



MUSLIMS AND HUMOUR

ESSAYS ON COMEDY, JOKING
AND MIRTH IN CONTEMPORARY
ISLAMIC CONTEXTS

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BERNARD SCHWEIZER AND
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Bernard Schweizer
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Lina Molokotos-Liederman
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‘Putting the Fun Back into Fundamentalism’: Toying with Islam and Extremism in Comedy

Mona Abdel-Fadil

Introduction

Comedians who poke fun at self-styled ‘Islamic fundamentalists’ often invoke the truism that ‘if we don’t ridicule religious zealots, then the terrorists have won’. Joking about Islam and extremism can come in many shapes and forms. The controversial Danish Muḥammad Cartoons and *Charlie Hebdo*’s satirical drawings are among the most notorious examples, not least due to the strong and violent reactions they spurred. These controversies also led to discussions on the boundaries of freedom of speech in satire (Godioli, 2020). Nevertheless, there is a much wider spectrum of comedic engagements with the theme of Islam and extremism. For instance, we witnessed an upsurge in comedy on the topic after 9/11, which has paved the way for much of the English-language comedy about Islam and extremism that we see today.¹ While post-9/11 comedies typically poked fun at al-Qaeda (and sometimes Bin Laden), today ISIS is a common target of ridicule within this genre.² Such parodies quite literally ‘put the fun back into fundamentalism’ to borrow a joke from the renowned and talented British-Iranian comedian Omid Djalili.

While Western and English-language parodies of ISIS are often hailed for being daring and innovative, the truth is that comedians in the Middle East have also produced a plethora of ISIS parodies in Arabic.³ Typically, members of ISIS are portrayed as sex-crazed, dim, rigid, hypocrites who lack a profound understanding of Islam. On YouTube, one can find Palestinian,

Syrian, Iraqi, and Egyptian sketches that poke fun at ISIS in Arabic (Trofimov, n.d.; *Al Arabiya*, 2014; Kamin, 2014; *Daily Dot*, 2015, 2021; Freij, 2015; Saul, 2015; Al-Rawi, 2016). The Arab region is the hardest hit by the violence of ISIS fighters, thus making ISIS a highly legitimate target of ridicule. Political comedy is often considered a tool for ‘speaking truth to power’ (Al-Rawi 2016, Alkheder, this volume). Anti-ISIS skits are steeped in dark humour and thus serve as both comic relief and political critique.⁴ For instance, in a spoof commercial, an ISIS wife is handed a special ISIS-branded washing powder which not only removes the blood stain from her husband’s shirt, but eventually self-detonates, killing her, too! A number of skits feature remastered, upbeat and, (more or less suggestive) dance versions of a solemn ISIS chant, serving not only to ridicule the song, but also poking fun at ISIS’s view of dancing as forbidden in Islam. As Giselinde Kuipers states: ‘Humor often deals with sensitive topics, touching on or transgressing social norms and moral boundaries. Such sensitivities vary greatly between groups, cultures, and contexts’ (2009: 229). Joking about ISIS certainly fits this bill. When comedy breaks taboos, it invariably upsets some segments of the audiences.

Here, I examine and compare two short, one-off skits that ridicule ISIS. The first is the BBC production ‘The Real Housewives of ISIS’, and the other is called ‘Daesh’.⁵ The Arabic-language skit ‘Daesh’ was originally created by the Palestinian satire show *Watan ala Watar* (Homeland Hanging by a String). It aired in 2014 but was rebroadcast the same year by the Saudi-owned Rotana network, which serves pan-Arab audiences. With its 15 TV channels, covering everything from conservative Islamic content to pure entertainment, Rotana is dedicated to music videos and TV dramas, and is a common staple in satellite bundles in the region. By contrast, ‘The Real Housewives of ISIS’ was produced primarily for British audiences and aired on BBC. Nonetheless, both skits are available for global audiences via YouTube. Both ‘The Real Housewives of ISIS’ and ‘Daesh’ went viral and caused controversy (Taylor, 2015; Khalaf, 2017). Some viewers disapprove of ‘Daesh’ and ‘The Real Housewives of ISIS’, because they believe that ISIS is far too serious and violent a topic to be dealt with through comedy. ‘The Real Housewives of ISIS’ is a one-minute-and-41-seconds-long British comedy skit aired in 2017 as part of a series called *Revoluting*. The skit mocks the idea that Muslim converts and Muslims who grow up in England would be tempted to leave their safe and comfortable existences for a life of hardship and violence. The ‘Daesh’ skit is longer (four minutes, 58 seconds) and a bit more slapstick in style than ‘The Real Housewives of ISIS’. ‘Daesh’ mocks the arbitrariness of violence and ISIS soldiers’ dim-witted immaturity.

In this chapter, I will briefly outline and critically examine each skit separately, before providing a conceptual comparison of ‘The Real Housewives of ISIS’ and ‘Daesh’. I am particularly interested in the

skits' content, their plot, and the comedic tools that drive them. More specifically, I will analyze and compare the stylistic and genre-specific choices, and the intertextual references embedded in each production. The fact that 'Daesh' is produced in Arabic and (primarily) for audiences in the Arab world in a Muslim majority context, while 'The Real Housewives of ISIS' is produced in English and (primarily) for audiences in the UK and in a minority Muslim context, suggests that this conceptual comparison may be a fruitful line of inquiry. I will examine to what extent contextual factors, such as where the skit is produced and who the target audience is, appear to dictate the build-up of the respective skits. I shall also discuss how the various intertextual elements of each skit relate to each geographical and societal context. The analysis is informed by my expertise within the fields of contemporary Islam, media studies, and the anthropology of the Middle East. I also lean on research from the field of political comedy and draw on my experience as a comedy improviser and writer of satire.

Toying with ISIS' recruitment of women in 'the West': 'The Real Housewives of ISIS'

'The Real Housewives of ISIS' is framed as a teaser for the next season of the (imaginary) reality show *The Real Housewives of ISIS*. It features a variety of reality show-inspired scenes with ISIS wives, draped in black abayas (robes) from head to toe. Their distinct British accents signal that they were born and bred in the UK. Following the narrator's introduction to the teaser and the show, the opening line by one of the ISIS wives is: 'It's only three days 'til the beheading and I've got no idea what I'm gonna wear', delivered in a chirpy tone of voice. The tone does not match the dreary prospect of witnessing a public beheading. The beheading is portrayed as if it was a fun social event. The emphasis is on how the beheading is seen as an opportunity to show off a fashionable wardrobe. Not having found an outfit yet to dress up in mocks the drab shapeless black garb that all the ISIS wife characters are wearing, making them virtually indistinguishable from one another. And, of course this segment is also taking a stab at *The Real Housewives* genre that is mimicked (and ridiculed) in the sketch. Staring into the camera, the character mentions her long line of successive (dead) husbands, which is simultaneously a stab at the easy come and go of romantic partners in both the reality genre and ISIS.

An interlinked densely packed one-liner is: 'So this is my sixth marriage, I've been widowed five times', which is delivered while a bomb explodes in the background. The comedic timing is flawless. The ISIS wife quickly regains her composure, straightens her robe, and says 'six times' while staring into the camera with a reassuring smile, confirming to the audience that

she just lost her sixth husband in the explosion going off behind her. The incongruity of the ISIS wife's cheerful nonchalant tone of voice when she speaks of being widowed six times is in part what paints a funny picture. In addition, the subtext points to the impending inevitability of this ISIS wife being widowed a seventh time or eighth time soon, which tickles the audience's comedic (if macabre) sensibilities. Moreover, the absurdity of the ISIS wife not caring about how many times she is widowed, or how much hardship she is put through, is in itself a subversive comedic choice which is packaged in cheerful chatter.

Aside from being comical in and of itself, this segment also alludes to the multiple spousal (and therefore sexual) partners she has had, in the capacity of being an ISIS wife. Thus, this segment functions as a meta commentary on both the heartlessness and the ironies of the serial marriages perpetuated by ISIS. Paradoxically, the serial marital partnerships perpetuated by ISIS represent a more liberal view on both sexual and marital relations than common mainstream idealized views of Muslim marriages which tend to focus on the sanctity of both marriage and virginity.⁶ Rather than focus on the media-saturated angle of ISIS soldiers being 'sexually insatiable', the subtext of the serialized widow joke is that the ISIS wife may actually be content with switching sexual partners so frequently in the ISIS-condoned way. Thus, the joke about the ISIS wife who was widowed six times in a row, also serves as a meta joke about the ironies of sexual and marital relations within a religious fundamentalist framework.

One of comedy's key operating principles is incongruity, that is to say the mismatching of elements for comedic effect. Using *The Real Housewives* reality show format and their style of bickering, verbal backstabbing, and envy as a means to ridicule ISIS' brainwashing and grooming activities is a case in point. Moreover, the skit shines a satirical light on ISIS-recruited Britons' need for constant excitement and yearning for danger. Indeed, the thrill of (unpredictable) action twinned with risk serves as an implicit backdrop as to why British citizens may be seduced by ISIS' online propaganda.

All the one-liners in 'The Real Housewives of ISIS' are jokes in their own right, but some have additional intertextual references. For instance, there is the ISIS housewife who confesses: 'Abdul seduced me online, he had me at free healthcare'. 'Free healthcare' functions primarily as a reference to how ISIS (and other fundamentalist groups) attract supporters by promising perks such as free healthcare and schooling, in addition to job opportunities, but it can also be viewed as a side-kick to the shortcomings of the National Health Service (NHS).⁷ ISIS' grooming activities, their promises of social benefits for all, and the technological shift to online grooming and flirtation, all contribute to women being recruited into ISIS from the UK and elsewhere. Leaving a comfortable life in the UK for a rather insufferable

life in the IS state is in and of itself comical because it defies common sense. In another scene, one of the characters says, 'I'm so glad I came out here. It is everything those guys in the chatrooms told me it would be. And it's full of so many wonderful surprises', she adds cheerfully to the camera before the video cuts to behind-the-scenes footage of the same ISIS wife on her hands and knees scrubbing the floor and cursing her fate: 'Didn't have to do this in Birmingham! Bullshit'. These jokes on a string constitute what is commonly referred to as 'pile-on jokes' among comedy improvisers. That is to say, these are jokes with multiple instalments, where interlinked exaggerations and punchlines are piled onto one another in order to create an overarching comical effect, often drawing on the absurd. In this case, the various instalments feature a variety of hardships which serve to underline the absurdity of leaving a dull but comfortable life for a life full of violence and misery. Additionally, the skit features a series of pile-on jokes about how living in the IS state brings many surprises, including the laborious household tasks and 'minor' social restrictions such as being chained to the kitchen, all serving to add detail to the incongruity and poke fun at what is portrayed as an overarching ISIS worldview. Despite the dark humour and the rather depressing topics discussed, the sketch comes across as light-hearted due to the delivery and the playful incongruity of the main elements.

One of the features that makes 'The Real Housewives of ISIS' skit comical and its punchlines effective is the excellent comedic timing of the cheerfully delivered lines coupled with the rather dark and depressing themes addressed. In one scene, an ISIS housewife is euphoric because she is now held on an eight-foot chain, which is longer than her last leash. This line is delivered while the ISIS wife nonchalantly shows the camera a heavy metal chain with which she is shackled to the kitchen stove. The metal chain noisily uncoils as she moves closer to the camera, enhancing the comical effect. 'So, I can almost get outside ... which is great', the ISIS wife character quips, adding to the gallows humour. These jokes are transgressive and provide pockets of comic relief about taboo topics, while simultaneously directing critique toward ISIS for their complete lack of gender equality and their violent practices (among other more specific grievances).

The fact that 'The Real Housewives of ISIS' is not only poking fun at ISIS but also at a genre of reality shows is essential. Toying with the format, in this case *The Real Housewives* franchise, is an example of what Kuipers (2009: 229) calls 'meta-humor'. 'The Real Housewives of ISIS' skit marries the real drama of ISIS (jihadism, martyrdom, repressive gender views) with the 'drama' of *The Real Housewives* reality genre (bickering, backstabbing, jealousy, and preoccupation with the superficial). This intertextuality and the borrowing of elements from the reality genre also gives the entire sketch a funny undertone, where the bickering, backstabbing, jealousy, and preoccupation with outfits also serve to transform the skit into a meta joke

about *both* ISIS and the genre itself. The fact that the skit also serves as a parody of *The Real Housewives* genre is in part responsible for many of the absurdities and the delivery of the jokes in a particular disparaging style of (trash) talking.

Throughout the skit, the ISIS wives make references to social media, and they cherish Instagrammable moments. For instance, in one scene, one of the ISIS wives is modelling a camouflage suicide vest (over her black abaya) that she was gifted from her ISIS husband. One of the other ISIS wives says: ‘Hashtag OMG, Hashtag Jihadi Jane, Hashtag Death to the West, ISIS emojis’, while typing frantically on her smart phone. The ISIS wife modelling the suicide vest asks the others: ‘How do I look?’ seeking affirmation. ‘Aww babes, I love it. You look gorgeous’, one ISIS wife says to her face, and then in the next shot, she tells the camera that ‘she looked massive’, which mimics the type of backstabbing and gossipy dialogue in *The Real Housewives* reality shows. The gallows humour is taken up a notch in the next line: ‘You’re gonna need a lotta Semtex to kill that one!’ The subtext and punchline of this joke is that the ISIS wife modelling the suicide vest is so ‘massive’ (that is, fat) that she will need plenty of explosives (Semtex) to effectively obliterate herself. In effect, this joke is packing layers of subtext and intertextual references. On the one hand, it is a playful stab at the superficial preoccupation with liposuction and with being skinny displayed in *The Real Housewives* genre. This is underlined by the fact that the character in question is by all reasonable standards anything but ‘massive’. On the other hand, the Semtex joke is also a stab at the lack of regard for one’s own and other people’s lives displayed by ISIS (and other militants) who are willing to enter into crowds to blow themselves up to kill scores of people. One could also argue that this is a subtle reference to how militant ideologues tend to preach that martyrdom is a great honour, while simultaneously ensuring that their *own* lives are never risked or sacrificed.⁸ And, last but not least, this joke, points to the fact that women are increasingly entering into this realm of martyrdom through suicide missions, which used to be an exclusively male prerogative.

Comedic drama also ensues when another ISIS wife makes an entrance while sporting the same type of camouflage suicide vest. This cringeworthy fashion crisis, while morbidly comical in an ISIS context, is also an intertextual reference to the competitive intra-personal relationships characteristic of *The Real Housewives* genre and the interlinked obsession with sartorial choices. The suicide vest drama signals that the climax of an ISIS romance is speeding up one’s spouse’s martyrdom. Still, this is also a playful stab at the limited fashion options in an IS state, not to mention that there is nowhere to go to show off one’s outfits. The lack of places to go out and the sparse entertainment or leisure options are also an intra-textual reference to the joke at the beginning of the skit about the public beheading.

In improvisational comedy this technique is termed 'a call-back', that is, calling back a previous joke.

The intertextual references make 'The Real Housewives of ISIS' a suitable vehicle through which to carry out social critique. Without intertextuality, the jokes would fall flat, or simply be jokes about violence devoid of any societal critique. That is to say, viewers need to know about certain current events in order to get all the punchlines. References to actual news stories and current issues are enmeshed in the jokes, and in a sense the more intertextual references a viewer spots, the funnier a joke may seem. Intriguingly, sometimes comedy functions as a springboard for acquiring news, or learning about current affairs. This has certainly been found to be the case with *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* (Baym, 2005). In the case of 'The Real Housewives of ISIS', despite all its mockery, it actually provides a surprisingly informative take on ISIS and their grooming activities (Ramsay and Alkheder, 2020). Thus, viewers with limited knowledge about ISIS might actually *learn something* about ISIS from watching the skit.

'The Real Housewives of ISIS' does not depict 'ordinary Muslims' as part of the twisted and thwarted extremist ISIS universe full of absurdity and violence.⁹ The producers of the skit are at pains to make sure that the category 'Muslim' is never blurred with the category 'extremist' and/or 'ISIS'. It helps the audiences a great deal that the skit is crystal clear about *who* and *what* it is ridiculing. ISIS is named both in the title of the skit and repeatedly during the sketch. There is no ambiguity here. The joke primarily targets ISIS and the women who become seduced by them, but it also mocks ISIS' sympathizers.

The Real Housewives genre also gets a side-punch, but it is not the main target of the ridicule. Rather, the reality TV genre is the format through which the social critique and comedy is performed. ISIS, the main target of the skit, is considered a legitimate object of comedy because the atrocities committed in its name construct ISIS as a particularly well-suited target for transgressive humour across multiple cultural and geographical contexts. Fascinatingly, the ISIS wives are not portrayed as mindless victims, which is a subversive comedic choice. Thus, 'The Real Housewives of ISIS' clearly paints the picture of ISIS as being the villains, while simultaneously portraying the women who were 'seduced' by them as having agency and autonomy in their own lives. The skit explicitly toys with the restrictions and risks of living in a dangerous war zone with many strict regulations. Yet, at the same time the subtext is that these ISIS wives have voluntarily made the choice to abandon an easy life in Birmingham for a life of hardship as serial widows in the IS state.

'The Real Housewives of ISIS' is an example of transgressive humour which may appeal to certain individuals or groups, but will horrify others, not least due to the serious and sensitive topics it pokes fun at. Still, the

intertextuality of the skit, combined with the broad range of punches to both *The Real Housewives* genre and to ISIS may be redeeming for those not immediately drawn to the black humour that pierces through the skit. Intriguingly, the main expressions of emotions in this skit are joy, merriness, and light-heartedness which are in stark contrast to the actual macabre content being delivered. The juxtaposing of transgressive, taboo content and conventional sentiment is largely what makes the jokes ‘work’ but it is also what may give rise to disgust among some viewers. The humour itself may be too dark to appeal to all, and most likely it will revolt a number of viewers who neither believe that these topics should be joked about, nor are able to see the funny in the darkness.

The dark humour portrayed pondering what to wear to a beheading (spoken about lightly), the serial widow (losing six ISIS husbands, and still counting), and the elongated yet highly restrictive metal chain that the wife is excited about since it is longer than the previous one, can certainly instil disgust in audiences. Yet, these jokes also serve as comic relief in light of ISIS’ own media campaigns. The playful light-hearted delivery of the punchlines in ‘The Real Housewives of ISIS’ sugar-coats the disturbing content, making the contrast of happiness and desolation all the more comical (to some).

‘The Real Housewives of ISIS’ received critique for being tasteless, insensitive, and taking things too far. Still the skit was also hailed by viewers for its transgressive humour. And, as pointed out by Ramsay and Alkheder (2020), ‘The Real Housewives of ISIS’ actually builds on accurate information about ISIS’ recruiting strategies. Similar critique and praise have been put forward about ‘Daesh’, to which we turn next.

Ridiculing the ISIS soldiers’ twisted ideologies and militarized practices: ‘Daesh’

‘Daesh’ is a bit more slapstick in style than the British skit, starting with the image of three ISIS soldiers in military slacks and vests, with big (obviously) fake beards. They are armed. Two of the ISIS soldiers are in focus, and the third one, sporting a big Kalashnikov on his shoulder, is in the background. The setting is outdoors, at a checkpoint, where cars drive up and the occasional pedestrian wanders through. The two main characters are the ISIS soldiers guarding the checkpoint. It is their job to stop pedestrians and cars. The tone of the checkpoint conversations alternates between boorish, hostile, and absurdly friendly. As viewers, we witness how these two ISIS soldiers engage in a series of absurd conversations and rounds of questioning of people trying to get through the checkpoint. Many of the conversations bounce (somewhat erratically) between friendliness and small (if significant) pockets of hostility. The first segment of ‘Daesh’ sets the slapstick overtone. It features an ISIS soldier beckoning his partner to cover him, prompting the

dim-witted partner to sling a black piece of cloth (possibly an ISIS flag) to cover the face of the soldier who had asked for help. 'What are you doing? Cover me. Cover me from behind!' the ISIS soldier says agitatedly while removing the black scarf/flag from his face. The technique of punning is used here. 'Cover me' has the same dual meaning in Arabic as in English. Given the context of carrying weapons and being in combat mode, the dim-witted partner ought to have understood the command, which is why the misunderstanding becomes comical.

Portraying 'enemies' as idiots is a typical trope in political comedy and there is certainly precedent for this trope when it comes to portraying religious fanatics as idiots in Arab comedy. Indeed, in Arabic-language comedy, religious fanaticism has been a point of ridicule for decades, even if executed unevenly and through blurred genres of comedy and drama (Ramsay and Alkheder, 2020). As discussed by Ramsay and Alkheder (2020: 198–199), Arab comedy's renewed attempts to 'reimagine' religious militants in a purely 'comical light' increased with the rise of ISIS in the region. Still, according to Ramsay and Alkheder (2020: 198–199), comedic depictions of ISIS tended to have a stilted quality, falling back on the same tried and tested motifs – false beards, incompetent, buffoonish henchmen, and cheerfully hypocritical caliphs. This description is an excellent fit for the ways in which the ISIS soldiers are depicted in 'Daesh'. The choice to use visibly false beards hardly seems coincidental. In a sense the false beards are laughable in and of themselves. Still, the laughable beards also serve to illustrate the performative aspects of conservative and militant ideologies, which tend to excessively focus on external markers of piety such as garb, head-cover, and facial hair. The subtext is that IS (and the likes) are brutes who know (and care) little about the pillars or ethics or readings of Islam.

'Daesh' depicts ISIS soldiers as a mixture of dumb, naive, and ruthless in all their encounters with the locals. The first person to show up at the checkpoint is a man in a car. He is asked to turn off the engine and get out of the car. Once the ISIS soldiers establish that the man is Lebanese, they proceed to enthusiastically ask if he is related to a Lebanese celebrity. This dialogue pokes fun at the ISIS soldiers being seduced by popular culture references which are forbidden in an ISIS universe. In response, the Lebanese man says that he is not related to the celebrity before adding: 'I don't watch TV because it is *haram*'. The fact that the Lebanese character is quick to assure the ISIS soldiers that he himself adheres to a fundamentalist stance of considering TV as strictly prohibited, can be interpreted as a reference to ritualized performative piety. Nevertheless, it can also be construed as the Lebanese character being far more religiously conservative and consistent than the two ISIS soldiers who may publicly denounce popular culture as *haram* only to wallow in TV dramas and music videos and admire celebrities

in private. The segment with the Lebanese man ends with him being asked how many prayer components (*raq'at*) he had prayed for the dawn prayer, to which he responds two obligatory prayers and two voluntary ones. The ISIS soldiers seem pleased with this answer until they ask him *where* he prayed. When the Lebanese man says that he prayed in the mosque, one of the ISIS soldiers whacks him on the head and scolds him, 'You forgot two extra prayers for the mosque'. We then see the Lebanese man move out of the screen and we hear a gunshot. While we do not witness the murder, the Lebanese character's death is implied. For readers unfamiliar with prayer rituals in Islam, this latter rule about adding on two prayers for the mosque is entirely fictional. Thus, the joke serves as an example of how extremists like ISIS make up and impose upon others a series of random rules which they arbitrarily label 'Islamic' or 'true Islam'. On a more sombre note, Ramsay and Alkheder (2020) maintain that the 'Daesh' skit mirrors a specific incident, namely the brutal killing of Alawite truck drivers by ISIS in a similar checkpoint encounter. One decisive factor in support of this analysis is that the Alawite truck drivers had been questioned about Sunni prayer rituals. This interrogation about Sunni prayers is mimicked in 'Daesh' and serves to underscore the skit's general critique of ISIS. Against this backdrop, this segment provides a critical and comedic commentary on the nonsensical arbitrary borders of 'religious' commitment, dictated by extremist understandings of Islam and the violence it inspires.

Throughout the 'Daesh' skit, many of the characters refer to 'takh takh' which is the equivalent to 'pew pew' in English and mimics the sound of gun shots. The repeated use of 'takh takh' illustrates how the shooting is spoken about in a cartoonish and video-game way. Moreover, the light-hearted delivery of the takh takhs are incongruous with the serious backdrop of armed ISIS soldiers at a checkpoint, and this becomes a running joke. This playful vibe is also present when the second civilian appears at the checkpoint, on foot, and a group of ISIS men sneak up on him before pouncing on him, as if playing a game of hide and seek (albeit enhanced with rifles in hand). The ISIS soldiers laugh heartily at their own prank and then one of them asks the man an utterly whimsical question about how many A's there are in an authoritative collection of Islamic texts. The pedestrian does not even try to answer but instead amicably responds, 'I will take a "takh"' and then walks out of sight (that is, out of camera view); then, once again, we hear the sound of a bullet being fired.

'Daesh' at times relishes in absurd dialogue. For instance, the longest stretch of the 'Daesh' sketch is a conversation between the two (main) ISIS characters and a Jordanian man. The ISIS soldiers burst into laughter when he states that his name is 'Khokha', which means 'peach' in Arabic.¹⁰ They crack a couple of name-related jokes, but they appear not to believe that Khokha is indeed his name, so they ask for his ID papers. When examining these, the

ISIS men spot that Khokha is listed as 'Christian' on his national ID card. One of the ISIS soldiers sceptically probes: 'You are Christian?' Khokha responds 'yes', upon which he receives a slap on the face. This is followed by a parodic conversation between the two ISIS soldiers, when one of them calls dibs at killing Khokha. This banter erupts into a quarrel about who gets to kill Khokha since killing a Christian will land them more 'points' (*hasanat*) for good deeds (in the afterlife) than killing a Muslim. One of the ISIS men weighs in: 'I shot five Muslims, this one is Christian', insinuating that it is far more lucrative to kill one Christian than five Muslims. A silly and inconsistent point system is then discussed. It is important to note that embedded within this joke there is a critique of the fact that extremists who commit violence in the name of Islam often target Muslims and may in fact be killing more Muslims than Christians or people of other faiths (or no faith). This scene also functions as a commentary on the devaluation of Muslims' lives, not just in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) but in the world at large. The conflict between the two ISIS soldiers escalates when they pounce on each other with weapons in hand. Suddenly, Khokha intervenes and suggests that they *each* use a bullet on him and thereby share the *hasanat* for killing him. The climax of this scene is when Khokha has a heart attack and the two ISIS soldiers are sad that he died without giving them the chance to kill him.

A surreal, game-like mood penetrates parts of the skit. These two ISIS soldiers sound like they actually care about Khokha, when they are uttering his name softly, and gently slapping his face, saying variants of: 'Khokha, please wake up so we can get the *hasanat*' and 'wake up and we will shoot you a bit and then you go back to dying again'. The delivery of these lines is for the most part in a gentle, soft, caring tone and the juxtaposing of all the friendly verbal cues and moral stances makes up for a highly absurd and dark humorous backdrop when the issue at hand is the casual execution of Khokha. This segment rests on the premise that the gravity of the violence and the killings escapes the ISIS soldiers.

Furthermore, the image that is painted is one of immature ISIS soldiers who are 'playing soldiers' in a childlike game, for whom this is all just make-believe. Thus, the ISIS soldiers' (recurring) insistence that Khokha wake up, so they can kill him again, also insinuates that ISIS soldiers have only a fleeting grasp on reality in their game-like existence, where they see Khokha as 'playing dead', then being resurrected or getting a new life, and subsequently getting to the next level of their checkpoint game. In this manner, 'Daesh' is packed with darkly humorous critiques of senseless killing. The meaninglessness of the gratuitous violence is palpable in nearly all scenes. Moreover, the ISIS characters are mocked for being stupid, childish brutes. Still, their portrayal as weirdly friendly and boorishly clumsy somehow softens the blow and makes it less antagonistic. Put differently,

the ISIS soldiers are humanized, even if they are portrayed as violent idiots, who do not know any better.

The humanizing segments of the skit are conveyed through an absurd comedy style, particularly in the dialogues with the characters who pass through the checkpoint. The social clumsiness and at times misplaced kindness in these dialogues humanizes the ISIS soldiers and eventually leads to the absurd Stockholm syndrome twist, where Khokha sympathetically offers the two ISIS characters the prospect of sharing the heavenly rewards of killing him, before reeling over with a heart attack. This humanization depicts the ISIS characters as ‘flawed and misled individuals who are, implicitly at least, candidates for rehabilitation into society’ (Ramsay and Alkheder, 2020: 205). Throughout ‘Daesh’, the arbitrariness of the ISIS soldiers’ questions at the checkpoint, and their alleged importance conveys a critique of a corrupted version of Islam which becomes a main point of ridicule. Likewise, the childlike and immature playing with life and death becomes a meta comment about the ISIS soldiers’ inability to understand the gravity of what they are a part of, either due to immaturity or to dimness. The skit ends with an Israeli pedestrian being ushered through, and no further questions asked. This ending serves as a pertinent commentary on some of the surprising alliances that are forged in MENA, a point I shall return to. All in all, ‘Daesh’ only somewhat fulfils the audience’s expectations of the ISIS soldiers to be ruthless, harsh, and extremely violent.

In the next section, we take a closer look at how ‘Daesh’ and ‘The Real Housewives of ISIS’ draw on distinctive intertextual references and comedic tools.

‘Daesh’ versus ‘The Real Housewives of ISIS’: decoding ISIS jokes

Ridicule ‘can be a form of aggression’ and the act of mocking someone can be understood ‘as a form of hostility’ (Kuipers, 2009: 223). This certainly holds true for the material analyzed in this chapter. It may come as no surprise that with a target such as ISIS, both skits launch a critique of ISIS’ ideas and activities through the tool of mockery. ‘Daesh’ and ‘The Real Housewives of ISIS’ are both unquestionably hostile toward ISIS and their grooming activities and proclivity for violence. In fact, most of the embedded jokes are packed with critique of ISIS’ modus operandi and heavy on intertextual references. Together, the Arabic skit ‘Daesh’ and the English skit ‘The Real Housewives of ISIS’ ridicule the brutalities and violence committed by extremists (be it chaining up women, beheadings, or killing those passing through a checkpoint). They also critique the meaninglessness of such violent acts and the twisted ideologies from which they spring. Nonetheless, their stylistic choices are quite different. The intertextual references embedded

in each skit draw on both cultural and political references that the imagined audiences are likely to pick up on.

Intertextuality is one of the main tools in satire. Hence, understanding (and appreciating) satirical skits such as 'The Real Housewives of ISIS' and 'Daesh' is highly reliant on viewers' prior and contextual knowledge. It is this knowledge which enables audiences to decode and interpret satire either favourably or unfavourably (Boukes et al, 2015). According to Kuipers (2009), humour marks social boundaries through knowledge. In her own words, 'humor requires three forms of knowledge: knowledge to decode the joke, to recognise the incongruity, and humor-specific knowledge about genres and scripts, as well as specialised knowledge to decode "meta-humor"' (Kuipers, 2009: 229). Thus, humour not only unites or divides across lines of personal taste, but social boundaries and structures of knowledge also ease or obscure audiences' comprehension of jokes. In the case of political satire about ISIS, having background knowledge about the organization, their militancy and recruitment processes will feed into the viewer's experience of amusement. Still, 'Daesh' and 'The Real Housewives of ISIS' were created in dissimilar corners of the world, in different languages and with diverse target audiences in mind. Thus, 'Daesh' and 'The Real Housewives of ISIS' draw on specific cultural and intertextual references that may resonate with their main target audience.

'Daesh' and 'The Real Housewives of ISIS' certainly display some interesting similarities and differences in the comedic techniques and the intertextual references they employ. For instance, while 'Daesh' is a less upbeat and cheerful skit than 'The Real Housewives of ISIS', it too relies on incongruity, particularly in the form of misplaced friendly amicable chit-chat in hostile situations, such as under gunpoint. Much like in the case of 'The Real Housewives of ISIS', 'Daesh' singles out ISIS and extremists as the clear targets of ridicule. In both skits there is no ambiguity or blurriness between 'ordinary Muslims' and members of ISIS. The juxtaposing of such serious offences and violence with an innate friendliness and everydayness is a similar comedic technique to the one employed in 'The Real Housewives of ISIS'. There is a comparatively stronger emphasis on showing the *arbitrariness* in addition to the absurdities of the extremist worldview in 'Daesh'. This might also be related to the imagined audience. 'Daesh' is produced for an Arabic-speaking audience who will for the most part be familiar with mainstream understandings of Islamic teachings, and thus be well-equipped to recognize absurd, distorted, and arbitrary elements deemed 'Islamic' by ISIS. British audiences are likely to have a more uneven understanding of both ISIS and Islam, but neither are strictly necessary to decode the comedy in 'The Real Housewives of ISIS'. Familiarity with the news stories about ISIS successfully recruiting women from the UK will suffice as a main point of reference.

At the very outset, the thematic focus of each skit reflects the different regional effects of ISIS' activities. 'Daesh' focuses on how ordinary citizens in the Arab world, trying to get from point A to Z, are stopped and harassed by ISIS at the checkpoint. That is to say, 'Daesh' focuses on how arbitrary brutality and warfare seeps into the everyday lives of Arabs, causing fractures in their lives and at times tearing apart lives in the most literal sense. In contrast, 'The Real Housewives of ISIS', while set in the IS state, focuses on the female recruits leaving the plush pleasures of the UK for a life of violence and (backward) hardship. The characters are not local to MENA, but British converts to Islam or Muslims born and bred in the UK. While 'The Real Housewives of ISIS' invariably uses these characters to ridicule ISIS, the focus is nonetheless on ISIS' impact on the UK. More specifically, the overarching focus of the skit is ISIS' grooming activities and their recruitment of British citizens to their ranks. The jokes are definitely on ISIS, but always with a sense of distance to the target. In 'Daesh', the target seems a lot closer. This may also account for some of the dramaturgical differences. 'Daesh' intermingles slapstick comedy with elements of sombre drama which has been a typical trait for Arab comedy that toys with Islam and extremism (Ramsay and Alkheder, 2020).¹¹

In the original *Watan ala Watar* version of 'Daesh', the break with the typical conventions of comedy is further enhanced by the fact that 'Daesh' actually uses some real live footage from the Alawite truck driver incident in ISIS territories, footage which is blended into the end of the skit (Ramsay and Alkheder, 2020: 117).¹² In contrast, 'The Real Housewives of ISIS' is consistently comedic throughout the skit. Moreover, adherence to *The Real Housewives* genre functions not just as a meta joke about the genre of real housewives, but also as a tool for structuring (and tightening) the skit.

The intertextual references in each skit reflect symbolic boundaries not only in terms of cultural and geographical references, but also in the form of transgressive humour (Kuipers, 2009: 229). In a similar vein, Ramsay and Alkheder (2020) divulge that, when writing their book *Joking About Jihad*, people in the UK on the whole found the topic 'sick', 'grotesque', or no laughing matter. In contrast, their contacts in the Arab world for the most part appear to have 'thicker skin' and welcome this sort of black humour. This type of satire builds on a long tradition of dark political humour in the region. Political satire permeates cultural production and everyday conversations. In fact, toying with political strife is so embedded into cultural contexts that it is expressed even in the darkest of times – or perhaps more accurately – *because of dire times*.¹³

'The Real Housewives of ISIS' is packed with transgressive humour, an example of which is the casual reference to beheadings in the skit. Kuipers (2009) argues that an often-used humour and transgressive technique is triggering disgust in the viewer. While disgust is often talked about in terms

of bodily excrements and the likes (Oppliger and Zillman, 1997), disgust is also a primary affect that is triggered when watching satire about grotesque topics, such as ISIS beheadings or chaining women to a stove, as depicted in 'The Real Housewives of ISIS'. As Ramsay and Alkheder (2020) argue, there is a fine line between satirizing the deeply disturbing practices of ISIS in a comical way and ceasing to be funny altogether. But, as Kuipers (2009) argues, transgressive humour that does not go far enough, falls flat. The bitter aftertaste of transgressive humour such as that portrayed in 'The Real Housewives of ISIS' comes from disgust, directed at both ISIS' real horrific beheadings, *and* the taboo of using such real events for comedic purposes. Oppliger and Zillman (1997) speak of 'disgust-sensitive' and 'disgust-tolerant' audiences, arguing that these two audiences will decode the same joke differently. In the context of this chapter, a number of audience members may be repelled by ISIS *per se* and may consequently find themselves unable to separate their disgust for ISIS from the skit itself. Yet other viewers might find the humoristic attack distasteful and deem ISIS' activities too grim and taboo for humoristic display. It is not uncommon to downgrade humour (as 'unfunny') when one finds it offensive (Oppliger and Zillman, 1997). The probability of audiences responding with unlaughter increases with jokes that deal with taboo or draw on disgust (Smith, 2009). Nonetheless, some viewers will be highly amused *by* the offensive comedic packaging of the 'Daesh' and 'The Real Housewives of ISIS' skits.

According to Oppliger and Zillman (1997), rebellious personalities enjoy disgust in humour to the fullest. In a sense, for some viewers, the more shocking or disgusting or inappropriate, the funnier a joke might be perceived. Contextual factors, such as the audiences' proximity to ISIS' activities and the degree to which ISIS affects the everyday life of the viewers, may also play a role in perceiving the parodies as acutely funny, comic relief, tasteless, or too close to home. While 'The Real Housewives of ISIS' draws heavily on the sensationalist newsworthy aspects, the suicide mission, the hardship of war, and gender roles, 'Daesh' focuses more on the local repercussions of having ISIS as your next-door neighbour, even mixing real footage with the comedic material to create a more blurry comedic expression that simultaneously hurts and makes you laugh. In a sense, the close proximity of the effects of ISIS surfaces in the comedic expression and thematic focus.

The critique of Israel for its occupation of Palestine in 'Daesh' also betrays a proximity to the target of ridicule. The checkpoint, as the setting for 'Daesh', is another example of intertextuality. In addition to the literal reference to ISIS checkpoints, the skit alludes to Israeli checkpoints in Palestine and to pan-Arab responses to the conflict. Also, the Palestine-Israel conflict is highlighted in the final punchline of 'Daesh'. In the very last segment, an Israeli pedestrian is beckoned to walk through the checkpoint. The ISIS

soldiers give the Israeli VIP treatment, utterly devoid of any interrogation or antagonism. He is simply met with, ‘Welcome. Welcome’ instead of the customary erratic combination of friendliness and hostility, characteristic of all previous encounters. In terms of encoding social critique into the political humour, the reference to the Palestine–Israel conflict is important in ‘Daesh’. In fact, the Israeli pedestrian is the only person to get through the checkpoint alive. The three Arabs (of different faiths) who tried to pass through before the Israeli all suffered their demise at the hands of ISIS. Thus, ‘Daesh’ also embeds a regional critique of leaving Palestinians to fend for themselves. More specifically, the punchline can be interpreted as a stab at ISIS (and other militants in the region) for making deals with Israel or whoever suits them without having a principled stance on their own citizens’ wellbeing, Arab politics at large, or freeing Palestine.

While both ‘Daesh’ and ‘The Real Housewives of ISIS’ mock the absurd conventions that ISIS abides by, it is only ‘Daesh’ that makes explicit reference to Islamic teachings or uses any terminology that is interlinked to the main tenets of Islam, even if this is done in an intentionally distorted way. This very distortion exemplifies Kuipers’ (2009) point about the symbolic boundaries that are drawn up on the basis of knowledge. Indeed, understanding the embedded jokes in the series of dialogues between the ISIS soldiers and the characters trying to get through the checkpoint requires basic knowledge about Islam. It is via general knowledge about Islam that a viewer would be able to recognize what the ISIS soldiers say as distorted versions of mainstream Islamic teachings. While ‘Daesh’ refers to the ISIS soldiers’ corrupted understandings of Islamic knowledge, it also reconstructs dialogue based on real interrogations of Alawite citizens who were, in fact, massacred at the hands of ISIS. The target Arabic-speaking audience for ‘Daesh’ is likely to be familiar with both the absurdist and distorted understandings of Islamic teachings perpetuated by the ISIS characters and share an antipathy for both ISIS and their skewed understanding of Islam.

‘The Real Housewives of ISIS’, for the most part, steers away from any explicit verbal references to Islam. In fact, if it were not for the visual cues such as the ISIS wives’ *abbayias* (long, loose robe worn over other garments) and *hijabs*, there would be no reference to the main characters being Muslims or Muslim converts. Nonetheless, the militant group ISIS’ controversial and self-declared linkages to Islam serve as a backdrop to the skit. The only mention of Islamic terminology is the reference to the word *jihad* which means ‘struggle’ and has multiple connotations ranging from inner struggle to violent combat. It is the latter meaning that is thrown about in global news and is referred to in this skit while the ISIS wife (Jane) is modelling the suicide vest in the aforementioned Instagrammable moment. In this context, ‘#JihadiJane’ is funny due to the alliteration and the juxtaposing of the very average British name ‘Jane’ with the word *jihad(i)*, and further because of the absurdity of

cheerfully hashtagging an imminent violent act on Instagram. Still, no real or in-depth knowledge of Islam or MENA is needed to decode these jokes. The intertextual references are mostly to local current events (recruitment of women from Birmingham) and global news stories (beheadings, warfare, ISIS' media platforming), and the meta humour about *The Real Housewives* reality genre. And, the fact that these women are so clearly depicted as ISIS wives, and not as 'ordinary Muslim wives', sends a clear message about who the target of ridicule is. This is particularly important in a global political climate where ordinary Muslims with no affiliations to – or sympathies for – any militant groups, are increasingly scapegoated as sympathizers or as potential security threats in the wake of acts of terrorism carried out in the name of Islam (Kinnvall and Nesbitt-Larking, 2011; Liebmann, 2018).

Another very clear difference between the two skits is the gender-composition embedded in the plot. In consequence, 'Daesh' features only male characters and 'The Real Housewives of ISIS' only features female characters. It is not a coincidence that 'The Real Housewives of ISIS' gives voice and agency to ISIS women. It functions as a counternarrative to the news stories that render the women recruited to ISIS as empty vessels with no voice, agency, or willpower. Similarly, the humanizing of male ISIS soldiers in 'Daesh', serves as a counternarrative against the herd-like quality with which they are portrayed in both regional and global news.

Still, viewers do not have to fully understand all the intertextual references in 'The Real Housewives of ISIS' and 'Daesh' to find them funny. Audiences may also relish the unexpectedness of what is perceived as strange (Boukes et al, 2015: 723). Some studies (Becker and Waisanen, 2013; Boukes et al, 2015) suggest that audiences will only laugh when unfavourably disposed to the target of ridicule or when the satire is not experienced as a personal attack on oneself. That is to say, being sceptical of or having antipathy for ISIS will (in this context) lend itself to appreciating 'The Real Housewives of ISIS' and 'Daesh' skits even more. In both skits, the object of ridicule is clearly ISIS.

Such ISIS parodies poke fun at the terrorists, focusing on the stupidity, randomness, and meaninglessness of their violence. While it can be argued that this humour strengthens negative stereotypes about ISIS and/or terrorists who operate 'in the name of Islam', ordinary Muslims are kept out of the equation or are depicted as distinctly different from terrorists. In other words, these distinctions are clear-cut in the skits themselves (particularly when compared with, for instance, the Danish Muḥammad cartoons, in which the link between Muslimness and extremism is far more blurry). Still, there is no guarantee that viewers will maintain this clear distinction in their minds (and hearts) after watching either 'Daesh' or 'The Real Housewives of ISIS'. A number of quantitative audience studies on political humour suggest that partisan viewers will read their own overarching politics into comedy (Becker and Waisanen, 2013).¹⁴

This means that audiences with diametrically opposite political stances may perceive ‘Daesh’ and ‘The Real Housewives of ISIS’ as an affirmation of their own worldview. In effect, viewers who operate with a clear distinction between ISIS and ordinary Muslims *and* viewers who believe the distinction to be non-existent, may potentially interpret the jokes in ‘Daesh’ or ‘The Real Housewives of ISIS’ as being in alignment with their own politics. Evidently, ‘putting the fun back into fundamentalism’ is no uncomplicated task, even if the last laugh is inevitably on ISIS.

Conclusion

Political satire and skits about ISIS seem to have two functions beyond being (potentially) funny: critiquing a twisted understanding of Islam and dismantling fear – that is, signalling to the terrorists that their attempts at paralysing the world with fear are futile. In fact, satire and counter-narratives about ISIS can sometimes even be viewed and used as ideological warfare, a means of combatting ISIS’ influence in the world. Mockery and exposure of meaningless violence, absurdities and inconsistencies, or hollowness of ideological views can serve to undermine the appeal of terrorist groups such as ISIS (Al-Rawi, 2016; Ramsay and Alkheder, 2020). As argued by Kuipers, ‘Humour is a very potent way of drawing symbolic boundaries’ (2009: 219). This is particularly true of highly transgressive and potentially offensive humour such as the ISIS skits discussed in this chapter. Political satire, with its dense intertextual references, sets up symbolic boundaries separating those who find the jokes offensive and those who do not. In this sense, both ‘Daesh’ and ‘The Real Housewives of ISIS’ serve to divide collectives, not only between friends and foes of ISIS, but also between fans of different kinds of comedy.

Notes

- ¹ Most notably *The Axis of Evil Comedy Show* featuring comedians Dean Obidellah, Aron Kader, Ahmed Ahmed, and Maz Jobrani. Other comedians who have contributed to this genre include Maysoun Zayid and Omid Djalili.
- ² This genre is not to be confused with *jihadi* humour prescribed and condoned by ISIS themselves, as discussed by Alagha (this volume) Hizbullah’s own *halal* jokes.
- ³ As argued by Amin (Chapter 4 in this volume), it is baffling that Muslims have been cast as ‘humourless’, particularly when coupled with the fact that it is possible to trace so-called ‘Muslim humour’ all the way back to medieval sources, and there is a strong tradition for comedy in most Muslim majority countries.
- ⁴ Ultra-conservative Muslims are poked fun at in the same way as militant fundamentalists (with less emphasis on brutality and violence), portrayed as ignorant, hypocritical, and over-sexed. The Salafi conservative religious character in the famous Egyptian comedy *The Terrorists & Kebab* in the 1990s certainly fits the bill. Another classic trope in many of the skits is a silly dialogue in exaggerated or badly executed classical Arabic. This latter

- was invoked on several occasions during my fieldwork with Islam Online in Cairo, when research participants wished to poke fun at very conservative Muslims (Abdel-Fadil, 2012).
- ⁵ In Arabic, D.A.E.S.H. is an acronym equivalent to I.S.I.S., but with an additional connotation of ‘crushing’ or ‘trampling’ or even ‘bigotry’ depending on the dialect and conjugation. ISIS despises being called ‘Daesh’, so using this term is an act of resistance, particularly when coupled with ISIS’ threat to cut off the tongues from anyone who uses the term (Garrity, 2015).
- ⁶ The reality is of course far more complex. Both serial monogamy and extramarital sexual relations exist in Muslim communities. While polygamy is practised in some communities, it is far from the norm.
- ⁷ See for instance, BBC 4’s *Getting On*.
- ⁸ The Palestinian film *Paradise Now* deals beautifully with this eerie paradox.
- ⁹ Several studies suggest that Muslims are often but not exclusively portrayed in comedy through negative stereotypes. See for example Sjö (2019); Hirzalla & van Zoonen (2016); Ahmed (2013) for more on a detailed analysis. See also Chapter 11 in this volume: ‘Comedy as Social Commentary in *Little Mosque on the Prairie*: Decoding Humour in the First ‘Muslim Sitcom’.
- ¹⁰ *Khokha*, incidentally, is also the name of a peach-coloured furry muppet on the Egyptian version of Sesame Street.
- ¹¹ The Arabic ISIS parodies typically joke about twisted understandings of Islam and violence, but also about sexuality and oppressive gender roles. A number of them directly target Al-Bukhari, the leader of ISIS (at the time). For instance, in a satirical song by the Lebanese band ‘The Great Departed’, ISIS’ front figure, al Baghdadi’s understanding of Islam is ridiculed through the lines: ‘because Islam is merciful we slaughter and divide the meat’. This pitch-dark humour is a wordplay which functions as a reference to both ISIS beheadings and the Islamic tradition of dividing meat (from slaughtered animals) among the poor as part of *Zakat*. This song is recorded before a live audience and receives too many outbursts of laughter and cheer to count (Mackey, 2014).
- ¹² The live ISIS footage is omitted in the Rotana version of the skit.
- ¹³ For instance, during the so-called Arab Spring when ordinary citizens took to the streets of Cairo to protest against political dictatorship, the police responded by bashing demonstrators with batons, snipe-shooting, sexual violence, and the lesser evil: tear gas. In response, Egyptian demonstrators showcased their remarkable resilience and dark sense of humour by playfully displaying all their creative ad hoc gas protection masks and body shields, made from regular household items or pieces of garbage. These iconic images travelled around the world. There was also a point in the upheaval when demonstrators chanted, ‘The people want the old tear gas’, as a facetious reference to the fact that the police forces had recently switched to using *expired* tear gas which was causing more severe damage to the demonstrators’ eyes and lungs. Moreover, the wording and rhythmic delivery was undoubtedly a play on the iconic (political) slogan – ‘The people want the regime to fall’– that set the Arab world ablaze in 2011.
- ¹⁴ Negative and even Islamophobic stereotypes about Muslims may surface in comedy as demonstrated by Ahmed (2013).

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- ‘The Real Housewives of ISIS’
- *Terrorism and Kebab (al-irhab w-al-kebab)*

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