Mythical State
The Aesthetics and Counter-Aesthetics of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria

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Abstract

In the summer of 2014, on the heels of the declaration of a ‘caliphate’ by the leader of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), a wave of satirical production depicting the group flooded the Arab media landscape. Seemingly spontaneous in some instances and tightly measured in others, the Arab comedy offensive paralleled strategic efforts by the United States and its allies to ‘take back the Internet’ from ISIS propagandists. In this essay, I examine the role of aesthetics, broadly, and satire in particular, in the creation and execution of ‘counter-narratives’ in the war against ISIS. Drawing on the pioneering theories of Fred Forest and others, I argue that in the age of digital reproduction, truth-based messaging campaigns underestimate the power of myth in swaying hearts and minds. As a modus of expression conceived as an act of fabrication, satire is poised to counter myth with myth. But artists must balance a very fine line.

Keywords

Introduction

In late February 2016, Capitol Hill was abuzz with the announcement by State Department officials that they were working on a major joint public-private initiative to “take back the Internet” from increasingly prolific jihadist supporters.1 The campaign, ‘Madison Valleywood’, was to include both the disman-
tling of propaganda on social media sites controlled by the Islamic State and the creation of ‘counter-narratives’ to roll back the effect of the group’s propaganda. Backed by major funding initiatives like the Metaphor Project from the IARP or Narrative Networks of DARPA, this latter notion, as it applied to the ‘global war on terror’, had been cycling through the federal government and academia for a decade, but was about to receive a boost from the input of big-data experts in Silicon Valley, in particular. Facebook’s Head of Global Policy Management, Monika Bickert, described how her company, for example, was studying the use of its online platform to combat Islamic State messaging. In the case of the United Kingdom and France, where Facebook had recently concluded its analysis of some 1,000 ‘anti-ISIS pages’, Bickert described six best-practice approaches for swaying hearts and minds. Based on numbers of ‘shares’ and a yet undisclosed algorithm for measuring influence, these included pages featuring ‘ways of responding’ to extremist recruitment; pages that illustrated ‘Islamophobia’; that ‘exposed’ Islamic State falsehoods; referenced ‘national solidarity’; drew differentiations between Islam and radical Islam; or employed ‘humor and parody’ (Bickert 2016).

Much of this research is compelling, and offers new avenues of inquiry for academics and strategists across a range of fields. But as this paper shows, a specific and troubling sort of irony has also emerged from the multi-million-dollar counter-communications industry. While former US President Obama’s


2 The Sociocultural Content in Language program and the Metaphor project at the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (IARP), like the Narrative Networks program disseminated through the Defense Advanced Research Project Agency (DARPA), have sought to ‘systematically analyze narratives and their psychological and neurobiological impact’ in an attempt to ‘define substrates and mechanisms related to culturally relevant cognitions and behaviors’; and, in turn, ‘to affect perceptions, emotions, behaviors, and tendencies for affiliation’ (Schmidle 2015).

3 President Obama’s former Special Envoy and Coordinator for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications, Rashad Hussain, in a 2015 speech to the Countering Violent Extremism Ministerial Summit in Australia, identified a similar six-pronged approach. The government would focus its communications strategy on highlighting narratives that featured ‘former radicals and Muslim victims of terrorism’; that amplified the ‘Islamic response to extremists’; that ‘de-glamorized’ ISIS; and that emphasized ‘positive narratives’. Hussain also described the import of maintaining a more ‘constant and creative’ online presence (Hussain 2015).
‘Cyber Campaign’, officially announced during a 2016 visit to Germany, was to include myriad forms of material intervention, it was also premised on a theoretical plane: Al-Qaeda and ISIS were ‘brainwashing’ young people with their narratives and so, with ‘counter-narratives’ the United States and its partners could reverse the trend (Obama 2015). Thus, the endgame would mirror just what the campaign had sought to control: the alteration of behavior through ideologically laden messaging.

### Tactical Dialectics

In the realm of narratology, Stanley Kubrick’s iconic adaptation of Anthony Burgess’ *A Clockwork Orange* (1962, 1971) comes to mind here. Readers will recall the plot: imprisoned for a series of unspeakable brutalities, the young adherent of ‘ultra-violence’, Alex, becomes subject to a novel experiment in ideology reversal. ‘The Ludovico technique’ is designed to so overwhelm Alex with images of horror and violence that eventually the very thought of transgression sends him spiraling into convulsions. As a particularly cruel twist, his torturers redeploy his once beloved Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony* to trigger memory of the technique. Could something like this work? Is it applicable to real-life extremists? These are rhetorical questions for Kubrick. In the end, we understand, Alex’s mind has not really been reformed as the camera pans to his eyes before flashing to a scene of sadism. Yet the dialectical impulse integral to this fictional technique of ideology reversal persists.

Witness the US State Department’s video messaging campaign ‘Think Again, Turn Away’. As part of its effort to dissuade would-be recruits from joining ISIS, the State Department produced a video so graphic in its portrayal of ‘Islamic State’ Land’ that YouTube imposed an age restriction on its viewers. In the United Kingdom, the Quilliam Foundation struck a similar chord with its short, glossy ‘Not Another Brother’, in which a regretful British fighter sitting on a dirty mattress in a filthy dungeon agonizes over a letter from his brother. ‘I wish I could take back every time I sent you a tweet or got all gassed up saying how the West has turned its back on us’, laments the sibling. In its ‘decryption’ of ISIS brainwashing, the French government’s campaign ‘Stop-djihadisme’ features decrepit hospital wards, pools of blood, rotting corpses. The acuity of the dialectic is almost Lacanian: the objective being, ostensibly, to overwhelm the ‘lone wolf’ with such an effusion of the grotesque that his subconscious mind retreats from his own self-image to the cowering state of a ‘defanged animal’.4

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4 The image of a defanged animal is the final shot of Alex’s treatment. Vincent Camby took
Expressed through the organization or reorganization of visual aesthetics—tone, image, language and sound—such counter-narratives appear to fall loosely under the strategic banner of ‘exposing’ Islamic State falsehoods. However, in a more basic way, the aesthetic functions as an expression of dialectical reasoning, the notion that there exists a rational correlation between the subject’s expressed system of beliefs and the ‘lifeworld’ context through which those beliefs are deduced and exonerated (Habermas 1990: 286). To manipulate the latter—the extremists’ narrative of reality—is to disrupt this correlation, thereby compelling the individual, presumably, to reboot his ideology. The strategy is explicit and contrived. And its results are more descriptive of the producers’ cultural ‘fore-conception’ than the reality they seek to deconstruct (Gadamer 2006: 269).5

Tactical Dialectics Vs. Strategic Eschatology

ISIS propaganda, in contrast, is an exercise in mythmaking. The group’s pixilated aesthetic is a mixture of the glorious past, a de-modernized, harmonious world, in short, a kind of paradise. Such ‘brainwashing’ has a storied tradition in the history of religion, including in radical Islam. Witness the ‘hashashin’ (also known as the ‘assassins’) as told by the poet Omar Khayyam. The medieval sect trained to assassinate the caliphs by drugging their recruits into unconsciousness, then awakening them inside a walled and verdant garden with flowing streams and other heavenly delights. The recruits were rendered unconscious again and removed from the chamber; on waking, they were given orders on how to return once more to the place of their dreams. It is the stuff of legend and fantasy, inseparable from Orientalist anxieties of the subversive Muslim Other. (Richard I of England, for example, was said to have been so mesmerized by Hassan al-Sabbah’s grip on the minds of his recruits that he sought to model his own mystique on the ‘Man on the Mountain’ (Hodgson 1980: 138). But ISIS propaganda is also eschatological. And unlike dialectical communications that operate in the secular realm of rationalization, eschatological thought functions only through a certain ‘willful suspension of disbelief’. In the age of digital reproduction, the lifeworld context of commu-

5 The phrase Gadamer quotes, ‘fore-conceptions’, comes from Heidegger’s description of the ‘hermeneutical circle’ in Sein und Zeit (Being and Time, 1927).
Communication precipitates a mode of rationalization that expects the absence of reality. In the age of digital reproduction, authenticity is irrelevant and myths make sense, as much as the truth, if not more.

Rashad Hussain alluded to the effect of this problem in his 2015 speech to the Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Ministerial Summit in Australia. While the Islamic State appears to disseminate ‘tens of thousands of tweets daily’, he noted, most are sent through automatons—‘bots without followers’. According to a study by the Brookings Institute, and cited by Hussain, in 2015, ISIS had no more than 500 to 2,000 dedicated tweeters (Hussain 2015). The research by Yanick Veilleux-Lepage and others at the Handa Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence appears to confirm the thesis that most ISIS communications are not sent by actual ISIS propagandists, but rather by soft sympathizers (Veilleux-Lepage 2016).

This thorny dimension of ISIS communications manifests itself in myriad ways. From the strange ubiquity of the group’s black and white insignia, to testimonials of western-educated converts dressed in fatigues and pronouncing half-formed ideas on sharia through appropriated soundbites in Arabic, there is, in ISIS communications, a material artificiality—an aesthetic—easily reproduced anywhere, anytime, with or without human involvement. Such reproducibility renders the aesthetic meaningless, or, as Deleuze famously observed, absent of ‘concept’ (Deleuze 1994: 13). The notion has been implicated in our understanding of digital aesthetics from the outset. Fred Forest, in his early meditation on the ‘internet’, a term not yet in use when he wrote his 1983 tract ‘The Aesthetic of Communication’, speculated that the digital medium would no longer sustain ‘artisans of tradition’ judged by their mastery in rendering preexistent forms of aesthetic expression in a vivid or nuanced way, rather, it would be ‘artists of communication’, valued for their capacity to transmit information by way of reproduction who would thrive in the new medium (Forest 1985). ISIS terror, seen as a global aesthetic system and one of the first such systems in the digital age, epitomizes this Deleuzian notion of reproduction. With each iteration, the original significance seems ever more obscure, if not irrelevant, the stuff of myth and punditry. The artists of this copy-and-paste aesthetic are, firstly, communicators, or, increasingly, anti-communicators—their value is based on metrics of ‘shares’, ‘likes’ and ‘retweets’.

The aesthetic is transmedial and transnational. In its reproducibility, it is both figurative and literal. Well before the declaration of a caliphate, the ultra-Salafi pastiche of an Islamic State was flowing through popular culture and blurring the lines between fiction and reality.

Witness the 2010 Qatari TV serial al-Qʿaqaʿ bin ʿAmru (al-Qaʿqaʿ ibn Amar), which depicted, coincidentally, the ridda wars of the seventh century (also
known as the ‘wars of apostasy’) and was filmed in eastern Syria just prior to the Arab uprisings.

Or consider public exhibitions, like the classical stick-fighting performance at a rally in southern Tunisia in 2012. The aesthetic, it could be said, is mythical, insofar as its concept is at once both present and absent. The fragile alignment of signifying elements, peppered and accented by political flourishes, or cultural contexts, aspires, by definition, to be a shell of itself—an aesthetic placeholder for that which it is not. As such, the aesthetic is always at risk of cooptation, manipulation or complete disintegration. As Roland Barthes once observed of myths: ‘It is precisely because they are historical that history can very easily suppress them’ (Barthes 1972: 120).6

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6 *Mythologies* appeared first in 1957.
Satire as Force Multiplier?
The dislocation of the ISIS aesthetic from its original meaning is occurring in degrees and almost always by way of inflection. One of the most significant force multipliers in this regard takes place by way of mockery, or satire. As a genre, satire exists, fundamentally, as an act of replication. At the same time, however, by directly commenting on the perceived origin of its appropriated aesthetic, satire risks legitimizing the authenticity of its source subject—in effect enhancing the mythological components of its expression. Witness the viral remix to the terror organization’s signature soundtrack (and title to their version of the video game ‘Grand Theft Auto’) Salil al-sawarim (‘The clanging of the swords’).

From online chatrooms and blog collectives, the original version is accompanied by bizarre sounds of violence, convoys of white pick-up trucks and running lions.

Then, in 2014, a new phenomenon emerged on YouTube, in which small groups of friends or individuals, in living rooms or bedrooms, wield plastic swords and perform the inevitable ‘beheading’ before breaking into a dance routine set to a blood-racing pastiche, a sort of ISIS ‘Gangnam Style’. As the phenomenon spread, embedded allusions to the ISIS aesthetic became ever more widespread. This allowed the genre to take on a life of its own, effectively multiplying its points of reference well beyond the parameters of takfiri critique. The genre sustained itself, rather, through an ever more generic form of semiotic currency: beards, turbans, and, above all, a pervasive tone of nihilism. ISIS itself appeared relatively unfazed by such commentary, though with some notable exceptions. In 2015, the Saudi Arabian creator of the MBC show Selfie,

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7 Often synonymous with “terrorism” in Arabic discourse, takfir (from the root k-f-r, meaning infidelity), refers to the act of calling someone an apostate.
Nasser al-Qasbi, faced death threats after his mockery of the terror organization (al-Turkmani 2015). In addition to depicting the group’s ‘sex jihad’, al-Qasbi’s ISIS actors delivered their lines in distinctly Iraqi and Syrian dialects, a gesture that seemed to inflame the kingdom’s already tense relationship with its Arab neighbors. First and foremost, the ISIS parody drew the attention of secular audiences. Routine comedy shows, like Ktir Salbe and Daiy’a al-Taseh from Lebanon, drew international coverage for their depictions of ISIS. The American comedy giant Saturday Night Live made headlines for its skit featuring a teary-eyed father dropping off his college-bound daughter at a bus terminal, where she is met by armed thugs in a pick-up truck. ‘Dad’, she says, ‘it’s just ISIS’.

A more nuanced, if provocative satirical depiction of ISIS came out of the West Bank in the summer of 2014. Watan 3 Watar, a well-known Palestinian comedy troupe, produced a series of sketches depicting belligerent Salafists operating a checkpoint in the wilderness. Drivers are stopped and interrogated about their religion before being shot and robbed. Meanwhile, the heavily bearded interrogators smoke and make lewd passes at women. Israelis pass freely. In Watan 3 Watar, the dominant illocutionary effect is a takfiri critique. These skits, also tinged with a kind of playful nihilism that characterizes other parodies of ISIS, performed a double task: they diluted the aesthetics of ISIS while reconstituting the embedded narrative of the group’s mythology from a call to jihad to a call to takfir.

Such satire, it could be said, reflects a more general sense of revulsion in the Middle East toward the hypocrisy of the powerful. In this regard, the genre is evolving simultaneously with the post-invasion, post-revolutionary scramble for political influence in the region; this scramble has included, but is not limited to, independent self-declared projects like ISIS. The most complete, if controversial expression of the genre assumed the shape of a new nationalist aesthetics, one integrally bound to the political and ideological imperatives of the current political machine in Baghdad.

**Mythical State**

Dawlat al-Khurafa (‘The state of myth’), aired for just one season. Launched in 2014 with a reported budget of $600,000, unprecedented then for Iraq, the show featured some of the best-known actors in the country. It was shown on al-Iraqiya, the largest network in the country and each of its twenty-seven episodes was later viewed hundreds of thousands of times on YouTube. Its controversial trailer, which I discuss shortly, had been viewed nearly seven million times by the spring of 2016.

Most intriguing about Dawlat al-Khurafa was the scope of its campaign. Unlike much ISIS satire organized around the genre of the skit, the creators
of the show attempted to reimagine ‘ISIS-land’ from the ground up. They featured fantastical television shows like ‘Who Wants to Slay a Million’, or ‘Dim Bi Shi’, the ‘Da’ishi’ daily newscast. They staged mock interviews with ‘Da’ishi’ filmmakers and mock Olympic games in which the ‘Daishyin’ execute participants before sauntering to victory. Part of this, at times elaborate production, included the re-creation of the terror organization’s personnel, a facet both foreign and Arab news media took note of. ‘The Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has appeared again’, reported the Lebanese daily al-Nahar in September 2014. ‘But this time on the set of a television comedy’ (‘Al-Khalifa’ 2014).

In terms of international coverage, it was the audacious musical trailer depicting the marriage of the devil to a Jewish bride, and their offspring (hatched from an egg) in the form of a miniature al-Baghdadi, that drew the most controversy. Not surprisingly, the trailer, which also featured a cowboy drinking whiskey and a Qatari Shaykha arranging the marriage between the devil and the Jew, was ultimately revised. During the regular season, a pimp-like hustler wearing a fedora and sporting golf clubs replaced the cowboy in the role of the devil’s best man. The Shaykha was deleted altogether.

Such attentiveness to political sensitivities highlights the fact that the state-sponsored Dawlat al-Khurafa was drenched in a certain officialese, an aspect that culminated in the show’s final episode with each member of the cast stepping on the back of the faux Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi before lining up to sing the national anthem. In various interviews, Ali al-Qassim, the director of Dawlat al-Khurafa, emphasized the counter-communications element of the show. Its theme music could be heard echoing through coffee shops in Baghdad, he claimed, and kids played ‘Da’oushy’ in the street. When the show first aired in September, he said ISIS thugs responded by smashing televisions in Mosul.

Framed as an act of provocation, or, at least, self-defense, Dawlat al-Khurafa intersected closely with western ambitions to stem the march of jihadist ideology. In the early days of the Iraq War, the Washington Post, the Los Angeles Times and the New York Times reported on the controversial allocation of a 300-million-dollar contract to three PR firms in Washington, DC, one of which
proposed to create an ‘anti-terrorist’ comedy show based on ‘The Three Stooges’ as way of broadening the reach of the military’s ‘stealth persuasion’ campaign. The now defunct Lincoln Group fell under heavy scrutiny in 2005 for revelations that it had paid for the dissemination of false news stories in the Iraqi press. Its proposed comedy offensive was ostensibly abandoned (Gerth 2005).

Curiously, however, the creators of Dawlat al-Khurafa appeared to pick up where the Lincoln Group left off. At the beginning of each episode, audiences were greeted by a singular motif: three bumbling stooges quarreling and engaging in slapstick humor over who or what to punish and how.

While many of the show’s riffs aimed to generate an illocutionary effect of hypocrisy—that ISIS is not simply a Western conspiracy but a bonafide capitalist enterprise—evident structural features like this evince a degree of cultural alienation that risked inverting the show’s intended effect, in essence reinforcing the fact that Dawlat al-Khurafa, not ISIS, was a staged creation.

This is one of the major findings by Aida al-Kaisy and the BBC Media Action project that polled audiences on their reception of programming by al-Iraqiya over the course of the 2014–2015 season. While patterns of division by sect are apparent, a prevailing sentiment of unease toward Dawlat al-Khurafa is also striking. As one woman responded: ‘If I had suffered the worst by ISIS, [been] displaced, had my daughter raped or sold, this show would be mocking me’ (al-Kaisy 2016). Satirical responses to violence typically generate a certain level of distaste among audiences. Regarding ISIS satire, in particular, even Saturday Night Live’s sketch, which was aimed at critiquing American naiveté, generated a storm of criticism for disregarding the gravity of the situation (Obeidallah 2015). More striking in audience responses to Dawlat al-Khurafa, however, is the level of aesthetic disjunction, the sense, that—regardless of whether or not the show was appropriate—it was poorly executed, confused, and ‘tacky’ (al-
Kaisy 2016). From its carefully constructed set to its glossy musical trailer, its lifeless acting, or blunt messaging, Dawlat al-Khurafa emerged less as a work of art, or satire, than an instance of communication: a mobilized product in the hot-war context of an embattled central government clambering for the hearts and minds of a fledgling nation.

Precedent exists in Iraq for this kind of creative communicative front. In The Republic of Fear, Kenan Makiya observes an incident in which an Iraqi satirist, writing for a Lebanese journal, is imprisoned and tortured for suggesting the regime was mandating humor as a way of deceiving the outside world (Makiya 1998). The analogy is far from perfect, but it cautions a certain restraint in applauding the creators for confronting fear with fabulation, which is what al-Qassim, the director, defined as his intention. While the genre of satire specific to ISIS appeared to begin in an almost viral fashion, particularly with the rapid consumption of Watan 3 Water, Dawlat al-Khurafa could also be read as a mode of political critique; it functioned, in essence, as an expression of tanfis (lit., ‘letting the air out’, here, ‘letting off steam’), what Rebecca Joubin, Lisa Wedeen, Miriam Cooke, Shareah Taleghani and others have described in looking at Syrian state television as the regime’s ‘safety valve’ approach to popular angst—the regime effectively diffuses internal hostilities toward leadership by redirecting the public gaze toward a more nefarious system of foreign hostility (Joubin 2015: 10).

Dawlat al-Khurafa’s neatly-made trailer embodies this approach succinctly. Here, ISIS is not merely the brainchild of a US-Israeli conspiracy, but an amalgamation of virtually all forces hostile to Baghdad. Of particular note, ex-Ba’athist soldiers chant in unison beside a band of singing Salafists, including one sitting cross-legged and raising his finger to the sky.

The shot closely replicates a little-known video of the Saudi mujahid songwriter and musician Abu Hajar al-Hadrami, a figure reportedly killed in 2015 in an American strike in Yemen (Ghobari and Mukhashaf 2015). The creators draw a straight line, with remarkable acuity, between the two most prominent elements of ISIS personnel in Western intelligence analyses: ex-Ba’athist soldiers and foreign-born mujahidin. Echoing well-known tropes of Ba’athist discourse—even recycling an infamous diatribe by Saddam Hussein’s former Minister of Information, Mohammed Said al-Sahhaf, on the Roman and Persian ‘ʿuluj or ‘infidels’ (‘the blood of the infidels will flow’) —the lyrics of al-Hadrami’s infamous nashid ‘Salami ʿala Dawlah’ appear to reinforce the analysis on an ideological level.8

8 The third stanza of the nashid is ‘Dam al-ʿuluj masfuh.’ Excerpts of al-Sahhaf’s discourse on ʿuluj are available on YouTube, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AJI88Bc07Xd4.
In contrast to the bulk of ISIS comedy that is formulated around a generic stereotype of Salafi-jihadists, this use of Hadrami’s image and nashid served to distinguish Dawlat al-Khurafa as an institutional mode of counter-communication. The political scope of the program was made yet more explicit in the decision to delete from the final version of the titular video any reference to American, Qatari, and Israeli involvement in the rhetorical birthing of al-Baghdadi. The latter symbol of this triad—Israel—it should be said, is still present, though the character’s Star of David necklace has been erased. It did keep in place a direct allusion to the ex-Ba’athist/mujahidin dynamic, however, and the subtle reference to a Muqtada al-Sadr-like figure in the character of al-Baghdadi (as he orchestrates the singing, he wields two whips in an image reminiscent of Shi’i self-flagellation rituals), would appear to reflect a desire, or political calculus, on the part of the creators at al-Iraqiya to frame the origin-story of ISIS as one of domestic separatism, as opposed to foreign conspiracy or even global jihad in the vein of al-Qaeda.

Such an emphasis can be seen in early concept descriptions of the show. Speaking with a reporter for the Russian Times (RT), al-Qassim noted that...
episodes were infused with references to ‘honored’ names from the history of Iraqi art, thus, it created a formal lineage to the show’s own historical endeavor while countering the terrorist organization’s prolific use of references to Islamic heritage. While ISIS employs primarily religious markers, the cultural signposts in Dawlat al-Khurafa were strictly secular. Even the satirical fighters portrayed in the show were aspirant ‘da’ishiyyin’ opposed to ‘mujahidin’, al-Qassim noted, ‘fighting for the sake of ISIS, and not Allah’ (Basal 2014). While downgrading the organization to the status of a self-serving political organization would appear to make sense in the same way that the western ‘falsehoods’ campaign seeks to debunk grandiose claims of manifest destiny, many interpreted this facet of the show as a form of valorization, highlighting the fact, as one woman responding to the BBC poll said, ‘that Da’ish are living with us and the government cannot control them’ (al-Kaisy 2016).

In line with this stark dichotomy—drawn clearly within the parameters of an existing, albeit fragile national framework—one group is notably absent in the symbolic free-for-fall of Dawlat al-Khurafa’s satirical blame game: Baghdad’s governing body. There is no discernable critique of Iraqi politics, and certainly not the Majlis al-Nuwab (the National Assembly). In this way, the show can be understood as part of a distinctly Arab Spring or counter-revolutionary genre, born of the same institutional discourse on terrorism, which, in less creative tones, has attempted to achieve the same goal: the identification and diminution of those most threatening to those in power. It is undoubtedly a nationalist genre born of a certain romance—fixated in the end on the way things were or should be.

**Conclusion: The Paradox of Takfir**

As an institutional effort, staged satire, like strategic counter-narratives in general, emanates from the position of an identity critique largely irrelevant to the conceptual eschatology of Salafi-jihadist aesthetics. The landscapes, hymns and imagined battles of the current generation—like the chambers of verdant gardens in the lore of the hashashin—only become more attractive when held against the monochrome universe of counter-aesthetics. Yet, there is an underlying irony to the proliferation of ISIS aesthetics as well. Disseminated and manufactured within a western means of communication on the Internet, the call to emigrate to the ‘state of the Khilafa’ simultaneously empowers that which Salafist thought must ardently reject, namely, modernization. The infinite reproducibility of ISIS aesthetics parallels the proliferation and subsequent dissolution of the group’s authority—a point made lucid by a number
of Salafist clerics who have written denouncing al-Baghdadi since his claim to the caliphate. In a 2014 article, the Jordanian cleric Shaykh Ali b. Hasan al-Halibi al-Athari noted that since the death of Shukri al-Mustafa al-Misri (founder of the Takfir wa-l-Hijra group) in the 1970s, the takfiri school has seen a succession of self-declared 'leaders of the faithful' (Amir al-Mu‘minin). Abu al-Ghawth Muhammad al-Amin ‘Abd al-Fattah preceded al-Mustafa, al-Athari writes; he was followed by Wahid Uthman, and then by Mulla ‘Umar of the Taliban. This division was further compounded with the declaration of al-Tanzim al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn (The Organization of Tawhid and Jihad in the Land Between Two Rivers), the forerunner of the Islamic State in Iraq, which preceded the ‘Khilafah State’ (Bin Hasan 2014). ‘Then not long ago another “Amir al-Mu‘minin” Abu ‘Isa al-Qurayshi al-Urduni, who dons a black turban and black robe, announced a Khilafah outside of the control of the Taliban,’ al-Athari writes. The latter issued a warning to al-Baghdadi ‘requesting him to pledge allegiance to him as the Caliph!!?’ (Bin Hasan 2014).

‘So then who is the Khalifah of whom?’ (Bin Hasan 2014). As al-Athari points out, the most serious threat to the survival of the organized campaign of takfir and jihad in Iraq and Syria may be neither ideology nor intervention, but the facile reproducibility of takfiri leadership, a self-destructive scenario in which a ‘thousand and one’ autocrats cannibalize the once powerful, albeit distant name of divine authority (Bin Hasan 2014).

The Islamist constitutions of 2012 spoke to this anxiety. Seeking to empower judicial discretion in the mode of semi-autonomous shura councils while simultaneously identifying al-Zaytouna and al-Azhar, in Tunisia and Egypt, respectively, as the adjudicators of last resort, al-Nahda and the Muslim Brotherhood looked to co-opt religious autonomy, just as they condoned its existence. The move generated instant and vociferous criticism from the countries’ secular judicial establishments. In Egypt, most notably, it was the threat of a constitution written by the Muslim Brotherhood that led to the military coup of 2013 and the ouster of Mohammed Morsi from the presidency. But arguably the most serious opposition, particularly in Tunisia, came in the form of Salafist ideologues who saw any degree of constitutionalization as a violation of sacred law. The leader of Ansar al-Sharia, the largest and most controversial variant of the Salafi-jihadist movement in the Maghrib, reportedly declared allegiance to

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9 A translation of the article is available in English: The ISIS Papers: A Compilation of the Salafi-Scholars Regarding ISIS/Isl (The So-Called ‘Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham’). Salafiminhaj.com.
al-Baghdadi after fleeing Tunisia to Durna, Libya, in 2014. Though Abu ‘Iyad had been a close associate of the Qaeda core in Afghanistan, the rumor was feasible, but hardly verifiable. As with the proliferation of wilayat (or ‘provinces’) beyond Libya, hollow allusion to ISIS has become a normative code of takfiri sovereignty in the digital age.

There is an inherent paradox to ISIS as a Salafist-takfiri project. The ideology condemns modernity but thrives on technology. It requires stricture and secrecy, but demands entrepreneurialism and free-thinking. The best of ISIS satire captures these inherent contradictions. The narrative of Dawlat al-Khurafa, in its finest moments, arrives at a point of lucid absurdity: the Da‘ishi filmmaker who dreams of producing a Bollywood-style melodrama, the fully veiled newscaster who cannot read her teleprompter. Modern Arab satire is rich in the satirical treatment of the social and human contradiction that is organized takfiri terror. Naguib Mahfouz, who helped define the genre in its modern iteration with his masterful, Orwellian allegory of religion and power, Awlad Haratina (published in English as Children of the Alley (1959)), captured the irony most succinctly in his absurdist short-story ‘al-Tanzim al-sirri’ (‘The Secret Organization’, 1984), written shortly after the assassination of Anwar al-Sadat. ‘Success was approaching until a previously unknown opinion—entirely without warning—burst into the open’, the narrator explains of the ‘secret organization’ to which he pledged his allegiance.

Representatives from each family clashed in heated discussion, each clamoring to defend his respective position and mocking the others’ methods. A general call was made for each to serve under its own flag. Anger erupted and insults were hurled. Soon blows were exchanged and in a moment’s notice our unity was torn apart. The good ones stood aside, shedding tears. It was the perfect moment, they knew, for the police to arrive and to dismantle our structure from its very foundation.

Mahfouz 2006

From the seed of opinion comes the beast of dissension. But the destruction the initiate witnesses was inevitable from the start, begun, already, by the very anti-order of the group’s design. As Mahfouz understood, takfiri ideology thrives on autonomous judgment just as it demands obedience. The charge is comedic in its absurdity, albeit tragic in the end. Such has been the case in the Arab world for decades. Like others of his generation, Mahfouz, who had witnessed the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and al-Jama‘at al-Islamiyya, saw in the phenomenon of the terror organization a parallax view of the increasing
authoritarianism of his country’s militant secularization. The proliferation of such groups, he once posited, remained the country’s greatest threat to democracy (Naqqash 1998). But Mahfouz’s historical influence compelled a certain degree of empathy in his satirical aesthetic of the sectarian cell. Although still conceived, in essence, through a dialectical lens, the Nobel laureate, who was almost killed for his critique of religious extremism, never pretended to postulate a tabulation of ‘counter’ facts, or to simply laugh at men in beards, rather, he imagined, from an intimate place, the logical end of the implicit duality of terror organizations. Though housed in the archives of literary history, this model may offer a more effective alternative to the endemic rationalism of most counter-communications campaigns today. At the very least, it can be said, its shelf life is much greater.

References


10 Soon after winning the Nobel prize in 1988, a fatwa was issued against Mahfouz by the blind shaykh of al-Jama’a al-Islamiyya, Omar ‘Abd al-Rahman, for his novel Children of the Alley. Mahfouz narrowly survived an attempt on his life five years later.


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