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THE ROLE OF HISTORICAL NARRATIVES IN EXTREMIST PROPAGANDA

Alastair Reed, Jennifer Dowling

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine the role of historical narratives in extremist propaganda, seeking to show how and why they are used to enhance the impact of such propaganda. To that end we use the concept of the ‘competitive system of meaning’, which lies at the heart of extremist propaganda and forms their grand overarching narrative. Through the use of two constructs, in-group/out-group identity and crisis/solution, propagandists form a cylindrically reinforcing narrative. This paper is exploratory in nature, and is envisaged as the first step in much more detailed research into the role of historical narratives in extremist propaganda. It seeks to show the importance of historical narratives to propaganda by identifying and exploring five ways in which such narratives are exploited to reinforce the extremists’ ‘competitive system of meaning’.

Keywords—*terrorism, violent extremism, propaganda, strategic communications*

About the Authors

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Introduction

History is a powerful weapon, and some of the fiercest battles are fought over how it is interpreted. Although extremist groups are fighting in the present, historical narratives are often used to justify their ongoing causes, and as a result feature prominently in their propaganda output.¹ A phenomenon that has been highlighted in recent years in the extensive propaganda output of the Islamic State (IS). At the heart of Islamic State propaganda is the notion that the Muslim world is in crisis—facing an existential struggle for survival against the West. Throughout their propaganda they connect the current conflict to historic struggles with the West from the crusades to colonisation. Thereby they strengthen the sense of crisis, by presenting it as an ongoing and never-ending conflict. Conversely, the solution they propose, a return to the Caliphate, is also drawn from the past. The use of historical narratives to strengthen propaganda is, however, not unique to IS, or even to other militant Islamist groups. Other groups with different ideological, motivational, and operational tactics, from a national to a supra-national view, also rely heavily on history as justification across their propaganda. A central feature of The Provisional IRA's multi-dimensional communication strategy,² with its republican, nationalist agenda, was the consistent reiteration that the centuries of British oppression and occupation were the root cause of the 'Irish problem'. The ultimate removal of the foreign force was seen as the only solution to their perpetual crisis. Likewise, far-right groups, such as the Christian-identity movement, stake their foundation and justification on historical narratives and extensive biblical genealogies, to justify their in-group/out-group dynamic and the history of conflict between the groups. Across the whole spectrum of diverse and different extremist groups, historical narratives are often prominent in their propaganda. The question this paper seeks to ask is: How and why is history used in extremist propaganda?

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1 The term propaganda has many negative connotations, but is used pragmatically in this paper to refer to messaging designed to influence the behaviour and attitudes of a target audience to achieve politico-military ends during conflict.

2 John Horgan and Max Taylor, 'The provisional Irish republican army: Command and functional structure', in *Terrorism and Political Violence* 9 (3)(1997): 1–32 ; In this article the authors praise the Provisional IRA for the group's publicity wing, which formed an intrinsic part of the group's advanced command and functional structure.

This paper aims to examine the role of historical narratives used in propaganda by extremist groups, looking beyond mere justification, to see how and why they are used to enhance the impact of such propaganda. How are historical narratives deployed as a communication technique in extremist propaganda? This paper uses the concept of the ‘competitive system of meaning’, which, lying at the heart of extremist propaganda, forms their grand overarching narrative through the use of in-group/out-group identity and crisis/solution constructs to form a cylindrically reinforcing narrative. It seeks to identify five ways in which historical narratives are exploited to re-inforce the extremists’ ‘competitive system of meaning’. First, crisis expansion—connecting current events to greater historical trajectories to magnify the depth and resonance of the ‘crisis’. Second, solution support—using historical narratives to strengthen the case for the proposed ‘solution’. Third, deepening the in-group/out-group dynamic—exacerbating the distinction between group identities and demonstrating that this is the result of a larger historical trend. Fourth, group legitimacy—drawing on history for cultural appropriation to bolster the claim to legitimacy. And finally, justification—using historical prophecies to connect the present to the future and generate motivation for action.

As this research is explorative, looking into the role historical narratives play in extremist propaganda, rather than focusing on the propaganda used by one particular group, this paper will draw on examples from across a variety of extremist groups.³ We will explore examples from three different types of groups, chosen primarily for their illustrative nature. The groups whose propaganda we analyse include: militant Islamist groups (al-Qaeda, Islamic State), a national-separatist group (the Provisional IRA), and right-wing extremists (Nazi, Christian Identity). It is crucial to note that these groups vary in almost every aspect—ideology, motivation, and operational level—and are not comparable beyond the use of historical narratives in their propaganda. We selected them primarily because they demonstrate compelling examples of the use of historical narratives in propaganda, each in its own distinct way; and second, for their differences, to highlight that this technique is used by the broadest spectrum of groups and movements. The objective here is to demonstrate the role that historical narratives play across extremist propaganda, regardless of ideology and motivation. Whilst the five ways historical narratives are exploited in propaganda outlined above are invariably employed by many extremist groups, the examples chosen here have been selected simply for their explanatory value,

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³ Given the scope of this paper the narratives projected by the opponents’ of these extremist groups’ narratives will not be explored, but could in the future be a suggestion for a similar analysis, as there have been numerous examples of charismatic political leaders who have similarly drawn on historical narratives to construct and strengthen their political narratives. Such a comparative analysis would provide a more holistic understanding of the narratives being projected by these extremist groups being analysed in this paper.

not to demonstrate that they have a particular application by one or another type of extremist group. Furthermore, it should be noted that this technique is not unique to extremist groups, and could be as equally prevalent in political rhetoric and government counter-messaging. We hope this paper provides the groundwork for more in-depth future research into the use of historical narrative by individual groups, and potentially by their opponents as well.

What is the system of meaning?

We build on frameworks of analysis developed within the Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communications (CTSC) research project,⁴ in particular work by Dr Haroro Ingram and J.M. Berger.

In his linkage-based approach, Ingram outlines a core structure based on two interlocking dichotomies at the heart of extremist propaganda. Together they form a ‘competitive system of meaning’ that brings the reader into an extremist world view and provides a lens through which to view and interpret the world as prescribed by a particular group. Although the scope of the article does not allow us to go into detail, these groups use the interplay of in-group/out-group identities and crisis/solution constructs, which are ‘linked’ together to create cyclically self-reinforcing narratives.⁵

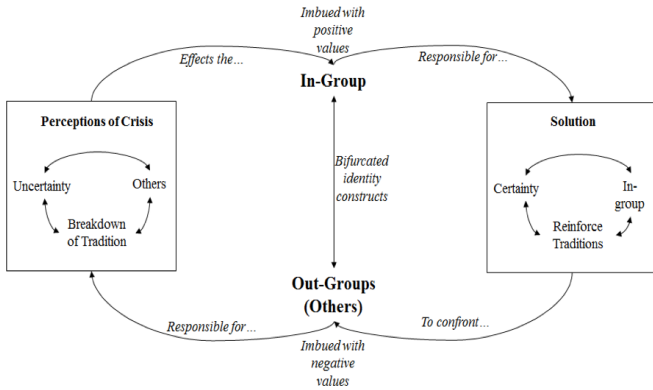


Figure 1. The cyclically reinforcing dynamic of extremist propaganda⁶

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4 For more information see: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, [The Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communications \(CTSC\) Project](#).

5 Ingram, ‘Deciphering the Siren Call of Militant Islamist Propaganda: Meaning, Credibility & Behavioural Change’, (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, September 2016).

6 Ingram, 2016

We can see here a three step process: first, the in-group/out-group dichotomy construct is established; then come the dichotomous crisis/solution constructs; and finally the messages that connect the crisis to the out-group, and the solution to the in-group. What may appear to be disparate messaging across many subjects and types of media, is in reality centered on deepening the two dichotomies and strengthening the connections, linking together and mutually reinforcing each other to provide the overarching grand narrative. Hence, Ingram calls his method the 'linkage' approach, referring to how the constructs that make up the system of meaning are 'linked' together to create the core narrative. Identifying the links is the key to dissecting and understanding the core narrative.

In terms of militant Islamist propaganda, Ingram summarises the core narrative as typically declaring: 'we are the champions and protectors of (appropriately aligned) Sunni Muslims (i.e. the in-group identity), everyone outside of this narrow category are [sic] enemies (i.e. out-group identities) responsible for the *ummah's*⁷ crises, so support us and our solutions (i.e. the in-group's politico-military agenda)'. Whilst the intricacies of the in-group/out-group and crisis/solution constructs may vary for different groups, the central dynamics remain roughly the same. As Ingram observes, this approach is not unique to militant Islamist propaganda; rather, a similarly constructed system of meaning is at the heart of most successful extremist propaganda, although imbued with the particulars of the narrative of each group's cause. Indeed, as he explains 'it is broadly echoed in [Mao] Tse-Tung's (2000 [1937]) *On Guerrilla Warfare*, the Irish Republican Army's (1985 [c.1950s]) *Handbook for Volunteers*, Guevara's (2007 [1961]) *Guerrilla Warfare* and al-Muqrin's (2009 [2003]) *A Practical Course for Guerrilla War*'.⁸

At the highest level, extremists link a specific out-group to a crisis or crises, and connect the in-group to solutions. But these high-level constructs can be unbundled into a series of more complex links enhanced by a variety of propaganda strategies. This paper focuses specifically on historical narratives as a lever for effective propaganda.

The Power of History

J.M. Berger builds on Ingram's linkage approach to explore how such linkages can be 'bundled together' to form high-level constructs that forge a single idea.

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⁷ The term *ummah* is generally taken to mean the collective or overall community of adherents to Islam.

⁸ Ingram, Haroro, 'An Analysis of Islamic State's *Dabiq Magazine*', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Volume 51, Issue 3 (2016): 458–77.

Berger demonstrates how extremist propagandists package together multiple sources of ‘evidence’ to create an apparently self-reinforcing argument that is presented as an historical ‘proof’, which then is accepted as ‘the truth’ for a particular scenario. Narratives are constructed through combining historical events with folklore, mythology, religious scriptures, and symbolism, to create the illusion of a sound argument. As Berger explains, an example of such a bundle ‘would be an ideological argument that draws connections between a conspiracy theory, a scriptural reference, a folkloric tradition, and a real historical event, representing the bundled product simply as “history”’.⁹ These bundles can then be linked with other bundles to construct highly complex, interconnected concepts that support an overarching narrative. Working backwards from a group’s core narrative, these concepts can be de-constructed by examining linkages and bundles to untangle the complex web that makes up the system of meaning. We use this approach to identify how historical narratives are exploited to support the construction of the system of meaning at the heart of extremist propaganda.

History, it is often said, is written by the winners, and some of the fiercest battles are often over the interpretation of history, and how its narratives are constructed. ‘History’ is used extensively by extremist propagandists as evidence to support their narratives, and the use of such ‘historical evidence’ can have the false appearance of scholarly rigour, which can add to the apparent persuasive power of the narrative.

We will explore how historical narratives are used in extremist propaganda through the lens of the system of meaning, setting out five different ways in which historical narratives have been employed to enhance and reinforce the system of meaning at the heart of extremist propaganda.

Crisis Expansion

At the heart of the crisis/solution dichotomy is the need to escalate the sense of crisis. The greater the perception of crisis the greater the call to action; and the greater the crisis the easier it is to justify extreme solutions, and so on. One way extremist propaganda has sought to increase the sense of crisis is to stretch it beyond the here and now by connecting it to a wider historical struggle. Such manipulation presents the view that the extent of the crisis transcends the current situation, which is merely the current manifestation of an ongoing historical, and possibly existential, conflict.

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⁹ J. M. Berger, ‘Extremist Construction of Identity: How Escalating Demands for Legitimacy Shape and Define In-Group and Out-Group Dynamics’ Vol. 8, № 7 (2017) (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism).

This connection of past and present crises is particularly obvious in militant Islamist propaganda. Al-Qaeda and IS invariably refer to ‘the West’ generically as the ‘crusaders’ throughout their propaganda output. They seek to conflate the western Christian crusades, almost a millennium ago, with what they perceive as the war currently being waged on the Muslim world by the West. Using this narrative, IS portrayed the West’s campaign against their group in Syria as a continuation of the crusades, writing for example in *Dabiq*: ‘It is yet another crusade just like the former crusades led by Richard the Lionheart, Barbarossa of Germany, and Louis of France. Likewise today, when Bush raised the cross, the crusader countries immediately scrambled.’¹⁰

Narratives about the crusades of the distant past are, in turn, woven together with narratives about Western colonialism in Muslim countries over the last few centuries, building to a perception of the Muslim world in perpetual struggle against subjugation by ‘the West’. One of IS’s most resonant videos from the period in which they rose to predominance was entitled ‘The End of Sykes-Picot’,¹¹ which featured IS fighters demolishing border posts between Syria and Iraq. The border, a remnant of the Sykes-Picot agreement between colonial France and Britain to divide up the Arab lands after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, is seen as a symbol of Western ‘crusader’ control and the deliberate division of Muslim lands, and a roadblock to the return of the Caliphate. In an article called ‘The Birth of Two New Wilayat’ in *Dabiq* Issue 4, sums up this idea:

After demolishing the Syrian/Iraqi border set up by the crusaders to divide and disunite the Muslims, and carve up their lands in order to consolidate their control of the region, the mujāhidīn of the Khilāfah delivered yet another blow to nationalism and the Sykes-Picot-inspired borders that define it. The establishment of a new wilāyah, Wilāyat al-Furāt, was announced this month by the Islamic State in an effort to eliminate any remaining traces of the kufri, nationalistic borders from the hearts of the Muslims.¹²

IS’s military advances and re-establishment of the Caliphate are depicted as rolling back old colonial injustices imposed on the Middle East.

10 ‘Foreword’, *Dabiq*, Issue 7, 2015, p. 3.

11 Al-Hayat Media Centre, ‘The End of Sykes-Picot’, video, 2014.

12 ‘The Revival of Slavery Before the Hour’, *Dabiq*, Issue 4 (2014) p. 17.

It was perhaps Bin Laden who was the most eloquent in his portrayal of the War on Terror as the continuation of history. In a letter to *Al Jazeera* in November 2001, Bin Laden clearly set out his arguments to brand the USA's response to 9/11, particularly the American-led invasion of Afghanistan, as a 'Crusade against Islam', citing president Bush's description of the war as a Crusade to make his point.¹³ Before going on to ask:

Is it a single, unrelated event, or is it part of a long series of Crusader wars against the Islamic world? Since World War One, which ended over 83 years ago, the entire Islamic world has fallen under the Crusader banners, under the British, French, and Italian governments. They divided up the whole world between them, and Palestine fell into the hands of the British.¹⁴

Bin Laden presents a perspective through which to view the Afghan invasion—not as a single event, but as the latest in a long line of allegedly anti-Muslim actions by the West. Having deepened the narrative by connecting the current conflict to a long chain of historical events, he next broadens it citing a litany of violence committed by the 'Crusaders' in recent history against multiple countries in the Muslim world, including Kashmir, Iraq, Palestine, Chechnya, the Philippines, and East Timor, before concluding his argument: 'We should therefore see events not as isolated incidents, but as part of a long chain of conspiracies, a war of annihilation in all senses of the word'.¹⁵ Bin Laden exploits historical narratives to both broaden and deepen the sense of crisis.

The device of connecting past and present crises also lies at the heart of the narratives used by the Provisional Irish Republican Movement, or the 'Provos'.¹⁶ The idea of the Irish engaged in a continuous struggle throughout their history,

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13 Osama Bin Laden, Bruce B. Lawrence (ed.), and James Howarth (trans.), *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama Bin Laden* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 128.

14 Bin Laden, p. 136.

15 Bin Laden, p. 137.

16 The Provisional Irish Republican Movement is the branch of the Irish resistance that was formed after Sinn Féin (and its military wing, the Irish Republican Army) split in 1970, after violent riots erupted among Catholics protesting repression in Northern Ireland in 1969. It consisted of the Provisional Sinn Féin (its political wing) and the Provisional IRA (its military wing). The Provisional branches split off from the original Sinn Féin and IRA because they refused to recognise the legitimacy of Leinster (Leinster House, Dublin, metonym for the government of the Republic of Ireland), Stormont (Stormont House, Belfast, metonym for the parliament of Northern Ireland, and Westminster (Westminster Palace, London, metonym for the parliament of the United Kingdom), demanding that Northern Ireland be separated from the UK and fully integrated into the Republic of Ireland. According to Ruairí Ó Brádaigh, then caretaker executive of Sinn Féin, recognising any of these governments was an 'act of treachery'; he is quoted in *An Phoblacht*, Issue 2, 1970 (see note 17). The official policy of the IRA had been one of non-violence until 'the Troubles', a period of unrest in Northern Ireland that lasted from 1968 to 1998. On 30 January 1972, also known as Bloody Sunday, the British shot down peaceful protesters demonstrating against the internment of dissidents. This event was a catalyst for increased violence on the part of the resistance as well as government repressions.

a theme endemic to the Irish national identity, was renewed in Northern Ireland during the late 1960's, when the Irish Republican Army justified its actions by exploiting existing nationalist ideologies, beliefs, and traditions. As James Downey¹⁷ noted, "The claim of a Provo supporter, that the Provos are fighting the last campaign to end eight hundred years of British oppression may seem equally unreal; but there has been enough real oppression over the centuries to give force to that belief."¹⁸ This quote describes the ideology of the Provisional Movement, which successfully drew on historical claims throughout their campaign.¹⁹ Throwing off the yoke of the occupying force has been intrinsic to the Irish struggle, and one the Provisional branch consistently reiterated in their public communications as the only solution to the 'Irish Question'. This was clearly illustrated in the Éire Nua²⁰ policy document: 'Sinn Féin has never looked on the ending of British Rule in Ireland as the end in itself, but rather as a means to restore the ownership of Ireland to the people of Ireland'.²¹

This idea was reiterated in the first issue of *An Phoblacht*,²² published in January 1970, immediately after the split in the Republican Movement. The headline on page one read 'On this we stand, the rock of the Republic',²³ signalling they would not be moved. In short, the Provisional IRA framed the 'Troubles' as a continuation of the centuries-old fight against British occupation.

Summary

In order to expand the sense of crisis, propagandists exploit historical narratives by means of 'temporal stretching'. Through connecting a current crisis to past events, the propagandist can present the current crisis as something bigger, the latest manifestation of an ongoing struggle. Thus the narratives in militant Islamism and the Irish Republican movement both portray their struggles as

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¹⁷ James Downey was a former London editor of the *Irish Times*, whose work focused on the politics of Northern Ireland.

¹⁸ James Downey, *Them & Us: Britain-Ireland and the Northern Question 1969–1982*, (Dublin: Ward River Press, 1983), p. 18.

¹⁹ Robert A. White, *Out of the Ashes: An Oral History of the Provisional Irish Republican Movement*, (Kildare: Merlion Press, 2017).

²⁰ Éire Nua [New Ireland]: *The Social and Economic Program of Sinn Féin*, policy document first published in January 1971, proposed a plan for uniting Northern Ireland with the Republic while instituting a devolution and federalisation of government to allow some home rule to the Ulster Protestant and unionist population. Éire Nua was reprinted in *Freedom Struggle*, a book published under the pseudonym P. O'Neill by the (Provisional) Irish Republican Publicity Bureau, [Dublin], 1973.

²¹ Éire Nua Booklet (Dublin: Irish Republican Publicity Bureau, 1972), p. 3.

²² *An Phoblacht* [The Republic] was the newspaper published by the (Provisional) Irish Republican Publicity Bureau, funded by those who formed the new Provisional wing of Sinn Féin; Ruairí Ó Brádaigh (Chairman) made it his mission to get the publication out quickly, before the split, to publicise the branch's objectives; see White, *Out of the Ashes*.

²³ 'On This We Stand: The Rock of the Republic', *An Phoblacht*, February 1970, p. 1.

the latest stage of centuries- old conflicts. Doing so heightens the perception of crisis: current events are not viewed in isolation, but as part of a broader historical struggle. This in turn allows the framing of crisis as something that is not transient, but a perpetual state, and hence only extreme action will be able to overcome it.

Solution Support

Thus far we have concentrated on the crisis; however, the crisis/solution dichotomy relies equally on the believability of the ‘solution’. The propagandist must demonstrate beyond doubt that the ‘solution’ is feasible and presents a practical alternative to the status quo. Here again, historical narratives can play a key role, invariably by allowing the propaganda to point to a time in history when the proposed ‘solution’ had been in place, thus providing evidence that it is feasible and effective—as acute as the crisis is now, and may have been in the past, it has been overcome before and therefore can be overcome again.

At the heart of IS propaganda, juxtaposed against the existential crisis Islam faces in its war against the crusader West, is the group’s solution, the restoration of the Caliphate. It is endemic throughout their propaganda that re-establishing the Caliphate is not only the central objective, but is necessary for achieving all of their other objectives. As stated in the first issue of *Dabiq*, ‘The goal of establishing the Khilafah [Caliphate] has always been one that occupied the hearts of the mujahidin since the revival of jihad this century.’²⁴ Similarly, the author of the article ‘Khilafah Declared’, which celebrates the re-establishment of the Caliphate in the parts of Syria/Iraq it controlled, jubilantly exclaims, ‘O Muslims everywhere, glad tidings to you and expect good. Raise your head high, for today—by Allah’s grace—you have a state and Khilafah, which will return your dignity, might, rights, and leadership.’²⁵

IS propaganda constantly refers to the Prophet Mohammed and the foundation of the original Caliphate, presenting this period as the ideal to return to, for it was a time of military and cultural dominance for the Islamic ummah. The first Caliphate is frequently praised, for example in *Dabiq* 14:

[B]y the time of the death of Allah’s Messenger, the tribes of Arabia were almost completely united with all traces of idolatry in the region virtually erased, a phenomenon unknown to

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²⁴ ‘From Hijrah to Khilafah’ *Dabiq*, Issue 1, 2014, p. 34.
²⁵ ‘Khilafah Declared’, *Dabiq*, Issue 1, 2014, p. 7.

historians before that time. Within decades, the impoverished and malnourished few thousand herders, date palm farmers, and trading travelers—the greatest, most knowledgeable, and most pious generations of the Ummah—plowed through the Roman and Persian empires to become literal masters of lands and people from the Iberian Peninsula to the Himalayas.²⁶

The parallels drawn here are clear: when the first Caliphate was declared the impossible became possible, and this can happen again. The re-establishment of the Caliphate is the first step to victory. This is further elaborated upon in an article in issue 13 of *Rumiyah*:

In other words, the religion of Allah became manifest and triumphant over the kuffar when a state was established for the Muslims whose foundations were laid down and fixed firmly by Allah's Messenger and then the rightly-guided khulafa after him. And likewise, the Khalifah of the Muslims and his soldiers undertake this matter today, with the support of Allah, so the achievement of victory and honor for the Muslims cannot be imagined without the establishment of the Islamic State, which has revived the rightly-guided Khilafah.²⁷

IS draws upon the greatest achievements of the Islamic empire for their recruitment narratives to instill the idea that it can re-establish the glorious period under which the ummah overcame the Crusaders.

To strengthen the appeal of an IS-run Caliphate, the group's propaganda draws on previous Islamic Caliphates, often taking specific examples from different Caliphates as alternatives to the current international system. For example, in an article referencing the economic crisis of the West at the time and in particular currency instability, IS announces the establishment of their own currency, the gold Dinar, citing the Islamic Dinar of the Umayyad empire:

The Islamic dinar appeared in 696 AD, when the Umayyad empire—based in Damascus—stretched from the Iberian peninsula to the Indus River in South Asia [...]. Last month the Islamic State announced plans to mint their own range of gold dinars and silver dirhams in a move to separate themselves from dollar-linked fiat currencies and to establish their own money, a currency that has intrinsic value.²⁸

26 'Kill the Imams of Kufr in the West', *Dabiq*, Issue 14, 2016, p. 12.

27 *Rumiyah*, 'The Position of Imamah in Religion', Issue 13, 2017, p. 17.

28 *Dabiq*, 'Meltdown – John Cantlie', Issue 6, 2014, p. 58.

By aligning themselves with the Umayyad Caliphate, IS position themselves as a legitimate state.

Proposing a solution to the current crisis was also intrinsic to the appeal of the Provisional IRA. The solution they put forward drew on the vision mapped out by their Republican predecessors, one that called for the restoration of Ireland's four provinces, otherwise known as the 'Four Green Fields'.²⁹ In *Éire Nua*, the Provisionals presented a solution that proposed four democratically elected provincial governments (based on the historical Irish provinces of Dáil Laighean, Uladh, Mumhan, and Connacht, anglicised as Leinster, Ulster, Munster, and Connacht). The Provisionals' proposals picked holes in the existing status quo and presented an inclusive solution they believed none of the governments in Dublin, Stormont, or Westminster could provide. Their political solution, which proposed 'Catholic, Protestant, Orange and Green, Left and Right'³⁰ to be represented within this provincial system, echoes that of Theobald Wolfe Tone's vision for the island a century past, in which a 'Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter could retain their identity and still find common identity in Irishmen'.³¹

Summary

As shown above, historical narratives can be used to support the called-for solution. Historical examples are brought forward to support and legitimise grounds for the proposed solution. Furthermore, historical examples can be used to strengthen the case that the proposed solution is actually feasible. The more plausible the solution appears when juxtaposed against the Crisis, the greater the dichotomy.

Reinforcing the In-group/Out-group Dynamic

The second of the two dichotomies in the system of meaning is the in-group/out-group dynamic. As with the crisis/solution construct, the greater the dichotomy appears, the stronger the impact. Here again, history provides a reservoir of evidence that can be cherry-picked and exploited in support of the extremist narrative. In particular, there are two ways in which historical narratives can be employed to strengthen the in-group/out-group dynamic: the

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29 The Four Green Fields is an Irish folk song widely known, where the 'four green fields' are a reference to Ireland's four historic provinces on the island.

30 *Éire Nua* [translated as 'New Ireland'] p.2, policy document published in July 1972 by the Provisional movement's publicity bureau outlining their proposed plans for political, social and economic progression in their vision of a unified federalised Irish state.

31 *An Phoblacht*, 1972, Issue 4, p. 8, this very quote from Wolfe Tone was reiterated again in *An Phoblacht* issue that year.

first is to provide evidence of the lineage of the two groups, and the second is to show the historical nature of the struggle between them. The latter has obvious parallels to the crisis-expansion narratives outlined above, where a crisis is portrayed as part of an ongoing historical struggle; it is slightly different in that it often focuses on demonstrating the ‘characters’ of the opposing groups.

At the root of most nationalist movements is a narrative of a separate ethnic identity that marks the foundation of the nation. Invariably, history is drawn upon to show the uniqueness of this ethnic group and often its superiority to other nations or races. In his infamous book *Mein Kampf*, Adolf Hitler outlines his Nazi ideology, writing at length of the German people descending from the Aryan race, and drawing examples from history to support his claim of their superiority. In Chapter 11, on ‘Race and People’, he asserts: ‘History furnishes us with innumerable instances that prove this law. It shows, with a startling clarity, that whenever Aryans have mingled their blood with that of an inferior race the result has been the downfall of the people who were the standard-bearers of a higher culture.’ As evidence, he claims that North America has come to dominate the the American continents because ‘in North America the Teutonic element, [...] has kept its racial stock pure and did not mix it with any other racial stock’, in contrast to Central and South America.³²

This narrative of in-group superiority was completed by pitching the assigned out-group, the common enemy—the Jew. Hitler declared: ‘The Jew offers the most striking contrast to the Aryan.’³³ The ‘inferiority’ and the ‘treachery’ of the Jews is constantly contrasted with the superiority of the Aryan race, cementing the in-group/out-group dynamic. Hitler draws upon numerous examples from history to demonise the Jews as the out-group, and to impress upon the reader that this alleged nature of the Jews is not a new phenomenon, but has remained unchanged through history, a permanent, immutable, and indisputable fact. He connects the alleged actions of the Jews in the present to biblical stories. For instance, he writes: ‘the Founder of Christianity made no secret indeed of His estimation of the Jewish people. When He found it necessary He drove those enemies of the human race out of the Temple of God; because then, as always, they used religion as a means of advancing their commercial interests.’³⁴ Hitler consistently attempted to show alleged Jewish prejudices of his own day as a permanent fact, unchanging through history.

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32 Hitler, Adolf, James Murphy (trans.), *‘Mein Kampf’*, Volume 1: Chapter 11 (London: Hurst and Blackett Ltd., 1939)

33 Hitler, p. 170.

34 Hitler, p. 174.

We see, then, that in *Mein Kampf*, Hitler uses historical narratives effectively to strengthen the in-group/out-group dynamic. By tracing the lineage of the German people back to the Aryans, he employs a historical narrative to define the in-group, firmly drawing the line dividing them from the out-group—there are no shades of grey. Furthermore, he uses historical examples as evidence to support the superiority of the German people. Next, he clearly defines the Jews as the out-group and uses historical examples to demonise them. He subjectively draws his examples from history to give the perception of the ‘Jewish character’ as fixed; that they have always been this way, and by inference they will always be this way, and are unable to change. The reference to Jesus driving the Jews out of the temple is used to connect an event two millennia ago to the present-day Jews.

Another good example of reinforcing the in-group/out-group dynamic using historical narratives can be found in British Israelism, which became more extreme over time, mutating into Christian Identity extremist groups. At the heart of the Christian Identity narrative is the belief that Anglo-Saxons are the true heirs of God’s covenant, and are his chosen people rather than the Jews. What started out as a belief that the Anglo-Saxons were one of lost tribes of Israel, evolved over time into the belief that they are the only true heirs as God’s chosen people, and that the ‘Jews’ are imposters. As J.M. Berger sums up: ‘While there are many variations on the ideology, adherents of Christian Identity broadly believe members of the “white race” are the Chosen People of God described in the Christian Bible, and that other races are impure and part of a genetic lineage that can be traced directly to Satan or to Satanic influences.’³⁵

Christian Identity uses a narrative based on historical events, folklore, scripture, and biblical genealogies to justify the in-group/out-group dynamic. On the one hand it is used to legitimise the in-group, the Anglo-Saxons, and on the other hand to de-legitimise the out-group, the Jews (and later, other races). To demonstrate that the Anglo-Saxons are indeed God’s chosen people, a complex historical theory was woven: that one of the lost tribes of Israel migrated westward, and from them, unknowingly, the Anglo-Saxons are descended. The lost tribes are distinct from the present day Jewish people, and as such they are the true heirs to God’s promises. In short, through pseudo-scholarly techniques, the adherents of Christian Identity aimed to increase their in-group legitimacy by ‘demonstrating’ that the Anglo-Saxons are in reality the true heirs to the

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³⁵ Berger, ‘Extremist Construction of Identity’, p. 9.

‘biblical covenants and promises of greatness’.³⁶ In delegitimising, and ultimately demonising the out-group, Christian Identity maintains that the Jewish people are in reality descended from Satan—the ‘seed of the serpent’. They argue that the Jews are descended from Cain, the Bible’s first murderer, and Cain was not the son of Adam, but the offspring of Eve and the serpent from the Garden of Eden, Satan himself.³⁷ Satanic descent is ultimately expanded to include all non-Anglo-Saxon races as descended from the same line.

In short, by writing their own interpretation of history, the Christian Identity theorists provide an apparently solid structure for their pre-defined in-group and out-group. History provides the linkage to connect today’s in-group and out-group back to the Bible. This process imbues the Christian Identity doctrine with the cultural capital of being derived from such a sacred text. It deepens the notion of the division of the in-group from the out-group by tracing it back to the beginning of time, simultaneously specifying with exactness who belongs to which group—there is no grey zone.

In their own way, the provisional IRA also used history to reinforce the in-group/out-group dynamic, through on the one hand portraying their fight as the continued historic struggle of the Irish against the British occupiers, and on the other providing a historical narrative arguing that the foundation of many problems in the island of Ireland are due to external interference by the British over the last centuries. Throughout the literature of the Provisional movement, there was consistent reference to the English coloniser, the imperial occupier, as the ultimate root of all Ireland’s problems.

Examples such as the Norman and English wars of conquest from 1100 to 1850 continued to provide a source of legitimation to the Republican movement for generations.³⁸ Crisis re-enforcing narratives added weight to these claims by depicting all of Ireland’s problems as coming from these earlier waves of colonisation. Similarly, the great Irish famine of the 1840s is often cited as a result of English ‘maladministration’, which allowed a cruel culling of half of Ireland’s population.³⁹ Crops continued to be exported from a deprived population to feed the interests of the occupier, something a ‘native’ administration would have never allowed.⁴⁰ By connecting these past events to the out-group, the British occupier, the narrative creates the perception of a pattern of behaviour.

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36 Ibid., p. 11.

37 Ibid., p. 33.

38 White, *Out of the Ashes*.

39 Downey, *Them & Us*, p. 32.

40 Ibid.

This re-enforces the in-group/ out-group dynamic by connecting the present to the past, creating a sense of permanence for the in-group/out-group divide.

Summary

Historical narratives can be used to strengthen the in-group/out-group dynamic in two main ways. First, the narrative is used to provide the lineage of both groups in order to define clearly which people belong to which group. Second, by connecting the current conflict to historical events, the narrative establishes a perception of permanence—that such an in/out group dynamic is unchanging and the normal order of things. The implication is that if it has always been like this, only extreme action will make a change.

Legitimacy and Credibility—Standing on the Shoulders of Giants

The source of information, and particularly the credibility of the source, play an important role in the effectiveness of communications—the messenger is as important as the message. The foundations of effective strategic communications at the macro-level are the three Rs—Reach, Relevance, and Resonance. This in turn relies on the meso-level comprised of the Messenger, Message, and Medium of the communications; all three aspects are required for communications to be effective.⁴¹ There is much supporting research across several fields exploring how the perception of the source of information can shape the way the message itself is interpreted and processed.⁴²

Hence an important aspect of extremist propaganda is to present the extremists, and especially their leaders, as credible messengers. Extremist groups are often lead by ‘charismatic leaders’, who present themselves as powerful and credible messengers. Such leaders often emphasise developing their identity and image, to increase their charismatic appeal. One way of doing this is to build on the charismatic capital of previous leaders, by drawing linkages through symbolism or quotations between past and present leaders. In this way they can claim to belong to a lineage of revered leaders. Ingram labels this ‘transformative charisma’, in which the charismatic capital of past leaders is drawn upon to bolster current leaders.⁴³

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41 For a full discussion see: Haroro Ingram and Alastair Reed, *Lessons from History for Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communications*, The Hague International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2016.

42 Haroro Ingram, ‘Deciphering the Siren Call of Militant Islamist Propaganda: Meaning, Credibility & Behavioural Change’, The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, Vol. 7, № 9, (2016): 19.

43 Haroro Ingram, *The Charismatic Leadership Phenomenon in Radical and Militant Islamism* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2013).

In his book *The Charismatic Leadership Phenomenon in Radical and Militant Islamism*, Ingram traces a long line of charismatic leaders within militant Islamism, who have all built on the charismatic capital of their predecessors to enhance their image and identity, and so come to embody the system of meaning. Ingram explains that al-Qaeda founder Bin Laden ‘emerged by not only drawing upon charismatic predecessors such as Azzam and Qutb but by surrounding himself with older Islamists with decades of experience in their regionally-based struggles (for example, Ayman al-Zawahiri and Muhammad Atef) to increase his own charismatic capital’.⁴⁴ Similarly, Bin Laden would cite medieval theologian Ibn Taymiyyah to back up his assertions and create an aura of legitimacy. More directly, he also deliberately tried to embody the warrior-scholar image of his mentor Azzam.⁴⁵

These trends are still prevalent in contemporary Islamist groups. Both al-Qaeda and IS constantly refer to leaders from decades and centuries past to appropriate their charismatic capital, weaving past and present into one continuity of identity. This technique is used in *Inspire* magazine (published by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula [AQAP]), in the sections on ‘History and Strategy’, and in *Dabiq* magazine (published by IS), in ‘From the Pages of History’. For example, *Inspire* carries a regular feature called ‘Words of Wisdom’ presenting quotations from prominent Jihadi leaders, including such revered past leaders as sheikh Abdallah Azzam, Sayyed Qutb, and the ‘blind sheikh’ Umar Abdul Rahman.⁴⁶ This is a clear attempt to situate AQAP as the heirs to their work.

In the same section, prominent Islamist ideologue and strategist Abu Mus’ab al-Suri writes a series of articles called ‘The Jihadi Experiences’.⁴⁷ Here, he provides a critique of past jihadist campaigns in ‘*Jihādī Current (1963–2001)*’, in which he identifies successful and unsuccessful strategies. Al-Suri promotes the strategies used in Chechnya, Bosnia, and Afghanistan, and outlines his military theory of the Global Islamic Resistance Call. These articles portray the efforts of AQAP as a continuation of the same struggle of the last six decades of Jihad.

Similarly, in IS’s *Dabiq*, articles ‘From the Pages of History’ give other examples. The article, ‘Lessons from the Fitnah of the Mongols’, from *Dabiq* 14, provides selected quotes from influential 13th century theologian Shaykh ul-Islām Ibn Taymiyyah from the time of the Mongol invasion, in which ‘[t]he shaykh draws

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44 Ibid., p. 193.

45 Ibid., p. 193–94.

46 See ‘Words of Wisdom’, *Inspire*, Issues 11, 13, 14, 15, and 17.

47 See ‘The Jihadi Experiences’, in *Inspire*, Issues 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, and 12

comparisons between the Battle of al-Ahzāb in the time of the Prophet and the fitnah of Ghazan, presenting lessons for the believers that will continue to remain relevant and crucial until the camp of imān defeats the camp of kufr once and for all.⁴⁸ Another article in the same series, ‘The Expeditions, Battles, and Victories of Ramadan’, recounts the victorious battles in which the Prophet participated or led during Ramadan.⁴⁹

The Provisional IRA also drew legitimacy from linking their struggle to those of their predecessors, from Wolfe Tone (1753–98), known as ‘the father of Irish Republicanism’, to the many leaders of the 1916 Easter Rising, including James Connolly and Patrick Pearse. Referring to these revolutionary leaders was not exclusive to the Provisional movement; they, like others, used this device to legitimise and strengthen their renewed struggle.

The Provisionals’ claim to be heirs of Wolfe Tone is exemplified in the second issue of *An Phoblacht* (1970), released just prior to the anniversary of the Easter Rising. The article entitled ‘What the 1916 Rising Meant’ makes reference to Wolfe’s ‘gospel’, which was to ‘break the connection with England, the never-failing source of all our political evils’.⁵⁰

The Provisionals here also claim that their Republican counterparts are incapable of being the heirs to this on-going struggle. Thereby they link to the crisis not only the classic out-group (the English), but also members of the in-group (other Irish republicans). This is evidenced in the same column, where they claim:

If, to-day, men hold commemorations of Easter week and at the same time support and uphold the British conquest in Ireland, they are as Pearse would describe them ‘tyrants, hypocrites, liars’. There are a number of groups claiming to be Republican who support the maintenance of two partitioned states.⁵¹

The column ends with a plea to followers to continue supporting only the goals of the Provisional branch: to refuse to recognise any group that should deny Ireland its right to a unified government. ‘So on this Easter Sunday, as we gather around the graves of our martyred dead we should again repudiate all institutions, which would limit the complete sovereignty of Ireland.’⁵²

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48 *Dabiq*, ‘Lessons From The Fitnah of the Mongols’, Issue 14, 2016, pp. 44–49.

49 *Dabiq*, ‘From the Pages of History’, Issue 10, 2015, pp. 26–29.

50 Art O Baoill, ‘What the 1916 Rising Meant’, *An Phoblacht*, March 1970, Volume 1, Issue 2, p. 4.

51 *Ibid.*

52 *Ibid.*

Summary

The messenger is as important as the message, as the perceived legitimacy and credibility of the messenger greatly impact how a message is interpreted. To increase their apparent legitimacy and credibility, the leaders of extremist groups frequently link themselves to past revered leaders, presenting themselves as their heirs. In this way they appropriate ‘cultural capital’ to support their claims of legitimacy.

Back to the Future: The Role of Prophecy

Whilst the previous sections have outlined how historical narratives can be exploited to strengthen different aspects of a system of meaning, sometimes history alone is not enough. Historical narratives are used as evidence to support a group’s arguments and narratives, or to connect the current circumstances to some greater inter-generational struggle—connecting the present to the past. Another technique used by the propagandist is the exploitation of historical prophecies—connecting the present to the future. Together these make a very strong tool: the group is portrayed as rooted in history, looking to the future, and tied to the divine.

The Christian Identity movement exploits biblical prophecies extensively to justify its narrative. First, it re-interprets history through the lens of biblical prophecies, using suitably realised prophecies to assert its legitimacy. For example, early British Israelist J.H. Allen first traced the lineage of the Anglo-Saxons back to the biblical figure of Ephraim, and then interpreted the prophecy that Ephraim would father ‘many nations’⁵³ as a reference to the British Empire. Similarly, he goes on to link the prophecy of another biblical figure, Manasseh, whose descendants would go on to form ‘a great nation’,⁵⁴ to the United States.⁵⁵ Connecting the ‘in-group’ to supposed realised prophecies creates a false sense of truth and legitimacy in their narratives.

As it evolved, the Christian Identity movement became more extreme, and increasingly focussed on the unfulfilled prophecies of the Book of Revelation and on millenarian sentiments fuelled by the recent world wars and the cold war. This new focus connecting unfulfilled apocalyptic prophecies to the present and near future, created a sense of urgency. In his analysis of Christian Identity

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53 Genesis 48:19

54 Ibid.

55 Berger, ‘Extremist Construction of Identity’, p. 11–12.

ideology, J.M. Berger described this combination of historical narratives and future prophecies as producing ‘a sort of Doppler Effect—as adherents rush from an increasingly expansive history toward an increasingly compressed timeline for a near-future upheaval of the world order, imbuing the out-group threat with an apocalyptic sense of urgency’.⁵⁶

When al-Qaeda central (AQC) launched its most recent affiliate, al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), in September 2014, the narrative they used referred to the hadith⁵⁷ prophecy about *Ghazwa al-Hind* [Battle of India], which foretells the Muslim conquest of India⁵⁸ and promises those who take part the reward of a place in paradise.⁵⁹ The group’s first major attack, at the Naval shipyard in Karachi in September 2014, was heralded as ‘a clear message to India that Ghazwa-e-Hind has only just begun’.⁶⁰ However, the exploitation of this particular narrative is nothing new, and has been a mainstay of Jihadist groups in the sub-continent since 1988, when they emerged in Indian-controlled Kashmir.⁶¹ The prophecy is used to cast the groups’ actions as part of a larger, inevitable conflict, and seemingly demonstrate their legitimacy because they are fulfilling a prophecy.

The *Ghazwa al-Hind* prophecy, is not the only hadith prophecy to be exploited by militant Islamists in South Asia. Husain Haqqani describes the another passage uses in the 1980s Jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan:

During the war against the Soviets and the ensuing Taliban rule, ancient prophecies of Khurasan—which includes modern Afghanistan—resurfaced to inspire jihadists and promise great heavenly rewards. These prophecies foreshadowed the appearance of the Mahdi or Messiah and the final battle between good (pure Islam) and evil before judgement day. According to one Hadith, an army with black flags would emerge from Khurasan to help the Mahdi establish his caliphate at Mecca.⁶²

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⁵⁶ Berger, ‘Extremist Construction of Identity’, p. 46.

⁵⁷ The Hadiths are the oral traditions attributed to the prophet Muhammad.

⁵⁸ The ‘battle for India’ is usually taken to refer to an area far bigger than the modern day nation state of India, including the land today covered by Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Kashmir, Myanmar and Bangladesh (and more).

⁵⁹ Alastair Reed, ‘Al Qaeda in the Indian Sub-Continent: A New Frontline in the Global Jihadist Movement?’, *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism*, (2016), p. 7; Arif Rafiq, ‘The New Al-Qaeda Group in South Asia Has Nothing To Do With ISIS’, *New Republic*, 5 September 2014; Husain Haqqani, ‘Prophecy and the Jihad in the Indian Subcontinent’, Washington DC, *Hudson Institute*, 27 March 2015.

⁶⁰ Reed, *Al Qaeda in the Indian Sub-Continent*, p. 8; Haqqani, ‘Prophecy and the Jihad’.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Haqqani, ‘Prophecy and the Jihad’.

The emergence of an army waving the black flag of jihad, was thought to support the idea that the Afghan jihad would be the first step toward fulfilling the prophecy.

Perhaps the most infamous use of prophecies in recent extremist propaganda is the Islamic State's use of apocalyptic prophecies drawn from the Koran and Hadiths, which were to play a central role in the group's narrative. One of the group's glossy English language propaganda magazines was called 'Dabiq', itself a direct reference to an end-of-times prophecy according to which Dabiq, a town in northern Syria, is the location of the final confrontation between the Muslim armies and the Roman Crusaders, after which victorious Muslim armies will march on Constantinople and then on Rome, ushering in the end times. The introduction to the first issue of *Dabiq* states:

According to the hadith, the area will play a historical role in the battles leading up to the conquests of Constantinople, then Rome. Presently, Dabiq is under the control of crusader-backed sahwat, close to the warfront between them and the Khilafah. May Allah purify Dabiq from the treachery of the sahwah and raise the flag of the Khilafah over its land.⁶³

This passage links the rise of IS and its present day campaign of violence directly to the prophecy. A quote from AQI founder Abu Mus'ab az-Zarqawi is printed at the start of each issue: '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 temporary defeat and occupation of Dabiq by IS forces provided a propaganda double whammy. First, raising the flag of the Khilafah in Dabiq seemingly proved the group's legitimacy, as it was seen as the first step towards fulfilling the prophecy. Second, this implied the realisation of the prophecy was close at hand; the final battle against the armies of the crusaders and the conquest of Constantinople and Rome were within reach. This belief generated an urgency to act—the time is now, the end times are upon us, action cannot be delayed. To increase this sense of urgency, the group high-lighted other events in the prophecies, such as the restoration of slavery after the declaration of the Caliphate, to strengthen the notion that the prophecies' fulfilment was fast approaching. As laid out in the article 'The Revival of Slavery Before the Hour'

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⁶³ *Dabiq*, 'Introduction', Issue 1, 2014, pp. 3–4.

in *Dabiq* 4, ‘it is interesting to note that slavery has been mentioned as one of the signs of the Hour as well as one of the causes behind al-Malhamah al-Kubrā’.⁶⁴

Summary

Extremist propaganda exploits prophecies in three ways. First, it uses prophecies that seemingly have been realised to establish legitimacy, i.e. prophesied events have come true in the past and will come true again. Second, it uses prophecies to support carrying out a certain type of action, for doing this will fulfil the prophecy, i.e. the use of self-fulfilling prophecy. Third, it uses prophecies to predict an imminent future event, often apocalyptic, to create an urgency to act. While historical narratives are used to support and justify extremist ideology, prophecies can be exploited to create the need to act now!

Conclusions

In this article, we have aimed to provide insight into how historical narratives are exploited by extremist propagandists to strengthen their overarching group narratives. This paper drew on examples of extremist groups, each of which in its own way provides compelling examples of propaganda. The purpose of the paper was not to compare these groups, as they differ greatly in their ideologies, motivations, and operations. Instead, the paper applied Ingram’s linkage approach and concept of a competitive system of meaning as an analytical lens to investigate how each of these disparate groups uses the techniques to strengthen its system of meaning.

This they did in five ways:

- First, in order to expand the sense of crisis, the current crisis is connected to past events to create a sense of temporal stretching in which current events are not viewed in isolation, but as part as something bigger, the latest stage in an on-going historic struggle.
- Second, solution support in which historical examples are used to support the argument for the proposed solution. The examples demonstrate that the ‘solution’ is actually feasible.
- Third, historical narratives can be used to reinforce the in-group/out-group dynamic, in two ways—by using history to trace the lineage of both groups to show who belongs in which group and to provide legitimacy to the in-group’s claims, and by connecting the current

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64 Dabiq, ‘The Revival of Slavery Before The Hour’, Issue 4 (2014), p.14

conflict to past events to reinforce the perception of a permanent struggle between the two groups.

- Fourth, by using historical narratives to strengthen the legitimacy and credibility of the messenger, and therefore the impact of the message. To this end the leadership of extremist groups frequently link themselves to past revered leaders, presenting themselves as their heirs, thus appropriating their ‘cultural capital’ to support their claims of legitimacy.
- Finally, extremist propaganda can make use of historical prophecies in one of three ways: first, by connecting past events to historical prophecies, the fulfilment of which serves to establish their legitimacy; second to justify carrying out a certain action because this would fulfil a given prophecy, and third, by using an impending crisis predicted by a prophecy to create a sense of urgency, and therefore a need to act now!

As this paper has shown historical narratives are a very potent tool in the hands of extremist propagandists, that can be applied in a number of ways to strengthen the groups’ narratives. At its most basic, historical narratives provide a reservoir of evidence or data points that can be interwoven to create supporting arguments to the extremists’ view point. However, what gives historical narratives their potency is their temporal characteristics. The ability to connect the present to the past, so that current events are not viewed in isolation but as part of a temporal continuum. In this way today’s conflicts are transformed into the latest stage of an historical struggle, and in-group/out-group dynamics, are ‘shown’ to be not a new dynamic but a continuous or perpetual struggle between two groups. In this way the crisis/solution and in-group/out-group dichotomies are deepened, and the links between Crisis + In-Group and the Solution + Out-Group are strengthened.

Future Research

This paper has been exploratory in nature, aiming to show how historical narratives are appropriated in extremist propaganda. However, we do not pretend that the mechanisms listed above are by any means exhaustive. Further research is needed to explore this dynamic, to examine more extremist groups, and to identify other ways in which historical narratives are incorporated into extremist propaganda. Similarly, as suggested already in this paper, an analysis of the narratives of the opponents’ of these extremist groups would be another interesting angle to investigate. The next step would be to apply the ideas described above to a series of in-depth case studies on a number of extremist groups and

their opponents. This would help us to better understand the mechanisms used by particular groups, but would also allow us to compare extremist groups and their opponents. Finally, given the prominence of historical levers in violent extremist propaganda as outlined in this paper, there are also many implications for advice regarding strategic communications policy for Counter Terrorism – Countering Violent Extremism operations.

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