



The Islamic State and Dream Warfare

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The Islamic State appear to attach considerable importance to dreams and have started publishing dream accounts of martyred jihadists. Do IS see this as a way of ‘calling’ potential lone wolf jihadists to action?

Over the last decade, [several studies](#) have shown that militant Islamists make extensive use of reported night dreams to inspire, announce, and validate violent jihad. Bin Laden himself [brought up](#) dreams in one of the first videos released after 9/11. Mullah Omar [was understood](#) by his followers to have founded the Taliban, and run his campaign, inspired and even guided by his dreams. Dream accounts can be found of numerous [other well-known militants](#), including Richard Reid, the failed shoe bomber, the two core 9/11 planners, Ramzi bin al-Shibh and Khalid Sheikh Muhammad, and the ‘20th’ suicide bomber, Zacarious Moussaoui.

This tradition has continued with Islamic State (IS) members and sympathisers who appear to attach considerable importance to dreams. This article updates the discussion and analysis of the role of dreams for IS jihadists, and, through looking at some recent case studies, asks whether IS is publishing martyred jihadist dreams as a way of ‘calling’ potential lone wolf jihadists to action.

Dreaming in Islam

To understand the jihadi appreciation for dreams, it is important to first understand that dreams are both historically and contemporaneously important in Islam. Indeed, today, Arabic TV programs are replete with dream interpretation programs and the internet is awash with Islamic dream interpretation websites.

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The dream tradition is similar across all the main branches of Islam: Sunni, Shia, Salafi and Sufi, as well as amongst the minority Alevi and Ahmadiyya sects. In the Sufi mystical traditions, dreaming is highly regarded. While Sufis have traditionally paid the most attention to dreams, the more literalist Salafis appear to have become more interested in them over time.

The Islamic tradition distinguishes between three types of dreams: the true dream (*al-ru'ya*), the false dream, which may come from the devil (*shatan*), and the meaningless everyday dream (*hulm*) which could be caused by what has been eaten by the dreamer and comes from the *nafs* (ego, or lower self). The interpretive tradition regarding the “true dream” (*al-ru'ya*) is a fundamental feature of Islamic theology. The true dream tradition is reported more extensively in the *hadith*.

Islamic dream interpretation differs from Western attitudes to dreams, which, being largely shaped by a scientific materialist outlook of the world, generally see dreams as bearing little or no relevance for people. But in Islam, dreams are understood as, on occasion, offering a portal to the divine will, and are seen as the only appropriate form of future divination. Dreams have a special authority as they are believed to communicate truth from the supernatural world (*dar al-haq*). Lamoreux summarises the importance of dreaming in Islamic societies:

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“ Dream interpretation offered Muslims a royal road that led not inward but outward, providing insight not into the dreamer’s psyche but into the hidden affairs of the world. In short, the aim of dream interpretation was not diagnosis, but divination. ”

Based on his anthropological research in Egypt, Gilsenan offers further insights:

“ In dreams began responsibilities. Judgements were made. Commands issues. Justifications provided. Hope renewed. Conduct was commented on by holy figures, by the Prophet himself, by the founding Sheik who had died some years before but who appeared with his son and successor. Dreams were public goods, circulated in conversational exchanges, valorizing the person, authoring and authorizing experience, at once unique and collective visual epiphanies. Dreams thus constituted a field of force and framed interchange between the living and the only apparently dead. ”

There is extensive literature on the art and science of dream interpretation in Islam going back over a thousand years, and scholars like [Sirriyeh](#) are emphatic about the importance of the Prophet Mohammed's God-guided interpretation of dreams. Mohammed's and his companions' dreams played a significant role before, during and after the Qur'anic revelation. In the six months before the revelation began, his wife Aisha said his dreams came true like the ocean's waves. The Prophet's famous night journey from Mecca to Jerusalem (*Laylat ul-isra wal miraj*), in which Muhammed ascended to heaven and was initiated into

the mysteries of the cosmos, is understood by many Muslims, though not all, as being in a dream vision (*al-ruya* can refer to vision and or dream). Mohammed would start the day asking about his companions' dreams as a source of possible illumination and spiritual guidance. The Prophet's companion, Abd Allah b. Zayd, is understood to have dreamt the Islamic call to prayer. There are three dream reports in the Qur'an, two reported as received by the Prophet Mohammed. One of these directly relates to the decisive [Battle of Badr](#) (624 CE). The [Joseph Sura](#) contains the reported dream experiences of the Prophet Joseph, such as that of the seven fat and seven lean cows.

The continued vitality and relevance of dreams in the Islam is well shown in the following examples of Islamic State fighters drawn from [Dabiq](#), the Islamic State magazine.

Recent dream accounts published by Islamic State

In April 2016 (issue 14) [Dabiq](#) published three dream accounts purporting to have inspired Khalid El Bakraoui in his martyrdom operation on the Brussels metro killing 14 people. Khalid's first dream was a 'life-changing' dream in prison in which he fought alongside the Prophet Mohammed against unbelievers. After the Paris 2016 attacks he is reported in the same *Dabiq* as having had two further motivational dreams. In the second, he 'arose to a high place, as if I was in space, surrounded by stars; but the sky was the blue of night'. He says he heard a voice telling him he was only created to worship Allah and ordering him to fight for his cause and make his word supreme'. The third dream follows on almost in a sequence as Khalid dreams of his own martyrdom:

“ I saw myself on a boat along with Abu Sulayman and another brother. Each of us had a Turkish soldier as a hostage. I had a pistol and Abu Sulayman had a belt. I told him to give me his belt, as I would feel better having it. So he gave me the belt and I gave him my pistol. I then quickly advanced with the Turkish hostage in order to close in other soldiers, two of whom were in front of us. I detonated my belt, killing the soldiers. My head then descended to the ground. One of the brothers working on the operation and Shaykh al-Adnani took my head and said, ‘check to see if he is smiling or not’. I then saw my soul and those of the three soldiers. All of a sudden, the soldiers souls burned and vanished and, suddenly, the banner of Islam – represented in the dream by the flag of the Islamic State – came out of the earth and was shining brightly. My soul then became full of light’.

”

He then claimed he heard a voice telling him he had achieved deliverance.

This tripartite dream account sequence evokes familiar Islamic dream tropes, images and ideas. In the first dream we see the dreamt and visualised conversion to violent jihad, including the 'presence' of the Prophet Mohammed which is understood in Islam as denoting a holy dream if the dream message is congruent with the teachings of the Qur'an and hadiths. Prison surroundings are famous, or infamous, for religious conversion dreams as many customary behaviours are circumscribed.

The second dream report reads as almost from an ancient holy text; high places and mountain tops are traditionally sites of vision. Indeed Attar's famous C12 epic Sufi poem '[The Conference of the Birds](#)' (Farid ud-Din Attar, 1984 (written 1177) is a tale of Islamic revelation and enlightenment, symbolised by the human journey to the mountain top from where and from within Allah/God can be directly known and joined. The instruction to worship, fight and 'make his word supreme' would make excellent sense to a pious Muslim as long as the notion of fighting was referenced to the greater jihad of fighting the lower self, the nafs or selfishly orientated ego. Khalid's membership of IS and the bloody and relentless killing of all peoples of a different religious persuasion (or none) by IS will have been experienced and apparently shared by militant jihadists as an example of the highest call to arms and martyrdom.

The third dream completes the sequence from the first calling dream to his visualised death and the spiritual testing of the martyrdom operation. Authorisation and sanctity are communicated via the imagery of Khalid's soul being composed of, or infused with, light while the enemies (Turkish soldiers) clearly have weaker or non-existent souls which may help validate (to

themselves and others) their killing even though they are also Muslims. The dream also conveniently defines Islam as Islamic State. And then 'deliverance' is signified at the end of this epic dream narration sequence. As propaganda, now to be read by thousands of jihadist and interested potential recruits, almost all of whom may be aware of the potentially sacred nature in Islam of at least some dreams as being divine emanations and commands, this dream story is a classic. Remove the IS context and many Muslims would feel blessed to have received such dreams.

In the following Dabiq (no 15) a future paradise dream example is quoted:

“ Abul-Muthanna as-Sumali (Ali Dirie) was a man of great character and worship. After being imprisoned by the Crusaders for seven years, he was able to flee Canada despite being banned from travel. Upon the official expansion of the Islamic State to the Levant, he rushed to revive the Muslim Jama’ah through his bay’ah. Several weeks later, he had a dream in which the Hur (the maidens of Paradise) gave him glad tidings of martyrdom on a specific date (one which I have forgotten). A week before his martyrdom, several of our friends decided to go shopping for new military attire. He told them he wouldn’t be going with them, because he was expecting martyrdom soon, and narrated to them his dream. When that day arrivedAbul-Muthanna rushed to battlefighting, until he was severely wounded, bleeding until he surrendered his soul to his Lord....May Allah accept him and add the blessing of caliphate we enjoy today to the scroll of his good deeds and that of all other martyrs. ”

These issues are the first times Dabiq has contained personal dream reports of significant IS members intending to demonstrate the glorious Allah inspired sacrifice of their martyrs.

Dreams may also feature in decision-making processes at different levels in the Islamic State organization. It **was reported** that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's decision to withdraw forces from Mosul in late 2014 was inspired by a dream in which Prophet Mohammed ordered al-Baghdadi to evacuate the city.

Both IS leaders and members strongly relate to their night dreams and IS have started recently publishing them. Is there a particular purpose to this new propaganda practice using dreams?

The transpersonal communication of night dreams in Islam

'Heroic' (in an Islamic form/genre) dream accounts are now being 'weaponised' to influence other IS members, followers and jihadi wannabees. We know the media has enormous effect on our dreams. We also know, though this is maybe irrelevant as IS hate Sufis due to their shrine and Shaykh workshop, that in the mystical Sufi Islamic groups it is normative for the top Shaykhs to 'send' dreams to their followers.

In April 2005 I interviewed **Shaykh Nazim**, a famous Naqshbandi Shaykh, who is now deceased, following numerous reports by his UK followers that he was sending them night dreams of spiritual advice. He told me, "Yes, sometimes I send my power in dreams, when necessary." I asked how he did this, and he said, "First you must take a step, even half a step, away from the material

world, and we Sufis have ways to do this”; enigmatic indeed!. Can dreams be implicitly or even explicitly ‘sent’ in some form, or maybe just believed to be so communicated? Such a thought may well seem farfetched and fanciful to Western post-enlightenment minds, but certainly many Sufis think so and such practices have a long history in Sufism.

Conclusion

The last two Dabiqs have contained personal dream reports of significant IS members seemingly for the first time. IS recognise and value some kinds of night dream accounts and see a role for them in their movement’s public propaganda war; so why now for this high tech, high media skills Caliphate-named organisation? IS are slowly being degraded from without and are ruthlessly striking at Western symbolic soft population centres; IS are now strongly encouraging their followers to attack western centres; we see a rise in the self-inspired, via the internet and perhaps dreams, of the lone wolf who is previous to their attack, untraceable. A few lone wolves in summer 2016 seem to have responded to IS media exhortations to attack western targets and some seem clearly to have a history of prior mental illness. Does this make them more vulnerable to being influenced by dreams? We don’t know yet. But vulnerable young people on the net who spend a lot of time reading about the ‘heroic’ caliphate and its actions may well start having related dreams.

Intelligence agents have spoken to me (2012) of the critical role of dreams in motivating potential jihadis from contemplation to decisive action. I was once told of a jihadi dreaming of his future death during anticipated jihad in Somalia, and another agent told me about a prospective jihadist experiencing two different peoples’ contradictory voices debating with him in his dream about whether he should go on jihad. Such uninterpreted and undigested dream

images and accounts may conceivably convince a vulnerable young person, possibly after their consulting an IS dream interpretation twitter account and/or their *baqiya* (IS 'family'), that their holy mission is through violent jihad. Is it possible then that potential lone wolves, perhaps with histories of mental health problems, believe themselves as being 'called' and then in part recruited not only through the internet, but through the sublime power of 'glorious' dream accounts of recent jihadi martyrs? We will have to wait for more autobiographical, media and trial accounts to emerge to know.

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