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line“

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Introducing *The Online Territories of Terror*

*Oh my companions, male and female, don't just study shari'a (Islamic law) or merely by clever at reading, writing and telling stories (about religion). In the end, this will lead to nothing but misery. Many who memorize the Qur'an and hadith love to condemn other people as infidels while ignoring their own infidelity (to God) their hearts and minds still mired in filth easily seduced by anger and passion amid the glittering temptations of this world jealous and envious of their neighbor's possessions for their hearts are full of darkness and contemptible.*¹

H.E. Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur)

Jihadist groups have aggressively expanded their use of social media including Twitter, Google+, Facebook, and YouTube, to disseminate a sophisticated blend of audio-visual media that is intended to attract fighters and fundraisers to the cause. This material on social media platforms produces a persistent and interconnected multiplatform *zeitgeist*, which is constantly updated by the *media mujahidin* (pl.).

The media departments – or the designated individual *media mujahid* (sg.) – facilitate all means possible to transport, broadcast and thus project *strategic influence* by enabling individuals worldwide to tune into the jihadist *monopoly of truth*. This *monopoly* is a dominant form of projecting only one *truth*, or *haqq*, in jihadist slang while remaining that every Muslim outside of this tight definition is either treading on the “path of falsehood (*batil*)”, is an apostate (*murtadd*), or simply excommunicated (*takfir*) as a disbeliever (*kafir*). The jihadi monopoly of “truth” only allows a specific interpretation and implementation of the corpus of *Qur'an* and *Sunna*, claiming absolute authority over common Islamic habits and traditions to widen their potential impact.

Symbols, icons, gestures, key words – and first and foremost the *Holy Qur'an* and

¹ Remembrance of God & the Path to Inner Perfection “Without Rules”; Javanese mystical poem sung by Indonesian LibForAll co-founder Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid at a spiritual gathering of Nahdlatul Ulama followers, to praise God and convey the essence of Islamic teachings. <http://www.libforall.org/media/videos/video-remembrance.html>, accessed August 12, 2014.

Prophetic Traditions, the *Sunna* are hijacked as the legitimate source for extremist reasoning and acting. The jihadist strives and struggles by all means, foremost by violent actions, to implement an orthodox and selective interpretation of Islamic divine texts. Paradox and ironic is the jihadists' usage of the Internet to archive an efficient output of this massive propaganda, disseminated online on all channels and platforms – in an increasing number of languages with differing appeal to the global and respective local audiences. The most modern means of communication are as playfully and to the outmost professional degree deployed to propagate an antiquated, ancient-medieval worldview as a response to contemporary geopolitical circumstances as well as local grievances; taking over a commitment fed by human nature to resist and act against unfair and inhumane realities mirrored by the vast majority of Arab regimes, backed and favoured by western states. Nevertheless, the crafting and disseminating of propaganda, containing among many elements this act of resistance by use of force is in the jihadists' intention declared as 'missionary work' (*da'wa*). Conducting *da'wa* online, on all channels and layers of the Internet, has proven highly effective in past conflicts and is a main element for operations of militant groups and also the related non-militant movements in principal.

With the innovative capacity of online forums, social media and in general 'new media' platforms, the jihadist ideology is effectively competing for the 'hearts and minds' of young Muslims with other mainstream and legitimate schools and interpretations.

As such, and in particular after the death of Osama bin Laden in May 2011, the role of individual sympathizers as well as organized media workers has been further acknowledged and equalized with the role of "martyrdom operatives" or 'regular' *Mujahidin* who actively fight in the field and who are framed, portrayed and made famous within the online circles and spheres of global *jihadism*. Individual operatives, for example the 9/11 hijackers, had filmed their testimonies (*wasiyya*) at an early stage of the planned attacks. The jihadist – al-Qa'ida (AQ) – media therefore had for many years new materials to broadcast celebrating the September 11, 2001, attacks, with the individual hijacker speaking in his own words and on his personal terms, providing the audience direct access to the mind-set and justification of the attacks embedded in a greater narrative and story telling of post-colonial occupation² and oppression³; of a global

² The propaganda is coherent, however dependent on local history and circumstances. The post-colonial struggle of Algeria, where AQ maintains a North Africa branch, finds its expression of

‘conspiracy against Islam’ and the ‘crusader-Zionist’ intentions of annihilating the proper religious worship for God. With the rise of the *Islamic State* (IS) in 2013/14 as a major player in the Syrian revolution and its subsequent re-emergence in Iraq, the jihadist media strategies have been further re-mastered and improved, with IS successfully competing with the turned rival AQ for the hearts and minds – using the media strategies and the ideology invented by AQ to broadcast and project influence on an unprecedented level. The deliberate and fluent use of social media outlets, in particular Twitter, has furthermore enabled the flow of images and videos from the real-life battlefields, sometimes in almost real-time. As such, *the Islamic State* has taken the ideology of AQ and outrun their mentors in terms of the scale and pace of flooding the Internet with their content – mainly videos as proof of applying ideology, while maintaining a persistent presence in both worlds: the territory in Syria and Iraq as well as the various communications channels on the Internet. Content is shared through a broad support network of media mujahedin in one of the clearest incarnations of *Netwar* since it was first envisaged.⁴

The thrive of jihadist content online, expressing the implementation of a specific belief set based on *Qur’an* and *Sunna*, follows an almost organic rhythm that is fueled by highly committed – and able – individuals from both the battlefields as well as the solitude elsewhere. It may be best compared to the paradigm of ants, as

“when a team of carpenters build a house, they follow a blueprint of specifications to achieve the final structure successfully, and have a metal

European, mostly French, influence and military personnel depicted as sent to combat the jihadists along “apostate” Algerian soldiers. A rhetoric justifying the execution and open war against governmental soldiers and police who, as Sunni Muslims, are termed as apostates (*murtaddin*) of Islam, loyal to man-made laws instead of divine legislation and therefore declared as legal military opponents.

³ Oppression by tyrants, termed in the jihadist mind set as idols (*taghut*), are another evident manifestation of the contradiction of the monotheistic principle of *tawhid* the jihadists fight for – the service and worship to the one and only God, who shall not be associated with partners of any kind. Thus, the jihadists define themselves as *muwahhidin*, exercising the *tawhid* principle in contradiction to the *mushrikin*, who neglect the monotheistic belief set and are rather loyal servants of dictatorial, secular or monarchist governments where individual leaders are hailed and praised in a similar fashion as God.

⁴ For details on the concept of *Netwar*: John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, *The Advent of Netwar* (Revisited), RAND,

http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1382/MR1382.ch1.pdf, accessed July 8, 2014.

John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt: *Networks, Netwars, and the Fight for the Future*, *First Monday*, Volume 6, Number 10, October 1, 2001,

<http://ojphi.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/889/798>, accessed July 8, 2014.

representation of what they do. However, when ants build their nest, there is no leader or blueprint to guide them in their collective nest-building actions. They do not base their behaviors on a global overview of the building but simply interact locally with the closest neighboring ants or with pheromones left by other ants.”⁵

In the jihadist online spheres, the pheromones are the tracks left behind by the corpus of written and mainly in audio-visual data, the application of the propagated ideology and the advocated role-models of what it means *being a true believer*. This is perhaps the most powerful message, received worldwide in multiple languages and broadcast from within jihadist, or in this particular case IS, controlled territory in Syria and Iraq – nevertheless, core Arab-Islamic territories. Ideology, expressed partially in the implementation of *shari’a* interpretation to deal with every-day aspects of life and as an alternative to worldly law enforced by local regimes, embeds the actor and empowers the individual to exercise the ends for what jihadist groups vow to fight for. The *monopoly of truth*, conveyed by comprising writings and the textual degree that is tightly related, as it’s expression, to the audio-visual genre of extremist propaganda engulfs and encircles the consumer with the portrayal of real-life role models acting on behalf of ideology and proclaimed prophetic as well as divine guidance. Rituals are employed in a fashion whereas,

“rather, ideology acts in such a way as to reproduce the social order by symbolically representing it as a unity in which the individual subject has a place. At the same time the symbols operate so as to generate a sense of identification and commitment. Thus the individual is hailed or constructed as a subject within a symbolic discourse, and it is these symbolic discourses which constitute ideological or imaginary communities.”⁶

⁵ Jean-Louis Deneubourg and Simon Goss, Collective patterns and decision-making. *Ethology Ecology & Evolution* (1989), 1, 295–311.

⁶ Kenneth Thompson, Durkheim and Sacred Identity, in: N.J Allen et. al, *On Durkheim’s Elementary Form of Religious Life*, Routledge Studies in Social and Political Thought, Routledge: London and New York, 1998, 94-95.

The jihadist media nurtures the

“need for clear definitions [that] can be stressed by the jihadists worldview urging clear cut divisions of the chaos of everyday life”⁷

the urge for control by reliant practices and policies to regulate the daily affairs of the ‘true’ believers. The jihadist is a practitioner of verses of the Qur’an, by his belief and standards, directly exercising the divine command by God’s words.⁸ Being alive in our contemporary times is a punishment, with the wishful dream to fight alongside the prophet. This dream, this imagined world, is shared within the jihadist and especially the *salafist* spectrum that seek to re-enact the lives and deeds of the early Muslims. As such, the historical texts of the Qur’an and *Sunna*, the recorded acts and deed of prophet Muhammad, are the ultimate playbooks and guidance.

Jihadist media actors, either embedded on the frontlines with actual fighting *Mujahidin* or as part of a global support network facilitating the media world wide are tech-savvy and keen to project influence by employing a smart rhetoric in combination with emotional audio-visual content. As Hamid Tawfik notes, the constant referencing of Qur’an and *Sunna* at the centre of projecting political messages, has the ability to include – instead of alienating – the targeted audience as,

“for Jews and Christians, the Bible is a testament to God’s covenant, to his deeds, to what he said to other people. God speaks to Moses, Moses paraphrases to his people, and the Old Testament tells us what Moses said. It is a history, a chronicle. Both the Old Testament and the New have been translated into countless languages and each translation is acceptable for prayer and study because the words themselves are less important than their

⁷ Rüdiger Lohlker, ‘The Forgotten Swamp Revisited’, in *New Approaches to the Analysis of Jihadism: Online and Offline*, ed. Rüdiger Lohlker (Vienna: University Press, 2012), 125.

⁸ As the German jihadist Abu Adam states in the video “Boden der Ehre, part 1” (Waziristan, March 2010), the *Mujahidin* are “practitioners of the verses” of the Qur’an, unlike most Muslims. Therefore, most Muslims dwell in the unchanged status of sin, particularly the diaspora in western countries while the *Mujahidin* have by their contribution to *jihad* and by undertaking the emigration (*hijrah*) ‘cleansed’ themselves of such sin and neglect.

meaning – it is the content that matters. For example, one of Judaism’s greatest scholars – Philo of Alexandria – based his writing chiefly on the Pentateuch (the Greek translation of the Old Testament); it is still a matter of debate whether he knew Hebrew. Similarly, Christians in America read the New Testament in English. They do not feel compelled to read it in Greek, unless they are theologians and do not feel themselves to be “less Christians” as a result.

The Quran is different. It is the actual word of God, directly transmitted to each believer individually. It is as if each believer is Moses being personally addressed by the Lord.”⁹

Interest groups, independent of their intentions, the aspired impact(s), cultural background, language or political aims always have the need to find means and potential ways of expression and conveying their ideals, appeals, ambitions and endeavours. The prerequisite for the corresponding expression of any individual or collective political will, ambition or intention or any company praising its product is set and bound to the deployment, the usability and in most cases the flexibility¹⁰ of language. Language carries, crafts and enables to convey ideas and ideals, therefore, having deep-rooted aspects of *territorializing* and of *territory* in its affect on people and the making of space, particularly by the modern means of the Internet.¹¹ In such, language is often tied to pertaining pictures, logos, icons or graphics – the iconography in general – and vice versa. This may be particularly the case for economic and political interest groups, but the modern means of the Internet has empowered in theory and practice basically anyone – or any group or conglomerate of any kind – to have the potential means of expression and access to the world wide public. Naturally, this is highly important for any interest group seeking the public, may it be by the purpose of propaganda, by highlighting and emphasizing a particular notion, an agenda, or, in short, an ideology.

⁹ Hamid Tawfik, *Inside Jihad – Understanding and Confronting Radical Islam*, Self published book: 2008, 32.

¹⁰ This comprises, for example, a modern, more youthful, form of expression but can also engulf more traditional idioms and contents that are nevertheless transmitted by the most modern means.

¹¹ Myria Georgiu: *Diaspora, Mediated Communication and Space – A Transnational Framework to Study Identity*, in: Miyase Christensen, André Jansson, Christian Christensen: *Online Territories – Globalization, Mediated Practice and Social Space*, Peter Lang: New York, Washington, Bern, 2011.

In a similar fashion, profit-orientated companies seek the public in order to advertise their products. Interest groups, political-driven unifications or profit-orientated companies, therefore, as the independent blogger, Facebook or 'normal' user of the Internet may, deploy their thoughts, ideas and attached graphics on the virtual platform for the global audience without much work. In most cases, the advertised *value, ideology* or *product* claiming a *life style*, is introduced to the public in the combined form of language and by visual means. Nothing is easier disseminated than by the means of online connectivity and mobile phones with Internet-capacity.

Interest groups of all forms seek the *appeal* and the *craving*, the *wish* or *wishful thinking* of individuals, to gain their attention, receive awareness and improve their standing by sympathizers, consumers or full-pledged members.

Independently of personal behavioral patterns Online or in our Offline dwellings, to some extent, as individuals, we are always exposed on the one or the other world; as consumers, readers, and viewers, as an audience or as targeted subjects.

Language is vital for the crafting of any individual for any belonging to a group and the group's appeal to individuals. Just as much as one may want a specific product, imagining the impact on his or her personal life and doing, one may in a political context seek to be part of a contemporary school of thought, movement, or sentiment. Implicating ones general readiness to overcome a passive (comfortable) stance *after* triggered into an active state due to personal factors that are affected by whatever conditions. In our subjective perception and consideration, and bound by our personal motifs and desires, we are part of a greater process of constant temptations. These temptations may consist of any form of consummation, as discussed, or, in a political context, in a form of empowerment with a reactionary response because of ill conditions one may be exposed to. Language in this discourse serves just as much as a unifying and an element of integrating uniformity, as a means of branding specific ideas and notions that are similar to the marketing of industrial products. Political and social groups, as advertisement, have the wish and the ultimate aim to *effect* or *indoctrinate*, to *infest* or even *incite* as many people as possible for the maximum profit or the greatest possible impact. Political groups, violent or non-violent,

however, are bound to issuing and broadcasting statements, explanations and forms of legitimizations for their actions.¹²

Contemporary Islamic heritage in the making by the understanding and the undertaking of the jihadists – a vital manifestation for this ‘contemporary’ – or ongoing – ‘Islamic heritage’ is the Internet. By re-enacting proclaimed historical role models, new, contemporary role models are crafted in advertised, propagated and each individual of the audience is enabled on his or her end to re-enact, joining the circle, thus becoming a role model that shall be advertised by the online propaganda platforms.

Global *jihad* provides a comprising religious ideology and a belief system, based on inclusion and exclusivity for anyone, within a specific “frame of reference” (*Referenzrahmen*)¹³ – rules, guidelines, guidance, conditions and belonging.

The *Mujahidin* are fighting within a frame of reference and the combination of filmed and written propaganda functions for the audience as a powerful and appealing vehicle. This functionality has consistency and within the online realms of jihadist forums and other mostly public virtual outlets populated by jihadi-sympathizers and – as a logical side effect – hard-core jihadist data (*isdarat*). The *frame of reference* is expanded and extended beyond the locations of filmed operations and beyond the reach of physical participation with *Mujahidin* fighting in an actual war to the outer limits of Macintosh, Personal Computer, tablet and smart-phone screens. The consumer is thought of being surrounded and embalmed by a religious output that

¹² This includes past, present and in some cases future actions. The sum of statements in unison with accompanying writings (for example, religious decrees of past and present scholars, or militarily training handbooks to produce and further the combat angle of an ideology, a social-theory that seeks by violent means its implication for ‘the greater good’)

¹³ Based on the understanding of Sönke Neitzel and Harald Welzer, and Harald Welzer, *Täter – Wie aus ganz normalen Menschen Massenmörder werden*, S. Fischer: Frankfurt am Main 2011, 4th Edition, 263.

seeks to re-format norms, rites and plots, adaptable by the viewer of the various genres of jihad videos and the online corpus of written jihadist materials.¹⁴

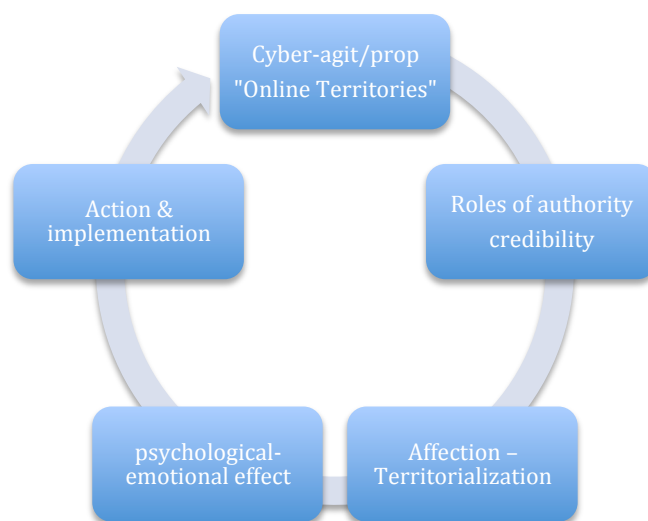


Figure 1 Affect and cause of extremist propaganda online, drawing potential sympathizers into active members participating at least within the media *jihad*

The dwelling within virtual worlds serves jihadist propaganda, who constantly enforce, legitimize, sanction and demand the continuation as well as the increase by pro-jihadist writings, fan-made-films, infestations within Facebook and YouTube by the consumers. The main ideological writings and especially the *movies of jihad* are offered sometimes on a daily basis within the dwellings of the *jihadi virtual* by various jihadist groups worldwide – mostly of those, who are *engaged* in combatting their enemies.¹⁵ Subsequently, a specific religious *habitus* is propagated as a filmed frame of reference that includes vital cornerstones of an ideology put into action with the perception of fighting for both justice and defense. The *intersection* of real-life and online, virtual worlds – accessible for anyone unlike the real-life scenarios, lead to questioning the effects of the accessibility to the jihadist propaganda for consumers sometimes thousands of miles away. But in close emotional, spiritual and politicized

¹⁴ This naturally includes the rhetoric of jihadist and salafist preachers and sermons alike that are thriving on YouTube. The UK-based website *salafimedia.com*, for example, hosts YouTube videos of sermons whereas specific notions and sentiments of the Islamic heritage are attached to behavioral codes and norms, allegedly valid for any Muslim in non-Islamic territories. This includes the recitation of jihadist core ideological sentiments – but foremost free of violent ambitions – such as *The Two Camps*, referring to the lines of demarcation among Muslims and towards non-Muslims in the division of “truth” and “falsehood.”

¹⁵ Regular publications are dominantly Arabic- and Urdu-language movies, ranging from Afghanistan to Pakistan, Yemen, Iraq but also filmed statements and clips from the Caucasus.

proximity with the fear, anger and cognition of being ‘persecuted’ because of ones faith. Thus, it would be deceptive to understand the intention as well as the desired effects of radicalizing and *inspiring* the audience as a sole or singular process. By studying and monitoring the written and filmed jihadist online propaganda, one must also find an understanding of *online elements* that are closely connected to the *offline events* – oftentimes inseparable with the one merely being the mirror of the other.

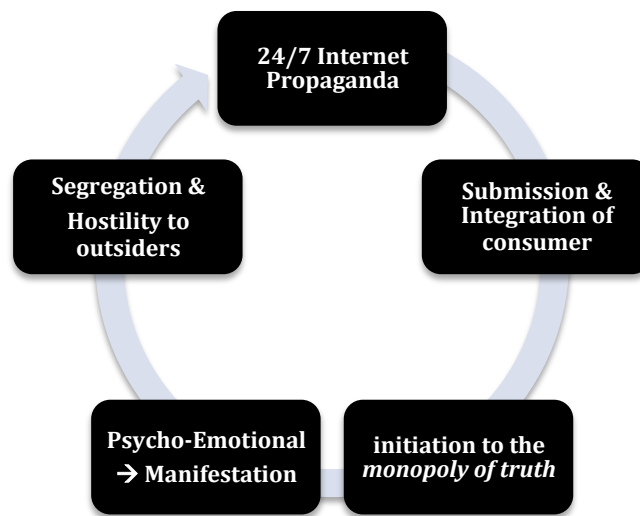


Figure 2 Exposure to extremist media with the intention of drawing lines between *us* and *them*

This intersection construes and fertilizes the jihadists’ frame of reference. This frame enables for the sake of understanding *individual actions* and *deeds*, the motivations that have consequently led to both individual and collective actions. *The monopoly of truth* seeks to break any pre-set identity of the consumer, with the intention of drawing the individual deep into the legitimacy of the advocated ideology and the pertaining ‘Islamic’ identity. The question for the viewer revolves around this religious identity: am I committing any sin? Must I (re-) address my lifestyle? Must I adhere to any call to *jihad (nida’)*? Must I help my siblings in times of war by any means possible? This can have the effect that especially individuals within non-Islamic societies identify with those who are the ultimate opponents of western governments, namely the fighting *Mujahidin* and the depicted Sunni civilian casualties everywhere. As a ultimate and worst case consequence, an individual politicised to this extend in his or her renewed religious identity can draw a line of

separation to the society he or she dwells in; referred to in the graph above as a “self-chosen segregation”. This segregation, part of the concept of being a stranger (*gharib*) as further outlined in this book, and is an essential line of demarcation not only to clear-manifest ‘enemies of Islam’ but also to fellow believers who are reconsidered in their respective sincerity of exercising piety according to the monopoly of truth.

Modern communication facilitates the crafting of an identity whereas political realities (occupation of Islamic territories, drone strikes, secret detention networks etc.) are addressed and framed. The individual consumer is not merely a passive consumer, but empowered and entitled to generate their own content and interact by posting comments, questions, or responses. Online media platforms facilitate a blend of audio-visual media interspersed with writings that further sanctions and explains specific ideological dimensions of jihadi activity.¹⁶ As the range of online platforms has expanded, so Jihadist groups have increasingly used sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, with their use of tumblr also gathering pace. The role of the *media mujahid* has been sanctioned and encouraged with the release of suggested strategies¹⁷, although not all have seen the move away from the traditional forum based interaction as positive,¹⁸ as detailed in an article co-authored with Ali Fisher for the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point.¹⁹

¹⁶ The persistent as well as ideological cohesive online presence of jihadist propaganda, framed as authoritative rulings and determinations, has become an open sub-culture. The jihadist narrative, enforced by audio- and visual elements strengthens in-group cohesion and affects mainstream Muslim culture, the main targeted audience.

¹⁷ Discussed in:

<http://www.jihadica.com/jihadi-twitter-activism-introduction/>

Members of the *Ansar al-Mujahideen* forum and *Shumukh al-Islam* have posted advice encouraging fellow users to develop social media profiles to disseminate their message to a wider group of users; for example:

“The Twitter Guide // the Most Important Jihadi Users and Support Accounts for Jihad and the Mujahideen on Twitter”, <https://shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=192509>.

“Selected Tweets from Twitter”, <https://shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=192509>.

¹⁸ The jihadi success of Twitter has had its impact on leading Jihadi writers such as Abu Sa‘d al-‘Amili to highlighted the shift of “major [jihadi] writers and analysts”, lamenting the general decline in participation in jihadi online forums.¹⁸ Furthermore, al-‘Amili issued a “Call (nida’) to the Soldiers of the Jihad Media” demanding that they “return to their frontiers (thughur)” elevating their status. Al-‘Amili himself is one of the high-profile clerics but is also quite active on twitter ([@al3aamili](https://twitter.com/al3aamili)).

Also see;

<http://www.jihadica.com/are-the-jihadi-forums-flagging-an-ideologue%E2%80%99s-lament/>

¹⁹ Nico Prucha and Ali Fisher. Tweeting for the Caliphate – Twitter as the New Frontier for Jihadist Propaganda. CTC Sentinel (Westpoint), June 2013, <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/tweeting-for-the-caliphate-twitter-as-the-new-frontier-for-jihadist-propaganda>.

The classical jihadi discussion forums remain the vital hub for authoritative and cohesive propaganda online, to initiate new members and expose them to the coherent textual and audio-visual expression of jihadist creed and ideology.²⁰ However, the importance given to Twitter has risen sharply with the increasing violence in Syrian in 2012, as discussed in detail in this thesis. Within the complex network of interconnecting sites, Twitter has become the main hub for the active dissemination of links guiding users to digital content hosted on a range of websites, social media platforms, and discussion forum.

Thus, with vast data and materials – mainly in Arabic – at hand, this doctoral thesis has the ambition to take the reader into elements of both, the strategy of using modern communication as well the advocated *monopoly of truth* by jihadist groups world wide.

With the rise of the *Islamic State* and their declaration of the *Caliphate* in mid-2014, the propaganda and the interspersed media strategies to fan-out such content has reached an unprecedented peak with no end in sight. The move by IS to shift to social media, their supporters, like other Jihadist groups, have become increasingly adept at integrating operations on the physical battlefield with the online effort to propagate their ideology and celebrate their ‘martyrs’. To achieve this success they have switched to using dispersed forms of network organization, strategy and technology attuned to the information age - as anticipated in the original visions of *Netwar*. This approach has proven resilient to current counter-strategies of account suspensions and content removal. As a result IS has been able to disseminate rich audio-visual content from the battlefield through an array of autonomous but interconnected social media accounts, that are quickly replaced in cases of take-downs – with the gap in between the *offline event* and the *online output* homing in, drawing the audiences even more

²⁰ Twitter has become an addition to the classical forums but is attracting more interaction among members subscribed to the jihadist worldview. Within the *jihadiscap* on Twitter, members re-publish and disseminate ‘official’ AQ content, upload their personal files, such as pictures via their mobile phones, or link to extremist content on YouTube.

Twitter has become the new beacon for jihadist propaganda, and – more important – a free zone for extremist users online. The jihadist forums, however, are the first place where new jihadi core content is injected and then promoted by initiated users. On the importance of online forums, Evan Kohlmann, “A Beacon for Extremists: The Ansar al-Mujahideen Web Forum”, CTC Sentinel, February 2010, Vol. 3, Issue 2.

into a freely available *sub-culture* on the Internet where men and women portray themselves as righteous fighters for freedom, justice and salvation.

Throughout the thesis the Arabic terminology is transliterated according to a simplified version set by the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*.

Jihadist Innovation and Learning by Adapting to the ‘New’ and ‘Social Media’ Zeitgeist

A thousand men who fear not for their lives are more to be dreaded than ten thousand who fear for their fortunes.

Denis Diderot

The ideology of al-Qa’ida (AQ) and its ability to propagate that ideology as a monopoly of truth through professional promotion and marketing material disseminated via modern communication technology has proven to be its most resilient foundation and greatest innovation. This Jihadist media activism is evident and strengthens this resilience on a daily basis with new audio-visual and written propaganda uploaded from a number of conflict zones, in numerous languages, to a wide range of online social platforms and multimedia channels. This propaganda is underpinned by an ideological authority which has maintained an important and influential role, despite the killing of Osama bin Laden by SEAL Team 6 and demise of AQ core leadership in drone strikes across the Afghan-Pakistani border area, events which have made it increasingly difficult to locate or define “al-Qa’ida”. Instead, AQ remains alive and has regained an active role by offshoot groups and individuals who subscribe to this monopoly of truth, the ideological parameters and interpretations of Islamic sources and the role model of the ‘proper’ Sunni Muslim according to these principals of faith (*‘aqida*) and religious methodology (*manhaj*). The doctrine of AQ provides a clear identity of what it should mean to be a ‘true’ monotheistic Muslim (*muwahhid*) and how to profess the divine laws of God (*shari’a*) as based on the authoritarian interpretations and guidelines freely available on the Internet. Fighters and clerics likewise and sometimes in rotating roles relate the written ideology into actions and fierce emotional sermons conveyed by the extremist’s most powerful platform: Twitter and YouTube, jihadi forums and dedicated websites. These role models, the corpus of texts, and most important the AQ-affiliated iconography most prominently represented and identifiable by the black banner with the imprinted

shahada,²¹ has successfully manifested within majority Sunni Islamic societies, and is even more so visible within the Arab public space amid the chaos and aftermath of the so-called ‘Arab Spring’.²² Perhaps even more so in times of upheaval and (re-) spawning of militant groups throughout the countries affected by the ‘Arab Spring’, first and foremost Syria, the emphasis of jihadist media advisors, strategists and contributors is set to undermine their own role and importance:

“We are indeed convinced that the battlefields of the media jihad are of the most important streams of jihad and a elementary front thereof in this raging war with our enemies. Therefore, we [media workers] commit ourselves just as any jihadi brigade, working correspondingly with our brothers in the fields of war, directly encountering the enemies.”²³

The self-esteem of the media battalions is further expressed in a strategy paper entitled *The Media Mujahid – First Steps to Professionalize the Media Jihad*. The paper was published in 2012 and outlines the ambition of the jihadi media in general and the jihadi media in particular as

²¹ The black flag comprises a centric grey circle imprinted with (from down upwards) “Muhammad – rasul – allah”, a reference to the Islamic creed “There is no God (allah) but God and Muhammad is the messenger (rasul) of God.” The symbolic is amplified as this exact layout and wording had been the seal of the prophet (*khatim al-nabawiyya*) whereas the contemporary jihadists further seek to position a monopoly of truth by signing documents and by placing the flag as an expression of divine will and power. The use of the Prophetic seal, placed not only on the flag but also to sign ‘official Islamic State’ documents and rulings, is served as a nonnegotiable authority, backed by the interpretation and application of Qur’an and Sunna – speaking in the name of God and His messenger, Muhammad, furthering the belief of being in a direct lineage to divinity and expressing the entitlement of the soldiers of God (*jund allah*).

²² The manifestation of pro-AQ styled jihadist groups, exercising violence or ‘soft-power’ such as restoring basic infrastructure and handing out supplies to the Sunni population is evident by the transnational appearance of the *Ansar al-Shari’a* network. The *Ansar al-Shari’a* groups propagate openly jihadist iconography and a similar rhetoric based on the fundamental teachings of AQ. The Libyan branch based in Benghazi and Derna as well as the chapter in Tunisia had been declared by the U.S. State Department as “foreign terrorist organizations” and “global terrorist entities” following the attack on the U.S. Consulate in Benghazi, September 11, 2012. Thomas Joscelyn, State Department designates 3 Ansar al Sharia organizations, leaders, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/01/state_department_des_2.php, January 10, 2013.

²³ Mu’assasat al-Ma’sada al-I’lamiyya / Fursan al-Balagh al-I’lam (eds.), Bayan nusrat al-ansar li-ikhwanihim al-Mujahidin al-abrar, <https://shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=212520>, October 10, 2013. This statement is signed by the most influential contemporary jihadi media key figures.

- (i) resetting the focus to the interior of the Arab countries affected by the transformation processes; as the counter terrorism and police forces are in a weakened position. Referring in particular the intensifying civil war in Syria but also the post-Gaddafi Libya where local jihadi militias are active, the online media workers define this as “the interior media departments” (*da’irat al-i’lam al-dakhili*).²⁴ The strategy is clear: to infiltrate or embed ideological adherents with al-Qa’ida media workers to indoctrinate fellow fighters and to frame group actions accordingly. This, however, is not restricted to the new media. For pre-Internet means are to be exploited by “relying on local radio and television stations, magazines and newspapers”²⁵ where the *Mujahidin* are in control over territory.
- (ii) Not neglecting the media work on a global level, emphasizing the role of the media outside of the actual conflict zones, defined as “international media departments” (*da’irat al-i’lam al-khariji*). Jihad videos advertising and sanctioning violence while providing the theological basis for the active *Mujahidin* are broadcast, “depending almost entirely on the Internet and social media networks. [This work allows to] maintain the anonymity and high professional security standards by the professional media workers, extending on the global level, by the grace of God.”²⁶

Or, as AQ leader Ayman al-Zawahiri summarized in his decree of “General Guidelines for Jihad”, September 2013:

“It is well known to the brothers that our work in this phase consists of two sections: 1. Military; 2. Propagating.”²⁷

The *Media Mujahid* document was released by the “al-Qayrawan” media foundation in the time of uncertainty and upheaval within the Arab countries, especially in

²⁴ Mu’assassat al-Qayrawan al-I’lamiyya, Tunis al-Islam. 2012. “Al-Mujahid al-I’lami– al-Khatawat al-‘ula li-ihtiraf al-jihad al- I’lami,” 4. *Shabakat al-shumukh al-Islam*, March 16, 2012. Accessed March 17, 2012. <http://www.shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=154861>.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ayman al-Zawahiri, Tawjihat ‘amma li l-‘aml al-jihadi, as-Sahab Media, <https://shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=211363>, accessed September 14, 2013.

Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and subsequently Syria but also Yemen. For the first time since mainly Arab foreign fighters had travelled to fight against non-Muslim enemies in conflicts such as Afghanistan or Bosnia, the Caucasus, Somalia or Iraq,²⁸ the focus was re-set on the Arab countries in the wake of the so called *Arab Spring* whereas the jihadists' attention has turned to these core countries of origin with the hopes and ambition to provoke change from within. The media strategy has shifted considerably to address the changing situation and to exploit potential weaknesses of local governments and security forces during transformation processes. As such, the *Media Mujahid* strategy paper issued a code and a codex for any jihadi media activist to follow and for overall orientation. The jihadist media does not seek to compete with the mainstream media or governmental sources, rather it assumes a *monopoly of authority* with the intention to act as the only credible news source for Muslims in general. Thus, the paper starts,

“we will summarize at the beginning the most important goals for the media *jihad*:

1. Disseminate the news of the *Mujahidin* and the truth that the media of the disbeliever (*kafir*) and the vassal²⁹ (*'amil*) tries to suppress.
2. Convey the messages by the leadership of *jihad* and the [militant and media] fronts (*jabhat*)³⁰, no matter if these have been published by the enemies or by the sons of the beloved *umma*. Furthermore, establish a line of communication between the *Mujahidin* and the Muslim *umma*.
3. Defend the *Mujahidin* and be committed to them.

²⁸ With the U.S. occupation of Iraq in 2003 Arab foreign fighters established a wide network in Iraq to fight U.S. troops and the Iraqi interim government. However, while the Sunni jihadists of the al-Qa'ida network succeeded and remain in control of strips of territory in mainly the al-Anbar province, the actual overthrow of the al-Maliki regime seems unlikely.

²⁹ The following bullet points are a summary of the most typical jihadist rhetoric. The term 'vassal' is a often used reference for Arab regimes the jihadists considers as loyal to the west, ruling in contradiction to the jihadists' interpretation of Qur'an and Sunna and therefore coined as an extension of western hegemony. The term for 'vassal', *'amil*, is also deployed by the jihadi propaganda for spies and agents, who are marked on a personal level as the local assets of the 'Crusaders', controlled by the foreign-led local governments to effectively combat Islam from within. The jihadist therefore on this level as well considers himself as the only 'true' Muslim engaged for the defense of Islam.

³⁰ The use of 'front' refers to both media as well as military fronts where active combat takes place. As the missionary aspect for the militant jihadi is inseparable to the armed missionary work the media in itself, and in particular the media groups operating on the Internet and consider themselves as a virtual front to incite and radicalize individuals on a global level to act on behalf of AQ or join the real-life conflict zones.

4. Disseminate the creed of *tawhid*³¹ and *jihad* and proselytize (*da'wa*) for it.
5. Disclose any doubts (*shubhat*)³² pertaining the cause of contemporary *jihad* and disprove every legal decree (*fatawa*) issued by the vile state-owned Islamic scholars (*'ulama' al-salatin*).³³
6. Incitement (*tahrid*)³⁴ for undertaking the *hijra* (migration) and joining *jihad*.
7. Incitement for financial spending on the path of God [demanding donations for the *Mujahidin*].
8. Support for the oppressed (*nusrat al-mustada'ifeen*)³⁵ and make their causes and suffering known.
9. Create awareness among the peoples about the reality of the *umma* and work to awaken them from their long lethargy (*subat*)³⁶ under which they have been living for years due to the effects of the media of the disbeliever and the vassal.
10. Escaping the subordination to the disbelieving West in everyday life.
11. Direct media raids against the enemies and widen the modes of engagements, like conducting organized hacker attacks.
12. Confuse the enemy and conduct a severe psychological war to break his spirits and efforts.

³¹ The *oneness* of God; the fundamental monotheistic principle to not only establish a rule by God's divine commandment, but rather set an identity as a *muwahhid*, who professes the worship and proper rituals for the one God as outlined in the Islamic *shahada* and set by the flag of the *Islamic State*.

³² *Shubhat* and 'reactions' (*radd*) by jihadi ideologues to pro-governmental Islamic scholars and intellectuals are frequent and serve to boost the jihadi ideologues' position and standing within the virtual hierarchy.

³³ These 'state-owned *'ulama*' are defined as corrupt scholars who neglect the true nature of Islam and thus have become followers of the "program of falsehood (*batil*)" whereas the jihadi as the only true, steadfast servant of God portrays himself as the follower of the "program of truth (*al-haqq*)."

³⁴ The term *incitement* – or *inspire*, the title of a English language electronic jihadi magazine – is a reference to two verses of the Qur'an (4:84 / 8:65) as outlined in the subsequent chapters. *Tahrid* by the modern means of the media is portrayed as a logical divine command to inspire and incite fellow Muslims by all means to combat the defined enemies in the name of God. This has become an ideological category of itself in the vast corpus of the online jihad materials where self-appointed clerics use *tahrid* as a rhetorical gateway to convey theological means according to extremist interpretation.

³⁵ The "oppressed" or "weak", *mustada'ifin*, is a reference to Qur'an 7:75 read by jihadi reasoning as a divine command to "fight in God's cause and for those oppressed men, women, and children who cry out, 'Lord, rescue us from this town whose people are oppressors! By Your grace, give us a protector and give us a helper!'" The *Mujahid* thus perceives and defines himself as the "helper" fighting on "God's cause" or path (*fi sabilillah*).

All following verses of the Qur'an are quotations of: Muhammad A. S. Abdel-Haleem, *The Qur'an* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

³⁶ This *lethargy* must be overcome by creating awareness and inspiring the need to awaken and empower the Islamic community (*umma*). Committed individuals acting as an avant-garde who are willing to sacrifice everything for this altruistic cause for their fellow believers and for God can only achieve this.

13. Disclose the truth about the idols (*tawaghit*)³⁷ and the obligation [for Muslims] to disbelief in them as well as their secular worldly laws (*qanun*).
14. Publish any media coverage by the *Mujahidin* wherever possible [on the Internet] and act as a pulpit (*minbar*) for the truth and as a voice for it, taking defensive positions to support the people of the frontier (*ahl al-thughur*).
15. Assemble and mobilize the *umma* to aid the *al-ta'ifa al-mansura*, the victorious group,³⁸ for the stage of [establishing] the Caliphate on all levels.”³⁹

In early 2014, the above points were re-emphasized in a posting issued by one of the jihadist tier-one forums, *al-Minbar al-I'lami al-Jihadi*. As a tier-one forum this particular forum is graded as being one of the top influential and most important online forums, a platform where users tend to turn to acquire, read, watch, and of course download and collect the latest official jihadist media material. Therefore, the above points that are fashioned as quintessential for the strategic communication by the *soldiers of God* has a wide reach within the extremist online communities, for:⁴⁰

³⁷ *Taghut*, pl. *tawaghit* are secular rulers who oppress their own people and are considered as being mere “agents” or “henchmen” of Western powers. Any *taghut* is a total contradiction of jihadist religious conduct as this “tyrant” rules by man-made law violating *shari'a* law while seeking to replace any worship to God by himself, thus breaking the concept of the *oneness* of God (*tawhid*). The tyrant ruler, the “idol” is enhanced in this hostile perception by nationwide statues, portrays, and pictorial propaganda, all of which is an essential violation of *tawhid*.

³⁸ *The Victorious Group* is a reference to the acts and deeds of early Muslims, who, against all odds succeeded. As the contemporary self-declared *mujahidin* are convicted to re-enact early Muslims, they tread on the path of God (*fi sabilillah*) on the conduct of “righteousness” (*haqq*), as opposed to anyone else. The collective perception is tied into the self-definition of being the soldiers of God (*jundallah*), who must succeed against all odds as part of a divine master plan of a cosmological war of ‘good’ versus ‘evil’ expressed by the fight of the *muwahhid* against the *mushrik*, who deviates from the proper worship of the *one God* and other enemies.

³⁹ Mu'assassa al-Qayrawan al-'i'lamiyya, Tunis al-Islam. 2012. “Al-Mujahid al-'I'lami – al-Khatawat al-'ulu li-ihitraf al-jihad al-'i'lami.” *Shabakat al-shumukh al-Islam*, March 16, 2012. Accessed March 17, 2012. <http://www.shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=154861>.

⁴⁰ It must be noted, however, that the al-Platform Media forum has tilted towards the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) with the declaration of the Caliphate by ISIS leader al-Baghdadi. With the ongoing rift between ISIS and AQ, as of writing, three types of jihadist forums exist:

- (i) forums that broadcast both ISIS and al-Qa'ida materials;
- (ii) forums such as the *Shabakat al-Jahad* which clearly reject and forbid any propaganda by the *Islamic State* and emphasize the latest publications by their rival, AQ-affiliated *Jabhat al-Nusra* and any publication by AQ central;
- (iii) forums with a strong tendency towards the Islamic State such as the *Shabakat Shumukh al-Islam* forum that only partially allows JN and AQ Central materials to appear while forums like the *al-Platform Media* which is in clear favor of the Islamic State with no space for rival material.

“in our modern times, the idols, the tyrants, have improved their previous ways to adopt and select a magician (*sahir*)⁴¹ [to misguide and appease the people], to fulfil the same tasks of disguise, cover-ups and lies; to fight against God and His messenger and His friends (*awliya*’)⁴² (...).

Therefore the *jund allah* are the troop of those who proceed them whom we deem as having been sincere in the fields of the *jihadi media*, the defenders of the *people of tawhid* and truth (*haqq*), who disclosed [the lies and deceit] broadcast by those magicians. This deceit comprises of broadcasting false news and facts by altering the news of the *Mujahidin*, by lying about their refutations of the [tyrant’s] accusation against them (...).

Indeed, God has granted our brothers previously to repel earlier campaigns of disinformation launched by the Crusader media and their agents from within our countries. They have set a precedent to repel such attacks.”⁴³

Despite all comparisons to the times of early Muslims and the struggle against the historical *mushrikin*, or ‘polytheists’, and local tyrants as well as any enemy of Islam, the contemporary jihadists are able and keen to fully exploit modern media for their cause. By using – and consuming – modern media, including otherwise considered problematic or forbidden Hollywood blockbusters, the contemporary media-wary and tech-savvy *mujahidin* place their messages and voice their cause on wide scale online – with pictures, declarations, videos, elements of state-building and severe violence from their – offline – realities. In that sense, victories on the battlefield are mirrored in a coherent and structured pattern on the Internet to broadcast professionally made videos and to also present, sometimes shortly after real-life battles take/took place, pictures and personal impressions of fighters to their online flock of fans and sympathizers. The fans and sympathizers, not only create their own fan-content, or user-generated content, but understand and know the movies and codes popular

⁴¹ The posting is introduced by verses relating to the story of Pharaoh and Moses, who ultimately defeats Pharaoh and his magicians and their ‘black magic’, winning the people to the true message of God. For details, refer to the subchapter *Re-enacting Prophecy – re-enacting Moses and the “Game of the Pharaohs*.

⁴² Referring to the *Mujahidin* in general.

⁴³ Support by the *al-Minbar Forum* for the *Islamic State*, <http://alplatformmedia.com/vb/showthread.php?t=40356>, March 10, 2014.

within the specific circles – crafting a connection between hard-core *mujahidin* and popular global culture, dominated by Western elements and movies in particular. This mechanism of relaying the on- and offline worlds is perhaps the most dangerous aspect of the modern usage of the Internet by jihadist activists to develop a deep-rooted movement worldwide, calling on Muslims everywhere to support the *Islamic State*. The logical consequence, perhaps, with

“ISIS making gains in Iraq and declaring an Islamic caliphate, media activists embedded along the front lines and their global support networks, the *media mujahedeen*, valorize their achievements in HD video and Hollywood film style posters which are distributed via social media. Their approach is one of the clearest incarnations of *Netwar*⁴⁴ since it was first envisaged. The public diplomacy⁴⁵ and cultural relations organisations mandated to counter violent extremism require strategies based on network concepts to counter it.”⁴⁶

The valorisation of achievements, in turn, is expressed in a young and highly visualized language. When *the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham*, prior to the declaration of the Caliphate⁴⁷ in a surprise move was able to gain a momentum and

⁴⁴ For details on the concept of *Netwar*: John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, *The Advent of Netwar (Revisited)*, RAND, http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1382/MR1382.ch1.pdf, accessed July 8, 2014.

John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt: *Networks, Netwars, and the Fight for the Future*, *First Monday*, Volume 6, Number 10, October 1, 2001,

<http://ojphi.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/889/798>, accessed July 8, 2014.

John Arquilla, *The New Rules of War*, *Foreign Policy*, February 22, 2010,

http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/02/22/the_new_rules_of_war, accessed July 8, 2014.

John Arquilla, David Ronfeldt, *Swarming and the Future of Conflict*, RAND – National Security Research Division, http://www.rand.org/pubs/documented_briefings/DB311.html, accessed July 8, 2014.

⁴⁵ As outlined in: *The Role of Public Diplomacy in Countering Violent Extremism*, Remarks by Tamara Sonenshine, U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/r/remarks/2013/206708.htm>, March 27, 2013.

⁴⁶ Ali Fisher and Nico Prucha, *Eye of the Swarm: The Rise of ISIS and the Media Mujahideen*, US Center on Public Diplomacy, <http://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/blog/eye-swarm-rise-isis-and-media-mujahedeen>, July 8, 2014.

⁴⁷ The Caliphate was declared on Ramadan 1, 1435, corresponding to June 29, 2014. As jihadists are often very aware of dates and historical references, the Caliphate, under the rule of the declared Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (Caliph Ibrahim), was announced to the day 90 years after its abolishment by the Ottomans. The *khutba* (sermon) by Caliph Ibrahim, showing himself for the first time on camera,

take control of vast parts of Iraq, including the urban hubs of Mosul, Tikrit and Samara', the jihadist self-esteem was boosted in their conviction of *being* the *chosen few* to act on behalf of God and the prophetic conduct (*manhaj al-nubuwwa*) was expressed in a most modern format on Twitter by sympathizers. By taking Hollywood movies, sympathizers frame and reframe their perception of what is happening on the ground. As pictured below, the Twitter handle "Prince Khattab", nevertheless a reference to *amir Khattab* who had been a fierce Saudi commander of Chechen *Mujahidin*, reproduces within his framework his support for the *Islamic State fighters*. With the two cats as his avatar, @princekhattab is part of a cluster network of English language supporters. Guided and influenced not only by jihadist propaganda, he based his assessment of "800 Islamic State fighters" against "30,000" Iraqi soldiers, referred to accordingly by extremist wording as "raafidah" on Western media sources; "I'm referring to this number given by the Guardian."⁴⁸

was published by the title "Sermon and Friday Prayers in a big Mosque in the City of Mosul", *al-Furqan Media*, <http://alplatformmedia.com/vb/showthread.php?t=53518>, July 6, 2014.

⁴⁸ <https://twitter.com/princekhattab/status/477531604181467136/photo/1>, June 13, 2014.

@princekhattab links to The Guardian article at: Martin Chulov et al, Iraq Army Capitulates to Isis Militants in four Cities, *The Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/11/mosul-isis-gunmen-middle-east-states>, June 12, 2014.

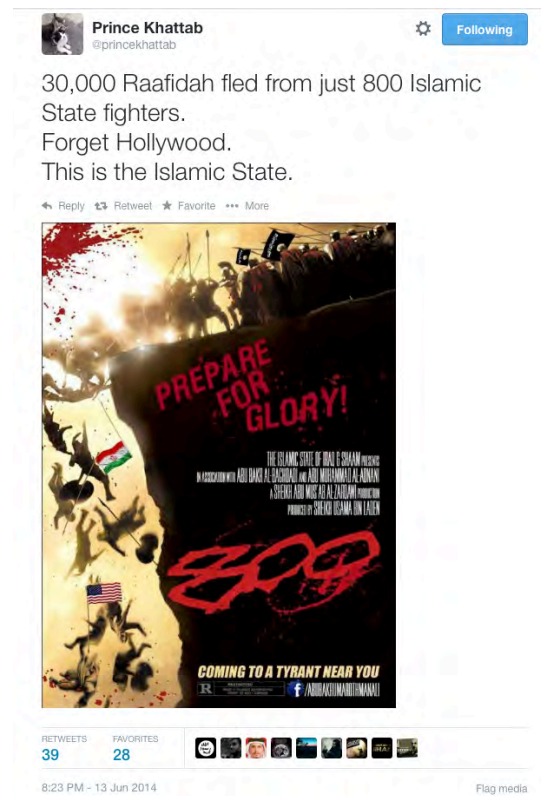


Figure 3 Dwelling on Social-Media inspired by Western comic adaption, ISIS supporters compare the fighters on the ground to the “300” heroic Spartan minority that held out against the Persian Empire.⁴⁹

The *al-Minbar al-I'lami al-Jihadi* forum, parsing in English in reference to its Uniform Resource Locator (URL) under the name *al-Platform Media* (alplatformmedia.com/vb), is as a tier-one jihadist forum one of the main important ones on the Internet. It has gained importance in the past years when other, older tier-one forums had vanished and thus is ranked within close proximity of the most important forums, the *Shumukh al-Islam*, *Ansar al-Mujahidin* and *al-Fida'* forum. As the forums are still of value and considered as first and important entry points of jihadist propaganda, the al-Platform Media administration embedded the above outlined points of the posting in a personalized understanding with the impact and value of strategic communication and pro-active dissemination on all channels on the Internet. Highlighted in red lettering, the forum administration seeks to determine their continued role for the media side of the militant jihad as

⁴⁹ <https://twitter.com/princekhattab/status/477531604181467136/photo/1>, June 13, 2014.

“we are your brothers on this forum. We are determined in our objective to engage in the defensive battle for our brothers in *The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham* as soldiers of their soldiers; or as a foundation of its foundation.”⁵⁰

Or, as the late Abu Yahya al-Libi wrote in his final “letter to the brothers of the jihadi media ports (*thaghr*)”,

“we are industrious in transforming our propagation to Islam (*da’wa*) into a general *da’wa*, with the ambition to reach the hearts of the people. We shall inject into their natural purified composition of their faith [our *da’wa*].”⁵¹

But al-Libi had taken the role of the Internet and the impact of the jihadist media a step further, with the participation by the audience and especially the contributors as an inclusive form of worship. Just as the *battlefield Mujahid*, the *media Mujahid* has the prospect of receiving great “benevolence and adoration.”⁵²

The jihadist propaganda has since the deadly terror attacks of September 11, 2001, turned into a dominant entity that – so it seems – is hardly contested or restrained on the Internet. Previous conflicts had – despite the increasing globalising nature of the international jihadists – been fought mainly within the respective local contexts. With Sunni foreign fighters rushing to aid Sunni civilians, framed as support for ‘their people in need in times of war’, defined as *tenderness among them (ruhama’ baynahum)*,⁵³ in conflict zones the most powerful weapon became the media work of various groups to promote the terrorists as a humanitarian and vice versa. This is an integral part of the merging ideology, connecting local grievances to global tales and narratives – for a worldwide audience.

⁵⁰ Ibid. This vow is a pledge to uphold and maintain the jihadist side of the media in general, while in support of ISIS after its rift with al-Qa’ida central.

⁵¹ The work of such media activists who either reproduce or mash up jihadist propaganda online has been sanctioned and approved especially since Osama bin Laden’s death in 2011. As outlined in the text of Abu Yahya al-Libi, “Risala ila l-ikhwa fi thaghr al-i’lam al-jihadiyyi”, Nukhbat al-I’lam al-Jihadiyyi, August 11, 2013, <http://justpaste.it/3djs>, 12. The life, role and impact of Abu Yahya al-Libi is outlined in the subchapter *The New Martyrs of the Internet – the Death of AQ’s Second-in-Command, Abu Yahya al-Libi, Eulogized by Ayman al-Zawahiri*.

⁵² Ibid, 13.

⁵³ As detailed in the chapter *The ‘Arab Spring’ as a Renaissance for AQ Affiliates in a Historical Perspective*.

Addressing real-life and existent grievances on an honest basis, showing empathy and providing active help to those affected by war, hunger and the constant struggle for survival on humanitarian grounds and by combative means, is a potent part of the extremist narration. The careful design of jihadist audio-visual productions, often mixed and enriched by (pseudo-) theological elements highlighting and marking any call to action as an obligation for any true believer is not new and has since the dawn of jihadist media found a voice by passionate members of militant groups worldwide. This, however, is one pillar on which extremist narratives are built on while the jihadi media in principal on an increasing scale assumes a hegemonic role and a monopoly of truth – with its strongest and yet safest foundation on the Internet, first and foremost on the forums and the vast channels provided by Social Media.

As every deed by the *Mujahid*, or *Media Mujahid* is accomplished for the pleasure of God, the motivation of the propagandist is as much fuelled by individuals as those who do undertake the physical migration (*hijra*) to join the battlefields. This movement is thus describable as consisting out of two main elements, (i) the support networks consisting of recruitment, financing, media work, local missionary work and preaching, and (ii) actual fighters and those in general who abandon their home countries and families to join real-life *Mujahidin* in real war zones. The first may be referred to as political *Salafists*, who adhere to the overall lifestyle of the early Muslims under the command of Prophet Muhammad, but who nevertheless share and support the commitment as well as the ideology of militant jihadists.

This specific substrate of *Salafism*

“operates in a grey zone between political Salafism and Jihadism. Three types of salafi groups are to be distinguished: the purists, the political and the jihadi salafists.⁵⁴ The purists are first of all concerned about a pure teaching of Islam and a God or Islam abiding life of the individual and society. Political Salafists on the contrary connect demands to implement shari’a and a devoted lifestyle to God with an explicit political agenda. Jihadist Salafists on the other

⁵⁴ This distinction is grounded on the definition and categorization by Quintan Wiktorowicz, “Anatomy of the Salafi Movements,” in: *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 29 (2006) 3, 207-239.

hand centre the armed struggle, framed as a holy war, at the very core of their thinking and acting.”⁵⁵

However, this categorization may perhaps be defined as too limited if we come to understand the jihadi media phenomena as one of the core and root sources for a Salafi to adopt his or her beliefs and lifestyle accordingly. Rüdiger Lohlker rather categorizes this as a *mutation*, which we may imagine as a specific related torrent, a substrate of global jihadist networks that engage in fighting local authorities for a seemingly unified and ideological coherent objective.⁵⁶

The humanitarian angle of contemporary jihadist groups and movements has promoted and empowered the pro-militant *Salafi* torrent worldwide. Unified by their media outlets, boosting a similar rhetoric, iconography, and in principal related narratives, the *Ansar* (supporter) of these jihadi groups seek to promote the jihadist lifestyle by the highly articulate ideology that finds expression by iconographical and visual means. While the fighting *Mujahid* by combat and guerrilla war tactics opposed the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan of the 1980s and the subsequent western intervention in 2001, the capitalization on the sectarian-ethnic divisions of Balkan war of the 1990s, or the rise of foreign fighters and the import of their ideology during the aftermath of the struggle for independency of former Soviet satellite states in the greater Caucasus region, the most damaging effect took almost two decades to manifest: the rise of a transnational Middle Eastern Arabic ideology of *jihad*, that not only has a resilient propaganda presence on the Internet, but rather in the course of the transformation in the Middle East has taken up roots within Islamic societies.

The Value of the Internet for Strategic Communication

The media in principal is used on a tactical level, not only to incite and recruit individuals worldwide, but to create a ideological denominators and operational

⁵⁵ Nico Prucha, “Die Vermittlung arabischer Jihadisten-Ideologie: Zur Rolle deutscher Aktivisten,” In: Guido Steinberg (ed.), *Jihadismus und Internet: Eine deutsche Perspektive*, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, October 2012, 45-56, http://www.swp-berlin.org/de/publikationen/swp-studien-de/swp-studien-detail/article/jihadismus_und_internet.html.

⁵⁶ Rüdiger Lohlker: *Salafismus als Teil der Globalgeschichte: Zur systematischen Betrachtung einer neuen religiösen Bewegung*, to be published 2014; in: Thorsten G. Schneiders (ed.): *Salafismus in Deutschland. Ursprünge und Gefahren einer islamisch-fundamentalistischen Bewegung*, forthcoming.

paradigms with policy guidelines for various jihadist groups. While “jihad” is first and foremost agreed to as being implemented by militant and violent means in general, or in short linked to “combat” (*qital*), the media thereof follows the rationale of propagating Islam (*da’wa*) and the proper religious methodology (*manhaj*). This propagation thus is part of the overall objective to “re-establish the rightly guided Caliphate” while uniting various Sunni fighting groups and individuals under this particular propagated *manhaj*.⁵⁷

As a consequence of the strategic value of jihadist media, the perception has shifted to a new role model: the “media Mujahid” and the “media martyr”. For any media worker embedded with fighting *Mujahidin* or committed in secret to develop and disseminate jihadist media worldwide has in the meantime been equated to any ‘regular’ *Mujahid* or even proactive martyrdom seeker. The jihadist media departments are as decentralized as the Internet itself. Subsequently, this role model is backed by the call to take the fight on a greater level on all channels online as issued by *al-Fajr*, an official media channel of AQ, in their response to the killing of bin Laden:

“The Internet is a battlefield for jihad, a place for missionary work, a field of confronting the enemies of God. It is upon any individual to consider himself as a media-mujahid, dedicating himself, his wealth and his time for God.”⁵⁸

For the ‘*media mujahid*’ there is no need to physically join the real-life militant groups to participate in the divine obligations of combat as his means of propagation are functional and of greater value far from the battlefield. This divine obligation in jihadist terminology consists of incitement, inspiring (*tahrid*) the targeted audience to follow the actions of the *Mujahidin*. AQ’s senior leadership has emphasized this in publications over the last years and made direct statements in recent *as-Sahab* videos. The Libyan ideologue ‘Attiyatullah al-Libi (d. 2012) had been quoted in a video

⁵⁷ Mu’assasat al-Ma’sada al-I’lamiyya / Fursan al-Balagh al-I’lam (eds.), Bayyan nusrat al-ansar li-ikhwanihim al-Mujahidin al-abrar, 3-5.

⁵⁸ Bayan min markaz al-Fajr li-l i’lam, “ta’ziyya wa-tahani’a li-ummat al-Islam bi-munasiba istishhad al-shaykh al-asad Osama bin Laden”, 1432 a.H.

entitled “You are only accountable for yourself”, a direct quote from the Qur’an (4:84), equating the urge to join the *Mujahidin* with the propaganda work that will inspire individuals to engage in

“missionary calls to each and every Muslim for jihad; to join the caravan of *jihad* (*qafilat al-jihad*) under any circumstances. This means without preconditions or limitations on the basis of the call to arms (*nafir*) towards this or that front – and the incitement to jihad is a *shari’a*-law obligation. God, exalted is He, says: “Prophet, urge the believers to fight...”⁵⁹, and: “Urge the believers on. God may well curb the power of the disbelievers.”⁶⁰ »⁶¹

‘Attiyatullah al-Libi was killed in a U.S. drone strike in Pakistan in August 2012 and of significant importance to the Afghanistan-Pakistan based AQ network and the global media outreach strategy. His mediaized legacy continues to influence actors and warzones to this day, as is evident in the case of Syria as of 2014 and outlined in the following chapters.⁶² The teachings of ‘Attiyatullah al-Libi, who revealed his clear-name in 2011 in the wake of the uprising against Libyan long-time ruler Mu’ammarr al-Qadhafi as Jamal Ibrahim Ishtiwiy al-Misrati⁶³ are part of a cluster-network of jihadist textual and audio-visual materials freely available on the Internet. Religion by the jihadist interpretation and reading of legitimate sources is thus framed and branded with the objective to broadcast a central frame of unity of all Sunni Muslims against the portrayed and defined enemies. Real-life grievances, pictures and video sequences of killed or maimed children, women, and elderly within the wider context of occupation and the associated “loss of territory” are thus linked to the ideological and theological network of texts and sermons. All of this material is linked and interlinked and the interconnected nature of this big data pool makes up one big network based on cohesive elements of its individual nodes. The *jihadism online sphere* with its many professional media nodes and organisations that work with,

⁵⁹ First part of 8:65.

⁶⁰ Part of 4:84.

⁶¹ La tukallafu ila nafsaka, as-Sahab Media Production, June 2011.

⁶² In particular in the chapter *Introducing ‘Attiyatullah al-Libi: The Online Superstar*.

⁶³ Nico Prucha, *Eyeballing Libya – al-Qa’ida’s New Foothold?*, Austrian Institute for International Affairs, *Policy Paper*, April 2011, www.oaip.ac.at/fileadmin/Unterlagen/Dateien/Newsletter/Libya.pdf.

among, and for real-life fighting brigades on the ground have retained resilience in terms of its ability to adapt and to regroup. This part of the Internet by the carriers and activists of *jihadism online* seems to be self-organizing and a non-linear phenomenon due to vast quantity and quality of materials available, that in its variety appeal differently to different users or consumers thereof. This “superorganism” in the sense

“as genes are to the organism, so memes are to the super organism, pulling together millions of individuals into a collective creature of awesome size”⁶⁴

has proven time and again to be a fertile ground to incite and recruit individual consumers. With the countless jihadist videos and the literal corpus of differing degree explaining and showcasing jihadist ideology and identity acting as the meme inside the “super organism” it is able and set to spawn and re-spawn in local environments. These local environments, such as in Syria or as far away as Indonesia, The Philippines, or within Western societies in the manifestation of pro-jihadist *salafist* circles, provide new media files to the cohesive overarching ideology. Naturally, we might replace the term *super organism* with *mother ship* in the understanding that jihadist ideology – similar as a colonizing spacecraft – sends out drones, beacons, and settlers to terraforming and colonization. While within human and majority Muslim societies such as in Indonesia, The Philippines, Malaysia and elsewhere, where some form of anti-government insurgency has been happening in the recent or historical past, seeds of the AQ inspired ideology and iconography are emerging.

The reproduction of the jihadist, mainly AQ narrative, within a localized environment spurs and elevates the decentralisation of the mainframe ideology, with the specific formations on the rhetorical and visual entering local communities, subsequently affecting and transforming these. Arabic remains the *lingua jihadica* with its pertaining iconography as a recognizable and appealing brand. The output of these

⁶⁴ Howard Bloom, *The Lucifer Principle – A Scientific Expedition into the Forces of History*, ebook edition, 82.

localized groups or detachments, independent of their open or non-open militancy,⁶⁵ adds to this multi-lingual “super organism”, on board the *mother ship*, with

“activists of online Jihadi subculture[s] (...) giving their best to create virtual statehood and organizations. Examples are the ritualized subordination under virtual institutions (...) the symbolism and aesthetics applied in online Jihadi spaces, as well as the specific ways of processing theological ideas in cyberspace (framing).”⁶⁶

Nevertheless, the role and importance of Sunni Foreign Fighters have had and indeed continue to have a devastating impact on local Muslim culture and societies. The majority of these foreign fighters are Arabs, and in the context of the Syrian conflict as of 2014 increasingly second and third generation Arab migrants from European countries.⁶⁷ These mainly young folks are tech-savvy and usually well equipped with smart phones, tablets, cameras, and other technical gimmicks which are used as two-way-stream communication devices, allowing:

1. active participation and consummation within the jihadist online sphere and territories, being members of jihadi forums, part of the clusters on Twitter, Facebook, instagram etc.
2. Within the various channels via their established online profiles those who physically joined jihadist groups inside zones of conflict add information.

⁶⁵ While jihadist ideology is enforced in “weak” or “failed states” with little to no repercussion by formal state actors, the pro-jihadist *Salafist* movements that spawned in particular in Europe in the years after September 11, 2001, have established support networks on- and offline. As outlined in Nico Prucha, “Die Vermittlung arabischer Jihadisten-Ideologie: Zur Rolle deutscher Aktivisten,” In: Guido Steinberg (ed.), *Jihadismus und Internet: Eine deutsche Perspektive*, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, October 2012, 45-56, http://www.swp-berlin.org/de/publikationen/swp-studien-de/swp-studien-detail/article/jihadismus_und_internet.html.

⁶⁶ Philipp Holtmann, *Virtual Leadership: How Jihadis Guide Each Other in Their “Internetworks.” A Study of Communicative Guidance Patterns in Online-Jihad*, manuscript, dissertation, University of Vienna, 9. Furthermore, as Philipp Holtmann describes in a pertaining footnote: “Discourses and narratives determine what is accepted as right and wrong within a culture. Jihadi discourses, for example, legitimize “holy war” and “suicide attacks.” Online jihad offers a sub-cultural narrative that strengthens the in-group cohesion of its participants and affects mainstream Muslim culture.”

⁶⁷ ICSR Insight: Up to 11,000 foreign fighters in Syria; steep rise among Western Europeans, *The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation*, <http://icsr.info/2013/12/icsr-insight-11000-foreign-fighters-syria-steep-rise-among-western-europeans/>.

Thus, these individuals become active role models themselves on the very channels where they may have been inspired by others to migrate (*hijra*) to the battlefields of *jihad* – participating as fighters and as media contributors.

As such, the high-output of jihadist videos whereas fighters, ideologues, preachers, or mere sympathizers assume a role of authority in interpreting religious sources with an immediate implementation thereof: by being a ‘true Muslim’, by translating religious comprehension and commitment into direct action. The combination of filmed output of written ideology with direct access to it by any ‘seeker’ is a cluster set of data on the Internet. This information cluster acts and functions by the understanding, motivation and intention by the contributors and makers as a network for *informal learning and education*. The *monopoly of truth* is core of the media strategies to relay and relate this form of *informal education* to the worldwide audience. The jihadist endeavours online are part of a global culture dependent on modern technology to broadcast themselves and their messages to the world. This modern agitprop is not restricted to jihadists and is used by likewise by other militant and hate groups. However, the jihadi use of the Internet is unprecedented in terms of the vast quantity of various categories of propaganda material. Especially the audio-visual productions are perhaps the most powerful tool as

“militants and hate groups of all colors and backgrounds use the Internet as a communication facility to lure consumers into their specific interpretation or world perception, trying to gain sympathy through modern, pop-cultural elements. Jihadists employ *nashid* [“praiseful hymns”⁶⁸] and *huda* [“encouraging battle songs”⁶⁹] in combination with appealing training, combat, or everyday aspects of the Mujahidin and use a powerful yet comprehensible rhetoric. The rhetoric is inseparable from the (audio-) visual content and enforces key elements such as grievances and the need to respond, usually framed as a “call” to arms (*naqir*).”⁷⁰

⁶⁸ For example a training video by the *Liwa’ al-Islam Brigade* (Syria) entitled “mashru’ takhrij dawrat al-maham al-khassa”, published April 14, 2013 on YouTube shows the powerful functioning of the *nashid*, and in a later part of the video the *huda*’, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l6wm6ErJhHE>.

⁶⁹ The powerful role of song craft, an essential part of the jihadi culture, is further detailed in this article in the chapter *The Martyrdom of the munshid of the al-Shumukh Forum*.

⁷⁰ Ali Fisher and Nico Prucha, “Jihadi Twitter Activism Part 2: Jabhat al-Nusra on the Twittersphere”, *Jihadica*, May 13, 2013, <http://www.jihadica.com/jihadi-twitter-activism-part-2-jabhat-al-nusra-on-the-twittersphere/>

The jihadi media occupies a public space online to manifest with the objective of influencing individuals or changing group dynamics to convey the ideology from the online space to offline territories and space in general. It is a question of identity and creating community with the jihadists' ambition of providing the consumers with awareness that will lead to religious radicalization. *Informal education* via the online channels has proven to be most effective to reach and include young Muslims worldwide. The *visual literacy* the young(er) generation is so familiar with is conveyed by icons, symbols, ritual acts while a jihadist customized rhetoric is embedded within this symbolism. These elements are in turn embedded in videos that capitalize on the aesthetics of martyrdom and frame military operations by *Mujahidin* in general as legitimate acts sanctioned by divine scripture. Perhaps as an outcome of the influx of Arab Foreign Fighters since the 1980s to today, the similarities of ideological codes and codex are a driving force and an identity marker evident in audio-visual productions worldwide showcasing icons, and policy implementation used within offline territories under control of jihadist groups. In studying various related sources from different regions, one finds an increasing conformity and an in-depth unilateralism of these geopolitical diverse and divided groups since 9/11. Arabic sources and emissaries have an impact and are reproduced by jihadist and Islamist groups subscribing to this monopoly of truth. The war for independence in Chechnya had been "jihadized" in a similar fashion as the struggle of the Uighurs in West China has become an essential part of the Arabic language jihadi media output, framing similar grievances of oppression, occupation and extortion by non-Muslim armies. On a visual basis with pertaining rhetorical means unity is advocated by the diverse jihadi related groups, despite the fact that the groups' immediate goals remain local. The long-term message, however, is about a local struggle for independence to establish future provinces (*walayats*) of the *Caliphate* in the global making.

In particular in the wake of the so-called 'Arab Spring' and even more so in times of the cruel and bloody civil-war in Syria, the jihadi media strategists can resort to a massive mediatized pool of real grievances while framing the any militant action as a just response to these cruelties. The frustration of the absence of any form of intervention by Western powers in Syria, as had been the case in Libya, despite the doubtful result, is a driving force for foreign fighters worldwide to act on behalf of the oppressed (*mustada'ifeen*) and

tortured. The trauma of the loss of Palestine⁷¹ and the declaration of the state of Israel referred to as in Arab circles as the *nakba* (catastrophe) must never be repeated. This trauma coincides with the motivation of being a vanguard to protect other Islamic territories and is evident for the motivation of foreign fighters joining the *jihad* in the 1980s against the Red Army in Afghanistan and other conflicts such as Bosnia where the fear of losing Islamic territory is tied into the threat of “de-Islamization” of this very ground.⁷² This category of jihadist ‘narratives’ has since 9/11 and the subsequent “war on terror” been framed as a “war on Islam” whereas only the jihadi or the supporter of jihadi movements are validated as uncorrupted believers in God. Furthermore, the jihadis assume the status of being soldiers of God (*jund allah*) and associate themselves by the Qur’anic reference *awliya’* (friends / saints) as being in closest proximity to divine power and spirit. This perception is mingled, however, with the frustration of any support for people in times of need. Perception translates to motivation resulting as practical action manifesting in any form of support for, in the jihadist narrative, oppressed Sunni civilians everywhere, reaching out to Muslims under fire as far away as in the Central African Republic or Mali. With no apparent support or help for the suffering people in conflict zones such as Syria as of 2014, any propagandist has an easy task to exploit this human drive to support (*nusra*). Supporting suffering civilians is one of the many pillars on which extremists build their narrative on. The exploitation of grievances (*ma’ana*) and the high-density visual data output thereof on Social Media and classical online channels has proven that consumers of these grievances accept and sanction jihadist ‘counter-violence’. This specific narrative is guised within the theological-ideological framework of the complex ideology and embedded in a the perception of the global “war on Islam.”

In their habitus and manifestation, jihadist media discourses refer to certain principles of belief, or state norms, symbols, wordings, and sources with the intention of resonance in their target or random audience. As members of their respective societies, or religiously influenced cultures, they operate from “within” in crafting public messages and framing their narratives, sanctioning violence and defining “justice” and “values”. It is as if

⁷¹ The implications and consequences in the collective perception of loosing an integral part of identity with the occupation of Palestine by non-Muslim actors for the dynamic of global jihad is analysed in: Hazim al- Amin. *al-Salafi al-yatim – al-wajha al-filastini li-“jihad al-alimi” wa-“l qa’ida”*, Dar al-Saqi: Beirut, London 2011.

⁷² Nico Prucha. *Arab Foreign Fighters in Bosnia – The Roads to Europe*, in: In: Gunther Hauser, Franz Kernic, Sven Gareis: “The European Union - a Global Actor?”, Opladen, Berlin, Toronto: Budrich Publishers, 2013, 334-50.

“the form in which the significant symbols are embodied to reach the public may be spoken, written, pictorial, or musical, and the number of stimulus carriers is indefinite. If the propagandist identifies himself imaginatively with the lives of the subjects in a particular situation, he is able to explore several channels of approach.”⁷³

Social Media and Iconography – the Visual Literacy of Ideology within the Reach of a Mouse Click

Social Media has become a main passageway and channel used by extremist groups worldwide, and has proven being instrumental in the promotion of the militants’ and hate groups causes. In regard of the militant jihadist and in general Islamist groups and actors, this promotion online is enriched by visual elements, tied into texts of various decrees, all of which are integral part of this cohesive and coherent radical ideology. Twitter is a main gateway leading to YouTube clips and movies, mainly published by official and verified media departments of militant groups fighting in various localities whereas the consumer finds easy access to all elements part of this cluster of information making up the ideology. With the conflict in Syria turning onto a full fledged civil war⁷⁴ with outside actors taking active opposing sides, as of 2012 the Sunni jihadist faction involved and engaged in this conflict have expanded and (re-) established their structures.

These structures include a paramilitary decree of command and control, whereas media departments and commissioned *media Mujahidin* are part of the hierarchy, organisation and fully acknowledged by the leadership. The televised and narrated actions and deeds of the militants within the cluster networks of the ideology, explaining and sanctioning these acts as legal, or morally justified, is perhaps the most threatening and appealing element of the innovative usage and understanding of the Internet by jihadist actors. AQ as a mother-ideology, or backbone of the jihadist “super organism”, has initiated these phenomena online, which continues to thrive even in times when the AQ senior

⁷³ Harold D. Lasswell, The Theory of Political Propaganda, The American Political Science Review, Vol. 21, No. 3. (Aug., 1927), 627-631, <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0003-0554%28192708%2921%3A3%3C627%3ATTOPP%3E2.0.CO%3B2-L>.

⁷⁴ George Sabra, the president of the National Council, opposes this sentiment, stating that “there is no war in Syria, but a revolution!” Interview with George Sabra, March 15, 2014, Vienna.

leadership distances themselves from relationship to *the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham*.⁷⁵

The main objective and the greatest success of AQ initiated ideology is the impact thereof on individuals and groups that ultimately subscribe to this understanding of the religion of Islam. This also, sadly, means and implies that this appealing ideology draws individuals and groups into giving up or replacing their religious rituals and commitment with that set of interpretations and hermeneutical explanations of Qur'an and Sunna by jihadist and/or AQ ideologues. Any individual or group action within the mainframe of this ideology that is returned to the visible side online, by issuing statements justifying attacks, bombings, executions etc. and in particular any audio-visual piece uploaded strengthens this ideology and action and furthers not only ideological coherence, but resilience. Any fighter or *Mujahid* in general by his own account and actions speaking to the audience serves as part of the cluster network, whereas he is a node of repetition – re-submitting conveyed narratives and the overall ideology by individual commitment. This is nothing new or innovatively as jihadi media brigades and activists have been keen to act in the fashion of 'documentary movie-makers' emphasizing the humanitarian aspect of their struggle for Sunni civilians in conflict zones. This element, showcasing the help and care to ease the suffering of Muslim civilians, had proven successful in the *jihad* against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s and has subsequently become a key *narrative* of jihadist video tale telling of the conflict in Syria as of 2013 onwards. The combination of

⁷⁵ Statement regarding the Relationship of the Qa'idat al-Jihad group to ISIS, Markaz al-Fajr li-l I'lam, <https://alfidaa.info/vb/showthread.php?t=92927>, February 2, 2014. Al-Qa'ida Central issued this statement distancing themselves from *the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham* with the refusal of ISIS' leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to pledge allegiance (*bay'a*) to AQ-*amir* Ayman al-Zawahiri. As a consequence, the Syrian revolution against al-Assad was further divided with various 'rebel' factions turning on each other – including *Jabhat al-Nusra*, the official branch of AQ turning on ISIS and vice versa. The clash – or *fitna* (tribulation) – between ISIS and JN as well as other factions is the manifestation of two torrents: the claim of seniority posed by AQ and it's Syrian franchise *Jabhat al-Nusra* versus the practicality of *the Islamic State* in advancing to establish for what AQ pledged to fight for: the establishment of an Islamic State as part of the constituting Caliphate. Joas Wagemakers refers to ISIS as the *Zarqawiyyun*, practical military orientated individuals who by brute force seek to implement their principles of faith versus the *Maqdisiyyun*, adherents of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi who criticized the *Islamic State* for it's apparent rapid move in declaring a Caliphate. For further reading: Joas Wagemakers, *A Quietist Jihadi – The Ideology and Influence of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, 2012. Cole Bunzel referred to this rift as "two tendencies predominate among jihadis insofar as the Syrian war is concerned: one favoring the al-Qaeda-affiliated *Jabhat al-Nusra* (JN) and cooperation with all rebel groups, and another favoring ISIS and its exclusionary political designs as the reborn Islamic state, or proto-caliphate." Cole Bunzel, *The Islamic State of Disunity: Jihadsim Divided*, *Jihadica*, January 30, 2014, <http://www.jihadica.com/the-islamic-state-of-disunity-jihadism-divided/>. See also: Ezzeldeen Khalil and Nico Prucha, Relationship between ISIL and local Syrian rebels break down, *IHS Jane's Islamic Affairs Analyst*, Islamic World Web Watch, April 2014.

the fighter and the caretaker was crafted by early *jihād* videos, as Abdal Asiem El Difraoui writes, whereas

“on y retrouve également certains des thèmes qui seront ensuite repris dans toutes les productions, comme celui de la souffrance des civils musulmans ou encore celui de la camaraderie qui deviendra un des thèmes les plus importants dans les vidéos de recrutement. A la fin du film, Al Qaida présente un élément qui n’apparaîtra plus dans ses futures productions audiovisuelles : des actions positives, humanitaires. De nombreuses séquences montrent comment des médecins arabes soignent des malades à l’hôpital de Jalalabad. On voit aussi la distribution de biens de première nécessité et la mise en place de camp de réfugiés composés de tentes fabriqués par les Arabes au profit des Afghans.”⁷⁶

While the videos and writings of the 1980s and early 1990s (Bosnia, Caucasus) had been restricted to VHS-tapes and print, the ideological bearings, the jihadist lifestyle in general entered popular culture in concentric circles since. In the aftermath of the attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C. on September 11, 2001, and as a consequence the intervention against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in October that year and the occupation of Iraq in 2003, the jihadi lifestyle became a popular expression for those who are in opposition to the renewed policy focus by the West in general affecting mainly Islamic countries. The hard-core jihadist media, comprising of the dual-use of propagating its ideology on a (audio-) visual and written basis, created in the decade after the September 11, 2001 attacks a new movement worldwide, consisting of those who found personal salvation by adhering to the jihadists’ framework of Muslim identity. What had been constrained to opposing *the* occupation (*ihtilal*) of Palestine turned into a notion of resistance to western interventions within the greater framework of “the war on terror” (*harb ‘ala irhab*), that was coined by AQ and sympathizers as a “war on Islam.” The constitution of the jihadist media in the 1980s conflict against the Soviets expanded and travelled together with foreign fighters and their ideology to new conflict zones. The

⁷⁶ Asiem El Difraoui, *Al Qaida par l’image ou la prophétie du martyr. Une analyse politique de la propagande audiovisuelle du jihad global* (PhD diss., Science Po, 2010), 144.

media had always been the main facility to carry legitimate grievances and sufferings of Muslim civilians forced to live under the plight of war, used and abused by these media

“activists [who] reframed religion as culture in need of protection. But also mindful of the value/myth of individual freedom to choose.”⁷⁷

With the media arms embedded into fighting units the value of the jihadist media for incitement, indoctrination, recruitment, and financing was quickly understood. These arms gained more and more independence of the warring side especially when non-militant groups solely established to promote ideology by means of *da'wa* as their core component enriched the combat units of jihad. This expansion and globalised notion grew exponentially to the “war on terrorism” policy of western states whereas grievances, discrimination and hatred towards the west in general was translated into the framework of identity by jihadist – and subsequently pro-jihadist *salafist* – standards. The framing of “Islam” by extremist narration and definition is carried by physical networks, originating from preachers or recruiters as those who relay the ideology to individuals or a wider audience. With the use of the Internet such radicalizers and recruiters have been empowered to exercise their influence online as well, being nodes of influence on- and offline. In the jihadist context, such nodes of influence within networks are agents to spread and disseminate the specific interpretation (*ta'wil*), religious orthopraxy or methodology (*manhaj*) and the wider spiritual mind set which is presented side-by-side with physical implementation and enacting (*'aqida*). What does it mean to be a ‘true’ Muslim, a ‘real’ *Mujahid*, a ‘pure’ believer, a ‘uncorrupted’ individual of the future caliphate or *umma* is advocated within the jihadist and pro-jihadist *salafist* corpus of writings, videos, audio-tracks, pictures. This corpus is fed by jihadi operations producing new content on a daily basis – especially with the unresolved and increasing sectarian conflict in Syria and the re-emergence of violence in Iraq. With the surge of jihadist groups, in size and numbers, it is a fair game for the respective media arms or battalions to employ

⁷⁷ Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment, in: *Annu. Rev. Sociol.* 2000. 26:611–39, 629.

“cultural ideas, items, or practices – [which] are framed so as to enhance the prospect of their resonance with the host or target culture: strategic selection or adaptation and strategic fitting or accommodation. Strategic selection encompasses situations in which there is intentional cross-cultural borrowing, with the adopter or importer assuming the role of an active agent in the process, strategically selecting and adapting the borrowed items to the new host context or culture.”⁷⁸

Ideological coherence and resilience coincides with the rise of *Jabhat al-Nusra* and ISIS in Syria, while the Iraqi State of Iraq as the foundation for ISIS is re-emerging throughout Iraq. Especially in the province of al-Anbar and Baghdad, Kirkuk, Mosul, Ramadi and Fallujah ISIS regained a military momentum and a renaissance, that led to the declaration of the Caliphate in June 2014. The impact of ideology mirrored on- and offline is a result of the jihadi endurance of high-quality edited media files that are an essential part of public media campaign. Groups tend to advocate their unity, embarking its consumers and the wider audience on a journey to the “battlefields” while employing a recognizable rhetoric alongside the image-based narratives and iconography. This has created in particular since September 11, 2001 and the rise of jihadi media predecessors in Iraq⁷⁹ in the aftermath of the 2003 military intervention by the United States of America a visualized public sphere, in which ideological messages are deployed, grievances addressed and framed accordingly. Within the online channels of *jihadism*, the most popular content, as outlined below, is mainly the audio-visual genre of the overall ideology. The audio-visual element is key of the creation of a *visual literacy* where individuals are initiated by iconography, rituals, and a specific habitus (clothing, acts, forms of prayer etc.) with pertaining rhetorical tools comprising sermons, explanations, definitions and a militant implementation of this specific ideology. If one seeks to further gain an understanding on religious key-concepts, textual data-sheds such as the website *tawhed.ws* serve to fulfil this cause as a major node within the cluster networks. The

⁷⁸ Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment, in: *Annu. Rev. Sociol.* 2000. 26:611–39, 627.

⁷⁹ As detailed in: Nico Prucha. “Online Territories of Terror – Utilizing the Internet for Jihadist Endeavors,” *ORIENT IV* (2011): 43.

jihadist ideology in its quantitative and qualitative rich output could be described as *liquid data*, whereas it serves to fulfil the need and ideological gap of any user by intellectual reasoning and interpretation of religious sources and the promoted actions of the *Mujahidin*. The package deployed online from various local conflict zones and western-based sympathizers is framed and made digestible to a global, multi-lingual audience, shaping and mapping the mechanism of identifying oneself as a ‘true’ Muslim.

The visual communication, the visualized conveyance of textual ideology in combination with the open-access to the textual side provide a secure environment of guidance and identification, with easy unrestricted access to all of the outlined elements. The vast amounts of ideological pieces are available to everyone. Without discrimination, rather reaching out to those who prefer a video explanation of key concepts to the exhausting reading of a lengthy *fatwa* or theological tractates, ideology is conveniently conveyed by practical examples or preachers/fighters explaining key concepts. Popular scripts have been made available in non-Arabic and serve to include all those unable to dig into the rich mainly Arabic textual databases. The iconography of violent and non-militant groups influenced by AQ and ISIS worldwide conveys the messages and the wider context by the recognizable symbols. At the same time, a clerical caste is promoted on different layers and levels, including historical scholars such as Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328)⁸⁰ or contemporary ideologues such as ‘Abdallah ‘Azzam (d. 1988), or the late bin Laden (d. 2011), Anwar al-Awlaki (d. 2011), Yahya ‘Attiya (2011).

It does pose a great irony that in fighting modernity the Internet has become the most resilient stronghold for groups as AQ, where it has found a “virtual sanctuary.”⁸¹ This sanctuary is the key launching pad for disseminating general communication and for providing informal education and guidance to their followers and sympathizers – with the ambition to provide paradigms to cope with real-world grievances, granting a rationale to the dire state of Muslim communities repressed in various countries and the master-narrative of the “war on Islam” on behalf of a Judeo-Crusader alliance.

⁸⁰ On Ibn Taymiyya and his work: Yahya Michot, *Muslims under non-Muslim Rule, Ibn Taymiyya on – Fleeing from Sin; - kinds of Emigration; - the Status of Mardin; - the conditions for challenging Power*, Oxford – London: Interface Publications, 2006.

⁸¹ Magnus Ranstorp, *The virtual sanctuary of al-Qaida and terrorism in an age of globalization*, in: J.Eriksson and G. Giacomello (eds.), *International Relations and Security in the Digital Age*, London: Routledge, 2007.

This *virtual sanctuary* is neither made up of a *single narrative*, nor does it is a *stand-alone* entity on the Internet. It is built on real-life, physical networks that feed new data into this online *sanctuary* from the offline-worlds. The advantage of this online data warehouse is considerable and has proven to be a solid network for non-jihadist, that is non-open-militant groups in the aftermath of the so-called ‘Arab Spring’. These non-openly militant groups in, for example Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and elsewhere re-occupied public space after the stepping down or ousting of dictators with an easing grip of local secret services on Islamist and jihadist proxy networks. Guided and inspired by jihadist scholars, the AQ leadership, and the cluster set of information by the online jihad framework, the hard-core jihadist networks have a major advantage over any local moderate or secular opposition group. As Islamist and jihadist networks are organized and inclusive, these nodes can further build on pre-existent organizations within the countries affected by the Arab Spring where Islamist networks have been suppressed and monitored for decades, having driven these network partially underground into a highly organized secretive subculture. Thus, jihadist endeavors in reaching out to their respective home countries can base their support on

- (i) pre-existing organizations;
- (ii) adhering networks established in the wake of the ‘Arab Spring’ (*Ansar al-shari’a*);
- (iii) individuals inspired by AQ/Online Jihadism;
- (iv) the foundations of massive and professional propaganda.

With a re-launch of Islamist and jihadist actors and groups inside Arab countries, these remerged elements can ‘plug’n’play’ with the pre-existing ideology, tapping into the overall jihadist framing and the claim of assuming sociopolitical and religious authority.

The jihadist media departments, the most visible and public side of groups such as al-Qaeda, has developed, maintained and gravely improved a massive virtual footprint since the attacks on September 11, 2001. As Magnus Ranstorp outlines, AQ has created a “virtual sanctuary” from where the ideological parameters seem untouchable and freely roam the Internet. In a move from static websites and classical online forums, jihadist media has nowadays infested the contemporary social media platforms following the

same similar strategic incentive of the past “virtual sanctuary.” The growth of jihadist propaganda outreach has boosted networks in principal, as Magnus Ranstorp assesses, these networks shifted into a

“polymorphic structure or design with multiplicity of nodes or pods swarming towards a mission or resurrecting shortly before or after an operation. More fundamentally it allows survivability through a constant virtual presence with no real or tangible physical centres of gravity and in constant stealth mode and ideological motion. Having simply an online presence confers a certain degree of legitimacy which they otherwise would not have. It also allows them to resurrect and reconfigure at any time.”⁸²

As outlined in an article in June 2013 with Ali Fisher for the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, the media strategies of jihadist actors changed drastically. For

“online media platforms facilitate a blend of audio-visual media interspersed with writings that further sanctions and explains specific ideological dimensions of jihadist activity.”⁸³

The persistent as well as ideological cohesive online presence of jihadist propaganda, framed as authoritative rulings and determinations, has become an open sub-culture. The jihadist narrative, enforced by audio- and visual elements strengthens in-group cohesion and affects mainstream Muslim culture, the main targeted audience.

With the increase of the range of

“online platforms has expanded, so jihadist groups have increasingly used sites such as Twitter,⁸⁴ Facebook, and YouTube,⁸⁵ with their use of tumblr also

⁸² Magnus Ranstorp, The virtual sanctuary of al-Qaida and terrorism in an age of globalization, in: J.Eriksson and G. Giacomello (eds.), *International Relations and Security in the Digital Age*, London: Routledge, 2007.

⁸³ Nico Prucha and Ali Fisher. Tweeting for the Caliphate – Twitter as the New Frontier for Jihadist Propaganda. CTC Sentinel (Westpoint), June 2013, <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/tweeting-for-the-caliphate-twitter-as-the-new-frontier-for-jihadist-propaganda>.

⁸⁴ For an introduction to the jihadist presence on Twitter as well as the social-media strategy deployed since the outbreak of violence in Syria: Ali Fisher and Nico Prucha, “Jihadi Twitter Activism – Introduction”, *Jihadica* (2013), <http://www.jihadica.com/jihadi-twitter-activism-introduction/>.

gathering pace.⁸⁶ The role and in particular the *role model* of the ‘media mujahid’ has been approved,⁸⁷ sanctioned⁸⁸ and encouraged with the release of suggested strategies⁸⁹, although not all have seen the move away from the traditional forum based interaction as positive.^{90,91}

The nature of communication has changed in the past decade with the Internet nowadays being an omnipresent entity.

The Everyday Jihad on the Internet

We engage in online discourses on a daily basis via our classical computers and laptops, but increasingly so by the use of small portable computers, such as smartphones and tablets. This highly engaging and engulfing media interaction allows a never-before possible interaction between those who produce media content and the consumers. As

⁸⁵ Cori E. Dauber, “*YouTube War: Fighting in a World of Cameras in Every Cell Phone and Photoshop on Every Computer*,” Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College (2009), <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=951>

⁸⁶ Rüdiger Lohlker, “Tumbling Along the Straight Path – Jihadis on tumblr.com”, Research Notes University of Vienna (2012). The article is available at: <http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/tumblr.pdf>, referenced in: Ali Fisher and Nico Prucha, Is this the most Successful Release of a Jihadist Video Ever? Part 2: The Release of *Salil al-sawarim al-rabi*’, *Jihadica*, May 21, 2014, <http://goo.gl/bMNPTC>.

⁸⁷ Al-Manhajiyya fi tahsil al-khbra al-i’lamiyya, Mu’assasat al-Furqan & Markaz al-Yaqin, part 1, May 2011.

⁸⁸ The sanctioning of jihadi activity is related to the existing core fatwas, authoritative rulings, ideological decrees and so on. Thus, any local jihadi AQ-affiliated action is therefore placed under the virtual umbrella, increasing the appeal. Prem Mahadevan, “The Glocalisation of al-Qaedaism”, Center for Security Studies (CSS), <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Articles/Special-Feature/Detail/?lng=en&id=161729&tabid=1454211886&contextid774=161729&contextid775=161659>.

⁸⁹ Discussed in:

<http://www.jihadica.com/jihadi-twitter-activism-introduction/>

Members of the Ansar al-Mujahidin forum and Shumukh al-Islam have posted advice encouraging fellow users to develop social media profiles to disseminate their message to a wider group of users; for example:

“The Twitter Guide // the Most Important Jihadi Users and Support Accounts for Jihad and the Mujahidin on Twitter”, <https://shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=192509>.

“Selected Tweets from Twitter”, <https://shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=192509>.

⁹⁰ The jihadi success of Twitter has had its impact on leading Jihadi writers such as Abu Sa’d al-‘Amili to highlight the shift of “major [jihadi] writers and analysts”, lamenting the general decline in participation in jihadi online forums. Cole Bunzel, “Are the Jihadi Forums Flagging? An Ideologue’s Lament”, *Jihadica*, March 20, 2013, <http://www.jihadica.com/are-the-jihadi-forums-flagging-an-ideologue%E2%80%99s-lament/>

⁹¹ Nico Prucha and Ali Fisher. Tweeting for the Caliphate – Twitter as the New Frontier for Jihadist Propaganda. CTC Sentinel (Westpoint), June 2013, <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/tweeting-for-the-caliphate-twitter-as-the-new-frontier-for-jihadist-propaganda>.

almost all forms of online media allow, enable, and empower users to generate their own content and interact by posting comments, questions, or responses, a new culture of media consumption and production has come to exist, whereas the jihadist sub-culture on the Internet are part of. The martyr videos are posted on YouTube and elsewhere, while

“the links to YouTube have the dual strength of a rich media environment and the potential to draw the viewer into a densely interconnected cluster of mutually reinforcing video content. In some cases the users must be aware of current jihadi developments and trends to fully comprehend pictures that may appear odd to an uninitiated viewer. However, other videos are a clear and obvious part of the jihadi visual culture of martyrdom and advocate ideological harmony. Pictures of individual martyrs for example, are framed as part of the overall jihadi culture and are popular on Twitter (and Facebook) where they are commemorated and propagated as role models.”⁹²

The jihadist culture online embraces the visual output, generating professionally made videos on a daily basis. Most of the ‘official’ productions by jihadi media departments are published via the jihadi forums and at the same time uploaded to YouTube with links being advertised for on Twitter and Facebook, where sympathizers contribute in disseminating the links or upload the videos to other channels to further decentralize the data. Especially with the violence in Syria on a viral scale with hundreds of jihadi brigades fighting the regime, the video output of the overall jihadist genre on YouTube has risen and is thus ultimate part of

“the unstoppable emergence of audiovisual content on the net. The figures and forecasts are downright impressive: video downloads reached 20m[illion] terabytes in 2012, which means an increase of over 50% in relation to 2010. It is estimated that, by 2016, 1.2m minutes of video will cross the net every

⁹² Ali Fisher and Nico Prucha, “Jihadi Twitter Activism Part 2: Jabhat al-Nusra on the Twittersphere”, Jihadica, May 13, 2013, <http://www.jihadica.com/jihadi-twitter-activism-part-2-jabhat-al-nusra-on-the-twittersphere/>.

second of the year. Also improvements in connectivity on mobile phones already highlight the fact that on-line video will be the fastest growing application at a rate of 75% between 2012 and 2017. Further to this, the availability of free editing software, constant bandwidth increases and access to on-line repositories have enriched audiovisual contributions on the net, adding to the phenomenon key social, cultural and political dimensions.”⁹³

The classical jihadi discussion forums remain the vital hub for authoritative, cohesive, and coherent propaganda disseminated via all channels of the Internet.⁹⁴ However, with an increasing pace, jihadi media groups and activists have turned to the social media and are fully committed on Twitter where selected parts and most popular aspects of this cohesive ideology are disseminated in a crowd-out style.⁹⁵ The importance and renewed focus on Twitter by jihadist groups, for example, is highlighted in the recently published 11th issue of the English Jihadi magazine *Inspire*,⁹⁶ where in a fandom styled fashion Twitter is appraised as another important tool for to propagate Islam by jihadist definition.

After all, as Jason Lanier puts it, “digital information is really just people in disguise”⁹⁷ and the Internet is an intersection whereas content from the real world, our daily lives, enter a global platform in textual, visual, and audio-/visual form. As much as any of the

⁹³ According to the “Call for Papers: Videoactivism, culture and participation. Theory and practice of social change in the age of the networks”, issued by Dr. Francisco Sierra and Dr. David Montero, E-Mail correspondence, September 2, 2013.

⁹⁴ The coherent and cohesive ideology, that in past years filled many gaps and open questions by responding to questions and criticism online, is difficult to counter, as no ‘single-narrative’ of al-Qa’ida is evident. Rather, on a multi-layered basis, emotional, theological, moral, and other elements are triggered by its massive professional propaganda output combining the textual layer with the audio-/visual one.

⁹⁵ Ali Fisher and Nico Prucha, “Tweeting for the Caliphate: Twitter as the New Frontier for Jihadist Propaganda”, CTC Sentinel, June 2013, West Point.

For an visualization on how effective selected parts of the ideology, in writing and audio-visual format, have an outreach on Twitter by the example of the Syrian “Jabhat al-Nusra”: Ali Fisher and Nico Prucha, “Jihadi Twitter Activism Part 2: Jabhat al-Nusra on the Twittersphere”, Jihadica, May 13, 2013, <http://www.jihadica.com/jihadi-twitter-activism-part-2-jabhat-al-nusra-on-the-twittersphere/>

⁹⁶ *Inspire*, al-Malahem Media, Special Issue (11), Spring 2013, p. 17. The cover story and a colorful picture commemorating Tamerlan Tsarnaev elaborate the “AQ Tweets” section. In the picture, the Boston bomber is depicted as sending an SMS from paradise to his mother: “My dear mom, I will lay down my life for Islam. I’m gonna die for Islam Inshaa Allah.”

Reactions taken from Twitter include for example the user “Abu Shamel”, stating: “Allahu Akbar, I feel so happy, only 2 soldiers of Allah defeated America, it’s army & #intel America can never stop the decree of Allah.” The magazine takes credit for having successfully inspired not only the Boston bombers, but also the Woolwich assailants, in a reasoning phrased as an “eye for an eye”, revenge for the occupation of Islamic countries and the deployment of unmanned drones.

⁹⁷ Jason Lanier, *Who Owns the Future?*, Penguin Books Ltd.: London, 2013, 52. EBook edition.

virtual content, jihadism with its vast media material from the real-world has created spheres of its own which attract various types of audience and who in turn are also able to participate in the “online jihad” by creating and publishing their own versions of fan-culture. Instead of following the mainstream parts of global and/or local culture, individuals hence are able to subscribe to a specific and nevertheless global lifestyle that is the essential and integral foundation of a worldwide active terror group, according by their own standards.⁹⁸ As outlined in the jihadist media in general and summarized by AQ leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in a speech eulogizing Abu Yahya al-Libi in September 2012,

“we do not tie our jihad to any organization, to any [specific] leader or leadership, not to any group, and not to any name or territory not even to the Holy Land. For the land does not hold anyone sacred but sanctifies one for one’s deeds. Therefore, we support this form of divine service while we engage the enemies of God, fighting them wherever [God] enables us to, in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, Iraq, Algeria, Syria, and Libya.”⁹⁹

The jihadi culture on the Internet is fed by authorized media material, which in the past years has more and more been re-disseminated based on increased fan activities. The fans and followers subscribe to AQ’s monopoly of absolute truth and their work in turn is valued as part of the overall *jihad*. Thus, engaging and drawing in their audiences by the new media in general is part of the jihadists’ motivation and tactic on the Internet

“as versatile, the converging medium, as wide is the range of different fan activities we find online. Beyond the “one-click fandom” on Facebook, the diversity of these practices necessitates the further qualification of how they cluster among different fan groups. Two definitions are thus required here: Firstly,

⁹⁸ As outlined in the jihadist media in general and summarized by AQ leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in a speech eulogizing Abu Yahya al-Libi in September 2012, “we do not tie our *jihad* to any organization, to any [specific] leader or leadership, not to any group, and not to any name or territory not even to the Holy Land. For the land does not hold anyone sacred but sanctifies one for one’s deeds. Therefore, we support this form of divine service while we engage the enemies of God, fighting them wherever [God] enables us to, in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, Iraq, Algeria, Syria, and Libya.” “Asad al-‘ilm wa-l-jihad Abu Yahya al-Libi”, as-Sahab Media, September 2012.

⁹⁹ Ayman al-Zawahiri, Asad al-‘ilm wa-l-jihad Abu Yahya al-Libi, as-Sahab Media, September 2012.

the emphasis on fans' productivity in online spaces warrants further attention to the different types of productivity in "participatory culture" (Jenkins, 2006). John Fiske (1992) distinguishes between three types of productivity among fans: semiotic productivity – the act of reading/watching/listening and thereby meaning construction on behalf of fans in encounters with the object of fandom and texts surrounding an object of fandom; enunciative productivity – which describes the interactions between fans surrounding their fan object such as fan talk, gossip, banter and speculations; and textual productivity – found in fans' creation of new texts such as fan fiction, music remixes, or fanzines."¹⁰⁰

The role of the 'public relationship departments' of AQ, via the online forums, the electronic magazines where individuals can be drawn into and even participate by writing articles, has resulted of a 'new martyr', who had been engaged online and then managed to join jihadi detachments in the real-world to die fighting "on the path of God." Such stories are on the rise with individuals being portrayed having had their first point of contact on the Internet and then moving on to the battlefields.

The intersection of offline acts and online visualization of these purported legitimate defensive and moral justified actions construe and fertilize the jihadists' frame of reference and the motivations that have consequently led to both individual and as well as collective actions. The effect does not only resort to connecting, relating and directly bridging the offline real world with the "virtual sanctuary". Rather, it is more devastating as

"this virtual domain simultaneously expands and de-territorializes the social interactions between the local and global jihadist milieus."¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Cornel Sandvoss, "Fans Online – Affective Media Consumption and Production in the Age of Convergence", in: Miyase Christensen, André Jansson et.al.: *Online Territories – Globalization, Mediated Practice and Social Space*, Peter Lang Publishing: New York 2011, 50.

¹⁰¹ Magnus Ranstorp, *The virtual sanctuary of al-Qaida and terrorism in an age of globalization*, in: J.Eriksson and G. Giacomello (eds.), *International Relations and Security in the Digital Age*, London: Routledge, 2007.

By using singular words or short phrases like the Islamic creed (shahada), “there is no God but God and Muhammad is His messenger”, the jihadists seek to hijack Islam exclusively for their cause and interpretation, with the ambition of drawing the consumer into their virtual ‘network of knowledge’ to further the understanding of this ideology that in the past years has covered more and more niches. In combination with the assumed position of AQ ideologues and the pertaining countless pseudo-scholarly writings, ideologues as well as ‘regular’ fighters or “martyrdom operatives” serve as guides for the consumers, leading them further into this online milieu of jihadism. By citing renowned jihadist figures or scholars the individual actor of jihadist videos relays the ideology in their corresponding dialect, language or emphasis, enabling the audience to read and expand their knowledge within the virtual worlds where countless religious writings and essays by historical as well as contemporary jihadi scholars can be easily accessed.

These religious authoritative writings serve as the backbone and as the intellectual motivation that find its expression by mostly male actors¹⁰² in the audio-visual propaganda – who openly address the audience with details of their motivation to conduct, for example, “martyrdom operations” or who had filmed their testimony (*wasiyya*) in case of being killed in ‘regular’ combat. The videos are the mainframe of the intersection of online and offline worlds.

The current phenomena of pro-jihadist but apparently non-militant groups springing up worldwide is a trend of expressing discontent over the state of the world and the renewed “Muslim” identity that is openly manifested by jihadist groups on many levels. The pro-jihadist support groups, usually termed by western media as “salafists”, openly demonstrating in western cities using the same iconography and slang of militant jihadists movements, with local language inspired by the jihadist propaganda at hand and in turn adding new files to the overall corpus, are a part of the cluster of propaganda used alike by militant and support groups. Arabic core files, writings, and the authoritative use of specific symbols are thus in a localized context and a local language used in a repetitive manner. This creates a coherent identity and group cohesion, whereas individuals receive

¹⁰² Female martyr and correspondingly biographies exist, for example: Yusuf al-Qaradawi, *Min qisas al-batula wa-l-fida*, *al-istishhadiyyat ‘arafna al-dukhula ila l-hayyat*, <http://www.palestine-info.info/arabic/feda/2004/isteshhadeat.htm>, accessed March 8, 2006.

guidance and can strengthen their notion of belonging within this community. According to Anthony Cohen,

“people construct community symbolically, making it a resource and repository of meaning, and a referent of their identity.”¹⁰³

Subsequently, a specific religious habitus is propagated as a audio-visual frame of reference that includes vital cornerstones of an ideology put into action with the perception of fighting for both justice and defense. The intersection of real-life and online, virtual worlds – accessible for anyone unlike most real-life scenarios, lead to questioning the effects of the accessibility to the jihadist propaganda for consumers sometimes thousands of miles away. But in close emotional, spiritual and politicized proximity with the fear, anger and cognition of being ‘persecuted’ because of ones faith and one’s identity as “Muslim.”

The jihadist strives and struggles by all means, foremost by violent actions, to implement their orthodox and selective interpretation (*ta’wil*) of Islamic divine scripture. Paradox and ironic is the jihadists’ usage of the Internet to achieve an efficient output of this massive propaganda, disseminated online on all channels, and in an increasing number of languages.¹⁰⁴ Nevertheless, the crafting and disseminating of propaganda, in the jihadists’ intention is declared as ‘missionary work’ (*da’wa*) or as “propagating Islam”, has proven highly effective in past conflicts and is a main element of operational groups and movements.

The propaganda of the jihadists, with the ideology merging due to the influence of Arab foreign fighters joining local conflicts, has since massively improved.¹⁰⁵ Own media

¹⁰³ Anthony Cohen. *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, London: Tavistock, 1985, 118.

¹⁰⁴ According to Rüdiger Lohlker in an interview with the Wiener Zeitung, 10./11. September 2011. <http://www.univie.ac.at/jihadism/>.

¹⁰⁵ With embedded “media battalions” as well as “media cells”, Arabic language films of various kinds are frequently published. In the 1980s VHS tapes from Afghanistan were used for active recruitment world wide, showing Arab Mujahidin and their lives in the Jihad against the Russians. Arabs fought alongside local Afghans who in some cases became foreign fighters themselves when the jihad in Afghanistan ended.

In a book entitled “Of the Stories of the Arab Martyrs in Bosnia and Herzegovina”, accounts of mainly Arab foreign fighters are biographically detailed, framing in particular the death as well as literally outlining ‘proof’ for attaining martyrdom in the jihadists’ worldview. Bodies emanating musk, smiling

departments were developed in the 1980s and deployed in the early 90s in Bosnia, the Caucasus and other war zones around the world with foreign fighters joining for the defense of local Muslims while preaching and instilling a specific interpretation of Islam that has in wide parts contradicted local traditions and belief sets.¹⁰⁶ Videos were made, edited and distributed world wide with ideological writings, jihadist magazines had been printed and individual *Mujahidin* and ideologues became popular heroes among the population of their countries of origin. The media departments prior to the 9/11 attacks in Washington, D.C. and New York have been further developed and expanded with the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq. With the innovative capacity of online forums, social media and in general ‘new media’ platforms, the jihadist ideology is effectively competing for the ‘hearts and minds’ of young Muslims with other mainstream and legitimate schools and interpretations. The professional and consequent use of the all-available media platforms empowers the extremists in general terms.

As such, and in particular after the death of Osama bin Laden in May 2011, the role of individual sympathizers as well as organized media workers has been further acknowledged and equalized with the role of “martyrdom operatives” or ‘regular’ *Mujahidin* who actively fight in the field and who are framed, portrayed and made famous within the online circles and spheres of global *jihadism*. Individual operatives, for example the 9/11 hijackers, had filmed their testimony (*wasiyya*) at an early stage of the planned attacks. The jihadist media therefore had for many years new materials to broadcast celebrating the September 11 attacks, with the individual hijacker speaking in his own words and terms, providing the audience direct access to the personal mind-set and individual justification of the attacks embedded in a greater narrative and story telling

combatants killed an action, bodies of deceased not decaying, and in general ‘miracle’ tales (*karamat*) of the martyrs are vividly narrated. Most accounts are of Arabs, mostly veterans of the Afghan war, but accounts also include Afghans who joined the international cause besides Turks, Eritreans, Tajiks and Chechens.

¹⁰⁶ Against all local customs and traditions, a ‘pure’ and only valid interpretation (*ta’wil*) of Islam is enforced by the foreign fighters, who as Arabs claim authority and teaching functions to non Arab Muslims in the zones of conflicts. Anything deemed as innovative (*bida’*) or forbidden (haram) is reformatted and reclaimed by the jihadist understanding of divine texts. A prominent example is the relative new phenomena of Islamists and jihadist fighters in central Africa in 2012 where the al-Qa’ida affiliated *Ansar al-Din*, the “Supporters of the Religion” occupied towns in northern Mali, deliberately targeting and destroying Sufi graves and holy places. The movement only has an Arab minority among them, but adheres to the global jihadi ideology and agenda. The destruction of holy graves and sites is in contradiction to the principles of *tawhid* and therefore a sin and branded as ‘polytheist’ (*shirk*).

of post-colonial occupation¹⁰⁷ and oppression¹⁰⁸; of a global “conspiracy against Islam” and the “crusader-Zionist” intentions of annihilating the proper religious worship for God. Naturally, such policies or authoritative rulings (*hukm*) and interpretations (*ta’wil*) affect the treatment of non-Muslims as well and strictly excommunicate (*takfir*) anyone normally considered a Muslim by harsh values.

Next to the vast corpus of written propaganda and ideological tracts are the filmed productions of jihadist movements, which have increased likewise. The jihad videos are in most cases perhaps more important and dangerous than the texts. The videos clearly depict and portray ideological torrents in a grand and most potent narrative whereas role models are addressing the virtual *umma*, the Islamic nation, with the ambition of being re-enacted by the consumers. These role models are the one who are fulfilling, living out, re-enacting the presumed acts and deeds of early Muslims, thus transforming themselves by their own acts – and most importantly their own words documented by the digital lens – as the only ‘true’ believers and real men, becoming the stars of in the online forums where fans can contribute their photoshopped pictures and meshed up videos¹⁰⁹ to endorse these stars.

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¹⁰⁷ The propaganda is coherent, however dependent on local history and circumstances. The post-colonial struggle of Algeria, where AQ maintains a North Africa branch, finds its expression of European, mostly French, influence and military personnel depicted as sent to combat the jihadists along “apostate” Algerian soldiers. A rhetoric justifying the execution and open war against governmental soldiers and police who, as Sunni Muslims, are termed as apostates (*murtaddin*) of Islam, loyal to man-made laws instead of divine legislation and therefore declared as legal military opponents.

¹⁰⁸ Oppression by tyrants, termed in the jihadist mind set as idols (*taghut*), are another evident manifestation of the contradiction of the monotheistic principle of *tawhid* the jihadists fight for – the service and worship to the one and only God, who shall not be associated with partners of any kind. Thus, the jihadists define themselves as *muwahhidin*, exercising the *tawhid* principle in contradiction to the *mushrikin*, who neglect the monotheistic belief set and are rather loyal servants of dictatorial, secular or monarchist governments where individual leaders are hailed and praised in a similar fashion as God.

¹⁰⁹ As outlined in the case of Abu Qasura al-Libi in the subchapter *Abu Qasura al-Libi – Fighting against al-Qadhdhafi and then al-Assad*.

stars in the online forums and the social media where fans endorse and appraise these stars, whose actions are to be re-enacted in real-life.



Celebrities of the Afterlife: Death Cult, Stars, and Fandom of Jihadist Propaganda on the Internet

By frequently publishing professionally made videos and corresponding writings, AQ uses common media elements to portray individual combatants as well as “martyrdom operatives” (or suicide bombers)¹¹⁰ who are famed, propagated, and presented as ultimate role models to the audience. These “martyred” individuals, who are deemed as having attained the *shahada*¹¹¹ “on the path of God” (*fi sabil l-llah*), are resurrected in the religious connotation as stars online, who have proven themselves as ‘true’ Muslims according to the worldview and the interpretations of jihadist groups in general. The biographies of martyrs (*qissas al-shuhada*) are a powerful tool to inspire and recruit young men worldwide and are a major motivational element in the extremist literature since the 1980s and the 1990s.¹¹² Videos and in general the televising of fighters and individuals who become such martyrs has become part of this cult or culture. While in the past decades the main narration was carried by the textual layer, the martyr biographies are nowadays mainly generated by professional audiovisual productions freely available online, while the pertaining literature is merely a bonus element of this genre. Any martyr story, televised or not, has the intention to showcase the jihadist ideology in action with the individual *Mujahid* who is thus transformed into the status of the *shahid* as the main element of this narration.

Within the complex network of interconnecting sites, Twitter has become the main hub for the active dissemination of links guiding users to digital content hosted on a range of

¹¹⁰ *Istishhadi* is the Arabic reference used by jihadists to refer to “martyrdom” bombers as well to those, who attained the *shahada*, having professed the Islamic creed by the ultimate and outmost sacrifice possible in this world. The mainstream Arabic language media usually refers to this phenomenon by the reference of “suicide” (*intihar*) instead of “martyrdom”.

¹¹¹ The *shahada* refers to the confession of the Islamic creed, to bear witness that there is no God but God and Muhammad is His messenger. By standards of jihadist framing

¹¹² ‘Abdallah ‘Azzam from his office in Peshawar was a key writer of such tales from mainly young Arab men who had been killed fighting the Soviet Red Army in Afghanistan, as outlined in his famous “‘Ashaq al-hur” martyr biography collection, <http://tawhed.ws/dl?i=pwtico4g>, accessed August 29, 2013. This tradition was continued in the 1990s with the influx of Arab foreign fighters in Bosnia, see for example: Majid al-Madani / Hamd al-Qatari (2002), *Min qissas al-shuhada al-Arab fi l-Busna wa-l-Hirsik*, www.saaaid.net

websites, social media platforms, and discussion forum, as well as a new platform to market and advertise the multi-faceted role model of the “martyr”.



Twitter and Facebook allow interacting and intersecting between the on- and offline worlds, where real-life and death are mediated from the battlefields to the living rooms. The above shown screen grab is taken from Twitter by the handle @ntfooosh (al-Simbatik)¹¹³ and shows the

“martyr Abu Yahya al-Libi¹¹⁴ – may God receive him:

A couple of days ago, he told me the stories of the *karamat* of God for the Mujahidin and today I am fortunate to ask for the *karamat* for the *shahid*.”

Karamat, the “miracles”, in this case the smiling *shahid* expressing his happiness for leaving this world and entering the afterlife, are popular not only in the classical jihadi literature but also in the modern context on Twitter. The picture with the statement was retweeted over 4,000 times with close to 500 ‘likes’ in a short time.

¹¹³ @ntfooosh, <https://twitter.com/ntfooosh/status/372693766341410816/photo/1>, August 28, 2013.

¹¹⁴ The clear name of the martyr is not revealed and not to be confused with Abu Yahya al-Libi, Hasan Muhammad Qa'id, AQ's second-in-command, as outlined in the following chapter.

Especially biographical stories of the martyrs (*shuhada*'), killed Mujahidin in action as well as "martyrdom operatives", or suicide-bombers, have been at the center of jihadist propaganda and are highly effective in terms of incitement, radicalization, and recruitment since the armed struggle in Afghanistan against the Soviet Red Army in the 1980s.¹¹⁵

On Jihadi Media Activists and New Martyr Role Models

Incitement to jihad is well established within the online dominions, where media activism can be achieved from any place, in- or outside of conflict zones. With a ring of decentralized media workers supporting those who are 'embedded' with fighting elements, the jihadi media has in the past years greatly improved in providing professional made videos and writings from real-life combat zones for computer-, tablet-, smartphone-, and television-screens throughout the world. The 'media mujahid' as a role model promotes those 'embedded' front-line cameramen in particular, without whom the quality and quantity of jihad groups worldwide would not have a lasting impact or relevance. In the jihadists' self perception, the

"media [worker] has become a martyrdom operative without an explosives belt, for they are entitled to these merits [of jihad]. Furthermore, haven't you seen how the cameramen handle the camera instead of carrying Kalashnikovs, running in front of the soldiers during attacks, defying death by exposing their chests to the hails of bullets!?"¹¹⁶

Rather, the media worker in the field has turned into a role model of adoration just like any hardcore fighter or martyrdom operative, and is portrayed by the jihadi media likewise and is accredited as an *istishhadi*, as someone who actively has sought out

¹¹⁵ Paradoxically, while pledging a merciless war against 'deviations' of Islam, in particular against Sufis in Afghanistan of the 1980s, the veneration of martyrs is a dominant Sufi influence. Faisal Devji, *The Terrorist in Search of Humanity – Militant Islam and Global Politics*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.

¹¹⁶ *Al-Manhajjiyya fi tahsil al-khbra al-i'lamiyya*, first part, 18. This ideological handbook is part of a lengthy series sanctioning the media work in general, published by the media groups Markaz al-Yaqin and al-Furqan in May 2011.

and attained the *shahada*. The wish to become a martyr, having a “clear intention” (*al-niyyat al-saliha*) as proof of their piety and their loyalty to God, being ‘true’ practitioners of Islam expecting compensation in the afterlife.

This powerful new role model is backed by the accreditation of the value of the quantitative and qualitative online propaganda:

“Haven’t you seen the cells responsible for expanding the electronic media files (*isdarat*), how they enter the most dangerous and most fortified areas and how they disseminate the *isdarat* of the Mujahidin in the heartlands of the hypocrites (*munafiqin*)!?”¹¹⁷

Media workers, on the other hand who are not directly embedded with fighting units, are not of lesser importance. For they ensure the process, editing, the layout, translating and subsequent publication.

The jihadist is a practitioner of verses of the Qur’an, by his belief and standards, directly exercising the divine command by God’s words.¹¹⁸ Being alive in our contemporary times is a punishment, with the wishful dream to fight alongside the prophet. This dream, this imagined world, is shared within the jihadist and especially the *salafist* spectrum¹¹⁹ that seek to re-enact the lives and deeds of the early Muslims. As such, the historical texts of the Qur’an and Sunna, the recorded acts and deed of prophet Muhammad, are the ultimate playbooks and guidance.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ As the German jihadist Abu Adam states in the video “Boden der Ehre, part 1” (Waziristan, March 2010), the *Mujahidin* are “practitioners of the verses” of the Qur’an, unlike most Muslims. Therefore, most Muslims dwell in the unchanged status of sin, particularly the diaspora in western countries while the *Mujahidin* have by their contribution to *jihad* and by undertaking the emigration (*hijra*) ‘cleansed’ themselves of such sin and neglect.

¹¹⁹ For example Abu Abdullah, “Wahre Männer”. Accessed July 5, 2012.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HXoEJE2I8e8>. In his sermon Abu Abdullah asks, “why are we not bestowed by God with the honor of living together with the prophet” as his companions had? “To spread the message, to fight with the prophet, to protect Islam, real men are needed (...). They are the most truthful men to have ever lived, the companions of the prophet, who gave their life for God.”

Various Martyr Types as Role Models

Particularly within the online spheres the martyr, the martyrdom seeker (or ‘suicide-bomber’; *istishhadi*) are role models incorporated in all forms of the jihadists’ propaganda. While ‘suicide-bombers’ regularly appear within jihadist videos, these operatives must be distinguished, both on a military as well as on an ideological level, from ‘regular’ Mujahidin who are killed on the battlefield, during enemy aerial bombings or as a result of wounds suffered in battle. The Arabic clearly distinguishes between the ‘suicide-bomber’ and the Mujahid who died in battle. The verb ‘istashhada’, however, is also used in jihadist statements and declarations when leaders or high-ranking members are killed, thus receiving the status of a *shahid*, bearing witness to jihadist-Islamic principles; but unlike those who conduct an ‘*amaliyyat al-istishhadiyya* (suicide bombing/martyrdom operation) the *shahada* was attained passively. Both terms (*istishhadi* and *shahid*) must be further analyzed for a proper and correct understanding of the jihadist mindset and the jihadist language¹²⁰ within the boundaries of the legal declarations of the legitimacy of the ‘*al-istishhadiyya* operations’. The Mujahid as well as the Mujahid who decides to undertake such an operation, henceforth termed the *istishhadi*, are both wandering on the “path of God” (*fi sabili l-llah*) in hope of attaining the *shahada* by good deeds. The *shahada* is the Islamic creed, the confession “there is no God but God and Muhammad is His messenger.” Thus, to attain the *shahada* in jihadist speak has a greater meaning of one’s readiness to sacrifice all possible worldly goods for God – including one’s own life and to pass on to the afterlife (the *shahid* is not dead, only in this world). Hence the statements are often introduced by Qur’an 3:169:

¹²⁰ Western media outlets are always quick to simply use the term “martyr” for both, the fallen Mujahid as well as the ‘suicide-bomber’. Arabic jihadist sources, however, provide a multitude of writings, emphasizing each term by historical and religious accounts. Simply translating both Arabic terms as “martyr” neglects the comprehensive meaning of these terms and does not acknowledge the deeply rooted ideological concepts that are fundamental to understand the motivation and determination of both the *shahid* as well as the *istishhadi*.

“Think not of those, who are slain in the path of God, as dead. Rather, they are alive with their Lord, they are bestowed with provision.”¹²¹

This mind-set is further sanctioned by citing Qur’an 2:154, to back up the above statement:

“Do not say that those who are killed in God’s cause are dead; they are alive, though you do not realize it.”¹²²

The stories of martyrs enable the narrator to present the individual as a ‘true’ Muslim who indeed lived, fought, and sacrificed for implantation of the divine definition as set in Qur’an, 3:146 to widen the conviction of “being alive with God” in the afterlife (*akhira*):

“Many prophets have fought, with large bands of godly men alongside them who, in the face of their suffering for God’s cause, did not lose heart or weaken or surrender: God loves those who are steadfast.”¹²³

The jihadi, in his self-perception, is part of “bands of godly men” and as such have remained steadfast, reluctant of their own safety or lives.

Furthermore, the jihadist sources emphasize that individual believers are expected to have “spent” their lives and their wealth “on the path of God”. Qur’an 9:111 is cited to provide an alleged theological and judicial framework:

¹²¹ All following verses of the Quran are quotations of: Muhammad A. S. Abdel-Haleem, *The Qur’an* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

¹²² See for example Mu’awiyya al-Qahtani, “The Biography of the Hero Abu Talha al-Ansari”, *Mu’assasat al-Mas’ada al-I’lamiyya*, 2012.

¹²³ Ibid.

“God has purchased the persons and possessions of the believers in return for the Garden – they fight in God’s way: they kill and are killed – this is a true promise given by Him in the Torah, the Gospel, and the Qur’an. Who could be more faithful to his promise than God? So be happy with the bargain you have made: that is the supreme triumph.”¹²⁴

The New Martyrs of the Internet – the Death of AQ’s Second-in-Command, Abu Yahya al-Libi, Eulogized by Ayman al-Zawahiri

The majority of the martyr biographies or tales in general are about ‘regular’ Mujahidin, martyrdom operatives, recently also about media activists, and describe leaders or more high ranking individuals of all types. The biographical elements have commonalities as outlined but the emphasis is more precise when the central or main leadership eulogizes high-ranking individuals. When leaders eulogize fellow leaders, the depth of the ideology expressed weighs heavier, for the slain leader remains a role model and a leader by his legacy. Perhaps the most active role model of such a slain leader is to date Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi, the Jordanian leader of the first generation of al-Qa’ida in Iraq. He has – long after his death – reemerged in the Syrian civil war where he serves as a role model to the AQ-linked jihadi battalions who re-stage and re-enact al-Zarqawi’s operational patterns and ideological paradigm to sanction attacks in general. Martyred leaders on the Internet remain alive for their speeches, statements, writings, and actions in general are used over and over again to frame them as ultimate role models. As seen in the picture below, published in July 2013, al-Zarqawi’s *modus operandi* from Iraq as well as his legacy for the Iraqi al-Qa’ida department, known as the “Islamic State of Iraq” is reflected today in Syria. The picture, posted on Twitter by @omarz7, enforces the meaning of al-Zarqawi, which is strengthened after the “Islamic State of Iraq” declared its extension into Syria, hence being renamed to the “Islamic State of Iraq and Syria”. Shortly before this

¹²⁴ For a contextual reading, Nico Prucha, “Abdallah ‘Azzam’s outlook for Jihad in 1988 – “Al-Jihad between Kabul and Jerusalem””, Research Institute for European and American Studies (2010), <http://www.rieas.gr/images/nicos2.pdf>.

declaration, AQ published pictures of the “shaykh al-Mujahid Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi – may God receive him – training camp.”¹²⁵



Al-Zarqawi had been a military leader with less so religious authoritative qualities while Abu Yahya al-Libi was a fully committed religious ideologue, the author of a wide range of extremist books and regularly appeared in as-Sahab videos as a preacher. In a message broadcast by AQ’s notorious as-Sahab media foundation in September 2012, Ayman al-Zawahiri eulogized the killing of his comrade and second-in-command Abu Yahya al-Libi.¹²⁶ Al-Libi, whose real name was confirmed after his death by Ayman al-Zawahiri as Hasan Muhammad Qa’id, killed in a drone strike in Pakistan in June 2012.¹²⁷ The death of al-Libi is a great loss for he had been a productive writer and somewhat of one of the remaining faces of as-Sahab. His comprising writings are hosted on Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi’s website tawhid.ws next to the prominence of jihadist scholars such as Osama Bin Laden, ‘Abdallah ‘Azzam, Sayyid Qutb, and many others.¹²⁸

¹²⁵ Ibn al-rafidayn (@omarz7), #al-dawlat_al-Islamiyya_fi_Iraq_wa-l-Sham #al-sham mu’askar Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi – taqaballahu l-llah, <https://twitter.com/omarz7/status/357567259339792385/photo/1>, July 17, 2013.

¹²⁶ Ayman al-Zawahiri, “Asad al-‘ilm wa-l-jihad Abu Yahya al-Libi”, as-Sahab Media, September 2012, <http://archive.org/details/Nosr.A>, September 2, 2013.

¹²⁷ Bill Rogio, “Abu Yahya al-Libi killed in latest drone strike, US officials say”, The Long War Journal, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/06/abu_yahya_al_libi_ru.php, June 5, 2012.

¹²⁸ “The folder of Abu Yahya al-Libi”, Minbar al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad, <http://tawhed.ws/a?a=hv5zmv47>, June 14, 2013.

Thus, al-Zawahiri elaborates on the role of al-Libi as a missionary worker for Islam (*da'i*) who was committed to “incite the *umma*” (*tahrid*) even more so after his episode of torture in the U.S. military prison in Baghram, Afghanistan.¹²⁹

Abu Yahya al-Libi’s importance to the AQ leadership and al-Zawahiri in particular, is perhaps further evident as al-Zawahiri wrote an apprising introduction (*taqdim*) for al-Libi’s mainframe on dealing with Muslim spies, the “Guidance regarding the Ruling on Muslim Spies.”¹³⁰ Abu Yahya al-Libi’s mainframe to operationalize *shari’a* Law for jihadist groups was widely read and implemented by groups such as the Somali based Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahidin who sanction the execution of alleged spies in propaganda videos¹³¹ and ideologues in AQ’s Yemeni department such as Harith bin Ghazi al-Nazzari, warning imprisoned Muslims to interact with their captors and thus be ‘turned’ into spying on their brothers.¹³²

Al-Libi’s *Guidance*, or tutorial to use a modern translation of “teacher”, *mu’allim*, has the intention to be a pragmatic handbook for jihadi groups worldwide. The central question revolves around the *shari’a* law permissibility to execute spies. As spies pose the greatest threat, the modern-day spy craft consists of submitting credible and vital military graded intelligence to the main combatant, the United States of America. In most cases such information results in the death of jihadists as well as theologians and ideologues as a result of an aerial bombardment of meeting places, safe houses, or while travelling. In other cases, the *intelligence* submitted by spies among the *Mujahidin* enables Special Forces to arrest high-value-targets with the ambition to gain further information. Prior to his eulogy of al-Libi, al-Zawahiri

¹²⁹ Al-Libi had managed to escape with three comrades and talked extensively about the escape and the torture in as-Sahab videos. Parts of the videos are re-used for al-Zawahiri’s eulogy, *Asad al-‘ilm wa-l-jihad Abu Yahya al-Libi*, as-Sahab Media, September 2012.

¹³⁰ Abu Yahya al-Libi, “*Al-Ma’alam fi hukm al-jasus al-muslim*” (Markaz al-Fajr li-l i’lam, 2009), <http://www.tawhed.ws/dl?i=y34deswq>, February 2012.

¹³¹ The Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahidin in late 2008 published a video entitled “Iqama hukm Allah ‘ala jasusayn”, the “implementation of the rule of God on two spies” whereas in the video al-Libi’s book is shown, quoted and the ultimate framework to execute two alleged Muslim spies who are shot.

¹³² His alleged real name is offered as Muhammad bin ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Murshidi as stated in: Harith bin Ghazi al-Nazzari, *al-Wajiz fi ahkam al-asir al-Muslim*, al-Malahem 2012. His first name is misspelled as al-Harith. In an audio speech by al-Nazzari showing filmed sequences to commemorate ‘Adal al-‘Abab, a high level AQAP ideologue, who was killed in Yemen issues his name properly. Firitha’ al-shaykh ‘Adal ‘Abab, al-Malahem media, March 6, 2013, <http://as-ansar.com/vb/showthread.php?p=501318>. The subchapter “Warning of ridda: The danger of becoming a kafir in prison” in al-Nazzari’s writing in this context is of particular interest.

emphasized the ideological as well as the operational value in general and his handbook in particular. Grading this work as “judicial knowledge” (*al-i’lmiyya al-fiqhiyya*) and by equating his 149 page long writing as a *fatwa*, a legal decree valid for all Muslims, al-Zawahiri further praises al-Libi who had

“migrated (*hajir*), embedding himself spiritually and physically-military (*rabit*), conducting the *jihad* since the communist rule over Afghanistan [in the 1980s]. Since that time his commitment for *jihad* and the *Mujahidin* has never been revoked. Not even during his time in capture in Pakistan and Afghanistan in the prisons of the crusaders and their henchmen; he was – by the kindness (*munna*)¹³³ of God – rescued from imprisonment¹³⁴ despite his aforementioned captors and then rejoined the fields of *jihad* and military preparation (*al-i’dad*). He then became the companion of the commander [Abu] al-Layth, the martyr – as we reckon him to be – Abu’ l-Layth al-Libi – may God have mercy on him – who was assassinated by an American missile [fired by an unmanned drone] based on the treason of spies and the deception of the hypocrites (*al-munafiqeen*). *Shaykh* Abu Yahya in this time did not eat and was tirelessly seeking knowledge,¹³⁵ studying and lecturing, and sought further knowledge by travelling to Mauretania to master lingual and juridical topics being instructed by the best of the masters¹³⁶ in the field.”¹³⁷

The death of al-Libi in 2012 and the eulogy by al-Zawahiri published in September of the same year provide an interesting insight into the overall concept of “martyrdom” by AQ’s leader. For al-Zawahiri’s perception of the martyrdom of al-Libi is focused

¹³³ Interestingly, Ayman al-Zawahiri uses the term *munna* (grace, kindness) that in the context of the overall theme of prisoners is often used in relation to the Qur’an.

¹³⁴ A reference to the U.S. military prison Bagram, Afghanistan.

¹³⁵ *Talab al-‘ilm* is a reference with historical and traditional connotation to those who seek to gain knowledge and understanding in religious practice and manners. It is a honorary and obligatory determination to actively seek knowledge on the proper orthopraxis and conduct of religious parameters for worldly circumstances.

¹³⁶ Al-Zawahiri uses the term *fursan*, referring to “knights” or, as loosely translated in this context, “masters”. *Fursan* has an implicit connotation referring to the brave, fearless men who sacrifice everything for their creed.

¹³⁷ Introduction by Ayman al-Zawahiri, in: Abu Yahya al-Libi: al-Ma’alim fi hukm al-jasus al-Muslim, Markaz al-Fajr li-l i’lam: 2009, 4-5.

on the latter's work and contribution to the media field, the tutoring and lecturing of Muslims worldwide while having been a field commander as well. Thus, one may argue, al-Libi had been a 'hybrid' whose martyr story comprises both elements and is as such of great value to the jihadi propaganda online as al-Libi is a role model having professed his faith online and in the real world. His legacy online, consisting of various writings and videos, remains.



For, according to Abu Yahya al-Libi who appears in his own eulogy describing martyrdom, the

“accounts of the Islamic creed (*shahada*) and the martyrs (*shuhada*) is an narration about life and being alive (*a’hiyya*),¹³⁸ not about leading a bad and unhappy life.”¹³⁹

For the *Mujahid* is framed as an individual loyal to God in this and the next life whereas in this world he thus is part of the group the most pious and rightly guided believers, being someone who pursues death to be alive. For the reward of ones God will compensate for deeds in this world in the next as outlined in selective reading of verses of the Qur’an by extremist’ interpretation,

¹³⁸ Following typical jihadist rhetoric, sentiments and key words of the Qur’an are employed to boost their frame of reference. “Being alive” is a reference to Qur’an 3:169 connoting that the martyrs are “alive with their Lord, they are bestowed with provision.”

¹³⁹ Abu Yahya al-Libi in his own words; Ayman al-Zawahiri, “Asad al-‘ilm wa-l-jihad Abu Yahya al-Libi”, as-Sahab Media, September 2012.

“for people desire life, fearful of death, while the *shahid* pursues death demanding life.”¹⁴⁰

As Ayman al-Zawahiri elaborated in his eulogy for Abu Yahya al-Libi, his

“attained martyrdom will raise the attention of the people to his writings and his missionary work to propagate Islam, God willing. For the *shahada* professes the words of life as the two martyrs – as we deem them to be – Sayyid Qutb and ‘Abdallah ‘Azzam – may God have mercy with them both – [have proven].

This is exactly what America cannot cope with, who define the *Mujahidin* and AQ as their primary enemy; for they are ignorant of the reality that AQ is merely a message for the Muslim *umma* to strive, struggle, resist, and to fight the foreign Crusader-Zionist injustice and the corruption (*fasad*¹⁴¹) inside [our countries]; for the attained martyrdom of the *Mujahidin* of AQ and the leadership only emphasizes the sincerity and promotes the message of AQ, for whenever our blood is shed for the sake of our articles of faith (*‘aqida*), our words become alive among our *umma*. Whenever the martyrs fall, the *da’wa* (propagation of Islam) of jihad is filled with life.”¹⁴²

The message or the comprising narration by AQ is mainly alive on the Internet where the martyrs and their stories remain present. Even if the use of the Internet was in the beginning of the early days of *jihadism online* a unique phenomena with limited actors, it is nowadays unthinkable that most individuals who subscribed to AQ’s worldview would not have profiles online or would be ignorant of the Internet and the

¹⁴⁰ Ayman al-Zawahiri, “Asad al-‘ilm wa-l-jihad Abu Yahya al-Libi”, as-Sahab Media, September 2012.

¹⁴¹ The term *fasad* is taken from the Qur’an but used by jihadists in the modern meaning for “corruption”. By exploiting this as a main slogan, jihadists seek to further position themselves as righteous people who, just like any average Arab, are victims of the “interior corruption”, referring to the widespread nepotism of Arab dictators.

¹⁴² Ayman al-Zawahiri, “Asad al-‘ilm wa-l-jihad Abu Yahya al-Libi”, as-Sahab Media, September 2012.

jihadist forums and social media channels. As al-Zawahiri further outlines, the Internet is the safest zone for AQ's message, independent of the slain leaders, activists, or fighters in general. For

“by these lies the Americans are deceived [by their own leadership] that the war against terror would be won against AQ by killing this or that person. It eludes their perception of reality and of their defeat in Iraq, and the coming defeat in Afghanistan. They have lost in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya, and they miss the point that AQ has indeed divided its real tasks into various parts, consisting of the incitement of the *umma* (*tahrid*). This is an omen of the defeat of America, God willing.”¹⁴³

For the extrajudicial execution of AQ personnel in general by drones and by other means, has no effect or impact on preventing the jihadist incitement of mainly Arab Muslims especially in the wake of the aftermath of the Arab Spring.

Al-Zawahiri re-emphasizes the hybrid role of martyrs, who first of all have fulfilled their part either way in this world and are mediatized on the Internet for their postume fame, that

“our martyrs will enhance the message of jihad by greatest means possible, spreading and presenting this message as firm as a wall, for we are killed for our *da'wa* to be alive.”¹⁴⁴

Elements of the Martyr Stories – Wondrous Tales (*karamat*) by ‘Abdallah ‘Azzam

¹⁴³ Ayman al-Zawahiri, “Asad al-‘ilm wa-l-jihad Abu Yahya al-Libi”, as-Sahab Media, September 2012.

¹⁴⁴ *ibid.*

The biographical literal stories often have a hagiographic character including divine miracle tales (*karamat*) that are very popular and regularly visualized in the visual productions with all technical means at hand. Elements such as the *karamat* are used to engulf and encapsulate the audience by telling the tales of “gracious wonders”, “miracles” or “thaumaturgic” occasions. Such *karamat*, whereas a *Mujahid* experienced a miracle by God while fighting on His path, are summarize how a Muslim can further draw a line of demarcation to ‘passive’ believers by joining the *jihad*. The *Mujahid* is in close proximity to God and as such a member of the *jund allah*, the *awliya’ allah*, who not only professes the proper principles of faith, but rather who comprehend and implement the “truth” (*haqq*) and refute any form of “falsehood” (*batil*). The *karamat* are thus used as a powerful instrument to convey a personal-emotional side of slain comrades in the name of God to the audience who can identify with these individual martyrs and can wishfully picture themselves or their friends as attaining such a ‘reward’. The *karamat* comprise of different layers, from supernatural stories regarding the deceased bodies, of smiling martyrs, of the smell of musk, or of tales of fighters who against all odds survived an ambush or enemy fire in general. The tales of the supernatural state of the religious-pious bodies of martyrs is described by ‘Azzam, for example, in his narration of

“‘Abdallah al-Masri; [he] attained the *shahada* on the first of *shawwal* 1407 (May 29, 1987) and we found him on the second of *dhu al-qa’da*, a month and a day later. He was as if he was sleeping, his blood kept flowing, and it was sticky and hadn’t frozen.”¹⁴⁵

Such ‘acts of God that emanate at the hand of creation’ are of course reserved only for the *Mujahidin* in the literature genre of *jihad* while one may argue that God shows signs of approvals, expressed by miracles, to confirm the righteousness of those wandering on His path, fulfilling their promise to Him (as frequently stated). The visual cult suggests that anyone can be special and receive such *karamat* with the guarantee of being made famous. Ironically, as the *jihadist* despises *Sufism*, *karamat* are essential in the *sufists’* spiritual notion. As *jihad* is a method and a place of veneration, those who die as a *shahid*

¹⁴⁵ A similar expression, “as if he were sleeping” is found in ‘Azzam’s description of the *karamat* in his book ‘Ushshaq al-hur, p. 150.

– for example – are subjected to unnatural conditions as their bodies smell like musk¹⁴⁶ and do not decompose. As ‘Abdallah ‘Azzam wrote extensively about killed *Mujahidin* in Afghanistan, he easily recalls several examples in his last known sermon in 1988 held in Seattle, U.S.A,¹⁴⁷ to underline the *karamat* for the killed before he refers to *karamat* experienced by fighters who under normal and logical circumstances would have been killed, however, wondrously survived unharmed! Their clothes are burned, but their bodies remain untouched, unharmed, non-violated and thus pious and pure.

Furthermore, the *karamat* continue in the sermon as ‘Azzam asks

“how many of the youth have entered battles and their clothes had been burned, and not one of them had been injured.”¹⁴⁸

The heroic epics, ongoing primarily in the *online jihad* propaganda of AQ today, had already been popular and fascinating in the modern sense of the *jihad* in Afghanistan.

“One, his name was Ahmad Banna from the leadership circle of Ahmad Shah Mas’ud, approximated that about 30 of the youth destroyed about 500 tanks in eight years. Najeeb¹⁴⁹ – the president of the state – send him [a note]: “O Banna, reduce your attacks and we will give you what you want. You know that we have your brother imprisoned, we will kill him if you continue to attack our tanks.” Ahmad Banna read a *hadith* “in the name of God” (who says at the time of the morning “in the name of God,” who does not lead anything on earth or in heaven by His name astray, for He is the all-hearing and all-knowing). Banna as a matter of fact believed that no bullet could injure

¹⁴⁶ See also Eli Alsheech (2008) who states that the texts of Hamas” commonly state that the martyrs’ corpses, gravesites, and personal belonging emit the scent of musk, a fragrance that the Qur’ān associates with Paradise and that the Islamic tradition (*hadith*) considers a proof that a martyr was accepted by God.” *Die Welt des Islams* (48), pp.35-36. In reference the *hadith* was related: “No-one is wounded in the Path of God, and God knows best who is wounded in His Path, except that he will come on the Day of Resurrection with his wounds spurting blood. Its colour will be like the color of blood and its smell will be that of musk” (al-Bukhari, Book 7, No. 441).

¹⁴⁷ ‘Abdallah ‘Azzam, “al-Jihad bayna Kabul wa-Bayt al-Maqdis”, video, Seattle, U.S.A., 1988.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Muhammad Najeebullah

him, as long as he recited this *hadith* three times.¹⁵⁰ He took auto buses and public transports [i.e. minibuses and shared taxis] on the Highway where the Russians had set up checkpoints and unarmed watch points. Banna's picture was distributed among the Russians who named him General Banna. As one of the Russian soldiers spotted him and said "Banna!", fear overcame him. An Arab youth told me: "By God, the weapons slipped out of the hand of the Russians who were at the checkpoint while Ahmad fended them off unarmed, jumping out of the car, and coming under machinegun fire. Only his clothes were burned. He was not wounded, not even a scratch."¹⁵¹

The attention is focused on the *karamat* that could be understood as a reward by God in this world, just as 'Azzam continues with two, perhaps at best termed paranormal, stories from the battlefields of Afghanistan, where he attributes *karamat* to individual *Mujahidin* during battle or when under fire. Following a classical-historical line of classical Arabic texts, 'Azzam re-enacts the *hadith* by copying its rhetorical style:

"I said to Abu Hafz al-Urduni before he was 'martyred' and returned from the Russian border, I said to him: "Tell me about the *karamat*, that you have seen." He said: "O *shaykh* 'Abdallah 'Azzam you are relating [stories] of the *karamat*, but you surely won't believe this *karamat* I will now tell you." I said: "Tell me." He said: "We had been at battle and a RPG¹⁵² was fired at the Afghan *Mujahids*. Such a RPG is capable to destroy a tank of 46 tons and just burned his clothes. He wasn't wounded by the RPG that can destroy a tank like a rocket, perforating up to 17 cm of steel, wasn't able to penetrate one cm of his flesh." I said to the leader in Qandahar: "*ya fulan*¹⁵³" he and his aide had been *shaykh* Siyyaf, who was sitting with him, said to him: "*ya fulan*, tell me

¹⁵⁰ In some regards, Voodoo witchcraft in Africa is being used to make soldiers "bulletproof". Rituals are replaced by the mere fact of reciting a *hadith* or just participating in *jihad*. It may be, that the firm belief in God's aid and guidance leads to high-risk actions that are, if survived, particularly unharmed, defined and

termed as "miracles" for the individual *Mujahid*.

¹⁵¹ 'Abdallah 'Azzam, "al-Jihad bayna Kabul wa-Bayt al-Maqdis", video, Seattle, U.S.A., 1988.

¹⁵² Rocket Propelled Grenade – primarily a shoulder fired anti-tank weapon.

¹⁵³ *Ya fulan*, "o someone", a stranger who is being addressed. This is quite common for the *hadith* where strangers and unknown (mostly) men addressed Muhammad with questions.

about the *karamat* you have seen.” He said: “One guy, I think his name was Yar Muhammad, one of the *Mujahidin*, once had an airplane flying over him. Therefore, he threw himself onto the ground and placed his weapon underneath his stomach. The aircraft fired a missile at him but only hit him on his back. His weapon underneath his stomach was broken while his back was not harmed.”¹⁵⁴

The stories of the martyrs of the *jihad* against the Red Army in the words of ‘Azzam are until this very day the basic notion of jihadi videos and new writings. The martyrs of the 1980s are admired and role models, the first generation of *Mujahidin* and foreign fighters that continue to inspire youngsters from all around the world to reenact their deeds and to copy their commitment to defend the *umma* against their enemies. As ‘Azzam in his last sermons recalls, the youth came to Pakistan from all Arab countries “as America watched and found them”, they moved on to Afghanistan to seek “‘martyrdom’ and not to die.” Two young Saudis, who came to Afghanistan, died and were buried next to one another impressed

“‘Abd al-Matin, a leader of the Afghan front, who told me: “An ‘*alim* had come to us, reciting the Qur’an on top of the head of Sa’ad al-Rushud [from al-Qasim] after he had attained the *shahada* 18 hours ago. As he heard the Qur’an, he – Sa’ad al-Rushud – started to tremble out of fear and awe and from their grave a light emitted on Monday and Thursday night. The light came out of their grave, up to the sky and then returned to their grave.”

Another story describing the *karamat* for those who attained the *shahada* in the jihadists’ reasoning is about two young Arabs (both 19 years of age), who “had been buried two months ago inside of al-Mas’ada¹⁵⁵” which is depicted as a

“centre for the Arabs who gathered the Arab youths there. The two had been buried, their blood, before they were buried was like precious musk. They buried them and a light started to come out of their graves, also on the second day. ‘Abdallah al-Ghamidi, he was 18 years old, out of his grave came the *takbir* “Allahu akbar”. The scream “Allahu akbar” came repeatedly out of his

¹⁵⁴ ‘Abdallah ‘Azzam, “al-Jihad bayna Kabul wa-Bayt al-Maqdis”, video, Seattle, U.S.A., 1988.

¹⁵⁵ It should be noted that *al-Mas’ada* in the meantime is the name of a highly active online-jihad media group.

grave. Khalid al-Kurdi, from the city al-Manawwara [Medina, Saudi Arabia], a landmine exploded under him. He lost his leg, his stomach was blasted open, his bowels and intestines gushing out on the ground. Doctor Salih al-Libi came to him, fixing his intestines up and started to wrap up his stomach with bandages. Doctor Salih was crying, and Khalid said to him: “O doctor Salih, why are you crying, this is just a slight injury on the back of my hand? [pointing to it]” It wasn’t so bad that his leg was blown off and his stomach blasted open. He met God after two hours while he told his brothers that it wasn’t so bad, saying his leg and his stomach had just been injured.”¹⁵⁶

Such attributes of the *shuhada*’ continue in the respective narratives (in writing and film)¹⁵⁷ to this very day.

Karamat per se are part of the Islamic culture. In times of war and occupation, the *karamat* are a mechanism of coping with loss, death and sacrifice, to ascribe the lives and deeds of those who died to a divine scheme – rendering death as a sacrifice for an altruistic cause, sanctioned and approved by God, who embraces these *martyrs* by granting the bodies a special status. Both, the *karamat* for the ‘martyrs’ (*karamat al-shuhada*’) as well as *karamat* to protect the *Mujahidin* are an important religious-psychological tool that only applies to the pious believers who actually move out and actively join the *jihad*. This is, of course, not only reserved for the *Mujahidin* in Afghanistan, or now for the global outlets of AQ or the *Islamic State*, but also systematically deployed by groups such as Hamas within their local framing.

¹⁵⁶ ‘Azzam narrates this very same story in a *khutba* (“The Sword is the Solution”) in Afghanistan. In this sermon ‘Azzam provides more details on the death of al-Kurdi, who “asked to attain the *shahada* as well that his brothers may seal their life with it.” ‘Azzam then relates that the “pleasant smell of musk was spread, when he left” this world. Usood 2, published by the Ansar al-Mujahidin in 2007 who include besides *khutbas* by ‘Azzam contemporary training sequences and speeches by Osama bin Laden, Abu Yahya al-Libi and Abu ‘l-Layth al-Libi (who was killed in a drone strike in early 2009). ‘Abdallah ‘Azzam, “al-Jihad bayna Kabul wa-Bayt al-Maqdis”, video, Seattle, U.S.A., 1988.

¹⁵⁷ Another example is the opening of the grave of Osama al-Shurbshi, a Palestinian *shahid*. His grave was opened to place his deceased father (d. 2007) next to his son, who died for the cause of al-Fatah (1982). As his corpse is uncovered, the smell of musk is predominant, such an unnatural state is claimed being *karamat al-shuhada*’: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=69Vgx4vIKuY> (22.10.2010). The video has more than 600,000 hits. For more information:

<http://moneer1976.maktoobblog.com/578717/قصة حقيقية جنت الشهيد أسامه الشوربجي م> (next to musk, “something like smoke exited the grave and a strong (perfume like) scent was smelled. One of the brothers passed out due to this strong and beautiful aroma.” In this example (1.7 million hits) a *karama* is accredited to a Palestinian boy before he died. Lying in a coma in a hospital bed, only his left index finger is moving (and interpreted as confessing the *shahada*);

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z9ZrPn3rDe8>.

Pictures of the *shuhada*’ appear regularly in various jihadist videos and in some cases *karamat*, such as the sprawled right index finger of deceased (confessing the unity of God (tawhid)) or – what is interpreted as – a smile on the face of the dead are to ‘proof’ that the *shahid* has confessed to the last and now has gained entry to Paradise.

Islamist Groups engaged in combat harvest the deep-rooted sentiment of *karamat* and exploit it for their causes. As samples from the Palestinian context highlight, the reasoning as well as the testimonials of *karamat* are very similar, even though both environments, the nationalist struggle for the liberation of Palestine, and the global jihadist agenda, are specific in their respective settings. However, to widen the understanding and the shared power of belief in *karamat* in times of suffering and powerlessness against superior enemies, samples from Palestine should be considered in this context. With Palestinian foreign fighters, including ideologues such as ‘Abdallah ‘Azzam in the 1980s or Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi’s lieutenant Abu Anas al-Shami¹⁵⁸ in 2003 onwards have left their mark in promoting the concept of *karamat*.

Such *karamat* apply to the graves, bodies and in another most interesting case to a newborn, as Eli Alsheech portrays in his fantastic article on Hamas ideology and the Intifadas:

“For example, accounts of miracles which the documents attribute to Palestinian martyrs can be viewed as a direct catalyst for consolidating Hamas power and expanding its ideological grip over an ever-growing convictional community. Such is the case in the biography of the martyr named ‘Alaa ‘Ayyad. A few days after ‘Alaa’s death, a nephew was born to him. On the nephews face a birthmark shaped like the word ‘Alaa. Attached to his biography is a picture of the newborn on which the birthmark, shaped like the word ‘Alaa, is clearly visible. The caption underneath the picture explains: “This is the glory of God as reflected in the martyrs’ miracles (*karamat al-shuhada*”).

By depicting the birthmark as a divine miracle and explaining it as evidence of God’s glory, as reflected in ‘Alaa’s martyrdom, the biography casts ‘Alaa as a divine instrument that God uses to broadcast His splendor in the world.”¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ Abu Anas al-Shami was a renowned ideologue and a vital figure for al-Zarqawi and his group. He was a Palestinian based in Jordan. He grew up in Kuwait, where arguably many Palestinian workers and engineers had been exposed to the strict teachings and interpretations of the Saudi dominated Arab Peninsula Islam. Experiencing war and expulsion again, the Palestinian migrants, who nevertheless had been refugees in Jordan and who had come to Kuwait in pursuit of economical opportunities, had to flee back to Jordan with the Iraqi aggression against Kuwait in 1990, taking the Arab Peninsula Salafism with them. As the PLO sided with Saddam Hussein, the Palestinians lost their base in Kuwait and in most cases returned to the refugee camps of Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and elsewhere. Hazim al-Amin, al-Salafi al-yatim – al-wajh al-Filastini li “l-jihad al-‘alimi” wa-l “Qa’ida”, Beirut-London: Dar al-Saqi, 2011, 114-127.

¹⁵⁹ Eli Alsheech, (2008) Egoistic Martyrdom and Hamas’ Success in the 2005 Municipal Elections: A Study of Hamas Martyrs’ Ethical Wills, Biographies and Eulogies, *Die Welt des Islams* (48), 40. The story of this *shahid* (including the pictures) is found here: <http://www.palestine-info.info/arabic/hamas/shuhda/2003/alla/syrah.htm> (22.10.2010).

Karamat al-shuhada’ apply to the ‘martyrs’ who are portrayed by some groups as saints (particularly Hizbullah and Hamas) as much as the *karamat* are applicable to the *Mujahidin* in general and who may be spared by divine intervention in battles and subsequently continue their strive for God.

“Miracles” and marvellous tales add to ‘Azzam’s claim that Islam is sooner or later dominating the world while Afghanistan serves as a centre to train, fight and return home to continue the *jihad* between Kabul und Jerusalem. Although the U.S., together with Russia, have somehow aligned to try to

“stop the Islamic advance, which is set in motion from Afghanistan, as they are not afraid that the cause will end with the expelling of the Russians defeated from the inside of Afghanistan. They are very well fearful, Islam is starting to roll from Afghanistan to penetrate Russia and to, once again, subdue Europe and that Europe pays the *jizya* [taxes for non-Muslims] as was the case for six centuries when it was paid to the Muslim Turks.”¹⁶⁰

Perhaps his concluding remark was a sign for the future to expand and widen the *jihad* between Kabul and Jerusalem?:

“O brothers, the Afghan *jihad* is a *jihad* striving to re-establish Islam on earth and indeed has Islam returned to the international agenda, today we are hearing “all praise be God” in Palestine, for there are Islamic jihadists movements starting to get operational. There is a connection between the Afghan *jihad* and between Palestine. I just read in a newspaper, citing a Jewish journalist that now they are in terror of [Muslim] youths present inside of Palestine and that they have uncovered that some of the youths are training in Afghanistan and will return. And the story of a young girl named ‘Attaf, who wanted to use her car as a bomb against a governmental building in Tel Aviv. They have found out that two of the youths, who both prepared for the operation, have been trained in a military training camp of the *Mujahidin* in Afghanistan.”

While the focus may have been between Kabul und Jerusalem, the conviction of the *Mujahidin* to have broken and destroyed the Soviet Union, as individuals in

¹⁶⁰ ‘Abdallah ‘Azzam, “al-Jihad bayna Kabul wa-Bayt al-Maqdis”, video, Seattle, U.S.A., 1988.

contemporary *as-Sahab* publications state¹⁶¹, may have led to the change of attitude in terms of widening the *jihad* on a global scale as it started in ‘first contact clashes’ with US-troops in Somalia in 1993.¹⁶²

Individual Mujahidin, from all over the world, are at least postum by written and audiovisual biographical descriptions made famous by their clear name, their actions and operations. In all of the available materials, ranging from digitalized content from the 1980s Jihad against the Red Army in Afghanistan, to the 1990s Balkan Wars, and in particular the peak of digital primary content from 2003 onward from Iraq and as of writing (2014) Syria, a similar reasoning, iconography and rhetoric is used on a coherent basis while new videos and writings from Somalia, Chechnya, Turkistan (West China), Palestine, Egypt, and many other zones of conflict with jihadist actors stir ‘the big picture’.¹⁶³

The *shahada* is at the center of jihadist motivation, for every single deed is undertaken only for God and the religion of “Islam”, with the black banner representing mainly the Islamic creed in the militants’ mindset. The black banner is sometimes complemented¹⁶⁴ by *allahu akbar* and *ihda l-husnayyin*, a reference to Qur’an 9:52,

“Say, ‘Do you expect something other than one of the two best things (*ihda l-*

¹⁶¹ As is the case of Abu Talha al-Almani (aka Bekkay Harrach) who claims that the same fate is due to happen to West. The economic crisis is simply the beginning and ‘proof’ of the coming victory (*as-Sahab* German language video, 2009).

¹⁶² As it was published in writings of the Saudi AQAP “The battle of Somalia convinced some of the leaders of *jihad* of the possibility to confront the Americans and revealed the power of the US-Army.” Prucha, N. (2010) Die Stimme des Dschihad – „*Sawt al-gihad*“ al-Qa’idas Erstes Online- Magazin, pp. 28-29.

¹⁶³ This sentiment was further elaborated in a speech by Ayman al-Zawahiri, September 2012, claiming the rise of al-Qa’ida as a movement is unstoppable as the *umma* has awakened worldwide; Ayman al-Zawahiri, “Asad al-ilm wa-l-jihad Abu Yahya al-Libi”, *as-Sahab* Media, September 2012.

¹⁶⁴ This also highlights the authority of Arabic for jihadist groups on a global scale, as the Qur’an was revealed in Arabic, the “speech of God” (*kalimat allah*) can truly only be repeated by the Arabic speaking believers. For an implementation of the above described complemented black banner, see the documentary “Terror in Moscow”, 12 May 2003,

http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0383669/?ref=fn_al_tt_1. A troop of Chechen Mujahidin had taken several hundred theater visitors hostage what become known as the “Nord Ost Theater Siege”. The documentary collected the speeches and demands made by the Chechen Mujahidin showing the black banner with the reference to the Qur’an; this is an element that has since gained a momentum within the jihadist main frame.

Oftentimes non-Arabs jihadi ideologues seek the use of Arabic to boost their standing and gain respect, as detailed in, Nico Prucha, “Die Vermittlung arabischer Jihadisten-Ideologie: Zur Rolle deutscher Aktivisten,” in Guido Steinberg (ed.), *Jihadismus und Internet: Eine deutsche Perspektive*, SWP, October 2012, 45-56, http://www.swp-berlin.org/de/publikationen/swp-studien-de/swp-studien-detail/article/jihadismus_und_internet.html.

husnayyin) to happen to us?’”

This is a popular slogan for jihadist groups, who refer to “one of the two glorious things” as either being victorious or attaining the *shahada*. Therefore, the *Mujahid* only anticipates in this world to be victorious, to remain alive and establish an Islamic state and the Caliphate in the long term, or to be killed “on the path of God.” Death is thus the most fundamental part of the *shahada*, to attest the utmost possible for God and for Islam, being rewarded by entry to paradise in the perception by the jihadists.¹⁶⁵

This is also referenced by the Qur’anic word *al-husaynayn* (“one of the two most beautiful deeds”), namely dying on the battlefield as a *shahid*, thus entering paradise (*al-janna*), or remaining in this world victorious (*nasr*), implementing and enforcing *shari’a*-law principles. The powerful message is conveyed by the dead, the mostly martyred men, who draw on a culture of fandom and whose biographies keep them alive on the Internet for – it seems – eternity.

The in parts comprising biographical stories are a literal genre of the greater corpus of the jihadist literature and are essential for the video-culture and audiovisual productions. This jihadi literature genre, however, has become inseparable from the audiovisual tracks that populate and roam the Internet, where a jihadi subculture of fandom and admiration deem it a divine command to not only be passive consumers, but rather also active publishers of ‘user-generated-content’ or simple re-disseminators.¹⁶⁶ The multi-lingual pop-cultural jihadi agitprop media departments and pro-active sympathizers complement one another.

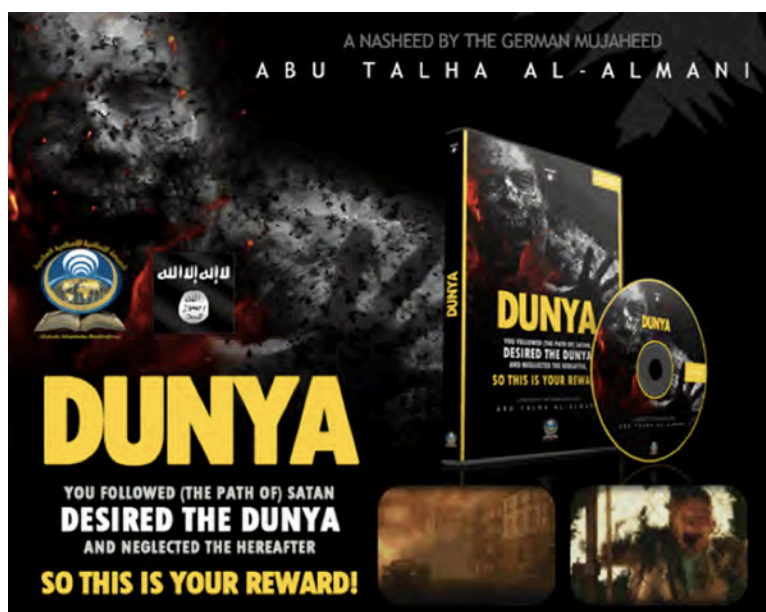
¹⁶⁵ For a precise analysis of this slogan in the context of the Saudi Arabian al-Qa’ida branch, see Nico Prucha, *Die Stimme des Dschihad* “Sawt al-gihad”: al-Qa’idas erstes Online-Magazin, Hamburg: Verlag Dr.Kovač, 2010, 39.

¹⁶⁶ The work of such media activists who either reproduce or mash up jihadist propaganda online has been sanctioned and approved especially since Osama bin Laden’s death in 2011. As outlined in the text of Abu Yahya al-Libi, “Risala ila l-ikhwa fi thaghr al-i’lam al-jihadiyyi”, *Nukhbat al-I’lam al-Jihadiyyi*, August 11, 2013, <http://justpaste.it/3djs>; or the paper by Abu Sa’d al-‘Amili, “nida’ ila junud al-i’lami al-jihadi – ilzamu amakanukum wa-‘udu ila thughurikum”, *Fursan al-Balagh al-I’lam*, March 2013, retrievable at <http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/stay.pdf>.

For an introduction to the jihadist presence on Twitter as well as the social-media strategy deployed since the outbreak of violence in Syria: Ali Fisher and Nico Prucha, “Jihadi Twitter Activism – Introduction”, *Jihadica*, April 27, 2013, <http://www.jihadica.com/jihadi-twitter-activism-introduction/>.

While ‘official’ media departments issue written tales of individual martyrs and also publish professional made videos, the media activists can choose the most appealing elements and retell or re-disseminate such stories, in either written or visual form.

The pop-cultural aspects expressed on the Internet are not confined or exclusive to traditional symbols or icons, but are in fact in parts a mirror of our global pop-culture in general. Jihadists sometimes use Hollywood movie posters or well-known popular icons from the movie culture in their own context to promote their slogans and frame of



reference.

In a German *nashid* by Abu Talha al-Almani (Denis Cuspert) published on the *Shumukh al-Islam Forum*¹⁶⁷ in September 2013, this pop-cultural ‘override’ of Hollywood-productions is quite visible. As the decaying body in the picture in the jihadist mind-set represents a Muslim who sold the hereafter (*akhirah*) for this world (*dunya*) thus rotting in hell like a Hollywood *Zombie*. The “Zombie” in the picture advertising the *nashid* is stolen from the popular AMC TV-series “The Walking Dead”¹⁶⁸ that is based on the original comic series created by Robert Kirkman.¹⁶⁹ Abu Talha al-Almani was based in Berlin and a former rapper. He reverted to Islam and embraced the *salafist* creed and was inspired and guided by the Austro-Egyptian Muhammad Mahmoud. In 2013 Abu Talha

¹⁶⁷ Abu Dujana al-Maqdisi. “GIMF: Dunya Nashid Abu Talha al-Almani”, Shabakat Shumukh al-Islam, September 2, 2013, <https://shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=210773>.

¹⁶⁸ For more on AMC’s “The Walking Dead”, <http://www.amctv.com/shows/the-walking-dead>.

¹⁶⁹ “The Walking Dead” on ComicVine, <http://www.comicvine.com/the-walking-dead/4050-18166/>.

was able to get into Syria and pledged his allegiance (*bay'a*) to The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham in April 2014.¹⁷⁰

Intersections – the theological making of the “media shahid”

AQ has established a worldview and a frame of reference, providing comfort and order to the chaos of life, which is aggressively and openly advertised on all levels of the Internet. In the meantime, the jihadists themselves term this as an “open source jihad.” This “open source jihad” is conducted by media workers either embedded with actual real-life Mujahidin in the field or supporting sympathizers, who edit, layout and make new materials available online in a professional manner are nevertheless the extension of the Kalashnikov of the ‘classical’ *Mujahid*, fighting on “the path of God.” “Open source jihad”, however, calls not only to become a part of AQ on a media level, but to conduct ‘lone wolf’ or ‘single cell’ attacks by all means, attempting to reach in particular disgruntled Muslims living in the west. As the Yemeni English language magazine “Inspire” defines “Open Source Jihad [as]

“(…) a resource manual for those who loathe the tyrants; includes bomb making techniques, security measures, guerrilla tactics, weapons training and all other jihād related activities.

- Informal: A disaster for the repressive imperialistic nations: *The open source jihād is America’s worst nightmare.*
- It allows Muslims to train at home instead of risking a dangerous travel abroad: *Look no further, the open source jihād is now at hands reach.*”¹⁷¹

By establishing and maintaining a coherent presence on the Internet, AQ and affiliate groups and branches have achieved and proven being resilient, even if the situation of

¹⁷⁰ For the role of the German salafiyya: *The Birth of a jihadist and Salafist Scene in Germany – 2005 onwards*. Denis Cuspert (Abu Talha al-Almani) is described in the subchapter *From Syria with Love: A German Voice for the Global Islamic Media Front*.

¹⁷¹ This page has so far appeared in all six editions of the magazine, except the third, special, edition (November 1431 / 2010), marking the special section *open source jihad*. Edition 1, p. 32; edition 2, p. 52; edition 4, p. 23; edition 5, p. 23; edition 6, p. 36.

the actual group may be dire or stretched thin due to the constant threat of unmanned drones or counter-terrorist operations.

The intersection of offline acts and online visualization of these purported legitimate defensive and moral justified actions construe and fertilize the jihadists' frame of reference and the motivations that have consequently led to both individual and as well as collective actions.

With its massive and immense online presence, consisting of both videos and comprising writings, jihadist materials seek to incite and inspire (*tahrid*) violence by its assumed religious-authoritative role, whereas the only "true believer" is the one fighting for ones creed (*iman*) and religion (*din*) based on the jihadist methodology of faith (*manhaj*).¹⁷² This methodology of faith has its slogans that are easy to comprehend and repeat while providing the clear cut framing of individual as well as collective actions. As Arabic is the most important language for Muslims, and deployed as well by non-Arab Muslim scholars in general, specific terms expressing the methodology of faith are stated in Arabic and are oftentimes a reference to the Qur'an. By using singular words or short phrases like the Islamic creed, "there is no God but God and Muhammad is His messenger", the jihadists seek to hijack Islam exclusively for their cause and interpretation, with the ambition of drawing the consumer into their virtual 'network of knowledge' to further the understanding of this ideology that in the past years has covered more and more niches. In combination with the assumed position of AQ ideologues and the pertaining countless pseudo-scholarly writings, ideologues as well as 'regular' fighters or "martyrdom operatives" in the propaganda serve as guides for the consumers, leading them further into this online milieu of jihadism. By citing renowned jihadist figures or scholars the individual actor of jihadist videos relays the ideology in their corresponding dialect, language or emphasis, enabling the audience to read and expand their knowledge within the virtual worlds where countless religious writings and essays by historical as well as contemporary jihadi scholars can be easily accessed.

¹⁷² Jihadists are fighting in a cosmological war between "truth" (*haqq*) and "falsehood" (*batil*), where the latter is a violation of fundamental principles such as the "unity/oneness of God" (*tawhid*). Nico Prucha, "Notes on the Jihadists' motivation for suicide-operations", http://www.univie.ac.at/jihadism/blog/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/Prucha_1.pdf, pp. 60-62.

These religious authoritative writings serve as the backbone and as the intellectual motivation that find its expression by mostly male actors¹⁷³ in the audiovisual propaganda – who openly address the audience with details of their motivation to conduct, for example, “martyrdom operations” or who had filmed their testimony (*wasiyya*) in case of being killed in ‘regular’ combat. The videos are the intersection of online and offline worlds.

These main ideological writings and especially the movies of jihad are offered sometimes on a daily basis within the dwellings of the jihadi virtual by various groups worldwide – including regular publications that are dominantly Arabic- and Urdu-language movies, ranging from Afghanistan to Pakistan, Yemen, Iraq but also filmed statements and clips from the Caucasus and elsewhere. As a recent phenomena, pro-jihadist but apparently non-militant groups, usually termed by western media as “salafists”, openly demonstrate in western cities using the same iconography and slang of militant jihadists movements, with local language jihad propaganda at hand and crafting new files to the overall corpus. Arabic core files, writings, and the authoritative use of specific symbols are thus in a localized context and a local language used in a repetitive manner. This creates a coherent identity and group cohesion, whereas individuals receive guidance and can strengthen their notion of belonging within this community. According to Anthony Cohen,

“people construct community symbolically, making it a resource and repository of meaning, and a referent of their identity.”¹⁷⁴

Subsequently, a specific religious habitus is propagated as a audio-visual frame of reference that includes vital cornerstones of an ideology put into action with the perception of fighting for both justice and defense. The intersection of real-life and online, virtual worlds – accessible for anyone unlike the real-life scenarios, lead to questioning the effects of the accessibility to the jihadist propaganda for consumers

¹⁷³ Most portrayed Jihadists by videos and biographical stories are men or young males in general. Female martyr and correspondingly biographies exist, for example: Yusuf al-Qaradawi, “Min qisas al-batula wa-l-fida’, al-istishhadiyyat ‘arafna al-dukhula ila l-hayyat”, <http://www.palestine-info.info/arabic/feda/2004/isteshhadeat.htm>, accessed March 8, 2006.

¹⁷⁴ Anthony Cohen. *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, London: Tavistock, 1985, 118.

sometimes thousands of miles away. But in close emotional, spiritual and politicized proximity with the fear, anger and cognition of being ‘persecuted’ because of ones faith and one’s identity as “Muslim.”

The media activist, who carries mainly the camera and not a rifle, is in particular popular in the Syrian conflict where AQ affiliates such as *Jabhat al-Nusra* propagate this role model in their videos along ‘classical’ martyrs.



Media Mujahidin such as Abu al-Wafa al-Ansari, whose clear name is stated as Ahmad Muhammad Baydar, are eulogized as having fulfilled the *jihad bi l-lisan*, “by the tongue”, in the reference to being on the ground and embedded cameramen and documentary-makers of the operations of their brothers. *Jabhat al-Nusra* is always keen to promote its Twitter handle and elevates any media worker of their troop to the status of the ‘regular’ Mujahidin.¹⁷⁵

Online Martyrs and Fandom Death Cult

¹⁷⁵ In the video, the “raid of Abu ‘l-Wafa al-Ansari”, the attack on the North-Syrian village Khan al-‘Asal is shown where al-Ansara was killed in the wake of filming. In the film an unknown Mujahid eulogizes al-Ansari and tells the story of the successful conquest of the village, underlined by combat-footage and sequences of taking many prisoners of the regular Syrian Army. Al-Manarat al-Bayda’, “raid of Abu ‘l-Wafa al-Ansari”, August 28, 2013, <https://shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=210395>.

The contemporary foundation of using the Internet by jihadist media activists was perhaps crafted by

“Abu Mus’ab al-Suri’s “Message to the British and European Peoples and Governments regarding the Explosions in London”, July 2005, where he outlined the Internet as the most important medium to propagate and spread the jihadists demands and frame of reference in general. He referred to “the jihadi elite” residing in Europe to partake in this venture.”¹⁷⁶

Perhaps the current state of “online jihad” is best described by al-Suri’s vision, with groups such as the *Nukhbat al-I’lam al-Jihadi* being a direct manifestation of al-Suri’s definition of *da’wa* and *tahrid* by all means; most and foremost in Arabic but for a global audience in all languages and sizes.

Media groups and battalions of real-life jihadi detachments and groups have fully utilized the Internet as the main capacity of delivering their message to their target audiences, increasingly via the interactive social media.¹⁷⁷ Naturally, the Internet functions only due to the human factor, who use intermediary devices such as smartphones, laptops, tablets, and classical stationary computers to feed new content and input in general into the jihadi cloud computing networks.

To understand the new landscape of martyred role modes advertised on the Internet, the depth as well as the value of the jihadist media activists must be embedded accordingly. While in some cases these activists are ‘hybrids’, meaning mainly young men engaged in combat and operations with the *Mujahidin* while conveying the messages from the front lines, others are only active from ‘safe areas’ or zones, sometimes located in far away places but as active – and important – as ‘embedded’ media activists. Especially in the context of the Syrian conflict has the martyred

¹⁷⁶ Ali Fisher and Nico Prucha, “66 Important Jihadist Twitter Accounts (Part 2)”, Jihadica, September 4, 2013, <http://www.jihadica.com/66-important-jihadist-twitter-accounts-part-2/>.

¹⁷⁷ Nico Prucha and Ali Fisher. Tweeting for the Caliphate – Twitter as the New Frontier for Jihadist Propaganda. CTC Sentinel (Westpoint), June 2013, <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/tweeting-for-the-caliphate-twitter-as-the-new-frontier-for-jihadist-propaganda>.

media activists gained a momentum and is celebrated as any regular *Mujahid* or suicide bomber by his brigade or battalion.¹⁷⁸ The individual media activists responsible for the daily output of media files are increasingly highlighted and valued as any *shahid*, for their work has been fully equated and is valued. One case of a ‘hybrid’ is outlined by the martyrdom biography of Mu’awiyya ‘Abd al-Qahhar Belhadj, who was eulogized by Salah Abu Muhammad, the head of AQIM’s media department al-Andalus, in August 2011. Having been a fulltime *Mujahid*, Belhadj had also been an integral part of AQ’s North African department’s media department and thus serves as a double role model.

The Martyrdom of the Media Mujahid Mu’awiyya ‘Abd al-Qahhar Belhadj

Belhadj was killed together with his brother at a checkpoint of the Algerian Army. Salah Abu Muhammad elevated his attainment of martyrdom in his eulogy of Belhadj and his companion. By referencing their death as *istishhad*, Salah Abu Muhammad seeks to equate their deaths to those who undertake, and thus chose death, in a martyrdom operation styled attack. As the individual Mujahid nevertheless awaits martyrdom on the “path of God”, his life in this world is exclusively based on the expectation to work to elevate the religion of God. For,

“this world is a corridor not an abode (*fa-l-dunya dar mamarr wa-laysat dar maqarr*).”¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁸ See for example this clip from Syria, published on August 20, 2013 on YouTube showing the remains of “the martyr – God willing – of the free media, the hero Muhammad Musallima Abu Halab, martyr for the free media, August 20, 2013”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gUqgZF8gpW0>. The deceased is seen in what appears to be an improvised morgue while a voice from the off recites Qur’an 3:169.

¹⁷⁹ Eli Alshech, (2008) Egoistic Martyrdom and Hamas Success in the 2005 Municipal Elections: A Study of Hamas Martyrs’ Ethical Wills, Biographies and Eulogies, *Die Welt des Islams* (48), pp. 23-49. Alshech references <http://www.palestine-info.info/arabic/Hamas/shuhda/abokwak/waseyah.htm> - where the *wasiya* (testimony) can be accessed, October 12, 2010.

Any individual subscribed to AQ's worldview strives to venture to the afterlife, seeking reward and re-compensation for his struggle. Thus, the reference *istishhad* is more commonly used to describe martyrdom in general, independent on the modus operandi of death.

“[Mu’awiyya] ‘Abd al-Qahhar and his brother Abu Nusayba – may God have mercy with them both – had been killed after being stopped at a security checkpoint. A group of Algerian soldiers and intelligence officers converged on them in an attempt to capture and humiliate them. But by their own free choice, they did not allow this to happen, not wanting to satisfy those of this world in their [misled] religion, not granting any joy to the enemies, they ignited their two explosives vests, thus killing and injuring 15 of the Pharaoh’s soldiers; the two were submitted to the mercy of their Lord, unsoiled, being pure returnees [from the *dunya*].”¹⁸⁰

The martyr story is of particular interest, for Mu’awiyya ‘Abd al-Qahhar was a key figure for the electronic media department, al-Andalus, for AQIM, while having been a perhaps ‘regular’ Mujahid otherwise. In the video, he is portrayed and eulogized as such a ‘regular’ Mujahid in the rows of AQIM, accrediting him the status of a warrior trained and equipped with the Kalashnikov and seen with his fellow fighters. His special role is, however, outlined in the eulogy (*ritha*’) as

“the al-Andalus Media Department lost one of its members, who are energetic in producing their share, participating with their pains (*bi jahdihim*), their sacrifice to incite (*tahrid*) the *umma*, shaking it awake; to break the spell of fear that has kept the *umma* in irons; to revolt against injustice and the tyrants. For the eye breaks a tear, while the heart saddens, for we are now apart with you and grievous, o ‘Abd al-Qahhar.”¹⁸¹

¹⁸⁰ Salah Abu Muhammad, Ritha’ qadwa al-shabab, Mu’awiyya ‘Abd al-Qahhar Belhaji”, al-Andalus Media, http://archive.org/details/osod_ggh78.

¹⁸¹ *ibid.*

The death of the technical-fluent propagandist seems more severe than the loss of a *Mujahid* in the sense of fighting member, who turned into a “martyrdom seeker” by his choosing, evading captivity thus keeping his ‘honor’ and ‘purity’ in jihadist understanding.



For only real men are ‘true’ believers manifesting themselves as such, who are able and capable, physically and mentally to fulfill the covenant to God as based on an often-cited verse of the Quran (33:23), which is used to visually enhance this young martyr:

“There are men among the believers who honoured their pledge to God: some of them have fulfilled it by death, and some are still waiting. They have not changed in the least.”

In the picture on the right, the martyr Belhadj is accredited with this divinity and eulogized by Salah Abu Muhammad, on the left, who is reading the eulogy from an illuminating computer screen reflecting in his glasses.

The Founders, pioneers and Actors of the early electronic Media Frontier – Abu A’id al-Filastini

The digital world had been a venue of interest since the days of ‘Abdallah ‘Azzam. The charismatic preacher inspired computer visionaries among his followers. One of

‘Azzam’s companions in the 1980s was a *Mujahid* named “Abu A’id al-Filastini”, who was killed in the events following the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan in late 2001. He is highlighted as a pioneer in the 1980s who foresaw the value of promoting the propagation of Islam by electronic means and by digitalizing the writings of renowned scholars such as his mentor and guide ‘Azzam. In the modern context of the vast amount of online jihadi endeavors, the digital files established by actors such as Abu A’id are a most essential a central part and set the first foundation in the electronic media frontier.¹⁸²

He gained prominence by his clear name Khalil bin Sa’id al-Dik, usually referred to as Khalil (al-) Deek in western media and writings. He was a Palestinian from Jordan who had studied computer science in Los Angeles. He later traveled from Pakistan and Afghanistan to Bosnia and was a Bosnian passport holder.¹⁸³ Deek is also sought responsible for recruiting the convert Adam Yahiya Gadahn (Adam Pearlman / ‘Azzam al-Amriki)¹⁸⁴ who turned into the media advisor and spokesman of al-Qaida in Pakistan. It is assumed that he

“worked as computer engineer and Charity Without Borders staffer, where it is now believed that Adam Yahiyeh Gadahn worked around that same time in 1997. The Charity was discovered to be an Al-Qaida organization used to funnel money overseas and wasn't shut down until after September 11, 2001. Hisham Diab was running this organization at the time and it was confirmed by his ex-wife Saraah Olson that Hisham and Khalil Said al-Deek recruited Adam Yahiyeh Gadahn and transformed him into an American-hating fanatic.”¹⁸⁵

¹⁸² The first AQ generation in Saudi Arabia digitalized a great deal of the the 1980s military handbooks and files in general, having thus further set the foundation for the contemporary massive data of this kind. For details: Nico Prucha, *Die Stimme des Dschihad* “Sawt al-gihad”: al-Qa’idas erstes Online-Magazin, Hamburg: Verlag Dr.Kovač, 2010, 73-77.

¹⁸³ John R. Schindler. *Unholy Terror: Bosnia, Al-Qa’ida, and the Rise of Global Jihad*, Zenith Press: St. Paul, 2007, 270.

¹⁸⁴ Ben Fox. Father of suspected al-Qaeda operative is baffled by accusation, <http://legacy.utsandiego.com/news/nation/terror/20040528-0715-terrorthreat-gadahn.html>. Accessed August 29, 2013.

¹⁸⁵ Khalil al-Deek, Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khalil_al-Deek. Accessed August 29, 2013.

He is the alleged co-conspirator of the “Millennium Plot” that intended a spade of attacks in the U.S. and the Middle East.

“On December 31, 1999, an Algerian/Jordanian terrorist cell with cooperation from Al-Qaeda planned to execute two thwarted terrorist attacks. One an attack on Los Angeles International Airport, and the other on biblical sites in the Middle East and a hotel in Amman Jordan. In late 1998 two Palestinians, Raed Hijazi and Abu Hoshar settled on a plan to attack multiple targets throughout the middle east. They would first attack four targets: the SAS Radisson Hotel in downtown Amman, the border crossings from Jordan into Israel, and two Christian holy sites, at a time when all these locations were likely to be thronged with American and other tourists. Next, they would target a local airport and other religious and cultural sites. Hijazi and Abu Hoshar cased the intended targets and sent reports to Abu Zubaydah, a longtime ally of Osama Bin-Ladin, who approved their plan.”¹⁸⁶

His martyr biography was published as part of a 350-page long collection edited by Abu ‘Ubayda al-Maqdisi featuring individuals from mainly the Arab countries perished after the events of September 11, 2001. The book entitled “*shuhada’ fi zaman al-ghurba*” (“The Martyrs in the Earthly [Stage] of Emigration”) hosts 121 martyr tales, with the majority showing a picture of the deceased. The pictures are mostly screen grabs of jihad-videos, mainly taken from the Afghanistan-based *Labayyka* productions.

According to the foreword by al-Maqdisi, this compilation of martyr stories with an introduction by Khalid bin Fathi al-Agha (Abu ‘I-Walid al-Ansari)¹⁸⁷ was completed

¹⁸⁶ The Millennium Plot, Global Security, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/security/ops/millennium-plot.htm>, accessed August 29, 2013.

¹⁸⁷ The introduction is dated to 2007. According to a footnote detailing al-Ansari, he was born in 1966 in Gaza and moved with his parents to Saudi Arabia where he went to school “until he heard the call to *jihad*, (...) to support his brothers, the Afghan *Mujahidin* in 1986.” The use of ideological keywords such as the “mounted *mujahid*” and the concept of the *murabiteen*, the one tied to the front fighting for their beliefs set is a reoccurring phenomena repeated throughout the individual martyr stories.

in Afghanistan in May 2005 and published in 2008.¹⁸⁸ In total 121 martyr biographies are hosted in this comprising compilation, with the majority having been from Arab countries, mainly Saudi Arabia (24), Egypt (11), Syria (7). Neighboring countries and regions also are represented often, including Waziristan¹⁸⁹ (10), Uzbekistan (9), Turkistan¹⁹⁰ (6). Based on the data of these biographies, table 1.1 indicates the martyrs by origin:

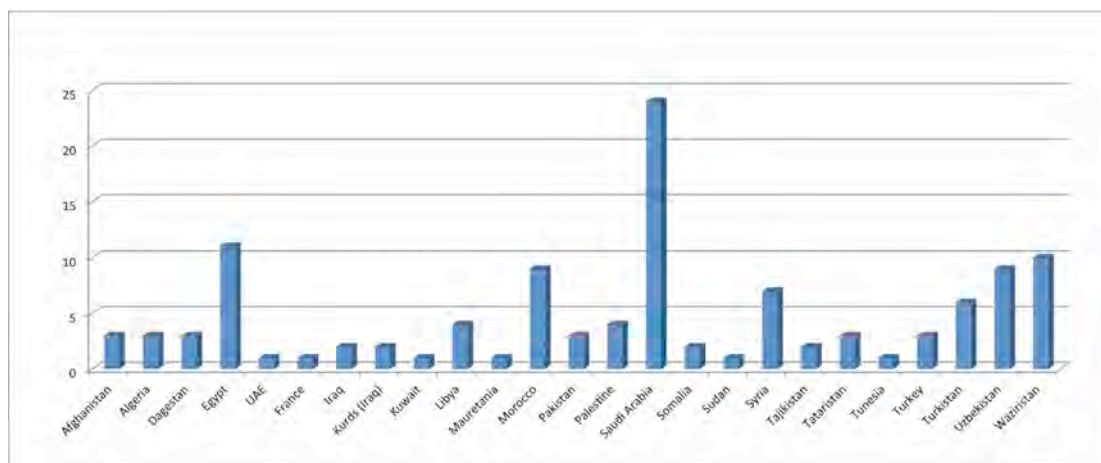


Figure 4 Martyrs by country of origin

One martyr from France, Mukhtar al-Karibi, had been prominently featured in an *as-Sahab* video “Crushing the Crusader”¹⁹¹ where he speaks in French with Arabic

¹⁸⁸ Abu ‘Ubayda al-Maqdisi and ‘Abdallah bin Khalid al-‘Adam. Shuhada fi zaman al-ghurba. The document was published as aPDF- and WORD format in the main jihadist forums, for example, <http://www.muslm.org/vb/showthread.php?322767-%D8%B3%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D9%85%D9%88%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%AF%D9%85-%28%28%C2%B0-%D8%B4%D9%87%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B2%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%BA%D8%B1%D8%A8%D8%A9-%C2%B0%29%29>.

¹⁸⁹ A tribal border area between Afghanistan-Pakistan.

¹⁹⁰ The West Chinese province is by jihadist definition part of any future Caliphate that is powerful enough to challenge Chinese authority over this historical Islamic territory. Chinese occupation and annexation have spurred grievances and discrimination against the local Uighur populace. The most present Sunni jihadist faction, the *Islamic Party of East Turkmenistan* issues all of their videos and writings in Arabic to consolidate their position within the Arabic dominated jihadist spectrum as being part of the *umma*. Due to Chinese policies, in a similar strategy used in Tibet, the former Muslim majority population has become a minority with the government backed settling of ethnic Han-Chinese in this region.

¹⁹¹ Part of the *Harb al-mustada'ifin* series, 1426. In the wake of the Syrian conflict a sympathizer of *Jabhat al-Nusra* re-uploaded the video on YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BZI6YgjbVS4>, September 11, 2012.

subtitles to his audience. In the book by al-Maqdisi, he al-Karibi is cherished as the “first martyr celebrated by the Caribbean Islands” where he was born.¹⁹²

Among the four Palestinians listed in Abu ‘Ubayda al-Maqdisi’s compilation, the story of Abu A’id is one of the most interesting ones, and perhaps the most prolific. According to his biography, he had been responsible in a wide range of *da’wa* related tasks, from digitalizing the notorious military “Encyclopedia of *Jihad*” to transcribing sermons (*khutba*) by ‘Abdallah ‘Azzam.

According to the 9/11 Commission Report, Abu A’id, a.k.a. Khalil Deek, played a vital role as a facilitator while in California and highlights his role as an ‘administor’ of jihadist material.

“In early 1999, [Raed] Hijazi and [Khadr] Abu Hoshar¹⁹³ contacted Khalil Deek, an American citizen and an associate of Abu Zubaydah who lived in Peshawar, Pakistan, and who, with Afghanistan-based extremists, had created an electronic version of a terrorist manual, the *Encyclopedia of Jihad*. They obtained a CD-ROM of this encyclopedia from Deek.”¹⁹⁴

He was perhaps one of the main actors on the new frontier for jihadist propaganda before and during the early days of the Internet. As the nature of the corpus of contemporary jihadist materials is seldom shy to overstate the roles individuals played, such descriptions must be read with caution. This is because in parts hagiographic elements are accredited to the martyrs while the impact and role of these individuals are elevated because of their impact and their contribution to further or establish a global jihadist network. In this case, however, the role of the martyr is rather downplayed and neither his role in the United States nor his involvement in the

¹⁹² According to this martyr story, al-Karibi was raised in France and converted to Islam. As a convert he is applauded as both an international fighter and as an outstanding individual who heeded the call to Islam and *jihad*.

Al-Maqdisi. *Shuhada’ fi Zaman al-Ghurba*, 283-285.

¹⁹³ Both had been accomplices of “Abu Zubaydah, a longtime ally of Bin Laden”, 9/11 Commission Report, 175,

¹⁹⁴ The 9/11 Commission Report, 175.

“Millennium Plot” is mentioned at all. His pioneer media work for the global jihadist agenda is at the center and can perhaps be understood as yet another trend set in death by this martyr. As it is not new but a modern trend to highlight individual contribution to the jihadi media of fighters who then set out to join the real-life battlefields, as outlined in the case of Abu Qasura al-Libi, for example. Already in the 1980s, during the war against the Red Army in Afghanistan, however, fighters are portrayed who also used their various expertise to conduct *da'wa* by the means of either crafting or disseminating propaganda or by finding new means for jihadist propaganda to manifest itself.

This unique aspect is accredited to Abu A'id al-Filastini, “the lion of Palestine, who disembarked” life and became a *shahid* in the course of his deeds for Islam. Supposedly, he was an engineer who studied civil aviation without a degree and subsequently used his computer skills and expertise to be a pioneer of digitalizing jihadist materials of the 1980s he would later publish on the Internet.

“By reasons only known to God, he abandoned his [civil aviation] studies and turned to gaining advanced computer knowledge.”¹⁹⁵

His real

“name was Khalil Sa'id al-Dik who, like many others of the sons of Palestine, lived in Jordan.¹⁹⁶ When he met one of the sons of the Islamic Movement (*al-harakat al-Islamiyya*), he immediately joined their Islamic center.”¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁵ Shuhada fi zaman al-ghurba, 157.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

For a highly interesting overview of the impact of Palestinians from Jordan for Global Jihad: Hazim al-Amin: al-Salafi al-yatim – al-wajha al-filastini li-“jihad al-alimi” wa-“l qa'ida”, Dar al-Saqi: Beirut, London 2011.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

Due to his endeavors and his skills he became well known among the scholars of this center, including ‘Abdallah ‘Azzam, whom he later accompanied to the “Mosques in America inciting and missionizing” (*muharridan wa-da’iyyan*) the salafist-jihadist creed. In the late 1980s ‘Azzam went to the United States to preach and tell stories of the Mujahidin in Afghanistan.¹⁹⁸ Abu A’id moved to Peshawar, Pakistan, which had been ‘Azzam’s chosen residence and the most important base for many Arab foreign fighters bound for Afghanistan to team up and meet. The text alters his name after stating his move to Peshawar to Abu A’id *al-Muhajir al-Gharib*, thus accrediting him with a special status only a *migrant (muhajir)*, or as a *stranger (gharib)* in this world in the *rite of passage* can be approved of. For

“Jihadists are “strangers”, who are merely passing through this world,”¹⁹⁹

hence Abu A’id is named *al-Gharib*, the *stranger* – further elevating his status in both this world (*al-dunya*) as well as in the afterlife (*al-akhirah*) where the jihadists’ creed propagates the reward for deeds in the service of God in this world. In the jihadist notion and spiritual essentials (*Geisteshaltung*), the constant fleeing of the physical, celestial surrounding is of grave essence. As most martyr stories indicate, the *Mujahid*, or the martyrdom operative, has a strong desire for the *shahada*, confessing the outmost possible by ones deeds for God. Until the status of actually attaining the *shahada* is reached, with the awards of the afterlife, where the believers are safe from any sin while enjoying the heavenly rewards (*ajr*). Thus, the *Mujahid* dwells in a state of mental transition into the celestial while disengaging this world, retreating into the belief set of being a soldier of God (*jund allah*), migrating from his life into a stage of *jihad*.

¹⁹⁸ This may be a reference to ‘Azzam’s last filmed *khutba* in 1988 in Seattle, Washington, U.S.A., as described in this chapter.

¹⁹⁹ Philipp Holtman: Leadership without Leaders – How Jihadists Guide Each Other in Cyberspace, in: Rüdiger (ed.), Studying Jihadism, Vienna University Press: Göttingen, 2012, 74.

As such, the individual *Mujahid* considers himself as being in the direct service for God. This may fulfill a human urge in the self-perception of terrorist actors in general, to be an avant-gardist and therefore of greatest importance.²⁰⁰

Abu A'id received military education and preparation in designated training camps while coming and going to fight in various battles in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Years later, at the time the conflict in Bosnia unraveled in the early 1990s, Abu A'id was deeply moved and travelled to Bosnia. He felt compelled to support the Muslims in Bosnia as

“the fires of jihad didn't just engulf Khurasan (Afghanistan) but where also lit on the wide plains of Bosnia-Hercegovina, while the voices of the *muwahhidin*²⁰¹ to oblige the support for the sons of the Muslims in this region had been raised.”²⁰²

Support (*nusra*) includes foremost military aid by foreign fighters, who moved to Bosnia to participate in training and combat missions and also of missionary work (*da'wa*) of the salafist-jihadist interpretation for the Bosnian Muslims.²⁰³ Following the usual rhetoric of this literal genre, the Muslims in Bosnia are termed as those “who are raided by the Serbian Crusader-legion.”²⁰⁴ The events, a reminder of the atheist communist Soviet occupation of Afghanistan,

²⁰⁰ As the terrorists is a political being who fights not only for him- or herself, but claims to be engaged for “liberty” or “justice”, international active groups such as the German *Red Army Faction* had a similar reasoning in their writings and a similar self-awareness. Al-Qa'ida perceives itself as a platform for “enlightened” individuals who comprehend the ‘truth’ and thus target designated main enemies to free ‘peoples’ from oppression. Parts of this notion is outlined in the following article: Henner, Hess. Die neue Herausforderung. Von der RAF zu AL-Qaida, In: Kraushaar, Wolfgang (ed.), Die RAF und der linke Terrorismus, Vol. 1, Hamburger Edition: Hamburg, 2006, 116.

²⁰¹ A reference to those, who truly practice the worship of God, professing the monotheistic framework in the mindset by jihadist interpretation. The term *muwahhid* is further a denotation for any ‘true’ Muslim.

²⁰² Shuhada fi zaman al-ghurba, 158.

²⁰³ The “Gitmo-Files”, illegally attained and published by WikiLeaks provides valuable insight on how Arab prisoners in the controversial US-facility Guantanamo are alleged of being supporters for the “Global Jihad Support Network” consisting of *da'wa* and combat stationed in Bosnia during and after the Balkan-war in the early to mid-90s. These files are available on the WikiLeaks website:

<http://wikileaks.org/gitmo/>.

²⁰⁴ Shuhada fi zaman al-ghurba, 158.

“lit the light of jihad in Bosnia and likewise ignited the heart of our *shahid*.”²⁰⁵

Abu A'id wanted to hurry

“into this land of the oppressed (*mustada'ifin*) where its people have to protect their innocent honor (*'ird*) by their sword and are terrorized by the by the infidel Serbs.”²⁰⁶

Somewhere between his episode in Bosnia and 9/11, he returned to Afghanistan to join the

“*shahid*, the leader Abu Mu'adh al-Khosti with whom he started a new round of killing and combat in the places where the angels transcend spreading their mercy in dark nights. This lion of the lions of the sons of *tawhid* of the emigrants (*al-muhajirin*), participated in their *jihad*, being tied into their fronts (*ribat*), everywhere among the green hills.”²⁰⁷

Abu A'id, however, was

“betrayed by the hands of the rejectionist Shiites and Abu Mu'adh al-Khusti journeyed to his Lord. [Abu A'id] was not able to stay after the leader was killed and immediately packed up his bags and was set to return to the Kingdom of Satan, whose “hump is America”²⁰⁸ [referring to the Kingdom of Jordan].”²⁰⁹

²⁰⁵ *ibid.*

²⁰⁶ *ibid.*

²⁰⁷ *ibid.*

²⁰⁸ As opposed to the “hump of Islam”, based on a saying of Prophet Muhammad. According to Holtmann (2012, 114),

Instead of returning to Jordan, Abu A'id resided in Peshawar where he married a Syrian with whom he had two sons, as seen in the picture of this martyr.²¹⁰



He settled in Pakistan and made use of his computer skills to develop and disseminate jihadi materials electronically. With his invaluable contribution and the – at the time – start of the evolution and the self-conception of the jihadi electronic media that would become a mainstream element of everyday-jihadism nearly a decade later, Abu A'id began to work on digitalizing jihadi materials used for *da'wa* and incitement (*tahrid*).

“The returnee (*al-a'id*) began anew to use his technical skills and his computer expertise for *da'wa* and *tahrid* and published military know-how tutorials via the Internet and he completed highly important tasks, such as:

- Producing electronic versions of the Afghani Military Encyclopedia and publishing the files on the World Wide Web;
- With great efforts he saved the heritage of the *imam*, the *shahid* 'Abdallah 'Azzam by transcribing his recorded *khutba*'s and publishing the electronic documents.”²¹¹

“this expression goes back to an allegedly sound Prophetic hadith (oral transmission of the sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions), in which Muhammad compares the duties of Islam to the different body parts of a camel, which was an extremely valuable animal in Arab tribal culture of the 7th century.”

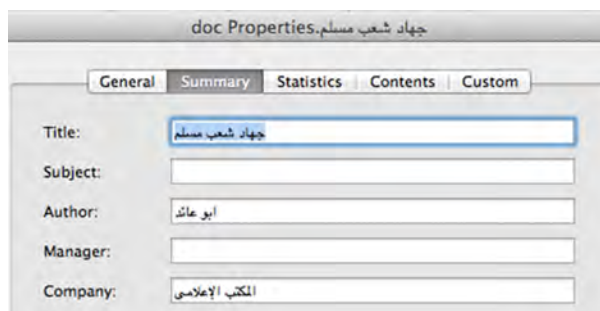
In the jihadist' meaning this refers to Muslims who traded their belief in God and work for Islam for worldly issues, such as turning one's loyalty to God over for the loyalty to hostile governments.

²⁰⁹ Shuhada fi zaman al-ghurba, 158.

²¹⁰ The picture on the left was originally published by the Californian Orange County News, June 2006. <http://www.ocweekly.com/2006-06-15/news/where-is-oc-s-missing-terrorist/>, accessed August 29, 2013. A caption reads, “Deek with his eldest children in Anaheim, mid-1990s. Photo courtesy Tawfiq Deek.”

²¹¹ *ibid.*

WORD documents, for example of ‘Abdallah ‘Azzam’s writings, obtained online sometimes bear the signature of the author. Perhaps part of Abu A’id’s legacy is best highlighted when looking at some of ‘Azzam’s writings on Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi’s online jihadi repository tawhed.ws. Some of ‘Azzam’s writings, uploaded or created as early as 1997, bear the signature in the document properties of “Abu A’id”, perhaps Abu A’id al-Filastini, as shown in the picture.²¹²



His ordeal started when he was arrested in Pakistan,

“due to his zeal and his connection to the sons of *tawhid*. [These sons] swore to never stop fighting until they drink the blood of the sons of the Cross and their henchmen who have crafted a reality in Peshawar consisting of apostasy of Islam (*ridda*) and hypocrisy (*nifaa*). He was arrested in Peshawar and extradited to the Kingdom of Evilness, Jordan, to be thrown into the dungeons of the *sahiyusalibiyya* (the Zionist-Crusader-Alliance). In small cells that seemed like small corridors, he could by no means remain under the whip of humiliation and he went on a hunger strike.”²¹³

He was wanted in connection with the thwarted “Millennium Plot”,

²¹² ‘Abdallah ‘Azzam. *Jihad sha’b Muslim*, Peshawar, second edition, Markaz al-shahid ‘Abdallah ‘Azzam, 1997; <http://tawhed.ws/dl?i=hr6mikyq>.

²¹³ *Shuhada fi zaman al-ghurba*, 158.

“after the arrests of Abu Hoshar and 15 others, the Jordanians tracked Deek to Peshawar, persuaded Pakistan to extradite him, and added him to their catch. Searches in Amman found the rented house and, among other things, 71 drums of acids, several forged Saudi passports, detonators, and Deek’s *Encyclopedia*.”²¹⁴

Abu A’id (Deek), had been arrested and extradited on December 16, 1999 but was released in May 2001, being 44 years old at that time.²¹⁵ According to the Turkish *Hürriyet Daily News*,

“Deek went on a hunger strike May 3 to highlight his plight in detention without being formally charged. Two weeks later, Deek was hospitalized for low blood pressure, physical weakness and fatigue, according to Adel Deek.”²¹⁶

According to his martyr biography he had nowhere to go after his release as he was banned from entering several countries, including Lebanon. He returned to Peshawar, where he was regularly checked on by the Pakistani intelligence, demanding that he would get to the U.S. embassy for questioning.²¹⁷

“Abu A’id was getting ready to show his approval regarding what was demanded of him, when he dreamt of that despicable crusader woman at the [American] embassy who had pressured him previously, saying: “Flee, flee no more.” Abu A’id awoke by her voice to pack his bags to depart right for his

²¹⁴ The 9/11 Commission Report, 175.

²¹⁵ Release of Deek angers Americans, *Hürriyet Daily News*, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/release-of-deek-angers-americans.aspx?pageID=438&n=release-of-deek-angers-americans-2001-05-24>. Accessed September 1, 2013.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Shuhada fi zaman al-ghurba, 159.

religion with the intention of returning to the frontiers of the *Murabiteen* here in Kabul.”²¹⁸

He continued his *da'wa* related work and witnessed the U.S. bombing raids on Kabul and later in Qandahar. He had managed to flee back into Pakistan where he sought to continue his work for *da'wa*, *tahrid*, and military preparation.

An agent of the “Pakistani intelligence agencies” gained his trust,

“and after several months, this treacherous agent was in the service of our martyr. On a memorable day, a festive public holiday, this traitor had lunch with our martyr. In a surprise move, this coward gained hold of the weapon of Abu A'id and emptied in his treacherous hatred all the bullets into the body of his guest. Verily, God bestowed the sons of *tawhid* with the honor to cut the head of this traitor-criminal off under the very same roof where the knight of Palestine departed and disembarked after bringing about his messages in this life.”²¹⁹

Abu 'Umar – the new Role Model of the “Media Martyr”

The martyr story of “Abu 'Umar” is perhaps the most precise outline of an exemplary case to underline the jihadists' importance of the Internet and of the physical actors behind this ongoing online jihad. He is presented as the ultimate new role model to the audience and termed as an *istishhadi al-i'lam al-jihadi*, a “jihadi media martyr.” For his contribution to the media enabled him to participate in jihad, being in charge of the media and engaged in interviewing and meeting front-line leaders.

He had been an absolute online-media-activist and as thus is bestowed with the same reward any killed Muhahid may claim “on the path of God” – the difference, however, is that stories such as this provide a different role model to be re-enacted:

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

using individual technical and communication skills for the greater aspects of contemporary jihad, as missionizing (*da'wa*) is essential for any form of *qital*.

Abu 'Umar is cherished as having actively attained the *shahada*, as his work is fully acknowledged and redeemed. By determining his status as an *istishhadi*, he is fully equated to any martyrdom seeker who rams his explosives-laden vehicle into a checkpoint or any bomber who carries the explosives on one's body. He had been a co-worker for the "Global Islamic Media Front" (GIMF) and founder of the "al-Qadisiyya Media Department", focusing on publishing material in "Asian languages". Both media departments issued a statement, commemorating his work and pledging to continue his legacy. The first statement, published by GIMF via the forums is a classical eulogy. It describes the martyr's life and death, praising his work and dedication. The emphasis is set on the important role he played for the development of GIMF and the various language departments. The second statement by al-Qadisiyya is a collection of various accounts by his colleagues and comrades, who shed very personal light on Abu 'Umar, allowing the reader a personal connection to this outstanding man and his ethos, granting him 'holy' attributes, usually restricted only for the real-deal fighters. Based on the account of "Abu Khalid", he once "saw the true image of Abu 'Umar in this verse of the Qur'an:

"Muhammad is the Messenger of God. Those who follow him are firm against the disbelievers and tender towards each other."^{220,221}

The GIMF statement was published on December 13, 2011 on the forums and on YouTube,²²² in Arabic, English, and Urdu. The statement by al-Qadisiyya was published in Arabic (January 26, 2012) and Urdu (February, 23). The death of Abu 'Umar is celebrated in unison with the one year anniversary of this media foundation he established.

²²⁰ Part of 48:29

²²¹ Abu 'Umar – *istishhadi al-i'lam al-jihadi*, al-Qadisiyya, January 26, 2012, accessed June 9, 2012, <http://shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=159657>.

²²² <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4YcNzNVamrM>

The statement starts with a typical rhetoric by announcing

“to the Islamic *umma* in general but to the Mujahidin in particular the martyrdom of one of the leaders of the Global Islamic Media Front, a knight of knights of the jihadi media and the [online] forums, namely the brother ‘Abd al-Mu’ayyad bin ‘Abd al-Salam, “Abu ‘Umar” – may God accept him. This occurred in a martyrdom operation during the firefight with the soldiers of apostasy of the Pakistani military intelligence – the agents of the Jews and the Christians – who attempted to storm his safe house in the region “Gulestan-e-Jauhar” of the city Karachi.”²²³

His key-role and prominence is correlated by the mainstream media claiming the death of an outstanding individual engaged in the work for GIMF on the Internet.²²⁴ The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) claimed a operation, killing three Pakistani “Ranger” soldiers

“as vengeance and revenge for the brother, the Mujahid ‘Abd al-Mu’ayyad bin ‘Abd al-Salam “Abu Umar” who was martyred in this same area after a raid by those apostate soldiers on his apartment.”²²⁵

As confirmed by CNN-Arabic, “Abu ‘Umar” was a U.S. citizen, verifying his clear name as indicated by the GIMF statement. The statement gives

²²³ GIMF, General Command, “bayyan bi khussus istishhad ahad qadatiha wa-faris min fursaniha al-akh Abu ‘Umar”.

²²⁴ “Pakistani Police: Key Leader of TTP Arrested”, CNN-Arabic, January 6, 2012, <http://arabic.cnn.com/2012/world/1/6/Pakistan.Taliban/>, accessed May 28, 2013.

²²⁵ <http://hanein.info/vb/showthread.php?t=267382>, December 16, 2011.

“the birthdate of the hero as July 17, 1974. He was raised and brought up in a wealthy family. He studied at the best schools and universities and worked as a teacher and a translator for international companies in Yemen the U.S. at the senior levels. He and his father received U.S.-citizenship, our hero, the martyr – God willing – lived a life of comfort, without any further intention for his worldly satisfaction.”

Three main events shaped the life and led to the ultimate radicalization of Abu ‘Umar. Having sympathies and apparently knowledge of jihadist ideology, methodology and interpretations, he applauded the 1998 declaration by bin Laden and later the 9/11 attack.

Our brother only subscribed to the jihadist methodology shortly before the foundation of the “Global Islamic Front for Jihad Against the Jews and Crusaders in 1998”, announcing the unification of the Egyptian al-Gama’at al-Jihad al-Islamiyya with Qaedat al-Jihad.²²⁶ And in 2001, shortly after the knights of Qaedat al-Jihad carried out the raids on Manhattan in the land of disbelief America where our hero lived at the time with his family, he heard the news of the blessed operation, maximizing his craving for jihad and to fight on the path of God, and to live happily among the Mujahidin.

The third event that “changed his life entirely” was the “Crusader assault on the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan” about one month after the September 11 attacks. Here his actual story begins.

“He moved on from theorizing and minor commitment to Jihad and became fully engaged to support Jihad and the Mujahidin.”

²²⁶ Sayeed Rahman, “A Note on Usama bin Ladin’s 1998 Declaration of War: al-Kisa’i vs. al-Kasani”, *Jihadica*, February 24, 2011, <http://www.jihadica.com/a-note-on-usama-bin-ladin%E2%80%99s-1998-declaration-of-war-al-kisai-vs-al-kasani/>.

In a vital step, Abu ‘Umar entered a phase of segregation – fully subscribing to the jihadist ideology and drawing lines of demarcation to the ‘other’, or the ‘enemy’ by secluding himself as much as possible to retain his newly boundaries of purity. This is a human element in radicalization processes after an individual commits himself to action and, naturally, after having fully accepted a particular worldview, vision, or ideology. As Gudrun Ensslin, German co-founder of the Red Army Faction wrote in 1971 from prison, any individual truly committed must “draw the line of demarcation every minute.”²²⁷

This could even be a more psychological-emotional vector for radicalized Muslims living in the U.S. in particular, in a non-majority Islamic society perceived as the main enemy.

He drew this line of demarcation by translating his mental or inner segregation or withdrawal by physically

“abandoning all of his worldly comforts and his job to support Jihad, to deter tyranny and enmities against the Islamic *umma*. Therefore, he migrated from America with his parents to Land of the Two Holy Sites²²⁸ and started his Jihad venture from there. He moved from between a number of countries, offering his various material and media services to support the Mujahidin and married a Pakistani in this time.”

He worked as a facilitator and “moved to Pakistan to join the fight with his brothers”. However, at first he seemed to have disapproved the

²²⁷ Ensslin, Christiane u. Gottfried (eds.): Gudrun Ensslin, *Zieht den Trennungsstrich, jede Minute. Briefe an ihre Schwester Christiane und ihren Bruder Gottfried aus dem Gefängnis 1972-1973* Hamburg: Konkret Literatur Verlag, 2005.

²²⁸ In jihadist speak a reference to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

“decision by the leadership to be chosen based on his experience and profession in media related tasks. He was a translator for numerous languages and chosen to resist the vicious [western] media assault on the Mujahidin especially in Pakistan and Afghanistan. [He was tasked] with providing material and media support to assist the Mujahidin, to promote their voices from deep inside the battlefield to the Muslims in general.

He joined the GIMF for many years and worked as an English translator. He had become the chief of the translation department, then he founded with some of his brothers the al-Qadisiyya Media Department to facilitate translations into Asian languages.”

The statement emphasizes Abu ‘Umar’s wish to interact as a media facilitator in a journalistic function to promote the

“voices of the Mujahidin in general but in particular the Mujahidin of the TTP and of AQ in as many languages as possible. Therefore, he set up local media groups and jihadist websites and forums online in Urdu, English, Benghali, and Pashto to defend the honor of the Mujahidin and to refute criticism and lies [promoted by the mainstream media]. Furthermore, to broadcast the true image of jihad and to correct the image, publishing the news and media data of the Mujahidin to incite and inspire Muslims to join and gather support [was his core motivation].”

His technical fluency, his passion for his work is likewise expressed by the habit to rarely has left his computer. This role model element, the tireless ‘office worker’ for the benefit of conducting da’wa, resulting in new attacks against the enemies is backed by repeatedly citing the martyr as “twenty four hours for media jihad is way too little”.

The GIMF statement concludes,

“the martyrdom of this leader will not quell the workflow of the jihadi media. This is what we are saying to the nations of disbelief (*kufir*), and the crusader armies as well as the legions of apostasy and hypocrisy; we are a nation that will not die without a fight. The death of our leaders and brothers will only strengthen our patience and resolve, their blood is lightening our path.”



من كرامات شهداء الامارة (صورة الشهيد ابو عمر بعد 3 ايام من استشهاده)



Fandom art online accredit Abu ‘Umar with the same *karamat* that had been so vividly described by ‘Azzam for the 1980s fighters, relating his smile and his bodily status “three days after his *istishhad*” as “*karamat* for the most high-ranking *shuhada*.”²²⁹

The Martyrdom of the *munshid* of the al-Shumukh Forum

One such outstanding example is the story of Khalad al-Farisi, a member of the Shumukh al-Islam Forum who was commemorated by the forum’s administration after his death and praised as the “*munshid* al-shumukh”, the praiseful hymn singer for the forum.



²²⁹ Abu Khabab al-Muhajir, <https://shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=159657&page=4>, January 28, 2012.

The announcing of the attained martyrdom by the administrators of one of their prominent members is significant, as the legacy of al-Farisi is a vital part of the massive quantity of propaganda material promoted by the forums in general. The vital audio-element of jihadi propaganda, the *nashid*, is even more so highlighted by the commemoration of one of the voices who acted as a direct intersection between on- and offline by his commitment within both worlds, further promoting the active role and his membership of the forum. The administrators address the

“*umma* of *al-tawhid* in general and the members of the Shumukh al-Islam forum in particular. We announce the attained martyrdom of the mujahid, the knight (al-faris), the lion²³⁰ Abu’ l-Bara’ Muhammad bin Salim al-Sudani, a renown [forum] member by his [online] name “Khalad al-Farisi”, may God receive him in [the rows among the] *shuhada’* and grant him residence in the highest level of Paradise.”²³¹

The elevation of the martyr, asking God for his acceptance and his placement in the highest level of Paradise, *al-firdaws*, is further underlining the importance of this individual. By his contribution online in parallel to his real-life commitment, he has the right to receive the outmost possible reward (*ajr*) by God. As mostly, but not always, his clear name is revealed to the community post-mortem.

“God granted him the *hijra* to Yemen and the wisdom to fight with his brothers of the Ansar al-shari’a against the tyrant, those who lost religion to excel the rottenness of this world in the battle of Lawdar in April 2012.”²³²

As the “prolific Internet shaykh”²³³ and prominent ideologue Abu Sa’d al-‘Amili would emphasize in a strategic writing in April 2013,²³⁴ the administration of the

²³⁰ lit.: the lion (al-hummam), the lion (al-asad), the lion (daraghima)

²³¹ Bushra sara: istishhad munshid al-shumukh al-akh Khalad al-Farisi, accessed April 18, 2012, <http://shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?p=1059006469>,

²³² *ibid.*

Shumukh forum embraces their members to re-enact this promoted role model, thus elevating their status likewise:

“For death for the enemies of God means devastation and anguish; for they bury their heads in the ground [escaping reality]. Therefore, [we] the jihadi forums wage our war against them day and night (...). Calling (*nafir*) on our members, our knights to join the battlefields of *jihad*. Thus, quench the thirst for blood.”²³⁵

The jihadi media in general and in particular the forums as well as social media are vital “frontiers” (*thughur*) and as essential as physical front lines in battle. The forum administration determining anyone of the Mujahidin, the virtual media activists as much as the real-deal fighters as *murabitun*, tied to the front in the historical-theological connotation as “frontier-guards”.²³⁶ Hence, the members are addressed as

“o you *murabitun* on the frontier of the media” – the role model of the martyr is instilled – “these are you brothers preceding you to the battle fields of glory and pride, where the neigh of the horse is heard, the teeth fletching, dispersing flesh and blood in support for the religion (*din*), defending the honor (*ird*).”²³⁷

The official part of the posting is concluded by download links of the *nashid* “The Journey of the Beloved”, “*rahl al-habib* by the voice of the brother, the *shahid* – may God accept him.” The *nashid* is a eulogy and a story of two friends – one having attained the *shahada*, while the other must remain in the *dunya*:

²³³ As coined by Brynar Lia, “Jihadis Debate Egypt, part 3”, Jihadica, February 7, 2011, <http://www.jihadica.com/jihadis-debate-egypt-3/>.

²³⁴ Abu Sa’d al-‘Amili, “Nida’ ila junud al-i’lami al-jihadi”, Fursan al-balagh li l-i’lami, March 2013.

²³⁵ Bushra sara: istishhad munshid al-shumukh al-akh Khalad al- Farisi

²³⁶ For a thorough analysis of the concept of *ribat* and its implication, Nico Prucha, “Jihadists’ Use of Quran’s *ribat* concept,” *Jane’s Islamic Affairs Analyst*, August 2009.

²³⁷ Bushra sara: istishhad munshid al-shumukh al-akh Khalad al- Farisi.

“The beloved has journeyed, for tears in my eyes burst out /
while the heart is torn up over the loss /
the one has journeyed who lived under His [God] sovereignty /
who advanced in a quick pace to the highest level /
the beloved one who abandoned his brothers crying over his loss/
with agony in [their] heart you embarked on your journey /
tears flowing on the cheeks, mixing with my tear /
tears running like fire we are accustomed with /
had we been together we would beg to meet our Lord /
death is a small river in the cracks [of my] heart [staying behind in this world] /
for how long have I craved a friend like him /
[...]

Abu Qasura al-Libi – Fighting against al-Qadhdhafi to die in al-Assad’s Syria.

One of the first foreign fighters killed in Syria fighting on the side of the al-Qaeda linked Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) was 19-year old Libyan Muhammad al-Zulaytani. A member of the JN-forum, “the support forum for the Front of Victory”, by the name “muraqib 2”²³⁸ posted a eulogy one day after al-Zulaytani’s death, posting a fan-made picture to commemorate the mujahid. Al- Zulaytani’s nom de guerre had been Abu Qasura al-Gharib.²³⁹ The chosen *kunya*, the wider meaning and implementation of the term *gharib*, implies the greater theological dimension this individual subscribed to,

²³⁸ “Muraqib 2” is a new member of the JN forum, who joined in January and had 45 contributions as of January 5th, 2012.

²³⁹ Muraqib 2, “Special / a picture of the *shahid* of Jabhat al-Nusra – as we reckon him to be – Abu Qasura al-Gharib, January 4, 2012”, *muntadiyyat al-nusra li jabhat al-nusra*, <http://jalnosra.com/vb/showthread.php?t=313>, accessed March 20, 2013.

understanding this world as a mere passage way where he considered himself a “stranger” (*al-gharib*).²⁴⁰

“He attained the *shahada* as we reckon it to be on January 4, 2012.²⁴¹ May God have mercy with you Abu Qasura and may you dwell as an inhabitant of His Paradise.”

The posting is concluded by a fan-made picture:



“The brother Muhammad al-Zulaytani was born in 1994 in Benghazi, Libya. He heard the call (*nafir*) to support our brothers in Syria. He was killed [in a firefight] by the criminal Assad regime on January 4, 2013.”²⁴²

The flag shown in this picture on the left is the new and revised flag of JN. The handcrafted flag in another picture published in a posting of the Shumukh al-Islam forum by his comrade “al-Assad al-Muhajir” shows that Abu Qasura had been a

²⁴⁰ See also Nico Prucha, “Die Vermittlung arabischer Jihadisten-Ideologie: Zur Rolle deutscher Aktivisten,” in Guido Steinberg (ed.), *Jihadismus und Internet: Eine deutsche Perspektive*, SWP, October 2012, 45-56, http://www.swp-berlin.org/de/publikationen/swp-studien-de/swp-studien-detail/article/jihadismus_und_internet.html.

²⁴¹ The date and the identity is confirmed by a website loyal to the Syrian Army, <http://syrianow.sy/index.php?d=26&id=69126>, accessed May 31, 2013.

²⁴² The link in the picture is defunct. JN has, however, opened a new Facebook group with the title “gazaanow”. It has over 20,000 “likes” as of May 22, 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/gazaanow>.

member of JN since the early days of its formation. A similar but slightly different notion as of the “*munshid al-shumukh*” thus bears the story of Abu Qasura in this posting entitled “eulogy for the beloved Abu Qasura al-Gharib”, narrated his comrade and brother in arms.²⁴³

The story is further outlined and photographs of Abu Qasura, showing him armed with a Pulemyot Kalashnikova, a heavy infantry weapon, and sitting in front of the handcraft Jabhat al-Nusra flag clearly align him to this elite band of *Mujahidin* that is greatly admired by the followers and subscribers of the al-Qaeda ideology. His comrade denotes him in a classical description for the martyrs as

“these words are coming from the heart; Abu Qasura drove himself to exhaustion to distinguish himself by the troop who deem themselves as those sincere with God.”



While having been a fighter, and thus a fully subscribed individual to the ideology of al-Qaeda expressed by his clear membership of Jabhat al-Nusra in its early phase, he

²⁴³ Published and accessed March 4, 2013, <https://shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=193834>,

contributed to the jihadi forums as a member. His status is thus further elevated by his routine online. However, the jihadi sub-culture on the Internet was where he had been drawn into the vision of AQ in the first place, as al-Muhajir states addressing the readers likewise:

“Don’t you remember the day when you cried out of pain while you were watching *the first* Friday sermon distributed [online] by Jabhat al-Nusra²⁴⁴ inciting to Jihad?!”

Don’t you recall the day when we sat in the lodge of our beloved Abu Mariyya al-Tunisi,²⁴⁵ may God accept him?!”

Don’t you remember how you ran out with him shouting “allahu akbar” when the preacher raised his weapon over his head on the pulpit?!”

As a role model, Abu Qasura serves as an identity marker, for he had been a ‘normal’, everyday user of the Internet. The general outline of his online radicalization, in combination with his combat actions in Libya and his exposure to fighters perhaps at least sympathetic to AQ’s worldview turn him into a role model who can be re-enacted even just by following jihadist sermons distributed online.

Perhaps before joining JN the online inspired Mujahid was further guided in the field by religious teachings and instructions. Ideologues like Palestinian Abu l’-Walid al-

²⁴⁴ The scene describes may remind the wary online consumer of Jabhat al-Nusra videos of the video entitled “*da’wa to Jihad for Syria*”. The about 30-minute long clip shows a sermon by a masked preacher who openly calls to arms and raises a Kalashnikov from the pulpit over his head inciting the male crowd to respond. The video was published on April 12, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ahakEgAig-8>, accessed May 31, 2013.

²⁴⁵ This is most likely a reference to a Tunisian fighter, killed February 26 in Aleppo, Syria. A Facebook page commemorating him has about 90,000 ‘likes’. “Révolution Tunisienne 2”, February 26, 2012, <https://www.facebook.com/revolution.tn.2/posts/106831816169836>, accessed May 27, 2013. A video published by the al-Bayariq Media Foundation, part of Ansar al-Shari’a in Tunisia and Egypt, on February 25, 2013 commemorates the fighter and details his life. His clear name was Ayman al-Hukayri, 30 years old from Matuer, Tunisia and he had been a member of Jabhat al-Nusra. He was jailed under Ben Ali’s rule based “on terrorism charges,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=24ISGT9T5E4>, accessed May 27, 2013.

Maqdisi²⁴⁶ had played a vital role in the religious teaching, who nevertheless was a prominent offline preacher based in Gaza and a vivid online activists likewise. The Israeli Air Force killed him in a targeted mission in October 2012.²⁴⁷ The impact of online active and Internet-fluent ideologues such as Abu ‘l-Walid al-Maqdisi, who had been the leader of various jihadist groups in Gaza and a veteran from Iraq was also acknowledged by Ayman al-Zawahiri in a eulogy.²⁴⁸

Remaining active within the virtual landscape, Abu Qasura translated his newly acquired knowledge about religious affairs into comprehensible contributions online for the like-minded youth, perhaps picturing himself in the footsteps of his role models such as al-Maqdisi.

“Whenever you had completed your work, being instructed or on guard duty, you went straight to your iPad and you finished your reading. O, how you loved Abu ‘l-Walid al-Maqdisi – may God accept him – even though you had never met him!

This is the *muwahhid*²⁴⁹ – the true professor of monotheism – I poetize!!

For he is a juvenile, a lion, a memorizer of the Book of God, Muhammad al-Zulaytani, may God receive him. He is one of the lions of JN in the glorious Idlib.”

The story resembles the classical elements of the shahid genre and is at the same time a milestone regarding the dissemination strategy by AQ groups such as JN as of. It shows how classical forums are still used as the primary channel to disseminate

²⁴⁶ His writings, rulings, decrees, and articles can be accessed on the website dedicated to Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi (‘Isam al-Barqawi) *Minbar al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad*, <http://tawhed.ws/a?a=abuwalid>, accessed May 27, 2013.

²⁴⁷ David Barnett, Bill Roggio, “Israeli Air Force kills leader of the Tawhid and Jihad Group in Gaza airstrike”, *The Long War Journal*, October 13, 2012, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/10/israeli_air_force_ki.php#ixzz2UuZROkjB, accessed May 31, 2013.

²⁴⁸ Ritha’ al-shaykh Hisham al-Sa’idani (Abu ‘l-Walid al-Maqdisi), as-Sahab Media, November 2012, http://www.jarchive.net/details.php?item_id=7808, accessed May 27, 2013.

²⁴⁹ Nico Prucha, *Die Stimme des Dschihad “Sawt al-Gihad”*: al-Qaidas erstes Online-Magazin (Hamburg: Verlag Dr. Kovac, 2010), 65.

information among the members without seeking the need to publish further details, in particular videos. The ‘classical’ jihadi forums serve as a normative and authoritative basis – for any content published here is credible and authentic. The content, however, is by far not limited to the forum. Rather, independent distribution via YouTube and Twitter boost role models such as Abu Qasura on all layers online. Photo-sharing social media sites such as flickr²⁵⁰ and naturally Twitter, where high-profile (and prolific) AQ-activists are advertising the martyr as another true role model²⁵¹ have contributed to the appeal of the *shahid* who is also eulogized in a special video on YouTube.²⁵²

The death of Abu Qasura was also confirmed by an online forum belonging to the “Free Syrian Army” in a posting entitled “the martyr al-Zulaytani of the Libyan martyrs who attained martyrdom in Syria in 2013.”²⁵³ The posting is introduced by Qur’an 3:169 and a picture shows Abu Qasura holding a commando version of the A.K. 47 assault rifle sitting at a beach. Beneath the picture a famous *hadith* complements the posting, emphasizing the divine obligation to fight in al-Sham (Syria):

“Narrated by Zayyid bin Thabit al-Ansari – may God be satisfied with him –, said: The messenger of God, peace and blessing be upon him, was heard saying: “My blessings for Sham! My blessings for Sham! My blessings for Sham!” They said: “O messenger of God, what is the meaning of this?” He said: “These angels of God have spread their wings over Sham.””²⁵⁴

²⁵⁰ <http://www.flickr.com/photos/93647787@N07/8518363744/in/photostream/>

²⁵¹ As promoted, for example, by the Twitter user @7AZ1M, <https://twitter.com/7AZ1M/status/305800644848152577>

²⁵² <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RelWqgxf9H0>, published January 7, 2013, accessed May 20, 2013.

²⁵³ <http://syrianarmyfree.com/vb/showthread.php?t=37269>, March 4, 2013, accessed May 31, 2013.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

For the reference of the hadith: Musnad Ahmad (21096).

A new generation of *shuhada'* – Pathways and Intersections of the On- and Offline Worlds

The massive jihadist content online has inspired and incited a new generation of passive sympathizers and active recruits resulting in a new generation of martyrs. For those who joined jihadist outlets or succeeded in undertaking 'lone wolf' attacks and have been martyred fighting or perished as martyrdom operatives and who nevertheless had a virtual footprint, by being forum members, contributors in general via Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube, re-enter the very same jihadist segments of the Internet after their death. These individual martyr stories, sometimes published as PDF- or WORD-documents, but also as threads on forums and the social media in general serve as intersecting or parsing the virtual online with the real-life offline world. Prominent stories are those, whereas the martyr had a role in both elements. The commemoration of the *munshid*, the *nashid* singer of the al-Shumukh al-Islam forum by the administration in April of 2012, or the eulogy of Abu Qasura, a young Libyan who was killed in 2012 in Syria fighting with Jabhat al-Nusra underline the successful impact and the passion of jihadist missionizing within both worlds and the mobilization.

Whether via 'retweets' on Twitter, posting comments on YouTube videos, or 'likes' on Facebook, by embracing the emergent behavior and 'social search' which sites such as Twitter and Facebook facilitate, anyone can connect with and disseminate propaganda content outside of the 'classical forums'. This has crafted a new generation of jihadists, who had been active within these virtual dominions of al-Qaeda, where the exposure to the media has had an impact on their personal lives and understanding of religious conduct. When individuals of that new generation become martyrs, they ultimately re-enter this jihadi sphere of role models and ideology online, being advocated and promoted as role models themselves. Such personal biographies further strengthen the overarching 'narrative' placed on the channels of the 'new' and 'social media' dominating the Internet. Twitter and Facebook are the natural choice for the jihadist strategic communication and specifically their crowd-out strategies, turning these new-generation martyrs into pop-stars with access to their Facebook

profiles, YouTube commemoration videos, photo-sharing sites such as flickr, or the Facebook groups promoted within jihadist forums.



Figure 5 The high-level ideologue and military leader Abu ‘I-Layth al-Libi, killed in a U.S. drone strike in 2008 is looking at the jihadi media activity on the photo-sharing site “flickr” from heaven in this fan-photoshopped picture

Facilitating the Internet as the prime and most effective (as well as cost-effective) communication facility to lure consumers into their specific interpretation or world perception is not restricted to the jihadi web. Militant and hate groups of all colors employ similar means to gain sympathy through modern and pop-cultural elements. However, the quantity as well as quality, not to neglect the multi-lingual capacity, of jihadi media departments is unmatched and unprecedented. Employing *nashid* (“praiseful hymns”) and *huda’* (“encouraging battle songs”) as powerful audio elements I like to term as *nashidworms* as they function and trigger elements

commonly known as ‘earworms’²⁵⁵ are a popular element and passed on from the jihadi forums to social media – boosting profiles within the online communities. Like most elements of jihadi media, this powerful emotional and romanticizing song craft is placed in combination with visual elements of appealing training, combat, or everyday aspects of the Mujahidin and use a powerful, yet comprehensible rhetoric enhancing the overall appeal. The rhetoric is inseparable from the (audio-) visual content and enforces key elements while reaching out to the audience to get active, empower the *umma* by individual response.

Social media, such as Facebook, on the other hand, also pose a potential threat to jihadist groups and their physical networks. As the nature of social media consists of an constant information flow, groups such as the in Syria active Kata’ib al-Muhajirin bi Ard al-Sham felt inclined to publish pictures and names of every martyr on their Facebook group, linking to YouTube. This crowd-out strategy, however, backfired and the Facebook page went silent. On May 5, 2013, the administrator posted an explanation of the group’s media outage:

“Peace be upon you, the mercy of God and His blessing, we apologize to every member of [our] honorable page for our absence recently, not publishing news and other things (...). [We] had been busy with internal issues and when we had uploaded a couple of pictures [on our Facebook page] of those who we deem being martyrs, the local security forces responded in their respective countries, raiding their houses. We therefore stopped this to protect the families [of the martyrs]. We are very sorry and ask you for forgiveness for our failure to protect them.”²⁵⁶

²⁵⁵ For a typology of the classical earworm, Ira Hyman, Naomi Burland, Hollyman Duskin et al, “Going Gaga: Investigating, Creating, and Manipulating the Song Stuck in My Head”, *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 27: 204–215 (2013).

²⁵⁶ Facebook page of the Kata’ib al-Muhajirin bi Ard al-Sham, published and accessed May 5, 2013, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=473426306061452&id=443758765694873

Jihadist Agitprop Online and New Media Strategies

This Zeitgeist reflects the virtual behavior of aspiring real-deal real-life jihadists who are influenced not only by the interactive and inclusive electronic propaganda of jihadi groups, but are moved and affected by the real-world grievances of mainly Islamic countries. The growth of extremist agitprop and the influx of such output on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter has led to a new generation of jihadists, who had been active within the virtual dominions of al-Qa'ida, where exposure to the media has had an impact on their personal lives and understanding of religious conduct.²⁵⁷ The term agitprop refers to the Soviet Department of Agitation and Propaganda that deployed laymen actors to perform theatre plays for workers throughout the Soviet Union of the 1920s. Thus,

“Agitprop theatre, unlike other forms of propaganda, was able to communicate directly to the masses; [with] one explicit purpose: to reach the working class directly.”²⁵⁸

The massive audio-visual content disseminated by jihadist media departments on multiple layers by various facets online is comparable, also in terms of its success, to the agitprop theatre.

This trend reflects to great extent a specific Zeitgeist, a contemporary as well as generational shift from texts and scripts to a visual literacy. Ideology is presented by iconographic, habitual, and most important rhetorical means. Elements shown in

²⁵⁷ Recent martyr biographies such as of Abu Qasura al-Gharib, a 19-year old Libyan fighting for Jabhat al-Nusra outline how the Internet and the regular consumption of ideological bearings have their impact on a new generation. According to this eulogy, Abu Qasura (Muhammad al-Zulaytni) used his iPad to improve his knowledge, embrace AQ ideologues, and remain active online within the jihadi spheres while he fought in Syria. The virtual footprint of real-life martyrs and their Internet habits is part of the advocated role model. He was killed on January 4, 2012, <https://shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=193834>.

²⁵⁸ Kevin Brown, “Agitprop in Soviet Russia”, *Constructing the Past*: Vol. 14: Issue 1, 2013, 5-6. Available at: <http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/constructing/vol14/iss1/4>.

jihadi videos are thus most appealing to initiated consumers who can read and identify the greater ideology at work.²⁵⁹

The main AQ forums have picked up on this Zeitgeist and are active on Twitter, advocating their official accounts on the main forum pages.²⁶⁰ Jihadi media activists and fighters on the ground use Twitter in the meantime on a regular basis to upload their personal pictures and videos, made by their cell phones cameras. This has furthered in general a renewed role model, namely that of the “media martyr”, in reference to any killed media activist within the rows of the regular *Mujahidin*.

This material enters the jihadist online sphere where it is instantly used and re-used to strengthen the worldview of al-Qaeda (AQ) and affiliated groups. As a result, new communication channels have emerged through which the new generation of activists and fighters, including those working for, or on behalf of, *al-Andalus* (AQIM), *al-Kata'ib* (HSM) and *al-Manarat al-Bayda'* (JN) can interact with potential influence multipliers and sympathizers. Groups such as the Somalia-based *Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahidin* (HSM) are relying on Twitter to publish pictures, statements, and links to YouTube jihadi videos primarily in Arabic and English. Twitter was used by HSM to update their followers regarding the failed French operation to free Denis Alex, who had been taken by the group in 2009.²⁶¹ Pictures of an alleged killed French special operative and his gear had been put on Twitter and Facebook,²⁶² the statement claiming the revenge execution of the hostage was exclusively claimed on Twitter by the “HSM Press Office (@HSMPress).”²⁶³ The Afghan Taliban (@ABalkhi), AQIM’s media department *al-Andalus* (@Andalus_Media), or AQ’s unofficial Iraqi *al-Furqan* media branch (@abo_al_hassa) have Twitter accounts and frequently publish and

²⁵⁹ On the strategy and tactic how the primarily Arabic language ideology is conveyed by individual preachers and activists, in this case for Germany and Austria: Nico Prucha, “Die Vermittlung arabischer Jihadisten-Ideologie: Zur Rolle deutscher Aktivisten,” In: Guido Steinberg (ed.), *Jihadismus und Internet: Eine deutsche Perspektive*, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, October 2012, 45-56, http://www.swp-berlin.org/de/publikationen/swp-studien-de/swp-studien-detail/article/jihadismus_und_internet.html.

²⁶⁰ The Ansar al-Mujahidin Network, a tier-one jihad forum, for example, advertises its Twitter account (@as_ansar) on its main page. The lesser renowned al-Minbar al-I'lami al-Jihadi forum (<http://www.alplatformmedia.com/vb/index.php>) does so likewise (@alplatformmedia).

²⁶¹ “Denis Alex: French agent 'killed' by Somalia al-Shabab”, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-21056592>.

²⁶² The Facebook link to HSM’s Arabic media account, Wakala shahada al-ikhbariyya, circulated on Twitter with the intention to gain traction to the Facebook account, <http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?pid=1050347&l=f3ee046c97&id=357503417665041>.

²⁶³ HSM Press Office, “PRESS RELEASE: Dennis [sic] Alex: an Agent Betrayed,” published on Twitter as a link to TwitLonger, <http://www.twitlonger.com/show/knkqp9>.

disseminate new and old content. With the declaration of ISIS a network of Twitter accounts sprung up as official representatives of the *al-I'tasimu* media department or the 'provincial' (*walaya*) ISIS governmental accounts of the future Caliphate.

The Yemeni branch, AQAP, for example recently resorted to publish and link statements first on Twitter.²⁶⁴ These 'official' media channels to facilitate an active communication with their sympathizers and followers also use twitter. The Twitter account of *al-Andalus Media* was advertised for by the official and thus verified member-account on the jihadi forums.²⁶⁵ Four days later, on April 1, 2013, an "open interview" was announced via the forums with "Shaykh Ahmad Abu 'Abd al-Ilaha, the head of the Media Board for al-Andalus", setting a time window to ask the questions on Twitter.²⁶⁶ Only English and Arabic questions had been considered and the answered respectively published on April 18.²⁶⁷

The "AQ Tweets" section of the 11th edition of the "Inspire" magazine, which highlighted tweets regarding the Boston bombing, further elevates the use of twitter by multilingual jihadist media activists.²⁶⁸ These English-language Tweets reflect a pop-cultural youth slang while the Tsarnaev brothers who committed the bombing are applauded as "only 2 soldiers of Allah", who by their operation "are lone wolves. That z wat ALQ wants, the #jihad project to be da ummah's prjct." The Boston bombing is furthermore a success within the framework of the sympathizers and supporters of al-Qaeda for the Chechen-born brothers Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev had been residents of the United States. Furthermore, they used the bomb-making instructions of the English-language Inspire magazine on how to build the pressure-cook-bomb. The innovative jihadi media outlets, of which the Inspire Magazine is the most prominent English substrate, celebrates the Tsarnaev brothers as the new role models who have been virtually guided by both the ideological as well as bomb-making parameters.

²⁶⁴ End of January, 2013, three statements by AQAP were only disseminated via Twitter. A high profile jihadi Twitter user, @STRATEGY, 'retweeted' these. A member of the *Ansar al-Mujahidin* forum posted a screenshot of the subsequent 'retweets' onto the forums, to gain more traction to AQAP, "Urgent – Three New Statements by AQAP", <http://as-ansar.com/vb/showthread.php?t=79875>.

²⁶⁵ "Statement regarding the New Twitter Account", <http://as-ansar.com/vb/showthread.php?t=85175>.

²⁶⁶ "Now the open interview with Shaykh Ahmad Abu 'Abd al-Ilaha, the head of the Media Board for al-Andalus", http://as-ansar.com/vb/showthread.php?t=85501&highlight=andalus_media.

²⁶⁷ English: <http://ia801702.us.archive.org/5/items/Ansewrs.AQMI/answers.pdf>








Arabic: <http://ia801703.us.archive.org/11/items/answersI.1/answersI.pdf>.

²⁶⁸ Inspire, al-Malahem Media, Special Issue (11), Spring 2013, 17.

AQTWEETS

Comments on the Boston Operation

Collected by Al-Malahem Media from the mujahideen in the Arabian Peninsula

 <p>Abu Omar I wish I was u #Tamerlan , u made a mother whose son has bn killed by US 2 smyl, I ask Allah to join us in Jannah.</p>	 <p>Suleiman khan I'm happy the 2nd anniversary of Sheikh Usama's martyrdom came while Americans mourn for the casualties of the blessed #Boston Bombing.</p>
 <p>Abu Sameer Al-Amriki We are drainin these kuffar's economy, no money no war no cry. Hope they increase the intelligence budget, wow! mo #taxes! Thats all folks :)</p>	 <p>Enemy of Tyrants #Boston Bombings: Good planning, even better is turning the plan into action, and the best thing is that the operation exceeded expectations</p>
 <p>Isaac X Pressure cooker is well named by Jose Martinez, the #Marathon cooker raised Obama's blood pressure,oh! he became over-cooked by Boston steam.</p>	 <p>Abu Shamel Allahu Akbar, I feel so happy, only 2 soldiers of Allah defeated America, its army & #Intel America can never stop the decree of Allah.</p>
 <p>Abul Kheir Al-Adany They say the bros arent Al-Qaeda, they are lone wolves. That z wat ALQ wants, the #jihad project to be da ummah's prjct, I blve we are winning.</p>	 <p>Abu Zaid In other marathons the winners wear metallic medals, in this #marathon even the supporters got their metallic share :)</p>
 <p>Abu Ali Al-Muhajir 1. The finishline is the new mirage in town, only it has more smoke and #shrapnel . 2. Quit killing innocents muslims or just quit racing</p>	 <p>Ismael As-Swabry Tips: dnt win a #marathon (no 1 shoots the tail) avoid crowded places (probably ther is a chef) cheer behind a wall (shrapnel dnt pierce walls)</p>

The 'Arab Spring' as a Renaissance for AQ Affiliates in a Historical Perspective

Within the framework of the turmoil in the wake of the 'Arab Spring', and especially with the conflict in Syria growing in intensity and scope, AQ has been able to re-emerge with two linked groups, *Jabhat al-Nusra* (JN) and *The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham* (ISIS). While JN has pledged allegiance (*bay'a*) to Ayman al-Zawahiri, ISIS under the rule of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has morphed into the greatest success of al-Qa'ida iconography and doctrine by adhering to the ideology without being subjected to it's formal leadership.²⁶⁹ As thus, the renaissance of al-Qaeda doctrine is largely based on it's most powerful tool that allows the network to morph and spread in many directions: the professional and coherent decentralised use of the Internet and the continuous and tireless deployment of media-workers and media-dedicated brigades embedded with fighting jihadi units in the real-life battle arenas.

²⁶⁹ See Cole Bunzel, *The Islamic State of Disobedience: al-Baghdadi Triumphant*, *Jihadica*, October 5, 2013, <http://www.jihadica.com/the-islamic-state-of-disobedience-al-baghdadis-defiance/>

The new AQ considers itself as an avant-garde, an icon (*ramz*) and in parts in its rhetoric even as *awliya'* (friends/saints)²⁷⁰ of God who are fighting against injustice, suppression, occupation, imprisonment, or the distortion of “Islam”. In the words of Ayman al-Zawahiri, contemporary *Mujahidin* are convicted of their re-enactment of Muslims under the command of Prophet Muhammad. He refers to the early Muslims as “the most noble servants in close proximity to God”, a sentiment that furthers the contemporary *Mujahid's* self-notion and perception as having a likewise relationship to God. This role model is outlined in al-Zawahiri’s writing “note on the most noble servants in close proximity to God – campaigns of death and martyrdom”, published in a second electronic edition by *as-Sahab* on the *Shumukh al-Islam* forum in mid-March 2014.²⁷¹ As based on jihadists in their own words, the sentiment is more than merely being “soldiers of God”, but rather consider themselves as the “men of [Prophet] Muhammad”, calling out by their filmed testimonials for men to join them in their endeavour.

Anyone is invited to tap into this freely available culture on the Internet and be a part, either as passive or active consumer – by various means within the shared space of the inclusive online territories that nevertheless promise the same paradise for the online activist or offline member. This has led to the construction of a virtual sense of a real (global) community, where individuals may feel compelled to commit acts of terror by themselves out of a presumed personal responsibility for the “Islamic” collective in the West or by seeking to join the *Mujahidin* within Islamic territories deemed as occupied by Western nations or at war with non-Sunni armies in general, as is the case in Syria as of writing.

On this virtual realm, the principles of the al-Qa’ida dominated ideology remain active and resilient whereas in real-life, offline-fighting groups, either with direct or indirect connections to the remnants of the AQ network propagates the implementation of these principles framed as “*shari’a* law” by force. Groups adhering to the jihadist theology and mind-set in general learned their lessons from past conflicts in Iraq and Algeria where the indiscriminate killing of Muslims contributed

²⁷⁰ The *awliya' allah*, “the friends of God” as stated in Qur’an 10:62 is an expression used by jihadists for describing themselves and elevating their deeds for God by approximating themselves to God as representatives exercising His will in this world.

²⁷¹ Ayman al-Zawahiri, risala ‘an ashraf qurubat al-‘ubbad hamlat al-mawt wa-l istishhad, second edition, Markaz al-fajr li-l i’lam, broadcast by as-Sahab, <https://shamikhl.info/vb/showthread.php?t=220308>, March 13, 2014.

to the demise of jihadi outlets and emphasize positive elements in their audio-visual incitement material published frequently online. The culture of jihadi videos is the main launching pad to document the replication and translation of AQ-ideology into visible action for the jihadi camera lenses, sanctioning not only policy and policing measures, but rather provide filmed materials of highly violent content alongside elements that can be graded as either winning the hearts and minds or state building measures. This mixture of “the book leading the right way” (*kitab yahdi*) and the “sword that assists” (*sayf yansur*)

“refers to a famous saying “the foundation of religion is a book leading the right way and a sword assisting” (qawam al-din kitab yahdi wa-sayf yansur) attributed to Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328), the famous Hanbali scholar, which is often used by Jihadis to legitimize their fight.”²⁷²

The slogan remains a popular and powerful element. A video published by the newly founded The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham in July 2013 from North Syria, Aleppo Province, bears the title *kitab yahdi wa-sayf yansur*. It was disseminated by the *al-Furqan Media Foundation* that sprang from al-Zarqawi’s pioneer media work in Iraq.²⁷³ With the widening of *The Islamic State of Iraq* into Syria and thus the declaration of (ISIS), this slogan is used on a frequent basis for the video series *Nawafidh ‘ala ard al-Malahim* published by the *al-Furqan* sub-department *al-I’tisam*, highlighting education, infrastructure, and in general state building elements, while at the end of these videos attacks, executions, suicide bombings and the like conclude the “book leading the right way” by the “sword that assists.” This series, which translates to “Windows into the Battlefield”²⁷⁴ combines, in short, the principles of

²⁷² Rüdiger Lohlker, “Religion, Weapons, and Jihadism: Emblematic discourses”, Manuscript, in: Rüdiger Lohlker (ed.), *Online Discourses and Representation*, V&R Unipress, Vienna University Press (2013), 65-89.

²⁷³ “*The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham: Video Publication: kitab yahdi.. wa-sayf yansur*”, <https://shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=207606&p=1059462800#post1059462800>, published July 24, 2013. Accessed July 31, 2013. In unison with the forum posting, the video was also uploaded on YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OzoPa6Xjua4>. It was watched over 20,000 times by July 31, 2013.

²⁷⁴ Battlefield is used to outline the understanding of the “territory of epic slaughter”, whereas the Arabic term *malahim* is a reference to AQAP’s media department and has since become a popular term within jihadist literature and videos.

education with killing, framing this combination as an integral part of an Islamic identity. Such violence on display is subsequently embedded in sequences of religious tutoring and ideological speeches and sermons validating and sanctifying the depicted violence; underlying fundamentals are determined being a divine obligation and the publication online is partially a media-campaign and, most important, a form of missionary work (*da'wa*). The majority of the videos are in Arabic but nevertheless appealing and attracting non-Arab Muslims to “join the caravan of jihad” as described by the German convert Abu Osama in the 32nd instalment of this series. As detailed in the following subchapter, Abu Usama joined ISIS in Syria to avenge the unjustified killing of Sunni Muslims by al-Assad’s forces and is proud of the Taliban repelling the occupation of Afghanistan while considering his status as a migrant committed on the “path of God” as a guarantee to attain entry to paradise.²⁷⁵ By portraying foreign fighters, the jihadi media seeks to display the extremist interpretation of “Islam” as an identity applicable to any individual – Western Muslims and non-Muslims alike and frames militancy as righteous actions sanctioned by God and as a moral obligation; by calling to Islam and questioning the foreign policy of Western states.²⁷⁶ As no western country seems to care for the suffering of the mainly Sunni population, foreign fighters are considered as something as an “outside intervention force”, bringing not only manpower to the battlefields, but also creating hybrid organisations that facilitate humanitarian help as part of the overall motivation. One part of the series *Nawafidh ‘ala ard al-Malahim* is to showcase the delivery of humanitarian goods to refugees. This is framed in the sixth instalment of the series as “handing out goods to help those in need in the countryside of Aleppo / ISIS”²⁷⁷, whereas masked soldiers of *the State* hand out boxes imprinted with the ISIS logo enhanced by the slogan “one banner, one *umma*” signed by the “Relief Agency in the Countryside of Aleppo” (*maktab al-ighatha bi rif Halab*). This *modus operandi* to win over the hearts and minds of people suffering the hardship of violence and displacement is not new and is framed by related groups likewise. The *Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahidin* from their main

²⁷⁵ Mu’assasat al-i’tisam, Nawafidh ‘ala ard al-malahim 32, <https://shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=215518>, December 2, 2013.

²⁷⁶ For example French convert Abu ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Fransi states in an interview with the al-Furqan Media Department to have committed himself to fight in Syria to not only avenge the raped Sunni women in prisons worldwide but also demands of François Hollande to withdraw all troops from Mali. Mu’assasat al-Furqan, al-ladhina amanu wa-hajaru wa-jahadu, <https://shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=206004>, July 10, 2013.

²⁷⁷ A collection of part one – 32 is conveniently available for download at <http://justpaste.it/drd5>, December 17, 2013.

base of operations Somalia publishes similar videos infrequently as prove of their proper *shari'a* law enforcement of handing out provisions as charity (*zakat*) to *their* people.²⁷⁸ In the likeminded spirit *al-Ansar* handed out toys and candy to their fellow Sunni Muslims in Iraq, showing off this “caretaking” in a twin-video series entitled *ruhama' baynahum* – “tender[ness] towards each other.” The second instalment of the series was published in 2011.²⁷⁹ Such videos show militant groups from a different perspective by their choosing as fulfilling the Qur'anic principle of being “tender towards each other.” This title is a reference of Qur'an 48:29 implying a direct order from God to “those who follow” Prophet Muhammad to show kindness to other Muslims and fierce resolution to the disbelievers. By merely using two words of the 29th verse of *Sura al-Fath* (Triumph) the contemporary *Mujahid* further associates himself with the early Muslims under the command of the Prophet while strengthening the narrative of a *just war* against all non-Muslims:

“Muhammad is the Messenger of God.

Those who follow him are firm against the disbelievers and tender towards each other. You see them kneeling and prostrating, seeking God's bounty and His good pleasure: on their faces they bear the marks of their prostrations. This is how they are pictured in the Torah and the Gospel: like a seed that puts forth its shoot, becomes strong, grows thick, and rises on its stem to the delight of its sowers. So God infuriates the disbelievers through them; God promises forgiveness and a great reward to those who believe and do righteous deeds” (48:29).

In jihadist reasoning the wider meaning of Qur'an 48:29 is narrowed within the visual literacy of their propaganda by enforcing the proper conduct of *shari'a law* as the ultimate conformity of *actually being* the direct correspondents of both God and His Messenger Muhammad in our time; while, in their function as the *soldiers of God*, fighting against the disbelievers – including Sunni Muslims decreed as apostates

²⁷⁸ Placing the people under the shades of the Islamic Shari'a in the city of Buulobarde, al-Kata'ib News Channel (HSM), <https://shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t219640>, March 12, 2014.

²⁷⁹

(*murtadd*) – without mercy. In the context of the Syrian conflict, with the confessional tensions rising due to the influx of jihadist brigades and groups as a result of the inhumane mass killing tactics by the al-Assad regime, such sentiments are vividly expressed and visualized by Sunni groups.



Figure 6 “firm against the disbelievers and tender towards each other” – Mighty God has spoken the truth” (al-Fath: 29)”

The picture above highlights the commitment of the jihadist interpretation of Qur’an 48:29 which, in times of war and suffering, is shared within the Sunni community and multiplied. Such sentiments are, of course, an element of basic human nature whenever a community or society is faced with merciless violence in times of unforgiving war.²⁸⁰

The humanitarian angle, expressed as a passionate brotherhood among the *Mujahidin* who nevertheless are the protectors of the Muslims, safeguarding not only their own families, but rather the Sunni Muslim community in principal. Based on the above outlined passage of the Qur’an two separate, but intertwined hash tags evolved on Twitter, referring to “firm against the disbelievers” (#أشداء_على_الكفار) “and tender towards each other” (#رحماء_بينهم).

²⁸⁰ The picture was originally tweeted by @fatehsameh481, an account that at the time used an avatar to identify with *Haraka Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya*, <https://twitter.com/fatehsameh481/status/337270760211103745/photo/1>, May 22, 2013.

The element of *mercy* for fellow Muslims, especially those in need, who are displaced due to violence and repressed by local authorities is a vital part within the jihadist visual and written literature and framed as humanitarian work. This strategy is not new and was vividly exploited in media productions and even TV-reports during the first *jihad* in Afghanistan in the 1980s. As Abdelasiem El Difraoui writes,

“la télévision saoudienne a organisé d’importants téléthons afin de collecter des fonds au profit des victimes de la guerre mais aussi pour encourager de jeunes Arabes à se rendre dans l’Hindou Kouch afin de fournir une aide de type humanitaire. Certains journaux ont publié l’éloge de martyrs arabes morts en Afghanistan.

Si, comme nous l’avons déjà souligné, les premières images d’al-Zawahiri et de Ben Laden ont été produites par des médias extérieurs à la mouvance jihadiste, la guerre d’Afghanistan marque incontestablement le début d’une production réalisée par des médias jihadistes. Les combattants et humanitaires arabes, qui étaient en grande majorité, basés à Peshawar ou qui ont transité par cette ville pour aller en Afghanistan, avaient réussi à créer un paysage médiatique créatif et animé.”²⁸¹

Depicting oneself as a humanitarian first and only then as a fighter, the modern *Mujahid* by the standards of the contemporary media foundations is branded as following God’s guidelines for war and peace as set in the Qur’an. Individuals unleashing fierce violence against the *kuffar* (disbelievers) is mirrored by gentle passion, or mercy for their own Sunni brothers. This sentiment is advertised for in a direct and subtle fashion. In the 24th instalment of the series “A Window into the Battlefield”, *The Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham* showcases one of their preachers who is giving a sermon on a market place in one of the ISIS controlled towns in north Syria. The camera moves to a poster with the slogan “Muhammad is the Messenger of God. Those who follow him are] firm against the disbelievers and tender towards each other.” The last part is written in big red letters on the picture of two hugging men who appear to be *Mujahidin*. In the top right, the ISIS icon brands the picture in

²⁸¹ Asiem El Difraoui, *Al Qaida par l’image ou la prophétie du martyr. Une analyse politique de la propagande audiovisuelle du jihad global* (PhD diss., Science Po, 2010), 136.

the same style used to identify the videos.²⁸² Not only does the unidentified preacher associate ISIS as implementing Qur'an 48:29, furthermore he calls out that God may

“protect Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. For soldiers are in *al-Sham*. Soldiers are in Yemen, in Iraq with the focus right now set on the territory of *al-Sham*: plenty of brigades, many battalions, all of them are waging war, bearing arms, but who is on the path righteousness (*haqq*)? Who is he who will support God, His religion, by his deeds?

Listen to your prophet: “Soldiers in al-Sham, soldiers in Yemen, and soldiers in Iraq.”²⁸³

Therefore, the *victorious group (al-ta'ifat al-mansura)* is the one fighting in Yemen and in Iraq.

Who fights in Iraq? The youth (*shabab*), the *mujahidin* who carry the creed (*'aqida*) of *al-wala' wa-l bara'*.²⁸⁴ Who fights in Yemen? He, who has been dispatched by Qatar, by Saudi Arabia, by America?

No.

It is he who fights and is steadfast for this religion, he, who fights for the sake of “there is no God but God.”²⁸⁵

²⁸² *Nawafidh 'ala ard al-malahim 24 – khayma da'awiyya fi rif walaya Halab*, <http://justpaste.it/drd>, December 17, 2013.

²⁸³ With Sunni jihadist actors on the rise in core Arab-Islamic countries, the parallel is easily drawn to the historical times of Prophet Muhammad. In the above stated *hadith*, the notion is backed that with “soldiers” (*jund*) fighting in *al-Sham* (modern Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine), the conviction is indeed fuelled that the Islamic *umma* is reemerging as had been the case during and shortly after the life of Prophet Muhammad. In a pro-Palestinian forum, the *Shabaka Filastin li-l hiwar*, a user with an avatar of Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi relayed this *hadith*, given as Abu Dawud, 2483, to events in Syria, implying without further comment that the application of this *hadith* is in progress with the presumed salvation as an outcome. <https://www.paldf.net/forum/showthread.php?t=1030826>, August 26, 2012.

²⁸⁴ “Loyalty and dissociation” which often is used in the framing of *muwala*, “loyalty” for God and Muslims and dissociation or renunciation to the disbelievers in general. The concept of *al-wala'* equates “loyalty” with love for a group of Muslims who are perceived as proper believers in their rites, conduct of life and actions for God. The ultimate distance, or dissociation, *al-bara'* to those defined as disbelievers, including nominal Muslims who are considered as not sincere in their faith. Madawi Al Rasheed, in citing Saudi head cleric bin Baz in his *majmu'a fatawa* (vol. V, 149), outlining the concept of *al-wala' wa-l bara'* as: “Hatred and enmity mean to hate them in your heart, never to take them as friends. Muslims should not hurt them. If they greet you, you should return the greeting. You should also preach to them and guide them to the Good. Jews and Christians are people of the book. They should be given aman [peace], unless they do injustice, then they should be punished. One can also give them charity.

²⁸⁵ *Nawafidh 'ala ard al-malahim 24 – khayma da'awiyya fi rif walaya Halab*, <http://justpaste.it/drd>, December 17, 2013.

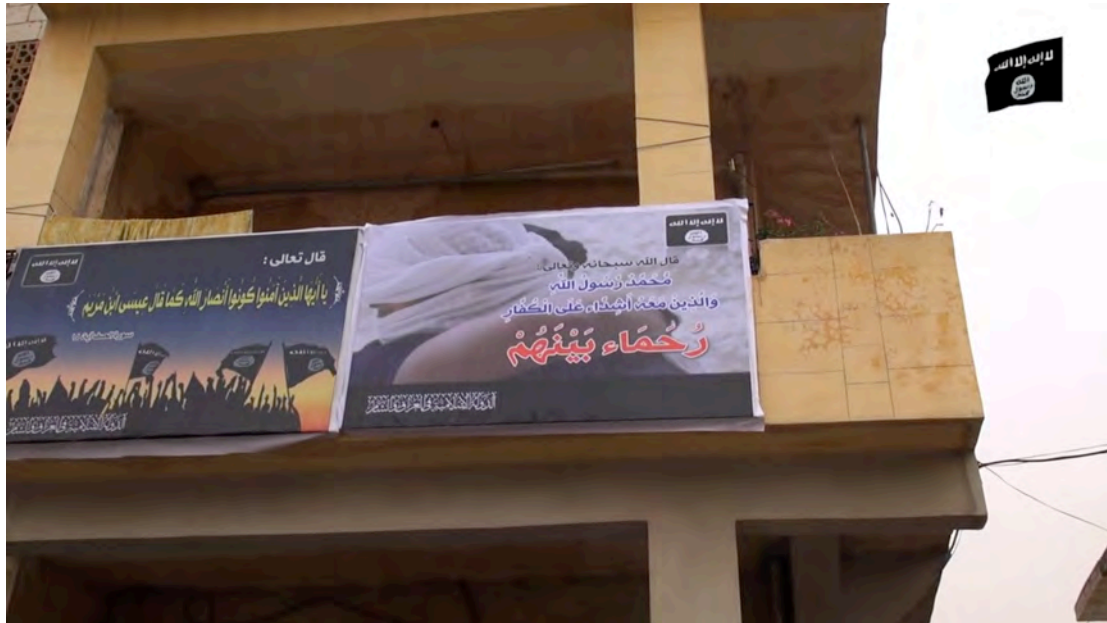


Figure 7 Applied propaganda in ISIS-controlled towns, where “missionary camps” are held. The right picture highlights the propagated “tender towards each other” principle exploited for recruitment. The picture on the left shows an iconic image used by the predecessor in Iraq, enforcing the Qur’anic statement “You who believe, be God’s helpers [ansar]. As Jesus, son of Mary said.” (61:14)

Mercy (*rahma*) as a concept within the framework of the *Islamic State* is deployed to enforce the state building and society fusing aspect along the frontiers of fighting for the unity – and sanctuary – of the re-emerging Islamic *umma*.²⁸⁶

The advertised notion of fighting for a ‘greater cause’ or for a ‘lesser evil’ is, however, not new. In the 1980s, during the fight against the Soviets, Western media at the time nevertheless reported about the *Mujahidin* in Afghanistan in a positive light, referring to them as “holy warriors” and “freedom fighters”, with sympathy for their struggle against the Soviet occupation as Debra Denker wrote in 1985 for the *National Geographic Magazine*:

“As a heavy dusk deepens over the craggy hills, a muezzin’s voice calls the men to prayer, and once again the mujahidin put aside their study of war. The holy warriors, Ishaq among them, spread their pattu on the ground, their weapons before them, and stand and bow and stand again. In the silence I feel

²⁸⁶ As noted in the subchapter: *Islam is like a Tree. Jihad is the Crown and the Ansar (supporters) are like a Branch*

their strong and quiet faith, and wish only for a swift and happy end to the struggle forced upon them.”²⁸⁷

Within the framework of the ‘Arab Spring’ the humanitarian element of militant groups further evolved. While groups such as the al-Qa’ida Organization on the Arab Peninsula (AQAP) maintained media departments prior dedicated to showcasing the proper *shari’a law* implementation, a new pan-Arab movement by the name of “supporters of *shari’a*” (*Ansar al-Shari’a*) came to light solely dedicated to the humanitarian needs of Sunnis in Arab countries. The *Ansar al-Shari’a* groups active in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and other Middle Eastern countries are driven by the militant jihadist interpretation of religion while focusing publicly on non-combative measures thereof. After the violent ousting and subsequent death of Libya’s long-time ruler Mu’ammarr al-Qadhafi in 2011, the Libyan *Ansar al-Shar’ia* movement sprang up in particular in Islamist strongholds in the eastern part of the country. It serves as precedence for the Middle East/North African region seeking to enforce *shari’a* practice by active missionizing and attempting to take over civil-society responsibilities abandoned by the state in transition. The salafists in close proximity to jihadi groups and ideology were quick, well organized and professional to occupy public space by demonstrations, public sermons, charity events, road-repairs and so on making not only their slogans but also their iconography popular.²⁸⁸ These locally operating groups are active within the same channels and cluster networks maintained by their hard-core jihadist archetypes on the Internet, thus extending their realm well

²⁸⁷ Debra Denker, Along Afghanistan’s War-torn Frontier, National Geographic Magazine, June 1985, 772-797.

²⁸⁸ States first affected by the ‘Arab Spring’ such as Tunisia and Egypt eased the grip of local police and military intelligence surveillance and repression against local Islamists and pro-jihadists. This opened up a corridor for these former banned individuals to regain an opportunity to show a public presence, both on- and offline, especially with the spread of the *Ansar al-Shari’a* movement. In Qayrawan, for example, thousands of salafists gathered in public hoisting al-Qa’ida linked flags to protest against the killing of bin Laden in May 2011 expressing their sympathy by chanting “Obama, Obama, we all are Osama!”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CBgwPhM6kxc>, March 23, 2014. In Cairo, senior jihadi clerics careful to not mention the legitimacy of violence in public turned to the *Midan al-Tahrir* where the peaceful and civil-society protests initiated leading to the ousting of Egypt’s long time ruler Hosni Muhammad Mubarak in February 2011. By September the following year, prominent figures such as the brother of AQ’s leader Muhammad al-Zawahiri who had recently been released from prison took to the *Tahrir* Square to give public sermons and defend jihadist movements in general. For details, Nico Prucha, Fatwa calling for the Death of the Director, Producer, and Actors Involved in Making the Film “The Innocence of Muslims”, Jihadica, September 18, 2012, <http://www.jihadica.com/fatwa-calling-for-the-death-of-the-director-producer-and-actors-involved-in-making-the-film-‘innocence-of-islam’/>.

into the social media and jihadist forums realms where they receive the approval and support they seek. Non-militant groups as *Ansar al-Shari'a* hide behind their public layer of humanitarian work and missionary “series to set up meeting places to explain and ascertain the fundamentals of faith (*'aqida*) and proper methodology (*manhaj*) of *Ansar al-Shari'a* in Libya.”²⁸⁹ The humanitarian angle by local groups with their own media environment at work functions as a complementary asset of militant groups and, with the ambition to recruit new members for proclaimed humanitarian work inside conflict zones, are in the meantime *hybrid groups*, providing humanitarian assistance but are also to a varying degree supportive of active fighting groups. Many of these Sunni hybrid organisations that on a public side first and foremost seek to provide medical assistance and care-packages in general in turn create videos and media files that are added to the jihadi-dominated cluster networks – especially when individuals are active in hot spots such as Syria or Somalia. Videos use the same Arabic *nashid* that are popular and known to the audience and sympathizers from militant jihadist videos. The intention to help is not restricted to *Ansar al-Shari'a* groups and the like within Islamic countries but on an increasing scale affect Muslims in the Diaspora. With the war in Syria intensifying *Ansar* organizations in Germany, for example, were set up and are active to collect donations and medical supply that then is brought into the war-torn country. The German based Salafist organizations on their end are a double-hybrid entity, as on the one hand Arabic jihadist ideology is mingled and made accessible in German for an local and German speaking audience, while on the other with the repetition of the Arabic jihadi iconography such networks are vital for the overall jihadist media on a global scale.²⁹⁰ The appeal to donate

²⁸⁹ <http://justpaste.it/equ5>, March 18, 2014. Similar campaigns by *Ansar al-Shar'ia* had been showcased in jihadist forums, enabling locals with a direct access to physical meet and be potentially recruited, “Pictures of the beneficial *AS* in Libya Campaigns”, <http://as-ansar.com/vb/showthread.php?t=79165>, January 26, 2013. Such content is part of the wide range of clusters, ranging from Twitter to Facebook groups (<http://facebook.com/raya.media>), having their own local media groups (for example *al-Qayrawan* (Tunisia) or *al-Raya* (Libya), *al-Faruq* (Egypt) Media Foundation).

²⁹⁰ *Ansar* networks exist throughout Europe, with hubs in London, Amsterdam, Brussels, Paris and Berlin. For example *Ansar Düsseldorf* is active and very media wary by using YouTube and Twitter to broadcast the collective actions of providing substantial and material help for their fellow Muslims in Syria, showcasing ambulances and containers ready for transport into the country. In an post-operational styled report, members of *Ansar Düsseldorf* speak out on YouTube in German about their experiences and the witnessed grievances of Sunni Muslims in Syria in a understandable fashion to their targeted German audience. For example, *The Journey to Syria (Relief Convoy) - Documentary, Ansaar Düsseldorf*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GJ0kA5ooLA>. The video has over 15,000 views and The bank details for donation to *Ansar Düsseldorf* is stated in the video details, where any donation must be dedicated to either missionary, supportive means in Germany, or Burma, Indonesia,

money to *Ansar* outlets is furthered by individual televised accounts on YouTube clearly stating the only resource for suffering Sunnites in Syria are Sunnites, thus

“the people in Syria lack people like us. They lack people who really donate. They lack people who support them by financial and material means. The people [in Syria] told us, this is your struggle to deal with from Europe; the people in Syria are without lobbyists; behind our brothers and sisters of the *Ahl al-Sunna wa-Jama'a* [ref. to Sunnites] there is no Russia, no Iran. Behind them [in support] are the people of *Ahl al-Sunna wa-Jama'a*, who may live in America, in Sweden, Germany, France, Luxemburg, or Belgium. And we must organise ourselves. In the meantime there are some Sunni relief organisations.”²⁹¹

The wide range of mainly audio-visual material at hand connected and interconnected within all online channels available enhance the ideology. The individual consumer can chose the preferred genre and by all means get involved and political active. Naturally, the need to help people in need is oftentimes intertwined to the desire to actively fight and punish those, who are framed as responsible for the suffering and grievances to the audience. Such

“frames help to render events or occurrences as meaningful and thereby function to organize experience and guide action. Collective action frames also perform this interpretive function by simplifying and condensing aspects of the “world out there,” but in ways that are intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists.”²⁹²

Somalia, Morocco or Syria. On the main website <http://www.ansaarduesseldorf.com> a “comprising documentation for any donator” is guaranteed.

²⁹¹ *The Journey to Syria (Relief Convoy) - Documentary, Ansaar Düsseldorf*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GJ0kA5ooLA>.

²⁹² Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment, in: *Annu. Rev. Sociol.* 2000. 26:611–39, 614.

The vast amounts of media material thus provide a coherent and cohesive collective action frames that challenge and are in competition with existing ones. Furthermore, the media departments of *jihad* and *ansar*-minded seek to entrench their targeted audiences and those who link-in by chance to “what Gamson and colleagues refer to as “injustice frames”²⁹³ that, according to Robert Benford and David Snow

“call attention to the ways in which movements identify the “victims” of a given injustice and amplify their victimization.”²⁹⁴

Furthermore, the quagmire of these encompassing agitprop materials can be highly appealing, particularly when sympathizers can interact in online forums and more so on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter with proclaimed real-life *Mujahidin* or *Ansar* and ask for advice about what one would need prior to joining.²⁹⁵ Subscribers to jihadist ideology and the media strategists seek to initiate the consumers by crafting a re-formulation of Muslim identity of the ‘Islamic public’ in general. The electronic incitement materials online serve to reinforce the offline and a made popular as a mirror of the real world, the real *Mujahidin*, the true Islamic implementation of *shari’a* law and so on. Global jihad provides a comprising religious ideology and a belief system, based on inclusion and exclusivity for anyone, within a specific frame of reference – rules, guidelines, guidance, conditions and belonging by coherent standards of identification.

This intersection between the off- and online construes and fertilizes the jihadists’ frame of reference. This frame enables for the sake of understanding individual

²⁹³ Ibid, 615. The Benford and Snow reference: Gamson WA. 1992a. Talking Politics. New York: Cambridge Univ. Press; Gamson WA. 1992b. The social psychology of collective action. See Morris & Mueller, pp.53–76.

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

²⁹⁵ As the following thread on the Shumukh al-Islam jihad forum highlights: <http://shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=126040>. Foremost, responding to the member ‘Abd al-Hakim’s question, (i) a sincere intention and (ii) faithfulness are required. Other members, such as Osama Hakim, reply in length by copying-and-pasting a “methodology to construct a Mujahid-terrorist personality” including listing important ideological writings next to basic information on various weapon-types.

actions and deeds, the motivations that have consequently led to both individual and collective actions.

“In order to explain a certain human behavior, one must reconstruct in which frame of reference (*Referenzrahmen*) they acted – what [factors] structured the perception of a certain person and suggested conclusions. For these reconstructions, analyses of objective constraint are insufficient. Furthermore, mentalities do not provide conclusions *why* somebody did something, in particular when members of the same mental formation reached completely different conclusions and decisions. This is where the systemic limitation of theories regarding wars of conviction (*Weltanschauungskriege*) and of totalitarian regimes are: While “the question, however, is always about how ‘Weltanschauung’ and ‘ideologies’ translate into individual perception and interpretation, and how the acts of individuals are affected,”²⁹⁶

the jihadist media groups and battalions are in place to enforce guidance and to reproduce not only high-ranking ideologues but rather portray common fighters or suicide-bombers as much as renown jihadist figures. The written and filmed statements of jihadist groups

“are given credibility by their social context (...) [and] the power of performative speech – vows and christenings – is rooted in social reality and is given currency by the laws and customs that stand behind it.”²⁹⁷

Subsequently, a specific religious habitus is propagated as a filmed frame of reference that includes vital cornerstones of an ideology put into action with the perception of

²⁹⁶ Sönke Neitzel, Harald Welzer, *Soldaten – Protokolle vom Kämpfen, Töten und Sterben*, S. Fischer Verlag: Frankfurt am Main 2011, 17.

²⁹⁷ Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God – The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, Third edition, University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles 2003, 127. Juergensmeyer references Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge 1991.

fighting for both justice and defence of mistreated Muslim civilians. The intersection of real-life and online, virtual worlds – accessible for anyone unlike the real-life scenarios, lead to questioning the effects of the accessibility to the jihadist propaganda for consumers sometimes thousands of miles away. But in close emotional, spiritual and politicized proximity with the fear, anger and cognition of being ‘persecuted’ because of ones faith. Thus, it would be deceptive to understand the intention as well as the desired effects of radicalizing and inspiring the audience as a sole process. By studying and monitoring the written and filmed jihadist online propaganda, one must also find an

“understanding of online practices and spaces not as distinct and isolated pursuits, but as closely linked with the everyday and offline milieu.”²⁹⁸

The jihadist online territories on the Internet are public spaces, which on a first glimpse may seem to be a pure online feature, a fantasy. However, these online territories are

“a variety of intersections between the online and the offline. This includes virtual spaces that are anchored offline, or extensions of online entities, as well as those social territories that may emerge when online activities are “lived out” or re-enacted in other parts of everyday life.”²⁹⁹

The jihadist community, physical and also virtually, exercised individually or in small groups, is a collective united by the absolute conviction of being the victims of a global conspiracy against Islam and in need of stars and heroes framed as the sole and legitimate defenders. The self-perception of the jihadi is essentially about the firm conviction being part of the “soldiers of God” (*jund allah*), who in their death prove

²⁹⁸ Miyase Christensen, André Jansson et.al.: *Online Territories – Globalization, Mediated Practice and Social Space*, Peter Lang Publishing: New York 2011, 2.

²⁹⁹ *ibid.*

their loyalty to God. The lines of demarcation are clearly drawn, any *Mujahid*, any fighter striving on the “path of God” (*fi sabil l-llah*) is portrayed and propagated as a real believer adhering to the “truth” (*haqq*) unlike those who have fallen into a state apostasy by their ignorance or open loyalty to anything defined by the jihadist’ reading of the Qur’an as “falsehood” (*batil*). This enables AQ as well as other Jihadist movements that are ideologically in close proximity to AQ and its massive amount of religiously authoritative writings to defend, sanction, explain and justify in short any military operation.

The Role of Social Media in Defining the *Rules of Engagement* for Jihadi Conflicts

Since the start of the war in Syria Jihadist groups have been producing increasingly professional and highly appealing audio-visual propaganda. To attract young people to the cause and raise funds jihadist groups have disseminated this content via new media. Another side of the coin is the use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter for seekers, who have questions regarding the proper ideological conduct or demand guidance in general by the intellectual leadership caste of *jihadism* in general. The Sunni *Mujahid* is confronted in Syria with all arrays and kinds of enemy combatants. The range of hostile encounters ranges from the worst kind consisting of fellow Sunnis fighting on behalf of the regime of al-Asad, named as apostates (*murtaddin*), to fellow Sunni-jihadis from rival brigades also termed apostates or deviants (*khawarij*); enemies include ‘natural’ non-Muslim foes, referred to as disbelievers (*kuffar*) such as mainly Christians but also Druzes, or Alawites and Shiites. The jihadist angle of perceiving enemies is wide and extends to the *mushrik*, a reference applicable to almost anyone and used mainly for those who associate and venerate things or people next to God. The term *rawafid* (rejectionist) has entered the jihadist main-slang to refer to Shiites but also to Alawites in Syria, who are nevertheless considered as Shiites and allies of Iran and *Hizbullah* by many Sunnis. What about the Sunni combatant, when does he actually become a *murtadd*, an apostate, and when does he have the right to repent (*tawba*) and return to the *ahl al-sunna*, the Sunni community? What about spies and secret agents who may claim to be Sunnis but are not, or are indeed Sunnis and yet work covertly for opposing factions along the fragile breaking lines of sectarianism in Syria?

Social media in this regard, on how to deal with prisoners and who is legitimate to execute or not, has come in handy. Problems arise in terms of identifying and grading the enemy, facilitating ideological guidance by renowned and most important established scholars of online *jihadism*.

Practical questions, such as how to deal with spoils of war or booty have also been posted on Facebook where answers by the prominence of contemporary jihadi ideologues are keen and quick to respond.

The question and answer style that delivers a comprehensible framework is attracting foreign fighters in general who see the embodiment of Islamic rule according to their mind-set evolve in Syria. With the influx of foreign fighters among the ranks of *The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria* (ISIS) from the European Union and the United States, the use of social media has reached an unprecedented dimension – with an immense input from both Arab and non-Arab foreign fighters in various languages on respective social media sites. These foreign fighters have the potential to have particular resonance for Islamic communities in their respective countries of origin, as the grievances and framing of “injustice”³⁰⁰ can vary depending on the local context, while the ideology is tied into the Arabic religious reasoning as expressed by writings and most important as conveyed by audio-visual means. With Arabic as the most important language for Islam, as the Qur’an is the speech of God (*kalimat allah*), revealed in Arabic, the *lingua jihadica* is likewise Arabic. Arabic key words of the jihadist segment, as a consequence, have become a mainstream substrate in many non-Arabic languages where Islam has found a home, providing non-Arabic speaking sympathizers of *jihad* a everyday slang to identify with and to use for their religious rituals. This is of importance when studying Arabic jihadist materials, perhaps even more so important in regards of the *social media jihad*, as the questions and answers provided here for operational or plainly ideological purposes could produce new key words for the jihadist lingual substrate worldwide.³⁰¹

There is an opportunity to leverage genuine interdisciplinary approaches, which combine in-depth knowledge of big data techniques and network analysis, with rich multilingual understanding of the ideological, religious, and cultural foundations of jihadist propaganda.

As part of their social media zeitgeist Jihadists create ‘fan pages’ on Facebook which allows them to disseminate content and enables sympathetic Facebook users to interact with each other. This, for example, produces insight into the role of foreign fighters within jihadist-produced content or the way local grievances are being

³⁰⁰ As detailed in the chapter *The ‘Arab Spring’ as a Renaissance for AQ Affiliates in a Historical Perspective*.

³⁰¹ This is most evident in non-Arabic language *nashid* where Arabic key words are build in reference to complex theological concepts. For more details, Nico Prucha, “Die Vermittlung arabischer Jihadisten-Ideologie: Zur Rolle deutscher Aktivisten,” In: Guido Steinberg (ed.), *Jihadismus und Internet: Eine deutsche Perspektive*, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, October 2012, 45-56, http://www.swp-berlin.org/de/publikationen/swp-studien-de/swp-studien-detail/article/jihadismus_und_internet.html.

leveraged by foreign fighters from different countries of origin. As well as what and how ideological questions are answered and most popular in general by local Syrians and foreign fighters alike.

Twitter functions as a beacon for sharing content. For example, videos shot on the battlefield in Syria are being uploaded onto YouTube and shared with followers via Twitter. This requires tracking of prominent Jihadist accounts and the hash tags (#) they use. By tracking these data prominent accounts producing and disseminating jihadist content can be tracked and measured. These include influential users such as high-level preachers who are able to reach out to young, social media savvy individuals and convey jihadist ideology in simple terms with graphic samples – in English.³⁰² The core content, in terms of quality and quantity, however, remains in Arabic as described in the chapter *Introducing Jihadist Twitter Activism: Utilizing Social Media to the Greatest Advantage of Militant Groups Worldwide*.

With the focus set on fighting for the establishment of an Islamic state in Syria, the conduct of *jihad* for Sunni brigades is questioned with guidelines sought to use as rules of engagement and dealing with practicalities of war such as prisoners and booty, and, in times of war and conflict, the rationale of sentencing prisoners to death.

Dividing the Spoils of War – Q&A on Facebook

Social media has become a platform of consent and guidance where knowledge and solutions to specific answers are actively sought and exchanged. Apart from the ‘classical’ jihadist forums, or the static textual database *Minbar al-Tawhid wa-l Jihad* act and remain as verified and authoritative ideological warehouses. Social media, however, by its interactive nature is oftentimes a meticulous mirror of current real world issues and reflects on the ground problems within the modern communication channels when fighters are in need of ideological ‘rules of engagement’ and the like. Rules of engagement are a code for armies but also individuals engaged in combat and set or limit specific actions, decree a behaviour codex and sanction specific

³⁰² As has been detailed by Joseph Carter, Shiraz Maher, Peter Neumann, #Greenbirds: Measuring Importance and Influence in Syrian Foreign Fighter Networks, *The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political* (ICSR), <http://icsr.info/2014/04/icsr-insight-inspires-syrian-foreign-fighters/>, April 15, 2014.

means or operational patterns. As the element of attaining spoils of war or booty (*ghanima*) is of great propaganda value for jihadist groups, the question always revolves around the issue on how such spoils should be divided among the fighters or groups, without violating *shari'a law* or the example of Prophet Muhammad. Militant and paramilitary groups in general like to showcase their spoils of war but also questions on how such booty should be divided plays a vital role within the jihadist sphere.³⁰³ In a posting on Facebook on May 31, 2013 this question was answered in a summarized version for the *Mujahidin* in Syria who may be in need of a fast answer. The answer is framed as a *fatwa*, a legally binding decree by *Munaqib nawadir al-salaf*, a group on Facebook with about 1,500 “likes.”³⁰⁴ The group claims to convey a proper understanding of the *salafi* way of life and the pertaining authoritative theology. The posting, which was linked via Twitter accounts from within the Syrian *jihad*, is entitled “the booty is for those who witnessed combat.” This a reference to a *hadith* and of further relevance in related legal documents shared by jihadi sympathizers and media activists. In this posting, however, the focus is set on five essential elements:

“A share of the booty is for God and His Messenger for the sake of the common interest of the Muslims;

Another share is for the kin;

The third share for the orphans;

And the poor;

And another share for the wayfarers.”³⁰⁵

The remainder of the *ghanima* is divided between the “infantry men and the knights.”

³⁰³ As outlined in the subchapter *The Fifth Most Often Shared Shortlink.*”

³⁰⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/MnaqbWNwadrAlslf?fref=nf>, September 10, 2013.

³⁰⁵ *Qismat al-ghanima*, <https://www.facebook.com/MnaqbWNwadrAlslf/posts/585856011448318>, May 31, 2013, accessed September 10, 2013.

This can hardly be applied to contemporary warfare or be part of a substantial understanding on how to divide any *ghanima*. The Facebook-posting is relevant due to its theological framework, as the “taking of the money of the disbelievers” is outlined by two verses of the Qur’an “as a right even for those, who do not fight.” This is of greater importance within the jihadist mindset as the war in Syria is framed as a confessional war with the Sunnites fighting against all other elements, branded as apostates, rejectionists, Christians, or in sum as infidels or disbelievers. Thus, Qur’an 8:41 is first presented to frame this notion, reaffirming, yet clearly distinguishing:

“Know that one-fifth of your battle gains belongs to God and the Messenger, to close relatives and orphans, to the needy and travellers, if you believe in God and the revelation We sent down to Our servant on the day of the decision, the day when the two forces met in battle. God has power over all things.”

The citation of the verse is enhanced by Qur’an 59:7, to emphasize the argument “as God said:”

“Whatever gains God has turned over to His Messenger from the inhabitants of the villages belong to God, the Messenger, kinsfolk, orphans, the needy, the traveller in need – this is so that they do not just circulate among those of you who are rich – so accept whatever the Messenger gives you, and abstain from whatever he forbids you. Be mindful of God: God is severe in punishment.”

While the Qur’anic Encyclopaedia³⁰⁶ narrows the reading of 59:7 that only God may take booty from lands taken from the *kuffar*, the Facebook-*fatwa* extends the goods a *Mujahid* may take as booty in Syria to material and human resources alike.

³⁰⁶ Wahba al-Zuhayli et al., *Al-Mawsu'a al-Qur'aniyya al-Muyassara*, Dar al-Fikr: Damascus, 2009, 547.

According to this *fatwa*, this allows the *amir* to give out booty to his soldiers after considering the general interests or benefits of the Muslims. Anyone who was part of the combat mission that led to the acquiring of the booty is entitled to his take, no matter what goods or weapons were taken. This legal decree extends to female captives independent of them being pregnant as they lose their marriage status as a consequence.

“It is not permissible to coerce a pregnant woman [into slavery] until she has given birth to her child.”³⁰⁷

The question on how to deal with territory gained in times of war is addressed in a concluding sentence;

“If Muslims take parts of their enemy’s territory as booty it may be the better judgement of the conquistadores to assign either one of two decrees: take it for the Muslims [to inhabit] or maintain the territory as it is, but encasing regular taxes to be paid to those who are in charge.”

“*Fatawa al-Minbar: Questions from #al-Sham regarding the #legal ruling on #prisoners and #booty?*” by Abu’ l-Mundhir al-Shinqithi

A *fatwa* posted by Abu’ l-Mundhir al-Shinqithi on Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi’s online warehouse *Minbar al-Tawhed wa-l-Jihad*³⁰⁸ addressed the difficulty of dealing with prisoners and booty (*ghanima*) in Syria. The ‘ruling’ was copy-and-pasted and disseminated via Facebook³⁰⁹ and Twitter,³¹⁰ but most prominently placed on the *Shabakat al-Shumukh al-Islam* (SSI) forum by a Twitter-styled headline. It announces the topic as “*Fatawa al-Minbar: Questions from #al-Sham regarding the #legal ruling*

³⁰⁷ *Qismat al-ghanima*, <https://www.facebook.com/MnaqbWNwadrAlslf/posts/585856011448318>, May 31, 2013, accessed September 10, 2013.

³⁰⁸ The questions had been posted with al-Shinqithi’s answers on the Q&A Fatwa Forum of al-Maqdisi’s website, February 6, 2013, http://www.tawhed.ws/FAQ/display_question?qid=7120&pageqa=1&i. Accessed February 6, 2013.

³⁰⁹ By *Ghorabaa News*, <https://www.facebook.com/GhorabaaNews/posts/569817999695887>, published February 6, 2013 with 244 likes, linking to @Jihadalumma’s Twitter account. The respective screen name is جهاد الأمة.

³¹⁰ @Jihadalumma tweeted the existence of the *fatwa* and a link to the full text via TwitLonger, <http://www.twitlonger.com/show/kui7hg>, February 5, 2013.

on #prisoners and #ghanima?”³¹¹ The “Forum for Questions” (*muntada al-as’ila*) is a subsection of the *Minbar al-Tawhed wa-l-Jihad* website where individuals can post questions. These questions are then answered by the prominence of jihadist clerics, whereas Abu’ l-Mundhir al-Shinqithi is highly prolific in providing legally binding answers to the flock. Sometimes, everyday questions for aspiring jihadists are placed on this forum giving the readers an interesting glimpse into the mind-set of the serious visitors who seek to join militant groups but are fearful of potentially violating Islamic law.³¹²

Such a question and answer was linked and interlinked and became a thread on SSI. The posting had been set by “your sister by God” *al-Khansa’ al-Muwahhida*.³¹³ This forum account is of importance, as it is most likely respectively present on Twitter via the account @al_khansaa2. The screen name of this highly prolific pro-ISIS account is *al-Khansa’ al-Muwahhida* (الخنساء الموحدة).³¹⁴

Forum member *Shami Murabit* appreciated her initial thread, by replying:

“may God reward you well, [this is an] important and valuable topic, dear one, if this renewed *fatwa* is [of service] here to benefit the brothers of the *Mujahidin*.”³¹⁵

The *fatwa* can be considered as a direct operational guidance for leaders and members of jihadi brigades inside Syria and potentially has an impact on the ground. It consists of four questions and answers regarding Sunni prisoners of war and kidnapping, the

³¹¹ <http://shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=190743>, posted and accessed February 6, 2013. The thread linked to the respective Facebook-page.

³¹² As detailed by Joas Wagemakers, Memo about Syria: Jihadis are People too, *Jihadica*, <http://www.jihadica.com/memo-about-syria-jihadis-are-people-too/>, September 6, 2013.

³¹³ *Al-Khansa’* is most likely a reference to the female companion of Muhammad who had been a poet and converted to Islam with her four sons. Her four sons were killed at the battle of al-Qadisiyya of 636. She is an outstanding female role model often referenced.

For the importance of al-Qadisiyya for contemporary jihadists: *Abu ‘Umar – the new Role Model of the “Media Martyr.”*

Al-Khansa’ had also been the name of a jihad magazine for women, for the “torments on the path of the female *mujahida*, *al-Khansa’*, rajjab 1425.

³¹⁴ For further analysis of this account and its impact and influence, please consult the subchapter *Datasets of Jabhat al-Nusra on Twitter and Drone Strikes in Yemen and Response on Twitter*.

³¹⁵ <http://shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=190743>, posted and accessed February 6, 2013.

question of repentance (*tawba*) for Sunnis who fought for al-Assad and the handling of booty (*ghanima*) taken from the enemy. Sunnis entangled with the regime are termed as *murtaddin*, as apostates, which carries a death sentence by definition. However, they had been Sunnis, members of the Sunni communities (*ahl al-Sunna*) and by the uniform they wear, they have evidently turned into apostates, manifesting as belonging to the ungodly regime.

In general, the *fatwa* intends to serve as a practical guideline for the *Mujahidin* to orientate themselves in times of war. The first question

“if a Mujahid group (*jama'a*) decides that a prisoner of the *murtaddin* to be released for a ransom (*fidya*);

is it permissible for another group to repeat this way of dealing with this [just released] former soldier, for he is after all a soldier of the tyrant;

And is there a difference in this matter between the *Nusayris*³¹⁶ and those who are actually related to the Sunnis?”³¹⁷

Abu' l-Mundhir al-Shinqithi in his capacity as a full member of the “Shari'a Gremium at the Minbar” website replies:

“this soldier is a legitimate target should he return to the battle carrying a weapon. By all means he should be targeted by either the brigade (*katiba*) that had set him free or by any other one.

However, it is not permissible to object to grant this soldier to repent (*tawba*), if by origin he is of the *ahl al-Sunna*.³¹⁸ But only if his capture and following

³¹⁶ Nusayri is a reference for 'Alawis, as it is believed that this torrent was founded by Ibn Nusayr in the eight century.

³¹⁷ <http://shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=190743>, posted and accessed February 6, 2013.

³¹⁸ Perhaps the term “birth right” would be applicable.

release is bound by the pledge to the *Mujahidin* to abandon the fight and to stop supporting the tyrant.³¹⁹

Concerning the *Nusayris*; for as long as he remains true to his religion, he is a *mushrik* whose blood is unprotected. He is a target worthy for consideration without the interference of [the brigade's overall] interest and neither should the targeting of individuals of the *Nusayri* be corrupted [by being paid off to refrain attacking them.]”³²⁰

Tawba, repentance, is only a commodity for the led-astray Sunnis and by no means a guarantee for survival and bound to specific conditions. With the conflict in Syria deepening among the confessions with a greater character of a confessional war (*harb ta'ifi*), the Christians and especially Alawites are defined as the most potent enemy, waging their war against Sunni Islam since the seizure of power by Hafez al-Assad in 1963.

Addressing the second question, the practical conduct of war,

“if the *Mujahidin* were to besiege a group (*ta'ifa*)³²¹ of the *murtaddin* in one of their strongholds from where the *murtaddin* inflict damage on the *Mujahidin* by shooting at them; would that imply to not offer the dissidents [of the Sunna] (*munshaq*)³²² to repent? Or should [the *Mujahidin*] wait in this matter if the enemy sustains his ability to fight?”

³¹⁹ The pop-cultural consumer of Hollywood movies – a cluster the author confesses being part of – may be reminded of a scene in Steven Spielberg's film *Saving Private Ryan* where a German Wehrmacht soldier is spared and released by American soldiers. The German soldier had pledged to return home and not continue fighting. Later in the movie, the soldier is taken again and this time killed.

³²⁰ <http://shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=190743>, posted and accessed February 6, 2013.

³²¹ The term *ta'ifa* is usually used to describe a religious torrent, or movement, a confession, but is a reference here to outline the *murtaddin* as such a similar cohesive group bound together by their firm disbelief or apostasy.

³²² Perhaps the term *munshaq* for “dissenter” is used in a lighter implication than that of the *murtadd*, granting the *tawba* based on this condition. The term may also simply imply that the soldiers are coerced into fighting without wanting to and are in the first place “dissenters” as outlined by a short movie by Syrian activists. Mental dissention leads to physical defection, to defend and protect their

This is perhaps a military question of tactical value. To wait and hold or to advance and storm the stronghold of the enemy, invoking the option of repentance for the *murtaddin* and the potential to switch sides.

Al-Shinqithi warns and cautions to

“not give the enemy a chance to harm the *Mujahidin* and the possibility to save himself and to withdraw. For if the enemy comes to reason that there is no escape for them by the siege laid upon them, and there is no call on them for repentance (*istitab*) [he could get desperate by all means].

For if the situation is not as clear [as outlined], then the repentance of the dissenters [of the *Sunna*] in this condition is by no means proof for their sincerity or their full reverse (*ruju'*) [to the *ahl al-Sunna*, denouncing the tyrant, the idol (*taghut*)]. However, his choice [of siding with the *taghut*] and his considerations must be evaluated until his sincerity of the *tawba* is asserted and that he will not abandon [his promise and recant his *tawba*] at the first chance to return to the battlefield for the tyrant.”³²³

This resonates in the third question of the *fatwa*, whether it

“is permissible to release a [Sunni] soldier dressed in the garments of apostasy if he promises to sincerely clear his status [and return to the *Sunna*]?”

own families after witnessing massacres committed by government troops the soldiers – without much choice – had been part of. *Munshaqq. A Syrian Movie about the Grievances of the Dissenting Soldiers*, <http://askyourright.wordpress.com/2012/06/26/منشوق فيلم سوري يصور معاناة الجند المن>, accessed July 31, 2013.

³²³ <http://shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=190743>, posted and accessed February 6, 2013.

Al-Shinqithi outlines that,

“in any case, the *murtaddin* must be fought; it is obligatory by *shari’a law*. If there is a chance for the *murtadd* to express his *tawba* and his piety the *amir* shall see and wage his options to deal with it.”

This enables to kill any *murtadd* based on the decision by the *amir*, who, according to al-Shinqithi, is granted full authority over the fate of the prisoners. ISIS, by nature the most extreme Sunni jihadi group in the Syrian conflict, has resorted to such decisions oftentimes, as the 37th installment of the *Window into the Battlefield* series shows.³²⁴

The fourth question is also of practical nature, as

“in Syria there are a number of brigades. Sometimes we fight the enemy [together] and we attain booty (*ghanima*) without [deciding how to] split it beforehand. Is it for us permissible to individually take such booty or not? If it is probable that some brigades hoard weapons to fight the *Mujahidin* in the future, is it hence permissible to take parts of the booty in secret before sharing?”

In re-enacting the habitus of Islamic scholars, al-Shinqithi begins his answer by citing the *hadith*

“conveyed by al-Bayhaqi and Ibn Abu Shayba as well as others that ‘Umar [ibn al-Khattab] ordered his soldiers.³²⁵ “the booty is for those who witnessed combat.” This is also conveyed by al-Bukhari in his *Sahih*.

³²⁴ Detailed in the subchapter: Repentance for Sunnis fighting with Assad – Execution in the mainframe of *The Islamic State*

³²⁵ Lit.: workers (*amal*). However, this is a typo or a mistake by al-Shinqithi, for “‘Umar ordered ‘Ammar that the booty is only of those, who witnessed [and thus participated in] battle.” *Bab al-*

Therefore, every Muslim who participated in battle has the right to the *ghanima*, the booty, and it is not permissible to forbid him his right.

And whoever fears the consequences of his command must not partake in battle.

For it is the commander (*al-amir*) who decides how the booty is divided among his soldiers under his command or among other brigades organized and coordinated by his order. On the other hand, whoever fought in the battle without being under the banner of the *amir* or any organization associated with him, for those are like the ones participating in battle [under the command of the *amir* or within the framework of a brigade]. For those are joining the battle and are likewise subjected to the obligation to not kill any women or servants (*'abid*) of God. Furthermore, they have no right of the *ghanima* and must yield to this.³²⁶

Mediating Historical Sources to Sanction Physical Punishment

The need for rules of engagement in the action radius of jihadist groups extends to answering questions related to their conduct and handling of prisoners, hostages, captured spies, or captives in general. The Syrian conflict has, as outlined, drafted the need for more such operational guidelines, in particular within a confessional framework where the jihadist acclaims himself as the only legitimate Sunni representatives in fighting infidels, heretics, hypocrites, and apostates.

This, in times of conflict where one must choose an identity for belonging, includes traitors and spies who must be rooted out and within a punitive legal framework receive a sentence or form of punishment. With sectarianism thriving it has become an identity marker for most without much alternatives and is a driving force for the hardliners on all sides. As all of the terms above can be used to describe those who deviate from the jihadist *manhaj*, jihadist groups may be keen and quick to impose the

ghanima li-man shahada al-waq'a,

http://library.islamweb.net/newlibrary/display_book.php?flag=1&bk_no=52&ID=5685, accessed August 2, 2013.

³²⁶ <http://shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=190743>, posted and accessed February 6, 2013.

death sentence. However, operational questions remain uncertain on, for example how to deal with Sunni clerics who gave their services to the enemies? And for who the alleged spies work, furthermore, no credible or sufficient proof is found. Is that individual cleric and his closest associates legitimate to execute, despite the scholar's claim to have repented and thus be spared, or shall he be executed just as any alleged spy of lower rank and file or individual of higher social standing within Sunni societies?

This is the essence of a question posted on the interactive Q&A fatwa forum on al-Maqdisi's website by the member *Nusrat al-Sham*, "the Victory for al-Sham."³²⁷ His question is entitled whether it is "sufficient for the spy to claim having repented before being overpowered?" The last part of the question, *taba qabla 'l-qidra 'alayhi*, is a direct reference to Qur'an 5:34:

"unless they repent before you overpower them – in that case bear in mind that God is forgiving and merciful."

The operational value of this verse is outlined in the chapter *Drone Strikes and Spies Among us – Televising Confessions and Executions* in the case of the Yemeni officer Tarbush, who was sentenced to death, as any *tawba* after being captured by the *Mujahidin* is invalid.

The issue is complex, as this spy in particular is a cleric, a *shaykh*, who, in the opinion of the questioner, is an impostor who worked in his religious authoritative role "to tirelessly promote lies." This cleric and his companion have been arrested for their swindle. The *shaykh* was

³²⁷ Mantada al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad: Hal yanfa' al-jasus za'amahu anahu tab qabla l-qidra 'alayhi?, Question number 6528, http://tawhed.ws/FAQ/display_question?qid=6528, accessed July 15, 2012.

“searched and a list of names of Syrian and Lebanese senior officers and high dignitaries was found on him. He confessed spying for the [Syrian] regime but claimed to have repented!”³²⁸

The core issue at hand is clear, is a Sunni Muslim who claims to have repented in silence before God prior to his arrest to be pardoned? Or is this a violation of Qur’an 5:34, whereas any repentance (*tawba*) under duress or *after* one’s arrest is invalid? How can the *tawba* be sincere then?

With both individuals arrested or by whatever means detained, the allegations against the two are further denoted:

“the *shaykh* had been collecting donations for the poor and spent the money on alcohol and to commit adultery (*zina*), as he confessed. Regarding the companion, there is no proof (*dalil*) for him spying, however, he did confess his desires to be part of the adultery and alcohol consummation with the false *shaykh*.”³²⁹

The question is focused on the practical implementation of *shari’a*-law for both individuals. As he is asking

“the brothers for a legal decision (*hukm*) on the swindler? And the ruling on his companion?”³³⁰

³²⁸ Ibid.

³²⁹ Ibid.

³³⁰ Ibid.

On behalf of the “*shari’a law council on al-Minbar*”, Abu ‘l-Mundhar al-Shanqiti answers by emphasizing four elements based on the question:

“He [the cleric] confessed being a spy.

In his possession was a list of names of senior officers and high-ranking dignitaries [of the Syrian regime].

His relentless self-destructive drive (*inghimas*)³³¹ into breaking inviolabilities, straying away from the *shari’a* as mentioned in the question regarding the legitimacy of not-recognizing his *tawba*.

Not having rid himself of those names and not having the pertaining numbers cleared from his mobile phone despite his the likelihood of his arrest [after confessing].”³³²

Al-Shinqithi sets a general finding as the premises by decreeing the cleric the status of a *muharrib*, who fares war against Muslims. Therefore, he initiates his ruling, and as based

“on the common understanding for dealing with those who engage in war against Muslims, do not grant them their repentance after you overpower them, this is affirmed and backed by taking His speech – exalted is He – into account: “unless they repent before you overpower them,” *al-Ma’ida*: 34. This applies to everyone who is a crude apostate [of Islam], summarizing everything between the warfare [against Muslims] on the one hand while committing apostasy (*rida*).

³³¹ In the meaning of plunging carelessly into the rows of his enemies – a reference usually made in a highly positive connotation for *Mujahidin* and in particular suicide-bombers; as there is no return. The wording *inghimas* in this context by al-Shinqithi, however, is quite contrary.

Ibn Taymiyya, *Qa’ida fi l-inghimas al-‘adu wa-hal yubah?* Riyadh: Adwa’ al-salaf, 2002.

³³² Mantada al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad: Hal yanfa’ al-jasus za’amahu anahu tab qabla l-qidra ‘alayhi?, Question number 6528, http://tawhed.ws/FAQ/display_question?qid=6528, accessed July 15, 2012.

This man had not shown his repentance before his scandalous matter was revealed, therefore claiming to have repented shall not save him then.”

In a classical style to back his argument to sentence the cleric determined by al-Shinqithi as an active combatant to death, Ibn Taymiyya’s work *al-Sarim al-Maslul* is cited. This citation is out of context, for Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328 AD), the *Shaykh al-Islam*, had dealt in his – in modern jihadist circles popular – book with those who insulted the prophet and should therefore be sentenced to death. Thus, al-Shinqithi moves further ahead to not only define this particular cleric of being a combatant, but by his deeds on behalf of anti-Islamic forces he is equated to anyone insulting prophet Muhammad. This bears the death sentence as the defined combatant against Islam is, because of his Sunni background, further degraded as a *murtadd*.

According to Ibn Taymiyya, in the reading of al-Shinqithi,

“if the insulter [of the prophet] was also an armed opponent of God and His messenger with the aim to soil the earth with corruption, then he must be punished by one of the mentioned conditions in the verse [5:34]; unless he is to repent before being overpowered (...).”³³³

“Shaykh al-Islam says: If this insulter is a combatant against God and His messenger, causing mischief (*fasad*) to appear in the land³³⁴, then he must be punished by the one of the sanctions mentioned in the verse [of the Qur’an]; unless he repented before being overpowered.”³³⁵

The alleged actions, the confession and the names found on the cleric are sufficient for al-Shinqithi to approve the execution. He furthermore refers to two more sources,

³³³ Ibid., citing Ibn Taymiyya’s work *al-Sarim al-maslul ‘ala man yushatim al-rusul*.

³³⁴ This can be interpreted as a subtle reference to Qur’an 40:26.

³³⁵ Mantada al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad: Hal yanfa’ al-jasus za’amahu anahu tab qabla l-qidra ‘alayhi?, Question number 6528, http://tawhed.ws/FAQ/display_question?qid=6528, accessed July 15, 2012.

by al-Nasa'i and Ibn al-Qayyim to back his argument and concludes by responding to the status of the companion of the incriminated cleric, saying:

“he is in the status of doubt, however, his mere presence next to the cleric does not necessarily mean that he is indeed a partner in his espionage against the Muslims. For the matter concerning him, more interrogations must be conducted with the aim of receiving a confession, allowing all tricks and methods of deceit, such as offering him to work as a spy against the regime to assess his relationship status with them.”³³⁶

³³⁶ Mantada al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad: Hal yanfa' al-jasus za'amahu anahu tab qabla l-qidra 'alayhi?, Question number 6528, http://tawhed.ws/FAQ/display_question?qid=6528, accessed July 15, 2012.

The Birth of a jihadist and Salafist Scene in Germany – 2005 onwards

In Germany and Austria a *salafist* scene was on the rise on 2005 and 2006, whereas the activists had been operating in a grey area in the shades of political *salafism* and *jihadism*. In 2005/2006 a German movement emerged in a confident and – what matters – visible and thereby potent manner. Not only does this community seek to draw clear lines of demarcation and to establish a clear line with German society, rather it declared the Federal Republic of Germany as a whole as one of the main enemies of Muslims. As Germany is part of the NATO mission to Afghanistan, it had become a target for German jihadists who joined al-Qa’ida prior and started to produce German-language propaganda for their audience in Germany. This has influenced and also helped to initiate a pro-jihadist salafist scene that would be led by the Egyptian-Austrian Muhammad Mahmud and the German Denis Cuspert. While Muhammad Mahmud, a.k.a. Abu Usama al-Gharib, was arrested in Turkey in March 2013³³⁷, Denis Cuspert a.k.a. Abu Talha al-Almani was able to get into Syria where he pledged his allegiance to the most radical jihadist faction, *The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham*, in April 2014.³³⁸

In the years of 2005-2007, the amount of jihadist propaganda targeted at Germany has increased. There have been peaks in the intensity of this propaganda usually when jihadists were aiming at coercing German authorities on a particular issue. For instance, in 2007, the aim of intensified propaganda was to stop the extension of the German military involvement in Afghanistan. In 2009, videos were again released with the aim of influencing the parliamentary election and obtaining the withdrawal of German troops from Afghanistan. The first propaganda video threatening Germany was entitled “A Urgent Message to the Governments of Germany Austria”³³⁹ was issued by the Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF) in cooperation with the Caliphate

³³⁷ Österreichischer Islamist in der Türkei gefasst, Die Welt, <http://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article114636865/Oesterreichischer-Islamist-in-der-Tuerkei-gefasst.html>, March 21, 2013.

³³⁸ Denis Cuspert aka Abu Talha al-Almani, Mein Treueid an den Islamischen Staat, al-Tibyan, <http://alplatformmedia.com/vb/showthread.php?p=201868#post201868>, April 14, 2014.

³³⁹ The video was announced in Arabic. *Risala ‘ajila ila hukumatay al-Almaniyya wa-l Nimsa, Shabakat al-Muhajirun al-Islamiyya*, <http://www.mohajroon.com/vb/showthread.php?t=47304>, March 10, 2007.

Voice Channel (CVC) on March 9, 2007. The jihadi media activists behind the video, primarily Muhammad Mahmud, demanded that the German army must be withdrawn from Afghanistan. A second video, released later in 2007 by the same groups also emphasized that Germany and Austria are legitimate targets to attack for global jihadists. The, at the time, Vienna based Muhammad Mahmud was imprisoned for this threat and re-emerged after his release as a more powerful *salafist* leader first in Austria, then in Germany.

At the beginning of 2009 *as-Sahab*, the media department of al-Qa'ida, issued their own videos that directly addressed Germany – these videos from the main jihadi organization had been a powerful message, showcasing that Germans are among the Arab dominated organization while the focus was set on Germany as a main enemy and ally of the Americans. In this video, entitled “The Salvation Package for Germany”³⁴⁰ a masked man, identifying himself as “Harrach” and by his nom de guerre Abu Talha al-Almani addresses the Germans in the German language. Bekay Harrach, a German of Moroccan descent, threatened terrorist attacks would be carried out two weeks after the elections if Germans voted for a government that continued to maintain the presence of German troops in Afghanistan. As Harrach's video came from al-Qa'ida's official media department, there were genuine fears that the threat could be credible. However, Angela Merkel was voted back into office and the ultimatum expired without an actual attack.

Over the same period, videos from the *Islamic Jihad Union*, released under the *Badr al-Tawhid* and *Elif Medya* brands, sought to garner support for their activities in Pakistan/Afghanistan, through encouraging Germans to travel to the region and join their militant forces. However, their videos did not directly exhort extremists to attack Germany and in some instances had the opposite intention. The video message recorded by Eric Breininger was directly aimed at denying speculation that he had returned to the country and was preparing a violent attack:

“I am in Afghanistan and personally do not plan any attack against the Federal Republic of Germany.” He then goes on to claim that the “German people are dazzled by politics, as they intend to portray that Germany would be the target for extremists and that they have to act decisively against it. But the danger

³⁴⁰ Das Rettungspaket für Deutschland, *as-Sahab*, *Shabakat al-Shura al-Islamiyya*, <http://al-shouraa.com/vb/showthread.php?t=20787>, September 2, 2009.

comes from the Germans themselves: They have stationed their soldiers in Afghanistan and in Uzbekistan. As long as this is the case, Germany must reckon with attacks. For if they withdraw their troops from a war, that was started by Americans, then Germany would not be the target of Islamists.”³⁴¹

Germany was, however, embedded in the jihadist propaganda scheme in 2009 following an attack by the Taliban in Afghanistan. In the 32th edition of the Arabic Taliban magazine “as-Samud” (Resistance) a “Message to the German People and to their Government, the Followers of the Americans”³⁴² was issued. This direct approach to Germany in this magazine clearly shows the increased inclusion of Germany as an enemy in the jihadist mindset. After the suicide bombing attack against the German embassy in Kabul on January 17, 2009, the Taliban immediately released a statement online which is repeated in the “as-Samud” magazine. The attack, that resulted in more damage and loss of life, according to the Taliban, to a neighboring American military compound should serve as “a warning and as a punishment” to the German government. With a alleged historical retrospective view on Afghan-German relations during World War II, the attitude towards Germany is now becoming more and more hostile as Germany not only participates in the American led “war on Islam” in Afghanistan, but is also responsible for the murder and mistreatment of innocent Muslim civilians. The magazine article stated:

“the German government with Angela Merkel leading is standing with the Americans, the occupants, who assaulted the Afghans and their country, [by the means of] tyranny and aggression, [the Germans] are participating with them in murdering Afghan children and women, the youth and the elderly.”³⁴³

This is a significant change of tone regarding Germany and the alleged attack against the embassy in Kabul shows that the Taliban and other elements may be directing more attacks against Germany in Afghanistan. The drastic increase of German fighters, mostly of German-Turkish origin, and the radical increase of threat messages read out in German in the recent past is a clear sign that Germany is more and more

³⁴¹ Eric Breininger, *Aufruf vom Hindukusch*, October 10, 2008.

³⁴² *Risala ila sha'ab al-Almani wa-hukumatihā al-muwaliyya li-l Amrikan, Majjala Islamiyya Shahriyya “al-Sumud”* (February 2009), 47-48.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*

being perceived as an enemy and as a legitimate target within jihadist mindset echoing from Afghanistan. The IED attacks against German soldiers and the used rhetoric is not unusual for jihadist propaganda but the direct address of, for example, Harrach in his messages to the German people follow a coherent *modus operandi* of propaganda, contextualizing attacks and damages against German nationals or interests as legitimate. The attack in Kabul was further framed by the penning of the *al-Sumud* writer that,

“therefore, this suicide operation has been a clear message to the German people (...), a warning message to those of the rulers, ignorant of the Afghan reality these days.”³⁴⁴

Communicating jihad

Jihadi propaganda has been an effective tool for incitement, radicalization, and recruitment ever since the armed struggle in Afghanistan against the Soviet Red Army in the 1980s, as detailed in previous chapters. Current jihadi videos are professionally made and produced, and are more frequently disseminated as full high-definition, professional edited movies. Regardless of the main language of the video, the theological narrative is coherent and backed by primarily Arabic ideologues whose writings can be easily found and accessed online. The jihad movies that are part of the German cluster echoing from Afghanistan and Pakistan are not much different in terms of the portrayed narrative. A typical video starts by portraying grievances or the suffering of Muslims, who have to endure occupation (*ihtilal*) and discrimination by either Zionist and/or Crusader military powers. Grievances are fuelled by the narration of “agents” (*‘umala’*), and “apostates” (*murtaddun*) who actively support the “war against Islam” and are thus excommunicated (*takfir*) from Sunni Islam. Following this are usually bloody and gory scenes, showing for example the aftermath of drone strikes in Pakistan, with body parts and killed children. “Praiseful hymns” (*nashid*) or “encouragement battle songs” (*huda’*) are an important emotional and theological part played during film sequences that justify the militants’ acts as necessary and as a divine obligation. Following the classical “an eye for an eye”

³⁴⁴ *ibid.*

guideline, martyrdom operations in general as well as various militant responses are sanctioned and framed as a “just war”, as well as rhetorically demarcated by religious keywords and sentiments. Typically, the next key notion consists of a sermon, held by a preacher: a scholar (*shaykh*), a fellow fighter (*mujahid*) or an *al-shaykh al-mujahid* whose words are backed by his personal commitment on the front lines.

While all non-Arabic jihad videos are dominated by the Arabic language videos, due to historical reasons and the dominance of Arabs in jihadi media centers, German jihad videos have become an essential part of the overall, global and multilingual al-Qa’ida media landscape. The German-language videos have been produced and published online by several jihadi groups, such as the *Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan* (IMU), the defunct *German Taliban Mujahidin* (DTM), or AQ’s main media outlet *as-Sahab*. In terms of content, while the core structure of the German language videos is broadly the same, a series of adaptations to the German audience are noticeable, such as hymns and battle songs in German, however, conveying specific meanings by Arabic key words.

Of importance in this context is the video “A Call to the Truth” (Ruf zur Wahrheit), disseminated online on 24 September 2009. The video addresses in great detail a series of political issues and events, speaks directly to Muslims but also to the broader population in Germany and engages statements made by German politicians. The NATO involvement in Afghanistan, the partnership with Israel, but also the issue of “targeted killings” or the “Adler mission” are central besides the usual jihadi doctrinal sermons and pseudo theological explanations. Secondly, the video, the first public appearance of the DTM, was released before the German parliamentary elections, shortly after a similar one released by a German AQ-member, Bekkay Harrach (a.k.a. Abu Talha al-Almani), in an apparent attempt to influence the results. Germany had been referred to and/or cautioned before in jihadi video-messages, but never directly threatened with imminent attacks, as retaliation for the engagement in Afghanistan, like in these two videos. The approx. 30 minute long film starts by showing training sequences and shooting exercises, followed by a lengthy monologue of an individual called “Ayyub Almani” (the German), later identified as the German national Yusuf Ocak from Berlin.³⁴⁵ Almani is sitting in a classical jihadi video set up: on the ground

³⁴⁵ Guido Steinberg, *German Jihad – On the Internationalization of Islamist Terrorism*, Columbia Studies in Terrorism and Irregular Warfare, Columbia University Press: New York, 2013, 155.

with a heavy machinegun, a Pulemyot Kalashnikova, in front of him. The scene has a symmetrical set up, on either side an artillery shell and a Kalashnikov rifle frame, behind him a large black banner of the Taliban, stating “Islamic Emirate Afghanistan”.

Additionally, to complete the picture of the reference points used in such videos and therefore to better compare and assess their resonance, an additional video was considered, *Böses Vaterland* (“Evil Fatherland”), released on February 9, 2012, and dated December 13 2011, Waziristan, Pakistan. The video was produced and disseminated by the *Jund Allah Studios*, the media wing of the IMU and mainly features two German-Moroccan brothers, Mounir and Yasin Choukha who act as the German-language media facilitators. The brothers are from Bonn and known in jihadi circles by their respective nom de guerre Abu Adam and Abu Ibrahim al-Almani. The video could perhaps be termed as a sequel to *Ruf zur Wahrheit* as it focuses on similar elements. The main actor featured in the video is Mounir Chouka who gives a sermon styled talk after a lengthy introduction. The statements are filled with religious connotations and references, with the intent to inspire German-speaking Muslims in the Diaspora to either join the IMU or undertake “lone wolf” attacks in their country of residence.

The introduction of the video summarizes the most evident notions by aligning several sequences of statements made by German politicians. The mashed sequences start with a short excerpt from a speech made by German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder on 11 September 2001: “I have assured the American President George Bush of Germany’s unrestricted solidarity”. This statement is then followed by sequences of several terror attacks, reminding the audience of the jihadi counteractions against Western countries who are all contributors to the troop deployment in Afghanistan.

Framing and data selection

In their habitus and manifestation, governmental as well as “terrorist” discourses refer to certain principles of belief, or state norms, symbols, wordings, and sources with the intention of resonance in their target or random audience. As members of their

respective societies, or religiously influenced cultures, they operate from “within” in crafting public messages and framing their narratives, sanctioning violence and defining “justice” and “values”. Persuasion as a function of resort to the “cultural kit” has long established itself as a major category of analysis in the context of social movement mobilization, and recently also in that of governmental discourse. Crawford notes “All political arguments occur in a context of belief and culture”, and further,

“if an argument can be understood within the lifeworld and the dominant discourse ... it has a much better chance of being persuasive. Arguments can also be *framed* by their proponents to fit with existing dominant beliefs, actors, and identities, and within existing social structures.”³⁴⁶

Frame analysis as *method* has been developed in the social movement literature and works with a series of major categories: diagnostic and prognostic framing (statement of problem and solution), as well as several resonance criteria clustered around frame credibility and salience.³⁴⁷ By the framing of “grievances” and “injustice” an emerging scene in Germany started to evolve in 2005. It directly tapped into existent narratives and literal as well as audio-visual materials out of the Arabic spectrum and develop a German-language narrative, with media strategies at work to be appealing to a local audience. As the *salafist* believes to be the only true Muslim, valid in his conviction to God and his habitus of ritual prayer, and distances himself not only from the majority of society but also from non-*salafist* Muslims. In the case of Germany, the *salafists* reject the German state and government, while considering themselves as strangers (*ghuraba'*) in a majority non-Islamic society that prosecutes them because of their firm conviction in God. Indeed, most *salafists* consider themselves a victim of a state-led war against their religion. As a consequence, the self-declared victims even more so seek to draw lines of demarcation and pursuit the codes and laws of a separate community in which they believe to be able to exercise and act out their Muslim identity as much as possible. However, only the *hijra* (migration) into a

³⁴⁶ N. Crawford, *Homo Politicus and Argument (nearly) all the way down: Persuasion in Politics, Perspectives on Politics*, 7 (1), 103-124, 118-119.

³⁴⁷ Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, *Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment*, in: *Annu. Rev. Sociol.* 2000. 26:611–39.

liberated space of Islamic territory, by jihadist definitions, is a sanctuary to which all ‘true’ Muslims of the *salafist* and jihadist spectrum should settle in. For the time being in non-majority Islamic societies, even more so in states considered part of the global ‘Crusader’ campaign against Islam, *salafists* in Germany developed their own rules to segregate themselves as much as possible from the German way of life: by choosing their own dress codes, inspired by Afghan clothes that are popular for *salafists* and jihadists alike since the 1980s, by developing their own language that often times is hard to comprehend. By mixing Arabic words such as *din* (religion)³⁴⁸, *du’a* (supplication), *shahada* (martyrdom)³⁴⁹ or *al-janna* (paradise).³⁵⁰ To strengthen ones sympathy and identity with violent and armed conflicts in the Islamic world, Arabic names of conflict zones such as Palestine (*Filastin*), Chechnya (*Shishan*)³⁵¹ and most prominently with the war in Syria (*al-Sham*) are rather used. At the same time the *salafists* are engaged in online media, whereas they reproduce and enhance Arabic extremist sources and deploy the same iconography as militant groups. By a dual approach of engaging on the Internet as well as in mosques and on the streets to recruit new members, the media savvy behavior and the codes used by *salafists* can be seen as attractive to especially disenfranchised young people. The *salafists* consider themselves as the primarily missionary charter of violent jihadist actors, who adhere to this missionary task (*da’wa*), manifesting as callers to faith (*da’i*), feeling entitled to spread the true religion (*al-din al-haqq*).

³⁴⁸ For example in a *nashid* sung by Denis Cuspert in German he referenced *din* for religion to showcase that the non-Muslims are engulfed in a war against Islam. In a mosque in Berlin he sang “wake up, wake up, war everywhere in the world, Muslims are falling because of money and oil. *Allahu akbar, allahu akbar*. Bombs are falling, bombs are falling, on Iraq and *Filastin*, they destroy our *din*, *allahu akbar*.” The song rhymes in German, Arabic key words are build into the German flow and boost the conveyed messages. *Filastin* translates to “Palestine” while *din* is Arabic for “religion”, referring to Islam, the religion of God.

This had been one of his earliest *nashid* after his reversion to Islam and his manifestations as an extremist. Ex Deso Dogg - Abu Malik - Abu Maleeq - *Nashid* 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FmpaKaWKSkc>, uploaded July 2012, with over 14,000 views as of May 19, 2014.

³⁴⁹ *Shahada* refers to the martyrdom but also the Islamic creed. The *shahid*, the martyr, is he who sacrificed everything to fulfill the Islamic creed, to confess and prove that “there is no God but God and Muhammad His messenger”. The plural for *shahid* is *shuhada’*. In a document published in German and Arabic by *Millatu Ibrahim*, titled “The First of the Shuhada’” (Die Ersten Shuhadah) underlines the common usage of Arabic key words.

<http://www.shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=183807>, November 7, 2012.

³⁵⁰ *Al-Jannah al-Jannah*, a *nashid* by Abu Talha al-Almani published by the Global Islamic Media Front, <http://ansar1.info/showthread.php?t=46561>, August 28, 2013. In this *nashid* martyrdom operations are appraised, “I wish for my death and can’t wait” calling out to commit suicide-operations in public transport networks.

³⁵¹ The title of another German-language *nashid* by Abu Talha, <http://as-ansar.com/vb/showthread.php?t=77011>, December 30, 2012.

The Federal Republic of Germany has become an important, if not the major enemy of this movement.³⁵² Partially, as outlined above, this sentiment was instilled by AQ propaganda claiming that the presence of German troops in Afghanistan is proof of the German hostility. With attacks by German jihadists occurring against the German Army, the *Bundeswehr*, in Afghanistan, the attitude of many *salafists* in Germany has become highly aggressive.

German-language media produced by fighting jihadist groups worldwide has instilled the notion in Germany-based support networks that this country is part of a wider campaign against Muslims worldwide. This has not only, as a consequence, initiated a German support base for jihadist groups who produce German media content and preach on the streets but has also had an effect for recruitment, with Germans appearing in jihadist videos.

In particular hostage videos exhibiting western hostages or high-ranking non-westerners, such as diplomats or envoys, receive plenty of media attention and grant the captors multiple platforms in multiple languages to address their demands and grievances. This is mirrored, in turn, by German citizens who have joined the ranks of al-Qa'ida or *The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham* as foreign fighters and who then address their government in a similar sense. However, in the case of hostage-taking, the captives are presented as trophies and exhibited. Jihadists in recent years have used this as a strategy to plant demands in the mouths of the kidnapped to directly appeal to their respective governments or their peoples, who should pressure their representatives and exercise their democratic rights and principles. The foreign policies of governments thereby are directly criticized and conveyed by the hostages themselves, demanding the withdrawal of troops or the release of prisoners in exchange for their lives. Germany has appeared in this context more frequent as a target for demands on the one hand while more German language videos appeared on the other, following the extremist media strategy that the German people may become aware on how their own government would be deceiving them. Apart the propaganda, financial motivations and demands are addressed in secret and mostly kept out of the media as well as the propaganda films. This has enabled a ideological and political

³⁵² This sentiment was carried and emphasized by the German member of the *Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan*, Mounir Chouka in video published in February 2012. *Böses Vaterland*, Jundallah Media.

merger of jihadist groups, who internationalized their demands by hostage-taking, demanding a shift of foreign policies or a withdrawal of troops, consolidating a transnational and global appeal of jihadist groups within the specific – unified – frame of reference. Besides the demand to release fellow *Mujahidin* or imprisoned sisters, hostages are often coerced to ask their family and friends to exercise pressure on the government – in hopes of creating enough public pressure for a shift of policy to negotiate with terrorists. This had been the case, out of many, for example, with the kidnapping of German nationals Hannelore and Sinan Krause in 2007 in Iraq by a group calling itself *Siham al-Haqq* (The Arrows of Truth). This is an ample example for this globalization and professionalizing of terrorist media handling: Hannelore Krause was forced to beg German Chancellor Angela Merkel to withdraw the Bundeswehr from Afghanistan to guarantee her and Sinan’s release from captivity. The “Arrows of Truth” had later released Hannelore Krause, the fate of her son Sinan remains unclear.³⁵³ In a similar move, al-Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM) published a video online showing German citizen Edgar Fritz Raupach begging for his life. The short film, shows Mr. Raupach placed between two armed *Mujahidin* in front of a hand drawn Islamic banner. He was abducted in early 2012 in Kato, north Nigeria. In a similar wording as the call by the kidnapped Saudi diplomat al-Khalidi in Yemen, “the German prisoner” Edgar Raupach calls (*nida*) upon “his government to save me... save my life.”



Figure 8 Edgar Fritz Raupach addressing the German government to be exchanged for Filiz Gelowicz³⁵⁴

³⁵³ Judith Tinnes, *Internetnutzung islamistischer Terror- und Insurgentengruppen unter besonderer Berücksichtigung vonmedialen Geiselnahmen im Irak, Afghanistan, Pakistan und Saudi-Arabien* (Saarbrücken: Universität des Saarlandes, 2010), 480-495.

³⁵⁴ The video was disseminated on March 19, 2012 and is dated to March 18. A statement released prior set the demands that the hostage does not repeat. He appeals to the German government to fulfill the demands to save his life and states his name, profession, employer and place of residence in Germany – in German and English. Filiz Gelowicz is the wife of the Sauerland chief Fritz, a member

In a written communiqué that clearly addresses the demands that are absent in the video, the release of Filiz Gelowicz aka “Umm Sayf Allah al-Ansariyya”, the “German government” is directly addressed: “Release Umm Sayf Allah al-Ansariyya and we will hand you your prisoner”.³⁵⁵ In concluding remarks of the statement, the kidnappers

“call upon the family of the prisoner and his friends as well as the German public opinion to hurry the pressure on the German government to force an end to the suffering to the oppressed Muslim sister.”³⁵⁶

Edgar Raupach was killed on May 31, 2012 during a failed rescue attempt. Filiz Gelowicz had been out of prison after serving her sentence by the end of April.³⁵⁷ A “special statement in regard of the killing of the German prisoner in Nigeria” was published by AQIM on June 10, 2012, justifying the act as ‘self-defense’ when the

“special police unit attempted to free him by force.” Directly addressing “the family of the German citizen that the blood of your son is tied around the neck of your government, having given the green light to the military assault operation to free him. Therefore, you should demand the permission to open a investigation to uncover the perpetrators of this crime.”³⁵⁸

of the *Islamic Jihad Union*, who had planed bomb American military installations in Germany. Filiz Gelowicz has mutated after her trial in Germany and her prison sentencing into an icon misused by the jihadists. Despite her early release from prison due to her good behavior and her pledge to resume a normal life, media jihadists are portraying her as steadfast on the path of God, not renouncing her conviction and continuing her efforts online by all possible means. “Wife of Sauerland-terrorist Filiz Gelowicz released from prison”, accessed April 24, 2012. <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/ehfrau-des-sauerland-terroristen-filiz-gelowicz-aus-haft-entlassen-a-829439.html>.

³⁵⁵ The written statement bears the same date as the video, March 18, 2012. Both files had been simultaneously published online.

³⁵⁶ Ibid.

³⁵⁷ “German hostage dies in Nigeria rescue attempt”, accessed May 31, 2012.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2012/05/2012531141350940867.html>.

³⁵⁸ Ibid.

Besides Iraqi jihadists kidnapping Germans to demand the German troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, the sanctioning of the execution of Russian special police force (OMON) members by Saudi AQ ideologue and first-generation leader Yusuf al-'Uyairi for the Chechen *Mujahidin*³⁵⁹ or the explanation of Libyan AQ ideologue and leader Abu Yahya al-Libi legitimizing the release of South Korean hostages,³⁶⁰ taken by the Taliban and released in exchange for the promise of troop withdrawal, undermine and portray the commonalities in the struggle against oppression, injustice and occupation that jihadist groups nourish on. The lessons learned since 9/11 and military interventions in the Islamic world are that jihadist media must properly portray hostages and issue clear demands to be perceived by the global media. If not directed at governments, then the message is for the people of respective governments.³⁶¹ Beheadings of hostages has proven at first in this context as an effective media strategy to gain the mainstream media's attention and to make the intentions of the *Mujahidin* clear.

Bridging the Gaps – Online and Offline Radical Milieus

In early 2012 members of the *salafist* movement protested several times in North-Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) against public events of the “Pro NRW” party. The right-wing party provoked the *salafists* by publicly exhibiting the controversial Muhammad caricatures by Danish daily Jyllands-Posten.³⁶² Violence emerged during several protests between the two extreme camps and Germany police officers were wounded repeatedly in these clashes.³⁶³ The clashes and subsequent arrest of *salafists* were used

³⁵⁹ Yusuf al-'Uyairi, “*Hadayyat al-Hiyara fi jawaz qatl al-asara. Markaz al-Dirasat wa-l Buhuth al-Islamiyya*”. His writing was originally published in 2000.

³⁶⁰ Abu Yahya al-Libi, “*Daf'a al-rayn 'an asri asabat al-kureen: Mabhath mukhtasar hawl al-kureen al-ladhina ukhtadifuhum al-mujahidin fi Afghanistan*” (Global Islamic Media Front, 2007). Accessed June 1, 2012. <http://www.muslim.net/vb/showthread.php?247969>.

³⁶¹ Another example is of two portrayed Kenyan soldiers captured by the *Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahidin* in Somalia. In their filmed statements (February 23, 2012), a video beginning with Quran 47:4 that is used oftentimes in connection with hostages and prisoners, one captured soldier states: “My release, it depends on the action of the Kenyan people and also on the action of the Kenyan government. I would like to appeal to my president. How many Kenyans are we willing to sacrifice?” In a similar *modus operandi*, al-Sahab released the appeal of American hostage Warren Weinstein who has a “message from the prisoner Warren Weinstein to his president.” The video was released in early May 2012.

³⁶² John Ward Anderson, Cartoons of Prophet met with outrage, *The Washington Post*, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/01/30/AR2006013001316.html>, January 31, 2006. Accessed February 12, 2014.

³⁶³ Hubert Gude, Die Ehre der Löwen, *DER SPIEGEL*, May 14, 2012.

for the propaganda cause immediately, framing the German police – and as such the state and society – as protecting the right-wing “Pro NRW” and the arrested Muslims as victims of this conflict. In this framing the *salafist*, the ‘true’ Muslim, is arrested for defending the honor of Prophet Muhammad, an obligation for every believer. A video appeared after a major clash in Solingen in May 2012 entitled “In Rank and File they Stood for *Rasulullah* [the Prophet of God]”³⁶⁴ showing how the ‘true’ Muslims engage to defend their brothers and the Prophet Muhammad, being well aware and conscious that punishing anyone who insults the Prophet is obligatory.

As salafists consider themselves as the only legitimate Muslims, they furthermore perceive themselves as ‘chosen’ and as the only ‘true’ believers who are in close proximity to Prophet Muhammad and God. At the same time they repeatedly conjure their readiness to sacrifice themselves, as Abu ‘Azzam al-Almani, a German media *Mujahid*, claims:

“By God, may all of *Millat Ibrahim* [the community of Prophet Abraham], man by man and sister by sister be extinguished, wiped out and murdered. We prefer this over the Prophet being insulted by just one word.”³⁶⁵

This statement was published in an interview for *alrisalah.de* in 2012, a website dedicated to promote jihadist ideology in German. As of 2014, the site “the message” (*al-risala*) promotes “true stories from Sham [Syria]” by a German migrant on their blog who incites the German readers to hurry and join the *jihad* in Syria.³⁶⁶

The *salafi jihadism*-supporter and their sympathizers communicate via the Internet with Muslims from Germany who have joined militant groups in Pakistan and Afghanistan. These fighters have become role models and heroes for the *salafi* milieu. With the outbreak of violence in Syria in 2012 and the emergence of AQ affiliated groups and *The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham*, this communication increased in

³⁶⁴ In Reih und Glied standen sie für Rasulullah, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?CRVgZdl5Zx0>, July 14, 2012. The original video had been removed, however, it has been uploaded again several times, for example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3IzTMuAFga4>, March 18, 2014. This edition has Farsi subtitles.

³⁶⁵ Abu Azzam al-Almani, Wir machen, was Allah uns befohlen hat!, Interview with Abu Usama al-Gharbib, *al-risalah.de*, <http://alrisalah.de/component/k2/item/60-interview-mit-abu-usama-al-gharib>. Accessed May 31, 2012.

³⁶⁶ Eindrücke eines Muhajir aus Deutschland – Wahre Geschichten aus Shaam, <http://die-botschaft.net/geschichten-aus-shaam-teil-1-10/>, January 14, 2014.

relation to the fighters arriving in Syria from Germany. However, in the years before the war in Syria, jihadists like the brothers Mounir and Yassin Chouka from Bonn had been the main focus who had produced German-language videos and *nashid* for years. In the meantime the Chouka brothers who joined the Islamic Movement Uzbekistan (IMU) and have become ultimate role models who have adhered to the religious duty of jihad, neglecting their own life, have produced about 40 videos. By this footprint and by their in-depth sermons and religious lessons from Waziristan, Pakistan, they are fulfilling the jihadist lifestyle in a most appealing manner for their audience who wish to be able to re-enact these two brothers and engage in physical combat with the framed “enemies of God”, including German soldiers in Afghanistan.

The professional and frequent use of the Internet has transformed the Chouka brothers not only into role models but also into ideological transmitters who are able to influence local movements in their former country of residence. Shortly after the violent clash in Solingen Yassin Chouka reacted in a video entitled “Death to the Pro NRW”. In this message, Yassin Chouka a.k.a. “Abu Ibraheem” called on the salafists in Germany to avoid the “Pro NRW” protests in the future and instead conduct a systematic hunt against the right-wing extremists, to kill them one by one.³⁶⁷ In his talk, Abu Ibraheem uses a specific language to justify his order, thus replicating Arab ideologues in German, as outlined below. His words have a certain authority within the scene in Germany as he has moved out to fight, having proven his readiness to die and become a martyr. These role models are the one who are fulfilling, living out, re-enacting the presumed acts and deeds of early Muslims, thus transforming themselves by their own acts – and most importantly their own words documented by the digital lens – as the only ‘true’ believers and real men. The captors are portrayed as judges and executors, as men, as true *Mujahidin* loyal to God, sacrificing everything for the Islamic cause. The jihadist is a practitioner of verses of the Qur’an, by his belief and standards, directly exercising the divine command by God’s words.³⁶⁸ Being alive in our contemporary times is a punishment, with the wishful dream to fight alongside the prophet. The collective is unified by the imagined taking part in historical battles

³⁶⁷ Yassin Chouka, Tod der Pro NRW, *Jundallah media*,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DyIMxNu3ask&feature=youtu.be>, May 20, 2012.

³⁶⁸ As the German jihadist Abu Adam states in the video “Boden der Ehre, part 1” (Waziristan, March 2010), the *Mujahidin* are “practitioners of the verses” of the Quran, unlike most Muslims. Therefore, most Muslims dwell in the unchanged status of sin, particularly the diaspora in western countries while the *Mujahidin* have by their contribution to *jihad* and by undertaking the emigration (*hijra*), ‘cleansed’ of such sin and neglect of God and His religion.

together with Muhammad – these battles, for the prophet and for God, are re-enacted today in the mindset of the *Mujahidin*.

His target audience are those who “stayed at home” (*al-qa'idin*), referring to supporters and sympathizers who have not moved out to fight, but instead have decided to prolong their stay in Germany. In the past years jihadi organizations have repeatedly published statements demanding that the *qa'idin* may get up and join armed groups.

Many *salafists* in Germany believe to be exposed to the tribulations of Satan and are discriminated by the society and the government alike. Yassin Chouka said in one of his messages that the true Muslims must endure

“to live humiliated, despite us being companions of truth (*ashab al-haqq*). Our hearts demanded healing.”³⁶⁹

Despite this negative perception on life in the diaspora the role of those who stay behind or at home is considered as less shameful, because of the spread of the *jihadist Internet*. Sympathizers are on the Internet one of the key actors for jihadi public relation. Especially when *salafists* in Germany engage actively, without terrorist or criminal means, against alleged discrimination and thus become visible and organized, holding rallies against right-wing parties such as the “Pro NRW.” This may not be equated to the armed and militant understanding of *jihad*, but this form of activism and media support is valued and appreciated.

Activists and preachers work as intermediaries and negotiators between the Germany-based scene and the militant factions in Pakistan, or, prominently, Syria since 2012/13. Fighters from Syria and other conflict zones appear online and call on their followers to adhere the example of the *Mujahidin*. The Internet has turned into one of their main tools, especially because central actors such as Denis Cuspert left Germany and merged with ISIS in Syria and because online individuals can promote themselves without much effort, claiming to have joined fighters and thus ‘prove that they are ‘true’ Muslims according to the advocated ideology.

Since 2005, bi-lingual preachers (German and Arabic) have made the Arabic ideology

³⁶⁹ Ibid.

available to a non-Arab audience, targeting mainly Muslims and converts in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Their ambition is to convey the ideology and to be the key nodes in a network where individuals are dependent on their knowledge or insights, while claiming absolute authority over the Arabic sources and conduct of religious affairs. As part of a wider strategy, the preachers employ rhetorical means and adapt to the local context of their target audience, responding to real-life circumstances and local grievances, re-interpreting Arabic sources accordingly. As consequences of this strategy, Arabic religious key words of the hard-core ideology have entered the slang used by *salafists* and are thus an integral part of *salafi-German*. The massive and frequent use of these Arabic key words with the corresponding *salafi* and jihadi interpretation by Internet activists and preachers is why such content has become popular outside of the extremist spectrum. With the war in Syria untangling as the most popular – and easy to reach – jihadist conflict, German foreign fighters have a easy time to broadcast and send out their messages back home. In this case, the new media possibilities are used to communicate and broker their renewed status as *muhajirin*, fighting for what the *salafi* support base outlines as obligatory for all Muslims, despite the majority of this support network remaining ‘at home’.

The Case of Muhammad Mahmud – Founder of the German Global Islamic Media Front

One of the most important activists is the Austrian-Egyptian Muhammad Mahmoud who founded the German language Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF) franchise. After his release from prison in September 2011 he became one of the key figures of the *salafi-jihad* supporters in Austria and Germany. He was promoted by using YouTube-clips and by the Europe wide organized platform SalafiMedia.com³⁷⁰ at the time. In particular Mahmoud is responsible for promoting the works of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi in German, masterminding the translation of his work in response to events such as the showing of the Muhammad cartoons by the “Pro NRW”, as will be discussed below. The perhaps most potent symbol of Mahmoud’s passion for al-Maqdisi became visible by using the name *Millatu Ibrahim* for his

³⁷⁰ The website and all of it’s charters are offline as of writing. Activists from London, Berlin, Vienna, Brussels, and Paris organized SalafiMedia.com, with also a Dutch charter on board. One of the main focuses was to make material, writings and videos, available to their local audience by translating texts and placing subtitles in videos.

group and followers. This group was banned in May 2012 in Germany, however, it remains active online on various channels and social media sites. With his former second-in-command, Abu Talha al-Almani (Denis Cuspert / Deso Dogg) in Syria the group continues to have a profile. From Syria al-Almani sings a *nashid* in the honor of *Millatu Ibrahim*,

“this *nashid* is a gift from *Millatu Ibrahim*, for all *Mujahidin* worldwide who are on the battlefields, for all *Mujahidin* in the western world who are preparing attacks; for all Muslims who stayed behind and have not yet recognized their duties.”³⁷¹

Al-Almani continues to dedicate this *nashid* to the *kuffar* and German Chancellor Angela Merkel. He then proceeds in singing his *nashid al-Janna al-Janna* with several masked and armed men singing the refrain in German. The masked men are lined up before the flag of ISIS and bear different weapons. What appears to be a 6 kilogram anti-tank mine, without the detonator, are placed between the singer, the *munshid*, and the choir-Mujahidin. This video was published by the Global Islamic Media Front with the title “for God” (Für Allah).

Millatu Ibrahim is the title of one of al-Maqdisi’s most influential work and of grave importance to the global jihad movement.³⁷² The author, the Jordanian Palestinian ‘Isam al-Barqawi a.k.a. Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi (born 1959) is one of the most influential thinker of the jihadist movement.³⁷³ Much of his work has been translated in the past ten years into German and is popular within jihadist circles in Germany. Al-Maqdisi references in his book *Millatu Ibrahim* the following verse from the Qur’an:

“You have a good example in Abraham and his companions, when they said

³⁷¹ Abu Talha al-Almani und Jama’at Millatu Ibrahim Nashid, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJbbyWQgSHs>, April 18, 2014.

³⁷² Guido Steinberg, Die Globale Islamische Medienfront (GIMF) und ihre Nachfolger, In: Guido Steinberg (ed.), Jihadismus und Internet: Eine deutsche Perspektive, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, October 2012, http://www.swp-berlin.org/de/publikationen/swp-studien-de/swp-studien-detail/article/jihadismus_und_internet.html.

³⁷³ Joas Wagemakers: Joas Wagemakers, A Quietist Jihadi – The Ideology and Influence of Abu Muhammad al-MAqdisi, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, 2012.

to their people, ‘We disown you and what you worship besides God! We renounce you! Until you believe in God alone, the enmity and hatred that has arisen between us will endure.’” (60:4)

By this verse al-Maqdisi derives the jihadist concept of loyalty (for the one and only God) and the dissociation of polytheism (*shirk*) and the followers thereof (*mushrikin*), termed in Arabic as *al-wala' wa-l bara'*. In accordance with this concept it is a duty of the believer to term Muslims as disbelievers if they are nominal or idle in their relationship to God, and to be hostile towards them.³⁷⁴ The foremost definition of the *mushrikin* is as described by the jihadist ideologue Abu Ahmad 'Abd al-Rahman al-Masri in his treatise “Stance on the Positions regarding Expelling the *mushrikin* from the Arab Peninsula”:

“What is the intention with the *mushrikin*? They are not Muslims. That is what the prophet – peace and blessing be upon him – said just as 'Umar – may God be pleased with him – bequeathed:

“To expel³⁷⁵ the Jews and Christians from the Arab Peninsula until only Muslims are there! (Muslim 3313; Abu Dawud 2635; al-Tirmidhi 1532). And likewise what he said in the *hadith* of A'isha – may God be pleased with her:

“Do not permit *two* religions on the Arab Peninsula” (Ahmad 25148; al-Tabari fi l-awsat 1116).”³⁷⁶

The term *mushrik* (plural *mushrikin*) refers to those being in absolute contrast to the *muwahhideen*, those who practice the “oneness of God” (*tawhid*) and thus ‘associate’ partners next to God – violating the monotheistic principle. The testimony (*wasiyya*) of prophet Muhammad is therefore the ultimate legitimacy to undertake kidnappings,

³⁷⁴ Ibid., 171.

³⁷⁵ In Arabic the re-enforcing commitment is emphasized – *la akhrijanna al-yahud wa-l-nasara min jazirat al-Arab*.

³⁷⁶ Abu Ahmad Abd al-Rahman al-Masri, „*Waqfat ma al-waqfat hawla “ikhraj al-mushrikin min jazirat al-'arab*” (Al-Ansar Mailing List Newsletter 2009), 3.

assassinations and greater bombing operations against western housing complexes, defined and determined as the religious obligatory acts. A sentiment that was exported by the Saudi AQAP into neighboring Iraq and Yemen and even has found its way into German Islamist propaganda.³⁷⁷ In general the jihadists convey a historical understanding based on a selective reading and interpretation of the Qur'an into modern times. This is intended to serve as a basis for the potential consumers who are aware of the term *mushrik* and who distinguish themselves as Muslims accordingly to the principle and rituals of *tawhid*. The purported historical and religious obligation to fight the *mushrikin* enables the jihadists to advocate themselves as the only 'true' Muslims fulfilling the testimony of Muhammad while re-enacting the deeds of early Muslims, fulfilling the divine command of furthering Islam and defending the Islamic *umma* against its enemies.³⁷⁸

Mahmoud and his followers have taken this teaching to their heart and it serves as their ultimate justification to segregate themselves from their environment and to fight those they deem are either *mushrik* or nominal Muslims in the Islamic world. This notion is also essential for the salafists' identity in the diaspora and demand that all believers are hostile towards non-conformist Muslims to their creed as well as towards the non-Muslims. In this sense the website of *Millatu Ibrahim* was set up, clearly indicating the authors as part of the wider jihadist ideology.

Mahmoud also had been a key actor within the German section of al-Maqdisi's website *Minbar al-Tawhid wa-l Jihad*. As of writing, the Arabic site remains intact while all other languages have been taken off the Internet.³⁷⁹ He attempted to benefit of al-Maqdisi's renowned stance whose website hosts thousands of mainly Arabic jihadist and Wahhabi-salafi writings. Historical as well as contemporary writers are hosted and a question and answer forum enables the readers to contact and engage

³⁷⁷ For example the short clip entitled "The Pride of a Muslim" (Stolz eines Muslims) showing former rapper Deso Dogg now acting as Abu Talha al-Almani as a member of the Salafist movement in Germany confronting German police officers in Berlin. The uniformed German police officers are, among other definitions, also designated as "mushrik kafir", accessed June 1, 2012.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aCb2mHJZxMY&feature=related>. *Kafir mushrik*, the other way around, is also used to determine Paul Johnson, further promoting the legality of his killing, *Sawt al-Jihad* number 21, 43, "Risala ila zawjat al-ilj al-qatil: Paul Johnson... min zawja ahad shuhada' jazirat al-Arab" (Letter to the wife of the slain occupier Paul Johnson – by the wife of one of the martyrs of the Arab Peninsula).

³⁷⁸ Nico Prucha, Die Stimme des Dschihad "Sawt al-gihad": al-Qa'id as erstes Online-Magazin Hamburg: Verlag Dr. Kovač, 2010, 62-71.

³⁷⁹ Minbar [pulpit] of Tawhid and Jihad – German Section. <http://www.tawhed.net/c.php?i=18>. Accessed July 16, 2012.

with *shari'a council* members of the website to receive legally binding answers (*fatwa*) to their questions.³⁸⁰ Mahmoud attempted to establish himself as a religious authority for the members of *Millatu Ibrahim*. Significant for this endeavor is one of his filmed sermons “The Begin of our Support” which was published by SalafiMedia.com, the British charter of *Millatu Ibrahim*. He is talking about the suffering of the Islamic world and states “not to abandon our *umma*”.³⁸¹ Referring to the Qur'an he further claims that

“we will give everything for *la ilaha illa l-llah*. This means to stand by the side of ones brothers and sisters, to be one row. If a Muslim suffers in China, so I suffer with him.”³⁸²

Underlining his sermon by relating to the war in Syria, based on violent videos that have left their mark on him, he continues

“*wa-llahi* [by God], it can't be, that I see what's happening in Syria; I still am laughing. I don't care. *Wa-llahi, la ilaha illa llah*, yesterday I watched a video, these *murtaddin* [apostates] slaughtered a child. *Wa-llahi*, they slaughter a child! What have we done to deserve this? And they slaughter it, because they are *ahl al-Sunna* [Sunnites] and because they are Muslims. For nothing else.”³⁸³

Mahmoud continues talking about the ongoing violence in the Islamic world and calls on the ‘true’ Muslim to only read and adhere to the real scholars (*‘ulama’*), who are not corrupt or ‘state owned’. Only scholars that are part of the salafi/jihadi spectrum may properly guide the true Muslim. He lists various jihadist scholars, such as the Egyptian Omar Abdarrahhman (imprisoned in the U.S.), the Saudi Faris al-Zahrani, or former in London detained Egyptian cleric Mustafa Kamal Mustafa (Abu Hamza al-

³⁸⁰ As detailed by Joas Wagemakers, Memo about Syria: Jihadis are People too, *Jihadica*, <http://www.jihadica.com/memo-about-syria-jihadis-are-people-too/>, September 6, 2013.

³⁸¹ Abu Usama al-Gharib (Muhammad Mahmud), Der Anfang unserer Unterstutzungen. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oShsFtQ1GYU>. Accessed August 12, 2012

³⁸² *ibid.*

³⁸³ *ibid.*

Masri), who was sentenced in the U.S. in 2014.³⁸⁴ He proceeds in naming prominent ideologues such as al-Maqdisi that are prosecuted because they had not bowed to censorship as “righteous scholars”.

While being a student of al-Maqdisi and using his work as the ultimate guidance for his group, Mahmoud is a ferocious fan of Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi’s use of extreme violence to meet political goals.

Inspired by Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi and the most brutal jihadist videos on the Internet, the filmed beheadings of prisoners, German speaking activists such as Muhammad Mahmoud used the upcoming *salafi* scene in Germany to promote his understanding of *male hood* and what it means being a *Muslim man*. As beheading of captives had been framed by al-Zarqawi to restore the propagated violated honor or holiness of female Sunni prisoners in the hands of non-Muslims thus effects and influences the admirers who seek to copy and employ at least a similar rhetoric, iconography and habitus. This has led to an ideological merger within jihadist and the pro-jihadist *salafist* discourse, where a similar role model of the ‘proper Muslim’ and similar parameters of male identification is highly popular. The repetition of such sentiments, fueled and inspired by ultimate role models like Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi are sought to be re-enacted, to be a ‘man’ and a true ‘believer’ among the *salafist* spectrum.³⁸⁵

The dominant element of male hood, defined to enable violence and the formation of a paramilitary structuring by the main objective of allegedly procuring the safety and integrity of *their* women is a driving force as well as an identity marker. This, as a greater theme in general, has entered the *salafist-jihadist* discourse, and has spread online and is vividly repeated. Only a true Muslim man is the one that distinguishes oneself from the acts and restrictions set on the female radius of actions. The men are

³⁸⁴ Profile: Abu Hamza, *BBC News*, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-11701269>, May 9, 2014. Accessed May 24, 2014.

³⁸⁵ For example the tale of “Prisoner 650”, Aafia Siddiqui, a Pakistani women detained in Afghanistan for her alleged involvement to attack U.S. forces. Abu Osama al-Gharib delivered a sermon calling for the men of the *umma* to rise and free their sister, <http://almumtahana.wordpress.com/2012/02/08/gefangene-650-die-geschichte-von-dr-afia-siddiqui/>. Accessed February 7, 2013. The description states: “Members of the family of Aafia Siddiqui asked the Taliban for help. As it is well known, the Taliban captured U.S. soldier Bowe Bergdahl to be exchanged for sister Aafia. Bowe Bergdahl converted to Islam in his captivity, all praise be God, and is now fighting side by side with the Taliban. And another Muslim of this *umma* is locked up in the prisons of the *kuffar*. May God grant them steadfastness and patience, bringing her back into the arms of her family or granting her the *shahada*, and punishing her tormentors severely.”

visible, in public and judged upon their acts, in this case their readiness and willingness to follow limitations defining them as the only ‘true’ Muslims by their manifestation as a *Muhajid*, or as “reverted Muslims” – either having converted to Islam or as reborn believers following the spiritual dogma.

The continuous enforcing of the male’s role is the proper social conduct in this context and a social codex of respect. Al-Zarqawi’s killing of hostages for the women in Iraq served as precedence for a greater ideological notion and motivation in the years to come. For the fighting for the protection and inviolability (*hurma*) of Sunni women has in the meantime entered the mainstream *salafist-jihadist* propaganda and is repeated by preachers in various languages all over.³⁸⁶ Inciting ones audience by describing the hardship of female prisoners, prominent women such as Aafia Siddqui, or remaining vague and general about incarcerated Muslimas is a emotional element often exploited and used to distinguish being a *man*, defined by *actions* for these women in contrast to women.

“Women sitting in prisons! What have we done for them? *Wa-l-llahi* [by God] I do not even want to say what they have done to them. No to mention [the abuse and imprisonment of our] Islamic scholars. *Wa-l-llahi* there are scholars of the *umma* in Arabia sitting in prisons since the 1960s or 1970s (...). This is the situation of the *umma* today. *Wa-l-llahi* if we remain idle, then our women are force to act. Then every one of us should [turning to Denis Cuspert asking about a shop in Berlin for Islamic clothing] buy a burka and a hijab, *wa-l-llahi* that is better. Because we have no male hood [to claim]. Our sisters and our mothers are beaten and raped in the prisons of the *tawaghit* and *murtaddin*, and we are sitting-by idle.”³⁸⁷

³⁸⁶ For example the Austrian-Egyptian Muhammad Mahmud sentenced to four years in prison in Austria for threatening the German and Austrian governments in 2008 by disseminating Global Islamic Media Front statements. Immediate after his release, he joined the UK-led Salafimedia platform and has remained active by preaching in German and Arabic. For more details on Muhammad Mahmud: Nico Prucha. Die Vermittlung arabischer Jihadisten-Ideologie: Zur Rolle deutscher Prediger Aktivisten, in: Guido Steinberg (ed.) Jihadismus und Internet: Eine deutsche Perspektive, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, Berlin 2012. http://www.swp-berlin.org/de/publikationen/swp-studien-de/swp-studien-detail/article/jihadismus_und_internet.html. Accessed October 30, 2012.

³⁸⁷ Abu Usama al-Gharib (Muhammad Mahmud), Der Anfang unserer Unterstützungen. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oShsFtQ1GYU>. Accessed August 12, 2012.

He refers to Saudi Arabia in particular and highlights the case of the imprisonment of first-generation AQAP ideologue and leader Abu Jandal al-Azdi (2004). Al-Azdi, real name Abu Salman Faris al-

Mahmoud, by his alias Abu Usama al-Gharib, does not only build his talks on the writings of jihadist scholars and uses similar rhetorical means, but he uses the complete spectrum of jihadist iconography and visual language taken from jihadist videos. He talks with his the index finger of his right hand raised, sitting in front of a black banner, the main icon of *Millatu Ibrahim*. On top of the banner the first part of the Islamic creed is written in Arabic, below in a white circle the words *allah, rasul, Muhammad* complement the *shahada*. Although it is not clear whether Prophet Muhammad used a seal, this has become the main visual element of identity in jihadist circles worldwide, since the Iraqi al-Qa'ida introduced this as their main banner in 2004.

The notion of disempowered Muslimas and men, who do nothing except for the chosen few the *salafist* and especially the jihadist considers to be part of spilled over from al-Zarqawi videos showing the execution of hostages in Iraq. Such gruesome videos influenced the mainstream *salafist* actors and groups worldwide and a left a mark in their rhetoric. In the following decade after the 2003 war in Iraq, *salafists* in countries like Germany started to share the understanding of Muslim women as targets in particular and thus must be defended by all means. This constitutes the basis of manhood, where all other means other than violence are designated as inferior and contrary, representing a failure of manhood if the advertised male role model remains idle and does not commit to the “forgotten duty: *jihad fi sabil li-llah*” as the German *salafist* preacher Abu Ibrahim states. Abu Ibrahim is a member of Mahmoud’s *Millatu Ibrahim* and does not speak Arabic. In his talks on YouTube such as “Fear of Islam”, he calls on active, engaged males and mixed in the belief that “respect” cannot be attained otherwise, as instilled by male role models such as the *Mujahid*, who is committed to ensure and maintaining safe conditions for Muslimas. To promote his sermon he uses Arabic key words that are the characteristic of this described *salafi-slang*:

Zahrani, is renown in jihadist circles for his work. But also imprisoned jihadi scholars mistreated in European and American prisons are detailed in a very emotional way by Abu Usamah al-Gharib, who considers himself of no lesser value or importance. His prison term in Vienna, Austria, has elevated his self-perception as well as his social standing among the salafi-jihadi sympathizers.

“Fear and dread has been taken out of the hearts of the *kuffar*³⁸⁸. [Thus,] neither respect nor fear for Muslims remains. Nothing. And you can see it. *Akhi*,³⁸⁹ today, the *kafir* can pull down the *hijab* of my sister. He can do it with ease. Because, *akhi*, he is very well aware that the *umma* has no men. The *umma* does not have any men remaining. That is the problem. We have lost our male hood. And that must be restored dear brothers and sisters (...) isn’t it our sister screaming in Afghanistan, or Somalia, or Chechnya, or Iraq? It is our sister, and everyone, everyone has heard the screams; no one has an excuse, no one! And that is why, my brother, we have to get back. For this religion demands men! It demands true men, dear brothers and sisters. Everyone should ask himself when he slept uneasy in his bed the last time when his sister is humiliated, when his brothers are slaughtered; because Allah’s³⁹⁰ *shari’a* is trampled all over, because the prophet is insulted. When? When dear brothers and sisters, when? The screams are coming every day my brother, every day out of these countries. We see them every day getting butchered. We see the women on a daily basis getting humiliated. We see them being raped every day.”³⁹¹

³⁸⁸ *Kafir* (sg.), pl. *kuffar*: disbeliever(s).

³⁸⁹ “My brother” (*mein Bruder*); Following a usual rhetoric, Arabic words and slang is used by non-Arab preachers with the ambition to ‘fertilize’ their otherwise weak sermon due to the lack of proper theological conduct and education. Weak, as most preachers lack a true religious training and understanding of the Arabic textual sources. Rather, as a phenomena that can be especially traced by German language repetitions of the Arabic source files, local preachers embed Arabic words of the Quran in sermons where the reading of a radical interpretation is served by simple examples and in a local slang, the mostly juvenile audiences of Berlin, Bonn and elsewhere understand and can cope with. For the impact of Arabic ideology on the German scene and on the conveyance of Arabic by bilingual preachers for their German audience: Nico Prucha, *Die Vermittlung arabischer Jihadisten-Ideologie: Zur Rolle deutscher Aktivisten*. In: Guido Steinberg (ed.), *Jihadismus und Internet: Eine deutsche Perspektive*, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, Oktober 2012, 45-56, http://www.swp-berlin.org/de/publikationen/swp-studien-de/swp-studien-detail/article/jihadismus_und_internet.html. Accessed November 1, 2012.

³⁹⁰ “Allah” is not translated in this quotation, as the German preacher Abu Ibrahim does not use the German “Gott” respectively. The reference to Arabic or, that is, *Islamic key words*, serve as a specific and particular authoritative frame of reference, used to convey knowledge and access. In doing so, both the speaker and respectively recipient brand themselves as outsiders, using rituals and subcultural settings as codes of communication. These codes strengthen in-group dynamics and enforce initiations, whereas individual members feel a strong urge to distinguish themselves from the perceived hostile majority non-Islamic society.

³⁹¹ Abu Ibrahim, *Die Vergessene Pflicht (The Forgotten Duty)* – November 2012. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dnnGfIrlQXds&feature=player_embedded. Accessed November 17, 2012. Abu Ibrahim seeks to incite his audience to act and “burn for this religion.” In the background of the sermon in the Arabic *nashid* “on the path of God we fight” (*fi sabilillah nuqatil*) enriches the sermon and integrates the German sermon into the greater ideological body.

The self-awareness of being a man is mostly intertwined to the perception of being a soldier, or a warrior. This distinction on a jihadi pop-cultural level online is also expressed in songs. The Taliban in Afghanistan, for example, use songs to question the male hood – and thus the identity – of those, who do not wish to join their fight in “Woman Songs”:

“Go put bangles on, like women do / Pick a pot like women do and bring water / If you are not going fighting, what use is your long hair? / All you do is eat - and that is all.”³⁹²

Such tales of violated women and the insulting claim that most men are indeed less brave than women is a tool used to reproduce global grievances on a local level; in the case of imprisoned and abused female prisoners, governments in the West are as guilty as the defined marionette governments in the Islamic world. The

“use of framing by Islamic groups reflects the cultural and ideational components of contentious politics; and while frames alone do not explain every dimension of collective action, they are important interpretive devices that translate grievances and perceived opportunities into the mobilization of resources and movement activism.”³⁹³

In this regard, the addressing of abuse in prisons and the obligation to act as based on a moral and divine necessity is repeated on a global level. Anyone has the chance to act and prove his male hood for the *umma* – an even more severe element in regard of claiming violence as sanctioned when acting for the protection of women. Muslimas are nevertheless sacred and inviolable (*hurma*) but exposed to non-Islamic aggressors the jihadist has vowed to fight in order to maintain the divine proscribed inviolability of Muslim women worldwide, including his fellow *Mujahidat*. As such, the advocated

³⁹² Taliban song scorns a man refusing to fight, castigating him as a “woman” and telling him to “put bangles on”, <https://audioboo.fm/boos/1245211-taliban-song-scorns-a-man-refusing-to-fight-castigating-him-as-a-woman-and-telling-him-to-put-bangles-on>, March 5, 2013.

³⁹³ Quintan Wiktorowicz, “Introduction: Islamic Activism and Social Movement Theory”, in *Islamic Activism: a Social Movement Theory Approach*, ed. Quintan Wiktorowicz (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2005), 19.

male role model of the warrior, the practical men willing and wanting to sacrifice themselves and the desire to face war, is even more appealing and sexy to the Salafist sympathizers.³⁹⁴

Mahmoud had called himself Abu Usama al-Gharib when he had been the chief of the German GIMF-section. Al-Gharib, meaning the “strange one” refers to a core concept of jihadist creed. Jihadists chose *gharib*, the singular of *ghuraba* (“the strangers”) since the 1980s as a preferred name for themselves. However, the expression was never so widely used as it is today. The popularity of this concept is one of the key narratives used to enrich videos, underlined by either *nashid* or because of renowned ideologues or fighters referring to themselves as part of the *ghuraba*. This concept is almost used apologetically in a jihadist self-definitions while their identity has rapidly spread through the Internet. The word *gharib* is a reference made by Prophet Muhammad in a *hadith*, stating

“the Prophet of God, God bless him, said: “Islam began as a stranger and will return as a stranger, so blessed are the strangers.”³⁹⁵

This particular *hadith* is popular among jihadists because they believe to be the only true Muslims and as such act as strangers or as a foreign body in a sea of disbelief and hypocrisy – just as Prophet Muhammad and his companions had in the early times of Islam. In the 1980s, during the first Afghan *jihad* against the Soviet Red Army ‘Abdallah’ Azzam in a reference used this term for Arab foreign fighters, who fought as a jihadist avant-garde on the side of their Afghan brothers. In this time and era the jihad-hymn “*al-ghuraba*” had become a classical *nashid* for this milieu, with the term appearing more regularly within jihadist literature as well. Mahmoud and his followers derived this term for their status in the diaspora, whereas they are living as

³⁹⁴ With the repetition of the iconography, the rhetoric, and the overall habitus that constitutes the global jihadists’ appearance, German jihadists via the online media try to be even more appealing to the salafist scene in Germany by advertising themselves as true role models, sacrificing their lives for the *ummah*. As the German GIMF publication *Our Lives before yours and therefore our blood before yours*, highlights, the salafi description of the Islamic *ummah* as the victim of infidel warfare can only be redeemed by moving out to join the caravans of jihad. The fight is also sanctioned for the Islamic communities in Germany; “Those soldiers, those warriors, those *Mujahidin* won’t forget you! You, however, forget them daily, some denounce, others insult, and yet others curse them; this is not justified. . . yes, by the Lord of the Ka’ba, and everything surrounding it, this is unjust! Know, that we, the *Mujahidin* love you, every *Muslim*. . . So feel addressed by us, for it is you, who we indeed address.” Abu Assad al-Almani, *Unser Leben vor Euer Leben und somit unser Blut vor Euer Blut*, GIMF, <http://as-ansar.com/vb/showthread.php?t=79178>, January 27, 2013.

³⁹⁵ Muslim b. al-Hajjaj (817-875), *Sahih Muslim*.

ghuraba. On the one hand they are living as *strangers* among Muslims who neglect their religion and are thus nominal Muslims at best. On the other hand they are confronted on a daily basis with the hardships of non-Muslim ways of life and are Muslims among them. This concept and term kept on appearing on blogs and sites connected to *Millatu Ibrahim*, such as the German support site for imprisoned brothers, Ansarul Aseer.³⁹⁶ On the respective website a video was published of the Pakistani-British Abu Waleed al-Gharib who is one of the makers of SalafiMedia.com. In this video entitled “Very beautiful. Who are the Ghorabaa?” Abu Waleed declares war against the disbelievers, with German subtitles:

“What would *rasulallah* in our times do? His *tarawih* [prayer ritual in the holy month of Ramadan] would be on the battlefield my dear brothers and sisters! His *tarawih* would be on the back of a horse on his way to the White House carrying the banner of Islam. (...) Those *ghuraba* never fear the tyrant. These *ghuraba*, these strangers – they will never bow their heads to the tyrant, rather they would remove the head of the tyrant. They remove the head of freedom, the head of democracy, the head of secularism and replace it with the divine laws of the Almighty!”³⁹⁷

Mahmoud and his lead *nashid* singer Denis Cuspert a.k.a. Deso Dogg and Abu Talha al-Almani convey the concept of *ghuraba*’ as a jihad-hymn (*nashid*). On the Internet these songs have become popular due to the outreach to their audience, as described in the previous chapters.

A *nashid* is an a cappella styled Jihad-rhyme that in the meantime is an essential genre on- and offline to convey the content of jihadist ideology. Such battle-songs became popular during the 1980s but only become broader phenomena thanks to the Internet. German *nashid*, freely available on YouTube, are easy to comprehend, rhythmical, and contain religious Arabic code words. The effect of the ideological content is strengthened and emphasized by pictures or short video sequences. The ambition of Deso Dogg certainly is and had been to be one of the most important German *nashid* singers. The perhaps most impressive German hymn is “mother

³⁹⁶ The website remains active and hosts writings and letters from imprisoned Muslims in Germany, <https://www.ansarul-aseer.com>. Accessed May 20, 2014.

³⁹⁷ https://www.ansarul-aseer.com/de/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=39:sehr-sch%C3%B6n-wer-sind-die-ghorabaa??&Itemid=127, accessed July 7, 2012.

remain steadfast” (Mutter bleibe standhaft)³⁹⁸, recorded by Mounir Chouka, originally from Bonn, who is one of the key German media activist for the Islamic Movement Uzbekistan. He and his brother Yassin produced plenty of videos and *nashid* from their base in the Pakistani Tribal areas, that as of 2014 has had their effect on Germans who joined jihadist factions in Syria.

From Syria with Love: A German Voice for the Global Islamic Media Front

Denis Cuspert, born 1975, (Deso Dogg) renounced his former rap-star career in an emotional video some time ago before he then started to rise as a new German-language *nashid* singer. He first chose the name Abu Maleeq and is now known as Abu Talha al-Almani. At least in his hometown Berlin he was a known rapper and has become “somewhat as the first Jihad-Pop Star of Germany.”³⁹⁹

His companion and leader, the Austro-Egyptian Mohammed Mahmoud, had ideologically guided him.⁴⁰⁰

Abu Talha does not speak Arabic spare for few words that are part of *salafi-jihadi* habitus. To showcase how German songs are enriched with Arabic key words, his *nashid Ghuraba’* is translated and commented. This *nashid* is accompanied by pictures of killed children and Muslim prisoners to boost the perception of being *strangers*, but, by all means fighting and sacrificing ones life for humane values and for peace:

“Ghuraba’, we are the strangers, whether alive or dead /
Guraba’, we are the strangers, our *umma*⁴⁰¹ is in need /
In the cells are prisoners, anywhere in the world /

³⁹⁸ The *nashid* has been listened to over 40,000 times on YouTube on this one link, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FDLz9H8Ajnc>, uploaded July 10, 2010. Accessed March 23, 2014.

The *nashid* is taken out of a lengthy sermon with the same title where Mounir Chouka addresses his mother to be proud as her two sons are fighting and are committed to jihad, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N2osH0s_ig0, December 16, 2011.

³⁹⁹ Wolf Schmid, Jung, deutsch, Taliban, Ch. Links Verlag: Berlin 2012.

⁴⁰⁰ In a video where Abu Talha justifies his pledge of allegiance to ISIS, published in April 2014 as described in the following chapter, he directly thanks Mahmoud for his guidance and support since his reversion to Islam in 2009.

⁴⁰¹ Ar.: Islamic community.

They are *Jund Allah's*⁴⁰² lions and there they are tortured /
Ghuraba', ya *sadiqi*,⁴⁰³ we include you in our *du'a* /
Ghuraba', ya *asir*,⁴⁰⁴ remain steadfast for *Allah*

In the cells are prisoners, anywhere in the world /
They are *jund allah's* lions and they are being tortured there

Wa-islama,⁴⁰⁵ we hear the call, little children lie in the blood /
Wa-islama, we hear the call, little children lie in the blood

What should we do, should we be silent, or do we stand for them up? /
Ghuraba', we are the strangers and we never give up /
Ghuraba', ya Umm Ubayda⁴⁰⁶ stay strong and stop crying /
Ghuraba', ya Umm Sayfillah⁴⁰⁷ we are crying on for you /
In the cells, prisoners are everywhere in this world /
They are *jund allah* sisters and they will be tormented there /
Can you hear them cry there, or are the heart dead?
Today there are siblings, tomorrow you're already in trouble /
And it does not attempt to deny, because the verses are clear:
Because the believers are brothers, so it also says *Allah* /
Ghuraba', ya Arid Uka⁴⁰⁸, ya *Mujahid*, make *du'a* /
for us out here noble brother and our *shuhada'*⁴⁰⁹/
Our siblings deny the truth, but the signs are clear /
Other veiled her eyes and that's why they call us the ghuraba'.⁴¹⁰

⁴⁰² Ar., lit: *being* of the soldiers of God.

⁴⁰³ Ar.: o my friend.

⁴⁰⁴ Ar.: o prisoner.

⁴⁰⁵ In the sense of rushing to aid and support Islam.

⁴⁰⁶ Malika el-Aroud,

⁴⁰⁷ The Islamic name of Filiz Gelowicz, the wife of Fritz who had been the ringleader of the *Sauerland Cell*.

⁴⁰⁸ Arid Uka shot two U.S. soldiers bound to Afghanistan at the Frankfurt airport on March 2, 2011. He had been inspired to this attack by listening to *nashid*, in particular the song „your son is in *jihad*“ (Dein Sohn ist im *Jihad*), <http://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/zeitgeschehen/2012-01/arid-uka-plaedoyer>. February 24, 2012.

⁴⁰⁹ Ar.: Martyrs

⁴¹⁰ Abu Talha al-Almani, Ghuraba (Nashid), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9uZ5meF1mak>, uploaded March 13, 2013. Accessed January 4, 2014.

This is followed by a supplication (*du'a*) in broken Arabic by Denis Cuspert repeating, “we are the *Jund Allah*.” The song is combined with images of prisoners convicted of terrorism. The song ends with an inmate on an American transport plane, who is tied to the floor and surrounded by soldiers probably flown to Guantánamo.

Together with Abu Usama al-Gharib (“the strange one”) he had left Germany for Egypt where the two appeared in several videos they made together. In the times of turmoil in the wake of the Arab Spring, Denis Cuspert managed to get into Syria and he became popular immediately as he was welcomed as a renowned German jihadist who had rushed to help his brothers and sisters.

On Twitter a member by the account @almnther posted a picture of Denis Cuspert, showing him before his reverse to Islam and transition as a *salafist* now turned *jihadist*. The picture on the right shows the former rapper with limited fame after his migration to Syria.

The caption reads:

“He was one of the most famous rap singers in Germany, known as Deso Dogg. He embraced Islam and his name became Abu Maleeq [Malik] with his nickname “Abu Talha al-Almani”. He left Germany for today he is [among] the rows of the Mujahidin in Syria.”⁴¹¹



The picture on the left is taken from his album “all eyes on me.”⁴¹² “Malik” was transliterated as “Maleeq”. When searching for “Abu Maleeq” on YouTube within the related SalafiMedia channels, the vast number of his appearances provides interesting insight into the progress of Cuspert’s reversion to Islam and his embrace of radicalism. It should be noted that pop-cultural aspects, or electronic game elements,

⁴¹¹ <https://twitter.com/almnther/status/369039152148258816/photo/1>, August 19, 2013.

⁴¹² <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9tEMzGzZgIk>, August 19, 2013.

such as the latest Call of Duty main theme, often enrich the German jihad music videos, which had been popular in jihadist circles.⁴¹³

His Jihadi hit, *al-Janna al-Janna*, was published as usual by the Global Islamic Media Front and received some coverage in the German media, saying that Cuspert is calling on suicide-bombers to act.⁴¹⁴ According to DER SPIEGEL, German authorities warn that Cuspert has previously been involved in burglary, blackmail, armed robbery, assault, and manslaughter.

“And today he doesn’t seem to be taking the rigid Islamic lifestyle too serious: investigators grade him as a “consumer of narcotics”, according to an internal LKA document.”⁴¹⁵

As mostly the case, the *al-Jannah al-Jannah nashid* was advertised for on the Arabic⁴¹⁶ and non-Arabic⁴¹⁷ jihadist forums and then was relaunched by Cuspert as outlined above when he got into Syria.

In the tweet, @almnther further states:

“to whoever looking at my tweets ((now));⁴¹⁸ repent to God; go forth to the land of *jihad*; await the extraordinary; embrace Islam, then go forth [to *jihad*], then fight. What will you do?”

In 2013 two videos emerged on Twitter of Denis Cuspert aka Deogo Dogg aka Abu Talha al-Almani who is allegedly shown in Syria as part of a group that had been introduced as *Junud al-Sham*. Both videos are “trailers” with the promise of the full clips to be released soon. As it turned out later, this video footage was genuine and al-Almani was able to join jihadist brigades in Syria where he swear his pledge of

⁴¹³ As discussed in Nico Prucha, *Worldwide Online Jihad versus the Gaming Industry Reloaded – Ventures of the Web*, in *New Approaches to the Analysis of Jihadism: Online and Offline*, ed. Rüdiger Lohlker Vienna University Press: Vienna, 2012.

⁴¹⁴ Jörg Dieh, Christoph Sydow, *Hassvideo: Deutscher Salafist ruft zu Selbstmordanschlägen auf*, DER SPIEGEL, <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/salafist-deso-dogg-ruft-in-hassvideo-zu-selbstmordanschlaegen-auf-a-914374.html>, August 1, 2013.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid.

⁴¹⁶ <https://shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=208315>, August 19, 2013.

⁴¹⁷ <http://ansar1.info/showthread.php?t=46561>, August 28, 2013.

⁴¹⁸ underline in the original Tweet. The use of brackets in Arabic serves to underline the importance within a sentence.

allegiance to *The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham* in April 2014.

The first video, published on August 14, 2013, is entitled “Abu Talha al-Almani Dokumentation [sic] Teaser.” The short clip was published by ShamCenter⁴¹⁹ on YouTube⁴²⁰ and also disseminated via Twitter. It had about 180,000 views as of August 13. It was also published with about 50,000 views with the Turkish title “Deso Dogg Suriye’de muhaliflerin safında Esed’e karşı savaşıyor” (“Deso Dogg fighting on the side of the opposition against al-Assad in Syria”).⁴²¹ By using his artist name *Deso Dogg*, he tries to appeal to his friends and fans in Berlin; building on his reputation he had or has on the streets.

The second video only had about 4,000 views and was also published by ShamCenter via YouTube and Twitter on August 20. This video too is a “trailer”, entitled “Abu Talha al-Almani Vortrag Trailer”,⁴²² a preview of a forthcoming sermon for his fellow Mujahidin of the Junud al-Sham. In the description, the audience is reminded that this will be a “brief admonishment by your brother, Abu Talha al-Almani.”

Sham Center maintains a multilingual website⁴²³ of most likely German dominance where videos and news in general are posted, both from jihadi as well as mainstream media sources. Naturally, Twitter,⁴²⁴ Facebook,⁴²⁵ Google+,⁴²⁶ Skype (shamcenterinfo), email⁴²⁷ and other contact⁴²⁸ information are available.

The Twitter account has a mere 573 followers, with the majority consisting of mainly academics, journalists and counter-terrorism analysts. The tweets replicate a typical jihadi style of content and rhetoric.

The Twitter activity consists of mostly provocative messages directed to German authorities and some basic information on the conquest of parts of the area of the

⁴¹⁹ <http://www.youtube.com/user/ShamCenter?feature=watch>, August 13, 2013.

⁴²⁰ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7RNYcxreKoc>, August 13, 2013.

⁴²¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LyIr2DvcRSs>, August 13, 2013.

⁴²² <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5v0LeQnmIpk>, August 20, 2013.

⁴²³ <http://shamcenter.info/>, August 20, 2013.

⁴²⁴ twitter.com/ShamCenterINFO, August 20, 2013.

⁴²⁵ [Facebook.com/ShamCenter](https://www.facebook.com/ShamCenter), August 20, 2013.

⁴²⁶ [gplus.to/ShamCenter](https://plus.google.com/ShamCenter), August 20, 2013.

⁴²⁷ info@shamcenter.info, August 20, 2013.

⁴²⁸ <http://shamcenter.org/de/contact-de/>, August 20, 2013.

Jabal Akrad and Jabal Durin, as promoted in one of their videos in German, Russian, and Arabic. The claim to be soon advancing on the city of Latakia is repeated. The Chechen commander Abu Muslim al-Walid is prominently advertised by ShamCenter and is seen in a video explaining the territorial gains made in Russian⁴²⁹. Al-Walid has previously been one of the key leaders of the *Liwa' al-Mujahidin bi ard al-Sham* (Latikia) and received some social media fame for his eulogy of a fellow Chechen explosives expert, one of the first Chechen cluster videos coming out of Syria.⁴³⁰

A German and Arabic language video⁴³¹ of the attack and conquest of the Jabal Akrad and Durin was published by the Center.

The first video, the “documentary about Abu Talha al-Almani” starts by visualizing his reverse to Islam, smiling into the camera with his “Thug Life” shirt and his movie styled crew before – what it seems like – some kind of a robbery. The title “A Documentary about Abu Talha al-Almani” flashes into the screen, summarized by the pathetic statement, “from the darkness, into the light.” Cuspert concludes this scene in his made-shift combat fatigue, sitting at a natural water spring splashing with water.

The second video with far lesser views is of a more serious nature with Abu Talha being presented as both a real-deal *Mujahid* and an ideologue who will give a lengthier sermon in the forthcoming film. Cuspert allegedly joined up with an unknown group called *Junud al-Sham* (“The Soldiers of al-Sham”, in short a reference to greater Syria). The video starts with a masked man hushing the audience to be silent, switching to perhaps the same water spring in the first video. It states “in corporation with *Junud ash-Sham*, a talk by Abu Talha al-Almani: Holiday Greetings (Urlaubsgrüße)”. The following scene shows Cuspert in a military outfit, armed with a commando version of the A.K. 47 marching in a forest area with an armed troop detail following in line. Most of the men are masked with last guy carrying a small AQ / ISI (or ISIS) flag. The “trailer” concludes with Cuspert sitting and what it seems lecturing to these *Mujahidin* he just, as suggested by the video, had led to this meeting point.

⁴²⁹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aDIps4nu_Gc, a version with Arabic subtitles was also produced and uploaded on YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0th8jKMVfHs>, August 20, 2013.

⁴³⁰ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uzhmCu-fP3o>, August 20, 2013.

⁴³¹ <http://archive.org/details/ShamCenterOperationJabalAkradDeutsch>, August 20, 2013.

Deso Doggs appearance in two trailers, claiming to have travelled to Syria and joined the *Junud al-Sham* is intended to portray him as a *Mujahid* who acts on his words and who now finally has the chance to engage in combat. The question remains for now to what extent he will fight, or even if he will fight at all, and go beyond acting merely as a media *Mujahid* / singer (*munshid*) and preacher for the cameras, splashing around in waterfalls.

“Meticulous Answers” by the Migrant Aid Worker and *Mujahid*

Abu Talha started to resurface in the jihadist propaganda spectrum in December 2013. He re-entered the jihadist stage and made his comeback when GIMF published an interview with him after he had been allegedly severely wounded in an airstrike. A video had been put on YouTube shortly after the airstrike claiming that Abu Talha had been killed. The poorly made video was later recalled when he re-emerged on the jihadist forums in an interview published by the GIMF, in which, however, sequences from this video appear. In later video publications by the GIMF he proudly shows his scar on his head, the result of the claimed airstrike that nearly killed him.⁴³²

This televised interview, however, is of interest as Abu Talha outlines his motivation to move out of Germany and into Syria and he talks about his understanding of specific ideological principles in his own words.

Despite his turning back to Islam and his embrace of jihadist ideology in 2009, he claims to have considered the *hijra*, the emigration into jihad, as early as the 1990s, during the Iraq-Kuwait war that triggered an intervention against Iraq under a United Nations mandate. But it took a while for his reversion and understanding of what he deems the true religion that was instilled in his mindset by the group *Millatu Ibrahim* and the Austro-Egyptian Muhammad Mahmoud.

“Years later I saw a lecture by an honorable *shaykh*, which the brothers at *Millatu Ibrahim* translated into German. The pictures, the killed children, the destruction and the admiration by the *shaykh* moved me so much and to the

⁴³² The video claims that Abu Talha was killed and shows his body being rushed away from the scene of the airstrike. It does not strike the critical audience as being authentic, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5xzjzPLx4pU>, November 17, 2013.

extend that I, all praise be Allah, finally undertook the *hijra*.⁴³³

He said that he migrated by himself, having written and prepared several *nashid* and engaged with the Arab world and culture. The interviewer asks about the “rocket attack” that had nearly killed him with sequences blending in where people rush the wounded Abu Talha into a car - most likely a tale to brand him as a fighter as much as a *munshid*, a *nashid* singer. Responding to the question “what happened there, and is it possible that the American or German intelligence services took part in it” he says that

“All praise is Allah! According to the media I have been killed two or three times already. First of all, let me cite what Allah says in the Qur’an 3:169:

“Think not of those, who are slain in the path of God, as dead. Rather, they are alive with their Lord, they are bestowed with provision.”⁴³⁴

This means, would I have been fatally injured by a rocket, bullet, or grenade, I would not have been dead. According to my intention, which is Allah willing pure, I would have been a *shahid*. This is the wish of every Muslim fulfilling *jihād* here in the territory of honor.⁴³⁵

In regards of the possible German or American involvement, an allegation impossible to prove and seemingly absurd given that this would require either a drone attack or some planning with the Syrian regime, Abu Talha nevertheless gives the viewers an interesting context in which he, as every *Mujahid*, moves in times of a perceived global war.

“I would not have been the first German hit in a missile strike, we have the

⁴³³ Feiger Anschlag, gezielte Antwort, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rm5CQOURhYo>, December 8, 2013.

Translated from German. As Denis Cuspert (Abu Talha al-Almani) refers to God by *Allah*, I have not used the respective English term.

⁴³⁴ Muhammad A. S. Abdel-Haleem, *The Qur’an* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Abu Talha recites this verse poorly, using his head injury as an excuse. For the context of this particular verse in jihadist reasoning turn to the chapter *Various Martyr Types as Role Models*.

⁴³⁵ Feiger Anschlag, gezielte Antwort, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rm5CQOURhYo>, December 8, 2013.

brothers and sisters in Waziristan who had become *shahid* because of this, the most recent victim I saw was Abu 'l-Layth al-Almani; likewise we have many scholars⁴³⁶ who have been hit in drone attacks.⁴³⁷ I think this will be end as well, God knows it best, as the *kuffar* reject those who proclaim the call to *jihad*.⁴³⁸

Naturally, Abu Talha follows the jihadist ideology wishing for himself to be killed in the line of duty for God and thus being a martyr himself with the ambition to gain entry to paradise as he had outlined based on Qur'an 3:169.

“What do you expect from martyrdom?” he replies:

“As a Muslim I think this is everyone’s wish to die as a *shahid*, to be spared by hellfire and the torments of the afterlife. Martyrdom is the wish of every *Mujahid* and it is no secret that death for the martyr is something that does not hurt except for a little bit, like a needle pinch⁴³⁹ and you will see and smell the paradise before you die.”⁴⁴⁰

With propaganda and poor media reports on foreign fighters in Syria, he re-emphasizes the hegemony and monopoly of truth set by jihadist media, which should be a source for information for everyone.

“I advise my brothers and sisters and also the *kuffar*, if you care about authentic reports, watch the news of trustworthy Muslims.”⁴⁴¹

⁴³⁶ Referring to Abu Yahya al-Libi but also to Anwar al-Awlaqi, ‘Attiyatullah al-Libi and others.

⁴³⁷ For example Abu Yahya al-Libi, detailed in the chapter *The New Martyrs of the Internet – the Death of AQ’s Second-in-Command, Abu Yahya al-Libi, Eulogized by Ayman al-Zawahiri*. The chapter *Death from Above: Drone Strikes and Abu Yahya al-Libi’s Mainframe to Operationalize Shari’a Law* outlines the effect of drone warfare in general on jihadist physical and virtual networks.

⁴³⁸ Feiger Anschlag, gezielte Antwort, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rm5CQOURhYo>, December 8, 2013.

⁴³⁹ As outlined in the subchapter *The forth most often shared shortlink*.

⁴⁴⁰ Feiger Anschlag, gezielte Antwort, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rm5CQOURhYo>, December 8, 2013.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid.

Islam is like a Tree. *Jihad* is the Crown and the *Ansar* (supporters) are like a Branch

The second part of an installment titled *al-rahma*, “the mercy” whereas the *muhajirin* provide humanitarian support to local families and refugees, displaced in their own country because of the fightings, was published by the GIMF in January 2014.⁴⁴² The title *al-Rahma* is referenced in the opening of this GIMF published video. The film starts with the recitation of *Surat al-Anbiya*, verse 107 of the Qur’an,

“It was only as a mercy that We sent you [Prophet] to all people.” (21:107)

In a similar notion as the Qur’anic “firm against the disbelievers; tender towards each other”, as based on 48:29 and outlined in the chapter *The ‘Arab Spring’ as a Renaissance for AQ Affiliates in a Historical Perspective*, the divine *tenderness* is applied to Sunni Muslims in times of need. The humanitarian angle of militant groups justify their cause to the great extent that not only is the fight set to establish a state that provides safety and comfort for Muslims, but also the struggle is highlighted during this state-building project to protect and aid the future citizens. Qur’an 48:29 as is 21:107 underlines the implementation of divine commands and underlines the humanitarian angle of the terrorist.

According to the description of the movie that was advertised for in the German section of the *Shumukh al-Islam Forum*, the clip is all about the

“families of refugees, their grievances and their difficult realities; their suffering is countless. Escaping the cruel mass murder, torture, rape, indiscriminate bombings, suffering hunger, exposed to the weather and lack basic things.

The reality for them consists of the war against Muslims in *al-Sham*, against their women, children, the weak, the elders and the sick.

In this episode, Abu Talha Al-Almani visits one of many refugee families in *Sham* who found refuge at a construction site. Have a look for yourself at their circumstances and conditions, their suffering and needs. Learn how we met

⁴⁴² This GIMF video was advertised for on the jihadist forums, <https://shamikhl.info/vb/showthread.php?t=217741>, January 8, 2014.

this family, how we helped them a little bit and see what is needed here as an example for all of *al-Sham*. Just think what a huge impact and happiness can be achieved by little means, money or gifts, when Muslims are helping each other, supporting and helping out, with a pure intention, blessed by God.”⁴⁴³

The video opens with Abu Talha being invited by a Syrian family into their temporary makeshift home. The family is neither named nor shown and claims to have fled to this rural countryside in hopes of finding security. Abu Talha and his gang claim to have spent time and money to help build up their temporary home in this territory controlled by the *Mujahidin*. He calls for his brothers and sisters to also give charity and help those like him. He wants to be perceived as a man of action, someone who acts instead of mere words, proactively supporting and aiding the fellow believers. In this mind-set and framework, the fellow believer is equated to the fellow citizen of the Islamic State, giving out charity (*zakat*) and collecting donations for the poor.

“*Allah* willing, more brothers and sisters will donate for this family, so that *insha'allah* this family can live in better conditions. For, as said, a Muslim is not a proper believer until he desires for his brother whatever he desires for himself. *Akhu akh* Muslim, these are our siblings and *Allah* has made *fard* (obligation) upon us, obligation upon us to help our siblings and that is why we have come to this land to help them and to teach them *la ilaha illa llah* [the creed of Islam]. To elevate the word of *Allah*, which we are trying to establish by all means possible.”⁴⁴⁴

Abu Talha continues to detail the humanitarian side of the jihadists' ambitions to teach and missionize by providing food, water, electricity and other basic goods to cover the basic elements of life for their fellow Sunnis, for whom they have migrated to Syria and who they believe must be taught and instructed about Islam. The commitment to educate the Syrians, who, as Abu Talha details in a later video have been turned away from their religion by force by the hands of the al-Asad regime, is part of the jihadists' *da'wa* ambitions and likewise the most practical expression of their self-perception as 'proper' or 'better' Muslims.

⁴⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid.

He claims to have collected money for the family and they are now able to construct a home. Comparing this to the living standards in Germany, Abu Talha is nevertheless shocked and sees himself in an even more important role.

“We set out and emigrated to those who were calling for helpers and supporters, as *Allah* says in the Qur’an, now we are those calling for help; but we are calling first and foremost *Allah*, all praise is His, then the brothers and sisters who have acknowledged their duties and those who strive for the reward of *Allah* (...). Everything is for *sabil llah*, the *jihad* is the hump of *din*; like a tree, *jihad* is the crown and this right here is a branch with leaves, we call the branch the *ansar*, the supporters, who take care and run errands like getting medical supplies. The *ansar* are very important and we will see what we can do.”⁴⁴⁵

The video is concluded by 5:8 and with an English *nashid* calling “on all people of the world” to help “the children of war.” Abu Talha concludes that by the means of the Internet,

“you are going to know through our channels about *al-rahma* and news from us, to get authentic news, you will see what we are doing here and what the *kuffar* say is nothing but trash; we broadcast authentic news (...). We continue *Allah* willing our work here until we are hit by a bomb, struck by a bullet or rocket.”

A Pledge of Allegiance to ISIS: Why Join and Fight for the Islamic State

In April 2014 Abu Talha al-Almani pledged allegiance to the leader of ISIS. In a hour-long video, he recalls his personal account of his *bay’a* to Abu Bakr al-Husayni al-Qurayshi al-Baghdadi, stating his full name to accredit the leadership role of Abu Bakr by affirming his lineage to Prophet Muhammad and thus legitimizing him even more so as the only valid leader. Abu Talha claims that he started to revert to Islam and practice Islam in 2009. His family and friends, as having been a gangster rapper

⁴⁴⁵ <https://shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=217741>, January 8, 2014.

who after his release from prison rediscovered his Islamic identity, met this decision with harsh criticism. He broke with his lifestyle and adopted everything to change himself as based on Qur'an and *Sunna*. This resulted in a first attempt by Deso Dogg to keep but change his music in accordance with Islam, but he soon discovered this is not possible. He does, however, refer to his rapper music as a first step in his awakening where he had already criticized governments and their deceit of people. But he claims to have known

“that a time will come where I change my path completely, heading in direction of al-janna, God willing. At the time my objective had been to move up [the social ladder] with the music, to get the chance to be at the Dome or at a Grammy Event [to be honored for my work] and then to declare at this [global televised event] on stage *la ilaha ila llah Muhammad rasul llah*. Hereby I am giving up my musical career.”⁴⁴⁶

In this about one-hour long video Abu Talha al-Almani explains his rationale to

“why I gave my citizenship to the Islamic State; meaning why I gave up my German citizenship, giving the *bay'a* deliberately to The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham. For me as a Muslim to join an Islamic State, ruled by the *Qur'an* and *Sunna*; in which the *shari'a* is implemented.”⁴⁴⁷

His words are cemented by an exemplary punishment - in accordance with *shari'a* law - of a young man accused of “insulting [his] parents.” For this ‘offense’ he receives “30 lashes.” The executor of this sentence gives the young man a kiss on his forehead after the whipping, framing the scene as a dire necessity of a pedagogical lesson. Abu Talha sits in the grass under a tree with a Kalashnikov resting against the trunk.

Not being able to cite *Qur'an* and *Sunna* even in a pseudo scholarly basis by jihadi standards, he seeks to cloak his religious ignorance by claiming

⁴⁴⁶ Mein Treueid an den islamischen Staat, <http://alplattformmedia.com/vb/showthread.php?p=201868#post201868>, April 12, 2014.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid.

“I want to explain [the reasons of my decision] through a logical point of view; not an academic one by citing *ayat* and *ahadith*.”

He justifies his personal account, attempting to guide his audience by his words,

“for many of my brothers and sisters, who are confused and who struggle with themselves and wrestle with the *shaytan*, that is why I decided to make this video (...) that my words may affect your hearts.”⁴⁴⁸

He continues to emphasize that ISIS is a fabric of brothers and sisters from among the midst of his audience, who nevertheless are just humans and thus make errors. Thus, ISIS has the mission to

“perceive mistakes of other people and are prepared to correct these, God willing, that is one of the reasons I joined the state.”

He expands the viewpoint in a AQ styled rhetoric to define the enemies who fight ISIS,

“no only by conspecific *kuffar* but also by mislead [Muslims], by hypocrites (*munafiqeen*), by the enemies in general and by the whole world.”⁴⁴⁹

in his phase after rediscovering Islam and reverting to it, he outlines that he sought being able to differentiate between *haqq* and *batil*,

“to be able to differ between good and evil, between false and truth, between *haqq* and *batil*. Today I am sitting here in al-Sham.”

As he states, he seeks to be a guide for those who are yet to get politically active, or, as Abu Talha calls out, join ISIS in Syria as he did. His intention is to establish himself as a role model explaining

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid.

“why I am helping the Muslims, my brothers and sisters, why I fight those who fight against Islam, which by its nature is a totally normal thing to do for a Muslim. It is a totally normal thing for a Muslim to engage for the sake of Allah, for Prophet Muhammad, the *umma*.”

He forgives, “as a Muslim” all those who are against him and who do not understand him. He outlines this an integral part of what it means to be a Muslim, to love everyone of the *umma*, even ones opponents. As he speaks a filmed sequence is blended in from the nawadh series showing several European FF hugging, to strengthen the aspect of “love and brotherhood” as a caption reads and to showcase the bond of the fighters in Syria in general.

Another sequence from the series feeds into the picture of Abu Talha stating that the reasons he gave his *bay'a* to ISIS

“is to implement *shari'a* law, that is why we have emigrated to Syria, we emigrated to assist the upcoming Caliphate that is coming soon, after over 100 years [since its decline], God willing. For how many years has the Caliphate been shattered? For a little over one hundred years. The sword of Islam, the flag of *tawhid* has been broken. Why? Because the people have dissociated themselves from *Qur'an* and *Sunna*.”⁴⁵⁰

Abu Talha references the videos by the German-Moroccan Chouka brothers who in 2011 had issued a mini series entitled “The Territory of Honor”. In his mindset, as a *muhajir* who has now joined ISIS, he finally has the opportunity to live within such a defined territory where as a Muslim he can live free and with the minimal threat of committing sins.⁴⁵¹ He greets his brothers from Sham to Waziristan, referencing Abu Adam...

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁵¹ Abu Talha later references Abu Ibrahim (Mounir Chouka) and Abu Adam, citing them referencing the hadith by Prophet Muhammad saying that “whoever dies without giving -36 minute screen shot

Inviting Muslims from Waziristan and the whole *umma* as such to Sham to live properly on the territory of honor and to defend the Islamic State.

“I live on Sham, the territory of honor, and I hear this *athan* (call to prayer). Our flag is waving, we are on the territory on which is being fought to implement this cause and to stabilize our cause, this state (...). This state as I have experienced it, is in its construction phase, and of course the *kuffar* worldwide are disgusted that this state remains and exists. This state is waged war upon because it stands for the laws of God, the Sunna of the Prophet, defending the rights of the Muslims and the poor and weak, the women and children - this state is what Allah has proscribed for Muslims (...). The state is the enemy of the world because it stands for *haqq*, it is based on it and the state is what we wished for and why we emigrated, to live under the flag of *la ilaha*. The state invites our brothers and sisters and all people worldwide to live united under one flag called to light by Allah. All praise be God, Christians are living in Sham under this flag, they are protected, paying the *jizyya*, paying taxes to ISIS, not to Merkel, Obama or whatever *taghut* [tyran].”⁴⁵²

Mentioning the infighting that broke out between Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS in early 2014, al-Almani simply understands this bloodshed between Muslims as

“*Allah* filtering and sorting out [the most noble Muslims], distinguishing between *haqq* and *batil*, separating the *munafiqeen* from the *muwahhiden* - we are currently in this era.”⁴⁵³

He does not cite but refers to Quran 2:216 which appears properly as a text in the video. This is the mark of a weak ideologue who tries to appear in a religious scholarly fashion, and Abu Talha is nevertheless keen to explain the verse,

⁴⁵² Mein Treueid an den islamischen Staat, <http://alplattformmedia.com/vb/showthread.php?p=201868#post201868>, April 12, 2014.

⁴⁵³ Mein Treueid an den islamischen Staat, <http://alplattformmedia.com/vb/showthread.php?p=201868#post201868>, April 12, 2014.

“*Allah* is telling us that there will be situations in life which you won't like, that are difficult (...). Things happen in life that are hard on you and weigh heavy on your heart, but *Allah* knows best.”⁴⁵⁴

ISIS is framed as the only sincere and legitimate body where a Muslim today can live void of non-Islamic influence. Exploiting his renowned *salafist* position during his time as an activist in Germany, he is very clear that the German state, as any non-Islamic state, is a core enemy of Islam; no matter how many Muslims live there.

“So try to look into your hearts, and ask yourself sincerely for the *haqq*, for truth. Allah will guide you. I have now spent four years in Islam. I used to live in Germany, in *kufr*, among the *kuffar*, under the flag of *tawaghit*. The police, the servants of the Crusaders raided and soiled my apartment; ask yourself, why is that? Can you live under such humiliation (...)? How can you live under a different flag than *la ilaha ila llah Muhammad rasul llah*. This is the flag declaring *there only is one God and Muhammad is His messenger*.”⁴⁵⁵

Addressing the Syrian people, Abu Talha outlines the mindset and motivation of many foreign fighters who indeed consider themselves as a kind of foreign intervention force in the absent light of any international support for the Syrians.⁴⁵⁶

“what are we *muhajirin* doing here in Sham? I am talking here to the Syrian people, to the *ansar*, who, as Allah says in the Quran, are those who love the *muhajirun*, who have come to their aid. You were the ones calling us and we heeded to the call from all over the world (...). We heard the call *wa-Islama*. We followed our obligations set upon us by Allah.”

The foreign fighters left their immediate families to support, aid, defend and protect their Islamic family of the *umma*, to defend *iman* in times of *kufr*, *haqq* when opposed to *batil*. Abu Talha claims that the final fight will take place here in Syria, between *haqq* and *batil*, between Islam and the religions of the *kuffar*. In this particular notion,

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁶ Kazakh foreign fighters to reporters of Vice News expressed this notion in May 2014. A City Left in Ruins: The Battle for Aleppo, *Vice News*, http://youtu.be/Zg5UEz_Ao0g, May 29, 2014.

the foreign fighters embody their legitimacy directly out of the historical perspective of early Muslims on the one hand while on the other believing to be the better Muslims. As such, they are responding to people in times of need where the international community simply has failed on all levels. As the Asad regime ruled for over forty years, the Muslims in Syria have been broken and forced to disengage from Islam. ISIS, with members like Abu Talha al-Almani,

“gave their *bay’a* to help their brothers and sisters of ISIS, to assist them to make *da’wa* and how to do it, how to propagate Islam among people who have suffered under Asad; to teach Islam that they couldn't learn for such a long time because they had been locked up and tortured. This is their *haqq* and freedom and guarantees them a place in *janna*, God willing. This legitimizes ISIS.”

He approaches his audience directly demanding that they may research and find out what ISIS stands for and what it does; do see the good spirited and hearted dogma of this state.

“Who are the brothers and sister of ISIS? Who are we? Try to get information, get it directly, you can come to me and you can send me messages. You know we live in an era of communication, send me questions and I will send you God willing many answers and proof that we are the ones who are representing the word of Allah, defending it and we are the ones living under the auspices of the flag and we protect those who live with us. This is us, this are the *muhajirin* of ISIS.”

After “35 years in *kufr*, and two years in *hijra* and *jihad*, finally home.”⁴⁵⁷

⁴⁵⁷ Mein Treueid an den islamischen Staat, <http://alplattformmedia.com/vb/showthread.php?p=201868#post201868>, April 12, 2014.

New Jihadis on the Block: Syria as the Main Base of Fighting and Filming

The breaking away of the rule of the al-Assad regime provided an ample opportunity to local and international jihadists to establish themselves on the side of the opposition to fight the regular Syrian Arab Army (SAA).⁴⁵⁸ Prominently, the first local franchise of al-Qa'ida, *Jabhat al-Nusra* (JN) under the command of Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani became an effective and well funded fighting force that quickly developed a professional media footprint within the online jihadist circles. JN introduced jihadist tactics and strategies that had been deployed in Iraq since the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime in 2003. With the withdrawal of American combat forces in December 2011, the Iraqi AQ department, *the Islamic State of Iraq* (ISI), regained lost territory and resorted to violence on a massive scale. ISI, who has had a history of pledging allegiance (*bay'a*) to the central AQ leadership, regained a momentum in province of al-Anbar and the cities of Ramadi and Fallujah where the most severe attacks against the U.S. occupational forces occurred. The U.S. Army suffered many losses in al-Anbar and was only able to retake the city of Fallujah after two intensive campaigns that had been made up of house-to-house fighting. With the dawn of *Jabhat al-Nusra* in Syria and with the infiltration of the Syrian revolution by many seasoned Iraqi veterans the violence in Syria increased rapidly as did the security situation decline in the neighbouring Iraqi province of al-Anbar. The phenomena of the rift between JN and what would be known as *The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham* (ISIS), the mutated entity of ISI that manifested inside Syria, in early 2014 is tied into the re-emergence the jihadists in Iraq whose agenda is focused on unifying their Iraqi homeland with newly acquired territory in Syria – to re-establish the Caliphate. *Jabhat al-Nusra*, despite its' *bay'a* to AQ leader Ayman al-Zawahiri and al-Qa'ida's global agenda is a more core-Syrian group who claim to first and foremost to wage a *jihad* to oust Bashar al-Assad and establish Islamic rule in Syria. The sympathy for Syrians may reside primarily with JN, if at all, as the

⁴⁵⁸ The Syrian Arab Army has an English-language Facebook group where it's supporters and fans issue a stern language of admiration for the SAA, <https://www.facebook.com/syrianmilitary>, accessed April 26, 2014. The group has over 11,00 likes and is part of a wider campaign of 'info-war' conducted by the Syrian regime and voluntary supporters. It's Arabic counterpart has over 33,000 likes and features much more pictures of Bashar al-Assad in a clear pose of a 'true' and 'heroic' leader, <https://ar-ar.facebook.com/Syrian.Arab.Army.protect.me>.

continued harsh repercussions of al-Assad's paramilitary *Shabiha* against the mainly Sunni population is a key driving force for the armed resistance. Despite on-going torture and extrajudicial execution of peaceful demonstrators, the people of Syria did not fray away from the streets to challenge the regime in the first phase of the 'Arab Spring'.⁴⁵⁹ When local groups and brigades began to manifest to defend themselves by arms against the *Shabiha* and the Syrian Arab Army, the border between Syria and the ISI dominated neighbouring Iraqi province of al-Anbar began to erode. The *Free Syrian Army* (FSA) was set-up as a consequence of the continued relentless and indiscriminate violence against the protestors, made up of various self-defence committees and defectors from the SAA.⁴⁶⁰ Although the *Free Syrian Army* (FSA) at first gave democracy orientated Syrians a home to unite their struggle for freedom independent of ethnicity or sectarian affiliation. Unfortunately, however, in the intensifying conflict of regime-forces against the Syrian populace, lines were drawn by both the regime of al-Assad and Sunni extremists. With al-Assad calling his allied Lebanese Shiite militia *Hizbullah* for support and using Iranian Qods Force and the wide network of Revolutionary Guards to back his military campaigns when Sunni extremists, with support from foreign fighters, gained ground, the FSA became more and more marginalized on the one hand, while on the other more Islamist and jihadist inspired brigades (*kata'ib* or *liwa'*) were declared and aligned themselves to the FSA. The extremism on both sides of the major players, the Syrian regime and Sunni extremists, led to a gridlock where grievances for both sides have reached an unprecedented level that has destroyed the traditional Syrian get along of the various religious groups. Sectarianism as driving force and a identity marker has turned into the first lines of division inside the Syrian conflict, despite the fact that, of course, Sunni beneficiaries of the Assad regime are fighting on it's side.

Often unmentioned is the fact that the Syrian society as a collective, independent of social or confessional belonging had demonstrated peacefully against the oppressive police state of Bashar al-Assad since April 2011 and endured violent repercussions. Violence sparked counter-violence that transformed into an all-out civil war with many foreign fighters introducing the interpretation of Islamic sources as well as

⁴⁵⁹ Global Voices, *Syria Protests 2011/12*, <http://globalvoicesonline.org/specialcoverage/2012-special-coverage/syria-protest-2011/>, updated January 31, 2014. Accessed April 26, 2014.

⁴⁶⁰ Jonathan Spyer, *Defying a Dictator: Meet the Free Syrian Army*, May/June 2012, <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/defying-dictator-meet-free-syrian-army>. Accessed April 26, 2014.

insurgent tactics of al-Qa'ida in Syria. The conflict in Syria, termed *al-Sham*, referring to the historical Greater Syria of the times of Prophet Muhammad, is of greatest ideological and historical importance for the *jihadists* in general.

For one, to fight the al-Assad regime has been a long awaited dream while the conquest of Syria is seen as the first and most vital step for the long-term liberalization of the occupied al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem (*al-Quds*). But Syria is considered a sacrosanct Islamic territory to fight for the restoration of this most vital part of the Sunni land and to 'cleanse' it off the Alawite-Shiite rule as the al-Assad regime is defined by jihadists' reasoning. Furthermore, as martyr stories from fighters such as *Jabhat al-Nusra* (JN) or in parts even the *Free Syrian Army* (FSA) highlight, the motivation to fight turned radical with the continued violence, the mass punishment of Sunni civilian quarters by indiscriminate shelling and bloody counter-insurgency techniques used by the regime.

Sayings by Prophet Muhammad have become a central theme to fight for *al-Sham* and blend more secular groups such as the FSA with AQ affiliates like JN, despite grave ideological differences. Such divisions are underlined by the fact that the jihadi groups are home to many foreigners whose interpretation and understanding of Islam clashes with the Syrian culture of tolerance and get along. To frame the military operations and actions against the regime are fuelled by the deliberate targeting of mainly Sunni civilians by the regime as collective punishment for the challenge of authority. Along these lines, from a human perspective, it may be understandable that real-life grievances drive many youngsters to join various brigades for the sake of collective security after suffering the trauma of collapsed houses and scores of dead civilians.⁴⁶¹

⁴⁶¹ Olly Lambert meticulously documents this, among other elements, in the PBS Frontline film "The Bombing of al-Barra". Together with his cameraman they witness and film the bombing of the civilian quarter *al-Barra*, where mainly Sunni refugees lived. With scores of dead being pulled from underneath the rubble of collapsed houses after a regime fighter-jet deliberately dropped its payload on the civilian target, Olly Lambert films the immediate aftermath. Moved by the traumatizing scene, a civilian helping transporting the dead from the another bombing site in the town pulls him to his van laden with corpses to swear revenge. "He shows me the bodies and then makes a speech, 'twenty-five civilians have been killed today in an airstrike on al-Barra. Twenty-five have been martyred because of the bombs of the Mig fighter-jet. *Allahu akbar, allahu, akbar*, I swear by God, we will take our revenge on you Bashar, on the Alawites, on [your] civilians. Just as you kill our Muslim brothers we will take our revenge on Alawite civilians. We will go to their villages and kill them, with the permission of God. This is sectarianism'." PBS Frontline, *The Bombing of al-Barra*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BHUKBaFetJY>, published and accessed April 8, 2013.

One case is highlighted by the death of Abu Qasura, who was a member of JN but his death was also confirmed by an online forum of the “Free Syrian Army” – an indicator for the cross-relationship of the two groups.⁴⁶² The posting is introduced by Qur’an 3:169 and a picture shows Abu Qasura holding a commando version of the A.K. 47 assault rifle sitting at a beach. Beneath the picture a famous *hadith* complements the posting, emphasizing the divine obligation to fight in *al-Sham* (Syria):

“Narrated by Zayyid bin Thabit al-Ansari – may God be pleased with him –, said: The messenger of God, peace and blessing be upon him, was heard saying: “My blessings for *Sham*! My blessings for *Sham*! My blessings for *Sham*!” They said: “O messenger of God, what is the meaning of this?” He said: “These angels of God have spread their wings over *Sham*.””⁴⁶³

The firm popular belief, on which the jihadist ideology and propaganda capitalize on, is employed in full in Syria based on the above outlined key sentiments.⁴⁶⁴ With the surge of jihadist brigades⁴⁶⁵ throughout Syria and the rise of *Jahbhat al-Nusra* that would transfer into a hybrid group siding with the *Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham* in early 2013 the Internet was also swamped with new jihadist propaganda videos, writings, pictures, and much more. With the differences between JN and ISIS as of early 2014, with JN the only AQ franchise in Syria and with ISIS having gone rogue as of April 2013 and overtaking AQ in their dominance to propagate the re-establishment of the Caliphate, the violence in Syria has reached an unprecedented level that is not even topped by Iraq or the civil war of Lebanon. As Ali Fisher and I outlined, the violence in Syria and the surge of jihadist brigades turned to all channels online and promoted their operations as part of the wider and overall al-Qa’ida ideology, framework and narrative. In particular,

⁴⁶² “The martyr al-Zulaytani of the Libyan martyrs who attained martyrdom in Syria in 2013.” <http://syrianarmyfree.com/vb/showthread.php?t=37269>, March 4, 2013, accessed May 31, 2013.

⁴⁶³ Ibid.

For the reference of the *hadith*: Musnad Ahmad (21096).

⁴⁶⁴ As detailed in the subchapter *Abu Qasura al-Libi – Fighting against al-Qadhafi and die in al-Assad’s Syria*.

⁴⁶⁵ The Arabic terms for “brigade” *katiba* (pl. *kata’ib*) and *liwa’* (pl. *alwiya*) are used most often in this context.

“Jihadists have aggressively expanded the use of twitter, in addition to Facebook and YouTube, especially since the outbreak of violence in Syria (...). It took a while for jihadi activism to fully unravel on Twitter, and they have maintained a cohesive as well as detailed presence on this social media platform since the Syrian conflict turned violent in 2012.”⁴⁶⁶

Videos and statements by jihadist groups immediately entered the online territories dominated by al-Qa’ida (and of course to a later point ISIS), in particular the existent network of forums.

The division along confessional lines is as a driving force and identity marker where individuals in Syria are coerced into choosing sides, either with the regime or against it. This has had a severe impact on the overall outlined ideology in regard of executing spies or “henchmen” of enemy forces for within Syria the *jihad* was not only declared against the al-Assad regime but against anyone supporting the tyrant, the idol (*taghut*).

Groups became more radicalized in the wake of the intensifying conflict and the continued harsh response by Syrian troops and the regime’s paramilitary militias, the *Shabiha*, whose members mainly are Alawites, just as the al-Assad family.

“At first Syrian non-violent activists used, and continue to use, twitter as a medium to document human rights abuse and war crimes of the Assad regime, but jihadists quickly adapted that content and the platform for their propaganda.

Social-media smart and professional jihadists adopted this treasure grove for their propaganda. By rebranding and reframing the content created by civil

⁴⁶⁶ For an introduction to the jihadist presence on Twitter as well as the social-media strategy deployed since the outbreak of violence in Syria: Ali Fisher and Nico Prucha, “Jihadi Twitter Activism – Introduction”, *Jihadica*, April 27, 2013, <http://www.jihadica.com/jihadi-twitter-activism-introduction/>. Accessed April 27, 2013.

society activists, jihadi propaganda used these grievances to support a key jihadist self-perception; the obligation to respond by force to defend and protect the Sunnites in Syria.⁴⁶⁷

The situation in Syria thus affects the establishment of the scholars of *jihad*, who issue their advice and counsel, their rulings and calls of mobilization to aide and guide the Sunni communities in and out of Syria. Within the mainframe AQ forums online as well as on the social media outlets, the question of the *jihad* in Syria is a primary topic. The changed situation demands spiritual guidance and ideological leadership, part of the comprising *jihadist* narrative and interpretation, thus further strengthening the ideological cohesion as well as the theological sub layers thereof. Guidance is needed as the Sunni *Mujahidin* nevertheless face a multi-layered and multifaceted enemy, who depends on various groups and parts of Syrian society. This includes not only al-Assad's loyal mainly Alawite paramilitary *Shabiha* militia,⁴⁶⁸ and affiliates,⁴⁶⁹

⁴⁶⁷ Ali Fisher and Nico Prucha, "Jihadi Twitter Activism – Introduction", *Jihadica*, April 27, 2013, <http://www.jihadica.com/jihadi-twitter-activism-introduction/>. Accessed April 27, 2013.

⁴⁶⁸ Filmed confessions and summary executions of *Shabiha* members are among the most often viewed content within the cluster of radical video clips originating from Syria. For example "the capture of a despicable *Shabiha*", published on September 8, 2012, had close to 600,000 views as of April 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z0rxMP5k42A>. The man was badly tortured and confesses to various crimes he as a member of the *Shabiha* is responsible for.

In a similar video published by ISIS, a Sunni *Shabiha* is offered to repent (*tawba*) if he confesses. Following the ideological framework, the *Shabiha* acknowledges his misery, repents and advises that no one will follow his footsteps before being shot so that "he can be judged by God." The executioner as well as the prisoner subscribe to the ideological framework while ISIS boosts itself as the only true faction protecting the Sunni population, cleansing the *Shabiha* everywhere, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ldMXtGpHNjM>. The video was first published on December 24, 2013 via the *Shumukh al-Islam* forum linking to YouTube and various download sites, <https://shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=216933>. JN, as outlined below, uses its operations against elements of the *Shabiha* in a like-minded framing, targeting even 'media *Shabiha*' by kidnapping and executing them.

⁴⁶⁹ Perhaps the most famed and important affiliate is the Iranian-supported Shiite *Liwa' Abu 'l-Fadl al-'Abbas*, which is mainly based in Damascus, well trained and equipped, defending the Sayyada Zaynab shrine. This militia also attracts foreign fighters with a similar narration, to protect Shiite sacral sites inside Syria and is another main enemy for Sunni jihadis as it reaffirms their conviction of the Iranian-Shiite engagement. For example, tweet by @Syria_AIHadath showing a picture of an alleged militia fighter described as "the dead *shabih* Husayn Fadl 'Abd al-Karim of the *Abu 'l-Fadl al-'Abbas* militia, he was a citizen of #Kuwait", https://twitter.com/Syria_AIHadath/status/365632218997063680/photo/1, August 9, 2013.

Shiite Foreign Fighters in Syria, mainly from Iraq have also had an impact for the execution videos, whereas Shiite foreign fighters who came for similar reasons to Syria as their Sunni counterparts are presented as proof of the Iranian hand in the "war against the Sunnites"; for example: "The implementation of the rule of God on a *rafidi* of the *Jaysh al-Mahdi* in Syria", a Shiite foreign fighter from Iraq who was captured, interrogated and subsequently shot in the head by the *Liwa' al-Mujahidin*, http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=i81QILy6rbk, published March 15,

but also throws the Lebanese Shiite Militia *Hizbullah*,⁴⁷⁰ Iranian Guardsmen,⁴⁷¹ Druze, Palestinian,⁴⁷² and Christian soldiers⁴⁷³ into the war to suppress the insurgent Sunni majority population inside Syria by all means. Furthermore, and confusing as it seems, not *all* Sunni's naturally side with the opposition, the FSA, or Sunni jihadi groups, and the gross of al-Assad's soldiers are yet Sunni's themselves, fighting for various reasons for the regime or out of ignorance. Not all Sunnis loyal to the regime, fighting as regular soldiers, may be aware who they are combatting due to the firm propaganda tools used by the regime. They could thus be victims of such propaganda and many have in the wake of the viral of violence unleashed by the Syrian government come to terms and renounced their loyalty, defecting (*inshiqaq*) to the 'rebel', or oppositional side. In regards of capturing soldiers of the Syrian army and the question of execution, this poses moral and legal obstructions whereas various scholars intent to provide direct guidance. As the *Mujahidin* must distinguish their prisoners, based on the prisoner's confessional belonging and his accredited crimes for al-Assad, each and every one, in theory, must be judged individually – a dilemma that led many Sunni brigade leaders to ask questions of this kind on Facebook and other social media outlets as outlined in the following.

2013. Accessed March 17, 2013. The clip had been advertised on the *Ansar al-Mujahidin* forum, <http://as-ansar.com/vb/showthread.php?t=84184>, March 17, 2013.

⁴⁷⁰ *Hizbullah* played a vital role in the battle for al-Qusayr. The active entry in the fight with al-Assad's troops enforced the jihadi narrative of the global as well as local war against Sunni Islam. For example the tweet by @safaa159 showing one of the first *Hizbullah* martyr "picture of the carcass, the member of *Hizb al-Shaytan* ("the party of Satan") Hatim Husayn, killed in the battle of #al-Qusayr", <https://twitter.com/safaa159/status/336157112054992896/photo/1>, May 19, 2013.

⁴⁷¹ Such sentiments are repeated in the Syrian conflict with captured men, framed as combatants and as "Iranians", or simply Shiites termed as "*rafidi*". For their enmity and crimes committed against the Sunnis, they are exhibited, beaten, and forced to confess before being executed. The killing is not always filmed. See for example, "As a delight to your eyes, a *rafidi-majus* Iranian caught by the hands of the *Mujahidin*; a charm for the end of Ramadan", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IXeMUFzS8A>, published and accessed August 8, 2013. The video was removed a day later from YouTube.

⁴⁷² In Syria many Palestinians found a permanent refugee after the *al-nakba*. They are mainly Sunnis and divided between regime supporters and opponents, siding with Islamist torrents in the country and the *Free Syrian Army* (FSA). According to some propaganda broadcast online, some Palestinian factions are actively engaged in fighting and spying for the al-Assad regime. For example, "The arrest of the *shabikh* Bahjat Husayn, who works for the Palestinian division for the intelligence services [of the regime]", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ruar8EtE8-Y>, April 15, 2013. He was captured by the Usama bin Zayyad Brigade in the vicinity of al-Qunaytra and confessed his role on providing human intelligence about the FSA to the regime. The term *shabikh* is an insulting reference to the paramilitary militia *Shabiha*, whereas the individual is guilty by association.

⁴⁷³ For example, "||| Prisoners of War ||| Images of some of the captured Dogs of Asad's Army!!!", *Ansar al-Mujahidin Forum*, <http://ansar1.info/showthread.php?t=43812>, published and accessed January 6, 2013.

With the rise of *Jahbhat al-Nusra* and its affiliated media departments and the emergence of the *Islamic State* in Syria connected to Iraqi provinces under ISIS command, the two main Sunni and most hard-core jihadist groups were keen to build up and maintain their frequent audio-visual productions – all of which are disseminated via social media outlets like Twitter and by the classical jihadi forums. As JN and ISIS are the most extreme Sunni jihadi groups – and the most influential in terms of quantity and quality, the graph below showcases the frequency and quantity of the published videos over a 13-month period.

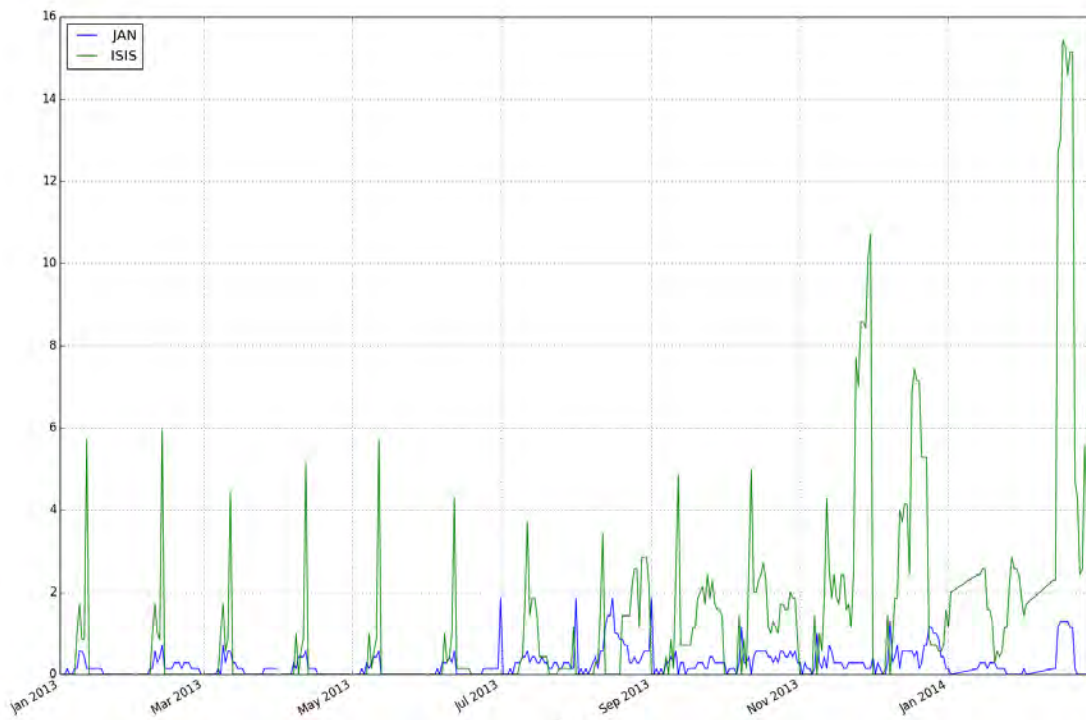


Figure 9 Comparing *Jahbhat al-Nusra* to ISIS video files over a seven-day average

ISIS published more frequently videos than JN, with an average six videos per week. JN remains in the lower one to two videos per week and was picking up speed early 2014. For the dataset only official videos are accounted, videos that had been published by the respective media departments (ISIS: *al-Furqan* and *I'tasimu*; JN: *al-Manarat al-Bayda'* and *al-Basir*). To verify the credibility of the videos, official channels of the respective media channels on Twitter, Facebook and the jihadi forums were used to acquire the data.

The meta-data of each video was acquired and placed in the corresponding database. The meta-data consists of a PDF of either the thread on a jihadi forum and/or the corresponding Twitter or Facebook account where the film was posted first. The overwhelming majority of videos downloaded from both ISIS and JN are of full high-definition quality. Both datasets are about 30 gigabytes each. The run-time of the videos varies, ranging from several minutes to one hour or more.

The most powerful *da'wa* tool for religious groups in general and militant organizations in particular are the production of comprehensible audio-visual materials. By broadcasting hate-speech within a religious or political set of beliefs, the jihadi media outlets in the past two decades succeeded in establishing a high degree of media professionalism to transport a coherent ideology and an alternative Muslim identity.

With the media-war continuing, the above-mentioned videos turned their focus to the element of execution as a tool of punishment. Especially in the wake of the alleged use of chemical weapons by the regime against its own people did the sentiment of sectarianism and a sectarian divide or war (*harb ta'ifi*) arise. Aiming for revenge in times of war is a compound of human nature on which groups such as *Jabhat al-Nusra* and subsequently ISIS even more so, capitalize on. As part of the clusters of video and textual statements, JN was keen to promote its operations under the auspices of a well-familiar jihadist terminology of *an eye for an eye*. While at first this series (*silsila*) was initiated in written form, videos of suicide-bombers exploited the notion at a later time.

The Capturing and Execution of the “Media *Shabiha*”, Statement no. 41

JN from the start was keen and firm in having a mediatized side to promote and boost their operations and claims. It has become a part of the integral files of jihadism promoted within the forums and the social media, where the media arm of this group, *al-Manarat al-Bayda'*, pioneered the use of Twitter. JN as the only official AQ franchise in Syria and before the emergence of ISIS was a favorite target to confront by the regime's state controlled television that regularly portrays any oppositional as a “terrorist” (*irhabi*). In the Syrian state TV framework, anyone opposing the regime of

Bashar al-Assad is a terrorist. The existence of a groups such as JN served this cause naturally to great extends. The extension of ‘information war’ is carried out widely within the regime’s propaganda television channels and its respective online outlets while JN responds and acts in full via the online channels.

Thus, the rationale of JN includes targeting individuals of the Assad’s propaganda machinery, equating the paramilitary *Shabiha* with the “media *Shabiha*”, to balance the ‘information war’. In JN’s statement number 41, published on August 3, 2012, the “capture and killing of the media *Shabiha* Muhammad al-Sa’id” was declared. Judging by his name al-Sa’id was perhaps a Sunni and is thus framed by JN as an apostate who did not repent and is consequently sentenced to death. He is guilty by his public association with the al-Assad regime. The one-paged statement shows two pictures of the victim, depicting him during a TV debate and one taken while in captivity. No video of the execution or pictures of al-Sa’id in any form had been published.



“For the war declared by the regime on Syria and the Syrian people has indeed become one of all means and an all-out-war.”⁴⁷⁴

The media, the state-run propaganda channels as well as those established and maintained on social-media outlets like YouTube in the service of the regime have drawn a black and white scheme that JN employs likewise. While the narrative of the

⁴⁷⁴ Asr wa-qatl al-shabih al-‘ilami: Muhammad al-Sa’id, Statement number 41, August 3, 2012.

regime consists of a – perhaps to western ears familiar – ‘with or against us’,⁴⁷⁵ the jihadist rationale is drawn among the Sunni and non-Sunni lines.

“Verily, we had warned previously that there is no place left for anyone in the middle [one must chose a side in this conflict], for the regime by its tyranny does not allow such a thing. The people of *jihad* in the clarity of their path and the power of their consciousness (*yaqin*) will not allow this either.

Therefore, all sides decree that one of the two sides⁴⁷⁶ may be chosen, so which of the two sides shall one belong to? The final decision thereof is decided by God, exalted is He.

By the grace of God, exalted is He, for the *Mujahidin* of *Jabhat al-Nusra*, the heroes of al-Ghawtat al-Gharbiyya⁴⁷⁷ had been able to take the media *shabih* Muhammad al-Sa’id as a prisoner. On July 19, 2012, he was executed after interrogating him. The *shabih* Muhammad al-Sa’id worked as a newscaster for The Syrian *al-Fada’iyya Channel*, having been a moderator of the program “Country-Report” (*Hadith al-Balad*).⁴⁷⁸

The execution of al-Sa’id – with no video published to perhaps further humiliate the victim who had been a prominent media figure in Syria, JN exercises deterrence – attempting to dissuade any al-Assad followers to continue on this path. JN employs a similar rhetoric the jihadist media consumer may be well aware of from the franchise

⁴⁷⁵ A phrase coined by U.S. President George W. Bush that in the meantime does apply to the wider extend of the ‘war on terror’; “You are either with us or against us”, CNN, <http://edition.cnn.com/2001/US/11/06/gen.attack.on.terror/>, November 6, 2001. Accessed May 5, 2014.

⁴⁷⁶ In jihadist reasoning the two sides consist of merely pro- and anti-regime without any alternative. This condition of course draws a clear line and sets identity markers and belonging without compromise. However, this can also be interpreted as an invitation to non-Sunni Syrians to join JN and become Muslims by acknowledging the falsehood of the regime and hence the righteousness of the *Sunna*.

⁴⁷⁷ A suburb of Damascus and western part of al-Ghawtat al-Sharqiyya where the al-Assad regime deployed chemical weapons killing at least 1,600 civilians in late August 2013. For an analysis, Al Jazeera Center for Studies, “A Possible U.S. Strike on Syria: Causes and Consequences”, <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/positionpapers/2013/09/201391511491236484.htm>, September 15, 2013. Accessed October 28, 2013.

⁴⁷⁸ Asr wa-qatl al-shabih al-‘ilami: Muhammad al-Sa’id, Statement number 41, August 3, 2012.

in Yemen, where the element to repent (*tawba*) and possibly ‘revert’ back to ‘true Islam’ is offered in a strategy to weaken the support by Sunnis for opposing regimes.⁴⁷⁹ The media-strategy is therefore set to serve as deterrence on the one hand, while on the other, the opening of “the door of repentance”, JN hopes to set a precedence for fighting Syria, as

“perhaps, by this operation and similar ones, deterring anyone who has signed up for this tyrannical-idol regime, that he may repent before God. For if not, the swords of the *Mujahidin* will pluck off their heads, cleansing the soil of *al-Sham* of their filth, God willing.”⁴⁸⁰

The “other side”, as defined by *Jabhat al-Nusra* in reference to the regime and anyone loyal by whatever means to it, commemorated Muhammad al-Sa’id on their media outlets, calling him a “media *shahid*”. The YouTube channel of the pro-regime media patchwork “Syrian Truth” uploaded a video of Muhammad al-Sa’id entitled “This is why they killed you, Muhammad – the Media *shahid* Muhammad al-Sa’id”, a sequence of his TV show where he held a multi-confessional – pro al-Assad – prayer.⁴⁸¹

The Killing of the Director of the Political Media Bureau, Statement no. 49

⁴⁷⁹ As discussed in the chapter: *Aborting IED Attacks to Preserve the Sacrosanct Blood of Muslims – YouTube Clips as Part of an Ideological Cluster Network*; further analysed in the subchapter: *Drone Strikes and Spies Among us – Televising Confessions and Executions*. For further reading: Nico Prucha, Kangaroo Trials - Justice in the Name of God, in: Rüdiger Lohker, *Jihadism: Online Discourses and Representations*, V&R unipress: Goettingen, 2013, 141-207.

⁴⁸⁰ Asr wa-qatl al-shabih al-‘ilami: Muhammad al-Sa’id, Statement number 41, August 3, 2012.

⁴⁸¹ The channel “Souriaisfree” links to the Facebook and Twitter site of Syrian Truth in Arabic, English, French. The video has over 25,000 views, “This is why they killed you, Muhammad – the Media *shahid* Muhammad al-Sa’id,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ScGhn2WNVgI>, uploaded on August 4, 2012, accessed October 11, 2013. Calls to release him and pleas where also sent via Facebook in a group called “The Journalist Muhammad al-Sa’id – a martyr or kidnapped, our hearts are with you”, <https://www.facebook.com/pages/208335712627997/> / [الإعلامي محمد السعيد شهيدا أم مختطف](https://www.facebook.com/pages/208335712627997/) / [قلوبنا معك](https://www.facebook.com/pages/208335712627997/) Accessed October 28, 2013.

The kidnapping and execution of hostages as well as targeted assassinations quickly turned into a custom employed by JN and others. In a statement just published twelve days after the proclaimed killing of Muhammad al-Sa'id, JN claimed to have detained and executed 'Ali 'Abbas, the “director of the political media bureau” of the regime in Damascus. The statement has the exact same wording as above, with the difference of two sentences in the Arabic writing:

“The heroes of Damascus had been able to kill the media *shabih* 'Ali 'Abbas. Data pulled from his computer proves his direct connection to the security branches, in particular because of the military graded cell phone found in his possessions. His handheld firearm was taken as booty, all praise and grace be to God.



Salvation from the swords of the *Mujahidin* is open for those who want peace and security for themselves, for anyone who reverts himself from the criminal idol regime.”⁴⁸²

The intention of deterring anyone from working with the regime is once again underlined in this statement. Furthermore, the subtle reference that the “doors of

⁴⁸² Qatl mudir maktab al-i'lam al-siyyasi: 'Ali 'Abbas. Statement number 49, August 15, 2012.

repentance” may be open, implying that Sunnis have a chance of both salvation and not being targeted and treated as apostates by groups such as JN.

An Eye for an Eye: Punishing Alawites as Revenge for Use of Chemical Weapons by the Regime

On early August 21, 2013, the Damascene suburb al-Ghawtat al-Sharqiyya and its vicinity was attacked with chemical agents, resulting in the death of at least 1,600 civilians, including hundreds of children. The suburb is a center of the rebellion and the inhabitants are mainly Sunnis. The district had been a classical hub of anti-Assad protests whereas the demonstrators had been keen to film and broadcast via YouTube to the outside world.⁴⁸³ Video-sequences and pictures of scores of dead children not only hit the international news and mainstream media outlets, but are also since prominent used in a wide array of jihadist video productions to justify military actions against the Syrian regime. Especially children, fighting for air, lying on the ground of makeshift clinics treated only by water and scores of deceased people with no apparent injuries have gravely contributed to the decisiveness to remove the regime of Bashar al-Assad by all means. Extremist groups capitalize on this sentiment and on a legitimate basis demand justice for the victims – only by their standards of exercising revenge on the premises of ‘an eye for an eye’. The leader of *Jabhat al-Nusra*, only known by his nom de guerre Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani has vowed to avenge the dead and started a campaign to counter the violence under the general the title of

“An eye for an eye. If you [believers] have to respond to an attack, make your response proportionate.”

This title is a direct reference taken from the Qur’an, Sura 16 verse 126. It implies not only *an eye for an eye* (*al-‘ayn bi l-‘ayn*) but also to punish and retaliate by the same means, coined in Arabic as *al-mithl bi l-mithl*; to give tit for tat. In a similar rhetoric

⁴⁸³ In a meeting in January 2014 in Vienna, held with a youth activist from this suburb who wishes to remain anonymous, he outlined how several youth-activists used their cellphones and video-cameras to document the protests and then the increasingly violent response by regime forces.

in the words of Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi and the reasoning of Abu Mus'ab al-Suri, al-Jawlani pledges to punish *bi l-mithl*, blaming the western world of standing by watching the Sunnis of Syria perish by the hands of the Alawites.

“For the Alawite Regime fired dozens of rockets stocked with chemical payloads into al-Ghawtat al-Sharqiyya and is responsible for the death of hundreds of children, women, men and elderlies. The regime struck after it received green light from the international regimes who started to partake in the evident crimes, clear to anyone who is following and watching [the news from Syria].^{484,485}

He vows that the regime and anyone associated with it, especially the Alawite minority, referred to as the *Nusayris*, in Syria, will be punished for they are inseparable from regime forces. This guilt by association is furthermore framed by al-Jawlani's call

“do not be disheartened, do not lose confidence in us, for we shall let them taste from the same cup as you have, our sons, and indeed it has been lawfully decreed upon us that we punish them by the same means.

“If you [believers] have to respond to an attack, make your response proportionate” [Qur'an 16:126].

Therefore, we announce a series of operations entitled *an eye for an eye*.

⁴⁸⁴ Al-Jawlani refers to independent media channels maintained by civil media activists on YouTube and, of course, the publications by his media department *al-Manarat al-Bayda*.

⁴⁸⁵ Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, “al-‘Ayn bi l-‘ayn – wa-in ‘aqabtum fa-‘aqibu bi-mithl ma ‘uqibtum bi-hi”, *al-Manarat al-Bayda*, August 25, 2013, <http://jalnosra.com/vb/showthread.php?p=4963#post4963>. The speech was also transcribed and disseminated, for example, <http://justpaste.it/jolani>, accessed August 26, 2013.

These operations will concentrate on launching attacks against Nusayri villages by firing at them every available missile with chemical compounds our people in al-Sham get a hold of.”⁴⁸⁶

The first revenge operation of the *an eye for an eye* campaign was declared one day later, on August 26, 2013, with the execution of Badr Wahib Ghazal. This statement, number 375, initiated the start for a series of revenge operations where individuals or villages were attacked due to the claim of declaring guilt by association. The association to the al-Assad regime is expressed by defining the targets as “Alawite” and “Nusayri” and thus guilty of supporting the regime and the war against the Sunnis of Syria. Thus, the prominence Alawite clerics and dignitaries are high-value-targets for groups like JN to exercise revenge for the slain Muslim Sunni civilians.

The Liquidation of the Preacher Badr Wahib Ghazal, “the Alawite Mufti of Latakia”

Statement 375 initiated the “series of raids *al-‘ayn bi l-‘ayn*” with the execution of Badr Wahib Ghazal, a religious leader who was violently abducted and then shot. The full title of the statement is “part of the campaign *al-‘ayn bi l-‘ayn (1)*; the killing of the missionary Badr Wahib Ghazal, Mufti of the Alawite Sect in Latakia.”⁴⁸⁷

The statement shows several pictures of Badr Wahib. In one picture, below on the left, Badr Wahib’s left arm seems to be broken and his arms show signs of defensive wounds. The picture on the right shows him after being shot multiple times. The position of the body, the bare chest and stomach with three clearly visible gun shot wounds, the blood on the head and beard, may suggest that Wahib was shot in the face first, then at least three more times.

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁷ Daman silsila ghazawat al-‘ayn bi l-‘ayn (1), tasfiyyat al-mad’uww Badr Wahib Ghazal mufti al-ta’ifa al-nusayriyya fi Ladhaqiyya, August 26, 2013.



The statement starts by praising God as a direct ‘commander-in-chief’ for *Jabhat al-Nusra*, for God is

“who commanded us to rule justly over the people, who decreed us commit aggression against those, who committed aggression against you.”⁴⁸⁸

The first installment of this revenge series is furthermore framed as a “new phase of *jihād* on the land of *al-Sham*,” the “start of the series of operations *al-‘ayn bi l-‘ayn*.” The general intention is expressed in a classical jihadi rhetoric to let the

“the tyrant and his soldiers taste of the same cup of bitterness the [Syrian people drink of], and to broadcast this to the general public.”⁴⁸⁹

The individual Badr Wahib Ghazal is sentenced and guilty by association to the Alawite minority as Bashar al-Assad is a member of this confession along with the majority of his government. Jihadists as well as al-Assad employ a war of the confessions (*harb ta’ifi*), whereas in *Jabhat al-Nusra*’s reasoning any individual of the Alawite community is subsequently to be sentenced to death for the crimes of the regime. The killing of the dignitary Badr Wahib was condemned by the *Alawite-*

⁴⁸⁸ Lit.: “To responds to those who committed aggression likewise”, this is a reference to 2:194 and to the wording of Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi.

⁴⁸⁹ Daman silsila ghazawat al-‘ayn bi l-‘ayn (1), tasfiyyat al-mad’uww Badr Wahib Ghazal mufti al-ta’ifa al-nusayriyya fi Ladhaqiyya, August 26, 2013.

Islamic Supreme Council of Syria and Abroad in a statement published electronically on August 7, 2013.⁴⁹⁰ IN jihadist mindset and also by Sunni conservative standards, the reference of *Islamic-Alawite* is troublesome, as Alawites are widely perceived as either being Shiites at best, or leaning more towards a non-Islamic belief. The statement shows a picture of Wahib in captivity with bloodstains on his white jalabiyya. The statement was published by *al-Urdun al-'Arabi*, the photo is credited to the Iranian *AhlulBayt News Agency* (Abna.ir). The Alawite-Islamic Supreme Council

“condemns the kidnapping of *shaykh* Badr Ghazal and the threat of being executed, as it condemns the abduction of religious dignitaries⁴⁹¹ in general. The Council expresses its condemnation in its statement to target Syrian religious dignitaries as this has the intention to annihilate the Syrian lifestyle of tolerance and shared spaces, build on mutual love and respect.”⁴⁹²

The statement of Islamic dignitaries points out that the targeted kidnapping and killing of “religious dignitaries – no matter if they are Christians or Muslims” is a serious attack on the Syrian way of life. The names of twelve assassinated religious scholars complement the statement that concludes with a stern warning of fostering a confessional war in Syria against all odds of Syria’s longstanding history of tolerance and get-along.

JN claimed that “Badr Wahib Ghazal, the missionary worker and *mufti* of the Alawite confession – the *Nusayris* – had been from the city of Latakia”, a coastal city of great strategic value and an Alawite stronghold.⁴⁹³

He was killed immediately after the deployment of chemical weapons against the majority Sunni civilians in the suburbs of Damascus, but had been

⁴⁹⁰ The statement was published by *al-Urdun al-'Arabi*, <http://bit.ly/1fLeLBW>, September 8, 2013.

⁴⁹¹ Lit.: “Men of religion”.

⁴⁹² Ibid.

⁴⁹³ Sunnis populate the countryside while the city itself is a majority Alawite stronghold.

“in the custody of the *Mujahidin* prior, by the grace of God and His empowerment (*tamkin*),⁴⁹⁴ He has no loyalty (*wala'*) to the criminal *Nusayri* regime while God supports and guides in full the *ahl al-Sunna*⁴⁹⁵ by truth (*haqq*) against the criminal regime.

The *ahl al-Sunna* shall know that men are not sleeping because of this injustice. Men, who shall neither decree nor turn their eyes away from them, until those who committed these aggressions punished.”⁴⁹⁶

The last part is a pragmatic reading and interpretation of Qur’anic verses, as outlined above and could be defined as an operational commandment of Qur’an 2:194. This *tafsir* by jihadist standards has swept into the on- and offline worlds with full force in particular since the September 11, 2001, terror attacks and the current situation in Syria highlights how such an interpretation is used, re-used, and implemented in a local context.

The Second *An Eye for an Eye* Operation: The Killing of *Shabiha* by major Martyrdom Operations

Just a few hours after the publication of the first operation of the “*al-‘ayn bi l-‘ayn* series” a second pertaining statement (no. 376) was disseminated online. The statement highlights two martyrdom operations against fortified buildings occupied by the *Shabiha* in the vicinity of Damascus. With the eyes set on revenge, JN started to further frame and brand its attacks and operational conduct within the framework of sectarian divisions. The first attack, which will be outlined below, consisted of

“a new raid against the headquarters of apostasy in the countryside of Damascus was conducted one day after the chemical weapons massacre

⁴⁹⁴ Tamkin Zawahiri speech prophets banner?

⁴⁹⁵ The Sunnites, an often-used phrase in the jihadist literature.

⁴⁹⁶ Daman silsila ghazawat al-‘ayn bi l-‘ayn (1), tasfiyyat al-mad’uww Badr Wahib Ghazal mufti al-ta’ifa al-nusayriyya fi Ladhaqiyya, August 26, 2013.

committed by the criminal *Nusayri* regime against our people, the oppressed (*mustada'ifeen*) Muslims. The heroes of *Jabhat al-Nusra* rapidly reacted – may God grant them strength – in al-Ghawtat al-Sharqiyya. Together with their brothers on behalf of some of the Islamic Brigades,⁴⁹⁷ two martyrdom operations were conducted:

The first operation was directed against a checkpoint, one of the most severe military positions to suppress the Muslims and to lash out against the *Mujahidin* as well, when several brigades had united in an attempt to destroy it for over ten months.

The other operation targeted a building used by the *Shabiha* as a rally point in the industrial province of Jawbar.⁴⁹⁸

According to the statement, both martyrdom operations were conducted just few minutes apart to maximize the effect on a practical military as well as psychological layer. For the first operation a modified truck was used in the suicide-bombing attack whereas the *istishhadi* was not mentioned and no testimony (*wasiyya*) was later conveyed.



The truck was equipped with an armored plate to protect the martyrdom operative from being stopped by gunfire. The caption below reads: “The explosives rigged truck on its way to the rally-points of the *Shabiha* in

Jawbar – the countryside of Damascus. *Al-‘ayn bi l-‘ayn.*”⁴⁹⁹

⁴⁹⁷ *Al-kata'ib al-Islamiyya*, a reference to allied groups. The term “Islamic Brigades”, however, is a distinction to the *jihadi*st brigades who in full have subscribed to the AQ worldview and ideological authority. JN seeks to include those more or less Islamist brigades in their operational spectrum with the intention of expanding their influence zone and their operational radius. For in particular the affected areas by the chemical weapons strike may occur more vulnerable to jihadi hard-core groups such as JN after such a horrific and traumatizing event, where one might understand the need for immediate revenge as general human nature.

⁴⁹⁸ Daman silsila ghazawat al-‘ayn bi l-‘ayn (2) nisf hajiz tu’ma ‘ala tariq Zamalka – al-Qabun al-muwassil ila Dimashq, August 26, 2013, <http://justpaste.it/4lox>.

The second martyrdom operation has a similar set up and framing according to the statement. The nature of the statements, however, changed in the immediate aftermath of the chemical weapons deployment against mainly Sunni populated quarters in the suburbs of Damascus. As such, all non-Sunni segments of Syrian society have been declared as legal to kill out of revenge, spreading the association of guilt to the regime across a wide network of parties active in the Syrian conflict, allowing jihadist media foundations to capitalize in full on this changed sentiment of sectarianism inside the country.

Capitalizing on Sectarianism: Revenge Operations in the Region of Dar'a

The third statement of the *al-'ayn bi l-'ayn* series employs a similar rhetoric as in the first two installments and re-emphasizes the general motivation of revenge. The attack in the region of Dar'a against “soldiers of the regime and the *Shabiha*” intends to validate JN’s existence throughout Syria, not just in the north. Therefore, the unity of JN, in parts with allied brigades and outlets, is a reaction to what

“occurred in response by all of the *Mujahidin* in the north, south, east and west against the insane and possessed hand of the regime tormenting the right of our people in al-Ghawta al-Sharqiyya. So that they may taste of the same cup they have had to taste.”⁵⁰⁰

The statement declares that on August 23, 2013 JN with “some of the Islamic brigades in the region the countryside of Dar'a liberated what is know as the town of Hara al-Badu.” This suburban town “consists of dozens of buildings occupied by more than 150 soldiers of the *Nusayri* army.” As previous assaults failed,

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁰ Daman silsilat al-'ayn bi-l 'ayn (3) tahrir Hara al-Badu fi Dar'a al-Balad min junud al-nizam wa-l shabiha, August 26, 2013.

“God now enabled His servants on this blessed day to liberate most buildings after a specially prepared car was exploded within the main building of the *Shabiha*. After the [initial] explosion the lions stormed the area and had been able – by the praise of God – to liberate more than 30 buildings.”⁵⁰¹

The statement concludes and claims, “among the killed soldiers was an Iranian officer.”

Repentance for Sunnis fighting with Assad – Execution in the mainframe of The Islamic State

Revenge operations against non-Sunni Muslims in Syria by jihadist actors have become a standard *modus operandi*, especially after the alleged deployment of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime in the Damascus suburb of al-Ghawtat al-Sharqiyya in August 2013. The two most extremist Sunni jihadist groups, *Jabhat al-Nusra*, the formal AQ affiliate for *al-Sham*, and – at the time – *the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham* elevated their propaganda output by emphasizing the confessional war: the mass killing of Sunni civilians by the regime by using chemical weapons can only be answered by *an eye for an eye* logic. The belief that Sunni Islam is the intended target by non-Sunni actors has been reflected by the U.S. occupation of Iraq, where the insurgency was fueled by the argument that the *ahl al-Sunna wa-l jama'a* are not only to be removed from power, but rather be placed under non-Sunni rule – an implication perceived as worse than the reign Saddam Hussein – with the intention to alter the true Islam from within. The expression, to safeguard the *Sunna*, framed as the only legitimate methodology and the sole Islamic representation, under attack by the Shiites and other non-Sunni actors is both a core motivation as well as a central theme of the emergence of al-Qa'ida in Iraq under Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi.⁵⁰² The increasing confessional breaking lines in the Syrian conflict during 2012/13 was marked by public executions of mainly non-Sunnis working for or acting under the

⁵⁰¹ Ibid.

⁵⁰² This had been expressed in the founding document of *the Islamic State of Iraq*, published in November 2006. Outlined in: Nico Prucha, Die Stimme des Kalifats Kanal und die Globale Islamische Medien Front, *Online Jihad*, <http://online-jihad.com/2007/03/12/stimme-des-kalifat-kanal-und-die-globale-islamische-medien-front/>, March 12, 2007.

command of the Alawite dominated regime of Bashar al-Assad. While JN pledged revenge operations against mainly Alawite villages and dignitaries,⁵⁰³ ISIS unleashed a campaign of destroying Sufi shrines and Shiite holy sites within Syria, and yet are keen to execute Sunnis who are siding with al-Assad.

The systematic war against non-Sunnis has even more so become a standard with groups such as *The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham* on the rise. Nevertheless, with clear operational rules of engagement on how to deal with Sunni traitors, the jihadists' intention is to root-out such apostates just like any non-Muslim in general. Anyone not siding with and subjecting oneself to the rules of the jihadist groups framed and branded as a conspirator of the al-Assad regime, as a spy, or worse, as a *Shabiha* or soldier. In the aftermath of the chemical weapons attack, ISIS was keen to showcase the implementation of ideology, as set by leading ideologues like Abu Basir al-Tartusi or Abu Yahya al-Libi, and published a video showing the confession, the repentance (*tawba*) and subsequent execution of a Sunni *Shabiha*. This video is of particular interest, as, with the lengthening of the war inside Syria that is more than merely a civil war with outsiders joining either Sunni or Shiite/governmental factions, the dealing with a Sunni fighting on behalf of the regime is a propaganda coup exploited by ISIS. With Iran reinforcing the regime by boots on the ground and substantial material support, with the Shiite-Lebanese *Hizbullah* playing a decisive role in favor of al-Assad the opposing force, mainly by ISIS, is made up of foreign fighters from all over the world. Any Sunni caught, especially by ISIS, is subject to the most extreme jihadist interpretation of *shari'a law*, and as such subject to this judiciary ruling as set by ISIS - nothing more or less than an actual *kangaroo trial*.⁵⁰⁴ In this case, a young Sunni who openly confesses of having committed crimes as a *shabih*, a member of al-Assad's paramilitary group, subscribes to this ideology as a prisoner on death row as much as his executors, who outline his fate.

On December 21, 2013, ISIS's sister media department of *al-Furqan, al-I'tasimu*,

⁵⁰³ As detailed in the chapter and the following subchapters of: An Eye for an Eye: Punishing Alawites as Revenge for Use of Chemical Weapons by the Regime.

⁵⁰⁴ As noted in the subchapter Drone Strikes and Spies Among us – Televising Confessions and Executions. For further reading: Nico Prucha, Kangaroo Trials - Justice in the Name of God, in: Rüdiger Lohlker, Jihadism: Online Discourses and Representations, V&R unipress: Goettingen, 2013, 141-207.

Findings of this study have already been published on *Jihadica*, Prucha, Nico and Fisher, Ali: Death from above – jihadist virtual networks respond to drone strikes in Yemen, *Jihadica*, May 15, 2014, <http://www.jihadica.com/death-from-above-jihadist-virtual-networks-respond-to-drone-strikes-in-yemen/>

published the 37th installment of the notorious *Window into the Battlefield* series (نوافذ على ارض الملاحم). It was published by – at the time – the corresponding Twitter account @e3tasimu, which after the initial shutdown moved to @wa3etasimu but has since been shut down time and again.⁵⁰⁵

Three days later the video was published on the jihadist forums by the official forum account of the *al-I'tasimu Media Foundation*.⁵⁰⁶ The video received a proper banner advertising for it on the forum's main page and was framed accordingly as

“A window into the territory of the epic battle – 37. Sentencing a *shabhiha* to death for his role in aiding the bombings of Muslims.⁵⁰⁷ There is no God but God; Muhammad is the Messenger of God. The Islamic State of Iraq and *al-Sham*.”⁵⁰⁸



Figure 10 The official banner by the *al-I'tasimu* media foundation advertising the “death sentence of a *shabih* artillery guide against Muslims”

The subtitle of the four-minute video gives the audience the full understanding of what to expect: “The implementation of the rule [of God] on a *shabiha*, after his

⁵⁰⁵ As of writing no official account of *al-I'tasimu* has managed to stay alive on Twitter. Especially after the *Islamic State* executed U.S. journalist James Foley in a move to coerce the White House to stop airstrikes in Iraq against IS positions on August 20, 2014, account suspension and content removal on Twitter but also on sites such as justpaste.it have increased. This increase of content removal as well as the technical and human ability to sight, identify and subsequently remove extremist content has, however, only affected the spread of propaganda on a marginal basis. With some of the official Twitter accounts under threat of constant removal, the *al-I'tasimu* operators moved their account to the Russian VK social media platform, <http://vk.com/ale3tasim>. Islamic State supporters on Twitter, in multiple languages disseminate new videos and download links created on their own behalf to their followers, rendering the removal of the *al-I'tasimu* accounts from Twitter rather ineffective. For details on content dissemination by sympathizers and fans online, please consult the chapters: *Enter the 'Jihadi Twittersphere'* and: *The Role of Twitter and the Most Important Accounts to Follow – by Advice of a Shumukh al-Islam Forum Member*.

⁵⁰⁶ <https://shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=216933>, December 24, 2013.

⁵⁰⁷ Most likely this young man, he appears to be in early twenties, was dispatched as some kind of spotter to guide and direct grenade or artillery fire.

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid. Another description of the video is set as “implementing the *shari'a* law rule on a *Shabih* who supported the *Nusayri* regime, after his repentance.”

repentance.”⁵⁰⁹ As a Sunni he is given the option to repent (*tawba*), so that God may be merciful on him after his death. His executors clearly tell him, based on the Qur’anic reading of 5:34, he may repent, but his death by the hands of ISIS is inevitable. This is the conversion of ideology into action, accordingly with the jihadist interpretation of 5:34, that

“unless they repent before you overpower them – in that case bear in mind that God is forgiving and merciful.”⁵¹⁰

As per definition of jihadist ideologues and scholars, who convey their opinions as legally binding rulings via social media outlets,⁵¹¹ videos such as this one enhance the cluster of extremist ideology – and their filmed output of implemented policies of militant groups that in turn enter the virtual realms as well.⁵¹² This video is a sample of the intersection of *off-* and *online*, whereas the militant groups are a medium as much as the consumers and producers of such content.⁵¹³ Another noteworthy element is the jihadist’s equation of life, executing this *shabiha* by the premises of retribution (*qisas*), as he is sought responsible for the deaths of Sunni Muslims. The term *qisas* is a reference to the Qur’an, whereas the *shari’a* council of ISIS seeks to apply a clear ruling on a member of al-Assad’s paramilitary *shabiha*, one of the regime’s most brutal and loyal units. The *shabiha* are sought responsible for the mass killings of civilians without providing a direct link to the Syrian regime. These “ghosts” (*shabiha*) are “tools of the regime seeking to dissociate themselves itself from atrocities.”⁵¹⁴ The notorious *shabiha* are at the center of the grievances echoing out of Syria since the start of the revolution, the execution of one of them by the *Islamic State* seeks to imply the application of not only *retribution* but also of the jihadist

⁵⁰⁹ *Nawafidh ‘ala ard al-malahim, al-i’tasimu* series, 37.

⁵¹⁰ This verse is applied to Sunnis who are captured and whose subsequent *tawba* is thus rendered ineffective. Other applications of Qur’an 5:34 are detailed in *Drone Strikes and Spies Among us – Televising Confessions and Executions* and in particular in the chapter *Mediating Historical Sources to Sanction Physical Punishment*.

⁵¹¹ As discussed in the chapter *Mediating Historical Sources to Sanction Physical Punishment*.

⁵¹² The chapter *Drone Strikes and Spies Among us – Televising Confessions and Executions* highlights another sample on how the specific interpretation of the Qur’an is used as the ultimate guidance to execute a Sunni Muslim spy in Yemen.

⁵¹³ As outlined in the chapter: *A new generation of shuhada’ – Pathways and Intersections of the On- and Offline Worlds*.

⁵¹⁴ Rana Moussaoui, Most Loyal Loyalists to Assad or Shabiha are Heart of Horror Scenarios in Syria, *Middle East Online*, <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=52762>, June 11, 2012.

principle of *an eye for an eye*.⁵¹⁵ The foundation of *qisas*, or retribution, is set on the Qur’anic reading of Surat al-Baqara (The Cow), verse 179:

“Fair retribution saves life for you, people of understanding, so that you may guard yourselves against what is wrong.”

Furthermore, the notion is nourished by Qur’an 5:45, stating in the *words of God (kalimat allah)*:

“In the Torah We prescribed for them a life for a life, an eye for an eye, a nose for a nose, an ear for an ear, a tooth for a tooth, an equal wound for a wound.”

This basic interpretation is in line with what al-Qa’ida’s main ideologue Abu Mus’ab al-Suri proscribed, for any

“aggression against Muslims necessitates retaliation in the same manner (*‘amaliyat bi-l-mithl*) or operations that deter aggression (*rad’ al-‘adwan*).”⁵¹⁶

As outlined in the previous chapters, jihadists oftentimes refer to the very principle of *an eye for an eye*. While the ‘classical’ al-Qa’ida school of thought uses this sentiment to primarily justify and refer to attacks within the west,⁵¹⁷ to avenge and punish interference with and occupation of Islamic territory, *the Islamic State* in this regard applies this understanding to engage in local enemies in Syrian and Iraq. The reading of the Qur’an is further instilled by the concept of “giving full measure”

⁵¹⁵ Jihadist factions such as *Jabhat al-Nusra* also seek to capitalize on this grievance by having sworn revenge for the massacring of Sunnis at the village of al-Houla. For further reading, please turn to the chapter: *AQ’s Syrian Stakeholder Jabhat al-Nusra on Twitter*; in particular the subchapter: *Case Studies of three prominent users*.

⁵¹⁶ Citing Philipp Holtmann: *The Concept of Deterrence in Arab and Muslim Thought*, Manuskript, 2012.

For further reading: Philipp Holtmann: *Abu Musab al-Suri’s Jihad Concept*, Tel Aviv, Dayan Center, 2009, chapters 8-9; Also: Abu Mus’ab al-Suri, “*Dawat al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya al-Alamiyya*”, published on the Internet, 2004, accessed June 24, 2012 – <http://archive.org/details/Dawaaah>.

⁵¹⁷ For example the German language jihad video by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, featuring Mounir Chouka who asks the audience: “what would you do, if somebody where to ignite explosives on German soil following the example of the Bundeswehr airstrike on September 4, 2009 in Kunduz, killing scores of people?” *Böses Vaterland*, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, *Jund allah Media*, February 2012.

(*qistas*) to the enemies or transgressors to repay them in full for their offensives against Sunni communities.

“Give full measure when you measure, and weigh with accurate scales: that is better and fairer in the end.” 17:35

While concepts such as the proper measuring is often used within the ideological frame of reference to sanction wider or general attacks against defined enemies, this also has a direct impact within the Syrian civil war for Sunni jihadist factions. It is simply a part of the application and implementation of *shari'a* conduct in times of war within Arab countries like Syria and Iraq – where old grievances and association by guilt are placed on individuals taken captive by militant groups. The extremist interpretation of religious sources⁵¹⁸ and the audio-visual output thereof, in this case offering a Sunni prisoner to repent before his execution, furthers the theological validation and showcases the practical angle of using modern media to boost the image of militant groups posing as a “state”. A similar narration and at the same theological guidelines apply worldwide not only for groups, but also for individuals acting on behalf of this jihadist ideology.⁵¹⁹

As recent videos from Egypt for example show, this ideological torrent has become essentially an integral substrate for Middle Eastern jihadist groups and movements, influenced and guided by *the Islamic State* who mastered to apply al-Qa’ida ideology and reasoning in practical terms.⁵²⁰

⁵¹⁸ For example the extremist analysis of selected *hadith*, statements by Prophet Muhammad, by Abu ‘I-Hasan al-Azdi, *al-Qistas al-‘adl fi jawwaz qatl atfal wa-nisa’ al-kuffar mu’aqiba bi l-mithl*, Ansar al-Mujahideen forum, 1432 a.H.

⁵¹⁹ The discourse following the killing and attempted beheading of a British soldier in Woolwich, London, was set in the words of the two assailants by the logic of *an eye for an eye*. This attack in early 2013 was credited in the English-language *Inspire* magazine, 11th Edition (2013), 24-25.

For a practical discours of *al-mithl bi l-mithl*, justifying operations against western targets for the sake of “defending Muslim countries”: Abu Mus’ab al-Suri, *Da’wa al-muqawama al-Islamiyya al-‘alimiyya*, 933. Al-Suri references *al-mu’amala bi l-mithl*, to imitate the acts of the enemies, thus exercising the principle of retribution in full.

⁵²⁰ Al-Qisas al-hiyyat, *Ajnad Masr*, https://twitter.com/ajnad_misr_am/status/456777846598283264, published May 18, 2014. This twenty-minute long video equates police brutality and military state repression against the Muslim Brotherhood members protesting to support ousted pro-MB Muhammad Mursi to the targeted killing and attacks on individuals and high-ranking officers of the “security organs.” The film follows two media strategies: (i) showcasing targeted assassinations of key players



Figure 11 the “implementation of the *shari’a* conduct” is announced with a picture of the prisoner in black and white.

A Mujahid who clarifies his inevitable misery, addresses him directly in the opening of the video, showing the sentenced prisoner with a caption reading “the implementation of the *shari’a* rule upon a *shabih* who aided the *Nusayri* regime, after his repentance.” The video sequence turns from color to black and white showing a still of the prisoner. The equation (*qisas*) is put in practical terms by the following sequence, where a Mujahid of the *Islamic State* asks the *shabih*:

“How many have you killed? You have committed apostasy on the religion of God; exchanged your loyalty to the disbelievers over the loyalty to Muslims. You have slain the *awliya*’⁵²¹ [here: Muslims] of God, exalted is He, therefore you will be ruled upon by the concept of retribution (*qisas*). If you were to repent to God, exalted is He:

For this is only between you and God, exalted is He. He may forgive you; you know that whoever kills, he will be killed likewise. Therefore, repent to God, exalted is He and return [to Him]; so repent and seek forgiveness for what you

of the Egyptian security establishment while (ii) avoiding any civilian, any Sunni, casualties, a lesson learned from past mistakes of Egyptian jihadist movements.

⁵²¹ A reference of the Qur’an for the “friends, allies, saints” of God, which is used as a direct, and thus, divine description for Sunni Muslims. The jihadist, in his self-perception, is as much representative as himself one of the *awliya’allah*, and as such in direct relationship to God. The notion of *awliya’* is detailed in the subchapter: *The Value of the Internet for Strategic Communication*.

have done. For only God, exalted is He, can grant you repentance, given what you have done and the amount of your sins. For God, exalted is He, says:

“Say, [God says] my servants who have harmed yourselves by your own excess, do not despair of God’s mercy. God forgives all sins.” 39:53

God will forgive all of your sins. This is between you and God. He will look into your heart. He won’t look at you, He will look into your heart and He will know.”⁵²²

The same argument is used by the AQ ideologue Abu Yahya al-Libi to justify the execution of Sunni Muslims spies. Drawing an analogy to the times of Prophet Muhammad and his companion Hatib b. Abi Balta’a, who wrote a letter to the Quraysh warning of the immediate attack by the Muslims, it was ‘Umar that wanted to behead and excommunicate Hatib as a consequence. Prophet Muhammad, however, affirmed Hatib’s sincerity as a believer in God, merely wanting to warn his family in Mecca, stating to have looked into his heart.⁵²³ While no man has the power to look into another man’s heart as Prophet Muhammad could, the only remaining path, thus, is that no Sunni can be pardoned and only God can pass His final judgment.

The young man who is about to die seems to have accepted his fate. He appears to have been captured without any visible physical harm. He sits as he listens to the conditions outlined above, his hands are tied behind his back and the mujahidin of ISIS treat him - with the camera present - almost in a brotherly manner. The condition of his *tawba* and subsequent execution due to his unforgiving crimes committed as a member of the *shabiha* is framed as a lesson, given by the mujahidin to this Sunni. Despite his exchange of loyalty for al-Assad with God he is not excommunicated, rather, as a Sunni, he receives the special treatment and the option to repent, before being executed. He seems calm and accepting his fate, almost as if he believes that his repenting will save him in the eyes of God, of whom he shall seek the forgiveness and mercy.

The *shabih* asks, “what will the *tawba* consist of?”, answered by one of the mujahidin present,

⁵²² *Nawāfiḍh ‘ala ard al-malahim, al-i’tasimu* series, 37.

⁵²³ As discussed in the subchapter: Hatib bin Abu Balta’a – The First Muslim Spy?

“the *tawba* is all about your life, about what you haven’t swallowed down, but all about your present life and your soul in your body; for God receives the *tawba*, whatever you have concealed inside of you. Therefore, repent to God, exalted and mighty is He, He is the One to forgive you.”⁵²⁴

In a further perhaps unusual move, the *shabih* is offered to give a testimony, in the style of a *nasiha* (advice) to “those who have entered on the same path as you, ingesting your methodology (*minhaj*)?”⁵²⁵ He responds in one simple sentence, hoping that no one will take him as an example following his path in fighting on behalf of the al-Assad regime. While the repentance is suggested to be on free terms of the sentenced *shabih*, the audience certainly does not know or perceives any mechanisms of coercion. If given the option to issue some kind of repentance, which may even be fully hearted after falling into the hands of the Sunni jihadist militants – nevertheless, being a militant with blood on your hands and a Sunni by ‘birthright’ – one may be inclined to understand the cooperation of this condemned individual. The video concludes by the “Mujahidin proceed in implementing the rule of God upon this repenting *shabih*”, blending to the reading of a statement by the jihadists and a confession by the victim in his full name. This is a similar style as groups such as AQAP used in the past⁵²⁶ and continue to use presently operating mainly in and out of Yemen.⁵²⁷

“In the name of God, praise be God’s, peace and blessings upon the messenger of God, by the grace of God, exalted and mighty is He, by His empowerment [for the Mujahidin]: the brothers had been able by the grace of God to capture this *shabih*, of the adulterous debauched regime; [this *shabih*] now testifies in his name in his confession.”⁵²⁸

⁵²⁴ *Nawafidh ‘ala ard al-malahim, al-i’tasimu* series, 37.

⁵²⁵ *ibid.*

⁵²⁶ For example the execution of the American helicopter engineer Paul Marshall Johnson as well as the beheadings of western hostages by Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi in Iraq have a similar to same modus operandi. Not in terms of allowing any kind of repentance, which is unthinkable for non-Sunnis, but in terms of the confessions and subsequent reading of the group’s statement and execution of the hostage. For further details: Nico Prucha, Kangaroo Trials - Justice in the Name of God, in: Rüdiger Lohlker, Jihadism: Online Discourses and Representations, V&R unipress: Goettingen, 2013, 141-207.

⁵²⁷ Please refer to the chapter: Death from Above: Drone Strikes and Abu Yahya al-Libi’s Mainframe to Operationalize *Shari’a* Conduct.

⁵²⁸ *Nawafidh ‘ala ard al-malahim, al-i’tasimu* series, 37.



Figure 12 Proclamation of sentence as given by the *shari'a* court in the province of Idlib.

The confession (*i'tiraf*):

“My name is ‘Abd al-Rahman bin Hasan al-Hasan, from the village of al-Firka, I was involved in maintaining the al-Khurasan⁵²⁹ post, where I was stationed. I guided the shelling from this post to bomb the Tal Khanzir and Wastif, resulting in the destruction of scores of houses in Tal Khanzir. About three houses had been destroyed in Wastif. I killed a young girl there, and [we] burned the agricultural crops.”⁵³⁰

Continuing by a classical layout, after the captive’s confession, a final and formal statement is read out loud by the Mujahidin, based on the “*shari'a* court in the province of Idlib,” further implying to frame this executions as an act of a “state” rather of a militant group.

“Based on the confession of ‘Abd al-Rahman bin Hasan al-Hasan and on his account, of what he stated in the confession, while being in full control of his mental powers: I decree upon you the death sentence. Because of the heavy

⁵²⁹ Al-Khurasan is the historic Islamic reference for Afghanistan. This shows, that this reference is not exclusively for jihadist groups, but also used by Arab regimes who perhaps try to link their armies and standing to the era of Arab power and domination.

⁵³⁰ *Nawafidh ‘ala ard al-malahim, al-i’tasimu series*, 37.

weight of apostasy, that has become clear in this case. We ask God for peace and for forgiveness, and He is the Guardian of success.”⁵³¹

The man having read out the statement and subsequently ruled this death sentence is identified as being the “head of general *shari’a* affairs of ISIS in the province of Idlib.” In the following sequence, “the *shabih* is killed by being shot” - by ISIS standards a humane and quick death compared to the mass-spree of beheadings of combatants, non-Sunnis, local journalists, and western hostages. The *shabih* is executed by being shot in the back of the head with a Kalashnikov rifle. The ISIS soldier shooting him is injured with his arm in a cast. A fellow mujahid assists in holding the rifle steady, with one shot in the back of his head, ‘Abd al-Rahman bin Hasan al-Hasan, who is on his knees, falls over. The video ends and blends to the typical concluding scene of this series.

⁵³¹ Nawafidh ‘ala ard al-malahim, al-i’tasimu series, 37.

Enter the ‘Jihadi Twittersphere’

Ali Fisher⁵³² and the author have recently exchanged thoughts and data regarding the increasing Jihadi use of Twitter in the wake of the Syrian civil war in 2012. By taking an interdisciplinary approach of social-media analysis and cluster network assessment, we decided to elaborate and study the overall jihadi, primarily Arabic language propaganda resonating among the audiences online. The key objective of this analysis is to highlight and decipher some of the core content most often shared on Twitter, allowing conclusions to be drawn about the parts of jihadist propaganda which resonate with a wider audience (and hence shared over and over again). To study the content is one part, knowing which parts and what elemental narratives resonate best with the targeted audience or those who unintentional stepped into the ‘jihadist realm online’. Twitter has manifested as the most potent means of delivery of content, mainly videos, pictures and texts for jihadist media brigades. Any individual that subscribes to the ideology or creed (*‘aqida*) can easily obtain new incitement materials by official and non-official Twitter media activists while by one-click that individual can re-disseminate this content with or without comment to his/her followers.

The recent essay by Abu Sa‘d al-‘Amili on the state of global online jihad⁵³³ lamented a general decline in participation in jihadi online forums. Furthermore, al-‘Amili issued a “Call (*nida*) to the Soldiers of the Jihadi Media”⁵³⁴ demanding that they “return to their frontiers (*thughur*)” elevating their status. Al-‘Amili himself is one of the high-profile clerics, a “prolific “Internet Shaykh”⁵³⁵ on the forums, but is also

⁵³² The author thanks his friend and colleague Ali Fisher for the exchange of ideas and data regarding the Arabic Jihadi ‘Twittersphere’ and for sharing his visualizations of the collected data. He has granted the author permission to use these to outline and embed in this and the following chapters. Ali is an adviser, strategist and author on methods of achieving influence across a range of disciplines including public diplomacy and strategic communication, counterterrorism, child protection, human security, and public health. Across these diverse disciplines his work enables organizations to identify and build networks of influence. His writings include, for example, Ali Fisher, Collaborative Public Diplomacy – How Transnational Networks Influenced American Studies in Europe, palgrave macmillan: New York, 2013.

⁵³³ Cole Bunzel, *Are the Jihadi Forums Flagging? An Ideologue’s Lament*, Jihadica, March 20, 2013, <http://www.jihadica.com/are-the-jihadi-forums-flagging-an-ideologue’s-lament/>.

⁵³⁴ Abu Sa‘d al-‘Amili, *Nida’ ila junud al-‘ilam al-jihadi – ilzamu amakanakum wa-a’udu ila thughurikum*, Fursan al-Balagh li l-I‘lam, March 2013, <http://as-ansar.com/vb/showthread.php?t=85483>, published and accessed April 1, 2013.

⁵³⁵ Brynjar Lia, *Jihadis Debate Egypt*, Part 3, Jihadica, February 7, 2011,

quite active on Twitter with his handle @al3aamili.

Two interrelated causes identified by Abu Sa‘d al-‘Amili were the periods when forums were offline and the migration of users to social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook is evident. This is exacerbated by the movement of “major [jihadi] writers and analysts”⁵³⁶ (*kibar al-kuttab wa-l-muhalilin*) from the forums to social media platforms. This has perhaps increased the momentum of members of tier-one jihad forums to expand onto Twitter while Twitter as a massive communication relay has become the basis for a new generation of sympathizers, posing another intersection. Twitter is a further medium of choice to (re-) disseminate propaganda material in general and is a platform where activists, sympathizers, and actual fighters upload audio-visual and other types into the jihadi hub on a high-frequency rate, granting anyone direct and in parts unfiltered access to real-time events unfolding inside war-torn Syria and other jihadist conflict zones.

Jihadists have aggressively expanded the use of Twitter, in addition to Facebook and YouTube, especially since the outbreak of violence in Syria. During 2011 members of Jihadist forums issued media-strategies and advisory to fellow members prior, as for example is stated in a postings of the *al-Ansar* forum. The posting, initiated by the member “Istishhadiyya” (female martyrdom seeker) is basically a very elemental guide, comprehensive and for beginners, highlighting the effective and fast communication capability.⁵³⁷ The same posting was copy-and-pasted by *Shumukh al-Islam* member Basha’ir within few hours.⁵³⁸ A handbook, compiled by Twitter user @osamh ended up on the jihadi forums to further underline the importance of Twitter as well as its difference to Facebook, where jihadists already have a strong presence.

It took a while for jihadi activism to fully unravel on Twitter, and they have maintained a cohesive as well as detailed presence on this social media platform since the Syrian conflict turned violent in 2012.

<http://www.jihadica.com/jihadis-debate-egypt-3/>.

⁵³⁶ Cole Bunzel, *Are the Jihadi Forums Flagging? An Ideologue’s Lament*, Jihadica, March 20, 2013, <http://www.jihadica.com/are-the-jihadi-forums-flagging-an-ideologue’s-lament/>.

⁵³⁷ A Detailed Description of Twitter, Shabaka Ansar al-Mujahidin, <http://as-ansar.com/vb/showthread.php?t=47834>, published and accessed October 25, 2011.

⁵³⁸ <https://180.235.150.135/~shamikh/vb/showthread.php?p=1058697890#post1058697890>, published and accessed October 25, 2011.

Twitter, and as such social media in general, is in the meantime an integral part of jihadists' media endeavours on the Internet, with the majority of jihadi forums having their official account advertised for on the main pages of the forums.

At first, the strategies to promote Twitter among members of jihadi forums failed to develop substantial traction, but this changed drastically during 2012. When jihadists in and outside of Syria started to use and incorporate Twitter as a medium to disseminate and re-post al-Qa'ida and other propaganda material. Twitter gained quick traction and has since not only become an integral part of every-day jihadist propaganda in terms of receiving new content from official media groups and contributing individuals, but Twitter itself has entered the jihadist perception as the most useful tool for dissemination.

Twitter activism and jihadi supporters

At first Syrian non-violent activists⁵³⁹ used, and continue to use, Twitter as a medium to document human rights abuse and war crimes of the Assad regime, but jihadists quickly adapted that content and the platform for their propaganda.

Social-media smart and professional jihadists adopted this treasure grove for their propaganda. By rebranding and reframing the content created by civil society activists, jihadi propaganda used these grievances to support a key jihadist self-perception; the obligation to respond by force to defend and protect the Sunnites in Syria.

Due to the effect and success of the Syrian based Jihadi groups, other jihadi groups as well as the main forums are adopting the twitter activism, advertising official forum accounts on the main pages with users within the forums using twitter hash tags (#) or references to Twitter users (for example: @al_nukhba). A list of “The most important

⁵³⁹ The Syrian-American Council, *#SMWSyriaOnline: Syrian Activists on Using Internet for the Revolution*, <http://socialmediaweek.org/blog/event/syrian-activists-on-internet-advocacy/#.UvtEPHIWoTF>. Accessed April 27, 2013.

jihadi and support sites for *jihad* and the *Mujahidin* on Twitter” was recently posted on the Shumukh al-Islam forum, allowing users to identify key accounts they might wish to follow, as detailed below.

Individual sympathizers and all those feeling inclined to contribute to the media jihad re-disseminate authoritative files of al-Qa’ida on Twitter on a larger scale. Now all major jihadi media departments, part of militant networks, have their own channels on Twitter, linking to content from the jihadi forums and other social media platforms, primarily YouTube, Facebook, and pictures in general.

Twitter has turned into a primary hub for the distribution of jihadi agitprop files. These Jihadi information sharing networks using Twitter coexist, autonomously, with the classical forums.

These networks carry, for example, samples of the wide range of jihadi propaganda files, in some cases placed first on Twitter, posted via mobile phones from the front lines. As a brief overview, a few samples consisting of:

- martyrs in general and martyrdom operatives (*istishhadiyyun*) announced and identified by their hash tag and Twitter account;
- calls for donations with phone numbers and social media contact information; taking care of the orphans of the martyrs among other civil elements;
- general material of incitement, and the impact of online attained propaganda files used offline are popular and gain plenty of traction,

What are they sharing?

In addition to disseminating their own propaganda, jihadi media activists repurpose content from social movements and non-jihadi groups for their own purposes, framing the non-jihadi actions or demonstrations as part of the global militant struggle. This

has created another ‘grey area’ where analysts have to carefully monitor and decipher such content. The forum administrators and media-activists also are starting to incorporate and misuse Twitter for their purposes, in coordinated attempts to virtually infiltrate legitimate social movements by using the same hash tags and a similar rhetoric to create ideological cohesion – and placing extremist views and files in that virtual sphere while claiming to fight on the ground for the sake of the people.

To analyze jihadi media networks, their sympathizers and followers we have used a combined approach focused on a unique interdisciplinary analysis of the data acquired by technical means and the subsequent and immediate analytical process of its content.

Using these methods we have asked a range of questions, how have jihadi propagandists been able to gain traction and a foothold online? How do they disseminate propaganda content to a global, multilingual audience and what resonates most with that audience? What are the networks through which their content flows and what are the different roles users play within these networks? Ultimately do the different jihadi twitter accounts reach a range of different communities, or is it a small densely interconnected echo chamber?

AQ’s Syrian Stakeholder *Jabhat al-Nusra* on Twitter

Following the outbreak of fighting in Syria it was Syrian non-violent activists,⁵⁴⁰ which used, and continue to use, Twitter as a medium to document human rights abuse and war crimes committed by the regime of Bashar al-Assad.⁵⁴¹ Jihadists, however, soon adapted such content and the platform for their own propaganda

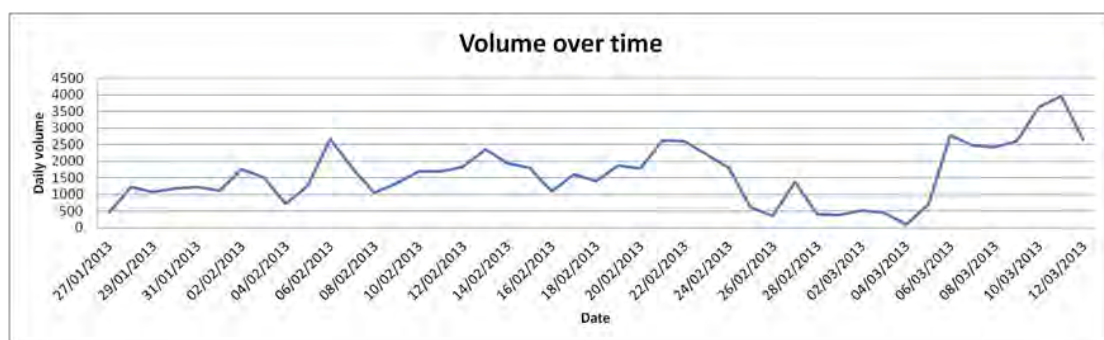
⁵⁴⁰ Interview with Yamen B. in Vienna, December 2013, a young activist who fled the Damascene district al-Ghawtat al-Sharqiyya. He had been persecuted because of his media work documenting the human rights violations by governmental forces. As such images shake the world, the Syrian Army and especially the *Shabiha* militia deliberately target those with cameras in their hands. Despite the neglect of the world and absence of intervention the civil-society media activists continue their dangerous work.

⁵⁴¹ The author thanks Mahmoud Hebbo, an activist from the Qadi ‘Askir part of Aleppo for his insights and media-activism. He has become a war-photographer documenting the war crimes by al-Assad’s forces and jihadi brigades in his home city. His pictures are published on Facebook by the AMC, the “Aleppo Media Center.”

purposes. Social-media smart and professional jihadists adopted this treasure grove for their media agitprop by rebranding and reframing the content created by civil society activists, and using these grievances to support a key jihadist self-perception; the obligation to respond by force to defend and protect the Sunnites in Syria, while framing the conflict as a the emergence of a historical confessional war (*harb ta'ifi*) with the Sunnites finally in reach for their freedom and right to re-establish an Islamic state entity.

The primary jihadist rebel group in Syria before the rise and set-up of the *Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham* (ISIS) had been *Jabhat al-Nusra* (JN). It retains an active role as a major jihadist faction and consists primarily of Syrian nationals fighting within its ranks, although mainly Saudis are frequently seen in their video publications.

@jbhatalnusra is the ‘official’ JN account in Arabic. Although the account has been quiet since April 10th, 2013, there has been a steady increase their following.⁵⁴² In addition to looking at @jbhatalnusra, to understand the resonance of jihadi propaganda, together with Ali Fisher, we identified and analyzed the influential users, the most shared links and the content to which those links lead from 76,000 tweets containing JN related content captured over a period of 50 days in 2013. We captured these tweets containing JN related content from January 27, 2013, to March 18, 2013.⁵⁴³



⁵⁴² At time of writing @jbhatalnusra has just over 60,000 followers, a 33% increase since April 3rd and 6.5% since May 7th.

⁵⁴³ An article of our findings, on which this chapter is based, was published in June 2013: Ali Fisher and Nico Prucha, “Tweeting for the Caliphate: Twitter as the New Frontier for Jihadist Propaganda”, CTC Sentinel, June 2013, West Point.

The *volume over time* chart indicates the usage of the Arabic hash tag corresponding to *Jabhat al-Nusra* on Twitter. The information flow is relatively steady and rose after a preliminary decline in early March 2013 to a new height with close to 4,000 Tweets relating to JN on March 11.

Jabhat al-Nusra's first Twitter account @jbhatalnusra went silent when the group's leader Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani pledged allegiance (*bay'a*) to AQ leader al-Zawahiri. ISIS in the meantime, which is under the command of the Iraqi leader Abu 'Umar al-Baghdadi, has the upper hand with JN demoted. Nevertheless, the media departments of ISIS, *al-Furqan*, *al-Hayyat* and *al-I'tisam*, as well as of JN, *al-Manarat al-Bayda*', promote and publish videos and writings frequently within the tier-one jihadi forums and are scarcely separable in ideological terms, but differ on an operational basis.

JN resorted to its Twitter activities, having migrated from the above mentioned account after the communication ban to the current account⁵⁴⁴ @jbhatALnusra_ and the official account of *al-Manarat al-Bayda*', @JbhtAnNusrah. The Twitter account, however, has since migrated to @JabhtAnNusrah as announced in an official statement⁵⁴⁵ published on December 31, 2013 – within approximately one month, this account attracted almost 35,000 followers while only having published 68 tweets.⁵⁴⁶ As of writing, April 2014, the Twitter handle attracted over 50,000 followers with 150 Tweets, thus perhaps being the groups' most important media outlet to broadcast new material. The statement announcing the new Twitter handle was officially published via the forums and in parallel via Twitter to ensure its authenticity. The migration to this account was coerced as the original one had been banned by Twitter and thus, in the “seventh media statement, the renewal of the official account of *Jabhat al-Nusra* on Twitter with a word to the supporters” is announced. The address to the supporters (*munasirun*) is a thank you letter

⁵⁴⁴ As of November 2013.

⁵⁴⁵ Jabhat al-Nusra, Bayan i'lamī raqm 7, <http://justpaste.it/dyj8>, January 2, 2014.

⁵⁴⁶ As of February 24, 2014, the account accumulated 43,338 followers with 97 tweets.

“for everyone supporting and aiding us as well as their contribution for the media of JN. (...) for you are a vital chapter in the series of *jihad*, by your endeavors and your work the messages of the *Mujahidin* are sent to the *umma* without outside interference. For as you are aware of the truth that whoever defends the *umma*, defending the honor (*ird*) of Muslims while pursuing their well-being “that God might separate the impure⁵⁴⁷ from the good.”^{548,549}

The media savvy JN seeks to maintain authority over its publications while at the same time, however, asking for support in their ambition to crowd-out these materials. The citation of this specific *aya* of the Qur’an in this context seeks to further elevate the media committed supporters of the *Nusra*, boosting the image of its local and foreign fighters alike, embedded in the greater narrative of strive and sacrifice for the collective security of the *umma*. The framework of implanting verses or parts of the Qur’an, as within the JN statement above, grants the authors coherent parameters to interpret these citations in relation to real-world circumstances, emphasizing the jihadists’ role model of what it means to be a ‘true’ Muslim. As the media-*jihad* is equated to physical combat and warfare, God thus likewise sanctions any engagement for the media side of militant groups in His divine command. Thus, “that God might separate the impure from the good” is perhaps the first step for any individual keyboard-JN sympathizer to ‘cleanse’ oneself and be committed.

As the general information war rages on, JN is stern to warn followers and sympathizers that at this time, this is the only official source of JN, on Twitter and the forums. The supporters are tasked to boost the image of JN within the technical *Zeitgeist* framework of the Internet. The statement continues and concludes,

“we are pleased to inform you that – by the praise of God – the official account of JN on the social media site “Twitter” has been renewed, after the cessation of the first. This renewed account is the exclusive and sole source

⁵⁴⁷ The term for “impure”, *khathith*, is a often used reference to distinguish the ‘true’ and pure Muslims from any corruption or corrosion of religion, referring to “secular” governments in general.

⁵⁴⁸ Qur’an 8:37.

⁵⁴⁹ Jabhat al-Nusra, Bayan i’lami raqm 7, <http://justpaste.it/dyj8>, January 2, 2014.

for military and media statements, for any audio and audio-visual content, and official declarations and positions of JN.

We reassure you that as of now we do not have any official website⁵⁵⁰ or forum⁵⁵¹, or any page or group on the social media site “Facebook”. We respect each and everyone of you who wants to support us and who provides us with help. However, do not use the phrase “*mu’assassat al-Manarat al-Bayda*”⁵⁵²; do not use this name to associate with us to prevent confusion when you are our supporters. For you are proactive appointees tasked with the dissemination of our audio-recordings and our messages sent out via our official [Twitter] account and by all other means available – may God grant you steadfastness and reward you.

Therefore, our official media material related to “*mu’assassat al-Manarat al-Bayda*” is to be published on the following sites:

Shabakat al-Fida’ al-Islamiyya

The Forums of Shabakat Shumukh al-Islam

Shabaka Ansar al-Mujahidin.”⁵⁵³

The importance of the tier-one jihadist forums at the time before the violent clashes with ISIS Front’s methodology of publishing credible material by verifiable means. As outlined above, the main jihadi forums, primarily *Shumukh al-Islam*, dropped JN and banned it from these jihadi information highways. In a statement issued by the *Shumukh al-Islam* administration regarding “the position of the *Shumukh al-Islam* forum of the latest events in *al-Sham*” *Jabhat al-Nusra* was criticized for fighting against “the State” (ISIS). The forums’ statement acknowledges the al-Qa’ida leadership in Afghanistan, notably Ayman al-Zawahiri, and prohibits any member to

⁵⁵⁰ The main website of JN has been <http://jalnosra.com> - the site has been running with offline intervals. The site and its forum had been down when the statement was published.

⁵⁵¹ The pertaining forum to the above mentioned website is <http://jalnosra.com/vb>. Neither the website nor the forum are of grave importance, the main communication hub for JN is Twitter. The static website, however, serves as a database where the user can easily download the vast majority of JN audio-visual productions.

⁵⁵² The name of the official media institute of JN.

⁵⁵³ *Jabhat al-Nusra*, Bayan i’lami raqm 7, <http://justpaste.it/dyj8>, January 2, 2014.

dishonor or insult them, threatening to ban any member disrespecting the jihadi leadership in general. With JN having sworn allegiance (*bay'a*) to AQ leader al-Zawahiri, the *Shumukh al-Islam* administration reassures their commitment and employs a diplomatic tone addressing

“*Jabhat al-Nusra* as our brothers, their missionizing calls to the truth (*haqq*) are an obligation for us and so is to guide and revert them [back to their state of piety] unlike what they are doing today. [That they may return] to their passion for us – God is in charge of all affairs in this world. And we will disseminate with the help of God, exalted is He, their victories (*nusra*) in their fight against the *Nusayri*, as they haughtily reclaim. We shall not assist Satan on their behalf, God willing.”⁵⁵⁴

As the forum sides with ISIS, the administration seeks to clarify that no videos or any other electronic publications of JN shall be broadcast to assist them in their current fight against ISIS. This would be a sin for the administration who

“call on all our members with special concern to the senior contributors that they may engage in reconciliation (*sulh*) between the *Mujahidin*; calling them to unite the rows in a peace building effort, relinquishing the differences, responding to God, exalted is He.”⁵⁵⁵

The forum administration does emphasize and

⁵⁵⁴ “Important Statement – Declaration of the Position of the Shumukh al-Islam Forum regarding Recent Events in al-Sham, <https://shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=220209>, March 14, 2014. Accessed April 2, 2014.

⁵⁵⁵ Ibid.

“call on our brothers of *The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham* and our brothers of *Jabhat al-Nusra* to “let them be mindful of God”⁵⁵⁶ – high and exalted is He – to hasten consent on establishing mutual *shari’a law* courts to resolve the allegations among them.”⁵⁵⁷

The ban from the majority of the tier-one forums – with the option of return at some point – however, is not an immense setback for JN. The strategic crow-out communication methods continue unaffected on Twitter. The emphasis and the verification of JN’s Twitter handle via the statement issued by the forums before the ban guarantees that JN remains in charge of its materials with the hierarchy of the inner senior rank in charge of the media approving all files while ensuring the high-quality editing thereof. With both the high quality material at hand and the verified and independent channels via the social-media, JN is able to compete with ISIS nevertheless. As all professional jihadi groups maintain ‘rules of engagement’, so does JN restrict its fighters to uploading their own videos without any leadership control, showing that the inner organizational structure of JN remains widely unaffected by the ban from the tier-one forums. Nevertheless, the mutual accusation of JN and ISIS claiming the respective group has lost its sincere *manhaj* continues online on all channels. While ISIS propagates mainly various foreigners (*muhajirun*) who left JN because of the group’s alleged misconduct in religious affairs and open enmity towards ISIS,⁵⁵⁸ *Jabhat al-Nusra* initiated a series entitled *mubahala* (imprecation or cursing). In this series scholars lash out against ISIS and primarily against Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. According to the *mubahala*, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi

⁵⁵⁶ *yatuqu l-llah* is a reference to Qur’an 4:9, relating to mercy for orphans and speaking out for justice.

⁵⁵⁷ “Important Statement – Declaration of the Position of the Shumukh al-Islam Forum regarding Recent Events in al-Sham, <https://shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=220209>, March 14, 2014. Accessed April 2, 2014.

⁵⁵⁸ One out of many examples is the account of a German convert who left *Jabhat al-Nusra* after experiencing their insincerity; “I was afraid for my [proper] *jihad*”, claiming that other groups “receive support from the Americans, the Crusaders”, while ISIS is the only true jihadist entity. Following the logic of *iman* (belief), *hijra* (migration), *jihad*, and this German foreign fighter continues to call on Muslims in Germany to join ISIS to fight for justice and freedom within the framework of the *Islamic State*. Ein deutscher Mujahid spricht über die Al-Nusra Front und ISIS, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e7MiizUJHoU>, March 2, 2014. The YouTube channel, “Indy Journalists”, is a German dominated media outlet showing various attacks in Syria where Germans participated in and propagates pro-jihadi Salafis in Germany, <http://www.youtube.com/user/INDYJOURNALISTS/videos>.

has not only betrayed the proper *manhaj* and AQ, but is a traitor to all of his predecessors who nevertheless had pledged allegiance to the AQ leadership.

By this series and by empowering JN-clerics, JN seeks to dismantle ISIS on a theological-ideological basis, framing the *Islamic State* as a renegade group and this misguided. Unlike JN, ISIS did not pledge allegiance to AQ leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, thus JN attempts to capitalize on the formal al-Qa'ida backing. ISIS issues Arabic language videos with English subtitles – to attract more non-Arabs from abroad, to further build up their strength (in terms of combat and media-wise) that is based on the influx of foreign fighters from neighboring countries as well as from western states.

The independency of the established forums and the reliance on Twitter is further illustrated by a follow-up Tweet by JN on March 2, 2014. Linking to the platform justpaste.it,⁵⁵⁹ JN clarified JN-affiliated and approved Twitter handles, promoting another media foundation and three clerics as an essential part. By contextualizing Qur'an 12:108 as the divine command to propagate Islam by all means, the statements opens:

“all praise be God, who said: “Say, ‘This is my way: based on clear evidence, I, and all who follow me, call [people] to God – glory be to God! – I do not join others with Him.’”⁵⁶⁰

Peace and blessing be upon His messenger, who said: “For God has rightly guided one single, this is more beneficent for you than to have all the riches” (...). For the *al-Basira* Media Foundation (@Albasira_JN) is an official media outlet and part of JN. This means that this media foundation publishes legitimate and missionizing media files of scholars and the *Mujahidin* seeking knowledge on the territory of *al-Sham*. All of the publications illustrate JN and their proper methodology and showcase samples of JN's politics and reasoning as based on *shari'a* law [conduct].

⁵⁵⁹ <http://justpaste.it/elq8>, March 2, 2014.

⁵⁶⁰ In a typical self-perception, the jihadist media activists of JN assumes a direct relationship to God, understanding as being addressed by God in this *aya* as those who follow Him.

Several members of JN's general *shari'a* council are active on the social media platform "Twitter", their handles are as following:

Shaykh Abu Mariyya al-Qahtani (@alghreebmohajer);⁵⁶¹

Shaykh Dr. Sami al-Oride (@sami_oride);⁵⁶²

Shaykh Abu Sulayman al-Muhajir (@abusulayman321).⁵⁶³

The statement concludes by emphasizing that any misconduct by any member of JN will be held accountable by corresponding *shari'a* law principles. This includes members of the media as well as the fighting groups – threatening individuals with being expelled for any mischief, if necessary. After tensions and fighting surged with the former ally and new rival ISIS, JN seeks to strengthen its ranks by assuring the members are loyal to the group. This coincides with JN's claim of being the only valid AQ stakeholder in Syria, implemented the proper *shari'a* conduct and judiciary for the Sunni Muslim populace – while ISIS employs the same rhetoric demoting *Jabhat al-Nusra* merely as the "front of [Abu Muhammad] al-Jawlani".

The Twitter activism of JN continues after the rift with ISIS and is as adaptable and innovative as ever.

⁵⁶¹ As of April 2, 2014, this handle has over 50,000 followers with about 9,000 Tweets. The avatar is a picture of the al-Aqsa Mosque with the profile describing the cleric as denying any form of citizenship as long as the mosque remains occupied.

⁵⁶² This account has about 23,000 followers with close to 1,500 Tweets, following 41 as of April 2, 2014. The profile simply states "o God, our lives are for Your religion and our *umma* on Your path. Qa'ida al-Jihad on the Land of *al-Sham*."

Al-Basira promotes and tweets under the has tag #البصيرة with the attempt to gain traction for their cleric al-Oride. YouTube videos of al-Oride, by titles such as "Waypoints on the proper methodology of the rightful forefathers." The two-part video was last promoted via Twitter on March 27, 2014, but has had received a little over 2,000 views on the announced YouTube link, https://twitter.com/Albasira_jn/status/449161182277296128. Accessed April 6, 2014.

Al-Oride is seated below a palm tree showing his walkie-talkie attached to his military fatigue off, implying to the audience of being a scholar and a fighter.

⁵⁶³ A foreigner, indicated by the chosen surname *al-muhajir* (who has migrated) ranks lasts on Twitter with a little over 7,000 followers, about 400 Tweets, while following 140. The profile states "Organization al-Qa'ida in *al-Sham*". This individual, cast off as a legitimate Islamic scholar like the others, is likewise present on YouTube giving sermons, for example: https://twitter.com/Albasira_jn/status/448448054857695233, March 25, 2014.

This pseudo scholar, however, reads his lecture from a flat screen sitting in front of a book shelf and is less charismatic than most self-appointed scholars in the jihadi scene.

Datasets of Jabhat al-Nusra on Twitter

Jabhat al-Nusra disseminates content using #جبهة_النصرة the original short version of the name in Arabic for which the group has become known.⁵⁶⁴ Through an analysis of the tweets containing the Arabic hashtag (#) for *Jabhat al-Nusra* the network sharing content via Twitter was identified.⁵⁶⁵ As table 1. shows there are a few users that frequently tweeted using the #جبهة_النصرة tag during the above detailed 50 day period:

Username	No. of Tweets using #جبهة_النصرة
Nasser1437	1257
zhoof21	593
al_khansaa2	363
qmzp1434	359
alshohdaa	300
az_241	287
Jalaaad_alshi3a	265
SaifAlbayan	254
shame210	230
ROOH_GNAN	223

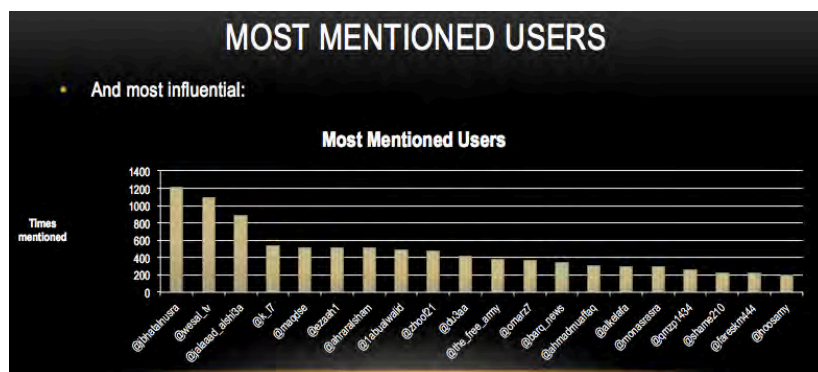
⁵⁶⁴ The full name of the group, according to the signature of statements and as seen on the group's black banner is *Jabhat al-Nusra li Ahl al-Sham* – “The Victorious Front for the People of Greater Syria.”

⁵⁶⁵ Analysis of the first two weeks of aggregated data, previously published on Jihadica identified a network of 12,253 connections between 7,051 accounts that were either actively sharing content via retweet or were mentioned in a tweet containing #جبهة_النصرة. 95% of the users formed a single interconnected information sharing network. Only 352 of the 7,051 users observed tweeting using #جبهة_النصرة did not interact with at least one member of this network.

<http://www.jihadica.com/jihadi-twitter-activism-part-2-jabhat-al-nusra-on-the-tweetsphere/>

Top tweeters of #جبهة النصرَة

Active users are those with a lot to say, however, it does not indicate whether anyone is listening or interested. To assess who users considers influential, the most frequently mentioned in tweets containing #جبهة_النصرة were identified.



Top 10 most mentioned users

Over the 50 days of data collection, users sharing tweets containing the #جبهة_النصرة tag created 45,959 connections between 20,459 users. 96.5% of these users were part of a single interconnected network.⁵⁶⁶ The most mentioned users are those that have been most frequently mentioned and this created the potential for them to be influential as users within the network have chosen to mention them. The two most influential Twitter-accounts using the JN hashtag are @jhalaaad_alshi3a, who appears to be a radical al-Qa’ida follower probably based in northern Syria and @wesal_TV, the “official account of the [Saudi] Wesal [satellite] Television Network”.⁵⁶⁷

⁵⁶⁶ A smaller version of this network can be seen: <http://www.jihadica.com/jihadi-twitter-activism-part-2-jabhat-al-nusra-on-the-tweetsphere/>.

⁵⁶⁷ @Wesal_TV actively addresses the on going fighting against the Assad regime, calling for financial, material, and personal support for the Sunnites in Syria. For a full discussion see: <http://www.jihadica.com/jihadi-twitter-activism-part-2-jabhat-al-nusra-on-the-tweetsphere/>

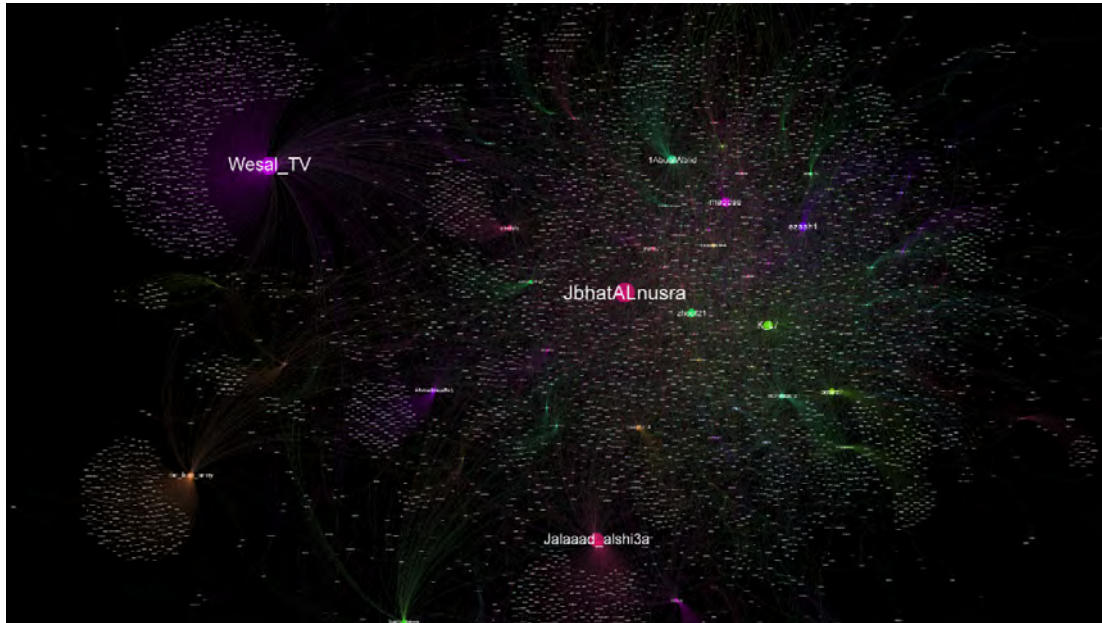


Figure 13 Visualizing 76,000 Tweets all related to #جبهة_النصرة

Information flow of tweets using #جبهة_النصرة – Nodes in this network represent users. Users that retweet or @mention another user are connected by a line representing the flow of information.

Case Studies of three prominent users

To begin the analysis, we shall have a brief look into the two most influential Twitter-accounts using the JN hashtag and being two of the most frequently mentioned users:

1. @wesal_TV, the “official account of the [Saudi] Wesal [satellite] Television Network.”
2. @jalaaad_alshi3a, who appears to be a radical al-Qa’ida follower probably based in northern Syria.
3. @ barq_news, bottom left in figure 2, a pseudo-news outlet part of a wider cluster-network focusing on Iraq, Ahwaz and Syria.

The Saudi [satellite TV station Wesal](#), a global television network had over 290,000 followers on Twitter as of April 2013. One year later, on April 7, 2014, this account has attracted a little over 440,000 followers. Thus, this account is even more than essential for *Jabhat al-Nusra* propaganda-wise. @Wesal_TV actively addresses the on going fighting against the Assad regime, calling for financial, material, and personal support for the Sunnites in Syria. This further promotes the confessional war in Syria, the Sunnites cause in general and an open enmity to the Shiites in Iraq and Syria. This is emphasized by the Arabic hashtag for *الرافضة* (*al-rafida*), a negative term used by Wahhabis and jihadists alike to insult Shiites.

@wesal_TV is a particularly important node in this network as in addition to the airing of recruitment videos for the Free Syrian Army⁵⁶⁸ throughout its global satellite TV network. Links to JN and other jihadi groups on YouTube are disseminated to those following @Wesal_TV on Twitter. In addition, individuals are promoted as role models via Twitter and the popular clips are also uploaded on YouTube by sympathizers and activists. This highlights a key element, for Twitter has become the main hub for the active dissemination of links guiding users to digital content hosted on a range of other platforms – within a wide cluster of information across different platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, etc. Even when the classical online jihadist forums are dysfunctional, Twitter remains operational and ready-to-use for jihadist media activists or media outlets of armed groups. A novelty that may emerge as a new trend is the use of Twitter even during active and on-going military operations, as the *Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahidin* have resorted to during their attack on the Kenyan West Gate Mall.⁵⁶⁹

⁵⁶⁸ For example, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m1FW-YFu1DE>.

⁵⁶⁹ Harriet Alexander, *Tweeting Terrorism: How al Shabaab Live Blogged the Nairobi Attacks*, *The Telegraph*, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/kenya/10326863/Tweeting-terrorism-How-al-Shabaab-live-blogged-the-Nairobi-attacks.html>, September 22, 2013.

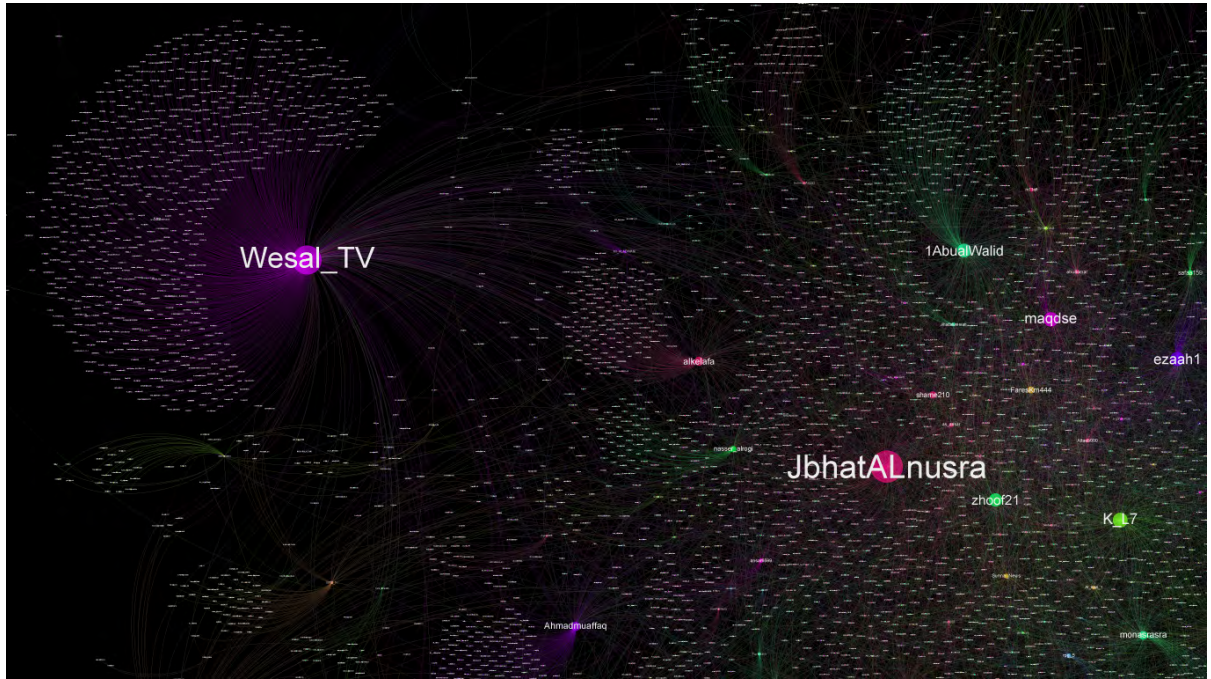


Figure 14 Focus on Wesal_TV - Wesal_TV is an important influence multiplier for @JbhatALnusra

@Wesal_TV, however, is pro-active in promoting the *Mujahid* role model. Promoting YouTube links has a massive effect in terms of views. On April 3, 2013, for instance, @Wesal_TV tweeted:

“A heroic *Mujahid* throws a grenade at a tank of Assad’s [army]. While not succeeding to blow it up, he returns to throw another one, without any fear or hesitation. [Look at] 1 minute 15 seconds.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VoFRXks2X68>.”



In the video, a man throws a hand grenade into the muzzle of a T-72 tank, but misses at first. Not discouraged, he returns and succeeds, resulting in an explosion inside the tank, destroying it by a massive burst of flames. The *Mujahidin* are introduced as part of the *Katibat al-Hamza Asad Allah*, or “Hamza Battalion Homs”, according to their Facebook group.⁵⁷⁰ The *katiba* (brigade) is part of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), fighting in the vicinity of the city of Homs. The YouTube channel⁵⁷¹ is part of a larger cluster belonging to the *al-Dab’a Media Center* with its Facebook-group.⁵⁷² However, only the video promoted by @Wesal_TV has received attention, with close to 260,000 views as of April 5, 2013 and 2,876 “likes”. According to the video statistics available on YouTube, the clip was viewed nearly 150,000 times on April 3. As of April 7, 2014, the video was viewed over 430,000 times with more than 3,200 “likes”. The clip had been uploaded on April 1. On May 7, 2013, the video was viewed 365,000 times, with over 3,000 likes. The other videos on the YouTube channel⁵⁷³ are marginal, with mostly only having been viewed several hundred times at best.

@jalaaad_alshi3a, the second of our Twitter case studies, is one of the accounts most frequently mentioned in tweets containing #جبهة_النصرة. @jalaaad_alshi3a has 17,005 followers and has been industrious in producing 39,600 tweets as of April 3, 2013. As of May 9, only 500 more followers signed up with roughly 1,000 tweets posted. As of April 7, 2014, this account was followed by more than 27,000, with over 50,000 tweets. The basic notion of this account consists of the hatred of the Shia in principal. The account, however, shifted away from JN in the meantime and is in full support of ISIS, as the profile picture indicates, showing the black banner. A hash tag further indicates the support by referencing #باقية (remain), a one-word slogan made popular of the predecessor *The Islamic State of Iraq* (ISI) when it was nearly defeated by U.S. and allied troops in 2010. As ISI pulled through and is thriving after the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq in December 2011 and with the expansion into Syria, ISIS soldiers often spray paint houses under their control with this one-word slogan. As ISIS is renowned for hunting and executing Shiites and Sunnis deemed as apostates, it

⁵⁷⁰ <http://www.facebook.com/Hamza.Battalion.homs>. Accessed April 5, 2013.

⁵⁷¹ <http://www.youtube.com/user/alldhabah?feature=watch>. Accessed April 5, 2013.

⁵⁷² <https://www.facebook.com/Aldab3.medai.center>. Accessed April 5, 2013.

⁵⁷³ <http://www.youtube.com/user/alldhabah?feature=watch>. Accessed April 5, 2013.

may not be surprising that @jalaaad_alshi3a, translating to *The Hangman of the Shia*, sides with ISIS.

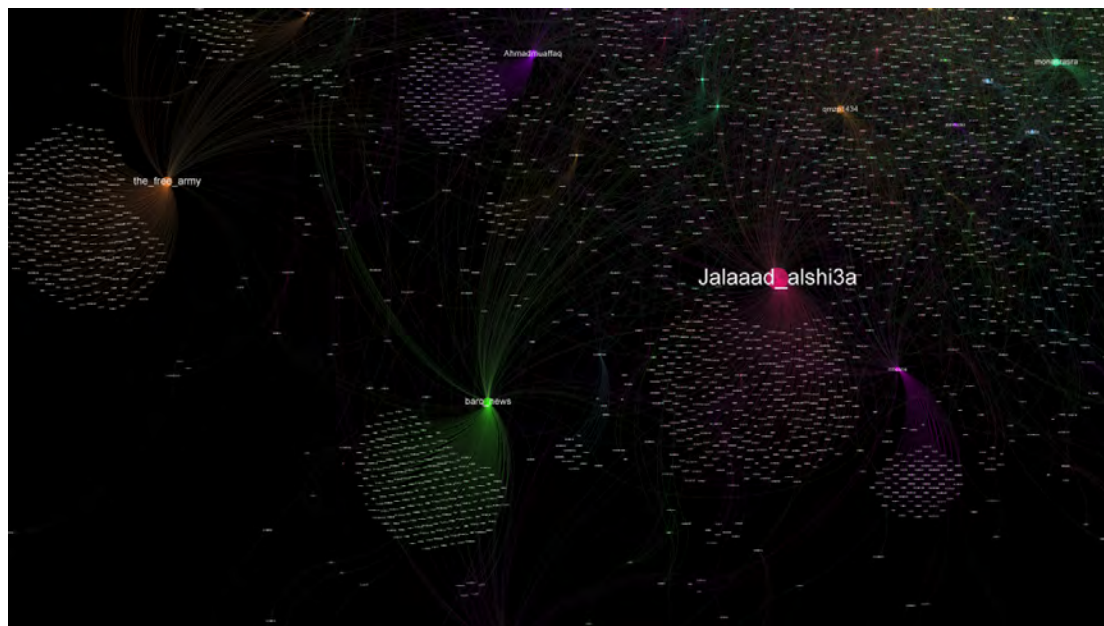


Figure 15 Focus on Jalaaad_alshi3a, one of the main promoters of JN

This user mostly shares videos, of YouTube, showing clips from various JN-affiliated brigades such as *Haraka Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya*,⁵⁷⁴ but also links to videos on YouTube from the above-described satellite station *Wesal*, defaming the Shiites in general. This sentiment is emphasized by YouTube clips⁵⁷⁵ allegedly showing books promoting the Shiite creed in Syria found in army and *Shabiha* bases. Especially ISIS carries this element as a key narrative used in videos. With the hatred towards *Shiism* affecting Sunni communities due to the grim realities in Iraq and Syria, individuals on Twitter such as @jalaaad_alshi3a repost, repack, reproduce and re-disseminate ‘proof’ of a Shiite-angle within the conflict as ISIS regularly claims by photographs and videos. The re-ignited conflict in Iraq after the U.S. withdrawal between the re-emerged *Islamic State* and the Shiite majority government of al-Maliki has resulted in fierce fighting in the contested Sunni province of al-Anbar. With ISIS framing this conflict as a war of Shiites against Sunnis after Iraqi governmental forces massacred unarmed Sunni protestors in Hawija⁵⁷⁶ while in Syria the Iranian Revolutionary Guard

⁵⁷⁴ <http://www.ahraralsham.com>

⁵⁷⁵ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=73G4or7XIys&feature=youtube_gdata_player

⁵⁷⁶ The “massacre of Hawija” (*majazara Hawija*) provoked a violent reaction by the Sunni majority of al-Anbar, driving many into the open arms of ISIS in April 2013. Filmed revenge operations against

and the Lebanese Shia militia *Hizbullah* (Party of God) fight on the side of the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Thus operations of *The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham* against either the Iraqi or Syrian governmental forces are at the centre of @jalaaad_alshi3a's media work, linking to YouTube clips via his Twitter account with appropriate comments.⁵⁷⁷ Videos of ISIS, such as *Protecting the Borders of the City of Aleppo* where the *Mujahidin* had been able to retake control over outskirts of the city in their mission to “hunt the apostates of the *Nusayri* army and the *rafida* of the party of Satan⁵⁷⁸” show scores of burned and otherwise maimed corpses. With the *Mujahidin* advancing on Syrian army positions, combing through the debris of destroyed buildings uncovering and searching the corpses of their killed enemies, Shiite religious items are held into the camera as proof of the sectarian motivated war by al-Assad and his allies.

Other videos include clips of *al-Malahem*, the media department of the Yemeni-based AQ on the Arab Peninsula, videos published by the *Ansar al-Mujahidin* forum, promotional pictures of martyrs – of past conflicts and current from Syria – or sequences of international news outlets to underline the “treatment of Sunnis” inside Iraqi prisons run by the Shiite government of al-Maliki, in this case taken off the Lebanese TV-Station MBC.⁵⁷⁹

Militants and hate groups of all colors and backgrounds use the Internet as a communication facility to lure consumers into their specific interpretation or world

the Iraqi army, termed as *Sufi*, *apostate*, *Shiite* henchmen of the al-Maliki government showing interrogations of captured soldiers and subsequent summary executions are broadcast via Twitter. As a result of the Iraqi government crackdown of peaceful Sunni protestors, ISIS was able to expand its reach and even take control over the cities of Fallujah and Ramadi.

<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/04/iraq-hawija-massacre-politics.html#>, accessed April 7, 2014.

Videos of the *Hawija Massacre* became popular on YouTube, turning into a vital element of grievance for the Sunni audience online, spurring approval of militant reactions. For example: “The protestors of Hawija before the assault of the al-Haliki army”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eSYZeVGFuWU>, uploaded April 23, 2013. Accessed May 4, 2013. “Al-Haliki” (perishing) is a negative wordplay for “al-Maliki”, widely used in jihadist publications claiming continuing victories over the Iraqi army.

⁵⁷⁷ For example clips of ISIS soldiers assaulting the Iraqi army, advertised by @jalaaad_alshi3a as “watch: the power of ISIS: <http://t.co/Y7oS7Tknd>”, linking to YouTube.

https://twitter.com/jalaaad_alshi3a/status/452925060215738368, April 6, 2014.

⁵⁷⁸ Reference to *Hizbullah*, whereas the *hizb al-Shaytan* is by Sunni jihadist reasoning the true character of the Shiite militia.

⁵⁷⁹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z9bGY9Ym2bg>

perception, trying to gain sympathy through modern, pop-cultural elements in relation with a passionate yet powerful comprehensible rhetoric. The rhetoric is inseparable from the (audio-) visual content and enforces key elements such as grievances (ma'ana) and the need to respond, usually framed as a “call” to arms (*nafir*), support, or general action. Early last year, Abu l-Mundhir al-Shinqithi issued such a *nafir*⁵⁸⁰ to join JN, a general question also addressed by Abu Nur al-Filastini on the *Minbar al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad* fatwa forum.⁵⁸¹

On May 31 2013, one week after the massacre of al-Houla,⁵⁸² the *amir* of JN, Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani declared a call to arms (*nafir*) stating, “the sons of Islam await the wrath by the soldiers of JN, responding to the massacre.” The massacre in the town of al-Houla was most likely orchestrated by regime forces and executed by the paramilitary *shabiha* units loyal to Bashar al-Assad. The call by Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani in late May 2013 was widely picked up and received reception among the jihadist online channels with full support for JN as a valid Sunni ‘response force’ with the ambition that any counter-violence would prevent massacres on such a scale for the future. This *nafir* was published by al-Manarat al-Bayda’s official account as a very brief audio-speech and transcribed in the regular jihadi forums, where this call relayed to Twitter by forum-members.⁵⁸³ To highlight that the use of Twitter is an implicit part of the strategic communication strategy, the official statement issued includes hashtags suggestions to make sure that the message is framed and categorized properly when individuals tweet a link of the speech. The tags consist of (in English) “# syria # jihad # nosrah # islamicSpring # freedom”. In a similar strategy of JN’s reasoning of framing revenge by the religious-monotheistic phrase *an eye for an eye* sentiment after the regime deployed chemical weapons against their populace in August 2013, the *nafir* is an attempt to promote JN’s legitimacy to act as a punisher for those deemed responsible for the massacre of al-Houla. A subsequent video published and advertised in the al-Ansar forum⁵⁸⁴ shows the “liquidation of the Lieutenant Colonel, the commanding officer of the *shabiha*, Mahmud Muhammad al-‘Ali” thought responsible for the massacre in al-Houla and Deir al-Zur. As the

⁵⁸⁰ Abu l-Mundhir al-Shinqithi, *Nafir al-‘amm ila Jabhat al-Nusra al-Sham, Minbar al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad*, <http://www.tawhed.ws/r?i=09031201>, March 9, 2013.

⁵⁸¹ http://tawhed.ws/FAQ/display_question?qid=185, May 10, 2013.

⁵⁸² <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jun/01/houla-massacre-reconstructing-25-may>, May 25, 2013

⁵⁸³ <http://as-ansar.com/vb/showthread.php?t=62833>, May 31, 2013.

⁵⁸⁴ <http://as-ansar.com/vb/showthread.php?t=62833>, May 6, 2013.

majority of victims in al-Houla had been Sunnis, the capturing, confession, subsequent execution of the alleged commanding officer responsible for the brutal killings was a direct response by JN, even though it's official media channels did neither claim credit nor publish any 'official' film or statement. JN furthermore promotes the sectarian divide in Syria, a strategy played by both al-Assad as Sunni Jihadi groups; the execution of Mahmud Muhammad al-'Ali is framed as the execution of an Alawite or Shiite who as such is punished for not only conducting the massacre, but is furthermore guilty by association. His given last name al-'Ali serves to fulfil this frame of reference of a wide war of non-Sunnis allied to destroy Sunni Islam. The video⁵⁸⁵ had about 500,000 views and went viral on the *thawrat al-mayadeen*⁵⁸⁶ YouTube-channel, which had been the only video on that channel prior to the removal by YouTube because it violated it's terms.

Links on YouTube

To further investigate the use of Twitter to disseminate links, all shortlinks in the dataset were identified.⁵⁸⁷ After the shortlinks only shared once were discarded, the remaining shortlinks had been shared 34,850 times. Each individual link was shared a mean of 6.4 times (with a median of 3).

Top 10 most shared Shortlinks

1. http://t.co/uBFlnqZ0YU	245
2. http://t.co/MYkNDkYI	200
3. https://t.co/zSyRYqdzC4	197
4. https://t.co/pXjBzxJy	180
5. http://t.co/JeqZAmqs	150

⁵⁸⁵ http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=ZO4eDIvjGuU, May 31, 2013. Link defunct as of writing.

⁵⁸⁶ <http://www.youtube.com/user/almuta2lk?feature=watch>, May 6, 2013.

⁵⁸⁷ URL shortening services save space in microblogs such as Twitter where character limits dominate the nature of the message.

6. http://t.co/EjGyfCxngo	133
7. http://t.co/OpWK6S7WwZ	129
8. http://t.co/EYMjObQ9	129
9. http://t.co/Mzh1SBHPsC	118
10. https://t.co/PJ2YFiiNoW	117

Of the 20 most shared shortlinks, 80% lead to YouTube videos, the other shortlinks lead to pictures shared via Twitter or Facebook. The most frequently shared shortlinks to YouTube content lead to 15 video files which have been watched a total of 440,200 times, although one video file accounted for 250,000 of those views. These videos are an average of 273 seconds in duration and have an average rating of 4.9 out of 5.

Three of the video files had more than one shortlink associated with them, these video files are;

- “The moment of attaining martyrdom by one member of JN” (23,599 views, shared twice);⁵⁸⁸
- “JN: The biggest martyrdom operation in al-Sham [Syria], March 11, 2013.” (241,551 views);
- “The martyr Khalid Abu Sulayman al-Kuwayti of JN” (41,622).⁵⁸⁹

⁵⁸⁸ Such “moments” of a person’s last grasp of life, in Arabic termed as *lahzat al-akhira*, have become a popular phenomena on YouTube where various individuals are filmed by their comrades in Syria just seconds before dying. In the jihadist frame of reference, this is referred to as *lahzat istishhad*, the “final moments” before attaining martyrdom and is applied universally. For example a YouTube account linked to the Free Syrian Army hosts a video entitled “The last moments of attaining martyrdom of the Rap-singer, the *Mujahid* Abu Talha al-Almani – with the permission of God – in Latakiya”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gZCd9XUE7oo>, uploaded and accessed November 23, 2013. Abu Talha al-Almani refers to Denis Cuspert a.k.a. Deso Dogg from Berlin. The video claims to show his body being dragged into a house and placed on a bed where the alleged deceased is filmed in detail. Cuspert, however, resurfaced shortly afterwards. Without explicitly mentioning it, his ‘survival’ is somewhat framed as a *karamat*, a “miraculous wonder”.

⁵⁸⁹ Numbers of views are per link, not in total. All numbers correspond to the number of views on YouTube, as of May 30, 2013. Three links regarding the martyr from Kuwait, Khalid Abu Sulayman, were shared, of which two are identical. The third video is a eulogy in form of a rhyme with various pictures of the fighter whose real name is given as Khalid bin Hadi al-Dihani al-Mutayri. This video has 9,617 views and includes screen grabs of Twitter where JN sympathizers propagated his martyrdom, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1b0a661vKNs>.

The collected metadata of YouTube for the video files to which the most shared shortlinks lead indicates that 7 shortlinks are duplicates, or triplicates – in the sense that more than one shortlink leads to the same video file.⁵⁹⁰ This process resulted in the identification of 12 YouTube video files amongst the shortlinks disseminated prominently via Twitter. All 12 clips are in Arabic, with one exception being in Turkish, as outlined in below. All videos are related to Syria. The video file most frequently shared within our Twitter dataset, has over 17,000 views on YouTube. It shows “the capture of one of the officers of Assad’s army by the heroes of the Free Syrian Army and JN.”⁵⁹¹

Samples of the ten most shared shortlinks

The first most shared shortlink (245 times) shows “the capture of one of the officers of Assad’s army by the heroes of the Free Syrian Army and *Jabhat al-Nusra*.” This individual is framed as a member of the *Shabiha* and transported, according to the information on YouTube to the countryside of Homs for interrogation. Allegedly, he was captured on the outskirts of Homs during a battle at a road leading to the city. With over 17,500 views as of May 30, 2013, the video only received little more attention with about 1,000 more views by mid November 2013. It stands to reason to suspect that this individual, who was found unconscious and was awakened by water poured onto him, was most likely later executed, as the description of the video further suggests. The majority of the comments condemn the Assad-soldier to death.

The Second Most Often Shared Shortlink

The second most shared video file demonstrates the multilayered and multifaceted dimension of jihadi video culture on the Internet vividly. It has over 10,000 views and consists of a short sequence from another video, “The Sincere Promise”, published by

⁵⁹⁰ We use ‘video file’ here meaning a file stored on the YouTube system with a specific ID to distinguish it from two visually similar ‘videos’ which have separate video IDs. Despite the colloquial use of ‘video’, users actually share, view and comment on specific video files.

⁵⁹¹ According to the video description the officer, also named a Shabiha, was captured and interrogated in the countryside of Homs, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9lsPYCaln5o&feature=g-sub-u>

JN's media department *al-Manarat al-Bayda*⁵⁹² on al-Qa'ida forums and other jihadi outlets online. The original one-hour long video was published on May 22, 2012⁵⁹³ and is available as a full HD version. It is in short a classical jihadi video but seems influenced by the Iraqi AQ franchise, resembling the general layout, the quality as well as the portrayed military operations and the overall conduct. Starting by depicting grievances, showing abuse and torture, JN has pledged the “sincere promise” to revenge and restore the dignity as well as the Sunni Islamic integrity violated in Syria by the non-Sunni Assad government.

While one may expect that the most bloodiest and brutal scenes of the film would be chosen, the testimonies of the portrayed martyrdom operatives (*istishhadiyyun*), the executions of captured soldiers, or sequences showing the torture of civilians by Assad's *Shabiha* militias, the sequence highlights the moral acting by JN, bringing a civilian out of the line of fire and aborting IED attacks to avoid collateral damage.



Figure 16 Aborting Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) attacks to propagate avoiding collateral damage to boost the standing of *Jabhat al-Nusra* on- and offline

The sequence of cancelling IED attacks due to “the presence of civilians” is repeated several times. This roughly one-minute extract of the *Sadaq al-Wa'id* film is most popular within the JN-*Twittersphere* with user appraisal of the outstanding and moral acts of this group. As outlined below, the abortion of roadside bombs despite the passing of high-value targets to spare Muslim blood – and thus not violate *shari'a* law – was well perceived and contextualized among the majority of the target audience.

⁵⁹² Aaron Y. Zelin, “The Rise of Al Qaeda in Syria”, *Foreign Policy*, December 6, 2012, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/12/06/the_rise_of_al_qaeda_in_syria.

⁵⁹³ Sidq al-Wa'd (“The Sincere Promise”) can be retrieved on the “Jihad Archive”, http://jarchive.net/details.php?item_id=7528 and most jihadi forums, for example, <http://jalnosra.com/vb/showthread.php?t=138>

The Third Most Often Shared Shortlink

“The martyr Khalid Abu Sulayman al-Kuwayti of JN”,⁵⁹⁴ this sample, as outlined, was shared twice and is the shortest video with a running time of 26 seconds. As of March 30, 2013, the video was watched 41,622 times. It was uploaded on February 21, 2013 by YouTube user “Bu Haza” who only has this video on his channel. As of November 25, 2013, the short clip was watched 43,434 times. The video features the deceased Abu Sulayman al-Kuwayti, a fighter for *Jabhat al-Nusra* from Kuwait. His body is shown dressed in combat fatigue on the floor of what appears to be a house while a fellow fighter lifts up his right hand with the camera zooming in on to the stiff index finger – a post-mortem sign of proof of confessing the *tawhid*, the oneness of God, which accredits him in jihadist mind set not only as being a true *muwawhhid* but of truly having attained the *shahada* and entry to Paradise.



Figure 17 Al-Mutayri (left) in court confessing the *oneness* of God; the raised index finger as a sign of *tawhid* in death (right)

This video was shared twice. A third video is related, which in principal is a fan-made eulogy (*ritha'*) and part of this cluster of videos on the YouTube-network. The eulogy is in form of a rhyme with various pictures of the al-Kuwayti whose real name is given as Khalid bin Hadi al-Dihani al-Mutayri. This video has 9,617 views as of March 2013 (11,613 November 2013) and includes screen grabs of Twitter where JN sympathizers propagated the martyrdom of one of their foreign fighters. One of the

⁵⁹⁴ Numbers of views are per link, not in total. All numbers correspond to the number of views on YouTube, as of May 30, 2013. Three links regarding the martyr from Kuwait, Khalid Abu Sulayman, were shared, of which two are identical. The third video is a eulogy of the fallen fighter.

pictures seen in this video shows al-Mutayri handcuffed in what appears to be a courtroom. He is smiling with a raised right index finger, confessing *tawhid* in life and death, as shown in the picture on the right.⁵⁹⁵

The Fourth Most Shared Shortlink

The fourth most often shared link highlights the very last moments of a fighter prior to his death on YouTube. This is a phenomenon of the Syrian conflict and showcases the impact of modern technology with all its connectivity, broadcasting clips directly from the battle field where as much filmed material as never before in the history of mankind during an ongoing war emerges on a daily basis. Such “moments” of a person’s last grasp of life, in Arabic termed as *lahzat al-akhira*, have become a popular phenomena on YouTube where various individuals are filmed by their comrades in Syria just seconds before dying.

This is a up close and sometimes personal filmed document where a fellow man perishes while filmed by his comrades or friends via cellphone cameras or by professional camera equipment. In this specific case in the JN-Twittersphere, a fighter of *Jabhat al-Nusra* is killed and therefore the wording is accordingly altered to underscore the attained martyrdom of the individual. The “moment of attaining martyrdom” (*lahza istishhad*) of one member of JN” had 23,599 views as of March 30, 2013 and was shared twice, ranging as the fourth and fifteenth most often shared shortlink. By mid-November 2013, this YouTube video just received somewhat over 25,000 clicks in total.

The four and a half minute long video shows four men. One of them is being equipped with a heavy machinegun, a Pulemyot Kalashnikova (P.K.) and wears a bulletproof vest. He marches off out of a narrow ally with two men and the cameraman following his lead. On his way, the would-be martyr speaks into a radio, which makes him appear like a local commander or troop leader. He starts to pace back and forth from the ally onto the street, firing his P.K., the other side starts firing back, missing him at first. Bullets hit and bounce off the wall behind him, ricocheting without hitting the machine-gunner who is widely exposed. He retreats to cover and allows his enemies to aim properly and wait for his return. As he dashes out once

⁵⁹⁵ The video was uploaded by “Ansar Sharia Doha”,
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1b0a661vKNs>.

more, with the opponent soldier locked on his position, a volley of bullets strike him down. His two comrades pull and rush him away, back through the narrow alley. Before his death, as he dashed out with the P.K. for the final time, *Sura 'Imran* is recited in a *nashid*-styled version:

“As for those who stayed behind, and said of their brothers, ‘If only they had listened to us, they would not have been killed’, tell them [Prophet], ‘Ward off death from yourselves, if what you say is true.’ [Prophet], do not think of those who have been killed in God’s way as dead. They are alive⁵⁹⁶ with their Lord, well provided for, happy with what God has given them of His favour; rejoicing that for those they have left behind who have yet to join them there is no fear,⁵⁹⁷ nor will they grieve; [rejoicing] in God’s blessing and favour”, Qur’an 3:168-171.

As the body of the machine-gunner is rushed away with blood gushing out of his head, the sequence is further framed and narrated by a saying of Prophet Muhammad (*hadith*) in red letters:

“The first thing a *shahid* will perceive before his death in his last moments is his place in Paradise and all of his sins are forgiven by the first drop of blood; the angels shelter him under their wings; the *hur al-‘ayn* (maidens of Paradise)⁵⁹⁸ take his soul to Paradise, safeguarding him from the torments of the grave. [By his deed], about 70 of the martyr’s kin are save from being questioned [and thus spared the torments of the grave as well].⁵⁹⁹

⁵⁹⁶ *Bal ahiyya’an*, is repeated twice as a rhetorical mean to enforce this belief set.

⁵⁹⁷ *la khawf*—repeated twice as well.

⁵⁹⁸ *Al-Huriyya*, a reference to the *hur al-‘ayn*, the “maidens of Paradise” that await the martyr for the pleasure of the afterlife (*al-akhira*).

⁵⁹⁹ The military wing of HAMAS, the ‘Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigade, uses a similar narrative in an explanation why the *shahid* always smiles. By citing sentences related to the “first moments for the martyr” (*awwala lahzat al-shahid*), as used in this JN-related video, taken from al-Tirmidhi to Muslim, the impression is backed by *hadith* scholars that the *shahid* as one of the very first elements to perceive would be his new residence. “His Lord is smiling to him and he sees his place in Paradise, he does not mourn being dead!”

“*awwala lahzat al-shahid*”, from the Juridical section related to *jihad*, Kata’ib al-Shahid ‘Izz al-Din al-Qassam, <http://www.alqassam.ps/arabic/fiqih.php?id=20>, accessed November 25, 2013.

O Lord, bestow upon us the *shahada*, do not ban us from *jihad* to elevate Your word.”⁶⁰⁰

The fifth most often shared shortlink

The fifth most often shared video has received over 30,518 clicks as of March 2013 (30,800 as of November 2013). The video had been initially popular as it showed the fast evolution of JN in the Syrian war as a credible player with increasing success and combat hardness against the Syrian Arab Army. Before the declaration of ISIS many Iraqi ISI fighters with years of combat experience had been part of JN. The spoils of war the JN fighters are able to acquire measure this success, according to this minute and twenty seconds long video. In this case a Syrian Arab Army missile depot was captured and JN positioned a fighter each on two missiles aligned side by side with six *Mujahidin* in front making the picture very symmetrical. The JN flag is not quite in the centre of both missiles. As the men hold still in their proud stance one of them gives a fierce speech to the audience. The video is entitled as “The Booty (*ghana'im*)⁶⁰¹ of the *Mujahidin* that Terrifies the Disbelievers” and the speaker calls upon “the youth of the *umma*” to support JN and their intention to implement the rule of God (*shari'a*) in Syria.

The remaining most often shared shortlink

The sixth most often shared shortlink is a picture hosted on Twitter by user @huthayfa_2003 whose screen name in Arabic refers to Abu Khattab al-Muhajir. The tweet pertaining to the picture reads “#Syria #Jabhat_al-Nusra urgent, share, may you be safe.” The picture is a screenshot of a text warning that the regime issued a general mobilization decree effecting students born after 1978. Young men in Damascus are warned to be cautious when approaching military checkpoints as they may be arrested and coerced to join the military.

⁶⁰⁰ A popular slogan within the *jihadist* environment and often used by Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi to legitimize the *jihad* in general for the sake of elevating the speech of God, a reference to the Qur'an and as such to the conduct of *shari'a*.

⁶⁰¹ As detailed in subchapter “*Fatawa al-Minbar: Questions from #al-Sham regarding the #legal ruling on #prisoners and #booty?*” by Abu l-Mundhir al-Shinqithi.

The seventh most often shared link lead to a YouTube video, “JN: The biggest martyrdom operation in al-Sham [Syria], March 11, 2013.” (241,551 views). The link is as of writing defunct and featured the full video of JN’s series *Bidaya al-nihaya*,⁶⁰² tenth instalment, about a martyrdom operation against a military installation. The martyr whose face is not visible is only introduced as Abu al-Islam and holds his testimony (*wasiyya*). One segment of the video is contributed to operational planning, with one of the *Mujahidin* explaining on a laptop screen with Google Maps which road to take and where to explode the payload at the military installation for maximum damage. The audience follows the route of the martyrdom operative on Google Maps in a immersive style that is strengthened by the *wasiyya* and the final massive detonation, filmed from three different angles to fully value the blast and its impact. As often seen in jihadist videos – and action movies of the 1980s – the explosion is repeated numerous times, played back and forth, even in slow motion.

The eighth most shared link is also a YouTube video documenting the cleaning up of the town of Banash. Unarmed men posing as civilians but are members of JN, are seen removing rubble and garbage. The scene is accompanied by a megaphone-speaker yelling, “this is the moral deed of the *Jabha*, this is the moral acting of *Jabhat al-Nusra!*” With heavy equipment and by manpower the streets of Banash are cleansed. This is part of a campaign to win the “hearts and minds” as well as to showcase state-building elements and the prospect for an Islamic State.

The ninth most shared shortlink is a screenshot taken from the video of the above detailed Abu Sulayman al-Kuwayti. The picture of the deceased in his combat fatigues was retweeted 118 times and received appraising attention in the comments.

The tenth most shared shortlink was a YouTube video, but the account has been suspended. It was the same video as outlined above, the seventh most shared shortlink.

The Top Four Shared Shortlinks of Jabhat al-Nusra in a Small Scale Sample

⁶⁰² “Beginning of the End”, perhaps a reference to the classic work of Sunni scholar Ibn Kathir (*al-Bidaya wa l-Nihaya*).

By using the same Arabic hash tag for *Jabhat al-Nusra* with the same methodology as outlined above, Ali Fisher and the author gathered a first-hand sample of 7,500 Tweets. This data was collected over a two-day period on January 29 – 30, 2013 separate and independent of the above outlined 76,000 Tweet sample. This brief sample revealed four most shared shortlinks and serves as a control sample highlighting two major differences reflecting the fighting within Syria at the time. First, of the four most often shared shortlinks, two are identical to the second most often shortlink of the 76,000 Tweets sample, showing the video excerpt showcasing the protection of Muslim blood by JN cancelling IED strikes on regime forces. The exact video excerpt, the same links to YouTube, rank on first and third with the emphasis that JN is “innocent (bari’) of any form of terrorism”, following the framed narration of the video *Sadaq al-wa’id*, part 1. The second most shared shortlink in this specific small sample revealed a non-Arabic sample, that, despite the majority of Arabic speakers referring to the Arabic hashtag for JN and Tweeting and retweeting in Arabic was referred to on Twitter but only has a marginal view count on YouTube, to where the shortlink leads.

The fourth most shared shortlink in this case study is a picture of two chocolate iced cakes with Arabic lettering hosted on Twitter. The viewers of this picture might question the relevance, its context and meaning, in particular for non-initiated and up to date consumers of jihadist news via Twitter and the classical forums.

The Turkish-Chechen Network in the Syrian Context of Twitter Activism

This second most shared shortlink is a Turkish-language clip on YouTube where supporters of the Islamic Emirate of Caucasus in Chechnya and Dagestan demonstrate in front of the Russian embassy in Ankara, Turkey. The protest rally is a small group flashing jihadist symbols and holding billboards of Dokku Umarov, the leader of the Islamic Emirate who was killed early 2014, shortly before the Olympics hosted by Russia in the Caucasian resort of Sochi.⁶⁰³

⁶⁰³ The Global Islamic Media Front commemorated “Abu Uthman Dokku Umarov” the leader of the Islamic Emirate of Caucasus, <http://alplatformmedia.com/vb/showthread.php?t=35737>, accessed January 29, 2014.

The Turkish video consists of a 13-minute video showing a radical pro-Chechnya Islamic Emirate, anti-Russian and anti-Assad demonstration by “Garip-Dar”. The video is concluded by the wishful promise that the *Mujahidin* will strike inside the countries of the enemies of God and any supporters while the Caliphate will inevitably be restored. It was uploaded on January 27, 2013 by the user *ömer onur belül* who only has this video on YouTube. It received much less traction, with about 2,500 views by February 25, 2013 and by mid November 2013 only somewhat 2,683 views. The clip shows a speaker and his followers holding a “press conference”, given in Turkish. This may be the reason for the difference in views compared to the Arabic language videos of the JN-Twitter analyses above, while the majority Arabic-language Twitter users reposted this clip in support of the *jihad* in Syria, it was of lesser importance due to the language barrier.⁶⁰⁴ The video, however, is significant as it shows how jihadist sympathizers cope with the continued violence in Syria and contextualize the conflict there to other conflict-zones within the Islamic world. Vice versa, the Turkish-Chechen support for Syria is well received within the *Jabhat al-Nusra* Twittersphere where also most prominently Chechen fighters and leaders have a high rank and are well respected.

The small group of protestors seem well organized and coordinated, and criticise the occupation of the Caucasus by the Russian army and Putin’s support for the al-Assad regime. The group of protestors holds up posters with a familiar jihadist iconography referring to the Caucasian Emirate as well as the al-Qa’ida franchise in Syria in unison with Iraq, what would later be known as ISIS. A front man gives the speech using a megaphone; his talk is enriched by well-rehearsed group chants. The speaker resembles the *Salaḥī style*, wearing a hat branded with the AQ logo and a black scarf with the *shahada* imprinted.

⁶⁰⁴ *Garib-Der Rusya BüyükelçiliĖ Basın Açıklaması*,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wVr4OGB6xGY&feature=youtube_gdata_player.



Figure 18 Turkish fallout of the mainly Arabic ideological cluster – linking Turkey to Syria, Chechnya and Russia

The motivation of the demonstrators is set to the firm belief of a “global war on Islam”, whereas Russia – by its continued support for the regime of Bashar al-Assad – is not only engaged in combating Muslims in the Caucasus, but also by it’s proxy of the al-Assad regime in Syria. For the *salafi* pro-*jihadi* mind-set, the Russians are engaged against Sunni Islam and are part of a global conspiracy to suppress and prevent the re-establishment of the Caliphate. Russian support for Syria, therefore, is not contextualized within the frameset of Russian policy or interest, but rather rationalized by the firm belief of the nature of Russia to violently engage Islam. Russia is thus part of a global mechanism, including the West, China, Israel etc. to set obstacles for the re-establishment of the Caliphate. Any re-emergence of a Caliphate, following this reasoning, would imply that an emerging “Islamic” Block would potentially compete with the rest of the world for resources, power, and hegemony.

The speaker starts the rally by outlining Russian war crimes committed during the Chechen wars and then relates this to the contemporary situation in Syria.⁶⁰⁵

“In every household people are living exposed to the Russian aggression; furthermore, now Muslims are targeted by Russian bombs. The Muslims of the Caucasus are victims of the worst genocide committed by Russia. Muslims had been eliminated by Russian military campaigns, in 1994 almost half of the Chechens, 300.000 people, were murdered.”

⁶⁰⁵ I am indebted to my friend and colleague Hakan Akbulut for his translation from Turkish to German.

The crowd of protestors responds in a choir chanting:

“Murderer Russia – piss off from the Caucasus;
Murder-Russians committing new genocides!”

The speaker continues:

“Commander Khusein and Muslim Gagaev⁶⁰⁶ along with eleven of the *Mujahidin* attained martyrdom. The enemy of God by the decree of the Russians, the infidel Kadyrow, gave the command.

Russians commit these crimes through their proxy servants. In Chechnya it’s Kadyrow, in Uzbekistan it’s the faithless Karimov, in Syria it is Bashar al-Assad, the Godless.”

Choir:

“Assad under the auspice of the Russians. Murderer-Russia piss off from Syria!”

The spokesman continues, addressing

“the Muslims: Muslims today are [in a state of] *gharib*,⁶⁰⁷ the *jihad* in the

⁶⁰⁶ The brothers had been killed in a firefight with security forces in the contested Vedensky District of the Chechen Republic. The Gagaev-brothers had been senior members and group leaders, their death was confirmed on January 24, 2013, by Russia Today, <http://rt.com/news/line/2013-01-24/>.

⁶⁰⁷ The believers state of *gharib* in this context refers to the conditions of Muslims at the dawn of Islam whereas this religion, by its rules, commandments, and conduct, was considered as ‘strange’ and unfamiliar to the surrounding. The speaker implies that, as early Muslims had – however due to different circumstances – fight for respect, dignity and freedom against their non-Muslim adversaries.

Caucasus continues while *jihad* is developing with Islam, having a global character. Commander [Doku] Umarov declared the Islamic Emirate, proving how deeply connected he is with the religion. The terror-state U.S.A. relied on the lying terrorists [=Russians], thus Umarov said we all are the enemies of the enemies of God.”

Choir:

“Long live our resistance in the Caucasus!”

“Umarov is one of the most influential Muslim leaders defending the perception that God is the sole source to implement law. The world shall know that the enemies won’t mingle with the friends of God.”

“Amir Doku is our path, he rushed to aid the Muslims of the Caucasus, Afghanistan, and Iraq, he took care of them and supported every *jihadist* movement in every region. But the *umma* has forgotten *jihad* in the Caucasus. This is the reason why God has sent the Russian plague to the Muslims of Syria, to test them.”

For the Muslims: Become conscious of your mistakes and support the *Mujahidin*, to escape this tribulation.”

Choir:

“All Muslims are brothers and sisters. Be aware that in Syria the supporters of

This seems to be a lost virtue as Muslims today are in a dire situation facing oppression and genocide without the self-empowerment and the firm belief in God to defend themselves the Muslims under the command of Prophet Muhammad had.

Islam and in Mali *Ansar al-Dine*⁶⁰⁸ are fighting. For what do you sacrifice your possessions? If you do not give them up, aren't you afraid to bear these [worldly] possessions as a burden around your neck in the afterlife, pulling you down into hell? Hasn't each and every one of you seen these crimes, committed against knowledgeable people? Abu Hanifa said *jihad* is a more beneficiary deed than to undertake the *hajj* 50 times.

Where are the Ahmad Hanbalis today?

Why is the *umma* not rising up against the crimes of the U.S.A. and Russia-Assad?"

Choir:

"Muslims, do not sleep, receive your brothers and sisters. Do not forget, the *da'wa* of God is the greatest and He is testing us by tribulations and trials, the lengthy *da'wa* shall not discourage us; He is testing us and continues the *da'wa*.

The tyrants reject this, thus God is confronting al-Assad with the supporters of Islam (*nusri*);

Greetings for the Caucasus go on with *jihad*!

Go on with *jihad* in Syria!

You tyrants, U.S.A., Russia, Kadyrow,⁶⁰⁹ God will soon honor the struggles of

⁶⁰⁸ Ansar al-Dine is a group based in Mali affiliated with the African charter of al-Qa'ida (AQIM). Prior to the French intervention in Mali and the destruction of the Azawad state declared by AQIM and their allies, Ansar al-Dine helped in transforming the jihadist agenda into a more popular movement. For the speaker in front of the Russian Embassy the presence of AQIM and their Islamic Police unites maintained by Ansar al-Dine in Mali re-enforces his conviction that Islam is on the verge to regain its historic momentum.

For an overview of extremists groups in Mali: May Ying Welsh, Making sense of Mali's armed groups, Aljazeera Feature, January 17, 2013,

<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/01/20131139522812326.html>.

⁶⁰⁹ Ramsan Kadyrow is the head of the Chechen Republic and loyal to the Kremlin and Russia's foreign policy regarding the situation in Syria. As observers fear that returning Chechen fighters from Syria may re-ignite the war for independence in the Caucasus region, Kadyrow announced a special regional unit to hunt down these terrorists. Kadyrow: Tschetschenien bekommt Syrien-

Muslims. Soon, the world will get to know an *umma* with a *Mujahid-Caliph*, ruling based on the laws of God, leading 400 million combat-ready people.

The Caliphate will rise and tyranny will end. They won't overcome the *Mujahidin*. You will pay for your crimes against the Muslims; the *Mujahidin* will come into your lands, killing you, as you have killed.

The answer of God is *jihad* for He will punish you severely.

The *Mujahidin* will come to hit you, Muslims who aren't part of the *Mujahidin* will repent their decision. Tyrants fall, *Mujahidin* come; The army of Muhammad is the fear of Russia; the army of Muhammad is the fear of the *Shabiha*.”

Aborting IED Attacks to Preserve the Sacrosanct Blood of Muslims – YouTube Clips as Part of an Ideological Cluster Network

As outlined above, in both *Jabhat al-Nusra* Twitter data-samples one video sequence was shared most often and thus had the greatest positive resonance within the audience. The short clip of JN’s video “The Sincere Promise” shows the rules of engagement for the *Mujahidin* who deliberately out of consideration to spare the blood of Muslims abort bombing attacks against Syrian governmental targets. As shown in the sequence from the full video, the first part of the clip allegedly shows JN fighters engaged in Syria’s Northeastern city of Idlib. During a firefight between JN and governmental forces, one *Mujahid* takes care of a civilian shielding him behind a wall. A grey arrow highlights “safeguarding Muslims” to counter any possible discrediting of JN, a lesson learned from Iraq and Algeria⁶¹⁰ where al-Qaeda affiliates indiscriminately bombed targets resulting in the death of scores of Sunnis, later claimed as ‘collateral damage’.⁶¹¹ The scene was furthermore detailed on JN’s official forum, describing themselves as the

“*Mujahidin* are the ones who bring death to the *Shabiha*. In another place the *Mujahidin* bring humanitarian aid.”⁶¹²

The later sequences show planned IED attacks on cars, minivans, army trucks and buses supposedly carrying troops loyal to Bashar al-Assad. In a following scene, a pedestrian is branded as “Muslim” by a grey arrow as the targets, marked as “targets” (*hadaf*) pass by, with JN deliberately aborting the operation. From the off, one of the *Mujahidin* is heard:

⁶¹⁰ For a case on how the leadership of al-Qa’ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) justified two major suicidebombing operations in the capital of Algeria in 2007 after being criticized by sympathizers on the jihad forums:

Nico Prucha, A Look at Jihadists' Suicide Fatwas: The Case of Algeria, <http://www.rieas.gr/images/prucha.pdf>.

⁶¹¹ Helfstein, Abdullah, al-Obeidi, Deadly Vanguard: A Study of al-Qa’ida’s Violence Against Muslims, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, Occasional Paper Series, December 2009, <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/deadly-vanguards-a-study-of-al-qaidas-violence-against-muslims>. Accessed March 18, 2013.

⁶¹² Jabhat al-Nusra: al-isdar al-mar’i al-ra’i *Sadaq al-Wa’id*, <http://jalnosra.com/vb/showthread.php?t=138>, December 31, 2012. The video was published in May 2012.

“we did not blow the car up as Muslims are here. We ask God that He may protect us, sparing their blood”.

This strategy, showing alleged prepared sites for IED attacks that are then aborted, as the shedding of Muslim blood would be a violation of the sacrosanct *shari'a law*, consists of a lesson learned from the years of reluctant violence by al-Qaeda and furthermore an essential element of jihadist media. In this case, JN is implementing these learned lessons and has adopted its ideology in coherence with the senior leadership of AQ. Similar jihad videos, for example the movie from Yemen published early 2011, *The Demise of the Traitors, part 2*, show a similar setting. Unlike in the JN clip, where the connotation seems to be understood by the makers of the film as well as to the target audience, the Yemeni movie of 2011 justifies the cancelling by blending to Ayman al-Zawahiri, who clarifies the operational pattern and the rules of engagement:

“to my brothers, the *Mujahidin*, everywhere in the world the true victory consists of the commitment to the *shari'a* of God and not to neglect the implementation of it. And therefore, it is obligatory for the *Mujahidin* to protect the sanctity of the blood of Muslims (*hurma dima' al-Muslimeen*), that their operations are in accordance with the orthodox rule [of God] (*bi-l-shari'a al-hanif*), that they precisely plan every operation, considering every angle, that the *Mujahidin* are cleared of any charge of every operation accredited to them. The *Mujahidin* are innocent of attacks against the Muslims in their markets, their mosques, and their meeting places. Rather, and we are as well innocent of any operation committed by any jihadist group that have not considered the safety of Muslims. For we have not left our houses and migrated from our native countries, offering our sacrifices, except to seek the

satisfaction of God, for the victory of His *shari'a* and the rules of His religion.”⁶¹³

The scene is similar. As cars and trucks pass by, voices are heard calling to abort the operation in order to spare the blood of a pedestrian framed as a Muslim man – that would otherwise be a harsh violation of the sacrosanct value of shedding the blood of fellow Muslims and in contrast to the propagated *shari'a* principles of AQ.



Figure 19 Ayman al-Zawahiri explains the greater value of sparing Muslim blood

“This man walks in front of the explosive devices, we are obliged to postpone the operation.” As the man is further down the road, the target, Ghalib al-Qamsh, a senior official of the Yemeni intelligence service PSO allegedly travels on this road in a car convoy. A speaker from the off narrates the setting:

“And here is the enemy of God, passing by with his escort. We are compelled to cancel the operation for the sake of this Muslim man. There is no strength and no power except by God. All praise be to God in every regard.”

⁶¹³ Al-Malahem Media (AQAP), *The Demise of the Traitors, part 2*.

A transcript (in Arabic) of the video was published by the *Nukhbat al-i'lam al-jihadi* media group, dated to February 2, 2011. The document, *Transcript of the second video (2) of the series "The Demise of the Traitors"*, was disseminated via the forums on February 6, 2011. The *Nukhba* (elite) group is also linked via *tawhed.ws*, the transcript can be downloaded at: <http://tawhed.ws/c?i=371> and is interlinked to the *Mu'assasat al-buraq al-i'lamiyya* media group, <http://up2001.co.cc/central-guide>.

The film freezes again and the picture of Ayman al-Zawahiri is blended in. As the “*shaykh al-Mujahid*, may God protect him”, speaks, the picture moves as well, showing the same scene of the man walking on the road.

The JN-video excerpt that resonates well among its cluster network on Twitter, so it appears, does not need any further ideological clarification or guidance – it just seems as the right thing to do. Without any framework of AQ leadership or other ideologues embedded into the clip, the YouTube link received great attention for a short time span.

Within few days, the sequence uploaded on YouTube under the title “*Jabhat al-Nusra* forbids the carrying out of operations due to the presence of civilians”⁶¹⁴ was viewed about 10,000 times. The two comments most ‘liked’ are approving JN. The member *shabih mandas* (16 likes) states:

“if this is the moral acting, then bravo and may God bless you.”

Another top rated comment (also 16 likes) by the member *Basheer AL Farwan* simply repeats a simple and popular slogan: “we all are *Jabhat al-Nusra*”. This slogan became popular after JN was designated a terror group by the U.S. State Department, and especially after the killing of Osama bin Laden in May 2011.⁶¹⁵

In general, the comments are positive and admire the professional work, the lived-out, firm ideology, and the pledge to fight for the defence of Sunni Muslims. The weight of the jihadist media is accredited as ‘truthful’ reporting while the mainstream media of, especially western outlets, may further lose influence and confidence into this substrate of the online audience. The proper operationalization of the propagated ideology is applauded by the member *soraqh*, stating that

⁶¹⁴ *Jabhat al-Nusra tamtana* ‘*an tanfidh ‘amaliyyat bi sabab wujud al-madaniyyin*; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ByRY4bxyZjM&feature=youtu.be>. Uploaded January 27, 2013, accessed February 1, 2013.

⁶¹⁵ Solidarity swept through social-media channels claiming that “we all are Osama” (*kulluna Usama*) in the framework of the U.S.-dominated “war against Islam”, any Muslim is a potential target.

“the jihad of our brothers in JN is [based] on the correct creed, and the blood of any Muslim is without doubt forbidden (*haram*).”

Rules of Engagement – Lessons Learned from Iraq and Algeria for the *Jihad* in Syria

This change of the *modus operandi*, however, is something relatively new, despite the fact that videos from Afghanistan and Iraq have shown prior that operations had been cancelled in order to spare the blood of Muslim bystanders. In recent years, the focus of safeguarding civilians is somewhat reemphasized but has been an issue for the past years in the ideological discourses. In November 2007, for example, the media outlet of the “Islamic State of Iraq”, al-*Furqan*, published a video as part of its comprising series “The Hell of the Romans and Apostates in the Land of the Two Rivers”. The video, entitled “Conservation of the Blood of all Muslims”⁶¹⁶, shows a similar scenario: A road in the middle of nowhere, a camera in a fixed angle and a caption that reads “the brother stops the operation, for a Muslim is present, in close proximity of the target.” Two people, one man and a boy, carrying buckets, wander up the road. In the back, an American armored personnel carrier speeds by, marked with a black arrow stating “the target”.



Figure 20 Part of the historical cluster: Aborting IED attacks to spare the blood of Iraqi Sunnis during the American occupation

⁶¹⁶ ‘Isma dima’ al-Muslimin jami’ihim, <http://www.muslim.org/vb/showthread.php?336157--عصمة دماء المسلمين جميعهم هي عقيدة المجاهدين عابري القارات>, March 14, 2007.

A caption cites a *hadith*, rationalizing the proper conduct and the rules of engagement for the *Mujahidin*:

“Prohibited for every Muslim of another Muslim is: his blood (*dammuhu*), his property (*maluhu*), his honor (*irduhu*).”⁶¹⁷

“His blood” (*dammuhu*) is written in red. All *hadith* sources, however, document a different order, starting with “*his property, his honor, his blood* [emphasis by author].”

The final screen shows the audience a text narrated from the off underlining why the blood of Muslims is absolutely non-permissible for other Muslims to spill as based on the aforementioned *hadith*:

“Of our good deeds which are not for bargain, is the Muslim who did not commit any sin allowing his blood to be violated or the like;

forbidden, forbidden, forbidden (*haram*).

And on this path the operations succeed, or are aborted. The planning is modified or revised. To anyone criticizing us to differ from our methodology, we say:

“the happiness belongs to those, who are mindful of Him.””

The last part is a reference to the partial verses of the Qur’an 7:128; 11:49; 27:83, which is an often cited part in jihadist sources to justify violence as an act of ‘*an eye for an eye*’. This reference is used not only to sanction the execution of hostages, but

⁶¹⁷ Abu Dawud, 4882, narrated by Abu Hurayra.

“[Any] Muslim is the brother of a Muslim; he does not betray him, lie to him, or lead him astray; Prohibited for every Muslim of another Muslim is: his property, his honor, his blood.” Narrated by Abu Hurayra, conveyed by al-Tirmidhi, 1927.

also to justify greater operations against civilian targets of enemy societies to hurt governments deemed at “war with Islam” in the jihadists’ mindset.

In turn, this particular part of the Qur’an is employed in a tactical-strategy manner by jihadi media productions to emphasize and confirm the sincerity of *jihadi* ideology to spare the inviolable blood of Muslims. For the *Mujahid* claims, “being mindful of Him”, referring to God, in his acts and deeds towards his enemies as well as his allies. This emphasis, to wage *jihad* for the benefit of the Sunni Islamic *umma*, to protect the individual Sunni Muslims while acting as a vanguard to propagate extremist readings of religious sources, had been renewed by AQAP in December of 2010 in a video showcasing the execution of ‘Ali Salah al-Hussam. In this video, Ayman al-Zawahiri by his ideological authority effects the operational ‘rules of engagement’ for AQAP, who subject their actions to the rulings and full religious as well as authoritative standing of the second in command of al-Qaeda at the time.

The April and December 2007 Suicide Bombings in Algeria as a Precedent for Jihadist Rules of Engagement

The need of the *Mujahidin* to exercise caution and rethink their reckless bombing campaigns was taken seriously when in 2007 the North African branch, AQIM, conducted two severe car-bomb attacks in Algiers. Questioning the high death toll of civilians, members at the time started to criticize AQIM on the *al-Hesbah* forum, triggering a response from its leadership.

“This open criticism led to a comprising response by the “Member of the *Shari’a* Committee / Chief of the Judicial Committee” of AQIM, Abu ‘l-Hasan Rashid al-Bulaydi, who published the answers on May 29, 2007 in a 30-page long document entitled “Answers by Abu ‘l-Hasan Rashid to the Questions of al-Hesbah.””⁶¹⁸

⁶¹⁸ As usual, this document is ready to print and was published in both WORD and PDF formats. It can be downloaded (Arabic / WORD format) at <http://tawhed.ws/a?a=xc6pd27i>. Accessed September 18, 2010.

In a most perverse reasoning, Rashid cites Islamic scholars and justifies martyrdom operations, claiming that any innocent Muslim bystander killed in the process has either become a martyr (*shahid*) as much as the suicide-bomber himself, having died for a ‘greater good’ and for the true belief, or died as an apostate (*murtadd*), guilty for being in the proximity of the target and now burning in hellfire – underlining his arguments to an analogy of Qur’an and *Sunna*.

The open criticism of jihadist groups and the comprising response by ideologues pioneered by Rashid has perhaps inspired “open meetings” (*al-liqa’ al-maftuh*) over the past years. In the meantime such “open meetings” have become quite common in the jihadist forums, with various “Answers to the Open Interview with *shura* Council Members of Qaedat al-Jihad in Khorasan”⁶¹⁹ or *as-Sahab* published interviews,⁶²⁰ that can include questions posted by forum members, such as “*as-Sahab*’s meeting with *ustadh* Ahmad Faruq”, subtitled “AQ Chief for *da’wa* and the Media Department for Pakistan”.⁶²¹ Most prominently is the “Open Meeting with *Shaykh* Ayman al-Zawahiri” in 2008,⁶²² who encouraged members on various jihadist forums at the time to post their questions and then responded by two lengthy documents. His answers include the justification of deploying ‘suicide bombers’, or, ‘martyrdom seekers’ (*istishhadiyyeen*), or the ruling of Muslims being used as “human shields by the infidel enemy” (*hukm al-tatarrus*)⁶²³ and thus declared Muslim civilians as legal to risk being killed as “collateral damage” during such types of attacks. Being asked by “a student of the Medical University of Algiers” on the legality and justification of the 11 December 2007 attacks in Algiers, where

⁶¹⁹ As the case with *Shaykh* ‘Abd al-Majeed ‘Abd al-Maajed, *Markaz al-Balagh li-l-i’lam*, 2010.

⁶²⁰ It is important to note, that interviews are a highly effective propaganda and indoctrination tool deployed by the global jihadist media departments. Critical questions are being answered and ‘defused’ even by sometimes dissatisfying replies or by referencing other parts of the online corpus of jihadist texts.

⁶²¹ Published in mid 2010 as a filmed interview, that was later transcribed and published within the forums. *Ustadh* (professor) Ahmad Faruq can be considered a hero for the jihadist movements in Afghanistan and Pakistan, a scholar who remained steadfast despite imprisonment and who didn’t recant any of his writings.

⁶²² Al-liqa al-maftuh ma’ al-shaykh Ayman al-Zawahiri, first part, *As-Sahab Media*, 1429 a.H., p.6, and – specifically – p.3 and p.25 for al-Zawahiri’s response and referencing to the question of “the ruling of human shields.” On the issue of *hukm al-tatarrus*: Jarret Brachman and Abdallah Warius. Abu Yahya al-Libi’s “Human Shields in Modern Jihad”, CTC Sentinel, May 2008, Vol. 1, Issue 6, 1-4.

⁶²³ The jihadist ruling and understanding of this type of operation is mainly based on the writing of Ibn Tayyimiyya, *Qa’ida fi l-inghimas fi l-‘adu wa-hal yubah?*, Dar Adwa’ as-Salaf: Riyadh, 2002.

“al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) [undertook multiple suicide bombings] whether killing of children and women is part of your jihad? I want from al-Zawahiri to answer me regarding those who kill the peoples in Algeria; what is the *shari'a*-law proof of killing innocents. The blood of sixty Muslims was spilled on the eleventh of December [2007] in Algiers and AQ claimed the attacks in which Muslims, who profess the unity of God (*tawhid*), died. Therefore, congratulations to the heroes al-Zawahiri and Droukal for killing innocent students, children and women on this feast. What are the sins of the innocent?”

Following the perverse and simple reasoning of AQIM after the 11 April suicide attacks in Algiers, al-Zawahiri repeats his claim,

“that those killed on 11 December 2007 in Algiers had not been of the innocent. Thus, according to the statement by our AQIM brothers, they had been of the infidel crusaders and soldiers of the government, who are defending them. And our AQIM brothers are more sincere, truthful and just than the sons of France, the liars, who regard Algeria being theirs and for America; those, who preach for the love of Israel until their leader of the Crusade, America, is satisfied. Those who commit crimes against the *shari'a* and violate it and remove its jurisdiction by force and by manipulation; those who murder hundreds and thousands of innocent Muslims; those who help the Americans and their Crusader allies to kill millions of Muslims, can neither be – by any chance – sincere nor fair.

For the 11 December operation was directed against the headquarters of the United Nations, the Constitutional Assembly and the Police Academy. There had been no school children and no women’s hospitals. The U.N. is an enemy for Islam and for Muslims. For it is the [institution] that codified and sanctioned the establishing of the State of Israel and its conquest over Muslim territories; for the U.N. views Chechnya as a part inseparably from Crusader Russia; that considers Ceuta and Melilla as inseparable parts of Crusader

Spain; it is the one codifying the presence of Crusader soldiers in Afghanistan as based on the Bonn Conference; the U.N. is approving the presence of Crusader soldiers in Iraq by its various resolutions; it decreed the separation of East Timor from Indonesia, while it doesn't approve this for Chechnya, the whole Muslim Caucasus region, for Kashmir, for Ceuta and Melilla or for Bosnia.

God granted the heroic *amir*, the *shahid* – as we deem him – Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, success – may God grant him mercy. So he blew up the headquarters of the U.N. in Baghdad at the beginning of the Crusader raids on Iraq. Subsequently, its remnants turned back and fled. Consequently, he ruined the Crusaders plan, to undertake their Crusader raid by an international force, without provoking Arab and Islamic sentiments. This is the same ruse, which the Crusaders used in Lebanon; hence the forces of *Hizbullah* withdrew 30 km to its rear and approved an international Crusader presence occupying Muslim territories on Lebanese soil. Furthermore, the leadership of *Hizbullah* even promised the perseverance of safety of these occupying Crusader forces on Muslim territories.”⁶²⁴

Mostly, al-Zawahiri references his book “The Exoneration” (*al-Tabri'a*, 2009) and his earlier (1996) writing “The Healing of the Chests of the Believers” (*Shifa' sudur al-mu'minin*) claiming the legality of undertaking the propagated *al-'amaliyat al-istishhadiya*. Simple, practical and as convenient as it is, he defines any Muslim civilian or bystander killed in such an operation either as an apostate working for the Crusaders as an agent or henchman, neglecting any sympathy for civilian collateral damage. Years later, the rethinking of the strategy was fully implemented, with *jihad* videos claiming the abortion of attacks to protect Muslim blood.

The Case of Algeria – Abu al-Hasan Rashid and the response to questions regarding the 11 April suicide attacks in Algiers

⁶²⁴ Al-liqa al-maftuh ma' al-shaykh Ayman al-Zawahiri, first part, *As-Sahab Media*, 1429 a.H., p. 4-6.

Members of the *al-Hesbah* Forum, one of the pioneers and a major mother-ship of jihadist forums that has been taken off the web for good in 2008,⁶²⁵ doubted the ‘lesser evil, greater good’ principle and questioned the deaths of Muslim civilians and the *modus operandi* of the operation. These attacks, a pretext to the more severe 11 December 2007 attacks, had been criticized and thus AQIM was forced to respond.

In this April attack, the first of a wave of *al-‘amaliyat al-istishhadiya* strikes that hit the Algerian capital, 33 people were killed and over 220 injured.⁶²⁶ According to the AQIM statement, issued on the day of the attack, entitled *Badr al-Maghrib al-Islami*, the “full moon over the western Maghreb”, a great number of enemies had been killed in the first two assaults.

“The first target: Headquarters of the government in Algiers, when the *shahid* Mu’adh bin Jabal drove a truck rigged with 700 kg of explosives bursting into the *murtaddin* injuring according to our special sources close to 45 and killing an unknown number of the wounded, destroying part of the building. The second target: Headquarters of the international Police Interpol (...) where the *shahid* al-Zubayr Abu Sajida steered a truck load of about 700 kg of explosives into the den of tyranny, disbelief and combat against jihad. (...) No less than 8 *murtaddin* had been killed and an unknown number wounded. The third target: Headquarters of the Special Police (...). The *shahid* Abu Dujana directed his truck load of approximately 500 kg into the fortress (*husn*)⁶²⁷ of

⁶²⁵ On 11 September 2008 several pioneer jihad forums had been shut down after the detention of several alleged administrators in Saudi Arabia,

<http://www.alriyadh.com/2008/09/11/article373597.html>, September 12, 2008. The ‘surviving’ members simply switched to other, still active forums, and thus changed the importance of the URL with the same content and the majority of the jihadist online flock. This predates the heavily use and reliance on social media, in particularly Twitter as outlined in the following chapters.

⁶²⁶ A good overview, incorporating local media and a subsequent analysis of the statements issued by AQIM can be found here:

<http://www.pvtr.org/pdf/GlobalAnalysis/Analysis%20of%20Suicide%20Car%20Attacks%20in%20Algeria.pdf>, accessed September 18, 2010.

⁶²⁷ This term is used as a direct analogy to the historical writings whereas scholars justified the attacks on fortresses, military encampments, strongholds, bases etc of enemies. *Husn* appears as a term to define a non-Islamic enemy who has set-up strongholds on Islamic territory and occupies Muslim territories. Muslims held as prisoners in such fortresses can be killed during assaults and attacks by Islamic forces, as the conquest of enemy strongholds is of higher avail to Islam. Rashid cites Ibn Taymiyya or Ibn Quddama al-Maqdisi for his purposes (p. 14). In a modern sense AQ applies *husn* for embassies and other more secure buildings.

the *murtaddin*, thus being able – by the grace of God – to destroy parts of it.”⁶²⁸

Abu ‘l-Hasan Rashid issued a lengthy proclaimed *shari’a* law assessment of using such operations against the enemy – and the acceptance of death and mayhem of fellow Muslims. Perhaps, the open questions and Rashid’s responses have simply reaffirmed the plan to hit the Algiers with the same *modus operandi* again on 11 December? Furthermore, al-Zawahiri’s positive response and claim that most Muslim civilian casualties had “not been of the innocent”⁶²⁹ may have increased AQIM’s favored weapon in their propagated jihad while comprising videos document both the *istishhadi*, including the testimony, as well as the depicted operation.

In the aftermath of the attacks, AQIM published comprising videos, including the professional combination of the propagated divine command to prepare for jihad (combat and weapons training, bomb-making, vehicle preparation, physical fitness) alongside the practical military output and thus the fulfilment of the “military readiness”: the filmed explosions after the read-out testimonies of the “three *istishhadiyin* of the lions of Islam to realize the raid (*ghazwa*) which is the first of its kind [in Algeria].”⁶³⁰

In his indoctrinating – but not original – answers, Rashid attempts to provide a thorough and detailed explanation based on verses of the Quran, quotes *hadith* from the *Sunna* collections, various *fatwas* by other radical scholars and also cites various historical figures for his purpose such as Ibn al-Quddama, Ibn Taymiyya or Ahmad bin Hanbal. Conspicuously, most of Rashid’s references are found as quotations taken from radical writings of other jihadists scholars, including the lengthy fatwa by “the

⁶²⁸ Ghazwa Badr al-Maghreb al-Islami, p.2 – 3.

⁶²⁹ It must be noted, that AQIM repeated their claim of not killing innocents in another recorded audio speech entitled “Who is Slaying the Innocent?!” released in early September 2008 by Salah ad-Din, “the head of the media [department] of the organization.” AQIM claims to be fighting for the defense of Muslims, thus protecting them from the alleged slaughtering of governmental and foreign forces who depict the casualties as victims of AQIM’s operations. On 20 September 2010 in another AQIM statement entitled “Service for the their French masters: The Army of Mauretania Shells Defenseless Innocents”, AQIM claims that as a reaction to their successful operations the army retaliated by “targeting defenseless innocents of the Muslims that led to the death of a Muslim women, her name had been “Najeha”, and a small child whose name had been “al-Sakela”. (...) This is the work of the coward criminals of the puppet army.”

⁶³⁰ Ghazwa Badr al-Magrebi al-Islami, 2.

Mufti of the Mujahidin in Chechnya, Muhammad ‘Abdallah al-Sayf,”⁶³¹ who in great parts simply copy-and-pasted from Saudi AQAP leader and ideologue Yusuf al-‘Uyairi. Also sources found in the GIMF publication entitled “The Ruling on [Suicide] Commando Attacks and Human Shields”⁶³² are found next to comprising religious/historical concepts such as the “Companions of the Ditch” (*ashab al-ukhdud*), the finding of *inghimas*, i.e. the plunging into the rows of the enemy, expecting a certain death,⁶³³ coincide with Rashid’s reasoning alongside a list of recent and contemporary Islamic scholars, who have issued and legitimized the use of *al-‘amaliyat al-istishhadiya* accordingly to jihadist understandings and reasoning. All of these writings can be retrieved online. The questions published in the document consisted of various concerns, such as the following examples:

1. “Preferences that the attacks targeted civilians. Thus we ask of you to comment to deny these [allegations].
2. Why hadn’t American interests been targeted with the observation that you had targeted Haliburton⁶³⁴ [workers prior] and that you had undertaken [a necessary] preparedness (...) according to the methodology (*manhaj*) of Osama bin Laden regarding the targeting of American economical interests;
3. Aren’t these assaults going to [negatively] effect the fundament concerning the mass of people for you of the sons of the peoples of Algeria, who are in favor and sympathetic with you?
4. Can you provide us with books in regard of *shari’a-law* proof, based on *shari’a* sources for these attacks;
5. Why did you undertake *istishhadiya* operations;
6. Isn’t the media war waged by the idol-regimes going to unify the good people against you as a powerful consequence of influence exercised by the media-

⁶³¹ A recently (re-) published bio can be found here (Arabic): <http://as-ansar.com/vb/showthread.php?t=16366&highlight=%C7%D3%C8%C7%E4%ED%C9> (18.09.2010)

⁶³² ‘Abd al-Majeed ‘Abd al-Maajed (2009) *Ahkam al-gharat al-fida’iyat wa-l tatarus, silsilat al-bina’ al-shakhsiyat al-Muslima*, 3 (Global Islamic Media Front).

⁶³³ Prucha, N. (2010) Notes on the Jihadists’ Motivation for Suicide-Operations, *Journal for Intelligence, Propaganda and Security Studies*, 4 (1).

⁶³⁴ On 11 December 2006 AQIM planted two improvised explosive devices (IED’s) in Bouzareh (close to Algiers) at the highway exit. A video, introduced by sequences depicting Bin Laden and al-Zawahiri, with images from Google Earth used to plan the operations as well as the making of the IED’s was subsequently disseminated (“Ghazwa Bushawi”). The video was published by “the Media Council of the Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat” prior to the official merging into AQ and thus turning into AQIM in 2007.

controlled media of these dictator regimes? This happened in the Egyptian⁶³⁵ and Saudi experiment,⁶³⁶ when the people had been subjected by these regimes [forced to publicly recant] and there had not been any support by the Muslim public present.”

Before providing – the more or the less – answers to the above stated questions, Rashid addresses that the

“noble reader must know that AQIM is not the pioneer to have opened the door of the *al-‘amaliyat al-istishhadiya*, deploying it as a means of combat while there is need for its foundation. But there are precedents of those, prior to the [contemporary] jihadist groups. Their foundations are published, all praise be God, on the Islamic websites. Rather, I want to expound the permissibility of this kind of combat operations regarding those, who are outside of the jihadist circles.”⁶³⁷

By this Rashid aims at preparing the reader with the globalized AQ notion regarding not only suicide-bomber operations but also the acceptance of potential ‘collateral damage’, namely Muslim civilians killed due to the fact of their physical proximity of targeted governmental and international installations.

⁶³⁵ The questioner refers to the demise of groups in Egypt such as *al-Gama’at al-Islamiyya* whose senior members had been forced to recant and repent. As a consequence of killed Sunni civilians the Egyptian government started a massive propaganda-campaign against jihadist movements denouncing their ideology, legitimacy and moral integrity in the 1990s. See for example the account of a former Egyptian police officer Hamdi al-Batran, *Ta’amalat fi ‘anf wa-tawbat al-Gama’at al-Islamiyya*, Dar al-‘Ayn li-l-nashr: Cairo, 2010.

For an Islamist account: Abd al-Mun’im Moneep, *Muraju’at al-mujahidin – al-qissat al-khafiyya li-muraju’at al-jihad wa-l Gama’at al-Islamiyya dakhil wa-kharj al-sujun*, Maktabat Madbouly: Cairo 2010. The sentiments were also expressed in an interview with Mr. Moneep by the author, Cairo in 2011, <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/prucha-abd-al-munim-moneep/407>.

⁶³⁶ See below regarding the fatal consequence of the *al-Muhayya* Complex bombing by AQAP.

⁶³⁷ Rashid, 2.

“My Muslim brothers [killed] in the explosions of Algiers had not been the target, they are civilians, just as the apostates (*al-murtaddin*) claimed. However, the targets had been those, who are affiliated (*al-muntasibun*) with the government as well as Interpol, the police of the apostates and those who wage war against the religion of God. There has been great and costly sacrifice among those war-farers, that has not been reported by the treacherous media outlets.”⁶³⁸

Moving on to a detailed basis concerning “the proof for the permissibility of a human to kill himself based on the highest word of God”, Rashid aims at further proving a waterproof answer. His findings are simply touching and incorporating historical and religious sources, (more and less) contemporary scholars and derives the “People of the Ditch” argument to our contemporary times. The “People of the Ditch” is a vital part of jihadists’ reasoning and justification, as much as the *inghimas* principle, on which radical ideologues have extensively published on incorporating writings by Ibn Taymiyya or Ibn al-Nahhas.⁶³⁹ Basically, the primary motive of the “People of the Ditch” argumentation is based on a tale taken from the *hadith* collections whereas a boy (*ghulam*) and a king (*malik*) struggle in a similar fashion with each other as Moses and the Pharaoh (as stated in the Qur’an 85:4).⁶⁴⁰

“Cursed were the people of the ditch (the story of the boy and the king).”⁶⁴¹

⁶³⁸ Ebd. Other jihadist online publications, particularly “The Voice of Jihad” had deployed a similar language and claims that the Saudi media as well as the international agencies would not report the “truth” and hence the contrary jihadists “counter-propaganda” is a fundamental backbone of the alleged claim to conduct “missionary work” and further the cause of “Islam”.

⁶³⁹ The two-volume writing of Ibn Nahhas, Mashari’ al-ashwaq ula masalih al-‘ushaq, originally is of greatest importance to jihadist thought. Ibn Nahhas, Mashari’ al-ashwaq ula masalih al-‘ushaq, Dar al-Basha’ir al-Islamiyya: Beirut, 1979, first edition.

⁶⁴⁰ And as Sulayman al-‘Alwan stresses in his fatwa issued in October 2000 “Ruling of *al-‘amaliyat al-istishhadiya I*”, <http://tawhed.ws/r?i=58geq47a>

⁶⁴¹ Translation by Taqiud ad-Din and M. Khan.

The worldly king claims divine powers as the nature of his entitlement, which is being rejected by the boy as a false belief and a violation of the monotheistic principle. The boy, however, is thus

“sentencing himself to death in order to purify the religion; therefore, the four law schools of Islam decree it permissible for the Muslim to plunge (*inghimas*) into the rows of the disbelievers [expecting certain death].”⁶⁴²

With the boy preferring death instead of acknowledging the king, he is termed a *shahid* after the king finally succeeds in killing him. The boy had not been killed, despite several attempts, only when the boy told the king how he can be killed, by the boy's own arrow taken from his quiver, while he said “in the name of the Lord of the boy”, did the king succeed, but he had lost the people present, as they now did not approve of the king anymore and sought the “Lord of the boy”.⁶⁴³ They became the “people of the ditch” as the king punished them by threatening them to throw them into a ditch of fire – a punishment they had accepted in “the name of the Lord of the boy”.⁶⁴⁴

Highly detailed and comprising notions based on historical and religious sources on specific key ideological understandings are derived to contemporary times and incorporated and subsequently covered by the global online jihad, filling more and more niches. “The permission to destruct oneself for the sake the [greater] common interest of religion”⁶⁴⁵ is a further line of demarcation according to jihadist propaganda defining the “real”, “true” Muslim. Bound to cherry-picked and context deprived parts of the Qur’an, the ideological writings and videos attempt to make their cases solid. With religious and historical sources, the jihadists’ writings and videos are sought being bound naturally to the historical times of Muhammad and early Muslims with the appeal – for contemporary times according to AQ’s reasoning

⁶⁴² Rashid, 4.

⁶⁴³ See for example Rashid, p.4. Also (English): Surur, R.: *Ashab al-ukhdud – The People of the Ditch* (At-Tibyan Publications).

⁶⁴⁴ This sentiment appears in almost every *fatwa* and writing on *al-‘amaliyat al-istishhadiya*.

⁶⁴⁵ Rashid, 5.

– to gain entry to paradise and to justify AQ’s religious-political definitions. Rashid cites the famous collector of 40 *hadith*, by al-Nawwawi:

“And what had been among the companions [of Muhammad] – may God be pleased with them – of love of the *shahada* and the desire for it. The people encountered fierce battles, being engulfed by combat and just agreed upon the permissibility to change oneself⁶⁴⁶ in *jihad*, in combat and the like; among it; that he who dies in a war against the disbelievers due to combat will be a *shahid* no matter if he was killed by *their* weapons, by his horse, by his own weapon turned against him or by any other way.”⁶⁴⁷

Followed by a similar approval of historical scholar Ibn al-Nahhas, Rashid simply lists several Islamic scholars (*‘ulama*) who “have decreed *fatwas* by contemporary people of knowledge, declaring these operations (*istishhadiya* and *inghimas*) as permissible, most prominently are” among clearly pro-jihadist scholars also controversial and in the meantime rejected scholar Yusuf al-Qaradawi (in reference to his *fatwa* decreeing the use of female suicide-bombers by Hamas as permissible, 2006⁶⁴⁸). Ranging from Sudan to Palestine, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia or Bosnia, Rashid implies the topic, the question and permissibility of such kinds of operations as clearly permissible and draws on a wide array of texts of the online jihadist corpus that indeed are clearly promoting the use of *istishhadiya* operations as a “legitimate means of *jihad* on the path of God”, decreed by a variety of scholars.⁶⁴⁹

Responding to the question “why have the operations been realized by *istishhadiya* means”, Rashid reintroduces “the noble reader to those who have decreed *inghimas* as permissible whereas one plunges into a greater number of the *mushrikin* with certain destruction” and names four conditions that must be met:

⁶⁴⁶ The *Mujahid* enters a different state, as he serves God in the frontlines of *jihad*, participating in true worship, while combating non-Islamic enemies who threaten to conquer and violate Muslim populaces.

⁶⁴⁷ Rashid, 8; Sharh Muslim, Kitab al-jihad wa-l sir (327/12).

⁶⁴⁸ <http://www.palestine-info.info/arabic/feda/2004/isteshhadeat.htm>

⁶⁴⁹ These scholars also reference sometimes their findings based on others, such as the case for the “opinion of Shaykh ‘Ali al-Khudayr” who cites Hamud bin ‘Uqla al-Shu’aybi, for example.

1. “Seeking the *shahada*;
2. existence of potential harm (*nikayia*);
3. danger for Muslims;
4. psychologically weakening the enemies, so that they may perceive this is the product of one among them, so what do you think of all of that?”⁶⁵⁰

In Rashid’s reasoning, the suicide-bombings in Algiers are part of a tactic to undertake severe and effective attacks against enemies in order to widen the battlefields and in order to hit the metropolis⁶⁵¹ and urban centres, spreading fear and insecurity among the populace and showing the inability of the governmental-satanic forces to protect themselves. Furthermore and paradoxically, it’s about

“taking revenge for the innocent, the destroyed cities, annihilated villages or the dragging into the total war, that doesn’t halt before the Muslims.”⁶⁵²

Throughout the document Rashid repeats the claim to defend and protect Muslims, even if Muslim civilians die in the course of AQIM’s operations. The ‘greater good’ argument – besides the possibility to declare Muslim civilians as apostates (being secret governmental assets or questioning the physical proximity to the hit targets), ‘martyrs’ (innocents who had been used by the government as “human shields” to deter potential bombings) or to pay “blood money” (*diya*) – consists of a just war by AQIM against the regime of Algeria within a universal broadcast ideology of “truth” against “falsehood”.

“And we indeed declared that the ruling regime in Algeria is an apostate regime from the religion, loyal to the enemies of God, allowing the people the

⁶⁵⁰ Rashid, 11.

⁶⁵¹ For a discourse on attacking the metropolis and insurgency war: Frantz Fanon: *The Wretched of the Earth*, New York: Grove Press, 2004.

⁶⁵² Rashid, 12.

work with an authority not based on *shari'a* law, enforcing it and killing for it. We have said this regime must be fought, it must not succeed.”⁶⁵³

The “answers” provided by Rashid had been sufficient enough to calm the most of the critical voices in the jihadist forums at the time (2007) – at least the ones that had been kept visible in hope of providing enough convincing arguments. Exactly eight months later another, similar, perhaps more devastating *al-‘amaliyat al-istishhadiya* was carried out, with no need by Rashid to quiet any criticism. The 30-page long document is filled with a high mixture of pseudo-theological, historical and scholarly arguments that work on a sophisticated level for most consumers as most stated principles and justifications are bound to a rich corpus of Arabic writings. The achievement of AQ global is the creation of their own (online) school based on their chosen sources and documents that are re-published and distributed primarily via the internet by professional means – including videos that provide further appeal and logic to the stated political, religious and social goals of AQ on a global scale. Part of this reasoning is the belief of ‘re-enacting’ a prophesy, struggling against “forces of disbelief” with an analogy to Moses and the Pharaoh or the “ People of the Ditch” while young *Mujahidin* are praised and eulogized particularly after their *al-‘ amaliyat al-istishhadiya* and their testimonies are published online within the propagated ideological framework of the local AQ groups claiming being operational on a global scale fighting for universal goals.

Introducing Attiyatullah al-Libi: The Online Jihadi Superstar

In the case of *Jabhat al-Nusra*, in early 2013, the operational pattern and conditions of rules of engagement must not be repeated but seem clear by the makers of the film and as such understood by the targeted audience at least. Therefore, it appears, the audience has had little to no further need of guidance to understand the aborting of planted IED’s, as Muslim blood is valued as the greatest good. The impermissibility or inviolability (*hurma*) is defined by ideologues such as ‘Attiyatullah ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Libi.

⁶⁵³ Rashid, 20.

Libyans have been active at the frontlines of *jihad* in the past decades. While numbers no certain number exists it must be noted that some of the most outstanding AQ operatives and leaders had been from Libya and gained a prominent position within the group. Local *jihad* groups such as the *Libyan Islamic Fighting Group* (LIFG) never had any chance of factually gaining any ground inside of Libya with the regime of al-Qadhafi in place. In a perhaps logical move, most Libyans jihadists set out to Afghanistan in the 1980s,⁶⁵⁴ participated in the Balkan wars in the 1990s⁶⁵⁵ and had been until their death at the hands of U.S. drone operatives, represented among the core leadership of AQ in Afghanistan/Pakistan. When the U.S. Army in the Iraqi town of Sinjar found documents of 700 jihadi foreign fighters who joined AQ in Iraq between August 2006 and August 2007, 591 of these records provided the country of origin. These files, known as the Sinjar Files, indicate that roughly 250 fighters had been from Saudi Arabia with Libya ranking as number two (about 100 fighters) followed by Yemen and Algeria. According to the Sinjar Files, 19 per cent of the fighters came from Libya and Libyans ranked number one in regard of fighters per capita.⁶⁵⁶ Perhaps a surge of Libyan aspirants of *jihad* was set in motion after the announced merger of LIFG with AQ. This merger was expressed by the Libyan AQ leader and military instructor Abu 'I-Layth al-Libi in November 2007,⁶⁵⁷ who would be killed soon after in a U.S. drone strike.⁶⁵⁸

The outbreak of violence in Libya in the wake of the 'Arab Spring' in 2011 conveniently suits the jihadist propaganda. Finally, one of the fiercest enemies, the regime of al-Qadhafi, did not 'simply' bow to the demands of a massive social movement. It must be noted that all social movements parallel to their protests and demonstrations had been keen to keep the world updated via the use of social media outlets such as Twitter, Facebook, blogs and YouTube. When the Libyan town of Misrata was affected by heavy fighting, AQ broadcast a speech by 'Attiyatullah who

⁶⁵⁴ For one account of a Libyan doctor (Salih al-Libi) who fought and served as a medic in the 1980s jihad against Soviet troops and the Afghan National Army, as detailed in the chapter: *Elements of the Martyr Stories – Wondrous Tales (karamat) by 'Abdallah 'Azzam.*

⁶⁵⁵ Al-Qatari, Hamd / Al-Madani, Majid (eds.): *Min qisas al-shuhada al-arab fi Busna wa-l Hursk*, p.58ff, p.115ff, <http://saaid.net/book/133.zip>

⁶⁵⁶ Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman: *al-Qa'ida's Foreign Fighters in Iraq – a First Look at the Sinjar Records*, Harmony Project, CTC at West Point, December 2007, <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/harmony/pdf/CTCForeignFighter.19.Dec07.pdf>

⁶⁵⁷ Camille Tawil, *Libyan Islamists Back Away from al-Qaeda Merger in Reconciliation with Qaddafi Regime*, June 18, 2009,

http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=35147

⁶⁵⁸ <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1978204/posts>

is active inside the jihadi media spectrum since many years, both as a writer⁶⁵⁹ and as a jihadist authority appearing in a number of videos, often handled as AQ's number 2.⁶⁶⁰ In what can be most likely interpreted as a typical blunt propaganda move, 'Attiyatullah issued a message entitled "Greetings to our People in Libya" on February 25, 2011, stating his clear, full name for the first time: Jamal Ibrahim Ishtiwiyy al-Misrati. By this, 'Attiyatullah implies being 'one of you' from Misrata and subsequently gives out advice to the "sons of the Islamic nation" in order to succumb and dispose al-Qadhafi and his regime. Clearly, the regime of Mu'ammarr al-Qadhafi is yet another defined non-Islamic government, ruled by an unjust tyrant, an idol (*taghut*) led by disbelief (*kufir*) and is part of a greater plan to continue the suppression of Muslims. As noted in an earlier message, 'Attiyatullah, who was

"a Libyan member of al-Qaeda since 1989 [and] who is now based in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region (...) sought to appropriate the recent North African uprisings for al-Qaeda."⁶⁶¹

When the presumed merger of LIFG with AQ did not create a foothold in Libya, senior leaders such as 'Attiyatullah perceived the situation as a new chance with the hope to "directly inspire Libyans to create their own local version of al-Qaeda."⁶⁶²

In one of last recordings, instigated before his death in an unmanned drone strike in Pakistan in August 2011,⁶⁶³ with the title "The Glorification of the Inviolability

⁶⁵⁹ Some of his writings can be retrieved here: <http://tawhed.ws/a?a=atiyatal>

⁶⁶⁰ The most recent one, a filmed sermon (*khutba*), was released by as-Sahab on 14 March 2011. "The Importance of the Sanctity of Muslim Blood" was published a few days later published in English by the Global Islamic Media Front.

He, for example, was featured in the notorious "Reeh al-janna" series, praising killed Abu 'l-Layth al-Libi as a military instructor and a combat veteran in the fields of jihad.

⁶⁶¹ Noman Benotman and James Brandon: Briefing paper: The jihadist threat in Libya, 24 March 2011, <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/images/stories/pdfs/libya24march11.pdf>

⁶⁶² Ibid.

⁶⁶³ Mark Mazzetti, "C.I.A. Drone Is Said to Kill Al Qaeda's No. 2", *The New York Times*, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/28/world/asia/28qaeda.html?_r=0, August 27, 2011, accessed November 26, 2013.

(*hurma*) of Muslim Blood,”⁶⁶⁴ ‘Attiyatullah emphasizes that any attack on Muslim civilians by alleged AQ elements or jihadi groups in general is part of a wider enemy propaganda campaign. While this is the exact same sentiment as expressed in the *Ansar* video “The Rain of the Earth” (*matar al-ard*) ‘Attiyatullah al-Libi outlines the *shari’a* law rules of engagement for the *Mujahidin* and warns of potential divine punishment for martyrdom operatives. This is an important strategic aspect to boost and strengthen the role of the jihadi groups and to further promote the jihadi media work as a legitimate and sincere source of information, independent of the mainstream media and news outlets. As ‘Attiyatullah states,

“the reason of this short message addressed to you is that we and the people in general often hear the accusations of the enemy and the media institutions under their control that the *jihadi* movements murder Muslims. The *Mujahidin* are framed merely as marauding armed groups without any cause but to spill blood and to pillage. They are portrayed without any honorable objective, noble intention, without any political agenda, and similar accusations. They are lying!”⁶⁶⁵

‘Attiyatullah via the jihadi media claims in a similar fashion as al-Zawahiri that AQ has no connection whatsoever to any bombing or attack against Muslim civilians. As AQ claims to be the sole defender of Sunni Islam, this notion is of strategic value and resonates among the targeted audience online, even in times of the Syrian civil war three years later. In the almost same wording as al-Zawahiri, ‘Attiyatullah declares:

“For we reassure our full innocence of any operation targeting Muslims. Whether in their mosques, their markets, their transportation routes, or their meeting places. For the organization Qa’ida al-Jihad as represented by its leadership, or as conveyed by statements, has expressed this time and again.

⁶⁶⁴ ‘Attiyat Allah al-Libi, “ta’zim hurma dima’ al-Muslimin”, *as-Sahab*, March 14, 2011.

⁶⁶⁵ Kalimat al-shaykh al-mujahid ‘Attiyat Allah “ta’zim hurma dima’ al-Muslimin”, *as-Sahab*, March 14, 2011. <https://archive.org/details/Ta3zeem-Hormat-Demaa-Al-Muslimeen>, accessed January 7, 2014.

We have clearly shown this rule of engagement⁶⁶⁶ as based on our methodology (*manhaj*), our conduct [of war] (*tariq*), and our calls to Islam (*da'wa*). We have clarified that we perceive our Islamic peoples⁶⁶⁷ as conquered and dominated populations. We do not consider them or ourselves as free from any shortcomings (...). For the populace of our *umma* is ruled over by apostate tyrants and by secular regimes, by traitors who are agents of the enemy, loyal to the West; [the dominated people] are the Muslim folk. It is our duty as is the duty of any able individual to save, liberate, guide, and lead them to piety, might, and dignity. Not to murder, loot their wealth, or to increase their suffering, misery and pain.

We have clarified, we abide to the *shari'a* of our Lord who has made any taking of life (*qatl al-nafs*) sacred, except in the pursuit of justice in the wake of the tyranny and the transgressions of the enemy.”⁶⁶⁸

The reference to the prohibition of taking life – *qatl al-nafs* – with the exemption to pursuit justice (*haqq*) is a direct quote of the Qur'an, rebranded in the context of Attiyatullah's speech. The commandment – and the exception – to take life is outlined in three verses:

“Do not take life, which God has made sacred, except by right. This is what He commands you to do: so that you may use your reason;” Qur'an 6:151.

“Do not take life, which God has made sacred, except by right: if anyone is killed wrongfully, We have already given authority to the defender of his rights, but he should not be excessive in taking life, for he is already aided [by God];” Qur'an 17:33;

“Nor take a life, which God has made sacred, except in the pursuit of justice;” Qur'an 25:28.

⁶⁶⁶ Lit.: this matter, but here meant in the framework of conducting military operations with the clear rule of engagement to abort any attack if Muslims could be collateral damage.

⁶⁶⁷ Referring to the Islamic populace in general, meaning Sunni Muslims in, for example Pakistan, but also elsewhere who are divided by borders but sought as one body by the jihadis.

⁶⁶⁸ Kalimat al-shaykh al-mujahid 'Attayat Allah “ta'zim hurma dima' al-Muslimin”, as-Sahab, March 14, 2011.

The sacrosanct element that Muslim blood is forbidden is at the core of ‘Attiyatullah’s speech as had been visualized in the *al-Furqan* video of 2007, as outlined above. According to him, both elements are of outmost importance, namely:

- (i) clarifying the impossibility of any jihadist group to deliberately target Muslim civilians;
- (ii) while addressing the “*Mujahidin* everywhere – may God grant them success – in the necessity to spread the knowledge of the glorified inviolability of [spilling] Muslim blood. Taking precaution thereof is an obligation, as is to protect and preserve it, and to fear the unlawful spilling thereof. Every gateway or path that may lead to the spilling of blood of the people of Islam, their wealth, their honor, must be blocked.”⁶⁶⁹

As the *Mujahid* considers himself to hold a holy relationship to both God and Prophet Muhammad, the divine textual sources are the ultimate playbook. These guidelines allow and sanction a direct reenactment of prophet Muhammad as based on his acts and deeds collected in the *hadith*, as ‘Attiyatullah outlines:

“For we are the servants of God, we are His soldiers. We are on the path of Muhammad – peace and blessing be upon him – by our absolute commitment, patience, and conviction.”⁶⁷⁰

Thus, it is impermissible for any jihadi group to violate the pious and divine role models by shedding Muslim blood or destroying property. Rather, ‘Attiyatullah declares,

⁶⁶⁹ Ibid.
⁶⁷⁰ ibid.

“we reassure that we are innocent of any action of this type undertaken in any form, no matter where and by whom. Whether the perpetrators are criminal gangs affiliated to the enemy, or infidel mercenaries associated with private military companies, may God humiliate them;⁶⁷¹ or whether they are people claiming being Muslims or [even] of the *Mujahidin* acting relentlessly or neglectful.

We, by all means declare these actions to be acts of corruption (*fasad*) on earth, forbidden by God [in the Qur’an, saying:] “God does not like corruption” [2:205]; “for God does not love those who do this.”^{672,673}

Claiming no connection what-so-ever to bombings that occurred time and again in markets or bazaars in Pakistan and elsewhere in the Islamic world, ‘Attiyyatullah blames outside forces or governmental agents for such acts. Furthermore, he emphasizes that no true *Mujahid* leadership would approve such operation. Being true adherents to the speech (*kalima*) of God and the *shari’a*, approving and conducting such an operation would be a direct violation of divinity. The *jihadi*, by his means and standards, nevertheless fights to resist. The resistance (*muqawama*)

“For our blessed *jihad* is legitimate, the intention thereof lofty and the objective noble; all elements thereof seek justice, tenderness, kindness, honor, self-respect, dignity, righteousness, development and prosperity – everything for the pleasure of mighty God – exalted is He. The existence alongside Him, in His row as supporters (*ansar*) for Him, mighty and majestic He is. We raise the speech of God, supporting His religion and we are the ones, who defend His religion. We seek to empower the truth, we fight against tyranny and

⁶⁷¹ This sentiment is frequently expressed by ideologues accrediting the brutality of war to the deployment of private military soldiers, often termed as “mercenaries” (*murtazaqa*). With governments outsourcing training and combat missions to private companies, the violence in general against Muslims is unprecedented as for example Abu Yahya al-Libi outlined in a lengthy book on the *shari’a* law conduct of Muslims who work as spies against *jihadi* groups.

Abu Yahya al-Libi, “*Al-Ma’lam fi hukm al-jasus al-muslim*”, Markaz al-Fajr li-l i’lam, 2009, 76.

⁶⁷² the first sentence of the last part of this verse is omitted in this speech; “Do not seek to spread corruption in the land.”

⁶⁷³ Kalimat al-shaykh al-mujahid ‘Attiyat Allah “ta’zim hurma dima’ al-Muslimin”, as-Sahab, March 14, 2011.

enmity, we liberate the people and the countries, we are the ones who are merciful towards the creation, serving the people.”⁶⁷⁴

Any spilling of Muslim thus is in contrast and contradiction of being the “soldiers of God” for the cause of justice and equality. This sin would forbid any *Mujahid* to claim re-enacting prophet Muhammad and be a direct breach of the covenant made to God, contradicting the *speech of God* (Qur’an). Exceptions are, of course, allowed and made by jihadist groups as based on the rulings and writings of theoreticians as Abu Yahya al-Libi elaborated. In what can be considered a handbook for dealing with the problematic of espionage, Abu Yahya provided a detailed mainframe on dealing with spies in his writing the “Guidance regarding the Ruling on Muslim Spies.”⁶⁷⁵ When confronted by the problematic that Muslim blood is sacrosanct, Abu Yahya al-Libi is keen to outline exceptions and rulings on when a Muslim is permissible for execution. Books as such are part of the wider ideological cluster providing a clear-cut understanding of historical and religious sources to sanction jihadist actions and parameters worldwide. Especially after the U.S. wars in Afghanistan (Pakistan) and Iraq, the threat of spies among the *Mujahidin* has become a real threat. While al-Qa’ida and splinter groups such as *The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham* are keen to portray themselves as morally integer groups acting on behalf of the proper interpretation of *shari’a law*, fighting for the protection of Sunni blood and the prospect of an Islamic state, the dealing with criminals and spies is also part of this ideological cluster. Regarding the classical context of the tradecraft of espionage, where information is acquired and carried by *human intelligence* (HUMINT), that is an agent, a spy ring or a cell of three or more people working in clandestine receiving and conveying information, the ruling is clear, any of these individuals is to be sentenced accordingly – no matter if the perpetrator is a Muslim or not. However, the indictment in the jihadi context is set in focus on the crime that a spy “by his appearance [is perceived as a member of] Islam” when in reality he is either “a [original Muslim] spy [serving] enemy armies, or a free non-Muslim subject living in

⁶⁷⁴ *ibid.*

⁶⁷⁵ Abu Yahya al-Libi, “*Al-Ma’lam fi hukm al-jasus al-muslim*” (Markaz al-Fajr li-l i’lam, 2009), <http://www.tawhed.ws/dl/?i=y34deswq>, February 2012.

The role and importance of Abu Yahya al-Libi is outlined in the subchapter *The New Martyrs of the Internet – the Death of AQ’s Second-in-Command, Abu Yahya al-Libi, Eulogized by Ayman al-Zawahiri.*

an Islamic community (*dhimmi*).”⁶⁷⁶ The difference between the two is of grave importance according to al-Libi, for the blood of the Muslim is forbidden to other Muslims, unless the individual is subject of excommunication (*takfir*). Any spy is subject to *takfir* and thus legitimate for execution. Citing a *hadith* based on the

“saying of prophet Muhammad – peace and blessings be upon him: “The blood of [another] Muslim is not permissible [to shed] unless for one of the three matters:

1. A man committing adultery after spiritual purification;
2. Or becomes an apostate after accepting Islam;⁶⁷⁷
3. Commits an unrighteousness murder, so he can be killed.”^{678,679}

As the focus of ‘Attiyatullah in his speech is set on providing rules of engagement for assault or bombing operations by the *Mujahidin*. The parameters are outlined for military operations and terrorist tactics within majority Sunni societies, clarifying that no innocent blood will be shed. He thus presents two main arguments to his followers and the greater audience with the prospect of avoiding collateral damage:

- (i) Commitment to *da’wa*: “we remind our brothers, the *Mujahidin*, everywhere – may God grant them success – of the necessity to spread the knowledge of the sanctity of Muslim blood and the obligation to take every possible precaution of protection”;
- (ii) Remaining loyal to the ideology and it steadfast as soldiers of God: “the fog of war and the circumstances of this fight, the sentiments, the amplifying of hate shall not interfere with our firm grasp of our Lord’s

⁶⁷⁶ Ibid., 76.

⁶⁷⁷ This refers to both, the Muslim by birth and the convert – to any individual who *outwardly manifests (zahir)* as a Muslim; this individual, however, is likewise stripped of his - by jihadist standards – *Islamic citizenship* should he be revealed as either a disbeliever posing as a Muslim or as a spy working against the interests of the Islamic community. For an analysis please consult the subchapter *Guidance regarding the ruling on Muslim Spies* – Abu Yahya al-Libi’s *Mainframe to Operationalize Sharia’a Law*.

⁶⁷⁸ Sunan Abu Dawud (4502); book 41, hadith 9 (*Kitab ad-Diyat*).

⁶⁷⁹ Abu Yahya al-Libi, “*Al-Ma’lam fi hukm al-jasus al-muslim*”, Markaz al-Fajr li-l i’lam, 2009, 76.

shari'a (...). For we are servants of God, for Him we are soldiers. We remain firm on the path of Muhammad – peace and blessing upon him – by our absolute commitment, patience, and conviction.”⁶⁸⁰

These *rules of engagement*, spreading knowledge as part of the *jihad* and the command to disengage from any potential operations that endanger Muslims is related by ‘Attiyatullah to the saying of prophet Muhammad:

“The end of the entire world is less important for God than the murder of a Muslim man.”⁶⁸¹

In jihadist-contemporary thought, this implies that

“let the world end, let us and our organizations, our groups, and detachments vanish, but not because of our hands being the cause of the unlawful spilling of Muslim blood.”⁶⁸²

With the shift towards the Arab world and the continued operations of AQ affiliates in Afghanistan and Pakistan, he advises the *Mujahidin* in general to exercise extreme prejudice in carrying out bombings. With the *jihad* in reverse, with a new generation emerging within Arab countries who not necessarily migrate to foreign places to fight, rather staying within their home-countries to participate for the political objectives of establishing Islamic rule, ‘Attiyatullah seeks to detail specific rules of engagement. These rules of engagement are set in order to not alienate the Sunni majority populace in general. This is a lesson learned not only from Algeria and Iraq, but from the fatal attacks conducted by the first generation of al-Qa’ida on the Arab Peninsula (AQAP)

⁶⁸⁰ *ibid.*

⁶⁸¹ Al-Albani (9208).

⁶⁸² *ibid.*

when they targeted the *al-Muhayya* complex in Riyadh. The November 2003 twin car bombing killed 18 people, injuring more than 100 among them many children. The majority of the victims had been Arabs, Lebanese and Egyptian expatriates;⁶⁸³ as a result AQAP lost support within the Saudi society, speeding up the decline of this the group.⁶⁸⁴ ‘Attiyattullah sets a framework of rules of engagement and operational parameters not only to prevent a repetition of the disaster of the *al-Muhayya* or Algiers bombing, but to deliver guidance for any aspiring martyrdom seeker to avoid punishment in the afterlife for partaking in similar acts. According to the jihadist mindset, God ties the fear of spilling of Muslim blood into the fear of going to hell as a consequence and a final punishment. Thus, the pure intention (*al-niyya al-saliha*) of the aspiring martyrdom operative would be tainted and God would hold him accountable. ‘Attiyatullah clarifies four main objectives for jihadist groups worldwide that must be drawn into the respective decision-making process:

“First: I call upon the *Mujahidin* to forbid their military wings and local cells to use explosives devices and similar means” to avoid potential collateral damage.

“Second: Operations know as *Tatarrus Operations*⁶⁸⁵ must be restrained (...). Such operations must be categorized as exceptional, only to be deployed in emergency situations. The leadership must be very strict in assessing the conditions and whether the factors that would rule to abort such a mission are given.” In short, only when the benefit out rules the potential negative impact are such operations allowed, where the enemy may be using Muslim civilians as *human shields* in any way. Otherwise, ‘Attiyatullah concludes, “it would harm [jihadist movements] while giving the enemy an opportunity to advance the war and the military state”, allowing them to have easy arguments to boost their counter-terrorism mandates when civilians are hit on a big scale.

⁶⁸³ Evan Osnos, Saudis warned of more attacks - http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2003-11-11/news/0311110099_1_senior-saudi-official-oil-rich-desert-kingdom-al-muhaya, November 11, 2003. Accessed April 24, 2014.

⁶⁸⁴ Nico Prucha, *Die Stimme des Dschihad – al-Qa’idas erstes Online Magazin*, Verlag Dr. Kovac: Hamburg, 2010, 148-154.

⁶⁸⁵ A reference to Muslims in proximity to enemy targets who are used – deliberately or being unaware – as human shields to deter any potential jihadist bomb attack. As described in the subchapter *The April and December 2007 Suicide Bombings in Algeria as a Precedent for Jihadist Rules of Engagement*.

Third: “Operations involving explosive devices and means must be delegated to specialized committees for oversight. These committees must be set up of trustworthy seekers of knowledge and military experts who take each matter into consideration individually and who decide whether or not operations will proceed. This is how we deal with operations in the *Qa’ida al-Jihad Organization*, praise be God.”

Further specifying the *modus operandi*, ‘Attiyattullah addressed the leadership in dealing with martyrdom operations;

“Fourth: It is obligatory for the leadership of the *Mujahidin* anywhere to tend and instruct the brothers with Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*). This applies to the *Mujahidin* in general and to the self-sacrificing units (*fida’iyyeen*) and martyrdom operatives (*istishhadiyyeen*) in particular. All advise must be directed at them, so as they gain a full understanding [of Islamic jurisprudence], that they become confident regarding the requirements to comprehend the rulings for the *Mujahid* who is about to carry out one of these operations. Recognizing the duties for God, exalted is He, performing the worship with sincere devotion (*ikhlas*), to be fully prepared to fully subject oneself to God (*ta’at allah*) – all glory is His, exalted is He; by giving ones life to elevate the speech of God, raising the flag of religion, fighting off the disbelieving enemy who corrupts religion and this world (*dunya*). They should never advance on a target, which is either doubtful or questionable; or consider targeting a place that can spur a debate or incite indifferences with the *Mujahidin*. Every selected target must be approved by one hundred percent, being sure and certain that the place to strike is legitimate; advancing on it will earn the pleasure of God.”⁶⁸⁶

⁶⁸⁶ Kalimat al-shaykh al-mujahid ‘Attiyat Allah “ta’zim hurma dima’ al-Muslimin”, as-Sahab, March 14, 2011.

The impact of this speech was again made evident on Twitter years later in the context of the Syrian conflict as of early 2014.



Figure 21 Online influence beyond the grave – the online legacy of senior AQ leaders

The picture was posted⁶⁸⁷ on January 4, 2014 by @zahar4321 (سمية الموحدة)

It shows a screen grab of ‘Attiyatullah from a video released by *as-Sahab* with the title of the speech and the citation of the *hadith* by Muhammad, emphasizing that the unlawful killing of a single Muslim is more grave to God than the end of the world. This screen grab was released by the *Nukhbat al-I’lam al-Jihadi* group and circulated on the jihadist forums at the time (2011).

The Tweet was directed towards the user @alghreebmohajer, who identifies himself in his profile as Abu Mariyya al-Qahtani al-Jaburi. He claims to be an independent Islamist mainly concerned with the liberation of Jerusalem, not associating himself to any group, movement, or country. He has over 55,000 followers and is a high-profile Twitter user, who, despite his independence according to his profile was recently announced as one of *Jabhat al-Nusra*’s member of *shari’a* council.⁶⁸⁸

On the right the Twitter avatar of @zahar4321 showcases the mindset of the user, with the full moon, a reference to the historical battle of *badr*, overcast by a right hand holding the black banner with the imprinted *shahada*. “Our Islam is our might –

⁶⁸⁷ <https://twitter.com/zahar4321/status/419540922741694464>, January 9, 2014.

⁶⁸⁸ As outlined in the chapter above, *AQ’s Syrian Stakeholder Jabhat al-Nusra* on Twitter. He is a frequent user of hash tags referring to JN and it’s media departments *al-Manarat al-Bayda*, *al-Basir*, and responds with tweets referring to ISIS.

it pulverizes their democracy.” The posting of the brief citation and the portrait of ‘Attiyattullah encountered general admiration by fellow Twitter users. One of the followers of @zahar4321, however, hadn’t yet reached a more advanced stage of initiation, asking “who is this man in the picture?”⁶⁸⁹

⁶⁸⁹ Response by @Islam_My_Life on January 9, 2014.

Death from Above: Drone Strikes and Abu Yahya al-Libi's Mainframe to Operationalize *Shari'a* Conduct

Abu Yahya al-Libi, whose real name was confirmed after his death by Ayman al-Zawahiri as Hassan Muhammad Qa'id,⁶⁹⁰ was killed in a drone strike in Pakistan in June 2012. He had been a prolific ideologue, appeared frequently on jihadist media outlets, and was highly respected for his life dedicated to *jihad*.⁶⁹¹

Any spy placed among jihadist networks in the field, naturally, poses a most grave threat. For one, the spy submits information resulting either in drone or aerial strikes against meeting places, safe houses, routes used for travel and the like. In other cases, the *intelligence* submitted by spies among the *Mujahidin* enables Special Forces to grab and kidnap high-value-targets with the ambition to gain further information by torture as had been made public in recent years by *Human Rights Watch*.⁶⁹²

Jihadi and Salafi networks are targeted by intelligence agencies worldwide since 9/11 with the intention to attain credible, accurate and timely information from within physical networks of radical groups. For this purpose various approaches and techniques are applied. One *modus operandi* may consist of the attempt to develop an elaborate approach to place agents, perhaps consisting in most cases of Arabs posing as Muslims, inside Islamic communities in general. The objective of this strategy could be to build up a relationship with individuals of the Islamic communities, ideally who are members or sympathizers of radical groups, who are considered as vulnerable. This vulnerability can consist of either discontent or discern in regards of the radical group; for whatever reason, may it be due to ideology, the hierarchy of the group, or personal – it does not matter. The vulnerability enables recruiters of intelligence services to attempt to 'turn' or 'flip' the member of the group, who nevertheless had been a member *before* his contact with the field agent, or the asset of an intelligence operator. While such 'agents' are a golden nugget for intelligence

⁶⁹⁰ *Asad al-'ilm wa-l-jihad Abu Yahya al-Libi*, as-Sahab Media, September 2012. In his many writings, he had often given his real name next to his *kunya*.

⁶⁹¹ For further details on al-Libi and on al-Zawahiri's eulogy, refer to the subchapter *The New Martyrs of the Internet – the Death of AQ's Second-in-Command, Abu Yahya al-Libi, Eulogized by Ayman al-Zawahiri*.

⁶⁹² Two documents by HRW are striking in this context; *Delivered into Enemy Hands*, *Human Rights Watch*, September 2009, http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/libya0912webwcover_1.pdf; and: *Double Jeopardy: CIA Renditions to Jordan*, *Human Rights Watch*, April 2008, <http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/jordan0408webwcover.pdf>.

agencies, they pose the greatest threat to any group or network. This makes trust costly, as jihadi groups are forced to develop and employ ‘counter-intelligence’ mechanisms to minimize the possible betrayal of individual group members.

The U.S. led global engagement against al-Qa’ida after the 9/11 attacks, termed as the “war on terror.” This oftentimes is only possible by using *human intelligence*. That is, to deploy agents or assets in the field or operational theatres with the aim and intention of infiltrating jihadi groups, cells, or structures in general. Aside of military operations and strikes, a global network has been crafted since the attacks on the U.S. in 2001 to find, locate and identify targets as well as to collect “intelligence” – information of military, technical or operational value.⁶⁹³ To gain information graded as intelligence, all means of classical and modern espionage techniques is since 9/11 legit and permitted. The work of agents, spies and informants has since been reassessed and is not even restricted to the *modus operandi* of domestic U.S. intelligence agencies in their ambition to root out radicalized individuals.⁶⁹⁴ However, U.S. or Saudi citizens, or locals receiving money in exchange for information, are the most potent threat to jihadi groups in general that operate in countries where drones are used to annihilate ideologues, leaders, media workers, and militants. In recent years, information collected by paid informants, infiltrators or by torturing incarcerated suspected jihadi members, has resulted in targeted assassinations by unmanned drones. As subsequently detailed, the threat of spies among the *Mujahidin* has become an integral part of the media as well as an important ideological factor.

⁶⁹³ The United States in particular has intensified its spending and also extended the freedom of its intelligence communities since 9/11. Although the various agencies are unified under the Director of National Intelligence (<http://www.dni.gov/index.php>); interagency mistrust continues. Reuters, Post 9/11 U.S. Intelligence Reform takes Roots, Problems Remain, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/09/08/us-sept11-intelligence-idUSTRE78714D20110908>, September 8, 2011.

⁶⁹⁴ The media has frequently reported about the use of *agent provocateurs* by the F.B.I or other law-enforcement agencies. In some cases, individuals had been spurred by three or four others claiming being al-Qa’ida members, but are in reality undercover agents to commit attacks, providing fake weapons and explosives. After the individual’s demonstration of his commitment and readiness, the undercover policemen busted the wanna-be jihadis when they embarked on the fake car bombs driving to the target location, or when they accepted the non-functional weapons. This *modus operandi* of the F.B.I. has been analysed in a report by *The Center for Human Rights and Global Justice (CHRGJ) at New York University School of Law*, entitled “Targeted and Entrapped: Manufacturing the “Homegrown Threat” in the United States”, available at <http://www.chrgj.org/projects/docs/targetedandentrapped.pdf>, accessed February 27, 2013. For a summary of this critical study: Targeted and Entrapped: Manufacturing the “Homegrown Threat” in the United States, *Jadaliyya*, Targeted and Entrapped: Manufacturing the “Homegrown Threat” in the United States, http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/1620/targeted-and-entrapped_manufacturing-the-homegrown, May 18, 2011, accessed February 27, 2013.

The ideological factor is covered by clerics such as Abu Yahya al-Libi who has had a big impact for the jihadi media.

The danger a spy poses is countless, as highlighted in this chapter, while the jihadi propaganda focuses on the spies' work to mark and designate targets on the ground to be struck by the seemingly omnipresent unmanned drones.

Human intelligence gathering as opposed to just technical information is still of the greatest value – for spies among the *Mujahidin* are able to interpret information and thus submit military graded intelligence on which decisions to strike can be made rapidly.

The deaths of high ranking ideologues and leaders by missiles fired from unmanned aerial vehicles, that have in the past years become the operational backbone of the “war on terror”, have risen and seem to be the operational weapon of choice by military planners.⁶⁹⁵ According to Paul Cruishank, drone “strikes had a reputation jihadist circles of being very effective”⁶⁹⁶ in the tribal areas of Pakistan and needless to say this accounts to operational theatres elsewhere. With ideologues and media-valued activists such as U.S. citizens Anwar al-Awlaqi and his media operator Samir Khan⁶⁹⁷ killed in Yemen in 2011, or the targeted killing of the Libyans ‘Attiyatullah and Abu Yahya in 2012 in Pakistan only highlight prominent drone operations recently. Nevertheless, the extrajudicial killing of al-Awlaqi and Khan did not kill off the English jihadi magazine *Inspire* that had published a new edition in May 2012 under the title “winning on the ground.” This ninth edition (Winter 1433 / 2012) addressed its readers on the cover page, asking

⁶⁹⁵ Leila Hudson, Colin S. Owens, David J. Callen, Drone Warfare in Yemen: Fostering Emirates through Counterterrorism? In: Middle East Policy Council. <http://www.mepc.org/journal/middle-east-policy-archives/drone-warfare-yemen-fostering-emirates-through-counterterrorism?print>. Accessed December 2, 2012.

⁶⁹⁶ Paul Cruishank, The 2008 Belgium Cell and FATA's Terrorist Pipelines, *The Sentinel*, April 2009, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-2008-belgium-cell-and-fata%E2%80%99s-terrorist-pipeline>.

⁶⁹⁷ Aliyah Shahid, Larry McShane, Anwar al-Awlaki and Samir Khan dead, Al Qaeda propagandists killed by U.S. missile strikes in Yemen, *The New York Times*, September 30, 2011, <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/anwar-al-awlaki-samir-khan-dead-al-qaeda-propagandists-killed-u-s-missile-strikes-yemen-article-1.958584>.

“does the assassination of senior jihadi figures have any significance in validating Obama’s claims? After a decade of ferocious war, who is more entitled to security?”⁶⁹⁸

According to the *Middle East Policy Council*, drones are deployed and in action not just in Afghanistan and Pakistan, but also in the Horn of Africa, the Arab Peninsula, as well as North Africa.⁶⁹⁹

Perhaps more than ever, the military command and the intelligence community as such is dependent on classical sources and means to acquire information to identify targets on the ground for the technical high-end gadgets. Innocent civilians or bystanders are defined as ‘collateral damage’ and in some cases cannot be clearly distinguished from ‘insurgent elements’. For the jihadi media departments, filmed sequences of killed civilians and destroyed houses are a win-win situation. Maimed bodies of civilians buried under rubble are proof of the inhumane crusader aggression targeting Muslim civilians, in particular women and children, in a quest to annihilate Islam. Nevertheless, the civilian population especially in the Afghan-Pakistani border area is severely effected by the Jihadi groups there, such as the *Tehrik-e Taliban-Pakistan* (TTP) and AQ affiliated torrents, and has to bear the military responses by the Pakistani army as well as the U.S. operated drones in their efforts in the war on terror in Afghanistan and Pakistan. It may be asserted that the U.S. operated drone program has similar affects on local populations as in Pakistan, although the decree of quantity differs from country to country. According to *The Long War Journal*, 354 drone strikes had taken place inside Pakistan⁷⁰⁰ and 95 bombing runs in Yemen.⁷⁰¹ The impact of frequent or more regularly occurring drone strikes on the people on the

⁶⁹⁸ Inspire, 9th edition Winter 1433/2012. The theme of this edition is dedicated to the U.S. drone warfare program that, however, enables AQAP in Yemen to win over the hearts and minds of the people.

⁶⁹⁹ Leila Hudson, Colin S. Owens, David J. Callen, Drone Warfare in Yemen: Fostering Emirates through Counterterrorism? In: Middle East Policy Council. <http://www.mepc.org/journal/middle-east-policy-archives/drone-warfare-yemen-fostering-emirates-through-counterterrorism?print>. Accessed December 2, 2012.

⁷⁰⁰ Bill Roggio and Rob Barry, Charting the data for US air strikes in Pakistan, 2002-2014, *The Long War Journal*, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/pakistan-strikes.php>, May 6, 2014.

⁷⁰¹ Bill Roggio and Rob Barry, Charting the data for US strikes in Yemen, 2002-2014, *The Long War Journal*, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/multimedia/Yemen/code/Yemen-strike.php>, May 6, 2014.

ground is devastating and generates new grievances with innocents being either mistaken for legitimate targets or are nevertheless considered as acceptable collateral damage.⁷⁰² The long-term side effects of drone warfare are open for debate, however, the tales of drone strikes and civilian suffering as a result of missile strikes have become a frequent narrative for jihadi videos and forums⁷⁰³ and are also addressed by scholars⁷⁰⁴ and journalists⁷⁰⁵ alike.

Killed civilians, mainly children, are pictured in jihadist propaganda material with the vow for revenge. In the picture below, published by the *Shumukh al-Islam* Forum in early May 2014, the administration of the forum via its media “workshop” (*warsha*) responded to the continuing drone activity inside Yemen that had recently killed a number of AQAP operatives. The “official account of *warsha shumukh al-Islam* for incitement” of the *Shumukh al-Islam* forum on Twitter promoted both pictures and a video.⁷⁰⁶ The picture below relates the death of children to call for revenge on a wider scale; some of the shown victims are from the *al-Malahem* video “The House of Spider Webs.” Parts of the text read,

“(…) our blood is cheap for them and their reckless air craft;

⁷⁰² Living under Drones – Death, Injury, and Trauma to Civilians From US Drone Practices in Pakistan, Stanford Law School, New York School of Law, http://livingunderdrones.org/wpcontent/uploads/2012/09/Stanford_NYU_LIVING_UNDER_DRONES_PDF. September 25, 2012.

⁷⁰³ The *Shumukh al-Islam Forum* published a video and pictures allegedly showing the aftermath of drone strikes in Yemen. Severe wounded civilians and maimed bodies of children underline the AQ narrative demanding “safe the oppressed Muslims of Yemen from the bombardments of the American and the assaults of the coward tyrant”, *Warsha Shumukh al-Islam al-tahridiyya*, Yemen al-Islam tunadi (Yemen of Islam cries out), <https://shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=222363>, May 8, 2014. Within than less of a day 24 forum members replied to this thread, that links to a YouTube video and archive.org where the video can be downloaded. Several pictures are placed in the thread while the video shows scores of bodies with Arabic subtitles calling to the people of Yemen and Muslims alike to resist and respond to the call of *jihad*. Yemen al-Islam tunadi, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kFvbW4biHMw>, May 7, 2014.

⁷⁰⁴ Besides the critical study *Living under Drones*, the overall question of drone strikes leading to radicalization in general is addressed by the scholarly community, for example: Martin Kahl, *Radikalisierung und Gewalt als Folge von Drohneneinsätze?*, unpublished manuscript, January 2014.

⁷⁰⁵ Jeremy Scahill, *Dirty Wars – The World is a Battlefield*, Nation Books: New York, 2013, e-book edition, 578-597. In the 32nd chapter “If they kill innocent children and call them al Qaeda, then we are all al Qaeda” he outlines the impact of drone strikes in Yemen and to what extend local people are sympathizing with the jihadi narrative as a consequence.

⁷⁰⁶ @warshshomokh1

Doom (*wail*)⁷⁰⁷ is theirs by the hands of the soldiers fighting on behalf of the religion of God;

We thus will indeed attack their airports – without aircrafts or drones [but by deploying suicide-bombers].”⁷⁰⁸



Figure 22 Victims of drone attacks in Yemen and the pledge for revenge

Drone Strikes in Yemen and the Response on Twitter

The posting of SSI in early May was the direct response to a drone strike that had killed about 40 AQAP members on April 21, 2014.⁷⁰⁹ Shortly afterwards, on April 24, 2014, jihadi-linked accounts on Twitter started posting pictures and names of the alleged slain AQAP fighters. By using the hash tag #شهداء_القصف_الأمريكي_باليمن all in all about 200 Tweets were issued from April 24 to April 27; all Tweets are in Arabic. The hash tag translated to “the martyrs of the American strike on Yemen.”

⁷⁰⁷ A document referencing this title was published in August 2012 in regard of dealing with spies who are sought responsible for drone attacks in Yemen, Hussam ‘Abd al-Ru’uf, *Wail lahum thumma wail lahum*, Nukhba al-i’lam al-jihadi, Vol. 4, August 1, 2012.

⁷⁰⁸ Warsha Shumukh *al-Islam al-tahridiyya*, Yemen al-Islam tunadi (Yemen of Islam cries out), <https://shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=222363>, May 8, 2014.

⁷⁰⁹ Erich Schmitt, U.S. Drones and Yemeni Forces Kill Qaeda-Linked Fighters, Officials Say, *The New York Times*, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/22/world/middleeast/us-drones-and-yemeni-forces-kill-qaeda-linked-fighters-officials-say.html?_r=1, April 21, 2014.

The distinctive feature of this Twitter network analysis is set on two key findings:

1. a division between pro-ISIS and pro-AQ can be identified. The main underlining finding, however, is the common relation to the U.S. drone strikes in Yemen against AQAP, whereas most pro-ISIS media activists and followers nevertheless have high, if not higher, sympathies for AQAP. There is a shared opinion on AQAP and drone strikes, independent of the leaning of individual accounts towards ISIS or AQ Central.
2. The hash tag referring to the drone strike was short-lived and quickly reached its peak when the majority of the *martyrs* had been announced on Twitter.

Four major hubs can be identified within this network on Twitter, with the respective accounts @_Glibeb, @AbuUsamh, @Adnan_Alawlaqi, and @al_khansaa2 as the most influential. These four major nodes are connected to each other by shared followers, who (re-) tweeted using the hash tag and by addressing accounts directly. Some of the interlinking accounts are further analyzed below.

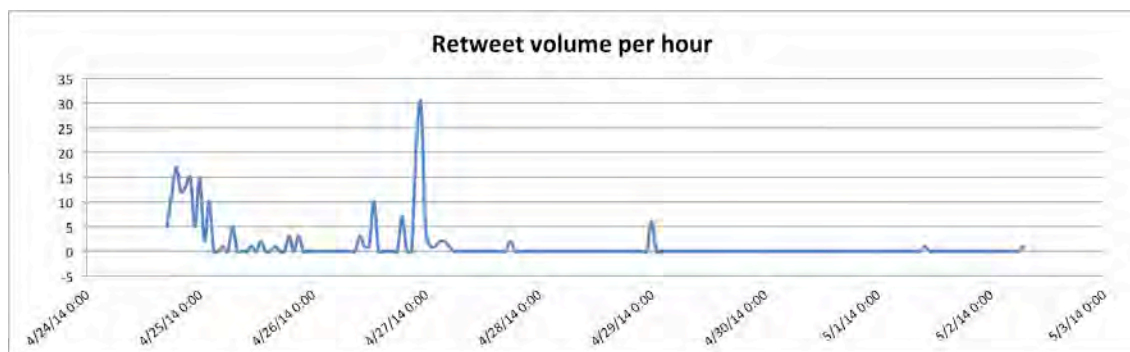


Figure 23 The quick response to the drone strike and the short time span of interest on Twitter is unique

The biggest node in this network analysis is @Adnan_Alawlaqi, some of his followers are connected to the other three major nodes. By choosing “Alawlaqi”, the account claims a direct relationship to the Yemeni tribe and to the U.S.-Yemeni cleric Anwar al-Awlaqi who had been killed in a drone strike in 2011.

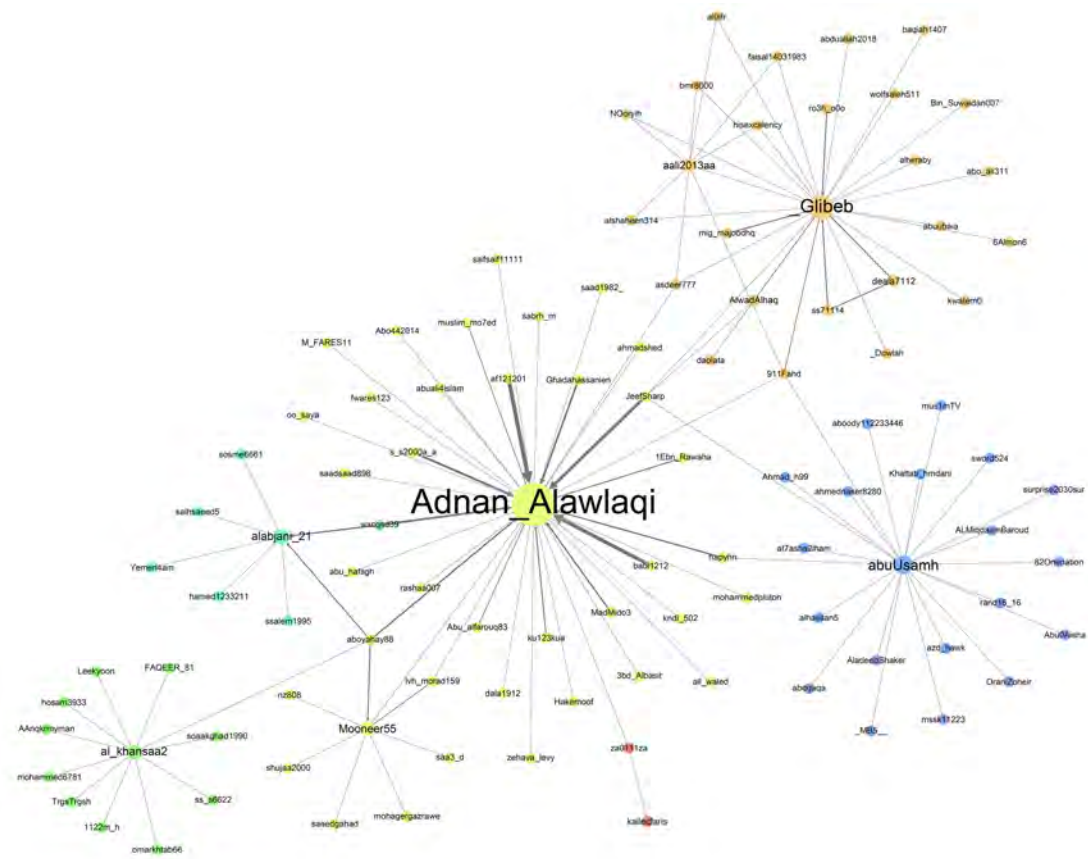


Figure 24 Networking about 200 Tweets relating to the U.S. drone strike in Yemen – the broader the arrow is in the graph, the more often the source mentions the addressed account

For the avatar of the account of @Adnan_Alawlaqi Osama bin Laden has been chosen, the background picture shows “the martyr: Abu ‘l-Ghayth al-Shabwani”, a Yemeni AQAP fighter killed in a drone strike. For his web interface Twitter account, he has chosen the cover of the book “Why I Chose al-Qa’ida” which has been written by Abu Mus’ab, an AQAP affiliate who claimed being a member of al-Awlaqi tribe.⁷¹⁰ According to the book, Abu Mus’ab al-Awlaqi “was martyred in an American strike on Wadi Rafd in the Shabwa Province” in 2009. His full name is given as Muhammad ‘Umayr al-Kalawi al-‘Awlaqi. The foreword of the book has been written by AQAP chief Abu Basir (Nasir al-Wuhayshi), which evidently was finished shortly before the death of Abu Mus’ab. The about 80-page long book outlines in simple words and reasoning the motivation to have joined al-Qa’ida and serves as a guide to inspire and indoctrinate a non-Arabic audience. The English-language magazine *Inspire* has a

⁷¹⁰ Abu Mus’ab al-Awlaqi, Limadha akhtartu ‘l-Qa’ida?, *al-Malahem*, July 2010.

regular section entitled “Why did I Choose Al Qaeda” where selected parts of the book are made available in English.⁷¹¹

The most mentioned users in this data-set highlights the impact and importance of the major nodes, with @Adnan_Alawlaqi ranging at the top. @Qaadayaalumaa1 has been omitted in this analysis, although rank 4, it is not connected to the above network analysis. Instead, it is an independent sub-network that uses the same hash tag and shares similar content.

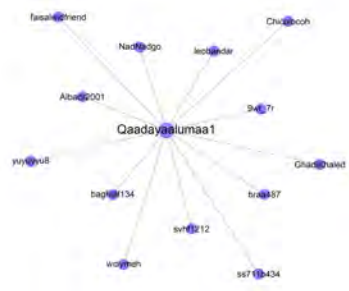


Figure 25 A not connected network sharing same content on Twitter

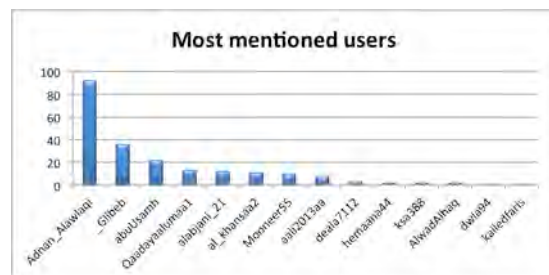


Figure 26 As detailed below, the most mentioned users within the network

@Adnan_Alawlaqi has a little over 4,000 followers and issued more than 2,000 Tweets as of May 12, 2014. The account is primarily affiliated with “the organization of al-Qa’ida on the Arab Peninsula” and pictures from within Yemen⁷¹² and of drones⁷¹³ are frequently published. It seems to be following the strict AQ conduct and has little to none connection to any ISIS related material.

Another major node in the network is @abuUsamh, as seen on the bottom right. According to his online profile, this is the account of Abu Usama al-Abini. His profile further states his clear favor of ISIS, hoping that

⁷¹¹ For example, Inspire, *al-Malahem*, 10th edition, Spring 1434 / 2013, 34-35.

⁷¹² “Crimes of the Yemeni army against the Sunni people in Shabwa”, https://twitter.com/Adnan_Alawlaqi/status/464782931891077120/photo/1, May 9, 2014.

⁷¹³ https://twitter.com/Adnan_Alawlaqi/status/465097992320462848/photo/1, May 10, 2014.

“the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham will remain and expand, by the will of God, #the lion cubs of *jihad* (#شبل_الجهاد)⁷¹⁴ // my backup account is @abusamh1.”⁷¹⁵



Figure 27 An alleged victim of the U.S. drone strike

He refers to the “soldiers of Yemen” (*jund al-Yemen*) and lists his YouTube channel “greebe1.”⁷¹⁶ His focus is also set on Yemen, but he approves and idealizes ISIS and their war in Syria as the future and considers them as an avant-garde that will soon arrive in Yemen as well. He has about 2,300 followers and issued 1,300 Tweets as of May 12, 2014.

@abusamh posted pictures of alleged victims of the April drone strike and provides further information. The name of the deceased seen here is given as “the *Mujahid*: Abu Tamim al-Qayfi (...) killed in the despicable American [missile] strike. Look at his smile!”⁷¹⁷

@abusamh is connected to @Adnan_Alawlaqi by three accounts, two of which also interlink to @_Glibeb. @Jeefsharp and @911Fahd interlink these two major nodes.

@_Glibeb refers to *Jilbib al-Shurruri* and has about 2,500 followers and issued close to 9,000 Tweets as of May 12, 2014. He too has a greater leaning towards ISIS and re-tweets and disseminates videos published by ISIS’s media channel *al-Furqan*.⁷¹⁸

⁷¹⁴ The lion cubs (*shibl*) of *jihad* is a often used reference to the youngest among the *Mujahidin* or in general the upcoming generation; consisting of, like their fathers, of both fighting and preaching elements.

⁷¹⁵ <https://twitter.com/abusamh>, May 12, 2014.

⁷¹⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/user/greebe1>, May 12, 2014.

⁷¹⁷ <https://twitter.com/abusamh/status/460184658357940224/photo/1>, April 26, 2014.

⁷¹⁸ “Special report on the civil service work by the Islamic State in Aleppo before ISIS was betrayed; preparing: Flour and bread – health care – electricity – overall services”, https://twitter.com/_Glibeb/status/464708125233139712, May 9, 2014. Two links are set in the Tweet, the first leads to YouTube where a sequence of the video *Services provided for by the State* of the ISIS series *Rasa’il min ard al-malahem*, part 14, is shown: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-wqXh3xmq1A>, published on December 30, 2013. The second link extends the civil aspect of ISIS by directing to a Facebook group, <https://www.facebook.com/IslamicManagementforServices>.

Like most other Twitter accounts linked to this hash tag, @_Glibeb posts pictures of male victims of the airstrike with the impression that they indeed had been AQAP members. He may be of Yemini origin and possibly related to some of the deceased by tribal relations.

The fourth most important node in this mini-network of approximately 200 Tweets is an account the reader of this work may already be acquainted with: @al_khansaa2.⁷¹⁹ This account in this network is only linked via the account @aboyahay88 to the main node of @Adnan_Alawlaqi. The main objective, as for the others, is to document the martyrs of the drone strike and provide affirmative comments on pictures of killed AQAP members. All pictures issued within this particular hash tag are male, some are flashing weapons, and others are a screen grab from a jihadi video. One of the pictures shared by @al_khansaa2 is a typical Yemini dressed man flashing his *janbiyya* a specific type of dagger with a short curved blade that is worn on a belt. This is a sign of male hood and pride and very common on the streets in Yemen.



Figure 28 "al-Miqdad al-Shururi killed in the province of Hadrawmawt by a drone"

@aboyahay88, the account linking @al_khansaa2 to @Adnan_Alawlaqi also connects to two other nodes, @alabjani_21 and @Mooneer55. @aboyahay88, whose screen name is *the sincere* (الصادق) referring to Abu Bakr further states on his profile “We belong to God and to Him we shall return”, taken out of the Qur’an (2:156). This part of the Qur’an is often cited at funerals and generally expressed to sympathize with the deceased, emphasizing the conviction in the existence of the afterlife. Apart from this @aboyahay88 is a low-key and low profile node with only 438 followers and over 4,000 Tweets as of May 12, 2014.

The majority of his shared pictures are Yemen related with some pictures apparently taken by a cell-phone, perhaps implying he has taken these himself. Other pictures are from ISIS accounts on Twitter. His Twitter account is linked to the open Facebook

⁷¹⁹ See for example the chapter *The Role of Social Media in Defining the Rules of Engagement for Jihadi Conflicts* or *Datasets of Jabhat al-Nusra on Twitter*.

group *al-Ta'ifa al-Mansura* that has eleven members but no actions or shared material whatsoever. All eleven members are part of the jihadist cluster network and show related iconography.⁷²⁰

@alabjani_21 is one of the more prolific Twitter accounts in this network, although not the biggest node in this particular network analysis. He has over 9,000 followers and Tweeted close to 17,000 times as of May 12, 2014. The chosen avatar is Ayman al-Zawahiri with both of hands held up towards the viewer – in a praying fashion, although it is clearly a screenshot of one of al-Zawahiri's sermons televised by *as-Sahab*. @Mooneer55 in turn only has 787 followers but Tweeted an impressive 11,700 times as of May 12, 2014. This account clearly aligns itself to ISIS with an avatar showing Abu 'Umar al-Baghdadi and referencing “the book leading the right way” (*kitab yahdi*) and the “sword that assists” (*sayf yansur*), as detailed in the chapter *The 'Arab Spring' as a Renaissance for AQ Affiliates in a Historical Perspective*.

Of greater interest are the two accounts linking the three nodes of @Adnan_Alawlaqi, @_Glibeb, @abuUsamh, which are:

@JeefSharp: This account is also in clear association to ISIS, stating in his profile,

“I pledge allegiance to the *amir al-mu'mineen Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi*.”

He has a meager 185 followers and around 3,500 Tweets. The majority of these are retweets of ISIS related accounts and material, that is in parts also anti-Muslim Brotherhood, demanding action instead of passive protests.⁷²¹

And @911Fahd: This account showcases the killed leader of the TTP, Hakim Allah Mehsud with an ISIS related avatar. He has a little over 1,000 followers and Tweeted an incredible 66,454 times as of May 12, 2014. The majority of his shared pictures are related to Iraq and ISIS but also include a picture of the Gaza-based *Jund Allah* and their leader Abu al-Nur al-Maqdisi – all of whom had been wiped out by their rival

⁷²⁰ <https://m.facebook.com/groups/327559194025966?view=info>, May 12, 2014.

⁷²¹ A retweet from @lion_isis, https://twitter.com/lion_isis/status/464968794004135937/photo/1, published May 10, 2014. Accessed May 12, 2014.

HAMAS in 2008.⁷²² Like the above account, @911Fahd mainly retweets and is interlinked to high profile users such as @al_khansaa2 or @Adnan_Alawlaqi.

Drone Strikes and Spies Among us – Televising Confessions and Executions

As filmed beheadings in the recent years before the outbreak of hardcore violence in Syria of mid-2012 have become rare and uncommon for Arab jihadists, AQAP in Yemen resumed the trend of abducting senior and high level functionaries of the regime. In at least two cases, *al-Malahim*, the media branch of the 2009 re-launched *tanzim Qa'ida al-Jihad fi Jazira al-Arab*, the al-Qa'ida branch on the Arab Peninsula show high ranking officials of the Yemeni Political Security Office (PSO), the secret service in charge of combatting the jihadists.⁷²³

The first video, entitled *The Demise of the Traitors (Masari' al-khawna)*⁷²⁴ was published in jihadist forums by AQAP's media branch *al-Malahem* in November 2009. The film is about nine minutes long. AQAP was able “after a short time to deliver a second, massive blow to the Yemeni security [apparatus]”⁷²⁵ when it revealed the kidnapping of Lieutenant Colonel Bassam Sulayman Tarbush. The first massive and propagandistically effective blow was the attempt on Saudi Prince Nayef's life by the martyrdom operative 'Assiri in August 2009.⁷²⁶ After the attempt on Prince Nayef's life in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, the Yemeni security apparatus started a massive sweep in the Hadramawt region relying on human intelligence (HUMINT) sources, locals, who provide the authorities with information on the hideouts and mobility of AQAP members. The mountainous region, where Osama bin Laden's family originates, has been a stronghold for jihadists who in some areas have local support and are able to retreat safely into remote areas, relying on a traditional social

⁷²² Details are given in the following subchapter: *Operationalization and internalization of ideology – the Intersection of Online Guidelines by Abu Yahya and the impact in the Offline.*

⁷²³ As noted prior, the first abduction and execution (Salah al-Hussam) was a revenge mission for counter-terrorist operations in Yemen; Bashir al-Bakr, 158.

⁷²⁴ *Masari'* (pl.) of *masra'*: killing, violent death, death site, downfall, destruction (Hans Wehr).

⁷²⁵ Bashir al-Bakr, *Al-Qa'ida fi Yaman wa-s-Sa'udiyya*, Beirut: Dar al-Saqi 2010, 160.

⁷²⁶ Aljazeera America, What is al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula?, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2013/8/7/profile-al-qaedainthearabianpeninsula.html>, August 7, 2013.

infrastructure. Local Yemenis, either pressured by the security forces or volunteers, have become a main threat for AQAP and are thus central targets by the jihadists' annihilation and kidnapping operations that are sanctified by the ideological framework. Spies are being punished, mostly by execution, but AQAP seeks to annihilate and assassinate the source of the local spies, the Saudi and Yemeni recruiters and handlers to whom these spies report. The overall strategy is to disrupt espionage networks and to discourage any potential recruits. The secret service officers are the main driving force in recruiting spies and are thereby considered as deviating Sunni Muslims from Islam. As such, these individuals are the cause for *fitna* (turmoil) among Sunnites, by coercing individuals into apostasy (*ridda*) when spying on the *Mujahidin*. The intelligence officers, in Yemen in most cases Sunni Muslims, are furthermore accused of hypocrisy (*nifaq*) and treason (*khiyyana*) while treated as apostates (*murtaddin*) and sentenced to death. The verdict of apostasy is emphasized due to individuals' work for the government of 'Ali 'Abdallah Saleh, a Shiite, the jihadists accuse of collaborating with Iran to wage a war against Sunni Islam from within, while being the agent of the United States. The allegation of being a mere vassal of the Americans applies to Saleh's successor, Abd al-Rubbu Mansur Hadi. As proof of precise targeted killings of high value individuals, the jihadi propaganda in some cases intends to show to the audience that operations are aborted if Muslim Sunni civilians are nearby and would potentially be collateral damage. This had been at the center of the second installment of this video series, where planted roadside bombs⁷²⁷ to ambush the convoy of the director of the Political Security Office (PSO) had been called off, in order to protect the blood of an innocent Muslim passing by.⁷²⁸ AQAP tries to market itself as a Muslim civilian-friendly organization that is a credible alternative to the corrupt Yemeni government, providing justice and freedom based on the presumed interpretation and teachings of the *shari'a*.

⁷²⁷ A so called "improvised explosive device", IED which is a homemade bomb planted on the roadside and set off via the cellular or wireless network allowing a precision detonation when the target, mostly a column of cars, passes by. This tactic has proven highly efficient with low costs and little risks for the attackers in Afghanistan and Iraq and was later exported to other battlefields such as Algeria (2007) and with the outbreak of violence also in Syria (2012).

On Algeria and the influx of IED's after joining AQ in 2006: Nico Prucha. Algeria: Tanzim al-Qa'ida fi-bilad al-maghreb al-islam airs new video. Accessed August 17, 2012. <http://online-jihad.com/2007/02/15/algeria-tanzim-al-qa'ida-fi-bilad-al-maghreb-al-islam-airs-new-video/>.

⁷²⁸ As outlined in the chapter: *Aborting IED Attacks to Preserve the Sacrosanct Blood of Muslims – YouTube Clips as Part of an Ideological Cluster Network*.

The kidnapping and filmed Kangaroo Trial of Colonel Tarbush thus had been a major propaganda coup and a severe loss for Yemeni intelligence operations in the Mareb Province. The kangaroo courts by the jihadists follow a somewhat coherent layout and codex. The Oxford reference dictionary describes kangaroo trials originally as courts

“improperly constituted or illegal court held by strikers, etc.”⁷²⁹

Such kangaroo trials thus are non-state courts that are based on the judiciary of a group, an ideology that sets the framework how to handle and order affairs in a (pseudo-) legal manner. In this case, the *shari'a*, consisting of legal rulings based on Qur'an and *Sunna* are the fundamental basis of jihadist *kangaroo courts*.

The video “The Demise of the Traitors”, part 1, starts by showing pictures of former Presidents Bush and Saleh as well as air strikes launched against undefined ground targets. Tarbush is blamed for his personal involvement in recruiting (*tajnid*) locals as spies (*jasus*) that led to the arrests of alleged AQAP members.

The sequence of the video in its opening minutes consists of selected pictures and frames to underline the impact of the work of the hostage, who thus is framed even more so as a legitimate prisoner, and by no means a victim the viewer could sympathize with. Followed by a picture of U.S. Ambassador Nabil Khuri standing next to at the time President Saleh's son Yahya Muhammad 'Abdallah Saleh, the local ring leader of the war against AQAP, devices are shown used by spies to mark ground targets designated to be hit by unmanned drones and attack aircraft in general. After showing the bombing of civilian houses by attack helicopters, the “prisoner” is blended in, and his “confession” (*i'tiraf*) begins.

⁷²⁹ Judy Pearsall et al. Oxford English Reference Dictionary, 2nd rev. ed. Edited (Oxford: University Press, 2003), 772.



Figure 29 Four screenshots taken of the video, top right is a direct reference to Abu Yahya al-Libi's book

According to *al-Malahim* propaganda, the U.S. continues to operate drones for surveillance as well as attack missions. Therefore, and under the ideological, operational and pragmatically guidance of Abu Yahya al-Libi's work *al-Ma'alim fi qatl al-jasus al-Muslim*, the jihadists are sensitive to find and execute any potential spy – having the ideological and therefore moral justification to do so nevertheless. This is even more so the case for those, who are deemed working directly for American, Saudi and/or Yemeni officials and responsible for recruiting mid- to low-level operatives in order to infiltrate the ranks of jihadist organizations.

Thereby, the *Kangaroo Trial* of Colonel Tarbush and his confession are of high value and seem to be underlining the jihadists' stance in general while claiming effective and successful 'counter-counter-terrorism' operations. The humiliation and the crimes of Bassam Tarbush who is coerced into his confession are embedded into the greater narrative of espionage and counter-espionage, the violation of *honor* (*'ird*) of Muslims in Yemen, particularly of the women whose forbidden quarters are being monitored and photographed by drones, thus violating the fundamental principles of *hurma*; the perversion of Tarbush, shown sitting on the ground with alcoholic beverages "found on him" further intend to dehumanize and de-Islamize the individual, who is portrayed as a willing executor of forces of evil and thus guilty of apostasy. The individual is portrayed, as an apostate, as a demon who has no human values, has neither status as a believer nor any moral norms.

As a Sunni Muslim, Tarbush is subjected to various stages of apostasy:

- (i) The individual is 'de-Sunnaized',⁷³⁰ working for the Shiite government of – at the time – ‘Ali ‘Abdallah Saleh, spying on Sunni Muslims.
- (ii) The apostate (*murtadd*) is a traitor to God and His believers, thus being a combatant (*muharrib*) and approximated to associating partners to God (*shirk*) and elements of black magic (*majus*).
- (iii) He is the servant of a government that is in clear violation of *shari'a* law and an ally of the west.
- (iv) Recruiting fellow Muslims and leading them astray is a grave sin, punishable by death.
- (v) He cannot repent (*tawba*) as he is caught, indicted and confesses his crimes and violations in captivity. Granting him repentance and mercy would therefore be in violation of 5:34: “unless they repent before you overpower them – in that case bear in mind that God is forgiving and merciful.”⁷³¹
- (vi) He is a hypocrite (*munafiq*). Despite all his work and commitment against the *Mujahidin*, the captive is perceived as defining himself as a Sunni Muslim. This is not accepted by his captors. The legality of executing the sinner is framed by the *Sura Muhammad* recited in the opening of the video. This is a setting for the inevitable and the condemnation of the individual to punishment in the afterlife. Thus, by the hands of the pious believers, the *jund allah*, the *Mujahidin* who perceive themselves as mere instruments of God, the “rule of God” (*hukm allah*) is implemented.

The video *The Demise of Traitors* is embedded in a coherent and stringent logic, opening with verses of the Quran, *Sura Muhammad* 47:25-28:

⁷³⁰ As referred to Thomas K. Gugler, Public Religiosity, Parrots of Paradise and the Symbols of the Super-Muslim: Sunna and Sunnaization in Islamic Missionary Movements, in: Mushirul Hasan (ed.), *Islam in a Globalized World: Negotiating Faultlines*, Gurgaon: ImprintOne, 2010.

⁷³¹ As ruled by Abu ‘l-Mundhar al-Shanqiti on the fatwa forum of the *Minbar al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad* website: Is the spy trustworthy who claims having repented before being captured? Accessed July 15, 2012. http://tawhed.ws/FAQ/display_question?qid=6528&pageqa=1&i=&PHPSESSID=c8448f9. For an analysis, turn to the chapter *Mediating Historical Sources to Sanction Physical Punishment*.

“Those who turn on their heels after being shown guidance are duped and tempted by Satan; they say to those who hate what God has sent down, ‘We will obey you in some matters’⁷³² – God knows their secret schemes. How will they feel when the angels take them in death beating their faces and their backs because they practiced things that incurred God’s wrath and disdained to please Him? He makes their deeds go to waste.”

The 47th Surah of the Quran, *Sura Muhammad*, is also known as “the *sura* of combat” (*surat al-qital*).⁷³³ The 25th verse explains the hypocrites (*al-munafiqeen*),

“those who returned to what they had [in the state] of unbelief (*kufir*), recanting (*taraja’u*) of whatever they had manifested of faith (*iman*), they are the *munafiqeen*.”⁷³⁴

From the off, with pictures of drones, arrests, oil refineries and politicians meeting to conspire against Islam, a technical angle of the modern-day spy-work is referenced. As Abu Yahya al-Libi addressed in his ideological writing he also provided pictures of technical gadgets and alleged devices used by the agents and spies to mark targets for aerial bombards by drones and the air force in general. These alleged missile-guiding chips are the main spy gadgets. The picture below is a screen shot grab from the video that build in al-Libi’s last page of his book.⁷³⁵ It shows several 9-volt battery operated stroboscope devices during the process of the introduction and narration of the video. These tiny devices are slightly bigger than a standard 9 V battery and are allegedly used by spies to designate targets (houses, cars, meeting places) for the U.S. operated drones:

⁷³² Haleem notes: “For instance, they will agree that Muhammad is not a prophet but will not agree to idol worship or denial of the Resurrection (Razi).”

⁷³³ Al-Mawsu’at al-Qur’aniyyat al-Mayssara, Dar al-Fakr: Damascus – Beirut, 2009, 508.

⁷³⁴ Ibid.

⁷³⁵ Abu Yahya al-Libi: al-Ma’lam fi hukm al-jasus al-Muslim, al-Fajr (2009), 146.



Figure 30 Another direct link to Abu Yahya’s book showing the alleged tools used by spies to mark targets

“The Islamic *umma* is curtailed in the present era by treacherous rulers (*bi-hukkam ‘umala’ khawna*) and by the patronage of the Jews and Christians, in their triumph over the Muslims. They have suspended the rule of God (*shara’ allah*) and govern by man-made, secular laws,⁷³⁶ spreading corruption in the [Islamic] countries with devastating immorality, looting and pillaging [the resources] predestined for the *umma*. The resources of the *umma* are exploited and used for this by all means: by their soldiers and their hired mercenaries, satisfied by injustice and destruction of the *umma*’s peoples and tribes; participating in the tyranny and labor force for the Jews and Christians for the sake of receiving some financial crumbs. Of the lowest and debased are these treacherous agents (*al-‘umala’ al-khawna*), the spies who continuously support the enemies of the *umma*, the rulers and the agents for the Americans and her allies. They present valuable information and they grant the aircraft that bombard, spies and collects intelligence guiding advice – at the expense of the honor of the *Mujahidin* and the Muslims, by different means. Indeed, the enemies of the *umma* receive plenty and plenty of information by these agents and spies. The enemies would not receive this kind of intelligence otherwise if not by these spies; after God permitted them to do so. For they are

⁷³⁶ A picture of the Yemeni parliament emphasizes the man-made laws people have to endure.

the disease flowing in the veins, they are the cancer that kills the *umma* from it's inside. They are the enemy. So beware of them and may God damn them.”

The sequence switches to the hostage, Bassam Tarbush al-Sharjabi, who, blindfolded, sits on the ground in what seems to be a large tent. Prior to his coerced confession, the narrator introduces and addresses the role of the tribes in Yemen, who are under increased pressure by the American and Saudi intelligence agencies as well as the Israeli Mossad.

“By His might and grace, God granted success for a blessed intelligence operation, concluded by the kidnapping of the chief of the secret police branch in the province of Mareb: Lieutenant Colonel Bassam Sulayman Tarbush al-Sharjabi. He was abducted while on espionage duty against the Muslims in general and the *Mujahidin* in particular, supervising a network of spies and recruiting some of the sons of the tribes to spy on Muslims. He indeed confessed names and gave details of the agents and spies and provided insight into their work and their recruitment against Muslims and the *Mujahidin*.”⁷³⁷

The information he allegedly gave up was put to use by AQAP in a later statement. In the following year, according to statement 21, the group claimed to have facilitated the confession of Tarbush to root out related spies in Yemen, by having assassinated

“the speaker of the chief of the secret police in the Mareb province, Muhammad Fari’. He was in charge of persecuting the *Mujahidin* and recruited spies. Based on information given up by Bassam al-Sharjabi [Tarbush] and confirmed by the special security apparatus of the *Mujahidin*, the assassination operation took place on August 29, 2010.”

⁷³⁷ Masari’ al-Khawna, *al-Malahim* Media, Dhu’l-qa’da, 1430 (November 2009).

By claiming of having a functioning and professionally established “security apparatus” (*al-jahiz al-amni*), AQAP seeks to further exhibit itself as a somewhat state-like entity in the making and on a small scale – applicable for all Muslims to join with the benefits of protection and safety. This notion would be manifest in 2011 and in 2012 with the ceding of power of ‘Ali Saleh to his vice president Hadi and AQAP’s control over territory and the propaganda of the *Ansar al-Shari’a* as a policing and religious police unit of AQAP at the time. This jihadists’ notion is also evident in the propaganda of the “Islamic State of Iraq” showing *Mujahidin* professionally dressed up and equipped as Iraqi special police and army units with corresponding cars attacking governmental targets.⁷³⁸ A habitus and a modus operandi that later proved as vital for the extension into Syria and the proclamation of *The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham* (Syria).

Furthermore, based on the ‘confession’ by Bassam Sulayman Tarbush, who sometimes is referred to as Bassam al-Sharjabi, the statement regarding the assassination of Fari’ continues:

“this is the fate for every spy or agent who sides⁷³⁹ with the campaign of the Crusaders in the Islamic countries. The swords of the *Mujahidin* will descend upon them, sooner or later and they will meet the same fate as Bassam al-Sharjabi or Muhammad Fari’. For, if they did not repent (*yatubu / tawba*), returning into the row of their *umma*, thus the one is happy who advocates the others accordingly. It doesn’t matter, for our dead are in Paradise (*al-jannah*), theirs are in the Hellfire (*al-nar*).”⁷⁴⁰

⁷³⁸ A similar rhetoric and rationale was broadcast by *The Islamic State of Iraq*, Salil al-sawarim, part 2. Al-Furqan, published August 17, 2012. <http://as-ansar.com/vb/showthread.php?p=385159>, showing the confession and subsequent execution of ‘collaborators’.

⁷³⁹ *Yaqif fi l-hamlat al-salibiyya*: “who placed himself in the row of the Crusader-campaign” and thus clearly drew a line of demarcation, in contrast of “repenting and returning into the rows of their *umma*.”

⁷⁴⁰ *Statement regarding the assassination of the speaker for the director of the secret police in the Mareb Province*, statement number 21, August 29, 2010, signed by the *Organization Qaedat al-Jihad on the Arab Peninsula*, published by *Markaz al-Fajr li-l-i’lam*.

The sequence switches to the hostage, Bassam Tarbush al-Sharjabi, who, blindfolded, sits on the ground in what seems to be a large tent. Prior to his coerced confession, the narrator introduces and addresses the role of the tribes in Yemen, who are under increased pressure by the American and Saudi intelligence agencies as well as the Israeli Mossad.

The statement of the Fari' assassination starts as the video of the filmed confession of Bassam Tarbush with verses of the *Surah Muhammad* (47:25-26), highlighting the basic notion of apostasy and the sin of spying on Muslims. Both operations are termed as part of a greater campaign, entitled *nafi al-khubuth*, the “cleansing of the wicked”. This statement, issued in August 2010, almost a year after the publication of *The Demise of the Traitors*, seeks to underline the coherence of AQAP's operations inside Yemen and their precision killing and abduction of individuals, who are deemed the ultimate enemies – without risking the blood of innocent Muslims, as a second video would later highlight – an element that would gain wide popularity in the Syrian context of 2012/3. The confession and sentencing of Bassam al-Sharjabi, however, was the first major publication of this genre of the re-launched Yemeni based AQAP and a propaganda success for al-Sharjabi was a recruiter and sought to mislead the sons of the honorable tribes of Yemen:

“Among them are some sons of honorable tribes, who do not accept these actions and refuse these [intelligence] services (*'amala*) and their means. Therefore, we took the decision to not announce the names of the tribes in order to safeguard their reputation from being damaged by some of these actions by persons who do not represent the tribes. By the grace of God, the rule of God executing (*hukm allah qatlan*) this agent, this spy, was imposed, in order to teach a lesson for those who need this lesson.”⁷⁴¹

⁷⁴¹ Masari' al-Khawna, *al-Malahim* Media, Dhu'l-qa'da, 1430 (November 2009).



Figure 31 Col Tarbush, the head of the PSO division in the Mareb Province

The interrogation starts. Blindfolded all the time, sitting on the ground in front of a blue plastic canvas with three bottles of alcohol in front of him, he is being questioned by the *Mujahidin*. Two to three voices are heard, following a militarily styled questioning while al-Sharjabi speaks very quiet and trembles.

“*Mujahidin*:

- Name.

The agent Bassam Sulayman:

- Bassam Sulayman Tarbush al-Sharjabi.

Mujahidin:

- Profession.

The agent Bassam Sulayman:

- Lieutenant colonel in the administration of the secret police (*al-bahth*), section chief of investigations of the *bahth* administration in Mareb.

Mujahidin:

- How long have you been doing this?

The agent Bassam Sulayman:

- Fourteen years. Ten years in Mareb.

Mujahidin:

- How many have you recruited?

The agent Bassam Sulayman:

- By God, the people we have recruited of the sons of the tribes and others, who live outside of the Mareb province...

Mujahidin:

- You have mentioned them in the interrogation?

The agent Bassam Sulayman:

- We have their names noted in the interrogations that you gave up.

Mujahidin:

- What was your work in the last phase?

The agent Bassam Sulayman:

- My work was about collecting intelligence and I was the supervisor, realizing the bulletins of the interior ministry by generally propagating the wanted men and by noting and delivering details and information on individuals of the investigations.

Mujahidin:

- Did you have confidential sources?

The agent Bassam Sulayman:

- Everyone who is in a higher position has such sources.

Mujahidin:

- Okay. By what means did the recruitment happen?

The agent Bassam Sulayman:

- By God, the means of recruiting, they looked at who seems able and more likely, who fulfilled the tasks and who tried to gain our confidence; these are the ones that they attracted to work for them and reached out to them by any means then they tried to recruit them.

Mujahidin:

- The ones working for you, are they respectable (*al-nuzuha*) or insolent fellows?

The agent Bassam Sulayman:

- By God, the majority are insolent fellows (*al-sufaha*).

Mujahidin:

- The government of the despicable ‘Ali ‘Abdallah [Saleh], that filth (*al-khabitha*⁷⁴²), did you know it rules by the Islamic *shari’ah* or not?

The agent Bassam Sulayman:

- No, no, no. Mostly by man-made laws, outside of the known *shari’ah* law.

Mujahidin:

- The government of ‘Ali ‘Abdallah [Saleh], did you know before that it is an agent for the Americans, or not?

The agent Bassam Sulayman:

- It is well known that they are puppets, based on the speeches, meetings, and policies set forth by the president.

⁷⁴² *Khabitha*, a reference to the Qur’an used as a swearword for “impure”, or in this context “filth”, is singular, *khubuth* the plural. Note the name of the AQAP campaign, *nafi al-khubuth*, that is often referred to as a “campaign to cleanse to wicked” by the hands of the pure, pious and moral integer *Mujahidin*.

Mujahidin:

- For example?

The agent Bassam Sulayman:

- Like the formation of a special intelligence branch, free of any restrictions to suppress the *Mujahidin*, as based on the demands by America.

Mujahidin:

- How did you get caught?⁷⁴³

The agent Bassam Sulayman:

- By God, while I was on my way to sell alcohol⁷⁴⁴ (*khamr*, wine) to someone.



Figure 32 “The alcohol found on him” as further proof of the deviation of this individual

Mujahidin:

⁷⁴³ *Kayfa tamm al-qabd ‘alayka* – “how did you get arrested”, resorting to the legality of ‘counter-prisons’ and a ‘counter-legal system’ as had been the case with Muslim and non-Muslim hostages in Iraq, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere where the jihadists by all means refute any statehood and claim their own frameworks.

⁷⁴⁴ The sale, possession and consumption of alcohol in Yemen is heavily restricted. Alcohol licenses had only been issued by the government for few luxury hotels in Sana’a and ‘Aden but have been revoked in the course of the ‘Arab Spring’. Prior to the unification of Yemen with the North suppressing South Yemen that had been under the sponsorship of the Soviet Union, the South had been liberal in terms of alcohol with a state-owned brewery.

- What's your specific profession?

The agent Bassam Sulayman:

- My profession, I am an officer of the secret police.

Mujahidin:

- What's your advice to your colleagues?

The agent Bassam Sulayman:

- I advice my colleagues to not get dragged and drift into operations and actions such as this one and to adhere to the *Mujahidin*.

Mujahidin:

- Your advice to those who have been recruited by you and your service?

The agent Bassam Sulayman:

- My advice to those who have been recruited is that they may distance themselves by these words and do not, by any means undertake any work or operation like mine. That they may return to their previous professions, prior to their recruitment. So that what happens to me may not happen to them, I regret this before they have to regret like me.

Some of the sons of the tribes have connections to the Saudi intelligence services and I have noted their names in the interrogation.

Mujahidin:

- What do you recommend to those?

The agent Bassam Sulayman:

- I advice them against this work and to stop it based on what I have noted before to my brothers. I advise them, our employees, our assets in Yemen, I advice them as well to not being involved in this affair. Don't get dragged [into this] by the American intelligence agencies and the Mossad and get us

involved in between our brothers by fighting one another and by prosecuting the honorable people and their officers.”

The video has two endings. First, Bassam al-Sharjabi is shown prior to his execution kneeling blindfolded in the desert sand, while seven masked men are standing behind him. All men are wearing the classical Yemeni skirts, the *futa* and have ammunition vests, six are bearing arms (RPG's and Kalashnikov assault rifles). One of the men, standing in the middle behind al-Sharjabi, has his Kalashnikov strapped on his back with his right index finger raised (for the *shahada*) and declares the verdict:



Figure 33 prior to the execution the final statement is read out

“All praise be God, the Lord of the Worlds. Peace and blessings be upon His messenger, the faithful, and upon his family, companions and whoever follows them by good deeds until the Day of Judgment (*yawm al-din*).

Your brothers, the *Mujahidin* on the Peninsula of Muhammad – God bless him and grant him and his family salvation – had been able to abduct this traitor (*kha'in*), this criminal (*mujrim*), this apostate (*murtadd*), who for over 14 years of his life has harmed God, His messenger and the believers. Persecuting the *Mujahidin*, mistreating the needy, spreading fear and loathing and selling

alcohol. On this day he will receive his just punishment by the hands of the *Mujahidin*. All might is to God, His messenger, and the believers, but the majority of people do not know.”

The screen turns red again and the viewer hears the sound of gunshots, indicating the execution. The actual killing is not shown. Rather, a red screen appears, showing the severed head of Bassam al-Sharjabi, in the red background the viewer sees the contours of the *Mujahidin*. On the red screen as a background, the severed head of Bassam al-Sharjabi appears and fades into the “concluding remarks”, again, written in white letters on the red background:

“We say to everyone who took a vow in this line of despicable work and who has committed themselves or endorse to spy on the *Mujahidin* or help the *murtaddin* of the regional rulers against the *Mujahidin*; those who attempt to make a living on our blood, those are the ones that won’t be left without punishment, God willing, and the time will come where the hands of the *Mujahidin* will descend upon him. Even if this takes time and prolongs injustice, it is not a characteristic of the *Mujahidin* and unacceptable for them; for they are warned. Happy are those, who take this advice by the examples of others. The door of repentance (*tawbah*) is open to whoever wants before his time is over, whereas regret is useless, the shame will follow him from this world into the torments of the afterlife.”

Guns on the Roof: The Action-Reaction Symbiosis of Violence

The escalation of violence spurred an increase of raids and counter-insurgency operations by the U.S. military and coalition forces that became a vital element for the jihadi video propaganda.⁷⁴⁵ These grievances, the violation of sacred space, such as

⁷⁴⁵ The narrative is strengthened by such videos to showcase the violation of the private spheres of Muslims, their houses, as well as random arrests to justify kidnapping missions and executions of high-ranking government employees sought responsible for such abuses.

family quarters penetrated by U.S. soldiers on ‘search-and-destroy’, ‘counter-insurgency’ missions or tasked with the arrest or annihilation of top-targets within this socio-religious environment have a real-life reference point. Likewise, the deployment of unmanned drones for reconnaissance and mainly for bombing missions

In Iraq the U.S. military worked with “target lists” that proved to be counterproductive as Andrew Exum, a former U.S. Army Ranger, recalls in an interview with Jeremy Scahill:

“Exum recalled hunting Izzat Ibrahim al Douri, one of Saddam’s senior military commanders, who had received the designation as the King of Clubs in the High Value Target deck of cards. They got a tip that Douri was in a particular house and conducted a night raid. As they began the raid, Exum’s Ranger team came under fire from two men. His team returned fire and gunned the men down. “We found out later that we were on two weeks old intelligence,” he remembered. “We killed them and, you know, we kind of realized later that these guys were just out guarding the neighborhood generator.” The men, Exum speculated, likely thought the Rangers were thieves. “Now, I didn’t lose any sleep over it, because these guys were shooting at me, but nonetheless, you start thinking about it from a strategic perspective, that’s a loss.””⁷⁴⁶

With the re-emergence of al-Qa’ida in Yemen (AQAP) in 2010, drones have been on the rise in the southern Arab Peninsula. The affect of drones in the sky has resulted in AQAP’s ramping up of its terror campaigns to target, kidnap and execute Yemeni intelligence officials thought responsible for providing the Americans with target data. However, the moral and legal deployment of drones is not only questioned in public and among scholars in the West,⁷⁴⁷ but is increasingly considered as being a

⁷⁴⁶ Jeremy Scahill, *Dirty Wars – The World is a Battlefield*, Nation Books: New York, 2013, e-book edition, 287.

⁷⁴⁷ David Carr, *Debating Drones in the Open*, *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/11/business/media/the-inconvenient-but-vital-drone-debate.html>, February 10, 2013.

new main narrative used by the jihadi propaganda to exploit grievances and thus to be contra productive and a 'blowback' as acknowledged.

“The counterterrorism “kill or capture” campaign initiated by the Bush administration after 9/11 relies almost exclusively on the use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), or drones. Under the Obama administration, the drone campaign has increased in terms of raw numbers and geographical reach. While Pakistan's FATA has been the battleground for U.S. drone warfare, the theater has expanded into Yemen. The deaths of Osama bin Laden and Abu Yahya al-Libi and the nearly decade-long drone campaign in FATA have led the Obama administration to conclude that the original al-Qaeda cadre is no longer capable of facilitating, coordinating and conducting strikes on the United States. However, a new threat has allegedly emerged from a more adept and diverse “al-Qaeda 2.0.” Largely based in Yemen, it incorporates more dual citizens, many holding U.S. passports, who are capable of moving between elusive al-Qaeda circles and mainstream Western societies.”⁷⁴⁸

With increasing cases of abducted intelligence officers and governmental employees parallel to the intensified killings of militants and ideologues in the Afghan-Pakistani border areas and elsewhere, Abu Yahya al-Libi delivered in 2009 a highly elaborated ideological framework for sanctioning and justifying the execution of Muslims, working as spies or informants for the enemies. His work, *Guidance in regard of the Rule of Executing Muslim Spies* revolves around the jihadist notion of legality for executing Muslims with the intent of clearly developing the ideological extend to cover this niche on a practical, operational level. With U.S. drones operating over difficult terrain on a frequent basis, the Western intelligence agencies in general are in dire need of *human intelligence*, agents and spies, recruited among the *Mujahidin*, or locals that are in close proximity to them, to mark targets or provide information on the ground. Spies on the ground can comprise of locals who are part of the civilian

⁷⁴⁸ Leila Hudson, Colin S. Owens, David J. Callen, Drone Warfare in Yemen: Fostering Emirates through Counterterrorism? In: Middle East Policy Council. <http://www.mepc.org/journal/middle-east-policy-archives/drone-warfare-yemen-fostering-emirates-through-counterterrorism?print>. Accessed December 2, 2012.

infrastructure the *Mujahidin* may rely on or agents who have infiltrated jihadi organizations, or who have been flipped and cooperate with intelligence agencies. Thus, the execution of Sunni Muslim spies, forced to confess for the camera, has increased in parallel to the jihadists' conduct of 'counter-espionage' within their file and rank.

This ideological niche, in a similar fashion as Abu Yahya's 2007 GIMF writing justifying the release of the South-Korean hostages,⁷⁴⁹ is now covered by Abu Yahya again who sought to elevate his authoritative ideological-theological standing among the offline communities and online spheres.⁷⁵⁰ Ironically his treatise is mostly a response to the assassination of his countryman and fellow *shaykh al-mujahid* Abu l-Layth al-Libi by a U.S. operated drone in 2007. Abu Yahya had eulogized Abu l-Layth in a video commemorating al-Layth as a *Mujahid*, training instructor, fighter, and ideologue.⁷⁵¹ A new element, however, was the capture and confession of men allegedly responsible for passing information on the whereabouts of Abu'l Layth al-Libi to the Pakistani and thus American intelligence agencies, enabling a precision strike on his position and killing him.⁷⁵² A mini-series of four videos was broadcast in January 2009 entitled as *al-Qasas*, a reference to measuring a life by another, around the time the video to commemorate Abu'l Layth was disseminated by *as-Sahab*. The confessions had been televised by the jihadi camera lens and the individuals had thus been sentenced to death within a – according to jihadist reasoning – legitimate legal framework. All four spies had been beheaded. With drone attacks rising, annihilating individuals who had neither been sentenced by any court or subject to any legal framework whatsoever, the jihadist media departments frame and portray the

⁷⁴⁹ Abu Yahya al-Libi, Daf' ar-rayn 'an asiri 'asabat al-kureen : Mabhath mukhtasar hawl al-kureen al-ladhina ukhtadifuhum al-mujahidun fi Afghanistan, *Global Islamic Media Front*, 2007.

⁷⁵⁰ Nico Prucha, "Praktische Erfahrungen aus dem Online-Dschihad. Anwendungsbeispiel der Online-Welten der „al-Qa'ida“: Yaman Mukhaddab, ein Online- Sympathisant," published 2007, accessed August 8, 2012, http://www.oaip.ac.at/fileadmin/Unterlagen/Dateien/Publikationen/Online_Dschihad.pdf.

⁷⁵¹ A video eulogizing Abu 'l-Layth was published by *as-Shabab* in January 2009 as part of the series *Rih al-Janna*, "The Wind of Paradise". Key figures of AQ at the time appear in this two-hour long video such as Osama bin Laden and 'Attiyatullah al-Libi.

⁷⁵² The alleged spies confess to passing on information to handlers and to placing missile guiding chips and stroboscopes as Abu Yahy al-Libi also describes in his book. A screenshot of al-Libi's page was depicted in a video broadcast by AQAP in Yemen to justify the abduction and killing of intelligence officers as outlined in this chapter.

execution of ‘perpetrators’ as judicial killings – in sharp contrast to the extrajudicial killings by the U.S. administration.

The jihadists’ treatment and handling of spies is a controversial theme. While, in most cases, hostages are mentioned as being treated according to *shari’a-law*, the execution of Muslim spies needs to be clearly resolved – especially when more and more of such cases are propagated by the *Mujahidin* worldwide. Abu Yahya al-Libi writes in a clear fashion but repeats himself throughout the book that is so frantically embraced by Ayman al-Zawahiri in the foreword. Claiming to have written about this in 2001, al-Libi republished this *fatwa* electronically as a lengthy book to provide the communities with a set of guidance and legalities. As he claims to have lost his prior work, perhaps under the circumstances of war, he now delivered the framework on a more comprehensive and far-reaching fashion. The underlining argument for al-Libi to execute a spy is, just as much as senior ideologue Abu Basir al-Tartusi (‘Abd al-Mun’im Mustafa Halima) emphasized in his *fatwa The Ruling on the Spy*⁷⁵³, which he had published in 2000 the tale Hatib, a companion of prophet Muhammad.

The violation of the sacrosanct ‘*awra* (private; private sphere, private parts; deficiency; pl. ‘*awrat*: genitals, weak spots) of Muslims justifies the counter-actions of jihadi groups.⁷⁵⁴ For this violation, this penetration of the private areas, in houses and the abuse of trust is absolute necessary to enable espionage in the first place. Most spies are thus sentenced to death for this penetration and spying upon the ‘*awra* of Muslims. Furthermore, Muslim spies neglect any form of *hurma* (sacrosanct inviolabilities), a sentiment very close to the defined ‘*awra* and therefore become disbelievers by their betrayal. By extremist reading, however, *hurma* applies to many aspect of Islamic life, in this case the penetration of *private* quarters of houses or the revealing of information not intended to leave specific personal circles. *Hurma*, as outlined in previous chapters, nevertheless extends to the definition that the unlawful spilling of Muslim blood is likewise a desecration and thus a sin. By jihadist

⁷⁵³ This fatwa was published by *Minbar al-Tawhid wa-l Jihad* where most of al-Tartusi’s writings can be retrieved: <http://tawhed.ws/r?i=eerrzmrh>. It was also published on his personal website, <http://www.abubaseer.bizland.com/>. Accessed November 21, 2012.

⁷⁵⁴ This term is interlinked to “honor” in general. Honor can only be instilled and implemented if certain aspects of life remain hidden, covered and thus protected from any outsiders. This applies foremost to women in the jihadists’ interpretation of Islamic social traditions based on the presumed re-enacting of early Muslims.

understanding, the violation of *hurma* has many layers and is reflected for jihadist operations against targets, whereas the blood of Muslims is more valuable and thus collateral damage is not justifiable anymore, while the Islamic communities must be protected likewise against agents and individuals sent by *outside forces*.

In order to gain intelligence and collect information of military value, the spy has to gain trust of his surrounding community, or, if he is a local, commit treason. Abu Yahya's work thus seeks to provide a definition of such ideological terms and their meaning and real-life value while the author provides authoritative interpretations and especially explanations (*tafsir*) of chosen sources of the Qur'an and *Sunna* as well as historical scholars to fundament his rulings and guidance to his audience.

In general the jihadist literature dealing with espionage consists of similar argumentations that is detailed in al-Libi's work, comprising of:

1. espionage in contemporary times;
2. as based on cases of prophet Muhammad, particularly the analogy to the companion of the prophet Hatib bin Abi Balta'a;
3. replacing one's loyalty to God with patronage to the disbelievers;
4. the dealing with spies and their treatment;
5. work for either local secret services (*mukhabarat*) and/or for western agencies, the worst "enemies of Islam", thus becoming a *kafir* and being excommunicated (*takfir*).
6. The sins and the effects of Muslim agents who provide the enemies in general with intelligence that
7. are the cause of death of Muslim civilians and *Mujahidin* by
 - designating targets for aerial strikes;⁷⁵⁵
 - marking targets in general as well as assassination operations;⁷⁵⁶

⁷⁵⁵ As described by al-Libi (p. 146) and claimed in the filmed trial of Bassam al-Sharjabi by AQAP, as detailed in the previous chapter.

⁷⁵⁶ As described in the chapter *The Founders, pioneers and Actors of the early electronic Media Frontier – Abu A'id al-Filastini*, a jihadi Internet-pioneer who was killed by a Pakistani spy. The spy, in turn, was captured and beheaded. Other examples include, more prominently, the assassination of the Saudi Samir al-Suwaylim, renown as Khattab. He had been the Arab leader of the Chechen *Mujahidin* and was poisoned by an agent working for the Russians, <http://www.muslimtents.com/aminahsworld/khattab.html>, April 29, 2002. Redirected from the

- enable police and army forces to storm and search the houses⁷⁵⁷ of Muslims, thus violating both fundamental principals of *'awra* and *hurma* alike as well as
 - the surveillance by air: spying on Muslims and *Mujahidin* by drones and specially equipped surveillance helicopters and aircraft, that are also an integral part of the harsh violation of *hurma* and the *'awrat*.⁷⁵⁸
8. The spy's work is not limited to drone strikes but also consists of the dangers of secret arrests and rendition of detainees, whereas the spy provides *human intelligence* to find, locate, and extract individuals.

The jihadists' notion of the fundamentals of *'awra* and *hurma* are based and embedded on the frame of reference whereas citations of both Qur'an and *Sunna* are used in a special interpretation over which ideologues such as Abu Yahya al-Libi attempt to claim their authority. Al-Libi, being a *shaykh al-Mujahid*, an ideologue as much as an active field commander warns of the danger spies embodies and provides the *shari'a-law* sanctioning and authority of punishment in his writing.

Operational radius of spies: penetrating Islamic houses

For the

“work of spies in our times is not confined to writing memoranda and the transmission of news, the disclosure of secrets; rather, it reaches to the extend

Department of Strategic Information, Kavkaz-Center,
<http://www.kavkaz.org/eng/article.php?id=565>.

⁷⁵⁷ *Dahamat al-buyut*: this is a core element within the jihadist literature in general. The illegal storming and searching of houses violates the women's quarters, deprives families of their dignity and safety and is in most cases described as an assault on civilians homes with the intend of kidnapping or killing. See for example the statements and memoranda of the first generation AQAP: Die Stimme des Dschihad – *Sawt al-jihad*: al-Qa'idas erstes Online Magazin, Hamburg: Verlag Dr. Kovac, 2010.

⁷⁵⁸ *Statement of the Operation of the Sa'ud al-Utaybi Martyr Brigade*, The Voice of Jihad, according to Nico Prucha (2010).

of actively participating and engaging in military operations to kill, imprison, intimidate and to offensively search [houses].”⁷⁵⁹

The illegal – and in most cases violent – storming of houses in order to search these for either contraband or wanted men is essential for the global literature of *jihad*. This perceived ‘break-in’ that is necessary for police forces and especially military units in war zones such as Afghanistan or Chechnya violates the vitality of the sacrosanct. Even more so, when the families of *Mujahidin* are involved and the assailants are Muslims, however by their actions termed as apostates. By dehumanizing and demonizing these *apostates* the jihadist literature and movies frame any killing of these individuals as an easy and legitimate act. The jihadist literature, the operational as well ideological genre, unanimously relates this to Qur’anic definitions emphasizing the individual *Mujahid* in his perception of being *of the soldiers of God (jund allah)*, chosen to punish and sanction anyone who is opposing God. As usual, chosen passages and parts of verses in unison with the *Sunna* are incorporated into the jihadists’ worldview and propagated by all modern means of communication, with the videos being the backbone of the ideological propaganda serving as proof of the operational implementation by the *Mujahidin*. The violation of Islamic principles by security forces underlines a clear separation, for the entry of any army or police force into the houses of the – self-declared – true Muslims leads to the analogy of early times of Islam as based on the verse:

“the hypocrites and the sick at heart said, ‘God and His Messenger promised us nothing but delusions!’ Some of them said, ‘People of Yathrib, you will not be able to withstand [the attack], so go back!’ Some of them asked the Prophet’s permission to leave, saying, ‘Our houses are exposed’ (*buyutuna ‘awratun*), even though they were not – they just wanted to run away: had the city been invaded from all sides, and the enemy invited them to rebel, they would have done so almost without hesitation” Qur’an 33: 12-14.

⁷⁵⁹ Abu Yahya al-Libi: *al-Ma’alim fi hukm al-jasus al-Muslim*, Markaz al-Fajr li-l i’lam: 2009, 25.

Historically the message of the prophet was directed at the people of Medina within the specific context that the jihadis nowadays parallel to the geopolitical circumstances. The jihadis naturally consider themselves as the only true Muslims whose belief and piety guarantees their willingness to fight and die as a martyr (*shahid*), or succeed victorious. A popular propaganda-slogan thus states that the *Mujahid* seeks one of the two most precious things (*al-husayn*): victory (*nasr*) or attaining the *shahada*, exiting this world and dwelling in paradise. The will and the desire (*'ushaq*) to attain the *shahada* makes the fighter fearless, thus becoming a 'real man'. As Ayman al-Zawahiri states in his eulogy for Abu Yahya al-Libi, "people are wishing for live, fearing death while the *shahid* follows death, driven by life."⁷⁶⁰

Unlike the historical people of Medina sent back to their homes by Muhammad, the avant-gardist jihadist seek combat to enforce their conviction and to demonstrate their piety to their comrades as well as the global YouTube audience who applaud and appraise them via Facebook and other social media means. Unlike the historical – or modern – cowards and hypocrites, the jihadists of our times empower their vision as true believers as the early Muslims under Muhammad's command had been by citing religious sources such as the above stated verse of the Quran (33:13). According to the tafsir of the Qur'anic Encyclopaedia, Muhammad addressed the people of Medina in this verse, explaining:

“So return to your homes in Medina to safe [yourselves]. So a troop (*fi'a*) of them asked the prophet for permission to return, saying: “our homes are not fortified and will be destroyed by the enemies.” So they lied, as [these] homes had been fortified [and thus provided sufficient protection]. They [simply] wanted the permission to flee from combat.”⁷⁶¹

The true pious believers remained who sought to protect the *'awra* within their houses by fighting with the prophet.

⁷⁶⁰ *Asad al-'ilm wa-l-jihad Abu Yahya al-Libi*, as-Sahab Media, September 2012.

⁷⁶¹ Wahba al-Zuhayli et al., *Al-Mawsu'a al-Qur'aniyya al-Muyassara*, Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, 2009, 420.

This same sentiment applies to the contemporary times where, by spies among the infrastructure of the jihadists, enemy forces are threatening the *'awra* by breaching into houses or by deploying drones for espionage missions to take photographs of suspected houses and safe zones for the *Mujahidin*. The *'awra* is neither secure nor private anymore and under constant threat of surprise attacks. Being spied upon by aerial surveillance, by unmanned drones, espionage aircraft, or satellites, is also a violation of the *'awra*. As Abu Basir and Abu Yahya state, the enemies are deploying *human intelligence*, agents placed among or in proximity of the *Mujahidin*, to acquire information on individuals who are then placed under surveillance by technical and social means. Thus, the Muslim spy who has a greater chance of succeeding in gaining trust due to his/her elemental understanding and practice of Islam and ritual traditions becomes a disbeliever of Islam and is legitimate to be executed. Both scholars, Abu Basir and Abu Yahya, use an analogy to the times of Muhammad and the case of his companion Hatib bin Abi Balta'a whose message to the Quraysh warning of the imminent attack was intercepted. Although the prophet pardoned him, after 'Umar ibn al-Khattab requested beheading him, al-Khattab's demand serves as the logical consequence in justifying the executions nowadays.

And the same applies to anyone who attempts to gather or send information that will be of potential value to the non-Islamic enemies, as al-Tartusi directly relates to the historical espionage incident of Hatib bin Abi Balta'a, equating Muhammad's command to seek and kill the infiltrator to find and annihilate any spy.

“Likewise, the prophet commanded to kill the woman, that carried the letter of Hatib to the disbelievers, the Quraysh, in the year of the conquest [of Mecca, 630].”⁷⁶²

As in the times of Muhammad, this illegal entry into the *exposed*, or *bare houses* of Muslims by an enemy is furthered by contemporary jihadists and serves as an vital element in the proposed re-enactment of the early times of Islam: Any army or police force, any individuals with ill intent, whether westerners or of any state-entity, is

⁷⁶² Abu Basir al-Tartusi, *op. cit.*, 3.

defined as being non-Islamic. Those of the Muslims, who seek excuses for not fighting, are hypocrites. For no Muslim would penetrate and violate the sacrosanct values of fellow Muslims and shed their blood willingly. Therefore, any assailant is, by his complete loyalty (*muwala*) to the authority that sends him, an enemy of Islam and defined as a *kafir* (disbeliever), an apostate (*murtadd*) or a hypocrite (*munafiq*). Events that happened in Medina to the early followers of Muhammad are now repeated: an army comprised of “*munafiqeen* and *murtaddin* of Islam are combatting Muslims.”⁷⁶³ Furthermore, the leaders and elders of Arab Islamic tribes (*qaba'il*) cooperating with the governments loyal to the western enemies are perceived as the threat of trying to achieve the enemies' objective to change Islam from within. This threat is in particular articulated in regard of Shiites, who are able to pose as Sunnis and infiltrate jihadist groups. With the war in Syria increasingly turning into a confessional conflict and with the re-emergence of Sunni fighters in Iraq facing a mainly Shiite government, this argument has gained popularity and is a deep-rooted part of the jihadi narratives at play. Besides the aforementioned *munafiqeen* and *murtaddin*, such tribes and especially tribal leaders are termed as “mercenaries” (*murtazaqa*) or simply as part of the U.S. financed and trained *sahwa* councils that had led to the demise of al-Qa'ida in Iraq until the American withdrawal December 2011.⁷⁶⁴ Conducting espionage, in general, is part of the ongoing war against the *Mujahidin* and as thus punishable by death.

The death sentence carries as stated theological and emotional components outlined by the jihadist reading of the aforementioned verse (33:13). The outcome of the violation of *'awra*, by means of search-and-destroy missions affecting the houses and residential zones, leads to tribulation among Muslims (*fitna*). The threat was first posed by the historical *al-ta'ifat al-munafiqeen*, the Group of Hypocrites, in Medina who by their treason tried to succumb the community of true Muslims, the *al-ta'ifa al-mansura*. This element is embedded into the greater concept of the jihadists'

⁷⁶³ Al-Mawsu'at al-Qur'aniyyat al-Mayssara, Dar al-Fakr: Damascus – Beirut, 2009, 420.

⁷⁶⁴ The term was famed in Iraq when some Arab tribes throughout the country and particularly in the Sunni province of al-Anbar started to cooperate with the U.S. military. Tribal meetings with U.S. officials, termed as *Sahwa* (awakening) councils, turned them in the perception of the jihadists' into paid mercenaries of the Americans. After the U.S. troop withdrawal in December 2011, videos emerged showing the revenge killing of *Sahwa* leaders and soldiers.

In the context of the role of spies and psychological operations (*psyops*) by western militaries to combat al-Qa'ida in Yemen: Hussam 'Abd al-Ru'uf, *Wail lahum thumma wail lahum*, Nukhba al-i'lam al-jihadi, 3, August 1, 2012.

perception of the universal fight against falsehood (*al-batil*) and those opposing *batil*, who confess the unity of God, the *muwahhideen*, and therefore profess the ‘truth’ (*al-haqq*). They compose the *Victorious Group* (*al-ta’ifa al-mansura*) and are as such the only valid believers, adherents of the program of truth (*barnamaj al-haqq*).⁷⁶⁵ What applied to early Muslims who had traitors among them, claiming being Muslims but then sided with the polytheist (*shirk*) hostile forces of the Quraysh or sought excuses of abstaining from combat, and thus being hypocrites, applies to contemporary Muslims as well. The jihadist in general, whether being a foreign fighter and/or preacher in zones of conflict or active in his native environment, seeks to establish safe zones and territories where Muslims are granted the security they otherwise can not attain. In the words of the German-Moroccan Abu Adam al-Almani, Mounir Chouka, this territory is referred to as

“the territory of honor, where Allah’s word is the most high; where *Muslim* and *Muslima* are not estranged to their religion.”⁷⁶⁶

The jihadists’ set of beliefs is engulfed by the rule of non-Islamic governments over Islamic territory, thus limiting and shrinking Islamic communities by implementing non-Islamic forms of rule and enabling secular influence in general. Within Islamic countries that are ruled by harsh and inhumane dictatorships any visibility of religion and in particular of much of any Islamic way of life has been suppressed for decades. Stories of being harassed, arrested and monitored by local intelligence agents is also part of the jihadist corpus of texts, as the tale of Abu Sa’ad al-Tunisi implies, based on the account of his mother:

⁷⁶⁵ Roel Meijer: Yūsuf al-‘Uyairī and the Making of a Revolutionary Salafī Praxis in: *Die Welt des Islams – International Journal for the Study of Modern Islam*, Vol. 47, Nrs. 3-4 2007, Brill: Leiden 2007, 422-459.

⁷⁶⁶ Abu Adam al-Almani, *Boden der Ehre*, Teil 1, *Jund allah*, Islamic Movement Uzbekistan, March 2010. The opening credit of the film claims the origin in Waziristan with al-Almani in following movies responding to attacks against the Pakistani army. In 2013, in the wake of the *jihād* in Syria, a German foreign fighter by the name of Abu Usama al-Almani who joined ISIS addressed Muslims in German video likewise as Abu Adam in 2010. Pro-ISIS German-language media activists such as *IslamInfo Austria* re-disseminate the talk by Abu Usama on YouTube, linking it directly to Abu Adam by setting the title to “message from Abu Usama from the territory of honor – ISIS” (Nachricht von Abu Usama vom Boden der Ehre – ISIS), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lfwVIJOucME>, December 18, 2013. Accessed May 11, 2014.

“I recall one time when he was fourteen years old. I had forbidden him to attend the morning prayers in the mosque, fearing for him as the police is monitoring and arresting everyone who attends these prayers.”⁷⁶⁷

This generates on the one hand apostasy (*ridda*) and hypocrisy (*nifaq*) as Muslims are forced to transform into idle religious entities or have to refrain their religious duties by commandment of the secular government. The *Mujahid*, by all means, seeks to provide zones of comfort that may serve as a new basis to launch missionary and military efforts, guaranteeing safety and implementing the “rule of God”. These zones, however, are under surveillance and attack in the post 9/11 world while new zones have been established in the aftermath of the *Arab Spring*, in particular in Syria where jihadists are conducting Iraq-styled attacks.

Therefore, spies, speaking local languages while being accustomed to the jihadist *habitus* frequently deliver information to assist in striking and decimating these Islamic communities. Information, in the context of gaining trust or by being granted entry into the private living quarters of suspected *Mujahidin* can only be obtained by violating the Islamic principle of the social and traditional inviolability of the ‘private’, defined by the Arabic *‘awra*.

The writing of Abu Basir al-Tartusi, in total 9 pages, and that of Abu Yahya al-Libi (149 pages) concur on the main issues of the violation of the ‘private sphere’, the excommunication of the Muslim spy and thus sanctioning the death sentence and the analogy to the story of Hatib ibn al-Balta’a. As Abu Basir clarifies and Abu Yahya shall expand,

⁷⁶⁷ Haddaya li-umahatinu: hiwar ma’ walida al-shahid kama nuhasibuhu Abu Sa’ad al-Tunisi, *Mu’assasat al-Mas’ada*, August 25, 2010. Abu Sa’ad moved on to fight and die in Iraq with his parents having moved to Europe, where, so the mother claims, she could smell the musk of the martyr in her living room. The title translates to “a present for our mothers: interview with the mother of the martyr – as we reckon him to be – Abu Sa’ad al-Tunisi.”

“whoever stakes out the ‘*awrat* of Muslims and spies upon them for the good of the idols, the disbelievers, he is in the first stage of hypocrisy; from his heart, faith (*iman*) is denied.”⁷⁶⁸

Using the *Sunna* to further underline this notion, Abu Basir cites Abu Dawud in his *sahih sinan*:

“Whoever protects a believer from a *munafiq* shall receive an angel from God to protect his flesh on judgment day (*yawm al-qiyama*) of the fire of hell. And whoever speaks ill of a Muslim,⁷⁶⁹ wanting his disgrace, will be withheld by God on the bridge of Hell,⁷⁷⁰ until recanting what he had said.”⁷⁷¹

Abu Basir misquotes the *hadith*, which is 4986 and not 4086. Perhaps this error occurred in the process of digitalizing the scholar’s work by his disciples.

The modern *hypocrites* and *apostates* are the majority of Muslims. Whereas actual jihadists, or factual members of the global jihad ‘outlets’ (actively, or indirectly) consider themselves as an elite (*nukhba*), avant-gardist force as the leadership of AQ worldwide always claims. This also applies to militant salafist circles that may neither openly or directly sympathize with the jihadist endeavors but are in close ideological, dogmatic and theological proximity to one another.

With western engagement and troops based in the Islamic world,⁷⁷² the safe-zones⁷⁷³ on a macro-level are being assaulted and violated – depriving the Muslims of their safety and their sacrosanct assets in their houses and thus being forced out.

⁷⁶⁸ Abu Basir al-Tartusi, op. cit., 3.

⁷⁶⁹ Lit.: “whoever throws something at a Muslim, wanting to disgrace him, will be withheld by God on the bridge of hell...”

⁷⁷⁰ In the figurative meaning of being cast into the hellfire, unable to pass over the bridge leading to the gates of paradise. The reader may be reminded of the Christian iconography of the Jacob’s ladder of the Church of Tekla in Ma’lula, Syria.

⁷⁷¹ Abu Basir al-Tartusi, op. cit., 3.

⁷⁷² The historic framework is established by the Israel-Palestine conflict, the displacement of Palestinians and the subsequent occupation of Islamic territory. This trauma is now repeated on a global scale by the conspiracy against Islam, consisting of *Zionists* (*sahiyyun*) and particularly of the

The main threat for Abu Yahya al-Libi consists of the real danger of spies among the *Mujahidin* who primarily mark targets, “high-value-individuals” for drone strikes, or targeted assassinations. Abu Yahya accredits the work of agents among the *Mujahidin* of the Taliban and the Arab fighters as those responsible for enabling airstrikes. He states,

“for [such] precision strikes by the means of guided missiles depend on the advice provided by spies [on the ground, in proximity to the target] and then automatically⁷⁷⁴ hits its intended targets. Operations at nighttime would not be possible without a network of spies⁷⁷⁵ or by a number of informed individuals knowing the designated routes [and the movement], the [safe-] houses, who know about the prisoners of the *Mujahidin* and who guard them and details of their work. All of this is of value for the disbelievers, relying on their spying agents.”⁷⁷⁶

Jihadists, however, are keen to not blame any potential spy as a traitor as videos from Yemen further underline. In a video published by AQAP in April 2013, entitled “The House of Spider Webs” (*bayt al-‘ankubat*)⁷⁷⁷ Yemeni civilians detail how they have been pressured by local police and intelligence officers to spy and place “missile-guiding chips”.

neo-Crusaders (*al-salibiyyun*). This sentiment comprises the ongoing conflict in Chechnya and the greater Caucasus region as much as the war zones of Somalia, where self-proclaimed *Mujahidin* are fighting against “occupational forces”, that are mostly non-Islamic, Christian forces sent by neighboring countries. All soldiers and military personnel are defined as “occupants” serving the same cause, unified by their enmity towards Islam.

⁷⁷³ These safe-zones included territories held by AQAP in Yemen (Zanjibar and Aden-Abyan), parts of Somalia, forest strongholds in Chechnya and rural tribal areas in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In the wake and aftermath of the ‘Arab Spring’ and the re-emergence of the *Islamic State* the grabbing of territory is ongoing inside of Syria and Iraq.

⁷⁷⁴ Lit.: blindly (*yughamiruna l-ilqaha ala l-ahdaf al-maqsuda*)

⁷⁷⁵ Lit.: by the fellowship of spies, *bi-sahba jasus*.

⁷⁷⁶ Abu Yahya al-Libi, op. cit., 22.

⁷⁷⁷ Bayt al-‘ankubat, *Mu’assassat al-Malahem*, April 2013, <https://nokbah.com/~w3/?p=3845>.



Figure 34 The account of the father of Barq in Yemen who was tried to be recruited by the Yemeni intelligence to place missile guiding chips to target meeting places and cars used by AQAP

In the video several spies are shown who had been executed by AQAP followed by the account of the father of Barq who was coerced into forcing his son to work on behalf of the Yemeni government. The consequence of drone strikes is clear; several killed AQAP leaders are shown including killed children and innocent civilians. A tribal leader asks whether or not such strikes to annihilate AQAP members can be justified at all, without any legal or judicial framework in place and thus blames the Yemeni and U.S. government likewise for the relentless missile strikes. Such narratives with strong pictures showing deceased individuals and the immediate aftermath of missile strikes boost the jihadist propaganda and underline the ideological arguments set by clerics such as Abu Yahya al-Libi.

The violation of the spy to betray his ‘own kind’ by selling information to the Americans is therefore clearly set. “The spy enters the patronage of the disbelievers”⁷⁷⁸ and hence is considered in violation of Islamic principles, taking the death of civilians for his personal benefit for granted. The spy is declared a non-Muslim (*takfir*), insulting and violating the ‘*awra* – for drone strikes are not restricted to affect women and also female quarters of Islamic houses. Any agent penetrates the *hurma* by posing as a Muslim and disguising as a pious believer who acts accordingly to the orthopraxy of the ultra-conservative group or society targeted. To mimic a true Muslim, blending in and seeking close proximity to the *Mujahidin* with the intent to

⁷⁷⁸ Abu Yahya al-Libi, op. cit., 24.

report vital military analytical insights to the *enemies of God* is a combined crime and as such justifies the most severe punishing. Consequently, this form of information is a critical threat to the militants and carries also a great range of collateral damage, takes the killing of Muslims in general into account and the destruction of infrastructure in general. In turn, no matter if an attack by a drone could be justified or not, the jihadi media activists have plenty of new propaganda film material showing the real-life drama in the jihadist frame.

Treason among the rows of the believers: The Case of Hatib b. Abi Balta'a as an Analogy to Modern Spies

Hatib bin Abi Balta'a is used in the jihadist context as a role model to sanction the killing of Muslim traitors and spies in general. Hatib had been a companion of prophet Muhamad who attempted to provide information to the Qurash in Mecca before the attack under the command of Muhammad.

Abu Yahya al-Libi contributes the great extend of his writing to the case of Hatib who is introduced in section of his book as an essential case for “some proof regarding the entry of spies into the loyalty (*muwala*) of the unbelievers (*kuffar*)”, referencing mainly verses of the *surat al-Mumtahana*. The first verse (*aya*) of *al-Mumtahana*, “the Woman tested”, is set by al-Libi as the argument to derive the story of Hatib and to provide the frame for contemporary dealings with Muslims spies:

“You who believe, do not take My enemies and yours⁷⁷⁹ as your allies, showing them friendship when they have rejected the truth you have received, and have driven you and the Messenger out simply because you believe in God, your Lord – not if you truly emigrated in order to strive for My cause and seek My good pleasure. You secretly show them friendship – I know all you conceal and all you reveal – but any of who do this are straying from the right path” Qur'an 60:1.

⁷⁷⁹ ‘*Aduwwi wa-‘aduwwakum* an important part of this verse for al-Libi’s following elaboration.

It must be, however, noted that the

“context in which Sūrat al-Mumtaḥana is said to have been revealed revolves around the Prophetic tradition (*ḥadīth*) of Ḥāṭib b. Abī Balta‘a. He was an early convert to Islam and had joined the Prophet Muḥammad in fleeing from hostilities in Mecca by making the *hijra* (emigration) to Medina in 622 AD. He had also participated in the battle of Badr against the Meccans in 624. After several years of hostile relations between the Muslims in Medina and the pagans in Mecca, the two sides decided to draw up a treaty at Ḥudaybiyya in 628, so that attacks between them would cease. After a breach of the treaty by a tribe allied to the Meccans, however, the Muslims decided to conquer that city in 630. According to Islamic tradition, it is at this point that the story of Ḥāṭib begins.”⁷⁸⁰

In al-Libi’s military dominated understanding perhaps, the story of Hatib could be interpreted as an attempt by the Qurash to have a spy in the proximity of the Prophet. As Joas Wagemakers further notes,

“the impending attack by the Muslims posed a problem for Ḥāṭib, since he feared this might endanger his family, who had not converted to Islam and had stayed in Mecca. He had further reason to fear for his relatives’ lives as they – like Ḥāṭib himself – were not originally from Mecca and therefore had no automatic tribal protection from possible threats by Meccans who might want to take revenge for Ḥāṭib’s conversion to Islam and his fighting against them. Islamic tradition has it that Ḥāṭib tried to solve this problem by secretly sending a letter to the Meccans to warn them of the attack at hand. By thus betraying the Muslims, he hoped to win the Meccans’ favour and persuade them to protect his family. Muḥammad found out about this, however, and

⁷⁸⁰ Joas Wagemakers. Defining the Enemy: Abū Muḥammad al-Maḥdī’s Radical Reading of Sūrat al-Mumtaḥana, in: *Die Welt des Islams* 48 (2008), 353.

sent ‘Alī al-Zubayr and perhaps one other person (either al-Miqdād⁷⁸¹ or Abū Marthad) to retrieve this letter at Rawḍat Khākh. They found it and brought it back to Muḥammad who read it and subsequently asked Ḥāṭib for an explanation. The rest of the *ḥadīth* contains four crucial points that figure in all later exegetical attempts to make sense of Ḥāṭib’s story: Ḥāṭib’s explanation that he had only written the letter out of fear for his family in Mecca and that he had not done so out of disbelief or apostasy (*ridḍa*); Muḥammad’s statement that Ḥāṭib had spoken the truth about this; the remark by ‘Umar, one of the Prophet’s companions who would later become the second Caliph, that Ḥāṭib was a traitor who should be beheaded⁷⁸²; and Muḥammad’s subsequent statement that Ḥāṭib had participated in the battle of Badr and that God had perhaps granted such men forgiveness, no matter what they do.’⁷⁸³

For setting a proper frame for al-Libi’s authoritative interpretation of the first *āya* of *surat al-Mumtahana*, he references several historical commentators of the Qur’an (*mufasssirun*) in his lengthy fatwa-styled book. Al-Libi seeks to clearly demarcate and define the Muslim spy and proceeds in his arguments based on the Qur’an and selected reading of the *mufasssirun* to sanction the execution. His main arguments consist of the breach of the loyalty to God by accepting non-Muslims as patrons, and secondly by spying on the Muslims the death sentence is further justified. By spying for the unbelievers, the spy thus not only loses his status as a Muslim but rather becomes one of the *awliya*’ (“friends”, “allies”) for them.

Thus, the spy is part of – in modern terms – a network and subsequently a node in a special relationship that extends to non-Muslim actors and patrons in the context within the propagated “war on Islam.” Therefore, the individual who commits acts of espionage against Muslims has taken non-Muslims as his friends and is hence in violation of divine commands as issued in Qur’an 60:1 or 5:51:

⁷⁸¹ Joas Wagemakers notes: “*Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, book 44, chapter 36, no.1.”

⁷⁸² Joas Wagemakers notes: “Some versions of this story have ‘Umar say this twice: once before Muḥammad stated that Ḥāṭib had spoken the truth and once afterwards. See *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, vol. V, book 59, chapter 8, no. 319; vol IX, book 84, chapter 9, no. 72.”

⁷⁸³ Joas Wagemakers. Defining the Enemy: Abū Muḥammad al-Maqdisī’s Radical Reading of Sūrat al-Mumtahana, in: *Die Welt des Islams* 48 (2008), 353-354.

“You who believe, do not take the Jews and Christians as allies [*awliya*]”⁷⁸⁴: they are allies only to each other. Anyone who takes them as an ally becomes one of them – God does not guide such wrongdoers.”

Abu Yahya cites and references a number of historical scholars to confirm this sentiment and to reason why *surat al-Mumtahana*, and in particular its first verse, was revealed. Espionage is presented as a threat as old as the Qur’an itself. Thus, this warning issued in *Sura al-Mumtahana* may be a reminder

“what God has forbidden for His servant, the believer; that he takes his enemies of the *mushrikin* as supporters (*ansar*) to reassert any [by the believers reporting] information regarding the Muslims.”⁷⁸⁵

For, whoever of the believers accepts non-Muslims as his superiors thus forfeits his status as a Muslim, withdrawing his loyalty to God, replacing his loyalty to non-Godly forces. For

“whoever does this, indeed has taken them [unbelievers] as friends (*awliya*’). And who takes them as friends is truly led astray.”⁷⁸⁶

Following a usual ignorant jihadi scholar style, al-Libi references without further details or bibliographical sourcing Imam Ibn Jarir [al-Tabari] to strengthen the interpretation of 60:1. Al-Libi dissects this *aya* bit by bit with the backing of legitimate historical scholars such as al-Tabari,

⁷⁸⁴ Haleem notes: “i.e. those who are against the Muslim camp, as is clear from the following verses, up to 59. ‘Do not turn to them as allies in preference to the Muslims’ (see 4:144).”

⁷⁸⁵ Abu Yahya al-Libi, op. cit., 26.

⁷⁸⁶ Ibid.

“who said – may God have mercy with him: “it is said by the Exalted in his reminder for the believers by the companions of the Messenger of God – peace and blessing be upon him: “You who believe, do not take My enemies” of the *mushrikin* “and yours as your allies (*awliya*’”, meaning as supporters (*ansar*); *Tafsir al-Tabari*: 23/309.”⁷⁸⁷

Al-Libi attempts to underline this finding by further citing in a selective manner the Qur’an,

“and God – exalted is He – said: “so give no help to the disbelievers”, 28:86.”⁷⁸⁸

This can be understood as an analogy to Qur’an 28:17,

“He [Moses] said, ‘My Lord, because of the blessings You have bestowed upon me, I shall never support those who do evil.’”

Any lending of support to the unbelievers, the ‘evildoers’ in this mindset, is not allowed. This would contradict and ultimately reject God’s message. The “proof of Qur’an and Sunna” (p. 27) is further welded into jihadist belief by relaying God’s warning and the divine command into the specific mindset. For any “friend”, or “ally” – in the wider sense of the term *awliya*’ – of the unbelievers shall use this privilege to spy on the Muslims; or, worse, to incite, inspire and mislead single Muslims to spy on their own. The proximity of any Muslim, argumentatively, to non-Muslims thus bears the threat of being ‘turned’ to work as a spy or at least to sympathize with the objectives of the non-Muslims. As stated, this would result in the excommunication

⁷⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸⁸ *ibid.*

(*takfir*) of the Muslim, whose punishment would be the death sentence, if discovered. Ideologues like Abu Yahya al-Libi interpret passages of the Qur'an, the speech of God, and the *Sunna*, the acts and sayings of Prophet Muhammad, as a warning to protect the groups of believers. Therefore,

“there is no difference whether [the “friend”] would be a unbeliever and secondly a *mushrik*, or a Jew, Christian, Magian (*majus*)⁷⁸⁹, a communist⁷⁹⁰, an Indian⁷⁹¹, a Budhist⁷⁹², or an apostate (*murtadd*), or whoever of the unbelievers profession of whatever kind. For all of them are summarized by the characterization of the verse of *surat al-Mumtahana* in His – exalted is He – speech: “My enemies and yours.”⁷⁹³ For the unbeliever is nothing else but the enemy of God and His Messenger and His pious believers, as God – exalted is He – said: “if anyone is an enemy of God, His angels and His messengers, of Gabriel and Michael, then God is certainly the enemy of such disbelievers” (*al-Baqara* [2]: 97-98);⁷⁹⁴

⁷⁸⁹ A reference to the ancient Persian and Median religion, the Zoroastrians, used in the jihadist context as a secret religion practiced by individuals otherwise posing as Muslims. The term *majus* is also referenced in Qur'an 22:17,

“As for the believers, those who follow the Jewish faith, the Sabians, the Christians, the Magians, and the idolators, God witnesses all things.”

⁷⁹⁰ The reference “communist” (*shiu'iyi*) is made to highlight the global historical as well as contemporary threat to “Islam” whereas not only the west is perceived as one of the main enemies. The invasion of Afghanistan by the Red Army in December 1979 fuels this notion while the continued crackdown of Uighur Muslims in Turkistan, West-China by the communist Chinese government, maintains this threat.

⁷⁹¹ Lit.: A Hindi (*hindusi*), a reference consisting of the Hindi-Muslim tensions inside India and in particular the occupation of Kashmir with the oppression of Muslims by the Indian army for decades. The Hindu religion is worst imaginable manifestation of *shirk* for a jihadi. The nature of this violation of *tawhid* is perhaps nowhere else as visible, as the “Indians, who pray to the cow” furthermore “kill our Muslim brothers in Kashmir” as stated in: *Sawt al-Jihad*, 11th memorandum, 18th edition (1425), 5-6.

⁷⁹² Buddhism is by no means a new or innovative concept of an enemy. It has gained a renewed attention recently due to the violent Burmese government crackdown and genocide of the Muslim Rohingya minority, prompting to calls within jihadist forums and media outlets to move to Burma to fight the Buddhists.

The alleged hostilities of Buddhists had previously been equated to Zionist and Russian aggression in the context of the 1980s with high ranking Saudi scholars such as Hamud bin ‘Uqla’ al-Shu’aybi defending the Muslims’ right of self-defense, even if so termed as ‘terrorism’.

Hamud b. al-Shu’aybi. *Hukm al-jihad wa-ista’dhan al-walidayn*, Minbar al-Tawhed wa-l-Jihad, <http://www.tawhed.ws/r?i=822&PHPSESSID=6e7cd3991ebce2b89175bbacb81ca16> March 18, 2008.

⁷⁹³ 60:1

⁷⁹⁴ Sura number 2. In contradiction to al-Libi’s reference, only verse 98 is quoted.

And – exalted is He – said: “When you [believers] are travelling in the land, you will not be blamed for shortening your prayers, if you fear the disbelievers may harm you: they are your sworn enemies” (*al-Nisa’* [4]: 101);

And, His is all glory, said: “that is the reward of the enemies of God – the fire will be their lasting home, a payment for their rejection of Our revelations” (*Fusilat* [41]: 28);

He, high and lofty is He, said: “Prepare against them whatever forces you [believers] can muster, including warhorses, to frighten off [these] enemies of God and of yours, and warn others unknown to you but known to God. Whatever you give in God’s cause will be repaid in full, and you will not be wronged” (*al-Anfal* [8]: 60).”

Al-Libi barrages selected cherry-picked part of the Qur’an above to boost his self-imposed religious authority. These parts serve to underline al-Libi’s argumentation and interpretation, crafting all non-Muslims as potential hostile threats to Islam in general. The precise term of the non-Muslim by this reasoning does not matter anymore, for any non-Muslim is (i) an unbeliever, and (ii) a potential enemy, independent of the association. This notion transforms the jihadist struggle on a global and universal level where ideologues like al-Libi seek to develop and provide guidelines for Muslims to cope with. Naturally, the specific guidelines extend to the divine obligation to militarily preparedness as emphasized by citing Qur’an 8:60.

The argument of the range of disbelief versus the ‘Muslim’ is expanded on the basis of Saudi scholars such as Muhammad b. al-Uthaymin⁷⁹⁵ (d. 2001), a leading representative of the conservative establishment, in his commentary of the *Riyad al-Salihin* (vol. 1, 12) as cited by al-Libi:

“For the unbeliever, of whatever nature, no matter of the Christians, the Jew, or of the heretics, whether claiming the name of Islam or not, the unbeliever is

⁷⁹⁵ A website with most of his writings is available at <http://www.ibnothaimeen.com/index.shtml>. Accessed September 30, 2013.

an enemy of God, His book, His Messenger, and for all of His believers. It is important to address this clearly, for he is an enemy.”⁷⁹⁶

Sura al-Mumtahana in Abu Yahya al-Libi’s analogy was revealed

“due to the writing of Hatib – may God be pleased with him – for the Qurash, the unbelievers. However, this does not mean that it is illicit for the unbelievers to take friends (*awliya*’), for whom it is forbidden to spy for on the Muslims. They [the Qurash] in particular are of the *mushrikin*, yet this ruling is valid for anyone loyal (*muwal*) to [any] unbeliever, in any époque. Indeed, the verses of the Qur’an had been revealed declaring loyalty to all of the unbelievers as forbidden; and especially those among them such as the Jews and Christians.”⁷⁹⁷

Referencing “*Shaykh ‘Attiya Muhammad Salim*”, al-Libi – again – seeks to tie this ban of befriending and working with unbelievers in general to God’s commandments. For, as outlined, two key statements by God set the main characteristic of the first verse of *Sura Mumtahana*:

““My enemies and yours”, and His speech: “when they have rejected the truth you have received”, referring to anyone who disbelieves in the truth we have received as the Jews, the Christians, the hypocrites (*munafiqeen*), and whoever seeks the renewal of modern movements.⁷⁹⁸ Anyone rejecting the truth we received belongs to these movements such as communism and others, for example Hinduism, Buddhism, and others. (*Adwa’ al-Bayyan*: 8:217)”⁷⁹⁹

⁷⁹⁶ Abu Yahya al-Libi, “*Al-Ma’lam fi hukm al-jasus al-muslim*”, Markaz al-Fajr li-l i’lam, 2009, 27.

⁷⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁹⁸ A modern translation for *ta’ifa* (“confession”) may be more appropriate. However, the use of the word *ta’ifa* implies any individual belonging to these modern movements has a religious value, whereas any loyalty to God is forfeit and replaced by worldly idols.

⁷⁹⁹ *ibid.*, 28.

Abu Yahya al-Libi excels the prohibition of aligning any form of loyalty to the unbelievers and continues to selectively cite historical scholars to back up his argument. In doing so, al-Libi seeks to reenact an Islamic tradition of scholarship that enables him by citing commentators of the Qur'an to validate his own interpretation thereof. As such,

“some of the scholars (*'ulama'*) designate this *sura* [*al-Mumtahana*] as an origin of the prohibition of aligning loyalty to the unbelievers in general, as the *Imam* Ibn 'Adil – may God have mercy with him – said.”⁸⁰⁰

Al-Libi reiterates his claim by having indirectly quoted Ibn 'Adil nevertheless, continuing,

“this *sura* is the source of the prohibition for aligning one's loyalty to the unbelievers. This view is presented in His speech: “The believers should not make the disbelievers their allies (*awliya'*)”⁸⁰¹ and His speech: “You who believe, do not take for your intimates such outsiders”⁸⁰² (*Tafsir al-Labab: 15 /224*).⁸⁰³

Furthermore, this understanding is backed by the *tafsir* of al-Qurtubi who in al-Libi's reasoning backs the above by complementing Qur'an 3:28, addressing this as the “second proof”, based on al-Qurtubi (*Tafsir al-Qurtubi: 18 /52*):

⁸⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁸⁰¹ 3:28.

⁸⁰² 3:118; the verse continues: “as spare not effort to ruin you and want to see you suffer: their hatred is evident from their mouths, but what their hearts conceal is far worse. We have made Our revelation clear for you; will you not use your reason?”

⁸⁰³ Abu Yahya al-Libi, “*Al-Ma'lam fi hukm al-jasus al-muslim*”, Markaz al-Fajr li-l i'lam, 2009, 28.

“The believers should not make the disbelievers their allies rather than other believers – anyone who does such a thing will isolate himself completely from God – except when you need to protect yourselves from them. God warns you to beware of Him: the Final Return is to God” (3:118).⁸⁰⁴

Should a Muslim thus take an unbeliever as his ally or friend concludes in the reasoning that the Muslim is passing information based on other Muslims on. This is a violation of the *‘awrat* (sg. *‘awra*), the “private sphere” or non-public side of the affairs of people. Al-Libi derives this finding from the text of *Imam* Ibn Jarir al-Tabari who commented on Qur’an 3:118 that

“this means: no believer shall take the unbelievers as patrons over their religion, by showing and actively supporting [the unbelievers] while helping them out at the expense of the Muslims, furnishing evidence on their *‘awrat*. For whoever does this, has nothing whatsoever with God, this means: He is indeed dissociated of God as God is dissociated of him, by his reverse from His religion and the entry into unbelief” (*Tafsir al-Tabari: 6 /313*).”⁸⁰⁵

This “proof” of spying on the *‘awrat* of Muslims is furthered by al-Tabari, who uses the term “*awliya*” in turn for those who have befriended the unbelievers, and subsequently are secret apostates, who seek to gain information on Muslims by their relations. In al-Libi’s sense, these are recruited spies on active duty for the unbelievers whose sole intention is to extract information and pose as pious Muslims to their victims. In al-Tabari’s *tafsir*

⁸⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁰⁵ Ibid., 29.

“regarding the “*awliya*”, for they are [outwardly] loyal to their religion while gaining knowledge of the ‘*awra* of the believers. For whoever commits such an act is a *mushrik*, indeed dissociated of God” (*Tafsir al-Tabari: 6 /313*).”⁸⁰⁶

Hatib bin Abu Balta’a – The First Muslim Spy?

Hatib’s intention to send a letter to his family in Mecca warning them of the coming attack by Muslim forces, fearing the revenge of the Qurash for his family for being a convert to Islam is clear proof for Abu Yahya al-Libi to determine him as “a Muslim spy” (p. 45). The question for al-Libi for our contemporary times is clear: is it permissible to execute a fellow Muslim for acts of espionage? How did the prophet and the companions treat the case of Hatib? What lessons can be learned for the handling of the problem of espionage 1,400 years later?

Jihadists do acknowledge the pardoning of Hatib by prophet Muhammad but emphasize the demand by ‘Umar to behead the hypocrite – and more so the fact that prophet Muhammad is absent and thus cannot rule without doubt whether or not an indicted spy is guilty of apostasy or not.

Al-Libi reminds his readers of the story of Hatib. He cites the *hadith* as told by

“Ubayd Allah bin Abu Rafi’, who said: “I heard ‘Ali – may God be pleased with him – saying: “the messenger of God – peace and blessings be upon him – had searched for me, al-Zubayr and al-Miqdad. He then said: “depart until you reach Rawda Khakh. If you find a woman wandering there, she will have a letter with her. So we went out on our horses and we found a woman wandering. We told her: “hand the letter over!” She replied: “I don’t have a letter with me”, so we said: “Give us the letter or we will frisk⁸⁰⁷ you!” So she then handed us the letter from her braid and we brought it back to the prophet where we learned [this letter] was from Hatib bin Abi Balta’a to the people of the *mushrikin* of Mecca, reporting on some of the matters of the prophet, who

⁸⁰⁶ Ibid., 29.

⁸⁰⁷ Lit.: “we will remove all of your clothes!”

asked: “What is this, Hatib?” He said: “Do not haste your judgment upon me, for I had been closely connected to the Qurash, but I did not belong to them [this tribe]. While the other emigrants (*al-muhajirin*) had their relatives protect their families, I have no one protecting my family in Mecca. Thus, I wanted to do them a favor. By God, I did not do this out of doubt in my religion, or because of preferring disbelief over Islam.” So the messenger of God said: “He has spoken the truth”, so ‘Umar demanded: “O messenger of God, grant me to strike this neck⁸⁰⁸ of this hypocrite.” So the messenger said: “He fought at the battle of Badr, and who knows, perhaps God has scrutinized the people of Badr and said, ‘most of them turn away,⁸⁰⁹ for I have forgiven you.’ Therefore, God revealed “You who believe, do not take My enemies and yours as your allies, showing them friendship” (60:1).”⁸¹⁰

Hatib’s claim “to do them a favor”, literally in the sense of reaching out with his hand to the Qurash in hopes of saving his family in Mecca, is clear proof for al-Libi of his espionage mission.

“As stated before by modern scholars, the story of Hatib is classified according to what he – may God be pleased with him – has done as spying. The truth is, that he revealed some of the secrets of the prophet – peace and blessings upon him – to the *mushrikin* Quraysh by his deed.”⁸¹¹

The case for al-Libi is solid as Hatib had been a spy, pardoned by prophet Muhammad, while this is not applicable for Muslims today who work in secret for the enemies. Perhaps al-Libi equates prophet Muhammad, who as commander had been the *amir*, to the leaders and commanders of contemporary jihadist movements. As these operate in secrecy, hostile intelligence agencies are in need of infiltrating these

⁸⁰⁸ A similar wording as in Qur’an 47:4.

⁸⁰⁹ This part is of Qur’an 41:8.

⁸¹⁰ Abu Yahya al-Libi, “*Al-Ma’lam fi hukm al-jasus al-muslim*”, Markaz al-Fajr li-l i’lam, 2009, 46, referencing Ahmad, al-Bukhari, Muslim, al-Tirmidhi et al without the reference number of the *hadith*.

⁸¹¹ *Ibid.*, 47.

groups by operatives posing as jihadists, abiding to the rituals and religious framing. This means that the spy must first and foremost pose as a Muslim while his true intentions are to be of service to the unbelievers, the apostates, the *mushrikin*, or whoever. Hatib is special as a companion of Muhammad, a veteran of Badr and as being clearly a Muslim and thus loyal to God, which was reconfirmed by the prophet in the *hadith*. The first *aya* of *sura al-Mumtahana* is a stern warning to any ally or friend of the unbelievers. In al-Libi's understanding, the verse addresses present Muslim soldiers who could be forced into spying on the "movements of the *Mujahidin*, their supporters, preyed upon like a wolf preys on his victim."⁸¹² 'Umar's initial demand to behead Hatib must be invoked for any Muslim spy to thwart the efforts of the enemies gaining knowledge and insight of the jihadi movements. "The loyalty to the unbelievers instead of Muslims proscribes the blood of the Muslim [spy] as legal to shed, this is the consequence based on his actions."⁸¹³ The actions of the spy, whether Muslim by birth or not, lead to his excommunication, bearing the immediate death sentence. This is valid in the historical era of prophet Muhammad, who solely had the power to pardon any spy and implies in our time that any Muslim violating the sacrosanct prescription, working for unbelievers, is legitimate to be executed.

As Joas Wagemakers explains

"Ibn al-'Arabī (1076-1148), who claims that Ḥāṭib was not declared a *kāfir* because his actions, which were undoubtedly sinful, did not emanate from unbelief in his heart, as Ḥāṭib himself told Muḥammad. Since the Prophet confirmed that this was the truth, Muslims can safely assume that Ḥāṭib was indeed not lying."⁸¹⁴

⁸¹² Ibid., 48.

⁸¹³ Ibid., 70.

⁸¹⁴ Joas Wagemakers. Defining the Enemy: Abū Muḥammad al-Maḥdī's Radical Reading of Sūrat al-Mumtahana, in: *Die Welt des Islams* 48 (2008), 354-355.

This mercy was only possible during the lifetime of Muhammad who was the only authority to confirm the truth. Al-Libi derives this thought in addressing contemporary soldiers (*junud al-‘asr*) who also are loyal to unislamic rulers, for

“whatever the soldiers do [nowadays] does not differ from what we have discussed prior [regarding Hatib]. They are, as stated a number of times, they are by no means different by being part of such armies in their support, manifestation, loyalty and allignment to the people of falsehood (*ahl al-batl*). Their mission is to deliberately harm Islam and the Muslims by their independent choosing of to elevate the speech of the *kuffar*.⁸¹⁵ There is only one difference [between soldiers and spies]: Armies issue statements and publicize their operations while [espionage] is about secrecy and hiding to master the performance, as God has verified about them in His speech:

“Those who turn on their heels after being shown guidance are duped and tempted by Satan; they say to those who hate what God has sent down, ‘We will obey you in some matters’ – God knows their secret schemes” (Muhammad [47]: 25-26).

There is no doubt, these spies are those who have signed contracts and concluded covenants with the unbelievers – whether they are Jews, Christians, apostates, or others. Those are “who hate what God has sent down” over their obidience [to God] “in some matters”, who reveal the secrets of Muslims, who disgrace the believers, and uncover the ‘*awrat* of the *muwahhideen*.’⁸¹⁶

“The Ruling on Killing the Spy who Poses as a Muslim” – Digging into Abu Yahya’s Mindset

As Abu Basir and al-Libi detailed throughout their writings, any individual who poses, that is outwardly manifests (*zahir*) as a Muslim to infiltrate and spy on Islamic communities is legitimate for execution. It doesn’t matter if the spy had been a

⁸¹⁵ As opposed to the Muslims’ obligation to elevate the speech of God.

⁸¹⁶ Abu Yahya al-Libi, “*Al-Ma’lam fi hukm al-jasus al-muslim*”, Markaz al-Fajr li-l i’lam, 2009, 49.

Muslim before his betrayal and subsequent excommunication, or an unbeliever disguising as a Muslim. The translation of al-Libi's subchapter in this regard is not entirely precise, as he literally seeks to address the "ruling on killing the spy who outwardly manifests Islam"⁸¹⁷ to conceal his true intentions, to gain trust and access to otherwise sealed-off communities.

The fundamental core of this essence is a propagated physical *habitus* in correlation with theological, presumed Islamic juridical and socio-religious notions that are outwardly (*zahir*)⁸¹⁸ manifested by the mostly filmed male *Mujahidin* or *martyrdom operatives*. This implies

"whoever outwardly (*zāhir*) accepts Islam, the external institutions of Islam (*aḥkām al-islām al-zāhira*) must act for him (...). To this end, the simple outward confession [of faith] suffices, even if one does not know what there is within [the heart of] the man [in question]."⁸¹⁹

In regard of the written and audio-visual publications of jihadism, the outwardly acts of individuals are clearly outlined by portrayed religious patterns and behavioral codes that altogether serve as models intended to be re-enacted by the consumers – following the guidelines and codes of the jihadi rules and implementations. The armchair jihadists, on their end at the flat panel displays, however, can only attempt to re-enact such behavioral codes either in private, small groups or never at all – yet, the portrayed religious conduct and spiritual notion of divine combat as ultimate worship can lead to a personal conduct of religion in terms of preparatory stand-by and physical readiness (*i'dad*) attached to the greater system of belief. While the front-line *Mujahid* attains a specific status, expressed by his participation in *jihad fi sabilillah*, the jihad on the path of God, he actively manifests his spiritual notion and dogmatic into worldly action. A violation of *zahir*, in the context of espionage, is set by the presumed Islamic identity that is *outwardly* shown to mislead and deceive by copying physical rituals, behavior codes and clothing to infiltrate Muslim communities

⁸¹⁷ *Hukm qatl al-jasus al-ladhi zahiruhu 'l-Islam*, Abu Yahya al-Libi, "Al-Ma'lam fi hukm al-jasus al-muslim", Markaz al-Fajr li-l 'lam, 2009, 76.

⁸¹⁸ As the marvelous Ibn Taymiyya specialist Yahya Michot translates the term *zāhir*; Yahya Michot, *Muslims under non-Muslim Rule, Ibn Taymiyya on – Fleeing from Sin; - kinds of Emigration; - the Status of Mardin; - the conditions for challenging Power*, Oxford – London: Interface Publications, 2006, 19, citing Ibn Taymiyya.

⁸¹⁹ *Ibid*, footnote, 19-20.

consisting of individuals who not only *outwardly* but rather *internalized* Islamic principles of faith.

The ruling on any form of espionage in al-Libi's reasoning is clear: any spy, no matter Muslim or not, is legitimate to be punished by the death penalty. In this subchapter this is the key question while al-Libi seeks to put the story of Hatib into the perspective of the modern-day tradecraft of espionage and spies, asking who exactly is a spy and what is the likelihood of discovering him in the age of modern technology.

Regarding the classical context of the tradecraft of espionage, where information is acquired and carried by *human intelligence* (HUMINT), that is an agent, a spy ring or a cell of working clandestine in receiving and conveying information, the ruling is clear, any of these individuals is to be sentenced accordingly. However, the indictment in the jihadi context is set in focus on the crime that a spy "by his appearance [is perceived as a member of] Islam" when in reality he is either "a [original Muslim] spy [serving] enemy armies, or a free non-Muslim subject living in an Islamic community (*dhimmi*)."⁸²⁰ The difference between the two is of grave importance according to al-Libi, for the blood of the Muslim is forbidden to other Muslims, unless the individual is subject of excommunication (*takfir*).⁸²¹

"Regarding the various types of spies, it is difficult to rule whether this spy is a *kafir* or not – as had been the case with Hatib – may God be pleased with him. I [al-Libi] need to repeat myself, as we must be cautious, for the various types of spies as well as the specific conditions of espionage [in the time of Hatib] are unprecedented and thus not taken into account of the rulings and decrees of the Islamic scholars at that time."⁸²²

⁸²⁰ Ibid., 76.

⁸²¹ As described in the subchapter *Operational shifts: Aborting attacks to spare the blood of Muslims*.

⁸²² Abu Yahya al-Libi, "*Al-Ma'lam fi hukm al-jasus al-muslim*", Markaz al-Fajr li-l i'lam, 2009, 76.

Especially since the attacks of 9/11 the worldwide business of information and espionage was revolutionized while undermining state authority on the monopoly of espionage and violence with the emergence of *private military companies* and the outsourcing in general. Unlike the traditional patterns at work during the time of Hatib, al-Libi argues, nowadays the definition of “spy” must be rethought and has due to the high degree of technology perhaps little to do with the spycraft of that era. For the modern-day spycraft, thus

“what we are today confronted with consists of established independent [and private security] agencies, while special ministries [of war] are under their auspices. [These agencies] are responsible for training and teaching the art of espionage, drilling their recruits to perfection. Millions of Dollars are spent on this tradecraft disguising it as what is to be commonly known in the eyes of ordinary people as regular “soldiers”, as well trained important men.”⁸²³

This may be a reference to “Special Operation Soldiers” by al-Libi whose point is to prove that the tradecraft of espionage has become something more common since the war was declared against the *Mujahidin*. Therefore, any spy is legitimate to kill for he is one of the most dangerous weapons deployed in this war, as information provided by humans is still the most valuable in a network of information in the process of intelligence agencies and militaries. Rather, the matter should be clarified by declaring any captured spy as a “prisoner of war” (*asir harb*), after

“first and foremost, his punishment bears the death sentence – as even decreed by the enemy’s worldly laws.”⁸²⁴

The death sentence, after all, is the logical and reasonable punishment for a spy in times of war,⁸²⁵ while, in al-Libi’s words,

⁸²³ Ibid., 76.

⁸²⁴ Ibid., 76.

“the being of this spy who poses as a Muslim is part of his profession of trickery to disclose secrets to the *kuffar*, including the ‘*awrat* of Muslims.”

Operationalization and internalization of ideology – the Intersection of *Online Guidelines* by Abu Yahya and the impact in the *Offline*

In a video published by al-Andalus Media, the media branch of the Somalia based *Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahidin* (HSM) in October 2009 shows the intended effect of Abu Yahya al-Libi’s writing. The five and a half minute long film was disseminated via the usual jihad forums and promoted on other channels online.⁸²⁶ The video, entitled “The Implementation of the Ruling of God on two Spies – Islamic Province of Banadir”, sanctions the shooting of two alleged spies by citing al-Libi’s book in detail. Ironically, not al-Libi’s words are the source used to frame and empower this execution, but rather his citation of historical and contemporary scholars. The video starts by announcing in writing with white letters on a black background incorporating the HSM logo as a watermark,

“God has rightly guided the *Mujahidin* in the arrest of two spies who had been in close proximity to their masters⁸²⁷ to disclose any information related to the *Mujahidin* to report. All praise to God, the Lord of the Worlds.”⁸²⁸

As in previous execution videos, the accused are introduced in a ‘kill screen’, typical for this kind of jihadi video genre, stating their names, alleged offenses, and in this case portrait photos.

⁸²⁵ Ibid., 77.

⁸²⁶ For example on the Palestinian Forum for Dialogue, <https://www.paldf.net/forum/showthread.php?t=497955>; Hanein Forum, <http://hanein.info/vb/showthread.php?t=135822>, October 19, 2009. Accessed October 6, 2013.

⁸²⁷ Or: their handlers (*asiyaduhum*) in the sense of having trust and personal affection for those to whom they would pass on intelligence graded information. ‘Handlers’, referring to agents of spy agencies who meet with ‘assets’, who provide human information in writing or during discussions, exploit such personal affection for their benefits.

⁸²⁸ Al-Andalus Media, *Iqama hukm allah ‘ala jasusayn, walayya Banadir al-Islamiyya – Mogadishu*, October 2008.

Name and accusation for both prisoners are detailed as

“Name: Hasan Mu’allim ‘Abdallah

Profession: Artillery spotter for the Crusader forces (AMISOM) to target the positions of the *Mujahidin*;

“Name: Muhammad ‘Ali Salaad

Profession: Spying and gathering information for the counter-terrorism unit.”

A narrator from the off introduces the work of Abu Yahya al-Libi after the “kill screen” showing two pages of his book blending to the audience to sanction the subsequent shooting of the men. The execution is justified as based on the reasoning and the findings of historical as well as contemporary scholars as outlined in al-Libi’s work.



Figure 35 The alleged spies and their indictment justifying the execution by the pen of Abu Yahya’s writing

Two passages of al-Libi’s work are shown to improve the framing of the sanctioned execution. First, a citation taken from

“*al-Imam* Ibn al-Qayyim [al-Jawziyya] said – based on what he chose of *al-Imam* Malik – in the assessment of the *al-Fath* raid: “it is permissible to execute a spy, even when he is Muslim. For ‘Umar – may God be pleased with him – had asked the messenger of God – to kill Hatib bin Abi Balta’a when he had dispatched information to the people of Mecca. The messenger of God – peace and blessings upon him – did not say: “Killing him is not permissible for he is Muslim.” Rather, he said: “You never know, perhaps God scrutinized the people of Badr and said ‘most of them turn away.’”⁸²⁹ By this, he [the messenger of God] answered that killing Hatib is forbidden, for he had partaken in the battle of Badr. Furthermore, his answer is a warning regarding the permissibility of killing a spy; there is no [general] objection to it. This is the opinion of the legal school of Malik. One contestor of this interpretation is Ahmad; correct is: killing [the spy] refers to the opinion of the *Imam* [Ibn Qayyim] based on his understanding the execution of the spy is in the interest of the Muslims. (*Zad al-Ma’ad*: 3/371)”⁸³⁰

This part of al-Libi’s book is read out to the audience in the video while the text is flashing on the screen. The second part highlighted draws a link from the historical to the contemporary scholars,

“who have come to terms on the duty of executing the spy. As such, *shaykh* Muhammad al-Salih al-Uthaymin – may God have mercy with him – as he said: “By all means, the spy must be killed, even when he was a Muslim, if he spies for the enemy. The prophet approves this – peace and blessings be upon him – when he revealed the espionage of one of the spies for the Quraysh, Hatib bin Abi Balta’a – may God be pleased with him – whom [the prophet] knew. The *commander of the faithful* (*amir al-mu’minin*) granted ‘Umar b. al-Khattab – may God be pleased with him – permission to kill him, as the prophet said: “He is one of the people of Badr and who knows, perhaps God

⁸²⁹ The story of Hatib is analyzed in the previous chapter *Hatib bin Abi Balta’a – The First Muslim*

Spy?

⁸³⁰ Abu Yahya al-Libi, “*Al-Ma’lam fi hukm al-jasus al-muslim*”, Markaz al-Fajr li-l i’lam, 2009, 85-86.

has scrutinized the people of Badr and said, ‘most of them turn away, for I have forgiven you.’” Thus, the prophet declared the blood of spies as legal [in general], the only objection being if the individual were to be of the people of Badr [having fought in the battle]. And this excuse does not apply to our time and era. For any human, a spy reporting our information to the enemy, or conveying this in an oral or a audio recorded manner, for he must be killed even if he were to repent, this is a punishment justified for his vicious damage [to the Muslims], deterring anyone with similar intentions. (*al-Sharh al-Mumta’*: 4/523)⁸³¹

The potential damage inflicted upon the Muslim community by the betrayal of Hatib is, as stated before, placed in the context of modern spies and their impact on the *Mujahidin*. In the case of the *al-Shabab* execution of two Muslims, the emphasis is placed on the permissibility to kill any Muslim spy, even if the individual would repent (*tawba*). As stated in the chapter *The Demise of the Traitor*, for example, repenting one’s crimes in working for the enemies does not necessarily lift the death sentence while the publicity of carrying out the sentencing has the intention to deter any other or prospect spies. The repentance is, however, set to specific pre-conditions and circumstances as the conflicts in Iraq and Syria have shown.⁸³²

The *al-Shabab* film only references the above sources taken from Abu Yahya al-Libi’s book and proceeds directly after this sanctioning to the sequence of the execution. A jeep and a truck are seen stopping in a remote area with a caption reading “the criminals arrive at the scene where the ruling of God is carried out.” The execution is a staged show for the public. Masked men armed with Kalashnikovs ferry the first “spy” with his arms tied behind his back beside a large crowd of bystanders arranged in the style of a theater audience. The “spy” is put on his knees on the ground while his last words are not audible. Several masked *Mujahidin* line up and shoot him in the back and the back of his head from a close distance. The same

⁸³¹ Ibid., 93.

⁸³² Cases from Syria have prompted the senior ideologues and leaders of jihadist groups to craft practical rules and guidelines, as detailed in the subchapter *The Role of Social Media in Defining the Rules of Engagement for Jihadi Conflicts*.

fate awaits the second prisoner; both corpses are shown up close with the cheering executioners walking away.

The video is concluded by a short part of a sermon by Abu al-Nur al-Maqdisi, the Gaza-based *shaykh* who dared in 2009 to proclaim an Islamic Emirate.⁸³³ The ‘Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, the paramilitary wing of HAMAS, prompted by violently attacking the Ibn Taymiyya Mosque in Rafah, the base of al-Maqdisi and his *Jund Ansar Allah* fighters who had been brutally slain. Pictures of al-Maqdisi, apparently shot multiple times in the face, were used in various jihadist publications by respected scholars such as Hani al-Siba’i⁸³⁴ and declarations that “the war of HAMAS is on the verge against Sunni *Mujahidin*”⁸³⁵ in Gaza. A part of his sermon “*the ruling on the Muslim spy*” therefore serves as a double warning against those who work and spy for the enemies, as this can have dire consequences threatening the very existence of any jihadi group. Furthermore, by concluding the Somali execution video by the sermon of the Palestinian Abu al-Nur al-Maqdisi in Rafah, a town on the Egyptian border in Gaza, HSM seeks to frame their actions as part of a global struggle for the same cause under the guidance and approval of mainly Arab jihadist scholars and as thus as rightly guided.

⁸³³ The renowned scholar Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi wrote a compelling eulogy of ‘Abd al-Latif b. Khalid Al Musa (Abu al-Nur al-Maqdisi) in the *Sada al-Jihad* magazine, special edition number 36, GIMF, Shuwwal 1430, 8-9.

⁸³⁴ Hani al-Siba’i, “HAMAS murders the seeker of protection in the house of God”, *Sada al-Jihad* magazine, special edition number 36, GIMF, Shuwwal 1430, 10-18. Hani al-Siba’i’s Twitter account, @hanisibu, is among the 66 most important jihadist accounts, as detailed in the chapter *the Role of Twitter and the Most Important Accounts to Follow – by Advice of a Shumukh al-Islam Forum Member*.

Pictures of the slain cleric are shown as proof of the crimes committed by HAMAS who by this move has replaced its loyalty to God with the loyalty to the Jews, becoming their clients in Gaza. This also sparked various jihadist scholars to respond declaring HAMAS as being a *takfiri* group, excommunicated from Islam as their war has turned against the Sunnis. Signed statements of various salafist scholars further distance themselves from HAMAS while the compilation of statements and operations by *Jund Ansar Allah* and al-Maqdisi’s sermons are beefed with pictures of the victims of the HAMAS attack showing strong indications of extrajudicial executions inside the Ibn Taymiyya Mosque in Rafah. “*Silsila li-llah thumma li-l tarikh*, The Events of the Ibn Taymiyya Mosque”, *Nukhbat al-i’lam al-jihadiyyi*, 1430 (2009).

⁸³⁵ HAMAS tawasul harbuha ‘ala Mujahidin al-Sunniyin, *Sada al-Jihad* magazine, special edition number 36, GIMF, Shuwwal 1430, 21-30.

The Role of Twitter and the Most Important Accounts to Follow – by Advice of a *Shumukh al-Islam* Forum Member

A posting on the *Shumukh al-Islam* (SSI) forum recently provided a “Twitter Guide” (*dalil Twitter*). This ‘guide’ outlined reasons for using Twitter as an important arena of the electronic *ribat* and identified the different types of accounts that users should follow. In this posting entitled “the most important jihadist sites and support for *jihad* and the *Mujahidin* on Twitter” by SSI-member Ahmad ‘Abdallah, 66 Arabic-language Twitter accounts are recommended to be followed by the fellow forum members.⁸³⁶

It is not the intention of this chapter to discuss whether, or not, the 66 users should be considered jihadis, but to identify the accounts recommended in the guide to using Twitter in the jihadist context, as stated in the forum thread.

Twitter as the “electronic *ribat*” – A Note on the Term “*ribat*” in contemporary jihadist mind-set

Twitter, for Ahmad ‘Abdallah, has an important role as an electronic *ribat*. Following a classical rhetoric and its comprising meaning, Ahmad ‘Abdallah terms “Twitter one of the arenas of the electronic *ribat*, and not less important than Facebook. Rather, it will be of much greater importance as accounts are rarely deleted and its easier to get signed up”, without providing a phone number as ‘Abdallah writes. The advantage is that you can follow anyone without having to be accepted as a friend as on Facebook, but “you will see all of their postings just as on Facebook.”

To translate and conceptualise the Arabic term *ribat* can be very contentious. The term is frequently referred to in both jihadist videos and in print / online literature in the context of religiously permissible warfare; in a modern meaning it could loosely be translated as “front”.

Ribat is prominent due to its reference in the 60th verse of the eight chapter of the Qur’an, the *Surat al-Anfal* (“the Spoils of War”). It is often used to legitimise acts of

⁸³⁶ <https://shamikhl1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=192509>, February 23, 2013, accessed March 1, 2013.

war and among others found in bomb making handbooks or as part of purported theological justification in relation to suicide operations. Extremist Islamists consider the clause as a divine command stipulating military preparation to wage jihad as part of a broader understanding of “religious service” on the “path of God.”

Ribat as it appears in the Qur’an is referenced in the context of “steeds of war” (*ribat al-khayl*) that must be kept ready at all times for war and hence remain “tied”, mostly in the Islamic world’s border regions or contested areas. In order to “strike terror into [the hearts of] the enemies of Allah”, these “steeds of war” are to be unleashed for military purposes and mounted (*murabit* – also a sense of being garrisoned) by the *Mujahidin*.

The relevant section reads:

“Prepare against them whatever forces you [believers] can muster, including warhorses,⁸³⁷ to frighten off [these] enemies of God and of your, and warn others unknown to you but known to God. Whatever you give in God’s cause will be repaid to you in full, and you will not be wronged,” Qur’an 8:60.

Ribat has two main aspects in contemporary jihadist thinking. First, the complete 60th verse of the Qur’an is often stated in introductions to various ideological and military handbooks or videos. While some videos issue *ribat* in connection with various weapons and the alleged divine command in the jihadist reading thereof, as outlined in the subchapter *The Concept of ‘ribat’ in jihadist Mindset*. As the real-world fighting *Mujahidin* are considered “strangers” (*ghuraba’*) in this world fighting at the very edge of worldly perception, thus being ‘mounted’ at the front (*ribat*) and the borders (*thughur*), the background networks of the ‘media *Mujahidin*’⁸³⁸ must be accredited likewise. Thus, in the past years, *ribat* has migrated and expanded into the virtual “front”, as the *murabit* who is partaking in the media work has been equated with the actual *Mujahid* fighting at the frontlines. In a similar understanding, the physical “frontier” or “border” is shifting to the ‘arm-chair jihadists’, the professional media teams embedded with fighting units as well as the global network of media supporters as the value of the media *jihad* is understood and used on a tactical and

⁸³⁷ *Ribat al-khayl*

⁸³⁸ Please consult the chapter *Celebrities of the Afterlife: Death Cult, Stars, and Fandom of Jihadist Propaganda on the Internet* for details thereof.

strategic level by militants to further their cause. Therefore, Ahmad ‘Abdallah assesses this strategic and tactical level in his posting and posts the recommendation to use Twitter and to start by following the 66 accounts he lists.

Types of account important for jihad and the Mujahidin on Twitter

As the Twitter ‘guide’ states;

“Today I have summarized for you all of the renowned accounts in support of jihad and the *Mujahidin* that convey their news or are in their favour; some are official accounts [by jihadi groups or brigades], some of which are accounts by scholars, ideologues, and supporters. We ask you for your support, even if just by following them.”⁸³⁹

In general, Ahmad ‘Abdallah lists five different types of accounts:

1. **“Accounts by Media and News Foundations”** referring to all Twitter accounts maintained by the official jihadi media outlets such as *Fursan al-Balagh li-l i’lam* (@fursanalbalaagh) or the *Ansar al-Mujahidin Forum* (@as_ansar).
2. **“Accounts by Scholars and Writers”** meaning stars such as the London-based Hani al-Siba’i⁸⁴⁰ (@hanisibu) or Muhammad al-Zawahiri,⁸⁴¹

⁸³⁹ <https://shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=192509>, February 23, 2013, accessed March 1, 2013.

⁸⁴⁰ Hani al-Siba’i is a prolific cleric whose writings are hosted on tawhed.ws. According to the the Militant Ideology Atlas, published by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, al-Siba’i was an “alleged member of the 14-person shura council of Egyptian Islamic Jihad, which is allied with bin Laden. Siba’i was convicted in absentia in Cairo on terrorism charges and is resident in London after Britain granted him political asylum.” William McCants (ed.), *Militant Ideology Atlas – Research Compendium*, November 2006, Combating Terrorism Center, West Point, NY, <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/militant-ideology-atlas>.

⁸⁴¹ The younger brother of AQ-leader Ayman al-Zawahiri appeared after his release following the ousting of Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak within the jihadist media landscape, but has been silent since his renewed arrest in August 2013. The arrest came in the wake of the Egyptian military’s intervention to curb elected president Mohammad Morsi and the public manifestation of Islamists throughout the country, Maggie Michael, Mohammed Al-Zawahiri Arrested: Brother Of Al-Qaeda

(@Mzmmd_Alzawahiri) or the notoriously industrious Abu Sa'd al-'Amili⁸⁴² (@al3aamili), to list a few.

3. **“Accounts by members of jihadist forums and brothers and sisters supporting the *Mujahidin*.”** This is a good example of ‘hybrid’ users active inside the jihadi forums and social media. This group comprises users that are not necessarily engaged in violent conflicts but can be graded as a support network. Members of this support network are media activists in terms of disseminating violent-militant material online while also propagating jihadist ideology in general.
4. **“Accounts supporting the *Mujahidin* in greater Syria (*al-Sham al-'izz wa-l-jihad*).”** This includes media activists in support of prisoners (@alassra2012)⁸⁴³ and campaigns by the *Ansar al-Sham* (@7_m_1_t) a charity regularly requesting money and support (financial, logistical, personnel) in general. Twitter handles with a jihadist slang and iconography from time to time send out tweets thanking groups such as *Ansar al-Sham* for received money or goods.⁸⁴⁴
5. **“Various accounts”**, this section includes activists such as the “unofficial account of *Minbar al-Tawhed wa-l-Jihad*” (@MinbarTawhed); *Israeli Affairs* (@IsraeliAffairs); or the high profile account *Mujhtahid*, “the divulging secrets of the Al Salul” an insulting reference to the ruling Saudi family (@mujtahidd).

Chief Ayman Al-Zawahiri Reportedly Detained In Egypt, The Huffington Post, August 17, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/17/mohammed-al-zawahiri-arrested_n_3772315.html.

Accessed February 11, 2014.

⁸⁴² He is a frequent writer for the *Shumukh al-Islam* forum and publishes for its media outlet.

⁸⁴³ The work and input by this Twitter handle are reflected on the account’s Facebook page, available at <https://www.facebook.com/alassra>, accessed February 11, 2014. The Facebook page is linked and interlinked to groups and pages such as “the support of Islamist (*al-Islamiyyun*) prisoners in Lebanon”, reflecting the trans-national agenda of the free prisoners campaign. The Twitter handle @alassra2012 accommodated mere 681 followers as of February 2014.

⁸⁴⁴ The slogan of *Ansar al-Sham* is “*al-Sham, al-Sham, ya ummat al-Islam*”, on their Twitter profile a telephone number is advertised. The number (0096550758039) is of Kuwaiti origin and also used in combination with the Skype handle (h_m_1_t_1) to reach out. Apparently, this strategy is successful with pro-ISIS Twitter handles thanking *Ansar al-Sham* for their deeds, for example *Mus'ab al-Muhajir* (@al_dolgy) showing the avatar of a *shahid* covered by the ISIS flag, February 11, 2014, https://twitter.com/al_dolgy/status/433156019494326272. A hash tag has been initiated for these kind of thank you tweets, reading (in Arabic) #Thank_you_Ansar_dawlat_al-Islam, clearly attributing the *Ansar al-Sham* campaign to the overall effort of ISIS with all the intentional state building elements within. The Twitter and Skype handle use the Latin coding for the Arabic “campaign” (*hamlat*).

The posting is concluded with the signature “Abu ‘Abdallah al-Baghdadi” and his own twitter account (@Ahmed_Abidullah) that has only 375 followers with a little over 1,000 tweets as of February 10, 2014.

“The most important jihadist sites and support for jihad and the Mujahidin on Twitter”

With the support of Ali Fisher the profile data for the 66 accounts listed by Ahmad ‘Abdallah are further deciphered in technical terms and embedded in context to their nature and content. The interdisciplinary approach helps understand and discover who these important users are individually and what we could find out about them as a group. One of the first elements in the data users tend to look at is the number of followers an account has. While not a measure of influence, it does give an indication that users have heard of the account and that they may be interested in seeing more of their specific content.

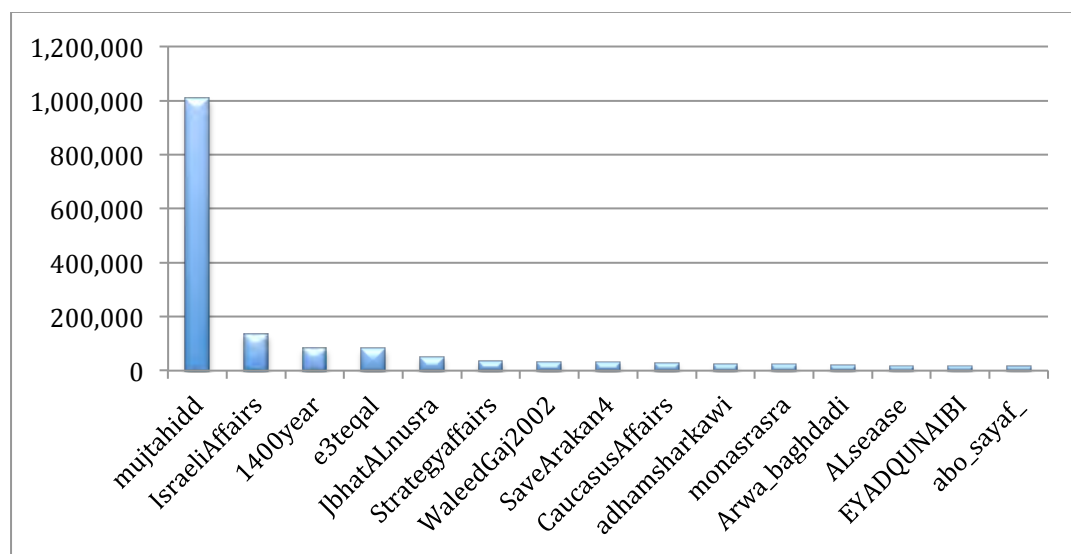


Figure 36 Number of followers of the advocated 66 Twitter accounts

Of the important jihadist accounts identified by Ahmad ‘Abdallah, @mujtahidd – he has over a million followers, but this an exception, next most followed are @IsraeliAffairs – around 180,000 followers – and @1400year – around 30,000 followers, as of August 20, 2013. By February 2014, @mujtahidd has over 1,3

million followers, @IsraeliAffairs over 200,000, while @1400year jumped to over 100,000 followers.

Who are the 66 users of influence recommended by the SSI posting?



Mujtahid is an Islamic term of jurisprudence, a “legist formulating independent decisions in legal or theological matters, based on the interpretation and application of the four *usul*”, according to Hans Wehr. It can also simply mean “industrious, diligent.”

His bio on Twitter merely consists of two Arabic names, *Harith and Hummam*, and his email (mujtahidmail@gmail.com). The two names also serve as a code relating to the saying of prophet Muhammad who stated these two names as of the most dear ones to God and to him (besides ‘Abdallah and ‘Abd al-Rahman). *Hummam* means lion and *Harith* cultivator. As location he simply entered: The world.

Jihadist Twitter members claim that @mujtahidd is a “known whistleblower inside the #Saudi government”, according to Al Battar Media, a media outlet that merged with the SSI media front and became the forum’s official media arm on January 8, 2014.⁸⁴⁵

⁸⁴⁵ <https://shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=218024>. Al Battar Media is active in editing and uploading jihadist videos, with a renewed focus on the troubled Iraqi province of al-Anbar. Despite the blackout of SSI, Al Battar Media has continued its work via Twitter (@Al_Bttaar) and justpaste.it as the official media arm, for example: <http://justpaste.it/ed63>, February 12, 2014. Jihadist forums such as alplatformmedia.com/vb host al-Battar material, and by thus promote SSI, as for instance is the case with the video “The Place [of Worship] for God Remains”, <http://alplatformmedia.com/vb/showthread.php?p=141888>, January 26, 2014. In videos such as these the unity of the *umma* is called upon for despite the recent rift between AQ central and ISIS.



@IsraeliAffairs - has about 180,000 followers as of August 20, 2013, and is the next most followed account,

in his bio, he writes:

“I am Muslim, my citizenship is Arab, I work on behalf of my country which is every span of hand on earth; raising on it the *adhan* [the call to prayer]! [I am] diplomat, translator, researcher in Israeli affairs...”



@1400year – has about 85,000 followers, the third most followed account.

The Arabic name of this account is *gharib fi wadanihi* – “the stranger in his own country”; the sentiment of *gharib* is a reference to a mental passageway as the ‘true’ believer considers himself somewhat as a foreign object in this world, associating oneself to the early Muslims who had been perceived as such strangers in their historical context by their social environment.⁸⁴⁶ The eagle next to the ISIS flag is a clear allocation to the strangers (*ghuraba’*) in the jihadist sense and implication thereof. Stranger or estranged is used here in the context of Palestine and the Israeli

⁸⁴⁶ This is a key sentiment for jihadists, as detailed in the chapter *The Case of Muhammad Mahmud – Founder of the German Global Islamic Media Front*.

occupation that is considered as the first catastrophe (*nakba*) of Islamic countries or territories. The *nakba* has since been complemented by the misery of occupation and war in Afghanistan in the 1980s and 2000s, the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the turmoil following the ‘Arab Spring’, especially the civil war in Syria.

When the data was captured for this post his bio stated:

“The man in the picture is Rachid Nekkaz, a French millionaire of Algerian origin, who opposes France's ban of the *niqab*. He said to the Muslimat of France to wear the *niqab* and I will pay the fine, I am honored by placing his picture [on my account].”

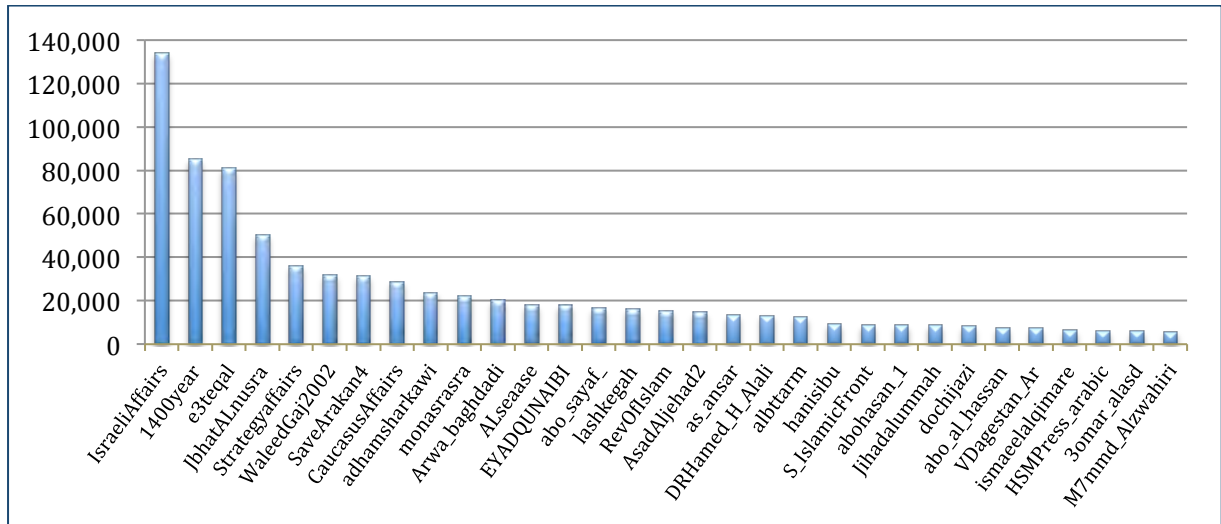
His updated bio, however, as shown in the screen grab above, states:

“The demise of Israel may be preceded by the demise of [Arab] regimes that made a living on the expense of their own people, laughing at them, destroying the societies (...).”

@1400year also has a YouTube account with 1,830 subscribers and 437,243 views. The links across platforms allows users to more effectively create their *zeitgeist*. This is similar to the way jihadist groups such as *Jabhat-al-Nusra* are using Twitter to disseminate links to video content shot on the battlefield in Syria and posted for mass consumption on YouTube.⁸⁴⁷

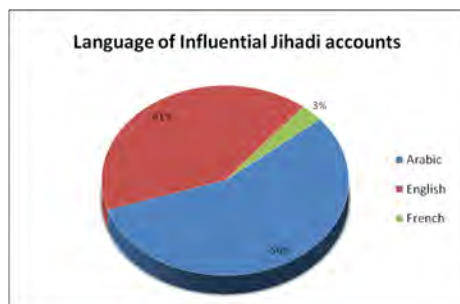
Of the remaining accounts, 32 of the 66 accounts listed have between 5,000 and 100,000 followers:

⁸⁴⁷ Nico Prucha and Ali Fisher. Tweeting for the Caliphate – Twitter as the New Frontier for Jihadist Propaganda. CTC Sentinel (Westpoint), June 2013, <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/tweeting-for-the-caliphate-twitter-as-the-new-frontier-for-jihadist-propaganda>.



The mean number of followers is 28,220 but this is heavily influenced by the three accounts with the greatest number of followers. The median number of followers is much lower 5377.

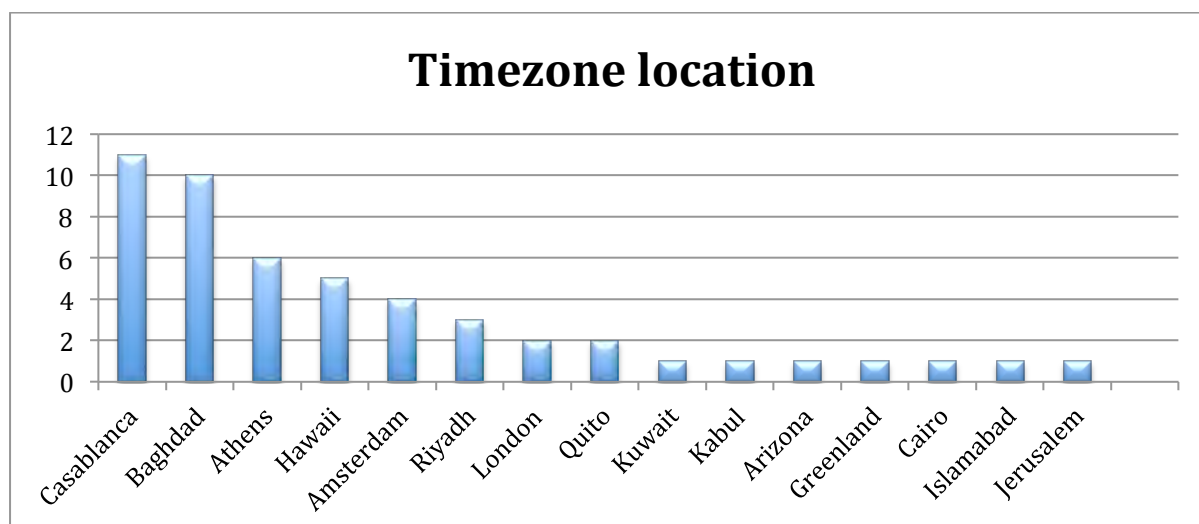
What language do they use?



The majority (56%) use Twitter in Arabic with 41% using English and 3% using French. The language of an account was determined from that listed in the twitter profile data.

Where are the accounts located?

Few users write meaningful locations in the 'location' field on their Twitter profile, and fewer still enable geotagging of Twitter content. However, a surprisingly high number of people tend to set the clock in their timezone, to either the correct timezone – or to a timezone in which they would like to appear to be.



Casablanca was the most common location account holders used to signify their time zone. It does not mean they are in these specific cities but it does provide an indication of the area of the world with which they associate.

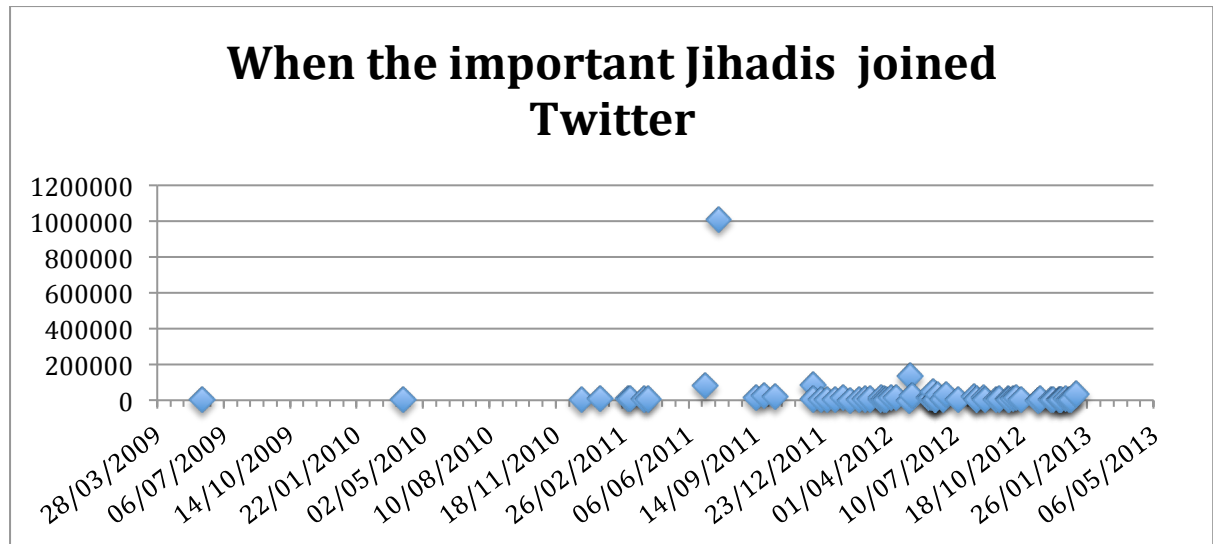
Using time zones can be useful as humans are creatures of habit. They like the clock to show the time – either where they are or based on location with which they mentally associate. For example, following the 2009 Presidential election in Iran, there was a brief campaign for users to show support for the protesters by changing their location to Tehran, perhaps only to confuse Iranian authorities. This strategy had more than a few problems, as Evgeny Morozov pointed out at the time.⁸⁴⁸ One of the more notable issues relevant in this context is the failure of the less savvy Twitter users to change the time zone as well as the location. Another problem with this strategy was the tendency of slacktivists⁸⁴⁹ to use different tags, such as #helpiranelection, to those used by protesters or ‘digital insiders’ (#GR88, #Neda, #Sohrab). As a result, interaction on Twitter was predominantly characterised by a series of local conversations rather than a one global debate.

When did the important Jihadi accounts join Twitter?

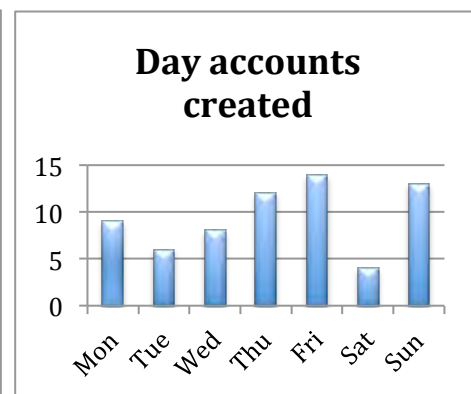
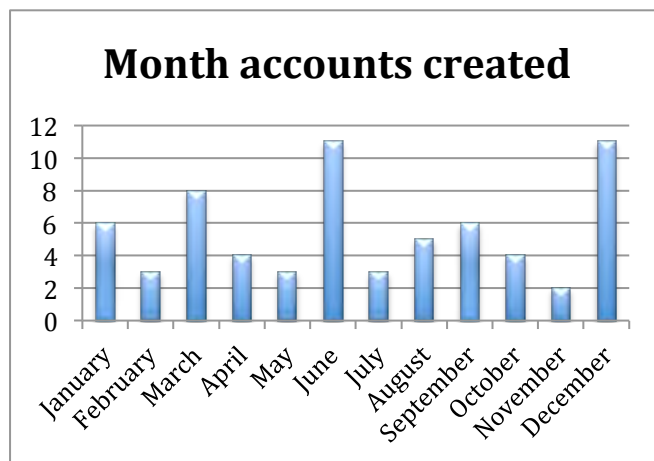
⁸⁴⁸ Evgeny Morozov, Foreign Policy: Twitter And Protests In Tehran, June 17, 2009, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=105506664>. Accessed August 1, 2013.

⁸⁴⁹ By definition of dictionary.com as “the public proclaiming of one’s political beliefs through activities that require little effort or commitment”, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/slacktivist>, August 1, 2013.

Although one jihadi account has been active since 2009, many of the important jihadi accounts were created during 2012. This data echoes the shift away from discussion on forums and toward social media, lamented by Abu Sa'd al-'Amili in his essay on the state of global online jihad as outlined by Cole Bunzel for Jihadica.⁸⁵⁰



The data also shows little tendency for accounts that have been active for a long time to have more followers than those created more recently.



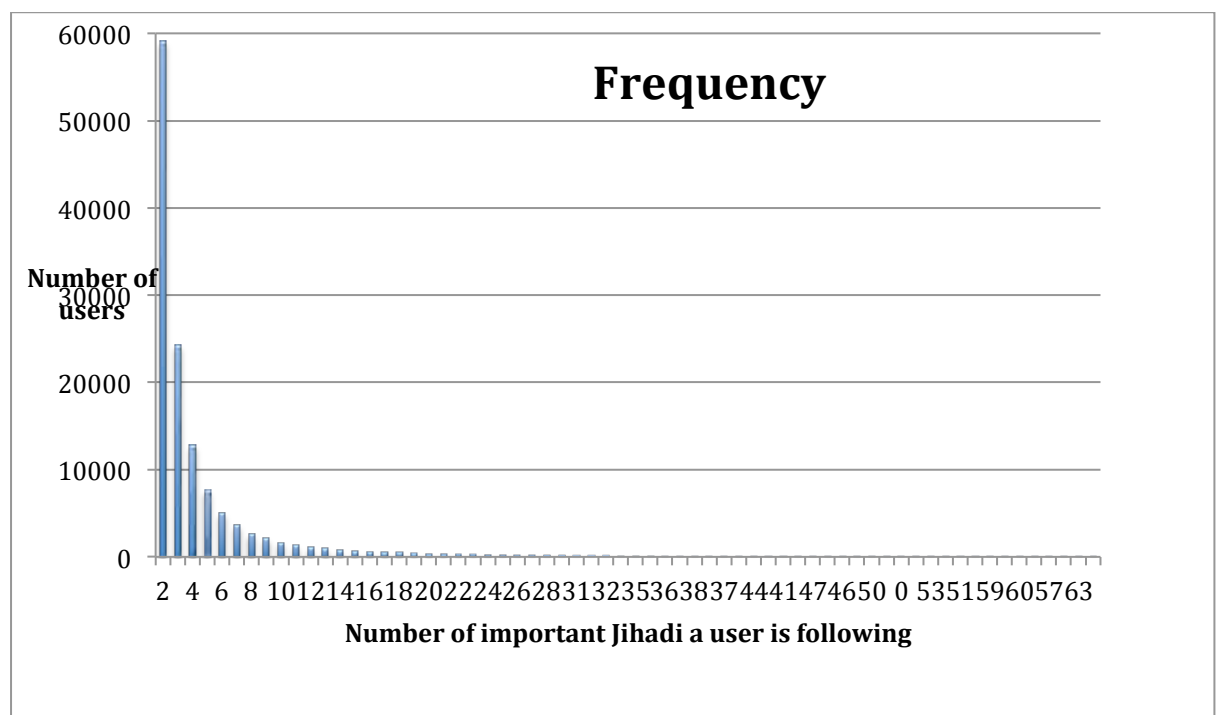
On what day and month did the most important Jihadi accounts for Ahmad ‘Abdallah create twitter accounts? This data indicates Friday, though Thursday and Sunday are not far behind. Equally, accounts were most frequently created in June and December.

Do these accounts all speak to the same followers?

⁸⁵⁰ <http://www.jihadica.com/are-the-jihadi-forums-flagging-an-ideologue%e2%80%99s-lament/>

If each of the 66 ‘important jihadi’ accounts were followed by a different group of Twitter users this would mean collectively they were reaching 1.8 million users as of August 20, 2013. However, @mujtahidd alone is followed by over 1.1 million followers, and the real number following the remaining important jihadi accounts is much lower than 700,000. This is because some users follow more than one ‘important jihadi’ account. Using network analysis, we found that the network following one or more of the important jihadi accounts (excluding @mujtahidd) was a little over 370,000 users and 850,000 follower/following relationships.

As one may expect from an online social environment, many users follow one or two accounts, while a very few follow many of the ‘important jihadi’ accounts. The graph below demonstrates a close approximation of a ‘power law’ curve.

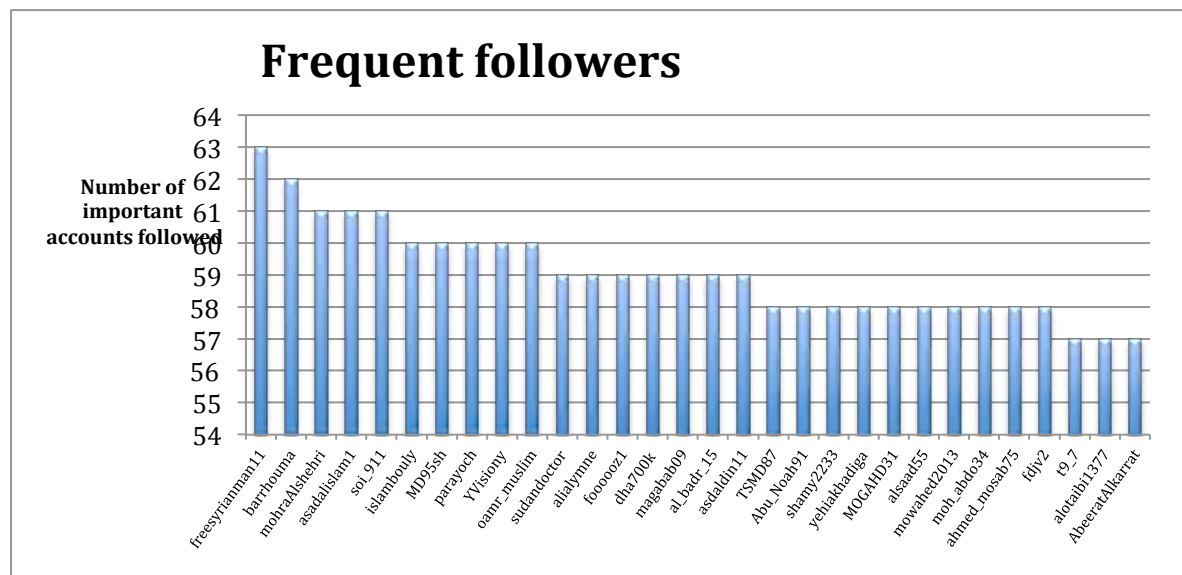


Of those users who follow on of the 66 important jihadi accounts (minus @mujtahidd), 34% follow more than one important jihadi account. However, of the users which follow more than one important jihadi account, 45% only follow two accounts. These can be thought of as casual followers.

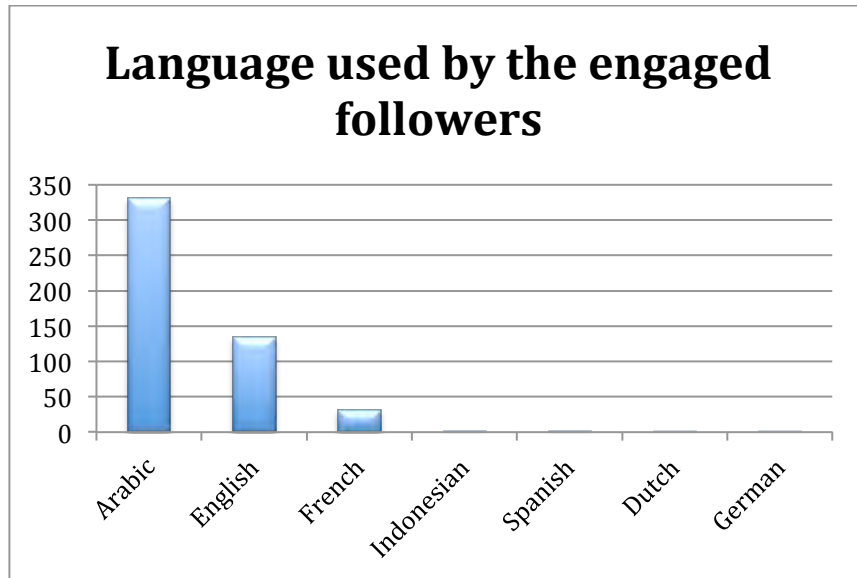
At the other end of the scale there are 109 users who follow fifty or more of the important jihadi listed and 504 users that follow 40 or more. These are the more engaged followers.

Engaged followers of ‘important jihadi’ accounts

Knowing that a user is particularly engaged in following the same accounts as were deemed important in the Twitter guide, does not necessarily indicate any political affiliation – not least because of the number of CT scholars actively following these accounts (and perhaps some of those using Quito / Hawaii as a time zone).

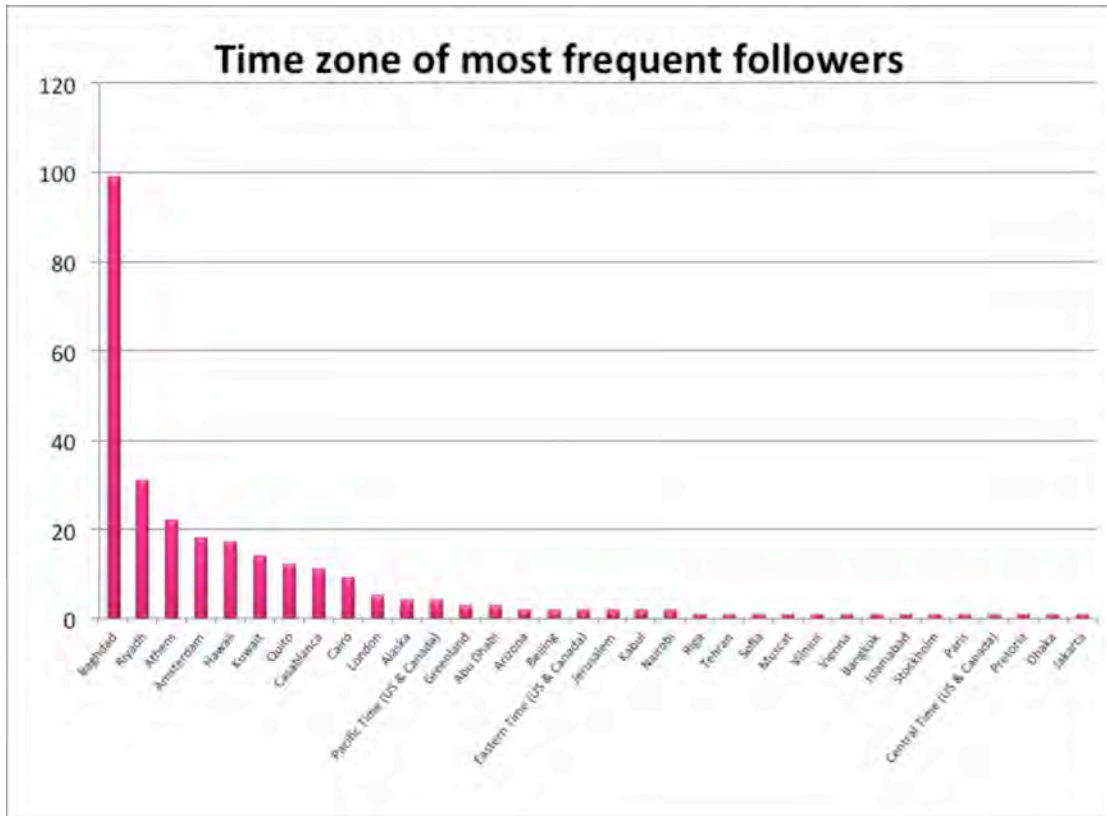


It is however, instructive to consider the aggregated traits of the group as a whole, for example, of the 504 users who follow forty or more important jihadi accounts, what language do they use?

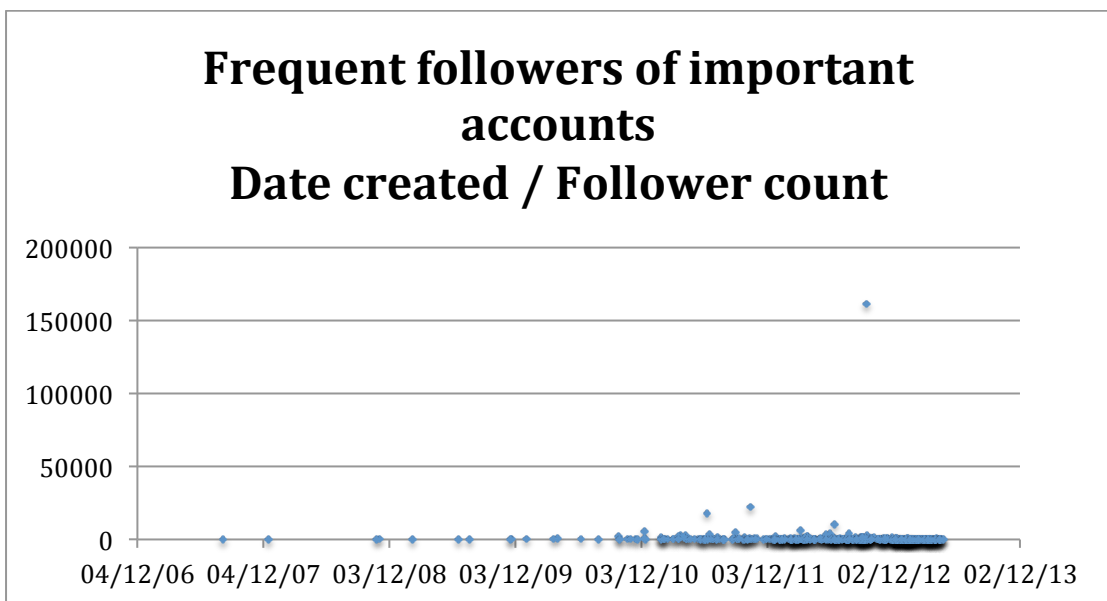


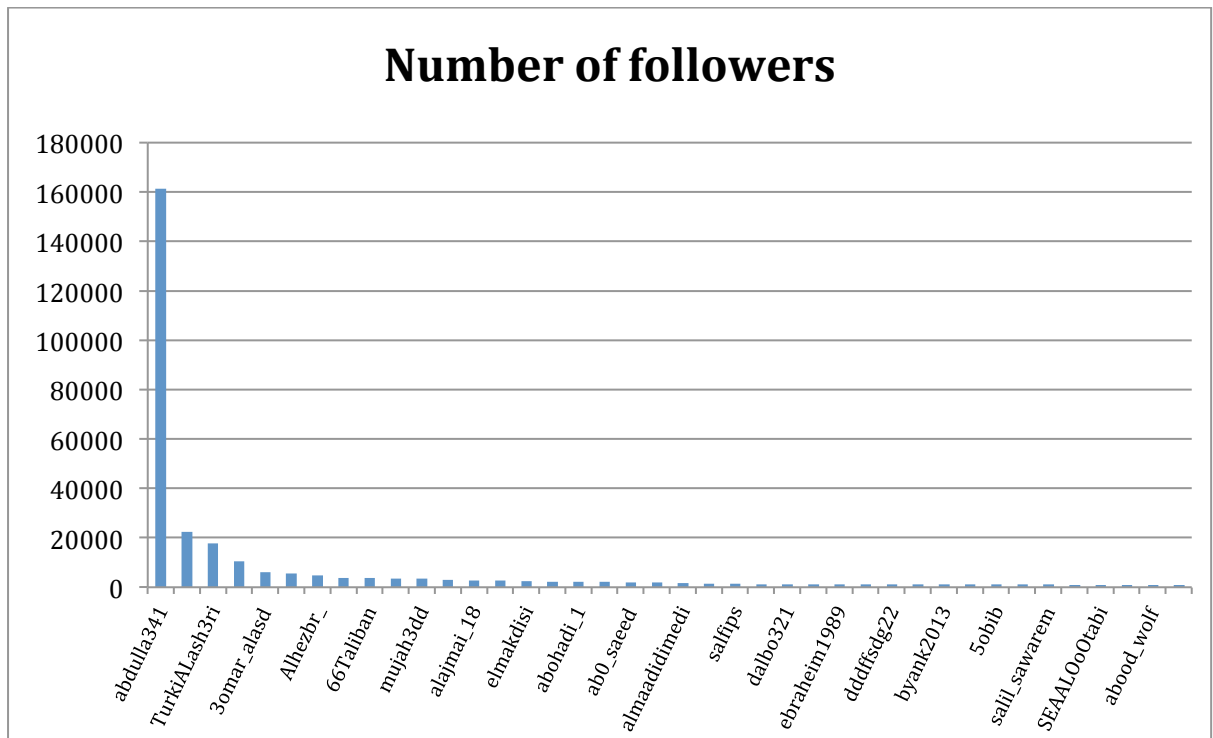
Unsurprisingly given the dominant languages used by important jihadi accounts, Arabic, English and French are the most frequently used languages. In addition, there are a small number of users who use Twitter in other languages, Indonesian, Spanish, Dutch and German.

From the aggregated profile data, a similar question can be asked about where in the world these engaged users appear to be.



Using the location users have designated to set time on their twitter account, the cultural importance of appearing (at least) in the Arabian Peninsula. Similar to the data on the 66 ‘important jihadi’ the engaged followers tend to have most frequently created accounts in 2012, equally, apart from a small number of exceptions, these users each have a small number of followers.





What does this tell us?

The ‘important jihadi’ accounts, as one may expect, tend to tweet in Arabic. They are followed by a network of around 300,000 people (if @mujtahidd is excluded) most of who are casual observers.

There are, however, somewhere between 500 and 1000 more engaged followers. These users tend to be Arabic speaking, have created accounts in the last year to 18 months as of August 2013, have relatively few followers and appear to have a greater tendency to identify with the Arab peninsular than the 66 ‘important jihadi’ accounts.

Relational dynamics

Analysing the relational dynamics between these accounts as a group and those who choose to follow them is a key part of understanding the online strategies.

The accounts had been categorized in different types by Ahmad ‘Abdallah. This underlines the diverse range of information, which was recommended to further the jihadist endeavour in general. In addition to understanding the specific accounts, the data can be used to analyse the network of individuals who follow the 66 ‘important jihadist’ accounts. The relationships are important as they influence the way individuals search⁸⁵¹ for information,⁸⁵² what they find and the behaviors⁸⁵³ they adopt.

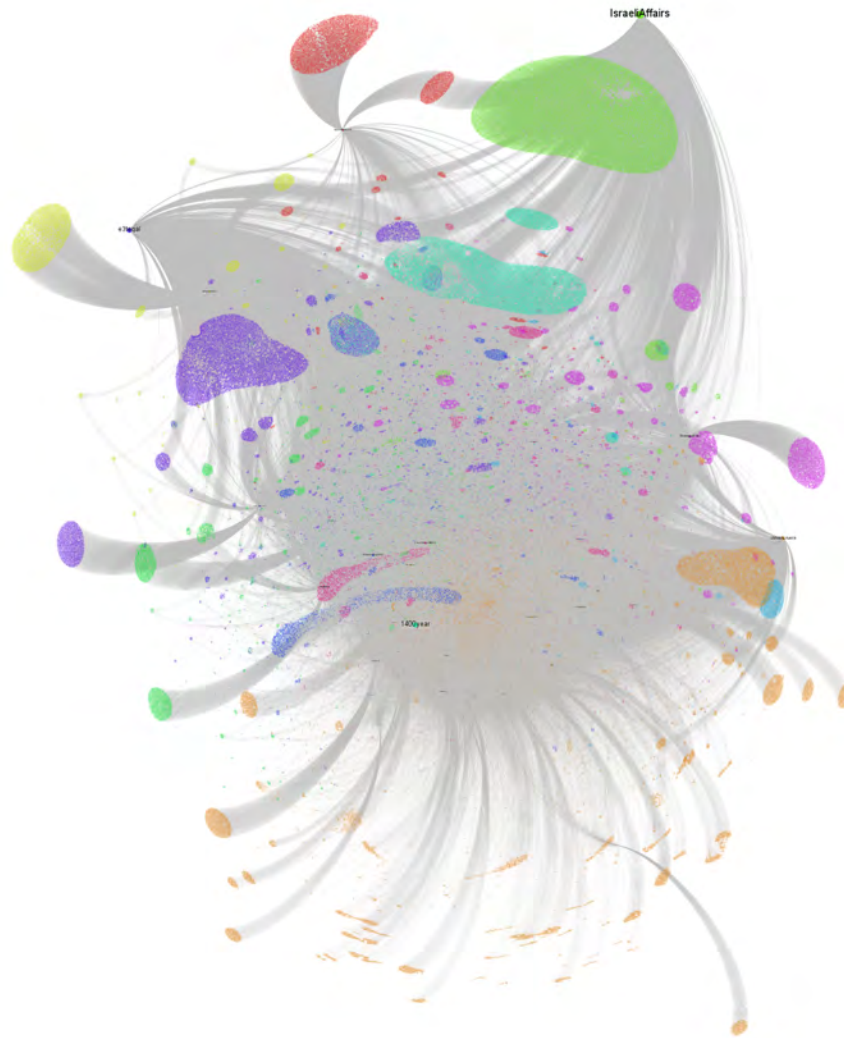
We began by identifying the followers of the 66 ‘important jihadist’ accounts. If each of these accounts were followed by a different group of Twitter users, then this would mean that collectively they were reaching 1.8 million users. However, @mujtahidd alone is followed by over 1.1 million followers, and the real number following the remaining important jihadi accounts is much lower than 700,000. This is because some users follow more than one of the ‘important jihadist’ accounts. Using network analysis, we found that the network following one or more of these accounts (excluding @mujtahidd) was 377235 users and 852948 follower/following relationships. The image below represents the network of important accounts and their respective followers. Each Twitter account is represented by a dot, and those with a follower / following relationship are connected by a line.

⁸⁵¹ Brynn M. Evans and Ed H. Chi, *Towards a Model of Understanding Social Search*, pre-print copy, <http://www.brynn-evans.com/papers/social-search-cscw08-preprint.pdf>, September 4, 2013.

⁸⁵² Peter Sheridan Dodds, et al., *An Experimental Study of Search in Global Social Networks*, *Science* 301, 827 (2003),

<http://www.distcomp.ethz.ch/lectures/fs10/seminar/paper/michael-6.pdf>, September 4, 2013.

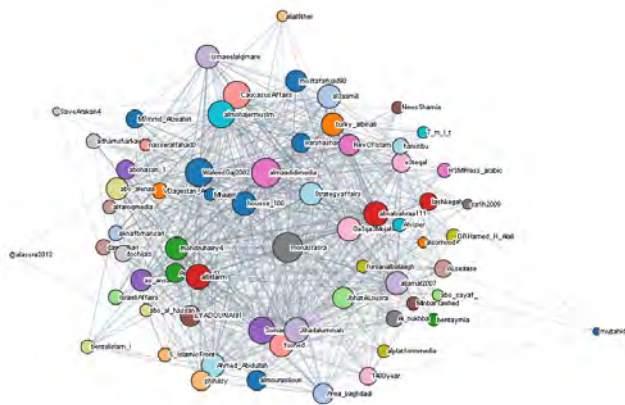
⁸⁵³ Tom R. Tyler, *Why People Obey the Law*, Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2006.



The graph (above) shows the network of users identified to be following at least one of the ‘important jihadist’ accounts (excluding @mujtahidd). The colours have been used to highlight the groups of users who follow the same users (or same combination of the 66 ‘important jihadist’ accounts). A quick view of the network image reinforces the previous observation that most of the users are following only one or two of these high-profile accounts in the jihadist online media mind-set. The importance of this combined approach is the ability to analyse the combinations of accounts that users have chosen to follow.

Focusing on the Network of the 66 ‘important jihadist’ Accounts

In addition to the potential to look at the followers of the 66 accounts claimed to be ‘most important’ by the *Shumukh al-Islam* posting, their profiles and time zones, the relationships between these specific 66 accounts can also provide analysts with insights. For example, JbhatALnusra, WaleedGaj2002, AsadAljehad2 are most frequently followed by the 66 ‘important jihadist’ accounts. Conversely, SaveArakan4, Mhaajrr, house_100, and alassra2012 appear on the list of the 66, but few other ‘important jihadist’ accounts follow them. The ranking (shown below) is based on frequency of being followed by the 66 ‘important’ accounts are also reflected in the eigenvector calculations for the network. The relationships between the 66 accounts are shown in the image below, and be explored in greater detail by clicking on the image, which will open the interactive version. When using the interactive image (hosted online at <http://bit.ly/1cFbjDg>),⁸⁵⁴ clicking on a node will focus on the connections of that user, double click to open the twitter account of that user.



screenname	No. of 66 important Jihadi following users
JbhatALnusra	36
WaleedGaj2002	30
AsadAljehad2	28
Strategyaffairs	26
EYADQUNAIBI	26
as_ansar	25
albttarm	24
RevOfislam	23
abo_alenaa	22
Al_nukhba	22

The network as a whole represents 958 relationships between the 66 ‘important jihadist’ users with a network diameter of 5 (the distance between the furthest two nodes calculated on the directed graph). The network density is 0.2 on the directed graph (1 would represent a complete graph, where all connections would exist).

Key nodes in the network

⁸⁵⁴ The interactive network sample based on the 66 accounts was programmed and set up by Ali Fisher, to whom I am most grateful for sharing this with me. The interactive network is hosted on Ali’s site *Wandren PD*, <http://www.wandrenpd.com/about-2/>. Please note that the interactive image works best in the Chrome browser.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the majority of the connected accounts are hard-core jihadi media activists. From the above listed, some of the high-profile hard-core jihadist Twitter accounts are further analysed:

@WaleedGaj2002



The account has over 45,000 followers while only following 387. Apparently this is the account of “former Guantanamo detainee and eyewitness of the Qila-e-Jangji massacre⁸⁵⁵ in Afghanistan” Walid [Muhammad] al-Hajj, from Sudan. According to his overall tweets, he still seems to be on the same page as the mainstream al-Qa’ida jihadists are, appraising Bin Laden and being cherished by other Twitter members for having known the *shaykh* personally. He was released in 2008 from Guantánamo Bay according to the Wikileaks Gitmo Project obtained by the New York Times.⁸⁵⁶ He is active within the mainstream media.⁸⁵⁷

@Strategyaffairs

⁸⁵⁵ For a detailed report thereof: John F. Kerry, *Tora Bora Revisited – How we Failed to Get Bin Laden and Why it Matters Today*, A Report to the Members of the Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate, First Session, November 30, 2009, http://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Tora_Bora_Report.pdf. Accessed August 31, 2013.

⁸⁵⁶ According to the Guantánamo Docket available at <http://projects.nytimes.com/guantanamo/detainees/81-walid-mohammad-haj-mohammad-ali>.

⁸⁵⁷ For an interview with Aljazeera: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ovg_EhYEGQw&list=PLEDD9DD060A47D3F4&index=3.



This is a prolific and quite industrious jihadi media activists with over 100,000 followers and just over a little of 4,000 tweets. He is also active in most classical jihadist forums as ‘Abdallah bin Muhammad. Occasionally he has tweeted statements by the Yemeni AQAP prior to the ‘official’ broadcast within the forums and contextualized as well as posted the statements both within the forums and Twitter. Other Shumukh al-Islam members, for instance, used his Twitter-input to further the AQAP statements within the forum raising @Strategyaffairs status in general.

@EYADQUNAIBI



Doctor Iyad Qunaybi is somewhat of a rising star within the radical on- and offline scene. He is active on all social media outlets and his videotaped speeches are also transcribed and published within the jihadist forums by media outlets such as the

above mentioned @fursanbalagh. He rose to fame within this subculture in 2011/12 during the troubled times in Egypt and also responded to the jihadi affairs of life in general. His sermons are in Arabic and sometimes subtitled in English, whereas his renewed focus has been set on Syria since the outbreak and spread of violence. By being included on Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi's database tawhed.ws, his standing was boosted. Few of his writings and audiobits are available on his author page on tawhed.ws⁸⁵⁸ under Iyad al-Qunaybi. His input is valued, re-tweeted and re-disseminated within the forums, on Facebook, and further published on sites such as justpaste.it.⁸⁵⁹

@as_ansar



This is the official Twitter account of the bi-lingual Shabakat al-Ansar al-Mujahidin. The main forum is in Arabic and it's sister forum in English. Both forums are sometimes taken down but usually resume working after some time. With the instability of the main forum, this is a good example on how Twitter has become a tangible alternative to the media driven jihadists, for the Twitter accounts remain alive and very active with their over 26,000 followers, untouched by any disruptions of the

⁸⁵⁸ <http://tawhed.ws/a?a=Equnaibi>, September 4, 2013.

⁸⁵⁹ For example. <http://justpaste.it/3c4q>, September 4, 2013. This makes it more difficult to disrupt such networks as copy-and-publish sites as justpaste.it enhance the already decentralised nature.

forums. The YouTube link above is an “invitation to Muslims to visit the forum” and recommends and instructs the use of Tor to conceal one’s identity online.⁸⁶⁰

@Al_nukhba



This account could be described as a jihadi media hub. The members, active on the forums for years, are highly committed and regularly produce transcriptions of jihadist media productions. This is naturally very helpful for any analyst but is also quite a service for the jihadi audience. Usually speeches of main leaders and ideologues as well as major video productions of as-Sahab, al-Malahem etc. are transcribed and can be conveniently downloaded as a PDF or Word document.

On their main website <https://nokbah.com> data collections and videos can be downloaded and also searched for. It is a well-built and maintained data warehouse for extremist content that is first and foremost uploaded and disseminated via the classical forums. The Twitter account has about 6,000 followers, over 500 tweets, and is following no one.

This had been one of the pioneer jihadi Twitter accounts and advertised their social media passion as early as 2009. Perhaps the name *nukhbat al-I'lami al-jihadi*, “the Jihadi Media Elite”, stems from Abu Mus’ab al-Suri’s “Message to the British and European Peoples and Governments regarding the Explosions in London”, July 2005, where he outlined the Internet as the most important medium to propagate and spread the jihadists demands and frame of reference in general. He referred to “the jihadi elite” residing in Europe to partake in this venture.

⁸⁶⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D8Mgpm1PgF4>, September 4, 2013.

screenname	Betweenness Centrality
WaleedGaj2002	325.5404128
CaucasusAffairs	259.9937174
monasrasra	201.3687307
albtarm	194.8161287
mohdzuairy4	125.636922
Strategyaffairs	109.9738094
abo_alenaa	95.68083523
aboalzahraa111	92.52805023
almaadidimedia	92.11048142
e3teqal	78.52499256

The ‘betweenness’ calculation highlights those users through which the shortest paths across the network most frequently pass. These users are often found near the centre of the network image. From the perspective of ‘betweenness’, in addition to some of the users mentioned above, also appear to have an important role bridging between different elements of the network.

To provide some additional insight in this, here is some basic information on

@Caucasusaffairs



The name of this account is program, everything related to the Caucasus, the Caucasus Emirate with the focus on Chechnya is published here in mainly Arabic but also Russian. With over 44,000 followers while following over 400 and about 8,000 tweets this account is a valuable asset besides the main forums and their pertaining subsections. It mainly retweets the Arabic language media outlet “Echo of Caucasus” (@RevOfIslam) which is one of the main media hubs in Arabic for many years. The reader may note the four fingered black hand on the yellow background, a symbol to

the *Rabaa al-Adawiya* protest camp referencing the massacre of pro-Morsi protestors in Egypt on August 14, 2013. This symbol

“has emerged in the Middle East, online and offline, to remember the crackdown of the Rabaa al-Adawiya protest camp whereby many pro-Mursi citizens were killed.”⁸⁶¹



The use of this icon in the Chechen context is yet another attempt by the media savvy jihadists to globalize their agenda and serves as proof for the repeated claim of the “war against Islam”. In the meantime this icon has been further ‘jihadised’ by adding the typical black banner, as shown on the left.⁸⁶²

What does this tell us?

The density of the network has two results. First it creates mutually reinforcing clusters of information which can crowd out⁸⁶³ other perspectives and contribute to the development of a *zeitgeist*, or a new electronic propaganda frontier, as discussed in relation to activity of *Jabhat al-Nusra*.⁸⁶⁴

Second, the density of the network tends to protect it against basic disruption strategies, for example the removal or suspension of individual accounts. As Paul Baran’s work *On Distributed Communications*⁸⁶⁵ has demonstrated only a small level

⁸⁶¹ Martijn Koenig, *R4bia – The Symbolic Construction of Protest*, Closer Blog, September 1, 2013, <http://religionresearch.org/martijn/2013/09/01/r4bia-the-symbolic-construction-of-protest/>.

⁸⁶² <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=572136932850986&set=a.105177976213553.7788.100001640538015&type=1&theater>

⁸⁶³ Elinor Ostrom. *Crowding out Citizenship*, Scandinavian Political Studies, Vol. 23, No. 1, 2000, https://tidsskrift.dk/index.php/scandinavian_political_studies/article/viewFile/13401/25548. Accessed September 4, 2013.

⁸⁶⁴ Nico Prucha and Ali Fisher. Tweeting for the Caliphate – Twitter as the New Frontier for Jihadist Propaganda. CTC Sentinel (Westpoint), June 2013, <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/tweeting-for-the-caliphate-twitter-as-the-new-frontier-for-jihadist-propaganda>.

⁸⁶⁵ Paul Baran. *On Distributed Communications*, RAND Corporation, 1964, http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_memoranda/RM3420.html. Accessed August 27, 2013.

of redundancy is required to build a communications systems to withstand heavy enemy attacks. Although this work was done in the context of the 1960s and was particularly focused on challenges faced in the 1970s, the insight provided by the study also relates to online activity and the need for more complex strategies to disrupt dense communication networks.

Information flow

The final section assesses the flow of information in a network that includes the ‘important jihadist’ accounts. Tracking the spread of this information provides a useful insight into the way relationships can influence the spread of information, and allow the identification of key actors or influential users within the Jihadi Twitter phenomenon. For example, a previous article by the authors on Syrian jihadist group Jabhat al-Nusra demonstrated how jihadist groups are using Twitter to disseminate links to video content shot on the battlefield in Syria and posted for mass consumption on YouTube.⁸⁶⁶

In this article, we use data on the way Twitter users communicating in Arabic responded to some of the data presented in the first sections of this article. The data was posted on Jihadica containing a brief analysis of the 66 ‘important jihadi’. Following the post, requests appeared on Twitter for a translation to be posted in Arabic. This translation subsequently appeared on Justpaste.it⁸⁶⁷ and news spread rapidly on Twitter using the #tag, #دراسة_أمريكية_أخطر_66_حساب_جهادي.

The majority of the tweets containing #دراسة_أمريكية_أخطر_66_حساب_جهادي appeared between the 8th and 10th of September 2013, after which time there was little activity. At its peak, the tag was used over 800 times in 15 minutes, equivalent to 53 tweets a minute.

⁸⁶⁶ Nico Prucha and Ali Fisher. Tweeting for the Caliphate – Twitter as the New Frontier for Jihadist Propaganda. CTC Sentinel (Westpoint), June 2013, <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/tweeting-for-the-caliphate-twitter-as-the-new-frontier-for-jihadist-propaganda>

⁸⁶⁷ <http://justpaste.it/ch2x>, the translator warns that “the enemies of God may even penetrate the jihadi forums as described in this analyses.”

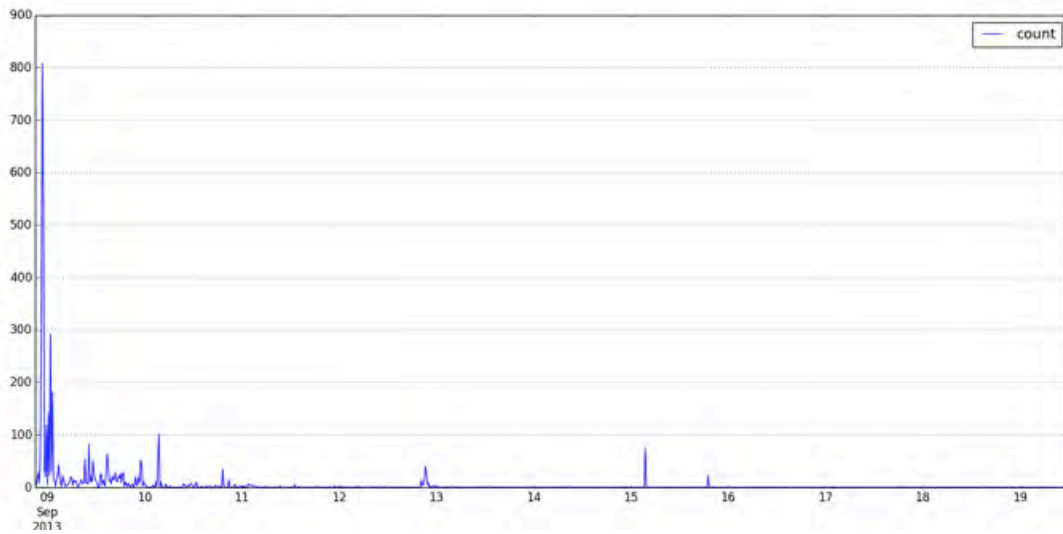
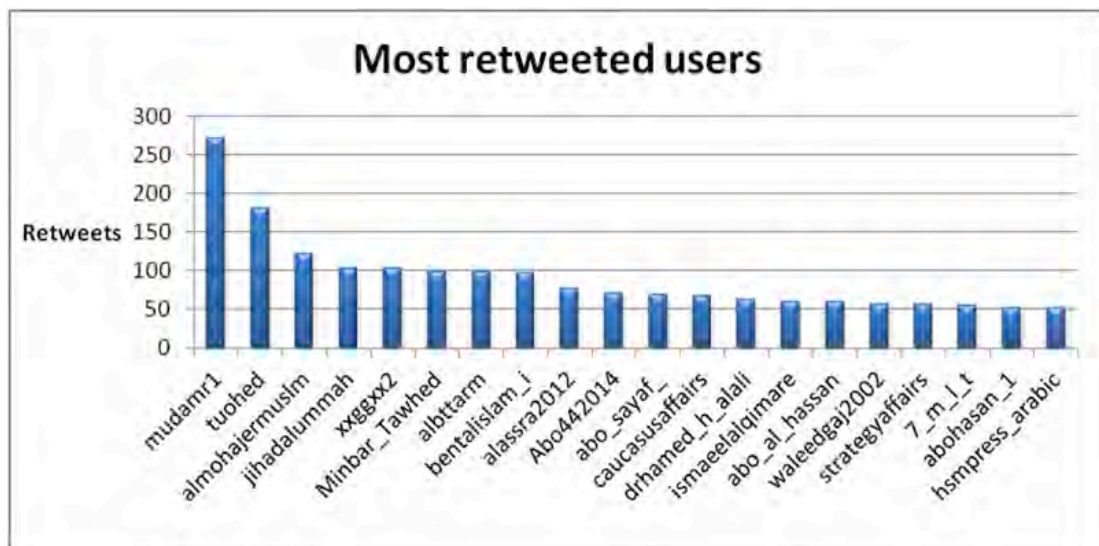


Figure 37 Visualization of the hash tag in use on September 9, 2013, 15 minute interval.⁸⁶⁸

The graph shows volume of tweets containing the #tag for each 15 minute period. This indicates that news travels fast, reaching most of the users it would reach within the first day. It highlights the speed of information dissemination within this network. A few users were particularly important in spreading the news:

Important users

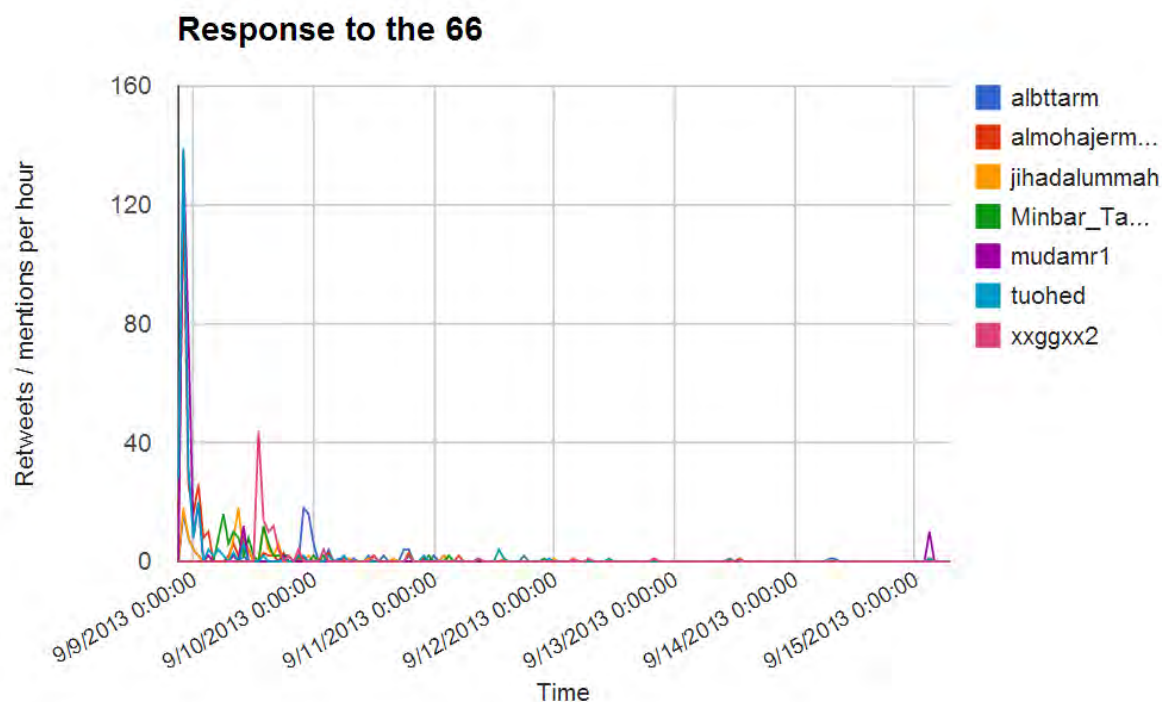
These are the users most frequently retweeted within our data.



⁸⁶⁸ <http://jihadisapes.humanshuddle.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/retweets-15-minute-intervals.png>

Engagement profiles

In addition to the volume of retweets, time is also a factor as not users were retweeted / mentioned at different times. This is known as an engagement profile, as it shows when users were particularly important.

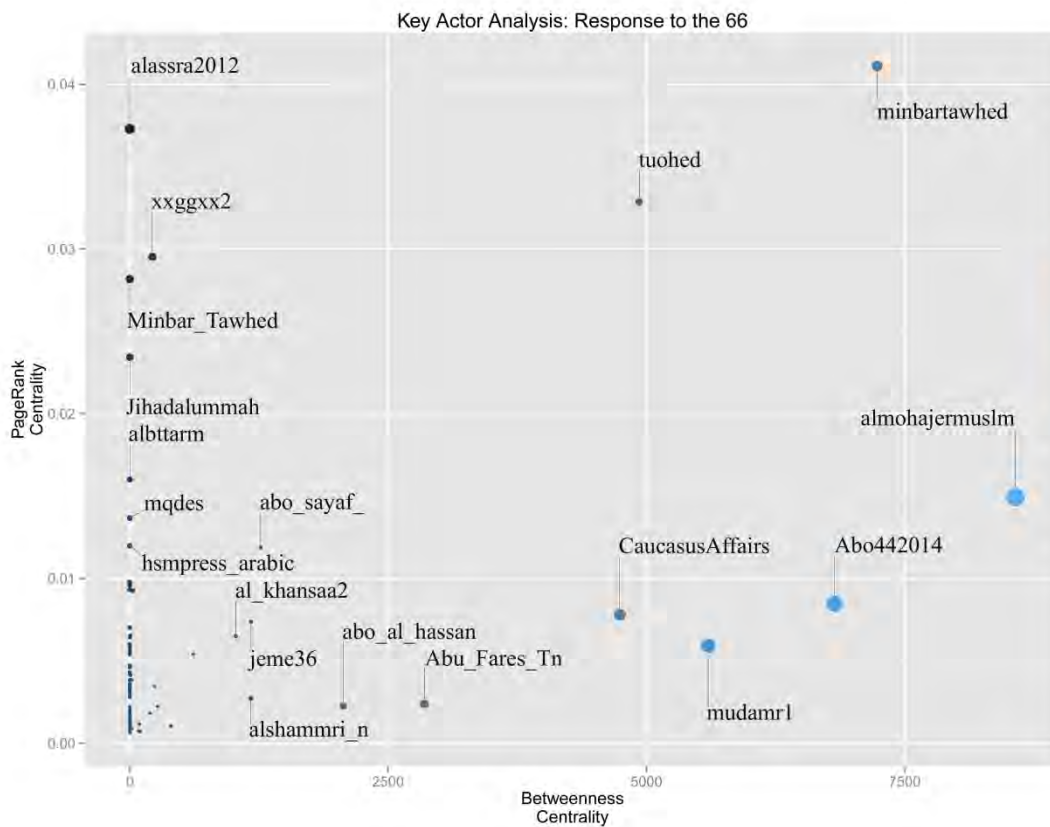


It also highlights that prominent users are retweeted rapidly – if observed in numerous contexts this would indicate information is travelling faster than current case-by-case counter-strategies can respond. In this case, @Tuohed and @almohajermuslm had the greatest levels of *retweets* and mentions early on the 9th. Twelve hours later, @xxggxx2 became prominent and almost a further twelve hours later *retweets* of @albtarm peaked. This hints at the features of the network, which gives it greater resilience. Information can be shared rapidly, shown by the initial spike in *retweets*. However, the engagement profiles also show that different users are able to continue the conversation highlighting that prominent users fulfil different roles in the network.

Key Actor Analysis

To gain greater insight into the way information travelled and the role of prominent users in the network, key actor analysis can differentiate those users that are important for reaching specific communities, from those users that are part of the core of the network. This creates resilience if there are a number of users that operate within the core, or vanguard, and others that act as conduits for content to a wider audience. This allows a network to withstand disruption caused by the occasional suspension of accounts due to activity deemed to breach Twitter’s terms of service.

The position of key actors on the scatter plot below is based on the network metrics, *pagerank* and *betweenness*.

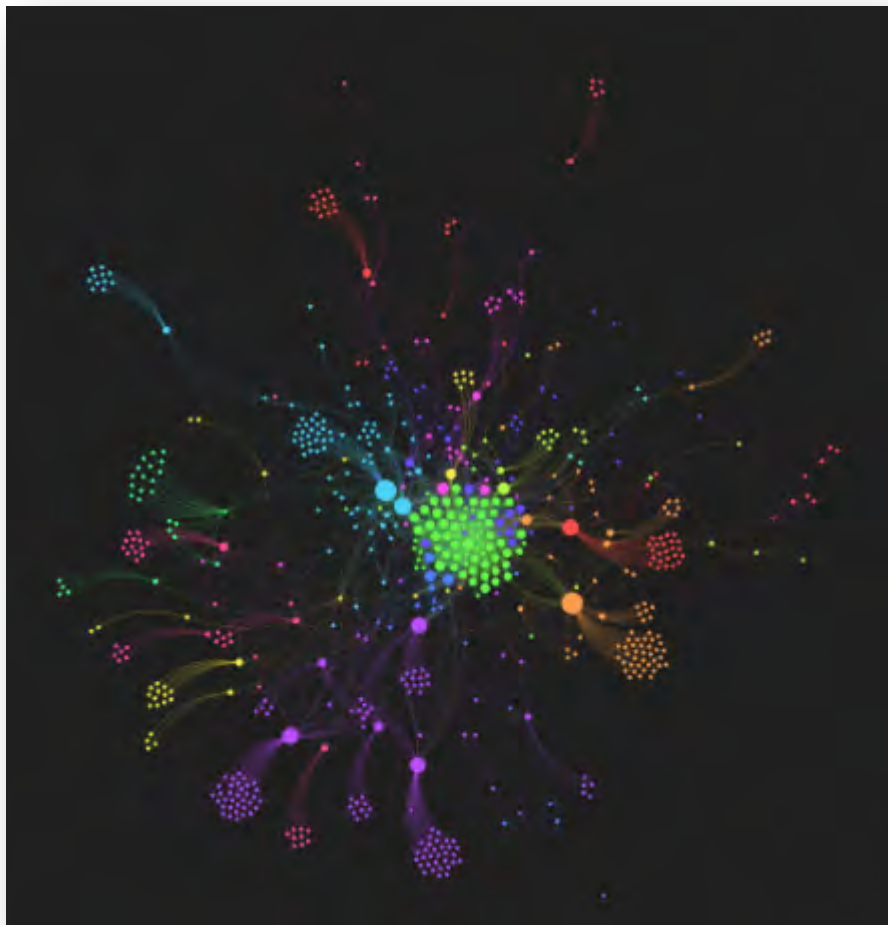


- Users in the bottom left of the graph tend to have no particular role and can be thought of as general users, although they may have high value to an often small and very specific group.
- Those in the top left of the graph tend to be in the core (or one of the cores) of the network. This indicates they are often those most invested in the network and have access to privileged information.

- Those in the bottom right of the graph fulfil the role of bridging between the core content producers and a specific community. The value of this role often comes from tailoring information to a specific ‘audience’ and as such these users are more valuable to that group but less important to everyone else.
- Users in the top right are rare. They have a dual function, as they have the same trusted status as those in the top left of the graph. They also fulfil the same ‘bridge’ role as users in the bottom right of the graph, reaching areas of the network which others do not.

Network graph

Viewing the network map can show which users communicated with each other, which reached the same communities, and which were a bridge to specific communities.



[an interactive version of the image can also be viewed here: <http://bit.ly/1jK1fPL>]

Colours show the different interconnected communities, note the green cluster of interconnected users in the middle of the network. This highlights the likely resilience of the core of the community on twitter, in addition to the resilience created by the multiplatform *Zeitgeist* identified in an earlier study of JN. There are significant levels of redundancy in the connections at the core of the network, this allows communication to continue even when some accounts are suspended.

This analysis has demonstrated that jihadist groups have used the opportunity created by the proliferation of social media platforms to develop a network of accounts that gives them persistent as well as ideologically cohesive presence for jihadist propaganda online. The case studies presented here indicate that the level of interconnection between core members of the network have reached a level of interconnection that gives it a high degree of resilience against the impact of individual account suspensions. If the finding is repeated across a range of other examples, it will have wide ranging consequences for counter-strategies as to be effective they will need to shift from countering individuals, to disrupting cohesion across a network.

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Abstract

The core theme of this doctoral thesis is the analysis of the media strategies employed by jihadist groups such as al-Qa'ida and the Islamic State and to assess the content of propaganda shared by such groups on all levels online. The online world cannot be understood in isolation of the offline, real world. Jihadist groups project influence over the Internet for a number of strategic reasons, among them to indoctrinate, radicalise and subsequently recruit online consumers; to project a “new Sunni Muslim” role model and way of life; in hopes of politicizing individuals with theological, historical, and – most important – visual samples of legitimate grievances, calling to act to defend civilians and much more. The vast and freely available online sources of jihadist media groups seek to change and alter the self-perception of their consumers and subsequently intend that the audience shifts in their offline existence this projected identity.

The media departments as much as any designated individual *media mujahid* facilitate all means possible to transport, broadcast and thus project *strategic influence* by enabling individuals worldwide to tune into the jihadist *monopoly of truth*. This *monopoly* is a dominant form of projecting only one *truth*, or *haqq*, in jihadist slang while remaining that every Muslim outside of this tight definition is either treading on the “path of falsehood (*batil*)”, is an apostate (*murtadd*), or simply excommunicated (*takfir*) as a disbeliever (*kafir*). The jihadi monopoly of “truth” only allows a specific interpretation and implementation of the corpus of *Qur'an* and *Sunna*, claiming absolute authority over common Islamic habits and traditions to widen their potential impact.

The media strategy and use thereof has been taken to an unprecedented level by the Islamic State in particular in 2014 – by establishing a massive presence mainly on Twitter and showing resilience, both ideologically and technically against potential outside influence and interferences. The doctoral thesis has the ambition to give the readers an impression of the online use, the media strategies and the *Twittersphere* of jihadism; while not neglecting to contextualize and value the mainly Arabic language content shared within these networks.

Abstract (Deutsch)

Das Kernthema dieser Dissertation ist die Analyse der Medienstrategien jihadistischer Gruppierungen wie al-Qa'ida und dem Islamischen Staat. Neben den Medienstrategien liegt das Augenmerk auf dem Inhalt der Propaganda, die von solchen Gruppen auf allen Ebenen Online verbreitet wird. Die Online-Welt kann nicht isoliert von der offline, realen Welt behandelt werden. Jihadistische Gruppen projizieren Einfluss über das Internet als ein Teil ihrer Strategie zu indoktrinieren, radikalieren und bestmöglich ihr Publikum zu rekrutieren; dabei wird der „neue sunnitische Muslim“ als ultimatives Vorbild und einzigmögliche Lebensweise projiziert; dies geschieht als Teil der Strategie das Publikum zu politisieren, mit theologischen, historischen und vor allem visuellen Material zu untermauern; das Leid der Zivilbevölkerung in Syrien und Irak zu instrumentalisieren und einen Aufruf zu senden, aktiv zu werden.

Die Medien-Abteilungen militanter Bewegungen und jeder einzelne designierte *Medien Mujahid* transportieren und projizieren auf allen möglichen Ebenen strategischen Einfluss, und vermitteln ein Wahrheitsmonopol weltweit. Dieses Monopol ist eine dominante Form der einen, einzigen Wahrheit, oder *haqq*, wie es der extremistischen Rhetorik folgend heißt. Das bedeutet, dass jeder Muslim, der als außerhalb dieser engen „Wahrheit“ definiert ist, auf dem „Pfad der Lüge (*batil*)“, ein Abtrünniger (*murtadd*) oder einfach als Ungläubiger (*kafir*). exkommuniziert (*takfir*) ist. Das Jihad-Monopol der „Wahrheit“ lässt nur eine bestimmte Auslegung und Umsetzung des Qur'ans und der Sunna zu und beansprucht die absolute Autorität über islamische Gewohnheiten und Traditionen.

Durch die massive Präsenz vor allem auf Twitter haben sich vor allen durch den Islamischen Staat 2014 eine gezielte Medienstrategie entwickelt. Die Netzwerke des Islamischen Staates sind belastbar und resilient; sowohl ideologisch als auch technisch gegen einen möglichen Einfluss von außen oder durch Interferenzen mit dem Ziel die radikalen Accounts nachhaltig zu löschen.

In der vorliegenden Dissertation wird den Lesern einen Eindruck der Online-Nutzung, den Media-Strategien und der „Twittersphere des Jihadismus“ vermittelt; vor allem aufbauend auf der Analyse und des Kontexts der arabischen Primärquellen extremistischer Propaganda, welche die Netzwerke online dominiert.

Lebenslauf

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