# The Use of Musical Compositions as a Mechanism for Communicating Hate Speech on Social Media: Study of a Jihadist Nasheed

## *El uso de composiciones musicales como mecanismo de comunicación del discurso de odio en redes sociales: estudio de una nasheed yihadista*

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**Abstract:**

With the rise of social media during the period known as the Arab Spring, a type of sympathiser of the jihadist cause started to emerge, termed prosumer[1], who consumes, but also produces extremist audio-visual content, thereby favouring the viralisation of hate speech on social media. A part of this propaganda is made up of jihadist musical compositions from the genre called nasheed, whose musical plasticity seeks to sugarcoat an ideology that defends and promotes violence, while at the same time trying to avoid the online content restrictions put in place by operators, by virtue of its symbolic dimension. The multimodal analysis performed on a piece circulated by the jihadist organisation Jabhat al-Nusrah shows that 65% of the verses are identified as violent and that 55% of them support martyrdom for the faith in the form of immolation, utilising symbolic elements that make it difficult for the algorithm to restrict content.

**Keywords:**

YouTube; violence; symbolism; jihad; internet.

***Resumen:***

*Con el auge de las redes sociales durante el período conocido como Primavera Árabe, empezó a gestarse un simpatizante de la causa yihadista, el llamado prosumidor[2], que consume, pero que también produce contenido audiovisual extremista, favoreciendo con su labor la viralización del discurso de odio en las redes sociales. Parte de ese material propagandístico lo conforman composiciones musicales yihadistas del género nasheed, cuya plasticidad musical procura edulcorar una ideología que defiende y promueve la violencia, al mismo tiempo que procura esquivar las medidas de restricción de contenidos de las operadoras a través de su dimensión simbólica. El análisis multimodal establecido sobre una pieza difundida por la organización yihadista Jabhat al-Nusrah demuestra que el 65% de los versos son identificados como violentos y que el 55% de ellos amparan el martirio por la fe en forma de inmolación, utilizando elementos simbólicos que dificultan la restricción de contenidos por parte del algoritmo.*

***Palabras clave:***

*YouTube; violencia; simbología; yihad; internet.*

## 1. Introduction

The year 2011 saw a considerable migration of jihadist propaganda to social media (Clifford & Powell, 2019), coinciding with the outbreak of the Arab Spring. This came about as a result of the significant success of the call for civil unrest made

1 A concept coined by the American sociologist Alvin Toffler (1980) in his book "*The Third Wave*", originally referring to economic issues, but redirected towards the idea of a user who consumes but also produces content.

2 Concepto ideado por el sociólogo estadounidense Alvin Toffler (1980) en su libro "*La tercera ola*", originalmente referido a cuestiones económicas, pero reconducido hacia la idea de un usuario que consume pero que también produce contenidos.

by anonymous individuals (Conway, 2012), operating from inaccessible geographic locations and providing "the means to coordinate and synchronise thousands of people, making mass meetings possible even in the absence of a formal organisational infrastructure" (Bellin, 2012: 138). This inertia favoured a progressive decentralisation of the production of jihadist content, within a dialectic that allowed consumers of propaganda to now interact as communicators (Weimann, 2015; Gallardo-Camacho, et al., 2018). The famous thesis of network warfare or *netwar,* first proposed by Johan Arquilla & David Ronfeldt (2001), was gaining resonance, this idea predicted a new era of cyberwars characterised by the role of small groups or individuals carrying out "network campaigns, often without a specific central command body" (2001: 6).

This scenario would foster the advent of independent individuals, referred to as armchair jihadists (Prucha, 2012), who live parallel lives between real life and their online activity, that is, a subject who joins "the jihadist narrative and online iconography while remaining more or less subjugated to their individual environment and social context" (Prucha, 2012: 153). Known also as *slacktivists*[3] (Córdoba Hernández, 2017) or *jihobbyists*[4] (Brachman, 2009), they assume the role of prosumers (Toffler, 1980) and *produsers*[5] (Bruns, 2007), being in constant dialogue through a terrorist hate narrative that is easily viralised through social media (Guiora, 2018).

Jihadist narratives sometimes use music as an ideological conveyor belt, while manifesting mechanisms of group cohesion, even of identity itself, as Thöres Theorell (2014) argues, in the face of an online scenario which they consider to be hostile. Psychiatrist Anthony Storr (1992: 20) expressed this view when he considered that "when a culture is under threat, music can become even more significant", stressing that "music can sometimes symbolise rebellion" (1992: 21). This takes up the idea put forward by Theorell (2014: 3) in relation to other variants, arguing that "rap and heavy metal are musical genres that began as social protest movements for young people with few social resources". Nazi propaganda also knew how to capitalise on the virtues of music, sometimes even "disassociated from its original content to generate an emotional experience" (Botstein, 2005: 492). Thus, music also functions as a mechanism for modulating moods (DeNora, 2000) to the point that "it can imprint a certain quality on the character of the soul" (Aristotle, 1988: 469), which requires bowing down before its power as Nietzsche himself saw it, considering that "with language one does not in any way achieve the exhaustive universal symbolism of music" (2011: 358). Thanks to this symbolic potential, music takes on a crucial role in certain communities, particularly so in the case of Algeria, where the *raï* genre became a refuge from the tensions rippling through Algerian society. As Bernabé Pons (2016) puts it, "in the songs and the underworld that the songs make up, raí singers and their audience concentrate many of the issues that concern and traumatize society, especially its less favoured collectives" (2016: 12), the genre being fiercely persecuted by Islamists during the Civil War (Jones, 2013; Bernabé Pons, 2016) due to its addressing issues banned by fundamentalism,

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3 A concept arising from the combination of the words "*activism*" and "*slacker*", which seeks to identify a type of user who participates very slightly, sometimes with "*likes*" or "*dislikes*", with certain campaigns on social media while "serving to describe a series of political activities that have no impact on real life, but serve to increase the feeling of well-being of the citizens who carry them out" (Córdoba Hernández, 2017: 240).

4 A pun combining "*hobby*" and "*jihad*" created by Jarret M. Brachman (2009), which suggests online jihadist activity as a type of hobby.

5 A combination of the terms "*producer*" and "*user*", which suggests the profile of a social media user who interacts and produces, without limiting themselves exclusively to consumption.

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such as the consumption of alcohol or sex (Bernabé Pons, 2016). During that conflict, raï music became a space "of essential freedom for a population that had been abandoned by their own government" (Jones, 2013: 474).

Music is thus reconfigured as a place of refuge that perhaps allows for the construction of a collective identity, in the understanding, as DeNora (2000) argues, that "music is used and functions as a means to define social order, structure subjectivity [...] and establish a basis for collaborative action" (2000: 111). This area of activity can be taken over by jihadist propaganda, whose strategy of spreading exclusionary messages takes advantage of an environment in which "music brings people together through a shared experience of pleasure, and this unifying quality can be a powerful means of recruitment and can strengthen the sense of community" (Pieslak, 2015: 37).

The link between hate speech conveyed by jihadist *nasheed* and the phenomenon of terrorism has been widely recognised by the United Nations, particularly in Recommendation #35 of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (2013), point 6 of which calls incitement to terrorism an extreme manifestation of hatred, and the Committee has "paid attention to hate speech directed against persons belonging to certain ethnic groups who profess or practise a religion different from that of the majority" (2013: 6). As suggested by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance of the Council of Europe in its General Recommendation #15 (2016: 5), "hate speech may be intended to incite others to commit acts of violence, intimidation, hostility or discrimination against those to whom it is addressed". In light of the ease the Internet offers for the sharing of illicit content, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and speech himself assumed in a 2011 report the need to restrict on the Internet, among other content, "the verbal incitement to hatred" (United Nations General Assembly, 2011: 8), while urging the rebuttal of online resources that encourage "the promotion of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence [...]" (2011: 9). That is precisely what Salafist-jihadism focuses on (Hafez, 2007; Maher, 2017), spurred on to defend an ideological project that enthrones a Manichean worldview and that does not hesitate to apply and incite violence against the moral influence and cultural stamp of the West, which "implies the conviction that jihad, understood in the bellicose sense, is necessary to bring God's message to all humanity" (Avilés Farré, 2017: 21). This violence, according to *takfir* doctrine[6] would be directed not only against non-Muslims, but also against those Muslims who have strayed from the faith, even against unjust Muslim rulers, which according to Luz Gómez García (2009: 320) is nothing more than an update of "the classic theory of Islamic apostasy."

### *1.1. State of the question*

This study seeks to cast an omniscient look towards an ecosystem of multimodal productions known as the jihadisphere[7] (Antinori, 2017) or the jihadist visual lexicon (Ostovar, 2017), which according to Benjamin Ducol (2012: 52) groups together "an online community of militants and sympathisers united by their common adherence to a global Salafi-jihadist ideology", the target audience often being minors, age not being an impediment to a user of over 14 years managing his or her own

6 As the Arabist Luz Gómez García (2009: 320) clarifies, the term "*takfir*" suggests an "accusation of infidelity to Islam."

7 The concept of jihadisphere defines a powerful online ecosystem that seeks to bring together the jihadist community on the Internet under a single term.

channel, taking advantage of the current legal vacuum in Spain "regarding the legal status of minors on the Internet" (Durán Alonso, 2022: 11).

This collective finds in jihadist musical compositions or jihadist *nasheed* a pleasant-seeming way of spreading a message of hate that "plays an important role in jihadist culture" (Gratrud, 2016: 1051). It is a recognizable a cappella form, as it addresses songs constructed through choirs of voices, without musical instruments, but which in recent times can be modified through post-production editing thanks to audio-editing software, resulting in the creation of automatic melodies or the amplification of reverberation (Botz-Bornstein, 2017), even vocal arrangements or harmonies (Pieslak, 2015).

*Nasheeds* became very popular in the 1970s and 1980s among Syrian and Egyptian jihadist groups (Said, 2012; El-Nashar & Nayef, 2023) and were capitalised on by Al-Qaeda in the late 1980s by suggesting the acquisition of cassette tapes and recorders with the intention of recording aural recitations of the Quran and *nasheeds* (Lahoud, 2017). The Hamburg 9/11 cell later resorted to this musical genre as a mechanism of group cohesion, within the ritual process of preparation for martyrdom (Seidensticker, 2006), in a plausible connection with the potential ability of music to influence human perception, to the point that "it can lead people to accept acts of aggression against the 'other' more diligently than rhetoric and talks" (El-Nashar & Nayef, 2023: 5), even in its evident function as a catalyst in recruitment processes (Pieslak, 2015). Nasheeds have really been popularised in recent times by the American jihadist of Yemeni origin Anwar Al Awlaki, especially in his famous text "44 ways to support jihad", where he moved towards a real link between jihadist culture and *nasheeds*:

> A good *nasheed* can spread so widely that it can reach an audience that cannot be reached through a lecture or a book. *Nasheeds* especially inspire the young, who are the foundation of jihad in any era. *Nasheeds* are an important element in the creation of a "jihadi culture." (Al Awlaki, 2009: 19).

As Henrik Gratrud (2016: 1051) puts it, "compared to more savage jihadist content, *nasheeds* are less likely to be removed from websites, which may help explain why they have become the most popular jihadist content online," encouraging activity more inclined to "appeal to the senses in ways that formal ideological texts fail to do" (Pieri & Grosholz, 2023: 2). Yet it is an "effective tool for propaganda" (Said, 2012: 875), on a game board that clearly profiles the enemy, as would have already occurred during the colonialist period, when musical poems similar in their motivations to *nasheeds* were used, in particular for the "legitimate struggle against tyrannical oppressors" (2012: 874).

Anti-terrorist activity in Spain has not been unaware of the distribution of *nasheeds* as an essential element in the consolidation of a multimodal form of jihadist propaganda. High Court judgment 1472/2019 pointed in that direction by proving that the defendant in that case distributed "a list of *nasheeds* (religious chants)" on different social media, "which provoked a mental state necessary to commit the bloody acts that are also disseminated" (Judgment AN, 2019: 33), in a perspective similar to that noted in the investigative phase of the foiled attack on board a Thalys high-speed train in 2015. According to the French Public Prosecutor's Office, the perpetrator, a Moroccan named Ayoub El-Khazzani, may have generated a state of motivation essential for the gestation of the attack by listening to jihadist songs on YouTube (Thomson & Robinson, 2015). The effects of such pieces were again felt in British public opinion in 2021. That year, the UK's public broadcasting regulator announced a fine of £2,000 for a community radio station linked to the Pakistani Islamic community in Sheffield, after accusing it of having broadcast a *nasheed* entitled "*Jundullah*" ('soldiers of Allah' in Arabic) in December 2020. According to the statement

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released by the public body (Ofcom, 2022), "the *nasheed* included an indirect call to action" (paragraph 2), while at the same time inciting "participation in violent acts as a devout expression of religion" (paragraph 2). This idea is consistent with what Möller & Mishler (2020) expressed when they point to jihadist musical pieces as another mechanism with which to "spread propaganda and highlight specific ideologies" (Möller & Mishler, 2020: 291), if anything as a factor of cohesion and as an activity to normalise violent dynamics (Möller & Mishler, 2020).

### *1.2. Objectives and hypothesis*

This study aims to comprehend how jihadist propaganda uses the *nasheed* genre to disguise its hate speech on social media, a strategy which would allow it to avoid large operators' content restriction policies. The study considers the need to identify possible strategies that may be used to expand or distribute jihadist ideology on social media, an ideology known for its ability to dehumanise its enemies and for its vocation to construct an exclusionary narrative. A hypothesis is proposed that violent discourse can be camouflaged in musical content to bypass algorithms and sustain a hate strategy over time.

## 2. Method

The research contained in this paper addresses the discourse analysis of a single musical piece or composition in the *nasheed* genre, contained in a sample of 234 videos previously dissected, and analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively in (Trujillo-Fernández, 2022; Trujillo-Fernández et al., 2024), as a result of searches on YouTube for content related to the jihadist organisation Jabhat al Nusrah.. The piece was identified as a *nasheed* based on the criteria of the Brill Encyclopaedia of Islam (1993: 975), which defines a *nasheed* as "a piece of oratory, a song, a hymn, and a form of vocal music." There is no single format for *nasheeds,* though it would seem that this type of musical composition responds to a tonal structure based on the *maqam* system, which emerged from secular Arabic music (Pieslak, 2015). The Arabic word *maqam* can be translated as 'rank' and, according to Hassan Touma (1981: 29), "it prescribes a firm tonal structure that must observe a tonal hierarchy as well as a certain tonal quality".

Based on the above characteristics and taking into account the sample analysed in Trujillo-Fernández (2022), a *nasheed* piece was identified, consisting of an image of a rose in GIF format, played in a loop with dewdrops. The 91-second video was uploaded to YouTube on August 3, 2015, by a channel called "Abdullah Barhaa", whose owner, possibly an individual user, categorised the piece under the heading of "Science and Technology," titling it "*Jabhat al nusra nasheed unknown title*," which can be translated as "*nasheed* of unknown title by Jabhat al Nusra" (Abdullah Barhaa, 2015). Thus, whoever uploaded the propaganda content to the network directly referred to the piece's link with a terrorist organization.

As was confirmed during the course of the investigation carried out on Trujillo-Fernández (2022), the URL linked to the *nasheed* managed to stay on the network for a year without disappearing despite the best efforts of the operator's content restriction policies. It was deemed appropriate to establish a multimodal bifurcation between lexicon and image, in order to look more deeply into the symbolic features of each vector, this as a part of the exercise of triangulation as a formula for methodological approximation. This strategy enhances research to the extent that the combined use of qualitative and quantitative methodology allows the two methodologies to consolidate each other (Ruiz Olabuénaga, 2012). It is considered more important to go deeper

into the analysis of the piece through a double methodological dimension, which allows switching between the symbolic aspects of the song's lexicon and the symbolic study of the piece's images, assuming the existence of both physical and non-physical symbols along the lines established by Professor Jonathan Matusitz (2015). His thesis covers both the prevalence of formulas of extralinguistic communication and linguistic symbols, considered by Matusitz (2015: 11) as "words or phrases whose meanings symbolise particular values, norms, cultural premises and beliefs about the world."

A multimodal observation is therefore adopted of a *nasheed* musical composition, commonly used by jihadist propaganda, which, in the case in point, uses classical Arabic as the vehicular language, in the form of a poem, with personalised metre, whose rhythm allows one to intuit a structure of twenty verses according to the indications provided by the Arabist Salvador Peña Martín, author of the translation of the piece (S. Peña Martín, personal communication, April 1, 2018). To facilitate the analysis and citations, a structure is methodologically articulated in tables that suggest the application of a personalised ad hoc numbering for each verse, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. Poem *"Fight with your sword"***

| Numeration | Verse |
|---|---|
| 1 | Fight with your sword he who sold the Golan, |
| 2 | and join the procession of the Phalanxes of Faith. |
| 3 | Seek not any protection other than that of your Flag, |
| 4 | that thirsts so much for streams of blood, |
| 5 | and raise your Ensign in Great Syria, for Great Syria is |
| 6 | a land of sacrifice, where the finest horsemen are found, |
| 7 | and a white minaret whose sprouting we have brought to pass, |
| 8 | and has already given its best in the thickest of the fight. |
| 9 | By Divinity the al-Nusra Front is raised, |
| 10 | Bowing not even before proof of death. |
| 11 | They overflow on their mounts towards the beautiful houris, |

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| | |
|---|---|
| 12 | and cover the face of the earth with shrouds. |
| 13 | They rush to strike the lead that spurs them on: |
| 14 | echoes of an epic, sounds of lances. |
| 15 | They are those who defend the Faith with their blood, |
| 16 | those who destroy Satan's suggestions. |
| 17 | The spirited Bedouins of Great Syria know that their blood |
| 18 | has never run through the veins of a coward. |
| 19 | O Great Syria! Land where Creed and dew meet! |
| 20 | Blessing of our soldiers and our homelands! |

**Source: created by the authors. Extracted from the multimodal piece by Abdullah Barhaa (2015)**

### *2.1. Formula chosen for the analysis of the lexicon of musical composition*

The prestigious Arabist Salvador Peña, professor at the University of Malaga and winner of the National Translation Award, was invited to collaborate on the transcription and subsequent translation of the lyrics. Professor Peña recognised the difficulties to be overcome due to the application of an overdubbing[8] effect in the piece in combination with background noises compatible with a scene of conflict. The professor found it necessary to reduce the playback speed in order to effectively transcribe the text of the piece (S. Peña Martín, personal communication, April 1, 2018).

### *2.2. Thematic filters applied for a qualitative study of the lexicon*

The twenty verses of the *nasheed*, hereinafter called "Fight with your sword", were subjected to several thematic filters that could favour contextualisation in ideological, geographical, and religious terms and concerning its position on the use of force, as can be seen in Table 2, assigning a percentage.

8 It can be defined as "the process by which a new sound is added to an existing recording, that is, a superimposition" (Innovasonora UCM, n.d. definition 1).

**Table 2. Subject areas considered in the lexicon**

| Content Type | Argument |
|---|---|
| Verses with religious content | Related to the application of the Quran and the sunnah, however, not necessarily linked to jihadism, although jihadist ideology can sometimes make use of this resource to favour or endorse its own actions. |
| Verses with violent content | Category that allows the assessment of the degree of violence shown by the lexicon of the *nasheed* analysed, in line with the characteristics provided by the World Health Organization (2002: 5) in relation to the meaning of violence, which it defines as "the deliberate use of physical force or power, whether as a threat or real, against oneself, another person or a group or community, that causes or has a high probability of causing injury, death, psychological damage, developmental disorders or deprivation." |
| Verses with references to Syria | Given the direct link between the *nasheed* and the propaganda apparatus of a jihadist organisation based in Syria, it seems necessary to check whether the geographical link of the Jabhat al Nusrah terrorist organisation also extends to the verses of the text in the piece being analysed. |
| Verses that justify religious martyrdom | This category will allow the determination of whether self-immolation is endorsed as a representative act of jihadist activity, on the understanding that "martyrs are a source of inspiration in Islamic culture and their images are used in visual propaganda to inspire support for the jihad" (Brachman, et al., 2006: 86 ). |

**Source: created by the authors**

Evidence of whether three clearly distinctive elements of terrorist action (Table 3) are reproduced in a symbolic form was also sought, such elements frequently being reproduced in jihadist propaganda, and are precisely the elements to which worship is paid.

**Table 3. List of symbolic grounds identified in the lexicon**

| Types of symbolic references | Motivation |
|---|---|
| References to combat | Considered as that violent activity that dignifies the jihadist martyr. |
| References to blood | Blood extols terrorist activity, as it "symbolises violence, martyrdom, sacrifice, injustice, tyranny, oppression and victory in battle" (Brachman, et al., 2006: 100). |
| References to death | Death as the prelude to *djanna* or paradise. |

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### *2.3. Analysis of the discourse contained in the nasheed lexicon*

By virtue of the multimodal vocation of this study, discourse analysis has been carried out of the poem "Fight with your sword" (Table 1), applying what Cortés Rodríguez & Camacho Adarve (2003: 77) consider to be essential for the analyst. Therefore, "a classification that enables a taxonomy of the variations that originate in the use of pragmalinguistic mechanisms as a consequence of social interaction" was applied. This strategy for approaching jihadist ideology opens a window to identifying hidden keys in the symbolic construction of the message contained in a lexicon.

### *2.4. Symbolic analysis of the images utilised in the GIF*

The piece shows a visual representation of a rose in GIF format, with dewdrops bouncing off its leaves which can be seen thanks to the rays of light coming from the sky, within a symbolic orchestration that corresponds, according to Professor Afshon Ostovar (2017), to the idea of an "adaptive and immersive" jihadist visual lexicon. The symbolic analysis was carried out independently, by virtue of three symbolic elements: the rose, the rays of light and the drops of water.

**Figure 1. Image capture extracted from the GIF accompanying the *nasheed* analysed**

**Source: A still from "Jabhat al nusra nasheed unknown title" [Video], by Abdullah Barhaa, 2015, 01m31s, YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CUG9EOvp0Cs )**

## 3. Results

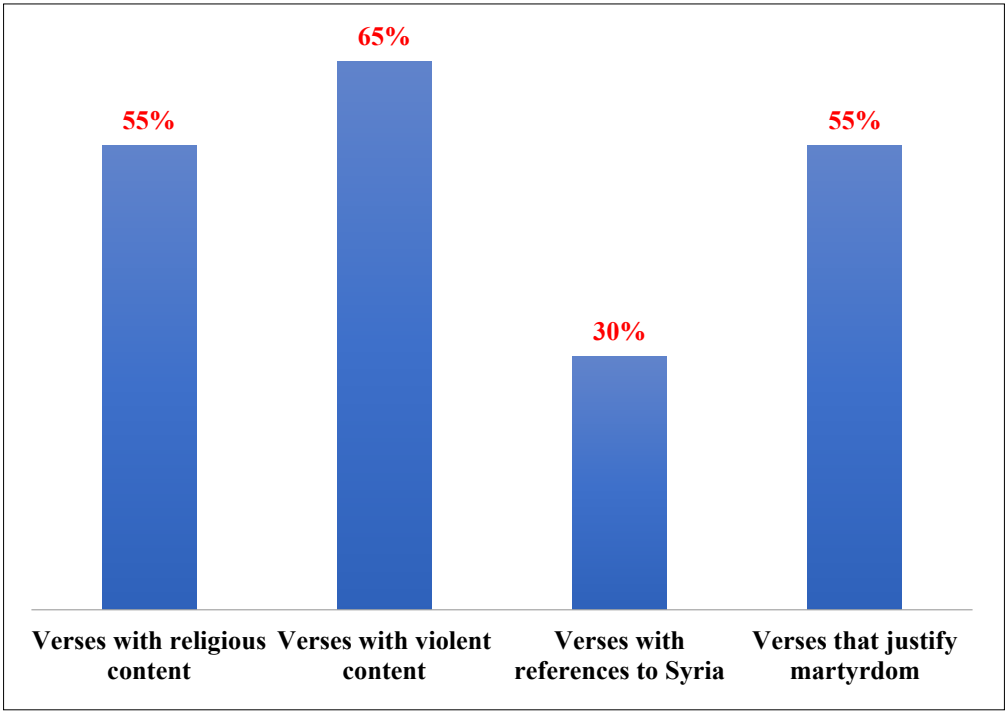
### *3.1. Dissecting the nasheed "Fight with your sword" from a lexical perspective*

From a unifying vision of methodological triangulation and in application of thematic filters, the following findings were obtained in the lexicon of the *nasheed* "Fight with your sword" (Abdullah Barhaa, 2015).

### *3.2. Quantitative analysis of lexical frequencies*

As shown in Figure 2, thirteen of the twenty verses of the poem (65%) contain violent content, while 55% of the verses have religious content, in percentage terms similar to the verses that advocate martyrdom, interpreted as the immolation of the subject for ideological reasons. In contrast, up to 30% of the verses place the narrative in the context of the Syrian War, where the terrorist activity of the Jabhat al Nusrah organisation has been carried out from the beginning.

**Figure 2. Principle thematic areas considered in the poem's lexicon**




**Source: created by the authors**

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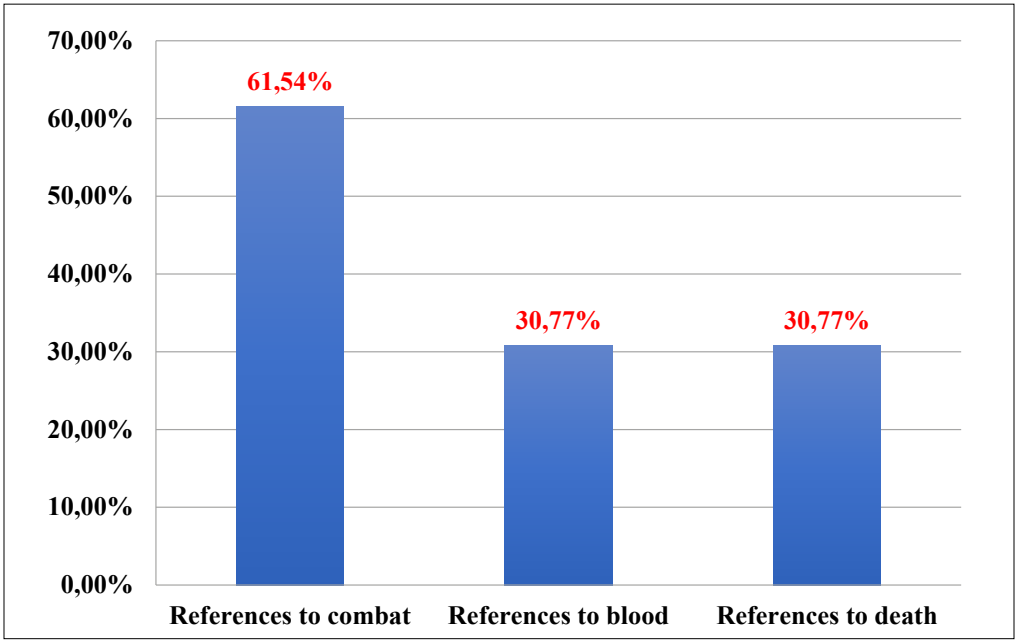
Figure 2 allows a deeper consideration of the poem's violent profile, as we later show in Figure 3, such that 61.54% of the thirteen verses containing explicit violence refer to acts of combat, with evident allusions to blood as a symbolic element compatible with violent acts, with 30.77% of the verses referring to that aspect. Finally, and in a similar proportion, 30.77% of the verses mention death.

**Figure 3. Study of symbolic references in verses with violent content**




**Source: created by the authors**

### *3.3. Symbolic interpretation of the transcription of the verses*

As shall be shown below, the discourse contained in the poem "Fight with your sword" complements the results obtained from the quantitative view of the piece analysed, brandishing hate speech that extends throughout the entire text. The initial verse (number 1) adopts the sword as a physical concept compatible with violent acts, an element that, without being directly cited in the Quran, is utilised to refer to the *At-Tauba surah* or the *Surah* of Repentance, where it is quoted verbatim: "kill the pagans wherever you find them" (The Quran, 2005, surah 9:5), in a clear allusion to idolaters, that is, to anyone who strays from the faith or worships other deities foreign to Islamic monotheism and the idea of the oneness of God, a capital vector in the

Islamic religion. The concept of the sword is mentioned on numerous occasions in the Sunnah[9], even related to the perception of bladed weapons as a formula for accessing the yearned-for paradise: "Certainly the gates of Heaven are under the shadow of swords" (Muslim, 2006, hadith 4681).

The narrative of hate is again conceived indirectly in the musical composition with the recourse to the "Phalanxes of Faith" (verse 2), understood as a synonym for a battalion and in the form of a messianic safe-conduct granted to the Jabhat al Nusrah organisation; even in an openly hostile way in verse 4, conceptualising the thirst for "streams of blood" that adorns the flag of the community of believers (verse 3), in a confrontational posture against non-Muslim communities. Blood is thus clearly tied to martyrdom, as the jihadist fighter's commitment to the faith, he who does not bow down "even before proof of death" (verse 10), even as an eschatological prelude to a new life, accessible after death, towards which the jihadist fighters stride who "overflow on their mounts towards the beautiful houris", in tune with the presence in the *djanna*[10] of "virgins of paradise promised to the believers" (Castillo, 1986: 7-8). The houris are mentioned on several occasions in the Quran, as "large-eyed houris, like hidden pearls" (The Quran, 2005, surah 56:22-24), considered as "those of modest gaze, untouched till then by man or genie" (The Quran 2005, surah 55:56).

Allusions to religious martyrdom are frequent throughout the poem, moving towards an apologia for killing, as emphasized in verse number 12 when referring to "and cover the face of the earth with shrouds." Shrouds form part of Islamic funerary rites and are justified by the Sunnah, which establishes the need to shroud the deceased "with three cloths of white cotton [...]" (Muslim, 2006, hadith 2052), however, in an exercise of appropriation, the terrorist act is linked to religious motivation, in a transmutation that seeks false refuge in Islam, but which in reality works in tune with the idea of strategic camouflage, that is, searching for plot lines in the Quran and the Sunnah to justify violent acts. This exercise of distorting reality is nothing new; in fact, Abdallah Azzam, founding member of the Al Qaeda terrorist organisation, related the idea of the martyr and the use of white shrouds in his work "Morals and Jurisprudence of the Jihad" when stating that "Muslim leaders washed Omar's body and formulated the prayer to the dead. He was therefore a martyr, but he achieved martyrdom without combat" (2008: 134-135).

The symbolism of certain words lowers the level of violence without avoiding it, an evident clue in verse number 19: "O Great Syria! Land where Creed and dew meet!" The dew intentionally alludes to the purity of water, which is inextricably linked to Heaven itself (Castillo, 2013). The notion of dew appears in a verified apocalyptic-type hadith, in which a detailed description of the arrival of *Dajjal* (the devil or antichrist) is favoured, since "Allah will send [make descend] a rain, which will be like dew or shadow, and will make the bodies of the people rise up (from the earth like plants)" (Muslim, 2006, hadith 7023).

The territorial issue that the poem resolves does not derive from a strictly geographical factor, as the spiritual plane must necessarily be present. This reasoning appears well focused in verse number 5 when mentioning "Great Syria," understood as a historical-cultural space known as Bilad al Sham that would encompass the territories of Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Israel; however, the term *Sham* in this poem designates a religious vision, imbued with the desire to form a single Islamic

9 This is the "set of precepts attributed to Muhammad and the first four orthodox caliphs" (Royal Spanish Academy, n.d., definition 1).

10 As Luz Gómez García (2009) points out, *djanna* or *yanna* is one of the names given in the Quran for paradise, a term that, according to this Arabist, can be translated as garden. Paradise, as the same author puts it, is "the place where the souls of true believers must rest after the Day of Judgement" (2009: 263).

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nation under the idea of *ummah*[11] or community of believers. The Sunnah compresses this idea of land in the following way: "Ibn 'Umar tells us that the Prophet (PBUH) said: Oh God! Bless us in Shâm (the 'Great Syria') and in Yemen" (Al-Bukhari, 2003, hadith 559). These are undoubtedly terms that coincide with the desire expressed by Al Qaeda to form an Islamic Caliphate in the region that would have Al Quds (Jerusalem) as the capital of the entire territory, never forgetting that Masjid Al Aqsa, the so-called "Farthest Mosque", is to be found there. This was evident in 2012, with a statement disseminated in the name of the deceased terrorist leader Ayman Al Zawahiri, who proclaimed the need to recover Al Quds as a medium- and long-term strategy to impose the Caliphate throughout the Middle East (Al-Zawahiri, 2012). This would include the recovery of the Golan Heights, occupied by Israel and expressly mentioned in Al-Zawahiri's statement (2012)[12], but also in the first verse of the musical composition examined herein, so that the consumer of this kind of content is directly exhorted to the practice, promotion or dissemination of violent action against the representatives of the Syrian regime, who are accused of having lost the Golan to the Israelis. Neither is it a coincidence that the founder of Jabhat al Nusrah, Abu Mohammed Al Jowlani, apparently came from that region, as his own alias suggests.

Such targeting of the Syrian dictatorship does not avoid another truth intrinsically linked to jihadist ideology: the Assad regime belongs to a minority and esoteric branch of Shiism called the Alawite sect, although they are also known as *Nusayris*. Being a sect, Sunni fundamentalism, especially the *takfir* current, considers that they must be fought (Rolland, 2003) in the same way that the need to raise the flag of vengeance of the community of believers "that thirsts so much for streams of blood" (verse 4) is given form in the poem's discourse. This idea of territorial cohesion faces off against the onslaught of non-Muslims, relegated to forced conversion, in a form of a squaring of a narrative of hate that seeks to endorse violent acts, under the premise of theological authorization, not only against non-Muslims, but also against Muslims who have strayed from the path marked by the Quran and the Sunnah.

The text of the composition does not uncouple its propagandistic vocation from terrorist action, attributing responsibility to the Jabhat al Nusrah jihadist organisation for moving towards the will of God: "By Divinity the al-Nusra front is raised" (verse 9). An al-Nusra front that ends up being anointed with a form of theological authorization, a license to act that works in harmony with the sunnah, as is clearly highlighted in verse 7: "and a white minaret whose sprouting we have brought to pass." This white minaret refers directly to the defunct media apparatus of the Jabhat al Nusrah terrorist organisation, an entity known at the time as Al Manarah al Bayda -which translates as white minaret-, which in turn coincides with an apocalyptic hadith which cites the east minaret of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, known, not by chance, as the "Minaret of Jesus" (Zelin, 2012). That hadith states that "Allah will send the Messiah, son of Mary, who will descend on the white minaret to the east of Damascus" (Muslim, 2006, hadith 7015).

11 The umma defines the entire Muslim collective or community of believers, reinforcing the concept of a single Islamic nation, although, as Luz Gómez García (2009: 336) says, "the umma was also a legal reality from very early on," which shows, according to this author, that "it is a concept with multiple nuances" (2009: 336).

12 The available link has been removed due to the type of content that promotes violent acts.

### *3.4. Symbolic analysis of a GIF linked to the nasheed "Fight with your sword"*

As can be seen in Figure 1, there are three visual elements that define the symbolic construction of the dynamic GIF utilised in the composing of the multimedia piece, namely: a rose, rays of light and drops of water.

#### *3.4.1. The rose*

The rose, as a visual motif, has been used suggestively in jihadist propaganda as a synonym for martyrdom (El Difraoui, 2013), brandishing this figure as a depiction of the sacrifice of Muslim fighters in defence of religion (Brachman, et al., 2006). In Muslim eschatology, the concept of sacrifice is coupled with the longed-for ascension into paradise, with the rose, as part of the flora, helping to complement the Islamic gardens, the existence of which is often equated to Eden in the Quran (Castillo, 2013), although this symbolic resource comes from literary uses of the pre-Islamic period (El Difraoui, 2013), readapted for the construction of a discourse that affirms violent acts in defence of a religious grouping.

#### *3.4.2. Rays of light*

Light embodies divinity, as the Holy Book itself states: "It is He who made of the sun brightness and of the moon light [...]" (The Quran, 2005, surah 10:5). The beams of light personify the presence of God as the creator of natural settings: "God is the light of the heavens and of the earth. His light is like an alcove with a burning wick in it" (The Quran, 2005, surah 24:35). The recourse to the divine allows for the granting of a supposed halo of divine legitimacy to the actions themselves, acts structured through propaganda, in a visual magnetism that symbolises the confluence between the need to perform violence and the virtue of obtaining divine blessing.

#### *3.4.3. Drops of water*

The water drops are visually identified as pure water, or as a form of *mutlaq* or condensed water vapor, taking water as something synonymous with purity and life: "God has sent down water from the heavens, giving life to the earth after its death. Verily, there is here a sign for those who would listen" (The Quran, 2005, surah 16: 65), corresponding to the presence of water in heaven itself. The purity of the water hints at the idea of the mission entrusted being part of the designs of Allah, and in some way the ascending sense of water droplets as dew draws a vivid synchronicity with the light emanating from heaven. It is conceived as a spiritual syncretism that aims to transport the consumer of the musical composition to a state of divine grace, but symbolically it exercises a function of apologia for terrorist activity, overlapping the perception of paradise with the value of the reward received.

## 4. Discussion

This formula could instrumentalise what Pieri & Grosholz (2023) underline as music's intrinsic ability to appeal to the senses in a far more decisive way than a mere ideological text, deepening, unlike other types of propaganda, the formal serenity of its multimodal formulations. These latter would have allowed this type of content, as Henrik Gratrud (2016) argues, to survive

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over time on social media, even becoming a very popular product, as Gratrud himself insists (2016). This nuance would act as an escape valve that would act as a formula for ideological camouflage using the vector of religion.

The piece analysed made intensive use of violent symbolic elements, with numerous references to blood, combat or death, and yet the amiable image of a rose managed to prevent the filtering algorithm applied by YouTube from performing its function of restricting content, allowing it, as was verified in the URL analysed, to remain on the platform for over a year, as shown in the research by Anonymised. This proposal coincides with the approach of Brachman, et al. (2006) concerning the construction of a propagandistic discourse employing religious and figurative elements, which in this case serve as camouflage to help evade the operator's restrictions. Although the piece analysed was eventually blocked by the operator's algorithm, it is no less true that it showed an easily-transited path for other *produsers* not necessarily related to jihadist ideology.

## 5. Conclusions

The research contained in this paper confirms that jihadist propaganda can turn to the *nasheed* subgenre relatively effectively to disguise hate speech, since, as has been shown, it is possible to use music to mask certain content that promotes exclusionary narratives, without the algorithm necessarily detecting the multimodal synchrony of the content of the poem embedded in the *nasheed* and the dynamic image that accompanies the audio.

In short, hate speech finds a relatively easy channel to counteract an operator's bespoke restrictive policies for avoiding violent content. Thus, this article sheds light on how certain musical content ascribed to any extremist ideology –not necessarily to jihadism– can secretly spew hate speech on social media.

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| Discussion and conclusions | Francisco Trujillo-Fernández, Jorge Gallardo-Camacho and Ana Jorge Alonso |
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## 8. Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest contained in this article.

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