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Title: Islamic State Nasheeds As Messaging Tools

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Abstract

Although jihadi *nasheeds* play an important role in the Islamic State's propaganda, there is scant literature on the topic. This article is an exploratory study on seventeen Islamic State *nasheeds* released between December 2013 and March 2015. The main argument is that Islamic State *nasheeds* are effective messaging tools because they focus on a limited number of themes that have broad appeal among Muslims. The *nasheeds* differ from other Islamic State propaganda in their almost exclusive focus on war and fighting, rather than on the softer sides of life in the Islamic State.

Introduction

The Islamic State's (IS) media output is unmatched by any other jihadi¹ group.² This output is essential to IS' strategy because it conveys the group's messaging aimed at spreading fear among enemies and attracting new followers. Jihadi hymns called *nasheeds*, or *anashid* in Arabic, are a vital part of this output, an undisputable fact considering that IS established the Ajnad Media Foundation in 2013 for the purpose of producing and distributing audio material such as *nasheeds*.³ However, in spite of *nasheeds*' importance to the group's messaging efforts, there is scant literature on the topic.

This article is an exploratory study on IS *nasheeds* as messaging tools, in which the two following questions will be addressed: Which characteristics make the *nasheeds* effective messaging tools, and how does the messaging in these hymns differ from other IS propaganda? It will be argued that the *nasheeds* are effective messaging tools for a number of reasons, but mainly because they focus on a limited number of themes that have broad appeal

in the *ummah*. Although the messaging in the *nasheeds* mostly confirm with what has been written about IS' messaging in general, there are some exceptions from this. Most notably, very few *nasheeds* portray the utopian life in the Islamic State. This suggests that IS *nasheeds* are more important in preparing for war than for depicting the softer sides of life in the Islamic State.

Although there are IS *nasheeds* in dialect, this article only examines *nasheeds* performed in classical Arabic released by the Ajnad Media Foundation between early December 2013 and mid-March 2015. Seventeen *nasheeds*⁴ meeting these criteria were found on archive.org through the pro-IS website *Ansar Khilafah*.⁵ These *nasheeds* have been translated to English by the author.⁶ Translation inevitably results in some translation loss, especially when translating poetical texts such as *nasheeds* that include many cultural specific references. To limit this loss the author has chosen to prioritize the source language (Arabic) rather than the target language (English).⁷ By doing this, the hope is to preserve as many cultural references as possible, while still producing comprehensible translations.

Background

Nasheed as a religious hymn dedicated “to worship God, express true religious feeling, or call others to Islam” is an old Musical genre⁸ and some form of *nasheed* such as the *Talbiya*, which is sung by pilgrims to Mecca, has always existed in Islam.⁹ Today there are several types of *nasheed* and one of these is the jihadi one. The jihadi *nasheed* originated in the 1970s and 80s during a period of Islamic revival in the Middle East. Thereafter Salafism's strict views on music have influenced the form and content of jihadi *nasheeds*, which explains why they are sung a cappella consisting of one or several male voices.

There are four main categories of jihadi *nasheeds*: “battle hymns” focusing on the war jihadis are waging; “martyr hymns” which put emphasis on martyrdom; “mourning hymns” lamenting the passing of an individual; and “praising hymns” that honor high standing individuals. There are other types as well, the most common being *nasheeds* dedicated to particular conflicts, prisoners, and to mothers of martyrs and fighters.¹⁰

Textually, jihadi *nasheeds* are identical to jihadi poetry. They tend to be composed in classical Arabic and adhere to some of the rules of the classical form of Arabic poetry called *qasida*.¹¹ The most important of these rules include the application of a monometre with lines divided into two hemistichs (half lines) and a monorhyme, a rhyme scheme where each line has an identical rhyme.¹² Although the clear majority are composed in Arabic, there are also *nasheed*-inspired hymns in other languages such as French, English, Turkish, and Urdu, which shows the global outreach of jihadi culture.¹³

Undoubtedly, *nasheeds* play an important role in jihadi culture. They are frequently sung at social events and gatherings such as weddings,¹⁴ as well as before leaving for battle to raise morale.¹⁵ They are often found as audio files on jihadi forums but perhaps more importantly, they are easily available on mainstream sites such as YouTube. Compared to more brutal jihadi content, *nasheeds* are less prone to being removed from these sites, which helps explain why they have become the most popular jihadi content online.¹⁶

Nasheeds play an important role in jihadis’ messaging and are used extensively in jihadi videos. In fact, most videos include at least one *nasheed*. Besides producing their own

nasheeds, jihadi groups use other *nasheeds* in their media output when deemed appropriate for the message that they want to communicate.¹⁷ According to Said,¹⁸ *nasheeds* are effective messaging tools since they can appeal both to the listener's mind and soul, a fact not lost on jihadis themselves. An example is the following remark by Samir Khan, the editor of al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula's magazine Inspire:

I remember when I traveled from San'a, for what seemed like years, in a car to one of the bases of the mujahidin, the driver played this one *nashid* repeatedly. It was "Sir ya bin Ladin." I already knew of this *nashid* from before, but something had struck me at that moment. The *nashid* repeated lines pertaining to fight the tyrants of the world for the purpose of giving victory to the Islamic nation. But it also reminded the listener that Shaykh Usama bin Ladin is the leader of this global fight.¹⁹

Although it seems clear that *nasheeds* can have powerful impact on their listeners, no study has provided an elaborate answer for why this is the case. By examining literature on music and jihadi poetry, the next section will therefore identify some factors that are likely to make jihadi *nasheeds* effective messaging tools.

Framework

What is likely to make *nasheeds* efficient messaging tools?

While there has been little effort to examine why *nasheeds* are effective messaging tools, there is much literature that shows that music can have a powerful impact on listeners.²⁰ Although music's impact on individuals varies greatly, it possesses certain characteristics that often make it a particularly powerful medium of communication when compared with others.

In their study of music's role in promoting violent extremism, Lemieux and Nill argue that people tend to be less critical of a message when set to music, because it engages them on an emotional level.²¹ This is useful for extremist groups, because it facilitates the delivery of messages that air grievances, glorify violence and dehumanize the enemy. Moreover, a song's melody can increase the ability to convey messages, because rhythmic and tonal elements can make it very engaging and addictive. When a song "hooks its listener" the lyric's underlying message is easily rehearsed and internalized.²² Since jihadi *nasheeds* tend to adhere to a monorhyme and a monometer they usually have a strong rhythm, which suggests that they have great potential to "hook their listeners". Lemieux and Nill also note that "(m)usic with aggressive lyrical themes has demonstrated the potential to increase aggressive thoughts, feelings, and potentially behaviors among listeners".²³ For groups that seek to persuade individuals to adopt violent causes this can be very useful. Considering the nature of jihadi groups, it is very likely that these hymns include aggressive lyrical themes.

Research on Taliban hymns called *taranas* also adds insight to *nasheeds*' potential as messaging tools. Although their lyrics follow centuries old patterns of Pashtu poetry,²⁴ these hymns are in some ways different from older Afghan jihadi songs. Unlike the older hymns, the Taliban *taranas* are a cappella, a trait that suggests a clear influence from *nasheeds*.²⁵ Returning to *nasheeds* as messaging tools, Johnson and Waheed have analyzed how the Taliban use *taranas* to communicate their narrative.²⁶ Interestingly, they found that "Taliban chants and other narratives seem to work effectively because of their simplicity, cultural relevance, iconic symbology, and repetition."²⁷ It is especially the fact that they limit the topics of their hymns and that they tend to use historical examples from Afghan history, as well as argue in a way that reflects Afghan and particularly Pashtun values and tradition that

make them effective messaging tools.²⁸ It appears that the Taliban do this in order to frame the messaging in a manner that is meant to have the largest emotional impact possible on listeners.

Since *nasheeds* are closely related to poetry, studies of jihadi poetry are relevant as well. A point supported by the fact that poetry is often used in speeches and read aloud in social gatherings.²⁹ Kendall has done interesting work on the topic, which shows that jihadi poetry is a powerful messaging tool for al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula. She found that it has three main functions: an ideological, an emotional, and a practical one. Ideologically, the poetry helps to create a jihadi identity against an “other”. A process facilitated by the use of “a strategy of binary opposition” such as *mujahidin* (those waging jihad) and *kuffar* (unbelievers), where “the interpretation of one term is generated by reference to another.”³⁰ This division of the world into two camps contributes to form the listener’s understanding of the world.

The poetry is also used to influence the way its readers and listeners behave and feel by appealing to their emotions. For example, by praising and mourning fallen martyrs, poetry might reassure members and future recruits that their actions are worth the sacrifice. Practically, it has the advantage of “papering over cracks in logic or avoiding the necessity of providing evidence by guiding an argument into an emotional rather than intellectual crescendo”.³¹ Kendall also notes that the use of the *qaṣida* form, classical Arabic, and references to Islamic history serves to legitimize the messages communicated in the poems.³² This is also the case for *nasheeds* performed in classical Arabic. Actually, when it comes to

nasheeds this factor is probably strengthened by the fact that they are sung a cappella, which puts further emphasis on the jihadis' Islamic character.

In sum, it seems that the following factors are likely to make jihadi *nasheeds* effective messaging tools: they focus on a limited number of themes that appeal to listeners' emotions; some of these themes are aggressive; they have engaging rhythms and are repetitive; they apply a strategy of binary opposition; and they make use of symbolism that is culturally relevant. Before examining how IS *nasheeds* fulfill these criteria, literature on IS' messaging will be reviewed in order to be able to show how the hymns differ from other IS propaganda.

The Islamic State's Political Messaging

The target audience of IS' political messaging can be divided into enemies, unaligned population, and supporters, including active members, potential recruits, disseminators, proselytizers, and enlistsers.³³ According to Winter, the group's messaging focuses on six interconnected themes: brutality, victimhood, mercy, war, belonging, and apocalyptic utopianism.³⁴

The brutality serves to intimidate its enemies and is often directed against groups considered un-Islamic by IS. Among these groups are the Shi'a, who are often singled out as the most dangerous threat to pure Islam and as a result of this anti-Shi'ism has become one of IS' most prominent ideological tenets.³⁵ However, the purpose of this brutality is not limited to having an impact on the enemy, it also underscores the triumphalism that IS seeks to communicate to its supporters. It is restoring Islam's glory and avenging the mistreatment of Sunni Muslims all over the world. This leads into the second theme, which is that IS portrays Sunni Muslims as victims of a global war on Islam. The third theme, mercy, is often featured with brutality.

Together they represent the choice that those facing IS have to make: resist and be killed, or surrender and accept IS' understanding of Islam to be spared. The content, which focuses on IS' war effort, portrays IS as a real state with an effective and well-organized army. It also serves to intimidate IS' opponents and raise morale among members. The fifth theme focuses on the feeling of camaraderie and belonging that fighters and other individuals allegedly experience in the Caliphate and its main purpose is to attract new recruits.³⁶

The last theme, apocalyptic utopianism, is by far the most comprehensive one. Winter writes that "the idea of the utopia-'caliphate' runs strongly throughout all the organization's messaging. Its constant presence makes sense: Islamic State's establishment and implementation of the 'caliphate' is the organization's unique selling point".³⁷ By establishing the Caliphate, IS asserted itself as the leader and protector of Islam. However, this has been widely criticized by other jihadis, who have claimed that its state is simply a battlefield command.³⁸ To counter this criticism, IS has sought to assert its statehood by depicting the just rule and the utopian life it is providing. The apocalyptic part refers to the frequent references that convey that the end is near. Its message is clear: the establishment of the Caliphate and its victories are bringing judgment day closer. Those who want to enter paradise must join IS or face eternity in hell.³⁹

Schmid identifies twelve claims that are key parts of IS' messaging.⁴⁰ These both support and supplement Winter's findings. Similarly, they focus on intimidation of enemies, the portrayal of Sunni Muslims as victims of a global war on Islam, the camaraderie among fighters, and the establishment of the Caliphate. Schmid stresses that IS claims religious and political authority over all Muslims and that it is obligatory to pledge allegiance to the Caliph, as well as to emigrate to the Caliphate because it is the true land of Islam.⁴¹

However, Schmid shows the motivational aspects of IS' messaging clearer than Winter. He puts emphasis on the importance of violent jihad to IS. It claims that jihad is the remedy to the problems facing Islam and that a Muslim must participate in a campaign at one point during his lifetime in order to enter paradise.⁴² This is closely connected to another claim, which is that those who answer the call by migrating to the Caliphate and/or waging jihad will be rewarded in this life and in the afterlife.⁴³

To sum up, literature on IS' messaging shows that the group's propaganda serves many purposes, but the most important is probably the output that centers on "the idea of the utopia-caliphate" seeking to persuade Muslims to join IS' cause, either by migrating to its territories or by supporting it from afar.

Characteristics of IS Nasheeds

Based on the framework above, the author has chosen to divide the structure of the analysis into four main parts: Themes, Rhythm and Repetition, Binary Opposition, and Symbolism.

Themes

Based on their frequency, nine themes have been selected to form the basis for the analysis of the messaging in the *nasheeds*. These categories are the following: the weakness of Islam; the feeling of humiliation that individuals experience in their lives; jihad is the solution; depictions that portray IS' fighters as role models; the rewards of jihad and martyrdom; the establishment of the Islamic State; the Islamic State's just rule; content that focuses on war and brutality; and IS as the leader and protector of Islam. The frequency of the topics has been summarized in Table 1.

It should be noted that what Winter refers to as apocalyptic utopianism has been divided into three themes due to its broadness. These include the establishment of the Islamic State, the Islamic State's just rule, and IS as the leader and protector of Islam. The themes that stress mercy to former unbelievers and the camaraderie among fighters have not been included, because no clear references to them were found in the *nasheeds*.

(Insert Table 1: Frequency of topics in the *nasheeds*)

The Weakness of Islam

The weakness of Islam is featured in three *nasheeds*. However, the emphasis that each *nasheed* puts on it varies. In "The Land of Sinai" and "Take Up Position And Be Patient" it is briefly mentioned, while it is the main theme in only one *nasheed*, namely "Why bowing". Although most of the *nasheeds* do not deal with this theme, they often allude to it. For instance, the need to revitalize Islam to restore its glory is frequently mentioned. Indirectly, this refers to the weakness of Islam, because if it had been strong there would have been no need to revitalize it in the first place. This point is supported by the following example from "Take Up Position And Be Patient", where the connection between revitalization and the weakness of Islam is evident:

Verily, life is martyrdom, so seize it oh brave one

With it the wounded religion is revitalized⁴⁴

"Why Bowing" is the only *nasheed* that provides a reason for Islam's weakness.

The illness spread in an *ummah*

Which strayed from the path of the prophets⁴⁵

Although not an elaborate explanation, it is clear that Islam is weak since the *ummah* has diverted from the true faith. Another example of how the weakness is depicted is the beginning of “Why Bowing” when the *munshid*, the individual performing the hymn, lachrymously addresses his *ummah* asking:

Oh my *ummah*, the grief crushes me

Why are you bowing?

What is this about your trip ending?

And that you have taken off the garment of pride?

If weeping would have helped me

I would have died of excessive crying⁴⁶

This is a good example of how the *nasheeds* are meant to resonate with their listeners by appealing to their emotions. The weakness of the *ummah* is a theme that has potential to resonate with a significant part of Muslim populations around the world. The last centuries have had a negative impact on many Muslims’ self-esteem. Part of “(a) civilization that had always viewed itself as destined for leadership suffered one setback after the other at the hands of infidels who now set the pace in all realms of human activity”.⁴⁷ Because the *munshid* represents IS, his description, which gives the listeners the impression that he would do anything to help the *ummah*, increases the probability that they will identify with IS’ cause.

Although “Why Bowing” focuses on the entire *ummah*, it also communicates that the listeners have a stake in the problem. The following example clearly demonstrates the consequence that the weakness of the *ummah* has for individuals:

My Lord, what has befallen us?

How has the pure become dishonored?⁴⁸

Based on this, it seems that IS not only tries to affect listeners by depicting the weakness of Islam, but that it also seeks to connect this weakness to their experiences. By establishing a causal relationship between the individuals’ situation and the condition of Islam, IS increases the probability that an individual will adopt its cause. An example is descriptions that focus on the humiliation that individuals experience in their lives, which is treated in the next section.

The Feeling of Humiliation

The feeling of humiliation that individuals experience is mentioned in five *nasheeds* and it is the main topic in both “I Am Not Pleased With The Life Of Humiliation” and “Oh My Lord I Ask You”. In the latter the *munshid* posing as a broken individual addresses God and asks:

Oh my lord I ask you to deliver me from my state

For I am weak and these are my conditions

Oh my God what do I have to offer for my tomorrow

To be the day that my humiliation and insanity ends?⁴⁹

The focus on humiliation probably has potential to resonate with many young Arab-speaking

Muslims. Except for Sub-Saharan Africa, Arab countries have the world's highest proportion of population below 30 years of age. Figures show that for the whole region one in three youths are unemployed, and in some countries the unemployment rates are even higher.⁵⁰ Coupled with the fact that young Arabs are quite well educated, this can be a volatile mixture, because it prevents them from realizing their goals in life, which ultimately may result in feelings of exclusion from economic, social and political life.⁵¹ Moreover, the effects of globalization can magnify this feeling. "In recent decades ... images of affluence and democratic lifestyles spread by the international mass media, have fuelled feelings of deprivation among vast populations."⁵²

The feeling of humiliation is also relevant for some Muslim youths living in the West, who suffer from discrimination and feel excluded from society. Second and third generation Muslim immigrants often feel a double sense of non-belonging.⁵³ They neither feel part of their parents' communities and home countries nor in Western society, which is something that has contributed to a significant number joining IS in Syria.⁵⁴

Jihad is the Solution

The portrayal of jihad as the solution to the problems facing the *ummah* is present in almost all the *nasheeds*. The purpose of this is twofold, the first being to legitimize IS' *raison d'être*. In "My *Ummah*, Dawn Has Appeared", for instance, it is clear that victory only will return to the *ummah* by fighting.

My *ummah*, God is our lord

So be generous with blood

Victory will not return

Except by the blood of martyrs⁵⁵

Similar to depictions of weakness and humiliation, talk of returning Islam to its former glory might resonate with some individuals. This leads into the second purpose of the theme, which is to encourage people to join the jihad. For example, in “The Clanging of The Swords” the causal relationship between fighting and the return of glory is accompanied by a call to join the struggle.

In the midst of an assault that exterminates the oppressors
The silencer gun is the beauty of the echo
So stand up, brother, to the path of salvation
So we can march together to repel the aggressors
And raise the glory ...⁵⁶

Jihad is not only portrayed as the solution for the *ummah* but also for the individual. In both “I Am Not Pleased With The Life of Humiliation” and “My Brother, Inform My Companions” it is suggested that martyrdom and jihad is the way out of a life of humiliation. In the latter, after the *munshid* explains that he will blow up the enemies’ barracks, he says: “My brother, join me if I die, for a life of humiliation is no life”.⁵⁷ Similar to this, a clear motivational aspect is found in the next two themes, which focus on the fighters’ virtues and the rewards of martyrdom.

The Fighters Are Role Models

Fifteen *nasheeds* include parts that portray the IS fighters in an idealistic manner. Perhaps the most important reason why their virtues are emphasized is to portray them as role models,

whose acts are worthy of emulation, to encourage Muslims to join the jihad. In particular, this may have impact on young individuals, who feel that their lives have little meaning. An example of how this is done is the following line from "Soon, Soon", which compares the fighters to lions to underscore their heroism, strength, and valor:⁵⁸

We die standing as lions of bravery⁵⁹

These comparisons are found in six *nasheeds* and seem to be quite common. Another way the *nasheeds* stress the fighters' virtues is by describing their willingness to sacrifice themselves for the sake of Islam. An example is found in "I Am Not Pleased With The Life Of Humiliation", where the *munshid* states the following:

I will remain faithful to the oath

Whatever setbacks I will suffer from creation, or else I will be to blame

Whatever the enemy will impose on me by force

I will remain steadfast whatever they let wander⁶⁰

In addition to portraying the fighters as role models, this serves to legitimize IS itself. For how can it not be worthy of support when its fighters are willing carry out the utmost sacrifices for the religion.

Rewards of Jihad and Martyrdom

It fulfills the same purpose as the previous theme, namely to motivate individuals to join the jihad. By describing the noble character of the fighters and the rewards they will receive, these two themes can also help to prevent dropouts by reassuring current members that the

cause is worth the sacrifice.

The rewards are featured in eight *nasheeds*; however, they are conveyed differently in each of them. An example is found in “Take Up Position And Be Patient” where it is clear that to wage jihad is the way to paradise. It is noteworthy that the text seems to be inspired by a hadith, an alleged saying of the Prophet Muhammad, that reports: “Know that Paradise is under the shades of swords”.⁶¹ The example is as follows:

You will find paradise harbored beneath the banners and the sword

So choose martyrdom in request of *Firdaws*, the highest degree of paradise⁶²

“Victory to whoever obtains martyrdom” is the only *nasheed* where the rewards of martyrdom constitute the main theme. Below is an extract from the *nasheed*:

Oh victory to whoever obtains martyrdom truthfully

The sins will be eradicated if blood is shed (...)

And they (the martyrs) dwell comfortably in the crops of birds

And within them their souls live on and thrive

And they have houses and companionship in paradise

And a spring of all that is good, which increases and expands

And they have beautiful *hur* to satisfy them

And they will mediate for their families if they are restricted⁶³

Here many of the rewards promised to Muslim martyrs are provided, which indicates that the

framing of the content is conducted with great care to have the largest possible impact on the listener. To mention a couple of these, the promise of *hur* (virgins) is featured, as is the possibility to intercede with God on behalf of family members if they need help to enter paradise.⁶⁴ Another example is the two lines describing that martyrs will live on comfortably inside crops of birds. It is a reference to a hadith, which reports that when asked about the fate of martyrs the Prophet Muhammad said, “(t)heir souls are inside green birds that have lamps, which are hanging below the Throne (of Allah), and they wander about in Paradise wherever they wish”.⁶⁵

The Establishment of the Islamic State

The message that the Islamic State is established is found in five *nasheeds*. IS employs this theme to portray itself as the leader and protector of the *ummah*. In line with the group’s triumphalism, it also stresses that IS is achieving great accomplishments. An example is found in "Oh Soldiers of Truth, Let's Go", which boasts that

The State of Islam has risen
So crush all the borders⁶⁶

According to IS, the establishment of the Islamic State and removal of the man-made borders in the Middle East, which were created on the basis of the Sykes-Picot agreement, are essential to bringing triumph and glory to Islam. Since IS has established the Islamic State, it therefore claims that victory is near. This claim is found in four *nasheeds* and can be seen in light of two features of IS’ worldview. The first is that IS contends that it is the victorious Islamic sect, which God has chosen to prevail.⁶⁷ The second is the group’s emphasis on millenarianism, since each of its victories is supposedly bringing judgment day closer.

Together these features communicate that there is a sense of urgency to join the group, something that probably increases its potential to attract new recruits and followers. Arguably, since IS is the only true Islamic sect and judgment day is drawing near, there is no alternative but to join the group for those who desire to enter paradise.

The establishment of the Islamic State is also a central theme in “Hands Are Stretched Pledging *Bay’a* To You As Imam”. However, its efforts to portray IS as the leader of Islam is most evident in the emphasis on the need to pledge allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as the leader of the *ummah* to stress that Muslims must unite under his leadership. Two examples show this particularly well, the first being the chorus:

Convey our greeting to Abu Bakr,
Convey that he is the honorable lord, the Imam
Raise our banners in each abode
The State of Islam is safety and peace

The second:

Oh Abu Bakr al-Husayni, look
The hands are stretched pledging *bay’a* to you as Imam⁶⁸

In the last example he is referred to as Abu Bakr al-Husayni, which signifies that he is a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad. Al-Baghdadi’s tribe, the Albu Badri of Samarra, claims lineage to the prophet’s grandson Husayn.⁶⁹ IS uses this to legitimize Abu Bakr’s

leadership of the *ummah* and in extension of this the establishment of its state. The reasoning behind this is that lineage to the prophet traditionally has served the purpose of legitimizing Caliphs. In fact, the majority of the world's Sunni Muslim scholars still assert that the Caliph must be from Muhammad's tribe.⁷⁰ The only other *nasheed* that mentions IS' leader is "The land of Sinai", which refers to him as the *shaykh*.

The *shaykh* for whom we will sacrifice ourselves swore
Reverence of him is binding upon us⁷¹

Interestingly, none of the *nasheeds* refers to IS as the Caliphate or to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as the Caliph. For roughly half of them this is natural because they were produced before the proclamation of the Caliphate. However, "The Land of Sinai" where he is referred to as *shaykh*, which means leader in this context, was produced after the proclamation. Albeit this is a venerable title, it is not as high-ranked as Caliph. When considering that much of IS' legitimacy rests upon its claim of being the Caliphate this seems quite surprising. More research is, however, needed to draw clear conclusions from this. For instance, it could be that this discrepancy is owed to preferred style and way of expression in *nasheeds*, rather than anything else.

The Islamic State's Just Rule

The just rule of IS is only featured in two *nasheeds*. In "Hands Are Stretched Pledging *Bay'a* To You As Imam" it is mentioned briefly, while it is the main theme in "Our Lord's Sharia". This theme differs from the others because it communicates a softer side of IS. It focuses on IS' ability to govern in accordance with Islamic law and that its rule is providing safety and peace for its subjects. An example is found in the second verse of "Our Lord's Sharia":

And our state has risen on the basis of true Islam

And in spite of its jihad on the enemy, it is governing people rightfully

And it takes care of its subjects with the utmost compassion and gentleness⁷²

This stresses that IS goes to great lengths to make its subjects' lives as good as possible, something that is conveyed even clearer in the last part of the *nasheed*, which asserts that IS has, in fact, been able to create an utopian Islamic society.

A life with so much comfort, it is as though we are in a dream

The splendor of Islam has sketched it, and what a beautiful drawing

And our state is achieving it, for it is not the companion of delusion

What a pure religion, what an eminent rule!⁷³

The main purpose of portraying life in the Islamic State in this way is probably to persuade Muslims to migrate to it.⁷⁴ Bearing this in mind, it is noteworthy that there are not more descriptions of IS' governance in the *nasheeds*.

War and Brutality

In fifteen of seventeen *nasheeds* war is a central theme, an unsurprising fact considering that these are jihadi *nasheeds* and that IS is fighting an existential battle. Some *nasheeds* also include threats against IS' enemies. In "Soon, Soon" intimidation seems to be the main purpose. Unlike most of the other *nasheeds* where the enemy is simply referred to as oppressors, tyranny, unbelievers, or unbelief, it indicates the main target of the intimidation. As apparent from the two following examples, it is directed at the members of the

international coalition against it:

Example one:

Soon, soon you will see the astonishing,

A terrifying fight; you will see

Within your homes the battles will be

Example two:

You started fighting me with the alliance of shelter

So taste my curse ...⁷⁵

The threat to bring the war to the member states of the coalition is in line with statements by its official spokesperson Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, where he calls for attacks against the Western partners of the coalition.⁷⁶ “Soon, Soon” also describes IS’ brutality against unbelief and its determination to be victorious no matter the cost. And similar to the other *nasheeds* of this sample, it does not single out one group, such as the Shi‘a, as a particular dangerous threat against pure Islam.

If unbelief spreads, is agitated and froths in anger

We will fill the roads with red blood

By the darkness of bayonets, by striking necks⁷⁷

Its brutality is also focused on in other *nasheeds* such as “We Came As Soldiers For God”⁷⁸ and “Squadrons of My State”, which orders the soldiers “to not have mercy on the impure

one whose tongue distorts”.⁷⁹ This brutality against unbelief shows that IS is strictly applying the salafi-jihadi concept of *al-wala’ wal-bara’*, which stipulates that Muslims must only be loyal to true Islam and disavow everything un-Islamic.⁸⁰ By conveying that IS will stop at nothing in its quest to purge the *ummah* of unwanted elements, the brutality might also serve to legitimize IS in some people’s eyes. This might explain some of IS’ appeal. Particularly for those suffering from lack of opportunities and experiencing humiliation, the opportunity to be part of a seemingly unstoppable group such as IS that provides both a sense of belonging and purpose can be very attractive.

The Leader and Protector of Islam

In some way all the themes feed into the message that IS is the legitimate leader of Islam. The establishment of the Islamic State is probably the most important one in this regard. Another way that IS stresses its leadership role is by communicating that it is re-establishing true Islam and that it is the only entity capable of doing so. This is particularly noticeable in “Our Lord’s Sharia” and in “My *Ummah*, Dawn Has Appeared.” The latter claims that

The state of Islam has risen
By the jihad of the pious
Righteously they have offered souls
With faithfulness and conviction
So that the religion will be established⁸¹

In “The Land of Sinai” IS’ role as the protector of Islam is mentioned explicitly. Unlike the other *nasheeds*, it also seeks to strengthen the message that IS is the leader of the *ummah* by focusing on its presence in regions outside Syria and Iraq. In a boastful manner it describes

some of the actions that jihadis have carried out in the Sinai Peninsula. An example is the following verse, where the striking of the gas deal refers to attacks carried out by jihadis on gas pipelines:⁸²

The gas deal, we struck it
The guider's help, we asked for it
The head of the spy, we cut it off
The army of tyranny, we roasted it
Oh soldiers of God march⁸³

“Victory to whoever obtains martyrdom” is the only *nasheed* that stresses IS’ leadership role by making references to important events in jihadi history. Since approximately half of the *nasheed’s* content deals with this topic, only an extract will be written to serve as an example.

Kabul has tightened up and the camels have become emaciated
Remember the people of the Arabian Peninsula
The brothers who left the comfort for jihad, they departed
They left their women, families and houses for the sake of God
And they assaulted against all odds saying *Allahu Akbar*
Ask the surviving Russians about their steadfastness
And ask them how they destroyed the fortifications

From Egypt they have marched and Algeria has provided fighters
And from every region others have marched

From Yemen with faith and sincere resoluteness
Its freemen have marched and not retreated
And mention Mesopotamia and our Sham
From there our heroes have prepared for battle⁸⁴

Here the *nasheed* links the jihad in Afghanistan and the *mujahidin's* contributions in other places to IS' current struggle in Sham (greater Syria) and Mesopotamia (Iraq), thereby, indicating that the group is following in their footsteps. Based on this and the rivalry with al-Qaida, it can be inferred that IS is attempting to assert itself as the only true jihadi movement.

The Themes and The *Nasheeds* As Messaging Tools

The analysis shows that IS focuses on a limited number of themes. These themes rarely provide detailed explanations for the claims they make. However, this does not limit their ability to deliver the message since they appeal to the listeners' emotions and are based on themes with broad appeal in the *ummah*. It also seems that the *nasheeds* have potential to make their listeners more prone to violence, because all except from "Our Lord's Sharia" include sections with aggressive lyrical themes.

Similar to the Taliban *taranas*, the focus on a limited number of themes contributes to make these *nasheeds* powerful messaging tools. This is especially the case since it facilitates the communication of a narrative in a clear and coherent way, which is a must for a narrative to be efficient.⁸⁵ Based on the analysis above, the following overarching narrative arises:

- Islam is in crisis. The *ummah* has come under the yoke of unbelief's oppression and this is causing suffering and humiliation for Muslims.

- IS is restoring the glory of Islam by purging the *ummah* of unbelief and waging jihad against Islam's enemies.
- IS has established the Islamic State and is the leader of Islam. Therefore, it is obligatory for every Muslim to swear allegiance to it.
- Those who answer IS' call to jihad will be rewarded in the afterlife.

None of the *nasheeds* communicate this narrative in its entirety. However, together the *nasheeds* are capable of conveying it to their listeners since someone, who is familiar with IS' cause and *nasheeds*, is likely to listen to more than one *nasheed*.

The narrative has clear diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational elements, which Benford and Snow explain are vital to mobilize support and persuade individuals to join a movement.⁸⁶

This suggests that the main target audience of the messaging in the *nasheeds* is Muslims and particularly those who are either sympathetic to IS' cause or could easily become so. A point supported by the fact that all the themes appear to target this group. Only a few *nasheeds*, such as "Soon, Soon" feature clear intimidations directed at the enemy. However, it is not clear whether or not IS' enemies are actually listening to these hymns. The purpose of these intimidations could also be to dehumanize the enemy and strengthen the binary opposition between Islam and unbelief, which is another feature of the IS *nasheeds* discussed in more detail below.

Rhythm and Repetition

The *nasheeds* fulfill some of the requirements of the *qasida*, as each one is composed in classical Arabic and applies a single metre with verses divided into two hemistichs.⁸⁷ As suggested previously, the last point contributes to give the *nasheeds* engaging rhythms and

melodies, which helps to explain their popularity among jihadis and their potential to make listeners addicted to them.⁸⁸

Rhyme schemes are also employed in all the *nasheeds*, which is something that intensifies their rhythm and increases their potential to influence listeners. Although the end-rhyme changes in some *nasheeds* such as “My *Ummah*, Dawn Has Appeared”, more than half apply a monorhyme. An example is the *nasheed* “Soon, Soon” where all the lines end with the syllable *rā*. Below is a transliteration of the two first lines of this hymn to exemplify this:

Qarīban qarība tarawna l-‘ajība, širā‘an rahība wa-sawfa tarā

Bi-‘uqri diyārik takūnu l-ma‘ārik li-‘ajlī damārik ḥusamī nbarā

The *nasheeds* are also very repetitive. Coupled with their engaging rhythm, this facilitates internalization of the messages in the *nasheeds*. For example, many of the *nasheeds* have a chorus that is repeated at least once. In “The Clanging of the Swords” the chorus constitutes sixteen out of a total of twenty-five lines, which makes it one of the most repetitive *nasheeds* of this sample. Some such as “We Have The Swords” and “Go Forward To Death” do not have choruses. Nonetheless, they are still quite repetitive since certain lines are repeated several times in a row, the purpose of which is to put emphasis on the key ideas communicated in the *nasheeds*, thereby, enhancing their ability to deliver messages. Below is an example of this from “I Am Not Pleased With The Life Of Humiliation”:

The life of humiliation, no, I am not pleased with it

And love of death with honor is a desire

By God, I do not fear death, for the slave has no place in the world

For the slave has no place in the world

For the slave has no place in the world⁸⁹

It effectively conveys that Muslims have to choose between a life of humiliation and an honorable death that involves fighting for the sake of God. In this case the repetition of the line “for the slave has no place in the world” indicates that they must choose to fight since the material world is less important than the afterlife.

Binary Opposition

The dichotomy between the material world and the afterlife, as well as between a life of humiliation and an honorable death indicate that there is much use of binary oppositions in the *nasheeds*. These oppositions help to communicate IS’ themes in a clear and somewhat simplistic manner, because they do not leave room for ambivalence. Another example of a binary opposition is found in “Our Lord’s Sharia”:

Our lord's sharia is a light, by it we rise higher than the star

By it we live without humiliation, a life of security and peace.

And our state has risen on the basis of true Islam⁹⁰

The opposition between a life of humiliation and a secure and peaceful life makes it clear that there is no middle ground. Muslims have to choose between a life of humiliation outside the Islamic State and a just and honorable life in this entity, where it is possible to live according to the sharia. This message is closely connected to the opposition between unbelief and IS as the representative of true Islam, which is the last example of binary opposition that will be

given here. It is featured in several *nasheeds* and effectively conveys that IS defends the *ummah* from unbelief. An example of this is found in “The Land Of Sinai”.

Oh soldiers of God march

And defeat the damned unbelief

Oh soldiers of God

Verily, the edifice of *tawhid* (the unity of God), we have built it ⁹¹

Here IS’ fighters are described as the soldiers of God, which stands in stark contrast to unbelief. Moreover, the claim to have built the edifice of *tawhid* stresses their commitment to Islam, as well as their clear opposition to unbelief.

Symbolism

There is extensive use of symbolism in the *nasheeds*. Some examples of this such as depictions of fighters as lions have already been mentioned. Another recurrent symbol is the sword, which is present in six *nasheeds*. In “We Have The Swords” and “The Clanging of The Swords” its centrality is evident, because it is featured in their titles. The sword has important symbolic meaning in Islamist culture and is often used in jihadi messaging. As Matusitz notes, “the sword personified the purity, nobility, and overall uprightness that are connected to the Prophet Muhammad, his companions, other early Islamic heroes, and their successful military campaigns”.⁹² By using this symbol, IS seeks to connect its jihad to the first generations of Muslim warriors. This reflects a key tenet of Salafi-jihadism, namely the fact that jihadis seek to emulate the *salaf*, the companions of the Prophet Muhammad.⁹³ An example of how IS uses this word to promote itself is found in the beginning of “We Have The Swords”:

We have the enraged and smiling swords
We have the cry of truth at the time of the clash
For we are the defiant lions⁹⁴

Based on the symbolism of the sword, this stresses that it is the leader and protector of true Islam. *Al-Quds* is another important jihadi symbol. It is the Arabic name for Jerusalem and is the third holiest place in Islam after Mecca and Medina. Since Jordan lost the city to Israel in the Six-Day War, it has been a powerful symbol for the struggle to reclaim Palestinian and more importantly, at least for jihadis, Muslim territory.⁹⁵ The only *nasheed* that mentions *al-Quds* is “Oh Victory To Whoever Obtains Martyrdom”, where the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is used as rallying call to jihad.

I convey a call to those strongholds
And to those that have prepared to depart
Make strong for the departure to jihad
Perhaps you will be killed for the sake of God, or maybe you will be victorious
And perhaps you will terrorize your enemy
For *al-Quds* is weeping while the Jews are being insolent⁹⁶

Conclusion

This article has examined the content of seventeen IS nasheeds released between December 2013 and March 2015. The *nasheeds* mostly convey the same political messages as IS’ propaganda in general. The *nasheeds* primarily target existing members of IS, or individuals

whom the group is trying to persuade to join its cause. The main themes that the *nasheeds* focus on feed into a clear and coherent message, which is that the *ummah* is weak because it has diverted from true Islam and come under the yoke of unbelief. However, there is hope. IS has established the Islamic State and is restoring Islam's glory by way of violent jihad.

By employing themes that are familiar to many Muslims, the message is carefully crafted to resonate with as many listeners as possible. This is most evident in the frequent appeals to the listeners' emotions such as when the *munshid* painfully describes Islam's weakness and the humiliation that some (especially young) Muslims feel in their everyday lives. The focus on war and brutality against unbelief, which is present in most of the *nasheeds*, might also appeal to certain audiences, especially since it gives the impression that IS is unstoppable. Moreover, these violent themes can increase aggressive thoughts, ideas, and behaviors among listeners; something that increases the probability that individuals will carry out violent acts to further IS' cause.

The widespread use of both culturally relevant symbolism and binary oppositions facilitates the communication of messages in a clear and comprehensible manner. As for the form, it is clear that the *nasheeds*' application of a monometre, use of rhyme schemes, and extensive use of repetition also enhance their effectiveness as a means of communication. The monometre and rhyme schemes make their rhythmic elements very engaging and addictive to the listener. This facilitates internalization of the message, while the repetitiveness helps to put emphasis on the main messages communicated in the *nasheeds*.

However, there are some differences between the *nasheeds* and other forms of IS

propaganda. For instance, neither the Caliphate nor the Caliph is mentioned in the *nasheeds* and there are no references to mercy to former unbelievers who have adopted IS' understanding of Islam. Additionally, camaraderie among the *mujahidin* is not mentioned. Even so, it is clear that the singing of *nasheeds*, which fighters often do in their spare time, is an act of camaraderie itself and that it plays an important role in strengthening the ties between IS members.

It is also noteworthy that only two *nasheeds* mention IS' good governance considering that this is regarded as one of the most important ways that the group asserts its statehood. It is outside the scope of this article to provide a sophisticated explanation for this. However, a contributing factor could be that hymns that depict a softer side of jihadi groups historically have been less common than those focusing on war.⁹⁷ And since jihadis often perform *nasheeds* before going into battle, the discrepancy could be owed to the fact that *nasheeds* might be more important in preparation for battle than other forms of messaging.

Anti-Shi'ism is considered one of the group's most prominent ideological tenets. In the *nasheeds*, however, there is no mentioning of the Shi'a. Rather, the enemy is mostly described in general terms such as unbelief. When it comes to the usage of *nasheeds* as messaging tools, this could be very useful to IS. By identifying the enemy as unbelief instead of targeting the Shi'a in particular, the hymns could also be used by IS affiliates, who operate in areas where there are no Shi'as, to demonize their enemies.

The article has only examined IS *nasheeds* as audio files. Future research could, therefore, examine the use of *nasheeds* in other forms of media such as propaganda videos to provide increased understanding of the role that *nasheeds* play in jihadi messaging. Future studies

may also compare *nasheeds* produced by different jihadi groups and results could show whether or not jihadi groups employ *nasheeds* in a similar fashion.

Notes

¹ Jihadi “refers here to militant individuals, groups, networks and ideologies emanating from the Arab-based foreign fighter movement of the Afghan jihad in the 1980s.” Petter Nesser and Anne Stenersen, “The Modus Operandi of Jihadi Terrorists in Europe,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 8, no. 6 (December 18, 2014): 3, <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/388>.

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⁴ The number of *nasheeds* might exceed this number; however, only those that it is certain that meet these criteria have been included.

⁵ “Ajnad Media Nasheed,” *Ansar Khilafah*, n.d., <https://ansarkhilafah.wordpress.com/ajnad-media-nasheed/>.

⁶ Complete English translations are available on file with author.

⁷ James Dickins, Sándor Hervey, and Ian Higgins, *Thinking Arabic Translation: A Course in Translation Method: Arabic to English* (Routledge, 2013), 6.

⁸ Michael Frishkopf, “Inshad Dini and Aghani Diniyya in Twentieth Century Egypt: A Review of Styles, Genres, and Available Recordings,” *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* 34, no. 2 (2000): 168.

⁹ Gilbert Ramsay, *Jihadi Culture on the World Wide Web* (Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2013), 64.

¹⁰ Behnam Said, “Hymns (*Nasheeds*): A Contribution to the Study of the *Jihadist* Culture,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 35, no. 12 (December 2012): 864, doi:10.1080/1057610X.2012.720242.

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¹³ Said, “Hymns (*Nasheeds*),” 864.

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- ¹⁸ Said, “Hymns (*Nasheeds*),” 875.
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- ²³ *Ibid.*, 150.
- ²⁴ Mikhail Pelevin and Matthias Weinreich, “The Songs of the Taliban: Continuity of Form and Thought in an Ever-Changing Environment,” *Iran and the Caucasus* 16, no. 1 (March 1, 2012): 45–70, doi:10.1163/160984912X13309560274055.
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- ⁶⁰ *I Am Not Pleased With The Life Of Humiliation*, n.d., <https://ia902508.us.archive.org/26/items/2jnd-7yt-dhl/gczn5A.mp3>.
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⁸⁴ *Oh Victory To Whoever Obtains Martyrdom.*

⁸⁵ David Betz, "The Virtual Dimension of Contemporary Insurgency and Counterinsurgency," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 19, no. 4 (2008): 520–522, doi:10.1080/09592310802462273.

⁸⁶ Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment," *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000): 614–618.

⁸⁷ Based on Stoetzer's overview of current classical Arabic metres, it was found that five monometres are used in the *nasheeds*. These include *mutadarik*, *mutaqarib*, *wafir*, *kamil* and *ramal*. While *mutadarik* is used in one *nasheed* only, each of the other metres is used in four *nasheeds*. This overview is found in Willem Stoetzer, "Prosody," in *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, ed. Julie Scott Meisami and Paul Starkey (Taylor & Francis, 1998), 621.

⁸⁸ E.g., Alex Marshall, "How Isis Got Its Anthem," *The Guardian*, November 9, 2014, sec. Music, <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/nov/09/nasheed-how-isis-got-its-anthem>; Seth Stevenson, "Teen or Terrorist?," *Slate*, April 6, 2015,

http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/dispatches/2015/04/tsarnaev_trial_closing_statements_the_prosecution_paints_dzhokhar_as_a_jihadi.html; Andrew Buncombe, "'Jihadi Anthems' Found on Al-Qaeda Suspect's Phone Played to New York Court," *The Independent*, February 24, 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/abid-naseer-terror-trial-jihadi-anthems-found-on-al-qaeda-suspects-phone-read-to-new-york-court-10066160.html>.

⁸⁹ *I Am Not Pleased With The Life Of Humiliation.*

⁹⁰ *Our Lord's Sharia.*

⁹¹ *The Land Of Sinai.*

⁹² Matusitz, *Symbolism in Terrorism.*

⁹³ Quintan Wiktorowicz, "A Genealogy of Radical Islam," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 28, no. 2 (February 16, 2005): 75–76.

⁹⁴ *We Have The Swords*, n.d.,

<https://ia802704.us.archive.org/35/items/anasheedajnad3/%D9%84%D9%86%D8%A7%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B1%D9%87%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%AA.mp3>.

⁹⁵ Matusitz, *Symbolism in Terrorism.*

⁹⁶ *Oh Victory To Whoever Obtains Martyrdom.*

⁹⁷ Said, "Hymns (*Nasheeds*)," 871.