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# Humour in jihadi rhetoric: comparative analysis of ISIS, Al-Qaeda, TTP, and the Taliban

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**ABSTRACT**

Research shows that humour plays a significant role in the formation of a collective identity and 'creates a sense of internal cohesion' based on shared experiences [Fominaya, C. F. (2007). The role of humour in the process of collective identity formation in autonomous social movement groups in contemporary Madrid. *International Review of Social History*, *52*(S15), 243–258. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859007003227]. In this paper, we focus on humour in jihadi English magazines. This study is based on 82 English magazines published by the Taliban, ISIS, Al-Qaeda and Tahrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP). This research takes a mixed method of analysing data both qualitatively and quantitatively. The findings point to a statistically significant difference amongst these groups in the type of humour they utilise. In general, Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and TTP show similar patterns in the types of humour they employ, a pattern that often stands in stark contrast with ISIS. ISIS is more likely than Al-Qaeda, the Taliban or TTP to use dehumanising and mocking humour while less likely than these groups to use situational humour, which is a less negative form of humour.

## Introduction

In studying the cultural dimensions of jihadism, Hegghammer writes that militancy is not just about operations, objectives, and strategic thinking. Militancy is about rituals, costumes and dress codes (Hegghammer, 2017). It is also about music, film and storytelling. 'It is about sports, jokes, and food' (Creswell & Haykel, 2017, p. 1). As observed by the author, this 'soft dimension of military life' has not received its due attention by scholars (Creswell & Haykel, 2017). Looking inside any radical group, we can observe a range of daily social practices that have no obvious strategic purpose (Creswell & Haykel, 2017). Jihadis use poetry, they speak about dreams, weep openly and value personal humility, artistic sensitivity, and displays of emotion (Creswell & Haykel, 2017). More recently, research has picked up on this topic and has explored various softer aspects of jihadi militancy. Pieslak and Lahoud (2020) for example, explore jihadi music. Creswell and Haykel

(2017) analyse the role of poetry in jihadi culture whilst Weinrich (2020) examines Islamic chanting and jihadi hymns. Furthermore, Mehran and Lemieux (2021) have studied the role of narrated stories in jihadi propaganda, highlighting how these serve to provide information, motivate followers, and offer advice for conducting jihad and hijra.

Hegghammer (2017) observes that militants do not waste time by engaging in poetry recitation, singing hymns, and other activities that have no apparent strategic purpose. It is not difficult to imagine that jihadi militants do not spend 'all' their time on their bomb-making skills. The downtimes and the soft dimensions of militants' life are depicted in the media products of the groups, in fact, play a 'strategic purpose'. When a jihadi militant who is about to go on an 'istishhadi mission' – suicide mission – is shown laughing and playing football with village children in a Taliban video (Mehran et al., 2021), or militants are described to be laughing, smiling, and joking in Al-Qaeda magazines, the question remains, what are the strategic purpose of depicting laughter, humour, jokes, and smiling militants in jihadi rhetoric? After all, jihad is a serious business, and the pages of magazines and minutes of videos are finite. Why spend time showing smiling militants or writing about their jokes?

When it comes to the realm of politics, humour has been studied and explored in various contexts and across different cultures. For example, humour has been studied as an American national tradition (Fry, 1976); it has been analysed in the political context of socialist states (Davies, 2015); investigated as a form of resistance in the Arab world (Kishtainy, 2009), and resistance in the workplace in Brazil (Rodrigues & Collinson, 1995) to name a few. As a means of popular communication, humour has the potential to enhance common-sense views on political issues (Tsakona & Popa, 2011). Political criticism is often encoded in humorous terms, softening the serious subject matter with playfulness and wit (Tsakona & Popa, 2011). Nonetheless, as observed by Tsakona and Popa, 'politics can be represented in a humorous manner and humour can have a serious intent' (2011, p. 1). In fact, humour takes many different forms, is extremely context dependent, and performs varied functions. In this paper, we study different types of humour and their function in jihadi rhetoric.

One of the most significant functions of humour within politics and social movements is its power to strengthen social identities. Understanding the contexts of jokes alongside their targets and purposes often clarify who is 'us' and who is 'them', thereby fostering a sense of cohesion for the group 'in on the joke' (Fominaya, 2007). Furthermore, adherence to the understood social dynamics of a group is a source of mutual solidarity and community reinforcement, particularly when the humour is more aggressive (Terrion & Ashforth, 2002).

In light of theoretical discussions on the role of humour in politics, we analyse humour as a soft dimension of jihadi militancy and its strategic purpose in jihadi rhetoric. This is an attempt at answering Hegghammer's call for more research on jihadi culture (Hegghammer, 2017). As such, our primary research questions are:

- What constitutes acceptable humour for violent jihadi groups?
- What is the role of humour in jihadi rhetoric?
- Do violent jihadi groups differ in how they use humour?

The findings are based on an analysis of 82 English language magazines by Al-Qaeda, ISIS, Taliban, and Tahrik-e Taliban Pakistan. The results illustrate that groups differ in terms

of the frequencies and kinds of humour they use. Broadly speaking, Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and TTP show similar patterns in types of humour they use, a pattern that often stands in contrast with how ISIS employs political humour. For example, ISIS is more likely than Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, or TTP to use dehumanising and mocking humour while less likely than these groups to use situational humour.

## Conceptual framework: political humour, context, and functionality

Much of the research on political humour describes the concept as an umbrella term depicting irony, satire, ridicule, parody, mockery, and scorn (Tsakona & Popa, 2011). Political humour is highly context dependent to the extent that without contextual knowledge of political issues, political humour cannot be processed and interpreted (Tsakona & Popa, 2011). The same utterance can have different meanings and connotations for different audiences.[1] Dynel, for example, observes that speakers' utterances can have both humorous and derogatory meanings which can only be recognised by the receptive audience that can appreciate the effect it would have on other parties (Dynel, 2011).

The context of political humour varies, such that humour by politicians happens in settings where the political discourse is serious (Tsakona & Popa, 2011). For example, humour by politicians often aims at undermining their opponents, while journalists and commentators use humour to criticise politics and politicians (Morreall, 2005). In comparison, political humour by the media and ordinary people occurs in the form of humorous genres such as jokes, cartoons, satirical shows on various platforms such as TV shows, radio shows, and online (Kuipers, 2008). Political humour highlights the inconsistencies and inadequacies of political decisions and actions and the 'incompetence, recklessness, and corruption of politicians and political leaders' (Tsakona & Popa, 2011, p. 6). It contrasts 'political reality' with observable reality. A shared language and understanding are needed to distinguish between sincerity, jocularity, and irony. To joke is to speak without meaning and joking can obviate responsibility for the consequences of the utterance (Stevens, 2021).

Humour, in addition to having a subversive power as a strategy for communication, also plays a key role in the conceptualisation of direct actions whose intended audience is the general public (Fominaya, 2007). The subversive role of humour has also been practiced by political extremists. For example, Billig's analysis of websites supportive of the Ku Klux Klan found that their extensive racism was de-emphasised by disclaimers that online discourse and humour were sequestered from real racism (Billig, 2005). More recently, far-right groups have turned to memes as vehicles of humour, enabling repackaging their ideologies into more accessible and acceptable formats (Askanius, 2021).

Theorising humour has been rooted in ontological reductivism, in that theoretical discussions have primarily identified humour in terms of its effect of laughter. Humour is often associated with, if not identified and confused with laughter. This is primarily because of the close relationship between humour and enjoyment (Tsakona & Popa, 2011). However, humour and laughter are two separate phenomena (Greatbatch & Clark, 2003). Laughter is certainly not a ubiquitous concept. A joyous laugh, for instance, is different from that of a dark realisation that would 'leave one without any breath at all' (Sontag, 2002, p. 34). As such, humour does not need to lead to laughter. For example,

Arendt warns against viewing idiotic or humorous behaviour as mutually exclusive with danger. Using Hitler as a case study, she notes that

> [w]hat is really necessary is – if I want to keep my integrity under these circumstances – then I can do it only if by remembering my old way of looking at such a thing and say: No matter what he [Hitler] does, if he killed ten million people, he is still a clown. (Arendt, 2018, p. 504)

Thus, Arendt asserts that to view Hitler as a clown and laugh at him, is to 'already know what he really is and still laugh' (in Stevens, 2021, p. 13).

In an attempt to clarify the nuances of this phenomena, Stevens proposes a typology of humour along dry or wet lines. In its archetypal form, dry humour is 'signified by an absence of passion or intentionally comic delivery' (Stevens, 2021, p. 4). Dry humour intends to unveil and divulge, despite the fact that these intentions might be missed by the audience (Stevens, 2021). Dry humour is witty or clever. In comparison, wet humour is hinged on shared belief or knowledge and 'operates within a logic of confirmation' (Stevens, 2021, p. 4). Continuing with this distinction between dry and wet humour, Stevens argues that while dry humour is an invitation to a new view; wet humour 'invites us to come to an extant view again' (Stevens, 2021, p. 4). Wet humour is about what should not need saying yet is said again anyway (Stevens, 2021). This confirmatory logic of wet humour is the core of the entertainment aspect of humour in social media (Stevens, 2021). Stevens contends that the most basic form of dry humour is puns (Stevens, 2021). As Cavell observes, puns are often uncomfortable as they alter the rules that language traditionally follows (Cavell, 2005). This in turn divides people based on whether they find such instances comical or not, reinforcing the boundary between insiders and outsiders. In contrast, Stevens provides the example of impressions as a form of wet humour which instead functions by creating a bond of unity through shared understanding of a topic (Stevens, 2021). Impressions or impersonations are easy for an audience to understand as they are simply a reiteration of something or someone with whom they are already familiar, yet they also allow for new layers of critique to be added by highlighting specific matters (Sørensen, 2013). Such examples highlight the differing ways in which humour can manifest itself, and the consequential impacts these can have beyond just being 'funny'.

It should be noted, however, that Stevens is quick to explain that his approach to dry and wet humour is not dichotomous and should be seen as a continuum. Stevens' notion of dry and wet humour is also akin to Tsakona and Popa's (2011) description of humour along two lines based on functionality: (a) humour conveys criticism against the political status quo (dry humour), and (b) humour reinforces and recycles dominant values and views about politics (wet humour). Tsakona and Popa (2011) give examples of political satire and cartoons as forms of political criticism. In the twentieth century, socio-political humour was synonymous with satire, a form of dry humour (Stevens, 2021). This traditional style of humour is 'dusty and desiccated' while political humour nowadays is received as 'entertainment' (Stevens, 2021, p. 3). Other scholars investigating online humour highlight the maliciousness of employing humour to troll. Young, while underlining the ambiguous nature of some online discourses, describes it as a 'contemporary digital culture of an irony of infinite reversibility, of texts that offer no critical vantage point for determining to what extent they mean what they say' (Young, 2019, para. 51).

Humour can also have a subversive function and lead to political change by offering different perspectives on political issues that lead audiences to question political decisions, representing a form of resistance (Tsakona & Popa, 2011). Subversive humour in the workplace, for example, is conveyed through 'discourse strategies which create social distance, and emphasize social boundaries between the speaker and the target of the humour' (Holmes & Marra, 2002, p. 65).

Humour plays a significant role in the process of identity construction and identity reinforcement. For example, in the context of social movements, Fominaya's ethnographic study points to the importance of humour in the process of collective identity formation within anti-capitalist groups in Madrid. The author asserts that humour generates a sense of internal cohesion and helps project an alternative identity (Fominaya, 2007). The mechanism through which humour contributes to identity construction is by both delineating and ratifying a collective (Stevens, 2021). A shared humour creates an environment that fosters internal cohesion and contributes to social bonding between interlocutors who agree on both the content and targets of humour, which is referred to as the inclusive function of humour (Dynel, 2011; Fominaya, 2007). It also plays an exclusive function by enhancing the gap between those who do and do not adopt the same stance towards the humour's themes and targets (Tsakona & Popa, 2011). Research in the field of film and television studies, illustrate that in movies ridicule and contempt are used to portray weakness of victims – paradigmatically women and children – as lack of physical power (Jasper et al., 2020). Stereotypes can be reinforced through contemptuous and ridiculous depiction of groups. For example, Jasper et al. (2020) claims that at the height of American racism, films like *The Birth of a Nation* portrayed black people as both silly and threatening at the same time.

At times humour is expected to take the place of physical retaliation (Stevens, 2021). As such, derogatory humour and ridicule are a 'critical part' of a delegitimization strategy in which people 'are categorized into negatively valued social groups that are not afforded protection or rights otherwise considered normative, for the purposes of justifying maltreatment' (Hodson & Macinnis, 2016, p. 69). Such disparaging inter-group humour works in tandem with processes such as dehumanisation and system justification with its specific function to label social groups as acceptable targets for devaluation (Hodson & Macinnis, 2016). In this way, more mundane forms of disparaging humour can 'play a key role in delegitimizing out-groups, trivializing their rights, concerns, and right to protection' (Hodson & Macinnis, 2016, p. 70). Furthermore, humour as a deviation from the norm has a social function that Tsakona and Popa argue constitutes a 'social corrective', that aims at 'highlighting, eliminating, and even preventing any disruption from what is socially accepted and approved of' (Tsakona & Popa, 2011, p. 4). Therefore, humour is viewed as a means of criticism as well as social control, as it implicitly projects norms and values of a specific community, and heightens boundaries between in- and out-group members (Archakis & Tsakona, 2005). For example, Fominaya compounds that deliberate use of humour in social movements represents 'a fundamental declaration of political orientation' and signals distancing from the status quo (Fominaya, 2007, p. 246).

Humour can also be geared towards controlling the target and fostering conflict (Holmes & Marra, 2002; Rodrigues & Collinson, 1995). This type of humour, often dubbed as 'aggressive humour', stands in stark contrast with solidarity-building and

affiliative functions of humour (Hay, 2000; Luginbühl, 2007). Aggressive humour distinguishes between an in-group of those who enjoy such utterances, and out-group(s) comprising the individuals/groups who are lambasted, criticised, or humiliated. This type of 'disaffiliate humour' – where the speaker uses aggressive utterances to be humorous to one group and abusive towards another group, is associated with sarcasm (Dynel, 2009; Partington, 2006), disparagement (Ferguson & Ford, 2008), ridicule (Billig, 2005) or mocking (Everts, 2003). As such, the audience is imperative in determining the type of humour. In the absence of a listener beside the one attacked, Dynel (2011, p. 112) expounds that, an aggressive utterance may be altogether devoid of any humorous capacity. Therefore, disaffiliate humour, is simultaneously affiliative, because 'it demonstrates camaraderie, and strengthens bonds of solidarity between those who laugh' (Dynel, 2011, p. 112). As such, central to such humour experiences are feelings of superiority, mockery, and amusement at the expense of the othered (Dynel, 2011, p. 113).

While this discussion highlights the functionality of humour and the debate surrounding various types of humour, less explored is the functionality of political humour in the context of extremism. Most recently, the use of humour by extremist actors has been revolutionised by online subcultures of the far-right. Scholarly attention has been especially drawn to the use of memes (Bogerts & Fielitz, 2019; Dafaure, 2020; Fielitz & Ahmed, 2021) that develop and spread virally by copying or combining with other units of meaning such as texts and images (Fielitz & Ahmed, 2021, p. 7). The visual culture of certain alt-right online communities share 'a cynical style of humour intended to numb and desensitise its consumers to the use of violence' (Fielitz & Ahmed, 2021, p. 4) with several violent far-right attacks in recent years closely connected to this 'chan culture' (Crawford et al., 2020). Memes are a form of countercultural irony used by far-right movements to shift what is acceptable discourse, gradually exposing users to increasingly virulent content by concealing it as ironic parody (Crawford et al., 2020). This parody also creates a sense of community by presupposing certain knowledge and hence excluding those who don't get the in-jokes (Lamerichs et al., 2018).

A recent study by Ayad reveals that a younger generation of Salafis, 'Gen-Z Salafis', are appropriating the tropes, language and visual culture originally espoused by the alt-right and far-right (Ayad, 2021). These online subcultures include members of 'Islamogram',[2] the akh-right,[3] as well as younger supporters of Islamic State, al-Qaeda and the Taliban who have adopted culture war tropes that attack the inherent degeneracy of western culture. By repurposing popular memes and video aesthetics to define themselves and their enemies, Gen-Z Salafis' use humour to engage and entice a younger generation towards a Salafi ideology and identity.

The importance of identity construction as a feature of strategic communications by violent jihadist organisations is well established. For example, ISIS communications aim to provide readers with a 'competitive system of meaning' to shape supporters' perceptions, polarise and convince them to mobilise (Ingram, 2018). Reicher et al. argue that the effectiveness of discursive strategies in mobilising violence is determined by the extent to which skilled entrepreneurs of identity can construe speaker and audience in a common social category, defining an in-group so as to exclude an out-group (Reicher et al., 2005). Humour is just one way in which violent actors use strategic communications to project norms and values of a specific community in order to heighten boundaries between in-group and out-group members (Archakis & Tsakona, 2005). This

research speaks to this line of literature by focusing on the role humour plays in the jihadi rhetoric.

## Research methodology

This study utilises 82 English magazines published by the Taliban, ISIS, Al-Qaeda and Tahrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) (see Table 1). The data is analysed both qualitatively and quantitatively.

All data analysed within this paper was accessed and retrieved from Jihadology.net, which provides access to primary source material from a range of global jihadi groups for research purposes. Although Al-Qaeda, ISIS, the Taliban and TTP have produced magazines in languages other than English (e.g. Urdu magazines by the Taliban and TTP, Pashtu by the Taliban, and Arabic by Al-Qaeda, ISIS, and the Taliban), for the purpose of this project we focus on English language material as it is the only language shared by all four groups analysed. Furthermore, the messaging strategies of a group will often differ depending on the language. For example, Lahoud observes that ISIS's *al-Naba* magazine – published in Arabic – uses stereotypical gender descriptions for women which are found to be demeaning and offensive even to female ISIS supporters. In comparison, the author contends that the English and French magazines produced by ISIS (*Dabiq* and *Dar al-Islam* respectively) widely avoid using demeaning language within their prose when addressing or discussing women (Lahoud, 2018). Furthermore, the choice of English language for these magazines is also indicative of an audience that has English language competency; this can apply to Muslims living in the West or the Western audience in general. As observed by Ingram, messaging strategies implemented by ISIS play on factors connected to identity, solution and crisis constructs (Ingram, 2018). Likewise, the Taliban (Johnson, 2018), Al Qaeda (Gohel, 2017), and TTP (Siddique, 2010), discuss grievances, provide solutions, and build identities within their rhetoric to attract potential recruits. Therefore, a comparative analysis of these magazines can shed light on the nuances and differences between these groups in how they depict humour and for what purposes.

Table 1 provides a detailed account of the data.

**Table 1.** Data description.

| Groups | Magazines | Number of issues | Publication dates |
|---|---|---|---|
| Taliban | Azan Magazines | 6 Issues | March 2013–August 2014 |
|  | In Fight Magazine | 1 Issue | June 2013 |
|  | Total count | 7 |  |
| ISIS | IS News | 3 Issues | June 2014 |
|  | IS Report | 4 Issues | June 2014 |
|  | Rumiyah | 13 Issues | September 2016–September 2017 |
|  | Dabiq | 15 Issues | July 2014–July 2016 |
|  | Voice of Hind | 13 Issues | February 2020–February 2021 |
|  | Total count | 48 |  |
| Al Qaeda | Inspire | 17 Issues | July 2010–August 2017 |
|  | Al Risalah | 4 Issues | July 2015–January 2017 |
|  | One Ummah | 2 Issues | September 2019–June 2020 |
|  | Total count | 23 |  |
| TTP | Sunnat-e Khola | 2 Issues | August 2017–October 2017 |
|  | Ihyaye Khilafat | 2 Issues | October 2014–December 2014 |
|  | Total count | 4 |  |
| Total |  | 82 |  |

## Conceptual definitions and operationalisation

Table 2 provides a detailed account of operationalisation of humour and different types of humour for which the data was coded. These categories are derived from a careful review and assessment of the relevant literature.

It should be noted that different categories of humour, for example dehumanising humour, ironic and sarcastic humour, mocking humour, and situational humour are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

## Data analysis

The study implemented a two-step coding process, which allowed for consistency with the process of a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 2003). The data was manually coded by five coders using computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, NVivo Initially, the team coded for text referring to humour and laughter identified through a broad definition of humour (see Table 2). Next, through a process of inductive coding, the team coded various types of humour and its contexts (subcategories) which were identified in the first round of coding. In the second step, all the entries that had been coded broadly for humour were analysed and coded into the identified subcategories.

To assess the inter-rater reliability, all coders separately coded a randomly selected trio of issues (*Al Risalah* Issues 1, 2, 4). Based on our independent codes, we calculated Cohen's

**Table 2.** Conceptual operationalisation.

| Concepts | | Definitions |
|---|---|---|
| Humour | | Humour as a general term denotes communications which elicit a response of amusement (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). Our initial, broad coding for humour captured any content which was funny, humorous, or ridiculous, as well as any mention of laughing/laughter, smiling, banter, or joking. All the further subcategories of humour in this paper are considered political humour due to the context in which they occur. |
| Boundaries of humour | Acceptable use of humour | Boundaries of humour are measured through guidelines or limitations to the humour style of a specific group (Kuipers, 2009). This variable constitutes acceptable and unacceptable use of humour. Boundary setting of when and who is allowed to use humour. This is generally the type of humour directed toward the other/the enemy. |
| | Unacceptable use of humour | Kinds of humour jihadi groups forbid. This is often humour directed at religious beliefs of jihadi groups. |
| Types of humour | Dehumanising humour | Use of humour as a tool to 'divest people of human qualities or attribute bestial qualities to them' such that they are 'no longer viewed as persons with feelings, hopes and concerns but as subhuman objects' (Bandura et al., 1996, p. 366). |
| | Ironic or sarcastic humour | Ironic or sarcastic humour is language that conveys an (often subtle) distinction between what is literally said and the intended meaning of the statement (Gal, 2019). |
| | Mocking humour | Mocking humour is a form of aggressive humour whereby a target's qualities are overtly presented in exaggerated or rude fashion (Everts, 2003). Compared to ironic and sarcastic humour, mocking humour is direct, overt, and not subtle. |
| | Situational humour | The use of humour, typically nostalgic, contextualised in narratives or 'first-hand account[s] of events experienced by jihadi militants' (Mehran & Lemieux, 2021, p. 3). Situational humour is not always negative (unlike mocking, sarcastic and dehumanising humour). |

Kappa coefficients. The results showed high levels of agreement on most coding categories (Kappa value of 0.88). Coders resolved the differences in this initial stage of coding by discussing the parameters of the codes and reaching an agreement as a group. In the second stage, each member of the team coded a separate set of magazines individually, which were in turn checked by at least one other member of the team. In this stage, the Kappa Coefficients were calculated for the pair of coders and the results in general indicated high levels of agreement (Kappa values ranging between 0.498 and 1.00). Any resultant disagreements were discussed and finalised by the coders. A final diagnostic test was performed by a single coder who conducted a 'constant comparison' process (George & Apter, 2004) by checking all entries for each category and subcategories of codes to ensure consistency (Carcary, 2009; Gwet, 2008). This process of detailed coding generated more than 1068 references allowing for rich quantitative discussion of the data, a practice that enhances the credibility of qualitative data (Patton, 1999).

## Findings

The overall findings of this research point to various forms of political humour being used by Al-Qaeda, ISIS, TTP, and the Taliban. In this section, we first provide an overall view of the frequencies of humour in jihadi rhetoric while discussing how each group perceives of acceptable or unacceptable humour. This discussion is based on descriptive statistics and provides counts and percentages of references to humour, regardless of type, and whether the jihadi group in question discusses what it believes is permissible or forbidden humour. This discussion is followed by analysing inter-group differences in various types of humour and what purposes they serve. Our findings illustrate that groups differ in terms of the frequencies and kinds of humour they use.

Table 3 provides purely descriptive statistics based on counts and percentages of references to humour per group. The first column illustrates the percentage of humour references per group. As the table demonstrates Al Qaeda and ISIS have the highest number of humour references. We also investigated whether each group discusses what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable of humour. These are counts of number of times a group discusses directly what is acceptable or unacceptable humour. We treat these categories as proxies for a definition of humour by the jihadi group.

Table 3. Percentages of references to humour type per group.

| Group | Political humour | Boundaries of humour | |
| | | Acceptable humour | Unacceptable humour |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Al Qaeda | 151 | 0 | 5 |
| Percentage | 38% | 0% | 17% |
| ISIS | 140 | 1 | 14 |
| Percentage | 35% | 33% | 48% |
| Taliban | 84 | 2 | 10 |
| Percentage | 21% | 67% | 34% |
| TTP | 26 | 0 | 0 |
| Percentage | 6% | 0% | 0% |
| Total column count and percentages | 401 | 3 | 29 |
| | 100% | 100% | 100% |

### Boundaries of humour

Boundaries of humour refers to language employed to distinguish what is and is not allowed to be discussed in a funny or comedic nature. Due to humour's inescapable sub-jectivity, there are no unanimous rules for what can be considered comedic. Instead, what is deemed humorous is predominantly determined by the social context it is being used in (Purcell et al., 2010). For example, Western boundaries of humour tend to be focused on ethics, political correctness, and the line of what is 'too far' in comedy (Peifer, 2012). This differs greatly from the boundaries posed in jihadi rhetoric where topics that many would consider 'off limits' such as people being killed are frequently mocked or ridiculed. Instead, boundaries for these jihadi groups are most frequently centred on religion, specifically regarding what constitutes appropriate humour for a 'good Muslim' and how the West is particularly disrespectful (Macdonald & Lorenzo-Dus, 2021).

By splitting humour into these two categories, norms can be developed on what and who should be mocked (Tsakona & Popa, 2011) strengthening the 'us versus them' nar-rative many groups aim to impose onto their readers. Quantitatively, Table 3 demon-strates statistically whether each individual group implements boundaries of humour and if so the percentages of usage in relation to the acceptable or unacceptable subca-tegories. Although the chi-squared test does not yield any statistically significant results, it can be observed that 48% of the references made to setting boundaries are by ISIS, with the Taliban being the next group (34% of references) that delineates what is unacceptable humour. For example:

> If a claimant of Islam worships anything or anyone besides Allah, mocks Allah, or completely abandons submission to Him, then he cannot be considered a Muslim.[4]

Throughout publications from ISIS, similar sentiments are made on multiple occasions, setting the boundary that mocking Allah or religious figures such as the Prophet Mohammed is to be considered an extreme offence.[5] In addition, unacceptable religious discourse is also further divided between rules for 'good Muslims' such and critiquing enemies for unacceptable humour in the form of disparaging remarks or content relating to Islamic figures.

> We as Muslims do take Islām seriously and we take it literally. We also take the honor of Muḥammad [?] seriously and we love him dearly. Cartoons defaming Muḥammad [?] are no joke and Muslims have made that very clear, yet the defamation continues as we have recently seen with the South Park affair.[6]

Furthermore, analysing Al-Qaeda's magazines also provided insight into the group's general attitude towards humour. For example, in an issue of *Inspire*, the author advises:

> […] to fear Allah in your akhlaq or behavior. Refrain from excessive joking and laughing. The more one laughs, the less dignity he will possess.[7]

While it is evidently unacceptable for Muslims to mock Islamic figures, humorous content deriving from enemies, particularly Western nations and their citizens, is presented as among the gravest of offences. For example:

> I do not see what happened at Charlie Hebdo as a tragedy. Rather the tragedy is that people think it is OK to demean the sacred and belittle that which is more beloved to we Muslims than their own souls.[8]

This statement suggests that partaking in overt expressions of humour is unacceptable behaviour for a principled Muslim who respects Allah. However, this sentiment is juxtaposed alongside a density of references to these very actions. Particularly this is visible for situational humour where in regular reference point to members making jokes and laughing among themselves or laughing at others. This contradiction supports Hellmich's contention that Al-Qaeda's messages are pervaded with hypocrisy, which undermines the organisation (Hellmich, 2008). The two groups with the highest frequencies for discussing unacceptable humour boundaries (ISIS and the Taliban) are also the only groups to show concern for acceptable humour boundaries, albeit at a much lower rate than the former. Therefore, it follows that these two groups may have stronger beliefs on how and when humour should be used to communicate messages. Nonetheless, all four groups use humour throughout their English magazines. This is evidence that Al-Qaeda, ISIS, the Taliban, and TTP consciously utilise humour to promote their own group's strategic aims, centred along the lines of group cohesion and group identity formation.

## Types of humour

In this step, we calculate the differences between the groups in the type of humour they use.

Since all the variables are nominal and the sample size of the material for each group is different, we used a Chi-squared test to analyse if the differences between the observed and expected values happened by chance. According to Yates et al., for tables larger than $2 \times 2$, a condition for Chi-squared test is that at least 80% of expected values should be equal to greater than 5 (Yates et al., 1999).

Table 4 shows that the lowest expected value for our $4 \times 4$ table is 5.15. As such, our analysis meets the accepted criteria as described above. The *p*-value is .00001, which indicates that the probability that the differences between the observed and expected values occurring by chance is below 1%.

The general rule is that the larger the difference between the observed and expected value, the higher the contribution that value has made to the overall Chi-squared test. We

**Table 4.** References to humour type per group and Chi-Squared test results.

| Group | Dehumanising humour | Irony and sarcasm | Mocking humour | Situational humour | Row totals |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| AQ | 19 (20.34) | 28 (36.37) | 29 (35.98) | 82 (65.31) | 158 |
| Adjusted residuals | −0.4 | −3.47* | −1.56 | 4.17* | |
| ISIS | 29 (19.05) | 36 (34.07) | 47 (33.70) | 36 (61.18) | 148 |
| Adjusted residuals | 3.83* | 0.49 | 3.97* | −4.18* | |
| TBN | 3 (7.47) | 13 (13.35) | 12 (13.21) | 30 (23.98) | 58 |
| Adjusted residuals | −1.82 | −0.12 | −0.4 | 1.95 | |
| TTP | 1 (5.15) | 16 (9.21) | 4 (9.11) | 19 (16.53) | 40 |
| Adjusted residuals | −1.83 | 3.17* | −1.82 | 0.89 | |
| Column totals | 52 | 93 | 92 | 167 | 404 (grand total) |

Notes: $\chi^2 = 44.44$. The *p*-value is .00001. Expected values are in brackets. The results are significant at $p < .01$. Adjusted residuals with * point to a difference of less than −2 and more than +2.

also standardised the residual (differences between observed and expected values) based on the following formula:

$$\text{Adjusted residual} = (\text{observed} - \text{expected})/$$
$$\sqrt{[\text{expected} \times (1 - \text{row total proportion}) \times (1 - \text{column total proportion})]}$$

In our qualitative analysis, we included those variables that yielded an adjusted residual value of less than −2 or more than +2, which indicates that the number of cases in the cell is significantly larger or smaller – depending on the sign of the value – than the expected value which means that the null hypothesis can be rejected (Everitt & Skrondal, 2010).

### Dehumanising humour

As Table 4 illustrates, all groups employ dehumanising humour in varying degrees. By applying dehumanisation techniques to a person or group, targets of the dehumanising humour will no longer be seen to have hopes, feelings, and concerns in the way a sentient human has. Instead, they will be considered subhuman entities (Bandura et al., 1996). Research shows that dehumanising humour deployed by extremist groups indicates mindlessness or an insentience within the targeted opposition (Wahlström et al., 2020). As such, when utilising dehumanisation within the framework of humour, terrorist organisations are able to contrast the more graphic imagery dehumanisation elicits with the softer aspect of humour as 'the communication vehicle that legitimises the derogation' (Hodson & Macinnis, 2016, p. 70), thereby strengthening the development of in/out-group dynamics through the use of othering.

The findings demonstrate that ISIS is more likely than Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, or TTP to use dehumanising humour (observed frequency is 29 while expected frequency is 19.05 with the results significant at the *p*-value of <.0001 and the adjusted residual differences is more than 2). This finding is not surprising given the well-documented scathing and uncompromising discourse ISIS uses within its rhetoric. Shaw and Bandara, for example, note the comparative prominence of inflammatory claims of *takfir* or heresy against certain groups as well as a different tone for ISIS magazines compared to Al-Qaeda's, which are 'wry, humorous, even temperate at times' (Shaw & Bandara, 2018, p. 1329). The noticeable use of dehumanisation within ISIS rhetoric has been previously examined by Ramsay, who argues animalistic dehumanisation is deployed to express moral judgement primarily against treacherous members of the Muslim community, especially Shi'ites and hypocrites (*munafiqun*) (Ramsay, 2016). Meanwhile, mechanical dehumanisation, i.e. comparing the enemy to machines and robots was only found in ISIS magazines indicating a broader and more developed use of this type of humour, especially compared with the Taliban and TTP (with observed frequencies of only 3 and 1 respectively).

In terms of types of dehumanisation, humour using animalistic dehumanisation is the most prevalent form implemented by all four groups, involving the denial of uniquely human characteristics such as refinement, civility and morality (Haslam, 2006). By attributing bestial qualities to the target through animalistic labelling such as vermin, pig, donkey or ape, the perceived primitiveness of the subject is demonstrated mockingly and humorously. Rhetoric which attributes animalistic qualities relates to the development of class structure as well as in and out-group dynamics (Loughnan et al., 2014). The target of

animalistic dehumanisation is presented as 'coarse, uncultured, lacking in self-control, and unintelligent' (Haslam, 2006, p. 258). The use of this humour therefore delineates clear social boundaries (Loughnan et al., 2014) in which the deliverer of the remark indicates to the reader that the target is of lesser social and cognitive standing.

Indeed, dehumanising humour lends itself to the mocking and scathing rhetoric implemented by all four groups analysed. Animalistic dehumanisation deploys an overt-ness as a humour mechanism, which when paired with a mocking delivery, signals to the reader in a clear manner where they should place their allegiance within the dialogue. However, it should also be noted that different animalistic comparisons will serve different humorous purposes. For instance, the repeated use of the term 'dog'[9] to describe President Bush refers to an animal considered culturally unclean; the term 'donkey'[10] to describe Americans indicates laziness, stupidity, and sexual promiscuity; whilst the more sinister comparison of American troops to vermin (see Note 10) functions to cause emotional disgust justifying their slaughter. Therefore, as with all forms of humour context is vital to understand its specific function. The following extract from ISIS's *Dabiq* magazine serves to mock the target reinforcing the boundary between in- and out-group, but in this instance does it through highlighting their subhuman stupidity:

> I found out that she was the wife of the donkey that was coming to me almost every day to rebuke me and to 'teach' me my religion, or so he claimed![11]

A different form of dehumanisation, mechanical dehumanisation, was also observed to use humour within our study:

> The governments are like a robot that is stuck on a loop, continually performing the wrong sequence despite repeated instructions by its master to the contrary. Master to robot: You have to find a different way of addressing the danger the mujāhidīn pose to the west. 'Cannot … compute … ' Military action does not work, what about negotiations? 'Must … obey … programming … ' Everything you've done since 9/11 has put us in more danger, not less. 'Zzzzz … syntax … error … ' Of course, Robo-Obama doesn't listen to voices of reason and thus programs himself with the same corrupted old data, making the same mis-takes over and over again … .[12]

This excerpt from the ISIS's magazine *Dabiq* demonstrates how humanness can be further conceptualised in relation to inanimate objects like robots. This form of dehumanisation denies 'human nature' characteristics such as emotionality, vitality, and warmth and is intended to make the target seem superficial, inert and cold (Haslam, 2006; Loughnan et al., 2014). In this context, ISIS portrays Obama as obsessed with military action and beholden to 'the wrong sequence' making him appear lacking in any agency or remorse for his actions. Dehumanisation is one of the most extreme forms of negative out-group identity construction, essentialising group boundaries by accentuating the difference between in and out-group members (Baele, 2019). Dehumanisation when used in a humorous context reinforces the exclusive function of humorous forms such as ridicule and mocking by justifying the derogation of certain groups.

### Ironic and sarcastic humour

Our definition of ironic and sarcastic humour is language that conveys a distinction between what is literally said and the intended meaning of the statement (Gal, 2019).

Sarcastic humour aims to unveil and divulge using clever or subtle language (Stevens, 2021). Subtlety distinguishes sarcastic humour from other more overt forms such as mocking humour and it often invites a new perspective which challenges the status quo. Sarcastic humour is also closely associated with 'disaffiliate humour', whereby the speaker uses utterances that are humorous to one group and humiliating or critical towards another, reinforcing a sense of 'us' versus 'them' (Dynel, 2011; Fominaya, 2007). In the context of jihadist propaganda, sarcastic humour serves as one of the tools to strengthen camaraderie between those who laugh, promoting feelings of superiority at the expense of the othered group.

TTP is more likely than ISIS, the Taliban and Al-Qaeda to resort to ironic and sarcastic humour. As shown in Table 4, observed frequencies of ironic and sarcastic humour are higher than their expected values. The observed frequency for TTP is 16, while the expected frequency is 9.21 with a $p$-value <.000. Comparing the quantitative findings, Al-Qaeda's and the Taliban's rhetoric contain markedly less ironic and sarcastic humour.

Therefore, sarcastic humour's subversive function – fostering resistance through novel perspectives (Rodrigues & Collinson, 1995; Tsakona & Popa, 2011).

In comparison, Al Qaeda is less likely than any group to use sarcastic humour. When Al Qaeda uses sarcastic humour it is aimed at ridiculing enemies, as shown by Al-Qaeda lambasting Donald Trump in the following example:

> Trump and many of his aides vehemently opposed the military option. They prefer to rely on economic sanctions, besides of course 'Presidential' tweets, which might force Tehran to bend to American demands or, after another forty years, somehow bring about the collapse of the regime![13]

Herein, Trump is the humour's target, with the suggestion that his tweets might bring the collapse of the Iranian regime representing sly mockery of the former president's intellect and policies.

In general, the use of sarcastic humour is employed as criticisms of enemy politicians and their policies. By highlighting visibly hypocritical or thoughtless Western policies, an audience is left to infer the meaning of the critique within the joke and act themselves to challenge the status quo. The attempt to delegitimize and expose western systems and established authorities (such as the Nobel Peace Prize) is a recognised feature within violent political language, functioning to reinforce the in-group as the 'sole holder of truth' (Baele, 2019, p. 712).

### Mocking humour

In comparison to ironic and sarcastic humour, mockery is direct and aggressive in style; it converts characteristics of its targets into accusations of incompetence (Everts, 2003). Attributes are presented in isolation or with egregious exaggeration until they become vices; an accent may become a speech impediment, or caution turned into indecision, while speed becomes recklessness. However, this requires the target audience to be receptive to the original qualities of the individual being mocked. Thus, for jihadi magazines trying to penetrate the Anglosphere, frequent targets of mockery are expected to be well-known individuals, especially internationally recognisable politicians and organisations. For example, ISIS labelled Joe Biden as 'the Senile Crusader' in a parody of

domestic political bickering between former President Trump and President Joe Biden.[14] Mockery easily extends to ascriptive characteristics as well, such as the corruption of former Israeli Prime Minister's surname 'Netanyahu' into 'Rottenyahu' by Al-Qaeda.[15] Quantitatively, ISIS is much more likely to resort to mocking humour than Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, or TTP (with an observed frequency of 47 versus an expected frequency of 33.70). This relationship is illustrated in Table 4, which is based on the differences between observed and expected values. As demonstrated, ISIS is the only jihadi group in this study that demonstrates higher observed frequencies for mocking humour than what would have been expected.

Stylistically, ISIS's mocking humour is particularly aggressive, sacrificing subtlety in favour of imagery that turns countries into individuals and people into animals, as demonstrated below:

> According to Scheuer, the only time airstrikes alone succeeded in determining the end of a war was the airstrikes of Hiroshima and Nagasaki! Indeed, America has been caught once again in a quagmire.[16]

In another example, we read:

> Indeed, the people today are like a hundred camels amongst which you almost can't find any that are fit for riding.[17]

To a lesser extent, other jihadi groups also use mocking humour to denigrate the enemy and create a well-demarcated in-group/out-group identity. Mocking humour is a diverse rhetorical toolkit for the authors of jihadist magazines and, although it can be used rather bluntly through simple animalisation – as conceptualised in the discussion of dehumanising humour – there is also evidence of more complex, strategic deployments. Al-Qaeda and the Taliban in particular use mockery and parody to galvanise the curious by placing emphasis on an 'us versus them' mentality, permitting careful blame attribution.

### Situational humour

Situational humour is defined as the use of humour, typically nostalgic, contextualised in narratives or 'first-hand accounts of event[s] experienced by jihadi militants' (Mehran & Lemieux, 2021, p. 3). It is often characterised by humour that is incorporated into narrating a situation, for example through storytelling, and describing past jihadi operations in a nostalgic way to evoke a sense of idyllic brotherhood. Situational humour is specifically used in these narratives for the strategic purpose of telling stories to motivate audiences and demonstrate privileged knowledge (Mehran & Lemieux, 2021).

Statistically, while situational humour is rather common amongst Al-Qaeda, it appears less often in the rhetoric of ISIS, distinguishing it from the other groups. For Al Qaeda, the observed value for this category is 82 versus an expected value of 65.31, while the *p*-value is .000 and the results fall within two standard deviations from the mean. References to smiling and laughing are common elements within situational humour. This relates to research by Hegghammer regarding the cultural dimensions of jihadism about the use of 'storytelling [and] jokes' in jihadi literature (Hegghammer, 2017, p. 1). Examples such as, '[i]t's a funny story, and actually (the brothers in) Al-Qaeda found it hilarious!'[18]

demonstrate the use of situational humour to create an idyllic and nostalgic frame of events experienced by the jihadis. Or in the following example, situational humour is used to valorise a martyred Al-Qaeda leader:

> Khattab was a very simple guy. He would make jokes, laugh a lot and form good ties and relationships with the people.[19]

Furthermore, situational humour is utilised to juxtapose perspectives between in- and out-groups within jihadist literature. In the example below, situational humour is used by the narrator to contrast his and his compatriots' experiences with those of his captors in a wistful yet mocking tone whilst recounting their time in Guantanamo Bay:

> 'We can't do anything, our hands are tied' was his reply. Months later, in Guantanamo, whilst looking back on these days, we would laugh and sing: They took us to Guantanamo, and (they said) their hands were tied.[20]

By framing, the clearly contrasted in- and out-groups of the story within a nostalgic sentiment, the perceived injustice of the narrator's captivity is signalled to the reader in a more strategic manner than if the same message had been stated more plainly and without using humour. Even though Al-Qaeda uses situational humour more than other jihadi groups studied in this paper, it is not unique to the group. The following is an example from ISIS's Dabiq magazine:

> Upon entering the blessed land of Sham, his heart was full of joy and he became the youngest brother among the Bengali muhajirin […] He was always cheerful and smiling.[21]

ISIS magazines typically reference smiling and laughing within the context of jihad. Examples such as 'I just smiled. This is the Decree and Will of Allah'[22] and 'Until they meet their Lord, for He has laughed and is pleased with them'[23] demonstrate how the use of situational humour within ISIS publications are often contextualised within the religious associations of jihadi acts. These literary narratives further help to mobilise individuals by emphasising the delight felt by those who participate in acts in the name of jihad.

Consequently, situational humour is used strategically to enrich narratives of past events and develop a religious rationale for conducting jihad, as well as motivating individuals to carry out their own operations. This humour depicts a softer side of jihad by emphasising the comradery and brotherhood of carrying out '*istishhadi*' missions and the peaceful, even joyful, nature of martyrdom.

## Conclusion

Through a comparative analysis of jihadi magazines, this research discusses boundaries of humour and inter-group differences in the types of humour each group focuses on. The findings of this research point to various forms of political humour being used by Al-Qaeda, ISIS, the Taliban, and TTP. In this paper, we categorised the humour appearing in jihadi rhetoric in the form of dehumanising humour, ironic and sarcastic humour, mocking humour, and situational humour. We also have demonstrated that groups differ in terms of the frequencies and kinds of humour they prefer. Broadly speaking, Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and TTP show similar patterns in the types of humour they use, a pattern that often stands in contrast with how ISIS employs political humour. For

example, ISIS is more likely than Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, or TTP to use dehumanising and mocking humour while less likely than these groups to use situational humour.

In general, political humour is used to build an in-group out-group identity, however, different types of humour have particular focus on how identities are constructed. Our findings illustrate that ISIS is more likely to use dehumanising and mocking humour than any other group. The increased regularity of dehumanising humour in ISIS's magazines reflects their overall aggressive and uncompromising stance on out-group members and combative opponents. Both dehumanising and mocking humour are more negative and sinister types of humour compared to sarcastic and situational humour. Situational humour on the other hand, demonstrates the formation of an in-group identity among jihadis based on shared experiences and depicts a sense of collective identity amongst them. Situational humour is often used to contextualise a narrative of events experienced by jihadi militants as it is incorporated into storytelling narratives with the objective to motivate individuals to mobilise. Situational humour is also used to demonstrate solidarity within jihadi organisations and foster the narrative of an idyllic brotherhood of jihadis. Ironic and sarcastic humour play an inclusive role in identity formation, because it is often necessary to relate to a jihadi ideology and political outlook for an audience to understand and enjoy the nuances of these jokes. A shared humour in turn creates an environment that fosters internal cohesion and creates social bonding while playing a role in construction and reinforcement of in-group identity.

The broader implications of these findings indicate that humour plays an important role in jihadi text as it can reinforce identity, establish group cohesion, and have an exclusive or inclusive functionality. Text containing humour, e.g. situational humour, normalises jihadi life and demonstrates a focus beyond the commonly perceived notion of militancy. This can be an effective persuasive tool to attract potential recruits who are given vison of a romanticised jihadi life and a venue to channel their shared frustrations and anger towards the othered enemy responsible for their grievances. As such, humour is an effective communication strategy. Our analysis also showed that jihadi groups utilise this strategy differently, for example building an identity by vilifying and dehumanising the enemy as in the case of ISIS and dehumanising humour, or by looking inwards and focusing on group cohesion, and shared experiences as in the case of situational humour used by Al Qaeda.

While this paper sheds light on a less studied aspect of jihadi rhetoric – jihadi humour – the findings are limited to the analysis of written text and English magazines only. To provide a more comprehensive picture of the functionality of humour in jihadi rhetoric, future research ought to focus on non-English textual material. Furthermore, the paper did not analyse any visual imagery encountered within the magazines, yet this component remains important and understudied. Exploring spoken humour in jihadi videos or humour depicted in images and memes and comparing it with written humour can be enlightening.

## Notes

1. These semantic changes can also be affected by linguistic differences across audiences. Humour is an advanced employment of language that is sensitive to and dependent upon listeners' knowledge of a joke's language. Puns, for example, are very difficult to translate effectively.

2. Ideologically heterogeneous, 'Islamogram' is a network of young Salafi propagators who use the Instagram platform but draw heavily on the visual and linguistic culture of 4Chan, Reddit and Discord. https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Islamogram.pdf, p. 12.
3. The akh-right is a specific set of young Salafis who use elements borrowed from white supremacists in their posts. https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Islamogram.pdf, p. 20.
4. Dabiq Magazine, Issue 13.
5. See for example, Dabiq Magazine, Issue 9.
6. Inspire Magazine, Issue 1.
7. Inspire Magazine, Issue 9.
8. Inspire Magazine, Issue 14.
9. Inspire Magazine, Issue 10; Rumiyah Magazine, Issue 12.
10. Rumiyah Magazine, Issue 10.
11. Dabiq Magazine, Issue 10.
12. Dabiq Magazine, Issue 5.
13. Ummah Magazine, Issue 2.
14. Voice of Hind Magazine, Issue 13.
15. Inspire Magazine, Issue 9.
16. Dabiq Magazine, Issue 4.
17. Dabiq Magazine, Issue 2.
18. Al Risalah Magazine Issue 2.
19. Al Risalah Magazine, Issue 1.
20. Al Risalah Magazine, Issue 3.
21. Dabiq Magazine, Issue 14.
22. Inspire Magazine, Issue 13.
23. Rumiyah Magazine, Issue 11.

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