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# Jihadist sniper culture: propagandising the 'caliphate' through the crosshair

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# Jihadist sniper culture: propagandising the ‘caliphate’ through the crosshair

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## ABSTRACT

Snipers have gained increasing prominence in modern warfare and insurgencies, both in actual combat and in military propaganda. Research on snipers, however, has remained largely limited to their strategic role in Western professional armed forces. This article provides the first in-depth analysis of the strategic and cultural dimensions of sniper propaganda of non-state armed groups. Focusing on the prominent case of the Islamic State (IS), this study draws from military and cultural-historical research and a wide range of primary sources to examine how IS used the figure of the sniper in its audiovisual propaganda. The findings indicate that snipers, as represented by IS, combined the roles of heroic mujahidin, authentically Islamic warriors, and appealing game heroes. As such, they embodied some of IS’s core beliefs and values and served as a strategic propaganda asset during the period of the group’s decline in Syria and Iraq (2015–2017). The article concludes that through the figure of the sniper, IS attempted to present itself as an enduring power in a potentially enticing and empowering manner. These findings complement existing research on sniping and IS, while opening new avenues for investigating insurgency warfare and propaganda representations more broadly.

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## Introduction

Snipers have gained increasing recognition and appraisal within military armed forces and among the broader public since the 1990s.<sup>1</sup> The hybridisation and mechanisation of warfare and an increase in urban combat instigated a more prominent role of snipers on the battlefield. In addition, their status was amplified by military propaganda and popular culture, including numerous novels, documentaries, and films that celebrated their skills and bravery. Within non-state armed groups, too, snipers have become increasingly valued in recent decades. Transnational jihadist groups provide a case in

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point. From Afghanistan in the 1980s to Syria today, snipers have served as a strategic asset in jihadist battles, insurgencies, and terrorist activities. Furthermore, they increasingly featured in jihadist propaganda over the last few decades, representing jihadist struggles across the world in hundreds of photosets, magazine articles, and video clips.<sup>2</sup>

Whereas sniping and sniper propaganda have become increasingly prominent topics in military and cultural-historical research over the last few decades, the existing literature mainly focuses on snipers in Western military armed forces. The roles of snipers and sniper propaganda in non-state armed groups in general, and jihadist groups in particular, has remained largely understudied until today. This article aims to contribute to filling this gap by providing the first in-depth analysis of the role of snipers in jihadist audio-visual propaganda. Focusing on the prominent case of the Islamic State (IS), the article examines why jihadist propagandists have considered the figure of the sniper as a valuable representative of their struggles. To address this question, the article provides a qualitative analysis of a series of 18 sniper videos released by IS between 2015 and 2017. The analysis focuses on two dimensions of these videos in particular: the *strategic* dimension, i.e. the (more explicit) strategic aims of the videos, and the *cultural* dimension, i.e. the (more implicit) cultural meanings given to the figure of the sniper in the media releases.

The argument proceeds as follows. After explaining the data selection and methodology, the article will review existing literature on the topic, mainly focusing on public perceptions of and meanings given to the figure of the sniper in recent history. The next section will introduce IS's sniper videos by embedding them in jihadist history, after which the main findings regarding the strategic and cultural dimensions of the videos will be presented. In brief, the paper concludes that the sniper was a significant strategic propaganda asset for IS during its downfall in Iraq and Syria and embodied some of the core beliefs and values of transnational jihadism in general and of IS in the 2015–2017 period in particular.

## Methodology

Throughout its existence, but especially since the downfall of its self-proclaimed 'caliphate' in Iraq and Syria, IS celebrated its sharpshooters in numerous media productions, varying from photosets and infographics to extensive videos featuring dozens of sniper attacks. The most remarkable of IS's sniper propaganda were a series of 18 videos that entirely focused on snipers (see [Appendix 1](#)). These heavily staged and edited videos, which show hundreds of sniper attacks in Iraq and Syria, were released during the period of IS's territorial decline in the region between February 2015 and November 2017.<sup>3</sup> This study primarily focuses on these 18 videos, as they

arguably provide the most comprehensive view on how and why IS constructed the figure of the sniper as a central symbol of its brand.

The qualitative analysis of these videos has been conducted by, first, tracing the historical development of sniper propaganda, and jihadist sniper videos in particular, based on a literature review of different strands of relevant research and the author's comprehensive archive of jihadist media releases. Subsequently, the narratives, rhetoric, and visuals of IS's sniper videos have been analysed by using thematically coded transcripts of the videos (which included short descriptions of their visuals). The coding framework focused on the two main dimensions of analysis (i.e. strategic and cultural), which were subdivided into sets of codes based on insights from previous research and a preliminary review of the data. Examples of codes included 'training footage', 'scope shot', and 'threat' regarding the strategic dimension and 'jihadist history', 'Islamic tradition', and 'virtue' regarding the cultural dimension. The patterns and key themes identified in the videos were subsequently interpreted by relating them to a wide range of relevant sources, varying from classical Islamic texts to contemporary films and video games. Based on these steps, the construction of IS's sniper videos was outlined and, finally, historicised and interpreted in the broader context of sniper culture and jihadist propaganda.

## Sniper culture

Sniping became a topic of scholarly research in the 1990s. Initially, military historians studying the history of sniping tactics, techniques, and weaponry dominated the field.<sup>4</sup> More recently, the cultural dimension of sniping gained increasing attention, for example in research focusing on public perceptions of snipers.<sup>5</sup> These studies indicate that these public perceptions have been ambiguous ever since the incorporation of snipers into regular military forces in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup> On the one hand, snipers have been regarded with suspicion.<sup>7</sup> As fighters who kill unseen and from a great distance without exposing themselves to bodily harm, they have been considered as not playing fair and violating the ideals of honour, masculinity, and chivalry that usually go with combat. In the American Civil War of 1861-65, they were criticised for acting dishonourably, as they 'sneak around trees and lurk behind stumps' to shoot men in cold blood.<sup>8</sup> The perception that sharpshooters were going against social norms and rules of war has persisted until the twenty-first century, and it is striking to note that even in today's videogame forums, sniper roles are regularly defamed for comparable reasons.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, however, snipers have been met with admiration. Throughout modern history, their skills and efficiency have been praised and mythologised in shooting exhibitions, stories, and

propaganda. This is illustrated by stories about legendary snipers such as Simo Häyhä from Finland and Vasily Zaitsev from Russia, who reportedly sniped hundreds of enemies during the 1939–1940 Winter War and the Battle of Stalingrad, respectively. Just like more recent media reports about snipers ‘breaking the world record for the longest confirmed kill shot’, these examples illustrate that sniping, in a sense, came to be seen as a ‘sporting’ way of killing that was a matter of prestige and competition for both the practitioners and the public.<sup>10</sup>

Whereas perceptions of snipers have remained ambiguous, their reputation seems to have positively transformed since the 1990s.<sup>11</sup> Around this time, the military effectiveness of snipers was increasingly recognised and valued within armed forces and among the broader public. Sniping gained increasing public visibility and acknowledgement due to military propaganda and a proliferation of novels, biographies, memoirs, films, and documentaries on the topic.<sup>12</sup> In Western popular culture, snipers were increasingly portrayed as heroes for their roles in overseas conflicts, the most illustrative example of which is probably the film *American Sniper* (2014), which is loosely based on the memoirs of U.S. Navy SEAL Chris Kyle and constituted only the second mainstream U.S. war film to feature a sniper as the protagonist.<sup>13</sup>

The increasing public attention for and appraisal of marksmanship since the 1990s can be partly explained by the changing geography and the accompanying hybridisation of warfare. An increase in urban combat and a larger significance of non-state actors employing unconventional warfare methods instigated a more prominent role for snipers. In addition, several studies point to the mechanisation of warfare to explain the re-evaluation of snipers.<sup>14</sup> Warfare has become increasingly technology-driven, and innovations such as long-range missiles, precision bombs, and drones have de-individualised and anonymised combat. Due to the decreasing reliance on human skills, contemporary warfare leaves only limited space for traditional ideals of honour, masculinity, and chivalry. Whereas sniping in the modern sense is essentially a product of these developments, it still relies on individual skill more than most other forms of fighting nowadays. In other words, sniping provides one of the few forms of killing that highlight individual prowess in anonymous, technologically-driven warfare.<sup>15</sup> This makes the figure of the sniper particularly suitable for veneration in the current era. It enables fighters and organisations to display their skills, thus facilitating myths of chivalry and heroism in memoirs, films, video games, and propaganda. In short, in addition to the increasing strategic value of snipers in modern combat, the transformation of warfare itself enabled the figure of the sniper to stand out. Jihadist sniper propaganda in general, and IS’s sniper videos in particular, exemplify this development.

## Jihadist sniper propaganda

The increasing public appraisal of snipers came to the fore in the rise of jihadist sniper propaganda since the early 2000s. Facilitated by insurgencies in several parts of the MENA region and a proliferation of jihadist activities online, jihadist groups and their supporters increasingly celebrated sniper actions on websites and forums. Sniping tactics and techniques became a popular topic of instruction and discussion, for instance in jihadist manuals such as 'The Encyclopaedia of Preparation' (*Mawsu 'at al-i dād*) and 'The al-Aqsa Encyclopaedia' (*Mawsu 'at al-Aqṣā*).<sup>16</sup> The Saudi branch of al-Qaeda, to provide another example, devoted several articles to sniping in its *Mu'askar al-Battār* magazine since 2004, detailing sniper tactics and the technologies of sniper rifles and bullets, while praising snipers as a 'sword of victory' for being a cost-effective way of 'inflicting heavy losses' on the enemy.<sup>17</sup> From Iraq, in particular, organisations started to propagate their cause through the figure of the sniper. The most prominent example in this respect was a video series produced by the Islamic Army in Iraq (IAI); a Sunni-nationalist insurgent group that primarily targeted the U.S.-led Coalition forces in the country. Between 2005 and 2008, IAI published four videos showing compilations of sniper attacks against Coalition forces in Baghdad. The most remarkable feature of this series is that they presented these attacks as being the work of a single sniper: Juba, 'the Baghdad sniper' (*qannās Baghdād*).<sup>18</sup> Due to these videos, Juba soon became a legendary figure, who was credited with dozens of kills and praised online in forum posts, comics, and songs.<sup>19</sup>

The success of the Baghdad sniper fuelled the emergence and spread of sniper propaganda among jihadist groups. Soon after the first instalment of the Juba series, the Iraqi groups Katā'ib Āl al-Bayt al-Salafiyya and Jaysh al-Mujāhidīn published a video showing a compilation of eight sniper attacks in Fallujah according to the same format; this time attributing the actions to 'the sniper of Fallujah' (*qannās al-Fallūjah*), a certain Sheikh 'Abdallāh Nijm.<sup>20</sup> Other organisations soon followed, releasing compilations of sniper actions, single sniper attacks, or sniper training footage.<sup>21</sup> This trend was joined by IS's predecessor, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). Since its establishment in 2006, ISI started to release sniper videos on a regular basis through its al-Furqān Foundation; the media group that would later become IS's most prominent media producer. For example, ISI's notorious video series 'Hell of the Romans and Apostates in the Land of the Two Rivers' included several sniper videos, usually consisting of short footage showing the killing of U.S. soldiers in central and North-Western Iraq.<sup>22</sup>

IS built on and further developed this existing genre. Among the various forms of its sniper propaganda were numerous photosets, typically depicting fully equipped fighters with Dragunov sniper rifles and camouflage gear. In addition, IS published infographics, claiming for example, that IS snipers had

killed over 1,700 ‘unbelievers and apostates’ during the Battle of Mosul in 2016–2017.<sup>23</sup> Dozens of the group’s video releases also included sniper attacks, including the series of 18 sniper videos constituting the main sources for this study. The following sections present the main findings regarding their strategic and cultural dimensions.

### **The Islamic state’s sniper videos: strategic aims**

The eighteen sniper videos are approximately ten minutes on average and were released by IS’s provincial media offices in Iraq (12), Syria (5), and Egypt. They have a standardised format, typically including three elements:

- (1) *Compilations of kill shots*: The videos show 338 sniper attacks in total, usually in the form of edited compilations that evoke the impression of the ‘greatest hits’ of IS’s sharpshooters in a particular province. Virtually all of these attacks are presented through a (superimposed) crosshair view, and their dramatic effect is amplified by special effects such as slow-motion replays, *anāshīd*, and sounds of gunshots and heartbeats.
- (2) *Sniper training, instruction, and preparation*: Most videos include footage of snipers practising shooting skills or receiving lessons on sniping equipment, techniques, and tactics. They also feature snipers while preparing for action, for example positioning themselves in strategic locations or spotting enemy positions. These scenes, too, are often highly dramatised, for example through zoomed-in slow-motion shots of particular details, such as the pulling of a trigger or dust swirling around after the firing of a shot.
- (3) *Video statements*: Most videos include video-recorded messages by snipers, commanders, and fellow fighters, typically commenting on their work and its significance.

Taken together, these elements indicate that IS’s sniper videos provide a dramatised portrayal of the sharpshooters as heroic, skilled, and effective professionals. The analysis suggests that this portrayal had two overarching strategic aims; findings that are corroborated by other studies of IS’s violent propaganda.<sup>24</sup>

First, IS used the figure of the sniper to terrorise opponents. As invisible fighters who strike unexpectedly, snipers have proven to be an effective means for this purpose throughout modern history.<sup>25</sup> When sniper attacks increased in Iraq in 2008, for instance, the U.S. Department of Defense warned that these attacks ‘not only caused numerous casualties, but also have an adverse psychological effect’ and ‘could potentially inflict even more casualties than IEDs’.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, fears like these have been prominent in public perceptions and representations of snipers throughout the last decades, as is



illustrated by cases such as the so-called ‘D.C. sniper’ in 2002 or the fearsome portrayal of snipers in numerous Hollywood films.<sup>27</sup> Following in the footsteps of its jihadist predecessors, IS played on these fears, for example by emphasising the effectiveness and deadly potential of its sniper attacks through infographics.<sup>28</sup> The sniper videos had the same purpose, as becomes evident from explicit threats against the enemies. In a video released during the Battle of Raqqa, for example, a sniper directly addresses the enemy, saying: ‘The snipers are monitoring all your moves and your deaths will increase each day, thanks to God’.<sup>29</sup> In addition to explicit threats, IS used production and editing techniques to increase tension and amplify horror among the viewers. For example, the hundreds of kill shots are typically accompanied by sounds of heartbeats and heavy breathing, while zoomed-in slow-motion footage of victims amplifies their horrifying effect.

Second, the findings suggest that IS’s sniper videos were aimed at empowering the group’s supporters. In the videos, IS portrayed its snipers as efficient, professional, and heroic warriors. Their efficiency comes to the fore in, among other things, the hundreds of kill shots featured in the videos, while professionalism is the central theme in the training footage and recorded statements. The heroic nature of sniping becomes particularly evident in dramatised action scenes. Edited sounds and visuals, combined with statements on their skills and bravery, presented the snipers as determined fighters who fearlessly move toward the enemy lines to strike opponents while protecting their people. Opposing traditional reputations of snipers as cowardly murderers, one of the videos even goes as far as comparing them to *inghimāsiyyūn*,<sup>30</sup> stating: ‘They are, by God’s grace, both snipers and *inghimāsiyyūn*. They do not rely on being situated far away from their targets. Rather, they infiltrate close to the fortifications and checkpoints of the apostate army and then cut the heads of its troops with their rifle bullets.’<sup>31</sup>

In short, these examples illustrate that IS purposefully used textual and audio-visual means to portray its snipers as efficient and brave warriors to both enemies and supporters. Through its snipers, IS thus signalled that, despite current hardships, it was determined and a powerful force worth following.

### **The Islamic state’s sniper videos: cultural meanings**

In addition to portraying snipers as efficient, professional, and heroic warriors for strategic reasons, the videos provide the figure of the snipers with cultural meanings that go beyond direct utilitarian purposes. This section analyses these processes of meaning-making by examining how IS appropriated narrative, rhetorical, and audio-visual elements from other sources to construct the figure of the sniper in its videos. The findings indicate that IS attributed meaning to its snipers by drawing from three sources in particular:

previous jihadist propaganda, early Islamic sources, and contemporary popular culture. The result is a figure who merged three archetypal roles: the mujahid, the Islamic warrior, and the game hero.

### ***The mujahid***

As noted before, IS's sniper videos fit within a longer tradition of jihadist sniper propaganda. IS explicitly embedded its sniper releases in this tradition, claiming, for example, that it had started focusing on sniping 'in the footsteps of its predecessors in jihad' and notably 'the blessed group Jamā' at al-Tawhīd wa-l-Jihād'.<sup>32</sup> Apart from explicit references, the composition, rhetoric, and visuals of IS's sniper videos echoed previous sniper propaganda. The three main elements of the videos (i.e. kill shot compilations, training footage, and video statements) were already present in jihadist releases in the mid-2000s.<sup>33</sup> More specifically, IS used similar – albeit updated – editing and production techniques, such as scope shots, slow-motion replays, and soundtrack-like *anāshīd*. An illustrative example of how IS appropriated elements from its predecessors is provided by a sniper video from IS's Nīnawā province, which mimicked the concept, storyline, and structure of a prominent decade-old sniper video: the second instalment of the Juba series.<sup>34</sup> Both videos feature a series of sniper attacks that they attribute to a single sniper, IAI's 'Juba, the Baghdad sniper' and IS's 'Abu Hamza, the sniper'. The videos have a similar structure, with opening and closing scenes featuring the protagonist and a main body primarily consisting of compilations of sniper attacks supported by special effects, *anāshīd*, and video statements. In addition, the snipers make statements on similar topics; however, Juba is shown writing in a diary while Abu Hamza delivers short, spoken speeches – the soundbite-like nature of which better fits the current media age than Juba's unhurried handwriting. Probably the most striking similarity between the videos is the motif of the trophy wall. The ISI video shows the Baghdad sniper marking a tally 37 on a wall, suggesting that he had sniped 37 Coalition soldiers by then. The IS video includes a comparable scene, but IS again upgraded the motif by visualising the 'scores': 'Abu Hamza' puts pictures of his victims on a trophy wall. In short, despite IS's adaptations to meet the demands of the 2010s, it evidently appropriated elements from the legendary Juba videos, arguably hoping for the same effect of mythologising its fighters.

This example illustrates that IS built on and further developed the existing genre of sniper videos by appropriating composition, storylines, themes, motifs, and audio-visual elements from previous jihadist sniper propaganda. This is understandable because sniper videos had already proven to be an effective means to terrorise enemies and empower supporters, especially in insurgency warfare against stronger enemies – contexts comparable to the situation of IS after 2015. In addition, by embedding its videos in the jihadist

propaganda genre, IS related its snipers to the rich history of jihad. Sympathisers familiar with the historical propaganda genre – either directly or indirectly via, for example, the cultural symbol of Juba – were reminded of the (alleged) heroic struggles of the mujahidin against Soviet and American ‘invaders’ and Arab ‘oppressors’ in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere.<sup>35</sup> By thus portraying its snipers as genuine mujahidin rather than cold-blooded murderers, IS, by extension, presented itself as the rightful heir of jihad, and therefore as the defenders of Muslims against injustice, tyranny, and oppression.

### ***The early Islamic warrior***

Early Islamic traditions provided the second set of sources that IS drew from to construct the figure of the sniper. Whereas sniping in the modern sense was evidently unknown in the early Islamic period, IS propaganda frequently related its snipers to the first three generations of Muslims (*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*; ‘the righteous predecessors’), and in particular to the archers that participated in the battles of the prophet Muhammad and his companions. Snipers, according to one of the videos, ‘have played a central role in determining the outcome of many battles in history, and their role has not changed, even though the means of shooting has changed from arrows and spears to rifles’.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, the videos describe IS’s snipers as the ‘arrows of the *muwahiddin*’ (followers of *tawḥīd*; monotheists) and repeatedly refer to hadiths on Muhammad’s archery.<sup>37</sup> A prominent example is the opening scene of a 2016 sniper video from IS’s al-Janūb province that was titled after an often-quoted expression of Muhammad: ‘Verily, the [army’s] strength is in the firing force’.<sup>38</sup> While a voice-over quotes several hadiths, the video shows recordings of IS’s snipers interspersed with scenes from historical films depicting Muhammad’s archers. This visual connection between IS’s sharpshooters and their (alleged) predecessors is complemented by sepia-toned footage of horsemen riding through the desert with IS’s characteristic black banner; a visual trope echoing legendary battles from the past. As this scene illustrates, the use of early Islamic traditions and accompanying visuals highlight the idea that IS’s sharpshooters are fighting a genuinely Islamic struggle in the footsteps of the prophet Muhammad and his companions.

More specifically, IS used early Islamic traditions to underline ideals and values that the group considered significant. This is illustrated by frequent references to the Battle of Uhūd (625 CE), which the Muslims lost after most archers neglected Muhammad’s explicit orders and abandoned their post on a hillside. In its sniper propaganda, IS repeatedly compared its snipers to the few archers who did obey Muhammad’s orders and stuck to their positions. A prominent example is ‘Abdallāh ibn Jubayr, the commander of the archers who paid with his life for not abandoning his post. In a video entitled The

Descendants of Ibn Jubayr, IS narrates the Battle of Uḥud and the role of Muhammad's archers therein, visualised by computer-animated depictions of the battle and modern film scenes.<sup>39</sup> The video introduces Ibn Jubayr as a symbol of steadfastness and perseverance (*thabāt*; *ṣabr*) and subsequently presents IS's snipers as his equivalents in the current era. Just like their authoritative predecessor, the video claims, IS's snipers obey the Prophet and stand firm, even in times of hardship and tribulation:

One of the most important conditions for success for any sniper is perseverance (*ṣabr*), for he could be in *ribāt* ['guarding the frontlines'] for hours without taking the eyes from his scope. (...) Sniping the unbelievers (*kuffār*) is not as easy as some people may think. Rather, it demands a tremendous level of patience (*ṣabr*), since the sniper may have to wait for hours or even days to massacre the enemies of God.<sup>40</sup>

Through the figure of Ibn Jubayr, IS thus portrayed its snipers as embodiments of *thabāt* and *ṣabr* – values that it repeatedly underlined in other sniper videos as well.<sup>41</sup> This emphasis is noteworthy considering the difficulties that IS was experiencing at the time in Iraq and Syria.<sup>42</sup> By personifying commitment and resolve in times of hardship, the snipers were valuable symbols of the group itself. As such, they served as a role model for the IS's supporters, who are called to 'remain firm as Mount Uḥud' until God grants them victory, either on the battlefield or, as in the case of Ibn Jubayr, through martyrdom.<sup>43</sup>

In sum, by appropriating early Islamic traditions, IS presented its snipers as genuine Islamic warriors who embodied some of the core values upheld by the group during its territorial decline. Through the figure of the sniper, IS expressed that it kept loyal to its cause and perseverant in its struggle – the path that will eventually lead to victory, just as it had done in the seventh century.

### **The game hero**

Despite their association with seventh-century warriors, IS also portrayed its snipers as thoroughly modern fighters. This becomes evident from the third source that IS drew from in constructing the figure of the sniper: contemporary popular culture. As several researchers have noticed, IS propaganda mimicked a 'Hollywood visual style'.<sup>44</sup> It used visual techniques known from Western filmmaking concerning colour, composition, camera angles, lighting, editing, and special effects.<sup>45</sup> In addition, popular combat video games provided a significant source for IS propaganda, in particular concerning aesthetic and design elements. IS's sniper videos illustrate this point. Taking advantage of the popularisation of snipers in popular culture since the 1990s, IS appropriated production and editing techniques from films, as well as from popular

videogame series (e.g. *Call of Duty*) and sniper games (e.g. *Ghost Warrior*, *Sniper Elite*, and *Silent Scope*).

The most prominent gaming element present in IS's videos is the First-Person Shooter (FPS) perspective. This perspective had already been present in earlier combat releases of IS, such as the 2014 *Ṣalīl al-Ṣawārim* ('The Clanging of the Swords') series.<sup>46</sup> However, in the sniper videos, IS used the FPS perspective in a particular fashion that characterises the genre: the scope shot (i.e. showing the victim through a superimposed crosshair). This technique had been present in films since *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) but was particularly popularised through video games.<sup>47</sup> IS appropriated the technique and accompanying special effects, such as edited sounds of breathing, heartbeats, and gunshots. In addition to the scope shot, IS used several other techniques from popular films and video games. For example, the videos repeatedly show replay shots (i.e. slow-motion replays of hits) and slow-motion animations of bullets leaving the sniper rifle, which mimic scenes from the film *American Sniper* and the *KillCam* mode in video games such as *Call of Duty*.<sup>48</sup> In addition to these techniques, the aesthetics of IS's sniper videos closely resemble video games. The dramatised action scenes in which IS's snipers prepare for action, for example, strongly relied on the aesthetics of popular sniper games. A vivid illustration is the camouflage gear used in a video from IS's Nīnawā province, which was hardly functional given the contrasting surroundings, but shows remarkable resemblances to the sniper's appearance in the cover photo of the popular video game *Sniper: Ghost Warrior 2*.<sup>49</sup>

These examples illustrate the gamification of IS's sniper videos.<sup>50</sup> The use of game elements not only provided the videos with a professional look, but also caused their style to be familiar to large parts of the target audience, which increased their appeal and convincingness.<sup>51</sup> In addition, through their gamification, the videos evoked a narrative central to many video games: that of a world divided between good and evil, in which the heroes are legitimised, or even required, to use violence to liberate the world from villains. In other words, they evoked a world that neatly fitted IS messaging, heroised the figure of the sniper, and legitimised their attacks by presenting them as necessary steps towards victory. Finally, as research on combat games and radicalisation suggests, gamification blurs the boundaries between the real and the virtual world.<sup>52</sup> Especially the FPS perspective creates an immersive experience and a sense of physical presence, which might increase sensation and excitement.<sup>53</sup> In other words, the incorporation of gaming motifs in IS's sniper propaganda brought the world as presented in the videos closer to the audience. Due to the participatory nature of video games, the videos may have facilitated a sense of agency among the viewers and fuelled the feeling that they could make a difference.<sup>54</sup>

## Conclusion and discussion

Notwithstanding the ambiguous reputation of snipers throughout modern history, IS propagandists put them on a pedestal during the downfall of the 'caliphate' in Iraq and Syria. This article examined how and why IS constructed the sniper as a central symbol of its brand between 2015 and 2017.

Focusing on IS's audiovisual sniper propaganda, the analysis indicated that IS produced these videos by appropriating narrative, rhetorical, and audio-visual elements from three particular sources: previous jihadist propaganda, early Islamic sources, and contemporary popular culture. The result was a portrayal of snipers as professional, efficient, and heroic warriors, which arguably fulfilled two strategic objectives: terrorising enemies and empowering supporters. In addition, the videos provided the figure of the sniper with cultural meanings beyond these immediate aims. As a mujahid, the sniper personified IS as the current manifestation of jihadists' longstanding, glorious efforts to defend Muslims against oppression. As an Islamic warrior, the sniper represented IS's (self-proclaimed) character as pure Muslims who patiently and perseveringly pursue their struggle despite current hardships. As a game hero, the sniper exemplified IS's heroic fights against evil in an appealing and motivating fashion. By merging these three archetypal roles, the figure of the sniper, as represented by IS, embodied some of the group's core ideas and values in a way that can be perceived as authentically Islamic while perfectly blending into the daily lives of its target audience.

These findings enable us to better understand the prominence of snipers in IS's propaganda since its downfall in Iraq and Syria. Being less and less able to promote itself as a well-governed state and successful war machine, IS adapted its core narratives around 2015.<sup>55</sup> Rather than focusing on its state-building efforts and large-scale battles, it highlighted guerrilla and insurgency operations in Iraq and Syria, including hit-and-run actions, suicide bombings, and assassinations. In addition, IS emphasised the long-term nature of its struggle, presenting current hardships as a test from God that called for perseverance and sacrifice in the context of a long war of attrition. IS's sniper videos exemplified these transformations. The attention for sniping since 2015 was part of the group's renewed focus on small-scale operations and its attempts to present itself as an enduring power that still needs to be reckoned with. In addition, snipers underlined the group's enduring efficiency and embodied the virtues of patience, perseverance, and sacrifice in times of hardship. In other words, in the context of IS's return to guerrilla, insurgency, and terrorist operations – i.e. a context similar to most transnational jihadist groups – the sniper provided potentially powerful representations of its brand.

Regarding the implications of these findings, it is first of all important to acknowledge that the scope of this study was limited to a specific set of audiovisual sources produced by a single organisation during a three years period. In other words, due to the single-case study research design, the

generalisability of the findings is restricted. Follow-up research focusing on other historical contexts, organisations, and forms of propaganda is needed to draw broader conclusions regarding the roles and meanings of snipers within jihadist groups and beyond.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the findings of this research complement existing literature on IS's propaganda. Whereas the general transformations of IS's media output since 2015 have been relatively well documented, the case study of its sniper videos provides an in-depth illustration of the group's self-portrayal during its decline, exemplifying the group's rebranding during its transformation from a 'proto-state' to an insurgent group relying on guerrilla tactics and terrorist attacks. In addition, the findings complement existing research on sniping and sniper propaganda. They indicate that jihadist sniper propaganda was a product of both general changes in warfare and particular historical circumstances. On the one hand, IS's sniper propaganda fitted the broader trend of a positive re-evaluation of snipers in recent decades due to increasing mechanisation, hybridisation, and anonymisation of warfare. On the other hand, however, this study suggests that sniping, and acts of violence more broadly, carry particular meanings dependent on specific historical and cultural contexts. This underlines the importance of expanding research on sniper culture, and military culture in general, to non-state armed forces beyond American and European contexts. Relatedly, it illustrates the significance of studying the cultural dimension of jihadist violence. Existing research on jihadi culture has mainly focused on non-violent practices, such as poetry, *anāshīd*, and dreaming.<sup>56</sup> However, studying processes of meaning-making is also significant to the understanding of acts of violence and their appeal. Sniper propaganda illustrates this point. To grasp why IS and its supporters are fascinated by the figure of the sniper, it is crucial to realise that it is not just about strategic aims but that, for some, killing through a crosshair might evoke associations ranging from Muhammad's archers and Iraqi mujahidin to saving the world via a game controller.

## Notes

1. Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing*; Taylor, "The Cultural Impact"; Stahl, *Through the Crosshairs*, 94–117.
2. For references, see the section "Jihadist sniper propaganda."
3. It is important to note that the release of this series coincided with IS's territorial decline. IS had not released any sniper videos during its heydays between the announcement of its 'caliphate' on 29 June 2014 and the fall of Kobane in January 2015; a symbolic defeat signaling the start of IS's decline in the region.
4. Pegler, *Out of Nowhere*; Pegler, *Sniper*; Dockery, *Stalkers and Shooters*; Dougherty, *SAS and Elite Forces Guide*.
5. Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing*; Taylor, "The Cultural Impact"; Stahl, *Through the Crosshairs*; Bar and Eyal, "Israeli Snipers".

6. Taylor, "The Cultural Impact"; Wood, "Why We Fear and Admire."
7. Stahl, *Through the Crosshairs*, 94–117; Taylor, "The Cultural Impact."
8. Taylor, "The Cultural Impact," 91.
9. "People Who Use Snipers Are Cowards."
10. Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing*, 61–62; "Canadian Sniper Breaks the Record."
11. Taylor, "The Cultural Impact"; Wood, "Why We Fear and Admire"; Stahl, *Through the Crosshairs*, 94–117.
12. See, for example, Kyle, *American Sniper*; Pavlychenko and Pegler, *Lady Death; Sniper: Inside the Crosshairs*; *Sniper: Deadliest Missions*; *Sniper: Bulletproof*.
13. Stahl, *Through the Crosshairs*, 97–98.
14. Stahl, *Through the Crosshairs*; Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing*; Taylor, "The Cultural Impact."
15. Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing*, 60–68.
16. "Jihadi Forums Marvel at New Role of Snipers."
17. "And a Sword of Victory: Snipers."
18. Islamic Army in Iraq, *Qannās Baghdād: Jūba*; Islamic Army in Iraq, *Qannās Baghdād: al-juz` al-thānī*; Islamic Army in Iraq, *Qannās Baghdād 3*; Islamic Army in Iraq, *Qannās Baghdād 4*.
19. See, for example, Latuff, "Tales of Iraq War." The existence of Juba has also been doubted, amongst others by U.S. military, who claimed him to be an urban legend who might be a composite of several snipers created for propaganda purposes. See, for example, "Baghdad Sniper: Myth or Menace?."
20. Katā'ib al-Āl al-Bayt al-Salafiyya and Jamā'at Jaysh al-Mujāhidin, *Ghazwa al-shaykh 'Abdallāh Nijm (Abu 'Azzām)*.
21. See, for example, Anṣār al-Sunna, *Qanaṣa jundī li-l-mukhābarāt al-Amrikiyya*; Jaysh al-Mujāhidin, *Aḥfād Sa`d*.
22. See, for example, al-Furqān Foundation, *Jaḥīm al-Rūm wa-l-murtaddīn `alā `ard al-rāfidayn* 31, 47, and 48, which show sniper attacks in the Iraqi provinces of Nināwā and Diyālā. The author is grateful to Charlie Winter for providing him with these sources.
23. See, for example, the photo series Wilāyat Khurāsān Media Office, *Ribāt sarāyā al-qanās fi Tūra Būra`*; and the infographic by IS-affiliated Al-Yaqīn Media Center, "Flames of Snipers upon the Kuffar and Murtaddin."
24. See, for example, Barr and Herfroy-Mischler, "ISIL's Execution Videos."
25. Taylor, "The Cultural Impact," 91–93.
26. Cited in Neville, *Modern Snipers*, 183.
27. See, for example, Censer and Miller, *On the Trail of the D.C. Sniper; The Sniper; The Day of the Jackal; Sniper; Phone Booth; The Wall*.
28. Al-Qaeda strategist `Abū `Ubayda al-Qurashī emphasised the strategic effectiveness of snipers and their devastating influence on the enemy's morale in the 1990s already. Brachman, *Global Jihadism*, 93.
29. Wilāyat al-Raqqā Media Office, *Umma walūd* 3. The author downloaded all IS videos referred to in this article from IS's Nashīr channels on Telegram. They can be accessed upon request.
30. *Inghimās* is a classical concept referring to fighters who willingly sacrificed themselves by "Plunging themselves into the ranks of the enemies."
31. Wilāyat Saynā` Media Office, *Sayā`qāt al-qulūb*.
32. Wilāyat al-Khayr Media Office, *Aḥfād Ibn Jubayr*.
33. See, for example, Islamic Army in Iraq, *Qannās Baghdād: al-juz` al-thānī*.



34. Islamic Army in Iraq, *Qannāṣ Baghdād: al-juz' al-thānī*; Wilāyat Ninawā Media Office, *Irmi fidāk 2*.
35. IS repeatedly amplified these associations in its sniper videos. For example, it extensively quoted one of the main jihadist icons of jihadist resistance in Iraq, Abū Muṣ'ab al-Zarqāwī, on the mujahidin's fights against Arab and Western 'tyrants'. See, for example, Wilāyat Ninawā Media Office, *Irmi Fidāk 2*.
36. Wilāyat al-Khayr Media Office, *Aḥfād Ibn Jubayr*.
37. Wilāyat Ḥalab Media Office, *al-Sahm al-qātil*; Wilāyat Kirkūk Media Office, *Sihām al-muwaḥiddīn*; Wilāyat Kirkūk Media Office, *Sihām al-muwaḥiddīn 2*.
38. Wilāyat al-Janūb Media Office, *Inna Al-quwwat al-ramī*. On the use of the hadith, see also Wilāyat Ḥalab Media Office, *al-Sahm al-qātil*; Wilāyat Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Media Office, *Qatafa al-ru'ūs*.
39. Wilāyat al-Khayr Media Office, *Aḥfād Ibn Jubayr*.
40. Ibid.
41. See, for example, Wilāyat Saynā' Media Office, *Ṣayā' qāt al-qulūb*; Wilāyat al-Raqqa Media Office, *Umma walūd 3*; Wilāyat Kirkūk Media Office, *Sihām al-muwaḥiddīn 2*.
42. Cf. Day, "Patience."
43. Wilāyat al-Khayr Media Office, *Aḥfād Ibn Jubayr*.
44. Dauber and Robinson, "ISIS and the Hollywood Visual Style"; Munk, "Has ISIS Gone Hollywood?"; Robinson and Dauber, "Grading the Quality of ISIS Videos."
45. Dauber and Robinson, "ISIS and the Hollywood Visual Style."
46. Tugendhaft, "Jihadists at Play."
47. Stahl, *Through the Crosshairs*, 94–117.
48. The KillCam mode refers to a (zoomed-in, slow-motion) replay of a game player's death from the perspective of the killer. See, for example, Wilāyat al-Janūb Media Office, *Inna al-quwwat al-ramī*.
49. Wilāyat Ninawā Media Office, *Irmi fidāk 2*.
50. Gamification refers to the use of game design elements in non-game contexts. On gamification and radicalisation, see Schlegel, "Jumanji Extremism?"; Robinson and Whittaker, "Playing for Hate?."
51. Dauber et al., "Call of Duty: Jihad."
52. Schlegel, "Can You Hear Your Call of Duty?."
53. Dauber and Robinson, "ISIS and the Hollywood Visual Style"; Dauber et al., "Call of Duty: Jihad," 22.
54. See, for example, Sailer et al., "How Gamification Motivates."
55. Milton, "Down but Not Out"; Winter, "Apocalypse, Later"; Nanninga, "Branding a Caliphate in Decline."
56. Hegghammer ed., *Jihadi Culture*; Nanninga, "Introduction: Jihadi Culture and Ideology."

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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**Appendix 1: The Islamic State's sniper videos (2015-2017)**

	Date	Title	Media Office	Length
1	2 Feb. 2015	<i>Qanaṣa aḥad murtaddī al-biḥmirkah fī qāṭi' Dāquq</i> ('Sniping one of the apostates of the Peshmerga in Daquq')	Wilāyat Kirkūk	0:48
2	23 Feb. 2015	<i>Qannās wilāyat al-Khayr</i> ('The snipers of wilāyat al-Khayr')	Wilāyat al-Khayr	3:24
3	17 July 2015	<i>Irmī fidāk</i> ('Shoot, [may my father and mother be] your ransom')	Wilāyat Ninawā	5:47
4	30 July 2015	<i>Takhrīj duf'ah al-qannāsin</i> ('Graduation of a new class of snipers')	Wilāyat Ṣalāh al-Dīn	8:08
5	10 Oct. 2015	<i>Qanaṣ al-muwaḥiddīn li-l-rāfiḍah al-ṣafawīyyīn</i> ('Snipers of the muwaḥiddīn for the rejectionist Safavids')	Wilāyat Shamāl Baghdād	5:22
6	12 Dec. 2015	<i>Qanaṣ al-muwaḥiddīn li-l-rāfiḍah al-ṣafawīyyīn 2</i> ('Snipers of the muwaḥiddīn for the rejectionist Safavids 2')	Wilāyat Shamāl Baghdād	7:51
7	10 Jan. 2016	<i>Inna al-quwwat al-ramī</i> ('Indeed, the firing force')	Wilāyat al-Janūb	10:40
8	13 Jan. 2016	<i>Al-sahm al-qāṭil</i> ('The fighting arrow')	Wilāyat Ḥalab	6:42
9	18 Jan. 2016	<i>Irmī fidāk 2</i> ('Shoot, [may my father and mother be] your ransom 2')	Wilāyat Ninawā	12:54
10	29 Mar. 2016	<i>Qatafa al-ru'ūs</i> ('Picking heads')	Wilāyat Ṣalāh al-Dīn	10:25
11	28 Nov. 2016	<i>Waq' al-raṣās</i> ('Impact of the bullets')	Wilāyat Ninawā	19:25
12	7 Apr. 2017	<i>Sihām al-muwaḥiddīn</i> ('Arrows of the monotheists')	Wilāyat Kirkūk	9:12
13	11 Apr. 2017	<i>Ṣayā' qāt al-qulūb</i> ('Heartbeats')	Wilāyat Saynā'	17:15
14	14 July 2017	<i>Umma walūd 3</i> ('The fertile umma 3')	Wilāyat al-Raqqa	5:47
15	6 Aug. 2017	<i>Sihām al-muwaḥiddīn 2</i> ('Arrows of the monotheists 2')	Wilāyat Kirkūk	7:15
16	12 Oct. 2017	<i>Aḥfād Ibn Jubayr</i> ('Descendants of Ibn Jubayr')	Wilāyat al-Khayr	18:09
17	31 Oct. 2017	<i>Sabīl al-'izz</i> ('The way of honour')	Wilāyat Dimashq	8:12
18	10 Nov. 2017	<i>Qannās al-janūb</i> ('The sniper of the South')	Wilāyat al-Janūb	6:00