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THE SONIC WORLD OF THE ISLAMIC STATE

Jonathan Pieslak

I am presently part of a team researching the mobilizing influence of media—print, music, and video—in the context of terrorism, with a specific focus on Salafi jihadism. Our project brings together scholars from a variety of fields, including political science, communications, musicology, among others, and we are funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Defense's Minerva Initiative (Principal Investigator: Anthony Lemieux, Georgia State University). My involvement with this research group comes as an extension of my recent book on radicalism and music in which I examine the musical cultures of al-Qa'ida, the American racist skinheads, Christian-affiliated radicals, and eco-animal right militancy (Pieslak 2015).

I arrived at this topic from my previous scholarship on music and the Iraq War (Pieslak 2009). As I researched music's role in U.S. military recruiting and as an inspiration for combat among American soldiers and Marines, I decided to examine, as best I could, what the other side of the conflict was doing: was music a pivotal part of the cultural life of Sunni militants in Iraq? From what I could tell at that time, indeed, it was. And in late 2006, I began following the propaganda of the newly formed Islamic State of Iraq (ISI); the entity that would become the most notoriously violent terrorist group of the 21st century.

This article explores the sonic world of the Islamic State (IS), *al-Dawlat al-Islamiyya*, providing an overview of their sonic production; it proceeds in three parts. First, I introduce my background studying the IS and the cultural dimensions of terrorism and political violence in general. Second, I describe the cultural production of the IS, outlining the group's media history, organizational structure, and output as of April 2016. Finally, I offer some concluding ideas on why cultural production is so important within the jihadi world and suggest avenues for developing practical strategies and policy implications.

Background and the study of culture in terrorism and political violence

My orientation and objectives for this research can be outlined as follows: (1) I pursue research to the best that circumstances allow, trying to understand how human beings employ cultural elements (namely, music) to cultivate and reinforce hateful attitudes towards one another, which often leads to violence in its varied forms; (2) I try to avoid discussions about the validity or justification of the beliefs that motivate radical groups; (3) I employ interpretative frameworks that allow me to reach practical and ethical policy recommendations based on weakening the

appeal and activity of the ideologies that provide the foundation for radicalism; (4) I emphasize the benefits of collaboration, maintaining that no single scholar possesses all of the knowledge necessary to fully understand the varied dimensions of jihadi cultural production (Hegghammer 2015). I am especially grateful to my colleagues who have contributed to the refinement of my understanding of jihadi culture, and I will cite and acknowledge them throughout this article. I also wish to thank my three research assistants, who will remain anonymous for privacy purposes, but I am grateful for their translations and in helping me reach a more nuanced understanding of the cultural background on this topic.

Regarding culture, I believe that the cultural dimensions of terrorism and political violence have been downplayed, particularly in post-9/11 research. These disciplines have prioritized what we might call “the hard stuff”: ideology, financial and armament resourcing, attacks, training, leadership, and military or tactical expertise. “Softer” elements, like the cultural lives of radical groups, have occupied a fairly peripheral position. Nonetheless, my starting point is the idea that terrorism and political violence cannot be actuated without the ability to convince another person that it is in their best interest to risk their lives and kill other human beings. The so-called “hard elements” that have traditionally been the focus of study in the field matter very little if no one is there to fight. While it is unlikely that any set of solutions will eradicate terrorism and political violence entirely, addressing the root causes for involvement holds considerable promise for weakening the appeal of such groups.

To be clear, I am not dismissing or minimizing the hard stuff, nor am I suggesting an opposing relationship between the two. When Elton Simpson and Nadi Hoofi opened fire on the “First Annual Muhammad Art Exhibit and Contest” in Garland, Texas on May 3, 2015, the investigation rightly focused on these assailants’ backgrounds, radicalization, ideological motivations, and planning and execution of the attack. But I might add to this, asking: what inspires a man to go on what was, for all intents and purposes, a suicide mission in the name of a group that he never had any personal interaction with, outside of social media on the Internet? Why did Simpson, only fifteen minutes before the attack, tweet *bay’a* (fealty or allegiance) to the Caliph of the IS, Abo Bakr al-Baghdadi. His tweet read: “The bro with me and myself have given bay’ah to Amirul Mu’mineen. May Allah accept us as mujahideen.” (“Amirul Mu’mineen” often translates as “Commander of the Faithful,” a phrase which, in this instance, refers to the IS’s declared Caliph, Abo Bakr al-Baghdadi.) But just an hour earlier, he also tweeted: “The knives have been sharpened, soon we will come to your streets with death and slaughter! #Qariban Qariba.” The tweet is a rather loose translation of lyrics to an Islamic State “song” entitled, “Qariban, Qariba” (“Soon, soon”), which he directs us to in the hashtag. This track provided the soundtrack to the video of the immolation of Jordanian pilot, Muath Safi Youssef al-Kasabeh, and is frequently used as a soundtrack to the most violent scenes in IS video messaging. If such lyrics were so important that he tweeted them only an hour before embarking on a violent attack that he knew would result in his death, then I think that questions about the role of culture are important to ask—in addition to those about more tactical issues.

My conclusions thus far support the idea that, to paraphrase the well-known counterterrorism consultant and forensic psychiatrist Marc Sageman, it may be just as much about what a terrorist feels as what they think (Sageman 2008: 157–58). The cultural dimensions of terrorism can be a vitally important part of what motivates people to act violently towards one another, perhaps more so than the professed ideology any violent activist espouses. The German scholar Thomas Bauer echoes Sageman’s idea when he proposes that terrorists are not defined by ideas as much as they are by passion (Bauer 2011: 125). If how a terrorist feels and their passion could run similarly to, or even outweigh, their ideological commitment, then the study of culture—and particularly music—has a great deal to contribute to this conversation. Ideology, as reasoned

argument in and of itself, may not be the primary motivation behind involvement and action; most IS fighters are not ideologues or intellectuals, and new recruits go through rigorous training in religious law (*shari'ah*). If the appeal of the IS's practice of Islam were the primary catalyst for recruitment, such religious training classes would have no need to be compulsory training.

To close this first section of the article, I would like to suggest that there are many ways to study jihadi cultural production, but my goals towards this endeavor are modest, following the prompt of political theorist and jihadi culture expert Thomas Hegghammer who suggests that the burgeoning field of jihadi culture research should have two immediate goals: (1) to document and describe the cultural production of jihadis, and (2) to examine why jihadis spend so much time and effort creating cultural forms (Hegghammer 2016). I will try to do this in the two parts that now follow.

The sonic world of the Islamic State

The IS is a complex group with a complex history. They have changed their name—at least twice; they seem to have rewritten their historical records, now contending that the establishment of the Caliphate dates back to October 2006 (not June 29, 2014); even their historical status as an al-Qa'ida break-away faction is uncertain (al-Tamimi 2015). In short, this group has a complicated history and ideology that remain the source of considerable disagreement. Even so, I will provide a short introduction to the group to provide a degree of context. While I am reluctant to oversimplify the history and ideology of the IS, it is nonetheless important that the group's sonic world be given some kind of framing, however incomplete. Readers familiar with the group may want to skip ahead a few paragraphs.

The “Islamic State” is a Sunni militant movement emerging from the Iraq War that was first considered to be al-Qa'ida's faction in Iraq (AQI). They changed their name in October 2006 to “The Islamic State of Iraq” (ISI), and then to “The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham” (“Sham” is the Arabic word for greater Syria) or “The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant,” in April 2013. Now, they call themselves “The Islamic State” (“*al-Dawlat al-Islamiyya*”), based on their declaration of the Caliphate on June 29, 2014. The group is further known by an Arabic acronym “da'esh”, and many governments in the region prefer this label so as not to elevate the group to a nation status. Following Cole Bunzel's report (Bunzel 2015) on the history and ideology of the IS, the group's history can be organized as follows:

1. Zarqawi Prelude (2002–06): the rise of Sunni jihadism in Iraq.
2. ISI (2006–13): a largely failed attempt at state formation, coinciding with a decline in interest from local Sunni jihadis.
3. ISIS (2013–14): the group's re-assertion and territorial expansion into Syria.
4. IS (2014–present): declaration of the Caliphate.

Generally speaking, the group espouses a form of Salafi jihadism, with certain origins in the Muslim Brotherhood's practice of jihadism, namely taking control of the state and fighting Western imperialism in the region, which they view as being the cause of a decline in Islam from public life. The IS tends towards a more dogmatic literalism in their interpretation of Salafi ideology than groups like al-Qa'ida, and their media output underscores, among other points, the following (Bunzel 2015):

1. They are the practitioners of the “true” Islam and Muslims must dissociate from anyone not following their brand of Salafi jihadism.

2. Failure to do #1 amounts to apostasy (hence their liberal application of *takfir* [apostasy or heresy]).
3. Shi'i Muslims are deserving of death.
4. Other groups, like the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, are traitors to Islam.
5. They must restore the Caliphate.

An extreme anti-Shi'ite worldview and the desire to restore the Caliphate are probably the most important ideas resounding in their messaging and literature.

Given its history, it seems logical to ask how the IS emerged from the Iraq War? By the late 2000s, they were reduced to an almost entirely clandestine operation and openly mocked on jihadi Internet forums as “a paper state”. Bunzel (2015) points to some pivotal factors leading to the IS's resurgence:

1. New leadership. It matters who is in charge, and the first al-Baghdadi and his successor Abo Hamza al-Muhajir were poor public speakers and generally uninspiring. Abo Bakr al-Baghdadi is a much more eloquent speaker (he uses a high/classical-style Arabic reminiscent of bin Laden) and has a much greater personality appeal.
2. Sunni disenfranchisement. Sunnis became increasingly resentful towards the new partisan Shia leadership, and the ISI leadership would exploit this resentment in their appeals to recruit.
3. Syrian civil war. The Syrian civil war was, and still is, being fought along sectarian lines, which allowed the group to increase its ranks through Sunni grievance, and make major territorial gains.

However, like the example I cited earlier of the investigation of the Garland, Texas shootings, I would caution that this is only part of the picture. Adding to these “hard element” points is the fact that the IS has launched the most sophisticated media campaign of any jihadi group in history. Their output is unprecedented in volume and quality, with a far more cinematized conceptualization of what their propaganda should do: dramatic scenes of fighters and battles, HD quality and highly colorized video, special graphics and effects, and, of course, music. Earlier generation jihadi culture was nothing like this. Al-Qa'ida often turned to dry, lecture-format videos, and relied more on personal contact in mosques or other settings for recruitment.

The *Washington Post* ran an excellent article (Miller and Mekhenet 2015) on the IS's media machine in November 2015 in which they interviewed seven IS defectors. All but one said that the principal influences kindling their fervor towards jihad and guiding their decisions to travel to Syria were the videos they saw online, or encounters on social media. Of the videos, one of the defectors said, “Some were like Van Damme movies. You see these men fighting and you want to be one of those brave heroes.” One might question if it was the attraction of the IS's practice of Islam (that is the reasoned argument of their ideology) that catalyzed his recruitment, or if the emotional satisfaction of having a “hero” identity and idea of defending the “just” cause of his perceived in-group was the pivotal factor. Crucial to eliciting these kinds of emotionally driven responses is the musical soundtracks that accompany such videos. Finally to the music...

Or, technically, not. For the IS, there is a distinct difference between what they “sound out” and “music.” Without opening the Pandora's box of what is or is not music in the context of conservative practices of Islam, I will simply say that there are widely varied interpretations of what constitutes acceptable, unfavored, or forbidden musical practices. Although the IS opposes “music” in all of its forms, there is a distinct genre of allowable sacred cantillation, *anashid*, that complicates the issue. *Anashid* is the plural of *nashid*, the etymology of which derives from *inshad*,

a “raising of the voice” usually associated with public recitation of poetry in pre-Islamic times. The term *anashid* is often translated as “Islamic songs” or “Islamic recitation/cantillation”, but the genre’s origin is more the domain of poetry than music. And I want to be clear that the cultural understanding of *anashid* is, first and foremost, a religious poetic genre than anything related to music (Shiloah 1995; and Matusky and Beng 2004). For the IS, the soundtracks to their videos are populated by sacred recitation, not music, and the sonic world of jihadi culture in general is overrun with jihad-themed *anashid*, also called *anashid jihadiyya* (Pieslak 2015).

So what does the IS’s sonic world sound like? The answer is that it has changed considerably over time. From what I have been able to ascertain, there are three primary eras of IS cultural production that seem to correspond with their state-building project. First, there are Zarqawi-era videos characterized as simple documentations of ultra violence, particularly decapitations. These followed a fairly simple formula: most often, a group of jihadis stands behind the victim, there is a reading of offenses, a confession, the pronouncement of judgment, optional last words, execution, and a statement of demands. The executioner is typically dressed in a black, military-style uniform, with a mask covering his face. The event was documented on video with no musical soundtrack, little staging, and minimal editing, and then released to the Internet.

On August 15, 2006, the group changed its name to “The Islamic State of Iraq,” and established a media foundation, al-Furqan, just over three months later. By the way, a dedicated media foundation is not a new idea to jihadi groups, al-Qa’ida has had its own media production wing, as-Sahab, since 2001. With a centralized production group overseeing official releases, the videos changed. I like to generally characterize this era of IS media as the era of “Go Pro” terrorism.

“Go Pro” Terrorism, 2006–14, notable events

2006, August 15:	Declaration of the ISI (Islamic State of Iraq).
2006, November 21:	First video release from al-Furqan.
2013, April 8:	Declaration of ISIS/ISIL.
2013, August 20:	Establishment of al-Ajnad.
2014, February 3:	al-Qa’ida officially cuts ties with ISIS.
2014, May 31:	Establishment of al-Hayat.

The reason I describe this era as “Go Pro” terrorism (besides the “Be a Hero” slogan) is that many of the videos capture IED attacks against coalition forces taken by fighters hiding in locations and filming the attack; these are short action videos and most often a jihad-themed *nashid* was overdubbed. The IS mostly used *anashid* produced by *munshideen* (reciters or “singers”) who were not affiliated with the group and who wrote texts on general jihadi themes, a favorite was the Saudi *munshid*, Abo Ali.

Important during this era was the division of al-Furqan into specific branches. On August 20, 2013, al-Ajnad media was announced and this specific branch of al-Furqan was responsible for producing Arabic-language *anashid* and Surah recitation (Koranic chapter recitation). Videos were still under the domain of al-Furqan but another branch of video production, al-I’tisam Media, was established. It is interesting that this division of propaganda labor and output seems to align with some of the IS’s strongest military buildups, attacks, and most significant territorial expansions.

From the that best I can determine, it was around the time of al-Ajnad’s founding that the IS began producing group-specific *anashid*. The IS now has member *munshideen* who write *anashid* specifically tailored for the group, explicitly honoring the IS or its declared Caliph (Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi [aka Caliph Ibrahim]). Examples here include: Maher Mesh’al (aka Abo Hajar

al-Hadrami [in the IS], and Abo Zubair al-Jazrawi [in Saudi Arabia before joining the IS]) or the *munshid* going by the name “Abo Yassir”. Then, on May 31, 2014, al-Hayat was established. This branch of media is responsible for their entire media production in non-Arabic languages, including videos, literature, and *anashid*. Al-Hayat initially demonstrated a preference for *nashid* videos over straight audio releases, with closed captioning in English (not Arabic) for a number of them. However, it is interesting that while 8 out of the first 9 al-Hayat *nashid* releases were *nashid* videos with English subtitles, only 2 of the last 11 have been *nashid* videos.

The third era of IS media production does not differ significantly from what I outlined in the previous one; it is still organized the same way. The main difference is that the IS changed its video strategy corresponding to the declaration of the Caliphate on June 29, 2014. It would be challenging to understate how significant this was. No group—not the Muslim Brotherhood, not AQ, not (really) the Taliban, no one—had truly dared declare itself the Caliphate and issued the mandate of *hijra* (migration) to the established land of “true” Islam. Now a polity, their videos became more about projecting the image of an actual state and governance. Although the violence continued, everything was cast through the lens of the IS’s control over lands and people as a legitimate political authority and a law-enforcing state. No longer were they filming drive-by shootings or sneaking around in bushes to film IED attacks. States do not do these things and no longer does the IS (at least not in their own video messaging).

Musically speaking, the breakdown of their production looks like this:

Total musical/recitation releases: 182 (from the founding of al-Ajnad to April 2016)

Anashid: 139

Surah Recitation: 43

Anashid: 119 in Arabic (mostly released through al-Ajnad)

20 in non-Arabic languages (released through al-Hayat)

al-Hayat has produced *anashid* in: Kurdish-Sorani (1), Uyghur (1), English (1), Indonesian (1), Russian (1), Unknown (1), German (2), Turkish (2), Chinese (2), Bengali (2), and French (4).

Their *anashid* are an inextricable part of their video messaging as well. As a generalization, the videos tend to present two contradictory portrayals of life in the IS; one is that of a peaceful utopia where citizens enjoy the abundance and prosperity that comes through living under “pure” Islamic law. The other is that of a land ruled by apocalyptic ultra violence and locked in a perpetual condition of war. To examine the *anashid* in these videos, I reviewed a sample set of approximately 35 Arabic-language IS videos, from May 19, 2015 to March 21, 2016. There were 112 instances of *anashid* used as soundtracks. I was able to identify 93 (or 83%). Of those 93, 41 different *anashid* were used. Only 7 *anashid* appeared four times or more; 13 *anashid* appeared three times or more. The 7 most popular, arranged in descending order of popularity, were:

English Title	Arabic Transliteration	Date Released
We will proceed to the excellencies	Sawfa Namdi Lilma’aliyy	August 30, 2015
Our shari’a	Shari’atuna	June 29, 2015
How great is the encampment of heroes	Lillahi Daru Mu’askaru Al-’btaali	2015
Attack Them	Ughzu Alayhim	2015
We have intended	Qad ’azamna	November 14, 2014
Come on, Indulge	Hayya Inghamis	November 29, 2015
We drove towards them	’ilaihim Rakebna	June 18, 2015

In terms of the song texts, there are any number of recurring themes, but some of the most common are those that encourage emigration, venerate martyrdom and fighters, glorify the IS, its leaders, and the re-establishment/rising up of the Caliphate (under “pure” Islamic law), threaten enemies, and call for jihad as the righteous defense of Islam. Below is an example of the unofficial “anthem” of the Islamic State, “Ummati, Qad Laha Fajarun” (“My Ummah, Dawn has appeared”).

“Ummati, Qad Laha Fajarun”

“My Ummah, Dawn has Appeared”

My Ummah, Dawn has appeared (seen from afar), so await the clear victory,

The Islamic State has arisen by the blood of the righteous (truthful),

The Islamic State has arisen by the Jihad of the pious (God-fearing),

They sacrificed their souls in the name of truth (righteousness) with constancy and conviction,

To establish in it [the Islamic State] the religion: the law [Shari’ah] of the Lord of the Worlds.

My Ummah, await glad tidings, and do not despair for victory is near,

The Islamic State has arisen, and the dreaded might has appeared (begun),

It has risen to create glory, and the era of darkness has ended,

By loyal men who do not fear warfare,

They have created an everlasting glory that does not perish or disappear.

My Ummah, Allah is our Lord and Protector, so grant your blood,

Victory shall not be reclaimed except by the blood of the martyrs,

Those men, who spent their lives seeking their Lord, [are] in the abode of the Prophets,

They offered their souls to Allah and for the religion [Islam] with self-sacrifice,

They are people of sacrifice and giving; they are people of generosity and honor.

My Ummah, await glad tidings; the sun of resilience (steadfastness) has risen,

We have marched in masses to the hills of ancient glory,

So that we may bring back the light, faith, and the glorious might,

By men who have forsaken the material life, and attained eternal life in the hereafter,

And they have revived the Ummah of glory and the assured victory.

Why cultural forms?

Returning to Hegghammer’s goals for contemporary jihadi culture research, I have documented and described some of the cultural production of the IS, so to conclude, I will briefly address his second goal: why jihadis spend so much time and effort creating cultural forms.

The kinds of cultural forms—especially music and videos with musical soundtracks—that we see operating so prominently in the IS are vital to the group’s recruitment, member retention, and motivation for fighter action. Why do they spend so much time and effort? Because the group cannot function without it. On paper and in theory, I suppose they can. Culture is not a utility maximizing activity, but only from a rather closed “hard elements” perspective. Culture

might be dismissed because one actually needs finances, arms, training, etc. to launch a terrorist campaign; one does not *need* music. But we may want to rethink this assumption.

Violent activists are often robbed of their humanity because they tend to do inhuman things. Their actions may be described as inhuman, but they are still human beings—many of whom became involved with radical ideology, not because of ideological appeal or a pre-standing ideological commitment, but because of very human impulses and processes: social identity formation, finding meaning in one's life, enculturation, emotional responses, social bonding, and others. My book on radicalism offers any number of examples to support this claim.

Why does this matter? If, as I am suggesting, individuals participate in radicalism for a variety of reasons, but not necessarily first and foremost because of the conviction of reasoned argument, then any attempt to make practical and ethical policy recommendations should place less emphasis on pure ideological analysis and rhetoric, and more on the foundational elements of culture. There should be less of a religious or ideological counternarrative (like the U.S. State Department's "Think Again, Turn Away" campaign or U.S. President Barak Obama's foray into Islamic theology, declaring that the IS is not "Islamic") and more of a culturally conceived one. If young men find validation by participating in jihad in ways that involve, not rational cognitive appeal, but social influence and bonding, feelings of heroism, defense of a just cause, identity formation, duty to religion and the protection of those in danger, and others, then we need to contemplate how to satisfy those very human impulses in non-violent ways.

Hegghammer (2016) puts it very well: "If emotion is more important, local authorities may want to spend less time on improving economic situations of youth at risk for radicalization, and more on offering 'substitution activities' that provide emotional rewards similar to those obtained in the jihadi underground." And music is at the heart of many of these "emotional rewards." The anthropology of music, the study of music in social movements, and any number of interpretative lenses on the socio-cultural dimensions of music illuminate music's pivotal role in how we bond, identify ourselves, express emotion, and how we can be influenced emotionally. I am optimistic that this scholarship can contribute to how we understand IS culture; for now, though, we are still in the phases of collecting the data and getting a general idea of what their culture sounds like and how it functions.

Even so, it seems to me that those involved in propagating jihadi culture understand the importance of the sonic world. Turning to a page from AQ propagandist, Anwar al-Awlaki, perhaps the most important AQ propagandist ever, *anashid* are singled out as a particularly useful way to mobilize jihad. In *44 Ways to Support Jihad* (2009), he wrote:

Muslims need to be inspired to practice Jihad. In the time of the "Prophet" (Muhammad) he had poets who would use their poetry to inspire the Muslims and demoralize the disbelievers. Today nasheed can play that role. A good nasheed can spread so widely it can reach to an audience that you could not reach through a lecture or a book. Nasheeds are especially inspiring to the youth, who are the foundation of Jihad in every age and time. Nasheeds are an important element in creating a "Jihad culture." It is worth mentioning that al-Awlaki's photograph was the image that Elton Simpson chose for his Twitter profile, and the name of his account, "Shariah is Light", suggests a connection to the popular IS *nashid*, "The Sharia of our Lord is a light."

Consider that within the IS, those involved with the production of media, mostly foreigners, are elevated in status within the group. One of the defectors interviewed by *The Washington Post* (Miller and Mekhenet 2015) said, "The media people are more important than the soldiers. Their monthly income is higher. They have better cars. They have the power to encourage those

inside to fight and the power to bring more recruits to the Islamic State.” In fact, the media often control day-to-day operations. Battles scenes, public executions, *hudud* crime punishment are highly scripted, with multiple takes, and fighters reading from cue cards. Yes, they run practice takes and choreograph beheadings, with the final lethal blow coming only when the media operative, not the executioner, gives the ok. This is a radically different way of portraying execution from the Zarqawi era, in particular because these grotesque proceedings are accompanied by a musical soundtrack, often attempting to cast the entire spectacle, through a *nashid* and its lyrics, as a religiously sanctioned act.

If we want to understand why the IS’s media production is so effective, we need only look in the mirror. In my 2009 book, *Sound Targets: American Soldiers and Music in the Iraq War*, I suggested that similar appeals to honorable duty, defense of a righteous cause, heroism, and country (“state”) were underlying messages in the propaganda of U.S. military recruiting. The music that reinforced these messages was critical to getting the target audience, 17–25 year-old males, to respond emotionally. I noted, though, that the same kinds of messaging was sounding through the *anashid* selected by the ISI to accompany their videos (those of the “Go Pro” terrorism era). Counternarratives and strategies to combat the effectiveness of radicalizing propaganda should consider that the foundation of a young man’s involvement with a terrorist group (or an established military) seems to have more to do with how they feel about an idea or how an idea makes them feel, than what they think about it in an intellectual sense. For instance, rather than focus on how “Islamic” the IS is or is not, it would be better to avoid theological debates altogether, which invariably come across as condescending and polluted when they come from Western, non-Muslims. As an alternative, one might point out that Salafi jihadi groups, like AQ, have killed eight Muslims for every non-Muslim, and the IS’s ratio is far higher. In short, joining the IS means that one is going to primarily kill other Muslims. Promotion of this kind of statistic appeals to a young Muslim man’s sense of duty and obligation to Islam more so than discussions on the varied interpretations of religious doctrine.

The solutions to terrorism and political violence do not lie at the end of a rifle. Particularly in relation to Salafi jihadism, military action alone has not solved the problem; it has addressed symptoms not causes and provided the fuel for grievance that lies at the heart of jihadi propaganda campaigns. Ultimately, I am not sure that there is a single solution or that the issues of terrorism and political violence can be completely eradicated from any society. Rather, a more successful effort to diminish the impact of terrorism and political violence may ultimately rest in disrupting someone’s ability to convince another human being that it is in their best interest to risk their lives and kill other human beings. And their reasons for taking up arms seem to have a greater degree of complexity than pure ideological commitment.

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