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Social Media and Jihadism: The Shaping of a New Discourse[1]

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About the author

Dr. Emna Ben Arab served as a Member of the Tunisian Parliament (2004-2011). She is an academic at the University of Sfax and the author of a book entitled *A Future Made Perfect? The Image of the Coming Millennium in American Science Fiction*, and of a number of articles on security issues: "The Making of a Foreign Terrorist Fighter: Tunisia as a Case Study", "The Impact of Syria's War on the Security Environment in the MENA Region", "Foreign Fighters: the new security threat" and many others.

Abstract

This paper explores the role of social media in shaping a jihadi narrative that played a decisive role in radicalizing an unprecedented number of youth and takes Tunisia as a case in action[2]. Drawing on jihadi content published in mainstream social media, and for the purpose of developing counter-narrative strategies, this paper seeks to provide a framework through which to understand a jihadi discourse based on shaping the perceptions of a target audience and on reinforcing its polarization. The paper argues that anti jihadi narrative strategies need to be synchronized with socio-economic and politico-military strategies rooted in a profound understanding of the sources of the jihadi discourse appeal and its ability to radicalize and mobilize potential supporters. For this, a mixed-methods approach based on a combination of quantitative analysis of social media content, and interviews with Tunisian radicalized youth in prisons is used.

Keywords: Counter-narrative, jihadi discourse, social media, perceptual/pragmatic factors, polarization

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[2] For the purpose of this paper, jihadism is used to refer to a politico-religious ideology that embraces violence to achieve a "rebirth" of a mystical sharia- based past society regardless of group specificities whose tactics and purposes very often converge (ISIS, Al-Qaida, etc.) A special emphasis will be laid on ISIS given the unprecedented number of foreign fighters who joined its ranks over a period of 18 months since June 2014 according to the Soufan Group, 2015.

From Al-Qaida to the Islamic State, the international jihadi movement has adapted itself to the evolution of the internet which has become a major operational platform for its propaganda and its transnational reach to radicalize its supporters towards action.1 Although research has shown that the internet-based jihadi propaganda activities in Tunisia have been less robust than in other theaters, the existence of an audience receptive to its messaging is evidenced first by the sustainable activity of the jihadi movement on Tunisian territory.

Between December 2012 and March 2016 more than 80 terrorist activities ranging from high profile attacks to thwarted attacks to logistic preparations for attacks were carried out on Tunisian soil as seen on the map of terror attacks. These activities were concentrated mainly along the western borders with 2013, 2014 and 2015 being the most deadly years. The relatively high number of Tunisians who were inspired to travel to Syria and join ISIS and other groups signaled the existence of a propaganda campaign targeting Tunisian youth.[3] This phenomenon, dubbed by UNSC Resolution 2178 Foreign Terrorist Fighters (henceforth FTF), goes beyond the actual number of FTFs to cover a highly radicalized milieu (family, friends, neighbors, etc.) highlighting the ardency of the arguments put forward for that purpose.

Drawing on jihadi content published in mainstream social media such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, the paper seeks to provide a framework through which to understand a jihadi discourse based on shaping the perceptions of a target audience and capitalizing on its polarization for the purpose of developing counter-narrative strategies. The movement's evolutionary adaptation to the online media landscape, the elements of its online discourse and how it is used to serve the ideology it seeks to advance will be highlighted. The paper concludes by arguing that anti jihadi narrative strategies need to be synchronized with socio- economic and politico-military strategies rooted in a profound understanding of the sources of the jihadi discourse appeal and its ability to radicalize and mobilize potential supporters. For this, a mixed-methods approach based on a combination of quantitative analysis of social media content, and interviews with Tunisian radicalized youth in prisons is used.

In the immediate aftermath of "Enduring Freedom" operation by the US and its allies against Afghanistan in 2011, Al- Qaida was hit hard and its leaders had to go underground. The movement was therefore transformed from a hierarchical centralized organization to a decentralized one with branches in Iraq and in the Maghreb. This organizational decentralization is helped by technological innovations and the passage from 1.0 to 2.0 web which allowed internet content consumers to become internet content producers leading to

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[3] According to a recent report, Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq (New York: The Soufan Group, 2015) , between 6,000 and 7,000 Tunisians are believed to have traveled to Syria to join jihadi groups, making Tunisia the single largest exporter of FTFs in the world. This number was refuted by the Tunisian authorities (2017) who claim that the number is around 3000 notwithstanding the 27000 Tunisians that the authorities prevented from traveling to Libya and Syria.

the multiplication of jihadi forums and the advent of the jihadi sphere,[4] as part of the internet forum phenomenon.

The golden age of the forums was short-lived due to intelligence infiltration and surveillance, but also to the advent of social media which have quickly become the main platform for the dissemination of links toward jihadi content. In 2014, around 46000 Twitter accounts were believed to be used by members or sympathizers of ISIS with an average of 1000 followers, five times the general average of any Twitter account followers.[5] Social media ushered in, therefore, a new era of a robust presence of jihadists on the net who quickly acquired sophisticated expertise and learnt how to use it to the benefit of the cause they defend. Ayman Al Dhawahiri underlined in his letter to Abou Moussab Al Zarkaoui that "more than half of the battle takes place in the media arena".[6]

In outlining the strategic logic of ISIS messaging, Ingram argues that ISIS seems to fully understand the basics of communication strategy based on the ability to reach its target audience, with a relevant, and resonating message (what he calls the three Rs) in order to attain its objectives of shaping perceptions and polarizing the support of contested populations. This happens, according to him, only if the message appeals to both "pragmatic and perceptual factors".[7] Pragmatic factors include socio-economic elements and the core narrative is that these are taken care of by ISIS as a geographic (having territory), political (with state-like institutions) and a moral (based on religious teachings) entity therefore ensuring the synchronicity of its narrative and actions while denigrating its enemy's by highlighting the gap between their narrative and actions. It also compels its audience to engage in rational choice decision-making based on pragmatic considerations. Perceptual factors play on the identity crisis of us vs them and on the positive self presentation and negative other presentation accentuating polarization and pushing the target audience to engage in identity-choice decision-making.
This framework of analysis, tested with 82 radicalized youth convicted on terrorism charges in Tunisian prisons over a period of 3 months (first three months of 2017),7 proves that the perceptual factor is very strong and multi-layered among the sample as underlined in the Table below:

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[4] Jihadism on the Web. A breeding Ground for Jihad in the Modern Age," (General Intelligence and Security Service, Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations of the Netherlands, 2012), 6. According to this report, around 25.000 jihadists from a hundred countries are members of these forums, Al-Ikhlas, Al-Firdaws, Al-Buraq, Al Fallouja, etc.

[5] J.M. Berger and Jonathan Morgan, "The ISIS Twitter Census. Defining and Describing the Population of ISIS supporters on Twitter," The Brookings Project on US Relations with the Islamic World, Analysis Paper, n° 20, March 2015.

[6] Letter of Ayman Al Dhawahiri to Abou Moussab Al Zarquaoui, July 9th 2005, http://fas.org/irp/news/2005/10/letter in english.pdf

[7] Ingram, Hororo J. "Understanding ISIS Propaganda : Appeal, Radicalisation and Counter-strategy Implications," in Expanding Research on Countering Violent Extremism, ed. Sara Zeiger (Hedaya and Edith Cowan University, 2016), 145

US	THEM
Youth	Authorities (macro and meso systems)
Sunnis	Shiites
Muslims	Infidels
Arabs	Israelis/ USA
The Arab and Islamic World	The West

This polarization has fueled the respondents' sense of victimization and has equally generated bonds of affiliation and identification with jihadi narrative and actions. In fact, there is a consensus among all the interviewees that one or more of the following factors were decisive in their radicalization: a strong feeling of injustice, a deep-seated feeling of hatred toward the police and security forces, frustration with political authorities, hatred of and lack of trust in the West.

The pragmatic factors are also confirmed by the interviews:

Age	44.8% 25-29
Marital status	74.1% unmarried
Education	87.9% dropouts
Employment	87.9% unemployed/vulnerable employment
Income	79.3% occasional
Drugs/alcohol addict prior to radicalization	63.8%

The quantitative data emerging from the interviews confirm that the jihadi discourse is based on a good understanding of the structural-psychological environment of the target audience (socio- economic, political and cultural and identity-based) made acute through social media. In his analysis of ISIS social media releases, Lombardi identifies three characteristics of their communication strategy,[8] which includes gamification, convergence,[9] and dramatization and Hollywood cinematic style that supports a strategy of emotional communication based on displaying the seductive appeal of shock-and-awe methods, paying attention to detail and technical quality to maximize outreach and impact. Storytelling and first-hand reports by locals and FTFs usually go viral on the net and receive an extensive media coverage that affects disenfranchised youth looking for a meaning to their life.

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[8] M. Lombardi, "Twitter and Jihad: the communication strategy of ISIS" (ISPI. Italy, 2015), 83–122

[9] Emna Ben Arab, "The Making of a Foreign Terrorist Fighter," in *Expanding Research on Countering Violent Extremism*, ed. Sara Zeiger (Hedayah and Edith Cowan University, 2016), 49.

Along the same line, Arnaboldi and Vidino in their analysis of ISIS propaganda strategy argue that the main characteristic of their communication style is the bottom-bottom approach which allows every addressee to become a content creator and to operate through personal Twitter or FB accounts producing and sharing materials leading to a staggering increase in the number of followers. This approach is by nature interactive, decentralized and empowering to the bottom. But, although free from hierarchical structures, it is based on reference models traced by major international jihadi groups. This is known as the swarm dynamics, a concept that describes the activities, behavior and ideology of terrorists as being shaped by "a few individuals… whose influence guides the collective flight of the swarm".

The propaganda produced by these various outlets is designed to be at the service of a politico-religious ideology whose objective is the strict application of Sharia law in Muslim territories by erasing state borders established by colonial powers for the eventual creation of a caliphate. For this purpose, the ideologically defined transformation of society is framed in a potent recruitment message that has focused on a set of themes that include appealing to the supporters' sense of religious obligation, projecting a message of strength and victory and fostering a climate of fear and panic.

The narrative of the conflict promoted by recruiters appeals to potential recruits' sense of religious duty. It is a religiously inspired gradualist message that starts, as it is revealed in the interviews of radicalized youth in Douar Hisher and Sidi Hassin,[10] and of FTFs in Tunisian jails, with religious teachings ranging from everyday behavioral code to the ultimate embrace by the targeted audience of a jihadi political agenda and the apology of a holy war against anything "other". Quotes and messages from the Koran and Hadith emerge from these interviews and the overwhelming FB posts and tweets as the main justificatory grounds for the group's activities.

The message emphasizes an acute polarization between the in-group and the out-group through negative lexicalization whereby representations are often articulated along an us vs them dimension. Their hardships are framed in terms of what the "Other" inflicted upon them creating, therefore, an existential threat that activates a sense of obligation to the common group to which they both belong and a duty to defend persecuted coreligionists. The notion of justice is, therefore, central to their doctrine-related message. It legitimizes their actions toward their opponents and at the same time strengthens their inward solidarity. Indeed, "ISIS's vision of resurrecting an idealized caliphate gives them the sense of serving a sacred mission",[11] and of "keeping the group's sense of mission alive, contributing to cement its spirit as a single entity and stressing its otherness vis-à-vis third-party subjects"

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[10] Salem, J. H. Salafi Jihadism in Tunisia: Current State and Prospects: an Ethnographic Case Study. Tunisian Institute of Strategic Studies, 2014.
[11] Fawaz A. Gerges, "ISIS and the Third Wave of Jihadism" Current History (December 2014), 343.

through "dehumanizing" and "deislamizing" the enemy.[12] Their recruitment messaging, therefore, emphasizes the necessity to take action to preserve the existence of the community.

Their actions aim at a double radicalization. Their multimedia releases showcase their brutality as an act of defense in reaction to Western aggression (invading Muslim land, killing innocent civilians…). While this serves as a radicalizing message for Muslim youth as they tend to interpret brutality as justice being rendered and as an act of reciprocity, it is understood by Westerners as an act of aggression that requires an equally brutal reaction, creating therefore new openings for extreme ideas that are gaining ground with the broader Western public. This is evidenced by the anti-Islamic impulses of the right wing politicians and base in the USA and Europe (e.g., the rhetorical excesses of Republican candidates for the 2016 Presidential elections such as Donald Trump and Ben Carson; the rise of right-wing parties in France, the Netherlands, Italy, Sweden, Greece and England, and ultra-right movements like Pegida, Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the Occident, a nationalist, anti-Islam political movement) that serve to intensify the conflict by allowing angry and reactive attitudes against Muslims in the West to take root.

The recruiters' narrative also underpins a social movement that provides them with a tight-knit community that offers them an outlet in which to express their grievances, a sense of belonging to cling to, and eventually the prestigious status of a martyr.

The utopian nature of their new world is also emphasized in the recruitment message and it is one major explanation of the unprecedented number of FTFs in Iraq and Syria compared to previous wars (conflicts in Chechnya (1994-2009), Somalia (1993- 2014) and Afghanistan after 2001 could not count on more than a few hundred foreign combatants).[13] An Islamic utopia that achieves a divine promise and an appealing vision of the future (in sheer contradiction to their reservoir of misery) is central to their propaganda. It is portrayed as the incarnation of the ideal Islamic state, a full state with a global political project, a corresponding territory and a normal daily life inspired and guided by Sharia law. ISIS magazine Islamic State News published by Al Hayet Media Center celebrates the success of the Caliphate by emphasizing its efficient and fair governance and the opportunities for development it offers and by showcasing the quality of life in a state that cares about its people for the purpose of attracting the families of FTFs. Al Baghdadi promised, in this

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[12] Andrea Plebani and Paolo Maggiolini. "The Centrality of the Enemy in Al- Baghdadi Caliphate".Twitter and Jihad: The Communication Strategy of ISIS. Eds. Monica Maggioni and Paolo Magri.(Milano: ISPI, 2015) 39.

[13] Isabelle Duyvesteyn and Bram Peeters in "Fickle Foreign Fighters? A Cross-Case Analysis of Seven Muslim Foreign Fighter Mobilisations (1980- 2015)," argue that the huge differences in the number of transnational insurgents in foreign wars is due to accessibility to the battlefield, the cohesion of the insurgent group and the chances of success.

context, marriage grants, fully equipped houses and free goods to ISIS fighters.[14]

ISIS narrative, in many respects, is used to support its actions on the ground, as "a force multiplier for itself and a force nullifier for its opponents".[15] Related to this is their message of strength and victory. By presenting itself as a state with global ambitions, as opposed to the localized projects of rival groups, and by publicizing its ultraviolent videos of battles, mass executions, beheadings and burning, ISIS gives the potential recruits the impression that they are playing for a winner, a "powerful vanguard movement capable of delivering victory and salvation".[16]

ISIS has, indeed, aggressively advanced a winner's message to its Tunisian audience. In May 2015, Africa Media, an online media group loyal to ISIS, tweeted an image of a poster with text claiming that "the mujahedeen of the mountains" in Tunisia— KUIN's main base of operations—had "joined the caravan of the caliphate." The statement also noted that Tunisia would "wish the al-Qaeda days were back," emphasizing its hard line tactics compared to those of al-Qaeda. This statement, though misleading, is typical of ISIS's messaging strategy, which often uses hyperbole to create an exaggerated view of strength and success.

Another aspect of ISIS's messaging of victory in Tunisia involves exalting its own military strength, while simultaneously emphasizing the failings of the Tunisian army. An example of this messaging came in May 2015, when Jund al-Khilafah released a statement on Twitter claiming that the Tunisian army was "unsuccessful" in a ground operation against the group, adding that the security forces were "cowardly" and had to retreat from the battleground chaotically, leaving behind their weapons and vehicles.[17] ISIS has released similar statements after perpetrating major terrorist attacks in Tunisia. For instance, in ISIS's statement claiming responsibility for the Bardo attack, the group vowed that the operation was only "the first drop of rain."

Linked to this is ISIS's messaging approach that downplays losses incurred by the group. Jund al-Khilafah has consistently refuted reports that its members were killed in security raids. For example, in May 2015, the group vehemently denied rumors that ten of its soldiers were killed by Tunisian security forces, instead claiming that its fighters were experiencing continued success against the government.

Coupled with deceptive messaging tactics, the group works to achieve policy paralysis by sowing confusion, stoking fears, and eroding trust in the state and

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[14] *Al Arabiya*, 29th August 2014.

[15] Haroro J. Ingram, "Understanding ISIS Propaganda : Appeal, Radicalization and Counter-Strategy Implications," in Expanding Research on Countering Violent Extremism, ed. Sara Zeiger (Hedaya and Edith Cowan University, 2016), 144.

[16] Fawaz A. Gerges, "ISIS and the Third Wave of Jihadism" Current History (December 2014), 342.

[17] "Commenting on the Unsuccessful Ground Operation of the Apostate Army in Jbel Kasserine," *Mu'asasat Ajnad al-Khilafah*, May 1, 2015.

its institutions to create space to operate and eventually govern. For this, an intimidation campaign aimed at scaring tourists away from Tunisia and maximizing the psychological damage resulting from ISIS-perpetrated attacks is orchestrated. After the Bardo attack, Jund al-Khilafah in Tunisia— an ISIS splinter group, believed to consist of defectors from KUIN, who pledged allegiance to ISIS in December 2014,[18] tweeted a message directed at tourists that threatened: "to the Christians planning their Summer vacations in Tunisia…we are preparing for u something that will make u forget #BardoAttack".[19] Similarly, a couple of months later, a media group loyal to ISIS tweeted a warning to Muslims, asking them not to fly Tunisair, suggesting that an attack on the airliner was imminent. Though such an attack never occurred, the Tweet added to the perception that Tunisia was unsafe for tourists and therefore perpetuating their propaganda strategy's self-fulfilling logic that if the group can create the perception of insecurity in Tunisia, it can bring about the actual collapse, or at least erosion, of the state.

Indeed, scare tactics are an integral part of ISIS's messaging strategy. ISIS supporters in Tunisia have threatened to burn alive any Tunisian soldier that they capture, a likely reference to ISIS's immolation of a Jordanian pilot captured in December 2014.[20] Moreover, ISIS has conveyed the message that Tunisian soldiers are not safe from the group, even in their own homes. To that end, in November 2016, the Amaq News Agency issued a statement indicating that a Tunisian soldier had been killed at his home by ISIS fighters. The message included a picture of the soldier's identification card.[21]

Key findings, emerging from ISIS online narrative analysis and its impact as revealed from the interviews conducted with a radicalized audience, pertain to the communication channel, the themes and the outcome. ISIS communication strategy makes exceptional use of the technical opportunities made available by social media (gamification, convergence and Hollywood cinematic techniques). Its narrative seeks to highlight synchronicity between discourse and actions for credibility and for rallying support among local as well as transnational audiences. Its appeal seems to come from a combination of an ideological/theological component and a structural-psychological component (socio-economic, political and cultural and identity-based) that reinforces some sort of convergence between "rational and identity-choice decision making processes" to join the caliphate. Extreme violence,[22] as ISIS trademark, has helped maximize the reach of the message to adversaries and supporters alike. Shock leads to intimidation andextensive coverage, and a sense of satisfaction reinforces the message of victory and of justice being

[18] "Alleged Group 'Jund al-Khilafah in Tunisia' Pledges to IS," SITE Intelligence Group, December 8, 2014, https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/alleged-group-jund-al- khilafah-in-tunisia-pledges-to-is.html

[19] Series of Tweets from Jund al-Khilafah (@AjnadKhilafa), posted on May 4, 2015.

[20] Series of Tweets from Jund al-Khilafah (@AjnadKhilafa), posted on May 4, 2015.

[21] "Amaq reports IS fighters killed Tunisian soldier in his home in Kasserine," SITE Intelligence Group, November 6, 2016, https://news-siteintelgroup-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/Jihadist-News/amaq-reports-is-fighterskilled-tunisian-soldier-in-his-home-in-kasserine.html.

[22] Ingram, 148.

rendered. Religious references are used as a cover for what is fundamentally a political project driven by ideological and geo-political imperatives.

While these trends are indicative, to varying degrees, of the success of jihadi propaganda in radicalizing ordinary people to become members of or fighters for the caliphate, they are equally reflective of alternative narrative strategies failures. Empirically- based understanding of the strategic rationale that drives the jihadi propaganda is essential. Shaping perception along with highlighting the narrative-action synchronicity is at the heart of the battle.

Currently, this lack of understanding is leading to quick fixes through a series of piecemeal security-focused policies (legislation monitoring charity associations, surveillance of homegrown networks and sympathizers, travel ban, etc.), rather than to solutions based on an integrated approach that takes into account the multifaceted and multi-dimensional threat.

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