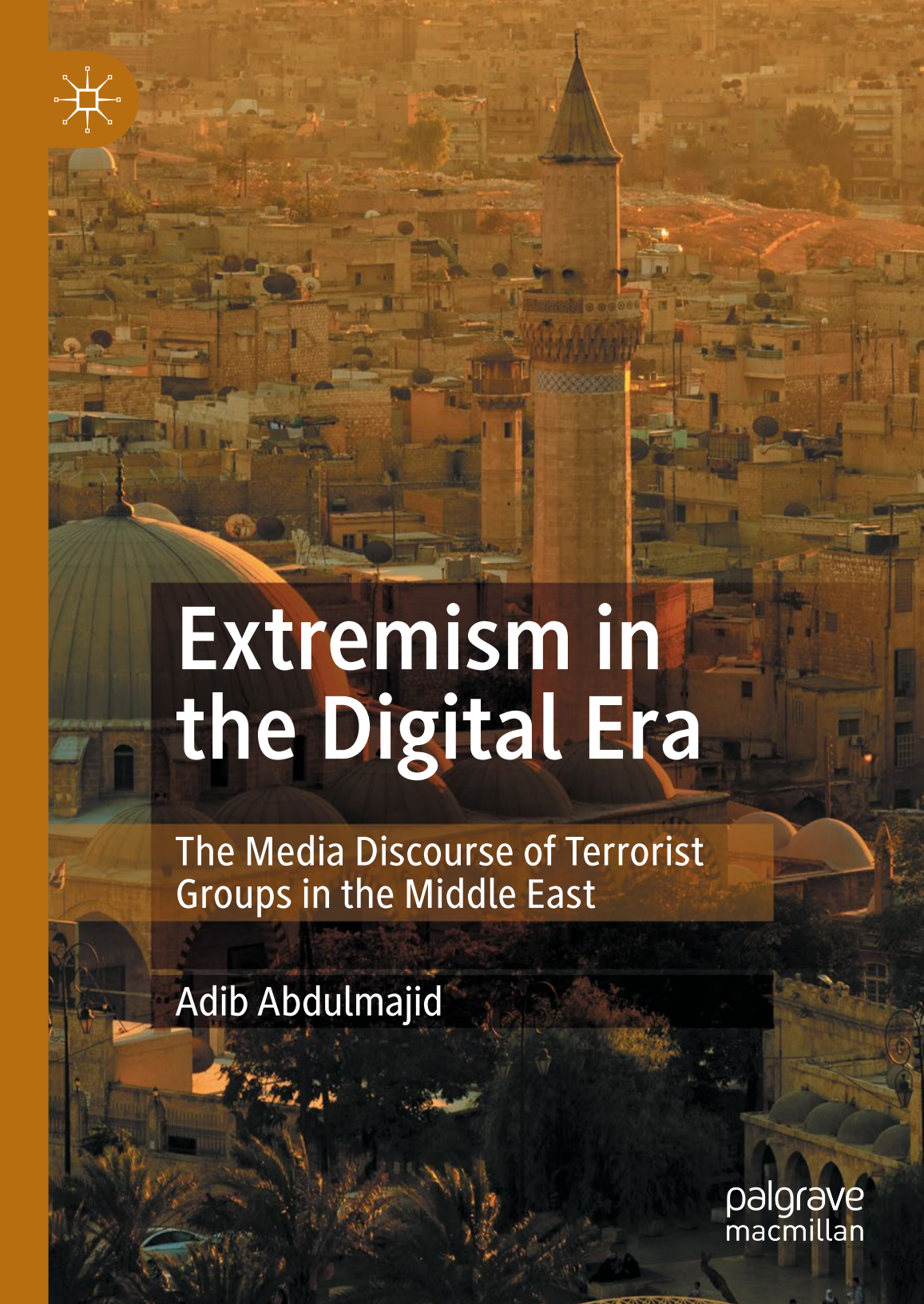
Extremism in the Digital Era
The Media Discourse of Terrorist Groups in the Middle East
Adib Abdulmajid
palgrave
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Preface

Amid the extensive use of digital media platforms by extremist groups operating in war-torn countries like Syria and Iraq, the discourse of such organizations is believed to have incited sectarian confrontations among diverse components of the society and to have contributed to the escalation of violence and the deterioration of living conditions in the heart of the Middle East. Major extremist religious organizations that emerged in the recent years in Syria and Iraq include ISIS, embodying radical Sunni Islam, and al-Hashd al-Shaabi, representing extremist Shia Islam. Each organization has founded multiple media platforms and made a remarkable use of the digital era to convey their messages and promote their activities to an unlimited audience. These groups have developed a discourse characterized, to a certain degree, by sectarian extremism and immense rancor toward rivals. The impact of the discourse employed by such radical organizations is deemed wide-ranging, with considerably resounding manifestations on local, regional, and international levels.

This discourse analytical study delves into the diverse aspects and dimensions of the discourse of ISIS and al-Hashd al-Shaabi. It explores the discursive practices and strategies utilized by media outlets associated with these extremist organizations. This volume also delves into the discursive environment within which these organizations have emerged and developed, namely the multifaceted Syrian and Iraqi media landscape and

the discursive activities pursued by influential local outlets. While multiple previous studies shed an increasing light on the emergence and the development of radical groups and their digital activities in the Middle East, the domain of discourse analysis with respect to the ultra-sectarian tendencies and strategies of such organizations remained relatively obscure. Besides, various previous studies illustrate remarkable academic efforts that mainly focus on the exploration of radical Sunnism, whereas radical Shiʿism remained scarcely researched, especially in terms of discourse. Thus, the volume at hand strives for providing a better understanding about the specific elements of the extremist discourse of influential radical Islamist organizations with diverse sectarian affiliations. It involves an exploration of linguistic and contextual activities and seeks to identify and interpret explicit and implicit messages associated with the discourse of the concerned organizations. The methodological framework applied for the sake of accomplishing the objectives of this study comprises Van Dijk's (2000) *Ideological Square* and Blass's (2005) *Manipulative Strategies.* These methodological instruments and the associated tools have allowed the researcher to conduct an in-depth discourse analytical study to the data included in the corpus of this research. Hence, activities and practices that fall under discursive ideologization and discursive manipulation are thoroughly investigated.

Key aspects and features identified within the discourse of the examined organizations include politicization, religionization, and sectarianization. Each organization has developed a discourse characterized by manipulative and ideological practices. Political, religious, sectarian, and ethnic affiliations and loyalties appear to have played a key role in the way the concerned organizations discursively approached ongoing matters and developments in the Syrian and Iraqi arenas. Religio-sectarian references are deemed crucial elements within the discourse of both ISIS and al-Hashd al-Shaabi. While the former emerges as global-minded in its discursive approach toward a worldwide Sunni community, the latter arises as more local- and regional-minded within the framework of its Shia-based discourse. The establishment of legitimacy and righteousness in leading the community, based on extremist sectarian-guided interpretations of theological concepts, doctrinal principles, and jurisprudential tenets, is deemed to be of a fundamental significance for each of these radical organizations. The incitement of sectarian and social divide emerges as a main

dimension of the discourse employed by the organizations investigated within the framework of this volume. The impact of such discursive dimensions, once adopted and acted upon, is believed to hold serious consequences with regard to the attitudes and behaviors of the concerned individuals and the society at large.

Antwerpen, Belgium Adib Abdulmajid

Acknowledgments

Throughout the stages that have constituted an enriching journey of knowledge and eventually led to the completion of this volume, the generous input and support of several persons have been invaluable. While words sometimes fail to express the extent of gratitude we feel toward certain remarkable people for their great and unconditional assistance and support, we still try to find a way to express our gratitude and appreciation to the efforts of such praiseworthy people.

Special thanks to Prof. Abdalrahman Alsulaiman and Prof. Michaël Opgenhaffen for their assistance, input, and suggestions throughout this remarkable journey.

I am also grateful to each of Prof. Leen d'Haenens, Prof. Helge Daniëls, Prof. Said Shiyab, and Prof. Dimitri Vanoverbeke for their reviews and enriching feedback. Discussing the content of my work with you could not be more fruitful.

Many thanks to my family, my source of inspiration to pursue my academic dreams. Despite the hardships of war and displacement across Syria and Iraq, being caught in the crossfire of a devastating ethno-sectarian conflict, my family has never hesitated to support me over the years. It is that unconditional love that persistently provides us with hope for a better tomorrow, free of violence, tyranny, discrimination, and marginalization.

To my soulmate, Rita, I would like to express my deepest gratitude. Your patience, assistance, and support have been crucial throughout the journey of writing this book.

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Note on Transliteration

The topics covered within the framework of this volume necessitate the employment of various Arabic terms. These terms are mainly transliterated by the author in accordance with the conventions of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* with diacritic markings. There are, however, some exceptions. The Arabic alphabetic system comprises 28 letters, of which 15 are consonants, phonetically comparable to the English *b*, *d*, *f*, *h*, *j*, *k*, *l*, *m*, *n*, *r*, *s*, *t*, *w*, *y*, and *z*. Three other consonants in Arabic reflect particular sounds as in the English *sh* and both the voiced and voiceless *th*, which are orthographically represented by a combination of two letters. Besides, there are four unfamiliar consonants that emerge in Arabic describable as the emphatic parallels of the English sounds *d*, *s*, *t*, and the voiced *dh*. Another two consonants sound as the voiced and voiceless French *r*, while the remaining four consonants are to be considered as entirely unfamiliar, including the glottal stop. In the case of the familiar 15 Arabic consonants that hold phonological features comparable to that of English sounds, explicit Latin parallel graphemes are used. Whereas various symbols are employed while transcribing the other unfamiliar consonants. Hence, the unique Arabic letters transcribed throughout this volume include: glottal stop [’]; voiceless interdental fricative [th]; voiced palato-alveolar sibilant [j]; voiceless pharyngeal constricted fricative [ḥ]; voiceless velar fricative [kh]; voiced interdental fricative [dh]; voiceless palatal sibilant [sh]; voiceless emphatic post-dental fricative [ṣ]; voiced emphatic post-dental stop [ḍ]; voiceless emphatic post-dental stop [ṭ]; voiced emphatic post-interdental fricative [ẓ]; voiced pharyngeal fricative

[ʿ]; voiced uvular fricative [gh]; long open front unrounded [ā]; long close back rounded [ū]; long close front unrounded [ī]. Nonetheless, certain terms, such as the Arabic names of organizations or acronyms, and particular concepts, which are derived from Arabic and transcribed into a comprehensive and straightforward Latin form, do not fall under this transliteration system for their already prevalent use and commonness.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Since the outbreak of the Syrian crisis in 2011 and the continued unrest in neighboring Iraq following the 2003 war, several radical Islamist groups have emerged and taken control of major areas, established their own institutions, and called for support from fellow Muslims both at home and in diaspora. Among the most powerful Islamist groups that emerged in Syria and Iraq were the Islamic State (ISIS),[1] embodying the most radical form of Sunni Islam, and al-Hashd al-Shaabi,[2] representing extremist Shia Islam. Each group has founded its own media outlets, mostly online, making use of the digital era and the age of social media to convey its messages and promote its activities to an unlimited audience. These groups have developed a discourse characterized, to some extent, by sectarian extremism and hostility toward rivals. This radical discourse is believed to have incited a sectarian conflict in Syria and Iraq, and continued to contribute to the escalation of the already intensifying confrontations between the social components of both war-torn countries.

When the Islamic State group (ISIS) took over about one-third of Iraq's territory and swept further into Syria in 2014, the group's self-proclaimed *khilāfah* (caliphate) encountered resistance from various local armed factions, some of them supported by the U.S.-led International Coalition, also known as the Global Anti-Terror Coalition that includes more than 60 countries. With the launch of the war on ISIS, the Iraqi security apparatus largely collapsed, leading a large number of volunteer fighters to join paramilitary militias rather than the fragile state army and

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police forces.[3] These militias gathered under the umbrella organization of the so-called Popular Mobilization Units, known as al-Hashd al-Shaabi in Arabic. Being engaged in a heavy fight against the mainly Sunni militants of ISIS,[4] the predominantly Shia organization was soon recognized by the Iraqi central government as a legitimate force combatting "terrorism" alongside the Iraqi Army and the Kurdish Peshmerga forces, and received a great support from Shia Muslims in the region, who described the organization as *al-Ḥashd al-Muqaddas* or the Sacred Mobilization Units. Since then, al-Hashd al-Shaabi has been regarded as a representative of the Shia's efforts to eradicate the so-called radical Sunnism represented by ISIS.[5] This sectarian dimension of the multifaceted conflict has been constantly emphasized by both ISIS and al-Hashd through their official statements, news items, and multimedia materials, backed by and spread via their capable media arms. Each group sought support from its "sect" to carry on the struggle for defending the righteousness and authenticity of its own version of Islam. However, while al-Hashd al-Shaabi occasionally built alliances with other groups for the sake of an alleged "greater cause,"[6] the strict institution of ISIS banned any form of alliances with any faction outside the umbrella of its self-proclaimed caliphate, leading to clashes even with other Sunni groups including al-Nusra Front (Jabhat al-Nuṣra), the al-Qaeda branch in Syria.[7] Besides persecuting and suppressing religious minorities and committing some of the most barbaric acts in the modern history against unarmed civilians in areas under its control, since its establishment ISIS has been in conflict, directly or indirectly, with any armed or political force, local, regional, or international, that differs ideologically or denies the legitimacy of the group's so-called caliphate. ISIS has carried out multiple atrocities against civilian populations in areas under its control, including massacres against minorities, beheading of those considered by the group as "apostates," throwing off suspected homosexuals from the top of high buildings, stoning to death women accused of "committing adultery," carrying out ethnic cleansing campaigns, capturing and selling Yezidi women at sex slavery markets in Syria and Iraq, flogging people for smoking, chopping hands of those accused of theft, using various methods of execution such as drowning or burning to death, besides destroying cultural heritage sites. Many such crimes and practices were documented by the group and spread through social media with the goal of creating a state of panic among their opponents and sending a message of intimidation to their enemies.

Unlike ISIS, the predominantly Shia organization of al-Hashd al-Shaabi has focused its activities on a local and regional scale. The group has been successful in establishing alliances, mostly bound by sectarian ties. This has been evident in the unlimited support the group has received from Iran, the major Shia power in the Middle East. Tehran has provided al-Hashd al-Shaabi with a remarkable military support and training, and the group's leadership has constantly consulted with Qassem Suleimani, the late commander of the Quds Force of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), in regard to its military strategies in Iraq, with the objective of maintaining the Shia power in key areas.[8] Furthermore, al-Hashd al-Shaabi declared allegiance to the Alawite (Shia-offshoot) regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, vowing to provide military assistance to pro-Assad forces whenever and wherever needed. The sectarian aspect has been repeatedly emphasized by al-Hashd al-Shaabi's discourse through its media channels, and the grudge toward the Sunni population in Iraq has overshadowed the group's actions on the ground, accusing Sunnis of providing a popular incubator to ISIS and blaming them for the country's instability. Al-Hashd al-Shaabi has been accused by various rights organizations, including Human Rights Watch, of committing war crimes against Sunni civilians in Iraq, blamed for mass killings, summary executions, kidnappings, and forced displacements.[9] The hate speech repeatedly presented and delivered by such radical groups toward rivals has undoubtedly carried a considerable bunch of sectarian elements, resulting in and reinforcing a discourse of "we" versus "them," remarkably deepening the divide among the various social components in the region. The impact of this discourse and the violent actions attached to it may exceed the recent chain of events in war-ravaged countries like Syria and Iraq, especially with the demographic changes and the geopolitical developments that this region has witnessed during the recent years, turning issues of coexistence and reconstruction of social ties in such culturally diverse societies into a considerable challenge. The sectarian dimension of the conflicts in Syria and Iraq has brought about a new reality for the social fabric in the region, forcing threatened minorities to either flee their towns and villages in search of safe haven or submit to the rule of aggressive armed groups, and in both cases such populations suffered the most and the ensuing humanitarian calamities led to mounting outrage among affected communities and caused an apparent breach in the social contract, rendering peaceful coexistence into a major challenge in the affected areas.

The extremist Islamist discourse has proven highly influential on an even broader scale, exceeding the regional boundaries and transforming the alleged cause of radical groups into an international issue by giving it a global dimension, reaching Muslims worldwide and leading to deadly assaults in the name of Islam.[10] One of the most active radical Islamist organizations on an international scale over the recent years has been ISIS. Amid a rapid decline of the group on the ground in Syria and Iraq in mid-2017, where local forces supported by the Global Anti-Terror Coalition expelled the extremist group from major areas in the region, ISIS increased its appeal to Muslims in the West to carry on the "Jihad" against Coalition member-states. It is worth mentioning that since its emergence as a powerful organization in 2014, the extremist group has succeeded in launching a series of attacks in key European cities that claimed dozens of civilian lives. On the 13th of November 2015, ISIS claimed responsibility for a sequence of terrifying attacks in Paris that killed at least 130 people and injured hundreds of others, an assault considered the deadliest on French soil since World War II. On March 22, 2016, the Belgian capital of Brussels was exposed to three terror bombings claimed by ISIS, causing the death of 32 people and the injury of over 300 others. Developing a new method for carrying out terrorist attacks, ISIS recruits in Europe started using trucks as an alternative weapon to hit densely populated locations and kill as many people as possible. The French seaside town of Nice fell victim to the first attack of such kind on July 14, 2016, when an ISIS recruit driving a lorry mowed down revelers on the Bastille Day, killing 84 people and injuring hundreds of others. On the 19th of December of the same year, a similar attack struck the German capital of Berlin, when a terrorist drove a lorry into a packed Christmas market, killing 12 people and injuring over 60. On April 7, 2017, an ISIS member drove a truck down a crowded shopping street in the Swedish capital of Stockholm, killing four people and injuring at least 15 others. The city of Barcelona, Spain, was also exposed to such an attack on August 17 of the same year, when a terrorist plowed a van into crowds. ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack that led to the death of 13 civilians and the injury of more than a hundred. In the UK, the extremist organization claimed several major assaults, including the Manchester terror attack on May 22, 2017, when a suicide bomber detonated explosives among teenage fans at a concert killing 22 and wounding 59 more, and the London Bridge attack on June 3, 2017, when three pro-ISIS knifemen mowed down pedestrians killing eight people and wounding several

others. This series of deadly attacks on Western soil within a period of less than three years is an obvious indication of how powerful and influential the extremist discourse and propaganda machines of radical groups like ISIS could be, and how facilitated the radicalization and recruitment of young Muslims by such groups in the era of digital media have become. One of the key incentives for the numerous terrorist attacks by ISIS abroad was the group's hostility toward member-states of the Global Anti-Terror Coalition, ignited by the loss of territory in Syria and Iraq amid intensified airstrikes by the coalition. The extremist discourse has also nurtured and increased divide among the social components on a local and regional level, turning people against each other in spite of a long history of coexistence. In addition, the Muslim community in diaspora began to suffer from the consequences of terrorist attacks through being confronted with a new reality where mounting suspicions by authorities about the existence of possible "sleeping cells" within the community increased,[11] exclusion under the pretext of maintaining national security became visible,[12] and anti-Islam campaigners grew stronger.[13]

Despite the influential role of the discourse of such radical Islamist groups and the serious consequences of their propaganda strategies, this domain remains in need of more extensive investigation and exploration. In the framework of this book, a thorough discourse analysis is conducted on written texts and multimedia materials released by ISIS and al-Hashd al-Shaabi in the period between 2014 and 2017. This phase in the history of those radical groups is being investigated for it represents a key stage in the development of extremist Islamist discourses through digital media that have gained a great attention from the international community, besides their association with an intensified sectarian hostility on a regional level, the persecution of religious minorities, rapid demographic changes, and the reproduction of administrative borderlines in accordance with military gains by parties to conflict in the region. Religious minorities in Iraq and Syria, such as the Yezidis and Christians, were notoriously victimized by armed Islamist groups and many of their places of worship were demolished. Campaigns of ethnic cleansing, forced displacements, and resettlements witnessed in different areas in the region at the hand of various armed groups have resulted in a dramatic demographic change in the affected towns and villages. As certain armed forces extended their areas of control at the expense of others, some villages and towns fell outside their usual, previously formal administrative borders and became part of

other—sometimes artificial—governorates or provinces. This has been reinforced by sieges, security checkpoints, and military fortifications.

This volume also delves into the religious texts and recitations employed by these groups to support and further increase the impact of their messages, with the goal of investigating the specific sources each group relies on and the general context of the original texts compared to the contemporary discourse and its ultimate objectives. Moreover, this volume investigates the development of extremist discourse in Syria and Iraq in the period between 2014 and 2017 in terms of topics, linguistic and contextual activities, messages, and targeted audiences. The research also touches on relevant issues, including—but not limited to—the Islamization of the Syrian pro-democracy uprising, the emergence of a Sunni—rather than a collective Syrian—discourse, the geopolitical environment and the involvement of sectarian-oriented foreign groups, and the role of the pro-Shia Iraqi official discourse in the escalation of the sectarian tension in Iraq. Furthermore, it sheds light on the sectarian element of the extremist discourse employed by radical groups through online media platforms to induce, radicalize, and eventually recruit a group of Muslim youth in Europe. The extremist discourse through digital media has played a central role in the radicalization of a considerable number of Western Muslims, which makes this discourse and the associated messages of a key interest to explore.

Hence, this volume comprises a journey into a relatively obscure field of research, in that there is a limited academic research done on the sectarian aspect of the discourse of radical Islamist groups in Syria and Iraq. Conducting a discourse analysis on the media material issued by leading extremist groups could provide new insights into the ideological mechanisms utilized by such organizations to incite sectarian conflicts and succeed in recruiting local and foreign guardians to their alleged cause. Moreover, sectarianism has played a key role in the escalation of conflicts in Syria and Iraq, endangered local minorities and stimulated sedition, hostility, and violence abroad, which raises the need for more academic efforts to investigate and analyze the inducing discourse behind that. The role of digital media in spreading the messages of such groups to audiences beyond regional borders is another aspect worth examining, given the relatively limited research done in this domain. The volume at hand provides an in-depth analysis of the discourse of ISIS and al-Hashd al-Shaabi, besides providing a large-scale insight into the discursive

environment within which both groups have emerged and grown, namely the discourse of the Syrian and Iraqi media.

Among the main contributions of this volume to the academic domains of discourse analysis, media studies, and Middle Eastern studies is the exploration of discursive practices and strategies employed by radical Islamist groups and the overall digital media in the region. The utilization of the *Ideological Square* and *Manipulative Strategies* has enabled the author to identify, analyze, and underline crucial aspects and dimensions within the discourse of prominent and influential extremist organizations in crisis-stricken Middle East. Politicization, religionization, and sectarianization are among those key aspects of the analyzed discourses. A large set of data is analyzed and efficient methodological instruments are employed for the sake of conducting an in-depth analysis of the discourses of ultra-sectarian extremist organizations in Syria and Iraq. This volume ultimately strives for studying and understanding the role of online propaganda in inciting sectarian-guided rifts and conflicts in the heart of the Middle East.

As this volume focuses on the analysis of the extremist discourse of ISIS and al-Hashd al-Shaabi, texts, news items, and multimedia materials released by online media outlets affiliated with these groups constitute the core data tackled by the analysis. The data that form the collective corpus of this study are extracted from online platforms of media organizations affiliated with ISIS and al-Hashd al-Shaabi, as well as platforms representing influential Syrian and Iraqi media to understand the discursive environment within which both groups emerged and grew. Hence, websites and digital magazines run by the concerned organizations constitute the main source of data. Unlike individual online communication channels utilized by members and followers of the involved parties, official online platforms of such organizations are included as they represent the official discourse of each of the involved organizations. Thus, this volume rather focuses on the prevalent language use by media outlets affiliated with the groups under study than that employed by members and followers of these groups through their online activities or interpersonal communications.

Leading pro-ISIS media outlets included for analysis are *al-Hayat Media Center*, *al-Furqan Foundation for Media Production*, *Dabiq Magazine*, and *Al-Naba Newspaper*. These outlets will form a key source of data for the sake of analyzing the discourse of the ISIS group. On the other hand, al-Hashd al-Shaabi, a representative of extremist Shia Islam, also publishes its statements and news reports through its own digital

media outlets. The most followed media channels of the group included in the data corpus are *Al-Tawjih Al-Aqaidi* corporation, *Humat al-Watan Magazine*, and *al-Hashd al-Shaabi Newspaper*. Other media corporations with diverse ethno-sectarian affiliations and political tendencies operating in Syria and Iraq, whose releases and news items demonstrated relevance to the topic of this volume, are incorporated for the sake of studying the discursive environment within which both ISIS and al-Hashd emerged and grew in impact. Syrian media sources consulted include the state-run *Syrian Arab News Agency* (*SANA*), pro-opposition media outlets *Enab Baladi* and *Zaman al-Wasl*, and pro-Kurdish *ANHA* and *ANF*. Iraqi outlets included as data sources are the pro-government *As-Sabah Newspaper*, pro-opposition *Ash-Sharqiya Channel*, and pro-Kurdish *Rudaw News Network*. The discourse analytical study covered by this volume primarily focuses on data produced by the aforementioned media outlets in the period between 2014 and 2017, a period that represents a key phase in the life of ISIS and al-Hashd. Both groups emerged in 2014 and gained a tremendous popularity among audiences at home and abroad. The events that followed throughout the next couple of years up until the end of 2017 marked a remarkable decline of ISIS and a widespread debate about the position of al-Hashd in Iraq. It is a period during which the radical groups under investigation have been highly active in the media arena and received an extensive local, regional, and international attention; a term of increased terror attacks in the West; and a phase of rapid changes in the power balance on the ground in Iraq and Syria that brought about a certain degree of demographic change, instability, and an increased sectarian strife that have threatened social coexistence in the region.

While various studies illustrate remarkable academic efforts to focus on radical Sunnism, radical Shiʿism remained under-researched. Multiple studies that tackle propaganda activities and discursive strategies by Sunni-based ISIS have emerged over the past few years,[14] while discursive activities by Shia-guided propaganda machines remained scarcely investigated. Including ISIS and al-Hashd al-Shaabi within the framework of the discourse analytical study covered by this book allows a room for drawing comparisons and contrasts between Sunnism and Shiʿism in their modern extremist forms in terms of discursive practices and the potential impact among the addressees. Also, the diversity of the research data extracted from Syrian and Iraqi media outlets, and analyzed accordingly, allows enriching this volume with research-based findings and conclusions on practices by influential media organizations operating in a crisis context.

The potential incitement of sectarian schism through the employment of religionized and politicized messages, besides the associated linguistic and contextual strategies and practices, demonstrates the critical importance of exploring and identifying such discursive dimensions. The probable effects of these multifaceted discourses can be seen as indicators to the significance of this study for the academic domains of Linguistics, Media Studies, and Middle Eastern Studies, or researchers operating in one of the domains to which this study belongs and contributes to. That is on an internal academic scale of benefit that could be derived from this volume.

On an external scale, namely contributions to the larger society concerned with the questions marked and tackled by this volume, raising awareness and sharing knowledge concerning the specifics and particularities of the discourse of extremist groups is another main objective of the book at hand. Given the fact that certain circles and components within the society as a whole are usually addressed and targeted by the discourse of extremist organizations, familiarity with the ideological and manipulative practices and strategies, and the correlated aspects and dimensions, utilized by such groups through their increasingly digital media discourse seems crucial. Insight, awareness, and comprehension may, to a certain degree, mitigate, reduce, or even eliminate the potential impact of the discursive strategies employed by extremist groups and relatively render the incorporated messages ineffectual and fruitless.

While the *first* chapter is dedicated to introducing the key topics covered through and tackled by this volume, the *second* chapter delves into the socio-economic and politico-religious circumstances that have largely contributed to the rise of ultra-extremist Sunni and Shia Islamist organizations, namely ISIS and al-Hashd al-Shaabi. The *third* chapter comprises a review of key theoretical concepts and movements with regard to the main topic of this volume, namely *jihad*, *Salafi-Jihadism*, and *sectarianism*. Chapter 4 tackles the development of the media landscape in the Middle East over the past three decades up until the outbreak of the Arab Spring and the associated media activities, and the eventual rise of media outlets affiliated with radical Islamist groups, besides reviewing recent analytical studies in the field. The *fifth* chapter delves into theoretical and practical aspects of discourse and discourse analysis, which will constitute the basis for the analytical Chapters 6 and 7, wherein an extended analysis of the media discourse in Syria and Iraq is conducted, and discursive activities pursued and employed by ISIS and al-Hashd al-Shaabi are explored and

illustrated. Chapter 8 provides concluding remarks on the contents of this volume on various levels and summarizes key findings of the critical discourse analysis conducted on the Syrian and Iraqi media in general and that of ISIS and al-Hashd al-Shaabi in particular.

Notes

1. Daesh [داعش dāʿish] is an acronym for the group's name in Arabic [الدولة الإسلامية في العراق والشام al-Dawlah al-Islāmiyah fi'l-ʿIrāq wa-sh-Shām]. In the course of this volume, the group is referred to as *ISIS*.
2. Al-Hashd al-Shaabi [الحشد الشعبي Al-Ḥashd Al-Shaʿbī] is also known as the People's Mobilization, the Popular Mobilization Units, PMU, or the Popular Mobilization Forces, PMF. The name *al-Hashd al-Shaabi* is used in this study to refer to this organization.
3. Tucker, S. (2017). *Modern Conflict in the Greater Middle East*.
4. Gerges, F. (2016). *A History of ISIS*.
5. Atwan, A. (2015). *Islamic State: The Digital Caliphate*.
6. Al-Hashd Al-Shaabi formed alliances with Iranian-trained Shia militias in Iraq, embraced strategic military plans presented by the IRGC, cooperated with the Iraqi Security Forces, and coordinated with the Kurdish Peshmerga during operations against ISIS.
7. Lister, C. (2016). *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*.
8. Abbas, H. (2017). *The Myth and Reality of Iraq's al-Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Forces): A Way Forward*.
9. In a report published on January 31, 2016, HRW accused al-Hashd al-Shaabi of committing possible war crimes against Sunnis in the Muqdadiya town in Diyala province (see: https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/01/31/iraq-possible-war-crimes-shia-militia). In a report released on February 16, 2017, HRW accused the same militia of abuses, including the destruction and demolishing of civilian houses in Sunni areas near Mosul (see: https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/02/16/iraq-looting-destruction-forces-fighting-isis).
10. Karam, Z. (2016). *Life and Death in ISIS: How the Islamic State Builds Its Caliphate*.
11. See: https://www.aivd.nl/onderwerpen/terrorisme/dreiging.
12. See: https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/01/27/executive-order-protecting-nation-foreign-terrorist-entry-united-states.
13. See:https://ejbron.wordpress.com/2017/09/16/geert-wilders-de-islam-is-geen-religie/. Also see: http://www.dw.com/en/far-right-afds-surge-worries-muslim-refugees-in-germany/a-40688641.

14. See Winter, C. (2019). Making Sense of Jihadi Stratcom: The Case of the Islamic State. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 13: 1. Also see Fahmy, S. (2020). The Age of Terrorism Media: The Visual Narratives of the Islamic State Group's Dabiq Magazine. *International Communication Gazette*, 82: 3. Also see El-Nashar, M. and Nayef, H. (2019). 'Cooking the Meal of Terror' Manipulative Strategies in Terrorist Discourse: A Critical Discourse Analysis of ISIS Statements. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 32: 8.

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CHAPTER 2

Extremism in a Multifaceted Revolutionary Age

Unlike other "-isms" which have a semantic kernel that partly explains the use of a concept, *extremism* has no such a core that could provide guidance as to its meaning.[1] Extremism could take a political or a religious form, namely "political extremism" or "religious extremism," and it is manifested by non-violent or violent activities. The term *extremism* is defined as the rejection, in thought or action, of democratic pluralism, and its operational heart is the suppression of difference and dissent and the elimination of the marketplace of ideas.[2] *Extremism* is also described as a set of activities—which involve beliefs, feelings, attitudes, strategies, and actions—of a character far removed from the ordinary.[3] It is viewed as a quality that is radical in opinion, characterized by intolerance toward opposing interests and is the key motivation for terrorist behavior.[4] Extremists may cross the line through their willingness to engage in violent activities in order to accomplish their goals. Crossing the line turns extremists into terrorists who usually develop honorable and dignified arguments in a bid to rationalize and justify their violent actions toward people, religions, or nations. According to Backes, the definition of *extremism* as a concept remains relativistic, yet extremists share a clear notion of what they absolutely oppose and struggle against, including pluralism, orientation toward common good of all people, self-determination by the majority of the people, and the generally binding legal rules.[5] Furthermore, Schmid maintains that humans "have a tendency to think that others should also think like they do and therefore tend to assume

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A. Abdulmajid, *Extremism in the Digital Era*,
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that their own position is shared by the majority of other 'reasonable' individuals."[6] Thus, it may occur that those deemed to be extremists consider others as "extremist," like in the case of the al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri who once condemned ISIS as being "too extreme."[7]

In order to rise and establish itself, extremism undoubtedly requires a fertile ground. Iraq and Syria emerged in the first two decades of the twenty-first century as major incubators for extremist Islamist groups in the Middle East. In the aftermath of the 2003 war, Iraq suffered from a widespread chaos and security vacuum, coupled with intensifying sectarian rifts, which erupted at a governmental level and later reached the very core of the society. These were key factors that led to the rise of sectarian Shia militias such as al-Hashd al-Shaabi and the radical Sunni ISIS group. Meanwhile, as the Syrian uprising of 2011 descended into a civil war, extremist organizations like al-Qaeda and ISIS found a sufficient foothold and joined the conflict under the pretext of protecting fellow Muslims. The rise of religious extremism considerably deprived the Syrian and Iraqi people of their legitimate aspiration to establish a pluralistic form of government based on democratic principles and willing to demonstrate respect to basic human rights. The anti-tyranny revolutionary era in these two countries was largely infiltrated and hijacked by some radical movements that sought to forcibly impose their extremist agenda on exhausted populations in war-ravaged areas.

2.1 Iraq in Turmoil

In the aftermath of the 2003 war, Iraq descended into chaos and disorder. After the U.S.-led invasion toppled the regime of Saddam Hussein, a violent conflict broke out between rival groups that mainly strived for power. The invasion of Iraq, which took place while the memory of the 9/11 attacks remained hot, was launched by the American-British alliance under the pretext of breaking potential ties between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda and eliminating alleged Iraqi mass destruction weapons, as well as removing what they perceived as the greatest source of unrest in the Middle East.[8] The U.S. assumptions on post-Saddam Iraq implied that the state would stay intact, that local security services would preserve law and order, and that the Iraqi bureaucracy would continue to operate in running the state. However, these pre-war assumptions have been proven completely wrong by the developments that followed the removal of Saddam's regime, which basically resulted in the collapse of the state and

a dramatic slide into civil war caused by several factors, including security vacuum and a struggle for power among existing and emerging forces. Existing forces included opposition parties, mainly Shia and Kurdish, and remnants of the Baath Party, whereas the emerging forces included militias, such as al-Qaeda, ISIS, and al-Hashd al-Shaabi, among others. Moreover, the erosion of the sovereignty of Iraq as a state and the elimination of key governmental institutions in post-2003 left a vacuum throughout political and social governance, leading people to retreat back into the sect or tribe in an attempt to re-establish an in-group identity and regain a certain degree of status in the new Iraq.[9] This resulted in a state of dramatically growing distrust and division among the components of the social fabric in Iraq, which was manifested later on in various forms, including armed struggle.

One of the main challenges facing post-dictatorship Iraq was the security vacuum. Subsequent to the invasion, the country has for years suffered from the absence of security forces capable of enforcing law and maintaining order. Meanwhile, the American troops focused most of their efforts on pursuing extremist insurgents in the rural parts of western Iraq, marginalizing densely populated cities that were encountering a large security vacuum.[10] The deteriorating situation led to the rise of organized crime, social elements hostile to each other amid a plague of ethnic and religious fear and insecurity, and sectarian militias seeking power and fighting for control over unstable areas. This has been evident in the case of ISIS taking control of Sunni-majority areas across Iraq amid a prompt collapse in the state security apparatus and an intensifying sectarian rivalry through later stages of the conflict. It was in this period that Muqtada al-Sadr established his sectarian Jaysh al-Mahdi militia to impose himself as a religious leader of Iraq's Shia, the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq—an armed Shia force that has been based in Iran since the 1980s—re-entered Iraq, and the Iranian-trained Badr Brigades emerged as another powerful umbrella of Shia militias. The Sunnis, on the other hand, refused to stay inactive toward the American invasion and the dramatic growth of Shia power in Iraq. Under the leadership of Jordanian national Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the Jamaʿat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad created its bases in the Sunni-majority parts of Iraq and recruited many local and regional jihādists, mostly affiliated with al-Qaeda, to combat the Americans and the Shiʿites. The sectarian militias carried out countless atrocities against civilians, including ethnic cleansing campaigns.[11]

Under the former regime of Saddam Hussein, the Sunni Arabs enjoyed a relatively greater political power and economic benefits in contrast to other communities in Iraq.[12] As Saddam's ethno-sectarian base, the Sunnis, who dominated the military and the intelligence services, had been the regime's instrument in oppressing the Shia and the Kurds. The 2003 U.S. invasion was seen by many Sunnis as a threat, since the Americans demonstrated a determination to re-establish Iraq as a more equitable state than it had been under the Saddam regime, which basically meant reducing the Sunni share of the pie and increasing that of the Shia as a majority. However, handing over the new Iraq to sectarian Shia elements led to the persecution of the Sunnis in retaliation for the woes they had suffered under Saddam, while the Americans basically remained standing by. The threat of being replaced by the Shia and the Kurds led the Sunni community to seek allies and any available support in order to resist exclusion from the power circle. Jihādist groups, with fighting skills and experience, weapons, and financial resources, showed willingness to support the Sunni cause and fight the Americans as well as the Shia in Iraq. For the jihādists, the American troops were seen as *Crusaders* occupying a Muslim country, and fighting them was believed to be a duty. The alleged main cause for al-Zarqawi and his fellow militant jihādists was protecting Sunni Muslims and liberating their land from the so-called *Crusaders*. This while the historic sectarian tension with the Shia continued to play out, and in this case, they were seen as traitors to the Muslim community after showing support to the American invasion in Iraq. Although the Sunni tribal leaders rejected such Salafist groups in the beginning, their deteriorating situation eventually pushed them to submit and join a guerilla war against the Americans and establish militias to fight the Shia.

The emerging and growing militias sought military as well as political and economic power, taking over oil facilities and transportation routes in key areas across the country, suppressing their opponents and rewarding supporters. Militia leaders became representatives of communities and were engaged in negotiations and elections on a state level.[13] Corruption flourished and sectarian divide deepened, turning Iraq into a failed state. The Shia-dominated government in Baghdad backed the incorporation of sectarian militiamen into the state security services and the military, inciting intensification of Sunni guerilla struggle, incubated by many voiceless people within the Sunni community across Iraq. Additionally, the increased Iranian support to the Iraqi Shia groups and Tehran's mounting interference into Baghdad's politics further inflamed the sectarian tension.

The Kurds, as a separate nation with their own cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and historical identity, never desired to be part of Iraq, Turkey, Syria, or Iran. Since 1918, the Kurds have been struggling to reach autonomy and establish their own state.[14] In comparison with their peers in other parts of "Great Kurdistan,"[15] Iraq's Kurds have been successful in accomplishing self-rule and developing their own economy. In the period between 1991 and 2003, the Kurds ruled a semi-autonomous region in northern Iraq. They counted on the American invasion to provide them with an opportunity to finally realize independence, but the U.S. insistence on maintaining Iraq's territorial unity under the pretext of preventing the outbreak of a civil war deprived the Kurds of the right to independence and forced them to join a coalition with Shia and Sunni factions in Baghdad. However, despite their de facto partnership with the Iraqi Central Government, the Kurds continued to rule themselves and achieved a considerable economic growth, besides proving their capability in maintaining security and civil peace within the borders of the Kurdistan Region while the rest of Iraq was sinking into a devastating sectarian conflict.[16] Furthermore, when the war on ISIS started in 2014, the Kurdish Peshmerga forces emerged as a powerful ally to the U.S.-led International Coalition in combatting the radical group.[17]

The formation of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) in 2007 was supposed to bring about more stability and civil peace, but the sectarian inclination remained dominant among the political blocks and overshadowed public life across the country. The significant Shia dominance over the Iraqi government and its policies led to the marginalization, and sometimes exclusion, of the Sunnis.[18] This while relations between the Kurdistan Regional Government in Erbil and the Iraqi Central Government in Baghdad remarkably deteriorated over several outstanding issues, including the governance of the so-called disputed areas[19]—which fall outside the Kurdish borders but allegedly belong to Kurdistan—and economic matters such as the distribution of oil returns and Kurdistan Region's constitutionally mandated share of the federal budget which had been suspended for years by the central government.[20] These factors stimulated the Kurds—who began to enjoy an unprecedented military and security power—to revive their call for independence and struggle for separation from Iraq.

The joint military operations by competing Iraqi factions against the ISIS radical group, which began in the summer of 2014 in cooperation and coordination with a global coalition, gave many Iraqis a glimpse of

hope to reach a new social contract and rebuild the country on the rubble of counter-terrorism efforts. ISIS constituted a threat to the various components of the Iraqi society, including the Shia, the Kurds, the ethno-religious minorities as well as the Sunnis themselves, through its brutal practices and innumerable atrocities. However, the roots of the sectarian divide appeared much deeper and greater than an urgent need for unity and reconciliation, as the "war on terrorism" was exploited by different groups in a way that ignited further escalation of tension and struggle for power throughout Iraq.

2.2 Syria: A Distorted Uprising

In Syria, where the ruling Assad family and the Baath Party have for decades employed the concept of nationalism in the service of monopolizing power and a forced sanctification of the leadership, opposition groups remained largely paralyzed, unable to take any actual steps toward reforms, constitutional change, or devolution of power in the country. Moreover, corruption has eaten up government institutions, amid absence of freedoms and basic human rights, causing a growing public outrage. As revolutionary movements succeeded in ousting dictatorships in Tunisia and Egypt, many Syrians were seeking a spark to start a similar revolution against Assad's rule. The day Mubarak stepped down in Egypt gave Syrians a glimpse of hope.

The Syrian President Bashar al-Assad acknowledged in January 2011 that there have been economic hardships for many Syrians and that political reform had been slow, but he was confident that his country was not in a state to undergo an anti-regime uprising similar to Tunisia and Egypt, arguing that his administration's policies were principally aligned with the fundamental aspirations of the Syrian people.[21] Amid ongoing unrest in the region, a group of children in Syria's southern city of Daraa drew fearless graffiti on the walls of their school: "People want to overthrow the regime … You [Assad] are next."[22] As the children were arrested and tortured, an uprising broke out and thousands started to take to the street across the country, calling for an end to the repressive authoritarian practices of the Assad regime, which have been taking place since Bashar's father Hafiz al-Assad came to power in 1971.[23] The authorities resorted to violence in a bid to end the protests, but that policy failed to hinder the storm of public anger; on the contrary, the crisis escalated and the numbers of protestors grew dramatically in a matter of days. The decades-long

stagnation in Syria's social and political life, reflected in a large-scale persecution and economic woes, were factors that raised a popular outrage against the authorities after more than four decades of silence, and rebellion became inevitable. Undoubtedly, the general environment in the region regarding other ongoing popular movements, besides other internal factors, played a role in motivating Syrians to take to the street and protest against their regime. In addition, global warming was also deemed one of the reasons that sparked the 2011 uprising in Syria, as a severe drought plagued Syria since 2007, pushing over 1.5 million people to leave the countryside and move into cities, which led to increased poverty and social unrest.[24]

In fact, Syrians were already familiar with the repressive practices of the security apparatus, especially after witnessing the suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood–led Hama rebellion in the 1980s and the Kurdish uprising of 2004. In the beginning of the 2011 uprising, young activists led the demonstrations, and social media played a remarkable role in the coordination of the popular movement on the ground. The active role of media activists enabled the documentation of the daily developments, which increased the importance of "citizen journalism."[25] Amid an increasing scale of protests, the regime started to cut off communications and besiege neighborhoods and towns that had become strongholds for anti-regime protestors. At the time, the Syrians appeared determined and aspiring to write a new chapter in Syria's history through founding a pluralistic and democratic system. However, the excessive use of force by the authorities to suppress the demonstrations, which swept into most of the country's major cities in a matter of months, claimed many lives and stimulated dozens of soldiers to desert the ranks of the regime's military forces. In July 2011, the defectors announced the formation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), to become the first armed wing of the revolution. The FSA was established under the pretext of protecting peaceful demonstrators and supporting the cause of overthrowing the government and promoting democratic and pluralistic principles. Nevertheless, the armament increased across the country and various rebel groups emerged. Hence, Syria began to slide into a long-term civil war that eventually resulted in devastating consequences on various levels.[26]

During the early stage of the uprising, Syrian protestors strongly condemned sectarianism, called for unity against dictatorship, and stressed the need for a democratic change. The opposition accused the Assad government of inducing minority groups into supporting its forces against the

uprising. On the other hand, President Assad in his public statements constantly sought to portray the opposition forces as Sunni extremists equivalent to al-Qaeda, and as participants in foreign conspiracies against his country.[27] As the uprising descended into a civil war, it has eventually acquired a sectarian overtone. The overwhelming majority of rebel fighters were Sunni Muslims, engaged in battles against predominantly Alawite troops and Shiʿite militias. The sectarian split was reflected in banners raised by parties to conflict in Syria, with anti-regime groups emphasizing their Sunni identity and pro-regime forces displaying their Shia-Alawite affiliation on different occasions, especially on the battleground. This sectarian dimension was also reflected in the alliances that emerged between local armed forces and regional actors, with Shiʿite Iran supporting the Alawite Assad regime and Sunni Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey supporting different rebel groups.[28]

As the conflict exacerbated, sectarian divisions hardened, and rifts emerged and intensified between armed opposition factions that shared control over different parts of the country. The FSA itself weakened amid increasing divisions that led to the rise of numerous rebel groups with an Islamist overtone, which eventually paved the way for the rise of the Qaeda-affiliated al-Nusra Front and the so-called Islamic State or ISIS. Meanwhile, the Kurds established their own armed force, namely, the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), and seized control of the Kurdish-majority parts of northern Syria. The Kurdish units concentrated their fight against ISIS and other Islamist groups, and developed their ranks by including Arab and Christian fighters under the umbrella of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which then became a key ally to the U.S.-led coalition in the war on ISIS.[29]

While rebel groups continued to mainly rely on light-to-medium weapons, pro-regime troops possessed a capable air force and various heavy weapons, including a chemical arsenal. The imbalance of military power between the parties to conflict in Syria, besides the continuous heavy military support by Russia and Iran to the Assad regime, enabled the latter to regain control over major parts of the country, including the key city of Aleppo. The Syrian regime forces also launched several chemical attacks on opposition-held areas, causing many casualties.[30] Political efforts weren't as fruitful to put an end to the conflict in its early years, and the rebellious movement against the regime declined gradually with the start of a global war on terror in Syria and abroad. The political opposition remained deeply divided, as rival blocks continued to battle for supremacy.

The main political opposition body was the Syrian National Coalition (SNC), but the fact that it was formed and remained based in exile kept its legitimacy dubious and its influence remained limited on the ground in Syria. At the United Nations Security Council, Russia vetoed at least eight Western-backed resolutions on Syria, which prevented the collapse of the Assad regime. Several short-term cease-fire agreements had been reached, but failed in implementation to stop the bloodshed or lead to a sustainable truce between the regime and the armed opposition forces. While the international community remained for years paralyzed toward finding a solution, the civil war in Syria caused a mass destruction to the country's infrastructure, the death of more than half a million citizens, forced disappearance of hundreds of thousands, and forced displacement of a half of the country's population, with millions of people seeking asylum in other countries. Syria then became one of the most dangerous places in the world.[31]

Civil war is considered the prevalent form of armed conflict in the contemporary international system, as most of the post–Cold War deadly conflicts have been domestic rather than interstate.[32] Nonetheless, many of these civil wars, like in the Syrian case, cannot be seen as purely internal or domestic. The Syrian crisis has been greatly influenced by regional developments at the beginning, and its decline into a civil war led to the rise and development of a set of loyalties and alliances among internal, regional, and international actors. The government of President Bashar al-Assad received a remarkable support—financial and military—from Iran, as a strategic regional ally, and Russia, as a key long-standing international ally, besides manpower reinforcements from sectarian (Shiʿite) militias like the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Iraqi Abu Fadl al-Abbas and al-Hashd al-Shaabi.[33] On the other hand, factions of the Syrian political opposition and the armed rebel groups—referred to as "revolutionary forces"—formed separate bodies in correspondence with their diverse regional supporters and financiers such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey, besides the Western-led Friends of Syria Group on an international level.[34] Consequently, the conflict took the form of a proxy war that drew in different regional and world powers. The war at times also spilled over into Lebanon, showing a regional dimension of the Syrian crisis. Lebanon witnessed sporadic clashes between some Syrian rebel factions and pro-Assad militias such as Hezbollah. Syria-related clashes occurred occasionally on the Lebanese soil in the period between 2011 and 2017.[35] Damascus was further exposed to several Israeli airstrikes that have mainly targeted

regime army bases, convoys, and shipments of weapons.[36] Syria and Israel are purportedly at war since 1948, but the borderline remained quiet from 1973 up until the outbreak of the Syrian civil war. Besides, Turkey intervened militarily into northern Syria and targeted Kurdish-held areas in an attempt to prevent the establishment of a Kurdish self-rule or self-administration along its southern border, but its operations had been limited due to an American military presence alongside the Kurdish-led SDF troops who jointly fought against ISIS in the group's de facto capital of Raqqa and other parts of northern Syria. After driving ISIS militants out of several areas in northern Syria, the Kurds announced the creation of a self-rule in 2015 to run Kurdish-majority areas of northern Syria under the banner of "Federation of Northern Syria-Rojava." This has ignited an aggressive Turkish response for fear of a similar move by Turkey's Kurds, and the Turkish military then repeatedly bombed Syria's Kurdish areas in a bid to deter the alleged threat. Eventually, amid a declining American presence, the Turkish military and allied Syrian rebels took over a couple of predominantly Kurdish towns in northern Syria under the pretext of eliminating threats to Turkish national security.[37] Furthermore, the emergence of radical Islamist groups, such as al-Nusra Front—al-Qaeda wing in Syria—and ISIS led to the involvement of many jihādists from different parts of the world to join the Syrian conflict under the pretext of defending fellow Sunni Muslims against the Alawite regime of Assad and allied Shiʿite militias. This multifaceted intervention from numerous regional and international actors indicates the transnational characteristic of the Syrian civil war.

2.3 Radical Islam Under Scrutiny: Rise of ISIS and al-Hashd al-Shaabi

Religious radicalism (*al-Taṭarruf al-Dīni*) is defined as a mode of thought and action that basically implicates the rejection of surrounding cultural values and embodiments perceived as nonindigenous or inauthentic to the religious tradition, which consequently entails defense of a tradition believed to be under siege.[38] The underlying impetus to the emergence and growth of radical Islamist activism is the failed secular modernization projects in the Middle East.[39] Radical Islamist ideology equips adherents with considerable strengths, and, at the same time, constitutes a source of constraints. Ideology is considered a crucial determinant of the ability of

radical Islamist organizations to mobilize support, to provide an alternative to the ideological superiority and control of the ruling class in the society, and to seize power. Radicalism, according to Richards, sprang up in the form of a political response to the deteriorating and deepening social, political, economic, and cultural crises in the Muslim World.[40] Besides, a rejectionist discourse to the West, democracy, secularism, and liberalism seemingly has been employed by radical Islamist groups to incite a state of grudge and outrage among the already desperate Muslim youth and ultimately drag them into an alleged rebellion against local as well as international actors and ideologies claimed to be behind their miseries and provide them with a supposedly holy cause to fight for. Thus, the rise of radical Islam in the Middle East can be attributed to a multitude of factors, including government policy failure, rapid demographic growth, high unemployment, and increasing poverty, which alienated a considerable proportion of the Muslim youth and opened the path for radical Islamist groups to emerge and expand. Radical Islamists were driven by various incentives, such as the search for alleged identity and recognition, an optimist aspiration of reaching an eventual transformation from marginalization to power, opposition to secular ideologies, and frustration toward ruling regimes accused of apostasy and corruption. Moreover, war-ravaged countries like Syria and Iraq, where security vacuum and chaos have prevailed for years, have served as breeding grounds for radical Islamists to establish themselves.

The Islamic State is deemed to be the most powerful radical Islamist group in world history.[41] The significantly powerful image demonstrated by and portrayed about the group stems from the remarkable combination of features that are deemed to be unprecedented to exist in a single Islamist militia. This strong combination, as outlined by Mabon and Royle, involves ideology, military power, ruthless violence, financial astuteness, and a strategic social media campaign.[42] In order to better understand the development of the group into a powerful self-proclaimed caliphate, exploring its origins seems inescapable. The group arose from the remnants of al-Qaeda in Iraq, also known as AQI, an offshoot of al-Qaeda organization founded by Jordanian national Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in 2004. Al-Zarqawi initially founded the *Jamaʿat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad* group in 1999. In 2004, he pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. Subsequently, his group became known as AQI or al-Qaeda in Iraq. Both al-Qaeda and ISIS belong to the same family, namely Salafi-Jihadism (*al-Salafīyah al-Jihādīyah*), and share a similar worldview. The

Salafi-Jihadi ideology, which rejects human-made laws, entails the replacement of state sovereignty with Allah's rule through the establishment of Qur'ānic-based states. This is deemed central to the worldview of all Salafi-Jihādis.[43] Yet, the origins of ISIS could be traced to the late 1980s, when al-Zarqawi headed to Afghanistan to join the Mujāhidīn[44] in the fight against the invading Soviet troops. In 2000, al-Zarqawi set up a training camp for jihādist fighters in Afghanistan with financial support from al-Qaeda, a step that enabled him to develop a recruitment network which succeeded in attracting fighters whose backgrounds were mostly in line with his own: Muslim youth with low education and fragile theological knowledge of the Qur'ān, often radicalized in prison.[45] While his resources were considerably insignificant when he arrived in Iraq to establish a branch of al-Qaeda there, the intensifying sectarian clashes provided al-Zarqawi with an opportunity to get supporters and attain the required resources in order to establish and strengthen his radical organization.

The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and the subsequent social turmoil resulted in the dismantling of governmental institutions and the formation of a political system that was largely based on *muḥāṣaṣa* or the distribution of power among communal, ethnic, and tribal groups. Deteriorating socio-economic conditions in predominantly Sunni parts of Iraq post-2003 is considered among the main factors that have pushed many Sunnis into cooperating with rising pro-Sunni militias for the sake of regaining some of the power they had lost subsequent to the fall of Saddam's regime. The sectarian-based political system and the tensions attributed to it are seen as a product of the destruction of the Iraqi state which followed the 2003 invasion. Therefore, Iraq can be viewed as a unique instance of how foreign intervention and failing state institutions and services paved the way to a condition of divisive discontent that was eventually exploited by ideologues such as al-Zarqawi. One of the key institutions that was dismantled after Saddam's removal was the military, which entailed the expulsion of tens of thousands of Sunni officers from their posts. Consequently, a state of resentment and rancor prevailed among the Sunni population in Iraq. Many Baathists, who were excluded from state services in post-2003 Iraq, were approached and recruited by al-Zarqawi's network. These new recruits, some of whom enjoyed remarkable military knowledge and experience that in some cases extended to the time of the Iraq-Iran war, would later hold high-ranking positions in the ranks of ISIS. However, the Baathists and al-Zarqawi basically had very little in common, except sharing a common enemy.[46] Initially, Baathists resorted to him for weapons

and military support, while he used them to provoke and spread chaos and to overthrow the U.S.-appointed government in Baghdad. The Sunni insurgency in Iraq broke out with a few thousands of ex-Baathists fighting against the U.S. occupation. Thus, it was far from being an Islamic revolt in its early stage. However, al-Zarqawi's arrival to Iraq and his rapid popularity among anti-U.S. fighters on the ground weakened the Baathists and persuaded many to follow him. Meanwhile, Nouri al-Maliki, who then occupied the position of Prime Minister in the post-Saddam government, insisted on disregarding calls for inclusion and, simultaneously, pursued sectarian-driven policies, which contributed to the escalation of the sectarian divide and helped al-Zarqawi play on the feelings of excluded Sunnis. The latter then established AQI with the blessing of Osama bin Laden, who supported the idea of launching a collective war against Shia Muslims alongside the already mounting struggle against the Americans in Iraq. Al-Zarqawi sought a sectarian strategy that targeted the Shia population and its religious centers, having in mind that a Sunni-Shia sectarian civil war could eventually force the U.S. troops to withdraw. The leader of AQI believed that once Iraq's territorial unity had collapsed and the country turned into separate sectarian enclaves, he would have the advantage to become the emir of the Sunni-populated territory, and the region would turn into a breeding ground for the rise of a new generation of jihādists. Nevertheless, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was killed in a U.S. airstrike on 7 June 2006, and he was replaced by Abu Ayyub al-Masri. A couple of months later, al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) merged with other armed groups and formed what became known as the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), but maintained tentative ties with al-Qaeda. Al-Masri announced the establishment of ISI on 15 October 2006, with Abu Omar al-Baghdadi as its leader.[47] The emerging ISI group was reportedly responsible for approximately 70 percent of the suicide attacks carried out in 2007 in Iraq.[48] As the U.S. troops extended their military campaign to hunt down ISI militants, the group was driven from Baghdad and many of its members were then concentrated in Mosul. The American military operations led to the death of prominent jihādists in the group and, by 2008, over 2000 ISI members were killed and nearly 8800 were detained.[49]

Al-Maliki's authoritarian regime and his insistence on refraining from addressing the increasing sectarian divide and the deteriorating security conditions across the country added to the complexity of the Iraqi landscape.[50] After taking office in 2006, al-Maliki started a security consolidation and took control of Iraq's military troops, intelligence and security

apparatus, special operations units, and state ministries. This enabled the rising Shiʿite Prime Minister to target Sunni groups and overcome any coup attempts. Under al-Maliki, Iraq basically descended into a spiral of sectarian confrontations amid a state of uncertainty. Sullivan maintains that Iraq's political and military powers were "highly centralized in the Prime Minister Maliki's personal office. The national unity government that was formed in the wake of 2010 parliamentary elections has given way to a de-facto majoritarian government in which Maliki has a monopoly on the institutions of the state."[51] Such practices evidently had significantly serious implications for Iraq in the years that followed. The U.S.-instituted process of *de-Baathification* was largely politicized by Nouri al-Maliki, who refused to integrate the Sunnis into state services, whether civilian or military, and excluded Sunni politicians for criticizing his regime.[52] The process of *de-Baathification* mainly entailed the elimination of the remnants of the Saddam Hussein regime and any elements of the then ruling Baath Party. The process was aimed at creating the basis for a democratic transition in Iraq. By 2009, al-Maliki government's excessive sectarian policies and practices toward the Sunnis led to mounting sectarian tensions, and ISI did not hesitate to intensify its suicide attacks in Baghdad and other cities and towns across Iraq, mostly Shia-populated. As a result, the popularity of and support for ISI considerably increased among Sunni tribal groups. This while the U.S. and allied Iraqi forces boosted their cooperation and coordination to combat Sunni insurgents and eliminate ISI leaders, an effort that eventually resulted in the killing of Abu Omar al-Baghdadi and Abu Ayyub al-Masri in April 2010. Subsequently, ISI found itself a new leader known as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, a man who would take al-Zarqawi's unfulfilled aspiration further to the extreme. While al-Zarqawi sought an emirate, al-Baghdadi pursued—and considerably succeeded in—the re-establishment of an alleged caliphate, a long-standing goal and an ultimate aspiration among jihādists. According to Sekulow et al., under the leadership of al-Baghdadi, ISIS has gone further than any other jihādist group to make that radical dream of reviving and re-establishing the Caliphate a present reality.[53] Within less than a decade, al-Baghdadi had gone "from quiet, pious obscurity to becoming the leader of one of the most feared" jihādist groups in history, yet people who knew him closely confirm that "he has always disliked the limelight and would never have pushed himself forward as a leader."[54]

After a little more than a year in the leadership of ISI, al-Baghdadi took the first step toward expanding his group's power through sending jihādist

operatives from Iraq into Syria in July 2011—as the country was descending into civil war. One of the key figures among these militant operatives was Abu Muhammad al-Joulani, who, in early 2012, formed a Syrian branch of al-Qaeda, known as al-Nusra Front. While his operatives started to get engaged in the Syrian conflict, al-Baghdadi launched an unprecedented armed campaign under the banner "Breaking the Walls"[55] which targeted state institutions and included some eight prison breaks in Iraq in the period between July 2012 and July 2013.[56] The ISI-led prison breaks freed many jihādists who had been imprisoned by the Iraqi authorities on the background of participating in various AQI-led attacks against the state. The campaign gave al-Baghdadi much credit among the jihādists and showed him as a strong and influential leader whose capabilities cannot be underestimated. Although ISI was funding the operations of al-Joulani-led al-Nusra Front in Syria,[57] al-Baghdadi formed his own cell there to represent ISI directly and to guarantee his share of the pie in case of any future rifts with jihādists operating under al-Joulani's command. In March 2013, the Syrian regime troops were driven out of Raqqa, and the city fell to several anti-Assad groups, including Syrian opposition fighters, al-Nusra Front and ISI. While these ideologically different factions[58] shared control over Raqqa in the beginning, ISI began to bring in more military reinforcements from Iraq in a bid to consolidate power over the city and expand its territory through opening new fighting fronts in Syria. In mid-April, al-Baghdadi moved into Syria's Raqqa and announced that ISI merged with al-Nusra Front to form the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which would unite jihādists in both countries militarily and territorially. However, Nusra's al-Joulani condemned the announcement and rejected an alliance with al-Baghdadi, stressing his group's allegiance to al-Qaeda. The ISIS leadership then considered al-Joulani "traitorous" and called al-Qaeda and its leader Ayman al-Zawahiri "a joke," besides accusing al-Qaeda of shifting its ideology and abandoning *tawḥīd* (monotheism) and *jihād* (struggle for Allah's cause).[59] Al-Joulani's refusal to subordinate himself to al-Baghdadi and his newly founded group caused a major split among the jihādists, who had to either stress their loyalty to al-Qaeda and continue to fight in the ranks of al-Nusra Front or pledge allegiance to al-Baghdadi and join his rising ISIS group. The consequences of the split surfaced in August 2013, when ISIS launched a major armed operation against al-Nusra Front and other Syrian Islamist rebel groups, such as Aḥrār al-Shām and Liwā' al-Tawḥīd, in Raqqa and Aleppo.

Meanwhile, ISIS was expanding in Iraq amid ongoing social frustration agitated by the failing state services and a considerably dysfunctional political system, and the group was able to capture large territories by December 2013, including the Sunni-majority city of Fallujah and parts of Ramadi in the central province of al-Anbar.[60] The destruction of state services and the subsequent social turmoil triggered a deep sectarian divide between Sunni Muslims and Shia Muslims and propelled the rise of ISIS "from an inconsequential non-state actor to an Islamic state," and Iraq's dysfunctional and broken political system, which suffered from increasing factionalism, provided the group with "ideological nourishment."[61] Thus, ISIS exploited the situation in favor of its agenda through promoting itself as a protector to the marginalized Sunnis and took Sunni-populated areas as strongholds for its operations. In Syria, the increased military and logistical support from Shia powers like Iran and Hezbollah to the Assad regime was largely condemned and frequently and emphatically referred to by ISIS in an attempt to support its narrative of defending and protecting Sunni Muslims against a Shia domination. Thus, like in the case of Iraq, the sectarian dimension of the conflict in Syria was remarkably exploited by ISIS. Meanwhile, after a few months of heavy fighting against al-Nusra Front and Syrian rebel groups, ISIS eventually seized control of Raqqa city in January 2014, and declared it a capital of its self-proclaimed Islamic emirate. The so-called *emirate* was the initial form of proclamation claimed by ISIS in territories taken over by its militants, before the group officially claimed the establishment of a *caliphate* in June 2014. A few months later, the radical group took over the city of Mosul in Iraq's northwestern Nineveh province following a major offensive. ISIS then expanded its territories by seizing control of more areas across Syria and Iraq, including Tikrit and Deir ez-Zor, besides taking over key oil facilities—which later constituted a crucial resource for the group to fund its operations. The group's weapons arsenal was also growing to include U.S.-manufactured arms seized from Iraqi troops, machine guns, and anti-tank rockets captured during clashes with Syrian rebel groups, as well as a certain quantity of chemical weapons obtained after capturing a chemical facility in Iraq.[62]

At the time, al-Baghdadi believed that his group's power had reached such a level that could enable him and his followers to finally reap the fruits of their alleged jihad. In a speech at the Grand al-Nuri Mosque in Mosul city, on June 29, 2014, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi stated that his group was rebranding itself as the *Islamic State* (*al-Dawla al-Islāmīya*), announced the establishment of an alleged caliphate (*khilāfah*), and

proclaimed himself as caliph (*khalīfah*) or the ruler of all Muslims. Although al-Baghdadi's self-proclaimed caliphate received a wave of criticism from leaders of renowned extremist groups, such as al-Qaeda and Taliban,[63] ISIS succeeded in attracting a large number of jihādists from all over the world. The rapid advance on the ground further enabled ISIS to systematically dismantle the border between Syria and Iraq to facilitate its operations on both sides of the borderline. It was then when the radical group announced the destruction of the Sykes-Picot border: "Allah facilitated that it [ISIS] step over the Sykes-Picot borders in its jihad."[64] In order to enhance its power in controlled territories and to legitimize its alleged caliphate, ISIS founded public institutions—including religious, judicial, educational, security, infrastructure, and humanitarian—to reflect its vision and strategy at political and military levels in order to demonstrate its governance capacities. In a study about governance within the ISIS's self-proclaimed caliphate, Caris and Reynolds maintain that the group's project was not a mere empty rhetoric:

> The idea of the caliphate that rests within a controlled territory is a core part of ISIS's political vision. The ISIS grand strategy to realize this vision involves first establishing control of terrain through military conquest and then reinforcing this control through governance. Available evidence indicates that ISIS has indeed demonstrated the capacity to govern both rural and urban areas in Syria that it controls. Through the integration of military and political campaigns, particularly in the provincial capital of Raqqa, ISIS has built a holistic system of governance.[65]

Moreover, the group was able to diversify its sources of revenue in order to guarantee a considerably uninterrupted management of internal affairs in the controlled areas as well as its military operations that were aimed at expanding its territorial presence. ISIS basically relied on natural resources, foreign donations, taxes and fees, sale of antiquities, kidnapping for ransom, looting, confiscation, and fine as key financial resources.[66] Nevertheless, in order to impose its rule over the populations inhabiting areas under its control, ISIS committed numerous atrocities toward entire communities—such as the Yezidis who suffered forced displacement, mass killings, and sex slavery at the hands of ISIS militants—or individuals who were accused of "apostasy" or other indictments for opposing the group or violating its strict rules.

Through its capable media outlets, ISIS produced and disseminated many footages that depicted public beheadings, floggings, mass executions, and other forms of brutal practices in a bid to deliver and maintain an image of strength and ruthlessness toward its internal opponents and external enemies. The group also claimed responsibility for several terror attacks that targeted densely populated locations in the West. Representing the most extreme manifestation of *Salafi-Jihadism*, ISIS received support from Salafi-Jihadis across the world, who hoped that its self-proclaimed caliphate would bring about a strict rule of *Islamic Sharīʿa*,[67] especially when the group made rapid advances against rivals and claimed gains that were deemed unprecedented among Salafi-Jihadi-guided radical groups. Thus, even though ISIS's power declined and its territories shrunk by the end of 2017, the effects of its discourse and practices on the local level—in terms of sectarianism—and its influential role in the arena of global jihādism in the period between 2014 and 2017 are believed to have long-term consequences.

While ISIS undoubtedly constitutes an instance of radical Sunnism, al-Hashd al-Shaabi remarkably represents Shiʿism in its extremist form. The rise and growth of both organizations reflect a deeply rooted sectarian schism within the Muslim society, which has evidently ignited long-standing tensions in the region. As each group was seeking glorious triumph, territorial expansion, and prevalence of dogmatically guided agendas, the civilian populations on both sides of the battleground had to pay an inescapable price and endure unbearable conditions.[68] Both Sunni- and Shia-populated areas, as well as territories inhabited by minority communities, were targeted by such sectarian forces which committed boundless atrocities.

When ISIS declared its caliphate following the capture of major cities such as Mosul, Fallujah, and Tikrit, and vowed to march further to Baghdad, the Iraqi army and security forces appeared incapable of impeding the radical group's progress and many Iraqi soldiers deserted or fled the battleground.[69] Subsequent to the ignominious collapse of the Iraqi army in the face of ISIS in June 2014, several Shia militias unified ranks to form al-Hashd al-Shaabi and fight under its umbrella in order to fill the vacuum and contribute to the defense of the capital Baghdad and the protection of the Shia-populated areas and worship centers across Iraq. The formation came in response to an edict or *fatwa* by Iraq's supreme Shia religious cleric Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who urged all capable men to assist in protecting the country, the population, and the holy shrines, which he

deemed to be a duty in the face of the existential threat posed by ISIS. Despite al-Sistani's relatively careful language in his edict, which basically stressed a national rather than a sectarian duty to confront the jihādists of ISIS, his call has been interpreted in a sectarian context and the developments on the ground eventually took the form of an unavoidable Shia-Sunni struggle. In his statement, Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani said:

> Iraq and the Iraqi people are facing great danger, the terrorists [of ISIS] are not aiming to control just several provinces, they said clearly, they are targeting all other provinces including Baghdad, Karbala and Najaf. So, the responsibility to face them and fight them is the responsibility of all, not one sect or one party. The responsibility now is saving Iraq, saving our country, saving the holy places of Iraq from these sects.[70]

Nevertheless, by mentioning the imminent threat to Karbala and Najaf, two holy Shia cities that are home to sacred shrines and hold a historical importance for the Shia sect, it may not come as a surprise that al-Sistani's edict has been interpreted in a sectarian context and eventually used by Shia militias as a source of inspiration to unite under the umbrella of the subsequently founded al-Hashd al-Shaabi to combat the Sunni extremists of ISIS and their alleged corroborators.

Interestingly, al-Hashd al-Shaabi included within its ranks Shia militiamen from various movements, who apparently decided to overcome their partisan differences for the sake of protecting the sect and its symbols. Among the foundational factions of al-Hashd were the pre-existing Shia armed groups that were previously active on the Iraqi soil in the period between 2003 and 2011 and continued to exist due to a remarkable Iranian support, such as Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Badr Organization, and Kataib Hezbollah. Another kind of forces that joined the ranks of al-Hashd were the armed wings of sectarian Shia political parties in Iraq which were already involved in the post-2003 civil war, such as al-Mahdi Army and Liwa' al-Shabaab al-Rasali—affiliated with the prominent Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. Moreover, in response to Sistani's *fatwa*, new militias emerged comprising Shia volunteers from southern Iraq, mainly from Karbala and Najaf, and joined al-Hashd.[71] The growing recruitment network helped the emerging organization to gain an increased popularity and expand its power rapidly. Undoubtedly, the monopoly of power in Baghdad by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who appointed Shia officers to hold the most significant command positions within the army and

security divisions,[72] enabled such Shia militias to grow and enjoy unprecedented freedom of movement and armament with a large Iranian support. Noteworthy, some factions within al-Hashd al-Shaabi pledged allegiance to al-Maliki and remained loyal to him as a member of al-Daʿwa Party, even after he resigned the office of Prime Minister under popular pressure in August 2014. It is also worth mentioning that Iran's support to al-Hashd al-Shaabi and its involvement in the already raging sectarian divide in Iraq did not remain restricted to the supply of arms, but developed further into organizing training programs and providing strategic planning to the militias operating on the ground in a bid to boost their position and enable them to accomplish more military gains. Qassem Suleimani, then the commander of the Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corpse (IRGC), guided several al-Hashd operations on the ground, along with other experienced Iranian military commanders.[73] Developing into a major force in Iraq, by 2016 al-Hashd had already included over 60 armed factions under its umbrella and the number of its fighters exceeded 150,000.[74]

Through the numerous military campaigns it led across Iraq, al-Hashd has proven to be a crucial force in the war on ISIS and played a key role in preventing a further territorial expansion by the group. Al-Hashd, in cooperation with the Iraqi security forces, Kurdish Peshmerga, and the U.S.-led coalition, were able to impede ISIS's advance and eventually brought the group to the brink of defeat in Iraq through late 2017.[75] According to Duman and Sönmez, al-Hashd's impact on the Iraqi sovereignty, statehood, and social cohesion has been enormous over the years of its activities across the country.[76] The organization has challenged the state's monopoly in terms of using military force in order to impose itself as a key military actor. Al-Hashd succeeded in promoting its objectives as to combat and oust ISIS from Iraq, to protect the country and sacred religious sites, to liberate the Iraqi people, and to defend the defenseless.[77] However, the confrontations transcended the battleground to reach the civilian population. Al-Hashd blamed the Sunnis for the rise and expansion of ISIS, accusing them of providing a fertile ground and a social incubator to the militants of the group. On April 1, 2015, al-Hashd militiamen took control of Tikrit after expelling ISIS from the city. In the aftermath of the alleged "liberation" of the Sunni-populated city, the people of Tikrit reportedly suffered from revenge acts by militants of al-Hashd al-Shaabi.[78] The city turned into a scene of violence and looting, summary executions of unarmed civilians, and hundreds of houses were burned

down. The atrocities were justified by al-Hashd through allegations of potential collaboration between the affected people and ISIS. Moreover, during the battle for the Sunni-majority city of Fallujah in mid-2016, the Shia paramilitary militias besieged the city and prevented food supplies from reaching civilians there as an act of collective punishment to the Sunni population inside the then ISIS-held Fallujah, which led to the starvation of dozens.[79] Until the city was fully retaken from ISIS on June 30, 2016, the human cost was deemed devastating.[80] Al-Hashd has been accused of exploiting the battle for sectarian purposes.[81] While many houses were demolished during the armed operations, hundreds of Sunni civilians were arrested and tortured—some of them were even beheaded and their corpses were desecrated—under the pretense that they had supported ISIS, and al-Hashd militiamen were blamed for committing acts of arson, crimes, and human rights violations based on sectarian incentives.[82] Comparable incidents were reported in Mosul[83] and its environs during anti-ISIS operations and following the announced "liberation" of the city on July 9, 2017, as Shia militiamen were accused of using Western-supplied arms to facilitate enforced abduction and disappearance of thousands of Sunni civilians, torture and extrajudicial executions, ethnic cleansing campaigns as well as wanton destruction of private property of Sunni families.[84] Hence, al-Hashd militiamen became a source of fear and dread for the Sunni population throughout Iraq. Such sectarian-based atrocities may be seen as a reflection of deeply rooted hostility and grudge among Shia militiamen toward Sunni rivals, which substantially transcends a mere interim conflict between two radical groups such as al-Hashd al-Shaabi and ISIS. Mabon and Royle refer to power vacuum and uncertainty as the main reasons for the rise and growth of al-Hashd al-Shaabi as well as ISIS, as these conditions often allow for the emergence of such militias to assume authority and impose their power on local populations and even gain a national recognition, like in the case of the Shia militias in Iraq.[85]

As al-Hashd al-Shaabi became an irrefutably strong force on the Iraqi soil, the central government under the leadership of Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi had no other option than institutionalizing this powerful Shia group. Al-Maliki's legacy of unstable state institutions and widespread unrest—which resulted in the rise of sectarian militias in the first place—could neither be denied nor be easily resolved by al-Abadi's administration.[86] Nevertheless, when Shia politician al-Abadi took office in September 2014, the already growing al-Hashd al-Shaabi drew his attention and was seen as a potential ally to the state in the then-intensifying fight against

ISIS. It is noteworthy that al-Hashd possessed several key characteristics that rendered the organization an acceptable force in the eyes of al-Abadi's government, including its significant military capacities and its members' fighting skills compared to the then-collapsing Iraqi army; its remarkable ability to mobilize popular support among Iraq's Shia majority; its strong opposition to ISIS and willingness to combat Sunni jihādists by all means; being a Shia organization which could facilitate coordination between its leadership and the Shia-led central government; and its affiliation with Iran—major supporter of post-2003 Shia-dominated government in Baghdad. Indeed, regardless of its extremist sectarian nature, al-Hashd cooperated with other state services in the war on ISIS and coordinated its ground operations with the Iraqi Central Government—which made al-Hashd an indirect ally of the U.S.-led coalition in counter-terrorism efforts. Subsequently, al-Abadi, who was previously reluctant to reveal the full-scale cooperation between his government forces and al-Hashd al-Shaabi, declared in September 2015 that the group was part of the state's official forces and openly legitimized it.[87] In a bid to manage and regulate its complex relationship with al-Hashd amid ISIS's decline, the Iraqi government took several steps including recognizing al-Hashd al-Shaabi as a legitimate national anti-terrorism force operating under the Iraqi Prime Minister's National Security Council, besides maintaining al-Hashd's prestige and autonomy as an independent unit, and adopting a resolution under the Iraqi Council of Ministers to provide financial support to al-Hashd and salaries to its fighters.[88] The recognition of al-Hashd al-Shaabi as a legitimate force and rewarding it financially, besides institutionalizing the group and including it under state services, indicate the sectarian framework within which the Iraqi government principally operates. Taking into consideration the widespread violations of human rights and atrocities committed by al-Hashd al-Shaabi, the group could be seen as no less a threat to the social coexistence in Iraq and the region than ISIS.

2.4 Recruitment and Mobilization

While al-Hashd al-Shaabi focused its efforts on the mobilization of sectarian-guided Shia militiamen on a local and regional scale, ISIS's recruitment activities went further beyond such borders to reach radicalized recruits throughout the globe. Since its establishment and increasingly subsequent to announcing a self-proclaimed caliphate, ISIS was able to attract thousands of foreigners to its ranks in Syria and Iraq. The group

made an undeniably remarkable success in terms of recruitment. ISIS recruiters began to operate at a global level and succeeded in inducting many foreign nationals into the group's ranks. ISIS considerably depended on its ability, through social media and the widespread recruitment cells, to demonstrate an image of being the most effective jihādist group across the world.

ISIS was often described as the strongest, most powerful, richest, and most influential jihādist group ever. Drawing a comparison between ISIS and al-Qaeda, Sekulow points out, "If we have feared and fought al-Qaeda, consider the following facts about ISIS: ISIS is more brutal than al-Qaeda, so brutal that al-Qaeda tries to persuade ISIS to change its tactics; ISIS is the world's richest terrorist group; ISIS controls more firepower and territory than any jihādist organization in history."[89] According to Atwan, in Islamic countries, initial recruitment approaches were more often made "via an intermediary or recruiter, but in the West, most said they had either directly messaged someone via Twitter or Facebook, or had been contacted by a friend, relative or acquaintance already inside Islamic State, to initiate their own 'migration' and to receive practical advice and logistical instructions."[90] Given the fact that a great number of recruits who emigrated to ISIS-controlled areas originate from non-Muslim countries, the group's recruitment process has mainly taken place online or by digital means. Even for those recruited by intermediaries or recruitment cells, the digital channels exploited by the group have played a key role in attracting potential recruits before making a final decision to join the so-called caliphate or seek a way toward joining the group. Hence, ISIS has made a remarkably extensive use of social media and launched competent, multilingual media platforms to increase the effect of its propaganda and present itself as a well-organized, rich, and powerful force that is eligible to lead the *Islamic jihād* and bring about an unprecedented triumph to the allegedly oppressed Muslims.

Making a significant use of advanced technology to promote its radical version of Islam, ISIS was able to expand its arena of impact and influence to such a degree that has never earlier been accomplished by any other hard-line organization. According to experts, digital media outlets run by ISIS became remarkable propaganda tools for the group to attract undeniably great numbers of recruits from different parts of the world. Moreover, the group's use of Twitter and other social media platforms helped to circulate messages that held the power of inciting so-called lone wolves to launch domestic attacks across countries deemed to be enemies of the

ISIS's self-proclaimed caliphate. ISIS's propaganda was described by the FBI Director as "unusually well done … broadcasting in something like 23 languages."[91] In order to attract recruits, ISIS employed several themes in its presentation of itself, including, but not limited to, rebranding itself into a caliphate as a utopian social space for Muslims; pledging allegiance to a caliph who is portrayed as a rightful ruler of all Muslims; raising sense of belonging among the *mujāhidīn*; presuming an alleged merciful redemption for each and every recruit who emigrate to the caliphate; emphasizing the greatness of martyrdom and the promised divine reward for those sacrificing themselves for the sake of the caliphate; presenting its courts as executors of divine justice; and promoting *jihād* as a righteous warfare against enemies of the caliphate.[92] Through such themes, ISIS was largely able to play on the emotions of a fairly considerable number of young men and women and radicalize them to eventually join its ranks. A 2015 study has illustrated that a majority of ISIS would-be members or sympathizers are youngsters, of whom 89 percent are active online and over 70 percent use social media networks on a daily basis, and each spends an average of 19.2 hours a week online.[93] By January 2016, up to 30,000 foreign recruits from over 85 countries had already joined ISIS in Syria and Iraq. Major countries of origin of ISIS foreign recruits dragged into the conflict in Syria and Iraq respectively include Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Morocco, France, Russia, Lebanon, Turkey, Libya, Germany, UK, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Belgium, Turkmenistan, Egypt, Bosnia, China, the Netherlands, and Australia, among others.[94] The majority of these recruits were men aged 15–35, mostly vulnerable, culturally isolated, disenfranchised, and marginalized individuals who had various incentives to join ISIS, such as status seeking, identity seeking, or revenge seeking.[95] Attracting such a relatively large number of foreign recruits from dozens of countries across the world within a matter of couple of years is in itself a demonstration of the significant success of ISIS's propaganda and an affirmation of the cross-border influence and effectiveness of its discourse.[96]

The group took a careful recruitment approach through its multifaceted discourse to attract as many people as possible to its areas of control through calling not only for would-be fighters to join its battlefields but also anyone who is willing to serve the caliphate within his/her area of expertise. ISIS sought—through its sophisticated propaganda—to entice potential jihādi wives and professionals such as engineers, doctors, media workers, and accountants in its endeavor to develop a new society under

the banner of its so-called caliphate.[97] The ISIS threat raised widespread concerns among Western societies and enormously captured the attention of the public, as the group's propaganda machine continued to broadcast footages of young citizens of Western countries pledging loyalty to al-Baghdadi and heading to Syria and Iraq to join ISIS's ranks in the fight for the alleged caliphate. While some of these recruits shared the ethnic linkage of the local populations living under ISIS, many of them did not.[98] Nevertheless, the self-proclaimed caliphate seemed inclusive enough to accept any new recruit willing to serve under its black flag regardless of his or her ethnic affiliation, coming from an Islamic background or being a recent convert. Speaking of an alleged golden era of Muslim honor and dignity following the formation of the so-called caliphate, ISIS's supreme leader and self-proclaimed caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, in an audio speech broadcasted on 1 July 2014, said:

> 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 khilāfah, which will return your dignity, might, rights, and leadership. It is a state where the Arab and non-Arab, the white man and black man, the easterner and westerner are all brothers. It is a khilāfah that gathered the Caucasian, Indian, Chinese, Shāmī, Iraqi, Yemeni, Egyptian, Maghribī, American, French, German, and Australian. Allah brought their hearts together, and thus, they became brothers by His grace, loving each other for the sake of Allah, standing in a single trench, defending and guarding each other, and sacrificing themselves for one another. Their blood mixed and became one, under a single flag and goal, in one pavilion, enjoying this blessing, the blessing of faithful brotherhood. If kings were to taste this blessing, they would abandon their kingdoms and fight over this grace. So, all praise and thanks are due to Allah.[99]

Thus, al-Baghdadi tried through his speech to encourage Muslims from all over the world to emigrate to the then newly established caliphate which, according to him, would regain them their dignity and preserve their rights in a utopian-like social space characterized by brotherhood among the *mujāhidīn*, regardless of their ethnic backgrounds or countries of origin.

ISIS implemented a multifaceted recruitment process in an attempt to reinforce its military ranks, increase its jihādi operations, enhance its institutions within areas under its control, and give legitimacy to its de facto state among the Muslims. The recruitment process included online

activities through social media, Web pages, chat rooms, and video indoctrination. Such channels enabled ISIS to promote its message and attract many new recruits, mostly on an individual basis. Yet the group also sought—and relatively succeeded in—the implementation of collective recruitment campaigns, mainly through messages delivered to crowds by religious leaders and conservative mosques. Therefore, the process of indoctrination, radicalization, and eventual recruitment took place personally as well as via the cyberspace, where the directed messages employed Qur'ānic verses, narrations of the Prophet, importance of *jihād* against the enemies of the Islamic caliphate, an urgency to assist Muslims suffering in war-ravaged countries like Iraq and Syria, and the obligation to regain dignity and might as Muslims. In order to demonstrate its cross-border influence and ability to target its enemies[100] through its widespread jihādi cells, ISIS launched a series of terrifying attacks[101] in the West that claimed dozens of lives and raised serious security concerns in key Western cities. Most of the attacks that hit Europe were launched by European nationals of Muslim origins who were radicalized and recruited by ISIS.[102] Amid ISIS's decline on the ground in Syria and Iraq after suffering heavy losses at the hands of the U.S.-led coalition and allied local troops, European officials voiced concerns about returning jihādists and how to deal with them, considering the potential threat they pose to their home countries.[103]

On the local level, both ISIS and al-Hashd al-Shaabi have exploited the already raging sectarian divide for the sake of mobilizing as many members and supporters as possible. While ISIS was largely relying on a pro-Sunni discourse to attract the Sunnis to its side in a war allegedly aimed at protecting them from rival Shia-affiliated militias and the "crusader" coalition led by Western powers trying to ultimately destroy the Muslims and their so-called caliphate, al-Hashd al-Shaabi was able through its largely sectarian discourse to mobilize most of Iraq's Shia on its side to confront the Sunni threat represented by ISIS jihādists.

Notes

1. Schmid, A. (2014). *Violent and Non-Violent Extremism: Two Sides of the Same Coin?*
2. Lipset, S. and Raab, E. (1978). *The Politics of Unreason: Right-Wing Extremism in America 1790–1977.*
3. Coleman, P. and Bartoli, A. (2014). *Addressing Extremism.*

4. Martin, G. (2017). *Essentials of Terrorism: Concepts and Controversies.*
5. Backes, U. (2010). *Political Extremes: A Conceptual History from Antiquity.*
6. Schmid, A. (2014). *Violent and Non-Violent Extremism: Two Sides of the Same Coin?*
7. Ayman al-Zawahiri, leader of al-Qaeda organization which is considered as one of the main extremist Islamic groups, in February 2014 denied any links between his organization and ISIS, emphasizing that the leaders of ISIS "disavow sedition amongst the mujāhidīn factions in the Levant [and were involved in] shedding protected blood … al-Qaeda is not responsible for ISIS's actions" (*Al Qaeda disavows ISIS militants in Syria*, BBC News—Middle East, 3 February 2014. Retrieved on 9 Nov. 2019, from: http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26016318).
8. Weitsman, P. (2014). *Waging War: Alliances, Coalitions, and Institutions of Interstate Violence.*
9. Mabon, S. and Royle, S. (2017). *The Origins of ISIS: The Collapse of Nations and Revolution in the Middle East.*
10. Zuhur, S. (2007). *A Hundred Osamas: Islamist Threats and the Future of Counterinsurgency.*
11. Thaler et al. (2008). *Future U.S. Security Relationships with Iraq and Afghanistan.*
12. Paya, A. and Esposito, J. (2011). *Iraq, Democracy and the Future of the Muslim World.*
13. Bensahel et al. (2008). *After Saddam: Prewar Planning and the Occupation of Iraq.*
14. Göl, A. (2006). *Iraq and World Order: A Turkish Perspective.*
15. The term is used to refer to the four parts of Kurdistan or the Kurdish inhabited areas in Syria, Turkey, Iraq, and Iran (Irwani, 2015: 40).
16. Voller, Y. (2014). *The Kurdish Liberation Movement in Iraq: From Insurgency to Statehood.*
17. The United States repeatedly emphasized the crucial role of the Kurdish Peshmerga forces in the fight against ISIS or ISIS. The U.S. State Department said in one of its statements in this regard: "With effective training, equipping, command and control, and Coalition firepower, Iraqi forces, including the Kurdish Peshmerga, have seized the initiative and removed ISIS from nearly all of Iraq's major population centers while preventing ISIS from retaking any territory in the process" (*U.S. Security Cooperation with Iraq*, U.S. Department of State, 22 March 2017. Retrieved on 15 Nov. 2019, from: https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/03/269040.htm).
18. Steele, J. (2008). *Defeat: Why the Lost Iraq.*

19. The so-called *disputed areas* mainly include territories in the governorates of Nineveh, Kirkuk, Erbil, and Diyala.
20. The Iraqi Central Government in Baghdad has cut the annual financial allocations to the Kurdistan Regional Government since 2014, although these were approved under and protected by the constitution. Ever since, the Kurdistan Region started to suffer deteriorating economic conditions. (Iraqi Kurdistan Economy Suffers Amidst Budget Dispute with Baghdad, Al-Monitor, 16 May 2014. Retrieved on 16 Nov. 2019 from: https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/tr/business/2014/05/iraq-kurdistan-region-budget-dispute-economic-effects.html.)
21. President Assad said in an interview with the *Wall Street Journal* in January 2011: "Syria is stable …because we are very closely linked to the beliefs of the people …we have to keep up … as a state and as institutions … political, administrative, economic: These are the changes we need … reform in politics is important, even if slowly and at the tail-end of other priorities" (*Interview with the Syria President Bashar al-Assad*, The Wall Street Journal, Jan. 31, 2011).
22. The story started when a doctor in the southern Syrian city of Daraa received a phone call from a friend about the fall of the Egyptian dictator. The female doctor's reaction was: "We hope that our dictator will be next." One day later, she was arrested. While the elders failed to find a way to release her, young members of her family reacted directly by drawing fearless graffiti on the walls of their schools, such as: "People want to overthrow the regime," and "You are next."
23. Leverett, F. (2005). *Inheriting Syria: Bashar's Trial by Fire*.
24. Hulme, M. (2017). *Weathered: Cultures of Climate*.
25. Allan, S. (2017). *Photojournalism and Citizen Journalism: Co-operation, Collaboration and Connectivity*.
26. According to a study by the World Bank Group, as of early 2017, the Syrian conflict had already inflicted significant damage to the country's physical capital stock (7 percent housing stock destroyed and 20 percent partially damaged), led to the death of nearly 470,000 people and the forced displacement of half of Syria's 2010 population, amid depressing economic activity (*The Toll of War: The Economic and Social Consequences of the Conflict in Syria*, World Bank Group, 2017. Retrieved on 11 Nov. 2019).
27. In an interview with Denmark's TV-2 in October 2016, President Assad said: "The moderate opposition is a myth … we won't accept that terrorists take control of any part of Syria … if there is opposition, what is the definition of opposition? Could you accept an opposition in your country that belongs to other countries? … this is an intervention in internal matters. This is against the sovereignty, against the international law."

28. Moore, E. (2014). *Russia-Iran Relations Since the End of the Cold War*.
29. Karam, Z. (2016). *Life and Death in ISIS: How the Islamic State Builds Its Caliphate*.
30. Chemical weapons were repeatedly used during the Syrian civil war, causing hundreds of casualties. Here are several attacks that were documented by the Arms Association Control: December 23, 2012, first alleged gas attack on Homs; March 20, 2013, chemical weapons attack reported in Aleppo and Damascus suburb; March 24, 2013, regime-led chemical attack reported in Adra town; April 13, 2013, another chemical attack on rebel-held area in Aleppo; April 29, 2013, the town of Saraqeb exposed to chemical attack; August 21, 2013, the largest chemical weapons attack launched by the regime hit the Ghouta region causing over 1000 casualties; April 11, 2014, chlorine gas attack hit Kafr Zita town; August 10, 2016, chlorine gas used in attack on opposition-held neighborhood in Aleppo; September 7, 2016, renewed chlorine attack on Aleppo; December 13, 2016, Hama targeted by chemical weapons; April 4, 2017, regime attacks rebel-held Idlib governorate with chemical missiles (*Timeline of Syrian Chemical Weapons Activity, 2012–2017*, by Kawashima, Y. and Sanders-Zakre, A., Arms Control Association. Retrieved on 11 Aug. 2019).
31. Dawoody, A. (2016). *Eradicating Terrorism from the Middle East: Policy and Administration Approaches*.
32. Gleditsch, K. (2016). *Civil War from a Transnational Perspective*.
33. Moore, E. (2014). *Russia-Iran Relations Since the End of the Cold War*.
34. Bernauer, E. (2016). *Identities in Civil Conflict: How Ethnicity, Religion and Ideology Jointly Affect Rebellion*.
35. See *Timeline: Spillover of the Syrian Civil War into Lebanon*, The Daily Star, 21 July 2017.
36. Israeli Air Force hit Syrian military targets several times during the Syrian civil war: On January 31, an Israeli raid hit a weapons convoy near Damascus. On May 3, an Israeli aircraft struck a shipment of surface-to-surface missiles in Syria. On May 5, 2013, Israel bombed multiple Syrian military sites (*Timeline: Israeli Attacks on Syrian Targets*, Aljazeera, 5 May 2013). On September 7, 2017, Israeli officials reported an airstrike on Syrian military sites believed to have been producing chemical weapons and advanced missiles (*Airstrikes on Syrian Military Sites Renew Focus on Chemical Missiles*, The New York Times, 7 Sept. 2017). The al-Mezzeh Airport of the Syrian army was struck by Israeli aircraft in December 2016 and January 2017. The Syrian Fourth Division's weapons arsenal was also exposed to an Israeli strike in November 2016 (*Israeli Airstrikes in Syria: The International Law Analysis*, Just Security, 3 May 2017).

37. See *Turkey's Occupation of Northern Syria*. Available at: https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/05/turkey-syria-population-transfers-tell-abyad-irk-kurds-arabs.html.
38. Sivan, E. and Friedman, M. (1990). *Religious Radicalism and Politics in the Middle East*.
39. Wiktorowicz, Q. and Kaltenthaler, K. (2006). *The Rationality of Radical Islam*.
40. Richards, A. (2003). *Socio-economic Roots of Radicalism? Toward Explaining the Appeal of Islamic Radicals*.
41. Lahaye, T. and Hindson, E. (2015). *Target Israel: Caught in the Crosshairs of the End Times*.
42. Mabon, S. and Royle, S. (2017). *The Origins of ISIS: The Collapse of Nations and Revolution in the Middle East*.
43. Gerges, F. (2016). *A History of ISIS*. 223.
44. *Mujāhidīn* (*muǧāhidīn* مجاهدين), singular *Mujāhid* (*Muǧahid* مجاهد), is a term describing those involved in *Jihad* (*ǧihād* جهاد), or the struggle for a praiseworthy goal. The term was broadly used with reference to Islamist Afghan fighters combatting Soviet troops subsequent to the 1979 invasion. Ever since, the term continued to be used and extended to other jihadist groups in different parts of the world.
45. Michael, G. (2007). *The Legend and Legacy of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi*. 339.
46. Moubayed, S. (2015). *Under the Black Flag: At the Frontier of the New Jihad*. 91.
47. See *Timeline: Rise and Spread of the Islamic State*, Wilson Centre; https://www.wilsoncentre.org/article/timeline-rise-and-spread-the-islamic-state.
48. Cordesman, A. and Davies, E. (2008). *Iraq's Insurgency and the Road to Civil Conflict*. 576.
49. Glenn, C. (2016). *Timeline: Rise and Spread of the Islamic State*. Wilson Centre. Retrieved from: https://www.wilsoncentre.org/article/timeline-rise-and-spread-the-islamic-state.
50. See *Maliki's Authoritarian Regime*, Middle East Security Report 10, by Marisa Sullivan, April 2013; http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Malikis-Authoritarian-Regime-Web.pdf.
51. Sullivan, M. (2013). *Maliki's Authoritarian Regime*. 6.
52. "In what may have been the most publicized incident of al-Maliki-Sunni strife, the Prime Minister accused the Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi, a Sunni, of plotting bombings and organizing assassination missions. Vice President al-Hashemi was tried in absentia and found guilty after fleeing to Kurdistan. The charges against Hashemi, the highest-ranking Sunni in Iraq, followed a decision by the Sunni bloc, in Iraq's parliament, to boycott future legislative proceedings … as a result of al-Maliki's refusal to …

expand government positions open to Sunnis" (Covarrubias, J., Lansford, T. and Pauly, R., 2016: 40).

53. Sekulow, J., Sekulow, J, Ash, R. and French, D. (2014). *Rise of ISIS: A Threat We Cannot Ignore*.
54. Atwan, A. (2015). *Islamic State: The Digital Caliphate*. 117.
55. The so-called "Breaking the Walls" campaign began on July 21, 2012 and ended on July 23, 2013. See *Al-Qaeda in Iraq Resurgent: The Breaking the Walls Campaign*, Part I; Middle East Security Report 14; Lewis, J., 2013, pp. 12.
56. See *Timeline: Rise and Spread of the Islamic State*, Wilson Centre.
57. Lister, C. (2016). *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*. 5.
58. The Syrian opposition factions operating in Raqqa at that time included some moderate revolutionary forces, driven by a struggle against the Assad regime, whereas al-Nusra Front and ISI had an Islamist agenda.
59. Mendelsohn, B. (2016). *The al-Qaeda Franchise: The Expansion of al-Qaeda and its Consequences*. 189.
60. Assisted by local Sunni tribal groups, ISIS was able to take over Fallujah and parts of Ramadi on December 30, 2013. See *Ambtsbericht Veiligheidssituatie in Iraq*, Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, Den Haag, pp. 9, September 2014.
61. Gerges, F. (2016). *A History of ISIS*. 11.
62. More detailed information on the weaponry seized by ISIS in 2014 could be found in: *Dispatch from the Field, Islamic State Weapons in Iraq and Syria, Analysis of Weapons and Ammunition Captured from Islamic State forces*; London: Conflict Armament Research Ltd, September 2014: http://conflictarm.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Dispatch_IS_Iraq_Syria_Weapons.pdf. ISIS also used chemical agents, such as the mustard gas, on several occasions, which indicates that the group once possessed a certain quantity of chemical weapons. See *Non-State Actors & WMD: Does ISIS have a Pathway to a Nuclear Weapon?*, BASIC, Eweiss, N, March 2016: http://www.basicint.org/sites/default/files/NonStateActors_WMD_Mar2016.pdf.
63. Williams, B. (2017). *Counter Jihad: America's Military Experience in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria*. 289.
64. Hyde, A. (2017). *Jihad: The Ottomans and the Allies 1914–1922*. 6.
65. Caris, C. and Reynolds, S. (2014). *ISIS Governance in Syria*. 4.
66. Neumann et al. (2017). *Caliphate in Decline: An Estimate of Islamic State's Financial Fortunes*. 7.
67. Karam, Z. (2016). *Life and Death in ISIS: How the Islamic State Builds Its Caliphate*. 168.
68. Details on abuses by parties to conflict are illustrated in *Iraq Report 2016–2017*, Amnesty International: https://www.amnesty.org/en/

countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/iraq/report-iraq/. Also see *Syria Report 2016/2017*, Amnesty International: https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/syria/report-syria. Further details provided by Human Rights Watch are available at: https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2015/country-chapters/iraq; https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/07/03/syria-deliberate-killing-civilians-isis; https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2016/country-chapters/Syria; https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/01/31/iraq-possible-war-crimes-shia-militia.

69. Tucker, S. (2017). *Modern Conflict in the Greater Middle East*. 122.
70. *Iraqi Shi'ite Cleric Issues Call to Arms*, The New York Times, 13 June 2014: https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/14/world/middleeast/iraq.html.
71. Abbas, H. (2017). *The Myth and Reality of Iraq's al-Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Forces): A Way Forward*. 4–5.
72. Sullivan, M. (2013). *Maliki's Authoritarian Regime*. 6.
73. Abbas, H. (2017). *The Myth and Reality of Iraq's al-Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Forces): A Way Forward*. 6.
74. See *al-Hashd al-Shaabi: Origin and Future*, Rawabet Centre for Research and Strategic Studies, 29 August 2016: http://rawabetcentre.com/en/?p=1037.
75. O'Driscoll, D. and Zoonen, D. (2017). *The Hashd al-Shaabi and Iraq: Subnationalism and the State*. 9.
76. Duman, B. and Sönmez, G. (2018). *An Influential Non-state Armed Actor in the Iraqi Context: Al-Hashd Al-Shaabi and the Implications of its Rising Influence*. 179.
77. Ibid., 177.
78. Details on the al-Hashd atrocities in Tikrit after ISIS expulsion to be found in *Special Report: After Iraqi Forces Take Tikrit, A Wave of Looting and Lynching*, Reuters, 3 April 2015: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-tikrit-special-re/special-report-after-iraqi-forces-take-tikrit-a-wave-of-looting-and-lynching-idUSKBN0MU1DP20150403.
79. The Human Rights Watch documented 140 cases of starvation in Fallujah under siege, many of them elderly and young children. See *Iraq: Fallujah Siege Starving Population*, HRW, 7 April 2016: https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/04/07/iraq-fallujah-siege-starving-population.
80. Residents of the city of Fallujah were exposed to mounting attacks during the anti-ISIS campaign. See *Iraq: Fallujah is Liberated, Now What?*, Aljazeera, 30 June 2016: http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/06/iraq-fallujah-liberated-160629074425645.html.

81. Obeidi, M. (2016, June 29). *Al-Hashd al-Shaabi Burns Down Homes in Fallujah.* Al-Sharq al-Awsat: English Archive: https://eng-archive.aawsat.com/munaf-al-ubaidi-and-hamza-mustafa/news-middle-east/al-hashd-al-shaabi-burns-homes-fallujah.
82. According to the Mayor of Fallujah, Isa Sayer Al-Issawi, Fallujah's infrastructure was exposed to heavy destruction and members of al-Hashd al-Shaabi "have committed acts of arson, crimes and violations and destroyed houses and shops." Quoted by Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, 29 June 2016; available at: https://eng-archive.aawsat.com/munaf-al-ubaidi-and-hamza-mustafa/news-middle-east/al-hashd-al-shaabi-burns-homes-fallujah.
83. The city of Mosul in Iraq's northwestern Nineveh province used to be a de facto capital for ISIS in Iraq.
84. A report by Amnesty International voiced concerns about the use of arms by Shia militants in atrocities against Sunni civilians in Iraq. See *Iraq: End Irresponsible Arms Transfers Fuelling Militia War Crimes*, Amnesty International, 5 January 2017: https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/01/iraq-end-irresponsible-arms-transfers-fuelling-militia-war-crimes/.
85. Mabon, S. and Royle, S. (2017). *The Origins of ISIS: The Collapse of Nations and Revolution in the Middle East.* 120.
86. Haidar al-Abadi remained in office as the Prime Minister of Iraq from September 2014 to October 2018.
87. See *From Militia to State Force: The Transformation of al-Hashd al-Shaabi*, Carnegie Middle East Centre, 16 November 2015: http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/61986.
88. Yesiltas, M. and Kardas, T. (2017). *Non-State Armed Actors in the Middle East: Geopolitics, Ideology, and Strategy.* 179–180.
89. Sekulow et al. (2014). *Rise of ISIS: A Threat We Cannot Ignore.* 8.
90. Atwan, A. (2015). *Islamic State: The Digital Caliphate.* 12.
91. Bolanos, H. (2016). *Hi-Jacked Islam: Wahhabism and Terrorism.* 106.
92. Hashemi, N. and Postel, D. (2017). *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East.* 72.
93. Atwan, A. (2015). *Islamic State: The Digital Caliphate.* 10.
94. Bakker, E. and Singleton, M. (2016). *Foreign Fighters in the Syria and Iraq Conflict: Statistics and Characteristics of a Rapidly Growing Phenomenon.* 15.
95. Badie, D. (2017). *After Saddam: American Foreign Policy and the Destruction of Secularism in the Middle East.* 143.
96. ISIS's recruitment efforts made a remarkable success in the years 2014–2015, and the group succeeded to double the number of its foreign recruits in 2015 in comparison to 2014, raising the number from

15,000 foreign recruits to 30,000 by end of 2015. See *Thousands Enter Syria to Join ISIS Despite Global Efforts*, The New York Times, 26 September 2015: https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/27/world/middleeast/thousands-enter-syria-to-join-isis-despite-global-efforts.html?partner=rss&emc=rss.

97. Karam, Z. (2016). *Life and Death in ISIS: How the Islamic State Builds Its Caliphate*. 150.
98. Howie, L. and Campbell, P. (2017). *Crisis and Terror in the Age of Anxiety: 9/11, the Global Financial Crisis and ISIS*. 37.
99. Al-Baghdadi's audio statement was first broadcasted by the ISIS-affiliated al-Furqan Foundation for Media Production on 1 July 2014. Available at http://ia600300.us.archive.org/6/items/mm_259336/risala.mp3.
100. Western countries targeted by ISIS terror attacks were mainly members of the Global Anti-Terror Coalition, led by the United States, whose air forces carried out hundreds of strikes against the group's key facilities in Syria and Iraq, which eventually led to a remarkable decline in the group's power on the ground. Such states were considered by ISIS as "Crusaders" trying to invade its self-proclaimed Caliphate, and with its decline on the ground the group's cells of supporters and recruits in the West were called upon to hit these states at home and make them suffer.
101. Since declaring its Caliphate, ISIS launched over 140 attacks abroad. The main attacks in Europe included the Paris attacks on November 13, 2015; Brussels attacks on March 22, 2016; Nice attack on July 14, 2016; Berlin attack on December 19, 2016; Stockholm attack on April 7, 2017; Manchester attack on May 22, 2017; London attack on July 3, 2017; Barcelona attack on August 17, 2017.
102. More details available on *ISIS Goes Global: 143 Attacks in 29 Countries have Killed 2,043*, CNN, 13 February 2017: http://edition.cnn.com/2015/12/17/world/mapping-isis-attacks-around-the-world/index.html.
103. This issue was raised and widely debated by European officials. See *Europe's Dilemma—How to Deal with Returning Jihadists*, Al-Monitor, 16 June 2017: https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/afp/2017/06/eu-attacks-jihadists.html.

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CHAPTER 3

Jihād, Salafi-Jihadism, and Sectarianism

Jihād is deemed to be the most renowned and yet the least understood Islamic notion in contemporary public consciousness.[1] It is therefore of crucial importance to explore *jihād* as a term, concept, and practice and to outline its fundamental features and tackle the development of its basic tenets throughout history, for both the sake of this volume and the general understanding of what it actually implicates. The word *jihād* basically means to "struggle" for a noble cause with determination or "strive" in the path of God (*jihād fī sabīl allāh*). Knapp, in his *The Concept and Practice of Jihad in Islam*, emphasizes that, while different radical Islamist groups insist that their actions are determined by and fall within the Islamic *jihād* and with the Western media continuing to make an excessive use of the term to describe such actions, there remains a misconception and misinterpretation of what is basically meant by *jihād* in Islam.[2] One of such misinterpretations is using the word *jihād* in a literal reference to "holy war"; however, war in Arabic is *ḥarb* and holy is *muqaddasah*, which combined make up *al-ḥarb al-muqaddasah*, a phrase that does not exist in any form in the Islamic tradition.[3] This emerges in contrast with the medieval Christian counterpart term of "crusade" or *the war for the cross*. Nevertheless, the continuous and ever-growing employment of the term *jihād* reflects a certain form of revival of the religious as well as military implications and connotations of the concept of *jihād* among Muslims into the current era. Therefore, *jihād*, known as the "sixth pillar of the

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Islamic faith," remains largely in need of revisiting for the sake of illustrating what the term entails and what it essentially implies.

According to Egyptian Islamic scholar and leading authority on Islamism Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who provides an authoritative account on *jihād* and Islamic jurisprudential reasoning in his extensive research-based book *Fiqh al-Jihād*,[4] the concept of *jihād* is quite multifaceted. With the term and its derivations mentioned in the Qur'ān thirty-four times, basically in reference to struggling, striving, and bearing the burden of protecting the *'ummah* and defending its core religious values and beliefs, the concept of *jihād*, however, goes deeper than the mere use of violence in such a struggle. Al-Qaradawi identifies several aspects and characteristics of what could be called "true jihād," including the prioritization of the community's interests over self-interest, the struggle against corruption and persecution, patience and endurance, combatting hypocrites, striving for invitation and clarification, and eventually fighting the enemies by force once peaceful options are exhausted. For al-Qaradawi, since the use of force emerges as a final form of *jihād* in its multilayered notion, framing "jihād" as a mere call for violence or use of weaponry in the face of enemies reflects a misconception and misinterpretation of what *jihād* essentially means. From a semantic perspective, the word *qitāl* (fight) is derived from *qatl* (murder), whereas *jihād* (struggle) is derived from *juhd* (effort). Furthermore, although the word *jihād* today is frequently associated with aggression and violence, where Islam itself is being perceived as a religion urging violence against other communities, the term *ʿunf* (violence) is never mentioned in the Qur'ān, neither as an infinitive nor as a verb or adjective. Nonetheless, al-Qaradawi's account on the definition of *jihād* remains prone to criticism for the ambiguity that certain concluding remarks hold. One such remark is his saying: "every fight is a *jihād* once it comprised a legitimate intention, but not every *jihād* is a fight."[5] While the second part of this statement appears well founded given the extensive analysis of religious texts he provides, the first part seems far from convincing since every self-proclaimed "mujāhid" could legitimize his intention in a way that may satisfy a particular group of fellow Muslims or certain Islamic scholars and seem "in the way of God" while bringing about harm and damage to innocents wrongfully designated as enemies.

Islamic scholars generally agree on the definition of *jihād* as the effort made by a Muslim to fight against evil inside himself/herself and in the surrounding community, and ultimately pursuing and combatting evil wherever it may exist. That is, fighting injustice, hypocrisy, oppression,

and forces hostile to the Muslim community. It is a multidimensional process that involves *ʿamalu l-qalb bilnīyah wal-ʿazm* (spiritual intention and determination); *ʿamalu l-isān bil-daʿwah wal-bayān* (communication for the sake of invitation and clarification); *ʿamalu l-ʿql bil-raʾī wal-tadbīr* (intellectual opinions and planning); and *ʿamalu l-badan bil-qitāl* (physical effort in combat).[6] Within the framework of its classical interpretation, two basic types of *jihād* could be identified: *Jihād al-Daf*ʿ (defensive struggle) and *Jihād al-Ṭalab* (proactive/offensive struggle). The former implicates resistance against hostile forces which invade or occupy Islamic territories and attack Muslims and their properties; whereas the latter entails carrying out premediated armed operations against enemy forces on their own soil (*fī ʿuqri dārih*), motivated by the preconceived urgency to expand the Islamic territory and to enable those living under the rule of enemy forces to receive the message of Islam. However, it is worth noting that the historical context and the surrounding circumstances are of key significance to understand the rise and development of such interpretations and jurisprudential reasoning about the notion of *jihād* among Muslims.

In the framework of its appeal for struggle in the path of God, the Qur'ān founded the basis for the notion of *jihād* as struggle for God's cause and godly order. This conception, as pointed out by Heck, dismissed tribal goals and communal concerns within the holy struggle, "even if the motivation was grounded in Islamic revelation."[7] In his *The Origins of Holy War in Islam*, Firestone suggests that in the early seventh century, the first followers of the Prophet Muhammad did not take *jihād* as a struggle in the path of God wholeheartedly as it implicated confrontation and fighting against their non-Muslim tribal kinsmen, given the high level of intertribal violence and "heightened insecurity through the [Arabian] peninsula" immediately before the emergence of Islam.[8] Muhammad's message is believed to have played a key role in weaning tribal peoples away from their usual incentives for conflict, including material interests and tribal prestige. The Qur'ānic declaration of *jihād* cannot be reduced to mere armed struggle, since virtually all instances of the root *j-h-d* speak primarily to the question of "true intention and devotion."[9] *Jihād* was viewed by Islamic jurists within the framework of struggle in a world perceived as divided between what came to be known as *Dār al-Islām*, or Islamic-controlled territory, and *Dār al-Ḥarb*, or territory of war that basically consisted of lands outside Islamic control and inhabited either by the "People of the Book," namely Jews and Christians, or by polytheists.[10]

Nevertheless, this division does not implicate a continuous warfare by Muslims to dominate what was known as *Dār al-Ḥarb*. Islamic jurists allowed a room for the negotiation of peace since "There is no compulsion in religion."[11]

The common understanding of the notion of *jihād* does not particularly implicate a requirement of every individual Muslim, known as *farḍ ʿayn*, but rather a general obligation of the Muslim community or a collective duty, known as *farḍ kifāyah*.[12] Considering *jihād* as a collective requirement rather than an individual duty stems from the fact that the concept essentially entails a voluntary activity rather than a compulsory one.[13] An obvious indication of this argument is the fact that *jihād* doesn't literally emerge among the notorious pillars of Islam or the five duties incumbent on each Muslim, known as *Arkān al-Islām*, which respectively comprise the Muslim profession of faith (*al-Shahādah*), prayer (*Ṣalāt*), the distribution of alms to the poor (*Zakāt*), the fasting of Ramadan (*Ṣawm*), and the pilgrimage to Mecca for those financially and physically capable (*Ḥajj*). Nonetheless, *jihād* arises in the *ḥadīth* as the sixth pillar of Islam, but in the form of a communal and collective requirement and not as an individual duty.[14] Once urged to perform *jihād*, mainly in the case of defending own territory against enemy assault or to combat injustice and corruption within society, it is sufficient for a group of Muslims to voluntarily carry the burden and perform the duty of *jihād* as representatives and defenders of the community as a whole.

However, this largely constrained, bounded, defensive, and preventative conception of *jihād* did not persist as a sole version for long, as it was contested, reinterpreted, and redefined by Muslim scholars and movements over the centuries. One of the most prominent Muslim thinkers who reshaped the core notion of *jihād* and contributed to radically shifting the debate about the then familiar version of *jihād* was Islamic legal philosopher Taqi al-Din Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328). According to Ibn Taymiyya, any form of authority or government is deemed illegitimate unless it enforced the *Sharīʿa* law in all aspects, including the fulfilment of *jihād*, considering power as a trust or *'amānah* from God that needs to be exercised in accordance with the terms laid down in the *Islamic Sharīʿa*.[15] Therefore, any Muslim authority that fails to implement the *Sharīʿa* and the duty of *jihād* would be deemed insufficiently Islamic and hence loses its legitimacy to rule. One of Ibn Taymiyya's main arguments in this regard is that *fasād* (corruption) in religious and communal practice leads to *jahl* (ignorance), *ẓulm* (injustice), and argumentation based

on *ẓann* (conjectural thought) and *hawā* (caprice) instead of commitment to the explicit rulings of the revealed law or *Sharīʿa*.[16] His spiritual texts on *jihād* have inspired many of modern-day radical Islamist leaders, such as al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri who cited Ibn Taymiyya in one of his speeches saying, "loving God necessarily requires *jihād*, because the lover loves what His beloved loves, and hates what He hates, and associates with whomever His beloved associated, and considers as enemies His beloved's enemies, he is pleased by what pleases Him, angered by what angers Him, commands what His beloved commands, forbids what He forbids."[17] According to Ibn Taymiyya's philosophy of *jihād*, given that all creatures must live and die, "one ought to put one's life and death at the service of a goal that will guarantee true happiness, namely *jihād* which rewards one with either a divinely supported victory over unbelief or the prize of martyrdom."[18] His key concern was no longer the geopolitical integrity of Islam, but rather the Islamic religious identity, which was no longer protected following the fall of the Caliphate at the hands of the Mongols at the time. The rhetoric employed by Ibn Taymiyya is deemed considerably inspirational to today's extremist Islamists.

Ibn Taymiyya differentiates between two types of *jihād*: "*jihād makkī*" and "*jihād madanī*." *Jihād makkī* refers to struggle with *ʿilm* or knowledge, as symbolized by the Prophet's *Daʿwah* or call to Islam in Mecca, which comes in the form of *jihād bil-ḥujja* or *jihād* with argument. Hence, *jihād makkī* implies the call for obeying the Islamic teachings and abiding by the *Sharīʿa* among the Muslims and the invitation to Islam among the non-Muslims. This type of *jihād* is referred to by several modern scholars as "inward *jihād*" or "*jihād* against the lower self."[19] *Jihād madanī*, on the other hand, entails the employment of force and military fighting alongside *Daʿwah*, which is stressed by Ibn Taymiyya as the best form of and true *jihād* for its potential efficiency. In order to support his claim, Ibn Taymiyya quotes the Qur'ānic verse: "You are the best nation produced for mankind. You enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong and believe in Allah. If only the People of the Book had believed, it would have been better for them. Among them are believers, but most of them are defiantly disobedient."[20] Sharif maintains that since *jihād makkī* precedes *jihād madanī* in Ibn Taymiyya's categorization, *Daʿwah* or peaceful means of *jihād* are prioritized and recommended before taking action and engaging in military strife.[21] Nevertheless, promoting the second form of *jihād* as the excellent and true one reflects Ibn Taymiyya's tendency to

recommend *jihād madanī* as the greater way to strive in the path of God. Given his emphasis on *jihād* as a significant part of duties assigned to Muslims by God, his well-founded argumentation on the necessity of applying *Sharīʿa* by any Muslim ruler or authority as a condition to acquire and maintain legitimacy, his call for branding a professing Muslim who does not live by Islamic teachings as an apostate, and his promotion of a combination of *Daʿwah* and military force as the best and most appreciated form of *jihād*, Ibn Taymiyya is believed to have established an intellectual groundwork that has considerably inspired prominent contemporary radical Islamists.

3.1 Salafi-Jihadism

The term *Salafi* and what it designates remain ill-defined and repeatedly misunderstood and misinterpreted in the literature on this movement and in studies on Islamism in general.[22] Saudi Arabia's supreme clerical authority, the Permanent Committee for Scholarly Research and Fatwas, maintains that Salafism basically refers to "the righteous predecessors of the first three generations of Muslims," prominently known as the *al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ* or the pious predecessors.[23] These include the Prophet's contemporary companions (*Ṣaḥābah*), the last of whom died around the year 690; the generation that followed and known as *tābiʿīn*, lived until 750; and the third generation referred to as *tābiʿ tābiʿīn*, the last of whom died around 810. These three generations are viewed as the founders of and participants in a golden era of authenticated, attested, and orthodox Islam. This arises in a *ḥadīth* by the Prophet in which he tackles the characteristics of the finest Muslims as "Of the generation to which I belong, then of the second generation, then of the third generation."[24] Hence, *Salafism* fundamentally entails the revival and maintenance of the version of Islam specifically as understood and practiced by the *al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*.

In *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea*, which traces the evolution of the movement and its basic conceptions, Maher defines *Salafism* as "a philosophy that believes in progression through regression" where the "perfect life is realized only by reviving the Islam of its first three generations."[25] The legacy of *al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ* is deemed to be "authentic" and "pure" in this deeply revivalist doctrine. The core principles of *Salafism* implicate a consistent emphasis on *tawḥīd* (God's unity), and the preservation of *ʿaqīdah* (doctrinal pureness). The Salafis consider themselves as the

al-ṭā'ifah al-manṣūrah or the sole triumphant group of Muslims, and *al-firqah al-nājiyah* or the saved denomination.[26] The doctrine supports this claim by a *ḥadīth* in which the Prophet Muhammad is reported as saying, "A group of my followers will remain victorious till Allah's Order [the Hour] comes upon them while they are still victorious."[27] The *ḥadīth* refers to an anticipated divide within the Muslim community, marked by the rise of different currents, mostly deviant, except for one group of Muhammad's followers who will remain pure in their belief and practice Islam in accordance with God's Order and will thus eventually prevail. *Salafism* is thus to be viewed as a doctrinal philosophy primarily focused on a supposedly exemplary form of Islam characterized by genuineness, purity, and unconditional commitment to the teachings of *al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*. In order to realize this vision, Salafi scholars refer to different methods (*manāhij*, s. *manhaj*). In a bid to explain the broadness and variance of methods to realize the Salafi version of Islam, Sheikh Salih ibn Fawzan provides a comparison between *manhaj* and *ʿaqīdah*: "*Manhaj* is broader than *ʿaqīdah*; *Manhaj* (method) occurs in *ʿaqīdah* (creed), in *sulūk* (behavior), in *'akhlāq* (manners), and in *muʿāmalāt* (dealings), as a part of the life of every Muslim. As for the *ʿaqīdah*, it constitutes the foundation of *'īmān* (faith)."[28] A similar contrast was outlined by Sheikh Naasir ud-Deen al-Albani, who maintains that *ʿaqīdah* is "more specific" than *manhaj* in that it has a direct link with *tawḥīd* (monotheism), which forms "the chief and fundamental aspect of Islam." This while *manhaj* is deemed to be "broader than *ʿaqīdah* and *tawḥīd*" in that it allows resorting to different methods for the sake of "conveying and actualizing Islam."[29]

Amid the rise of various *manāhij* or methods meant to assist in the realization of the Salafi philosophy, one particular *manhaj* has gained the attention of the majority of Salafis since the nineteenth century, namely *Wahhabism*. Introduced by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703–1792), the followers of this *manhaj* are frequently referred to as Wahhabis, and the works and legacy of ibn Abd al-Wahhab are considered to be highly influential among and of great impact on contemporary Salafis worldwide. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab provided what some scholars consider to be a narrow definition of "true faith," as it mainly focuses on the founder's teachings that have ultimately introduced the principles of *takfīr* (denouncing fellow Muslims as apostates) and *jihād* against the *kāfir* (infidel).[30] Hence, *Wahhabism* is deemed to be the most extreme manifestation of radical Sunni Islam.[31] *Wahhabism* mainly implicates a return to the basic values

and teachings of Islam, and striving for the purification of the faith from any form of theological additions or philosophical speculations.[32] Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's extremely conservative thoughts stem from the fact that he was remarkably influenced by the teachings of the strictly orthodox and traditionalist Ḥanbalī school of law, and particularly by the works and thoughts of the Ḥanbalī-based legal philosopher Ibn Taymiyya. This has led scholars on *Islamism* to associate *Salafism* with the legacy of both Ibn Taymiyya and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, who are seen as primary architects of today's *Salafism*. One of the defining categorizations within *Salafism* was introduced by Wiktorowicz, who points out that the movement can be divided into three categories: purists, politicos, and jihādis.[33] While being used as a reference by many scholars, Wiktorovicz's categorization remains prone to criticism. According to Hegghammer, *Salafism* is essentially a "theological, not a political category," which raises controversy about the basis upon which Wiktorovicz's categorization was fundamentally built.[34] Other attempts to contest this categorization were made by Hafez, who criticizes the terminology employed by Wiktorowicz while dividing *Salafism* into three separate groups, arguing that the term "purist" would have been better understood if replaced by "conservative."[35] Yet, the main problematic issue within Wiktorovicz's categorization is that its broadness makes it fail to depict how actors from these different groups within the movement interact with each other, the form of their approach to power, and the manner in which they aspire to change it.

It remains unclear when the term *Salafi-Jihadism* first emerged, yet the Salafi-Jihadis employ the term today to describe their movement and what it essentially stands for. According to prominent Islamic scholar and theorist of *Salafi-Jihadism* Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, the term did not originate from inside the movement, yet it is commonly used in reference to it. "[Salafi-Jihadism] is a current that combines the call to monotheism in its totality with jihād for this end," al-Maqdisi maintains, "it is a current that strives to actualize monotheism by waging jihād against the false gods … Its jihād is not limited to a certain geographic spot; its [Salafi] jihādis are carrying out the jihād across the globe."[36] Other Salafi scholars tried to demonstrate the accuracy of the term in defining the movement and its doctrinal principles, such as Sadiq al-Karkhi, who illustrates the key characteristics of a member of *Salafi-Jihadism* as being "*Salafī-yul ʿaqīdah* (Salafi in creed), *Jihādī-yul manhaj* (Jihādi in method)."[37]

In order to understand what *Salafi-Jihadism* basically entails, it is of key importance to tackle the characteristics that define the movement and

what its philosophy primarily implicates. Several scholars have attempted to identify such characteristics. Hafez maintains that the movement has five key characteristics to be identified, which include *tawḥīd* (monotheism), *takfīr* (categorizing others as non-believers), *ḥākimiyyah* (God's might and rule), *jihād* (struggle in the path of God), and a rejection of *bidʿah* (heretical innovations).[38] While agreeing with Hafez's reference to *tawḥīd*, *takfīr*, and *jihād* as basic characteristics of contemporary *Salafism*, Brachman rejects the inclusion of *ḥākimiyyah* and *bidʿah* among those defining features, advocating the replacement of both notions with *ʿaqīdah* (creed) and *al-walā' wa-l-barā'* (loyalty and disavowal) instead.[39] According to Alsulaiman, the main characteristics of the *Salafi-Jihadi* movement originally stem from *Wahhabism*, which is defined by *tawḥīd*, *ṭāghūt*, *al-ḥākimiyyah*, *al-walā' wa-l-barā'*, and *jihād*.[40] Hence, the concept of *bidʿah* is hereby replaced with *ṭāghūt*, which refers to all kinds of notions and conceptions that seem to replace God, deviate a believer from His worship, and eventually endanger the *tawḥīd* or monotheism—the cornerstone of the whole religion.

Delving into the conceptual building-blocks of *Salafi-Jihadism* requires tackling the broader set of Islamic jurisprudential notions. There are certain practical, theoretical, and ritualistic jurisprudential concepts of significance in this regard. The practical dimension involves the concepts of *riddah/irtidād* (apostasy), *ḥisbah* (accountability within the framework of Islamic call to "command good and forbid evil"), and *bidʿah* (heretical innovations), which are of concern not only to Salafi-Jihadis but also to other Muslim traditions and movements. The theoretical concepts fundamentally comprise *ʾīmān* (faith) and *ʿaqīdah* (creed or doctrine), which are considered basic notions to be adopted by any Muslim in order to accept and embrace Islam. The ritualistic ideas include *shafāʿah* (intercession) and *ḏikr* (mentioning and remembrance of God), both of which are primarily practiced by Sufi Muslims while considered by the majority of Salafis as certain forms of heretical innovations or *bidʿah*.[41] Thus, although some of these concepts are shared by various Muslim traditions and movements, including *Salafi-Jihadism*, the interpretation and employment of certain aspects of these notions emerge in different forms within a current compared to others. Despite the various perspectives and constantly emerging and developing theories on the defining features of *Salafi-Jihadism*, there remain five undeniably crucial characteristics of the movement and its philosophy which, regardless of terminological variance between sources, include: *tawḥīd*, *ḥākimiyyah*, *al-walā' wa-l-barā'*, *takfīr*,

and *jihād*. Furthermore, an inescapable aspect of these defining features is that they mainly focus on two issues in particular: the protection of the faith and its promotion. The safeguarding and preservation of the faith is, in accordance with the Salafi-Jihadi doctrine, accomplished by means of *jihād*, *al-walā' wa-l-barā'*, and *takfīr*. Whereas the promotion of the faith is, first and foremost, attached to the concepts of *tawḥīd* and *ḥākimiyyah*. "It is the first part of this equation that interests Salafi-Jihadis the most because it is battlefield-related," Maher emphasizes, "providing the *raison d'être* for their modus operandi."[42]

The Salafi-Jihadi thought and worldview could be traced and better understood through revisiting the group's selection of references and ideas, for these hold direct ties with the departure points of their philosophy and the objectives that the movement strives to realize. *Salafi-Jihadism* is thus concerned with the preservation of what it perceives as authenticity, legitimate and righteous authority, submission, and revolution, with its doctrinal components set to serve these principles and to accomplish its objectives. It urges and enforces *tawḥīd* and *ḥākimiyyah* in order to determine the legitimacy and righteousness of an authority and ensure the application of authentic teachings of Islam; it takes *al-walā' wa-l-barā'* as a basic doctrine to set up the rules and borderlines of loyalty and disavowal; it resorts to *takfīr* in a bid to protect Islam in its authentic form against perversion and violations from within the *'ummah*; and praises *jihād* as a blessed *manhaj* that would guarantee the realization of the ultimate aspirations of the movement.

The rise and growth of *Salafi-Jihadism* come as a consequence of previous, highly relevant events and developments in the Islamic world. Tackling the evolution of the Salafi-Jihadi ideology necessitates revisiting certain historical occurrences of crucial significance to *Islamism*, as they have contributed to reshaping several predominantly Muslim countries. Among those developments are the rise of *Wahhabism* and its incorporation into politics and state-leadership in Saudi Arabia based on an agreement between Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and the founder of the Saudi dynasty Ibn Saud in the eighteenth century; the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and the suppression of its leading members by the Egyptian authorities throughout the twentieth century; the American-sponsored Egyptian-Israeli Camp David Treaty of 1978 that was followed by the assassination of the then Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in 1981 by the *takfīri* Wahhabi-based al-Jamāʿa al-Islāmiyya (the Islamic Group), whose

members are considered among the pioneers of *Salafi-Jihadism*; the Iranian Revolution of 1979 that brought Khomeini to power and transformed Iran into a Shia-based theocratic Islamic republic, led within the ideological framework of *Wilāyat al-Faqīh* (the guardianship of the theologian); the Afghan War between 1979 and 1989 and the associated developments, particularly the rise of armed Islamic militants or *mujāhidīn* and the eventual emergence of al-Qaeda; and the Algerian Civil War in the period between 1991 and 2002.[43] The employment of *Wahhabism* as an instrument for political objectives in Saudi Arabia is believed to have caused an internal split within the Wahhabi movement, especially in the twentieth century, resulting in the emergence of two Wahhabi currents: one of them insisting on maintaining its purist-religious nature, and the other increasingly drawn into politics.

Given the impact of the surrounding developments and changes across the region, including the Egyptian-Israeli Camp David Treaty, the Iranian Revolution, and the Afghan War, the Wahhabi movement faced increasing intra-confrontations during the 1980s, which led to a final split within the movement in the aftermath of the Gulf Crisis of 1990. Since then, two forms of *Wahhabism* came to the surface: one associated with and demarcated by its ties to the Saudi state establishment; while the other sought to reach Muslims across the globe, caught by a worldview implicating the *takfīr* of many fellow Muslims and considering contemporary Saudi, Arab, and international order as *ṭāghūt* that requires fundamental reformation. The latter doctrine and its philosophy came to be regarded as *Salafi-Jihadism* and its adherents are thus branded as Salafi-Jihadis.[44] There is a set of extreme Wahhabi tenets considered central to the Salafist tradition, and hence to Salafi-Jihadis, to be identified, including: the rejection of reverence for saints, "holy" images or objects, places, shrines, or graves, considering them as a form of heresy; the *taḥrīm* (forbidding) of shaving, smoking, swearing, alcohol, and musical instruments; and denying women leadership roles.[45] Such extreme teachings emerged at the heart of ISIS's regulations imposed on populations under the group's control, giving an example of the most radical form of *Salafi-Jihadism*. The ideological and doctrinal philosophy of *Salafi-Jihadism* was adopted and brought forward by several groups over the past four decades, such as al-Jamāʿa al-Islāmiyya (the Islamic Group), Jamāʿat al-Tawḥīd wal-Jihād (Organization of Monotheism and Jihad), and Jamāʿat Anṣār al-Islām (Islam Supporters Group). With *Salafi-Jihadism* at the core of their doctrine and practice, these groups have inspired, equipped, and contributed to the rise of

remarkably violent and notoriously extremist Islamist groups, the most prominent of which were al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (ISIS).

Literature that is deemed to be of high significance to the ideology of *Salafi-Jihadism* and constitute the groundwork for its doctrinal philosophy was mostly developed in the 70s and 80s of the last century, such as *al-Farīḍah al-Ghā'ibah* (the neglected duty, 'jihād') by Muhammad 'Abd al-Salām Faraj; *Risalāt al-'īmān* (messages of the faith) by Sālih Sariyyah; *Kalimāt Ḥaqq* (the honest word) by Omar Abdulrahman; *Mithāq al-ʿAmal al-Islāmī* (the charter of Islamic activism) by al-Jamāʿa al-Islāmiyya; *Millat 'Ibrāhīm* (the community of Abraham) by Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi; *'Ilḥaq bi'l-Qāfilah* (Do not miss the [jihād] convoy) by Abdullah 'Azzām; and *al-ʿUmdah fī 'Iʿdād al-ʿUddah* (the adequate preparation for the struggle) by Abdulqader Abdulaziz. All these pamphlets and monographs are primarily based on a strictly orthodox Wahhabi thought, taking the principal teachings of *Wahhabism* as a departure-point, extremely advocating and emphatically urging to preserve and revive the doctrines of *tawḥīd*, *ḥākimiyyah*, *al-walā' wa-l-barā'*, *takfīr*, and *jihād*. The Salafi-Jihadi literature basically tends to employ substantial Wahhabi teachings for the sake of feeding the ideological tenets of *Salafi-Jihadism* and adjust its recommendations in accordance with the movement's worldview. Yet the term *Salafi-Jihadism* was first referred to in a speech by the current leader of al-Qaeda Ayman al-Zawahiri in 1994, and its first appearance in academic research was in 1998 in two separate studies on the Algerian Civil War both by Gilles Kepel and Kamil al-Tawil.[46] Pargeter emphasizes that the term primarily reflects a "current of thought" to which individuals may subscribe, and it "should not be confused with a specific group as such."[47] Other scholars reiterate that the term *Salafi-Jihadism* is to be viewed as an ideological strain, or thought, that certain individuals may adhere to and follow, and it does not belong to any particular movement or organization.[48] It is deemed to be today's major Islam-based reactionary religio-political current. It holds sufficient features to be seen as a political religion in the sense of providing its adherents with a shared cause, belongingness, and a common purpose that create a community unified under the same umbrella of ideological tenets within a framework of activism that turns politics into religion.

Thus, we may define *Salafi-Jihadism* as a strictly orthodox, religio-political Islamist current of thought, characterized by ideological tenets mainly derived from *Wahhabism* and essentially inspired by the works of Ibn Taymiyya. It strives for the revival and maintenance of the version of

Islam specifically as understood and practiced by the *al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*. The Salafi-Jihadi doctrine implicates a struggle to protect what its adherents consider to be an original version of the faith through *jihād*, *al-walā' wa-l-barā'*, and *takfīr*, besides combatting *bidʿah* and *ṭāghūt*. It also entails an aspiration of promoting the faith by means of emphasizing the concepts of *tawḥīd* and *ḥākimiyyah*. It embraces *jihād* as a blessed and efficient *manhaj* or method for the sake of realizing its objectives. *Salafi-Jihadism* is chiefly the product of a chain of historical developments, associated with the rise of a set of literary works aimed at further inspiring, ideologizing and feeding its adherents and guiding them toward the accomplishment of its goals. The Salafi-Jihadi philosophy, with its religio-political nature, has survived and developed over decades to eventually inspire some of today's most radical Islamist groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS, and the fact that it remains a current of thought to which various groups may adhere indicates its potential power to continue inspiring groups of individuals into extremism in the future.

3.2 Sectarianism

In discussions about the Middle East and regional rifts and conflicts such as that of Syria or Iraq, the term *sectarianism* (*al-Ṭa'ifīyah*) is frequently mentioned, often without a sufficient explanation or a sharp definition.[49] Although the concept of *sectarianism* remains largely undertheorized, several definitions of the term and explanations of its characteristics have been produced over the years.[50] *Sectarianism* is defined by Liechty and Clegg as "a system of attitudes, actions, beliefs and structures, which arises as a distorted expression of positive, human needs especially for belonging, identity and the free expression of difference and is expressed in destructive patters of relating."[51] It is believed to function at personal, communal, and institutional levels, constantly involving a religious element as well as a negative mixture of politics and religion.[52] According to Brewer, *sectarianism* can be considered as "the determination of actions, attitudes and practices by practices about religious difference, which results in them invoked as the boundary marker to represent social stratification and conflict."[53] The term thus refers to a bunch of beliefs, ideas, and myths about religious difference mainly used to turn religion into a social marker and make disdainful comments and statements about other groups. In tensions between Sunni Muslims and Shia Muslims, or between one religious

group and another like between Muslims and Christians, each group tends to identify itself with the religious and political features displayed in the discourse of its leadership, separating it from other communities in the area they inhabit and leading to some discriminatory statements about the alleged "other." *Sectarianism* is further deemed to be a set of prejudiced attitudes, policies, and types of treatment based on religious difference, occurring at the levels of ideas, individual action, and social structure.[54] In its modern context, *sectarianism* implies reference to the deployment of religious heritage as a key marker of modern political identity. It is ultimately "an act of interpretation that shapes as well as is shaped by religious mobilizations and violence in the modern world."[55] *Sectarianism* is described by Makdisi in his *The Culture of Sectarianism* as "a disease that prevents modernization."[56]

The academic discussion around the notion of *sectarianism* in the recent years has been increasingly driven by the rise and development of intra-religious strife, whether within Islam, Christianity, or Judaism, leading many scholars to study and explore the nature and origins of sectarian rifts and struggle. One of the key aspects of *sectarianism* is the growth of in-group sentiments and an extreme attachment to a certain set of values and beliefs that emerge in contrast with that of other groups within the same society. Despite the various disagreements within the scholarly discussion of *sectarianism*, there is a relevant degree of agreement on what defines belongingness to a particular sect, which implicates "being a member of a group that has a shared identity, belief or ideology that defines them from the rest of the society."[57] While the term is basically employed in the context of discussing differences among religious communities with negative connotations involved, the concept of *sectarianism* has further expanded to include political as well as ethnic minorities. In order to understand the fundamental dynamics of *sectarianism*, it is of great importance to consider Ibn Khaldun's idea of *ʿaṣabīyah* or group feeling, which entails a process of developing group relations and ties as a key factor for empowering a community and ensuring the survival of its identity and basic values against any outside danger.[58] Hence, attributing negative connotations to the perceived "others" and subsequently excluding other groups for not sharing similar values, beliefs, and ideological tenets emerge at the core of the notion of *sectarianism*. Its discriminative nature often leads to social divide that may eventually manifest itself in the form of violent strife aimed at the survival and prevalence of one's own sectarian identity over others.

Although the term is basically used in reference to animosity, grudge, and prejudice toward individuals or groups with different beliefs, *sectarianism* also holds a political dimension. Mabon and Royle strongly disagree with the narrative that suggests that *sectarianism* is inherently violent, arguing that violence only occurs when the sectarian differences or identities are politicized.[59] The notion of *sectarianism* is widely used in describing a country's social and political divisions with religious implications involved. The Middle East has witnessed numerous such examples. Saudi Arabia, the major Sunni power in the region, has repeatedly witnessed suppression of predominantly Shia movements in the Kingdom, where the authorities accused Iran, the major Shia power in the Middle East, of supporting such movements to destabilize the region. In Syria, rebel groups fighting the regime of Bashar al-Assad in the aftermath of the 2011 uprising were mainly characterized by their Sunni-based struggle, striving to overthrow the Alawites from power. In Iraq and Bahrain, tensions and struggle for power are mainly based on the deep Sunni-Shia cleavage. Another example of the political dimension of the concept of *sectarianism* is Lebanon, where the political system is formally based on the distribution of power between Maronite Christians, Shia, and Sunni Muslims. In this context, competitive or hostile political relationships between communities defined by their religious characteristics and traits are expressed through a sectarian discourse. This basically applies to tensions and conflicts between groups adhering to a broad faith community such as Muslims, where widespread disputes and clashes between Sunni and Shia have been taking place, similar to tensions between Protestants and Catholics in Europe, and also between completely different faiths like between Muslims and Christians.[60] Hence, a religious identity is employed as a marker of difference among diverse communities, leading to rifts and tensions over power and political matters, where questions of marginalization, discrimination, and exclusion on the basis of religious affiliation are raised.[61]

In the Islamic world, *sectarianism* has for long played a defining role with regard to key rifts and differences that have emerged and surfaced within the Muslim society over centuries in the aftermath of the major Sunni-Shia split. Issues of rightful religious authority and eligible political leadership arise at the heart of intra-Islamic *sectarianism*. Subsequent to the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 AD, a split within the Muslim community occurred, mainly due to political disagreements.[62] Two major branches of Islam emerged, the largest of which was the Sunni, the

followers of *Sunnah* (tradition) and known as *'Ahl al-Sunnah* (the People of the Tradition), and the second was the Shiʿa or Shiʿites, a name derived from the Arabic *Shiʿat ʿAli* or the party of Ali. The Sunnis, who constitute the vast majority within the Muslim community today, endorse and approve the first four Caliphs, including Ali, as *'al-Khulafā' 'al-Rāshidūn* or the Rightly-Guided successors of the Prophet Muhammad. This while the Shiʿites insist on the idea that Ali and his descendants were the sole rightful successors instead. Taking such a position with respect to the succession of the Prophet has resulted in branding them as *rāfiḍah* (rejectionists), which has become a pejorative word for Shia.[63] Despite the subtle differences in conducting obligatory prayers, both Sunnis and Shiʿites share a considerably analogous understanding of essential Islamic tenets.

The Shiʿites consider Ali ibn Abi Talib as the first true leader of the Muslim people. He is referred to as *imām*, a title that, according to the Shia, indicates leadership as well as signifying blood relation to the Prophet. Ali's descendants (*imāms*) undertook the leadership of the Shia community. Serving as a political and spiritual leader, each Imām appointed a successor and "passed down spiritual knowledge to the following leader," according to the Shia beliefs.[64] Amid the Shia decline after losing the political conflict to the Sunni leaders, the Imāms centered their efforts on the development of a spirituality that would constitute the essence of the Shia religious beliefs and practices. According to some of its foundational sources, Shiʿism defines itself as an essentially esoteric and initiatory doctrine which does not uncover itself easily. In *The Spirituality of Shi'i Islam*, Moezzi points out that in a tradition traced back to several Shia Imāms it is stated, "Our teaching is secret, it is a secret about a secret. It includes an exoteric (*ẓāhir*), esoteric (*bāṭin*) and esoteric of the esoteric (*bāṭin al-bāṭin*) dimension."[65] The Shia spirituality is deemed to be complex, yet its practices and beliefs reveal some consistence and coherence in the essential role of knowledge and initiation, in the ambivalence of the Imām's figure as the alpha and omega of Shiʿism. With the end of the line of Imāms descended from Ali, the *Mujtahids* or religious guides and leaders earned the right to explicate religious, mystical and statutory knowledge to the community, and those with the highest level of knowledge and understanding are known among the Shiʿites as *ayatollahs* or the "sign of God." The most popular yearly ritual revived by the Shiʿites worldwide is the ʿAshurā', a ritualistic remembrance of the death of Ali's younger son Hussein, who was murdered during a battle with Sunni forces in Iraq's Karbala in 680. The Shiʿites believe that the tale of Hussein's martyrdom

holds moral lessons for the community, and it considerably reinforced and strengthened Shia religious beliefs and practices.

The political system developed by the Sunni Muslims holds different concepts than those developed by the Shiʿite *ʿulamāʾ*. The Sunnis embraced and promoted concepts deemed pragmatic in nature, such as *ijmāʿ* (consensus), *ahlul-ḥalli-wal-ʿaqd* (elite scholars who loose and bind), *Khilāfah* (Caliphate), *Khalīfah* (the Caliph), and *bayʿah* (swearing allegiance to the Caliph). The Sunnis, or *Ahl al-Sunnah wal-Jamāʿah*, believe that the Prophet did not designate anyone as his successor and that the Muslims would find themselves a leader after his death. The pragmatic nature of the Sunni political practices stems from this belief. Therefore, a consensus among the Muslims and the role of *ahlul-ḥalli-wal-ʿaqd* are deemed crucial is electing a Caliph to run the Caliphate after receiving *bayʿah*. The Shiʿites, on the other hand, distinguished themselves by promoting concepts like *ʾImāmah* (imamate), *wilāyah* (guardianship), and *ʿiṣmah* (faultlessness and infallibility of the Imām), arguing that it was extremely unlikely that *Allah* (God) with his *lutf* (benevolence) and *ʿadl* (justice) have left a crucial matter like the *imamate* (leadership) undecided.[66] They therefore emphasized the importance of Imāms in the *wilāyah* (guardianship) of the community in the absence of God's messenger. From a doctrinal perspective, both Sunnis and Shiʿites share the basic religious principles of *Tawḥīd* (monotheism), *Nubuwwah* (Muhammad's Messengership), and *Maʿād* (Judgement Day). However, the Shiʿites included two additional principles to the ranks of doctrinal principles, namely, *ʾImāmah* and *ʿadl* (Divine Justice). As a minority group among the Muslims, the Shiʿites historically sought a distinct identity as a strategy for survival.[67]

The Sunnis are considered as a part of Islamic "orthodoxy" and they segregate the Shia as "heterodox" or even "heretical" sect.[68] The orthodoxy of Sunni Muslims is mainly marked by an emphasis on the views and customs of the majority of the community (*ʾummah*), as distinguished from the views of peripheral groups. By developing an institution of consensus, the Sunnis were able to incorporate different customs and usages throughout history, although these had no roots in the Qur'ān. In Shiʿism, numerous Qur'ānic verses are explained in a hermeneutic way with reference to the primacy of Ali and the Household of the Prophet or *ʾAhl al-Bayt*. This exemplifies the reason why the Sunnis consider the Shia to be heterodoxical, if not heretical.[69] Such interpretations reveal more about the ideological and intellectual climate within which these sects emerged

than about the tension they claim to depict and symbolize.[70] The Sunni-Shia tension is thus viewed as a political quarrel about the course of history, with Sunnis advocating the status quo and the Shia representing those who mainly contest such conformism. According to many contemporary world leaders, politicians, intellectuals, and media commentators, the ongoing tensions and instability across the Middle East are attributed to ancient rancor and hostility between Sunnis and Shia that has emerged and developed since the dawn of Islam.[71] Dixon maintains that the "sectarian narrative" has remarkably become a crucial explanatory feature for conflict in today's Middle East.[72] This narrative basically involves considering the seventh-century Sunni-Shia split and struggle over the succession of the Prophet as responsible for the region's recent descent into unrest and, in certain cases, civil war. This millennia-and-a-half-old conflict has been reproduced over and over throughout the history of the Middle East, and is currently one of the key factors of instability in Iraq, Syria and other parts of the region, nourished and reinforced by the rise and expansion of extremist groups.

Sunni and Shia Muslims principally agree on the application of *jihād* once certain circumstances exist that basically justify a struggle in the path of God. Such circumstances include the defense of faith, territory, property, and way of life.[73] *Jihād*, in its spiritual and physical forms, is thus deemed justified by both Sunnis and Shiʿites in the cases of repelling threats of invasion by hostile troops, protecting the Muslims and their properties, and guaranteeing the freedom of practicing and spreading Islam. However, the issue of having an eligible and righteous authority to wage and direct *jihād* emerged as a divisive factor between Sunnis and Shiʿites. According to the Sunni interpretation of "right authority" that is deemed to be eligible to call for and direct *jihād*, all Muslim Caliphs, including the rightly guided first four Caliphs and those who followed, possess the right to wage and guide *jihād* as long as they hold the political and religious authority and possess the support of Islamic scholars (*ʿulamāʾ*). The Shia believe that this right has been exclusively meant for the Imāms, but it was arbitrarily and wrongly deprived of them by the Sunni majority. This disagreement is deeply rooted in the Sunni-Shia original struggle over whether religio-political leadership was meant to be passed on by bloodline, known as the *Shia Imamate*, or through election, known as the *Sunni Caliphate*.[74] Hence, the jurisprudential variance between the Sunni and Shia conceptions of *jihād* is deemed to have been

shaped by historical developments and the associated religio-political approach of the *ʿulamā'*.

Delving into the Shia perception of *jihād* illustrates that the historical suffering and grievances of the Shia are considered essential to the sect's understanding of the notion of *jihād* as intimately tied to these grievances.[75] One of the key incidents deemed crucial to the identity-building of the Shia was the martyrdom of Hussein, the Prophet's grandson and Ali's younger son, during a battle with Sunni Umayyad forces in Iraq's Karbala in 680 on ʿAshurā', the 10th day of the month of Muharram according to the Islamic calendar. The Shiʿites believe that the tale of Hussein's martyrdom holds moral lessons for the community and has become a symbol for struggling against suppression and striving for justice. This interpretation, which constitutes a key element of the Shia doctrine, tends to draw a direct link between the martyrdom of Hussein and the fundamental notion of *jihād* as a struggle for God's cause and godly order. Another element of the Shia doctrine that considerably determines the perception of a majority of Shiʿites with regard to *jihād* is the *ghaybah* or occultation of the 12th Imām.[76] The *Twelver Shiʿism* (*Ithnaʿ Asharis*) is the largest denomination of Shiʿites, and its followers believe that the Prophet's spiritual authority and religious leadership were passed on to 12 of his descendants, beginning with Ali, Hasan, and Hussein. The Twelvers believe that the 12th Imām, Muhammad al-Mahdi, known as the "Awaited Imām" or "Hidden Imām,"[77] has disappeared from a cave below a mosque in 874 and will reappear at the end of the time to bring absolute justice and peace to the world.[78] Thus, it is the *Hidden Imām* who, according to the majority of Shiʿites, possesses the true authority that would provide him with the right to direct *jihād*, and during the absence of the *Hidden Imām* the concerned *ʿulamā'* or *Mujtahids*—the most senior religious scholars—are performing this task until his return. The main point of difference between the Sunni and Shia perceptions of *jihād* is thus the righteousness and legitimacy of an authority to initiate and guide the *jihād*. According to the mainstream Shia scholars, while the *defensive jihād* that is aimed at protecting and defending the *'ummah* against an outside attack is compulsory and may be authorized by the *Mujtahids*, the authorization of *offensive jihād* remains unlawful in the absence of the "Hidden Imām."[79] Having an identity marked by grievances and suffering, the Shiʿites perceive Sunnis as the main source of their miseries throughout history and they therefore believe in the need to resist and fight against what they deem to be a long-standing injustice and oppression practiced on them. In

terms of combatting fellow Muslims under the banner of *jihād*, a classical Shia interpretation of *jihād* is used as a main reference for authorization, which falls under *jihād of the sword*. It basically permits fighting even against fellow Muslims once those are found guilty of spreading discord, schism, and injustice in the Islamic realm.[80] Such an interpretation has allowed for a greater divide to find its way into the Muslim society and contribute to the continuity and escalation of sectarian differences and confrontations between Sunnis and Shiʿites throughout history into the modern era.

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49. Sectarianism (*al-Ta'ifiyah*) was frequently brought forward by the media and political analysts during the coverage of the Iraqi and Syrian conflicts as a key aspect of the political rifts and armed tensions. This sectarian dimension was demonstrated and reinforced by parties to conflict through their discourse and declared agendas with the objective of gaining popular support from their communities and drawing a defining line between them and their alleged enemies.
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suffered over 15 years from a sectarian-based civil war that exhausted the country and devastated its people.

62. In the early history of Islam, strong disagreements erupted between the Islamic elite regarding grave issues affecting the '*ummah*. One of the most bitter and definitely the longest lasting issues was the rift that occurred over the political succession of the Prophet Muhammad. A Sunni-Shia split emerged as a consequence of the different claims to the leadership of political Islam. Other political disputes occurred between those who had been the earliest converts and companions of the Prophet (*Sahaba*) and those who had joined Islam much later on (mainly the elders of the Quraysh tribe). These disagreements threatened to tear apart the community (Fattah and Caso 2009: 68).
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CHAPTER 4

Media Landscape in a Changing Middle East

Delving into the history of media in the Middle East would provide the observer with a scene of mainly state-controlled outlets, where the influence of ruling authorities could be bluntly visible during and throughout the coverage of various topics, whether political, economic, or social. Media laws and regulations in most of Middle Eastern countries imply provisions for the licensing of media corporations and their activities, as well as detailing a broad set of restrictions for journalists.[1] Therefore, any discussion of the media industry in this region, particularly the Arab media, cannot turn a blind eye to the degree of state influence over an outlet's agenda.[2] During the 1970s and the 1980s, media in the region suffered mounting pressure and suppression by the ruling regimes, and freedom of expression turned into an unattainable aspiration. Lynch describes the Arab media in these decades as "something of a wasteland."[3] Up until the 1990s, media establishments in the Arab world were largely viewed as propaganda tools for authoritarian regimes to maintain power.[4] The rise of satellite television led many to consider the emerging media as a potential contributor to the democratization of the Middle East if met with a political openness and a popular volition for change. Nevertheless, issues of censorship and ownership continued to surface as key factors behind the inability of major media outlets to maintain some of the essential building blocks of professional journalism, such as impartiality, objectivity, accountability, and independence.[5]

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The Qatar-based Aljazeera media corporation appeared in 1996 as the first trans-Arabian news network with an obviously different approach to covering developments in the Middle East as a perceived independent channel. Unlike other Arab media corporations, Aljazeera launched unprecedentedly critical programs toward ongoing developments in the region, such as *al-'Ittijāh al-Muʿākis* (the opposite direction), and presented itself as a forum for different opinions. Noteworthy, the establishment of Aljazeera came as a result of a decree by the Qatari government, only one year after a regime change took place following a bloodless coup led by Emir Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani against his father in June 1995.[6] Described as a *maverick* media corporation, Aljazeera is deemed to have challenged Western hegemony over global news since its emergence.[7] While in the past the worldwide audience used to receive news about the Middle East through leading Western media networks such as the BBC and CNN, this region has been given a voice to speak for itself via Aljazeera, which took the lead in conveying local happenings to the world through its multilingual network. Although Aljazeera's territorial broadcasting continued to be owned and funded by the Qatari government, the corporation was able to initiate a widespread coverage across the Middle East, transcend restrictions imposed by authorities on peer Arab media channels, and pursue an unprecedented critical stance toward relevant developments in the region. It promoted itself as *the voice of the voiceless* (Ṣawt man la-Ṣawta la-hū) and a forum for *the opinion and the other opinion* (Arra'ī war-Ra'ī al-Ākhar). The channel was launched under such slogans since its launch in 1996, emphasizing that it has "broken away from the traditional Arab media" from its inception, that "no Arab journalist and broadcaster has previously enjoyed the same amount of freedom in practicing his profession in his own country", and that "the channel has become similar to a live parliament where different opinions are debated on air."[8]

Thus, one of the main factors behind Aljazeera's success was that it presented itself as a relatively independent channel "operating in what many observers perceive as one of the regions that are less inclined toward freedom of expression."[9] As Khalil and Kraidy explain, "Aljazeera's blend of hard-nosed reporting, unbridled talk-show debates and investigative ethos took the Arab world—viewers and rulers alike—by storm. The channel hosted Israeli officials, Islamist Egyptian clerics, Saudi dissidents, exiled Arab intellectuals, feminist activists and Arab government ministers. Its flagship programme *al-'Ittijāh al-Muʿākis* [The Opposite Direction] became a *cause célèbre* first in the Arab world and then globally …

Aljazeera's editorial slant combines Arab nationalism, Islamism and Third Worldism."[10] Its broad coverage of news, diverse critical programs, and experienced staff made the well-funded corporation a hard-to-challenge phenomenon. According to regional media studies, Aljazeera has largely proved to skeptical Middle Eastern viewers that Arab media could eventually play a useful role in professionally informing its audience and replace in its importance the previously relied-on Western news outlets in terms of coverage of relevant events. In mid-2000s, Aljazeera was already able to attract over 80 percent of satellite watchers throughout the Middle East.[11] In order to diversify its targeted audiences and expand its influence in the international media arena, Aljazeera launched its English-language channel in 2006, followed by the launch of Aljazeera Balkan in 2011 and Aljazeera America in 2013, alongside with multilingual online news services. The corporation advertised itself as a forum for different viewpoints, continuously broadcasted on controversial issues, and shed light on critical matters of grave concern for the public opinion in the region until it acquired a *maverick* image and started to directly influence the political landscape in the Arab and Islamic world.[12] Nevertheless, the Qatari government's political standpoints and agenda toward ongoing developments across the region are believed to have been frequently reflected by Aljazeera's discourse.[13]

While the rise of Aljazeera marked the beginning of a revolutionary age in the media industry in the Middle East, the corporation could not monopolize the media market in the region, at least not for long. In 2003, a new promising Arab news network emerged: the Saudi-funded all-news Al Arabiya channel, headquartered in Dubai, became a crucial news player in the region and a strong competitor to Aljazeera. Subsequent to its launch, Al Arabiya gained a growing popularity among Middle Eastern audiences and has been constantly rated as one of the top pan-Arab news channels. Al Arabiya is considered as an alternative media corporation "to both government or state-controlled Arab media and western media."[14] Despite the fact that the corporation enjoys a relative independence in its editorial practices compared to many other Arab news channels, Al Arabiya still has certain restrictions and limitations "because of its Saudi Arabian ownership."[15] The 24-hour news service enabled the station to play a leading role in the regional media arena, enhanced later by the launch of an online English-speaking news service in 2007. According to its mission statement, Al Arabiya news network strives to "deepen understanding of Arab societies, cultures and economies."[16] Nonetheless, the

"understanding" referred to in the mission statement was exposed to criticism by scholars for the undeniable ties between the network's editorial policy and the Saudi government's political agenda in the domestic and external spheres.[17] Al Arabiya's approach toward local and regional happenings and developments has seemingly been enormously influenced by Saudi Arabia's official discourse and its government's standpoints.[18] Yet, Aljazeera's commitment to the Qatari government's political agenda has been no less visible while covering relevant developments in the region. An illustrative example of this is the coverage of the 2013 political change in Egypt: Aljazeera labeled the Egyptian military's ousting of the elected Islamist President Mohamed Morsi as a "military coup,"[19] whereas Al Arabiya hailed that as a "second revolution" by the Egyptian people against the Islamization of the state.[20] Thus, Aljazeera adopted the Qatari government's pro-Muslim Brotherhood (MB) discourse and Al Arabiya promoted the Saudi government's anti-MB discourse while covering the 2013 crisis in Egypt. This may lead us to the conclusion that the space of freedom given by ruling authorities to these giant media outlets is evidently conditional and the independence they enjoy remains considerably restricted, which basically affects the very foundational principles of professional journalism in terms of objectivity and impartiality. Eventually, issues of funding and ownership remain key to understanding how these two giant corporations fundamentally operate. As Kraidy illustrates, both channels "ride the wave of high energy prices. Qatari natural gas is Aljazeera's lifeblood; Saudi oil is Al Arabiya's."[21]

4.1 Freedom, Sectarianism, and Extremism in the New Media

Post-2003 Iraq witnessed the growth of a new generation of media figures and the emergence of several influential organizations. While during the decades-long rule by the Baathist regime the media industry was under the iron fist of the totalitarian Saddam government, the U.S.-led invasion triggered an apparent dramatic development in the Iraqi media landscape. Although the rise of new media outlets came under the pretext of supporting an alleged *democratization* of Iraq,[22] pre-existing political disputes and sectarian tensions were largely reintroduced through the competitiveness that overshadowed the emerging media. The majority of these outlets are believed to have been financed and controlled by rival political forces,

which resulted in a considerably limited room for independence and professional journalistic conduct. Therefore, state and partisan pressures became defining factors in the post-2003 Iraqi media landscape, which often play out in the discourse associated with the coverage of the daily happenings and developments throughout the country. Sectarian disputes and partisan rivalry have constantly surfaced in the discourse of several Iraqi media outlets, each in accordance with the tendencies or affiliation of its managerial board. Subjectivity toward certain relevant events would appear in the news material published or broadcasted by the concerned media channels. The sectarian discourse was largely incorporated in the style-book of these outlets, leading to misinformation and misleading of the public, especially when it overshadows news reporting.

The collapse of the Baathist regime has undoubtedly paved the way for hundreds of newspapers and dozens of radio and television stations, besides numerous online news services, to emerge, providing the diverse audiences in Iraq with a range of unprecedented media options. Subsequent to the downfall of the Baathist regime in 2003, the Iraqi media landscape blossomed into one of the most diverse and unfettered press environments in the Middle East. Privately owned news outlets grew from zero to more than 200 in a rush to meet the growing demand for uncensored information. And despite formidable chaos over press freedom, Iraqi citizens suddenly had access to a varied menu of information unimaginable under the former regime.[23] Nonetheless, issues of ownership, political and sectarian tendencies, and allegiances among the heads of media outlets operating across the country enormously obstructed people's access to objective, reliable news content. Major state-funded outlets, such as *Al Iraqiya* television and *As-Sabah* newspaper, are criticized for the perceived bias observed during the coverage of Sunni-related news due to their apparent affiliation to the Shia-led government.[24] Iraq's Shia also launched television stations, including *Al-Furat*, mainly to broadcast Shia religious programs, promote a Shia political agenda, and ultimately become a mouthpiece to the sect's religious and political leaders. Meanwhile, channels such as *Ash-Sharqiyah* and *Al-Baghdadiya* are criticized for their performance as pro-Sunni broadcasters. Yet, other channels that emerged in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion, including *As-Sumaria* and *Al-Fayhaa*, are viewed as relatively more independent and less sectarian-oriented outlets.[25] The Kurdistan Region of Iraq also witnessed the rise of several media outlets, including *Rudaw* and *Zagros*, which were repeatedly criticized for operating as exclusively pro-Kurdish corporations and serving

partisan agendas. Considering the overall media landscape in today's Iraq, it would be fair to acknowledge the certain degree of press freedom. However, it is inescapable to utter that most of Iraq's media outlets continue to fail in producing professional news content and journalists struggle in terms of impartiality amid overwhelmingly dominant sectarian and partisan influence.

With the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2010–2011, media giants Aljazeera and Al Arabiya played a key role in conveying the popular demands of the previously voiceless protestors in the region to the world through a non-stop coverage.[26] These well-funded, leading news networks became largely involved in stimulating the mobilization of demonstrators across the Arab Spring–affected countries and turned into a serious threat to major dictators who used to rule their people by an iron fist for decades. Media corporations such as Aljazeera were largely able to mirror the audience because they understood the media market and their consumers, and consequently became a source of fear for regional powers. Every government in the region was offended by Al Jazeera at some point.[27] Both outlets encouraged activists and protestors to film ongoing happenings in order to broadcast the delivered footages to millions of watchers. Aljazeera launched an online service known as *Sharek*[28] (share), where everyone is allowed to sign up and upload multimedia material that would be reviewed and broadcasted accordingly by the station's editorial board in a step that optimized user experience. Al Arabiya, on the other hand, launched a similar service known as *Ana-Ara*[29] (I-witness), allowing media activists to upload footages of events in Arab Spring–affected countries to be broadcasted by its news channel. Most of the visual materials shared by activists at that time were captured on phone cameras. It was then when the so-called *citizen journalists*[30] took the initiative to feed the public with information and multimedia materials from areas under blockade, providing an alternative to the reports broadcasted by the mainstream media. Furthermore, the rise of social media has undoubtedly provided media activists—or citizen journalists—with an unprecedented opportunity to establish active platforms and publish reports based on locally collected information, mostly backed by visual materials. Although the phenomenon was referred to by different names, including *network journalism*, *community journalism*, or *open source journalism*, the term *citizen journalism* has been used the most by scholars.[31] The rise of citizen journalism could be attributed to the perceived image that individual, subjective voices are actively sought and shared across the media arena today.[32] Yet,

this may not exclude potentially negative consequences of inaccurate reporting by some of these *subjective voices*, taking into account that the audiences or addressees are *culturally embedded* to a certain degree, which could eventually result in misinterpretation or inability to sufficiently understand or explicate unverified information.[33]

When the popular uprisings of the Arab Spring broke out, however, it was the time for Middle Eastern citizen journalists to shine. This was observed as a de facto reality given the ban imposed by local authorities or parties to conflict on independent media outlets to enter hot areas and report from there. According to Gunter et al., citizen journalism "played a vital role in the series of protests and revolutions that have affected many countries" in the Middle East.[34] Middle Eastern governments in general consider social media a serious threat to their stability and yet failed to neutralize its power. Making an extensive use of the internet, mobile phones, and social media has enabled citizen journalists in the region to collect and produce a massive amount of data, documenting on-ground events and developments during the Arab Spring and in its aftermath. While the activities of citizen journalists or media activists in most of the Arab Spring–affected countries remained limited to protests and civil society movements, they took a different form in war-ravaged Syria, where mostly stranded activists became responsible for collecting information in enormously dangerous and largely blocked areas, reporting on atrocities committed by parties to conflict over several years. This kind of online reporting falls within the framework of the so-called *technological mediation* that enables a local media activist to share images taken on the ground with audiences across the globe, marking *openness toward distant others.*[35] The dramatic developments in the region made of digital media a primary platform for the suppressed communities to exercise freedom of expression, remain informed on relevant happenings, interact in a space of civic engagement, contribute to uncovering violations in hard-to-reach areas, and share information with distant others.

Social media played a vital role in the outbreak and development of the revolutionary movements during the Arab Spring. Social media networks and platforms considerably allowed suppressed communities across the Middle East to realize their mutual hardships, joint grievances, and shared concerns. The very same networks enabled them to mobilize and revolt against dictatorship, corruption, and injustice. Thus, the new social media networks are believed to have provided an unprecedented space for alternative voices and opposition. Such networks became a main force behind

the 2010–2011 popular uprisings through facilitating social change and political mobilization. Social media arose as an alternative source of information; a cyberspace for political and social participation; a platform allowing people to share their views and exchange ideas; a podium for public engagement in civil society activities, freedom of expression, and democracy. This does not undermine the dark side of social media usage by extremists and sectarian-guided online activists whose activities on such platforms have, to a certain extent, contributed to the escalation of partisan rivalry, hostility, and social divide. Nonetheless, it turned into a main tool to mobilize domestic and international support for protests that primarily aimed at ousting dictators and realizing a democratic change. Domestically, such networks assisted anti-regime activists in countries like Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain to organize protests, uncover atrocities taking place in hard-to-reach areas, and ensure an uninterrupted flow of information on a daily, or even hourly, basis. Meanwhile, foreign audiences were able to follow the crucial events and experience the turmoil in the Middle East at the time through real-time Tweeter feeds or YouTube videos posted and extensively shared on Facebook. The use of social media sites and digital media technologies emerged as a key interesting aspect of the Arab Spring, which was famously represented in the mainstream media as a *social media revolution*.[36] It demonstrated an apparent shift away from the traditional media industry and regular news reporting toward a revolutionary age of citizen journalism and social media activism. Although the latter was prone to critique with regard to a claimed lack of professionalism and necessary expertise to report on sensitive issues and essential events, it is definitely hard to deny the role of media activists, and accordingly social media itself, in breaking a heavy siege imposed by authorities on the flow of information concerning local happenings and developments to the outside world. Nevertheless, one of the major cons of this reality was the monopolized access to information by the few locals and the inability of outside organizations to verify the accuracy of the reported information or the authenticity of the delivered visual materials before broadcasting them. As a result, there has been a certain degree of misinformation on certain events, especially since the mostly revolutionary generation of citizen journalists were directly or indirectly involved in and affected by the crisis storming their country.

While social media activists carried on with their cause of maintaining the flow of information from Arab Spring–affected countries, which later took the form of campaigning for specific parties against others as well as

criticizing practices of certain politically motivated groups, the chiefly journalistic-minded activists along with experienced media workers concentrated their efforts on launching their own media outlets and gradually institutionalizing their previously dispersed activities.[37] These outlets are mainly referred to as *new media*. According to Aday et al., the *new media* played a key role in promoting the popular uprisings that swept the Middle East in 2010–2011, which reflects an apparent linkage between the rising revolutionary media outlets and politics, besides promoting political and social polarization and attracting an international attention toward domestic developments in the affected countries.[38]

The *new media* is believed to have created a certain shift in power in the media arena, leaving previously dominant mainstream media corporations to struggle to maintain control over the flow of information. As the authorities in countries like Syria insistently prevented regional and international news networks from entering the country to report on the ground, local citizen journalists working for newly founded outlets took the responsibility for covering ongoing events and became a main source of information to the outside world. Khamis et al. maintain that Assad's blackout policy has "backfired" on the Syria regime, mainly due to the "over-reliance of international media on the Syrian activists' citizen journalism efforts."[39] Post-2011 Syria has witnessed the launch of dozens of news websites, newspapers, radio, and television stations. The emerging media organizations together formed what became known as *alternative media* or *new Syrian media*.[40] After more than four decades of dictatorship and suppression, the Syrian uprising of 2011 led to an explosion in the number of media outlets, which explicitly signaled greater freedom of speech. Amid a dramatically escalating rebellious movement against the regime, Syrian journalists and media activists set up media centers and local news agencies throughout the country in a bid to keep pace with the ongoing developments at the political, military, and humanitarian levels alike. In the summer of 2011, the *new Syrian media* started to attract the attention on internal and regional levels, as the *Watan FM* radio station began broadcasting inside Damascus, coupled with the distribution of the first free newspapers such as *Souriatna*, *Oxygen*, and *Enab Baladi*.[41] While the launch of such outlets marked the rise of "a new generation of media figures" in Syria, citizen journalists mainly aged 18–30, they primarily operated as a "bulwark" against the regime's propaganda machines represented in long-standing government-funded channels—such as the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), Syria TV, and the state-run daily newspapers

of *Tishreen*, *Thawra*, and *Baath*.[42] However, most of the emerging outlets had a revolutionary overtone, either due to affiliation with the opposition or because of the lack of sufficient professional experience in the field. Some of the outlets of the *new Syrian media* openly expressed their so-called revolutionary tendency through their mission statements, while others made that explicit through their rhetoric and choice of words.

While pro-regime media channels continued to excessively defend the Assad government's practices and designating all anti-regime factions—whether peaceful protestors or armed rebels—as "terrorists," most of the rising outlets focused primarily on abuses carried out by pro-Assad troops while considerably turning a blind eye to those committed by the rebels.[43] A study by the *Middle East Institute* in 2016 spotted 196 active non-state media outlets in Syria, categorizing 71 media outlets as pro-opposition, 39 as independent, 72 as pro-regime, and 14 as independent Kurdish.[44] The distinction was reportedly based on rhetoric and language-use during the coverage of events, which suggests the perceived degree of bias within reports published or broadcasted by these outlets. An apparent ethno-sectarian rhetoric developed among the emerging media organizations during the early years of the crisis in Syria, especially when a certain report tackles a perceived "other."[45] Still, the existence and development of independent media may be seen as a reflection of the ambitions of a large proportion of the population in Syria. It is also reflective of a part of the population that does not aspire to a Syria defined by sectarianism, religious fundamentalism, or repressive autocracy. For some of the founders of Syria's new media outlets, the step meant giving civil society a voice.[46] The Kurds viewed this new era of perceived media freedom as an opportunity to re-establish bridges of communication with other Syrian communities after decades of discrimination and regime-led ban on the use of the Kurdish language. There were only a few secretly published Kurdish bulletins in Syria, mostly linked to political parties and used to be distributed only to a limited circle of audience due to the many security risks. However, in the post-2011 Syria several Kurdish newspapers, news websites, and radio stations were launched, some of which worked closely with Arab media outlets from cities like Damascus and Aleppo in an effort to break down the previous ban imposed by the Baathist regime on the Kurdish language and culture. Yet, for others it meant a new horizon for seeking political and military power on the ground through influencing the public opinion and mobilizing support for their aspirations to come true.

The 2011 uprising, which gradually descended into a devastating civil war, unquestionably provided a sufficient space for a new generation of media outlets to emerge and develop.[47] However, the very same space was exploited by various groups, including sectarian and extremist factions, each for the sake of promoting their own agenda. Every armed group, moderates and radicals alike, established their own media centers, through which they continuously addressed the people as well as their alleged enemies, claiming to cover news on the military operations and relevant developments on the ground. Nearly each party to conflict in Syria has founded its own media center to reinforce its presence in the political or military arena through the media. Islamist groups such as Jaish al-Islam and al-Jabha al-Islamiya launched their exclusive media centers; other rebel groups had, besides their separate media centers, joint platforms online such as the Revolutionary Forces of Syria Media Office; Kurdish-led forces such as the YPG and SDF took a similar step; pro-regime militias made extensive use of state media outlets to broadcast their official statements; radical groups such as al-Nusra and ISIS developed multiple media channels of their own; and the diverse political parties and local coalitions launched media offices and news websites to promote their activities. Despite their biased rhetoric and often poorly founded reports, media centers of armed factions were constantly used as a source of information by many local outlets of the *new Syrian media*, which frequently put the credibility of those allegedly independent channels at stake.

Besides, the emergence and growth of a sectarian rhetoric among the rising media organizations left its impact in the Syrian media arena and within the society at large. Identifying people during news coverage by their religious or ethnic affiliation, or describing an area through a sectarian scope, became largely visible in the discourse of many channels of the *new Syrian media*.[48] Sectarian distinctions between Sunni, Shia, Alawite, Druze, and Christian, and ethnic distinctions between Arabs, Kurds, and Turkmen, among others, became keywords in reports about alleged ethnic cleansing campaigns, massacres, claimed collective punishment, and mass graves.[49] While some of such reports would provide sufficient details and data to support its newsworthiness, many reports of this kind would lack the minimum basis but yet be reported with an emphasis on the religious or ethnic identity of the alleged perpetrators. This kind of reporting can be seen as particularly aimed at inciting sectarian sentiments, division, and even hostility, which reflects the other—perhaps intentionally dangerous—face of Syria's new media. Thus, the Syrian conflict was often framed

in sectarian terms by a set of partisan and biased media outlets through whose lens the outside world continuously observed the local happenings across Syria for years.

Parties to conflict in Syria didn't solely rely on their own media organizations though. They have made a remarkable use of social media as well to ensure reaching the largest crowd of audiences possible. The political opposition, Kurdish parties, and pro-regime factions were no exception in the media race that accompanied the Syrian conflict throughout its different stages. The Syrian civil war is deemed to be one of the most mediatized, well-documented conflicts in history.[50] Since the outbreak of the Syrian conflict, media activists continuously documented the daily happenings throughout the country's provinces, cities, towns, and villages. A massive amount of data, mostly visual materials, about the daily events in Syria have been shared through various social media platforms. The process of documenting the war continued for years despite the serious risks the activists and citizen journalists were constantly exposed to. Hence, the Syrian war is seen as one of the most documented conflicts ever.[51] Nevertheless, the war-related data released by rising Syrian media outlets were constantly prone to criticism with regard to accuracy and credibility, given the partisan nature of many of the media workers in these channels, besides the general rhetoric that would considerably reveal the editorial policy—and in certain cases the *political agenda*—pursued by each of these corporations.

Thus, looking at the media landscape that emerged after the fall of the Baathist regime in Iraq and in light of the anti-regime rebellion in Syria, one may observe numerous outlets that have significantly deviated from the path of professionalism and generally developed into partisan and sectarian networks instead. Representation, proprietorship, sponsorship, and political tendencies are undoubtedly matters that, once given an influential space, can overwhelmingly influence the editorial policy of any media outlet and subsequently incite antagonism and divide, especially in such an environment like that of Iraq and Syria—where the lengthy conflict has left the population considerably fragile and prone to further devastation.

4.2 Mediatized Extremism

The rise of media outlets affiliated to extremist groups, which accomplished a greater success in terms of followership and effectiveness than those run by less significant groups on the ground, was beyond the

expectations of local, regional, and international followers of the crisis afflicting the heart of the Middle East. It took a group like ISIS to launch a glossy magazine—namely *Dabiq*—and a couple of propaganda websites—including *al-Hayat*—to gain more attention from the international community than the many Syrian uprising-affiliated media outlets.[52] Besides the relevance of ISIS's messages to the West and its dramatic growth at the time in Syria and Iraq, the group was able to develop a qualitative production—particularly the visual releases—that appeared hard for many new Syrian or Iraqi media outlets to match or compete with. The sophisticated media campaign enabled ISIS to reach out to audiences across the globe, promoting high-quality videos and glossy monthly magazines on an array of social media.[53] The group has further employed social media platforms for fundraising and recruitment campaigns. Tackling ISIS's large-scale use of social media, a 2016 study by Brookings Institute revealed that more than 46,000 active Twitter accounts supporting ISIS were spotted in a two-month period.[54] In 2015, a Twitter account affiliated with ISIS under the name of *Cyber Caliphate* reached over 110,000 followers within a short period of time before being shut down by Twitter, which reflects the group's ability to build up a solid presence on social media and the undeniable large numbers of online-active extremists. Media has served the group as a crucial instrument in its efforts of ideological expansion, which falls within the framework of *Da'wah* or outreach, supposedly accomplished through sending the "right" message, inviting sympathizers to join in re-establishing and preserving the caliphate, and spreading fear among its perceived enemies. Within the framework of its media activities, ISIS has been able to pair atrocious footages of mass executions, floggings, beheadings, and battlefront clashes with propaganda messages showing its militants as idealized brave warriors and models of truthfulness and piety. Such media releases were basically aimed at spreading fear among the ranks of the group's enemies and drawing the attention of more potential recruits from all over the world. In the narrative of ISIS's media outlets, the enemy always flees in disgrace or killed.[55] Furthermore, in a bid to play on the emotions of its audiences, attract more recruits, and justify its mounting atrocities against perceived enemies, whether local or foreign, ISIS resorted to a humanitarian appeal by releasing images of Syrian civilians who fell victim to airstrikes or other forms of military attacks by the group's opponents on areas under its control. Other extremist groups that have occupied a space in the emerging Syrian media arena included al-Qaeda-affiliated al-Nusra

Front, al-Jabha al-Shamiya, and Tahrir al-Sham Movement, each of which founded a media center capable of influencing the overall media landscape with regard to war reporting.[56]

Media is believed to have played a key role in ISIS's increased fame and prominence compared to other jihādi groups around the globe. The military and financial capabilities of ISIS are definitely undeniable factors that contributed to its remarkable rise in 2014 and the few years that followed, yet the media played a crucial role in the development of the organization's sphere of influence. Nevertheless, the organization was active in the media arena before its advance into Syria. In November 2006, when it was still a merely local militia operating within the Iraqi borders, ISIS's [known then as ISI] leaders launched the *al-Furqan Foundation for Media Production*. Moubayed establishes a direct link between the launch of *al-Furqan* and the effect of Hezbollah's media during the Israeli war on Lebanon, "where the world had been amazed by the effectiveness of Hezbollah's media campaign" leading the ISIS militant group in Iraq to "copy what it had seen, producing posters and pamphlets while also managing an active online campaign with ISIS-related material."[57] *Al-Furqan Foundation for Media Production* accompanied ISIS during the different stages of its development and it eventually became a main mouthpiece for the group's self-proclaimed caliphate. This long-standing media branch of ISIS released numerous propaganda reportages and multimedia materials on the group's activities, besides operating as the main broadcaster of the group's official statements and messages.

Another leading media organization run by ISIS is *al-Hayat Media Center*. Launched in 2014, *al-Hayat* (life) played a key role in further spreading ISIS's message to audiences across the globe through an active presence on online platforms and social media networks by releasing content in several languages including Arabic, French, English, Russian, and German. This media branch of ISIS has released numerous jihādi propaganda materials, including news reports, articles, and videos, with a quality that suggests that the production staff has had previous experience working with Western audiences.[58] Besides producing shockingly brutal content to promote the group's alleged power on the ground, *al-Hayat Media Center* constantly covered the day-to-day life under the so-called caliphate in Iraq and Syria in a bid to portray "good life" there to encourage the emigration of Muslims to areas under ISIS's control—which was a part of the radicalization and recruitment policies pursued by the group.[59] The multilingual content produced by *al-Hayat*, reinforced by the efforts

of an active group of experts, enabled ISIS to reach an ever-growing circle of audiences mostly led by curiosity to know more about the alleged *Islamic State*. In addition to its active presence online, *al-Hayat*'s material was repeatedly broadcasted by regional and international media corporations during the coverage of ISIS-related events.

Subsequent to the establishment of the caliphate on the 29th of June 2014, ISIS's media branch *al-Hayat Media Center* launched an online magazine entitled *Dabiq*. The magazine was named after a village in northwestern Syria with an Islamic religious symbolism. *Dabiq* was mentioned in a *ḥadīth*[60] as the location of an apocalyptic battle that will take place between Muslims and their enemies.[61] The glossy digital magazine was published in English as a near monthly periodical with an alleged purpose of truth-seeking, promoting unity in what ISIS claimed to be a holy war against crusaders and enemies of Islam, and encouraging migration of Muslims to the land of the caliphate.[62] Each issue of *Dabiq* has as an opening a quote from the group's founder Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, which reads, "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 Dābiq." The professionally designed magazine is filled with interviews with ISIS militant fighters and stories of their alleged conquests. The magazine was basically designed to fit into ISIS's broader propaganda and politico-military campaign strategy as it presents the claimed successes enjoyed by its members as evidence of Allah's blessing.[63]

Furthermore, in an effort to increase its propagandist influence on a local level, ISIS founded the weekly newspaper of *al-Naba* in April 2015. The newspaper, which mainly contains official statements, news items, and articles promoting the group's alleged victories over its enemies, as well as messages to the local populations, used to be distributed in print across the ISIS-controlled areas in Syria and Iraq in the period between 2015 and 2017. Every published issue was also uploaded and redistributed online. The above-mentioned media outlets will gain a particular focus in this volume for the sake of analyzing ISIS's discourse.

The prevalent environment of armed conflict, political rifts, and social schism in Iraq has also formed a fertile ground for Iraqi local extremist militias to appear and grow in the media arena through continuously delivering directed messages to an ever-growing audience and sharing news items on a daily basis, mostly about their alleged resistance and victories over rivals, which enabled them to remarkably influence the public opinion, primarily through a deeply sectarian-based discourse. Digital

media became a main instrumental platform for sectarian Iraqi groups such as al-Hashd al-Shaabi to attract the public's attention by covering ongoing military operations from the battleground against rival groups, especially in the period between 2014 and 2017.

Subsequent to its establishment, al-Hashd al-Shaabi launched its official website in the summer of 2014 under the banner *al-Tawjih al-Aqaidi*,[64] followed by the launch of *Humat al-Watan* magazine and *al-Hashd al-Shaabi* newspaper. While the former primarily focuses on Shiʿite indicative guidance, recruitment, and indoctrination, the other two platforms mainly concentrate on covering relevant news and publishing official statements issued by the group's leadership. Yet, all three media organizations evidently remained committed to the same Shia-based discourse that often carries elements of animosity and rancor toward rival groups, especially the Sunnis. This has been playing out for years at these media outlets, particularly when addressing happenings in the predominantly Sunni parts of Iraq. Such channels constantly labelled the non-Shia Islamist movements—thus the Sunnis—as *radicals* and *terrorists* who seek to destroy Islam and Islamic values and traditions in the service of a fanatic agenda. Under such a pretext many civilians were targeted as alleged terrorists. This discourse further contributed to the escalating rifts among different Iraqi communities.[65] Unlike ISIS, al-Hashd's media items are produced only in Arabic, which illustrates the group's focus on targeting Arabic-speaking local and regional audiences.

Al-Hashd al-Shaabi has launched its own media outlets mainly for the sake of promoting its vision and propagandizing its claimed influence on the ground, occupying a space in the Iraqi media landscape that has frequently been described as a mirror of the politico-sectarian divisions.[66] Subsequent to its establishment in the summer of 2014, al-Hashd al-Shaabi founded several media platforms to deliver its messages to the public and cover its daily activities, namely *al-Tawjih al-Aqaidi* corporation, *Humat al-Watan* magazine, and *al-Hashd al-Shaabi* newspaper. While al-Hashd al-Shaabi made use of other, already existing, pro-Shia media channels[67] in the Iraqi arena to advocate its position, its official media outlets will gain a particular attention in this volume as they continuously operated as a mouthpiece for the organization in terms of mirroring its rhetoric.

Al-Tawjih al-Aqaidi, which stands for *doctrinal guidance*, emerged as a one of the main media outlets run by the al-Hashd al-Shaabi organization. On its official website, the outlet defines itself as "the cultural and educational platform of al-Hashd al-Shaabi, aimed at providing doctrinal

guidance to the [Shia] mujāhidīn, mobilizing true jihadist concepts and reinforcing the ranks of the mujāhidīn through solid religious and ideological teaching."[68] Besides publishing selective news items on the organization's daily activities, *al-Tawjih al-Aqaidi* has been responsible for releasing official statements issued by the leaders of al-Hashd as well as posting propaganda multimedia materials on its website.

The second media outlet launched and run by al-Hashd al-Shaabi is the *Humat al-Watan* magazine, which appeared in July 2014, right after ISIS's announcement of the so-called caliphate in Iraq and Syria. *Humat al-Watan* magazine was founded by the *al-Tawjih al-Aqaidi* corporation within the framework of mobilizing popular support for al-Hashd al-Shaabi and as an additional effort to enhance the indoctrination policies within the organization's ranks. This is evident in the main slogan placed on the first page of each issue, which reads: "An educational doctrinal bulletin for al-Hashd al-Shaabi's forces." Entitling the magazine *Humat al-Watan*, which in Arabic stands for *guardians of the homeland*, reveals the propagandist nature of the magazine, emphasizing the nationalist message the militia organization allegedly tries to get through to the Iraqi people in order to gain support and legitimacy.

Another al-Hashd-affiliated media outlet is the *al-Hashd al-Shaabi* newspaper, an Arabic weekly newspaper released and distributed in predominantly Shia areas in Iraq. The paper, which emerged in August 2016, played a key role in covering al-Hashd-led military operations against rivals, with a pro-Shia sectarian overtone, besides publishing dozens of articles on relevant regional developments. The editorial board raised the slogan "An educational jihādi newspaper," which is placed next to the official logo of al-Hashd al-Shaabi organization at the header of each issue. Given an apparent room for content-diversity, the newspaper has been feeding its audience with news reports, in-depth articles, interviews, and opinion pieces. Nevertheless, the scope of topics has remained exclusively restricted to the organization's activities and certain Shia-related developments in Iraq and the region. The religio-sectarian element emerges as key to the propagandist nature of the *al-Hashd al-Shaabi* newspaper.

Over the past few years, scholars tried to dismantle the complex propaganda machines run by major terrorist groups, through delving into discursive strategies utilized by such organizations, in order to help us understand the key factors behind the considerable success of radical groups in luring numerous addressees into embracing their implicit and

explicit messages and end up acting upon them. In his *Making Sense of Jihadi Stratcom: The Case of the Islamic State*,[69] Winter examines key doctrinal texts produced and disseminated by ISIS as part of its propaganda outreach. According to this study, ISIS seems to consider media warfare as an efficient strategy to propagate itself, legitimize its cause, and intimidate its foes and adversaries. Winter observed that the group, despite the hardships and heavy losses it encountered following its decline in late 2017, did not bring about radical changes to its propaganda strategies in its media warfare. On the contrary, the online jihādi propaganda appeared to increase in terms of the dissemination of instructional materials and to have become even more important for ISIS than before, particularly in terms of showing the continuity of its alleged struggle.[70]

Exploring the impact of the propaganda campaign launched by ISIS through its media arms, particularly in terms of recruitment, Damaj sheds light on the strategy of "the romanticization" of the group's self-proclaimed caliphate in her study *Fatal Attraction: The Islamic State's Politics of Sentimentality*.[71] ISIS tends, through its discursive practices, to create a sense of community among excluded, marginalized, and disenfranchised followers and sympathizers through virtual and actual spaces.[72] One of the key discursive strategies utilized by the organization for the sake of accomplishing its objective in luring individuals into its ranks was the propagation of themes such as suffering and victimhood, to which identification is considerably realizable regardless of the specific experience the individual addressee has gone through. According to Ceron et al., ISIS's losses on the ground across the MENA region coincided with a growing online activity by the organization, which primarily targeted communities receptive to its message, especially in the West.[73]

In their study *Islamic State Propaganda and Attacks: How Are They Related?*, Rosenblatt et al. differentiate between central and regional propaganda activities by ISIS in relation to terror attacks and the associated discursive practices by the organization's media arms.[74] One of the main findings of the study indicates an explicit difference in response to ISIS-led terror attacks between the group's Central Media Office and its regional affiliate media offices. On the one hand, ISIS's central media increase the production of propaganda during the two weeks that follow an attack on European soil, and the intensity of propaganda decreases gradually during the third week subsequent to such an attack. On the other hand, regional media offices affiliated with the group appear to be more concerned with regional developments and reluctant in terms of responding to an attack

abroad, in which case the propaganda tackling such an attack doesn't continue for more than a week before the outlet returns to focus on events that matter the most for the local or regional addressees.[75] This could be seen as a reflection of the different ways the ISIS-affiliated media approach their international audience in contrast to local or regional recipients.

Several discourse analytical studies have emerged recently to illustrate an increased academic interest in identifying and interpreting discursive tools and instruments utilized by extremist organizations and analyzing them within cultural, political, and religious contexts. In their *Cooking the Meal of Terror*, El-Nashar and Nayef delve into the manipulative strategies employed by ISIS to influence potential recipients, arguing that the organization seems to have utilized particular linguistic tactics for the sake of inciting a positive response to their extremist ideology.[76] Based on the analysis of 17 public statements issued by ISIS leadership, the authors maintain that the organization increasingly resorts to the use of pronouns in place of names (deictics) and names in association with descendants of the Prophet Muhammad (anthroponyms), besides trying to consolidate a positive self-representation by means of religiously affiliated wording.[77] The examination of linguistic nuances within ISIS discourse illustrates the effective use of broadcasting strategies by the group and explains its rapid expansion and its considerably successful recruitment campaign.

Inspiring many individuals to join its cause and respond to its call for "lone jihād" in spite of the group's defeat on the ground in Iraq and Syria is deemed to be an explicit reflection of the resounding impact of ISIS's effective propaganda strategies. According to Abdelrahim, whose study *Visual Analysis of ISIS Discourse Strategies and Types in Dabiq and Rumiyah Online Magazines* examines discourse types and visual resources in two major ISIS magazines, the organization communicates its messages through five major strategies, namely legitimation, false dilemma, obligation, derogation, and persuasion.[78] The study further shows that ISIS's online propaganda machines utilize not only descriptive discursive practices, but also instructional methods. Such strategies are mainly aimed at educating recipients and followers on lone-wolf terror techniques.

Delving into the language use by violent jihādi organizations, with a particular focus on lexis encoding concepts from Islam, Brookes and McEnery argue that religious terms employed throughout the discourse of violent jihādi groups, and the redefinition of the notions behind such terms, are deemed to be a crucial element within the symbolic capital utilized by radical groups to establish identities, which eventually allow,

encourage, praise, and license violence.[79] The correlational patterns identified and interpreted across various violent jihādist texts reflect an ideological struggle for symbolic power. The efficiency of such a struggle depends on how receptive the individuals targeted by the employed discourse are, and the ability of the organization in question to establish its legitimacy and dominance.[80] Hence, understanding rhetorical strategies utilized across texts produced by extremist organizations provides an insight into the attempts of such groups to persuade addressees to embrace certain ideological beliefs and values, and take a particular course of action.

While various studies focus on radical Sunnism, radical Shiʿism has remained under-researched. Multiple studies that tackle propaganda activities and discursive strategies by Sunni-based ISIS have emerged over the past few years,[81] while discursive activities by Shia-guided propaganda machines remained scarcely investigated. Including ISIS and al-Hashd al-Shaabi within the framework of the discourse analytical study covered by this book allows a room for drawing comparisons and contrasts between Sunnism and Shiʿism in their modern extremist forms in terms of discursive practices and the potential impact among the addressees. This volume also delves into the discursive environment within which these organizations have emerged and developed, namely the multifaceted Syrian and Iraqi media landscape and the discursive activities pursued by influential local outlets. This volume comprises a journey into a relatively obscure field of research, in that there is a limited academic research done on the *sectarian* aspect of the discourse of radical Islamist groups. The potential incitement of sectarian schism through the employment of religionized and politicized messages, besides the associated linguistic and contextual strategies and practices, demonstrates the critical importance of further exploring such discursive dimensions.

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29. See *Make the News. Share the Happenings* (اصنع الأخبار. شارك الأحداث) online service at Al Arabiya: http://www.alarabiya.net/ana-ara.
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CHAPTER 5

Discourse: Theory and Practice

Discourse is generally defined as a system of texts, including spoken or written language, cultural artifacts, and visual representations, that bring about objects through production, dissemination, and consumption.[1] Discourse analysis implicates the study of language use and linguistic structure, the exploration of social practices and ideological assumptions incorporated into language and communication.[2] Given the fact that this volume delves into the discourse of extremist groups and examines the diverse discursive strategies employed by such organizations, exploring theoretical and practical implications of discourse and discourse analysis seems crucial.

Discourse analysis, as a domain of discourse studies, has emerged in response to the interdisciplinary requirement demanded by the complex nature of this field of research, which is defined by diversity and mobility. According to Schiffrin, studying language for social, expressive, and referential purposes is possible through six different approaches, including pragmatics, ethnography of communication, the theory of speech acts, ethnomethodology, interactional sociolinguistics, and variational sociolinguistics.[3] This interdisciplinary nature of the field of discourse analysis emerges as a main characteristic of various approaches that have continued to surface in the academic arena over decades. The discourse framework developed by Fairclough, for instance, is characterized by three distinct dimensions of meaning, namely: *text*, whether in reference to written or spoken language; *interaction*, which entails a multifaceted process of

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textual production and interpretation; and *context*, which primarily concerns the social and cultural environment that surrounds the production and interpretation of discourse. Identifying these three aspects of discourse, Fairclough distinguishes between three corresponding levels of discourse analysis, namely: description, interpretation, and explanation.[4] *Description* basically centers around the structures and meanings included in a text, though it remains a hard task to distinguish between both components in a text because meanings are necessarily realized in forms and differences in meaning entail differences in form. The *interpretation* level implies a certain degree of mediation between a given text and surrounding social practice(s) throughout a process of production and comprehension with cognitive processes involved. The final stage of *explanation* primarily focuses on the analysis of explicit or implicit relationships between *interaction* and the social or general *context* of production and interpretation.

Fairclough's critical approach to discourse analysis emerges in a considerable consistence with Wodak's discourse-historical approach (DHA) as they both view discourse essentially as a form of social practice.[5] The discourse-historical approach is fundamentally based on three distinguishable levels of analysis: Firstly, identifying the particular topics, themes, or contents of a particular discourse that is driven by racist, sectarian, ethnicist or nationalist orientations or tendencies; secondly, pinpointing the discursive practices and strategies underlying the topics; and finally, exploring the linguistic means of the strategies employed in the discourse under study. There is thus an intertextual and interdiscursive relationship between the texts, discourses, political and sociological dimensions, historical and situational frames. Realizing such interconnections ultimately helps a discourse analyst to investigate "how discourses, genres and texts change in relation to socio-political change" and gain a broad insight into the development of meanings through the process of recontextualization or "the transfer of given elements to new contexts."[6]

Exploring the evolution of discourse analytical studies requires a particular attention to the groundbreaking work of van Dijk, especially since the method of ideology he developed will constitute an essential component of the methodological framework employed in the analytical part of this volume. Drawing on the contributions of Beaugrande and Dressler to the domain of text linguistics, particularly the study of the relationships between text and context or social embedding,[7] van Dijk developed and elaborated on a significant number of methodological concepts, including

structures, macrostructures, strategies, schemata, and scripts, before tackling the question of ideology. Such notions are deemed advanced instruments that may assist discourse analysts to explain complex issues of information processing and unravel the different ways through which knowledge is being gathered by discourse recipients. He built on the philosophical works of Frege and Quine regarding the question of *meaning*,[8] in order to examine the sociolinguistic notions of legitimization and persuasion within the framework of discourse. Van Dijk considers discourse as a communicative event or a manifestation pattern of a variety of meanings, the most prominent element of which is the social dimension. He regards the individual elements in discourse as already social in character, arguing that schemata or scripts are essentially shaped in agreement with the social context within which they emerge.[9]

Van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Approach, also known as Socio-Cognitive Discourse Analysis, is mainly characterized by the interaction and interrelationship between cognition, discourse, and society. The approach initially started as a part of formal text linguistics and then developed further to incorporate components of the psychological model of memory and the cognitive concept of *frame*.[10] A main proportion of van Dijk's work tackles the questions of power abuse by elites, the reproduction of ethnic prejudice, stereotypes, and resistance. He considers dominance over discourse aspects as a means for accessing and gaining power in the political and social arenas. Another key component of his theory on the production, consumption, and comprehension of discourse is the *K-device*, which entails knowledge on multiple levels, including personal, interpersonal, cultural, institutional, and national levels.[11] Cognition, as accomplished through collective mental models based on consensus, is considered the interface between discursive and societal structures.[12] According to van Dijk, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) requires a certain model of context in order for the analysis to realize its objectives through a sufficiently well-established process. One of the key models of context is Moscovici's *social representation theory*, which implicates that an individual's cognition is mainly informed through dynamic constructs, namely *social representations*, including values, norms, concepts, and images shared by members of a social group, and enacted and preserved by means of discourse.[13] Within the framework of his CDA work, van Dijk primarily promotes the analysis of semantic macrostructures, formal structures, local and global discourse forms, local meanings, linguistic realizations, and context. Main discursive dimensions that require a special attention by discourse analysts

include topic and lexical selection, coherence, rhetorical figures, implications, and speech acts. Nonetheless, while this approach provides multiple discourse analytical tools and methods, its application on multiple levels of text and speech remains open for various interpretations.[14]

In order to obtain a deep insight into the multifaceted concept of CDA and to gain a sufficient understanding of what this approach implies and what its application entails, reviewing the definition of Fairclough and Wodak seems inevitable:

> CDA sees discourse—language use in speech and writing—as a form of "social practice". Describing discourse as social practice implies a dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and the situation(s), institution(s) and social structure(s), which frame it: The discursive event is shaped by them, but it also shapes them. That is, discourse is socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned—it constitutes situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people. It is constitutive both in the sense that it helps to sustain and reproduce the social status quo, and in the sense that it contributes to transforming it. Since discourse is so socially consequential, it gives rise to important issues of power. Discursive practices may have major ideological effects—that is, they can help produce and reproduce unequal power relations between (for instance) social classes, women and men, and ethnic/cultural majorities and minorities through the ways in which they represent things and position people.[15]

Nevertheless, the widespread and ever-growing interest in discourse and discourse analysis seemingly stems from deeper incentives than a mere belief in what Fairclough and Wodak describe as a form of social practice. According to Jäger, discourses "are not interesting as mere expressions of social practice, but because they serve certain ends, namely to exercise power with all its effects."[16] Thus, a discourse analyst is principally guided by an urgency to explore ideological and power-related components of a discourse with the goal of analyzing and explaining its connection to the surrounding social or political context via the interpretation of the underlying meanings and objectives.

The critical approach to discourse analysis, known among scholars of discourse studies as Critical Discourse Analysis or CDA, is aimed at shedding light on "social problems, and especially the role of discourse in the production and reproduction of power abuse or domination."[17] CDA is essentially an interdisciplinary methodology of the study of discourse with

as an ultimate goal exploring how "social power abuse, supremacy and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context."[18] Wodak and Meyer explain that CDA is primarily characterized by a set of principles, such as "all approaches are problem-oriented, and thus necessarily multidisciplinary and eclectic; [interest in] de-mystifying ideologies and power through the systematic and retroductable investigation of semiotic data [written, spoken or visual]."[19] Accordingly, the ultimate objective of a discourse analyst is to investigate the ideological and power-related elements within a discourse and explain its relationship with reality and surrounding circumstances through interpreting concealed meanings and purposes.

Van Dijk, who is considered one of the pioneers of CDA and whose extensive work in the field of discourse analysis furthers our understanding of this critical approach, maintains that CDA "is primarily interested and motivated by pressing social issues, which it hopes to better understand through discourse analysis. Theories, descriptions, methods and empirical work are chosen or elaborated as a function of their relevance for the realization of such a sociopolitical goal."[20] This intelligibly emphasizes the multidisciplinary nature of CDA. It is an approach that goes beyond observational, explanatory, and descriptive activities, to explore the particularities of the relationships and connections between language, power, society, and culture.

The critical approach to discourse analysis is basically concerned with analyzing "opaque as well as transparent relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control" as manifested in language.[21] As an interdisciplinary approach, CDA allows researchers to examine theories from various, relevant disciplines such as psychology, sociology, and economics for the sake of gaining a better understanding of complex discursive practices. This critical approach is mainly aimed at uncovering "the relationship between discourse, ideology, and power" as manifested in a written or verbal discourse, be it explicit or implicit.[22]

Thus, the multidisciplinary characteristic of CDA considerably enables discourse analysts to delve into the specifics of discursive practices and examine the various aspects of the relationships between language, power, and the social framework within which a discourse takes place. An analyst is hereby allowed, and even urged, to investigate potential discursive strategies utilized in a discourse by means of multiple disciplines, including, but not limited to, psychology, sociology, politics, and economics. It is the critical feature of this approach that triggers an extensive, in-depth research

into the different dimensions of a discourse to explore the concealed meanings and purposes.

In the age of digitalization and amid the rise of a new media culture, scholarly work tends to explore new forms, frameworks, and methods of discourse analysis in response to the technological evolution and the associated complexities. Digital technologies are deemed considerably multimodal in terms of combining various semiotic modes, including texts, images, and multimedia products. The analysis of digital discourse mainly focuses on the study of the intersection and convergence of language resources, society, and technology.[23] Hence, digital discourse analysis, also known as new media sociolinguistics, digital communication or computer-mediated discourse, is increasingly concerned with what Fairclough labeled as "social practice" and less focused on language use.[24] Jones et al. view digital discourse analysis as the examination of the diverse manners and practices through which the social world is built and managed by means of various semiotic systems.[25] According to Blitvich and Bou-Franch, discourse analysis in the age of digitalization is mainly concerned with "how multimodal, multisemiotic resources are employed to enact identities, activities and ideologies in the digital world, as part of a larger social world."[26] While earlier discourse analytical studies view identity practices as basically discursive and relational, digital discourse analysis tends to delve into aspects of identity performances and negotiations in the online space of communication.

Noteworthy, Critical Discourse Analysis seems predominantly concerned with the investigation of *top-down* discursive processes of ideological hegemony, while relatively neglecting *bottom-up* practices and strategies "of those who may contest or subvert these ideologies."[27] Recent discourse analytical studies that tackle questions of ideology and social identity encourage scholars to investigate popular digital practices, given the fact that technological advances have led to what Turner coined as a "demotic turn"[28] that allows citizens to gain access to "a public sphere in which to either contest or reinforce dominant ideologies."[29] In order to study digital communication in terms of discursive strategies and ideologies, and for the sake of keeping up with the technological advances and the associated complexities concerning discourse, more self-reflective and critical methods are required.

Thurlow and Mroczek emphasize the inherently ideological nature of digital technologies, arguing that the ideological dimension of the digital discourse stems from the "political economics of access and control" of

the addressers and the employed "mechanisms or resources for both *normative* and *resistive* representation."[30] The correlation between power-related agendas and ideological-guided discursive practices through the digital discourse emerges in different forms, including the expression of ideological viewpoints during online activities or on social media,[31] and the way certain strategies tend to restrict the audiences' options and force them to eventually accept and act upon a certain message. Nevertheless, one of the main concerns regarding the examination of digital data within the framework of discourse analysis is the ethical dimension, particularly in terms of distinguishing between public and private domains of online discursive practices and digital communication in general.

Amid the growing scholarly interest in critical digital discourse analysis, several contributions have recently emerged aiming to tackle questions revolving around discursive strategies in the digital era. In an attempt to respond to the increasing global impact of digital media, critical discourse studies encourage the incorporation of digital discursive practices and online social networks with theoretical and methodological rigor. KhosraviNik and Unger, in their *Critical Discourse Studies and Social Media*, argue that the essential theoretical principles of CDS "such as problem orientation and a focus on linguistic/discursive features, abduction etc. are still relevant to new spaces for discursive practices."[32] Therefore, taking a critical stance toward power as practiced by addressers still applies to digitally mediated discourses, besides the required contextualization of the language use employed by digital media through drawing on social, political, and cultural contexts in the immediate surroundings of the addressees, whether in the direct online context or within the society. Given the fact that CDA is essentially a socially committed approach to discourse analysis, there is a need for engagement with digitally mediated discourses. This stems from the observed effects of digital discourse on the society at large. Hence, critical discourse studies should allow researchers "to account for both the *macro* issues of institutional context and media ecologies" on the one hand, and the "*micro* dynamics of communicative affordances" on the other.[33] Recent CDA studies tend to re-emphasize the interdisciplinarity of critical discourse studies within the framework of seeking to enrich the explanatory level of discourse analysis by means of providing political, psychological, sociological, and historical explanations about the nature of certain discursive practices and the broader macro-structure. Nevertheless, the study of KhosraviNik and Unger shows that in the course of examining digitally mediated discourses,

like in the case of social media, the interdisciplinary focus tends to incorporate insights from a media-technology approach along with other basic approaches.[34]

According to van Leeuwen, given the fact that today's discourses that require the scrutiny of a critical eye are deemed "overwhelmingly multimodal and mediated by digital systems," there seems to be an urgent need to resort to a multimodal analysis of digital discourse.[35] Moschini, in her study *Critical Multimodal Analysis of Digital Discourse*, argues that the rise and expansion of new technologies in the age of globalization and localization have resulted in the creation and massive sharing of "very complex digitally mediated texts that not only present varied semiotic compositions, but also feature multiple (and often hybridized) references to different socio-cultural contexts."[36] Hence, awareness and knowledge of the diverse semiotic systems, linguistic, and socio-cultural contexts are considered invaluable instruments to assist in the process of decoding paradigms and patterns of distributed textuality and the particular eco-social experiences emerging in a communicative act.[37] In their study *Multi-Modal Critical Discourse Analysis*, Ledin and Machin examine the fundamentally social question of the types of semiotic resources employed in discourse and communication for the sake of establishing ideological work.[38] The study shows that photography, writing, and layout, along with the associated diverse affordances, are combined and utilized "as elaborated semiotic resources" in discourse, emerging in alignment with the core objectives of CDA in revealing buried ideologies and power relations.[39] Ideological and manipulative discursive practices are believed to be key tools utilized by various media organizations in the digital era, which require a highly critical CDA-guided eye to be identified, interpreted, analyzed, and explained.

5.1 Media Discourse and Digitalization

Media discourse basically refers to interactions that take place through a broadcast platform, whether spoken or written, in which the discourse is oriented to "a non-present reader, listener or viewer."[40] Manufactured by media outlets, this kind of discourse addresses or targets a certain circle of audience or audiences, directly or indirectly, while tackling relevant issues. It is characterized by contextual framing and particular language usage approved by an editorial policy that ultimately serves a board of directors

and their potential tendencies whether political, economic, social, or cultural.

It is unavoidable to utter that media plays a significant role in shaping as well as reshaping our opinions and beliefs about some significant issues and developments in our surroundings. Given the undeniable impact of media on our individual identities and the society at large, the ethical principles upon which media outlets are said to be based remain at question. According to Berger, besides its many other effects, media possesses the necessary tools to indoctrinate us.[41] The industry enormously contributes to the formation of our viewpoints, behaviors, and attitudes toward the different racial, religious, and ethnic communities. The multifaceted impact of media finds its roots in the discourse employed and the framing that determines the context through which each particular story is being delivered to the public. Certain tools, such as audience-indicators, are used by media corporations to increase viewership and determine target-groups in order to further expand their influence. Throughout this process, which implicates a discourse linked to a specific editorial policy under certain ownership and censorship conditions, journalistic principles of objectivity and impartiality may gradually fade into thin air.

Diving deeper into media influence, Arias identifies two types of effects: *Individual or direct effect*, under which the media mainly relies on the persuasive power of the content that incites a perceived form of individual learning process resulting in updated personal values and beliefs; and *social or indirect effect*, where media's influence manifests itself via the capability to feed the public with information in a manner that reinforces coordination on a certain norm or activity through the establishment of a common knowledge or a shared belief.[42] Thus, media holds the power to form or alter basic individual viewpoints and behaviors through the use of instructive transmission of knowledge and persuasion, and to create a collective sense of understanding regarding particular shared values and beliefs within a community via the utilization of a social mechanism.

Since media generally operates within the society as a crucial source of information, the associated discourse is deemed vital to the public understanding with respect to the reported issues or events. Therefore, media discourse plays a significant role in the course of defining developments—which take place in the surroundings of the recipients—as social problems and in mediating knowledge about perceived matters at stake. As such, discourse and its driving forces and policies may lead to the rise of issues like inclusion and exclusion, "othering" characterization as a symbolic

degradation,[43] in-group versus out-group,[44] "us-versus-them" relations, representation, and misrepresentation. In this regard, Boulter explains that power relationships "inherent in access to and production of media illustrate similar disparities between the powerful and the disenfranchised in a broader sense, and definitions of the included and excluded of a society are built and reinforced within the news media discourse."[45]

Once a media organization recognizes the basic principles of professional journalism, both theoretically and practically, and prevents matters of ownership and censorship from intermingling with its editorial policy, the responsibility moves down to the journalists, whether reporters or editors, to determine the boundaries of the discourse on different topics through their choice of words, linguistic means, and the power of framing. Nevertheless, many linguistic analysts take a critical stance toward potential manipulation of language used in media reports in a bid to allegedly distort reality. It is believed that *subjective* features could still be conveyed through a relatively *objective* language during the reporting process. In a study on the narrative of mass-media, White argues that the journalists' attempt to incorporate subjective features in news reports through the use of an objective language to preserve neutrality can be viewed merely as "a rhetorical stratagem to aid the obfuscation of a reporter's subjectivity."[46]

O'Keeffe, in her study *Media and Discourse Analysis*, identifies the main characteristics of media discourse as primarily being *public* and *on-record*, a fact that attracts discourse analysts and provides them with largely accessible—mostly online—data for research. "One important strand of research into media discourse is preoccupied with taking a critical stance to media discourse, namely critical discourse analysis."[47] The complex, multifaceted nature of media discourse may be seen as a driving force behind the recourse to CDA as a critical, multidisciplinary approach to discourse analysis.

The rise of new forms of media in the digital age has undoubtedly led to the emergence of new means and forms of communication that tend to provide a social binder through an increased speed of verbal exchange in the modern society. KhosraviNik and Unger argue that although the mainstream mass media still constitute a powerful field for sociopolitical discourses, "a large proportion of day-to-day verbal and visual communication has migrated to various participatory web platforms, and there is increasing evidence that this paradigm shift is ongoing."[48] O'Halloran and Smith explain that contemporary societies are "grappling with the social implications of the rapid increase in sophistication and range of

multimodal practices particularly within interactive digital media."[49] This new reality has brought about a certain set of complexities in terms of digital media discourse, and the process of examining implicit and explicit meanings of communication necessitates a heterogeneous and diversified set of knowledge. Hence, the focal point of the study of digital media discourse is the exploration of linguistic and contextual activities within the electronic environment by means of discourse analytical methods. The complexity and variety of the digital media discourse are generated by the impact of technical and situational factors. The environmental features of the digital space are deemed significant and crucial in terms of understanding the nature of language and language usage by media actors, since the digital environment is believed to have a considerable impact on the linguistic behavior of users and recipients. According to Levy, the digital environment provides "cooperative construction tools for a common context of multiple, geographically scattered groups," marking a considerable shift from traditional media, which mainly implicates a mere "diffusion or a transport of the message," to a largely interactive space where "everybody seeks to alter or stabilize" and negotiate meanings through "a process of mutual recognition and contribution of individuals/groups in the communication process."[50] Digital media operate in accordance with a specific set of principles that is relatively different from that used by traditional media. The digital nature of such media implicates a tendency toward the adoption and utilization of new technologies and the implementation of multimedia storytelling formats.[51] Besides such structural dimensions, digital media demonstrate a particular enforcement of news values and a distinctive approach toward news coverage.[52]

In today's highly digitally mediated world, online platforms, which enable users to share content on an unprecedented large scale, mainly aim to enhance and increase social interaction, self-representation, and collaboration. By this, social media platforms became dominant players and influential communication channels in terms of the distribution, consumption, and appropriation of various information and news.[53] This transformation has led to a remarkable shift from the traditional media culture, which is primarily characterized by the concepts of production and consumption of news, into a new media culture where digitalization and advanced technologies tend to shape new cultural relations and connections that seem to have been overlooked by the traditional media industry. Consequently, the modern contextual circumstances have introduced updated contextual activities by the new media in terms of

approaching their recipients, particularly through the incorporation of subjective elements into their products in order to increase the impact of their discursively communicated messages and allow a greater interaction among the audiences. According to Dragomir and Thompson, digitalization has resulted in a considerable change in the nature of journalism as it affected "news values, professional ethics, workflows and working conditions."[54] While it tremendously enhanced access to information and dissemination channels, digitalization seems to have unleashed certain unethical practices, such as the lack of verification and transparency. Unlike traditional media, which were increasingly characterized by their bias and marginalization practices toward minorities, digitalization has opened up a growing space for freedom of expression among previously marginalized groups to make their voices heard and provided a greater room for political expression.[55]

Delving into the impact of digitalization on media activities in the Middle East, Jamai emphasizes the significant role of social media in enabling an unprecedented degree of political and civil activism.[56] Yet, government restrictions imposed on traditional or legacy media across the region are also applied to the digital media sector, and sectarian-guided voices emerged as dominant players throughout online platforms in the region, which constitute key factors behind the failure of the supposedly interactive space in bringing about what Levy coined as a "mutual recognition" and partnership in the communication process.[57] Furthermore, the rise of the new digital media was described by some Middle Eastern journalists and scholars as a process of digital de-professionalization, emphasizing the negative impact of digitalization on professional ethics of journalism, including a sharp decline in fact-checking activities, a growth of sensationalism, and an increase in patterns of data theft.[58] Thus, journalists seem to be far from exploiting the possibilities provided by digitalization in terms of accessing sources, boosting dissemination of their materials, expanding diversity of perspectives in their stories, and enhancing transparency with regard to their activities.

The involvement of political actors in and their interaction with media practices and discourses enable them, as influential players, to design as well as demarcate the impact of media on society. Such an interaction is referred to by Kissas as *technologies of politics* that imply "discursive practices and discursive formations" manifested in media items and emphasized by its producers.[59] Once entangled into political agendas, whether through the intervention of political actors in power or due to the political

tendencies of its authors, media discourse deviates from the ethical objective of enlightening the recipients and descends into manipulation instead. Manipulation at a discursive level, as van Dijk puts it, involves "the usual forms and formats of ideological discourse, such as emphasizing speaker's good things, and emphasizing other's bad things."[60] Hence, politically driven, agenda-guided media discourse strives to indoctrinate and ideologize its recipients.

Social media researchers emphasize the significance of certain social processes, particularly self-presentation and relational management, while engaging in online communication. Over the past few years, multiple studies emerged illustrating scholarly efforts to examine the construction of *our* self-presentation and the way we relate to *others* within the framework of digital media and online communication environments.[61] Social media open the path for and stimulate the examination of online identity relational performances. According to Tagg and Seargeant, self-presentation practices and relational processes are considerably interconnected through the strategies utilized by online users in an environment that brings together diverse communities into a unified digital sphere for interaction.[62] This interaction within social networking sites requires, to a certain degree, modification and variation in the manners through which users socially act and interact while addressing their imagined addressees.[63] The exploration of processes behind the construction of advanced forms of social interaction introduced by social media requires a special attention to the impact of social and technological contexts. Among the main influential factors behind online identity formation, performance and negotiation are the utilized semiotic modes and the selective resources that ultimately serve the particular discourse and objectives of the addresser. Such resources may include the choice of terminology, topicalization, and the discursive practices of vagueness and deliberate ambiguity. There is a significant amount of discursive activities and communicative focus on social media that renders the participatory cyberspace into new networks of power and influence for society.[64]

The rise of extremism and radicalization as key themes within the propaganda strategies employed by terrorist organizations in the digital era has raised questions about the use of online social networks by such organizations for the sake of facilitating and accelerating the process of radicalization among receptive users. In his *Leaderless Jihad*, Sageman emphasizes that in order to understand the ingredients and incentives of violent extremism, one needs to focus on the dynamics of social media and the

impact of online networks on the behavior of recipients who end up sympathizing with and supporting the messages of terrorist organizations, and ultimately get involved in terrorist activities.[65] According to Bouchard, whose study *Social Networks, Terrorism and Counterterrorism* examines the impact of social networks on the behavior of individuals within the process of radicalization, investigating a person's social ties is crucial in order to understand that person's eventual decision to approve, support, and engage with violent extremist beliefs and actions.[66] Within the framework of their online propaganda strategies, extremist organizations tend to exploit various factors that render addressees vulnerable and more receptive to the messages conveyed through extremist digital media discourse. These include political grievances, socioeconomic deprivation, marginalization, exclusion, and religious beliefs.[67] Such factors are viewed as key incentives incorporated into extremist discourse through certain ideological and manipulative strategies to influence individuals on the route to radicalization and terrorism.

5.2 Discursive Ideologization

Ideologies often dominate the thoughts, perceptions, and beliefs of a social group, which as a consequence come to characterize that group in terms of identity, norms, values, resources, and goals. According to van Dijk, ideologies are primarily *ideas* or *belief systems* that comprise "social representations that define the social identity of a group" and "control and organize other socially shared beliefs."[68] Emphasizing the interrelationship between ideology and discourse, van Dijk argues that the shared social representations produced and underlined by ideologies constitute "the basis of discourse and other social practices … ideologies are largely expressed and acquired by discourse, that is, by spoken or written communicative interaction. When group members explain, motivate or legitimate their (group-based) actions, they typically do so in terms of ideological discourse."[69]

Nonetheless, Critical Discourse Analysis is more interested in the hidden and latent type of everyday beliefs that often emerge disguised "as conceptual metaphors and analogies" than the type of ideology that appears on the surface of culture.[70] Wodak and Meyer argue that CDA primarily focuses on exploring the functions of ideologies in everyday life, which involves an examination of the way discourse (re)produces social domination, inequality and the discursive struggle between the *dominant*

and the potentially *dominated*.[71] CDA regards a text as a manifestation of social action that is fundamentally determined by social structure. Thus, CDA is mainly interested in exploring and analyzing various forms of structural relationships of "dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language."[72] Delving into ideological structures and practices in discourse, van Dijk explains that ideological mapping on discourse structures in seldom direct. It rather "takes place through more specific group knowledge and attitudes, the formation of 'biased' models of events and contexts, the construction of meaning representations, and the expression in variable forms and surface structures."[73] Operating on a group level, ideological discourses, with the manifested relations of competition and conflict among participants, may eventually guide and enact relations between diverse groups. Thus, ideological discourse analysis emerges as a highly complex process that requires examining various levels of text, context, and the broader social, cultural, and political backgrounds of a given discourse.

The perceived incorporation of ideological standpoints in discourses is deemed to be a primary argument within discourse studies in general, and the critical approach to discourse analysis in particular. Carvalho maintains that ideological standpoints explicitly represent "the most fundamental shaping influence of a text."[74] Yet the notion of ideologies being embedded in discourses is believed to transcend textual discursive practices into other forms of discourse, given the fact that media outlets, for instance, use multiple platforms to reach the audience whether through broadcasting, printing, or online publishing. Nevertheless, it is the "semantic structure of discourse" that constitute the core content of "expression of ideological opinions."[75] Thus, the ideological standpoints of an addresser are being transmitted to recipients through utilizing a certain semantic framing and by means of particular discursive strategies in a bid to get a message through.

In his groundbreaking study *Ideology: A Multidisciplinary Approach*, van Dijk concludes that discourse is the most crucial social practice in terms of the formulation of ideologies in their social reproduction, language use, text, talk, and communication. Such practices are "needed and used by group members to learn, acquire, change, confirm, articulate, as well as persuasively convey ideologies to other ingroup members, to inculcate them in novices, defend them against (or conceal them from) outgroup members or to propagate them among those who are (as yet) the infidels… if we want to know what ideologies actually look like, how they

work, and how they are created, changed and reproduced, we need to look closely at their *discursive manifestations*."[76] Given the fact that ideologies are fundamentally social and group-based, the ideological perspectives and standpoints expressed in discourse mainly carry implications for groups and social issues.[77] Ideological communication is primarily a double-sided process that implicates the expression or concealment of ideological beliefs and values with the objective of persuasively controlling the minds of recipients and addressees. Van Dijk argues that in order to construct certain preferred models in a particular context, discourse structures "must be shaped in such a way that specific model structures are the most likely consequence."[78]

Since this volume mainly tackles media discourse employed by radical groups, expressing ideological beliefs and viewpoints within the framework of news reporting is basically considered a *discursive ideologization* activity. Given the media impact in shaping and reshaping its audience's beliefs and opinions, embodying ideological standpoints or promoting specific political agendas by means of discursive strategies implies an attempt to ideologize the potential recipients, mobilize their support around the delivered message, and incite their advocacy concerning its objectives.[79] Thus, within the framework of this volume, *discursive ideologization* is used in reference to the incorporation of ideological thoughts—of politicized and subjective nature—into media discourse—which is supposed to be objective and impartial in order to serve the society, especially during news coverage activities.

Ideological standpoints could emerge in a discourse, whether written or verbal, either explicitly or implicitly, which urges a highly critical and analytical observation in order to detect its elements and analyze its aspects. A discourse analyst is required to develop analytical tools based on a multifaceted learning process that fundamentally entails an ability to identify ideological standpoints from relatively subtle mechanisms and devices. Looking at alternative constructions of the same reality, such as different media reports, is a helpful strategy.[80] Among such analytical tools is reviewing a discourse *politically*, since politics is deemed to be "contingent, plural and conflictual,"[81] and may thus draw attention toward potential alternatives to the account provided by a dominant addresser. Hence, in a discursive context, politicization, as a notion of fundamental ties with politics and power,[82] forms an intrinsic dimension of what I hereby coin as *discursive ideologization* in that it promotes politically guided messages of

those in power with the objective of influencing supposedly vulnerable recipients.

The theory of ideology, as a multidisciplinary approach, has produced a notably influential notion in the field of discourse analytical studies, developed and presented by CDA pioneer Teun van Dijk. Largely known among scholars as *van Dijk's Ideological Square*,[83] this methodological notion provides the basis for a subtle ideological analysis and the exploration of discursively expressed ideological stances. Van Dijk has formulated four fundamental principles that form the ideological square:

- Emphasize positive things about *us*.
- Emphasize negative things about *them*.
- De-emphasize negative things about *us*.
- De-emphasize positive things about *them*.

These four discursive practices constitute a part of a general strategy that implicates positive self-presentation and negative other presentation. The *Ideological Square*, as a concept and a methodological framework, may be applied to the analysis of all levels of discourse structure. Hence, the content of the aforementioned principles could apply to semantic as well as lexical analysis of discourse. Nevertheless, the incorporated opposing-pairs *emphasize* and *de-emphasize* open the path for various forms of structural variation to rise. For instance, whether to extend or limit the emphasis on our positive features or their negative ones; either in an explicit or implicit way; by means of either obvious or less significant headlines, and so on.

An addresser may employ different discursive tools in order to *emphasize* or *de-emphasize* information or meanings in an ideological discourse. As the semantics of ideological discourse are deemed key to analysis, van Dijk identifies key aspects of discourse meaning that may assist analysts to examine the ideological dimension of discursive strategies on different levels as part of the *Ideological Square* framework. These include:

- *Topics*: The topics represent the most significant information of a discourse and reveal its whereabouts. In order to emphasize certain information, namely "our good things," an addresser topicalize them; and to de-emphasize implies to de-topicalize such information.
- *Level of description and degree of detail*: Whether to provide many or few details on a certain event; to give a mere general, abstract

description of the event or provide specifics. Hence, being more specific and detailed about "our good things" and "their bad things," while being vague and general about "our bad things" and "their good things."

- *Implications and presuppositions*: Keeping certain information implicit if inconsistent with "our positive self-image." This while explicitly expressing any piece of information that may tackle "their bad things" or presuppose baseless information in a bid to consolidate "their negative image."
- *Contrast*: Ideologies often emerge when two or more groups have conflicting interests, when there is social struggle or competition, and in situations of domination. Cognitively and discursively, such opposition may be realized through various forms of polarization, as the well-known pronoun pair *Us* and *Them* illustrates. Therefore, emphasizing "our good things" and "their bad things," as a strategy of ideological discourse, entails the use of a form of polarization that is semantically implemented by contrast, and such discursive practices involve distinguishing between *in-groups* and *out-groups*.
- *Actors*: Key players, sponsors, or beneficiaries. To reveal and explore their role is considered crucial within the framework of analyzing ideological discourse. They may emerge in many guises, collectively or individually, as *in-group* ("we") or *out-group* members ("they"), specifically or generally, identified by their name, group, profession or function; in personal or impersonal roles.[84]

Thus, the positive-negative standpoints, as manifested in ideological discourse, basically reflect a state of dispute, crisis, or conflict between *Us* and *Them*. In the ideological condition of power abuse, dominance, competition, or group conflict, members of out-groups are usually portrayed negatively, whereas members of in-groups are treated positively. Each level of analysis would illustrate an emphasis on or prominence of *our* good features and *their* bad characteristics, and vice versa with regard to *our* bad things and *their* good things. Hence, while the term *Us* is overwhelmingly associated with positivity in a social context, the term *Them* primarily refers to negativity as illustrated throughout van Dijk's *Ideological Square*, which constitutes a key method for data analysis in this volume.

5.3 Manipulation

Over the past few decades, several definitions of manipulation as a concept have emerged. Although these definitions may have tackled the notion from various perspectives, they are mostly centered around the idea of deceiving and misguiding recipients by means of different discursive instruments. Goodin defines manipulation as "intentionally and directly influencing someone's beliefs, desires and/or emotions in a way typically not in his self-interest or ways that are likely not to be in his self-interest in the present context."[85] Ware's definition of manipulation basically corresponds to that of Goodin, describing it as a covert attempt to influence a recipient who either lacks basic knowledge of the manipulative attempt or does not understand the tools employed by the manipulator to influence his beliefs and choices.[86] Exploiting a recipient's insufficient knowledge about the expressed issue and lack of understating with regard to the incentives, intentions, and goals of the manipulator is viewed by Reisigl and Wodak as one of the most negative aspects of manipulative discourse.[87] Other theorists went further to reveal negative persuasion strategies utilized by the manipulator to misguide a recipient in a way that merely serves the former's interests and negatively affects the latter's. This dimension of the notion of manipulation was considerably emphasized by Mills, who maintains that "what is distinctive about manipulation is that it purports to be legitimate persuasion that offers good reasons, but in fact, bad reasons are offered."[88] The covert and surreptitious nature of manipulation reflect its deceptive essence. As such, deception is accomplished by means of persuasion that ultimately serves the manipulator regardless of the interests and aspirations of the manipulated.

Manipulation, as a notion, constitutes a key component of CDA for its connection to the concepts of social inequality and abuse of power that occur within the framework of discourse, whether written or oral. In his definition of the concept of manipulation as part of his socio-cognitive approach, van Dijk describes manipulation from a *social* perspective as an "illegitimate domination confirming social inequality"; from a *cognitive* perspective as a form of mind control that involves "the interference with processes of understanding"; and *discursively* "manipulation generally involves the usual forms and formats of ideological discourse, such as emphasizing speaker's good things, and emphasizing other's bad things."[89] Thus, the core nature of manipulation in discourse lies in its reflection of the interests of a dominant speaker or writer versus dominated recipients

or perceived *others*. It eventually produces or reproduces inequality in the society.

Manipulation is considered one of the strategic techniques in which a discourse manipulator exercises control over others in an attempt to persuade them and amend their ideologies while distorting reality in a way that serves the manipulator's interests against those of the potentially manipulated addressees.[90] The concept fundamentally implies the application of constraints of which the assumed manipulated recipient is unaware. According to Blass, manipulation is seen as "an attempt to affect the target in such a way that his behavior/action is an instrument of attaining the goals of the manipulator, who acts without using force but in such a way that the target does not know the goal of the manipulator's actions."[91] Manipulation is deemed to be a pivotal instrument utilized, for instance, by media outlets through a misleadingly persuasive discourse that primarily serves the editorial policy of a corporation and the social or political tendencies of its owners or funders. Van Eemeren explains that manipulation in discourse boils down to "intentionally deceiving one's addressees by persuading them of something that is foremost in one's own interest through the covert use of communicative devices that are not in agreement with generally acknowledged critical standards of reasonableness."[92] Chilton maintains that manipulation in discourse mainly arises through the attempts of a propagator to control and dominate "an intended receiver's mind."[93]

Nonetheless, van Dijk distinguishes between a positive form of manipulation and a negative one. *Positive* manipulation constitutes a part of persuasion attempts in a way that leaves the addressees with a space of freedom to either accept or reject the addresser's arguments. Whereas *negative* manipulation implies a typical allocation of addressees in a mainly passive role where they are seen as mere *victims* of manipulation.[94] Manipulation, according to Baron, could take three different forms: *Deceptive*, by means of misleading the targeted audience, encouraging false assumptions, or enforcing an interpretation that is favorable to the manipulator's purpose; *pressure to acquiesce*, mainly through offering inducement or getting the recipient to agree to something to avoid further discomfort; *emotional*, which implies eliciting emotions such as fear, sympathy, gratitude toward the manipulator or guilt in case the recipient resisted the manipulator's objectives.[95]

Hence, a manipulator is considered an abuser of power who strives to impose control over the recipients in such a way that violates social norms

and values. Discourse manipulation is eventually an illegitimate exercise of influence by manipulators, primarily aimed at enforcing certain beliefs and attitudes that serve the interests of the addresser and contradict those of the addressees. Employing particular linguistic devices, including pronominal usages such as *us*-vs.-*them*, throughout a manipulative discourse reflect a covert attempt to establish an "in-group/out-group ideological discrimination."[96] According to Blass, manipulation mainly concerns attempts to control the beliefs "that the addressees may accept and may act upon. They [manipulators] withhold relevant information from the addressee that he could accept as relevant."[97] In order to reach such objectives, a manipulator usually relies on the effectiveness of his/her discursive strategies to (re)shape the audience's beliefs, attitudes and behavior.

Described as manifestations of linguistic phenomena, a set of manipulative strategies in discourse are defined by Blass—which will be employed accordingly to analyze extremist media discourse in the following chapters. Based on her theory, manipulation can be conducted by means of *omission*, *commission*, or *propaganda strategies*. Several sub-categories fall under these three categories, as presented below.

Omission implies withholding information that could be crucial to the addressees' understanding of a certain issue, development, or event in their vicinity. Its passive connotations are derived from the fact that the addresser intentionally and purposefully keeps the recipients in the dark with regard to certain information.[98] The passive nature of *omission*, characterized by the speaker's practice of withholding information, prevents the addressee from acquiring certain beliefs and values that he or she would have otherwise been capable of establishing. Blass further elaborates that *omission* also occurs in lies, "where the speaker tells the addressee something that he knows to be false and he withholds relevant information."[99] In such a context, communicators tend to mold their utterances through withholding certain details or expressing them in a manner that ultimately suits intended effects. *Omission* as a manipulative discursive practice reflects what Galasinski defined as "deception in discourse" which is "intended to induce in the addressee a particular belief, by manipulating the truth and falsity of information."[100] If the targeted addressees had access to all the relevant information in a particular communicative act, deception, as a crucial dimension of discursive manipulation, would be out of the question and beyond the bounds of possibility. Therefore, the discursive strategy of withholding particular pieces of information and controlling the way certain information is basically communicated to the

recipients constitute an essential cornerstone of deception, and manipulation in general.

Commission takes place if a receiver is active, with the objective of ultimately leading the addressee to acquire or continue a belief and eventually accept it. Manipulation by commission is accomplished either explicitly, known as *explicit commission*, by means of exaggeration, minimization, lies or deliberate ambiguities, or implicitly, defined as *implicit commission*, by means of delivering and emphasizing particular tacit information.[101] *Explicit commission* implicates purposeful discursive strategies employed by a speaker who tends to metarepresent a certain set of beliefs "under a higher level representation of disbelief in the truth or relevance of the lower level representations" that he or she wants the recipients to embrace and accept as relevant. Within the lower-level representation, certain irrelevant information is thus ostensively communicated to the audience with the objective of making the audience believe and act upon such overt informative intention. As for the higher-level representation, which is characterized by a certain degree of disbelief, relevant information and real facts are kept hidden intentionally by the addresser. Blass defines *lies* in discourse as an act of conveying messages that are intended and meant to mislead the audience.[102] *Exaggerations*, according to Turner et al., are overstatements that entail "giving more information than required," arising in contrast to half-truths, which implicate deceiving the addressee by means of providing less information.[103] Metts considers discursive practices such as *exaggeration* and *minimization* as "manipulation with truth."[104] Within the framework of *implicit commission*, the addresser tends to employ misleading "underspecified explicatures and false implicatures."[105] Hence, *implicit commission* may occur through implied information, which can take place on a propositional level, namely explicature, or on an implicature level by means of misleading assumptions and conclusions.

Propaganda strategies include *repetition* and *emotional appeal* as key instruments of discourse manipulation. In terms of *repetition*, Balss illustrates that the "exposure to the same information again and again invites the addressee, whether directly addressed or by information via media, posters, etc., to think about this information and have it therefore easily accessible." This manipulative strategy is deemed considerably efficient as a tool of persuasion, enormously influencing the recipients' beliefs and behaviors. *Emotional appeal*, on the other hand, implicates attempts by the addresser to reach and touch on the feelings of the recipients in a bid

to deliver a message, amplify its impact, and increase the credibility of specific information. By appealing to the feelings of the audience, the addressees are "often more easily ready to accept, believe and act upon the propagated information without thorough coherence checking."[106] Lasswell's conception of *propaganda* illustrates the notion as a technique of influencing human action "by manipulation of representations. These representations may take spoken, written, pictorial or musical form."[107] It is deemed a task "of creating and directing public opinion."[108] While early definitions of the concept viewed *propaganda* as the dissemination of biased ideas and opinions by means of deception and manipulative strategies, the notion of *propaganda* has evolved to mean influencing the public opinion through "the manipulation of symbols and the psychology of the individual."[109] Parry-Giles maintains that propaganda activities implicate the dissemination of "strategically devised messages" to the mass public by an organization "for the purpose of generating action benefiting its source."[110] Discursive propaganda strategies essentially reflect deliberate and systematic attempts by a propagandist "to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist."[111]

The social, cultural, political, and economic contexts within which the manipulative discourse takes place are of a specific significance for a discourse analyst, as they determine power relations and moral codes and values that are key to comprehensively understand the discursive practices and the associated purposes. According to van Dijk, manipulation is one of CDA's notions that imply discursive power abuse. "To understand and analyze manipulative discourse, it is crucial to first examine its social environment," he maintains, "[It] is first of all a control of the mind, that is, of the beliefs of recipients, and indirectly a control of the actions of recipients based on such manipulated beliefs."[112] Thus, manipulation—and accordingly manipulative strategies—constitutes a key element of CDA in terms of media discourse analysis, assisting the researcher to gain a better insight into the discursive practices employed throughout the texts under study in order to ultimately obtain and provide a better understanding of the manipulative discourse. Ideological manipulative discourse is believed to be more effective and efficient in societies where some conditions are met, especially a state of crisis.[113] Media discourse and interaction, specifically in times of crises, tend to disseminate robust and vigorous ideologies to the public and construct certain narratives that serve powerful addressers.[114] Hence, crisis conditions facilitate the accomplishment of a higher

degree of impact by a manipulator's ideological discourse, since the addressees in this case are considered to be more receptive, vulnerable, and thus prone to manipulation. This certainly applies to our study as it tackles media discourse in crisis-afflicted, war-torn Syria and Iraq.

The methodology employed within this study, namely the *Ideological Square* and the *Manipulative Strategies*, are particularly chosen for they provide a clear structure and an explicit framework to analyze the data. Both methodological instruments provide a set of explicit tools to examine the research data and explore the various dimensions implicated.

5.4 Data Set and Selection Strategy

The study tackled by this volume is predominantly corpus-based. The advantages of a corpus approach for the study of discourse include the emphasis on the representativeness of the text sample.[115] According to Upton and Cohen, one of the main methodological issues to be tackled by any corpus-based study of discourse structure is deciding and focusing on a specific unit of analysis. Thus, a corpus-based discourse analytical study requires that "all texts in the corpus must be analyzed for their component discourse units."[116] In order to reach generalizable corpus-based descriptions and explanations of discourse structure, Biber et al. underline seven key analytical phases to be followed by discourse analysts. These include: functional categories or types of discourse units that can serve in corpus; segmentation of each text into discourse units; classification of functional types of each discourse unit; linguistic analysis of each unit; linguistic description of discourse categories; text structure as a sequence of discourse units; and discourse organizational tendencies or description of general patterns of discourse organization throughout all texts included in the corpus.[117]

As this volume focuses on the analysis of the ultra-sectarian extremist discourse of ISIS and al-Hashd al-Shaabi, diverse media materials released by online media outlets affiliated with these groups are included for analysis. Also, journalistic data produced by platforms representing influential Syrian and Iraqi outlets are included for the sake of studying the discursive environment within which outlets affiliated with ISIS and al-Hashd emerged and developed. Hence, websites and digital magazines run by the involved organizations constitute the main source of the research data. Unlike individual online communication channels utilized by members and followers of the involved parties, official online platforms of these

organizations are included for they represent the official discourse of each of the concerned organizations, which will again be the main focus of this volume. The data that constitute the corpus of this study mainly date to the period between 2014 and 2017. This period of time has been particularly chosen for several basic reasons: both ISIS and al-Hashd al-Shaabi emerged in 2014; ISIS declined at the end of 2017, and at the time there was a widespread debate about the future of al-Hashd al-Shaabi in Iraq. This period also reflects a highly active presence of both organizations in the media arena, gaining an increasing attention from local, regional, and international audiences. Besides, during this particular period a series of terror attacks took place in the West. There has also been a rapid change in the power balance on the ground in Syria and Iraq that has brought about certain demographic changes associated with numerous violations to human rights. This period further represents a dark phase in the modern history of the region where sectarian rifts and confrontations intensified and threatened the long-standing peaceful coexistence among the diverse components of the society.

Main pro-ISIS outlets included for analysis are *al-Hayat Media Center*, *al-Furqan Foundation for Media Production*, *Dabiq* magazine, and *Al-Naba* newspaper. These outlets form the main source of data for the sake of analyzing the discourse of the ISIS group. A recorded speech by al-Baghdadi from the archive of *al-Furqan Foundation*, carrying the title "*March Forth Whether Light or Heavy*," released on May 14, 2015, was extracted for analysis. Also, two official statements that were issued by the ISIS spokesperson, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, are retrieved from *al-Furqan* to be analyzed within the framework of this volume. The first speech by al-Adnani included in the corpus was released on June 29, 2014, under the title "This is the Promise of Allah," in which the spokesperson announces the formation of the group's alleged "Caliphate." The second official statement by al-Adnani under study was originally issued on May 21, 2016, carrying the title "And Those Who Lived [In Faith] Would Live Upon Evidence." Furthermore, a set of press releases by *al-Hayat Media Center* are retrieved and included in the data set. This concerns four issues of the so-called Islamic State Report, or *ISR*. The first issue carries the title "Propagating the Correct Manhaj"; the second issue has *"Zakah; On the Beat: ISR Examines How the Islamic Police Safeguards Ar-Raqqah*" as a main title; the third one is titled "Islamic State Liberates the City of Mosul"; and the fourth issue of the *ISR* carries the title "Smashing the Borders of the Tawaghit." All four issues were released in May–June 2014.

In terms of the relevance of the aforementioned material to this study, these four issues of the *ISR* were released by *al-Hayat Media Center* in a period when ISIS was preparing to announce the establishment of its self-proclaimed caliphate, and the group was therefore making an effort through its media wings to justify its cause in a bid to gain a popular incubator on a local level and promote its project to attract Muslim recruits from abroad. Also, four issues of the *Dabiq* magazine are included in this volume for analysis: The first issue was published on July 5, 2014, entitled "The Return of the Khilāfah"; the second issue included was released on October 11, 2014 under the title "The Failed Crusade"; the third was published on November 21, 2014, and carries the title "Remaining and Expanding"; the fourth issue included within the corpus of this study is entitled "From Hypocrisy to Apostasy: The Extinction of the Grayzone," published on February 12, 2015. *Dabiq*'s extensive propagandist use of religious rhetoric and historical references, as well as being directly aimed at a Western Muslim audience, makes the material of this media outlet of a specific interest within the framework of this volume. Moreover, three issues of the local *Al-Naba* newspaper are selected and included in the data set: the first was released on October 3, 2015, the second on July 11, 2016, and the third was published and distributed on May 6, 2017. These three particular issues are selected for the diversity of content each of them includes and the different stages of ISIS's life and the accompanied challenges they tackle.

As for al-Hashd al-Shaabi, media outlets included as data source include *al-Tawjih al-Aqaidi* corporation, *Humat al-Watan* magazine, and *al-Hashd al-Shaabi* newspaper. Out of the items published by *al-Tawjih al-Aqaidi*, five articles are collected and added to the research data for analysis, namely: "About the Lions of al-Hashd al-Shaabi," published on September 22, 2015; "The Behavior of al-Hashd al-Shaabi, Between Reality and Misinformation," October 22, 2016; "Saddam, the Prince of the Dawaesh," published on January 19, 2017; "The Manners of al-Hashd al-Shaabi," August 18, 2017; "Al-Hashd al-Shaabi Emerges as a Defining Theme at the Holy Fortieth Visit," November 12, 2017. Thus, these articles constitute a part of the data under study. Besides, four issues of the *Humat al-Watan* magazine are collected and added to the data set, each of which contains several titles at the cover page, mentioning the month and year of release without specifying an exact date, with the number of pages reaching 50 pages in some of the issues. Issues collected for the sake of this study include: "Issue 2: The Holy Victory: The Ashura' Operations,"

published in November 2014; "Issue 7: An Iron Fist," August 2015; "Issue 24: Three Years of Victories," published in June 2017; and "Issue 27: Al-Hashd al-Shaabi, a Birth from the Womb of the Husseini Cause," which was released in October 2017. The Arabic *Humat al-Watan* magazine primarily provides its readers with a variety of articles, reports, religious references, and sectarian-guided texts mostly focused on Shiʿism, allegedly meant for educational purposes. Items published in the aforementioned issues constitute a part of the study-data. Furthermore, four issues from the *al-Hashd al-Shaabi* newspaper are collected for the sake of analysis. The first issue included in the corpus was released on August 21, 2016, carrying as front-page title: "The fatwa of the religious reference fortified us against ISIS: This is our Hashd." The second was released on September 20, 2016, with "Do not undermine the sacrifices of al-Hashd al-Shaabi" as a key title. The third dates October 5, 2016, under the heading "Without al-Hashd, Iraq would Cease to Exist." The fourth issue of the *al-Hashd al-Shaabi* newspaper included is Issue 26, out of which a particular article titled "Al-Hashd al-Shaabi Liberates More Areas in Salahuddin Province," published on September 26, 2017, is added to the corpus for analysis.

The research data further extends to include media items of particular interest for and specific relevance to the main topic of this volume produced by media organizations operating in the local arena in Syria and Iraq. Different media players in both countries have released materials addressing questions related to active radical groups, as well as other relevant developments, within the timeframe covered by this volume,[118] employing a certain degree of sectarian-motivated discourse while addressing a particular topic or event. In order to study the discourse of extremist organizations such as ISIS and al-Hashd al-Shaabi through their media mouthpieces, it seems important to understand the discursive environment and context within which such organizations have emerged in the first place. That's why delving into the prevalent media discourse in Syria and Iraq is deemed to be relevant with respect to the main topic tackled by this volume.

Syrian media outlets included in this volume as data source include the state-run *Syrian Arab News Agency* (*SANA*), pro-opposition media outlets *Enab Baladi* and *Zaman al-Wasl*, and pro-Kurdish *ANHA* and *ANF*. Six *SANA* articles are extracted from the agency's website and added to the corpus for analysis. These include: "ISIL acts in Iraq aimed at distorting Islam and destroying country," published on June 26, 2014;

"Syria strongly condemns the European Union's policy of misinformation and hypocrisy regarding Syria," September 1, 2014; "Awqaf Minister warns of wider spread of extremist mentality if not defeated now," published on September 13, 2014; "Syria condemns Brussels terrorist attacks, says they are result of wrong policies in favor of terrorism," March 22, 2016; "Army continues operations against Takfiri terrorists, inflicts heavy losses upon them," dated September 25, 2016; and "Syria congratulates Iraq over triumph in Mosul against ISIS," July 10, 2017. These specific articles are chosen for the diverse topics they cover, reflecting the Syrian regime's official standpoint toward different matters, and the fact that they include news items, official statements, and reports which represent the discourse of the *SANA* agency as a media corporation in general. Also, four reports published by *Enab Baladi* newspaper are included in the research data, including: "Main truces and armistices between Assad regime and Syrian opposition," dated December 6, 2015; "No legal recognition for Shariʿa Court documents … Opposition activists register their marriages in al-Assad's court," November 12, 2016; " 'The end of Aleppo'… The reasons behind defeat and the potential consequences," published on December 4, 2016; and "Between Hamdanid Dynasty and the State of al-Assad, will Aleppo convert to Shiʿism," dated August 22, 2017. These articles by *Enab Baladi* are selected for the diversity of topics they tackle and the fact that they fall within the timeframe this study covers. Besides, three articles published by *Zaman al-Wasl* are incorporated into the data corpus, namely: "Shia and Shiʿism in Syria," published on January 28, 2014; "Pro-regime Sunni fighters in Aleppo defy sectarian narrative," dated March 16, 2014; and "FSA brigades pledge allegiance to ISIS in Al Bukamal, east Syria," July 7, 2014. Moreover, five reports published by *ANHA* and *ANF* were selected to be included in the research data. These include: "ISIS emir captured by YPG: Turkey satisfies all of our needs," August 18, 2015; "Mercenaries of the coalition break the truce," dated September 15, 2016; "Changes in Aleppo, Idleb and Hama," published on October 16, 2016; "Resistance has overturned balances," October 24, 2016; and "PYD contributed to building a cooperative policy in this region," September 27, 2017.

As for the Iraqi media, outlets included comprise pro-government *As-Sabah Newspaper*, pro-opposition *Ash-Sharqiya Channel*, and pro-Kurdish *Rudaw News Network*. Four front-page articles published by four different issues of *As-Sabah Newspaper* within the timeframe covered by this volume were selected and added to the research data, namely:

"Incubators of terrorism," published on July 2, 2015; "Cross-border terrorism," dated July 8, 2015; "al-Hashd al-Shaabi," February 25, 2016; and "First we have to admit that cleavage exists!" published on December 23, 2017. Also, four reports released by *Ash-Sharqiya* were collected for analysis within the framework of this volume. These include: "Mosques burned down in Jalaula and Saadiyah," published on November 27, 2014; "Tikrit won't be liberated without the participation of its own people," March 21, 2015; "Militiamen abduct more than 30 civilians in al-Farhatiyah and Sayed Gharib in Salah al-Din," June 2, 2015; and "Forces of al-Hashd al-Shaabi in Iraq form a strategic force to maintain future security in the country," published on January 4, 2017. Furthermore, five *Rudaw* reports—published within the period covered by this study—on various local developments are included in the research data: "Jalawla, Sadia seethe in sectarian rivalries," published on January 2, 2015; "Sectarian tensions simmer in Iraq shrine city targeted by ISIS," March 25, 2015; "Hashd al-Shaabi trains hundreds of child soldiers south of Kirkuk," August 12, 2017; "Iraq's Sunni, Shiʿite leaders unite to condemn Kirkuk's referendum vote," published on August 30, 2017; and "Sunni Arabs want to follow in footsteps of Kurdistan's referendum," October 9, 2017. These particular articles were selected for they tackle different topics and depict different phases of the multifaceted crisis in Iraq.

The data presented above constitute the collective corpus of this study and form the basis upon which the analysis process is developed and conducted. The data selection strategy and downsizing procedure were based on several criteria, including *topic relevance*, *subject diversity*, *inclusiveness*, *availability*, and *accessibility*. Hence, key factors for the selection of this specific data set include the relevance of the topics of the selected media materials, and the diversity of the subjects these materials tend to tackle. Also, the corpus is meant to be as inclusive as possible in terms of the various affiliations of the media organizations included. Last but not least, the availability and accessibility of the data have played an undeniable role in the selection process.

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CHAPTER 6

Media Discourse in Syria and Iraq

This chapter delves into the discourse of various Syrian and Iraqi media outlets in a bid to study and explore the environment within which the extremist discourse of groups like ISIS and al-Hashd al-Shaabi has originated. Research data, collected from multiple influential local media outlets, is analyzed on the basis of methodological tools developed by van Dijk and Blass. Each section in this discourse analytical part is divided into categories and subcategories based on the methods employed, and each category comprises the analysis and discussion of a diverse set of data. This categorizational structure is meant to facilitate the analysis and discussion of every specific discursive practice as implemented by the concerned media outlets. This chapter primarily aims to tackle the question of sectarianization within the media discourse in Syria and Iraq through exploring the employed manipulative and ideological aspects.

6.1 Syrian Media Discourse

Covering ongoing events and developments across the country, each Syrian media outlet has developed its own discourse while approaching the country's crisis. Political, religious, and ethnic affiliations and loyalties are believed to have played a certain role in the emergence and increase of manipulative and ideological discursive practices by the Syrian media

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organizations, wherein sectarianization and social divide seem to arise as key aspects. This section aims at tackling various discursive practices employed by the Syrian media.

6.1.1 Pro-Government Media

The following fragments are extracted from news reports published by *SANA* and analyzed on discursive ideologization and manipulation:

Extract I: *The unity binding the Syrian army, leadership, and people, including Muslims and Christians coupled by the support of Syria's friends have enabled it to face the internationally-devised takfīri terrorist attack launched against it … the conspiracy against Syria started with exploiting the slogans of "freedom" and "democracy" just like what is now taking place in Ukraine, and mosques have been exploited to mislead people into carrying up arms and fighting the Syrian army.*[1]

Extract II: *All takfīri terrorist organizations are trying to mislead many youngsters with their extremist thought under the title of religion and other sectarian titles and they are seeking to establish their "Islamic state" while in fact it is an attempt to distort religion and destroy countries … considering all takfīri extremist groups as being misled and swayed away from the Holy Quran. … [reflected in] the victories of the Syrian Arab Army against the terrorists in Syria.*[2]

Extract III: *Syria expressed strong condemnation of the terrorist attacks in Brussels, saying they are an inevitable consequence of wrong policies … and of tolerance for terrorism to realize certain agendas and attempts to legitimize it through trying to classify as "moderate" terrorist groups that are actually but offshoots of the Takfīri Wahhabi doctrine." … Concerted efforts are needed to curb the conduct of the countries supporting terrorism and compel them to stop providing support to the terrorist organizations in any form in preservation of the peace and stability of the region and world.*[3]

Extract IV: *Army units on Sunday launched more military operations against dens and positions of the Takfīri terrorist organizations in different areas across the country, killing scores of their members and destroying their arms and equipment. Army units destroyed dens, vehicles and gatherings of terrorist organizations in Daraa al-Balad and al-Mahatta neighborhood in the southern Daraa province … an army unit killed all members of a terrorist group in a special operation to the south of Busra Square and targeted gatherings of terrorists … the Syrian Air Force eliminated a number of terrorists and destroyed their fortified positions.*[4]

> **Extract V:** *Syria, which has always believed in solidarity between Syria and Iraq in the common war on terrorism, is proud of the great sacrifices offered by the Iraqi people, army and PMU to achieve this triumph and great victory in Mosul against ISIS … the Syrian people, army, and government are going ahead alongside the Iraqi people, government, army, and PMU to eradicate what remains of ISIS, because the mobilization of the joint efforts of the two countries is the main factor to guarantee that ISIS or any other form of terrorism will not return to these two countries or any other part of the region.*[5]

The author of the first *SANA* article cited above seems to have employed a discursive distinction between an in-group "us" and an out-group "them." The discursive ideologization utilized in the article emerges in the form of *contrast, implications, and presuppositions.* The term "unity" is associated with the government's "army" and "leadership" as well as its supporters, whether internal "people" or external "friends." This arises in contrast with the alleged "internationally-devised takfīri terrorists." Thus, this discourse implicates that "we" the government, "our" forces and "our" supporters are united in the fight against "them" the takfīri terrorists; "our" external friends support the state and its people, whereas "their" friends support terrorism and social schism. This discourse further presupposes that the allies of the Syrian government are rightly guided and aspire for accomplishing the good of the people, while international actors who back the opposition are merely conspiring against the Syrian state and seek to destroy the country and divide its social components. In order to verbally maximize the legitimacy of the government's policies and practices, the author refers to "Muslims" and "Christians" as genuine supporters of the Syrian government, which illustrates the exploitation of a sectarian dimension in this discourse. Referring to anti-government forces as to have exploited slogans of "freedom" and "democracy" and taking part in a "conspiracy" against the state, *SANA* is hereby speaking of all the opponents of the government, whether peaceful demonstrators or armed rebels, liberals, moderates or Islamists. It is thus a reference to all anti-government activists that are hereby branded as "takfīri terrorists" for opposing the government of President Bashar al-Assad. Any kind of support by international powers to anti-government individuals or organizations, whether civilian, political or armed, is hereby considered as a support for terrorism.

The second article shows the employment of a set of negative terms while describing anti-government factions in an apparent attempt to

emphasize negative aspects about groups in conflict with the regime, to which *SANA* is deemed to be a mouthpiece. Terms such as "mislead," "distort," and "destroy" are used to describe anti-government groups. The report also refers to all those groups fighting against the government as "takfīri," "extremist," "sectarian," and "terrorist," regardless of their cause or affiliation. By branding them "all" as such, the article appeals to the audience to consider the pro-government troops as the only *good* forces while the rest parties to conflict are to be viewed as destructive, distorted, and misleading. Such discursive practices imply consolidating "our positive self-image" and "their negative image." Interestingly, the use of the term "takfīri" in reference to armed rebel groups, whether Islamists or moderates, is aimed at leaving an impression among the recipients that the various anti-government militias active on the Syrian soil are followers of *Salafi-Jihadism*. As Wright et al. maintain, *takfīrism* or the excommunication of fellow Muslims emerged as one of the basic tenets of the Salafi-Jihadi movement during its inception.[6] Hence, the term "takfīri" is employed by *SANA* to emphasize the extremist nature of anti-government armed organizations.

A key aspect of discursive ideologization employed in the third fragment is *topicalization*, as the Brussels terrorist attacks are emphatically associated with "wrong policies" and "tolerance for terrorism." By topicalizing Brussels' policies as a main reason behind the attacks, *SANA*'s report tends to repeatedly undermine the Belgian authorities and their approach to combatting terrorism on the internal as well as external levels. Using the term "tolerance" with regard to the national policies toward terrorism serves *SANA*'s agenda in educating its audience that Brussels, and hence other anti-Syrian government European powers, are involved somehow in the growth of global terrorism. Furthermore, the author utilizes *contrast* as an additional discursive ideological strategy, basically through emphasizing an alleged serious and hard approach taken by the Syrian government toward terrorist organizations, in contrast with Brussels' "tolerant" and soft approach. In order to further consolidate a negative image about Brussels, the discourse employed in the report *implies* that Belgium and other Western states have been supporting terrorism in Syria under the pretext of backing a "moderate" opposition against the Assad regime. In a bid to increase the impact of its message, *SANA*'s report employs phrases such as "Takfīri Wahhabi doctrine" while describing those "moderates." *Wahhabism* forms the doctrinal basis to today's *Salafi-Jihadism*, to which main radical Islamist groups

ideologically and dogmatically belong. It mainly implicates a return to the basic values and teachings of Islam, and striving for the purification of the faith from any forms of theological additions or philosophical speculations. Armed Syrian rebels, affiliated with the Western-backed political opposition, have been branded as "moderate" in the formal Western discourse while addressing the crisis in Syria, mainly to distinguish such factions from more orthodox Islamist groups and terrorist organizations. Yet, the Syrian official discourse, as represented by *SANA* and other state media outlets, has insisted since the start of the popular uprising in 2011 on branding all opposition factions as terrorists. Thus, *SANA*'s language use, which is obviously based on and strongly linked to the official discourse of the Syrian government, emerges as an apparent case of discursive ideologization wherein multiple practices have been utilized to increase the degree of impact and persuasiveness of the agency's explicit and implicit messages among the recipients.

Several manipulative strategies could be observed in the discourse employed throughout the fourth *SANA* news report presented above. Firstly, the author has utilized *omission* as a strategy to keep the recipients in the dark in terms of certain crucial information and hence to consolidate an image of the military developments on the ground in Syria in accordance with the official discourse of the government, which entails constant military gains by the army against its opponents. *Omission* is conducted by means of withholding key information on the identity of those it brands as "terrorists," which reflects the regime's formal discourse of branding all opponents as "terrorists" or members of "terrorist organizations." Also, the report provides detailed information on the alleged losses in the ranks of these groups, while it avoids mentioning any such losses in the ranks of the pro-government "army units" in an attempt to maintain an image of strength concerning the Syrian army while stressing the weakness of its enemies. Secondly, *implicit commission* emerges as another manipulative strategy in the report, mainly in the form of constant emphasis on the military capabilities of the pro-government army units through the use of terms such as "accurate," to stress the accuracy of the army's military operations, and "fortified," to show that however fortified the positions of the rebels are the army is still capable of inflicting heavy losses on them. Such discursive practices are aimed at leading the audience to acquire a belief and eventually accept the story exactly as it is being told by the author. A third form of manipulation observed in this article is *repetition*, as a *propaganda strategy*, where terms and phrases such as

"terrorists," "terrorist group(s)," and "terrorist organizations" are repeatedly used throughout the article in a bid to persuade the readers that the Syrian army is merely dealing with terrorists whose only goal is to destroy the country and terrorize its people. Such a strategy is deemed one of the key manipulative tools in discourse, as it guarantees a continuous exposure of the same information to invite the addressee to think about it and have it therefore easily accessible.

The fifth *SANA* article, which tackles the defeat of ISIS in the Iraqi city of Mosul in June 2017, reflects the Syrian government's political ties with the Iraqi government and the sectarian basis of these ties, especially with regard to PMU—an acronym for the Shia militias of al-Hashd al-Shaabi. Several *manipulative strategies* are observed throughout the discourse employed by *SANA* in this article. Firstly, the author has utilized *explicit commission* by means of *exaggeration* when it comes to the role of al-Hashd al-Shaabi (PMU) in the fight against ISIS. Every mention of the Iraqi army in the article is followed by a mention of the PMU militias, which indicates a constant emphasis on the role of these Shia militias in the "great victory" and "triumph" accomplished against ISIS. At the same time, this discourse reflects a form of *implicit commission* in terms of celebrating the role of al-Hashd al-Shaabi and legitimizing its activities under the banner of "war on terrorism," particularly through associating it with the Iraqi army as if to show the group as a governmental security force that would allegedly be operating lawfully. Another manipulative strategy that emerges in this discourse is *omission*, mainly with regard to al-Hashd al-Shaabi. The organization is hereby presented as a lawful armed force solely concerned with combatting terrorism and maintaining security in the country. As such, the author avoids tackling any form of violations or misconduct by these Shia militias against civilians in predominantly Sunni areas across Iraq. Another form of *omission* has been employed by means of withholding information about other key actors involved in combatting ISIS and defeating the group in Iraq. As documented by O'Driscoll and Zoonen, the Kurdish Peshmerga forces and the U.S.-led coalition's Air Force have played a crucial role in the fight against ISIS in Iraq, along with al-Hashd and the Iraqi army.[7] Such discursive practices reflect the formal standpoint of the Syrian regime, as represented by *SANA*, in that it denies any positive role of what it deems to be hostile forces in anti-terrorism efforts in the region—in this case the Kurds and the U.S.-led coalition are denied credit in the anti-ISIS campaign. Manipulative strategies employed by *SANA* in this article further illustrate a sectarian-guided tone by the

Alawite-based Syrian regime toward allied Shia-based Iraqi government and al-Hashd militias in the "mobilization of joint efforts" against Sunni-based ISIS. Moreover, the propaganda strategy of *repetition*, as defined by Blass, has been utilized by the author, particularly through the frequent mention of "PMU" throughout the article. This can be seen as an attempt to consolidate an image of strength, lawfulness, and commitment on the part of al-Hashd within the framework of the "war on terrorism." Hence, it is an implicit *emotional appeal* to the audience to (re)consider and embrace al-Hashd al-Shaabi as a legitimate Iraqi force that strives for preserving civil peace against any threat by Sunni extremists.

6.1.2 Pro-Opposition Media

The following fragments, extracted from articles and news reports produced and published by prominent opposition-affiliated media outlets *Enab Baladi* and *Zaman al-Wasl*, are analyzed for the sake of exploring ideological and manipulative aspects of the discourse of pro-opposition media while covering the long-standing Syrian crisis:

> **Extract I:** *Syrian opposition fighters evacuated the old districts in Homs and headed to the "liberated" areas in Idlib Province. The armed opposition factions Ahrar Ash-Sham, al-Nusra Front and Free Syrian Army were besieged in Homs for two years. They remained in the city with hundreds of families who preferred staying over migrating in spite of destroyed public services and buildings. Assad's recapture of Homs was facilitated by Iranian patronage and International Community supervision … There is a concealed agreement between the FSA and regime forces. FSA permits regime vehicles to enter the citadel and in return Assad forces avoid harming civilians … But Assad air forces targeted the town and killed 13 civilians.*[8]
>
> **Extract II:** *Behind the scenes, religious attempts to attract people to Shiʿism reached the regime-controlled areas, as an extension of the Iranian project in Syria. The Assad forces were also fighting the opposition factions, supported with officers of the Iranian, Iraqi, and Lebanese Shiʿite militias, which united the city under the frame of a "systematic Shiʿite targeting," taking different military, ideological and demographic forms … Attempts at making people believe in Shiʿism in Aleppo may not be the same as those in Damascus, Homs and the Syrian coast in terms of proliferation, influence and clarity, but some details show that the city of Aleppo is connected to the "Iranian Shiʿite project" in Syria.*[9]

Extract III: *The Syrian regime has remained within its sectarian circle when it decided to break the Alawite monopoly over the Ministry of Information, which confirms the suspicions about the conversion of the current minister to Shiʿism … Over decades of Assad family's rule in Syria, the Alawites (Nuṣayris) have been in control of Syria's military and security apparatus as well as government institutions. The Alawites could be easily recognized by their dialect or the way in which they used to approach other citizens, unlike the rest of Shiʿites who remained operating secretly. People were unaware of the existence of Shia amongst them, but many Shiʿites have eventually occupied key positions … Atrocities were committed by the Shia against Sunnis … The regime relied on the Shia as key supporters.*[10]

Extract IV: *It is the end of Aleppo … No one predicted the horrors the besieged people of eastern Aleppo would witness. Hopes of victory were high, but they were soon destroyed. Assad, supported by Russia and Iran, achieved some of his goals by storming eastern Aleppo, his fighters and mercenaries took over the whole province … The Syrian regime depended on armed militias, that are sectarian in nature, to fight the rebels … Jaish al-Fateh, which enjoys popular support in Aleppo, prevent warplanes from obstructing the operation … The resounding victory of rebels caused the Assad forces heavy losses … Assad forces, Russia and Iran prevent humanitarian aid or weapons from moving along this route.*[11]

Extract V: *It is easy to see how the bourgeois Sunnis of Syria's commercial capital prefer the regime's protection, but how can we account for the fact that the powerful pro-regime militias that have made such significant gains were drawn from the less privileged Sunni classes? What could explain certain Sunni towns and villages in Aleppo countryside being staunchly pro-regime while the majority of rural Aleppan Sunnis are vehemently allied with the opposition? It's easy enough to understand why the villages of Nibol and Zahra are loyalist and their men volunteer to fight for Assad, as they're predominantly Shiʿite, but the Nayrab Palestinian refugee camp is Sunni, and its men have formed their own militia, the Al-Quds Brigades.*[12]

The first fragment presented above, extracted from an *Enab Baladi* article, is supposed to belong to news reporting category, yet the discourse used to deliver the incorporated information to the audience holds a certain level of politicized language use. Using the term "liberated" while referring to areas that fall under the control of opposition forces can be viewed as an indication to the newspapers' fundamental ties to the opposition, since such expressions frequently pop up in the official political discourse of the Syrian opposition while addressing the territorial divide across the country. By referring to opposition-held areas in Syria as

"liberated," this kind of discourse implies and presupposes that Syrian territories held by other armed forces are basically "occupied" and will remain so until being "liberated" by the opposition. The author further refers to the Syrian government as "Assad," which implicates that all government-led operations and practices are merely orchestrated by and planned to serve President Bashar al-Assad personally, a language use that tends to emphatically delegitimize the government. This, again, is an indication of the employment of a politicized ideological discourse. The article further emphasizes "Iranian patronage" to the movements of Syrian regime forces, which is another expression repeatedly used by the opposition and hence adopted and employed by this media outlet to reiterate the message that Iran is basically in charge on the ground in Syria. In order to consolidate a negative image about the government and its forces, the article suggests that these forces mainly aim at targeting and killing civilians, in contrast to the armed opposition factions that are presented in the article as being primarily concerned with the safety and well-being of civilians. Thus, the theory of ideological discourse applies to the language use in this article in terms of the utilization of *implications*, *presuppositions*, and *contrast* strategies. Furthermore, including the al-Qaeda-affiliated al-Nusra Front among "opposition factions" in this article reflects an implicit adoption of the Syrian Islamic-based opposition's discourse by *Enab Baladi*. Al-Nusra and ISIS were operating closely together under the al-Qaeda umbrella until 2013, and following their split al-Nusra began to establish alliances with Syrian Islamist rebel groups against ISIS and the Syrian regime. This cooperation on the part of al-Nusra Front led main Syrian political opposition bodies to sympathize with the organization and consider it a part of their alleged anti-dictatorship efforts in Syria. That's why referring to al-Nusra as a part of the opposition could be viewed as revealing a partially Islamist nature of the discourse employed by *Enab Baladi*, as shown in the extracted fragment, while considering the regime as the sole key enemy to the Syrian people. The article also implicates that the "International Community" has been supervising and facilitating the "Iranian patronage" over military operations by the Syrian army, without providing any information that supports such an allegation. Thus, several discursive practices of ideological nature have been observed and pointed out with regard to this *Enab Baladi* report.

Multiple aspects of discursive ideologization are observed in the second fragment from an *Enab Baladi* in-depth report, which tackles a sensitive issue of sectarianization by means of political and military efforts in the

city of Aleppo. The alleged sectarian change in Aleppo is *topicalized* through the incorporation of the question "Will Aleppo convert to Shiʿism?" in the title. This could be seen as an attempt to warn the recipients and raise their awareness about an approaching danger that supposedly targets their core beliefs and religious traditions, especially that Aleppo has been for long known as a major Sunni stronghold in Syria. The report commences with the phrase "behind the scenes" to emphasize that its content is meant to educate the audience on a serious issue that is taking place in their direct environment and reveal an approaching threat to the religious Sunni identity of Muslims in Aleppo. The discourse employed in the article *implies* that a "systematic Shiʿite targeting" has been taking place in the city. In order to increase the impact of this message, the author refers to various forms through which the alleged campaign is being conducted, namely "military, ideological and demographic." The report further *presupposes* that the campaign comes within the framework of the so-called Iranian Shiʿite project in Syria, which is said to be aiming at converting the Sunni population of Aleppo to "Shiʿism." Iran is hereby referred to as a key *actor* in the alleged process of Shiʿitizing the Sunnis of Aleppo. This emphatic reference to Iran as the major Shia power in the region behind the reported campaign is meant to warn the audience about the seriousness of the threat to Aleppo's Sunnis. Thus, key discursive ideological practices observed throughout this article include *topicalization*, *implications*, and *presuppositions*, besides the emphatic reference to a crucial *actor*. Yet, the most remarkable aspect observed in this report's discourse by the opposition-affiliated *Enab Baladi* newspaper is the considerably sectarian language use. The remarkable emphasis on "Shiʿism" as a danger to the "Sunni" existence emerges as a central point of focus. According to Makdisi, sectarianism, in its modern context, implies reference to the deployment of religious heritage as a key marker of modern political identity that is ultimately "an act of interpretation that shapes as well as is shaped by religious mobilizations and violence in the modern world."[13] This combination of politics and religious identity in the context of conflict arises as an enormously dangerous aspect of sectarian media discourse for its potential capability to facilitate and consolidate social divide. The Sunni background of those running *Enab Baladi* surfaces as a vital factor in the utilized discourse, especially in terms of emphasizing a negative image of Shiʿites compared to Sunnis, who are presented as victims to the former's political, military, and sectarian agendas. This relates directly to the in-depth study of the emerging Syrian media by

Corstange and York, who consider such discursive practices as a part of framing the Syrian conflict in sectarian terms.[14] Such a discourse, as that of *Enab Baladi*, could be regarded as sectarian-based politicized ideological discourse that tends to feed the audience stories framed in accordance with a certain set of predetermined editorial policies, which ultimately serve conservative Sunni factions of the Syrian opposition.

The discourse of pro-opposition media outlet *Zaman al-Wasl*, as shown in the third fragment, can be viewed as no less sectarian than that of some other opposition-affiliated organizations such as *Enab Baladi*, especially when it comes to topics involving non-Sunnis in Syria. The main ideological aspect observed in the discourse employed in this article is the attempt to consolidate a negative image about the Alawites and the Shia in general. This is achieved by means of emphasizing the "monopoly" and "control" of the Alawite sect over the governmental institutions in Syria on the one hand, and the development of the role of the Shia—as an allied sectarian component of society to the Assad regime—in sharing power over the country with their Alawite peers on the other hand. This image is meant to be further consolidated through emphasizing the "atrocities" at the hands of the Shia against the Sunni population of Homs. Furthermore, the author maintains that although this sect forms a minority in the Syrian society, as its members merely reside some small "towns and villages" compared to the major Sunni-populated cities, they enjoy influence over key institutions of the government. In order to stress the high degree of the Alawite and Shia influence and draw the audience's attention to the potentially associated threat, the article suggests their control of "military, security, governmental, social and economic" institutions, besides the implicitly required conversion of any Sunni figure to Shiʿism as a condition to climb the ladder of power in the country. Such a discourse implies the victimization of the Sunni majority at the hands of the Alawite and Shia minorities, and presupposes a dark future for Syria's Sunni population as long as no action is taken. The Sunnis are shown as completely excluded from power, and only those who convert to Shiʿism could aspire for playing an active role within the government. Such statements, while they lack supporting information and hence remain considerably questionable, are meant to raise the level of persuasion among the recipients on the sectarian-based, politically driven message. The sectarian schism is further emphasized in *Zaman al-Wasl*'s discourse in this article through the employment of certain markers to identify the perceived "other," such as the Alawite "dialect" and the implicated negative attitude of the members of the sect,

as demonstrated in phrases such as "the way in which they [Alawites] used to approach other [Sunni] citizens." Thus, discursive practices such as *topicalization*, *contrast*, *implications*, and *presuppositions* emerge throughout the article as indicators of the utilization of an ideological discourse.

The author of the fourth citation from an *Enab Baladi* article has apparently utilized a set of *manipulative strategies* with the objective of persuading the recipients that anti-government rebels are supported by the people of Aleppo and are solely concerned with the well-being of the residents, while the government forces and their allies are merely trying to take over the city, regardless of the devastating consequences and the civilian tragedy caused by their military operations. A key manipulative strategy observed in the associated discourse is *omission*, basically in terms of withholding information about violations by the rebel groups in Aleppo, while constantly emphasizing those committed by pro-regime forces. This could be explained in the context of the revolutionary overtone adopted by *Enab Baladi*, which emerges in the apparent attempt to advocate pro-opposition factions and their practices as long as they claim to be part of the "Syrian revolution" against the Assad regime and its allies. Noteworthy is that most of the rising Syrian media organizations post-2011 have focused primarily on abuses carried out by pro-Assad troops while relatively turning a blind eye to those committed by the rebels.[15] *Implicit commission* also arises throughout the text at hand in terms of stressing that pro-government forces regaining control of Aleppo city would mean "the end of Aleppo" and "horrors" to its "besieged people," as indicated by the language use in the article. This strategy is also employed to consolidate an image of the pro-government troops as solely loyal to President Bashar al-Assad and not to the state through the systematic use of the phrase "Al-Assad forces," besides branding many factions fighting in the ranks of the pro-regime troops as "militias" and "mercenaries" that are said to be "sectarian in nature." The claim is backed by the frequent mention of "Iran"—major Shia power—as an ally of the Alawite-based regime of Assad in the Syrian conflict. This discourse suggests that pro-regime troops—mainly Alawite and Shia—are involved in a sectarian conflict against the Sunni component of the Syrian society as represented by the predominantly Sunni opposition factions. Using the phrase "sectarian in nature" is meant to persuade the audience that the fundamental driving factor for pro-government troops is sectarianism, in a bid to touch on the feelings of the audience and warn them about a threat that is allegedly targeting their very existence based on their sectarian affiliation, which

falls under the manipulative strategy of *emotional appeal*. The article further suggests that the Islamist rebel group of Jaish al-Fateh enjoys "popular support," which implicates that the group is to be seen as a legitimate representative and protector of the people of "Aleppo and its countryside" and that its "resounding victory" reflects the people's "hopes." This while the "al-Assad forces, Russia and Iran" are reported as "targeting" humanitarian routes, "besieging" civilians and preventing "aid convoys" from reaching those in need.

The *Zaman al-Wasl* discourse, as exemplified by the fifth fragment, appears as yet another example of the discourse of the pro-opposition Syrian media in terms of outlining sectarian-based social split alongside political loyalties. *Implicit commission* arises as one of the main strategies utilized in the discourse associated with this in-depth report. Stressing the sectarian identity of parties to conflict in Syria implicates the significance of inter- and intra-sectarian differences with regard to the ongoing crisis. Loyalties and alliances are hereby referred to in sectarian terms through the uttered distinction between "Sunni" and "Shiʿite" Muslims in Aleppo, which shows an undeniable degree of discursive sectarianization in the context of the Syrian crisis. *Repetition* is further employed to consolidate a kind of sectarian mapping of Aleppo and its countryside. "Sunni" and "Shiʿite" are repeatedly used throughout the article while describing militias, geographic areas, and political and military actors. Using sectarian affiliation as a defining feature or marker while describing groups or areas can be seen as an implicit attempt to reinforce social schism and re-establish territorial borderlines in accordance with sectarian differences among the inhabitants of the same province and inside the same country. Such a discourse and its potential effects could be seen as a part of the threats facing the cultural diversity in the region.

6.1.3 Pro-Kurdish Media

Extracted from news reports produced and published by pro-Kurdish media outlets *ANHA* and *ANF News*, the following fragments are analyzed with the objective of exploring the degree of discursive ideologization and manipulation utilized by pro-Kurdish media while reporting on relevant stories during the Syrian conflict:

Extract I: *All critically injured [ISIS] gang members received treatment in Turkey, which gives logistic support to ISIS. The Turkish state gives economic as*

well as military and political support to ISIS. ISIS gangs fighting against Kurds in Rojava receive the biggest external support from Turkey, which continues to fail convincing the world that it is fighting against ISIS since its collaboration with the gangs was exposed. ISIS Emir Yasin Ebdileziz Egumi was captured by YPG forces during the ISIS attack on Kobanê, and confessed to Turkey's military and logistic support to ISIS, saying that the group that carried out the June 25 massacre entered Kobanê from Turkey.[16]

Extract II: *The Turkish occupying army has escalated its attacks on the revolutionary [Kurdish-led] factions in Shahba regions … The occupying Turkish army has been attacking with different kinds of arms the liberated villages … It is crystal clear that the Turkish state is threatened by the revolutionary factions and the Kurds, while the Turkish state is putting all its eggs in a basket striving to prevent Kurds from obtaining their rights … The mercenary gangs affiliated to the Turkish state are struggling with the regime and Russia in Aleppo and Idleb … It is crystal clear that mercenaries of the Turkish state would not leave.*[17]

Extract III: *Mercenaries of the Syrian coalition violated the truce declared after the American-Russian agreement … Mercenaries of the coalition have attacked points of the Army of Rebels and the revolutionary factions of [Kurdish-led] SDF which declared its commitment to the truce in an official statement … the mercenaries have launched an attack with heavy arms last night on positions of [pro-Kurdish] Army of Rebels and the revolutionary factions in Marenaz and Alqamiya villages … The mercenaries were shelling these villages from Azaz town … The shelling caused huge damage to the properties of the civilians.*[18]

Extract IV: *Every withdrawal of the mercenaries supported by Turkey from Syrian cities is followed by delivering regions to Turkey in return … Jund al-Akhsa mercenaries have signed an agreement with the regime to move their mercenaries from Hama to Raqqa, the main stronghold of ISIS, and they assured that they will move on 3 stages, each including 50 members and they said the first one has crossed from Hama to Raqqa. But Jund al-Akhsa were in Idleb and the Syrian Coalition, whose headquarter is in Turkey, has considered Idleb liberated from al-Thuwar, but Jund al-Akhsa mercenaries have announced they're joining Jabhat al-Nusra and they headed to Raqqa. This asserts the strong connection between the Coalition, al-Nusra Front and ISIS, and the participation of the Turkish and Baathist regimes and their support to these groups.*[19]

The discourse employed within the first news article by *ANF News* reflects an attempt to consolidate a negative image about Turkey through emphasizing its multifaceted support to ISIS. It implies a deep-rooted Turkish involvement in the destruction of "Rojava" or northern Syria and

the miseries that the people there endure due to Turkey-backed ISIS terrorism. This negative image about Turkey is being emphasized by means of utilizing a particular language use. The author stresses that "all" injured ISIS members receive treatment in Turkey, and that the "Turkish state" provides various kinds of support to the terrorist organization, including "economic," "military," and "political." Using the phrase "Turkish state" is meant to persuade the audience that the Turkish government and its official institutions are all involved in supporting ISIS terrorism in Syria, and especially in its Kurdish region or "Rojava." The negative Turkish role in the Syrian crisis is further stressed through the use of expressions such as "the biggest external support [to ISIS comes] from Turkey." Furthermore, the discourse of this report suggests that the main target of ISIS terrorism are the Kurds, showing the Kurds as the sole victims of ISIS through the employment of phrases such as "ISIS gangs [are] fighting against Kurds." The employed discourse further provides an implicit contrast between the "YPG" as a legitimate armed force that struggles to protect the people and their way of life, and the "Turkish state" as a supporter of terrorism. Interestingly, this discourse reveals a long-standing conflict between the Kurds and Turkey. Hence, the discursive practices observed in the article are seen as part of an ideological discourse that implicates a positive self-image versus a negative image about the perceived others by means of *contrast* and *implications*.

The discourse employed across the second fragment from an *ANHA* article demonstrates another case of discursive ideologization through politicizing news reporting in accordance with the agency's ethno-political affiliations. Describing the Turkish army as an "occupying" force is meant to persuade the audience that any form of Turkish military involvement in Syria is aimed at occupying parts of the country and its population. This arises in *contrast* to the Kurdish-led "revolutionary factions" and their efforts to "liberate" areas from Turkey and its allies. Thus, the ideological discourse hereby emerges in the form of what van Dijk explains as "emphasizing negative things about them" and "emphasizing positive things about us," besides "de-emphasizing positive things about them" and "de-emphasizing negative things about us." Terms such as "mercenaries" and "mercenary gangs" are used to refer to Turkey-backed Syrian rebels in a bid to consolidate a *negative image* not only about Turkey, but also about every local party that has links with or is supported by Turkey, which is employed as a main *actor*—or antagonist—throughout the article. Turkey is repeatedly referred to as "the Turkish state" in an attempt to persuade

the recipients that the state of Turkey, with all its governmental institutions, is involved in backing "mercenaries" to destroy Syria, fight the Kurds, and occupy Syrian territories with the support of the Turkish army. The report suggests that all the Turkish efforts in Syria are aimed at "preventing the Kurds from obtaining their rights." While such a statement could be argued on the basis of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict, yet the context within which it emerges indicates *ANHA*'s ethno-political Kurdish, anti-Turkey, tendencies. Moreover, using expressions such as "crystal clear" before reporting information or uttering conclusions can be seen as a discursive practice primarily aimed at reassuring the recipients on the certainty of the information being reported and the accuracy of the argument being made. All that is meant to serve the goal of delivering the intended message to the audience as well as guaranteeing its impact to (re) shape their opinions and standpoints. This is what Berger calls the power of media in indoctrinating its audience, once the necessary discursive tools are utilized.[20] The ideological feature of the *ANHA* discourse is observed in this article through the utilized *actors*—Kurdish-led revolutionaries as protagonists and Turkey and its so-called mercenaries as the antagonists—and the associated *contrast* between "our" good aspects and "their" bad characteristics and actions.

ANHA's discourse in the third news report cited above appears considerably manipulative, given the observed discursive strategies employed by the author. Firstly, *omission* has been utilized throughout the report, particularly with regard to avoiding any mention of violations by pro-Kurdish armed forces of Army of Rebels or SDF, while remarkably shedding light on violations by Syrian opposition groups. Secondly, *explicit commission* by means of *deliberate ambiguities* emerges in the observed discourse, particularly through the use of the term "mercenaries" to describe the Syrian opposition's coalition while refraining from describing the nature of the so-called mercenaries or who supports them. Such a language use implicates that armed opposition factions supported by regional powers—such as Turkey—are merely "mercenaries" operating within the Syrian borders in accordance with an external agenda, and hence deprives these factions of any righteous cause to take part in the conflict. Thirdly, *explicit commission* by means of *exaggeration* is observed with each reference to pro-Kurdish troops. These armed forces are referred to as "revolutionary" to stress that they have a just cause, in contrast to the so-called mercenaries. They are also presented as "committed" to the reported truce, whereas

the "mercenaries of the Syrian coalition" are shown as targeting "civilians." So, an exaggerated positive image of the pro-Kurdish forces is being provided to the audience, which could be explained within the framework of *ANHA*'s ethno-political tendencies. Moreover, the propaganda strategy of *repetition* arises across the text as an additional manipulative practice to ensure the impact of the discourse on the recipients. The term "mercenaries" has been constantly and frequently employed while describing certain factions of the armed opposition in Syria with the apparent goal of consolidating an unfavorable image about the concerned groups and provoke discontent among the audience toward them.

The fourth article fragment provides another example of politicized media discourse employed by *ANHA* news agency, and the incorporation of the political tendencies of those running the agency is being achieved through the utilization of certain *manipulative strategies*. In order to establish an alleged link between hostile parties to the Kurdish-led Self-Administration of northern Syria, or Rojava,[21] the author has employed *explicit commission* by means of *deliberate ambiguities* through emphatically claiming the existence of such a link while deliberately providing a set of ambiguous and unsupported information. The discourse employed suggests that the Syrian opposition's Coalition and Islamist militants of al-Nusra and ISIS are operating together with support from Turkey and the Syrian regime. Although such an alliance is hard to establish, the agency asserts its existence due to what it calls "strong connection" between these parties to conflict in Syria. Reporting such an ambiguous scenario in absolute terms without sufficient supportive details or official statements from the concerned parties indicates the politicization of news reporting by the agency. The propaganda strategy of *repetition* is also employed by means of frequently describing rebel groups as "mercenaries" and repeatedly stressing their ties with "Turkey," a discursive strategy aimed at consolidating a negative image about armed factions that oppose the Rojava administration or its institutions.[22] Moreover, the discourse observed in the article implicates that Turkey's "support" to rebels and Islamist militants in Syria is paid back by such groups through "delivering" parts of Syrian territory to Turkey "in return." This basically means that the Turkish involvement in the Syrian conflict is ultimately aimed at serving potential expansionist aspirations by the Turkish government. The language use and the associated message emerge as a form of *implicit commission*. Hence, the *manipulative strategies* utilized throughout the

discourse of such media corporations are primarily meant to serve particular political tendencies or ethno-sectarian affiliations that appear to be playing a crucial role in the determination of what to publish and how to ensure the impact of the explicit and implicit messages.

6.2 Iraqi Media Discourse

The local media in Iraq have vigorously covered happenings and developments that have overshadowed the scenery across the country in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion. Alongside the progress of the developments, each media organization has developed a discourse through which the news has been communicated and reported to the targeted audiences. Political alliances as well as religious and ethnic affiliations are deemed to have played a role in the rise of manipulative and ideological discursive practices among the Iraqi media outlets, with sectarianization playing out as a key dimension of such practices. This section explores the diverse discursive practices utilized by the Iraqi media.

6.2.1 Pro-Shia Government Media

In order to examine the degree of discursive ideologization and manipulation employed by the pro-Shia state media in Iraq, the following extracts from articles published by *As-Sabah* are thoroughly analyzed:

> **Extract I:** *Terrorist groups do not merely move inside an empty box. They rather operate within an incubator of a suitable social environment that forms a safe haven through the multi-faceted facilitation it provides to such terrorist groups. Such a social incubator, which provides financial and other forms of support to groups like ISIS, do not necessarily operate with a blessing of governments. Such activities mainly occur out of social sympathy toward such groups … Saudi Arabia is one of the greatest incubators to ISIS sympathizers and terrorists … Iraq is being targeted by ISIS terrorists while Saudi Arabia enjoys peace and stability … They bear the responsibility for hosting a social incubator to terrorist cells and enabling them to launch attacks.*[23]
>
> **Extract II:** *ISIS has succeeded in establishing a cross-border form of terrorism through going beyond the Iraqi political and geographic borders. Nevertheless, this success has been primarily restricted to the sectarian borderline, as ISIS has only been able to move amongst Sunni Muslims. The group cannot carry out any kind of activities amongst the Shia Muslims. That's why ISIS has obtained a Sunni identity, despite condemnation from certain Sunni*

circles to the group and its practices. Hence, it is a limited kind of success that arises in the form of recruiting young Sunni men and women from various countries.[24]

Extract III: *The Shia in Iraq have suffered from systematic exclusion, marginalization and oppression that has targeted their religious identity and rituals under the former regime. Such policies have taken a sectarian form following the downfall of the previous regime, and many Sunnis have sided with the opposition against change in Iraq, which they've considered a mere Shia victory … Iraq has become extremely sectarianized and the sectarian differences turned into a main factor for the growth of violence. Citizens are being identified by their sectarian affiliation and the areas of origin play a main role in this type of sectarian identification … The ethnic division includes the case of Iraqi Kurdistan … The new generation of Kurds do not accept the Arabs as partners in this country, and some of the Kurds have even taken a hardline position against the Arabs in Iraq.*[25]

Extract IV: *Since its establishment following the fatwa of the supreme religious reference and the homeland's call, al-Hashd al-Shaabi has been suffering from a systematic smearing campaign by pro-ISIS political and media activists, who insist on calling al-Hash "Shia militias". Hired criminals try to impersonate members of al-Hashd while carrying out criminal activities. Such actions are aimed at smearing the reputation of al-Hashd and negatively affecting the morale of its fighters whose sole concern is the security of the country and the safety of its citizens … Al-Hashd is a legitimate and official government force that operates based on state orders and regulations … The heroic role of al-Hashd in defending Iraq against terrorists and liberating its territories cannot be denied.*[26]

Language use and the relatively implicit messages associated with the discourse of the first *As-Sabah* article reflect a certain degree of discursive ideologization with sectarian sentiments incorporated. The "social environment" referred to by the author is basically the Sunni component of the Iraqi society. Sunni Muslims are hereby deemed to be an "incubator" for "ISIS" terrorists and are accused of providing what the article suggests being a "safe haven" to the group as well as a "multi-faceted facilitation" to its terrorist actions. In order to emphasize the role of the so-called social incubator in the growth of ISIS, the author uses phrases such as "social sympathy" toward ISIS and refers to "financial" and "other forms of support" being received by the group from a particular part of the Iraqi society. The reference to "Saudi Arabia" as one of the "greatest incubators to ISIS sympathizers and terrorists" reveals the sectarian dimension of the discourse employed by the author, since Saudi Arabia is perceived as the

major Sunni power in the region, emerging in contrast to Iran as a major Shia power—which enjoys strong ties with the Iraqi government and supports the activities of Shia militias across Iraq. Hence, negative features about the Sunni community are being emphasized throughout the article, whereas the Shia-led Iraqi government and the Shia community of Iraq are being presented as victims of Sunni-backed/-led terrorism. Basic ideological aspects observed in this article include *topicalization*, explicit reference to *actors*, in this case Sunni Muslims and Saudi Arabia, and *implications* in a bid to increase the impact of the incorporated messages among the audience. Hence, this kind of discourse basically carries elements of sectarian discursive ideologization.

The discourse utilized in the second *As-Sabah* article reveals the sectarian affiliation of this pro-government media outlet, as it draws an explicit distinction between Sunni and Shia Muslims. This is observed in the frequent use of the term "Sunni" in contrast to "Shia," and the employment of phrases such as "sectarian borderline" and "Sunni identity." The article emphasizes the existence of a fundamental correlation between ISIS and "Sunni Muslims," "Sunni circles," and "Sunni men and women." Aspects of the *Ideological Square* are observed throughout the discourse of this pro-government newspaper in the form of "emphasizing negative things about them" and "de-emphasizing negative things about us," especially when suggesting that ISIS holds a "Sunni identity" while the Shia remain immune to the group's influence. The *level of description* employed in reference to the Sunni community-ISIS ties, the *contrast* drawn between Sunni and Shia Muslims in Iraq, and the *implications and presuppositions* that emerge in the article are seen as key characteristics of the discursive ideologization practiced by *As-Sabah*. Such kind of discursive practices are to be considered as an attempt to consolidate a negative image about the Sunni community in Iraq and ultimately blame this community for the emergence and growth of ISIS in Iraq and across the region.

The *As-Sabah* discourse, as exemplified by the third article fragment, emerges as an example of the discourse of pro-Shia Iraqi media in terms of consolidating an ethno-sectarian-guided social cleavage. *Implicit commission* arises as a main manipulative strategy utilized in the discourse associated with this article. Emphasizing the ethno-sectarian affiliation of the parties involved—hereby referred to either positively or negatively—basically implicates the significance of ethnic as well as sectarian differences as a key factor in the escalation of the crisis that has been storming Iraq for years. Alliances and loyalties are tackled in sectarian terms through the

expressed distinctions between "Shia" and "Sunnis," "Arabs" and "Kurds," which can be viewed as an example of the considerable degree of discursive sectarianization employed by the media in the context of the Iraqi crisis. *Repetition* is also observed throughout this article as a discursive practice, mainly aimed at consolidating an ethno-sectarian mapping of the political conflict across Iraq. Besides the frequent reference to the ethnic or sectarian identities of parties involved, phrases such as "sectarian differences," "sectarian identification," "sectarian affiliation," and "ethnic division" arise throughout the article as a means of ensuring the impact of the incorporated message among the recipients. Furthermore, the discourse employed in the article carries features of *emotional appeal*, as a *propaganda strategy*, primarily observed in the implicit attempt to touch on the feelings of the audience by means of incorporating terms such as "systematic exclusion" and "oppression" while referring to the "religious identity" and "rituals" of the "Shia" in pre-2003 Iraq. This discourse appeals to the recipients to consider the Shia as victims, and the Sunnis as sectarian-guided rivals; the Arabs as guardians of the national unity of Iraq, and the Kurds as anti-Arab separatists. The potential effects of such a discourse can be viewed as one of the basic threats to the cultural diversity in Iraq and the region at large.

Several manipulative strategies could be observed in the discourse employed throughout the fourth *As-Sabah* report. Firstly, the author has utilized *omission* as a strategy to keep certain information from the recipients with regard to reported violations attributed to al-Hashd al-Shaabi and hence to consolidate an image about al-Hashd troops that corresponds with the official narrative of the Iraqi government, which entails that al-Hashd was formed in response to the "homeland's call" to maintain the "security of the country" and the "safety of its citizens," operating as a "legitimate" and "official government force" that follows "state orders and regulations." The report tends to stress positive characteristics about al-Hashd al-Shaabi while trying to withhold any information that may confirm the group's involvement in any kind of "criminal activities." Such discursive practices are aimed at leading the recipients to acquire a belief and eventually accept the story exactly as it is being told by the author. Secondly, *explicit commission* by means of *exaggeration* emerges as another manipulative strategy in this report, mainly in the form of constant emphasis on the "heroic role" of al-Hashd al-Shaabi in "defending" the Iraqi people "against terrorism" and "liberating" the country from terrorists. Terms and phrases that support the consolidation of a "heroic" image

about al-Hashd keep popping up throughout the report, which reflects the author's attempt to exaggeratedly defend the honor of the Shia forces against the reported violations. Thirdly, *deliberate ambiguities*, as another form of *explicit commission*, arise in the article with regard to the "criminal activities" attributed to al-Hashd members. The report basically fails to tackle any details or specifics about those activities before jumping to the conclusion that these reports are merely a part of "a systematic smearing campaign" conducted by "pro-ISIS" activists in a bid to negatively influence the "morale" of al-Hashd fighters. A fourth manipulative practice observed in the text is *repetition*, as a *propaganda strategy* employed by *As-Sabah*. This is mainly accomplished through the excessive use of phrases describing positive features of al-Hashd al-Shaabi—hereby described as "heroic," "defending Iraq," and "liberating its territories"—with the goal of persuading the addressees that any news reports trying to claim otherwise are merely a part of a "smearing campaign." Such a strategy is deemed one of the key manipulative tools in discourse, as it guarantees a continuous exposure of the same information or narrative to invite the addressee to think about it and have it therefore easily accessible. Moreover, a second *propaganda strategy*, namely *emotional appeal*, seems to have been utilized in the discourse of this report. This strategy arises through the soft tone employed while referring to—and the enormously positive description about—al-Hashd al-Shaabi. This is to be noticed on phrases such as "response to … homeland's call," "sole concern is the security of the country and the safety of its citizens," "heroic role of al-Hashd in defending Iraq against terrorism," "local and regional irritation and agitation grows" toward al-Hashd for its "victories." Such language use is meant to reach and appeal to the feelings of the recipients in a bid to amplify the impact of the message and increase the credibility of the reported heroism of al-Hashd, while denying reports about "criminal activities" or violations by the group. As Blass puts it, "By appealing to the feelings of the audience, the addressees are often more easily ready to accept, believe and act upon the propagated information without thorough coherence checking."[27]

6.2.2 Pro-Sunni Opposition Media

The pro-Sunni Iraqi media discourse is analyzed in terms of ideologization and manipulation based on several articles published by the news website *Ash-Sharqiyah*:

Extract I: *The number of mosques targeted by sectarian militias in the province of Diyala have increased to seven mosques, following the clashes between them and ISIS. The militias have destroyed and set on fire several of these mosques … More mosques have been exposed to vandalism at the hands of these militias … Members of al-Hashd al-Shaabi militias have also destroyed civilian houses and burned private properties in the villages of Quraq, Balat Kabir and Jabnaz, amongst others.*[28]

Extract II: *Al-Hashd al-Shaabi should realize that these areas [in Takrit] cannot be liberated except at the hands of its own people … The difference of loyalties amongst the fighters has caused an obvious state of hesitance amongst the Sunni leaders on whether to support the military operations … Al-Hashd al-Shaabi continues to burn down villages and destroy residential districts in the liberated areas, which could be seen as a clear indication that the ongoing military operations remain meaningless … Certain parties in the government, known for their corruption and monopoly of power over Iraq, try to undermine the Sunnis.*[29]

Extract III: *Militiamen have detained and abducted many civilians in Salah al-Din province and demanded the families of the victims to pay ransoms … Members of these militias have abducted more than 30 civilians from the areas of al-Farhatiyah and Sayed Gharib, and have separated women from their children … The militiamen have earlier abducted 112 men and women in the Badiya … Leaders of al-Hashd al-Shaabi bear the responsibility for these actions, since these militiamen fall under the al-Hashd umbrella.*[30]

Extract IV: *The Supreme Council for Iranian National Security has emphasized the crucial role of the Shia forces of Iraq's al-Hashd al-Shaabi in maintaining security in the region … Al-Hashd al-Shaabi is an important strategic force that can guarantee future stability in Iraq … Iran supports the Shia alliance in Iraq as it considers its role to be crucial amidst current challenges … The Iranian council views the unity of Shia forces in Iraq as a positive step that yet needs to develop and be reinforced in order to continue, emphasizing the role of Shia leaders in accomplishing this harmony and cooperation.*[31]

Extracted from an *Ash-Sharqiyah* article, the first fragment basically reflects the agency's affiliation with Iraq's Sunnis, as demonstrated in the language use and way of expression where characteristics of discursive ideologization can be traced. The frequent reference to al-Hashd al-Shaabi as "militias" with a "sectarian" identity that targets and "destroys" mosques in Sunni areas shows the author's intention to consolidate a negative image about al-Hashd al-Shaabi, whereas the Sunni community is presented as a victim to the militants' sectarian-guided aggression. Most of Iraq's media outlets continue to fail in producing professional news

content and journalists struggle in terms of impartiality amid overwhelmingly dominant sectarian and partisan influence. This environment has also formed a fertile ground for radical groups to appear and grow in the media arena through continuously delivering directed messages to an ever-growing audience and sharing news items on a daily basis mostly about their alleged resistance and victories over rivals, which enabled them to remarkably influence the public opinion primarily through a deeply sectarian-based discourse. Emerging in the form of *contrast* between certain *actors*, namely the Shia-led groups as aggressors and the Sunni community as a victim, and the associated *implications and presuppositions*, the discourse employed in the article contains basic features of the *Ideological Square* as it stresses *negative* features about the Shia and de-emphasizes any potential negative aspects about the Sunnis.

The discourse observed in the second article aims at fostering a negative perception among the audience about the Shia-led government in Baghdad by referring to its parties as "corrupt" and abusers of power who primarily try to "undermine the Sunnis." Furthermore, it draws an explicit linkage between the government and the reported atrocities carried out by al-Hashd al-Shaabi across Iraq. This while the Sunnis as shown as a community with great potential and capabilities but marginalized as well as targeted by the government-linked militiamen of al-Hashd in predominantly Sunni areas. Thus, an exaggerated emphasis is put on the positive features of the Sunnis and the negative characteristics of the Shia, while positive aspects of the Shia and negative traits of the Sunnis are considerably de-emphasized. Such discursive practices relate directly to the *Ideological Square* by means of *level of description* and *implications* as utilized throughout the discourse of this article.

The discourse of *Ash-Sharqiyah*, as demonstrated throughout the third article cited above, shows traces of manipulative strategies employed in a bid to guarantee the intended message of consolidating a negative image about al-Hashd al-Shaabi forces. *Explicit commission* emerges as a main manipulative strategy utilized by the author, particularly by means of presenting members of al-Hashd al-Shaabi as mere "militiamen" and associating them with acts of "detention," "abduction," and "torture" of "civilians," atrocities that have reportedly not excluded "women" and "children." Also, *implicit commission*, as a manipulative discursive practice, is observed in the article, basically through delivering and emphasizing certain information regarding the frequent conduct of atrocities and human rights violations against civilians. The repeated mention of

"women" as well as "children" as main victims of the reported practices by the al-Hashd-related "militiamen" arises as an additional discursive effort to guarantee and even increase the impact of the intended message delivered by *Ash-Sharqiyah* through the employed discourse. It holds traces of both *repetition* and *emotional appeals*, as *propaganda strategies*, that are aimed at serving an enhanced effect among the recipients.

A main manipulative strategy depicted through the discourse of the fourth *Ash-Sharqiyah* article is *implicit commission*, which arises in terms of constantly emphasizing the Iranian involvement in the domestic affairs of Iraq. The role of the "Supreme Council for Iranian National Security," a key government institution in Iran, is emphasized with regard to its support to the Shia troops of "al-Hashd al-Shaabi" and "Shia leaders" in Iraq. The emphasis on the sectarian nature of the parties supported by Iran in Iraq, namely the "Shia," reflects *Ash-Sharqiyah*'s Sunni ties, as the Sunnis basically oppose and strongly reject Iranian involvement in Iraq's internal affairs, whether at a military or a political level. This implies that the Iranian involvement in Iraq is of a pure sectarian nature, mainly supporting the Shia against potential Sunni threat, and that any claims about the Iranian authorities seeking "future stability" within Iraq are baseless. Furthermore, both *propaganda strategies* of *repetition* and *emotional appeal* arise throughout the discourse employed in this article. Sectarian branding, exemplified by the term "Shia," emerges repeatedly across the article in reference to Iraqi forces being backed and supported by Iran. This can be seen as an indication of a sectarian-based discourse by pro-Sunni media, primarily aimed at rendering Iranian allegations of aspiring for and advocating "security" and "stability" in Iraq baseless, ill-founded, and even mischievous. This discourse also reflects an attempt by the author to touch on the feelings of the addressees, namely the Sunni audience, by means of underlining an implicit Iranian-backed Shia threat to Sunnis in Iraq and the region.[32]

6.2.3 Pro-Kurdish Media

The journalistic data put to analysis in this section are included as samples that reflect the overall discourse of the pro-Kurdish media in the Iraqi arena. The following extracts from articles published by *Rudaw* are analyzed on discursive ideologization and manipulation:

Extract I: *The Sunni residents of Jalawla and Sadia accuse the Shiʿite militias, which played a role in the fight to liberate the towns from ISIS, of now imposing their anti-Sunni rule … After fierce fighting that killed 144 Peshmerga and wounded 300, ISIS was driven out of the area. The Kurds entered the towns, but so did the Shiʿite militias. The Shiʿites are not going to leave Jalawla and Sadia peacefully. The Sunni Arabs in these two towns will have to live in fear … The presence of Shiʿite militias in the town has created chaos.*[33]

Extract II: *There is a growing political movement amongst Sunni Arabs, feeling marginalized in today's Iraq and inspired by Kurdistan's independence referendum … Sunnis boycotted the political process in Iraq in 2005. They returned to politics in 2009, but quickly faced problems with the Shiʿite authority. This led to demonstrations in Sunni areas, which the government curbed by force. In the war against ISIS, the Shiʿite al-Hashd al-Shaabi forces were accused of abuses against Sunni populations, and Sunni areas witnessed heavy destruction. Now some are hoping Kurdistan's September referendum will breathe new life into Sunni Arabs who want to regain power.*[34]

Extract III: *Shiʿite Hashd al-Shaabi forces have trained some 280 children since last year in the use of light and heavy weapons … Children under 18 are seen in military uniforms, receiving weapons training. [They] are to take part in combat, if necessary. The Iraqi parliament passed a law last year that recognizes the Shiʿite force as an official part of the Iraqi armed forces. Recruitment and use of child soldiers are prohibited internationally and under Iraqi law … A reported 100 child soldiers have graduated from a three months military training this year. Last year, 180 child soldiers received training. A representative of the Shiʿite authority in Bashir village defended the decision to train children on using arms.*[35]

Extract IV: *Iraq's Sunni and Shiʿite leaders have united to condemn Kirkuk's vote on participation in Kurdistan independence referendum. Shiʿite and Sunni political leaders have expressed their opposition to Kirkuk Provincial Council's decision to participate in the Kurdistan independence referendum … Kirkuk Turkmen Front faction and Arab faction boycotted the council session, saying the vote was unconstitutional … Kirkuk is one of the disputed Kurdistani areas claimed by both Erbil and Baghdad. The province is home to large oil reserves and an ethnically diverse population.*[36]

The discourse employed by pro-Kurdish news network *Rudaw* in the first news report primarily reflects a sectarian-based discursive ideologization, which could be seen in the language use while referring to the groups involved in the reported developments and the constant emphasis on their sectarian affiliation. On the one hand, the author tries to consolidate a

negative image about the so-called Shiʿite militias, namely al-Hashd al-Shaabi which has been in conflict not only with ISIS but also with Kurdish Peshmerga forces on particular occasions,[37] by means of using terms such as "fear" and "chaos" while describing the situation of "Sunni Arabs" and living conditions in predominantly Sunni areas in Iraq. On the other hand, the "Kurds" are only referred to as a crucial player in the fight against ISIS and their sacrifices are emphasized in detail, particularly through mentioning numbers of killed and injured "Peshmerga" fighters during the clashes, while any negative features that might be attributed to the Kurdish participation in the conflict seem to have been left out. The *level of description and degree of detail*, and the *implications and presuppositions* that arise throughout the article are hereby viewed as primary ideological discursive practices utilized by *Rudaw*. Also, naming the *actors* involved in the reported happenings with an emphasis on their ethno-sectarian identity is meant to guarantee the effect of the *implicated* message.

The second *Rudaw* article represents another example of discursive ideologization in the process of news reporting. On the one hand, it tackles the Sunni-Shia struggle in Iraq, particularly through showing Iraq's "Sunni Arabs" as "marginalized" and the Shiʿites as a governing "authority" in today's Iraq that uses "force" and carries out "abuses" against Sunnis. On the other hand, the discourse employed across the article reflects an attempt to show the Kurdistan Region and its policies as inspirational to Sunni Arabs, particularly the Kurdish "independence referendum." The author elaborates on the importance of Kurdistan's independence referendum by stressing that it is being looked up to by Sunni Arabs as a glimpse of hope for a "new life" for minorities or less powerful communities in the Iraqi arena. Aspects of discursive sectarianization emerge frequently throughout the article, basically in the form of describing areas, populations, authorities, and armed forces by their ethno-sectarian affiliation. The ideological discourse observed in this *Rudaw* article has been accomplished by means of *topicalization*, *level of description*, *contrast*, *implications*, *and presuppositions* in order to consolidate a positive image about *us* and a negative image about *them*.

The discourse employed by *Rudaw* in the third article holds different aspects of discursive manipulation. Firstly, the author seems to have resorted to *explicit commission* by means of *exaggeration*, particularly in terms of excessively emphasizing violations to human rights committed by al-Hashd al-Shaabi through a reportedly increasing recruitment of "child soldiers," "training" them on not only "light" but even "heavy weapons,"

and preparing them to actually "take part in combat" against "ISIS." Reporting the ages of those children and their numbers, as well as asserting their alleged participation in "combat" against such a merciless group like "ISIS," is a discursive element utilized with the objective of reassuring the delivery of a resounding impact on the recipients. Secondly, *explicit commission* by means of *minimization* is employed through the observed diminishing of the role of al-Hashd al-Shaabi as an undeniable force in the face of ISIS in Iraq. This is accomplished by means of avoiding to mention the conditions on the ground in areas lost by ISIS to al-Hashd and its allies, or any information that may play in favor of al-Hashd in terms of the reasons for its formation and its achievements as an important player on the Iraqi soil. Thirdly, *repetition* emerges as another key manipulative strategy in *Rudaw*'s discourse. The term "Shiʿite," as a sectarian marker, is repeatedly used to describe al-Hashd al-Shaabi in a bid to stress an assumed sectarian nature of these forces. This considerably deprives al-Hashd of any claims about being an Iraqi troop that aspires to defend Iraqi citizens against the ISIS threat. Also, the link between the "Shiʿite al-Hashd al-Shaabi" and the Iraqi government is frequently underlined in the context of committing violations through recruiting "child soldiers." This serves the assumption that the behavior of al-Hashd forces reflects that of the government itself, and it implicates that the Iraqi authorities are thus directly responsible for violations committed by these forces, since they are recognized by the "state" as "official" and a "part of the Iraqi armed forces." Moreover, the phrase "child soldiers" is deployed across the article to emphasize this violation to human rights as committed by al-Hashd and guarantee the impact of the implied message—on the violent and inhumane nature of these forces—among the addressees. *Rudaw*'s discourse ultimately reflects the overall Kurdish official position toward al-Hashd al-Shaabi as a rival ground force to the Kurdish Peshmerga and a reflection of Baghdad's policy of utilizing ethno-sectarian differences as a weapon to face alleged Kurdish separatist aspirations. Such a policy surfaced during the deployment of al-Hashd by orders from the Iraqi central government along the borders with Iraqi Kurdistan Region following the 2017 independence referendum in Erbil.[38]

The discourse employed throughout the fourth article shows traces of two key manipulative strategies as utilized by *Rudaw*. On the one hand, *implicit commission* seems to have been employed through the considerably constant emphasis on the reportedly unified position among various components of the Iraqi society toward the referendum on "Kurdistan

independence." Ethno-sectarian identities of parties that have openly opposed the holding of the referendum are reported and stressed across the article—"Shiʿite" and "Sunni," "Turkmen" and "Arab"—in an attempt to draw the audience's attention to the fact that the Kurdish right to self-determination has been abandoned, or even denied and contested against, by all those who supposedly have once been partners in the struggle for freedoms. The implicit message essentially entails that despite the deeply rooted differences and rivalries between the various ethno-sectarian populations of Iraq, they all seem to have one enemy in common: namely an independent Kurdistan. The message in particular implicates that the Shia and the Sunnis basically disagree on almost everything, except on opposing the Kurdish cause or the Kurdish right to self-determination. On the other hand, *emotional appeal* emerges at the heart of this discourse and what it holds in terms of the position of Kurds after deciding to hold the independence referendum. Emphasizing the strong rejection and condemnation to the Kurdistan independence referendum by various parties in Iraq is primarily aimed at seeking the recipients' sympathy with regard to the situation of the Kurds as a nation that has suffered throughout history from suppression, discrimination, and exclusion, while keeps struggling for its rights.

6.3 Ideologization, Manipulation, and Sectarianization Within the Syrian and Iraqi Media Discourse

Media materials produced and published by diverse Syrian and Iraqi media outlets, which constitute an essential part of the corpus of this study, have been analyzed on the basis of methodological tools developed by van Dijk[39] and Blass.[40] Discourses of the included media organizations have been explored in terms of *ideologization* and *manipulation*. These methodological tools have been utilized in a bid to analyze and better understand the various aspects of the discourses of the Syrian and Iraqi media. Main issues tackled throughout the analysis process include the sectarianization of media discourses in both countries and the potential impact of such a discourse in the inflammation of extremism and the escalation of sectarian strife.

Based on the analysis of the Syrian and Iraqi media, political, religious, and ethnic affiliations and loyalties seem to have played a main role in the

rise and increase of a discourse characterized by manipulative and ideological discursive practices as employed by various media organizations, wherein sectarianization and social divide emerged as key aspects. Media outlets appear to have utilized diverse discursive practices in order to consolidate a negative image about rival parties to conflict and a positive image about those they represent or are affiliated with. Traces of the *ideologization* have been observed throughout the research data, which demonstrates obvious attempts by the concerned media outlets to resort to ideologizing their audiences and pushing them toward believing the specific version of each story delivered in accordance with a particular political or sectarian agenda. Such discursive practices have been revealed and thoroughly analyzed on the basis of the *Ideological Square*, which comprises emphasizing positive things about *us* and negative things about *them*, while de-emphasizing negative things about *us* and positive things about *them*. The analysis process has delved into the various strategic tools employed in order to consolidate the desired image about the concerned parties and to frame the developments during news reporting based on the incentives and purposes of the editorial policies of each media organization. These include *topicalization*, *level of description and degree of detail*, *implications and presuppositions*, *contrast*, and *actors*.

The Syrian state media generally try to employ discursive ideologization by means of branding anti-government forces either as *takfīri terrorists* or as *conspirators* associated with external actors, while presenting the government as a *protector* of the rights of minorities and a *defender* of the sovereignty of the Syrian state. The concept of *takfīrism* or the excommunication of fellow Muslims has emerged as one of the basic tenets of Salafi-Jihadism during its inception.[41] Thus, the state media, in order to emphasize an alleged extremist nature of all anti-government organizations, regardless of their demands or the employed means to accomplish them, has frequently utilized the term *takfīri*. By branding all opposition factions as *terrorists*, the Syrian regime has primarily aimed at depriving the 2011 Syrian popular uprising of its legitimacy, even before the country descends into a civil war. Such a narrative, weaponized by the state media as a mouthpiece to the government, constitutes an obvious denial to the political and socio-economic conditions that have played a key role in the outbreak of the 2011 uprising. Meanwhile, the discourse of pro-opposition media, also known as "alternative media," has been no less ideological than that of the government, as illustrated through the analysis of journalistic data produced by relevant media outlets. The government is

increasingly branded as an *occupier* to the Syrian territories and its forces deemed to be systematically targeting civilians, whereas the opposition factions, including hardline Islamist groups, are presented to the recipients as *liberators* and *freedom fighters*. The discourse of pro-opposition Syrian media has further employed a considerably sectarian overtone through repeatedly referring to the regime and its allies by their sectarian affiliation. Concepts of *othering*, in-*group* versus out-*group*, *us* versus *them*, representation and misrepresentation have been enormously utilized in the discourse of pro-opposition media. *Sectarianization* and *politicization* are among the key aspects observed during the analysis of the discourse of opposition-affiliated Syrian media outlets. This relates to the serious consequences of sectarianization among local communities and the sectarian narrative as a remarkably crucial explanatory feature for conflict in today's Middle East, as well as the threats posed by radical sectarianism to the cultural diversity in the region. The analysis of Syria's pro-Kurdish media has also illustrated the employment of ideological discursive practices wherever possible, especially once an article or a news report appears to tackle developments that involve anti-Kurdish factions. A positive image about *Rojava* and the Kurdish forces in northern Syria is being constantly consolidated, whereas political and ideological rivals are being negatively presented and branded as *mercenaries* and *extremists*. A *liberal* and *democratic* nature of Kurdish political and armed factions is being considerably emphasized in the discourse of the pro-Kurdish media, while a dark image about the opponents is continuously delivered and stressed to the addressees. This relates to the fact that Syria's Kurdish units have concentrated their fight against ISIS and other Islamist groups, and developed their ranks by including Arab and Christian fighters under the umbrella of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which then became a key ally to the U.S.-led coalition in the war on ISIS. The ideological analysis of the Iraqi media has shown no less degree of discursive ideologization employed by various media organizations, especially in terms of *sectarianization* and *politicization* of the news reporting. This process falls under the relationship between discourse, ideology, and power. The pro-Shia government media, on the one hand, has mainly resorted to such discursive practices in a bid to frame opponents, particularly those of *other* ethno-sectarian backgrounds, as *incubators* to and *supporters* of *terrorism*, whereas presenting allied factions as *national heroes*. The pro-Sunni media, on the other hand, has constantly insisted on showing Shia-based factions as *powerful aggressors* and the Sunnis as *helpless victims*. As for the pro-Kurdish media in Iraq,

their discourse reveals that relations to other components of the Iraqi society are defined in accordance with each representative party's position toward the Kurdish issue or their attitudes toward ongoing developments in the Kurdish arena. A positive image about the Kurdish political and military establishments and allies is constantly consolidated, whereas a negative image is persistently emphasized about rivals and opponents. As such, the Shia-Sunni, Arab-Kurdish differences and rivalries emerge at the heart of the discursive ideologization process pursued by various Iraqi media outlets, each in accordance with their own political loyalties and ethno-sectarian affiliations. Given the power of the media to employ the necessary tools to indoctrinate its addressees, the utilization of discursive ideologization in the context of conflict, especially in culturally diverse crisis-torn countries such as Syria and Iraq, renders involved media organizations substantially responsible for the incitement and escalation of sectarian-based violence.

With regard to discursive manipulation, Syrian media corporations included in this research have utilized multiple manipulative strategies in order to reassure the highest level of impact possible among the recipients in a way that ultimately serves each corporation's agenda and the associated explicit or implicit messages. Aspects of manipulative strategies, as introduced by Blass, have been observed across the research data, showing increasing attempts by the involved media organizations to discursively manipulate the addressees' understanding, opinions, and beliefs with respect to issues and developments in their surroundings. Manipulative strategies depicted during the analysis of the data included *omission*, *commission*, and *propaganda strategies*, and the associated tools that render the employment of discursive manipulation possible and efficient. The Syrian pro-government media discourse embodies discursive manipulation that ultimately serves regime policies in denying any existence of a popular pro-democracy uprising and branding all opponents indiscriminately as misled *extremists*, *terrorists*, or *conspirators*. While the Sunni-led opposition is branded as such, Alawite- or Shia-led movements and their practices, whether on a domestic or a regional level, are remarkably praised, reflecting the sectarian dimension of the Syrian regime's policies as manifested by the state media discourse. The pro-opposition media discourse emerges as no less manipulative and sectarian than that of the regime, particularly in terms of trying to enforce a belief that Sunni-based actors or activities hold *legitimate aspirations* and are thus *praiseworthy*, whereas Alawite- and Shia-led practices are said to be merely *sectarian-guided* and *offensive*.

Furthermore, the pro-Kurdish media discourse appears to carry traces of ethno-sectarianism in that it mainly strives for showing opponents of the Kurdish cause in Syria as *chauvinists*, *mercenaries*, or *radical Islamists*. This is accomplished by means of employing a discourse that holds various manipulative strategies to guarantee reaching the desired effects in the ranks of the recipients. With regard to the Iraqi media discourse, manipulative strategies seem to have been increasingly utilized by various media outlets, as illustrated by the analytical part of this chapter. The discourse of Iraq's pro-Shia government media, on the one hand, manifests an explicit example of the exploitation of multiple manipulative practices with the objective of fostering an image of unavoidable ethno-sectarian divide and blaming the intensification and severity of the conflict on certain components of the Iraqi society. The Shia are constantly portrayed either as *victims* or as *national heroes*, whereas the Sunnis are usually associated with *aggression* and *terrorism*. Similar attributes arise while making a discursive distinction between ethnic Arabs and ethnic Kurds, which is believed to ultimately contribute to the deepening of the already escalating ethno-sectarian divide and sedition in Iraq. Manipulative strategies are excessively instrumentalized for the sake of boosting the impact of such a message among the addressees. On the other hand, the discourse of pro-Sunni media seems carrying no less of a sectarian-guided manipulative dose. The Sunnis are primarily presented as *victims* of *discrimination* and *marginalization* conducted by a *suppressive* and *aggressive* Shia majority that seems to have monopolized power over political and military institutions in Iraq, besides operating in the form of *abusive* militias. Meanwhile, the discourse of Iraq's pro-Kurdish media emerges as if operating in accordance with the compass of the interests of the Kurdistan Region through portraying the perceived *others*, based on politicized ethno-sectarian differences and rivalries, as *suppressive*, *chauvinistic*, or *extremely hostile*. Discursive manipulation has hereby played an instrumental role in framing the developments in the Iraqi arena as such with the ultimate goal of influencing the recipients' views and beliefs regarding relevant matters.

The analysis of the data has shown that media outlets increasingly resort to *ideologization* and *manipulative strategies* as key discursive practices to deliver implicit as well as explicit messages to their audiences and ensure their effectiveness. Ethno-sectarian affiliations and political loyalties arise as key factors behind the utilization of certain discursive practices by various media organizations. While such discursive strategies appear to be taking different forms and applied on various levels, they yet fall under what

White outlines as the incorporation of subjective features in news reporting.[42] The critical consequences of *discursive ideologization* and *manipulation* are to be seriously considered since media discourse basically plays a significant role in the course of defining developments—which take place in the surroundings of the recipients—as social problems and in mediating knowledge about perceived matters at stake. Hence, discursive practices employed by the Syrian and Iraqi media are deemed crucial in terms of impact for the eventual (re)shaping of the addressees' opinions and beliefs, whether through direct or indirect effects, as well as the potential indoctrination such practices entail among recipients.

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CHAPTER 7

Radical Islamists in the Digital Era: A Multifaceted Extremist Discourse

This chapter comprises the analysis of the extremist discourse of ISIS and al-Hashd al-Shaabi and it explores the sectarian aspect of the discourse of both groups in the context of Sunni and Shiʿite extremism. Research data extracted from media outlets affiliated with ISIS and al-Hashd al-Shaabi are analyzed within the methodological framework of *ideologization* and *manipulation*. This discourse analytical part primarily focuses on data produced by media outlets linked to ISIS and al-Hashd al-Shaabi in the period between 2014 and 2017, a period that marks a key phase of growth and remarkably active presence by both groups in the Syrian and Iraqi arenas. It is a period during which these radical groups were highly active in the media arena and received an extensive local, regional, and international attention. Each section in this analytical part is divided into categories and subcategories based on the methods employed, and each category involves the analysis and discussion of a diverse set of data. This categorizational structure is meant to facilitate the analysis and discussion of every specific discursive practice as implemented by the concerned organizations. The ultimate objective of this chapter is to explore the development of the discourse of the radical Islamist groups ISIS and al-Hashd al-Shaabi, by means of delving into the linguistic and contextual activities applied and the associated messages. The analysis also strives for unraveling aspects of religionization,[1] politicization,[2] and sectarianization[3] of the media discourse of ISIS and al-Hashd al-Shaabi through identifying and investigating manipulative and ideological instruments employed.

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7.1 ISIS Discourse

ISIS is believed to have made an extensive use of digital media channels to reach out to audiences on local, regional, and global scales in order to deliver its messages through the organization's sophisticated media campaign. Media has served the group as a crucial instrument in its efforts of ideological expansion, which falls within the framework of *Daʿwah* or outreach. The discourse utilized by the group while delivering its explicit as well as implicit messages to the recipients is believed to involve manipulative and ideological discursive practices for the sake of ensuring the desired effects. Analyzing potential ideological and manipulative practices in the discourse of ISIS may provide an insight into discursive dimensions of key significance to this study, including religionization, politicization, and sectarianization.

7.1.1 Ideologization Within ISIS Discourse

In order to analyze the discourse of ISIS on discursive ideologization, the *Ideological Square* is utilized. Ideological standpoints could emerge in a discourse, whether written or verbal, either explicitly or implicitly, which urge a highly critical and analytical observation in order to detect its elements and analyze its aspects. Within the framework of this study, *discursive ideologization* is used in reference to the incorporation of ideological thoughts—of politicized and subjective nature—into media discourse. According to van Dijk, ideologies are primarily "ideas" or "belief systems" that comprise "social representations that define the social identity of a group" and "control and organize other socially shared beliefs."[4] Furthermore, Carvalho maintains that ideological standpoints explicitly represent "the most fundamental shaping influence" of discourse.[5] It is the "semantic structure of discourse" that constitute "the core 'content' of expression of ideological opinions."[6] The *Ideological Square*, as a multidisciplinary approach to discourse analytical studies, provides the basis for a subtle ideological analysis and the exploration of discursively expressed ideological stances. The fundamental principles of this approach include *emphasizing* positive things about *us* and negative characteristics about the perceived *other*, while *de-emphasizing* negative things about the *in-group* and positive things about the *out-group*. The theory of ideology basically implicates a positive self-presentation and negative other presentation. The *Ideological Square*, as a concept and a methodological framework,

"may be applied to the analysis of all levels of discourse structure."[7] Hence, the application of this method on the research data extracted from ISIS-operated media outlets is primarily meant to facilitate the process of exploring and analyzing various aspects of the discourse employed by the group.

The following fragments are extracted from the online platforms of prominent ISIS-run media organizations *al-Furqan Foundation for Media Production*, *al-Hayat Media Center*, *Dabiq* magazine, and *al-Naba* newspaper. The extracts are analyzed accordingly, within the framework of *discursive ideologization*, for the sake of exploring incorporated discursive practices and the potential ends such strategies are meant to serve.

- **Extract I**: Speech by ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi:

> *Allah (the Mighty and Majestic) said, {Fighting has been enjoined upon you while it is hateful to you} [Al-Baqarah: 216]. And He said, {So let those fight in the cause of Allah who sell the life of this world for the Hereafter. And he who fights in the cause of Allah and is killed or achieves victory—We will bestow upon him a great reward} [An-Nisā': 74]. Speech will not benefit you without action, for there is no faith without action. So whoever says, "Allah is my Lord," it is incumbent upon him to obey Allah who enjoined fighting, meaning that He made it obligatory upon those who believe in Him, and commanded the performance of jihād for His cause, and promised reward for those who obey His command, and threatened those who disobey Him. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said, "I would love to fight for the cause of Allah and be killed, and then fight for the cause of Allah and be killed again, and then fight for the cause of Allah and be killed again." If you are truthful in your claim, then obey your beloved and fight for the cause of Allah and emulate your beloved, and do not die except as a mujāhid for the cause of Allah … {And you will not find in the way of Allah any change} [Al-Ahzāb: 62]. Indeed, fighting the disbelievers, hijrah, and jihād will remain until the Hour … It is the war of every Muslim in every place, and the Islamic State is merely the spearhead in this war. It is but the war of the people of faith against the people of disbelief.*[8]

The Qur'ānic verses employed in this speech show an apparent degree of selectivity in the process of reciting the Qur'ān in a way that primarily serves the messages incorporated by ISIS leadership. Most of the recited verses tackle the concept of *jihād* in combination with what al-Qaradawi describes as *ʿamalu l-badan bil-qitāl* or the physical form of effort in combat.[9] The incorporation of such verses and the employment of

interpretations that remarkably reduce *jihād* to a mere physical activity are aimed at emphasizing the righteousness of ISIS in establishing its state and presenting its struggle as a struggle between "the people of faith" and "the people of disbelief." The employed discourse implicates that ISIS is basically fighting "for the cause of Allah" and everyone who joins its ranks and end up dead is "a mujāhid for the cause of Allah." The alleged cause that ISIS claims to fight for is being propagated as "the cause of Allah" toward which all Muslims are said to bear a responsibility. Coined as a "war" against the enemies of Allah, namely the disbelievers, it is presented as "the war of every Muslim in every place." Calling upon Muslims worldwide to pursue "hijrah" is basically meant to compare an aspired immigration of Muslims to ISIS's alleged "Islamic State" to the historical event of *hijrah* by the Prophet and his companions from Mecca to Medina. Such a reference is meant to exploit a historical event held dear by most Muslims and put it in the service of the group's objective of attracting and recruiting Muslim individuals into the group's ranks.

The ideological aspect of the discourse employed in this speech emerges in the form of consolidating a positive image about those who join the ranks of ISIS and fight for its allegedly holy cause, who are shown as "the people of believe." Whereas a negative image is being consolidated about all those denying the legitimacy of ISIS's cause or refuse to recognize the righteousness of the group's alleged caliphate. Those submit to and join ISIS in its alleged struggle are reassured a "reward" from Allah, and those who choose to neglect al-Baghdadi's call are deemed to be disobeying Allah and would hence be punished. The utilized discourse puts a constant emphasis on *jihād*, in its physical form, as an "obligatory" action and a "command" by Allah. This arises in contradiction with some of the fundamental tenets of the concept of *jihād*, and it ignores certain basic aspects of the notion. According to al-Qaradawi, the use of force against the enemies, or *physical jihād*, is only allowed once peaceful options are exhausted.[10] The Qur'ānic declaration of *jihād* cannot be reduced to mere armed struggle, since virtually all instances of the root *j-h-d* speak primarily to the question of true intention and devotion.[11] In its reference to the significance of *jihād*, the Qur'ān primarily stresses the level of dedication to God's cause vis-à-vis excessive attention to worldly matters (Q9:19; 9:24; 60:2). This emerges in contrast with how the concept of *jihād* is being generally perceived by many as a mere call for war and conflict. Various Qur'ānic verses signify *jihād* as meriting forgiveness and divine

favor (Q4:95; 4:96; 9:20; 29:6; 29:7), indicating a basic element in one's relation with and orientation to God (Q22:78; 29:69; 61:11), which is, nonetheless, eventually known only to God.[12]

The common understanding of the notion of *jihād* does not particularly implicate a requirement of every individual Muslim, known as *farḍ ʿayn*, but rather a general obligation of the Muslim community or a collective duty, known as *farḍ kifāyah*.[13] Considering *jihād* as a collective requirement rather than an individual duty stems from the fact that the concept essentially entails a voluntary activity rather than a compulsory one. This arises in contrast to what this speech by the leader of ISIS implicates. Hence, the discourse of ISIS, as observed throughout this speech, emerges as highly ideological-guided in that it ignores any aspects of *jihād* that may contradict its implicit as well as explicit message and seems to be barely focused on justifying the group's actions, praising its objectives, and excessively stigmatizing and degrading its opponents and rivals. Such discursive practices fall within the framework of the *ideologization*, primarily achieved by means of *contrast*, *implications*, *and presuppositions.*

- **Extract II**: Speech by ISIS spokesperson Abu Muhammad al-Adnani:

Here the flag of the Islamic State, the flag of tawḥīd, rises and flutters … Beneath it, the walls of the tawāghīt have been demolished. The kuffār are disgraced. Ahlus-Sunnah are masters and are esteemed. The people of bid'ah are humiliated … It is a dream that lives in the depths of every Muslim believer. It is a hope that flutters in the heart of every mujāhid and muwaḥid. It is the khilāfah. It is the khilāfah—the abandoned obligation of the era … the Islamic State—represented by ahlul-halli-wal-ʿaqd, consisting of its senior figures, leaders, and the shūrā council—resolved to announce the establishment of the Islamic khilāfah, the appointment of a khalīfah for the Muslims, and the pledge of allegiance to the shaykh, the mujāhid, the scholar who practices what he preaches, the worshipper, the leader, the warrior, the reviver, descendent from the family of the Prophet, the slave of Allah, Ibrāhīm Ibn ʿAwwād Ibn Ibrāhīm Ibn ʿAlī Ibn Muhammad al-Badrī al-Hāshimī al-Husaynī al-Qurashī by lineage … And he has accepted the bayʿah … By Allah, if you disbelieve in democracy, secularism, nationalism, as well as all the other garbage and ideas from the west, and rush to your religion and creed, then by Allah, you will own the earth, and the east and west will submit to you. This is the promise of Allah to you. {So do not weaken and do not grieve, and you will be superior if you are believers} [Āl ʿImrān: 139] … Today the hypocrites are degraded. Today the rāfiḍah and murtaddīn are humiliated. Today the tawāghīt in the east and

west are frightened. Today the nations of kufr in the west are terrified … Today the flag of tawḥīd rises with its people.[14]

The discourse employed in this speech by the spokesperson of ISIS Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, which was released by *al-Furqan Foundation*, shows multiple aspects of ideologization. The discursive practices observed throughout this speech primarily aim at consolidating a positive image about ISIS and a negative image about its opponents, a key characteristic of the *Ideological Square*. ISIS leadership and members are hereby branded as "mujāhidīn" and "muwaḥidīn," whereas everyone who tends to oppose the group or deny the legitimacy of its message are branded as "tawāghīt," "kuffār," "murtaddīn," "people of bidʿah" and "hypocrites." This discourse basically reflects the *takfīri* doctrine embraced by ISIS, as promoted by the pioneers of Salafi-Jihadism such as Sayyid Qutb.[15] The direct or indirect reference to *tawḥīd*, *takfīr*, *ḥākimiyyah*, and *jihād* that emerge in the discourse of this speech shows the group's commitment to the fundamental tenets of Salafi-Jihadism.

The legitimacy of the group's self-proclaimed "Islamic khilāfah" is discursively supported by the mention of *ahlul-ḥalli-wal-ʿaqd* (elite scholars who loose and bind), *ijmāʿ* (consensus), and *bayʿah* (swearing allegiance to the Caliph). This terminology and the associated concepts originate in the establishment of the first Caliphate subsequent to the death of the Prophet, as introduced by the Sunnis or *Ahl al-Sunnah wal-Jamāʿah*. Hence, the employment of such terms while referring to the so-called Islamic State is meant to assert the legitimacy and validity of ISIS's "khilāfah." Furthermore, in order to legitimize Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's claim of the position of "khalīfah for all Muslims," multiple honorable characteristics are ascribed to the alleged "khalīfah" with the ultimate objective of convincing the addressees about al-Baghdadi's righteousness and qualification to occupy such a position. Such features include him being a "shaykh," "mujāhid," "scholar," "worshipper," "leader," "warrior," "reviver," and "descendant from the family of the Prophet." The exaggerated qualifications of al-Baghdadi, as delivered within the speech, are meant to reassure his eligibility as a "khalīfah." Such a discourse could be seen as an attempt to almost compare ISIS's leader to the Rightly-Guided Caliphs or the *Rāshidūn*.[16] The Rightly-Guided Caliphs (*al-Khulafa' al-Rāshidūn*) were the first four Caliphs who succeeded the Prophet: Abu Bakr (632–634), Umar (634–644), Uthman (644–656), and Ali (656–661). The term "Rightly-Guided" signifies that their actions were

accepted by all Muslims as the closest to the Prophet's example. After the Prophet Muhammad, the words and actions of the Rightly-Guided Caliphs were deemed the most authoritative source of Muslim behavior.

The positive image of the "Islamic State" is being further consolidated by means of emphasizing the institutional nature of the alleged "State," showing its establishment as a "dream" the Muslims have for long aspired to see come true and a hope they wished to attain someday. Al-Adnani hereby suggests that this long-standing "dream" has actually come true and that it is time for Muslims worldwide to become a part of this "honor" and join this alleged "victory." Meanwhile, the discourse utilized brands "democracy, secularism and nationalism" as "garbage" ideologies and beliefs produced by the West, calling upon Muslims to rather submit to the "Islamic State" than following and embracing such values. Therefore, this discourse shows visible traces of politicization and religionization. A clear-cut distinction is being fostered between what ISIS hereby considers as "kuffār," "tawāghīt," "murtaddīn," "people of bidʿah," and "hypocrites" on the one hand, and the "believers," "muwaḥidī," and "mujāhidīn" on the other hand. The rejection of *bidʿah* (heretical innovations) is deemed as one of the key characteristics of Salafi-Jihadism.[17] The ideological dimension of such discursive practices arises in the form of enforcing a contrast between good and evil. All about *us* represents the ultimate good, and all about *them* represents the ultimate evil. Thus, notions of *othering*, *in-group* versus *out-group*, *us* versus *them*, representation and misrepresentation have been enormously utilized in the discourse of ISIS.

Moreover, discursive sectarianization[18] emerges as yet another key aspect of the discourse observed in this speech. Sunni Muslims or "Ahlus-Sunnah" (*Ahl al-Sunnah wal-Jamāʿah*) are referred to as "masters" and "esteemed," whereas the Shiʿites are merely branded as "rāfiḍah" or rejectionists. Branding Shiʿite Muslims as such holds deeply sectarian sentiments, for the term has first emerged during the historical rift over the rightly guided successor of the Prophet. While the Sunnis relied at the time on consensus, the Shiʿites insisted on the idea that Ali and his descendants were the rightful successors, and they were therefore branded as *rāfiḍah*.[19] The observed discourse thus includes the Shia among the enemies of ISIS's alleged caliphate in a reflection of the sectarian nature of this speech, added to features of politicization[20] and religionization[21] observed throughout this employed discourse. Hence, discursive ideologization has been utilized in this ISIS speech by means of *topicalization*, *contrast*, *actors*, *level of description and degree of detail.*

- **Extract III**: Speech by ISIS spokesperson Abu Muhammad al-Adnani:

> *We will fight to the death, even if corps are destroyed, houses are demolished, honor is disgraced, people are killed, and blood is shed … victory is to live as muwaḥidīn, to disbelieve in ṭāghūt, to fulfil walā' and barā', and to establish the religion … O Muslims! Truly, the mujāhidīn are victorious—victorious by the sword and arrowhead, by the evidence and proof … There are only two armies, two camps, two trenches. It is the war between kufr and ʾīmān. It is the war of walā' and barā' … The mockery and greatest calamity is that the donkeys of knowledge—who are falsely counted as mujāhidīn—pass fatwas against the mujāhidīn, declaring that the vetted apostates are actually mujāhidīn for Allah's cause … The false and deceiving mask of nobility has fallen, showing its ugly face under the Nuṣayri barrels of death, destruction, and gas. America and its allies do not ache or feel pain, except when the mujāhidīn advance and gain victories.*[22]

One of the key discursive strategies utilized in this speech is the attempt to redefine Islam as a religion and associate *jihād* with "fighting," "destruction," "demolishing," mass "killing," and "blood-shedding." The opening of this speech already illustrates the ideological tenets upon which ISIS seems to have been established. In order to justify such actions, the employed discourse emphasizes "obedience to Allah" as a context for such practices that are said to lead to "victory." Even the core concept of "victory" is hereby redefined to include defeat as another version of victory, as long as the fight is being led by the "muwaḥidīn" of ISIS against "disbelief" and the "ṭāghūt" for the sake of fulfilling "walā' and barā'" and establishing "the religion." The "mujāhidīn" are thus "victorious," regardless of the outcome. According to al-Qaradawi, the use of force emerges as a final form of *jihād* in its multilayered notion, and thus framing *jihād* as a mere call for violence or use of weaponry in the face of enemies reflects a misconception and misinterpretation of what *jihād* essentially means.[23] From a semantic perspective, the word *qitāl* (fighting) is derived from *qatl* (murdering), whereas *jihād* (struggle) is derived from *juhd* (effort). Although today the word *jihād* is frequently associated with aggression and violence, where Islam itself is being perceived as a religion urging and encouraging violence against other communities, the term *ʿunf* (violence) is never mentioned in the Qur'ān, neither as an infinitive nor as a verb or an adjective. Hence, al-Adnani's insistence on defining *jihād* as "fighting" and a call for destruction and mass killings merely shows the essential

ideology of ISIS, wherein religion is being exploited for the justification of brutal atrocities carried out by the group's so-called mujāhidīn against the perceived enemies, besides sacrificing the lives of those the group claims to be founded to protect, namely Muslim civilians. This falls under discursive religionization and politicization.

The language use in the discourse employed in this speech illustrates the Salafi-Jihadi tenets, originally stemming from *Wahhabism* as the most extreme manifestation of radical Sunni Islam, upon which ISIS has been ideologically established, which is defined by *tawḥīd*, *ṭāghūt*, *al-ḥākimiyyah*, *al-walā' wa-l-barā'*, and *jihād*. According to Ibn Taymiyya's[24] philosophy of *jihād*, given that all creatures must live and die, "one ought to put one's life and death at the service of a goal that will guarantee true happiness, namely *jihād* which rewards one with either a divinely supported victory over unbelief or the prize of martyrdom."[25] Muslim scholars who do not comply with or abide by ISIS's version of Islam are branded as "evil scholars" and "donkeys of knowledge," which reflects the ideological discourse of ISIS by means of consolidating a glorious image about its own religious legislation and practices, while stigmatizing that of those disagreeing with its interpretations of religious literature and its actions in the name of Islam.

In order to further enhance the contrast between an in-group versus an out-group, the utilized discourse distinguishes between "two tranches" or "two camps" supposedly at war, that of "ʾīmān" or belief being represented by ISIS itself on the one hand, and that of "kufr" or disbelief represented by all those who fall outside its ranks. Furthermore, discursive sectarianization emerges as another aspect of this speech, especially through referring to the Alawite-led Syrian regime as "Nuṣayri," which is basically used to describe the Alawite sect. The sectarian dimension of such a terminology stems from the fact that the roots of Alawism, as a branch of Shiʿism, lie in the teachings of Muhammad ibn Nusayr an-Namiri, a Basran contemporary of the tenth Shiʿism Imām. Orthodox Sunnis segregate the Shia—including its branches—as "heterodox" or even "heretical" sect.[26] Hence, the use of the term "Nuṣayri" with reference to the Alawites basically originates in a deeply sectarian-guided perspective and is meant to associate the sect with heterodoxy and heresy, to which Salafi-Jihadis are strongly rejective. Such interpretations are believed to reveal more about the ideological and intellectual climate within which these sects emerged than about the tension they claim to depict and symbolize.[27] Given the ideological tools utilized throughout the discourse of

this speech, discursive ideologization seems to have been employed, as examined on the basis of the *Ideological Square*. Observed ideological practices include *level of description*, *contrast*, *actors*, *implications*, *and presuppositions*. Religionization and sectarianization emerge among the key aspects of this ideological discourse.

- **Extract IV**: Article by al-Hayat Media Center:

> *Spreading Islamic knowledge, correcting the people's understanding of the religion, and clarifying the truth are all from amongst the most important goals of the Islamic State of Iraq and Shaam. For this reason, the scholars and du'aat of the Islamic State have made a concerted effort to clarify the methodology of truth, which the prophet Muhammad (PBUH) came with. They did so by holding educational seminars, opening institutes for Islamic studies, and running Daʿwah tents … This fundamental truth is tawḥīd—worshipping none but Allah, may He be glorified. Allah the Exalted says: And We certainly sent into every nation a messenger. {Worship Allah and avoid ṭāghūt} [An-Nahl: 36]. Given the process of changing a society begins in the masjid, the leadership of Wilayat Ar-Raqqa sought to establish educational seminars to train and prepare duʿaat, Imāms and khateebs in order to undo the damage of the regime, which corrupted the minds of the people one generation after another.*[28]

The discourse utilized in this article can be viewed as an explicit example of discursive ideologization, as it shows a tireless attempt to consolidate a positive image about ISIS and a negative image about what is labeled as the "regime." The alleged ultimate objective of ISIS is presented as enlightening people through "clarifying the truth," "spreading knowledge," and "correcting" the general understanding of "the religion" among the people of Raqqa by means of "educational seminars." According to the article, these "seminars" constitute a part of the ISIS-led "Daʿwah" on the basis of "Tawḥīd." This emerges in the observed discourse in *contrast* to educational activities held by the "regime" that are said to have "corrupted" the minds of the people "generation after generation." ISIS is thus referred to as a savior of the people, enlightening them by means of leading them to the true path of "Tawḥīd" and preserving them from the calamities associated with the "ṭāghūt." This *presupposes* that without ISIS there will be no "knowledge" but ignorance, no light but "darkness," no "truth" but falsehood, no "Jannah" but "fire," no "ʾīmān" but "kufr," no "tawḥīd" but "ṭāghūt." In order to support such *implications* and *presuppositions*, the Qur'ānic verse {Worship Allah and avoid ṭāghūt} [An-Nahl:

36] is recited to provide a religious basis for the group's alleged "goal" of carrying out "daʿwah."

The constant employment of the concept of *Daʿwah* takes us back to Ibn Taymiyya, whose literature forms a fundamental basis for Salafi-Jihadis, and particularly his definition of *jihād* in which he differentiates between "*jihād makkī*" and "*jihād madanī*." *Jihād makkī* refers to struggle with *ʿilm* or knowledge, as symbolized by the Prophet's *Daʿwah* or call to Islam in Mecca, which comes in the form of *jihād bil-ḥujja* or *jihād* with argument. Hence, *jihād makkī* implies the call for obeying the Islamic teachings and abiding by the Sharīʿa among the Muslims and the invitation to Islam among the non-Muslims. This type of *jihād* is referred to by several modern scholars as *inward jihād* or *jihād against the lower self*.[29] *Jihād madanī*, on the other hand, entails the employment of force and military fighting alongside *Daʿwah*, which is stressed by Ibn Taymiyya as the best form of and true *jihād* for its potential efficiency. In order to support his claim, Ibn Taymiyya quotes the Qur'ānic verse: "You are the best nation produced for mankind. You enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong and believe in Allah" (Q3:110). The fact that *jihād makkī* precedes *jihād madanī* in Ibn Taymiyya's categorization, *Daʿwah* or peaceful means of *jihād* could be seen as prioritized and recommended before taking action and engaging in military strife. Nevertheless, promoting the second form of *jihād* as the excellent and true one reflects Ibn Taymiyya's tendency to recommend *jihād madanī* as the greater way to strive in the path of God. A combination of *Daʿwah* and military force is promoted by the Salafi-Jihadi literature[30] as the best and most appreciated form of *jihād*, and the observed discourse illustrates that ISIS has spared no effort to propagate such a combination while addressing its audiences.

The reference to the so-called methodology of truth shows the Salafi-based doctrinal and ideological philosophy advocated by ISIS as observed in the discourse utilized throughout this *al-Hayat* article, which primarily focuses on a supposedly exemplary form of Islam characterized by genuineness, purity, and unconditional commitment to the teachings of *al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*. The "methodology" or *manhaj* that ISIS claims to have adopted is hereby promoted as being based on the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad. This can be seen as an explicit attempt by ISIS to propagate itself as the *al-ṭā'ifah al-manṣūrah* or the sole triumphant group of Muslims, and *al-firqah al-nājiyah* or the saved denomination.[31] This relates directly to the core principles of Salafism that entail a consistent emphasis on *tawḥīd* or God's unity, and the preservation of *ʿaqīdah* or

doctrinal pureness by means of what Salafi-Jihadi movements such as ISIS promote as the "correct" and "true" methodology or *manhaj*. Thus, given the discursive practices employed in this article, including *implications*, *presuppositions*, and *contrast*, the discourse observed seems unambiguously ideological in that it amplifies the enlightening, rightful, and trustworthy nature of ISIS's activities and practices, whereas it renders those of other factions and formations as ill-founded and corrupt.

- **Extract V**: Article by al-Hayat Media Center:

> *Campaign "Enter Upon Them Through the Gate" succeeded in placing the city under the full control of the Islamic State, with thousands of prisoners freed from the Rāfiḍi dungeons in Mosul during the course of the offensive … Since the start of the jihād in 2003, the province of Al-Anbar has traditionally been the stronghold of the mujāhidīn, with Fallujah serving as its jihādi capital. Islamic State saw it necessary to further expand beyond its center of power and conduct large-scale operations in numerous regions of Iraq in order to confuse and overwhelm the Rāfiḍi forces. The state would then continue its policy of governing any liberated areas in accordance with the Qur'an and Sunnah, providing civilians with a range of social services based on the needs of the population and locality, and educating, recruiting, training and deploying more and more Muslims eager to play their role in rebuilding the Islamic khilāfah … With the liberation of Mosul, the Islamic State now controls another major population center, mirroring its control of Ar-Raqqa in neighboring Sham. The Rāfiḍi government is now left scrambling to pick up the pieces … begging the US ambassador and Kurdish officials for help. This victory was followed by the liberation of Tikrit, the capital of Salahuddin. Ṣafawi soldiers and politicians continue to flee, with the soldiers removing their uniforms and abandoning their posts … May Allah grant success to the lions of the Islamic State and continue to disgrace and humiliate the filthy Rāfiḍah and their allies.*[32]

Conflict sectarianization arises as a primary aspect of the increasingly ideological discourse employed throughout this news article. The Shiʿites are hereby referred to as "Rāfiḍi" or rejectionists, which is derived from the source term *rāfiḍah*. Branding Shiʿite Muslims as such holds immensely sectarian sentiments, since the term has first emerged during the historical rift over the rightly guided successor of the Prophet. While the Sunnis relied at the time on consensus, the Shiʿites insisted on the idea that '*Ahl al-Bayt* or the Prophet's household, namely Ali and his descendants, were the rightful successors, and they were therefore branded as *rāfiḍah*.

Therefore, such a language use reveals ISIS's intention to present its alleged "khilāfah" as authentic and rightful, comparing contemporary Shiʿite opposition to it with the historical rift that broke out over the succession of the Prophet and the associated sectarian conflict between the Sunnis and the Shiʿites. Besides, describing the "Rāfiḍi" as "filthy" and asking "Allah" to "continue to disgrace and humiliate" them illustrates the remarkable degree of sectarian-based contempt and grudge ISIS appears to hold toward Shiʿite Muslims.

Such a discursive sectarianization is further boosted by means of politicization through the deployment of phrases such as "Rāfiḍi government" and the reference to Iran as an ally—whose support to Shiʿite factions in the region, both politically and militarily, remains remarkable. Besides, branding Shiʿite "soldiers" and "politicians" as "Ṣafawi" carries historical sectarian connotations. It is a direct reference to Safavid Persia that was once engaged in a sectarian-based conflict with the Ottoman Empire in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, where the Ottomans were representing a Sunni Muslim power and the Safavids were leading the Shia Muslims. The Ottoman Empire and Safavid Persia, then the two major powers in the Near East, were engaged in a series of conflicts over territorial control in Mesopotamia, particularly in the period between 1514 and 1639, with a continued, but less tense, tension until the eighteenth century. The warfare was further fueled by sectarian and dogmatic differences.[33] Thus, the terminology utilized throughout this report reflects a substantial degree of discursive sectarianization and politicization.

The mention of "start of *jihād* in 2003" can be viewed as an indication to the key developments that have led to the eventual rise of ISIS, as it arose from the remnants of AQI or al-Qaeda in Iraq, established by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi following the 2003 invasion. It also utters the group's fundamental affiliation with Salafi-Jihadism (*al-Salafīyah al-Jihādīyah*) in terms of principles and worldview. Key ideological aspects observed throughout the employed discourse include tireless discursive attempts to consolidate a positive image about ISIS and emphasizing negative characteristics about rivals and enemies. Members of ISIS are portrayed as "mujāhidīn," "lions," and victorious liberators who aspire to "govern" in accordance with the "Qur'an and Sunnah" with the ultimate objective of reassuring the well-being of the "citizens." Areas under ISIS control are referred to as "the state" where people are being "educated" and "trained" in order to participate in "rebuilding the Islamic khilāfah." This while opponents and enemies are pictured as cowards who "flee" the battlefield

and "abandon their posts" after shamefully "removing their uniforms." Hence, multiple ideological discursive tools seem to have been utilized across this discourse, including *level of description*, *implications*, *contrast*, and identifying *actors*.

- **Extract VI**: Article by al-Hayat Media Center:

> *The Sykes-Picot agreement, which mapped out parts of the Middle East, led to invisible borders that separate between a Muslim and his brother, and pave the way for ruthless, nationalistic ṭawāghīt to entrench the 'ummah's division … The consequences of the crusader partitions would play directly into the hands of the enemies of Islam, with the average Muslim's unconditional walā' for his fellow Muslims and barā' for the kuffar being tempered by the notion of patriotism toward a piece of land demarcated by imaginary lines on a map, and the idea of an Islamic khilāfah appearing more and more as an exotic fantasy … the Prophet (PBUH) said: "There will be khilāfah on the prophetic methodology and it will be for as long as Allah wills." It was only a matter of time before the oppressive ṭawāghīt of the Muslim world would begin to fall one-by-one to the swords of the mujāhidīn, who would raise the banner of tawḥīd, restore the ḥukm of Allah, direct the masses back to the prophetic manhaj of jihād and away from the corruption of democracy and nationalism … The mujāhidīn of the Islamic State reached yet another significant milestone on the path to restoring the prophetic khilāfah. As the operation to capture Ninawa and advance toward Baghdad and the Rāfiḍi strongholds to the south was underway, the lions succeeded in taking control of the border region [between Syria and Iraq] … and in demolishing the barriers set up to enforce the crusader partitions of the past century. The mujāhidīn had taken a major step in casting off the shackles of the kāfir nations and proving that no kāfir was strong enough to separate the Muslims from one another, neither with their artificial borders, nor with their corrupt ideologies.*[34]

Main discursive instruments utilized within the ideological discourse of this *al-Hayat* article comprise *topicalization*, *contrast*, *implications*, *and presuppositions*, and the employment of *actors*. The article basically tackles the *topic* of political borders in the Middle East, coined as "imaginary lines" and "artificial borders" produced by "crusader partitions" in accordance with the "Sykes-Picot agreement." The rapid advance on the ground enabled ISIS to systematically dismantle the border between Syria and Iraq to facilitate its operations on both sides of the borderline. It was then when the radical group announced the demolishing of the

Sykes-Picot borders: "Allah facilitated that it [ISIS] step over the Sykes-Picot borders in its jihād."[35] The consequences of the agreement are hereby pictured as grave to the "Muslim 'ummah" for it has enabled "oppressive ṭawāghīt" to rule the region, rendering the "Islamic khilāfah" into an "exotic fantasy."

The employed discourse draws a *contrast* between the "mujāhidīn" and the "kuffar"; a "prophetic manhaj of jihād" and corrupt ideologies of "democracy and nationalism"; an "Islamic khilāfah" and "ruthless ṭawāghīt"; a "Muslim 'ummah" and "kāfir nations." This discourse further *implicates* that "jihād" is the only path to liberate the "'ummah" from Western influence and "oppressive ṭawāghīt," and it *presupposes* that "khilāfah" is the only rightly guided form of ruling. The associated language use illustrates the author's attempt to consolidate a positive picture about ISIS and its alleged objectives, while presenting its enemies and rival ideologies in remarkably negative terms. Such discursive practices fall within the framework of the *Ideological Square*.

The reference to the principles of *tawḥīd*, *ṭāghūt*, *al-ḥākimiyyah*, *al-walā' wa-l-barā'*, and *jihād* illustrates the core religionized ideological tenets upon which ISIS dogmatically rests, which fundamentally trace back to Salafi-Jihadism. The Salafi-Jihadi thought and worldview could be traced and better understood through revisiting the group's selection of references and ideas, for these hold direct ties with the departure points of their philosophy and the objectives that the movement strives to realize. *Salafi-Jihadism* is thus concerned with the preservation of what it perceives as authenticity, legitimate and righteous authority, submission, and revolution, with its doctrinal components set to serve these principles and to accomplish its objectives. Sadiq al-Karkhi illustrates the key characteristics of a member of *Salafi-Jihadism* as being *Salafī-yul ʿaqīdah* (Salafi in creed), *Jihādī-yul manhaj* (Jihādi in method).[36] Such characteristics emerge as a crucial part of the image ISIS tries to consolidate about itself through the utilized discourse and terminology. Besides, sectarianism emerges as an additional dimension of ideologization in the observed discourse, particularly in terms of branding Shiʿites as "Rāfiḍi" (*rāfiḍah*) or rejectionists. Such a language use reveals deeply rooted Sunni-based sectarian sentiments of hostility toward Shiʿite Muslims. Thus, a clear distinction is hereby discursively drawn between in-group versus out-group that involves representation and misrepresentation, which constitute a basic feature of discursive ideologization.

- **Extract VII**: Article by *Dabiq* magazine:

> *The goal of establishing the Khilāfah has always been one that occupied the hearts of the mujāhidīn since the revival of jihād this century. It was always a hope the mujāhidīn were certain of attaining, for Allah's Messenger (PBUH) had promised them with it. During the jihād in Afghanistan against the communists, many of the muhajirin found themselves fighting a war similar to the one being fought in Sham now … The biggest distinguishing factors were the serious innovations that destroyed the creed and the healthy body of the Muslim jamāʿah … The jamāʿah would use the absent obligation of jihād as its fundamental means for change, implementing Allah's command, {And fight them until there is no fitnah and [until] the religion, all of it, is for Allah} [Al-Anfal: 39]. Its jihād would be based upon hijrah, bayʿah, sam', ta'ah, and i'dad, leading to ribāt and qitāl, then Khilāfah or shahādah. The mujāhidīn of the Islamic State swept through Iraq … as the lions of the Islamic State chased the filthy Ṣafawis out of numerous towns and cities, forcing them to flee all the way to Baghdad in spite of their numbers, and the billions spent on them by the crusaders on weapons and training. The storm raging through Iraq wasn't the doing of the mujāhidīn. It was simply the help of Allah, and it proceeded not only to subdue the enemies of Islam, but to also save thousands of murtaddīn from the millah of kufr and nifāq.*[37]

The employed discourse reflects an attempt to convey the ultimate objectives of ISIS's activities, namely the "(re-)establishment of Khilāfah" and the alleged "revival of jihad," through ideologization. Firstly, *topicalization*, as a tool of discursive ideologization, is utilized in terms of framing ISIS's dogmatic standpoints and the group's activities and objectives as necessary means and efforts on the path of establishing the alleged "Khilāfah." Secondly, *contrast* is constantly employed through showing ISIS's members as "mujāhidīn" and "lions" who are said to be "victorious" by the "help of Allah," while portraying rivals and opponents as "enemies of Islam," people of "kufr and nifāq," "murtaddīn," and "filthy Ṣafawis" backed by the "crusaders" or the West. Such a *contrast* is ultimately meant to proclaim ISIS as a rightful and blessed group of "mujāhidīn" seeking reformation in the ranks of the '*ummah*, and to portray those who fall outside the group's ideological framework as *kuffār*, *munāfiqīn* (hypocrites), and *murtaddīn* (apostates), many of whom are claimed to have been lured and misled by destructive innovations and notions such as "nationalism." Several concepts that emerge throughout the discourse of this *Dabiq* article are derived from the jurisprudential

building-blocks of Salafi-Jihadism, such as *riddah/irtidād* (apostasy) and *bidʿah* (heretical innovations). According to Maher, both concepts fall under the practical jurisprudential notions embraced by Salafi-Jihadis.[38]

The notion of *takfīr*—which traces back to *Wahhabism*—arises as another dimension of this Ideological discourse. In his discussion of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's definition of "true faith," Atwan maintains that such teachings as that of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab ultimately introduced the principles of *takfīr* (denouncing fellow Muslims as apostates) and *jihād* against the *kāfir* (infidel).[39] These have been later adopted by the Salafi-Jihadi movement and the organizations that belong to the same umbrella of thoughts and aspirations, including ISIS. Emphasizing the significance of territorial expansion, the revival of *jihād*, and the establishment of Khilāfah, besides demonstrating an ineradicable hostility and rancor toward modernization, illustrates ISIS's intrinsic dogmatic and ideological link to Salafi-Jihadism. Streusand explains that combating pro-modernization Muslims, toppling secular or apostate regimes, establishing Islamic Sharīʿa rule in Muslim states, restoring the caliphate, and expanding Islamic territory are key objectives of *jihād* as promoted by the Salafi-Jihadi discourse and its literature.[40]

Another tool of ideologization observed across the employed discourse is the utilization of *implications and presupposition*s. Employing phrases such as "Khilāfah or shahādah" (martyrdom) *implicates* the suicidal nature of ISIS's members and their belief in the allegedly divine reward awaiting every *shahīd* for the cause of Allah. According to Ibn Taymiyya's philosophy, *jihād* "rewards one with either a divinely supported victory over unbelief or the prize of martyrdom."[41] In his discussion and interpretation of the *ḥadīth*, Nawawi tackles the physical embodiment of *jihād* as an activity of self-sacrifice, participation in armed struggle in the path of God and aspiration for *shahādah* (martyrdom) for God's cause.[42] ISIS seems eager to justify its activities and practices as necessary efforts within the framework of *jihād* for the cause of Allah, calling upon its members and potential recruits to either be victorious through succeeding in regaining the alleged *khilāfah* or end up as *shahīd* and be rewarded by Allah in the afterlife.

Furthermore, the reference to "the *jihād* in Afghanistan" reflects a seemingly solid link between ISIS and the developments over the past few decades that eventually led to the rise of the group. The Afghan War of 1979–1989 constitutes a crucial event in a chain of developments in the history of Salafi-Jihadism, especially due to the associated rise of armed

Islamic militants or *mujāhidīn* and the eventual emergence of al-Qaeda—which has then produced ISIS. Key historical developments that have contributed to the emergence of Salafi-Jihadism include the rise of *Wahhabism* and its incorporation into politics and state-leadership in Saudi Arabia based on an agreement between Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and the founder of the Saudi dynasty Ibn Saud in the eighteenth century; the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and the suppression of its leading members by the Egyptian authorities throughout the twentieth century; the American-sponsored Egyptian-Israeli Camp David Treaty of 1978 that was followed by the assassination of the then Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in 1981 by the takfīri Wahhabi-based *al-Jamāʿa al-Islāmiyya* (the Islamic Group), whose members are considered among the pioneers of Salafi-Jihadism; the Iranian Revolution of 1979 that brought Khomeini to power and transformed Iran into a Shia-based theocratic Islamic republic, led within the ideological framework of *Wilāyat al-Faqīh* (the guardianship of the theologian); the Afghan War between 1979 and 1989 and the associated developments; and the Algerian Civil War in the period between 1991 and 2002. The employed discourse further *presupposes* the legitimacy of ISIS's alleged Khilāfah (caliphate) by means of emphasizing the principles of *bayʿah* (swearing allegiance to the caliph), *samʿ* (listening), and *ṭāʿah* (obedience) as fundamental features of the members of the *ʾummah* with regard to their relationship to the caliph. This terminology and the associated concepts originate in the establishment of the first Caliphate subsequent to the death of the Prophet, as introduced by the Sunnis.

Referring to Iraq's Shiʿite Muslims as "filthy Ṣafawi" carries deeply rooted sectarian connotations, as it refers to the historical struggle between Sunni-based Ottomans and Shia-based Safavid Persia.[43] Another term that reveals discursive sectarianization is "jamāʿah," which is usually used with reference to the Sunnis as a majority of Muslims. The term is derived from the expression *Ahl al-Sunnah wal-Jamāʿah*. Thus, the terminology utilized throughout this article reflects a substantial degree of discursive sectarianization and politicization. Given the ideological tools utilized throughout the discourse of this article, discursive ideologization seems to have been employed. Observed ideological practices include *topicalization*, *contrast*, *implications*, *and presuppositions.*

- **Extract VIII**: Article by *Dabiq* magazine:

> *The Yezidis' creed entails the worship of Iblīs … they have made Iblīs—who is the biggest tāghūt—the symbolic head of enlightenment and piety! What arrogant kufr can be greater than this? Their creed is so deviant from the truth that even cross-worshipping Christians for ages considered them devil worshippers and Satanists … they never accepted Islam nor claimed to have adopted it. The apparent origin of the religion is … expressed in the heretical vocabulary of extreme Sufism. Accordingly, the Islamic State dealt with this group as the majority of fuqahā' have indicated how mushrikīn should be dealt with … their women could be enslaved unlike female apostates who the majority of the fuqahā' say cannot be enslaved and can only be given an ultimatum to repent or face the sword. This large-scale enslavement of mushrik families is probably the first since the abandonment of the Sharī'ah law. {You are the best nation produced for mankind} [Āli 'Imrān: 110]… enslaving the families of the kuffār and taking their women as concubines is a firmly established aspect of the Sharī'ah that if one were to deny or mock, he would be denying or mocking the verses of the Qur'ān and the narrations of the Prophet (PBUH), and thereby apostatizing from Islam … May Allah bless this Islamic State with the revival of further aspects of the religion occurring at its hands.*[44]

The employed discourse reflects ISIS's attempt to impose its extremist ideology and radicalized version of Islam on populations in areas under the group's control. Discursive ideologization emerges in the form of *contrast*, *presuppositions*, *and implications*, which ultimately serve ISIS's objectives of consolidating a positive image about the group through justifying its atrocities against the Yezidi religious minority[45] and presenting the latter as "devil worshippers," "Satanists," and "kuffār" whose suppression and "enslavement" are allegedly recommended within the framework of the "Sharīʿa." This discourse implicates that the Yezidis are merely followers of "Iblīs, who is the biggest ṭāghūt" and "mushrikīn" (polytheists), who, therefore, deserve no mercy.

In order to support this extremist, sectarian, and inhumane ideology, the "Qur'ān," "narrations of the Prophet," and the "Sharīʿa" are referred to as jurisprudential bases. This shows traces of Ibn Taymiyyah's teachings—where the Qur'ān and the ḥadīth are exploited—with regard to the implementation of the Sharīʿa and the duty of the mujāhidīn in combatting and ultimately eliminating polytheism, disbelief, transgression, and evil.[46] *Dabiq*'s discourse further portrays the "Sufis" as "heretical," while ISIS's "creed" is pictured as the true version of "Islam" and the group's practices as efforts to revive "aspects of the religion." Branding the Sufis

and their interpretations of Islamic principles as "heretical" reflects the extremist Salafi-Jihadi doctrinal basis of ISIS.[47]

The emphatic promotion of the rhetoric of *takfīrism* across the observed discourse illustrates the influence of Salafi literature on ISIS's ideological tendency, particularly that of Islamic ideologues such as Sayyid Qutb. By means of such a rhetoric, Yezidi civilians are eventually dehumanized, while ISIS militants are praised as "the best people." Underlining such a *contrast* arises as a key aspect of discursive ideologization applied by the ISIS-run *Dabiq* magazine to guarantee the desired impact among the recipients and ensure the effectiveness of the implied messages. Religionization and sectarianization emerge as main dimensions of the discursive ideologization observed throughout the discourse of this text.

- **Extract IX**: Report by *al-Naba* newspaper:

> The *misled* elite and their followers of the *munāfiqīn* continue to target the *people of ʾīmān* in any way possible, exploiting all available means. They constantly attribute *false accusations* to Muslims and mock their *state* … They accuse *Ahl al-Sunnah* of deviating from Allah's path and His recommendations. They continue to spread *lies* about the Islamic State, where Muslims rather live under an *Islamic rule* and in the shadow of the *Sharīʿa law* … These *hypocrites* deny the fact that the Islamic State has enforced the *Islamic Sharīʿa* in accordance with the *Prophet's manhaj* … The society that resides in the Islamic State today won't, in any way, prove to be better than that once resided the state at the time of the Sahabah. This state is resided by the *mujāhidīn* fighters as well as the ones who sit and avoid action. Yet what we should primarily focus on is *al-Amr bil-Maʿrūf wan-Nahī ʿan al-Munkar*. This duty, as implemented by this *Islamic State*, begins with combatting *shurk*, which is the greatest of all sins and is unforgivable by Allah. *Removing injustice* and regain the *rights of the vulnerable* is another key regulation enforced by the *state*.[48]

Traces of discursive ideologization are observed throughout the discourse employed within this report by the ISIS-run *al-Naba* newspaper. A positive image about ISIS is consolidated, while critics and opponents of the group and its policies and practices are described in negative terms and hence pictured as enemies of Islam. *Topicalization*, *contrast*, and *implications* emerge as key instruments of this ideological discourse. Distinguishing between various currents within the Muslim society, namely the "misled," "munāfiqīn" (hypocrites), and "people of ʾīmān," is *topicalized* as the

most significant information conveyed through the employed discourse. ISIS is thus portrayed as an "Islamic State," its members as "mujāhidīn" and "people of ʾīmān" (belief), its practices as necessary efforts to enforce "Islamic Sharīʿa" in accordance with "the Prophet's manhaj" (method), and its objectives as "removing injustice" and protecting the "vulnerable" by means of focusing on "al-Amr bil-Maʿruf wan-Nahī ʿan al-Munkar" (enjoining good and forbidding evil). In *contrast*, ISIS's opponents are pictured as "misled" and "munāfiqīn" (hypocrites), their critique as "false" and "lies," and their attitude as "shurk" (polytheism).

Furthermore, presenting ISIS as a "state" *implicates* an institutional formation that grants ISIS the right to represent Sunni Muslims worldwide. The terminology utilized in this discourse, such as "ʾīmān" and "manhaj," reflect a particular interest in the theological literature of Salafi scholars. In a bid to explain the broadness and variance of methods to realize the Salafi version of Islam, Sheikh Salih ibn Fawzan, a prominent Salafi scholar, provides a comparison between *manhaj* and *ʿaqīdah*: "*Manhaj* is broader than *ʿaqīdah*; *Manhaj* (methodology) occurs in *ʿaqīdah*, in *sulūk* (behavior), in *ʾakhlāq* (manners), and in *muʿāmalāt* (dealings), as a part of the life of every Muslim. As for the *ʿaqīdah*, it constitutes the foundation of *ʾīmān* (faith)."[49] Sheikh Naasir ud-Deen al-Albani, also a prominent Salafi scholar, maintains that *manhaj* is deemed to be "broader than ʿaqīdah and tawḥīd" in that it allows resorting to different methods for the sake of "conveying and actualizing Islam."[50] ISIS's constant reference to "the Prophet's manhaj" as a basic method for rulings in its alleged "state" illustrates the group's attachment to certain crucial characteristics of Salafi-Jihadism.

As followers of a revivalist doctrine, Salafi-Jihadis consider themselves as the *al-ṭāʾifah al-manṣūrah* (the sole triumphant group of Muslims), and *al-firqah al-nājiyah* (the saved denomination). The doctrine supports this claim by a *ḥadīth* in which the Prophet Muhammad is reported as saying: "A group of my followers will remain victorious till Allah's Order [the Hour] comes upon them while they are still victorious."[51] The *ḥadīth* refers to an anticipated divide within the Muslim community, marked by the rise of different currents, mostly deviant, except for one group of Muhammad's followers who will remain pure in their belief and practice Islam in accordance with God's Order and will thus eventually prevail. Given the discursive ideologization observed in *al-Naba* article, this seems to be the image that ISIS tries to consolidate about itself, as *al-ṭāʾifah al-manṣūrah* and *al-firqah al-nājiyah*, while its opponents are positioned among the deviant currents.

7.1.2 Manipulative Strategies in ISIS Discourse

In order to analyze the discourse of ISIS on discursive manipulation, the *Manipulative Strategies* developed and defined by Blass are utilized. Manipulation is defined by various scholars as a form of covert attempt by a manipulator to intentionally and directly influence the recipients' beliefs, desires, emotions, choices, and attitudes toward a certain issue of relevance. It entails exploiting a recipient's insufficient knowledge about the expressed issue and lack of understating with regard to the incentives, intentions, and goals of the manipulator. Manipulation, as a notion, constitutes a key component of CDA for its connection to the concepts of social inequality and abuse of power that occur within the framework of discourse. The concept fundamentally implicates the application of constraints of which the assumed manipulated recipient is unaware. Manipulation is deemed to be a pivotal instrument utilized, for instance, by media outlets through a misleadingly persuasive discourse that primarily serves the editorial policy of a corporation and the social or political tendencies of its owners or funders. Baron maintains that discursive manipulation could take three different forms: *Deceptive*, by means of misleading the targeted audience, encouraging false assumptions, or enforcing an interpretation that is favorable to the manipulator's purpose; *pressure to acquiesce*, mainly through offering inducement or getting the recipient to agree to something to avoid further discomfort; and *emotional*, which implies eliciting emotions such as fear, sympathy, gratitude toward the manipulator or guilt in case the recipient resisted the manipulator's objectives.[52] A manipulative discourse is said to be most effective and efficient within societies encountering an ongoing state of crisis, as addressees under such conditions are deemed to be more receptive, vulnerable, and thus prone to manipulation. According to Blass, manipulation is seen as "an attempt to affect the target in such a way that his behavior/action is an instrument of attaining the goals of the manipulator, who acts without using force but in such a way that the target does not know the goal of the manipulator's actions."[53] Based on the methodological framework developed by Blass, manipulation can be conducted by means of *omission*, *commission*, or *propaganda strategies.* These discursive practices, as categories and the associated sub-categories that are hereby employed as methodological instruments within the framework of discourse analysis, are utilized for the ultimate objective of identifying manipulative aspects in the discourse of ISIS.

Extracted from ISIS-run media platforms, the following fragments are analyzed within the framework of *discursive manipulation* for the sake of exploring incorporated manipulative strategies and the potential goals they tend to accomplish.

- **Extract I**: Speech by ISIS spokesperson Abu Muhammad al-Adnani:

> *Where are the* Kāfir *West's alleged defense of "civilians" and the protection of "human rights" and "freedom"? Indeed, the false and deceiving mask of nobility has fallen, showing its ugly face under the Nuṣayri barrels of death, destruction, and gas. America and its allies do not ache or feel pain, except when the mujāhidīn advance and gain victories. The world does not weep at the Russian and Nuṣayri massacres each day against the Muslims. They are not disturbed by the hunger, disease, suffering, and death of thousands of helpless and besieged children, women, and elderly people … So it is not transgression, criminal, or terrorism unless it is perpetrated by a Muslim; just as it is not transgression, criminal, or terrorism if the victim is a Muslim … The evil scholars, the shuyukh of dollars and dinars, and the assembly of sorcerers, hypocrites, and agents, then the falsity of their fatwas, which they vomit, has become clear … When the mujāhidīn gain a foothold in some city, ruling therein by what Allah revealed, their blood boils and they burst in anger, regurgitating their vomit and passing the fatwa to disobey the mujāhidīn and to fight them, expel them, and to uproot them, no matter the cost of Muslim blood, ruin, and destruction … To soldiers and supporters of the Khilāfah in Europe and America, O slaves of Allah, O muwaḥidīn! If the ṭawāghīt have shut the door of hijrah in your faces, then open the door of jihād in theirs.*[54]

Several manipulative strategies are observed throughout the discourse employed within this speech by al-Adnani. Firstly, *omission* has been utilized as a strategy to keep the recipients in the dark in terms of certain crucial information with regard to the atrocities committed by ISIS's members against the very same "Muslims" the group claims to protect, based on sectarian and political differences. The ultimate objective of the utilization of such a manipulative strategy is to demonstrate that ISIS is merely concerned with the safety and well-being of the Muslims while fighting the "Kāfir" forces of the "West" and their "agents" across the region. Any information that might contradict this allegation or harm such an image about ISIS as a protector of Muslims is being withheld.

With respect to the language use in the course of this speech, *takfīrism* emerges as a key aspect of the employed discourse, which fundamentally

reflects the extremist nature of ISIS. Secondly, *implicit commission* arises as another manipulative strategy utilized in the observed discourse. Emphasizing alleged double-standards of the "Kāfir West" and their "agents" with regard to "human rights," particularly when certain developments involve "Muslims," is ultimately meant to render declared Western principles baseless when it comes to protecting and defending human rights. Such discursive practices reflect implicit attempts to show ISIS as the only party to be trusted by Muslims as a defender of their honor and protector of their rights. According to Blass, this particular manipulative strategy is primarily aimed at leading the addressees to "acquire a belief" and eventually "accept" the narrative of and messages delivered by the addresser.[55]

A third form of manipulation observed in the speech is *repetition*, as a *propaganda strategy* utilized throughout this discourse. It mainly concerns the emphatic and frequent reference to the religiosity of ISIS with respect to the group's goals, policies, and practices. One of the key words repeatedly employed to define members of ISIS is "mujāhidīn," whose struggle is said to be "righteous" and in the path of "Allah." Such a strategy is deemed one of the key manipulative tools in discourse, as it guarantees a continuous "exposure of the same information" to invite the addressee to think about it and "have it therefore easily accessible."[56]

- **Extract II**: Article by *Dabiq* magazine:

> *In executing the mujāhidīn, Jordan is merely hastening the inevitable destruction of its tāghūt regime. Allah's Messenger (PBUH) said, "Whoever harms an ally of Mine, then I have declared war against him" [Sahīh al- Bukhārī]. In burning the crusader pilot alive and burying him under a pile of debris, the Islamic State carried out a just form of retaliation for his involvement in the crusader bombing campaign which continues to result in the killing of countless Muslims—men, women, and children—who survive the airstrikes are left injured and disabled. {And if you punish [an enemy], punish with an equivalent of that with which you were harmed} [An-Nahl: 126]. {So whoever has assaulted you, then assault him in the same way that he has assaulted you} [Al-Baqarah: 194]. We ask Allah to take revenge for the Muslims and the mujāhidīn, and rain fire and destruction upon the kuffār and murtaddīn wherever they are.*[57]

In a bid to justify the brutal execution of the Jordanian pilot through burning him to death, *Dabiq* refers to the victim as an operative of the

anti-ISIS International Coalition, coined as "crusader," describing the execution as an act of "retaliation" and "revenge" for the Muslims killed by coalition airstrikes. Such a discursive practice falls under the *propaganda strategy* of *emotional appeal*, particularly through the explicit reference to the civilian victims of airstrikes supposedly carried out by the executed pilot. *Emotional appeal* implicates attempts by the addresser to reach and touch on the feelings of the recipients in a bid to deliver a message and amplify its impact.[58] Emphasizing the "suffering" of the Muslims under the so-called crusader bombing campaign is particularly meant to emotionally manipulate the addressees and eventually lead them to believe the *Dabiq* narrative on the justification of the execution as an act of "retaliation" for the sake of Muslims residing ISIS-controlled areas.

Besides, the extreme form of execution is further discursively justified based on theological sources, particularly by means of reciting a ḥadīth and a couple of Qur'ānic verses, such as [An-Nahl: 126] and [Al-Baqarah: 194]. This reveals the selective nature of Salafi-Jihadis when it comes to the recitation of theological sources in the course of justifying their actions and practices. According to Wright et al., basic concepts within the Islamic faith have been radicalized by the Salafi-Jihadis in a process that has eventually led to the rise of some of the most fanatic and atrocious organizations in terms of thought, ideology, discourse, and course of action.[59]

Another manipulative strategy utilized by the author is *omission*, as the article fails to address any of the atrocities conducted by ISIS militants toward the very "Muslims" the group claims to be protecting and defending. The focus is rather shifted toward the "crusader" coalition as a source of miseries and "suffering" among the Muslims in ISIS-held areas. Moreover, employing terms such as "ṭāghūt," "kuffār," and "murtaddīn" basically reflects the *takfīri* mentality of ISIS, as promoted by the pioneers of Salafi-Jihadism.[60]

- **Extract III**: News report by *al-Naba* newspaper:

At least 25 members of the Rāfiḍah army have been killed in an ambush planned by soldiers of the Islamic State in Wilayat al-Furat on Friday. The media office of Wilayat al-Furat has confirmed that dozens of boats manned by members of the Rāfiḍah and Riddah members have departed al-Khafsah district, heading toward al-Jazeera region to target Muslim civilians. While they were passing by the ambush area they were attacked from different directions. At least 10 of these boats have been destroyed and 25 murtad were killed, while

> *those who survived fled the scene. Soldiers of the Islamic State had targeted on Thursday members of the Rāfiḍah army in Wilayat al-Furat. At least four murtad from the Rāfiḍah army were killed.*[61]

A main manipulative strategy employed in this news report is *explicit commission* by means of *deliberate ambiguities*. In order to consolidate a multifaceted negative picture about the Iraqi army forces, hereby described as troops of "Rāfiḍah" and "Riddah," the author mainly sheds light on alleged atrocities carried out by these enemy forces, such as deliberately targeting "civilians," while emphasizing the military capabilities of the so-called soldiers of the Islamic State. Yet, the addressees are kept in the dark concerning the losses of ISIS in such military operations and atrocities committed by the group against civilians on the other side. Such *deliberate ambiguities* are meant to ensure the delivery of the intended messages and to guarantee the desired impact among the recipients.

The *propaganda strategy* of *repetition* emerges as another manipulative strategy seemingly utilized within the framework of the observed discourse. In a bid to stigmatize and dehumanize the enemy, terms such as "Rāfiḍah" (rejectionist) and "murtad" (apostate) are repeatedly employed to describe members of the Iraqi security and army forces. The frequent exposure to the same information invites the addressees to think about this information, a process that may eventually lead to (re)shaping their beliefs and behaviors in accordance with the addresser's desires. With regard to language use, the Shiʿites are hereby referred to as "Rāfiḍi" or rejectionists, which is derived from the source term "rāfiḍah." Branding Shiʿite Muslims as such holds immensely sectarian sentiments, since the term has first emerged during the historical Sunni-Shia rift over the rightly guided successor of the Prophet. Such language use illustrates the remarkable degree of sectarian-based contempt ISIS appears to hold toward the Shiʿite Muslims and reflects a considerable level of discursive sectarianization as witnessed throughout the discourse employed by *al-Naba* within this news report.

Furthermore, the employment of terms like "riddah" (apostasy) and "murtad" (apostate) elucidate the extremist Salafi-Jihadi nature of ISIS, particularly in the way the group—whose discourse is hereby delivered by al-Naba—strives for labelling and branding individuals based on extremist jurisprudential interpretations. The notion of *riddah/irtidād* is derived from the jurisprudential building-blocks of Salafi-Jihadism, just like *takfīr* (denouncing fellow Muslims as apostates) and *jihād* against the *kāfir* (infidel).

- **Extract IV**: Report by al-Hayat Media Center:

> *In Wilayat al-Barakah this year was the best one since the year 2000, and it came after years of drought. To ensure the success of the harvest in Wilayat al-Barakah, the Islamic State provided harvest machine owners many things to facilitate their work, expecting an increase in barakah this season. At the start of the season, landowners were informed of the obligation to pay Zakah, which would be collected by the Islamic State. Once the season has ended, the wilaya's department of Zakah will distribute Zakah in accordance with Shar'i guidelines. {Zakah expenditures are only for the poor and for the needy and for those employed to collect [zakah] and for bringing hearts together [for Islam] and for freeing captives [or slaves] and for those in debt and for the cause of Allah and for the [stranded] traveller—an obligation imposed by Allah. And Allah is knowing and Wise} [At-Tawbah: 60]. Islamic police safeguards Ar-Raqqa … They've tackled many difficulties, carried many burdens, and become accustomed to sleepless nights, all for the sake of spreading safety and security across the wilayah. The men of the Islamic police force in Wilayat Ar-Raqqa are a group composed of some of the best men of the Islamic State and its people, and are responsible for protecting the Muslims and their property from being violated. They work day and night patrolling the streets and alleyways, and set up security checkpoints in order to guard the safety of the Muslims.*[62]

Aspects of discursive manipulation arise throughout the discourse employed in this report, showing attempts to portray ISIS as an institutional organization staffed by committed members and civil servants whose alleged main objective is to serve the citizens in areas held by the group and to ensure their well-being. One of the main manipulative strategies utilized in the observed discourse is *explicit commission* by means of *exaggeration*. This is primarily witnessed in the discursive attempts to show how well organized ISIS is and how the group strives for guaranteeing the "safety" of civilians and the "security" of areas controlled by the so-called Islamic State through a supposedly unique system of governance.[63] The quality of the services allegedly provided by ISIS is emphasized and the commitment of the group's members is reiterated, as shown by the language use. Syria's northeastern province of Hasakah, called by *al-Hayat* "Wilayat al-Barakah," is said to have been suffering from "drought" for years up until the arrival of the so-called Islamic State, which has supposedly brought about "Barakah" or blessed increase of profit to the area and its people.

The members of ISIS's so-called Islamic police are described as "the best men" who work "day and night" to ensure the "safety" of the Muslims and "protect" their interests. Delivering such an exaggeratedly positive image about the group is primarily aimed at ensuring a resounding impact among the recipients as desired by *al-Hayat*, which represents one of the key mouthpieces of ISIS as an organization. Employing the term and concept of "Zakah" in this context can be seen as an endeavor to discursively religionize the framework within which ISIS operates, given the fact that "Zakah" (Zakāt) or the distribution of alms to the poor is one of the five duties incumbent on every Muslim, known as *Arkān al-Islām*. The claim of ISIS with regard to applying this duty on an organizational level is further discursively supported by means of reciting verse 60 of At-Tawbah chapter of the Qur'ān.

Moreover, the *propaganda strategy* of *emotional appeal* emerges as another aspect of discursive manipulation within the framework of this report, particularly when addressing the situation of those in need and the group's insistence on applying the "Sharʿi guidelines" in order to guarantee the welfare of citizens residing ISIS-held areas. The same strategy arises in the context of tackling the alleged sacrifices of the so-called Islamic police in Raqqa for the sake of "protecting the Muslims" and ensuring their "safety." This discourse echoes Ibn Taymiyya's teachings about authority and his interpretation of power as a trust or *'amānah* from God that needs to be exercised in accordance with the terms laid down in the Islamic Sharīʿa.[64] The image *al-Hayat* insists to convey about ISIS and the way the group runs its areas through this manipulative discourse is of a *utopian* nature, illustrating extreme attempts to convince the addressees about the goodness and piety of ISIS and the righteousness of its practices and activities. Hence, *omission* can be considered an additional form of manipulation in the context of this report's discourse, particularly with regard to the way *al-Hayat* seems to avoid mentioning any of the violent practices and atrocities committed by ISIS against the very same people the group claims to defend, protect and care for.

- **Extract V**: News report by *al-Naba* newspaper:

The soldiers of the Islamic State have expelled the Nuṣayri army from key military posts and the Durehem oil field near the district of Khanasir in Aleppo's southern countryside. The advance came after the soldiers of the Islamic State launched a surprise attack against the strongholds of the Nuṣayri army and the

allied Rāfiḍi militias … Soldiers of the Caliphate have also taken control of several towns and villages in the area following heavy clashes with the Rāfiḍi militias and the Nuṣayri army … The Nuṣayri troops fled the battlefield after suffering heavy losses under heavy bombardment by the soldiers of the Caliphate … The mujāhidīn were able to eliminate dozens of murtaddīn, including Iranian Rāfiḍis … The army of the Nuṣayri regime has also lost a T72 tank, as it exploded while trying to hit the sites of the mujāhidīn. The soldiers of the caliphate had launched a military operation aimed at blocking the main supply route of the Nuṣayri army near Aleppo … Amongst the losses of the Nuṣayri army were 450 murtad who were killed by the mujāhidīn.[65]

Certain traces of manipulation can be identified in the discourse of this news article. Key manipulative strategies emerging throughout the utilized discourse include *explicit commission*, *implicit commission*, and *repetition*. Firstly, *explicit commission* seems to have been employed by means of *exaggeration* with regard to the military capabilities of ISIS in contrast to those of the enemy forces. An emphatic light is shed on ISIS's military gains, versus the losses of enemy troops in the Syrian arena. While ISIS is shown as a military power that possesses the required military strategies in order to "advance" on the ground, the Syrian army and its allies, as well as the Kurdish forces, are pictured as "suffering" enormous and mounting "losses." Secondly, *implicit commission* is employed by means of delivering and emphasizing detailed information concerning the kind of losses anti-ISIS troops have encountered during the mentioned clashes. This particular strategy is meant to create a sense of accuracy and credibility with respect to the reported developments on the ground and lead the addressees to believe in the allegedly advanced military capabilities of ISIS on the one hand, and the collapse of its enemies on the other. Thirdly, the *propaganda strategy* of *repetition* emerges as another key aspect of discursive manipulation throughout the discourse employed by *al-Naba*. The term "soldiers" is repeatedly used to describe the fighters of ISIS in a bid to portray the group as an organized and legitimate military force fighting for some righteous and justifiable objectives. Also, the term "mujāhidīn" arises frequently across the article for the sake of stressing the religious nature of ISIS's members and portraying them as pious fighters in the path of God (*jihād fī sabīl allāh*).

Amid the increasing misuse and misinterpretation of *jihād* as a term and a concept, every self-proclaimed "mujāhid" strives for justifying and eventually legitimizing his intention in a way that may satisfy a particular group

of fellow Muslims or certain Islamic scholars and seem as a form of struggling "in the way of God" while bringing about harm and damage to those designated as enemies. The enemies of ISIS are pictured by *al-Naba* as mere "murtaddīn" (apostates) who do not deserve any kind of mercy, a discursive practice particularly aimed at justifying the activities of the so-called mujāhidīn and framing their efforts as a part of *jihād fī sabīl allāh*. The term "murtad" (*pl. murtaddīn*) is fundamentally derived from the notion of *riddah/irtidād* (apostasy), which is derived from the jurisprudential building-blocks of Salafi-Jihadism and falls under the umbrella of the practical jurisprudential concepts embraced by Salafi-Jihadis.[66] Branding someone as such implicates a certain form of punishment, mostly of a merciless and violent nature when it comes to the Salafi-Jihadi legislative—and the eventual executive—framework.

In an attempt to stigmatize and dehumanize the enemy, terms such as "Rāfiḍi" (rejectionist) and "murtad" (apostate) are frequently used by *al-Naba* in reference to enemy forces. Within the framework of discursive manipulation, the frequent exposure to the same information basically represents an invitation to the recipients to think about this information, a process that may eventually lead to (re)shaping their beliefs and attitudes in accordance with the addresser's desires. The sectarian nature of the employed manipulative discourse is manifested in the language use, particularly by branding the Shiʿites as "Rāfiḍi" and the Alawites as "Nuṣayri." Branding Shiʿite Muslims as such holds deeply sectarian sentiments, for the term implicates a Shiʿite rejection to and denial of the legitimacy of any successor of the Prophet other than Ali and his descendants. Concerning the use of the term "Nuṣayri," the sectarian dimension of such a terminology stems from the fact that the roots of Alawism lie in the teachings of Muhammad ibn Nusayr an-Namiri, a Basran contemporary of the tenth Shiʿite Imām, and such teachings are seen by orthodox Sunnis as heretical innovations. This language use primarily implicates that ISIS represents *Ahl al-Sunnah wal-Jamāʿah* in what seems to have been framed as a religio-sectarian conflict.

- **Extract VI**: Article by *Dabiq* magazine:

Allah taʾālā said, {They want to extinguish the light of Allah with their mouths, but Allah refuses except to complete His light, even if the Kāfirīn despise such. It is He who sent His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth to manifest it over all religion, even if the mushrikīn despise such} [At-Tawbah:

32–33]. His Messenger said, "Indeed, Allah gathered the Earth for me, and thus I saw its eastern and western extents, and indeed the reign of my 'ummah will reach what was gathered for me from the Earth" [Sahīh Muslim]… This is the promise of Allah. The true religion—embodied by the Jamāʿah of the Muslims (the Khilāfah) and their Imām (the Khalīfah)—will be manifest over all false religions, with proof and evidence and by the sword and spear, even if the kāfirīn and mushrikīn despise such … The Khalīfah Ibrāhīm accepted the bayʿāt from all groups and individuals who pledged allegiance from other lands. Thus, while the eyes of the world were all blinded and spellbound by the sorcerous media "covering" the battle of ʿAyn al-Islām, the eyes of the Islamic State were scanning East and West, preparing for the expansion that—by Allah's permission—would put an end to the Jewish State, Āl Salūl, and the rest of the apostate tawāghīt … filling the world with the truth and justice of Islam.[67]

This article mainly tackles the ambitious plan of ISIS to expand its territory and scope of influence. Discursive manipulation is employed through the utilization of several strategies, such as *implicit commission*, *repetition*, and *emotional appeal*. Religionization emerges as a particularly interesting dimension of the observed discourse, especially with the recitation of the Qur'ān and the ḥadīth in a way that serves the ultimate objectives of ISIS, that is, the allegedly destined necessity to expand. Certain phrases and messages that arise within the recited verses are seemingly reused throughout the observed discourse in a bid to religionize ISIS's activities and ambitions, particularly with regard to what the "kāfirīn" and "mushrikīn" fundamentally "despise" and what is deemed to be the plan of "Allah" and the ambition of "His Messenger." This plan, namely the spread of Islam as a "religion of truth" across the globe, is claimed to be a key goal of ISIS and is to be implemented through the group's efforts and the determination of its members. This message is being reiterated throughout the employed discourse, taking the form of *implicit commission*, which implicates delivering and stressing particular information with the goal of leading the recipients to embrace the implicit message.

Emotional appeal seems to have also been utilized across *Dabiq*'s discourse. The employment of certain phrases such as "true religion," "Allah's permission," and "truth and justice of Islam" are aimed at touching on the feelings of the mainly Muslim addressees and lure them to believe that ISIS's alleged "Khilāfah" is the only path toward implementing the words of Allah and His Messenger and lead the "'ummah" to the promised glory. In this context, ISIS claims to embody and represent the

"Jamāʿah" of the Muslims and calls its leader the "'īmām" and "Khalīfah" of the "true" Muslims. In order to ensure the impact of this message, *repetition* is utilized with regard to stigmatizing and denouncing the enemies of ISIS. A set of terms with negative connotations are attributed to the perceived enemies, including *kāfirīn*, *mushrikīn*, *apostates*, and *ṭawāghīt*. The excessive discursive attempt to discredit and degrade the perceived enemies is ultimately aimed at showing ISIS as the only righteous party to this supposedly holy war.

In a bid to emphasize the legitimacy of ISIS's alleged "Khilāfah" and its supposed "Khalīfah," the term "bayʿāt" (*sing. bayʿah*, swearing allegiance to the Caliph) is employed. The utilization of such terms as "Jamāʿah" and "bayʿāt" while referring to the so-called Islamic State is meant to assert the legitimacy and validity of ISIS's "Khilāfah." Within the framework of stigmatizing ISIS's enemies, *Dabiq* brands the Saudi royal family as "Āl Salūl," a term that carries negative connotations and stands for *munāfiq* or hypocrite. According to Bunzel, *Āl Salūl* is basically a designation referring to Abdallah ibn Ubayy ibn Salul, a leader of the so-called hypocrites of early Islam who are repeatedly denounced in the Qur'ān.[68] Ibn Salul is regarded poorly in the Islamic history as a hypocrite (munāfiq) because his conversion to Islam was considered by many as false. Hence, in ISIS's narrative the Saudi royal family is branded as such for its failure to live up to the expectations of Muslims and selling out the creed. The language use, particularly terms relating to the principles of *takfīr* and the struggle against *shurk* and *ṭāghūt*, illustrates ISIS's intrinsic dogmatic and ideological link to Salafi-Jihadism.

7.2 Al-Hashd al-Shaabi Discourse

Subsequent to its establishment in the summer of 2014, al-Hashd al-Shaabi has launched several media outlets with the objective of promoting its vision and propagandizing its claimed impact on the ground in Iraq. Al-Hashd's media activities, which have primarily taken a digital form, exemplify what Amos describes as a mirror to the political-sectarian divide in Iraq.[69] The discourse employed by the organization in the process of delivering its messages to the addressees is believed to carry traces of ideological and manipulative practices for the purpose of securing a significant impact. The exploration of such potential practices in the discourse of al-Hashd may contribute to acquiring a better understanding of critical discursive aspects, such as politicization, religionization, and sectarianization.

7.2.1 Ideologization Within the Discourse of al-Hashd al-Shaabi

Discursive ideologization refers to integrating ideological standpoints or promoting specific political agendas by means of discursive strategies, which basically imply an attempt to ideologize potential recipients, mobilize their support around the delivered message, and incite their advocacy concerning its objectives. Identifying ideological standpoints in discourse requires openness to alternative constructions of the same reality as well as sufficient knowledge and understanding of the specific background and context of the delivered message. Carver and Hyvärinen suggest that one of the strategic analytical tools to investigate ideology in discourse is reviewing a discourse "politically," since politics is deemed to be "contingent, plural and conflictual."[70] When members of an organization explain, motivate, or legitimize their (group-based) actions, "they typically do so in terms of ideological discourse."[71] The *Ideological Square*, employed as a methodological framework for analysis, primarily implicates considerable attempts to discursively consolidate a *positive* image about the *in-group* and a *negative* perception about the rival *other*. Thus, applying this method on the research data extracted from al-Hashd al-Shaabi-operated media outlets is primarily meant to facilitate the process of examining different dimensions of the discourse employed by the organization.

The following fragments are extracted from the digital platforms of media outlets run by al-Hashd al-Shaabi, including *al-Tawjih al-Aqaidi Corporation*, *Humat al-Watan* magazine, and *al-Hashd al-Shaabi* newspaper. The extracts are analyzed within the framework of *discursive ideologization* for the sake of exploring incorporated discursive practices and their ultimate objectives.

- **Extract I**: Report by al-Tawjih al-Aqaidi:

The jihād of al-Hashd al-Shaabi, under the umbrella of the fatwa issued by the Supreme Religious Reference, is mainly marked by its humanitarian values. We have seen ISIS members escaping Iraqi areas disguised in women's clothes amidst the advance of al-Hashd al-Shaabi. The fatwa of jihād kifāyah has been launched by Imām al-Sistani, whose advice guaranteed the commitment of al-

> *Hashd members to the Islamic principles and humanitarian values with regard to the way women, children and the elderly should be treated … The mujāhidīn of al-Hashd al-Shaabi have opened humanitarian corridors to ensure a safe passage for the civilians from conflict zones, embraced these civilians and provided them with basic supplies. The mujāhidīn of al-Hashd have also protected private property in the liberated areas. They have never violated such principles … This ideal behavior by al-Hashd has been witnessed in various conflict areas, such as Falluja, where the mujāhidīn of al-Hashd accomplished victory in a short period of time without harming life inside the city. After liberation, the city was handed over to the security forces. Despite all of that, some mercenary media outlets insisted on smearing the reputation of al-Hashd al-Shaabi with the goal of depriving it of its legitimacy … Al-Hashd has always committed itself to liberating the country from ISIS, protecting civilians and ensuring their safety. Sectarian differences have been avoided during these efforts by the mujāhidīn of al-Hashd al-Shaabi. Al-Hashd has given a great lesson to everyone in terms of national unity in the face of the forces of darkness.*[72]

Main aspects of the ideologization observed within this discourse include the *level of description and degree of detail*, *implications*, and drawing a *contrast* between involved *actors*. Members of al-Hashd al-Shaabi are presented as "mujāhidīn" who are committed to "Islamic principles" and "humanitarian values," whose practices are mainly described as a part of an "ideal behavior" solely focused on the "liberation" of the homeland and the "protection" of civilians, regardless of "sectarian differences." This emerges in *contrast* to what ISIS basically stands for, which is coined as "darkness." Branding areas taken over by al-Hashd al-Shaabi as "liberated" *implicates* that rivals form an occupying force, and emphasizing al-Hashd's concern about the "safety" of Iraqi civilians *implicates* barbaric and suppressive practices by such rivals as ISIS toward civilians.

The extensive *description* of al-Hashd al-Shaabi's commitment to "liberating" the country, guaranteeing the "safety" of its citizens and preserving "national unity" is meant to consolidate a positive image about al-Hashd vis-à-vis ISIS as "forces of darkness." Hence, while multiple positive characteristics are attributed to al-Hashd al-Shaabi, negative features are only attributed to ISIS. This emerges as a key reflection of the discursive ideologization utilized throughout this article by *al-Tawjih al-Aqaidi*. Portraying al-Hashd members as "mujāhidīn" is meant to show those fighters as the sole *true* representatives of *Islamic jihād* in the Iraqi conflict, which indirectly deprives ISIS fighters of the title and renders them illegitimate or *false* mujāhidīn. This discourse holds traces of the

historic differences between the Shiʿites and the Sunnis, including the interpretation of *jihād* in accordance with sectarian disagreements. Sunni and Shia Muslims principally agree on the application of *jihād* once certain circumstances exist that basically justify struggle in the path of God. Such circumstances include the defense of faith, territory, property, and way of life.[73] However, the issue of having an eligible and righteous authority to wage and direct *jihād* emerged as a divisive factor between Sunnis and Shiʿites. According to the Sunni interpretation of "right authority" that has the right to call for and direct *jihād*, all Muslim Caliphs, including the rightly guided first four Caliphs and those who followed, possess the right to wage and guide *jihād* as long as they hold the political and religious authority and possess the support of Islamic scholars or *ʿulamā'*. Whereas the Shia believe that this right has been exclusively meant for the Imāms, but it was arbitrarily and wrongly taken away from them by the Sunni majority. This disagreement is deeply rooted in the Sunni-Shia original struggle over whether religio-political leadership was meant to be passed on by bloodline, known as the *Shia Imamate*, or through election, known as the *Sunni Caliphate*.[74] Therefore, while ISIS claims to represent Sunni Muslims in its struggle for (re-)establishing the caliphate within the framework of its version of *jihād*, the Shiʿite al-Hashd al-Shaabi strives for emphasizing the legitimacy of its *jihād* since it is based on the "fatwa" of "Imām al-Sistani." This can be interpreted as a manifestation of the rivalry between the *Shia Imamate* and the *Sunni Caliphate*, and the associated differences in interpreting the concept of *jihād* on a sectarian basis.

Employing the term "jihād kifāyah" is meant to emphasize the voluntary basis of the alleged *jihād* claimed by al-Hashd al-Shaabi. According to Hegghammer, the common understanding of the notion of *jihād* does not particularly implicate a requirement of every individual Muslim, known as *farḍ ʿayn*, but rather a general obligation of the Muslim community or a collective duty, known as *farḍ kifāyah*.[75] Considering *jihād* as a collective requirement rather than an individual duty stems from the fact that the concept essentially entails a voluntary activity rather than a compulsory one. Besides the rise of *farḍ kifāyah* as a key feature of the "jihād" claimed by al-Hashd, another main characteristic of this *jihād* is being defensive in nature, namely *Jihād al-Daf'*.[76] While the term is not literally utilized in the context of the *al-Tawjih al-Aqaidi*'s text, the extensive description of the efforts of al-Hashd al-Shaabi illustrates a discursive attempt to manifest the military campaign carried out by group as a form

of defensive struggle for the sake of the land and its people. This is to be traced in the Shia interpretation of *jihād* and its tenets. According to the mainstream Shia scholars, while the *defensive jihād* that is aimed at protecting and defending the *'ummah* against an outside attack may be authorized by the *Mujtahids*, in this case a supreme religious reference such as Imām Ali al-Sistani, the authorization of *offensive jihād* remains unlawful in the absence of the Hidden Imām.

Having an identity marked by grievances and suffering, the Shiʿites perceive Sunnis as the main source of their miseries throughout history and they therefore believe in the need to resist and fight against what they deem to be a long-standing injustice and oppression practiced against them. In terms of combatting fellow Muslims under the banner of *jihād*, Moghadam refers to a classical Shia interpretation of *jihād* that falls under "jihād of the sword," which permits fighting even against fellow Muslims once those are found guilty of spreading discord, schism, and injustice in the Islamic realm.[77] This is exactly what *al-Tawjih al-Aqaidi* tends to discursively convey to its addressees. The discourse of this article shows an attempt to deliver a message that implicates that al-Hashd al-Shaabi has launched *jihād* against a group of Muslims who try to spread fear, hostility, and injustice among the people. Thus, this discourse reflects a unique example of ideologization, wherein religionization and sectarianization are instrumentalized.

- **Extract II**: Article by al-Tawjih al-Aqaidi:

> *In the aftermath of the downfall of the regime of Saddam Hussein in 2003, the Baathis fled and their ideology, which comprised nationalism, religion and the sect, was destroyed. The developments have shown that the nationalist ideology of the Baath Party has been employed in the practices of the Salafists. Following the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime, most of the Baathis have suffered an ideological crisis until they eventually found in the radical Islamism a convenient incubator for their continuity. While the former Shia Baathis returned to their sectarian incubator and fortified themselves by taking a rightful path, the Sunni Baathis embraced Salafism and joined organizations such as al-Qaeda and ISIS. The Shia joined the government's institutions in the Shiʿite state that arose on the rubble of the Sunni Baathi rule. Hence, the Shia Baathis took a right path through joining the government institutions, while the Sunni Baathis embraced Salafism and extremism and joined or sympathized with radical groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS.*[78]

Aspects of politicization, religionization, and sectarianization appear as basic features of the ideological discourse employed in this text. Sunnis and Shia emerge as key *actors* in terms of shaping and reshaping the political scenery in the Iraqi arena. The utilized discourse suggests a struggle for power and a competition for (re)gaining authority between desperate, ideologically disoriented Sunnis, and righteous Shia. Describing the Baathist ideology as comprising "nationalism," "religion," and "the sect," besides the explicit reference to today's Iraq as a "Shiʿite state" in *contrast* to what is discursively considered as a Sunni state under the former regime of Saddam Hussein, illustrates a religio-political and sectarian foundation of the employed discourse.

Tackling the concept of "nationalism" in such a context reflects what Hourani considers to be a tension between different ideas and a desperate attempt to intermingle nationalism with other notions of relevance to a state seeking stability and aspiring for maintaining balances.[79] The Baath Party was established in 1943 in Damascus by two Syrian schoolteachers who had studied at the Sorbonne in Paris during the 1920s, namely, Michel Aflaq, a Greek Orthodox Christian, and Salah al-Din al-Bitar, a Sunni Muslim. The party adopted its constitution in 1947. It merged with the Syrian Socialist Party in 1953 and together they founded the Arab Socialist Baath (Renaissance) Party [*Ḥizb al-Baʿath al-ʿArabī al-Ishtirākī*]. The Baath Party declared non-alignment and opposition to colonialism and imperialism as basic principles in its mission statement, allegedly taking inspiration from what it considered to be positive values of Islam and expressed ambition to combat class divisions. The basic structure of the Baath Party was significantly centralized and largely authoritarian. Aflaq and al-Bitar envisioned the Baath Party as a modern revolutionary movement that would unite Arabs and liberate their lands from colonial control.[80] Its message of pan-Arab unity held great appeal to the peoples inhabiting the territories of Syria, Iraq, and Transjordan in the 1940s, and by the 1960s the Baath Party had become a dominant player in the Syrian and Iraqi politics. In 1968, the Baath Party became the sole ruling force in Iraq, and in 1979 prominent Baathist Saddam Hussein took over and stayed in power until the American invasion in 2003.

Another particular manifestation of the bases upon which this discourse rests is the eventual association of the former Sunni adherents of the Baathist ideology with "extremism" and "radical Islamism," while describing the Shia's return to the so-called sectarian incubator as a demonstration of commitment to a "rightful path." Islamism, as a concept and

phenomenon, refers to social and political expressions prevalent within Islamic societies, aimed at integrating and incorporating Islam into state affairs, politics, economics, and legal systems. It is deemed a form of instrumentalization of Islam by certain individuals or organizations that seek political goals.[81] According to Adediji, politicization, as a notion of fundamental ties with politics and power, forms an intrinsic dimension of 'discursive idelogization' in that it promotes politically guided messages of those in power with the objective of influencing supposedly vulnerable recipients.[82] Traces of the *Ideological Square* arise throughout the discourse of *al-Tawjih al-Aqaidi*, particularly in the form of *emphasizing* positive features about the Shia and negative ones about the Sunnis, while *de-emphasizing* negative aspects about the former and any potential positive features about the latter. Thus, a clear-cut *contrast* is drawn between the Shiʿites and the Sunnis, as major *actors* in the Iraqi arena. The Shiʿites are portrayed as a rightly guided component of the Iraqi society, abiding by the rules and regulations of the state and are associated with the government and its institutions. This while the Sunnis, especially former Baathis, are portrayed as adherents of "Salafism," "radical Islamism," and "extremism." This can be seen as a manifestation of what Dixon coins as "sectarian narrative," which has become a basic explanatory feature of conflicts occurring in the region and a crucial discursive tool utilized among rivals.[83]

The broad *level of description* utilized to consolidate a negative image about Iraq's Sunnis associated with the late Baathist rule in Iraq extends to link these "Sunnis" to terrorist organizations such as "al-Qaeda and ISIS." This language use implicates a sectarian-based attraction to extremism, and the frequent reference to Sunni Muslims in this regard shows implicit discursive attempts to picture the Sunnis as prone to sympathizing and eventually joining radical Islamist groups, while demonstrating that the Shiʿites are immune to the impact and influence of such organizations. Such discursive practices relate to Liechty and Clegg's definition of sectarianism and sectarianization as a system of attitudes, beliefs, and actions arising in the form of distorted expressions, involving "a religious element" as well as a negative mixture of politics and religion.[84] The intended impact of such a discourse among the recipients, as well as the associated messages, whether implicit or explicit, falls within the framework of what Brewer calls "attitudes and practices" that invoke religious differences as the boundary marker to represent social stratification and conflict.[85]

- **Extract III**: Article by al-Tawjih al-Aqaidi:

> *Most of the world's terrorist groups and the Wahhabis claim that al-Hashd al-Shaabi targets people on a sectarian basis and destroy their private properties. However, al-Hashd al-Shaabi has proven otherwise, as its fighters confronted ISIS terrorists and liberated the cities of Fallujah, Salahuddin, Tikrit, Mosul and parts of Diala province in Iraq. Al-Hashd al-Shaabi mainly protects and defends the people of Iraq, governmental institutions and sacred religious sites. Many martyrs of al-Hashd have fallen for the sake of liberating Iraq and its people from ISIS terrorists who have brutally oppressed the people and caused a lot of destruction in the occupied parts of the country. Furthermore, forces of al-Hashd al-Shaabi have provided humanitarian aid to the displaced families, liberated areas occupied by ISIS, helped people starting a new life and ensured security for everyone.*[86]

As the article primarily addresses accusations by opponents to the practices of al-Hashd al-Shaabi troops in Iraq, positive characteristics of al-Hashd are *topicalized*, while the legitimacy and background of the reported accusations and critique are *de-topicalized*. The discourse employed is primarily focused on depriving the allegations of any potential credibility and render them unjustifiable and eventually baseless. This process is being discursively facilitated by means of rather emphasizing the accomplishments of al-Hashd in the war on "terrorism" and further shifting the focus to the negative image of those claimed to have basically initiated such accusations.

In order to ensure the intended impact among the recipients, a *contrast* is drawn between al-Hashd and its objectives and achievements, on the one hand, and those criticizing the organization, their practices, and what they stand for, on the other hand. Those claiming that al-Hashd "targets people on a sectarian basis" are labeled as "terrorists," "Wahhabis," brutal oppressors, and occupiers. Whereas al-Hashd al-Shaabi is described as a liberating force that ultimately desires to "protect" and "defend" Iraq and its people, besides seeking to ensure "security" for all Iraqis and provide "humanitarian aid" to those in need. Using the term "everyone" while tackling the issue of "security" mainly *implicates* that al-Hashd's struggle is for the sake of all citizens and *presupposes* that any claims about the group targeting people on a "sectarian basis" are unfounded and remain unjustifiable.

Furthermore, a great *level of description* is observed with respect to the values and accomplishments of the forces of al-Hashd al-Shaabi. Names of

cities and provinces said to have been "liberated" by al-Hashd are mentioned in detail, and the group's protection to the people, governmental institutions, and religious sites is underlined. Besides, "martyrs" of al-Hashd are referred to in a bid to draw the addressees' attention to the sacrifices of the organization in the conflict against ISIS. Therefore, the discursive practices utilized throughout this article reflect certain dimensions of the *Ideological Square* and illustrate an apparent degree of discursive ideologization aspired for by *al-Tawjih al-Aqaidi*. It is also worth mentioning that the use of the term "Wahhabis" in reference to the critics of the Shia-led al-Hashd al-Shaabi holds traces of discursive sectarianization. The term is utilized to indicate an extreme nature of those criticizing al-Hashd, namely Sunni critics and opponents, given that *Wahhabism* is deemed to be the most extreme manifestation of radical Sunni Islam. This stems from the fact that the teachings of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, whose *manhaj*'s followers—predominantly Sunnis—are referred to as Wahhabis, mainly focus on *takfīr* (denouncing fellow Muslims as apostates) and *jihād* against the *kāfir* (infidel). This *manhaj* is also believed to have played a significantly influential role among contemporary Salafis and their worldview. Hence, the use of the term in this context discloses the sectarian-based orientation of the author.

- **Extract IV**: Article by al-Tawjih al-Aqaidi:

Many experts in the Iraqi affairs associate the holy celebration of the martyrdom of al-Hussein during the Fortieth Visit and the rise of al-Hashd al-Shaabi. This is one of the main reasons for the sacred image of al-Hashd al-Shaabi, as these mujāhidīn derive their saintliness from this sacred celebration. The fatwa of the Religious Reference Ali al-Sistani has played a key role in the formation of al-Hashd and the associated sacredness of these forces. This fatwa is seen as a visible proof of a hidden sacred evidence to the saintliness of al-Hashd forces, namely the link between al-Hashd and the Fortieth Visit to the shrine of the master of all martyrs … Beside the national and religious duty performed by al-Hashd al-Shaabi, these forces represent the historical struggle amongst Shia Muslims against injustice as symbolized by the third Imām of Ahl al-Bayt, Imām al-Hussein … Today Shia parents are sending their sons to combat ISIS terrorism. Members of al-Hashd al-Shaabi derive their religious legitimacy from the Fortieth Visit, beside the fatwa of jihād kifāyah and the political and legal legitimacy of these forces who operate in accordance with the regulations of the Iraqi Parliament … The current challenges show the necessity for the continuity of al-Hashd al-Shaabi as a religious-based force to protect Iraq.

> *Whenever you ask mothers of martyrs from al-Hashd, they immediately respond by saying "it's a sacrifice for the sake of al-Hussein". This unmatched spirit is renowned amongst the Shia Muslims in Iraq. The Shia have historically suffered during the Fortieth Visit, and many of them lost their lives while under way to the shrine of Imām al-Hussein. This shows the link between this holy day and the emergence of al-Hashd al-Shaabi.*[87]

This discourse reflects a sectarian-guided tendency within the framework of discursive ideologization, with aspects of religionization and politicization involved. The ideological nature of this discourse emerges in the form of an obvious attempt to consolidate a "holy," "sacred," and "saintly" image about al-Hashd al-Shaabi and its Shiʿite members. A link is being discursively established between the Shia celebration of the martyrdom of Imām al-Hussein and the "rise" of al-Hashd al-Shaabi as an armed organization. Establishing such a link is primarily aimed at showing al-Hashd as a rightly guided armed formation and ensuring the impact of such a message among the addressees. The constant association of al-Hashd with Shiʿism and the martyrdom of al-Hussein renders the utilized discourse a unique example of sectarianization in the context of armed conflict, for it shows a clear manifestation of what Ibn Khaldun termed as *ʿaṣabīyah* or the nurturing of a group feeling at times of crisis.[88] The emphasis on Imām al-Hussein's membership to *'Ahl al-Bayt* reflects a sectarian-based Shia perspective on "sacredness" and "saintliness," wherein the sect views Imāms as carriers of the Prophetic Light, divinely safeguarded against error and sin, and possessors of an impeccable and infallible knowledge and understanding of Islam and the Qur'ān.

Besides, religionization and politicization arise as key dimensions of the employed discourse. Indicative language use observed throughout this text include phrases such as "religious legitimacy," "political legitimacy," "religious-based force," and "national and religious duty." Such a language use illustrates implicit cornerstones upon which this ideological discourse seems to be founded, particularly in terms of a politicization of religio-sectarian tenets and a religionization of conflict. The reference to the "fatwa" of Imām Ali al-Sistani, on the basis of which al-Hashd al-Shaabi is said to have been formed to launch its *jihād*, can be viewed within the context of the role of *Mujtahids* in initiating *jihād* in accordance with the Shiʿite teachings. Imām al-Sistani is thus deemed one of the *ʿulamā'* or *Mujtahids* who possess the authority to launch *jihād* in its defensive form.

The emphasis on "protection" as a key objective of al-Hashd's operations illustrates that the "jihād" referred to in this text is a *defensive jihād*. This reveals a general commitment to the Shiʿite teachings, particularly in terms of authorization to launch *jihād*, since the initiation of an *offensive jihād* remains unlawful in the absence of the Hidden Imām. Describing al-Sistani's fatwa as "the fatwa of jihād kifāyah" implicates that his call to the Shia to take up arms to "protect Iraq" basically falls within the framework of *jihād* as a general obligation of the community or a collective duty, known as *farḍ kifāyah*. Hence, the term "kifāyah," which is constantly associated with Imām al-Sistani's fatwa, originates from the notion of *jihād* as a *farḍ kifāyah*. With regard to the particularities of *farḍ kifāyah*, al-Qaradawi maintains that considering *jihād* as a collective requirement essentially entails a voluntary activity.[89]

By drawing a link between the "mujāhidīn" of al-Hashd al-Shaabi on the one hand, and the Shia's "historical" suffering, al-Hussein's martyrdom, and the annual "visit" to his shrine as "the master of all martyrs" on the other hand, the author seems to try to consolidate a trustworthy, positive image about al-Hashd among the recipients. This discourse carries traces of fundamental Shia tenets, namely an emotional attachment to their historical exclusion from power at the hands of the Sunnis, an allegedly constant strive for bringing about justice, a long-standing sectarian rivalry, a great commitment to the principle of *ʾImāmah* or the leadership of the infallible Shia Imāms, and embracing Imām al-Hussein's martyrdom as a moral lesson that symbolizes the community's suffering and strengthens religious beliefs and values among its members, the Shiʿites. Thus, given the various aspects observed throughout the discourse of this article by *al-Tawjih al-Aqaidi*, main tools of discursive ideologization that seem to have been utilized include *topicalization*, *level of description and degree of detail*, and *implications and presuppositions*.

- **Extract V**: News report by *Humat al-Watan* magazine:

> *"Fight them, and Allah will punish them by your hands, cover them with shame, and help you to victory over them." With the help of Allah, the first phase of the al-Hashd operation was completed with a great success, and ISIS terrorists received a heavy blow at the hands of the forces who were inspired by lessons of sacrifice of the holy month of Muharram. Under the banner "O' Father of Abdullah al-Hussein", forces of al-Hashd al-Shaabi and the army hit strongholds of the terrorists and turned them into pieces … The forces advanced with*

> *an Alawi will and a Husseini spirit, regained control of major areas and forced the terrorists to flee … The district of jarf al-Nasr was cleansed of the terrorists. Civilian families, mainly women of children, were evacuated and taken into safety … With the help of Allah, these victories were made possible against ISIS terrorists, and the people expressed their happiness and gratitude.*[90]

The discursive foundation of this text shows an attempt to draw an explicit *contrast* between al-Hashd al-Shaabi and its enemies. On the one hand, al-Hashd is emphatically shown as a blessed force, victorious by the "help of Allah," and staffed by fighters willing to "scarify" for the sake of freeing Iraq and ensuring the "safety" of its citizens. On the other hand, enemies of al-Hashd, mainly embodied by ISIS, are presented as mere "terrorists" whose cowardice led them to "flee" the battlefield. The same discourse further *implicates* that al-Hashd and its allies are blessed and assisted by "Allah" and His holy force, whereas the enemy seems to have been condemned and destined to be defeated. The main objective of utilizing such discursive tools is to consolidate a positive image about al-Hashd al-Shaabi and a negative picture about the enemy.

While positive characteristics about the former are emphasized and potential negative ones are de-emphasized, the latter's negative features are underlined across this ideological discourse. Such discursive practices fall within the framework of the *Ideological Square*. Reciting a Qur'anic verse from surat At-Taubah (Q9:14) at the very beginning of the article reflects an explicit instance of discursive religionization with respect to the armed conflict in Iraq. Given the context within which this verse has been recited, the implicit message emerges in the form of conveying an impression about God's involvement in rendering al-Hashd al-Shaabi victorious over its enemies, punishing the latter and covering them with shame following their defeat. Such a recitation is meant to support the process of portraying al-Hashd as a holy force.

Sectarianization arises as a crucial dimension of the discourse of *Humat al-Watan* magazine in this article. Indicative language use includes the reference to the "holy month of Muharram" and the employment of phrases such as "Alawi will" and "Husseini spirit." Such terminology fundamentally relates to the core doctrinal tenets of Shiʿism. Based on the Islamic calendar, "Muharram" is the month in which Ali's younger son, Hussein, was murdered at the hands of Sunni Umayyad forces in Iraq's Karbala in the year 680. According to the Shiʿites, the 10th of Muharram marks *ʿAshurā'*, the day of the martyrdom of Imām al-Hussein. The term

"Alawi" is derived from the name Ali ibn Abi Talib, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, who, according to the Shia, was the righteous successor of the Prophet Muhammad. The phrase "Alawi will" is used in reference to the struggle of Ali, as one of '*Ahl al-Bayt*, to claim his righteous position as a successor of the Prophet and his struggle for bringing about what *Shiʿat ʿAli* or the party of Ali believed to be justice. Finally, the phrase "Husseini spirit" is extracted from the tale of Imām al-Hussein ibn Ali and his martyrdom. Al-Hussein's figure is celebrated by the Shiʿites as a symbol for struggling against suppression and striving for justice. It is basically this "spirit"—along with the associated sectarian-based values—that is being referred to by *Humat al-Watan* in this discourse. Thus, religionization and sectarianization arise as key aspects of the ideological discourse utilized throughout the text.

- **Extract VI**: News report by *Humat al-Watan* magazine:

> *Members of ISIS were seen escaping the advance of al-Hashd forces and they avoided direct confrontations. The terrorists of ISIS have placed explosives inside civilian houses and mosques in the city of Fallujah in preparation to bomb these sites in case the group lost the battle. Al-Hashd al-Shaabi and the security forces are highly concerned about the safety of the civilians and the possibility of a massacre against innocent civilians … Many areas have been liberated in the vicinity of Fallujah after a heavy siege on ISIS terrorists … Regiments of al-Hashd al-Shaabi participated in the operations alongside counter-terrorism forces and other armed factions … ISIS militants were seen fleeing the battlefield into hiding … Our forces have proven themselves to be victorious in such battles.*[91]

Traces of ideologization could be seen throughout the discourse of this article. A positive image about forces of al-Hashd al-Shaabi is being consolidated in *contrast* to ISIS's members, who are presented in negative terms in a way that ultimately serves the objectives of the author and supports the messages being conveyed to the addressees. On the one hand, troops of al-Hashd al-Shaabi are portrayed as "victorious" liberators whose main concerns are summarized in terms of ensuring the "safety" of civilians and the elimination of terrorism in the Iraqi arena. On the other hand, members of ISIS are pictured as losers, unmanly and cowardly acting militants who are said to have "avoided" direct armed clashes and have been seen "escaping" the advances of al-Hashd and its allies and ended up "fleeing" the battlefield.

The discourse utilized further *implicates* the integrity of al-Hashd al-Shaabi and *presupposes* the legitimacy of its practices by means of associating its members with the Iraqi security forces and picturing their efforts as a part and parcel of the government's efforts in the war on terrorism. According to van Dijk, when an organization explains, motivates, or legitimizes group-based actions, it typically does so "in terms of ideological discourse."[92] Hence, the ideological nature of the discourse of *Humat al-Watan* hereby emerges in the form of emphasizing positive things about *us* and negative things about *them*, while de-emphasizing negative things about *us* and any positive things about *them*. Key tools of discursive ideologization employed include *contrast* and *presuppositions*. Such discursive practices essentially relate to what Adediji describes as an influential tie between discourse and political power, which enables the addresser to promote certain, mostly politically guided, messages of those in power with the objective of influencing supposedly vulnerable recipients.[93] Given the discursive attempt to portray al-Hashd as a force acting under the government's umbrella, politicization arises as key dimension of this discourse.

- **Extract VII**: Article by *Humat al-Watan* magazine:

> *The martyrdom of al-Hussein has left a heavy impact in the hearts of the believers. Whenever they face difficulties, they are reminded of the affliction and calamity suffered by their grandfather Imām al-Hussein … Ahl al-Bayt have suffered multiple calamities at the hands of their enemies … This heat in the hearts of the believers on Imām al-Hussein son of Ali triggers the fire of revolution against the oppressors and the corrupt. That's why we witness many revolutions following his martyrdom … This is how the Shia inherited this manhaj from their Imāms and their forefathers … They have also inherited the jihād against injustice, calling for justice and equality for the vulnerable. And al-Hashd al-Shaabi today, with their response to the fatwa of the Religious Reference, their answer to the call for jihād, and the mobilization of millions of the followers of Ahl al-Bayt to support the religion and the homeland, is inspired by the Fortieth Visit to Imām al-Hussein … Leaders of injustice and libertinism have fought against Imām al-Hussein, his customs and the holy visit to his shrine.*[94]

Sectarianization can be seen as a main aspect of the ideological discourse of this text. A direct line is being drawn between the "martyrdom" of Imām al-Hussein, the "affliction and calamity" suffered by him, the

"manhaj" inherited by the Shiʿites, lessons of "revolution" derived from the Shia history against "oppressors," and the rise of al-Hashd al-Shaabi. The implicit message hereby delivered to the recipients is that the efforts of al-Hashd in Iraq should be seen in light of a historical context, beginning with the "martyrdom" of al-Hussein and the associated lessons and consequences for the Shia sect, and ending with the emergence of al-Hashd al-Shaabi as an ultimate manifestation of the Shiʿites' efforts in combatting injustice and suppression. While consolidating such a positive image about the Shia in general and al-Hashd in particular, the term "enemies" could be interpreted as a reference to the Sunnis, who are blamed for the "affliction and calamity" suffered by the Shia and their "Imām al-Hussein." Given the sectarian nature of this discourse, the terminology could be viewed as an implicit attempt to revive ancient wounds associated with the earliest sectarian split witnessed in the Islamic history and the everlasting struggle for power within the Islamic society. Additional language use that serves such ends includes the employment of phrases such as "followers of Ahl al-Bayt" while referring to members and supporters of al-Hashd. In other words, this is just another discursive manner to emphasize the legitimacy and righteousness of the Shiʿite claim that the Prophet's family, or *'Ahl al-Bayt*, are the sole legitimate successors of the Prophet and that the Imamate is the only way to preserve his legacy.

The reference to Imām al-Hussein and *'Ahl al-Bayt* is meant to stress the Shiʿite nature of al-Hashd al-Shaabi, the sectarian background of its members, and the kind of doctrinal tenets their efforts are based on in the path of attaining the objectives they claim to struggle for and aspire to accomplish. Furthermore, the mention of "religion" and "homeland" while tackling Iraq's armed conflict and the role of al-Hashd therein could be traced back to attempts of religionizing the developments for political ends. This can be viewed as an aspect of discursive politicization with sectarian-religious components involved. The use of the term "jihād" within this discursive context reflects a Shia interpretation of the principles of *jihād* as a concept and the aspects it involves, given the reference to the "fatwa" of Imām Ali al-Sistani, the so-called Religious Reference, as a basis for the mentioned "call for jihād." One of the key differences between the Sunni and Shia interpretations of the notion of *jihād* is the perspective on who might hold the religious authority to initiate *jihād*. The Sunni interpretation of "right authority" that enjoys the right to lead *jihād* entails that all Muslim Caliphs possess the right to wage and guide *jihād* as long as they hold the political and religious authority and possess the support

of the *ʿulamāʾ*. Whereas the Shia believe that this right has been exclusively meant for the Imāms. Hence, the reference to the "fatwa" of Imām al-Sistani as a basis for al-Hashd al-Shaabi's "jihād" can be seen as a manifestation of the Shia version of "right authority" to launch and guide the *jihād*.

Key elements of ideologization observed in the text include *topicalization*, *contrast*, *implications*, *and presuppositions*, and involvement of *actors*. Positive traits of the main *actors* involved in the story delivered by this *Humat al-Watan*'s article, namely al-Hussein, the Shia and al-Hashd al-Shaabi, are *topicalized* and reiterated for the sake of ensuring an efficient impact among the addressees. Main points of *contrast* consolidated by this discourse between the Shia-based al-Hashd al-Shaabi and the alleged "enemies" include portraying al-Hashd as a revolutionary force inspired by the sufferings of the Shiʿites and fighting for justice and freedom; this while picturing the "enemies" as "corrupt," "oppressors" who seek "injustice" and are allegedly known for their "libertinism." The context within which such terminology emerges reflects *implications and presuppositions* about the nature of the "enemies" and their claimed aspirations and ultimate goals. Given the emphasis on the sectarian background of the in-group, namely being "Shia," the out-group is no other than *Sunni*. There are mounting indicators that may lead to such an interpretation, particularly the references to historical developments that essentially tackle a Sunni-Shia rivalry, besides the utilized language and the contextual dimensions involved.

- **Extract VIII**: Report by *al-Hashd al-Shaabi* newspaper:

> *Since the downfall of the tyrant Saddam Hussein in 2003 and the elevation of the Shia men to the political leadership, as they represent the majority in Iraq, they've been exposed to a merciless campaign by the U.S. and Israel through their agents in the region, namely Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan and Turkey … Media organizations have been recruited for the sake of discrediting and distorting the reputation of the Shia. Their main goal is undermining and hindering the political process in Iraq … The state of hypocrisy and terrorism, Saudi Arabia, has been involved in Iraq's internal affairs through their agents and misleading takfīri fatwas. Their main goal was to consolidate a kāfir image about the Shia and transgress the Shia blood … The takfīri fatwas have provided terrorist organizations with the necessary legitimacy to attack and shed the blood of the Shia in Iraq. They consider the Shia as cattle that needs to*

> *be slaughtered … However, with Allah's grace, the hidden assistance of our great leader Imām al-Mahdi, and the blessed historical fatwa of the Religious Reference Imām Ali al-Sistani have foiled the agenda of those barbarians to destroy Iraq. The establishment of al-Hashd al-Shaabi, on the basis of the blessed fatwa, has enabled the righteous men, who are protected by Allah, to repel one of the most brutal and barbarian attacks in the modern history. Al-Hashd al-Shaabi has gained great and legendary victories that have exceeded the comprehension of the human mind.*[95]

The ideological facet of this text arises through the apparent effort made to consolidate a positive image about the Shia and al-Hashd al-Shaabi, and a negative picture about the perceived *others*. The core objective of such discursive practices fundamentally relates to the concept of *othering* characterization as a symbolic degradation and the incitement and strengthening of *in-group* versus *out-group* sentiments among the recipients. Positive features of al-Hashd al-Shaabi, as a main *actor* and a representative of the Shia sect within the Iraqi conflict, are stressed and *topicalized* for the sake of guaranteeing an efficient impact among the addressees. Al-Hashd is hereby portrayed as a sacred force that is "protected by Allah" and His "grace," its members as "righteous men" who are struggling for the survival of Iraq and have eventually been granted "legendary victories" with the "hidden assistance" of "Imām al-Mahdi" and the blessing of "Imām Ali al-Sistani."

Given the fact that this kind of language use already carries sufficient evidence of discursive sectarianization, as manifested in this pro-Shia sectarian-guided discourse, the perceived *others* are basically represented by the Sunnis. This is apparent in the reference to the mostly Sunni-led states, including "Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey," as enemies for their alleged link to "takfīr" toward the "Shia." For instance, Saudi Arabia is described as a "state of hypocrisy and terrorism" wherein "takfīri fatwas" are being issued against the "Shia." This essentially *implicates* that the policies of these states and the associated organizations are purely sectarian-based and a comparable response would be required to protect the Shia against the alleged threat represented by the Sunnis, both locally and regionally. These states and their alleged allies, as key antagonistic *actors* who are described as "brutal barbarians," are said to have launched a multifaceted campaign against the "Shia," with the goal of "discrediting" and "distorting" the "reputation of the Shia" as well as "hindering" the political process in Iraq, "destroying" the country, terrorizing and "slaughtering" the

Shia. Hence, the negative characteristics of those perceived enemies are *topicalized* for the sake of ensuring a resounding impact among the addressees. Various interesting terms of theological, sectarian, and doctrinal nature emerge as part of the language use in the context of this report.

The employment of the term "takfīr" in the course of the observed discourse is meant to identify Sunni-based states and armed groups as extremists, in *contrast* to the Shia, who are presented as blessed, pious, and righteous. The concept of *takfīr*, which entails denouncing fellow Muslims as apostates, has a fundamental tie with *jihād* or struggle against the *kāfir* or infidel. Hence, by associating rivals and enemies with "takfīr," *al-Hashd al-Shaabi* newspaper tries to portray the Shia as victims of radical Sunni players who are determined to eradicate the perceived "kāfirs" based on some extremist doctrinal principles and religio-sectarian fanaticism. Furthermore, the reference to the so-called hidden assistance of "Imām al-Mahdi" illustrates the core sectarian tenets upon which this discourse was basically built. Such a reference holds a direct link to the doctrinal principles among the adherents of the largest denomination of Shiʿites, namely the *Twelver Shiʿism* (*Ithnaʿ Asharis*), who believe that the Prophet's spiritual authority and religious leadership were passed on to 12 of his descendants, beginning with Ali, Hasan and Hussein. The Twelvers believe that the 12th Imām, Muhammad al-Mahdi, known as the 'Awaited Imām' or 'Hidden Imām', has disappeared from a cave below a mosque in 874 and will reappear at the end of the time to bring absolute justice and peace to the world.[96] Thus, religionization and sectarianization emerge as crucial dimensions of the ideological discourse observed across this text.

7.2.2 Manipulative Strategies in al-Hashd al-Shaabi Discourse

The covert and surreptitious nature of manipulation reflects its deceptive essence. As such, deception is accomplished by means of persuasion that ultimately serves the manipulator, regardless of the interests and aspirations of the manipulated. Van Eemeren explains that manipulation in discourse boils down to "intentionally deceiving one's addressees" by convincing them about certain ideas and narratives that ultimately serve one's own interest through the "covert use of communicative devices" that are not in agreement with generally acknowledged critical standards of reasonableness.[97] In order to examine the discourse of al-Hashd al-Shaabi on manipulation, *Manipulative Strategies* developed by Blass are utilized.

The following extracts are analyzed to explore incorporated discursive practices of manipulation by al-Hashd-affiliated media platforms and the potential goals such strategies are aimed to achieve.

- **Extract I**: Article by *Humat al-Watan* magazine:

> *Three years have passed since the launch of al-Hashd al-Shaabi-led operations, based on the sacred fatwa of the Religious Reference Ali al-Sistani, against ISIS terrorism … Although the call was for a kifāyah jihād, not ʿayn jihād, hundreds of believers have mobilized in response to the blessed call to arise to the path of the master of all martyrs [al-Hussein]. Those believers mobilized their ranks in order to defend the homeland and protect the ʿaqīdah, offering one martyr after another … May Allah bless these brave mujāhidīn, who carry the medal of sacrifice for the sake of Allah's cause … They [al-Hashd fighters] have rushed to rescue civilians and protect the displaced families through providing safe corridors to them and supplying them with basic aid, beside protecting private properties … The fatwa of jihād kifāyah has turned the battle from a sectarian conflict—as wished for by the terrorists—into a national struggle characterized by national unity in the face of sectarianism and terrorism. Al-Hashd al-Shaabi has proven itself as the legitimate newborn force out of this fatwa.*[98]

Several manipulative practices can be identified throughout this text. Firstly, *omission* has been utilized as a strategy to keep the recipients in the dark in terms of certain crucial information with regard to the atrocities[99] committed by the al-Hashd al-Shaabi during the military operations against "terrorists." Also, the efforts of al-Hashd al-Shaabi within the framework of the Iraqi conflict are portrayed as "national," "sacred," and "[non]sectarian," while any information that tackles the sectarian-based foundation of the al-Hashd and the sectarian-guided practices by the organization toward the perceived others is left out. The ultimate objective of the utilization of such a manipulative strategy is to demonstrate that al-Hashd al-Shaabi is merely concerned with the "safety" and "protection" of "civilians" and "the homeland."

Secondly, *implicit commission* arises through the particular emphasis on the religious nature of al-Hashd al-Shaabi. The organization is said to be fundamentally based on the so-called sacred fatwa by Imām al-Sistani, described as a "call for kifāyah jihād," that is aimed at protecting the "ʿaqīdah." The *ʿaqīdah*, as a notion, basically constitutes the foundation of *ʾīmān* (faith).[100] Thus, protecting the *ʿaqīdah* essentially entails preserving

the faith as a whole. Members of al-Hashd are further portrayed as "brave mujāhidīn" who are willing to scarify "for the cause of Allah." Combined with the stress on the "national" characteristic of al-Hashd al-Shaabi, the religionization of the image of the organization is meant to legitimize its efforts and to convince the addressees about the piety, devotion, and dedication of its members in their alleged struggle for the greater good. This particular manipulative strategy is primarily aimed at leading the recipients to acquire a belief and eventually accept and act upon the narrative of and messages delivered by the addresser.

Thirdly, *repetition*, as a *propaganda strategy*, appears to have been utilized throughout this discourse. The "fatwa" of the "Religious Reference" is repeatedly mentioned as a building block of al-Hashd al-Shaabi as an organization, and "jihād kifāyah" is frequently referred to as a jurisprudential framework within which al-Hashd is said to operate. Such a reiteration of terms and concepts is meant to characterize the organization's members as *true* "mujāhidīn," in contrast to ISIS's members who are depicted as mere "terrorists." Portraying al-Hashd members as "mujāhidīn" is meant to show those fighters as the sole *true* representatives of *Islamic jihād* in the Iraqi conflict, which indirectly deprives ISIS fighters of the title and renders them illegitimate or *false* mujāhidīn. Considering the "fatwa" of Imām al-Sistani as a call for "jihād" and emphasizing the necessity to act upon it reflects the essential Shia belief in the exclusive right of the Imāms to launch and guide *jihād*. Furthermore, the reference to the concept of "jihād kifāyah" is meant to underline the voluntary basis of the alleged *jihād* led by al-Hashd al-Shaabi. Besides the rise of *farḍ kifāyah* as a key feature of the "jihād" claimed by al-Hashd al-Shaabi, another key aspect of this *jihād* is being defensive in nature, namely *Jihād al-Daf'*. While the term is not literally employed by *Humat al-Watan*, the extensive description of the efforts of al-Hashd illustrates a discursive attempt to manifest the military campaign carried out by the group as a form of defensive struggle for the sake of the land and its people. Mainstream Shia scholars agree that the *defensive jihād*, that is aimed at protecting and defending the *'ummah* against an outside attack, may be authorized by the *Mujtahids*, in this case a supreme religious reference such as Imām Ali al-Sistani.

Besides, *emotional appeal* emerges as another manipulative strategy that has been utilized in this text. The particular attempt to tackle the role of al-Hashd al-Shaabi in easing the human suffering within the conflict and the reference to the group's alleged efforts to ensure the "safety" and

"protection" of civilians is primarily aimed at touching on the feelings of the recipients by means of portraying al-Hashd members as lifesavers and preservers of human values. Shedding light on the supposed humanistic feature of al-Hashd fighters is aimed at emotionally appealing to the audience, which, according to Blass, facilitates the process of making the addressees believe and eventually act upon "the propagated information" without thorough checking.[101]

- **Extract II**: Article by *al-Hashd al-Shaabi* newspaper:

> *The sacrifices of al-Hashd al-Shaabi must not be undermined or neglected. Supporting these forces means backing the legitimate protectors of the country against the criminal gangs of ISIS that have destroyed the country and spread fear amongst the civilians in a clear violation to the religious teachings of Islam. The great sacrifices of the forces of al-Hashd al-Shaabi have played a key role in the advances made in the war on ISIS. Many areas have been liberated, and a lot of blood has been shed for the sake of this liberation. The blood offered by the fighters of al-Hashd and the tribes they represent should never be forgotten for this blood has guaranteed the liberation and protection of the Iraqi territories. Al-Hashd has ensured the protection of the various components of the Iraqi society from ISIS terrorism.*[102]

Traces of discursive manipulation surface in this text with the objective of legitimizing as well as praising the role of al-Hashd al-Shaabi in Iraq's conflict. One of the key manipulative strategies utilized is *explicit commission* by means of *exaggeration*, which emerges within the framework of emphasizing an alleged crucial role of al-Hashd in the "war against ISIS." Members of al-Hashd al-Shaabi are constantly described as "protectors" and "liberators" of the country and its people. Their involvement is branded as "legitimate" both nationally, through the emphasis on the "protection of the country," and religiously, as true "protectors" of the faith, in contrast to ISIS members who are said to have committed "a clear violation to the religious teachings of Islam." Such a discursive practice is primarily meant to (re)shape the recipients' beliefs, opinions and attitudes with respect to al-Hashd as an organization and a group of individuals who strive for bringing about peace and freeing people from "terrorism."

Another manipulative strategy that seems to have been employed throughout the observed discourse is the propaganda method of *repetition*. The "sacrifices" of and "bloodshed" by fighters of al-Hashd al-Shaabi

are repeatedly mentioned and stressed throughout the article, arising as the most frequently used terms. The main goal of the utilization of such a manipulative strategy is to draw the attention of the addressees to the "great" cost al-Hashd has paid for the sake of "liberation." A second propaganda method employed in this discourse is *emotional appeal*, particularly through the reference to the "suffering" of civilians and the concern about their "safety" under ongoing war conditions. Hence, coupling the "great sacrifices" of al-Hashd with the "protection" of the land and religion and the strife for the "safety" of the people is mainly aimed at touching on the feelings of the recipients and leading the latter to sympathize with the organization and its efforts. Mentioning the "various components" of the Iraqi society as being taken under the "protection" of al-Hashd al-Shaabi during the conflict reflects a discursive attempt to render any claims about the sectarian nature of and sectarian-based practices by al-Hashd[103] as inaccurate and false.

- **Extract III**: News report by *al-Hashd al-Shaabi* newspaper:

> *The forces of al-Hashd al-Shaabi have liberated more areas in the Salahuddin province … In cooperation with the security forces, al-Hashd troops have been able to liberate various parts of the country. Al-Hashd has launched a new operation to enforce security measures in the liberated areas to ensure a prompt return of stability to these areas … Al-Hashd is determined to secure the borderline between Iraq and Syria … The high morale of the mujāhidīn of al-Hashd and their remarkable strength will guarantee victory over terrorists … ISIS has taken many civilians as hostages. The group has moved more than 100 detainees from al-Hawijah to an unknown destination, before escaping the advance of al-Hashd and the security forces. This comes amidst fears of a new massacre being prepared by ISIS against innocent civilians … The liberation campaign launched by al-Hashd and the security forces continues amidst precautions to ensure the safety of the civilians.*[104]

Within the discourse of this news report, while a negative image is consolidated about ISIS in terms of atrocities committed against "civilians" during the Iraqi conflict, any information that might indicate comparable violations at the hands of al-Hashd al-Shaabi's members or their failure to avoid civilian casualties during their military operations[105] is excluded for the sake of maintaining a solid positive picture about al-Hashd. Such a discursive practice basically falls under manipulation by *omission*. The employed discourse further manifests an excessive attempt to legitimize

al-Hashd al-Shaabi's involvement in the conflict amid security vacuum and uncertainty across the country. This is accomplished through the constant emphasis on al-Hashd being a "stability" and "security" factor. This type of *implicit commission* is ultimately aimed at creating a belief among the recipients about the crucial role of al-Hashd al-Shaabi in bringing about a state of stability and ensuring the transformation of the country from violence and chaos to security and safety. Hence, the "victory" of al-Hashd is being coined as an alleged "victory" for the Iraqi state and its people.

In order to stress the significance of the participation of al-Hashd in the war against "ISIS terrorists" and the effectiveness of such an involvement, the *propaganda strategy* of *repetition* has been employed. Terms such as "liberation" arise frequently throughout the observed discourse for the sake of ensuring the impact of the message that entails that al-Hashd al-Shaabi is a liberating force which is solely focused on the objective of freeing the country and its people from ISIS, presupposing that such an effort should be unconditionally praised and supported. Also, the reference to "civilians," coupled with the notions of "security" and "safety," emerges repeatedly with the apparent goal of showing that the condition of the people is a primary concern for al-Hashd in the course of the conflict. Interestingly, the members of al-Hashd al-Shaabi are portrayed as "mujāhidīn" in a bid to religionize the image of the organization and eventually legitimize its efforts, emphasize its righteousness, and convince the addressees about the determination, piety, and devotion of its members.

- **Extract IV**: Report by *al-Hashd al-Shaabi* newspaper:

Al-Hashd has shown its commitment to the struggle against a barbaric campaign that aims at spreading darkness and violating basic human values, on the path of the Islamic teachings as embodied by the most honorable of people Prophet Muhammad Ibn Abdullah (PBUH), who said: "I've been sent to complete high morals." If it was not for al-Hashd al-Shaabi and its courageous members, these values would have been eliminated at the hands of the terrorist Wahhabis of ISIS … Al-Hashd al-Shaabi has accomplished an epic jihādi glory that arose to the level of supreme glories and attitudes of our great Imām Abu Abullah al-Hussein … Our men have surprised us with the voluntary mobilization in response to the fatwa of jihād kifāyah. Al-Hashd has liberated these cities and towns by their own courageous and glorious hands … With Allah's assistance and the determination of our men, most of the territories of our homeland will be liberated … Without the sacred al-Hashd, instability and chaos would have spread … The position taken by the sacred forces of al-Hashd and their jihād have left the enemy helpless.[106]

In this text, al-Hashd's members are depicted as remarkably religious, pious fighters and true protectors of the Islamic values. Main manipulative strategies utilized within this discourse include *implicit commission*, *explicit commission* by means of *exaggeration*, and *emotional appeal*. The religious nature of al-Hashd al-Shaabi, at both organizational and individual levels, is constantly underlined, particularly by means of picturing the activities of its members as a genuine effort within the framework of "jihād." The behavior of al-Hashd's fighters is described as a "struggle" to maintain "Islamic teachings" and values. The employed discourse furthers its excessive effort to religionize the image of al-Hashd al-Shaabi by describing its military operations in Iraq as an "epic jihādi glory" and compare the behavior of its members to the manners of the Prophet Muhammad and the glorious attitudes of Imām al-Hussein. Terms such as "sacred," "glorious," and "courageous" are utilized to describe the religiosity and bravery of the members of the organization. The observed language use and contextual framing reflect a considerable discursive effort to ensure a resounding impact among the recipients and guarantee the delivery of the implied message that entails a necessity to back al-Hashd al-Shaabi as a condition to accomplish victory over ISIS. The recitation of the *ḥadīth* in this context is basically meant to support the effort of religionizing the image of al-Hashd and ultimately assist in (re)shaping the opinions and beliefs of the addressees with regard to the organization and direct them toward the desired conclusion about its position and objectives. Moreover, the reference to the Prophet and Imām al-Hussein within the framework of the so-called struggle for the homeland and the religion is aimed at touching on the feelings of Muslim recipients and draw their attention to the alleged devotion and determination of al-Hashd to "liberate" Iraq and its people and achieve "glory" with "Allah's assistance."

Another crucial dimension of this manipulative discourse is sectarianization, which emerges implicitly through drawing a contrast between "terrorist Wahhabis" as symbolic representatives of the Sunnis on the one hand, and the greatness of the Imamate headed by Imām al-Hussein as a symbolic representative of the Shia on the other hand. Associating the "Wahhabis" with terrorism indicates al-Hashd al-Shaabi's Shia-guided enmity to the Sunni-based movement of *Wahhabism* and its alleged adherents among the Salafi-Jihadis. Referring to "Imām Abu Abdullah al-Hussein" to emphasize the religious glory of al-Hashd al-Shaabi reflects one of the defining features of the Shia doctrine in terms of leadership, particularly with respect to *'Ahl al-Bayt* or the Prophet's family. Such a reference

fundamentally relates to the Shiʿite belief in the importance of bloodline when it comes to the religious leadership of the *'ummah* and is to trace back to the concept of *Shia Imamate*, in contrast with the notion of *Sunni Caliphate*. Furthermore, the concept of "jihād kifāyah" is employed within this discourse for the sake of emphasizing the voluntary basis of the form of *jihād* allegedly carried out by al-Hashd. The emphasis on "jihād kifāyah" as the ultimate product of the "fatwa" of the "Supreme Religious Reference" can be viewed as a manifestation of the Shia interpretation of *jihād*. The Shia doctrine allows the *Mujtahids*—such as the Supreme Religious Reference—to initiate the *defensive jihād*, in this case as a "jihād kifāyah" for the sake of protecting the "homeland," the people and the religion, while it forbids the authorization of *offensive jihād* in the absence of the Hidden Imām. Thus, religionization and sectarianization arise as essential features of this manipulative discourse.

- **Extract V**: Article by al-Tawjih al-Aqaidi:

> *Most of the [former] Baathists have suffered an ideological crisis until they eventually found in the radical Islamism a convenient incubator for their continuity. While the former Shia Baathis returned to their sectarian incubator and fortified themselves by taking a rightful path, the Sunni Baathis embraced Salafism … The Shia joined the government's institutions in the Shiʿite state that arose on the rubble of the Sunni Baathi rule. Hence, the Shia Baathists took a right path through joining the government institutions, while the Sunni Baathists embraced Salafism and extremism and joined or sympathized with radical groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS … Saddam has mainly recruited Sunni Islamists and supported Sunni clerics and movements, at a time when Saudi patriarchy amongst the Sunnis and Iranian patriarchy amongst the Shia was prevalent in the region.*[107]

This text reflects discursive efforts to show the Shia as rightful rulers of Iraq and the Sunnis as mere "extremists" who solely struggle for regaining power over the country. Under the former regime of Saddam Hussein, Sunni Arabs enjoyed a relatively greater political power and economic benefits in contrast to other communities in Iraq.[108] As Saddam's ethno-sectarian base, the Sunnis, who dominated the military and intelligence services, had been the regime's instrument in oppressing the Shia and the Kurds. The 2003 U.S. invasion was seen by many Sunnis as a threat, since the Americans demonstrated a determination to re-establish Iraq as a more

equitable state than it had been under the Saddam regime, which basically meant reducing the Sunni share of the pie and increasing that of the Shia as a majority.[109] However, handing over the new Iraq to sectarian Shia elements led to the persecution of the Sunnis in retaliation for the woes formerly suffered by the Shia. Hence, the discourse employed can be seen as a unique example of sectarianization, particularly in terms of drawing a sectarian borderline between social components of the Iraqi society and drawing a contrast between good and evil purely on the basis of the sectarian identity of those involved.

Main manipulative strategies utilized for the sake of delivering the intended messages and accomplishing the desired impact include *explicit commission* by means of *deliberate ambiguities*, *implicit commission*, *omission*, and *repetition*. Firstly, the employed discourse tends to draw a link between nationalism, sectarianism, Islamism, and Salafism for the sake of blaming the Sunnis for the miseries of Iraq in both the past and the present, as well as picturing them as a threat to the future of the country. However, this alleged link is being delivered in vague terms and is purely based on arguments that solely serve the objectives of *al-Tawjih al-Aqaidi* in enforcing a belief among the addressees that such a connection exists, and lead them to accept this claim as a matter of fact. Intermingling the concept of nationalism with other notions in such a way reflects a historical tension of thoughts and ideas that have been attributed to *nationalism*, such as socialism and unity, as witnessed in the Middle East during the second half of the twentieth century. Furthermore, combining Islamism and Salafism in the same context is meant to tackle the orthodox nature of the Sunni scholars who have pioneered and developed these movements.

Secondly, the idea that Iraq's Shia are following a "rightful path" while the Sunnis are collectively misguided by a supposedly "nationalist-Salafist" ideology, suffering a so-called ideological crisis, and are involved in some "extremist" and "radical" form of "Islamism" is being reiterated across the employed discourse. The main goal of such a discursive strategy and language use is to consolidate a vicious and ferocious image about the Sunni Muslims and their supposedly destructive role in shaping and reshaping the image of the Iraqi state on various levels.

Thirdly, while Sunnism is being emphatically associated with sectarianism, extremism, and radicalism, Shiʿism is described in terms of patriotism. Any negative connotations that may bring harm to the positive portrayal of the Shiʿites are being excluded completely. Even the so-called sectarian incubator within which the Shiʿites are said to be "fortifying" themselves

is being framed as a "rightful path," suggesting that a Shia sectarianism is a positive form of sectarianism while that of the Sunnis is a wrongful and condemned one. According to Mabon and Royle, the post-2003 vacuum throughout political and social governance led many Iraqis to retreat back into the sect or tribe in an attempt to re-establish an in-group identity and regain a certain degree of status in the new Iraq.[110] Eventually, such "incubators" are believed to have contributed to the escalation of unrest across the region.

Fourthly, certain terms, such as "Sunni" and "Shia," emerge repeatedly throughout the text. Such a *repetition* is meant to ensure the delivery and a resounding impact of the message in accordance with the tendencies of *al-Tawjih al-Aqaidi* in leading the recipients to praise the "Shia" as patriots and saviors of Iraq, and to dismiss the "Sunnis" as a hostile entity to the future of Iraq as a state and a nation. Makdisi maintains that sectarianism, in its modern context, implicates a deployment of religious heritage as a defining feature of modern political identity, which indicates "an act of interpretation that shapes as well as is shaped by religious mobilizations and violence in the modern world."[111] Combining religion and politics in the context of conflict emerges as one of the serious dimensions of sectarian media discourse for its potential capability to facilitate and consolidate social divide. Hence, sectarianization and politicization arise as fundamental dimensions within this manipulative discourse.

- **Extract VI**: Article by al-Tawjih al-Aqaidi:

> *The lions of al-Hashd al-Shaabi embody a holy outrage against the enemies of Allah, and those who deny their legitimacy will never be saved … Once they enter a battlefield, they are victorious by Allah's will. The mujāhidīn of al-Hashd al-Shaabi are the proud men of Allah, the heroes of the Iraq of Ali and al-Hussein. The enemies of Allah, the takfīri and the Baathist ISIS militants, forgot that the Najaf of Iraq is led and protected by the determination of Ali and the glory of al-Hussein. When the Religious Reference Ali al-Sistani called for jihād, the mujāhidīn, the lions, the protectors of the homeland, the courageous men of 'Ashurā' mobilized their forces to accomplish victory … Anyone who criticize al-Hashd al-Shaabi must be mercilessly punished … The country won't be liberated without the efforts of the heroes of al-Hashd. May Allah curse the takfīri terrorists and everyone supporting them.*[112]

Traces of discursive manipulation can be detected on multiple levels in this article. Among the main manipulative strategies that seem to have

been utilized are *omission*, *implicit commission*, *explicit commission* by means of *exaggeration* and *deliberate ambiguities*, and *repetition*. Remarkable discursive efforts to portray al-Hashd al-Shaabi as a religiously and patriotically superior force arise constantly throughout the employed discourse in a bid to create a belief among the recipients about the credibility of such an image and to (re)shape their opinion toward al-Hashd and its involvement in the conflict in Iraq. This portrayal takes an exaggerated form in that it coins the struggle of al-Hashd al-Shaabi as a "holy outrage" and describes its members as "lions," "heroes," "protectors of the homeland," "proud men of Allah," and "courageous men of ʿAshurā." The employment of such a terminology indicates attempts of religionizing the image of al-Hashd's fighters by means of stressing their devotion to the path of "Allah" and determination to "liberate" Iraq and "protect" its people.

In the process of picturing al-Hashd's members as such, this discourse takes a sectarian dimension, particularly through utilizing expressions such as "Iraq of Ali and al-Hussein," "determination of Ali," and "glory of al-Hussein." The reference to Imām Ali and Imām al-Hussein illustrates the nature of the employed discourse as sectarian-guided. Drawing a direct link between the efforts of al-Hashd al-Shaabi and the *ʿAshurā'* reflects another fundamentally sectarian feature of this text, for it implicates a supposedly high level of commitment within the ranks of al-Hashd to the teachings of al-Hussein and lessons associated with his martyrdom.[113] The Shiʿites believe that the tale of Hussein's martyrdom holds moral lessons for the community and became a symbol for struggling against suppression and striving for justice. This interpretation, which constitutes a key element of the Shia doctrine, tends to draw a link between the "martyrdom" of Hussein and the fundamental notion of *jihād* as a struggle for God's cause and godly order. This sectarian-guided Shia-based language use tends to emphasize the sectarian affiliation of those supposedly religious and national "heroes" and show that any victory by al-Hashd al-Shaabi would eventually mean a victory for the faith and the adherents of the Shia doctrine.

Discursive sectarianization arises further through the contrast this discourse tends to draw between allegedly pious Shiʿite fighters of al-Hashd on the one hand, and radical "takfīri" terrorists of ISIS, who implicitly represent the Sunnis, on the other hand. The repeated use of the term "mujāhidīn" to describe fighters of al-Hashd is primarily aimed at picturing those fighters as the only true strugglers in the path of Allah (*jihād fī*

sabīl allāh) in the Iraqi arena. Any information, details, or expressions that may contradict or hinder the effort of building up such an extremely positive image about al-Hashd al-Shaabi are being excluded. Besides, "anyone" who would dare to "criticize" the organization is said to be "mercilessly punished." This can be viewed as an encouragement of an invitation to violence against critics and opponents. Releasing such statements indicate the extreme level of manipulation employed in the discourse of *al-Tawjih al-Aqaidi*, for it reveals intentions to ignite violence and call for merciless and brutal reaction to the perceived *others*. While a great deal of the article discursively focuses on consolidating a highly affirmative and favorable image about al-Hashd al-Shaabi, ambiguity overshadows the image of the organization in terms of its actual activities and practices on the ground. Hence, given the discursive strategies utilized, it is fair to say that religionization and sectarianization constitute key aspects of this manipulative discourse.

7.3 Sectarian Extremism in the Manipulative and Ideological Discourse of ISIS and al-Hashd al-Shaabi

In order to explore fundamental elements of the extremist discourse overshadowing crisis-stricken parts of the Middle East, a thorough analysis of the discourse of ISIS and al-Hashd al-Shaabi has been conducted under this chapter. Media materials produced and released by various media corporations run by or allied with both radical groups have been analyzed based on discursive ideologization and manipulation. Main questions tackled by this chapter revolve around the evolution and development of the discourses of extremist Sunni and Shia groups; the associated messages, linguistic and contextual activities; employment of religious sources; key distinctive aspects that emerge as defining features of these discourses; and the ultimate goals the utilized strategies tend to serve.

The analysis has shown politicization, religionization, and sectarianization as key aspects of the discourses of ISIS and al-Hashd al-Shaabi. While employed on variable levels and seem to have been utilized in accordance with the degree of relevance to each subject covered by the concerned media material, these aspects remain present in the majority of the analyzed data. Manipulative and ideological discursive practices arise as primary features of the media materials produced by both ISIS and al-Hashd

al-Shaabi. Media outlets under study have apparently made great discursive efforts for the sake of consolidating a negative image about their rivals and perceived enemies, and a positive portrayal concerning those they represent or are affiliated with. Characteristics of the *Ideological Square* emerge throughout the analyzed data, illustrating an apparent endeavor by the concerned organizations to exercise ideologization on the recipients with the ultimate goal of leading the latter to accept and believe in the particular narrative delivered by the addresser and act upon it. Within the framework of such a process, the addresser tends to enact and ensure the effect of the delivered messages, whether explicitly or implicitly, in accordance with the specific agenda behind them. Discursive practices that fall under the umbrella of ideologization have been unraveled through the analysis process that has taken van Dijk's methodological tool of *Ideological Square* as a basis. This methodological framework comprises emphasizing positive things about *us* and negative things about *them*, while de-emphasizing negative things about *us* and positive things about *them*.[114] In the course of the analysis process, various strategic tools have been identified as being employed to consolidate the desired image about the concerned parties and to frame the reported developments and stories in a way that solely serves the goals of the organization that determines the editorial policy of those publishing them. These discursive tools comprise *topicalization*, *level of description and degree of detail*, *implications and presuppositions*, *contrast*, and *actors*.[115] In terms of discursive manipulation, traces of diverse manipulative strategies have been detected in the research data, illustrating considerable efforts by media outlets affiliated with both radical groups to discursively manipulate the recipients' understanding, opinions, and beliefs with regard to matters and happenings in their surroundings. Manipulative strategies depicted during the analysis included *omission*, *commission*, and *propaganda strategies*, and the associated tools that render the employment of discursive manipulation viable, achievable, and effective.[116]

Media organizations run by or associated with ISIS, including *al-Furqan*, *al-Hayat*, *Dabiq*, and *al-Naba*, seem to have spent much of their efforts on the employment of discursive ideologization by means of validating and excessively advocating ISIS, while discrediting and extremely stigmatizing its rivals and enemies. The struggle claimed by ISIS and its alleged state is constantly depicted as a struggle between *ʾīmān* (belief) represented by ISIS itself on the one hand, and *kufr* (disbelief) represented by all those who fall outside its ranks. The physical form of *jihād*

(*ʿamalu l-badan bil-qitāl*) is remarkably promoted within the framework of ISIS's discourse. The group's activities are tackled as blessed efforts for the sake of a holy cause and its members are continuously portrayed as true *mujāhidīn* and *muwaḥidīn* who follow the command of Allah and are eventually rewarded by Him. This while everyone who tends to oppose the group or deny the legitimacy of its cause is branded as *ṭawāghīt*, *kuffār*, *murtaddīn*, *people of bidʿah*, and *munāfiqīn*. This reflects the takfīri nature of ISIS and the group's affiliation with *al-Salafīyah al-Jihādīyah* (Salafi-Jihadism) in terms of fundamental tenets, principles, and world-view. The legitimacy of the group's self-proclaimed "Islamic khilāfah" is discursively supported by the frequent mention of *ahlul-ḥalli-wal-ʿaqd* (elite scholars who loose and bind), *ijmāʿ* (consensus), and *bayʿah* (swearing allegiance to the Caliph). In order to legitimize Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's claim of the position of "khalīfah for all Muslims," multiple honorable characteristics are ascribed to the alleged *khalīfah*, such as "shaykh," "mujāhid," "scholar," "worshipper," "leader," "warrior," "reviver," and "descendant from the family of the Prophet." ISIS's discourse further emphasizes the legitimacy of its alleged *khilāfah* (caliphate) by means of emphasizing the principles of *bayʿah* (swearing allegiance to the caliph), *samʿ* (listening), and *ṭāʿah* (obedience) as fundamental features of the members of the *'ummah* with regard to their relationship to the caliph. While ISIS's alleged "Islamic khilāfah" is depicted as a long-standing "dream" for all Muslims, notions such as "democracy, secularism, and nationalism" are coined as "garbage" and "corrupt" ideologies and beliefs that need to be destroyed. According to the analysis of the discourse of ISIS, the group tends to present itself and those associated with its struggle as *al-ṭā'ifah al-manṣūrah* (the sole triumphant group of Muslims), and *al-firqah al-nājiyah* (the saved denomination), while its opponents, rivals, and enemies are shown as lost and misled. This reflects the attachment of Salafi-Jihadis to what al-Karkhi once described as being *Salafī-yul ʿaqīdah* (Salafi in creed), *Jihādī-yul manhaj* (Jihādi in method).[117] Concepts of *othering*, *in-group* versus *out-group*, *us* versus *them*, representation and misrepresentation arise throughout the data extracted from pro-ISIS media outlets. Politicization, religionization, and sectarianization emerge as crucial aspects of the discourse of ISIS. One of the key sectarian-guided contrasts drawn by the observed discourse is between Sunni and Shia Muslims, wherein the Sunnis (*Ahl al-Sunnah wal-Jamāʿah*) are referred to as "masters" and "esteemed," whereas the Shiʿites are merely branded as

"rāfiḍah" (rejectionists) and "Ṣafawi." The terminology employed illustrates deeply sectarian sentiments derived from a historical divide within the Muslim community and shows an attempt to revive sectarian strife for the sake of certain strategic and political goals. This shows ISIS as an extreme manifestation of radical Sunnism. Furthermore, ISIS is repeatedly pictured as an enlightening organization that strives for spreading knowledge among populations in areas under the group's control within the framework of its *tawḥīd*-based *Daʿwah*. Hence, while ISIS is shown as a representative of tawḥīd, faith, knowledge, and truth, its enemies are shown as representatives of ignorance, darkness, falsehood, kufr, and ṭāghūt. The "methodology" or *manhaj* that ISIS claims to have adopted is discursively promoted as being derived from the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, which shows the Salafi-based doctrinal and ideological philosophy advocated by ISIS through focusing on a supposedly exemplary form of Islam characterized by genuineness, purity, and unconditional commitment to the teachings of *al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*.

In the context of its advancement on the ground in Syria and Iraq, ISIS is presented—in the discourse of its loyalist media outlets—as an organized and institutional "State" staffed by the "best" members of the Muslim society who allegedly strive for facilitating the work of its citizens, enforcing "Sharīʿa guidelines" and ensuring the safety and security of civilians. Propagating such an image about its efforts and objectives is meant to show ISIS to the recipients through the lens of Ibn Taymiyya's teachings on legitimate authority, particularly in terms of enforcing the Sharīʿa law and considering power as a trust or *'amānah* from God that needs to be exercised in accordance with the terms laid down in the Islamic Sharīʿa. ISIS further claims to have eliminated the so-called imaginary lines and "artificial borders" demarcated by "crusaders" in accordance with the "Sykes-Picot agreement." The desired impact behind this strategy is to convince the recipients that ISIS is basically bringing Muslim populations together after being forcefully divided by Western powers that once dominated this region in the early twentieth century. The claim is further meant to show ISIS as being truly concerned about the unity of the *'ummah*, in contrast to the so-called *ṭawāghīt*, *kuffār*, *murtaddīn*, *people of bidʿah*, and *munāfiqīn*. Such a portrayal about the group carries traces of *ʿaqīdah* (creed) and *al-walā' wa-l-barā'* (loyalty and disavowal) as key characteristics of ISIS within the framework of its alleged struggle for the sake of all Muslims. It is also meant to illustrate the group's ability to bring about

ḥākimiyyah or God's might and rule through the enforcement of what is allegedly in the best interest of the Muslim *'ummah*. The implications associated with this approach reflect traces of the vision of Islamic scholars such as Sayyid Qutb, particularly with regard to the establishment of what they considered as a true Islamic rule. Such a strategy goes hand in hand with the dramatic evolution of the movement of *jihadism* through the tactics, targets, and arenas of operation pursued by such groups as ISIS. Such a development constitutes an unprecedented transformation of the basic idea of *jihād* into a radical concept upon which some of the most fanatic and atrocious organizations are based in terms of thought, ideology, discourse, and course of action.

The frequent reference to the principles of *tawḥīd*, *ṭāghūt*, *al-ḥākimiyyah*, *al-walā' wa-l-barā'*, and *jihād* illustrates the core religionized ideological tenets upon which ISIS dogmatically rests, which fundamentally trace back to Salafi-Jihadism. Employing phrases such as "khilāfah or shahādah" (*'imma-l Khilāfah 'aw-eshahādah*—either the caliphate or martyrdom)—illustrates the suicidal nature of ISIS's members and their belief in the allegedly divine reward awaiting every *shahīd* for the cause of Allah. Such a language use reflects the physical embodiment of *jihād* as an activity of self-sacrifice, participation in armed struggle in the path of God and aspiration for *shahādah* or martyrdom for God's cause. In a bid to justify any kind of atrocities carried out by ISIS against minority groups in areas under its control, the discourse employed by ISIS-linked media outlets primarily tends to stigmatize the victims either as *mushrikīn* (polytheists), *murtaddīn* (apostates), or heretical who deserve no mercy. In order to support this extremist, sectarian, and inhumane ideology, the "Qur'ān," "narrations of the Prophet," and the "Sharīʿa" are referred to as jurisprudential bases for the sake of ideologizing the recipients and gain their acceptance of and eventual support for the group's policies and practices. ISIS is thus primarily portrayed as an Islamic State, its members as *mujāhidīn* and people of *'īmān* (belief), its practices as necessary efforts to enforce Islamic Sharīʿa in accordance with "the Prophet's manhaj" (method), and its objectives as "removing injustice" by means of focusing on "al-'Amr bil-Maʿruf wan-Nahī ʿan al-Munkar" (enjoining good and forbidding evil). In contrast, ISIS's opponents are pictured as misled and *munāfiqīn* (hypocrites), their critique as false, and their attitude as *shurk* (polytheism). Hence, discursive ideologization seems to have been utilized and incorporated in the media activities of pro-ISIS media outlets on

a systematic basis for the sake of maintaining a positive portrayal of ISIS and a negative picture about its opponents, rivals, and enemies. The ultimate objective of such discursive practices, that comprise tools and strategies defined under the *Ideological Square*, is to deliver certain messages that serve ISIS and its agenda, and to influence the recipients' views and beliefs with regard to the reported issues.

The analysis has also shown that discursive manipulation has played an instrumental role within the framework of the language use, linguistic and contextual activities of pro-ISIS media organizations. Various manipulative strategies seem to have been utilized by ISIS media. *Omission*, *commission*, *propaganda strategies*, and the associated manipulative tools and instruments have been identified within the analyzed data. Firstly, the manipulative strategy of *omission* has been repeatedly employed by means of selectively excluding relevant information and details with negative connotations that might have jeopardized the image of the group among the addressees and rendered its messages ineffective and questionable. Key details left out and unmentioned in most of the media material released by ISIS-linked media organizations include: atrocities and violations committed by the group against civilians and minority groups; suppression of populations in territories under ISIS's control; Muslims being targeted by the group under baseless pretexts; destruction of populated districts; suffering military losses; shortage of basic supplies; and administrative and logistical challenges encountered by the group. Secondly, *commission*, whether in its *explicit* or *implicit* forms, has been considerably employed in the course of tackling various issues and developments. Such matters include the following: emphasizing alleged double-standards of the so-called Kāfir West with regard to human rights and the protection of civilians; showing ISIS as the sole trustworthy and capable organization to protect and defend Muslims; reiterating the legitimacy of ISIS's alleged caliphate; stressing the suicidal nature of the group's militants through the use of phrases such as "khilāfah or shahādah" (martyrdom); consolidating a belief in the alleged divine reward awaiting every *shahīd* for the cause of Allah; righteousness of ISIS in representing the "jamāʿah" and leading the "jihād" against the so-called enemies of Islam; shedding light on violations by enemy forces; sectarianization of the conflict by means of utilizing terms such as *rāfiḍah* and *Ṣafawi* to describe the Shiʿites, and *Nuṣayri* or *heretical* to describe the Alawites; showing ISIS as powerful and well organized, in contrast to the enemies who are said to be losing and misled; religionization of the discourse through the frequent recitation of the

Qur'ān and the ḥadīth; and portraying ISIS's members as pious and dedicated mujāhidīn. Thirdly, *propaganda strategies* of *repetition* and *emotional appeal* emerge as crucial manipulative practices utilized by pro-ISIS media outlets for the sake of ensuring the desired impact of the messages delivered to the addressees. Emphatic and reiterated concepts and terminology employed include: "righteous," "jihād," "mujāhidīn," "Allah's command," "liberation," "rāfiḍah"; "Ṣafawi," "kāfirīn," "mushrikīn," "apostates," and "ṭawāghīt." Thus, terms with positive connotations are repeatedly used in reference to ISIS and its members, while vocabulary with negative connotations are frequently attributed to anti-ISIS forces, groups, and individuals. Furthermore, primary issues tackled by means of employing *emotional appeal* include: the suffering of Muslim civilians under the so-called crusader bombing campaign; representation of the *Ahl al-Sunnah wal-Jamāʿah*; fairness of the Islamic law and the application of the Sharīʿa in order to guarantee the welfare of citizens residing ISIS-held areas; the "khilāfah" as the only path toward implementing the words of Allah and His Messenger and leading the *'ummah* to the promised glory; and the initiation of and invitation to *jihād fī sabīl allāh*. Hence, the data analysis has shown that manipulation constitutes a main characteristic of the discourse employed by pro-ISIS media organizations.

The utilization of particular linguistic devices, including pronominal usages such as *us*-vs.-*them*, throughout a manipulative discourse reflects a covert attempt to establish an in-group/out-group ideological discrimination. The deceptive, pressure to acquiesce, and emotional instruments of discursive manipulation and their potential impact illustrate the degree of power enjoyed by a manipulator. A manipulator is basically considered an abuser of power who strives to impose control over the recipients in a way that violates social norms and values. Discourse manipulation is eventually an illegitimate exercise of influence by manipulators, primarily aimed at enforcing certain beliefs and attitudes that serve the interests of the addresser and contradict those of the addressees. The analysis of the ISIS-related data has revealed the employment of multiple manipulative strategies by the concerned media outlets for the sake of serving the goals of the group and defending its practices, while denigrating and condemning those of its opponents, rivals, and enemies. Moreover, religionization and sectarianization emerge among the crucial aspects of ISIS's discourse.

Media outlets run by or associated with al-Hashd al-Shaabi, including *al-Tawjih al-Aqaidi Corporation*, *Humat al-Watan* magazine, and

al-Hashd al-Shaabi newspaper, appear to be no less ideological in their discourse than those linked to ISIS, given the undeniable efforts made to employ discursive ideologization for the sake of consolidating a positive image about al-Hashd al-Shaabi and a negative portrayal about forces considered hostile to its activities and aspirations. Members of al-Hashd are constantly described as *true* mujāhidīn who are committed to maintain Islamic principles through the struggle against the so-called enemies of Islam, and to preserve fundamental human values by means of protecting civilians and ensuring their safety. Advances of al-Hashd on the ground are termed as *liberation*, while those by enemy forces as *occupation*. Al-Hashd al-Shaabi, in the discourse of its media arms, stands for *enlightenment* and *hope*, while its enemies are depicted as standing for *darkness* and *barbarism*. The struggle of al-Hashd is enormously pictured as a *true* jihād and a strife for *national unity*, whereas that of its enemies as a *false* jihād aimed at *destruction* of the land and its people. The struggle in the path of God as claimed by al-Hashd is framed as a *defense* of faith, territory, property, and way of life.

A clear sectarian-based distinction between Sunnis and Shia is observed throughout the discourse of media outlets linked to al-Hashd. While ISIS claims to represent Sunni Muslims in their struggle for re-establishing the caliphate within the framework of its version of *jihād*, the Shiʿite al-Hashd al-Shaabi strives for emphasizing the legitimacy of its *jihād* since it is based on the "fatwa" of "Imām al-Sistani." This can be interpreted as a manifestation of the rivalry between the *Shia Imamate* and the *Sunni Caliphate*, and the associated differences in interpreting the concept of *jihād* on a sectarian basis. Moreover, employing the term "jihād kifāyah" is meant to emphasize the voluntary basis of the *jihād* claimed by al-Hashd al-Shaabi. Considering *jihād* as a collective requirement rather than an individual duty stems from the fact that the concept essentially entails a voluntary activity rather than a compulsory one. Besides the rise of *farḍ kifāyah* as a key feature of the *jihād* claimed by al-Hashd, another main characteristic of this *jihād* is being defensive in nature, namely *Jihād al-Daf*ʿ. Emphasizing the defensive form of *jihād* carried out by al-Hashd al-Shaabi originates in the Shia interpretation of *jihād* and its tenets. Mainstream Shia scholars argue that while *defensive jihād*—aimed at protecting and defending the *'ummah* against an outside attack—may be authorized by the *Mujtahids*, in this case a supreme religious reference such as Imām Ali al-Sistani, the authorization of *offensive jihād* remains unlawful in the absence of the Awaited Imām. A main message delivered by the discourse employed

within the majority of the media material concerning al-Hashd basically implicates that the group has launched *jihād* against a group of Muslims who try to spread fear, hostility, and injustice among the people, which traces back to the classical Shia interpretation of *jihād* that falls under *jihād of the sword*. A positive image about al-Hashd al-Shaabi is being constantly consolidated through portraying al-Hashd's members as "heroes," "protectors," "liberators," "mujāhidīn," and "proud men of Allah." This while an extremely negative image is being conveyed to the audience about enemy forces by means of picturing them as "enemies of Allah," "takfīri," "Baathist," and "gangs" who are primarily concerned with "smashing" and "destroying" the country and its people in accordance with an agenda described as "terrorist," "separatist," and "sectarian."

Language use that reveals the sectarian-guided discourse of al-Hashd media includes references to Imām Ali, the martyrdom of Imām al-Hussein, and the ʿAshurā'. The Shiʿites believe that the tale of al-Hussein's martyrdom holds moral lessons for the community and has become a symbol for struggle against suppression and striving for justice. Furthermore, the Shia are referred to as righteous rulers of Iraq, while the Sunnis as desperate ideologues who have been ideologically disoriented as to believe in having a right to lead Iraq, which reveals sectarianization and politicization as crucial aspects in this discourse. The Sunnis are enormously associated with "Salafism," "extremism," "terrorism," and "radical Islamism," which can be seen as a manifestation of the sectarian narrative as an explanatory feature of conflicts occurring in the region and a critical discursive tool utilized among rivals. Such discursive practices can be viewed within the context of sectarianization as a system of attitudes, beliefs, and actions arising in the form of distorted expressions, involving a religious element as well as a negative mixture of politics and religion. The intended impact of such a discourse among the recipients, as well as the associated messages, whether implicit or explicit, fall within the framework of the attitudes and practices that invoke religious differences as the boundary marker to represent social stratification and conflict. The term *Wahhabism* also emerges in the discourse of pro-al-Hashd media when tackling the ideological basis upon which radical Sunni groups rest, which reflects an attempt to emphasize the extremist nature of the rivals and enemies of al-Hashd, given that *Wahhabism* is deemed to be the most extreme manifestation of radical Sunni Islam. Also, the concept of *takfīr* is repeatedly attributed to Sunni-based organizations in a bid to emphasize the extremist Salafi-Jihadi nature of those perceived enemies. In order to stress the

religiosity of al-Hashd al-Shaabi, the group's Shiʿite members are portrayed as "holy," "sacred," and "saintly." The constant association of al-Hashd al-Shaabi with Shiʿism and the martyrdom of al-Hussein, besides other religio-sectarian-based symbols and beliefs, renders the utilized discourse a unique example of sectarianization in the context of armed conflict, for it shows a clear manifestation of what Ibn Khaldun labeled as *ʿaṣabīyah* or the nurturing of a group feeling at times of crisis. Phrases employed to support such an image-building include "religious legitimacy," "political legitimacy," and "religious-based force."

Furthermore, associating al-Hashd's claimed struggle with Imām al-Hussein and emphasizing the latter's membership to *'Ahl al-Bayt* reflect a sectarian-based Shia perspective on "sacredness" and "saintliness," wherein the sect views Imāms as carriers of the Prophetic Light, divinely safeguarded against error and sin, and possessors of an impeccable and infallible knowledge and understanding of Islam and the Qur'ān. Drawing a link between the *mujāhidīn* of al-Hashd al-Shaabi on the one hand, and the Shia's "historical" suffering, al-Hussein's martyrdom, and the annual "visit" to his shrine as "the master of all martyrs," on the other hand, is meant to serve the consolidation of a religiously positive image about al-Hashd. The religionized and sectarianized ideological discourse of various pro-al-Hashd media outlets carries traces of fundamental Shia tenets, namely an emotional attachment to the historical exclusion from power at the hands of the Sunnis; an allegedly constant striving for bringing about justice; a long-standing sectarian rivalry; a great commitment to the principle of *'Imāmah* or the leadership of the infallible Shia Imāms; and embracing Imām al-Hussein's martyrdom as a moral lesson that symbolizes the community's suffering and strengthens religious beliefs and values among its members. The Shia sect is frequently depicted as a victim of the false claims and suppression by Sunni-led entities in Iraq and the region, and al-Hashd al-Shaabi is deemed to be the "righteous" force to protect the sect through its so-called legendary victories and the "hidden assistance" of "Imām al-Mahdi" and the blessing of "Imām Ali al-Sistani." This sectarian discourse contradicts the claim of struggling for national unity and denouncing sectarian divide within the Iraqi society and the Muslim *'ummah* at large. Armed and political conflicts are hence discursively sectarianized through the utilization of *Sunni* and *Shia* as defining markers attributed to parties to conflict in Iraq and the region. Notions of *othering* characterization as a symbolic degradation, and the incitement

and strengthening of *in*-group versus *out*-group sentiments, emerge at the core of such strategies. Thus, discursive ideologization seems to have been systematically employed by al-Hashd media for the sake of consolidating a positive image about the organization and a negative picture about its opponents, rivals, and enemies. The main goal of such discursive practices is to ensure the delivery of certain messages that serve al-Hashd and its agenda, and to influence the addressees' views and beliefs with regard to matters tackled by the media materials.

Discursive manipulation also emerges as a crucial strategy pursued by al-Hashd media. Firstly, *omission* has been frequently employed by means of dismissing relevant details that carry negative connotations for the organization and its practices and activities. Such details, which could be of crucial importance for the addressees' understanding of ongoing developments, seem to have been purposefully withheld for the sake of maintaining a positive image about al-Hashd al-Shaabi and ensuring the effectiveness of the messages associated with the utilized discourse. Information and details excluded by al-Hashd media outlets primarily include: the sectarian basis behind the establishment of al-Hashd al-Shaabi; the sectarian nature of the relationship between the organization and the Iraqi government; violations and atrocities committed by al-Hashd forces against civilians during military operations; and sectarian-guided practices against the perceived *others*. Secondly, *explicit and implicit commission* have been remarkably utilized throughout the process of tackling different issues and happenings. Such matters include: emphasizing the religious nature of al-Hashd al-Shaabi in terms of sacredness, piety, devotion, determination, and commitment to *jihād* and *ʿaqīdah*; stressing the crucial role of al-Hashd forces in the war on terrorism, the protection of civilians and the liberation of the country; delving into and frequently underlining the "sacrifices" of al-Hashd members and the "bloodshed" among their ranks for the sake of the land and the religion; asserting the legitimacy of the "fatwa" of Imām al-Sistani with respect to "jihād kifāyah" and insisting on the rightfulness of the Imamate (*ʾImāmah*) in initiating *jihād* and leading the *ʾummah*; maintaining an image of al-Hashd as protectors of the people and defenders of the country; insisting on al-Hashd's key role in bringing about stability and security to Iraq; underlining the determination of the group's fighters to preserve basic *Islamic teachings* and to maintain fundamental religious and human values and principles; excessively blaming the Sunnis for the challenges and miseries encountering Iraq and its people in both the past and the present, as well as picturing them as a threat to the

future of the country; consolidating an extremist image about Sunni Muslims; and emphatically associating Sunnism with sectarianism, Salafism, Wahhabism, Islamism, and radicalism, while describing Shiʿism in terms of patriotism, religiosity, and piety. Thirdly, *emotional appeal* and *repetition* arise as main *propaganda strategies* employed by al-Hashd media for the sake of guaranteeing a resounding impact of the messages delivered to the recipients. Emphatic and reiterated terminology used throughout the data include: "fatwa," "Supreme Religious Reference," "Imām," "jihād kifāyah," "mujāhidīn," "sacrifices," "liberation," "security," "safety," "Sunnis," "Shia," "holy," "sacred," "glorious," "courageous," "martyrdom," "nationalism," "terrorism," "extremism," and "sectarianism." Terms with positive connotations are repeatedly employed in reference to al-Hashd al-Shaabi and its members, while terms with negative or less favorable connotations are constantly attributed to critics, opponents, rivals, or enemies. Besides, primary issues tackled by means of employing *emotional appeal* include: the role of al-Hashd in easing the human suffering during the Iraqi conflict, allegedly through ensuring the "safety" and "protection" of civilians; the reference to the "great sacrifices" of al-Hashd for the sake of liberating the country, protecting the "various components" of the Iraqi society, and defending true Islam against terrorists; embracing martyrdom by al-Hashd's members during the protection of "sacred religious sites"; framing the involvement of al-Hashd in the Iraqi conflict as a "struggle" for the "homeland" and the "religion"; associating al-Hashd al-Shaabi with religious symbols, the *Imamate* and *ʿAhl al-Bayt*. Thus, the analysis has illustrated that manipulation forms a main feature of the discourse employed by media outlets run by or associated with al-Hashd al-Shaabi.

Main aspects of the analyzed discourse—as identified and explored throughout the analysis process—include religionization and sectarianization. The core nature of manipulation in discourse lies in its reflection of the interests of a dominant speaker or writer versus dominated recipients or perceived *others*. It eventually produces or reproduces inequality in the society. The manipulation observed throughout the analyzed media materials rises to the level of deception as described by Blass, who explains such a discursive practice as "an attempt to affect the target in such a way that his behavior/action is an instrument of attaining the goals of the manipulator, who acts without using force but in such a way that the target does not know the goal of the manipulator's actions."[118] Given the power of discourse in (re)shaping the opinions and beliefs of the recipients, as well

as their attitudes and behaviors, especially in a state of crisis, the impact and consequences of the discursive practices identified, interpreted, and explained in the course of this study may not be underestimated.

Notes

1. Liechty, J. and Clegg, C (2001). *Moving Beyond Sectarianism: Religion, Conflict and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland*. 102.
2. Adediji, A. (2016). *The Politicization of Ethnicity as Source of Conflict*. 93.
3. Jarman, N. (2012). *Defining Sectarianism and Sectarian Hate Crime*. 7.
4. van Dijk, T.A. (2006b). *Ideology and Discourse Analysis*. 116.
5. Carvalho, A. (2008). *Media(ted) Discourse and Society*. 170.
6. van Dijk, T.A. (1998). *Opinions and Ideologies in the Press*. 31.
7. van Dijk, T.A. (2000). *Ideology and Discourse: A Multidisciplinary Introduction*. 44.
8. "*March Forth Whether Light of Heavy*", Recorded speech by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, al-Furqan Foundation for Media Production, 14 May 2015.
9. Al-Qaradawi, Y. (2009). *Fiqh al-Jihad (2 vols.)* 68.
10. ibid, 55.
11. Heck, P.L. (2004). *Jihad Revisited*. 97.
12. Ibid., 98.
13. Hegghammer, T. (2010). *The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad*. 74.
14. "*This is The Promise of Allah*", Recorded speech by Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, al-Furqan Foundation for Media Production, 29 June 2014.
15. Wright *et al*. (2017). *The Jihadi Threat: ISIS, al-Qaeda, and Beyond*. 8.
16. Sardar, Z. and Davies, M. (2004). *The No-nonsense Guide to Islam*. 52.
17. Hafez, M. (2007). *Suicide Bombers in Iraq: The Strategy and Ideology of Martyrdom*. 66.
18. See Jarman, N. (2012). *Defining Sectarianism and Sectarian Hate Crime*. 7. Also see: Champion, D. (2003). *The Paradoxical Kingdom: Saudi Arabia and the Momentum of Reform*.
19. Hassan, H. (2017). *The Sectarianism of the Islamic State: Ideological Roots and Political Conflict*. 51.
20. Adediji, A. (2016). *The Politicization of Ethnicity as Source of Conflict*. 93.
21. Liechty, J. and Clegg, C (2001). *Moving Beyond Sectarianism: Religion, Conflict and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland*. 102.
22. "*And Those Who Lived [In Faith] Would Live Upon Evidence*", Recorded speech by Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, al-Furqan Foundation for Media Production, 21 May 2016.
23. Al-Qaradawi, Y. (2009). *Fiqh al-Jihad (2 vols.)* 56.

24. Ibn Taymiyya is believed to have established an intellectual groundwork that has considerably inspired prominent contemporary radical Islamists.
25. Heck, P.L. (2004). *Jihad Revisited*. 117.
26. Stefon, M. (2010). *Islamic Beliefs and Practices*. 134. Also see: Wilson, P. (1988). *Scandal: Essays in Islamic Heresy*. 15.
27. Brunner, R. (2013). *Sunnis and Shiʿites in Modern Islam: Politics, Rapprochement and the Role of Al-Azhar*. 26.
28. "*Propagating the Correct Manjah*", IS report: An Insight into the Islamic State, al-Hayat Media Centre, Issue 1 (p.1), 1 May 2014.
29. See Schleifer, S.A. (1983), 'Understanding Jihād: Definition and Methodology', *Islamic Quarterly*, London, 26:121–129; Morabia, A. (1978), 'Ibn Taymiyya, Dernier Grand Thoéricien Du Gihâd Médiéval', *Bulletin D'Etudes Orientales*, Paris, 30:85–100.
30. Instances of such literature include *al-Farīḍah al-Ghā'ibah* (the neglected duty, 'jihad') by Muhammad 'Abd al-Salām Faraj; *Risalāt al-ʾīmān* (messages of the faith) by Sālih Sariyyah; *Kalimāt Ḥaqq* (the honest word) by Omar Abdulrahman; *Mithāq al-ʿAmal al-Islāmī* (the charter of Islamic activism) by al-Jamāʿa al-Islāmiyya; *Millat ʾIbrāhīm* (the community of Abraham) by Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi; *'Ilḥaq bi'l-Qāfilah* (Do not miss the [jihad] caravan) by Abdullah 'Azzām; and *al-ʿUmdah fī ʾIʿdād al-ʿUddah* (the adequate preparation for the struggle) by Abdulqader Abdulaziz (Alsulaiman, 2016: 187).
31. Maher, S. (2017). *Salafi-Jihadim: The History of an Idea*. 8.
32. "*Islamic State Liberates the City of Mosul*", IS report: An Insight into the Islamic State, al-Hayat Media Centre, Issue 3 (pp. 1–2), 1 June 2014.
33. Rogan, E. (2015). *The Fall of the Ottomans: The Great War in the Middle East, 1914–1920*.
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    https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2015/country-chapters/iraq
    https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/07/03/syria-deliberate-killing-civilians-isis
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    https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/01/31/iraq-possible-war-crimes-shia-militia

    In a report published on January 31, 2016, HRW accused al-Hashd al-Shaabi of committing possible war crimes against Sunnis in the Muqdadiya town in Diyala province (See: https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/01/31/iraq-possible-war-crimes-shia-militia).

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CHAPTER 8

Conclusions: Discursive Practices by Sectarian-Guided Propaganda Machines

8.1 Incubators of Extremism: Media Discourse in Syria and Iraq

The discursive environment within which radical groups such as ISIS and al-Hashd al-Shaabi have emerged, namely the discourses of Syrian and Iraqi media, was increasingly characterized by manipulation and ideologization. Political, religious, and ethnic affiliations and loyalties of the various media organizations seem to have played a crucial role in the way they discursively approached ongoing matters and events. The incitement of sectarian and social divide emerges as one of the main aspects of this discursive environment. The analysis has indicated the employment of various strategic tools, aimed at consolidating the desired image about the concerned parties and framing the developments during news reporting based on the incentives and purposes of the editorial policies of each media organization. Traces of the *Ideological Square* have been observed throughout the research data, which demonstrate obvious attempts by the concerned media outlets to resort to ideologizing their audiences and pushing them toward believing the specific version of each story delivered in accordance with the particular political or sectarian agenda. The Syrian state media generally seem to try to employ discursive ideologization by means of branding anti-government forces either as *takfīri terrorists* or as *conspirators* associated with external actors, while presenting the government as a *protector* of the rights of minorities and a *defender* of the sovereignty

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of the Syrian state. The pro-Syrian regime discourse has primarily aimed at depriving the 2011 Syrian popular uprising of its legitimacy, even before the country's descent into a civil war. Such a narrative, weaponized by the state media as a mouthpiece of the government, constitutes an obvious denial to the political and socio-economic conditions that have played a key role in the outbreak of the 2011 uprising. Meanwhile, the discourse of pro-opposition media has been no less ideological than that of the government, as illustrated through the analysis of journalistic data produced by relevant media outlets. The government is increasingly branded as an *occupier* of Syrian territories and its forces are deemed to have systematically targeted civilians, whereas the opposition factions, including hardline Islamist groups, are presented as *liberators* and *freedom fighters*. This discourse can be seen as an indicator of the Islamization of the Syrian uprising amid growing violence across the country during the period covered by this study. The discourse of pro-opposition Syrian media has further employed a considerably sectarian overtone through repeatedly referring to the regime and its allies by their sectarian affiliation. The analysis of Syria's pro-Kurdish media has also illustrated the utilization of ideological discursive practices wherever possible, especially once an article or a news report appears to tackle developments that involve anti-Kurdish factions. A positive image about *Rojava* and the Kurdish forces in northern Syria has been constantly consolidated, whereas political and ideological rivals have been negatively presented and branded as *mercenaries* and *extremists*. *Liberal* and *democratic* features of Kurdish political and armed factions have been considerably emphasized in the discourse of pro-Kurdish media, while a dark image about the opponents has been continuously delivered and stressed.

The ideological analysis of the Iraqi media has shown no less degree of discursive ideologization employed by various media organizations, especially in terms of sectarianization and politicization of the news reporting. The pro-Shia government media, on the one hand, has mainly resorted to such discursive practices in a bid to frame opponents, particularly those of *other* ethno-sectarian backgrounds, as *incubators* to and *supporters* of *terrorism*, whereas presenting allied factions as *national heroes*. The pro-Sunni media, on the other hand, has constantly insisted on showing Shia-based factions as *powerful aggressors* and the Sunnis as *helpless victims*. As for the pro-Kurdish media in Iraq, their discourse reveals that relations to other components of the Iraqi society are defined in accordance with each representative party's position toward the Kurdish issue or their

attitudes toward ongoing developments in the Kurdish arena. A positive image about the Kurdish political and military establishments and allies has been constantly consolidated, whereas a negative image has been persistently emphasized about rivals and opponents. As such, the Shia-Sunni, Arab-Kurdish differences and rivalries emerge at the heart of the discursive ideologization process pursued by various Iraqi media outlets, each in accordance with their own political loyalties and ethno-sectarian affiliations. Hence, concepts of *othering*, *in*-group versus *out*-group, *us* versus *them*, representation and misrepresentation have been enormously utilized throughout the discourse of the studied media organizations. Sectarianization and politicization are among the key aspects observed during the analysis of the discourse of various Syrian and Iraqi media corporations included in this volume. Given the power of the media to employ the necessary tools to indoctrinate its addressees, the utilization of discursive ideologization in the context of conflict, especially in culturally diverse crisis-torn countries such as Syria and Iraq, renders involved media organizations substantially responsible for the incitement and escalation of sectarian-based violence.

Discursive manipulation seems to have also been systematically employed by the included Syrian and Iraqi media corporations. Aspects of *Manipulative Strategies* have been observed across the data, showing increasing attempts by the involved media organizations to discursively manipulate the addressees' understanding, opinions, and beliefs with respect to issues and developments in their surroundings. The Syrian pro-government media discourse embodies discursive manipulation that ultimately serves regime policies in denying any existence of a popular pro-democracy uprising and branding all opponents indiscriminately as misled *extremists*, *terrorists*, or *conspirators*. Whereas Alawite- or Shia-led movements and their practices are remarkably praised, reflecting the sectarian dimension of the Syrian regime's policies as manifested by the state media discourse. The pro-opposition media discourse emerges as no less manipulative and sectarian than that of the regime, particularly in terms of trying to enforce a belief that Sunni-based actors or activities hold *legitimate aspirations* and are thus *praiseworthy*, whereas Alawite- and Shia-led practices are said to be merely *sectarian-guided* and *offensive*. Moreover, the pro-Kurdish media discourse appears to carry traces of ethno-sectarianism in that it mainly strives for showing opponents of the Kurdish cause in Syria as *chauvinists*, *mercenaries*, or *radical Islamists*. This has been accomplished by means of employing a discourse wherein multiple

manipulative strategies are utilized for the sake of ensuring reaching the desired effects in the ranks of the addressees.

With regard to the Iraqi media, the discourse of Iraq's pro-Shia government media manifests an explicit example of the exploitation of multiple manipulative practices with the objective of fostering an image of unavoidable ethno-sectarian divide and blaming the intensification and severity of the conflict on certain components of the Iraqi society. The Shia are constantly portrayed either as *victims* or *national heroes*, whereas the Sunnis are usually associated with *aggression* and *terrorism*. Similar attributes arise while making a discursive distinction between ethnic Arabs and ethnic Kurds, which is believed to ultimately contribute to the deepening of the already escalating ethno-sectarian divide and sedition in Iraq. Manipulative strategies are excessively instrumentalized for the sake of boosting the impact of such a message among the addressees. Also, the discourse of pro-Sunni media seems to carry no less of a sectarian-guided manipulative dose. The Sunnis are primarily presented as *victims* of *discrimination* and *marginalization*, conducted by a *suppressive* and *aggressive* Shia majority that seems to have monopolized power over political and military institutions in Iraq, besides operating in the form of *abusive* militias. Furthermore, the discourse of Iraq's pro-Kurdish media emerges as if operating in accordance with the compass of the interests of the Kurdistan Region through portraying the perceived *others*, based on politicized ethno-sectarian differences and rivalries, as *suppressive*, *chauvinistic*, or *extremely hostile*. Discursive manipulation has hereby played an instrumental role in framing the developments in the Iraqi arena as such with the ultimate goal of influencing the recipients' views and beliefs regarding the matters in question.

Thus, this study has illustrated that media outlets in the Syrian and Iraqi arena have increasingly resorted to ideologization and manipulation as key discursive practices to deliver implicit as well as explicit messages to their audiences in a bid to ensure the effectiveness of such messages. Ethno-sectarian affiliations and political loyalties emerge as crucial factors behind the utilization of certain discursive practices by the involved media organizations. The critical consequences of discursive ideologization and manipulation are to be seriously considered since media discourse basically plays a significant role in the course of defining developments—which mostly take place in the surroundings of the recipients—as social problems and in mediating knowledge about perceived matters at stake. Hence, discursive practices employed by the Syrian and Iraqi media are deemed crucial in terms of impact for the eventual (re)shaping of the addressees' opinions

and beliefs, whether through direct or indirect effects, as well as the potential indoctrination such practices entail among the recipients.

8.2 Evolution of Extremist Discourse in the Heart of the Middle East

The discourses of ISIS and al-Hashd al-Shaabi seem to have developed in the period between 2014 and 2017—as covered by this study—in accordance with the happenings and developments in the surroundings of both groups, whether on local, regional, or international level. Looking at the chronological evolution of ISIS's discourse, the group, through its media mouthpieces, seems to have initially focused on releasing leadership speeches and news reports that primarily tackle the rise of the group and its project, namely the caliphate. First of all, religionization arises as a main dimension of the early messages conveyed by ISIS to its audiences. Key concepts employed throughout the discourse of the relevant media material include *jihād*, the revival of the Islamic caliphate, representation of the Sunni Muslims, and the *hijrah* of Muslims from various parts of the world to the promised land of *khilāfah*. The notion of *hijrah* was primarily utilized as a part of the recruitment strategy by ISIS. Most of the recited verses of the Qur'ān and the ḥadīth tackle the concept of *jihād* in combination with the notion of *ʿamalu l-badan bil-qitāl* or the physical form of effort in combat. ISIS has promoted its agenda as a struggle for the cause of Allah through branding its members as *mujāhidīn* and *muwaḥidīn*. Secondly, politicization emerges as another dimension of the discourse employed by pro-ISIS media organizations. This arises mainly in the way the group seems to have been insisting on legitimizing its self-proclaimed "Islamic khilāfah" by means of employing the concepts of *ahlul-ḥalli-wal-ʿaqd* (elite scholars who loose and bind), *ijmāʿ* (consensus), and *bayʿah* (swearing allegiance to the Caliph). The group further tried to emphasize its legitimacy in initiating *jihād* and establishing "Islamic khilāfah" through claiming representation of the Sunnis or *Ahl al-Sunnah wal-Jamāʿah*. Throughout the later stages of its advancement on the ground, as propagated through its online platforms, ISIS's struggle has been constantly portrayed as a fight against the *ṭawāghīt* (idols and tyrants), *kuffār* (infidels), *murtaddīn* (apostates), *people of bidʿah* (heretical innovations), and *munāfiqīn* (hypocrites). The utilized terminology reveals the Salafi-Jihadi doctrinal basis of the group with regard to its agenda and worldview.

Redrawing the borders of Syria and Iraqi as part of the group's strategy and the employment of hate speech with respect to the West arise as additional aspects of politicization by the group. This approach developed increasingly throughout the final stages of ISIS's struggle for maintaining control over the territory once held by the group. At the phase of expansion and prosperity, the group's discourse enormously focused on the administrative capabilities of the institutions it claimed to run. Among the main topics tackled by the concerned media organizations at this stage were education, *Daʿwah*, the enforcement of the *Sharīʿa*, combatting corruption, and securing areas under the group's control. When these areas were exposed to bombardment by the so-called enemy forces, ISIS began to shed an increasing light on the suffering of the Muslim civilians and extremely tried to discursively weaponize its recipients with politicized and sectarianized messages. In a nutshell, the discourse of ISIS seems to have gone through multiple evolutionary phases, starting with religionized extremist calls for *jihād* and *hijrah*; attempts to legitimize its self-proclaimed *khilāfah*; politicizing and sectarianizing the conflict; glorifying military advances and territorial expansion; praising administrative capabilities of its institutions and enforcing the *Sharīʿa* while running areas controlled by its forces; shedding light on the suffering of Muslims under bombardment by enemy forces; and eventually delivering desperate calls to recruits and sympathizers to take action against foes and adversaries. Hence, ISIS considers media warfare as an efficient strategy to propagate itself, legitimize its cause, and intimidate its enemies. Despite the hardships and heavy losses the group encountered following its decline in late 2017, ISIS's online propaganda appeared to increase in terms of the dissemination of instructional materials and to have become even more important for the group than before, particularly in terms of showing the continuity of its alleged struggle.[1] Inspiring many individuals to join its cause and respond to its call for "lone jihād" in spite of the group's defeat on the ground in Iraq and Syria is deemed to be an explicit reflection of the resounding impact of ISIS's effective propaganda strategies.

The discourse of al-Hashd al-Shaabi has also been influenced by the surrounding developments during the period covered by this study. Unlike ISIS, al-Hashd al-Shaabi has shown a greater interaction with the local—and on certain occasions the regional—happenings and issues in terms of discourse than with international matters. At its early stages, the discourse of al-Hashd mainly focused on the question of legitimacy by means of religionization and politicization. On the one hand, the group's religious

legitimacy has been emphasized through drawing a solid link between the establishment of al-Hashd al-Shaabi and the *fatwa* of the Supreme Religious Reference of the Shiʿites in Iraq, Imām Ali al-Sistani. This *fatwa* has been pictured as a *sacred* call for *jihād kifāyah*, within the framework of which the members of al-Hashd al-Shaabi are portrayed as *true* mujāhidīn who are committed to protect the basic principles of Islam. The discourse of media outlets associated with al-Hashd al-Shaabi holds traces of the historic differences between the *Shiʿites* and the *Sunnis*, including the interpretation of *jihād* in accordance with sectarian-based jurisprudential disagreements, particularly with regard to the eligible authority to initiate and lead *jihād*. This disagreement is deeply rooted in the Sunni-Shia original struggle over whether religio-political leadership was meant to be passed on by bloodline, known as the *Shia Imamate*, or through election, known as the *Sunni Caliphate*. On the other hand, al-Hashd's political legitimacy has been stressed by means of constantly referring to the *nationalist* spirit of the organization—portrayed as a formation loyal to the central Iraqi government. Under the umbrella of this religio-political-based discourse, al-Hashd al-Shaabi is initially portrayed as a crucial force in the fight against the enemies of Islam, namely ISIS and those allegedly associated with it, with a claimed ultimate objective of preserving Islamic values, teachings and sacred sites from destruction and devastation. Then, the organization is pictured as a *liberator* of the country and a *protector* of its sovereignty and the national unity within its borders. In a later phase of the development of al-Hashd's discourse, the organization has been depicted as a *defender* of human values through the protection of civilians and the struggle for stability and security. Nevertheless, the *Shiʿite* nature of the organization's agenda and its fundamental affiliation with the Shia emerge at the core of the discourse employed by media outlets associated with al-Hashd. This basically reflects sectarianism as a key incentive behind the rise and struggle of the organization. The discursive practices observed throughout the data of pro-al-Hashd media illustrate that the Islamic teachings al-Hashd claims to protect are basically those that are solely embraced by the Shia Muslims; the sacred sites referred to are of a Shiʿite affiliation; the concept of *jihād* arises exclusively in accordance with Shiʿite interpretations; populations that practically fall under the protection of al-Hashd are predominantly Shiʿite; and the supposed national unity aspired for emerges only within the framework of the agenda of the Shia-led Iraqi government, which forms the only source of national legitimacy for al-Hashd al-Shaabi in the Iraqi arena. In terms of terminology, various

terms of sectarian nature are seen popping up throughout the discourse of the concerned media organizations, including multiple references to the sacredness of the Imāms—including Ali, al-Hussein, and the Hidden Imām—as carriers of the Prophetic Light, alongside with basic Shia-embraced notions such as ʿAshurā', the martyrdom of al-Hussein, victimization of the Shiʿites, and the fundamental role of *Mujtahids* in initiating *jihād* in accordance with the Shiʿite teachings. Furthermore, the recited religious verses seem to have been carefully selected for the sake of serving the contextual foundation of the tackled matters and the effectiveness of the associated messages. Hence, the phases through which the discourse of al-Hashd al-Shaabi seems to have undergone include religionized portrayal of the organization and its members, aimed at establishing religious legitimacy; sectarianized call for *jihād*; politicized framing of the struggle of al-Hashd for the sake of national recognition; praising the organization's sacrifices as protectors of the homeland and the religion; idealizing al-Hashd al-Shaabi as a defender of human values; and finally promoting the organization as a crucial factor of stabilization and security in Iraq.

8.3 Messages, Linguistic, and Contextual Activities

Comparing the discursive approach to recipients by ISIS on the one hand, and al-Hashd al-Shaabi on the other, we may conclude that while the former has shown attempts to address a worldwide Muslim community, the latter has rather focused its efforts to reach a local audience. Global-minded ISIS has primarily structured its discourse in such a way that facilitates targeting and touching on the feelings of Sunni Muslims across the world. The group's discourse and the associated messages are mainly directed to all Sunni Muslims to manipulate their emotions through involving the dream of the caliphate and utilizing Sunni-based elements. This is also reflected in the group's attempts to recruit Muslims from different parts of the world to join its ranks in Syria and Iraq or to operate as lone wolves as well as scattered smaller cells across the so-called enemy states. Indications of such kind of messages are observed in the discourse of ISIS's leadership while addressing the group's recruits and potential sympathizers. Meanwhile, al-Hashd al-Shaabi appears to be mainly local-minded, and in certain cases regionally influenced in accordance with developments related to Shia Muslims. The organization's Shia-based

discourse demonstrates a considerable attachment to unified actions under the umbrella of sectarian-based fatwas, where discursive efforts seem to be mainly focused on a local Shia-guided agenda.

The main messages observed throughout the analysis of ISIS's discourse include: the revival of the Islamic caliphate; the legitimacy of ISIS in leading the worldwide Muslim community as a sole representative of *Ahl al-Sunnah wal-Jamāʿah*; the group's possession of the necessary tools, such as military capabilities and religious guidance, to defeat the *kuffār*; an invitation to Muslims in diaspora to immigrate (*hijrah*) to the so-called land of the caliphate and join its project; emphasis on *jihād*, in its physical form, as an obligatory action and a command by Allah; a divine reward to those who join the group, and a merciless punishment to those who neglect its call or oppose its agenda; ISIS's administrative capabilities to run a so-called Islamic state; combating foreign forces and sectarian adversaries as a duty on every Sunni Muslim; promising a glorious victory for the *mujāhidīn*; the application of the Islamic Sharīʿa in accordance with the Prophet's *manhaj*; striving against all forms of *ṭāghūt*, *nifāq*, and *bidʿah*; resisting the *kuffār*; and suppressing the *murtaddīn*. In order to realize and ensure a resounding impact of the delivered messages among the recipients, certain linguistic and contextual activities have been employed throughout the discourse of ISIS.

The analysis of the ISIS's media materials has illustrated a selective recitation of various Qur'ānic verses and ḥadīths in accordance with the context they tend to serve, and in such a way that would ultimately facilitate the delivery of particular messages. Qur'ānic verses from the Chapters *Al-Baqarah* and *An-Nisā'*, alongside with a prophetic ḥadīth, are recited within the framework of ISIS's call for *jihād* and *martyrdom*. These are undoubtedly selected for they tackle these particular subjects and they are eventually employed within the context of the group's own call on Muslims to rise up and fight for the group's cause. The recited verses tackle the concept of *jihād* in combination with the notion of *ʿamalu l-badan bil-qitāl* (the physical form of effort in combat). The incorporation of such verses and the employment of interpretations that remarkably reduce *jihād* to a mere physical activity are aimed at emphasizing the righteousness of ISIS in establishing its state and presenting its struggle as a struggle between "the people of faith" and "the people of disbelief." Such a discourse basically implicates that ISIS is fighting "for the cause of Allah" and everyone who joins its ranks is "a *mujāhid* for the cause of Allah," and those who end up dead are portrayed as *shuhadā'* (martyrs). The alleged

cause ISIS claims to fight for is being propagated as "the cause of Allah" toward which all Muslims are said to bear a responsibility. Another example of recitation for contextual purposes is that of a verse from *Āl 'Imrān* Chapter, which tackles the glory promised by Allah to the believers. The utilization of such a verse in the concerned context could be seen as an attempt by the group to mobilize forces for its own cause, on the one hand, and to stress ISIS's righteousness in reviving the caliphate and leading the Muslims, on the other. The analysis has indicated the employment of multiple verses from Qur'ānic Chapters, each appearing in a certain context and serving a particular message. These include *An-Nahl* on fighting against the enemies of Allah; *At-Tawbah* on preserving and applying Islamic teachings; *Al Anfāl* on enforcing the Islamic faith among the people; and *Al-Baqarah* on the necessity of resistance against oppressors. Multiple ḥadīths are also recited for the sake of emphasizing the credibility of ISIS's claims with respect to various questions, such as the Prophetic *manhaj* for leading the *'ummah*; demanding non-believers to submit to Allah and enter Islam; and promising a glorious and victorious end to the Muslims. Thus, the selective recitation of the Qur'ān and the ḥadīth within ISIS's discourse can be viewed as a contextual activity that tends to serve the ultimate objectives of the group, that is, reaching the addressees through a convincing tone and ensuring the conveyance and effectiveness of the implicit and explicit messages.

Furthermore, in terms of language use, a set of terms that explain the extremist and sectarian nature of ISIS have been identified in the course of the data analysis. The employed vocabulary and concepts, such as *jihād*, *ṭāghūt*, *nifāq*, *bidʿah*, *takfīr*, *riddah*, *al-walā' wa-l-barā'*, *tawḥīd*, and *ḥākimiyyah*, reveal the Salafi-Jihadi foundation of ISIS and manifest religious extremism as one of the cornerstones upon which the group seems to ideologically rest. Another terminological set that constantly appears in ISIS's discourse shows traces of sectarian-guided hate speech that portrays foes and adversaries in the most malicious, resentful, and indignant terms. Such terms mostly carry historical connotations of divisive, schismatic, and inciteful nature. The conflict to which ISIS emerges as a main party is discursively sectarianized by means of utilizing terms such as *rāfiḍah* (rejectionists) and *Ṣafawi* to describe the Shiʿites, and *Nuṣayri* or heretical to describe the Alawites. Other linguistic and contextual activities depicted throughout the analysis of ISIS's discourse include: picturing the ongoing conflict as a struggle between *'īmān* (belief), allegedly represented by ISIS, and *kufr* (disbelief), supposedly represented by all those who fall

outside its ranks; the group's activities are described as blessed efforts for the sake of a holy cause and its members are continuously portrayed as *true mujāhidīn* and *muwaḥidīn* who follow the command of Allah and are eventually rewarded by Him; everyone who tends to oppose the group or deny the legitimacy of its cause are branded as *ṭawāghīt* (idols and tyrants), *kuffār* (infidels), *murtaddīn* (apostates), *people of bidʿah* (heretical innovations) and *munāfiqīn* (hypocrites); the legitimacy of the group's self-proclaimed "Islamic khilāfah" is discursively supported by the frequent mention of *ahlul-ḥalli-wal-ʿaqd* (elite scholars who loose and bind), *ijmāʿ* (consensus), and *bayʿah* (swearing allegiance to the Caliph). While ISIS's alleged "Islamic khilāfah" is depicted as a long-standing "dream" of all Muslims, notions such as "democracy, secularism and nationalism" are labeled as "garbage" and "corrupt" ideologies and beliefs that need to be destroyed. The group tends to present itself and those associated with its struggle as *al-ṭāʾifah al-manṣūrah* (the sole triumphant group of Muslims) and *al-firqah al-nājiyah* (the saved denomination); whereas its opponents, rivals, and enemies are shown as lost and misled. The Sunnis or *Ahl al-Sunnah wal-Jamāʿah* are referred to as "masters" and "esteemed," whereas the Shiʿites are merely branded as "rāfiḍah" (rejectionists) and "filthy Ṣafawi." Finally, ISIS is repeatedly pictured as an enlightening organization that strives for spreading knowledge among populations in areas under the group's control within the framework of its *Tawḥīd*-based *Daʿwah*. Thus, ISIS tends, through its discursive practices, to create a sense of community among excluded, marginalized, and disenfranchised followers and sympathizers through virtual and actual spaces.[2]

Key messages identified within the discourse of al-Hashd al-Shaabi involve: the maintenance of basic Islamic principles and teachings by the *mujāhidīn* of al-Hashd; the preservation of human values by means of protecting civilians and ensuring their safety by the organization; the liberation of Iraq from perceived enemies; contributing to the protection of national unity; emphasizing the crucial role of the *Shia Imamate*—as well as the *Mujtahids*—in initiating and leading *jihād* against foes and adversaries; coining the struggle of al-Hashd as a *jihād kifāyah* or *farḍ kifāyah*, launched voluntarily based on the *fatwa* of the Shia Supreme Religious Reference for the sake of defending the land and the religion—namely *Jihād al-Daf*—against enemies; showing the Shiʿites as victims to injustices by the Sunni majority throughout the Islamic history into this day; stressing attachment to Shiʿite symbols and rituals as a source of inspiration; associating the Sunnis with "Salafism," "extremism," "terrorism,"

and "radical Islamism"; emphasizing the sacredness and piety of al-Hashd members; claiming embodiment of the will and determination of *ʿAhl al-Bayt* in terms of bringing about justice among the Muslims; praising and glorifying the sacrifices of al-Hashd, and celebrating its members' courage as *true mujāhidīn*; underlining the political legitimacy of the organization under the umbrella of the Shia-led Iraqi government; sectarianizing the conflict by means of asserting the superiority of the Shia over other components of the society and the employment of sectarian markers; insisting on al-Hashd's key role in bringing about stability and security in Iraq.

In terms of contextual activities, the analysis has illustrated an increasing reference to the *Shia Imamate* and the associated teachings, lessons, values, and principles. This while the Qur'ān has rarely been recited by pro-al-Hashd media. This explains the deeply rooted sectarian spirit guiding the organization through its discourse and the importance of the Shia characteristics to the organization, rather than the religious features that may bring al-Hashd al-Shaabi closer to other Islamist groups. Such discursive practices can be interpreted as a quest for uniqueness through what we may call *religio-sectarian distancing*, which entails reinforcing sectarian divide in order to draw a clear line between good and evil, with sectarian markers involved. One of the very few Qur'ānic verses observed within the media materials of al-Hashd al-Shaabi is *surat At-Taubah* (Q9:14), with respect to the armed conflict in Iraq. Given the context within which this verse has been employed, the implicit message emerges in the form of conveying an impression about God's involvement in rendering al-Hashd victorious over its enemies, punishing the latter and covering them with shame subsequent to their defeat. Such a recitation is meant to support the process of portraying al-Hashd as a holy force. Besides, the ḥadīth emerges in the context of tackling the embodiment of core Islamic values by the Prophet and *ʿAhl al-Bayt*—to whom al-Hashd claims a fundamental attachment—in a bid to underline the Shiʿite belief in the importance of bloodline when it comes to the religious leadership of the *ʿummah*, which is to trace back to the concept of *Shia Imamate*. Such recitations are basically meant to support the effort of religionizing the image of al-Hashd al-Shaabi and ultimately assist in (re)shaping the opinions of the addressees with regard to the organization and direct them toward the desired conclusion about its position and objectives.

Exploring linguistic activities spotted within the discourse of al-Hashd al-Shaabi, a set of terms that explain the extremist and sectarian nature of the organization have been identified in the course of the data analysis

process. The employed vocabulary and notions, such as *jihād kifāyah*, *fatwa*, *Imamate*, *Alawi will*, and *Husseini spirit*, explain attempts of discursive sectarianization and the incitement of sectarian sentiments, whether among supporters or rivals. A positive image about al-Hashd is constantly consolidated through portraying al-Hashd's members as "heroes," "protectors," "liberators," "mujāhidīn," and "proud men of Allah." This while an extremely negative image is being conveyed to the audience about rivals and adversaries by means of picturing them as "enemies of Allah," "takfīri," "Baathist," "Wahhabi," "extremists," "Salafists," and "gangs" who are primarily concerned with "smashing" and "destroying" the country and its people in accordance with an agenda described as "terrorist," "separatist," and "sectarian." The concept of *takfīr* is repeatedly attributed to Sunni-based organizations in a bid to emphasize the extremist Salafi-Jihadi nature of those perceived enemies. In order to stress the religiosity of al-Hashd al-Shaabi, the group's Shiʿite members are portrayed as "holy," "sacred," and "saintly." The constant association of al-Hashd with Shiʿism and the martyrdom of al-Hussein renders the utilized discourse a unique example of sectarianization in the context of armed conflict, for it shows a clear manifestation of what Ibn Khaldun coined as *ʿaṣabīyah* or the nurturing of a group feeling at times of crisis. Phrases such as "religious-based force" are employed to support such an image-building. Besides, associating al-Hashd's claimed struggle with Imām al-Hussein and emphasizing the latter's membership to '*Ahl al-Bayt* reflect a sectarian-based Shia perspective on "sacredness" and "saintliness."

Hence, despite the different approaches each of these radical groups seems to have discursively pursued in terms of contextual and linguistic activities, the messages they both tend to deliver to their addressees reflect religious extremism at the core of their discourses. Once such discursive practices succeed in rendering the implied messages effective and impactful, the incitement of sectarian schism and the contribution to an intensified sectarian strife in war-torn countries such as Syria and Iraq seem to be an inevitable consequence.

8.4 Aspects and Defining Features

Elements of discursive manipulation and ideologization within the discourses of ISIS and al-Hashd al-Shaabi have been explored, identified, explained, and discussed in the analytical part of this volume. The main

objective of the employment of manipulative and ideological discursive elements involves maintaining a bright and affirmative portrayal about the in-group, serving its ultimate agendas, and gaining public sympathy and support for its claimed efforts, activities, and alleged accomplishments. Based on the critical discourse analysis conducted, politicization, religionization, and sectarianization emerge as main aspects of the discourses employed by media corporations associated with ISIS and al-Hashd al-Shaabi.

8.4.1 Politicization

In a discursive context, *politicization*, as a notion of fundamental ties with politics and power, forms an intrinsic dimension of *discursive idelogization* in that it promotes politically guided messages of those in power with the objective of influencing supposedly vulnerable recipients. Politicization arises as a key dimension of the discourses of both ISIS and al-Hashd al-Shaabi. As a discursive strategy, politicization has manifested itself on various levels across the studied media materials.

In ISIS's discourse, contrasts have been drawn between the Islamic Sharīʿa as a correct *manhaj* of governance on the one hand, and the concepts of democracy, secularism, and nationalism as misleading Western-based ideologies on the other hand. Also, employing a religio-historical context over the legitimacy of ruling the Islamic realm for the sake of consolidating an image about the Shia as enemies to the majority Sunni Muslims has been observed across the discourse of ISIS. In the same context, the Iraqi central government is depicted as a *Rāfiḍi* authority, and its relationship with Iran as a major Shia power and a facilitator of the Iraqi government's political and military activities is highlighted alongside the sectarian borderlines demarcated and reinforced by ISIS's discourse. References are made to the Shia Safavids and their historical struggle against the Sunnis, and that same historical context is projected onto the ongoing conflict within this politicized discourse. Another manifestation of discursive politicization is the emphatic reference to ISIS's political integrity and pursuit of justice within the framework of the group's ruling of Syrian and Iraqi areas, allegedly in accordance to Sharīʿa guidelines.

The discourse of al-Hashd al-Shaabi appears to have been no less politicized than that of ISIS. Within al-Hashd's discourse, the Sunnis arise as main facilitators of dictatorship and terrorism to which Iraq has been and is still being exposed, whereas the Shia emerge as a key player in terms of

positively reshaping the political scenery in the Iraqi arena. The utilized discourse suggests a struggle for power and a competition for (re)gaining authority between desperate, ideologically disoriented Sunnis, and righteous Shia. Describing the Baathist ideology as comprising nationalism, religion, and the sect, besides the explicit reference to today's Iraq as a Shiʿite state in contrast to what is discursively considered as a Sunni state under the former regime of Saddam Hussein, illustrate a religio-political and sectarian foundation of the employed discourse. Combining religion and politics in the context of conflict emerges as one of the serious dimensions of sectarian media discourse for its potential capability to facilitate and consolidate social divide. Politicization also manifests itself within the discourse of al-Hashd in the form of constant attempts to emphasize the political legitimacy of the organization, its role in maintaining national unity in Iraq, defending its sovereignty, ensuring future stability of the country, and enforcing security in its different parts. Besides, the discursive attempt to portray al-Hashd as a force acting under the legislative and executive umbrella of the Iraqi central government falls under politicization as a discursive strategy, aimed at establishing and preserving legitimacy in terms of the organization's activities and objectives. This can be interpreted as an attempt to nationalize the agenda of an armed sectarian militia and provide it with the necessary tools to prosper and increase its power and influence into the future of the region.

8.4.2 Religionization

Within the framework of this volume, *discursive religionization* is defined as the employment of religious identity, recitation of religious sources, and the utilization of religious symbols and references for the sake of asserting the religiosity, piety, and righteousness of those involved. As such, religionization surfaces as one of the major aspects of the discourses of Sunni-based ISIS and Shia-based al-Hashd.

Traces and indications of discursive religionization are regularly observed throughout the ISIS's media data. A clear distinction is being fostered between what ISIS considers as *kuffār*, *ṭawāghīt*, *murtaddīn*, *people of bidʿah*, and *munāfiqīn,* on the one hand, and the *believers*, *muwaḥidīn*, and *mujāhidīn,* on the other. Terms with religious connotations are constantly employed for the sake of stressing the religiosity of the group and its members. The legitimacy of the group's self-proclaimed *khilāfah* is discursively supported by the mention of *ahlul-ḥalli-wal-ʿaqd*,

ijmāʿ, and *bayʿah*. Such notions originate in the establishment of the first Caliphate subsequent to the death of the Prophet, as introduced by *Ahl al-Sunnah wal-Jamāʿah*. Also, in order to legitimize Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's claim of the position of *khalīfah*, multiple honorable characteristics are ascribed to the alleged caliph with the ultimate objective of convincing the addressees about al-Baghdadi's righteousness and qualification to occupy such a position. Such features include him being a "shaykh," "mujāhid," "scholar," "worshipper," "leader," "warrior," "reviver," and "descendant from the family of the Prophet." The exaggerated qualifications of al-Baghdadi are meant to reassure his eligibility as a *khalīfah*. This discourse could be seen as an attempt to almost compare ISIS's leader to the Rightly-Guided Caliphas (*Rāshidūn*). Furthermore, the concept of *qitāl* (combat) is utilized as a key dimension of the *jihād* ISIS tends to promote. The group defines *jihād* as "fighting" and a call for destruction and mass killings, which illustrates the essential ideology of the group, wherein religion is being exploited for the justification of brutal atrocities carried out by the group's so-called mujāhidīn against the perceived enemies, besides sacrificing the lives of those the group claims to be founded to protect, namely Muslim civilians. The "methodology" or *manhaj* that ISIS claims to have adopted is remarkably promoted as being based on the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad. This can be seen as an explicit attempt by ISIS to propagate itself as the *al-ṭāʾifah al-manṣūrah* (the sole triumphant group of Muslims) and *al-firqah al-nājiyah* (the saved denomination). This relates directly to the core principles of Salafism that entail a consistent emphasis on *tawḥīd* (God's unity), and the preservation of *ʿaqīdah* (doctrinal pureness) by means of what Salafi-Jihadi movements such as ISIS promote as the "correct" and "true" *manhaj*. Stressing the distribution of "Zakah" or alms to the poor as an "obligation" on "landowners" in ISIS's "Wilayāt" or provinces is meant to show the group's commitment to *Arkān al-Islām*.[3] Also, the reference to the *Sharīʿa* guidelines in this context as a basis for the way ISIS allegedly runs its "Wilayāt" illustrates the organization's attempt to politicize religion and religionize politics, as emphatically theorized within the theologian teachings of Ibn Taymiyya. The direct or indirect reference to *tawḥīd*, *takfīr*, *ḥākimiyyah*, and *jihād* that emerge in the discourse of ISIS shows the group's commitment and attachment to the fundamental tenets of Salafi-Jihadism. The utilization of such discursive practices can be seen as an obvious attempt by ISIS to characterize itself as an organization staffed

by a group of *mujāhidīn* who are deemed to be Salafi in creed and jihādi in method (*Salafī-yul ʿaqīdah wa Jihādī-yul manhaj*). Moreover, calling upon Muslims worldwide to pursue *hijrah* is basically meant to compare an aspired immigration of Muslims to ISIS's alleged "Islamic State" to the historical event of *hijrah* by the Prophet and his companions from Mecca to Medina. Such a reference is meant to exploit a historical event held dear by most Muslims and put it in the service of the group's objective of attracting and recruiting Muslim individuals into the group's ranks. A crucial religio-ideological aspect of this discourse is picturing those who join the ranks of ISIS and fight for its alleged holy cause as "the people of believe." Those who submit to and join ISIS in its alleged struggle are reassured a "reward" from Allah, and those who choose to neglect the call are deemed to be disobeying Allah and would hence be punished. The utilized discourse places a constant emphasis on *jihād*, in its physical form, as an "obligatory" action and a "command" by Allah. Employing phrases such as "either *khilāfah* or *shahādah*" (martyrdom) illustrates the suicidal nature of ISIS's members and their belief in the alleged divine reward awaiting every *shahīd*. The terminology reflects a physical embodiment of *jihād* as an activity of self-sacrifice, participation in armed struggle in the path of God, and aspiration for *shahādah* for God's cause. The group's efforts are mostly religionized by means of emphasizing the *Qur'ān* and the *Sunnah* (tradition) as bases upon which ISIS claims to rule areas under its control. In order to support the consolidation of a positive image about its ranks and its project, the *Qur'ān*, *ḥadīth* and the *Sharīʿa* are referred to as jurisprudential bases within ISIS's discourse. This shows traces of Ibn Taymiyya's teachings—where the *Qur'ān* and *ḥadīth* are exploited—with regard to the implementation of the *Sharīʿa* and the duty of the *mujāhidīn* in combatting and ultimately eliminating polytheism, disbelief, transgression, and evil. Thus, religious sources are constantly recited in a way that serves the ultimate goals of ISIS and accomplishing a resounding impact among the recipients concerning the piety and religiosity of the organization and its members and adherents.

Likewise, religionization arises as a fundamental element in the discourse of al-Hashd al-Shaabi. Portraying al-Hashd members as *mujāhidīn* is meant to show those fighters as the sole true representatives of *Islamic jihād* in the Iraqi conflict, which indirectly deprives ISIS's fighters of the title and renders them illegitimate or *false* mujāhidīn. This discourse holds traces of the historic differences between the Shiʿites and the Sunnis,

including the interpretation of *jihād* in accordance with sectarian disagreements. The repeated use of the term *mujāhidīn* to describe fighters of al-Hashd is primarily aimed at picturing those fighters as the only true strugglers in the path of Allah (*jihād fī sabīl allāh*) in the Iraqi arena. Employing the term and concept of *jihād kifāyah* is meant to emphasize the voluntary basis of the alleged *jihād* of al-Hashd al-Shaabi. Stressing the commitment of the organization's members to the *fatwa* of Imām al-Sistani and the call for *jihād* is meant to show the religiosity and devotion of al-Hashd's members. Besides the rise of *farḍ kifāyah* as a key feature of the *jihād* claimed by al-Hashd al-Shaabi, another main characteristic of this *jihād* is being defensive in nature, namely *Jihād al-Daf'*. Having an identity marked by grievances and suffering, the Shiʿites perceive Sunnis as the main source of their miseries throughout history and they therefore believe in the need to resist and fight against what they deem to be a long-standing injustice and oppression practiced against them, known as *jihād of the sword*. Such an image is being constantly consolidated through the discourse of al-Hashd al-Shaabi. In order to consolidate a positively religionized portrayal about al-Hashd, members of the organization are defined as "mujāhidīn" and "proud men of Allah," while rivals are mainly pictured as "enemies of Allah" and takfīris. Al-Hashd's discourse further implicates an alleged "holiness" of the mission and efforts of the organization by means of associating them with the "determination of Ali" and the "glory of al-Hussein," besides portraying them as "the courageous men of ʿAshurā'." Drawing a direct link between the efforts of al-Hashd and the *ʿAshurā'* reflects another fundamentally sectarian feature of this discourse, for it implicates a supposedly high level of commitment among the ranks of al-Hashd to the teachings of al-Hussein and lessons associated with his martyrdom. The religio-ideological nature of al-Hashd's discourse mainly emerges in the form of an obvious attempt to consolidate a "holy," "sacred," and "saintly" image about the group and its Shiʿite members. Their so-called religious legitimacy is remarkably emphasized through the employment of descriptive phrases such as "sacred religious-based force." Imām Ali al-Sistani, known as the Supreme Religious Reference among Iraq's Shiʿites, whose fatwa led to the establishment of al-Hashd al-Shaabi, is portrayed as one of the *ʿulamā'* or *Mujtahids* who possess the authority to launch *jihād* in its defensive form. This can be viewed within the context of the role of *Mujtahids* in initiating *jihād* in accordance with the Shiʿite teachings and al-Hashd's religious commitment to the principle of

ʾImāmah or the leadership of the infallible Shia Imāms. Al-Hashd al-Shaabi is also portrayed as a protector of the "*ʿaqīdah.*" The *ʿaqīdah*, as a notion, basically constitutes the foundation of *ʾīmān*. Thus, protecting the *ʿaqīdah* essentially implicates preserving the faith as a whole. Furthermore, the Qur'ān is being recited within the framework of the discourse of al-Hashd al-Shaabi in such a context that primarily entails conveying an impression about God's involvement in rendering al-Hashd victorious over its enemies, punishing the latter and covering them with shame. Such a recitation is meant to support the process of portraying al-Hashd as a *holy* force. Besides, members of al-Hashd al-Shaabi are discursively depicted as adherents and followers of *ʾAhl al-Bayt*, in a bid to emphasize the religiosity and sectarian identity of those fighters. Hence, the religionization of the group's image is meant to legitimize its efforts and to convince the addressees about the piety, devotion, and dedication of its members in their alleged struggle for the greater good. Discursive religionization is ultimately aimed at influencing the addressees' views and attitudes toward the concerned organization, and eventually gaining their sympathy and support.

8.4.3 Sectarianization

Discursive sectarianization implicates the employment of sectarian markers for the sake of increasing the sense of belonging to an *in*-group and demarcating the relationship to an *out*-group. It involves a set of prejudiced attitudes, policies, and types of treatment based on religious differences, occurring at the levels of ideas, individual actions, and social structures. It essentially reflects a manifestation of what Ibn Khaldun labeled as *ʿaṣabīyah* or the nurturing of a group feeling as a main objective. Sectarianization further represents a sectarian-guided incitement of social stratification and divide that could eventually lead to conflict, wherein religion and politics arise as key factors. Concepts of *othering*, *in*-group versus *out*-group, and representation and misrepresentation emerge at the heart of sectarianization. Within the framework of discursive sectarianization, sectarian markers with positive connotations are attributed to the *in*-group, while those with negative connotations are associated with the *out*-group or the perceived *others*. Religio-sectarian values and principles of the *in*-group are praised and labeled as valid and righteous, whereas those

embraced by the *out*-group are deemed to be spurious, illusive, and even vicious.

Sectarianization emerges as a crucial dimension within the discourse of ISIS. One of the key sectarian-guided contrasts drawn by the observed discourse is between Sunni and Shia Muslims, wherein *Ahl al-Sunnah wal-Jamāʿah* are referred to as "masters" and "esteemed," whereas the Shiʿites are merely branded as *rāfiḍah* (rejectionists) and *Ṣafawi*, and terms such as *Nuṣayri* or *heretical* are utilized to describe the Alawites. The terminology employed illustrates deeply sectarian sentiments derived from a historical divide within the Muslim community and shows an attempt to revive a sectarian strife for the sake of certain strategic and political ends. This shows ISIS as an extreme manifestation of radical Sunnism. The constant attribution of the term *rāfiḍah* to Shiʿite Muslims holds deeply sectarian sentiments, for the term has first emerged during the historical rift over the rightly guided successor of the Prophet. While the Sunnis relied at the time on consensus, the Shiʿites insisted on the idea that Ali and his descendants were the rightful successors, and they were therefore branded as *rāfiḍah*. Such a branding basically illustrates the remarkable degree of sectarian-based contempt and grudge ISIS appears to hold toward Shiʿite Muslims. Also, using the term *Nuṣayri* to describe the Alawite sect is meant to label its adherents as heretical. The sectarian dimension of such terminology stems from the fact that the roots of Alawism, as a branch of Shiʿism, lie in the teachings of Muhammad ibn Nusayr an-Namiri, a Basran contemporary of the tenth Shiʿism imām. Orthodox Sunnis segregate the Shia—including its branches—as *heterodox* and *heretical*. Hence, the use of the term *Nuṣayri* in reference to the Alawites basically originates in a deeply sectarian-guided perspective and is meant to associate the sect with heterodoxy and heresy, to which Salafi-Jihadis are strongly rejective. Another term that reveals discursive sectarianization as utilized by ISIS is *jamāʿah*, which is usually used in reference to the Sunnis as a majority of Muslims. The term is derived from the expression *Ahl al-Sunnah wal-Jamāʿah*. By this, ISIS tends to claim representation and leadership of the majority of Muslims, namely the Sunnis, through presenting itself as a protector of their interests and defender of their rights against rivals and enemies. ISIS's "creed" is frequently pictured as the *true* version of Islam and the group's practices as efforts to *revive* "aspects of the religion," in contrast to the Sufis who are portrayed as "heretical." Branding the Sufis and their interpretations of Islamic principles as *heretical* reflects the extreme Salafi-Jihadi doctrinal basis of ISIS. Furthermore, the Yezidi

religious minority is depicted as a group of "devil worshippers," "Satanists," and "kuffār" whose suppression and "enslavement" are allegedly recommended within the framework of the Sharīʿa. This discourse implicates that the Yezidis are merely followers of "Iblīs, who is the biggest ṭāghūt" and "mushrikīn" (polytheists) who, therefore, deserve no mercy. In order to support this extremist, sectarian, and inhumane ideology, the *Qur'ān*, the *ḥadīth*, and the *Sharīʿa* are referred to as jurisprudential bases. This shows traces of Ibn Taymiyya's teachings with regard to the implementation of the *Sharīʿa* and the duty of the *mujāhidīn* in combatting and ultimately eliminating polytheism, disbelief, transgression, and evil. Thus, sectarian markers are increasingly utilized through ISIS's discourse for the sake of igniting sectarian sentiments among the recipients to embrace the group as the sole virtuous party to conflict, on the one hand, and to condemn and justify aggression against the adherents of other religio-sectarian beliefs, on the other hand.

Traces of discursive sectarianization manifest themselves throughout the discourse of al-Hashd al-Shaabi as well. Certain language use that reveals the sectarian basis of the discourse of al-Hashd al-Shaabi include references to Imām Ali, the martyrdom of Imām al-Hussein, and the ʿAshurā'. The Shiʿites believe that the tale of Hussein's martyrdom holds moral lessons for the community and has become a symbol for struggling against suppression and striving for justice. Furthermore, the Shia are referred to as righteous rulers of Iraq, while the Sunnis as desperate ideologues who have been ideologically disoriented as to believe in having a right to lead Iraq, which reveals traces of sectarianization in the employed discourse. The Sunnis are enormously associated with "Salafism," "extremism," "terrorism," and "radical Islamism," which can be seen as a manifestation of the sectarian narrative, which has become a basic explanatory feature of conflicts occurring in the region and a crucial discursive tool utilized among rivals. The term *Wahhabism* also emerges in al-Hashd's discourse while tackling the ideological basis upon which radical Sunni groups rest, which reflects an attempt to emphasize the extremist nature of the rivals and enemies of al-Hashd, given that *Wahhabism* is deemed the most extreme manifestation of radical Sunni Islam. Also, the concept of *takfīr* is repeatedly attributed to Sunni-based organizations in a bid to emphasize the extremist Salafi-Jihadi doctrinal foundation of those perceived enemies. In order to stress the religiosity of al-Hashd al-Shaabi, the group's Shiʿite members are portrayed as "holy," "sacred," and "saintly." The constant association of al-Hashd with Shiʿism and the martyrdom of

al-Hussein renders the utilized discourse a unique example of sectarianization in the context of armed conflict. Besides, associating al-Hashd's claimed struggle with Imām al-Hussein and emphasizing the latter's membership to *'Ahl al-Bayt* reflect a sectarian-based Shia perspective on "sacredness" and "saintliness," wherein the sect views Imāms as carriers of the Prophetic Light, divinely safeguarded against error and sin, and possessors of an impeccable and infallible knowledge and understanding of Islam and the Qur'ān. Drawing a link between the *mujāhidīn* of al-Hashd, on the one hand, and the Shia's historical suffering, al-Hussein's martyrdom, and the annual "visit" to his shrine as "the master of all martyrs," on the other, is meant to serve the consolidation of a trustworthy, positive image about al-Hashd among the recipients. The religionized and sectarianized ideological discourse of al-Hashd al-Shaabi carries traces of fundamental Shia tenets, namely an emotional attachment to the historical exclusion from power at the hands of the Sunnis; an alleged constant strive for bringing about justice; a long-standing sectarian rivalry; a great commitment to the principle of *'Imāmah* or the leadership of the infallible Shia Imāms; and embracing Imām al-Hussein's martyrdom as a moral lesson that symbolizes the community's suffering and strengthens religious beliefs and values of its members. The Shia sect is frequently depicted as a victim of the false claims and suppression by Sunni-led entities in Iraq and the region, and al-Hashd al-Shaabi is deemed to be the "righteous" force to protect the sect through its so-called legendary victories, the "hidden assistance" of Imām al-Mahdi and the blessing of Imām Ali al-Sistani. This deeply sectarian discourse contradicts the claim of struggling for unity and denouncing sectarian divide within the society and the Muslim *'ummah* at large. Armed and political conflicts are hence discursively sectarianized through the utilization of *Sunni* and *Shia* as markers to parties to conflict in Iraq and the region.

The intended impact of the observed discourses among the addressees falls within the framework of the attitudes and practices that invoke religious differences as the boundary marker to represent social stratification and conflict. Thus, the incitement of sectarian strife arises as a main potential objective of the observed discourses, once the associated messages accomplish the desired impact among the recipients. The impact of such discursive dimensions, once adopted and acted upon, is believed to hold serious consequences regarding the attitudes and behaviors of the concerned individuals and the society at large. Given the growth of violence in Syria and Iraq amid the rise of sectarian-guided radical organizations

such as ISIS and al-Hashd al-Shaabi, and the increase of attacks in the name of such groups on regional and international levels, the discourse employed by media outlets affiliated with these groups is believed to have played an undeniably considerable role in inciting sectarian-guided ferocity, aggression, and social divide.

Through the examination and exploration of rhetorical strategies and discursive practices utilized across media materials produced by influential extremist organizations, this volume has provided an insight into the multidimensional attempts of such groups to persuade addressees to embrace certain ideological beliefs and values, and take a particular course of action. The examined linguistic nuances, contextual activities, and messages within the discourse of major radical Islamist organizations illustrate the effective use of digital media as a propaganda machine by such groups and explain their rapid expansion and considerably successful recruitment and mobilization campaigns. The incitement of sectarian schism through the employment of religionized and politicized messages, besides the associated linguistic and contextual strategies and practices, demonstrates the critical importance of exploring and identifying such discursive dimensions. The effects of these multifaceted discourses can be seen as indicators to the significance of this study for the academic domains of Linguistics, Media Studies, and Middle Eastern Studies, or researchers operating in one of the domains to which this study belongs and contributes to. That is on an internal academic scale of benefit that could be derived from this volume. On an external scale, namely contributions to the larger society concerned with the questions marked and tackled by this study, raising awareness and sharing knowledge concerning the specifics and particularities of the discourse of extremist groups is another main objective of the volume at hand. Given the fact that certain circles and components within the society as a whole are usually addressed and targeted by the discourse of extremist organizations, familiarity with the ideological and manipulative practices and strategies, and the correlated aspects and dimensions, utilized by such groups through their increasingly digital media discourse, seems crucial. Awareness, comprehension, and insightfulness may, to a certain degree, mitigate, reduce, or even eliminate the potential impact of the discursive strategies employed by extremist groups and relatively render the incorporated messages ineffectual and fruitless.

Notes

1. Winter, C. (2019). Making Sense of Jihadi Stratcom: The Case of the Islamic State. 59.
2. Damaj, Y. (2019). Fatal Attraction: The Islamic State's Politics of Sentimentality. 2.
3. The notorious pillars of Islam or the five duties incumbent on each Muslim, known as *Arkān al-Islām*, respectively comprise the Muslim profession of faith (al-Shahādah), prayer (Ṣalāt), the distribution of alms to the poor (Zakāt), the fasting of Ramadan (Ṣawm), and the pilgrimage to Mecca for those financially and physically capable (Ḥajj).

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