A Gift for the Network:

Digital Sovereignty and Symbolism in Mojahedeen Secrets

In the April 2016 edition of their French online newspaper, *Dar al-Islam*, the Islamic state released a 15-page guide entitled "Sécurité Informatique." The article provided practical online security guidance for jihadists, such as how to set up *Tails*, an amnesiac, forensically secure operating system, connect to the *Tor Network* to anonymize their online identity, and how to set up PGP encryption keys for concealing and authenticating online communications.[1] At the time of its publication, many researchers viewed this article as evidence of an ongoing shift in how jihadist movements understood and employed secure communication technologies to conceal their activities. Some observers have further argued that this shift originates from the release of mainstream encrypted communication platforms like Telegram (released 2013) and Signal (released 2014),[2] or from Edward Snowden's 2013 disclosures revealing the scope of the National Security Agency's global surveillance and decryption capabilities.[3] However, the use of encrypted communications within international jihadist movements predates both Snowden's leaks and the rise of consumer encryption platforms. As early as the mid-2000s, jihadist actors were distributing and promoting secure communication tools specifically tailored to their ideological and cultural context. One such example is *Mojahedeen Secrets (or Asrar al-Mujahideen)*, a lesser-known file encryption program that circulated widely in jihadist forums.

This software will be the primary focus of this paper, which asks the question: "*What does the Mojahedeen Secrets encryption program reveal about how jihadi actors conceptualized secure communications?*" Through an in-depth analysis of the program's graphical user interface, as well as the documentation provided alongside the software, I argue that the authors of *Mojahedeen Secrets* designed the tool with the intention of cultivating a sense of digital sovereignty among their fighters. To accomplish this, they relied heavily on incorporating common motifs in jihadi visual culture into the program, such as militant, religious and historical symbols. It is this attempt to create a "jihadist-friendly" encryption program that reveals how the developers conceptualized these tools. They saw secure communications technology as something that could be taken from Western government agencies, companies, and research institutions, and reworked into a powerful weapon for the jihadist cause.

[1] Graham, Robert. "How Terrorists Use Encryption." *CTC Sentinel* 9, no. 6 (June 2016).

[2] Clifford, Bennett, and Helen Powell. Rep. *Encrypted Extremism Inside the English-Speaking Islamic State Ecosystem on Telegram*. Washington DC: GWU, 2019.

[3] Schmitt, Eric, and Michael S. Schmitt. Qaeda plot leak has undermined U.S. intelligence (published 2013), September 29, 2013. https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/30/us/qaeda-plot-leak-has-undermined-us-intelligence.html.

Origins and Distribution of Mojahedeen Secrets

  Mojahedeen Secrets (*MS*) was first published in early 2007 by the Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF), which was an Islamist propaganda organization associated with al-Qaeda and other Islamic extremist groups. It is a file encryption program that essentially acts as a PGP wrapper, meaning that it does not introduce novel cryptographic algorithms, but rather relies on the OpenPGP standard and widely used open-source cryptographic code libraries that were written or designed by Western cryptographers.[4] Shortly after its release, *MS* was adopted by another group known as the "Ikhlas Islamic Network." This group took the software and released an updated version in January 2008, which was known simply as *Mojahedeen Secrets 2* (*MS2*). The anonymous authors claim that it was intentionally released on the one-year anniversary of the declaration of the Islamic state by the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), though this is called into question by sources claiming the ISI was declared in October 2006.[5] [6] Regardless, the developers appear to have been supporters of this group. The Ikhlas group lauded the "qualitative leap" that *MS* provided in the techniques of secure communications, but felt that a faster version was necessary that provided digital signature services and didn't rely on file downloading sites that risked revealing the IP addresses of *MS*'s users.[7] The software was distributed free of charge across a number of password-protected forums operated by the Ikhlas Islamic network. It was packaged in the format of an encrypted .rar file, which is a compressed file archive that can contain multiple files bundled together, much like a .zip file. Since it is outside the scope of this paper, I will not provide a full report detailing my search for *MS2*, though it did involve using the *Tails* operating system alongside *Tor* to anonymize my identity, and to allow me to access both Clearnet and dark web sites safely. I eventually found a copy of the program on Internet Archive, where it was uploaded by a user named "archivejihad" on February 23, 2011. Despite my success, however, I still wasn't finished with my search because archivejihad did not include the password required to decrypt the .rar file. I found that password about a week later in an article about *MS2* published in 2008 that was written by a supposed USAF/NSA codebreaker named Jeff Bardin. Given the age of the article, all of the embedded image content seems to have been lost or corrupted, but I was lucky enough to have found that he included the password in a
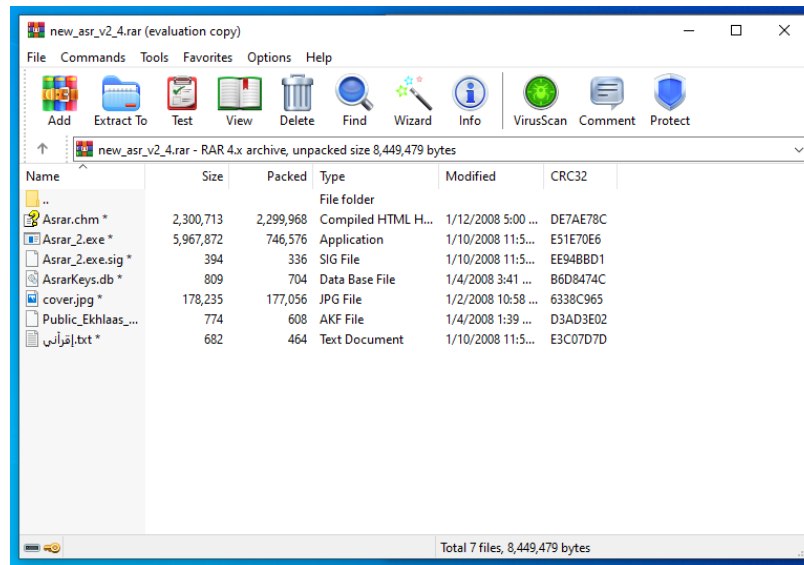
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[4] For reference, the famous RSA cryptosystem that *MS* uses was developed by Ron Rivest and Leonard Adleman, two American cryptographers, and Adi Shamir, an Israeli cryptographer. The Advanced Encryption Standard (AES) was designed by Belgian researchers Joan Daemon and Vincent Rijmen and later standardized by the U.S. National Institute of Standards and Technology. Similarly, PGP (Pretty Good Privacy), the bases for OpenPGP, was invented by American cryptographer Phil Zimmerman.

[5] Ikhlas Islamic Network. "Mojahedeen Secrets." Program documentation. Ikhlas Islamic Network, 2008. https://aekhlaas.org.

[6] CNN Editorial Research. "Isis Fast Facts." CNN, September 2, 2025. https://www.cnn.com/world/isis-fast-facts.

[7] Ikhlas Islamic Network. "Mojahedeen Secrets." Program documentation. Ikhlas Islamic Network, 2008. https://aekhlaas.org.

parenthetical aside.[8] [9] Upon using the password to decrypt the .rar file containing *MS2,* I found a directory containing the program and several other interesting files:

For this paper, I will focus on the content of "Asrar_2.exe" (the windows executable that launches the actual *MS2* program), and "Asrar.chm," which is a "Compiled HTML Help" file. This file acts as on offline collection of webpages that can be opened and viewed like a .pdf, and it contains the user manual that comes alongside the program. At this point, I was ready to begin my symbolic analysis of the program's interface.

Militant Symbolism

The first, and perhaps most jarring, piece of jihadist art appears almost instantly in the middle of your computer screen when you double click on the executable, waiting for the program to load. Within a round crimson frame, we see the name of the program hovering above what appears to be an M16A2 rifle, the barrel of which is transforming into a key, all set in front of a stylized map of the world.

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[8] Bardin, Jeff. "A Gift from the Islamic Faithful Network – Mujahedeen Secrets 2 Program." CSO Online, February 27, 2008. https://www.csoonline.com/article/543261/identity-management-a-gift-from-the-islamic-faithful-network-mujahedeen-secrets-2-program.html.

[9] In case anyone needs it in the future, the key to open the file is: Asrar@_EkLaAs.TsG@[$^/!p@]z-2008

This rifle-key hybrid is especially notable, as it functions as a very direct, condensed visual statement about how the authors of the program conceptualized their tool. According to *The Islamic Imagery Project*, a study on visual motifs in jihadi internet propaganda, modern-style weapons such as the M16 variant pictured above appear in jihadi visual culture as a representation of the strength jihadists have, their status as a modern military force, and "…to embody the inherent capacity of the jihadi movement to overcome and defeat the West, using the latter's own military technology."[10] The inclusion of a map of the world further reinforces this message by placing encryption within the broader context of a global jihad, where encryption is deemed necessary to safely communicate with fighters across the globe. By fusing universally recognizable symbols of militant jihad with a cryptographic key, the authors of the program reframe encryption as an offensive capability, and a direct continuation of their armed struggle. This visual association encourages the user to place encrypted communication in the same conceptual category as other militant symbols like rifles and swords, thus bringing them to the conclusion that secure communication tools are an inherent part of a jihadist's arsenal. This framing reveals that the authors of *MS2* conceptualized secure communications technology as a form of digital weaponry that, much like an American-made rifle, could be seized from technologically dominant power and repurposed to advance the global jihad.

Religious Symbolism

Within the study of jihadist visual culture, one of the most important areas of focus are cultural images and symbols that involve religious references. While the user manual does contain at least one verse from the Qur'an, as well as a dedication, these aren't technically elements of visual

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[10] Combatting Terrorism Center. Rep. *The Islamic Imagery Project: Visual Motifs in Jihadi Internet Propaganda*. West Point, New York: Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 2006.

culture. I'd argue that the most interesting piece of visual religious symbolism is included in a .jpg that is embedded in the HTML of the .chm archive's home page:

In this image, we see a presumably locked door embedded in a concrete wall, surrounded by a mixture of keys and what appear to be fish symbols also embedded in the concrete. On the door, we see the *MS2* logo, and an overlay of a sky full of wispy clouds at sunset, high above the earthly terrain.

Note: I have not been able to conclude what the fish represent, not what the text "MYP.ppp" refers to.

This depiction of the sky as the sun is setting functions as a clear allusion to *janna*, or the Islamic depiction of heavenly paradise as described in the Qur'an. In jihadist visual culture, heaven is frequently represented through the motifs of natural beauty, such as open skies, bursts of sunlight,

and clouds.[11] Furthermore, these depictions are often set at sunset to allude to the earthly death required for a person to transition into the afterlife.[12] By depicting this vision of paradise as something that lies behind a locked door, and associating those keys with cryptographic keys, this image frames secure communications as a means of "unlocking" a pathway to paradise. The inclusion of the *MS2* logo hanging on the door further suggests that the authors wanted their own jihad-tailored software to be understood as the correct encryption tool through which that access is obtained. As such, this artwork is used by the developers to link the use of their own software to religious significance and spiritual legitimacy, thus reinforcing the urgency of using digitally sovereign encryption in the minds of the users. That they felt compelled to directly link *MS2* to symbols of paradise indicates that the developers conceptualized these sorts of programs as capable of being reworked from a tool used by the enemy to persecute Muslims, into a tool capable of delivering a jihadist to eternal paradise.

Historical Symbolism

During my examination of *MS2*, I tried to find every different page, tab, or element of the graphical user interface by clicking all the buttons I could find, and testing as many of the features as possible. As I did this, I stumbled upon a somewhat hidden cultural symbol that holds historical significance in jihadist visual culture. Clicking the "about" button on the left panel brings up an image of the program's logo yet again (you can tell the authors are very proud of it). However, this time there is a small addition: a red question mark embedded just below some of the writing. Clicking on this icon replaces the center of the logo with the black flag of the Islamic State.
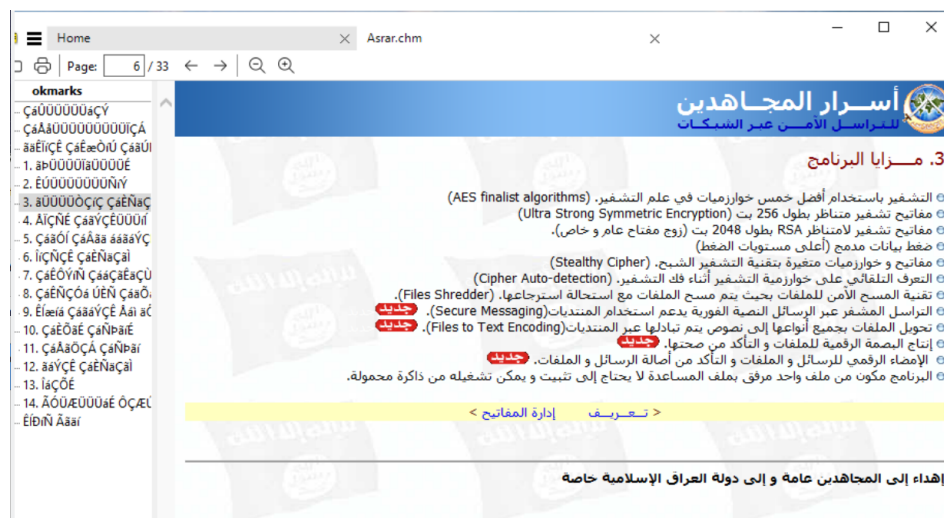

Though it is now easily recognizable as the flag used by the Islamic State, at the time this program was published it was quite new, belonging to a precursor group. This flag, designed by the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), was created and promoted to help distinguish the group from al-Qaeda in Iraq,

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[11] Hegghammer, Thomas, and Afshon Ostovar. "Chapter 4: The Visual Culture of Jihad." Essay. In *Jihadi Culture: The Art and Social Practices of Militant Islamists*, 114–17. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

[12] Ibid.

which the group had emerged from. The ISI claimed that the flag was an accurate recreation of the Islamic standard from the Prophet Muhammad's era, as the white circle and its text comprised the official seal of the Prophet in Ottoman records.[13] They also claimed that the ordering of the words "God, messenger, Muhammad" arranged from top to bottom followed Islamic oral traditions describing the Prophet Muhammad's seal.[14] Furthermore, in Islamic tradition, black flags are usually used to evoke the black standards flown during the eighth-century Abbasid Revolution, wherein the Abbasids overthrew the Umayyad clan and established a new Iraq-based caliphate that ushered in the Golden Age of Islam.[15] While the inclusion of this flag no doubt also serves a political purpose (promoting the ISI), incorporating a flag that holds references to the purported seal of the Prophet Muhammad and the standards of the Abbasid Revolution also serves to help ground the software's place in the history of Islam. The authors of this tool want users to view its use as an act of participation in a historical continuum of struggle that extends back to the era of the Prophet Muhammad himself.

The Islamic State flag also appears as a background pattern in the user manual.

To the users, utilizing this jihadist-designed encryption program becomes a symbolically meaningful act that connects them to the historical life of the Prophet and the heroes of their faith. As such, by binding their software with historic symbols, the authors of *MS2* conceptualized secure communications as a technology that could be integrated into the long arc of Islamic history through its utility in the jihadist struggle.

While it is certainly true that the design and oversight of secure communications infrastructure have a history of being politically contested in Western countries, the actual software

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[13] Hegghammer, Thomas, and Afshon Ostovar. "Chapter 4: The Visual Culture of Jihad." Essay. In *Jihadi Culture: The Art and Social Practices of Militant Islamists*, 100–105. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2017.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.

itself is traditionally a purely technical conduit for the open-source algorithms it implements. A thorough examination of *Mojahedeen Secrets 2*, however, reveals a very different approach. Rather than finding something purely technical, we find a program steeped in jihadist visual culture, with imagery drawn from jihadist militancy symbols, Islamic depictions of the afterlife, and historically grounded flags, all woven directly into the program's user interface. By intentionally integrating symbols selected to resonate with a jihadist audience, the authors of *Mojahedeen Secrets 2* demonstrate that the communication tools we use can be as ideologically meaningful as they are technically meaningful. They sought to create a tool that was attractive not just for its ability to conceal and authenticate messages, but because it originated in the minds of jihadists, not the minds of the enemy. The cultivation of this sense of digital sovereignty thus reveals the answer to our question: "*What does Mojahedeen Secrets reveal about how jihadi actors conceptualized secure communications?*" The developers of *Mojahedeen Secrets 2* conceptualized the principles and technology behind secure communications as a malleable set of instruments that, if implemented attractively, could become a native tool of jihad. Though homemade programs like *Mojahedeen Secrets 2* would eventually fall to the wayside, eclipsed by more secure and user-friendly applications like Telegram, the underlying conceptualization of secure communications technology as a tool to be appropriated and brought under jihadist control has endured, and is likely to endure well into the future.

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