



Symbolisms of basic islamic imagery in jihadi propaganda

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The proverb “one picture is worth a thousand words” summarizes the importance of image in the field of communication. The tragic events of September 11, the attacks on Madrid and London highlighted the importance of understanding the ideology and methods of jihadi groups. There is a lack of information on modern imagery associated with political Islam, especially imagery produced by radical and violent extreme Muslim groups. These organizations have had a brief but prolific history in the production and distribution of visual propaganda, and have arguably created their own distinct genre of Internet-based Islamic imagery. Visual propaganda is more than a host for textual messages; it is an expressive medium which communicates ideas just even more effectively than writing. Jihadi imagery is a primary vehicle for the communication and diffusion of jihadi ideas, an essential tool utilized by radical terrorist organizations. Therefore, understanding how these images work, what ideas they convey, why they are employed and what responses they may elicit, is vital to the struggle against the influence of jihadi organizations and their violence. Below are examples of basic Islamic imagery and its symbolisms:

CRESCENT MOON

The crescent moon serves primarily as a symbol of Islamic identity, while evoking notions of the divine and afterlife. A more realistic image of the moon carries the same meaning, but it also evokes strong notions of purity and religious piety. The white crescent in the sky can allude to the goal of martyrdom and the promise of heavenly paradise. The green crescent makes a more politicized reference to Islam, with strong notions of the Prophet Muhammad and because of this, it is viewed as a more overt, militantly Islamic and fundamentalist version of the crescent motif. It is a more aggressively Islamic symbol, unlike the more passive white crescent.

FLOWERS and GARDEN:

Generally, flowers symbolize both martyrdom and paradise. Jihadi imagery makes ample use of flowers. Yellow flowers often suggest a sense of living, or inevitable martyrdom and the reward of everlasting paradise. A white rose appears as a symbol of purity and martyrdom, of the straight path and the paradise that awaits those martyred in cause of God in Islamic culture; in jihadi propaganda it may be used with the image of an individual martyr. The red rose- another symbol of martyrdom- signifies violent (jihadi) struggle more broadly. Other kinds of red flowers may be used in this way, symbolically synonymous with red roses. In the Shiite tradition - especially the Iranian variety - red tulips are used as symbols of martyrdom, which stems from a tradition regarding the martyrdom of the Imam Husayn. Generally, there is perhaps no greater inspiration for jihadi activists than the belief they will be rewarded for their sacrifice by being granted entrance into the garden (*janna*) of heavenly paradise. Symbols and images may allude to paradise indirectly or directly. The word used to indicate heaven “janna” also means “garden” and indicates the garden of paradise that awaits those Muslims who have lived particularly just, obedient, and righteous lives. It is associated with attaining this reward, including the accompanying huris (pure, virgin angels).

FLAGS:

In jihadi propaganda, political symbols are often combined to create literal and symbolic connections between them. In the case of flags, this is often done in reference to jihadi campaigns taking place in different locations. The black flag (*al-riya*) traces its roots to the very beginning of Islam. It was the battle flag of the Prophet Muhammad, carried into battle by many of his companions including his nephew 'Ali ibn Abi Talib. The flag regained prominence in the 8th century with its use by the leader of the Abbasid revolution, Abu Muslim, who led a revolt against the Umayyad clan and its Caliphate. Since then, the image of the black flag has been used as a symbol of religious revolt and battle (i.e. jihad) and in Shiite belief, the black flag is connected with expectations about the afterlife. In the contemporary Islamist movement, the black flag is used to symbolize both offensive jihad and the proponents of re-establishing the Islamic Caliphate. In the Islamic tradition the white flag (*al-liwaa*) was used by Prophet Muhammad to represent both the leader of the Muslim army and the first Muslim state. It is most often used in reference with the Prophet and the idea of establishing an Islamic state. With regards to the latter, the Taliban used the white flag as the official flag for their briefly recognized state. The green flag generally represents the Muslim proclamation of faith (*shahada*). The colour green is considered to be the colour of the Prophet and this is why green flags (regardless of the text) conjure up historical, genealogical and religious notions of the Prophet and Islam. The green flag is often used synonymously with the black and white flags in jihadi imagery, although it has a less overt militant (or jihadist) message than the black flag and is slightly less state-oriented than the white flag. The general green flag should not be confused with the Saudi flag, which is very similar, but also features a curved sword below the Arabic calligraphy. Green flags may also include text other than the *shahada*, like the word "Gaza" written upon it, referring to the struggle against Israeli occupation and oppression within the Gaza Strip with explicit notions of Islam.

MONUMENTS:

There are many buildings, shrines, monuments, tombs and mosques associated with important holy figures in the Islamic tradition. Reverence for many of them is shared by all Muslims, while others hold special significance only for certain groups. Regardless of the nature of these monuments, almost all of them have religious as well as national and regional significance to Muslim peoples, thus, they are invoked to draw upon both loyalties. For instance, while the Dome of the Rock is recognized and revered by all Muslims, it is also a powerful symbol of Palestinian national identity. Likewise, the tomb of the Imam Husayn in Karbala is an important monument for most Muslims, but it is of particular value to Shiites worldwide and its image can be employed as a Shiite-centric symbol of Iraqi nationality. The Dome of the Rock was built on the site where Muslims believe Prophet Muhammad ascended to heaven in his *miraj* or Night Journey and it is considered the third holiest site in Islam. It is perhaps the most recognizable and important nationalist motif used by militant Palestinian groups and this is why the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade employs the Dome to evoke both a sense of national duty and religious sacrifice. The Dome, paired with the photos of martyrs legitimizes the actions of the militants linking them with Islam and the memory of the Prophet Muhammad. The Al-Aqsa Mosque, which is adjacent to the Dome of the Rock and conjures up many of the same associations, is also used extensively in jihadi imagery produced by Palestinian groups. Unlike the Dome of the Rock, however, the Al-Aqsa Mosque is generally not used as a pan-Islamic symbol, but rather is employed as an Islamic symbol of Palestinian national identity. The Kaaba in Mecca is the symbolic and literal center of the Islamic faith for all Muslims and it is a common motif in jihadi imagery. It is the single most important and holiest, site in Islam and evokes the strongest sense of Islamic identity and tradition across

all Muslim sects and groups. Although it is inherently pan-Islamic, the Kaaba can also be employed to draw attention to issues concerning more specifically Saudi Arabia, or internationalize, or pan-Islamize, specific Saudi-centered jihadi concerns, such as the “occupation” of the Saudi holy sites by American forces during the first Gulf War.

MARTYRDOM:

In Islamic tradition, there is no greater sacrifice than martyrdom. To die for one’s faith is the most spiritual act and is seen as a reward in itself. It is also believed that Muslim martyrs will be highly rewarded in the afterlife and will hold a special station in heavenly paradise. This is why martyrdom is one of the central themes in jihadi visual propaganda and it is used by nearly every group. Martyrs are a source of inspiration in Islamic culture and their images are used in visual propaganda to inspire support for jihad. Furthermore, there is a sub-genre of jihadi imagery concerned solely with martyrdom, advertising, praising, encouraging and celebrating it. Martyrs depicted generally fall into two categories: innocents who are killed by enemies and jihadi activists, who are either killed in battle or on suicide missions. There are many ways to depict martyrs and one common technique is inside an oval or round “frame.” By framing the photograph of a specific martyr, jihadi propaganda is able to evoke notions of familial sentimentality. They use this method for both innocent martyrs and those killed in action. These “portraits” are meant to remind the audience of their own family portraits, conveying a sense that these are typical people, engaged in an activity that is a reasonable option for other members of the community too. Framed martyr photos are most commonly used by Palestinian organizations. Another common technique for depicting martyrs in jihadi visual propaganda is to combine a photograph of a martyr with a representation of the country in which he was killed or from which he originated. This way attention is drawn to the jihadi activities taking place within that country, while emphasizing the oppression of the ruling and occupying powers. The “before shot” or “last will and testament” image is another pattern in jihadi propaganda. These photographs, generally taken before a suicide mission to mark that event, include weapons, the Koran and other religious symbols. They combine these disparate items into a single overall message: the religious importance of martyrdom and its violent nature. These images also serve to inflate the actual power of jihadi groups and their activists.

WOMEN:

Women hold a very unique and powerful symbolic value in Islamic culture. They symbolize masculine honour and purity, central to nearly every Muslim man’s sense of pride. This is why images of female martyrs and maternal female images are common in jihadi visual propaganda calling for duty and justice. When a Muslim woman is killed by enemies or is driven to sacrifice herself through militant activism, Muslim men feel an intense sense of shame and oppression. Muslim women, thus, are used to both stir sympathy for the innocent victims of violent oppression and to cause male Muslims into responding against the perceived injustice with jihadi activism.

CHILDREN:

Children are employed in jihadi imagery to wake up feelings of pride, honour and most importantly injustice. Images of living children usually include boys as symbols of innocence and purity. The paternal pride and honour evoked are symbolic of the need to protect Islam from outside harm. Images of young boys also suggest that there is a new generation of jihadi fighters on the rise, implying that the cause will live on through these children for years to come. Dead children (i.e. children killed by outside forces) have a special use: they are typically utilized to inspire feelings of injustice, anger and ultimately

the desire to retaliate against the stated enemy. To this effect, the dead children can be either little boys or girls, usually brutally murdered, giving a powerful blow to the strong Muslim sense of pride, honour and paternal responsibility.

The understanding of how propaganda can move people to action is of a very high order, especially when we are dealing with religious violence and more specifically Islamic terrorism. Organizations aim to move believers and target inner, deep and even subconscious notions, inherent to people through tradition and religious upbringing. Visual motifs accomplish several objectives: First, they create a mental conception of reality for their audiences. The use of carefully edited images evokes existing emotional or historical memories, provoking an emotional response. Often, these motifs tap into intersubjective understandings. Text, language and pictures, provide interactive ways for jihadis to engage the ideology itself, as the notion of resonance- the ways in which a message harmonizes with existing understandings of an audience- is the outcome of this dialectical process. This way they can recruit followers or even gain sympathisers of their cause and actions. In addition they are able to paint a picture of their objectives, their enemies and their strategy using image. The jihadi propaganda and the spread of violent messages has become even more dangerous as Internet plays a key role in the use of Islamic imagery today; it is the main media vehicle providing today a most convenient way for jihadist to pass ideological, tactical and operational level instruction of the kind that they had been delivering in the Afghan training camps. Visual jihad education through image and sound are only a mouse click away...