

# The Big Daddy Show: The potentiality and shortcomings of countering Islamic State through animated satire

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## Abstract

This paper is motivated by the following question: how can animated satire constitute a tool of resistance against terrorist groups and their extremist narratives? To answer this question, I examine an Iraqi animated satirical show produced from late 2015 to 2017 to support the military campaign against Islamic State (IS) by turning the self-proclaimed caliph and other IS terrorists into objects of derision, detached from Iraq and Islam. Engaging with critical approaches to satire and counter/alternative narratives, I argue that the case under analysis has possibilities and limitations. On the one hand, the show attempted to alienate IS from Iraqis and Muslims and unite them in one front in the fight against the group by highlighting the Iraqi identity and exposing contradictions in its narratives. On the other hand, it reinforced problematic conspiracy theory discourses about IS's origin, as well as racial and gender stereotypes, ironically producing another set of contradictions.

## KEYWORDS

animated satire, counternarratives, discourse, Iraq, Islamic State, social media, terrorism

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

By the end of November 2015, a Facebook page named A'maq al-Khalifa Barhoom [The Depths of the Caliph Barhoom, in reference to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi]<sup>1</sup> was set up to satirize the terrorist group Islamic State (IS) and its self-proclaimed caliph and to support the military campaign against IS. It was not known who launched or ran the page, but it was created by a group of mainly Iraqi and Arab youth to mock IS, according to its posts.<sup>2</sup> The page was a combination of a parody of al-Baghdadi, ridiculing the group and its extremist discourse, and more serious posts reporting on the battle on the ground to liberate Iraqi lands from IS's grip. Then, on December 30, 2015, the page released the first episode of a cartoon titled *The Bigh Daddy Show*, a wordplay alluding to IS's self-proclaimed caliph's last name, al-Baghdadi, and mimicking the 1999 American movie, *The Big Daddy*. Since then, three seasons with more than 40 episodes have been released concurrently on Facebook and YouTube via a channel holding the same title. From episode one, the series was translated into English subtitles to attract the attention of a wider international audience. It seems that this was a successful strategy. The BBC, for instance, interviewed one of the animation creators, who remained anonymous for security reasons. The interviewee described the main goals of the animation and the people behind it: "we are a group of activists from different Arab countries. We have lawyers, graphic designers, comedians and political writers. Our aim is to undermine the dominance of ISIS discourse on social media" (*BBC News*, 2016). However, despite the claim that a group of activists created the animation, the sophistication of the series raises questions about its funding and whether it was supported by (non)-governmental organizations. It was also more focused on the Iraqi context. For example, the last episode launched on December 17, 2017, shortly following the official declaration of the liberation of Mosul, was a collaborative production with a mainstream popular Iraqi socio-political satirical TV programme known as *the Melon City*. It also featured Ahmed Wahid, a well-known Iraqi stand-up comedian, to depict the defeat of IS and the arrest of Bigh Daddy at the hands of Iraqi forces.<sup>3</sup> The last episode went viral on social media. It was viewed more than a million times and shared by more than a thousand people on Facebook. Many episodes in the series were as popular, gaining hundreds of thousands of views (see the links in the endnote).

Both the animation and the Facebook page could be seen as a strategic tool of resisting IS by creating a new online discourse constituted of counter and alternative narratives (Braddock & Horgan, 2016; Briggs & Feve, 2013; Grossman, 2015). The show and the Facebook page focused on deforming IS by making them "look like idiots with guns,"<sup>4</sup> challenging their discourse and weaving in a cross-sectarian narrative by heightening the Iraqi national identity. Whether this was a successful endeavor is hard to prove. However, the animation had the potential of exposing some of the inconsistencies and discrepancies in the group's discourse. Despite this potential, the animation had limitations that stemmed from resorting to a repertoire of problematic conspiracy theories, ironically resulting in other contradictions and perhaps unintentionally belittling some of IS's victims. Meanwhile, it entrenched negative stereotypical images about race, gender, and appearances.

By engaging with the concepts of counter and alternative narratives as part of a strategic counter-discourse to IS, my paper explores the potentiality and pitfalls of *The Bigh Daddy Show*, contributing to critical terrorism studies (Downing, 2020; Downing et al., 2022; Heath-Kelly & Jarvis, 2017) and research on counternarratives (Braddock & Horgan, 2016; Briggs & Feve, 2013; Grossman, 2015). The analysis is based on my close observation of all the show episodes, as well as the posts published on its Facebook page. I mainly focus on the former in

the paper, using the latter as a secondary data source. To understand the significance of the counter/alternative narratives promoted by the animation and the Facebook page, I will engage with the literature on narratives drawing on a social constructivist approach to narrative (Baker, 2006; Harding, 2012; Somers, 1994; Somers & Gibson, 1994). I will also draw on my previous work on IS's narratives (Mustafa, 2018; Mustafa, in press) and other scholars' relevant research (e.g., Mahood & Rane, 2017).

My paper first introduces an overview of (animated) satire, placing it within the context of the Arab world, in general, and Iraq, in particular. The following two sections present the theoretical assumptions informing the analysis. Section three situates satire within the field of terrorism studies. Section four defines the key concepts of narrative, counternarratives, and alternative narratives, which underpin the analysis of the case study. The paper then proceeds to the case study, investigating its counter and alternative narratives. The last section sheds light on some of the animation flaws.

## 2 | (ANIMATED) SATIRE IN THE ARAB WORLD: AN EMERGING GENRE

Various approaches and theories differently define satire, making it difficult to find a single definition of the term (Condren, 2012). For the purpose of this article, satire is understood as the use of humor critically and intentionally to mock, challenge and reveal the failure, hypocrisy, and double standards of political figures, institutions, and terrorist groups (Downing, 2020; Heath-Kelly & Jarvis, 2017; Jones, 2017). I will return to the role of satire in resisting terrorism in the following section.

Even though humor is second in popularity after poetry in the Arab world (Kishtainy, 1985), political satire is a relatively new phenomenon fraught with challenges. It has flourished during the Arab Spring uprisings as a tool of nonviolent resistance (e.g., Hatab, 2016; Noderer, 2020), creating “a counter-discursive ideological position” to institutional and mainstream discourse (Marzouki, 2015, p. 282). However, cracking down on activists, including satirists, has generally become a regular practice in many Arab countries, such as Egypt and Jordan, reflecting how authorities see satire as a source of threat that needs to be addressed and controlled (Elsayed, 2016). Indeed, satire cannot thrive without an environment where freedom of speech prevails and is protected (Rulyova, 2010). One of the most popular TV satire programmes is *al-Bernameg* [The Programme]. Created and hosted by the Egyptian comedian Bassem Youssef from 2011 to 2014, the TV programme ended in 2014 due to pressures after Youssef lampooned the Egyptian military institution (*BBC News*, 2014). *Al-Bernameg* has been a source of inspiration to Arab comedians, including Iraqi journalist Ahmed al-Basheer, who kicked off the Al-Basheer Show in 2012 from Jordan.<sup>5</sup> According to al-Basheer, it wasn't possible for him to “make satire while in Iraq” (Al-Basheer, 2016). Political satire has since gained massive popularity in Iraq but has become a risky business. Most media outlets in the country are owned or funded by powerful political parties and their armed groups, posing threats on local comedians. Many of them have had to leave the country and run their shows from abroad or resort to social media, which provides a relatively safer platform without eliminating all the risks facing their lives (Abu Hussein, 2019). As Marzouki (2015) argues, the Internet has freed various cultural forms, including satire, from the complete control of state media. It has also enabled the production and dissemination of relatively new sub-genres of satire, including

animated satire, and bolstering a set of political and social discourses, which attempt to undermine the mainstream institutional narratives.

Unlike the west, where satirical animated series or sitcoms are popular, the genre of animated satire is relatively new in the Arab world. Influenced by adaptations of some of the well-known western animated sitcoms, including *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, and *Family Guy*, this genre has gradually gained momentum in different Arab countries since 2000 (Sayfo, 2015). Animated satire combines cartoon and sitcom (Armstrong, 2005) and can blend different genres (Mittell, 2001), including parody “through exaggeration,” which acts as the animation’s “subversive medium” (Thorogood, 2020, p. 362). Wells (1998) noted that cartoon serves “to disguise and dilute the potency of some of its more daring imagery” (p. 19). In other words, animation can accommodate satire well because of its ability to amuse through “nonserious characters” (Kuipers, 2011, p. 64), making the comedy more socially acceptable (Gray, 2006; O’Donnell, 2007). However, due to the conservatism of Arab societies, mainstream satirical animations are less bold than American ones, with a focus on social and political discourses rather than the religious discourse (Sayfo, 2015).

As noted earlier, the events of the Arab Spring, accompanied by the advent of the Internet and communication technologies, has given activists a space to be bolder and practise freedom of speech in many forms, including satirical animation. Unlike televised animations, cartoons circulated on social media are more daring, breaking social and religious taboos and norms. Social media sites have also opened up new possibilities for individuals to negotiate and challenge acts of terrorism and violence, not just political institutions and state powers (Downing, 2020). Nonetheless, activists still face many challenges, especially regarding their safety (Elsayed, 2016). The following section discusses the role of satire in the discourse around terrorism.

### 3 | SATIRE AND TERRORISM

Political discourses of nonelite actors in resisting terrorist narratives have long been neglected by mainstream terrorism studies (Jackson & Hall, 2016). Downing (2020) rightly notes that much of the scholarship around political satire has mainly focused on its use within political institutions (e.g., Brassett, 2016; Kilby, 2018; Yang & Jiang, 2015) or social movements (e.g., Sørensen, 2008, 2016, 2017). In recent years, though, scholars in terrorism studies have turned to the role of humor and laughter in the (re) production of discourses around terrorism by both elite and nonelite actors (e.g., Downing, 2020; Downing et al., 2022; Goodall et al., 2012; Heath-Kelly & Jarvis, 2017). Laughing at terror and terrorists fulfils different functions. First, humor helps to alleviate people’s emotions of anxiety and fears through its incongruity effect (Heath-Kelly & Jarvis, 2017; Kuipers, 2005). Second, it seeks to “expose and challenge the contradictions” in the discourses of terrorist groups (Heath-Kelly & Jarvis, 2017, p. 244). Third, it aims to mock terrorists themselves in an attempt to counter terrorism and reduce support for terrorists (Braddock & Horgan, 2016). Yet, Heath-Kelly and Jarvis (2017) warn that the last function may have adverse effects. Citing the example of the controversial Danish cartoons, they argue that the depiction of terror through mockery and contempt “contribute to a twin process of othering” (Heath-Kelly & Jarvis, 2017, p. 244). On the one hand, Muslims can be alienated as violent people whose faith becomes essentially aggressive and uncivilized. On the other hand, through the othering of the terrorists themselves, “the danger they pose” can be belittled and downplayed (Heath-Kelly & Jarvis, 2017, p. 244).

In a non-western context, humor in all its forms, including animation, has been used by mainstream institutions and ordinary people to ridicule IS and extremism since 2014 in many



countries, including Iraq (Al-Rawi, 2016). Narratives produced by the latter can be seen as part of the “vernacular,” “everyday narratives of lay members of the public” to resist terrorist groups (Jackson & Hall, 2016, p. 293). The affordances of social media have allowed the creation of online “discourses of resistance” to acts of terrors in various forms (Downing, 2020, p. 4). However, most literature on online terrorism has concentrated on the “hard aspects of the internet as a sphere for extremism and dissent” (Atwan, 2015; Downing et al., 2022, p. 2). Emerging research has started to critically examine the role of social media in disseminating a set of emotional, physical, socio-political, and cultural responses to terrorism (e.g. Al-Rawi, 2016; Downing, 2020; Downing et al., 2022; Merrill et al., 2020).

My paper, therefore, aims to contribute to these critical studies by examining a unique case of animated satire created and circulated on the Internet by local actors, mainly from Iraq, in the context of the military battle against IS. Its findings help us understand how local actors (re)constructed and responded to IS's narratives, offering fresh insights into the field of terrorism studies. To explore these responses, I draw on the two concepts of counter and alternative narratives (Braddock & Horgan, 2016; Briggs & Feve, 2013; Goodall et al., 2012).

#### 4 | COUNTER AND ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES

Before discussing counter and alternative narratives, it is first essential to define the concept of narrative. The latter is omnipresent in all disciplines and is defined differently accordingly. In this paper, I adopt a social constructivist approach to narrative that views it as a “construction of a reality” rather than a mere representation (Somers & Gibson, 1994). According to a social approach to narratives, narratives help us understand ourselves and express our identities (Somers, 1994). And herein is their power. Narratives can appeal to people persuasively when they have a purpose. Their strength lies in their ability to explain and organize events simplistically and convincingly (Braddock & Horgan, 2016; Eerten et al., 2017; Freedman, 2006). Narratives can be divided into master or meta-narratives (macro-level) and more local, specific, and personal ones (micro-level) (Baker, 2006; Harding, 2012; Somers & Gibson, 1994; Somers, 1994). Master narratives “exist deeply within the history of an ethnic, social or religious group” (Mahood & Rane, 2017, p. 20) and can include religious or historical narratives often reinvoked by IS, which attempts to enforce them in the current context and situation (Halverson et al., 2011; Mustafa, in press). Meta-narratives are similar to master narratives in their abstractedness, but their influence is not limited to a specific group. It “transcends multiple historical and cultural settings” (Mustafa, in press, p. 19). Master and meta-narratives can therefore overlap with ideologies. On the other hand, local narratives relate to “particular events (and the particular actions of particular actors) in particular places at particular times” (Harding, 2012, p. 29). They are more concrete, “*cohesive and coherent*” than master and meta-narratives and link a set of events *with “an identifiable beginning, middle, and end”*. In other words, they are the “vehicle” through which macro-level narratives or ideologies are communicated (Braddock & Horgan, 2016, pp. 382–383, emphasis in original). The *Bigh Daddy* constructs larger narratives through the coherently linked stories of its individual episodes.

In other words, IS's and other terrorist groups' narratives can be resisted and challenged through counternarratives at the micro and macro-level. Counternarratives are storylines designed and nurtured to “resist, reframe, divert, subvert, or disable other stories and other voices that vie for or already command discursive power” and “seek to disrupt, dismantle, or speak back to other narrative trajectories that exert discursive power” (Grossman, 2015, p. 74). They are, therefore, “reactive, confrontational, direct and intentional” (Ferguson, 2016, p. 7). As Braddock and Horgan

(2016) contend, counternarratives are most effective in discouraging support for terrorism when they succeed in contradicting “the themes that fuel and sustain terrorist narratives” (p. 382). However, Braddock and Horgan seemingly place much emphasis on the content and who is responsible for communicating that content to determine the effectiveness of counternarratives. But it is equally important to consider the genre and modes, that is, the material form (Kress, 2009) through which counternarratives are established and delivered.

The genre of satire communicated through the mode of animation can be an effective tool for creating counternarratives to IS because it can strategically amplify the stigma around the organization, shifting “the public perceptions of terrorist groups and their operations” (Goodall et al., 2012, p. 75). When local actors counter IS through satire, they can arguably have more potential to persuade the target audience. Nonetheless, it remains hard to measure or prove the effectiveness of counternarratives in resisting terrorist groups, and therefore, they cannot be viewed as the panacea for extremism. Instead, they can be understood as a medium for consciousness in the anti-extremism discourse (Ördén, 2018).

Furthermore, the potential of counternarratives may be hindered when satire results in unintended consequences, including dividing audiences by introducing negative responses that are not static and open to multiple interpretations (Goodall et al., 2012). Satirical devices are context-specific in that they function within specific “regimes” (Kuipers, 2006), which differ from one cultural context to another. Therefore, they are interconnected with intercultural communication (see Griffin, 1994). What can be funny for a particular group of people may be offensive to others. In this regard, examining racist and ethnic humor, Billig (2005) rightly argues against the universality of humor, and by extension, satire, placing it within “a moral, political and aesthetic debate” (p. 28). Reproducing dominant cultural narratives or stereotypes can also weaken the influence of counternarratives.

In addition to counternarratives established by the animation, the show's Facebook page helped to disseminate alternative narratives that aimed to provide a positive alternative to extremist narratives by focusing on “what we are for” rather than “what we are against” (Briggs & Feve, 2013, pp. 1–2). Alternative narratives are directed toward those who may be vulnerable to the extremist discourse. Thus, they can potentially help unite people against extremist groups by highlighting “solidarity, common causes and shared values” (Briggs & Feve, 2013, p. 12). The main goal of the animation Facebook page under scrutiny was to remind Iraqis of their national identity as opposed to the sectarian identities that became more salient post-2003. Like counternarratives, alternative stories are intentional but should not be reactive. Instead, I would contend that they need to be proactive and continuous to maintain their momentum. The fact that the positive content posted on the Facebook page was temporary and limited to the timeframe related to the military campaign against IS undermines its ability to create a more lasting influence.

What counter and alternative narratives were established by The Bigh Daddy Show and its Facebook page? What were the limitations? The answer is in the following sections.

## **5 | BIGH DADDY COUNTER AND ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES: OTHERING IS FROM IRAQ AND MUSLIMS**

The overarching narrative of both the animated satire and the Facebook page was the total alienation of IS from Iraqis, Muslims, and Islam. Othering the group was a strategic discursive tool to reverse the binary of “us versus them” IS had capitalized on to divide people into two camps: those who followed IS's ideology and those who opposed it. In this way, IS constructed

an alternative collective identity with the concept of *ummah* [one community] at its heart (Mahood & Rane, 2017). Fostering a homogenous identity enabled the group to exploit the grievances of disenfranchised Sunni communities, ultimately recruiting more than 40,000 foreign fighters from over 130 countries (Speckhard & Ellenberg, 2020, p. 82). The show producers subverted the dichotomy of us versus them by creating another dichotomy of us, including every Iraqi and Muslim irrespective of other secondary identities, and them, which was exclusive to IS. However, to recall Heath-Kelly and Javris' (2017) argument, the othering of IS might have come at the expense of dismissing IS's threats and cruel actions.

Different counternarratives were embedded within the master narrative of othering. Among them were the narratives of cowardice, idiocy, criminality, hypocrisy, and debauchery. In their article on how young Muslims resist extremist jihadist organizations, Sandberg and Andersen (2019) found that young Muslims often “describe jihadists as either crazy and bloodthirsty or weak and vulnerable” (p. 457). These labels create pejorative counternarratives, refuting “Jihadist narratives [that] portray jihadists as heroes fighting for justice” (Sandberg & Andersen, 2019, p. 457; Hegghammer, 2017; Sageman, 2008). Similarly, the series reconstructed IS as a bunch of stupid criminals who abused religion to meet their ends. In so doing, IS's narrative of heroism and martyrdom intensified both in their propaganda videos and magazines was turned on its head in the show.

The derogatory counternarratives were communicated in various ways, starting from the characters themselves. They all were portrayed as weak, stupid, and clueless, even if the physical characteristics of some of the animated characters might have suggested otherwise. For instance, as the name implies, the Human Tank, one of the caliph's aides, was presented as a giant muscle man. Despite his angry-looking face and strong muscles, the Human Tank was a coward who had no clue what he was doing. In contrast, Abu Jandal, the mastermind and leader of the underground operations, was represented as a dwarf capable of going underground by disguising himself in reference to his fearfulness and foolishness. Shaimaa, the caliph's wife, was a trivial woman lacking agency. She only cared about her appearance on social media and was obsessed with taking and posting selfies to impress her followers with her ironically only outlook: the black veil (see Figure 1). However, in the penultimate episode of season three, when all the main characters try to flee Mosul as Iraqi security forces enter the city, we see Shaimaa finally takes off her veil. She now wears a revealing red dress because, for her, there was no point in pretending to be a devout Muslim anymore (see Figure 2).<sup>6</sup> Inherent in such descriptions were gender stereotypes, as discussed in the following section.



**FIGURE 1** Bigh Daddy characters: Abu Jandal, Human Tank, the Secretary-General of the League of Arab States (The Secretary-General of the League of Arab States appears on the trailer only to ridicule the stance of the organization and its condemnation statements), Bigh Daddy, Shaimaa, Abu Kotada, Suhayb the Australian

As for the show's protagonist, Bigh Daddy, he was always depicted as imprudent, a coward and pervert who was obsessed with sex and women. Furthermore, Bigh Daddy was a hypocrite who had no clue about Islam. He admitted to his soldiers in one episode in season 1: “We use religion as an excuse, and we do not understand a thing about it” (see Figure 3).<sup>7</sup> During his childhood, he had dreamt of establishing a caliphate in the future but did not necessarily believe in extremist ideas. His radicalization was caused by the radical teaching he received from his Islamist teacher and jealousy of Shikaw, the clever and confident black classmate who used to bully him (I will come back to this point in the next section) (see Figure 4). Both the teacher and the classmate mocked and underestimated his hesitation, lack of self-confidence, and positive religious ideas. The pressure he was subjected to reached its climax, and as a result, Bigh Daddy kills an innocent child to prove his teacher and friend wrong.<sup>8</sup> When he



FIGURE 2 Shaimaa in the penultimate episode



FIGURE 3 Bigh Daddy addressing his soldiers

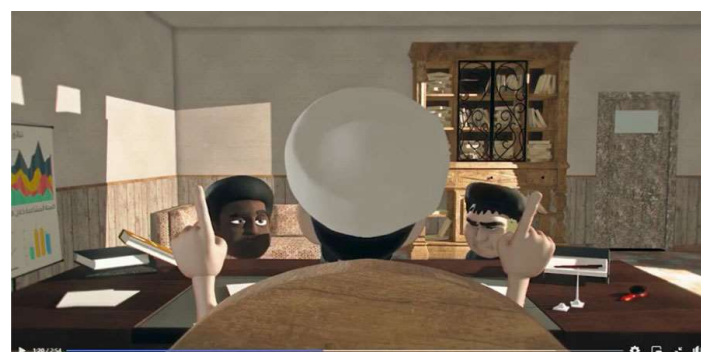


FIGURE 4 Bigh Daddy and Shikaw meeting their teacher



grew up, he exploited the extremist religious interpretations he received as a child to justify his criminality. He never fasted during Ramadan. Nor did he abide by Islamic rules. He even drank alcohol in contradiction to Islamic teachings, and so did all his aides. Abu Kotada, for instance, was not just an alcoholic but also a drug addict and dealer.

The show last season was fully dedicated to the narratives of cowardice and hypocrisy. The goal was clearly to boost the morale of the security forces on the ground as they were approaching the city of Mosul, which was the last phase of the battle. Realizing that their end was close, Bigh Daddy and his aides were scared, confused, anxious, and unmotivated. In the first episode of the third season, Bigh Daddy called the then Iraqi prime minister, Haider al-Abadi, begging for forgiveness. Pretending to be someone else, he told the former PM, “What if I repented and kissed your hand? Impossible! Ok, thank you, thank you so much!”<sup>9</sup>

In episode 11, when the air campaign started, he was hiding in his house with his aides. They get drunk to forget that they are about to be defeated. They then recalled the show song aired in the first season of the animation, whose lyrics accentuated the narrative of criminality: “Destroy them! Kill them!” says the song.<sup>10</sup> His aides, then, improvised new additional lines, describing the caliph as “children molester” and “women's rapist,” to which he laughingly agreed.<sup>11</sup>

The labels “molester” and “rapist” were employed to counter IS's narrative of a legitimate practice of *sabi*, the sexual enslavement of Yezidi women enshrined with religious interpretations to justify it (Mustafa, 2018). Such terms were meant to shake, subvert, and deny the religious legitimacy the group attempted to surround the atrocity with. In other words, in this episode, the narratives of fearfulness and hypocrisy coalesced into a master narrative of intense othering.

In addition to the religious hypocrisy, IS's political hypocrisy was brought to the fore by referring to Palestine, which Bigh Daddy seemed to always evade in other episodes. For example, in episode 3 of season 1, when Bigh Daddy was delivering a speech to his fighters, enthusiastically pledging to liberate many countries, one soldier interrupted him several times, chanting for Jerusalem. At first, the caliph tried to be calm and ignore him. But he later lost his patience and shot the soldier to silence him.<sup>12</sup> The irony could not be more vivid: Palestine is always absent but only enters IS's discourse when the caliph is in an unconscious state of mind; when he feels defeated, powerless, and helpless, suggesting that Palestine has never been on his list of priorities. Contrary to the earlier encounter, Bigh Daddy could now remember Palestine when drunk. So, when he now recalls it, he stammers it out slowly and with noticeable difficulty. In the beginning, he only manages to utter the first Arabic letter of *Falestine* [Palestine]: “we should not forget f,” he told his aide as he was listing the countries his group needed to liberate. Not realizing that he meant Palestine, the latter replied: “we should not forget falafel.” Even when Bigh Daddy could finally say the Arabic word for Palestine, Abu Kotada thought he meant Palestinian falafel. But the caliph corrected this for him, asking him to say it with passion.<sup>13</sup>

By creating an incongruity effect, the conversation was meant to produce laughter among the target audience while exposing a contradiction between IS's discourse and lack of action toward Israel. Employing this contradiction in several instances in the cartoon was another discursive tool of reinforcing the narrative of hypocrisy, consequently challenging IS's political legitimacy. Although IS had “pledged to conquer the Jewish state and incorporate it into its core caliphate,” establishing two affiliates: “Wilayat Sinai (Sinai Province) on the Egyptian peninsula, and the Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade on the Syrian side of the Golan Heights,” it never attacked Israel. Analysts interpreted IS's reluctance to attack Israel as fear to face the

consequences of crossing a redline warned by Israel as part of its strategy of deterrence (Allison, 2016).

The animation had a similar take on IS's stance toward Iran; another country IS had never attacked before 2017 when it undertook attacks on the Iranian parliament and Ayatollah Khomeini's mausoleum in the capital (*BBC News*, 2017). IS's inaction toward Iran despite its anti-Shiism discourse based on ethnic or national grounds and reflected in notions such as "filthy *Safawis* or *Safavids*"<sup>14</sup> (Haddad, 2011; Mustafa, in press) was interpreted by some Arabic media outlets as evidence for IS's fake religious claims, selectivity, and illegitimacy (see, for instance, Jamaan, 2016). Similarly, the animation tried to de-legitimize IS's discourse by shedding light on this gap between the discourse and lack of action toward Iran. In the same episode of season 1 discussed above, when the caliph lists other countries his organization needed to liberate, including the United States, he asks Abu Jandal if he has forgotten something. When Abu Jandal replies "Iran," the caliph shoots at him.

Another dominant narrative in the show was the *un-Iraqiness* of IS, which dissociated the latter from Iraq by foregrounding a counter/alternative national narrative with the Iraqi identity at its core. It did so by employing several tools. First, the show's main characters were implicitly or explicitly portrayed as non-Iraqis. For instance, Suhaib, responsible for IS's media production and propaganda, was described as an Australian and labeled "the caliphate's playboy" in the urban sense of a dumb artist, clearly to mock IS's media apparatus (see Figure 1). Abu Kotada was depicted in the show trailer as "the biggest Captagon [a drug] consumer in the Caliphate, Benghazi and Andalusia Sea," in reference to Libya and Spain, respectively.<sup>15</sup>

Second, all the characters used a miscellaneous dialect. It is hard to tell whether they speak Iraqi, Gulf, or Syrian dialect. Arguably, the choice of the dialect was deliberate and strategic for the purpose of painting IS as a nonlocal organization, highlighting its multinational composition. Third, this emphasis was also enhanced in the opening of the cartoon trailer, which establishes a parody of the Walt Disney movies Intro. Instead of Walt Disney, The Caliphate Disney was used. At first glance, the reason for this choice could be to reach foreign audiences. However, when juxtaposed with other series, I would argue that the parody aimed to portray IS as an international organization created by the west, a point I will revisit later in the paper. Fourth, as previously mentioned, the title of the animation itself was a wordplay playing of double meanings inherent in the self-proclaimed caliph's name and that of the American movie, *The Big Daddy*, deliberately misleading the target audience through ambiguity which is a crucial humor feature (Ross, 1998). The significance of this wordplay was twofold. First, it was intended to belittle al-Baghdadi. Second, it was meant to attract the attention of an international audience by choosing a film title familiar to them. Beyond these two objectives, and in line with other evidence, it could be argued that the title was meant to reinforce the detachment between Iraq and the terrorist organization.

Another tool implemented by the animation creators to invoke the narrative of the *unIraqiness* of IS was the repetition of the following line by the show protagonist, the caliph: "We came to liberate Iraq from Iraqis,"<sup>16</sup> in multiple episodes to sarcastically frame IS as a non-Iraqi organization, suggesting that IS was targeting all Iraqis regardless of their religious or ethnic backgrounds. In other words, the narrative triggered here is that of annihilation of Iraqi people, their history, and culture. This counter-narrative was also in response to IS's anti-Iraqi identity discourse heightened in the group's English-language magazine, *Dabiq*. In its eighth issue released in 2015, that narrative was evidenced both in the title: "Erasing the legacy of a ruined nation," in reference to Iraq, and in one of its articles, where IS refuted a nationalist

narrative for threatening Muslims' unity and contradicting the concept of loyalty toward Islam. The anti-Iraqi national narrative was simultaneously visually intensified in footage showing IS's members tearing down Iraqi flags in the same issue of *Dabiq* (Mustafa, in press).

On the Facebook page, the alternative narrative of *Iraqiness* was likewise reinforced in many posts dedicated to supporting the military campaign against IS while lashing out at the Iraqi government and disconnecting Sunnis in areas under IS's control from the group. For instance, when the battle for liberating Ramadi, a small Sunni city in the west of Iraq, was approaching, the page criticized the political failure in Iraq, blaming it for IS's rise and warning that repeating the same mistakes might reproduce IS. In the post introduction, there was a reference to "the great sacrifices by all Iraqis," which need not go in vain.<sup>17</sup>

Disconnecting IS from Iraqis and Sunni Muslims was the main goal in an episode responding to IS's announcement of releasing a new currency inspired by the Omayyad coinage models to replace Iraqi dinar, Syrian pound, and US dollar in both its *Dabiq* magazine in 2014 and later in a propaganda video released in 2015 (Moos, 2018). The episode showcased people's resistance and rejection of IS's new currency in Mosul. The resistance shocked Abu Jandal and made him furious. Having understood that the merchants in the city of Mosul no longer wanted to use the golden dinar, IS currency, in favor of the Iraqi dinar, he came to Bigh Daddy telling him he was planning to burn the city market down. The caliph then told Abu Jandal that the currency was nothing but propaganda, and no one should buy into it anyways. The latter affirmed people's disbelief when he described to Bigh Daddy how people sarcastically asked how it was possible for IS to claim they were a state when they used Iraqi ID documents, labeling them as idiots.<sup>18</sup> Clearly, the episode concurrently belittled IS and the caliph, conveying his acknowledgment that he failed to win the hearts and minds of Iraqis in Mosul.

## 6 | BIGH DADDY SHORTCOMINGS: CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND STEREOTYPES

In the last section of this paper, I discuss some of the animated series limitations. My starting point is that the ethics of humor and satire are as crucial as their esthetics (Billig, 2005). Analyzing satire critically allows us to explore both the potential and the pitfalls. *Bigh Daddy* had the potential of countering IS by revealing some of the gaps in its discourse. However, that potential was sometimes undermined by reproducing a set of problematic narratives and stereotypes, perpetuating several dominant cultural narratives deeply embedded within the society. By trying to contest IS's anti-west propaganda that blames the west for personal and collective grievances (Van Eerten et al., 2017), The Bigh Daddy Show ostensibly or explicitly amplified conspiracy theories about IS's origin. Swami et al. (2016) define conspiracy theories as 'narratives in which multiple agents are believed to be working together toward malevolent ends' (p. 86). Conspiracy theories are ubiquitous yet damaging (Rousis et al., 2020) because they lack evidence and are "devoid of truth." Nonetheless, due to their circulation, "they have claimed veracity divorced from reality" (Hoffman & Dryer, 2007, p. 97). The show assumed that IS was created by different foreign powers, including the United States and Israel. The assumption was implicitly articulated on occasions through its trailer opening parodying Disney, as previously mentioned. On other occasions, the counter conspiracy theory was made more explicit. For example, in one of its second season episodes, Bigh Daddy was having a friendly video conversation with the then Israeli PM, Benjamin Netanyahu, who called the caliph to negotiate the release of four Iranian prisoners so that he could use them in a prisoners

exchange deal he agreed on with Iran. In return, the Israeli PM offered to send IS a weapon shipment. The caliph then tells Netanyahu that he only had one Iranian prisoner to find out later that the prisoner disappeared. Thus, he sends Israel his Persian translator because they don't need him anyway.<sup>19</sup>

Conspiracy theories about IS and other extremist groups' links to the west, particularly the United States and Israel, are widespread in the region and are often fed by local or Russian media outlets (Tucker, 2016). Reinforcing grand conspiracy theories like these could have been intended to further the master narrative of othering. However, it obscured reality instead of contributing to deciphering the root causes of IS. To add insult to injury, in episode 10 of season 1, western victims of appalling beheading videos were misrepresented when the beheadings were parodied to show that IS had beheaded everyone and now they needed to recruit an actor to film another beheading video.<sup>20</sup> It could be argued that the parody here was used as a tactic to reveal the lack of attention paid by western media to IS's local victims (see Friis, 2015; Mustafa, in press), but was poorly executed in a way that was open to different interpretations. Using an actor to play the role of those beheaded by IS could have been offensive to real victims and their families. Victims should not be used for satirical purposes at any cost. The same argument applies to women who were sexually enslaved by IS when they were sometimes referred to in an unintentionally demeaning manner to elicit laughter.

Another limitation was the misrepresentation of the only black male character in the animation: Bigh Daddy's childhood friend, whom the caliph was jealous of because he had always pleased their Islamist teacher with his adherence to extremist religious narratives. Compared to Bigh Daddy himself, the dark-skinned friend was not portrayed as a victim of radicalization. Rather, he was guilty of believing in and disseminating jihadist discourse even as a child. In other words, he was the main reason Bigh Daddy became an extremist criminal. The negative representation of the black male character recalls harmful racial stereotypes about black people as "aggressive and criminally inclined" (Harrison & Esqueda, 2001, p. 82). Similar characterization still permeates Arabic films, drama, and media but has rarely been studied, criticized, or discussed (Fahim, 2020). In Iraq, Afro Iraqis constantly face racism and discrimination (Sallum, 2014), and media misrepresentations contribute to solidifying negative assumptions about them.

In addition to racial stereotypes, the animated series heightened gender stereotypes about masculinity and femininity, correlating physical characteristics with traits such as courage, strength, and smartness. It was ironic that the Human Tank, for example, was a coward despite what his physical appearance might have suggested. The only female character, the caliph's wife, was portrayed as superficial and lacking agency, contributing to the stereotypical assumptions about women's role in terrorist organizations. According to such interpretations, women are associated with non-violence. They are usually assigned an auxiliary role that makes them irrelevant "to the broader functioning of the group as they represent a fraction of the overall membership", which is not always true (Mahmood, 2019, p. 13).

Other stereotypical images concerned the relationship between people's appearances, extremism, and even morality. Shaimaa, who was veiled throughout the cartoon, revealed her true colors when the game was over: she was a hypocrite and non-Muslim. The only way to prove this was through her outlook: she now puts on a sexy red dress that deviates from the Islamic dress code, and therefore, she is an outsider. This pernicious image views women through a restrictive lens that reduces them to objects. According to this lens, it was permissible to measure their Islamicness, virtue, and morality. Another similar example relates to Bigh Daddy's childhood teacher, who had a long beard and traditional religious attire associated



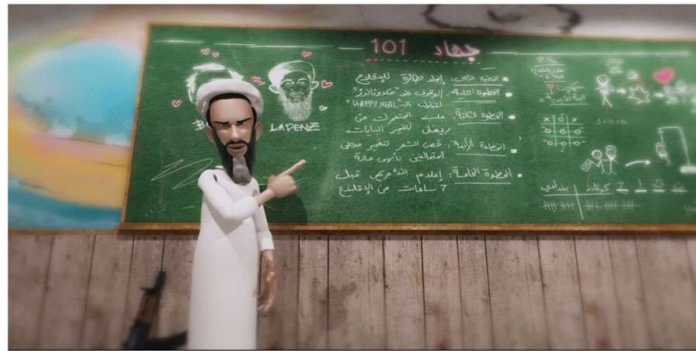


FIGURE 5 Bigh Daddy's childhood teacher

with Salafists (see Figure 5). The clothes are used as a parameter for Muslims' extremist or moderate practices and, therefore, may have real-life consequences on their perception by people (see Abbass, 2019).

## 7 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

My paper has explored both the promises and the limitations of *The Bigh Daddy Show* in resisting IS and extremism. The master narrative of the animated sitcom was extreme othering of IS from Iraq and Islam to de-legitimize the group and its claims. Embedded within this narrative were a set of smaller negative narratives reconstructing the terrorists as cowards, hypocrites, idiots, yet criminals. Othering terrorists, though, could have inadvertently contributed to diminishing their peril and menace in reality. *The Bigh Daddy Show* tried to push away Iraqis' secondary ethnic or sectarian identities by emphasizing the national identity of all Iraqis. In doing so, it projected IS as a nonlocal entity. Such projection nevertheless contradicted reality. Although IS was a multinational group, it consisted of local members. Paradoxically, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was an Iraqi national.

Furthermore, perhaps to enhance the master narrative of othering, *The Bigh Daddy Show* re-circulated prevalent conspiracy theories about IS's existence and its relation with several foreign powers, including Israel and the United States. Conspiracy theories narratives are one of the cartoon's main drawbacks for being superficial and devoid of evidence. They obscure rather than illuminate our understanding of the multifaceted circumstances that have contributed to producing IS. Many analysts and researchers have rightly argued that IS grew out in a climate of political turmoil and resentment that prevailed in Iraq post-2003 following the devastating US reconstruction policies (see Haddad, 2014; Mabon, 2017). Except for one episode where an Iraqi politician was featured as having a meeting with the caliph,<sup>21</sup> alluding to the complacency of the political class in the conditions leading to IS and the mutual interest in keeping Iraq unstable, the animation largely overlooked the complicated conditions that had contributed to the group's emergence. Since one of the main objectives of the series was to support the battle against IS, it was quite ironic to accuse the United States, albeit implicitly, of IS's rise when it was involved in the anti-IS coalition fighting the group.

Moreover, even though the series tacitly referred to oil smuggling in one of its episodes<sup>22</sup> and the drug trade (through labeling Abu Kotada as a Captagon consumer) as key sources for IS's funding, it ignored the artifacts. IS has destroyed both pre-Islamic and religious sites, antiquities, and shrines that threatened its existence, leaving others that did not intact

(O'Loughlin, 2018). According to media reports, priceless antiquities in both Syria and Iraq were looted by IS and became their primary funding source (Hammer, 2017). In a recent interview conducted by late Iraqi researcher, Hisham al-Hashimi, with Tahah Abdel Rahim Abdallah Bakr al-Ghassani, a senior IS leader captured by Iraqi security forces in 2020, al-Ghassani claimed that antiquities were a major source of funding but were destroyed when the group failed to smuggle them to Europe (Al-Hashimi, 2020). In my opinion, there was an opportunity for the animated series producers to invest in this selective approach IS had adopted toward Iraqi heritage to expose its hypocrisy and double standards. Such a focus, I would argue, could have produced a powerful, influential, and persuasive counternarrative.

Additionally, by perpetuating damaging stereotypes about race, gender, and appearances, the potentiality of the show counternarratives was impacted, an area that deserves to be further investigated in future research. Another area worthy of exploring is audiences' reception of the animation episodes by analyzing the comments posted on Facebook or YouTube through a vernacular terrorism and security studies lens (Downing, 2020; Downing et al., 2022; Jackson & Hall, 2016) to explore how ordinary people (re)construct terrorism and its discourses.

A final thought to conclude the paper with concerns the vitality of continuity in resisting radicalization or extremism through alternative narratives. The case under scrutiny was a temporal and reactive tool of resistance against IS. However, temporality is insufficient in resisting extremism. On the Facebook page, the animation creators promised that the show would not just challenge IS but also extremism in general. Nevertheless, except for one Facebook post, this promise was never fulfilled. In the post published in March 2017 following the kidnapping of seven activists in Baghdad by Shia militias, a powerful irony was delivered: the caliph now celebrates the triumph of the group ideology through other groups the post could not name. Instead, it used the word "kidnappers": "After we believed in our organization that the ISIS doctrine would be erased from Iraq with the near loss of Mosul, I was informed that there were 7 young men kidnapped in Baghdad. Salute to their captors. You have made me victorious."<sup>23</sup> Unlike powerful Shia militias, IS was a common enemy to all parties in Iraq, and so it was easier to combat it through satire. Both the animation and the Facebook page largely ignored Shia militias fighting alongside the security forces and their human rights violations well-documented by human rights organizations (see Human Rights Watch, 2015).

Furthermore, to counter extremism and radicalization more effectively, one needs to constantly confront *Daeshism*, the ideology of subjugating others and it is not just practised by IS. Even though the terrorist group was defeated as a caliphate, it has continued as an insurgency. More importantly, its ideology has persisted.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Amaq here is a wordplay mimicking IS's official media wing.

<sup>2</sup> Facebook post. Available at: [https://m.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=404069176469694&id=403397603203518&\\_rdr](https://m.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=404069176469694&id=403397603203518&_rdr).

<sup>3</sup> The Bigh Daddy Show (2017). Episode 13, Season 3. Available at: <https://fb.watch/bWckDQTy65/>.

<sup>4</sup> Refer to the link in endnote 2.

<sup>5</sup> Al-Basheer Show currently airs weekly on the Arabic channel of Deutsche Welle and YouTube.

<sup>6</sup> The Bigh Daddy Show (2016). Episode 12, Season 3. Available at: <https://fb.watch/9RunJzNGvZ/>.

<sup>7</sup> The Bigh Daddy Show (2016). Episode 5, Season 1. Available at: [https://m.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=554621098081167&id=403397603203518&\\_rdr](https://m.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=554621098081167&id=403397603203518&_rdr).

- <sup>8</sup> The Bigh Daddy Show (2016). Episode 5, Season 2. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/bighdaddyshow/videos/470726853137259/>.
- <sup>9</sup> The Bigh Daddy Show (2016). Episode 1, Season 3. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/bighdaddyshow/videos/506787839531160>.
- <sup>10</sup> The show song. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/bighdaddyshow/videos/440211602855451/>.
- <sup>11</sup> The Bigh Daddy Show (2016). Episode 11, Season 3. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/bighdaddyshow/videos/536843006525643>.
- <sup>12</sup> The Bigh Daddy Show (2016). Episode 3, Season 1. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/bighdaddyshow/videos/419055884971023/>.
- <sup>13</sup> Refer to endnote 10.
- <sup>14</sup> Safavid or *Safawi* mainly refers to “the Safavid dynasty that ruled Persia from 1501 to 1736 [and] is used to depict Shia ties to Iran” (Siegel, 2015, p. 5).
- <sup>15</sup> The Bigh Daddy Show Trailer (2015). Available at: Walt Disney from the Caliphate—YouTube. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=12ZVITrxDOI>.
- <sup>16</sup> See the link in endnote 12.
- <sup>17</sup> Facebook post. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/403397603203518/photos/a.404068843136394/410277242515554>.
- <sup>18</sup> The Bigh Daddy Show (2016). Episode 3, Season 3. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/bighdaddyshow/videos/509608585915752/>.
- <sup>19</sup> The Bigh Daddy Show (2016). Episode 11, Season 2. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/bighdaddyshow/videos/498909533652324/>.
- <sup>20</sup> The Bigh Daddy Show (2016). Episode 10, Season 1. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/bighdaddyshow/videos/431877283688883/>.
- <sup>21</sup> The Bigh Daddy Show (2016). Episode 4, Season 1. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/bighdaddyshow/videos/421097738100171>.
- <sup>22</sup> The Bigh Daddy Show (2016). Episode 12. Season 1. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/bighdaddyshow/videos/436722163204395>.
- <sup>23</sup> Facebook post. Available at: [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=604294866447123&id=403397603203518](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=604294866447123&id=403397603203518).

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