IS and the Jihadist Information Highway – Projecting Influence and Religious Identity via Telegram

by Nico Prucha

Abstract

Groups such as al-Qaida (AQ) have pursued spectacular attacks to garner media attention and popularize their cause. What is often not noted, however, is that for those who submit themselves to the religious thinking of al-Qaida – and nowadays the self-designated "Islamic State" (IS) – the militant struggle is intertwined with the duty to call upon others to join the movement (da'wa). For jihadists da'wa is obligatory. While AQ's central organization pioneered the use of bulletin forums, blogs, YouTube and to some extent Facebook, for this and other purposes, it was its Syrian branch, Jabhat al-Nusra, that in 2012 pushed effectively into Twitter use. AQ lost its momentum as the social media pioneer of jihadism shortly thereafter to IS. Since 2013, IS has taken the use of social media da'wa and other activities to the next level. From that point onward IS has very effectively projected influence on Twitter on a massive scale, reaching a global audience. Since early 2016, however, IS's networks on Twitter have been degraded by various counter-measures, but the group has reconfigured and shifted to a new social media outlet: Telegram. This application has become the most important information outlet for IS and has been used to recruit and guide attackers in Europe. This article takes a closer look at what Telegram is, and how IS uses it for different purposes: not only operationally, but also for identity building.

Keywords: Al-Qaida; Islamic State; Jihadism; Internet; social media; Telegram; recruitment

> *"The battle for your reality begins in the fields of digital interaction"*
>
> - Douglas Rushkoff "Cyberia"[1]

Introduction

Sunni extremist groups such as al-Qaida (AQ) and the self-proclaimed "Islamic State" (IS) use the Internet as a communication hub to broadcast their messages. Online jihad is a phenomenon that has spread on a massive scale and at fast pace over the past fifteen years. IS in particular puts much effort into its online operation, including maintaining and re-establishing accounts and networks on *Twitter*, *Facebook*, *YouTube*, and *Telegram*. Massive amounts of jihadist audio, video and written content can be found on these networks, mostly in Arabic.

IS has moved from *Twitter* to *Telegram*, after a mass amount of account suspensions and more effective spam filters limited the group's appearance on *Twitter*. However, the move to *Telegram* allows IS to operate from the "dark web"[2] and orchestrate media raids and sting attacks into the "surface web", such as *Twitter* and *Facebook*. Several hundred IS channels on *Telegram* ensure that the content, the videos and writings, of IS are disseminated without much interruption. Among the many messages IS sends, the notion of being a "state" is one of the most appealing ones, as outlined in Jacob Sheikh's contribution in this Special Issue of *Perspectives on Terrorism*.

This content conveys a coherent jihadist worldview, based on theological texts written by AQ ideologues and affiliates as far back as the 1980s. The jihadists' need for spreading theological writings has driven the development of audio-visual productions since the 1980s. A main purpose, back then as well as today, has been identity building: to explain who the "*mujahidin*" are, what they are fighting for, and whom they are fighting against. It is important to stress, that no single political narrative and enemy perception exists among the militants. Rather, groups such as AQ and IS enforce a coherent theology, that constitutes the foundation of what is often referred to as "ideology" in Western discourse, as outlined by Rüdiger Lohlker:

> *"Indeed, it is crystal clear—to virtually anyone who has the linguistic capacity to grasp and the opportunity to witness what jihadists are actually saying, writing and doing, both online and offline—that religion matters."[3]*

Following 9/11, the Internet became an important platform for AQ to spread its brand of Sunni extremist theology. The online media footprint today is built upon nearly two decades of committed media work by jihadist actors. This dedicated work has been, and is, the expression of a strategic discourse on how to conduct jihadist warfare online, and has been outlined in a highly coherent manner by leading jihadist theoreticians such as Abu Mus'ab al-Suri.[4] This theology, carved out by AQ in the 1980s, entered a new evolutionary phase in 2014 when ISIS declared a "Caliphate."[5] This AQ offshoot then became the central organization's primary rival, developing a massive foothold on social media sites, first Twitter[6], now Telegram, while AQ has been losing significant support, both online and offline,–especially among young extremists.[7] AQ has retained ideological seniority, projected by senior jihadist scholars (*shuyukh al-jihad*), such as Abu Qatada al-Filistini, or Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, who criticized IS' declaration of an Islamic state and, for example, lambasted the group for the burning of the captured Jordanian combat pilot in 2015. [8] IS on the other hand has managed to translate territorial control and governance into a coherent, highly professional and structured online output. IS uses AQ's theology for two ends: (i) applied theology: what AQ theorized on paper, IS puts into practice and films it (this is documented by the vast amount of videos released throughout the past three years), and (ii) either re-publishing AQ theological writings (lengthy books, articles, religious guidelines, legal binding documents (*fatwas*), military handbooks etc.), or simply releasing a second, or third edition of an AQ book.

Jihadist videos are a powerful tool – even more so when originating from within territory that is defined as "Islamic". This definition is exemplified in IS videos which, for example, claim to document the application of sharia law, and the enforcement of a life-style in the society under its control that has been romanticized in salafi and salafi-jihadist writings. The massive production and release of videos on *Twitter* in the period 2013-2015 was truly a game changer, as acknowledged by one *Ahrar al-Sham* sympathizer on Twitter:

> *"#dangers on the path of jihad; my knowledge on jihad is based on professionally produced jihadist videos affecting the youth more than a thousand books or [religious] sermons."[9]*

This let Abu al-Jamajem (Sam Heller, @AbuJamajem) to comment: "Analog jihadists in *Ahrar al-Sham* and *Jabhat al-Nusra* lament ISIS's new, digital world."

Under Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, IS[10] adopted al-Qaida's iconography and doctrine, without being subject to its formal leadership.[11] The Internet serves as a powerful tool that allows the jihadist network to morph and spread in many directions. IS dedicates time and resources to maintain a persistent output of videos and other items – with *Telegram* being the primary hub to strategically dispatch new content since early 2016.

Strategic Targeting of Selected Audiences Using Foreign Fighters

Cameras are the most effective gateways between real-life and the virtual world. AQ initiated – and theologically sanctioned – using the Internet as a basic tool to call people to come to Islam. This is inseparably tied to militant actions and terrorist operations. IS has learned valuable lessons in using and praising the media work and understands how to use its foreign fighters best: in front of cameras instead of just using them as mere cannon fodder in the front lines. Non-Arab foreign fighters do not, however, appear very often in videos on social media. When they do, they usually convey their individual and personal motivation as to why they have joined IS, explaining in their own words and language to potential recruits in their home countries what "real-Islam" is, while often addressing legitimate and real grievances and injustices endured by Sunni civilians in Syria or other places.

IS has taken the lead in producing mainly Arabic language videos to incite a global Arab audience. IS does so by glamourizing its fighters, ideologues and preachers as ultimate role models, modern-day Islamic warriors, or simply as defenders of Sunni communities in times of suffering. IS presents itself as an Arab movement fighting for independence, yet welcoming non-Arab Muslim foreign fighters into their ranks who are used strategically and on a tactical level for jihadist media, where they can be of value to the state-building efforts. Non-Arab media activists from within the "Caliphate" can call for attacks in their home countries in their respective language or slang and may become guides grooming potential attackers on applications such as *Telegram*.

It must be noted that non-Arab foreign fighters fulfil another role under the guidance of IS media strategists: talking about personal commitment and motivations for having undertaken the emigration (*hijra*) to the "Islamic State" gives such speakers the ability to inspire others to emigrate. Non-Arab foreign fighters tend to be keen to explain in their language aspects of jihadist theology, potentially drawing their audience into reading magazines such as Dabiq to further their education on religious concepts such as "*tawhid*" (monotheism) or "*shirk*" (polytheism).

Influence and Information Campaigns: from Twitter to Telegram

The theology of al-Qaida and subsequently IS, and their ability to propagate that theology as a monopoly of truth through professional promotion and marketing materials disseminated via modern communication technology–has proven to be jihadism's most resilient foundation, and greatest innovation. This jihadist media activism strengthens the movement's resilience on a daily basis with new audio-visual and written propaganda uploaded from a number of conflict zones, in numerous languages, to a wide range of online social platforms and multimedia channels.

In the West, policy makers are struggling to cope with the massive quantity and often times high quality productions issued by groups such IS who continue to draw in new recruits from Western societies, especially from Europe. Policy-makers have slowly recognized that the so-called "counter narratives" are failing, as highlighter by *New York Times* in 2015.[12] IS has proven its resilience on the battlefield and the West has so far employed half-hearted "counter-narratives", that usually neither touch upon the Arabic propaganda content, nor the messages conveyed by non-Arab foreign fighters, who explain their reasons for joining the cause in their own words. Due to the tactical focus of both "counter-narratives" and takedowns of IS messages from the Internet, the U.S. and its Western allies are being drawn into open online warfare, on a battlefield chosen by their jihadist adversaries. Those jihadists who will probably thrive in the resulting chaos. The ideology/theology of IS, offering a coherent worldview, while IS had been gaining and consolidating territory, has proven time and again to be resilient on all layers on the Internet.[13]

From 2011 onwards, the main platform for Sunni jihadists online was *Twitter*, in addition to *Facebook* and *YouTube*, especially since the outbreak of violence in Syria. This propagation effort by the so-called "*media mujahidin*" has been approved and sanctioned by the movement's leaders, and now feeds an interconnected jihadist Zeitgeist.[14] For example, jihadist groups had been using *Twitter* to disseminate links to video content shot on the battlefield in Syria and posted such video footage for mass consumption on *YouTube*. [15] Since 2011, members of jihadist forums have issued media strategy advice that encourages the development of *media mujahidin*. This has been accompanied by the release of guides on how to use social media platforms, which often included lists of recommended accounts to follow.[16] With relatively small efforts, IS was able to maintain massive networks on *Twitter*. This gave the media operations a whole new and unprecedented window of opportunity: the releasing of videos from within what is defined as "Islamic territory", liberated from their enemies, to a massive number of active or passive followers.[17]

Twitter did, after a while, an excellent job in preventing IS from keeping up its extensive networks on the service, despite the commitment and dedication of some of the media mujahidin to re-open hundreds of new accounts. This too changed when *Twitter* became more effective at banning IS content by adjusting its spam settings, severely weakening the jihadists' network on the platform. The degrading of IS *Twitter* networks led many Western observers on Twitter to believe IS in general was in decline. However, while the '*Twitter* ship' was sinking for IS, the jihadi online swarm simply turned to a new social media platform – *Telegram*.

In early 2016 a massive shift from *Twitter* to *Telegram* among IS militants and sympathizers could be observed. Until then IS had been able to maintain a persistent network on *Twitter*, despite a steadily growing rate of account suspensions. Because *media mujahidin* are highly dedicated – as much as *mujahidin* are on the battlefield – IS *Twitter* users usually reappeared on the platform, using a different account once their original account had been banned. From a user perspective, all you needed to be aware of was a good set of Arabic and non-Arabic key words 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 returned.

Substituting the Jihadist Twittersphere for Islamic State Telegrams

Telegram offers privacy and encryption, allowing users to interact, using their mobile devices (tablets and smartphones) as well as laptop and desktop computers. It offers a secure environment where sharing content is very easy. This includes the option to download large files directly via the *Telegram* application instead of having to open an external link in a browser to access the new videos and word documents. According to *Telegram*, the application is a cloud-based instant messaging service, providing optional end-to-end-encrypted messaging. It is free and open, having an "open API and protocol free for everyone," while having no limits on how much data individual users can share.[18]

Media savvy IS members and sympathizers then took to *Telegram* where in the meantime, via hundreds of channels, often more than 30,000 *Telegram* messages are being pushed out by them each week. *Telegram* is being used to share content produced by 'official' IS channels. As had been the case on *Twitter* – and as is the nature of online jihad on social media sites – such content is enriched and enhanced by media supporters from within ISIS held territory, as well as by sympathisers worldwide. The output is mainly in Arabic whereas dedicated linguist and translation departments ensure that a global audience is reached. *Telegram* is being used as a formal communication channel by a range of content aggregators within the movement, rolling out the official IS videos from the various provinces to Microsoft Word and PDF documents released by a rich blend of media agencies, such as *al-Battar*, *al-Wafa'*, *Ashhad*, *al-Hayyat* and many more.

A media group by the name *Horizon* (*Mu'assassat Afaaq*) established itself as a new IS media wing to provide sympathisers with advice and tutorials on online security and encryption. This is a current trend and highlights that user security on mobile devices, encryption and general awareness is rising. Arguably, this chatter on *Telegram* also led 'classic' IS media newspapers to pick up this trend and their messaging put more emphasis on the "electronic war", enemy capabilities and operational security, accompanied by relevant advice for IS members and sympathizers.[19]

Arabic transcribed keywords in Latin such as "*ghazwa*" play a major role, and help identify content quickly and sign up for new jihadist related channels on *Telegram*. As visualized above – taken from the IS channel *Ghazwa* on Telegram, the transliteration can vary especially after channels are being suspended, yet the words are easily identified by Arabic-speakers.

The "*Ghazwa*" channel on *Telegram* alludes to the classical understanding of conducting raids in the desert. It celebrates the early Muslims raiders, being *murabitin,* horsemen ready for war while spiritually tuned to defend territory and willing to enter Paradise.[20]

Jihadists perceive *Telegram* as a coordination point for raids (*ghazawat*), enabling the injection of content in an orchestrated manner onto social media platforms. *Telegram* is central to the supply of text for *Tweets*, disseminating new hashtags, the timing of such raids, and the flooding of comments on *Facebook* pages and so on. However, IS media operatives and sympathizers miss *Twitter*. IS official media outlets has called for a return to *Twitter* – fearing that da'wa on *Telegram* just reaching like-minded sympathizers will not work (more on this below).[21]
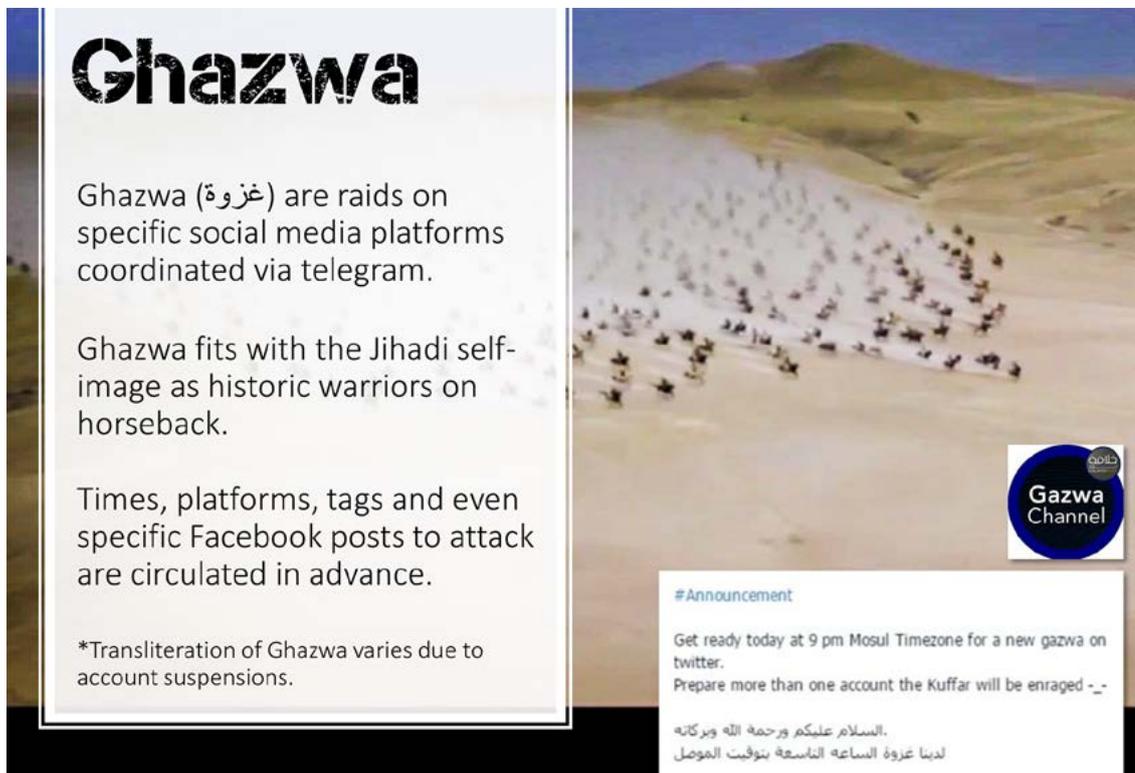

Figure 1: Sunni Jihadists, and in particular IS, have a passion for publishing and disseminating pictures, conveying coded notions and sentiments. The "Ghazwa" channel on Telegram sees itself in the tradition of the classical horseback charging 'hit-and-run' warriors, independent of a fixed base or camp.

During the attacks in March 2016 in Brussels, IS media operatives on *Telegram* prepared French language Tweets with hashtags used at the time of the attack to maximize the reach of pro-IS Tweets. Likewise, other social media platforms are affected by such "social media raids." By the time accounts were deleted on *Twitter* and elsewhere, IS had a new event-driven operation backed by social media raids. While the attacks in Paris and Brussels were major external events, most IS-driven and mediatized events are occurring in the Arab countries. A day before the November 2015 Paris attack, IS had dispatched suicide bombers to strike in Beirut, followed by social media raids. Since the beginning of the Iraqi Army operations to reclaim Mosul from IS on October 16, 2016, most event driven media raids are related thereto. As had been the case on *Twitter*, *Telegram* is now the main hub for IS to share content reposting from *Twitter*, other social media such as *YouTube*, *Vimeo*, *DailyMotion*, *SendVid* and *Facebook*, as well as websites containing IS propaganda, including those hosted on *WordPress.com*.

The multi-lingual strategic outreach and communication approach has a clear objective: targeting non-Arabic speaking potential recruits in the West. This remains a high priority for IS, while also maintaining and ensuring the steady and uninterrupted production and dissemination of Arabic content (targeting Arab native speakers worldwide).
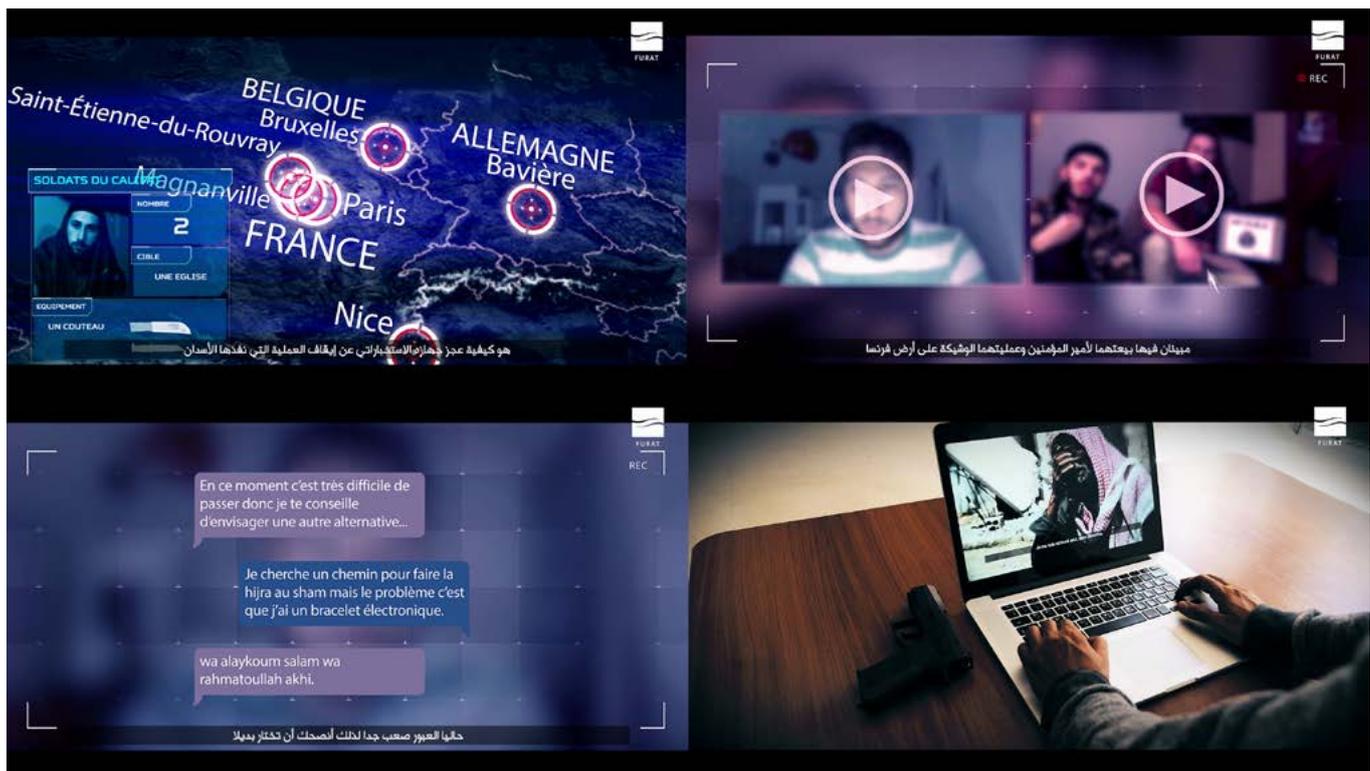
Figure 2: Multi-dimension outreach strategy: orchestrating an influence operation during the March 2016 Brussels attack, calling for a "Twitter Campaign". French-language pro-IS tweets to be copiedy-and-pasted onto Twitter accounts that will be abandoned shortly aftewardsr, using French mainstream hashtags to inject pro-IS messages into general networks. This method is also used to ensure content moves from Telegram where it is only visible to channel members onto open platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, or blogs such as WordPress.

How Does IS Use the Platform to Recruit European Foreign Fighters and Terrorists?

Throughout the Summer of 2016, alleged "lone wolf" attackers struck in France, Germany, Russia[22] and the U.S. The attackers acted on behalf of IS and in most cases selfie-styled videos had been made and uploaded by them to IS media operatives of *Amaq Agency* (*wakalat al-'Amaq*). The short videos followed a classical Jihadist template, with the variation that these had not been foreign fighters, but rather local French, American, Chechen citizens, or as in the case of Germany, refugees from Syria or Afghanistan.

Omar Mateen, U.S. citizen born in America, attacked a night club in Orland, Florida in June 2016, leaving 49 people dead and 53 injured.[23] Jihadist users on *Telegram* were quick to disseminate pictures of Omar Mateen – after these had been released by the mainstream media – to praise the attacker as a martyr and "soldier of the Caliphate." A trend on *Telegram* quickly emerged to refer to such attacks under the hashtag "in your homes", a reference to the jihadist division of world into "*dar al-Islam*" (abode of Islam) and "*dar al-kuffar*" (abode of disbelievers).

As French, American and other anti-IS coalition combat aircraft continue to bomb the "*dar al-Islam*", IS seeks to inspire and theologically guide supporters such as Omar Mateen to conduct revenge operations in the "depth of your abodes" (*fi 'aqr diyarikum*), as the Arabic hashtag for "in your homes" advocates. Whatever the jihadists produce for publication, it always must be theologically coherent. The concept of *dar* (abode) is an identity marker for the Islamic State.

According to IS, "Islam" has been restored and is now embodied by its "state".[24] IS presents itself as the only legitimate zone where Sunni Muslims can exercise their duties towards God since

> "….the whole world, from east to west, became dar al-kufr, the "abode of the disbelievers". Therefore God set in motion the establishment of the Islamic State. This state consists of numerous elements that make it dar al-Islam."[25]

The Syrian refugee who failed undertaking a suicide bombing attack in Ansbach, Germany, as well as the Afghan refugee who at random stabbed passengers on train in the region of Würzburg had filmed their final statements beforehand. These statements are – just like the 9/11 "martyr's" videotaped farewell message or the 7/7/ bombing attackers last words – testimony (*wasiyya*) as much as legacy. Clearly IS pursues a strategy of seeking to recruit refugees, or dispatching sleeper cells posing as refugees coming to Europe, knowing this results in an increase of polarization within Western societies.

Allegedly, *Telegram* was used to communicate from within the 'Caliphate' with at least some of the attackers, who then in turn used the app to upload their self-filmed *wasiyya*. This video was then edited and branded with the *Amaq* logo and released to the IS *Telegram* community with the intention that the swarm would fan it out to other online sites and platforms for maximum visibility.

The value of continuing its successful influence operation has driven IS on *Telegram* to dedicate media channels and media operatives to translating and producing new content for specific French, German, Italian, English, Russian, and Bahasa Indonesian audiences.

Figure 3: Screenshots of the video highlighting attacks, assailants and encrypted communication on Telegram.

This has led to a two-tier production line: (i) official and (ii) user generated content. Together, these packages carry a range of messages which focus on the importance of the individual to initiate action. They echo the ethos captured in the 'Open Source Jihad' as set by AQ's English language magazine *Inspire*, where barriers

to entry are low and anyone can contribute. For example, they encourage individuals to realise that not all attacks have to be complex coordinated operations, nor use sophisticated weaponry, nor focus on a specific high profile target. Instead they articulate that anyone can strike a blow for IS.

On November 26, 2016, IS released a video in French with Arabic subtitles. The video was published *Furat Media*–a dedicated IS-media institution that produces content for non-Arab(ic) audience. As usual, the video is in 16:9 format, full high definition, and features praise for the spate of "lone wolf" attackers in 2016. The film, entitled "Sur leur pas" and على خطاهم in Arabic, demonstrates vividly how IS uses *Telegram* to instigate attacks.

Assailants are introduced and areas of attacks highlighted. Combined with mainstream media footage of completed attacks, IS portrays these as revenge operations and part of the Islamic State's 'foreign policy.' *Telegram* chat exchanges claim to 'document' that some aspiring IS fighters had expressed the wish to conduct the *hijra* (emigration) and join IS, but had been warned this was too dangerous. Instead, they may have been swayed to launch attacks in their home countries rather than risking arrest while seeking to emigrate. The video concludes with a young man watching an IS video on his laptop. His gun rests besides his laptop, suggesting he is ready to stage an attack as revenge for the many atrocities against Sunni Muslims, he has just been lectured about via the laptop.

IS's Criticism of Telegram Usage: "Supporters of the Caliphate - Do not Isolate Yourself on Telegram!"

A brief, 2-page document, published by *al-Wafa'* (devotion, faithfulness) Media, one of IS's media groups, in charge of releasing text documents of various kinds, warns the online community of IS supporters against the risk of becoming isolated on *Telegram*. This would be a strategic error, it argues, and in direct violation of the Sunni extremist' obligatory proselytization on the Internet, that has proven to be a vital factor for IS to project influence, incite terrorism, and recruit worldwide.

The document is entitled "supporters (*ansar*) of the Caliphate: do not isolate yourself on *Telegram*", released on July 3, 2016, and authored by Abu Usama Sinan al-Ghazzi, a regular contributor and representative of the media outlet's views. His chosen *nom de guerre* suggests a link to Gaza, Palestine. According to al-Ghazzi, IS maintains its grip on physical territory and holds power to project influence despite a global alliance to destroy the jihadists' project of building and up keeping an Islamic state. However, the "state-*da'wa*" must be upheld; and al-Ghazzi criticizes the shift to *Telegram*, maintaining that the outreach to new customers is absolutely degraded in comparison to open content sharing networks on *Twitter*.

Jihadist media strategies are coherently implemented while the online networks reconfigure all the time like a flock of bees or a swarm, and have proven to be resilient.[26] This is outlined by al-Ghazzi as:

> "The disbelievers (...) are confronted in their media war by an army of [IS] supporters who dedicate their time for the defense of the people of jihad."[27]

This "defense" or "protection" includes refuting the 'lies' of enemies and, in particular, to clarify what are genuine jihadist media materials and maintaining the dissemination of legitimate statements. The response of the enemies merely consists of

> "campaigns to delete and shut down thousands and thousands of accounts on social media platforms, in an attempt to dissuade the supporters of the IS in their mission and of what has been set in motion by them. However, the supporters of the Caliphate are resisting online, following the fashion and example of how their state resists on the front lines of the global war unleashed against them; and all praise is for God."[28]

The move to social media in the wake of the conflict in Syria and, in particular, the subsequent IS media operations on *Twitter* are one of the most remarkable developments of the online jihad in the past decade.

Against this background, al-Ghazzi defines the objective of the enemies as:

> "….causing problems for the supporters of the Caliphate on social media platforms is one of the most important desires for the Crusaders to achieve. This is the filet [sic] for [the enemy] media [strategies] and the analysts when they stress to counter and address this issue. This is their objective for which they wish to achieve sufficient account take down and removal operations, without an end in sight."[29]

This statement reflects the current reality of IS media supporters and dedicated media operatives, in particular on *Twitter*, where accounts are often removed. This has, however, not significantly diminished or interrupted the broadcasting of IS videos and writings. On *Twitter*, however, IS sympathizers and supporters have to be somewhat more proactive these days to look up current IS-related and trending hash tags, or check out 'surviving' accounts to find and follow the new ones. Often IS content is now to be found in a pool of anti-IS materials and the consumer has to search to find what he or she is looking for. *Telegram,* on the other hand, gives IS the ability to organize 'media stings' and push messages and external links to websites and file-hosting sites of online platforms. This is part of the IS response to al-Ghazzi's criticism against remaining comfortable, but secluded on *Telegram*, rather than returning to seek the momentum to reach out, incite and inspire new potential recruits.

Hence the war for the hearts and minds, as outlined by al-Ghazzi, is not just militarily between in the physical space in Syria and Iraq, but also online:

> "In this electronic war between the supporters and the Crusaders, lots of our brothers prefer Telegram over anything else. With the desertion of the remaining social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to Telegram, obviously due to … account removal operations…, Telegram is furthermore set to resist deletions as channels get forwarded easily to private channels. Therefore I wish to send a message to the brothers of the ansar to the effect that you do not isolate yourself on Telegram! The Telegram application despite all its positivity has also a number of downsides. It is a closed group and reserved to the administrator of the channel; the app does not allow users to actively search for channels; you can only access a channel via a link provided by the channel admin."[30]

The secrecy and encryption of *Telegram* is harmful for IS' swarming operations as the networks which are sustained on *Telegram* lack the outreach as well as the opportunities for projecting influence, which *Twitter* in particular allowed. To avoid marginalization and simple in-house-recruitment or indoctrination, al-Ghazzi demands a return to the 'classical' social media platforms.

> "Return to Twitter and Facebook, for our missionary operations (da'wa) have greater reach on these platforms. Those we intend to reach [and influence] are not on Telegram, rather we find them on Twitter and Facebook."

This can be seen as a direct order and perhaps as a reconfiguration of IS media networks: use Telegram as a safe haven or fall back position from where new *Twitter* and *Facebook* accounts are published and bring the content you get on *Telegram* back in full to *Twitter* and *Facebook*. The mission is to incite and recruit new members–not those who are already initiated and thus active within the *Telegram* networks.

Conclusion

Unlike AQ, IS controls swathes of territory in the Sunni Arab heartlands, primarily in Iraq and Syria. The theology which was largely theoretical in the case of AQ is now applied in full by IS – making the "state" a real and, to IS-sympathizers, attractive alternative where the imaginary "real-Islam" promoted by AQ has now become a reality with IS. Sunni extremism is driven by an absolute belief in God for which the application of absolute formalized religious rule is the desired final objective (and the only solution to minimize the risk

of living in a state of sin, which would mean ending up in hellfire). For more than three decades, jihadists, in their own words, both in their writings and in their video productions, have been yearning for the creation of an Islamic State and, ultimately, the return of the Caliphate. The self-designated "Islamic State" claims to answer to this desire for the restoration of Islam to a position of power.

The existence of a coherent set of powerful jihadist narratives, combined with the unprecedented achievement of the Islamic State to ensure a persistent presence on social media and the Internet in general, make the task of effectively countering IS a big challenge. Any approach taken needs to combine hard and soft measures (counter-terrorism and counter-narratives). Improving nascent efforts at producing counter-narratives can be one step in the right direction in the soft-power domain. These efforts need to engage in religious discourses, as religion is one of the central elements in IS' efforts to recruit and radicalize its potential followers. Unless the religious dimension is properly acknowledged and addressed, the legacy of IS will not die with the fall of the territorial Caliphate that is now under attack from coalition forces. As also highlighted in Jakob Sheikh's contribution to this Special Issue of *Perspectives on Terrorism*, the idea of an Islamic State, is rooted in a broad Sunni jihadist tradition that has been gaining strength for more than 35 years and has become a major pull-factor for militant recruitment.

Neglecting the fact that jihadist online networks are forming a whole as they are basing themselves on a coherent theological framework will allow IS to survive a recover even after territorial extinction. In the words of Rüdiger Lohlker: "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 organized force, such as the Islamic State, may be destroyed on the ground."[31]

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Notes

[1] Douglas Rushkoff, *Cyberia: Life in the Trenches of Hyperspace*. New York: Harpercollins Publishers, 1995 (reprint).

[2] The name "dark web" is often used to refer to the part of the Internet which is neither indexed nor visible by search engines such as Google and not accessible by using standard browsers such as Microsoft Edge or Apple's Safari. Most dark websites are part of the onion network, can only be accessed using the Tor Browser which provides a high degree of anonymity to users to access websites in general. Andy Greenberg, "Hacker Lexicon: What is the Dark Web?" *Wired*, September 19, 2014; URL: https://www.wired.com/2014/11/hacker-lexicon-whats-dark-web/

[3] Rüdiger Lohlker, "Why Theology Matters – The Case of ISIS," *Strategic Review,* July –September 2016; URL: http://sr-indonesia.com/in-the-journal/view/europe-s-misunderstanding-of-islam-and-isis

[4] Brynjar Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of Al Qaeda Strategist Abu Mus'ab Al-Suri*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.

[5] "Statement regarding the Relationship of the Qa'idat al-Jihad group to ISIS," (in Arabic) *Markaz al-Fajr li-l I'lam*; URL*:* https://alfidaa.info/vb/showthread.php?t=92927 (accessed February 2, 2014). Al-Qaida Central issued this statement distancing themselves from *the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham* after the refusal of ISIS' leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to pledge allegiance (*bay'a*) to AQ-*amir* Ayman al-Zawahiri. As a consequence, the Syrian revolution against al-Assad was further divided with various 'rebel' factions turning on each other – including *Jabhat al-Nusra*, the official branch of AQ turning on ISIS and vice versa. The clash – or *fitna* (tribulation) – between ISIS and *Jabhat al-Nusra* as well as other factions is the manifestation of two torrents: the claim of seniority posed by AQ and its Syrian franchise *Jabhat al-Nusra* versus the practicality of the "Islamic State" which advanced what AQ pledged to fight for: the establishment of a Caliphate. Joas Wagemakers refers to ISIS as the *Zarqawiyyun*, practical military orientated individuals who seek to implement their principles of faith by brute force versus the *Maqdisiyyun*, adherents of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi who criticized the "Islamic State" for its apparent rapid move in declaring a Caliphate. For further reading: Joas Wagemakers, *A Quietist Jihadi – The Ideology and Influence of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.–Cole Bunzel referred to this rift in these terms: "….two tendencies predominate among jihadists insofar as the Syrian war is concerned: one favoring the al-Qaida-affiliated *Jabhat al-Nusra* and cooperation with all rebel groups, and another favoring ISIS and its exclusionary political designs as the reborn Islamic state, or proto-caliphate." Cole Bunzel. "The Islamic State of Disunity: Jihadism Divided." *Jihadica*, January 30, 2014; URL: http://www.jihadica.com/the-islamic-state-of-disunity-jihadism-divided/. See also: Khalil Ezzeldeen and Nico Prucha. "Relationship between ISIL and local Syrian rebels break down," *IHS Jane's Islamic Affairs Analyst*, Islamic World Web Watch, April 2014.URL: http://magazines.ihs.com/IHSJanesIslamicAffairsAnalystProducts/

[6] Ali Fisher. "How Jihadist Networks Maintain a Persistent Presence Online," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 9, No. 3, July 2015 ; URL: http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/426.

[7] *Jabhat al-Nusra (JN)*, the Syrian AQ affiliate was first to use *Twitter* on a noticeable scale and facilitated the social media platform to disseminate propaganda videos and writings. The JN-IS divide caused JN to lose members, fighters, and media activists to the "Islamic State"; see Nico Prucha and Ali Fisher. "Tweeting for the Caliphate – Twitter as the New Frontier for Jihadist Propaganda," *CTC Sentinel,* June 2013; URL: http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/tweeting-for-the-caliphate-twitter-as-the-new-frontier-for-jihadist-propaganda.

[8] Abu Qatada al-Filistini, "radd khilafa daesh (thiyyab al-khilafa), isaba al-ijram fi al-Iraq wa-l Sham, Juli 11, 2014; URL: https://da3ich.wordpress.com/2014/07/11/%D8%B1%D8%AF-%D8%A3%D8%A8%D9%8A-%D9%82%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%B7%D9%8A%D9%86%D9%8A-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%AE%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%A9-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%B4/; Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, "risala al-Maqdisi li-l Baghdadi hawl al-Kasasiba, al-Ghad al-Urduni, February 7, 2015; URL: http://www.alghad.com/articles/852017-%D9%86%D8%B5-%D8%B1%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%82%D8%AF%D8%B3%D9%8A-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%BA%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%8A-%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A8%D8%A9

[9] Khalid Abu Anas (@khaled852111), October 10, 2015. All Arabic translations by author (N. Prucha).

[10] At that time the "Islamic State" referred to itself as *dawlat al-Islamiyya fi l-'Iraq wa-l Sham* (ISIS), then shortened its name after the declaration of the Caliphate to IS or *dawlat al-khilafa*.

[11] See Cole Bunzel, "The Islamic State of Disobedience: al-Baghdadi Triumphant," *Jihadica*, October 5, 2013; URL: http://www.jihadica.com/the-islamic-state-of-disobedience-al-baghdadis-defiance/.

[12] Mark Mazzetti and Michael R. Gordon, "ISIS is Winning the Social Media War, U.S. Concludes," *New York Times*, June 13, 2015 ; URL: http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/13/world/middleeast/isis-is-winning-message-war-us-concludes.html?_r=0

[13] Ali Fisher and Nico Prucha, "ISIS is Winning the Online Jihad Against the West," *The Daily Beast*, October 1, 2014; URL: http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/10/01/isis-is-winning-the-online-jihad-against-the-west.html

[14] *Al-Manhajiyya fi tahsil al-khibra al-i'lamiyya,* Mu'assasat al-Furqan & Markaz al-Yaqin, part 1," Markaz al-Yaqin and al-Furqan, May 2011. Two jihadist media departments from Iraq published this Arabic language handbook, part of a greater series. Jihadist activity is sanctioned through the existing core *fatwa* (authoritative religious ruling or decrees) based on historical scholars such as Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328), the famous Hanbali scholar, and enriched by the senior leadership of al-Qaida and now ISIS. Thus, any local jihadist, al-Qaida- or ISIS-affiliated action can fall under this umbrella approbation, thereby increasing its appeal. See Prem Mahadevan, "The Glocalisation of al-Qaedaism," *Center for Security Studies*, 22 March 2013; URL: http://www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/Strategic-Trends-2013-AlKaida.pdf

[15] Ali Fisher and Nico Prucha, "Tweeting for the Caliphate: Twitter as the New Frontier for Jihadist Propaganda", op. cit.

[16] Discussed in Ali Fisher and Nico Prucha, "Jihadi Twitter Activism – Introduction"; Nico Prucha, "Online Territories of Terror – Utilizing the Internet for Jihadist Endeavors," *Orient* 4 (2011). Members of the *Ansar al-Mujahidin* forum and *Shumukh al-Islam* have posted advice, encouraging fellow users to develop social media profiles to disseminate their message to a wider group of users. See, for example: "The Twitter Guide: the Most Important Jihadi Users and Support Accounts for Jihad and the Mujahideen on Twitter"; URL: www.shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=192509

[17] For a discussion of the themes of content and networks, including visualized Twitter IS networks, see Ali Fisher, Nico Prucha, "Turning up the volume to 11 is not enough: Why counter-strategies have to target extremist clusters," *Jihadica*, February 9, 2015; URL: http://www.jihadica.com/turning-the-volume-up-to-11-is-not-enough-why-counter-strategies-have-to-target-extremist-clusters/

[18] www.telegram.org .

[19] *Al-Naba' Magazine* no. 54.

[20] The comprising theological concept of *ribat* is discussed in: Nico Prucha, "Jihadists' Use of Quran's ribat concept," *Jane's Islamic Affairs Analyst*, August 2009.

[21] Abu Usama Sinan al-Ghazzi, "*ya Ansar al-khilafa; la tataqawqa'u fi Telegram*," *Mu'assassat al-Wafa'*, June 27, 2016; URL: www.telegram.org

[22] Thomas Joscelyn, "Jihadists who Attacked Russian Police Appear in Islamic State Video," *The Long War Journal*, August 18, 2016; URL: http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/08/jihadists-who-attacked-russian-police-appear-in-islamic-state-video.php

[23] Lizette Alvarez et al, "Orlando Gunman was 'Cool and Calm' After Massacre, Police say," *New York Times*, June 13, 2016; URL: http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/14/us/orlando-shooting.html?_r=0.

[24] Please consult the contribution by Jakob Sheikh "I just said it. The State": Examining the motivations for Danish foreign fighting in Syria," in this Special Issue of *Perspectives on Terrorism*.

[25] Suhayl al-Najdi, "*Luju' al-Muslimin ila ard al-salibiyyin wa-l iqama fiha*," Mu'assassat al-Wafa', September 2015; URL: www.telegram.org . The "dar al-Islam" embodied by the "Islamic State" is further related by the following factors outlined by al-Najdi:

"The rule of shari'a law returned as well as the implementation of physical punishment (al-hudud), cutting off the hands of thieves, punishing adultery by stoning to death and beheading wizards. The establishment of the Islamic State as a reaction to those who commit injustice, governed by "commanding right and forbidding wrong" while driving a jihad against the disbelievers – thus the might of the Islamic community has been restored. Muslims living in the state openly manifest the rituals of their religion, not fearing anything apart from God – therefore the state of Islam is the abode of Islam in this era. It is obligatory for every Muslim to support and protect it, to openly display dissociation and enmity to the enemies of the Islamic State."

[26] Ali Fisher, "Swarmcast: How Jihadist Networks Maintain a Persistent Online Presence", *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 9, No. 3, 2015; URL: http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/426/html

[27] Abu Usama Sinan al-Ghazzi, "ya Ansar al-khilafa; la tataqawqa'u fi Telegram," Mu'assassat al-Wafa', June 27, 2016.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Rüdiger Lohlker, "Why Theology Matters – The Case of ISIS," *Strategic Review* July –September 2016; URL: http://sr-indonesia.com/in-the-journal/view/europe-s-misunderstanding-of-islam-and-isis.