

The Dreams of Islamic State

by Iain R. Edgar

Abstract

Previous research has shown that jihadis attach great importance to dreams, to the point of taking them into account in personal and strategic decision-making. This article asks whether the same is true of Islamic State (IS). Using evidence from social media and IS publications, I review night dream accounts by IS members and supporters, seeking to assess the prominence, main themes, and reception of such accounts. Dreams appear to be at least as important to IS as to previous jihadi groups. Like other jihadis, IS activists consider dreams a potential window into the future and use them to make sense of the world, justify decisions, and claim authority. In at least one case (that of Garland, Texas attacker Elton Simpson), a dream may have informed the decision to take violent action.

Keywords: Jihadism, dreaming, ISIS, Al Qaeda, ideology

Introduction

Several studies over the last decade have shown that militant Islamists such as al-Qaida and the Taliban make extensive use of reported night dreams to inspire, announce, and validate violent jihad.[1] In this article I ask whether dreams play a similar role in Islamic State (IS). Using evidence from social media and IS publications, I review night dream accounts by IS members and supporters and the discussions they generate. This is the first academic study of the significance of dreams in Islamic State ideology.

As we shall see, IS members and sympathisers appear to attach considerable importance to dreams. Just as in other jihadi groups, dream accounts and discussions proliferate, and activists express belief in the predictive potential of night dreams. Dreams may also feature in decision-making processes at different levels in the organization, from Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's decision to withdraw forces from Mosul in late 2014 to IS sympathizer Elton Simpson's May 2015 attack in Garland, Texas.

The article has three parts. First I summarize what we know about the significance of dreams in Muslim societies generally and in jihadi groups specifically. I then describe a sample of IS-related night dream accounts, before briefly discussing the connection between dreams and action.

The significance of dreams

Dreaming in Islam

To understand the jihadi appreciation for dreams, it is important to realise that dreams are important in Islam more generally. The interpretive tradition regarding the "true dream" (*al-ru'ya*) is a fundamental feature of Islamic theology.[2] There are three dream reports in the Qur'an, two reported as received by the Prophet Mohammed. One of these directly relates to the decisive battle of Badr between the Muslims and the Quraish from Mecca in 624 CE.[3] The Joseph Sura in the Qur'an contains the reported dream experiences of the Prophet Joseph, such as that of the seven fat and seven lean cows.[4] The true dream tradition is reported more extensively in the *hadith*, the recorded sayings of the Prophet Mohammed. The *hadith* Bukhari and

Muslim Sahih, for example, each have a chapter recording the teachings of the Prophet Mohammed about true dreams that come from Allah.[5]

The Islamic tradition distinguishes between three types of dreams: the true dream (*al-ru'ya*), the false dream, which may come from the devil, and the meaningless everyday dream (*hulm*). True dreams are more likely to be experienced or received by pious Muslims, but potentially all Muslims can receive them. There is an extensive literature on the art and science of dream interpretation going back over a thousand years.

In the contemporary Muslim world, dreams command considerable popular interest. Arabic TV channels, for example, are replete with dream interpretation programs. My anthropological research over many years across four continents has shown that *istikhara*, the ritual of incubating night dreams for guidance, is widespread in many if not most Islamic countries.[6] During my fieldwork research, especially in Pakistan, Turkey, Bosnia and the UK, I rarely met a Muslim who didn't relate to his night dreams as a potential portal to the divine. Moreover, I found this dream tradition to be similar across all the main branches of Islam: Sunni, Shia, Salafi and Sufi, as well as amongst the minority Alevi and Ahmadiyya sects.[7] In the Sufi mystical traditions, dreaming is most highly regarded.[8] While Sufis have traditionally paid the most attention to dreams, the more literalist Salafis appear to have become more interested in them over time. As a salafi dream interpretation book states:

Salafis view the tradition of vision and dream been interpretation as being rooted in Islam and having been inherited from the Salaf. Indeed, it has inherited from the Prophets (peace be upon them), so any insinuation that Salafis are in some way opposed to vision interpretation in its totality would be incorrect.[9]

Dreams thus have a different status in the Muslim world compared to Western societies. A longstanding Christian tradition dating in part to the 4th century CE viewed dreams as superstition, perhaps to prevent charismatic dreamers challenging the institution of the church.[10] Later, Freudian psychoanalysis considered dream content as mirroring, reassembling, and encoding personal experiences of the past. By contrast, Islamic dream interpretation has an important forward looking component.[11] As Lamoreux writes, "Dream interpretation offered Muslims a royal road that led not inward but outward, providing insight not into the dreamer's psyche but into the hidden affairs of the world. In short, the aim of dream interpretation was not diagnosis, but divination." [12]

Dreaming in jihadism

For my previous research on al-Qaida's dreams and interpretive practices, I trawled books, newspapers accounts, internet reports, and trial transcripts for dream accounts by militants to see whether there was a distinctive jihadist dreaming. I found a lot of material. Bin Ladin himself brought up dreams in one of the first videos released after 9/11.[13] Elsewhere I found dream accounts reported by numerous well-known militants, including the failed shoe bomber Richard Reid, the two core 9/11 planners Ramzi bin al-Shibh and Khalid Sheikh Muhammad, the alleged 20th hijacker Zacariou Moussaoui, and several Guantanamo Bay detainees.[14] Scattered through autobiographies and biographies of various al-Qaida-linked militants, night dreams are prominently described and invoked as justifications for daytime decisions to wage violent jihad.[15] The famous jihadi website www.azzam.com contained lists of martyr biographies from Bosnia and elsewhere that contained many examples of dreams of martyrdom with anticipatory illustrations of either future paradisaical states of being, or of fallen martyrs describing Paradise to the living.

I also conducted extensive fieldwork in Pakistan, Turkey and Northern Cyprus. In April 2005 I interviewed Rahimullah Yusufzai, a BBC journalist then (now Editor of the *Pakistan News International*) who was probably the only journalist who had extensively interviewed Taliban leader Mullah Omar pre-9/11. Yusufzai confirmed the importance of both inspirational and strategic planning dream accounts for the Taliban commanders and soldiers:

I kept hearing these stories, no big military operation can happen unless he (Mullah Omar) gets his instructions in his dreams; he was a big believer in dreams; he told me he had been entrusted with a mission, a holy mission and the mission is to unite Afghan, to save it from divisions and to restore order and enforce Sharia law.[16]

And it was not just in the mountains of Afghanistan that radicals discussed dreams. Three years ago at a conference a Western intelligence official told me that “Everyone we are watching in our area is into dreaming as crucial to their jihadi membership, progress and their final decision, via Istakhara/Islamic dream incubation, as to whether to go on militant jihad.”[17]

Of course, not all Muslims who believe they have true dreams about jihad or martyrdom, become militants. For some radicalized individuals, however, a dream or series of dreams can be a catalyst for taking up arms. A short or long period of contemplation can be followed by a vivid command or message dream of the kind described by Yusufzai above.[18]

Not all dream imagery is as explicit as Mullah Omar’s message dream. Often the meaning of the dream is opaque or metaphorical and needs interpreting by the dreamer, possibly via one of a number of dream interpretation books (such as the well known one purported to be by the medieval Islamic dream interpreter Ibn Sirin), by a family member or an Imam, or indeed through a dream interpretation website.[19] In radical circles or militant groups, that interpretation is often carried out by fellow activists, and therefore susceptible to biased interpretation or outright manipulation.

The dreams of IS members and supporters

Let us now turn to the dreams of IS fighters and their many online supporters. In the following I present a sample of dream accounts collected from social media and IS publications.

Twitter-based dream interpretation

A number of IS sympathisers discuss dreams on Twitter. JM Berger’s article in this special issue refers to the now-defunct Twitter handle “End of Time Dreams” (@entimdrms), which “serves as a broker between dreamers and allegedly authoritative third parties (more numerous and tweeting in Arabic) who interpret those dreams with a pro-ISIS bent.”[20] The name of the handle is likely inspired by a *hadith* which states that at the end of time the dreams of the believer will come true.[21]

At the current time of writing, a similar-looking Twitter handle (@entdrm13) is active and providing the same kind of service as the original End Time Dreams.[22] About half the posts on @entdrm13 are about dream accounts that seem to be offering positive expectations of IS advances on the battlefields of Iraq and Syria. Some of the dreams also refer to anticipated pledges of allegiance by other jihadi groups to IS. Examples include the following:

July 11: seems to be a few dreams about the Kurds too, watch out for Kobani and Tal Abyad.[23]

July 11: The brother had this dream yesterday so that leaves until next Thursday or Friday for it to occur: just had a dream that Hasakah has been liberated in Ramadan and ISIS is marching towards Kurds. Abu Talha@akbanyash87.[24]

Here we see dreams presented as anticipatory or even in the prophetic tradition of true dreams.

July 11: recent rumours whether al shabaad will give bayat...here's two dreams. Also a dream from 2013 about a bayat from Egypt:[25]

Dream: I saw al-Zawahiri in video giving a talk and you could see signs of regret on him. I give bayat to the amir of the lands between the two rivers (Iraq) and Somalia.

Interpretation (on site): if the dream comes true then al Zawahiri will give bayat to the Islamic state after the mujahideen of Somalia give it (al shabaab) and Allah knows best. [26]

We see here the classic Islamic theme of dreams shedding potential light on the future. Such posts probably serve to reinforce the sense among IS fighters that God and destiny is on their side in their holy war. They view the future as being known only to God, but also as divivable through true dreams. Let us now take a look at some slightly longer dream descriptions by IS fighters.

Explicit dreams: The "Critical Prophet"[27]

The following example was posted by a Russian speaking IS fighter and was shared on social media on 1 July 2015 by several IS accounts including @pravdaig ("Truth ISIS"). The timing of the dream was significant, because it reportedly occurred during a series of difficult battles for IS against the Syrian Kurdish Peoples' Protection Units (YPG) during June and July. In mid-June 2015, Kurdish forces recaptured the Syrian border town of Tel Abyad – which is the focus of the dream – from IS in a significant defeat for the extremist group, because it deprived IS of a key point for bringing supplies and foreign fighters into Syria.[28]

THE DREAM OF A CERTAIN BROTHER!

Assalam aleikum Muslim brothers and sisters and mujahideen! Recently, one of the brothers of the Islamic State dreamed a dream. In the dream, he saw the Communist Kurds took Tel Abyad and got as far as Ayn al-Isa. And he saw the Prophet of Peace [NB in Russian, the word "mir" can mean both "peace" and "world"] above them, who thrust his sword into the ground. And the brothers said to him, fight with us against them. He replied that he would not fight. When they ask him about the reason for his refusal, he replied that you are being profligate with food [i.e. wasting food], throwing food away and not giving it to the poor, you are not getting up for the night time namaz [prayers]. May Allah reward you with a blessing!

Here we can see that a dream image of what is presumed to be the Prophet Mohammed, (though that is not certain) is taken as a true dream according to the *hadiths* as described beforehand. The fighter's supplication for help from the Prophet is refused due to IS fighters failing to do their charitable duty of feeding the poor. This dream would likely be interpreted by fighters as a command to give more food to the poor and to be more observant of prayer in the future.

Opaque dreams: "The Lion, the Tree and the Hypocrite"[29]

Another Chechen IS fighter writes of a dream that a fellow IS militant named Abu Yusuf had about Umar Shishani (Tarkhan Batirashvili), an ethnic Chechen from Georgia's Pankisi Gorge who has risen to become

IS's military commander in Syria. Shishani is a greatly-admired figure among Russian-speaking IS jihadis. To be fighting alongside Umar is therefore a noteworthy event. The fighter who relates Abu Yusuf's dream goes on to say that, he, too, had the very same dream.

One brother-mujahid (Abu Yusuf) had a dream: "I was standing on the front line, as if guarding the brothers. It seemed as if brother Adam was among them, and definitely Umar Shishani. Suddenly, I heard the noises of dogs, suddenly it became dark, and Umar and the other brothers were asleep. I was alert, and started to look attentively in all directions, and I saw a large animal like a lion, dull gray in color. Alongside it was a masked man, looking like the brothers, who petted the lion.

I went up to Umar and said,

"Umar, there is a lion and a suspicious man in a mask."

He went with me, "show me," he says, and I showed him.

I asked him, "Can you shoot them?" At that, Umar said, "Wait a minute and look at them."

But suddenly they saw us, the man in the mask saw us first. And he swiftly ran at me, saying, now I will kill you.

I asked Umar for permission to shoot.

But Umar instead of speaking fell silent. The man in the mask ran very close. I wanted to shoot but it seemed I had not taken the safety off my gun. But Umar, defending me, started to shoot at him. I also opened fire and we started to shoot together and killed the one in the mask. But the lion was not dead. Then Umar said, "there's a tree, jump up on it." All the brothers jumped. Me and Umar remained on the ground.

Umar said that these lions can climb trees. So be careful. We also climbed the tree. And the lion jumps after us and says to me in human speech, "if I catch you, I'll kill you." He jumps from side to side. I jump up after him. I jump, catch the lion's head and turn it this side and that. And I say to myself, 'I'm only afraid of Allah, not you.' And I actually killed the lion."

Ma sha'llah. And at that time I dreamed the same dream. We explained the dream according to the Quran and the Sunna: the lion is the taghut, the man in the mask is a munafiq (hypocrite), the tree is IS.[30]

In these two contrasting Russian/Chechen IS fighters' dreams we see the classic distinction between explicit and opaque dreams. The first dream gives a clear reprimand about the waste of food and failure to pray correctly, while the second dream is more metaphorical and open to interpretation. This distinction echoes the Freudian notion of manifest and latent dream content.[31] The command dream doesn't need interpretation, but rather explicitly advocates remedial action and explains military failure. The metaphorical interpretation of the second dream utilizes Qur'anic references, which is commonplace in Islamic dream interpretation books and dictionaries.[32] The second dream also shows Umar Shishani as a heroic and successful warrior leader saving the dreamer and the group from being devoured by the enemy lion and man (hypocrite).

There is an intriguing reference at the end of this dream text about the reporter (the author) and the reported (the dreamer) having experienced the same dream. Sharing the same dream does seem to add to its perceived importance though; Philips writes that the "fifth principle regarding true dreams" is that they are shared, and refers to Bukhari who records that the 'Night of Power' *Laylatul al-Qadr* in Ramadan was confirmed by the prophet Mohammed following some people dreaming about this.[33] We also know from Bin Laden's first

video post-9/11 that he was worried prior to the attack that people would get wind of it as so many of his followers were having dreams of planes flying into tall buildings.[34]

Dream accounts as authoritative arguments

Dabiq, the Islamic State's main English-language newsletter, is primarily concerned with reports of battlefield successes and effective rebel governance. But *Dabiq* also contains references to dreams. In one instance, *Dabiq* reproduces a dream account from a well-known hadith:

When the Prophet (sallallahu alay-hi was sallam) migrated to madinah, At-Tufayl ibn amr Ad-dawsi (radiyallahu anh) migrated to the Prophet, and along with At-Tufayl migrated a man of his tribe. They later disliked residence in Madinah (because of disease and fatigue caused by its climate). The man fell sick and lost patience. So he took hold of a wide arrowhead and cut off his fingerjoints. The blood gushed forth from his hands, until he died. At-Tufayl said to him, 'what did your Lord do with you? He replied, 'Allah granted me forgiveness because of my hijrah to his Prophet'. At-Tufayl said, 'why do I see you covering your hands?' He replied, 'I was told, 'we will not mend what you have damaged.' At-Tufayl narrated this dream to Allah's messenger (sallallahu alay-hi was sallam). Then Allah's messenger prayed, 'O Allah, forgive him also for his two hands' (Sahih Muslim).[35]

This dream narrative and its interpretation are included in a section devoted to 'Hijrah and Forgiveness'. This is a so-called "strong" (i.e. reliable) hadith, and its inclusion provides theological justification for IS's claim that emigrating to Islamic State will lead inexorably to God's forgiveness of previous sins.[36] Indeed, just previous to the above quotation is the reporting of the Prophet Mohammed saying, again from Sahih Muslim *hadith*,

Are you not aware that Islam wipes out all previous sins? And that Hijrah wipes out all previous sins? And that Hajj wipes out all previous sins?

Paradise revealed through Dreams

IS's ideological literature is replete with the expressed belief that fighters who join IS and die on the battlefield become martyrs for whom a special place has been reserved in paradise. One example from *Dabiq* refers to a paradisaical outcome for having gone on *Hijrah*:

Because Hijrah for Allah's cause is a great matter, Allah revealed about it...Allah is pleased with them and they are pleased with him, and he has prepared for them gardens beneath rivers flow, wherein they will abide for ever [sic]. That is the great success.[37]

Al-Baghdadi, IS leader, in a recent audio tape constantly refers to the future paradisaical state of those who die in the cause of jihad:

And He (the Glorified) said, And those who are killed in the cause of Allah – never will He waste their deeds. He will guide them and amend their condition, and admit them to Paradise, which He has made known to them. Indeed, Allah has purchased from the believers their lives and their properties [in exchange] for that they will have Paradise. They fight in the cause of Allah, so they kill and are killed. [It is] a true promise [binding] upon Him in the Torah and the Gospel and the Qur'an. And who is truer to his covenant than Allah? So rejoice in your transaction which you have contracted. And it is that which is the great attainment.[38]

Believing in the 'invisible' Paradise

Given this belief, it is not surprising that the night dreams of IS fighters and other jihadis are often dreaming about Paradise. In the Islamic dream tradition, the only way to personally pre-experience heaven and hell is through the true dream or vision. In chapter nine of the *hadith* by Bukhari there are several accounts of the prophet Mohammed's paradisaical dreams offering information as to followers and their place there.

Kinberg's detailed study shows how dreams in Islam have historically been considered as a "communicative technology" between the living and the dead.[39] She defines two types of dreams: dreams that emphasise rewards bestowed upon the pious in the afterworld, and dreams in which the dead answer the questions of the living about the process of dying, or about the most rewarding deed. The dreams included in these categories share one common ethical purpose, namely to show believers the right way of conduct. In the first type, dreams illustrate specific rewards such as "its magnificent gardens and palaces, and its beautiful women who wait for the pious people to come." [40] Kinberg quotes many examples, one of which is that of a reported dream of the Prophet Mohammed.

Likewise the Prophet informed his companions about ar-Rumaysaa and Bilaal being in paradise based upon one of the Prophet's dreams. Jaabir ibn Abdillah related that the Prophet said: I saw myself (in a dream) entering paradise, and saw Aboo Talhah's wife, ar-Rumaysaa. Then I heard footsteps and asked, "Who is it?" Somebody said, "It is Bilaal." Then I saw a palace with a lady sitting in its courtyard and I asked, "to whom does this palace belong?" Somebody replied, "It belongs to Umar." I wanted to enter it and look around, but I remembered your (Umar's) sense of honor (and did not). Umar said, "Let my parents be sacrificed for you, O Allah's messenger. How dare I think of my sense of honour being offended by you?" [41]

So, paradisaical insight and knowledge of other worlds can be available via the portal of dreams. The example of Mohammed above is echoed in many biographies of fallen jihadis before the formation of IS and detailed and analysed elsewhere.[42] One well-known example can be found in the famous "9/11 hijacker letter" which instructed the hijackers on what to do in the final days and hours before the operation: "You should know that the Gardens {of paradise} have been decorated for you in the most beautiful way, and that the *houris* are calling to you: 'O friend of God, come,' after dressing in their most beautiful clothing." [43]

Such beliefs are very widespread among militant Islamists. For example, a *Sunday Times* journalist abducted by jihadi insurgents in Syria in 2012 later said his guard had lectured him about the rewards of martyrdom:

And we kept receiving sermons from the Koran, When you die you will be taken to paradise by a green bird. You will see Allah and his thrones, in a house made of gold and silver. Your family will meet you up there. You will have 72 wives. [44]

The motif of "green birds" is commonly invoked in relation to martyrdom. For example, on 21 July 2015, the *Guardian* newspaper reported the death in action of Reyaad Khan, a 21-year old British foreign fighter from Cardiff, as follows:

On social media, an account believed to belong to a female British jihadi in Syria said on 17 July that "Abu Dujana" (a name used for Khan) had been "lost". Employing a term used by jihadis to describe dead fighters, she went on to describe him as having become a "green bird." [45]

David Cook traces the dream-martyrdom connection back to the seventh century AD, when Muslims were also reporting dreams about martyrs, as recorded by Ibn Abi al-Dunya (d. 994-95). [46] Cook, who maintains a database of some 5,000 dream accounts from throughout Islamic history, concludes his survey of early Islamic martyrdom:

All of these dreams – only a small selection of those available – are common throughout the Muslim martyrdom tradition. The general themes of the martyrdom literature serve to confirm the status of the martyrs after their death, to demonstrate their satisfaction with their fate and to influence others to follow them.[47]

Cook's conclusions about early Islamic martyrdom and dreaming closely resemble mine in relation to contemporary jihadis.

Dreams and visions are likely then to have kept their special place in the spiritual or ideological worldview of IS. A core part of such a role for the dream vision is to give information about future paradise and the place of fallen comrades; indeed such dreams are the key to the unseen, and presumed heavenly knowledge.

The evidence reviewed so far suggests that dreams interest IS members greatly and constitute an important part of their religious experience. But does it matter? Do these spiritual experiences have any practical implications?

Dreams and IS decision-making

Previous research has shown that some jihadis take, or at least claim to take, dreams into consideration when they make decisions to join a group, become a foreign fighter, volunteer for operations, or (if they are leaders) pursue particular military strategies. There are several examples of jihadis claiming to make such decisions almost *entirely* based on alleged dreams.[48] Thus far there is limited evidence of this in relation to IS, but there are two important cases worth mentioning.

Al-Baghdadi's Mosul dream

The first is a very interesting, albeit somewhat unreliable, report of IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi allegedly taking a strategic military decision based on a dream. In March 2015, anti-IS news outlets reported that al-Baghdadi had had a dream in which the Prophet Muhammad ordered him to withdraw forces from Mosul. [49] The Kurdish Democratic Party website reported that "Baghdadi ordered his fighters to withdraw from the city, following his dream that he met the Prophet Mohammed, who ordered him to leave Mosul city." This was at a time when the Iraqi army had retaken Tikrit and there was speculation that it would move toward Mosul. The Kurdish website interpreted the report to mean that "fear is spreading among the militants in Mosul for the predictions of liberating Mosul."

While this one report is by no means conclusive regarding the current importance of night dreams within IS, the account is entirely within the realm of the possible, because in the past other militant leaders such as Mullah Omar have openly claimed to have made military decisions based on dreams. In such cases we can never know whether the leader's dream experience is genuine or fabricated, but it is worth bearing in mind that in Islam it is considered a serious sin to lie about a dream; indeed a special part of hell is reserved for such sinners.[50] Even if this report were fabricated by the anti-IS Kurds it still shows how at this time dream reports can be part of the current Middle Eastern propaganda war.

The Dream of Elton Simpson

The second data point concerns Elton Simpson, one of the two perpetrators of the gun attack on the Muhammad cartoon exhibition in Garland, Texas, in May 2015. According to Amarnath Amarasingam, who

studied Simpson's conversion statement and interviewed his family, Simpson may have been spurred to act based on a dream. Here is Amarasingam's analysis:

According to some in his baqiya[51] family, with migration to Syria no longer viable, a few factors came together pushing Simpson to act. First, there is the increasingly vibrant narrative coming from the Islamic State that Muslim youth who cannot migrate to Syria must commit acts of violence in their home countries. Second, Simpson became aware of an event in Texas, organized by so-called anti-Islam activist Pamela Geller to draw the Prophet Muhammad. Given the brand of Islam Simpson had adopted by this point, he clearly saw the event as a legitimate and timely target.

Then there is the dream. As some members of his online family told me, Simpson had a dream some months ago "about a woman in a hijab looking down at him on the road." For those who see themselves on the path of jihad, this dream is often seen as an indication that the women (or "virgins") of paradise are awaiting him. In other words, it is a sign that martyrdom is near. Simpson followed the signs that he believed were being sent to him and acted accordingly. For his baqiya family, however, it came as a shock. He left no clues and didn't really discuss it with them, leaving behind only a tweet pledging an oath of allegiance to the Islamic State. "The brother was beautiful," said one of his online friends, "We always exchanged hadith and always laughed and joked. I will miss him. I wish I told him how much I loved him for the sake of Allah.[52]

We also know that Simpson discussed his dream with IS-affiliated Twitter users. Berger writes that Elton Simpson had been in contact with the abovementioned "End of Time Dreams" Twitter handle days before his attack:

Significantly, "End of Time Dreams" conversed over Twitter with Elton Simpson, one of two Americans who attacked a "Draw the Prophet Mohammed" contest in Garland, Texas. While a complete record of the exchange was unavailable, due to Simpson's account having been suspended, it appeared "End of Time Dreams" arranged for a dream to be interpreted at Simpson's request several days before the attack took place.[53]

Simpson, it would seem, was emotionally affected by this paradise virgin dream and his actions may have been triggered by it. We cannot be sure how important the dream was compared to other factors, but we cannot exclude the possibility that the dream mattered.

These two examples alone do not tell us much about the extent to which dreams inform IS decision-making. More research is needed here. It is worth bearing in mind that we are at a very early stage in the process of documenting the IS phenomenon. We may know a lot about the group's propaganda, military exploits, and governance efforts, but we have only rudimentary knowledge of the personal trajectories of IS fighters, especially leaders. As more thick descriptions of life within IS emerges, I expect to see more evidence of dream-inspired action.

Conclusion

Dreams seen as true by the believer can transform perceptions of earthly defeat into the will of God and the call to greater righteousness. Dreams can augur victory, legitimize defeat, and inspire or demoralize armies. Dreams and their interpretations are strategic military goods, and may be manipulated strategically; dreams confirm and legitimate radical group membership, the path of holy jihad and the destined entry to paradise, with all sins forgiven. Dreams are a form of metaphysical currency to be shared and reflected upon and redeemed in action.

IS follows in this tradition and resembles al-Qaida and Taliban in their ascribing importance to the Islamic dreamland. The examples presented here reflect the traditional Islamic separation of dreams into clear message dreams and metaphorical ones, and the tendency to see some dreams as offering information about future paradisaical realms. Dreams may even be critical tipping points to the move from contemplating jihad to killing people as in the case of Elton Simpson.

However, this article only constitutes a preliminary study, and more research is needed on dreaming in IS. A key question regards the importance of the night dream in the recruitment, inspiration, and day-to-day guidance of IS members of different ranks in the organisation. Are “lone wolf” fighters in developed countries more prone to relate to their dreams than fighters on the Middle Eastern battlefields? And how do such “lone wolf” fighters interpret special dreams without the support of actual real life comrades? Are particular dream imagery sequences linked to being primary, secondary or ancillary drivers to radical conversion to militant jihad? Do IS fighters dream of their leader, al-Baghdadi, or other commanders such as Umar Shishani, and if so how, and with what outcome? How do IS followers deal with dreams thought to be prophetic but that don't seem to come true in reality. These questions can be addressed by compiling and examining more written dream accounts, by analysing memoirs of IS fighters, and by interviewing IS defectors and former foreign fighters.

The recent Quilliam foundation analysis of the propaganda war between IS and the West describes the radicalisation process as being from “tacit supporter to active member.”[54] Their analysis weighs the evidence as to the radicalising effect of the internet and social media, and refers to Ellul's work on propaganda immersion; yet how that total propaganda immersion influences dreaming and how that subsequent dreaming influences behaviour (or not) is not considered.[55] As David Anderson (Q.C.), the official reviewer of Britain's terrorism laws, put it: “A lot of people talk a good game about terrorism. The knack is to identify those who are going to do something about it.”[56]

Maybe intelligence agencies will one day use dream reports as part of a predictive technology to identify individuals and groups who reach and cross over the line between contemplation and action. Hopefully we won't reach a scenario in which thousands of tiny ‘butterfly’ drones listen to dream narratives at breakfast time across parts of Asia, only to zap certain eye-rubbing young men after running their dream account through an algorithm.

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Notes

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- [27] Joanna Paraszczuk shared and translated this dream account for me; she also wrote the following contextual paragraph introducing the dream account.
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[48] For examples, see the dream accounts of Zacarias Moussaoui who was ‘inspired’ in dreams to fly a plane into the White House, Washington, (Donahue: *Slave of Allah*, 80-81, and analysed also in Edgar, *Dream in Islam*: 69-70); Richard Reid, the shoe bomber, talks of dreams that he understands as guiding him in his choice of targets (<http://edition.cnn.com/2006/LAW/04/21/moussaoui.trial/> and Donahue, op. cit., 91); Mulla Omar, Taliban leader, is reported as founding the Taliban and developing his campaign strategies through his true dreams (Edgar, *The Dream in Islam*, 179-94); Dreams were reported as an important recruiting strategy in bringing young women to fight in the siege of the Red Mosque in Islamabad in 2007, “Jihadis tap anti-Musharraf feeling,” *BBC News* (online), 14 July 2007: (<http://www.afghanistannewscenter.com/news/2007/july/jul142007.html#9>, last accessed 25 July 2015); “Pakistan’s Red Mosque: Start of Unrest: The Full Story Behind the Red Mosque Crisis,” by Misbah Abdul- Baqi <http://www.onislam.net/english/politics/asia/433784.html>, last accessed 25 July 2015. An American jihadi in Somalia, Omar Hammami, described dreams as influencing decision to continue fighting; see Abu Mansuur al Amriiki, *An American jihadi part one*, 88. (<https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/omar-hammami-abc5ab-mane1b9a3c5abr-al-amrc4abkc4ab-22the-story-of-an-american-jihc481dc4ab-part-122.pdf> last accessed 25 July 2015).

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[51] [Amarasingam defines Baqiya](#) as follows: “For this study, I interview current and former fighters, the friends and family of these jihadist volunteers, and members of the close-knit transnational virtual community of Islamic State supporters. They call themselves the ‘baqiya family.’ *Baqiya* means enduring, and is often used as a war cry by members of the Islamic State”; Amarnath [Amarasingam](#), “Elton ‘Ibrahim’ Simpson’s Path to Jihad in Garland, Texas”, *War on the Rocks*, 14 May 2015 (<http://warontherocks.com/2015/05/elton-ibrahim-simpsons-path-to-jihad-in-garland-texas/2/>, last accessed 25 July 2015).

[52] [Amarasingam, op. cit.](#)

[53] *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9 no. 4 (2015), p. 66-67

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[56] Alan Travis, “Analysis: even with 4000 staff, MI5’s work is a question of priorities,” *Guardian*, 28 February 2015 (<http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/feb/27/mi5-struggle-identify-people-britain-likely-turn-terrorism-isis>, last accessed 24 July 2015).