

Rüdiger Lohlker (Vienna)

Introduction

This volume intends to try something impossible. We want to present to some results from our research into sources published in Arabic as the main language of Jihadi subcultures. And we try again to do something as impossible as the one mentioned before: teaching the obvious to the oblivious (@Nico Prucha): If there is no knowledge in Arabic you will not understand people speaking and writing Arabic.

Let's try! Rüdiger Lohlker explores the Jihadi abyss at *telegram* based on empirical survey of Jihadi communication of IS- and al-Qaeda-related channels and groups. Nico Prucha and Seth Canthey contributed a sketch of the development of IS activity online (and offline) and its perspectives – referring also to al-Qaeda. David Jordan gives valuable insights into an organization often mentioned but ignored by most researchers. Tamara Abu-Hamdeh presents a groundbreaking study on the use of infographics bei IS. Ferdinand Haberl provides insights into the almost known world of Jihadi covert actions, subversion and intelligence. Rüdiger Lohlker presents a study of a IS group disseminating military and other knowledge on *telegram*. The last chapter by Sarah Ahmed and Rüdiger Lohlker provides an overview of the material collected at the University of Vienna.

The papers of this papers are independent studies focusing on Jihadism.

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Al-Nabi al-dawlawi? On the Role of the Prophet in IS and other jihadi Subcultures

To begin with a line of a poem: "What mystery pervades a well! That water lives so far..."¹ reading it slightly different as Emily Dickinson intended, we will climb down in a bloody abyss to look a special case of the living Prophet nowadays and some mysteries related to it.²

Climbing down in this abyss is evidently less pleasant than to look other aspects of contemporary ways of contextualizing the Prophet. Nevertheless, researching this aspect is necessary to understand *all* dimensions of contemporary representations of the Prophet Muḥammad.

Introductory Remarks

Since we are talking about the "Islamic State": Recent research on rebel administrations/states hint at a certain statehood in territories controlled by jihadis³, a proto-state at least to leave the discussions emerging from the needs of legitimizing warfare against IS by declaring that IS is no state at all, a militia, etc. aside, we will simply follow the practice of the members and followers to call this entity *al-dawla* and it Islamic State. The loss of territory of the IS-caliphate does not affect our research since it is a research on online communication. The loss of offline territory does not mean a loss of online territory. In terms of territory it may mean a transformation of territorial control to a flexible control of changing territories, sometimes temporal, i. e., operations at night, not in daylight, and changing the modus operandi to guerrilla warfare.

Turning to the Prophet, we will have to face the first problem: Take an organization – i. e., IS – and its motto: "*al-ḵilāfa ʿalā minḵāj al-nubuwwa*", the caliphate following the method of prophethood, and you do have a very clear hint at the centrality of *nubuwwah*, of prophethood, as a core idea of this organisation – as so does its seal. But what about *minḵāj* and its relation to prophethood?

Minḵāj in modern times is different from, e. g., the use of the concept in pre-modern Islam. Simply think of *Minḵāj al-ṭālibīn* of al-Nawawī, just to take the title of a book as an example. To cut a long discussion

¹ Dickinson, *Poems*, 599 (poem 1400).

² I am very grateful to the most valuable comments of Stefan Reichmuth and David Jordan. The first version of this text has been presented at the conference *The Prophet and the Modern State* at the Ruhr University Bochum, Germany, May 2018.

³ See for a balanced view Donker, "Dschihadismus und Governance in Nordsyrien."

short I will refer to *minhāj* here following William E. Shepard as an all-encompassing system, a methodology to organize all aspects of life.⁴

It is important to bear in mind that jihadism is not a homogenous phenomenon not changing over time. IS is the outcome of a process of ISI turning ISIS, then turning IS and turning IS 2.0 in the future. Thus, using concepts ignoring the histories of these subcultures would be an analytical fallacy leading to a loss of understanding of the phenomena studied.⁵

Prophetic Justice turned Jihadi Justice

One of the few writers writing on the theology of IS (and al-Qa'ida) wrote about the difference of the classical prophetic project and the jihadi prophetic project:

"However, IS⁶ does more; it twists the Islamic civilizational project and subjugates God's love and mercy to His justice. It reduces God's sovereignty to a superficial and mechanical rendition of the law, and it makes sacrifice of self and other an aim in itself. Which brings us back full circle to the political theology of IS, and the legitimacy it claims at a formative foundational moment where sovereignty derives from God himself and not just from God's laws.

The author of *Idarat al-Tawabbush*⁷ argues that God sends prophets to alert people to the consequences of their actions. [...] As such, jihad becomes, more merciful to humanity than directly bearing the enormous torrent of God. This is why God ordained that those who deserve punishment shall be tormented by the hands of the believers.

This is a twisted model of prophetic justice, one that contends that God inflicts suffering on a large scale, and that his mercy and compassion are neither through an embodied God who suffers on behalf of humanity, nor through Prophets who guide and remind, but through jihad, which afflicts limited pain to avert larger suffering. However, IS goes further and combines the immediacy of prophetic justice [...] This opportunistic combination of models of prophetic and messianic justice alleviates the burden of having to deliver real justice."⁸

⁴ Shepard, "Islam as a 'System' in the later Writings of Sayyid Qutb".

⁵ One of the few exceptions is Ould Mohamedou, *A Theory of ISIS*.

⁶ Shortened here and later on by RL.

⁷ A text from the subculture of al-Qa'ida playing an important role in IS.

⁸ Dallal, *The Political Theology*, p.33. See also Lohlker, *Theology*.

Guidance of IS, not the Guidance of the Prophet

The understanding of Dallal of the theology of IS opens up a perspective to analyze the role of the Prophet in IS and the difference to the role in al-Qa'ida. A thesis at hand is the changing priority in IS: 1) God, 2) jihad, and 3) Prophet. But do we have empirical evidence to corroborate this thesis?

Empirical Research

For the following remarks, we will follow the results of empirical research of online resources linked to IS for reliable information and not on impressions gleaned from sources selected randomly, the usual way jihadism research is done. Our research focuses on quantitative data. Thus, the study of the content and way of using Hadiths and references to the Prophet is not to be expected here.⁹ To give some preliminary results of a research of some of the around 300 jihadist channels that are monitored constantly researching for occurrences of *nabi*, *rasul* and related expressions in channels on *telegram* officially or unofficially related to IS:¹⁰

a) "May 10, 2018, *taktikāt 'askariyya*: O God, make us among those who will order what is recommended and forbid what is reprehended! On the authority of Abu Sa'īd al-Khudrī and Abū Hurayra, God may be pleased by them, that the Prophet said, etc." This post is crossposted in other channels and groups on *telegram*.

Characterization: Simple Hadith quotation.

b) "April 21, 2018, *millat Ibrāhīm*. In the name of God, the most gracious, the most merciful. Praise be on the messenger of God, prayers, and peace upon him, from Muḥammad b. 'Abdalwahhāb etc. the *tawḥīd* the messenger is calling for, etc."

Characterization: The Prophet is of minor importance compared to Muḥammad b. 'Abdalwahhāb.

c) "April 8, 2018, *ḡād-al-m-b-aj-r ilā rabb-h*, on the authority of 'Abdarraḥmān b. Samra: He said: 'Uthmān came to the prophet etc. 'A'isha said: The messenger of God ... was"

Characterization: Simple Hadith quotation.

To summarize the findings from this first sample, we might say, the Prophet or the messenger of God is a resource for some quotations, but not relevant to the messages conveyed in these texts.

⁹ A thorough study of Hadiths as used in jihadi subcultures will be finished next year.

¹⁰ The data is archived at the Oriental Institute, University of Vienna, Austria, in the Jihadism Database; see the article of Ahmed and Lohlker in this volume. Due to the increasing legal restrictions and political pressure on jihadism research no exact links are provided.

¹¹ The channels and groups on *telegram* are quoted by their Arabic titles.