

# ISIS Anashid and the Logic of Imagined Communities

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## Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	2
BACKGROUND AND RELEVANT WORK	5
<i>ISIS Anashid in the Terrorism Literature</i>	6
<i>Literatures in Other Fields</i>	9
IMAGINED COMMUNITIES FOR PROPAGANDA	11
<i>Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities</i>	12
<i>Limitations of Imagined Communities for ISIS Anashid</i>	14
<i>Interplay of Discursive and Non-Discursive Perspectives</i>	16
ISIS ANASHID AND THE LOGIC OF IMAGINED COMMUNITIES	18
THE LOGIC OF IMAGINED COMMUNITIES: DISCURSIVE ANALYSIS	21
<i>Methodology</i>	21
<i>Results and Discussion</i>	23
THE LOGIC OF IMAGINED COMMUNITIES: NON-DISCURSIVE ANALYSIS	26
<i>Identification</i>	27
<i>Villainization</i>	30
<i>Internalization</i>	32
IMPLICATIONS	34
CONCLUSION	36
APPENDIX A: DATA COLLECTION AND SOURCING	39
APPENDIX B: FULL DISCURSIVE ANALYSIS CODING RESULTS	40
REFERENCES	45

## Introduction

Any terrorist organization worth its salt can carry out a few deadly attacks every year - but the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) does better than that. ISIS has found a way for foreign fighters from over ten different countries to carry out these attacks. In this context, understanding ISIS foreign fighter recruitment is very important. Theories profiling lone wolves, the mechanics of social media, and the social logic of martyrdom, and pan-Islamic movements have all been proposed as potential explanations (Spaaij 2010; Lieberman 2017; Pape, Rovang, and Decety 2017; Hegghammer 2010). While these theories might hold some truth, they are incomplete. They fail to consider that ISIS recruits must be drawn from some pre-existing pool of support. This paper will argue that musical propaganda – specifically ISIS anashid – plays a key role in the formation of ISIS’s recruitment pool.

Propaganda has been well-studied as a technique of targeted messaging to mobilize audiences for the propagandist’s cause. ISIS anashid (sg. nasheed) can intuitively be classified as propaganda, if only because they are one of many media materials released by the group. Since August 2013, ISIS has released over 90 anashid – Islamic chants that vary in sound from invigorating anthems to ethereal sung poetry. Statements made by the Islamic militants themselves describe anashid’s ability to mobilize individuals in the name of Islamic militant insurgencies. Anwar al-Awlaki, a prolific Islamic lecturer and ideological leader of Al Qaeda, noted in *44 Ways to Support*

*Jihad*, one of the key text for jihadi recruitment that “Muslims need to be inspired to practice Jihad... [and] today nasheed can play that role”(al-Awlaki 2009). Clearly, the propagandists are aware of the power of their tool.

The current literature and common understanding of ISIS propaganda are highly focused on how propaganda mobilizes individuals to make *hijrah* (emigrate) for the purposes of *jihad* (a sacrifice in the name of God), to fight in Iraq and Syria or conduct attacks in their home country. However, this analysis has only examined the discursive power – the word-based content – of propaganda. It is assumed that the explicit statement of ISIS’s values as prominent themes in the propaganda suffices as an explanatory variable; appeals to ISIS’s ultimate goals, such as the establishment of a pan-Arabic Islamic caliphate and the destruction of its enemies, are posited as causal linkages between propaganda and action. In short, the existing literature claims that hearing about jihad inspires jihad. While this explanation is informative, it is incomplete.

Thus, this paper seeks to perform two main tasks. The first is to bridge the gap between studies of propaganda, music, and terrorism. A complete and systematic understanding of ISIS propaganda requires the dual recognition of propaganda’s discursive and non-discursive power. An understanding of ISIS propaganda solely for military recruitment without acknowledging the variety of intermediate and qualitative consequences that its non-discursive components can have limits the scope of academic

debate on propaganda. As music's non-discursive power has been studied outside of the propaganda literature, especially for its ability to create intense emotional affect and unique social bonds, we will consider literature beyond the scope of traditional propaganda studies.

The second task of this paper is to propose a strategic logic of ISIS anashid. This paper argues that ISIS's anashid contribute to the advancement of its goals through the formation and consolidation of an imagined ISIS community. First, anashid serve an identification process, which aims to create meaningful relations among members. Second, they villainize the enemy and establish a boundary between ISIS supporters (nasheed-listeners) and non-supporters (non-nasheed-listeners). Third, ISIS anashid increase knowledge of the shared ISIS culture, to deepen the commitment of individuals to the group and strengthen emotional connections. Given that no previous theories exist on the contribution of ISIS anashid to the group's overall strategic goals, this argument calls attention to the logic implicit in ISIS anashid, and how it explains the behavior of the group. Note that this is not about the success of the group or their recruitment efforts directly; instead, anashid offer a new perspective into ISIS's use of propaganda.

An answer to the question of how anashid fit into ISIS's propaganda strategy makes both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it illuminates the special role of musical propaganda and situates it in the broader propaganda context. It

also demonstrates the importance and interconnectedness of discursive and non-discursive elements of power. Practically, it informs policymaking on ISIS for individual countries and the international system. Propaganda reveals how the propagandists perceive themselves and the reputation they want to create for themselves, both of which are necessary to understand ISIS's structure and how to engage it.

This paper is structured in five parts. First, I give the context and background of musical propaganda and highlight the gap in the literature. Second, I present a new logic of ISIS anashid, which implements Anderson's theory of imagined communities and draws on both discursive and non-discursive elements. Third, I present discursive content analysis of 20 anashid for the logic of ISIS anashid. Fourth, I present a non-discursive analysis of ISIS anashid and its contextual features. Finally, I conclude with implications and further considerations.

## **Background and Relevant Work**

The current literature on music as a force in politics and society is divorced from that of terrorism, which puts a study of ISIS anashid on extremely shaky ground. Most literature on propaganda and terrorism is empirical work from the world of political science. This literature is well suited to analyze discursive content. In contrast, most work specifically on musical propaganda is contained within humanities, such as in

sociology and anthropology. This work tends to be more descriptive with regards to how music affects an individual's self-perceptions and relationships to others. These non-discursive factors are especially important as they consider the effects of the anashid as an object of consideration, something that can be discussed and shared, instead of only listened to. The goal of this section is to demonstrate how current discussion of ISIS anashid is operating on an incomplete theoretical foundation, then to show that it can be grounded with knowledge from other academic fields.

### *ISIS Anashid in the Terrorism Literature*

The current literature that attempts to find explanations of how ISIS anashid function for recruitment consists solely of discursive analysis. In a study of seventeen anashid, Gråtrud concludes that the anashid are effective messaging tools because they focus on a limited number of broadly-appealing themes: the *ummah* (global Muslim community) has been weakened and humiliated and only ISIS can and will restore Islam's glory (Gråtrud 2016). The most comprehensive work on ISIS anashid is Behnam Said's book based on an earlier article, which traces the lineage of anashid in jihadi contexts; however, the core of the work is a typology of four anashid categories (Said 2012, 2016). While it establishes valuable historical context, the work generates classifications based solely on the lingual content of the anashid. Jonathan Lee expands beyond a typology in positing that anashid create an ISIS aesthetic of an idealized

Islamic State (Lee 2015). However, evidence for this claim is still only discursive, employing a comparative study of ISIS anashid and Taliban poetry.

The lack of theoretically complete analyses of ISIS anashid may be attributed to circumstantial factors. ISIS anashid are have only been produced for four years and are consistently removed from popular social media sites such as YouTube and Twitter within a few days or weeks of being posted. Further, the volume of ISIS propaganda only took off in 2013, reaching a peak in August 2015, and has declined in the last two years (Milton 2016). In short, ISIS anashid have not been around for very long and are difficult to obtain systemically. For these reasons, case studies of individual anashid and especially foreign language anashid (since they tend to attract more media), are more common, such as in German (Heinke and Raudszus 2015), Chinese (Wong and Wu 2015) and French (Velasco-Puffleau 2015).

The terrorism literature has also emphasized relevant but ultimately insufficient explanations for changes in modern terrorist propaganda and recruitment. A first involves the Internet and its facilitation of fast, cheap, and efficient distribution of content. While the mechanics of social media undeniably contribute to ISIS's success, they cannot be the only factor, or else all terrorist organizations would be able to achieve similar levels of success. Archetti terms this misguided view that the web is solely responsible for modern radicalization the "demonization of the Internet" (Archetti 2014). Another incomplete understanding claims that 'catchy' music will be

popular enough to mobilize individuals to fight. Researchers note that anashid are, indeed, 'catchy,' and thus assume they have the explanatory power for mobilization (Jaafari 2016). However, Islamic State anashid have become popular in unexpected online communities without inciting support, where online users acknowledge aesthetic pleasures of ISIS anashid while disavowing the content of their message.<sup>1</sup> Some 'catchy' anashid are not enough to convince individuals to join ISIS, but Western media continues to claim that is the sole purpose of ISIS propaganda efforts.

While the terrorism literature has struggled to account for ISIS anashid as part of its propaganda successes, the role of anashid within jihadi history generally has enjoyed increased scholarship in recent years. Anashid are not unique to ISIS or even insurgent organizations, but instead are rooted in an Islamic tradition and are widely known among Arabic-speaking populations. The role of nasheed has been studied in a wide range of communities, from the jihadi Patanis on YouTube to British Muslim youths (Andre 2014; Miah and Kalra 2008). Further, many scholars have highlighted anashid as a critical aspect of jihadi culture in insurgent organizations in the Middle East, such as Al Qaeda, Hezbollah, and the Taliban (Pieslak 2015a; Pieslak 2015b; Alagha 2012; Strick van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012). Said has conducted the most comprehensive work on

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<sup>1</sup> Some examples are to be expected, such as YouTube videos ([youtube.com/watch?v=l7qZg3zOkpw](https://youtube.com/watch?v=l7qZg3zOkpw), [youtube.com/watch?v=3Ln6cZ21heo](https://youtube.com/watch?v=3Ln6cZ21heo)), but others are a little more surprising: for instance, a bodybuilding forum ([forum.bodybuilding.com/showthread.php?t=164256041](https://forum.bodybuilding.com/showthread.php?t=164256041)).

this topic, tracing the lineage of jihadi anashid from their roots in 1970s Islamists in Egypt and Syria (Said 2012, 2016).

Comparisons of ISIS propaganda to US counter-messaging highlight the ability of ISIS to speak to coherent narratives that propagate their view of the world (Allendorfer and Herring 2015; Bean and Edgar 2017). Most scholars agree that the range of narratives appearing in ISIS propaganda include its power to organize the world and correct a variety of perceived wrongs. While these are valuable findings, the literature has not come up with a satisfactory or convincing answer to the specific role of ISIS anashid within broader propaganda strategies, nor how ISIS anashid are different from videos or digital print propaganda.

### *Literatures in Other Fields*

Many frameworks of analysis taken from literatures other than the terrorist literature are relevant for the non-discursive elements of anashid. These frameworks, however, are meant to apply to music – a classification of anashid which ISIS would deny. While there are debates within the Islamic community about whether music is *haram* (permissible), anashid still consist of words delivered with some tonality, distributed in short audio recordings. Most Western audiences would hardly even consider these religious debates. For the purposes of this study, ISIS anashid will be

considered music, which allows us to analyze them within existing frameworks of music analysis.

Studies in the humanities suggest a variety of qualities of music that make it well-suited for propaganda. In sociology, music is noted for its tendency to bring individuals together. Music is hypothesized to affirm and reinforce “attitudes and prejudices associated with particular (counter or sub cultural) identities” in a way that creates a “combination of spatial occupation, acoustic omnipresence and community building”(Birdsall 2012). Drawing on classic psychology’s in-group and out-group dynamics, the content of that music could then be leveraged to encourage affection towards other members or to foster distrust and hostility towards nonmembers (Downes 2014, 272). Historically, Joseph Goebbels, director of Nazi Germany’s propaganda efforts, noted that “Music affects the heart and emotions more than the intellect.” Goebbels understood that music has a distinctive ability to move its listeners by playing with unspoken messages or emotive appeals, conveyed subtly through melody or motif. Words themselves, powerful on their own, can be enhanced with music (Cowell 1948). Music has special characteristics that add to its benefit as a form of propaganda.

The assertion that music has an effect distinct from that of, say, video, is based on the premise that there are differences in emotive capability and conveyance inherent in every media form. In *The Presence of the Word*, a pioneering work for media studies, Ong

proposed that the content of information changes when transmitted in different mediums (Ong 1967). In Ong's work, the stress is placed on the differences in resulting messages, dependent on the medium through which it is conveyed. He identifies various cultural communications and the senses they stress; ISIS anashid can be studied as a further extension of this model, stressing hearing over sight and the others. Thus, due to their distinct sensory traits in the sphere of ISIS propaganda, anashid have a role distinct from all the other mediums.

ISIS propaganda operates in a context that lies at the intersection of many different disciplines. While the anashid are not original to ISIS, they represent a very particular manifestation of propaganda that functions on a discursive as well as non-discursive level. An understanding of ISIS anashid, then, will require input from multiple disciplines. It will require the descriptive work that the humanities have done to grapple with the content and potential power of ISIS anashid; then, the work done in political science can contextualize and strategize the impact of ISIS anashid on individuals. The former answers the question of *what* ISIS anashid are, and the latter answers the question of *why* ISIS makes them.

### **Imagined Communities for Propaganda**

Formulated in the context of nineteenth- and twentieth-century states, Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined communities is directly relevant to ISIS, a group whose

stated aim is to establish a Caliphate: an Islamic state. Imagined communities are the causal logic that explain how ISIS has built a nation of people supporting it, which is necessary for the existence of its Caliphate. Anderson's theory of imagined communities defines nations as socially-constructed by the individuals that comprise the community. The logic of ISIS anashid as a propaganda tool for creating nationalism can be explained by three causal mechanisms distilled from Anderson's theory of imagined communities.

### *Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities*

First, imagined communities require the identification of other members. Anderson conceives of the nation as a "deep, horizontal comradeship," and even though members of the community have never met each other, "in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 2006, 6-7). In highlighting that physical togetherness is not required the imagination of the community, Anderson redefines what bonding factors are necessary to hold a community together. The requirement of direct contact is discarded: just as no American knows all other Americans, "[most] will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 2006, 6). In the chapter "Census, Map, Museum," Anderson gives the example of censuses as a state institution

used to identify and classify populations.<sup>2</sup> The census in colonial Malaysia contained lists of populations by race and religion at various points in time, as the colonial administration repeatedly attempted to create categorizations for the population. He especially highlights the census-makers' "intolerance of multiple, politically 'transvestite,' blurred, or changing identifications... everyone has a place [in the census], and that everyone has one – and only one – extremely clear place" (Anderson 2006, 166). While the colonial classifications struggled to find fixed identities to ascribe to the colonized population, their efforts demonstrate the importance of identification in establishing imagined communities.

Second, Anderson establishes that imagined communities are limited, as "even the largest is not coterminous with mankind" (Anderson 2006, 7). He specifies that while boundaries may be elastic, they are "finite... [and] beyond which lie other nations" (Anderson 2006, 173). Communities necessarily have boundaries, especially as they come up against other communities. This discreteness can be seen in the spatial realities of maps, which visually encode boundaries of an imagined community.

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<sup>2</sup> While "Census, Map, Museum" primarily considers imagined communities in colonial legacies, Anderson himself includes the chapter to demonstrate the broad similarities between the colonial context and one of European nationalism. This paper continues this generalization of the logic of imagined communities and applies it to ISIS anashid. That is not to say such an approach is without limitations, however; these will be addressed in the following subsection.

Third, imagined communities promote a communal identity, which may include shared values or common histories. Anderson highlights museums in the colonial eras as creators of a common history: for example, British colonialists in India attempted to become “the guardian of a generalized, but also local Tradition [of monumental archaeology]. The old sacred sites were to be incorporated into the map of the colony, and their ancient prestige (which, if this had disappeared, as it often had, the state would attempt to revive) draped around the mappers” (Anderson 2006, 181-2). While states draw on historical narratives and claim to these alternative legitimacies, it is often done to elicit deeper loyalties and increased legitimacy. Ultimately the appeal is to a single, rich identity – such as the true Muslim or the hardworking American, or in the case of British colonialists in India, a benevolent and wise guardian. These identities are essential in the construction of an imagined community.

### *Limitations of Imagined Communities for ISIS Anashid*

While the Anderson’s theory of imagined communities serves as an excellent framework for understanding ISIS anashid’s role as propaganda, it does not go far enough in certain respects. For one, ISIS is a non-state actor that lacks many of the conventional attributes Anderson took for granted, such as clear and pre-existing geographic boundaries or powerful and organized bureaucracies. Although ISIS has

increasingly gained those attributes, they spent much of their history without them, and still lack an established nation's administrative force and clear borders.

The unique quality of ISIS anashid as musical propaganda is also not adequately addressed by the current conception of imagined communities. Anderson does name music as one of the tools that builds imagined political communities, but subsumes it within the general category of language:

There is a special kind of contemporaneous community which language alone suggests - above all in the form of poetry and songs. Take national anthems for example... no matter how banal and mediocre the tunes, there is in this singing an experience of simultaneity. At precisely such moments, people wholly known to each other utter the same verses to the same melody. The image: unisonance (Anderson 2016, 145).

Music is deemed valuable for its capability to bind individuals together across spatial and temporal boundaries. However, it is not clear how singing in unison differs from collectively watching a movie or the contemporaneous reading of a Sunday newspaper. Indeed, this is the crux of the issue, of how anashid differ from ISIS's other propaganda outputs, especially ISIS videos and digital print propaganda. Answering this question requires a more nuanced investigation of music's unique qualities, which Anderson's theory lacks.

Finally, Anderson has a narrow understanding of the power of imagined communities' boundaries: "The cultural products of nationalism - poetry, prose fiction, music, plastic arts - show this love very clearly in thousands of different forms and styles. On the other hand, how truly rare it is to find analogous nationalist products

expressing fear and loathing” (Anderson 141-142). He did not believe that the boundaries between communities could be leveraged for negative, “othering” purposes. However, the case of Nazi Germany presents a different perspective: “musical song... also reasserts the German nation’s military power in opposition to its enemies” (Birdsall 2012, 109). The fear and loathing that Anderson doubts is extremely important in ISIS’s anashid, which often express the loathing of the enemy and provoking their fears.

### *Interplay of Discursive and Non-Discursive Perspectives*

ISIS anashid are strategically relevant precisely because of their ability to combine the discursive and non-discursive dimensions of imagined communities. Despite limitations listed in the previous subsection, Anderson’s theory of imagined communities is still useful for outlining the three mechanisms in which the two dimensions meet. A few recent works have begun to understand the non-discursive aspects of ISIS anashid as also supporting the goals of the propagandist. Non-discursive aspects, such as social bonds and emotional appeals, enrich the story of ISIS anashid’s role in creating a shared culture and community (Bean and Edgar 2016, 3; Pieslak 2015b). This paper aims to continue this line of argument further within Anderson’s theory of imagined communities.

Analyzing the discursive and non-discursive dimensions in tandem is the only way to truly understand ISIS anashid. A preliminary investigation of Anwar al-Awlaki's pamphlet on the *44 Ways to Support Jihad* is presented here:

In the time of Rasulullah (saaws) he had poets who would use their poetry to inspire the Muslims and demoralize the disbelievers. Today nasheed can play that role. A good nasheed can spread so widely it can reach to an audience that you could not reach through a lecture or a book. Nasheeds are especially inspiring to the youth, who are the foundation of Jihad in every age and time. Nasheeds are an important element in creating a "Jihad culture". Nasheeds are abundant in Arabic but scarce in English. Hence it is important for talented poets and talented singers to take up this responsibility. The nasheeds can cover topics such as: Martyrdom, Jihad is our only solution, support of the mujahideen, support of the present day leaders of Jihad (to connect the youth to them), the situation of the Ummah, the responsibility of the youth, the victory of Islam and defending the religion. The nasheeds should focus on Justice rather than peace and strength rather than weakness. The nasheeds should be strong and uplifting and not apologetic and feminine (al-Awlaki 2009).

Evidence of the three mechanisms can be found in this Al-Awlaki statement. He highlights the ability of anashid to reach audiences otherwise unreachable through other means, to create the deep horizontal bonds of the community. "Demoralize the disbelievers" is another way of clearly demarcating the boundaries between the "disbelievers" and the believers. Finally, Al-Awlaki lists many of the discursive elements that would deepen the commitment of individuals to the community.

Although al-Awlaki did not live to see the rise of ISIS, his words are directly applicable and increase the possibility that ISIS themselves view anashid to play a similar role in the pursuit of their goals.