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AFTER ISLAMIC STATE: THE PLACE OF NIGHT DREAM INSPIRATION AND PROPAGANDA

Though non-Muslims might dismiss dreams as irrelevant, dreaming often plays a significant role in Islamic life, including for Islamist extremists. Iain Edgar explains how dreams have influenced decisions and shaped perceptions in jihadist campaigns.

Dreaming has an important role in Islam, and Islamic State (IS) use dream interpretation narratives for conversions, propaganda, legitimisation and inspiration. The former flagship magazine of IS, *Dabiq* (now *Rumaniya*), contained in its last publication a narrative concerning a fighter who was reported as seeing his martyrdom in a prior dream. Also published in *Dabiq* were three dreams of the Brussels bomber, Khalid El Bakraoui.

These included his first prison conversion, his IS inspired dream battle fighting alongside the Prophet Mohammed, and his own ultimate mountain-top deliverance. Such martyrdom dream accounts have a long history in Islamic countries and interpretive dream practices are contained in various accounts of the life of the Prophet Muhammad.

Dreams are not just something that are received, they can also be sent. Dream transmission by authorised teachers, Shaykhs, is an enduring trope in Sufi Islam. One Cyprus-based Naqshbandi Shaykh I interviewed confirmed that he sometimes sent his followers spiritual guidance in night dreams. Outside of Sufi Islam, there are two notable accounts of night dreams being sent and used to call followers to jihad.

Dreams were reported as an important recruitment strategy in bringing many young women to fight in the siege of the Red Mosque in Islamabad in 2007.

Even more extraordinarily, hundreds of the followers of the leader of the failed 1979 siege of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, Juhayman bin Seif al-Uteybi, were reported to have had dreams of his brother-in-law being the true Mahdi – the prophesied redeemer of Islam.

Leadership is an important theme in dream accounts. For example, accounts attributed to Mullah Omar are well known to have authorised, inspired and validated the rise of the Taliban leader. They also helped secure and legitimate his position.

DREAMS CAN DISTURB AS WELL AS INSPIRE

In 2016, a dream of al-Baghdadi being instructed by the Prophet Mohammed to leave Mosul apparently caused consternation amongst IS fighters in the city. This dream was publicised on pro-Assad and Kurdish websites, possibly as part of a counter strategy designed to taint al-Baghdadi.

Dreams are also not restricted to leaders who live. The spiritual reputation of the leader is important and a reclusive figure such as al-Baghdadi may be less of a dream focus than Osama bin Laden. On Twitter, there are accounts of the now dead IS military leader, Omar al-Shishani, who often courted media coverage, being dreamt about heroically by his followers.

Dreams and their interpretation in Islam, and likewise by IS, are an accepted way of conjuring a hopeful future and a way of understanding and recovering from defeat. IS Twitter accounts providing dream interpretation have been highly used amongst IS networks.

For instance, dream accounts by IS on Twitter help explain defeat by revealing a critique of IS for not helping the poor enough and wasting food. The change in dream subjects can also be significant.

Dream accounts of glorious martyrdom in recent *Dabiq* publications could well have been intended to inspire extremists to undertake jihad and violence in the West.

Whether they are felt to be transmitted or received, night dreams and visions are likely to continue to play an important role in the cultural tapestry of Islamic State fighters, regardless of territorial losses.

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