



The Social Jihad

ISIS's use of social media may be the greater danger

by Animesh Roul

THE ACCUSATION that ISIS is attempting to set up a “medieval-era” caliphate vastly underestimates the modernity of the threat the organization poses. With its digital outreach efforts, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is a whole new entity. Along with its military advances within the Iraq and Syrian hinterlands, ISIS has stretched its virtual footprint beyond its territory through robust online media management and operations. It seeks to reach a wider audience with regular Islamic discourse and propaganda. By exploiting all available web outlets and forums, ISIS has managed to penetrate online social media, blogging, and publishing platforms to communicate and spread its message across the world, and it has succeeded in inspiring many individuals and groups towards its cause, without necessarily leaving any trace of contact.

Reports released in 2015 estimated that between 27,000 and 31,000 foreigners from 86 countries have been recruited to the Syrian war theatre, 70 percent of whom have joined the ranks of ISIS. While the Muslim nations of the Arabian and Sub-Saharan region contributed the highest number of fighters, European countries like France, England, and Belgium have also been major sources of foreign fighters for Jihadi groups in Syria and Iraq.

The Islamic State, however, is not only scouting

talent for its fighting force and day-to-day governance and services within its caliphate: it is intent on spreading its message of hate around the world. While the number of recruits who have crossed international borders can be estimated, it is completely unknown how many more online followers have become sympathetic to ISIS at home. How is ISIS managing this recruitment? How successful have they been? And how can they be stopped?

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The Virtual Jihadi Sphere

By and large, ISIS and other jihadi terrorist groups use Internet social media for four broad reasons: recruitment, propaganda, fundraising, and strategic/encrypted communications. The first three are interconnected. In addition to dedicated websites and jihadi periodicals, like *Dabiq Magazine*, ISIS operates social media accounts as a means of direct communica-

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tion with sympathizers. The Islamic State had favored public messages on Twitter, where it can quickly share its views around the world, but Twitter has silenced those accounts when it has found them. The company announced in February that it has shut down 125,000 accounts with alleged connection to Islamic extremists, like ISIS and al-Qaeda, since mid-2015.

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In order to stay ahead, ISIS has exploited every available online platform: Telegram, Friendica, Quitter, Diaspora, blogging platforms like Wordpress, the self-publishing site Justpaste.it, and messaging platforms like WhatsApp, Viper, and Mixlr. These Internet-based applications enable users both to send private content and to broadcast live audio, text, images, and even video clips to other smartphones. All these technologies have been used by ISIS to connect with and solicit recruits for its cause in Iraq and Syria and abroad, and as companies like Facebook and Twitter crack down on this, there are fears that IS is attempting to create its own messaging and video sharing applications. To date, they have had little success.

The main strategic question, the answer to which both ISIS and governments worldwide would like to know, is what causes troubled youth to join ISIS. What causes radicalization? It is often assumed that violence breeds radicalization, as in the case of the Islamic State arising out of the Iraq conflict, but that is not the case with its recruitment strategies. ISIS has drawn sympathizers from many peaceful nations.

The answer is multifarious. The two Arabic nations with the highest per-capita number of defectors joining armed forces in Syria, leading by an almost triple margin, all have predominantly Sunni populations, which is the same sect of Islam as that professed by ISIS. These nations are Jordan, at 315 fighters per million inhabitants, and Tunisia, at 280, according to estimates from the International Centre for the Study of Radicalization. The same is true for the three European countries with the most recruits: the Muslim populations of Belgium, Sweden, and Denmark, with 46, 32, and 27 recruited fighters per million inhabitants

respectively, are largely Sunni. However, while ISIS and other armed Sunni groups fighting against Syria's Bashar al-Assad obviously draw sympathizers along sectarian lines, this is not the only factor influencing radicalization. Spain, like Denmark, is 4 percent Muslim, the majority of whom are Sunni, but per capita, it has supplied only a tenth the number of the foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria that Denmark has.

Even these kinds of statistics denote only the larger trends. ISIS has succeeded in recruiting fighters from nearly every nation, regardless of the size of its Sunni population. It is estimated that more than 250 Americans have gone to the region to join one or the other side of the conflict. That is less than a fiftieth of the number from Belgium per capita, but a more frightening question is how many have been radicalized but remain at home. While ISIS needs large numbers of recruits to support its caliphate in conventional military tactics on the ground, it does not need large numbers to strike in foreign nations. The numbers of recruits from Belgium demonstrate that the country was at higher risk of homegrown terrorist attacks



A page from ISIS' sDabiq Magazine

than others, as was proven all too clearly this March, but perhaps the more terrifying takeaway from that tragedy was the reminder that it takes only a handful of jihadists to orchestrate such attacks—and it is through social media that ISIS reaches out to disenfranchised youth and troubled individuals in foreign countries to encourage domestic attacks.

It is naive to conclude that radicalization happens simply by surfing or browsing jihadi propaganda on websites; however, ease of access certainly facilitates and creates opportunities for virtual social interactions, the sharing of details of sufferings of Muslims at the hands of others, anecdotal stories of battlefield heroism, and other suchlike details that can influence already discontented minds. These exchanges create a bond or affinity and ultimately unite like-minded sympathizers within the so-called virtual jihadi sphere. It is through this means that ISIS extends its reach across every border to every country.

The Indian Case

In the face of this vast recruitment scheme, approximately only 25 Indian nationals have so far joined ISIS, according to government figures. A similar number have been arrested for varying levels of connection with the Islamic State. The number seems negligible compared to the 400-500 recruits from neighboring Pakistan or when put against India's 172 million-strong Muslim population, the majority of whom are Sunni. The numbers reveal that the vast majority of Indian Muslims have rejected the extremist ideals of ISIS and al-Qaeda.

It is because of this fact, however, that the Islamic State's recruiting strategy in India must use social media, that disgruntled youths look for a violent outlet not at their mosques but online, and that in India, ISIS is not preaching to the choir but trying to find converts. This social media strategy is having its effect: the number of recruits and sympathizers are rising in India and around the world. The continuous online propaganda is succeeding, and jihadi groups have found traction with some Indian Muslim youths. Why this is happening must be understood if it is to be countered. The cases of those who have been arrested for supporting or trying to join ISIS in India reveal a great deal about the Islamic State's recruitment strategies in peaceful foreign nations.

In January, Maharashtra State police and forces from the central investigating agencies unearthed a network of ISIS-influenced extremists; 14 were arrested. They had been sent funds by a suspected ISIS affiliate to carry out a bombing in India.

Nationwide alerts and search and sweep operations were triggered by these arrests. The police claim that these suspects are part of "Junud-ul-khalifa-al-Hind" or the Army of the Caliph of India. With the arrest of its leader, Muddabir Mushtaq Sheikh, the Islamic State's emerging position and its systematic recruitment process using Internet and its applications in India came to the fore. But it was not the first time ISIS influence had reached India.

The Indian authorities have blocked over 90 websites with suspected links with ISIS and other radical Islamic groups. The list of blocked sites includes web portals that are used to spread ISIS propaganda in order to radicalize the Indian populace. The pervasive use of the Internet in fact serves as a medium of virtual *da'wab*, the proselytizing of Islam. This widespread use of the Internet and social media by jihadi groups in the region was first revealed after a number of high-profile arrests from 2014 to 2015, including four engineering students from Kalyan, the Islamic State sympathizer and recruiter Afsha Jabeen, and Mehdi Biswas, who had been running a pro-ISIS Twitter account (@ShamiWitness).

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The latter, a 24-year-old electrical engineer who allegedly used Twitter for incitement and propaganda targeting Muslim youths, had nearly 16,000 followers before he was arrested at his apartment in December, 2014. He posted and circulated an estimated 122,203 pro-Islamic State messages and web links depicting beheading videos and other messages from the battlefields in Iraq and Syria.

Other youths had gone through many non-violent *da'wab* groups and online chat forums before their recruitment into the ISIS rank and file. If the confessional statement of Areeb Majeed, the only recruit from the Syrian war to have returned to India, is to be believed, the Internet served as a trigger and facilitated his and his companions' journey to the front in June 2014. He had been radicalized well before this trip, joining jihadi chat rooms after first reading jihadi literature and listening to hate-promoting speakers who are widely condemned in India. After watching online videos about ISIS and jihad, he connected with ISIS sympathizers from across the world, in Australia, Tur-



The pro-ISIS ShamiWitness Twitter account

key, Saudi Arabia, America, and elsewhere. Ultimately he, along with two friends, traveled to the Iraq and Syrian war theatres.

The Afsha Jabeen case provides further evidence. This ISIS recruiter, who had created groups on Facebook to spread propaganda and attract new members, was arrested in Hyderabad in September 2015. Jabeen claimed that she was influenced by YouTube videos of ISIS and lectures by Muslim extremists. She operated as an online recruiter and indoctrinated many using a fake identity through Facebook. The same is true of Salman Mohiuddin, who created multiple Facebook

sociated with the Islamic State or al-Qaeda through their less-extremist video sermons and the like. Without other cultural influences to counter these, these individuals, often online loners, absorb hour after hour of one-sided propaganda urging them in the direction of jihad. The result, self-inspired jihadists who act alone or in smaller groups, is exactly what the jihadi forums want. They are encouraging foreigners, if they cannot join ISIS, to fight solo against Western nationals and properties as an effective way of instilling fear.

Then, in January of this year, the arrests of the 14 Army of the Caliph of India operatives brought the role of the Internet and social media in helping ISIS recruit fighters to strike against a foreign country into the limelight. This ISIS unit in India has members who have frequently accessed ISIS propaganda materials and networked among themselves with ease. Nafees Khan of Hyderabad and Rizwan of Uttar Pradesh got much of their motivation to take up jihad from discussions on social media like Facebook. They accessed bomb making know how from publishing platforms like 'justpaste.it'. From the social media accounts of Obeidullah Khan of Hyderabad, investigating agencies found ISIS videos and images that were frequently shared by him with his followers. It is clear that they used the Internet to connect with 'Gumnaam of Syria', or Shafi Armar, who is alleged to be the chief recruiter of the 14 men in Syria.

Though he is suspected to be in Iraq or Syria, the former Indian Mujahideen fighter recruited the

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groups to propagate Islamic State ideology. Mohiuddin was arrested in January 2016 while attempting to flee the country. Jabeen, also known as Nicky Joseph, moderated a Facebook group called "Islam Vs Christianity Friendly Discussion" to propagate Islam among nearly 50,000 followers.

Outside of direct recruitment, the virtual *da'wah* propagated via the Internet is a factor that should not be overlooked. Many young people apparently found their way to the websites of radical Islamic clerics as-

14 men online. Shafi Armar is well versed in Internet technology and use of social media, handling multiple accounts on Twitter and Facebook to carry out recruitment in India for militant activities, and he has used many online pseudonyms to evade scrutiny. He has been instrumental in influencing recruits from the Student Islamic Movement of India through Internet chatrooms or platforms like Trillian, Surespot, or Skype.

The National Investigation Agency of India recently stated that the Internet is a common factor in the radicalization of young Indians who have joined or want to join ISIS. During interrogations and subsequent counseling, it was noticed that through imagery and propaganda materials available on the Internet, those people were made to believe that Islam is in danger and only ISIS can save it.

As the case of India demonstrates, the Internet has proven to be the primary space for radicalization in those countries and communities where radical Islam is not the norm. Even though it is naïve to say that online activism is the main culprit behind the attacks in Europe and the growing international recruitment for ISIS, there is ample evidence that social media and the Internet has occasionally played a major role. Radicalization does not happen simply due to the availability of jihadi content on websites, but that content, along with like-minded communities, creates a space for those ideologies to grow

Indeed, Internet chat rooms and social media fo-

ums have proved to be jihadi echo chambers, places where individuals find their worldviews and ideas supported and reverberated by other like-minded individuals, support which only furthers their extremism. This is the nature of social networks, and it plays right into ISIS's recruitment strategy.

It is a lesson that countries with laws regulating online behavior and banning hate speech must enforce them, and do as Twitter did when it shut down ISIS and al-Qaeda accounts. The company didn't need to target any specific political group, only maintain its policy of banning messages that encourage violence. At the same time, in many regions the authorities should not overlook the traditional outlets for youth radicalization, the prisons and madrasas that facilitate real-world interaction and networking among future extremist elements. But governments and their primary agencies must recognize the danger posed by the Internet and find ways to counteract it, for instance by promoting reputed, non-radical Islamic scholars and intervening through robust counter-narratives using same social media to prevent or reverse radicalization. The war against ISIS is not only military: it also takes place in the hearts and minds of the disaffected, who must be reached out to and shown that there are other ways. ■

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ISIS recruiter Shafi Armar