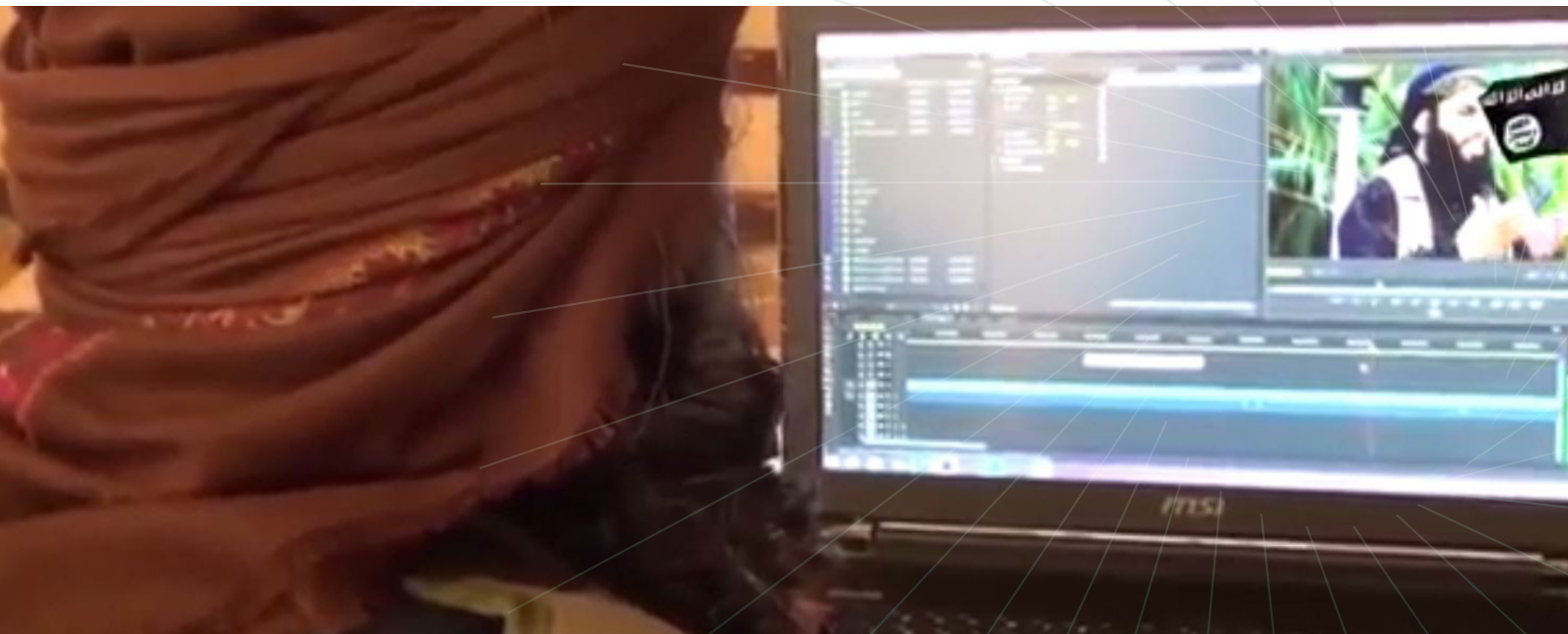


Jane's Militant Propaganda Analysis

Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Centre (JTIC)

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Why does JTIC analyse propaganda and social media?

The production of media in its various forms and the use of social media has become an integral part of most militant groups' operations. It is a key aspect of groups' communication strategies, which serve multiple means, from radicalisation to encouraging attacks to defending groups' theological positions to resolving or escalating internal or inter-communal disputes within groups.

Moreover, the use of social media by individual militants has also become ubiquitous; there are thousands of militants around the world, from the Niger Delta Avengers in Nigeria to the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, who use social media on a daily basis in ways that are open to scrutiny.

These activity patterns on social media, together with an examination of the official production of propaganda and its distribution and consumption, offer highly valuable information for understanding militancy around the world. Jane's militant propaganda analysis can be used in a multitude of ways, from understanding the perspectives of a militant group and figuring out its reasons and logic for pursuing particular operations and objectives, to providing forward looking intelligence on where and why violence may flare up due to previously unforeseen dynamics and circumstances.

As such, the service offers terrorism analysts and law enforcement agencies involved in counter-terrorism a valuable tool that will help understand narratives and provide information and insights to inform decision-making. Additionally, through in-depth analysis of extremist narratives and propaganda content, Jane's Militant Propaganda Analysis provides substantial value for countering violent extremism (CVE) and counter-radicalisation programmes.

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Context: Militancy, technological changes, and the rise of social media

Technological changes have affected the way we can understand militancy: they have transformed the manner in which militant groups communicate to the world, and as a result increased the amount of information available on these groups in open sources drastically.

A notable change within terrorism over the past two decades has been the use of media. Maximum publicity has always been a key factor and driver of terrorist attacks, but technological advancements and the decentralisation of the media sphere is a new phenomenon in the history of terrorism since the 2000s. This allows for a much wider distribution of content and the wider consumption of that content by the public at large.

Essentially, new forms of media distribution and access to media have complicated the media sphere by decentralising it. This means that governments and large corporations now have less power over what media society consumes, and technological advances have reduced this power imbalance, allowing individuals, small groups, and organisations to produce content and reach larger audiences. The field and direction of communication has become more “horizontal”, directed and controlled from the top down. This was initially reflected more clearly in the rise of “citizen journalism”, whereby individuals take it upon themselves to report on conflicts and issues being discussed within mainstream media in alternative sources, but these same distribution channels were also quickly adopted by militant groups.

“Technological advances have allowed individuals and small groups and organisations to produce content and reach larger audiences.”



In particular, militants have adopted social media to convey, portray, and facilitate violence. Of course, the use of violent content to recruit and radicalise people is not new. For example, in the early 90s during the Chechen conflict, London was an epicentre for the circulation of VHS tapes containing militant Islamist footage, depicting fighting and violence in the Balkans and the North Caucasus in Russia that were used to recruit foreign fighters from the United Kingdom. However, technological advances now mean these types of videos are available to everyone, and militant groups such as the Islamic State have recognised this and taken a systematic approach to exploiting this opportunity to reach a far wider, transnational, and truly global audience with its messaging.



Excerpts from Islamic State propaganda.

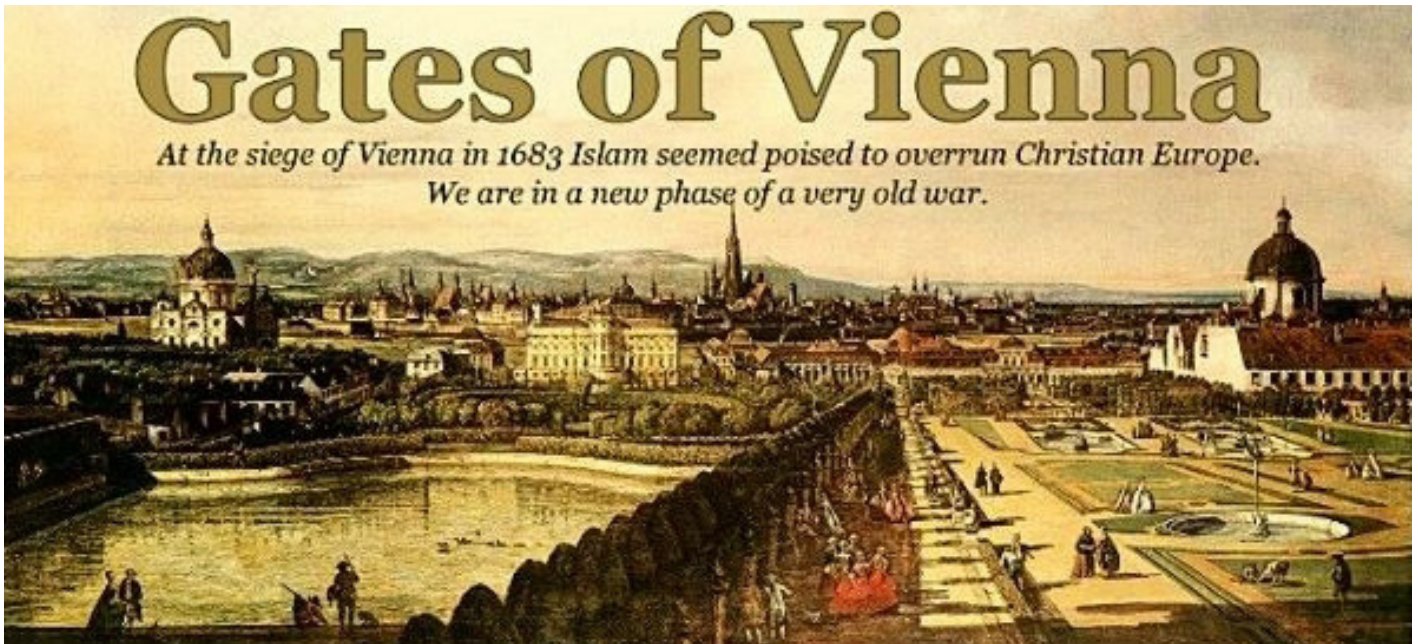
Impacts of decentralisation

The decentralisation of the media sphere has also given more power to marginal groups and social movements, providing an avenue through which to discuss, debate, and develop narratives and ideologies over particular issues. The internet has levelled the playing field in information production and the generation of knowledge. It has allowed for the creation of so-called “echo chambers”, where dominant viewpoints within a group or community are strengthened indefinitely with no intention to engage in true debate or substantially alter the narrative developed by the movement. This is an ideal environment for militant groups and suits their purposes perfectly.

Social media and increased online interaction has also allowed the creation of transnational networks and social movements that can help foster a radical environment, in which justifying violent acts through particular narratives

becomes easier and campaigns to counter violent extremism by governments and law enforcement may become harder. This applies to Islamist militancy and radical Islamist online communities, but in the context of Europe and North America it also applies to right-wing extremism and groups such as the Counter-Jihad, which is a movement across the West that operates primarily online and is opposed to Muslim immigration to the West in protection of a perceived shared Judeo-Christian culture.

In terms of implications for militancy and for terrorist threats, the narratives promoted in this type of radical milieu in the “information age” have a much higher probability of inspiring violence, be it lone actor attacks or attacks conducted by small cells, by the creation of an environment that can easily be used to justify violence.



The banner for Gates of Vienna, a blog promoting Counter-Jihad ideology.

The decentralisation of the media sphere has thus allowed militant groups and radical social movements to achieve a global presence and become much more influential than their counterparts in the preceding decades. In some ways, as has become apparent with the Islamic State’s claimed attacks that are being conducted by individuals who claim allegiance but have no operational links to the group, militancy and violence is becoming more decentralised as well, driven in part by the increased production of propaganda and the effective use of social media to both distribute and consume that content.

“Militancy and violence has become more decentralised, driven by the increased production of propaganda and the effective use of social media to both distribute and consume that content.”

Militant Propaganda Analysis reference guide

JTIC uses militant propaganda analysis to help improve clients' understanding of terrorist groups, conflicts around the world, groups' operational capabilities, their communication strategies and the aims of their propaganda, the people who are intended to be the consumers of this content, and also to identify trends in what militant groups of different persuasions around the world see as important. Understanding militant propaganda plays a fundamental role in generating forward-looking analysis and accurate forecasting of emerging security patterns around the world.

The following presents a reference guide for clients to help understand the platforms and the types of materials that are monitored to produce the content in this module.

Platforms

JTIC analyses a wide range of social media platforms and user generated content. These include social media networks and messaging platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Telegram, Russian VK, video-sharing site YouTube and LiveLeak, websites set up by militant groups, and a number of other user-generated sources.

Twitter

A social media and messaging platform that allows the dispatch of 140-character messages. However, Twitter also allows the posting of imagery and videos, and is frequently used by militant groups as a way to advertise and distribute new videos and statements. Though Twitter has become less popular due to its openness and the ease of monitoring conversations, as well as the banning of accounts distributing extremist material, it is still used widely as a channel to disseminate propaganda in all its forms.



Facebook

Facebook is the largest social network in the world, used by 1.79 billion active users in the third quarter of 2016. A number of militant groups maintain Facebook profiles and pages, where supporters, sympathisers, and members conduct conversations and where these groups post images, videos, statements, and prose. Public and private Facebook pages are also used by individuals to share their experiences, have discussions and debates about issues pertaining to militant groups or their operations, all of which provide valuable insights into group dynamics. Facebook as an organisation has become relatively responsive to reported violent content, though, which has driven many groups to other less restrictive platforms for the purpose of disseminating propaganda.



Telegram

Telegram is a free cloud-based instant messaging service which was launched in August 2013. The software's website states that Telegram is a messaging application with a focus on speed and security, which can be used on different devices (such as mobile phones or computers) simultaneously, and which can be used to share messages, videos, photos, and files of any type up to 1.5 GB each. In February 2016, Telegram stated that it had 100 million monthly active users, sending 15 billion messages daily.



Telegram

a new era of messaging

Users can read and post information in open or closed channels, with all traffic secured via client-server/server-client encryption by default. Some channels operate via an invitation only basis, while others are open to view without invitation. Many militant groups use Telegram as a central channel to disseminate propaganda, in particular links to more extreme, violent content that would be likely quickly taken down if posted on more restrictive platforms. Telegram is also used for fundraising, radicalisation, recruitment, online training, and command and control.

Vkontakte

Vkontakte is the largest European social network, often described as the Russian-language Facebook. It has more than 300 million users, and is considered less restrictive than Facebook. It allows users to share personal photos and videos as well as third-party material. Given its popularity among Russian speakers, the platform offers a window into the social media behaviour of many extremist groups in Russia and the CIS region.



YouTube

YouTube is a popular video-sharing site. Its use for militant groups is limited because of an increasingly strict and effective monitoring of videos with violent content, though groups nonetheless often use the platform to post either non-graphic material, such as video or audio statements, or alternatively use the platform as an initial distribution network with the understanding that the content will likely be taken down swiftly.



LiveLeak

LiveLeak is a website operating with the vision to provide a platform for so-called “reality footage”, with little censorship exercised. This makes it an ideal initial platform for militant propaganda, as much of the content on the website is of a graphic and violent nature.



Material

The material JTIC analyses is as varied as the platforms, enabling a holistic approach to understand militancy that is not limited to single group types or ideologies. That is, while most militant groups publish propaganda regularly, the types of material they typically produce can vary widely, with some operating across all material categories and others limited to just one or two. This means following only videos, for example, would exclude a number of highly active groups, such as anarchists, largely from the scope of propaganda analysis.

Videos

This category comprises videos produced by militant groups. These videos – published most prolifically by the Islamic State and other militant Islamist groups – often display attacks, combat training, life in militant-controlled areas, retributive videos of executions, video statements by leaders and key militants, footage showing operational capabilities and access to weapons systems, and so on.



The promotional banner for a Russian-language Islamic State video.

Imagery

Militant groups frequently post photographs and other imagery, such as infographics, on different platforms. Analysing imagery generates value on some of the same topics covered under videos, but additional value can be gleaned from paying close attention to what type of imagery the militants are deciding to broadcast. For example, is an image posted on Twitter pulled from a news article, or is it proprietary material shot or obtained by the group itself, or what does such an image say about its purpose; is it a highly stylised image with substantial editing intended primarily for propaganda and radicalisation purposes, or is it an image showing an important individual or giving away information regarding the positioning and tactics of militants during an attack? On the other hand, infographics reveal a chosen focus for militant groups and allow for a comparison of militant claims – for example of the purported number of casualties or captured vehicles in a given event – against information from other verifiable sources.



An excerpt from an Islamic State infographic.

Audio statements

This category includes audio statements released by militant groups or individuals connected to militant groups. Although topics covered in audio statements can be broad, the content is typically denser and can be more complex than the information presented in video statements or other propaganda videos. Topics often associated with audio statements can include substantial organisational announcements, such as leadership changes or other structural changes, or responses by group leadership to major events such as key offensives or the death of a key militant figure. Similarly, the type of material a militant group produces – and is able to produce – gives insights into the nature of the organisation and its resources, as well as the type of audience the group is looking to reach. Audio statements, for example, require lower technological resources and post-production capabilities, and can be published with a quicker turnaround than videos.

Written statements

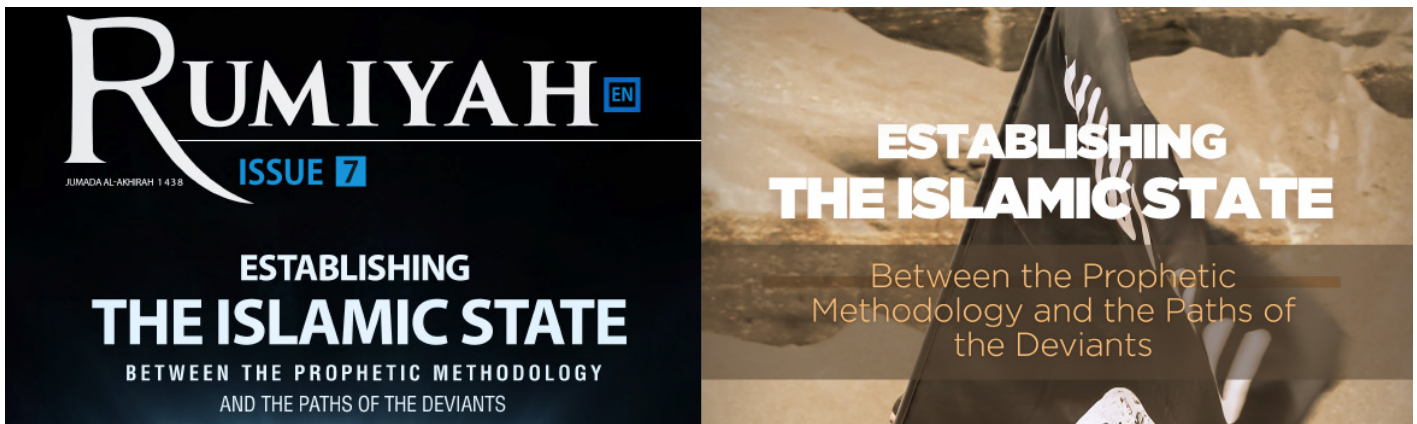
Written statements are a separate category from print, because they often take on the nature of an “official communique” for militant groups, openly addressing the public, other militant groups, or other active entities within their area of operations. Written statements can also have similar content to audio statements, often marking organisational or leadership changes, or accompanying other forms of propaganda such as videos. They can range in length from a one-page memorandum defending the operations of a group of militant Islamists in Libya, to 70-page ruminations by an imprisoned anarchist on the best modes of operation for clandestine cells in Greece.



A screenshot of a written statement issued by the Saraya al-Difaa an-Binghazi, or the Benghazi Defense Brigades.

Magazines

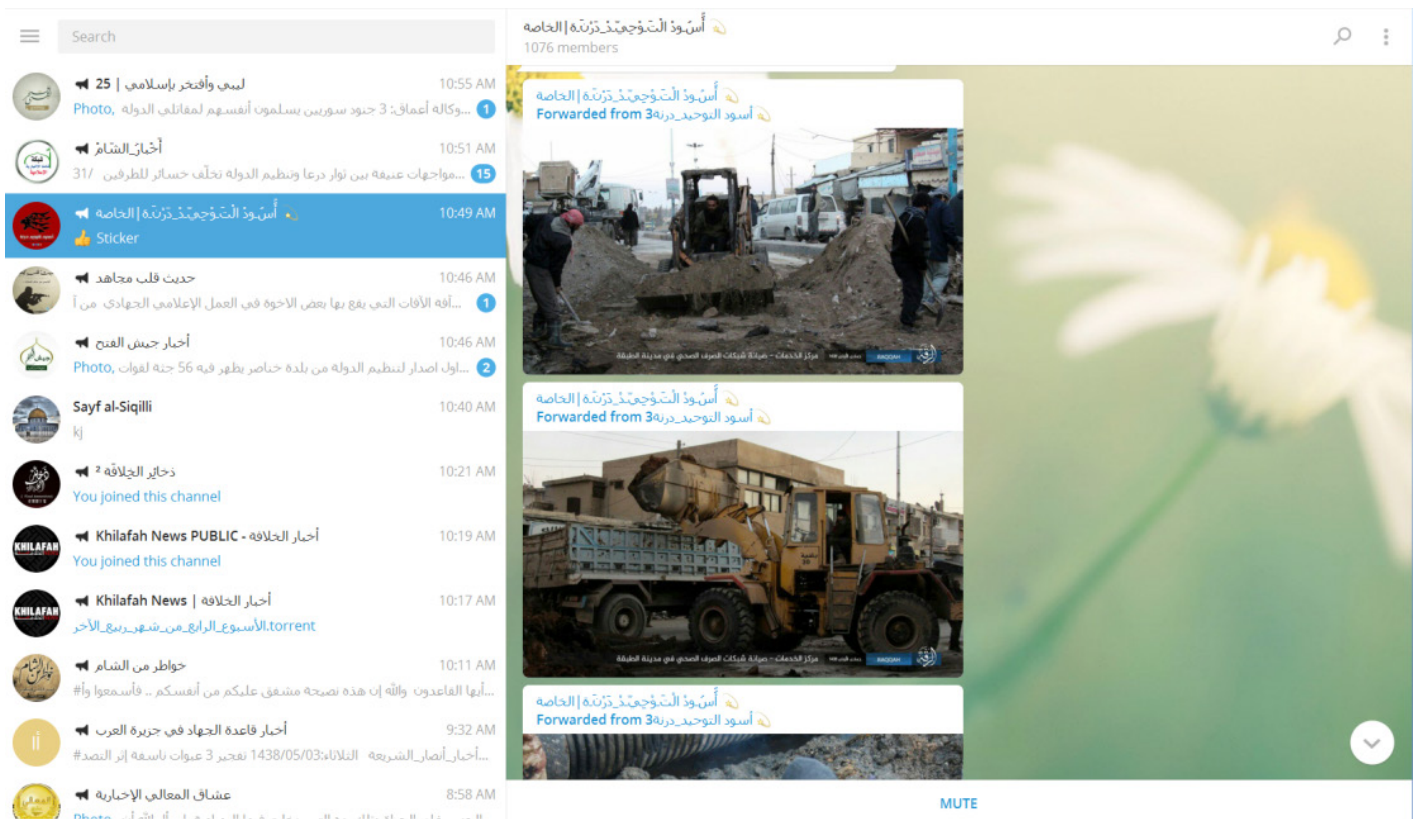
Jane's Militant Propaganda Analysis provides analysis of magazines produced regularly by militant groups in various languages, covering a wide range of topics from the provision of instructions to conduct attacks to theological justifications for groups' operations and actions. Examples include the Islamic State's Dabiq, Rumiya, and Dar al-Islam magazines, as well as Al-Qaeda-affiliated Al-Risalah, Inspire, and Inspire Guide magazines, alongside a many other publications. Additionally, this category also includes ad-hoc magazine publications.



Images pulled from the seventh issue of the Islamic State's Rumiya magazine.

Social media activity

This category includes material published by both ordinary and prominent individuals on available social media channels associated with militant groups. Discussion forums, Facebook, and to a lesser extent Telegram and Twitter, lend themselves to monitoring publicly held discussions and chats within militant communities. This category involves the analysis of such material, providing insights on what problems individual militants face, how they are communicating with supporters and sympathisers, how group cohesiveness is built within conflict zones, and where ideological or theological fractures may be emerging, among other topics.



A screenshot of the Telegram interface, showing a list of groups and channels a user is subscribed to on the left, with a feed to the right showing the content posted on those channels.

Militant perspectives – analytical themes to consider

In analysing this militant-produced material there are a number of key things to consider, which will help provide additional layers of information and find new ways to understand the value of this material. Three recurring themes across Jane's Militant Propaganda Analysis are covered below, including: different messaging for different audiences; developing and strengthening narratives; and the encouragement and threat of attacks.

Audiences

Militant groups produce material for specific, differing, and sometimes multiple audiences. The intended audience of the propaganda often dictates the purpose of the material, and understanding these nuances allows militant-produced material to be interpreted more effectively, gaining a stronger picture of what different groups prioritise and view as important.

To illustrate, execution videos by the Islamic State often carry dual meanings. On the one hand, the hyper violence of the executions – often shot in high definition video with carefully considered and symbolic settings – are intended to shock with their brutality, gathering global media publicity and portraying the group as irrational and barbaric to opponents. On the other hand, these videos also have an internal audience, to whom the violence is being clearly and carefully justified on theological grounds and based on the victims' alleged transgressions and crimes. In this context, a single video might have three different considered audiences, with a message for each: supporters and members of the Islamic State whose views are strengthened and reinforced; subjects of the group in its territory who are discouraged and placed into submission through fear of punishment; and the opponent who the propaganda openly baits, provokes, and threatens.

Additionally, and to the extent that it is possible via open sources, monitoring responses by consumers of the material helps provide insights into how this is received by the target audience, whether it is effective, or whether the material has missed its mark.



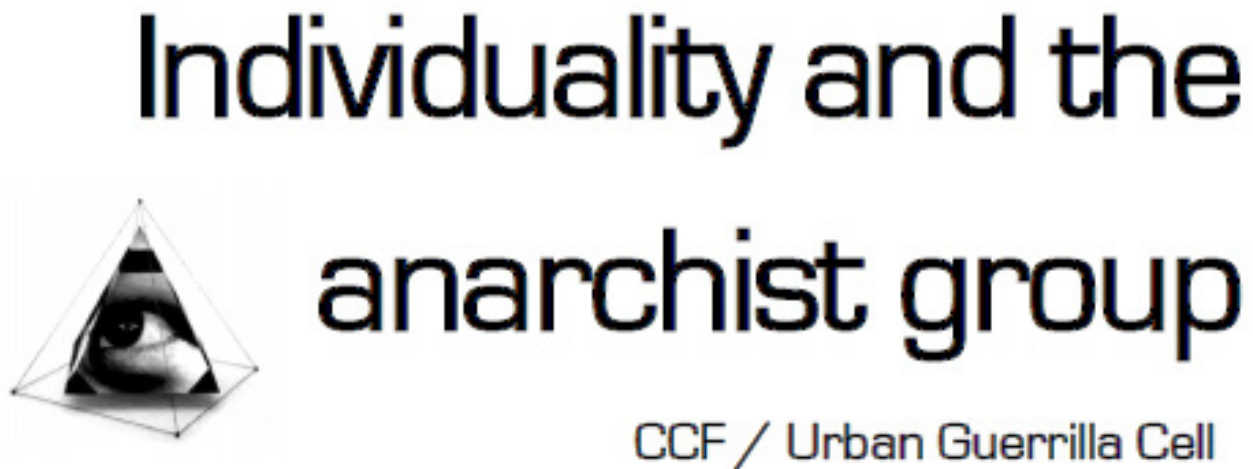
A screenshot from the Islamic State video *Story of Slaughter*, released on 29 June 2016.

Narratives

Much of the militant-produced content is also focused around developing and strengthening the group's ideology and narrative for both an internal and external audience. This is as true of anarchist manifestos in Greece as it is of PKK affiliates in Northern Syria, or the Islamic State and its network of media centres in Iraq and Syria that produce a constant stream, particularly of video and print media.

Magazines such as the Islamic State's Rumiya, thus far a monthly publication since September 2016, focus heavily on promoting the group's narrative to as wide an audience as possible. The magazine is produced to a high quality and has to date been published in at least 10 languages, with some unique content provided for specific countries, illustrating how these publications are being used to cater to specific issues and specific audiences around the world. For example, the Bahasa edition of Rumiya provided different content to the Finnish language edition of the magazine, with the Bahasa more than 60 pages long and the Finnish edition a mere 23, reflecting the level of resources being put into – and available for – providing content for a larger readership in Southeast Asia, which are perhaps less likely to be able to consume the material in English or other predominant languages of publication.

Some of these releases also take highly theoretical approaches that can help understand the direction a particular group is going towards. For instance, an interview of militant Islamist theorist Abu Qatada al-Filistini published on Twitter on 1 October 2016 discussed the theoretical ceiling for militant rule in Syria in the current international context, advising groups over what type of group and governance structure they would most likely be able to hold under the current international order. The interview can be understood as guidance to Jabhat Fath al-Sham, formerly Jabhat al-Nusra, in adopting a new strategic course in the coming years and months as the Syrian conflict advances. By monitoring these types of communications, and further, discussions about these communications, on social media, analysts are able to build much stronger cases regarding the currents and trajectories that are at play inside militant groups at any given time.



The title page graphic of a CCF/Urban Guerrilla Cell anarchist paper

Threats

One of the recurrent themes in militant propaganda is encouragement for supporters and sympathisers of the group to conduct attacks, whether in conflict zones or in their home countries. The widening of distribution channels for propaganda as a result of the decentralisation of the media sphere has made this content and such messaging particularly available and, as a result, more effective, imbuing propaganda with a direct impact on evolving threat landscapes, particularly in areas outside of conflict zones.

Causal links are difficult to prove between encouragement of attacks in propaganda and the actual conducting of attacks by supporters abroad. However, understanding the shifting trends of – for example – the Islamic State's calls and encouragement for attacks, and the methods and channels through which such communication is undertaken, enables the provision of informed and up-to-date forecasting. The Islamic State has issued repeated calls for knife attacks on both civilians and security forces, and in Europe throughout 2016 a number of such attacks were recorded: from an attack on Chinese nationals in Wurzburg, Bavaria, in July, to a stabbing of teenagers in Hamburg in October, to the beheading of a catholic priest in Normandy in July, to the murder of a police officer and his partner in the Magnanville suburb outside Paris in June, all these attacks were in line with the group's propaganda messaging. Similarly, both the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda have called for vehicle-impact attacks of the types conducted in Nice, France in July 2016 and Berlin, Germany in December 2016.

In the October edition of Rumiya, the Islamic State – perhaps knowing or at least hoping that it was the main driver behind at least some of these acts – issued a long editorial on knife attacks, instructing inspiring militants on how to pick the best knives, how to select targets, conduct reconnaissance, and attack causing maximum pain and in a way that makes it clear the attack was an act of terrorism.



The Islamic State has frequently encouraged conducting knife attacks in its propaganda, as in this image taken from Rumiya magazine.

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