

JIHADISM AND INFORMATION WARFARE BEYOND DAESH

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In recent years, the narrative surrounding the question of social media usage in the post-2011 Middle East has undeniably shifted. In the early stages of the Arab Spring, a common assumption was that social media had facilitated new forms of political mobilisation by circumventing censorship and acting as an alternative to state-controlled media (Breuer, 2012; Gerbaudo, 2012). As such, it was regarded as beneficial to freedom of speech, pluralism, deliberation and the democratisation process (Howard & Hussein, 2013). However, in light of the debate surrounding the issue of Jihadist propaganda, the initial optimism has been replaced by a more sceptical view on the pitfalls of online-based political activism in the Middle East. The development of innovative communication and recruitment strategies like that of ISIS brings social scientists to shift their perspective by considering whether social media may alternatively be used to introduce a new age of information warfare (Winter, 2017a).

This paper examines the nature of today's information warfare, as much as it relates to online propaganda, by reflecting on how it operates across different agencies. It considers not only how information warfare translates into the strategy of radical insurgency groups but also the extent to which policy-makers and state-owned media engage with it by positioning themselves in relation to the fight against terrorism and emerging forms of radicalisation. Finally, it introduces a discussion on how this issue may be framed to build and maintain the legitimacy of political elites in the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings, incidentally pulling the once-politicised youth away from the mainstream political sphere. In addition, it will comment on how political elites have embraced information warfare as part of the complex interplay of proxy wars currently taking place in the Levant. It argues that this unwillingly creates a climate of uncertainty, which lays the grounds for conspiracy theories and presumably acts as a push factor of radicalisation.

As the recent literature suggests (Ayad, 2015; Kepel, 2015; Gambhir, 2016; Winter, 2017a), social media-based propaganda has been essential to the development of ISIS' leaderless Jihad initially envisioned by al-Qaeda's strategist Abu Mus'ab al Suri. By disseminating propaganda for an online and geographically widespread audience, Jihadist groups' message is no longer necessarily context-specific and evolves to become, in the case of ISIS, less ideologically driven. Experts agree that online Jihadist propaganda is designed to convey a rather fluid and utopian ideological discourse, likely to consolidate a transnational community of supporters. ISIS' idealised representation of its caliphate may in this regard be considered as virtual (Gambhir, 2016; Winter, 2016; 2017a), not only because it relies to a significant extent on online social networks but also because it substitutes the virtual reality of death and the after-life to that of political action (Roy, 2017). Online propaganda has been central to the development of ISIS' transnational recruitment strategy, its unpredictable lone-wolf attacks and its ability to capitalise on different environments for potential insurgency beyond the Iraqi-Syrian context. This is precisely the reason why, as a result of its territorial decline and successive defeats in Sirte, Mosul and Raqqa, the group has revealed its intention to prioritise information warfare in its "media operative" document released in spring 2017 (Winter, 2017a). As a matter of fact, the promotion of media Jihad is certainly regarded as a critical condition for the resilience of the organisation as well as an alternative to territorial Jihad (Gambhir, 2016; Lister, 2017). Nevertheless, the real impact of Jihadist propaganda in terms of information warfare does not relate to the marginal proportion of its online audience but to the way political powers have responded to the issue of online radicalisation in the mainstream political debate and global media scene (Mahlouly, 2017).

Although the volume, diversity and reach of ISIS' propaganda has considerably decreased since 2015 (Winter, 2017b), policy-makers, tech companies and civil society members are still investing resources to raise awareness and develop counter-radicalisation strategies. Censorship policies implemented over the last two years reduced the group's visibility on mainstream social networks such as Twitter and contributed – along with surveillance – to limit its activity to encrypted platforms (Hecker, 2015). In addition, the emphasis has now been put on the promotion of counter-narratives, which reveals to what extent political institutions and corporate media are willing to respond and to engage in a war over media narratives. Therefore, in order to fully understand the scope of insurgency-led information warfare, one needs to assess the receptiveness of the public debate to the issue of online radicalisation. Arguably, policy responses to terrorism contribute to the visibility and media ecology of ISIS as much as it has been the case for al-Qaeda in the years following the 9/11 attack (Mannoni & Bonardi, 2003; Ayad, 2015; Kepel, 2015). As suggested by the critique of radicalisation initiated in the field of media studies (Awan, Hoskins, & O'Loughlin, 2012; Kundnani, 2014), information warfare also translates in political elites' ability to capitalise on the fear of terrorism in order to gain credibility and legitimise foreign policy strategies.

The framing of radicalisation in the mainstream media and the public sphere is presumably even more relevant in countries that suffered a period of political instability, which affected their economic growth, in the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings. The threat of radicalism may have helped discredit political Islam (Boubekeur, 2016) playing in favour of the Egyptian military regime and the Nidaa Tounes coalition formed by the Tunisian secular elites. Although Sisi and Marzouki's governments have occasionally been criticised for representing the counter-revolution (Laiq, 2013), they have still benefitted from the common assumption that they are most likely to ensure political stability and guarantee a secularised governance. Consequently, as much as it has been used in the recent US and European elections to underpin populist narratives around immigration and national identity, the debate on global security in the MENA region served the return of the leading political forces to power. It is therefore also used as a pretext to justify repressive measures and authoritarian leadership, which would prevent the politically-engaged youth from seeking representation in the mainstream political sphere. As a matter of fact, research indicates that a significant proportion of the disillusioned pro-revolutionary youth is drifting away from political institutions and only occasionally engages in informal forms of politics (Yerkes, 2017).

Yet from the perspective of Olivier Roy's theory (2017), the political alienation of youths may as well be considered as a significant push factor of radicalisation. As he argues in his latest book, ISIS' radicalism offers nihilist youths the opportunity to escape and deny reality through Jihad and death. Accordingly as an alternative to counter-narratives an effective way to prevent radicalisation would be to engage the disfranchised, marginalised and politically disillusioned youths back to mainstream politics (Cavatorta, 2015; Merone, 2014).

Instead, elites may create an enabling environment for radicalisation by opposing diverging media narratives, which expose the negative consequences of their approaches towards political Islam – often framed as counter-terrorism measures. This stands out from the rationale behind the Saudi-led bloc boycotting Qatar as well as from the way Qatari and Saudi news channels are distinctively reporting on military interventions in Iraq and Syria. Beyond the controversial nature of its relationship with Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood, Qatar has been more specifically condemned for the fact that its news channel Al Jazeera provides a critical perspective on the leadership of the political elites in power across the MENA region. For instance, as argued in a forthcoming comparative study (Mahlouly and Al Saud, forthcoming), Al Jazeera and its Saudi-owned competitor Al Arabiya provide significantly different perspectives when covering US foreign policy in the Middle East. Further, based on the analysis mentioned above, which investigates a sample of news reports and readers' comments, I argue that the two media channels stimulate an equally polarised debate amongst their audiences. This may be the sign that political powers competing over the moral high grounds in the proclaimed fight against terrorism indirectly cultivate an environment as favourable to polarisation and conspiracy theory as radical propaganda itself.

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Published jointly with Aula Mediterrània.