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Youth as an Object of Online Extremist Propaganda: The Case of the IS¹

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Abstract. A youth audience is the most vulnerable part of society as an object of influence of radical ideas. The authors argue that the most efficient tool of involving young people of different origin and confessional affiliation into the extremist activity on the present stage is social networks. Despite the fact that the practice of using communication networks in the Internet space by terrorist organizations have existed before, it was the information policy of the ISIS (and later IS) that was characterized by the greatest effectiveness, due to the creation of an integrated media structure, which consisted of numerous foundations and agencies (“Al Furqan”, “Aynad”, “Itisaam”, “Al-Hayat”, etc.), allowing them to spread their extremist religious and ideological doctrine on a global scale. The use of the widest range of high-quality media products in Internet media and social networks has expanded the organization’s area of influence by attracting supporters not only from the Middle East region, but also from European countries and the Russian Federation. The case-study of the mechanisms for attracting European youth through social networks, such as Twitter, Facebook, etc., to extremist activities under the auspices of the IS is held. In conclusion, the prospects for the influence of IS propaganda in social networks after the defeat of a terrorist organization in 2018 are assessed. As a methodological basis of the research, aspect and activity approaches, as well as analytical, statistical methods and the method of content analysis are used.

Keywords: terrorism, extremism, Islamic State, social networks, youth, European countries, propaganda

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¹ An international Islamist terrorist organization prohibited in Russia.

Молодежь как объект экстремистской пропаганды в интернет-пространстве: на примере «Исламского государства»²

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Аннотация. Молодежь является наиболее уязвимой частью общества в качестве объекта воздействия радикальных идей. Авторы статьи утверждают, что самым эффективным методом распространения экстремистских идей в молодежной среде на современном этапе, служат социальные сети. Несмотря на то, что практика использования коммуникационных сетей в интернет-пространстве террористическими организациями существовала и ранее, именно информационная политика ИГИЛ (и позднее ИГ) характеризовалась наибольшей результативностью, за счет создания комплексной медийной структуры, состоявшей из многочисленных фондов и агентств («Аль-Фуркан», «Айнад», «Итисаам», «Аль-Хайат» и др.), позволив распространять их экстремистскую религиозно-идеологическую доктрину в мировом масштабе. Использование широчайшего спектра высококачественной медиапродукции в интернет-СМИ и социальных сетях увеличило ареал влияния организации путем привлечения сторонников не только из ближневосточного региона, но в том числе и из европейских стран. В данной статье выявляются механизмы привлечения европейской молодежи через социальные сети, такие как Twitter, Facebook и др. к экстремистской деятельности под эгидой ИГ. В заключении оцениваются перспективы влияния пропаганды ИГ в социальных сетях после разгрома террористической организации в 2018 г. В качестве методологической базы исследования выступают аспектный и деятельностный подходы, а также аналитический, статистический методы и метод контент-анализа.

Ключевые слова: терроризм, экстремизм, Исламское Государство, молодежь, социальные сети, европейские страны, пропаганда

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Introduction

On the present stage the use of information technologies provides the rapid and scarcely controlled dissemination of diverse messages in the socio-political sphere and facilitates the implementation of propagandistic activities. Taking into account the possibilities of network technologies, participants in social and political actors use a variety of means to form the positions and perceptions of people and to influence their behavior. In the case of extremist ideas, this poses a particular danger, since it leads to radicalization in society and the spread of antihuman ideology, especially among the most susceptible and least socialized group of the

² Организация запрещена в РФ.

population – youth. It is not surprising, therefore, that this topic is of profound recent interest to both foreign and Russian researchers in different scientific social areas studying issues of a general nature of propaganda [Bernays 2010; Evdokimov 2012; Kolesnikova 2014], and more specialized questions of youth radicalization methods [Strebkov et al. 2015; Movchan 2017] and influence of Internet mass-media [Volodenkov, 2016]

Militant groups have long used traditional media and the Internet to disseminate information, spread their propaganda, and recruit potential militants [Cohen 2012]. However, no group to date has been as perceptive in terms of its propaganda campaign and recruiting terrorists via the Internet, and specifically via social media platforms, as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Islamic State nowadays)³. The Islamic State (IS) used a variety of platforms, such as: Facebook, Instagram, Tumbler, Ask.fm, and most prominently, Twitter to spread its message [Bodine-Baron, Helmus, Magnuson, Winkelman, 2016].

As of early 2015, terrorist organizations operated in Syria have recruited over 20,000 foreign fighters to their cause, the overwhelming majority of whom have joined the ranks of the Islamic State⁴. The main reason for the recruiting success of the group was the skillful use of propaganda and social media, which expanded its scope from the conflict in Iraq and Syria to global appeal.

Propagandists and recruiters were primarily focused on the most vulnerable and at the same time most active part of society – the youth. The young people consciousness is open to the perception of new ideas, fantasy-prone and suggestible, that, alongside with insufficient critical attitude to the receiving information, make them an easier prey for all kinds of influence. Also, an immanent feature of youth as a group, being in the process of primary socialization is extremeness [Strebkov et al. 2015–801] and with the appropriate impact, it might be developed into the adoption of extremist ideology. Besides, young people more often have no social obligations, like their own family or permanent job, and are more prone to spontaneous decisions and actions. The mass spread of the Internet technologies among youth on a wider extent comparatively with other population groups and unlimited possibilities of communication in social networks significantly facilitate ways of manipulation, and malinformation. Virtual space is not the only ground of the youth recruitment which also takes place in bars and discos, in college dormitories, in mosques and prayer rooms, but supposedly the most large-scale and effective on the present stage. Organizations like the Islamic State own the most modern recruiting technologies, actively using social networks,

³ Shane, S., & Hubbard, B. ISIS displaying a deft command of varied media. The New York Times. August 30, 2014. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/31/world/middleeast/isis-displaying-a-deft-command-of-varied-media.html> (accessed: 09.08.2020).

⁴ Neumann, P. Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000; surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s. The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence. January 26, 2015. URL: <http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-Afghanistan-conflict-1980s> (accessed: 12.09.2020).

Skype, and mobiles. While analyzing personal pages of potential objects of recruiting propagandists tend to choose young people who display activity, and simultaneously, the lack of clear personal worldview. At the first stage of searching for potential candidates, recruiters conduct a thorough analysis of a person's actual desire, his psychological problems and value orientations. On the following stages, based on the information received, they individually process possible candidates.

Attempts to counteract IS propaganda have been vague and ineffective, in spite of declarative efforts by the international actors like the USA, the UK, Saudi Arabia, and even al-Qaida. Counter-messaging efforts, such as those by the U.S. Department of State's Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC), were negligible due to the considerable scale of the IS footprint. Social media companies also did not impose strict and timely restrictions to prevent the Islamic State and its followers from distributing their propagandistic appeals. The Islamic State has significant differences from the other terrorist organizations for a multitude of reasons: first, its construction of a pseudo state, an "Islamic Caliphate"; second, its ability to sustain itself economically by amassing greater riches than any terrorist organization in the past; third, its globalist and apocalyptic ambitions and its millenarianism; and finally, its powerful social media campaign with a global following, which has to date attracted over 18,000 foreign fighters from over 90 countries.

Media, due to the events in Arab countries commonly entitled as the "Arab Spring", has taken on a new role. They ceased to be merely an SCCEM-exchange for pictures and messages with friends, but became punk-tem meetings revolutionaries. Through group and created profiles on Facebook, activists posted about peaceful protests, encouraging participation in them. The authorities belatedly caught with the scale. One of them was posting on Twitter through the specially launched hotline. Information published in the local media largely deviated from the facts, which was demonstrated through videos posted on the website YouTube. They showed differences between the propaganda television programmes and the actual events in the region [El Ghamari 2017: 70].

In this study, the authors examine the impact of social media on the attraction of young citizens of the European countries to terrorist groups such as the IS. The defeat of the IS has caused many citizens of these countries to return to their homeland, which can raise security concerns for governments. Therefore, the control of these groups is very important for all countries, as there is a probability of rejoining to these terrorist organizations in the future. The novelty of the article is based on the fact that although a number of researches has been made on the use of takfiri groups such as the IS of social networks, the focus of the present study is to examine the mechanisms of attracting European youth via social networks to the IS extremist activity. As a methodological basis of the research, aspect and activity approaches, as well as analytical, statistical methods and the method of content analysis are used.

The Islamic State's Internet Media Propaganda

The foundation of the Islamic State's media organization was laid in 2006, when the ISIS established the al-Furqan Institute for Media Production. Besides Al-Furqan, which produces brochures, films, posters, and material for the Internet and official statements, the IS's centrally organized media centres include Al-Hayat, which publishes inside the caliphate-videos, and the radio network al-Bayan. There is also the Ajnad foundation, which mostly publishes nasheeds, i.e., traditional Arabic a Capella song. The IS writes and produces their own nasheeds, for use as revolutionary songs. Their lyrics deal with such topics as jihad, the caliphate, or allegiance to al-Baghdadi. They are not only played on the radio, but are also used for setting IS film material to music, among other things⁵. Most of the material analyzed in this research is produced by Al-Hayat, founded in 2014, and specialized in producing material in different languages, such as English, German, French, and Russian. Al-Hayat's production includes the magazines Dabiq, Dar al-Islam, and Rumiya, intended for an international Muslim audience⁶. All the titles of the above-mentioned media structures and magazines are deeply rooted in the Islamic eschatology and are of a great symbolic significance. For instance, especially popular and often cited words of Prophet Muhammad about the last battle between the Muslim army and infidels which had to be held in Dabiq gave name to the main propagandistic journal.

The first issue of Dabiq was published in July 2014, immediately after the IS captured Mosul. The issue was called "The Return of Khilafah" and carried the date "Ramadan 1435". Fifteen issues of Dabiq were published between July 2014 and July 2016. In September 2016, the magazine changed its name to Rumiya (Rome). The name Rumiya is a reference to another hadith in which Muhammad said that Muslims would conquer both Constantinople and Rome. Between September 2016 and September 2017, 13 issues of Rumiya were released. Both magazines are produced by Al-Hayat Media Center. To attract members from all over the world, both Dabiq and Rumiya are published in a number of different languages. Rumiya, for example, is released in eleven different languages – English, Bahasa, Bosnian, French, German, Kurdish, Pashto, Russian, Turkish Urdu and Uyghur⁷. Each issue is sub-divided thematically, and includes a segment on the latest news updates from the battlefields. Each issue of Rumiya is around 40 pages, while its

⁵ Schatz, B. (2015, February 09). Inside the World of Isis Propaganda Music. *Mother Jones*. Retrieved from <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2015/02/isis-islamic-state-baghdadi-music-jihad-nasheeds/>

⁶ Milton, D. (2016, October). Communication Breakdown: Unraveling the Islamic State's Media Efforts. *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*. Retrieved from <https://www.stratcomcoe.org/milton-d-communication-breakdown-unraveling-islamic-states-media-efforts>

⁷ Mahlouly, D., & Winter, C. (2018). A Tale of Two Caliphates. Comparing the Islamic State's Internal and External Messaging Priorities. *ICSR*. Retrieved from <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ICSR-Report-A-Tale-of-Two-Caliphates-Comparing-the-IslamicState%E2%80%99s-Internal-and-External-Messaging-Priorities.pdf>

predecessor Dabiq was nearly twice that length⁸. Dabiq and Rumiya target three broad groups of readers: 1) the IS fighters, supporters and sympathizers, 2) potential recruits from across the world, and 3) the IS' enemies.

Violence plays a major part in Islamic State's brand and its appeal among the followers. The IS transformed the goal of many Islamist groups. Since the foundation of al-Qaeda, Osama Bin Laden advocated focusing on the "head of the snake", as he called the USA. He argued that once one destroys the source of "evil" that dominates Muslim countries, its puppets (Arab and Muslim leaders) would consequently lose power, and Islamic lands would be freed. This message insisted on gradualism and portrayed the battle between Jihadists and the US and its supporters in the context of David vs Goliath.

On the other hand, the IS, from the beginning, refused to portray itself as an underdog, focusing on its victories, atrocious violent acts against minorities (and particularly, the Shias, whom they used as a target in order to gain support among certain sectors of the Sunni community), and its call for an Islamic state. This was an intentional posture, which is reflected profoundly in its message to: 1) excite and attract many young men and women to this "exciting" and "victorious" journey that brings pride to its participants, and 2) to escape the spiritual hegemony of al-Qaeda-central and Ayman al-Zawahiri's attempts to control the jihadi scene in Iraq and Syria. Therefore, we see a strong emphasis on violence-related topics in the IS' Twitter sphere. We see a trend of violence-related rhetoric rising around some of the offline events that we have outlined. Four events stand out: the crucifixions in Raqqa⁹, the invasion of Mosul and Tikrit (Saddam Hussein's hometown, a place of symbolic importance) by IS, the invasion of Sinjar (Yazidi town), and the taking over of the Shaer gas field. All these events, annotated in the timelines, align faithfully with conversation spikes online (Figure 1). As for the "Names + Violence" tweets, we see the same pattern of relationship with the crucifixions (Figure 2).

The IS, after inflicting violence upon minorities, would engage in theological defense and justifications for its actions. We see a sharp increase in Twitter discussions among the IS members and the sympathizers after the IS self-pronounced itself a Caliphate, suggesting how important the perception of this event was among the IS followers. For the "Names + Theological" tweets, we again see the same sharp rise in tweet volume after the announcement of the caliphate (Figure 3). It is worth noting that IS's digital magazine Dabiq focused on legitimizing the caliphate since the announcement of its establishment [Winter 2015]. This should not be surprising, since the concept of the caliphate plays a

⁸ Mahzam, R. (2017, 9 (3)). Rumiya: Jihadist Propaganda and Information Warfare in Cyberspace. *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses by the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS)*. Retrieved from <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/CTTA-March-2017.pdf>

⁹ Abdelaziz, S. (2014, May 02). Death and Desecration in Syria: Jihadist Group "Crucifies" Bodies to Send Message. *CNN*. Retrieved from <http://www.cnn.com/2014/05/01/world/meast/syria-bodies-crucifixions/>

crucial role in political Islam and arguably in Islamic theology or Fiqh (Muslim Law). To many Islamists, Muslims need an “Islamic” state where they can live their lives under the guidance of the Sharia, or in their view free from exogenous corrupting influences. The need for an Islamic state, especially since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, has been a motivating cause for many Islamic groups, including the groups that some might see as moderate, such as the Muslim Brotherhood.

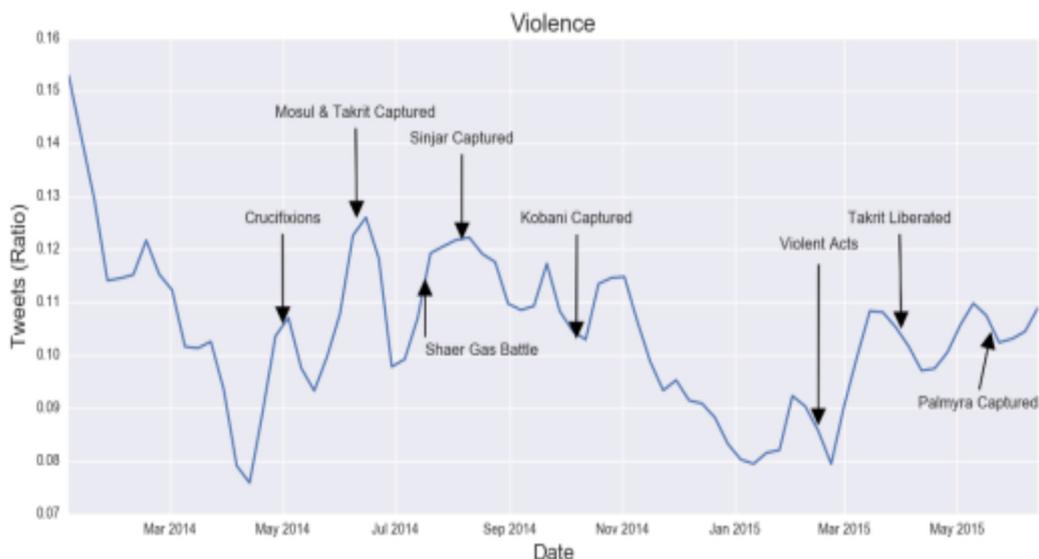


Fig. 1. Tweets classified under “Violence” with important external violent events plotted
Source: [Badawy, Ferrara 2018].

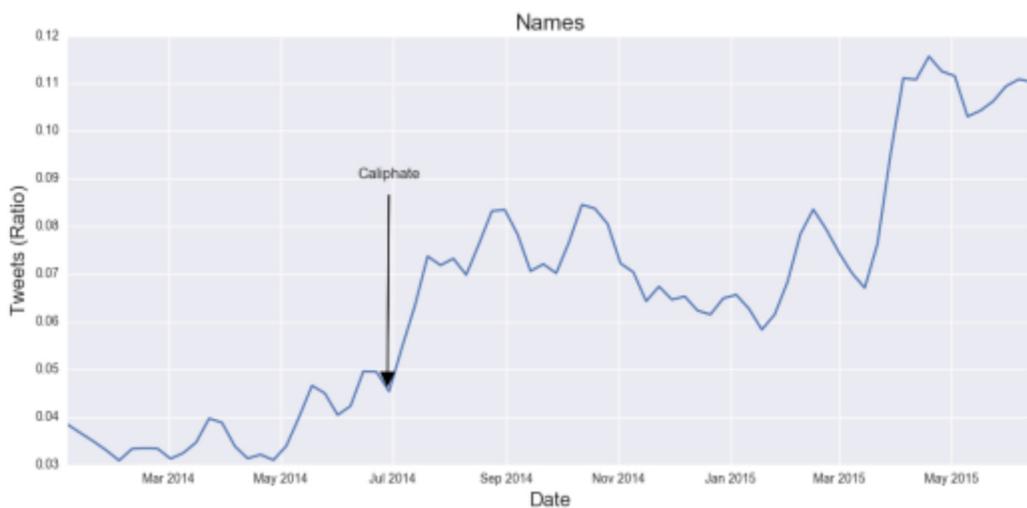


Fig. 2. Tweets classified under “Names” with the announcement of the Caliphate plotted
Source: [Badawy, Ferrara 2018].

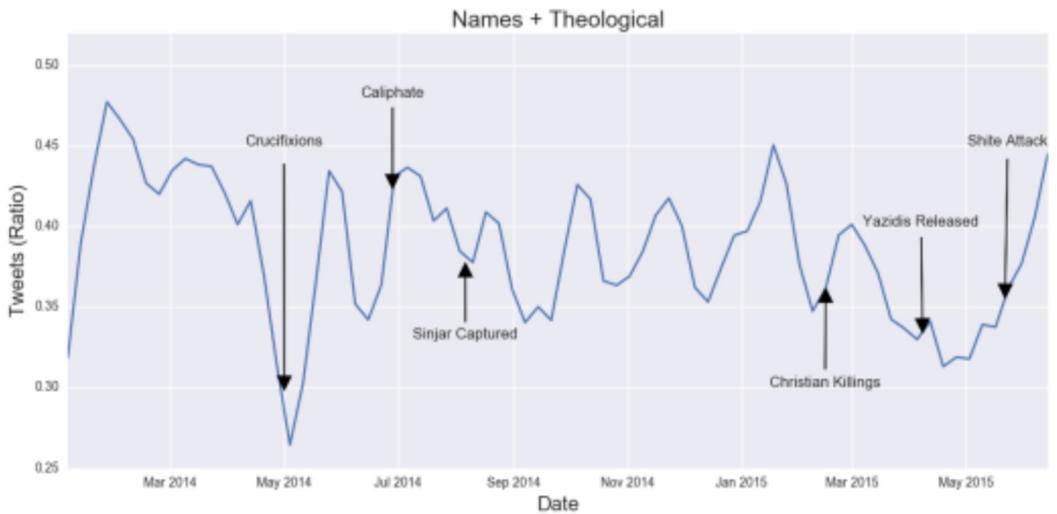


Fig. 3. Tweets classified under “Names+Sectarian” with important external sectarian events plotted
 Source: [Badawy, Ferrara 2018].

Since the “Names” category includes names of various entities, we did not have a uniform expectation regarding the relationship of any specific offline event and the tweets classified under this category, except for the announcement of the caliphate. The “Names” category includes three stems related to the caliphate: a sharp rise in this category after the announcement of the caliphate by the leader of IS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, appears as expected (Figure 4).

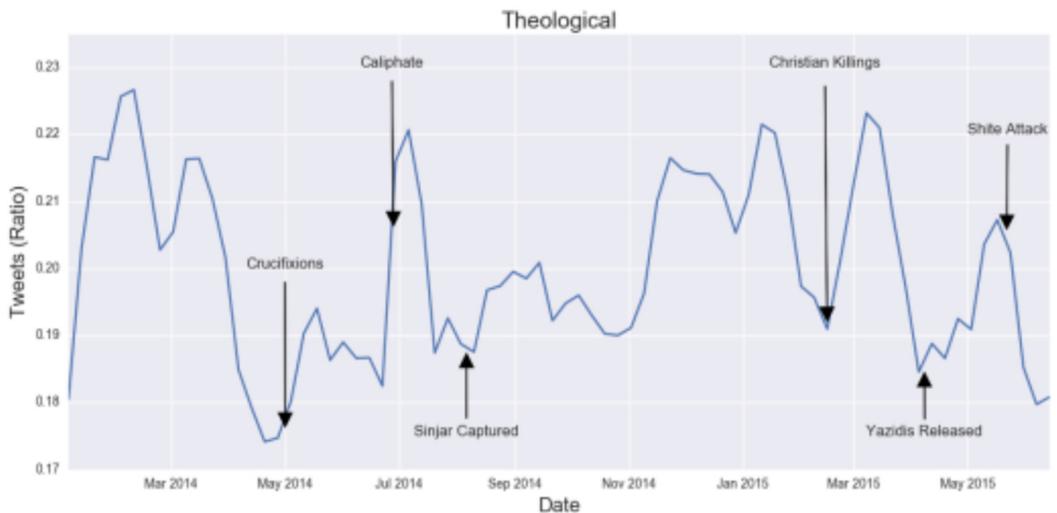


Fig. 4. Tweets classified under “Sectarian” with important external sectarian events plotted
 Source: [Badawy, Ferrara 2018].

Propaganda messages are usually not the only grounds for radicalization or recruitment to violent extremist ideologies. Those people who have joined terrorist groups such as the IS, and actually travelled to the caliphate, have usually acted this way after having interacted with others, online or offline¹⁰. “The group uses a very successful strategy of having an “online battalion” or the so-called “the mujahidin (industrious)”, that is likely a small group of 500-2,000 active online members who post and retweet certain tweets to make these messages trending, increasing the group’s exposure and outreach” [Berger & Morgan 2015]. Online propaganda messages serve as facilitators of the radicalization process, by capturing and retaining the individual’s interest, and by constituting “proof” for radical beliefs (Table 1). Well-designed propaganda may incline individuals to actively seek out people who can further introduce them into the ideology, thus making extremist organizations less dependent on an individual recruiter’s abilities to use rhetoric and charisma as tools of recruitment [Winter 2015]. Propaganda can be a gateway into a radicalization process, and it can also serve as a sustaining factor in an ongoing radicalization process. There is also the matter of lone actors, individuals who commit terror attacks without any prior reciprocal contact with a terrorist group. For these individuals, propaganda is essential for the development of extreme beliefs, and also an inspiration for violent actions.

To summarize, the functions of the IS’ propaganda are:

- 1) A gateway into radicalization,
- 2) A facilitating aspect in an on-going radicalization process,
- 3) Intimidation of the enemy, and
- 4) Inspiration for lone actor terrorists.

Table 1

Top 20-collocation network of key words across word cloud [Awan 2017:10]

Words	Words
Muslim	Khalifah
Islamic State	Syria
State	Brothers Rise Up
IS	Claim Victory
Extreme	Haya
Fight	Extremists
Terrorism	Haya alal-Jihad
Kill	Mujaheddin
ISIL	Rush to the Battlefield
Killing	Slaughter

Source: [Awan 2017].

¹⁰ Dunleavy P. (2012, April 04). The Myth of Self-Radicalization. *IPT New*.

The Al-Qaeda had already recognized the opportunities to carry out terrorist operations in the virtual sphere. In 2005, Ayman al-Zawahiri said, “we are in a battle and more than half of this battle is in the media. In this media battle, we are in the race for the hearts and minds of our Umma [the Muslim community]”¹¹.

The IS’ propaganda is also a multi-vectoral one. The IS communication agency, AMAQ, is highly active. The group communicates through its media center Al-Hayat¹² and the “jihad sphere” has experienced significant development since the official proclamation of the caliphate in 2014. Henceforth, the so-called Islamic State not only has websites, chat rooms and online journals, but it also makes extensive use of social networks, blogs, instant messengers, video sharing sites, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Tumblr, etc. The group is also active on Telegram and on specialized forums (terror forums) as well as on the Darknet, where terrorist operations can be organized and coordinated. This diversity of the means of dissemination also makes use of a variety of formats: videos, articles, songs, reports, memes, etc. IS claimed responsibility for the attacks of November 2015 in Paris via an official written statement, which was also repeated in song to a much younger audience. In doing so, the Islamic State is building a propaganda apparatus capable of attracting diverse audiences. These audiences are subject to meticulous targeting that seeks primarily to exploit the social, economic, political and cultural vulnerabilities of certain communities (Table 2). The multiplication of memes and terrorist videos suggests that young people are the principal target of the conspiracy theories spun by the so-called Islamic State. The IS offers these vulnerable young people answers to the challenges that come with entering the professional world and building an adult identity. The IS uses individualized targeting at an unprecedented level¹³.

¹¹ Schori Liang, C. (2015, February 01). *Cyber Jihad: Understanding and Countering Islamic State Propaganda*. *The Geneva Centre for Security Policy*. Retrieved from <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/189426/2015%2020%20Cyber%20Jihad.pdf>

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Jeangène Vilmer, J.B., Escorcía, A., Guillaume, M., & Herrera, J. (2018, August 28). *Information Manipulation: A Challenge for Our Democracies*. *Report by the Policy Planning Staff (CAPS) of the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs and the Institute for Strategic Research (IRSEM) of the Ministry for the Armed Forces*. Paris. Retrieved from https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/information_manipulation_rvb_cle838736.pdf

Table 2

Offender behavior characteristics

Type	Characteristics	Cases on Twitter	Cases on Facebook	Total No of Cases
Cyber Mobs	Using social media platforms to create a mob mentality and urging others to fight for the IS goal. This is done through group posts, videos and comments of hate directing groups of Muslim has to fight. Often personified through retweets, likes and views of specific IS propaganda materials	78	55	133
Loners	Often done through individual posts and comments. This individual is someone who is attracted to the IS campaign but clearly is exposed to individual grievances and has a lone mentality	51	65	116
Fantasists	Someone using social media platforms to fantasise over the IS movement. In particular, these individuals have blurred the lines between reality and fiction and are making direct pleas to fight for IS	45	94	139
Thrill Seekers	People who are promoting IS propaganda through videos and posts and forums. Indeed, some of these individuals claim to be directly using the Internet for online extremist purposes. These individuals are describing the sense of adrenaline rush they are receiving by watching and partaking in fighting on the battlefield whether online or offline	85	98	183
Moral Crusaders	These individuals are talking about the moral duty to fight. Many of these individuals are also constructing arguments based on ideology and theology as a means to promise people external rewards	140	95	235
Narcissists	These people are using political, foreign policy and individual grievances as a means to whip up a climate of revenge seeking and wanting to fight for the IS mission and goals	166	104	270
Identity Seekers	Mostly this is users who appear to be seeking some form of identity. Primarily people searching for some form of masculinity and therefore the IS recruitment drive appeals to them. This applies to males and females	87	101	188

Source: [Awan 2017: 6].

The European case study

Terrorist groups such as the Islamic State have used various media to influence public opinion and recruit followers since its inception. Some analysts call the

Internet as an “IS’ main playground”¹⁴. By June 2014, when the ISIS had gained enough territory to turn their main objective into a reality, the caliphate was claimed, with al-Baghdadi as its caliph, and Raqqa as its capital. The ISIS has become the IS, dropping their geographical limits to suit their ambition to expand. During the preceding months, “virtual expanding” was launched as well in particular by means of translating much of their Arabic propaganda into English. They started to produce magazines in English, French and German. A massive propaganda campaign directed at the West was issued, wherein Muslims of all trades – doctors, engineers, social workers etc. – were encouraged to come and live in the caliphate. This politics determined another distinguishing feature of the IS – the geographical diversity of their members. It is estimated that more than 40,000 citizens from 80 different countries travelled to Syria and Iraq to join the IS¹⁵. “The IS is following an unprecedented and sophisticated audiovisual strategy, consisting on the massive elaboration and distribution of audiovisual images that are highly salient and resonant in the culture of their targeted audiences. The segmentation of Daesh messages also includes the use of different languages, depending on the audiences they try to reach with each message. IS has released 120 campaigns aimed at Western countries: 27 percent of those have been released in English, 15 percent in Russian, 13 percent in French, and 3 percent in German” [El Ghamari 2017: 77].

Social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and Instagram have played an influential role in disseminating their thoughts and objectives, with 80% of the IS forces recruited through social media. Twitter can be considered the most important media tool of the IS to promote and also attract young people from the Western countries. The network also has access to all foreign media. Based on the demographic, social, and economic characteristics of the IS European terrorists, it is estimated that six percent of IS’ foreign members have joined the group from the EU countries; many of them are second or third generation immigrants. Very few of them already had ties to Syria, and about 18 percent of those who have joined the IS from the West are women¹⁶. The average age of people who have joined the IS from Western countries is between 18–29 years old. The average age of the IS foreign terrorists in France is estimated at 27 years, and in Belgium and the United Kingdom at 23.5 years¹⁷. It should be noted that the largest Muslim minority in

¹⁴ Saber, M. How Did ISIL Advance the Media Wave? When the Media Becomes Violent in the Context of Terror? *Khorasan Newspaper*. Retrieved November 15, 2020, from <http://khorasannews.com/> (In Persian).

¹⁵ Cook, J., & Vale, G. (2018, July 23). From Daesh to ‘Diaspora’: Tracing the Women and Minors of the Islamic State. *International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation*. Retrieved from <https://icsr.info/2018/07/23/from-daesh-to-diaspora-tracing-the-women-and-minors-of-islamic-state/>

¹⁶ Davis, C., & Opperman, J. (2014, June 05). Female Foreign Fighters Syria and Iraq. *TRAC Terrorism Research and Analysis Consortium*. Retrieved from www.trackingterrorism.org/article/female-foreign-fighters-syria-and-iraq

¹⁷ Pantucci, R. (2014, March 22). Foreign Fighters – Battle-Hardened Europeans Return Home from Syria. Retrieved from <https://raffaellopantucci.com/2014/01/14/foreign-fighters-battle-hardened-europeans-return-from-syria/>

Europe can be found in France amounted to approximately 4–5 million people. Then goes Germany with about 3 million Muslim population and the UK with less than 2 million Muslims. Most French Muslims are African immigrants who are dissatisfied with French migration policy; but quite paradoxically the social reasons have not prevailed in their motivation as the majority of young Europeans who joined the IS came from the middle-class families and their life prospects have been reasonable. Most European IS terrorists join the IS without any military training or previous experience of war. According to the statistics from 2013, more than 6,000 people from 28 EU member states left for Syria¹⁸. According to 2015 estimates, the number of people who have joined the IS from Western European countries has increased to almost 4,000. This is almost double the figures presented in December 2013. The majority of people who joined the IS came from the most influential European countries (France, the UK and Germany). Many people from countries such as Belgium, Denmark and Sweden have joined the IS in proportion to their population. According to the ICSR, about one-fifth of the population of foreign terrorists who are members of the IS are from Western European countries: from France (1200), Germany (500–600), the UK (500–600), Belgium (440), Netherlands (200–250), Sweden (150–180), Austria (100–150), Denmark (100–150), Spain (50–100), Italy (80), Finland (50–70), Norway (60), Switzerland (40), Ireland (30), terrorists have joined the IS in Iraq and Syria¹⁹.

A research of the use of different kind of PR technologies by the IS via social networks showed that the recruiters, due to their professional and elaborate activity managed to attract citizens from almost a hundred countries of the world, and the ranks of terrorists continue to grow. As a result of the IS's active use of PR technologies in Europe "84% of young people joined the ranks of terrorist organizations via the Internet; 47% paid attention to materials (video and text) posted online; 41% have sworn allegiance to IS online; 19% used online instructions when preparing a terrorist attack (making improvised explosive devices and bombs)"²⁰. The recruitment methodology is extremely simple but proved to be extremely effective at the same time. The recruiters are actively preparing and distributing professional video products, which colorfully show the supposedly "prosperous" life of the militants. Once young people were recruited, they became even more susceptible to terrorists' control and indoctrination, in some cases with use of drugs and the threat of harm to their families²¹.

¹⁸ Harrod, A.E. (2013, May 22). European Jihad in Syria. *Investigative Project on Terrorism*. Retrieved from www.investigativeproject.org/4153/european-jihad-in-syria

¹⁹ Neumann, P. (2015, January 26). Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000; surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s. *ICSR*. Retrieved from <https://icsr.info/2015/01/26/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s/>

²⁰ Sokolov, N. Conveyor Belt of Death: How Young People Fall into the Trap of the Islamic State. *Vesti.ru*. Retrieved from <https://www.vesti.ru/article/1756301> (In French).

²¹ Human Rights Watch. (2008, April 16). *Coercion and Intimidation of Child Soldiers to Participate in Violence*. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/news/2008/04/16/coercion-and-intimidation-child-soldiers-participate-violence>

Boko Haram, in particular, is notorious for drugging children before sending them on suicide missions²², tactics which as well could be used by the IS.

A relatively understudied pathway into terrorism is being born into a violent extremist family. Of the roughly 40,000 foreign IS members identified in Iraq and Syria, 12 percent were children under the age of 18. In total, at least 4,640 foreign minors have been identified as IS affiliates. More than 730 infants were born in the IS-controlled territory to foreign terrorist fighters between April 2013 and June 2018²³. Some estimates place the total number of children born in territory controlled by the IS as high as 5,000²⁴. In these instances, the family is the primary site of radicalization. The children of violent extremists may have a much higher attachment to ideology and require more exhaustive efforts to counter their indoctrination. Leaders' children may also serve important roles in terrorist organizations, contributing to the groups' longevity. For instance, Osama bin Laden's son, Hamza, is widely believed to be the future leader of al Qaeda²⁵. Even as we begin to grapple with the challenge posed by youth involvement in terrorism—and in particular, the thousands of children associated with IS—the long-term risks posed by children raised in violent extremist environments remain unclear.

While the exact number of people affiliated with the IS is unknown, according to information provided in the book “IS: The Land of Terror” by Stern and Berger, some foreign European terrorists who joined IS have risen to the top of this takfiri group. European terrorists were involved in the military and media structure of the IS. People who joined the IS from Europe had education and experience in areas such as media and cinema; hence they provided these experiences to the IS. An important part of increasing IS's operational, technical and tactical capabilities depends on European forces. In this way, for example, chemists can help the IS in the production or use of chemical weapons. On the other hand, those who have artistic and media expertise in the field of propaganda and extension put their expertise in the service of IS's media power [Stern & Berger 2015].

On the other hand, according to the statistics of a study center in the Great Britain, since the formation of the IS until 2018, about 13,000 Europeans have left for Syria and Iraq to join this terrorist group. A study by the International Center for the Study of Extremism at King's College London in July 2018 also shows that the IS foreign forces included 3,2809 men, 4,671 women and 4,640 children. Of

²² Trafficking of Pills Used by Suicide Bombers Soars in Sahel. *BBC*. (2017, December 12). Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-42326253>

²³ Cook, J., & Vale, G. (2018, July 23). From Daesh to 'Diaspora': Tracing the Women and Minors of the Islamic State. *International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation*. Retrieved from <https://icsr.info/2018/07/23/from-daesh-todiaspora-tracing-the-women-andminors-of-Islamic-state/>

²⁴ Chulov, M. (2017, October 07). Scorned and Stateless: Children of Isis Fighters Face an Uncertain Future. *Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/07/children-isis-fighters-syria-raqqa-orphans-uncertain-future>

²⁵ Schwartz, M.S. (2019, March 01). U.S. Offers \$1 Million for Info Leading to Son of Bin Laden. *National Public Radio*. Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/2019/03/01/699264405/u-s-offers-1-million-for-info-leading-to-son-of-bin-laden>

these, 7,252 from Eastern Europe and 5,904 from Western Europe joined IS. Meanwhile, about 850 people from the UK joined the IS. Researchers at the International Center for the Study of Extremism have found that at least 7,366 IS foreign troops have returned to their home countries, including 256 women and 1,180 children. Of these, 1,765 returned to Western Europe and 784 to Eastern Europe. However, of the 425 IS members who returned to Britain, only two women and four children were accepted²⁶.

It is not surprising therefore that the United Nations has expressed its “grave concern at the increase of foreign fighters joining the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant/Sham”. According to UN data, over 25,000 foreign citizens from more than 100 countries have joined the IS and other branches. The secretary general of the UN estimated, that there was an approximately 70 % increase in foreign terrorist fighters worldwide in the period between the mid-2014 and mid-2015 [El Ghamari 2017: 77].

After losing their capitals Mosul and Raqqa (in July and October 2017 respectively), the IS could no longer by any means be considered as a state. The people of the caliphate have mostly been killed, detained, deported or dispersed. A recent report showed that while 41,490 IS affiliates remain in Iraq and Syria; there are 7,366 returnees to their countries of departure²⁷. Though slower than expected, the flow of returnees still poses a challenge for the receiving countries.

Therefore, recently the problem of so-called returnees is one of the most significant concerns in the European countries. It attracted special attention in particular in Sweden. By the end of 2015, it was estimated that approximately 300 persons had travelled from Sweden to conflict areas in Syria and Iraq to fight for the IS²⁸. In a European perspective, Sweden has a relatively high percentage of the IS travelers per capita, only Belgium and Austria have more. Primarily young men between 18 and 30 have travelled from Europe to the caliphate (17 % of the European travelers are women)²⁹. A study from 2017 that included 267 travelers from Sweden to jihadi terrorist groups between June 2012 and September 2016 showed that 80% of the travelers were associated with IS, 76% were male, 75%

²⁶ *13,000 Europeans are members of ISIS. Hamshahri Online*. Retrieved October 05, 2020, from <https://www.hamshahrionline.ir/news/432804/%D8%B9%D8%B6%D9%88%DB%8C%D8%AA-%DB%B1%DB%B3%D9%87%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%B1.%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%BE%D8%A7%DB%8C%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%B4> (in Persian).

²⁷ Cook, J., & Vale, G. (2018, July 23). From Daesh to ‘Diaspora’: Tracing the Women and Minors of the Islamic State. *International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation*. Retrieved from <https://icsr.info/2018/07/23/from-daesh-to-diaspora-tracing-the-women-and-minors-of-islamic-state/>

²⁸ *Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq. The Soufan Group*. (2015, December). Retrieved from https://www.cvereferenceguide.org/sites/default/files/resources/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf

²⁹ Van Ginkel, B., & Entenmann, E. (2016, April). The foreign fighters phenomenon in the European Union: profiles, threats & policies. *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism*. DOI: 10.19165/2016.1.02

were Swedish citizens, and 34% were born in Sweden. It is estimated that 49 out of the 267 travelers died in battle³⁰.

As of 9 January 2017, approximately 150 returnees from the IS resided in Sweden³¹. Returnees have usually accumulated new knowledge and new contacts, lowered their violence threshold, and sometimes become status figures or role models for other violent extremists. While away, some of them have received military training, or carried out terrorist attacks. According to the Swedish Security Service, it is likely that many of these individuals will continue to operate in Sweden, in support activities or radicalization³². Even if the returnees are capable of conducting terrorist attacks, it is estimated that only a small number of them have an intention to commit a terrorist act in Sweden. Among those individuals who do constitute a terrorist threat in Sweden are not only returnees, but also individuals who have been radicalized without ever having left the country.

On 7 April 2017, Sweden was struck by a terrorist attack, when a stolen delivery truck was driven into crowds of shoppers along one of Stockholm's most popular pedestrian malls, a method clearly inspired by the modus operandi of the IS. The attack in Stockholm followed a trend in acts of terror in Europe during 2016, with attacks in Nice, Berlin, London, Brussels and Barcelona generating the most headlines. In all of these cases, the perpetrators expressed sympathy for the IS. Using open source information and a Wikipedia list of terrorist attacks linked to the IS, we have found that terrorist attacks that can be linked to the IS between January 2013 and September 2018 have killed at least 6,305 and injured 11,800 people. Suicide bombs were used in almost half of the attacks. Firearms are the second most commonly used tactic³³.

The threat from the IS in its current form is diverse and hard to predict. A UN report from August 2018 estimates that more than 20,000 members remain in Syria and Iraq. In eastern Syria, the IS has been able to hold on to territory in a few small towns and villages. However, most IS members are dispersed and embedded in different locations in the area. Certain IS facilities, such as Amaq news agency, continues to function. The prognosis offered by the UN is that what remains of the IS is likely to survive due to complex stabilization challenges in the area. Insecure environments are safe spaces for terrorists and the IS can easily obtain arms and

³⁰ Gustafsson, L., & Ranstorp, M. (June 15, 2017). *Swedish Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq: An Analysis of Open-Source Intelligence and Statistical Data*. Swedish Defence University. Retrieved from <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A1110355&dsid=771>

³¹ Karlsson, P. (2017, January 09). Säpo-chefen: Över 150-jihadister har återvänt until Sverige [Security Service Chief: Over 150 jihadis have returned to Sweden]. *Aftonbladet*. Retrieved from <https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/samhalle/a/g9PWJ/sapo-chefen-over-150-jihadister-har-atervant-till-sverige>

³² *Swedish Security Service annual report 2016*. Retrieved October 08, 2020, from https://www.securitas.com/globalassets/com/files/annual-reports/en/securitas_annual_report_2016.pdf

³³ Cohen, K., & Kaati, L. (2018, December 15). Digital Jihad Propaganda from the Islamic State. *Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI)*. Retrieved from file:///C:/Users/aus/AppData/Local/Temp/FOIR4645SE.pdf

materiel in areas with weak governance. It excels in the manufacture of improvised explosive devices and in the weaponization of drones³⁴.

When former IS fighters relocate, so does their expertise in military tactics and their skills in handling weaponry and explosive devices. An ICSR report from February 2018 states that while the return of foreign fighters will not likely lead to an increase of terrorist plots, it will increase the complexity of such plots. So far, less than a fifth of all known jihadist plots in Europe have been planned by returnees. Most have been untrained lone offenders using crude methods, such as knives or vehicles. With the advent of IS-trained jihadists, there is a fear of a professionalization of worldwide Jihadi terrorism. The coordinated attacks in Paris in November 2015³⁵ and in Brussels in March 2016 were planned and executed by returnees, while the simpler knife-and-vehicle plots have been executed by individuals without training or expertise. In early 2018, authorities in Europe remained concerned about this more advanced terrorist threat³⁶.

In the last three months of 2017, the IS official online strategic communication capabilities were decimated, leading to a notable decline of propaganda distribution [Winter & Ingram 2018]. While it slightly recovered during the first months of 2018, it reached an all-time low by June 2018. However, some IS' propaganda bureaus outside of Iraq and Syria have increased their production in 2018³⁷. "The IS still continues to use social media to urge its supporters in Europe to execute attacks in their country of residence. The 2018 FIFA World Cup became a focus for propaganda urging lone individuals or small cells to carry out attacks. The IS continues to disseminate various attack methodologies, as well as instructions for creating bombs and explosive vests. The recent trend has been away from directed and enabled attacks towards inspired attacks"³⁸.

Conclusion

The focus of this article has been to research the IS' use of Internet propaganda to gain followers worldwide and in the European countries, in particular. Their digital prowess has been a crucial part of their success in gaining a global network

³⁴ UN. Seventh report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to international peace and security and the range of United Nations efforts in support of Member States in countering the threat. (2018, August 16). *United Nations*. Retrieved from file:///C:/Users/aus/AppData/Local/Temp/S_2018_770-EN.pdf

³⁵ Neumann, P. (2018, February 16). ISIS and Terrorism in Europe: What next? *ICSR*. Retrieved from <https://icsr.info/2018/02/16/isis-terrorism-europe-next/>

³⁶ Renard, T., & Coolsaet, R. (2018, March 22). How Belgium Overcame the Threat from Returning Terrorist Fighters. *Egmont Commentary*. Retrieved from http://aci.pitt.edu/97523/1/how_belgium.pdf

³⁷ Milton, D. (2018, July). Down, but Not Out: An Updated examination of the Islamic State's Visual Propaganda. In *Combating Terrorism Centre at West Point*. Retrieved from <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Down-But-Not-Out.pdf>

³⁸ UN. Seventh report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to international peace and security and the range of United Nations efforts in support of Member States in countering the threat. *United Nations*. (2018, August 16). Retrieved from file:///C:/Users/aus/AppData/Local/Temp/S_2018_770-EN.pdf

of followers. The IS lured European youth to the terrorist group through deceptive propaganda on media and virtual networks such as YouTube, Telegram, Instagram and Twitter. A decline of IS propaganda distribution was noted during the final three months of 2017, after the great territorial losses during which several key media contributors were also presumably killed. A partial recovery of the propaganda production was noted in early 2018, but by June 2018, it reached an all-time low. However, the IS' propaganda bureaus outside of Iraq and Syria have increased their activity in 2018. Meanwhile, the number of IS-related terror attacks have plummeted during 2018. Between 2015 and 2017 the IS carried out on average 21 attacks per year, whereas they have only carried out four in 2018 (by September). Yet, the number of averting attacks remained on a steady level showing that IS intention of committing terror attacks has not waned at all.

Since 2014, the IS has been posting content on the Internet to potential terrorist fighters and using social media to attract recruits into its ranks. Once they have entered into correspondence, IS recruiters and accomplices are rapidly switching to various encrypted applications, making it difficult to trace and analyze these types of contacts in the countries of residence of the persons they are trying to recruit. In Europe, the IS uses its Internet presence to encourage supporters to launch attacks in their home countries. Although the IS presence in the Middle East, especially in Syria and Iraq, is now declining, small groups of their associates operate in Afghanistan and the Central Asian countries closer to the Russian borders. This means that the IS' ideology has not yet disappeared and they are trying to form more cohesive groups through social networks to attract more forces. In this regard, many members of the IS originating from the European countries have returned to their homeland and their places of activity in cyberspace are many and may create security concerns both in cyberspace and in reality, worldwide in the near future. In this case, governments must make coherent efforts to confront IS' attempts to attract its citizens in the field of media and propaganda.

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