A Gift for the Network
Digital Sovereignty and Symbolism in Mojahedeen Secrets

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Abstract

This paper examines "Mojahedeen Secrets," a file encryption program circulated in jihadist forums in the mid-2000s. Through an analysis of the program's graphical user interface and documentation, I argue that the software was designed to cultivate "digital sovereignty" among fighters. By incorporating militant, religious, and historical motifs—such as weaponry, Islamic symbolism, and historical flags—the developers reframed Western cryptographic technology as a weaponized tool for the jihadist cause.

1 Introduction

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 set up PGP encryption keys for concealing and authenticating online communications (**graham2016**).

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) (**clifford2019**), or from Edward Snowden's 2013 disclosures revealing the scope of the National Security Agency's global surveillance and decryption capabilities (**schmitt2013**).

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.

2 Origins and Distribution of Mojahedeen Secrets

Mojahedeen Secrets (MS) was first published in early 2007 by the Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF), 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.[1]

Shortly after its release, MS was adopted by another group known as the "Ikhlas Islamic Network." This group released an updated version in January 2008, 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 of Iraq (ISI), though this is called into question by sources claiming the ISI was declared in October 2006 (**ikhlas2008**; **cnn2025**). 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 did not rely on file downloading sites that risked revealing the IP addresses of MS's users (**ikhlas2008**).

The software was distributed free of charge across a number of password-protected forums operated by the Ikhlas Islamic network. It was packaged as an encrypted .rar file. I eventually found a copy of the program on the Internet Archive, uploaded by a user named "archivejihad" on February 23, 2011. The password required to decrypt the archive was located in a 2008 article by codebreaker Jeff Bardin (**bardin2008**).[2]

Upon using the password to decrypt the .rar file containing MS2, I found a directory containing the program and several other files. For this paper, I will focus on the content of

[1]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 basis for OpenPGP, was invented by American cryptographer Phil Zimmerman.

[2]For future reference, the key to open the file is: `Asrar@_EkLaAs.TsG@[$^/!p@]z-2008`

`Asrar_2.exe` (the Windows executable) and `Asrar.chm` (the compiled HTML help file).

3 Militant Symbolism

The first, and perhaps most jarring, piece of jihadist art appears almost instantly in the middle of the computer screen when the executable is launched. 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.

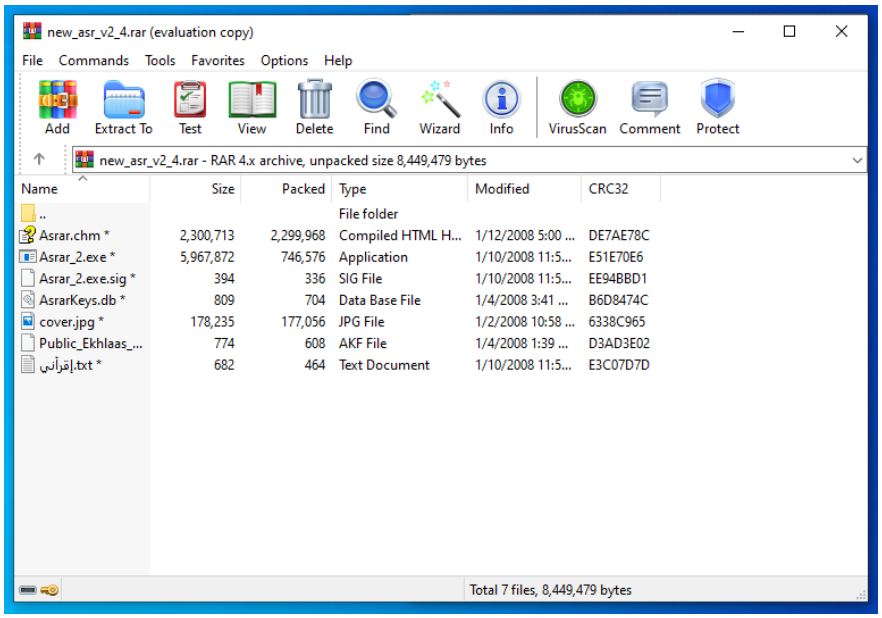

Figure 1: The splash screen of Mojahedeen Secrets 2, depicting an M16A2 rifle barrel morphing into a cryptographic key.

This rifle-key hybrid is especially notable, as it functions as a condensed visual statement about how the authors conceptualized their tool. According to *The Islamic Imagery Project*, modern-style weapons such as the M16 variant appear in jihadi visual culture to embody the inherent capacity of the movement to defeat the West using the latter's own military technology (**ctc2006**). The inclusion of a map of the world reinforces this message by placing encryption within the context of a global jihad.

By fusing universally recognizable symbols of militant jihad with a cryptographic key, the authors reframe encryption as an offensive capability. This visual association encourages the user to place encrypted communication in the same conceptual category as rifles and swords. This framing reveals that the authors of MS2 conceptualized secure communications technology as a form of digital weaponry that could be seized from a technologically dominant power and repurposed.

4 Religious Symbolism

Within the study of jihadist visual culture, one of the most important areas of focus involves religious references. I argue that the most interesting piece of visual religious symbolism is included in a .jpg embedded in the HTML of the .chm archive's home page.

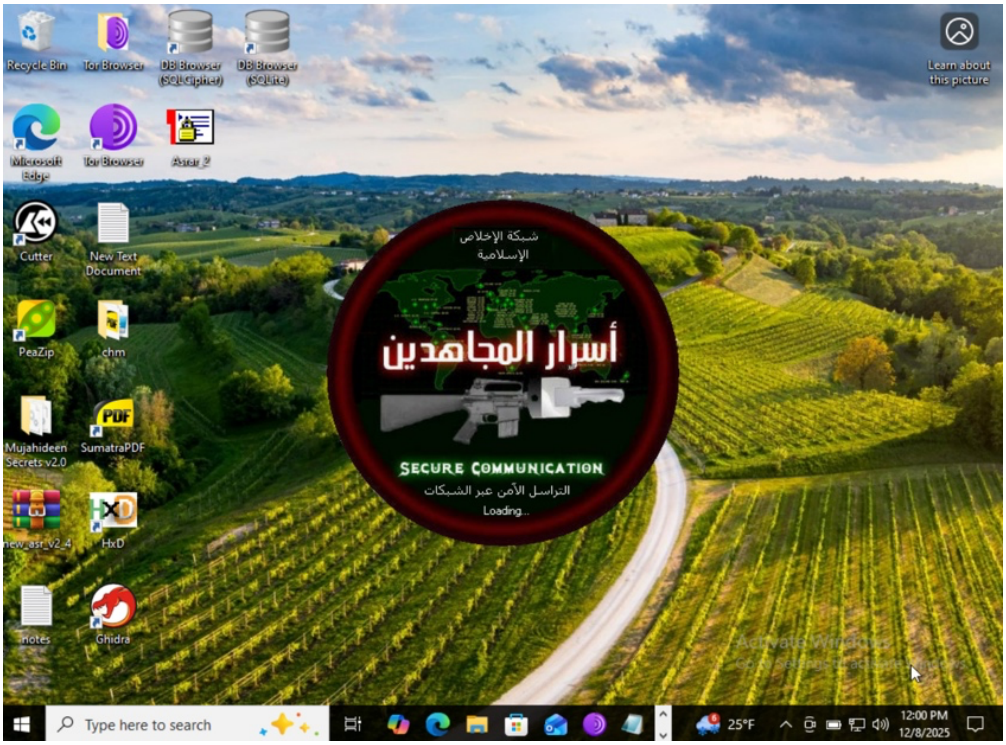

Figure 2: The user manual interface displaying the program header.

In the specific imagery below, we see a locked door embedded in a concrete wall, surrounded by keys and fish symbols. 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.

Figure 3: Visual assets extracted from the help file depicting a "locked door" to paradise, overlaid with the MS2 logo.

This depiction of the sky at sunset functions as a clear allusion to *janna*, or the Islamic depiction of heavenly paradise. In jihadist visual culture, heaven is frequently represented through motifs of natural beauty, such as open skies and clouds (**hegghammer2017**). Furthermore, these depictions are often set at sunset to allude to the earthly death required for a person to transition into the afterlife (**hegghammer2017**).

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 suggests that the authors wanted their own jihad-tailored software to be understood as the correct

encryption tool through which that access is obtained.

5 Historical Symbolism

During my examination of MS2, I stumbled upon a hidden cultural symbol that holds historical significance. Clicking the “about” button on the left panel brings up an image of the program’s logo. However, clicking a small red question mark icon replaces the center of the logo with the black flag of the Islamic State.

Figure 4: The standard "About" screen of the Mojahedeen Secrets 2 program.

Figure 5: The hidden "About" screen revealing the flag of the Islamic State of Iraq when the question mark is clicked.

Though now recognizable as the flag used by the Islamic State, at the time this program was published it belonged to the precursor group, the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI). The ISI claimed that the flag was an accurate recreation of the Islamic standard from the Prophet Muhammad's era (**hegghammer2017**). The ordering of the words "God, messenger, Muhammad" follows Islamic oral traditions describing the Prophet's seal. Furthermore, black flags are used to evoke the standards flown during the eighth-century Abbasid Revolution (**hegghammer2017**).

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

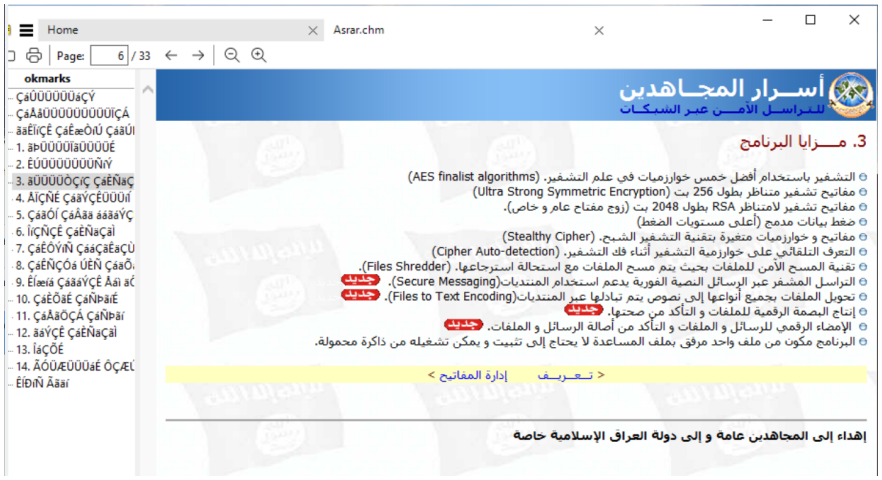

Figure 6: The Islamic State flag utilized as a repeated background pattern within the software documentation.

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.

6 Conclusion

While the design of secure communications infrastructure is politically contested in Western countries, the software itself is traditionally a purely technical conduit. A examination of Mojahedeen Secrets 2, however, reveals a different approach. Rather than finding something purely technical, we find a program steeped in jihadist visual culture.

By intentionally integrating symbols selected to resonate with a jihadist audience, the authors of Mojahedeen Secrets 2 demonstrate that communication tools can be as ideologically meaningful as they are technically meaningful. The cultivation of this sense of digital sovereignty reveals that the developers conceptualized secure communications not merely as utilities, but as malleable instruments that, if implemented attractively, could become native tools of jihad.