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Losing Mood(s): Examining Jihadi Supporters' Responses to ISIS' Territorial Decline

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ABSTRACT

The fall of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria has raised a number of questions over the future of the organization and the potential threat it might continue to pose. While some commenters argue that the demise of the Caliphate will reduce ISIS's global appeal, others have stressed the role that jihadi supporters may play in perpetuating ISIS's ideological legacy. Yet, little is known on how supporters have responded to recent changes in circumstances. Employing a cognitive dissonance approach, this contribution examines the implications of ISIS's defeat on twelve jihadi supporters' commitment. It shows that while a minority of supporters have disengaged, the majority have remained committed to the group. While these differences stress the influence of personal situational factors on supporters' responses, the data at the same time indicates that dissonance has preceded in some cases ISIS's defeat. The contribution overall shows that integrating cognitive dissonance theory to the study of radicalization and terrorism can provide a more nuanced understanding of how individuals renegotiate the nature of their involvement in extremism when confronted by changes in circumstances.

KEYWORDS

Islamic state; global jihadism; cognitive dissonance; dissonance reduction; disengagement

Introduction

The recent military defeat of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has raised a number of questions over the future of the organization and the potential threat it might continue to pose. Originating from Al Qaeda in Iraq, ISIS is a jihadi movement that rapidly spread in Iraq and Syria in the early 2010s to establish itself as one of “the most dominant and resourceful jihadi organizations” in contemporary history.¹ Unlike other modern-day jihadi groups, it has distinguished itself through its extensive reinvestment of prophetic traditions predicting the revival of the Caliphate in Iraq and Syria and the central role it will play in instigating a new world order.² Serving both as a marketing and recruitment strategy, it sparked renewed support for global jihadism. As McCants observes:

References to the End Times [are] a big selling point with foreign fighters, who want to travel to the lands where the final battles of the apocalypse will take place. The civil wars raging in those countries today [Iraq and Syria] lend credibility to the prophecies. The Islamic State has stoked the apocalyptic fire. [...] For Bin Laden's generation, the apocalypse wasn't a great recruiting pitch. Governments in the Middle East two decades ago were more stable, and sectarianism was more subdued. It was better to recruit by calling to arms against corruption

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and tyranny than against the Antichrist. Today, though, the apocalyptic recruiting pitch makes more sense than before.³

Since the proclamation of ISIS's Caliphate in June 2014, thousands of jihadi supporters have traveled to Iraq and Syria to settle in ISIS territories and fight alongside the organization. In Europe, an unprecedented number of jihadi supporters have moreover expressed their support for the group. More than five years later, ISIS has however lost most of the territories it controlled. Its Caliphate, which expanded across Iraq and Syria and encompassed several provinces in Africa, Asia, the Caucasus, and the Middle East, has collapsed over the past years, leading to ISIS's military defeat in March 2019.⁴ Most of its fighters in Iraq and Syria have died—including its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi—and a large number of surviving members are today waiting in Kurdish camps and Iraqi prisons for their fate to be decided.⁵ With the exception of a few military achievements in its provinces over the past year,⁶ ISIS's dream to "remain and expand" seems to have come to a halt. Yet, some commenters have warned of possible ways whereby ISIS may overcome its defeat and continue to inspire a new wave of jihadists. In a study published in 2017, Nance and Sampson, for instance, anticipated that "the destruction of ISIS will be a historical achievement, but the by-product will be a less centralized terror group that will rely much more on inspiring terror attacks rather than planning them and deploying cells."⁷ Yashlavskii has similarly warned of "a possibility of [ISIS] militants' relocation to different regions of the world both in conflict areas (Afghanistan, Yemen, Libya, etc.) and other countries (not excepting European countries and Russia). In this context, there is a real danger of foreign jihadi fighters returning to their home countries for sabotage and terrorist activities, as well as for the creation of 'autonomous jihad' sleeper cells."⁸ Through its reliance on digital propaganda and encrypted apps, it is moreover believed that ISIS may continue to coordinate attacks and to strengthen its support base until it can reclaim a new physical territory.⁹ These strategic debates overall stress the limited impact that a military defeat will have on ISIS as a transnational jihadi movement and its support base. As McCants argues, jihadi supporters "will continue to wage insurgencies, taking advantage of the political instabilities and social unrests that gave rise to their statelet in the first place," with or without the existence of an ISIS territorial foothold in Iraq and Syria.¹⁰

While these strategic debates stress the role homegrown jihadi milieus may play in sustaining ISIS's ideological legacy, little is known on how supporters have perceived and responded to ISIS's defeat. Yet, militant groups are not "free-floating" entities. As Malthaner and Waldmann observe, they emerge from and operate within a specific social environment which "shares [their] perspective and objectives, approves of certain forms of violence, and (at least to a certain extent) supports the [groups] morally and logistically."¹¹ This supportive environment constitutes the backbone of militant groups' campaigns. By spreading militant groups' ideology and mobilizing support, it contributes to militant groups' development and provides the necessary resources for their survival.¹² Several authors have moreover stressed the role that extremist milieus may play in the escalation of violent conflicts.¹³ As illustrated by the waves of attacks orchestrated by ISIS-related networks in Europe over the past years, supporters may actively contribute to the orchestration of attacks and the perpetuation of violence. Given the role that supporters play in militant groups' campaigns, greater attention must be paid to how jihadi supporters have perceived ISIS's defeat to anticipate future developments in the jihadi scene.

Drawing on interviews with twelve participants from Belgium and the Netherlands, this contribution examines the implications of ISIS's military defeat on homegrown jihadi supporters' commitment. The term "homegrown jihadi supporters" refers in this study to men and women who have shared—at least to a certain extent—ISIS's perspective and frame of reference. It includes individuals who have attempted to travel to Iraq and Syria, have engaged in support activities in their home country and/or have supported the establishment of an ISIS Caliphate in Iraq and Syria. The theoretical approach employed in this study draws on cognitive dissonance theory (CDT), which is concerned with cognition and behavior in context and is therefore well-equipped for examining how individuals renegotiate their beliefs, behavior, and attitudes in relation to particular events. After providing a brief overview of the CDT literature, this contribution outlines the methods used for data collection, as well as potential methodological limitations. The result section then examines how participants have cognitively and behaviorally responded to ISIS's defeat by outlining two main processes: (1) reaffirmation of ISIS's belief system, and (2) disengagement from ISIS's belief system. The last section seeks to further interpret participants' responses by examining differences in their degree of commitment, their self-concept, and their belief system. The article finally concludes by summarizing the research findings and providing some brief recommendations for counter-extremism programs.

Research approach and theoretical framework

Questions as to how members of ideological groups respond to changes in circumstances have extensively been addressed in the scholarship on CDT. First developed by Festinger and his colleagues, CDT is concerned with how external, social and interpersonal factors influence individuals' cognition and behavior.¹⁴ Its focus is on personal and collective processes whereby individuals and groups cope with discrepant cognitions. According to CDT, discrepant cognitions arise when two or more elements of one's knowledge, belief, attitude, values, emotion, or behavior enter in conflict.¹⁵ This situation triggers feelings of psychological discomfort—or dissonance—that individuals will be motivated to resolve to bring their thoughts into greater harmony.¹⁶ Studies have shown that they will do so by altering the cognition that is the least resistant to changes.¹⁷ This may, for instance, require individuals to modify their behavior or attitude, to alter one of the conflicting cognitions, or to introduce a new element in their belief system.¹⁸ Failure to reduce dissonance will conversely sustain the negative cognitive state.

One of the most often cited examples of dissonance which interests us here is that which arises from prophetic disconfirmation in particular and perceived threat to one's belief system in general. Generally defined, prophetic disconfirmation can be described as the non-happening of a predicted or expected event.¹⁹ This situation triggers dissonance for those who have invested in the predicted event because it is dissonant "with continuing to believe both the prediction and the remainder of the ideology of which the prediction was the central item" and "with all the actions that the believer took in preparation of its fulfillment." Normally, this would mean to change our expectations or beliefs to bring out thoughts into greater harmony. Yet, studies have shown that in most cases, individuals tend to respond to prophetic refutation in a way that reaffirms their beliefs.²⁰ According to Festinger and his colleagues, "frequently the behavioral commitment to the belief system is so strong that almost any other course of action is preferable [to admitting that one has

been wrong] ... It may even be less painful to tolerate the dissonance than to discard the belief.”²¹ A prophetic disconfirmation may thus be reinterpreted as a test of faith, a human error or a partial fulfillment of the prophecy. In some cases, individuals may conversely respond to dissonance by abandoning the norms and values of the group. In their study on the Bahá'ís Under the Provisions of the Covenant (BUPC), Balch and his colleagues for instance found that while the most “genuine believers” had renewed their support to BUPC in the aftermath of a prophetic failure, a majority of members had left the group.²² They concluded that individuals’ responses to disconfirmation were closely related to their degree of commitment to the group. Overall, these studies stress two main adaptive responses—or discrepancy reduction—to perceived threats to one’s belief system: individuals may either reduce dissonance by modifying some aspects of their belief and/or their behavior so that it conforms better to reality, or they may conversely filter and alter reality so that it conforms better to their belief system.²³

Several studies have clarified dissonance arousal and dissonance reduction processes by examining the role of social processes and self-concept on individuals’ responses to discrepant cognitions. Concerning social processes, Dawson has listed several factors that may influence reduction processes. These include (1) the degree to which believers are socialized to the prophetic process and expectations, (2) the degree to which members are motivated or compelled to engage in costly preparations for the prophesized event, (3) the degree to which leaders respond swiftly and thoroughly to apparent failures, and (4) the degree of solidarity and social support present in the group.²⁴ As he notes, these factors will vary from group to group and from time to time. Studies that focus on self-concept have additionally stressed the role of self-categorization on dissonance processes. Markus and Nurius define self-concept as the mental representation that organizes perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes that individuals have about themselves and the world.²⁵ This self-concept is not fixed but is gradually redefined as individuals move across social settings and social groups. Through their interactions with the social world, individuals come to identify with particular social groups and to internalize their representations of reality, which in turn contributes to shaping their definition of the self and the world.²⁶ According to the self-concept theory, the more meaningful a social identity is for an individual, the more salient it will be to his or her self-concept.²⁷ Studies that focus on the relationship between cognitive dissonance and self-concept posit that (1) dissonance will be particularly high when individuals experience a threat to their self-concept, and (2) individuals will reduce dissonance in a way that reaffirms and is consistent with their self-concept.²⁸ McGregor and his colleagues have for instance found a correlation between threats to self-integrity (self-concept), personal uncertainty and dissonance reduction through authoritarianism, belief reaffirmation, and devaluation of the out-group.²⁹ In their study of counter-extremism programs (CVE), Day and Kleimann have similarly shown that exposure to counter-narratives tends to produce a psychological “back-fire effect” and pushes individuals toward further radicalization.³⁰ The more individuals value a particular identity, the more committed they will consequently be to reaffirm it when confronted to perceived threats to their self-concept.

Given its focus on cognition and behavior, CDT arguably provides a relevant framework for understanding how jihadi supporters have responded to ideological setbacks and renegotiated the nature of their involvement in the wake of ISIS’s defeat. As a form of conversion, involvement in extremism can be described as a progressive learning process which involves both physical and cognitive aspects: through their socialization within an

extremist milieu, individuals come to commit to an ideological and moral framework which frames reality in a particular way, legitimizes certain modes of actions and contributes to shaping their definition of the self and the world.³¹ In the case of ISIS, this framework can be said to be “world-transforming” because it promotes the instigation of a new social order which rejects dominant cultural values, beliefs, and institutions.³² Besides predicting cataclysmic changes, ISIS has also provided its followers with several attractive incentives such as ultimate meaning, belonging, excitement, adventure, salvation, as well as an opportunity to realize themselves in a meaningful way.³³ According to Dawson, there are therefore “strong incentives [for supporters] ... to reinterpret the seeming failure of prophecy as part of a larger plan, of a march towards eventual triumph over the forces of evil.”³⁴ Yet, no empirical study has so far applied a CDT approach to the demise of the Caliphate, which constitutes the central focus of this study.

Methodology

The empirical material on which this contribution is based consists of semi-structured interviews and electronic conversations with twelve ISIS sympathizers from Belgium and the Netherlands. As previously mentioned, the term “sympathizers” refers in this contribution to men and women who did not necessarily travel to Iraq and Syria but who have been involved in supportive milieus sharing ISIS’s frame of reference. The interviews were conducted between January 2018 and July 2019 as part of a broader research project on the evolution of beliefs and behavior during involvement in Islamic extremism in Western countries. The research sample included three women and nine men who were between twenty and thirty years old. Two were “born-again” Muslims who had rediscovered their faith over recent years and ten were converts. This section will further elaborate on participants’ backgrounds and how they have been approached, as well as on potential research limitations.

Participants’ recruitment and data collection process

In the majority of cases, participants were first contacted through social media to take part in research on the development of Islamic fundamentalist ideals advocating for far-reaching changes in society. Although interviews were also conducted with individuals who did not support armed jihad or had fought alongside other groups than ISIS, this contribution solely focuses on participants who have supported the establishment of an ISIS Caliphate. After initial contacts on social media, an interview was arranged with participants at a time and place of their choice. Several topics were addressed during the interviews. These topics notably included participants’ background, their process of (re) conversion to Islam, their journey through extremism, their experience with jihadism, and their views of the fall and future of the Islamic State. Electronic conversations were additionally conducted with participants on encrypted applications to collect additional data and clarify specific themes addressed during the interviews. Eight out of twelve interviews were recorded, with participants’ consent, and transcribed shortly after the interview. In one case, recording was not possible. Data was consequently transcribed through notetaking. Due to geographical distance, three interviews were moreover conducted through extensive electronic conversations and audio-recordings on Telegram, an

encrypted electronic platform popular among jihadi supporters. All the interviews and electronic conversations were coded with Atlas.ti and analyzed based on an inductive approach which aimed at generating theory through methodical examination of the data. Specific attention was paid to how individuals emotionally and discursively framed the demise of the Caliphate and how they had responded to it. Given the fact that most participants were monitored by authorities, only their country of origin will be mentioned. Personal details that could lead to the identification of the participants have moreover been omitted.

Participants' background and characteristics

All the participants included in this study had been part of homegrown extremist milieus which shared ISIS perspectives and objectives, approved its methodology (at least to a certain extent) and had exported a number of foreign fighters since the outbreak of the Syrian war. Four participants had become involved in these milieus prior to the Syrian war, while the vast majority had joined at a later stage. Consistent with previous studies, participants reported a combination of “push” and “pull” factors for becoming involved in extremist groups. These “push” and “pull” factors included a need for meaning and personal significance, a search for a stable identity, dissatisfaction with Western policies and interventions in Muslim countries, personal and social grievances, as well as socialization processes.³⁵ Although the majority of participants did not physically take part in the armed struggle—with the exception of one female participant who had traveled to Iraq in 2015—they all reported having supported the establishment of a Caliphate in Iraq and Syria, yet to varying degrees. While more than half of the participants considered ISIS to be the only legitimate jihadi group worldwide, a minority had conversely chosen to not take a side in the ideological conflict between ISIS and Al Qaeda. Eight participants additionally reported during interviews to have actively looked into possible ways to travel to Iraq and Syria to fight alongside ISIS but to have abandoned their plans due to prosecution and surveillance, or to financial obstacles. Three participants conversely considered armed jihad to not be an obligation and had instead chosen to focus on activism in their home country. Only one participant had traveled to Iraq but minimized her involvement with ISIS. Despite these differences, all the participants had been involved in some forms of support activities, ranging from propaganda and recruitment to financial and moral support. Overall, they reported that being part of extremist milieus had provided them with a context and rationale for personal and social transformations and had contributed to their self-concept.

Limitations

Before proceeding further, several methodological limitations should be mentioned. The first limitation concerns the period around which data were collected. In the majority of cases, interviews took place between January and September 2018, a period during which ISIS had already suffered numerous territorial defeats but was still active in some parts of the Euphrates river and Anbar area. While some participants had already started distancing themselves from ISIS, the majority continued to express their support for the group. Given the recent military defeat of ISIS in Baghuz in March 2019, it would have been valuable to conduct follow-up interviews to examine whether these developments had had

any implications on participants' commitment. In most cases, this was however not possible. A second limitation concerns difficulties in gaining access to individuals who were still fighting alongside ISIS or had surrendered to opposition forces. Although some interviews were conducted with relatives of foreign fighters, no direct contact was established with individuals who were still in Iraq and Syria. This contribution thus mainly focuses on sympathizers who have stayed in their home country. A third limitation is related to internal validity. Because this study draws on personal accounts, it first and foremost relies on narratives of past and present involvement. While there are a number of values in using personal accounts—namely, that it provides a glimpse into individuals' lifeworld and the meaning they ascribe to their experience—it is at the same time important to mention that the production of narratives is influenced by a number of factors such as the positionality of the one who speaks and the one who listens, what participants decide to disclose or to conceal, the meaning they give to their past experiences, as well as social desirability.³⁶ One can for instance think about several reasons for which a former ISIS supporter may attempt to minimize his or her past involvement when interacting with outsiders (e.g. social desirability, stigma, etc.). Personal accounts should consequently be read as internal truths rather than factual accounts.³⁷ Last but not least, it should be mentioned that given the qualitative nature of the present study and the limited sample of participants interviewed by the author, conclusions are first and foremost exploratory. Nevertheless, the data provides a valuable preliminary empirical look into some supporters' responses to the fall of the Caliphate, a topic which has so far been underexplored.

Making sense of the fall of the caliphate in Iraq and Syria: Belief reaffirmation and disengagement

The interviews on which this study is based revealed a contrasted picture of jihadi supporters' responses to the demise of the Caliphate. At the time the interviews were conducted, ISIS had already suffered significant territorial defeats and was on the verge of collapse. Yet, more than half of the participants continued to commit to ISIS's ideology. Although they acknowledged that ISIS had faced a number of territorial setbacks, they interpreted these territorial losses in a way that reaffirmed their belief system and justified their sustained commitment to the group. Only a minority distanced themselves from ISIS and minimized their past support for the group. Data indicated that for these participants, dissonance had often preceded the fall of the Caliphate. The following subsections will further examine how participants coped with the demise of the Caliphate in Iraq and Syria by outlining two main responses: (1) belief reaffirmation, and (2) disengagement. The last subsection will further explain these differences by developing on the role of belief system, self-concept, and disillusionment in participants' responses.

Belief reaffirmation

You know what they say ... *baqiya* [remaining and expanding].³⁸

This was Mourad's first response when asked about the demise of the Caliphate in Iraq and Syria during an interview in February 2019. According to Mourad, the territorial

losses ISIS had suffered since 2015 only constituted a minor setback in ISIS's ideological project. In fact, he argued that the establishment of a Caliphate in Iraq and Syria had never been a central aspect of ISIS's ambitions. Instead, he stressed the widespread support that ISIS had garnered worldwide and overemphasized local achievements and victories. Such an argument is illustrative of how most participants interpreted and made sense of the demise of the Caliphate. While they acknowledged that ISIS had suffered a number of territorial setbacks, they at the same time trivialized the relevance of the Caliphate, spiritualized ISIS's territorial defeat and/or filtered out information that conflicted with their claim that a victory was near. According to them, ISIS would remain and expand.

Consistent with CDT, most participants interpreted the fall of the Caliphate in a way that reaffirmed their belief system and justified their commitment to the group. As a form of cognitive resistance, belief reaffirmation entails a reinterpretation of reality so that it conforms to individuals' belief system. Such a dissonance reducing process is more likely to occur when individuals attach high importance value to the cognition under threat.³⁹ As Dalgaard-Nielsen argues, "people strive to see themselves, and to appear to others, as consistent and competent and harbor a dislike against going through a potentially painful and disorienting process of restructuring ideas and values that are closely tied up with their identity, life, and life-choices."⁴⁰ When confronted with inconsistencies, individuals will consequently seek to reduce dissonance by altering facts, information or events that conflict with their beliefs.⁴¹ Among participants, this manifested in two ways: on the discursive level through the reinterpretation of the demise of the Caliphate, and on the behavioral level through sustained commitment to support activities and proselytism.

The first set of techniques—discursive practices—may be described as both a self-affirmation and impression-management technique.⁴² By reinterpreting the fall of the Caliphate, participants both confirmed their self-concept to themselves and others, gave meaning to their past and present commitment, and portrayed their faith as unshaken. At the same time, differences were observed in the type of discursive techniques participants employed. Like Mourad, most participants acknowledged that ISIS had experienced territorial setbacks but either altered the relevance of the Caliphate in Iraq and Syria and/or over-emphasized ISIS's widespread support and anticipated the role that ISIS supporters and returning fighters could play in exporting global jihadism in their home countries. As Mourad further explained "when [ISIS fighters] will be arrested, they will go to prison in their country and the ideology will spread even more than when it was concealed to Syria. So I don't know if you can see it as a win or as a defeat. Because first it was contained in a place and now it will spread everywhere. You cannot have control over thousands of people, over the children ... they have it firmly to their heart. Even the Yazidi children."⁴³ Several participants additionally stressed the role that local jihadi groups could play in reestablishing a physical Caliphate in ISIS's provinces. They thus restored consistency by minimizing the conflicting aspects of their belief system—such as prophetic traditions and territorial expansion in the Levant—and over-emphasizing the more tangible aspects of ISIS's ideology such as worldwide mobilization, local alliances and victories. Two participants additionally reinterpreted territorial losses as a test of faith. For these participants, the revival of the Caliphate in Iraq and Syria had been a central aspect of ISIS's ideological project. At the same time, they minimized its demise by interpreting territorial losses as partial fulfillment of ISIS's prophetic ambitions. As Johan, for instance, explained when asked about the fall of the Caliphate:

It is indeed a huge trial from Allah, Allah tests who are the sincere ones with huge calamities, it is to clear the ranks to prepare for an upcoming huge victory (...) If Dawla [ISIS] was strong and everyone joined and went we wouldn't know *munafiq* [hypocrite] from the truthful so Allah strikes with the calamities 'cause the *munafiqeen* [hypocrites] can't hold. But the few sincere ones will be firm. If you look closely this will be the case. There is a huge victory coming by the will of Allah and the more the calamity intensifies the nearer is victory.⁴⁴

In Johan's view, the territorial losses ISIS had suffered first and foremost aimed to distinguish weak believers from the faithful ones. He thus rationalized the demise of the Caliphate by ascribing divine meaning to territorial setbacks. Melton identifies such dissonance reducing process as "spiritualization," a process consisting of apprehending dissonant shreds of evidence as if they had a divine meaning or spiritual function.⁴⁵ One obvious merit of spiritualization is that it makes believers' worldview immune to disconfirmation. Any conflicting fact or information is reinterpreted as part of a cosmic realm and thus as a confirmation of individuals' belief systems. Moreover, it allowed participants to rationalize defection among ISIS fighters. Jaap, a twenty years-old convert, for instance claimed that many foreign fighters were not ideologically driven but were motivated by the social and material rewards of membership, including accommodation, marriage, financial compensation and the spoils of war.⁴⁶ Like Johan, he believed that the territorial setbacks ISIS has suffered since 2015 served to purge and purify ISIS's ranks in preparation for a final victory. As he explained, "Islam began as something strange and it will return to being something strange as it first began, so glad tidings to the strangers."⁴⁷ Spiritualizing ISIS's defeat thus allowed participants to reaffirm their belief system and to at the same time rationalize the investments they had made for the group by establishing a clear boundary between "true believers" and "hypocrites."

The ascription of divine meaning to territorial losses moreover indicated that participants were able to draw on the broader context of their faith to reduce dissonance in the face of ISIS's imminent defeat. As Geelhoed argues, the idea of being tested through hardship, suffering, and tribulations is an inherent aspect of Islamic belief: the more one suffers, the stronger one is in the eyes of God.⁴⁸ Dawson moreover stresses the "supply of rationalizations available in the rich heritage of the Qur'an, Hadith, and history of Islam" and the tools it provides to spiritualize territorial losses.⁴⁹ Participants moreover referred to the broader vocabulary of motives deployed in ISIS's propaganda. Shaffir describes a vocabulary of motives as a set of dissonance-reducing techniques provided by cultic milieus to prepare their followers for prophetic disconfirmation.⁵⁰ Developed on the organizational level and learned through socialization, these dissonance-reducing techniques constitute an integral part of the cognitive framework which individuals acquire during membership in cultic milieus.⁵¹ Similar to cultic milieus, ISIS has developed a vocabulary of motives to prepare its followers for a potential defeat. In an article entitled *Apocalypse Delayed*, McCants for instance noted that ISIS leaders started in 2015 to downplay the significance of Dabiq, a village in Northern Syria where the great final battle was predicted to occur, as airstrikes intensified and the group's confidence declined.⁵² In 2016, following several symbolic defeats, ISIS media officials released a newsletter to announce that the battle of Dabiq was in fact not the final battle mentioned in Islamic traditions. Lakomy similarly stresses the use of damage control techniques in ISIS's propaganda magazine *Rumiyah*.⁵³ Ranging from concealing defeats to overemphasizing military victories in ISIS's provinces, these techniques

have served to minimize the impact of its defeat and sustain supporters' commitment. The fact that some participants used similar rationalization techniques during interviews seems to confirm Dawson's prediction that "the exegetical resourcefulness of the movement's ideologues, and the group's revolutionary exploitation of the internet and other new social media" will continue to provide sufficient motivation and inspiration for its supporters.⁵⁴

Interestingly enough, two participants reaffirmed their belief system by engaging in rhetoric of denial and filtering information about the demise of the Caliphate. For these participants, media coverage about ISIS's defeat was part of a Western propaganda campaign which aimed at discrediting ISIS's achievements and deterring potential *muja-hidin* (fighters) from migrating to Iraq and Syria. Sally, a twenty-two year-old convert from the Netherlands, for instance claimed that life in the Caliphate remained idyllic and continued to attract a number of foreign fighters willing to contribute to its expansion.⁵⁵ These participants supported their rhetoric of denial with references to alternative sources deemed more reliable than Western media and through selective information processing. During interviews, they for instance primarily referred to propaganda content produced between 2013 and 2015. This ranged from videos celebrating the establishment of the Caliphate in Iraq and Syria, *anasheed* (Islamic hymns) calling for *hijra* (migration to Islamic lands), outdated images of poster boys who were no longer alive, and to utopian accounts of women who had traveled to Iraq and Syria after the proclamation of the Caliphate. This choice of propaganda, along with the rhetoric of denial these participants engaged in, suggested that they sustained their belief-system through the construction of a cognitive bubble rooted in past narratives of success. While the data did not allow for the drawing of conclusions on why these participants engaged in denial, it could be argued that ISIS's vocabulary of motives was either ineffective in reducing the dissonance they experienced, or that they were most cognitively affected by the fall of the physical Caliphate in Iraq and Syria. Overall, it echoes Festinger's argument that to effectively reduce or eliminate dissonance, individuals may go as far as blinding themselves to the fact that their expectations have not been met.⁵⁶

In addition to reinterpreting ISIS's defeat, participants reaffirmed their belief system by behaviorally committing to support activities and adopting new roles. These support activities ranged from moral and financial support to proselytism and propaganda. Clara, a twenty-two years old convert who had temporarily abandoned her plans to migrate to ISIS territories, had started organizing underground lectures to consolidate homegrown support in Belgium and the Netherlands. According to Clara, a number of homegrown supporters had left her network over the past two years to join *Madkhalist* groups, a quietist strain of Salafism that advocates for personal piety and that sanctions the use of violence as well as rebellion against Muslim rulers. Clara ascribed disengagement among her former peers to their limited Islamic knowledge and their weak faith. She had consequently started to give lectures on the danger of *taghut* (worshipping idols other than Allah) and on the practice of *takfir* (excommunication of Muslims committing apostasy) and was simultaneously involved in a number of support activities for imprisoned peers and their families. Jaap, who had previously worked as a translator for pro-ISIS Telegram channels, had shifted toward *da'wah* (missionary) activities and had created a platform for spreading "true Islam" in online and offline settings. While he did not openly call for violence during his missionary activities, he stressed the importance of physical jihad in his online videos. These various activities were perceived among

participants as more beneficial to the jihadi community than joining the armed struggle, for it exposed individuals to the risk of being captured or killed by opposition forces. Festinger moreover notes that sustained involvement in proselytism can serve to confirm the faith that one has in his or her belief system and the truth of its teaching in the aftermath of disconfirmation.⁵⁷ By voicing their belief to others and sustaining their behavioral commitment, individuals portray their faith as unshaken and immune to changes in circumstances.⁵⁸ The adoption of new supportive roles thus constitutes a fundamental part of the dissonance reducing processes participants engaged in to reaffirm their belief in the wake of ISIS's defeat.

Disengagement

While most participants reinterpreted the demise of the Caliphate in a way that reaffirmed their commitment to the group, four conversely perceived ISIS's territorial losses as a clear sign that the revolution in Iraq and Syria had come to a standstill. For these participants, the demise of the Caliphate did not only constitute a significant ideological setback for ISIS but also for global jihadism in general. On the one hand, they stressed jihadi groups' failure to overthrow the Assad government and to reestablish Sharia in Iraq and Syria, which they attributed to both Western intervention in the Syrian war and to the increasing *fitna* (division) in the jihadi scene. In their view, most jihadi groups in Iraq and Syria had been motivated by worldly interests, which had contributed to increasing conflicts and eventually to territorial losses. Several participants moreover reported having started questioning the effectiveness of armed jihad and the adapted methods to establish an Islamic State. Overall, they expressed a sense of uncertainty toward jihadi groups' ability to regain territories in Iraq and Syria and to bring the armed conflict toward a positive outcome.

While the data indicated that participants experienced dissonance, it is important to note that the majority had started disengaging before the fall of the Caliphate. First coined by Horgan, disengagement can be defined as ceasing or reducing involvement in activities associated with extremism, either because individuals abandon the norms, values, and orientations forged during membership and/or because they shift toward new roles that minimize their involvement in extremism.⁵⁹ In this contribution it refers to a declining commitment to ideological groups' belief systems as a result of dissonance.⁶⁰ Data indicated that like belief reaffirmation, disengagement among participants had both a discursive and behavioral dimension. On the discursive level, disengagement notably manifested through participants' condemnation of ISIS's methods and through their reinterpretation of what "doing jihad" meant. In some cases, participants additionally reframed their past commitment by minimizing their involvement in supportive milieus and by stressing differences between their current belief system and ISIS's frame of reference. On the behavioral level, a reduced commitment to support activities, along with a gradual reorientation toward more conventional forms of social involvement, were moreover observed. In most cases, these changes in commitment had preceded the demise of the Caliphate. Several participants for instance mentioned a number of personal and organizational factors that had contributed to an alteration of their belief system and self-concept, and a reassessment of the costs and benefits of their involvement in extremism. On the organizational level, they mentioned a sense of discrepancy between their own values and ISIS's methods. In particular, they questioned the killing of Sunni

Muslims, the orchestration of attacks in the West and the atrocities ISIS had engaged in. Some participants additionally reported to have experienced some initial doubts toward ISIS's prophetic legitimacy and to have maintained a bystander position in the escalating conflict between ISIS and Al Qaeda. On the personal level, prosecution, incarceration, disillusionment with activism's lack of effectiveness, motherhood/fatherhood, as well as a change in priority, seemed to have acted as contributing factors to disengagement.⁶¹ Rather than triggering dissonance, it is thus more accurate to say that the demise of the Caliphate had reinforced participants' ongoing sense of disillusionment. As one participant, Paul, for instance explained:

I did not fully believe in the rise of an Islamic State and now I know why [...] It rose so quickly that everyone knew you cannot manage such an enormous amount of territory. It's not sustainable. And they wanted [to expand] because it was one way to prove they were right. "Look we are so quick because we are on the winning side now." But I think it's not sustainable. It's a bubble.⁶²

Paul consequently interpreted the demise of the Caliphate as a confirmation of his initial doubts toward ISIS's ability to sustain a Caliphate. Another participant, Abdul, alternatively attributed territorial losses to ISIS's "communist and atheist leadership" which had used a "coat of Islamic appearance" to mobilize support.⁶³ While he claimed to have warned jihadi supporters against the unislamic character of ISIS from the moment it had established its Caliphate, his past online activities however indicated that he had for a long time supported ISIS. When confronted about these inconsistencies, he explained that "I think [that by flirting with jihadi milieus] I was trying to portray myself as someone cool, like 'look at me'. When you are young, you like the attention [...] but I was not a real jihadist in the sense that I have never been interested in weapons or fighting."⁶⁴ He thus minimized his support for the group by attributing his involvement in extremism to his craving for attention. Miriam, who had returned to Europe after the fall of Mosul, similarly minimized her past support for ISIS by claiming that she had initially traveled to Iraq to visit some family members.⁶⁵ While the data did not allow for the drawing of conclusions on whether participants had indeed experienced initial doubts or were rather motivated by social desirability (or both), they seemed to no longer perceive the identity they derived from their involvement in extremist milieus as desirable, either because they did not identify anymore with ISIS's norms and values or because the demise of the Caliphate made ISIS membership far less attractive.⁶⁶ Claiming to have experienced doubts at the same time allowed them to morally disengage from ISIS's actions and methods, and thus to present themselves in a way that was more acceptable to outsiders (and potentially more consistent with their present self-concept).⁶⁷

While participants reported having experienced initial doubts toward ISIS's legitimacy, they at the same time continued to adhere to jihadi ideals. All of the participants for instance believed that governance through Sharia would benefit Muslims as well as non-Muslims, and that defensive jihad was permissible under certain conditions. Yet, they claimed that the current situation in Iraq and Syria had led them to question whether the use of force was the most effective means to establish an Islamic state and implement Sharia. In addition, several participants reported having started reconsidering the costs and benefits of their involvement in subversive actions. This reassessment often resulted from a combination of factors that preceded the demise of the Caliphate and notably

included incarceration, prosecution and counter-terrorism crackdowns on supportive milieus. As Abdul for instance explained:

I am more careful now with what I say, I try to focus on my life. Before I was more carefree, but now I don't try to get involved with anything because I have seen what it brought [to be involved in activism]. I had to stop with my studies and focus on defending myself and of course I have to work to earn a living.⁶⁸

Paul similarly associated his withdrawal from subversive actions to prosecution and to his disillusionment with activism:

I think the activism has died inside me. At the moment I was doing it, I think it was good in the sense that I still agree with the principles and the topics we raised, I think the Muslim community is still being marginalized and discriminated [...] but if you look at it practically, does [activism] really help? Will it really change something? Is it worth the effort? Well I think a lot of Salafists would say that it's about the effort, because you are rewarded for the efforts, not for the outcome, so yes, it's worth it but I think I could use the time for other things, like studying ... [And] I think it's also because of the trial. If you are [incarcerated for your ideas], at some point you are like 'well I will try everything to not come back here'. In this sense prison helped [to change my approach] because it's just not worth it.⁶⁹

Both Abdul and Paul reported a sense of disillusionment with activism as a result of prosecution and the limited effectiveness of their subversive actions. Miriam alternatively stressed motherhood and the intensification of airstrikes in Iraq as the main reasons for coming back to Europe.⁷⁰ These factors appeared to have led to a change in priority and a reconsideration of their modes of action. Following his release, Paul had withdrawn from subversive actions and had shifted toward more legitimate forms of involvement in public debates which, in his view, allowed him to contribute more effectively to the Muslim community. Abdul had started considering entering politics to contribute to social debates on Islam. According to Whalen and Flacks, such reorientation toward more conventional forms of social involvement does not necessarily represent a rupture in former activists' trajectory but rather a next step in "moral career":⁷¹ just like involvement in extremism had provided participants with the feeling that they were actively involved in social changes, their reorientation toward more socially acceptable careers allowed them to conciliate their ideological convictions with their changes in priority and their search for a more stable future. Jeroen and Miriam had conversely shifted toward inner jihad, that was, bettering themselves as Muslims, which in their current view constituted a precondition for social changes. As Jeroen explained, "if you want to change society, you first need to change your own house, that is what Allah said to the Muslims. Start with your own house. You cannot change the world if inside you are not a good person."⁷²

Participants' apparent changing views on how they could best benefit the Muslim community overall indicated an attempt to redefine what "doing jihad" meant in the light of their disillusionment with jihadi groups in Iraq and Syria and their involvement in extremism. While they previously conceived armed struggle and subversive actions as the only possible means to achieve far-reaching changes in society, the ineffectiveness of ISIS's tactics and supportive milieus' actions had led them to reconsider their own modes of actions and to shift toward more conventional resources. These included working on improving their relations with non-Muslims to positively influence their view on Islam,

pursuing their education and conducting research, and participating in public and political debates. These alternatives allowed participants to remain actively involved in social changes and at the same time focus on other aspects of their lives such as their family or their professional development. This in turn allowed them to restore consistency between their behavior and their changing attitudes toward jihadism. Overall, the data indicated that the demise of the Caliphate had only had a limited impact on participants' ongoing disengagement.

Explaining differences in adaptive responses

So far, this contribution has attempted to delineate the implications of ISIS's territorial defeat on jihadi supporters' commitment by examining how participants have perceived and responded to the demise of the physical Caliphate in Iraq and Syria. As it has become clear, participants either responded to the demise of the Caliphate by reaffirming their commitment to the group or conversely distanced themselves from the group. This subsection aims to further explain these differences by examining the influence of personal and situational factors on participants' responses.

Despite the restricted sample examined in this study, some tentative observations can be made. A first observation concerns the degree to which participants have been socialized into ISIS's ideology and have been committed to engaging in costly investments for the realization of its Caliphate. A comparison of participants' profiles indicated that those who engaged in belief reaffirmation in the wake of ISIS's defeat tended to associate jihadism with ISIS's ideology. These participants had for the majority converted to jihadism during the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and under the influence of pro-ISIS networks, which had contributed to shaping their interpretation of jihadi principles and doctrine. Participants who distanced themselves from ISIS conversely perceived its ideology as an interpretation of jihadi principles. While ISIS's ideology had influenced their belief system, they attached less importance to the realization of its Caliphate. Moreover, they were more likely to report discrepancies between their own moral values and ISIS's methods. In addition, differences were observed in participants' degree of commitment to the group. Those who attached less importance to the realization of the Caliphate had for the majority chosen to remain in their home country during the Syrian war—with the exception of Miriam who had traveled to Iraq. Although they reported having supported the armed struggle in Iraq and Syria, they claimed to perceive themselves as “men of words” rather than “men of actions.” As Paul explained, “I was not into militancy, I was more into activism. I wasn't thinking about using violence, and traveling to a war zone, not knowing what would happen, that's not something that interested me. Activism was enough for me, we can change a lot in society here.”⁷³ Miriam had traveled to Iraq but came back to Europe after the fall of Mosul; like Paul, she reported not being ready to sacrifice herself for ISIS's cause. Participants who remained committed to the group conversely claimed that their decision to not join the armed struggle was involuntary and stressed a number of factors that had prevented them from traveling to ISIS areas. Not being able to physically take part in the armed struggle moreover seemed to have exacerbated their idealization of the Islamic State and their commitment to the group. These participants were indeed more likely to interpret ISIS's defeat as a test of faith, to over-emphasize its victory, and to attribute defection among

ISIS fighters and supporters to their weak faith. These differences seem to indicate both divergences in participants' belief system and their level of commitment.

A second observation concerns the degree to which participants have derived their self-concept from membership in supportive milieus. Consistent with CDT, the data indicated that participants who engaged in belief reaffirmation tended to align their self-concept on the supportive milieus they were part of. Several participants had broken ties with their family members and their previous environment, had dropped out of school or had left their job shortly after becoming involved in extremism. In addition, they reported to primarily interact with like-minded peers and to restrict their contacts with outsiders. As Moghaddam notes in his study on RAF members, isolation from wider society can play an important role in sheltering individuals from the wider world and in sustaining their loyalty to the group in the wake of a defeat.⁷⁴ All of them were moreover monitored for their involvement in homegrown extremist groups, which restricted their access to employment and reinforced their sense of grievance and victimhood. Social isolation and unemployment also meant that they were less likely to foresee meaningful alternatives to their current membership. According to Rumelili, this can motivate individuals to perpetuate the conflicts on which their self-concept and sense of certainty rest.⁷⁵ As she notes, conflicts "help contain existential anxieties respectively by establishing definite objects of fear, producing systems of meaning that clearly differentiate friends from enemies, and setting unequivocal moral standards premised on the necessity for survival."⁷⁶ Conflict resolutions, organizational changes in circumstances or military defeats conversely threaten individuals' sense of certainty for it requires flexibility, as well as a redefinition of both the identity of the self and others.⁷⁷ Individuals must rethink their everyday life and their future, what they will do and what they will be in the absence of a cause to live for. This situation can induce anxiety and motivates individuals to sustain their commitment to the group on which their self-concept rests. Last but not least, participants reported a negative public perception of (former) ISIS members, which seemed to exacerbate the dichotomous thinking of "us" versus "them." As Decker and Lauritsen note in their research on desistance among gang members, continuing to be perceived and treated as members of a devalued group may convince individuals that exiting the group is not worth the effort and lead to an increase in group commitment.⁷⁸ Extremist milieus conversely provided participants with a valorized identity, a community of belonging, a cause and purpose to live for, as well as a meaningful narrative to orientate themselves in the world. The existential and social rewards they derived from membership, along with the (real or perceived) obstacles they faced outside of supportive milieus, may consequently explain why they were more likely to reinterpret the demise of the Caliphate in a way that reaffirmed their beliefs and sustained their commitment.⁷⁹ Those who distanced themselves from ISIS conversely seemed to have maintained some critical distance toward jihadi groups in Iraq and Syria and to have continued investing in their education and professional career during their involvement in extremism. They moreover stressed the negative impacts that their involvement in extremism had had on their social identity and personal life. Last but not least, they reported moral discrepancies between their own personal values and ISIS's methods. As previously mentioned, these factors seemed to have led participants to redefine some aspects of their self-concept and belief system, as well as their priorities. The above observations overall stress differences in the degree to which participants have derived their belief system and self-concept from ISIS ideology at

the time of its defeat. Consistent with CDT, the data indicated that the more participants derived their self-concept and belief system from ISIS's ideology, the more likely they were to engage in belief reaffirmation in the wake of ISIS's defeat and to remain committed to the group.⁸⁰ Conversely, the less value they attached to ISIS's ideological project, the more likely they were to distance themselves from the group.

Conclusion

In an article anticipating the demise of ISIS's Caliphate, Dawson observed that prophecies "are invariably less important to the day-to-day lives of believers than outsiders tend to think ... The social and spiritual rewards of being in the group surpass the costs of the specific failure, and the ridicule of outsiders often serves to reinforce the conviction they are part of the elect, the blessed few who see the truth and are destined for greater things."⁸¹ Thus "if Abū Bakr al Baghdadi, or a legitimate successor, can continue to successfully communicate with the rank and file of IS and its vast network of supporters around the world, supplying them with a plausible rationale for the unexpected twist of fate IS has experienced, then there is a strong likelihood that IS will survive the demise of the Caliphate in Iraq and Syria."⁸² The accounts of jihadi supporters examined in this contribution largely confirm Dawson's prediction. While the data indicated that a minority of participants had started disengaging prior to the fall of the Caliphate, the majority continued to commit to ISIS and expressed an unshaken faith in their belief system. As it has been argued, these differences in participants' responses can be attributed to several personal and situational factors. These included the degree to which individuals were committed to ISIS's ideological project and willing to engage in costly investments on the behalf of the group; the degree to which they derived their belief system from ISIS's ideology; and the degree to which they derived their self-concept from identification with ISIS and their membership in supportive milieus. The more individuals identified with ISIS at the time of its defeat, the more likely they were to engage in belief reaffirmation. Overall, the social and existential rewards they derived from membership were sufficient reasons to remain committed to the group in the wake of its defeat. Conversely, the less central ISIS's ideology was to individuals' self-concept and belief-system, the more likely they were to alter their attitude and behavior when confronted with personal changes in circumstances (incarceration, prosecution, negative experiences with an extremist mode of life) and ideological setbacks. Given the fact that most participants continued to be committed to ISIS, it may be expected that ISIS's military defeat will only have a limited impact on supportive milieus. While its global appeal may be reduced among those experiencing doubts toward the legitimacy of its violent methods and ideology, it is likely that a majority of "genuine believers" will continue to find certainty, meaning, belonging and purpose in ISIS's supportive milieus.

On a more theoretical level, this contribution has shown that applying cognitive dissonance theory to the study of radicalization and terrorism can provide a more nuanced understanding of how supporters respond to specific situations such as organizational changes in circumstances, perceived discrepancy between their own moral values and the norms of the group they adhere to, military defeats and the like. With its focus on cognitive adaptability, cognitive dissonance links threats to one's belief system and self-concept with cognitive and behavioral responses, and thus provides an

analytical tool for understanding extremism in context. Moreover, it can shed light on why some individuals disengage from extremism while others remain committed to the group.

Finally, this paper also has implications for counter-extremism programs (CVE). Given the fact that individuals tend to respond to counter-attitudinal messages by increasing their commitment to their belief-system, it is likely that CVE programs that focus on countering individuals' beliefs will be met with resistance unless individuals are already in a phase of doubt.⁸³ The data at the same time suggests that the presence of meaningful alternatives to extremism—in particular via more conventional forms of being involved in social change—can facilitate role change and disengagement. As shown in this contribution, shifting toward more conventional forms of social involvement allowed disillusioned participants to conciliate their ideological and personal convictions with their changes in priority while at the same time contributing to their redefinition of what “doing jihad” meant. To promote exit from extremism, CVE programs should consequently limit counter-narrative and counter-ideology interventions to instead focus on social reintegration, as well as social and affective bonds. Greater attention should additionally be paid to militant groups' supportive environment. While governments' crackdown on supportive milieus is likely to result in further support for militancy, focusing on social cohesion and on bridging ties between supportive milieus and wider society may conversely encourage dialogue and prevent the escalation of conflicts.⁸⁴ A relevant question for counter-terrorism debates should therefore not solely be that of whether jihadi supporters may continue to pose a threat to international security; instead, it is necessary to examine how society currently addresses supporters' grievances and what kinds of prospects it offers them to construct a sense of certainty, meaning, and purpose outside of extremism. Without addressing such questions, it is likely that militant groups—whether religiously-inspired or secular—will continue to attract a number of young people and pose a risk to domestic and international security in the future.

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42. Goffman defines impression management as process in which people attempt to influence the perception of other people about a person, object or event. It is closely related to identity performance (see Ervin Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1959)). Self-affirmation conversely refers to how individuals adapt to information or experience that threaten their self-concept (see Claude Steele, "The Psychology of Self-Affirmation").
43. Interview with Mourad, February 2019.
44. Electronic conversation with Johan, March 2018.
45. Gordon J. Melton, "Spiritualization and Reaffirmation: What Really Happens When Prophecy Fails," *American Studies* 26, no. 2 (1985): 17–19.
46. Interview with Jaap, May 2018.
47. Attributed to the prophet, this statement refers to a "saved sect" of Muslims which will lead the final battle between good and evil and will be granted heaven on the Day of the Judgement. They are said to be "strange" because they held the true message of Islam that most Muslims reject in a time of ignorance and disbeliefs and commit themselves to their religion.

48. Fiore Geelhoed, "Purification and Resistance: Glocal Meanings of Islamic Fundamentalism in the Netherlands" (Doctoral dissertation, Rotterdam University, Rotterdam, The Netherlands, 2015), 111.
49. Dawson, "The Failure of Prophecy and the Future of IS," 6.
50. William Shaffir, "When Prophecy is Not Validated: Explaining the Unexpected in a Messianic Campaign," *The Jewish Journal of Sociology* 37, no. 2 (1995): 119–236.
51. Dawson, "The Failure of Prophecy and the Future of IS"; Stone, *Expecting Armageddon*, 1–30.
52. William McCants, "Apocalypse Delayed," *Jihadica*, October 16, 2016, <http://www.jihadica.com/apocalypse-delayed/> (accessed January 13, 2019); Dawson, "The Failure of Prophecy," 3–4.
53. Lakomy, "One of the Two Good Outcomes'."
54. Dawson, "The Failure of Prophecy and the Future of IS," 6.
55. Interview with Sally, January 2018.
56. Festinger, Reicken and Schacter, *When Prophecy Fails*, 27.
57. *Ibid.*
58. Festinger, Reicken and Schacter, *When Prophecy Fails*; Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*; Balch, Farnsworth, and Wilkins, "When the Bombs Drop"; Aronson, "The Theory of Cognitive Dissonance"; Steele, "The Psychology of Self-Affirmation."
59. Horgan, *Walking Away from Terrorism*, 8; Tore Bjørgo and John Horgan, *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and Collective Disengagement* (London, UK: Routledge, 2009).
60. Kira Harris, Eyal Gringar and Deirdre Drake, "Leaving Ideological Groups Behind: A Model of Disengagement," *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 10, no. 2 (2017): 91–109.
61. This is consistent with previous studies on disengagement (see for instance Horgan, *Walking Away from Terrorism*).
62. Interview with Paul, May 2018.
63. Interview with Abdul, May 2018.
64. *Ibid.*
65. Informal conversation with Myriam, July 2019.
66. See Harris, Gringar and Drake, "Leaving Ideological Groups Behind."
67. *Ibid.*
68. Interview with Abdul, May 2018.
69. Interview with Paul, May 2018.
70. Informal conversation with Miriam, July 2019.
71. Jack Whalen and Richard Flacks, *Beyond the Barricades: The Sixties Generation Grows Up* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1989).
72. Interview with Jeroen, May 2018.
73. Interview with Paul, May 2018.
74. Moghadam, "Failure and Disengagement in the Red Army Faction."
75. Rumelili, *Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security*.
76. Rumelili, *Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security*, 13.
77. *Ibid.*
78. Scott Decker, and Janet Lauritsen, "Breaking the Bonds of Membership: Leaving the Gang," in *Gangs in America III*, ed. Ronald Huff (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2002), 103–22.
79. Balch, Farnsworth, and Wilkins, "When the Bombs Drop."
80. See for instance Aronson, "The Theory of Cognitive Dissonance"; and Steele, "The Psychology of Self-Affirmation."
81. Dawson, "The Failure of Prophecy and the Future of IS," 6.
82. *Ibid.*
83. Day and Kleinmann, "Combating the Cult of ISIS"; Dalgaard-Nielsen, "Promoting Exit from Violent Extremism."
84. *Ibid.*