

Icons and Symbols in Extremism

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Why does imagery matter?

The output of extremist imagery on the internet has increased exponentially as additional platforms such as Telegram and Twitter have become available.

This research project intends to develop classification methodologies to aid practitioners in assessing both the content of the images and their significance.



Figure A

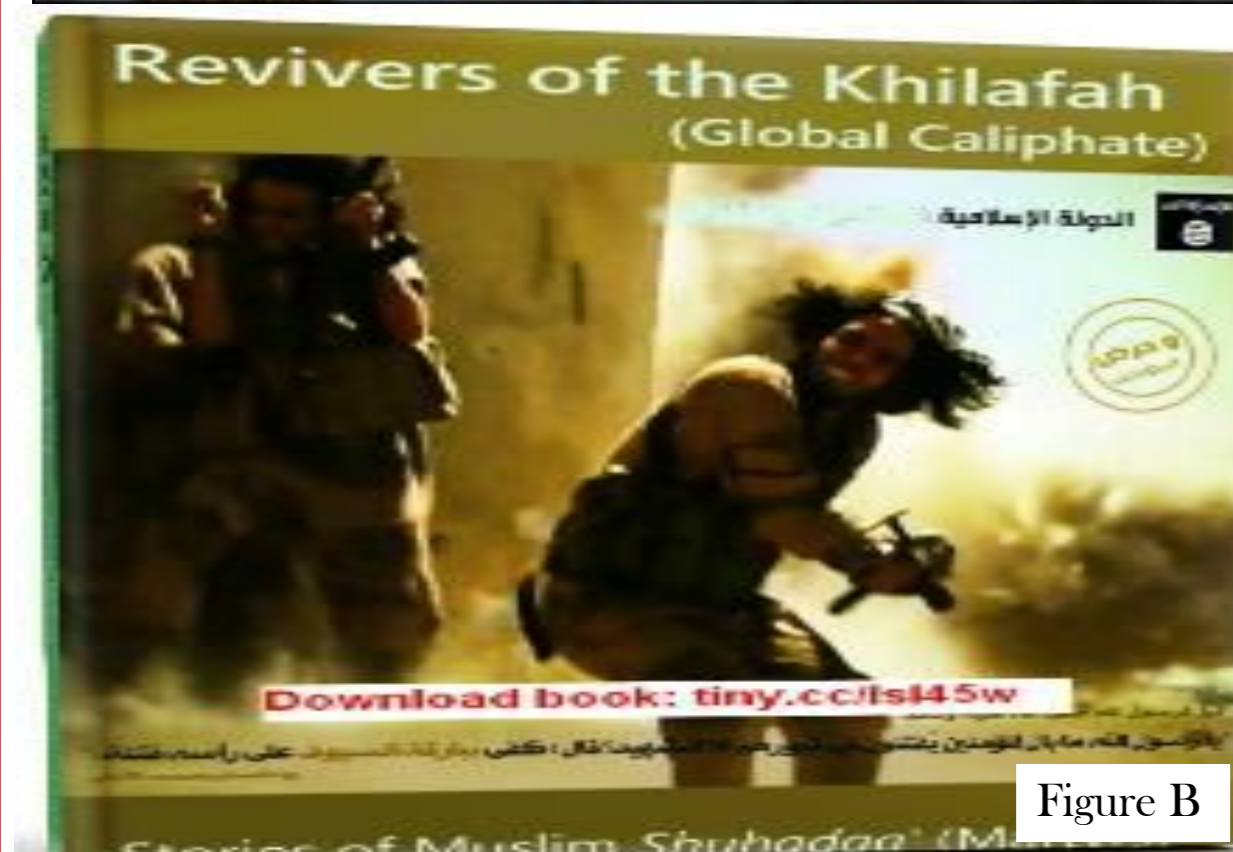


Figure B

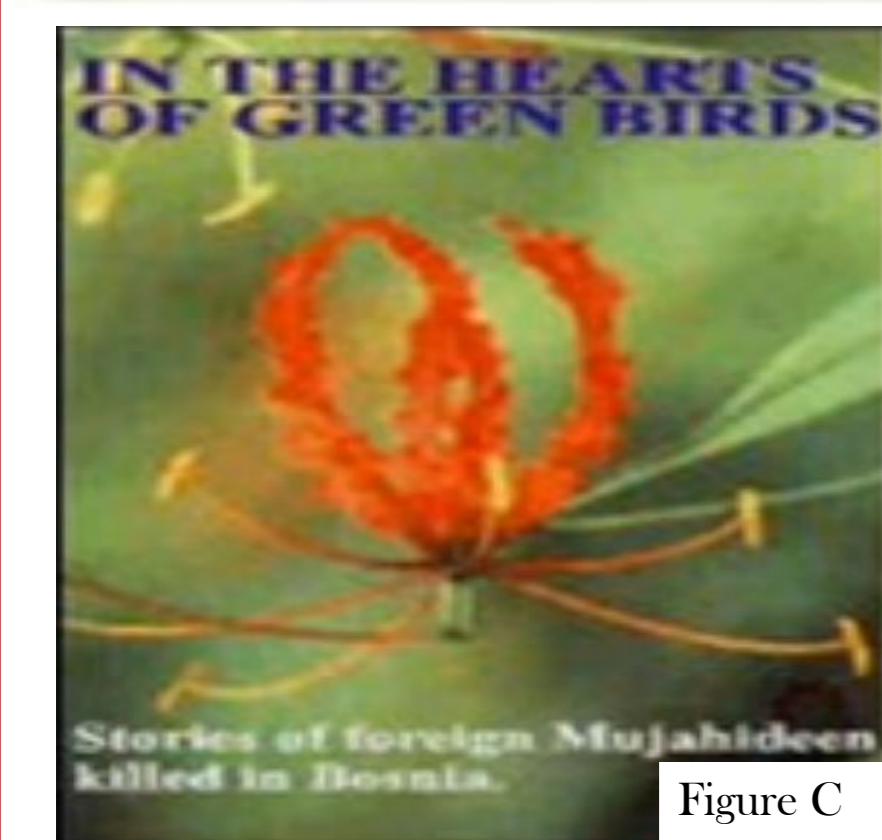


Figure C



Figure D



Figure E

Martyrdom narratives – from written to audio to visual

Martyrdom narratives were revived through the writings of Abdullah Azzam (figure A from an As-Sahab video), who wrote about the Afghan jihad against the Soviet Union. They have remained a constant through the Bosnian Civil War and into current conflicts.

Jihadists seek to narrow the definition of a martyr to focus specifically on those who die fighting jihad.

Figure B is a screen-grab from an Islamic State (IS) video. Babar Ahmed brought martyrdom narratives from Bosnia in the '90's (figure C).

The right hand image (figure D) comes from an IS-aligned Kurdish group and was amended and used by a British woman in her social media avatar.

Doves have minimal symbolism in Salafi Islam. figure E, possibly from Jabhat al-Nusra, celebrates Omar Mateen (the Florida gay nightclub killer).

How do emblems change over time and become 'iconic'

Variations on a theme are shown in the iterations of the Islamic State organisation through its beginnings in the Tawheed and Jihad group (figure F) through the Mujahedeen Shura Council (figure G) to the Islamic State of Iraq device (figure H) in use to the present day.

Each emphasises the centrality of divine monotheism (*tawheed*) through representations of the declaration of faith. The bottom and most famous image uses archaic script which was also employed in Muslim Brotherhood and Gammiyya Islamiyya devices. The Islamic State group has emphasised the personal role of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in designing the first of these devices.

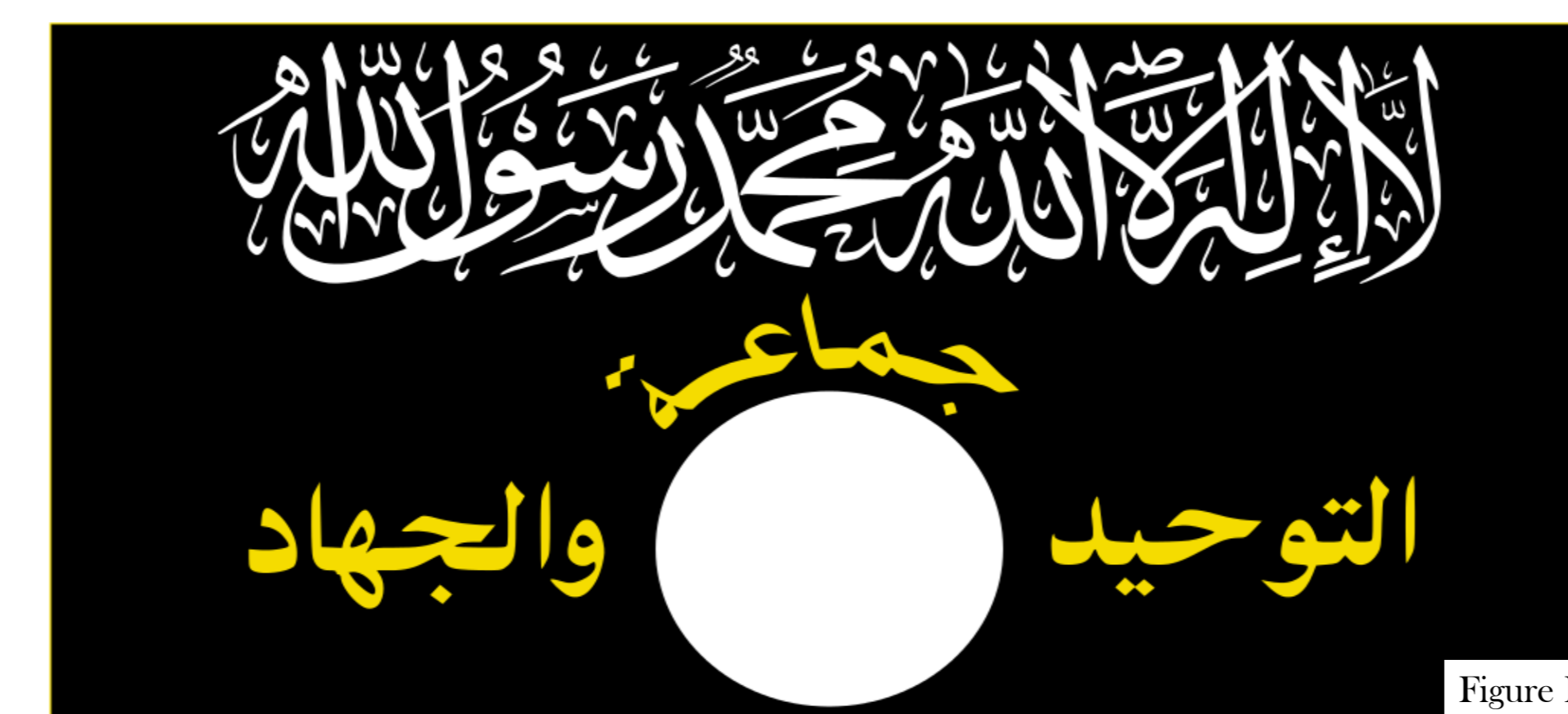


Figure F



Figure G

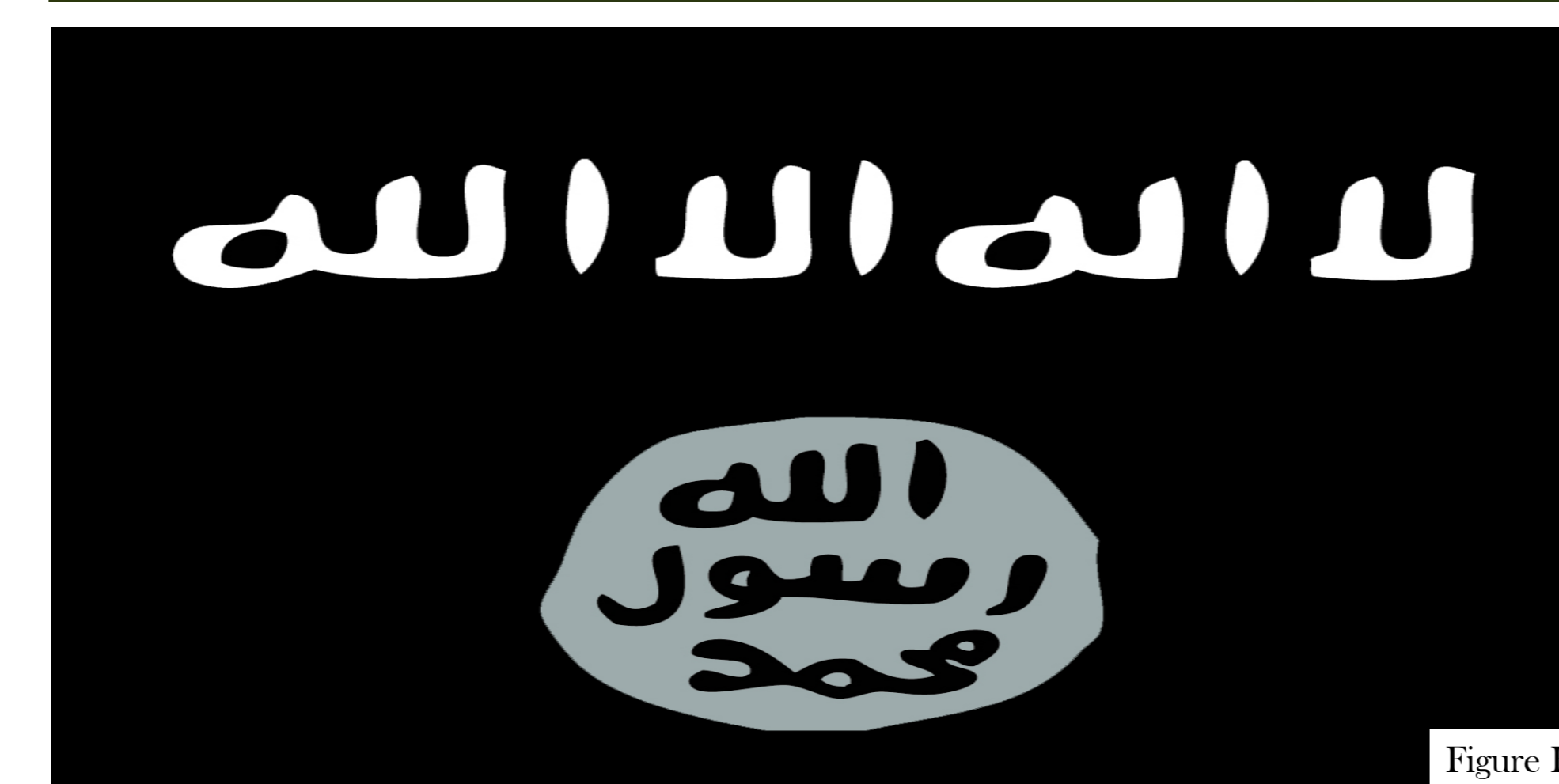


Figure H

Invented traditions

In 2015 the Islamic State announced its new currency in a series of videos and texts (figure I). The design of the coins (figure J) shows Islamic State's use of religious themes to prove its legitimacy. The ears of wheat refer to the virtues of spending money to support the jihad, the spear device refers to a hadith that has the Prophet Muhammad refer to the sustenance of his nation being under the shade of a spear. Note the White Minaret design in the silver coin, a reference to the prophesised descent of Jesus in the second coming.

The Islamic State differs from its principal rivals for the Islamist audience in ensuring that the iconography it employs is explained down to the finest 'thick' detail, so that its significance can be fully understood (figure J taken from *Dabiq* magazine). The emphasis on apocalyptic narratives is reflected in the choice of the white minaret in Damascus, *al manara al baydaa*. Jabhat al-Nusra used this same symbol by giving the same name to its media outlet, but without explanation

Cultural currency

The animal design in the martyrdom imagery shows cross-cultural movement in extremist imagery. The dove (figure D) as a symbol of peace is not mentioned in Quranic accounts of Noah and the flood. Outside the Caucasus, the wolf (figure E) is not celebrated in Islamic culture, being regarded as treacherous. Has Western media references to lone wolf attacks been adopted by extremists to play back against Western audiences?



Figure I

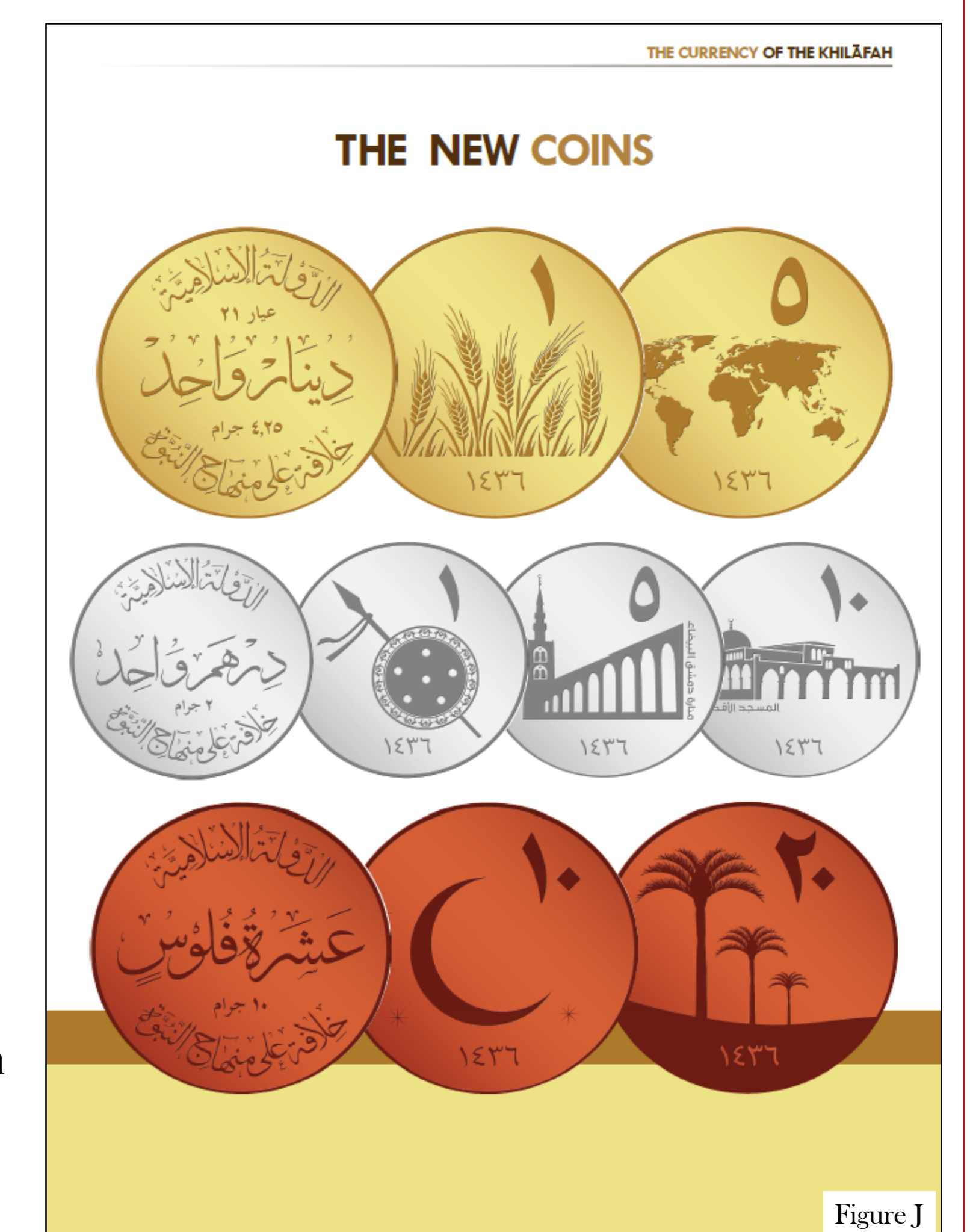


Figure J