

# DIGITAL JIHAD

## ONLINE COMMUNICATION AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

edited by **Francesco Marone**

introduction by **Paolo Magri**



ISPI



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## **ONLINE COMMUNICATION AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM**

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**ISPI**

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DIGITAL JIHAD. ONLINE COMMUNICATION AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM  
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# Introduction

Paolo Magri

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Throughout history, violent political groups have exploited available means of communications to promote their cause, engage with their audiences and oppose their adversaries.

Clearly, in our age the internet offers tremendous opportunities for violent extremists across the ideological spectrum and at a global level. In addition to propaganda, digital technologies have transformed the dynamics of radical mobilisation, recruitment and participation. At least in the West, few cases of jihadist radicalisation completely lack a web component, including occasional viewing of extremist propaganda.

The study of the dynamics and trends of violent extremism on the internet are particularly relevant to the current evolution of the jihadist threat. While at first sight the collapse of the “caliphate” in Syria and Iraq, the death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2019, and the decrease in the number of jihadist attacks in the West since 2017 could suggest violent extremism has entered a phase of relative decline, the web remains a crucial means for radical propaganda, mobilisation, planning attacks and financing.

Even though the jihadist threat has seemingly declined, the danger exists of the internet being an environment where radical messages can survive and even prosper. Online militants and sympathisers are still difficult to counter and continue to represent a critical part of the extremist threat. The vast availability of diverse digital platforms and the continuous development of technology have allowed extremists to rapidly adapt and employ

new communication techniques. However, this does not imply the virtual sphere can replace the real world; rather, online and offline dynamics can complement one another.

Against this background, this ISPI report aims to investigate the current landscape of jihadist online communication, including original empirical analysis. In doing so, the volume does not interpret the internet as a shapeless monolith but tries to highlight the opportunities and limitations of different digital platforms. It also explores the current Italian-language jihadist scenario, thus filling a gap in the analysis of this phenomenon. Specific attention is also placed on potential measures and initiatives to address the threat of online violent extremism.

In the opening chapter Francesco Marone examines the relationship between violent extremism and the tools made available by digital communication technologies. Clearly, this relationship is anything but new. Back in the 1980s, U.S. far-right militants were the first to grasp the potential of the internet, but its use has increased dramatically since then. Traditional “static” websites were initially replaced by forums and chat rooms, then by social media and finally by encrypted messaging applications. In particular, this chapter covers six areas of application for violent extremism: cyberattacks; dissemination of operational instructions; hacking and “doxing”; recruitment and terrorist “virtual entrepreneurship”; propaganda; and financing.

Torres Soriano puts the spotlight on seven “premises” for how jihadist activism has materialised on the internet and what to expect in the coming years. The author highlights not only the strengths of the web, but also its less evident dilemmas and vulnerabilities: the influence of the medium on the key features of online activism; the complex relationship between web presence and engagement in armed jihad in the real world; the inclination of terrorists to become “early adopters” of internet innovations; the dynamics of “Darwinian negative selection” on the web that favour the most sophisticated extremists; and the consequences of the fact the number of people in terrorist organisations in charge of propaganda tasks is usually small.

Terrorist groups such as so-called Islamic State (IS) quickly understood the potential of social media to broadcast their propaganda and gain support. The chapter by Colombo provides an original empirical analysis of Arab-speaking users' discourse about IS on Twitter with a view to identifying the most recurrent arguments for and against this organisation. There is also an exploration of the issue of political and religious leadership in the Muslim world, a crucial aspect for IS given that, since the proclamation of its "caliphate" in 2014, this organisation, unlike other terrorist groups, has presented itself as the political and religious authority of the entire Sunni community.

As Fisher and Prucha emphasise in their chapter, for jihadist groups the online material in Arabic is particularly important because it tends to carry greater authority and is also more extensive than for other languages. Their contribution provides an evidence-based analysis of what jihadist networks share on Telegram (arguably the favoured online platform for jihadists over the last few years) through a content analysis of an Arabic-language IS core channel which collectively has over 111,000 pages. The authors show the jihadist movement thrives on lengthy documents that set out the movement's theology, beliefs and strategy. They further highlight why examining this content matters in order to understand persistent online presence of jihadists and the outlook for their real-world survival.

Mazzoni presents an original in-depth analysis of the Italian-language jihadist scene on Telegram, a topic that has received little attention so far. In particular, the author analyses one of the main Italian-language propaganda channels affiliated with the Islamic State and compares its activity to that of its more developed counterparts in French and English. The chapter also tries to outline the possible development of the Italian-language channels that translate the material produced by IS and its affiliates, taking into account the organisation's recent territorial defeats and the simultaneous decrease in its propaganda material.

As Lombardi and Plebani emphasise in their chapter, IS has been showing signs of profound transformation since 2017,



through an evident change in strategies and communication practices. This contribution explores this interesting period of change, which may be read through the “caliphate’s” communication products, in the belief that this change has led to a “legacy of Islamic State” that defines the ongoing, enduring threat of jihadist terrorism.

The last chapter by Bishop and Macdonald focuses on the response to the threat of online extremist content. It is well-known that in the past few years regulatory measures have been imposed that require social media companies to do more to remove terrorist content from their platforms. The chapter examines what form these measures should take, under the premise that there is no one-size-fits-all measure. In particular, the authors argue that efforts to remove online terrorist content should target the whole of the social media ecosystem, not just the social media giants.

Recognising the salience of this ever-changing environment, this ISPI report intends to provide an original, in-depth and updated analysis of online violent extremism, with the aim of presenting important points for reflection on the phenomenon in the West (including Italy) and beyond.

Digital communication technologies can offer ample opportunities for violent extremists, but at the same time they provide formidable instruments to confront the threat and even to promote alternative visions.

*Paolo Magri*  
*ISPI Executive Vice President and Director*

# 1. Violent Extremism and the Internet, Between Foreign Fighters and Terrorist Financing

Francesco Marone

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This introductory chapter aims to concisely examine the current relationship between violent extremism and the tools offered by digital communication technologies<sup>1</sup>, particularly the Web.

As is well-known, the internet has become a crucial environment for violent extremism and for terrorism across the ideological spectrum. It is worth recalling that US far-right militants were the first to grasp the potential of the internet back in the 1980s. Since then its use has increased dramatically. Over time, traditional extremist websites have been replaced by forums and chat rooms<sup>2</sup>, then social media and finally encrypted messaging applications (“apps”). In the future the so-called dark web<sup>3</sup> could represent a new frontier.

With regard to jihadist extremism, in recent years online propaganda and communication has moved to a large extent

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<sup>1</sup> A. Meleagrou-Hitchens, A. Alexander and N. Kaderbhai, “The impact of digital communications technology on radicalization and recruitment”, *International Affairs*, vol. 93, no. 5, 2017, pp. 1233-1249.

<sup>2</sup> A. Zelin, *The State of Global Jihad Online: A Qualitative, Quantitative, and Cross Lingual Analysis*, New America Foundation, 2013. See also Torres Soriano’s chapter in this volume.

<sup>3</sup> See G. Weimann, “Going Dark: Terrorism on the Dark Web”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2016, pp. 195-206.

from open social media such as Twitter<sup>4</sup> to more protected applications such as Telegram<sup>5</sup>. However, the role of non-encrypted social networks remains salient for the debate on violent extremism<sup>6</sup>.

The continuous search for new online platforms and services is not surprising. In general, it is evident that the Web offers huge opportunities to pursue various causes, including radical ones. In general, compared to more traditional communication channels, it presents various benefits, including: high level of anonymity; ease of use; economic convenience; widespread availability; interactivity (so-called “Web 2.0” and beyond); difficult control by public authorities; and the possibility to circumvent the constraints of mainstream media.

For instance, various empirical analyses showed how at the height of the self-proclaimed “Caliphate” the Web – and, in particular, social network platforms – had a key role in informing, inspiring and connecting jihadist foreign fighters headed for Syria and Iraq<sup>7</sup>.

On the other hand, the internet is not without problems even for extremist activism, ranging from the dissonance among

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<sup>4</sup> J.M. Berger and J. Morgan, *The ISIS Twitter Census: Defining and Describing the Population of ISIS Supporters on Twitter*, Analysis Paper, Brookings Institution, 2015; A. Alexander, *Digital Decay? Tracing Change over Time among English-Language Islamic State Sympathizers on Twitter*, Report, Program on Extremism at George Washington University, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> N. Prucha, “IS and the Jihadist Information Highway – Projecting Influence and Religious Identity via Telegram”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 10, no. 6, 2016, pp. 48-58; M. Bloom, H. Tiflati and J. Horgan, “Navigating ISIS’s preferred platform: Telegram”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 31, no. 6, 2019, pp. 1242-1254. See also chapter 3 by Ali Fisher and Nico Prucha, and chapter 5 by Valerio Mazzoni in this volume.

<sup>6</sup> See chapter 4 by Matteo Colombo in this volume.

<sup>7</sup> In particular, J.A. Carter, S. Maher and P.R. Neumann, *#Greenbirds: Measuring Importance and Influence in Syrian Foreign Fighter Networks*, Report, International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR), 2014; J. Klausen, “Tweeting the Jihad: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq”, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2015, pp. 1-22.

“keyboard warriors” who promote action in the real world without putting it into practice to difficulties in maintaining control and discipline for terrorist organisations<sup>8</sup>.

Clearly, the Web can perform different functions for extremists and terrorists. This chapter will present and discuss six areas of application, in decreasing order of proximity to the actual use of violence: 1) cyberattacks; 2) dissemination of operational instructions; 3) hacking and “doxing”; 4) recruitment and terrorist “virtual entrepreneurship”; 5) propaganda; 6) financing.

## Cyberattacks

When one thinks about terrorism and cyberspace in our time, it is perhaps natural to consider the possibility that terrorist groups such as the so-called Islamic State (IS) or al-Qaeda could launch attacks, even on a large scale, directly through the Web. Outside of the world of terrorism, destructive cyberattacks, such as those on Iran in the late 2000s or on Ukraine in June 2017, have already indicated the seriousness that certain operations can have in the real world<sup>9</sup>. Furthermore, there may also be the risk of a connection between violent extremism and transnational organised criminal networks<sup>10</sup>.

Although there has not yet been anything which can vaguely resemble a “cyber 9/11”, it is clear that extremist groups could be interested in taking advantage of the internet for offensive actions. Of particular importance would be the case of the so-called Islamic State or Daesh, which has already demonstrated on several occasions its skills in conducting relevant activities on the internet.

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<sup>8</sup> See chapter 2 by Manuel R. Torres Soriano in this volume.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. F. Rügge (ed.), *Confronting an “Axis of Cyber”? China, Iran, North Korea, Russia in Cyberspace*, Milan, Ledizioni-ISPI, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> F. Bosco and M. Becker, *Transnational organized crime and violent extremist organisations: Which links?*, Commentary, ISPI, 16 July 2018.

However, compared to reality, today the effects of “cyber-terrorism” appear to be inflated in many respects. In fact, so far terrorist groups have shown neither the intention nor the capability to launch destructive cyberattacks. On the one hand, the intention to use these methods is not well-documented: few groups appear to have genuinely expressed the intent to target critical networks or national infrastructure using cyberattacks. On the other hand, the undeniable experiences and skills of terrorist groups such as IS in the sphere of online propaganda and communication do not necessarily transfer to the ability to launch destructive cyberattacks<sup>11</sup>.

Additionally, in general, claims of responsibility for targeted efforts in the virtual arena are not always identifiable. In the real world, a group can “lie about terrorism”<sup>12</sup> in different ways: by taking credit for an attack it did not commit, by disclaiming an attack it actually committed and also by falsely blaming an attack (regardless of whether it actually committed it) on another actor.

As is well-known, the “attribution problem” is even more serious in cyberspace<sup>13</sup>. For example, cyber groups that appear associated with an extremist or terrorist organisation are not necessarily connected to that organisation<sup>14</sup>. On the one hand, an actor could make some malicious online activities appear to be by other actors, including extremist organisations, *to their detriment* (or at the very least not in their interest), in the context of false flag operations. For example, in October 2018 British authorities claimed that the virtual group called

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<sup>11</sup> R. Bernard, “These are not the terrorist groups you’re looking for: An assessment of the cyber capabilities of Islamic State”, *Journal of Cyber Policy*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2017, pp. 255-265.

<sup>12</sup> E.M. Kearns, B. Conlon, and J.K. Young, “Lying about terrorism”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 37, no. 5, 2014, pp. 422-439.

<sup>13</sup> See, among others, T. Rid and B. Buchanan, “Attributing cyber attacks”, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 38, no. 1-2, 2015, pp. 4-37.

<sup>14</sup> A. Alexander and B. Clifford, “Doxing and Defacements: Examining the Islamic State’s Hacking Capabilities”, *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 12, no. 4, April 2019, pp. 22-28 (p. 24).

“CyberCaliphate” was actually associated with the Russian military intelligence service<sup>15</sup>.

On the other hand, especially since extremist groups are able to inspire other actors from a distance without direct contacts, even white lies “for the good” are possible: for example, cyber groups that appear associated with a terrorist organisation, such as IS, are not necessarily connected with that organisation even if they conduct campaigns that (should) *benefit* that organisation and its leadership. These lies “for the good” may not always be appreciated: for example, the “caliphate” already formally disassociated itself from *pro-IS* cyber collectives<sup>16</sup>.

## Dissemination of Operational Instructions

The use of the internet for terrorism also includes the provision of operational instructions: information for carrying out attacks with explosive devices or with other weapons or tools (including everyday objects, such as knives), but also instructions about operational security (in particular, on how to avoid detection offline and above all online)<sup>17</sup>.

In general, with the exception of simple low-tech actions, the preparation and execution of terrorist attacks requires not only, to use the language of organisational studies, a formal “explicit knowledge”, but also a “tacit knowledge”, which is not codified and difficult to express and transfer<sup>18</sup>. Michael Kenney<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Government of the United Kingdom, “UK exposes Russian cyber attacks”, Press release, 4 October 2019.

<sup>16</sup> R. Bernard (2017), p. 258.

<sup>17</sup> B. Clifford, “Trucks, Knives, Bombs, Whatever’: Exploring Pro-Islamic State Instructional Material on Telegram”, *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 11, no. 5, 2018, pp. 23-29 (p. 26).

<sup>18</sup> B.A. Jackson, “Technology Acquisition by Terrorist Groups: Threat Assessment Informed by Lessons from Private Sector Technology Adoption”, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, vol. 24, no. 3, 2001, pp. 183-213.

<sup>19</sup> M. Kenney, “Beyond the Internet: Mētis, Techne, and the Limitations of Online Artifacts for Islamist Terrorists”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 22,

adopted a similar distinction between two types of knowledge: the abstract and universal *techne* and the practical and specific *mētis* which adheres to different local contexts. *Mētis* is a type of knowledge that is gradually acquired with experience. Jihadist and other extremist militants operating in hostile environments, such as Western societies after 9/11, have to resort to a range of precautions and restrictions that can have the effect of reducing opportunities for the accumulation of such practical knowledge. For instance, suicide attacks – acts of violence that, if successful, by definition can only be carried out once – prevent learning from trial and error, at least in the case of lone actors or at least autonomous cells with a low level of labor division<sup>20</sup>.

In this context, the internet may not be a reliable source of operational knowledge for terrorists; it offers general information in terms of abstract *techne*, but it can hardly convey that practical knowledge in terms of *mētis* that one learns with training and practice in the real world.

Overall, the practical information available on the Web is frequently introductory and generic, in part because the authors and users of the various platforms know that they may be monitored by intelligence services and law enforcement agencies<sup>21</sup>. In many cases the instructions actually available are only useful if the would-be terrorists already have technical skills. Online indications for carrying out terrorist attacks are not infrequently flawed, when not spoiled by errors, including egregious ones<sup>22</sup>.

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no. 2, 2010, pp. 177-197; Idem, “‘Dumb’ Yet Deadly: Local Knowledge and Poor Tradecraft Among Islamist Militants in Britain and Spain”, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, vol. 33, no. 10, 2010, pp. 911-932.

<sup>20</sup> F. Marone, *La politica del terrorismo suicida*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2013.

<sup>21</sup> See M.R. Torres Soriano, “The Vulnerabilities of Online Terrorism”, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, vol. 35, no. 4, 2012, pp. 263-277.

<sup>22</sup> See A. Stenersen, “The Internet: A Virtual Training Camp?”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2008, pp. 215-233; M. Kenney, *Beyond the Internet*, cit., pp. 188-191.

For example, even today, plotters without relevant offline contacts may find difficult and dangerous to synthesise explosive compounds such as TATP (triacetone triperoxide) and then to construct a bomb that really works: the Parsons Green training bombing in London on 15 September 2017, which provoked no fatal casualties, can be considered a good example in this respect<sup>23</sup>.

In this field, Telegram has played a major role in recent years. On this free platform, unlike in other messaging services, users can benefit from encrypted messages, remarkable file-sharing capabilities, and the opportunity to publish material in various file formats and house it internally on the platform. Furthermore, Telegram has been generally criticised for its reluctance to regulate extremist content. Thus, it is not surprising that, in addition to purposes linked with propaganda and recruitment, Telegram has been extensively used to disseminate operational instructions as well<sup>24</sup>.

In relation to English-language material, mainly directed at a Western audience, as a recent work noted<sup>25</sup>, the so-called Islamic State has rarely released official attack-planning material, except for low-tech attacks (stabblings, vehicular assaults, etc.). Thus, a large proportion of instructional manuals distributed by IS supporters on Telegram are actually replicas of instructions developed by al-Qaeda (in particular, *Inspire*, the notorious English-language magazine published by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, AQAP) or other jihadist groups, or even sources external to the broader jihadist movement. In fact, these operational materials can of course be used in order to pursue different militant causes, regardless of their original authors and creators.

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<sup>23</sup> B. Clifford (2018), p. 26.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.



## Hacking and Doxing

Another significant threat is represented by hacking and so-called “doxing” (or “doxxing”), that is the practice of gathering and disclosing an individual’s personally identifiable information (PII) online for different purposes, particularly with the intent of inflicting harm.

To mention one salient example, beginning in April 2015, Ardit Ferizi<sup>26</sup>, a Kosovar hacker who studied computer science in Malaysia, acquired direct contacts with Islamic State militants in Syria, including Junaid Hussain, the notorious British online propagandist and influencer (killed by a US drone strike in late August 2015). Ferizi provided support to the jihadist organisation by transmitting PII of US and Western European citizens he had obtained by illegally accessing customer records databases of a US company. This list was published by Hussain on 11 August 2015. Ferizi was finally arrested in Kuala Lumpur in September 2015 and extradited to the United States where he was sentenced to 20 years in prison in September 2016. Ferizi’s hacking efforts resulted in “the publication of one of the best-known ‘kill lists’ released by Islamic State sympathizers, and to date, it remains one of the more sophisticated computer network operations on behalf of the group”<sup>27</sup>.

Another, less sophisticated example of doxing comes from Italy. In 2015, several jihadist-inspired Twitter accounts called for the targeting of ten Italian law enforcement officers, indicating personal data, phone numbers and addresses; this information was presumably retrieved from open sources and it was in many cases partial and/or incorrect. In addition, a document calling for the “conquest of Rome”, a slogan widely used by jihadist groups<sup>28</sup>, was also circulated from one of these accounts. Meriem Rehaily, a young woman of Moroccan origin, living

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<sup>26</sup> A. Alexander and B. Clifford (2019), pp. 22-28 (pp. 23-24).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>28</sup> F. Marone and M. Olimpio, “*Conquisteremo la vostra Roma*”. *I riferimenti all’Italia e al Vaticano nella propaganda dello Stato Islamico*, Working Paper, ISPI, 2018.

in the province of Padua (North-Eastern Italy), was behind these accounts. In July 2015, Rehaily left for Syria to join IS<sup>29</sup>, thanks to online contacts. In the territory of the self-proclaimed “Caliphate” she reportedly deployed her good computer skills, carrying out propaganda and proselytising activities for the jihadist organisation. In December 2017 she was sentenced in absentia to 4 years in prison for terrorist association.

The different experiences of Ferizi and Rehaily clearly show that the level of sophistication in doxing efforts can be highly variable: while Faridi was able to breach the servers of a private company, Rehaily presumably collected open-source information.

The degree of connection with a terrorist organisation is also variable. Rehaily had probably no direct links with relevant IS members in the Levant before she left Italy in 2015. For his part, Faridi was not a full member of the organisation but acquired contacts with prominent Islamic State militants in Syria. By contrast, towards the other extreme of this continuum, the aforementioned Junaid Hussain (aka Abu Hussain al-Britani)<sup>30</sup>, after joining IS, supported hacking-related efforts under the banner of the “Islamic State Hacking Division”, ISHD (a hacking collective that however has not been officially recognised by IS). In particular, in March 2015, Hussain posted a kill list including US military personnel.

In general, doxing efforts and the dissemination of hit lists may be attractive to aspiring online operatives because they are relatively feasible, even without expert-level hacking skills, and can instigate fear. In addition to promoters of these doxing

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<sup>29</sup> F. Marone, *Italy's Jihadists in the Syrian Civil War*, Research Paper, The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT), 2016. See also F. Marone and L. Vidino, *Destination Jihad: Italy's Foreign Fighters*, The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT) in partnership with ISPI and the Program on Extremism at George Washington University, 2019.

<sup>30</sup> N. Hamid, “[The British Hacker Who Became the Islamic State's Chief Terror Cybercoach: A Profile of Junaid Hussain](#)”, *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 11, no. 4, April 2018, pp. 30-39.

efforts, extremist sympathizers can also offer their contribution by reposting these hit lists and by providing additional information and instructions. This type of contribution usually requires even less skills and resources<sup>31</sup>.

It is worth recalling that the use of online hit lists is not limited to jihadist extremism. Back in the 1990s US extremist anti-abortion activists secured abortion providers' PII and published them as an alleged hit list on the Web. On the other hand, to mention a recent example, the name of Walter Lübcke, the German local politician who was assassinated at his home by a neo-Nazi activist on 2 June 2019, appeared on an online neo-Nazi hit list and his private address was published on a far-right blog<sup>32</sup>.

## **Recruitment and Terrorist “Virtual Entrepreneurship”**

The Web can also play a key role in the recruitment of extremists and terrorists. In particular, the interesting and worrying practice of terrorist “cybercoaching” deserves particular attention. We know in fact that extremist “virtual planners” (also known as “virtual entrepreneurs”) can target and guide unaffiliated radical sympathizers remotely, only via the Web, in particular through the use of encrypted applications.

One of IS's best-known virtual planners was Rachid Kassim, a former rapper from the French city of Roanne, who was reportedly killed in July 2017 in Mosul, Iraq. His Telegram channel helped guide several recruits in carrying out attacks in France. Another European foreign fighter, the aforementioned Junaid Hussain, enabled at least six terrorist operations in Europe and the United States.

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<sup>31</sup> A. Alexander and B. Clifford (2019), pp. 24-26.

<sup>32</sup> K. Bennhold, “[A Political Murder and Far-Right Terrorism: Germany's New Hateful Reality](#)”, *The New York Times*, 7 July 2019.

In fact the phenomenon of “virtual entrepreneurship” was also exported to the other side of the Atlantic. According to an article published in 2017 by Hughes and Meleagrou-Hitchens, out of a total of 38 IS-inspired domestic plots and attacks in the United States between 1 March 2014, and 1 March 2017, at least eight (21%) involved some form of digital communication with virtual entrepreneurs. In addition, they were also involved in at least six other terrorism-related cases, including assisting with logistics related to traveling to join the Islamic State<sup>33</sup>. In America the most sustained efforts came from a group based in Raqqa, Syria, which the FBI has nicknamed “the Legion”. The most prominent member of the group was Junaid Hussain.

As the same authors remarked, “to some extent, the emergence of virtual entrepreneurs represents a hybrid between what are commonly seen as the two previous manifestations of the jihadist terrorist threat to the West: networked and inspired lone-attacker plots”<sup>34</sup>, combining some advantages of both. In general terms, virtual entrepreneurship can be effective, does not require extensive resources and reduces the risk of being identified and stopped by the authorities.

In general, today the role of the Web for extremist radicalisation and recruitment is crucial. However, it is important to keep in mind that offline interactions in physical networks are often still essential, especially in the most advanced stages of the processes of radicalisation<sup>35</sup>.

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<sup>33</sup> Hughes and A. Meleagrou-Hitchens, “[The Threat to the United States from the Islamic State’s Virtual Entrepreneurs](#)”, *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 10, no. 3, March 2017, pp. 1-8 (p. 1).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> See L. Vidino, F. Marone and E. Entenmann, *Fear Thy Neighbor: Radicalization and Jihadist Attacks in the West*, Forwords by B. Hoffman and M. Ranstorp, Report, ISPI in partnership with the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT) and the Program on Extremism at George Washington University, 2017.

## Propaganda

As is well-known, the use of the Web has played a crucial role in the communication strategy of different extremist groups, including terrorist organisations, and several pages in this volume are devoted to this subject.

Understandably, in recent years much attention has been paid to the so-called Islamic State. IS is of course not the first armed group to have made strategic use of modern media, but its level of sophistication has proven unprecedented. Thanks to the technological and communication skills of some of his militants, it has built and institutionalised a vast and complex propaganda machine capable of attracting at least spectators, if not active sympathizers and militants, all over the world<sup>36</sup>.

IS's propaganda campaign combines official publications with unofficial, self-produced content. In fact, on the one hand, in order to create and disseminate its propaganda products (videos, audio, images, magazines, songs, even videogames, etc.), the organisation has made use of highly professional communication structures. On the other hand, it can also count on a large number of sympathizers who independently produce and spread messages in support of the self-proclaimed "Caliphate", usually via the Web.

Overall, extremists have proved to be able to adapt changing circumstances and new constraints. In particular, over time, jihadists have progressively moved to encrypted messaging platforms. As has been noted<sup>37</sup>, from 2013 to 2015-2016

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<sup>36</sup> The literature on IS's propaganda is vast. See, among others, A.Y. Zelin, "Picture or it didn't happen: A snapshot of the Islamic State's official media output", *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 9, no. 4, 2015, pp. 85-97; C. Winter, *The Virtual 'Caliphate': Understanding Islamic State's Propaganda Strategy*, Quilliam Foundation, 2015; H. Ingram, "An analysis of Islamic State's Dabiq magazine", *Australian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 51, no. 3, 2016, pp. 458-477; C. Winter, "Apocalypse, later: a longitudinal study of the Islamic State brand", *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2018, pp. 103-121

<sup>37</sup> In particular, C. Winter, *Researching Jihadist Propaganda: Access, Interpretation, and Trauma*, Resolve Network Researching Violent Extremism Series, May 2019,

their propaganda was easily accessible to potentially anyone on mainstream platforms, especially Twitter, with a view to maximising their visibility. However, since mid-2015, in front of the reaction of governments and technology corporations, jihadists started to favor other, lesser-known, and less-accessible platforms, particularly Telegram.

In turn, from the summer of 2016 onwards, Telegram started to become less hospitable to jihadist groups and their supporters: dissemination channels that were once public started to become private, and their accessibility has decreased almost exponentially since<sup>38</sup>. However, the platform has not been abandoned<sup>39</sup>.

In general terms, building on social movement theory, it can be argued that propaganda and rhetoric of extremist groups, too, is associated with three “framing” strategies (so-called “core framing tasks”)<sup>40</sup>: 1) “diagnostic” framing deals with the identification of the problem and its source; 2) “prognostic” framing promotes the solution to the problem; 3) “motivational framing” presents the rationale for action, including the call to arms<sup>41</sup>.

Propaganda by extremists is often based on narratives<sup>42</sup>, or systems of stories, which together provide an apparently

pp. 2-3.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>39</sup> The original contributions by Ali Fischer and Nico Prucha (chapter 3) and Valerio Mazzoni (chapter 5) in this volume provide empirical analysis precisely on IS-linked propaganda on Telegram, respectively in Arabic and in Italian.

<sup>40</sup> D.A. Snow et al., “Frame alignment processes, micromobilization, and movement participation”, *American Sociological Review*, vol. 51, no. 4, 1986, pp. 464-481; R.D. Benford and D.A. Snow, “Framing processes and social movements: An overview and assessment”, *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 26, 2000, pp. 611-639.

<sup>41</sup> See, among others, F. Marone, “Examining the Narratives of Radical Islamists and Other Extremely Violent Groups: The Case of the ‘Islamic State’”, in M. Martellini and J. Rao (eds), *The Risk of Skilled Scientist Radicalization and Emerging Biological Warfare Threats*, Amsterdam, IOS Press, 2017, pp. 64-73.

<sup>42</sup> In particular, K. Braddock and J. Horgan, “Towards a Guide for Constructing and Disseminating Counternarratives to Reduce Support for Terrorism”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 39, no. 5, 2016, pp. 381-404.

coherent view of the world. Extremist narratives, often endowed with a strong emotional charge, can portray and convey in a concrete and vivid way ideas and values, even abstract ones, making the radical message more incisive and effective. Some extremist narratives can be invented from scratch, but many others represent selective and creative re-interpretations of events, stories and motifs that already exist in a given cultural environment (for example, within a religious tradition)<sup>43</sup>.

In general, extremist propaganda has found fertile ground in the Web. First of all, online radical content can be consumed with ease, for free (or at low cost), and potentially at any time. Moreover, as has been noted, the anonymity on the Web tends to create a disinhibition effect that can, in turn, foster increased hostility and polarisation. Additionally, the attendance of online extremist channels can facilitate the isolation of the user from the surrounding context and the inclusion in closed “echo chambers” of like-minded people in which radical interests and beliefs can be further reinforced and amplified, also due to possible (inadvertent) effects of web algorithms<sup>44</sup>.

## Financing

A further problem is the financing of terrorism and other extremist activities via the Web. It is evident that, much like legal organisations, terrorist groups need economic resources to survive and to conduct their activities, including the preparation and execution of attacks. In this respect, it is important to note that in recent years several terrorist actions, at least in Europe<sup>45</sup>,

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<sup>43</sup> In particular, see J. R. Halverson, H. L. Goodall, Jr. and S. R. Corman, *Master Narratives of Islamist Extremism*, New York. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011; S. Mahood and H. Rane, *Islamist narratives in ISIS recruitment propaganda*, in «The Journal of International Communication», Vol. 23, No. 1, 2017, pp. 15-35.

<sup>44</sup> In particular, A. Meleagrou-Hitchens, A. Alexander and N. Kaderbhai (2017), pp. 1238-1241.

<sup>45</sup> P. Nesser, A. Stenersen and E. Oftedal, “Jihadi Terrorism in Europe: The IS-Effect”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 10, no. 6, 2016, pp. 3-24 (pp. 15-18).

did not require significant economic resources: in particular, most low-tech attacks (e.g., stabbings) by lone actors or small cells are relatively inexpensive.

Terrorist groups can use various sources and methods for self-financing, from apparently legitimate activities (businesses, donations, etc.) to illegitimate actions such as crimes, to state sponsorship.

In these efforts, the internet can play a significant role, mainly thanks to its relatively high level of anonymity and ease of use. Extremist or terrorist groups can solicit funds directly from their supporters through electronic transfers of money. On-line fundraising activities can also be based on the participation of non-profit organisations and charities (that may be either deceptively abused by the extremist group or consciously complicit with it) or the creation and management of genuine front organisations, also using social media<sup>46</sup>.

On the other hand, other methods of online financing do not imply the consent of the source provider (whether it is informed or based on deception)<sup>47</sup>. Cybercrime can be a relevant method in this respect. For example, part of the funding for the devastating jihadist attacks in London on 7 July 2005 derived from credit card fraud<sup>48</sup>.

As for money transfer modes, the use of open-loop prepaid card and internet-based payment systems can be particularly troubling<sup>49</sup>. Moreover, cybercurrencies, associated with an even higher level of anonymity and with a decentralised structure, could represent a new frontier for online terrorist financing. Overall, this option can present limitations and risks, such as the rapid and unpredictable fluctuation of virtual currencies.

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<sup>46</sup> B.U. Başaranel, "Online Terrorist Financing", in M. Conway, L. Jarvis, O. Lehane, S. Macdonald and L. Nouri (eds.), *Terrorists' Use of the Internet: Assessment and Response*, Amsterdam, IOS Press, 2017, pp. 95-108 (pp. 95-96).

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> M. Jacobson, "Terrorist financing and the Internet", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 33, no. 4, 2010, pp. 353-363 (p. 357).

<sup>49</sup> B.U. Başaranel (2017).



However, it is worth mentioning that the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, the armed wing of Hamas, has already developed a sophisticated campaign to raise funds using Bitcoin, through its website, available in several languages<sup>50</sup>.

## Conclusion

Despite the collapse of the self-proclaimed Caliphate in Syria and Iraq, the “legacy” of the so-called Islamic State is still relevant<sup>51</sup>. Overall, the jihadist cause remains very present on the Web.

Moreover, serious terrorist attacks such as the massacre in New Zealand on Friday 15 March 2019 strongly remind us that terrorism is not only jihadist. In the far-right attacks at two mosques in Christchurch, the internet (has) had a major role in publicizing violence, with even a livestream on a social network website<sup>52</sup>. Thus, other forms of radical causes, including far-right or anarchist violent extremism<sup>53</sup>, rely heavily on the Web.

In the face of these dangers and challenges, public authorities, companies and civil society organisations are stepping up their efforts. This struggle against online violent extremism is complex and demanding and requires targeted initiatives<sup>54</sup>. On the other hand, for the reasons outlined above, it is increasingly relevant.

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<sup>50</sup> N. Popper, “Terrorists Turn to Bitcoin for Funding, and They’re Learning Fast”, *The New York Times*, 18 August 2019.

<sup>51</sup> As chapter 6 by Marco Lombardi and Daniele Plebani argues in this volume.

<sup>52</sup> G. Macklin, “The Christchurch Attacks: Livestream Terror in the Viral Video Age”, *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 12, no. 6, July 2019, pp. 18-29.

<sup>53</sup> See F. Marone, “The Rise of Insurrectionary Anarchist Terrorism in Italy”, *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2015, pp. 194-214.

<sup>54</sup> As chapter 7 in this volume by Patrick Bishop and Stuart Macdonald carefully notes.

## **2. Seven Premises of Jihadist Activism on the Internet**

Manuel R. Torres Soriano

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Jihadist terrorism has a long history in its relationship with new information technologies. The popularisation of the internet occurred in parallel with the expansion of radical content in cyberspace. By 1996, when access to the internet was still restricted to a few government and educational institutions, there were already websites dedicated to propagating a jihadist interpretation of the armed conflict in the former Yugoslavia and Chechnya<sup>1</sup>.

The course of more than two decades of terrorist activities on the internet gives us sufficient time perspective to draw some useful lessons to support strategies to combat this phenomenon. Although we are referring to a highly diverse universe of actors, contexts and strategies, it is possible to formulate some premises on how jihadist activism has materialised on the internet and what should be expected in the coming years.

### **The Medium Creates the Activist**

When analysing the impact of the internet on terrorist violence, it is common to forget that the internet is a constantly evolving instrument, and consequently the way in which terrorists relate

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<sup>1</sup> M. Torres Soriano, *El eco del terror. Ideología y propaganda en el terrorismo yihadista*, Madrid, Plaza & Valdés, 2009.

to the medium has also changed. This transformation is not due to a change in strategy on the part of these violent organisations, but rather to the fact that under the generic term “internet”, we encompass a succession of different technological tools over a short space of time. Each of these instruments has made a different type of terrorist activism possible, and has mobilised different types of individuals as a result<sup>2</sup>.

When we look at terrorist activism on the internet, it is perceived as a phenomenon which mobilises thousands of radicals. Through their contributions, they are able to allow radical messages to remain accessible despite attempts by companies and governments to eradicate them. However, this massive mobilisation has little to do with the beginnings of the terrorist presence on the internet. In the late 1990s, only a handful of activists, usually computer literates, were involved in maintaining the terrorist presence in cyberspace. The reason for this was not the absence of supporters of these organisations, but the existence of high barriers to access. The terrorist activism of this era was limited to a small number of static websites. The creation of these spaces was a complex task which required programming knowledge and a great deal of time to manage and update their content. In this context, the only role for the mass of followers was to be passive consumers of the content disseminated by others. The popularisation of blogging services would open the door for the large mass of internet users to publish their own content for the first time. However, the main problem with these platforms as a mechanism for dissemination was their disconnection from the target audience. The multiple blogs with terrorist content remained dispersed and had no impact within the immensity of cyberspace. It was internet forums, platforms which made the participation of a large number of supporters of jihadism possible, which had an impact<sup>3</sup>. The cy-

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<sup>2</sup> J. Burke, “The Age of Selfie Jihad: How Evolving Media Technology is Changing Terrorism”, *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 9, no. 11, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> M. Torres Soriano, “The Dynamics of the Creation, Evolution, and Disappearance of Terrorist Internet Forums”, *International Journal of Conflict and*

ber-jihadists congregated on a few platforms which served as meeting points to consume the propaganda materials produced by terrorist organisations, but also as places where forum users felt relevant through a gamification system which spurred their participation. However, despite its appearance of horizontality, the viability of this forum system remained the responsibility of a small number of activists who assumed a high cost in terms of effort and commitment.

The democratisation of online terrorism would not take place until the emergence of the large social networks of the internet. The appearance of platforms such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter removed a large part of the access barriers which had excluded those activists who did not want to expend the necessary effort to keep the Jihadist message alive in a hostile environment. The emergence of this low-intensity activism took place under the protection of friendly and intuitive services.

The conclusion is that terrorist activism on the internet is not necessarily the natural destiny of any individual who assumes radical approaches. This technological tool offers new channels of action which did not exist before, and therefore broadens the spectrum of potential activists. However, the ability to mobilise one person or another within this collective depends not only on the usefulness which these individuals perceive their actions to have, but also the cost of their actions in terms of effort. This explains, for example, the failure of predictions which claimed there would be a massive outpouring of terrorist presence on the Deep Web<sup>4</sup>, despite the fact that, a priori, it met all the conditions to become a new digital sanctuary for terrorism: a space deliberately created to guarantee the anonymity of its users and where no state is capable of exercising control. The reality is that the cost measured in learning effort and need is much more similar to Web 1.0, which only mobilised a handful of activists, than to the massive internet of social networks and mobile devices.

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*Violence*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2013, pp. 164-178.

<sup>4</sup> G. Weimann, "Going Dark: Terrorism on the Dark Web", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 39, no. 3, pp. 195-206.

## Substitution Activism Is Viable Through the Internet

The internet occupies a central place in the process of adopting the beliefs and values which facilitate violent radicalisation. While in some cases, it is the only influence which leads an individual to terrorist militancy, it can also be the initial trigger of a radicalisation which will be fuelled by other kinds of interactions; in other cases, it will act as a reinforcer and accelerator of a radicalisation which has taken place in an offline environment<sup>5</sup>.

The internet can also be seen as an arena where substitution activism takes place – where radicals carry out a series of activities which enable them to reinforce their identity as Muslims committed to jihad. For some individuals, this is a second option in the face of the impossibility of participating in other more attractive activities, which are precluded by logistical difficulties, personal limitations, or the absence of adequate contacts.

Jihadism is first and foremost a tale of calling for violence. In its rhetoric, there is a glorification of the virtues of the warrior, military comradeship, and of the ultraterrestrial rewards awaiting those who fight Allah's enemies. This makes the desire to become a combatant a priority within the expectations of radicalised individuals. However, this preference cannot always be achieved, and other violent alternatives such as participation in terrorist attacks against the civilian population create more reticence among potential candidates, because they are more difficult to rationalise than confronting an armed enemy.

Online activism is a satisfactory alternative for those individuals who have not been able to realise their plans to travel to a "battlefront", or to be part of the militancy of a jihadist organisation. The internet allows these frustrated combatants to

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<sup>5</sup> B. Ducol et al. *Assessment of the state of knowledge: Connections between research on the social psychology of the Internet and violent extremism*, TSAS Working Paper No. 16-05, 2016.

contribute with their keyboard to a cause which, for the time-being, they cannot support with weapons. Through cyberspace, these activists can boost the propaganda action of these organisations, contribute to the recruitment and mobilisation of new combatants, or strengthen their finances.

Jihadist organisations try to prevent this virtual activism from being perceived as a second-level commitment. To achieve this, they have increased the doctrinal production which seeks to dignify the work of those *mujahedin* who fight jihad from the rearguard, emphasising that their contribution is as valuable as that of those who carry arms<sup>6</sup>. The growing prestige of online activism has benefited from the specific advantages of this medium. Ease of access and potential anonymity make it a natural destination for radicals who decide to temporarily relegate their determination to use violence.

Understanding how online activism can be a substitute for and a temporary form of engagement in armed jihad helps us to better assess the true danger of some of these individuals, who harbour enough radicalism to participate in the most brutal crimes.

## Online Activism Produces Dissatisfaction

The passage of time produces dissatisfaction in individuals who project their commitment exclusively through the internet. Among their most frequent tasks are the editing, translation and dissemination of propaganda, which cause them to have a much higher than average exposure to this content. The discourse they try to promote seeks to create a mobilising malaise among the Muslim population, which is accused of remaining impassive in the face of the suffering of its brothers. This appeal is reinforced by a glorification of martyrdom, which is presented as the goal to which every good Muslim should

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<sup>6</sup> M. Torres Soriano, "Between the Pen and the Sword: The Global Islamic Media Front in the West", *Terrorism & Political Violence*, vol. 24, no. 5, 2012, pp. 769-786.

aspire. They are messages which inevitably create a profound dissonance among these “keyboard warriors”, who perceive that their way of life hardly resembles what they promote for other Muslims. Although jihadist propaganda has tried to reduce this demotivating effect, it has not prevented a large number of cyber-activists from resolving this cognitive dissonance by opting for violence.

The people affected by this disappointment are not only those who play a marginal role and feel less gratified by this online experience, but also those who enjoyed status and recognition by their community of reference, which theoretically should have made them less susceptible to this frustration<sup>7</sup>.

An illustrative example is that of Younis Tsouli, considered the first cyber-jihadist in history. This UK-based computer science student, nicknamed Irhabi 007 (“terrorist 007”), would become a celebrity within the jihadist subculture on the internet because of his technical skills. The young Moroccan would become a fundamental link in the propaganda distribution chain of some of the main jihadist organisations of the time. Despite being publicly praised by Al-Qaeda in Iraq, his successful activism in cyberspace was not able to fulfil his commitment, and he began to consider the possibility of becoming directly involved in carrying out terrorist attacks. One day before a group of jihadists carried out the 7 July, 2005 attacks in the British capital, Younis wrote to his colleagues: “The only thing that could prevent me from joining the brothers is to attack the bastards here in London. The sooner the better”<sup>8</sup>. He would be arrested shortly afterwards.

This dynamic can be seen very prominently in the constellation of groups based in Europe called Sharia4, a

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<sup>7</sup> M. Torres Soriano, “The Hidden Face of Jihadist Internet Forum Management: The Case of Ansar Al Mujahideen”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 28, no. 4, 2016, pp. 735-749.

<sup>8</sup> S. O’Neill, “Terrorist 007 ‘was internet propagandist for al-Qaeda””, *The Times*, 26 April 2007. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/terrorist-007-was-internet-propagandist-for-al-qaeda-3fg0sn6nvn0>

fundamentalist movement with little structure but a great political and media activism, dedicated to the *da'wa* or public preaching of its literalist and militant interpretation of Islam<sup>9</sup>. This group (especially its Belgian and British factions) had an enormous propaganda activism, always bordering on the limit between freedom of expression and apologising for terrorism. Its members, despite being initially regarded by security agencies as mere “charlatans”, would end up massively integrating themselves into the contingents of combatants who undertook the trip from Europe to Syria or Iraq to join some of the multiple jihadist organisations which were fighting the Bashar al-Assad regime.

### **Terrorists Need To Be Early Adopters**

In business, the term “early adopters” is used to designate those consumers who are willing to purchase or use the initial version of a technological product which has just come onto the market. Usually these first releases are more expensive than later versions, and often suffer from design or usability problems which have gone unnoticed and will not be remedied until the product is used massively. Despite these disadvantages, there are consumers who, because of their identification with the brand, or because they derive much higher than the average satisfaction, are willing to assume the cost of being pioneers. For companies, the existence of this small group of enthusiasts is key, not only because they can draw on their experience to perfect their products, but also because these early users are the basis for a wide dissemination of their launches, and ultimately commercial success.

In pursuit of a different goal, terrorists have also become early adopters of internet innovations. Some of them contribute to the traditional uses of the internet by terrorists, but there is

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<sup>9</sup> L. Vidino, “*Sharia4: From Confrontational Activism to Militancy*”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2015, pp. 2-16.



another, more important reason: the temporary impunity they enjoy in these new spaces<sup>10</sup>.

The creators of terrorist content on the internet participate in an endless game of cat and mouse, consisting of evading the pressure of the different security agencies and companies<sup>11</sup>, reorienting their activities towards those spaces and services which, due to their novel character, have not yet been incorporated into the work routines and strategies of action of their persecutors. Counterterrorist agencies are bureaucratised bodies which adapt to change more slowly than other, less formalised organisations. Institutional inertia means that the allocation of human and material resources to new fields of action does not take place in an agile manner, and that the process consumes a considerable amount of time. It is a reality which contrasts with the frenetic speed of emergence, development and extinction of new internet services and applications. This dysfunction temporarily generates spaces of impunity where radicals operate with greater security and efficiency.

The advantages of this “early colonisation” have made it possible to trace terrorist content in products and services which are in a mature phase or which have a marginal diffusion. The smaller the human infrastructure supporting such services, the more likely jihadists are to operate in them relatively trouble-free. The companies in question function like a start-up: a business idea designed to achieve very rapid success with limited financial resources. While this happens, the available resources are geared almost exclusively to providing the service and generating additional revenue. Supervising the terms of use or satisfying the constant requests for collaboration by the authorities are viewed as expensive distractions from the primary goal, namely, mass adoption by internet users before financial paralysis sets in. The undesired effect of this philosophy is that

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<sup>10</sup> M. Torres Soriano, *Lecciones aprendidas de la lucha contra el yihadismo en Internet*, IEEE Documento de Opinión (4/2017), 2017.

<sup>11</sup> B. Fishman, “[Crossroads: Counter-terrorism and the Internet](#)”, *Texas National Security Review*, vol 2, no. 2, 2019.

the early adopters of these new internet products increasingly include supporters of jihadism among their ranks.

Although the dynamics of innovation on the internet continually offer terrorists new windows of opportunity, they are closing faster. Jihadism is also a victim of its own aggressiveness, which has accelerated cooperation between counterterrorist agencies, companies and civil society. The example of Telegram is very illustrative. The rapid emergence of Jihadist content in this application forced those responsible to contradict the libertarian philosophy which inspired the project, according to which the service did not take charge of controlling the publications of its users. These were the responsibility of their creators, and therefore, there would be no suspensions of accounts or erasure of content. However, the terrorist presence had become such a toxic element that it compromised Telegram's viability, which meant that shortly after the appearance of "official" Islamic State channels on the platform, administrators announced an exception to their policy of non-intervention, reporting that they had suspended all accounts linked to this terrorist group and that they would continue to be vigilant in expelling this content from their servers<sup>12</sup>.

## **Natural Selection Also Affects Terrorist Activism on the Internet**

The most skilful terrorists learn vicariously: they draw inspiration from those experiences they identify as successful (regardless of their origin), and try to correct the mistakes of the past. This manner of proceeding explains why, in the realm of the internet, the operational security habits used by today's cyber-jihadists are much more complex and elaborate than those of their predecessors. The first steps of terrorism on the internet were influenced by the vision that this was a wild territory where

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<sup>12</sup> R. Mackey, "Telegram Messaging App Closes Channels Used by ISIS", *The New York Times*, 18 November 2015.

the presence of governments was minimal, and therefore it was not necessary to adopt the self-protection measures they used when using a telephone, moving around or holding a meeting. As a consequence of this erroneous perception, even the most diligent terrorists made carefree use of this new tool, leaving behind an extensive digital trail whose investigation would end up forming part of the working routines of security agencies. Radicals were forced to adopt a whole series of cybersecurity practices, in the popularisation of which the jihadist websites and forums would play a vital role, and which devoted more and more attention to the dissemination of tutorials, tools and advice aimed at enhancing the anonymity of their followers.

However, all these measures make internet use a complex and unintuitive activity. Surfing safely requires enormous discipline and self-control in order not to miss any of the steps which prevent one's identity from being compromised. These qualities have not been very frequent among radicalised individuals who have made use of the internet. In most of them an impulsive and unmethodical behaviour has predominated, which has pushed them to ignore those basic guidelines of self-protection. As a consequence, in recent decades there has been a Darwinian process of negative selection, wherein security agencies have become dedicated to neutralising the less capable and disciplined cyberactivists. As a consequence of this process, the terrorists who survived this process of natural selection are much more sophisticated than their peers in the past. Unlike what happened in the period between 2011 and 2015, during which terrorist content hatched on the big social networks, today it is increasingly rare that security agencies can reveal the identity of an internet activist through simple open-source search procedures.

## **The Size of the Organisations Conditions Their Propaganda Activity**

The rapid rise and territorial expansion of the Islamic State group is an exception in the general history of terrorism, as it

is the most elaborate example of an organisation which transcended the realm of terrorism to become a proto-state capable of exercising effective control over millions of people.

The group was able to maintain an unprecedented level of propaganda production, maintaining high standards of technical and narrative quality, without experiencing excessive oscillations despite the deaths or detention of its members<sup>13</sup>. The propaganda activity of the group was fully institutionalised; standardised procedures made it possible for the people who performed these functions to be easily replaced<sup>14</sup>.

However, the propaganda practices observed in the Islamic State can hardly be extrapolated to any other terrorist organisation. While the terrorism ecosystem is characterised by scant resources and the need to operate in a hostile environment, the organisation under the leadership of al-Baghdadi enjoyed a stable territorial base, generous economic and material resources, and the ability to select the most skilled activists from thousands of supporters around the globe<sup>15</sup>.

On the contrary, mainstream terrorist organisations have a clear tendency to integrate a small number of militants into their structure<sup>16</sup>. This option allows them to operate with greater security than structures which mobilise a large number of activists, which require bureaucratised management and continuous processes of communication and control among their members. The logistics required to manage a large organisation can be counterproductive for actors who need to operate clandestinely.

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<sup>13</sup> A. Zelin, "Picture Or It Didn't Happen: A Snapshot of the Islamic State's Official Media Output", *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 9, no. 4, 2015, pp. 85-97.

<sup>14</sup> D. Milton. *Pulling Back the Curtain: An Inside Look at the Islamic State's Media Organization*, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point (United States Military Academy), 2018.

<sup>15</sup> G. Miller and S. Mekhennet, "Inside the surreal world of the Islamic State's propaganda machine", *The Washington Post*, 20 November 2015.

<sup>16</sup> W. Laqueur, *The New Terrorism. Fanaticism and the Arms of Mass Destruction*, London, Phoenix Press, 2001.

The numerical constraint has an enormous impact on the ability of these organisations to engage in effective public communication activity. The number of candidates wishing to occupy the role of propagandist is quite small, which makes it difficult to be selective, especially when the candidate must meet a series of qualities and skills which are not abundant in these groups. These individuals must be creative and have remarkable written and oral skills, which is particularly difficult to achieve in settings with high illiteracy rates. In addition to intellectual skills, there are instrumental skills, which have not ceased to grow over time. Thus, for example, if at an early stage it was essential to be familiar with the use of analogue equipment for video recording and editing their products, the new technological environment added the need for knowledge of graphic design, layout, digital video editing, and computer skills sufficient to safely manage the virtual presence of the organisation on the internet: eliminating metadata, anonymising navigation, and so on.

Terrorist organisations have problems equipping themselves with these skills, not only because of the low ratio between activists and positions to occupy, but above all because the predominant profile within their militancy is that of the warrior, not that of the communicator. Jihadism practices a glorification of violence and death itself as a sacred duty in defence of Islam and its people. The ethos of the *mujahedin* is not very compatible with the tasks carried out in the rearguard, which reduces the possibilities of these organisations attracting people who are more qualified for propaganda than for the use of violence.

The effect of these limitations is the poor communicative performance of organisations which are incapable of endowing themselves with this talent. While some groups have tried to make up for these shortcomings by outsourcing propaganda tasks, this generates a problem of lack of control over the message, which creates an important vulnerability: individuals who are outside the scope over which the group can exercise its discipline are much more prone to factionalism and to questioning the decisions made by the leadership of organisations.

This is the case, for example, with the Algerian terrorist group Armed Islamic Group (GIA, from the French), which relied in the early 1990s on a small group of jihad veterans against the Soviets and radical preachers based mainly in London<sup>17</sup>. They edited an influential propaganda magazine known as *Al-Ansar* (“the supporters”). Among those responsible were key ideologues of the global jihadist movement, such as Omar Othman Abu Omar (Abu Qatada), and the author of important works on the strategy of global jihad: Mustafa Setmariyan (Abu Musab al-Suri)<sup>18</sup>. This delegation allowed the organisation to have skills and resources which it was not able to generate on its own. However, the same activists who had been instrumental in promoting the legitimacy of jihad in Algeria before an international audience were also the first to betray the GIA. These propagandists used the same channels of communication to publicly manifest their break with the group and denounce its deviation when they considered that indiscriminate killing of the civilian population could no longer be justified. This organisation was unable to confront this dissident message, since in order to do so, it first had to build a propaganda apparatus capable of reaching that same international audience from scratch.

A translation of this example into the digital age has been the case with some of the media platforms which have dedicated themselves to supporting the activity of groups such as the Islamic State or Al-Qaeda from the internet<sup>19</sup>. Although these groups have benefited from the intense propaganda activity of groups located on the periphery of their organisations, they have preferred to establish a prudent public distance. It is possible to find numerous examples of the wisdom of this decision if

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<sup>17</sup> B. Lia and A. Kjøk, *Islamist Insurgencies, Diasporic Support Networks, and their Host States: The Case of the Algerian GIA in Europe 1993-2000*, FFI/R-APPOR, no. 03789, 2001.

<sup>18</sup> B. Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of Al-Qaeda Strategist Abu Mus'ab Al-Suri*, London, Hurst, 2007.

<sup>19</sup> C. Bunzel, “A House Divided: Origins and Persistence of the Islamic State’s Ideological Divide”, *Jihadica*, 5 June 2018.

we take into account the evolution of some of these platforms, which went from being enthusiastic defenders of the strategy followed by these groups to becoming the main outlet of those who questioned the legitimacy of their leaders.

One of the main difficulties which a terrorist organisation must face in order to consolidate and endure over time is that of establishing an effective system of control and discipline between a militancy who are usually dispersed and with whom there is little possibility of establishing fluid communication<sup>20</sup>. Propaganda is an essential instrument for consolidating group leadership and imposing a common narrative and methodology on all members. This explains why much of the communications activity of these organisations is directed towards internal consumption. The propaganda attempts to preserve the loyalty of followers through messages which raise morale or rationalise certain decisions which provoke controversy.

## The Centrality of Individuals Over Organisations

The small number of people in charge of propaganda tasks generates another effect: the personal bias introduced by those responsible for propaganda in the format and content of the official discourse of the organisation. The messages which reach the public, far from being the result of a collective process of elaboration and supervision which encompasses all the steps of leadership, are usually the product of the action of a single person, or of a small number of participants who more or less consciously transfer their personalities, their particular ideas of how to approach communication, as well as a whole set of prejudices, phobias and phobias. While the disappearance of these people does not necessarily affect the volume of propaganda activity, it does have a direct impact on the quality and format of the activity<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> J. Shapiro, *The Terrorist's Dilemma: Managing Violent Covert Organizations*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2013.

<sup>21</sup> M. Smith and J. Walsh, "Do Drone Strikes Degrade Al Qaeda? Evidence from

This phenomenon is reinforced by the disconnection which occurs for security reasons between the leaders and those in charge of transmitting the group's messages to the public. The dissemination of propaganda can become a high-risk task for its protagonists, since they must repeatedly compromise their anonymity, establishing contacts with journalists, transferring files on the internet or maintaining communications with those in charge of physically transferring these materials. The intelligence services pay special attention to the logistical distribution process because its infiltration allows them to locate the leaders of the organisations<sup>22</sup>. This is the reason why some groups, such as Al-Qaeda, not only physically separated their main commanders from those in charge of spreading the message, but in the process of communicating between both extremes, used a complex chain of human mail. These measures, although they provide more security, end up reducing the agility of the group's capacity to pronounce on current affairs. Thus, for example, at the end of 2010, during the gestation of the so-called "Arab springs", Al Qaeda's leaders were barely able to make their positions public due to the rapidity with which events in Tunisia and Egypt were happening. Events ran at a rate much faster than the 32 days which the group was employing on average between the words of their leaders being recorded and the messages managing to reach their public<sup>23</sup>.

Terrorist organisations cannot indefinitely allow their self-protection needs to impair their ability to communicate. That is the reason why they give considerable autonomy to those responsible for propaganda, so that they can react in a more agile way to current events, although for this they must take numerous decisions on behalf of the organisation without the possibility of consulting with those in charge.

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Propaganda Output", *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2013, pp. 311-327.

<sup>22</sup> M. Morell, *The Great War of Our Time. The CIA's Fight Against Terrorism - From al Qaeda to ISIS*, New York, Twelve, 2015.

<sup>23</sup> P. Cruickshank, "Analysis: Why Arab Spring could be Al Qaeda's Fall", *CNN.com*, 21 February 2011.



On the other hand, it is customary to analyse novelties in an organisation's propaganda action (especially when new topics are addressed, or innovations in formats are introduced) as a visible indicator of a change in its strategy. However, in a large number of cases, these oscillations, far from being the symptom of the transformations which a collective's course of action may have undergone, are usually the result of the individual initiatives of those responsible for communication or the visible effect of the incorporation of new militants, who bring with them their own perspectives on the group's objectives and methodology. In this sense, one of the more common mistakes is to assume that the incorporation of new languages in the propaganda action of a terrorist group is a clear indicator of how a group has modified its preferences to reach a new audience or expand its scope of violent action. However, in most cases, the emergence (and disappearance) of a language is due more to the availability or lack of qualified people than to a strategic calculation. Individuals not only provide linguistic skills, but their influence can even be appreciated in how the discursive style is modulated according to who acts as spokesperson for the group. Individuals end up projecting a more or less aggressive tone, their preference for erudition or the use of popular expressions<sup>24</sup>.

The process of incorporating new members into the propaganda apparatus is not always the result of an organisation's effort to increase its capacities by identifying and recruiting new talent. The new incorporations can be accidental, which does not prevent these individuals from making a radical change not only to communication, but even to the strategy of the organisation. A clear example is that of the duo of American citizens made up of Yemeni preacher Anwar al-Awlaki and Pakistani cyberactivist Samir Khan<sup>25</sup>.

The former was nicknamed "the Sheikh of the internet" for

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<sup>24</sup> M. Torres Soriano, "La Tiranía De Los Pequeños Números: El Factor Individual En La Propaganda Yihadista", *Revista UNISCI*, no. 44, 2017, pp. 73-90.

<sup>25</sup> S. Shane, *Objective Troy: A Terrorist, a President, and the Rise of the Drone*, New York, Crown, 2016.

his intense use of new information technologies, which he used to propagate his sermons in English and Arabic. These were produced in a much more accessible and attractive style than those of the preachers of previous generations. After the attacks of September 11, 2001, Awlaki underwent a gradual process of radicalisation which would lead him from being considered one of the main voices of moderate Islam in the United States to becoming one of the most active defenders of terrorism against the same country. Awlaki felt harassed by the US authorities, as well as by what he considered an insufferable atmosphere of Islamophobia, which led him to settle in the United Kingdom, and finally in Yemen, his family's country of origin. Under the auspices of the United States, he would be imprisoned. After being released, he contacted Al Qaeda's affiliate in Yemen, becoming one of its most active propagandists and a key piece of the group's plots in the West. Awlaki's incorporation into Al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) was accidental, but his arrival revolutionised the group's communications apparatus.

The Awlaki-Khan duo did not merely manage an influential propaganda platform, rather their contributions had a profound impact on the group's tactical orientation. In the pages of *Inspire* magazine, individual acts of terrorism all over the world were permanently encouraged, a tactic which had so far received little attention in Al-Qaeda's discourse. The figure of the "lone wolf", at the behest of these two propagandists, began to play an increasingly important role in the strategy of jihadism against the West.

In conclusion, it can be said that the individual dimension is decisive for understanding the propaganda performance of terrorist organisations, which are constrained by the small number of their members, their insufficient qualifications, the autonomy propagandists are granted for security reasons, and the high turnover which occurs in this group due to the dissatisfaction produced by these tasks.

### 3. Follow the White Rabbit - Tracking IS Online and Insights into What Jihadists Share

Ali Fisher, Nico Prucha

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Sunni jihadists have developed their own media items since the dawn of the Soviet Invasion into Afghanistan. As a result, the jihadist movement combines a long history of theological writing and strategic thought with a distribution system that has utilised the technology available to them at any given point in time. In the 1980s, scholars had to find ways to physically gather print material, audio tapes, VHS and later DVD. However, the growing use of the internet by the Jihadist movement since the 1990s created the opportunity for sympathisers and scholars around the world to access, read, watch, listen and engage with that content digitally. What began as electronic scans of material written on typewriters and video content transferred from VHS to CD and DVD since the early 2000s, is now a digital publishing system delivering content simultaneously in physical and digital form.

This chapter examines the texts that underpin the Jihadi movement, based on the library of material which the movement shares on Telegram. It shows that not one of over 900 texts stored in the Caliphate Library channel on Telegram envisages a “Jihadist Utopia” or proposes a “Utopian narrative”. The idea of a “Utopian Narrative” is an artefact of Western misinterpretation. It is not rooted in the texts of the Islamic State (*al-Dawlat al-Islamiyya*) or their predecessors. Instead,

the analysis finds that the Jihadi current is comprised of many groups with many shared theological concepts, but which differ on specific nuances. Each group considers themselves:

the only group that is able to realize the true rule of Islam on earth, being the “victorious group” (al-ta’ifa al-mansura), an eschatological concept with a long history. And this “victorious group” is the jihadi current, the only “group with religious knowledge and leading [violent] jihad” (al-’Iraqi 1425: 6)<sup>1</sup>.

## The Salafist-Jihadi Nexus

The first jihadi magazines, created using typewriters, laid the foundation of today’s global Sunni jihadist movement. Those magazines used the same rhetoric and extremist theological motifs for their cause as those that appear in the material produced by the current Jihadi movement. Sunni extremists seek to fulfil these two objectives:

- i) commitment to militancy is often termed as *jihad bi-l sayf* (jihad by the sword), whereas jihad is the ultimate form of worship;
- ii) to dedicate oneself to the calling of Islam<sup>2</sup>. Sunni extremists, whether militant or not, refer to this as *jihad bi-l lisan* (jihad by the tongue)<sup>3</sup>. Abandoning, forsaking or leaving jihad, according

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<sup>1</sup> R. Lohlker, “The Forgotten Swamp Revisited”, in Id. (ed.), *New Approaches to the Analysis of Jihadism. Online and Offline*, Vienna, Vienna University Press, 2011, pp. 125-139.

<sup>2</sup> *Da’wa* is the equivalent of missionary work as usually referred to in Western discourse.

<sup>3</sup> Both references, jihad by the sword as well as the tongue are based on Ibn Taymiyya’s understanding thereof, whereas Ibn Taymiyya declares “jihad by one’s hand, heart, and tongue”. Ibn Taymiyya, *Qa’ida fi l-Ingihimas al-’adu wa-bal yubah?* Riyadh: Adwa’ al-salaf, 2002, p. 19. The first generation of al-Qaeda on the Arab Peninsula (AQAP) referenced the “tongue” as part of the overall endeavour to commit themselves to God and using violence to deny the application of man-made laws: “We call all Muslims to work on behalf of the religion of God, and to jihad on the path of God, by dedicating one’s live, financial abilities and one’s

to the Sunni extremist literature, leads to individual demise and is the root cause why Muslim populations are in a general state of moral decay, infiltrated by anti-Islamic lobbyists and dominated by local tyrants.

The Jihadi movement interprets waging jihad as a religious duty, and they consider innovation in religion unacceptable. As a result, Jihadi culture is based on what they consider evidence; evidence rooted in a long tradition of theological writing, divine commandment and historical human acting (i.e. tales of the Sahaba and selective readings of the Sunna).

That evidence is the key to an authentic interpretation of the material the movement produces. If commentary and academic interpretations cannot explicitly cite the evidence and connect their interpretation of it to the long history of Jihadi theological writing, they risk becoming significantly more about what Western researchers imagine they see; an interpretation trapped in a Western habitus rather than an authentic interpretation of the Jihadi movement.

While much contemporary academic attention is focused on infographics, pictures, and English-language magazines, the Sunni jihadist movement mainly seeks to attract native Arabic speakers; specifically the native Sunni Arabs are their prime target audience. As a result, the Jihadi movement is “almost entirely directed in Arabic and its content is intimately tied to the socio-political context of the Arab world”<sup>4</sup>.

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tongue”. “Statement by the mujahidin on the Arab Peninsula regarding the latest declarations by the Ministry of Interior”, translated and commented in N. Prucha, *Die Stimme des Dschihad – al-Qa’idas erstes Online Magazin*, Hamburg, Verlag Dr. Kovac, 2010, pp. 137-144.

<sup>4</sup> R. Paz, “Reading Their Lips: The Credibility of Jihadi Web Sites as ‘Soft Power’ in the War of the Minds”, *The Project for the Research of Islamist Movements (PRISM), Global Research in International Affairs (GLORIA) Center*, vol. 5, no. 5, December 2007.

Furthermore, as Rüdiger Lohlker has argued, Salafis are:

proclaiming a preeminence of Arabic as sacred language. “Yet because of the emphasis on the Qur’an as an Arabic document [...] Arabic itself becomes disproportionately privileged in the creation of a pure Islam”. (Reinhart 2010: 108) [...] mastering the Arabic language becomes another marker of religious identity (cf. Devji 2008) enabling the Salafi believer to understand “the fixed, stable nature of the meaning of the qur’anic text” (Duderija 2010: 78) by simply reading it<sup>5</sup>.

As a result, Jihadi groups distribute lengthy Arabic documents which set out in detail their theology, strategy, and interpretation of current events. The output of al-Dawlat al-Islamiyya propaganda follows the example set by previous generations of Jihadi groups. Of the over 300,000 pages in mainly Arabic writing that both al-Qaeda (AQ) and the Islamic State (IS) have produced, and distributed online as of March 2018, the Islamic State alone produced over 138,700 pages of text.

FIG. 3.1 - OF OVER 300,000 PAGES OF SUNNI JIHADIST LITERATURE (IS AND AQ), IS ALONE PRODUCED OVER 138,000 PAGES IN A FEW YEARS, FEATURING OVER 80,000 PAGES OF HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY EXTREMIST SALAFIST WRITINGS THAT MATTER TO THEM THE MOST

BlackLight Strategic Insight

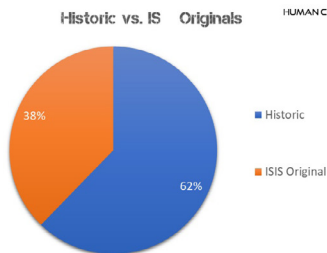
## IS have produced over 138,700 pages

Written in Arabic  
Demonstrates coherence  
Systemically ignored by research

- 86,355 Historical and contemporary rereleases
- Salafi output actual consumed -> online operations -> influencing var. actors
- 52,368 Original

Similarly largely ignored:

- 206,796 pages of pre-IS Majalla, Ideologies and Handbooks



HUMAN COGNITION

<sup>5</sup> R. Lohlker (2011).

The chart above shows the ecosystem of IS textual output – the number of pages of media institutions that are either part of IS (i.e. Maktabat al-Himma) or affiliated with it (al-Battar, al-Saqri, etc.). Following the example of decades of AQ writers and inspired by extremist Salafist historical and contemporary products, IS has published 52,368 pages of original text – as of March 2018. However, the evidence from IS publications shows that they have also published 86,355 pages of mainly multi-volume books which are not written by IS. While not originally produced by IS, this material is shared within the core IS ecosystem and furthermore often referenced and referred to within the IS core writings (and videos<sup>6</sup>). These historical and contemporary extremist Salafist sources matter to IS, just as many of these Salafist authors are important to the AQ ecosystem and the wider (pro-)militant Sunni jihadist ecosystem.

## Sunni Jihadist Groups: Operation Telegram

Early in 2016 we witnessed a massive shift from Twitter to Telegram among IS militants and sympathizers. Until then, IS was able to maintain a persistent network on Twitter, despite a massive rate of account suspensions. Since the media operatives who are embedded with or support the Islamic State are highly dedicated, banned IS (al-Dawlat al-Islamiyya) Twitter users usually reappeared on the platform using a different account. From a user perspective, all you needed to be aware of was the right Arabic and non-Arabic keywords to find IS content on Twitter, and then start following the accounts. At the same time, the IS network on Twitter was not taken down at once, and the remaining accounts keenly promoted the new Twitter handles of those who came back<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Demonstrating the active implementation of theological concepts to boost the IS specific projection of Sunni Muslim identity as the only legal format by citing historical and contemporary extremist Salafist authors as authoritative sources of religious understanding.

<sup>7</sup> A. Fisher, “How jihadist networks maintain a persistent online presence”,

By March 2016, however, this reality had changed drastically. In response to push factors such as increasingly aggressive content removal and account closures, along with pull factors such as the greater utility, file-sharing potential, encryption, and range of services on offer, Jihadist groups including al-Dawlat al-Islamiyya developed a clear preference for using Telegram to engage with core supporters. At this time al-Dawlat al-Islamiyya still held physical territory and was not affected by the internal rift expressed by text-based media institutions breaking away<sup>8</sup>.

While Telegram offered greater utility when engaging with the vanguard of supporters, some lamented losing the broader audience which Twitter afforded and feared they were now merely talking each other and lacked a proper media presence outside of closed Telegram channels and groups<sup>9</sup>. IS, however, was quick to adapt following internal discussions that led to al-Wafa' strategy papers<sup>10</sup>, which concluded that Telegram offers many features that would allow it to function as an 'all-in-one' hub for communication<sup>11</sup>.

As of 2019, IS and media operatives continue to use the service as one of many within a multi-platform communication system. IS have recognised that Telegram suits their purposes when communicating with the *mujahid* vanguard. However, that is only one strand of their communication strategy. The secrecy and encryption of Telegram was potentially harmful for the other strand, the swarming operations as the networks sustained on Telegram lack the outreach ambition and do not provide the opportunities for projecting influence that were instead widely available on Twitter in particular.

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*Perspectives on terrorism*, vol. 9, no. 3, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> IS clerics arrested by internal security, dissidents allege, BBC Monitoring, 25 September 2018, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c2007ogq>

<sup>9</sup> N. Prucha, "IS and the Jihadist Information Highway – Projecting Influence and Religious Identity via Telegram", *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 10, no. 6, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> This media outlet has turned against IS leader in recent months.

<sup>11</sup> Abu Usama Sinan al-Ghazzi, "ya Ansar al-khilafa; la tataqawq'a'u fi 'Telegram'", Mu'assasat al-Wafa', 27 June 2016. All Arabic to English translations by Nico Prucha.



As Abu Usama Sinan al-Ghazzi wrote in a document published by al-Wafa' media in 2016, to achieve mass reach, inspire others, or create the possibility of a mass movement, they will need to continue to use other platforms including Twitter and Facebook<sup>12</sup>. This is particularly evident in the coordination of *ghazwa* (raids) which enable rapid deployment on Twitter without having to maintain large-scale Twitter networks. To avoid marginalisation and simple in-house recruitment or indoctrination, al-Ghazzi demanded a return to the 'classical' social media platforms<sup>13</sup> while Sunni jihadists in general consolidated their operations on Telegram to ensure effective coordination.

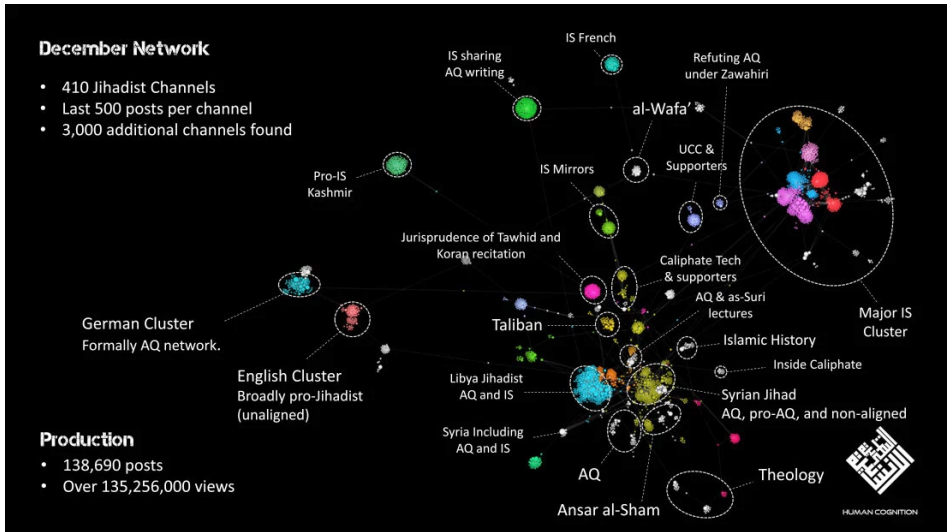
In December 2018 the network of Jihadi Telegram channels and groups was a vast interconnected collection of clusters, each with their specific focal point. Analysis of posts from 410 human-verified Jihadi channels uncovers that these channels draw on a wider network of over 3,000 further groups and channels. A strategic level network analysis of this network of channels and groups shows that the Jihadi movement, despite differences over nuance, draws on similar sources and attracts some of the same supporter channels. This can be seen in the co-occurrence of AQ and IS channels in clusters which focus on specific locations such as Libya or Syria.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Abu Usama Sinan al-Ghazzi, "ya Ansar al-khilafa; la tataqawqa'u fi 'Telegram", Mu'assassat al-Wafa', 27 June 2016.

FIG. 3.2 - THE NETWORK OF JIHADIST TELEGRAM CHANNELS  
(DECEMBER 2018)



This interconnected network is a reflection of a longer-term online pluralism within the Jihadi current. The increased use of the Internet had by 2007 produced “the Open University for *Jihad* Studies”, drawing many thousands of students. This ‘Open University’ produced a new arena in which debates over nuance within the Jihadi-Salafi online could play out. As Reuven Paz noted, the community has been “intensively encouraged to take part in the debates, as the ‘virtual *jihad*’ became a legitimate branch of the ‘Jihadi war of minds’”<sup>14</sup>.

On Telegram, IS shares a range of extremist Salafist writings as part of its past and present terrorist attack claims. IS-written products (writings and video) often use citations by historical Salafist hardliners such as Ibn al-Qayyim (1292-1350 AD) or

<sup>14</sup> R. Paz, “Debates within the family: Jihadi-Salafi debates on strategy, takfir, extremism, suicide bombings and the sense of the apocalypse”, in R. Meijer (ed.), *Global Salafism: Islam’s New Religious Movement*, 2009, pp. 267-280.

Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328) to project authoritativeness. IS uses extremist Salafist writings to demonstrate how they apply extremist theology and uses this to justify killings and to dehumanize their targets. Extremist Salafist writings are intermixed with terrorist statements, attack claims and more broadly extremist Salafist authors are cited to justify the destruction of Shiite mosques<sup>15</sup>, the killing of non-Sunnis<sup>16</sup>, the declaration of Sunnis as apostates<sup>17</sup>, and to justify various means of a solely militant jihad against non-Muslim, crusader, enemies<sup>18</sup>.

This combination of theological texts and practical applications is shown in the following screenshot of a core-IS telegram channel from the end of February 2019. At this time IS released a photo report from Wilayat Sinai (Egypt) having overrun a small remote Egyptian army outpost, killing several soldiers, taking loot (mainly weapons) and burning armored vehicles.

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<sup>15</sup> I.e. as demonstrated in the IS video ‘*ala Minhaj al-Nubuwwa*, July 2014.

<sup>16</sup> I.e. putting a captured Iraqi soldier on ‘trial’ as he claims to be a Sunni yet fails to pray according to the Sunni habitus and outs himself as a Shiite. As a consequence, he is shot in the back of the head next to his already executed comrades. *Wa-qtuluhum haythu thaqiftumuhum, wilaya Salah al-Din*, July 2015. Sentiments such as these are founded on the writings of Imam Shawkani (1760-1834).

<sup>17</sup> Often simplified as the principle of takfir, of “excommunication” and hence obligation the killing of these individuals. However, it follows a more complex system of declaring Sunnis as apostates, which is used by Sunni jihadists more often to justify the persecution and execution of unwanted individuals, citing a wide range of extremist Salafist sources from ibn al-Qayyim to Ibn Taymiyya, to the ecosystem of writings by various authors influenced by Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792).

<sup>18</sup> I.e. the famed work by ibn Nahhas which is a cornerstone for AQ and IS literature alike.

FIG. 3.3 - SNAPSHOT OF A TYPICAL IS CORE TELEGRAM CHANNEL COMMUNICATION: SALAFIST WRITINGS SHARED IN COMBINATION WITH THE AUDIO OF AN IS FIGHTER REMAINING RESISTANT AND STEADFAST WITHIN BESIEGED AL-BAGHUZ, FEBRUARY 2019



In addition to that photo report<sup>19</sup>, the channel shared an audio message purportedly from inside al-Baghuз<sup>20</sup>, which at the time was under siege and referred to as the last IS territorial

<sup>19</sup> The photo report is in the collection of the authors.

<sup>20</sup> The audio featured a Mujahid speaking about steadfastness to attain entry to paradise by remaining loyal to his faith and commitment to God in fighting non-Muslim enemies and their local apostate proxies.

stronghold. In addition to these demonstrations of applied theology, the channel shared two PDF documents: one by the notorious Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab titled “a message by the imam ‘Abd al-Wahhab obligating to ask about the meaning of there is no God but God” and the other by al-Walid bin ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Fariyyan with the title “jurisprudential ruling regarding travelling to the lands of ‘polytheism’”<sup>21</sup>. These documents set out the detailed theological arguments behind specific actions. The mixture of practical action and theological constructs are an important element of the core jihadi movement. The long documents create a theological context in which current events can be interpreted, while photo reports and audio (along with video) show this is not abstract theory but applied theology. Both PDF documents have been downloaded with the Telegram application 1425 and 933 times. The al-Baghuz audio has been downloaded 1343 times.

## **The Caliphate Library on Telegram – Dissecting the Document Warehouse**

On Telegram, IS runs a channel called “The Caliphate Library”. Analysing the content shared on this channel allows to demonstrate how the jihadi movement thrives on lengthy documents that set out their theology, beliefs – and strategy, fostering the Salafist-jihadi nexus.

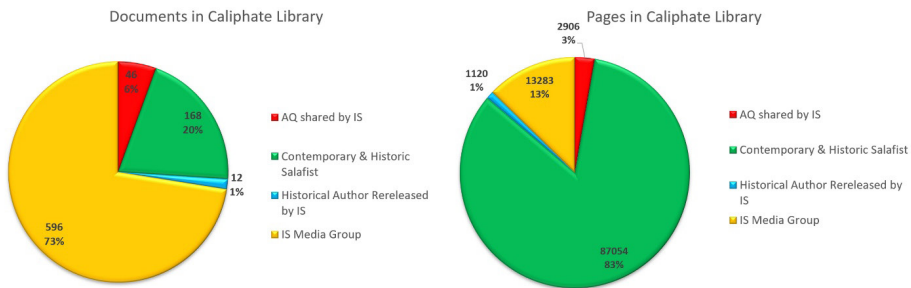
This individual library contains 908 PDF documents, which collectively contain over 111,000 pages. This is far from what one might expect from a movement which thinks in 140 characters, as some Western commentators suggest – and constitutes the core IS-related literature. The 908 PDF documents are of different origin, as outlined below. Particularly important

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<sup>21</sup> Literally shirk means to associate or partner people, items, icons, idols, etc. next to God, hence violating the principle of tawheed, or the “oneness of God”. This is a core theological narrative featured in all Sunni extremist writings and videos – based on a rich range of extremist Salafist writings.

to note, while the majority of documents (73%) were produced by an ISIS or ISI media group, the vast majority of writing by number of pages (83%) are theological texts from contemporary and historic Salafist authors. These documents provide a vital insight into the diverse nature of documents which comprise the Salafist-Jihadi nexus.

FIG. 3.4 - BREAKDOWN OF CALIPHATE LIBRARY BY NUMBER OF DOCUMENTS AND PAGES



The pie-chart on the left shows the number of pages for each category. The categories are:

- AQ era (without ISI/IS) in red;
- IS media group in yellow;
- Extremist Salafist books by contemporary and historical authors in green. These writings are neither banned nor illegal in most countries around the world and provide the religious ecosystem to degrade humans and define the “other” as enemy and so forth. The number of pages of these writings outweigh what terrorist groups produce;
- Blue shows the dedicated re-publication of such legal extremist Salafist writings by IS’ Maktabat al-Himma publishing house, marking the importance for the extremist constituents.

The pie-chart on the right side shows the quantity of documents in the Caliphate Library. 596 uniquely IS (and ISI) produced documents make up over 13,000 pages. Hence, the number of IS produced documents are shorter, quicker to read, greater in number, yet reference the rich ecosystem of the (green) 87,000 pages of extremist Salafist writings.

### The AQ Era (The Arabian Peninsula Documents)

6% of the 908 PDF documents are from the AQ era, excluding the Iraqi AQ side, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), the forerunner of IS. It is significant to note that, for IS and their readership, the ‘historical’ AQ documents of the Arabian Peninsula jihadist ecosystem matter. They provide the theological legitimacy to kill fellow Sunni Muslims who are in the service of Arab regimes (e.g., al-Zahrani<sup>22</sup>), the historical jihadist legitimacy of indiscriminate killings (eg., al-Fahd<sup>23</sup>) or the re-enforced intellectual argumentations of fighting jihad until the end of times (i.e. al-‘Uyairi<sup>24</sup>). The first generation of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) pioneered using the Internet as a constant medium for their output in the early 2000s and had a major crossover to the unfolding jihad in neighbouring Iraq<sup>25</sup>. AQAP not only produced the first electronic jihad magazines but also had been key cornerstones in the development of the Sunni jihadist online activism<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> Faris al-Zahrani, also known as Abu Jandal al-Azdi, was a jihadist militant (AQAP core member in the role of a leading theologian) and preacher. He was executed in Saudi Arabia in 2016.

<sup>23</sup> Nasir al-Fahd, a long-time jihadist sympathizer and endorsed by the classical AQ, is currently imprisoned in Saudi Arabia.

<sup>24</sup> Yusuf al-‘Uyairi was former bin Laden’s bodyguard and key AQAP theologian; his writings are in parts of analytical sobriety and in other parts clear theological instructions. His writing “constants on the path of jihad” is one of the most important documents and was indirectly cited by the then IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi when he re-iterated that “god commands us to wage jihad, he did not order us to win”, emphasizing jihadist motivation in this world is to strive to be certified to enter paradise in the next.

<sup>25</sup> R. Paz (2009), pp. 267-280.

<sup>26</sup> The range of pioneer activist media operations spanned from re-thinking

Of these core pre-IS AQ documents one AQ author is prominently featured: Abu Hummam Bakr bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz al-Athari (1984-2017). Al-Athari gained fame under his real name, Abu Sufyan Turki bin Mubarak bin al-Bin’ali; he had been a keen supporter of the Islamic State in Iraq when it was part of AQ and later sided with al-Baghdadi before falling out with him. He was a prolific writer and, for example, under his pseudonym eulogised the Islamic State of Iraq leaders, the “believer of the faithful and his minister”, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi and Abu Hamza al-Muhajir in April 2010<sup>27</sup>. His writings regarding the Arab Spring in 2011, calling for violence as the only possible means in Syria<sup>28</sup> are shared by the Library as well. A document from February 2010 entitled “Conversation or Mooing”<sup>29</sup> is shared as well, highlighting the framework of that time when the West sought to engage moderate Islamic forces to undermine extremist groups. That this document is shared in the current context, almost ten years later, is seen by the Caliphate Library’s target audience as proof that ‘true’ Islam is victorious despite the odds. His 2011 fatwa-styled ruling on banning women from driving is also part of the collection and was enforced by IS during its physical territorial phase in Syria and Iraq<sup>30</sup>.

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jihadist videos to professionally broadcast the testimonies of suicide bombers, include important textual sources in filmed documents to legitimize beheadings (before these became a symbol in Western mindset for al-Qaeda in Iraq with the filmed beheading of Nick Berg in 2004), and even a first form of streaming: a squad of AQAP operatives maintained a cellphone connection allowing an audio recording as the operation unfolded. This audio was then included in a later video production to praise the attack and commemorate the killed operatives. N. Prucha (2010).

<sup>27</sup> Both Abu Omar al-Baghdadi and Abu Hamza al-Muhajir (Abu Ayyub al-Masri) were killed in 2010.

<sup>28</sup> Al-Bin’ali (al-Athari): *Ya ahl al-Sham inn al-asima fi l-husam*, Minbar al-Tawhid wa-l Jihād, 2011.

<sup>29</sup> Al-Bin’ali (al-Athari): *Hivar am khuwar?*, *Minbar al-Tawhid wa-l Jihād*, 2010. He notes the term *khuwar* “mooing sounds” by citing the Lisan al-‘Arab reference of the Qur’an: 7:147.

<sup>30</sup> Al-Bin’ali (al-Athari): *al-Ishara fi hukm qiyyada al-mara’t al-siyyara*, Minbar



Other writings of the AQ era feature Nasir al-Fahd, with a treatise on “What a Woman should wear in front of other women” written in 2000. Nasir al-Fahd was a prominently-featured scholar in the ecosystem and among other things his writings called for indiscriminate revenge bombings of citizens of enemy nations and the like. Nasir al-Fahd was arrested after the May bombings 2003 in Riyadh and recanted his support of terrorism while in prison. AQ, at that time active in Saudi Arabia, was keen to support al-Fahd by the emergent online ecosystem at the time and al-Fahd’s alleged letter “recanting the alleged recantation” was featured within this ecosystem<sup>31</sup>.

Unlike al-Fahd, Abu Jandal al-Azdi was executed by the Saudi state after his arrest in August 2004. Abu Jandal al-Azdi aka as Abu Salman Faris al-Zahrani by his real name, was a key jihadi theologian. In the Caliphate Library collection his work on “Usama bin Laden – Reformer of our Time and Crusher of the Americans” (640 pages) is featured and a new IS version of his early 2000s writing regarding the permissibility to kill Muslims in the service of Arab nation states has been re-published. He was on a wanted list in Saudi Arabia, to which AQAP responded by issuing a 65 page long ‘counter-narrative’ featuring the 26 individuals on the most wanted list. This writing was edited by al-Azdi and is part of the Caliphate Library.

IS media groups, including the precursor Islamic State of Iraq (ISI)

In addition to the material produced by the Islamic State (*al-Dawlat al-Islamiyya*), the channel republished ISI-era documents. This is an important part of the identity for *al-Dawlat al-Islamiyya* and a religious authoritative source. These combined represent 73% of documents and over 13% of total pages (over 13,000 pages). Many of the documents from the ISI era

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al-Tawhid wa-l Jihād, 2011.

<sup>31</sup> For more on the online operations and key players of the first generation of AQ in Saudi Arabia: N. Prucha (2010).

are martyr stories that had been published by the AQ in Iraqi Media Diwan (2005) and were then distributed by the Majlis al-Shura al-Mujahidin and al-Furqan, the foundations of ISI. IS re-published these early martyr stories of Iraq fighting against mainly the Americans in 2018. This 235-page document features over 50 martyr stories, including prominent al-Zarqawi lieutenant Abu Anas al-Shami<sup>32</sup>, promoting the avant-gardist jihadist operations of the time that led to the success of the Islamic State a decade later. The textual cohesion set out in such martyr stories of the ISI-era is continued by similar stories by, for example, IS' al-Rimah media featuring the martyr Abu 'Ali al-Shammari, a member of a large tribe from Iraq, following the "examples of Khattab [Samir Saleh 'Abdallah, who fought and was killed in Chechnya], Shamil [Basayev, from Chechnya], Usama [bin Laden] and other" jihadi foreign fighters<sup>33</sup>. A focal point, naturally, are the IS era documents that, to a degree, are transcripts of IS radio al-Bayan programs, featuring lengthy theological explanations by iconic IS figures such as Abu 'Ali al-Anbari (killed in 2016) outlining the Sunni jihadist understanding of being a *muwahhid*, of professing the meaning of the "oneness of God"<sup>34</sup>.

<sup>32</sup> Abu Anas al-Shami was a renowned theologian and a vital figure for al-Zarqawi and his group. He died in a targeted missile strike by American forces in 2004 near Abu Ghraib in Iraq. He was a Palestinian based in Jordan. He grew up in Kuwait, where arguably many Palestinian workers and engineers had been exposed to the strict teachings and interpretations of the Wahhabi dominated Arabian Peninsula Islam. Experiencing war and expulsion again, the Palestinian migrants, who nevertheless had been refugees in Jordan and had come to Kuwait in pursuit of economic opportunities, had to flee back to Jordan because of the Iraqi aggression against Kuwait in 1990, taking the Arabian Peninsula Salafism with them. As the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) sided with Saddam Hussein, the Palestinians lost their base in Kuwait and in most cases returned to the refugee camps of Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and elsewhere. Hazim al-Amin, *Al-Salafi al-yatim – al-wajib al-Filastini li "l-jihad al-'alimi" wa-l "Qa'ida"*, Beirut-London, Dar al-Saqi, 2011, pp. 114-127.

<sup>33</sup> Abu Mu'adh al-Shammari, *Qissa shahid min ard al-'Iraq Abu 'Ali al-Shammari*, Rimah Media, 2018.

<sup>34</sup> For example the – as featured in the library as of time of writing – 26 transcribed

Other key documents include the series about the “Ba ‘th party – its history and ideology” (al-Battar), the treatise “legal ruling on defending against an attack against the Islamic shari’a and the ruling of the [jihadist] banner”, an updated re-print from the Saudi AQ era and released by al-Battar Media Foundation in 2015. The collected speeches by Abu Muhammad al-Adnani are likewise featured with IS Maktabat al-Himma re-releases of slain ISI leaders’ writings, and featured prominently the “30 recommendations to the amirs and soldiers of the Islamic State” by ‘Abd al-Mun’im bin ‘Iz al-Din al-Badawi aka Abu Hamza al-Muhajir. This 74-page long essay, in a sense his legacy, was re-distributed in multiple languages by Maktabat al-Himma in 2016, along with articles from Dabiq magazine and selected articles taken from the weekly al-Naba’ newspaper. These documents showcase the active side of the Islamic State, the constant emphasis on jurisprudence, which during their occupation of urban areas *was actively* implemented. Lengthy documents clarifying everyday legal issues are also part of the library. These documents use a Q&A style to explain issues ranging from legal rulings (fatwa) to mundane issues such as who has to recompense what to the family of a victim of traffic accidents or general rulings with regards to blood money and revenge killings<sup>35</sup>, Ashhad writings on the proper process during Ramadan<sup>36</sup>, reacting to AQ claims and drawing a line of distinction between AQ under bin Laden and that of al-Zawahiri<sup>37</sup> and classical jihadist-styled theological treatises that in sum can be labeled as anti-democracy analyses<sup>38</sup>.

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episodes of al-Anbari’s lessons how to avoid involuntarily shirk (‘polytheism’).

<sup>35</sup> i.e. Fatawa ‘abr al-athir: Qatl wa-mawt wa-qisas wadiyyat wa-l jana’iz, al-Bayan, 2017.

<sup>36</sup> Abu ‘Ammar al-Ansari, al-Khuttab al-madhbariyya istiqbal Ramadan, Ashhad, 2018.

<sup>37</sup> Abu l-Bara’a al-Yamani, al-Radd al-qasif ‘ala shuyukh al-qa’ida al-khawalif, Ashhad, 2018.

<sup>38</sup> Abu Mu’adh al-Shammari, al-Dimukratiyya wa-atiba’uha fi mizan al-shar’i, Ashhad, 2018.

Not one of the texts envisages a “Jihadist Utopia” or proposes a “Utopian narrative”. The idea of a “Utopian Narrative” is an artefact of Western misinterpretation. It is not rooted in the texts of of *al-Dawlat al-Islamiyya* or their predecessors.

### Historic and contemporary Salafist writings

While the majority of PDF documents are crafted by the two dominant Sunni jihadist groups AQ and IS, the Caliphate Library distributed historical and contemporary Salafist writing which intersects with modern Sunni jihadist theology. Of the non-IS branded Salafist writings shared by the Library, not all works are to be associated with the extremist segment. The 40 hadith by al-Nuwawwi (1233-1277) for example are an exception and are often simply part of any well-stocked Islamic library. What allows the Salafist writings shared by the Library to be defined as extremist, however, revolves around two principles:

- The Salafist writings are linked to modern jihadist groups based on a shared theology, using the same language and referencing oftentimes the same religious sources to justify violence. Legitimising killing those who insult prophet Muhammad (ibn Taymiyya) is put into practice by AQ in the 2000s (following the Muhammad cartoons), sanctions the murder of Theo van Gogh (Amsterdam, 2004) and is the main theme of a major ISI/IS themed video series (2012-2014). The writings are the basis of modern jihadist theology, relating the jihadist religiosity to violence against what is defined as ungodly, unholy or simply unhuman “other”.
- Writings such as Minhaj al-Muslim featured in the Library are heavily cited by AQ and IS. Looking at the Arabic-language content of jihadist groups allows to reference and link the sources. The Caliphate Library Telegram channel provides a comprehensive collection of such core-jihadist historical and contemporary extremist Salafist textbooks that continue to inspire and

fuel the Sunni jihadist movement as such. This is not limited to historical Salafist writers such as of ‘Abd al-Wahhab and ibn al-Qayyim, but includes modern extremist Salafist thinkers who are as outspoken in their works.

Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), a theological forefather for contemporary Sunni jihadist groups and theoretician of the Muslim Brotherhood, used the Arabic term *jahiliyya* to relate the state of Muslims of his time to that of the pre-Islamic state of “ignorance” and dazzlement. He defined the state of Islam as merely being nominal and as a solution minted the concept of *hakimiyyat allah*, the need to implement the absolute sovereignty of God as an order for humans. Hence, the Minhaj of Islam is absent and subsequently *jahiliyya* reigns. The rule of God is based on ayat of the Qur’an and selected hadith, Qutb portrays this concept as being diametrically opposed to any form of manmade models, ranging from nationalism, the nation-state, democracy and other formats. For Qutb, the revelation Muhammad received is unchangeable, yet, of course, “the path of the revelation cannot be repeated, but the principles of the Quran [that is the written documentation of the oral revelation] are called for in every new era”<sup>39</sup>. As Yusuf al-‘Uyairi would outline in his 2003 writing “Constants on the Path of Jihad”, Qutb re-enforced theological principles based on the reading of the Quran that must be put into active practice, abolishing manmade nation-states in the process, to ensure the *hakimiyyat allah* on earth. Only then, when the constants called for by God and having been led by human historical role models of Prophet Muhammad and his companions, can Muslims lead a humane, worldly and thus finite life – and thus be eligible to enter paradise after death. The highest reward for their human life is received in this perspective by being a martyr

<sup>39</sup> Sayyid Qutb, *Ma’alim fi l-tariq*, p. 20, Dar al-Shuruq, 1979. Electronic (scanned version) retrieved at <https://archive.org/details/m3alem.shiqaji>. The cover of the book is imprinted with the Saudi Ministry for Religious Affairs.

in combat and is based on personal actions and deeds within the framework of living by the principles of *hakimiyyat allah*, the common rule of divine law. Personal faith, dedication and commitment within the socio-religious collective embodied by *hakimiyyat allah* means that jihad has to be waged against non-Muslims while Sunni Muslims who do not abide these rules are declared as apostates and hence must be murdered.

Qutb, as many contemporary jihadists, often cites historical clerics such as Ibn al-Qayyim. In Qutb's chapter "al-jihad on the path of God"<sup>40</sup> he refers to Ibn al-Qayyim's "Zad al-Ma'ad" to clarify the permissibility to fight and, in particular, in a reference to the pre-Islamic time of jahiliyya that again has taken over the world, "God's command to combat the *mushrikin* until religion in its entirety is for God"<sup>41</sup>. Qutb, just as AQ and the Islamic State rely on historical clerics such as Ibn al-Qayyim, who had been a disciple of Ibn Taymiyya, to explain and define the enemy. The *mushrikin* are, according to this reading of the term backed by the writings of religious scholars such as al-Qayyim, 'Abd al-Wahhab or contemporary Gulf scholars such as Abu Bakr al-Jaz'ir, people who associate things, persons, and other Gods beside God and hence violate the ultimate commandment of *tawhid*: the oneness of God as expressed in the Islamic "*shahada la illaha ila l-llah*", there is no God but God. Qutb dedicates a whole chapter on understanding the Islamic creed, adding it is the "methodology to life"<sup>42</sup>. Just as many parts of the writings by historical scholars such as al-Qayyim or Imam Shawkani are relevant for understanding the actions of jihadists today, and are expressed in their own words in their writings hidden behind the firewall of Arabic, contemporary authors such as Sayyid Qutb, his brother Muhammad, and a range of others continue to influence the motifs and actions by militant and non-openly militant jihadist groups and actors.

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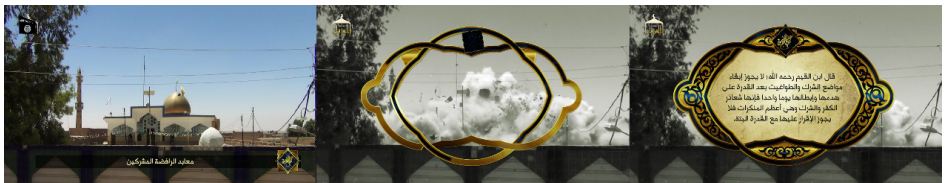
<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 55-82.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., pp. 83-96.

Theology in practice, as called for, means nothing short of applied theology. This activist form of application is filmed and mediated in audio/visual formats – but almost exclusively based on writings. The Islamic State, thus, was able to apply existent written theology by historical extremist Salafist scholars as well as AQ unto territory inside Syria and Iraq, having the privilege to claim liberating core Arab-Sunni territories and subjecting a native Arab-Sunni population to the *hakimiyyat al-lab*. Furthermore, this gave IS the power to project what Sunni jihadists had been fighting for since the early 1980s: bringing jihad home into the Arab-Sunni heartlands and justifying their actions as based on “the prophetic methodology”. Hence, applying theology on this territorial scale and pace during the height of IS territorial existence was a dream come true for the AQ penned theology and the filmed documentation thereof is highly appealing to the target audience. In a major film release in July 2014 by *al-Furqan*, IS documented the destruction of graves and Shiite mosques on an unprecedented scale, explaining to its audience the theological legality and obligation for their actions. The title of the film, “Upon the prophetic methodology”, has become a popular slogan for IS, spanning billboards inside the caliphate and memes on the Internet. In one sequence of the film, a Shiite mosque is raided, ransacked and then blown up. Theological guidance is embedded by textual works such as those by Ibn al-Qayyim.

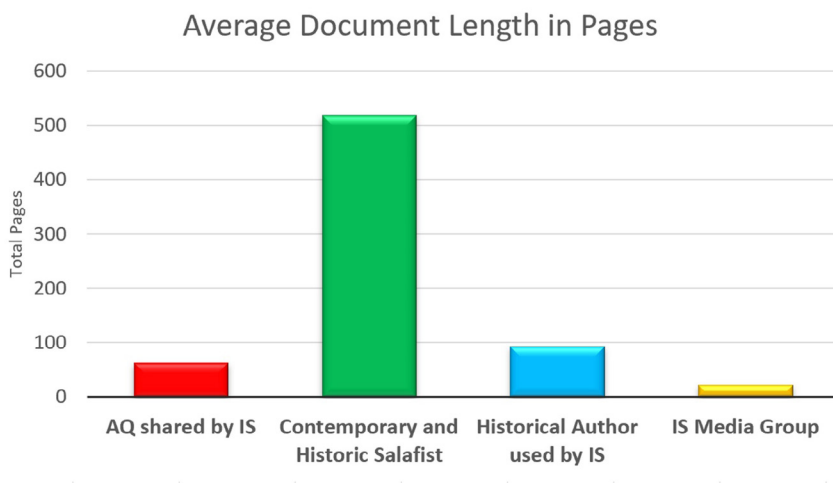
FIG. 3.5 - A SHIITE MOSQUE, REFERRED TO AS “THE SITE OF WORSHIP FOR REJECTIONIST-MUSHRIKIN” IS DESTROYED – FOLLOWING THE PROPHETIC CONDUCT OF PROPHET MUHAMMAD AND HIS COMPANIONS ACCORDING TO IS UNDERSTANDING



Citing Ibn al-Qayyim, the disciple of Ibn Taymiyya, referred to as *shaykh al-Islam* by orthodox Muslims, the destruction of the “site of veneration by the *rafidi mushrikin*” is legalised:

it is not permissible [for Sunni Muslims] to leave the sites and places of *shirk* and idols<sup>43</sup> untouched once the power to destroy them is established, even if just for one day. For these are the symbols of *kufr* and *shirk* are from the greatest of evil. Therefore, it is not permissible to rule maintaining these sites after conquering thereof<sup>44</sup>.

FIG. 3.6 - SALAFIST BOOKS OUTWEIGH IN PAGE LENGTH JIHADIST WRITINGS BY FAR



<sup>43</sup> In Arabic: *tawaghit*, plural of *taghut*, a term used in reference of worldly tyrant rulers and idols, worshipped in violation of *tawhid*. The fight against *taghut* in jihadist mindset is bound by both elements – fighting worldly un-Islamic Arab regimes and thus restore the ‘true’ Islamic community (*umma*).

<sup>44</sup> Ibn al-Qayyim, *Zad al-ma’ad fi hadi kbayr al-’abad* (1/506). Discussed for example here: <http://katarat1.com/forum/showthread.php?t=968>, 13 September 2011.



In terms of total pages, the Salafist books featured in the Caliphate Library Channel far outweigh the jihadist documents. Apart from classical works by Imam Shawkani or Ibn al-Qayyim, the *shaykh al-Islam*, Ibn Taymiyya is overrepresented. Ibn Taymiyya, who died 1328, was a prolific writer and member of the Hanbali school of jurisprudence. His work has influenced the Wahhabi movement of which the theological jihadist branch is the most extremist extension thereof. Within the 300,000 pages penned by AQ authors and IS productions, Ibn Taymiyya is referenced over 40,000 times. His jurisprudential (*fiqh*) works justify the persecution and killing of non-Muslims and provide a clear-cut definition of when Sunnis become apostates – the very essence of almost every contemporary jihadist author (and applied in the videos of jihadist groups). Ibn Taymiyya is renowned for his “characteristically juridical thinking”<sup>45</sup> and has a high level of competence as a legal scholar expressed in his writings that are based – at least in part – on Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*). Ibn Taymiyya has been frequently cited in Sunni extremist writings since the 1980s and accordingly referred to and quoted by jihadist ideologues in audio-visual publications. The “Islamic State” is basing all of its audio-visual output on the theology that has been penned by AQ since the 1980s – with the significant difference, however, that IS has had the territory to implement and enforce this corpus of theology upon the population of the self-designated “caliphate” – which as of 2019 serves as the filmed legacy and pretext for the return of IS. Featured in the Caliphate Library is the over 4,000-page-long multivolume “*tafsir shaykh al-Islam*”, the exegesis of the Qur’an by Ibn Taymiyya and his notorious book “The drawn sword against the insulter of the Prophet” (*al-sarim al-maslul didda shatim al-rasul*). Within the Sunni extremist mindset, the sword must be drawn upon anyone who opposes their worldview and specific interpretations of Qur’anic

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<sup>45</sup> Wael b. Hallaq: *Ibn Taymiyya against the Greek Logicians*. Translated with an introduction by Wael Hallaq, New York, Oxford University Press, 1993, p. xxxiii.

sources, the hadith (sayings and deeds of Prophet Muhammad) or frame of references that have been penned since the 1980s. Ibn Taymiyya's book has been used by Muhammed Bouyeri to justify killing Dutch filmmaker and Islam critic Theo van Gogh in November 2004 in Amsterdam and is part of a long list jihadist operations in recent years:

The text details how and why to kill targets, first of all because of insult (*shatm*, *sabb*, *adhan*) of Islam. Bouyeri tried to sever van Gogh's head with a big knife after he had shot him several times. In the text we find the passage: "the cutting of the head without mercy is legal if the Prophet does not disapprove it." Moreover, the text advises multiple times to use assassination as an act of deterrence. The slaughter of van Gogh in open daylight seems like a one-to-one translation into reality of the directives we find in the text<sup>46</sup>.

For example, Ibn Taymiyya has been used to justify the suicide bombing attack of the Danish Embassy in Pakistan (2008)<sup>47</sup> after the Muhammad cartoons had been released. In June 2012 the *Jund allah* (soldiers of God) media outlet of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan published a German-language video featuring Moroccan-German "Abu Ibraheem" (Yassin Chouka) calling on his associates in Bonn from Waziristan to kill members of the German right-wing party *Pro NRW*.

This exact notion was picked up by German-speaking Global Islamic Media Front activists in 2012 in the wake of the violent protests in parts of the Islamic world in response to the

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Al-Qaeda claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing attack on the Danish Embassy in Pakistan in 2008. In video entitled *al-qawla qawla al-sawarim*, "the words [are now about action and hence] words of the sword", shows the testimony of the suicide operative identified as a Saudi by the nom de guerre Abu Gharib al-Makki [the Meccan]. The one-hour long video justifies the attack – among a rich blend of theological narratives – by the referencing of the time to talk is over, the time for actions (i.e., the swords must be drawn) has come to avenge the insults of Prophet Muhammad, referring to the work of Ibn Taymiyya.

movie “Innocence of Muslims”. A German translation of al-Maqdisi’s pamphlet, presumably by Austro-Egyptian jihadist Muhammad Mahmud, enriched the fatwa by the Egyptian pro-jihadist Ahmad ‘Ashush calling for the death of anyone involved in the movie project<sup>48</sup>.

In January 2015 two brothers, apparently trained by al-Qa-eda in the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen, attacked the offices of the French satire magazine Charlie Hebdo. After the massacre, the Kouachi brothers are seen and heard in one video made by a bystander shouting “we have avenged the Prophet” (*li-intiqamma al-rasul*), and then shooting wounded French police officer Ahmad Merabet in the head<sup>49</sup>. A video published on January 11, 2015 by the IS-affiliated media outlet, *Asawitimedia*, praises the attacks. The video is entitled “The French have insulted the Prophet of God – thus a merciless reaction”.

### The Salafist-Jihadist Nexus by Maktabat al-Himma

Earlier writings are re-published by al-Dawlat al-Islamiyya through Maktabat al-Himma (MH), a theologically-driven IS publication house republishing writings by authors of the ‘Abd al-Wahhab family, mainly Muhammad bin ‘Abd al-Wahhab. His writings are the backbone of the modern-day Wahhabism that constitutes the state doctrine of Saudi Arabia and had been radical-revolutionary at his time. Banning veneration of graves and being outspoken anti-Shiite, the work of ‘Abd al-Wahhab gave birth to modern jihadism where a clear Sunni identity is laid out in cohesive literal format and with the Islamic State

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<sup>48</sup> N. Prucha, “Fatwa calling for the death of the director, producer, and actors involved in the making the film ‘Innocence of Muslims’”, *Jihadica*, 18 September 2012.

<sup>49</sup> A detailed oversight is provided by the BBC, outlining in depth also the attack by IS member Amedy Coulibaly who executed several hostages in a Jewish supermarket, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30708237>. Amedy Coulibaly uploaded a video where he pledges allegiance to al-Baghdadi. Part of his video is used in one of the ‘official’ IS videos to applaud the January 2015 Paris attack, *Risala ila Fransa*, Wilayah Salah al-Din, 14 February 2015.

2013 onwards, demonstrating the power of applying this form of extremist theology in audio-visual format to appeal to a less text-affluent *zeitgeist* on the Internet. Apart from extremist Salafist books re-published through Maktabat al-Himma, using their own covers featuring the MH and IS logo with the slogan “upon prophetic methodology”<sup>50</sup>, many Salafist writings shared by the Library channel are scans made available as PDFs.

FIG. 3.7 - MAKTABAT AL-HIMMA, IS CORE TEXTUAL MEDIA FOUNDATION, DISTRIBUTES HISTORICAL WRITINGS BY MUHAMMAD ‘ABD AL-WAHHAB TO BOOST AND PROMOTE THEIR ACTIONS AS THEOLOGICAL SOUND BASED ON THE WRITINGS OF THE FOUNDER OF WAHHABISM



## Conclusion

This chapter provides evidence-based analysis of Jihadi networks on Telegram and demonstrates what Jihadi networks share through a content analysis of an Arabic core IS channel, the “Caliphate Library”.

<sup>50</sup> N. Prucha, “Part 2: ‘Upon the prophetic methodology’ and the media universe”, Online Jihad: Monitoring Jihadist Online Communities, 1 August 2017.

The documents in the library demonstrate that the Jihadi movement thrives on lengthy documents that set out their theology, beliefs, and strategy. Not one of the texts envisages a “Jihadist Utopia” or proposes a “Utopian narrative”. The idea of a “Utopian Narrative” is an artefact of Western misinterpretation. It is not rooted in the texts of *Dawlat al-Islamiyya* or their predecessors. This highlights the nexus around which Salafi and Jihadi theology intersect and emphasises why understanding this content matters in order to understand the jihadists’ persistent online presence and the outlook for their real-world survival. Sunni extremists continue operating freely online, expanding their existing databases of texts (theory) and videos (practice) for future generations. Organising on platforms such as Telegram allows them to swarm other platforms, social media sites and the internet in general, in their belief to fulfil the divine obligation of *da’wa* (proselytising) to indoctrinate future generations for their cause. Groups such as IS can easily operate online, as their clandestine networks are protected by:

- Arabic language required to access clandestine networks; the ongoing paucity of these language skills amongst researchers is appalling (linguistic firewall);
- Knowledge of the coherent use of coded religious language and keywords, which few researchers can demonstrate in their writing (initiation firewall);
- With the migration to Telegram, IS succeeded in shifting and re-adapting their modus operandi of in-group discussions & designated curated content intended for the public (as part of wider *da’wa*).

Media raids ensure that dedicated content gets pumped to the surface web, ranging from Twitter to Facebook, while the IS swarm can (re-)configure and organize content related to what is happening offline on the ground to ensure the cycle of offline events influencing / producing online materials is uninterrupted. The theological motivation, coherently repacked and

put in practice, based on 300,000 pages of writings and over 2,000 videos just by IS needs to be addressed. Yet, “without deconstructing the theology of violence inherent in jihadi communications and practice, these religious ideas will continue to inspire others to act, long after any given organised force, such as the Islamic State, may be destroyed on the ground”<sup>51</sup>.

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<sup>51</sup> R. Lohlker, “Why Theology Matters – The Case of ISIS”, *Strategic Review*, July/September 2016.

## 4. IS and the Others. A Topic Analysis of Pro- and Anti-IS Discourse on Arabic-Speaking Twitter

Matteo Colombo

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Current studies of alleged Islamic State (IS) propaganda on the internet mostly focused on the communication strategy of the terrorist group. However, social media has radically changed the role of the audience, which is no longer a passive target for propaganda, but rather an active player in the process of narrative creation. Consider how political communication is received on social media: users do not just passively read it; they also actively interact with contents by liking, criticising, sharing, endorsing, re-interpreting and modifying their message. Furthermore, social media has provided a powerful tool for any political organisation to extend its popularity beyond national borders.

This is particularly evident on Arabic-speaking Twitter. Despite regional dialects, Arabs have a common language (*Modern Standard Arabic*) and often share some aspects of their culture and history. All these elements make it easier for users to interact on a transnational level. In this context, any user from an Arab country can find a much larger audience for their messages than just the citizens of their own country. The characteristics of these platforms, with retweets, likes and hashtags,

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\* For the Arabic Tweets translation, I thank Fadi Alkhabbaz and Mina Samir. The analysed sample is drawn from the database of my PhD, but I utilise a different set of tweets and categories than in my thesis.

allow for a faster and more effective dissemination of content.

The Islamic State organisation quickly understood the potential of Twitter to broadcast its propaganda and gain support. My approach looks specifically at users' discourse about IS to identify the most recurrent arguments utilised in supporting or opposing this organisation.

The study draws from a sample of 5,000 tweets, which were randomly extracted from a database of almost 32.7 million tweets collected from the 1st of October 2014 to the 30th of September 2017, comprising one-third of all tweets in Arabic on the Islamic State in that period<sup>1</sup>. All the tweets, which include retweets as counted as individual tweets and content from banned accounts, are in Arabic and were collected using the provider *Brandwatch*<sup>2</sup>. To analyse the discourse, I divided the tweets into two groups: content expressing support and content expressing hostility towards the Islamic State. Within each of

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<sup>1</sup> To create a random sample of tweets, I utilised the R programme. This is a tool that is widely utilised in text analysis. Among its many features, it allows to extract randomly a given percentage of contents from a larger set. To carry out the analysis, I first removed "noise", especially that related to pornography, from the dataset. Secondly, I created a training set comprising all tweets from a given month or week. Thirdly, I merged those tweets into the same group, from which I randomly extracted 5,000 tweets.

<sup>2</sup> Brandwatch is a tool for Social Media Analysis. The database comprises 33% of all published tweets that contain the selected keywords, which are:

دعش / داعش (Da3esh) = The term is commonly to refer to the Islamic State in the Arab World. Both terms represent the acronyms of the group name and also include a derogatory meaning.

إرهاب (Includes: Terrorist-) = The word "terrorist" is used to refer to IS, but also to similar groups. It casts the Islamic State in a negative light.

تنظيم الدولة (The State organisation) = The term is often used in the news to indicate the Islamic State.

الدولة الإسلامية (The Islamic State) = The official name of the Islamic State, mostly used by its supporters.

الخلافة (Includes: Caliphate-) = "Caliph" is another way to call the Islamic State by its supporters.

الخلافة (Include: Caliph-) = The "Caliph" is the highest office in the Islamic State.

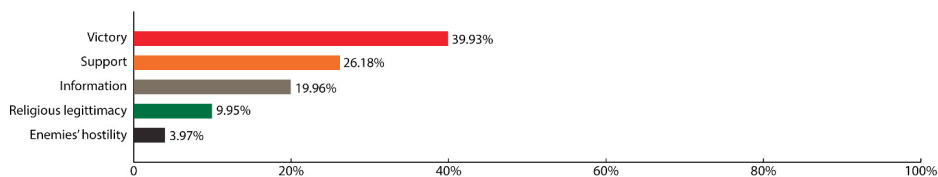
أبو بكر البغدادي = Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was the self-proclaimed Caliph of the Islamic State until his death in October 2019.



the two groups, I coded each tweet according to the prevalent topic. I relied on a professional Arab translator for the translation of tweets I could not clearly understand. Furthermore, I focused on a specific subset of pro- and anti-IS groups discussing the political and religious leadership of the Sunni community. This issue will be a central aspect of the last part of the chapter because the proclamation of the “Caliphate” differentiates the Islamic State from any other terrorist group. IS claims political and religious leadership over the entire Sunni community, which is an open challenge to some of the states of the region, in particular Saudi Arabia. I also accounted for the most frequent conspiracy theories about IS. The object of the chapter is to give an overview of the most recurrent topics of the two groups so as to provide useful information for policy-makers and other professionals.



### The most recurrent topics in the pro-IS Tweets



## IS Support: The Main Topics of Pro-IS Tweets

The pro-IS tweets in my sample comprise a heterogeneous combination of IS-generated propaganda, users who express support for the terrorist organisation and bots<sup>3</sup>. There are many

<sup>3</sup> Bots are non-human accounts, which are designed to perform automatic tasks. In social media, they often publish contents resembling that created by real users

pieces of evidence that a small network of pro-IS accounts has often published a very high number of tweets a day to spread the terrorist organisation's message. In November and October 2014, when IS extensively utilised Twitter for its propaganda, a study by Berger and Morgan estimated that the number of pro-IS accounts were approximately 46,000<sup>4</sup>. To understand the impact of this network, it worth mentioning that Ceron, Curini and Iacus have estimated the average number of tweets for days in the period between June 2014 and January 2015 to be approximately 160,000 a day<sup>5</sup>. Berber and Morgan have also stressed that IS has utilised bots extensively to spread its message on Twitter. The online Caliphate even created an app, the "*dawn of glad tidings*", to post its propaganda tweets on personal users' accounts.

In this chapter, I do not distinguish between IS propaganda, pro-IS users' support and bots, because my aim is to analyse the most recurrent topics expressing a stance in favour of the Islamic State. In other words, I am not looking at Twitter to understand how popular the Islamic State has been in the analysed period, but to identify at the topics that the terrorist group and its supporters have chosen to gain new followers. This is a particularly interesting topic because IS and its supporters began sharing their opinions on Twitter at a time when a trans-national discourse on Arab Twitter was already in place, and they could thus select the issues they felt would best resonate in the Arab Twitter community.

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for political or commercial reasons.

<sup>4</sup> J.M. Berger and J. Morgan, *The ISIS Twitter Census*, Brooking Institution, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> This number relies on my Ph.D. research and a study by Ceron, Curini and Iacus (2018). These authors analyse the percentage of pro-IS tweets between June 2014 and January 2015 in all contents which contain a reference to the Islamic State. They found a percentage of 25.1% in the analysed period, which reduces to 12.9% in those days which have more than 200,000 comments (90% percentile). For further details the article is: A. Ceron, L. Curini and S. M. Iacus, ISIS at its apogee: the Arabic discourse on Twitter and what we can learn from that about ISIS support and Foreign Fighters, *Sage Open*, vol. 9, no.1, 2019.

There are five recurrent topics in the pro-IS tweets, which are “*victory*”, “*support*”, “*information*”, “*religious legitimacy*” and “*enemies’ hostility*”. In my sample, the most recurrent category is that of “*victory*”, which celebrates or reports the military achievements of Islamic State against its enemies. The “*victory*” category is the prevalent one, representing 39.93% of the total pro-IS content I collected. An example of this category are the tweets, “*photos from a side of the battle in the #Willayat\_Salahaddin #State\_of\_the\_Caliphate #Islamic\_State*”<sup>6</sup> and “*breaking news: about 19 hummer cars are taken as booty by the Islamic State soldiers from the Rafidi flocks in at-Tash battles in the outskirts of #Ramadi*”.

The recurrence of IS propaganda on military strength has three main reasons. The first and most obvious is to threaten and terrorise its opponents. This is an old military strategy, which aims at gaining a psychological advantage over enemies through fear. To change the current state of affairs by indulging in violence is also the most distinctive characteristic of any terrorist group. As Schmid<sup>7</sup> argues, “terrorism can be broadly defined as the use of violence to create fear (*i.e. terror, psychic fear*) for (1) political, (2) religious, or (3) ideological reasons”.

The second reason revolves around the specific characteristics of IS communication towards its supporters and possible sympathisers. Islamic State propaganda devotes a great effort to framing its actions as being coherent with Islam. In the first phase of its territorial expansion, day-to-day victories were presented as a sign of God’s benevolence towards the group. Later, when the terrorist group started to lose ground, the Islamic State’s rhetoric framed its fight within a broader timeframe,

<sup>6</sup> The original tweet is:

صور لجانب من سير المعارك في #ولاية\_صلاح\_الدين  
<link>  
#دولة\_الخلافة  
#الدولة\_الإسلامية  
<picture>

<sup>7</sup> A.P. Schmid (ed.), *Handbook of Terrorism Research*, London, Routledge, 2011.

that of the centuries-long battle between the forces of Islam and those of impiety. The message of IS has been that the group is currently losing, but its setbacks mean nothing because victory will finally arrive for the true Muslims. An excellent example of this communication strategy can be found in the video titled “*Hunter of the Shield*” about the 2017 loss of Mosul. The video starts with a highly symbolic montage of images from the current fight between the Islamic state and its enemies at the edge of Mosul, and those from historical movies about the battles of Muslims in the first years of Islam. The message is that the fight started many years ago and one loss will not undermine the God-given victory at the end of time<sup>8</sup>.

The last reason is that IS aims at acquiring supremacy within the fragmented galaxy of jihadist organisations. The message is that victory is on the side of the Islamic State because God supports IS in the centuries-long battle between Muslims and their enemies.

The second most recurrent theme is that of “*support*”, which is the main topic in 26.18% of all pro-IS tweets. These contents openly show allegiance and a certain degree of sympathy for the Islamic State and its leaders. An example is the tweet: “*the (Islamic) state depends mainly on supporters in the social media, How are good your acts! oh supporters of the Islamic state!<link>*”<sup>9</sup>. Contents which express support seem to be produced both by genuine IS sympathisers and the IS propaganda machine with bots.

As Klausen correctly points out, the terrorist organisation utilises Twitter to “give the illusion of authenticity, as a spontaneous activity of a generation accustomed to using cell phones for self-publication to generate the illusion of wide support”<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> The video is available here: <https://jihadology.net/2016/12/13/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-hunters-of-the-shields-wilayat-ninawa/>

<sup>9</sup> The original tweet is:

<picture>الدولة تعتمد بصورة أساسية على مناصريها في وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي لله دُرُّكُمْ يا أنصار الدولة الإسلامية

<sup>10</sup> J. Klausen, “Tweeting the Jihad: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2015, pp. 1-22.

For the Islamic State and its followers, it is essential to sustain the claim that its actions are carried out in the name of the entire Muslim community and therefore to provide evidence of support from a large percentage of ordinary Muslims. This is a central element for Islamic State propaganda because the proclamation of the Caliphate means that the terrorist group cast itself as the political and religious authority of the entire Sunni community. Any of these claims would be null without a constituency which recognises the authority of the Caliphate as legitimate. Showing the support from its constituency thus aims to strengthen IS' discourse on the legitimacy of the Caliphate and reinforce the idea that IS's jihad is not about the organisation and its enemies, but is a defensive war for all Sunnis against non-Sunni powers.

The third most recurrent theme in the pro-IS group is that of "information". The tweets included in this category are those that provide the terrorist organisation's perspective on its activities and actions. These tweets comprise both generic collections of the propaganda material of the Islamic State organisation (e.g. "Everything you want to know about the #Islamic\_State"<sup>11</sup>) and more specific references to its state-like activities (e.g. *Media office for the #Willayat\_al\_Jazeera presents: The Zakat and Charity Department provides the poor and the needy with a financial grant* <link> #Islamic\_State<sup>12</sup>). These tweets comprise 19.96% of total content expressing a positive stance towards IS.

The Islamic State and its supporters provide information on the organisations' activities for three main reasons. The first is the most obvious, which is informing the audience about the achievements of the group. IS does not have access to mainstream media and, therefore, it must rely on social media to spread its message. This communication strategy both aims at motivating

<sup>11</sup> The original tweet is:

كل ماتريد معرفته عن #الدولة\_الإسلامية <picture>

<sup>12</sup> The original tweet is:

المكتب الإعلامي لـ #ولاية\_الجزيرة يقدم ديوان الزكاة والصدقات بمنح الفقراء والمساكين منحة مالية  
#الدولة\_الإسلامية <link>

supporters and acquiring new followers, especially among those who share some degree of sympathy with jihadist organisations other than IS. The underlying message to other jihadists is that the Islamic State is powerful and that it is fulfilling its promise of creating a state based on Islamic law. In sharing their message on statehood, the communication strategy of IS revolves around the issues of territorial control and provision of services to the population. More specifically, 30.29% of all tweets coded in the category of “*information*” describe the state-like functions performed by the alleged Caliphate (53.3% revolve around the provision of services, 46.6% focus on the territorial control of the state).

The fourth most common tweets are those which argue that the Islamic State has “*religious legitimacy*”. This category includes all those tweets which aim at presenting the actions of the Islamic State as being in accordance with Islam. The total percentage of tweets included in this category is 9.95%. These tweets revolve around the idea that the actions of the Islamic State are legitimate from a religious point of view and are therefore acceptable. An example of this category is the tweet “*those who observe well the current events in the world are very aware of the Prophet promise, peace be upon him, ‘Caliphate on the path of of the prophecy’ and its meaning. #Islamic\_Caliphate*”<sup>13</sup>.

Religious legitimacy is considered fundamental in IS propaganda because of the claim by the terrorist organisation to be a Caliphate, which is the supreme political and religious authority in Islam. Furthermore, the Islamic State and its supporters depict its jihad within the framework of an epic war between Muslims and infidels, which precedes the end of times. IS supporters have reinterpreted a saying of Muhammad (*hadith*)<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> The original tweet is:

من يتمعن جيدا في الأحداث الحالية في العالم سيدرك جيدا وعد الرسول صلى الله عليه و سلم «خلافة على منهاج النبوة»  
و معناها  
#الخلافة\_الإسلامية

<sup>14</sup> “*Hadith*” are collections of the record of the words and actions of Mohammad. These sayings were collected many years after the death of the Prophet of Islam and there are many discussions on their interpretation and whether they are all

which states that the enemy of Islam will “gather for the fierce battle, and at that time they will come with eighty banners”<sup>15</sup>. Islamic State propaganda often links these 80 banners to the states that are fighting against it. Interestingly enough, the website of the anti-Daesh coalition counts 80 countries in its ranks<sup>16</sup>. It might sound strange to an educated audience, but the idea that the world is about to end has been quite popular in the Arab world and beyond in recent years. McCants<sup>17</sup> points out correctly that “apocalyptic messages resonate among many Muslims today because of the political turmoil in the Middle East”. This author reports that in 2012, half of all Muslims in North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia expected the imminent appearance of the Mahdi<sup>18</sup>.

The last topic refers to the idea that “the Islamic State is under attack from a plurality of world powers”. It comprises 3.97% of the total tweets. An example is “Amaq Agency”<sup>19</sup>: *The International Alliance supports the Syrian #regime in its battles against the Islamic State fighters in #Hasaka, for more details...*<sup>20</sup>, which express the idea that both the West and its allies (*Arab countries which participated in the anti-IS coalition*) are conspiring with Iran and Russia to eliminate the Islamic State. This propaganda strategy is also linked to a recurrent characteristic

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authentic. Scholars widely differ on this issue.

<sup>15</sup> Sunan Ibn Majâh, vol. 5, Book 36, Hadith 4095. The Hadith is available here: <https://sunnah.com/ibnmajah/36/171>.

<sup>16</sup> The website of the “Global Coalition Against Daesh” is: <https://theglobal-coalition.org/en/>

<sup>17</sup> W. McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State*, St Martin Press, New York, 2015.

<sup>18</sup> The *Mahdi* is an eschatological redeemer and a messianic figure who, according to some strains of Islamic tradition, will appear in the last days, before the Day of Judgment.

<sup>19</sup> *Amaq News Agency* is the semi-official “news agency” of the alleged Caliphate, which shares news on its actions and operations. Interestingly enough, Amaq often utilises a ‘neutral’ terminology in describing the IS actions.

<sup>20</sup> The original tweet is:

وكالة أعماق التحالف الدولي يساند #النظام السوري في معاركه ضد مقاتلي #الدولة الإسلامية في مدينة #الحسكة للتفاصيل  
<link>

in terrorist organisations, which is to present their fight within the framework of “Us” versus “Them”. This concept is well summarised in a quote from Jerold Post<sup>21</sup>, who argues that in the discourse of terrorist organisations:

“They”, the establishment, are the source of all evil in vivid contrast to “us”, the freedom fighters, consumed by righteous rage. And, if “they” are the source of “our” problems, it follows ineluctably in the special psycho-logic of the terrorist, that “they” must be destroyed.

When defining the enemies engaged in a war against the Islamic State, pro-IS tweets often express the idea of religious-based hostility and utilise sectarian terminology. Some derogatory terms are specifically for non-Muslims (e.g. *Crusaders*<sup>22</sup>, *Kafir*<sup>23</sup>) and Shia enemies<sup>24</sup> (e.g. *Rafidi*<sup>25</sup>, *Safawi*<sup>26</sup>, *Majusi*<sup>27</sup>, *Nusayri*<sup>28</sup>). Tweets which express sectarian-based hostility can be found in 16.8% of the pro-IS sample (10.88% of total tweets are aimed at Shia and 5.92% of total tweets at Christians).

<sup>21</sup> J.M. Post, “Terrorist psycho-logic: Terrorist behaviour as a product of psychological forces” in W. Reich (ed.), *Origins of terrorism: Psychologies, ideologies, theologies, states of mind*, New York, NY, Cambridge University Press, 1990, pp. 25-40.

<sup>22</sup> *Crusaders* (sing: صليبي plural الصليبيين) is a derogatory term to indicate “Christians” in general and Westerners in particular.

<sup>23</sup> *Kafir* (sing: كافر, pl. كافر) means “infidels” and it is utilised to indicate non-Muslims, often in a derogatory way.

<sup>24</sup> The Islamic State ideology considers followers of Shia Islam to be outside the Muslim community, because in the interpretation of the organisation Sunni Islam is the only true version of the Islamic religion.

<sup>25</sup> *Rafidi* (sing: رافضي, pl. روافض) means “those who refuse Abu Bakr al-Siddiq, Omar bin al-Khattab and Uthman ibn Affan as legitimate successors of the Prophet Muhammad” a derogatory term to accuse Twelver Shia of refusing (Sunni) Islam, which makes them apostates.

<sup>26</sup> *Safawi* (sing: صفوي, pl. صفويون) refers to the Iranian dynasty who declared Shia Islam the official religion in Iran and some of the surrounding territories, and it is often used to indicate the Iranian government.

<sup>27</sup> *Majusi* (sing: مجوسي, pl. مجوسيون) links to Zoroastrianism, the main religion in Iran before Islam, and it is used to stress their impiety.

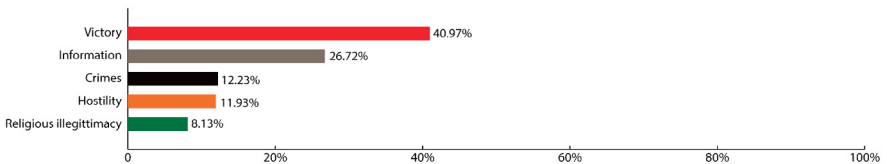
<sup>28</sup> *Nusayri* (sing: نصيري, pl. نصيريون) refers to a branch of Shia Islam, commonly known as Alawites. IS uses this term for the Syrian regime because Bashar-al-Assad and some of its inner circle members belong to this religious community.



This rhetoric serves two purposes for the Islamic State. The first is to put enemies' hostility beyond political contingency, which makes it virtually impossible to stipulate any truce with them. The message of IS is quite straightforward and can be summed-up with the sentence "They hate all us because we are Sunni Muslims, and they always will, so we need to defend ourselves". The second is to exploit sectarian-based hostility from the wider community. In this respect, some opponents of IS nevertheless share a similar sectarian attitude towards IS's enemies. This is particularly true when looking at anti-Shia discourse, which is widespread in the anti-IS sample of tweets as well. More specifically, when coding all tweets which express a sectarian stance towards Shia, 45.6% are from the anti-IS sample 55.4% are pro-IS. The topic will be further discussed in the next section.



### The most recurrent topics in the anti-IS Tweets



## How To Oppose IS? The Main Topics of Anti-IS Discourse

Anti-IS tweets comprise all content expressing a certain degree of hostility towards the terrorist organisation. Unlike pro-IS tweets, there is no a single organisation which spreads its message for political purposes, but a plurality of accounts which differ in their ideological orientation, but share a negative opinion of IS. To interpret the results, I cannot rely much on the (nearly absent) literature on the topic of anti-IS Twitter, but I formulate some hypotheses on the reasons why many users

have chosen a specific topic to express their anti-IS stance. In this part of the chapter, my aim is, therefore, to analyse users' motivations for opposing the Islamic State and to identify the most recurrent topics in anti-IS discourse on Arabic-speaking Twitter.

Before discussing the topics in these tweets, it is worth mentioning that a substantial percentage of anti-IS tweets revolves around Saudi Arabia or expresses a pro-Saudi stance (43.56%). This likely reflects the demographic composition of Arabic-speaking Twitter (29% from Saudi Arabia and 20% from the other Gulf states<sup>29</sup>), but I also noticed that, in some cases, the same tweet is repeated many times by different Twitter accounts. Despite not having any evidence to support the claim of an extensive use of pro-Saudi bots, I think this is an interesting finding worth investigating further. It might indicate that the Saudi government was deeply involved in the Twitter war against the Caliphate for a number of reasons, which I will discuss in the last part of the chapter.

When analysing anti-IS discourse, I identified five recurrent topics: “*victory*”, “*information*”, “*crimes*”, “*hostility*”, and “*religious illegitimacy*”. The most popular category is that of “*victory*”, which comprises 40.92% of total anti-IS tweets. Those contents revolve around the idea that the Islamic State is weakening both because of military defeats and because of the arrest of its members. An example of a tweet on victory is: “*Fast progress of the #joint\_forces and the collapse of the terrorist defences of #Daesh in the area of #Ramadi*”<sup>30</sup>. In another case, a tweet links an arrest to the group's capacity to cause harm: “*a statement of the Ministry of Interior on the arrest of terrorists from #Daesh*”

<sup>29</sup> Arab Social Media Report, *Social Media and the Internet of Things*, Mohammad Bin Rashid School of Government, 2017.

Most of these countries, except for Qatar from 2017, have an official pro-Saudi policy at a government level.

<sup>30</sup> The original tweet is:

<picture> تقدم سريع #للقوات\_المشتركة وانهيار دفاعات ارهابيي #داعش في محاور #الرمادي

in #Riyadh and #Dammam <link> #Supporters #Jabhat\_al\_Nusra”<sup>31</sup>. For those who oppose IS, these messages are aimed at countering its propaganda by stating that the claims of victories from the organisation do not correspond to the actual situation on the ground. In addition, reports on the defeats of the Islamic State counter the pro-IS argument that their *jihad* is carried out in the name of God. In a religious framework, God gives victory to those who follow its path, which anti-IS discourse identifies as those who are fighting against IS.

Finally, ordinary Arab Sunnis are obviously scared to lose their lives in terrorist attacks and are comforted by the weakening of IS. The Islamic State sees most ordinary Sunnis as legitimate targets because it considers those who do not belong to their group to be outside the Muslim community<sup>32</sup>. It is worth mentioning that many Sunnis lost their lives in terrorist attacks, especially at the apogee of the Islamic State’s power. According to the Global Terrorism Index of 2015, around 43% of all victims of terrorist attacks were in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Pakistan<sup>33</sup>.

The second most common topic in the anti-IS discourse is that of “*information*” which comprises 26.76% of the total anti-IS tweets. This category includes all tweets that provide details on the Islamic State and its leaders or the geopolitical context in which the alleged Caliphate has emerged. This group includes both those tweets which share information from the mainstream media on the terrorist organisation and those which propagate conspiracy theories on the Islamic State. Among the latter, a recurrent opinion is that the Islamic State

<sup>31</sup> The original tweet is:

بيان وزارة الداخلية السعودية بشأن القبض على عناصر ارهابية من #داعش بـ #الرياض و #الدمام <link> #المناصرون  
#جبهة\_النصرة

<sup>32</sup> A comprehensive analysis of the IS view of the enemy can be found in A. Plebani and P. Maggolini, *The Centrality of the Enemy in al-Bagdadi’s Caliphate*, in M. Maggioni and P. Magri (eds.), *Twitter and Jihad: The Communication Strategy of ISIS*, ISPI, 2014.

<sup>33</sup> The data are available here. <http://globalterrorismindex.org/>

has been created by Iran or some Western state, especially the United States and Israel. An example of the first approach to the Islamic State is the following: “A question to Daesh: Who is al-Baghdadi? What are his scientific achievements? Where did he study? Where was before and after the Syrian revolution?# Daesh\_and\_Iran\_openly\_against\_Saudi\_Arabia”<sup>34</sup>. An example of the second type of tweets, which refers to conspiracy content, is: “Channel 24 Saudi. Alliance #Iran and #Daesh against the country of the two mosques #Arrest #Daesh #Islamic\_State #Jabhat\_al\_Nusra”<sup>35</sup>.

The vast majority of anti-IS “conspiracy” tweets express the idea that IS has been created by Iran. An astounding 91.96% of the 16.67% of anti-IS tweets that promote conspiracy theories identify Iran as the power or one of the powers behind the alleged Caliphate. Within the group of tweets which contain conspiracy theories, some go as far as arguing that Iran is in a secret alliance with Israel and the United States, which are also suspected of being responsible for the creation of the terrorist group (5.67%). A smaller percentage of tweets (2.34%) argues that Saudi Arabia is behind the organisation. Another interesting finding is that these types of tweets are quite widespread in anti-IS discourse. The tweets which express support this conspiracy comprise 14.2 % of total anti-IS tweets. 59.49% of the total tweets in the “information” category centre on the idea that foreign powers are behind IS for political reasons, namely to weaken the Sunni-majority state and extend their influence in the region. On the contrary, a smaller percentage of users argue that current hostility is based on religious motivations. They claim that hostile powers have created IS to tarnish the image of Islam or to weaken the Islamic community. To express

<sup>34</sup> The original tweet is:

سؤال الى #داعش من هو المدعو #البغدادي؟ تحصيله العلمي مناهج الدراسة أين درس أين كان قبل ثورة سوريا وبعدها أين  
#داعش\_وايران\_علنا\_ضد\_السعودية

<sup>35</sup> The original tweet is:

#قناة 42 سعودي: تحالف #ايران و #داعش ضد بلاد الحرمين الشريفين <link>... #اعتقال #داعش #الدولة\_الإسلامية  
#جبهة\_النصرة

this idea, many users utilise sectarian terminology to express this concept and, in the case of my sample, direct their hostility towards Iran.

The third type of tweets that express hostility towards IS are those which denounce their “*crimes*”. This topic is central in 12.23% of total anti-IS tweets. An example is “*latest news CNN: An Iraqi deputy: #Daesh killed 200 Yazidi in Mosul on Friday <link> #Organisation of the state*”<sup>36</sup>. All these tweets express outrage for the mass crimes of the Islamic State against civilians. Most of the users refer to the many violations of basic human rights by the terrorists, mostly in regard to the mass killing of civilians in the conquered areas, as the main reason to condemn the actions of the Islamic State. However, a smaller percentage of users add another level of interpretation to the crimes committed by the terrorist organisation, which is the idea that the terrorist group has been created by foreign powers to tarnish the image of Islam. This argument links back to conspiracy theories against Iran or Western states and Israel.

Another category of tweets includes those expressing a generic “*hostility*” towards the Islamic State and its actions. The total percentage of these tweets is 11.93% of total anti-IS tweets. Generic hostility is the expression of a spontaneous negative sentiment towards the organisation, which cannot be linked to a general unifying topic.

The last of the most recurrent topics is that of “*religious illegitimacy*”. These tweets revolving around the idea that the Islamic State is acting against Islam. These tweets account for 8.13% of the total sample. An example is: “*The terrorists of Daesh take its name from Islam and terrorism from the West. #Daesh\_and\_Iran Publicly\_against\_the\_Saudi*”<sup>37</sup>. The idea that IS does not act according to the principles of Islam has been central for anti-IS

<sup>36</sup> The original tweet is:

آخر خبر CNN.. برلماني عراقي لـ#داعش قتل 200 أيزيدي في #الموصل يوم الجمعة <link>

#تنظيم\_الدولة

<sup>37</sup> The original tweet is:

داعش الارهابيين اخذوا من الاسلام اسمه ومن الغرب ارهابه #داعش\_وايران\_علنا\_ضد\_السعودية

discourse among intellectuals in the Arab world. IS has regularly been accused of distorting the principles of Islam, and some scholars<sup>38</sup> – including the highly influential Imam Muhammad al-Yaqoubi, who wrote the book “Refuting ISIS<sup>39</sup>” – have often shared this viewpoint. My research suggests that this type of argument has clearly resonated in the Twitter universe, but was not the main topic of those who oppose the terrorist organisation. The issue of competition for religious leadership in the Islamic community will be further discussed in the next section.

## Who Defends the Sunnis? The Quest for Symbolic Leadership of the Umma

The analysis of tweets about the Islamic State provides interesting insights into the current debate about the symbolic leadership of the Arab Sunni community. On Twitter, most of the users are Arab and Sunni<sup>40</sup> and therefore IS propaganda on this

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<sup>38</sup> A comprehensive list of condemnations of IS by Muslim institutions or associations can be found here: <https://ing.org/global-condemnations-of-isis-isis/>

<sup>39</sup> M. al-Yacoubi, *Refuting ISIS: A Rebuttal of its Religious and Ideological Foundations*, 2016, Sacred Knowledge.

<sup>40</sup> The audience of not-Sunni on Arab Twitter cannot be easily identified. Users are often not explicit in their religious affiliation in their description. I estimate the percentage of Arabs who belong to these religious affiliations to be around 16,85% (World Bank 2018, Pew Research 2009, CIA World Factbook 2018), but the Arabic-speaking population on Twitter is not evenly distributed. To have a more precise estimation, I weighted this percentage for the percentage of Twitter users by country in the Arab Social Media of 2017 (11,1 million), which return a percentage of 13,80%. Another possible estimation is to look the percentage of geo-localised Tweets in the 5,000 sample of Tweets on IS by looking at those not located in the US, which are 27,9% (7,68% from the Arab countries). Looking at the demographic composition for each country in this group, the value of Tweets written by non-Sunni is 9,44%. I estimate the percentage of not-Sunni in my sample to be 11,62%, which is the average between the 9,44% and 13,80% for the category enemies. I am aware that this estimation is not methodologically strong as it has several weak points (e.g. the sample has changed in 3 years’ time, there are consistent Arab speaking minority outside the Arab world), therefore I am not using this percentage just as an indication.

platform was mostly focused on gaining their support by stating that its actions have been carried out in the name of the Sunni community. Despite the message of the terrorist group being directed to all Sunnis (Arab and non-Arab), IS has considered gaining the support of Arab Sunnis as crucial for its political project. Arabs have always had a privileged status in the Sunni community. Historically, the Islamic Caliphate was proclaimed in the Arab land and the first four Caliphs were Arabs; symbolically, all the main sanctuaries of Islam are situated in Arab-majority lands; religiously, the Quran is written in Arabic and therefore this language has a special status for all Muslims; politically, the Arab region is at the centre stage of the struggle between major powers.

The proclamation of the Caliphate by the Islamic State after entering Mosul in June 2014 has had a significant impact on the Arab-Sunni community. Although the title has mostly been honorific since the Ottoman empire, this institution was the main political and religious authority in the Muslim world for a large part of its history. Since the abolition of the Caliphate by Atatürk in 1924, there has not been any credible claim for the Caliphate authority for decades. Even jihadist groups like al-Qaeda were very cautious in claiming the title. IS propaganda attributes great importance to the Caliphate claim and often argues that it is a duty of all Muslims to obey the Caliph and travel to his lands.

Furthermore, the IS's decision is in open defiance to the symbolic leadership which Saudi Arabia has gained after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the Arab-Sunni community. Despite the al-Saud dynasty never taking the Caliphate authority in their hands, the rulers of Saudi Arabia have often utilised the title of "Custodian of the two holy mosques" as one of their primary titles. "Custodian of the two holy mosques" refers officially to the responsibility for the safeguarding and maintaining of the two holiest sites of Islam: the al-Haram mosque in Mecca and the Prophets' mosque in Medina. However, the title carries a broader meaning for the entire Arab-Sunni community,

which is the indication of a certain degree of symbolic religious authority for Saudi Arabia over other Sunni-majority states. This symbolic authority has been utilised by Saudi Arabia to strengthen its regional leadership.

This struggle for religious and political leadership is recurrent in the Twitter discourse and it revolves around IS's claim of symbolic leadership of the Sunni community. Among pro-IS tweets, many frame IS *jihad* as a struggle to defend all Sunnis. The percentage of tweets which state that the Islamic state is fighting in the name of the Sunni community is 10.68% of total pro-IS tweets. To support this claim, IS utilises two lines of argument. The first is that its actions are carried out in the name of all Muslims. An example of this type of propaganda is the tweet "*#the\_Islamic\_State\_claims\_responsibility\_for\_the\_attack\_in\_Texas. The awakening for the defence of the Muslims and the sacrifice of their lives for the sake of the prophet. Peace and blessing be upon him*"<sup>41</sup>. In other words, IS discourse revolves around the idea that Sunni Islam is under attack and that it is necessary for the Caliphate, which is the supreme political and religious authority for all Sunnis, to take actions in defending the entire community.

The second argument of IS propaganda is that the Sunnis support IS's claim of religious leadership. Any claim of defending the Sunni community would be clearly null without popular backing, and it is, therefore, essential for the Islamic State to show that its claim is widely supported. An example of this discourse is this tweet: "*the joy of the Sunni has now erupted in the street of #Ramadi. Handshakes and hugs for their sons in the #Islamic State and they offer drinks and food to them*"<sup>42</sup>. This tweet also aims at showing that the Islamic State is a good place

<sup>41</sup> The original tweet is:

#الدولة\_الإسلامية\_تتبنى\_عملية\_تكساس\_من\_يقظه\_دفاع\_اثنين\_من\_المسلمين  
وتضحيتهم\_بأرواحهم\_من\_أجل\_الرسول  
عليه\_الصلاة\_والسلام\_فليراجع\_عقيدته

<sup>42</sup> The original tweet is:

فرحة\_تغمر\_أهل\_السنة\_الآن\_في\_شارع\_#الرمادي\_ومصافحة\_وعناق\_لأبنائهم\_في\_#الدولة\_الإسلامية\_وتقديم\_الطعام\_والشراب\_لهم



to live, which is one of the recurrent themes in IS propagan-  
da to convince new supporters to move into the territories it  
controls.

The anti-IS group has widely contested the claim that the  
Islamic State represents and defends the Arab-Sunni communi-  
ty. The main arguments have been to prove that the group has  
committed many crimes against Sunni civilians and to question  
the Islamic credentials of the alleged Caliphate. An example of  
the first type of tweet is: “*Not in Burma, Central Africa or Mali!  
But they are Al-Baghdadi’s Kharijites Crimes*<sup>43</sup> *against the Sunnis*  
<link> #Daesh\_is\_a\_Product\_of\_Iran\_and\_Russia”<sup>44</sup>. This im-  
plies that the Arab-Sunni majority states which have fought  
against the terrorist group were not acting against their own  
community, but were defending it from IS. Another argument  
is that the threat of IS has not been only against Arab-Sunni  
Muslims but also Islam itself. This idea is well summarised in  
this tweet: “*Daesh is the one which politicises Islam and used the  
blood of innocents. It will never be safe heavens and a right path  
to the right jihad. Daesh is real terrorism to eliminate Islam and  
terrify It*”<sup>45</sup>. In other words, anti-IS users deconstruct IS’s claim  
to be fighting for Islam by stating both that the claim is contra-  
dicted by IS actions and that IS ideology is hostile to Islam. In  
the anti-IS group, there is a large percentage of pro-Saudi ac-  
counts that have utilised religiously-influenced terminology to  
stress the credentials of the al-Saud family *vis-a-vis* the Islamic

<sup>43</sup> Kharijites is a derogatory term utilised to refer to IS. It derives from the Arabic  
root K- R- G (ج - ر - خ). In the Islamic tradition, it refers to a group of soldiers  
who left the Ali Army: the group of fighters which fought the fourth Caliph Ali  
ibn Abi Talib. The term is often utilised to indicate groups like al-Qaeda or IS to  
signal that they have exited Islam.

<sup>44</sup> The original tweet is:

ليست في بورما ولا أفريقيا الوسطى ولا مالي!! لكنها جرائم خوارج البغدادي ضد أهل السنة# <link> داعش\_صناعة\_ايران\_وروسيا

<sup>45</sup> The original tweet is:

داعش التي سبست الاسلام وتاجرت بدماء الابرياء  
لن تكون يوماً ملاذ آمن وطريق صحيح للجهاد الحق داعش ارهاب ممنهج  
لل قضاء على الاسلام وترهيبه

State. An example is the tweet “*May God help and save the security and army members and all who stay up late to keep the country under protection after Him! #Arrest #Daesh #Islamic\_State*”<sup>46</sup>, which was published after an attack of the terrorist organisation against Saudi border guards.

## Conclusion

The predominant approach of internet platforms towards jihadist groups has been to censor content expressing support for these organisations. However, jihadist propaganda has proved resilient. IS and other organisations have found other ways to share their discourse, mostly through encrypted messaging apps like Telegram. Censorship alone does not appear to be sufficient to counter terrorist groups. Moreover, while jihadists have mostly disappeared from social media, some of the building blocks of their discourse have survived censorship. For example, for my research I have found that a considerable percentage of Muslims still believe that there is a war against Sunni Islam and it is necessary to defend the community from enemy aggression. The study of Twitter discourse on the Islamic State from its apogee to its decline provides some useful information that remains relevant for changing our approach from censorship towards an effective counter-narrative against jihadist propaganda. Looking at the recurrent topics of pro-and anti-IS discourse can be particularly useful in order to identify the themes which the Islamic State has used to gain support from Arab Sunnis and those which have been implemented by anti-IS users to oppose its propaganda. This information can contribute to more effectively counter jihadist arguments.

Moreover, I believe that analysing tweets allows us obtain a more compelling account of pro and anti-IS content than other methods, such as focus groups. Users can potentially open their

<sup>46</sup> The original tweet is:

الله يعين ويحفظ رجال الأمن والعسكري كل من سهر علي حفاظ البلد بعد الله #اعتقال #داعش #الدولة\_الإسلامية<picture>

accounts anonymously and therefore their opinions are less affected by *bias*<sup>47</sup> than interviews. This feature is particularly useful for better understanding the motivations for supporting the Islamic State, because users would be taking great risks by openly stating their sympathy for the terrorist organisation.

Furthermore, a topic analysis of Twitter can help experts and specialists in de-radicalizing foreign fighters who have returned to their home countries. They might look at Arab Twitter to identify the recurrent themes of IS propaganda and isolate the content that should be countered more forcefully. Finally, they can rely on the most widely shared anti-IS content in identifying successful arguments for designing an effective counter-narrative to the terrorists' arguments.

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<sup>47</sup> Bias is the tendency of leaning in a certain direction. In my case, the issue of IS is of course highly sensitive and it is not socially accepted, and I thus expect that people who answer about questions on this terrorist organisation to expect that researchers have a negative opinion of it.

## 5. Sleeping, but Present: The Cyber Activity Inspired by the Islamic State in Italy

Valerio Mazzoni

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Since its emergence in 2014, when the self-styled caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi appeared in a video reciting a sermon in the Al Nur mosque in Mosul, the Islamic State (IS) has not carried out any attacks in Italy. Despite this, there have been numerous counter-terrorism operations carried out in the country to dismantle cells or arrest individuals who were somehow connected to IS. As shown by numerous investigations carried out<sup>1</sup> in these five years, there are IS sympathizers in Italy who support the jihadi cause with different methodologies and at various levels. This support extends to both “real” offline world, where, for example, radical sermons and face-to-face recruitment activities are carried out; and the “virtual” online world, where statements, videos and infographics produced by the group or its followers are disseminated.

In this chapter we will analyze one of the main Italian-language propaganda channels affiliated with the Islamic State, tracked down and monitored on the Telegram messaging platform. In the monitoring conducted over the course of about two months, we tried to compare the activity carried out by the Italian-language channel with that of its French and English

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<sup>1</sup> L. Vidino and F. Marone, *The Jibadist Threat in Italy: A Primer*, Analysis ISPI, 13 November 2017.

counterparts, all of which aim to spread the ideology of the self-styled Islamic State in their respective languages. We will then analyze the quality of the messages disseminated and we will try to outline the probable evolution of the Italian channels that translate the material produced by IS and affiliates, taking into account the group's recent territorial defeats and the consequent decrease in the media material produced.

## **Ghulibati a Rum (GaR) - The Defeat of Rome**

The Italian translations of bulletins, official statements and infographics taken from Al Naba, the official weekly magazine of IS, are broadcast on Telegram by the “Ghulibati a Rum” channel, which in Arabic means “The Conquest of Rome”.

Ghulibati a Rum (GaR) is not an official channel of the Islamic State, and neither is Halummu, which disseminates the material produced in English, nor is Infos an Nur (IaN), which disseminates the material translated into French.

Before starting the qualitative and quantitative analysis, a premise is necessary. Monitoring the online activities of a particular group or of followers of a certain ideology is not an exact science. Despite the material we analyzed and the channels we monitored, we cannot exclude *a priori* the existence of other channels and/or groups that are unknown to us. However, this does not make the monitoring of jihadi extremism online a merely academic exercise. Indeed, constant monitoring made it possible identify, well in advance, the evolution of the threat and/or identify relevant new supporters of the Islamic State in Italy in both quantitative and qualitative terms.

At present, GaR has 3 broadcast channels; only administrators can forward messages, photos, videos and files. Interaction between users is not allowed. We know how many users these channels have, but we do not know their identities.

The three channels existing at the moment are named GaR 10, GaR 11 and GaR 14. GaR 10 is the main channel and it is the first to broadcast messages translated into Italian. Once

broadcast on the GaR 10 channel, the messages are in turn forwarded to the other two channels, GaR 11 and GaR 14 (see figures 5.1, 5.2 and 5.3).

The existence of three channels, with the same name and same function, could have a dual explanation:

- The GaR administrators want to have the reserve channels already functioning in case the main channel, GaR 10 should be taken off the air.
- The main channel could be considered a loyalist channel, composed of users considered most active and most devoted to the cause, already known to GaR administrators through their activities on other international chats of supporters of the Islamic State. To corroborate this second hypothesis GaR 10, despite being the main channel, is the one with the fewest subscribers. Moreover, in the chats or on the monitored international channels, the messages forwarded by GaR are those of the main channel.

As reported above, the messages broadcast on the three GaR channels are also frequently disseminated in the chat groups and international channels of supporters of the Islamic State, such as *Where are Muwabbhid*, *Sabil al Rashid* (i.e., the Path of Rashid), *State of Ummah* and *Baqyia United* (United Resistance). Within these channels, translations of Islamic State statements and propaganda photomontages made by other channels of supporters of the so-called caliphate are also disseminated in other languages, such as French, Bengali, German and English.

The dissemination of GaR messages within these international chats could be explained by two reasons:

- The search for new Italian-speaking supporters of the Islamic State cause. This thesis is corroborated by the fact that often, following the dissemination of GaR messages in these chats, the link to access one of the secondary GaR channels is provided.
- Reassuring jihadi supporters about the global dimension of the Islamic State.

There are two main accounts that spread the messages of the Islamic State translated into Italian by GaR. Once the GaR messages are broadcast, these accounts deactivate their user on Telegram and then reappear, under a different name and nickname, only when they decide to forward new messages produced by GaR. Other channels similar to GaR, such as French IaN, have their own official account, which shares its name with the channel in question. Other, more sophisticated channels such as Halummu – which broadcasts the English translations of messages from the Islamic State – or as the official channel of the Global Islamic Media Front – a media channel affiliated with al Qaeda that translates branches' media productions into English – use bots to spread their messages within chats or to individual users.

### **The Metamorphosis of Ghulibati a Rum and the Alignment with Other “Western” Channels**

Nearly three years of monitoring evidenced a degree of evolution in the GaR channel in terms of both structure and graphic presentation. The channel has improved its back-up systems in order to better deal with any shut-down of the main channel.

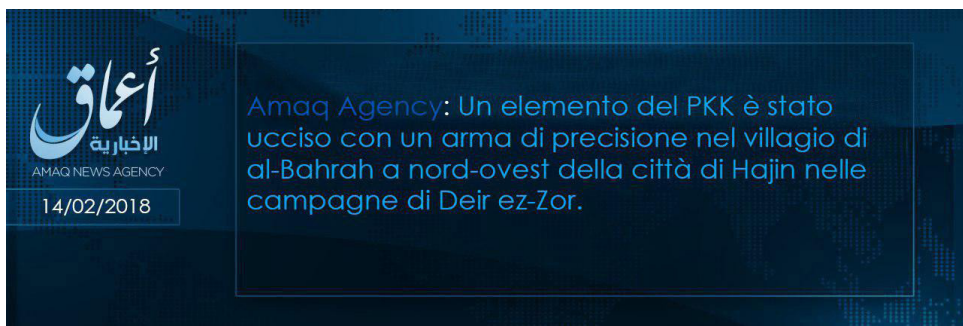
Previously, GaR administrators disseminated the link to the main channel more confidently, trying to add as many users as possible to their network of support for the Islamic State. The back-up channels were left unused and carried only the name of the channel, even lacking a profile image. Whenever the main channel was shut down, the back-up channel sprung into operation, with the official logo of the group as a profile image, with the access link and translations being made available on other international chats.

However, after incurring various suspensions, which for long periods completely eliminated proselytizing activity in Italian, the GaR administrators decided to adopt a more cautious approach in promoting their own channel and to structure their network differently. Indeed, right now, it is difficult to find the

link to the main GaR channel, which in fact currently has just over a dozen users. On the other hand, the secondary channels, GaR 11 and GaR 14, which have several dozen users, are advertised on various international chats. Whenever the administrators decide to find new Italian-speaking supporters, they forward the links to GaR 11 and GaR 14, thus protecting the main channel from attempts to infiltrate it.

Although the structural evolution has proved decisive for GaR's survival, the stylistic changes related to the channel's media production are much more relevant. Initially the GaR administrators simply released the original Amaq News Agency bulletins and the official statements issued by the Islamic State in Arabic with captions in Italian. Subsequently, the GaR administrators started to make stylistic changes, working directly on the statement or bulletin they wanted to disseminate in Italian. The graphic design remained the same as that used by Amaq News Agency and by the official statements issued by the Islamic State, but the Italian translation was superimposed on it.

FIG. 5.1 - THE OLD TEMPLATE USED BY GaR,  
WITH THE ITALIAN TRANSLATION SUPERIMPOSED ON THE GRAPHIC  
DESIGN USED BY AMAQ NEWS AGENCY





With the increasingly evident territorial difficulties of the group, and the consequent difficulty in keeping the quantitative and qualitative levels of its media production high<sup>2</sup>, by 2018 the galaxy of IS supporters began to make up for the group's media shortcomings. In the implementation of its *media devolution* – as witnessed, for example, by the suspension of the official magazines *Rumiyah* and *Dabiq* and by the subsequent birth of magazines produced by IS supporters such as *From Dabiq to Rome* and *Youth of Caliphate* – the central leadership of the Islamic State reiterated that only official statements could be considered official communications<sup>3</sup>. Communications related to the group's operations worldwide are followed by the *brothers* of Amaq News Agency. Following this official communication, and to avoid confusion between material released directly by the group and translations of such material by IS supporters, the latter decided to adopt their own graphic layout to distinguish their output from original IS material and give a sort of structural and narrative coherence to all supporters of the organisation.

As the reference channel for supporters of the Islamic State in Italy, GaR was not exempt from this restyling and starting in early 2018 it began to publish its translations using the same template used by supporters of the “caliphate” in French- and English-speaking countries.

To distinguish their output from products officially issued by the organization and from Amaq, supporters of the Islamic State decided to adopt a white and red template for translations of the Amaq bulletins and a green template (the color of the *Jannah*, i.e. “paradise”) for official statements issued by the group.

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<sup>2</sup> D. Milton, *Down but Not Out: An Updated Examination of the Islamic State's Visual Propaganda*, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, July 2018.

<sup>3</sup> L. Dearden, “[Isis orders supporters to use official channels after onslaught of fake propaganda and cyberattacks](#)”, *Independent*, July 2018.

FIG. 5.2 - THE NEW GRAPHIC DESIGN ADOPTED BY GaR,  
THE SAME USED BY IaN AND OTHER TRANSLATOR CHANNELS



We cannot know the reasons that led GaR administrators to adopt the choice to graphically align their productions with those of the other channels of IS followers. This may be an attempt to give the impression of a cohesive and united front of supporters, which takes decisions together and adapts, perhaps, to directives given directly by the leadership of the group.

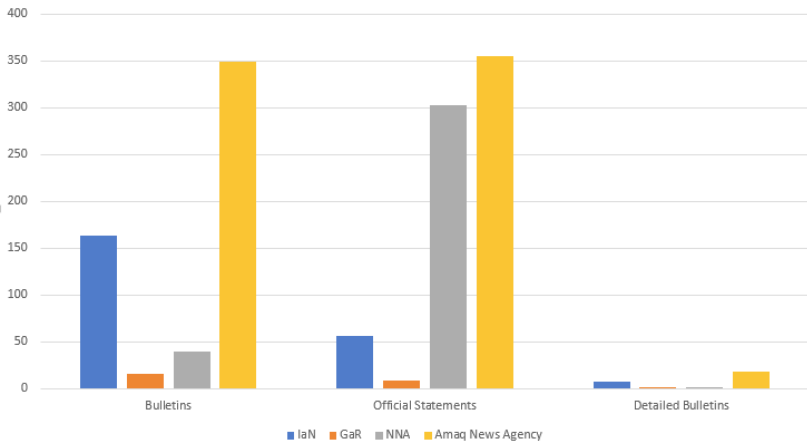
### **Analysis of Ghulibati in Rum in Comparison with Infos and Nur and Nashir News Agency**

A two-month comparative analysis of GaR, IaN and an English-speaking channel revealed additional information that can help us better understand the objectives pursued by the leadership of GaR and the type of engagement required to achieve them.

The comparison between IaN, GaR and an English-speaking channel called Nashir News Agency ENG (NNA) was conducted between 17 March and 7 May 2019. The NNA channel broadcasts translations that were made in English from the Halummu channel, which translates the Amaq bulletins and the official statements issued by the Islamic State. Since the main channel of Halummu was not fully available during the period in which the research was conducted, we are unable to establish with absolute certainty if the NNA administrators reported the totality of the media production of Halummu.

Despite this, we are able to argue that the data we collected provides a true picture of the major qualitative and quantitative differences between GaR and the other two channels analysed.

FIG. 5.3 - COMPARISON BETWEEN AMAQ NEWS AGENCY AND THE TRANSLATOR CHANNELS



Between March and May 2019, 349 information bulletins were issued by Amaq News Agency. In addition to these, Amaq released 18 detailed bulletins, concerning the operations deemed most important by the organisation, including the special bulletin on the release of the video featuring the then “caliph” Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on 29 April 2019. In addition, the official channels of the Islamic State, which disseminate the newsletters of the Amaq News Agency, released 355 official statements issued by the organisation. Excluding photo reportages, videos and other files of various kinds, including editions of the weekly magazine *al Naba* and news reported by the group’s official radio *al Bayan*, we took into account a total of 722 media productions deemed to be official.

Over the same period, the NNA channel, which broadcasts the English translations made by Halummu channel, disseminated 39 Amaq bulletins, 2 detailed bulletins and 303 official

statements of the group, for a total of 344 items. The choice made by the administrators of NNA channel to favor the dissemination of official statements issued by IS (303 translations out of 355 official announcements issued) is thus evident.

The IaN channel, which broadcasts the media productions of the Islamic State in French, disseminated the translations of 163 Amaq News Agency bulletins, 8 detailed bulletins and 56 official statements issued by the group, for a total of 227 interactions recorded between March and May 2019. Unlike NNA, there are no clear indications that IaN a well-defined strategy to give greater prominence to the official statements of the group. Despite this, IaN has rapidly translated the most important statements issued by the self-styled Islamic State or by Amaq during the period in which the monitoring took place, for example translating the most important bulletins concerning the operation *Battle for the Vengeance of the Blessed Sham Wilaya* (i.e., “Levant province”), the group’s first operations in Mali and the Congo (with the proclamation of the *Wilaya Wasat Ifriqiya*, i.e. “Central Africa province”), the attacks claimed in Bangladesh, the release of the video of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the terrorist attacks carried out in Sri Lanka.

In the same time period in which the IaN and NNA channels were monitored, the Italian channel Ghulibati a Rum translated 16 Amaq bulletins, 1 detailed bulletin and 9 official statements issued by Islamic State. GaR has translated only 26 of the 722 official media productions released by the organization. This enormous gap between the output of GaR and that of its French and English counterparts is further evidenced by comparing the dissemination of translations of files of various types, such as infographics taken by al Naba weekly magazine. In this regard, IaN has published 9 translated infographics, NNA 26, while GaR only 5.

Looking at a longer timeframe, when we monitored Ghulibati a Rum from February 1 to 10 May 2019 we recorded the release of 61 Amaq bulletins, 33 official statements and 1 detailed bulletin (referring to the 2019 Sri Lanka Easter terrorist attacks).

There were also the translations of 5 infographics – about which more later – and two videos with Italian subtitles: the recent *In the Hospitality of the Emir of Believers*, released on 10 May 2019 and *You have to fight them oh Muwahid*, an older video produced around 2016 near Raqqa.

The much more limited dissemination of material carried out by GaR compared to IaN and NNA also reflects the fact that the channel was on the air for a limited period of time: in 99 days of monitoring, the channel was active on only 21 days; on 8 of these days, GaR only released a single media product. The most productive working day was 6 February 2019, with the dissemination of the Italian translations of 7 Amaq News Agency bulletins and 7 official statements issued by the group.

## **Analysis of the Media Production of Ghulibati a Rum**

As shown in the previous paragraph, GaR's media output shows a clear quantitative gap if compared with IaN and NNA.

In this paragraph we will analyze what has been translated into Italian, and how.

The 61 information bulletins of Amaq, translated into Italian in the period between February 1 and 10 May 2019 involved the following IS *Wilayat* (“provinces”):

- Wilaya Yemen: 2
- Wilaya Sham: 20
- Wilaya Iraq: 23
- Wilaya Khorasan: 9
- Wilaya Somal: 2
- Wilaya East Asia: 1
- Wilaya West Africa: 3
- Sri Lanka: 1

The 33 official statements released by the Islamic State and translated into Italian regarded the following IS *Wilayat*:

- Wilaya Sham: 10
- Wilaya Iraq: 15
- Wilaya Khorasan: 4
- Wilaya West Africa: 3
- Sri Lanka: 1

During the monitoring period on the GaR channel, the following infographics were translated into Italian:

- *The most important military operations in Western Africa*
- *Cowardice*
- *The six books*
- *Master the Arabic language*
- *The conquest of Sri Lanka*

FIG. 5.4 - THE INFOGRAPHIC SHARED BY GaR ON THE ATTACKS CARRIED OUT IN SRI LANKA IN 2019



The only detailed bulletin of Amaq News Agency translated into Italian by GaR is the one related to the attacks carried out in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday 2019.

The video featuring Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, released by the Furqan Media Foundation on 29 April 2019, was broadcast with Italian subtitles on 10 May.

FIG. 5.5 - THE POSTER INTRODUCING THE ITALIAN TRANSLATION OF ABU BAKR AL-BAGHDADI'S LAST SPEECH



Several observations are worth making. The first is the failure to translate a number of Amaq News Agency bulletins and official statements of the Islamic State regarding operations that would have had great symbolic value for Italian sympathizers of the Islamic State:

- 1 March 2019: the Islamic State claimed an operation perpetrated in the governorate of Gafsa, in Tunisia. On 16 March, the Islamic State claimed responsibility for the murder of a “spy member” of the local security forces on the border between Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine regions in Tunisia.
- 18 March: the Islamic State claimed responsibility for the killing of the “*Italian crusader*” Lorenzo Orsetti<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> “Siria, l'annuncio dell'Isis: ‘Abbiamo ucciso un crociato italiano’. È Lorenzo Orsetti”, *La Repubblica*, 18 March 2019.

along with 4 other Syrian Democratic Forces fighters during the battle of Baghouz, providing images of the victim and his documents.

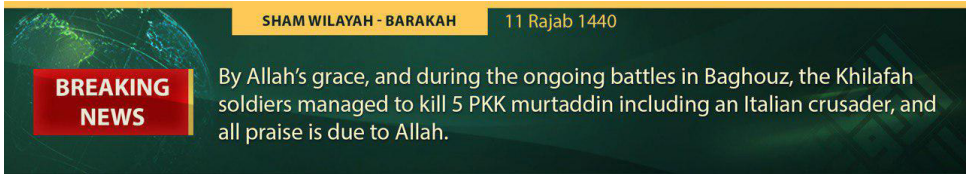
- 9 April: as part of the operation *Battle for the Vengeance of the Blessed Sham Wilaya*, the Islamic State resumed its attacks in Libya with several operations carried out in the country during the monitoring period.
- 18 April: the Islamic State claimed its first operation carried out in the Congo, proclaiming the *Wilaya Wasat Ifriqiya*.
- The second operation claimed in Sri Lanka, on 27 April 2019, in which several security officers were killed and wounded following a suicide “martyrdom” attack.
- The attack claimed by the Islamic State in Bangladesh, carried out on 29 April 2019 in the capital Dhaka.
- 10 May: the Islamic State proclaimed the opening of *Wilaya al Hind* (Indian Province), claiming an attack carried out in Kashmir against Indian security forces.

The above operations were translated into both English and French and disseminated by the IaN and NNA channels.

The failure to translate news of the killing of Lorenzo Orsetti, an Italian militant fighting alongside the Kurdish-led militias SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces), is particularly noteworthy. The killing of the “*Italian Crusader*” was reported in an information bulletin by Amaq News Agency and later in an official statement issued by the Islamic State. With regards to this operation, IaN and NNA only translated the information bulletin issued by Amaq News Agency. Why did the GaR administrators miss the opportunity to translate one of the very few statements and bulletins of Amaq News Agency mentioning Italy?



FIG. 5.6 - THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF THE OFFICIAL STATEMENT REGARDING THE DEATH OF LORENZO ORSETTI



Other operations, such as the attack in Bangladesh, or the opening of the new *wilayat* in Central Africa and in India, give the group a global dimension, offering its supporters the image of an organization able to strike outside its core region and expand its attacks despite the defeats suffered in Syria and Iraq. While NNA and IaN administrators considered it important to translate communications related to these events, GaN administrators seem to have thought otherwise.

Although some of al Naba weekly magazine's infographics have been translated into Italian, those concerning *Battle for the Vengeance of the Blessed Sham Wilaya* in issue 177 were not translated, despite the strong symbolic value of the operation, launched just a few weeks after the Islamic State's defeat in al Baghouz.

The detailed statement from Amaq News Agency on the video portraying Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi released on 29 April 2019 was not translated into Italian, although it, was translated by both NNA and IaN.

Reading the material translated from the Italian channel GaN, we can say almost with absolute certainty that the person/s in charge of the translations is/are not native speaker/s. Indeed, the translations contain spelling, syntactic and grammatical errors. Moreover, the more complex the translation becomes, the greater the frequency of errors, to the extent that the text in Italian becomes difficult to understand. This, for example, often happens in translations of infographics. It is thus likely that GaR's translators are not Italian by birth and their knowledge of Italian is limited. There is another important aspect to

highlight. The GaR channel only disseminates Italian translations of material that was previously translated into French by IaN. A bulletin issued by Amaq News Agency or a statement released by the Islamic State has never been translated directly into Italian if its translation was not first published in French by the Infos an Nur channel. This trend was confirmed for the entire duration of the monitoring that we carried out. For example, the attacks carried out in Sri Lanka were claimed by the Islamic State through an initial bulletin released by Amaq News Agency, at 12:35 am (Italy time) on 23 April 2019. The translation of that bulletin into French was released at 3.56 pm, while the one into Italian at 7.45 pm.

On 28 May 2019, the infographic taken from the 183th issue of al Naba titled *La Zakat-ul Fitr* was published on the Italian channel GaR. Surprisingly, this infographic, was published in French instead of Italian, and was originally translated by the IaN channel on 25 May.

With respect to this specific event, there is one last consideration to add. GaR's translations feature some linguistic calques from likely erroneous translations from French into Italian. In the Italian translations of the claims on the attacks carried out in Sri Lanka, there is the expression *scatenando il suo giubbetto esplosivo* ("unleashing his explosive vest"). This could be an awkward translation of the French *déclenchant ainsi son gilet explosive* ("triggering his explosive vest"), since in Italian the correct expression would have been *detonando il suo giubbetto esplosivo* ("detonating his explosive vest").

FIG. 4.7 - THE FRENCH TRANSLATION MISTAKENLY PUBLISHED ON THE GAR CHANNEL

**Ghullbat a-Rum 10 غلبت الزوم**  
**Forwarded from Ghullbat a-Rum 1440 غلبت الزوم**

# La Zakât ul-Fitr

Charité versée après la rupture du jeûne au dernier jour du mois de Ramadan

Abûdâh Ibn Omayr a dit : " Le Messager d'Allah ﷺ a imposé le versement d'un Sa' de dattes ou d'un Sa' d'orge en tant qu'aumône purificatrice (Zakât ul-Fitr) pour chaque musulman, serviteur ou libre, homme ou femme, jeune ou vieux, et il a ordonné qu'elle soit donnée avant l'entrée des portes de la prière." (Rapporté par Al-Khatib)

**Le jeûnement relatif à la Zakât ul-Fitr**

L'aumône est obligatoire pour chaque musulman, jeune ou vieux, homme ou femme, serviteur ou libre. Le père doit verser l'aumône au nom de ses enfants et leurs familles, s'ils ne sont pas capables de la verser eux-mêmes. Un esclave, le maître doit la verser pour son esclave.

**Pour qui elle est destinée**

Elle est obligatoire pour chaque musulman qui possède l'équivalent d'un Sa' de provisions rattachant de l'espace de sa nourriture, lui servant ainsi qu'àux personnes à sa charge le jour et la nuit du fid.

**La sagesse derrière son obligation**

Abû Allah ﷺ rapporte : "Le Messager d'Allah a ordonné l'aumône purificatrice à celui qui jeûne pour le purifier de tout acte ou discours incriminés et dans le but de nourrir de la nourriture aux nécessiteux." (Rapporté par Abû Dawûd)

**Des questions**

**L'aumône purificatrice est-elle autorisée à être donnée en valeur monétaire?**

La majorité des savants sont d'avis que l'aumône purificatrice ne peut être donnée qu'en nourriture (ou personnellement) et qu'il n'est pas autorisé de la donner en valeur monétaire. Il est avisé d'être équilibré, car il n'est réellement rapporté que le prophète ﷺ et ses compagnons l'aient donnée sous forme d'argent.

**A quel moment verser l'aumône**

Elle est obligatoire au coucher du soleil lors de donner pour de Ramadan jusqu'au lever de l'aube le jour de l'Édi et le meilleur moment pour la verser est après la prière de l'aube du jour de l'Édi jusqu'à la prière de l'Édi. Elle peut être néanmoins donnée en six jours avant.

**A quoi donner l'aumône purificatrice?**

Elle doit être versée en priorité aux pauvres et aux nécessiteux parmi les gens de sa pays. Il est préférable qu'elle soit donnée aux plus nécessiteux et aux plus proches parents les musulmans.

Le Sa' est une unité de mesure de quantité et non de poids, car les musulmans diffèrent en poids. Le tableau suivant indique les poids approximatifs en grammes afin de faciliter le calcul de la quantité de la Zakât ul-Fitr.

Type	Poids de Sa'	Type	Poids de Sa'	Type	Poids de Sa'	Type	Poids de Sa'
Riz à grain long	2300 g	Le litr séché	2700 g	Les lentilles	2000 g	Les Dattes	2200 g
Riz à grain court	2300 g	L'orge	2300 g	Les lentilles rouges	2000 g	Les Raisins secs	2800 g
Le haricots	2300 g	La farine	2300 g	Le blé	2000 g	Moyennement séché	1500 g
Le blé dur (Frikha)	2200 g	Les haricots blancs secs	2500 g	Le Riz cikié	2000 g	Moyennement séché	1800 g

Infographie An Nabâ  
Ramadan 1442 H

#CaliffatoIT

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**Infografica Nabaa 183 "Zakat Al-Fitr."**  
<https://i.imgur.com/MvnsTkU.jpg>  
<https://i.imgur.com/IHsKgFd.jpg> 1 18:25

FIG. 4.8 - THE ITALIAN TRANSLATION, RELEASED BY GaR, OF THE OFFICIAL STATEMENT REGARDING THE ATTACKS CARRIED OUT IN SRI LANKA IN 2019



In summary, three lines of evidence support a link between IaN and GaR:

- There are awkward translations into Italian, probably taken from the French.
- All of GaR's media contents tracked during the monitoring period were previously released in French by the IaN channel.
- The Italian channel GaR published at least one infographic translated into French.

## Possible Developments

The GaR channel, both in terms of quality and quantity of material distributed in the Italian language, does not currently seem capable of enhancing the radicalization of Italian-speaking

users on the Internet. This seems to reflect the current scenario of the jihadist terrorism threat in Italy; a fragmented extremist activity that should certainly be monitored but does appear to be as worrying as in other European countries such as France, Germany and Britain. In addition to having already been hit by terrorist attacks on their national soil, these countries also host online activities, in their respective languages, that are much more structured than those detected in Italy.

To better outline the state of art of the online proselytizing activities conducted by Islamic State supporters in Italy it will be necessary, as highlighted in this chapter, to continue to monitor the online activities of the latter and compare them with those carried out by IS supporters in other languages.

In terms of future scenarios, identifying the factors that suggest an increase in the terrorist threat linked to the Islamic State and its online ideology in Italy is of key importance. With regards to the Ghulibati a Rum Channel, these may include:

- An increase in online activity with a consequent qualitative leap in the materials distributed in Italian.
- The appearance of bots linked to the channel or official IS accounts.
- Efforts by the Ghulibati a Rum channel to expand to other online platforms such as RocketChat, already used by the official channels of the Islamic State and by other channels of IS supporters such as Halummu.

Other possible scenarios unrelated to the Ghulibati a Rum channel but still referable to the online proselytizing on the part of IS supporters in Italy would also warrant our attention.

These include the creation of new chats, such as *Ansar al Khilafa fi Italia*, which is currently not traceable, or the reappearance of online forums such as *ItalJihad*. *Ansar al Khilafa fi Italia*, a chat group where alleged Italian supporters of the Islamic State discuss matters regarding the caliphate and the Ummah. This Telegram chat was previously linked to an online blog named *ItalJihad*, where one could read different news items and posts related the Islamic State ideology, divided into different topics.

In Spain, for example, in the last year, we witnessed the birth of the channel *Al Andalusia Publicaciones*, which produces high-quality original content and which, as part of the *The Best Outcome is for the Pious* media campaign, renewed its loyalty to the then “caliph” Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. In recent weeks, the channel has also begun to translate extracts taken from *Rumiyah* magazine, with indications for potential “Lone Wolf” attackers.

FIG. 4.9 - LOGO OF THE AL MUTAJIM ITALIAN-LANGUAGE CHANNEL



In relation to Italy's involvement in international projects undertaken by Islamic State supporters, it is worth mentioning that in September 2018 the transnational *Al Mutarjim* (The Translator) project tried to open a channel for Italian translations of media products released by the Islamic State. For a short period of time, *Al Mutarjim Italia* published the bulletins of Amaq News Agency and the official statements of the group with Italian captions, much like Ghulibati a Rum began its online activities. The experiment was discontinued and *Al Mutarjim* closed its Italian channel. In fact, *Al Mutarjim* has branches that disseminate official communications issued by IS or by the Amaq News Agency in German, Spanish, Farsi, French (also active on RocketChat), Filipino, Bengali, Pashto, Urdu, Indonesian, English (which has its own original template), Somali and Swahili. The Italian channel of *Al Mutarjim* has yet to resurface online.

There are other international projects linked to the Islamic State supporters' galaxy that are in the process of expansion, and which could bring about online proselytism in Italy. Among these we should mention the *Anis Almohadin* and *Ash Shaff News* channel networks.

*Anis Almohadin* is a network of channels which aims at translating the group's statements in various languages. Its online activity, however, also aims to translate original works produced by channels linked to the Islamic State supporters' network, such as the infamous *Al Battar Media*, *Al Saqri Military Foundation* and *Al Abd al Faqir*. Currently, *Anis Almohadin* has translation channels in Russian, French, English, Filipino and Spanish.

*Ash Shaff News*, on the other hand, is a network of channels that disseminates translations of the official statements issued by the Islamic State, aiming, however, to provide more in-depth coverage and include more details than the news officially reported by the group. The channel also produces original material, such as infographics and photomontages, threatening "crusader countries" and "apostate regimes". The Ash Shaff

network currently has branches in France, English, Germany, and Sweden.

*Al Mutarjim*, *Ash Shaff News* and *Anis Almohadin* also have official accounts, which can be contacted in order to obtain access links for their channels.

Often these accounts require volunteers to help the network with translations within the chat groups they participate in. If any of the above were able to open an Italian channel and support online activity at acceptable quantitative levels and with good quality, the potential threat should not be underestimated.

These last possible developments further underscore the need to conduct online monitoring of jihadi extremist activities. A close focus should remain on the channels and groups operating in Italy, but with an eye on the international scenario as well, in order to evaluate the evolution of the threat on an international scale and the way it unfolds in individual countries. As regards the Italian scenario, we must expand such monitoring activities, because with the very limited number of researchers currently accessing jihadist contents<sup>5</sup>, the risk of underestimating emerging new threats is very high.

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<sup>5</sup> C. Winter, "Researching Jihadist Propaganda: Access, Interpretation, and Trauma", *Resolve Network*, 13 May 2019.



## 6. From the Rise of Daesh to the “Legacy of Islamic State”

Marco Lombardi, Daniele Plebani

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From the very beginning, the Islamic State (IS) has taken everyone by surprise, most noticeably by seizing control over the media’s communicative and public domains through effective strategic moves<sup>1</sup>, insinuating itself into the global political agenda, and defying the security experts that have grappled with its establishment and its ability to control territories and expand outwards like an unstoppable shockwave.

However, the key question that has accompanied the Islamic State throughout its history concerns how this terrorist group has been, and still is, capable of adapting and evolving. In the context of hybrid warfare, in which each actor plays a specific role, IS has demonstrated that it is a formidable actor capable of playing offense on both physical and virtual battlefields, where communication has become a fundamental asset. Since 2014, the year in which the “caliphate” was established, communication by IS was developed under a watchful eye, employing resources based on the use of recent techniques and technologies, taking advantage of both traditional channels and more participatory social channels, and spreading a plethora of messages aiming at propaganda, recruitment, promotion, and threats, all

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<sup>1</sup> C. Whiteside, *Lighting the path: the evolution of Islamic State media enterprise (2003-2016)*, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT), 15 November 2016; F. Reinares, *Brussels attacks: Challenge to security and Coexistence*, Real Instituto Elcano, 28 March 2016.

with the intent of consolidating the statehood and legitimacy of the “caliphate” project<sup>2</sup>. Reaching its fragmented target audience is a goal that IS has sought and pursued with great care, as claimed from the start and reflected in the evolution of its name, which first changed into ISI - Islamic State of Iraq (2006), then ISIS – Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (2012), ISIL – Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (2013), ISIS – Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (2013), and finally into IS - Islamic State (2014). This objective is confirmed by the prompt organisation of a media centre every time a new province is declared<sup>3</sup>.

The structure of every complex organisation is held together by its communicative and economic dimensions. This has also been the case for IS, which has been showing signs of a profound morphogenetic transformation since August 2017, through an evident change in strategies and communicative practices<sup>4</sup>. The “caliphate” was hit hard militarily by the coalition, while its territory was crumbling and its chains of command were making room for common practices that were more emergency-based and less cohesive. This opportunistic change, aiming to ensure the survival of the group, had started and was bound to bring ISIS to reaffirm itself, in order not to lose its primacy as an Islamist terrorism organisation. The present study explores precisely this interesting period of change, which may be read through the “caliphate’s” products of communication, in the knowledge that this change has led to the “*legacy of Islamic State*” that defines the ongoing enduring threat brought by Islamist terrorism.

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<sup>2</sup> A. Schmid, *Challenging the narrative of the “Islamic State”*, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT), 4 June 2015.

<sup>3</sup> For an analysis of IS’ communication during its early years, see M. Lombardi, “IS 2.0 and Beyond: The Caliphate’s Communication Project”, in M. Maggioni and P. Magri (eds.), *Twitter and Jihad. The Communication Strategy of ISIS*, Milano, Epoké-ISPI, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> E. Karmon, *After ISIS Symposium: where will ISIS regroup?*, Fathom, 10 October 2017; A. Ortega, *Averting an IS 2.0*, Real Instituto Elcano, 18 July 2017.

An analysis of IS communication and how it has changed over time reveals a great deal about the group’s essence and strategy, especially if one considers the key role of communication in the processes of radicalisation, and of the shift from communication to violent acts. By better understanding how IS attacked in the past, it is possible to identify its moments of transformation and more swiftly identify hints of further change. While bearing in mind the “state” structure that characterised IS during the “caliphate”’s early years, it is also necessary to acknowledge the group’s most recent and significant developments: hence, the study focuses on the period ranging from the fall of Mosul in Iraq (2017) to that of Baghouz in Syria (2019). However, IS is also capable of attacking through more subtle and indirect means, especially after the fall of its main urban strongholds in 2017. This led to the rise of the legacy of the Islamic State, where attacks and communication feed off of each other and where IS may find both acolytes who are faithful to the cause and imitators who are untouched by its war but who, thanks to this legacy, learn how to fight their own.

## **The Midway Scenario: Summer and Autumn 2017**

The first signs of a change in IS emerged in the wake of the attack on La Rambla in Barcelona on August 17, 2017. The change was not in the way the attack was carried out – as a matter of fact, it was very similar to the ones executed in Nice (14 July 2016) and London (3 June 2017) – but rather in how it led to a series of similar initiatives, both on the ground and on the web. In fact, three more attacks occurred a few days later (Turku in Finland, Surgut in Russia, and Brussels in Belgium), followed by three more (in Paris, Chalon-sur-Saône and Birmingham) right after the attack on the London Underground (15 September 2017<sup>5</sup>). At the same time, IS propaganda “exploded”, not only

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<sup>5</sup> M. Lombardi, “[Analizzare la minaccia del terrorismo dopo Barcellona](#)”, ITSTIME, 20 August 2017.

celebrating the attack, but also proposing new targets, not least of all Rome and the Vatican, while easily finding an “ally” in various media outlets that covered these new developments extensively, thus multiplying their dangerousness<sup>6</sup>.

Since August 2017, the state of IS has become more dynamic, its changes are rapid, and its actors become more fragmented as they acquire autonomy and a communicative and organisational profile of their own. We are witnessing a process of adjustment that reflects the search for a new organisational form that is functional for a different “caliphate”, and whose comprehension is fundamental in order to appropriately interpret the threat as it evolves. For these reasons, it is useful to outline an intermediate scenario that is evolutionary and reveals some points of stability, i.e. the pieces of a puzzle that make up the entire picture.

The first piece of the puzzle is the so-called “Hybrid War”, a pervasive, delocalised conflict that goes far beyond the definition of asymmetrical combat, positioning itself within the uncertainty of warfare without shared rules among foes comprising armies, terrorists, insurgents, freedom fighters, the media, NGOs, etc., “tearing each other to pieces” without sharing rules or strategies. Moreover, it consists of a form of warfare that exploits globalized networks, a system of interdependencies where all actors have ties to one another. In recent years, IS has been the only actor able to exploit this, as it has a presence in 36 countries and leads 40 “coordinated” groups. One cannot understand the phenomenon of terrorism in recent years without considering the Hybrid War as the founding element of this scenario. Yet, its denial is the only way to “save the politicians” by allowing them to not present the electorate with the unbearable narrative of the Third World War<sup>7</sup> in progress, an

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<sup>6</sup> D. Plebani, “Nuove minacce contro Italia e Vaticano? Distinguere tra “lupi” e sciacalli”, ITSTIME, 24 November 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Upon returning from Turkey on 30 November 2014 Pope Francis declared: “This is just my opinion, but I am convinced that we are living a Third World War in pieces”. Later, on August 19, 2015, during the 36th Rimini Meeting,

inevitable consequence were terrorism to be incorporated into the conflict as an actor according to the definition of Hybrid Warfare. Not accepting this makes it possible to define events in the Middle East, Central Asia or the Horn of Africa as “actions of war” in traditional terms, as opposed to the “acts of terrorism” affecting Europe (starting from Paris).

The second piece of the puzzle is the viral nature of IS, which makes it an example of innovative and opportunistic terrorism that has managed to exploit all of its enemies’ vulnerabilities. In the summer of 2017, the “caliphate” was about to shed the historicised shape created on 29 June 2014 and undergo a change that was forced upon it, and whose signs were manifested in the chain of attacks that started in the Rambla in Barcelona (17 August 2017). This series of attacks was carried out by aspiring members who were disillusioned because they could not fight in Siraq, but were not necessarily motivated by a common radical religious choice. They were driven towards viral and imitative behaviours by a propaganda machine whose efficiency lies in its dissemination of simple operating modes. The ways in which the attacks have been executed since August involve the activation of “singularities” on the basis of information and training that had been completed in the previous months.

Starting in late August, further impetus was provided by the editions of *Knights of Lone Jihad*, which were then published almost on a weekly basis and became a handbook for jihadists, presenting simple attack methods in three or four pages, ranging from the use of poison, knives, vehicles, fire, and acids, to ways of provoking car accidents<sup>8</sup>. These are actions that anyone can easily imagine and are therefore simple, repeatable, and do not require advance planning. Although being of little

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Italian President Sergio Mattarella stated that: “Terrorism, fueled by fanatic distortions of faith in God, is trying to plant the seeds of a Third World War in the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and Africa”.

<sup>8</sup> Marco Lombardi, presentation at the seminar of the Mediterranean and Middle East Special Group (GSM) during the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, 23 November 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XC5bERTzus8>.

effectiveness in terms of victims, these methods do have significant propaganda returns, especially if they make use of their viral potential, i.e. their imitative power, which can unleash a chain of copycat attacks. Far from exhorting readers to emulate terrorists, the handbook urged caution, and did not stress the need to lay claim to the act because it is self-evident in the enemy's interpretation and because the social media audience would not be long in spontaneously appropriating it. A significant sign of change and of the struggles endured by IS in this period may be seen in its difficulty in communicating with the same qualitative and strategic standards of the past. The last months of 2017 were characterised by communication that was less intense than usual but above all reactive, repetitive, evocative and in line with the public's image of IS, but not articulated in the way that the "caliphate" had accustomed us to in addressing its audience. IS's habitual stylistic features do remain during this autumn buffer phase, but IS communications were in the hand of authors who had hitherto been the addressees of this process, and ended up being the *prosumers* of the "caliphate" with less programmatic rigour but great efficacy. These were the warning signs of the ongoing crisis at Mosul and Raqqa that prompted IS to change.

The third element is the IS's loss of territory: Mosul and Raqqa were under siege in September and October and required the greatest effort from the "caliphate", especially in preventing the usual major communicative figures from worrying about their output. Starting from the initial 800-1000 launches per month, the number fell to 300 launches a month after the loss of territory and only climbed back to about 650 launches in January 2018. There are some exceptions among these products, such as *Flames of War II* and *Inside the Khilafa*, which were introduced with the usual excellent qualitative standard of "international communication" because they are not produced in territories under attack. The rest of the "caliphate"'s narratives fell into obscurity with the disappearance of the magazine *Rumiya*, the silencing of the radio station *Al-Bayan*, and the crisis of the

*Amaq news agency* which was the main source of information that showed a different trend of action compared to the previous situation. In fact, while *Amaq* continued to claim responsibility for terrorist attacks that took place in other territories like Somalia, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Libya, and Russia, it was almost uninterested in laying claim for the events that took place in the West. For instance, the attack on Manhattan (27 October 2017) was claimed in a highly unusual manner by the weekly magazine *Al-Naba*, the only source of information within the Syrian-Iraqi territory to be printed in paper form. The customary information flow that was channelled through *Amaq*, and especially that which was not in Arabic and was also transmitted via Telegram, was thus significantly reduced until December 2017, signalling that the IS’s loss of territory had also an immediate negative effect on the organisational structure of its communications. Only in January did the quantitative increase in communication demonstrate a clear desire to recover, also thanks to information originating from other battlefields where Islamist terrorism was involved and where the “caliphate” was determined to maintain its permanence on the ground, so as to not be reduced to an exclusively virtual state, but continue being a main actor on the real battlefield of the Hybrid War.

The fourth element of the scenario consists in the redefinition of alliances between those who had been formally lined up against IS until August 2017. Since its first appearance, the “caliphate” had the good luck of being identified as a shared enemy by a cobbled-together coalition; this ensured its survival. The main problem did not lie in the government of Syria and Iraq without IS terrorism, but rather in the redivision of the Middle East, bringing Iranians, Kurds, Turks, various Arabs, Americans, Russians, and Israelis to confront each other over the *governance* of the area.

Therefore, the reasons for the continuation of the conflict in 2019 were already clear, and there are signs of this in the public communication surrounding IS but not necessarily produced by it. For example, soon after the attack on Barcelona,

European media raised an alarm because of a photograph titled *Photo Disseminated of Individual Displaying IS Flag on Phone in New York City* that was distributed by an American news agency on 23 August 2017. The photograph shows a man's hand holding a mobile phone with the image of a black flag and the new World Trade Center in the background. The following day, again in the Usa, the image of a man with a knife and a caption in Italian "*devi combatterli*" ("you must fight them") was sent. The Italian Ansa news agency presented the news as follows:

"Attack Italy" - This is the order that ISIS is giving its members, according to the Site Intelligence Group, the American company that deals with publishing all the online activity of jihadist organisations. "The pro-Isis Telegram channel incites the lone wolves to attack", referring to "Italian jihadists", as reported on Site's website, which also shows the picture of a man seen from the back with a knife in his hand and the writing "Devi combatterli".

The image of the mobile phone may be traced back to September 2014 and was used for the anniversary of 9/11. The picture of the man with the knife is from Ghulibati a-Rum's translation of the propaganda video brochure, published on 26 November 2016, by Ar Raqqa Wilayat and entitled "*You Must Fight Them O Muwabbid*". In other words, the threats of future attacks that were made in August 2017 are merely recycled IS imagery produced in the USA with the intent of alarming the Italian nation<sup>9</sup>. This communication is reiterated with seasonal messages threatening attacks at Christmas and New Year's. The communication "of" and "on" Islamist terrorism during this "intermediate scenario" phase displays all of the features of the main assets of hybrid conflict within a context of great uncertainty due to the reorganisation of a system of alliances that has lost the enemy and is in search of a new form.

There thus emerges a new scenario in which the threat of

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<sup>9</sup> M. Lombardi, presentation at the seminar of the Special Group, previously quoted work.



the “caliphate” is repositioned playing out: the framework of hybrid warfare; the viral nature of its simple operating modes; the reactivity of communication during a buffer period and its restoration within forms that are more coherent with the *recovery* of IS<sup>10</sup>; a coalition against terrorism that shows signs of inner strife. Day after day, other pieces are added and the frame of the picture is set, but the picture itself is still polymorphic, so the level of predictability of the shape that terrorism will take on is rather low.

Yet a picture does emerge and leads to the following stages of “consolidation”, “dirty bomb”<sup>11</sup> that is being prepared the “second reorganization” of IS’ territories.

### **From Autumn 2017 to Summer 2019: Monitoring IS’ Changes Through Communication**

As previously underlined, IS’s communication has always been one of the group’s main cornerstones and appears to be all the more crucial now after the victory in Baghouz in Syria which symbolically resulted in the second “fall of the caliphate”. In light of the gradual change in IS’s organization, we can identify six phases of communication in the period between the fall of Mosul and that of Baghouz<sup>12</sup>: late “state”, semi lethargic-austarchic mode, recovery, transition, consolidation, and “dirty

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<sup>10</sup> M. Barak, *The Media system of the Islamic State: on the road to recovery?*, International Institute for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT), 22 July 2018; M. Munoz, *Selling the long war: Islamic State propaganda after the Caliphate*, CTC Sentinel, vol. 11, no. 10, November 2018.

<sup>11</sup> D. Plebani, “[La comunicazione di Stato Islamico: evoluzione, trasformazione ed eredità](#)”, lecture for the course in Public Policy for Security at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, 8 May 2019; W.T. Oosterveld and W. Bloem, *The Rise and Fall of ISIS: From Evitability to Inevitability*, The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> For a more in-depth examination of the communication phases described here, see D. Plebani, “[Stato Islamico, 2018: anno zero? L’evoluzione di IS a un anno dalla liberazione di Raqqa](#)”, ITSTIME, 9 February 2019.

bomb”-second reorganization. This subdivision does not imply a clean break between one period and the next, but rather the emergence of peculiarities that are linked to events on the field or to communication. Each one must therefore be placed in its proper context.

- **Late “state”:** in the period between the fall of Mosul and that of Raqqa in 2017, IS tried to present its defeats as “victories of the martyrs”. To that end, its video production focused on the skirmishes that were taking place in the Iraqi city, which was transformed into an “epic film set”. The same could not be said for the Syrian city of Raqqa a few months later, when video production hit bottom for the first time and propaganda appeared devoid of products comparable to those found in the magazine *Rumiyah*. This phase was characterised by what the Western media portrayed as the “fall of the caliphate”, i.e. the loss of its urban strongholds as an immediate prelude to the total collapse of the organisation;
- **Semi lethargic-autarchic mode:** an inferior (semi-lethargic) production of official propaganda in this period sparked hope for the long-term breakdown of the IS’s communicative machine. In this context, spontaneous (“autarchic”) propaganda came into play with greater force, thanks to various authors who started a form of pro-IS production that was mostly composed of banners and, in some cases, videos. Soon afterwards, however, the spontaneous material that was disseminated seemed to almost exclusively reflect this bottom-up dynamic, showing signs of mutual inspiration and, in some cases, of indirect gatherings of authors. This process was risky for IS, for these authors pursued their own agendas which did not always coincide with that of the group’s central communications system, and almost acted against its plans at times, as in the case of the FIFA

World Cup in Russia in 2018<sup>13</sup>. This is a fundamental phase, for it showcased the “choral” spontaneous effort of these volunteers;

- **Recovery:** Between the end of 2017 and the beginning of 2018, IS began to show signs of its media relaunch. After being galvanised by a series of important attacks in the West and thanks to the help of its online supporters, the official movement resumed its activity. In this period, IS’s communication seemed to revolve around specific topics that were not only present in its central products but also in regional ones. For instance, the issues of resistance and injured or disabled fighters’ recourse to propaganda tools were frequently shown in the course of a little over a single month: some of these videos include *Inside the Khilafah VI* (27 December 2017), *Ways of the peace* (20 January 2018), *The wounded on the way of God* (23 January 2018), *Inside the Khilafah VII* (7 February 2018);
- **Transition:** the transition phase lasted from spring to summer 2018 and built upon the developments of the previous months; official and spontaneous propaganda carried on in a fluctuating manner, apparently without any real central coordination. This was also the period in which the World Football Championship took place in Russia and, before the spontaneous authors’ almost daily media campaign against the event, IS’s official communication seemed unable to seize the chance to prompt to strike the same target with force. It was also a time of rifts and severe blows within the communicative galaxy of the IS, with various authors accusing one another of being false supporters or spies. In addition, numerous online operations by security forces from all over the world were enacted, aiming at invalidating the

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<sup>13</sup> D. Plebani, *Stato Islamico e propaganda spontanea verso un bivio: accentrimento o laissez faire?*, ITSTIME, 22 July 2018.

communicative ability of the group and its supporters by operating in a coordinated manner;

- **Consolidation:** July 2018 was characterised by the beginning of a great reorganisation and consolidation process of IS's new communication apparatus. Through the weekly bulletin al-Naba, the group declared that the over twenty provinces in Iraq and Syria would be combined into two, al-Iraq and al-Sham, a procedure it also applied in its territories in Libya and Yemen. Somalia and East Asia were acknowledged as full-fledged *wilayats* both through official statements and the al-Naba bulletin. IS's vast communication apparatus in its "state" phase was therefore reduced to a core of media cases with different levels of prolificacy and product quality. At the same time, there seemed to have been a decisive admonition for the authors of spontaneous propaganda: in fact, on 14 July 2018 a statement was released by IS, reminding the faithful to only rely on official agencies and to neither listen to nor collaborate in any way with other information distributors. This admonition did not result in the end of spontaneous propaganda, but rather its (apparent) alignment with the central guidelines. Some authors presented themselves as connectors for others: al-Faqeer Media, for example, started its own editorial and video production and was occasionally joined by other groups, thus conveying a message of unity, an element that was strongly advocated by IS. Finally, with the progressive uprooting of residual territories under IS control in Syria along the borders of Iraq, a second "fall of the caliphate" seemed to take shape from the Western media chorus. However, this was a symptom of a profound misunderstanding of the "IS phenomenon";

- **“Dirty bomb” and Second Reorganization<sup>14</sup>:** This name indicates a device that releases chemical, toxic and/or radioactive substances in the environment after exploding, possibly making such a release its most dangerous element. This comparison may be applied to what happened in Baghouz: after the “caliphate” symbolically deflagrated in the small Syrian village, it then “vaporised” with greater force throughout global communication in provinces outside of the Syrian-Iraqi quadrant, from Eastern Asia to Western Africa, from the Caucasus to Yemen. The fall of Baghouz also marked the end of the *first reorganisation* of the wilayats which had started in July 2018<sup>15</sup>, and the beginning of its second *global restructuring*<sup>16</sup>. In the time immediately preceding and following Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s speech on 28 April 2019, five years after the last image of the “caliphate”, new wilayats emerged in IS’ communication: the province of Central Africa was established on 18 April 2019 in the wake of the group’s first attack in the Democratic Republic of the Congo<sup>17</sup>; on 10 May 2019 attacks in the Kashmir region that the group claimed responsibility for announced the birth of Wilayah al-Hind; on 15 May 2019, two attacks in Quetta marked the creation of Wilayah al-Pakistan; on 10 July 2019, a pledge of allegiance came from the new province of Turkey. IS then declared its presence in other territories – Azerbaijan (2 July 2019), Tunisia (16 July) and “Bengal” (Bangladesh – West Bengal,

<sup>14</sup> D. Plebani, “La comunicazione di Stato Islamico: evoluzione, trasformazione ed eredità”..., cit.; Id., “Remaining and Expanding: IS’ second reorganization”, ITSTIME, 1 July 2019.

<sup>15</sup> D. Plebani, “Verso un nuovo Stato Islamico? La recente riorganizzazione del “califfato” in tre direttrici”, ITSTIME, 12 August 2018

<sup>16</sup> D. Plebani, “Remaining and Expanding: IS’ second reorganization”..., cit.

<sup>17</sup> D. Plebani, “Stato Islamico e l’espansione in Africa Centrale”, ITSTIME, 21 April 2019.

9 August) – though they were not recognised as full-fledged Wilayat. Not bounded anymore to its “state” in the Syrian-Iraqi quadrant, IS is now more able to propose itself as a brand all over the world, thus “abandoning” the role of “state” that had almost become a burden from an operational point of view<sup>18</sup>.

This brief examination sheds light on how, since the end of 2017, the Islamic State has initiated a rapid, and at times radical, process of metamorphosis that has continued until the present day. However, the war against the group cannot be reduced to a mere communication “game of chess”. Rather, it reverberates throughout the very fabric of the “playing field”, occasionally changing it and turning it into an element in favour of one actor or another. The attack-communication binomial is emblematic in this sense, and in time has shaped a new “phase” for the Islamic State that is contemporary and at times parallel to that of the “legacy of Islamic State” group.

## **The Legacy of Islamic State<sup>19</sup>**

Since its foundation, the “caliphate” has produced a pervasive and effective propaganda calibrated to strike terror in its enemies and inspire its acolytes. A prudent diversification enabled an extremely vast audience to find what it was looking for in its vision of “the” Islamist State: “Islamic” law and order, no ethnic barriers, the call to adventure for young men and women, and stability for families. The problem – and opportunity – concerning those who could not emigrate to the “caliphate” remained, along with the need to offer them the chance to contribute to

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<sup>18</sup> D. Plebani, “Remaining and Expanding: IS’ second reorganization” ..., cit.

<sup>19</sup> For a more extensive examination of the theory of the “Legacy of Islamic State”, see D. Plebani, “L’eredità operativa di IS: da open source jihad a open source extremism”, *GNOSIS – Rivista italiana di intelligence*, vol. 1/2019, April 2019.

the cause of IS. In this sense, “didactic” communication products, regarding how and when to attack the enemy, have multiplied in the course of the years, not only in number but also in quality, to the point of including videos, banners, magazines and *anasheed*. In this manner, while spectacular attacks, like the one on the Bataclan in 2015, set an exemplary standard in terrorist attacks’ practices, IS has also provided its sympathizers with the (minimal) skills to emulate them: knives, vehicle ramming, poisons, fire, and even nail guns are presented as an “everyday arsenal” that is available to all those who wish to follow the “feats” of the “soldiers of the caliphate”. This attention for those commonly referred to as “*lone jihads*” is not the prerogative of the Islamic State, but rather an evolution of violent jihadism: in al-Qaeda’s magazine *Inspire*, a section is dedicated to this, identifying *open source jihad* as “A resource manual [...]; includes bomb making techniques, security measures, guerrilla tactics, weapons training and all other jihad related activities. [...] It allows Muslims to train at home instead of risking dangerous travel abroad”. One of the most influential strategists of jihadism, Abu Musab al-Suri, had already given a decisive turn in this direction from an organisational point of view as well. He believed that in order to be victorious over one’s enemies, it was necessary for jihadism to be free from the rigid hierarchical controls that caused a sort of immobility. He argued instead that the imperative was to internalise the principles of the cause and join or fight with a fluid and minimal structure, as it is well emphasized by the slogan “system, not organisation”<sup>20</sup>.

A more marked contribution by IS is clearly expressed in the words of one of the group’s previous spokespeople, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani:

Do not ask for anyone’s advice and do not seek anyone’s verdict. [...] So, oh muwahhid, do not let this battle pass you by wherever you may be. [...] If you are not able to find an IED or a bullet, then single out the disbelieving American, Frenchman or any of

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

their allies. Smash his head with a rock, or slaughter him with a knife, or run him over with your car, or throw him down from a high place, or choke him, or poison him<sup>21</sup>.

The step taken by IS therefore seems to go beyond the vision of the qaedist strategist, lowering the requirements for an acolyte or sympathizer to declare themselves part of the IS, and impressing a change on al-Suri's words from "system, not organization" to "action, not system".

After this necessary introduction to the changes in operational strategy in IS, it is now possible to more precisely understand how the attacks that were carried out or inspired by the group are part of a more extensive framework.

As previously pointed out, some of the attacks particularly seemed to have had the function of triggering copycat gestures, thus activating a vicious circle in which an attack celebrated through communicative means could encourage new attacks that would be later celebrated by official and/or spontaneous communication. IS could also "count" on the media, which – especially in the West often portrayed the group's attacks and videos in a sensationalistic manner, therefore acting as a perfect echo chamber for the group and increasing both its sympathizers and those who were potentially vulnerable to its messages of terror. This resulted in a strong conditioning of the public, to the point of making it fear that an attack by IS could be behind numerous events. The group has extensively ridden the wave of this result, even laying claim on some particularly showy attacks with which they had no explicit connection. A telling example of all this is the Las Vegas massacre in 2017, when Stephen Paddock opened fire from a hotel room on a crowd of people gathered at a concert, which resulted in about 60 victims. Statements and actions therefore reproduce themselves, ensuring a "terror effect" that has lasted despite the numerous victories over IS in Sirte, Raqqa, Marawi, and Mosul, among others. This process has allowed the continuation of its battle even after its various "falls".

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.



This is the path that has led to the conception of the “legacy of Islamic State”. Its first positioning as *heritage* or *school*, as described above, consists in a “direct line between the organisation and its proselytes, an ideological-operational continuum that, by gathering the know-how that has been gained in the course of its existence, intends to carry on its battle”<sup>22</sup>.

It is therefore possible to claim that the objective of giving life to this “terror effect”<sup>23</sup>, whose effects have been seen, for example, in the London Underground at Oxford Circus<sup>24</sup> and in Piazza San Carlo in Turin<sup>25</sup> in 2017, as well as its mechanism of emulation, has actually been partially achieved by IS. Nevertheless, the extensive audience that these messages targeted was not only divided between sympathizers and victims: on the contrary, this communication-based campaign sustained (albeit involuntarily) by the media has sown the seeds of a new way of behaving, a flag on which one’s frustrations may be directed, and a method to translate them in a violent way. Some cases seem to be emblematic in this sense<sup>26</sup>:

- **Case 1.** In June 2017, a man driving a van intends to run over some protesters in the city of London. Having failed to do so, he drives for hours until he finds a group of people outside a place of worship. The man accelerates and tries to hit as many people as possible;
- **Case 2.** In April 2017, in Germany, a bus full of people is hit by three explosions soon after its departure. Nearby, a letter is found, laying claim on the attack and accusing the German government of keeping troops on Muslim ground and hosting American military bases on its territory;

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<sup>22</sup> D. Plebani, “L’eredità operativa di IS: da open source jihad a open source extremism”..., cit.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> M. Lombardi, “Francia in finale, terrorismo minaccioso”, ITSTIME, 11 July 2018.

<sup>26</sup> D. Plebani, “L’eredità operativa di IS: da open source jihad a open source extremism”..., cit.

- **Case 3.** In August 2017, in the USA, a young extremist in his twenties is taking part in a protest organised by a group of radicals. After an argument with some people who were protesting against the event, he rams his car into them.

All of these episodes appear to be generally traceable to the methods used by Islamic State: in truth though, none of them are directly connected to the terrorist group. In the third case, the attacker was James Fields, a member of the Far Right in the USA; in the second case, the culprit was a speculator who wagered on a loss in shares of the German Borussia-Dortmund football team that was on the bus. The first case is perhaps the clearest example of this process: Darren Osborne, who perceived the entire Muslim population as an enemy, first tried to run over some people (including the mayor of London) during a protest; having failed, he wandered for hours until he found some Muslim worshippers outside a mosque and accelerated in the attempt to run them over. It seems appropriate to report the exact words of the judge who dealt with the case, Justice Cheema-Grubb:

[...] Your plan was simple. To copy the method used by some Islamist terrorist and take a vehicle to a densely populated place and wreak as much devastation as possible as well as sowing long-lasting terror among the Muslim population<sup>27</sup>.

This “side effect” of the strategy of the Islamic State represents the second form of its inheritance, i.e. as a “legacy” or “method”: exploit the operational experience of IS, which is open to anyone who wants to adopt its best practices to reach goals that are not necessarily associated with an ideology. This method marks a transition from an “open source jihad” to a broader “open source extremism”, a phase of “new normality” with attacks and threats that are potentially contemporary to and/or parallel with those of jihadism<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> D. Plebani, “[Stato Islamico rivendica Strasburgo – ma la vera minaccia è la ‘nuova](#)

The third element of the legacy of the Islamic State refers to the communication ecosystem in which it operates and how this environment has reacted to its presence. In fact, the two variations described above are based on and feed off communication, especially that of societies that are strongly shaped by the media like in the West. Over time, Islamic State went from being just a terrorist group to being a brand and, finally, a phenomenon that is employed for an array of reasons and in numerous contexts. In 2016, a false attack by IS was staged at Prague for political purposes. In 2018, a group of men entered a mall in Teheran mimicking IS until it was discovered that they were really extras hired to promote a movie. Numerous references to IS are made in the entertainment industry, from music to concerts to TV series. It is therefore possible to detect how the “phenomenon of the Islamic State” has been somehow “incorporated” by the societies that it has tried to strike. Utmost attention should be paid to the way in which this is happening in order to avoid a sort of indirect and posthumous propaganda of the group and of those who have been inspired by it<sup>29</sup>.

## Conclusion

The morphogenetic processes of the Islamic State, when read through the signs of communication, which not only narrate it but also constitute its organisational structure, reveal a threat that is destined to renew itself in an opportunistic and creative way within the reticular and conflictual world that it expresses. The attempts to interpret this change often clash with the definition of terrorism with which everyone grapples in order to understand if the events that we are starting from are acts of “terrorism” or not. The definition is important because,

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normalità”, ITSTIME, 14 December 2018; M. Lombardi and M. Maiolino, “Attacco a Liegi: il terrorismo quotidiano che ci perseguita”, ITSTIME, 29 May 2018.

<sup>29</sup> D. Plebani, “L’eredità operativa di IS: da open source jihad a open source extremism”..., cit.

beyond merely guiding legal means, it provides the interpretative boundaries of the phenomenon and, as a result, the lines of action that must be used to respond to it.

The limits of this debate, and the tentativeness of its outcome, is that the players are trapped in an attempt to confirm existing models and fail to fully grasp the evolutionary capacity of these patterns of terrorism, thus disrupting the interpretative frameworks of those who fight it. It is futile to insist on repositioning today's terrorism within European or national definitions, or those of experts or jurists: those who do so are trying to box something that now evolves in a different way into something they already know.

In particular, the act of relying on the necessary formal organisational dimension and on political or ideological matrices to define terrorism is useless and dangerous.

The new organisational structures, i.e. the systems of significant relations that serve to construct identity and interpret reality, have become flexible and adaptable: belonging to the group has been substituted by belonging to the network based on relations between single individuals who imitate, confirm and emulate one another. The idea of the Lone Wolf is a stereotyped exorcism that does not acknowledge the fact that organisational solitude does not correspond to existential solitude. One no longer belongs to a group that legitimises ideas and may even plan attacks, but rather participates in a network that auto-selects itself based on its ability to satisfy individual needs that may also change very rapidly. This is the new form of belonging, which is different from the previous ones but foundational to the point of not being able to speak of solitude, and dramatic to the point of making any form of prevention practically impossible within a liquid organisational context.

In the same manner, reasoning according to a political or ideological matrix is outdated. Ideologies, like political orientation, were a "socially useful" means for compensating for the expression of one's beliefs: sharing an ideology entailed ethics and a legitimisation of certain behaviours but not of others.

Today, ideologies are absent and have given primacy to problems that are presented with practical urgency but without any ideal mediation, resulting in the explosion of the commonality of issues within the diversity with which each person manifests their own path to solve them.

For those who deal with terrorism today, the challenge is therefore not to try to box various events into existing definitions that are generally never shared, but rather to search for more suitable interpretative models in order to understand a phenomenon that is different from the terrorism that has affected us so far.

The position expressed by the authors of this paper and ITSTIME<sup>30</sup> sustains that today a phenomenon is considered terrorism based on the consequences that it produces, not the motivations that generate it. It consists in an “operational” approach that is closely tied with the present, and is therefore evolutionary but less vulnerable than the old definitions that many experts still refer to. From this perspective, this does not entail sustaining that everything is terrorism, but rather that the dimension within which one reads the attribute of terrorism does not lie in its reasons but rather in its manifestations. It is a new form of terrorism whose viral nature and the ease with which it disseminates behaviours through imitation have become the key to maintaining widespread conflict. Therefore, from this perspective, the communication of terrorism has acquired tactic, strategic and political value of enormous significance capable of spreading its threat in a rapid and unpredictable manner. In our societies, the use of extremist rhetoric in contexts and for causes that may even be quite distant from one another has been exponentially proliferating in recent years, even involving causes that have been naively considered almost “untouchable” for terrorist groups. However, it is necessary to understand the objective established risk that is represented by the “weapon” of

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<sup>30</sup> ITSTIME – Italian Team for Security, Terroristic Issues & Managing Emergencies research centre of the Department of Sociology at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, <http://www.itstime.it/>.

communication of extremist rhetoric regardless of its “flag”, so that we may not find ourselves many steps behind the threat<sup>31</sup> once again. Islamic State has opened this path and, whatever form it may take on in the future, it has opened a pathway that has already been entrusted to its posterity of violence through its legacy.

The greatest risk that we are running these days, after this series of events, is to want to put our minds at ease by confirming our crystallised beliefs within normative definitions and systems, instead of searching for new interpretative models that will account for a reality that is changing regardless of our conformist way of seeing the world.

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<sup>31</sup> D. Plebani, “Azione al centro. Un’analisi del rischio trasversale nelle retoriche jihadiste, identitarie ed ecologiste”, *ITSTIME*, 12 May 2019.

## 7. Terrorist Content and the Social Media Ecosystem: The Role of Regulation

Patrick Bishop, Stuart Macdonald

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Two months after the two attacks on mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, and French President, Emmanuel Macron brought together Heads of State and Government and leaders from the tech sector to adopt the Christchurch Call. Among the commitments listed in the call was a pledge from the Governments to “Consider appropriate action to prevent the use of online services to disseminate terrorist and violent extremist content”, including “Awareness-raising and capacity-building activities aimed at smaller online service providers” and “Regulatory or policy measures consistent with a free, open and secure internet and international human rights law”<sup>1</sup>.

On the same day, a consortium of technology companies – including Amazon, Facebook, Google, Twitter and Microsoft – released a list of nine steps it would take to “address the abuse of technology to spread terrorist content”<sup>2</sup>. These included both individual actions (such as continued investment in technology to improve detection and removal of terrorist and violent extremist content) and collective actions (such as working across

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.christchurchcall.com/call.html> (last retrieved on 12 July 2019).

<sup>2</sup> GIFCT, [Actions to Address the Abuse of Technology to Spread Terrorist and Violent Extremist Content](#), 15 May 2019 (last accessed 12 July 2019); Amazon, Microsoft, Google, Facebook, and twitter, [Joint Statement in Support of Christchurch Call](#) (last retrieved on 12 July 2019).

industry, governments, and NGOs to create crisis protocols).

The Christchurch Call is the latest in a number of efforts in recent years to require social media companies to do more to ensure that terrorist content is removed from their platforms. In 2018, the European Commission published a proposal for a new Regulation on preventing the dissemination of terrorist content online<sup>3</sup>. Aiming to balance the swift and effective detection and removal of terrorist content with the protection of human rights, Article 3 of the Regulation proposes the creation of a general duty for hosting services to “take appropriate, reasonable and proportionate actions [...] against the dissemination of terrorist content and to protect users from terrorist content”. Article 4 proposes the introduction of a removal order. This could be issued either administratively or judicially and would oblige the relevant platform to remove the content within one hour<sup>4</sup>.

A year earlier, in 2017, Germany passed its Network Enforcement Act (“NetzDG”). This applies to all for-profit social media platforms with at least two million registered users in Germany. The NetzDG law requires platforms to remove or block obviously illegal content within 24 hours and to decide on all other complaints within one week<sup>5</sup>. Fines of up to €50 million can be imposed in cases involving systematic breaches of the law<sup>6</sup>.

The introduction of a similar law has also been approved by the French National Assembly and is currently awaiting consideration by the Senate<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> European Commission, “Proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on preventing the dissemination of terrorist content online”, 2018/0331 (COD), 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Article 18 provides that member states should lay down the penalties for non-compliance.

<sup>5</sup> W. Echikson and O. Knodt, *Germany’s NetzDG: A key test for combatting online hate*, CEPS Research Report, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Section 4(2) of NetzDG invokes section 30(2) of the Act on Regulatory Offences, which states that the maximum regulatory fine may be multiplied by ten.

<sup>7</sup> Agence France-Presse, “France online hate speech law to force social media



In the UK, meanwhile, in April 2019 the Government proposed the creation of a new independent regulatory body in its *Online Harms* white paper. The regulator would enforce a new statutory duty of care on relevant companies to take reasonable steps to keep their users safe and tackle illegal and harmful activity on their services, with a range of enforcement options including the imposition of fines<sup>8</sup>.

Against this backdrop, the starting point for this chapter is not *whether* regulatory measures should be imposed that require social media companies to do more to remove terrorist content from their platforms, but *what form* such measures should take. The chapter will argue, first, that a diverse regulatory toolkit is essential. There is no one-size-fits-all regulatory intervention. Whilst public discourse has tended to focus on the imposition of fines, other measures such as capacity-building, removal orders and the disruption of business activities (e.g. removal from search engine results and ISP blocking) are also necessary.

Second, the chapter will argue that efforts to regulate social media companies must be responsive to a range of factors, including the company's size and the extent of its engagement with the regulator. The benefits of responsive regulation are well-established and have been discussed extensively in academic literature<sup>9</sup>.

Third, in order to ensure responsiveness, the regulatory toolkit should be arranged in a pyramid structure, where each layer of the pyramid consists of sanctions of increasing severity. The underlying logic is that regulated entities will be more likely to engage with the less draconian interventions at the base of the pyramid when faced with the prospect of escalation and increasingly severe penalties.

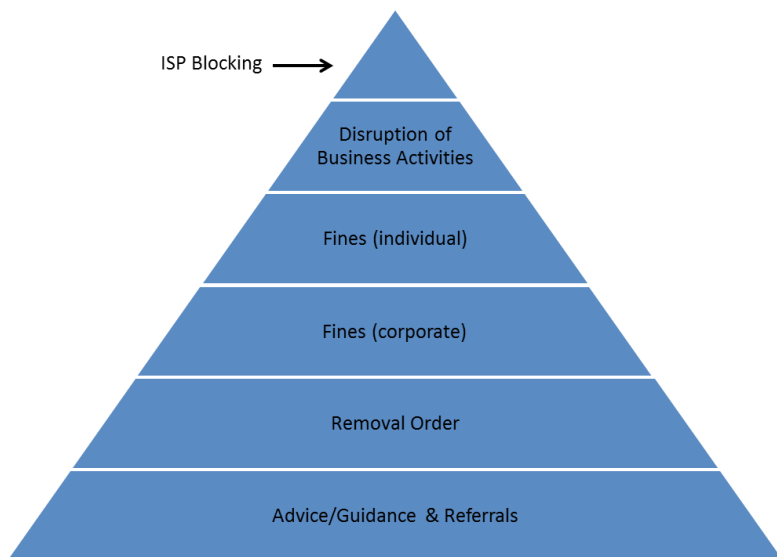
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sites to act quickly", *The Guardian*, 9 July 2019.

<sup>8</sup> HM Government, *Online Harms White Paper*, The Stationery Office, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> I. Ayres and J. Braithwaite, *Responsive Regulation: Transcending the Deregulation Debate*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992; J. Braithwaite, *Restorative Justice and Responsive Regulation*, New York, Oxford University Press.

The chapter accordingly proposes the following enforcement pyramid:



At the bottom are advice, guidance and referrals. These strategies seek to support companies' efforts to self-regulate their platforms. For companies that fail to do so, the next layers of the pyramid are removal orders and, in the event of breach of a removal order, fines. At the top of the pyramid are disruption of business activities and, as a last resort, ISP blocking.

The chapter begins by explaining that efforts to remove online terrorist content must target the whole of the social media ecosystem, not just the social media giants. Having shown how terrorist groups exploit smaller platforms in order to ensure relatively stable access to their propaganda, the chapter then discusses three types of company in turn: the social media giants; smaller companies that lack the capacity to regulate their platforms effectively; and, smaller companies that lack the willingness to do so.

## The Social Media Ecosystem

Before the Christchurch attacks, the attacker uploaded his manifesto to a range of smaller file-sharing sites (including MediaFire, ZippyShare and Solidfiles). Shortly before the first attack, he went onto Facebook, Twitter and 8chan and posted links to the copies of his manifesto available on these file-sharing sites. The post on 8chan also included a link to his Facebook profile, through which he livestreamed the attack<sup>10</sup>. Facebook has reported that the video was viewed fewer than 200 times during the live broadcast<sup>11</sup>. The first user report on the original video arrived 29 minutes after the video started, and 12 minutes after the live broadcast ended, by which time a user on 8chan had already posted a link to a copy of the video on a file-sharing site<sup>12</sup>. The video was subsequently shared on YouTube, as well as smaller platforms LiveLeak, BitChute and Kiwifarms, and as a downloadable file on Torrentz. Further links to the attack were re-shared on Facebook, Reddit, and 8chan. Whilst most of the smaller platforms reacted responsibly, some did not and still have active links to the video and manifesto<sup>13</sup>.

Facebook has stated that, in the 24 hours after the attack, it blocked more than 1.2 million videos of the attack at upload<sup>14</sup>. A further 300,000 copies were removed after they were posted. One of the reasons why these additional copies were not detected by Facebook's image and video matching technology was the proliferation of different variants of the video: more than 800 "visually-distinct variants" were in circulation<sup>15</sup>. Some of these were the product of "a core community of bad actors working

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<sup>10</sup> Tech Against Terrorism, "[Analysis: New Zealand attack and the terrorist use of the internet](#)", 26 March 2019 (last retrieved on 12 July 2019).

<sup>11</sup> G. Rosen, "[A Further Update on New Zealand Terrorist Attack](#)", *Facebook News*, 20 March 2019 (last retrieved on 12 July 2019).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Tech Against Terrorism (2019).

<sup>14</sup> G. Rosen, [A Further Update on New Zealand Terrorist Attack...](#), cit.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

together to continually re-upload edited versions of this video in ways designed to defeat our detection”<sup>16</sup>.

The dissemination of the Christchurch attack video has similarities with IS (Islamic State)’s propaganda dissemination strategy. In the past five years IS’s presence on Twitter has greatly diminished and a migration to Telegram has occurred<sup>17</sup>. Whilst Telegram’s suite of features is used by IS supporters to interact and communicate, to distribute joinlinks to other groups and channels and to provide instructional materials, by far the most common function is the distribution of core IS media and, in particular, other pro-IS materials (regardless of their origin)<sup>18</sup>. As well as “using Telegram’s file-sharing features to disseminate content internally, IS sympathizers on Telegram use external file-sharing sites to ensure IS content remains on the internet and resilient to takedowns”<sup>19</sup>. Dozens of unique URLs to a single piece of pro-IS material on different file-sharing sites are distributed using Telegram channels and groups. The URLs are then shared on Twitter, Facebook, and other mainstream social media platforms<sup>20</sup>. This separation of the content producers, disseminators, and consumers from the material itself bolsters IS dissemination networks against the effects of takedowns by ensuring that, even if content is removed from one site, stable access exists to others<sup>21</sup>. File-sharing platforms are thus utilised as “communication black-boxes” to “enable the rapid redistribution of content even under conditions of drastic policing

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> M. Conway et al., *Disrupting Daesh: Measuring Takedown of Online Terrorist Material and its Impacts*, VOX-Pol Network of Excellence, 2017.

<sup>18</sup> B. Clifford and H. Powell, *Encrypted Extremism: Inside the English-Speaking Islamic State Ecosystem on Telegram*, Washington, DC, George Washington University Program on Extremism, 2019.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>20</sup> S. Macdonald, D. Grinnell, A. Kinzel, and N. Lorenzo-Dus, “Daesh, Twitter and the Social Media Ecosystem: A Study of Outlinks Contained in Tweets Mentioning Rumiyaḥ”, *The RUSI Journal*, 2019

<sup>21</sup> S. Weirman and A. Alexander, “Hyperlinked Sympathizers: URLs and the Islamic State”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 18 April 2018.

and filtering”<sup>22</sup>. The result is a “fragmentation” of IS propaganda that makes these materials “less trackable by authorities” and results in a “relatively closed and stable digital propaganda ecosystem”<sup>23</sup>.

## The Social Media Giants

As the previous section showed, efforts to remove online terrorist content must address the whole social media ecosystem. This section discusses the application of the regulatory pyramid outlined above to the social media giants. The next sections then turn to smaller platforms.

### Self-regulatory measures

Given the sheer volume of content posted and uploaded to social media every day, the use of technology to identify and remove terrorist content is essential. Some progress has already been made in this respect. Facebook utilises image matching (so that, if someone tries to upload a photo or video that matches a photo or video that has previously been identified as terrorist, they are prevented from doing so), language understanding (analysing text that has been removed for praising or supporting terrorist organisations in order to develop text-based signals that can go into machine learning algorithms to detect similar future posts), removing terrorist clusters (using algorithms to work outwards from pages, groups, posts or profiles that have been identified as supporting terrorism, employing signals such as whether an account is friends with a high number of accounts that have been disabled for terrorism) and tackling recidivism

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<sup>22</sup> T.E. Mitew and A. Shehabat, “Black-boxing the Black Flag: Anonymous Sharing Platforms and ISIS Content Distribution Tactics”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2018, pp. 81-99, 84, 97.

<sup>23</sup> L. Bindner and R. Gluck, *Trends in Islamic State’s Online Propaganda: Shorter Longevity, Wider Dissemination of Content*, ICCT Perspective, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, The Hague, 2018.

(detecting new accounts created by repeat offenders)<sup>24</sup>.

In the first quarter of 2019, Facebook removed 6.4 million items of terrorist propaganda. In 2018 it removed 19 million<sup>25</sup>. Twitter also uses its own technology to identify accounts promoting terrorism, as does YouTube<sup>26</sup>. From 1 August 2015 to the end of 2018, Twitter suspended a total of 1,582,026 accounts for the promotion of terrorism<sup>27</sup>. From September 2018 to March 2019, YouTube removed 149,980 videos for the promotion of violence and violent extremism<sup>28</sup>. Across all three platforms, referrals from users, law enforcement and governments are responsible for only a small minority of suspensions and take-downs; the vast majority of violations are detected by technology<sup>29</sup>.

In addition, in order to try and prevent terrorists jumping from one platform to another, in 2017 Facebook, Google, Microsoft and Twitter founded the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT). Members of the GIFCT collaborate to disrupt terrorist exploitation of their platforms. This includes a shared database of hashes (i.e. unique digital fingerprints). When a violent terrorist image or terrorist recruitment video is removed from a member company's platform, its hash is shared with other GIFCT members, enabling them to identify and remove it – or block it before it has even been posted.

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<sup>24</sup> M. Bickert and B. Fishman, "Hard Questions: How We Counter Terrorism", *Facebook News*, 15 June 2017 (last retrieved on 14 July 2019).

<sup>25</sup> G. Rosen, "An Update on How We Are Doing At Enforcing Our Community Standards", *Facebook News*, 23 May 2019 (last retrieved 14 July 2019).

<sup>26</sup> V. Gadde, "Key data and insights from our 14th Twitter Transparency Report", *Twitter Public Policy Blog*, 9 May 2019 (last retrieved on 14 July 2019); S. Wojcicki, "Expanding our work against abuse of our platform", *YouTube Official Blog*, 4 December 2017 (last retrieved 14 July 2019).

<sup>27</sup> Figures taken from Twitter's biannual transparency reports.

<sup>28</sup> Figures taken from the "YouTube Community Guidelines" section of Google's transparency reports, available at <https://transparencyreport.google.com/youtube-policy/removals?hl=en> (last retrieved on 14 July 2019).

<sup>29</sup> M. Bickert, "Hard Questions: What Are We Doing to Stay Ahead of Terrorists?", *Facebook News*, 8 November 2018 (last retrieved on 14 July 2019); V. Gadde (2019).

There are currently 14 GIFCT members and over 200,000 hashes in the shared database<sup>30</sup>.

## Removal orders and fines

Whilst some progress has been made, there nonetheless remains a conviction that reliance on self-regulation is insufficient and that the biggest social media companies should be doing more<sup>31</sup>. According to the European Commission, for example, “the scale and pace of progress among hosting service providers as a whole is not sufficient to adequately address this problem”<sup>32</sup>. This has led to the various regulatory measures and proposals outlined in the introduction. At the same time, however, attempts to impose sanctions on the biggest social media companies raise a number of difficult issues.

The use of fines and other financial penalties (whether imposed administratively or judicially) is an almost ubiquitous feature of regulatory regimes. As Germany’s NetzDG law illustrates, fines may be utilised for a number of reasons. These include: failure to respond to a removal order within the allotted timeframe; failure to comply with reporting/transparency mechanisms; and failure to ensure an effective complaints mechanism. In addition to the direct economic impact, the reputational damage associated with a fine may provide an additional incentive for compliance<sup>33</sup>. In particular, it may affect the platform’s attractiveness as an advertising space, as highlighted by the UK Parliament’s Intelligence and Security Committee:

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<sup>30</sup> See <https://gifct.org/joint-tech-innovation/> (last accessed 14 July 2019).

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, the evidence session before the UK Parliament’s Home Affairs Committee, at which the Chair of the Committee stated to representatives from Facebook, YouTube and Twitter: “It seems to me that time and again you are simply not keeping up with the scale of the problem, the scale of criminal and terrorist activity, and doing the things that we all, as communities across the world, need you to be doing” (Home Affairs Committee, “Oral evidence: Hate crime and its violent consequences”, HC 683 24 April 2019 Q904).

<sup>32</sup> European Commission (2018).

<sup>33</sup> ICF Consulting Services Ltd, *Research into Online Platforms’ Operating Models and Management of Online Harms*, 2019 (last retrieved on 16 July 2019).

When there was a social media backlash against companies whose adverts appeared alongside extremist videos on YouTube, those companies had little choice but temporarily to stop advertising on YouTube. More recently, Unilever announced that it is considering withdrawing its business from companies that are not doing more to provide “responsible digital infrastructure”<sup>34</sup>.

At the same time, the imposition of fines may not be straightforward. For a start, a company may not be willing to pay and, if it is registered outside of jurisdiction and does not have any physical assets within jurisdiction, it may not be possible to enforce it. In terms of the social media giants, however, this is less of a problem. Facebook, Google, Microsoft and Twitter all have physical headquarters within the EU and, as such, member states may enforce fines via a system of mutual recognition<sup>35</sup>.

A more significant limitation stems from these companies’ sheer economic strength. Any fine may simply be absorbed as an additional cost of doing business. One potential solution here is to base the level of fines on the financial strength of the platform. Under the General Data Protection Regulation, for example, the most serious infringements may incur a fine of up to €20 million or 4 per cent of the company’s total worldwide turnover in the preceding financial year, whichever is higher<sup>36</sup>.

In traditional business models, there is a danger that the cost of substantial fines will ultimately be borne by consumers. As one commentator has remarked, “when the corporation catches a cold, some else sneezes”<sup>37</sup>. However, since most social media

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<sup>34</sup> Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament, *The 2017 Attacks: What needs to change?*, 2018 (last retrieved on 19 August 2019).

<sup>35</sup> Council Framework Decision 2005/214/JHA of 24 February 2005 on the application of the principle of mutual recognition to financial penalties.

<sup>36</sup> Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data, and repealing Directive 95/46/EC (General Data Protection Regulation), art.83(5).

<sup>37</sup> J. Coffee, “No soul to damn: no body to kick: an unscandalized inquiry into the problem of corporate Punishment”, *Michigan Law Review*, vol. 79, no. 386, 1980, p. 389.



companies provide services to users free of charge, a different dynamic applies. Perhaps the cost of fines will be passed on to advertisers, which could lead to reduced investment in advertising on the platform. Or perhaps the impact of a substantial fine will be mitigated by increasing the volume of advertising on the platform, which could spoil the user experience and impact the number of active users. Either way, the possibility of a substantial fine provides an incentive to the company to ensure compliance with the regulatory regime in the first place.

There is also the possibility of imposing personal liability on senior management. Individual liability in the context of corporate transgressions is a growing trend<sup>38</sup>. The UK's recent *Online Harms* white paper considers the possibility of senior management liability for major breaches of the proposed statutory duty of care but acknowledged a number of challenges, including identifying the roles to which liability might attach<sup>39</sup>. Within the UK, the Data Protection Act 2018 permits individual liability in cases where an offence has been committed by a corporation with the consent or connivance of a director, manager, secretary or similar officer, or is attributable to the neglect of one of these<sup>40</sup>. However, even if a person with a suitably senior role resides within jurisdiction, the requirement to demonstrate consent, neglect, etc. is a potentially difficult hurdle to overcome. This might be particularly challenging in the case of social media giants with complex management structures.

### Disruption of business activities and ISP blocking

In extreme cases it may be necessary to resort to the most draconian enforcement options at the top of the regulatory pyramid: disruption of business activities and ISP blocking. Both of these possibilities are considered by the UK's *Online Harms*

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<sup>38</sup> M. Nietsch, "Corporate illegal conduct and directors' liability: an approach to personal accountability for violations of corporate legal compliance", *Journal of Corporate Law Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2018, pp. 151-184.

<sup>39</sup> Above, no. 8, p. 60.

<sup>40</sup> Data Protection Act 2018, s.198(1).

white paper. The former would include requiring third parties to withdraw services from the transgressing company, including removal from search results and app stores, and the cancellation of a range of ancillary services such as domain name registration and payment processing. Such measures might restrict the future growth of platforms, although in the case of the social media giants – who already have extremely large numbers of existing registered users – the impact may be minimal.

ISP blocking represents an option of last resort and raises some significant issues. Social media has become an integral aspect of people's everyday lives. Blocking access to the biggest platforms would cause public outcry and would have a significant socio-economic impact. It would also represent a prior restraint on speech, something which is generally seen as antithetical to liberal democratic traditions<sup>41</sup>. Whilst prior restraints may sometimes be consistent with the European Convention on Human Rights<sup>42</sup>, it is questionable whether blocking an entire platform will be deemed proportionate when the vast majority of activity on the platform is lawful. There are also additional technological challenges, not least the ability of users to circumvent measures such as ISP blocking. This is a significant issue given that “we are entering an online environment in which the knowledge barrier for using technologies such as VPNs and TOR has never been lower”<sup>43</sup>.

## **Smaller Companies That Lack Capacity**

Governments may be less concerned about the impact of terrorist content published on small- or micro-platforms because, by definition, such platforms have relatively limited reach. The NetzDG law, for example, only applies to platforms with

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<sup>41</sup> E. Barendt, *Freedom of Speech*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007.

<sup>42</sup> *Observer and Guardian v UK*, 14 EHRR 153, 1992.

<sup>43</sup> CYTREC, *Response to the Online Harms White Paper*, 2019 (last retrieved on 16 July 2019).

over two million registered users in Germany. Yet, as explained above, the social media giants form just one part of a wider ecosystem. It is through the exploitation of smaller platforms that terrorist groups have managed to bolster resilience against take-downs and ensure stable access to their propaganda. Moreover, the more effective the regulation of the biggest platforms, the more likely terrorist migration to smaller platforms becomes.

In terms of these smaller platforms, the challenge is often not a lack of willingness but a lack of capacity. A well-known example is Justpaste.it. Justpaste.it is a free content-sharing service that allows content to be posted within seconds with no registration required. Owned by Mariusz Zurawek, who runs the site out of his home in Poland, the content posted on Justpaste.it began to include IS propaganda in early 2014. By March 2015, Zurawek estimated that he had removed up to 2,000 posts at the request of London Metropolitan Police<sup>44</sup>. Since then he has received a large volume of take-down requests from all over the world. This poses challenges in terms of identifying what content is legal and responding to take-down requests in other languages, as well as capacity and resources<sup>45</sup>. So, whilst any potential regulatory framework ought to apply to smaller platforms, it must also be proportionate and mindful of such platforms' relatively limited resources.

When dealing with such platforms, the central role of any regulator is to enable self-regulation by the provision of advice and guidance. In the UK's *Online Harms* white paper, for example, the functions of the proposed regulator include: the publication of codes of practice; the establishment of a transparency, trust and accountability framework; and, the provision

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<sup>44</sup> S. Stalinsky and R. Sosnow, *The Jihadi Cycle On Content-Sharing Web Services 2009-2016 And The Case Of Justpaste.it: Favored By ISIS, Al-Qaeda, And Other Jihadis For Posting Content And Sharing It On Twitter - Jihadis Move To Their Own Platforms (Manbar, Nashir, Alors.Ninja) But Then Return To Justpaste.it*, MEMRI Inquiry & Analysis Series No. 1255, 6 June 2016 (last retrieved on 15 July 2019).

<sup>45</sup> Tech Against Terrorism, "[UK Launch of Tech Against Terrorism at Chatham House](#)", 12 July 2017 (last retrieved on 15 July 2019).

of support to start-ups and SMEs to help them fulfil their legal obligations in a proportionate and effective manner<sup>46</sup>. One of the objectives of the GIFCT is also to build the capacity of smaller platforms by knowledge-sharing. To this end, it has collaborated with the U.N.-mandated Tech Against Terrorism initiative to launch a knowledge-sharing platform<sup>47</sup>. This offers various resources including a list of terrorist groups and individuals on the U.N. sanctions list, recommendations for model terms of service and model guidelines for transparency reports.

Smaller platforms are also likely to have limited technological capacity. Here, the *Online Harms* white paper proposes equipping a regulator with powers to facilitate the sharing of technological solutions. It offers the example of a hackathon, attended by leading tech firms and hosted by the UK's Home Secretary and Microsoft, which commenced the development of a tool to identify online grooming. When complete the tool will be licensed free of charge to smaller and medium companies worldwide<sup>48</sup>.

As mentioned above, GIFCT members have already collaborated to develop a shared hash database. Yet more could be done. GIFCT members are reportedly experimenting with URL sharing<sup>49</sup>. This is welcome, given the important role URLs play in propaganda dissemination strategies. Since botnets have also been found to play a significant role in efforts to disseminate terrorist propaganda, GIFCT members should also develop shared automated systems that use behavioural (as opposed to content-based) cues to block terrorist content (such as abnormal posting volume or the use of trending hashtags to

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<sup>46</sup> Above, no. 8, para. 5.2.

<sup>47</sup> GIFCT, “Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism: an update on our efforts to use technology, support smaller companies and fund research to fight terrorism online”, 18 June 2018 (last retrieved on 15 July 2019).

<sup>48</sup> UK Government, “New tool developed to tackle online child grooming”, 13 November 2018 (last retrieved on 17 July).

<sup>49</sup> G. Rosen, [A Further Update on New Zealand Terrorist Attack...](#), cit.

gain attention)<sup>50</sup>. This is important, given that many smaller platforms rely exclusively on humans to identify and remove terrorist content<sup>51</sup>.

There is also a pressing need to expand membership of the GIFCT, to ensure access to such initiatives. One study found evidence of more than 330 different platforms being used by terrorist groups since 2016, with 25 of the top 50 most-used platforms being small- or micro-platforms<sup>52</sup>. In comparison, there are just fourteen GIFCT members. Many smaller platforms lack the capacity required to fulfil the GIFCT membership criteria. These criteria include: terms of service that include content standards; regular, public data transparency; a public commitment to human rights; and, support for civil society organisations challenging violent extremism<sup>53</sup>. Here, the provision of advice and guidance by a regulator, along the lines envisaged by the UK's *Online Harms* white paper, could have significant value.

Lastly, it should be noted that, whilst the role of a regulator in the case of smaller companies that are willing to cooperate would naturally be focused on interventions located at the base of the regulatory pyramid, a responsive approach would nonetheless require escalation to stricter interventions if self-regulatory strategies do not achieve the desired outcomes. Where this occurs, a truly responsive approach would require an element of proportionality, for example, by allowing a longer period to comply with a removal order than would be case with a social media giant.

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<sup>50</sup> S. Macdonald, D. Grinnell, A. Kinzel, and N. Lorenzo-Dus, *A Study of Outlinks Contained in Tweets Mentioning Rumiyah*, Global Research Network on Terrorism and Technology, Paper no. 2, 2019 (last retrieved on 15 July 2019).

<sup>51</sup> I. van der Vegt, P. Gill, P. S. Macdonald, and B. Kleinberg, *Shedding Light on Terrorist and Extremist Content Removal*, Global Research Network on Terrorism and Technology, Paper no. 3, 2019 (last retrieved on 15 July 2019).

<sup>52</sup> Tech Against Terrorism, “ISIS use of smaller platforms and the DWeb to share terrorist content”, 29 April 2019 (last retrieved on 15 July 2019).

<sup>53</sup> See <https://gifct.org/members/> (last retrieved on 15 July 2019).

## Smaller, Uncooperative Companies

As the video of the Christchurch attack illustrates, there may be some smaller platforms that are unwilling to remove terrorist content. From a regulatory perspective, these companies pose different challenges. There is little reason to provide advice and guidance on regulatory compliance if the platform in question does not accept the desirability of removing terrorist content in the first place. Facilitation strategies require a predisposition towards compliance and the broad objectives of the regulatory framework.

The use of fines in cases involving such companies may also be problematic. The enforcement of any financial penalties will depend on the nature of the jurisdiction where the platform is registered and senior management is domiciled. It is not difficult to imagine a scenario in which a platform is based in an uncooperative country and, in the absence of a reciprocal agreement with that country, any fines imposed are unenforceable.

Given the limited efficacy of traditional regulatory sanctions in cases involving uncooperative platforms, another enforcement strategy could be to force companies that provide supporting services to take responsibility. ISPs could, for example, be pressured to raise prices on such companies, provide them with a lower quality of service, or deny them service altogether. Following the October 2018 Pittsburgh Synagogue shooting, GoDaddy refused to be further associated with the controversial social media platform Gab, forcing it to find another domain provider<sup>54</sup>. Similarly, following the August 2019 shooting in El Paso, Texas, Cloudflare announced that it would no longer offer the message board 8chan protection from distributed denial of service attacks<sup>55</sup>. Such action might cause the

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<sup>54</sup> Far-right social network Gab goes offline after GoDaddy tells it to find another domain registrar <https://techcrunch.com/2018/10/28/far-right-social-network-gab-goes-offline-after-godaddy-tells-it-to-find-another-domain-registrar/> (last retrieved on 19 July 2019).

<sup>55</sup> J. Taylor and J.C. Wong, “Cloudflare cuts off far-right message board 8chan

impugned company to change their behaviour or force them to seek another ISP, which would be a significant cost for a smaller company. The ultimate threat of ISP blocking should also remain in the regulator's armoury as a way of incentivising engagement with less severe interventions.

## Conclusion

This chapter has identified three requirements for efforts to require social media companies to do more to remove terrorist content from their platforms to be effective. First, a diverse regulatory toolkit is required. The chapter has discussed a range of regulatory interventions, including advice and guidance, removal orders and fines, and disruption of business activity and ISP blocking. Each of these has value in certain contexts and limitations in others. Second, the chapter has shown the importance of responsivity to a range of factors, including: the nature of the relevant platform and its position within the social media ecosystem; the degree of company engagement with the regulator; and, the extent to which the conduct of companies enhances or undermines the overall rationale of the framework. Third, to achieve this responsivity, the various interventions in the toolkit should be organised in a regulatory pyramid.

Even the most carefully designed regulatory framework will not lead to perfect compliance. Some problems are likely to persist, particularly in respect of a regulatory framework that is limited to a single jurisdiction. Terrorist groups may migrate to platforms or jurisdictions which are relatively unregulated. Some regulatory tools, such as ISP blocking, may also be circumvented using such means as VPNs and the TOR browser, which enable access to platforms that are blocked in the user's home country but accessible in others. The obvious solution to these challenges is to adopt a global approach – but obtaining

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after El Paso shooting”, *The Guardian*, 5 August 2019 (last retrieved on 23 August 2019).

international agreement is beset with difficulties. The prospects for a regional approach may be more favourable; the Council of Europe Convention on Cybercrime has not only been ratified by countries beyond Europe but has also influenced the design of cybercrime legislation in a number of non-signatory states<sup>56</sup>. Ultimately, however, the fact that a regulatory regime will not achieve perfect compliance is not a reason to not enact the regime in the first place. As Berger and Morgan state in their study of the disruption of IS activity on Twitter, “The consequences of neglecting to weed a garden are obvious, even though weeds will always return”<sup>57</sup>.

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<sup>56</sup> J. Clough, “A world of difference: the Budapest Convention on Cybercrime and the challenges of harmonisation”, *Monash University Law Review*, vol. 40, no. 3, 2014, pp. 698-736.

<sup>57</sup> J.M. Berger and J. Morgan, *The ISIS Twitter Census: Defining and Describing the Population of ISIS Supporters on Twitter*, Analysis Paper no. 20, Brookings Institution, Washington, DC, 2015, p. 56.



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