

Journal of Terrorism Research



Volume 7, Issue 1, January 2016

ISSN: 2049-7040



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/).



Contents

Articles

1

#IS_Fangirl: Exploring a New Role for Women in Terrorism..... 1

by Laura Huey and Eric Witmer

The Capability Spectrum; Locating Terrorism in Relation to other Manifestations of Political Violence..... 11

by Thomas Whelan

Italian Jihadists in Syria and Iraq..... 20

by Francesco Marone

Paradigmatic Shifts in Jihadism in Cyberspace:

The Emerging Role of Unaffiliated Sympathizers in Islamic State’s Social Media Strategy..... 36

by Yannick Veilleux-Lepage

Do Territorial Control and the Loss of Territory Determine the Use of Indiscriminate Violence by Incumbent Actors? An Examination of the Syrian Civil War in Aleppo over 45 weeks..... 52

by Evan Tyner

About JTR

67



Articles

#IS_Fangirl: Exploring a New Role for Women in Terrorism

by Laura Huey and Eric Witmer



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/).

Abstract

In this paper we present initial results from an ongoing study of women affiliated with pro-IS networks on Twitter and other social media. Our particular focus is on 20 accounts belonging to individual identified as 'fan girls.' Drawing on an analysis of Twitter posts from these 20 accounts, we identify key characteristics of the fan girl in an attempt to bring conceptual clarity to this role and enhance our understanding of who these girls are and their potential for radicalization.

Keywords: terrorism; women; Islamic State; fan girl; Jihad; social media

"feeling extra radical tonight" – fan girl tweet, 2015

Throughout 2014 and 2015 an emergent phenomenon began to draw significant media attention: young girls and women were decamping from the West to begin radically different lives in territories held by the terrorist organization, the Islamic State (IS). Searching for ways in which to better understand this phenomenon, media outlets fixated on the potential role of social media as a radicalizing agent, turning to Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr and other sites as portals through which to peek into the psyches of an increasing number of young women. In their bafflement, reporters and/or their expert guests made a number of erroneous claims. One notable example was the statement made during a CNN report that IS propagandists gain female recruits online through the strategic use of pictures of kittens and promises of Nutella. More widely, media outlets simply dismissed female followers as 'fan girls', thus likening all IS affiliated women to rabidly infatuated teenagers swooning over teen idols.

'Fan girl', as Merriam-Webster (2015) defines the term, refers to a "girl or woman who is an extremely overly enthusiastic fan of someone or something." When one conjures an image of a stereotypical fan girl, they may envision hysterical teenagers screaming and crying at a One Direction concert or at a Twilight movie premiere. However, this term has also been adopted by members of IS networks as a derogatory epithet for individuals who are viewed as lacking the sincere ideological commitment of regular members ('baqiya'), and who join IS networks in order to enjoy the notoriety that comes from participating in pro-jihadist groups[1]. Thus, within the IS subculture, fan girl has a very specific meaning. Moreover, the over-broad use of the term to describe all or most women affiliated with the IS is not only inaccurate, but obscures significant differences in the motives underlying women's actions.

In the present study we present initial findings from an ongoing study that includes a sample of 20 individuals identified as 'fan girls.' Drawing on a qualitative analysis of social media posts (primarily Twitter) over a 10 month period, we demonstrate key characteristics of the fan girl in order to bring some conceptual clarity to this role and its place within pro-IS networks. By examining the different trajectories some of these



girls' lives took over ten months, we are also able to enhance our understanding of the fan girl's potential for embracing *and* enacting IS ideology.

Female roles in pro-jihadist terrorist groups

A central misconception previously found within public discourse on pro-jihadist terrorist groups is that women play little to no role in their activities. In large part this misconception can be attributed to what is perceived to be the inferior nature of women's status within radical Salafist movements. Although it is manifestly the case that women within many such groups do play a lesser role – for example, being barred by some from waging jihad on the battlefield like their male counterparts (Lahoud 2014) – they do effectively participate in a number of other, often equally crucial ways (Al-Tabaa 2013). Cragin and Daly (2009) have identified three: as facilitators, propagandists and as a group's historical conscience[2]. Elaborating on the nature of women's participation in pro-jihadist groups, Cunningham (2007: 121) observes:

Women have been supporters and family members of global Islamist groups like Al Qaeda for many years, but they have also reportedly been used to train women ('Mother of Usama'), run women's organizations and groups, participate as girls in Islamist summer camps, run Internet magazines, distribute Qur'ans in prisons and schools, create Islamist nongovernmental organizations and charities, participate in Muslim Student Associations (MSAs), and engage in illegal activities such as fund-raising ... Although these activities are nonviolent, they are also frequent pathways to militancy for male members of global Islamist groups and are critical sources for propaganda, recruitment, and fund-raising.

Then there is, of course, women's participation in direct terrorist activities such as suicide attacks (Bloom 2011). In short, despite the fact that, prior to the rise of social media, women's participation in pro-Jihadist groups was often invisible to external audiences, they have played an "essential role in the short- and long-term survival" of pro-jihadist groups (Von Knop 2007: 398).

Social media has had at least two significant effects in relation to women and terrorism. First, social media sites are spaces within which women are now increasingly afforded new opportunities to become exposed to Jihadist groups and their ideologies. Within these sites, potentially interested females can link to other sympathizers, as well as to recruiters (Hoyle, Bradford and Frenett 2015). These sites also allow women a greater freedom to engage in a wider array of activities on behalf of such groups, including recruiting potential converts, distributing propaganda and mobilizing sympathizers (Cragin and Daly 2009; Rabasa and Benard 2014).

Second, social media has permitted us a greater glimpse of the types of activities women engage in within pro-Jihadist networks. However, despite increasing attention to women's activities online within IS, Al Qaeda and other networks, there remains critical gaps in our understanding of the roles that women play in online Jihadist communities. As we noted previously, one of the roles that remains under-examined is that of the 'fan girl.' Within the pages that follow, we take up the challenge of beginning the process of examining this role in greater depth.

Method of inquiry

The present paper is based on results derived from analysis of data generated through the qualitative portion



of a larger, on-going mixed methodological study of gender and online radicalization within pro-jihadist networks. The larger study, which began in January 2015, examines women's participation in online radical milieus (forms of social media hosting pro-jihadist content). It is composed of four smaller inter-linked projects: a quantitative analysis of posting/tweeting patterns by males and females (from multiple pro-jihadist groups on Twitter[3]), a network analysis of selected online Twitter-based groups (pro-IS, pro-AQ), a qualitative study tracking and analyzing posting activities of approximately 50-60 Twitter accounts disseminating pro-IS content, and; a smaller qualitative study of female identified accounts found within Al Qaeda affiliated Twitter groups.

Data collection and analysis

The data for this paper is drawn exclusively from the third project, the goal of which is to identify the various roles women play within pro-IS networks in the form of a typology. To develop this typology, in January 2015 one of the authors began to follow and collect Twitter postings from approximately 40 accounts following one of several popular pro-jihadist Twitter accounts. Over time, and as accounts appeared and disappeared, this number grew to include postings from 105 accounts. Criteria for inclusion: the account owner self-identified as female, posted principally in English and was a member of one or more networks associated with IS. Determinations as to gender were aided by the use of female titles for names/twitter handles, pictures of female figures as avatars and/or references to one's role as a mother or wife. As each account was added, her Twitter account was captured in PDF using Adobe Acrobat and her tweets were collected on a daily basis in Excel format through the analytic software, Twitonomy. Further information about the account holder's online activities was also sought through keying her twitter name and handle into online search engines. These searches yielded women's blogs, YouTube channels, postings on ask.fm and Facebook accounts. We were also aided by the fact that account holders also frequently post links to other online content of interest to them – such as e-books about the Islamic State, blogs and e-books on making hijrah to Syria – were followed and these materials also collected for analysis.

To analyze our data, we employed a form of Glaser and Strauss' (1967) 'grounded theory' approach. Thus Twitter postings and other materials collected from the accounts studied was subject to an initial open coding using Glaser's (1978) concept-indicator model: key concepts were searched for first, and then linked to words and phrases that functioned as indicators of that concept. Once an initial typology of roles was developed, and each of the accounts in this study coded by role(s), the coding was then independently verified by trained research assistants working in our lab. Of the 7 roles identified as being largely unique to IS[4] networks, the focus of this paper is the 'fan girl'.

The #fan_girl

In developing criteria for constructing the 'fan girl' role as part of her typology, one of the authors relied not only on formal definitions of the term (as found in Merriam-Webster and other sources), but also on posting characteristics typically seen to be associated with individuals referred to as 'fan girls', and sometimes 'fan boys', by IS followers. This led to the development of the following list of indicators. Individuals identified as 'fan girls':

- generated few independent posts of an ideological nature
- were more likely to retweet ideologically-oriented posts of others within their network



- exhibited contradictions in behaviour and attitude with respect to IS dogma
- openly viewed the act of belonging to a subversive network as 'cool'
- treated key figures and other popular actors within their network with extreme respect, following them, tweeting to them, citing them in posts and attacking those they felt were disrespecting these individuals or the IS (including attacks against both IS and non-IS members)
- viewed Twitter suspensions as a 'badge of honour' and publicly boasted of their Twitter 'martyrdom.'
- were more likely to tweet a wider range of content than women in other groups, including
- often highly personal information
- were sometimes treated dismissively as 'wannabes' or, at best, fringe members of IS networks by more established members.

#Fan_girl sample characteristics

Of the 105[5] accounts studied over nine months of data collection, 20 met the criteria discussed above and were coded as 'fan girl' accounts. Of these 20, the youngest was reportedly 15 at the start of data collection and the oldest 32 (the average age was, however, under 25). All were unmarried. Nationalities of the women in this sample reveal a wide range of geographic locations: Venezuela, Sweden, Australia, Indonesia, Britain and the U.S. Their ethnic origins were equally diverse, including Kurds, Somalis, Chechens, Iraqis and self-described 'Caucasians'. While some were from Muslim families, others were 'converts' – that is, converts to the Muslim religion, usually fairly recently converted. Of those from Muslim families, we suggest they were not typically from families practising extreme or even particularly traditional forms of the faith, as a recurring theme in many postings from this group was parental concerns over their daughter's recent behaviours and attitudes.

Unpacking the #fan girl phenomenon

"radicalize is my new fave word btw"

"someone radicalize me yo"

- Tweets from a fan girl, 2015.

In this section, we explore the fan girl phenomenon in further detail, drawing on our data to unpack this role and how it fits within pro-IS networks.

While it is the case that we have identified eight criteria for differentiating fan girls from other female posters within pro-Jihadist online groups, perhaps the single defining characteristic of a fan girl is simply her apparent belief in violent extremism as something that is 'cool'. As one of the authors (cite) has argued elsewhere, for many disaffected youth violent extremism is seen as having a certain subcultural cachet because it allows one to see herself as fighting back against real or perceived disempowerment. Adding to the 'coolness' factor is a slick IS propaganda campaign aimed at attracting young people from across the globe through messages that make not only the IS's 'cause' seem variously cool and romantic, and their brand of extreme violence as 'fun.' Fan girls appear susceptible to such messages as illustrated by their active retweeting of images like the one found below (see Figure 1.).



Figure 1: A cartoon version of extreme violence



When fan girls spoke directly about violence – whether it be violence enacted by the IS or in relation to things in their personal life – they exhibited a similar cartoonish sensibility. For example, rather than using graphic descriptions or imagery to evidence their support for acts of violence – gruesome imagery that is widely available through social media – they tended to use emoticons instead[6] (see Figure 2 below).

Figure 2. Tweet from a fan girl

WALLAHI THE FIGHTING HAS JUST
BEGUN, DIE IN YOUR RAGE O'KUFR. 🔥
🔫🔪💣

Not only does belonging to a pro-IS network on social media confer a 'cool' status upon the fan girl, it also provides her with an 'instant family'. As Amarnath Amarasingam (2015) similarly noted following the Garland shootings[7], one of the strongest attractors associated with pro-IS networks is that, once an individual is accepted, they belong to a "deeply connected group of youth who find a sense of community and kinship online", a community "united by mutual love and support." Such bonds can become so tight that girls sometimes complain they spend more time on social media than engaged in activities in the real world. Indeed, most of the fan girls are, relative to other posters in their network, high volume tweeters and thus it was not uncommon to see individuals posting upwards of 50 to 100 tweets per day. Further, these tweets also indicated that these girls were also fairly active on other social media sites – ask.fm, Facebook, snapchat, kik and surespot – and were using these sites to advance friendships and other relationships with IS network members.

Participation within a network alone does not, however, denote 'coolness'. Although IS social media networks can be fairly large – consisting of thousands of connections – most networks have a core cluster of participants, 'thought leaders', who maintain close relationships only with their most trusted followers and largely through Twitter's direct messaging system or in secure chat rooms. When new individuals attempt to join networks, they may be viewed with distrust and it can take some time before they are accepted within



a network, even at its fringes. Postings from new network members may be scrutinized and criticized by skeptical regular members. ‘Newbies’ can also find themselves blocked by Twitter users or otherwise denied access to the posts of suspicious Tweeters. Thus, to break into an inner circle, fan girls typically attempt to gain the online ‘friendship’ of influential figures. Perhaps not surprisingly, the easiest online members to attract attention from within these networks are IS recruiters, who deliberately maintain active, popular accounts. Indeed, almost all of the fan girls studied had, at least at one point, attached themselves to one of the most notorious female recruiters within IS circles, a woman publicly identified within IS literature as a source of assistance for females wanting to migrate to Syria. While closeness to this woman, and other known recruiters, was common, fan girls also linked themselves to other influential members in attempts to boost their online status. Two well-known radical male clerics were frequent targets of such attention. These attempts, while in some instances creating friendly connections between the fan girl and her target, also had an unintended negative effect: they exposed her as a ‘wannabe’ who either did not know of, or did not ascribe to the prohibition against ‘free mixing’ between genders (online and elsewhere). Thus, such attempts derailed any postures of public piety the girl may have attempted as a means of establishing her bona fides within the group. One fan girl who attempted this route was outed as a ‘kafirra’, or female non-believer, by one of her male targets:

“I’m back ya kaffira [name deleted] may I make baraa from you, your democracy and your followers” – Twitter post, 2015.

The example above, was, however, only one of several instances where we observed a significant lack of coherence between the ideological stances a fan girl might profess to have adopted and her behaviours and comments on social media. The most notable lack of congruence in professed beliefs and outward behaviours were found in avatars and pictures posted by fan girls. It is a central tenet of IS doctrine that female faces should not be seen in public. If females are to be seen at all, no part of their body must be visible to male eyes. When we first began this study in January 2015, at least two of the girls maintained face avatars on their Twitter accounts, one while using a IS propaganda image as background (see Figure 3 below). The other girl had links on her Twitter account to other social media sites – Instagram and others – where she had posted ‘selfies’ of face and body shots, revealing not only her face and hair, but also a fair amount of cleavage. Such examples call into question the depth of a girl’s commitment to the tenets of IS dogma. They also underscore our point that many of these girls appear to be initially attracted to IS networks because of their purported ‘cool’ factor and not because of a sincere, committed belief in the IS brand of fundamentalist Islam. Another piece of support for this contention comes from the content and tone of their posts, which often had more to do with daily life – complaints about babysitting, family members – or gossiping about others in their network than to do with expressions of piety or faith.



Figure 3: Example of lack of ideological coherence[8]



The #fan girl and the question of radicalization

The primary reason for studying what would appear to be a group of relatively normal, if highly misguided teenagers, is that the online social space to which they have gravitated is one that is actively used to recruit members for the IS. It is what we would call a ‘radicalizing milieu’ (Bloom 2013). Thus, while it is the case that ten months of observation of the behaviours of a small group of individuals might seem to yield little information in terms of answering significant social and behavioural questions in other contexts, the speed with which individuals can undergo a radicalization process, and have apparently done so in relation to joining the IS (Homeland Security Committee 2015), suggests that ten months is not inadequate for developing some insights into this phenomenon.

For the purposes of this study, radicalization is defined as:

1. Engaging in behaviours on behalf of the IS that constitute criminal conduct and/or
2. Migrating to Syria or Iraq to join the IS

Of the twenty girls identified as fan girls, only two exhibited indisputable signs of having been radicalized. One was a 15 year old girl who was arrested at London’s Stansted airport on her way to Turkey, where she intended to cross the border into Syria. In this case, her family and school had been alert to changes in her behaviour at least one month prior to her attempt to leave the U.K. as evidenced by the post below, written several weeks before she was found at the airport:

My mum and my school make me go counselling because my mum thinks I’m becoming radical and people online are “grooming” me into a cult. 🤔😂🔫 - Fan girl tweet, 2015.

A second UK girl, aged 16, pled guilty to possessing instructions for how to make bombs. A police investigation also turned up evidence that she had been involved with a young male implicated in a terrorist plot in Australia. Among various plans, they intended to migrate to Syria together to join the IS. As with the first girl, this individual also left behind several clues prompting school officials to contact police. A third woman, 32, and a close friend to the 15 year old girl intending to leave the U.K., was also investigated by police, although it is not known if any charges were laid. Two of the women are presently active on Twitter (the girl 15 and the woman 32); however, their pro-IS postings have decreased substantially. The 16 year old has been largely inactive, likely because she is out on bail pending sentencing.

Of the remaining fan girls, three moved into the role of being a ‘baqiya’ or accepted community member.



Their accounts are active, they continue to post pro-IS messages and they remain tied to influential community members. However, recently we observed that the content and tone of one of the most prolific posters in the group, had changed significantly. We attribute this to the fact that, after an extensive campaign by Twitter to remove pro-IS accounts and destroy their networks, the number of Baqiyah members has dwindled and thus individuals are receiving far less attention and support than previously. One possible explanation is that with fewer individuals to mirror and thus reinforce this girl's ideological posturing, she is returning to more mundane topics, such as babysitting and kittens.

Interestingly, the majority of the girls followed ($n=14$), have either become inactive ($n=3$) or their accounts have been deleted ($n=11$) and they had not rejoined. For the latter group, extensive efforts have been made to see if we could find these individuals operating under a different Twitter name. While we have had a lot of success locating some of the original 105, many of whose accounts have disappeared and reappeared over time, we could not find these 11. In our larger sample, accounts were deactivated for a number of reasons, some of which may also be the case here. Reasons cited for leaving and not returning to Twitter included: individuals decamped to other social media platforms where they were less likely to be banned; some left for family or other personal reasons, and; other wanted to focus on graduate and other studies.

Based on the findings from our sample, it would appear that while radicalization remains a reasonable concern in relation to those inhabiting the fan girl role, over the short-term most of the girls and young women did not become sufficiently radicalized to pose an immediate flight or other risk. Of the two who clearly did, both were fairly young, connected to IS recruiters through social media, had extensive IS connections (online and in the real world) and were involved in romantic relationships with males who also actively ascribed to IS ideology.

Concluding remarks

Recent media reporting on women's participation in IS and other pro-jihadist groups has substantially raised the profile of a phenomenon that had previously been largely obscured. However, while it is the case that we now know more about female involvement in radical Islamist terrorist organizations, much of that same reporting has also tended to oversimplify a significantly more complex set of dynamics. In essence, the role of women within these groups is often reduced to a single dismissive term: fan girls.

Within this paper we sought to establish some conceptual clarity around the fan girl role by sharing insights we had learned from studying the social media activity of 105 women affiliated with IS networks, both online and in the real world. From these 105 women, we identified 20 who clearly met the criteria of a fan girl. By tracking their posting activity, we gleaned some useful insights into who these girls are, and, perhaps most importantly, their potential for a deeper involvement in pro-IS activities – that is, their potential for moving beyond expressions of online support for IS doctrine to actual IS-inspired acts in the real world. What we learned from this exercise is that the majority of fan girls studied do not go on to become violent actors in the real world; nor did most of them migrate, or attempt to migrate, to IS held territories in Syria or northern Iraq. Indeed, it appears that over time most of them simply dropped out of pro-IS networks, likely moving on to some new enthusiasm. Of the two who did manifest signs of radicalization, both left sufficient signs to indicate they had moved into a more active adoption of IS ideology and thus could no longer easily be dismissed as 'fan girls.'

The present study is not without limitations. Among these limitations, we note that, absent the ability to trace individual IP addresses to establish identities, we are forced to rely on sociodemographic and other



information provided by posters. It may be the case that one or more of these accounts are ‘sock puppet’ accounts – that is, accounts belonging to individuals hoping to deceive others, a not uncommon problem in relation to research on IS Twitter groups (author cite). Further, we note that our sample size is relatively small given the potential for there to be hundreds, if not thousands, of fan girls within IS Twitter groups. Future researchers in this area might consider a larger sample size.

About the authors:

Dr. Laura Huey is the Director of the Canadian Society of Evidence Based Policing (CAN-SEBP at www.can-sebp.net or @can_sebp), the Director of the Canadian Policing Research Network, a member of the Council of Canadian Academies’ Expert Panel on the Future of Policing Models, a founding member of SERENE-RISC (a NCE-funded cybercrime research consortium) and a Senior Researcher for the Canadian Network for Research on Terrorism, Security and Society.

Eric Witmer is a graduate student in the Department of Sociology at the University of Western Ontario.

Notes

- [1] The fan girl phenomenon is not unique to females; the term ‘fan boy’ is also freely employed for young males.
- [2] This is what Von Knop (2007) refers to, in relation to women’s roles within Al Qaeda, as their educative function – rendering ideological motivations into stories told to inspire present and future generations.
- [3] Twitter was selected as the primary data collection site because of our interest in the IS. As other researchers have noted (Klausen 2015), Twitter appears to be the online milieu of choice for IS followers.
- [4] Our fourth study – in progress – examines the extent to which roles adopted by women in Al Qaeda networks cohere with roles identified for IS affiliated women.
- [5] The majority of accounts were coded as ‘baqiya’ – that is as regular members of the IS online community.
- [6] It has been suggested these posters may use emoticons because of Twitter’s 140 character limit on posts. However, in our larger, ongoing study we have found that older, more established Baqiyah members use emoticons with far less frequency and some eschew them altogether.
- [7] Two IS affiliated gunmen embarked on a shooting spree at the site of a ‘draw the prophet Muhammad’ rally in Garland, Texas.
- [8] Women within fundamentalist branches of Islam are meant not only to cover their hair but also to refrain from showing their face in public.

References

- Amarasingam, A. (2015). ‘Elton ‘Ibrahim’ Simpson’s Path to Jihad in Garland, Texas.’ *War on the Rocks*, online. Available at: <http://warontherocks.com/2015/05/elton-ibrahim-simpsons-path-to-jihad-in-garlandtexas/>
- Bloom, M. 2013. ‘In Defense of Honor: Women and Terrorist Recruitment on the Internet.’ *Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 4(1): 150-195.



- Bloom, M. (2011). *Bombshell: Women and Terrorism*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Cragin, R. and Daly, S. (2009). *Women as Terrorists: Mothers, Recruiters, Martyrs*. Oxford, Eng.: Praeger Intl.
- Cunningham, K. (2007). 'Countering Female Terrorism.' *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 30:113–129.
- Glaser, B. (1978) *Theoretical sensitivity*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.
- Glaser, B. and Strauss, A. (1967) *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Homeland Security Committee (2015) 'Final Report of the Task Force on Combating Terrorist and Foreign Fighter Travel.' Available at: <https://homeland.house.gov/wpcontent/uploads/2015/09/TaskForceFinalReport.pdf>
- Hoyle, C., Bradford, A., and Frenett, R. (2015). 'Becoming Mulan? Female Western Migrants to ISIS'. Report of the Institute for Strategic Dialogue. Available at: http://www.strategicdialogue.org/ISDJ2969_Becoming_Mulan_01.15_WEB.PDF
- Klausen, J. (2015). 'Tweeting the *Jihad*: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq.' *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 38:1–22.
- Lahoud, N. (2014). 'The Neglected Sex: The Jihadis' Exclusion of Women from Jihad.' *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 26:780–802.
- Ness, C. (Ed.). (2007). *Female Terrorism and Militancy: Agency, Utility, and Organization*. London: Routledge.
- Rabasa, A. and Benard, C. (2014) *Eurojihad: Patterns of Islamist Radicalization and Terrorism in Europe*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Weimann, G. (2008). 'www.Al-Qaeda: the Reliance of Al-Qaeda on the Internet,' in NATO Science for Peace and Security Program (eds.). *Responses to Cyber Terrorism*. Amsterdam: IOS Press. Pp. 61–69



The Capability Spectrum; Locating Terrorism in Relation to other Manifestations of Political Violence

by Thomas Whelan



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/).

Abstract

Terrorism is often discussed in isolation from other manifestations of political violence; however, significant understanding of the phenomenon can be gained by assessing terrorism in relation to the wider context of other forms of political violence. This paper presents a model which locates terrorism in relation to acts ranging from rioting to insurgency, based on a spectrum of increasing capabilities. This spectrum suggests that the predominantly communicative acts of terrorism locates it closely to the communicative acts of political rioting; whilst at the same time, the desire of terrorist groups to militarise further links terrorism to insurgency.

Keywords: Terrorism; Political violence; Rioting; Insurgency; Capabilities; Spectrum

Introduction

Social scientists often follow a process of examining certain phenomena, such as terrorism, in isolation in order to gain a focused understanding of a subject (Neuman 2007). Whilst this approach has much value, creating subject-specific fields such as 'Terrorism Studies', it is also worthwhile to consider how subjects such as terrorism relate to their wider context. In this case, the question of how does terrorism differ (if it does at all) from other manifestations of political violence, adopts such an approach.

In order to explore the differences between terrorism and other manifestations of political violence, this assessment will place terrorism along a spectrum of political violence (see *Figure 1*), ranging in capabilities (such as membership, material resources, and territorial, administrative, and security control) from low-level political violence such as rioting at one end, to insurgency at the other. This attempt will address terrorism within its wider context of other forms of political violence, and will suggest the idea that terrorism rests within an awkward 'bridging' position, between the communicative violence of rioting (Lowe 2013), and the controlled employment of militarised force in an insurgency conflict (Byman 2008).

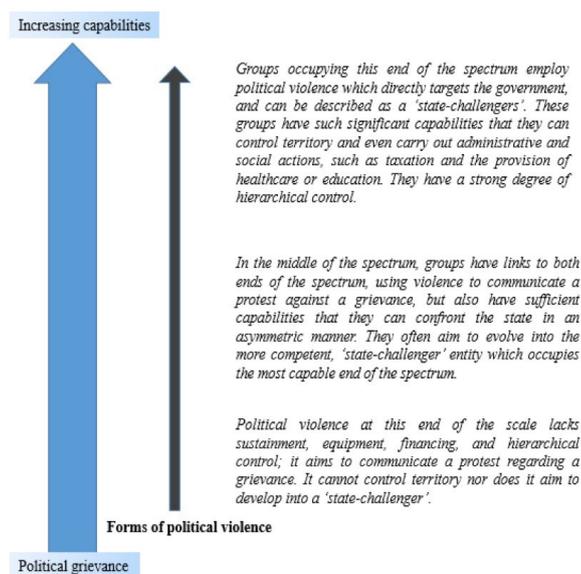
This position will be demonstrated by firstly highlighting the fundamental similarities between terrorism and all manifestations of political violence – namely the common socio-political, grievance-inspired foundation which all forms of political violence share (Hoffman, 2006), the idea that all types of political violence are extensions of politics (von Clausewitz 1874), the communication focus of both terrorism and rioting (Schmid 2005), and the desire for militarised action terrorism and insurgency (Burleigh 2008; Guevara 2006).

Attention will then turn to the differences between terrorism and rioting and insurgency respectively. This analysis will highlight the substantial desire for increasing militarisation and conflict (rather than contest) witnessed in terrorist groups for the violence to be classed within the same grouping as acts of political violence such as rioting. Whilst at the same time demonstrating terrorism to be still be firmly rooted in communication for it to be an embryonic stage of insurgency. By exploring both views it will become clear



that terrorism rests in an awkward space between the communication-focused protest, and the militarised insurgency, and it is perhaps for this reason that terrorism gains a disproportional amount of attention and confusion, making it the intriguing phenomenon it remains today.

Figure 1: *The Template for the Capability Spectrum of Political Violence*



Definitions

Political violence is a realm in which definitions are often heavily contested. In general, it is any form of violence employed for a political motive, yet despite having mentioned the importance of viewing varieties of political violence as a collective, for this study it is necessary to define what is to be meant by 'terrorism', 'insurgency', and 'low-level political violence'. For this study, 'terrorism' refers to the *"the premeditated use or threat of violence by individuals or subnational groups to obtain a political or social objective through the intimidation of a large audience beyond that of the immediate victims"* (Enders & Sandler in Masters 2008). Importantly, this definition does not restrict terrorism to attacks against civilians, but rather includes attacks on military or governmental personnel. The idea argued by some academics, such as Kamm (2008), that terrorism only targets civilians appears flawed, considering the 2001 attacks on 9/11 targeted both civilian (the World Trade Centre) and military individuals (the Pentagon). 'Insurgency' will refer to violence employed *"to obtain political goals by an organised and primarily indigenous group... using protracted, irregular warfare and allied political technique"* (Scott 1970). The adoption of this definition of insurgency is favoured due to its inclusion of irregular military tactics used over a period of time – rather than simply swift decisive force which can be seen in a coup – combined with the emphasis on the political efforts which are central to an insurgency's struggle. The 'irregular warfare' referred to is the tactic of guerrilla warfare, in which lightly to moderately armed groups aim to harass the enemy and gradually erode his will and capability through launching highly mobile, hit-and-run attacks (O'Neil 2005). Finally 'low-level' political violence, refers to *"relatively spontaneous illegitimate group violence [for a political motive]"*, as witnessed in



London during August 2011 (Joyce 2012; Marx 1970).

At this point it is significant to highlight Weber's thoughts on 'ideal types'. Weber's argument suggests that social scientists examine events or phenomena – such as political violence in this case—and compares them to a preconceived 'ideal type'; which is “an ideal limiting concept with which the real situation or action, is compared” (Cahnman 1965). Through this process of comparison, types of violence are categorised as to whether they appear more like an 'ideal' case 'terrorism', or an 'ideal' case of something else. Despite social scientists' disposition to isolating and classifying violence according to these 'ideal types', the reality of our world is that finding idea types which perfectly fit the specified criteria rarely exist. With this in mind, there is value in thinking of political violence as a spectrum, and one along which groups and movements can shift forwards and backwards depending on their conditions, resources, and support.

Terrorism and other forms of political violence, one and the same?

In order to examine the differences between terrorism and other manifestations of political violence, it is first necessary to acknowledge the similarities terrorism exhibits with these other forms of political violence. Despite the tendency of social scientists to view types of political violence in isolation, considerable advantages can be gained when types of political violence are examined in relation to each other. To begin, it is vital to state that all forms of political violence (from low-level riots, to communal violence, terrorism, and insurgencies), are all born out of a political grievance; a broad term which incorporates a range of grievances, from single-issue matters to wider societal marginalisation (Hoffman, 2006).

A political grievance can inspire or provoke protests, (violent or non-violent), and has been seen to do so in numerous cases throughout history. These protests can either be successful, or end through suppression and arrests, or fade away due a lack of momentum. Just as low-level acts of political violence, such as rioting, have been witnessed to emerge in response to a political grievance, other manifestations of political violence such as terrorism and insurgency have similarly been seen to arise from the same background. A good example of this can be found in the emergence of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) following the failure of the earlier Civil Rights movements in Northern Ireland (1960s), and the decade-long protests for Tamil rights respectively (Hewitt 1981; Nadarajah and Sriskandarajah 2005). Indeed Wright-Neville and Smith's writings on terrorism as being a form of 'political rage' based off socio-political grievances (Smith 2009), combined with Gerry Adams' comments that “the requirements for later [IRA violence] revolution could be found within the rioting and protests of 1960s Ballymurphy” (De Baroid 2000), suggest a strong link between terrorism and rioting (or low-level political violence). This common foundation by which all manifestations of political violence are linked, supports the idea of viewing such violence as a collective rather than in isolation. This point identifies a fundamental connection between terrorism and both insurgency and lower-levels of political violence such as political rioting. Furthermore, this grievance-inspired foundation from which terrorism and other manifestations of political violence emerge, makes it possible to view all forms of political violence as extensions of political action or protest. This thought builds on Clausewitz's views on war (von Clausewitz 1997), but the point appears particularly relevant to other forms of political violence such as terrorism and rioting.

Terrorism has always been 'theatrical violence', and it is widely agreed that terrorism aims to communicate a message to a wide audience (Nacos 2002; Turk 2004). This intent shapes its character, with targets normally holding a symbolic meaning, and with attacks intending to gain attention through surprise, shock, and drama. This character of terrorist violence can be seen from the Anarchist dynamite attacks of the latter



half of the Nineteenth Century, to the 'skyjackings' of the 1960s, and to the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre (Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* 2006). Fundamentally, the drama of terrorist violence is based on a desire to communicate a message, and this factor locates terrorism in a very similar area to lower levels of political violence, such as rioting. Protests, non-violent or violent, are often viewed as expressions of frustration with a particular socio-political grievance, and at their very core are a communication act (Martin and Varney 2003). Violent protest, such as rioting, appears little different to terrorism when viewed through this lens, with both existing as violent acts of political communication. Whilst the message of a riot may be poorly articulated and vague (as argued by Marx's concept of rioting for a 'generalised belief' (Marx 1970)), the message still carries through to its audience in many cases. Terrorist violence is often accompanied by very clear political messages through media ranging from the symbolism of their targets, to paper manifestos, and to YouTube videos. Terrorist violence conveys a message, be it the 'religiously-inspired' terror beheadings of the 'Islamic State of Iraq and Syria' (ISIS), the declarations of war on America by Al Qaeda (Bergen 2008), or the far-right attack of Anders Breivik (Teitelbaum and Winter 2013) – all of which are political statements and protests.

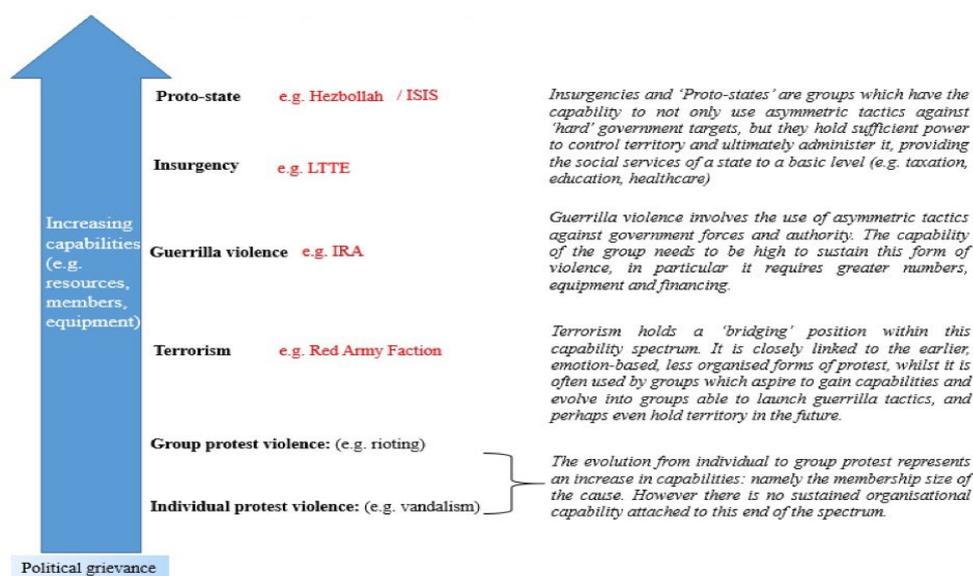
At the same time, the message terrorist groups have often been seen to communicate is that 'violent action is the only way forward' (Gerwehr and Daly 2006), and this desire for militarism in order to accomplish a goal or change locates terrorism as an embryonic form of insurgency, similar to the Maoist's first stage of a guerrilla insurgency (Jones and Johnston 2013). An increase in membership and support can enable initially small terrorist groups to develop into organisations which use increasingly militarised and guerrilla tactics typically used by insurgencies. The LTTE and IRA provide valid examples of this shift towards insurgency following increasing levels of membership and weaponry sophistication. Oppenheimer highlights the IRA's impressive stores of Russian-made heavy machine guns, mortars, and semtex explosives (Oppenheimer 2009), whilst the LTTE's force could be measured in brigades, and even included a maritime component (Katoch 1991). These capabilities are superior, or at least more 'militarised' than those an 'ideal-type' terrorist group might employ, and are more reminiscent of an insurgency than a terrorism group (Sadowski 1998); highlighting the fluidity of the spectrum on which terrorism lies. The militarism associated with terrorism – the emphasis on terrorism being a '*weapon of the weak*' (Azzam 2003), and the fact that terrorist groups have historically been seen to evolve into an insurgency, employing guerrilla tactics, suggests strong connections between the two forms of political violence and even prompts the question of whether terrorism is an embryonic stage of insurgency. This shift from terrorism to an insurgency employing predominantly guerrilla tactics, indicates a shift in capabilities and intentions, as the group's increased capabilities enable them to move from employing communicative violence to violence which aims to erode the opposition's will and material power. Furthermore, terrorism marks the first stage whereby a relatively small group attempts to control the violence employed for a cause, departing from the more popular, (in terms of numbers involved), yet conventionally less organised and less pre-meditated acts of rioting, and appear similar to an embryonic form of insurgency. This in part explains the emphasis terrorist groups place on recruitment (as exemplified by the '*Inspire*' Al Qaeda recruitment magazines (Ibrahim 2011) and well documented YouTube videos), outbidding (Kydd and Walter 2006), and gaining material support (Kennedy and Weimann 2011). Indeed the frequent use of 'Army' in the nomenclature of groups, and of uniforms and insignia, hold add further weight to the idea of terrorism as an early form of sub-state conflict, and locate the phenomenon closer to other manifestations of political violence such as insurgency.

Since all forms of political violence can be viewed as extensions of politics based on a common foundation of a political grievance, it is acceptable for terrorism to be viewed as similar to both rioting (with their



shared emphasis on communication), and to insurgency (for their shared desire for military action to bring about change). It is clear that terrorism holds core connections and similarities with various manifestations of political violence, and this allows terrorism to be viewed on a spectrum of political violence. *Figure 2* attempts to form such a spectrum, and is primarily based on increasing capabilities. At the foundation, all political violence is based on a political grievance, and often a protest movement. This protest, if unanswered, can turn violent, with rioting ensuing as a form of political frustration and communication. Terrorist violence, due to its ability to be carried out by only a handful of individuals (or even a 'lone-wolf'), can emerge at any point. As explained, this can be regarded as a communication act similar to an act of rioting, yet with the potential for a desire to militarise. An increase in capabilities, such as membership and resources, can see this embryonic form of militarised action develop into an insurgency. In some instances, further increases to the capability of a group or movement can lead to the creation of a 'proto-state', where control of territory leads a group to administering a territory, providing social services, and crucially according to Kalyvas, security (Kalyvas 2006). This diagram addresses complexities caused by the fact that 'terrorist' groups such as the Provisional IRA, the LTTE, or ISIS (Wall 2014), due to their military strategies, control over territory, and large membership bases, appear more akin to an insurgency or a proto-state (in the case of the LTTE or ISIS) than to an 'ideal' terrorist group.

Figure 2. The Capability Spectrum of Political Violence



It is important to highlight that Figure 2 does not suggest that during the lifetime of a movement a group will always progress through each stage. Indeed it is quite possible for a violent protest, with sufficient support, to move straight to an insurgency phase (the current example of the Syrian civil war being a good example of this (BBC 2014)) and never engage in acts of terrorism. Likewise, terrorism, since it requires such few numbers to be employed, does not necessarily follow violent protest, as it may indeed be the first point of violent protest a group uses, or a tactic of a proto-state.

As *Figure 2* demonstrates, terrorism rests between the communicative and frustrated acts of rioting, and the militarised insurgency. In reality, many groups never leave the terrorist stage (the Red Army Faction failed to attract widespread membership and support, and numbered only a "few dozen" (Shughart 2006)). In some cases, terrorist groups such as the IRA, LTTE, and (currently) ISIL, have evolved into insurgencies or even proto-states. This violent form of communication, or potential militarised conflict, projects an image of terrorism little different to other manifestations of political violence. Certainly there is much value in



attempting to locate terrorism in a wider context, and perhaps the most significant result of doing so is that terrorism clearly rests at the awkward position between crime and militarised conflict. This may explain why terrorism causes such debate, and is able to be viewed either as a crime or as an attack on the body politic (Norwitz 2004), and by extension, why there are differing methods of countering terrorism; namely through the criminal justice model or the war model.

Differences by their similarities

Figure 2 highlights the awkward position terrorism lies on the spectrum of political violence; a form of violent communication, but one which has the desire and potential to develop into a militarised entity (i.e. an embryonic form of insurgency). Despite the abundance of similarities terrorism shares with other manifestations of political violence, these same characteristics are the reasons which cause terrorism to be different to other manifestations of violence. In summary, the communication-based intent of terrorism, contrasts with the military-campaign focused character of insurgencies (Hammes 2007), whilst at the same time terrorist violence is often carried out by groups who have a desire for further militarisation of the struggle, and to turn the contest into a military conflict, something which is quite unlike a protest movement or even acts of rioting. Through highlighting the differences between terrorism and insurgency, and then terrorism and rioting, the differences between terrorism and other manifestations of political violence will be clear.

When addressing the differences between terrorism and insurgency, it is clear that the central concept is the level of emphasis and importance placed on communication. All insurgencies place importance on communication regarding their own support populations (Hoffman, *Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency in Iraq* 2006), and their opposing government, yet their focus is in line with a militarised approach – tactical gains regarding territory and resources (Marighella 1982). Terrorism is different in this regard because it focuses *entirely* on the communication of a message. The choice of targets an insurgency will select will often differ to that of a terrorist attack; an insurgency, using predominantly guerrilla tactics, is likely to focus on tactical locations, such as bridges, supply routes or areas on which ‘hit and run’ attacks can be carried out, in order to disrupt or destabilise the opposition (as demonstrated by the actions of the French Maquis throughout Occupied France (Wright 1962; Millar 2013)). Terrorist attacks normally select symbolic targets – such as urban transport (for example the London 7/7 bombings), key figures (such as police or magistrates by the Red Brigade (Moss 1983)), or governmental buildings (the Oslo bombings by Breivik (Appleton 2014)). The purpose of selecting symbolic targets is to communicate a message to a wider audience, not for tactical or strategic benefit (in terms of disrupting or defeating an opposing government). It is at this point of difference where inevitably grey areas exist and cause confusion. When insurgent movements use suicide attacks – normally labelled ‘terrorism’ – for communicative *and* military-attacking purposes, (as with the 1983 suicide attack by Hezbollah on the USA base in Lebanon, or the LTTE’s use of suicide-bombers as a substitution for the lack of an Air Force (Stokke 2006)), these attacks can be located on the political violence spectrum somewhere between terrorism and insurgency. It is possible that this restriction to communication which terrorist violence adopts is the result of a lack of support and resources, as a small group of individuals, with limited capabilities and hunted by a state’s law enforcement, only have the power to use shocking acts of violence to communicate a message, rather than directly challenge the state itself. This suggestion however,



does not detract from this fundamental difference between terrorism and insurgency.

Despite the common, communication-based focus both terrorism and rioting hold, terrorism differs from this form of political violence significantly regarding the level of violence it employs. Rioting is a form of popular protest, in which some degree of low-level violence or destruction of property occurs. At worst, lives are lost, but the act of killing is not the intent of rioting. There have been historical examples, such as the PFLP skyjackings, of terrorist acts which do not aim to kill either, yet the dramatic act of violence such as bomb explosions, or the Mall massacres of Kenya (Gathara 2014) and 2008 attacks in Mumbai (Henderson 2013) are clearly different, both in terms of intent to kill and the number of casualties resulting from the attacks. Furthermore, terrorism has a degree of premeditation to it which is entirely different from rioting. Whilst some communities experience rioting at regular times of the year (such as the 12th July in Northern Ireland), terrorist attacks are often the products of months of planning and even training for a single attack. Not only this, but the aforementioned *desire* to militarise shown by many groups who employ terrorist violence is very different to an act of rioting.

Conclusion

The use of a spectrum of political violence, ranging from rioting to terrorism and insurgency, has appeared an insightful method of assessing terrorism in relation to other forms of political violence. Despite a shared foundation of political grievance, and the ability of one group to emerge out of protests to employ terrorism and develop into an insurgency, terrorism has been found to hold certain similarities with both rioting (regarding their emphasis on communication), and insurgency (regarding the desire for greater militarism, recruitment, and 'Army' nomenclature). Yet it is these same characters which hold the key to terrorism's difference to these other manifestations of terrorist violence. The dominance of communication in terrorism (albeit potentially directed by a lack of capabilities) is considerably different to that of a military campaign insurgency. On the other hand, terrorism cannot be classed purely as another form of violent rioting as it employs an entirely different form of violence – one which is premeditated, shocking, and in some cases, is designed to kill, and to evolve into a military struggle. This assessment has found terrorism to exist on a spectrum of political violence between communication-based rioting, and militarised insurgency; an awkward resting point between the two, and explains the difficulty in countering terrorism as either a crime or an act of conflict.

About the author: *Thomas Whelan studied at the Handa Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence at the University of St Andrews where he gained a Distinction in the MLitt in Terrorism Studies programme. As part of this degree, he spent one semester on exchange at Georgetown University, Washington DC, on their Security Studies Program, focusing on insurgency violence. His research interests focus on the relationship between terrorism and insurgency.*



Bibliography

- Appleton, C. "Lone-wolf terrorism in Norway." *The International Journal of Human Rights* 18, no. 2 (2014): p. 127.
- Azzam, M. "Weapon of the Weak." *The World Today*, August-September 2003: p. 10-12.
- BBC, The. *Syria profile: timeline*. September 16th, 2014. www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14703995.
- Bergen, P. "Al Qaeda, the Organisation: a Five-Year Forecast." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 618 (July 2008): p. 14.
- Cahnman, W. "Ideal Type Theory: Max Weber's Concept and Some of Its Derivations." *The Sociological Quarterly*, Summer 1965: p. 269.
- Clausewitz, von. *On War*. Translated by J Graham. London, 1997.
- De Baroid, C. *Ballymurphy and the Irish War*. London, 2000.
- Early, B. "Larger than a Party, yet Smaller than a State: Locating Hezbollah's Place within Lebanon's State and Society." *World Affairs* 168, no. 3 (Winter 2006): pp. 115-128.
- Enders & Sandler in Masters, D. "'The Origin of Terrorist Threats: Religious, Separatist, or Something Else?'" *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20, no. 3 (2008): p. 406.
- Gathara, P. *Mysteries linger over Westgate Mall Attack, Al Jazeera Opinion*. September 21st, 2014. <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/09/mysteries-linger-over-westgate—201492171737803205.html>.
- Gerwehr, S, and S Daly. *Al Qaida, Terrorist Selection and Recruitment*. National Security Research Division, 2006, p. 77.
- Hammes, T. "Fourth Generation Warfare Evolves, Fifth Generation Emerges." *Military Review*, May-June 2007: p. 14.
- Henderson, B. "Mumbai 26/11: Five years on, city still feels scars of devastating terrorist attack." *The Telegraph*, November 26th, 2013.
- Hewitt, C. "Catholic Grievance, Catholic Nationalism and Violence in Northern Ireland during the Civil Rights Period: a Reconsideration." *The British Journal of Sociology*, September 1981: pp. 362-380.
- Hoffman, B. *Inside Terrorism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.
- Hoffman, B. "Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency in Iraq." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29, no. 2 (2006): p. 108.
- Ibrahim, Y, ed. *Inspire*, Fall 2011.
- Jones, S, and P Johnston. "The future of insurgency." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 1 (2013): p. 5.
- Joyce, J, & Wells, H. *England Riots: day of looting, arson, and violence*. March 27th, 2012. www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-17522870.
- Kalyvas, S. *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Kamm, F. "Terrorism and Intending Evil." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 36, no. 2 (Spring 2008): p. 157.
- Katoch, A. "LTTE: Need for a Balanced Assessment." *Economic and Political Weekly* 26, no. 44 (November 1991): p. 2505.



- Kennedy, J, and G Weimmann. "The Strength of Weak Terrorist Ties." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 23, no. 2 (2011): p. 203.
- Kydd, A, and B Walter. "The Strategies of Terrorism." *International Security* 31, no. 1 (Summer 2006): pp. 49-80.
- Marighella, C. "Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla." In *Terror and Urban Guerrillas*, by J Mallin, p. 67. Miami, 1982.
- Marx, G. "Issueless Rioting." *Annals of the American Academy of Political & Social Science* 391 (1970): p. 23.
- Millar, G. *Maquis—an Englishman in the French Resistance*. 2nd. London: The Dovecote Press, 2013.
- Moss, D. "Analysing Italian political violence as a sequence of communicative acts: the Red Brigades 1970-82." *The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice*, no. 13 (May 1983): p. 97.
- Nadarajah, S, & Sriskandarajah, D. "Liberation Struggle or Terrorism? The Politics of Naming the LTTE." *Third World Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (2005): p. 87.
- Norwitz, J. "Combating Terrorism: with a Helmet or a Badge." In *Terrorism and Counterterrorism Understanding the New Security Environment*, edited by R Howard, p. 470-481. Columbus: McGraw-Hill, 2004.
- O'Neil, C. *Terrorism and Insurgency: from Apocalypse to Revolution*. Dulles, Virginia: Potomac Books, 2005.
- Oppenheimer, A. *IRA: the bombs and the bullets, a history of deadly ingenuity*. Dublin, 2009.
- Sadowski, Y. "Ethnic Conflict." *Foreign Policy*, no. 111 (Summer 1998): p. 13.
- Scott, A, et. al. *Insurgency*. North Carolina, 1970.
- Shughart, W. "An Analytical History of Terrorism, 1945-2000." *Public Choice* 128, no. 1/2 (July 2006): p. 21.
- Smith, Wright-Nevill and. "Political rage: terrorism and the politics of emoton." *Global Change, Peace & Security* 21, no. 1 (2009): p. 97.
- Stokke, K. "Building the Tamil Eelan State: emerging state institutions and forms of governance in LTTE-controlled areas in Sri Lanka." *Third World Quarterly* 27, no. 6 (2006): pp. 1021-1040.
- Teitelbaum, M, and J Winter. "Islam in Europe." In *The General Spread of Fertility Decline*, by M, and Winter, J Teitelbaum, p. 109. Yale University Press, 2013.
- Turk, A. "Sociology of Terrorism." *Annual Review of Sociology* 30 (2004): p. 274.
- Varney, Martin and. "Nonviolence and Communication." *Journal of Peace Research* 40, no. 2 (2003): p. 213.
- Wall, C. "Special Operations Forces." *Public Lecture—The Handa Postgraduate Conference on Terrorism and Political Violence—'The Future of Terrorism & Terrorism Studies'*. St Andrews, December 5th, 2014.
- Wright, G. "Reflections on the French Resistance." *Political Science Quarterly* 77, no. 3 (September 1962): pp. 336-349.



Italian Jihadists in Syria and Iraq

by Francesco Marone



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/).

Abstract

This article explores the current extent of Italy's Sunni jihadists in Syria and Iraq. The country presents interesting particularities, including a relatively small number of foreign fighters compared to other European countries (not more than 90 individuals, and only a dozen with Italian passports). However, the Italian case has not been extensively investigated. This article first examines the scale of the problem and then focuses on the cases of three Italian nationals who left for Syria: a convert who died in combat in the Aleppo area in 2013, a second-generation immigrant who joined the ranks of the Islamic State (IS) and a muhajira ("emigrant") who, as a woman, has not been allowed to take combat roles in the self-proclaimed "caliphate".

Keywords: Terrorism; radicalisation; jihadism; foreign fighters; *muhajirin*; Islamic State; Italy

Introduction

Over the last few years the authorities in a number of countries have expressed strong concerns about the thousands of citizens and residents joining the ranks of jihadist armed groups in Syria and Iraq.

As is well-known, the danger of so-called "foreign fighters" is high on the agenda. These individuals can access militant groups, acquire weapons training and combat experience and develop radical anti-Western positions (among others, Byman and Shapiro, 2014). Clearly, in addition to their debatable role in conflict areas (Bakke, 2014; Rich and Conduit, 2015), the fear is that some of them return to their home countries or to a third country and carry out or support terrorist attacks.[1]

This threat is serious in Europe. According to an estimate by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR), the number of foreign fighters from Western European countries rose to nearly 4,000 (Neumann 2015). In April 2015, the EU Justice Commissioner, Věra Jourová, said in an interview that "at the European level, we estimate that 5,000 to 6,000 individuals have left for Syria", adding the true number was likely to be far higher because of the difficulty of tracking foreign fighters in the conflict (Gonzales, 2015).

Against this background, the contingent of Italy's jihadists who travelled to Syria and Iraq appears to be fairly small. According to the latest estimates (September 2015), the number of foreign fighters from Italy – Italian citizens or not – is probably not more than 90 individuals. After all, this is a modest figure, compared to recent estimates (Neumann, 2015) for other large European countries, such as France (1,200 fighters), the UK (500-600) (Pantucci, 2014) and Germany (500-600) (Heinke and Raudszus, 2015); and low even compared to less populous countries such as Belgium (440) and Denmark (100-150).

This article explores the current extent of Italy's Sunni jihadists in Syria and Iraq. Unlike other Western countries, the Italian case has not been extensively investigated.[2] This paper aims to help fill a gap in the



scientific literature. The analysis draws on both primary sources (in particular, original jihadist materials) and secondary sources (scientific works, journalistic pieces, official reports).

The text is organised in four sections. The first section examines the scale of the problem. The second analyses the backgrounds, motivations and activities of three Italian jihadists on whom open-source information is available: two male foreign fighters and a female *muhajira* (“emigrant”). It should be said that, regardless of their motivations, women who have joined jihadist armed groups in Syria and Iraq cannot be considered as genuine foreign fighters because at the moment such groups do not allow them to take combat roles. The third section discusses these three individual cases, underlining points of similarity and difference. The conclusions recapitulate the most important findings presented in the article.

The Italian contingent

The Paris attacks of January 7-9, 2015 provided an opportunity to take stock of the situation in Italy. On January 18, 2015, during a press conference, Interior Minister Angelino Alfano presented official data on foreign fighters connected with the country. According to the Minister, 59 foreign fighters had connections with Italy (Italian Interior Ministry, 2015). Not all of them were on the national territory at the time. In fact, in his words, there were “five Italians who left for Syria, two individuals with dual nationality, 15 foreigners who left from Italy, 25 foreigners linked to the country in various forms and 13 Syrians who left from Italy”. In addition, 14 foreign fighters had already died in combat (Italian Interior Ministry, 2015; Marone, 2015, p. 300). The Interior Minister did not add other information, including names and ethnicities, on grounds of secrecy.

In September 2015, Defence Minister Roberta Pinotti said that 87 foreign fighters travelled from Italy. Only 12 individuals had Italian passports; in her words, “six were Italian nationals and another six had dual nationality” (Il Sole 24 Ore, 2015).

Some of these foreign fighters are connected with the local home-grown jihadist milieu, made up of converts and second-generation immigrants (with or without Italian passports) (Vidino, 2014). This home-grown jihadist scene has only recently emerged in the country, arguably not before 2009, and it is still relatively small in size, especially in comparison with other Western European countries.

As for second-generation immigrants, the limited scope of this threat is, to some extent, the result of a simple demographic factor: large-scale Muslim immigration to Italy began only in the late 1980s and early 1990s and therefore the first wave of second-generation Muslims has only recently entered adulthood (Vidino, 2014, p. 8).

Today very few Italian nationals are publicly known to have joined armed groups in Syria or Iraq. However, these individuals deserve attention because they are particularly difficult to detect and stop. In fact, full-fledged Italian citizens may appear to be above suspicion. Furthermore, they cannot be expelled. By contrast, many home-grown jihadists who were born or grew up in the country may not have citizenship, because of Italy’s strict naturalization laws, and could therefore be subject to deportation (Vidino, 2014, pp. 9, 77, 104).

Three individual cases

Although, in general, there is little public information on Italy’s foreign fighters and other jihadists who left for Syria and Iraq, three cases are relatively well-known. They concern: Giuliano Delnevo, a convert who died in combat in the Aleppo area in 2013; Anas el Abboubi, a second-generation “born-again” Muslim who



joined the ranks of the Islamic State (IS) in 2013; and Maria Giulia Sergio, a female convert who is now in the self-proclaimed “caliphate”, where she has received some weapons training. Delnevo and el Abboubi served as foreign fighters alongside an al-Qaeda-linked group and IS, respectively, while Sergio, as a woman, is not allowed to engage in combat. All three have Italian passports.

This section reconstructs their backgrounds, motivations, and activities, on the basis of currently available information. While this is a small sample, it is drawn from a relatively small population and can contribute to a better understanding of the foreign fighter threat in Italy.

Giuliano Delnevo

Giuliano Delnevo was born in 1989 in the north-western city port of Genoa to a Catholic middle-class family. His parents separated when he was a child. He grew up in the historic centre of the city, one of Italy’s most ethnically diverse areas (Pieracci, 2013; Vidino, 2014, pp. 69-74).

He was a quite introverted person and experienced socialisation and academic difficulties in his teenage years. The closest among his few friends was an undisciplined classmate of Moroccan descent, Naim. Once turned 18, Delnevo and his friend spent some months in Ancona, in central Italy, where Giuliano’s older brother worked as a nautical engineer (Piccardo, 2013; Delnevo, 2015). There Delnevo got a job as a handyman in a shipyard and met a group of fellow workers, probably from Bangladesh, who reportedly were members of Tablighi Jamaat, the Islamic missionary movement established in India in the 1920s. In 2008, Delnevo converted to Islam and took the name Ibrahim (Delnevo, 2014; Vidino, 2014, pp. 69-70).

Once back in Genoa, Delnevo enrolled in university but preferred to devote most of his time to Islam. He befriended Umar Andrea Lazzaro, another Genoese convert who was known for his previous militancy in the local far-right scene and his strong anti-American sentiments (Grasso and Indicre, 2014).[3] Lazzaro and Delnevo were the driving force of a small group of converts operating in the city of Genoa, inspired mainly by the Deobandi school, the Indo-Pakistan revivalist movement established in 1867. According to the information available, most local mosques shunned these converts. Thus, the small group started to seek contact with more established Islamist circles in other European countries. Following a trip to the UK, Delnevo was investigated in Genoa on suspicion of enlistment for the purposes of international terrorism (Imarisio, 2013). According to unconfirmed reports, he also visited Chechnya (Pieracci, 2013).

Delnevo was active on the Internet. He created a Facebook profile and a YouTube channel which he called LiguristanTV (Liguria being the Italian region of which Genoa is capital).[4] In his online production, the Genoese convert created an original hybrid, mixing the usual narrative of jihadism with Western and Italian themes, such as leftist anti-imperialist symbols, images of youth rebellion, and even celebratory references to the Italian nation (Vergani, 2014).

Delnevo did not study or work and all his life revolved around Islamic activism. He became increasingly militant. Online he met a Moroccan woman 13 years his senior and married her soon after. He moved to Tangier, but returned without her after a few months (Vidino, 2014, p. 72). She remained in Morocco with her family. In Genoa Delnevo separated from his small group of converts and broke with his friend Lazzaro, a



reflective person seemingly more interested in his studies than in action (Imarisio, 2013; Grasso and Indicre, 2014).

Delnevo began looking for connections that would allow him to join a field of *jihad* abroad. In the summer of 2012, he travelled to Turkey and from there sought to cross into Syria but his attempt failed and he returned to Italy.

He tried again a few months later, with more success. First, he shaved his long beard and started wearing Western clothes again. Then, on November 27, 2012, he went to Turkey by plane and reached Syria. After a few weeks, he called his father, telling him he had travelled to Syria and joined a group of foreign fighters led by Chechen militants; that is the *Katibat al-Muhajirin* (Brigade of the Emigrants).[5] He appeared to be enthusiastic about his experience and optimistic about the final outcome of the conflict against the Assad regime (Vidino, 2014, pp. 73-74).

In a dramatic Skype conversation on June 11, 2013, Delnevo told his father that the enemy was only 100 meters away and to pray for him. On the next day his father received a call from a man named Zamza, possibly a Chechen commander, using Delnevo's cell phone, telling him that his son Giuliano / Ibrahim had died the night before while trying to help a fellow fighter of Somali origin who had been shot (Delnevo, 2014, 2015; Persano, 2013). The Genoese foreign fighter lost his life near the village of Kafr Hamrah, in the north-west of Syria (Delnevo, 2015). He was the first Italian foreign fighter to fall in battle. His eulogy, which referred to him as Abu Musa, was featured on various jihadist websites (Vidino, 2014, p. 74).

From December 2012 to March 2013, Delnevo's mother, Eva Guerriero, travelled along the border between Turkey and Syria in her search of her son, but she did not succeed in finding him (Calandri, 2013). In a visit to Syria in the autumn of 2013, after his death, she managed to find Giuliano / Ibrahim's diary (Preve, 2014). [6] This document was consigned to the public prosecutor's office of Genoa and, at the time of writing, apart from few passages, its content has not been made available (Dellacasa, 2014). Delnevo's body has not been found and officially he is still under investigation for recruitment with the aim of international terrorism (Grasso, 2014).

Delnevo's father, Carlo, has repeatedly described his son as a "hero" (Persano, 2013), even though he explicitly does not share his radical ideas (La Repubblica, 2014). His statements caused controversy in the country (e.g., Ansa, 2015). In early 2014, Carlo Delnevo, a "practicing Catholic" in his own words, decided, accepting his son's wishes, to convert to Islam (Delnevo, 2015).

Anas el Abboubi

Anas el Abboubi was born in Marrakech, Morocco, in 1992, but moved to Italy when he was seven. He lived with his well-integrated Muslim family in Vobarno, a small rural town near Brescia, in northern Italy (in particular, Vidino, 2014, p. 60).

In high school, el Abboubi developed a passion for rap and was active in the Brescia hip hop scene under the name of McKhalifh. In March 2012, he appeared in a MTV reportage on Muslim young musicians in Italy. In this mini-documentary, he expressed ambivalent, albeit not hostile, feelings toward Italians and described with satisfaction his "return" to Islam a year and a half before the interview.[7]

Nevertheless, in a few months, el Abboubi went from being a restless teenager using alcohol and light drugs to a rapper motivated by Islam and, finally, a committed jihadist militant (Vidino, 2014, p. 62). Tellingly, he changed the content of the YouTube channel he had held since his rap days to bring it more in line with



his new religious zeal.[8] In the summer of 2012, he began to follow and produce Islamist material on the Internet, under the name of Anas Abu Shakur. In particular, he lashed out at the values and institutions of Western civilisation (including individualism and sexual promiscuity, man-made legal systems, global capitalism and the banking system[9]) and denounced the “crusade against Islam of the new world order” led by the US. He also displayed anti-Jewish sentiments. Furthermore, he openly expressed his desire to travel for *jihad* (Vidino, 2014, pp. 63-64).

El Abboubi soon got in touch with other jihadist activists, especially in central and northern Europe (the UK, Belgium, Germany). He was also in contact with Giuliano / Ibrahim Delnevo. Moreover, he tried to open the Italian branch of the radical Sharia4 franchise,[10] Sharia4Italy,[11] although without much success (Micalessin, 2014).

Italian authorities have monitored his activities at least since September 2012. On June 12, 2013, they decided to arrest el Abboubi after becoming concerned by the increased militancy of his online activities and, above all, by the fact that he had used the internet to research various iconic sites in Brescia (Italian State Police, 2013; Petenzi, 2013). The worry was that he could be planning attacks in the city. However, on June 28, 2013, he was released, as the court did not deem his behaviour a violation of the law (Rodella, 2013a).

On September 14, 2013 Abboubi travelled to Syria, via Turkey (Rodella, 2013b; Rodella, 2015a), where he became a fighter of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (now Islamic State). In order to arrange his travel, el Abboubi contacted a small group of Albanian jihadist facilitators who operated between the Balkans and Italy (Petenzzi, 2015). Two Albanian citizens, uncle and nephew, were arrested on these grounds by Italian authorities in March 2015 (Rodella, 2015b).[12]

In August 2013, el Abboubi created a new Facebook profile, quite active, under the name Anas al-Italy and indicated his job as “jihad”. However, since January 2014 this profile has no longer been available (Rodella, 2014). The last phone call with his mother was on January 28, 2014 (Rodella, 2015a).

The fate of Anas is uncertain. At the time of writing, it is not clear whether he is still alive (Rodella, 2015c).

Maria Giulia Sergio

Maria Giulia Sergio, a 28-year-old woman, was born in Torre del Greco, near Naples, to a Catholic family (father, mother and an older sister). The family had economic problems and decided to move to northern Italy around 2000; they settled in Inzago, a town between Milan and Bergamo. There her sister Marianna (born in 1985) married a Muslim immigrant of Algerian origin.

After high-school, Sergio studied biotechnology at the State University of Milan. She also worked in part-time jobs to pay for her studies. In September 2007, she converted to Islam on her own initiative and took a new name, Fatima az Zahra.[13] In her words, the Internet facilitated a sudden conversion experience (Assumma, 2013; Sarfatti, 2015). Initially her parents did not approve of her decision (Serafini, 2015b, p. 39).

After two years, Maria Giulia / Fatima married Jamal, a local pizza maker of Moroccan origin, but in 2011 filed for divorce, possibly disappointed by his lack of religious fervour.

On October 5, 2009, she participated in a popular TV show (*Pomeriggio 5*) where she argued for the use of the headscarf (*hijab*) for Muslim women and supported the idea of a “pluralist system” in society (Biloslavo, 2015b). Around that time, she adopted the *niqab* (the veil that covers the entire face with only a slit for the eyes). In addition, on September 16, 2011, she subscribed to a petition in favour of the *niqab*, along with her



sister and her mother. The petition was signed by Delnevo and Lazzaro, too, and was reportedly written by the latter (Biloslavo, 2015a).[14]

Sergio felt she was a victim of religious discrimination (Serafini, 2015b, pp. 42, 46-47). Furthermore, over time, her positions became increasingly radical. On September 17, 2014, in the mosque of Treviglio, near Bergamo, she married an Albanian citizen, Aldo “Said” Kobuzi,[15] in an apparent marriage of convenience, facilitated by a mutual acquaintance of Albanian origin, Lubjana Gjecaj. Sergio soon moved to Kobuzi’s house near Grosseto, in Tuscany. Just four days after the marriage, Sergio and her new husband took an airplane from Rome to Istanbul and then reached Syria from Gaziantep, where they joined the so-called Islamic State (IS). They settled near the Tishrin Dam on the Euphrates, in the Aleppo Governorate, where they were probably reunited with Kobuzi’s sister and mother (Serafini, 2015b, pp. 86-87, 97).

In her eyes, Sergio fulfilled the duty of the “journey” (*Hijra*)[16] to the newly-claimed “caliphate”, responding to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s call; in this way, she became a *muhajira* (female “emigrant”, from the same root of *Hijra*) (Perešin, 2015; Perešin and Cervone, 2015). In Syria, Sergio took up firearms training, waiting to take part in combat someday (Serafini, 2015b, pp. 102, 132-133). She explicitly expressed her desire to fight. [17] Thus, strictly speaking, Maria Giulia / Fatima is not a foreign fighter, but only because at the moment IS, basing its activity on a rigid interpretation of *Sharia* law, prefers not to use women in military combat (cf. Cook, 2005; Lahoud, 2014). However, this does not preclude the possibility that she could conduct acts of violence in the self-proclaimed “caliphate” or in other countries (cf. Perešin, 2015, pp. 31-32). For his part, Aldo Kobuzi went to an IS training camp in Iraq in November 2014 (Serafini, 2015b, pp. 96-98).

One by one, all family members of Sergio converted to a very strict form of Islam. On July 1, 2015, Italian police arrested Sergio’s father, mother and sister[18] in their house in Inzago, on charges of travel for the purposes of international terrorism and criminal association:[19] they were preparing to go to Syria and join the self-proclaimed “caliphate”, convinced by the young woman’s pressing requests (Berizzi, 2015). On the same day, two Albanian relatives of Aldo Kobuzi (his uncle Baki Coku and his aunt Arta, alias Anila, Kacabuni) were arrested. Five arrest warrants were also issued for the Kobuzi-Sergio couple, two other Kobuzi-Coku relatives (his sister Serjola and his mother Donika Coku) and an Italian-born woman with Canadian passport, Bushra Haik.[20] At the time of writing, they are still wanted (Italian State Police, 2015).

Italian authorities had intercepted Sergio’s Internet and SMS communications with her relatives in Italy. These wiretaps give a valuable insight into Sergio’s activities and motivations. Among other things, in these conversations (actually, almost monologues), this assertive woman endorsed the duty to “destroy the unbelievers” and expressed a strong desire to “die as a martyr”. Moreover, she referred, generically, to the presence of “*mujahidin* in Italy who have connections”. She also prefigured the progressive expansion of the self-proclaimed “caliphate” to Rome itself: in her words, “towards the end, *Insha’Allah*, we will go to Rome, too, as the Prophet said (...) In Rome there will be a great battle” (Sergio, 2015; Serafini, 2015b, p. 137).

According to Italian investigators, these wiretaps led to the Turkish phone number of an “important IS member”, Ahmed Abu al-Harith, who coordinated the arrival in Syria of foreign fighters from different countries (Santucci, 2015; Serafini, 2015b, pp. 76-82).

Sergio has peculiarly contrasting views about the role of women. On one hand, she appears to be a strong-minded woman and certainly represents the driving force in her family; but, on the other hand, she maintains that women should recognise the superiority of men. Tellingly, in an intercepted Skype conversation, Maria Giulia / Fatima paradoxically *demand*ed that her father impose his (actually, her) will on her mother, by saying: “you are in charge (...) you decide, you are the man of the house and then grab mum by her hair and



come here [to Syria] and make *Hijra*! She doesn't need to have any opinion about it" (Sergio, 2015; Serafini, 2015b, p. 131).

On July 5, 2015, Sergio gave a striking interview to Italy's most important newspaper (Serafini, 2015a; Serafini, 2015b, pp. 9-15). In a short Skype conversation, Maria Giulia / Fatima denounced her relatives' arrests as "illogical and irrational". Furthermore, she glorified IS as a "perfect state" based on *Sharia* law. She denied the accusation of human rights violations in the newly-proclaimed "caliphate" but at the same time defended the use of beheadings and other forms of corporal punishment. The entire interview was conducted by her in a self-confident, doctrinaire tone.

Radicalisation pathways

These three stories present similarities but also important differences. With regard to socio-demographic characteristics, all protagonists were quite young: Delnevo was born in 1989, el Abboubi in 1992, Sergio in 1987. They all lived in northern Italy (in the regions of Lombardia and Liguria), in the richest and most dynamic part of the country. None suffered conditions of poverty or social exclusion, although Sergio's family of origin had experienced some economic difficulties.

As for psychological factors, none showed signs of mental illness. On the other hand, they differed markedly in their personality traits: in particular, while Delnevo was a troubled young man (Delnevo, 2015; Grasso, 2014), Sergio is a strong-minded, self-confident person (Serafini, 2015b, pp. 9-15ff.).

Apart from a few similarities, there are no indications of a specific profile. This conclusion is in line with the findings of the current literature on radicalisation. In fact earlier attempts to draw conclusions from socio-demographic variables and to identify the "terrorist personality" have been largely abandoned. Rather, today there is a general tendency to "shift the focus away from profiling extremists to profiling the radicalization pathways they take" (Hafez and Mullins, 2015, pp. 959)

As most Italian homegrown jihadists (Vidino, 2014), their radicalisation pathways did not take place in traditional settings, such as radical mosques or prisons. On one hand, el Abboubi had no strong connections with Islamic places of worship or cultural centres (Valle Sabbia News, 2013; Vidino, 2014, p. 79); Delnevo went to mosque from time to time and, for a short time, frequented a mosque with "known militant ties" near Imperia (Vidino, 2014, p. 73), not far from Genoa; while Sergio attended a few mosques quite regularly. However, on closer inspection, mosque attendance did not play a crucial role in their decision to join jihadist groups in Syria. On the other hand, neither did they have criminal records nor had they ever been to prison, with the exception of el Abboubi's short detention in June 2013. By contrast, the Internet played an important role in their radicalisation process, especially for el Abboubi.

All three jihadists made the leap from a "cognitive" form of radicalisation, based on the acquisition of radical attitudes, values and beliefs, to a "behavioural" form, associated with actual participation in a range of radical activities, including illegal and clandestine ones, which can culminate in violent extremism and terrorism (among others, Neumann, 2013).

In relation to "cognitive" radicalisation, all three expressed serious grievances. In particular, as mentioned above, el Abboubi critiqued the alleged vices of the Western style of life (Vidino, 2014, pp. 63-66); Sergio complained about religious discrimination and Islamophobic attitudes in the country (Serafini, 2015b, pp. 42, 46-47); and Delnevo expressed strong disagreements with Italy's foreign policy toward Muslim-majority nations.[21] Some of the grievances are not uncommon in sections of Europe's Muslim communities.



However, the three Italian radicals framed problems and solutions in the perspective of jihadist ideology, with its principles, narratives, and symbols.

All three did not hesitate to publicly advance their radical ideas, at least to a certain degree. For instance, el Abboubi in September 2012 asked the police if he could obtain the permit necessary to organise a public protest in Brescia, adding that he planned to publicly burn Israeli flags during the event and display banners containing offensive material targeting US President Barak Obama. A demonstration eventually took place in front of a mall on October 6, 2012; reportedly less than a dozen people attended it (Vidino, 2014, p. 60). Delnevo and Sergio subscribed to a public petition in favour of the *niqab*. Sergio participated in a national TV show and gave various newspaper interviews.

In particular, these three jihadists were active on social media, where they expressed extremist positions, including incitement to hatred (e.g., Alfonso and Persano, 2013; Serafini, 2015b, p. 32). Each of them had at least one Facebook profile; they have since been removed. El Abboubi and Delnevo created their own YouTube channel. El Abboubi used a Twitter account for a short time in 2012.[22] As mentioned earlier, he also started two blogs, Sharia4Italy and Banca Islamica.

These public statements, together with other sources (in particular, testimonies of family members, friends, acquaintances and other relevant actors), make it possible to dig into their lives. However, it is not easy to reconstruct their original motivations. In general, their decision to embrace jihadism and travel to Syria was driven by similar, but not identical reasons. Apparently, el Abboubi became disgusted by the values and institutions of Western society and wanted to rebel against them; Delnevo was fascinated by the mission of fighting for an alleged ‘good cause’, in solidarity with suffering (Sunni) Muslim populations, and by the idea of sacrificing his life for Islam (in particular, Delnevo, 2014, 2015); while Sergio was obsessed with the idea of purity, based on a fundamentalist and militant interpretation of the religion,[23] and was attracted by the cause of the newly-proclaimed “caliphate”.

At some point these three radicals decided to take action and leave for Syria. They moved on to a “behavioural” form of radicalisation in connection with jihadist armed groups. Unfortunately there is little open-source information about the ways in which these Italian citizens travelled to Syria, via Turkey. According to the information currently available, they were not directly recruited by militant organisations through a traditional top-down process of recruitment, but rather actively sought contacts with various facilitators, on the basis of a bottom-up process. Both el Abboubi and Sergio had connections with Albanian jihadists. This fact confirms the influence of Balkan extremists in Italy (Giacalone, 2015). However, other details are still vague, unknown or not publicly available. For example, the role of “IS member” Abu al-Harith still needs to be clarified.

Importantly, with the possible exception of el Abboubi in 2013, there are no indications that these home-grown jihadists were interested in preparing attacks in Italian territory (cf. Hegghammer, 2013).

Another noteworthy aspect concerns the families of the jihadists. All three remained in touch with their family members back home. However, their reactions were significantly different. Delnevo’s family was not aware of his decision to leave for *jihad*. As mentioned earlier, after his departure, his mother travelled to Syria to find him. His father repeatedly asked him to return to Italy on the phone. However, after the tragic death of the young man in June 2013, Carlo Delnevo, a practicing Catholic before his recent conversion to Islam,



although not sharing Giuliano / Ibrahim's extremist ideas, described his son as an idealistic "hero" (Delnevo, 2015).

El Abboubi's family seemingly presented more ambiguous positions. For example, his mother expressed partial reservations; in an intercepted conversation, she told him: "When they conquer Syria and enter Palestine, I'll let you go. It is a war against Israel and you don't fight Arabs" (Bianconi, 2015). Moreover, she reportedly said to a friend: "He went for the honour of *jihād*" (Giornale di Brescia, 2015). According to prosecuting authorities, el Abboubi's "family never let him lack support and understanding" (Giornale di Brescia, 2015).

On the other hand, all of Sergio's family members converted to a very strict form of Islam, approved of her decision to leave for Syria and, following her constant requests, even agreed to move to the territory under the control of the self-proclaimed "caliphate". Eventually Maria Giulia / Fatima was able to recruit her whole family, using both the carrot and stick approaches. In particular, she did not hesitate to resort to emotional blackmail (Serafini, 2015b, pp. 114ff.).

Seemingly, Delnevo's and el Abboubi's families have, in different ways, painfully tried to balance their original non-militant attitudes and ideas with attachment and consideration for their loved one. They have handled this on their own.

In general, working with families can be an important tool in preventing violent extremism. Thus, it is worth stressing that at present, unlike other countries (cf. Gielen, 2015), Italy does not have actual support initiatives for the parents and relatives of foreign fighters and, more generally, it has not developed full-fledged counter-radicalisation and de-radicalisation programmes (Vidino, 2015b). On the contrary, Italy has given priority to a criminal justice approach, based on the prosecution of foreign fighters. This approach has its advantages and disadvantages (cf. Reed et al., 2015). For example, in some conversations with their parents from Syria, both el Abboubi and Delnevo explicitly mentioned the fear of being arrested and convicted in Italy as a reason not to return home. On the other hand, family members and friends were discouraged from passing on information to authorities.

Conclusions

This article has explored the current extent of Italy's Sunni jihadists in Syria and Iraq. It has sought to fill a gap that exists in the scientific literature on the Italian case. Clearly, further research is needed on this topic. Furthermore, a comprehensive analysis of this complex phenomenon would require a broad multi-causal approach. In particular, many scholars of terrorism distinguish three levels of analysis: the micro-level concerning individuals, the meso-level concerning groups, networks or organisations and the macro-level concerning the social environment (among others, Crenshaw, 1981). Developments at one level of analysis may impact other levels. This explorative article has focused mainly on the micro level, on the basis of currently available information. Nevertheless, future research should examine the meso- and the macro-levels and analyse the interaction between these three levels.

Overall, the number of foreign fighters connected with Italy appears to be limited, especially when compared to other European countries. In particular, today very few Italian citizens are publicly known to have joined



armed groups in Syria or Iraq. However, these individuals deserve attention because they are particularly difficult to detect and stop.

This contribution has examined the stories of three Italian nationals: Giuliano (alias “Ibrahim”) Delnevo, a convert who died in combat in the Aleppo area in 2013; Anas el Abboubi (alias “Anas Abu Shaku” or “Anas al-Italy”), a second-generation immigrant of Moroccan descent who joined the ranks of the so-called Islamic State (IS) in Syria in 2013; and Maria Giulia Sergio (alias “Fatima az Zahra”), a convert who is now in the self-proclaimed “caliphate”, where she has received firearms training. Delnevo and el Abboubi served as foreign fighters, while Sergio, as a woman, is an aspiring foreign fighter for IS.

These three case studies present interesting similarities but also important differences and they do not permit the identification of a common profile of an Italian foreign fighter. This fact confirms the widely held assumption that the radicalisation process is based on individual pathways that differ from one person to another (among others, Hafez and Mullins, 2015).

In their experience in conflict areas, jihadists such as Delnevo, el Abboubi and Sergio could access militant groups and gain in social status, acquire weapons training and entrench anti-Western positions. As mentioned earlier, el Abboubi was already being investigated on suspicion of planning attacks in Italy, before his departure for Syria.

In conclusion, it is clear that Italian foreign fighters and *muhajirin* (“emigrants”) in Syria and Iraq, though relatively few in number, potentially pose a significant and complex security threat.

About the author: *Francesco Marone is a Research Fellow at the University of Pavia and an Adjunct Lecturer at the University Institute Umanitaria–Ciels in Milan (Italy). Moreover, he is currently a Fellow of the Centre for Advanced Studies (CAS) at the University of Rijeka (Croatia). He was a Visiting Fellow at Aberystwyth University (Wales, UK) and a Visiting Postdoctoral Researcher at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (Israel). His research interests include terrorism and political violence, radicalisation, and migration and security.*



References

- Alfonso, D. and Persano, B. Ucciso in Siria, voleva il Liguristan. 'Già indagato per terrorismo'. *La Repubblica*, Genoa local edition (June 18, 2013).
- Ansa. Renzi, chi uccide in nome dio non è eroe, no indulgenza. *Ansa* (January 15, 2015).
- Assumma, A. 'Vi racconto perché ho scelto l'Islam'. *L'Espresso* (October 30, 2013).
- Bakke, K. M. (2014). Help wanted? The mixed record of foreign fighters in domestic insurgencies. *International Security*, 38(4), 150-187.
- Berizzi, P. In cella dai genitori di Lady Jihad: 'Credere in Allah non è terrorismo'. *La Repubblica* (July 14, 2015).
- Bianconi, G. Le conversazioni via Facebook. 'Reclutati quaranta italiani'. *Corriere della Sera* (March 26, 2015).
- Biloslavo, F. L'italiana che è pronta a colpirci. *Il Giornale* (January 11, 2015).
- Biloslavo, F. Quando 'Lady Jihad' disse in tv: 'Santanchè sparge odio e violenza'. *Il Giornale* (January 14, 2015).
- Biloslavo, F. L'allegria famiglia (italo-albanese) che combatte con il Califfo. *Panorama* (March 11, 2015).
- Biloslavo, F. Dal trucco al velo, vi racconto la svolta del clan femminile guidato da Lady Jihad. *Il Giornale* (July 3, 2015).
- Byman, D. and Shapiro, J. (2014). Be Afraid. Be a Little Afraid: The Threat of Terrorism from Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq. Policy Paper No. 34. Brookings Institution.
- Calandri, M. 'Tre mesi di odissea a un passo dal fronte, volevo salvare mio figlio ma ho fallito'. *La Repubblica*, Genoa local edition (June 20, 2013).
- Cook, D. (2005). Women Fighting in Jihad?. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 28(5), 375-384.
- Corriere della Sera. La lettera delle sorelle Sergio a Ciampi in difesa del burqa. *Corriere della Sera*, Milan local edition (January 13, 2015).
- Crenshaw, M. (1981). The causes of terrorism. *Comparative Politics*, 13(4), 379-399.
- Dellacasa, E. Il diario di 'Ibrahim', jihadista genovese: capi in hotel, noi in tenda. *Corriere della Sera* (August 24, 2014).
- Delnevo, C. *Vi racconto Giuliano* [I'll tell you about Giuliano], YouTube video. September 2, 2014. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8B8NLaHS4HA>.
- Delnevo, C. (2015). *Il figlio musulmano*. Tricase: Youcanprint.
- Giacalone, G. (2015). La rete jihadista albanese e le ripercussioni italiane. Analysis No. 288. ISPI (July 2015).
- Gielen, A.-J. (2015). Supporting Families of Foreign Fighters. A Realistic Approach for Measuring the Effectiveness. *Journal for Deradicalization*, 2, 21-48.
- Giornale di Brescia. Anas, da Vobarno alla Siria 'per l'onore della Jihad'. *Giornale di Brescia* (March 25, 2015).
- Gonzales, P. Vera Jourova: 'Près de 6000 Européens sont partis faire le djihad'. *Le Figaro* (April 12, 2015).
- Grasso, M. Indagato l'amico del genovese ucciso in Siria. *Il Secolo XIX* (August 29, 2014).
- Grasso, M. La madre del genovese morto in Siria: 'Io una minaccia? Loro ci usano'. *Il Secolo XIX* (February 28, 2015).



Grasso, M. and Indicre, M. Il genovese ‘Umar’ e la morte di Delnevo: ‘È inutile, tanto voi non capite’. *Il Secolo XIX* (August 28, 2014).

Hafez, F. (2014). Shifting borders: Islamophobia as common ground for building pan-European right-wing unity. *Patterns of Prejudice*, 48(5), 479-499.

Hafez, M., and Mullins, C. (2015). The Radicalization Puzzle: A Theoretical Synthesis of Empirical Approaches to Homegrown Extremism. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 38(11), 958-975.

Hegghammer, T. 2013. Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists’ Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting. *American Political Science Review*, 107(1), 1-15.

Heinke, D. H. and Raudszus, J. (2015). “German Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq”. *CTC Sentinel*, 8(1), 18-21.

Il Sole 24 Ore. Pinotti: nelle file dell’Isis 87 foreign fighters passati dall’Italia. *Il Sole 24 Ore* (September 20, 2015).

Imarisio, M. ‘L’italiano ucciso in Siria reclutava altri guerriglieri’. *Corriere della Sera* (June 20, 2013).

Italian Interior Ministry. “Alfano: ‘Stato di massima allerta contro il terrorismo’”. Press release, Rome, January 19, 2015. Available at <http://www.interno.gov.it/it/notizie/alfano-stato-allerta-massimo-contro-terrorismo>.

Italian State Police. “Operazione Scen Shot”. Press release, Brescia, June 20, 2013. Available at: <http://questure.poliziadistato.it/Brescia/articolo-6-91-56067-1.htm>.

Italian State Police. “Milan: 5 arrested on suspicion of international terrorism”. Press release, Milan, July 1, 2015. Available at: <http://www.poliziadistato.it/articolo/view/39239/> (English version).

Klausen, J. (2015). Tweeting the Jihad: Social media networks of Western foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 38(1), 1-22.

La Repubblica. Jihad, il padre del ragazzo ucciso: ‘Ragazzi non partite’. *La Repubblica*, Genoa local edition (August 28, 2014).

Lahoud, N. (2014). The Neglected Sex: The Jihadis’ Exclusion of Women from Jihad. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 26(5), 780-802.

Marone, F. (2015). Il nuovo volto del terrorismo jihadista. *Il Mulino*, 64(2), 293-302.

Micalessin, G. La guerra santa di Al Italy il ‘bresciano’. *Il Giornale* (June 21, 2014).

Moore, C. (2015). Foreign Bodies: Transnational Activism, the Insurgency in the North Caucasus and “Beyond”. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 27(3), 395-415.

Neumann, P. R. (2013). The trouble with radicalization. *International Affairs*, 89(4), 873-893.

Neumann, P. R. “Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000; surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s”. International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR), January 26, 2015. Available at: <http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s/>.

Pantucci, R. (2014). The British Foreign Fighter Contingent in Syria. *CTC Sentinel*, 7(5), 17-21.

Perešin, A. (2015). Fatal Attraction: Western Muslimas and ISIS. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 9(3), 21-38.

Perešin, A. and Cervone, A. (2015). The Western *Muhajirat* of ISIS. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 38(7), 495-509.



- Persano, B. Il padre di Giuliano Delnevo: 'Mio figlio è morto da eroe per salvare un amico'. *La Repubblica* (June 19, 2013).
- Petenzì, W. Nel mirino dello studente pure questore e piazza Loggia. *Corriere della Sera* (June 13, 2013).
- Petenzì, W. Isis, reclutatori nei paesi Balcani. La pista bresciana porta in Albania. *Corriere della Sera* (March 5, 2015).
- Piccardo, G. Giuliano Ibrahim Delnevo: l'amico Umberto Marozzi: 'Mi scrisse che in Siria i martiri profumano...'. *L'Huffington Post* (June 18, 2013).
- Pieracci, A. Dal Marocco alla Cecenia. L'orizzonte del male di Ibrahim. *La Stampa* (June 19, 2013).
- Plebani, A. (Ed.). (2015). *New (And Old) Patterns of Jihadism: Al-Qa'ida, the Islamic State and Beyond*. Milan: ISPI.
- Preve, M. Trovato il diario del genovese ucciso in Siria per la Jihad. *La Repubblica*, Genoa local edition (August 23, 2014).
- Reed A., de Roy van Zuijdewijn, J. and Bakker, E. (2015). Pathways of Foreign Fighters: Policy Options and Their (Un)Intended Consequences. ICCT Policy Brief. The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT).
- Rich, B. and Conduit, D. (2015). The Impact of Jihadist Foreign Fighters on Indigenous Secular-Nationalist Causes: Contrasting Chechnya and Syria. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 38(2), 113-131.
- Rodella, M. Il 'terrorista' di Vobarno torna a casa. *Corriere della Sera* (June 29, 2013).
- Rodella, M. L'islamista di Vobarno sparito nell'inferno siriano. *Corriere della Sera* (November 9, 2013).
- Rodella, M. Il rapper che canta la Jihad ora è scomparso nel nulla. *Corriere della Sera* (August 23, 2014).
- Rodella, M. Anas, due tentativi per arrivare in Siria. L'ultima telefonata: siamo sotto attacco. *Corriere della Sera* (March 26, 2015).
- Rodella, M. Reclutavano combattenti dell'Isis. Tre jihadisti finiscono in manette. *Corriere della Sera*, (March 26, 2015).
- Rodella, M. La madre di Anas: 'Siete qui per dirmi che è morto'. *Corriere della Sera* (March 27, 2015).
- Rodella, M. Jihad, era 'pronto ad arruolarsi': resterà sotto sorveglianza per 5 anni. *Corriere della Sera* (April 25, 2015).
- Santucci, G. Così il colonnello del Califfo reclutava i combattenti in Italia. *Corriere della Sera* (July 2, 2015).
- Sarfatti, M. Maria Giulia Sergio, alias Fatima: 'Grazie al Corano ho capito cosa vuol dire sentirsi una donna'. Incontro con lady Jihad. *L'Huffington Post* (January 13, 2015).
- Sergio, M. G. Terrorismo, le intercettazioni della jihadista italiana. YouTube video, July 3, 2015. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dQuber1xcZo> (in Italian). (This YouTube video presents the original audio of some intercepted conversations between Sergio and her Italian family, while she was in Syria)
- Serafini, M. Italian Woman Jihadist Speaks, *Corriere della Sera* (English version) (July 7, 2015).
- Serafini, M. (2015b). *Maria Giulia che divenne Fatima. Storia della donna che ha lasciato l'Italia per l'Isis*. Milan: Corriere della Sera.
- Sistema di Informazione per la Sicurezza della Repubblica. *Relazione sulla politica dell'informazione per la sicurezza 2014* [2014 Report on Security Intelligence Policy] (February 13, 2015).



Tempera, N. È caccia alla bolognese ideologa dell'Isis. *Il Resto del Carlino* (July 2, 2015).

Valle Sabbia News. 'La pacifica convivenza non è in discussione'. *Valle Sabbia News* (June 13, 2013).

Vergani, M. (2014). Neojihadist Prosumers and Al Qaeda Single Narrative: The Case Study of Giuliano Delnevo. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 37(7), 604-617.

Vidino, L. (2014). *Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy: Birth, Development and Radicalization Dynamics*. Foreword by Stefano Dambruoso. Milan: ISPI and European Foundation for Democracy.

Vidino, L. (Ed.). (2015a). *L'Italia e il terrorismo in casa. Che fare?*. Milan: ISPI.

Vidino, L. (2015b). Sharia4: From Confrontational Activism to Militancy. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 9(2), 2-16.

Whine, M. (2007). Common Motifs on Jihadi and Far Right Websites. In B. Ganor, K. Von Knop and C. Duarte (Eds). *Hypermedia Seduction for Terrorist Recruiting*. Amsterdam: IOS Press, 76-95.

Notes

[1] For example, according to Hegghammer's original data for the period 1990-2010, about one in nine foreign fighters returned for an attack in the West. On the other hand, those who were involved in plots were twice as likely to kill (Hegghammer, 2013).

[2] References to Italian foreign fighters and jihadists in Syria and Iraq can be found in Vidino (2014) and Vergani (2014) and also in Plebani (2015) and Vidino (2015a).

[3] According to media reports, Andrea Lazzaro started to frequent the local headquarters of *Forza Nuova* ("New Force"), an ultra-Catholic neo-fascist party, around 2003, when he was a teenager, and later got close to *Fronte Nazionale* ("National Front"), another small, more secular, far-right party (Imarisio, 2013; Grasso and Indicre, 2014). According to a Genoese comrade, Lazzaro "read a lot" and was "interested in religions"; however, "his permanent idea was anti-Americanism". In fact, at the time Lazzaro started a radical blog called *Lantiamericanista* ("The Anti-Americanist"), now no longer available. Apparently he has been particularly attracted to a quest for spirituality. Around 2007, Andrea / Umar explained his recent conversion to Islam with these words: "in my last year of high school I had the urge to look for an alternative. Something that was beyond ephemeral trends, that helped me understand the meaning of life [...] I wanted to look for a connection with the transcendent, that went beyond material reality, beyond the produce-consume-die cycle" (Grasso and Indicre, 2014).

This transition from right-wing extremism to Islamism may seem odd, especially considering that today Islamophobic discourses have become a feature of many divergent parties and movements in the far-right camp (among others, Hafez, 2014). However, these two radical ideologies also have some general themes and motives in common (cf. Whine, 2007), including ultra-conservatism, aversion to pluralism and liberalism, anti-globalisation outlooks, anti-Semitism, anti-Americanism, contempt for a materialistic view of reality. The last two elements – anti-Americanism and contempt for materialism – appear to be crucial in Lazzaro's pathway.

[4] See: <https://www.youtube.com/user/liguristanTV>. Delnevo uploaded nine low-quality videos.

[5] In March 2013, this brigade merged with two other jihadist groups and became *Jaish al-Muhajirin wal-Ansar* (Army of Emigrants and Helpers) (cf. Moore, 2015).



- [6] Eva Guerriero visited the area alone, without the support of the government (Preve, 2014). To the contrary, at the beginning of 2015, after the Italian intelligence system referred in general terms to the potential threat posed by “family members / friends (including women)” of foreign fighters in the annual report to Parliament (Sistema di Informazione per la Sicurezza della Repubblica, 2015, p. 31), Guerriero, pressured by the media, bitterly said in a newspaper interview: “They [Italian authorities] used us [Delnevo’s family], intercepted us, tailed us. And that didn’t even help save my son’s life. I wonder if this is still a constitutional State” (Grasso, 2015). Italian authorities have made no comment.
- [7] MTV Italia, *Nel ritmo di Allah* [In the Rhythm of Allah], 2012; a trailer of this report is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EObUCoujN0o&feature=youtu.be>. The mini-documentary on el Abboubi (*La storia di McKhalifh*, “The Story of McKhalifh”) is no longer available online (see Vidino, 2014, pp. 61-62).
- [8] See: <https://www.youtube.com/user/MCKHALIF>. El Abboubi uploaded four videos.
- [9] See his blog: <http://banca-islamica.blogspot.it/>. El Abboubi wrote only one post, on August 18, 2012.
- [10] Sharia4 is a transnational movement with autonomous branches in various European countries. It is well-known for its provocative rhetoric and deliberately confrontational protests. In some cases, local branches, especially Sharia4Belgium, also facilitated the passage of jihadists to Iraq and Syria (Vidino, 2015b).
- [11] El Abboubi started a dedicated blog: <http://sharia4italy.blogspot.it/>. There are only two posts, both written on May 19, 2012.
- [12] The two Albanian citizens, Alban Haki Elezi, 38, and Idris Elvis Elezi, 20, also tried to recruit an Italian-born teenager of Tunisian descent who lived in Como, not far from Milan. In the end, the boy backed out (Bianconi, 2015; Rodella, 2015d).
- [13] Fatimah, known as az Zahra (“the Shining One” in Arabic), was the youngest daughter of the Prophet Muhammad and Khadijah and the wife of Ali.
- [14] The text of the petition is quoted in *Corriere della Sera* (2015) (in Italian).
- [15] Aldo Kobuzi was born in northwestern Albania in 1991; he worked as a mechanic. His younger sister Serjola had already left for Syria in 2013 together with her husband, Mariglen Dervishllari, and their child, Hataab. Kobuzi’s brother-in-law died of leukemia in Syria (Biloslavo, 2015c).
- [16] As is well-known, the *Hijra* is the migration of the Prophet Muhammad and his Companions from hostile Mecca to Yathrib (Medina) in 622 CE.
- [17] For example, in some 2015 intercepted conversations, Sergio told her family that in Syria she had already used a handgun and a kalashnikov. Furthermore, she said: “I make *du’a* [supplication in Islam] everyday that Abu Bakr al Baghdadi confirms *jihad* for women (...) because I can’t wait to die as a *shahid*” (Serafini, 2015b, pp. 132-133).
- [18] Marianna Sergio divorced in February 2015 and returned home to live with her parents.
- [19] Specifically, Sergio’s father and mother were charged only with the crime of “transfers” for the purposes of international terrorism. This type of crime was introduced by an antiterrorism law passed in April 2015 (Law 17 April 2015, no. 43). By contrast, Maria Giulia’s sister was also charged with the crime of “association” for the purposes of international terrorism (Serafini, 2015b, pp. 145-146).
- [20] Haik, a Canadian national of Syrian descent, allegedly is a IS supporter and had an important role in indoctrinating Maria Giulia / Fatima, her sister Marianna and other women via the Internet (Serafini, 2015b,



pp. 59-63). She was born in Bologna, Italy, in 1985 and lived in the country for many years, before she moved to Riyadh, in Saudi Arabia (Tempera, 2015; Serafini, 2015b, p. 59).

[21] In a video uploaded on his YouTube channel on April 29, 2012, Delnevo addressed “the President of the Italian Republic Mario Monti and his government” (actually, Monti was President of the Council of Ministers, that is head of government, not head of state) and asked the unconditional withdrawal of Italian army from Afghanistan, particularly in a period of economic crisis (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wdM9x8oN778>). In another video uploaded on October 3, 2012, he denounced the “invasion of Somalia” by the *Kuffar* (unbelievers) (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0NH_mhOIBY4). However, it is worth stressing that the Syrian civil war does not involve a non-Muslim invader.

[22] See: https://twitter.com/anas_abdu. Cf. Klausen (2015).

[23] Tellingly, before she left for Syria, Sergio told an acquaintance: “I was Catholic but I embraced Islam because it is a *cleaner* religion” (emphasis added) (Biloslavo, 2015d).



Paradigmatic Shifts in Jihadism in Cyberspace:

The Emerging Role of Unaffiliated Sympathizers in Islamic State's Social Media Strategy

by Yannick Veilleux-Lepage



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/).

Abstract[1]

This paper provides an overview of the evolution of the concept of jihadism as it presently exists in cyberspace. From its roots during the Chechen conflict to the current use of social media by the Islamic State (IS), this paper identifies and examines three highly significant paradigm shifts: (1) the emergence of rudimentary Web 2.0 platforms and jihadist forums; (2) the advent of advanced Web 2.0 and social media platforms as methods of spreading jihadism; and (3) turn towards 'lone wolf' terrorism. In this paper, the author argues that IS' extensive reliance on unaffiliated sympathizers, who either re-tweet or re-post content produced and authorized by the IS leadership can be seen as a groundbreaking paradigm shift in the evolution of jihadism in cyberspace. Furthermore, it is also argued that IS' strategy of empowering of unaffiliated sympathizers represents a further development in the evolution of jihadism in cyberspace and can best be understood as an attempt to normalize and legitimize IS' existence through its efforts to dominate the 'IS narrative' across social media platforms.

Keywords: Islamic State; Cyber-Jihad; Unaffiliated Sympathizers; Social Media; Counter-Narrative; and Twitter

1. Introduction

In the heyday of al-Qaeda's operations in Afghanistan, from late 2004 through early 2007, the group produced numerous low-quality, amateurish, videos featuring battle triumphs both in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as pronouncements from its leaders Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri exhorting young Muslims to jihad. The latter in particular often took the form of poorly lit, lengthy and theologically dense monologues, unlikely to captivate a wide audience. These videos, presumably produced on inexpensive video cameras and then uploaded to the internet from cafés in Pakistan and elsewhere were nonetheless a powerful reminder to the West that al-Qaeda's agenda to defeat the "far enemy" remained operational. Years of painful and expensive US and allied operations silenced al-Qaeda's core but then, rising from another quarter, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) metastasized in Yemen, dragging Western focus away from Afghanistan and Iraq. AQAP's addition to the jihadi media toolbox was a slick eMagazine entitled *Inspire* which featured how-to articles for what has been termed 'Do It Yourself Jihad.' Leading on from this, since taking over a third of Iraq and declaring the establishment of a caliphate in the summer of 2014, Islamic State (IS) has fascinated and disturbed the world with its highly sophisticated and, at times, shocking media operations; al-Qaeda's grainy battlefield videos and tedious 2-hour-long monologues have been replaced by IS' high definition steadicam shots – with carefully scripted and edited narration – and multilingual messaging aimed, in part, at radicalizing young Muslims, and at encouraging them to emigrate to the newly-



founded caliphate.

While the quality of jihadist material online has undoubtedly improved, this paper contends that the most important aspect of Islamic State's evolved use of the media and the internet concerns its initial methods of distribution and the role of unaffiliated supporters who further disseminate content, rather than the content itself. In other words, this paper argues that Islamic State's use of social media, notably Twitter, represents an important development within global jihadist movements; there has been a clear shift away from the highly organization-centric model advanced by al-Qaeda towards one where unaffiliated sympathizers can interact with and, to some extent, shape propaganda content in real-time by actively participating in its further dissemination, thus contributing to the organisation(s) whose message they convey. In order to provide an appropriate analysis of this ongoing and highly dynamic phenomenon, the first section of this research paper seeks to provide an overview of the evolution of jihadism in cyberspace, from its roots during the Chechen conflict to AQAP's contribution, by identifying and examining three highly significant paradigm shifts: (1) the emergence of rudimentary Web 2.0 platforms and jihadist forums, (2) the advent of advanced Web 2.0 and social media platforms, and (3) the move towards 'do-it-yourself' terrorism. The purpose of this is to provide a broad conceptual understanding of the evolving relationship between jihadism and cyberspace, and to highlight an important contrast between al-Qaeda's media efforts and the modernity, reach and effectiveness of the media operations of its former branch and new rival: Islamic State.

The following section begins by providing an overview and analysis of IS' main propaganda products, namely its online publications, its professionally edited videos, and the techniques it employs to leverage the power of social media platforms to reach a widening audience. The implications of Islamic State's social media strategy are then addressed, with particular attention to the new found role and strategic purpose of unaffiliated sympathizers in the dissemination of propaganda created by official IS media production units. It is argued that IS' strategy of empowering of unaffiliated sympathizers represents a further development in the evolution of jihadism in cyberspace and can best be understood as an attempt to normalize and legitimize IS' existence through the domination of the so-called 'Twittersphere.' Finally, this paper concludes by offering thoughts on how the adaptation of counterterrorism policy and practice could lead to more effective countering of online radicalization, thereby undermining IS' social media strategy and its growing appeal.

2. Jihadists in Cyberspace: A Brief Overview

Poor understanding of the early history of jihadi presence online is in large part due to the fact that, by the time cyberspace began to attract the attention of security agencies and scholars, jihadist groups' use of the Internet had already proliferated (Weimann, 2006).[2] Early attempts by jihadists to leverage the Internet included the establishment of azzam.com, which is self described as "an independent media organization providing authentic news and information about jihad and the Foreign Mujahideen everywhere" (as quoted in Awan and Al-Lami, 2009: 56). This is generally cited as the very first authentic jihadist website. The emergence of Azzam.com, along with the Islamic Media Centre and alneda.com, during the First Chechen War (1994-1996) and other nascent peripheral conflicts, aimed to "transmit a version of events different from that offered by the mass media from the other side of the battlefield" (Thomas, 2003: 120). Having recognized that conventional media could easily be censored or filtered by governments (Thomas, 2003), Chechen jihadists instead turned to e-mail distribution lists to transmit their message, uncensored and unfiltered, quickly to a highly targeted audience. In other words, the Internet allowed jihadist groups to explain their actions without the constraints of traditional media, thus offsetting both censorship and condemnation



(Thomas, 2003).

Whilst the jihadist presence in cyberspace remained limited until early 2000s, these websites laid the groundwork for the ascendancy of more sophisticated and interactive uses of the Internet in this century.

2. 1. The Emergence of Jihadist Forums

The generation of an explosion of interactive content and the connected user participation – allowed for by the emergence of early Web 2.0 capabilities and rudimentary online forums – meant users not only passively consumed online content but also actively contributed to its creation (Warren and Leitch, 2012; Hoeren and Vossen, 2009). The increased popularity of general interest online forums coincided with increased participation in jihadist forums, with a 2005 study uncovering upwards of 4,300 active jihadist forums (Weimann, 2006).

Awan and Al-Lami (2009) attributed the move away from traditional websites and the concurrent exponential growth of online forums to the shifting security paradigm in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. In the months following the attacks on New York City and Washington, various groups of hackers engaged in complex campaigns to disrupt jihadist websites.[3] Similarly, law enforcement agencies ramped up their scrutiny and prosecution of jihadist online activities.[4] This sustained assault led to the realization of the necessity of decentralizing the jihadist presence online in order to ensure the continuity of the messaging. Therefore, in an effort to counter the “systemic disruption or removal of important jihadists websites,” the transition was made from traditional websites to online forums in a conscious effort to delegate “responsibility ... to a suitable large and diffused body of anonymous web users” (Awan and Al-Lami, 2009: 57-58).

Despite shifting to online forums, the production of jihadist media remained highly hierarchically organized and strictly regulated. In fact, in the aftermath of the mid-2000 invasion of Afghanistan, senior leaders of al-Qaeda increasingly sought to provide readily accessible information about the organization, its membership, ideology, and strategy, in order to compensate for its reduced capability to commit successful acts of terror (Brachman, 2014). This rhetoric remained inherently one-directional, as avenues for interaction between the global following and al-Qaeda’s senior leadership were limited: messages were produced, disseminated and received, but no formal feedback mechanism was built into the process. In other words, “users on these forums were often more akin to traditional categories of passive media consumers that appeared inimical to the revolution in audience roles heralded by Web 2.0” (Awan and Al-Lami, 2009; 59).

2. 2. The Transition to Web 2.0

The paradigm shifted again with the emergence and growing popularity of increasingly sophisticated Web 2.0 platforms, namely file-sharing portals and social networking sites (Conway, 2012). The al-Qaeda core leadership based in Afghanistan and Pakistan maintained a considerable amount of control over its narrative through its media groups. In addition to this, al-Qaeda affiliates such as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) began utilizing this new media environment to disseminate downloadable content such as magazines, video and brochures. This paradigm shift is best embodied by the media strategy of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and AQI in the interregnum between the demise of Web 1.0 and the fully-fledged Web 2.0. The release of a thirty-minute recording by al-Zarqawi, explaining who he was, why he was fighting, and providing details of the attacks he and his groups were responsible for heralded the start of al-Zarqawi’s media offensive in early



2004 (Conway, 2012). As a veteran of the Soviet–Afghan War he sought to legitimize himself in the eyes of the al-Qaeda leaders who did not wish to recognize his affiliation and role as the “manager of [al-Qaeda’s] Iraqi franchise” (Maggioni, 2015; 56). Paul Eadle described the recording as an example of a “comprehensive brand statement” aimed at gaining brand-recognition (Eadle, 2005; 124-125) and notoriety within the jihadi community. Subsequently, capitalizing on this newfound recognition, AQI released a video depicting al-Zarqawi beheading the American civilian contractor Nicholas Berg (Conway, 2012). This video, entitled *Abu Musa’b al-Zarqawi slaughters an American*, was uploaded to ogrish.com, a popular shock site, and was – as a result – viewed over 15 million times (Talbot, 2005). Moreover, despite some initial resistance by Aymen al-Zawahiri, Osama bin Laden’s deputy, the video of Nick Berg’s killing helped al-Zarqawi consolidate his position as al-Qaeda’s chief in Iraq (Maggioni, 2015).[5]

The video of Nick Berg’s beheading marked a significant change in jihadist propaganda. These “kidnapped narrative series followed a precise script including Westerners kneeling down with Kalashnikov-armed [jihadists] standing behind them” (Maggioni, 2015; 58-59). In addition, it became common for “improvised film-makers” embedded within fighting groups to produce videos of footage gained when “systematically following every action against coalition forces”, and to then publish them soon afterwards “on jihadist and video sharing websites,” thereby achieving wide distribution despite their “limited technological and narrative ability” (Maggioni, 2015; 58-59). The recognition by jihadist groups operating in Iraq and elsewhere of the power of easy-to-access video sharing websites such as YouTube as a novel arena led to their increased use for the dissemination of propaganda, and for the raising of funds. Aided by the popularity of such mediums,[6] and the fact that no Arabic language skills or high level of Internet literacy were now required to locate jihadist content, YouTube rapidly became a significant platform for jihadist groups and their supporters, fostering a thriving subculture which used it to communicate and share propaganda worldwide. In fact, a 2008 study analyzing the users’ comments on YouTube videos depicting suicide operations in Iraq found that the majority of viewers resided outside of the Middle East and North Africa, with the largest percentage located in the United States (Conway and McInerney, 2008). This led to the conclusion that jihadist media was “spreading far beyond traditional Jihadist websites or even dedicated forums to embrace ... video sharing and social networking – both hallmarks of Web 2.0 – and thus extending their reach far beyond what may be conceived as their core support base in the [Middle East and North Africa] region to diaspora populations, converts, and political sympathizers” (Conway and McInerney, 2008: 10).

The dissemination of jihadi messages outside of dedicated forums was, nonetheless, not entirely welcomed by all jihadist media organizations. A case in point is *al-Boraq Media*’s September 2006 publication of a detailed policy paper entitled *Media Exuberance*, which sought to curtail the proliferation and production of unattributed jihadist media. They feared that unpolished and unprofessional content by “scattershot individuals posting jihadist media materials without the sanction of a recognized” jihadist media group undermined the credibility of jihadist media and diverted attention from official sources (Kimmage, 2008: 5).

2. 3. *The Shift Towards ‘DIY Terrorism’*

Despite the aforementioned opposition from some jihadist media groups, al-Qaeda strategists, such as Abu Mus’ab al-Suri, nonetheless quickly recognized the importance of the decentralization of their operations. Notably, in 2004, al-Suri penned his *Call for a Global Islamic Resistance*, in which he decried the hierarchical model of al-Qaeda as outdated and vulnerable, espousing instead the advantages grassroots leaderless resistance (Bousquet, 2011; Michael, 2013). Al-Suri’s strategy of individual jihad is best illustrated by the



activities of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

Another highly important paradigm shift, largely dependent on the power of the Internet, occurred with the 2010 AQAP launch of its widely distributed English-language online magazine titled *Inspire*, which encouraged individual jihad against Americans and Westerners (Michael, 2013). With slick production values and graphics, *Inspire* mixed ideologically driven material with pragmatic instructional and skill-building content in an effort to foster a do-it-yourself approach to terrorism (Lemieux et al., 2014). Moreover, this emphasis on a do-it-yourself ethos targeted at an English-speaking readership is an “especially interesting development in *Inspire* that set it apart from other examples of the al-Qaeda propaganda” (Lemieux et al., 2014). Through a section entitled *Open Source Jihad*, *Inspire* attempted to increase the motivation of individuals in the West, while lowering skill-based barriers that had previously hampered individuals attempting to carry out successful terrorist attacks. For example, one issue detailed how to conduct a random shooting in a crowded restaurant, while another instructed readers how to weld blades to the front of a pick up truck to “mow down the enemies of Allah”[7] (as quoted in Michael, 2013; 55).

The production of *Inspire* magazine is, in many ways, the incarnation of the strategic vision of Anwar al-Awlaki, a popular,[8] American born, online cleric affiliated with AQAP whose sermons were widely distributed on YouTube. Al-Awlaki is also credited with inspiring a number of terrorist plots and attacks. [9] According to Brian Jenkins (2011), al-Awlaki and *Inspire* led to a fundamental shift in al-Qaeda’s strategy from organizationally-led jihad towards do-it-yourself terrorism. Similarly, Jarret Brachman (2014) claims that al-Awlaki and AQAP made do-it-yourself terrorism and its participants, the focus of their media efforts, rather than conceptualizing al-Qaeda’s sympathizers as merely an audience. According to Bruce Hoffman, (2010), the ability of terrorist organizations—such as AQAP—to motivate and empower individuals to commit acts outside of any chain of command, represents a change in the nature of terrorism itself.”

As a result of this paradigmatic shift, online jihadist activity came to have standing in its own right. A 2012 article on electronic jihad, posted on the leading jihadist forums *alFida* and *Shumukh al-Islam*, stated that:

“[A]ny Muslim who intends to do jihad against the enemy electronically, is considered in one way or another a *mujahed*, as long as he meets the conditions of jihad such as the sincere intention and the goal of serving Islam and defending it, even if he is far away from the battlefield” (as quoted in Weimann 2014, 4).

Similarly, Muhammad bin Ahmad al-Salim’s *39 Ways to Serve and Participate in Jihad* extolled “performing electronic jihad” as a “blessed field which contains much benefit” (as quoted in Awan et al 2011: 56).

The sanction given to electronic jihad was particularly important in assuaging cognitive dissonance for individuals who wish to advance the jihadist cause but are unable or unwilling to partake in actual conflict, by providing them with a vindictory rationale for this alternative and, as a result of such statements, a now entirely legitimate mode of action. As participation in indirect jihad became seen to be both a required and effective form of action, the call for electronic jihad inevitably did not remain unanswered in the wake of the Syrian Civil War.

3. *The Use of Social Media by IS*

As highlighted by Lewis (2014), the military victory of IS represents only one part of the equation in establishing its caliphate. The key battle for IS is not solely military and achieved by violence, but also includes the formation of “the practical basis of a society” (p. 11-12). In order to achieve this social objective,



IS relies on the dissemination of its message to foster support both domestically and abroad through a uniquely effective social media strategy.

Although all sides of the Syrian Civil War have adopted social media, the use of social media by IS appears to have generated far more attention, and consequently has been more successful than others. In addition, whilst various terrorist organizations, such as AQAP and al-Shabaab, have maintained Twitter accounts since 2010, they often did so as a secondary means of communication. The bulk of content was instead available on extremist forums, featuring downloadable content such as magazines, videos and brochures. In contrast, the distribution of information almost exclusively on Twitter has allowed IS to quickly reach a large audience. Therefore, the dissemination of its ideology and the advancement of its long-term objective, namely the legitimization of the consolidation and expansion of territory, has occurred more successfully than it might otherwise have done (Friedland, 2014).

In order to frame its message, IS has developed a range of exceptionally professional and sophisticated communication and social media initiatives that are exceptionally easy to access and highly attractive to their audiences, including publishing ebooks and eMagazines and professionally edited videos produced by *al-Furqan* and *al-Hayat*.

On 5 July 2014, IS media group *al-Hayat* released in numerous different languages (including Albanian, English, French, and German) the first issue of its online magazine *Dabiq*,^[10] a publication reminiscent of AQAP's *Inspire* magazine (Cambhir, 2014). With its slick and sophisticated production value, *Dabiq* defines itself as:

“a periodical magazine focusing on the issues of unity (tawhid), truth-seeking (mamhaj), migration (hijrah), holy war (jihad) and community (jama'ah). It also contains photo reports, current events, and informative articles on matters relating to the Islamic State” (as quoted in Maggioni, 2015; 71).

Each issue of *Dabiq* reaffirms “key themes, strategic exploits and ideological constructions, as well as speech from [IS] leaders” (Saltman and Winter, 2014; 39) and contains powerful photographic imagery of IS' military and state-building endeavors such as images of wounded Iraqi Security Force soldiers; the distribution of food and water by IS fighters in regions under its control; victorious parades of militants in invaded cities; the destruction of Shiite and Sufi shrines; and the execution of prisoners and members of religious minorities (Styszynski, 2014). The content of *Dabiq* is evocative and aims at spreading a very precise message – which can both engage the reader and stimulate curiosity – in order to enlarge the potential readership. In this way, *Dabiq* targets readers who are already interested in political Islam, but not necessarily already convinced jihadists. Instead, *Dabiq* attempts to skillfully ‘educate’ the reader on the caliphate's aims, projects, and accomplishments.

In addition to *Dabiq*, Islamic State has also published series of ebooks, the “Black Flags Books,” which are widely advertised on social media and jihadist forums (Lombardi, 2015), the first series of which, entitled *Islamic State 2015* and containing 8 volumes, was released in early January 2015. Although not particularly refined and of lesser quality than *Dabiq*, the ebooks' contents deals with similar themes. Perhaps most interestingly, they also often use information and infographics taken from Western media but presented from the caliphate's perspective (Lombardi, 2015). While the text itself adds little relevant information about the caliphate, it systematically organizes information already circulated on the internet and thus represents a useful tool of state propaganda which is easily accessible to those who seek out information about the caliphate: although the ebooks reveal nothing new, the content is reorganized to reflect the caliphate's view, and is aimed at a wider Western audience – particularly new recruits.



Apart from its e-publications, the Islamic State has also produced several high-quality videos. An analysis of these videos[11] reveals that, in general terms, Islamic State's propaganda can be divided into two genres that target different audiences. The first includes 'The Beheading Series' (the four videos depicting the decapitations of Western journalists and aid workers James Foley, Steven Sotloff, David Haines, and Alan Henning), and other depictions of atrocities and human rights abuses, such as images of wounded or dead Iraqi Security Force soldiers; the destruction of Shiite and Sufi shrines; and the execution of prisoners and members of religious minorities. The second category, meanwhile, largely focuses on imagery of genuine state-building exercises

Propaganda featuring acts of violence represents an effort to support IS' military activities and intimidate its foes. These videos are carefully scripted to achieve a high quality final product, which is not easy, even by Western production standards (Maggioni, 2015). For example, in February 2015, IS' *al-Furqan* media group released – via Twitter – a 22-minute video, entitled *Healing the Believer's Chests*, which depicted the immolation of captured Royal Jordanian Air Force Pilot, Muath Safi Yousef alKasasbeh. The video begins by building up to "dramatic crescendo" using mixed images of effects of air strikes, flying pilots and interviews with [al-Kasasbeh's] family" as al-Kasasbeh is walked towards a cage in an area full of debris and surrounded by a handful of IS fighters "standing in a theatrical pose," their positions and movements seemingly carefully choreographed for dramatic effect (Lombardi, 2015; 94-95). The video, along with other *al-Hayat* and *al-Furqan* productions are all filmed and edited in a consistent matter, suggesting a single director or a small group who possess extremely sophisticated skills and are familiar with editing, writing, and cinematography techniques, drawing from both contemporary motion picture and videogame production. According to Vitale and Keagle (2014), these – often feature length – videos, punctuated with cinematographic effects, such as instant replays and slow-motion shots, "appear to be something from a Hollywood action film or a video game" (p. 9), thereby adding to their appeal to Western audiences.

However, while videos such as the 'The Beheading Series,' and the murder of alKasasbeh have gained a tremendous profile, particularly among Western audiences, their sister category of state-building imagery is arguably just as, if not more, important to IS. This second category of propaganda includes depictions of the enforcement of sharia law through the establishment of a religious police force; the establishment of religious schools; the distribution of food; and the introduction of road ordinances, currency, and, apparently, passports. This imagery of genuine state-building represents an entirely different genre of propaganda and is an integral part of the IS' strategy. For example, the videos *The End of Sykes-Picot*, *The Flames of War*, *The Clanging of the Swords I-IV*, and *Upon the Prophetic Methodology*, romanticize the daily lives of IS fighters, attempting to lure new recruits and to legitimize the existence of the Islamic State.

The development of this highly sophisticated media strategy relies upon the decentralized nature of social media, particularly Twitter, and has allowed for the mass dissemination of IS' multitudinous products. While content is created under the direct guidance of IS strategists, dissemination relies upon sympathizers at the grassroots level. Therefore, the message of IS' communications remains strategically unified despite dissemination being 'crowd sourced.' Page 80-81 of the Islamic State ebook entitled *Islamic State 2015*, under the subtitle *The Islamic State Online*, provides an interesting, albeit poorly written, insight into the way the Islamic State disseminates its propaganda:

It is surprising to notice that the Islamic State does not have a website of its own. Its entire network of propaganda consists of the following media types:

- Professionally edited videos. (ie. al-Furqan, al-Hayat)



- Social media accounts (ie. on Twitter).
- Ebooks and eMagazines. (ie. Dabiq magazine).

The Islamic State's Online world is similar to its practical real life world, in that everything is decentralised. Example: In real life, nobody knows where Khalifah Ibrahim (Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi) is located, similarly no-one has one centralised website they can visit to find the Islamic State and its content. This is really important because by hiding Khalifah Ibrahim's location, no-one can easily assassinate him. Similarly, by not having a website, no-one can hack it and claim online victory.

The Islamic State's content (videos, ebooks, social media accounts) are scattered all around the internet. Just like the different provinces of the Islamic State are scattered in different locations. Each province has its own responsibility in creating its own videos and social media accounts to share its successes. By decentralising everything from the core leadership, even if a province fails online or offline, the leadership and overall Khilafah (Caliphate) leadership project is still safe and can grow elsewhere.

Hashtags: whenever Islamic State members want to promote a cause or message, they will use hashtags (such as: #AllEyesOnISIS) to promote their campaign, message or to advertise a new release.[12]

This extensive reliance on unaffiliated sympathizers either re-tweeting or re-posting content produced and authorized by IS leadership has “no clear precedent” (Barrett, 2014; 51) and thus can be seen as a groundbreaking paradigm shift in the evolution of jihadism in cyberspace. This reliance on unaffiliated sympathizers was clearly exemplified on the day Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared the establishment of the Caliphate; IS began circulating pictures of his speech before a video of the speech was uploaded several times on YouTube. The links to these YouTube videos were then uploaded on the widely popular file sharing website *justpaste.it* by agents for IS' official media groups prior to being tweeted by IS to tens of thousands of sympathizers. These sympathizers, in turn, re-tweeted the links and – more importantly – copied and uploaded links to the video and the video itself, using various different accounts. These new links were then added to *justpaste.it* and tweeted again, in a repetitive manner (Barrett, 2014). This strategy, aimed at gaining maximum exposure and overcoming YouTube's attempt to suppress IS propaganda, has shown its efficiency on many other occasions. Another pertinent example of this strategy in action, showing “the ease” and “speed with which IS is able to spread its message” (Barrett, 2014; 52), is that of the film *Flames of War*. After two days of having been uploaded, one randomly selected page (amongst dozens of others promoting the video) had alone recorded 18,034 views within just a seven-hour timeframe.

Moreover, to further its strategy of crowd-sourced dissemination, IS affiliates developed an Android application called *The Dawn of Glad Tidings*[13] to enable users to keep up with the latest news about the activities of Islamic State. Vitally, the application also allows IS' main communication branch to send tweets periodically from the accounts of everyone who has installed the application, thereby flooding social media with IS propaganda without triggering Twitter's spam-detection algorithms (Berger, 2014). *The Dawn of Glad Tidings* first went into wide use in April 2014, but reached an all-time high of almost 40,000 tweets on the day IS marched into Mosul (Vitale and Keagle, 2014).

In addition, IS sympathizers also routinely engage in systematic ‘hashtag hijacking,’ manipulating Twitter to magnify IS' message. Hashtag hijacking involves the repurposing of popular and/or trending hashtags by adding those hashtags into unrelated tweets as a means of infiltrating conversations. For example, on the eve of the Scottish Independence referendum, an operative from Islamic State's al-Furqan media production unit,



using the Twitter handle @With_Baghdadi, advised his followers that *alFurqan* would soon be releasing a new video. The video, entitled *Lend me Your Ears*, showed kidnapped British photojournalist John Cantlie discussing British foreign policy and his captivity. Within minutes of being uploaded to YouTube, another propaganda operative, identified as Abdulrahman al-Hamid, asked his 4,000 Twitter followers to inform him of the highest trending hashtags on Twitter in the UK:

We need those who can supply us with the most active hashtags in the UK. And also the accounts of the most famous celebrities. I believe that the hashtag of Scotland's separation from Britain should be first (as quoted in Malik et al., 2014).

Replies from his followers advised using #andymurray, #scotland, #VoteNo, #VoteYes and #scotlandindependence when re-tweeting the video in order to raise the video's profile and exposure (as quoted in Malik et al. 2014). Al-Hamid urged his followers to "work hard to publish all the links," while @With_Baghdadi asked his to "invade [the #VoteNo hastags] with video of the British prisoner" (as quoted in Malik et al., 2014). IS sympathizers have also co-opted World Cup hashtags such as #Brazil2014 or #WC2014 (Vitale and Keagle, 2014) in order to increase the visibility of their messages. Utilizing popular and trending hashtags in conjunction with IS' own hashtags such as #theFridayofsupportingISIS, #Thought_of_a_Lone_Lion and #AmessagefromISIStoUS, increases the exposure of the message. This strategy allows for a message which has effectively been crafted by only a handful of IS propaganda agents to be disseminated by thousands of sympathizers in order to reach millions of Twitter users. In fact, in the period between 17 September and 17 October 2014, the activities of IS supporters resulted in 4.1 million re-tweets (Barrett, 2014).

3. 1. Implications of IS' Social Media Strategy

Although there is nothing new in violent extremist groups quickly adopting new technology as demonstrated in the section detailing the evolution of the jihadist in cyberspace, what has hardly any precedent is the breadth of the communication strategy implemented by IS. Not only does IS use new technology to create the content which it releases, it also utilizes new technologies innovatively in the dissemination of that content. This strategy has, until now, been only sparsely covered in terrorism study literature. That being said, communications scholar Henry Jenkins' (2006) notion of convergence culture provides a useful theoretical framework to analyze the impact of IS tactics.

According to Jenkins (2006), convergence culture whereby "old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways" (p. 2), is not a technological change. Rather, it is the embodiment of a social change where media consumers no longer passively consume material, but also engage in the creation of virtual communities, combining their collective intelligence and resources to achieve a defined purpose. The fundamental innovation of IS' media strategy is this exploitation of the collective resource which is its Western followers.

Fundamentally, IS recognizes that the majority of Western supporters will never engage in kinetic actions such as terrorist acts in their homelands, or fighting abroad. Instead, IS utilizes these supporters for the purpose of disseminating information and propaganda relating to their cause. Arguably, not requiring Western supporters to engage actively in physical violence allows IS to garner the participation of these supporters without asking them to cross moral boundaries they might not feel comfortable crossing. This perfectly embodies Brachman's notion of jihobbyists. Brachman (2008) contends that the rise of Web 2.0 allowed individuals who have largely driven their own radicalization without direct assistance, training, or



support “to move forward the Jihadist agenda” (p. 19).

In addition to increasing the exposure of IS’ message, these disseminators also seek to move forward this jihadist agenda by aiding IS to gain recognition and acceptance. In other words, they are actively engaged in an attempt to normalize IS’ narrative. IS media strategy can be understood in terms of soft power projection. While some of IS’ propaganda is clearly aimed at intimidating Western audiences with depictions of atrocities and human rights abuse, these intimidation tactics have been punctuated with imagery of genuine state-building exercises. These images include the depiction of IS’ engagement in administrative functions. Particularly relevant examples include: the enforcement of sharia law through the establishment of a religious police force; the establishment of religious schools; the distribution of food; and reconstruction projects (Lefler, 2014). The aim of these depictions is the advancement of the notion of Islamic State as a legitimate state in order to gain long-term support of the local populace. This is of critical importance to IS in its attempt to socialize the Muslim world to the ideas and values of Islamic State.

In order to socialize its global Muslim audience, the mass dissemination of IS’ carefully crafted message seeks to dominate the narrative. The creation of an echo chamber amplifies and reinforces its messages through transmission and repetitions whilst also drowning out competing views. In other words, by ensuring that its narrative is louder than that of its opponents, IS’ sophisticated use of social media creates an impression of large legitimate online support, which exceeds the actual reality. Whilst videos of beheadings and other atrocities have gained tremendous profile, possibly more important is the positive narrative created by IS videos which depict a unified community where pious men police the streets eliminating drugs and making sure everyone prays together. This offers a sharply idealized contrast to most states in the Middle East, where aging autocrats are seen to preside over irredeemably corrupt and stagnant governments, and can arguably be seen as IS’ greatest success.

Despite IS’ impressive social media strategy, its narrative remains vulnerable to challenges. Echo chambers are typically present within closed systems, such as online forums, which are hermetically sealed from divergent perspectives. However, Twitter in itself is not a closed system. As such, whilst any open system may be open to domination by a series of ‘loud noises’, this domination of narrative is only temporary and can be challenged by various competing views, which in this particular case weakens the ‘absoluteness’ of IS’ message. Among these challenges the satire from within Muslim world has been particularly effective in slowly eroding the absoluteness of the IS narrative. For example, the *Burn the IS Flag* campaign, seemingly started by Muslims outraged by the actions of IS, has been trending on Twitter under the hashtags #BurnISISFlagChallenge and #BurnISIS. Based on the *ALS Ice Bucket Challenge*, the movement features people posting photos and videos of themselves burning IS’ banner and then challenging their friends to follow suit (Palmer, 2014). Similarly, the US State Department’s launch of a tough and graphic counter campaign uses IS’ own images of barbaric acts against fellow Muslims in propaganda which counters IS’ narrative. The corner stone of this counter-campaign is a video entitled *Run – Do Not Walk to ISIS Land*, which tells potential recruits that they can learn “useful new skills” such as “blowing up mosques” and “crucifying and executing Muslims,” in a sarcastic attempt to illustrate the appeal of joining IS, whilst also offering an alternative to IS’ seductive message (Logiurato, 2014). More recently, on August 4, 2015, the video agency *Verbalisation* launched a highly powerful and moving video on Twitter and Youtube as part of the Quilliam Foundation’s #NotAnotherBrother campaign, which aims to highlight the effects of online radicalization. Drawing on months of research by military experts, psychologists, linguists, and crowdfunded by 150 donors, the video has been shared widely on social media (“Anti-Isis YouTube video,” 2015). However, it remains too early to evaluate the impact, if any, it will have in countering Islamic States’ narrative.



Conclusion

As demonstrated in this paper, IS relies on a global network of disseminators to promote its material. Instead of a single source acting as the monolithic voice of the organization, multiple messengers collaborate to communicate its message thus lending the appearance of authenticity and wide acceptance. It also creates a huge problem for the people attempting to curb the spread of IS's messages. Blocking multiple offending users as they pop up becomes a challenge, and squashing violent statements on Twitter brings up questions regarding free speech that are as yet unanswered. Moreover, relying exclusively on the administrators of social media platforms to effectively limit the spread of IS ideology through account closures and suspensions is unreliable at best. In this era of instantaneous global communication it is, for the most part, futile to close or suspend accounts unless this is nested within a wider, comprehensive anti-propaganda effort designed to neuter IS' domination of the narrative.

Perhaps the biggest mistake in the 'War on Terror' was the belief that the destruction of Al-Qaeda's training camps and leadership would lead to the demise of the group, its affiliated movements, and its ideology. In the same way that Islamic State's land grab is impressive, if shocking, the group's online actions have been even more deeply troubling. The pervasiveness of its ideology and message means that defeating the group will require more of Western governments than a simple military response in Iraq, or even elsewhere in the Middle East: the message itself needs effective countering as well. Western countries need to use an integrated, coordinated, and synchronized approach, with support from allied countries in the Islamic world and Muslim civil society more generally, in order to accomplish such a goal.

***About the author:** Yannick Veilleux-Lepage is a PhD candidate at the Handa Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence based at the University of St. Andrews. His doctoral research focuses on the historical antecedents and the evolution of modern terrorism. He can be reached by email at yvl@st-andrews.ac.uk or followed on twitter @yveilleuxlepage.*

Notes

[1] An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 6th International Terrorism and Transnational Crime Conference held in Antalya, Turkey on December 5-7, 2014. The author would like to thank Echosec and Paterva for their assistance in obtaining some of the software tools employed for the monitoring of IS' social media activities which has furthered this research.

[2] Evidence suggests that terrorist groups, irrespective of ideology, were quick to embrace the power of the Internet to pursue their strategic objectives. In fact, in 1998, fewer than half of the 30 groups designated as foreign terrorist organizations by the US State Department under the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996 maintained websites. By the end of 1999, nearly all designated organizations had established an Internet presence (Weimann, 2006).

[3] Alneda.com was famously hacked and defaced with the words "Hacked, tracked and now owned by the USA" by American pornographic site owner Jon Messner for five days in August 2002 before the site's administrators managed to regain control. (Awan and Al-Lami, 2009: 57). Similarly, between 2002 and 2003, the Internet Haganah, a self-described "global intelligence network dedicated to confronting Internet activities by Islamists and their supporters, enablers and apologists," shut down more than 600 sites it claimed were "linked to terror" (Awan and Al-Lami, 2009: 57-58). The Internet Haganah also engaged in a campaign



requesting American based Internet Service Providers to shut down sites of concerns.

[4] A notable example was the arrest and subsequent extradition to the United States of Babar Ahmad, the creator of azzam.com, under the UK Terrorism Act (Awan and Al-Lami, 2009).

[5] On 27, December 2004, Bin Laden acknowledged al-Zarqawi stating: “we call for the unification of jihadist groups under one rule, recognizing al-Zarqawi as al-Qaeda’s emir in Iraq” (as quoted in Maggioni, 2015; 56).

[6] YouTube was established in February 2005 as an online repository for sharing video content. According to YouTube, on average more than one billion users watch about six billion hours of video footage every month. Every minute, 100 hours of new videos are uploaded (Weimann, 2014; 10).

[7] A similar tactic, minus the blades, was employed in the West on at least three occasions: In 2006, Mohammed Taheri-Azar injured nine people with a sports utility vehicle on the campus of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (Spencer, 2010); On 22 May 2013, a British Army soldier was run over by a car before being stabbed and hacked to death by two converts to Islam in the southeast of London (“Return to old-style terror,” 2013); and more recently, a Canadian soldier was killed and another one injured after being deliberately struck by a car driven by a convert who had previously expressed a desire to travel to Iraq to fight with ISIS (Woods, 2014). This tactic embodies the essence of ‘do-it-yourself’ terrorism, as it “offers terrorists with limited access to explosives or weapons an opportunity to conduct a homeland attack with minimal prior training or experience” (FBI, 2010),

[8] A 2009 British government analysis of YouTube found 1,910 videos of al-Awlaki, one of which had been viewed 164,420 times (Weimann, 2014). Similarly, in 2008, his popular lecture *Constants on the Path of Jihad* was available on ummah.com, a mainstream site that received at the time approximately 48,300 visit per month from the US alone (Meleagrou-Hitchens, 2011).

[9] Al-Awlaki is believed to have been in contact with at least two of the 9/11 hijackers. He is also credited with inspiring or directing a number of other terrorist attacks: the failed 2008 Times Square bombing; the 2009 shooting inside the Fort Hood military base; the failed 2009 “underwear bomber;” and a failed 2010 bombing attempt involving a parcel bomb hidden inside a printer in the cargo hold of a passenger jet (Weimann, 2014). Moreover, Roshanara Choudhry, a Muslim student jailed for attempting to murder British MP Stephen Timms in May 2010, claimed that she was radicalized after listening to Awlaki’s YouTube videos (Weimann, 2014).

[10] Dabiq is a town located in north Syria and is mentioned in a hadith (6924) which describes events of the Malahim (Armageddon) where the greatest battle between Muslims and the crusaders will take place before the Messiah returns (Saltman and Winter, 2014). Although it is worth noting that some advanced Koranic Studies experts regard this interpretation as a reductionary take on a very complex hadith, the jihadist groups has capitalized on this narrative (Maggioni, 2015; 71). In fact, al-Zarqawi had stated (prior to being killed by a U.S. missile strike in 2006) that: “The spark has been lit here in Iraq, and its heart will continue to intensify – by Allah’s permission – until it burns the crusader armies in Dabiq.” (as quoted in Maggioni, 2015; 71). This sentence appears above the index of each issue of *Dabiq* released thus far. Moreover, the executioner of Peter Kassig, known within media circles as Jihadi John, also references Dabiq in the now infamous video of Kassig’s beheading, stating: “Here we are, burying the first American Crusader in Dabiq, eagerly waiting for the remainder of your armies to arrive,” while the severed head of Kassig is shown on camera (as quoted in Maggioni, 2015; 71).



[11] For a more in-depth content analysis of videos published by IS media groups, see (Winter, 2015; and Zelin, 2015).

[12] The full text is available at <http://syriancivilwararchive.com/PDF/The%20Islamic%20State%202015,%20an%20E-Book%20that%20describes%20the%20battle%20strategies,%20training%20camps,%20and%20future%20expansion%20projects,%20all%20from%20a%20Daesh%20supporter's%20perspective.pdf> [Accessed August 15, 2015].

[13] *The Dawn of Glad Tidings* was available through the Google Play store prior to its removal for violating Google's terms of service.

Bibliography

Amble, J. C. (2012) Combating Terrorism in the New Media Environment. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 35(5), 339–353.

Anti-isis YouTube video aims to counter terror group's social media campaign. (2015, 4 August). *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/aug/04/anti-isis-youtube-video-notanotherbrother>

Awan, A. N. and Al-Lami. M. (2009) Al-Qa'ida's Virtual Crisis. *The RUSI Journal*, 154(1), 56-64.

Berger, J.M. (2014, June 16). How ISIS Games Twitter. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/06/isis-iraq-twitter-social-media-strategy/372856/>.

Bousquet, A. (2012) Complexity Theory and the War on Terror: Understanding the Self-Organising Dynamics of Leaderless Jihad. *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 15, 345-369.

Burke, J. (2003). *Al-Qaeda: Casting a Shadow of Terror*. New York: I.B. Tauris.

Chittooran, J. T. (2013). The Syrian Conflict in a Connected World. *Council on Foreign Relations*. Retrieved from http://www.cfr.org/content/publications/attachments/Syrian_Conflict_in_a_Connected_World_Rapporteur_Notes_7-2-13.pdf.

Conway, M. (2012) From al-Zarqawi to al-Awlaki: The emergence and development of an online radical milieu. *CTX: Combating Terrorism Exchange*, 2(4), 12-22.

Conway, M., & McInerney, L. (2008). Jihadi Video & Auto-Radicalisation: Evidence from an Exploratory YouTube Study. In proceedings of the 1st European Conference on intelligence and Security informatics.

Department of Homeland Security. (2013). Terrorist Use of Vehicle Ramming Tactics. (Report No. IA-0086-11). Retrieved from <https://publicintelligence.net/ufouo-dhs-fbi-warning-terrorist-use-of-vehicle-ramming-tactics/>.

Eedle, P. (2005). Al Qaeda's Media Strategy. In K. G. Greenberg (Eds.), *Al Qaeda Now*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Fieldland, E. (2014). The Islamic State (ISIS) Fact Sheet. *Clarion Project*. Retrieved from www.clarionproject.org/factsheet/islamic-state-isis-isil.

Gambhir, H. (2014). Dbiq: The Strategic Messaging of the Islamic State. *Institute for the Study of War*. Retrieved from <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/dabiq-strategic-messaging-islamic-state>

Gulmohamad, Z. K. (2014) The Rise and Fall of the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham (Levant) ISIS. *Global Security Studies*, 5(2), 1-11.



Hoeren T. & Vossen, G. Manifest: The Role of Law in an Electronic World Dominated by Web 2.0. *Computer Science Research and Development*, 23(1), 7-13.

Hoffman, B. (2010, July 21). The American Jihad, Part II. *The National Interest*. Retrieved from <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/american-jihad-part-ii-3680>.

Jenkins, B. M. (2003). Is Al Qaeda's Internet Strategy Working? *The RAND Corporation*. Retrieved from http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/2011/RAND_CT371.pdf

Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence Culture: Where old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York University Press.

Kase, S. E., Mowman, E. K., Al Amin, T., & Abdelzahar, T. (June 2014) Exploiting Social Media for Army Operations: Syrian Civil War Use Case. *Army Research Laboratory*. (Report ARL-RP-0489). Retrieved from www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA60368

Kimmage, D. (2008). The Al-Qaeda Media Nexus: The Virtual Network Behind the Global Message. *Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty*. Retrieved from http://www.e-prism.org/images/AQ_Media_Nexus_-_March08.pdf

Kirdar, M.J. (2011). "al-Qaeda in Iraq." *Center for Strategic & International Studies*. Retrieved from www.csis.org/files/publication/110614_Kirdar_AlQaedaIraq_Web.pdf

Lefler, J. (2014). Life under ISIS in Mosul. *Institute for the study of War*. Retrieved from <http://iswiraq.blogspot.com/2014/07/life-under-isis-in-mosul.html>.

Lombardi, M. (2015) IS 2.0 and Beyond: The Caliphate's Communication Project, in Twitter and Jihad: the Communication Strategy of ISIS, edited by Monica Maggioni and Paolo Magri, *Italian Institute for International Political Studies*, 84-120. Retrieved from http://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/twitter_and_jihad_en.pdf

Lemieux, A. F., Brachman, J. M., Levitt, J., & Wood, J. (2014) *Inspire Magazine: A Critical Analysis of its Significance and Potential Impact Through the Lens of the Information, Motivation, and Behavioral Skills Model*. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 26(2) 354-371.

Lewis, J. D. (2014). The Islamic State: A Counter-Strategic for a Counter-State. *Middle East Security*. (Report 21). Retrieved from <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Lewis-Center%20of%20gravity.pdf>

Loguirato, B. (2014, September 5). U.S. releases mock ISIS recruitment video that shows jihadist group blowing up mosques, crucifying Muslims. *The National Post*. Retrieved from <http://news.nationalpost.com/2014/09/05/u-s-releases-mock-isis-recruitment-video-that-shows-jihadist-group-blowing-up-mosques-crucifying-muslims/>.

Lynch, M., Freelon, D., & Aday, S. (2014). Syria's Socially Mediated Civil War. *United States Institute of Peace*. Retrieved from <http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PW91-Syrias%20Socially%20Mediated%20Civil%20War.pdf>

Maggioni, M. (2015), The Islamic State: Not That Surprising, If You Know Where to Look, In Twitter and Jihad: the Communication Strategy of ISIS, edited by Monica Maggioni and Paolo Magri, *Italian Institute for International Political Studies*, 49-81. Retrieved from http://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/twitter_and_jihad_en.pdf



- Malik, S., Laville S., Cresci, E., & Gani, A. (2014, September 24). ISIS duel with Twitter and YouTube to spread extremist propaganda. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/24/isis-twitter-youtube-message-social-media-jihadi>
- Meleagrou-Hitchens, A. (2011). As American as Apple Pie: How Anwar al- Awlaki Became the Face of Western Jihad. *The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence*.
- Michael, G. (2013) The New Media and the Rise of Exhortatory Terrorism. *Strategic Studies Quarterly* Spring, 7(1), 40-68.
- O'Callaghan, D., Prucha, N., Greene, D., Conway, M., Carthy, Joe., & Cunningham, P. (2014). *Online Social Media in the Syria Conflict: Encompassing the Extremes and the In-Betweens*. Paper presented at the International Conference on Advances in Social Networks Analysis and Mining.
- Palmer, E. (2014, September 4). 'Burn Isis Flag Challenge' Goes Viral in Arab World. *Yahoo News*. Retrieved from <https://uk.news.yahoo.com/burn-isis-flag-challenge-goes-viral-arab-world-124824439.html#71eHmsL>.
- Ramsay, G. (2009). Relocating the Virtual War. *Defence Against Terrorism Review*, 2(1), 31–50.
- Rid, T., & Hecker, M. (2009). *War 2.0: Irregular Warfare in the Information Age*. Westport, CT and London: Praeger Security International.
- Return to old-style terror. (2013, May 25). *The Economist*. Retrieved from <http://www.economist.com/news/britain/21578453-shocking-killing-reminder-disorganised-jihadists-are-harder-stop-organised>.
- Saltman, E. M., & Winter, C. (2014). Islamic State: The Changing Face of Modern Jihadism. *Quilliam*. Retrieved from <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/islamic-state-the-changing-face-of-modern-jihadism.pdf>
- Sageman, M. (2008), *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Seabrook, J. (2013, January 12). Streaming Dreams. *The New Yorker*. Retrieved from <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/01/16/streaming-dreams>.
- Spencer, R. (2010, October 12). Al-Qaeda Magazine Teaches How to Kill Americans, *The Telegraph*. Retrieved from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/yemen/8059725/Al-Qaeda-magazine-teaches-how-to-kill-Americans.html>.
- Styszynski, M. (2014). ISIS and Al Qaeda: Expanding the Jihadist Discourse. *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis*, 6(8), 9-14.
- Talbot, D. (2014, February 1). Terror's Server. *Technology Review*. Retrieved from <http://www.technologyreview.com/featuredstory/403657/terrors-server/>.
- Thomas, T. L. (2013) Al-Qaeda and the Internet: The Danger of 'Cyberplanning'. *Parameters*, 112-123.
- Torres, M., Jordan, J., & Horsburgh, N. (2006) Analysis and Evolution of the Global Jihadist Movement Propaganda. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 18, 399-421.
- Torres-Seriano, M. R. (2013) The Dynamics of Creation, Evolution, and Disappearance of Terrorist Internet Forums. *International Journal of Conflict and Violence*, 7(1), 164-178.
- Tsfati, Y., & Weimann, G. (2002) www.terrorism.com: Terror on the Internet. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 25(5), 317-332.



- Vitale, H. M., & Keagle, J.M. (2014). A Time to Tweet, as well as a Time to Kill: ISIS' Project of Power in Iraq and Syria. *Institute for National Strategic Studies*. Retrieved from <http://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/defensehorizon/DH-77.pdf>
- Weimann, G. (2014). New Terrorism and New Media. *Commons Lab of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars*, Retrieved from <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/new-terrorism-and-new-media>.
- Weimann, G. (2008) The Psychology of Mass-Mediated Terrorism. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 52(69), 69-86.
- Weimann, G. (2006). Terror on the Internet: The New Arena, the New Challenges. *Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace*.
- Winter, C. (2015) I The Virtual 'Caliphate': Understanding Islamic State's Propaganda Strategy, *Quilliam*. Retrieved from <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/the-virtual-caliphate-understanding-islamic-states-propaganda-strategy.pdf>
- Woods, A. (2014, October 26). How Martin Couture-Rouleau became an aspiring Islamic State fighter. *The Star*. Retrieved from http://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2014/10/26/how_martin_couturerouleau_became_an_aspiring_islamic_state_fighter.html.
- Zelin, A. Y., (2015). Picture Or It Didn't Happen: A Snapshot of the Islamic State's Official Media Output. *Perspective on Terrorism*, 9(4), 85-97.



Do Territorial Control and the Loss of Territory Determine the Use of Indiscriminate Violence by Incumbent Actors? An Examination of the Syrian Civil War in Aleppo over 45 weeks

by Evan Tyner



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/).

Abstract

*This study tests the 'control-collaboration' model detailed by Stathis Kalyvas in *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (2006). The control-collaboration model makes various theoretical claims on the relationship between territorial control and the use and motivations of violence (whether selective or indiscriminate). This study tests two of the key claims made in the model: 1. There is an inverse relationship between level of territorial control and the use of indiscriminate violence; and, 2. The loss of territory encourages the use of indiscriminate violence. Using data on civilian and child deaths taken from the 'Syrian Martyr Database', this study examines the relationship between territorial control and territorial loss, and the use of indiscriminate violence by incumbent (Syrian state) forces. Examining the levels of territorial control/loss and the extent of civilian and child casualties in Aleppo, Syria, results of the study largely support the theoretical assumptions outlined by Kalyvas.*

Keywords: indiscriminate violence, selective violence, territorial control, territorial loss, civilian casualties, incumbent actors, insurgents

Introduction

The Syrian Conflict (or Civil War) has raged since July 2011, resulting in a death toll of over 250,000 the displacement of 12 million people (United Nations, 2015). Since the onset of the conflict the balance of power between warring factions has varied greatly, with armed opposition groups, proxy forces (such as Hezbollah) and foreign actors (such as Russia and Iran) influencing the progression and security dynamics of the civil war and developing competing spheres of influence. The complex nature of the Syrian Civil War makes it a very interesting, yet to date scarcely researched, topic for micro-dynamic study. The control-collaboration model can prove a useful tool in helping to understand and potentially improve the security and humanitarian crisis, which through defining the use of indiscriminate violence can draw attention to the causes, nature and location of some of the most brutal areas of conflict in the world.

Political theorist Hannah Arendt concluded that all violence is instrumental and occurs where power is in jeopardy (Arendt, 1969). Political scientist and civil-war expert Stathis Kalyvas has built on this notion in the formation of his 'control-collaboration' model. The premise of the control-collaboration model stipulates that the use of selective and indiscriminate violence is related to the control of territory (Kalyvas, 2012). The model is divided into two parts. The first part is concerned with alliances and transactions between supra-local and local actors, whereby local actors (e.g. civilians) are considered valuable resources and control over them in conflicts (especially civil wars [1]) is vital (Vargas, 2009, 111). This part of the model argues that violent actors in a conflict desire the collaboration of civilians (especially in disputed territory) and therefore



are often driven to secure their cooperation through violent means. Additionally the incumbent actor is often forced to compete with insurgents for control over the population (Kocher, 2008, 5) and therefore may decide to destroy the population if it feels it will not be able to use it as a strategic resource. The second part of this model considers the evolution and spatial distribution of indiscriminate and selective violence (Kocher, 2008, 5). Kalyvas argues that the use of indiscriminate violence [2] is inversely related to the level of territorial control. Indiscriminate violence is employed in areas where an actor experiences disputed territorial control, whereas selective violence is employed in areas where an actor enjoys levels of complete control (Kalyvas, 2012, 661). The model also argues that the use of indiscriminate violence is most prevalent during periods of territorial loss. In *The Logic of violence in Civil War* (2006) Kalyvas divides the variable of 'territorial control' into zones, ranging from secure incumbent control to secure insurgent control (Kalyvas, 2006, 16). Building on this model this study utilises the below 5 zones of control:

Zone 1: secure (incumbents)

Zone 2: insecure (incumbents)

Zone 3: contested

Zone 4: insecure (insurgents)

Zone 5: secure (insurgents).

According to the model, the use of indiscriminate violence will be most common in zones 2 -4, while zones 1 and 5 will experience little indiscriminate violence but higher levels of selective violence (Kalyvas, 2006).

This study tests the 2nd part of this model. Through the use of data gathered from the 'Syrian Martyr Database', this study considers the use of indiscriminate violence by Syrian state forces over a period of 45 weeks (April 2012-January 2013) in the city of Aleppo. This author contends that high levels of non-combatant casualties is indicative of the use of indiscriminate violence. Therefore the data analysed in this study consists of civilian and child deaths as a function of territorial control and territorial loss. The 45 week period is divided into three 15 week periods. Period 1 constitutes a time of secure incumbent (state) control (zone 1); period 2 constitutes a time of insecure incumbent control (zone 2); and, period 3 constitutes a time of contested territorial control between incumbent and insurgent forces (zone 3).

This study will firstly examine the existing literature on this subject and consider the validity and reliability of the control-collaboration model in other contexts. Secondly, details of the methodology of this study will be provided before the data is analysed and discussed. The results of the data analysis provide evidence to support Kalyvas' argument that lower levels of territorial control lead to higher levels of indiscriminate violence and that the initial loss of territory leads to even greater levels of indiscriminate violence. However, this study is limited to testing just two of the components of this model and thus merely justifies the need for greater analysis of the Syrian conflict. Access to more detailed and comprehensive data would allow for the full testing of this model, including levels of selective violence, different forms of indiscriminate violence, and the motivations behind their use.

Literature Review

In 1935 the publication of *The Incidence of the Terror during the French Revolution* (1935) by Greer marked the first statistical-based study to use territorial control as a variable in the study of violence. Studying data on executions by region during the French Reign of Terror, Greer noted that, "It is at once apparent that certain



regions bore the brunt of the Terror while others escaped almost unscathed.” (qtd Louie, 1964, 380). Since Greer’s work, the study of intra-state conflict and violence has continued this trend of macro econometric study. However the continuous improvement in data availability has allowed for new studies on the micro-dynamics of intra-state conflict to emerge, which in taking a sub-national focus, allow for the possibility of testing micro-foundations, causal mechanisms and improving the links between concepts and data (Kalyvas *et al*, 2008, 397). Since the control-collaboration model was published in 2006, it has been applied to different national, regional and local contexts. It is important to consider the findings of other scholars and theorists in order to gage the strengths and weaknesses of the control-collaboration model before proceeding with this current study.

Kocher and Kalyvas provide one of the earliest tests of the control-collaboration model in their 2008 study on the determinants of violence against civilians during the Vietnam War (Kocher; Kalyvas, 2009). Taking the hamlet as the territorial unit of analysis the authors conclude that indiscriminate violence affecting civilians, was a function of the level of territorial control of both sides: South Vietnamese and US forces performed acts of indiscriminate violence in territory that had less control over and exercised selective violence in areas that they dominated (Kocher; Kalyvas, 2009, 335). In a very different context Gonzalo Vargas studied the use of coercion and violence against civilians during an urban irregular war in the Colombian city of Barrancabermeja from 1998 onwards (Vargas, 2009). Vargas found that guerrillas fighting state counter-insurgency forces used high levels of indiscriminate violence in areas that were contested or they had little control over, yet, in contradiction to Kalyvas’ model, employed very little selective violence in areas that they controlled (Vargas, 2009, 126). In a more comprehensive study Bhavnani *et al* (2012) and considered outbreaks of violence between Israelis and Palestinians between 1987-2005 and noted that indiscriminate violence was used in areas of disputed or non-existent territorial control in order to overcome identification problems due to lack of precise information on who constituted the enemy, as well as a means of deterring collaboration through the form of collective punishment (Bhavnani *et al*, 2012; Wood, 2010). The problematic effect that territorial control has on information is echoed by Schutte in his analysis of 11 different cases of insurgency (Schutte, 2013). In his ‘distance-decay’ model Schutte notes that an actor’s inability to distinguish between neutral or allied civilians and enemy collaborators increases as the distance from their ‘power centre’ increases (Schutte, 2013, 1). Along similar lines to this present study, Ziemke conducted an analysis of approximately 10,000 geo-referenced observations of massacres and battle events during the Angolan war, considering not just different stages of territorial control but also the process of territorial loss (Ziemke, 2008). In agreement with the conclusions made in this study, Ziemke concluded that the level of indiscriminate violence against civilians is a function both of territorial control and of territorial loss, with post-battle territorial losses leading to the greatest levels of civilian abuse and massacres (Ziemke, 2008). Other studies such as Fagerlund (2011), Hultman (2007, 2008), Metelits, (2010), Straus, (2012), Wood (2010), Zhukov (2013) also use qualitative and quantitative methods to vindicate Kalyvas’ framework and well as underline the importance considering violence as representing a strategic continuation of the bargaining process.

Although this study does not extend to examining the motivations and effectiveness of the use of indiscriminate violence it does provide the first step toward a more detailed study agenda. The role and effects of territorial control have been examined and statistically analysed in many different contexts and the model has been proved largely water-tight. However the Syrian crisis has not yet been used as a subject of analysis. This study therefore represents a continuation of the rapidly advancing field of the micro-dynamics of intra-state conflict. As well as being a current event, the Syria crisis represents a very interesting and



challenging subject of analysis. Syria's history of ethnic and sectarian divisions and its background of extreme instability have helped create the conditions for the present-day conflict (Smith, 2012, 1). Although this study only accounts for two actors (state and rebel forces), Syria is made up of many groups, including the majority Sunni Muslims (74%), the ruling Alawis (12%), Christians (10%) and Druze (4%) (Hopwood, 1988, 9), as well as foreign fighter groups such as Hezbollah. The Syria crisis therefore represents a complicated, yet valuable untapped resource for micro quantitative study.

Before proceeding to detail the methodology of this study, the control-collaboration model and the above literature allow for several hypotheses to be drawn to test the relationship between territorial control and indiscriminate violence:

H1: Period 1 (zone 1) will experience the lowest level of indiscriminate violence.

H2: Period 2 (zone 2) will experience the highest level of indiscriminate violence as it represents both a level of insecure incumbent control and occurs at a time of territorial loss.

H3: Period 3 (zone 3) will experience a high level of indiscriminate violence. However no further territory has been lost since period 2. Therefore period 3 will experience lesser levels of indiscriminate violence than period 2.

Methodology

This study takes its data sample from the Syrian Revolution Martyr Database (syriansshuhada.com). This online database contains a comprehensive collection of data on the Syrian Crisis death toll. The database compiles data from five principle sources: The Violations Documentation Centre in Syria (VDC), the Syrian Centre for Human Rights (SCHR), the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), the Local Coordination Committees of Syria (LCC) and The Syrian Revolution Database. The database also uses information obtained from social media and news network sites. To date it has listed the deaths of 89,376 people, including 8,733 in Aleppo, over a period of 998 days (syriansshuhada.com).

Data on the daily deaths of children and civilians over the course of a 45 week period (from 1.4.2012 to 12.1.2013) in Aleppo was gathered. The city[3] of Aleppo was chosen as a unit of analysis since it has been a centre-point of clashes between rebel and state forces. Events have also been widely reported on and data is therefore more readily available. The daily death tolls were added up each 7 days to allow for a weekly total. Data and calculations (including weekly totals, standard deviations and period means) were used to descriptively analyse the fluctuations by week and between periods, as well as conduct inferential statistical and post-hoc tests to quantify the difference in civilian and child deaths between periods (ANOVA testing at 5% significance was carried out to analyse variance between groups and a post-hoc Tukey-HSD test, also at 5% significance, was carried out to analyse the difference in means between periods).

Data on the nature of deaths was insufficient to allow for distinction to be made between different methods of violence (e.g. aerial bombardment or missile strikes). This study therefore rests on the assumption that civilian deaths and child deaths are, in general terms, an indicator of indiscriminate forms of violence committed by the incumbent actor. In making this assumption this author acknowledges the potential risk of omitted variable bias. Additionally given the nature of the data source (an anti-government organisation), the risk of bias and the conflation of civilian and rebel fighter must also be acknowledged. Therefore until data has been further triangulated and sources verified by impartial bodies, the results of this study must be treated at best as a general indicator, rather than a statement of undisputed fact.



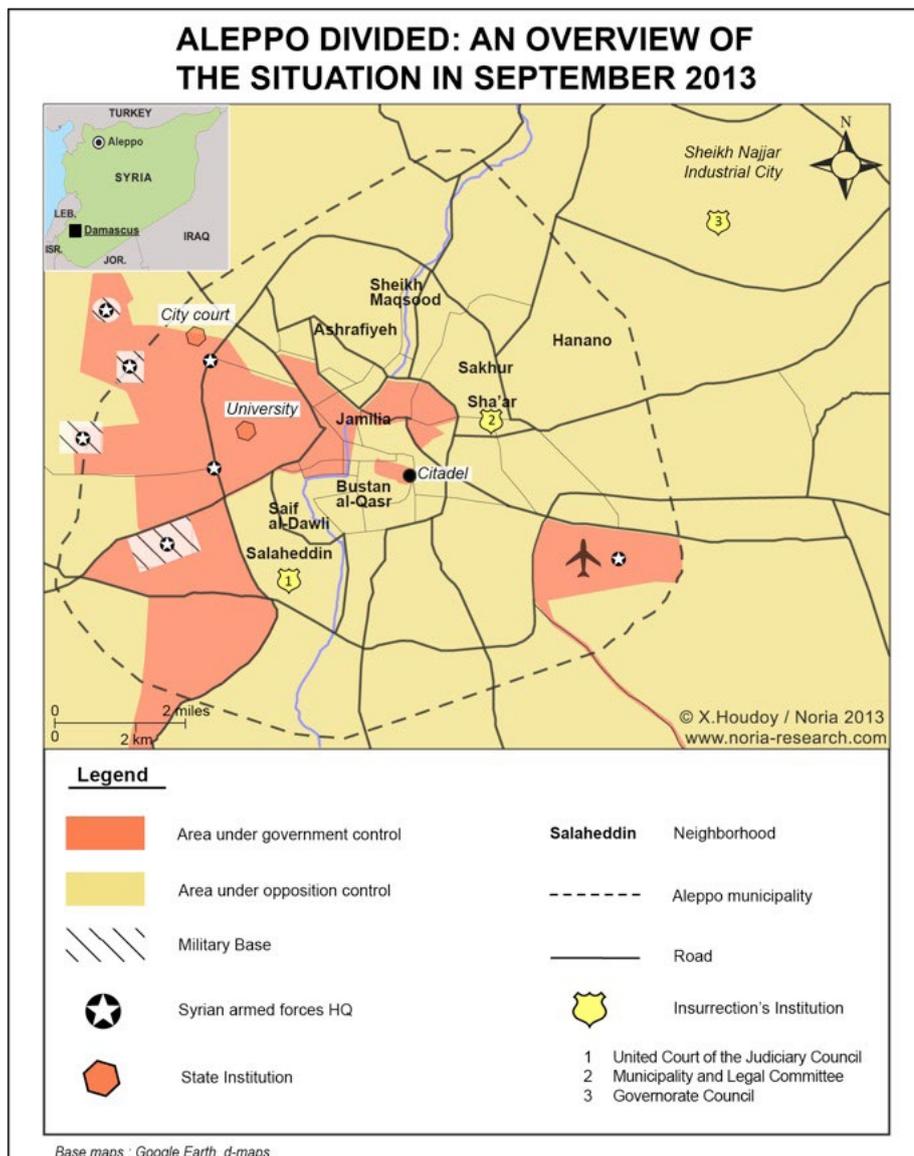
As Kalyvas and Kocher noted with regards to this topic of research, “...the main obstacles to establishing external validity are the lack of data on control and the absence of disaggregated data on selective and indiscriminate violence.” (qtd Bhavnani et al, 2011, 62). Due to this, selective violence will not be considered in this particular test of the control-collaboration model since, with the data available, it is harder to determine. On the other hand, territorial control (as the causal variable) is possible to measure in terms of zoning (although quantifying it precisely is beyond the scope of this study). The time period chosen in this study is a reflection of an evolution in territorial control over Aleppo[4]:

Period 1: Small-scale uprisings and protests occurred but the state retained full control over the city.

Period 2: Rebel forces attacked the city and state forces immediately lost control of rural areas and sections of Aleppo city but retained control over strategically important areas.

Period 3: Rebel forces made small gains, followed by periods of retreat. Territorial control over the city remained contested and at a stalemate (as shown below).

Figure 1: Aleppo territorial control in September 2013



(noria-research.com)



Analysis

i. Aleppo in Numbers

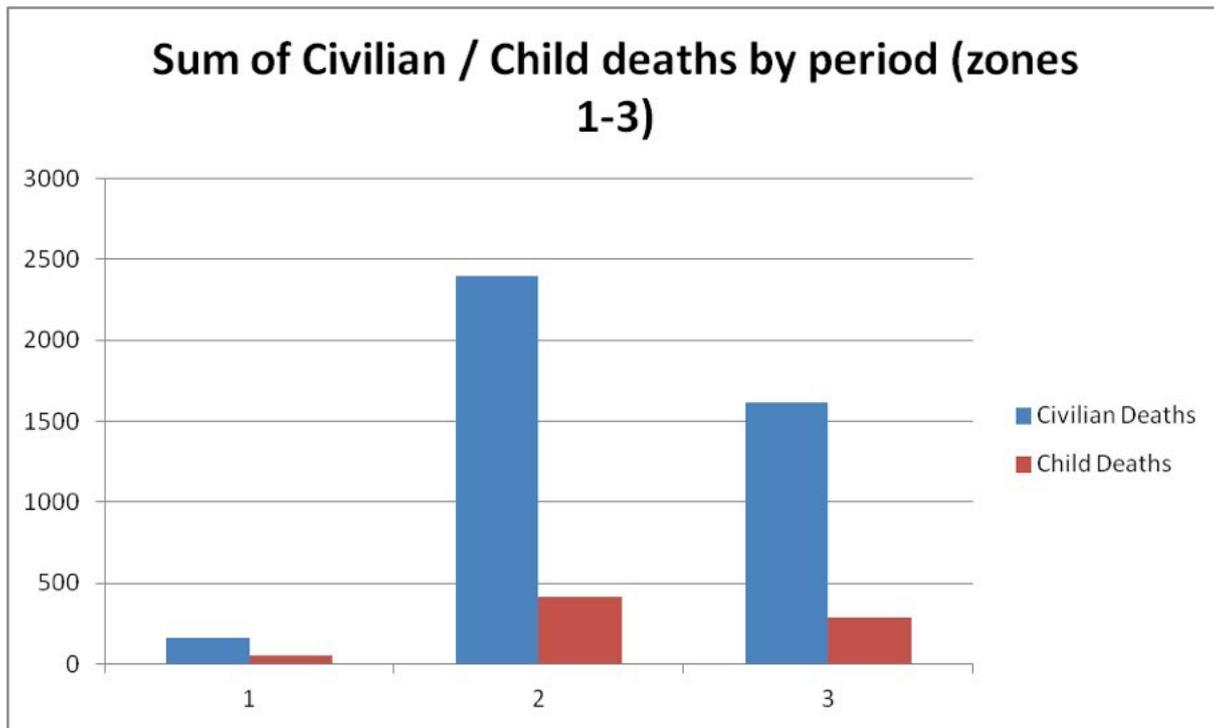
In line with Hypothesis 1, period 1 (zone 1) sees the lowest number of both child and civilian casualties (162 and 50 respectively, as shown in graph 1 below, where blue bars indicate levels or civilian death and red bars indicate child deaths). The mean values of 10.8 and 3.33 (civilian and child deaths per week) suggest low levels of indiscriminate violence by incumbent forces. Relatively low standard deviation values (5.65 and 2.85) show that weekly dispersion from the period average is not significant. It is thus more likely that non-combatant deaths occurred during this period as a result of street fighting, riots and minor clashes, rather than by events such as aerial bombardment or missile strikes (media sources that reported the use of indiscriminate violence during this period could not be located).

In contrast, period 2 (zone 2) sees a sharp increase in civilian and child deaths (totalling 2,399 civilian and 417 child deaths over 15 weeks). Weekly mean values of 159.93 and 27.8 mark a stark contrast from period 1 and provide evidence for Hypothesis 2: Period 2 (zone 2), occurring at a time of territorial loss, will experience the highest level of indiscriminate violence. The high standard deviation values (60.85 and 14.12) show that weekly dispersion from the period average is significant. This adheres to the incumbent's violent reaction during times of immediate loss. For example on the 24th of July a Free Syrian Army offensive to capture parts of the city centre pushed incumbent forces back. The Syrian Army then retaliated with missile strikes across the city (Weaver; Whitaker, 2012). This perhaps explains why the civilian death toll jumped to 190, compared to 40 the week before. Graph 2 (below) shows the variations in weekly sums of civilian and child deaths over the 45 week period[5].

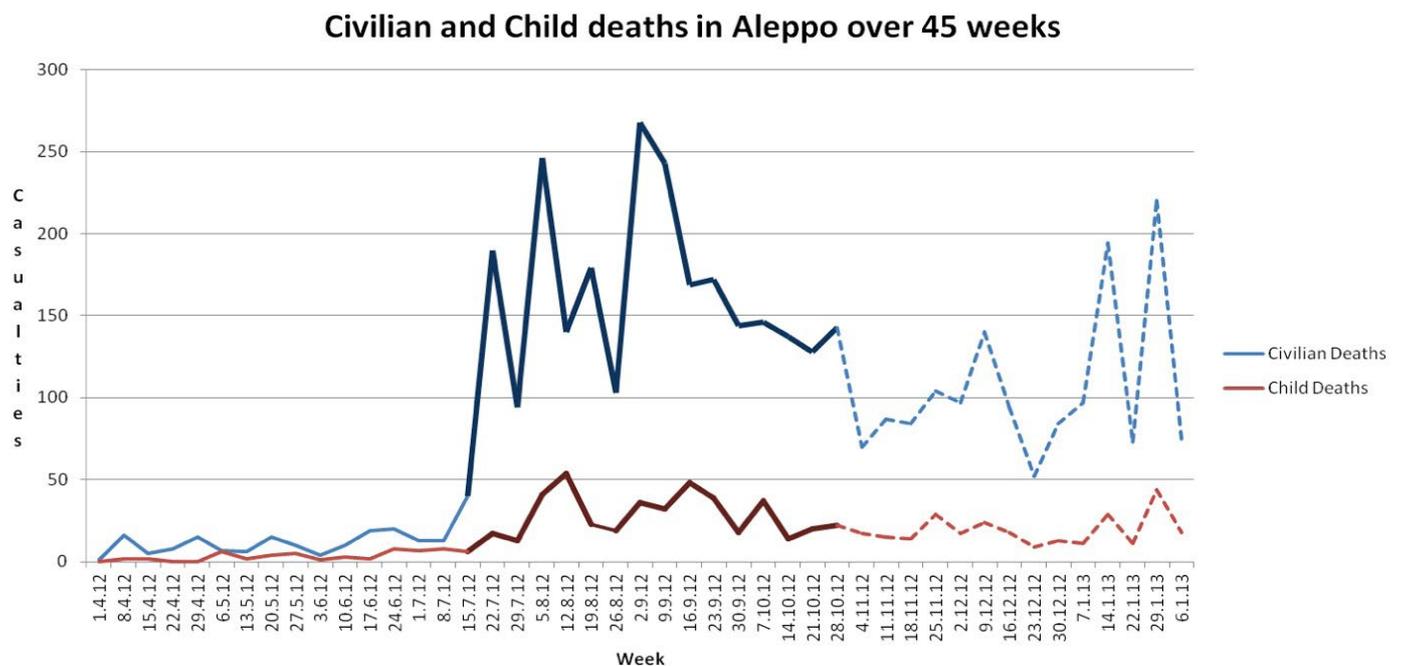
In line with Hypothesis 3, period 3 (zone 3) continues to see high civilian and child death tolls, yet at lower levels than experienced during period 2. High means of 107.53 and 19.4 suggest that levels of indiscriminate violence remain high, yet as territorial control remains contested and there has not been any periods of loss during this time, there has been a tapering in the use of indiscriminate violence. High standard deviation values (47.23 and 9.15) are again however suggestive of sporadic uses of indiscriminate violence. For example an aerial bombing and tank shelling campaign occurred at the end of January, meanwhile the massacre of civilians was reported ('Syria', bbc.co.uk). During this particular week, civilian and child casualties jump to 220 and 44 from 73 and 11 the week before.



Graph 1: Civilian and Child Deaths by Period



Graph 2: Civilian and Child deaths by Week



ii. Statistical Analysis of Aleppo

Although the difference in levels of civilian and child casualties between the three 15 week periods are clearly



observable, it is also important to quantify as well as describe this difference in order to determine whether it is statistically significant. To achieve this aim, this study first conducted a single factor, or one-way ANOVA (analysis of variance) test at 5% significance. ANOVA testing is used to test the null hypothesis that the means of several samples are all equal, against the alternative hypothesis that the means of several samples are different. The full results of the ANOVA testing for civilian and child deaths data samples are listed in the appendix, under the headings: Table 4 and Table 5.

The important values to consider in this test are the F and F critical values. An F value larger than an F critical value means that the difference in means between periods is statistically significant. Table 4 shows an F value, or ratio, (43.19) larger than the F critical value of 3.22. Table 5 also shows an F value (23.71) larger than the F critical value of 3.22. Thus in both cases there is significant difference between means and the null hypothesis is rejected in favour of the alternative hypothesis. In other words, according to the data presented, there is evidence to suggest that change in death rates between periods is statistically significant.

In order to examine where these differences lie and to determine whether there is statistically significant difference from one period to another (e.g. between 1-2, 2-3 and 1-3) a post-hoc Tukey-HSD (honest significant difference) test was conducted (also at a 5% significance level) using the information provided in the ANOVA tests. The HSD value is used to compare with the ratio between means. An HSD value greater than the difference between two means allows for the rejection of the null hypothesis in favour of the alternative hypothesis.

Using the values in the ANOVA results table a Tukey-HSD test, using JMP software for calculation gave the results for civilian casualties measuring an $HSD(.05) = 39.58$ and for child casualties an $HSD(.05) = 8.78$. Furthermore, the differences in mean values for civilian deaths between periods 1 and 2 is 148.2 (159.93 – 10.8), the difference between periods 2 and 3 is 52.4 (159.93 – 107.53) and between periods 1 and 3 is equal to 96.73 (107.53 – 10.8). For civilian casualties each of the mean comparisons show values greater than the HSD value of 39.58. Therefore they are all statistically significantly different, with the greatest difference being between periods 1 and 2.

The differences in mean values for child deaths between periods 1 and 2 is 24.47 (27.8 – 3.33), the difference between periods 2 and 3 is 8.4 (27.8 – 19.4) and between periods 1 and 3 is equal to 16.07 (19.4 – 3.33). Mean comparisons between periods 1 and 2, and between periods 1 and 3 show values greater than the HSD value of 8.78 and therefore show statistically significant difference. Difference between periods 2 and 3 however is not large enough to be considered statistically significant. Therefore in this particular case the hypothesis that there is not a statistically significant difference between child deaths over these two periods (null hypothesis), may not be rejected.

Lastly a correlation coefficient was calculated between civilian and child deaths over the entire 45 week period. The correlation between the two samples gave a value of $r = 0.85$. This value represents a very strong positive linear relationship between civilian and child deaths. This final test was carried out to help nullify the potential error in miscategorising rebel fighters (or insurgents) as civilians. There is far less ambiguity between children and insurgents than there is between civilians and insurgents and therefore a low correlation value would have forced this study to reconsider the accuracy of using civilian casualties as an indicator of indiscriminate violence.



Discussion

Referring back to the initial research question, results from this study have, for the most part, vindicated the indiscriminate violence assumption of the control-collaboration model. Descriptive statistics, ANOVA testing and post-hoc Tukey-HSD testing has shown that there is statistically significant difference between periods 1-2, 2-3, and 1-3, of civilian casualties, and hence an inverse relationship between levels of territorial control and territorial loss on one hand, and the use of indiscriminate violence on the other, throughout the course of April 2012 to January 2013 in Aleppo. Hypotheses 1, 2 and 3, generated from the assumptions made in the model, were thus confirmed.

Descriptive and inferential statistical analysis has provided results[6] which echo the conclusions drawn by many of the authors discussed earlier. As in Ziemke's study, the highest levels of indiscriminate violence occurred during the initial process of losing territory (period 2). These conclusions are also supported by the observations of media, intelligence, NGO and human rights groups. The American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), for example, conducted a satellite observation programme of Aleppo throughout the conflict and has stated that, "The spatial distribution of destruction in Aleppo is severely lopsided with respect to political control. Of the 713 instances that were observed during the study period, only six occurred in areas reported to be occupied by regime forces." ('Staff Report', aaas.org). The same report also concluded that the "...striking dichotomy in damage, in conjunction with direct observations of military activity, is consistent with reports that government forces have been using aircraft, missiles, and long-range artillery to bombard rebel-held areas." ('Staff Report', aaas.org). Satellite images (such as figure 2 below) further evidence the use of indiscriminate violence in non-incumbent controlled areas and help explain the sudden spikes in death figures during given weeks, as can be clearly observed in graph 2 (such as during the week of 2.9.2012). Again however it is important to note the risk of omitted variable bias. The Syrian conflict has involved a large number of domestic and international actors, who all affect regime action in different ways. For example, it is possible that use of indiscriminate violence declined from period 2-3 due to international pressure, the threat of foreign intervention and/or through the influence of strategic allies, such as Russia and Iran. Further in-depth study is needed in order to discount the potential effects of confounding variables.

Figure 2: *Effects of Aerial Bombardment*



Ard al-Hamra neighbourhood, Aleppo, before and after a regime missile strike (February 22, 2013) (Davis, 2013)



Despite the conclusions reached, this study remains limited to providing evidence for just two assumptions of the control-collaboration model. The first part of the model, which focuses on the motivations behind the use of violence, as well as the remainder of the second part of the model, including the use of violence by insurgent forces and the use of selective violence, remain outside the scope of this study. Ultimately as Thucydides noted, civil wars encourage the privatisation of violence and involve a vast array of motivations and actors in what is a 'war of all against all.' (Kalyvas, 2003, 475). It is not clear in this case what motivated incumbent forces to use indiscriminate violence. This study has thus marked a starting point and has emphasised the requirement for greater study into the micro-dynamics of the Syrian crisis. Eck and Hultman's findings on regime type as a determiner of the use of indiscriminate violence, Schutte's 'distance-decay' model, Metelits' argument on territorial 'bargaining' and Bhavnani's thesis on the nexus between information and use of indiscriminate violence could all potentially prove insightful in examining the motivations behind the Syrian regime's use of violence.

Lastly it is important to note that the results of this study also serve to question the labelling of Syrian state forces as a terrorist actor (in the case of Aleppo). Mitchell describes state terrorism as, "...deliberate coercion and violence directed at some victim, with the intention of inducing extreme fear in the target observers who identify with that victim in a way that they perceive themselves as potential future victims." (Schmid, 2011, 127). This definition does indeed adhere to the effects of indiscriminate violence performed by incumbent forces, and possibly the motivation behind its use. However, the use of indiscriminate violence in areas of insecure or low territorial control falls against the arguments of state terror literature which note that state terror is a direct function of high government control (Kalyvas, 2006, 17). This study therefore casts doubt on some of the theoretical assumptions made by state-terrorism scholars. Wider study of the Syrian conflict is necessary however before such claims can be judged externally valid to the entire zone of conflict.

Conclusion

This study has examined an area of civil war and domestic and international crisis, which to date has been largely unexplored by micro-dynamic theorists of intra-state conflict. While acknowledging the limitations and potential faults of this study, the data gathered and the subsequent analysis has provided strong evidence to support two key assumptions of the control-collaboration model. Firstly data from the 45 week period of the Battle of Aleppo has shown that the level of territorial control is inversely related to the rate of death of civilians and children, and thus also the use of indiscriminate violence by incumbent forces. Secondly, the loss of territory is accompanied by an increase in the death rate of civilians and children, again representative of a higher rate of indiscriminate violence. To return to the initial research question, territorial control and the loss of territory do indeed determine the use of indiscriminate violence by the incumbent actor in Aleppo, Syria, over the time period analysed.

Although the use of indiscriminate violence is seen by most as repugnant, its very existence is testament to the belief that it can be an effective tool of counterinsurgency (Kocher, 2008, 2). The results of this study suggest, as concluded by many of the authors discussed, civilians, rather than soldiers, are the tactical targets in this conflict (Rueda, 2013). It is essential now to advance this research agenda and to examine why exactly civilians become the victims of territorial conflict. Are violent actors in the Syria conflict motivated by a will to punish, a will to achieve bargaining power, or, simply an inability to employ selective violence against their enemies? This study has made important discoveries, yet in doing so has also produced a series of questions to be answered. The Syrian crisis is one of the greatest security, geopolitical and humanitarian issues facing



the international system today, and greater understanding of the micro-dynamics of the conflict may prove useful in crisis management, diplomacy, humanitarian relief and conflict resolution.

About the author: *Evan Tyner is a recent graduate from the University of St Andrews where he obtained an MA in International Relations and an MLitt in Terrorism Studies. He is currently working in Brussels at the European Institute of Peace (EIP), where he retains a focus on violent extremism and political violence. He continues to conduct research on terrorism and the activities of armed groups, with particular focus on the MENA region.*

Notes

[1] Defined by Kalyvas as “...armed combat within the boundaries of a recognized sovereign entity between parties subject to a common authority at the outset of the hostilities.” (qtd Bhavnani et al , 2011, 62).

[2] Although he does not provide a definitive definition of indiscriminate violence, Kalyvas classifies the intentional use of ‘cheap’ military technologies such as artillery, bombs, missile strikes and aerial bombardment as indiscriminate methods (Kocher, 2008, 6).

[3] Although using a city as a unit analysis, rather than a more macro unit, may reduce external validity to the wider conflict, it also increases the internal validity of the study and helps reduce the risk of observational equivalence, endogeneity and over-aggregation.

[4] The dates chosen for each period are a reflection of the troop movements and control held by either side according to news sources and International Organizations that reported on the Battle of Aleppo (UNHCR.org; crisisgroup.org; bbc.co.uk). They have been chosen at the author’s discretion based on the trends reported by the above organisations.

[5] The fine blue and red lines represent period 1; the bold lines represent period 2; and the dotted lines represent period 3.

[6] With the only exception being in the mean ratio of child deaths between periods 2 and 3.

References

- American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), ‘AAAS Report Shows Steady Escalation of Destruction in Aleppo’, Staff Report (aaas.org), P: 2.8.2013, A: 12.12.2013.
- Arendt, H., (1969). *On violence*. New York: Harcourt Brace and Company.
- BBC online, ‘Syria’, (bbc.co.uk), accessed 10 December 2013.
- Bhavnani, R., Miodownik, D., Choi, H., (2012), ‘Three Two Tango: Territorial Control and Selective Violence in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza’, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 55: 1, pp. 133–158.
- Bhavnani, R., Miodownik, D., Choi, H., (2011) ‘Violence and Control in Civil Conflict: Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza’, *Comparative Politics*, 44: 1, pp. 61–80.
- Eck, K., Hultman, L. (2007) ‘One-Sided Violence Against Civilians in War: Insights from New Fatality Data’, *Journal of Peace Research*, 44: 2, pp. 233–246;
- Fagerlund, E. (2011), ‘The Tigers’ Roar: Insurgent Violence Against Civilians in Sri Lanka’, *Psychology & Society*, 4: 1, pp. 96 – 11



- Hopwood, D., (1988) *Syria 1945-1986*, Unwin Hyman: London.
- Hultman, L. (2008) 'Targeting the Unarmed: Strategic Rebel Violence in Civil War', Unpublished manuscript.
- International Crisis Group, 'Syria', (crisisgroup.org), accessed 10 December 2013.
- Kalyvas, S. (2012) 'Micro-Level Studies of Violence in Civil War: Refining and Extending the Control-Collaboration Model', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 24:4, pp. 658-668
- Kalyvas, S., Kocher, A. (2009) 'The Dynamics of Violence in Vietnam: An Analysis of the Hamlet Evaluation System (HES)', *Journal of Peace Research*, 46: 3, pp. 335-355.
- Kalyvas, S., Shapiro, I., Masoud, T. (2008) *Order, Conflict, and Violence*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP.
- Kalyvas, S. (2006) *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Kalyvas, S. (2003) 'The Ontology of "Political Violence": Action and Identity in Civil Wars', *Perspectives on Politics*, 1:3, pp. 475-494
- Kocher, (2008), 'Aerial Bombardment, Indiscriminate Violence, and Territorial Control in Unconventional Wars: Evidence from Vietnam.', Paper prepared for presentation at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association Boston, MA August 28 – 31, 2008. Unpublished manuscript.
- Louie, R. (1964) 'The Incidence of the Terror: A Critique of a Statistical Interpretation', *French Historical Studies*, 3: 3, pp. 379-389.
- Metelits, C. (2010) *Inside Insurgency: Violence, Civilians, and Revolutionary Group Behavior*, New York: New York Press.
- Noria Research – Network of Researchers in International Affairs, (noria-research.com), Map uploads 2013, P: September 2013, A: 9.12.2013.
- Rueda, M. (2013), 'Popular Support, Denunciations and Territorial Control in Civil War'. Unpublished manuscript.
- Schmid, A. (2011) *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research*. New York: Routledge.
- Schutte, S. (2013) 'Geographical determinants of indiscriminate violence in civil wars.', ETH Zurich, Paper prepared to be presented at the meeting of the European Network of Conflict Research, Amsterdam, Netherlands, April 24-26, 2013.
- Smith, B., (2012), 'Syria: No End in Sight?', Research Paper 12/48, House of Commons library.
- Solomon, R., Syria Death Toll Hits Nearly 126,000, Reuters, (reuters.com), P: 2.12.2013, A: 2.12.2013.
- Straus, S. (2012) "'Destroy Them to Save Us": Theories of Genocide and the Logics of Political Violence', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 24:4, pp. 544-560.
- Syrian Revolution Martyr Database ([url: syrianshuhada.com](http://syrianshuhada.com)), A: 8.12.2013.
- United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), 'Syria Profile', (www.unhcr.org), accessed 10 December 2013.
- United Nations Security Council (UNSC) 'Alarmed by Continuing Syria Crisis, Security Council Affirms Its Support for Special Envoy's Approach in Moving Political Solution Forward', SC/12008, 7504th Meeting. Accessed 28.01.16.
- Vargas, G. (200) 'Urban Irregular Warfare and Violence Against Civilians: Evidence From a Colombian City', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 21: 1, pp. 110-132.



Weaver, M., Whitaker, B., Middle East Live–Syria crisis: rebels ‘execute shabiha’ in Aleppo–Wednesday 1 August 2012, *The Guardian*, (theguardian.com), P: 1.8.2012, A. 11.12.2013.

Wood, R. (2010), ‘Competing for Control: Conflict Power Dynamics, Civilian Loyalties and Violence in Civil War’, University of North Carolina. Unpublished manuscript.

Zhukov, Y. (2013), ‘A Theory of Indiscriminate Violence in Civil War’, Unpublished manuscript.

Ziemke, J. (2008) ‘From Battles to Massacres’ Prepared for the 3rd Annual Harvard-Yale-MIT Graduate Student Conference on Order, Conflict and Violence. Unpublished manuscript.

Appendix

Periods 1-3:

Table 1

Week	Civilian Casualties	Child Casualties
1.4.12	1	0
8.4.12	16	2
15.4.12	5	2
22.4.12	8	0
29.4.12	15	0
6.5.12	7	6
13.5.12	6	2
20.5.12	15	4
27.5.12	10	5
3.6.12	4	1
10.6.12	10	3
17.6.12	19	2
24.6.12	20	8
1.7.12	13	7
8.7.12	13	8
Sum	162	50
Mean	10.8	3.33
S.D.	5.65	2.85

Table 2



Week	Civilian Casualties	Child Casualties
15.7.12	40	6
22.7.12	190	17
29.7.12	94	13
5.8.12	246	41
12.8.12	140	54
19.8.12	179	23
26.8.12	103	19
2.9.12	268	36
9.9.12	243	32
16.9.12	169	48
23.9.12	172	39
30.9.12	144	18
7.10.12	146	37
14.10.12	137	14
21.10.12	128	20
Sum	2399	417
Mean	159.93	27.8
S.D.	60.85	14.12



Table 3

Week	Civilian Casualties	Child Casualties
28.10.12	143	22
4.11.12	70	17
11.11.12	87	15
18.11.12	84	14
25.11.12	104	29
2.12.12	97	17
9.12.12	140	24
16.12.12	94	18
23.12.12	52	9
30.12.12	84	13
7.1.13	97	11
14.1.13	194	29
22.1.13	73	11
29.1.13	220	44
6.1.13	74	18
Sum	1613	291
Mean	107.53	19.4
S.D.	47.23	9.15

Table 4 - Civilian Deaths

ANOVA						
Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	P-value	F crit
Between Groups	171719.2	2	85859.62	43.1946	6.44E-11	3.219942
Within Groups	83485.07	42	1987.74			
Total	255204.3	44				

Table 5 - Child Deaths

ANOVA						
Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	P-value	F crit
Between Groups	4636.578	2	2318.289	23.70592	1.29E-07	3.219942
Within Groups	4107.333	42	97.79365			
Total	8743.911	44				



About JTR

In 2010 the Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence launched the online Journal of Terrorism Research. The aim of this Journal is to provide a space for academics and counter- terrorism professionals to publish work focused on the study of terrorism. Given the interdisciplinary nature of the study of terrorism, high-quality submissions from all academic and professional backgrounds are encouraged. Students are also warmly encouraged to submit work for publication.

Editor:

Gillian Brunton

Associate Editor:

Joseph J Easson

Editorial Advisory Board:

David Veness

Sarah Marsden

Joel Busher

Michael Loadenthal

Cheryl Graham

Frederic Ishebeck-Baum

Authors who wish to have an article considered for publication should consult the submission guidelines or email gm39@st-andrews.ac.uk for further information.