JOURNAL FOR DERADICALIZATION

Fall 2022
No. 32
ISSN: 2363-9849

Visual representations of martyrdom: Comparing the symbolism of Jihadi and far-right online martyrologies

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Abstract
Martyrologies are often associated with Jihadi propaganda. From Al-Qaeda to the Islamic State, Islamist groups have been widely spreading their cult of martyrs through e-magazines, online blogs, and social media to convey extremist messages and radicalise individuals. Nonetheless, such a trend has recently come to characterise the far right as well. Far-right groups have developed online martyrologies, diffusing images parsing far-right terrorists and extremists who conducted deadly attacks as saints and martyrs. This emerging trend in far-right online propaganda has led to a revived interest in comparative research addressing Jihadi and far-right online activity. By applying critical discourse analysis (CDA) to the study of Jihadi and far-right martyrdom propaganda images, this research compares Islamist and far-right martyrologies, explores their commonalities and differences, and provides theoretical insight into the use of martyrologies in online content. Both ideologies convey complex symbolism to effectively spread their messages and aim to radicalise online users. Diverse symbols operate on multiple levels and impact group dynamics. Although similarities between Jihadi and far-right symbolism are numerous, differences must not be overlooked as they show the complexity and diversity of online martyrologies and radicalisation strategies. Indeed, while adopting similar rhetoric, Jihadi and far-right martyrologies draw upon different traditions and cultures which target different audiences and appeal to individuals with different backgrounds.

Article History
Received June 24, 2022
Accepted Sept 19, 2022
Published Sept 30, 2022

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis; Martyrologies; Symbolism; Jihadism; far-right

Introduction

Far-right attacks have become a significant security concern in recent years (Auger, 2020), stimulating researchers to analyse the phenomenon by exploring potential similarities and differences with the long-established threat of Jihadi terrorism (Ronen, 2020). As both Jihadi and far-right groups extensively exploit the online sphere for propaganda, recruitment, planning and funding (Ganesh & Bright, 2020; Winter et al., 2020), the interest in

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comparative research on how terrorists use the Internet has significantly increased (Gill et al., 2017).

While important differences characterise Jihadi and far-right organisational approaches towards the online space (Balazakis et al., 2019), analysts have found that online Islamist and far-right propaganda discourses present key similarities (Wegener, 2020; Mehran et al, 2022). Indeed, both violent extremisms use social media platforms to propagandise justification narratives and polarise society through the dissemination of diverse content (e.g., texts, videos, and images) (Caniglia, 2021). The diffusion of online propaganda serves multiple objectives such as persuading the audience(s) to adopt the vision(s) of the group(s), building in-group identity, celebrating leaders, soliciting funds, and delivering training (Rieger et al., 2013; Aly et al., 2016; Rudner, 2016). Although the visions of Jihadi and far-right organisations differ in ideological content (Comerford & Davey, 2020), the discursive means of persuasion and propaganda share similarities. For example, as Mehran et al. (2022: 14, 18) have found in their recent article comparing Jihadi and far-right online texts, both ideological extremisms convey victimisation narratives to cause emotional responses in the targeted audiences and radicalise individuals.

Online martyrologies – traditionally associated with Jihadi narratives – have now become part of the far-right discourse. In 2019, the Atomwaffen Division (AWD), a neo-Nazi terrorist network, stated online that 'the culture of martyrdom and insurgency within groups like the Taliban and ISIS is something to admire and reproduce in the neo-Nazi terror movement.' (New Jersey Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness, 2020: 18) This rhetoric follows the logic of propaganda. Indeed, online martyrdom iconographies have 'the potential to maximize the reception of depicted narratives among sympathetic audiences' (Baele, Boyd, & Coan, 2019: 639) and reinforce identity and group boundaries (Middleton, 2014). By using religious and political symbolism, martyrologies emphasise the emotive and sacrificial features of terrorism (Dingley & Kirk-Smith, 2002), transforming atrocities such as mass shootings and suicide bombings into heroic acts and keeping the terror acts themselves alive in the minds of those who remember the martyrs.

This research paper aims to contribute to the comparative study of Jihadi and far-right online terrorist propaganda by exploring commonalities and differences between Islamist and

far-right online martyrologies. It analyses the featural aspects and symbolism characterising Jihadi and far-right martyrologies, evaluates whether these elements present either similarities or differences and hypothesise about the content creators' aims behind these discursive strategies. This paper will first define the terminology adopted for this research and conduct a literature review addressing the core sources relevant to the analysis of Jihadi and far-right martyrologies, arguing that far-right martyrologies are an emerging and under-explored phenomenon. It will then illustrate the methodology employed and the criteria underlying the cases' selection. Subsequently, it will analyse the visuals, first concentrating on the Jihadi images, then dedicating in-depth focus to the far-right content, and eventually comparing Jihadi and far-right martyrologies. Finally, the paper will discuss some core implications of this research for preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) and address the limitations of this study. The analysis is guided by the following research questions: *(1) what are the similarities and differences in symbolism between Jihadi and far-right martyrologies? (2) how is the far-right discourse on martyrdom characterised? (3) does Christianity play a role in influencing the far-right conceptualisation of martyrdom? (4) what can be inferred about group dynamics and intended audiences from the analysis of Jihadi and far-right martyrologies' symbolism?*

Definitions

This article adopts the term "far-right" as a synonym for "far-right extremism." Such a phenomenon has been conceptualised by focusing on both its ideological content and behavioural aspects (Jupskås & Segers, 2020). The paper follows the definition of 'Far-Right extremism (FRE)' used by The Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right (CARR) (n.d.):

> *A form of political extremism that describes a cluster of ideological features: extreme or ultra-nationalism; racism; xenophobia; ethnocentrism; anti-Semitism; anti-communism; demand for strong law and order/strong state; opposition to the principles of human equality; anti-democracy/anti-liberalism. FRE can embrace violence in order to promote its ideological agenda.*

As it will be explained in the methodological section, the adoption of this definition led the author to exclude peculiar forms of extremism such as the Incel movement, although their communities have developed a cult of martyrs and saints.

The concept of martyrdom is fervently debated in academia (Middleton, 2017). Semantically, the word martyr derives from the Greek *μάρτυς* that means "witness." (Di Berardino, 2014) This meaning is conveyed in core religious sources such as the Bible and the *Qur'an* respectively through the Greek word *μάρτυς* and the Arabic term *shahid* (Trites, 1973; Bonsen, 2020). However, the words' meaning has not been static. Both the word *shahid* and the Greek word *μάρτυς* appear numerous times with different meanings in Islamic and Christian sources, referring to both witnesses and individuals who died of diverse causes (e.g., homicide, battle, and diseases) (Trites, 1973; Habib, 2014). Despite the diversity in the causes, these religious sources emphasise the importance of the individual's commitment to faith as a constitutive element of martyrdom (Ibid.).

Nonetheless, the term has progressively lost its mainly religious connotation, being employed for political purposes throughout history in secularised contexts where the category of political martyrdom – intended as psychological and physical self-sacrifice for the cause – has been noted (Smith, 2008). Faith is not understood just in religious terms but also includes political and social causes. This paper adopts Smith's views on martyrdom that place the focus not only on the concept of self-sacrifice and the willingness of the martyr to die for an either religious or political cause but also on the role of the audiences that accord martyrs their title. Most importantly, Smith's research has shown that the way audiences conceptualise martyrs can radically depart from narrow definitions of martyrdom, including cases that would not fall within the category. Consequently, this study understands martyrdom in a broader sense and considers martyrdom also those cases that would not fall within a narrower definition but were labelled as martyrdom by audiences. This choice will be further explained in the methodological section.

In addition, it is worth mentioning that this paper does not constrain the concept of martyrdom by looking only at the words *μάρτυς* and *shahid*. The Greek term *μάρτυς* which is translated as martyr into English is not the sole word used to convey martyrdom narratives in the Western world. For example, Christian churches also use the terms "saint" and

"confessor"[2] (Schmalz, 2017); numerous saints are also martyrs,[3] although the public often refers to them mainly by using the term "saint." Similarly, *shahid* is not the sole word used to convey martyrdom narratives in Jihadi propaganda. For instance, the term *inghimasi* is used in IS's propaganda to refer to specific types of martyrdom operations (Winter, 2017: 4-5). As a result, this paper looks at different words such as "martyr," "saint," *sahihid* and *inghimasi* when analysing martyrologies. This choice has had core methodological implications that will be addressed in the following sections.

Finally, it is necessary to briefly define martyrologies. In the Christian world, martyrologies are documents that provide the names of saints and martyrs and feasts for each day of the year (Di Berardino, 2014). Christian martyrologies have been produced since the 5th century and were updated throughout the Middle Ages up to the 20th century (Ibid.). However, this research does not use the term in such a liturgical sense. Martyrologies are a synonym for martyrdom narratives and also refer to the images collected and analysed. The research does not argue that there is an established and structured martyrology of contemporary Jihadi and far-right martyrs and saints like the Roman Martyrology[4] of the Catholic Church.

Literature review

Scholarship on martyrdom is rich and emerges from multiple fields of studies such as religious studies, anthropology, sociology, history and terrorism and extremism studies. Because martyrologies are embedded not only in religious and spiritual traditions but also in concepts such as nationalism, self-sacrifice, and collective identity, it is necessary to explore martyrdom from a multidisciplinary perspective. While Jihadi martyrologies of contemporary terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda (AQ) and the Islamic State (IS) have been extensively

[2] A confessor is a saint who 'has been tortured or prosecuted for his or her faith, but not killed.' (Schmalz, 2017)
[3] For example, Saint Justus of Trieste is also venerated as Justus the Martyr. Similarly, Saint Balise of Sebaste was canonised as a martyr. Numerous other examples can be found in the Roman Martyrology of the Catholic Church (see note 4).
[4] The Roman Martyrology is the official martyrology of the Catholic Church and lists the saints recognised by the Catholic Church.

analysed, studies on far-right martyrologies have mainly focused on the historical cases of Nazism and Fascism, overlooking the surge of martyrologies in the current far right.

Core sociological and anthropological research has developed analytical frameworks to explore the concept of self-sacrifice and the dynamics behind heroes' and martyrs' celebration. Particularly, anthropological studies have developed the concept of 'devoted actors'[5] to identify those individuals willing to sacrifice themselves for a collective cause and mobilising collective actions to protect the in-group and its values (Atran, 2016: 192-194). The concepts of self-sacrifice and collective identities are of central importance and characterise devoted actors among a wide spectrum of religious and political ideologies (Bargdill et al., 2021; Gómez et al., 2022). Empirical research has found that not only are devoted actors prone to defending the in-group and its values, but they are also inclined to acting violently against the actors threatening the in-group (Vázquez et al., 2020).

Although the devoted actors themselves influence the creation of martyrologies, their transformation into martyrs is often posthumous. Research has emphasised that martyrs are created, evoked, and remembered after their death by actors interested in providing communities with examples and models that emphasise the ideological and altruistic character of martyrdom to boost collective identity, and call the in-group to social and political action (DeSoucey et al., 2008). Scholars have also explored the role of collective memory, its manipulation for political purposes and its connection to martyrologies in different contexts and times, showing that martyrs can be a posthumous contentious rhetorical creation (Harris, 2012; Hearty, 2015; Buffam, 2020). These studies are of relevance as they point to the myth-making nature of martyrologies, highlighting how martyrs become part of collective political identities (Ibid.).

These concepts and observations align with research on the role of Islam in political conflicts and its relation to jihadism. In Islamic and Jihadi contexts, martyrdom and martyrologies have played a crucial role in socio-political struggles and the religious justification of violent extremism. Research has found that the cult of political martyrs has strongly influenced the politics of countries and territories such as Palestine, Lebanon, and

[5] Atran (2016: 192) has defined devoted actors as 'deontic agents who mobilize for collective action to protect cherished values in ways that are dissociated from likely risks or rewards.'

Iran where martyrologies have been developed by different political, religious, and ethnic sate and non-state actors to boost identity politics, protect cherished values, exacerbate the boundaries between the in-group and the out-group, and provide communities with examples to follow (Abu Hashhash, 2006; Bonsen, 2020; Rolston, 2020). Similarly, Jihadi groups such as AQ and IS have developed their own martyrologies, using traditional Islamic symbolism to eulogise their martyrs, perpetuate Jihadi values, highlight the altruistic nature of martyrdom, and convey the idea of the positive nature of violent self-sacrifice for the cause (Combating Terrorism Center, 2006; Nanninga, 2018; Toguslu, 2018).

In addition, research on Jihadi martyrologies has explored the nexus between self-sacrifice, suicide, and martyrdom. While the religious legitimacy of suicide-attacks is fervently debated among Islamic scholars, academics largely agree that Jihadi groups have developed their own interpretation of Islamic sources to religiously legitimise suicide-attacks and label them as martyrdom (Fierke, 2009; Post, 2009; Middleton, 2017). Jihadi groups have conceptualised suicide as the ultimate form of self-sacrifice in defence of the common cause (Ibid.). Scholarship has shown that groups such as AQ and the Taliban manipulate Islamic sources to religiously motivate and justify suicide-bombings, spread a military death-seeking culture of martyrdom, and encourage affiliates to conduct suicide missions to demonstrate their willingness in achieving Jihadi objectives (Molloy, 2009; Ahmadzai, 2021).

Although these studies point to the importance of the Jihadi martyrdom's religious component, researchers have emphasised that the political dimension of martyrdom in the Jihadi terrorist landscape should not be overlooked. Groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah have merged the religious significance of martyrdom with a political dimension by linking the concept of self-sacrifice to national and territorial struggles. Particularly, the Palestinian terrorist group Hamas has heavily drawn upon Islamic traditions to elevate martyrdom into a pivotal component of collective national aspiration for the Palestinians (Litvak, 2010). Similarly, the Lebanese Hezbollah has weaponised the traditional Shia conceptualisation and narratives of martyrdom to validate political and military objectives and motivate its fighters into battle (Bianchi, 2018a; Bianchi, 2018b).

In a similar vein, studies on Western nationalist-driven martyrologies have analysed the nexus between martyrologies and identity politics as well as the weaponization of religion

to celebrate martyrs. Academic works on the relation between martyrologies and nationalism in the 19th and 20th centuries have shown that the cult of heroes and martyrs strongly contributed to the creation of national identities and the idea of a common and collective historical memory in countries like Italy, France, Poland, Estonia, and Russia (Riall, 2010; Fredericks, 2016; Fomina, 2017; Paert, 2022). Moreover, these studies have provided insight into the role Christianity and Christian churches played in shaping the iconography and symbolism of martyrologies (Riall, 2010; Fomina, 2017; Paert, 2022).

Further studies in the field have concentrated on martyrologies in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany and come to similar conclusions. Both the Fascist and Nazi regimes produced propaganda celebrating supporters who died for the cause to strengthen national identities and boost a transnational Nazi-Fascist sense of belonging (Valli, 2000; Casquete, 2009). Religious views, including Christianity, shaped Nazi martyrologies by providing the totalitarian regime in Germany with examples to draw upon in the development and construction of martyrdom propaganda (Taylor, 1981). Similarly, the Fascist regime in Italy developed its cult of martyrs heavily drawing upon Christian symbology (King, 2019).

Although contemporary far-right martyrologies have received little attention, the few studies produced are in line with the findings concerning historical martyrologies and reveal key features of the far-right conceptualisation of martyrdom. Barkun (2007) has analysed the case of the Branch Davidian dead who were proclaimed as martyrs by far-right anti-government groups, militias, and Christian Identity movements after the 1993 Waco siege, becoming catalysts for the 1995 Oklahoma bombing. His study is of pivotal importance as it has emphasised the posthumous nature of martyrologies and the construction of martyrs through a manipulative process of collective memory (Ibid.). However, in contrast to historical far-right martyrologies that aimed at enhancing national identity, the Branch Davidian martyrs were weaponised by the far right to spread anti-government sentiments and build in-group solidarity and identity (Ibid.). More recent research has drawn attention to the cases of Robert Bowers and Brenton Tarrant, who have been ideologized as heroes, saints, and martyrs in online far-right visual propaganda despite being still alive after committing the attacks (Ben Am and Weimann, 2020). Particularly, Ben Am and Weimann's study has highlighted the influence of Christian themes and symbolism on Tarrant's iconographic

propaganda and the blurred boundaries between the concepts of hero, saint, and martyr. Finally, Koehler (2020) has provided a pivotal contribution to this sub-field of research by analysing how martyrdom and suicide-terrorism are conceptualised by the far right. His research has shown that historical conceptualisations of martyrdom originating from the Nazi regime have influenced current far-right movements (Ibid.). He has emphasised that far-right groups do not encourage suicide-attacks and argued that their conceptualisation of the death-martyrdom nexus is more passive and focused on either the killing of the far-right individual by the enemy or the strategy of self-termination (Ibid.).

This literature review shows that martyrdom is a complex concept that relates to diverse issues including religious views, identity politics and group dynamics and needs to be explored from a broader perspective. Research on the Jihadi and far-right conceptualisation of martyrdom is rich and diverse and addresses martyrologies from multiple perspectives (e.g., historical, theological, and socio-political). The literature can also help to develop some core observations about hypothesised similarities and differences between Jihadi and far-right martyrologies. Research has shown that both Jihadi and far-right martyrologies convey religious and political narratives. Hence, both Jihadi and far-right martyrologies are likely characterised by religious and political symbolism. Nonetheless, research has emphasised that such religious and political messages are rooted in different religions, political cultures, and traditions (e.g., Islam, jihadism, Christianity, and far-right politics). Therefore, while Jihadi martyrologies' symbolism highly likely draws upon Islam and jihadism, far-right martyrologies are plausibly influenced by Christianity and the Fascist and Nazi political thinking.

In addition, researchers have highlighted that Jihadi groups strongly associate martyrdom with death, while far-right martyrdom narratives do not necessarily link martyrdom to the violent self-sacrifice of the individual. Consequently, Jihadi martyrologies' symbolism likely accentuates the death-seeking culture of martyrdom, whereas far-right martyrologies convey a more passive conceptualisation of martyrdom. Moreover, the literature also points to pivotal considerations on the impact of martyrologies on group dynamics. Indeed, scholars have highlighted that both extremisms weaponize martyrs to build in-group identity and exacerbate the tensions with the out-group. Therefore, both Jihadi and

far-right martyrologies' symbolism likely aims at boosting similar group dynamics. However, Jihadi and far-right martyrdom narratives likely target different audiences. As they draw upon different religious and political traditions, martyrologies are likely aimed at different groups influenced by those religious and political factors.

Although the literature provides pivotal findings to inform the analysis and answer the research questions, the systemic body of work found in Islamist-focused studies is yet to be developed in the sub-field of research addressing far-right martyrologies. The cult of martyrs in the current far right has been the subject of only a few pivotal studies (Barkun, 2007; Ben Am and Weimann, 2020; Koehler, 2020) that, however, have paved the way for the analysis of modern martyrologies. This paper aims to fill this research gap by developing qualitative comparative research addressing Jihadi and contemporary far-right martyrologies, dedicating in-depth attention to far-right martyrdom narratives.

Methodology

This research is based on a qualitative and evidence-based methodology and focuses on the analysis of visual content collected from open sources.

The study employs critical discourse analysis (CDA) to analyse the evidence collected. Specifically, this research paper adopts the three layers framework of CDA developed by Norman Fairclough (1995: 98). This methodology is designed to analyse content by describing the sources, interpreting them, and assessing their relevance in the social context. Hence, the study will describe who the subjects in the images are (description), analyse the visuals' symbolism (interpretation) and, finally, hypothesise how it can impact the in-group/out-group dynamics (relevance in the social context). After applying this approach first to the Jihadi and then to the far-right images, the paper will develop the comparative sections for each of the layers, emphasising the similarities and differences.

The Jihadi images' selection is based on a two-stage methodological process. Firstly, the literature has been reviewed to identify prominent Jihadi and far-right terrorists and extremists and the visual propaganda connected to them. As a result, the researcher decided to concentrate on IS martyrdom visual propaganda as it has been widely studied and the

numerous existing academic works can provide strong theoretical and empirical background. In addition, the author opted for focusing on the *Dabiq* and the *Rumiyah* magazines as they constitute crucial components of IS online propaganda strategies (Ingram, 2018; Lakomy, 2021). As a result, the researcher focused on three main Jihadi cases – the 2015 Paris attackers, the 2016 Brussels attackers and the 2016 Dhaka attackers. Although numerous terrorists have been eulogised as martyrs in dedicated biographies within the section "Among the Believers Are Men" of both the *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* magazines (Nanninga, 2018), these texts often do not present images and are connected to terrorists deemed as less relevant by the literature. Conversely, the three cases selected are considered as extremely relevant by the literature and are present in the IS magazines as both images and biographies.

Similarly, specific cases connected to the far right were selected due to two main considerations. Firstly, images not making explicit linguistic or symbolic references to martyrdom were excluded. For instance, the images portraying Anders Breivik and Robert Bowers – which can be found in the research of Ben Am and Weimann (2020) – were excluded from the analysis because they do not celebrate the attackers using the terms "martyr" and "saint." Breivik is represented as a knight while Bowers is defined as a 'Chad,' a 'disciple' and a 'warrior.' (Ivi.: 137-139)[6] In addition, these two cases were excluded due to ethical concerns as, to the knowledge of the author, further images are not available in open source. Such a criterion will be further explained in the following paragraph. Secondly, this study has excluded cases connected to unconventional ideologies influenced by far-right ideas, namely the supremacist misogyny of the Incel movement, as they arguably do not fall within the definition of far right adopted for the research. Although the author is aware of the existence of Incel martyrologies, these are not part of the research as the Incel ideology can be better analysed through other lenses such as gender (Berger, 2018; Leidig, 2021). As a result,

[6] Although Ben Am and Weimann (2020: 137-139) have argued in their paper that Bowers was widely celebrated as a 'warrior-saint,' such a terminology has not been detected from neither linguistic nor symbolic perspectives in the images portraying him and used in their work. In their study, the application of the term 'saint' to Bowers is reflected only in the three 4chan posts dated 2019 which are reported in the study (Ibid.: 137). Only the third 4chan post could have been of relevance to the study as it also reports an image of a knight with a saint-style circlet – that likely resembles a Black Sun symbol – around the head. However, the image could not be used as it is part of a post which the author cannot access due to ethical concerns. These further observations led to excluding the case from the analysis.

the researcher decided to concentrate on three main cases – Dylann Roof, Brenton Tarrant, and Ashli Babbitt.

The second stage of the methodological process added other core criteria underlying the images' selection. If visuals were available for the cases, the images were selected according to three main criteria: 1) similarity; 2) language used; and 3) accessibility. Therefore, the visuals analysed are 1) images conveying martyrdom narratives 2) with text in English 3) that are accessible in open source. The accessibility criterion is aimed also at ensuring ethical standards and at preserving the researcher's safety. The Jihadi images were acquired by subscribing to the website *Jihadology* – which has the largest repository of Jihadi content (Zelin, 2021) – and legally downloading the IS' *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* magazines. The far-right images were downloaded from open-source academic articles, reports, and blogs such as the piece by Ben Am and Weimann (2020) and the Anti-Defamation League's (ADL) (2019; 2021) blogs. This brought the researcher to exclude certain far-right martyrologies that are not available to the public such as the images praising Kyle Rittenhouse, who has been celebrated as a saint by the far right (Stall, 2020). As a result of this two-stage methodological process, 11 publicly available images related to the cases were explored.

JOURNAL FOR DERADICALIZATION

Fall 2022
No. 32
ISSN: 2363-9849

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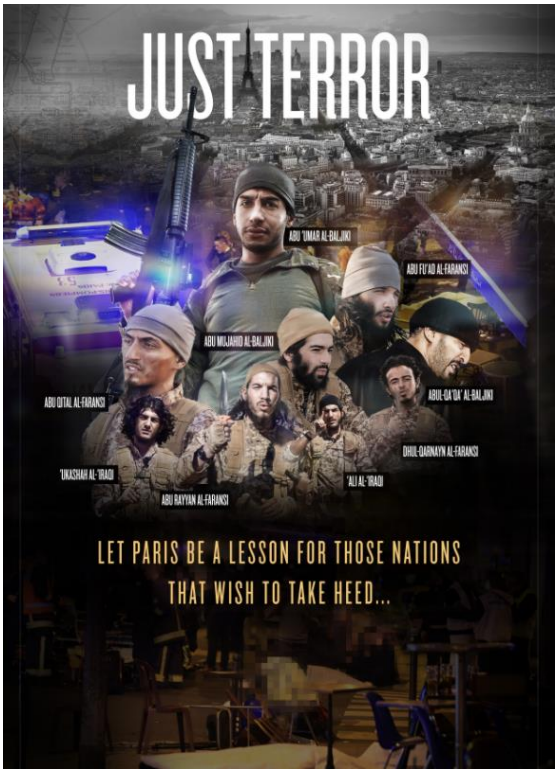

Figure 1. *The 2015 Paris terrorist attackers (Islamic State, 2016a)*

Figure 2. *The 2016 Brussels terrorist attackers (Islamic State, 2016b)*

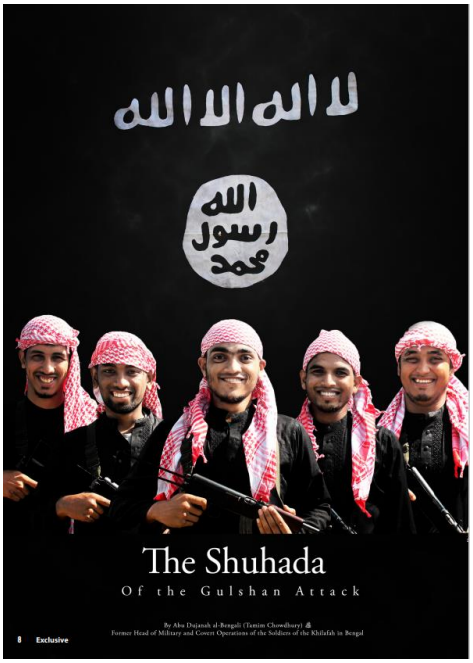

Figure 3. *The 2016 Dhaka terrorist attackers (Islamic State, 2016c)*

IS had been particularly active and successful in both ground battles and online propaganda activities in the years 2014-2016 (Dhanaraj, 2018; Mitts et al., 2021; Lakomy, 2021). Among the multiple IS-sponsored and -related terrorist attacks that occurred in this timeframe, researchers have highlighted three main cases due to their importance and the space dedicated to them in the *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* magazines: the 2015 Paris attacks, the 2016 Brussels attacks, and the 2016 Dhaka attacks (Bisard, 2015; Rapoport, 2016; Rathore, 2016; Riaz & Parvez, 2018; Lakomy, 2021).

The English version of the 13th and 14th issues of the *Dabiq* magazine featured images and articles praising the 2015 Paris and the 2016 Brussels attacks (Figures 1, 2). *Abu 'Umar al-Baljiki*, *Abu Fu'Ad al-Faransi*, *Abul Qa'Qa' al-Baljiki*, *Dhul Qarnayn al-Faransi*, *Abu Rayyan al-Faransi*, *Ali al-Iraqi*, *Ukashah al-Iraqi*, *Abu Qital al-Faransi*, and *Abu Mujaed al-Baljiki* were the nom de guerre of the nine terrorists actively involved in the planning and execution of the November 2015 Paris attacks (Islamic State, 2016a). By combining multiple tactics such as mass shootings, hostage-taking and suicide bombings, the terrorists killed 130 people, conducting the deadliest attack in Europe since the 2004 Madrid train bombing (Brisard, 2015). *Abū 'Abdil- 'Azīz al-Jazā'irī* and *Abū Idrīs al-Baljīkī* were two terrorists

affiliated with IS, linked to the 2015 Paris attacks, and actively involved in the 2016 Brussels bombings which caused 31 fatalities (Remmers, 2019). According to Rapoport (2016) and Rathore (2016), the attacks are important, along with the 2015 Paris attacks, as they testified a shift towards the operational activity of European Jihadist cells.

Although the *Rumiyah* magazine dedicated less space to martyrologies, "the second issue of the magazine featured an 'exclusive' article entitled 'The Shuhada of the Ghulshan Attack.'" (Lakomy, 2021: 177) *Abu Rahiq al-Bengali*, *Abu Muharib al-Bengali*, *Abu Salamah al-Bengali*, *Abu 'Umayr al-Bengali*, and *Abu Muslim al-Bengali* conducted the July 2016 Dhaka attack which costed the lives of 22 civilians (Islamic State, 2016c). The terrorists were celebrated by IS's propaganda (Figure 3). The terrorist operation was considered 'the most gruesome and large-scale attack in the recent history of Bangladesh.' (Riaz & Parvez, 2018: 947) The perpetrators were members of *Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh*, a terrorist group not officially affiliated with IS, that, however, was praised after the operation by the *Amaq* news agency, managed by IS (Momen, 2020).

All the terrorists involved in the Paris, Brussels and Dhaka attacks died either during the operations or in their aftermath. In total, seven out of nine of the Paris attackers died during the attacks, most of them committing suicide bombings. The mastermind of the operation, *Abdelhamid Abaaoud*, known as *Abu 'Umar al-Baljiki*, died together with *Chakib Akrouh*, known as *Abu Mujaed al-Baljiki*, a few days after the attack in a police raid in Saint-Denis (BBC News, 2015). All the Brussels' terrorists died as well. *Mohamed Belkaid*, also known as *Abū 'Abdil-'Azīz al-Jazā'irī*, died while exchanging fire with the police storming the flat where he was hiding with other terrorists. (Islamic State, 2016b) *Najim Laachraoui*, also known as *Abū Idrīs al-Baljīkī*, was the cell's explosives maker and committed a suicide bombing at the Brussels airport. (Islamic State, 2016b; Van Ostaeyen, 2016) The attackers involved in the operation in Dhaka died exchanging fire with the police commando carrying out the hostages' rescue operation (BBC News, 2019).

Colours, weapons, and history to convey religious and military symbolism

Because aniconism[7] is a core characteristic of Islamic religious art (Grabar, 2003; Gaifman, 2017), the Jihadi images do not significantly draw on a religious heritage of Islamic iconography.[8] However, the visual style of the IS images finds precedents in the visual representation of martyrdom through posters and murals in countries and territories such as Iran and Palestine (Abu Hashhash, 2006; Daraghme, 2017; Rolston, 2020). Like the visuals in Iran and Palestine, the IS images make core religious references and largely convey military symbolism. However, it is necessary to investigate the hidden meanings of colours and weapons to fully understand the complexity of the Jihadi symbology.

The visuals present multiple colours such as the black of the background and the white of the artificial light illuminating the jihadists (Figures 1, 2, 3). In the Arab-Muslim culture, black is associated with death and hell, while white is a symbol of purity (Hasan et al., 2011). However, both colours are mentioned in the *Qur'an* to convey multiple other meanings: white is also connected with death and the afterlife (Zainan Nazri et al., 2015), while black represents the sinners, but also power and holiness (Hirsch, 2020). Black also is the colour of the holy flag adopted first by the Prophet Muhammad and then by the Abbasid movement in the battles against their enemies (Bahari & Hassan, 2014). For these reasons, the black flag is used by IS – as well as by other Islamic movements. The IS' black flag (Figure 3) also reports the *Shahada*, the Islamic Oath and pillar of Islam which reads: "There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is Allah's Messenger." Further references can also be attributed to Islam. The word '*shahadah*' (Figure 2) is used in the *Qur'an* and relates to the semantic root *sh-h-d* which means 'to bear witness'/'to be a martyr.' (Cook, 2007: 20) A similar connection derives from the word *shuhada* (Figure 3) which shares the same semantic root and means 'martyrs.' (Ibid.)

[7] Aniconism in Islam is argued to stem 'from a doctrine which rejects and condemns all representations and from a liturgical, social, and individual practice of the faith which does not accept any substitute to the divine.' (Grabar, 2003: 46)

[8] Although this general conclusion about aniconism in Islam is shared among scholars, researchers have emphasised that the history of Islam in Middle Eastern and Asian countries shows that Muslim communities have indeed produced objects and representations to commemorate and celebrate people and events (Grabar, 2003; Ali, 2017; Gaifman, 2017). A prominent example is the Umayyad Caliphate which produced several figural images (Ibid.).

The representation of blood dripping from the knife (Figure 2) serves multiple purposes. It portrays the violence of the *jihad* and the strength of the successful warrior-martyr, linking the attacks to the military victories achieved by the first Muslims guided by Muhamad (Combating Terrorism Center, 2006: 100). The red colour is thus linked to sacrifice and the blood of the murdered (Hirsch, 2020). In the images (Figures 1, 2), the combination of pre-modern weapons (the daggers) with modern weapons (firearms) symbolises the link between the struggles of the first Muslims and the contemporary jihadists (Combating Terrorism Center, 2006). Finally, hypothetically, the word 'knights' (Figure 2) can be a reference to the Muslim soldiers/*shaheeds* who fought the Christian armies during the Crusades. The use of such a reference by Jihadi groups has been widely studied by academics and does not represent a novelty introduced by the IS's propaganda. For instance, Riedel (2007) and Elliott (2017) have illustrated how AQ has used the term to draw a parallel between its members and the Muslim warriors fighting the Crusaders in Palestine, thus emphasising the longevity of the commitment to the cause. Besides these potential historical references, the concept conveys a positive stereotypical image associated with the values of honour, dedication, and chivalry (Lakomy, 2021).

Sacralization of violence, gestures, and emotions as pivotal drivers of group dynamics

The symbolism of the Jihadi images impacts in-group/out-group dynamics on multiple levels. Firstly, there is the contrast between the *jahiliyyah*[9] and the *jihad*, a trending topic in the IS's propaganda (Ingram, 2016). Such a contrast is reflected by the black colour, linked to the *jahiliyyah*, representing the non-Muslim world, and the white light illuminating the martyrs that symbolises *jihad* (Figures 1, 2, 3). This symbolism serves the purpose of radicalising the in-group by legitimising the use of violence against the out-group, which is showed as the evil being defeated. Furthermore, the reference to the historical past of the Prophet/Abbasids and the Crusades (Figures 2, 3) aims to accentuate the dichotomy between the Western countries

[9] Often traduced as 'ignorance', the term *jahiliyyah* refers to the pre-Islamic era which is stated to be an age of barbarism and corruption (Halverson, Goodall and Corman, 2011: 37-38).

and the Muslim communities and enhance the sense of belonging to a movement that is perceived as historically rooted.

Moreover, gestures such as direct eye contact (Figures 1, 2, 3) highlight the dominance that the in-group seeks to exert on the out-group (Winkler et al., 2018). Indeed, direct eye contact is associated with intimidation and aggressiveness (Tang & Schmeichel, 2015). Furthermore, the jihadists are portrayed in the act of professing the *tawhid*,[10] with the finger pointing at the sky (Figure 1). Research has revealed the importance of the *tawhid* for the IS's propaganda by showing that it connects to the concepts of one political identity and one *ummah* (the global Islamic community) (El-Badawy et al., 2017), thus strengthening the sense of belonging to the in-group. In addition, the terrorists are smiling (Figures 2, 3), an attitude that testifies the desire to sacrifice the self for the in-group and relates to the Islamic belief in collectivism and obedience as opposed to the Western individualism (Teodorescu, 2019). Potentially, the smiles are also linked to a sense of optimism IS was aiming to generate as at the time of the images' dissemination the Caliphate was being successfully created. Finally, the portrayal of violence and victory – respectively the weapons and the glorious gestures (Figures 1, 2, 3) – stimulates both negative and positive emotions in the audience(s). Fear and hope reinforce the political narratives of the victorious in-group while demonizing the Other (Baele, Boyd, & Coan, 2019). In addition, honour, pride, and compassion for the martyrs boost the group' solidarity by strengthening a narrative of just cause (Wright-Neville & Smith, 2009).

[10] *Tawhid* is the foundational principle of Islam and refers to the unity and oneness of God. Such a concept is intrinsically liked to the *shahadah* formula "There is no god but Allah and Muhammad is His prophet."

Roof, Tarrant, and Babbitt: far-right saints and martyrs

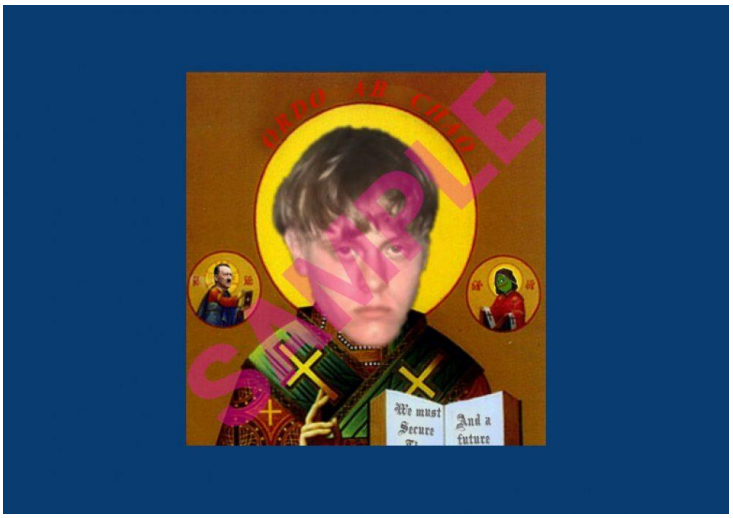

Figure 4. *Dylann Roof, the 2015 Charleston church shooting perpetrator (Anti-Defamation League (ADL), 2019).*

Figure 5. *Dylann Roof, the 2015 Charleston attacker (Anti-Defamation League (ADL), 2019).*

Figure 6. *Brenton Tarrant, the 2019 Christchurch Mosque shooting attacker (Ben Am & Weimann, 2020).*

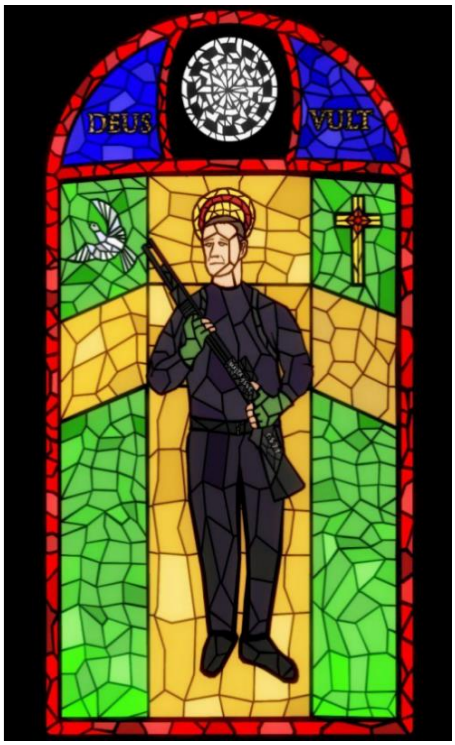

Figure 7. *Brenton Tarrant, the 2019 Christchurch Mosque shooting attacker (Ben Am &*

JOURNAL FOR DERADICALIZATION

Fall 2022
No. 32
ISSN: 2363-9849

Figure 8. *Brenton Tarrant depicted together with Dylann Roof (Ben Am & Weimann, 2020).*

Figure 10. *Ashli Babbitt, killed by the Capitol police during the 2021 United States Capitol attack (Purdue, 2021).*

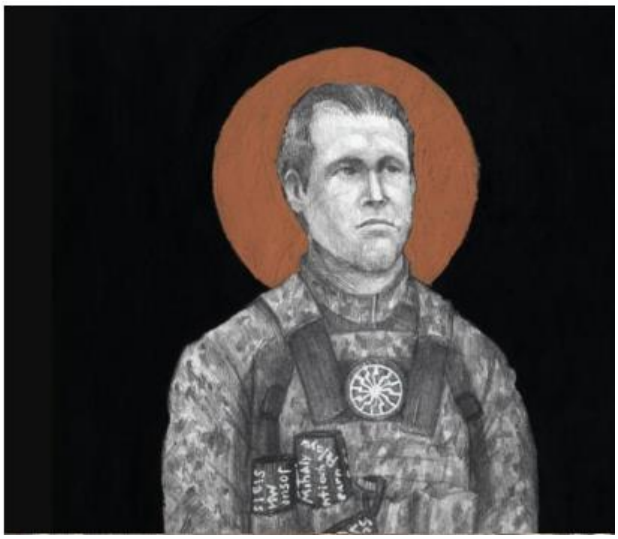

Figure 9. *Brenton Tarrant, the 2019 Christchurch attacker (Ben Am & Weimann, 2020).*

Figure 11. *Ashli Babbitt commemorated as a Martyr (Argentino & Raja, 2021).*

As the literature review has shown, contemporary far-right martyrologies are an emerging and under-studied phenomenon. However, academics and practitioners have recently analysed far-right martyrologies, highlighting three main cases: Dylann Roof, Brenton Tarrant, and Ashli Babbitt.

Dylann Roof, a U.S. citizen, conducted the 2015 Charleston church shooting killing nine African Americans in the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina (Sweeney & Perliger, 2018). At that time, the attack constituted the deadliest mass shooting in a house of worship since the 1991 Waddell Buddhist temple shooting (Bailey, 2015). Roof was arrested by the police and sentenced to death. The killing drew the attention of the U.S. public, re-igniting a widespread national debate around racism in the country as well as on the Confederate symbols present in U.S. states such as South Carolina and Virginia (Rogers, 2015; Shropshire, 2020). The violent extremist soon became an icon for white supremacist groups, being hailed as a cult hero and a 'saint' (Figure 5) by far-right Internet users (Anti-Defamation League (ADL), 2019).

Brenton Tarrant, an Australian citizen, perpetrated the 2019 Christchurch terrorist attack in New Zealand. 'Unprecedented in terms of its scale,' the attack caused the death of 51 people (Battersby & Ball, 2019: 192). His actions became notorious due to the high number of fatalities and the livestreaming of the attack on Facebook (Macklin, 2019). Tarrant was arrested by the police and eventually condemned to life imprisonment. The livestreaming of the attack multiplied far-right online content in forums such as *8chan*, generating a high-rate sharing which has been defined as the 'Tarrant effect.' (Baele, Brace, & Coan, 2020: 3) The persistence of his legacy in the virtual environment constituted such a complex issue that countries like Australia, New Zealand and France adopted a new regulatory framework as a policy response (Ford, 2020). Soon after committing the attack, Brenton Tarrant was extensively celebrated as a saint and a martyr by the far right (Ben Am & Weimann, 2020).

Ashli Babbitt, a U.S. citizen, participated in the 2021 United States Capitol storming and was killed in the attempt to breach a barricade (McEvoy, 2021). Far-right groups such as the Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers have been capitalising on her death by praising her as a 'martyr' (Figure 11) on multiple social media channels (Purdue, 2021). Her death ignited political debate around the former Trump administration, on the radicalisation of QAnon'

supporters in the United States and their link to far-right organisations (Bloom & Moskalenko, 2021b). The martyrologies centred on her death are being used as propaganda by the far right (Bloom & Moskalenko, 2021a).

Religion and history from the ancient times to modernity: the symbolism of the far-right martyrology

The images draw heavily on the use of religious symbols. However, a more attentive analysis reveals how the far-right symbology also draws upon complex historical references.

The Black Sun, used in multiple images and designed on objects such as Tarrant's manifesto and his anti-projectile jacket (Figures 5, 6, 7, 8, 9), is a symbol invented by the Nazis to look like an ancient Norse symbol[11] and represents a supposed age of white purity in Europe (Richardson, 2020). The Black Sun also symbolises allegiance to neo-Nazism (Ibid.) as it is evident in the image representing Hitler, Roof, and Tarrant (Figure 8). The Celtic Cross on Tarrant's tag (Figure 6) is a symbol of early Christianity in Ireland (Ibid.). The three fingers (thumb, fore and middle fingers) of Dylann Roof's and Tarrant's right hands (Figures 4, 6) represent the Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), while the golden circlet around their heads symbolises sanctity (Crawford Lindsay, 2012). The golden circlet is extensively used in the images (Figures 4, 5, 6, 7, 9) and provides the terrorists with an aura of sainthood. As of this, Dylann Roof is openly defined 'The Saint' (Figure 5) by the far-right extremists online. Furthermore, Tarrant's manifesto is depicted as the Holy Bible and the terrorist is portrayed both as a warrior-saint and Jesus (Figures 6, 7, 8, 9) who can be understood as a Christian 'proto-martyr.' (Downing, 1963: 291)

Ashli Babbitt constitutes a more peculiar case. She can be seen as a symbol of traditional Christian martyrologies. Celebrated online by the far right as 'a white woman who had multiple kids and a home,' (Anti-Defamation League (ADL), 2021) her female martyr archetype can be traced back to the martyrology of Saint Perpetua. Perpetua, a Christian woman and mother, was killed by the Romans in Carthage for not renouncing her faith.

[11] In particular, the Black Sun was incised by the Nazis into the marble floor of the Wewelsburg Castle that was made the spiritual home of the SS under Heinrich Himmler in 1934 (Richardson, 2020).

Researchers have emphasised that Perpetua's choice to die despite being a Christian mother and woman is itself a symbol of subversion against the oppressor (Dunn, 2010). Babbitt is depicted in white, which is the colour of purity and innocence in the Christian tradition (Bastide, 1967). Such a reference is found also in Tarrant's iconography with the white dove (Figure 7) representing the Holy Spirit. Babbitt is spilling blood from her throat. The red of the blood is also used to represent the Capitol. Interestingly, in the Christian tradition, red conveys numerous meanings associated with the concepts of sin/hell, holiness, and martyrdom (Zuiddam, 2018). Therefore, the death of Babbitt and the Capitol's image might represent respectively the sin and the sinners, while Babbitt's blood might symbolise purity and martyrdom.

Potentially, the drop of red blood in the image representing Ashli Babbitt (Figures 10, 11) conveys further religious and political meanings. Such a symbol has been employed in the past by far-right groups. For instance, the Ku Klux Klan has used it in its well-known Blood Drop Cross symbol – called MIOAK (Mystic Insignia of a Klansman) by the group's members (Anti-Defamation League (ADL), 2016a). The drop of red blood symbolises the atonement and sacrifice of Jesus Christ and is used by the Ku Klux Klan to convey the idea of white purity (Johnson, 2017). Such a reference can have an underlying Anti-Semitic tone as for centuries[12] generations of Jews have been blamed for the killing of Christ; the Jewish deicide rhetoric has often been used to spread Anti-Semitism, for example, by the German church in the 1930s (Rohrbacher, 1991; Eldridge, 2006). This also connects to the use of more explicit Anti-Semitic tropes in the far-right visuals such as the representation of Adolf Hitler (Figures 4, 8) and of Nazy symbols like the Black Sun and the 14 words slogan (Figures 4, 5, 6, 8, 9).

In addition, other symbols are used to spread religious/spiritual and political messages. The Pepe the Frog meme in the image representing Dylann Roof (Figure 4) is used to spread the peculiar contemporary far-right Cult of Kek. This is an invented cult shared among far-right supporters who believe in a connection between Pepe the Frog and the ancient Egyptian

[12] It is worth mentioning that the Catholic Church issued an official document of repudiation of the Jewish deicide – the declaration *Nostra Aetate* issued by Pope Paul VI – only in 1965, after the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). The document can be read at the following link: https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html.

divinity of Ogdoad, whose frog personification (Kek) represented darkness (Liyanage, 2020). Likely, the use of the Pepe the Frog meme also makes political and sub-cultural references. Theoretical and empirical studies have shown that the meme has gradually evolved in meanings and has been weaponised by far-right individuals to incite hate speech, spread Anti-Semitic beliefs, and normalise hostile attitudes towards minority groups and political opponents (Miller-Idriss, 2018; Zannettou et al., 2018; Glitsos & Hall, 2019). Further spiritual meanings are conveyed in the image depicting Dylann Roof by drawing upon Masonic occultism; the visual reports the Masonic motto 'Ordo ab Chao' which means 'Order from Chaos.' (Figure 4)

There are numerous historical references in the images. Wodak and Forchtner (2014: 237-238) have defined this practice as 'fictionalization politics.' Such an approach develops a collective memory of past events by linking them to the contemporary context (Ibid.). This idea finds empirical evidence in Tarrant's rifle (Figures 6, 7, 9, 12) that cites historical figures and battles such as Marco Antonio Bragadin[13] and the battle of Tours (732)[14]. Other historical events and figures mentioned are Skanderbeg[15], Charles Martel[16], and Edward Codrington[17]. The phrase 'Deus Vult' ('God wills it') (Figure 7) refers to the Crusades; the motto has been widely used in far-right online propaganda (Kim, 2018). A similar connection is established in the image that portrays Ashli Babbitt as the Statue of Liberty (Figure 11), one of the most important symbols in U.S. history and popular culture.

Modernity is included in the far-right symbology as well. The rifle (Figure 12) reports the number '14' which refers to the 14 words of the slogan 'We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children' coined by the white supremacist leader David Lane (Richardson, 2020: 38). The slogan derives from the eighth chapter of Hitler's Mein Kampf thus being a symbol of Neo-Nazism (Ibid.). The slogan is also recorded in the book held by

[13] Marco Antonio Bragadin was a military officer of the Republic of Venice who led the defence of the city of Famagusta, besieged by Ottman forces in 1570-1571. Bragadin made terms with the Ottomans before the city was taken by force. Nonetheless, Bragadin was tortured, jailed, and eventually brutally killed by the Ottomans.
[14] See note 16 on Charles Martel.
[15] Gjergj Kastrioti known as Skanderbeg was an Albanian military commander who led a rebellion against the Ottomans in what today are territories part of Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Greece, Montenegro, and Serbia.
[16] Charles Martel was a Frankish political and military leader who ruled the Kingdom of the Franks and led Frankish forces against the Umayyad Caliphate during the Battle of Tours (732) in the Iberian Peninsula.
[17] Edward Codrington was a British admiral who took part in the Battle of Trafalgar (1805) against French and Spanish ships and in the Battle of Navarino (1827) against the Ottoman and Egyptian fleets.

Dylann Roof (Figure 13). Adolf Hitler is the most evident reference to Nazism made in the images, being represented as a sort of master blessing both Dylann Roof (Figure 4) and Brenton Tarrant (Figure 8). Furthermore, the phrase 'Remove Kebab' on Tarrant's rifle (Figure 12) refers to a Serbian song celebrating Radovan Karadžic, found guilty of committing genocide against the Muslim minority in Bosnia-Herzegovina during the 1990s Yugoslav wars (Cosentino, 2020).

The references incised into Tarrant's rifle are strategically placed as they represent centuries when Christendom fought against the Muslims/Ottoman Empire. However, these historical quotes would not have a fictionalisation[18] effect if they were not connected to current times. For example, the rifle (Figure 12) reports other names such as Alexandre Bissonnette, the 27-year-old that carried out the 2017 Quebec City Mosque shooting. A similar connection is then established by representing Tarrant as being crowned by Dylann Roof (Figure 8). The phrase 'refugees welcome to hell' (Figure 12) is linked to the current worldwide refugee crisis. Finally, Tarrant chose the rifle, an AR-15, as a weapon with an 'accelerationist mind-set'[19] as the terrorist aimed to re-ignite current debates on guns control (Cosentino: 82). Hence, representing the actual weapon used by the terrorist perpetuates this accelerationist dynamic and further links history to current times.

[18] In their study on far-right populism, Wodak and Forchtner (2014) use the term to identify the political narratives aimed at connecting a historical collective memory to current events.
[19] Accelerationism is 'an ideological style and a strategic method, meant to bring about the failure of the ideologies that prevail in any given system or country at this particular moment in time.' (Hughes & Miller-Idriss, 2021: 13)

Figure 12. *Tarrant's rifle (Ben Am & Weimann, 2020).*

Figure 13. *The Bible of Dylann Roof reporting the 14 words slogan (ADL, 2019).*

Medievalism, the Bible, and emotions as key in-group/out-group factors

The symbolism of the far-right images operates on different layers in order to boost group dynamics. The in-group/out-group dynamics are strengthened by historical references. Such rhetorical use of the past has been studied by Elliott who has defined it as 'banal medievalism.' (Elliott, 2018: 8) This results in the creation of content that is spread online to stimulate negative and positive reactions in the audience(s) so that previous beliefs are confirmed (Ibid.). The cherry-picking of historical facts also serves the purpose of justifying the violence of the in-group as a religious duty (Koch, 2017).

In addition, the representation of Tarrant's manifesto, The Great Replacement, as the Bible (Figure 6) is a key factor influencing the group dynamics. This also applies to the image representing Dylann Roof (Figure 4) who is holding a sacred book reporting the 14 words slogan (Figure 13). This pattern has already been observed in Breivik's manifesto where references to the Bible are numerous and aim to legitimate the violence of the in-group, shaping it as a mean of a holy racial and anti-Muslim war (Strømmen, 2017). Hence, the

conspiracy theory of the Great Replacement as well as the neo-Nazi ideology likely become the "revealed truth" that Jesus brought to the disciples and the "Word of God."

Finally, emotions play a crucial role. The icon of the warrior-saint suggests admiration in the audience, whereas the portrayal of Roof as a Saint, Tarrant as Jesus, and Babbitt as a martyr triggers compassion. These positive emotions reinforce in-group boundaries (Wright-Neville & Smith, 2009). The words on Tarrant's rifle as well as his manifesto boost anger and fear. These negative emotions emphasise the contrast between the in-group and the out-group (Baele, Boyd, & Coan, 2019). Anger can be also treated as a positive action-oriented emotion contributing to a sense of shared purpose and instigating commitment towards action (Ballsun-Stanton et al., 2020: 30). The representation of Ashli Babbitt as an innocent martyr triggers the rage of the in-group. Indeed, depicting her as an 'unarmed woman' (Figure 11) aims to highlight her innocence and purity, factors which are demonstrated to be at the centre of far-right online propaganda strategies (Purdue, 2021).

Moreover, sufferance and outcry are enhanced in the images representing Ashli Babbitt who is surrounded by four stars (Figures 10, 11) representing the four martyrs (Ashli Babbitt, Benjamin Phillips, Kevin Greeson, and Rosanne Boyland) of the Capitol Storming (Argentino & Raja, 2021; McEvoy, 2021). Finally, emotions such as irony are stimulated by using memes, a peculiar propaganda strategy the far-right has widely adopted. Pepe the Frog (Figure 4) – already transformed into an iconic far-right meme (Anti-Defamation League (ADL), 2016b) – and the bowlcut meme (Anti-Defamation League (ADL), n.d.-a) (Figure 8) shape a shared sub-culture permeated by extremist beliefs among the far-right Internet users who can understand this complex symbology.

Similarities in symbolism: sacred violence, weaponization of history, and militarism

The comparison between the images and their symbolism suggests that there are significant commonalities between Jihadi and far-right online martyrologies. Indeed, the visuals employ religious symbolism, conduct historical cherry-picking, and spread a terrorist military culture.

Despite being inspired by different religions and spiritual beliefs, the sacred references in the images serve the same purpose: sanctifying violence. As Ronen (2020: 19-20) has noted

in his analysis of the Atomwaffen Division, while Jihadi groups perpetuate the idea of *jihad*, far-right organisations conduct a 'racial holy war.' The same reasoning applies to the above images. Indeed, the *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* magazines' images are based on the idea of violent *jihad*, while the far-right content is permeated by the idea of the holiness of war and sanctity of violence. These observations align with the concept of devoted actors developed by anthropologists (Atran, 2016); the sacralisation of the in-group's values contribute to the legitimisation of violence against the out-group (Ibid.; Vázquez et al., 2020).

Another fundamental similarity is the weaponization of history. Such a commonality between the general Jihadi and far-right online discourse was found also by Mehran et al. (2022: 17-18). The images refer to the past and link it to current times, portraying historical events as a sort of glorious golden age. The Jihadi images refer to the era of the Prophet, thus highlighting the continuity of Muhammad's military struggle (Toguslu, 2018). The far-right content aims at a similar objective by citing different historical periods such as the battles between Christian Europe and the Ottoman Empire, Nazi Germany' struggle for race supremacy and the Statue of Liberty, which refers to the independence of the United States of America.[20] They diffuse a set of values by referencing history and portraying the attackers as pious soldiers, saints, and martyrs. Both Jihadi and far-right martyrologies aim to build a collective identity by cherry-picking historical events to provide their audiences with a shared sense of belonging and historical memory. From a topical perspective, the cherry-picking of the history of the Crusades is an important commonality between Jihadi and far-right martyrologies.[21] These are crucial aspects of modern religious and secularised martyrologies as shown by research on the connection between martyrologies and collective memory (DeSoucey, Pozner, Fields, Dobransky, & Fine, 2008).

Finally, a culture of militarism, represented by weapons, military clothing, and blood, characterises the images. This observation is supported by recent studies. As DeCook (2018) has illustrated, U.S. Proud Boys use military symbolism to aestheticize their political ideology. The rifle AR-15 symbolises the accelerationist ideology of Brenton Tarrant. In a

[20] The Statue of Liberty was dedicated in 1886, and it holds an inscribed tablet that reports the date (1776) of the U.S. Declaration of Independence.
[21] From a broader perspective, the historical imaginary and collective memories of the Crusades have led to the development of cultural and political narratives in both Western and Arab-Islamic societies (D'Arcens, 2019).

similar vein, the Jihadi images portray the terrorists as soldiers-martyrs fighting for the *jihad*. This key aspect aligns with the observations of Toguslu (2018: 117) on the *Dabiq* magazine's 'cult of military martyrdom,' which represents the will to establish a new religious order.

Differences in symbolism: audiences and individualism/collectivism

Despite the similarities, the symbolism of the visual content refers to different cultural backgrounds. These divergencies must not be overlooked as they can help to hypothesise about key differences between the Jihadi and far-right target audiences.

As analysed by Rieger et al. (2013), members of Islamist networks in Europe present different levels of religiosity and knowledge of Arabic and Islam. The IS visuals seem to use simpler symbolism (e.g., weapons, and clothing) to primarily target Muslims with low-medium knowledge of Islam. More complex symbols such as the Quranic references and the colours are likely aimed at individuals with a deeper knowledge of Islam. The martyrs of Paris and Brussels are propaganda products for second and third-generation European Muslims. This also applies to the Dhaka attackers as the *Rumiyah* magazine is English friendly and designed for an English-speaking audience. As of this, the sentence 'The Knights of *shahadah* in Belgium' (Figure 2) is emblematic. Indeed, instead of the Arabic word *al-Fursan*, the image uses the English word 'knights' (Figure 2) which is easier to understand for non-Arabic speakers. Moreover, the words 'Paris' and 'Belgium' (Figures 1, 2) are open references to Europe and the Muslims living there. A similar reasoning can be applied to the other image (Figure 3) with English text.

Presumably, the far-right images target a different and specific type of audience. Robinson and Whittaker (2021) have analysed the symbolism used in far-right videogames and argued that, due to its complexity, it targets already sympathising audiences that have previous knowledge of the hidden meanings. Conversely, IS videogames such as *Salil al-Sawarem* (The Clanging of the Swords), which was adapted from the famous videogame Grand Theft Auto (GTA), target mainly young audiences who do not need to understand complex Jihadi symbology to be enchanted by the game and its violent extremist rhetoric (Al-Rawi, 2016). This analysis applies to the images of Dylann Roof and Brenton Tarrant and to a

lesser extent to the visuals portraying Ashli Babbitt. The symbology employed in Roof's and Tarrant's iconographies requires the audiences to have a certain degree of familiarity with the far-right ideology, while Babbitt's images rely on less complex symbolism except for the potential religious references to the Christian female martyr archetype. Moreover, the images likely appeal mainly to white people with a Christian background due to the Christian-inspired symbolism adopted.

Finally, as the concept of *jihad* is intrinsically interrelated with the idea of fighting for the *ummah*, the Muslim community, the Jihadi images may convey a sense of collectivism (Halliday, 2002). Conversely, the far-right content portrays the struggle of the individual by mentioning Christian generals fighting against the Ottoman Empire, living far-right terrorists, and single historical individuals such as Adolf Hitler, therefore testifying a certain degree of individualism. Such different approaches may be reflected also by the choice of representing groups of martyrs in the Jihadi images, while only single terrorists in the far-right content. The image depicting Hitler, Roof, and Tarrant (Figure 8) defers to a certain extent; however, Tarrant is placed at the centre of the content, thus being the protagonist. These observations may have pivotal implications. Indeed, the far-right content may suggest a lone actor model, while the Jihadi visuals may advocate for the success of the cell model. However, these are suppositions and hypotheses that need further empirical evidence to be proved.

Theoretical implications for P/CVE

This study's findings have core implications for P/CVE. In particular, this research can impact counter narrative strategies aimed at tackling online terrorist and extremist martyrologies. This research has highlighted the importance of sacred values in both Jihadi and far-right online martyrologies. Sacred values do not merely include religious/spiritual beliefs; they also relate to secularised values such as political beliefs and cultural values (Atran, 2016: 194). Not only do the Islamic State martyrologies aim at spreading extremist religious beliefs, but they also convey political narratives through the idea of statehood, incarnated by the Caliphate, and by depicting martyrdom as a political act. Similarly, far-right martyrdom narratives convey both extremist political messages and religious narratives. This research has

shown that Christianity plays a crucial role in shaping far-right martyrologies by constructing a common religious and cultural background allegedly threatened by the out-group.

As Atran (2016: 201) has argued in his research on devoted actors, 'sacred values are best opposed with other sacred values that inspire devotion.' Therefore, counter narratives addressing terrorist martyrologies should consider conveying alternative sacred values aimed at inspiring positive behaviours and tackling the spread of martyrologies. Although P/CVE policies have mainly focused on Islamism and Jihadi groups, often overlooking the role of other religions/spiritual beliefs in legitimising and justifying diverse forms of violent extremism (Mandaville & Nozell, 2017: 5), this research's findings encourage to consider the influence of Christian beliefs on far-right martyrologies and develop tailored counter narratives. Counter messages addressing far-right martyrdom narratives should incorporate positive Christian values to challenge the weaponization of Christianity by the far-right. Such a call to action has been recently made by Christian faith leaders who have advocated for developing religious narratives to counter the spread of extremist Christianity among the far right (Jones, 2022).

As suggested by Williams (2017: 173-175) in his study on the relationship between prosocial behaviours and immortality priming, individuals holding religious/spiritual beliefs can be encouraged to engage in positive non-violent behaviours towards both in-group and out-group members by bringing their ideas into accord with their deepest values. Specifically, symbolic immortality, conceived as the building of the individual's legacy that endures beyond death, can play a role in P/CVE interventions (Ibid.: 160), including counter narratives. The building of a legacy provides the individual with a sense of existential meaning, which was shown to be at the centre of martyrdom narratives in the guise, for example, of in-group's protection and the fight for the cause. By boosting the individuals' aspiration to act for the community to build a legacy, counter narratives can tackle the spread of martyrdom narratives by conveying a positive non-violent relationship between sacred values and prosocial behaviour.

Williams indeed suggests that this attempt to leverage symbolic immortality can mitigate the tensions between the in-group and the out-group and boost disengagement from violence, stimulating alternative non-violent forms of prosocial behaviour. Because Jihadi and

far-right martyrologies spread religious/spiritual meanings targeting believers of respectively Islamic and Christian faith, counter narratives could encourage prosocial behaviours aligned with those religious/spiritual values. For example, counter narratives could convey symbolic immortality messages encouraging charitable donations and to volunteer for the community. Such a strategy aims to redirect the individual's need for existential meaning towards non-violent actions that however can grant the subject a role within the community and the opportunity to act according to his/her values.

Moreover, leveraging symbolic immortality can also address the notion of violent self-sacrifice, which was shown to be a core underlying motive of martyrologies. According to Routledge and Arndt (2008), individuals are inclined to self-sacrificing themselves for the community to achieve some form of immortality and manage death awareness. Their research has shown that providing individuals with alternative means to pursue symbolic immortality can decrease their willingness to self-sacrifice for the nation (Ibid.). Such alternative means can be provided by religions and spiritual beliefs. Indeed, both Islam and Christianity conceive non-violent forms of prosocial behaviour (i.e., charitable donations) to live righteously and, therefore, achieve immortality (the afterlife) (Stamatoulakis, 2013; Batara et al., 2016). Counter narratives should convey these religious/spiritual messages to provide individuals with means to manage death awareness and, therefore, decrease their willingness to violently self-sacrifice for the cause.

Regarding the impact of sacred values on group dynamics, a further reflection can be made by drawing upon the study of Noor and Halabi (2018) on perspective-taking, forgiveness, and inter-group conflicts. Noor and Halabi have found that perspective-taking increases conflicting parties' motivation to forgive the target of violent action (the out-group), thus mediating between adversarial actors and encouraging reconciliation. Because forgiveness can be viewed from a religious/spiritual perspective (Auerbach, 2005), counter narratives addressing online terrorist and extremist martyrologies could convey messages centred on the religious conceptualisation of forgiveness to stimulate perspective-taking and mitigate group dynamics. By encouraging to take the perspective of the out-group and focusing on forgiveness, counter narratives could impact the audiences targeted by martyrologies. As shown by Auerbach (Ivi.: 478-481), forgiveness has different religious

meanings in Islam and Christianity. Therefore, counter narratives should carefully convey a tailored religious conceptualisation of forgiveness that can appeal to the specific audiences potentially affected by martyrologies.

Furthermore, perspective-taking can help to defuse identities. Because identity fusion – the sense of oneness with the (in-)group – has been shown to increase individuals' willingness to self-sacrifice (Whitehouse, 2018), encouraging in-group members to take the perspective of the out-group can have pivotal implications for countering martyrologies. Indeed, perspective-taking can blurry the boundaries between groups and help to defuse identities, thus also affecting the self-sacrificial motives of martyrdom narratives. Once more, religions can play a role in defusing identities. In their empirical study analysing the impact of religions on individuals' empathy and perspective-taking ability, Giordano et al. (2014) have found that higher levels of religiosity/spirituality corresponded to higher levels of empathy. Therefore, counter narratives conveying religious values can encourage individuals with religious/spiritual background to take the perspective of the out-group and potentially empathise with its members. By exposing these individuals to religious values, counter narratives can help to defuse identities and, potentially, decrease their willingness to self-sacrifice, thus tackling online martyrologies.

In addition, this paper' suppositions about martyrologies' target audiences and group dynamics can help to better inform counter narratives. Hypothesising about target audiences is a pivotal consideration to make when designing counter narrative campaigns (Tuck & Silverman, 2016: 7). By exploring the symbolism of Jihadi and far-right martyrologies, it is possible to identify potential vulnerable subjects that can be exposed to martyrdom narratives. By considering the characteristics of audiences, it is possible to better determine the message, medium and messenger for counter narrative campaigns. This allows for producing counter narratives that are tailored to empower these vulnerable audiences, tackling the spread of martyrologies.

Moreover, this research has emphasised the diverse potential drivers of group dynamics that should be addressed by counter narratives. This study has emphasised the role of emotions (e.g., anger, fear, and joy) in affecting in-group and out-group dynamics by showing how terrorist and extremist content can weaponize target audiences' emotional

responses to spread radical views. The importance of creating emotionally driven counter messages has been acknowledged in recent research on counter narratives (Schlegel, 2022). By acting on an emotional level, counter narratives can 'persuade affectively rather than cognitively.' (Ibid.) Counter narrative campaigns aimed at tackling the diffusion of martyrologies should seek to cause positive emotional responses in audiences, increasing their resilience to terrorist and extremist martyrdom narratives.

Limitations and future research

This study's limitations stem from its research design and methodology. Critical discourse analysis is centred on interpretation and sources are open to multiple readings (Flowerdew, 1999). Hence, interpretation cannot serve as a general theory but rather as a tool to explore core elements characterising the source(s) under analysis and provide interpretative hypotheses. In addition, this paper is a qualitative study of a limited sample of cases and related visuals. Hence, it cannot provide a comprehensive analysis of Jihadi and far-right martyrologies which require longer-length studies and the analysis of multiple and diverse content (e.g., texts, videos, and audios). Consequently, generalizations on both Jihadi and far-right online martyrologies are cautious and should be considered as hypotheses to be tested in future research. These limitations point to the theoretical nature of this study that aims to offer considerations for further research.

Because this research's findings are highly theoretical and based on a small sample of evidence, the conclusions about the implications for P/CVE must be viewed as hypotheses to be tested and evaluated in future empirically assessable research. It is necessary to further reflect on the crucial role sacred values play in shaping terrorist martyrologies. Particularly, future research needs to further explore the political dimension of Islamist martyrdom propaganda, its merger with religious extremism and the nexus between Christianity and political extremism in far-right martyrologies. Moreover, evidence-based studies need to produce additional hypotheses about martyrologies' intended audiences to improve the impact of counter narratives and address the spread of martyrdom narratives across online communities.

Further research is needed to explore both Jihadi and far-right online martyrologies. Indeed, the cult of martyrs is an emerging trend in online far-right propaganda and is likely to evolve and become more prominent. Future studies need to conduct in-depth reflection on the doctrinal aspects of far-right martyrdom, carefully evaluating the impact of historical martyrologies and the influence of religion(s) and spiritual beliefs on the far-right conceptualisation of sainthood and martyrdom. In addition, the influence of emotions on group dynamics still has to be comprehensively addressed in terrorism studies as this field suffers from a gap concerning the nexus between emotions and political violence (Wright-Neville & Smith, 2009). Future research addressing martyrologies can help to fill this research gap, bringing about a better understanding of the impact of terrorist propaganda on online radicalisation processes and helping to improve P/CVE strategies.

Conclusions

This research's findings on Jihadi and far-right martyrologies align with the core observations developed by the body of research analysed in the literature review. Jihadi and far-right online martyrologies share numerous commonalities. Both the Jihadi and far-right terrorists-martyrs embody the core belief of violent extremism: the necessity to act violently against an out-group perceived as fundamentally dangerous to the success and survival of the in-group (Berger, 2018). Moreover, both online martyrologies employ diverse symbols drawing upon religious and political signs, historical references, and military culture. Particularly, they both weaponize religion, respectively Islam and Christianity, make references to ancient, modern, and current times, and utilise military signs (e.g., weapons, and clothing). In addition, Jihadi and far-right martyrologies seem to boost similar radicalisation factors by depicting the terrorists as righteous martyrs fighting against an inferior and satanic evil, therefore triggering emotions that glorify the in-group and demonise the out-group.

Nonetheless, differences between Jihadi and far-right martyrologies must not be overlooked. There is a major divergence in the doctrinal approach underlying martyrdom narratives. While the Jihadi content propagandises a close connection between martyrdom and death, the far-right images conceptualise living saints and martyrs. While death by suicide is

part of the Jihadi martyrdom narratives, the far-right martyrologies analysed by this study suggest that death by suicide is not part of the far-right conceptualisation of martyrdom. Moreover, a different cultural background permeates the symbolism adopted, thus hypothetically appealing to different audiences. Indeed, the Jihadi visuals arguably target mainly second and third-generation European Muslims who presumably do not speak Arabic and do not necessitate a deep understanding of Jihadi ideology, whereas the far-right martyrologies seem to target already radicalised individuals who have knowledge of core far-right concepts. Future studies may contradict these findings by observing peculiarities in other content.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to Dr Daniel Koehler, Dr Julian Droogan and Lise Waldek for reading through this paper and providing me with valuable feedback. Their observations have been pivotal to analysing Jihadi and far-right terrorism and extremism.

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ISSN: 2363-9849