

Research Note**How Hezbollah Uses Dreams to Inspire Jihad and Sanctify Martyrdom****by Kendall Bianchi****Abstract**

Previous research has shown that Sunni jihadist groups regard dreams as revelatory devices and thus consider them a key source of inspiration for their followers. This article broadens the existing literature by demonstrating that a similar phenomenon holds true for a different category of jihadists: the Shia jihadist group Lebanese Hezbollah. Using evidence drawn from pro-Hezbollah websites, I examine the ways in which the group's online media apparatus strategically wields dream accounts to serve organizational goals. I contend that Hezbollah dream accounts serve primarily to reinforce one critical element of the group's ideology: a belief in martyrdom.

Keywords: Jihadism, dreaming, Hezbollah, martyrdom, messaging, Lebanon

Introduction

In February 2013, an anonymous young woman recounted[1] a recent dream to the pro-Hezbollah news outlet *Arabipress.org*. Her vision featured the martyred Hezbollah fighter Zulfiqar Azzadin, who had been tortured and killed[2] by Syrian militants that year in a gruesome video released by the perpetrators. In the dream he stood intact atop a tall building, observing his own funeral procession from above. According to a cleric who interpreted the woman's dream, Azzadin was joyful because many aspire to a martyrdom like his; perhaps his remains—still held by the enemy—would soon be returned and given an extravagant funeral. Indeed, since Azzadin's death in 2013, reports of dreams involving the martyr have been mentioned at least six times in pro-Hezbollah media.[3] Nearly all of these dreams, like the one above, draw attention to the young fighter's eternal triumph as a martyr—effectively rewriting the narrative of his earthly suffering and painful death.

Similar stories of dreams, visions, and premonitions appear frequently in jihadist literature and propaganda. But a reverence for dreams and visions is not limited to jihadist circles; rather, it is rooted in an Islamic tradition that regards dreams as prophetic devices and a portal to the divine. John Lamoreaux (2002) traced the development of dream interpretation in Islam from its roots in the Quran and the Hadiths, to its manifestation in the medieval “dream manuals” of dream interpreters Ibn Sirin and Ibn al Musayyab.[4] Lamoreaux and other scholars including Leah Kinberg (1993) have argued that the Hadiths, in particular, cemented prophetic dream interpretation as legitimate by demonstrating the Prophet Muhammad's endorsement of the practice.[5] According to Lamoreaux, “a good Muslim can expect to receive from God messages in dreams.”[6]

In more recent years, scholars have shown that a range of Sunni Islamist militant groups—including the Taliban, Al Qaeda (AQ), and the Islamic State (IS)—have embraced the Islamic tradition of regarding dreams as divine prophecies. Iain Edgar (2004) explored Al Qaeda and the Taliban's reported reliance on dreams to inspire political action, inform military operations, and claim religious authority. Taliban founder Mullah Omar claimed to have established the movement after the Prophet Mohammed appeared to him in a dream, asking him to save Afghanistan from foreign influence; Osama bin Laden, meanwhile, reportedly worried that the plan for the 9/11 attacks would be leaked due to a number of anticipatory dreams by followers who had not been informed of the plan.[7] In recent years, members of the Islamic State have reportedly attached similar importance to dreams; an April 2016 issue of *Dabiq*, for instance, reported that the 2016 Brussels metro station bomber Khalid El Bakraoui drew inspiration for his attack from a series of three dreams.[8] Edgar and Looijer (2017) further note that dreams often appear to play a powerful role in galvanizing recruits to join jihadist organizations.[9]

It may be impossible for the outside observer to discern the authenticity of these dream accounts, but the frequency with which they appear in jihadist media and discourse indicates that they provide strategic value to these organizations. As Edgar notes in his 2015 study on the dreams of the Islamic State, dreams constitute a form of “metaphysical currency,” that can “confirm and legitimate radical group membership, the path of holy jihad and the destined entry to paradise, with all sins forgiven.”[10] In other words, because dreams are believed to transmit divine guidance, jihadist groups can publicly manipulate them to reinforce their ideology, galvanize supporters, and boost morale.[11]

Hezbollah-affiliated online media content—including the example above—suggests that it, too, harnesses dreams in this way. Dream accounts in pro-Hezbollah media serve primarily to bolster one key aspect of the group’s religious ideology: a belief in martyrdom. This media is replete with descriptions of dreams that relate to and usually foreshadow a fighter’s death in battle. They range from vague premonitions of impending death, to metaphorical dreams requiring interpretation, to full-fledged night visions that point explicitly to imminent martyrdom. In some cases, the martyr’s family members or friends will relate dreams that they claim the martyr described to them before his death; in other cases, they recount their own dreams featuring the martyr. The content of these accounts varies, but frequently involves visits from revered religious figures or previously martyred relatives.

Indeed, the concept of the prognosticatory “martyrdom dream” has been identified in previous research on both mainstream Muslims and jihadists, notably by Cook (2007) and Sirriyeh (2011).[12] According to them, dream accounts such as those described above often seek to confirm the status of the fighter killed in battle as a true martyr—a key ideological objective for Hezbollah and other groups that exploit the appeal of martyrdom to recruit and motivate new fighters. According to Sirriyeh, the significance of these dream accounts lies not only in the comfort they offer the martyr’s associates, but also their role in encouraging others in the larger community to follow in the martyr’s footsteps—in the same way that fatwas by radical clerics may incentivize suicide missions by declaring them to be pathways to martyrdom.

Although scholars have explored the idea of the martyrdom dream, no previous research has examined the role of dreams in the context of Lebanese Hezbollah; to date, research on jihadist dreams has largely been limited to the Sunni groups such as the ones discussed above. While a comparative study of the dreams of Sunni versus Shia jihadist groups is beyond the scope of this paper, the distinction is key. As Thomas Hegghammer notes in his recent edited volume, understanding jihadi culture is key to understanding the mindsets, motivations, and worldviews of such groups.[13] He further observes that the topic remains deeply underexplored, with various research questions yet to be answered—both descriptive and comparative in nature. By broadening the scope of descriptive research on individual jihadist groups, this paper will help enable scholars to begin answering the comparative questions Hegghammer identifies about how jihadist cultural practices differ across time, space, sect, and culture.

There are several limitations to this research worth mentioning. First, this paper discusses only those dream accounts appearing in online media sources. It sheds no light on what members of Hezbollah say about their dreams offline, which may be an important element of jihadi dream culture. Moreover, as mentioned, it may be impossible to discern whether dream accounts appearing in the media are authentic or whether they truly play a role in inspiring other fighters. For this reason, this research limits its focus to the ways in which pro-Hezbollah media sources appear to instrumentalize dream accounts as “strategic currency,” offering no judgment on the validity of the accounts or the effectiveness of the apparent strategy behind them. Of course, the premise of this study also relies upon the assumption that the appearance of dream accounts in Hezbollah-affiliated media reflects a deliberate strategy on the part of group leaders or supporters—although the frequency with which they appear suggests that it is, indeed, deliberate.

The rest of this paper proceeds as follows. First, I explain the significance of martyrdom and dreams to Hezbollah by contextualizing them within the Shia perspective on Islamic history. Then, I delve into the specifics of

how Hezbollah-affiliated media harnesses dreams to promote and validate martyrdom by demonstrating predestination, intent, and parallels with previously-martyred historical figures. Finally, I offer perspectives on the role of martyrs' family members in Hezbollah dream accounts.

The Hezbollah Context

While the concept of martyrdom is present across multiple sects of Islam, it holds special importance in the Shia tradition due to the legacy of the 7th-century Battle of Karbala, when members of the Prophet's family were martyred at the hands of Umayyad leaders. A belief in martyrdom, moreover, is the lifeblood of Hezbollah's military. Not only does the promise of the afterlife help motivate fighters into battle—but the desire to avenge previously martyred fighters helps sustain the “resistance” ideology that underpins the group's existence.[14] Furthermore, martyrdom serves to validate political and military objectives; because only those killed “in the way of God” achieve martyrdom, a sign from God that dead fighters have become martyrs can corroborate the divine legitimacy of the mission for which they sacrificed themselves. As a result, Hezbollah leaders try to instill a belief in martyrdom among their supporters. Dreams, visions, and premonitions help the group accomplish this goal.

The idea mentioned above that dreams may specifically portend martyrdom also has a basis in the events and characters central to the Shia worldview. The Shia narrative, for instance, holds that shortly before the Battle of Karbala, the Imam Husayn had a vision of the Prophet Muhammad, who informed his grandson of his impending martyrdom. Another tradition holds that one of the Prophet's wives, a woman known as Umm Salama, originally learned of Husayn's martyrdom in a dream. Hezbollah's ideology embraces these narratives, and the group's media makes occasional references to them.[15] Given this history and the imperative of propagating a belief in martyrdom, it should come as no surprise that the group would seek to instrumentalize dreams as evidence of the martyr status of its dead fighters.

The Dreams of Hezbollah

Hezbollah media often uses dream accounts to show that fighters killed in battle received a sign of their impending deaths, often in the form of a vague premonition. In videos and articles, friends and family of a martyr will frequently recall that during their last meeting, the fighter had expressed a sense of anticipation. “The last time I saw him, he told me he might not return,” the friend of the martyr Ali Abbas Dahini told [16] the Hezbollah-affiliated TV station Al Manar in a recent documentary, recalling that it was the first time his friend had made such a statement despite having participated in numerous battles. Ali was killed shortly thereafter in the Battle of Qusayr. Another account [17] relates how, on the night before his death in 2014, the martyr Hussein Shaheitli sent his family photographs that his comrades had taken of him praying that night, “as if to tell them, ‘say goodbye to me, for these are my last moments.’”

Other premonitions are more explicit and appear in the form of dreams or night visions. An article from June 2017 describes how the martyr Hamza Ibrahim Haider stopped in the middle of a battle to tell his comrade Ali Baiz that he would soon be martyred.[18] Two days prior, by Ali's account, Hamza had seen the Imam Mahdi in his dream. The Imam had given him three numbers—the first belonging to a martyr who had been killed the day after the dream, the second belonging to Hamza, and the third belonging to a martyr who would die shortly thereafter. Hamza then reportedly implored Ali to continue on with the others after his martyrdom, lift the banner of victory, and remember him. The prophecy materialized a few minutes later: “Lo and behold, I saw him spread out, tinged with his own blood, an expression of glory on his face,” [19] Ali told *Arabipress*. “He had been martyred... just as he had said.” Taken in the context of the role of dreams in the Muslim martyrdom tradition, such accounts imbue the warrior's demise with sacred meaning and help convey the message that he has died a martyr's death. Moreover, the juxtaposition of Hamza's prophecy with his heroic exploits communicates to the audience his *intent* to sacrifice himself in the way of God—a necessary qualification to become a martyr.

Many visions also involve interactions with previously martyred heroes and other historical figures. These accounts help build continuity between past and present battles—imbuing the latter with greater legitimacy and elevating the status of today’s martyrs by placing them in the same category as their glorious predecessors. One article tells the story of the martyr mentioned at the beginning of this paper, Zulfiqar Azzadin, who purportedly dreamt of his own grisly death a week before traveling to Syria and told a friend what he had seen. [20] The Imam Hussein appeared in his dream, comforting him: “Do not fear. The angels took care to lift up my head, and I will take care to lift yours.” After Zulfiqar’s capture by “takfiris,” he reportedly took solace in this vision during a brutal interrogation that ended in his martyrdom as he had envisioned it. “He did not give them any information.... When they cut his head, he took comfort in Hussein, and when they cut his hands, he took comfort in Abbas.” The story further cited the fact that he informed a friend of his prescient dream as “proof of the divine custody that protected Zulfiqar.” In this instance, a dream account is used to place Azzadin on the same plane as a member of Ahl al Bayt, instantly conferring legitimacy and honor upon him.

Another article served a similar purpose but featured an episode from more recent history, telling the story of a father-son pair who died exactly 15 years apart.[21] It described how on the night before the son Ali’s martyrdom in 2015, he told his comrades tales of his father’s heroics and rallying cry against the Israelis years prior. “Thus, [Ali’s father] was also present on that night,” the article continued. During the battle the following day that claimed Ali’s life, the story came full circle. “Like he who dreams of his father’s face after a long absence, Ali repeated [his father’s] call from years before: ‘Let’s go, onto the criminals!’ Ali fought the takfiris as his father fought from his heart against the soldiers of the Israeli occupation.” These symbolic connections between past and present-day martyrs lionize the latter’s sacrifices, linking them with esteemed historical figures and thereby cementing their status as martyrs for a divine cause.

As discussed above, fostering a belief in martyrdom—and the perception that those dying in Syria are martyrs—is critical because it can inspire others to follow in the same path. Previous research has also pointed out that Hezbollah promotes a culture of martyrdom in part to raise the battlefield morale of its fighters, who may conduct themselves with less inhibition if they view death in battle as the ultimate prize.[22] Nasrallah himself articulated the logic behind this strategy when he argued that “the fighter’s strength and superiority does not stem from the type of weapon he carries, inasmuch as it stems from his will... and his advance towards death.”[23] But if dream accounts intend to inspire Hezbollah supporters, they also aim to intimidate the group’s opponents. Cook and Allison (2007) contend that dream accounts and other symbolic indicators of martyrdom in Al Qaeda literature are intended not only to recruit new fighters, but also to “project to the outer world the image that the *mujahidin* are unstoppable.”[24] The same is likely true for Hezbollah. The group sees the spiritual and psychological dimensions as key to military victory, and has therefore developed sophisticated capabilities in that domain; its leaders believe that projecting the reputation of a religiously-motivated fighting force that aspires to death in a holy war may inflict considerable psychological damage on the enemy. Dream accounts in pro-Hezbollah media help foster that image.

Hezbollah Families

Dream accounts in Hezbollah’s media also target the families of fighters and martyrs. Families are a key constituency because they may have considerable influence over whether a young man joins the group and goes to Syria. Indeed, previous research on Hezbollah has shed light on the importance of family ties[25] in facilitating recruitment and building unit cohesion; some articles in pro-Hezbollah media have even made reference[26] to recruits asking for their parents’ permission to wage jihad in Syria. Even after a fighter is killed in battle, his family is still crucial to Hezbollah’s messaging campaign. At best, families can serve as a valuable recruitment tool by encouraging others to sacrifice their sons to the resistance and join the honored ranks of martyr families, as seen in the Al Manar documentary series *Alive with Their God*[27]; at worst, however, they can tarnish the party’s reputation by speaking out against it.[28] It is therefore critical that the family believes that they are sending their sons to be martyred—and not to die a meaningless death. Not only will they be

comforted at the fate of their son, but Hezbollah's ideology also emphasizes the fact that the family will reap eternal rewards from the martyrdom of a son (not to mention the earthly rewards they also receive).

The impacts of dream accounts, as a result, also appear to be aimed at families of fighters. Accounts of the fighters' dreams may serve this purpose; but so do accounts of the dreams and premonitions of family members themselves. Not only do these dreams help reassure the family that their loved one has been martyred, but they also connect the family spiritually to the martyr's sacrifice—and to the divine rewards that martyrdom supposedly entails. One article described the dreams of multiple family members of the martyr Habibullah Mazloom—including two brothers and his mother—foreshadowing his death in Aleppo. Habibullah's older brother recalled a series of three dreams leading up to his martyrdom, involving scenes of a speech by Secretary General Nasrallah and a remembrance ceremony for the Imam Ali, as well as a vision of himself chanting a funeral lament.[29] "These dreams convinced me that something would happen to my brother," he concluded. When reports of the young man's martyrdom started to trickle in, according to the article, most of the town's residents "were convinced that the news was just a rumor or a lie... But the family prepared throughout these hours for the worst." In another instance, the father of the martyr Hussein Mounis remembered receiving a call telling him that his son had been injured. "I told him, 'no, my son has been martyred'... I just had a feeling." [30]

Dream accounts may also be used to communicate messages from the martyr. In one article, a dream account is used to communicate the feelings of the martyr Ali Hassan Ibrahim to his family after his death.[31] The story describes how upon hearing the news of Ali's martyrdom, his mother comported herself with dignity and restraint. "That day, the martyr visited his sister in her dream and said to her, 'I am happy because my mother behaved in this way.'"

It is worth noting that while the occurrence of a prophetic dream can help corroborate martyrdom, dreams may also serve as vehicles for other symbols and indications associated with martyrdom or religious commitment. In an article from December 2014, the mother of the martyr Ahmad Wael Raed relates that when she was pregnant with him, she dreamt of seeing a "bright face and a green turban" in a corner of her home, a symbol of strong religious faith.[32] During Ahmad's childhood, according to his mother, he displayed an unusual degree of piety and devotion to his religious education. "He was the oldest [of his siblings] and their guide in all matters, especially religious matters," until he was martyred in May of 2013.

As discussed, this paper offers no comparative analysis of Shia versus Sunni jihadist groups. However, it is worth noting that the prevalence of family members in this dream literature may reflect strategic imperatives specific to Hezbollah. While groups like Al Qaeda and ISIS have in recent years relied more heavily on a diaspora of foreign fighters from abroad and often tend to eschew national borders, Hezbollah professes a more nationalist ethos that is intimately tied with its ability to serve and protect the Lebanese people. As such, cultivating a strong relationship with the communities from which the group draws its fighters is critical to its success. Incorporating fighters' families into dream literature, therefore, is one way to tie the Hezbollah community spiritually to both the blessings that martyrdom incurs and the cause that it purportedly serves.

As all of these examples demonstrate, pro-Hezbollah media strategically wields dream accounts to influence the beliefs and behavior of Hezbollah recruits, fighters, and families. Against this backdrop, it may be useful to return once more to the case of Zulfikar Azzadin to illustrate the extent to which the group values these dream accounts as a form of strategic capital. The broadcast of Azzadin's brutal murder on Lebanon's LBCI channel provoked a stir within the Hezbollah community, so much so that Arabipress published an article in late 2013 criticizing the station for broadcasting such ghastly images and accusing it of acting as a platform for Salafi-jihadist messaging.[33] Viewed in this context, Azzadin's repeated appearances in dream accounts appear designed to comfort the community and thereby counteract the potentially demoralizing effects of his public and gruesome death. In other words, Hezbollah seemingly views dream accounts as one of its most valuable tools in crafting favorable narratives surrounding its fighters' deaths in battle, and in countering enemy propaganda.

Conclusions

In many ways, Hezbollah's dream literature sheds additional light on well-known aspects of the group's ideology, including the importance of martyrdom, family, and community. Nonetheless, this literature is key to understanding the group's worldview and mindset. Because dreams provide strategic value as portals to the divine, the circumstances of their use in pro-Hezbollah media can provide a window into the organization's psyche.

The current generation of Hezbollah fighters came of age in the context of resistance to Israel; they most likely never imagined that they would one day fight and kill fellow Arabs in Syria. It is no surprise, then, that some members of the community have reportedly begun to question the worth of Hezbollah's role in Syria—and even the martyr status of fighters killed there. Against this backdrop, the use of the “currency” of dreams to reinforce the culture of martyrdom may reflect a certain degree of anxiety—and a tacit recognition of the group's own ideological vulnerabilities in the present day. Alternatively, it may simply reflect a preoccupation with a more perennial and universal dilemma: how can military organizations persuade fighters and their families to pay the ultimate price of self-sacrifice?

Either way, analysts should not dismiss dreams and other elements of jihadi culture as mere religious superstitions or practices unrelated to the military activities of jihadist groups. Rather, culture plays a central role in enhancing motivation, commitment, and military capabilities; to believe otherwise would be to ignore one of their most important assets.

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Notes

[1] “A young woman recounts what she saw in her dream about the martyr Zulfiqar Azzadin,” *Arabipress*, February 3, 2014. URL: <https://bit.ly/2Hhyzvl> accessed June 3, 2018.

[2] “Syrian opposition member to al Janoubia: ‘We did not execute Zulfiqar Azzadin,’” *Al Janoubia*, September 20, 2013. URL: <https://bit.ly/2JkIO3B> accessed June 4, 2018.

[3] See: Mother of the martyr Zulfiqar Hassan Azzadin holds for him “aroos al qasem,” *Al Manar*, December 24, 2013, <https://bit.ly/2sH7pbj>; “The Martyr Zulfiqar Azzadin,” July 20, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2Jvhu6i>; “A young woman recounts what she saw in her dream about the martyr Zulfiqar Azzadin,” *Arabipress*, February 3, 2014, <https://bit.ly/2Hhyzvl>; “Our martyrs: Karbala continues,” *Arabipress*, November 15, 2014, <https://bit.ly/2LVDc1v>; “The story of the martyr Zulfiqar Azzadin in his mother's words,” *Arabipress*, August 7, 2014, <https://bit.ly/2swT4j4>; “Life in your death is victorious,” *Arabipress*, January 25, 2015, <https://bit.ly/2xRPF3B>; all accessed May 17, 2018.

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