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Rhetoric to Erase Feelings: How Have ISIS Magazines Done It?



The rise of the recruitment of young people for terrorist purposes is a growing concern all around the world. A new article examines the mechanisms of recruitment by ISIS in *Dabiq* magazine and proposes a rhetorical analysis of its content. This investigation is particularly relevant considering the increasing misinformation in digital spaces, and it is useful for localizing radicalized individuals and preventing their actions.

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The recruitment of young people from around the world, including Europe, for terrorist purposes is a growing phenomenon, as recently highlighted in an [article](#) by *The Wall Street Journal*. A doctoral thesis from the Department of Media, Communication, and Culture at the UAB proposes a rhetorical analysis of *Dabiq* magazine, one of ISIS's most widely and influential distributed publications. The analysis focuses on psychological linguistic and communicative weapons of its content.

Nouran Khalil, Carme Ferré-Pavia, and Luisa Martínez García have published the first results of their research in the journal *Media, War & Conflict*, edited by Sage. The article "*Dabiq*: An analysis of the usage of selective moral disengagement in terrorist-produced

media" presents a content analysis of all Dabiq's issues, covering approximately 1,000 pages of the journal.

The research examines the presence of moral disengagement mechanisms in the publication's rhetoric. These elements are based on the approaches of Albert Bandura, a renowned psychologist specializing in learning patterns. The results indicate the presence of all seven distancing mechanisms (justification, euphemisms applied to violent acts and victims, dehumanization, shifting of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, rejection of consequences, and advantageous comparisons toward the perpetrators) in *Dabiq*.

Of these, the most frequent are moral justification and shifting of responsibility. ISIS jihadists leverage these psychological mechanisms to establish an alliance and foster a sense of in-group support, enabling them to tolerate, promote, and engage in violent acts that, from a human perspective, appear to be devoid of any trace of empathy or religious devotion. The results suggest that the psychological impact on readers could be much more serious than that of the mere use of propaganda, activating deep mechanisms that can disconnect moral judgment and human autonomy.

This research is particularly relevant and timely, given the rise of false messages, online manipulation, and the growing prevalence of toxicity in digital spaces. These factors make these spaces increasingly attractive to terrorists of all kinds. From a communication perspective, this knowledge can support two key areas. First, it can assist authorities in monitoring networks to identify radicalized individuals who may be susceptible to attacks. Second, it can support programs designed to prevent and halt radicalization processes among young people. These programs aim to counter the dissemination of radical discourse and its associated mechanisms.

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