

Islamic State War Documentaries

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Amid the bloodshed of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the Al-Qaeda affiliate known as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) introduced into their repertoire a new tool of war: the handheld camera. Tracing the evolution of the *ghazwa*, or military expedition aesthetic, in ISI and later ISIS filmmaking, this article explores the way in which the organization's primary organ of communication, Al-Furqan Media Foundation, expanded from its origins as a documentary film unit to become one of the world's most potent vehicles of performative violence. Drawing on a comparative frame of reference with other active media units within the greater sphere of Al-Qaeda communications, including the Al-Andalus Establishment for Media Production of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and Al-Furqan Media in the Egyptian Sinai, this article examines the manner in which aesthetic prerogatives, intertwined with religious mythology, served to transcend and unite disparate political factions around a common "narrative identity," one that preceded and will outlast the reign of the Islamic State caliphate.

Keywords: Al-Qaeda, Al-Furqan AQIM, aesthetics documentaries, Islamic State, jihad

In his 2015 memoir, Yousri Fawdah recalls the morning after his arrival at the Al-Qaeda safe house in Karachi, Pakistan, in April 2002. Seated for morning prayer amid the so-called *ahl al-dar* (people of the house), he is joined by Khaled Shaykh Mohammad, head of Al-Qaeda's military council, and Ramzi Bin al-Shiba, the coordinator of "Tuesday's blessed operation (as Shaykh Mohammad describes the attack on 9/11; Fawdah, 2015, pp. 50–51). Taking note of his exceptional company, Fawdah is struck by the selection for the *fajr* prayer: *surat al-tawbah*, the Surah of Repentance. Famous in part because it is the only chapter of the Qu'ran that does not begin with the opening *basmala* ("in the name of God most benevolent, ever-merciful") *al-Tawbah*, Fawdah writes, was revealed as a "declaration of war" (2015, p. 50). And not surprisingly, it was this Surah, along with the accompanying eighth Surah, *al-Anfal* (The Spoils of War), that provided Al-Qaeda their "blessing" for the September 11 operation. The date 9/11/01, he learns, was chosen in light of *surat al-tawbah*: Chapter 9, verse 111 (Fawdah, 2015, p. 51).¹

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¹ Verse 111 of Surah 9 reads:

"God has verily bought the souls and possessions
of the faithful in exchange for a promise of Paradise.
They fight in the cause of God, and kill and are killed.

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A reporter at the time for Al-Jazeera and one of the first to gain access to members of Al-Qaeda's core leadership, Fawdah's interview with al-Shiba and Shaykh Mohammad gained instant international acclaim.² As he wrote in his memoir, it was on his first night that the two men introduced themselves as the parties responsible for the attack on America (Fawdah, 2015, p. 50). But Fawdah's account post-factum was exceptional for his attention to detail. With the imminence of a pending retaliation and the group dispersed across safe houses, the recitation of *al-Tawbah* seemed to crystalize for the writer what he understood as the fundamental transcendentalism of the group's ideology—a willingness to "speak in dreams" as he wrote, but to not allow the "dream to stop at dreaming" (Fouda, 2015, p. 45).

Amid a community of worshipers in the Salafist tradition convened already by a certain longing for the past, Al-Qaeda's discourse produced a "magnetic effect," Fawdah observed (2015, p. 55). The Surah of Repentance and the Surah of The Spoils of War articulated a mystical span of time in Islamic theology, a 10-year period following the Expedition of Badr (*Ghazwat al-Badr*) and the Expedition of Tobuk (*Ghazwat al-Tobuk*), what is often described as being the Prophet's final revelation. Delivered against the backdrop of a Byzantine invasion of the Arabian Peninsula, *al-Tawbah* is famous for its invocations of jihad as a military duty and its unequivocal pronouncements of excommunication (*takfir*) for idolaters who disobey the call to fight. As Joshua Gilliam (2016) has written, the famed polymath Ibn Sina, among others, observed in the 12th century that the Verse of the Sword from *al-Tawbah* plainly commands that every "polytheist must be slain whether he is a monk or not" (p. 5). Beyond its centrality to the ideological bearing of the modern Salafi-jihadist movement, these *surat*, Fawdah (2015) observed, gave shape to the movement's narrative identity: "its essence and flavor, its visions and rituals" (p. 55). The group's code name for the 9/11 operation, he noted, "*ghazwat Manhattan*," was a direct allusion to the peculiar language of the Quranic military expeditions or raids (*ghazawat*). Reference to these surahs flows through the canon of jihadist discourse, from invocation of the Verse of the Swords by Salam Faraj following the assassination of Anwar Sadat in 1981,³ to the infamous 1998 fatwa signed by Bin Laden and issued by the World Islamic Front extolling the murder of "Jews and Crusaders" anywhere on earth. The Verse of the Swords (9:5), the condemnation of "hypocrites" (9:64), and the application of "*jaziyah*" (9:29) remain, along with many verses from *al-Anfal* ubiquitous points of reference in the communiqués of the Islamic State group and its affiliates.

It goes without saying these are hardly the only textual points of reference for the Salafi-jihadist movement. Nor are prevailing interpretations of these surahs as a defense of modern jihad without great controversy. But they are distinctive in their capacity for engendering a certain "horizon of expectations"

This is a promise incumbent on Him,
as in the Torah, so the Gospel and the Qur'an.
And who is more true to his promise than God?
So rejoice at the bargain you have made with him;
for this will be triumph supreme."

For this and other citations from the Qur'an, I refer to the English translation by Orooj Ahmed Ali (1993).

² "Vérification faite," wrote Bernard Henri Lévy (2003) of Fawdah's reporting from Karachi. It was Yosri Fawdah, "la star de al-Jazira, le Bob Woodward arabe" (p. 221), he writes, that fixed the location of the 9/11 planners in Karachi, Pakistan.

³ Faraj was head of the Tanzim al-Jihad. See Marc Sageman (2004, p. 15).

(*Erwartungshorizont*) in Hans Robert Jauss's (1982) words, an imaginative sphere of time and space toward which the mind projects a sense of wonder (p. 79). Imagery of the afterlife—of “gardens with streams of running water / where they will abide forever in supreme triumph” (Qur'an, 9:89)—as well as the compulsion for fraternization, or “social bonds” (Sageman, 2004, p. 16), are intertwined into these surahs. As an aesthetic, this latter element finds perhaps its sharpest resolution in the image of war. As any reader of Shakespeare knows, the “band of brothers,” as a poetic allusion, is equally timeless as it is effective in marshaling the will to fight.

As I argue in the following, the aesthetic afterlife of these surahs remains central to the Islamic State's rendition of the *ghazwa* trope. However, in contrast to Al-Qaeda's earlier and largely rhetorical use of the allusion, the Islamic State, through their principal organ, Al-Furqan Media Foundation, pursues a literalist mode of interpretation. No longer predicated on an imaginary horizon of expectations, *al-ghazwa*, in Al-Furqan's documentary corpus, is performed live with the filmmakers themselves playing at times a leading role. This defining gesture—comparable in essence to reality TV—marks a dangerous new stage in the communicative project of the Salafi-jihadist movement.

Al-Furqan Media and the Iraqi Expeditions

Since its inception in the early 2000s as the mouthpiece of the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI; successor to Al-Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers), Al-Furqan Media Foundation has worked to flatten and accelerate the mythical dimensions of Al-Qaeda's narrative identity unlike any group before it.⁴ Al-Furqan's figurative representation of Al-Qaeda's rhetoric has been especially evident in its depiction of military expeditions, or *ghazawat*.

In recordings like the 15-minute documentary *Ghazwat Badr Baghdad (Expedition Badr of Baghdad)*, the 30-minute *Ghazwat al-muhajirin wa al-ansar (Expedition of the Emigrants and the Supporters)*, or the hour-long *Ghazwat 'Omar Hadid (The Expedition of Omar Hadid)*—each staged as part of a wave bombings aimed primarily at Shia targets in and around Baghdad in the Spring of 2010⁵—Al-Furqan filmmakers worked to contextualize their footage within a set of visual and rhetorical references selected to invoke what Yousri Fawdah (2015) described as the “dictionary of Bin Laden and his followers” (p. 55). This is achieved through direct quotation, as in the title “*ghazwat al-muhajirin wa al-ansar*” (*Expedition of the Emigrants and the Supporters*; Bin Laden described Muslims as existing in two categories: “emigrants” and “supporters”; Fawdah, 2015, p. 55). And through cinematography: *Ghazwat al-muhajirin wa al-ansar*, for example, begins with footage from within a proverbial “war room” where a masked military commander in fatigues instructs fighters on the logistics of a pending operation.

Following closely on the heels of Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi's release from prison and his subsequent ascension to the head of ISI in April 2010,⁶ the aesthetic imperative underlying the 2010 *ghazawat* cycle

⁴ For more on the history of Al-Furqan, see Stenersen (2017).

⁵ “Dozens Killed” (2010). m

⁶ On the rise of Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim Ali al-Badri al-Samarrai (aka Abu Bakar al-Baghdadi), see Kamolnick (2017).

appeared to foreshadow an imminent shift in ISI's rhetorical embrace of a more assertive mode of self-representation. The two-part documentary *Ghazwat al-asir*, or *The Prisoner of War Expedition*, was indicative of this development.

Using recycled footage, news clips, and narrative overlay in the tradition of al-Qaeda's "Dark Tunnel" series, *Ghazwat al-asir* begins with a lengthy exposition on prisoner abuse under American and later Iraqi government forces before cutting to the preparation and (in part two) execution of an apparent surprise attack on a remote prison camp in al-Anbar.

Distinct from Al-Furqan's previous productions, *The Prisoner of War Expedition* (see Figure 1) presents the viewer with a notably postmodern twist with the filmmaker inserting himself directly into the stream of action.



Figure 1. Al-Furqan Media (2010). The Prisoner of War Expedition. Available at Archive.org.

As the so-called Black Oneness (*aswad tawhid*) brigade sets out to raid an "apostate" prison camp in al-Anbar, the filmmaker sets down his camera on the hood of their pickup truck before running off with his Kalashnikov to join the fight. As Anne Stenersen (2017) of the Norwegian Defense Research Establishment has shown, some of the earliest iterations of jihadi filmmaking from the 1990s featured live battles in Bosnia and Chechnya, where the cameraman effectively doubled as a fighter (p. 110). Here, in the careful staging of this dynamic—the camera placed at the literal center of the shot—the filmmaker appears to be making a conscientious nod to this tradition, signaling interest in the aesthetic and not simply the documentative value of the film. Equally notable in this regard, *The Prisoner of War Expedition* evinced a relatively sophisticated display of digital editing techniques, including the use of graphic design software and a more rapid-fire approach to

editing.⁷ This latter quality would become particularly pronounced in the more infamous productions of Al-Furqan, including the graphic feature length films released between the summer of 2014 and the fall of 2016, in which the filmmakers make extensive use of the computer animation and modeling software Maya as well as a DSLR, drone footage, and a high-resolution handheld camera with a “red” clear lens (Shufan, 2015).

The quantity and quality of Al-Furqan’s media output expanded following the expansion of ISI into Syria in 2013 and its subsequent rebranding as ISIS. It was at this time that Al-Furqan reportedly added some 85 dedicated communications experts (Shufan, 2015) while also creating two new media wings, Al-Hayat and Al-Itisam, the latter of which fell under the direction of the IT specialist Ahmad Abousamra who emigrated to Aleppo, Syria, following the onset of the Arab uprisings in the winter of 2010–11 (Atwan, 2015, p.15).

Al-Itisam and the Realization of Turath Aesthetics

The son of a prominent endocrinologist then living in Massachusetts, the French-born Abousamra brought a previously unseen level of sophistication to the communications apparatus of ISI (Atwan, 2015, p. 15). Trained in ICT and having worked in the U.S. as a telecommunications specialist, Abousamra is believed to have been behind some of the group’s most daring cyber operations, including the creation of the Twitter app Al-Fajr, or the “Dawn of Good Tidings,” which enabled the organization to commandeer Twitter accounts (Atwan, 2015, p. 15), disseminating at one point nearly 40,000 tweets a day (Berger, 2014). Abousamra is also thought to have been behind a marked shift in the production value of ISIS communications, creating both the glossy English-language magazine *Al-Dabiq* as well as the graphic execution videos for which Al-Itisam would become infamous (Atwan, 2015, p. 15). (Also notable: It was with al-Itisam that the postmodern element witnessed in *The Prisoner of War Expedition II* assumed a more ominous tone.)

The full genealogy of Al-Itisam’s aesthetic remains obscure, but it is clear that by 2015 the *ghazwa* films produced under Abousamra’s direction had evolved from their pseudohistoricist roots in documentary and testimonial filmmaking to become a kind of hybrid HD reality show for the 21st century. Picking up on the thread introduced by *The Prisoner of War Expedition*, films like the *Clanging of the Swords* (2014), *The Land of Epic Battle* (2015), and *Flames of War* (2014–17), integrated, in shocking fashion, an exhibitionist element wherein the lore of jihad is not simply retold, but enacted live. Rhetorical inferences to the “dictionary of Bin Laden” become explicit under Abousamra’s direction, with affiliated syndicates across the

⁷ An unnamed graphic design specialist for the French bureau of Al-Arabi Al-Jadid, which began monitoring the group’s electronic communications extensively following al-Baghdadi’s speech from the pulpit of Mosul in 2014, noted that al-Furqan made frequent use of the computer animation and modeling software Maya (Shufan, 2015). The use of a DSLR camera as well as a high-resolution handheld camera with a “red” clear lens also contributes to the cinematic-like quality of the group’s footage (Shufan, 2015). More notable still, as Shufan notes, is al-Furqan’s extensive and synchronized use of jump cuts—0.1 seconds each—throughout the duration of its films. This, combined with the fact that videos are generated within a matter of days following the events they depict, indicates the 85-plus media producers employed by the Islamic State possessed the highest level of training and expertise (Shufan, 2015).

greater ISIS territory closely adhering to the organization's literalist interpretation of Bin Laden's "dictionary."

Strolling in slow motion through the proverbial "Garden of Eden," the blond-haired, blue-eyed *muhajirun* (emigrants) from the 2016 release *The Structure of the Caliphate* (see Figures 2 and 3) represent a demystification of the *ghazwa* aesthetic. Tightly sequenced with the shot of a presumably local fighter dressed in the garb of the *ansar* (supporters) and hoisting a child to the sky in a show of happy welcome, scenes like this reinforce the militaristic mystique of the organization while also attempting to illustrate the otherwise mythological dimensions of *ghazwa* as a lived reality. The motif of *al-ansar* (the supporters—dressed in Salafist garb) and the *muhajirin* (wearing military fatigues), persisted as late as 2016, as seen in the Wilayat Tarabalus releases *A Message to Our Monotheistic Brothers* and *Extract Charity From Their Wealth* (see Figures 3 and 4).



Figure 2. Al-Furqan Media Foundation (2016). The Structure of the Caliphate. Available at Jihadology.com.



Figure 3. Al-Furqan Media Foundation (2016): The Structure of the Caliphate. Available at Jihadology.com.



Figure 4. Al-Furqan Media Foundation (Wilayat Tarabalus; 2015): From A Message to Our Monotheistic Brothers. Available at Archive.org.



Figure 5. Al-Furqan Media Foundation (Wilayat Tarabalus; 2016): From Extract Charity From Their Wealth. Available at Archive.org.

Older generation Al-Qaeda productions were stark, featuring little more than a Quranic recitation and a fatwa followed by Bin Laden's spectral figure rescinding into a cave. New generation filmmaking under Al-Itisam, in contrast, was explicit, leaving nothing to the imagination and imposing instead a blunt, if unequivocal, resolution to Bin Laden's rhetorical "horizon of expectations."

Such is the effect of Al-Itisam's take on the execution scene, already an infamous motif within the corpus of Al-Qaeda filmmaking and one that has been discussed at some length elsewhere. The group's tendency to render previously obscure rhetorical motifs in a literal fashion can be seen throughout its corpus and this tendency has been replicated across the mediasphere of adherents and sympathizers alike. The elaborate embellishment and audio redubbing of the 2005 film *Kingdom of Heaven* (see Figure 6), for example, served to translate long-standing rhetorical allusions into a visual palate requiring neither exegetic expertise nor even basic familiarity with Islamic history. Here, the story of the Crusades and Salah al-Din is refashioned into a basic paring down of good and evil, Mujahid and Crusader. Needless to say, the original version aimed to achieve much the same innuendo. The embellished version, which also features in Al-Furqan's 2015 *Ardh al-malahim (The Land of Epic Battles)* has proven popular, being viewed more than 7 million times on YouTube by February 2018. At once distorting and replicating the original product, ISIS's *Kingdom of Heaven* spawned a veritable microgenre with countless spin-offs and imitations churning through the online universe of global Salafism.



Figure 6. Abu Khallid. 2010. The Kingdom of Heaven remix featuring the nashid "Aqul qul al-sawarim." Available at YouTube.com.

But this "new utopianism is only in part a glorification of new machinery," as Jameson (1991, p. 313) wrote of fascism and the Futurist movement. It is an imperfect comparison, of course, not least in the degree to which discourse on the parallel aesthetics of the Islamic State and Interwar Europe lends itself to the punditry of the Far Right, which, ironically, is only too keen to wield the label of fascism for the purpose of corraling opposition to their world view. But the comparison is instructive, in analytical terms, insofar as the radical ahistoricity of the Salafist project lends itself to the pastiche aesthetics of Ba'athism, in the Iraqi context, as much, if not more than the ascetic impulses of the movement's original forerunners. In addition to the numerous personnel crossovers between the Ba'ath party and ISIS leadership, Al-Furqan's and Al-Itisam's aesthetic echoed that of state media under Saddam Hussein, particularly in regard to the regime's reliance on *turath*, or heritage aesthetics (Al-Khalil, 1991, p. 2).⁸ In Saddam's Iraq, the postcolonial gesture of "looking back" becomes "stamped" with "bureaucratic connotation" (Jameson, 1991, p. 314). The manipulation of heritage aesthetics under Saddam's regime was realized to devastating effect; the infamous Victory Arch of Baghdad being perhaps the most explicit example. Forged around the actual helmets of 5,000 dead Iranian soldiers, the giant replica of Saddam's right arm clutching a towering saber epitomized the degree to which the once "secularist" Ba'ath party had appropriated elements of Islamic history to reinforce the dictatorship's populist overtones: The design, as is well known, was conceived in reference to the defeat of the Persian Sasanian Empire by Sunni Muslims in the seventh-century battle of Qadisiyah. Saddam even insisted, reportedly, that the adjacent forearm completing the arch also be modeled on his right forearm (Al-Khalil, 1991, p. 10).

As with the prolific use of social media by the creators of the ISIS aesthetic, Saddam's authority was bound to telecommunications technology. "*La régime existe dans l'esprit des gens à cause de la télévision,*" says one observer in Pierre Darle's 2003 anthropological study of Saddam-era propaganda. Among the deluge of material produced by Hikmat Studio in Baghdad, Iraqi viewers were regularly subjected

⁸ Kanan Makiya described this period in his 1991 study of Saddam-era art and architecture, *The Monument*, in which he describes the difference between Saddam era projects as "*turath-as-kitsch*," in response to the "*turath-as-art*" movement of the 1960s (p. 2).

to “cultural programming,” a bricolage of edited film extracts, “truncated and disarticulated,” streaming alongside calls to prayer on one hand, and dancing girls on the other (Darle, 2003, p. 57). The effect, as one of Darle’s (2003) respondents said, was “sadistic” insofar as the relentless imposition of Saddam, his image and the images he controlled, was at once easily dismissible but utterly unavoidable (p. 57). A certain continuity between the communications strategy of the Ba’ath party and ISIS prevailed in the sense that the latter, like the former, sought to permeate the totality of its communications with “gray” if not “white” propaganda. No effort is made to disguise the origins of its truth campaign or to hide its relentless praise of the leader. Even the strategic ambiguity of silence—the yawning gaps between Al-Baghdadi’s July 4 sermon, for example, and his subsequent communiqués—echoed the omnipotent effect of Saddam’s rule. “The combination of all-pervasive organization and a closed ideological system,” wrote Kenan Makiya (1991) of the Ba’ath regime, “produces not only a stable polity (while the leader is alive) but also citizens who feel extremely fragile” (p. 116). This dynamic reinforces the grip of hero worship such that even when the hero does not “exist in reality” he has to be “clutched at in the imagination” (Makiya, 1991, p. 116).

The convergence of Ba’athist and ISIS aesthetics resonated in thematic ways as well. In one of ISIS’s most iconic hymns (*anashid*)—*Dawlatna Mansoura* (“Our State Is Established”)—which was featured in the 2013 film *Punish Not Those Whom He Has Abandoned*, the poet hails the various provinces of Iraq while sounding a dog whistle to adherents of the ancient regime. “The spirit is in Yusufiya” (*Wa fi al-Yusufiyah al-ruh*) the third verse follows: “*al-dam al-'uluj masfuh*” (the infidels’ blood is spilt) (Al-Furqan, 2013). Echoing a famously belligerent utterance by Saddam’s Minister of Communication Mohammad Sa’id al-Sahhaf (a.k.a. “Baghdad Bob”)—the phrase “*dam al-'uluj*,” written and performed by the al-Qaeda songwriter Abu Hajar al-Hadhrami, captured in figurative terms what would become a material reality in the concert of Ba’athist and Al-Qaeda forces as they overran Mosul in the spring of 2014.

Comparative Aesthetics of ISIS Filmmaking

Archives of the various jihadist “foundations for media production”—from Al-Andalus (Algeria/Mauritania), to Al-Sahhab (Yemen), or Tarabalus (Libya)—overflow with records of *ghazawat* recorded and overlaid with *anashid* and verses from the Qu’ran. The documentation of successful IED operations, suicide bombings, or checkpoint raids became common fare on Arab satellite TV in the early years of the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Lightly edited and filmed with handheld cameras, these scenes, which streamed 24 hours a day on some stations, offered little in the way of dramatic seduction. Narrative structure was elusive, if not absent altogether, for the unwitting viewer. Shots of weaponry and gun-mounted pickups flashing across a desert landscape, while inducing a sense of imminent destruction, provided little in the way of explanation. Yet these early jihadist films nonetheless functioned on a communicative level.

In 2011, the U.S. military and DARPA launched a large-scale funding initiative to understand the neurobiological shape of reception to such cultural products (DARPA 2011). One such experiment involved measuring the brain’s response to short films artificially crafted around culturally specific narrative signifiers—the origin story of the Kabah or Christ in *Valley of the Shadow of Death*—recast and fragmented within a modern frame of reference. Anecdotal results found that the brain of the nonfamiliar participant (i.e., a Hindu viewing a modern adaptation of a biblical story) worked harder, in layman’s terms, to make

sense of the story, even drawing on radically extraneous points of reference (i.e., “contemporary American docudramas”) in an attempt to characterize the information (Ruston, 2016, p. 33). In contrast, recipients familiar with the underlying biblical references “overlooked missing clues” and focused instead on “resolution elements” (Ruston, 2016, p. 34), an indication that even fragmented narrative signifiers can marshal a degree of cultural identification. Though an outside observer may have been confounded by the material, for the viewer who identified meaning in the violence, Al-Qaeda’s documentaries from the early days of the Iraq War effectively represented what the filmmakers intended—namely, the execution of jihad in the face of “Roman” invaders.

The mythical references and illusions infused into these communications, what researchers at the Center for Strategic Communication at Arizona State University described as the “master narratives of Islamic extremism” (Halverson, Corman, & Goodall, 2011, book title), constituted the dream world of Al-Qaeda. Over the first decade of the 21st century, each of the evolving constellations in the greater universe of the jihadists’ imagined *ummah* contributed to this dictionary with their own unique and geographically specific set of mythical references.

“Why Al-Andalus?” read the maiden communique by the Andalus Foundation for Media Production:

It is the lost paradise of Muslims. It was owned by Muslims for eight centuries, where they established religion and raised the banner of jihad, and God strengthened them on earth. In 1492 C.E., Andalus fell after it was occupied by the Spanish Crusaders when Muslims neglected jihad, depended on life and their Jewish and Christian rulers, and divided themselves into parties the same way we are today with the cursed Sykes-Picot borders. With the fall of Andalus (which was due to Muslims neglecting jihad and their failure to defend it) the sun of Islam began to set in the Spanish Peninsula and was followed by the countdown of Muslim sultans. Therefore, jihad is and has been a duty for the Muslim nation for approximately six centuries, since the fall of the first city in Andalus. The Muslim nation, from east to west, has sinned by abandoning jihad. It did not just sin today (since the occupation of Palestine by the Jews, the occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan by the Crusaders, or the occupation of the Islamic Maghreb and other Islamic countries by the representatives of the Crusaders), rather, it has sinned since the fall of Andalus. (Tanzim al-Qa'idah fi bilad al-Maghreb al-Islami, 2009, para. 10)

Ingrained in such mythologies, there appears a narrative insofar as one may posit that “myth” is a kind of “ideology in narrative form” (Lincoln, 2012, p. 55, cited in Halverson & Greenberg, 2017, p. 5). What distinguished Al-Qaeda’s dictionary from the myriad Salafist identity projects throughout the Muslim world, however, was the group’s steady emphasis on the phenomenon of combat as an instance of praxis between the imagined and lived space of an Islamic state. Al-Andalus Establishment for Media Production prefaced their opening salvo with a verse from al-Anfal (8:60). And like all subsequent so-called emirates, the group peppered its discourse throughout with a profusion of Quranic citations, historical allusions, and spiritual invocations. A 2013 survey of 55 communications between 2007 and 2012 found that al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb’s (*Tanzim al-Qa'eda fi bilad al-Maghrib al-Islami*, AQIM) predominate material signifier of hostile antagonism was the perceived collaboration between “crusader” (129 mentions) and “apostate” forces (273

mentions), be they local or foreign (Halverson & Greenberg, 2017). Reference to this rhetorical axis appeared 40% more frequently in 2007 than in the period between 2008 and 2011 (Halverson & Greenberg, 2017). The reasons for this appear myriad. However, as the abovementioned study suggests, the high density of references to “crusaders” and “apostates” in 2007 likely reflected an effort on the part of leadership in AQIM to more closely align its rhetoric with the campaign in Iraq. Just two years prior, the relationship between the North African organization and Al-Qaeda’s Iraqi affiliate, led then by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, had been “sealed with the blood” after two Algerian diplomats, including the country’s chief diplomat Ali Belarousa, were abducted in Baghdad and executed at AQIM’s behest (Filiu, 2009, p. 5).

As a banner organization, AQIM, known previously *al-Jama'at al-Salafiyah lil-Da'wah wal-Qital* (the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat [French acronym GSPC]) served a particularly vital role in the early days of the Iraqi jihad, and understanding the nuances of their communicative aesthetics offers an important point comparison for this study. The North African organization, as Jean-Pierre Filiu (2009) observed, was part of a “triangular” strategy with Zarqawi’s brigade (p. 1). Algeria and the Maghreb constituted a principal pool of recruitment for the Iraqi theater (nearly a fourth of all suicide bombers in Iraq were thought to be from North Africa), while nearby Europe, with its history of colonialism in North Africa, provided a wellspring of rhetorical resentment for the recruiters (Filiu, 2009, p.1). But as the group’s emir Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud (a.k.a. Abd al-Malek Droukdel) articulated as early as 2008, no part of the emergent jihadist landscape was without purpose. “Rejoice,” he wrote in a communiqué from September 22 of that year,

The jihadi wave is clearly growing in all our countries. Praise be to God for this blessing. God has blessed it with an Islamic emirate in Afghanistan and Chechnya and the Islamic state in the country of Iraq. He has allowed the honest mujahidin brothers in Somalia to triumph, and tomorrow, God willing, He will establish the state of the Qu'ran in the lands of the Islamic Maghreb so it becomes a strong block in the sought after caliphate. (Abdel-Wadoud, 2008)

For the Salafist population of the region, Al-Qaeda’s war documentaries in Iraq functioned in this context as a vanguard aesthetic.

While al-Qaeda in Iraq documented scores of “victories,” AQIM’s own visual sphere of representation tended to favor images of training camps hidden in the Aurass mountains (see Figure 7). Its communiqués included still a robust index of attacks executed within Algeria. And like its Mesopotamian counterpart, some were filmed and overlaid with *anashid*. But before the Arab uprisings, the quantity and quality of such footage in the Maghreb, not surprisingly, was far less than of that coming out of Iraq. For this population of *muhajirin*, future pilgrims in the service of jihad, invocation of the Crusades and recitations of *al-Anfal* and *al-Tawbah* served to paint both a mythical and literal “horizon of expectations.”



Figure 7. Al-Andalus Establishment for Media Production (2010). From Algeria and the Dark Tunnel. Available at Archive.org.

The Da'wah Front

The general amnesties in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya following the uprisings in late 2010 and early 2011 helped fuel a similar dynamic in the post-Arab Spring context. Among those freed as part of the amnesty in Tunisia was Sayfallah Bin Hussein (a.k.a. Abu 'Ayadh; United Nations Security Council, 2017). A hardened jihadist, arrested in Turkey and transferred to Tunisia in 2003, where he was sentenced to serve 43 years, Abu 'Ayadh, once head of the infamous Tunisian Combat Group, worked alongside the core of Al-Qaeda leadership in Jalalabad, Afghanistan, where he ran the so-called Tunisian Guest House in the mid to late 1990s. In 2011 and 2012, under the newly formed Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (*Ansar al-Shari'ah fi Tunis*, AST), Abu 'Ayadh used the emergent security vacuum in Tunisia to recruit thousands of *muhajirin* for the jihad in Iraq and Syria. By most estimates, Tunisians constituted the largest pool of foreign fighters to travel to the warfront—6,000 was the number provided by the Soufan Group in 2016, nearly triple the number of the second largest pool of fighters from Saudi Arabia (Trofimov, 2016). In one of the most important studies of AST conducted during the brief window of access provided by the political opening of 2011, Fabio Merone and Francisco Cavorta found among young initiates in Tunisia that “the stories of the al-Qaeda *mujahiddin* reminded of the epic of the *sahaba* (the first group of Muslims)” [sic] (Merone, 2013, para. 19). The lore of Abu 'Ayadh's proximity to the leaders of the jihad in Afghanistan invoked in and of itself the material realization of an otherwise distant fantasy.

Capitalizing on the political climate of the postrevolutionary milieu, Ansar al-Sharia sought to translate Al-Qaeda's “dictionary” into an elaborate mode of public exhibitionism. Based in and around the Tunis, Ansar al-Sharia led the push to take over the pulpit of at least 400 mosques throughout the country (Bughlab, 2012). They staged charity events and supply caravans, held rallies, and delivered speeches, many of which were uploaded to YouTube, often with flashy introductory montages and audio overlays. Assistants and attendees at AST rallies wore bright orange vests used in the Iraqi (and Guantánamo) prison system (see Figure 8). The black and white flag of the *shahada* (the Muslim profession of faith) including many in the ISI variant, appeared in superabundance.



Figure 8. Ansar al-Sharia (2012) YouTube. Orange protest vests with imprint of the organization's name.

(Video is no longer available.)

In celebration of such unprecedented freedom, the crowds at these demonstrations indulged in impassioned new chants that epitomized the pastiche mode of Salafist rhetoric: "*khaybr ya yahud*" ("Khayb, Khaybr o ye Jew"), or "*Obama, Obama, koluna Osama!*" ("Obama, Obama we are all Osama").⁹ Though some were planned months in advance, others emerged in reaction to happenings in the public sphere: the screening of a controversial film, university protests, or fishermen selling black-marketed liquor at a portside market. At the group's largest rally (see Figure 9), in May of 2012, in the ancient city of Kairouan, Abu 'Ayadh distributed tickets emblazoned with the group's insignia and encouraged his audience, with no shortage of irony, to behave as "political police" (a term used by Ben 'Ali's antiterrorism forces) and to enforce sharia wherever they saw fit. A string of violent episodes ensued over the summer, including raids on the capital's upscale neighborhoods and the ransacking of an art exhibition perceived to be displaying blasphemous imagery.¹⁰ The following September, in the wake of two controversial videos, both virulently denounced on the group's Facebook page, American embassies throughout the region were besieged by protests. Both of the attacks in Tunisia and Libya (where

⁹ The chant, "*Khaybr, khaybr ya yahud*" ["Khaybr, Khaybr Oh Ye Jew"] is in reference to the seventh century battle between Jews and Muslims in northwestern quarter of the Arabian Peninsula. "*Obama, Obama, koluna Osama,*" became a common refrain. It means "Obama we are all Osama." This quote, as with the above image, was taken from video recordings posted by the group on YouTube. They are no longer available for public view.

¹⁰ A more immediate impetus for the attack on the art exhibition, "*Le printemps d'art*"— which featured, among other things, an instillation of two women in hijab surrounded by stones, another with the word of God formed by ants crawling from the nose of a young boy, and a painting of a demi-nude woman against the backdrop of bearded men—was likely a call early that month by a Salafi Shaykh in Tunisia, Hussayn Obaydi (Malka, 2015, p. 115).

the American Ambassador was killed) were attributed to Ansar al-Sharia. Abu 'Ayadh, as emir of the organization, quickly became one of the most wanted men in the world.

In the months and years ahead, Abu 'Ayadh disappeared from the public spotlight but his influence remained: "*baqiyah*" ("remaining") read the digital communique released on the Ansar al-Sharia YouTube channel in the fall of 2013 (see Figure 10), a message foreshadowing the official ISIS slogans "*baqiyah wa tatamaddad*" ("remaining and expanding"), which would become ubiquitous in the years ahead. As though tracking his imaginary course out of the country, Tunisian media ran a series of stories on smuggled arms and even chemical explosives along the Algerian border where it was believed he had fled ("Arrestation," 2012). Other reports surfaced that he had been allowed to relocate to a house in central Tunis, placing him in direct proximity to the Ministry of the Interior ("Abou Iyadh," 2014). In his absence, new leaders emerged and rallies continued, though in much reduced fashion. The assassination of the labor leaders Chokri Belaid and Mohamed al-Brahmi in the spring and summer of 2013 drove remaining members of Ansar al-Sharia underground. More hardened militants reportedly fled to the Chaambi Mountains along the Algerian border, where they were said to have joined forces with the Brigade of 'Uqba Ibn Nafiha, a group Tunisia's Minister of the Interior 'Ali Laareydh claimed had aligned itself with AQIM (Roger, 2013). All the while speculation about Abu 'Ayadh's whereabouts intensified. The online news site *Kapitalis* and the Algerian newspaper *El-Khabar* placed him in the Libyan capital Tripoli where he was said to have evaded airstrikes targeting him and his partner in hiding, the yet more infamous Mokhtar Belmokhtar of AQIM. Belmokhtar's death had been previously announced by Algerian authorities on at least three occasions. In November, Tunisia's Ministry of the Interior told reporters that Abu 'Ayadh had surfaced in Derna, Libya ("Bin Jidu," 2014). Two months after that, on January 15, 2014 (the third anniversary of the first day of protest in the eastern Libyan city of Al-Bayda), Ansar al-Sharia's media network in Tunisia released a recorded message of Abu 'Ayadh pledging his allegiance to the "Mujahiddin brethren in Syria" (Fariq al-tawasul al-elektruni, 2014). Framing the announcement with quotes from *Surat al-Saff* (61:4), the declaration which came just days after the deputy Libyan Minister of Industry, Hassan al-Darouei, was assassinated outside of the city of Sirte (soon to be the capital of the Islamic State in Libya; "Tribal Leaders," 2014), was a watershed moment in the Syrian jihad as it served to consolidate the loyalties of many North African fighters around the singular cause of the Islamic State.¹¹ This announcement of a trans-Mediterranean alliance with fighters in Iraq and Syria preceded Abu Bakar al-Baghdadi's formal declaration of a global Caliphate from the pulpit of the al-Nuri Mosque in Mosul by five months.

¹¹ In addition to the assassination of the deputy minister news of a "special forces officer" killed in Derna surfaced in a *Voice of America* report concerning an uptick in tribal violence in the south of the country ("Tribal Leaders," 2014). The article published by the official US government organ provides no additional detail on the unnamed "officer."



Figure 9. Ansar al-Sharia's YouTube channel (2013). Video featuring Abu 'Ayadh and phrase: "Ansar al-Sharia remains"

(Video is no longer available.)

Conclusion: The State of Sinai

Similar to the Algerian training camps in the early 2000s, AST's public *da'wah* campaign appeared calibrated to draw as many adherents as possible toward the theater of war in Iraq and Syria. Facilitating that bridge was a robust aesthetic and rhetorical repertoire which, in the wake of the Arab uprisings, gained unprecedented public exposure. As a result of this historical development, however, replicating the once secretive language of Al-Qaeda was now increasingly easy and effective for engaging a wide swath of the mainstream public. To say nothing of the multibillion-dollar countercommunications campaign launched by Western and Arab governments alike, the rapid proliferation of satirical interpretations of ISIS, along with dramatic reenactments like the MBC TV series *Ghrabib sud* (2017), illustrated the degree to which the aesthetic had been normalized and, perhaps, to a degree, neutralized insofar as the mythical iconography surrounding the movement appeared distant if not forgotten altogether.

But more recent examples from Al-Furqan's catalog seem designed to negate the hollowing out of the brand. The 23-minute film *Wilayat Sinai': Hamat al-Sharia (The State of Sinai: Guardians of Sharia)*, released in early 2018, takes pains to frame its narrative in mythical tones, tightly sequencing a string of glossy earth pictures along with an ode to the creation of the universe (*khalaq al-kun*). The elaborate digital effects quickly give way to a more standard rendition of the Al-Qaeda documentary. Echoing the earliest iterations of the genre—from *al-Ghrab wa al-nafaq al-mazlim (The West and the Dark Tunnel; 2009)*, to *al-Jaza'ir wa al-nafaq al-mazlim (Algeria and the Dark Tunnel; 2014)*—*Wilayat Sinai'* methodically arranges its narrative into a history of aggression (Mubarak and the emergency laws), betrayal (the Muslim Brotherhood ousted from power), and revenge. The antagonists are the apostate rulers, shaking hands with the devil

and conspiring to unseat the rule of God. The victims are the Muslims, in this case Brotherhood leaders and Salafists, who faced persecution under El-Sisi. From here, however, the film breaks with the older genre, announcing to viewers that it is unmistakably a product of the Islamic State.

A Levantine speaker introduces to the camera "Brother Abu Suleiman al-Masri," an Egyptian and presumably a Sinai local (see Figure 11). Al-Masri stammers out a brief statement about shaking people from their slumber (Al-Furqan, 2018). Verse 38 from *Surat-Anfal* flashes across the screen: "so fight them till all opposition (*fitna*) ends" (Qu'ran 8:38). The camera cuts to al-Masri speeding his pickup truck full of farm goods and materiel into an Egyptian military convoy (see Figure 12). The explosion is massive.



Figure 11. Al-Furqan Media Foundation (Wilayat Sinai'; 2018): Hamat al-Sharia. Source: Vimeo.com



Figure 12. Al-Furqan Media Foundation (2018)(Wilayat Sinai'): Hamat al-Sharia. Source: Vimeo.com

With memories of Algeria's Dark Decade in hindsight, AQIM's Abdel Malek Droukdel had cautioned his fighters from pledging allegiance to ISIS for fear of "fitna." Here, in the wake of the caliphate's physical collapse in Iraq and Syria, was an alternative message: Fight until all opposition ends. Fight forever.

Al-Masri eviscerated along with his countrymen, the filmmakers descend on the carnage, executing the injured, torching the vehicles, and looting the weapons. The film continues in this fashion for its remainder, interspersing embellished news footage and interviews with sauntering young mujahidin and dismembered soldiers. But the movie is incomplete. The final execution scene—a boy shot in the head by an unknown man in an unnamed desert town—appears with no explanation. An informant, perhaps? A regime traitor? An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth: The only thing certain is, the killing goes on. The Caliphate remains.

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