

4. Transnational extremist recruitment through social media

Afshin Ismaeli

As early as 2002, Taliban leader Mullah Muhammad Omar received a letter from Osama bin Laden, who wrote, “It is obvious that the media war in this century is one of the strongest methods; in fact, its ratio may reach 90 per cent of the total preparation for the battles” (Awan, 2010).

Al-Qaeda was a forerunner and a central movement in the preparations for battle; and perhaps it was the first extremist organization to pursue the use of modern media tools to promote global jihadism. Unlike traditional Salafism, whose activity was confined to an area in Middle East and South-East Asia, modern or neo-Salafism is more globally active. Due largely to the revolution in communications and the development of social media movements, the world’s neo-Salafism has advanced significantly.

Since media in the age of communication has the greatest effect on public opinion, they comprise one of the most important platforms for developing political, military, social and cultural goals. Supporting this view, Ayman al-Zawahiri, Osama bin Laden’s second in command, during the first jihadist insurgency in Iraq, wrote to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq on July 9, 2005: “We are in a battle, and more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media. And we are in a media battle in a race for the hearts and minds of our Ummah” (Gerges, 2013).

By uploading grainy videos of his atrocities to the Internet, al-Zarqawi tried to gain the hearts and minds of Muslim communities across the

Afshin Ismaeli has an MA in journalism studies, and has worked for a number of years covering wars and conflicts in the Middle East.

globe and create an ideological stance aimed to humiliate, intimidate and cause fear.

In the last decade, many Salafi-jihadist groups have come to power in the region; without doubt, none of them has been as active in media sphere as the Islamic State (IS), also called *Daesh*. Neo-Salafists such as the IS have taken substantial advantage of the digital era. The Islamic State is called a digital caliphate (Atwan, 2016). IS applied a complex digital network to radicalize, recruit young men and women, instigate fear, and propagate terror.

IS' "Caliphate" leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi in a voice message urged Islamists: "I appeal to the youth and men of Islam around the globe and invoke them to mobilize and join us to consolidate the pillar of the state of Islam and wage jihad against the Rafidhas (Shia), the Safawis of Shi'ites" (New Delhi Times, 2015). But how does the Islamic State recruit through social media? How have these methods helped their cause? In what follows, I present some examples of the extra efforts which IS has utilized in propaganda.

This chapter is based on my observations of the activities of Islamic state members and families on Twitter, Facebook, Whatsapp and Telegram. I have also interviewed some Yazidi survivors who have been kidnapped by IS. I used a Facebook account to identify accounts that support and do propaganda for the Islamic State and try to communicate with them. I had the chance to meet more than one hundred Islamic State members (men and women) during my fieldwork. Qualitative interviews have been conducted over a period of three years journalistic work around Mosul, Raqqa, Baghdad, Al-Hol and Deir ez-Zour.

I analyze messages of terrorist groups and individuals on online platforms (Twitter and Facebook) in order to identify the communication strategies used to recruit people.

From Al Jazeera to independent jihadi media: "We make the news"

Compared to IS, Al-Qaeda's media strategy has been more methodical as it organizes and controls its digital terror cells and is more reliant on addresses by the leadership, reflecting its efforts to embed itself in local social fabrics with the aim of radicalization (IHS Economics and Country Risk, 2015).

During the first phase¹ known as “the awakening” of the jihadist insurgency, movements such as al-Qaeda relied mostly on TV channels like Al Jazeera and Al-Arabiya to disseminate its ideology, collect intelligence on potential targets, and communicate with sympathizers around the globe. These Arabic media houses became a confined distribution platform for insurgents. Every message and videotape that has been sent to those media channels went through different gates, which would edit material before airing it. However, Adam Gadahn², media advisor for Al-Qaeda, in a letter to Bin-Laden and al-Zawahiri called them to reach out to international digital media, rather than rely on Al-Jazeera and the jihadist forums: ‘[to] rely on Al-Jazeera and jihadist forums on the internet is not useful. Al-Jazeera seems to impose conditions like other channels’ (Scaife, 2017: 41).

Jihadists were producing media in several languages other than Arabic and controlling the output of the media. IS was one of the first jihadi groups to begin following newer methods in Iraq and Syria. These included uploading finished videos and messages onto various websites, such as Youtube, and then disseminating addresses of these sites among followers on Internet forums. The use of extremely violent videos, depicting brutal acts, beheadings and torture of civilians, has become an instrument to project an image of invincibility aimed at potential recruits and affiliates, as well as aiming to intimidate potential forms of opposition (Maniculli, 2017).

Islamic State as a media conglomerate

Other terrorist organizations have also increasingly used social media platforms. However, according to Dilo Brusik, agent in the counter-terror and intelligence service of the Syrian democratic forces (SDF), the IS is more expertly equipped to control communication and social media in their own interest than is the al-Nusra Front (linked to Al Qaeda) and other radical Islamist groups here in Syria. Daesh has demonstrated a high degree of expertise in using modern communication technology, exploiting the Internet and social media with unparalleled marketing skills (Maniculli, 2017). Due to the broad usage of social media and Internet by IS, some experts consider the Internet as the virtual playground for extremist views, which are reinforced and encouraged through the maintenance of thematic echo chambers (Awan, 2017).

IS launched an official radio station, called *Al Bayan*, disseminating daily news. Furthermore, it has published a monthly magazine *Dabiq*, in many languages including English, as PDF. In addition, they launched an Internet TV channel, called *Amaq*, and a variety of production companies to develop videos.

In both Iraq and Syria, IS and its affiliates have used *Al-Hayat*, *Al-Furqan*, and *Al-Ethar* media centers as their centralized Information Ministry. IS controlled media offices in each of the Wilayats³, maintaining tight control over all publications that have the function of official outlets, fulfilling multiple functions, from recruitment, to dissemination of ideology and tactics, to sowing fear and intimidation (Callimachi, 2016).

The regional media bureaus are media entities, which exist within the administrative structure of “provinces” or *wilayat* of the Islamic State. Products have been sent from the media entities to the main bureau in each *wilayat* media center in order to be verified and published.

These different media centers have used social media outlets like Youtube, Twitter, and Facebook, in addition to certain websites and radio stations, to disseminate their ideology. Aisha Shezadi, a Norwegian radicalized woman who lived in Al-Shadadi, a town in North-Eastern Syria mentioned the media center of Al-Shadadi town as highly active. She reported that these centers used to accumulate information, produce videos and propaganda. At the end, the videos and information produced by these centers have been spread to thousands of online sympathizers across the world through unofficial accounts that appear to be under the IS umbrella.

Technology revolutions and social media helped free terrorists from depending upon mainstream media. To repeat, the Islamic State, right from the announcement of the caliphate, started its activities on social and other media in order to inspire public opinion and recruit people. They have demonstrated a high degree of expertise in using technology and communication platforms, exploiting the Internet and social media in their interest. Furthermore, Caliphate soldiers have demonstrated considerable competence in terms of communication qualities, mastering social media and the internet, especially in terms of video production, updating their followers, as well as published an enormous amount of documentation.

Additionally, some foreign fighters with the permission from the IS information ministry were actively publishing propaganda works on social media platforms. Abu Hamza Somal, an Islamic State jihadist, regularly published propaganda messages on Twitter (see below). The aim of individual jihadists was to target people who do not have access to the media outputs of the Caliphate, or reach out, for purposes of recruitment, to individuals with whom they had no concrete ties.



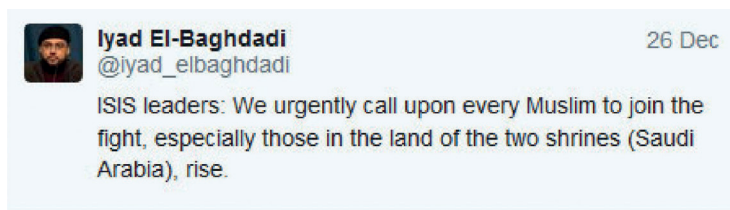
Screenshot of tweets by Abu Hamza As Somaal (IS, nickname) who urges and invites Muslims to join jihad [accessed January 3, 2017]

Videos, tweets and reports are recorded and written in different languages so that their messages reach maximum audiences throughout the world. In other words, the new jihadists no longer need a central point of command, since they operate as a “virtual Islamic network”.

In a study on social media in this context, Klausen (2015) argues that social media are used for purposes of recruitment and indoctrination, as well as to build a transnational community of violent extremism. Essentially, social media provide a potential platform to extremists, and they allow them to communicate directly and briefly with their audiences.

Contradictory behaviour

The Islamic State (IS) group has actively been using social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook and Youtube for three reasons: (1) by publishing videos of beheading and mass killings, they have tried to inspire



Screenshot of IS Recruitment and Propaganda in Cyberspace [accessed December 29, 2016]

terror and fear. As Abu-Bakr Naji wrote in his book, *The Management of Savagery* (that would become the Islamic state's blueprint) wrote the "[e]scaping and fleeing" of infidels "happens when there is the killing of a large number of people along with good media propaganda and also good media justification" (Naji, 2006: 193). (2) Further, publishing and disseminating their advancements and conquests, has helped inform people of their major activities. (3) They actively report some of their humanitarian activities which are totally in contradiction with their two other actions. With this dual and contradictory behaviour, on one hand, they try to demonstrate their power, on the other hand, they try to obtain a relative popularity among people in the Muslim world to recruit, radicalize and raise funds.

To pursue their aim, IS has moved their online presence away from the traditional media, to an interactive social media technology, in which they approach audiences and start a linear communication. According to Weimann (2014), social networking allows terrorists to reach out to their target audiences and virtually "knock on their doors" – in contrast to older models of websites in which terrorists had to wait for visitors to come to them.

Recruiters therefore may use more interactive communication to contact audiences and militants located outside the war zone. Klausen (2015: 20) claims that sympathizers can be reached "directly and amplified by the echo chamber of lateral duplication across multiple platforms at low cost. A handful of hyper-active online activists can quickly and at low cost distribute massive amounts of material."

According to a Brookings Institute study, at the end of 2014, Daesh supporters controlled about 45,000 social media accounts (Berger &

Morgan, 2015). The success of IS's communication strategy is further demonstrated, by its high number of recruits, not only in Iraq and Syria, but also in other places in the world. A study by Efraim Benmelech and Esteban F. Klor shows that the number of Westerners fighting alongside ISIS in Syria and Iraq could number in the thousands, thanks in large part to Twitter and Facebook, and this scares the West (Benmelech & Klor, 2016).

Targeting new generations

Former President of the United States, Barack Obama, described some of IS's strategies in a speech delivered in February 2015: "The high-quality videos, the online magazines, the use of social media, terrorist Twitter accounts – it's all designed to target today's young people online, in cyberspace" (Gilsinan, 2015).

Younger segments of the population have always been more vulnerable to IS propaganda. Alienation of young Muslims in the west provides a large recruitment opportunity for extremist groups. IS has shown the ability to use the media and all propaganda tools as it aims to convince very young recruits to travel to its Caliphate and take part in combat operations. In order to radicalize and create a new generation of cyber jihadists, IS used different media tools to fight an online cyber war.

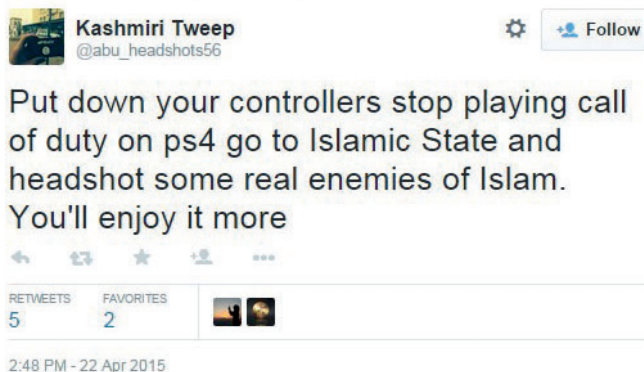
By closely observing media activities in the West, IS tried to play a big role, targeting young boys and girls of migrant backgrounds with their propaganda activities. According to the Iraqi intelligence service, the age of most recruits is from 14 to 35. A study conducted by Maura Conway and Lisa McInerney (2008) analyzed the online supporters of jihad-promoting video content on Youtube, focusing on those posting and commenting on material promoting martyrdom originating from Iraq. According to this study, most of the users are under the age of 35 and reside outside the Middle East and North Africa, many in Europe.

Recruiters target their victims, and most of the time they capture them in a very short time. In most cases, this study showed that to recruit young boys and girls, IS targeted and approached each individual and contacted them via social media. Usually, a recruiter with his own or a fake name contacted targeted persons, telling them about their "happiness" after joining IS and asks them to join the "rightness and

truthiness” front. Mancuilli (2015) claims that youngsters have been targeted through images and the streaming of those professionally edited violent online videos which since have gone viral. Portraying a glamorized and “cool” image IS fighters began to act as the new “rock stars” of global cyber jihad.

Changing hearts and minds

The dissemination of violent videos displaying executions and torture represents a type of marketing strategy that addresses the emotional needs of violence-inclined individuals, thus creating a sense of belonging to the group and ultimately making the younger recruits more likely to accept IS’s appeals and ideology (Mancuilli, 2015: 10). They might even have made it seem more desirable and thrilling to be in Mosul and Raqqa than to sit comfortably, and somewhat boringly, at home: “Put down your controllers stop playing call of duty on Play station 4, go to Islamic State and headshot some real enemies of Islam. You will enjoy it more”, tweeted Kashmiri Tweep, an IS foreign fighter.



Screenshot of a tweet by Kashmiri tweep. [accessed May 15, 2015]

IS also created a video game called “Salil al-Sawareem” (which means ‘the clanging of the words’), hinting at the real video game Grand Theft Auto (GTA) to attract more attention and recruits. In general, the main target of such video games has been young people.

The players’ key targets are American and Iraqi soldiers. The game’s cover reads: “Your games are produced by you, but we have the same



Screenshot of the IS video game trailer Text in Arabic: It heals the souls of the believers. [accessed December 29, 2015]

actions in the battlefields!” In other words, IS’s version of the game includes all tactics and barbaric methods that they have been using against their video-game opponents. It has a harsh and violent language, and you can hear “Allah wa Akbar” (God is Great) while the player kills and beheads opponents.

On the other hand, IS also released sympathetic and complimentary images by showing its humanitarian side, such as controlling markets, helping elderly people, assisting in social life or organizing life in those cities they controlled. Some also show fighters relaxing, swimming, eating, and playing with cats. James Farwell (2014: 50) claims that these “warmer images aim to communicate the message that, while strictly Islamic; ISIS stands for promoting the welfare of people, not murdering them”.

Many of the online chats between younger extremists are infused with fun; they sound sexy and adventurist. Marc Sageman (2008) states that this form of interaction and chat rooms helps build ideological rela-



Screenshot of IS propaganda on twitter, which shows jihadists having fun. Text in Arabic: The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant. [accessed May 15, 2015]

tionships and is a key tool in radicalizing young people. Young people become curious and are attracted to the prospect of a new life in the “Caliphate” territories: How is the normal daily life in the Caliphate? Does the Islamic State sell Nutella in Raqqa? Gym equipment? How do they charge their mobile phones? Those were among the questions raised in one such chat room.

Jihadists also have online live programs for mobilizing and recruiting women. “Ask a Sister” is a weekly Q&A Islamic show where the student of Islamic knowledge, Mualima Maseeha Saloojee, answers questions, which have been posted by men and women on Facebook. The show is aired directly from Syria. It tries to explain how happy women are in the territory with sharia laws and are promised a perfect life in a religious outfit.



Screenshot from twitter:
"Abu Muthanna" holding
a jar of Nutella pictured
in a store in Syria (from @
GuyVan-Vlierden). [acces-
sed March 28, 2017]

Many women are influenced by the social media activity of those who have already joined IS, and their online activities on social media try to attract more people by showing Caliphate life to be fun, comfortable and pleasant. They document their life and tell stories of how happy they are, post pictures of their beautiful houses, children, food, and cats. This they do on social media. In this way, they try to show Muslims



Screenshot: "Ask a Sister" Facebook page. [accessed April 17, 2018]

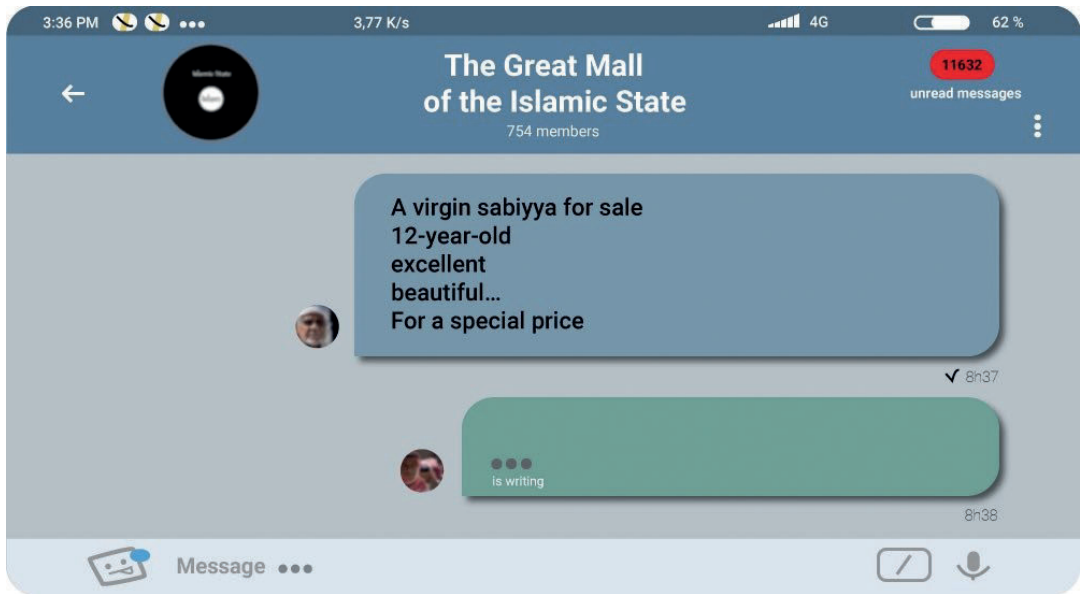
across the world a truly Islamic society built on Islamic sharia law, and persuade others to immigrate to the Islamic State. Some of the girls travel from the West to meet militants they have encountered online.

Aisha Shezadi (26), a Norwegian extremist, was radicalized as a teenager. She explains her journey to Syria, as having started with social media and having watched videos from Syria and Iraq. “I was convinced to travel to Syria by watching videos showing suffering in Syria” she said. She later started chatting directly via Facebook and Whatsapp with other Norwegians who went to Syria. “Those who already travelled to Syria told me how they live, about their houses, medical help and food. I asked the questions and they answered me.” In the beginning, she did not believe what they said. “When I arrived, it was much better than what I have been told.”⁴ In order to immigrate to Syria, she was told by Bastian Vasquez, a Norwegian IS fighter, that she must first marry him. She decided to do so via Whatsapp to obtain the holy pass to the Islamic State. However, she found out later that it was not true and she did not need to marry a fighter to get there. Nazle, a young Kurdish woman from Iran, had been promised a better life through chatting with one of her relatives who had already joined the Islamic State. After she came to IS, she said that she had found it interesting. Thousands of young women and men in the West left their homes and their families to join IS (Benmelech & Klor, 2016) to find a new life and experience what had been promised by recruiters.⁵

Social media as a sex bazaar

Young people were attracted by the prospect of a new and better life, which has been promised by the Islamic state. Temporary marriages and having *Sabaya* (sex slaves) were a new and interesting practice and promise for young male extremists around the world. Islamic state recruiters attracted attention and enticed possible victims by publishing a series of videos of how IS jihadists were buying and selling Yazidi women as sex slaves.

IS used its propaganda media, social media and magazines to justify the possession of sex slaves. By referring to the Quran, and quotes from the Muslim prophet in their publications, jihadis have tried to expand sex slavery. Yazidi minorities were the main target in this media campaign. In an article entitled “Revival of Slavery before the Hour”,

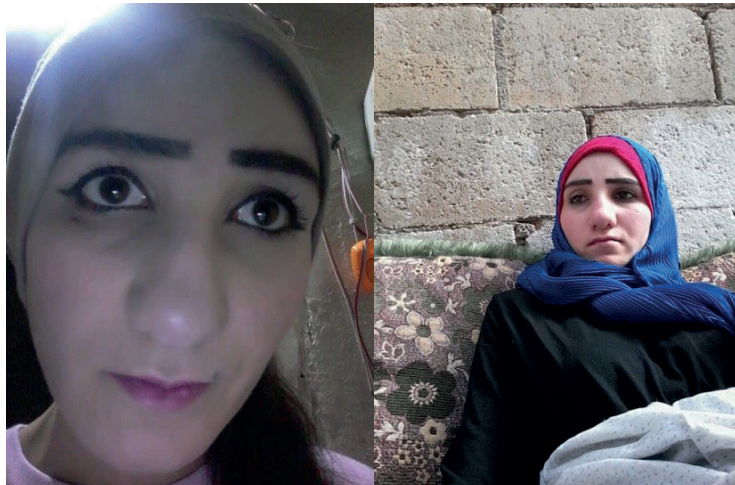


Screenshot: A document of selling Yazidi girls in "The Great Mall of the Islamic State" social media network which was published by Nobel prize laureate 2018, Nadia Murad. [accessed December 20, 2018]

published in October 2014, they claim it is done as a duty of Islam. The article targets Yazidis and considers them as offspring of the devil. They do not belong to people of the scripture (Islam, Judaism or Christianity) and therefore, according to IS's interpretation of Islam, it is justifiable to kill their men and keep the women as war booty (Sabaya).

One of the videos that went viral in social media and Youtube⁶ shows young men sitting and joking about women slaves. "Today is slave market day," says one. "Today is distribution day, God willing". The men tease a fighter who appears to be very young. "Can you handle one?" they ask, as he laughs. The man in the video mentions beautiful Yazidi girls for sale if the young guy can handle her. Islamic State jihadists published many such videos and pictures.

For jihadists, social media became a platform for buying and selling sex slaves, and at the same time, attracting younger radicals from all over the world to join the jihad. Sherihan (18) who was a sex slave and abused sexually by Islamic state, described how Facebook has been used by Islamic State fighters to buy and sell Yazidi women. "I had to prepare



Sherihan was adorned by the “owner” when he wanted to sell her. Here, there is an “owner” in Mosul who took a picture and posted it on Facebook. Someone who knew Sherihan saw the picture on Facebook and shared it with the family. (Permission has been granted by Sherihan herself to the author).

myself and put on make-up. Then I had to walk through a room full of IS fighters”.⁷ If fighters did not buy her immediately, the owner took a photo of her and put it on Facebook: She is for sale. IS fighters were taking Sheridan’s photos multiple times and published them in social media. She was sold ten times in three years, before she escaped after the fall of Mosul.

Conclusion

The widespread presence of jihadists on social media is a remarkable feature. This study tries to show the vital importance, for leaders of extremist groups, of engaging in, and recruiting militants through social media. By using and moderating different social media platforms, jihadists are communicating with their followers and sympathizers, recruiting new members from across the world and providing training materials. Such platforms are the fastest, easiest, cheapest and most effective communication methods.

Islamic State and other jihadist groups have also used savagery and fear as a media strategy. Abu-Bakr Naji (2006: 50) wrote that jihadists

depend on a brutal “media strategy targeting and focusing on the masses, in order to push a large number of them to join the jihad, offer positive support, and adopt a negative attitude toward those who do not join the ranks”.

The propaganda and media strategy of IS has been successfully present both in social media platforms and international news. The media techniques employed by jihadists succeeded in gaining an increasing number of foreign recruits, yet their recent military and territorial losses have clearly affected their strategy and influence.

The military defeat has damaged IS’s propaganda machine. Its social media present fewer items than at any time during the past three years. A study conducted by Wired magazine, which focuses on technology and its effects on culture, politics and economics, shows how the rate of ISIS’s content creation has fallen dramatically in the past two years, from almost 900 uploads in August 2015 to just over 100 in November 2017.

The Caliphate’s media house concentrated mostly on producing military propaganda and giving military updates to its followers and enemies, maintaining that they were still on the ground. In August 2015, the majority of Islamic State’s propaganda focused on promoting life under the Caliphate as a utopia. In 2018–2019, more than 90 per cent of ISIS media output is about war (Winter, 2017).

The loss of territories and resources, struck a blow to Islamic State’s media network. In recent weeks, during the fighting’s in Baghuz and after the fall of Baghuz, the last stronghold of Islamic State, IS’s propaganda has been operating very weakly. That can be seen by the low level of activity on Internet sites, social media and low quality of its media products, both verbally and visually. The last video published by IS before they lost the last territory 21 March 2019, was about fighting in Baghuz (Jihadology, 2019). Most of the clips used in their propaganda in this period are taken from other international agencies. IS media network published two visual releases in March 2019 and zero in February, while at the same time in 2015 they published up to 800 visual releases (Milton, 2018). Jihadi networks in other countries have also been less active, and produce a smaller amount of propaganda.

The fall of Islamic state in March 2019 does not indicate the end of the group’s ability to produce propaganda, nor is it an indicator of the final decline of their social media activities. The Islamic State has

been destroyed geographically, but according to recent reports from Iraq, their options to continue by way of their insurgent roots even after battlefield defeats are still there. IS jihadists have already started their propaganda in social media, by publishing eight visual releases in January 2019, regarding their insurgent activities in Iraq (Jihadology, 2019). Thus, it seems social media is going to play an important role for IS as it tries to reorganize and recruit new generations of jihadists in Iraq and Syria.

There are also indications that the group's leaders, after losing all territory in Iraq and Syria, are looking to shift their main efforts and the main front of their jihad to Afghanistan. There have been military operations in Afghanistan by Islamic State's Khorasan Province (ISKP) jihadists and they gained control of some districts in Nangarhar Province, bordering on Pakistan. According to afghan intelligence officials, at the end of 2016, Afghans fighting for the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq started to move back to Afghanistan after requests by ISKP leaders for more support to train and recruit new people (Johnson, 2016). In order to expand their capabilities and recruit more people, ISKP appealed to IS leaders requesting Arab trainers. However, although some experts believe that ISKP strength is exaggerated, and the dominance of Taliban in Afghanistan is clear, the Islamic State propaganda effects should not be underestimated. IS has become a historical culture for their followers. IS propaganda products (anthem, video clips, songs, images) and symbols (clothing, black flag and headbands) are circulating in social media among young Afghans.

Notes

1. This was supposed to have lasted from 2000 to 2003, or more precisely from the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 in New York and Washington to the fall of Baghdad in 2003.
2. Gadhafi is an American convert to Islam who appears as an al-Qaeda spokesman toward the West. He was charged with treason in the United States in October 2006 for his propaganda activities with al-Qaeda.
3. Arabic word for an administrative division, usually translated as "state", "province".
4. Interviewed 2018, June 18 by the author.
5. Author's own field observations
6. ISIS militants speak about taking yazidi girls. Youtube. November 11, 2014. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LJHW-xQ4XgE> [accessed 2018, October 02].
7. Interviewed 2018, April 16 by the author.

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