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ANALYSIS: ISIS's magazine Dabiq & what it tells us

by Charles Cameron - 18th February 2015

THE TITLE, and much of the content, of the Islamic State's magazine, Dabiq, emphasises the 'end times' nature of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's so-called caliphate.

The beheadings, crucifixions and most recently the burning of 45 people in Al-Baghdadi, grab the West's attention, and are intended to trigger a military over-reaction, proving to those who are willing to believe it that the West is in a 'war with Islam'.

But the Islamic State's English-language magazine Dabiq has a different audience and a distinctly different message.

Dabiq, which is published online and first appeared on July 14th, 2014, barely two weeks after Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's announcement of the caliphate, is in some ways similar to Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's magazine Inspire - a glossy which gives an appearance of sophistication, carrying the terrorist's message to possible recruits in the west.

Theological

Inspire is known for its practical instructions in bomb-making as well as its theological content, and seeks to encourage lone wolf attacks in the West in the name of Al Qaeda.

Dabiq by contrast is more concerned with the territorial gains IS has made, the wilayat or provinces it claims in Iraq, Syria and elsewhere, a theological call to possible recruits encouraging them to make the pilgrimage to join their jihad in the Middle East - and an easily missed focus on end times beliefs that are popular among Sunni Muslims.

Some say the magazine's title is a reference back to 1516 when the Ottomans defeated the Mamluk Sultanate in a small town in Syria a little north of Aleppo named Dabiq. But the magazine itself makes it very clear that is not the title's primary reference.

According to Abu Musabab-Zarqawi, the founder of the Islamic State's predecessor, Al Qaeda in Iraq, 'The spark has been lit here in Iraq, and its heat will continue to intensify - by Allah's permission - until it burns the crusader armies in Dabiq.'

The image pictured inside ISIS's Dabiq magazine

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That's an explicitly future-focused quote, and it is the very first thing you see when you open the first issue of Dabiq, right above the table of contents and juxtaposed with the image pictured (above).

The picture, too, clearly indicates that the battle will be against the 'Crusader armies' - not the Mamluks - in the near future.

Armageddon

Page three of the magazine says, 'As for the name of the magazine, then it is taken from the area named Dabiq in the northern countryside of Halab (Aleppo) in Sham. This place was mentioned in a hadith describing some of the events of the Malahim (what is sometimes referred to as Armageddon in English). One of the greatest battles between the Muslims and the crusaders will take place near Dabiq.'

The magazine bookends its references to the end times with an extended hadith on page three - and on the back cover.

“The Hour will not be established until the Romans land at al-Amaq or Dabiq (two places near each other in the northern countryside of Halab).

“Then an army from al-Madinah of the best people on the earth at that time will leave for them. ... Then they will conquer Constantinople. Then while they are preparing for battle and filing their ranks, the prayer is called. So ‘Isa Ibn Maryam (alayhis-Salam) will descend and lead them.

“When the enemy of Allah sees him, he will melt as salt melts in water”

‘Isa Ibn Maryam is Jesus son of Mary, and this narration, attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, states that not long after the battle of Dabiq, Jesus will descend from heaven.

In another ahadith, not quoted in the magazine but well known to many readers, this event is predicted to take place at the Umayyad mosque in Damascus.

Mistake

Issue four of Dabiq

Issue four of Dabiq

Read by western secular eyes, all this talk of the end times can easily be glossed over in favor of the photos of Toyotas filled with gun-toting, flag-waving jihadists, the descriptions of battles won and jurisdictions established – the military and to some extent political side of things. But that would be a mistake.

Seen through the eyes of a prospective recruit, perhaps disenchanted with the wars the west has been fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, troubled by western support of dictators like the Shiite Assad overlordship of the Sunnis in Syria, egged on by friends and eager for a life of adventure and significance in a world which seems to offer little of either one, the picture looks quite different.

The images of battle victories, the killing of enemies and the distribution of food and essential services in conquered territories suggest that God may be blessing the newly proclaimed caliph’s efforts – but the greatest thrill comes from the promise of the end times.

Honour

Here the wannabe jihadist is offered the opportunity of a lifetime: to fight, not in just any old war, not even in a war to protect his religion, but in the greatest and most glorious of wars -- the final war between good and evil which ends with the inevitable triumph of good. To die in that war is to be a martyr and hero at the epic, culminating moment of history, and rewarded as such in paradise. And to fight and live and see the end is to be among the companions of both the returning Christ and the Mahdi: there could be no greater honour.

For purposes of recruitment, then, Dabiq’s insistence on the end times nature of the jihad is a powerful lure, and the passion it evokes can be extraordinary.

Writing in *Holy Wars*, Dr Timothy Furnish says, “Muslim messianic movements are to fundamentalist uprisings what nuclear weapons are to conventional ones: triggered by the same detonating agents, but far more powerful in scope and effect.”

The realities of war are harsh, and many of those from Europe and around the world who have joined the fight with IS are having the wind knocked out of their sails, and either returning home disillusioned, or getting executed for trying to make their way home. The bloody business of war, in other words, adds a strong dose of reality to the apocalyptic appeal, and can in some cases completely cure it.

Seriously

Nonetheless, it is a potent appeal, especially to those who read Dabiq and consider going to join the jihad – and we would do well to take it seriously. In Dabiq, the ‘caliphate’ of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is telling potential recruits loud and clear that Islam’s equivalent of Armageddon is now on the horizon, and they have the chance to fight on God’s side.

If we wish to understand the Islamic State, and perhaps to counter their narrative, it would be good not to discount this element.

ement of their ideology as though it were 'a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.' It is a potent aspect of their appeal.

<http://www.lapidomedia.com/analysis-what-we-learn-about-isis-magazine-dabiq>