

The Islamic State's Tactics in Syria: Role of Social Media in Shifting a Peaceful Arab Spring into Terrorism

by Steve Johnston

Introduction

This article will examine the Islamic State's use of social media to gain support from within the Syrian public during the 2011 Arab Spring. The public revolt in Syria followed other such revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. However, unlike these countries, the Syrian revolution evolved into a civil war that provided a suitable environment for the Islamic State to increase its support base. This descriptive study seeks to determine how the Islamic State used social media to exploit this emerging opportunity within Syria.

The turbulent situation in Syria created an opportunity for some extreme Islamists, who believe in al-Qaida ideology, to insight the formation of the Islamic Caliphate under the Islamic Sharia in 'Bilad al-Sham' (the Levant).¹ The Islamic State (IS), otherwise called Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), or Da'ish (translated letters of ISIS using Arabic language: Al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham), provided an opportunity for the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) to establish a safe haven in Syria for operations in Iraq.² (See Figure 1.) Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, leader of the ISI, authorized Abu Mohammad al-Joulani, a Syrian and al-Qaeda in Iraq militant, to begin a new subdivision of al-Qaeda in Syria.³ In August 2011, al-Joulani and a group of prominent al-Qaeda operatives crossed the border from Iraq into Syria. Al-Baghdadi sent this group, armed with the plans and funding needed to win the Syrian civil war, to meet with pre-existing extreme Islamists in northeastern Raqqa, Aleppo, Hasakah and Azaz in Syria.⁴ Together, they formed Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) in October 2011.⁵

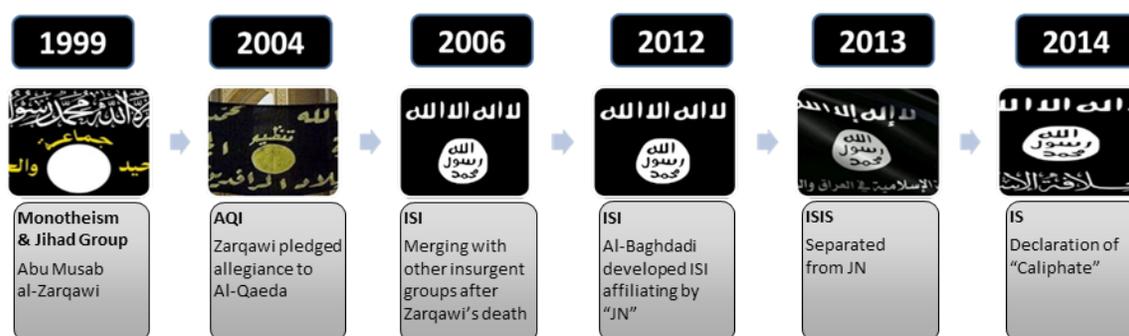


Figure 1. Origin of Islamic State

On April 8, 2013, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi released a recorded audio message on the Internet. He announced that JN was merging with ISI to become the “Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham” (ISIS), under his command.⁶ The next day al-Joulani rejected the merger and affirmed the group’s allegiance to al-Qaeda and its leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri.⁷ Al-Nusra then split into two groups. Some members, particularly foreign fighters, followed Baghdadi’s edict and joined ISIS, while others stayed loyal to al-Joulani.⁸ On June 29, 2014, and despite al-Zawahiri’s announcement in late 2013, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi announced his new title as “the Caliph” for the newly established Islamic State, which extended from Aleppo in Syria to Diyala in Iraq.⁹

Importance of the Problem

The importance of the present article lies in its practical significance of media literacy, fighting terrorism, oppression, and the double-edge of social media. There is an urgent need for governments to curb the negative effects of social media, know how to utilize it, and to find effective ways to combat terrorists that are using social media as a weapon. Social media has become a means by which IS can increase its support base, and increase the likelihood that an Islamic Caliphate is possible. Social media is an ideal propaganda platform that might launch a misinformation campaign. As such, it is critical to understand how terrorist groups like IS use social media because it is the new domain within modern theaters of global war.

Fundamental Concepts

Terms defined as part of this article are described below. Below are the manners in which these terms are used within the context of this article.

Islamists: Members of Islam who reject the notion of a separation between religion and public life. Islamists believe that ideals, values, or principles rooted in Islam are relevant to the modern world, and that they provide useful guidance on contemporary political and public policy issues.¹⁰

Jihad: According to the Islamic Supreme Council of America, the Arabic word “Jihad” means “struggling” or “striving” for the God. In a religious intellect, in the Quran and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (s), “jihad” refers to the efforts to be a good Muslim or a believer, as well as working to inform people about the faith of Islam.¹¹

Relevant Literature

This section presents the relevant literature review pertaining to the use of social media to cultivate collective strength by uniting people with a common set of objectives. Though this article subject is specific to the Islamic State, the concept of social mobilization is not exclusive to it. Social media, in its ‘golden age,’ has evolved significantly over the last sixteen years.¹² There are sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat that provide an interface for users to not only access the vast amounts of data, but also provide digital communities. These users can congregate virtually with a lot of posting, pinning, and tweeting circulating around the globe.¹³

The Role of Social Media in the Syrian Arab Spring

Protestors presented the main content in social media during the Arab Spring. They used the social tools available on the internet to share ideas, social mobilization techniques, and gain popular support that allowed the rapid spread of analogous active social movements across North Africa and the Middle East. This resulted in mass cyber communities united by similar aspirations. In this domain, the professors Richard Fox and Jennifer Ramos, in their iBook: *iPolitics: Citizens, Elections, and Governing in the New Media Era*, wrote that new media sources and tools provide new opportunities for citizens to express and organize themselves around their political interests.¹⁴ The notion of their claim was also seen in the

Syrian rebels' use of social media tools. The Syrian rebels scheduled the events using Facebook posts and prearranged their protest slogans in tweets.¹⁵

In early February 2011, Syrian protestors started creating Facebook pages that were shared widely, one of which called for protests across the country on February fourth and fifth.¹⁶ More than 16,000 Syrians on Facebook expressed support. However, the demonstrations, organized entirely on Facebook, did not take place because the people feared the Syrian regime apparatus.¹⁷ On February 9, 2011, Al Jazeera described Syria as a "kingdom of silence" because anti-government protests did not happen for many years.¹⁸

Syrian intellectuals created 70 Local Coordinating Committees (LCCs) initially to document the Syrian revolution, but they evolved into the primary organizers of protests and information disseminators.¹⁹ The committee members include "young Syrian journalists and human rights activists from different ethnic, religious, and class backgrounds operating within Syria."²⁰ The primary objective of the organizations is to overthrow the Syrian regime.²¹ As information disseminators, the LCCs are responsible for reporting updates on the movement to Arab and international media. The primary means of reporting is through the LCC website and its Facebook page.²²

In March 2011 and parallel to the efforts of the LCCs, Syrian activists created a Facebook page called "The Syrian Revolution 2011." It had up to 120,000 followers, mainly from the local Syrians and the Syrian opposition activists globally, to disseminate their message, which produced a rallying effect for all those involved.²³ Furthermore, social media provided a mechanism to reveal human rights violations to the international media. Media channels monitored the "The Syrian Revolution 2011" Facebook page to get pictures and videos of what was happening in Syria, which facilitated the propagation of the reality that Syrian protestors faced.

In the Internet realm of social mobilization, Twitter functions in a centralized networking role as a clearinghouse of revolutionary propaganda.²⁴ Twitter enabled the leaders of the Syrian opposition to create a substantial network of Internet supporters. On Twitter, opposition organizers published videos and tweets revealing violence perpetrated by the Syrian regime that resulted in an emotionally energized effect on supporters. Zeina Karam, in her article "Social Media's role in the Syrian Civil War," estimated that in January 2012 the twitter account "#SyrianRevolution" had 183,000 tweets, 23,400 photos and videos posted, and 144,000 followers.

Ahmad Shehabat, in his article "The social media cyber-war: The unfolding events in the Syrian revolution 2011," observed that videos uploaded to YouTube from people's cell phones were their primary retaliatory weapon against the Syrian regime during demonstrations.²⁵ Jennifer Preston in her article "Seeking to Disrupt Protesters, Syria Cracks Down on Social Media" argues that the Syrian government began targeting activists on social media.²⁶ The purpose of this targeting was two-fold. First, the regime monitored social media in order to identify people associated with the protests. Secondly, the regime wanted to limit the spread of information on-line. This targeting methodology was effective because of the regime's extensive censorship protocols that involved sequential blocking and allowing access to the internet and social media sites.²⁷ Syrian officials denied access to the Internet as well as the 3G mobile Internet in Damascus, Daraa, and Homs, in order to control uploading videos and photos of protests inside Syria to the world.²⁸ Additionally, the Syrian regime created a cyber-army to continue the virtual conflict.²⁹

IS and Social Media

Mobilization using social media is not limited to peaceful protestors. Terrorist networks require similar capabilities to recruit, raise funds, and deter opposition. As such, this section examines the literature illustrating IS's successful use of social media to establish a foundation within Syria and project the perception of strength regionally.

Many researchers have analyzed how IS used social media to spread its terroristic message and attract followers. Jonathon Morgan and J. M. Berger assert in their paper “The IS Twitter Census: Defining and Describing the Population of IS Supporters on Twitter” that from September through December 2014, IS supporters used at least 46,000 Twitter accounts, although not all of them were active at the same time.³⁰ Authors of the United States Department of State Publication report, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2015*, agree that IS is a group of violent extremists that currently occupies parts of Syria and Iraq. IS has also taken to posting violent videos and recruiting materials on many other digital platforms, posing a dilemma for companies such as YouTube, Google, Facebook, Twitter and others.³¹ These companies have censored terrorism and have pledged to crack down on terrorists who use their sites.³² In 2013, Ines von Behr, Anaïs Reding, Charlie Edwards, and Luke Gribbon wrote a report named *Radicalisation in the Digital Era: The Use of the Internet in 15 Cases of Terrorism and Extremism*. They found that the Internet enables more opportunities to become radicalized, because of its availability, and enabling connections of like-minded individuals from across the world 24/7.³³

Extreme Jihadists used social media in their operations in Syria, Iraq, and many other countries. Twitter was the main social media used. Klausen Jytte’s article entitled, “*Tweeting the Jihad: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq*,” collected informational data over a period of three months, from the Twitter accounts of 59 Western-origin fighters known to be in Syria.³⁴ She used the snowball method, which is a non-probability sampling technique where existing study subjects recruit future subjects from among their acquaintances, to collect data about the most popular accounts in the network-at-large.³⁵ Social network analysis points to two conclusions. First is the controlling role played by feeder accounts belonging to terrorist organizations in the insurgency zone. Second, that Europe-based organizational accounts were associated with Al Muhajiroun, the banned British organization, and in particular with Anjem Choudary, the London-based preacher.³⁶

Brenden I. Kderner in his article, “*Why ISIS is Winning the Social Media War*,” in April 2016, groups IS’s social media achievements in five themes: (1) Cultivate the brand, through messaging propaganda on social media to stir the hearts of potential recruits and to boost the organization’s ghastly brand. (2) Innovate across platforms, in taking pride in its flair for developing innovative and repugnant content through farewell scenes videos some of which captured by a drone. (3) Crowdsourcing the distribution, by means of its widely distributed high-quality media via different social media channels. (4) Inspire real-world action, because of recruiting people and convincing them that recruiters’ violence actions must show that they are following to God and they are pledging allegiance to IS. Finally, (5) steer the conversation, via focusing on its ability to governance in the area it controlled.³⁷

Domino Effect Theory

Clay Shirky in his book, *The Political Power of Social Media: Technology, the Public Sphere, and Political Change*, asserts that social media did not play a central role in the evolution of social mobilization. Social media rather allowed protestors to perform by different rules of engagement and to create a booster to stimulate the formation and development of social movements.^{38,39} Accordingly, social media plays the role of associate factor rather than a causative factor in social movements. One of the social media theories to develop social media strategies is the theory of “Domino Effect.”

Gerri Baum, a marketing and communications professional, proposes six questions for “Domino Effect Theory” that addresses the creation of an effective social media strategy. The answers of the questions determines the targeted people, the appropriate social media platforms, organization’s plan and goals, and the proper tool to measure the results.⁴⁰

Shivani Sinha, in her article “*Will There Be a Domino’s Effect on Social Media?*” counter argues that the problem of “Domino Effect Theory” is that the user must be active online to view the websites and

social media forums' outputs. This might give the user more than enough time to think of the issue.⁴¹ The effectiveness of this campaign remains considered, but the tactics used could have an overwhelming impact on the way big organizations publicize products to their users, one of which is IS.⁴²

Methodology

In the light of research discussed in the relevant literature review, this article will answer the following primary question: How did the Islamic State use Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to radicalize peaceful protestors during Syria's Arab Spring in 2011 and create a foundation of tacit and explicit support that enabled them to evolve into a viable terrorist group that had global aspirations? The guiding sub-questions include:

1. What social media capabilities did the Islamic State develop and use between 2011 and 2014?
2. What subgroups of the Syrian population did the Islamic State target and why?

In this study, the topics used for collecting qualitative data include IS's social media capabilities and their relative applications on social media, and the targeted subgroups within the Syrians. The sources used for the study are a selection of secondary sources and open media that provide information about IS's social media usage of YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook. The data collection method used for evaluation in this article is the document review method.⁴³

The qualitative research design methodology used for this article is the narrative design. The inductive approach used to analyze the data collected is the framework analysis, which is similar to both thematic analysis and content analysis.⁴⁴ Framework analysis produces similarities and variances within collected data that facilitates the formation of descriptive conclusions based on inferred thematic relationships.⁴⁵ It focused on the audiences of IS social media, IS's social media capabilities, and sustainability of its usage.⁴⁶

Organizational capability analysis was used to analyze evidence associated with guiding sub-question one, determining IS's social media capabilities between 2011 and 2014.⁴⁷ Technological resources (tools and systems) and technical expertise (knowledge, skills and behaviors) were the two variable factors of organizational capabilities analysis. This framework was used to derive IS's capabilities to perform specified tasks to recruit, fear, fund, and coordinate and synchronize, and achieve established goals. The Domino Effect Theory matched perfectly the primary research question and the sub-questions as illustrated in Figure 2.

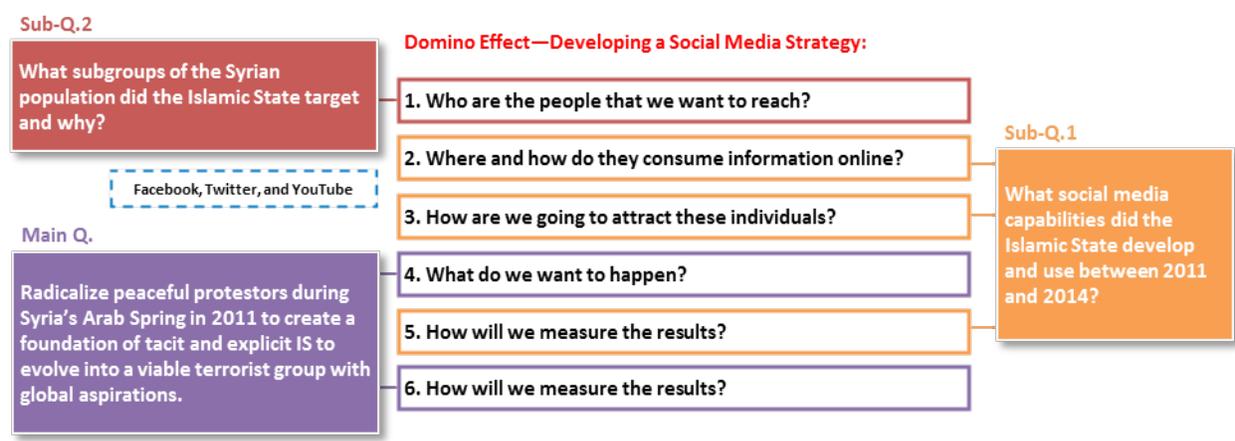


Figure 2. Relation Between Domino Effect Theory and the Research Questions

Findings

Addressing the First Guiding Research Question

The first guiding question of this article addresses the social media capabilities that the IS developed and used for its rise in the world. Social media enabled IS militants to raise its status among other terror groups acting in Syria. It served to coordinate troops in battles, facilitated governance in its area of control, and expand far beyond its physical territories. They posted hi-tech videos of group and individual execution of victims, blasted across the social media platforms through an offensive hacking capability using imitated Twitter accounts. Moreover, it showed an advanced capability to humanize its fighters and recruit more people of both genders using online magazines, televisions, and radios.

Twitter Application: “Fajr al-Bashaer”

The Islamic State executes a portion of its psychological warfare campaign using Twitter because it offers the capability for users to tweet and retweet automatically by using key words and hashtags. An application called “Fajr al-Bashaer,” or “The Dawn of Glad Tidings” is an official IS product promoted through its top users.⁴⁸ Hundreds of users have subscribed to the application through either the Internet or the Google Play store on their Android smart phones.⁴⁹ In addition to sending updates on the fighting, IS also uses this capability to prove that they are able to govern the controlled areas in Syria. However, Twitter is not the preferred method to disseminate IS’s violent media.

Video Production

YouTube is the IS’s primary technique to propagate its brutal tactics, which requires a significant video production capacity. These YouTube videos are filmed documentary style and are available in high definition in multiple languages, and are available by conducting simple searches on the internet. IS recruited professional film crews. It invested in Hollywood-caliber software to produce its videos. The videos portray violent executions using bizarre inhumane executions, such as shooting, drowning, and being thrown off buildings. The videos have a psychological impact on its viewers, who cannot help but tense up when watching the cruel acts depicted on screen. The tension can be classified as either excitement or fear. As such, the videos are used as both a recruitment tool and a terror tool. IS taped and posted on social media platforms most of the mass executions of Syrian Army soldiers and other ethnical and religious executions in order to threaten and discourage its enemies who were fighting. They threatened bloodshed against any Muslims thinking in joining other Syrian rebel groups in Syria to fight IS.⁵⁰ This led to the reinforcement of IS rules in the area of control and showed the power of the organization to its followers of the ability of gaining territories and executing the enemies in groups. The execution of a Jordanian pilot, named Maaz Kasabeh, showcases the professionalism of IS’s production capability in terms of filming.⁵¹

Offensive Hacking

IS began amassing a significant cyber warfare capacity in 2014. The Islamic State Hacking Division, also known as the Cyber Caliphate, officially launched in 2014 when it published recruitment ads on extremist internet sites.⁵² The Cyber Caliphate has the ability to breach other network defenses by exploiting network or computer program weaknesses. IS’s cyber-soldiers are as important as the IS’s ground forces, and the British expert “Junaid Hussein” trained them. Hussain was recruited from England to teach IS hackers how to conduct cyber warfare.⁵³ He became a prominent leader within the organization, the head of the Cyber Caliphate, and a celebrity.^{54,55}

After IS’s declaration in September 2014 to create a Cyber Caliphate, it took until January 2015 to evidence IS’s cyber-attacks in hacking websites and posting extremist propaganda on defaced websites.⁵⁶ The group launched itself into the spotlight timing its attack on the Twitter and YouTube account of US Central

Command (CENTCOM) with President Obama's cyber security speech on January 12, 2015.⁵⁷ IS's goal is to manipulate social media to facilitate recruitment and funding while also showing its capacity to project power beyond Syria.⁵⁸

Synchronization and Coordination

For IS, Twitter is a critical means of social communication that terrorists use for interaction and coordination. It provides virtual communities that are composed spontaneously during major events, which would benefit those groups by following up the latest information about any issue that appears in the public domain. IS has increased its ability to coordinate and operate under the radar of its enemies, keeping its electronic communications secret. IS's use of cyber experts to stay several steps ahead of law enforcement. IS recruited communication experts. They taught terrorists how to use encryption and communication platforms like Silent Circle, Telegram and WhatsApp.⁵⁹

"DABIQ": Online Magazine

"DABIQ" is a monthly high quality online magazine issued in different languages that covers the building of the Islamic State as an organization and its insight. It talks about the world war against it through the coalition strikes led by USA, the Russian strikes, and the conspiracy against it from some Arab countries. IS visualizes a culture distinct from the Islamic culture and it is spreading the culture of what is called "radical Islam." It is culture of atonement, brutality of offenders, and the legalization of bloody attacks to rule and spread the Islamic State. In general, the magazine encourages people who read it to join the Islamic State in the way they show itself as the right destination to follow and meet God in a proper way. It discusses the extreme Islamic thoughts, ideology, faith, and importance of Jihad in its fields by money, by hands, and by tongues.⁶⁰

Radio and Television

The Islamic State launched the state radio "Al-Bayan" in Iraq and Syria in early 2015. It broadcasts al-Baghdadi speeches and vocal newsletters that contain the local news of the organization in Syria and Iraq. In addition, it covers IS's battle achievements and the world war against it. IS also launched a television channel in early 2015 called "Caliphate Channel," which broadcasts over the Internet, focusing on encouraging the Muslims to join the organization.⁶¹

Sexual Violence

IS uses sexual violence as a tactic to increase the returns of its field achievements and inflate the base to recruit followers, as well as destroy the social unity of the targeted communities. They displayed women as sexual slaves as a strategic pull factor in attracting men, including local youths and foreign fighters, to join the organization.⁶² Women and girls were sold in auctions on the Internet.⁶³ In addition, the IS's picture of women dressed in traditional Islamic dress holding weapons next to luxury vehicles has proved proactive and enticing to both young men and women to join the organization. IS's leaders believe that this leads to recruiting more females, which will result in more families and a more socially stable Islamic State.⁶⁴

Humanize the IS Soldiers

IS used social media platforms as a means to humanize its followers. It showed scenes of soldiers visiting its wounded peers in the hospitals, which reflected the comfort of the injured soldiers. In addition, the videos showed IS fighters handing out candy and ice cream to smiling children to show its care for children. It organized, imaged, and displayed entertainment for children and elderly people in Aleppo and Raqqa. The organization installed "media points" kiosks as informational points. The kiosks distributed all publications of the organization free as a replacement of the social media, and announced specific times so people can gather and watch on TV its media publications in areas near the kiosks.⁶⁵

Funding and Moral Support

IS utilized social media to attract and direct funding to buy weapons, pay salaries, improve infrastructure, and operate civil and social services in the areas of control. IS relied on some of the fatwas from some preachers who tweeted on Twitter for the sacrifice of money and souls. In addition to financial support, IS got moral support through social networking sites. Some web pages showed the virtual allegiance of supporters to IS, such as “Allegiance of the Faithful Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi,” “Forensic Alliance of the faithful Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi Advertising,” and others. They played a role in the spread of the organization and the expansion of its supporters across the virtual world.⁶⁶

Second Guiding Research Question

IS targeted some of the Syrian population and used social media as a part of its recruitment procedure to encourage new followers and fighters within its ranks. The targeted population is categorized into three groups as illustrated in Figure 3. (See page 85.) The first group was the Syrian Islamists who share the same religious ideology of the Islamic Caliphate. The second group was the majority of people within its control area, mainly youths and poor people, to get its support and win the public opinion in order to assert influence on wider community. The third group was the armed people of other rebel groups that were already in Syria and fighting the Syrian regime.

Syrian Islamists

Some Syrian Islamists were the first supporters of IS who saw the power and will to achieve its goals through the organization’s ideology and achievements on the battlefield. The short-term goal of both was to get rid of the Syrian regime, and the long-term goal was to establish the Islamic Caliphate. IS skillfully used its powerful religious ideology to convince these Islamists of all ages to leave other rebel groups and join the organization. IS publications on social media typically used out-of-context or out-of-period quotes from the holy book Qur’an as an alluring religious attraction such as Jihad for God’s sake as obligatory, and the true presence of living is in “al-Janna” which means Paradise.

Syrian Population

IS focused its social media capabilities on the Sunni population in Syria. It used the aggressiveness of the Syrian regime against the population of the Sunni majority. This aroused the religious background of young Sunni Syrians, who are jobless and have low standards of living, to join the sound of Islamic Sunni rights and Sharia law of Islam. Some of the Syrian population saw on social media platforms that IS was the first force to promise to get rid of the uncertain and shameful life being loyal to rulers under civilian laws—a route to a brilliant environment for Sunnis. The access to the organization, the financial benefits, and the social services attracts some Syrians.⁶⁷ Some of the Syrians consider what is happening in Syria as an adventure that is good to experience. These recruits are considered dangerous because they might go to extreme actions for the sake of their adventure. IS offered complete installations of social service networks in the areas it rules. It pays good salaries. IS tries to provide an acceptable social atmosphere to facilitate the living in its areas.⁶⁸

Armed Syrian Population

Some of the experienced retired soldiers and officers of the Syrian Army, who have had trouble earning a living, were happy to join IS, which gave them employment, a renewed sense of honor, and a way to continue their fight against the Baathist party who rule the army. These veterans have provided IS with seasoned military and organizational expertise. They saw the shift from a retired person seeking to work for living, to a zone commander ruling the area of their living. Social media platforms offered them a good medium to communicate with the organization to prepare meetings in mosques and join processes for local recruitments.

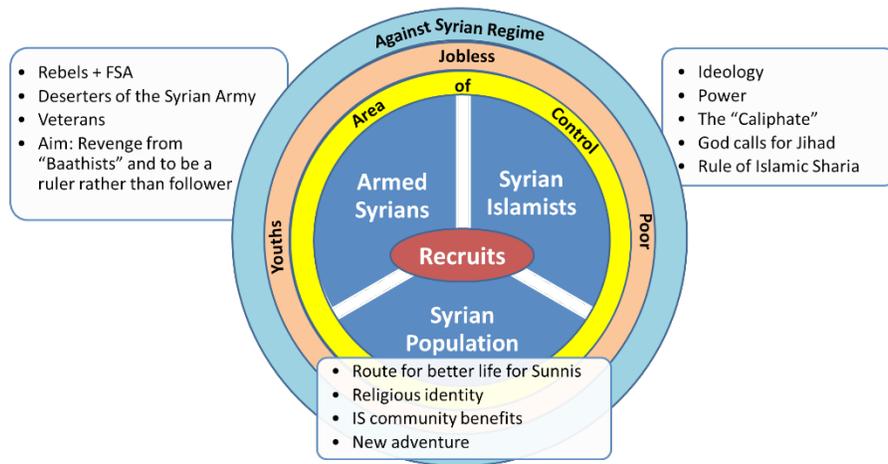


Figure 3. IS Targeted Populations in Syria

IS worked hard on social media to encourage those who joined the Free Syrian Army (FSA) to join it. They used the intimidation and coaxing methods on the Free Army followers. IS propaganda of its rigid ideology on social media attracted the rebels to run from FSA and other militias and join it. Others saw that they have the power to put an end to the Syrian regime. IS's brutality on social media towards people against IS made the rebels fear the organization and forced them to join it to save their lives.

Addressing the Main Research Question

IS leaders used the following tactics to establish the foundation: Sending representatives to identified groups, focusing on illegal behaviors of the Syrian's armed forces, emphasizing the need for an Islamic State, highlighting the state of victimized prisoners, and connecting those in the subgroup with diverse social media platforms. It also employed social-media tactics that expanded its message, recruit, radicalize, and raise funds.⁶⁹

The majority of the Syrian rebels in 2011 were youths who did not have adequate expertise to determine effective, durable methods to realize their ambitions.⁷⁰ The smart phones became their tongues to express, their pens to write their opinions, and their weapons to attack their government and the rulers. They also offered this weapon for others to get its benefits to use and reach the hidden goals, one of which is IS. (See Figure 4 on page 86.)

Syrian rebels and exiled and persecuted Syrians abroad encouraged those who still lived in Syria to use social media to proceed with their uprising. The efforts did not combine into one "aim" which gave Islamic State militants the opportunity to lead the ground movement in a very professional, well-organized way to move some of Syrian rebels towards it. The IS militants, in contrast, had a definite religious vision in mind and a well-developed strategy for using newly developed weapons-social media tools.

The rebels were easily led to join any ideology, repeat any slogan, or accept any propaganda. The extreme Syrian Islamists found an opportunity to manipulate the various sects of the Syrian and foreign Muslims to take revenge on the Syrian government, which blocked their freedom of speech and made them keep silent to survive.

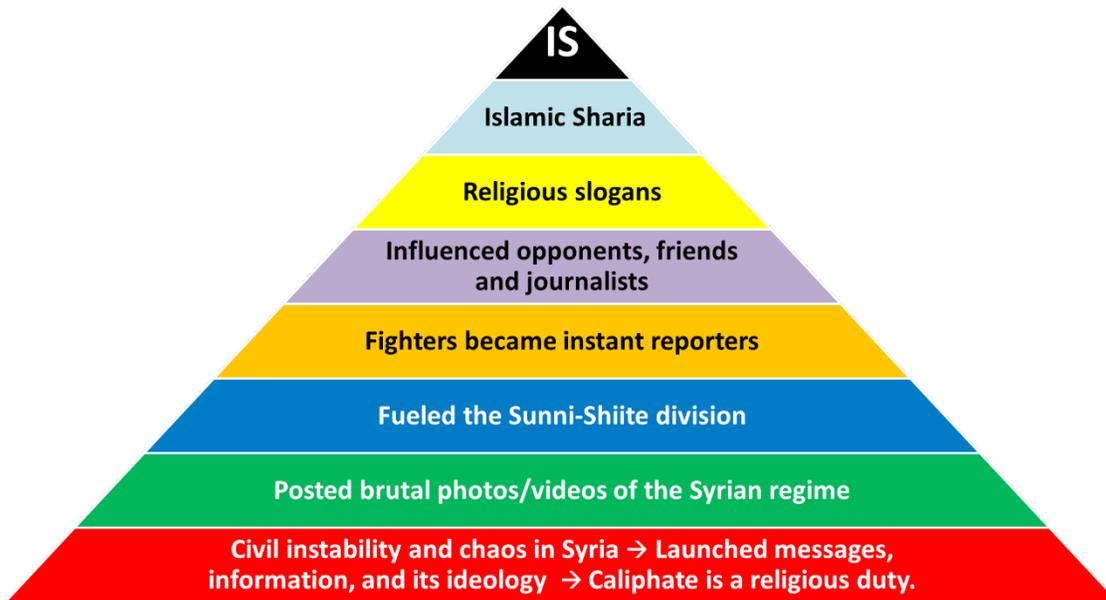


Figure 4. IS's Social Media Tactics

The violence of the Syrian uprising transformed Islamist speech from an uprising of the Syrian people to an uprising of Sunnis to fight the Syrian “Alawite” regime. This fueled the Sunni-Shiite division in some Arab countries, especially Syria, and has encouraged the Islamic Syrian Sunnis to join IS in Syria. IS sheds light using social media platforms on the Syrian regime help that was obtained from Iran and the Shiite militant groups from Lebanon (Hezbollah) and Iraq. That frustrated the Syrian Sunnis more. This has gradually changed the revolution from a Syrian uprising to a Sunni rebellion. The Syrian rebel slogans of protestors changed from yelling “silmeyyah silmiyyah” (peaceful, peaceful) to “Allahu Akbar” (God is great) with bearded rebel fighters posting their brutal videos of the executions of the Syrian soldiers on YouTube and Facebook, such as one of the extremists who removed the heart of a Syrian soldier. That gave a real image of IS’s brutality.

Implications of the Findings

The vision of IS’s leaders is that IS will survive and expand. A way to achieve these goals is the effective use of social media. IS uses the Internet and social media for propaganda, recruitment, facilitation of foreign terrorist fighters, communications, coordination and synchronization, and fund raising. It is also used as weaponry information and technical knowledge for manufacturing explosives.

It is clear that IS wants to share its actions and views in public. It is part of its propaganda. However, international media institutions indirectly helped IS to rise by highlighting its videos, speeches, publications, and wrong concepts of Islam as an ideology. Many people are drawn to watch its videos, irrespective of the brutality and violence in them, when they hear from international media about a certain publication.

IS successfully used social media platforms to attract part of the Syrian population who share the same religious ideology or goals to recruit them as “ready soldiers” to fight under IS flag. Not only young people joined IS, but also mature men and women did. Some Syrians joined the organization in spite of its terroristic ideology. On one hand, IS changed the peaceful Syrian Arab Spring into a bloody terroristic civil war. On the other hand, it indirectly affected the whole world by spreading fear and terror through attacks.

The analysis showed that the organization uses social media platforms in more than one language (Arabic, English, French, and German). It also uses quotes from the Holy Qur'an, to influence the greatest number of individuals. It clarifies the power of the organization through broadcasting its field of operations. In addition, IS followers showed that they enjoyed life in the area IS controls, which made many Syrian youths want to experience it as well. On the other side, IS publishes many of the videos on YouTube that show its use of violence and brutality.

What is distinct about IS is the way it merges traditional media broadcasting like television, radio, and jihad web forums, with pop cultural platforms such as Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook, to intensify its message. IS uses Twitter as a primary means of media propagation. Its distribution is public and characterized by its efficient, controlled, and decentralized plan. Twitter allows IS to reach its audience very rapidly, within seconds, which makes the relation between IS leaders and followers closer and in real time. Tweeting and retweeting is a simple procedure to interact and spread the posts. This tactic of IS convinces the followers that they are part of the decision-making for establishing the Caliphate and provokes them to physically join.

Social media companies like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube have adjusted their regulations to block the accounts related to IS that show violence and brutal content. However, because of the decentralized social media tactics of IS, it is difficult to control the suppression of the material issued. IS's social media users are able to create new accounts rapidly and with ease. This contributes to a partial failure of social media companies' strategy to stop IS on the Internet. IS has the ability to spread false information and hack others' sites and pages with ease through the Internet. IS's social media users formed well organized and methodical networks through which social media followers access and distribute IS publications like "DABIQ," and synchronize posts and hashtags.

Through social media posts and IS publications IS has shown a long-term strategy, the establishment of the Islamic Caliphate. IS showed that it does not want to have a decisive combat with the West or engage in regional sectarian (Sunni-Shiite) war. IS finds the use of brutality in Syria against the regime or innocent populations who refer to other religions a necessary mean to reach the desired end of establishing the Caliphate. In Syria IS adopted many features to sustain the area it controlled through social media platforms. For example, it launched public services including medical aids, education, local and religious security services (Sharia courts), and infrastructure projects. It made the Syrians in those areas dependent on IS to get the required resources to live.

Recommendations

As a result, because IS succeeded in influencing some of the Syrian population and young people from other countries to join it through social media, this study recommends the following:

Syrian Population

Syrians must encourage a return to their diversity and the acceptance of other partners in the country from other sects and religions. All terrorists' social media platforms must be blocked in Syria. Syrians must launch counter social media activities to show IS followers the illusions and psychological traps of its ideology. Jihadists must view social media posts defining the real meaning of "Jihad" as what Islam religion instructed and the Prophet Muhammad called for in the forgiveness and respect of others.

Muslim Communities

Muslim voices who represent the real Islam should reach young Muslims in each country who are vulnerable to radical extremism through social media platforms. Starting from the Syrian population, Middle Eastern, and Western countries. Muslims must post on-line what Islam really calls for and how IS is shifting the religious concepts to match its goals.

International Communities

Countries must work to fight it through social media platforms too. Some countries have already begun to do so, as they closed many of IS pages. In addition, they deleted the brutal and violent videos the organization published to provoke horror to the community. Also, the recruiting videos that were posted to attract many young people through the idea of a Caliphate should be obstructed or stopped. Countries must also contain the young people who come back from such organizations. They can do this by providing them with jobs, in addition to seminars and lectures to educate these young people.

Schools and Universities

Schools and universities must launch anti-IS social media messages and videos that can be shared within educational institutions and local media. As a result, the number of social media intelligence experts will increase in communities to fight terrorism electronically.

Social Media Companies

Social media companies must update their policies against terrorism and brutality scenes, and focus on infiltrating and abolishing the social media networks (real and virtual) behind IS's social media campaign. By detecting and targeting IS followers Twitter accounts individually, social media companies might be able to break IS's global social media campaign.

Suggestions for Future Studies

The article can be expanded through further testing against the social media usage that ties the terrorist groups found in Iraq, Syria, Sudan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Egypt, Libya, and the lone wolves found all over the world. IS supporters are ready to explode themselves among innocent people, and the trigger is set in a tweet on social media. Is IS request from its followers to use knives to kill people a declaration of IS falling? The coming days will reveal everything.

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