

Fighting horror with humor, Iraqis retaliate against IS

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([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) The situation in Iraq is no laughing matter, but artists of all stripes are turning to humor to wage war on the Islamic State (IS), an entity so terrifying by nature that no distortion is needed to achieve the goal of ridicule.

“The purpose of comedy and cartoons is to pick something peculiar and exaggerate it, but what is happening now in Iraq is so abnormal that I can’t pump it up any further,” said veteran Iraqi cartoonist Diyaa al-Hajjar.

“Hollywood movie monsters like Dracula and zombies are sweet compared to ISIS and its brutality,” added Hajjar, known also for his children storybooks.

Published across national newspapers and picked up on Facebook, his political cartoons depict the victims of terrorism; IS executioners and fighters; Gulf states bankrolling terrorists; and the purported profiteers—namely the U.S. and Israel, who he says are the only ones to benefit from Iraq’s chaos.

In one cartoon, a towering cleric in traditional Arabic dress removes the brains from subservient donkey-eared jihadists and replaces them with bombs. The newly programmed, black-clad fighters rush off to battle, wielding a scimitar in each hand.

“Every phenomenon has its own reflection, but what is beautiful about what is happening today is that there is no fear, especially among the young generation. They are attacking *Daash* [the Arabic acronym for IS] on Facebook, on TV, and online through animations,” Hajjar said. The cartoonist, who survived an assassination attempt in 2006, says now that he wishes to leave Iraq.

Online, skits and animations poking fun at IS jihadists pop up all the time on YouTube.

Bluto repurposed

An Iraqi video circulating on YouTube recycles an old episode of Popeye, adding a voice-over. The new storyline shows the villain Bluto as a new IS convert, lusting as usual after Olive. He sends her an invitation to join sexual jihad, triggering a new fight between Popeye and his arch nemesis.

Another video skit making the rounds online portrays a heavily bearded, pot-bellied man about to execute a blindfolded youth on charges of worshipping his father because he was caught crying at the foot of his grave. The youth begs for mercy saying: "I am not going to cry for my father any more."

The executioner retorts: "It is too late now. You will be hanged by bullets."

The soundtrack is a remix of one of the Sunni militant group's staple lyrics: "They are not the follower of Mohammed." It is an accusation IS lobes against Muslims who do not share its radical world view. The video skit has been viewed 591,000 times since it was posted in May.

The latest comic weapon to be deployed against IS in Iraq, however, may be the biggest gun in the arsenal: a full-blown satirical soap opera that Iraqi TV viewers have been tuning into since Saturday—and that some actors even stayed away from out of fear of retaliation.

"State of Myth" depicts the arrival of IS fighters and their ideology to a fictional town in Iraq. Director Ali al-Qassim says its goal is to expose those who have tarnished the name of Islam.

"This is a message to IS specifically," says Mr. Ali while on a filming break. "Islam is not killings and explosions and displacing people, but unfortunately this is what is happening in Iraq. We must fight them. In the same way that the police and army have heroes, the media must speak up and be heroic against them."

Fear of retaliation

But politics and fear have already gotten in the way of production.

The original trailer, still available on the Internet, took a jab at the CIA, Israel, and the Gulf monarchies, a trio that many Iraqis hold responsible for the rise of the demonic group. The production company Iraqi Media Networks decided to recast the first episode after the US-led coalition got Arab allies on board, but the subliminal

message still gets across.

Many stars refused to join the cast, fearing the consequences. The name of the Iraqi actor who plays IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was dropped from the titles. The man is the spitting image of the elusive caliph. As an Iranian make-up artist applies the finishing touches, he admits: "It is not the most difficult role I've played, but it is the most dangerous."

Wissam Abdelwahid plays Fuda - a drunkard with an annoying penchant for snapping selfies who is quickly co-opted by the Islamic State and adopts its tyrannical ways.

"It is our duty to denounce the brutality of IS," he says. "Despite the horrible crimes, our goal is to plant a smile on people's faces."