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ICCT Research Paper

October 2022

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Abstract

He was credited with having compiled the “Lonely Planet guide” to joining ISIS, yet little is known of the remarkable stories told in Zafirr Golamaully’s series of blogs called ‘Dusty Feet’. In this research paper we retell these stories, of an individual’s journey to join, dwell with and fight for ISIS. As we describe these accounts, we discuss their significance as informal reflections seeking to reach Western audiences and draw them into a radical milieu supporting Islamist militancy. We argue that these accounts are important for three reasons: they highlight the role of informal communication in legitimising and promoting terrorism; they illustrate how such communication contributes to notions of a jihadi community that combines the virtual and physical, where real experiences imbue online outreach efforts with credibility; and they constitute innovative attempts at bridging cultural domains, linking the austere and heavily theological representation of ISIS with ironic, often humorous messaging designed to appeal to Westernised youths.

Keywords: ISIS, Syria, terrorism, propaganda

Introduction

In spring 2014, amid the seemingly unstoppable advance of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) from its base in Syria into neighbouring Iraq, a young admirer of the group from the Indian Ocean island of Mauritius, called Zafirr Golamaully, made plans to join scores of other volunteers who had journeyed, and would continue to flock, to join ISIS' ranks in pursuit of its caliphate.

As he prepared, Golamaully made contact with his aunt and uncle who lived in London, and shared his admiration for ISIS, asking them for help in disguising his plans from his parents. He told them the cover story he was going to concoct: "Told them I'm going to get 'nursing' training and that I won't be available for next two weeks." His uncle, Mohammed, approved, noting "The story of two weeks training sounds plausible prior to undertaking humanitarian aid."¹

Zafirr arrived in Syria weeks after these exchanges, joined ISIS and became a fighter. He wrote to his uncle requesting money, describing the combat training he had already received. His aunt and uncle obliged, and were later convicted for financing terrorism. Back in Mauritius, Golamaully's parents expressed their shock and dismay at the revelation their son had joined ISIS, which, after conquering Mosul in June, declared a caliphate and renamed itself the 'Islamic State' (IS). Their anguish became greater still when in March 2015, a year after Zafirr's departure, their daughter Lubnaa resolved to make the journey too, following her brother's goading. She texted her uncle Mohammed in London saying Zafirr had bought her a gun. "You'll need to learn how to use it now", he replied. Meanwhile, Mohammed's wife, Nazimabee, texted the children's mother in Mauritius asking if she was OK. She replied: "No, we are not okay... been in shock... I do not know if we have missed anything in our education of our children." Nazimabee retorted: "Not at all, instead maybe u have been blessed but u just can't see it now."²

There would be multiple such accounts of ISIS sympathisers across the globe - youths mostly, flocking to Syria and Iraq to aid the 'caliphate' and participate in its reign of terror. Numbers leapt from an estimated 6,000 foreign fighters in 2013, to 20,000 in 2015 and 40,000 in 2017.³ Many answered the call of the 'caliph', Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to join "a state where the Arab and non-Arab, the white man and black man, the easterner and westerner are all brothers, [...] that gathered the Caucasian, Indian, American, French, German, and Australian."⁴ Their exploits were celebrated in ISIS propaganda, some of the slickest we had seen, and the crimes committed by the organisation and its supporters are still being investigated.⁵

While most aspects of ISIS's establishment, leadership, organisation, public relations and violence have been documented in detail, many of the individual experiences that ultimately underpinned the group, especially its multifaceted foreign fighter contingent, remain untold or have yet to be discovered. And it is here that Zafirr provided a valuable resource. As well as being a foreign fighter, he became a prolific blogger, recounting his experiences with ISIS (and later IS), particularly to Western youths, assuming an online persona that reflected his 'real world' experiences.

1 Lizzie Dearden, "Couple face jail for sending money to nephew as he fought for Isis; Nephew recruited jihadists wanting to join Isis and celebrated the Charlie Hebdo attacks," *The Independent*, 4 October, 2016, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/isis-london-couple-face-jail-admit-guilty-sending-money-nephew-isis-zafirr-mohammed-nazimabee-golamaully-syria-charlie-hebdo-a7343951.html>.

2 BBC News, "Couple admit funding Islamic State fighter nephew," 3 October, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-37508537>.

3 "ISIS Foreign Fighters after the Fall of the Caliphate," *Armed Conflict Survey* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 23-30.

4 Haroro J. Ingram, Craic Whiteside, Charlie Winter, *The ISIS Reader: Milestone Texts of the Islamic State Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 164.

5 UNITAD, "Eighth report of the Special Adviser and Head of the United Nations Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant," 26 May, 2022.

In this piece, we uncover this material, a series of blogs titled ‘Dusty Feet’, and retell Zafirr’s story, from his early efforts to travel to Syria, to his experiences with ISIS and his impressions of its ‘caliphate’ and its battles.

These diary entries describe a cosmopolitan community, bound together by a common mission, and as we relay Zafirr’s story we explore the significance of such *informal* communication for the furtherance of the type of global society that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi alluded to in his speech. The literature on foreign fighters has referred to such community building as the construction of a “fictive kin”, a relatedness that rests on “a shared sense of solidarity—connectedness, bonds,” beyond simply blood-ties.⁶ Conceiving of such a community, both virtually and physically, was very much at the heart of Dusty Feet. “The family is the building block of society,” read one entry, “and the society the basis for the Islamic state.”⁷

Zafirr’s story is thus important for three reasons. First, it highlights the role of informal communication, including self-accounts and blogging, in legitimising and promoting terrorism and its organisations. Second, it illustrates how such communication contributes to notions of a jihadi community that combines the virtual and physical, where real experiences imbue online outreach efforts with credibility. Third, it provides an important example of how informal messaging in promotion of terrorism bridges cultural domains, in this case the austere and heavily theological representation of ISIS with ironic, often humorous messaging designed to appeal to Westernised youths.

Blogging for Jihad

Zafirr Golamaully, of course, was far from alone in promoting ISIS on social media. Indeed, his Dusty Feet blog existed within a wider network of pro-ISIS content that thrived on websites such as Tumblr, often promoted with excerpts on Twitter. Dusty Feet itself frequently reblogged material from other jihadi accounts, in particular when answering questions from readers.

For example, when discussing the issues specific to women joining ISIS – a prominent theme of Dusty Feet – the blog frequently reposted material from female ISIS members, especially ‘BintLaden’ (a.k.a. Umm Haritha) and ‘al-Khanssa’, an account she co-managed with Umm Ubaydah.⁸ Their more prominent associate, Aqsa Mahmood (a.k.a. Umm Layth), a Scottish ISIS propagandist and recruiter, also featured in Dusty Feet and she, in turn, referenced Zafirr’s blog in some of her entries.⁹ Her segment in Dusty Feet quoted the wife of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi lambasting young Muslims for neglecting jihad.¹⁰

Other notable ISIS bloggers featuring on Dusty Feet included Abu Sa’eed al-Britani (a.k.a. Omar Hussain); a British member who gained prominence for his active use of Tumblr and Telegram.¹¹ The post in question was about how women can keep their husband’s love; in summary, it urged women not to nag their husbands, and to “Attend to his sexual desires (well either you do or he finds satisfaction some other place).” Zafirr linked to the piece in response to a question about

6 Cerwyn Moore, “Foreign Bodies: Transnational Activism, the Insurgency in the North Caucasus and “Beyond”,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 27, no. 3 (Spring 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2015.1032035>): 395-415.

7 Dusty Feet blog post: ‘Know Your Strengths & Weaknesses – 3/2/14’.

8 See e.g. Dusty Feet blog entry: Q&A, 7/5/14 and blog entry: Q&A, 13/5/14.

9 Atika Shubert and Bharati Naik, “CNN exclusive: From Glasgow girl to ‘bedroom radical’ and ISIS bride,” *CNN*, 5 September, 2014, <https://edition.cnn.com/2014/09/05/world/europe/isis-bride-glasgow-scotland/>; Mahmood blogged at <http://fatubalilghuraba.tumblr.com/>.

10 Dusty Feet blog entry: Q&A, 12/3/14.

11 Jason Farrell, “Notorious British jihadist Abu Sa’eed Al Britani may have perished in IS death camp,” *Sky News*, 21 October, 2017, <https://news.sky.com/story/notorious-british-jihadist-abu-saeed-al-britani-may-have-perished-in-is-death-camp-11090767>.

what kind of wife he wanted.¹² Notably, Dusty Feet featured both al-Britani and Mahmood on the same day, 12 March 2014, immediately before Zafirr embarked on his journey to Syria.

There are a number of other ISIS social media accounts that do not feature on Dusty Feet, but nonetheless form part of the social media community that was central to the group's efforts in persuading Western Muslims to join. The most famous, and the most studied, of these is the Tumblr blog *Diary of a Muhajirah* (though different versions existed), authored by 'Bird of Jannah' (also known as 'Shams'). The author of this blog claimed to be a 26-year-old Malaysian doctor.¹³ Her social media posts talked about life in the Islamic State, as well as what it was like to be married to a jihadi fighter.¹⁴ 'Bird of Jannah' is one of the few ISIS social media users who has been subject to academic study, as well as media interest.¹⁵

Although the emergence of ISIS led to a proliferation of social media content, these formal and informal reflections of terrorists are not new. There are well over 100 known terrorist memoirs and other 'self-accounts' that have been a fruitful avenue of study, including a growing conceptual literature on terrorist 'narratives'.¹⁶ So far, however, such reflections on behalf of ISIS have attracted less attention, especially when compared to the group's official output.

Though much of Dusty Feet is no longer available online, we relied on our own archived entries—including links—that we secured from the web in full before they were removed.¹⁷ These amounted to roughly 60,000 words which we read before dividing them into the three thematic areas that reflect Zafirr's own writings.¹⁸ These themes also follow the chronological order in which they were presented: joining the Islamic State, being in the Islamic State, and fighting for the Islamic State. This evolution reflects a gradual shift in tone from the practical—the challenges of joining—to the theological: the rationalisation of mass violence and enslavement. Throughout, as an early blog entry explained, the target audience was "mainly Muslims who live in the West or in other developed countries where a certain level of 'luxury' (for want of a better word) is present."¹⁹

Zafirr

The case of Zafirr Golamaully attracted some press attention at the time, but little by way of detailed scrutiny, despite a recognition that his was an instrumental voice in the recruitment of ISIS members, particularly in the West. In his native Mauritius, the local press interviewed his friends in order to understand why he had travelled to join ISIS.²⁰ In the UK, the successful prosecution of

¹² Dusty Feet blog entry: Q&A, 12/3/14.

¹³ Given that the author's identity is unknown, we cannot say for sure that these details are authentic.

¹⁴ Ellie Hall, "An ISIS Love Story: "Till Martyrdom Do Us Part"," *Buzzfeed News*, 17 September, 2014, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ellievhall/an-isis-love-story-till-martyrdom-do-us-part>. Joanna Paraszczuk, "Diary Of An Islamic State Wife: British Woman In Syria Tells Of Husband's Death In Kobani," *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, 24 November, 2014, <https://www.rferl.org/a/islamic-state-wives-syria-uk-blog-kobani/26708088.html>.

¹⁵ Suhartini Samsudin and Anitawati Mohd Lokma, "Women and Emotion: The Themes and Narratives of the 'Diary of a Muhajirah' Tumblr Page," *Kansei Engineering and Emotion Research*, (2018), https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-981-10-8612-0_21: 187-195.

¹⁶ In 2014 Jacob Shapiro identified 108 terrorist memoirs (Jacob Shapiro, "108 terrorist memoirs, analyzed," *Boston Globe*, 19 January, 2014, https://scholar.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/jns/files/108_terrorist_memoirs_analyzed_-_ideas_-_the_boston_globe_0.pdf. The Terrorist Memoir Project at the University of Pittsburgh say that they examine approximately 120 memoirs (Simon Copeland, "Telling stories of terrorism: a framework for applying narrative approaches to the study of militant's self-accounts," *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 11, no. 3, 2019: 232-253).

¹⁷ Some entries are still available through the Way Back Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20150717141837/http://paladinofjihad.tumblr.com/>.

¹⁸ All entries were typed up and read manually rather than being processed in software.

¹⁹ Dusty Feet blog post: 'Like a Feather – 16/2/14.'

²⁰ Lexpress, "Djihadistes mauriciens: des amis de Zafirr et Lubnaa Golamaully racontent," 8 October, 2016, <https://www.lexpress.mu/article/291164/djihadistes-mauriciens-amis-zafirr-et-lubnaa-golamaully-racontent>.

his aunt and uncle for financing him was covered widely.²¹ Zafirr himself also featured in the press for his apparent foreshadowing of the Charlie Hebdo attacks.²² Finally, in the US Zafirr appears to have been central to the case of the Khan siblings; three American teenagers who attempted to join ISIS. One of the siblings followed Zafirr on Twitter and communicated with him there.²³

Those covering the case of Zafirr often mentioned the uniqueness of his voice. Whilst many ISIS communicators were remote and austere, an article in *Rolling Stone* described Zafirr as “a friendly bro” whose Dusty Feet blog “was almost a Lonely Planet guide to hijra”.²⁴ As a “particularly skilled manipulator”, Zafirr would answer his readers’ questions whilst pushing them towards getting their feet ‘dusty’.²⁵ An article by Linda Dayan made similar points, saying that Zafirr’s “informal elements” gave him an “image that endears him to his target audience: young, media-savvy, disillusioned Westerners.”²⁶ A comment piece in *The Guardian* also stated that Zafirr was “inclined to post doggerel, slangy hashtags or jokes about rape”.²⁷

Like many radical Islamists, Zafirr, born 21 February 1989, displayed little interest in extremist religion for most of his early life. Friends, who called him Gola, described an intelligent, ordinary boy, who was interested in rock music. In his early twenties, Zafirr began to grow a beard, but a friend told the Mauritian press that this was a sign of the young man’s commitment to rock music rather than religion. Zafirr’s move towards more radical Islamism seems to have begun around 2012, when, according to a close friend, Zafirr began to advocate for the creation of an Islamic caliphate. Zafirr’s radicalisation beyond this point seems to have gone undetected amongst his friends, who expressed surprise at his actions.²⁸

Even if the precise details and timing of Zafirr’s radicalisation are unclear, the context in which it occurred is more apparent. Mauritius had (and indeed still has) a small but vocal Islamist presence. The central figure in Mauritius’ Islamist community is Javed Meetoo, a radical preacher who had called for the implementation of shariah law in the country. Meetoo has promoted ISIS, and in 2015 was arrested in Turkey with his family, almost certainly trying to cross into Syria.²⁹ Meetoo’s brother-in-law, Reaz Lauthan, was reportedly killed fighting for the group in 2013. Furthermore, Zafirr was not the only Mauritian who travelled into Syria to join ISIS. One fighter, known as Abu Shuaib al-Afriki, posted online videos urging Muslims to support ISIS in Creole, the local dialect of Mauritius.³⁰

21 Steve Swann, “Couple jailed for funding Islamic State fighter nephew,” *BBC News*, 22 November, 2016, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-38056207>.

22 Corey Charlton, “Did ISIS know Charlie Hebdo was going to be attacked? Fighter posted Twitter message about ‘SnailEaters’ the day before attack...then bragged hours after slaughter,” *Daily Mail*, 9 January, 2015, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2903132/Did-ISIS-know-Charlie-Hebdo-going-attacked-Fighter-posted-Twitter-message-SnailEaters-day-attack-bragged-hours-slaughter.html>.

23 Janet Reitman, “The Children of ISIS,” *Rolling Stone*, 25 March, 2015, <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/the-children-of-isis-42701/>.

24 *Ibid.*

25 *Ibid.*

26 Linda Dayan, “ISIS Social Media and the Case of Tumblr,” *Beehive: Middle East Social Media* 3, no. 1 (Winter 2015), <https://dayan.org/content/isis-social-media-and-case-tumblr/>: 1-3.

27 Sadakat Kadri, “Want to understand the appeal of Isis? Think like a young Muslim outsider,” *The Guardian*, 18 June, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jun/18/appeal-isis-muslim-outsider-recruits>.

28 *Lexpress*, “Djihadistes mauriciens.”

29 David H. Ucko, “Trouble in Paradise: Mauritius Tries to Ward Off Islamist Radicalization,” *World Politics Review*, 28 November, 2017, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/trouble-in-paradise-mauritius-tries-to-ward-off-the-rise-of-islamist-extremism/?one-time-read-code=43962165970280137863>.

30 Zinfos974, “Javed Meetoo: “Oui, je suis pour un état islamique, même à Maurice”,” 4 June, 2018, https://www.zinfos974.com/Javed-Meetoo-Oui-je-suis-pour-un-etat-islamique-meme-a-Maurice_a128357.html.

Although Zafirr’s precise relationship to the Islamist community in Mauritius is unknown, it is important to recognise that this was the context from which he emerged. Furthermore, as noted above, there is also clear evidence of extremism within Zafirr’s own family. As well as helping him conceal his planned exodus to Syria, Zafirr’s London-based uncle wrote WhatsApp messages to the family praising speeches by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and referred to the Kurdistan Workers Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, or PKK) as “dogs” who “need eradicating”.³¹

Zafirr’s writings offered further insights regarding his ideological sympathies. Prior to his journey to Syria, he posted the five “shuyook” he most enjoyed listening to: Ahmad Musa Jibril, Ali al-Tamimi, Anwar al-Awlaki, Abu Hamza al-Masri, and Omar Bakri Muhammad.³² All five of these men are amongst the most prolific English-speaking Islamist preachers. Zafirr, as he admitted in *Dusty Feet*, did not speak Arabic,³³ and therefore would have been reliant on such figures. A particular favourite, Zafirr noted, was Abu Hamza’s lecture ‘Allah’s Governance on Earth,’ calling for the implementation of shariah, including the execution of gays, which predated ISIS by many years. Other favourites included English-language jihadi staples such as At-Tibyan’s translation of Muhammad bin Ahmad As-Salim’s ‘39 Ways to Support Jihad’. Indeed, Zafirr commented, “it’s a good thing to always have the Tibyan PDFs at hand, except when you’re making H [hijra] or when it’s gonna get you jailed.”³⁴ *Dusty Feet* entries also quoted from Abdallah Azzam, though inevitably plastered them with the silly jokes that characterised Zafirr’s style:

I don’t remember who it was who said something like ‘jihad is a university’. If memory serves me right (#NoInboxInvasionPlease) I reckon it was shaykh ‘Abdullah ‘Azzam, rahimahullah, wa Allahu a’lam. Well, the important thing is that, a truer statement has seldom been said describing jihad (#UoJ_Represent). For one, nobody ever comes out dumber than they were when getting into it. Even the kuffs learn something of it when they fight the mujahidin (‘cept Muhricuh, inni? #AhlanWaSahlan #kaboom).³⁵

Despite his lack of Arabic, Zafirr also endeavoured to quote directly from scripture to support his arguments, though he often relied on interlocutors as he did so. In one entry he simply offered: “The explanations of this hadith are many and extensive, and easily available online at a Google search’s reach.”³⁶ For more profound interpretations, he relied on ideological texts, especially the modern English language rendition of a medieval treatise on jihad by Ibn Nuhaas al-Dumyati, which he described as “a must-read book,”³⁷ relating, in another post, his excitement when encountering the Arabic original: “Imagine now that you’re with the brothers. You just prayed Dhuhr and some brothers casually take out a copy of Ibn Nuhas’s Book of Jihad (in Arabische, lol) and start reading from it to each other (in Arabische, lol #iJustSaidThat).”³⁸

A reading list, proposed by Zafirr in response to a reader, was more curious. The list, which was heavy on Islamic history and biographies, contained classic Islamist texts such as *Al Bidaya wa al-Nihaya* by ibn Kathir. However, it also included books written by non-Muslims, including a biography of Osama bin Laden by Michael Scheuer, the former head of the bin Laden unit at the CIA. Surprisingly, *Dusty Feet*’s recommended readings also contained little by way of dedicated ISIS content, though later entries sought to delegitimise its ideological rivals. One post retold Abu Naasir al-Iraqi’s tale about the split between Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS, describing Abu Muhammed

31 Swann, “Couple jailed.”

32 *Dusty Feet* blog post: Q&A, 2/3/14. ‘Shuyook’ being the plural form of ‘shaikh’, denoting nobility, authority or leadership.

33 *Dusty Feet* blog post: Q&A, 28/9/14.

34 *Dusty Feet* blog post: ‘The permissibility of suicide out of fear of revealing important secrets – 7/1/15.’

35 *Dusty Feet* blog post: ‘Just Be Nice, subhan Allah! – 28/9/14’. *Muhricuh* appears to refer to ‘America’.

36 *Dusty Feet* blog post: ‘Like a Feather – 16/2/14’.

37 *Dusty Feet* blog post: ‘Your Body is Your Gym (1 of 2) – 9/3/14’.

38 *Dusty Feet* blog post: ‘Sitting in Gatherings – 28/9/14’.

al-Jawlani, the founder of the former, as a thief who deserved to be killed.³⁹ Another guest post referred to al-Qaeda as “one of the most hated groups by the general Ummah.” Nevertheless, Dusty Feet recommended guides on guerrilla warfare by Shaykh Yusuf al-Uyayri, of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in preparation for battle.⁴⁰

Paladin of Jihad

Zafirr Golamaully wrote his first blog entry in late January 2014, noting that he had “decided to start this blog for one main reason: that is, to organise my thoughts in a coherent manner which I can then refer back to as and when needs so arise.”⁴¹ He continued: the “Ummah is in distress. Who can argue about that? The Muslims are suffering everywhere. Who can deny this? Something needs to be done.”⁴²

As he developed his blog, Zafirr described his own journey, literally and metaphorically, from his home in the Mauritius to becoming a member of ISIS and fighting on its behalf. He adopted ‘Abu Hud’ as a kunya⁴³ and ‘Paladin of Jihad’ as his online avatar. He thought of Abu Hud, he wrote, after hearing about the prophet Hud in Anwar al-Awlaki’s popular series ‘Lives of the Prophets’: “I chose Abu Hud because Hud AS is pretty awesome. He was like a giant of some sort and he was the best of the people of Ad who were themselves pretty advanced technologically and stuff.”⁴⁴

If Zafirr’s *nom de guerre* was rooted in Islamic history, his pseudonym ‘Paladin of Jihad’ was noticeably low-brow. According to Zafirr, he adopted the nickname after reading an article in *Time* magazine where Usama bin Ladin was described as a Paladin.⁴⁵ Plus, he added: “Paladins also appear in the game Age of Empires II, as very powerful mounted units. Since I love the game, and I loved using paladins, it was a very appealing nickname for me to take up.”⁴⁶ Such fusion of Islamic history and theology with Western youth culture was typical of Paladin of Jihad’s online persona, and perhaps his appeal. A typical post, for instance, urged readers to leave their Xbox consoles behind as they would “learn to play some other kind of Call of Duty here, trust me, akhi...”.⁴⁷ Such cultural references were designed to appeal to a particular subset of a Westernised, primarily English-speaking jihadi sympathisers and prospective ISIS recruits. Zafirr even experimented with his own poetry. One poem was titled ‘For us the Huris’ and went like this:⁴⁸

We butchering them Shi’is

Putting slugs in their bodies

*So all the Bashars and the Nuris*⁴⁹

With their lackeys and their cronies

39 Dusty Feet blog post: ‘History of Jabhatun-Nusrah and Dawlatul-Islam: - muwahideen - 15/2/14’.

40 Dusty Feet blog post: ‘Your Body is Your Gym (2 of 2) – 11/3/14’.

41 Dusty Feet blog post: ‘What is this blog about? – 31/1/14’.

42 Ibid.

43 Traditionally, kunyas are used in Arabic as a teknonym. However, they are commonly used by jihadi fighters as a *nom de guerre*.

44 Dusty Feet blog post: Q&A, 31/1/14.

45 The original piece was: Scott Macleod, ‘Osama bin Laden: The Paladin of Jihad: Fearless and Super-Rich, Osama bin Laden Finances Islamic Extremism’ (6 May 1996), <https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,984493,00.html>.

46 Dusty Feet blog post: Q&A, 16/2/14.

47 Dusty Feet blog post: ‘What to Pack & Why – 13/3/14’.

48 Dusty Feet blog post: ‘FOR US THE HURIS – 5/8/14’.

49 Possibly a reference to Nuri al-Maliki, the Iraqi president.

*Like the Saleel Sawarim series*⁵⁰

We unleash upon them the furies

But as for us the Jihadis

We don't care about the madanis [civilians]

If they give us their beauties

Be they diamonds or rubies

*'Cause for us the Huris*⁵¹

*And for them the Suris*⁵²

Notably, Zafirr began blogging several months before he actually arrived in Syria, though he was happy to give readers the impression his writings from the very start reflected those of an ISIS insider. His first blog post was on the 31 January, 2014, six weeks before he made the journey.⁵³

Dusty Feet ultimately became a series of blogs, running from January 2014 to September 2015. There were two blog series: #DustyFeet, which contained information about reaching the Islamic State, and #DustyFeet Blitz Chronicles, which largely focused on life in Syria. These thoughts were similarly promoted on Twitter, where Zafirr wrote under a variety of guises, upping his blogs and ideas, commenting on world affairs, even reposting from—and sometimes taunting—ISIS researchers.⁵⁴ In addition to this, Zafirr posted a number of blog posts on a wide array of topics, as well as reposting blog entries written by others, including fellow-fighters and ISIS members. Finally, Zafirr engaged in questions and answers with his readers.

Joining the Islamic State

Zafirr's quest, through Dusty Feet, to encourage youths to join ISIS thus evolved, as noted, and reflected his own experiences. They offered, to begin with, a detailed account on how to travel to Syria, and were followed by glorification of life in the Islamic State, with some qualifications though, and justifications for its violence.

Four blog entries, appropriately labelled with headings such as "What to Pack & Why" and "Don't Get Busted," that spanned a ten-month period were dedicated to joining ISIS. There was one guest entry—"Practical Guidelines for H-day"—from another recruit, as well as further detail on travel in a dedicated Q&A. But Zafirr was keen to emphasise that any preparation needed to be done for the right reasons: "The heart is the seat of intentions; it is the seat of *iman*", he wrote, "the intention to get your feet dusty". "It is easy on the tongue to say that you have the intention to get your feet dusty for the sake of Allah, *'azza wa jal*," he wrote, "however, actually doing it, or preparing for it, is altogether, another beast to tame."⁵⁵

50 The 'Clashing of Swords' series of ISIS videos.

51 Referring to the beautiful maidens of paradise.

52 Possibly reference to the Suruism of Muhammad Surur bin Nayif Zayn al-'Abidin, a Syrian Islamist.

53 Swann, "Couple jailed."

54 Dusty Feet blog post: Q&A, 10/1/15. Most Twitter accounts are down, with the exception of @outghimasi (at the time of writing).

55 Dusty Feet blog post: 'Like a Feather – 16/2/14'.

Unsurprisingly, budding travellers were advised to enter the Islamic State through Turkey. Those migrating from the West were encouraged to add a third country, such as Bulgaria.⁵⁶ “Anything to throw off the kuffar is good,” Zafirr wrote, “so, I’d advise taking a detour.”⁵⁷ Prospective recruits would then “establish contact with their “inside person” as soon as possible once in Turkey”.⁵⁸ At this point, the advice given for men and women differed. The broad advice, which was directed at men, told them to “book a coach/bus or flight to the destination you have been instructed to.”⁵⁹

Advice for women was more detailed. A subsection titled ‘Sisters Making Hijra to al-Dawlah’ reflected the experiences of a “Moroccan brother” who had just brought his family over to Syria and offered bullet-pointed guidance. Women were told: “Have your acquaintance inside Dawlah provide you with the telephone numbers of the Office of Borders of Dawlah (called ‘Madrassat al-Hudud’) before you depart to Turkey”. Then a taxi would take them to a hotel and then to a safe house, while women would remain in “constant contact” with their fixers. Zafirr added: “If there’s no taxi (maybe if it’s late night), call the numbers (“the numbers” mean Dawlah. Saying ‘the numbers’ is just more dramatic y’know!).”⁶⁰ The women would wait at the safe house until they could cross the border. Once they did so, Zafirr told them: “be sure to take a breath of fresh air, ‘cause that’s how shari’ah feels like. (LoL you will probably be out of breath and panting, but I’ll allow you).”⁶¹

Despite how simple Zafirr made it seem, travelling to the Islamic State via Turkey was fraught with risk. In order to ameliorate this, his Tumblr account was filled with advice with regards to operational security. Travellers were urged to develop a good cover story, such as pretending to be tourists:

*Make sure you have a good knowledge of the tourist attractions in Turkey. Go to a travel agent and get yourself some brochures on Turkey or buy a traveller’s handbook. This is important since if they question you, you can just brandish this in front of their noses and show them how serious of a tourist you are.*⁶²

Changes in appearance were also recommended: “Some brothers I know shaved or shortened their beards. I’ve heard of some sister[s] who took off[f] their niqab. Some adopt another style of dressing.”⁶³ The importance of wiping electronic equipment of incriminating evidence before travelling was also highlighted. Indeed, a later entry—written with the help of another émigré—went one step further, urging people to “erase all the data from your phones/tablets”, including social media accounts, ensuring, however, that “important [social media] contacts that you’ll need once you reach places where you’ll need *help*” were saved, including Twitter handles that could be scribbled down on pieces of paper or kept electronically and password protected. Once emigrants had reach a safehouse, the social media programmes could be re-downloaded (Wickr, Kik and Skype were “important”, Twitter only “if needed”), and online contacts re-acquired through password-protected flash drives or saved Gmail drafts.⁶⁴

Such preparations would need to start well before the departure date: “the kuffar are out to prevent our brothers and sisters from making hijra and what we can take from this is that we should increase our preparations and increase the precautions [sic] we take when making our

56 Dusty Feet blog post: Q&A, 26/5/14.

57 Dusty Feet blog post: Q&A, 1/1/15.

58 Dusty Feet blog post: ‘Quick Safety/Practical Guidelines for the H-day – 2/1/15’.

59 Ibid.

60 Dusty Feet blog post: ‘Issues about Turkey – 25/5/14’.

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid.

63 Dusty Feet blog post: ‘What to Pack & Why – 13/3/14’.

64 Dusty Feet blog post: ‘Quick Safety/Practical Guidelines for the H-day – 2/1/15’.

preparations.”⁶⁵ Specifically, Zafirr advised: “Never to use Google for any searches relating to H&J [hijrah and jihad]. Instead use a search engine like DuckDuckGo, which is safer and which doesn’t track your searches.”⁶⁶ He added:

*be aware, brothers and sisters, that the main giveaway which will get you ‘busted’ is your behaviour – how you act, how you dress, your language and the content of your speech, how, where and with whom you spend your time, etc. Basically, you will be found out only and only if you **externally** display what you **internally** conceal.*⁶⁷

This discussion of communications equipment, in an entry titled ‘Don’t get Busted’, came about as Zafirr was searching for a PDF file titled “Hijrah to the Islamic State (2015)”, published by Islamic State. His search had been prompted by a brother who informed him that the authors of the work had plagiarised his blog, much to Zafirr’s annoyance: “I was just curious as to what how much exactly they took (without even letting me know... but that’s besides the point, #inni?)”.⁶⁸ However, when searching for the PDF file he was directed to a UK government program designed to help families affected by radicalisation called FAST: families against stress and trauma. The discovery prompted a dedicated entry on Dusty Feet titled ‘Behaviour Changes’, which offered a step-by-step guide on how to avoid displaying the signs that the counter-extremist guide had identified. On language, for instance, Zafirr offered the following advice: “If you want to say ‘kafir’, say “potential Muslims” and stuff of that sort. If you want to say ‘Dawlah’, say “Da’ish [...] If you want to say ‘pigs’, say ‘Jews.’” Responding to the FAST query: “Do they express themselves in a divisive ‘them and us’ manner about others who do not share their religion or beliefs?”, Zafirr alluded, as other Islamist militants had done, to President George W. Bush’s comments after the 11 September 2001 attacks: “Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.”⁶⁹ He wrote:

*You don’t have to repeat Bush’s quote all day long. We all know the quote by now. So, chill. Allah (subhanahu wa ta’ala) Himself divides humankind into two camps. You know this, you believe in this. But just for the sake of not blowing up your cover, maybe embrace multiculturalism, feign tolerance and moderation and ‘coconutry’. We are all humans after all, #inni?*⁷⁰

The main thing was to ensure counter-extremism and counter-terrorism efforts would not thwart believers’ natural inclination towards militancy: “The arts of getting one’s feet covered in dust have thus been abandoned and been plastered all over with the stigma of training for terrorism.”⁷¹

Yet, there was also tension between operational security and necessity. In particular, as the above discussion demonstrates, communications equipment was a major threat to those travelling to Syria; hence the focus on removing compromising data. However, it was also true that mobile phones were absolutely central to joining ISIS, as they were the primary way that contact could be made with the “inside person” once in Turkey: “Make sure you have a phone with you (duh... Please don’t attempt to make hijra if your parents confiscated you phone),” read an entry from late May 2014.⁷²

65 Dusty Feet blog post: ‘Don’t Get Busted – 3/6/15’.

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid. Emphasis in original.

68 Dusty Feet blog post: ‘Don’t Get Busted – 3/6/15’.

69 VOA, “Bush: ‘You Are Either With Us, Or With the Terrorists’ - 2001-09-21,” 27 October, 2009, <https://www.voanews.com/a/a-13-a-2001-09-21-14-bush-66411197/549664.html>.

70 Dusty Feet blog post: ‘Don’t Get Busted – 3/6/15’.

71 Dusty Feet blog post: ‘Your Body is Your Gym (1 of 2) – 9/3/14’.

72 Dusty Feet blog post: ‘Issues about Turkey – 25/5/14’.

Much of the operational advice given related to this conundrum. The entries in Dusty Feet recommended that individuals save the contact details of their “inside person” on their phone, or write it on a piece of paper, under a fake label: “(not under a moniker such as “Osama bin Laden”, though, okay? Promise? Good).”⁷³

Moving onto other things to pack for the journey, Dusty Feet highlighted items that would be in short supply once migrants entered the Islamic State. An early post, prior to Zafirr’s own departure, recommended knives:

*I strongly recommend you to bring knives because they’re essential tools here (and because maybe I am a bit of a knife freak, but #AllowIt), there isn’t one day I spent here where I didn’t have to use my knife. Also, knives here are scarce and those available are of very, very low quality (and that’s putting it nicely), so bringing your own is a must.*⁷⁴

Notably, of course, Zafirr had not arrived “here” in Syria, when this was written, though he wished to give the impression he had. Indeed, his advice on knives was later retracted. Referring to another ISIS veteran, a subsequent Dusty Feet post warned: “Bringing, e.g. a knife is RISKY. Don’t neglect this if you’re extremely afraid of getting caught.”⁷⁵

Similarly, travellers were also urged to bring equipment such as torches, knee- and elbow-pads and sleeping bags, though how this would fit the image of the innocent brochure-waving tourist that Dusty Feet suggested as a cover story was never fully addressed. A similar contradiction is apparent with Dusty Feet’s advice not to post extremist content on social media – indeed, not to use social media at all – and the fact that Zafirr was writing this very blog prior to leaving Mauritius.

Being in the Islamic State

Zafirr’s scribbblings, of course, coincided with more official efforts from ISIS to glorify their state-building project. Dusty Feet reflects this, in part, but also conveyed a more nuanced, perhaps more realistic picture of the life that awaited new recruits. Introducing the DustyFeet Chronicles he wrote: “I will feature mostly my experiences, reflections and observations in al-Sham since many people are curious as to how life is in al-Dawlat al-Islamiya (ISIS).”⁷⁶ Entries spoke to the lack of material goods (“Items here in al-Dawlah are not the best you will get.”)⁷⁷ Hot showers were “almost a luxury,” noted a post from late 2014.⁷⁸

On the other hand, as recounted by al-Khanssa (Umm Haritha and Umm Ubaydah), and reposted on Dusty Feet, ISIS “provide electricity alhamdulillah, and also they give food and clothes (mostly Ghanima) to families, today for example we received fresh bread. It’s [Raqqa] almost like a normal town but the shops all close for salah and you see mujahideen everywhere.”⁷⁹

Zafirr, similarly, made life under ISIS seem relatively normal. When asked what he ate, he replied: “I usually eat khubz (the flat thingy, y’know) and whatever else is available: jam, eggs, fruits, tomatoes. Instant noodles are very popular here. Also we have rice, chicken, lamb, beef, etc. There’s decent variety, Al-Hamdulillah.”⁸⁰ He confirmed that he had access to chocolate, and

73 Ibid.

74 Dusty Feet blog post: ‘What to Pack & Why – 13/3/14’.

75 Dusty Feet blog post: ‘Issues about Turkey – 25/5/14’.

76 Dusty Feet blog post: ‘BROTHERHOOD – 21/5/14’.

77 Dusty Feet blog post: ‘What to Pack & Why – 13/3/14’.

78 Dusty Feet blog post: Q&A, 13/11/14.

79 Dusty Feet blog post: Q&A, 13/5/14. *Ghanima referring to spoils of war.*

80 Dusty Feet blog post: Q&A, 21/6/14.

that it was possible to buy a car: “Prices are cray, doe.”⁸¹ Zafirr also offered an insight into the daily routine of an ISIS fighter: “We just chill around waiting for the next assignment, I guess. It’s all very normal. Haven’t you seen the various videos? There’re places to eat and shop. Some muhajirin have families just like the ansar. It’s a fully functional society.”⁸²

Ultimately, however, the draw of the Islamic State for Zafirr was not the creature comforts it offered, but the opportunity to live under the shariah. When asked what he loved most about life in Sham, Zafirr replied: “This is a tough one but living under shari’ah in the only areas on planet Earth where the laws of Allah are being implemented 100% is pretty awesome... That just #CantBeBeat...”⁸³

Central to this feeling of living under ISIS was the notion of ‘brotherhood’. Throughout his blog, and echoing al-Baghdadi’s speech cited above, Zafirr mentioned the various nationalities of those who had travelled to Syria. The Islamic State, Zafirr believed, had members from 103 different countries, though he admitted he got the figure from someone on Twitter.⁸⁴ He portrayed life there as the ultimate cosmopolitan experience:

*Maybe those who’ve lived in or come from very eclectic, heterogeneous and cosmopolitan settings could faintly be able to ‘visualise’ how the streets of Al-Raqqa or Manbej are like but I guarantee you that unless you’re here, you won’t ever know how it ‘feels’ to be walking side by side with a Malaysian brother, shaking hands with a German one of Turkish origins, cracking a joke with a Kenyan, trying to speak broken Arabic to a Macedonian or praying next to a Russian-speaking Chechen.*⁸⁵

This international brotherhood was a central theme to Dusty Feet. “You know, all those tweets, all those statements, all those pictures and videos about how amazing the brotherhood supposedly is in al-Dawlah... well, guess what... it’s very true, so very true”, one entry read. “You have never seen nor will you ever see anything like the brotherhood here, anywhere else, not in any other jama’ah, not in any so-called Muslim country, not even in Hajj (by the way, have you been to ‘the haajjj’, yet?).”⁸⁶ Another poem—titled *Gharibafisabilillah* (‘strangers for the sake of Allah’)—alluded to this allure of being among the chosen few:

We exchange our soft bed for this uncomfortable rough ground to be our bed..

Our pillow... its either a rock, our things or our weapon...

Our blanket are the skies..

We exchange our dunya for our akhirah⁸⁷... To exchange our life for martyrdom!!

This is us, we are hated.. We are slandered and we are backbited... By some angry coconut baboon sitting only in their comfy home..

But they don’t know.. We dont care the blames of the blamers..

We dont bark back, because we are not dogs.. We are the lions of Allah..

81 Dusty Feet blog post: Q&A, 23/11/14.

82 Dusty Feet blog post: Q&A, 23/11/14.

83 Dusty Feet blog post: Q&A, 5/2/15.

84 Dusty Feet blog post: ‘OBSERVING IMPERFECTIONS – 3/9/14’.

85 Ibid.

86 Dusty Feet blog post: ‘BROTHERHOOD – 21/5/14’.

87 The temporal existence for the afterlife.

So we roar against the enemies..

This is us..

The Few.. The proud

The Mujahideen!!⁸⁸

On a daily basis, Zafirr reported, he would “go through an experience after which I stop and think to myself, ‘subhan Allah, this is real brotherhood!’”⁸⁹ Of his first moments with the Islamic State, he wrote:

A moment has stuck with me and which I hope never to forget is when I first set foot in a Dawlah compound. It was late, around 2 AM, and the vehicle we were in entered, through some gate, into a big yard. We got down, and I was extremely tired but all of a sudden, some brothers came out from the compound’s building and flocked towards us. And, subhan Allah, this brother (may Allah reunite us in jannat-al-firdaws) came towards me. It was a night of full moon and the moonlight shone upon his face... he had a broad smile, and not any kind of smile, but those ones which are expressed through the eyes! Ma sha Allah, he said salams and hugged me. I probably never felt as good meeting a brother as I felt that night. [...] I really felt like... like at long last, I ‘belonged’ to something, to a project, to a cause.⁹⁰

There were, however, tensions among this universal brotherhood too; a weakening of bonds that normally would be left obscured, certainly in official propaganda. Two revealing posts from September 2014, perhaps following a nadir in Zafirr’s perception of his fellow-travellers, described when things boiled over. “Observing Imperfections” related how:

themoשבewilderingmomentwillbewhatyoufirstactuallyclocktheclearbackbitingthatoneortwo brothers would unashamedly indulge in (#TheWhoaWhatJustHappenedThereMoment). Equally, flabbergasted (#DidIJustUseThisWord? Lulz) will you be when you witness how lazy, unwilling to train, disobedient and rebellious some brothers can be.⁹¹

The second post, “Just Be Nice, subhan Allah!”, described:

As sad and strange as it might be, you will find some brothers here who are just not nice. I wouldn’t go as far as saying that they’re downright nasty but it’s just that they’re don’t exude of niceness in the least.

Then, dumbfounded, you witness that first time when two brothers clash because of something terribly mundane. ‘Subhan Allah, how can this be?’ you tell yourself, half-horrified, half-confused. ‘Did these guys really reach the point where they were actually going to punch each other? Allahu-al-Musta’an!’⁹²

Such portrayal appeared to depart from the unwavering unity that ISIS’ leadership and propagandists, as alluded to at the beginning of this article, wished to present. Seeking to reconcile this reality with the ideal type presented in propaganda, and perhaps his own expectations, Zafirr offered the following explanation. People, he argued, had been exposed to

88 Dusty Feet blog post: ‘gharibafisabilillah – 14/3/15’. ‘The Few, the Proud, the Mujahideen’, was a common phrase from the early days of the ISIS fan community and parodies the slogan of the US Marines.

89 Dusty Feet blog post: ‘BROTHERHOOD – 21/5/14’.

90 Ibid.

91 Dusty Feet blog post: ‘OBSERVING IMPERFECTIONS – 3/9/14’.

92 Dusty Feet blog post: ‘Just Be Nice, subhan Allah! – 28/9/14’.

an “impeccable image of the mujahid: noble, honourable, obedient, steadfast, ruthless, clinical, just, fair, selfless, calm, silent, composed and above all, having taqwa [piety].”⁹³ Normally, Zafirr, argued, this reflected that fact that it was “extremely hard to nearly impossible to make hijra to the lands of jihad. Thus, anyone who actually made it to the ranks of the mujahidin had to go through a rigorous selection... So, only the very best of the best of the cream of the crop made it and became mujahidin, by the permission of Allah.”⁹⁴

The creation of the Islamic State, however, had lowered the bar to becoming a Mujahideen. “Naturally, this process of ‘selection’ became so much easier and even Muslims with very little tarbiya [development] found their way, by the mercy of Allah, to the lands of al-Sham.” However, Zafirr was quick to add, “we’ve got to realise that mistakes committed by some do not invalidate the jihad of others or the whole jihad itself.” In doing so, he stressed the ordinariness of his fellow fighters: “However, At the end of the day, the mujahidin of al-Dawlah are just normal Muslims who’ve responded to the call of “what give [them] life”. To paraphrase a brother, ‘we were supposed to be the guys who sat at home watching them videos on YouTube, not the ones featuring in them!’”⁹⁵

Dusty Feet also touched on the role of women in the Islamic State, though relied in part on other bloggers to this end too, such as entries from the British émigré Omar Hussain (a.k.a. Abu Sa’eed al-Britani). Unsurprisingly, life for women in Dusty Feet centred around marriage. Zafirr claimed women were not forced into marriage: “If you don’t want to get married, I don’t think anyone can force you to. But you will always have a place to stay in Dawlah”,⁹⁶ but went to demonstrate how women would be pressured into relationships.

From arrival in Syria, he explained, married women were taken to a place known as “madhafah” [guest house / hostel] until their husband had finished his training, whereas single women were “taken to al-Raqqa to a place where single sisters stay (I don’t know the name of the place). If you want to get married, you send in a request.”⁹⁷ Zafirr reposted from BintLaden, who went into more detail about the experience of single women:

*you feel like you are intruding on peoples lives like you are a burden on them (financially, your physical presence etc.). Although you will have successfully made hijra to a land where the law of Allah rules over all you still feel useless like you are not doing enough beneficial things with your life.*⁹⁸

As a single woman, she continued, “The main things that got to me was not being able to do much as a single woman without anyone to guide me (sounds cheesy but I mean no one to tell you what the things you can do to benefit here)” as well as the feeling of intrusion.⁹⁹ Repostings from the al-khanssa account contrasted the difficulty of single life to the simplicity of marriage:

*marriage life is simple here, especially since it’s hard to live a single life as you would need to be provided for, and being married my husband does everything, and I have someone looking after me. When you come you wouldn’t need to get married as soon as, but it easier. And it’s a lot of khayr [good] since you’d be marrying a mujahid and would be getting his reward.*¹⁰⁰

93 Dusty Feet blog post: ‘OBSERVING IMPERFECTIONS – 3/9/14’.

94 Ibid.

95 Ibid.

96 Dusty Feet blog post: ‘Issues about Turkey – 25/5/14’.

97 Ibid.

98 Dusty Feet blog post: Q&A, 7/5/14.

99 Ibid.

100 Dusty Feet blog post: Q&A, 13/5/14.

Fighting for the Islamic State

For the most part, the extreme violence inherent to ISIS took a back-seat in Dusty Feet. The two main blog series - #DustyFeet and #DustyFeet Blitz-Chronicles – rarely mentioned the subject. When they did, it was only in passing. To take one example, Zafirr’s blog posts about the denizens of the Islamic State would occasionally refer to them as Mujahideen, but the focus of the posts was about their character, not their martial prowess.

Importantly, however, there were temporal changes in how the blog discussed ISIS’ violence. For most of 2014, Zafirr made infrequent references to ISIS’ violence, and when he did it was typically in his irreverent fashion. These two examples are taken from Zafirr’s response to his readers’ questions.

From late-September 2014:

Anon - Not really fond of the ish you do but I find myself constantly checking on updates. And I know yahll are all about dyin, but whose blog’s gonna occupy my time whilst on house arrest. #styalittlelonger #thanx

Zafirr - Find a hobby, y’know, like how to make things go boom.

Then try to make some parliament go boom, inni.

That’d occupy your time enough.¹⁰¹

From mid-November 2014:

Anon - What are you doing right now, and no not answering this

Zafirr - Showing a kid a Dawlah video with Nusayris [Alawites] being beheaded.

We was kinda... Uhm... Surprised.

But I think he enjoyed.

#happy?¹⁰²

However, in 2015 this changed in two ways. First, references to ISIS’ violence increased. Second, and perhaps more importantly, Zafirr’s tone changed. Whereas for most of 2014 Zafirr’s posts were written in an irreverent, humorous tone, many of his posts in 2015 came across as bitter and angry. For example, in September 2015 Zafirr wrote a series of responses to readers who were evidently uneasy about the violence perpetrated by ISIS. His response to a reader who held ISIS responsible for the deaths of refugees is worth quoting in full:

Do you even read what you type? Is it the baby’s fault? Or his coward male relatives’ who are well capable of defending him?

I don’t even know why I’m replying to this. I normally ignore people like you.

But get this, you don’t have a clue, not the slightest idea, of what the reality on the ground is. You allow yourself to be fed garbage by a biased media hellbent on portraying us as the bad guys. You form your opinion, which no one cares about to begin with, based on

¹⁰¹ Dusty Feet blog post: Q&A, 29/9/14.

¹⁰² Dusty Feet blog post: Q&A, 12/11/14.

erroneous information , then you make as if you care. Sorry to burst your bubble, but that's not how it works.

*If you cared, you'd be here fighting and defending the weak and the oppressed here. Not crying about them after you got hyped watching on al-Jazeera as they end up on a shoreline somewhere.*¹⁰³

Note the lack of ironic hashtags, puns, jokes etc., that were littered in many of Dusty Feet's earlier posts. In a sense, the shift in tone at this point in time reflected the shift in ISIS' fortunes. Whereas 2014 saw stunning and rapid military advances for the group, in 2015 it was suffering significant casualties and the loss of territory.

A post from February 2015 referred to the brutal execution of Muath al-Kasasbeh, a Jordanian pilot whose fighter jet was shot down over Syria: "IS not only burned him alive but threw debris and rubbles on top of him and then crushed him. (#WatchTheVidDude) This is because his bombings had the same effect on innocent Muslims. We just gave Jordan a taste of its own medicine."¹⁰⁴

On violence against women, Zafirr had joked about the forced enslavement of women and children, saying that if ISIS fighters came across a non-Muslim British woman they would "take her as right-hand possession."¹⁰⁵ Later, when asked if he had seen any mistreatment or trafficking of women and children by ISIS he replied: "Nah, But, then again, I haven't been to the slave markets. #WaitinFoDaSales"¹⁰⁶

A March 2015 entry, in turn, which was one of the longest blogs of the series, sought to deflect criticism of IS from Abu Qatada, a jihadist scholar and mentor to Abu Hamza al-Masri—whom Zafirr greatly admired, as we have seen. This was an abridged rendition of the detailed refutation of Qatada's critique of IS titled 'The Cloak of The Khilafa' by Abu Musaddas a.k.a. Abu Yusuf al-Hindiyy, who, Zafirr added, was an "Islamic State CITIZEN". Its key point was rejecting the accusation that IS was guilty of excess and extremism:

*Dawlah have always been active in teaching against extremism in Takfeer [excommunication] and have imprisoned those who are upon this Manhaj [method]. Shaykh Aboo Bakr Al-Baghdaadiyy has even given specific orders to kill anyone with this mentality (after court trial and discussion with them etc) and to make public examples of them.*¹⁰⁷

By contrast, one of the final blog posts made on Dusty Feet, posted in September 2015, was dedicated to legitimising the enslavement of Yazidis.¹⁰⁸ "Of Yazidis and Slavery" began by saying that when the caliphate was announced in June 2014, "the idea of capturing prisoners of war and enslaving and trading them was a sunnah that the mujahidin were more than keen to revive." It continued: "The sincere mujahidin are always in search of new opportunities to put terror and grief in the hearts of kuffar and munafiqin, not so that they can be accused of being monsters with a penchant for snuff films but, on the contrary, so that they can emulate the best to come forth from humankind."¹⁰⁹ It went on:

103 Dusty Feet blog post: Q&A, 3/9/15. This refers, no doubt, to the story of Aylan Kurdi, the 3 year old who was drowned when his parents' attempt to reach Greece went tragically wrong.

104 Dusty Feet blog post: Q&A, 5/2/15.

105 Dusty Feet blog post: Q&A, 5/8/14.

106 Dusty Feet blog post: Q&A, 7/6/15.

107 Dusty Feet blog post: 'A Review On Shaykh Aboo Qataadah's (fa) Writing: 'The Cloak of The Khilafa' – 10/3/15'.

108 Dusty Feet blog post: 'Of Yazidis and Slavery – 21/9/15'.

109 Ibid.

So, shortly after, came the episode of the Yazidi people (who hold a [belief] system frankly filthier than filth: openly worshipping Iblis-can you get more mushrik than that?).¹¹⁰ And the Islamic State boldly obliged, wiping its feet once against off the pages of the UN charter for Human Rights. To quote the Bane of the kuffar, the panther with his staff-like misqak [sic]¹¹¹, the one who didn't #BringBackTheirGirls, the one and only shaykh Abu Bakr Shekau [Boko Haram] (may Allah preserve him), the mujahidin of the khalfah thus captured, enslaved and started to 'sellllllll' sabaya [prisoners of war].¹¹²

Justifications in *Dusty Feet* for the enslavement of Yazidi women and children were multifaceted. First, drawing on verses from the Quran and the Sunnah they claimed that “the rules of jihad permitted without any ambiguity whatsoever that the Islamic State had every right to bring back the region of Sinjar, where they Yazidis were located, under the shade of the shari’ah.” Once the region was captured, “the Yazidis were offered the merciful option of leaving their filthy creed and embracing the purity of Islam or, with the sword.” As they were neither apostates, nor Jews or Christians, “the Yazidis were therefore not fit for the jizya to be levied from them and their women and children were thus eligible to be captured and enslaved by the mujahidin.”¹¹³

Beyond such oft-touted ‘legal’ justifications, *Dusty Feet* offered further ‘moral’ rationalisations, including referencing slavery under the Crusades and the wrath Yazidi converts to Islam suffered from within their community.¹¹⁴

But Zafirr had entered terrain that was controversial, even for the readership of *Dusty Feet*. He sought to “quickly shed light on some of the reaction I got on this blog concerning Yazidi slaves,” reiterating that: “there is nothing wrong with the slavery which is associated to Islam and nothing wrong with the slavery associated with the Islamic State.” Indeed, “why would a Muslim manhaj find anything wrong with slavery? The only ones who should be annoyed with and scared of slavery are the kuffar, because they are the target of enslavement. So let the munafiqin reflect on themselves...”¹¹⁵ “Islam has set down specific guidelines for slave-owners as to [how] to treat slaves. If they have taqwa¹¹⁶, the slave-owners will follow those guidelines, foremost among which is mercy (rahmah) towards the slave,” though having child concubines would fit within those guidelines, that “NEED NOT agree with Western morals, nor the laughable UN charters, nor your opinion (while we’re at it).”¹¹⁷

Discussion

Jihadis have been described as being part of an “epistemic community”, in that “they see each other as parts of the same movement and partake, through online and offline publications, in a global conversation about theological, political, and strategic matters.”¹¹⁸ And this community “is also a cultural one, in the sense that they have many products and practices in common.”¹¹⁹ This ‘radical milieu’, the supportive social environment in which terrorist groups operate,¹²⁰ thus

110 Iblis being the devil, *mushrik* refers to idolators.

111 Presumably *miswak*, teeth-cleaning twig prescribed in *hadith* and commonly associated with Shekau.

112 Ibid.

113 Ibid.

114 Ibid.

115 Ibid.

116 Piety.

117 Ibid.

118 Thomas Hegghammer, ‘What is Jihadi Culture and Why should We Study It?’, in *Jihadi Culture: The Art and Social Practices of Militant Islamists*, edited by Thomas Hegghammer (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017): 8-9.

119 Ibid, 10.

120 Stefan Malthaner and Peter Waldmann, “The Radical Milieu: Conceptualizing the Supportive Social Environment of Terrorist Groups,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 37, no. 12 (Summer 2014): 979-998.

incorporates the self-attribution, the ‘we-feeling’ of social movements¹²¹ and the subcultural practices that are shared within, including identification and interaction with common media.¹²²

In this piece, we have explored one of the plethora of nodes that make up this sociality. On the surface, perhaps, Dusty Feet may seem on the superficial, even naïve side of a milieu made up of dense strategic arguments, theological debates, and austere and traditional cultural expressions. But its simplicity may have been part of its appeal, and importance. Dusty Feet spoke to the “guys who sat at home watching them videos on YouTube” and offered them a way to become “the ones featuring in them,” to “get their feet dusty”, to belong to “something, to a project, to a cause.”

As informal self-accounts, the stories of Dusty Feet purported to depart from the gloss of propaganda to recognise the human fallibility that any honest account of such a diverse brotherhood would have to appreciate: there were fall-outs, backbiting, even plagiarising. These were dynamics that have been observed in individuals’ desistance from terrorism,¹²³ but were presented here as part of a greater whole that made it all the more credible.

Yet, these accounts also showed how alienated, video-game-playing Westernised youths could emancipate themselves from such temporal distractions and become part of something real, “to play some other kind of Call of Duty.” Indeed, Dusty Feet described Zafir’s own transition from the virtuality of fantasy and immersion in extremist media to the reality of “fighting and defending the weak and the oppressed”. Zafir’s description of his first encounters with ISIS seem little short of a complete rebirth. And these tales bridge cultural worlds, a proto ‘state’ governed by shariah, supposedly modelled on the formative years of Islam, so the rationale goes, and ironic, hashtag-laden and humorous missives targeting the avid users of social media platforms, which, tellingly, were seen as important companions as new emigres made—and completed—their journey to the Islamic State.

We rarely see examples of such ‘jihadi humour’ on display, but as Ramsay and Alkheder observe, it plays an important role in significant ways:

On the one hand, jihadi humour can be read as outward facing propaganda—a way to gain more recruits by putting a human face on the movement. On the other, it can be seen as offering insight into aspects of the internal culture of jihadi groups that seem to jar with the more conventional representations offered up by the media. [...] In their more benign forms [humorous jihadi accounts] present the sense of esprit de corps, youthful energy and exuberance that plays a key role in making participation in the jihad seem attractive to alienated, bored and directionless youth looking for adventure and companionship, and presumably they also help dispel the idea of jihad as a wholly fanatical endeavour. On the other hand, the more brutal stories serve to laugh off any potential empathy which an already radicalised online audience might be tempted to feel for the jihadis’ sectarian enemies.¹²⁴

121 Dieter Rucht, “Studying Social Movements: Some Conceptual Challenges,” in *The History of Social Movements in Global Perspective: A Survey*, edited by Stefan Berger and Holger Nehring (London: Palgrave, 2017): 44.

122 Gilbert Ramsay, “Consuming the Jihad: An Inquiry into the Subculture of Internet Jihadism” (PhD diss., University of St Andrews, 2011).

123 Liesbeth van der Heide & Robbert Huurman, ‘Suburban Bliss or Disillusionment - Why Do Terrorists Quit?’ *Journal for Deradicalization* (Fall 2016, no 8).

124 Gilbert Ramsay and Moutaz Alkheder, *Joking About Jihad: Comedy and Terror in the Arab World* (London: Hurst, 2020): 142, 168-169.

In *Dusty Feet* we see examples of both these roles: innocent jokes to establish a sense of camaraderie and grotesque trivialisations of modern enslavement. But such duality speaks to the hybrid nature of *Dusty Feet* that we have already alluded to: combining West with East, old and new, virtual and physical, funny and serious. Even though *Dusty Feet* represents a transition—literal and metaphorical—and is moulded by changes in the fortunes of the Islamic State, it does not represent a complete break from one world in favour of the other. Even the final dismissals of “laughable UN charters”, “Western morals” and the mainstream media that peddles them speak to a recognition that IS’s support community nonetheless needs to keep defending itself against accusations immersed in those worlds.

Dusty Feet is thus not only an important account in its own right—a piece of the recent history of a major terrorist actor that should be preserved—but also an illustrative example of the multifaceted ways in which the radical milieu supporting militancy is—and will continue to be—maintained.

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