Deconstruction of Identity Concepts in Islamic State Propaganda

A Linkage-Based Approach to Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communications

Author: J.M. Berger
via the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), The Hague
Europol Public Information

1   Introduction

In a March 2017 paper published by the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism—The Hague, this author introduced a framework for studying the construction of extremist identity through ideological texts. This paper will examine the framework against a historical example of the so-called Islamic State (IS) propaganda to illustrate how messaging strategies can be based on insights derived from the framework and the resulting analysis.

1.1   Framework Described

The framework discussed here proceeds from a series of papers published by Strategic Counter-Terrorism Communications project at ICCT. In "A 'Linkage-Based' Approach to Combating Militant Islamist Propaganda" (2016)[1], Dr. Haroro Ingram proposed a strategy for counterterrorism strategic communications based on dismantling connections that form a "system of meaning" in extremist propaganda.

Typically, the system of meaning describes a crisis afflicting an in-group, which is caused by an out-group. The in-group is then linked to a solution proposed by the extremist organization. Ingram proposes messaging campaigns that seek to dissolve the linkage between out-group and crisis, and between in-group and solution, replacing these linkages with a competitive system of meaning.

In "Extremist Construction of Identity" (2017)[2], by this author, the linkage-based approach was expanded to map a wide range of concepts found in extremist propaganda, specifically those related to how ideologues and propagandists construct and define in-groups, out-groups and crises.

The result of this analysis was the "Ladder of Identity Construction" (see Figure 1, below) which proposes a standard set of linkages that can apply to a wide range of ideological platforms. In-group and out-group identities are delineated by extremists using the following descriptive categories:

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[1] Ingram, H. J. "A "Linkage-Based" Approach to Combating Militant Islamist Propaganda: A Two-Tiered Framework for Practitioners", The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague 7, no. 6 (2016).

[2] Berger, J.M. "Extremist Construction of Identity: How Escalating Demands for Legitimacy Shape and Define In-Group and Out-Group Dynamics", The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague 8, no. 7 (2017).

- Beliefs
- Traits
- Behaviour
  - Past behaviour
  - Current behaviour
  - Expected future behaviour

These descriptive categories are justified with references to sources of information. While in-group beliefs are directly experienced, most of the other categories are justified with reference to secondary sources, such as history, myth and scripture. Naturally, the descriptions of in-groups and out-groups are highly subjective and sometimes based on entirely incorrect information.

Not all of elements of the Ladder of Identity Construction are present in all ideologies, nor are they enunciated in every extremist text, but elements of the framework tend to be filled in over time. The more complex the descriptions of each group, the more robust the extremist message.

As the descriptions of each group become more robust, extremist ideologues and propagandists draw on each described element to justify characterizing the out-group as a threat to the in-group. Conflict between identity groups may not be inherently extremist, but it becomes more so as the description of the in-group and out-group are expanded to characterize the conflict as having a historical basis (past behaviour) or as the fulfilment of apocalyptic expectations or prophecies (future behaviour). Once the out-group is associated with a threat to the in-group, the extremist author then proposes how the in-group should solve that threat through proportionate hostile action.

As extremist propagandists and ideologues describe each of these categories in turn, they compare and contrast between the in-group and out-group to present and reinforce three cumulative narratives (per Ingram):

- Perception of in-group and out-group values
- Perception of dichotomy between in-group and out-group
- Perception of crisis afflicting in-group and caused by out-group

Values-reinforcing messages travel vertically on the ladder of identity, while dichotomy- and crisis-reinforcing messages can travel horizontally and diagonally, as the beliefs, practices and traits of the in-group and out-group are compared in ways unfavourable to the out-group, and then out-group beliefs, practices and traits are associated with various levels of threat (see Figure 2, below).
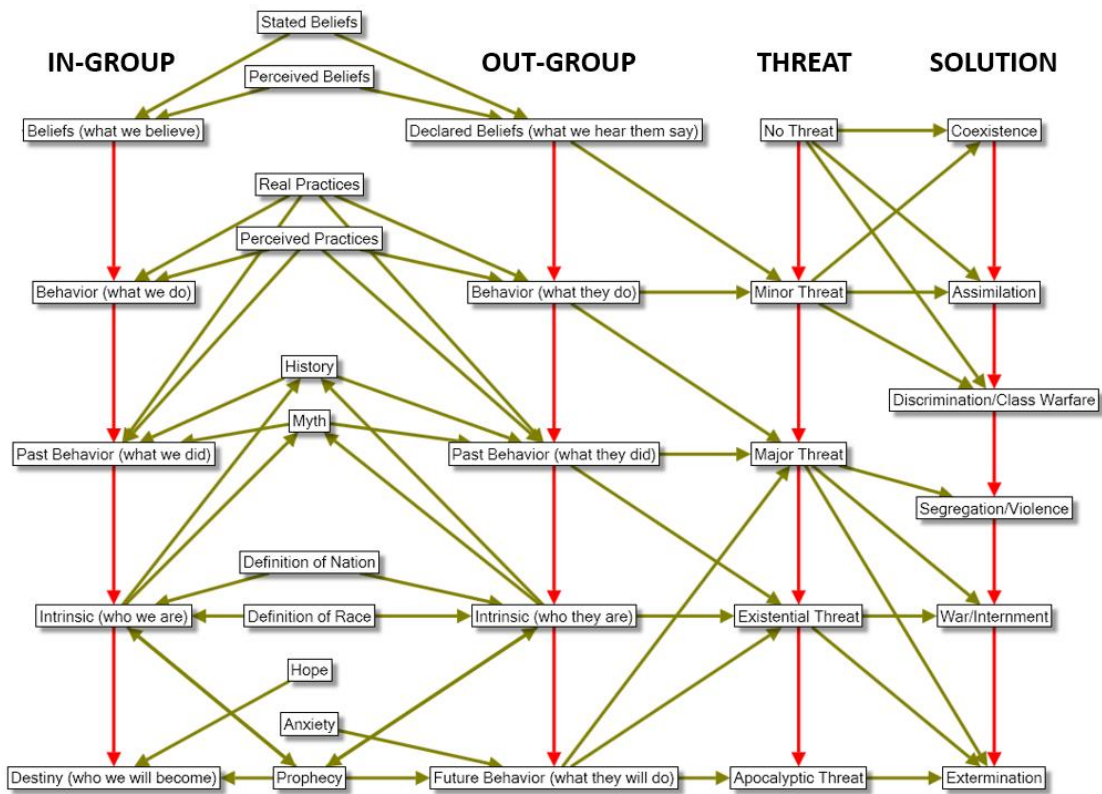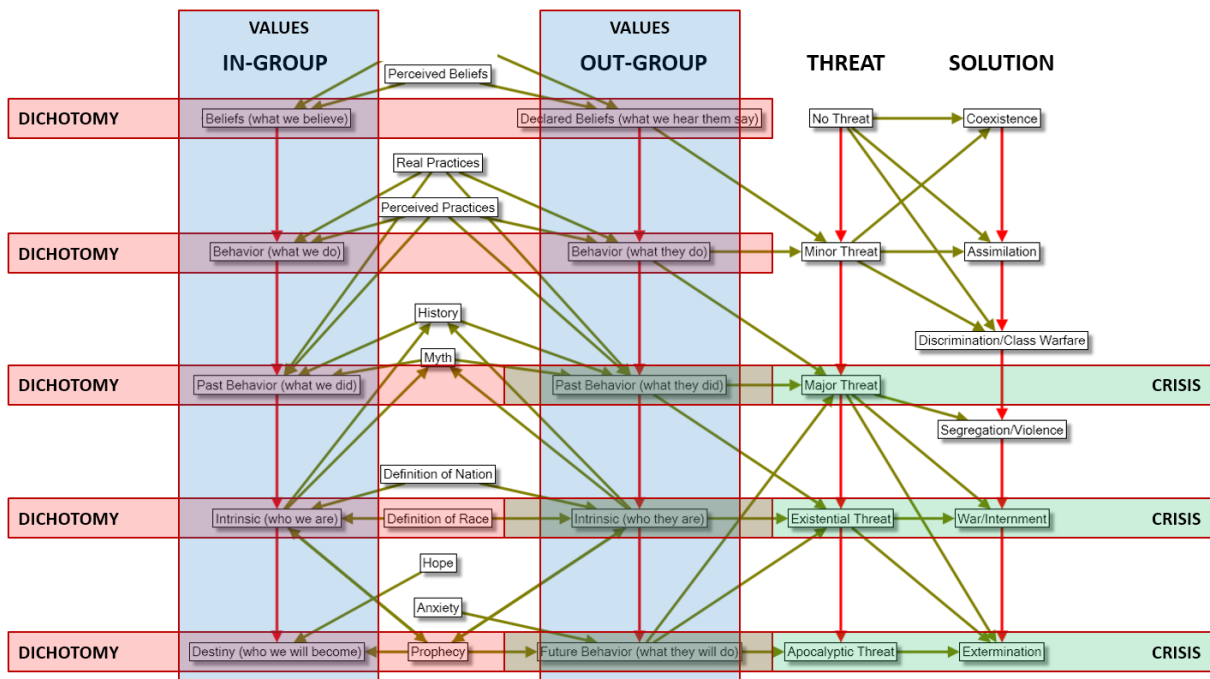
Figure 1: The Ladder of Identity Construction

Figure 2: Crisis-, dichotomy- and values-reinforcing message paths

All of these linkages together constitute the extremist ideology, defined here as a textual narrative that defines an in-group identity collective in contrast to a defined enemy out-group, using parallel narrative tracks.

By understanding these patterns of linkages, we can analyse extremist messaging (including both ideological and propagandistic texts) for vulnerabilities, while designing both offensive and defensive messages that undermine the extremist group's ideological construction.

1.2 Crisis and Solution Constructs

In "A "Linkage-Based" Approach to Combating Militant Islamist Propaganda," Ingram notes that "perceptions of crisis" are a key element in radicalization and ideological escalation.[3] Ingram posits that extremist propagandists argue an out-group is identified as the cause of a crisis that afflicts the in-group. The in-group is then linked to a solution to the crisis, typically involving violent action.

Based on the analysis of an IS text described in detail below, this paper proposes to analyse a slightly more complex set of linkages, distinguishing between two types of in-groups referenced by IS. The first is the extremist in-group, in this example meaning active members of the IS organization. The second is the "eligible" in-group, in this example meaning Sunni Muslims whom IS wishes to recruit. The extremist narrative tells the following story:

1) The out-group is responsible for a crisis that afflicts the eligible in-group.
2) The extremist in-group is responsible for a solution that confronts the out-group to resolve the crisis.
3) In order to access the solution, members of the eligible in-group must join the extremist in-group.

Extremist messaging seeks to reinforce each of these linkages, tying the out-group to the crisis, the extremist in-group to the solution, and making the case

Figure 3: Crisis-solution construct

for a link between the eligible in-group and the extremist in-group. Depending on the stage of an extremist group's development, including the status of its organizations, and the au-
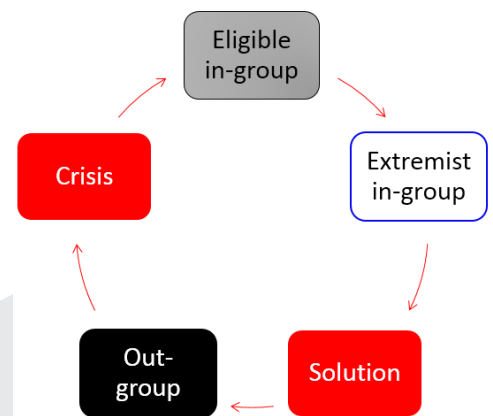
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[3] Ingram, H. J. "A "Linkage-Based" Approach to Combating Militant Islamist Propaganda: A Two-Tiered Framework for Practitioners", The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague 7, no. 6 (2016).

dience for a particular text, extremist propagandists and ideologues may or may not distinguish between the eligible in-group and the extremist in-group. Even when the link is implicit, however, it is a component of the message that can be targeted in strategic communications.

2 Analysis of Text: The Islamic State Will Remain

This paper will examine an August 2011 speech by Abu Muhammad al Adnani, the deputy leader of IS and its most effective spokesman. Adnani's lectures were delivered in Arabic but disseminated in multiple languages, including English. The English translation provided by IS serves as the reference text herein.[4]

This speech was issued during a time of great weakness for the organization then known as the Islamic State of Iraq. The U.S. military "surge" in Iraq had resulted in devastating losses, and the ISI's leadership was wiped out in 2010 by U.S. airstrikes, resulting in the ascendance of Abu Bakr al Baghdadi to lead the organization. At the time of this release, IS had not yet claimed the mantle of the caliphate, and the organization was still part of al Qaeda.

As with most of his speeches, Adnani divides his attention between general ideological points and specific messages, including courtesy acknowledgements of jihadist leaders such as the Taliban's Mullah Omar and al Qaeda's Ayman al Zawahiri, or messages to fighters in specific locations. This analysis will concern itself primarily with the substantial portion of the speech devoted to describing and defining in-groups and out-groups. These descriptions are based on IS's worldview, and they include a mix of true, false and distorted claims.

Adnani describes three types of groups in detail:

- The extremist in-group, the IS organization
- The eligible in-group (people not currently part of the extremist in-group, but who are eligible to join), consisting of Sunni Muslims
- The out-group, primarily Shi'a Muslims in this speech, although Adnani also makes reference to non-Muslim out-groups including Americans and Jews

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[4] Al Adnani, Abu Muhammad. "The Islamic State Will Remain Safe." The Islamic State Organization. August 2011. A version of the speech is available at https://scholarship.tricolib.brynmawr.edu/bitstream/handle/10066/15267/ADN20110807.pdf?sequence=1

2.1 Extremist In-Group Description

Quoting Abu Bakr's predecessor, Abu Omar al Baghdadi, Adnani introduces the main premise of his message: The Islamic State will survive (also commonly translated as "remain" or "remain safe"). Adnani describes the beliefs, practices and traits of the IS organization and its members, including:

1) Beliefs
   a. Religion of eligible in-group is in need of renewal.
   b. Status of eligible in-group is diminished.
   c. Extremist in-group has continuity with historical figures from early Islam (such as early Caliphs Abu Bakr, Omar, Othman, and Ali).

2) Practices
   a. Protects the eligible in-group.
   b. Punishes those who unlawfully harm the eligible in-group.
   c. Renews the religion of Islam and the status of Muslims.
   d. Purifies the eligible in-group of its flaws.
   e. Continues until victory or death.
   f. Carries out warfare (with a list of specific tactics).
   g. Prepares carefully for warfare.
   h. Avoids civilian casualties.
   i. Forgives repentant members of the eligible in-group.
   j. Does not betray comrades.
   k. Keeps promises.
   l. Will fight the antichrist until the Day of Resurrection.

3) Traits
   a. Self-sufficient (operates without support from the eligible in-group).
   b. Not reluctant to take part in war.
   c. Courageous.
   d. Loves death in the line of duty.
   e. Does not entertain regrets.
   f. Receives God's greatest blessings.
   g. Chosen by God.
   h. Guided by God.
   i. Patient and perseverant in the face of setbacks.
   j. Kind to eligible in-group members.
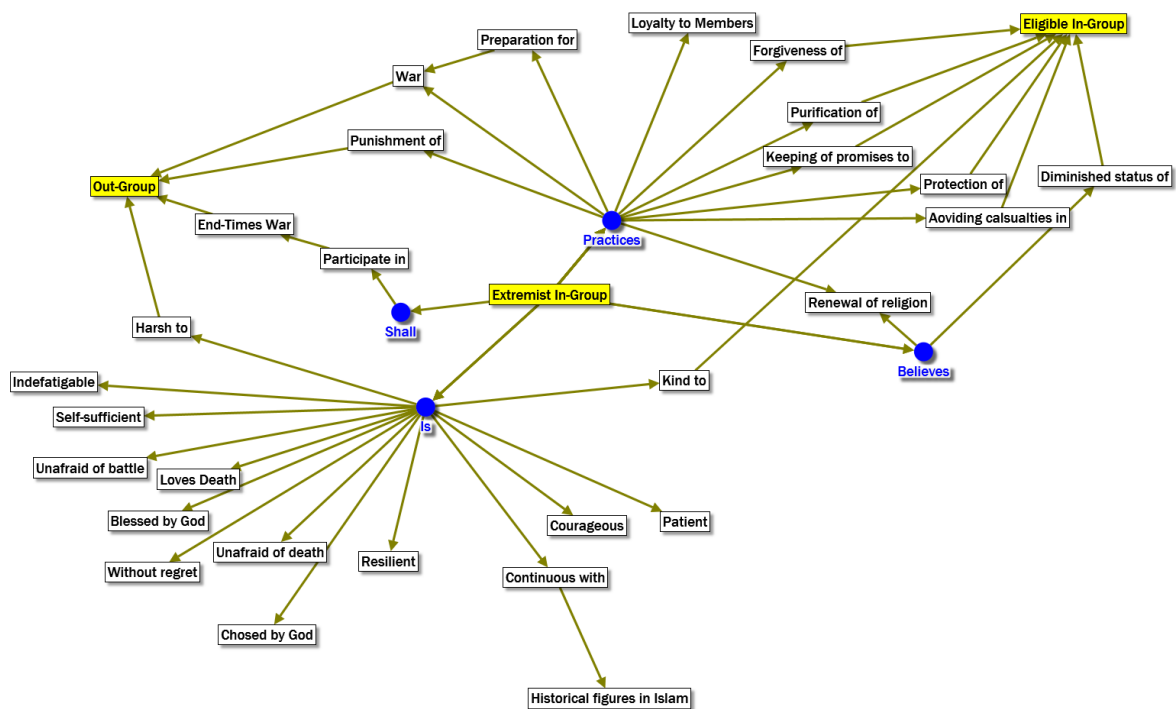   k. Harsh to out-group members.

Figure 4: Diagramming of Extremist In-Group Description (see larger-size graphic in appendix).

Diagramming the extremist in-group description provided by Adnani shows that a significant portion of the in-group's identity construction consists of traits (what the Islamic Sate "is," as depicted in in the graph). Most of these traits are self-contained, depicted on the graph as "pendants"—nodes featuring only one link, which "hang" from the extremist in-group and do not connect to other groups.

The next most important messaging component is primarily focused on practices, most of which pertain to how IS, the extremist in-group, relates to Sunni Muslims, the eligible in-group. Most of these practices bridge between the extremist in-group and the eligible in-group, making the description of practices more active and complex than the description of traits. Future behaviour (practices) are depicted in the graph as "shall."

Finally, a portion of the description pertains to how IS interacts with the out-group, primarily defined in this speech as Shi'a Muslims. Most of these linkages pertain to practices as well, primarily fighting and punishment.

2.2 Out-Group Description

Several overlapping and allied out-groups are mentioned by Adnani in a similar format to the in-group description, with lists of traits and behaviours. The major out-groups are Rafida (Arabic for "rejectionists," a derogatory term for Shi'a Mus-

lims), Crusaders (Western forces, especially Americans), and Jews. The vast majority of Adnani's descriptions are focused on Shi'a Muslims. Adnani describes Shi'a beliefs, practices and traits, including

1) Beliefs
    a. Rejection of legitimate hadith and acceptance of illegitimate hadith.
    b. The family of the Prophet is divine and should be worshipped.
    c. Legitimacy of secular political processes.
    d. Desirability/acceptability of coexistence with unbelievers.
    e. Equal rights for unbelievers.
2) Practices
    a. Slanders historical figures in Islam
    b. Pursues material gain over religious virtue
    c. Incorrect fasting and pilgrimage practices
3) Traits
    a. Hypocritical
    b. Persian (Iranian), with a racial preference for Persians over Arabs
    c. Snake-like
    d. Treacherous

While Adnani makes reference to other out-group categories such as Americans and Jews, their traits are not described in detail, and the context in which they are mentioned generally pertains to their actions in alliance with the Shi'a. Although the majority of out-group description applies to the Shi'a, the list of traits and practices is notably less robust than the description of the extremist in-group, and much of the content in this category is repetitive.
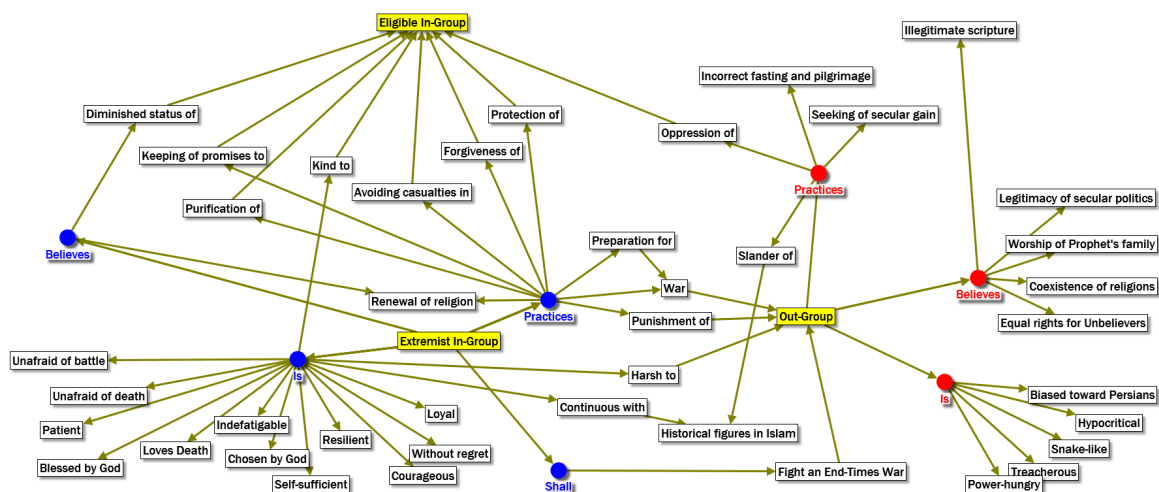
Figure 5: Diagramming of Out-Group Description (see larger-size graphic in appendix). Blue circles are extremist in-group practices, red circles are out-group practices.

Diagramming the out-group description reveals a significant number of pendants (nodes with only one link), similar to those found in the in-group description. The concepts that bridge to the extremist in-group and eligible in-group are significant, reflecting the crisis-solution construct.

The out-group is described as oppressing the eligible in-group, while the extremist in-group provides a solution by punishing and waging war against the out-group. The value proposition in the crisis-solution framing is squarely centred on practices, but beliefs and traits play a significant role in explaining to the audience why the crisis exists and the scale of the threat by stipulating that the crisis cannot be easily solved due to the out-group's intrinsic nature.

2.3 Eligible In-Group Description

While providing clear in- and out-group categories, Adnani addresses much of his speech to Sunni Muslims, who are eligible for in-group acceptance but are not currently supporting IS. The audience for this speech was primarily Iraqi, and much of the speech is oriented to local political conditions, but Adnani does sketch out broader ideological principles to make his case.

One key point repeated at length is to emphasize the simple fact of a distinction between the eligible in-group and the out-group:

> [T]he leaders among your blocs are still repeating: "There is no difference between Sunnis and Shiites"; while the Rafida, whom your chiefs do not see any difference between you and them, are still refuting all the hadiths (Sayings) of Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him.

Simply encouraging listeners to draw distinctions serves a purpose for the would-be radicalizers. As noted in "Extremist Construction of Identity" by this author[5]:

> The very act of embracing a collective identity, even when seen as positive may set the stage for the seeds of negativity. Tajfel (1981), drawing on earlier authors, describes an individual's adoption of a collective identity as part of the "process of categorization" and a "cognitive aspect" leading to the formation of prejudices.[6]

The speech heavily emphasizes eligibility for the extremist in-group, with assurances that those who repent and embrace IS will be welcomed. But it is paired with a direct threat: Adnani warns that IS is fully capable of killing members of the eligible in-group if they refuse to join the extremist in-group. The State prefers repentance, but its offer of clemency has implicit limits.

Adnani describes the eligible in-group's beliefs, practices and traits:

1) Beliefs:
    a. Correct Sunni religious sources (legitimate hadith).
    b. Disillusioned with and disavows secular government.
2) Practices:
    a. Works to promote and publicly support shari'a forms of government, specifically the goal of restoring the caliphate.
    b. Correct fasting and pilgrimage
3) Traits:
    a. Lacking in dignity
    b. Living in mixed society

Diagramming the eligible in-group description and its connection to the previous group descriptions, results in a very complex chart (Figure 6).

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[5] Berger, *Extremist Construction of Identity*, op. cit.

[6] Tajfel, Henri. *Human groups and social categories: Studies in social psychology*. CUP Archive, 1981. pp 132-133, 141, 147. See also Sageman, Marc. *Misunderstanding Terrorism*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. Kindle location: 1820 et. al.
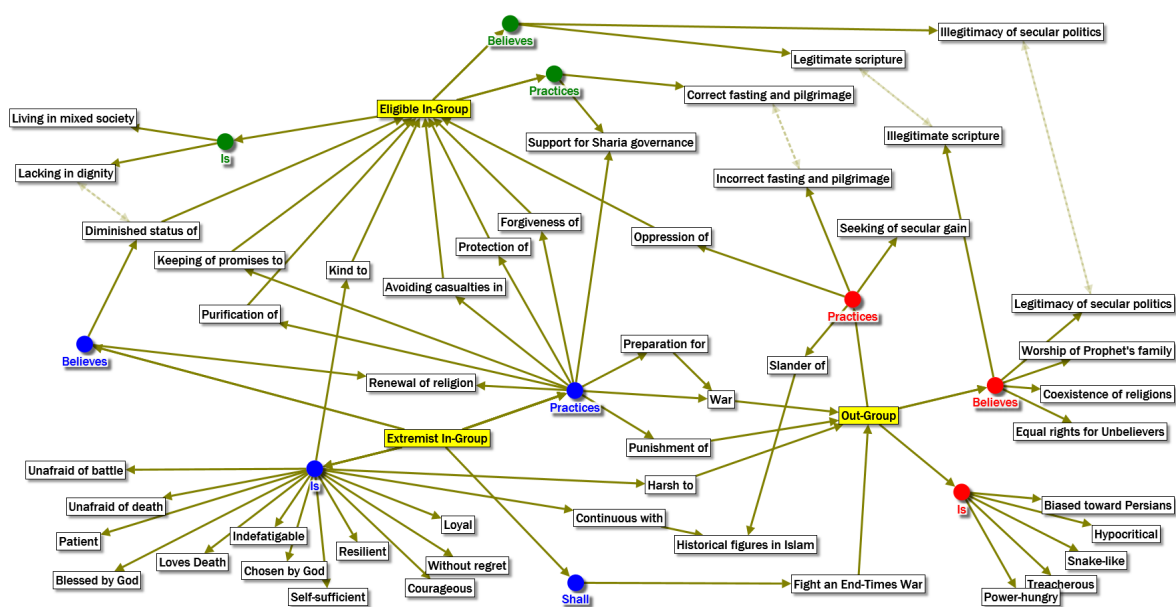
Figure 6: Diagramming of Eligible In-Group Description (see larger-size graphic in appendix).

The new set of in-group descriptors sets up several dichotomy-reinforcing elements as attributes of the eligible in-group contain implicit contrasts with the out-group, including correct versus incorrect pilgrimage and fasting practices, correct versus incorrect scriptural sources, and most explicit in the text, correct mistrust of secular politics versus an incorrect belief in their legitimacy.

Adnani promises benefits to those who "unite with the mujahidin" (the extremist in-group), including to "restore honour, dignity and control that you have missed since the fall of the Islamic caliphate." This sets up the relative or transactional qualities that mark a transition between the eligible in-group and the extremist-group, resulting in a solution to the crisis caused by the out-group. These include:

1) Lack of honour in the eligible in-group transitioning to honour as part of the extremist in-group.
2) Eligible in-group lack of dignity transitioning to dignity.
3) Eligible in-group lack of control transitioning to control.
4) Eligible in-group ceases to associate with those "who have prescribed for you a religion that Allah does not approve."

3 Dissolving Linkages

There are many possible counter-messaging strategies based on the mappings of Adnani's speech. The following section will quickly review some of the most obvious approaches. By examining a historical work, rather than a contemporary work, this analysis can also identify potential pitfalls in specific approaches that may not have been apparent at the time.

The first approach involves messaging that attacks the linkages established in Adnani's speech. Structurally speaking, the linkages that matter most bridge between groups. In the graph, there are a number of "pendants," generally consisting of traits that describe one of the groups without connecting two or more groups. For instance, it is inefficient to attack IS's characterization of its warriors as "courageous." While this characterization may have appeal to some potential recruits, it does not pertain to the internal logic of the message's appeal.

The most efficient and targeted countermessaging pertains to themes that connect with the eligible in-group, which is the primary audience for this particular speech. This and many other works of IS propaganda are designed to entice the eligible in-group to join the extremist in-group, by highlighting commonalities between the two (values-reinforcing) and by emphasizing out-group descriptions that accentuate contrasts with the eligible and extremist in-groups (dichotomy-reinforcing). The message also focuses on out-group actions perceived to negatively impact the eligible in-group (crisis-reinforcing).

Attacking values-reinforcing linkages vertically is likely to trigger escalating justifications from the extremist propagandists without necessarily dissolving the message's internal
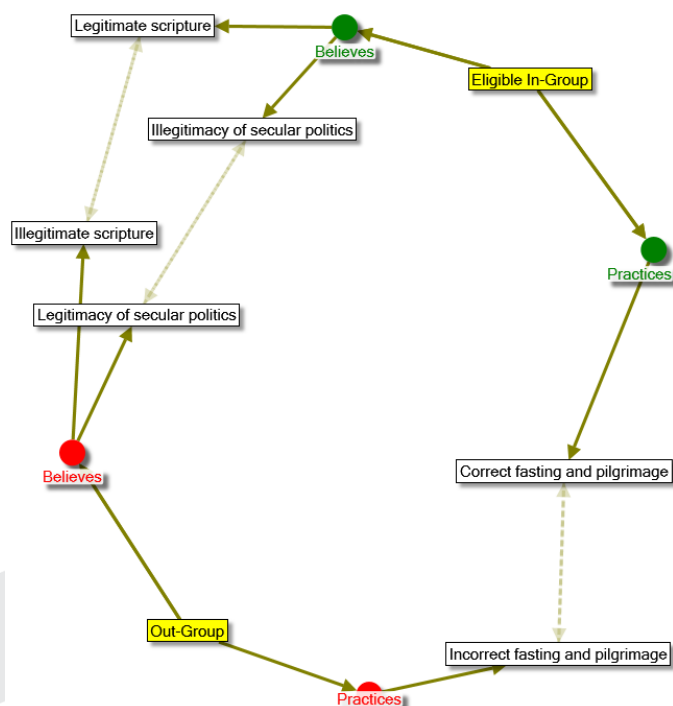

Figure 7: Dichotomy-reinforcing links in the text

logic.[7] Messaging about values should instead be framed against the extremists' dichotomy-reinforcing linkages (Figure 7), which are designed to provoke feelings of animosity.

Some of these linkages are difficult to work with, such as disputes over correct scriptural sources or fasting/pilgrimage practices, which even non-extremists acknowledge as a legitimate point of disagreement. However, a vulnerable linkage in this messaging nexus may be the legitimacy of secular politics. Adnani's characterization of the eligible in-group's belief that secular politics are illegitimate is somewhat aspirational, as not everyone in the eligible in-group would agree with that assertion. Therefore, messaging that highlights examples of fruitful participation in secular political processes by members of the eligible in-group would undermine the effort to create or reinforce a dichotomy between the eligible in-group and the out-group.

Messaging that seeks to address the crisis-solution matrix identified by Ingram is likely to be more productive, as the bulk of the speech's internal logic is devoted to the web of linkages that reinforce that theme (Figure 8).
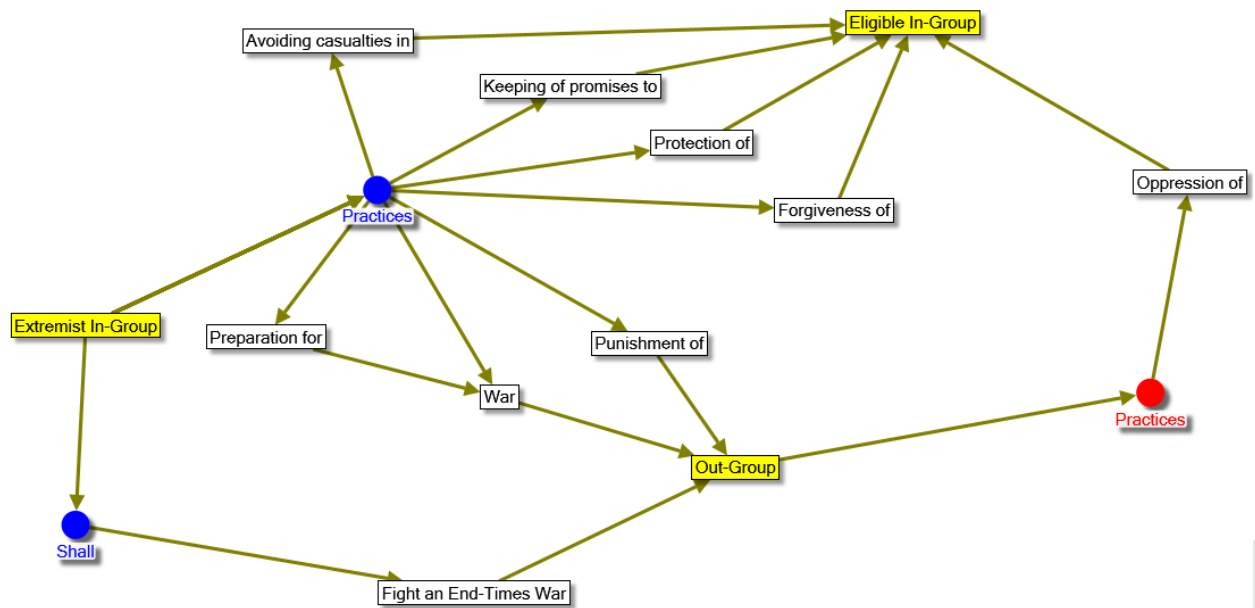

Figure 8: Crisis-reinforcing linkages in Adnani's speech

Efforts to message against the primary linkage—that the out-group oppresses the eligible in-group—is complicated by the "say-do" gap discussed by Ingram. The say-do gap refers to the disparity between words and actions, generally meaning incon-

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[7] Berger, op. cit., pp. 47-51, 59-60.

sistencies between the sponsoring group's message and its policies. When policies do not align with messaging, the message is vulnerable to attack by adversary propaganda.

During the period immediately following the speech, Iraqi politicians exacerbated Sunni-Shi'a tensions in a variety of ways.[8] Messaging that seeks to dissolve linkages between out-group and crisis must be compatible with reality, which can be difficult or impossible.

However, IS's own say-do gap can work for those seeking to counter Adnani's message. For instance, in the period following the speech, IS frequently carried out violence and retribution against some in the eligible in-group, despite its claims to protect and forgive them, and its assurances that it seeks to avoid eligible in-group collateral damage.[9] By highlighting that say-do gap, countermessaging campaigns may be able to dissolve linkages promoted by IS in its appeal for support from the eligible in-group.

Other crisis-solution linkages may be dissolved over time. For instance, in Syria during the period after the speech, IS faced credible charges that it colluded with the Syrian government in various ways.[10] Messaging about these charges helps dissolve the linkage that proposes the extremist in-group is fighting and punishing the out-group.

Another vulnerable link is IS's claim that it is participating in an apocalyptic "End Times" war with Shi'a Muslims and other out-groups. In addition to say-do gap violations, these linkages could potentially be attacked on theological grounds. Rather than trying to directly contradict its overall apocalyptic narrative, which could trigger escalation, one important messaging vector could argue that apocalyptic times are not *imminent*, the as perception of temporal compression is a key element of an apocalyptic movement's appeal.[11]

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[8] Parker, Ned. "The Iraq We Left Behind: Welcome to the World's Next Failed State." *Foreign Affairs* (2012): 94-110.

[9] "ISIS' mass executions of Sunni men, women and children in Iraq continues." CBSNews.com. November 2, 2014. http://www.cbsnews.com/news/isis-mass-executions-of-sunni-men-women-and-children-in-iraq-continues/

[10] Orton, Kyle. "The Assad Regime's Collusion With ISIS and al-Qaeda: Assessing The Evidence." The Syrian Intifada. March 24, 2014. https://kyleorton1991.wordpress.com/2014/03/24/assessing-evidence-collusion-assad-isis-qaeda/

[11] Landes, Richard. *Heaven on Earth: The Varieties of the Millennial Experience*. Oxford University Press (2011). pp. 13, 15, 16; Hassner, Ron E. "Sacred Time and Conflict Initiation," *Security Studies*, Vol. 20, Issue 4, 2011.

4 Creating Linkages

Another way to undercut IS's propaganda is to create new linkages that challenge the strategic logic of the organization's message and create alternative narrative pathways. One approach to this is to associate the extremist in-group with the same dichotomy-reinforcing traits its own propaganda associates with the out-group. This approach can be further enhanced by combining it with messages that dissolve complementary and competing linkages contained in the extremists' propaganda.
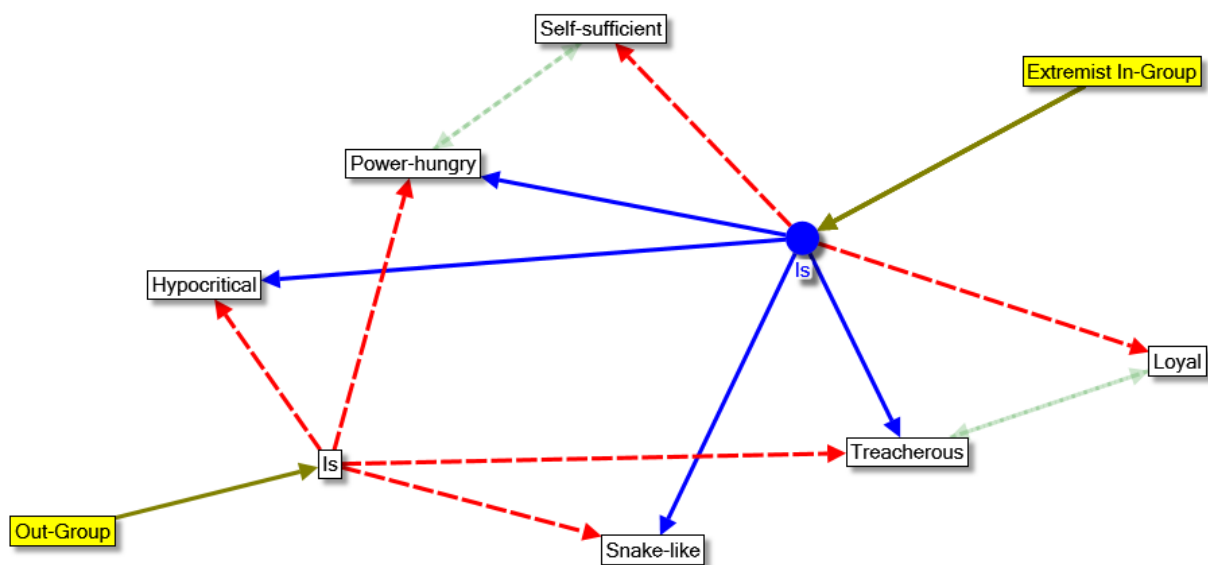

Figure 9: Countering dichotomy-reinforcing messages. Blue lines indicate new linkages that can be created in countermessaging. Red lines indicate extremist propaganda linkages that the countermessaging campaign seeks to dissolve.

This two-pronged approach can also be used to attack crisis-reinforcing messages by highlighting the extremist in-group's say-do gap (see Figure 10), linking the extremist in-group to practices it attributes to the out-group, while dissolving complementary and competing linkages from the adversary's propaganda.
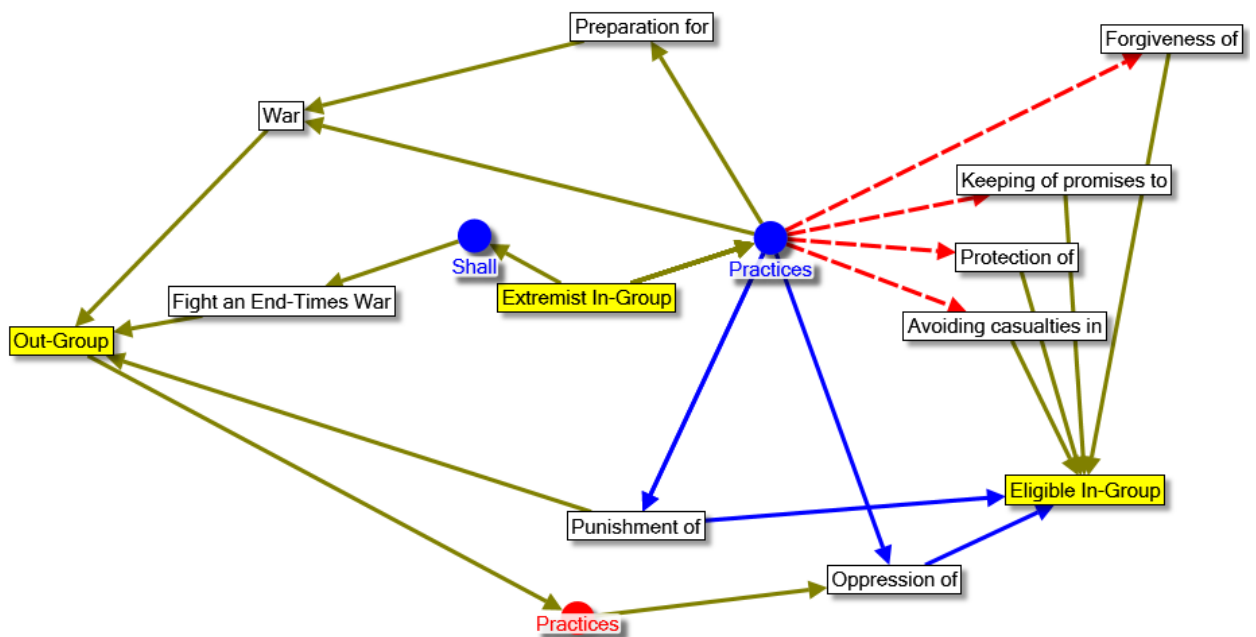
Figure 10: Countering crisis-reinforcing messages.

5 Conclusions

The methodology described in this paper can serve as a starting point for the design of strategic counterterrorism communications, which should be carefully and quantifiably evaluated to examine their effectiveness.

By charting extremist propaganda with a linkage-based framework, messaging campaigns can target the themes exploited by extremist organizations to mobilize potential recruits, rather than wasting efforts on elements that do not create or reinforce dichotomies or crisis constructs.
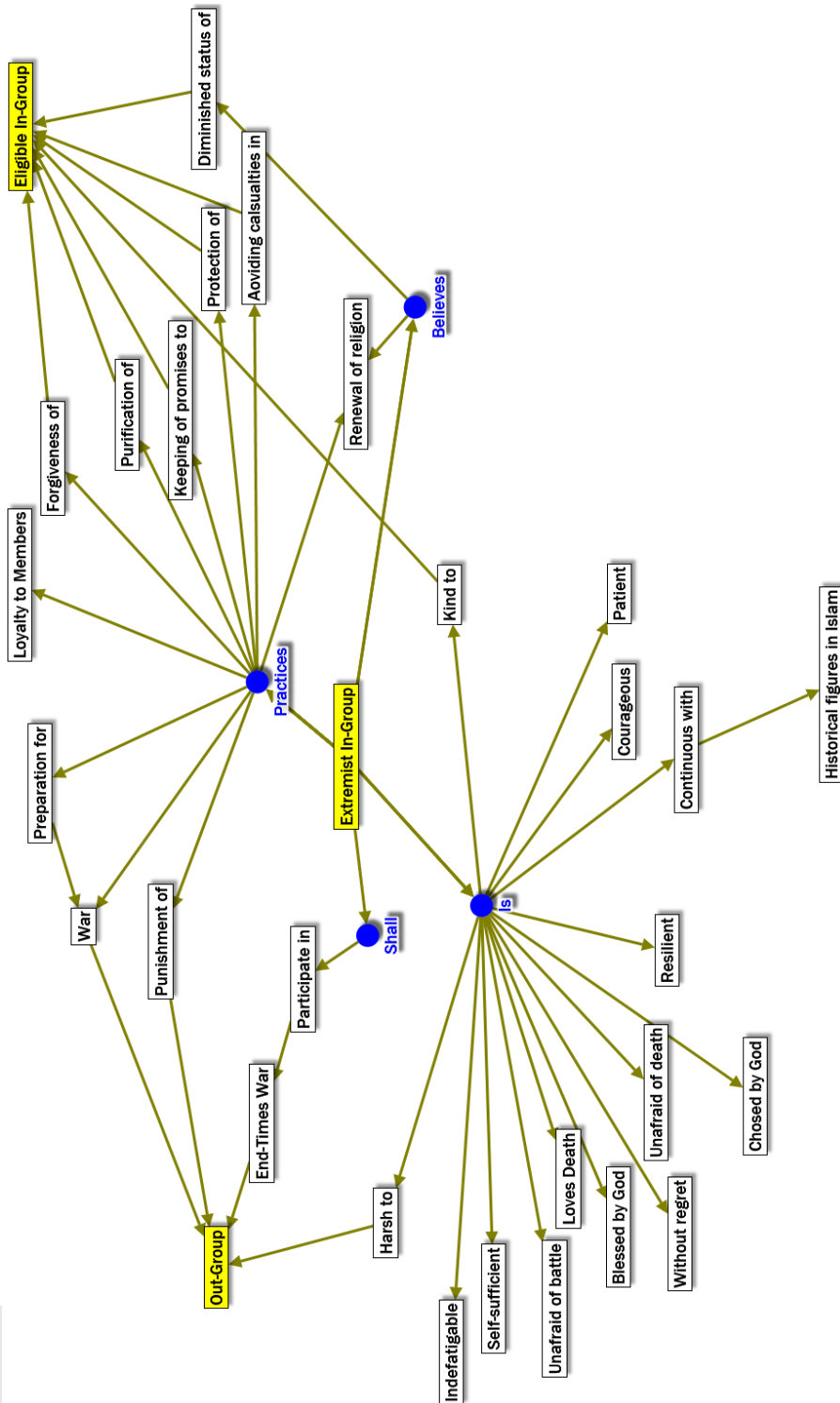
Key to this approach is understanding the identities that extremists construct to support radicalizing narratives, including how they address beliefs, traits and practices, and link these group descriptions to threat assessments and solutions.

Extremist propaganda can serve a variety of purposes. Some propaganda is directed at out-groups, to provoke or intimidate them. But perhaps the most important function is the recruitment of new members and supporters. Therefore, a high priority should be placed on content that describes the eligible in-group, and its relationships to both the extremist in-group and the out-group.
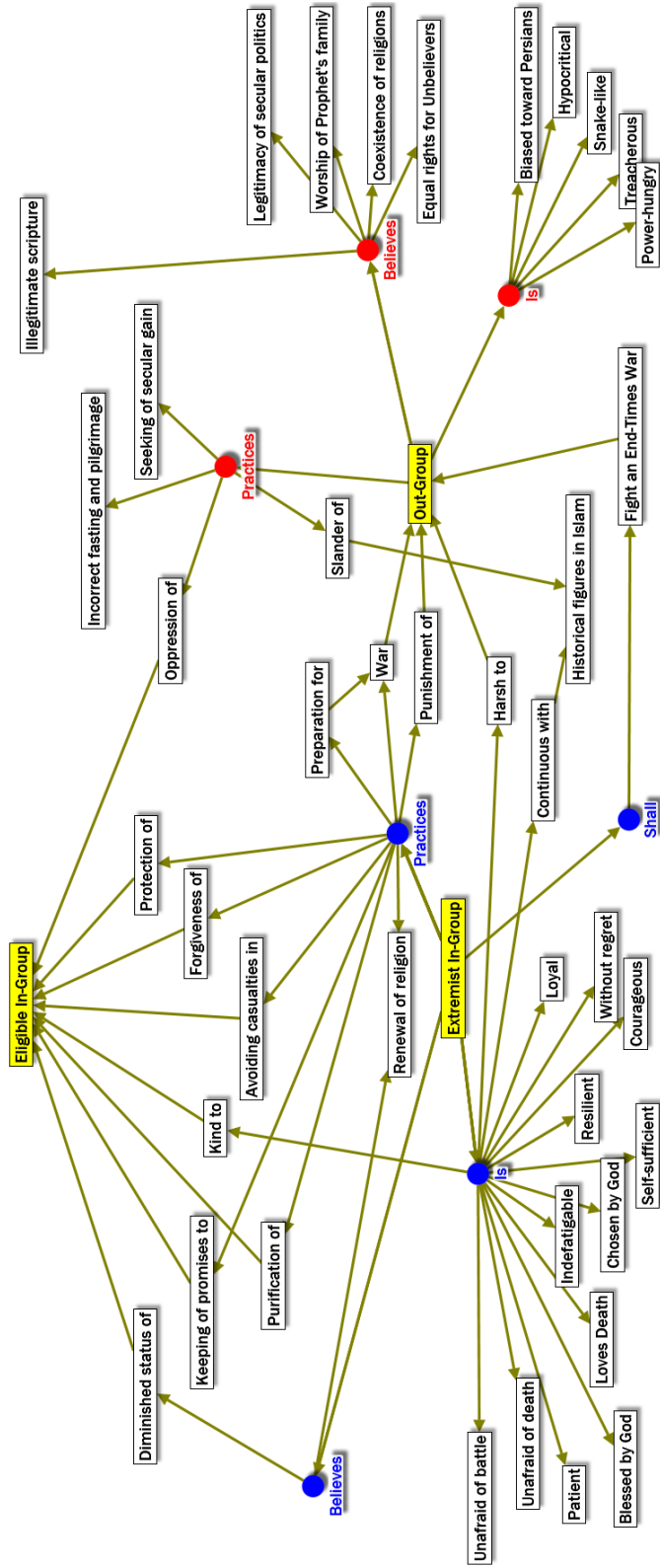
Diagramming linkages in texts, whether ideological or propagandistic, helps us assess the critical portions of an extremist message and the value proposition it presents to potential recruits. When an extremist group is particularly successful, as IS has been, these insights may be useful in understanding which elements of a recruitment campaign are most important and relevant to audiences.

Appendix: Enlarged Charts

5.1 Figure Four