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# The Inspirational Night Dream in the Motivation and Justification of Jihad

Iain R. Edgar

**ABSTRACT:** This article uses a wide variety of examples to argue that the experience of the true dream (*rûya*) is a fundamental, inspirational, and even strategic, part of the contemporary militant jihadist movement in the Middle East and elsewhere. Dream narratives are contextualized through a consideration of the historical role of the perceived revelatory power of the night dream in Islam. This article further explores some key aspects of Islamic dream theory and interpretation, and offers examples and analysis of the inspirational guidance claimed by many of the best known al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders and jihadists.

This article argues that the experience of the true dream (*rûya*) is a fundamental, inspirational, and even strategic, part of the contemporary militant jihadist movement, in the Middle East and elsewhere, by contextualizing dream narrative data through a consideration of the historical role of the perceived revelatory power of the night dream in Islam.

Islam is probably the largest night dream culture in the world today. In Islam, the night dream is thought to offer a way to metaphysical and divinatory knowledge, to be a practical, alternative, and potentially accessible source of imaginative inspiration and guidance, and to offer ethical clarity concerning action in this world. Yet dreams, even purportedly true dreams, are notoriously difficult to validate and, sometimes, to interpret. This article explores some key aspects of Islamic dream theory and interpretation, and considers many examples of the inspirational guidance claimed by many of the best known al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders and jihadist activists. I thematically analyze these dream narratives.

## DREAMS AS PERCEIVED METAPHYSICAL AND DIVINATORY KNOWLEDGE

Islam was both born in, and gave birth to, spiritual dreamtime. The Prophet Muhammad is said to have received *ruan*<sup>1</sup> (the plural of *rûya*) or “true dreams” from God for six months before the beginning of the revelation of the Quran. Bukhari,<sup>2</sup> compiler of the best-known hadith (sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad) reports the words of Muhammad’s wife, Aisha, that the “commencement of the divine inspiration was in the form of good righteous [true] dreams in his sleep. He never had a dream but that it came true like bright day of light.” Indeed, it is said that 1/46<sup>th</sup> of the Quran was given to Muhammad in dreams.<sup>3</sup>

Sara Sviri sets out the consequences of this for the role of dreaming in medieval Islam: “While prophecy has ceased, Muhammad being the seal of the Prophets, messages of divine origin can still be communicated through dreams, albeit on a smaller scale than prophecy.”<sup>4</sup> The same point is made in a hadith included in Bukhari: “Nothing is left of prophetism except *Al-Mubashshirat*,” which the Prophet explained as being “the true good dreams that convey glad tidings.”<sup>5</sup> In mainstream Islam, then, there is no future revelation to come other than through the oneiocratic vehicle of true dreams. This gives such dreams a special charisma, power and authority, and means that—for all Muslims, and particularly for those followers of Islam with a mystical facility—the dream is a potential pathway to the divine. In sleep or in deep contemplation, the mystically attuned have access to the noumenal, not just the surreal.

The Islamic philosopher Ibn Ishaq al-Kindi (d. ca. 866), in his *Epistle on the Nature of Sleep and Dreams*,<sup>6</sup> argues that whilst asleep the psyche is liberated from the senses and the sensible (*al-hissiyya*), and has direct access to “the form-creating faculty” (*al-quwwa al-musawwira*). In general, the truth (*al-Haq*) can only be discerned by the pure heart once the many veils covering it have been removed by spiritual and religious practice. In dreams, however, the liberated soul has potential access to the truth as the material world with its many desires is dormant.

Three kinds of dreams are recognized, first by the Prophet and then by later dream writers such as Ibn Sirin, the eighth-century dream interpreter from Basra whose book *Dreams and their Interpretation* remains the most popular

dream interpretation manual in many Islamic countries today.<sup>7</sup> First come true spiritual dreams, *ruan* inspired by God; second come dreams inspired by the devil; third come “dreams emanating from the *nafs* or earthly spirit that dwells in the dreamer’s body (as this word in Arabic means ‘running, hot blood’) and is distinct from the soul, and what this *nafs* or innermost heart...ardently desires.”<sup>8</sup> This third kind of dream could be caused by what had been eaten and by what was desired by the dreamer, so producing “a medley of dreams, muddled, jumbled dreams, mere hallucinations, and nightmares.”<sup>9</sup>

True dreams are most likely to be experienced by the pious and the righteous, those who have already stripped away some of the veils of materialism from their hearts. From West Africa to the Philippines, however, the tripartite schematization of dreams explained above is part of the worldview of the majority of Muslims, not just the especially pious. Muhammad Amanullah studied a dozen staff in the religious studies department of a Malaysian university: the majority reported true dreams, and fifty percent believed that they had seen the Prophet in a dream.<sup>10</sup> A recent anthropological study of female adult conversion to Islam in the U.S. confirms the crucial significance of night dreams in the conversion process.<sup>11</sup>

Fieldwork in the U.K., Turkey, Northern Cyprus, and Pakistan between 2004 and 2005<sup>12</sup> confirmed this using extensive and random—serendipitous—interviewing of people from all walks of life.<sup>13</sup> Ask a Muslim about dreams, and usually you will be told of a significant dream that has influenced their life through focusing their attention on a possibility not previously recognized by their conscious mind. Sufis, followers of the mystical branch of Islam, are especially steeped in the power and extraordinary value of dreaming. Several Sufis in Sheffield, U.K., told me about dreams they had had of their shaykh in which they received valuable teachings about their spiritual development or about their core life issues. These Sufis regarded dreams of their shaykh as true dreams.<sup>14</sup> A Muslim drycleaner in the U.K. told of his mother, who had dreams in which the Prophet advised her about how to pray.<sup>15</sup> A textile seller in Peshawar, Pakistan, told how the Prophet had appeared in a dream and shown him the way to slake the continual thirst he had experienced in his dream, through praying five times a day.<sup>16</sup> Thereafter he had been happy. A fifteen-year-old-boy from Birmingham, U.K., whom I met in a *madrassa* in Peshawar, told how he had moved to Pakistan to study to become an imam partly through a dream.<sup>17</sup>

The appearance of the Prophet Muhammad in a dream is of particular importance. The hadiths say that if the Prophet appears in a dream, then it is a true dream.<sup>18</sup> Many people I spoke to confirmed this. For non-Muslims, the conviction that to dream of the Prophet is to have received a true guidance from God could be seen as opening a Pandora’s Box of new revelations, but there are safeguards. The Prophet must be complete in his shape,<sup>19</sup> and no true dream can advocate behavior contrary to the teachings of the Quran and the hadiths. An imam in Peshawar gave two examples of this from his own experience. The first involved a lawyer who went to him for help in interpreting a dream of the Prophet rolled up in a carpet. The imam responded by saying “you are a corrupt lawyer,” presumably as the body and energy of the Prophet were circumscribed. The second example was of a man who had a dream in which the Prophet had said he could drink alcohol. The imam asked him if he was a drinker and the man said “yes,” to which the imam replied that it was not the Prophet he had seen, but a self-justification for his drinking alcohol.

Dream interpretation in Islam, even given the apparently simple classificatory system, is extremely sophisticated, and takes into account factors that include the piety and spiritual rank of the dreamer, their social position, the time of night of the dream, and the time of year. Islamic dream dictionaries, unlike their Western counterparts, may contain many interpretations for the same symbol.<sup>20</sup> For example, if a poor person dreams of honey, this can be a sign of illness as only then will poor people buy honey, whereas for a rich person to dream of honey is a favorable sign. I was told by religious scholars that only a prophet can definitively distinguish a true from a false dream; even spiritual leaders such as shaykhs may disagree about interpretations.

Anyone, then, may have a true dream, though it is more likely to be experienced by a pious person, or by one who is perhaps going to become more pious on account of the dream. In this sense, Islamic dream theory and practice enshrines the possibility of every believer having true dreams, and indeed in Islamic eschatology all believers will receive true dreams prior to the End Time.

Dreams can facilitate conversions, either into Islam or into militant jihadism. An example of the first type of conversion is a Chilean man whom I met in Islamabad, who had previously been a TV shop owner in Chile.<sup>21</sup> He told me he became Muslim following a dream in which he saw the first words of the Quran written in the skies. He moved to Pakistan with his family and was studying Islam in a Karachi *madrassa*. His mother had married a Muslim preacher, and his son had trained as a *hafiz* (one who can recite all the Quran). An example of the second type of conversion is the dream of the sister of Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi, the former leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, which is said to have been one of two reasons why he converted to Jihadism. This dream is discussed below.

## THE PATTERNS AND THREADS RUNNING THROUGH JIHADIST DREAM INTERPRETATION

Certain patterns inform jihadist dream interpretive narratives. First, jihadists are reported to receive divine inspiration, guidance and divinatory news of future events in this world and the world hereafter. Second, dream narratives in part legitimate jihadist actions for the dreamers themselves, for their followers, and for the Islamic nation, the umma. Third, dream visions connect the dreamers with the mythically real past of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions, the golden age of Islam. In addition, dreams actually introduce this glorious past into the present: the visionary and revelatory world of Islam is reborn today, as dreamers base their inspired jihad upon the “glad tidings” that Muhammad said would come through true dreams. Fourth, there is often a marked reliance on the manifest content of the dream symbolism: sacred figures from the visionary history of Islam (particularly the Prophet, his companions, and Hasan and Hussein) communicate, usually through the spoken word, directly to the dreamer as in a revelation, announcing and instructing the dreamer. Dreams of heavenly spaces and the glorious reception of the martyrs are reported; dead friends appear with metaphysical information.

As in all dream cultures, jihadists both dream and interpret their dreams within their own culturally-specific worldview, in this case that of Islam, according to which this material world is not our final destination, but rather a series of lessons and tests and a preparation for the hereafter and the time of judgment at death. The more real world of the hereafter does, however, occasionally intersect with this material world through night dreams, and, more rarely, through waking visions. Such hyperlucid experiences can define actions and events in this world. This interrelationship between dreams and events positions dreaming as potentially related to the future rather than to the past, as is the case in most Western psychoanalytic theories of dreaming, such as that of Freud.<sup>22</sup> In Islam, dreams and future events in this world can be clearly related, unlike in the West. The Joseph *sura* in the Quran makes this especially clear as Joseph, through his interpretation of the seven fat and thin cows dream of the Egyptian pharaoh, enables the pharaoh to plan ahead for a succession of bad harvests. Specifically, through the Prophetic example of Muhammad, dreams can be related to success in warfare. Muhammad dreams before the battle of Badr that the enemy forces are smaller than they actually are, giving him and his army confidence in victory.<sup>23</sup>

### THE DREAMS OF AL-QAEDA MEMBERS

There are many reports on the power and significance of true dreams of many of the best known jihadist commanders and followers, some of which now follow. These accounts come from secondary sources such as websites and newspaper articles. However, I gathered the data concerning Mullah Omar, the Taliban leader, directly. Overall, I suggest that—whatever veracity issues there may be concerning particular individual dream narratives—there are definitely thematic patterns, as outlined above, in these dream narratives and in their legitimacy claims which are fully consistent with Islamic night dream teachings and practices.

All the reported dreams in this paper, often involving a divinatory or precognitive claim, are still reported after the events that the dreams claim to refer to. In the conclusion, I discuss the possibility that all the dream narratives in this paper are fabricated and propagandist in intent, and argue that this is both unlikely and, in one sense, beside the point.

#### Osama bin Laden

Osama bin Laden, the well-known leader of al-Qaeda, does seem to relate to night dreams. Following the 9/11 attack in New York, many newspapers reported a transcript of a video apparently showing bin Laden referring to the anticipatory dreams of some of his followers.<sup>24</sup> These followers apparently did not know of the planned attacks, and bin Laden speaks of his concern that “the secret [of the attacks] would be revealed if everyone starts seeing it in their dreams.”<sup>25</sup> Early in the video bin Laden says,

Abu'l-Hassan al-Masri told me a year ago: “I saw in a dream, we were playing a soccer game against the Americans. When our team showed up in the field, they were all pilots!” He [Al-Masri] didn’t know anything about the operation until he heard it on the radio. He said the game went on and we defeated them. That was a good omen for us.<sup>26</sup>

The use of the term omen indicates a belief that dreams are a potential source of divination, especially for pious and spiritually-oriented Muslims. Moreover, whilst the military contest is disguised as a football match, the victory over the Americans by the jihadist pilots is made manifest in the dream symbolism. Future victory is clearly symbolized.

Yosri Fouda was the Al-Jazeera journalist who in 2002 interviewed in Karachi, Pakistan, two of the Al-Qaeda planners for the 9/11 attack: Ramzi bin al-Shibh and Khalid Shaykh Muhammad. He wrote about the role of dreaming for the 9/11 attackers:

Dreams and visions and their interpretations are also an integral part of these spiritual beliefs. They mean that the Mujahideen are close to the Prophet, for whatever the Prophet dreams will come true. In a videotape recorded shortly after 11 September, al-Qaeda spokesman Sulaiman Abu Ghaith is seen and heard speaking in the company of bin Laden, who was playing host to a visitor from Mecca: "I saw in my dreams that I was sitting in a room with the Sheikh [Bin Laden], and all of a sudden there was breaking news on TV. It showed an Egyptian family going about its business and a rotating strap that said: 'In revenge for the sons of Al-Aqsa [that is, the Palestinians], Osama bin Laden executes strikes against the Americans.'" That was before the event.

Bin Laden then interprets: "The Egyptian family symbolises Muhammad Atta, may Allah have mercy on his soul. He was in charge of the group."

Ramzi Binalshibh would later tell Fouda long stories about the many dreams and visions of the "brothers" in the run-up to 11 September. He would speak of the Prophet and his close companions as if he had actually met them . . . Atta . . . also told Ramzi a little anecdote about "brother" Marwan (al-Shehdi) that he knew would please him.<sup>27</sup> "Muhammad (Atta) told me that Marwan had a beautiful dream that he was [physically] flying high in the sky surrounded by green birds not from our world, and that he was crashing into things, and that he felt so happy."

"What things?" Fouda asked.

"Just things," answered Ramzi.

Green birds are often given significance in these dreams.<sup>28</sup>

Whilst Ramzi is cautious about analyzing this dream, it is likely that the "green birds not from our world" would be interpreted as a heavenly symbol: green is a spiritual color in Islam, and flying birds are a common symbol of heaven. Marwan reporting that he was flying high in a symbolically-constituted heavenly realm and also crashing into things could easily be interpreted as another "good" omen for the 9/11 jihadists. Whilst the rotating strap that speaks is surreal, its message is plain: that the basic political cause fueling the jihad is the continual oppression of the Palestinian people by Israel, the U.S. and its allies. Revenge is indeed in the air, and success against the Americans is foretold through the medium of the television, a medium that later presented the 9/11 attack so graphically.

By defining the meaning of the dream in relating the Egyptian family image to the person of Atta, bin Laden is taking on part of the traditional spiritually authoritative role of a shaykh, a spiritual master, as an interpreter of dreams. Binalshibh speaks of the Prophet and his companions as if he had actually met them in his visions and dreams, thereby showing his apparent familiarity with, and connection to, the early days of Islam. His mindset is tuned into an eternally enduring hyper-reality, in which linear temporality is confounded and the glorious Islamist past is evoked in an ongoing intimacy and immediacy. The days of revelation are indeed present today.<sup>29</sup>

Robert Fisk, the Middle East correspondent for the *Independent*, reports that during one of his three meetings with bin Laden, bin Laden said: "Mr Robert...one of our brothers had a dream. He dreamt that you came to us one day on a horse, that you had a beard and that you were a spiritual person. You wore a robe like us. This means you are a true Moslem." This terrifies Fisk, who fears he is meant to "accept this 'dream' as a prophecy and a divine instruction." Fisk says "I am not a Moslem, I am a journalist." Osama replies, "if you tell the truth, that means you are a good Moslem." The moment passes.<sup>30</sup>

One view of this could be that bin Laden is using the dream trope as a way of challenging Fisk, or as a device to influence his followers. However, since it is considered wrong to lie about a dream in the Islamic tradition, it is more likely that this provides further evidence that bin Laden considers dreams a potentially divinatory form of communication. The beard is a sign of a devout Muslim and the horse is traditionally interpreted in Islamic dream dictionaries as symbolizing a "person's status, rank, honor, dignity, power and glory."<sup>31</sup> Again, we see bin Laden acting as a spiritual master, defining the meaning of this dream, and reframing Fisk's reply to confirm his, bin Laden's, interpretation of the dream. Bin Laden utilizes his companion's dream as a source of spiritual certainty in the Prophetic tradition.

## **Zacarias Moussaoui**

Zacarias Moussaoui has often been described as the twentieth member of the 9/11 attack team. A French citizen of Moroccan origin, he was an al-Qaeda member who attended flight training school before 9/11. He was tried in

2006 and found guilty of conspiring to kill Americans in the 9/11 attack. His reported night dream of flying a plane into a tall building was a significant issue in his trial. There was debate as to whether such a dream was evidence of schizophrenia, or was an aspect of his fundamentalist Islamic belief.<sup>32</sup> Again, the dream is interpreted manifestly and as being divinatory. Bin Laden was reported at the trial as having advised him “to follow his dream.”

### **Richard Reid**

Richard Reid is the British al-Qaeda sympathizer sentenced to life imprisonment for attempting to blow up an American Airlines airplane flying from France to the U.S. in December 2001. He was found to be carrying explosives in his shoes. He is reported as divining special meaning about his role as an Islamic militant from his dreams, which he refers to in one of his final three emails.<sup>33</sup> I have been unable to obtain a copy of these emails, but the dream is referred to in Moussaoui’s 2006 trial. According to the transcript:

In the dream, Reid was waiting for a ride, but when the ride (a pick-up truck) came, it was full and Reid could not go. He was upset and had to go later in a smaller car. Reid explained the meaning of the dream as follows: “I now believe that the pickup that came first was 9/11 as it’s true that I was upset at not being sent.”<sup>34</sup>

There is little evidence here of how Reid interpreted this dream. However, this narrative does show his perception of its veracity and potential guidance. In Reid’s interpretation there is an interpretive translation from the symbolism of the pickup truck to that of the airplane; both are forms of group conveyance. Being upset in the dream connects his dream with his real-world loss of the 9/11 attack opportunity.

### **Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi and Other Iraqi Martyrs**

Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi was the Jordanian leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq until his death in June 2006. He is reported on a website by one of his Jordanian jailmates to have converted to radical Islam partly through his sister’s dream of a sword with the word “Jihad” on the one side and the Quranic verse: “God will never abandon you and will never forget you” on the other side.<sup>35</sup> The sacred communication is manifest; divine instructions are perceived as having been received. Jihad is authorized and a spiritual promise made. Unfortunately, no more details of his dreams are known.

Another website carries Islamic martyrs’ biographies.<sup>36</sup> The following extracts concerning two Saudi Arabian martyrs (April 2006) refer to dream narratives as significant. The first is that of Abu Bakr al-Qasimi, from the city of Al-Haboob in the Qassem region, who was killed in Iraq. This dream refers to the idea that holy warriors will be welcomed and attended in heaven by beautiful maidens:

Abu Bakr would stay up at night for prayer...the martyr, may God have mercy on his soul, saw the beautiful black-eyed women in paradise [in dreams] more than once [in fact three times], and he became increasingly passionate about meeting blessed God.<sup>37</sup>

The dream imagery is understood as referring to an actual paradisaical other world and Abu Bakr is increasingly drawn to this envisioned world and its consummate promise.

The second is that of Abu Uthman al-Yamani, from Yemen, who appeared, following his martyrdom in Iraq, in one of the dreams of Ab’ul-Harith al-Dusari:

One of Abu Uthman’s brothers saw him in his dream. He dreamt that someone called out to him and told him that Abu Uthman had managed to secure a place in one of the best gardens of paradise—a dream that I interpret as a sign that he indeed became a martyr, though only God knows. One of his brothers from the peninsula of blessed Muhammad [Saudi Arabia] made him swear that he would appear in his dreams if God allowed him to join the ranks of martyrs. And, indeed, this is exactly what happened, and Abu Uthman appeared in his dreams urging him to come and join him in paradise. Farewell, Abu Uthman, and may God have mercy upon your soul.<sup>38</sup>

The interpretation is explicit to the dreamer, a sign to be read just as it is, a message from another more—and differently—real world. The dream communication beckons the dreamer to follow him to paradise. There is no phantasmagoric or surreal incomprehensibility to unravel. The dream is its own interpretation.<sup>39</sup>

## THE DREAMS OF OTHER JIHADISTS

The patterns that have been noted above in the cases of members of al-Qaeda are repeated with other jihadists.

### Mullah Omar

Mullah Muhammad Omar led the Taliban movement in Afghanistan and was effectively Afghanistan's ruler from 1996 to 2001. After the 9/11 attacks there were several media and Internet notices of his visionary dreams, referring to his legitimizing the founding of the Taliban by claiming divine guidance and instruction in his dreams.<sup>40</sup> I was told that it was common knowledge in Afghanistan that Mullah Omar had been inspired by a holy dream.<sup>41</sup>

In 2005 I interviewed Rahimullah Yusufzai, the BBC correspondent in Peshawar. He was one of very few reporters to have met Omar frequently, and was Omar's main outlet to the Western media.<sup>42</sup> According to Yusufzai, Omar trusted him because:

The BBC is very powerful in Afghanistan; they [the Taliban] wanted to have good relations with the BBC and I was the first one to reach Kandahar and report about the emerging Taliban. Mullah Omar was grateful to me; that's why he will call me up; I spoke the same language Pashto and I was a Muslim, I was a Pakistani, I was someone he could trust.<sup>43</sup>

Yusufzai described how Omar derived charismatic authority from his reported dreams:

The story I was being told everywhere was that because of his courage, because of his very timely decision to fight the Mujahideen that had made him very popular and the Taliban flocked to his banner as they thought he has this vision, this dream, he has challenged the Mujahideen and because he has been instructed to fight the Mujahideen they thought he was going to succeed...The whole project was maybe built on this dream, he had this task or duty to perform and he must lead his Taliban, his fighters, and he must restore order and peace and enforce Sharia, Islamic law...I was told by so many Taliban leaders, commanders, fighters: "Look, you know, Mullah Omar is a holy man and he gets instructions in his dream and he follows them up." The genesis of the Taliban Islamic movement was this vision, this night dream that Mullah Omar had.

Omar's reputed talent for true dreams was not confined to a single dream. Yusufzai related how such dreams became a source of strategic military action and decision-making: "I kept hearing these stories, no big military operation can happen unless he gets his instructions in his dreams; he was a big believer in dreams."

Yusufzai told me that on one occasion Omar had telephoned him and had asked him about a dream that his (Omar's) brother had had:

[He] asked me if I had been to the White House and I said yes; "can you tell me about it?" and I said, yes, and I told him about the White House in Washington [Mullah Omar already knew that Yusufzai had formally visited the White House before as part of an invited group of journalists] and Omar said in Pashto "white house, white palace, look my younger brother had a dream and he was telling me that a white palace somewhere is on fire...I have a belief in dreams and this is what my dreams are saying and if you have been there then this description by my brother of a white palace/house means it will catch fire" and this was before 9/11. I am convinced that Mullah Omar was not aware of Osama bin Laden's plans to attack on 9/11.

These reports contain what are now familiar threads: divinatory communication from sacred figures; followers' belief in true dreams as indicating holiness; and the relationship between dreams and events as in Omar's brother's "white house" dream. Direct guidance as to military action is claimed. Omar is called to implement sharia and the true Islamic state.

### Pakistani Relations

Dreaming also plays a role in the process of becoming a jihadist in the Pakistani-based movement against the Indian occupation of a large part of Kashmir. Before a young man can go on a martyrdom operation in Indian-held Kashmir, he has to obtain parental permission, which may finally be given following a dream by a mother or maternal uncle:

In many cases, a few days before the boy “drinks the cup of martyrdom” [*jam-e shahadat nush karna*] mothers and often maternal uncles see him in Paradise, wearing beautiful white clothes, smiling, surrounded by trees and flowers and drinking milk.<sup>44</sup>

Here, paradisiacal imagery from the Quran justifies martyrdom. The mythical world of Islam is seen, recognized, made present and manifest.

Such dreams are also to be found among radical Muslims in Europe, as in the case of Amir Cheema, a 28-year-old Pakistani textile-engineering student who died in 2006 in a German prison while awaiting trial for entering the offices of the German newspaper *Die Welt* with a large knife, intending to kill the editor for reprinting the Danish cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad. Fifty thousand people later attended his funeral in Pakistan.<sup>45</sup> The following dream narrative by Cheema’s father was published in the Urdu press and then reprinted in English in the weekly *Friday Times* in Pakistan:

Fountains of light [noor] had burst forth in all directions as the sacred gathering became visible. It was announced that the companions (of the Prophet) had arrived. Then it was declared that the Prophet PBUH himself was seated in the vicinity but his face could not be seen. Then the voice of the Prophet PBUH was heard saying Amir Cheema is coming! [Amir aa raha hai]. The companions stood up in respect and started looking in one direction. Then the voice of the Prophet PBUH said: “Hasan and Husain, look who I am sending to you, look after him.”<sup>46</sup>

Hasan and Hussein were the sons of Ali and Fatima, and so the grandsons of the Prophet Muhammad. The dream announces the elevated spiritual status of Amir Cheema through the word of the Prophet Muhammad, attended by his companions. We again find the themes of sacred light, and of the clear communication of the spiritually elevated status of the martyr.

### **Guantanamo Bay**

Many of the detainees at Guantanamo Bay were from Pakistan. In May 2005 the following dream narrative was published by a Pakistani newspaper:

A Guantanamo ex-prisoner named Qari Badruzzaman Badr said in an interview that at Guantanamo many Arabs had dreams in which the Holy Prophet (PBUH) personally gave them news of their freedom and called them the People of Badr.<sup>47</sup> The Prophet said that Christ will soon arrive. One Arab saw Jesus who took his hand and told him that Christians were now misled. Later the other prisoners could smell the sweet smell of Jesus from his hand. His hand was rubbed on all the prisoners.<sup>48</sup>

Again, the dream message is explicit. It is Jesus, a major prophet in Islam, who informs them that the Christian nation, the Crusaders that imprison them, are misled: what a transcendence of their oppression this dream message must have seemed! It is immediately communicated, not only by word of mouth but also by touch, presumably to transfer the *baraka* (blessing) from the dream.<sup>49</sup>

Not only the jihadist leaders but also the foot soldiers in Guantanamo see dreams that they interpret as true through the sacred iconography of their content and the relationship with future events. Jaram al-Harath, a detainee from the U.K., reported that he was told in a dream that he would be released in two years—which apparently he was.<sup>50</sup> Likewise Ibrahim Sen, a Turkish detainee, has written about how inmates experienced dreams of the Prophet Muhammad and the angels that watched over them.<sup>51</sup>

## **CONCLUSIONS**

For Islamic militant jihadists, in al-Qaeda or not, dreams and visions are a key way of confirming and legitimating to others their ideological worldview and the path to becoming a *shahid*, a holy martyr. Whatever the veracity of individual dream narratives reported in this article, there is a clear overall pattern of reliance on divinatory dreams for inspiration and guidance within the Islamic dreaming tradition begun by the Prophet Muhammad. The true dream experience is consistently utilized as a powerful legitimating device within the context of the Islamic theological exegesis of the potential, if very occasional, noumenal power and authority of the night dream. The assertions that jihadists are inspired by night dreams and, secondly, legitimate their actions partly on the basis of night dreams constitute the first and second analytic threads of my argument.

I have previously considered the role of dreams in politics<sup>52</sup> and the problematic issues of using and validating dreams as data in general in a book on imagination-based research methods.<sup>53</sup> While we cannot ever know directly

another person's dream,<sup>54</sup> we can, as social scientists, study the worldly usage and the politically legitimating function of dreams: how they inspire and evoke emotion and sometimes apparent novel insight, and how and when people believe them to be true dreams from God. Night dreams can be seen as a technology of the sacred. It might be argued, however, that such dream narratives are cynically adopted by jihadist leaders and some followers for propaganda purposes in the knowledge that faithful Muslims believe in the possibility of such divinely-inspired night dreams. Whilst this may be the case in some of my examples, I would contend that the range and number of such reported dream narratives presented in this article strongly militate against such an argument. Indeed, even if it is the case that all my reported jihadist dream narratives are fabricated, the fact that Muslims often believe them and are mobilized to jihad partly on their account, as in the example of Mullah Omar's dream narratives, is of significance.

While dreams are experienced by the ego, they are not generally generated or controlled by the ego, unless the dreamer is an experienced lucid dreamer or a student of Tibetan dream yoga.<sup>55</sup> Social scientists can, through studies of Islamic dreaming, show how particular dream motifs (such as the Prophet and his companions) are part of a shared visionary world which can connect present-day believers with the mythically real past, and especially with the imagined early glorious days of Islam, the time of the Prophet himself. Moreover, such true dreams appear to facilitate the re-enactment of this past in the present. This merging of mythical dream reality and mundane reality constitutes the third thread of my argument, and this is shown, for instance, in the quotation from Fouda concerning Binalshibh, who "speaks of the Prophet and his close companions as if he had actually met them." The dreamworld is experienced as more real than this world, and reality becomes more dreamlike, a veil over the sublime glory of hidden paradisiacal worlds. Dreams can be tastes, divinations, of possible welcome futures. Sacred figures are to be emulated and even identified with, and certainly their words are perceived as divine instruction. We see bin Laden clearly interpreting dreams as a spiritual leader.

The fourth thread of my argument is that militant Jihadism can apparently be directly authorized by dream content. The classical Freudian distinction between the manifest and latent meanings of a dream is changed. The clearer the manifest communication, the closer to God the dreamer is, as we have seen in many of the dream narratives reported in this article. Mullah Omar is given "instructions" in his dreams as to his military strategy, the U.S. "white house" burns, bin Laden is said to have "executed" 9/11 to avenge the Palestinians; Moussaoui dreams of flying a plane into a tall building; Abu Cheema is welcomed into paradise and the Prophet is heard speaking clearly; the words of Jesus are heard by a Guantanamo Bay inmate; another is told he will be released in two years.

However, not all the dream narratives are understood solely through reliance on their obvious meaning. Reid's interpretation of the full pickup truck passing him by as referring to his missing the 9/11 attack is an interpretation from a manifest to a supposed latent meaning, as is bin Laden's claiming that his soccer team being dressed as pilots and winning against the American team is a good omen, or his interpretation of the Egyptian family going about its business as a reference to Atta.

These narratives clearly show that jihadists understand their dreams within the context of an Islamic worldview. Dreamt sacred figures, for example, are not unreal projections of the unconscious or deeply encoded manifestations of earlier dysfunctional familial experiences, but figures that inhabit the supernaturally real world of Islam, and reassert the eternal truths of the Quran and the hadiths.

The relationship between dreams and events is another analytic thread running through the narratives. Mullah Omar is called to save his country and introduce sharia, and for a while the Taliban did achieve extraordinary success, thereby seeming to confirm to his followers his dreamt inspiration.<sup>56</sup> A final thread—that of the Prophetic example of Muhammad's advisory dream before the battle of Badr—is again shown in the dream narratives attributed to Mullah Omar, whose followers appear to have believed that he was strategically guided in warfare by his night dreams. Likewise, bin Laden interprets the successful football match by his pilot team against the Americans as a good omen for his jihadist team.

Dreams can then be offered by such charismatic leaders as Mullah Omar as a self-justifying and legitimating device, claiming them to be revelations from beyond this world and containing authorization for radical human action in this world. Reported dreams have, potentially, a special legitimating role precisely because they are unverifiable, ontologically derived, and numinous. Burrige confirms the powerful role of night dreams in his study of charisma:

At the start the personal qualities of the prophet seem to matter little. What is important is that his message should appear to come from a source beyond commonsense experience. It must be a revelation. Usually the message is claimed, or presumed, to have been revealed in a dream or a vision or some other mystical experience. Whatever the cultural idiom, the message is taken to be beyond man's wit to devise. It is a divine revelation. It transcends the capacities of a man acting alone.<sup>57</sup>

I have aimed in this article to show through a wide variety of mainly secondary source examples that the experience of the true dream in Islam is a core revelatory narrative that can be understood to inspire, and certainly legitimate, aspects of the contemporary Islamic militant jihadist movement in the Middle East and elsewhere. As such, perceived, reported and interpreted dreams are a powerful element of charismatic religious and political leadership, and such dream narratives still contribute today, as they have throughout history, to the generation of existential, political and militant realities.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Ruya* in Arabic can refer to either day vision or true night dreams from God. All my references to *ruya* refer to what are considered to be such true night dreams.

<sup>2</sup> Bukhari, *The Translations of the Meanings of Sahih-al-Bukhari*, trans., M. M. Khan (Lahore, Pakistan: Kazi Publications, 1979), 9.91.

<sup>3</sup> Bukhari, *Sahih-al-Bukhari*, 9.96.

<sup>4</sup> Sara Sviri, "Dreaming Analysed and Recorded: Dreams in the World of Medieval Islam," in *Dream Culture*, ed. David Shulman and Guy Stroumsa, (London: Routledge, 1999), 252.

<sup>5</sup> Bukhari, *Sahih-al-Bukhari*, 9.99.

<sup>6</sup> Sviri, "Dreaming Analysed and Recorded," 253.

<sup>7</sup> A. H. Bin Sireen, *Dreams and Interpretations* (Karachi: Darul-Ishaat Urdu Bazar, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> Yehia Gouda, *Dreams and their Meanings in the Old Arab Tradition*, (New York: Vantage Press, 1991), 8.

<sup>9</sup> Gouda, *Dreams and their Meanings*, 4.

<sup>10</sup> Mohammad Amanullah, "Dreams in Islam: An Analysis of Its Truthfulness and Influence," paper presented at the annual conference of the International Association for the Study of Dreams, Berkeley, Calif., 24-28 June 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Anna McGinty, *Becoming Muslim: Western Women's Conversions to Islam* (New York: Palgrave, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> My 2004 fieldwork trip to Turkey, Northern Cyprus and Pakistan was funded by the British Academy small research grants scheme.

<sup>13</sup> Iain Edgar, "Analysis of the 'True Dream' in Contemporary Islamic/Jihadist Dreamwork: Case Study of the Dreams of Mullah Omar," *Contemporary South Asia* 15, no. 3 (2006): 263-72.

<sup>14</sup> Sufis also play with true dreams. A Nashqbandi shaykh told me that he had had a dream in which the Prophet Muhammad had given him pieces of bread to eat; he had subsequently told his own shaykh this dream. At the latter shaykh's birthday party, he had fed him small pieces of bread, playfully and metaphorically affirming the true dream image.

<sup>15</sup> Interview, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, U.K., 24 March 2004.

<sup>16</sup> Interview, Peshawar, 29 March 2005.

<sup>17</sup> Interview, Peshawar, 30 March 2005.

<sup>18</sup> For example, a hadith reported by Bukhari relates that the Prophet said, "whoever has seen me in a dream, then no doubt, he has seen me, for Satan cannot imitate my shape." Bukhari, *Sahih-al-Bukhari*, 9.104.

<sup>19</sup> Bukhari, *Sahih-al-Bukhari*, 9.104.

<sup>20</sup> John Lamoreux, *The Early Muslim Tradition of Dream Interpretation* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002).

<sup>21</sup> Interview, Islamabad, 4 April 2005.

<sup>22</sup> The anthropologist Ellen Basso divided dream cultures into past and future-oriented interpretive approaches. "The implications of a progressive theory of dreaming," in *Dreaming: An Anthropological and Psychological Interpretations*, ed. Barbara Tedlock, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 101.

<sup>23</sup> *The Koran*, trans. N. J. Dawood (London: Penguin Books 1956), 8.43-46.

<sup>24</sup> Andy Lines "Sick Videotape proves bin Laden was the evil mastermind behind the horrors of Sept 11," *The Mirror* [London] (14 December 2001).

<sup>25</sup> Lines "Sick Videotape."

<sup>26</sup> Lines "Sick Videotape."

<sup>27</sup> Marwan (al-Shehdi) was one of the nineteen 9/11 suicide bombers.

- <sup>28</sup> Yosri Fouda, *Masterminds of Terror: The Truth Behind the Most Devastating Terrorist Attack the World Has Ever Seen* (London: Mainstream Publishing, 2003), 109.
- <sup>29</sup> I am very grateful to my friend and colleague Marc Applebaum, doctoral student of cultural psychology at Saybrook Graduate School, San Francisco, for his help in developing this idea.
- <sup>30</sup> Robert Fisk, *The Great War for Civilisation: The Conquest of the Middle East* (London: Fourth Estate, 2005), 34.
- <sup>31</sup> Allamah Muhammad Bin Sireen, *Dreams and Interpretations* (Karachi: Darul-Ishaat 2000).
- <sup>32</sup> NewsMax.com Wires, “Moussaoui’s Dream Comes Back To Haunt Him,” <<http://www.newsmax.com/archives/articles/2006/3/9/95852>>, accessed 11 August 2006.
- <sup>33</sup> Tim Reid, “‘Shoe-bomber’ likely to be jailed for life,” *The Times* [London] (30 January 2003).
- <sup>34</sup> CNN, “Shoe Bomber Denies Role in 9/11 Attacks,” 21 April 2006, <<http://www.cnn.com/2006/LAW/04/21/moussaoui.trial>>.
- <sup>35</sup> News24.com, “Zarqawi: Delinquent to Extremist,” <[http://www.news24.com/news24/World/Iraq/02-10-1460\\_1617729,00.html](http://www.news24.com/news24/World/Iraq/02-10-1460_1617729,00.html)>, accessed 11 August 2006.
- <sup>36</sup> Global Terrorist Alert (April 2006), <<http://www.globalterroralert.com/archive0406.html>>, accessed 19 July 2007.
- <sup>37</sup> Global Terrorist Alert (April 2006).
- <sup>38</sup> Global Terrorist Alert (April 2006).
- <sup>39</sup> Carl Jung quotes this line from the Talmud. “Approaching the Unconscious,” in *Man and His Symbols* (London: Aldus Books 1964), 90.
- <sup>40</sup> Iain Edgar, “A War of Dreams? Militant Muslim Dreaming in the Context of Traditional and Contemporary Islamic Dream Theory and Practice,” *Dreaming* 14, no.1 (2004): 21-29.
- <sup>41</sup> Personal communication, Mariam Abou Zahab, a French political scientist (IEP/CERI-INALCO, Paris) who has spent many years conducting research in Pakistan and Afghanistan.
- <sup>42</sup> *Time Asia*, “‘We Are Against terrorism’: Online-only interview with Taliban supremeleader Mullah Muhammed Omar,” <<http://www.time.com/time/asia/magazine/2000/0221/afghan.omar.html>>, accessed 19 July 2007.
- <sup>43</sup> Interview, Peshawar, 27 March 2005.
- <sup>44</sup> Mariam Abou Zahab, “‘I shall be waiting for you at the door of Paradise’: the Pakistani Martyrs of the Lashkar-e Taiba (Army of the Pure),” in *The Practice of War: The Production, Reproduction and Communication of Armed Violence*, ed. Aparna Rao, Monika Böck and Michael Bollig (Oxford: Berghahn Books, forthcoming).
- <sup>45</sup> BBC News, “Huge Crowds at Pakistani Funeral,” 13 May 2006, <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/4768615.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4768615.stm)>.
- <sup>46</sup> “Amir Cheema in Heaven,” in “Nuggets from the Urdu Press,” *Friday Times* (30 June-6 July 2006).
- <sup>47</sup> The battle of Badr in 622 C.E. was a key battle against the Meccan Quraish tribe. The Muslims were victorious.
- <sup>48</sup> Ahmed, “TV review,” *Daily Times* [Pakistan] (23 May 2005).
- <sup>49</sup> Again, I am grateful to Marc Applebaum for his help in developing this idea.
- <sup>50</sup> Rosa Prince and Gary Jones, “My Hell in Camp X-ray,” *The Mirror* [London] (12 March 2004).
- <sup>51</sup> “Interview of Ibrahim Sen, a Turkish national detained in Guantanamo,” *Vakit* [Istanbul] (10 November 2006).
- <sup>52</sup> Iain Edgar, “Invisible Elites? Authority and the Dream,” *Dreaming* 12, no. 2 (2002): 79-92.
- <sup>53</sup> Iain Edgar, *Guide to Imagework: Imagination-based Research Methods* (London: Routledge, 2004), 60-80.
- <sup>54</sup> The social anthropologist Waud Kracke persuasively argues that this inability to know another’s dream is similar to our inability to know for certain any mental or emotional content of another person. Kracke, “Beyond the Mythologies” in *Dream Travellers: Sleep Experiences and Culture in the Western Pacific*, ed. Roger Lohmann (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 212.
- <sup>55</sup> Tarab Tulku, “Lucid Dreaming: Exerting the Creativity of the Unconscious,” in *The Psychology of Awakening*, ed. Gay Watson, Stephen Batchelor and Guy Clayton. (London: Rider, 1999), 271-83.
- <sup>56</sup> Jason Burke, *Al-Qaeda: Casting a Shadow of Terror* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2003).
- <sup>57</sup> Keith Burridge, *New Heaven, New Earth* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), 111.