

Chapter 2

Contemporary Terror on the Net

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INTRODUCTION

The networked global society that has been enabled by the internet and accompanying digital technologies and social media platforms has created an affordable, geographically and temporally unbounded, and semi-anonymous space where the exchange of dialogue, ideas, and calls to action have become increasingly more frequent. This networked space provides for both egalitarian democratic efforts as witnessed in the Arab Spring (2009-2013) as well as Hong Kong (2014) and the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States (2013-present). Yet many theorists dating back to the late 1990s have pontificated on the availability of this unbounded network to *bad actors*, including hacktivists, international criminal cartels, as well as terrorist groups (Conway, 2006; Hinnen, 2004; Soriano, 2008; Teich, 2013), which will be the focus of this book.

While research on the use of the internet by terrorist organizations is available in abundance, the correlation of social media platforms, more advanced technology, the dark web, and their exploitation by much demographically younger and savvier terrorist networks has provided a new landscape for research into not only the organization of these groups in the contemporary digital age, but also their goals, intentions, and their affective persuasion online in order to accomplish their mission. This has been particularly true for the Islamic State (also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the Islamic State of Syria and the Levant (ISIL), and more globally, as Daesh). The foundation for the Islamic State were established in the period after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the group was formed out of Al Qaeda in Iraq, and is an unprecedented organization that combines terrorism with military capabilities. IS began its true rise in 2011 after the United States removed troops from Iraq, the moment was heralded as a celebration of seemingly, the beginning of the end of the War on Terror and notably, the government of Iraq being stable enough for the U.S. to dislodge from the puppet government.

Prime Minister al-Maliki began a crusade against Sunnis, including in the government, military and law enforcement within the Iraqi society after the U.S. removed itself from the situation, inflaming centuries old religious and sectarian tension in the region (Frontline, 2014). Although Al Qaeda in Iraq

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-3163-0.ch002

was essentially decimated after the American invasion, the militants that remained (becoming the foundation of the Islamic State) were Baathists from Saddam Hussein's military, battle-hardened terrorists who managed to escape death at the hands of an international coalition in Iraq, and were able to form an organization through the opportunity of the Syrian civil war. The Islamic State used the violence and anti-Assad sentiment in Syria to their advantage, marketing their message to a rebel groups fighting the government, this enabled the meager group that crossed the border into the Syrian conflict to grow its numbers and influence into the formidable group that exists today. IS has obtained advanced weapons from the Iraqi and Syrian militaries, including tanks, artillery, and chemical weapons that it has seized in successful combat engagements (Kam, 2015). This arsenal now reportedly includes armed drones, which were confirmed to have been used in an attack in Northern Iraq in early October 2016 that killed two Kurdish peshmerga fighters and wounded two French Special Operations troops (Gibbons-Neff, 2016). The group is also in possession of chemical weapons, which prompted the U.S. to target chemical weapons plants in September 2016, blaming IS for using chlorine and mustard gas (Starr, 2016).

IS distinguished itself from Al Qaeda as early as 2007 by using violence against civilians (Vitale & Keagle, 2014). Yet the formal announcement of the formation of the Islamic State from Baghdadi would not come until 2014. The division among the groups was clear and generational. While Al Qaeda, led by al-Zawahiri born in 1951, prefers more methodical, slow-developing plans to engage with the community to gain trust and support for their government, and targets were entities or officials of the state; IS uses violence against all, including women and children in extremely violent, and often public (whether executions are preformed as theatre for locals in ancient ruins, or recorded for mass consumption online).

In terms of leadership, Islamic State leader, Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi, born in 1971 proved a strong influence on the global jihadist community by using a combination of physical and spiritual (ideological) power on the ground and in the hearts and minds of many, much of this strategy relied on available technologies to broadcast the message.

Framing the message is crucial to the ability of terror groups to elicit support that turns into active membership. IS focuses much of its messaging on the plight of Muslims, particularly those living in the West with the enemy, and how that enemy tears apart the foundation of the Islamic culture, religion, and identity. This, IS claims, can only be counterbalanced by the establishment of a caliphate for all Muslims. The recruitment of foreign fighters was

part and parcel of its leader's vision to restore the Islamic caliphate, a vision directly threatening the future of local regimes and representing the magnet attracting the thousands of young people streaming to Syria and Iraq to enlist" in the jihad (Kam, 2015, Pg. 22).

The ideological is combined, as Zelin (2015) explains, with the daily reinforcement that the IS military is continuing to gain ground and make achievements that attempt to legitimize and stabilize the caliphate. Terrorist groups today still have not started utilizing social media to the extent that IS has in the last two years to spur recruitment and inspire attacks around the world (Vitale & Keagle, 2014, Pg. 6).

DIGITAL TERRORISM AND THE OTHER

Brian Jenkins identifies emerging trends in terrorism, although he does not provide correlations between the new trends and the availability of the internet, many of the trends he notes can be amplified via use

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