

# Musical Criminology

## A Comparative Analysis of Jihadist *Nasheeds* and *Narco Corridos*

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Jihadists have their *nasheeds*, and the Islamic State (IS) became popular for its nasheed compositions used in propaganda videos. Nasheed is an a cappella song praising the Prophet Muhammad and reciting Quranic verses glorifying jihad. Similarly, drug cartels have bands that compose and sing *narco corridos*, or “drug ballads,” based on Mexican folk music, which glorify cartel leaders as modern-day “Robin Hood” figures and announce executions of enemies. Both nasheeds and narco corridos have much in common: glorifying historical victories over enemies in wars and revolutions; using lyrics to warn their enemies about their invincibility and strength and bravery; calling out specific enemies as targets; and using their respective ideologies to justify their acts, behaviors, and beliefs.

This study examines and comparatively analyzes the two musical genres in the context of terrorism and narco-terrorism, and how these musical traditions affect their respective followers, admirers, and devotees. The analysis also highlights how these musical genres popularize crime and violence, and desensitize audiences to the extreme brutality praised and glorified in their songs.

There are some contextual distinctions that separate the two genres as well, and these entail part of the comparative analysis. The use of social media in both contexts is an essential tool to popularize nasheeds and narco corridos; they use YouTube videos, Twitter and Facebook, and other Internet resources to spread their music and messages. In particular, Western democracies provide freedom of expression, which further facilitates the proliferation of nasheeds and narco corridos. Specifically, the nasheeds are sung with religious references, verses, and lyrics, which endow them with greater allure and legitimacy in the eyes of the religious public. However, even some drug cartels and their leaders and followers embrace religious cult-like ideologies related to their narco-paradigms. They come complete with cults of personality attributed to specific drug lords and folkloric heroes from Mexican and Latin American history. An entire industry in entertainment, jewelry, amulets, shrines, icons, and spiritual “saints” and shaman-like figures flourishes in advancing what is called the “narco-culture.”

Moreover, law enforcement faces substantial hindrances to monitor and control online materials. How have governments responded to these social and religious

musical media that glorify violent crimes? What are the implications of these for counterterrorism and counternarcotics strategies, bearing in mind that drug cartels often resort to narco-terrorism in much of the same ways as religious terrorist organizations operate, and, in fact, in many cases, the narco-terrorists are *even more* brutal and heinous in their tactics, shock value, and impacts. Yet, each type of terrorist—religious and narco-terrorists—still secures a loyal following. Their audiovisual tools for glorifying their respective causes, leaders, ideologies, and roles in society have made them extremely popular, especially among the youth. Each type of terrorist claims to fight against corrupt political elites and to stand for and support the masses, especially the poor, disenfranchised, and oppressed in society. In their propaganda, they use words like “oppression,” “persecution,” the “corrupt officials,” and the like, and they present themselves as the heroic warriors rising from among the masses to fight against oppression and injustice, but never mind the drug production, drug and human trafficking, and senseless violence that they perpetrate. And, in the case of ISIS and al-Qaeda, their violent repression and brutality against anyone who fails to accept their creed, leadership, and way of life are clearly paradoxical to their claims of serving as fighters against oppression and injustice. Thus, we see that both narco corridos and nasheeds have much in common, while at the same time they are contextually different.

The fact that narco-terrorists and religious terrorist groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda use songs at all is rather surprising. For the world of narcos, traditional Mexican and other Latino folk music and songs in Spanish provide an historical backdrop for their narco corridos. However, in more contemporary times, narco-corrido singers and composers have been increasingly inspired by American hip-hop and rap music and what has evolved into the “gangster-rap,” or “gangsta rap” genre. This is easily correlated to drug cartels and dealers, because many gangs engage in the buying, processing, and selling of illegal drugs, mostly in urban streets, but now the target market is also expanding into the more suburban and rural areas of the United States.

Groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda present nasheeds without music, hence a nasheed is a religious hymn sung a cappella, mainly in Arabic. According to their extremist interpretations of Islam, instrumental music and female voices are not allowed. Therefore, only male voices are heard in nasheeds, which are sung and chanted without any instrumental accompaniment, especially when it comes to *jihadist nasheeds*. This is conducive to the traditional oral traditions of poetry and storytelling in Arab culture and history.

In order to understand the modern usage of nasheeds and narco-corridos, one must first understand each genre’s history, concepts, and cultural contexts. Then, it is imperative to analyze each genre’s messaging, propensity for glorifying gro-

tesque violence, and tools of dissemination. Finally, it is essential to assess the effectiveness of each genre's lyrics, strategic use of propaganda, profiteering, and growth of the cult-like cultures and industries associated with them, which could not happen without their music increasing in popularity among the masses, despite their criminality.



(Source: Mike Keefe, "ISIS vs. Western Modernity," 4 September 2014, <https://www.intoon.com/toons/2014/KeefeM20140904.jpg>)

**Figure 1. ISIS vs. Western Modernity**

### Nasheeds: The Hymns of Jihad

In the Muslim world, the nasheed (plural, *anasheed*) is a song without musical instruments with lyrics that resemble hymns that praise God (*Allah*). The person who sings a nasheed is called a *munshid*. According to the Islamic Board website, in Islam "what is meant by Nasheed is a song that carries with it an Islamic belief, practice, etiquette, lesson, etc. They do take many forms. Some are just pure simple praises of Allah, some have very specific lessons related to Qur'anic passages, some are lessons of life stated in an Islamic manner; . . . a Nasheed should be voice only with no use of musical instruments."<sup>1</sup> Sometimes a simple percussion is used in the background to accompany the a cappella singing. Most nasheeds are sung in Arabic, but they are contextually known in comparable terminology in other languages, for example, as *Islami nazam* in Urdu.<sup>2</sup>

According to some music scholars, nasheeds evolved from seventh century Arabia, similar to Christian hymns or psalms, which were sung as "tributes to the spiritual life."<sup>3</sup> With the worldwide spread of Islam, "worshippers began using elements from their own musical traditions, including instruments, to sing their own songs of praise. This led to the growth of several new subgenres of Islamic

music stretching across continents. Today's youth have also incorporated the latest styles, such as hip-hop and pop music, to craft their own modern odes to Islam."<sup>4</sup> In his article, "Music of the Arab World," Saeed Saeed explains the nasheed's traditional contents, rules, evolution, and iterations:

Islamic music was originally defined by what it didn't contain: no strings, brass, or wind instruments and no female vocals. The only instrument initially allowed was minimal percussion by an Arabic drum called the *daf*. This minimal form remains widely practiced in the Gulf and some other parts of the Arab world.

However, in places such as Turkey and Southeast Asia, several new styles of spiritual songs have developed. In Turkey, Sufi adherents incorporate music into worship. The most popular are services undertaken by Mevlevi Sufis, which include chanting and the famous whirling dervishes.

In Pakistan and Southeast Asia, the most recognized form of devotional music is *qawwali*. Performed by up to nine men, a qawwali group would often use instruments such as the harmonium (a type of keyboard) and percussion instruments including a tabla and dholak. The songs often run from 15 to 30 minutes and include instrumental preludes, repeated refrains and vocal improvisation. In recent times, nasheed artists from the Gulf have found innovative ways to overcome the no-instrument rule.

Albums by Sharjah's Ahmed Bukhatir and Kuwait's Mishary Rashid Al Afasy use studio trickery and manipulate backing vocals to sound like a synth piano or string section. In the West, groups such as America's Native Deen and Australia's The Brothahood use hip-hop music to get their spiritual message across to a new generation of young Muslims. The nasheeds in English by South Africa's Zain Bhikha secured him a large following in Europe and the Middle East.<sup>5</sup>

Global jihadists have composed their own brand of hymns derived from this tradition of nasheeds, and they have been using the nasheed genre in their propaganda videos, audio recordings, and recruitment tactics. These chants "are now the soundtrack of jihad."<sup>6</sup> In his *Euronews* article, Thomas Seymat says that, "Nasheeds were not always so significant in the jihadi culture, their rise has been only recent. 'There was an increase of songs after the outbreak of the Arab Spring and the diversification of the jihadi scene which was no longer represented by al-Qaeda alone'," quoting Behnam T. Said, a doctoral candidate at the University of Jena; "But an even stronger increase of new nasheeds could be observed during the last years within the context of the war in Syria and Iraq."<sup>7</sup>

Two scholars have focused on jihadi nasheeds: Behnam Said, whose 2012 journal article in *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* explains how nasheeds constitute a significant "Contribution to the Study of Jihadist Culture." Also, Aymenn Jawad

Al-Tamimi has been translating jihadi nasheeds from Arabic to English for many years and has posted his work on his website.<sup>8</sup> Behnam Said makes a startling discovery in his article, stating that the songs represent an inspiration for many modern jihadists, for instance Anwar al-Awlaqi, whom the United States killed in an airstrike in Yemen in September 2011, made an “interesting statement [in] his pamphlet ‘44 Ways to Support Jihad’,” saying:

In the time of Rasulullah (i.e., The Prophet Muhammad) he had poets who would use their poetry to inspire the Muslims and demoralize the disbelievers. Today Nasheed can play that role. A good Nasheed can spread so widely it can reach to an audience that you could not reach through a lecture or a book. Nasheeds are especially inspiring to the youth, who are the foundation of Jihad in every age and time. Nasheeds are an important element in creating a ‘Jihad culture.’ Nasheeds are abundant in Arabic but scarce in English. Hence it is important for talented poets and talented singers to take up this responsibility. The nasheeds can cover topics such as: Martyrdom, Jihad is our only solution, support of the present-day leaders of Jihad (to connect the youth to them), the situation of the *Ummah* (global Muslim community) the responsibility of the youth, the victory of Islam and defending the religion. The nasheeds should focus on Justice rather than peace and strength rather than weakness. The nasheeds should be strong and uplifting and not apologetic and feminine.<sup>9</sup>

Hence, we see that jihadists have used nasheeds strategically in a concerted effort to spread their propaganda, legitimize their ideologies in the façade of religion, and popularize their genre to gain recruits and loyal followers. Nasheeds are “used by different Islamic groups who are engaged in battle, Sunni or Shia. But many new songs are produced by one of the most powerful actors on the battlefield: the Islamic State”<sup>10</sup> (IS, also known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or ISIS; and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, or ISIL). During the peak of the IS’s power and ubiquitous presence on the Internet, especially Twitter, newly composed nasheeds would be announced with great fanfare. The IS has produced Hollywood-quality propaganda videos that play nasheeds in the background, sometimes providing the lyrics in subtexts on the screen. In addition, al-Qaeda has used nasheeds for its own propaganda purposes as well.

According to Behnam Said, “There are more nasheeds, which are not subsumed under one special category due to the reasons that they are less common in jihadi publications than other ones. These nasheeds are related to Palestine, prisoners, or current political situations.”<sup>11</sup> He goes on, providing an example for a Palestine nasheed:

‘*Sahm al-Ams*’ (The arrow of yesterday) . . . by Abu Ali. This song has been used by Al Qaeda in its video ‘*al-Quds lan tubawwada*’ (Jerusalem will not be juda-

ized) from 19 July 2010 as well as in the 'Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghrib' (AQIM) film '*Adkbulu al-bab aleihim*' (Enter through the door against them), which was released in July 2011. The song's text is about the loss of Jerusalem and Palestine and the loss of dignity, which can be restored only by means of fighting for the land. The text itself is not militant but is apparently attractive for the militant scene as we can conclude from the fact that core Al Qaeda and its branches used this song for their videos.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to finding Jihadi nasheeds in propaganda videos, you can also hear them on the Internet, and prior to the technology of today, there was "already a distribution [before the Internet] via song books, cassettes and videos but the Internet worked as a catalyst."<sup>13</sup> The Internet also provides forums containing audios (*sautiyat*) and sections for discussions "about the permissibility of nasheeds, [and] they are asking for specific songs they come across in videos, etc."<sup>14</sup> Seymat reports in *Euronews*:

In a few clicks, *euronews* found similar forums, web portals and even a subreddit, that host hundreds of MP3s of nasheeds, available to stream or download.

On YouTube, a search for "nasheed" returns 1.3 million results (and more than 80,400 for 'jihad nasheed'), large parts of which use military imagery and claim geographical origins from Chechnya to Bosnia.

Militant Islamist groups have no qualms using Western inventions like the Internet to circulate their hymns: 'Jihadists are very pragmatic,' [Behnam Said] tells *euronews*. 'You will find that skepticism more amongst purist Salafis, like Nasir al-Din al-Albani and many Wahhabi scholars from Saudi Arabia.'

Peter Neumann, a professor of Security Studies at the Department of War Studies at King's College, London, sees irony in the situation. 'There has never been an objection to using Western technology, for example, as long as its use is for a religiously permitted purpose,' Neumann explained during an interview on NPR.

'That's always been the sort of irony and contradiction of this movement – that they are essentially trying to establish states that are following medieval rules, but they are taking advantage of the Internet' and other cutting-edge technologies, according to Neumann, who is the director of The International Center for the Study of Radicalization (ICSR).<sup>15</sup>

Nasheeds have been attached to jihadi videos, which often contain graphic, grotesque, and morbid imagery from battlefields, terrorist attacks, and executions that include beheadings. Sometimes nasheed music attributed to particular Jjihadi videos are banned "from video-hosting platforms, but in most cases not because of the nasheeds but because of the footage."<sup>16</sup> "But you can still access nasheed videos on internet platforms quite easily. The songs have spread so far and there

are so many that it is not possible to control their spread via internet. Also, in many cases you need experts telling you whether the song is a radical one or not and why it should be banned or not. So this is a quite complex task.”<sup>17</sup> Jihadi nasheeds convey a range of messaging, some specific, and some more ambiguous. Often, the “pictures or footage which illustrate the videos leave no doubt of its support for violent jihadist groups, at times the symbols used, such as lions, or scimitars, are ambiguous. Other propaganda videos do not contain violence but are posted by accounts claiming to be linked to ISIL.”<sup>18</sup>

The IS “has used nasheeds to spread its message since its founding, disseminating battle hymns online through its own media unit and other affiliated propaganda outlets.”<sup>19</sup> Most IS nasheeds “are in Arabic, but the language of delivery can be as diverse as the foreign fighters who have joined its ranks.”<sup>20</sup> In 2017, the IS released a new nasheed, entitled, “*Dawlati Baqia*,” or “My State Is Remaining,” which was “professionally recorded and has an Auto Tune quality to it.”<sup>21</sup> The song begins:

*My state is remaining, firing at the enemy.  
Its soldiers shout that it is remaining.  
Its path will not be eliminated; its light seeks to expand.*

Like other ISIS nasheeds, this one was disseminated across the Internet, on encrypted messaging applications, and likely on the organization’s radio station—still broadcasting in areas under its control. The verses are a defiant reply to those who believe IS’s battlefield setbacks signal the group’s demise.<sup>22</sup>

Law enforcement finds it difficult to monitor and police Internet content. However, YouTube, which is owned by Google, “has ‘clear policies prohibiting content intended to incite violence, and [we] remove videos violating these policies when flagged by our users. We also terminate any account registered by a member of a designated Foreign Terrorist Organization and used in an official capacity to further its interests,’ a YouTube spokesperson told *Euronews*. ‘We allow videos posted with a clear news or documentary purpose to remain on YouTube, applying warnings and age-restrictions as appropriate.’”<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, YouTube has “given a number of government agencies ‘trusted’ flagger status to prioritize their reporting of dangerous or illegal material.”<sup>24</sup> However, that might not suffice, since the Internet is global and the sheer capacity and capability to police it around the clock for each platform is impossible. Moreover, as Seymat indicates, “For video-hosting platform YouTube, it is a case of finding the right balance between freedom of expression and removing violent videos.”<sup>25</sup>

From the 1970s until the present, nasheeds have evolved in three contexts and purposes: (1) the “Islamic Resurgence” period as a means to counter cultural changes in Muslim societies and against various governments; (2) the anti-

occupation context and causes, such as Hamas's nasheeds against Israeli occupation, and militant groups fighting against Western forces in Iraq and Afghanistan—the precursor to this has been the much glorified jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan; and (3) the “singing” or chanting of nasheeds as battle hymns, which include mourning for special martyrs and praising hymns that invoke jihadist and ideological leaders like Osama bin Laden, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, Sayyid Qutb, and Samir Salih Abdallah al-Suwailam (aka “Saif al-Islam Khat-tab”), a highly-respected foreign commander in the Chechnya War (1994–1996).<sup>26</sup>

According to Behnam Said, the prominence of nasheeds grew in modern history based on the preaching of Sayyid Qutb, an Egyptian author, educator, Islamic theorist, poet, and a leading member of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in the 1950s and 1960s, which means that the MB embraced nasheeds, within certain parameters, to invoke Qutb and praise him and his “martyrdom.”<sup>27</sup> This phenomenon has mainly targeted internal changes within Muslim societies to repel secular Western cultures and ideas because they threaten Islamic principles and ways of life, as the MB interprets them. In general, most Salafists and Wahhabis do not find nasheeds incompatible with Islam, as long as musical instruments are not used. Salafism and Wahhabism are ultra-orthodox ideologies that usually inspire global jihadists and jihadist movements. Therefore, they use nasheeds to promote Islamism and Islamic principles and teachings and as morale boosters on the battlefield. The IS, which claims to follow Wahhabism, in particular, has popularized nasheeds in their videos and audios, and their videos frequently have extremely violent and graphic images.

The global jihadist movements use nasheeds strategically to connect “between the global jihadist scene to which [nasheeds] are helpful in creating a common narrative and building up a collective historical mind.”<sup>28</sup> Jihadist nasheeds pose significant problems for counterterrorism—specifically countering terrorist ideologies—because they are “very widespread throughout the Internet, so that not only adherents of the jihadist movements but also their sympathizers can get in touch with this material easily, because you will find many hard-core nasheeds not exclusively on jihadist websites but also on sites that claim to provide ‘Islamic nasheeds’.”<sup>29</sup> Scholar Behnam Said warns that, “by those websites people can come in touch with this material, which can, in combination with other factors, radicalize individuals on a rational and emotional level.”<sup>30</sup> Hence, the lines are increasingly blurred between the legal dissemination of nasheeds that are used in peaceful worship and those promoting violent extremism and jihadism.

Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi translates IS documents and nasheeds for counterterrorism purposes. He provided the English translation from Arabic for an IS



nasheed in November 2017 intended to boost morale following the loss of territories of the Caliphate, as mentioned above. According to Al-Tamimi,

The Islamic State's Ajnad Media, which produces nasheeds in Arabic, has released a new production entitled *Dawlati la tuqharu* ("My state will not be vanquished"). As with the other nasheeds produced in recent months by Ajnad Media, this nasheed follows the same theme of the endurance of the Islamic State despite the loss of its core territories in Iraq and Syria. Below is my translation of it:

*Cry the takbir [Allahu Akbar] and rejoice: my state will not be vanquished.  
My state, for we have continued supporting it.  
My state's edifice is built from our blood.  
My state's banners proudly fly in Excellence.  
On the day of the tumult, our soldiers' horse does not slacken.  
Their determination does not bend, their spear is not broken.  
What noble men they are! For loftiness they have embarked.  
In their efforts, our soldiers have bewildered mere men.  
Oh our enemies, come forth, mobilize and issue the summoning call.  
Gather your soldiers, in hellfire they will be burnt.  
You will either be killed or taken prisoner.  
Our swords have not ceased to drip with your blood.<sup>31</sup>*

Thus, we see that nasheeds remain as paramount strategic tools for the global jihadist movement that includes al-Qaeda, the IS, and a host of other militant groups and cells. The nasheeds have penetrated the spirit and psyche of thousands, if not millions, of admirers and sympathizers who have taken the nasheed as bait. Counterterrorism efforts must consider tackling nasheeds without violating freedoms and rights and without offending religious sensitivities. These are not only challenging goals and aspirations, but given the nasheeds' religious legacy, legitimacy, and history, they might be nearly impossible to achieve, especially since the Internet provides the ultimate platform for global reach and individual exposure to the "Islamic hymns."

Similarly, drug cartels have been using narco ballads called narco corridos to promote narco culture, beliefs, messages, and paradigms. The next section examines narco corridos and their impact on what can be described as "adoring fans," despite the narco stigma of criminality and reputation for excessive violence.

### **Narco Corridos: The Drug Ballads of Narco-Culture and Narco-Terrorism**

In 2013, Netflix aired a shocking documentary entitled *Narco Cultura*, or "Narco Culture." The film depicts the contrasting circumstances of drug cartels, or *narcos*,

and a law enforcement forensics team (SEMEOF, a crime scene investigation service) in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, which is located at a mere stone's throw to the border town of El Paso, Texas. The film provides homicide statistics, stating that in 2007 Juárez suffered 320 murders; in 2008, 1,623 murders; in 2009, 2,754 murders, and in 2010, 3,622 murders; whereas, El Paso, Texas had less than eight murders per year.

The film opens with scenes and narrations about pistols, AK-47 and R15 machine guns, 9 mm handguns, beheaded and dismembered bodies, and, the narrator points out that, "sometimes the heads have messages" attached to them. These are the crimes of the narco cells in Juárez, and obviously, by looking at the statistics for homicides, these terrorists have increased their presence and bloody operations in the city. The local civilians suffer terribly from the narco gangs' extortion, bullying, kidnappings, and grotesque violence. The locals yearn for peace, security, and stability, and some desire to cross the border to safer ground in El Paso. The film also profiles Edgar Quintero, a popular narco corrido singer who is married and has two small children.<sup>32</sup> Quintero breaks into song on camera:

*I was walking in peace around Guadalajara  
The damn government started a battle  
With an AK-47 but no bulletproof vest,  
I cruised in my white truck  
I hit one, my rifle never fails  
With a good eye and a good pulse, my school fights back<sup>33</sup>*

Edgar Quintero then talks on the phone with "El Ghost," his narco benefactor. Quintero asks his employer what he wants in the next song. He gets paid a bundle of US dollars. He informs the viewers that he was approached in prison to be in a band called Buknas de Culiacan. In another scene, Quintero's wife says on camera, "I like narco-corridos. People like hip-hop . . . There's nothing better than narco-corridos, you know."<sup>34</sup>

If you go to "Narco-Corridos" in Amazon.com, you will see the following:

**Audio CD (2001)**

**Editorial Review**

The corrido, or ballad, is one of Mexico's oldest and most respected song styles, and also one of its most contemporary and controversial. The classic corridos are Mexico's equivalent of the Spanish romances, the British broadside ballads, and the cowboy songs of the old West. Today, the form has been reborn as one of the most popular musics in Mexico and the U.S., but most of the corrido protagonists now are drug traffickers, and in Los Angeles or the border towns these narcocorridos are regarded by many people as a sort of Mexican equivalent of

gangsta rap. While narco songs dominate the field, groups like Los Tigres del Norte also use corridos to tell eloquent stories of immigrant life, and to deal with the twists and turns of contemporary politics.

This album, designed to accompany the book 'Narcocorrido: A Journey into the Music of Drugs, Guns, and Guerrillas' (Rayo/HarperCollins) is the first to survey the modern corrido boom. It focuses on the work of the genre's defining band, *Los Tigres del Norte*, with examples of other styles and artists showing the breadth and variety of the current scene. Like the book, it gives particular attention to the great *corridistas*, the writers who have made this medievaly-rooted form into one of the most exciting and relevant musics of our time. It has full notes on all the songs and artists by author Elijah Wald, in both English and Spanish.

This music is far more popular than most English-speakers can imagine. In the year 2000, Mexican regional music accounted for over half of all Latin and Spanish-language record sales in the United States—selling almost four times as many records as all the 'tropical' styles (salsa, merengue, cumbia) put together. It is hard to say what proportion of those records are corridos, but one of the five top stations in Los Angeles is playing corridos and narcocorridos virtually *all day long*, and corrido stars appear regularly on the Billboard Latin charts.<sup>35</sup> [emphasis added]

In the aforementioned documentary, viewers see extremely disturbing scenes, including Quintero riding a bicycle with his child in tow, singing, "We're blood-thirsty, crazy, and we like to kill," and then he turns to his child and says, "Sing it!" The scene brings home the fact that narcos often use children to kill; some are as young as 14 and 15 years old.<sup>36</sup> This is similar to the IS and various other militias and terrorist organizations, who increasingly see value in indoctrinating children and getting them to carry out their operations.

In his book *Narco-Cults*, Tony Kail describes the Mexican drug cartels as "a sophisticated breed of criminal enterprise," adding that, "The growth of the cartel networks and their expansion throughout the world also produced extreme acts of violence in a campaign to spread drug distribution routes."<sup>37</sup> He cites the statistics that since 2006, "more than 60,000 people have been killed in cartel-related violence and more than 26,000 have gone missing"<sup>38</sup> in Mexico. He adds,

Acts of violence, including public hangings, beheadings, and torture, have become trademarks of the cartel culture. Cartels publicly claim ownership of communities by flying 'narco banners' (*narcomantas*) or signs that display the cartel's name and challenges to rivals in the area. Internet postings, including videos of beheadings and shootings, are used to intimidate communities and rivals. Bodies of victims are displayed as warnings to rivals and threats to local communities. There are increasing acts of violence toward innocent civilians as well as journal-

ists covering the drug war. . . . Once small-time drug trafficking rings, many of these groups have evolved into international terrorist groups.<sup>39</sup>

Along with beheadings, hangings, and shootings, cartels are known for training recruits in disemboweling, filleting, boiling victims in vats (referred to as a “stew”), torturing, and flaying. Drug cartels have left rows of decapitated heads on public streets long before the IS began indulging in this grossly violent crime. Yet, despite these atrocities, narco corridos are extremely popular throughout Latin America and even in the United States.

Narco corridos—singing bands engage in concert tours in major US cities. Their concerts are packed with screaming audiences, who know all the lyrics by heart and sing along with the chorus. Often, the band members carry machine gun and bazooka props on stage while they sing and interact with the audience. The documentary shows a number of such scenes, one in which Buknas performs in El Paso, Texas, and gets the audience to sing along to these lyrics:

*With an AK-47 and a bazooka on my shoulder  
Cross my path and I'll chop your head off  
We're bloodthirsty, crazy, and we like to kill*

*[The audience repeats]*

*We are the best at kidnapping; our gang always travels in a caravan,  
with bulletproof vests, ready to execute!  
I'm number one, code name 'M1' . . . I'm backed up by El Chapo  
My name is Manuel Torres Felix, sending greetings from Culiacan  
(Sinaloa)<sup>40</sup>*

Performing in Los Angeles, lyrics by Los Twiins, Culiacan, who founded the Movimiento Alterado bands, include the following:

*Sending reinforcements to decapitate  
El Macho leads wearing a bulletproof vest  
Bazooka in hand with experience  
Wearing grenades, death is within  
The girls take off their clothes  
A private party like you can't imagine!<sup>41</sup>*

On camera, one of the founders of Los Twiins says, “Hundreds of clubs play this kind of music in the United States;” people go to the clubs and “feel narco for that night. It’s an anti-system rebellion that makes a hero out of somebody that operates outside of the law.”<sup>42</sup> Many people respect Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán—who is currently in a federal prison in the United States—because of his “Robin Hood”-like reputation for helping the poor in Sinaloa.<sup>43</sup> People get drunk and take drugs

at these concerts, and they get into fights. Young kids really like the corridos, and the bands that perform them, and they are practically giddy for singers starring in Mexican narco films.<sup>44</sup> In one scene of *Narco Cultura*, a young schoolgirl interviewed on camera says in Spanish, “I would like to be the girlfriend of a Narco, because it’s a way of life, not anything bad. . . . Well, okay, it’s something bad, but it’s a way of life. It’s something that’s a culture for us.”<sup>45</sup> Walmart, Target, and all the major chain stores sell music CDs of narco corridos. The music “is becoming more professional,” says Adolfo Valenzuela of Twiins Enterprises.<sup>46</sup>

The top-selling narco corrido singer is El Komander, whose logo is an AK-47. He aspires to enter Hollywood. In addition, Mexico has an entire film industry that caters to narco soap operas and action films, but many narco singers and actors want to make it big in the United States, particularly in Hollywood films. Narco corridos are enormously popular throughout the Western hemisphere, particularly in the United States, and the drug cartels even use them to taunt law enforcement personnel. For example, in Juárez you always hear narco corridos playing on police radio frequencies, signifying that there has been an execution.<sup>47</sup> The documentary *Narco Cultura* points out that the, now defunct, website [www.narco.com](http://www.narco.com) provided songwriters with ideas; it was loaded with extremely violent images, including real dead bodies.<sup>48</sup> The website contained videos and audios, including videos of cartels interrogating rival cartel members, as well as executions, all taking place to narco corridos playing in the background. They also make direct threats to the Juárez forensics personnel, SEMEFO, a number of whom have already been killed.<sup>49</sup>

Narco culture encompasses more than just drug production and smuggling and excessive violence; it also incorporates religious and cult-like beliefs, including the deification of some saints and drug lords, diverse iconography, spiritual roles of shaman figures, tattoo symbols, secret hand codes, and some even practice animal sacrifices and voodoo-like rituals. At least two Mexican cartels, La Familia Michoacana and Caballeros Templarios (Knights Templars), base their ideologies on Christian beliefs, symbols, and rituals. According to Tony Kail, “approximately 83 percent of Mexico identifies itself as Catholic (U.S. Department of State). Various forms and denominations of Christianity are widely accepted and embraced among the Mexican population. Drug traffickers who appropriate Christian elements into their practices may find that potential recruits feel as if they can identify with the religious aspects of the group if they are predisposed to this culture.”<sup>50</sup> Consequently, the convictions of the recruits are deeply entrenched, which are reinforced by fear tactics through excessive violence that the narcos utilize to deter operatives from disobeying orders, snitching on the drug lords, betraying the narcos, and/or withdrawing from cartel membership.

Mexico is locked in a drug war that appears unwinnable. The security forces and police have to hide their faces in public, or else they risk getting threats, or worse, from the narcos. Also, corruption and co-optation of government officials, the police, and a host of other figures and business people throughout the social spectrum pose significant challenges and obstacles to effective law enforcement efforts to rein in the narcos. Moreover, the drug gangs, leaders, and operatives who are in prison are capable of continuing their narco-related operations even behind bars. Therefore, if physical containment of the narcos is so difficult in the real world, one can only imagine how incredibly challenging control of their messaging in the virtual world/cyberspace becomes for law enforcement.

Furthermore, the drug cartels are meeting the high demands for consuming narcotics north of the border in the United States. The top drugs of choice over the last several years in the United States have been marijuana, methamphetamine (Meth), heroin, cocaine, and most recently fentanyl, which has emerged with the opioid abuse epidemic. The drug cartels in Mexico and Central and South America are very savvy in adjusting the drug supplies to meet the contemporary demand trends. Thus, it is important to note that if the demand for illicit drugs is so high and the volume of consumption and addictive traits only reinforce the needs for the supplies, then there remains very few ways and means—*if any*—to tackle the popularity of narco corridos and narco culture. In other words, the drug consumption culture, statistics, and demographics have skyrocketed in the United States. These trends provide immensely lucrative profits to the narcos, who then use the revenue to push and market the narco culture in the form of narco corridos and narco films. The narco world and its culture, messages, violence, and criminal behavior are proliferating not only in the real world but also in cyberspace, and until now, there is practically nothing that law enforcement can do about it—especially for long-term impacts against these variables and forces. In turn, the public seems to love narco corridos, the bands that sing them, and the drugs that the cartels produce and traffic particularly to consumers in the United States.

In many ways, the narco culture, organizational structures, methods of operations, ideologies and beliefs, use of narco corridos to popularize the culture, use of excessive violence, and taking advantage of cybertools bear striking similarities to the IS. In the same vein, both the narco corridos and culture and the IS also have distinct differences. The next section comparatively analyzes the similarities and differences between the narco culture/narcoterrorism and the IS. In particular, the comparative analysis focuses on the similarities and differences between narco corridos and jihadist nasheeds.

## **Two-Sided Mirror: Narco-terrorism and Jihadist Terrorism**

Jihadist nasheeds and narco-corridos have some striking similarities and contextual differences (*see* table 1). First, examining the similarities between them, we see that both have cult-like characteristics as symbolized in words, imagery, glorified heroes and leaders, icons, and totalitarian lifestyles, for example, one's membership in the narco world or IS requires complete and total acceptance of the ideologies and assimilation into the ways of life inside these cultures, and the organizations are able to monitor and enforce the rules and practices—violently if necessary. Jihadist nasheeds and narco corridos also glorify violent combat and operations. Both genres also call out their respective enemies and condemn, curse, and ridicule them in lyrics. Both genres also make reference to historical victories over enemies in wars, battles, and revolutions. Both genres use lyrics to warn enemies about the organizations' invincibility and strength and bravery. Both parties claim divine guidance and support on each of their sides in their respective goals and causes. Both genres and their respective organizations engage in brainwashing their followers and sympathizers.

Both genres glorify violence, and the bloodier and more grotesque and excessive in the shock value, the better; and, both use their ideologies to justify their acts, behavior, operations, beliefs, and lifestyles. Both genres pay homage to their fallen heroes, or "martyrs." Both genres are used to disseminate their respective organizations' propaganda, messaging, and ideological worldviews. Both genres are used to project their respective cultures. Both genres have agendas to weaken and/or discourage law enforcement entities and personnel, and they taunt and attempt to intimidate the authorities at large. Both genres have enemies within their own cultures—the Islamic State and al-Qaeda are enemies, and drug cartels are always violently competing with each other for drug smuggling territories and routes. Both genres extensively use social media tools, audiovisual tools, and Internet resources to expand their influence globally. Both genres and their respective organizations systematically and strategically use children in their agendas, operations, and propaganda tools, mainly to ensure the longevity of their ideologies and establishments. Finally, both genres use their songs and lyrics to recruit members and increase popular support worldwide.

Second, examining the contextual differences between Jihadist nasheeds and narco corridos, we see that the nasheeds are based on the jihadist organizations' interpretations of Islam and the scripture, the Quran. The narco corridos are based on the ideologies, tenets, and rules of drug cartels and drug lords, with religion used more as a legitimizing prop in narco culture rather than the core ideology. The jihadist nasheeds of the IS are composed and performed specifically for the greater

objective of creating the Caliphate and continuing its agendas. The narco corridos are composed and performed for the drug cartel leaders who pay the artists. The jihadist nasheeds are not intended for lucrative profits in the same way that narco corridos seek to gain immense fame and fortune for a given band or singer.

**Table 1: A comparative analysis of nasheeds and narco corridos: similarities and differences**

Jihadist Nasheeds	Both	Narco-Corridos
<p>Jihadist nasheeds are based on the jihadist organizations' interpretations of Islam and the scripture, the Quran.</p> <p>The Islamic State's nasheeds have the greater objective of creating the "Caliphate."</p> <p>Jihadist nasheeds do not seek fame and fortune in the same way as narco corridos.</p> <p>The Islamic State's nasheeds glorify jihad, and the fallen fighters as "martyrs."</p> <p>Jihadist nasheeds have very specific military themes and concepts.</p> <p>Jihadist nasheeds have derived from legitimate religious (Islamic) hymns.</p>	<p>Both have cult-like characteristics as symbolized in words, imagery, glorified heroes and leaders, icons, and totalitarian lifestyles.</p> <p>Both glorify violent combat and operations.</p> <p>Both condemn, curse, and ridicule their enemies.</p> <p>Both refer to historical victories over enemies in wars, battles, and revolutions.</p> <p>Both warn their enemies about their invincibility and strength and bravery.</p> <p>Both claim divine guidance and support on each of their sides in their respective goals and causes.</p> <p>Both engage in brainwashing their followers and sympathizers.</p> <p>Both glorify violence, and the bloodier and more grotesque and excessive in the shock value, the better.</p> <p>Both use their ideologies to justify their acts, behavior, operations, beliefs, and lifestyles.</p> <p>Both genres pay homage to their fallen heroes, or "martyrs."</p> <p>Both genres are used to disseminate their respective organizations' propaganda, messaging, and ideological worldviews.</p> <p>Both genres are used to project their respective cultures.</p> <p>Both taunt and attempt to intimidate law enforcement.</p> <p>Both have enemies within their own cultures.</p> <p>Both genres extensively use social media tools, audio-visual tools, and Internet resources to expand their influence globally.</p> <p>Both systematically and strategically use children.</p> <p>Both use their songs and lyrics to recruit members and increase popular support.</p> <p>Both present themselves as the "Good" forces fighting against the "Evil" ones.</p>	<p>Narco corridos are based on the ideologies, tenets, and rules of drug cartels and drug lords.</p> <p>Narco corridos are composed and performed for the drug cartel leaders who pay them.</p> <p>Narco corridos seek to gain immense fame and fortune for a given band and singer.</p> <p>Narco corridos glorify drug cartel leaders as "heroes."</p> <p>Narco corridos have more to do with asymmetric warfare and violence.</p> <p>Narco corridos are a unique genre in its own right, relative to the narco culture.</p>



The jihadist nasheeds glorify jihad, the supposedly divinely sanctioned “just battle” of good against evil, as the IS interprets these attributes. The narco corridos also symbolize the battle between good versus evil, but it is in the context of the oppressed poor for whom “Robin Hood”-like figures and revolutionaries, like Pancho Villa, come to the rescue. The only twist is that in narco corridos the drug cartel leaders are presented as the symbolic Robin Hood heroes fighting oppression on behalf of the poor masses.

Jihadist nasheeds have very specific military themes and concepts; whereas, the narco corridos lyrics have more to do with asymmetric warfare and violence against other rival cartels and law enforcement authorities. Finally, jihadist nasheeds are derived from legitimate religious (Islamic) hymns, and hence this makes them more difficult to distinguish between the peaceful and “radical” or extremist nasheeds. On the other hand, narco corridos are a unique genre in its own right, relative to the narco culture, although narco corridos draw influences from German polkas for the use of the accordion, as well as many influences from American rap, hip-hop, and Gangsta music. Nonetheless, narco corridos stand out as their own genre with no direct religious background, unlike the nasheed.

## **Conclusion**

The modern world of popular culture is complex enough, and when jihadist nasheeds and narco corridos are added into the mix, an extremely challenging problem emerges for law enforcement, social order, and basic human decency. The jihadist nasheeds are deliberately couched in the legitimate religious genre of the Islamic nasheed, which has been popular for decades, if not centuries. Violent jihadist organizations, like the IS and al-Qaeda, have strategically used nasheeds in their propaganda, indoctrination tactics, and global appeal, especially by means of social media and other Internet tools. Drug cartels have succeeded in popularizing the narco culture, and narco corridos have been the primary tool for drug lords and their organizations to glorify themselves, venerate excessive violence, threaten their enemies, and taunt law enforcement authorities.

Counterterrorism strategists face formidable obstacles and challenges on a regular day, but when including the power, influence, and reach of jihadist nasheeds and narco corridos, the terrorist organizations seem to enjoy many advantages. Social media and various Internet tools afford terrorist organizations, which include narco-terrorists, an edge that they effectively exploit, and global public demand for both nasheeds and narco corridos allows these organizations to proliferate and sustain their longevity. Counterterrorism experts, intelligence officials, and law enforcement authorities must consider innovative ways to disrupt the momentum and popular appeal of jihadist nasheeds and narco corridos without

offending cultural and religious sensitivities. Moreover, countering narco-terrorism also requires addressing the demand and consumption side of the illicit drugs equation. Anything less will eventually threaten global peace and security.

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**Notes**

1. “Nasheeds, What are They?” *Islamic Board*, 2018, <https://www.islamicboard.com/>.
2. Nasheeds are distinguished from South Asian Urdu *na’at*, which is poetry recitation praising the Prophet Muhammad; predominantly recited in Urdu, the *na’at* is also performed in other South Asian languages.
3. Although scholars have no consensus about this; some reject the notion that nasheeds date back to the seventh century and contend that they are a twentieth-century creation, while others contend that they are derived from Sufism, or Islamic mysticism, from early Islamic history.
4. Saeed Saeed, “Music of the Arab World: The Sound of Islam,” *National*, 21 July 2012, <https://www.thenational.ae/>.
5. Saeed, “Music of the Arab World.” See also Zain Bhikha’s “Allah Knows,” *YouTube*, 7 May 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/>.
6. Thomas Seymat, “How Nasheeds Became the Soundtrack of Jihad,” *Euronews*, 10 August 2014, <https://www.euronews.com/>.
7. Seymat, “How Nasheeds Became the Soundtrack of Jihad.”
8. See Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi’s blog at <https://www.aymennjawad.org/>.
9. Behnam Said, “Hymns (Nasheeds): A Contribution to the Study of Jihadist Culture,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 35 no. 12 (2012), 863–64, <https://www.tandfonline.com/>.
10. Seymat, “How Nasheeds Became the Soundtrack of Jihad.”
11. Said, “Hymns (Nasheeds),” 864–65.
12. Said, “Hymns (Nasheeds),” 865.
13. Seymat, “How Nasheeds Became the Soundtrack of Jihad.”
14. Seymat, “How Nasheeds Became the Soundtrack of Jihad.”
15. Seymat, “How Nasheeds Became the Soundtrack of Jihad.”
16. Seymat, “How Nasheeds Became the Soundtrack of Jihad.”
17. Seymat, “How Nasheeds Became the Soundtrack of Jihad.”
18. Seymat, “How Nasheeds Became the Soundtrack of Jihad.”
19. Alison Meuse, “As ISIS Gets Squeezed in Syria and Iraq, It’s Using Music as a Weapon,” *National Public Radio*, 29 June 2017, <https://www.npr.org/>.
20. Meuse, “As ISIS Gets Squeezed in Syria and Iraq.”

21. Meuse, "As ISIS Gets Squeezed in Syria and Iraq."
22. Meuse, "As ISIS Gets Squeezed in Syria and Iraq."
23. Seymat, "How Nasheeds Became the Soundtrack of Jihad," *Euronews*.
24. Seymat, "How Nasheeds Became the Soundtrack of Jihad."
25. Seymat, "How Nasheeds Became the Soundtrack of Jihad."
26. See Said, "Hymns (Nasheeds)," 863–79.
27. Said, "Hymns (Nasheeds)," 863–79.
28. Said, "Hymns (Nasheeds)," 863–79.
29. Said, "Hymns (Nasheeds)," 876.
30. Said, "Hymns (Nasheeds)," 876.
31. Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "My State Will Not Be Vanquished' – New Nasheed from Ajnad Media," translation from Arabic to English, Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi (blog), 21 November 2017, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/>.
32. See *Narco Cultura*, documentary film, directed by Shaul Schwarz, 2013, originally broadcast on Netflix: <https://www.imdb.com/>. Warning: The film contains extremely graphic content.
33. *Narco Cultura*.
34. *Narco Cultura*.
35. See Various Artists, "Corridos y Narcocorridos," Amazon (website), <https://www.amazon.com/>.
36. *Narco Cultura*.
37. Tony M. Kail, *Narco-Cults: Understanding the Use of Afro-Caribbean and Mexican Religious Cultures in the Drug Wars* (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, Taylor and Francis, 2015), 1. Warning: The book contains extremely graphic photos.
38. Kail, *Narco-Cults*, 2.
39. Kail, *Narco-Cults*, 2.
40. *Narco Cultura*.
41. *Narco Cultura*.
42. *Narco Cultura*.
43. *Narco Cultura*.
44. *Narco Cultura*.
45. *Narco Cultura*.
46. *Narco Cultura*.
47. *Narco Cultura*.
48. An archived version of the site can be found at
49. *Narco Cultura*.
50. Kail, *Narco-Cults*, 233.

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