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Online Jihadist Magazines and the “Religious Terrorism” Thesis

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Abstract

This article presents findings from an empirical study of 39 issues of five online terrorist magazines in order to problematise the concept of religious terrorism. The presentation of the study’s findings focuses on the magazines’ textual content, examining the types of textual item each magazine contains, how the producers of the magazines perceive the publications, the justifications the magazines offer for the groups’ activities, and the motivations that underlie these activities. This analysis shows that there are important differences between the messages each group expounds. These differences, the article argues, are obscured by the homogeneous label religious terrorism. Moreover, an examination of these groups’ messages shows that the purported distinction between religion and politics is unsustainable and has detrimental political-normative repercussions.

Keywords: terrorism, religion, politics, propaganda, narratives

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Introduction

At the heart of both the new terrorism and fourth wave theses of modern terrorism lies the claim that the terrorism of today is religious in nature (Hoffman 1998; Laqueur 1999; Rapoport 2004). By drawing on the findings of an empirical study of online jihadist magazines, this article seeks to problematise this claim. The article begins by outlining the religious terrorism thesis and summarising existing criticisms of it. It then introduces the empirical study. After an overview of the dataset the article presents three sets of findings pertaining to the textual content of the magazines. The first focuses on the types of textual item contained within each magazine, the second examines the magazines’ editorials to investigate how the publications are perceived by those that produce them, and the third explores the justifications that are advanced in the magazines’ articles and the motivations that underlie these. The article thus seeks to contribute to the field of Critical Terrorism Studies by taking seriously the voice of the violent actor. It uses this voice to identify important differences between the messages expounded by the producers of these magazines

and argues that these differences are obscured by imposing the homogeneous label religious terrorism. These differences also illustrate the difficulties in juxtaposing religion with politics since the magazines' heterogeneity is the product of politics, understood as "the exercise of power" (Hay 2002, 187). Having shown that the "religious terrorism" thesis is analytically deficient, the article concludes by arguing that it also has important political-normative repercussions. Not only does it contribute to a stigmatisation of the Muslim faith; it also reinforces the very Othering that characterises the dichotomous identity choice appeals found within these magazines' pages.

The "Religious Terrorism" Thesis

The catalyst for religious terrorism is said to be the threat of secularisation (Ranstorp 1996). Not only is there a "widespread perception that politics is immoral and public life desperately needs the sacred cleansing that religion can offer it" (Juergensmeyer 1997, 20), religious terrorist groups also perceive a threat to their identity and survival. For this reason, they "perceive their actions as defensive and reactive in character and justify them in this way" (Ranstorp 1996, 47). The groups' aims are defined in religious terms, with leaders providing a theological justification for the groups' actions (Bin Hassan 2007). Religious terrorist groups frequently make use of "well-established, mainstream religious concepts", in order to appeal to a vast "ready-made, self-conscious constituency" (Sedgwick 2004, 808). This has a number of important effects: it creates a sharp distinction between the faithful and the unfaithful, leaving no middle ground and Othering those outside the group (Ranstorp 1996); it identifies the group's claims with the commands of God, giving the group "an uncontested superiority over competing claims which now appear to be blasphemous having no moral justification at all" (Hasenclever and Rittberger 2000, 655-656); and, it results in a "zero-sum game" in which one side is regarded as fanatical and the other as evil, creating a

“vicious circle of antagonism” (656). For this reason, many descriptions of religious terrorism “openly state, or strongly imply, that the religious element is a central cause of the violence, not simply something that is used to legitimize tactics or motivate followers” (Gunning and Jackson 2011, 373).

Accounts of religious terrorism state that one of its key characteristics is its lethality and indiscriminate use of violence. Since religious terrorists refer to their enemies in dehumanizing terms (Ranstorp 1996), since they regard violence as a sacramental act or divine duty (Hoffman 1995), and since they regard violence not as a means to an end but as an end in itself (Hoffman 1995), they are not constrained by the political, moral, or practical constraints that seem to affect other terrorists. Hence James Woolsey, the former head of the C.I.A., claimed that today “Terrorists don’t want a seat at the table, they want to destroy the table and everyone sitting at it” (Lemann 2001). In particular, religious terrorists utilize notions of martyrdom and self-sacrifice, “idealising suffering in this world and promising rewards in another” (Hasenclever and Rittberger 2000, 656). This has led to what Rapoport describes as “the most deadly tactical innovation” of his fourth wave of modern terrorism: suicide bombing (Rapoport 2004, 62).

The religious terrorism thesis has, however, been criticised. The first set of criticisms is classificatory. Gunning and Jackson (2011) have queried the assumption that religion is clearly definable and that it can be straightforwardly distinguished from the secular and the political. They point out that the term religion, as it is used in English-language social science publications, is historically and culturally specific and that what we think of as religion today “is a product of the particular political and social trajectory of European politics, when, as part of the rise of the modern state, and in response to both ideational shifts and the ‘religious wars’ of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, religion was relegated to the private sphere and conceptualized as a set of irrational beliefs in opposition to ‘rational science’” (375; see

also Francis 2016). As an example of the difficulty of distinguishing between religious and political discourse, they state:

“Creating an Islamic State is a more explicitly religiously inspired goal. But even here we would query whether this could be usefully categorized as simply religious. It may be framed and inspired by a religious tradition, but it has emerged within a very particular – and a particularly political and modern – interpretation of religion which has been moulded by a number of arguably ‘secular’ dynamics” (376-377)

The second set of criticisms is empirical. Here, Gunning and Jackson (2011) contest the claim that religious terrorists are more fanatical and indiscriminate in their use of violence. They point out that many religious terrorist groups have “this-worldly goals and constituencies” and demonstrate a powerful strategic rationality, whilst some secular terrorist groups have committed symbolic acts of violence, painted their conflict in terms akin to cosmic war and “described their enemies in similar eschatological terms as al-Qaeda” (378). Statistics which are used to evidence the claim that religious terrorism is more lethal are, they argue, “skewed by a few exceptionally lethal attacks and by vast discrepancies between groups” (379).

Furthermore, interpreting such data is a complex task given the numerous factors at play. Focusing on Middle Eastern violence, they point out that “many of the structural factors named in the wider literature as key ‘drivers’ of political violence ... are present in abundance” (380).

The third set of criticisms concerns the causal role of religion. In their exposition of a constructivist approach to the role faith plays in political conflict, Hasenclever and Rittberger (2000) warn that “the constitutive effects of intersubjective understandings” should not be conflated with causal effects (648). The leaders of religious terrorist groups may seek to utilise religious traditions for the purpose of “demonisation of the enemy, promoting a zero-sum mentality, motivating (and reaching) the faithful and creating an in-group identity”

(Gunning and Jackson 2011, 380-381), but this in itself is insufficient to establish causation and their rhetorical power in this respect is “far from unlimited” (Hasenclever and Rittberger 2000, 649). Gunning and Jackson (2011) state that religion is:

“... particularly likely to play a role in conflict when political and religious elites decide it is in their mutual interest to ally themselves or when foreign occupation overlaps with religious difference ... But to label such conflicts ‘religious’ risks obscuring the complex interaction between religion and all these other factors” (380-381)

Moreover, at the individual level, people join or leave groups for reasons other than ideological commitment, including family or friendship ties, search for social acceptance and securing access to otherwise unavailable goods or services. In fact, ideological commitment tends to follow action, not the other way around (Gunning and Jackson 2011).

The final criticism of the religious terrorism thesis is that it homogenises a wide array of different groups with different objectives, structures and behaviours (Gunning and Jackson 2011). Indeed, advocates of the religious terrorism thesis acknowledge this complexity.

Ranstorp (1996) states that “religious terrorists are, by their very nature, largely motivated by religion, but they are also driven by day-to-day practical political considerations within their context-specific environment” (44). Conversely, Hoffman (1995) states that secular/political groups like the Provisional Irish Republican Army and the Tamil Tigers have a strong religious element. Similarly, Sedgwick (2004) writes that whilst “al-Qaeda’s objectives were almost certainly political rather than religious and owe more to European radicalism than to Islam” al-Qaeda is nonetheless “clearly marked by Islam, and not only in its ultimate aims. Al-Qaeda’s potential constituency is the world’s Muslims, and the means it uses to mobilize support in this constituency are derived from Islam” (805).

This article seeks to add to this body of literature by drawing on the findings of its study of online jihadist magazines to illustrate the heterogeneity that exists between groups that not only fall within the notion of religious terrorism but that also all claim to act in the name of the same religion. As such, the article seeks to add empirical support to the statement that “a broad label such as ‘religious’ is problematic because religion can be interpreted, and has been lived, in countless different manners” (Gunning and Jackson 2011, 378).

Methodology

This article focuses exclusively on online magazines, so excludes other types of online publication (such as newsletters and manifestos) and magazines written in other languages. In total, there were five magazines that met the criteria for inclusion, all of which were published by groups that follow a jihadist ideology: *Azan* (published by the Taliban in Khurasan); *Dabiq* (published by Islamic State); *Gaidi Mtaani* (published by al-Shabaab); *Inspire* (published by al-Qaeda); and, *Jihad Recollections* (also published by al-Qaeda, and apparently the forerunner to *Inspire*¹). The study focused on issues published between 1 January 2009 and 30 June 2015. During this period a total of 39 issues were published; together, these contained 892,174 words of content and 3869 images (Macdonald et al 2015). Table 1 presents an overview of this dataset by year of publication.

Table 1: Overview of online English language terrorist magazines by year of publication.

		2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	January – June 2015	Total
Magazine	<i>Azan</i>					4	2		6
	<i>Dabiq</i>						6	3	9
	<i>Gaidi Mtaani</i>				2	2	2	1	7
	<i>Inspire</i>		4	4	1	2	2		13

	<i>Jihad Recollections</i>	4							4
	Total	4	4	4	3	8	12	4	39

Note. In the second half of 2015 a further six issues were published: three issues of *Dabiq*; one issue of *Inspire*; and two issues of a new magazine called *Al-Risalah*, published by al-Nusra.

Findings

This section is divided into three parts. It begins with an overview of the textual items contained within the magazines. It then examines two types of textual item in greater detail: editorials; and, articles.

Overview of textual items

Between them, the 39 issues contained a total of 505 textual items. These were divided into seven categories using an iterative data-led process. First, a list of types of textual item was drawn up based on an initial reading of the magazines. During the first round of coding this list was amended in the light of the content of the magazines. The list was then finalised, and each of the items was viewed a second time and re-coded where necessary to ensure consistency. The breakdown is shown in table 2.

Table 2: Types of textual item contained within the magazines.

	Articles	Instructional guides	Editorials	Creative works (e.g., poems)	Statements	Interviews	Eulogies	Total
<i>Inspire</i>	117 (57.4%)	27 (13.2%)	13 (6.4%)	18 (8.8%)	8 (3.9%)	9 (4.4%)	12 (5.9%)	204
<i>Dabiq</i>	84 (82.4%)	0	9 (8.8%)	0	3 (2.9%)	6 (5.9%)	0	102
<i>Azan</i>	74 (73.3%)	0	6 (5.9%)	3 (3.0%)	16 (15.8%)	2 (2.0%)	0	101
<i>Jihad Recollections</i>	54 (76.1%)	7 (9.9%)	4 (5.6%)	4 (5.6%)	2 (2.8%)	0	0	71
<i>Gaidi Mtaani</i>	17 (63.0%)	2 (7.4%)	4 (14.8%)	1 (3.7%)	2 (7.4%)	0	1 (3.7%)	27
Total	346 (68.5%)	36 (7.1%)	36 (7.1%)	26 (5.1%)	31 (6.1%)	17 (3.4%)	13 (2.6%)	505

(NB: *Gaidi Mtaani* also contained a total of 22 non-English language textual items, which are not included in this table)

Whilst the most common type of textual item across all five magazines was articles, the proportion of items in *Dabiq* that were classified as articles was significantly higher than for the other four titles, particularly *Inspire* (82.4% compared to 57.4%). Two other points are also worth highlighting, for they are indicative of the differing structures and objectives of the various groups and so support the criticisms of the homogeneity of the label religious terrorism. First, table 2 shows the importance *Azan* places on specific figures of authority. It contained a greater proportion of statements than any of the other magazines (i.e., formal statements that were presented as being official and were attributed to the group's leadership structure). Of the 16 statements found in the six issues of *Azan*, three were attributed to Ayman al-Zawahiri and two each to Abdullah Azzam, Mulla Muhammad Umar and Usama bin Laden.ⁱⁱ By contrast, the thirteen issues of *Inspire* contained a total of eight statements,

six of which were attributed to the group itself as opposed to a named individual. *Inspire* also contained a total of nine interviews and 12 eulogies. Whilst the interviews tended to be with leadership figures (such as Abu Basir, Adil al-Abbab and Anwar al-Awlaki), the eulogies told the stories of individuals that had been killed whilst fighting (all of them men), using such titles as “The Veteran Lion” (issue six, 17), “Sincerity of a Hero” (issue six, 27) and “The Face of Joy” (issue nine, 14). This recognition of rank-and-file individuals reflects *Inspire*’s stated aim to encourage lone actor attacks, and stands in marked contrast to *Azan*, which contained no eulogies and only two interviews (one describing the claimed escape from prison of Adnan Rasheed and the other with the German Mujahid Abu Adam).

The second noteworthy point, also reflective of *Inspire*’s stated aim, is the prevalence of instructional guides within its pages, particularly in comparison to the magazines of the other groups. Neither *Dabiq* nor *Azan* contained any instructional guides, whilst only two guides were found in *Gaidi Mtaani* (one on how to make a molotov cocktail, the other on how to stop security agencies gathering information from your mobile phone). So, 34 of the 36 guides were found in the two al-Qaeda magazines, *Jihad Recollections* and *Inspire*.

Moreover, whilst the most common types of guide in *Inspire* were bomb-making (eight items) and using firearms (four items), the most common in *Jihad Recollections* was keep-fit (four items). *Inspire* thus appeared to be the only one of the magazines that sought to equip readers to a significant extent with the skills needed to carry out bomb and firearm attacks.

The differences between the magazines in terms of the composition of their textual content reflected different strategies for influencing readers’ thoughts and actions. Whilst *Azan* emphasised formal statements from identified leadership figures, *Inspire* acknowledged and glorified rank-and-file individuals and provided practical how-to guides that purported to make complex tasks such as bomb-making straightforward and offered advice on how to avoid arousing suspicion (Conway, Parker and Looney 2017). These attempts to shape

readers' conduct through incitement and persuasion may thus be understood as exercises of power; in other words, as politics (Hay 2002).

Editorials

Every issue of all five of the magazines contained an editorial/foreword.ⁱⁱⁱ These offer a valuable insight into the objectives of the magazine's producers, and their perception of the publication. Examination of their voice provides a further illustration of the difficulties with the homogeneous label religious terrorism. Moreover, like the differences in the textual composition outlined above, the differences between the magazines' editorials/forewords are the product of politics, further underlining the classificatory difficulties described by Gunning and Jackson.

Perhaps the most distinctive of the five sets of editorials/forewords was found in *Azan*. The editorial found in issue one stated:

“So, in times such as ours, when truth has become difficult to see and follow, by the Grace of Allah, *Azan* is a humble effort at renewing the call to Tawheed that has been proclaimed by the Prophets and the men of Allah throughout time ... It is hoped that Allah Would accept this work and make it a source of Guidance for the entire humanity and a source of humiliation for every stubborn tyrant” (p. 3)

Similarly, issue two's editorial stated: “We hope that Allah makes this issue of benefit to everyone as well. All good in it is from Allah and all the mistakes are from our own selves ... So whoever finds good in it should Praise Allah Alone, The One Worthy of All Praise” (p. 3). The implied assertion that *Azan* contains “good ... from Allah” and the invocation of the proclamations of past prophets are suggestive of claims to divine truth and authority. This again illustrates the difficulty in juxtaposing religion with politics. Claims of divine authority

are offered by Lukes (2005) as one example of “the supreme and most insidious exercise of power”. He explains that claims of divine ordination seek to prevent people from having grievances “by shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things” (28).

Whilst the editorials/forewords of the other four magazines were also framed within a religious discourse, they sought to engage and influence readers in a quite different manner: by emphasising the reporting of current events, issues of wider interest and academic discussion and debate. For example, the editorial contained in issue three of *Gaidi Mtaani* stated, “Hopefully this magazine will also do its duty of giving objective reporting and analysis of the Jihad in Somalia and expose the lies and propaganda spread by the KDF Kuffar” (p. 4), whilst the one in issue seven claimed, “We have also presented you, the reader with a new assortment of enlightening articles, insightful poetry and the latest news from the lands of Hijra and Shar’iah to accompany you in your journey of Jihad” (p. 4). The forewords in *Dabiq* also emphasised the reporting of news and updates. The foreword to issue one stated, “After a review of some of the comments received on the first issues of Islamic State News and Islamic State Report, AlHayat Media Center decided to carry on the effort – in sha-Allah – into a periodical magazine focusing on issues of tawhid [oneness of God], manhaj [methodology], hijrah [migration], jihad [combat], and jama’ah [organisation]” (p. 3), whilst the foreword to the next issue promised to “convey the position of the Islamic State leadership” on the issue of “[readers’] obligations towards the Khilafah” (p. 3). Meanwhile, *Jihad Recollections* presented itself more as a forum for academic debate and understanding. Issue two promised “a major focus on producing academic-style analysis that are not only just opinionated responses to current events, but also constructive criticisms which we hope will breed a culture of deep analytical thinking in the jihadi community as well as amongst the most senior of jihadi’s” (p. 2), whilst issues one and three claimed respectively that

“Some of [our guest writers] have completed their Masters degree in their respective field of study, and so that academia approach will be reflected throughout the magazine” (p. 2) and “Our magazine wishes to set a standard in the understanding of the religion in the modern day” (p. 4). Expressions like “journey of Jihad” (*Gaidi Mtaani*), “obligations towards the Khilafah” (*Dabiq*) and “understanding of the religion in the modern day” (*Jihad Recollections*) show that the producers of these magazines present them as being religious in nature. Yet the magazines’ producers are also engaged in politics for, whilst they seek to persuade and instruct readers differently to *Azan*, they nonetheless exercise power by shaping the conduct of their readers.

Like *Gaidi Mtaani* and *Dabiq*, the editorials in *Inspire* also promised coverage of current issues. In fact, readers were invited to suggest topics – “We also call upon and encourage our readers to contribute by sending their articles, comments or suggestions to us” (issue one, p. 2) – and, indeed, an article on “the shar’iah view on killing ‘civilians’ in the operations of mujahidin” found in issue eight was presented as a response to the most asked question during an “exclusive video interview” with Anwar al-Awlaki (p. 3). This emphasis on reader-generated content stands in marked contrast to *Azan*’s implied claims that it contained divinely ordained truth. The producers of these magazines thus appear to have quite different perceptions of their own role, again demonstrating the dangers of homogenisation. *Inspire* was also the most explicit of the magazines in stating its objectives. These were twofold: “The first one is to call for and inspire to jihad in the English speaking world and second one is to deliver to every inspired Muslim anywhere around the world the operational know-how of carrying out attacks from within the West” (issue nine, p. 4). This sentence is a particularly stark example of the coincidence of politics – the magazine seeks to influence readers’ conduct by providing them with the motivation and ability to perpetrate acts of violence –

and religion – the acts that the magazine seeks to incite are portrayed as acts of jihad committed by devout Muslims.

Articles

Since articles were the most common type of textual item in all five of the magazines, they were examined further in terms of both their underlying motivations and justificatory grounds. To identify the motivations underlying, and justifications employed in, the magazines' articles, a similar process was employed to the one used to classify the different types of textual item. First, lists of potential justifications and motivations were drawn up based on prior background reading. During the first reading of the magazines these lists were amended and adapted in the light of the content of the articles. The two lists were then finalised, and each of the articles was read a second time and re-coded where necessary to ensure consistency. The results are shown in tables 3 and 4.

Table 3: The motivations underlying the articles.

	Total number of articles	Hatred towards kuffar	Religious obligation	Hatred towards the West and its allies	Geographical concerns	Hatred towards other religions	Unity	Revenge
<i>Inspire</i>	117	67 (57.3%)	56 (47.9%)	70 (59.8%)	34 (29.1%)	33 (28.2%)	29 (24.8%)	18 (15.4%)
<i>Dabiq</i>	84	41 (48.8%)	53 (63.1%)	43 (51.2%)	44 (52.4%)	16 (19.0%)	28 (33.3%)	11 (13.1%)
<i>Azan</i>	74	51 (68.9%)	33 (44.6%)	26 (35.1%)	12 (16.2%)	28 (37.8%)	6 (8.1%)	12 (16.2%)

<i>Jihad Recollections</i>	54	20 (37.0%)	22 (40.7%)	18 (33.3%)	2 (3.7%)	8 (14.8%)	2 (3.7%)	4 (7.4%)
<i>Gaidi Mtaani</i>	17	10 (58.8%)	7 (41.2%)	11 (64.7%)	2 (11.8%)	3 (17.6%)	1 (5.9%)	5 (29.4%)
Total	346	189 (54.6%)	171 (49.4%)	160 (46.2%)	94 (27.2%)	88 (25.4%)	66 (19.1%)	50 (14.5%)

NB: This table does not include the figures for four other underlying motivations: day of judgement (38 articles); economics (33 articles); hatred towards other ethnicities (29 articles); and, hatred towards other terrorist groups (13 articles). It should also be pointed out that since many of the articles were assessed as having more than one underlying motivation the percentages in each row of the table add up to more 100%.

Table 3 shows that the most common underlying motivation across the five magazines was hatred towards kuffar (54.6%), followed by religious obligation (49.4%) and hatred towards the West and its allies (46.2%). Differences between the magazines are also apparent (Macdonald 2016). *Azan* had the highest figure for both hatred towards kuffar and hatred towards other religions; *Gaidi Mtaani* had the highest figure for both hatred towards the West and its allies (in this case, Kenya) and revenge; and, *Dabiq* had the highest figure for religious obligation, geographical concerns (e.g., capturing territory) and unity. The findings in respect of *Dabiq* – which are consistent with the goal of the so-called Islamic State to establish a Caliphate – are particularly significant when viewed in the light of the justifications each magazine advanced.

Table 4: The justifications employed in the articles.

	Total number of articles	Allah	Quran	Scholars	Hadith/Fatwa/ Religious text	Leaders	Retaliation	History
<i>Inspire</i>	117	98 (83.8%)	74 (63.2%)	31 (26.5%)	25 (21.4%)	32 (27.4%)	41 (35.0%)	22 (18.8%)
<i>Dabiq</i>	84	55 (65.5%)	42 (50%)	35 (41.7%)	30 (35.7%)	36 (42.9%)	15 (17.9%)	10 (11.9%)
<i>Azan</i>	74	66 (89.2%)	55 (74.3%)	32 (43.2%)	24 (32.4%)	13 (17.6%)	9 (12.2%)	15 (20.3%)
<i>Jihad Recollections</i>	54	31 (57.4%)	21 (38.9%)	21 (38.9%)	4 (7.4%)	0	6 (11.1%)	12 (22.2%)
<i>Gaidi Mtaani</i>	17	8 (47.1%)	6 (35.3%)	4 (23.5%)	2 (11.8%)	0	3 (17.7%)	4 (23.5%)
Total	346	258 (74.6%)	198 (57.2%)	123 (35.5%)	85 (24.6%)	81 (23.4%)	74 (21.4%)	63 (18.2%)

NB: This table does not include the figures for two other justifications. The first is personal opinion. This was used as a justification in a total of 30 articles, 17 of which were published in *Dabiq*. The second is public opinion. This was used as a justification in a total of 18 articles, 14 of which were published in *Dabiq*. Again, the figures on each row of the table do not add up to 100% because many articles were assessed as using more than one justification.

For the purposes of the present discussion, three points emerge from these findings.^{iv} First, whilst Allah, Quran and scholars were the three most commonly used justificatory grounds across the magazines, the highest proportion for all three of these was found in *Azan* (89.2%, 74.3% and 43.2% respectively). This emphasis on words taken directly from the Quran and ones attributed to Allah is in keeping with *Azan*'s use of (implied) claims of divine authority to exercise power, as described above.

Second, the figure for retaliation was far higher for *Inspire* than for the other four magazines. This finding is consistent with Hellmich's (2014) study of statements of bin Laden across a variety of media, which concluded that the central theme of his reasoning was

“... the suffering and humiliation of the *umma*, the global community of all Muslims, at the hands of the unbelievers, i.e., the US and its allies ... The only way to defend the *umma* against this perceived aggression is through military (in effect, paramilitary) confrontation with America, which bin Ladin used to present in highly emotive terms as the rightful jihad of the present time against the principal enemy of God's favoured community, and even of Islam itself ... Yet, he was at pains to point out that his was a reactive kind of violence – an act of retaliation against what he perceived as the much greater form of aggression exercised by the West against the Muslim world over a far longer period of time” (243-244)

Here again we see the coincidence of politics – using calls for retaliation to persuade readers and shape their conduct – and religion – framing the retaliatory acts as “rightful jihad” in response to the “suffering and humiliation of the *umma*”.

The third point is that, whilst *Dabiq* had the highest proportion of articles that were motivated by religious obligation, the proportion of its articles that used either Allah or the Quran as a justificatory ground was below the average for the dataset as a whole. In fact, across all five magazines there were only 15 articles that were motivated by religious obligation but did not use either Allah or the Quran as a justification, and seven of these (46.7%) appeared in *Dabiq* (whereas only 24.3% of the articles in dataset as a whole appeared in *Dabiq*). By contrast, *Dabiq* had the highest figure for hadith/fatwa/religious text (35.7%) and by far the highest figure for leaders (42.9%). Also indicative of this emphasis on a wider range of sources of religious authority is *Dabiq*'s presentation of quotes from the Quran. Whilst it consistently cites the verse in the Quran from which quotes are taken, unlike the other four magazines *Dabiq*

does not generally use a different colour for such quotes nor does it present them in bold or in italics, instead presenting them in the same way as quotes from other religious texts and the group's leaders. *Dabiq* may thus be understood as part of the wider decentralisation and fragmentation of traditional structures of religious authority in Islam, in which “a broad spectrum of interpretations emerges, which provides alternative opinions to those of the traditional religious establishments” (Hellmich 2014, 247). This is possible, according to Aly (2016), because “epistemic authority in Islam is highly dependent on the perception and acceptance of authority by a social network as opposed to being embedded in an institutional order” (109). She argues that it is therefore important to “consider not only loci of religious authority but also the power of Muslim audiences to prefer one religious authority over another” (109). This observation not only helps explain the findings presented in table 4. It also points to the diversity of approaches and understandings that are possible within a single religion. Appealing to the sources of religious authority that are the most conducive to one's message – and/or that are the most likely to be preferred by one's audience – is an attempt to influence and persuade. It is therefore an exercise of power and another example of the overlap between politics and religion.

Conclusion

Whilst the four groups that produced the magazines examined in this study all claim to act in the name of the same religion, the findings presented in this article demonstrate that there are important differences in the messages that each group expounds in these publications. *Azan* prioritises traditional sources of religious authority and statements from named authority figures, manifesting hatred for kuffar and other religions. *Inspire* emphasises retaliation against the West, draws on both interviews with named authority figures and eulogies of rank-and-file individuals, and seeks to equip its readers with the skills needed to perpetrate acts of violence.

Dabiq emphasises religious obligation but draws on a wider range of religious authorities including non-traditional sources (in particular, its own leaders), whilst also stressing territorial concerns. And *Gaidi Mtaani* is characterised by hatred towards the West and its allies – particularly Kenya – and a desire for revenge. The article thus provides empirical support for the criticisms set out earlier that question the analytical value of the term “religious terrorism”. First, the article has shown that important differences exist between the four groups examined in this study. Appreciating these nuances is essential in order to understand the groups’ objectives and individuals’ engagement with them, and to tailor appropriate responses. Yet these differences are obscured by clumping the groups together under the one homogeneous label. Second, the article has shown that differences between the magazines – in terms of their textual composition, self-portrayal, selection of religious authorities and underlying motivations – are the result of politics, understood as the exercise of power. Religion and politics are inextricably intertwined in the messages expounded in these magazines, and to attempt to erect a distinction between the two is impossible.

Having shown that the term “religious terrorism” is analytically deficient, it is important to add by way of conclusion that the term also has political-normative consequences. Studies of the discourse of legislators and policy-makers have shown that the notion of religious terrorism has been used to “depoliticise and securitise in the political realm”, resulting in counterproductive counterterrorism laws and policies (Gunning and Jackson 2011, 382). Studies of the impact of these laws and policies on minority communities have shown that the notion of religious terrorism has contributed to a stigmatisation of the Muslim faith (Antúnez and Tellidis 2013; Hardy 2011). Breen-Smyth’s (2014) redefinition of the term “suspect community” explains how counterterrorism laws and policies that are focused on a particular sub-set of the population “[create] in the public mind a suspiciousness of people apparently in that category and renders them a ‘suspect community’” (232). Being “suspect” silences,

marginalises and “also stimulates particular forms of self-censorship, especially in relation to political expression, with detrimental consequences for the possibility of participatory democracy” (223-224). The effect “has been to severely constrict the political space available to Muslims to engage critically with foreign policy” (237). This is particularly significant because, for many people across the religions, political participation is regarded as an essential outworking of their faith. Indeed, this is emphasised in the magazines examined in this study, as the following quote illustrates:

“This separation of religion from life that democracy stands on is utter falsehood. The one who believes in it commits *Kufr* (disbelief). This principle is against all those clear verses and Ahadith which clearly state that Islam shall rule in government, politics, economics, societies, legislations and judiciaries. Islam is not limited to a few rituals of worship to be done inside some specific buildings. Hence, this false principle that separates Islam from human life is utter disbelief in the religion of Allah” (*Azan*, issue one, 64)

Focusing on the voice of the violent actors themselves thus reveals a further damaging consequence of the term religious terrorism. Not only does it limit the perceived ability of members of the suspect community to engage in political expression; by separating the political from the religious it also reinforces the very Othering that characterises these groups’ dichotomous identity choice appeals (Ingram 2016; Lorenzo-Dus and Macdonald 2018).

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ⁱ All four issues of *Jihad Recollections* were published in 2009 under the editorship of Samir Khan. Khan moved to Yemen and began work on *Inspire* in October 2009, publishing the first issue in 2010. This timeline – plus the fact that a biography of Khan published by al-Qaeda after Khan's death that described *Inspire* as "an extension of *Jihad Recollections*, a magazine he described as 'America's Worst Nightmare'" – suggest that, at the very least, *Jihad Recollections* was endorsed by al-Qaeda even if it was not technically an al-Qaeda publication.

ⁱⁱ Of the other seven statements, one was attributed to the Prophet Muhammed and the others were attributed to six different individuals (one of which was Anwar al-Awlaki).

ⁱⁱⁱ The editorials in three of the issues of *Gaidi Mtaani* (issues 1, 2 and 6) were not in the English language, and so could not be analysed.

^{iv} For further discussion see Macdonald (2016).