td>car bomb</td>
<td>k41, 131 w</td>
<td>Yes*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19-Dec-04</td>
<td>Funeral procession</td>
<td></td>
<td>Imam Ali Mosque, Karbala</td>
<td>suicide car bomb</td>
<td>k67 w97</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-Jul-05</td>
<td>marketplace</td>
<td></td>
<td>Musayyib</td>
<td>explosive belt</td>
<td>k100 w130</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17-Aug-05</td>
<td>bus station</td>
<td></td>
<td>Nahda bus station, Baghdad</td>
<td>triple bombing</td>
<td>k43 w78</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14-Sep-05</td>
<td>Pagan Guard (crowd construction workers)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Oruba square, Baghdad</td>
<td>suicide car bombing</td>
<td>k160 w570</td>
<td>Yes*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-Nov-05</td>
<td>Shia mosques</td>
<td>Friday prayers</td>
<td>Khaniqin</td>
<td>explosive belts in mosque</td>
<td>k74 w100+</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-Jan-06</td>
<td>Pilgrims</td>
<td>Visiting</td>
<td>Karbala</td>
<td>explosive belts in square</td>
<td>k60 w100</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22-Feb-06</td>
<td>al Askari Mosque bombing</td>
<td></td>
<td>Samarra</td>
<td>rigged explosives</td>
<td>k100k in following days</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-Apr-06</td>
<td>buried mosque bombing, Imam was an MP</td>
<td>Friday prayers</td>
<td>Baghdad</td>
<td>belts x 3, one a woman</td>
<td>k85 w160</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23-Nov-06</td>
<td>Sadriyah bombings</td>
<td></td>
<td>Baghdad</td>
<td>car bombs and mortar</td>
<td>k215 w257</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-Jan-07</td>
<td>Mustansiriya university bombing (Shia)</td>
<td>Female students</td>
<td>Baghdad</td>
<td>car bomb belt combo</td>
<td>k70 w169</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22-Jan-07</td>
<td>bab al sharqi market</td>
<td>Ashura</td>
<td>central Baghdad</td>
<td>two car bombs</td>
<td>k88 w160</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-Feb-07</td>
<td>Sadriyah market</td>
<td>Shia area</td>
<td>Baghdad</td>
<td>car bomb</td>
<td>k135 w339</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12-Feb-07</td>
<td>shorja market</td>
<td>Anniversary of Samarra</td>
<td>Baghdad</td>
<td>two car bombs</td>
<td>k76 w135</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-Feb-07</td>
<td>marketplace</td>
<td>Shia area</td>
<td>New Baghdad</td>
<td>two bombs</td>
<td>k60 w131</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-Mar-07</td>
<td>Pilgrims</td>
<td>Arbaeen</td>
<td>Hillah</td>
<td>explosive vests</td>
<td>k115 w250</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27-Mar-07</td>
<td>Shia areas</td>
<td>Tal afar</td>
<td>two truck bombs</td>
<td>k152 w347</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29-Mar-07</td>
<td>al shaab market</td>
<td>Shia area</td>
<td>Baghdad</td>
<td>two suicide vests</td>
<td>k82 w138</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14-Apr-07</td>
<td>imam hussein mosque</td>
<td>Bus station</td>
<td>Karbala</td>
<td>car bomb</td>
<td>k42 w160</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28-Apr-07</td>
<td>Abbas ibn Ali shrine</td>
<td>Pilgrims</td>
<td>Karbala</td>
<td>car bomb</td>
<td>k68 w162</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-Apr-07</td>
<td>Sadriyah market</td>
<td>Shia area</td>
<td>Baghdad (Risafi, Karada, Sadriva, Shurja, Sadr City)</td>
<td>five car bombs</td>
<td>k198 w251</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19-Jun-07</td>
<td>al Khilani Mosque</td>
<td>Prayer</td>
<td>Baghdad</td>
<td>truck bomb (built inside the city)</td>
<td>k78 w87</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-Jul-07</td>
<td>market place</td>
<td>Shia kurds</td>
<td>Amerli</td>
<td>suicide car bomb</td>
<td>k156 w255</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-Jul-07</td>
<td>marketplace</td>
<td>Karada</td>
<td>Baghdad</td>
<td>truck bomb rocket attack</td>
<td>k92 w127</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-Aug-07</td>
<td>shopping district</td>
<td>Shia</td>
<td>Karada</td>
<td>car bomb</td>
<td>k17 w32</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14-Aug</td>
<td>Yazidi community</td>
<td>Yazidi</td>
<td>Kahauniya Jazeera</td>
<td>four suicide car bombs</td>
<td>k796 w1562</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14-Aug</td>
<td>shopping district</td>
<td>Could be Shia v Shah</td>
<td>Al amaarah</td>
<td>three car bombs</td>
<td>k46 w149</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-Feb-08</td>
<td>mosque</td>
<td>Shia</td>
<td>Baghdad</td>
<td>two suicide vests (disabled women)</td>
<td>k98 w200</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-Mar-08</td>
<td>shopping district</td>
<td>Shia</td>
<td>Karada</td>
<td>double bombing (roadside, belt)</td>
<td>k68 w120</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17-Mar-08</td>
<td>Imam hussein mosque</td>
<td>Safe near shrine</td>
<td>Karbala</td>
<td>female bomber</td>
<td>k42 w58</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17-Jun-08</td>
<td>bus stop</td>
<td>Shia neighborhood</td>
<td>Hurniya, Baghdad</td>
<td>Suicide car bomb</td>
<td>k51 w75</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23-Apr-09</td>
<td>New Khanaqin restaurant</td>
<td>Shia (iranian)</td>
<td>Muqaddiyah</td>
<td>Car bomb</td>
<td>k48 w63</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23-Apr-09</td>
<td>basil square</td>
<td>Shia area</td>
<td>Baghdad</td>
<td>female bomber w belt</td>
<td>k80 w50</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-Jun-09</td>
<td>mosque</td>
<td>Shia</td>
<td>Taza near kirkuk</td>
<td>Suicide truck bomb</td>
<td>k73 w200</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24-Jun-09</td>
<td>Muradi market</td>
<td>Shia</td>
<td>Sadr City</td>
<td>Vegetable cart bomb</td>
<td>k69 w150</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-Feb-10</td>
<td>Pilgrim route</td>
<td>Pilgrims</td>
<td>Baghdad</td>
<td>Female bomber</td>
<td>k54 w100</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23-Apr-10</td>
<td>mosque, neighborhood, market</td>
<td>Shia areas</td>
<td>Baghdad (Hurniya, Sadr City, al Amin)</td>
<td>Five car bombs</td>
<td>k85 w145</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-Jul-10</td>
<td>Musa Kadhimi mosque</td>
<td>Pilgrims</td>
<td>Kadhimiya</td>
<td>Suicide bomber</td>
<td>k70 w400</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23-Jul-12</td>
<td>marketplace</td>
<td>Shia</td>
<td>Diwaniyah</td>
<td>Car bomb</td>
<td>k22 w25</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-Aug-12</td>
<td>amusement park</td>
<td>Shia area</td>
<td>Zaafaraniya</td>
<td>Car bomb</td>
<td>k27 w75</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17-Jan-13</td>
<td>Shia pilgrims</td>
<td>Samarra, Hilla</td>
<td>Car bombs</td>
<td>k26</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8-Feb-13</td>
<td>bird market</td>
<td>Shia area</td>
<td>Kadhimiya</td>
<td>Car bombs</td>
<td>k33 w100</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17-Feb-13</td>
<td>Markets</td>
<td>Shia</td>
<td>Baghdad</td>
<td>8 Car bombs</td>
<td>k37</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17-Mar-13</td>
<td>bus station</td>
<td>Shia</td>
<td>Basra</td>
<td>Car bomb</td>
<td>k10</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19-Mar-13</td>
<td>shopping district</td>
<td>Shia</td>
<td>Baghdad</td>
<td>12 Car bombs</td>
<td>k56 w200</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29-Mar-13</td>
<td>4 mosques</td>
<td>Shia</td>
<td>Baghdad, kirkuk</td>
<td>Four Car bombs</td>
<td>k23</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
*these claims were for the intended military target highlighted in column two, not the civilian casualties in parentheses.

**Attribution**

There is little doubt among informed observers that the ISI was responsible for these early bombings. They had the motivation, the intention, and the specialized experience to pull off complex suicide car bomb attacks. Their rhetoric and letters to AQC demonstrate that their strategy was to attack Shia civilians and disable this government before they could become powerful enough to defeat the movement. I coded almost 3000 ISI documents, and the majority of the documents were attack claims of every conceivable type of attack. They proudly claimed assassinations of clerics, female spies, Sunni politicians, judges, poll workers, and municipal employees. Why wouldn’t they claim these very successful attacks that utilized valuable human capital (the suicide bomber) and expensive car bombs that could have been used against other targets?

There are two possibilities. One, it might not have been the ISI. Other groups could have taken advantage of the notoriety of the ISI to commit these atrocities, which served their ends of regaining control of the country while avoiding the negative backlash. This is a possibility. While ISI claimed over 88% of claimed suicide attacks, analysis by Seifert and McCauley indicated that only 22% of all suicide bombings were claimed at all from 2003 to 2010 (2014, p. 8). If another group did execute these early attacks, it would have had to have reached the very high level of capability that ISI had achieved in order to execute the February 2004 Ashura bombings, which is highly doubtful. Those bombings were planned and perfectly executed against highly protected targets that were hit simultaneously by carefully constructed bombs, killing over 150 people and wounding hundreds.
The other possibility, which I find more convincing, is that the ISI learned early on to only claim attacks against military targets, as long as they were free of significant collateral damage. This logic is visible in ISI claims early on, to include their subtle camouflaging of attacks in Shia civilian areas in their reports as attacks on Shia militias. These claims are quite hard to dispute, since the difference between militia members and civilians is quite difficult to determine according to the rules of war or even simply by observation. Either way, ISI eliminated the possibility of criticism from the friction and fog of war by their bombers in the field by simply not claiming anything that could reflect poorly on the organization. Again, refer to Table 5.3 above to see that after 2005, ISI does not claim a single major incident again in the war. A group that claimed 88% of all claimed suicide attacks claimed 0% of high casualty attacks after early criticism. This validates the social competition imperative of bolstering the group’s positive image of themselves while demonizing, dehumanizing, and de-Islamizing the enemy.

**Claimed Sectarian Attacks**

As mentioned above and in other sections of this dissertation, ISI did not claim major sectarian attacks. Their expansive media presence, high skills, and harsh rhetoric made them the prime suspect, and over time the ISI became the usual suspect – so much so that there was little interest in proving this claim or investigating further. I think there is a high probability that other insurgent groups attacked civilian targets and allowed the ISI to garner the blame, and that some of ISI’s denials are indeed accurate. The decision to claim an attack was a serious one for the ISI, as claiming an attack could mean additional recruits and funding from external sponsors. As I coded the statements in the database (see Appendix A for the coding worksheet), one of the variables I looked for was whether ISI claimed a sectarian attack in the document. Table 5.4
(below) displays the dates for statements in which ISI claims an attack on a sectarian target. There was one in 2003 – the Hakim attack, and then none until 2006. The height of sectarian warfare (2006-7) saw a small rise in claimed sectarian acts, a small fraction of what probably happened but these were actually claimed. Once the civil war ends in 2007, claimed sectarian attacks drop to almost nothing until 2011, when Abu Bakr begins his drive to bring the Islamic State back to prominence.

Figure 5.1 – Claimed sectarian attacks

Note: The data for 2013 is the annual rate based on the first three months of data; the group became ISIS in April.

In viewing Figure 5.1, one interesting fact jumps out: the Samarra bombing was not one of the sectarian attacks above claimed by the IS. In fact, the very next day their MSC’s media outlet redirected the blame to the Shias and Iran, claiming that it was a false flag operation. The goal of this subterfuge was to cover up their crimes against the Sunni and change the perception of the Shia from criminals to victims. These are the people, after all, that “fill the world with their wails,” a reference to Shiite religious rites and Ashura mourning and a deliberate contrast
between the often victimized Shia and the proud and stoic Sunni. The failure of the Shia to take Baghdad from the Sunni was evidence of the power of the ISI, and that their retaliation would be “shuddering” (MSC, 2006, Feb 23).

In investigating ISI’s role in the Samarra bombing, a break in the case came when Hamed Jumaa Faris Jur al-Saeidi was captured a few months after the bombing just north of Baghdad (Paley, 2006, Sep 4). He claimed to be a high ranking official in AQI, and to supervising Haitham al Badri, the alleged leader of the squad that conducted the Samarra bombing. Al Badri was killed in a subsequent airstrike, but a Tunisian known as Abu Qudama, who was in the squad, was captured after being wounded in a shootout (Roberts, 2006, June 28). Both Abu Qudama and Saeidi admitted culpability for the bombing, and Abu Qudama was later executed (Roberts, 2006, Jun 28). Interestingly, both his family and a human rights organization claimed he was tortured into confessing, and the Tunisian interim President asked Iraq for a pardon. So although there were multiple confessions, there is a possibility due to the accusations of torture that we won’t ever know the full story of how the Samarra mosque was destroyed, subsequently causing the deaths of thousands on both sides over the following weeks. To further complicate the situation, AQI denied that he was in their organization at the time – although that could have been disinformation since he cooperated strongly with his captors.

This deliberate obscurity over their operations, despite ISI’s clearly genocidal rhetoric about Shias, is about maintaining a positive self-image for their group and for the Sunnis at large. Sunni consternation about the killings of Shia in Iraq was a very touchy subject for ISI and it was addressed thoroughly in an interview by Zarqawi that was published posthumously by the ISI. Zarqawi claimed that his group was fighting to reclaim Muslim lands (Muslim meaning Sunni).
The Shia were cowards who lied, discriminated against the Sunni in all aspects of current life, were torturing and killing Sunnis before the Sunni had fired a single shot at them, and were told by Sistani to not fight the Americans. Their tribes from the south had been Sunni at one point 100-200 years ago, but were forcibly and unjustly converted (Zarqawi, 2006, Dec 28).

This message, most likely Zarqawi’s last, was typical and one of many communications he made in order to shape and reinforce the positive images of his group while denigrating the group he considered most dangerous – the Iraqi Shia as a whole. To assist this image bolstering, strictly sectarian attacks were not made to the public, as can be seen in Table 5.3 and Figure 5.1 above, with two major exceptions.

Rise in Claimed Sectarian Attacks

I won’t discuss the claimed sectarian attacks during the civil war period, except to say that the period in question had so much random violence that there is little to be gained by examining the statistics. At that point in the civil war, death squads were killing people because of names and locations of where they lived in the city or country, and there is little to be gained by such analysis. Figure 5.1 shows a rise in claimed sectarian attacks, but this is probably a problem with message discipline during heated times. While the years after the civil war (2008-10) were tough for ISI, they still carried out sectarian attacks but did not claim them. If you refer back to Table 3.2 and Figure 3.2 in Chapter 3, pilgrim attacks were still happening, but are a larger proportion of the violence in 2008-10 due to the fact that overall violence was down considerably. As most insurgent groups went over to the Awakening at this point, it can be reliably thought that the ISI made some or all of those attacks – but did not claim them.

The policy to not claim sectarian attacks changed after 2010 however. There are three possible reasons for this change; first, the organization had recently lost its two long time leaders
and had selected Abu Bakr al Baghdadi as its new emir. Another possibility is that as the United States left Iraq (a process that took most of 2011), the Dependent of the Enemy image of the Iraqi Government changed to that of the Rogue. The Iraqi Shia, relatively unprotected from the car bombing campaign in the cities and during pilgrimages, were already seen in the Rogue image (see Table 5.1 above). With the Rogue image, the ISI saw a relatively weak foe that deserved to be punished for their weak culture, and the opportunity to attack and kill their foe was too much to pass up. Furthermore, since ISI was dealing with two Rogue images (that were somewhat intertwined as a group anyways), the need for positive self-image was not as important anymore, since the rogue image generates a great deal of antipathy from the ISI’s identity group. The farther the delta between images in the social competition, the more likely the one with the higher worth is able to crush the lower worth without significant blowback. The third reason that ISI might claim sectarian attacks after 2010 is that the social competition became less important to them following their defeat in 2007 at the hands of their fellow Sunnis. Any of these three or a combination of them is a possible explanation for why the ISI began to claim something that they have, in all probabilities, been doing all along.

**Eulogies and Social Identity Theory**

Striking in the ISI’s manipulation of the elements of social competition is their use of public eulogies of their fighters. The United States puts out a news release and relies on units to conduct local ceremonies for fallen service members (DOD, 2014, 14 Jun). The news releases contain the age, hometown, unit, rank, and a terse description of the circumstances involving the death, i.e. lost at sea, wounds sustained by small arms fire, etc. Being a smaller organization, the ISI was able to produce individual eulogies and post them on jihadist websites for the Sunni
Ummah to read. These eulogies served as recruiting vehicles to be sure, but, at the same time, they served a much more important service.

The 89 eulogies (see Table 4.2) posted by the organization give a spectacular insight into the life of a member of the Islamic State. The importance of the eulogies to the organization was great; not every fighter was eulogized, and the series became known as the Eminent Martyrs series. The very first statement in the database is a eulogy by Zarqawi to his best friend Abd al Hadi Daghlas, killed by the Americans almost a year before. Zarqawi grieved for his friend, but spent most of the message attacking Sunni clerics for their silence and failure to call for all Muslims to support the jihad in Iraq and Afghanistan. His real message was that his group was the true vanguard of the Sunni nation, not the clerics.

The eulogies contain valuable insights for a variety of reasons. The writers were friends who share mundane moments on the battlefield and share stories that illuminate the personality of the fallen member. The story usually covers the death of the fighter, often an unlikely account of unreal heroism – not unlike western action movies – except in this version the fighter succumbs to trickery, unfair bombing, or the will of Allah. Although some of these statements are for suicide bombers who kill hundreds of innocents, that information is glossed over. Very rarely will the eulogy venture into ISI strategic targeting, but occasionally they do. One Saudi fighter spurned the opportunity to conduct a martyr mission against the Americans, deciding that it would be best to attack the Shia. “Fighting the apostates is of higher priority than fighting the original (infidels),” he said, citing Islamic law as support for the claim (AQI, 2005, Dec 1). This is an example of norm transmission to the organization and the greater Sunni Ummah, and its roots are deep in Social Identity Theory. More importantly, the eulogies are evidence that the
type of ethnic conflict observed in this war was not driven by political elites, but by true
believers like Zarqawi and his many comrades.

Victimhood and Social Identity

A final discussion about Social Identity Theory and the maintenance role it plays for
group images - crucial to attainment of a superior social standing - revolves around the
competition for victimhood. The concept of victimhood was foreign to Sunni Iraqis, but veteran
jihadists knew a bit about this from their extensive time in regime prisons. Victimhood had long
been a facet of life for the Shia of Iraq, and to some degree, to the sect as a whole based on their
persecution by the various Caliphs after Ali. The Ba’ath party’s dominance over Iraq had blinded
the Sunni to a growing sectarian divergence (Haddad, 2011, p. 175). The end of the Ba’ath and
the Sunni’s unceremonious dismissal from the political elite was a shock to members of TwJ,
who had never lived or operated in places where Sunni Islam was not the dominant culture.
Jordan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia all were dominated by the Sunni culture. The
immediate display of sectarian behaviors during the Arbae’en celebration in April, 2003 was an
instant wake up to most Sunni Arabs that times in Iraq had changed.

Certainly the Sunni had no original intention of playing the role of victim, even once in
the minority – if you could find some that acknowledged that they were actually the minority.
This stance changed over time as the Sunnis suffered De-Ba’athificaton, persecution at the hands
of a sectarian interior ministry, were targeted by death squads during the height of sectarian
warfare during 2005-7, and lost significant portions of their Baghdad neighborhoods to ethnic
cleansing (Ollivant, 2011). The ISI tapped into this potential by fully embracing a victim status
they did not believe in. By early 2006, Zarqawi had transformed some of his triumphal rhetoric
about defeating the United States to talking points he must have felt would resonate better among
a Sunni people squeezed on all sides. Not only was the United States’ presence a bad influence – by producing agents that would undermine the Muslims – but it also “gave the rafidah a free hand” to persecute and torture Sunni (Zarqawi, 2006, Jan 9). This kind of message runs counter to the images ISI held of the Shia, of them being weak and incompetent. This inconsistency fulfills another purpose however, which is to compete with the Shia for victimhood status – a motivating factor in sustaining group membership and pride through fear of elimination.

For the Shia groups, which to a lesser extent include the government, letting go of their domination of victimhood status in the culture was not something that would happen overnight. The Ashura rituals were an annual reinforcement of their permanent status as the underdog, as can be seen in a newly surfaced video of the very first Arba’een in 2003. Just days after the toppling of the Saddam regime, Shia pilgrims flocked to Karbala on foot to celebrate the first pilgrimage since Saddam banned the displays in the late 1970s. The Shia pilgrims do not seem to have forgotten their rituals in the interim; in watching the video, you can sense an optimism and feeling of stubborn pride among them. The crowds shout “No, No, Saddam” – a clear message that Saddam was against them and that anyone with Saddam was also unwelcome (Sykes, 2013). I watched this video wondering if Zarqawi or his group members had watched these very scenes live, and wondered how the rituals were perceived: were the members shocked and dismayed, or merely determined. These processions were the first to occur, and the last to go unmolested. Four months later, Zarqawi struck his enemies hard.

After Zarqawi’s sectarian attacks on the Shia in 2003, Shia militia groups agitated for a supremacist attitude for all Shias, but the success of this cultural shift is doubtful (Haddad, 2011, p. 159). Certainly the hardening of sectarian feelings in 2014 and the loss of significant portions
of Iraqi territory has Shia supremacists\textsuperscript{34} thinking more than ever about breaking away from Iraq and setting up a Shia Iraq, one safe from Sunni extremists and in command of Iraq’s natural resources. This is exemplified in a tweet by an Iraqi whose Twitter handle is @SumerRising – a reference to the ancient civilization in southern Mesopotamia, which is modern day southern Iraq. Reports of Shia militia retaliation against Sunni civilians in response to recent Islamic State atrocities are shrugged off. “When I tell my family back in Iraq what @hrw (Human Rights Watch) says about Shia paramilitary groups, they laugh. On the streets, they’re regarded as heroes” tweeted one Iraqi Shia partisan (Grendizer, 2014, Nov 8). It is hard to estimate how popular this sentiment is among Shia Iraqis, but various experts see some rise in Shia separatist movements since 2004 (Visser, 2005; 2014, Sep 9). This movement is indicative of a cultural pressure to shrug off the Shia victimhood monopoly and embrace the power and prestige of Iraqi Shia cultural dominance in the new Iraq. The idea of Shia victim status, which Zarqawi hated so much and felt was a cover for their crimes, could eventually fade. The only reason that it stubbornly hangs on is the ISI bombing of innocent Shia civilians and pilgrims, and even the recent (2014) massacres of Iraqi security forces – human killings more reminiscent of animal slaughter than anything else.

ISI’s struggle over whether to claim victimhood on the one hand and finding new and innovative ways to keep their opponents as the victims is symbolic of their own losing struggle to win the social competition between sects in Iraq. Having failed to win large numbers of Iraqi Sunni to their side, their attempts to frame the competition have been no more successful. Social Identity theory is helpful in understanding this motivation, even when events seem unexplainable.

\textsuperscript{34} The term Shia supremacists comes from Joel Rayburn’s book, \textit{Iraq after America, Strongmen, Sectarians, Resistance} (2014).
Part III – Political Worldview and Strategy and Tactics

There is one major question remaining to answer: how do Image Theory and Social Identity Theory explain the differences in the way the ISI treated the Sahwa, Sunni collaborators, and Shia Iraqis. These groups had different images (See Table 5.1 above), but similar characteristics except for one (culture). All three had low capability, harmful intentions, and were seen by the ISI as an opportunity for exploitation of the group. Why were the three groups treated differently?

The obvious answer is the difference in evaluation of culture, a vital characteristic of any image. Since ISI shared much of the same social background and took pride in many of the same ethnic, historical, religious, and traditional backgrounds as the two Sunni groups, there is a strong impetus to alter treatment of the latter over Iraqi Shias. For the same reason, ISI messaging focused on highlighting the following: alleged differences in ethnic background, historically inferiority, past traitorous acts, and sacrilegious religious rites. Zarqawi called the Shia circumambulators, which was a critique of their monument worship, and called them obsessed with their un-Islamic mourning rituals. The importance of these social distinctions was a key influence on the group, as Hypotheses (H2) and (H3) measured during the research. Another factor that impacted the difference in treatment of these three images was Hypothesis (H4), which measured in-group defection and shifts in attention.

The creation of a new set of images, covered in Part I and Part II above, resulted in a shift of attention from the obvious target of crusader infidels occupying a Muslim country to the challenge of a new social competitor for cultural dominance. This increased attention to Shia Iraqis (as a larger group) has been validated by the results of the research, as discussed in
Chapter 4. In 2006-7, however, the ISI faced an existential crisis when the Sahwa movement arose in Anbar province.

The new and unexpected threat to the group was serious, as evidenced in this captured document: “this difficult stage forced the leadership, as I believe, to reduce the entry of Muhajirin (foreign fighters) for many reasons, most notably the withdrawal of tribal support and the difficulty the Muhajirin faced when moving about due to their inability to communicate in the Iraqi dialect” (Unknown [Harmony - 612449], 2007). Another ISI leader discussed the growing enemies within Anbar, advising that the Sharia council – when approving requests for assassination, should “differentiate between targets in the Islamic Party, or the Ba’ath Party…and Sheiks and leaders of the tribes where most people especially in villages love and respect them, the first kind’s reaction is leaving (sic) signs and condemning, the second kind blames, and sometimes opens a front against us” (Unknown [Harmony 060316-01], 2006-7). The author here is saying that Sunni politicians can be targeted with impunity, but attacks on tribal leaders, while necessary, are much more sensitive due to their familial connections. These discussions are popular throughout the captured documents in the Harmony Collection, with exhortations about how to deal with these tribal leaders.

The creation of another new image for the Awakening category took some time for ISI, and there was a six-month gap between the founding of the Awakening and the point where they were acknowledged as a target in official ISI messaging. The Sahwa image was a slight adaptation of the Sunni Collaborator image, and they share identical characteristics. Although similar in image, ISI treated these two groups differently. The Sahwa were targeted, but also appealed to in multiple messages to repent and return to their religion (ISI, 2007, Sep 24). Seifert and McCauley, in their study of suicide bombing targets in Iraq, found that after 2005,
suicide bombing targets against international forces dropped to very low levels compared to a fivefold spike in bombings targeting Iraqis. In 2008, it was the Awakening movement that garnered a significant increase in suicide bombing attacks – almost as many in the summer of 2008 as there were against the Shia government and civilians (2014, p. 807). At this same time, the ISI found they were unable to operate in their own core areas and had to displace to remote locations away from Awakening forces. To understand how the ISI decided how to handle these two groups, the next section investigates the ISI campaign against both the Awakening movement and Sunni collaborators.

**The Return of the State**

How long are you [Awakening members] going to live in fear? No one among you dares to leave his house, travel, or even sleep peacefully in his own home. When will you enjoy peace again? How long are you going to stay alert day and night? Do you think we will go away? Do you think we will cease to exist or get bored? No! - Abu Mohammed al Adnani, spokesman for the Islamic State of Iraq (2011, Aug 7).

By 2010, a competitive election with high Sunni turnout and non-sectarian voting patterns coincided with the killing of the top two leaders of the ISI, Abu Hamza al Muhajir and Abu Omar al Baghdadi. These achievements fueled the belief that while there was still work to be done, a tipping point had been reached. Security incidents were at an all-time low, and the United States began looking to exit a war that had taken much longer than planned. The shock of success encouraged the United States to move quickly and decisively toward the door without deep consideration of several important issues: What would be the fate of the Sunni leaders who fought the Islamic State? How would these leaders integrate into their government, and how would the ISI react? The ISI opponents had a much different perspective about military efficacy and a better appreciation for the ebb and flow of warfare.

In *Iraq and the Evolution of American Strategy*, Steven Metz described strategy as a contest between antagonists that are seeking every advantage over the other (2007, p. xx). What
seems like a simple path to success will be countered and frustrated at every turn by the opposing side, and this is what makes strategy formulation difficult. The American change in strategy that led to the “surge” was able to generate great success in the short term. This success was temporary and subject to a reaction by the ISI. The tactic of using local Sunni tribes to secure their local areas and reconcile with the Iraqi government was effective in reducing violence, but how did the ISI deal with this setback, which was nothing less than a major military, political, economic, and psychological defeat? Their identity as the vanguard of the Sunni nation was discredited, and their soldiers in the field were hunted and displaced from areas that had been under their control since 2004.

The ISI constructed a new military campaign dedicated to defeating America’s Sunni allies, and undercutting the leadership of the security forces with the most successful assassination campaign since the Viet Cong’s attack on the Diem government in 1959-1960. To paraphrase political scientist Stathis Kalyvas, successful insurgents use discriminate violence in contrast to the indiscriminate techniques often used by their government opponents, and the ISI understood this imperative (2006, p.167). The purposes of the ISI’s campaign were to punish those that worked against them, to deter those who would take up arms against them, and to recruit a political base from the Sunni community that would work with the ISI willingly or unwillingly. Key to achieving those objectives would require: 1) establishing sanctuaries in their former core areas after careful elimination of Awakening members, 2) recruiting experienced fighters that could contribute immediately, and 3) a slow rollback of Iraqi security forces to allow the “state” to expand its governing functions on behalf of the Sunnis of Iraq.

**Repent and Reform**

As for those who were misled by chieftains and members of our tribes and thus sided with the ranks of the Crusader United States and became servants and stooges of the Safavid government, I tell them that I swear to God you will not be harmed if you follow the truth and support the religion of God, just as you
At first, the message the ISI had for the traitors among the ranks of the Sunni was an unwritten one: death at the hands of its assassins as it crept back into their former base areas. A multi-year campaign – from 2007-2010 – to kill key leaders of the Awakening and the Sunni Islamic Party members was eventually successful enough for Abu Omar al Baghdadi to moderate the message, and offer an opportunity for repentance for tribe members willing to confess their crimes and swear allegiance to the “State” (2008, Sep 9). During this time period, ISI propaganda included this carrot-and-stick approach, showing repentance ceremonies of large groups of Sunni tribesmen and other video clips of confession/executions (ISI, 2013, Jan 11). The latter often contained pictures of the Awakening members with American benefactors of the past.

In the Sunni areas where the Iraqi government had a tenuous control, it did not take long for the ISI to slowly and methodically eliminate resistance one person at a time. Just south of Baghdad there is a small town on the Euphrates River named Jurf ah Sakhr, which means rocky bank. The location is considered strategic, as it sits on the Sunni-Shia fault line – where the Sunni tribes along the Euphrates live near the border of the Shia south. The villages surrounding Jurf ah Sakhr were strongly against the occupation and the Shia government. Jurf, which is an overwhelmingly Sunni town, is only a few miles from Musayyib, a largely Shia town sitting on the highway to Karbala from Baghdad. At least twice a year, the pilgrims walk and ride buses on this highway, very close to these Sunni areas, and in the past have been subject to attacks (see Table 5.3 above). Needless to say, it is an area where sectarian tensions are high.

In the summer of 2007, the Awakening movement ejected ISI fighters and pacified the area, reconciling with government security forces. Violence dropped dramatically. One
resistance fighter from the Islamic Army of Iraq was barred from the Jurf Awakening council due to his involvement in an IED that killed a popular member of the coalition forces, although it was clear that he supported the Awakening forces. By 2008, he was dead – reportedly ambushed by ISI fighters just outside of Jurf ah Sakhr. Originally thought to be an isolated incident, it turned out to be the canary in the coal mine.

According to Seifert and McCauley, the year 2008 was characterized by a large amount of attacks on the Awakening movement as a whole. In the town of Jurf ah Sakhr, 46 Awakening members were reported killed between 2009 and the end of 2013, in 27 different incidents. Most were shot singly or in pairs in the first three years of the campaign, and four were Sheiks from the local Janabi tribe and leaders of the Awakening council. According to data I downloaded from the Iraqi Body Count database and then filtered according to target, 1,345 Awakening members across Iraq were killed during this same period across Iraq. This is a massive undercount as the data is only based on confirmed media reports of killings. As the ISI captured documents point out, the ISI was strongly divided between leaving bodies behind for fear factor and hiding the bodies in the desert. While these numbers seem relatively low by civil war standards, there are obvious patterns of activity that indicate the very tight focus on the contested areas that the ISI wanted to control.

**Targeting Sunni Collaborators - The Islamic Party**

While prominent Awakening killings, including Abdul Sattar Abu Risha’s in late 2007, attracted some attention - most killings were barely noticed by the Iraqi government or in the media. This is despite the fact that the ISI proudly claimed such kills, albeit several months later, in their periodic operational reports. One example is the assassination of Samir Safwat al Hadithi, an elected official and member of the Sunni Islamic Party. According to NPR’s *Morning
unknown gunmen opened fire and killed Samir as he left his house the morning of February 18, 2009. His relatives thought it was sectarian: that Shia militias opposed to reconciliation killed him. An Iraqi political analyst opined that it was part of the rough and tumble politics among Sunni politicians, which seems extreme even by Iraqi standards. These guesses, as you probably have surmised, were wrong – the real culprit went unmentioned in the wide-ranging list of possibilities in the NPR piece (Flintoff, 2009, Feb 24). Weeks later, and apparently unnoticed, the ISI proudly claimed responsibility in a statement posted on jihadist websites, naming Samir as a collaborator who deserved death – along with dozens of other killings that took place in greater southern Baghdad during February and March (ISI, 2009, May 11).

By 2012, the highly discriminate campaign by the ISI to systematically weaken the Iraqi government’s police and intelligence services and its Awakening presence in Sunni areas was gaining rapid momentum and seeing excellent results. Success allowed the ISI more flexibility in offering repentance to certain Sahwa tribes, which differed from their treatment of Sunni Collaborators. The Sunni tribes were useful to the ISI and certain tribes made up the majority of their recruits, and had a higher cultural evaluation than the Sunni Collaborators. Islamic Party members were more secular and believed in the democratic process, something incompatible and contemptuous to the ISI. There was no future for Islamic Party members in the Islamic State, and therefore they were expendable.

Conclusion

This chapter expanded the analysis from the results in Chapter 4 to discuss the worldview of the ISI and how Image Theory provides a framework and tools to track changes of this worldview over time. While changes require individual images to be created, reconstructed, or
altered, there is much more continuity for the majority of images within a particular group’s worldview. This paradigm remained true for the Islamic State of Iraq. Earlier in this chapter, I discussed the role of Social Identity Theory in the creation and reinforcement of group norms, boundaries, and images. Social Identity factors played a large role in both strategic targeting by the ISI and their information operations campaign. Why did the ISI attack certain targets but not claim them? The social competition between Sunni and Shia for cultural dominance required the ISI to modify their media procedures to protect the group’s self-image.

The competition between Sunni and Shia took on increasing importance through 2007 when a greater threat caused the ISI to change their strategy dramatically. To do this, they had to finalize the image creation of a new group – that of the Sahwa. Many of the Sahwa had come from a splintering of ISI’s own group and other groups very much like theirs in the social spectrum. It took time for this new image to form, time that the ISI did not have due to the threat of the Sahwa – who knew exactly who they were and where they lived – who dealt the ISI a significant defeat once they joined with the Americans and the Iraqi government. Undaunted, the ISI began to work to regain the core areas they had lost because of their in-group defection, utilizing a slow, methodical campaign of assassinations. The ISI focused on eliminating the most dangerous threat, Sunnis that lived in their core areas, in order to undermine the capabilities of the Iraqi government in Anbar, Diyala, Ninewa, and parts of Babil province. Once the ISI was able to decimate Awakening forces in their former core areas, as seen in the Jurfi ah Sakhr example, they were able to eliminate the eyes and ears of the security forces in those areas (see Annex D for more detail). At that point, they were able to eject Iraqi police and Army units at will from posts scattered around the Sunni provinces.
This process has continued after the Islamic State was able to collapse major Iraqi Army units in the North and West of Baghdad. As of the fall of 2014, it remains to be seen if the Iraqi government can extract the Islamic State from the territory gained during the summer offensive. Regardless of the outcome, this case study is a valuable one in examining and implementing the framework of Image Theory and Social Identity to learn more about identity conflict and worldview formation and maintenance. In the final chapter, I will discuss what this case study illuminates for students of conflict in other scenarios and areas of the world.
Chapter 6 – Conclusion

If you pick up a newspaper in 2014 and read about car bombings in Baghdad, there will inevitably be a short phrase that ascribes the motivations of the bombers as trying to incite a civil war. The bombings will not be attributed, but the reporter will usually write that these attacks have typically been done by the Islamic State, a group that considers Shi’ites to be heretics. There are elements of truth in both statements, and they serve an important role as heuristics to enable the general population to somehow comprehend such nihilistic attacks. Like most heuristics, they are only partially true and in this case, possibly more false than they are true.

If you look back, newspapers have been writing these very same phrases for the hundreds of attacks over the past decade. In fact, there probably isn’t a month that didn’t have an attack like this followed by these very explanations. This continuity doesn’t make it false, but it opens the door for a credible investigation into whether this is true. What group continues a strategy for ten years without changing it if it doesn’t work? Certainly a group that has survived a multi-directional fight from the reigning global hegemon, several nation states, and the dominant religious sect in the area does not do this.

The idea that the ISI has pursued a blowback strategy stems from intuition, and it was first mentioned in the news articles mentioned above long before TwJ made a single statement. The evidence for the strategy has been fueled by Zarqawi’s own justification of his Shia strategy in his letter to Zawahiri while in negotiations for TwJ to join al Qaeda (Zarqawi, 2004, Feb). What is not emphasized in this debate is Zawahiri’s counterpoint to Zarqawi: can you kill all of the Shia (Zawahiri, 2005)? Also not emphasized in the debate is Zarqawi’s early frustration with the Shia, particularly Sistani, who refused the obvious bait and publicly ordered no retribution in early and continual fatwas.
Zarqawi’s attacks on Shia civilian targets did provoke one response, based on the security dilemma. Shia militias enacted their own counterstrategy of ethnic cleansing in mixed areas, particularly in Baghdad, in order to remove possible insurgent cells among the Sunni population there (Ollivant, 2011). This targeted action reduced risk in most areas, but had second order effects that helped perpetuate Zarqawi’s strategy beyond the al Qaeda leader’s death. First, the ethnic cleansing made the areas more Shia and therefore a cleaner target for the ISI, who began to avoid causing Sunni collateral damage due to the unpopularity of their bombing campaign among their own supporters worldwide (Zarqawi, 2005, Jun 7). Second, the ethnic cleansing created a sense of growing victimhood among the Sunni who were being forced out of homes and killed randomly by Shia death squads targeting specific areas. This victimhood, unpredictable by the self-appointed guardians of Sunni status – ISI – forced ISI to continue expending valuable resources in attacking Shia civilian targets out of revenge for Tal Afar, Samarra, al Qaim, Fallujah, and Baghdad (Zarqawi, 2005, Sep 16).

It seems quite ironic that the group that admittedly struck the Shia in the opening blows of the campaign can find themselves angry at the proposition of having to defend themselves against the quiet Shia campaign of ethnic cleansing and their open support for occupation forces, at least when it comes to operations against the Sunni. In actuality, it is even more ironic when one considers that the ISI’s unpopular campaign targeting Shia civilians and Sunni collaborators with the government are large reasons for the splintering of their own identity group and the civil war that occurred between Sunnis. Irony aside, this case study allows us to consider some important points that hopefully can be generalized to conflicts where identity struggles and demographic changes are looming in other parts of the world.
In this chapter, I propose the following findings from this study that have implications to scholars and observers outside of the sectarian conflict in the Middle East. First, I will discuss the impact of cognition on strategy formation, execution, and revision. Next, I look at the issues of attribution or claiming attacks as part of a strategy. The use of sexual imagery as a motivational tool is something I found interesting in my investigation that deserves further inquiry. At the tactical level, I have questions about the impact of a long term assassination campaign on local stability and governance. Finally, demographic change has been associated with identity conflict, and this can be seen in this case as well. What impact will population changes have on communities in the United States and Europe?

**Strategy and Cognition**

An explanation of ISI strategy formulation can be informed by the recent work of Dan Kahan, a law professor at Yale who researches cultural cognition. In an experiment that looked at ideological motivated reasoning, Kahan’s findings rejected two popular theories on heuristic driven reasoning. Bounded Rationality Position, which asserts that individuals consume information in accordance with ideological and cultural predispositions, and Ideological Asymmetry Position, which holds that political conservatives are more averse to complexity and reject evidence contrary to their political goals, were not supported by the results of Kahan’s study. Instead, Kahan found evidence to support his hypothesis that ideologically motivated reasoning is a “reasoning adaptation suited to promoting the interest that individuals have in conveying their membership in and loyalty to affinity groups central to their personal wellbeing” (Kahan, 2013, p. 417-418).

Kahan’s larger point is that group identity plays a large part in assessment of risk and the heated discourse surrounding the risk to society as a whole. This discourse prevents resolution of
the conflict due to the individual’s alignment with positions that their important social identity
group finds important. Since all individuals firmly attached to particular social groups process
information in this way, collectively the problem gets worse, not better. In the Iraq case study,
this concept is much more likely to be the cause of attacks on Shia civilians than the alternate
causes analyzed in this research. The solution to this kind of dilemma is for academics to
conduct more research into image construction, maintenance, and perpetuation in order to
discover what causes these identity poles to be created. The creation of these polar opposites then
justifies any and all facts that confirm differences and the rhetoric that sustains the existence of
different groups. Since the groups are unreceptive to information that contradicts their positions
out of fear of group defection, the only way to address this problem is to focus on the group
identity formation.

The defection of large elements of the Sunni identity that fed the ISI self-image happened
not because of any action by the Coalition or Iraqi Government, but by Sunnis that could not
adopt the evolving identity of the Salafist-Jihadist, which had assimilated an ethic of killing
civilians of the opposing sect. This identity formation and sustainment is the key to defeating a
group like the Islamic State. The sectarian actions of the Shia government might play into ISI
messaging, but in reality might have little effect on whether Sunnis actually consider themselves
to identify with the group itself. Sectarian warfare in Syria has most likely been a boon to the ISI
as it has brought foreigners back to the organization to fight in Syria, and they have been brought
into Iraq to fight more important battles according to the ISI. But the ISI hold over Sunni Iraqis
in Anbar, Diyala, and parts of North Babil is contested to be sure, and any effort to defeat the
Islamic State must start with their fractured identity and a reassurance that the overall Sunni
identity is not threatened within Iraq. Steps toward a meaningful reconciliation, like the elimination of de-Ba’athification laws, would be actions in the right direction.

**Attribution**

Large portions of this dissertation investigated the lack of attribution by ISI on their successful sectarian attacks. As discussed in Chapter 5, no large civilian casualty producing event was ever claimed by the ISI after 2003’s Hakim bombing. This is a significant finding that I have not seen in any other research to date. The ISI acknowledged that its rhetoric matched the activities that it has been accused of, yet continued to deny these attacks until recently. Their atrocities documented in the summer of 2014 were against military prisoners, which they claim as following precedent from Sharia and the early Islamic period. Claiming civilian casualties has been a topic steadily avoided by the ISI for years. Is attribution, or lack of attribution, by a perpetrator an important factor in ethnic conflict or terrorism studies?

My research in Chapter 4 and 5 highlights how non-attribution was most likely a policy decision by the ISI leadership to counter public criticism of their brand. This policy works for the reasons Kahan found in his experiments: ideologues would reject information that is counter to their identity group’s consensus on controversial issues. Most newspapers blame the ISI for car bombs against civilians in Iraq, which the ISI fails to claim in order to prevent their supporters from having to struggle with an ocean of information that counters their belief in the righteousness of their cause. This is otherwise known as plausible deniability.

We have seen this play out recently in the Ukraine and in cyber-attacks, where the creation of doubt about the origination of attacks are enough to prolong assignment of blame until it loses impact in the battle for public opinion. The obscuration of the origins of the Buk
surface to air missile system that shot down a Malaysian airliner in July of 2014 was effective in preventing blame assignment during the period that the shoot down was in the news. Russian supporters could rest assured that any attacks on their identity as Russians – due to their government’s provision of the weapon system to Ukrainian separatists – could be denied or parried due to this plausible deniability.

In an October, 2014 Atlantic Council issue brief, Jason Healey makes a parallel point about cyber-attacks on U.S. companies. In the consternation on what to do about “anonymous” attacks, Healey argued that “the compulsion to comprehensively backtrack the trajectory of the cyber-stones” is irrelevant to decision making about what to do in response (2012, p. 2). There is a spectrum of state responsibility for cyber-attacks originating in their territory, and Healey suggests that, under the normal use of the concept of sovereignty, states should hold others responsible for stopping cyber-attacks occurring from within their borders. Since Healey’s brief was published, the United States has indicted members of the Chinese Peoples’ Liberation Army for cyber-attacks on U.S. companies in an attempt to bring attention to this problem (Schmidt & Sanger, 2014, May 19).

In regards to the ISI and their non-attributed attacks in Iraq, there has been little effort or thought to either prove that it is ISI behind the unlawful civilian attacks, or hold them responsible. The Iraqi government’s prosecution of ISI members has been undermined by accusations of torture and forced confessions, which in the Samarra case mar what could be a clear refutation of ISI dissembling about their involvement. This dissembling could be used to discredit their claims to focus on military targets, and tarnish their image of honorable warriors simply carrying out their instructions in accordance with Sharia law and Salafist teachings. The truth is that none of their civilian attacks are condoned under either legal framework or
traditional understanding. Failure to exploit this ISI vulnerability by all parties has been a wasted opportunity to damage the ISI brand.

As a matter of policy, the Iraqi government could have introduced the two surviving Samarra suspects to independent legal judgments and oversight by human rights groups. Executing the Tunisian alleged perpetrator really eliminated any chance to prove beyond a doubt that the ISI was lying about their role in the bombing, a fact that has some importance since the ISI has denied it on multiple occasions in 2006. Making the investigation public would be another step in the right direction. The point follows Healey’s logic: that you need to make a solid (not foolproof) case about attribution that people can believe, and then move on from the finding to an informed policy that takes action against the perpetrators. The Iraqi government did the latter to some degree, but could have improved on making the case to the international public. Certainly the fact that the Tunisian government and a human rights group tried to intervene to prevent the execution of the accused bomber does not validate the process that occurred from a neutral perspective. Furthermore, any information the United States has about such a crucial attack, or any of these sectarian attacks, should have been declassified and released within a reasonable amount of time. The State Department’s campaign to counter ISI messaging is new and controversial, but if done correctly, could be a promising idea that needs access to the right information and an in-depth understanding of ISI vulnerabilities in order to be effective (@ThinkAgain_DOS, 2014).

There is one last point about the need to investigate attacks on civilians when an actor like the ISI is deliberately trying to camouflage their actions. The targeting of Iraq Shia specifically because of their faith, and not for reasons associated with the overthrow of a government, suggests that the campaign could meet the requirements to be genocidal in nature.
This quickly elevates the concern of countries like the United States, which would rather decide about intervention in the Iraq conflict of 2014 on the merits of tangible national interests and not on moral issues. The Islamic State’s campaign against the Yazidis near Sinjar in the summer and fall of 2014 quickly changed the calculus of the United States, who up until that point was happy to stay out of the conflict. The prevention of genocide has become a foreign policy objective of the United States, according to its current National Security Strategy (2010), and it is obvious that the plight of women and children at the hands of the Islamic State prompted immediate and direct action. Yet as my research revealed, the Islamic State has maintained this policy toward the Shia, and to a much lesser extent the Yazidis, for over a decade. Penetration of the fog of non-attribution is important work and necessary to avoid a reactive foreign policy – not to mention the deaths of innocents.

**Sexual Imagery and Identity Mobilization**

A surprise to me in researching this topic was the amount of sexual references in official ISI messaging. Reminiscent of the Greeks’ reaction to the “abduction” of Helen by Paris in the Iliad, ISI used sexual imagery to motivate their own social group and to create an emotional sense of identity assault by the Shia and Crusaders for recruitment and funding purposes. Sex has been used as a weapon of war since the beginning of time, but its discussion today is a reminder that there are timeless elements to the nature of war. Either the ISI found accusations of rape to be a successful recruiting tool or just relied on their intuition, I cannot be sure. Zarqawi was fixated by the subject and addressed it in dozens of communications. He was responsible for using graphic illustrations of sex concerning the raping of Sunni women by U.S. and Shia Iraqi soldiers that are normally absent from official communications. His discourse about the alleged Shia proclivity for anal sex, obviously to discredit the entire sect, was a bit out of the ordinary.
Aside from considerations that Zarqawi himself had psychological disorders associated with sex, the use of sex to motivate identity ties and rally members is an interesting area for continued research. Mia Bloom, an expert on suicide terrorism and the use of women in terrorism from the University of Massachusetts - Lowell, conducts excellent research in this area but there is much more to be done.

What is it about “our” women being raped that motivates group members to rally to the cause? The rape and killing of Abeer Janabi by four American soldiers near Yousifiyah, a story well told by Jim Frederick (2011) in *Blackhearts*, appears in multiple ISI messaging as proof of what is alleged to be policy by the U.S. and Iraqi government against the Sunni (Abu Omar, 2007, Apr 17). It is a call for revenge, but Abu Omar was obviously using it as a recruiting tool for those who would rally to the defense of the Sunni identity. There are intuitive reasons why this might work, but I am unaware of any theoretical reason other than what is discussed above from Kahan’s research and the findings in this research about the role of identity in conflict that would explain why rape imagery motivates recruits.

**War by a Thousand Cuts – The ISI assassination campaign**

The ISI assassination campaign, started against Shia militias early on and expanded to every aspect of governance and target, was breathtaking in scope. While it has nothing to do with the theoretical investigation of this dissertation, it was hard not to notice two things. One, according to their own statements, the ISI has assassinated a large number of people over a long period of time. If the overwhelming majority of people focus on living their lives, farming, running business, and enjoying their family – then there is a small minority of any society that actually invests in becoming policemen, city council members, mayors, and government
workers. When that small segment of society is under intense assault, there is the chance that a society could collapse from within.

Second, the campaign against the Sahwa movement and Sunni collaborators, as described in Chapter 5 with the story of Jurf and that of the politician Samir, has had a large impact on the ability of the Iraqi government to control the Sunni areas of the political minority. This is not unlike certain cities in the United States that have areas that are “no-go” areas for the police, due to their inability to run informants about criminal activity and the danger to the police themselves. How does a government combat an active enemy campaign that uses penetrated communities for the precise information needed to eliminate government supporters? Recent commentary about the collapse of the Iraqi security forces in Anbar and Ninewa province in Iraq (2014) overlooks the effects of a multi-year campaign to disconnect the government from its population at the grass roots level. If proper counterinsurgency tactics try to connect the government and its population, than this is the antidote. Similar dynamics were seen in the Viet Cong campaign to eliminate Diem government outreach to South Vietnamese villages, as well as the CIA’s Phoenix program – which was an attempt to replicate the same effect on the Viet Cong “infrastructure” in the villages (Colby, 1989).

I am at a loss to illustrate any mitigation to the devastating impact that such an assassination campaign could have on a government or society. My research of ISI statements led me to believe, through its amazing breadth and scope, that the assassination campaign is not only underreported, but that its relative invisibility produces a lack of awareness in policy makers of the efficacy of feasible strategies to defeat the Islamic State in 2014. While it is possible that these assassinations, in comparison to the population as a whole, are a small enough number to be dismissed, I am unconvinced. The targeting of individuals by strategic location, as
in the Jurf ah Sakhr example, and the targeting of irreplaceable leadership, is a cause of major concern. At some point, no one will be left in these important communities to lead, and then it doesn’t matter what your overall strategy is.

**Social Identity and Demographic Change**

The greatest impact of this research could be applied to demographic change and its impact on social identities. What has caused this civil war between Iraqis is not the result of ‘hundreds of years of Sunni-Shia violence,’ or manipulation by the elite, or instrumental violence to gain international funding – but the result of the loss of social dominance by one identity group to its former social inferiors. This dynamic was mentioned in Chapter 2 with the Northern Ireland case, where a highly fertile political minority approaches and threatens to overcome the social dominance of the previous order, leading to violence.

The United States is a much different country demographically than Northern Ireland or Iraq, but it does have a changing demographic pattern that will change the political order in the future based on current voting patterns. What is interesting about the situation is not how political parties adapt to this future, but how the identity of Anglo-Saxon/European America adjusts to a future as just another ethnic group in the American melting pot. Could this cause ethnic conflict, or are the principles of pluralism in the United States strong enough to prevent it?

I don’t believe there would be ethnic conflict in the United States over political dominance, but there are similarities to the case study. American whites, although tolerant of the many minority groups in the country, can do so because they are the solid majority – particularly of those able and willing to vote. In their view, American culture and white culture are the same. Inability to assimilate to such a great culture is not only frowned upon, but generates hostility.
Failure to speak English in schools becomes a community fight in California, even when some students will not succeed if they cannot learn in their native language. School administrators banning American flag shirts during Cinco de Mayo day in California schools sparks protests. The American government’s transportation of undocumented migrant children from Central America to other locations because of overcrowding causes citizens to mobilize to forcibly turn away buses from their communities. Illegal aliens voting or claiming illegal tax returns for children outside of the United States becomes a political issue.

These issues might have been part of the American immigration pattern for the past two centuries. However, at no time was the cultural dominance of the Euro-American ever in question before. Now, demographic patterns dictate a future that resembles what happened in Iraq. Nakash (2003) argued that the Shia were the minority not long ago in Iraq (this theme was ironically echoed by the ISI leadership often), and that the South became predominantly Shia because the nomadic tribes that settled near the famous shrine cities of Karbala and Najaf were less dogmatic about sect and saw economic benefits in the association with Shi’ism. This dynamic, along with a reported higher birthrate, transformed the Shia from the minority in the population to the majority. The identity conflict between groups in Iraq is to a large degree a result of the former political majority failing to adjust to their loss of power.

Another similarity between the Iraq case study and American demographic change is the Sunni association with the Iraqi identity, as argued by Haddad (2011). The Sunni identity and the Iraqi identity were so intertwined that it was hard to differentiate for most Sunni. When Iraqi Sunni (and others like Zarqawi) saw open displays of Shia assertiveness through the participation in Ashura rituals, coupled with anti-Saddam language and a relief that the regime was gone, it hardened sectarian relations. An attack on Iraq was an attack on the Sunni, and vice versa, since
the Sunni could not appreciate how Iraqi Shia could be relieved at the regime change of a hated dictator that had so forcibly put down the uprising of 1991.

After researching this case study, and attenuating to clues of identity politics, rhetoric, and symbolic violence for several years, it is hard not to draw parallels to any situation where the majority ethnic or racial group slips into the minority. This is a possibility here in the United States as well in areas of Europe, or any area where population demographics are changing. The identity struggle and the influence of image creation does not predict violence, which seems to come more from instrumental beliefs that violence was an efficient means to an end. But dominant identity groups do not slip into the minority without a struggle to maintain their cultural dominance. How this plays out in any one situation is probably influenced greatly by culture and historical precedence. For Hispanics in the Republican Party hoping that their fellow politicians will curtail inflammatory rhetoric against illegal/undocumented immigrants, they can understand why that will be a difficult sell by absorbing the findings of this research.

The difficulties of failing to manage rising identity conflict can be seen outside of Iraq as well. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia both have an increasing amount of violence directed at their Shia minority as the heated discourse, much like Kahan found in his research of divisive symbols of political identity, spreads to other areas with the same demographic dynamic and becomes unmanageable. Countries like Jordan have started campaigns to monitor religious clerics in order to moderate the heated discourse and sectarian language (Booth & Luck, 2014, Nov 9). A recent attack on an Ashura observance in Qatif, a restless Shia province in northeast Saudi Arabia, was countered by an organized multi-sect funeral for both the Shia worshippers and the Sunni security forces killed. Slogans of national unity were sung and the discourse turned to shared cultural and religious histories (Omran, 2014, Nov 9). These are simple steps that won’t
erase Sunni chauvinism over the Shia minority in Qatif, but too often these easy victories are unclaimed – which then allows the rhetoric to fuel a further polarization of rival identities.

Conclusion

The town of Jurf ah Sakhr was in the news again in the fall of 2014 as it was forcibly cleared of Islamic State militants who had regained dominance of the area sometime around 2011. The government’s motivation was to stop future attacks against the upcoming Ashura festival. After the major setbacks of the summer of 2014, the government abandoned its usual practice and utilized Shia militias to clear the township, which in normal circumstances was the home to over 80,000 Sunnis (Morris, 2014, Oct 29). The Iraqi government claimed it was a great victory, and my knowledge of the reputation of Jurf ah Sakhr among Shia Iraqis confirms that it is a symbolic town representing the old Sunni order. The town had a strong retired military presence and was the home of the Republican Guard’s Medina division prior to 2003.

The local defeat of the Islamic State and reoccupation of Jurf ah Sakhr by the Iraqi government stood in stark contrast with a similar event in 2007, when American forces and the local Awakening council ejected ISI forces from the area with a minor amount of skirmishing and impact upon the civilian population. According to the Washington Post, the town has been destroyed in the current campaign (Morris, 2014, Oct 29). The Badr Corps commander Hadi al-Amiri led the fight for the Shia government, and photographs of Iran’s Quds Force commander, Qassem Soleimani, went viral in Shia social media showing him celebrating with Amiri at the Jurf ah Sakhr city council building shortly after the victory (Green Lemon, 2014, Oct 25).

Whatever the motivation of the ISI to attack Iraqi Shia as an identity group, it has created a situation where identity has subsumed all other influences. The idea of the Iranian leader of
their elite special operations/intelligence service – himself a veteran of the Iraq/Iran War - in the Sunni heartland surrounded by Shia militia members will harden the Sunni elite, men who fought bitterly against Iran in the 1980s. While elite manipulation of sectarian tensions for political gain is commonplace, at some point the events on the ground overshadow and surpass the intentions of the elite. It is hard to imagine reconciliation between Sunni and Shia in Iraq now, just four short years after the highpoint of Sunni-Shia relations during the elections of 2010. The use of Shia militias to recapture lost ground, and to continue to ethnically cleanse Sunnis from strategic areas, will make reconciliation impossible. Sectarian conflict eventually creates its own logic, which will dominate the area for an unknowable future. The sad thing is this was all preventable in so many ways. Most importantly, understanding the dynamic presented in this research could identify future conflicts and hopefully prevent them.
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Appendix A – Sample Coding Worksheet

File Name: CTC-ISIAgreement_Trans.pdf
Media Source: Captured Document ID: MNFT-2007-636896
Author: Doctor (Al Hajji) and ISI (represented by Abu Sa’adi)
Collection: CTC Harmony Database
Release Date: 38453
Event: Agreement between the Doctore and ISI to cease all violence before a court preceding occurs

Purpose:
- Recruitment
- Eulogy
- Defense
- Celebrate
- Strategy Communication
- Admin

Target(s):
- a. U.S.
- b. Iraq Govt (&Security Forces)
- c. Israel
- d. Iran
- e. Iraqi Shia
- f. Sawha
- g. Sunni Collaborators (not Sawha)
- h. Sunni Ummah
- i. AQC
- j. Sunni Insurgent Groups
- k. Shia Insurgent Groups
- l. Sunni Apostate Leaders
- m. Sunni Insurgent Groups
- n. Shia Insurgent Groups
- o. Sunni Apostate Leaders
- p. Iraqi People
- q. Shia Pilgrims
- r. Kurds

Sectarian Language:
- a. Present Y/N?
- b. Language:
- c. Event Scripts:

Strategy Communications:
- a. Claim credit for Sectarian Civilian Attack Y/N:
- b. Sectarian Blowback Reference Y/N:
- c. Financial references Y/N:

Target 1 Capability (H/M/L):
- a. Military:
- b. Economic:

Target Culture (H/M/L):
- a. Religious:
- b. Education:

Target Intentions:
- a. Goals (H/N/F):
- b. List Goals:
- c. Aggression Y/N:
- d. Cooperation Y/N:

Target DM (H/M/L):
- a. Domestic Politics efficacy
- b. Competition (Y/N)
- c. Style (List):

Target Opportunity Y/N:

Group ID
- a. Culture:
- b. Capability:
- c. Intentions:

Indicators of Image Confusion:
Appendix B - Coding Book

A0: Admin electronic file Name

Explanation: Administrative tracking for the purpose of reviewing data and retrieving the file for re-inspection.

A1: Media Source
   a. Captured Doc (Number)
   b. Press release

Explanation: The two different types of data for this research are captured documents (from the Harmony Collection at the Combating Terrorism Center CTC at West Point) and official Islamic State of Iraq (including TWJ, MSC, and ISI) press releases. The designation here is a binary one. Captured Documents will be referenced by their DOD tracking number for cross-reference and verification.

A2: Author
   a. Leadership (Name)
   b. Official release by PR firm (Al Furqan, ISI Media Bn)
   c. Unknown

Explanation: This variable attempts to assess who the author was (if known). Leadership statements are identified by speaker due to their importance. Some captured documents are as well. Press releases either designate who the statement is authored by (senior leadership – give the name) or is making an official statement by the PR wing of ISI (label as the name of the wing which changes all the time). If unknown (rare) label as “c.”

A3: Collection
   a. CTC Harmony
   b. Haverford College
   c. Flashpoint
   d. Global Terrorism
   e. Open Source

Explanation: This administrative category attempts to identify the origin of the document. If it does not belong to the first four categories (normal), put unknown.

A4: Release Date

Explanation: This is the date on the document (if known) it was released to the press. If this is unknown, go with the internet posting date. If this is also unknown, put “unknown”. Further research will try to nail this down.

A5: Event associated with release and date
Explanation: The purpose of this is to later go back and examine press releases and use various databases to correlate events/attacks for confirmation and validation. Also, one of the research questions is to examine the probability that ISI will claim a pilgrim attack. Put as much information here as needed to tie the press release to the attack (sometimes there is a delay of up to a week – sometimes months between event and any press release). Put a general major event that influences the report if a generic strategic document. Put N/A if this is an administrative document.

Q1: Purpose of message:
   a. Recruitment
   b. Eulogy of fighter or other ISI figure
   c. Defense (reply to recent criticism)
   d. Celebrate
   e. Strategy communication
   f. Admin

Explanation: what we are trying to determine here is the frequency of different message types.
   Recruitment: Messages that Specifically Call for young men to join the Jihad
   Eulogy: Specifically mourning a fighter martyred in the jihad, regardless of where it is (outside Iraq is fine). Don’t indicate if mentioned in passing, or as a result of reporting an attack (like a suicide bomber, etc.).
   Defense: Key will be a reference to another individual/group’s message and a tailored response and defense of ISI personnel and policies. Emotional language used in these types of messages make them better representatives of cognitive process and less likely to include deception.
   Celebrate: These will be the majority of the messages and follow successful insurgent actions or celebrate other insurgent actions and attacks on common enemies.
   Strategy Communication: Any message or document that discusses or argues on behalf of strategic choices. These include ways, means, acknowledgement of the environment on choices, evaluation of risks, and goals.
   Admin: This is an administrative document not meant for public consumption or a message correcting a previous message. This could be a clarification of group involvement (non-claim) or activity.

Note: this answer can include multiple entries, as long as it is a major theme in the message. Don’t include afterthoughts.

Q2: Target of message
   a. United States
   c. Israel
   d. Iran
   e. Iran Shia
   f. Sawha
   g. Sunni Collaborators in Government
   h. Sunni ummah
i. AQC
j. Sunni Insurgent Groups
k. Shia Insurgent Groups (Badr, Mahdi Militia, Splinter Groups)
l. IrISI people in general (non-sectarian or ethnic)
m. Shia pilgrims

Explanation: This is an important variable to determine who ISI is targeting with their strategic communications. Multiple entries are possible here, go in the order listed here. Be careful to delineate between IrISI Government and Shia civilians (which are not the same).

Q3: Sectarian Language (defined by derogatory slang for other group)
   a. Is it present: Y/N?
   b. Record specific language
   c. What historical event scripts are referenced (list all)?

Explanation: Looking for derogatory slang names that highlight social competition between Sunni and any other groups. First, is it present in the document/release (Q3a). This helps us understand the prevalence of sectarian language in the data as well as to look at it over time. If present, record each reference, to include number of times if repeated. Example: rafida x3, shroog, rejectionist would be the entry for Q3b. Historical event scripts are any event from the past that is unrelated to the press release/document subject but factors in the motivation for any attack or strategy. Example: The Mongol sack of Baghdad, the sack of Tal Afar.

Q4: Strategy Communications:
   a. Claim for credit of Sectarian Civilian Attack Y/N
   b. Sectarian blowback reference Y/N
   c. Financial references Y/N

Explanation: The purpose of this category is to determine if and when specific strategies are mentioned. The first part asks for claims of specific civilian (non-military) targets. Next, are there any blowback references here, including trying to provoke Shia attacks on the Sunni and anything referring to uniting the Sunni community in Iraq (and elsewhere) to fight the Shia in a civil war. Finally, is there any appeal for financial support, mention of a loss of financial support, or discussion of the expenses of running an insurgency.

Q5: Ref target of Q2, what is evaluated capability(high/medium/low)?
   a. Military
   b. Economic

Explanation: Referring to the target listed in Q2, are there indicators in the document of the target’s military or economic capabilities? Measure based on the language in the document (only if it is there) on a High/Medium/Low scale.

Q6: Ref target of Q2, are their indicators of culture (high/med/low)?
a. Religious
b. Education

Explanation: Referring to the target listed in Q2, are there indicators in the document of the target’s religious sophistication or level of education? Measure based on the language in the document (only if it is there) on a High/Medium/Low scale.

Q7: Ref target of Q2, what are Intentions?
   a. Goals (Hostile/Neutral/Friendly)
   b. List Goals:
   c. Aggression (Y/N)
   d. Cooperation (Y/N)

Explanation: Referring to the target listed in Q2, are there indicators in the document of the target’s Goals? If so, evaluate them as Hostile/Neutral/Friendly in Q7a and list them in Q7b. Measure references of Aggression and Cooperation based on the language in the document (only if it is there) on a High/Medium/Low scale.

Q8: Ref target of Q2, what is nature of DM group?
   a. Domestic politics efficacy (High/Med/Low)
   b. Competition (Y/N)
   c. Style (List)

Explanation: Referring to the target listed in Q2, are there indicators in the document of the target’s domestic political efficacy? Measure based on the language in the document (only if it is there) on a High/Medium/Low scale. For Q8b are there references to competition internally that could be promising for the future or that would be advantageous to ISI for exploitation? Example could be anti-war demonstrations in the U.S., etc. The purpose of evaluating comments about governmental or DM style help evaluate the perception of threat in Q8c. Example: weak democracy, or illegitimate monarchy.

Q9: Ref target of Q2, is there an opportunity to exploit? (Y/N)

Explanation: When looking at ISI tactics, opportunities to exploit are usually taken. Does the message expose these opportunities?

Q10: Group Identity – are there indicators of self-image development present?
   a. Culture (list)
   b. Capability (list)
   c. Intentions (list)

Explanation: This is an evaluation of ISI’s image of themselves. Culture would have any references to religious excellence or upholding traditions. Capability would include military or political prowess. Intentions would be the beneficial intent of ISI and what would happen if they reached their goals.
Q11: Elements of Image Confusion: (List)

Explanation: I am looking specifically here for any evidence of other images which are causing cognitive stress due to categorization issues or mis-categorization. An example would be the Shia as a strong (instead of weak) culture or capability, which would cause ISI to reconsider its tactical choices against this different image possibility.
### Appendix C – Sample Database Entry

**FILE NAME**  
Image 0419-229x310.jpg

**SOURCE**  
Captured Document

**AUTHOR**  
Islamic State of Iraq

**COLLECTION**  
CTC Harmony Database

**RELEASE DATE**  
11-Apr-05

**EVENT (ASSOCIATED WITH RELEASE DATE)**  
Wanted Poster for Yasir al Habib (lost/loser the abominable) "Khasir al

---

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TGT#1 Int: List</th>
<th>TGT#1 Int: Aggression</th>
<th>TGT#1 Int: Cooperation</th>
<th>TGT#1 DM Capability</th>
<th>TGT#1 Int: Opportunity Y/N</th>
<th>Group ID</th>
<th>Group ID</th>
<th>Group ID</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Slander Aisha</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>We will destroy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stop fighting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Reliance on</td>
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<tr>
<td>between groups</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sharia law</td>
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</table>

---

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Sec/Lang Present</th>
<th>Sec/Lang Event</th>
<th>Sec/Lang Language</th>
<th>Sec/Lang Scripts</th>
<th>SC Sect</th>
<th>SC Blowback</th>
<th>SC $ Ref</th>
<th>Name Target#1</th>
<th>TGT#1 Capability</th>
<th>TGT#1 Culture</th>
<th>TGT#1 Intentions: Goals H/N/F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>attack</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td>rafida, mut'a, daqa slander,</td>
<td>N</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Iraqi Shia</td>
<td>L: sexual deviants.</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>F</td>
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<tr>
<td>strategy</td>
<td>N</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sunni Insurgent Groups</td>
<td></td>
<td>H</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
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</table>
# Appendix D – Jurf al-Sakhr Awakening Casualties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IBC #</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Exact Location</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>k12022</td>
<td>2-Jan-09</td>
<td>Jurf al-Sakhar</td>
<td>Awakening Council checkpoint</td>
<td>gunfire</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k12129</td>
<td>4-Jan-09</td>
<td>Jurf al-Sakhr</td>
<td>Awakening Council checkpoint</td>
<td>gunfire</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k12265</td>
<td>23-Feb-09</td>
<td>Jurf al-Sakhar</td>
<td>member found handcuffed and shot dead</td>
<td>gunfire, executed</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k13077</td>
<td>21-Mar-09</td>
<td>Sunaydiq, al-Musayab</td>
<td>Adnan Salah al-Jinabi, Al-Musayab Awakening Council leader</td>
<td>bomb attached to c</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k13126</td>
<td>30-Mar-09</td>
<td>Jurf al-Sakhr</td>
<td>Awakening Council member found shot dead in car</td>
<td>gunfire</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k13634</td>
<td>12-Jul-09</td>
<td>Imam Wees area</td>
<td>Jurf al-Sakhar member found shot dead</td>
<td>gunfire</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k13852</td>
<td>17-Aug-09</td>
<td>Sendij, Musayab</td>
<td>Awakening Council checkpoint</td>
<td>gunfire</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k14281</td>
<td>12-Nov-09</td>
<td>Jurf al-Sakhr</td>
<td>Awakening Council checkpoint</td>
<td>gunfire</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k14777</td>
<td>16-Mar-10</td>
<td>between Jurf al-Sakhar and Sendij, Musayab</td>
<td>bodies of kidnapped Sahwa members found shot dead</td>
<td>gunfire, executed</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k14873</td>
<td>10-Apr-10</td>
<td>Jurf al-Sakhar</td>
<td>Sheikh Abdullah Fihan al-Janabi, Awakening Council leader</td>
<td>drive-by shooting</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k15086</td>
<td>6-Jun-10</td>
<td>Jurf al-Sakhar</td>
<td>homes of Sahwa members</td>
<td>gunfire</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k15529</td>
<td>10-Aug-10</td>
<td>Jurf al-Sakhar</td>
<td>Malik al-Janabi, Awakening Council leader</td>
<td>gunfire</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k15547</td>
<td>15-Aug-10</td>
<td>Jurf al-Sakhr</td>
<td>Awakening Council members leaving mosque</td>
<td>gunfire</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k15921</td>
<td>4-Oct-10</td>
<td>Jurf al-Sakhar</td>
<td>Awakening Council leader near house</td>
<td>gunfire</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k15940</td>
<td>7-Oct-10</td>
<td>Jurf al-Sakhar</td>
<td>Awakening Council member</td>
<td>drive-by shooting</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k16145</td>
<td>18-Nov-10</td>
<td>Farisiya, near Iskandariya</td>
<td>Awakening Council member</td>
<td>gunfire</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k16653</td>
<td>18-Mar-11</td>
<td>Jurf al-Sakhar</td>
<td>Awakening Council members in home</td>
<td>gunfire</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k16730</td>
<td>4-Apr-11</td>
<td>Jurf al-Sakhar</td>
<td>Awakening Council members investigating site of possible body</td>
<td>roadside bomb</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k17070</td>
<td>31-May-11</td>
<td>Jurf al-Sakhar</td>
<td>Awakening Council leader</td>
<td>drive-by shooting</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k17086</td>
<td>5-Jun-11</td>
<td>Jurf al-Sakhar</td>
<td>Sahwa member</td>
<td>gunfire</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k17266</td>
<td>3-Jul-11</td>
<td>Jurf al-Sakhar</td>
<td>Sahwa member</td>
<td>magnetic bomb</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k17304</td>
<td>8-Jul-11</td>
<td>Jurf al-Sakhar</td>
<td>Sahwa members</td>
<td>drive-by shooting</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k17927</td>
<td>26-Oct-11</td>
<td>Jurf al-Sakhar</td>
<td>Awakening Council patrol</td>
<td>roadside bomb</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d7951</td>
<td>27-Mar-12</td>
<td>Jurf al-Sakhr</td>
<td>house of Sahwa leader Sheikh Wahid Monjid al-Atabi</td>
<td>improvised explosive device</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>k19689</td>
<td>7-Oct-12</td>
<td>Jurf al-Sakher</td>
<td>Awakening Council member</td>
<td>drive-by shooting</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k19970</td>
<td>30-Aug-13</td>
<td>Rabee'a, Jurf al-Sakhar</td>
<td>Sahwa member</td>
<td>gunfire</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k20455</td>
<td>1-Nov-13</td>
<td>Fadhiliya, west Hilla</td>
<td>Sahwa members in vehicle</td>
<td>roadside bomb</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total 46
This data is extracted and filtered from entries in the Iraqi Body Count database, iraqibodycount.org, (2014).