

Hashtag Terror: How ISIS Manipulates Social Media

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As the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS, an Al Qaeda inspired terrorist organization seeking to create an Islamic empire) gains confidence and territory in the Middle East, its social media presence has expanded its influence well beyond the battlefields.

Building on techniques pioneered by other terrorist organizations, such as [Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula](#) and [Al Shabaab](#), ISIS not only employs social media to spread its messages and recruit followers, including Westerners, but also to empower its supporters to take part in that process.

The increasing numbers of Americans and other Westerners seeking to join ISIS, combined with the support it has received on the ground in some places, suggest that its online efforts may be paying off.

Current reports estimate that between 12,000 and 15,000 foreign fighters, including as many as 100 [Americans, are currently engaged in the conflict in Syria and Iraq](#). Although it is impossible to say that social media has played a definitive role in their recruitment, ISIS's online propaganda has often targeted westerners.

Of the five Americans arrested on terrorism charges in 2014, three had allegedly attempted to join ISIS: [Shannon Conley](#) of Colorado, [Michael Todd Wolfe](#) of Texas and [Nicholas Teasant](#) of California. Donald Ray Morgan of North Carolina was arrested on weapons charges, but is allegedly believed to have been attempting to join ISIS as well. And two apparent Americans have been featured in pro-ISIS

propaganda videos: One using the name [Abu Dujana al-Amriki](#) in 2013, and one using the name [Abu Abdurahman al-Trinidadadi](#) in 2014.

The involvement of foreign fighters with ISIS and other militia and terrorist groups raises particular concerns that they may pose a risk to their home countries upon their return. This concern was driven home with the [May 2014 shooting in the Brussels Jewish Museum](#). The suspect in the attack, Mehdi Nemmouche, was believed to have spent about a year in Syria, where he may have fought with ISIS.

ISIS's sophisticated use of social media - a blueprint that will likely be copied and expanded upon by other terrorist groups as well - serves as a stark reminder of the role social media plays for terrorists around the world.

Dissemination

Although various [terrorist organizations have maintained Twitter accounts since at least 2010](#), they often did so as a secondary means of communication. Terrorist propaganda was generally made available on extremist forums, featuring downloadable content such as magazines, videos and brochures.

ISIS, however, has disseminated information almost exclusively via Twitter, where it can quickly share its views around the world and enable supporters to take part in that process. ISIS also relies on this network of support to [increase the reach and influence of its messages](#).

Twitter users are also able to conceal their identities more effectively than on forums and other social networking sites. And while Twitter accounts can be – and indeed, sometimes are – shut down by Twitter, new ones can almost always be immediately established.

ISIS has maintained Twitter accounts for several of its official media outlets, including Al-Hayat media, which mostly distributes polished propaganda pieces

in Arabic, although it also maintains Twitter feeds in various other languages, including English; Al-Medrar, which publishes in a variety of languages; Platform Media, which primarily tweets news updates in Arabic; and Al-Battar media, which has English and Arabic feeds that tweet news, graphics, official statements, and videos. In addition, multiple ISIS regional groups maintain Twitter feeds posting news, images, and video of their activities.

ISIS has also [attempted to branch out to alternate social networks such as Friendica, Quitter and Diaspora, but with limited success](#); Friendica and Quitter in particular were quick to remove the group's presence from their sites. In August 2014, following ISIS's online release of a [video depicting the beheading of an American journalist](#), Diaspora removed ISIS accounts on its site and Twitter adopted a more active policy of removing ISIS and pro-ISIS accounts (which it had already been doing to some extent prior to the release), suspending accounts that posted imagery from the video. However, ISIS has been adept at quickly reinstating its Twitter accounts.

ISIS official Twitter accounts are augmented by supporters, some of whom seem to have quasi-official status. The Markaz al Islam Twitter feed, for example, has not only promoted ISIS propaganda (primarily in English), but has also directed supporters to his English-language Facebook pages (continuously replacing pages as they are removed by Facebook for content violation) that do the same. Several other feeds appear to serve similar roles. Such supporters are often active in a variety of languages and on a variety of platforms, including Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and the question and answer service Ask.FM.

Supporters can also sign up for an app for Android through Google Play called "Dawn of Glad Tidings" as a way of receiving information from ISIS on the smart phone. When they do so, ISIS also gains the ability to post Tweets from users' Twitter accounts – which therefore become defacto ISIS propaganda outlets.

ISIS also organizes hashtag campaigns, skewing trending terms by encouraging supporters to repeatedly Tweet various hashtags such as #AllEyesonISIS or #CalamityWillBefallUS. The goal is that these terms will then trend on Twitter, vastly increasing the visibility of tweets with ISIS's message.

Similarly, ISIS encourages tweets of "active hashtags," or hashtags that are already trending. Thus, it will encourage its supporters to tweet ISIS messages with popular hashtags such as #worldcup so that people searching for those hashtags will inadvertently come across pro-ISIS posts.

Views of the U.S. and the West

ISIS emerged out of [Al Qaeda in Iraq](#), a group that had been largely dedicated to fighting the U.S. presence in Iraq. When the group shifted its focus to Syria it rebranded itself ISIS. Anti-American sentiment played a relatively minor role in the initial deluge of ISIS propaganda at that time.

That changed in June 2014, when ISIS resumed fighting in Iraq. Fearing U.S. intervention against ISIS advancements, ISIS launched a social media campaign called a "[Warning to the American People](#)." Official ISIS Twitter accounts encouraged followers to post threats against the U.S. on social media with the hashtag #CalamityWillBefallUS. Among the official ISIS suggested tweets were:

- "If the United States bombs Iraq, every citizen is a legitimate target for us."
- "This is a message for every American citizen. You are the target of every Muslim in the world wherever you are."
- "For every drop of blood shed of the Iraqis, Americans will shed a river of blood."
- "Every American doctor working in any country will be slaughtered if America attacks Iraq."
- "Don't come to Iraq unless you want another 11th September to happen."

In August 2014, when the U.S. began limited airstrikes in Iraq to counter ISIS and provide humanitarian aid, [ISIS resumed this social media campaign](#) using the #CalamityWillBefallUS hashtag along with the hashtag #AMessageFromISISToUS. Tweets from official ISIS Twitter accounts included "Would you like to taste the losses, pain, death and all what (sic) you tasted in Iraq again?" and "O Westerners, your governments have lost their minds, and they will let you pay the cost of their stupidity, the Islamic State is too strong, so you must yield to it, not fight it!"

On August 19 2014, ISIS acted on those threats, [releasing a video depicting the beheading](#) of American journalist James Wright Foley and threatening to behead a second American journalist. The video cited American airstrikes as the reason for the murder.

ISIS has disseminated various other statements attacking the U.S. via social media. The official ISIS translation of an April 2014 speech from the group's main spokesman Abu Mohammad al-Adnani, states, "Yes, verily the plot of *Shaytan* [Satan] is weak. America came to Iraq leading a frenzied crusade...The Crusaders thought that no one would be able to overcome them; however Allah the Mighty and Majestic disgraced them and showed us the weakness of their plot."

Mohammad al-Adnani also claims credit in the speech for ISIS expelling the U.S. from Iraq.

Some of these posts target Westerners or non-Muslims more generally. The video ["Ya Junod Al-Haqq Hayya"](#) ('Soldiers of the just cause, let's go!') video, released in June 2014, features a song with the lyric: "Break the crosses and destroy the lineage of the grandsons of monkeys," apparent references to Christians and Jews and, therefore, indicating that Christians and Jews are the enemy.

The same video also included more direct anti-Jewish statements: "Wherever our war goes, Jewish rabbis are humiliated." Such Messages [highlighting a 'Jewish enemy' to recruit followers](#) is commonly employed by terrorist organizations.

[Another video, released in August 2014](#), featured individuals allegedly from the U.S., Great Britain, Finland, Tunisia, Indonesia, Belgium, Morocco and South Africa praising ISIS and encouraging Muslims from around the world to join the organization and to establish themselves in the territory it holds.

Similarly, ISIS and its supporters have disseminated [propaganda against Israel](#). Official ISIS maps have included Israel as part of the group's territorial ambitions, with one threatening rocket attacks and noting that the organization is operating but 220km away from Israel. [Similar threats were issued](#) during the conflict between Hamas and Israel in the summer of 2014. Following the [kidnapping and killing of three Israeli teenagers](#), Naftali Fraenkel, Gilad Shaar and Eyal Yifrach, one ISIS supporter who regularly tweets messages praising ISIS warned that the kidnappings would be the first of many such attacks by ISIS militants. And the second issue of ISIS's English-language *Dabiq* magazine stated that, "The Islamic State will do everything within its means to continue striking down every apostate who stands as an obstacle on its path towards Palestine... It is only a matter of time and patience before it reaches Palestine to fight the barbaric jews (sic) and kill those of them hiding behind the gharqad trees – the trees of the jews (sic)."

Recruiting and Image

The vast majority of non-Arabic propaganda distributed by ISIS is designed to get attention (often tweeting information at members of the media and government), enhance the group's image and encourage Westerners to support and join the organization.

Much of the social media campaign centers on depicting ISIS as a goodwill organization. Several Twitter feeds maintained by ISIS (as well as accounts on Facebook and other social media outlets belonging to ISIS or supporters) regularly distribute images of militants engaging with children, distributing food and performing other social services. In April 2014, ISIS released a video featuring former German rapper-turned-ISIS-militant Denis Cuspert engaged in a snowball fight with fellow extremists, stating in German, "Now you see...here in Syria, we

also can have fun!...That's jihad, jihad makes fun...and we have fun here with the children...Come on, we invite you to jihad!"

In June 2014, ISIS began posting a series of short videos called "Mujatweets" (named ostensibly for their brevity) to YouTube. The videos are designed to depict ISIS as a charitable organization, beloved by civilians and establishing a better society. The first episode depicts an apparent European recruit singing a song in German praising ISIS. The second episode shows clips of children having fun with ISIS militants. The third episode features an apparent Syrian chef – an everyday civilian – who explains how good life is now that ISIS controls his region.

The fourth, released in July 2014, takes a slightly different tack, following an apparently German ISIS member who visits supposed wounded militants in a hospital, telling viewers, "Come to the land of honor and search for *shahada* (martyrdom)." The fourth episode is in German with English subtitles. By August 2014, ISIS had released 8 Mujatweets episodes in total.

Some ISIS propaganda also focuses on the work the organization is doing to establish a supposedly model Islamic state. Along with multiple short Tweets and messages by the organization and its supporters praising a coming caliphate, the organization has released highly popularized videos such as "Khairah Ummah," a fifteen minute film released in June 2014 and promoted on multiple Twitter feeds and on Facebook that shows an ISIS member "reminding" shopkeepers to go to the mosque on Friday and not to display manikins with women's clothing, among other things. This, he explains, creates, "the best *Ummah* [community] produced for mankind."

The video later shows how ISIS found and executed someone they claimed to be a sorcerer – a scene meant to show the extent to which it is working to eradicate evil and implement Islamic law and values. The Khairah Ummah video was released in multiple versions for western audiences, with subtitles in several languages, including English, French, Russian and Turkish.

Other social media efforts tout ISIS's military strength, calling on followers to join in fighting. The "[Ya Junod Al-Haqq Hayya](#)" video, released early in June 2014, featured prominently displayed English subtitles of a song bragging about ISIS's military conquests and its ability to instill fear in its enemies. Later in the same month, a video called "Haya alal-Jihad" or "Let's go for Jihad!" featured a song in German, with prominent English subtitles, with the lyrics: "Brothers join us/We slaughter until the day of Judgment," and proclaims that ISIS members "love to die." The song was accompanied by images of explosions, casualties and fighting ISIS members.

The image ISIS seeks to portray is reminiscent of [Inspire magazine](#), published by Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. The magazine's earlier issues attempted to encourage Americans to join terrorist training camps abroad by depicting an almost summer-camp like atmosphere.

ISIS has created its own English-language magazines that are distributed on Twitter as well. Its first attempt, the *Islamic State Report*, primarily featured images with headlines and quotes from the Qu'ran, along with occasional short essays praising ISIS. Various news items in the report included brags about killing sorcerers and information about grain distribution and implementation of Islamic law in relation to giving charity and tax.

In July 2014, ISIS issued a second English-language magazine called *Dabiq*. In its first issue, *Dabiq* was more similar to other terrorist magazines like *Inspire*, featuring 50 pages of graphics and articles on ideology, theology and praise of the organization, as well as quotes from American military and political figures describing ISIS's strength. The [second issue of Dabiq](#), released in July 2014, included philosophical justifications for ISIS and its ideology and urged readers to move to ISIS territory or at least pledge allegiance to the organization.

Like that of other terrorist organizations, ISIS propaganda does not shy away from graphic military imagery. It regularly posts images of shootings, crucifixions,

beheadings and mass executions it claims to perpetrate, as well as images of individuals it claims as martyrs. These can be seen on organizational Twitter accounts as well as on the accounts of its regional affiliates. Throughout the winter of 2013-2014, ISIS also released a number of propaganda posters explaining the “virtues of swords,” “virtues of seeking martyrdom,” and the benefit of “racing towards jihad.”

Background on ISIS

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria was designated by the U.S. State Department as a terrorist organization in 2003 (as Al Qaeda in Iraq). In June 2014, ISIS renamed itself IS, the Islamic State, reflecting its claims of territorial sovereignty in parts of Iraq and Syria.

ISIS was founded in 2003 as [Al Qaeda in Iraq](#) with a mission of defeating the U.S. coalition forces that had invaded Iraq and, imposing Islamist governance. In 2006 it became The Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) and, while still affiliated with Al Qaeda, incorporated a number of additional insurgent groups into a coalition.

Following the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011, ISI forces began fighting along with other rebel forces there as well. In 2012, the group renamed itself the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (Syria), reflecting its new regional ambitions. While fighting in Syria, it acquired strength and greater numbers of foreign recruits, drawn specifically to that conflict. However, it also began clashing with other rebel organizations including Jabhat al-Nusra, the Syria Al Qaeda affiliate.

In February 2014, Ayman al-Zawahiri, the head of Al Qaeda, formally disowned ISIS for disobeying his orders to stay in Iraq and for clashing with JN and other groups. Rather than disbanding, ISIS apparently grew stronger, attracting more recruits and gaining a reputation for brutal tactics.

In June 2014, ISIS renewed its attention toward Iraq. It organized a series of successful attacks in Iraq and quickly conquered significant territory stretching

between Iraq and Syria. At the end of the month, it declared the territory it held in Syria and Iraq the third Caliphate and renamed itself the Islamic State. Abu Bakr al Bagdhadi, the group's leader, was named Caliph under the name Caliph Ibrahim.