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AL-JIHAD FI SABILILLAH: IN THE HEART OF GREEN BIRDS

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Abstract

With an increasing focus on lone-wolf operations, al-Qaeda is becoming increasingly focussed on its internet discourses and propaganda. One of its most significant discourses is the importance of jihad and martyrdom in carrying out a terrorist attack. This study looks at Facebook pages and profiles and examines the discourses presented in relation to jihad and martyrdom. Three important concepts including their justification are considered: Al-Jihad fi Sabilillah (just fight for the sake of Allah), Istishhad (operational heroism of loving death more than the West love life) and Shaheed (becoming a martyr). Results supported previous studies indicating the strong seductive nature of such discourses. Although many discourses were similar to previous studies, several key differences were noted; namely, different emphasises within the concept of Shaheed as well as a strong focus on green bird imagery which became prominent during the Bosnian conflict. Understanding such discourses will be critical in not only preventing terrorism, but also in the developing better deradicalisation strategies.

Keywords

Al-Jihad fi Sabilillah, discourses, Facebook, heart of green birds, Istishhad, jihad, lone-wolf, martyrdom, narratives, Shaheed, social media, terrorism.

INTRODUCTION

Despite a measure of progress in Afghanistan, coupled with increasing attention and strategies implemented to reduce the risk of terrorism in the West, the threat of terrorism itself is far from over. Significantly, there has been a shift towards more isolated acts of terrorism facilitated by skilled recruiters using internet and social media technologies (Page, October 11, 2012). These isolated acts of terrorism are termed 'lone-wolf' and pose the most significant current threat in the West (Page, October 11, 2012; Sageman, 2008).

Understanding the processes and discourses of seduction is an important step in developing strategies in preventing terrorism. Essentially, terrorism is a social construct where actors are guided to behave a certain way within a given context (Hawdon & Ryan, 2009). Within Western society, terrorism is a subculture that aims to seduce by adapting people to products and discourses for its subculture (Hamm, 2004). One of the best ways to understand this culture is through an analysis of its discourse and narratives. In fact, narratives are fundamental to social constructs because they shape identity and action, as well as, represent products of a culture or subculture (Presser, 2012). Furthermore, narratives are useful in criminology because they are very descriptive of both the individual and group subculture (Presser, 2009).

Examination of terrorist cases confirms this idea of narrative discourses being an antecedent to terrorist behaviour. The Benbrika case in Australia found a common theme in radical Islamic material that was confiscated; discussing that paradise awaits the martyr who follows the path of jihad ("Australian terror trial told of "library of extremist books"," 2008). Moreover, material outlining the rewards of the martyr, such as: 72 virgins, interceding on behalf of one's family and the martyr's soul being kept in the heart of a green bird to fly around in paradise were noted ("Australian terror trial told of "library of extremist books"," 2008). More recently in 2010, the Stockholm suicide bomber, Taimour Abdulwahab al-Abdaly left a 'suicide' video showing his canaries as a representation of martyr's being in the heart of green birds (Anonymous, 04.01.2011). This year (2012), the Sydney riots took place (and became violent) over an anti-Islamic film involving some radical elements from the Muslim community. This in turn demonstrates the potential risk of radicalised Muslims within Australia. The Australian Federal Police Assistant Commissioner for counter-terrorism, Steve Lancaster stated in an interview that disaffected men are at risk of being influenced especially by those who have been overseas (Zwartz, September 27, 2012). Of particular concern, are those with the fundamentalist Sunni ideology (Zwartz, September 27, 2012). This was evident with the promotion of an additional sixth pillar of jihad

promoted at the Sydney riots on some T-Shirts (Box & Edwards, 2012) which is held by extremist Sunni minorities. Extremist notions of jihad are often very closely associated with martyrdom, particularly given the risks faced by those undertaking the challenge of facing an often more powerful adversary.

Research Focus

This paper will focus specifically on narratives and discourses related to martyrdom as the ultimate form of jihad. The purpose of the research was to explore which discourses and narratives are most prominent on extremist pages and groups on the social media site of Facebook.

Discourses and Imagery Related to Jihad and Martyrdom

Imagery is an essential aspect of jihad particularly in its ability to evoke emotion. Of particular interest, is the fact that this affective dimension is targeted toward the alienated and disaffected. Such alienation often leads towards a greater propensity for radicalisation (Tripathi, 2002). Furthermore, shame and humiliation can be an important driver for terrorism, promoting not only a need for violent action but also spiritual purity (Jones, 2006). Radical Islam (Salafi jihadist) has a number of important narrative concepts that will be outlined below.

Al-Jihad fi Sabilillah

The Arabic phrase Al-Jihad fi Sabilillah means striving or fighting in the path of Allah (Gawrych, 2002) and is referred to in the Qur'an (Holbrook, 2010). Fundamental to this fight is an underlying just cause. It is a test of devotion and self-sacrifice for the individual (Minzili, 2007). There is one of two outcomes from this just fight and that is either victory or, martyrdom and paradise (Bar, 2006). This willingness to fight and die for a just cause is viewed as a major tactical advantage by terrorist leaders (Schweitzer, 2006) and is closely related to the next concept - Istishhad.

Istishhad

Istishhad is a discourse that seeks to evoke a very sharp contrast between the faithful and the infidel. Simply put, it is the fact that in operations it contrasts the faithful Muslim as one that loves death and eagerly awaits death with the West who value and love life (Schweitzer & Ferber, 2005). It is a rejection of the temporal world and a focus on the eternal. Jihad in Shia discourse shares many similarities with that of Sunni salafists (despite extreme Sunni salafists viewing Shia's as heretics), with one of the most important being that success of operations depends on being able to focus a warrior towards the goal of paradise (Litvak, 2010). Perhaps the most important aspect of this concept is that it is independent of any forms of structured leadership which has been imperative for al-Qaeda since the global war on terror (Schweitzer, 2006). The goal of one that holds a strong view of Istishhad is to become a martyr (shaheed).

Shaheed

Shaheed or martyr is the name given to anyone who has died fighting for the cause of Allah (Gawrych, 2002). Shaheed is much more than a term; it encapsulates a whole range of imagery. It is a brave soul who has fought an oppressive enemy at close range (Raja, 2005). Moreover, Shaheed encompasses a passage or Shahaadat, between life and paradise bypassing the place of judgement indicating a cleansing and forgiveness of sin (Raja, 2005). They also receive a place of elevation amongst other Muslims (Minzili, 2007).

History and Justification of Jihad and Martyrdom

Historically, the term jihad has undergone many transformations. Whilst jihad has connotations to both internal and external struggles, nonetheless, the ultimate model of a martyr's death is based on the earliest martyrs who first battled for the Islamic cause (Heck, 2004).

Justification for jihad and martyrdom is often argued from both the Qu'ran (e.g. 9:38) and the Hadith (Bar, 2006). For example Qur'an 9:38:

O you who believe! What is the matter with you, that when you are asked to march forth in the Cause of Allah (i.e., Jihad) you cling heavily to the earth? Are you pleased with the life of this world rather than the Hereafter? But little is the enjoyment of the life of this world as compared with the Hereafter.

Nevertheless, it is the Hadith that carries much of the discourse related to martyrdom (Bar, 2006). In addition, both early writings and more recent fatwas by clerics both declare jihad as a legal and religious obligation as well as an act that attracts many heroic rewards (Bar, 2006; Holbrook, 2010).

Jihad and Martyrdom on the Internet

Al-Jihad fi Sabilillah is one of the core discourses that al-Qaeda seeks to promote through the internet (Schweitzer & Ferber, 2005). Also, Istishhad is a concept al-Qaeda has sought to globalise due to its power of seduction (Schweitzer & Ferber, 2005). Sites such as YouTube are filled with narratives of martyrs.

In a study of how martyrdom is propagated online, Hafez (2007) found that a disturbingly incredible job was done in capturing the narratives of the oppression of Muslims coupled with redemption through faithful service. Additionally, video narratives tended to be emotive and seek to promote the status of the heroic martyr with the rewards of martyrdom are spelt out clearly (Hafez, 2007). Consequently, the key question arises, will a similar focus and emphasis be found on Facebook?

METHODOLOGY

The research project utilised a grounded theory approach where discourses were collected from multiple pages and groups using fifty one different pseudonym user names. Discourses were observed for a period of six months and collected over a period of three weeks. Data collection was limited to Facebook pages and groups and involved no interaction with any members. As far as possible, emphasis was placed on collecting material from Australian based profiles. A total of thirty four profile and group pages were collected for analysis.

Data was analysed using an inductive qualitative approach. A framework based on the three broad categories found in the literature review was used to organise the data. Open comparative coding was used in order to identify further core categories and themes (Mills, Bonnor & Francis, 2006; Holton, 2007). In addition, meanings were questioned to avoid taken for granted assumptions (Mills, Bonnor & Francis, 2006). Additionally, data was cross checked and searched to ensure no new themes emerged and hence data saturation was achieved (Holton, 2007). All results will use pseudonym codes to ensure adherence to National Ethical Guidelines. All spelling mistakes and variations have been left in the original posts.

RESULTS

When presenting the results it is important to remember that while the concepts of Al-Jihad fi Sabilillah, Istishhad and Shaheed have been separated, they are very much interrelated. Overall, on analysis of posts, the main emphasis was on the final concept of Shaheed. As part of the inductive analysis of this concept, discourse and imagery about martyrs being in the heart of green birds was a recurring theme and thus will be discussed under a separate heading.

Al-Jihad fi Sabilillah

This concept is essentially the starting point that may lead to martyrdom (shaheed). Interestingly, posts relating to this concept were mostly targeted towards moderate Muslims and were essentially an apologetic defence of the concept (see Figure 1). Coupled with this were posts highlighting the oppression of Muslims by the West across the globe.

Be careful not to prevent others from Jihad in Allah’s Cause, whatever the cause is [0104]

How can you dare to prevent people from carrying out an act of obedience which Allah loves, Has commanded His Slaves and Has obligated in the likes of these circumstances? [0107]

O Muslims, we are fighting in defense of our religion and your religion, our honor and your honor. If you do not fight with us, at least do not stand in our way as we fight those criminal traitors [quote from martyr Ibn Hazm] [0108]

And wanted to point out that we (muslims) are not in any position to criticise or blacklist these people as bad people. Mujahiddeens never fight for their own desires [02113]

Death is only once so let it be in the path of Alllah [0704]

Jihad FI Sabilillah Let us sell our lives to our Lord to gain His mercy and devote our life for One who deserve [0706]

Sources: Moderate Muslim discussion pages and extremist pages on Facebook

Figure 1. Posts relating to the path of jihad for the sake of Allah

Posts in Figure 1 were primarily found on moderate Islamic web pages in an attempt to gain broader support for this concept. In addition to the posts, a pdf ebook based on the teachings of Sayyid Mawdudi emphasised the need for a just cause in the pursuit of Al- Jihad fi Sabilillah.

Istishhad

The concept of embracing death was present on many extremist pages (see Figure 2), which also incorporated the notion of death for the sake of Allah. Extremists viewed death as a passionate desire, a process to not only acknowledge, but undertake with fervent love. Further to this, an emphasis was placed on the concept of Shaheed.

“O you who believe! What is the matter with you, that when you are asked to march forth in the Cause of Allah (i.e. Jihad) you cling heavily to the earth? Are you pleased with the life of this world rather than the Hereafter?” [Al-Tawbah: 38]^a [0625]

The cowards are afraid to fight and they do not yearn for martyrdom [0834]

Muslims love death more than life [0315]

We love death (in the path of Allah) just as much as you (kuffar)^b love life [0317]

Sources: Extremist pages on Facebook

a. Cited from the Qur’an b. Meaning apostates

Figure 2. Posts relating to an embracing of death

Shaheed

One of the most striking points of this analysis is the elevation and status not only given to martyrs themselves, but also to their discourses. Apart from quoting sacred texts, it is martyrs who are quoted (see Figure 3). Moreover, the theme of martyrs being the first or the elite amongst Muslims was reinforced. Interesting, there is a recursive pattern where aspiring martyrs praise the shaheed who have gone before them, and then upon death, they become praised and their words hold a level of sacredness; thus the cycle continues.

And an even smaller group from this elite group is the ones who sacrifice their SOULS and their BLOOD in order to bring Victory to these convictions and ambitions. So they are the Cream of the Cream of the Cream [Abu Hamzah Al-Muhajir (May Allah accept him as Martyr)] [0507]

I was merely discharging a religious obligation by waging Jihad against those who attacked Muslims. It does not matter if I die in the course of fulfilling this responsibility; my death and the death of others like me will one day awaken millions of Muslims from apathy" [Ibn Khattab (may Allah accept him as Martyr)] [0656]

Source: Extremist group pages

Figure 3. Quotes from martyrs about martyrdom

The benefits or rewards of shaheed are clearly spelt out on extremist individual and group pages. Sorting of data into categories saw three main areas: the joy of shaheed, the specific rewards of shaheed and finally the transition to shaheed (Figure 4).

Martyrdom is viewed as a joyful event, a transition into happiness. In addition, specific rewards are listed for the martyr. Perhaps most importantly is the transition to the next world. Imagery of a bridge is used to symbolise this transition in one post (Figure 4). Furthermore, attempts are made to allay fears associated with death such as whether or not the experience will be painful. Overall, shaheed is presented as a very positive and rewarding experience that one should not only work towards, but encourage others to seek as well.

1) Joy of shaheed

Al-Qur'an mentioned that martyrdom is a delightful gift from Allah for those who want It. This gift sends its owners towards perfection in life, fortune and happiness.

"If you are slain, or die, in Allah's Cause [as a martyr], pardon from Allah and mercy are far better than all they could amass. (Quran, 3:156)"

Martyrdom Is A Bliss

See. Why do they die with a smile on their face. Why they so happy that they are dead. Why they look at peace. They have their reward from the most merciful Allah.

2) Rewards of Shaheed

Allah grant them [the martyr] the highest parts of Jannah

The shaheed is granted seven gifts from Allaah (these are then listed)

The most beautiful of virgins waits them in jannah

3) Transition of shaheed

What will cleanse our sins? What will purify our mistakes? And what will clean our dirt? It will not be washed except with the blood of martyrdom, and know that there is no path except this Path. If not, then the Accountability will be difficult, the Scale awaits, the Bridge is ready and your time is running out, so consider it...

Indeed, death in the way of Allah is not as frightening as people have imagined. They are a lot of hadiths which relate that the Shuhada's do not feel the pain when finding martyrdom, except like that of a pinch.

Source: Extremist group pages

Figure 4. Benefits of martyrdom

Another interesting pattern found on analysis was a mystic dimension of shaheed. In Figure 4 there is a post noting that martyrs die with a smile on their face. This was found to be a very important theme with many posts showing photos of dead martyrs smiling. Additionally, this is also captured in narratives such as the one given in Figure 5. Musk scented blood was another narrative found to illustrate this mystic dimension of shaheed which seems designed to give evidence to support the concept.

Dr. Abdullah Azzam conveyed, “Subhanallah! Indeed, we have witnessed it on most of the people who have died shaheed. The smell of their blood are like the aroma of musk. And indeed, in my pocket is a piece of letter – on it are drops of blood belongings to Abdul Wahid (Al Shaheed, insha Allah)- it has been 2 months, but the scent is very fragrant like that of musk.”

Humaydullah was honoured with Shahaadat whilst amongst us. When burying him, I found him smiling. I thought I was imagining. I therefore came out and wiped my eyes. I then found him to be the same. Fathullah, one of Haqqani’s senior leaders, narrated to me: I saw the Shaheed, Suhait Khan 4 days after his burial. We opened his grave and he was smiling. Khairullah says: “I saw him looking at me.”

Source: Extremist group pages

Figure 5. Narratives supporting a mystic dimension of shaheed

In the Heart of Green Birds

Being carried in the heart of a green bird was a very important part of shaheed found on Facebook sites with both literary descriptions (Figure 6) as well as actual images of green birds. This concept is originally founded in the following verse of the Hadith Qudsi 27:

‘Their souls are in the insides of green birds having lanterns suspended from the Throne, roaming freely in Paradise where they please, then taking shelter in those lanterns. So their Lord cast a glance at them (1) and said: ‘Do you wish for anything?’ They said: ‘What shall we wish for when we roam freely in Paradise where we please?’

This verse or slight variations of it (Figure 6) were found in many pages and profiles associated with martyrdom. Even the name – green bird, as well as variations of it, were utilised as user names on Facebook. Although Anwar Awlaki has been killed (to extremists he is a worthy martyr), his work continues to be one of the most important and commonly endorsed by extremists, as well as, the most quoted, including his imagery of birds in which he contrasts the freedom of birds with the limitations of man.

The bird has an honor that man does not have,
Man lives in the traps of his abdicated laws and traditions;
but the birds live according to the natural law of ALLAH,
The Almighty--Who causes the earth to turn around the sun

Real Soldiers don't reside within the depths of the ghettos;
Real Soldiers are Slave of Allah...
Real Soldiers Reside within the Hearts of Green Birds!

I learned so many things here...Green Birds changed me inside out... At times I thought that my studies, my work, my earnings will be of no use if I don't have treasure of Iman...

The souls of the martyrs live in the bodies of green birds who have their nests in chandeliers hung from the throne of the Almighty. They eat the fruits of Paradise wherever they like and then nestle in these chandeliers. Once, their Lord cast a glance at them and said: "Do you want anything?" They said: "What more can we desire? We eat the fruit of Paradise wherever we like."

The arwah of the Shuhada's are with Allah on Judgement Day inside the belly of green birds. They have lanterns suspended from the 'Asrh. They fly in Paradise to where ever they want

Surely in the hearts of green bird we will meet For Allah is pleased for we have done the righteous deed

Source: extremist group pages

Figure 6. Discourse related to the heart of green birds

DISCUSSION

Prior to discussion of results, it is important to note that the relative size of the sample of material used in this study is quite small compared to the extremely large volume of radicalised material on Facebook. Nonetheless, the sample is representative of extreme proponents of Sunni salafist, and will form a solid, yet incomplete basis for comparison with previous research trends.

Although not a primary focus, the impetus for shifting non-Muslims and moderate Muslim towards more radicalised views was found to be a propagation of the message of Muslim alienation and oppression. This strongly supports findings of other scholars (Hafez, 2007; Jones, 2006; Tripathi, 2002). However, in what seems to be indicative of criticism of radical elements from more moderate Muslims, attempts have been made to try and address these criticisms. Moderate Muslims are asked not to stand in the way or be critical of more radical elements, even if they do not agree. Again, focus is redirected towards alienation and taking action for a just cause for Allah.

Previous research argues the global success of implementing the discourse of Istishhad (Schweitzer, 2006; Schweitzer & Ferber, 2005). Evidence from this study does support this discourse albeit in a more implicit way. Istishhad aims to form a strong contrast between the jihadi love of death and the Western love of life and is a critical al-Qaeda ideology. Furthermore, this concept is very much intertwined with the ideals of shaheed.

Congruent with the findings of Hafez (2007), the emotive aspects of shaheed were present coupled with the elevated status of martyrs and this was propagated through a large variety of radical material. Although the seven rewards of martyrdom as outlined by Hafez (2007) are noted, there were several distinctive differences found in this study. Emphasis was placed on the soul of the martyr, including issues of transition, purity and joy. Very little material was found promoting the rewards of the 72 virgins, though it was mentioned; the focus was mainly on the happiness displayed by the martyrs upon death – the joy they showed on their faces at death and what reward was waiting for them. Also, there was no mention of the intercession for family members. Easing the fear of transition into the next life for the martyr was found to be an important aspect of the discourse to encourage others to not fear being part of a martyrdom operation.

In terms of justifying martyrdom or providing authority for its discourse, this study, in general, confirmed previous findings (Hafez, 2007; Helfont, 2009; Holbrook, 2010). While posts utilised some verses of the Qur'an and to a greater extent the Hadith (see Bukay, 2006), the main focus was placed on narratives and discourses of martyrs. There was however two major points of distinction from previous research. Firstly, was the mystic nature of martyrdom and secondly, the strong imagery of green birds.

In conjunction with written authority of interpretations from the Qur'an, Hadith and other scholars, evidence of the power and authority of shaheed was also promoted through a mystic dimension that in many ways parallels the Catholic notion of miracles to certify saints. Narratives of smiling martyrs and musk aromas of martyr's blood are aimed at adding a new dimension of evidence to the concept of the shaheed entering into paradise.

The most significant finding of the research was the imagery of the martyr being in the heart of a green bird. This finding was consistent with the increased emphasis on the destination of the soul in martyrdom operations. Although the discourse of green birds is mentioned in the Hadith, it gained prominence during the Bosnian conflict. Following the conflict, Sheik Azzam published a series of audio files also available as an ebook called *In the heart of green birds*. Stories of martyrs are presented, each one emphasising their sacrifice as well as their place in the heart of green birds. Several YouTube videos have also been produced (e.g. www.youtube.com/watch?v=iLn3SsCPc18 , www.youtube.com/watch?v=dDTes0OyThe). This powerful imagery has been picked up by prominent terrorist leaders such as Anwar Al-Awlaki and promotes a strong contrast between the oppression and limitations felt by many Muslims and the freedom that the green bird imagery captures.

CONCLUSION

Al-Jihad fi Sabilillah is the first goal of terrorist recruiters, finding those willing to follow the path of jihad. Subsequently, followers need to adopt the attitude or method of Istishhad which aims to end in martyrdom, in the heart of green birds. Thus, the title for this paper was constructed with the starting point (Al-Jihad fi Sabilillah) and the end goal of terrorist seducers (In the heart of green birds).

Understanding radical concepts and narratives will be critical for the monitoring of social media sites in attempts to both identify possible threats as well as developing deradicalisation strategies. While this study confirms many previous research findings, it also contains some key distinctions illustrating that the processes and propaganda messages online are constantly evolving in the face of tightening anti-terrorism strategies.

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