

The Structure and Visual Rhetoric of the Martyrdom Video:

An Enquiry into the Martyrdom Video Genre

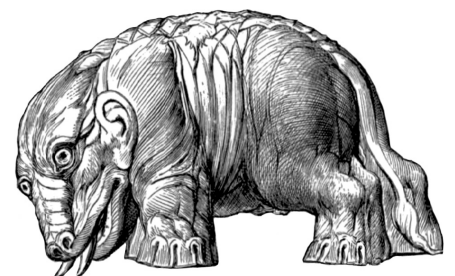
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Abstract

Since its inception in the 1980s, the genre of vehicular martyrdom videos has served to promote radical Islam. Its history has been generally unsystematic but it has led to the development of several story elements and formal requirements whose occurrence in martyrdom videos has become a contingency. In going beyond the structure of the martyrdom attack genre, this article provides an exemplary analysis of the visual rhetoric of the martyrdom video based on an adapted reading of Roland Barthes' *Rhetoric of the Image*, adapted for the analysis of audiovisual content. The effectiveness of the genre in matters of recruitment is found in the genre's use of pathos: the genre suggests that a martyr goes to the beyond and, from that place, sends a message to this world. This is most evident in the visual language of the genre which is ideologically informed on the level of connotation.

Keywords: martyrdom videos, jihadist video propaganda, visual rhetoric, Islamic State

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With its origins in the 1980s, the martyrdom video started off as a rare and generally unsystematic genre. Footage of martyrdom attacks has cropped up in various types of video since, but especially in jihadist propaganda. While numbers of martyrdom deeds are difficult to compile, a few regional statistics are available. Notably, Mohammed M. Hafez (2007) writes that suicide attacks in Iraq between 2003 and 2006 totalled more than 300 with 70% being vehicle based. Charlie Winter's 2015 to 2016 study of Islamic State suicide attacks came to a similar result, concluding that 70% of the 923 suicide attacks recorded were vehicle based. As time progressed, not only have martyrdom operations increased in jihadist circles, the recording of martyrdom events and especially vehicle-based suicide attacks has become noticeably more frequent. By 2017 it has become clear that the known number of martyrdom media items must have increased well into the four digits, with videos being at least in the three digits. A majority of the latter was produced by various jihadist groups and, most noticeably, the Islamic State (IS) since 2014. Of all jihadi video propagandists, the Islamic State is the first to lay claim to being at least a quasi-professional and systematic video producer. Many of its productions, especially those produced between 2015 and 2017, give the impression of a sophisticated production process. More important, however, is to take note of the Islamic State's ability to code ideology into its audiovisual rhetoric in order to attract soldiers for its cause.

The jihadist and martyrdom ideology, by which I understand a jihadist's or martyr's way of thinking about and recognising the world, also determines the jihadist's or martyr's practices. By extension then, these practices include ideas of how to handle a camera, how to record sound, and how to edit video. This may not apply to all types of martyrdom videos (since not all of the known videos were produced by jihadists) but many practices apply to virtually all known martyrdom videos. The producers of such videos seem to have relatively congruent notions of what plot points and episodes a video may or may not consist of and also of the ways in which to portray martyrs and their respective deeds. The development of the "vehicular martyrdom" video genre, i.e. the type of video that documents martyrdom by a vehicle laden with explosives, is of particular interest. As a genre it has produced the vast majority of martyrdom videos, especially since the Islamic State has begun exploiting it for purposes of recruitment via social networks with other present day groups following suit (such as *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham*, for example). This begs the question how a genre that basically seems to consist only of brief biographic depictions, final words, and footage of explosions—all of which usually amount to only a few minutes of video—can reflect the aforementioned jihadist or martyr ideology, respectively.

To answer this question, this paper will first look at the history of the martyrdom video genre, specifically the vehicular suicide attack subgenre, and gather a catalogue of its structural and formal elements. In a second step it will dig into the semantic lining of a present day vehicular martyrdom video produced by the Islamic State, the most prolific producer of jihadist media. The study will culminate in an analysis of the visual rhetoric of a "martyr shot": the piece of footage of every martyr video that shows the deed itself

and usually the most function-bearing take in the context of any martyrdom video. Not only does it serve as the rhetorical climax of any video of the genre, it is very likely the most persuasive piece of footage in terms of attracting willing jihadists or willing martyrs respectively.

Uncovering the semantic layers of martyrdom genre videos and shot of the deed in particular is crucial in understanding the shot's function and, by extension, the genre's function: on the one hand the genre is actively used to intimidate the opposition, on the other hand it serves to support jihad and even persuade potential recruits to seek martyrdom. While the rhetoric of film lies, perhaps more than anything, in movement (cf. for example Kanzog 2001), this enquiry will employ a trimmed down rhetorical approach in order to get at the core semantics of the genre. Focussing on the visual, auditive, and textual/linguistic components of the Islamic State video, this enquiry will pick apart levels of denotation and connotation in particular. Taking a series of paradigmatic screenshots from the deed shot as its object of study, the method applied will consider said screenshots a progression of rhetorical (i.e. semantic) states through which the video proceeds. As such, this study will necessarily resemble an analysis using Roland Barthes' *Rhetoric of the Image* (1977), yet go beyond it by accounting for the auditive components of the video as well as some of its narratological specifics.

A Brief History of Martyrdom Videos

As the martyrdom video genre developed over time, various producers have tried their hand at documenting martyrs. There is little to no systematic development to be observed until the mid to late 2000s, but martyrdom video producers develop very similar ideas about the episodic contents of their videos. Footage of the suicide attack itself (usually a car taking off followed by an explosion in the distance) is obviously the centrepiece of each video. But all other episodes—from family photos of the martyr-to-be to his or her final goodbyes—have remained generally contingent until recently. The same observation has to be made for the way in which the martyr's deed itself is recorded on video, changing from an eye level shot to a top down view of the deed. Developments like this are a footprint of the Islamic State media workers in the genre. But in keeping with the subject matter: the following pages are dedicated to identifying the elements of the martyr video as well as pinpointing particularly what appears to be the desired representation of martyrdom videos informed by jihadist ideology throughout the genre's history.

Interestingly, many of the staples of martyrdom videos produced by the Islamic State were present at the genre's inception in the 1980s when a video titled *SANA'A* was circulated. The *SANA'A* video, published in 1985 and produced by the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), marks the earliest vehicular martyrdom operation captured on video and edited for propaganda purposes known today. Despite the facts that 1. the majority (if not all) martyrdom videos come from radical islamist groups and 2. those same islamist groups treat martyrdom similarly to the way the *SANA'A* video does, *SANA'A* is not technically a jihadist video. Its protagonist, a young woman by the name of

Sana'a Mehaidli (1968–1985), was a member of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party who gave her life using an explosive-laden vehicle while attacking Israeli forces in South Lebanon. The video was shown on television on the day of Mehaidli's martyrdom and marked the "medial islamisation of suicide terrorism" (according Croitoru 2015)—however it is disputed whether or not this was Mehaidli's or the SSNP's intention respectively since Mehaidli may in fact have been a Christian.

The 17 minute video surprisingly features a wealth of elements that were lost on many martyrdom video producers in subsequent years.^[1] Besides a reading of the martyr's ultimate message, the video features spoken words of explanation, footage of tanks to symbolise Israeli occupation and aggression for backdrop, the martyr-to-be driving her (supposed) vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (V.B.I.E.D.), vignettted photographs of Mehaidli, and footage of Mehaidli in a wedding gown (more on this further below). Quite virtuously composed for a martyrdom video, these episodes are organised as the strands of parallel syntagmas. Montage freely intercuts between these, which suggests some mythopoetic savvy on the part of the director. However, the video is missing footage of the actual martyrdom deed which perforce it replaces with stock footage of an explosion in what seems to be an empty space or possibly fireworks in a night sky (sadly, this can't be fully discerned since the video has been digitalised in a relatively low quality). Obviously, an omission of the deed was not acceptable to the producers, even if it meant using alternative footage. This notion is present in virtually all subsequent productions although none preferred alternative footage. Yet, they often meet the additional formal requirements set by SANA'A, too, such as the use of music on the extradiegetic level to frame the visual and using soft dissolves for punctuation.

Scenes of Mehaidli in a wedding gown represent the first instance of the martyr genre using visual tropes. Organising itself as an intercutting of parallel syntagmas, the martyr Mehaidli is thus allegorised as being or becoming a bride—but to whom? Neuwirth (2008) has presented some work on the relation between marriage and martyrdom, pointing out that there are hagiographic and spiritual interpretations. The former locates an erotic dimension in the afterlife while the latter considers the martyr's death as meaningful for his or her community and society. The application of these subject matters to the SANA'A video and the martyr video genre in general seems somewhat limited though, as martyrdom videos do not normally stress the provision of virgins or other marital partners in the afterlife. Much rather they emphasise the ontological transformation of the martyr that leads to his or her newfound dwelling beside Allah and/or his or her fulfilling the role of a protector of his society.^[2] (In the case of the Islamic State this will extend to portraying the martyr as a protector of the Caliphate, *Muslims*, and 'true Islam'.) In terms of visual language this transformation is what SANA'A plays with and it seems to explain Sana'a Mehaidli's nickname: 'the bride of the south'.

^[1] Technically speaking this is not surprising either since jihadist propaganda has started more or less as a home video genre and since developed coextensively with the technology on the home retail market: Osama bin Laden's video speeches from the 1980s and 1990s were likely recorded on retail camcorders. In the new millennium, jihadist group Jundallah Studio seemingly makes use of early digital cameras. And while the Islamic State may have produced thousands of slick-looking HD videos and photo reports, it, too, has only used products available on the retail market. In fact, a look at the Islamic State's recent releases like *INSIDE THE KHILAFAH 8* (al-Hayat Media Office, 30 October 2018) confirms that the Islamic State's means of production include DSLR cameras with wide-angle lenses as well as head-mounted GoPro cameras (both standardised to produce images in 720p or 1080p quality) and also Adobe Premiere for editing.

^[2] As Kalisch (2013) explains, the martyr gives his life not only for God but for his community in order to defend it. However, defending society is just the factual act while the relation between God and the martyr is of theological meaning.



Left: The SANA'A video constructs the mental object of the protagonist for the viewer by superimposing vignette images—the genre is protagonist-driven and therefore underscores his or her motivations; Right: Sana'a Mehadli as the 'Bride of the South' allegory; Bottom: The ontological transformation of the martyr is signified by a vignette image of the martyr superimposed onto a picture of the sky, taken from THE EXPEDITION OF SHAYKH UMAR HADID (at-Tibyan Publications, 2006).

A final point of interest with the SANA'A video is found in its visual language that, again, was lost on many martyrdom video producers in the following years. Shots of Mehadli in a wedding gown were filmed as rear figures (*Rückenfigur*), and shots of her driving were made over the shoulder. In both cases the camera locates its view and the viewer's position behind the protagonist. Positioning the view behind the martyr heading for her or his final deed will become a staple of the genre over the following decades, especially with serial productions. The function of the rear figure has been well-researched in the past. As an image type it implies its own rule of play, namely subjectification, i.e. of the protagonist's inner life: Since the narrative is driven by a subject (the protagonist), the rear figure image activates the viewer and lets him or her focalise the subject's perception, emotions, and objects. The video thus draws on the backdrops it has painted in previous episodes (in this case, military occupation and the object of freeing people from it), allowing for conclusions to be drawn from the material itself. SANA'A even makes these references explicit through circular inserts to signify mental concepts present in the protagonist.[3]

Most, if not all, known videos produced between 1985 and 2014 show some or even several of the rudiments first laid out by SANA'A but fall behind it with respect to the structure of the narrative. While no other vehicular martyrdom videos from the 1980s are available for study, it is nonetheless noteworthy

[3] An early counterdraft to the vehicular martyrdom structure described here is offered by *MARTYRS OF BOSNIA* (2000). It goes noticeably further than the comparatively tame SANA'A video by showing the corpses of people declared martyrs, some of which are harshly disfigured. Yet, the persons shown in the video may not necessarily have been active martyrdom seekers but soldiers in the way of jihad or even civilians. The Islamic State would later employ similar storytelling in its battlefield videos, first showing its *mujahidin* fighting and later showing their corpses as they were found on the battlefield.

that the 1980s mark the period in which the “forefather of transnational jihadism”, ‘Abdallāh ‘Azzām, publishes writings on the *sahāba* (the companions of the Prophet Mohammed) in Afghanistan. These would inspire martyrdom operations and in the 1990s they would be spread via the internet (Lohlker 2015, 95). Given the habit of documenting their actions, jihadists and especially al-Qaida may have produced footage of early vehicular martyrdom missions that is now lost. What can be said with certainty, however, is that the genre only produces videos only sporadically until the proclamation of the Islamic State in 2014, yet with increasing quantity during the war in Iraq starting in 2003.

Two other early instances of the genre are *THE SHATOY AMBUSH* (1996) and *USHĀQ ASH-SHAHADAH* (Black Banners Studios, 1994). These two videos do not deal exclusively with martyrs but integrate them into various narratives presented within the same video. This has remained common practice since. *AMERICAN HELL IN IRAQ* (as-Sahab Media, 2003,) is the first to show male martyrs *inside* their vehicles. The video employs a shameless glorification strategy by vignetting a martyr in bright light, triggering various connotations of the beyond, paradise, and the afterlife, to name just the three most obvious ones.



The vignette of the martyr is a favourite of the genre and serves as a strong rhetorical device. It signals that the deed has been performed and that the deceased has reached his or her place beside Allah. Left: Vignetted image of Sana'a Mehaidli; Right: A martyr has reached heaven, taken from FURSAN ASH-SHAHADA 5[4]; Bottom: A martyr in seemingly pure light, taken from AMERICAN HELL IN IRAQ.

The producers of *AMERICAN HELL IN IRAQ* also managed to record panoramic shots of the deed itself which marks a development of the martyr narrative in terms of camera technique. The wide-angle shot would receive more attention

[4] As Günther (2011) writes, martyrs are being portrayed a loving jihad more than life, thus enabling them to fulfill their personal devotion to God. The visual rhetoric of the vignette image very much reflects this line of thought.

in future productions. It likely marks a rhetorical edge for the producers of this video when compared with SANA'A. Interestingly, the notion of marriage or at least some vague romanticism does not seem too distant for male martyrs in this video, since the producers employ heart wipes to transition between takes. But this element of pathos will generally remain an exception in the visual rhetoric of the genre.

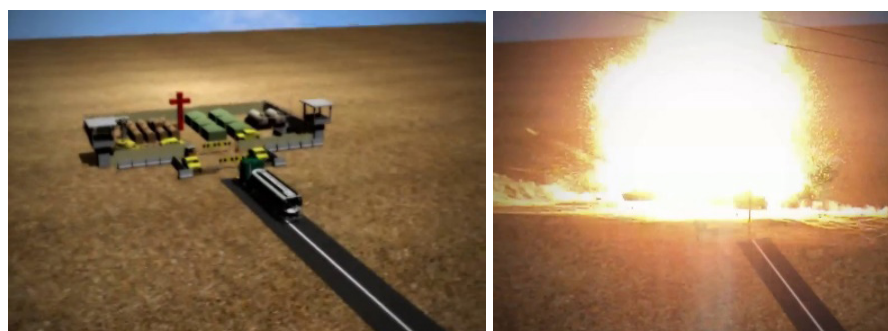
BADR AR-RIYADH (as-Sahab Media, 2004) is notable for two reasons. First, after presenting two martyrdom seekers outside of their prepared car, the video employs rough-pixeled footage that must have been recorded on a mobile phone of the time. This marks a coming technological change in the jihadist video genre as a whole which has developed with the technology available on the retail market since the first camcorders were released in the 1980s (see footnote 2). Second, the recitation of hadiths or Koranic verses as a combination of on-screen text and voiceover is of note in BADR AR-RIYADH. These two techniques have become a standard in all jihadist video propaganda, appearing not only in the opening motto (*basmala*) of most contemporary productions but also as a reference that enables the author to 1. place the martyrdom shown in the video in a religious context, 2. parallelise the martyr's deed with religious narratives, thereby lending religious meaning to the event, and 3. lend religious authority to the video's producer (who normally is indicated by an identifier at the beginning of the video).

Turkish *mujahid* video SÖZÜNDE DURANLAR (2005) goes beyond using historic pictures of the martyr by introducing moving images of the protagonist in happier times. Here, one martyr-to-be is shown relaxing at the beach and swimming in the sea. Lifetime footage of martyrs has since more or less become a staple of the genre. THE EXPEDITION OF SHAYKH UMAR HADID (at-Tibyan Publications, 2006) is notable for several reasons. First, it shows various vehicular attacks in sequence which makes it one of the more direct spiritual precursors of the video formats later developed by the Islamic State (which in some instances provide conveyor belt edits of martyrdom deeds). Second, the martyr-to-be gives a speech the moment before entering his vehicle.^[5] In subsequent years, some martyrdom videos will put more emphasis on this speech by repeating it during the panoramic shot of the deed, often with the face of the martyr composited into the shot. Finally, and most importantly, THE EXPEDITION OF SHAYKH UMAR HADID employs computer animations of a jail or prison cell. While computer animated environments remain a rarity in jihadi video propaganda, they nonetheless are ideologically functional as they reflect the ideologeme of Muslim victimhood. But their significance does not stop there as they mark a coming paradigm shift.

A few years later some footage would be published that shows a computer simulation of the martyr attack itself. This type of visual representation would be used in vehicular suicide videos published by the *al-Furqan Foundation for Media Production*, the longest serving media office of the Islamic State and its predecessors. Throughout 2008 and 2009 it released a video series titled FURSAN ASH-SHAHADA ("Knights of Martyrdom") which, besides introducing the story-step of "saying goodbye to friends", made further use of virtual environments. The computer animations used by *al-Furqan* in 2008 mark

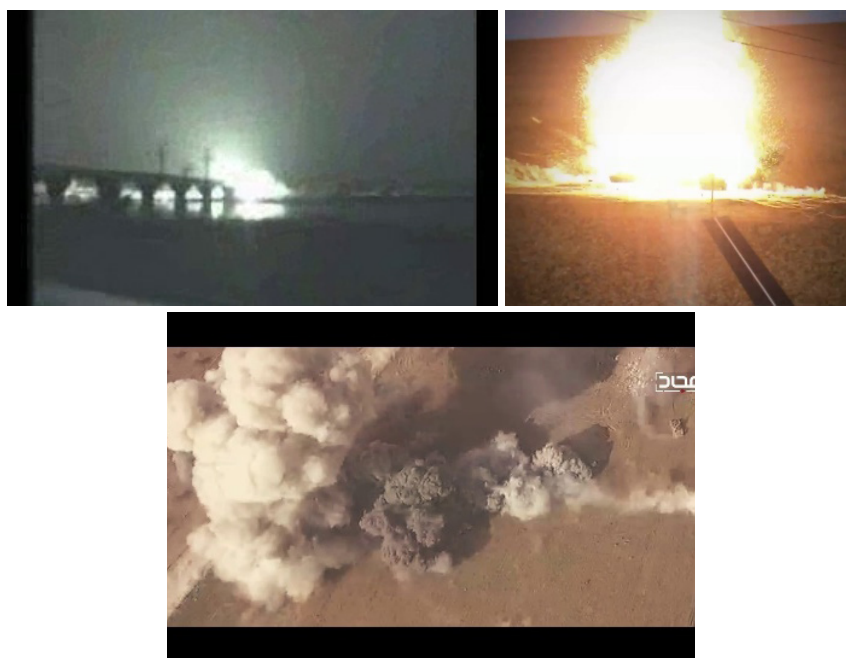
[5] As Joseph Croitoru (2015) correctly notes, this is one story-step that is already present in films of Japanese kamikaze pilots. Interestingly, Croitoru also considers the kamikaze pilots as somewhat of a spiritual predecessor of jihadist martyrs, particularly via the events of the 1972 attack on Tel Aviv airport (which were committed by the Japanese Red Army and thus may have served as an inspiration to radical islamists), the 1974 massacre in Kiryat Shmona (which is said to have included suicide bombings), and ultimately the 1974 suicide bombing in a Tel Aviv cinema (which Croitoru argues has become a foil for suicide vest attacks).

a coming change to how the martyr shot is conceptualised. While virtual trucks are shown at eye level, the deed itself is shown from above. But why would computer graphics be used at all? This question aims at the practices of the genre. On the one hand, producing the martyr shot (i.e. footage of the suicide attack) is not without its pragmatic dimensions. Filming a suicide attack requires the camera operator to remain behind the line of fighting or at least remain invisible to the eventual martyr's target and, in any case, keep a safe distance. Therefore, martyrdom operations are filmed necessarily as a more or less wide angle shot. Limitations are set only by distance and picture format which remained rather small until HD technology was introduced and wide-angle lenses became more accessible. Virtual landscapes, on the other hand, offer one distinct advantage over real life footage: the director has control over the design of the environment, the way the virtual camera moves, and what it captures as well as how it captures it. The preference of a computer simulation with a top down shot indicates not only a desire for visual completion (*all* of the explosion is captured) and visual impact (the deed must look impressive), the practice of filming from above seems to be very positively assessed in jihadist ideology (i.e. jihadist practice).



FURSAN ASH-SHAHADA 5 shows the deed from above. The video marks a development in the filming of a martyr attack as it is shown from above for the first using computer technology.

What then are the advantages of the top down martyr shot when compared to the eye level or from below shot? As mentioned above, technical limitations may play the biggest part: While filming an explosion and the resulting column of smoke from below will make the results appear visually huge, users of retail equipment may struggle to capture a panorama of the explosion from ground level. What is perhaps even more crucial in choosing a top down shot over a shot from below is the fact that the view of the camera may be obstructed and the attacker as well as his victims cannot be seen. This means a loss of visual and rhetorical impact and also of “proof” of the deed. The top down shot offers more possibilities regarding the explosion and the depiction of enemies. Filming them from above makes enemy environments and soldiers seem small, miniaturized even, while the explosion of the martyr vehicle produces a massive column of smoke and fire that commands the centre of the visual. This practice allows for a rhetorical epification of the deed itself despite it being filmed from above.



The martyr shot develops over time: as indicated by a computer animation, the ideal representation of the suicide attack in the eye of jihadist video producers is a top down wide angle shot. Left: An explosion in the distance, taken from AMERICAN HELL IN IRAQ (2003); Right: the aforementioned FURSAN ASH-SHAHADA 5; Bottom: A top down panorama from A WAY OF LIFE (Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, 17 October 2018)

Filming the deed at eye level and from below remained the standard even until 2013 when *Jundallah Studio* in Uzbekistan released *THE MARTYRDOM OF SISTER UMM USMAN* (7 September 2013), only the second video with a female martyr in the history of the genre (interestingly, neither this video nor *SANA'A* omit showing the martyr driving her car in an over-the-shoulder shot from the inside of the vehicle). Around 2014, the latest videos would be published which feature the preparation of the vehicle itself. *BLESSED MARTYRDOM* by *Jabhat al-Nusrah* (22 February 2014) is one such instance, showing large gas canisters being loaded onto a truck and also showing the wiring of the explosion mechanism.

Upon its inception, the Islamic State would invest heavily into its media wing. Soon the IS would not only produce martyrdom videos in HD but it would acquire the means to produce martyr shots from above as drones made their way onto the retail market. Thereby it would accomplish the ideal representation of the martyr shot as projected by the *al-Furqan Media Foundation*. The new type of shot would become paradigmatic in Islamic State productions, appearing, it seems, whenever a drone was available. Outside the Islamic State, other jihadist media producers have adopted this method of filming the deed, too. Especially *al-Muhājirūn* (2015–2017) and later *Hay'at Taḥrīr al-Shām* (HTS), whose media wings may be a home to former *al-Muhājirūn* media workers as well as defectors of the Islamic State, have demonstrated that they acquired the visual language of the martyr shot. The *al-Muhājirūn* production *TIME FOR THIS, TIME FOR THAT* (2016) already uses it and so does HTS's recent release titled *A WAY OF LIFE* (17 October 2017)

which uses a personal interest story to convey an invitation to martyrdom. While by 2018 many jihadi groups strived to record top down deed shots, it remains to be seen if and when the media work by groups close to al-Qaida will follow suit.



Martyrs before their death: Suggesting a happy lifetime drives the pathos of the genre. Screenshots taken from SÖZÜNDE DURANLAR and the quite concisely produced THE SEEKERS OF LIFE (Wilayat Halab, 19 October 2016)

Further additions to the genre by the Islamic State include using amputees, wheel chair-bound soldiers, and children as protagonists. One video by the Islamic State called THE SEEKERS OF LIFE (Wilayat Halab, 19 October 2016) even elaborates on the selection process for martyrdom in the Islamic State. The voice over explains that martyrdom seekers may register in an “*istishhādī* house” where they will spend time until being called into battle. A later episode in the video even shows a spontaneous selection process during battle with two willing *mujahidin* drawing straws to decide who would be allowed to drive the explosive vehicle. Whereas previous martyrdom video productions may rely on a protagonist that will not bow down to power and oppression, the Islamic State uses the martyr’s heroism to conversely frame the Islamic State as powerful and possessing military savvy, even going as far as to suggest the Islamic State’s invincibility. But it also uses martyrs to market martyrdom: The attempt to attract jihadists is made possible by offering the social role of

the *mujahid* and connecting it to the ideologemes of the *umma*, the Muslim community which requires protection, and Muslim victimhood, which connects to factors like the loss of the caliphate and imperialism.[6] A number of martyrdom videos which have met the internal quality standards of the IS have therefore been translated and used for recruitment on the internet.[7]

One final item of note that has been mentioned briefly is that martyrdom narratives may or may not appear as part of videos that generally set a very different focus. The aforementioned BADR AR-RİYADH is one such instance, presenting the martyrdom deed only as one of various narratives (the video also includes speeches by chief ideologues like Osama bin Laden and scenes of military training). Another noteworthy exception is the aforementioned TIME FOR THIS, TIME FOR THAT (al-Muhajirun Media Office, 29 April 2016). Starting off as a wedding video, it makes no initial attempt to suggest it might be of the martyrdom genre despite being a vehicle for the producer to invite jihadists from Yemen to Syria (the authors even mention the Sana'a region in a possible attempt to play at historic martyrdom videos).[8] However, the final three minutes of the 13 minute video are dedicated to a martyrdom operation. It does not become explicit but the operation (which is not performed by the groom) may or may not be in honour of the wedding. Barring further finds, this particular video is the first and so far only known martyrdom video since SANA'A that at least loosely connects martyrdom to an actual wedding.

The episodic structure of the vehicular martyrdom video genre can be summarised as follows:

Historic backdrop (e.g. scenes of oppression of Muslims, scenes of war)

Reading of a statement by the martyr-to-be explaining his or her actions

Preparations (e.g. preparing the vehicle, a V.B.I.E.D.)

Reading of Qur'an verses or hadiths (usually a wall of text, often with a voice over)

Time before martyrdom mission (e.g. waiting while performing everyday tasks, *istishhādī* house, selection for mission)

Saying goodbye to family and/or friends (may also be part of the martyr taking off for his or her deed, see below)

Documents of the martyr's life (e.g. photos, videos of everyday activity; these may be given a slow-motion treatment in order stress the connotation of past happiness)

Final words before mounting the vehicle (may include final goodbyes from acquaintances; final words while standing by the vehicle may be omitted if final words have been recorded separately)

Setting off (usually a rear figure of the car leaving, played for pathos)

Driving (some footage shot from another car focussing on the martyr's vehicle or even footage from presumably inside the martyr's vehicle or from a section of the actual drive may be provided)

[6] The aforementioned article by Charlie Winter would even go so far as to speak of the Islamic State's martyrdom industry.

[7] Said internal quality standards have recently been cast light on by Daniel Milton (2018) who has published, translated, and analysed some corresponding internal documents.

[8] The producer of the video, al-Muhajirun, was located in Syria and did not subordinate to the Islamic State at any point in time. All indications are that al-Muhajirun joined Jaish al-Fath in 2017.

The suicide attack (the mandatory shot serving as the rhetorical climax; shifts to top-down wide angle after 2014, may today feature multiple wide angles)

The vignetted image of the martyr

Looking at the known corpus of martyrdom videos, it seems apparent that of these scenes only the following are rarely omitted: historic backdrop, reading of the will or a speech by the martyr-to-be, setting off, and the deed itself. The deed shot is virtually never omitted and in the case of SANA'A, which is a rare exception where actual footage of the deed is not available, it is represented by stock footage. A considerable contingent of martyrdom videos also present images from the martyr's private life. The rule of thumb here is, the more serial the production, the less extensive the insight into the martyr's private life. The scenes of the martyr video may appear in any order in any given video, although relative chronology is usually preserved. Generally speaking, the genre prefers male protagonists but takes its origins in a comparatively strong presentation of a female protagonist.

As for the application of film language, the genre may be treated to parallel syntagmas (which overall remains a rarity, however), voice over, soft dissolves for interpunction, metaphors of light, the use of music to frame the narrative, and the ever-present vignette image. All of these elements run the threat of losing their function for the narrative if the suicide attack cannot be *seen*. The martyr shot is the culmination of the striving of a martyr-to-be, the climax of his or her narrative, and it logically connects to all other episodes. It is part of a chronological sequence of events, it takes its causality from the protagonist words, it becomes meaningful against its historic (and ideological) backdrop, and the images of the martyr while happy and alive would not unfold the same pathos without visual confirmation of the martyr's death.

The Visual Rhetoric of the Top Down Wide Angle Shot in Martyrdom Videos

For an analysis of the martyr shot, I have chosen a video by the Islamic State. FURSÂN AL-DAQĀWIN (Wilayat Ninawa, 24 January 2017) is a video that features a series of martyrdom attacks. At the time of its production the Iraqi offense against the Islamic State had already begun but the Islamic State's propaganda apparatus was still strong. Within a month of the beginning of the Manbij Offense in the summer of 2016, the Islamic State attempted to ramp up media production and tried to keep its visuals at the highest level of quality possible by Jihadi standards. Yet soon after, the video production would have to take small steps backwards with many of the short biographic martyr episodes in this video already lacking several of the aforementioned elements. However, there is one episode that maintains structural completeness and adds a variation on the vignetted image that breaks new ground for the genre. This development will require explanation, however: jihadist propaganda may be perceived as being effective in terms of persuasion but what is often overseen is the fact that jihadist propaganda implies background knowledge

on the teleology and metaphysics, or, in short, the belief of jihadist ideology. It therefore commonly provides only the tip of the ideological iceberg and requires the ideologically interested viewer to enter a hermeneutic circle of jihadist documents. All necessary information will be provided for this article.

FURSÂN AL-DAQĀWIN features the martyrdom of a boy soldier who, no older than 15 or 16 years, is stylised as a young man. A three-minute sequence is dedicated to his personal story, a duration that is more or less in tune with the majority of martyr portrayals in Islamic State propaganda. This segment of FURSÂN AL-DAQĀWIN meets almost all the elements of the genre. The boy is shown patrolling and relaxing in the countryside, having a shooting exercise, eating, laughing, and studying martyrdom videos. (To some attentive viewers, seeing him admire the glorifying film images of previous IS-martyrs may not be without religious or ideological irony). Then he gives his speech, enters a V.B.I.E.D. with a bystander bidding adieu as he leaves in a rear figure shot, performs his suicide mission (in one of the most soundly produced top down deed shots in HD quality to date), and his image appears one final time in a vignettised piece of footage.



A subject-driven narrative: The martyr-to-be speaks final words of resolve.

Before turning to the deed shot, some context is required that derives from the take of the martyr-to-be speaking words of determination. The linguistic message of this image is located in the spoken words of the boy soldier and it is run-of-the-mill Islamic State propaganda. After going through the education provided by the IS, he went into battle and took part in raids. He claims that he has made a career within the Islamic State and finally decided to become a martyr for the cause of Allah. The young man's speech allows for the assumption that the Islamic State invites martyrdom seekers. These, in turn, make up the social role that the Islamic State willingly offers to its recruits. The protagonist thus leads by example, implying the possibility of martyrdom in the Islamic State for those willing.

The visual denotative level here is centred on the image of the young man. Buildings and trees in the background are recognisable but do not bear on the semantics of the scene since they remain largely in soft focus. The camera

operator applies a shallow depth of field in order to accentuate the young man in front of the camera. In turn, this suppresses the background and the possibilities of denotation it might provide beyond two trees, some bushes, and high grass. Visual denotation stresses the young *mujahid*, giving further weight to the notion of the narrative being subject-driven. As for further visible objects, the boy wears a functional vest and carries a rifle. His tone of voice, posture, lack of gestures, and somewhat stern facial expression mark him as a determined representative of the Islamic State's cause. This is further put into perspective when considering the producer's logo in the top right corner which includes the black banner of the Islamic State for ideological context. The boy soldier is without doubt constructed as a model soldier of the caliphate.

An audio-visual composition like this controls various connotations of warfare, personal determination, and resolve. In considering the notion that the semantics of the image are first and foremost informed by the ideology of the producer, they must be interpreted as follows. This "young man" is a fighter in the way of 'true Islam', a *mujahid* willing to give his life in order to protect the society of Muslims (*umma*) and spread the word of Allah. This also makes him one willing to leave this world (*dunya*) in order to head to paradise (*janna*). He is one who draws the line between belief and disbelief by his martyrdom and thereby proves his own belief. Protecting Islam, the society of Muslims, and even the expansion of the caliphate is his ultimate goal. He is a personification of determination and resolve in the sense of jihadism.

However, since the young man appears to be reading lines lying before him (possibly a note on a desk in front of him) some unintentional connotations sneak into the semantic lining of the shot as well. It remains unclear whether the young *mujahid* could not or would not memorise the text (which is conceivable considering what his frame of mind must have been before the attack), is made to read the text (which is less likely although IS media workers *were* and *are* required to support the military), or whether there was precious little time in filming the video (which is possible considering the Islamic State's military situation at the time the video was produced). Considering that his words appear to be very standardised in the sense that they reflect the Islamic State's ideology practically word for word and lack personal notions, the young man was probably offered to read a text provided by the media office. The field of hypotheses remains open but ultimately seems to expose the practices in making the video.



The first segment of the martyr shot: the drive up to the place of martyrdom.

In the drive-up to the place of martyrdom, there is a textual linguistic level present and it denotes the driver, identifying him (in the superimposed picture) and by function (in the top down shot via tracking mattes). Via a superimposed image of the driver, the editor opens a direct denotation, noting that this deed is that of the young man in the picture. The same image bears a connotation of joy which is derived from the broad smile of the martyr-to-be. At the same time the logo of the producer, the media office of *Wilayat Ninawa* (“Ninawa Province”), remains in the upper third, alternating between the calligraphy logo of the regional media office and the black banner of the Islamic State. The producers bring their ideological background and the identity of the martyr to the attention of the viewer and thereby label both the Islamic State and the boy as the originators of the unfolding scene.

On the visual denotative level of the video the martyr’s V.B.I.E.D. is entering a residential area. The scene is shown from above which is very much in tune with the style sheet of the Islamic State. Enemy forces are preferably filmed from above and the wide angle shot ensures that the carnage that is about to unfold is captured in full. The deictic elements of the picture, namely the combination of the producer’s logo with footage of a residential area, indicate that this is a residential area in Wilayat Ninawa, a cradle region of the Islamic State that once extended across the border of Syria and Iraq. White puffs of air from the roofs and a nearby window indicate there is gunfire in an attempt the stop the armoured vehicle. This residential area certainly has been required to house the advancing military opposition to the Islamic State. Several vehicles are parked in the street, all of them are seemingly armoured and therefore a serious threat to Islamic State fighters. As soon as the defenders realise the danger of the situation, the gunmen on the roof start retreating and at least two bystanders race for safety across the yard of their building. The situation is becoming one of life and death as the military forces in the residential area must be well aware of what it means when an armoured vehicle pulls into their street.

By constructing a point of view from above, the video opens to various connotations. The camera position suggests a viewpoint that is “above things”

and “above the enemy”. (Islamic State videos have put this philosophy to use since at least 2014 while, conversely, filming its own forces and institutions from below to make them seem bigger.) Probably the most dominant connotation in this image is military prowess as indicated by the symmetry of the scene from above. This perspective used to be reserved for satellite images and cartography resources like Google Earth before drones made their way onto the retail market. The Islamic State very much welcomes the notion of having military grade drones and the matching tracking devices at its disposal in their visual language. (This is even played at in another segment of *FURSĀN AL-DAQĀWIN* that deals with the Islamic State’s drones which, technically, are refurbished retail items). Its media tactic demands for portrayal of the Islamic State as being an invincible superpower.[9] Thus, suggesting that the Islamic State has a clear idea of which targets to attack by marking three possible targets with red dots is congruent with this strategy. (To be clear, these marks were necessarily added during post-production using a retail editing programme like Adobe Premiere.) Connected to this is another possible connotation that the martyr has been precisely instructed where to go, what possible targets to hit and when to set off the explosion. With the fighters on the ground taking to their heels, the connotative level suggests notions of dominance, terror, and successful warfare on the part of the Islamic State. These notions all connect to the position of the protagonist who is an identification figure to the willingly indoctrinated.

The V.B.I.E.D. approaches what appears to be a tank. The driver may not be tasked with damaging buildings in the vicinity since the building to his right has already been destroyed and the housing across the street have spacious yards. This operation appears to be solely about destroying the tanks, yet it would not be uncommon for the Islamic State’s V.B.I.E.D. attackers to partially fail their mission as on the ground soldiers run for safety.



The centrepiece and rhetorical climax of the martyr shot: the explosion.

Linguistic messages are scarce now as only the logo of the video producer remains a visible textual element. The editors place all possible emphasis on the act of martyrdom without going against their visual stylesheet. The denotative core of the martyr shot, its own rhetorical climax, is the explosion

[9] This is, of course, a bold claim considering it does not have actual satellites, an air force, or a navy. Effectively this has forced the Islamic State to provoke ground combat as is further evidenced by two releases titled *No RESPITE* (al-Hayat Media Center, 24 November 2015) and *THE DABIQ APPOINTMENT* (Wilayat Ninawa, 11 December 2015).

of the V.B.I.E.D. as the driver reaches his target. With a loud bang a shock wave that is as sudden as it is forceful is emitted through the neighbourhood. The sound of the explosion may have been added in post-production as the Islamic State's media workers often have. (Also, depending on the drone model, mounting a microphone to a retail drone in addition to a camera may make the device too heavy for flight.) The explosion creates a bright light destroying the nearby target vehicle, damaging buildings, and likely killing or injuring a number of people on the ground. Numerous pieces of debris are sent flying through the vicinity.

The tangible connotations in this image encompass concepts of warfare, destructiveness and, given the ideologic context, the determination of the *mujahid*. The ideologemic subtext of 'defending true Islam against attackers and disbelievers' is very much present across virtually all Islamic State media and therefore remains inferable in this instance. Thus, the martyr and the Islamic State are making their metaphysical claim of jihad in the way of Allah. The light of the explosion has a yellow and golden shine, a colour that alludes to the metaphor of light which has been played on before in this particular video (the producers employ virtually generated lens flares for dissolves between scenes). It is presumable that the directors have applied colour auto-correction to the footage during post-production or, at the least, adjusted the colour temperature. Light is an often-used metaphor in martyrdom videos and here it suggests that the beyond is transcending this world for a brief moment. Of course, the jihadist's mind is ultimately not accessible but in a jihadist reading of the connotative level the martyr shot may be focussed on this very type of semantics which encodes the martyr's transformation in the visual of the explosion.



Segment 3 of the martyr shot: the moments after the explosion.

Musing on the event, the visual conveys denotations of size and destruction which become dominant in the semantic lining of the scene. While not necessarily crossing the line to hyperbole, this martyr shot effortlessly manages to epify the event of martyrdom by contrasting the size of the explosion and the resulting column of smoke with the smallness of the scene. While spoken and

written linguistic messages are repressed for the moment, there is a jihadist chant (*nashīd*) playing on the extradiegetic level throughout the martyr shot. The language barrier prohibits a better understanding, yet the chant carries some connotative character nonetheless. Sung exclusively by a male voice, the song is performed virtually without counterpoints. It very much gives the impression of sacral chanting, thus placing the unfolding scene of martyrdom in a uniformly religious (i.e. ideologically informed) context. Meanwhile, visual denotation focusses on the column of smoke that has resulted from the explosion. As the drone (not the lens) pulls out in order to capture as much of the growing column of smoke as possible, the column itself quickly seems to exceed 100 metres in height. (Also, it becomes quite obvious that the camera is mounted to a retail drone. The nature of the slight and sudden movements of camera performs betrays this.)



After an immediate replay (another footprint of the Islamic State in the genre), the video's discourse returns to the footage of the attack and applies new features to it. First, playback speed shifts to about half the footage's original speed (i.e. slow motion). This moves the visual discourse to the present participle, thus extending the temporal presence of martyrdom attack and intensifying the savour of the moment.

Second, the video makes use of a vignette ("dark corners") which serves, possibly, a double function. The cognitive function it fulfils with certainty relates to the viewer whose attention is guided to the centre of the image. But also, there is a possible attempt by the Islamic State to bring its brand into play. The image now displays an outward semblance to the black banner of the Islamic State ("white centre on black ground"), turning the image into a simile of the flag.

Third, and most importantly, the martyr's face is embedded *into the martyr shot*, letting the martyr's face appear in the explosion (another Islamic State novelty).[10] Technically, the footage of the boy soldier is in itself vignettised and layered onto the footage of the attack with a degree of transparency. This montage signals a coincidence of realms with the martyrs words and his attack now occupying the same moment. This point is further driven by

[10] Interestingly, the Islamic State's visual lexicon may invite a reading of the boy's face placed in the explosion. Boy soldiers were deemed the "cubs of the caliphate" in various Islamic State videos and here this metaphor may be implied in the connotative material of the visual. The visual level constructs the explosion sort of like a "lion's mane", possibly suggesting that the cub of the caliphate has "grown up". While the video was not designed as a coming of age narrative it may invite or consolidate such a reading to the ideologically indoctrinated viewer.

the auditive level: the words chosen by the editor to be in the vignette are not merely a repetition of the words spoken earlier but a different segment of the previously recorded speech. Here the martyr speaks the *shahāda* (his confession of faith) and further proclaims that he is fighting for Allah and the Islamic State, which “commands good and forbids evil”. (Both of these phrases are taken directly from the Islamic State’s textbook which further underscores the Islamic State’s attempt to brand this martyrdom.) With the words of the boy soldier and his deed made co-present by means of montage, this segment of the footage exposes its rhetorical form. The boy soldier’s words and his martyrdom are *alike* in that they both represent the expression of his belief. This constellation may be read as a simile (one is like the other, meaning “the *mujahed*’s words are like his deed”) or, perhaps more precisely, a metaphor (with the “expression of faith” serving as the *tertium comparationis*). In combination with the participle form of the narrative discourse (see above), this rhetorical trope is placed syntactically as the climax of the sequence and serves to suggest that the boy soldier’s message is *lasting* by letting him “speak through his deed”.

It is here that the appeal of the vehicular martyrdom video in times of the Islamic State must be located. The rhetorical climax of martyrdom video has been further developed by the Islamic State. Using replays and additional montage, the “deed shot” has been extended into a symbolic representation of the Islamic State’s ideology which provides for martyrdom seekers *as well as* individual martyrdom seekers who are allowed to provide a supposed proof of their belief by putting their martyrdom on display. The martyr is thus proven to have defended the *umma* and ‘true Islam’ with their life by the Islamic State’s media. The ideologeme of “verifying one’s *shahāda*” seems to be very much captured in the semantic lining of the Islamic State’s deed shot which, under the Islamic State’s influence, has almost transformed into an emblem: there is an icon (image of the *mujahid*), an epigram (spoken by the *mujahid*), and also some hint at a *lemma* (the image is framed as being an Islamic State product). It is currently assumed that this strategy of *conflating the spoken word with the deed in film language* is a direct appeal to willing jihadists who seek to verify their *shahāda*.

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