



# Black flags and balaclavas: how jihadists dress for imaginary war

January 16, 2015 1.19am EST



## Author



### Michael Semple

Visiting Research Professor,  
Institute for the Study of Conflict  
Transformation and Social Justice,  
Queen's University Belfast

## Disclosure statement

Michael Semple does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the



Ready or not, here they come. EPA

Email

Twitter

48

Facebook

4

LinkedIn

0

Print

The first thing that I noticed in the gruesome pictures of two gunmen fleeing the scene of their [attack on Charlie Hebdo](#) was that the men were dressed from head to toe in black.

It might sound strange, but terrorist couture is a surprisingly relevant detail from which to start making sense of what happened in Paris, and how it connects to other acts of jihadi terrorism worldwide.

The attackers dressed to look like members of a paramilitary force not to trick their way through a security check, but to symbolise their belonging to an army – albeit an imagined one.

The spectacle of the balaclava-clad figures was reminiscent of many scenes [which I have studied](#) from jihadi propaganda videos produced in Pakistan and Afghanistan. One of the strongest themes projected throughout those videos is military toughness: they show young men in training camps being put through assault-course style exercises, just as they would be in a regular army or commando unit.

academic appointment above.

## Partners



[Queen's University Belfast](#) provides funding as a founding partner of The Conversation UK.

## Republish this article

We believe in the free flow of information. We use a [Creative Commons Attribution NoDerivatives](#) licence, so you can republish our articles for free, online or in print.



The trainees sometimes pose wearing headbands inscribed with the words “Allahu Akbar” and talk about the missions they are supposed to undertake against infidel armies.

These images are very deliberately assembled to project the notion that those waging a jihad in contemporary Afghanistan and Pakistan (and beyond) actually do command an Islamic army. Of course, the reality of the conflict is one of unphotogenic landmines and booby-traps, augmented by [assassination attempts](#) and [massacres at schools](#).

Given the ugly reality of what’s going on, it has fallen to jihadi propagandists to project the idea that their forces are strong, organised and state-like, and that task has involved multiple layers of deceit.

## Pushing back

The 21st century version of jihadism did not come out of nowhere. It is firmly rooted in the politics of the post-colonial Muslim world, and is based on the idea that the predicament of Muslim societies reflects the global imbalance of power – most of all, the ability of the US to prop up client regimes in the Middle East and project its values globally by force.

That gives today’s jihadi groups a political appeal that insulates them from the scorn of the mainstream. The authoritative Islamic scholars of the ancient [al-Azhar University](#) were quick to condemn the Paris attacks as un-Islamic, and numerous commentators have pointed out that

mainstream Sunni Islamic theology rejects this kind of response to alleged blasphemy. But the organisers of the modern jihad are immune to such theological arguments.



Iraqi militiamen with a captured Islamic State flag. EPA/Alaa al-Shemaree

To those scripting the jihad, the significance of the Kouachis' act will not have been that it avenged blasphemy, but that it demonstrated that the Mujahideen have started to redress the military imbalance against the West.

One device which they use is the idea of the “ameer”, or divinely guided commander. A footsoldier waging jihad submits to the authority of his ameer and relies on him to deal with issues of right and wrong and settle

accounts on the day of judgement.

These hierarchical militaristic ideas are the ones we tend to miss in Western commentary on the attacks: those who inspired or ordered the attacks were quite probably not trying to win a theological argument about an insult to the Prophet Mohammed, but to demonstrate a military reality.

And once we look at the attacks through this military lens, it should not be surprising that six months after the Islamic State emerged as the world's pre-eminent jihadi organisation, the Paris attackers instead proclaimed a link to [al-Qaeda's branch in Yemen](#).

Al-Qaeda and Islamic State are separate organisations, with a history of intense rivalry, but they are both part of a broader and more amorphous movement made up of multiple groups who share a set of core doctrines about the modern jihad and a commitment to violence.

People and ideas move between groups in this movement, and so the rise of Islamic State has goaded al-Qaeda into further action, not dormancy (see the admittedly [farcical](#) rollout of the new franchise, [al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent](#)). An imagined army, after all, can transcend the petty differences between rival factions in its drive to recruit new members.

## Back in black

Taken alongside all this, the attackers' black outfits are still the starkest clue to the thinking behind their actions.

One of the tendencies in the jihadi Islamic movement is to attach serious apocryphal and apocalyptic significance to black flags. This stems from a much-disputed tale from the life of the Prophet Mohammed, in which he is supposed to have prophesied that the arrival of an army flying black flags and coming from the direction of [Khorasan](#) (Afghanistan) would be a prelude to the day of judgement.



Jihadi fighters inspired by this story do not just imagine being in an army which stands up to Western might; they dream of being a part of the dramatic events at the very end of the world. The colour black signifies that dream.

The violence unleashed on Charlie Hebdo by black-clad assassins was an act of violence deliberately employed by a movement whose leaders think globally and politically. The “ameers” of this movement claim religious inspiration, employ religious rhetoric and display piety, but they are also immune to any theological objections.

And yet, along with the jihadis' very worldly use of armed struggle, many are also susceptible to magical thinking and tales of modern miracles, with many of the hallmarks of a cult.

## Wake up

To avoid more attacks like those in Paris, we must challenge the jihadists' dream that they belong to a real army with a just cause. That, of course, is easier said than done. Undermining the appeal of an imagined army will require more subtlety and reflection than we apply to any other global problem.

The first line of defence will always be security force action, but the problem may simply be too big and too amorphous to be handled by the

security services. One novel way to undermine the appeal of the jihadi recruiters would be for Europe to do a better job of projecting itself as a protector of peace and justice at the global level – but such an approach would require some challenging rethinking of the Euro-American allies' military involvement in majority-Muslim countries, which could well last for decades.

A more direct approach would involve exposing the hypocrisy and contradictions with which the groups of the jihadists' Islamic movement are riddled. Some of the people who can challenge the jihadi militarists' narrative most effectively are those who have themselves served in the Islamic Movement, but who have since rejected violence. They are informed by an insider's understanding of reality inside the cult.

Their voices should be nurtured and promoted. But for that to happen, countries in Europe and the Muslim world will have to keep open pathways for those exiting the jihad back to normal life, at a time when popular pressure will demand the opposite.



Jihad

Propaganda

al-Qaida

Islamic State

Islamic Terrorism

Charlie Hebdo attack

You might also like

---



Did the Crusades lead to Islamic State?

Islamic State and the Assassins: reviving fanciful tales of the medieval Orient

If Islamic State is based on religion, why is it so violent?

Islamic State lays claim to Muslim theological tradition and turns it on its head

6 Comments

Oldest

Newest

Sign in to comment



Mike Stevens

Why would Western countries welcome back returning jihadis on the off chance they may become reformed and speak out against jihad? Is not thir further radicalisation more likely?

a year ago • Report



Alice Kelly

they wouldn't wear pink and yellow, or orange. Has to be black. They really are disenfranchised boys pretending to be men. They are not accountable to anyone, least of all 'allah'. Posturing, legs apart, presumably to draw attention to the power of their genitals and will, really is a pathetic attempt to fulfil whatever bloodthirsty

masculine ideal they have conjured in their minds. Acting out vile fantasies is probably not a good decision if they want a long and rewarding life.

Black, colour of power authority, anarchists, clergy, law, death and evil. They're

[Read more](#)

a year ago • Report

Show all comments

## Most popular on The Conversation

There's a new addiction on campus:  
Problematic Internet Use (PIU)

Trump's South Carolina victory could  
make him unstoppable in GOP race

So long social media: the kids are  
opting out of the online public square

Chicago police shooting data may  
reveal new ways to reduce deaths and  
racial disparity

Malheur occupation is over, but the war  
for America's public lands rages on

What Scalia's death means for  
environment and climate

Eying exomoons in the search for E.T.

Why do we pretend Supreme Court  
justices are anything but political  
officials?

Will anyone be prosecuted in the Flint  
water crisis?

Four steps to appointing a Supreme  
Court justice

## Expert Database



Find experts with knowledge in:\*

e.g. Cyber Security

Search

## Want to write?

Write an article and join a growing  
community of more than 31,100  
academics and researchers from 1,529  
institutions.

Register now

THE CONVERSATION

Community

**Community standards**

**Republishing guidelines**

**Research and Expert Database**

 **Job Board**

 **Our feeds**

Company

**Who we are**

**Our charter**

**Our team**

**Our blog**

**Partners and funders**

**Contributing institutions**

**Contact us**

**Stay informed**

**Subscribe to our Newsletters**

**Subscribe**

Follow us on social media

