

Digital Radicalization: ISIS Cyber-Jihadists

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Digital jihadist propaganda

Jihadists approach, seduce and finally convert young people¹ through the Web. They use digital applications (websites, forums, chat rooms etc.) all over the world practically with no limitations. They adopted immediately all the interactive ways of communication² exploiting any digital possibility. Especially in west countries³ the use of the internet is sine qua non presupposition for all candidatures for jihadist radicalisation⁴ and terrorist action. As a result, jihadists managed to deify virtual reality in order to control decisively offline reality of young people through their pro jihād propaganda.

¹ On the influence of violent video games on young people's personality see «Technical Report on the Review of the Violent Video Game Literature», *American Psychological Association Task Force on Violent Media*, <https://www.apa.org/pi/families/review-video-games.pdf> (04/03/2020) and Cunningham A.S.-Engelstätter B.-Ward M.R., *Understanding the Effects of Violent Video Games on Violent Crime*, Discussion Paper No. 11-042, Centre for European Economic Research, <http://ftp.zew.de/pub/zew-docs/dp/dp11042.pdf> (13.02.2020).

² Really notable is the case of the famous British Muslim of Pakistani descent Babar Ahmad (1974-), which operated a jihadist website since 1997 propagating global jihād.

³ «At least in the West few cases of jihadist radicalisation completely lack a web component, including occasional viewing of extremist propaganda», Magri P., «Introduction», in Fr. Marone (ed.), *Digital Jihad. Online Communication and Violent Extremism*, Ledizioni, Milano 2019, p. 6.

⁴ For the steps that follow and the various mechanisms that are activated in the candidates to jihadist radicalisation through the internet and its applications see Edwards Ch.-Gibbon L., «Pathways to Violent Extremism in the Digital Era», *The RUSI Journal* 158:5 (2013), pp. 40-47.

The theological narrative of ISIS digital propaganda

The theological mantle of ISIS -as well other similar organisations- main narrative⁵ is indeed very interesting. They pretend⁶ to preserve archetypal Islamic values. They claim Islamic authenticity opposite to anyone else Muslim and non-Muslim indiscreetly. Their theological narrative is properly elucidated in order to well display digitally. They also make sure that it is attractive to the relevant audience. Of course the lack of theological accuracy and historical precision are more than obvious⁷.

The narrative⁸ argues that the only possible way out from the tragic reality of oppressed Muslims all over the world is only one. The true hope is the revival of the archetypal Islamic authentication. All jihadist and islamist groups highlight and defend the Islamic Golden Age. Simultaneously, radical theorists constantly condemn the dark age of spiritual ignorance -jāhiliyya, with which identify current era.

The core of the theological narrative: Islamisation of everything through shari‘a (Theocracy/Nomocracy)

All jihadists and radical sites, chat rooms, Facebook, Twitter, You Tube etc. equally in Surface, Dark and Deep Internet⁹ promote this particular conclusion: Islamisation of everything

⁵ See Droogan J.-Peattie Sh., «Mapping the Thematic Landscape of Dabiq Magazine», *Australian Journal of Political Science* 71:6 (2017), pp. 591-620, Ingram H., «An Analysis of Inspire and Dabiq: Lessons from AQAP and Islamic State’s Propaganda War», *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40:5 (2016), pp. 357-375 and Winter Ch., «Apocalypse, Later: A Longitudinal Study of the Islamic State Brand», *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 35:1 (2018), pp. 103-21.

⁶ For the use and misuse of Islamic values by ISIS propagandists see Mahood S.-Rane H., «Islamist narratives in ISIS recruitment propaganda», *The Journal of International Communication*, 23:1 (2017), pp. 15-35.

⁷ See Marioras M., *Islamic Radicalism: Historical and Theological Presuppositions of Jihād*, Pedio Books, Athens 2020 (in greek).

⁸ For the central themes of Islamist narratives and their analysis based on modern narrative theories see Halverson J.-Corman S.- Goodall H.L., *Master Narratives of Islamist Extremism*, Palgrave Macmillan US, New York 2011.

⁹ There are hundreds of thousands of websites, chat rooms, satellite channels, end-to-end encrypted communication applications (e.g. Telegram), etc. To a large extent all these media recycle similar material. Especially the contents of al-Qā’ida’s classic *Inspire* magazine, as the instructions for making bombs and other weapons are widely reproduced, see Sivek Currie S., «Packaging Inspiration: Al Qaeda’s Digital Magazine Inspire in the Self-Radicalization Process», *International Journal of Communication* 7 (2013), pp. 584–606. For the response of western states see <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/03/25/reading-this-magazine-could-land-you-in-jail/>, 30.03.2020. We do not refer to jihadist websites in the context of the responsibility of researchers for the non-further dissemination of their content. Our self-restraint is based on the relevant conclusions of Winter Ch.’s work, *Researching Jihadist Propaganda: Access, Interpretation, and Trauma*, Resolve Network Researching Violent Extremism Series, Washington 2019.

through full application of sharī'a. In this sense their efforts support the inescapable necessity of absolute Theocracy or more precisely *Nomocracy*¹⁰. The ideal state of affairs in their mind is the one that prevailed during the time of *Salaf al Ṣāliḥ*. Of course, they enrich their argumentation by teachings of the most important islamist theorists, namely S. Quṭb and M. Mawdūdī.

ISIS technological superiority and the content of digital production

ISIS digital propaganda is totally successful as it relies on its technological superiority in the field of Mass Media. In fact superior digital propaganda yielded important results¹¹, such as significant increase of supporters and spread of ideology locally (Iraq, Syria) and globally. As a remarkable consequence a great number of foreign fighters¹² joined the ranks of ISIS in order to fight the infidels whether they were Muslims or whatever.

The main topics of the propaganda material include¹³: i) on camera executions of western prisoners, ii) fiery sermons, and iii) videos with a) rules of ethical behavior, b) patrols to control and punish moral transgressions, c) impressive military operations. Also, other material to fanaticize the followers and proselytizing others. Special spots were created throughout ISIS territory for the dissemination and distribution of its propaganda material offering free cd, dvd, usb etc. targeting in particular young people.

From the above issues they have a greater impact and influence¹⁴ especially: i) military actions, ii) ISIS governance, iii) da'wa sermons, iv) the observance of sharī'a's moral precepts and the punishment of their violation -ḥisbah, v) ISIS's promotion and advertising of its multilevel achievements, vi) the unjust and unholy attacks of the international alliance against ISIS.

¹⁰ For the crucial characterization of Islam as Theocracy or *Nomocracy*, the theological starting point of each term and the consequent consequences see Marioras M. *The Dialogue of Muslims and westerns scholars about Sharī'a, vol.ii, Sunna and Sharī'a in Islam*, 2014 Athens (in greek), p. 338.

¹¹ «It is only through a holistic assessment of the organisation's media activities that one can begin to garner an understanding of just how important propaganda is to the success of the organization...By creating content intended for consumption by a wide range of mass audiences, all meticulously branded with caliphal motifs, the organisation is able to consolidate appeal and cement its menace», Winter Ch., *ibid.*, p. 41.

¹² For ISIS's Foreign Fighters digital activity see Klausen J., «Tweeting the Jihad: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq», *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38:1 (2015), pp.1-22.

¹³ See Winter Ch., *ibid.*, p.12.

¹⁴ See Zelin A.Y., «Picture Or It Didn't Happen: A Snapshot of the Islamic State's Official Media Output», *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9:4 (2015), pp. 85-97.