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Subject: (REPORT) <u>Trends and Dynamics in Jihadist Propaganda</u>

As a consequence of Syrian Democratic Forces announcing that Daesh had lost its final stronghold in Syria (bringing an end to their so-called caliphate), on March 23rd, 2019, the United States' Pentagon announced the physical defeat of the "Islamic State's caliphate" in Syria.

Although and before that operational defeat in Iraq and Syria (Sham), the ambitioned dream of Daesh was mirrored, trespassed and distributed to different territories all around the world, under the label of external "*Wilayats*" (provinces).

But the initially estimated as "hybrid" caliphate has progressively let space for some sort of predominantly "virtual" caliphate. The digital jihadist universe which was growing in parallel to DAESH´s success in order to promote and amplify the terrene central caliphate has progressively taken a connected-but-separated role.

All propaganda formerly or currently associated to Daesh is sooner or later imitated by similar and divergent threat networks (far-right, Daesh´s rivals, states) in their own influence activities[1].

*Announcement (video format?) and covers of "*الإعلامي أيها أنت مجاهد*" (Source – Twitter and https://hetteen.files.wordpress.com).*

"*Oh media agent, you are a Mujahid too!*" (الإعلامي أيها أنت مجاهد) is the translated title of a book published by "The Al-Himma Library" in April 2015, which highlighted the relevance of propaganda and media activities in the aim of the Caliphate: links to that publication could be currently find through:

-Free digital libraries (https://archive.org/details/MujahdAnt_201803).

- Digital publishing platforms (https://issuu.com/elhimmalibrary/docs/_____).

- Book download websites (noor-book.com and https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/37424810).

- Audio file sharing platforms (https://clyp.it/bwkhdlv4).

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[1] See terrorist´s video of the attack in Christchurch NZL or propaganda from conflicts (e.g. Ukraine, Nagorno-Karabakh), even Al Qaeda´s one...

- Jihadist forums and websites.

- Cloud-based instant messaging (e.g. Telegram).

- Links to file downloading sites shared through anonymous text pasting-sharing tools (e.g. https://justpaste.it/) or text/image sharing platforms (e.g. www.telegra.ph)...

During 2018, the territorial collapse of Daesh dramatically contributed to reduce their experienced/skilled human infrastructure dedicated to media and propaganda activities, along with allowing the terrorist group´s loss of financial resources. The banning reaction against terrorist publicity supported by national/multinational security agencies (e.g. EUROPOL) and taken by Internet-management companies (e.g. those related to Facebook, YouTube, Twitter…) also multiplied the reductive effect on proliferation of content from violent extremist organizations (VEOs).

Most of the old media agencies from Daesh and Al Qaeda already persist although their relative decrease in relevance and production, so they have let space for a wide umbrella of decentralized agencies managed by jihadist groups followers, which release less planned but more intermittent productions… although the quality is sometimes looking worse, that is balanced by a modern design plus a direct and clear message.

EVOLUTION OF DIGITAL MAGAZINES

During first years of Daesh, their peak of success even allowed the temporary selling of high-quality printing paperback "DABIQ" issues (produced by AL-HAYAT MEDIA CENTRE) on AMAZON websites… those websites listed the publisher of the magazines as "*CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform*" (AMAZON-owned self-publishing company).

The former jihadist digital magazine[2] (e.g. DABIQ, INSPIRE, RUMIYAH, AL RISALAH, KONSTANTINIYYE, ISTOK, AL FATIHIN, AZAN, AL-SHAMIKHA, DAR AL-ISLAM, AL-MALHAMAH, GAIDI MATAANI, FROM DABIQ TO ROME, KYBERNETIQ…) as published by (more or less) centralized media offices continue being valued and redistributed through all potential ways and means, even some of their respective contents are sometimes embedded into new-style publications.

Front covers of last issues of "DABIQ", "INSPIRE", "RUMIYAH" and "YOUTH OF THE CALIPHATE" magazines (Source – Twitter).

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[2] If you want go deeper into jihadist digital magazines´ history, you could always read "*A Matter Prompted by Printed Matter: Threat Networks and Digital Magazines*" article in Counter-IED Report Autumn 2015 issue https://ciedcoe.org/index.php/reports/external-reports/counter-ied-report/42-0003-counter-ied-report-autumn-2015/file, along with "*Radical Islamist English-Language Online Magazines. Research Guide, Strategic Insights, and Policy Response*" by Robert J. Bunker and Pamela Ligouri Bunker and published by US Army War College Press and the Strategic Studies Institute https://publications.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/3549.pdf.

Of course, the overall design quality, multilingual approach and accuracy in targeted audience of the former publications were higher than the average ones of current digital magazines, with minor exceptions. Nonetheless, the visually attractive and modern concept of "YOUTH OF THE CALIPHATE" (*Shabaab Khilafah*) magazine has been guiding new publications, through the jihadist multiorganizational contribution, the selected distribution through direct links/encrypted means, and the open invitation to future submissions from readers in the last page.

The most veteran digital magazine is currently "AL NABA" weekly newspaper, which has been permanently showing Daesh´s operations all around the globe and articles about ideology/dogma since firstly published in 2014 by Daesh central office until 268th issue published on January 7th 2021...

The last months have witnessed the production and online distribution of several digital publications by decentralized media agencies and jihadist groups´ followers, as follows:

- With regards to Al Qaeda franchises, and among others, we could remark the publishing of "ONE UMMAH" (4 issues in Arabic and English language by AS SAHAB MEDIA), "THUBAT" (11 issues in Arabic language by THABAT NEWS AGENCY) and "WOLVES OF MANHATTAN" (1 issue in both Arabic and English languages by JAISH AL-MALAHEM AL-ELECTRONI).

Front covers of "ONE UMMAH", "THUBAT" and "WOLVES OF MANHATTAN" magazines (Source – Twitter).

- From Daesh's side, we would select "VOICE OF HIND" (10+3 issues in English language from AL QITAL MEDIA CENTRE), "DAESH IN PICTURES" (4 issues in Arabic language by AL BATTAR), "DABIQ WEEKLY" (one single issue in English), "ARKAN" (1 English issue from ARRUKN CENTER).

Front covers of "VOICE OF HIND", "ISLAMIC STATE IN PICTURES", "DABIQ WEEKLY" and "ARKAN" (Source – Twitter)

During 2020, all those pdf-formatted magazines have apparently let the leadership of "VOICE OF HIND" and "AL NABA" (Daesh side), and "ONE UMMAH" (Al Qaeda side). The transition of "VOICE OF HIND" (*Swat Al-Hind*) magazine from a Southern Asian regional approach to a worldwide message has (temporarily?) allowed that publication to spread some sort of a global Daesh message.

TRENDS IN PROPAGANDA POSTERS

In accordance with Dr. Michael Krona (see the references at the end of this article), the current "Virtual Caliphate" has gained in dynamism compared with the original form of Daesh's online environment, mostly based on its fragmentation with multiple unaffiliated and emancipated media groups and collectives in the digital realm. He bases his analysis in several indicators, as follows:

- A more decentralized structure spanning over a large amount and variety of digital platforms, which allows higher resilience, flexibility, concealment, creativity and mobility.
- The message promoting the individual commitment and support with/to religion and culture is substituting those with/to the "Islamic State" itself, as it happened before.
- Independent media collectives and online supporters are replacing the centralized production by creating propaganda focused on specific purposes and target audiences, rather than trying to reach a maximum visibility to the widest of the audiences.
- Open social media platforms are progressively giving pass to encrypted virtual spaces, peer-to-peer communication tools, information only accessible through shared links and/or enclosed digital environments.
- Increase in collective engagement and collaborative media practices among jihadism supporters.
- The globalism of the centrally guided caliphate is being replaced by messages a bit closer to the different individuals and groups, just focusing on regional, cultural and national approaches.

The referred dynamism is mostly evidenced in the quality, quantity, accuracy and ability/speed to exploit success that the propaganda posters are showing.
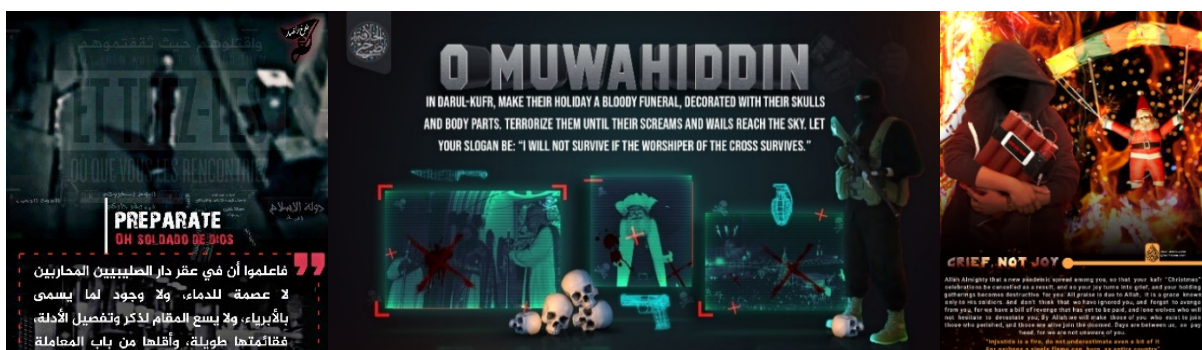
Samples of jihadist propaganda posters released during December 2020 (Source – Twitter).

The main subjects are mostly based on calls to followers´ commitment, weapons/tactics of choice, target selection and models to follow/admire (e.g. successful attacks/attackers). The reference to the use of arson tactics and techniques against different kind of targets has been a continuum during 2020 too.

AUDIO-VISUAL DYNAMICS

The first years of Daesh´s grown were plenty of extremely well designed and produced videos, which had a relevant effect/impact over recruitment and support in benefit of the living utopia of a global Islamic State.

Daesh uses to produce propaganda videos that play a nasheed [3] in the background, sometimes providing the lyrics in subtexts on the screen. There were even specific musical production offices which counted on the collaboration of several relatively famous hip-hop/rap singers providing soundtrack to jihadist videos in the form of modern nasheeds (remember "EXTEND YOUR HAND TO PLEDGE ALLEGIANCE", "ANSWER THE CALL" or "HAYA ALAL JIHAD" videos from Al Hayat Media Centre), in different languages (lyrics and subtitles in French, English, Arabic…), and giving a shape/style to that kind of chants which make them much more attractive to youth.

Capture from a multi-translated version of Al Hayat Media´s "ANSWER THE CALL" video (Source – www.archive.org).

But "*anasheed*" could not only be discovered behind jihadist propaganda videos, also you can listen and download them on the Internet… in fact, Daesh and their followers have focused the subjects of nasheed in jihad (war and fighting) instead of referring to other possible aspects of Islamic culture.

Although the amount, embedded violence, originality and quality of the current propaganda videos is not the same than it was, there are some media agencies still providing high quality videos through the Internet (e.g. VIRTUAL BATTLEFIELD, WAR and MEDIA…), while veterans like AL HAYAT continue producing.

Nowadays the production of videos is mostly supported by regional offices from different Daesh´s wilayats or by the own media offices of Daesh affiliated groups or those related to Al Qaeda (e.g AL-SHABAAB´s AL-KHATAIB MEDIA FOUNDATION, JNIM[4]'s AL-ZALLAQA MEDIA). Nonetheless, there was a relative increase in the multi-sourced redistribution of old Daesh´s videos during 2020. The translation of former videos into different languages than the original is offering an opportunity for less-skilled producers to continue spreading an effective influence, along with their smart reuse of recorded speeches and visually relevant portions from different old video productions to enrich current audiovisual propaganda.

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[3] Islamic vocal music chant (plural. "anasheed")
[4] Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimeen

"KHILAFAH NEWS", THE DAESH´S DAILY GAZETTE

From Summer 2014, Twitter was the preferred mean to spread the daily updates about Daesh´s developments, products and operations until the massive suspension and lockdown of jihadist accounts in that social media space in late Summer and early Autumn 2015. Then they trespassed the main distribution of that compilation of news to Telegram channels (led by NASHIR NEWS AGENCY initially under names as "NASHERISLAMICSTATE", "ISDARAT_ISLAMICSTATE", and then mirroring with HALUMMU, KHILAFAH NEWS, IS NEWS and KN labels, among others and translated into different languages for widest propaganda).

Evolving versions of "KHILAFAH NEWS" sources (Source – www.archive.org, www.pastethis.to and www.telegra.ph).

In fact, "Khilafah News Daily Report" and similar products have mostly been taking their content from "Amaq News Agency" and lately from "Al Naba" newsletter´s content, along with announcements of upcoming jihadist videos, pictures and publications.

The law prosecution and online security measures have been progressively removing the "Khilafah News" distribution accounts, platforms, websites and forums, which has made them move to alternate means relatively harder to find from investigators, which already persists, as follows:

- Digital libraries (www.archive.org).
- PDF-formatted text with fake/hidden naming and metadata (www.pdfhost.io...).
- Anonymous text pasting-sharing tools (www.justpaste.it, www.pastethis.to, www.pastefs.com).
- Anonymous text/image sharing platforms (www.telegra.ph, www.oc2o.com...).
- Webpage archives (www.archive.vn, www.archive.ph, www.archive.md).
- Audio formats just reading the news (mp3).
- Video formats from pictures (e.g. https://files.fm/u/82v4bgx5j#/view/t666jafnw 30DEC2020).
- Websites allocated in hard-to-ban domains (e.g. www.xxx....in, www.xxx....ng, www.xxx...ml).
- Packages of pictures, compressed files, posting sites (e.g. [www.redditinc.com)](www.redditinc.com)...

Even publications like "DAESH IN PICTURES" and "DABIQ WEEKLY" are merely structured products based on compilation of daily "Khilafah News" …

IMPACT FROM BANNING CAMPAIGNS AGAINST JIHADIST DIGITAL PROPAGANDA

After several banning campaigns against jihadist and other radical propaganda during last two years, the production and distribution of guides, digital news and practical tips for information security has increased on the Internet: Electronic Horizons Foundation (EHF) continues being the most active element after five years of existence. They have been promoting the use of Virtual Private Networks (VPNs), multi-layer authentication, smart devices protection, use of encryption, data protection, utilization of safe platforms, anticipation to counter measures, secure online payment services, and so on.

The techniques and procedures mostly used for disrupting jihadist online activity have been:

- Suspension of individual websites and social media accounts.
- Deletion of individual pieces of propaganda.

Although their relative impact over dissemination and access of radical content, those methods are time-consuming, are not too systematic, attempt superficially/temporarily to solve the problem, and cannot prevent the re-establishment of new accounts or parallel sites.

Cover from a report about Telegram disruption impact over Jihadist platforms (Source – www.crestresearch.ac.uk).

The threat networks´ reaction/anticipation to the investigator´s activities, digital censorship, closure of accounts and disruption of websites has been mostly based on:

- Redundancy of resources.
- Rebuilding of networks.
- Multi-platform approach.
- Encrypted services.
- Use of shortlinks.
- Benefit from non-indexed procedures to store information and propaganda.

The resilience and sustainment of propaganda of resources is getting achieved through:

- Use of backup-mirror channels for sites and repositories.
- Backup posting on mainstream commercial platforms (e.g. Dropbox, www.archive.org, Google Drive, UStream, Amazon Cloud Services, Microsoft One Drive, OwnCloud …).
- Individual user´s downloading and self-archiving.
- Regular distribution of content through diversified/redundant posting on different sites.

From late 2019, the jihadist networks for propaganda sharing and distribution have been trying (with higher or lesser success) to diversify into all kind of end-to-end encryption and decentralised web platforms other to Telegram, as they are Rocket.Chat, Nadbox, Hoop Messenger, TamTam, Mastodon, Blockchain messengers, Wire, Matrix, Minds, Threema, Gab Chat, Pinngle, Hoop, Element (formerly Riot and Vector), Likee, Zeronet, TikTok, Baaz, MeWe, Diaspora, Friendica, Yahoo Together, Viber, Discord…

The propaganda moving through those platforms could be even more difficult to discover in case of being used in conjunction with VPNs and encrypted email providers (e.g., ProtonMail, Hushmail, Tutanota, Mailfence, Zohomail, Mailbox.org…).

As previously said, jihadist extremists are using mainstream commercial platforms to share and stream content. These sites are not searchable, due to content can only be accessed with the adequate URL (uniform resource locator), and that kind of online information is stored at the cloud.

In line with the widest benefit from available Internet tools, jihadist propaganda is equally stored at video sharing and hosting sites other than Youtube, as Vimeo, Nicovideo, TikTok, Nicozon.net, Vidyard, Odysee…
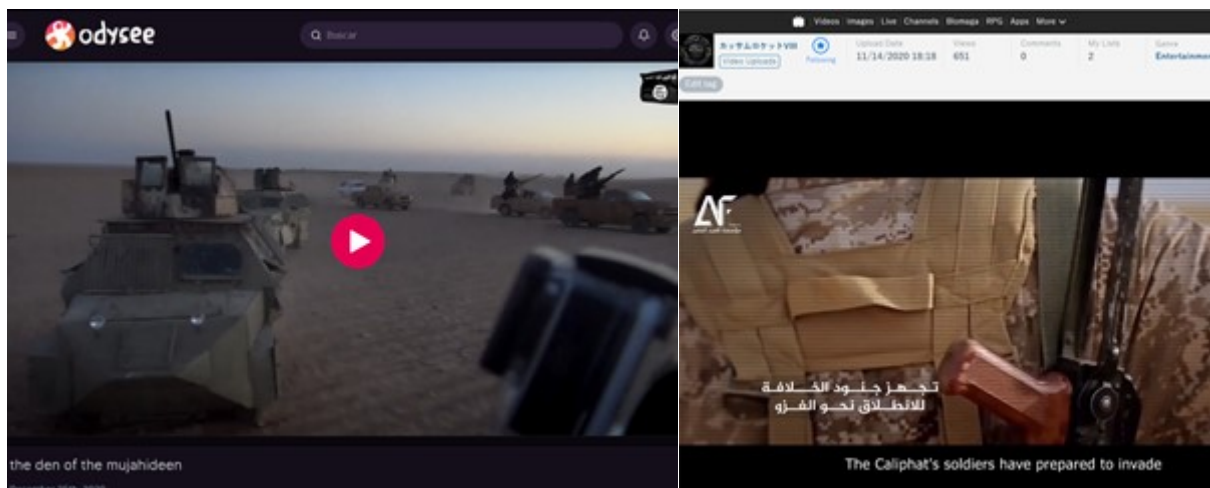
Captures from video-sharing site accounts with jihadist propaganda (Source – https://odysee.com/ and www.nicovideo.jp).

With regards to the use of shortlinks, those are shorter URL version of regular URLs for easy sharing and remembering. Some of the most familiar shortlinks creators are TinyURL, bit.ly, t.co, Pretty Link, goo.gl, SimpleURLs, wp.me… they could make the sharing of links easier, and less open to get detected by external searchers. In fact, most of the platforms and content-sharing sites are used as containers of links guiding to URLs which will direct people to propaganda.

ASSESSMENT

During 2020, the Telegram app continued to be the main platform used for distributing extremist messages and publications all around the world, but some other decentralized platforms are increasing their preference by threat networks to distribute their propaganda.

The classic "kinetic" actions against online distribution of extremist propaganda have been mostly based on nationally/world-widely removing content/websites, filtering in accordance with blacklists, deleting accounts in digital platforms, and hiding through manipulation of search engine.

In accordance with the extremist multiplatform approach, we should understand that the law enforcement and companies´ activities to detect/deny distribution and access of/to jihadist propaganda must be always coordinated not only among different platforms, but among different companies too.

It is always much more relevant to anticipate the potential moment for distribution of new content (e.g. online announcement of its close release, reactions to governmental measures, incoming relevant events to target, anniversaries, periodicity of publication…), and then act against the main storage nodes instead of pursuing those sharing the links to that piece of propaganda.

Last campaigns against jihadist accounts have targeted "good guys", so the support to those searching and investigating propaganda from the right side should be maintained through identifying and verifying them as researchers or analysts (maybe a procedure to register themselves as those?), while maintaining their relative anonymity.

Diversification of search and evaluation languages (other than English!) would strongly support the effort against jihadist propaganda, so the use of Arabic and other local languages/dialects is extremely relevant to take actions against most of the originators of propaganda instead of against the sharing agents: it would even allow to achieve anticipatory effects.

Heavy deletions of sites and/or accounts should get balanced with providing opportunities to access the content and surveil the "evil" members of them.

The support from technology companies is essential, but it should combine their typical fixed protocols, machine learning and automated removal with end-stage human analysis and verification, especially when trying to differentiate ideological messages from extremist content, and those from terrorism promotion.

To conclude, it is not highly recommendable to delete, cancel or close every content, account or website. The enemy will always find alternate means to distribute their message. In parallel, our analysts and researchers would lose the capacity to access propaganda products in that case (which could support the necessary anticipatory analysis and understanding of jihadist messages/audiences/intent).

So instead, "selection and control" could be better than "prohibition" at medium-term, for example by:

- Cutting most of the accesses but maintaining little of them alive to reduce the number of sites, which could allow intelligence the control of "who" could distribute or access the referred piece of propaganda.
- Search, filter, investigate & target the primary/original sources of distribution of propaganda, instead of attacking the subsequent/less-relevant redistribution sources of that content.

"*Every time we exterminate a predator, we are in a sense creating a new predator.*" ⁽David Rains Wallace, in his book "*The Untamed Garden and Other Personal Essays*", first published in 1986).

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All pieces of information used to build this document are exclusively and strictly based on open-sources.

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