Theoretical Approaches to the Root Causes of Terrorism: An Analysis of ISIS and Al-Qaeda in the post-9/11 Middle East

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Abstract

Coercive non-state actors (NSAs) exploit socio-political-economic disparities to maintain control, gain power, manipulate others, or achieve similar objectives. Their tactics have improved over time with technological advancements. This paper hence reviews theoretical paradigms to understand the fertile ground for violent extremism (VE) and the role of digitalization in transforming the perceived deprivation into organized violence. Ted Robert Gurr theorizes that relative deprivation arises from constant comparisons with others; feeling demoted in any way may lead to violence. Contrasting groups of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Al-Qaeda are used as case studies. Findings depict that Al-Qaeda's ideology arises from symbolic deprivation by well-established and educated elites, who portray violence as sacred resistance rooted in the perceived erosion of identity caused by Western cultural dominance. ISIS, conversely, offers direct incentives and hence appeals to economically marginalized Sunni populations through material deprivation. Despite distinct radicalization trajectories, both groups pursue retributive justice through violence for sacred reasons and fulfill their moral duty to accelerate radicalization via social learning, i.e., adopting behaviors by imitating societal actions, and through encrypted propaganda on digital platforms. Since the findings negate the monocausal explanations of terrorism that merely reveal how deprivation is strategically weaponized across distinct contexts, it is argued that a hybrid concept of deprivation, encompassing physical, symbolic, and sectarian aspects, is the main driver of transnational terrorism. It has been intensified by digitalization in efforts to reach the targeted audience and gain support; hence, counterterrorism efforts must combine addressing structural inequalities with strategies to disrupt digital networks of radicalization.
Keywords: Middle East, Counterterrorism, Relative Deprivation Theory, Al-Qaeda, Terrorism, Digital Radicalization, Retributive Justice, ISIS.

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Introduction

NSAs have modernized terrorist activities since the end of World War II by integrating technology-driven strategies to execute mass-casualty attacks. To shape public opinion and garner support for recruitment, these groups often seek widespread media visibility to promote their operational tactics. It also spreads fear and legitimizes violent acts as retribution against perceived oppressors. Both ISIS and al-Qaeda exemplify the relative deprivation theory, which argues that structural inequalities and perceived injustice may convert personal grievances into collective violence,[1] especially online. However, in the absence of a universal definition of terrorism, which remains highly contested owing to varying interpretations by states and organizations, each is shaped by historical, ideological, and political factors. It raises a critical question about how to counter it without its clear descriptions.[2]

To analyze the causes of religious extremism of ISIS and al-Qaeda across the Middle East, this paper adopts Schmid's working definition of terrorism, i.e., "a criminal tactic of conflict-waging,"[3] including intentional violent acts against civilians and non-combatants. Regional instability, foreign intervention, and perceived social-economic-political inequalities led to the emergence of these organizations. ISIS[4] has a complex nomenclature, i.e., a complicated naming system, which reflects its evolving identity and history, starting as "Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)."[5] It rebranded after splitting from al-Qaeda during the Syrian civil war as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). 'Al-Sham' refers to "the Levant,"[6] encompassing Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, and Palestine; whereas the alternative acronym ISIL (Islamic

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[1] Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*, 40th anniversary paperback ed. (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), originally published 1970.

[2] Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

[3] Alex P. Schmid, "Root Causes of Terrorism: Some Conceptual Notes, a Set of Indicators, and a Model," *Democracy and Security* 1, no. 2 (2005): 127–36.

[4] The group is also widely known by its Arabic acronym, Daesh, a term preferred by many governments as a deliberate act of delegitimization. The former French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius stated (as cited in France24), "I do not recommend using the term Islamic State because it blurs the lines between Islam, Muslims and Islamists" (Nasr, 2014). Furthermore, the term Daesh is disliked by the group (Dews, 2015) as it can be interpreted as a pejorative play on words in Arabic, meaning to trample or a bigot (Lister, 2015). Yet, in 2014, after capturing large swathes of territory, the group declared itself a worldwide caliphate and dropped the geographical designation, simply calling itself "The Islamic State (IS)" (Gerges, 2016). The name highlights the influential role of language in shaping perceptions of terrorism and its legitimacy. Either way, this paper employs the acronym ISIS because of its prevailing alignment with academic and media discourse and best distinguishes the group from the general concept of an "Islamic state" and other historical militant organizations.

[5] Fawaz A. Gerges, *ISIS: A History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

[6] Fred Dews, "ISIS, ISIL, Islamic State? A Terminology Primer," *Brookings*, September 15, 2015, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/isis-isil-islamic-state-a-terminology-primer/.

State of Iraq and the Levant) is officially used by the US State Department on its list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs).[7]

This research addresses the emergence of ideological extremism in the Middle East, as the selected coercive NSAs have developed high-impact tactics by embracing non-traditional forms of violence through media and the internet as intervening variables. Digital platforms have intensified in terrorism because they can bypass traditional media gatekeepers to directly target vulnerable individuals. Since this makes detection and counteraction harder, it becomes even more essential to understand the root causes of terrorism to formulate effective counterterrorism strategies that can anticipate and respond to these structural and motivational changes.

Applying Ted Robert Gurr's relative deprivation theory, which explains that individuals perceived disparities between expected and actual conditions, whether economic, political, or symbolic, can lead to hopelessness and make them more vulnerable to radicalization and extremist beliefs. The conditions of feeling significantly disadvantaged compared to others can also be worsened by government failures, ultimately attracting them to extremist organizations promising them empowerment, belonging, and the rectification of injustices.[8] While integrating thematic and comparative analysis in understanding modern terrorist techniques, the study answers two critical questions: How do social-political-economic inequalities promote deprivation that motivates ISIS and Al-Qaeda's terrorism, and how do media and the internet transform the perceived deprivation into violence? This addresses a critical gap in understanding how hybrid deprivation (material and symbolic) interacts with digital networks to fuel transnational terrorism.

Methodology

To understand each group's interconnected yet distinct operationalization of relative deprivation, this study employs a qualitative research design in examining the root causes of terrorism through an in-depth case study of ISIS and Al-Qaeda in the Middle East from 2001 to 2017. This temporal scope covers the post-9/11 development of Al-Qaeda, the rise and territorial peak of ISIS, and their subsequent decline. For data collection, this research uses both primary and secondary sources to ensure a comprehensive analysis. Primary data includes original propaganda and official statements from ISIS and Al-Qaeda. Secondary data

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[7] United States Department of State, "Foreign Terrorist Organizations," Bureau of Counterterrorism, n.d., https://www.state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organizations/.

[8] Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*, 40th anniversary paperback ed. (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), originally published 1970.

comprises academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and reports. Explanations and data from the theoretical framework, historical context, and scholarly interpretation clarify the evolution of Al-Qaeda and ISIS, as well as the socio-political-economic disparities that contributed to their spread across the region.

The data was analyzed using thematic and comparative methods. Applying Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke's approach,[9] all data were coded to identify the iterative themes for analysis. The codes to extract themes from pre-defined dimensions coherent with the research questions were reviewed, including social-political-economic deprivation triggers, media exploitation, and grievance mobilization strategies. Subsequently, employing the comparative analysis techniques of Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett,[10] this study is meant to both divergent and convergent elements between ISIS and Al-Qaeda regarding their motivational evolution, predominant structures, and tactical adaptations in recruiting through media strategies.

Theoretical Debates on the Root Causes of Terrorism

The insights and limitations of multidisciplinary theoretical frameworks, including geopolitical, economic-sociological, and biological-psychological perspectives, are reviewed to explore the roots of terrorism and identify practical responses. These debates and their counterarguments assisted in capturing structural grievances, identity politics, and the cognitive processes of groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIS's acts of terrorism.

▪ *Geopolitical Perspective*

Various theorists have sought to analyze the causes of terrorism through a geopolitical lens. Fawaz A. Gerges, in his book "ISIS: A History," emphasizes that the birth of ISIS was a result of Western colonialism's legacy, specifically through the artificial borders created by the Sykes-Picot Agreement. Hence, it appeared as a saviour against the Western encroachment, seeking to dismantle the imposed division within the Arab-Islamic world. ISIS's rise was also equally propelled by interconnected factors, including regional instability, domestic sociopolitical disenfranchisement, the devastating collapse of Iraq and Syria, anti-Western sentiments, and its oil wealth.[11] Its ambitious ideological commitments, coupled with military strength, extend beyond Samuel Huntington's civilization-based assumptions. He argues in

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[9] Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101, https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.

[10] Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, Belfer Center Studies in International Security, ed. Steven E. Miller and Jacqueline L. Hazelton (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

[11] Gerges, *ISIS: A History.*

"The Clash of Civilizations" that cultural and religious identities mainly cause geopolitical conflicts. This notion is often criticized for oversimplifying complex geopolitical dynamics through cultural binaries, thereby obscuring the root causes of these conflicts. He notably predicted a clash between the "Islamic civilization" and the "West,"[12] which inadvertently reinforces Islamophobic discourses, as the rise of Al-Qaeda and ISIS can also be interpreted as part of a broader "clash" between Western and Islamic civilizations. While political conflicts in the Middle East are frequently misinterpreted as civilizational clashes, Edward W. Said recognizes that the endogenous forces, meaning the region's socio-politico-economic realities, can lead to massive clashes.[13] These factors fueled the invasion of Iraq and the Syrian civil war, which subsequently contributed to the growth of Al-Qaeda and ISIS as coercive groups and spread across the Middle East. Therefore, it must be considered, with caution, how Western perceptions of Islam are impacted by characterizing terrorism as a civilizational clash. He asserts that such generalizations can mask nuanced political grievances and promote fear, suspicion, stereotypes, and hostility between different cultural groups.[14]

- ### *Economic and Sociological Debates*

Among many scholarly debates, Michael Klare discusses economic or resource-related conflicts. He argues that the depletion of natural resources leads to competition over them, which can lead to war. His assumptions prompt a new debate about whether the race over resource control directly causes terrorism or if it serves as a means to achieve ideological goals.[15] If we connect this idea to ISIS fighting over oil, we can safely say that the oil economy is used to support their broader ideological, political, and religious agenda. For instance, the push for the resurgence of the caliphate system outweighs a simple pursuit of material wealth. Conversely, Gurr stresses the perceived socio-economic inequalities that create a sense of relative deprivation and discontent. People constantly compare their circumstances to those of others to identify discrepancies between their expectations and reality, rather than focusing solely on absolute poverty.

This process primarily occurs within their own social groups. Once they track disparities in wealth, rights, or treatment, it can incite aggression, which may encourage individuals to resort to violence, including terrorism. Therefore, it is understandable that economic factors

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[12] Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

[13] Edward W. Said, "The Clash of Ignorance," *The Nation*, October 4, 2001, https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/clash-ignorance/.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Michael Klare, *Resource Wars: The New Landscape of Global Conflict*, 1st ed. (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001).

can exacerbate feelings of relative deprivation, even though this concept encompasses various dimensions in explaining collective violent actions, given the relative nature of deprivation for each person.[16] It is still debated whether economic inequalities or ideological grievances play a more influential role in terrorist recruits. ISIS evidently gained momentum in regions facing an unemployment crisis. For instance, the severity of poor living conditions in Anbar province was recorded at 33.3% in 2014, the highest in Iraq at the time.[17] The Iraqi Ministry of Planning records also back economic vulnerability as a determining factor in the ISIS invasion and prolonged stronghold, as the national poverty rate surged from 15% in 2013 to 22.5% in 2014.[18]

However, critics argue that this theory fails to account for the motivations of terrorists who are not from impoverished backgrounds. They contend that factors beyond absolute poverty or deprivation are important, as many terrorists live above the poverty line and come from middle and educated classes. Regression models from a statistical analysis comparing deceased Hezbollah militants to the general Lebanese population show that the likelihood of participating in Hezbollah's military activities was negatively correlated with poverty and positively correlated with having a secondary education or higher, with 0% illiteracy versus 6% in the broader populace. The authors, however, warn that missing poverty data for many militants means these findings are "suggestive, but not definitive."

Similarly, biographical data of Palestinian suicide bombers revealed that these individuals were not from poor families and had completed high school or attended college more than the general Palestinian population of a similar age. The authors cited that "none of them were uneducated, desperately poor, simple minded or depressed." This pattern is mirrored even historically in the Israeli Jewish settlers who attacked Palestinians in the West Bank in the early 1980s, who were "disproportionately well-educated and in high-paying occupations," including professions such as teachers, engineers, a combat pilot, and a computer programmer.

These statistics indicate that "neither poverty nor education has a direct, causal impact on terrorism."[19] This supports the idea that the leadership of Al-Qaeda is mainly driven by ideological or religious beliefs rather than economic hardship. Figure 1 illustrates the proposed hybrid deprivation model of radicalization by integrating the deprivation types with digital

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[16] Gurr, *Why Men Rebel.*
[17] Rajaa Khudhair Al-Rubay, "The Economic and Social Implications of Unemployment on the Aggregate Demand and the Labor Market in Iraq," *Turkish Journal of Computer and Mathematics Education* 12, no. 10 (2021): 3389–3402.
[18] Lawk Ghafuri, "ISIS Caused Massive Spike in Iraq's Poverty Rate," *Rudaw Media Network*, February 16, 2020, https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/160220201.
[19] Alan B. Krueger and Jitka Malečková, "Education, Poverty and Terrorism: Is There a Causal Connection?," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 17, no. 4 (2003): 119–44, https://doi.org/10.1257/089533003772034925.

amplifiers that each coercive NSA differentially weaponizes to converge as violent transnational terrorist organizations.

Robert A. Pape refutes the simple connection between poverty, education, and terrorism by offering a hypothesis backed by empirical data when examining the root causes of the deliberate use of "suicide terrorism." Pape's study reveals that suicide terrorism is motivated by strategic and political objectives rather than solely by religious extremism or poverty, as is commonly assumed. He asserts it happens in response to foreign military occupation, explicitly aimed *"to compel modern democracies to withdraw military forces from territory that the terrorists consider to be their homeland. Religion is rarely the root cause, although it is often used as a tool by terrorist organizations in recruiting and other efforts in service of the broader strategic objective."*
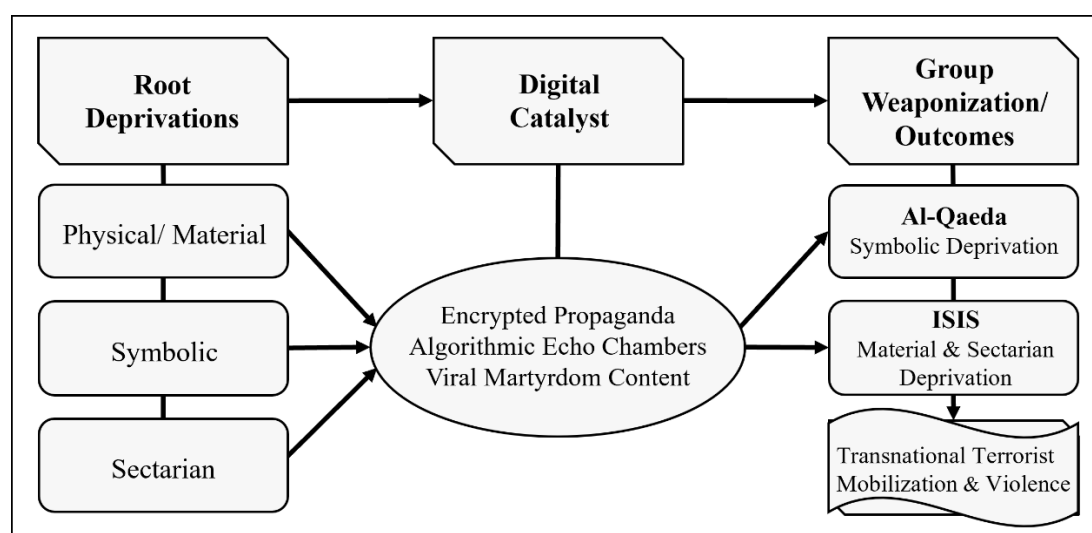

Figure 1: Hybrid Deprivation Model

His work cites instances of Israeli, Russian, Indian, and American occupations causing indigenous resentment, which became the central factor motivating coercive NSAs to carry out suicide bombings as acts of defiance. Pape states, "Even al-Qaeda fits this pattern." Therefore, geopolitical and strategic goals are the primary reasons for terrorism, not the conventional belief that terrorism is driven by ideological or religious fanaticism. Additionally, suicide terrorism possesses a distinctive capacity that makes it the most effective form of violence for mobilizing communities and generating political pressure because of its powerful psychological impact on the targeted audiences.[20]

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[20] Robert Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*, Reprint ed. (New York: Random House Publishing Group, 2006).

Assaf Moghadam counters Pape's work for overstating the foreign occupation thesis as a primary motivator of suicide terrorism and ignoring that the patterns of globalized suicide terrorism involve a wide range of ideologies and operational strategies, including ideological, religious, and sociocultural factors, all beyond simple occupation. Many instances prove that globalized suicide terrorism extends far beyond a single occupied territory and often targets states without a direct occupation relationship. Therefore, the concept of occupation is just one factor among others in explaining localized, traditional patterns of resistance-based suicide terrorism, such as in Palestine or Lebanon, and among groups like Al-Qaeda. According to Moghadam's framework, Al-Qaeda's attacks are justified as part of a broader, globalized jihad rather than a direct response to occupation.[21]

Bruce Hoffman identifies that religious terrorism fundamentally differs from secular motives because the former often pursues absolute or unwavering goals, which can lead to extreme violence. Since religion drives terrorist organizations with non-negotiable objectives, their missions become sacred and divinely commanded. The leading members of religious terrorism view them as a route to eternal reward, leading to even more extreme acts because dialogue and negotiations become strained by non-compromising principles. It also reduces the effectiveness of conventional deterrence methods in combating religious terrorism, such as avoiding punishment and threatening arrest or death. These measures lack the same dissuasive impact because the coercive groups' unique ideological push for martyrdom makes them resistant.

Secular terrorist organizations are motivated by tangible, compensatory grievances, which they may seek to negotiate and can be dissolved through political or territorial concessions. In contrast, groups like Al-Qaeda demonstrate the strength and resilience of religiously motivated terrorism because the prospect of death through self-sacrifice is viewed not as a deterrent but as a revered, desirable outcome. Their operatives are driven by intangible goals, such as earning paradise and eternal spiritual salvation. Therefore, combating this kind of terrorism requires a complete package of understanding religious, ideological, psychological, and organizational motivations.[22]

▪ *Biological and Psychological Debates*

Social learning theorists suggest that behaviors are learned through imitating observed actions. Individuals tend to gravitate toward specific behaviors that may bring them rewards. The same

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[21] Assaf Moghadam, "Suicide Terrorism, Occupation, and the Globalization of Martyrdom: A Critique of *Dying to Win*," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29, no. 8 (2006): 707–29, https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100600561907.
[22] Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*.

idea applies to observing and mimicking violent behaviors from peers, mentors, or media figures associated with extremist ideologies.[23] Adrian Raine connects these behaviors to biological factors, such as genetic and neurological conditions. He claims that people with particular brain abnormalities or genetic predispositions might better explain aggressive tendencies, regardless of social influences. Therefore, social learning alone does not comprehensively account for the underlying causes of terrorism.[24] Similarly, Konrad Lorenz believes that humans possess aggression as an inherent drive rooted in biological predispositions.

This explains that since aggression is instinctive and can be triggered under certain conditions as a survival mechanism, it can also potentially lead to violent acts[25] such as terrorism. However, this view does not entirely seem to explain terrorism either, because it is an established reality that cultural and societal norms can channel and regulate aggression; additionally, terrorism often stems from cultural, political, and ideological marginalization, which influences the intensity and motivation behind acts of violence. This opens the door to a new debate that terrorism is better understood through political, ideological, and socio-economic lenses. Leon Festinger proposes a cognitive dissonance hypothesis, which posits that mental discomfort arises when an individual holds two or more conflicting beliefs, concepts, or values simultaneously.

This mental unease compels people to seek consistency in their views of the world, creating a clash between their beliefs and societal realities. To reduce this dissonance, individuals may adjust their beliefs or behaviors, often leading them to take radical actions rather than merely observing and imitating others. Nevertheless, it explains that terrorists often experience cognitive dissonance, striving to reconcile conflicting beliefs and ultimately rationalizing their radicalization.[26] Some people may experience a disconnect between their personal values and their peer group's actions, sparking another debate about whether terrorism is primarily fueled by personal psychological struggles or by collective identity and social bonds.

Critics propose that group dynamics and peer pressure, especially the desire to conform to group values, have a stronger correlation to violent behavior than individual cognitive

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[23] Saul McLeod, "Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory," *Simply Psychology*, February 1, 2024, https://www.simplypsychology.org/bandura.html.

[24] Adrian Raine, *The Psychopathology of Crime: Criminal Behavior as a Clinical Disorder* (San Diego, CA: Academic Press, 1993).

[25] Konrad Lorenz, *On Aggression*, First Edition (Harper Paperbacks, 1974).

[26] Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford University Press, 1957).

dissonance. To alleviate this discomfort of self-uncertainty, one might resort to violence while following the groups that offer clear and distinct identities. Specifically, if the group offers a strong sense of belonging, followers with a high sense of identity centrality can be convinced that violence is the only way to resolve conflicts and defend the group's identity, and by extension, their own self-concept.[27]

Another psychological theory that contradicts social learning theory is the frustration-aggression theory, which emphasizes the potential for personal frustration to lead to aggression. In extreme cases, frustration can be manifested as terrorism, even without social modeling. It mainly occurs when individuals or groups are unable to achieve their goals,[28] as after the United States invaded Iraq, the Sunni exclusion from the socio-political domains alienated them. The frustration of targeted marginalization led many of them to join ISIS. Others, however, argue that this theory fails to account for the strategic[29] and ideological aspects of terrorism.[30][31] For instance, Al-Qaeda's leadership clearly states its political or religious goals, indicating that it wages a calculated (strategic) war for ideological dominance rather than simply lashing out from personal frustration.

Thematic Analysis

Applying Braun and Clarke's qualitative coding process, this section presents the resultant recurring themes for each group, and a detailed comparative discussion of these themes follows in the subsequent section. The core themes demonstrate varying forms of relative deprivation, motivating different disenfranchised individuals to join these terrorist organizations. To illuminate the motivations behind terrorist acts, this study also examined how digital platforms spread extremist narratives to recruit and turn personal deprivation into collective violence.

■ *Al-Qaeda*

The United States' entry into the Middle East and the continued foreign presence bred frustration and welcomed radical ambitions in the region. Sageman's study on jihadists shows that most of the jihadists came from privileged, educated, and socially connected backgrounds. The profile of educated and affluent leadership within Al-Qaeda also evidences symbolic deprivation as an absolute goal for them, one that transcends typical political aims in pursuit

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[27] Michael A. Hogg and Janice Adelman, "Uncertainty–Identity Theory: Extreme Groups, Radical Behavior, and Authoritarian Leadership," *Journal of Social Issues* 69, no. 3 (2013): 436–54, https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12023.
[28] John Dollard et al., *Frustration and Aggression*, Frustration and Aggression (Yale University Press, 1939).
[29] Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*.
[30] Moghadam, "Suicide Terrorism, Occupation, and the Globalization of Martyrdom: A Critique of Dying to Win."
[31] Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*.

of sacredly aspirational mandates.[32] Figures like Ayman al-Zawahiri, with a medical background, exemplify this by professionally standing in contrast to the radical revolutionary path.[33] The perception of civilizational annihilation arose from foreign invasion, prompting them to weaponize perceptions of cultural erosion and justify violence as a necessary form of existential self-defense mechanism.[34] Al-Qaeda, with its strong anti-Western sentiments, frames the West as the architect of Muslim deprivation.

Dimension	Themes	Supporting Data
Primary Form of Grievance	Symbolic and Civilizational Deprivation	Focus on defending global Muslim identity from Western cultural erosion; leadership profiles (e.g., bin Laden, al-Zawahiri) showing high education/ wealth
Mobilization Narrative	Global Jihad as Defensive Duty	Framing violence as a sacred, strategic obligation to protect the Ummah; rhetoric responding to drone strikes, Abu Ghraib
Media/Propaganda Strategy	Centralized, Elite-Oriented Messaging	Use of professional media wing (As-Sahab); production of ideological treaties and leader statements for long-term legitimacy

Table 1: Themes Identified for Al-Qaeda

Therefore, the group's pursuit of a non-negotiable global Jihad ideology legitimizes violence as a divine command to safeguard Islam from perceived threats, like infidel influence or Western hegemony, and to establish a state governed by religious principles, akin to a caliphate form of governance.[35] The ideological message was disseminated through a highly centralized media apparatus, i.e., Al-Qaeda's official production wing, as-Sahab (The Clouds). Its goal was to symbolically convey the group's ideology, legitimize authority, and resonate with its target audiences.[36] Allowing foreign intervention also illuminates the unstable state-society relations. Here, the Middle Eastern states are perceivably blamed for Al-Qaeda's

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[32] Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

[33] Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*.

[34] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, First Ed. edition (Vintage Books, 1979).

[35] Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*.

[36] David K. Lyons, "Analyzing the Effectiveness of Al Qaeda's Online Influence Operations by Means of Propaganda Theory" (master's thesis, The University of Texas at El Paso, 2013), https://www.utep.edu/liberalarts/nssi/_files/docs/theses1/analyzing-the-effectiveness-of-al-qaeda-s-online-influence-operations-lyons.pdf.

struggle against forces they believe are responsible for their deprivation. Overall, when identity threats intensify, the sense of theological obligation against oppressors activates as a psychological defense mechanism to rectify injustices. Table 1 shows themes for Al-Qaeda.

- ### ISIS

ISIS emerged from a triad of interconnected drivers, including economic grievances, social alienation, and retributive justice against local and global forces perceived to oppress Muslim communities. It strategically exploits tangible material deprivation to recruit impoverished and unemployed citizens, as evidenced by the high regional unemployment rates documented in Table 2 for 2014 and 2016. ISIS's leveraged events include Sunni marginalization post-2003 US invasion of Iraq, the dismantling of the Ba'athist state in Iraq, and Syria's economic collapse, followed by civil war.[37]

Governorate	2014		2016	
	Unemployment	**Economic activity**	**Unemployment**	**Economic activity**
Dahuk	15	33.7	28.1	34.5
Nineveh	12.8	36.4	000	000
Sulaymaniyah	12.3	37.2	19.4	35.8
Kirkuk	5.2	42.2	28.7	27.6
Erbil	11.2	43.8	22.2	41.4
Diyala	17.9	35.9	12	31.6
Al, Anbar	33.3	33.1	000	00
Baghdad	19	39.9	18.6	38.2
Babylon	21.3	34.1	11	45.8
Karbala	12.2	40.4	12.1	37.7
Salah ad Din	15.3	35.6	16.3	33.5
Al, Najaf	10.6	39.1	16.4	38.6
Al, Qadisiya	21	40.7	21	33.4
Al, Muthanna	12	31.6	26	31.6
Dhi Qar	31	36.7	34.8	29
Maysan	28.7	37.7	29.2	33.4
Basra	22.7	33	25.5	39.7

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[37] Gerges, *ISIS: A History*

Total	17.6	37.3	20.4	36.6

Table 2: Unemployment rate among youth aged 15-24 in Iraqi provinces from 2014 to 2016[38]

ISIS's wealth accumulation through oil smuggling, taxation, and looting enabled it to fund a sophisticated governance system during its territorial control. Its "total revenue rose from a little less than $1 million per month in late 2008 and early 2009 to perhaps $1 million to $3 million per day in 2014."[39] To maintain area occupation and secure loyalty, it highly paid its fighters and administrative workers+ Similarly, the collective social or sectarian oppression of the Sunni sect promoted a homogenous end goal among radicalized members, which ISIS capitalized on by positioning itself as a refuge for the targeted marginalized. Table 3 presents the group's identified themes.

Dimension	Themes	Supporting Data
Primary Form of Grievance	Material and Sectarian Deprivation	Exploitation of poverty/ unemployment in Iraq/ Syria; mobilization based on Sunni political exclusion post-2003
Mobilization Narrative	Retributive Justice and Sectarian Crusade	Framing violence as righteous vengeance against Shia ("Rafidah") and the West; showcasing brutality as empowerment
Media/Propaganda Strategy	Decentralized, Viral Mobilization	High-volume output on social media (e.g., 46,000[+] Twitter accounts in 2015); use of graphic videos and glossy magazines (Dabiq)

Table 3: Themes Identified for ISIS

ISIS aims to bring together both local and global oppressed recruits who feel entitled to unmet socio-economic and political rights under its umbrella, transforming their isolation into extremist solidarity. By tapping into collective resentment, frustration, and anger, it forms a unified force seeking retributive justice against those they blame for their hardships to correct perceived power imbalances and restore dignity. ISIS labels the Shia community "al-Rafida"

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[38] Recreated by the authors from data in the Ministry of Planning, Central Bureau of Statistics (2014, 2016), as cited in Rajaa Khudhair Al-Rubay, "The Economic and Social Implications of Unemployment on The Aggregate Demand and The Labor Market In Iraq," *Turkish Journal of Computer and Mathematics Education* 12, no. 10 (2021): 3389–3402.

[39] Ana Swanson, "12 Ways ISIS Gets Funding," *World Economic Forum*, November 23, 2015, https://www.weforum.org/stories/2015/11/12-ways-isis-gets-funding/.

(rejectionist apostates),[40] "a derogatory term for the Shia used by Sunnis since early Islam."[41] Severe violent actions, such as beheadings and suicide bombings, were legitimized as righteous vengeance through mythologized empowerment narratives. Particularly, the killing of Shias was explicitly propagated through their official Dabiq magazine as a religious duty backed by divine authority.[42] It pioneered large-scale social media mobilization and propaganda, running tens of thousands of Twitter accounts to circulate its narratives, with its most influential accounts gaining over 46,000 followers.[43]

Comparative Analysis

Both NSAs possess global reach and influence and operate extensively across the region, unlike localized terrorist groups. The catalytic role of media sophistication has helped validate their worldwide propaganda of relative deprivation and improved their overall transnational operational capabilities. As-Sahab, for instance, Al-Qaeda's central propaganda wing, has rapidly produced ideology-focused high-quality professional videos that resonate with people feeling symbolically deprived and seeking ideological approval. Its rhetoric mostly attracted educated Muslim diasporas experiencing status deprivation.[44] ISIS, on the other hand, distinguished itself from Al-Qaeda's controlled channels by not just broadcasting radical messages through its Dabiq magazine[45] but also building digital environments at a relentless pace. It produced viral videos that glorified martyrdom and violence and attracted youth seeking empowerment through action.[46] They did so by relying on algorithmic amplification on social media and gaming platforms to build self-reinforcing echo chambers, condensing months or years of work into days.[47]

This vast online reach helped it recruit "more than 40,000" foreign fighters globally by drawing individuals from "100 countries."[48] It also gave the group an immediate edge in expanding its reach, which is likely to increase with the advent of AI-generated content and

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[40] Cole Bunzel, "From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State," *The Brookings Institution*, March 19, 2015.

[41] Cole Bunzel, "The Kingdom and the Caliphate: Duel of the Islamic States," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 18, 2016, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2016/02/the-kingdom-and-the-caliphate-duel-of-the-islamic-states?lang=en.

[42] The Carter Center, *Overview of Daesh's Online Recruitment Propaganda Magazine, Dabiq* (The Carter Center, 2015).

[43] J.M. Berger and Jonathon Morgan, *The ISIS Twitter Census: Defining and Describing the Population of ISIS Supporters on Twitter* (Brookings, 2015).

[44] Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism.*

[45] The Carter Center, *Overview of Daesh's Online Recruitment Propaganda Magazine, Dabiq* (The Carter Center, 2015).

[46] Berger and Morgan, *The ISIS Twitter Census.*

[47] Gabriel Weimann, "Terrorist Migration to the Dark Web," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10, no. 3 (2016): 40–44.

[48] Al Jazeera, "5,600 'Have Returned Home' from ISIL-Held Areas," October 24, 2017, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/24/5600-have-returned-home-from-isil-held-areas.

encrypted networks on the dark web. Secured communication methods on top of these, including encrypted applications such as Telegram and WhatsApp, have complicated the work of law enforcement agencies because app developers and even hackers often find it difficult to intercept readable content. This digital innovation has effectively revolutionized recruitment strategies, enabling jihadis to communicate with potential recruits in familiar ways. The emerging trends of digital use for radicalization pose heightened threats, including the potential use of weapons of mass destruction.[49]

While groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIS have a transnational reach, the dominant Western media narrative used to explain them often falls back on reductive cultural explanations. Said's Orientalism highlights how Western framing tends to worsen divisions and complicate radicalization rather than addressing the root issues. The West commonly depicts Eastern societies as inherently barbaric, irrational, and exotic, establishing a misleading divide between the "civilized" West and the "backward" East.[50] Coverage of Al-Qaeda and ISIS often reflects orientalist stereotypes that depict Eastern barbarism, entirely ignoring the underlying grievances that motivate their actions. Although these portrayals justify foreign interventions, they also empower terrorist groups with a sense that they are the defenders against Westernization through their own media platforms.

In any case, Al-Qaeda preserved its ideology through patience and deliberate adjustments to its operations, rhetoric, and alliances in accordance with shifting regional dynamics, rather than pursuing rapid territorial control. ISIS, in contrast, redefined jihadism with its strict interpretation of Sharia law and prioritized immediate territorial control (2014-2017).[51] ISIS not only exploited material deprivation but also applied economic pragmatism to address absolute poverty by luring impoverished, often less-educated recruits,[52] with high salaries. The exploitation of tangible injustice is a stark contrast to Al-Qaeda's educated elites and their identity-centric appeal, rather than solely material grievances. The differences between them peaked in 2014 when al-Zawahiri, the long-time ideological leader of Al-Qaeda and successor to Osama bin Laden, condemned the caliphate declaration by ISIS as premature and reckless. He also dismissed sectarian violence against Shia Muslims as counterproductive in gaining broader support for a caliphate system and promoting pan-Islamic (Ummah) unity.[53][54]

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[49] Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*.

[50] Said, *Orientalism*.

[51] Berger and Morgan, *The ISIS Twitter Census*.

[52] UNDP, *Journey to Extremism in Africa* (United Nations Development Programme, 2017), https://www.undp.org/africa/publications/journey-extremism-africa.

[53] Gerges, *ISIS: A History*.

[54] Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*.

Despite their differences, both groups exhibit anti-Western attitudes, Salafi-jihadist foundations, and aim to establish a caliphate, but diverge in strategies, recruitment, and ideological execution. They share the theme of retributive justice for ritualizing violence as a moral rebalancing mechanism. Propaganda in both cases portrays vengeance as heroic, legitimizing violence like beheadings, suicide bombings, and hostage executions as righteous retaliation. For Al-Qaeda, this often-meant direct retaliation for Western actions, and even Osama bin Laden declared such acts a duty to repel the aggressor.[55] By positioning itself as a traditionalist and gradualist force, it aimed to preserve its compromised identity; meanwhile, the other extended retribution into sectarian crusade,[56] targeting the disenfranchised socio-economic individuals. Table 4 displays the points at which these terrorist outfits converge and diverge.

Aspect	Convergence	Divergence
Root Cause/ Ideology	–Born from Salafi-jihadist ideology post-9/11 –Goal of establishing a caliphate –Anti-Western, anti-apostate regime stance	–**Al-Qaeda:** Prioritizes symbolic deprivation (identity, dignity) –**ISIS:** Prioritizes material and sectarian deprivation (poverty, Sunni exclusion)
Recruitment/ Membership	–Global recruitment using digital propaganda –Appeal to individuals seeking purpose/vengeance	–**Al-Qaeda:** Targets educated, middle-class diasporas –**ISIS:** Recruits economically marginalized youth and foreign adventurers, often with direct incentives
Tactics	–Use suicide terrorism and spectacular violence –Justify violence as a form of retributive justice	–**Al-Qaeda:** "Long-game" strategy, violence as a means to provoke and exhaust enemies over time –**ISIS:** Immediate state-building (2014-2017), violence as a tool for governance and sectarian purification

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[55] Bruce Lawrence, ed., *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama Bin Laden* (VERSO, 2005).

[56] Muhammad Al-'Ubaydi et al., *The Group That Calls Itself a State: Understanding the Evolution and Challenges of the Islamic State* (The Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 2014).

Media/ Propaganda	−Sophisticated use of digital platforms to radicalize and inspire −Propaganda frames perpetrators as heroic avengers	−**Al-Qaeda:** Centralized, top-down messaging (e.g., As-Sahab) focused on ideological authority −**ISIS:** Decentralized, viral model using social media algorithms for rapid, broad recruitment
Relationship/ Rivalry	−Shared ideological roots; ISIS originated as an Al-Qaeda affiliate	**Fundamental split in 2014:** Al-Qaeda criticized ISIS's brutality and premature caliphate declaration as strategically reckless and harmful to the broader jihadist cause

Table 4: Comparison of ISIS and Al-Qaeda

Conclusion

Pape's logic on suicide terrorism partially fits with this study, as it accurately focuses on economic and political grievances but insufficiently addresses the struggles of educated supporters advocating for the ideological absolutism of groups like Al-Qaeda. Their prioritized objectives were never solely about the territorial withdrawal of foreign occupation but centered on an existential defense of identity against cultural erosion. Likewise, Huntington's clash of civilizations focuses more on cultural schisms but underestimates the symbolic and other dimensions of deprivation. It also does not explain the fractures within civilization, such as Sunni-Shia sectarian clashes, which ISIS exploited far more ruthlessly than any civilizational binary. Hence, applying such lenses is empirically flawed in reaching the root causes of terrorism. Analysis of Al-Qaeda and ISIS's religious radicalization trajectories following the 9/11 attacks, for the same ambitions of retributive justice against the oppressors, challenges the singular narratives of terrorism causality. Instead, it reveals that radicalization is a complex process that is neither deterministic nor monolithic in nature. Each group weaponizes distinct manifestations of deprivation, symbolic for Al-Qaeda, material and sectarian for ISIS. Using Gurr's foundational framework, this study proposes a synergy of hybrid relative grievances by incorporating tangible and intangible injustices while acknowledging the deterministic role of media catalysts in the process. Since both organizations exploited the digital ecosystem to infuse their heroic vengeance with powerful force, counterterrorism strategies must also consider dismantling digital spaces that legitimize violence through counter-narratives. However, this approach alone is insufficient, exactly as relying purely on kinetic-militarized

responses is doomed to fail in building inclusive societies. Effective deradicalization primarily depends on addressing underlying disparities in the social, economic, and political sources of resentment among affected populations.