Chapter 85

Jihadist Propaganda on Social Media:
An Examination of ISIS Related Content on Twitter

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on ISIS followers on Twitter in an effort to understand the nature of their social media propaganda. The research study provides unique insight into one of the largest data sets that investigates ISIS propaganda efforts on Twitter by examining over 50 million tweets posted by more than 8 million unique users that referenced the keywords "ISIS" or "ISIL." The authors then searched this corpus for eight keywords in Arabic that included terms of support for ISIS and the names of different Al-Qaeda leaders. A mixed research method was used, and the findings indicate that ISIS activity on Twitter witnessed a gradual decline, but the group was still able to post different types of tweets to maintain its online presence. Also, the feud between ISIS and Al-Qaeda was intense, ongoing, and prevalent in online interactions among ISIS followers. The study provides an understanding of using big data to better grasp the propaganda activities of terrorist groups.

INTRODUCTION

This study, which analyzes the efforts of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) to promote itself and disseminate information on Twitter, examined a unique big data set on ISIS that included over 46 million tweets. The majority of previous studies focused on English language productions of ISIS, while this study empirically investigated Arabic language tweets, which further makes it a unique contribution to literature on terrorists' groups branding on social media. The study also provides empirical evidence

on the feud between Al-Qaeda and ISIS members, and how the latter members are pressuring other extremists to join ISIS through social media. Building on the theoretical concept of online propaganda, the study discusses the way ISIS brands itself on Twitter and cites primary sources taken from ISIS's Arabic publications in order to further understand how this terrorist group envisioned jihad and its objectives. In doing so, we build upon earlier work that examined the audiovisual productions and social media use of ISIS (Quilliam, 2014; Winter, 2015a & 2015b; Stern & Berger, 2015). In its self-identified Jihad, previous work has shown that ISIS views media as an important tool to brand itself and promote group's extremist ideology. Further, the group used to run a sophisticated and centralized media apparatus with its own news agency called Amaq (depths), Dabiq magazine in Arabic and English, as well as the Al Bayan radio station in Mosul that also featured a mobile app (Callimachi, 2016; Shiloach, 2015a).

It is important to note here mainstream Arab societies and Muslim cultures reject ISIS's radical and extremist ideology and often counters it in many ways including the use of humor, comedy, and a variety of other media productions (Al-Rawi, 2016a; Al-Rawi & Jiwani, 2017). This kind of cultural rejection of extremism includes using the popular term Daesh (داعش) to refer to the terrorist group which is an indirect way to demean and discredit ISIS (Al-Rawi, 2016b). On the other hand, ISIS wants people around the globe to use the term "Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant" or "Islamic State in Iraq and Syria" (الدولة الإسلامية في العراق والشام) in order to gain credibility among people since this description entails an acknowledgement that the terrorist group is both Islamic and a state, while average Muslims reject these two designations (Al-Rawi, 2016a & 2016b). This is one of the reasons that explains why we chose the two terms ISIS and ISIL to search for sympathizers who are more likely to use these mentions and hashtags.

The centralization of ISIS's media division is further evident in the hierarchy of its leadership. As one example, in September 2016, the Pentagon announced that it killed Wael Adel Al-Fayadh, or Dr. Wael, who is regarded as ISIS's Minster of Information (BBC Arabic, 2016; Warrick, 2016). Al-Fayadh was responsible for supervising the production of promotional productions in the different provinces controlled by ISIS. He was also close to Mohammed Al-Adnani, the former spokesperson of ISIS, who was also killed in an earlier US drone attack. Later, ISIS' senior member, Abi Hasan Al-Muhajir, was appointed as the terrorist group's spokesperson in December 2016 (Huffington Post Arabic, 2016a).

In this regard, there was a feud between Al-Qaeda and ISIS. Current Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri disowned ISIS in 2013, leading to the creation of a jihadist global civil war especially after the declaration of the Caliphate by Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi (Byman & Williams, 2015; McConnell & Todd, 2015). On its turn, nine former Al-Qaeda fighters joined ISIS and accused the group of committing different 'unIslamic' acts like leniency in dealing with Shiites and participating in the political process instead of waging jihad (Habeck, 2015). Due to the ideologically-based feud, bloodshed followed between Al-Qaeda and ISIS especially following ISIS's demand from Al Qaeda to pledge allegiance to Al-Baghdadi (Ellis, 2016). This feud is evident in the social media data examined in this study, as will be explained below. In the following section, a theoretical discussion is provided on the concept of propaganda in the contemporary online, social, and mobile media ecosystem with a focus on ISIS's vision of media and e-jiahd.

JIHAD, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND PROPAGANDA

Before discussing ISIS and its online media strategies, a review on the connection between terrorism and propaganda is provided. Jowett and O'Donnell define propaganda as the "deliberate, systematic

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