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TERRORISTS AND CYBERSPACE: THE DIGITAL BATTLEGROUND

by

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TERRORISTS AND CYBERSPACE: THE DIGITAL BATTLEGROUND

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ABSTRACT

This thesis asks why and how terrorist organizations use the Internet to achieve three strategic goals: 1) the dissemination of propaganda, 2) recruitment, and 3) fundraising. It is immediately apparent that the Internet offers a number of advantages, including low cost, global reach, and anonymity. Nonetheless, terrorist organizations vary in their exploitation of these advantages according to their immediate objectives. To explain these variations, this thesis presents a comparative study of Al Qaeda, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and the Taliban. This study considers how different objectives render distinct narratives and thereby affect how those narratives leverage images and information in the dissemination of propaganda. Similarly, targets of recruitment vary according to the objectives of the respective organizations; this primarily affects their use of social media, including Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and other applications. Fundraising methods also vary, from local means (extortion, narcotics, smuggling) to contemporary exploitation of digital platforms like PayPal and cell phone applications enabling anonymous donations. This thesis concludes that the sophistication of terrorist organizations online requires an equally sophisticated response that is as essential to the fight against violent extremism as kinetic operations.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ANSF	Afghan National Security Forces
AQC	Al Qaeda Central
AQI	Al Qaeda in Iraq
AQIM	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
ARES	Armament Research Services
BIF	Benevolence International Foundation
CentCom	Central Command
CMC	Computer-Mediated Communication
DRF	Global Relief Foundation
FATF	Financial Action Task Force
GWOT	Global War on Terrorism
IANA	Islamic Assembly of North America
IEA	Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan
IMB	Information-Motivation-Behavioral Skills
IO	information operations
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
NPR	National Public Radio
UN	United Nations
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes

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I. INTRODUCTION

The advent of the Internet and the development of social media and digital platforms globalized the diffusion of information, changing commerce, politics, and the way people interact. The global reach of the Internet has crossed borders and given freedom of expression to everybody, but not always for noble purposes. Terrorist organizations, for example, have embraced the use of the Internet by taking advantage of its intrinsic characteristics (low cost, global reach, anonymity, low coercion), which provide coverage from physical exposure to kinetic attack from countries leading the fight against extremist groups. The Internet, through social media and digital platforms, is the instrument that terrorist organizations frequently use to deliver their religious extremist message and advance a radicalization process in order to deliver propaganda, raise funds, and recruit new members. This thesis analyzes three Salafist jihadist organizations: Al Qaeda, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and the Taliban, and how they use the Internet, social media, and digital platforms to achieve their strategic goals (i.e., to combat the far enemy that supports apostate regimes, to extend a caliphate through the Middle East, and to establish the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan [IEA], respectively). To satisfy this analysis, this thesis addresses how and why these terrorist organizations and extremist groups use social media and digital platforms to spread propaganda, recruit new members, and raise funds.

A. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION

After September 11, 2001, the Global War on Terrorism moved a great deal of human and economic resources to combat terrorist organizations and the states that host these groups. The initial strategy consisted of a kinetic war targeting terrorist leaders, training camps, and any infrastructure linked to terrorist organizations. These attacks ultimately forced terrorist organizations to exploit the concealment offered by the Internet in order to hide their operations and coordinate their efforts. Specifically, “the network of computer-mediated communication (CMC) is ideal for terrorists-as-communicators: it is decentralized, it cannot be subjected to control or restriction, it is not censored, and it allows

access to anyone who wants it.”¹ Ultimately, organizations like ISIS, Al Qaeda, and the Taliban decided to leverage the advantages of social media and digital platforms to achieve their strategic goals. Although several scholars have studied the general phenomenon of terrorists using the Internet, few researchers have explained in detail how and why each group uses the Internet *differently* to achieve distinct goals. An analysis of the use of social media and digital platforms by these terrorist groups is essential to understand the modus operandi through which they conduct activities vital to their organizations. This thesis highlights the use of social media and digital platforms by terrorist organizations for recruiting, fundraising, and information operations, and in so doing may provide insights and recommendations to combat and frustrate their operations.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

The terrorist organizations described in this literature review—Al Qaeda, ISIS, and the Taliban—are the central focus of the United States and its allies’ strategy in the war against terrorism. The general approach of these terrorist organizations to Internet activities shares some common features. Gabriel Weimann points out that “terrorists employ the Internet for a variety of instrumental, as well as communicative purposes [including} ... information gathering (like everybody), ... raising funds and coordinating actions (like traditional political organizations), [and] ... hiding instructions, manuals and directions in coded messages or encrypted files (more unusual and distinctive).”² However, on a close examination, each terrorist organization tailors its approach to meet its own distinct strategic goals.

This literature review analyzes the work of various scholars and explains why ISIS, Al Qaeda, and the Taliban use the Internet, social media, and digital platforms to legitimize their agenda, procure funds, and recruit individuals in order to assure their short-term and long-term goals.

¹ Gabriel Weimann, *Terror on the Internet* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2006), 25.

² Weimann, 111.

1. Why Do Terrorist Organizations Use the Internet and Social Media?

In a general sense, the easiest answer to this question is *because it is effective*. According to Neil Krishan Aggarwal, “the Internet has destabilized geographical notions of local and global as readers anywhere can access, identify, and attach themselves to distant conflicts, compelling us to rethink the relationship among language, cultural identity, and psychology.”³ Terrorist organizations have been successful in developing essential operations through the Internet under the principle of economy of effort, keeping a low profile in order to avoid kinetic actions of the states committed in the war against terrorism.

Martha Crenshaw and Gary Lafree highlight that the Internet is “what unites the multifaceted violent jihadist movements in recent years is not language or national or ethnic identity but a shared aspiration to unite and defend Muslim lands against perceived foreign threats, overthrow apostate regimes, and replace them with states founded on a rigidly conservative interpretation of Islamic law.”⁴ Consequently, the Internet—through social media and digital platforms—provides channels of rapid integration and coordination to terrorist organizations. This enables them to keep actively working on promoting jihad and at the same time keeping a low profile to avoid detection by their enemy.

Without doubt, terrorist organizations have mastered the use of the Internet to exercise a vast range of activities in support of the holy war. Terrorist organizations embrace the use of the Internet due to its intrinsic characteristics (i.e., direct communication, global reach, inclusive nature, and low cost). These characteristics facilitate essential operations through social media and digital platforms without censorship or disruption. Additionally, this thesis exposes terrorist organizations’ behavior on the web, and provides arguments that explain why terrorist groups embrace the use of this technology.

³ Neil Krishan Aggarwal, *The Taliban’s Virtual Emirate* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), XIV.

⁴ Martha Crenshaw and Gary Lafree, *Countering Terrorism* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2017), 122, 123.

Social media on the Internet has opened countless opportunities for terrorist organizations to convey their radical message worldwide. Weimann provides concise arguments that explain why terrorist organizations migrated their operations to cyberspace. He argues that the limitations imposed by conventional mass media motivated terrorists to explore new media technologies and the Internet as a platform to deliver their message freely, as it is a cheap and global communication tool.⁵ Traditional media (i.e., radio, television, newspapers, magazines, etc.) are subject to scheduled, established, and edited content. Such content may also be subject to censorship and likely to condemn terrorist activities. By contrast, the Internet provides freedom of action to develop activities in support of their endeavor. Consequently, social media and digital platforms available on the Internet provide terrorist organizations the freedom to develop a propaganda campaign to consolidate a radicalization process that can influence hearts and minds and stir the *ummah*'s (worldwide Muslim community) support. As Weimann points out, these groups achieve "ubiquitous and real-time communication ... thus fueling and expanding the fighting and bloodshed to a hitherto almost unprecedented extent."⁶ As result, through social media terrorist groups can be interactive, creative, and persuasive due to the power of communication platforms like Twitter, Flickr, YouTube, Facebook, Whatsapp, and Instagram.⁷ Every day, terrorist organizations reaffirm their presence in cyberspace to spread fear and at the same time gain legitimacy connecting with people using instruments of mass diffusion like social media in order to influence society. Additionally, Weimann points out that terrorist organizations use the Internet because of the interactivity offered through websites, the establishment of online communities, and the ability to share (upload/download) videos on several sites. The Internet also allow terrorist organizations develop a proactive attitude to interact with people in order to sell their ideology and gain adepts that support their objectives.⁸ The social media and digital platforms provide multiple

⁵ Gabriel Weimann, *Terrorism in Cyberspace the Next Generation* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Press, 2015), 15.

⁶ Weimann, xii.

⁷ Weimann.

⁸ Weimann, 19.

channels to develop essential activities for terrorist organizations (propaganda, fundraising, and recruiting) with little or no interference by the countries and institutions involved in the Global War on Terrorism. Furthermore, terrorist organizations also maximize their use of the Internet as they compete with each other for militants and economic support.

The Internet is a minimally regulated means of communication that allows terrorist organizations to upload graphic material without being censored. Consequently, they can target and tailor their message to people from different countries, different languages, and different backgrounds. Similarly, Philip Seib and Dana Janbek state that terrorist groups use the Internet because it allows control of content and addresses their message to different spectators along different idioms, which they cannot do through mainstream media.⁹ It is impressive how quickly terrorist organizations populated the cyberspace, diversifying their content, making high quality videos, and articulating a well thought out religious and political message developed under professional supervision. According to Seib and Janbek, terrorist groups' growing use of the Internet through websites is a consequence of globalization, which brought technological advancement at a low cost.¹⁰ websites support a direct flow of information, enabling terrorist organizations to communicate and interact with their followers about their activities, missions, and achievements.

In summary, Seib, and Janbek state as a convincing reason why terrorist organizations use the Internet:

It is a relatively new technology; regulations surrounding its use in many countries are just now being enacted: *as an open, decentralized interoperable network, regulations are few in number and impose minimal constraints.* ... Another reason that terrorists use the Internet is its anonymous nature. ... The Internet has the potential to reach millions of users. ... Ideas can flow freely across country boundaries, connecting people with similar ideologies and thus expanding the network. ... Most importantly, the posting of press releases and videos online creates an *Internet buzz* in the hope that the group's news will appear in mainstream media.¹¹

⁹ Philip Seib and Dana Janbek, *Global Terrorism and New Media* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 55.

¹⁰ Seib and Janbek, 58, 59.

¹¹ Seib and Janbek, *Global Terrorism and New Media*, 58, 59.

In the past, as Brigitte Nacos notes, terrorist groups had to rely on coverage by traditional media like radio, newspapers, and television, which were once the predominant means of communication around the world, to gain publicity and disseminate propaganda.¹² However, she states that this changed in the last decade with the arrival of the Internet, social media, mobile phone applications, and blogs, which became potent weapons of communication.¹³ Indeed, terrorist groups found the autonomy to schedule and deliver radical content on the Internet in order to attain global recognition; however, they have not achieved the legitimacy that they pursue through terrorist attacks.

As a response to why terrorist organizations use the Internet, Nacos listed several qualities that make this technology preferred by terrorist organizations. She claims the Internet is global, accessible, inexpensive, mostly unregulated, anonymous, inclusive in that it reaches a huge audience, and exclusive in that it can grant and deny access to a specific group or audience.¹⁴ These distinctive characteristics provide terrorist organizations with countless advantages in the planning, coordination, and execution of terrorist attacks or activities that support the organization's objectives.

In conclusion, terrorist organizations have established their virtual center of operations on the Internet, taking jihad to cyberspace and developing vital activities to pursue and consolidate their political objectives. As many scholars have noted, terrorists likely moved operations to this sphere due to the Internet's intrinsic characteristics that offer free movement, greater range of operation, and low risk of exposure, enabling them to avoid retribution by states fighting terrorist organizations.

2. How Do Terrorist Organizations Use the Internet and Social Media?

After analyzing why terrorist organizations use the Internet, it is important to highlight how these organizations develop essential activities through social media and digital platforms to execute *information operations, fundraising, and recruitment* that to

¹² Brigitte Nacos, *Mass-mediated Terrorism: Mainstream and Digital Media in Terrorism and Counterterrorism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publisher, Inc., 2016), xvii.

¹³ Nacos, xvii.

¹⁴ Nacos, 74.

compete with other terrorist groups for resources and supremacy or to overcome interference from countries that would block them from achieving their goals.

Terrorist organizations are proactive in developing multiple activities on the Internet to support their objectives. In fact, Weimann highlights some activities developed by terrorist organizations using the Internet, and he points out that many of these activities overlap.¹⁵ According to Weimann, these groups have mastered the use of the Internet to safeguard internal communications, radicalize new recruits, spread propaganda, and execute psychological warfare, as well as to create virtual training camps for new prospects and online education and training of terrorists.¹⁶

Other scholars add more activities developed by radical groups that take advantage of the Internet's distinctive characteristics. For example, Maura Conway, in her research titled *Terrorist 'Use' of the Internet and Fighting Back*, explains how terrorist organizations use the Internet. In this study, she cites the work of five scholars (Steve Furnell and Matthew Warren, Fred Cohen, Timothy L. Thomas, and Gabriel Weimann). They explain how terrorist organizations use the Internet to create channels of communication and operative structures, to achieve strategic objectives, and avoid disruption and direct confrontation.¹⁷ These five scholars identify the main activities that illustrate how terrorist organizations use the Internet to ensure support for their enterprises. Although they differ on the names and numbers of such activities, they concur in establishing the events in which terrorist organizations have been successful using the Internet.

One of the earliest studies exposing how terrorist organizations use the Internet is Steve M. Furnell and Matthew J. Warren's 1999 study, "Computer Hacking and

¹⁵ Nacos, *Mass-mediated Terrorism*, 23.

¹⁶ Nacos, 24.

¹⁷ Maura Conway, "Terrorist 'Use' of the Internet and Fighting Back," Department of Political Science, Trinity College, September 2005, https://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/archive/downloads/research/cybersafety/papers/maura_conway.pdf.

Cyberterrorism: The Real Threat in the New Millennium?, ”¹⁸ in which they point out the emergence of a new threat in cyberspace due to the recurrence of terrorist organizations using this means to realize essential activities like “propaganda & publicity, fundraising, information dissemination, and secure communications.”¹⁹ Because terrorist organizations actively carry out training, coordination, intelligence operations, attacks, and radicalization to hinder their enemy’s capabilities, Furnell and Warren perceived the Internet to be as lethal as any other weapon in the terrorists’ arsenal.

The use of the Internet by terrorist organizations was also highlighted by Fred Cohen in his 2002 book *Terrorism and Cyberspace*. Cohen exposes the following indispensable activities conducted on the web by terrorist groups: *planning, finance, coordination and operations, political actions, and propaganda*.²⁰ Since then, the range of activities developed by terrorist organizations has expanded and grown more diversified. Only one year later, in 2003, Timothy L. Thomas published *Al Qaeda and the Internet: The Danger of Cyberplanning*, in which he provides a list of activities developed on the Internet by this terrorist organization, including

- profiling,
- propaganda,
- anonymous /covert communications,
- generating cyber fear,
- finance,
- command & control,
- mobilization & recruitment,
- information gathering,

¹⁸ Steve M. Furnell and Matthew J. Warren, “Computer Hacking and Cyberterrorism: The Real Threat in the New Millennium?” Semantic Scholar, 1999, <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/4d04/d6a7ef313a50f525297059f3965f103d7b54.pdf>.

¹⁹ Furnell and Warren.

²⁰ Conway, “Terrorist ‘Use’ of the Internet and Fighting Back.”

- mitigation of risk,
- theft/manipulation of data,
- offensive use, and
- misinformation.²¹

Although this research focused on Al Qaeda and the activities it developed on the Internet, these activities are common to other terrorist groups that take advantage of the intrinsic characteristics of the Internet and digital platforms.

Another work that highlights how terrorist organizations use the Internet came in 2004, when Gabriel Weimann penned a special report titled *WWW.terror.net: How Modern Terrorism Uses the Internet* for the United States Institute of Peace. Weimann's findings concur with those of the previous scholars about the list of web-based activities—vital to terrorists' subsistence—carried out by militant organizations. The activities listed by Weimann “are psychological warfare, publicity and propaganda, data mining, fundraising, recruitment & mobilization, networking, sharing information, and planning & coordination.”²² Indeed, Weimann points out core activities that terrorist organizations develop on the Internet to advance the consolidation of their political objectives.

This thesis aims to provide facts that help to understand how and why the use of the Internet by terrorist organizations evolved, and how the Internet increased their opportunities to carry out activities that support their objectives globally—without detection or disruption. Based on the review of previous research, this thesis focuses on the following web-based activities essential to advancing the objectives of terrorist groups: Information Operations, Fundraising, and Recruiting.

As the upcoming discussion in Chapter II shows, Al Qaeda has made strategic use of the Internet to gain global reach, while avoiding exposure. This organization uses social media and digital platforms to promote its ideology and arouse support through propaganda,

²¹ Timothy L. Thomas, “Al Qaeda and the Internet: The Danger of Cyberplanning,” Spring 2003, <http://www.iwar.org.uk/cyberterror/resources/cyberplanning/thomas.pdf>.

²² Conway, “Terrorist ‘Use’ of the Internet and Fighting Back.”

fundraising, and recruiting. According to the Dutch National Coordinator for Counterterrorism, by the end of the 1990s, Al Qaeda had established alneda.com, a website created in Singapore. *Al Neda* or '*The Call*' serves as a host to promote terrorist actions by delivering radical messages, posting videos and pictures, and offering jihadist sermons. In addition, Al Qaeda has distributed its efforts across multiple platforms, including the website named the Center for Islamic Studies and Relief, which was created by Abu Gaith en al-Zawahiri to post threat statements targeting the United States.²³ This website is linked to a bi-monthly magazine called *The Voice of Jihad* (Sawat al-jihad), devoted to spreading Al Qaeda's propaganda. It is argued that Al Qaeda turned to online activities in order to escape detection following the invasion of Afghanistan in 2002. Since then, Al Qaeda has gradually increased its activities on the Internet through different digital platforms to export its radical ideology to a broader audience without physical exposure. According to the United Nations Counter Terrorism Implementation Task Force, "a report noted that in 2002, the Al-Qaida media arm As-Sahab had issued only six audio or video web messages. By 2007, the number had increased to nearly 100 multimedia files. Increasingly violent and explicit videos of suicide bombings and other attacks were posted online, having a noted propaganda effect."²⁴ Al Qaeda found security on the Internet after its leadership and training camps were targeted in the Global War on Terrorism. This also led the organization to shift its recruitment tactics online. Robyn Toro states "the constant surveillance and targeting of terrorist training camps has provided al-Qaeda no choice but to adopt new training and recruitment strategies, which are now carried out online."²⁵ Moreover, according to *The Insider* (referring to a *New York Times* article) the methods used by Al Qaeda came to include extensive online training, illustrated by the distribution of a manual called *A Course in the Art of Recruiting*, which explains how to approach new

²³ "Jihadis and the Internet," The Dutch National Coordinator for Counterterrorism, accessed October 25, 2017, <https://www.investigativeproject.org/documents/testimony/226.pdf>.

²⁴ "Countering the Use of the Internet for Terrorist Purposes-Legal and Technical Aspects," United Nations, Counter Terrorism Implementation Task Force, May 2011, 28, http://www.un.org/es/terrorism/ctitf/pdfs/ctitf_interagency_wg_compendium_legal_technical_aspects_web.pdf.

²⁵ Robyn Toro, "Developing an Explanatory Model for the Process of Online Radicalization and Terrorism," Springer, 2013, <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1186%2F2190-8532-2-6.pdf>.

prospects to become jihadist fighters or supporters.²⁶ The techniques contained in this manual are similar to the steps given by ISIS.

Additionally, Al Qaeda and its affiliates have developed robust resources online to receive economic support from followers in the Middle East and around the world. In particular, Al Qaeda has adeptly created innovative methods to elude authorities trying to prevent its collection and distribution of funds. According to the Norwegian Defense Research Establishment (FORSVARETS FORSKNINGSINSTITUTT), Al Qaeda's fundraising methods evolved over time, initially "sending CDs of jihadist attacks to define supporters a couple of years ago, the Internet today provides supporters all over the world with videos and other kinds of propaganda, thus increasing the foundation for fundraising significantly."²⁷ Al Qaeda fundraising activities appeal to Muslim's economic support through social and face to face interaction with possible donors or through social media and digital platforms. Weimann highlights that in 2002, a Council of Foreign Relations report called *Terrorist Financing* detailed these activities:

Al-Qaeda's financial network is characterized by layers and redundancies. It raises money from a variety of sources and moves money in a variety of manners.... The most important source of Al-Qaeda's money is its continued fundraising efforts. Al-Qaeda's financial backbone was built from the foundation of charities, nongovernmental organizations, mosques, websites, fundraisers, intermediaries, facilitators and banks and other financial institutions. ... This network extended to all corners of the Muslim world. It included everyone from wealthy gulf Arabs, who could be solicited directly to give huge sums themselves, to masses, who would make regular charitable donations as part of their religious obligations.²⁸

Similarly, ISIS uses various methods, discussed in detail in Chapter III, to develop a radicalization process through the Internet for spreading propaganda, fundraising, and

²⁶ Pamela Engel, "Here's the Manual that Al Qaeda and Now ISIS Use to Brainwash People Online," Business Insider, July 2, 2015, <http://www.businessinsider.com/the-manual-al-qaeda-and-now-isis-use-to-brainwash-people-online-2015-7>.

²⁷ Hanna Rogan, *Jihadism Online—a Study of How Al-Qaida and Radical Islamist Groups Use the Internet for Terrorist Purposes* (Norway Norwegian Defense Research Establishment, 2006), 31, <https://www.ffi.no/no/Rapporter/06-00915.pdf>.

²⁸ Gabriel Weimann, *Terror on the Internet* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2006), 138.

recruiting. ISIS launched a propaganda offensive via social media by disseminating shocking images, including mass beheadings, setting people in cages on fire, crucifixions, and burying people alive. According to the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs of the United States Senate, in the hearing *Jihad 2.0: Social Media in the Next Evolution of Terrorist Recruitment*, one of the key components of ISIS' social media operations is:

Disseminating propaganda designed to manipulate its enemies' perceptions and political reactions. While some of this material purports to demoralize and deter potential enemies from taking action, its real intent is often to inflame animosity and engage foreign countries in a wider regional war. Some of this propaganda also aims to undermine the unity of the coalition opposing ISIS. Its terrorist actions are synchronized with this goal.²⁹

At the same time, ISIS has also showcased its achievements in the cities they conquered by presenting to the outside world their success in implementing Sharia law. They have attempted to show that they are competently providing public services and building de facto government institutions.

To disseminate its messages on the Internet, ISIS has used from 500 to 2,000 people, whom they call the *mujtahidun* (industrious), to develop a radicalization process that employs moral, religious, and aggressive rhetoric.³⁰ The use of the social media and digital platforms by ISIS is critical to disseminating propaganda, according to military strategists. General Joseph Votel, head of U.S. Central Command, told the *Los Angeles Times* that "ISIS' loss of territory did not mean it was on the verge of absolute collapse ... the group [will] continue to coordinate and inspire attacks from its online *virtual caliphate*."³¹ Although ISIS lost its stronghold in Iraq and in Syria, it is actively using

²⁹ *Jihad 2.0: Social Media in the Next Evolution of Terrorist Recruitment: Hearing before the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, Senate, 114th Cong, 1st sess., May 7, 2015, 66.*

³⁰ Adam Badawy and Emilio Ferrara, "The Rise of Jihadist Propaganda on Social Networks" (research paper, University of Southern California, Information Sciences Institute), accessed October 24, 2017. <https://arxiv.org/ftp/arxiv/papers/1702/1702.02263.pdf>.

³¹ Martyn Frampton, Ali Fisher, and Nico Prucha, *The New Netwar: Countering Extremism Online* (London: Policy Exchange, 2017), <https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/The-New-Netwar-2.pdf>.

social media and digital platforms disseminating propaganda in order to recover the ummah's support to retake its momentum.

ISIS undertook an aggressive campaign to recruit on social media and digital platforms, and scattered its rhetoric to lure potential recruits to support jihad. Their approach may well have been effective. As Andrew Schwartz states, "an accurate counting of foreign fighters is just not possible, but various official estimates exceed 40,000 fighters from more than 120 countries over the past five years of fighting in Syria, Iraq, and Libya."³² ISIS' strategy was to attract supporters from a wide range of educational backgrounds and skillsets who could travel to Syria and Iraq and enable their tactical, operational, and strategic objectives. ISIS often looked for people born in Western countries who were new initiates in Islam. These recruits could speak the language of the target country and move freely to coordinate and execute terrorist attacks as lone wolves.

According to Victoria Barrow, a Research Associate of the Citizens for Global Solutions, ISIS recruiters worked under the guidelines of a manual called *A Course in the Art of Recruiting*. This manual advised recruiters to approach potential individuals as friends, establishing empathy, and then introducing a theme about Islam.³³ Barrow points out that these recruiters spent thousands of hours developing connections with new ISIS prospects to indoctrinate them in the group's theology and political ideals. Such recruiters were well rewarded: "ISIS pays its supporters up to \$10,000 for every person they recruit. The price paid depends on who is recruited—if the people are well educated, such as computer specialists or doctors, they are worth more."³⁴ ISIS also monitors social media and chat rooms to determine who may be interested in the group's activities. Maeghin Alarid writes:

³² H. Andrew, Schwartz, "Foreign Fighter Fallout: A Conversation with Lt. Gen. Michael K. Nagata," Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 5, 2017, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/foreign-fighter-fallout-conversation-lt-gen-michael-k-nagata>.

³³ Victoria Barrow, "ISIS Recruitment: Social Media, Isolation, and Manipulation," Citizens for Global Solutions, December 4, 2015, <http://globalsolutions.org/blog/2015/12/ISIS-Recruitment-Social-Media-Isolation-and-Manipulation#.WSt7ToyGPIW>.

³⁴ Barrow.

A candidate for recruitment may come to the group's attention by making a financial donation, downloading extremist propaganda, entering a jihadi chat room, or visiting radical pages on Facebook. In today's environment, we see numerous examples of the radicalization process, from interest to recruitment, through execution of an actual mission, happening entirely online.³⁵

Thereafter, the Internet is used to coordinate aid to potential recruits. Abdel Bari Atwan, in his book *Islamic State: The Digital Caliphate*, argues:

Anyone seeking to migrate to Iraq or Syria can get advice on how to do so from someone is already living in Dawla (short for Dawlatul Islamiyyah, Islamic State), easily contactable via Twitter. The would-be recruit is then instructed to contact someone "off-page" on Ask.com or Kikanonymous where anything goes and nothing is traceable for more specific details and offers of help.³⁶

ISIS has mastered the use of social media and digital platforms to feed its organization with new fighters, even from Western countries, who leave their homes to become a *Muhaajireen*. (The term *Muhaajireen* is a term used by Muhammad to refer to foreign fighters that travel to support jihad.)³⁷ These *Muhaajireen* not only augment ISIS' combat forces, but also provide technological support. In order to lure people with technological knowledge, ISIS communicates that not all of their followers have to fight on the front lines, and that recruits who execute warfare online are granted the same status.³⁸ Nacos, in her book *Mass-Mediated Terrorism: Mainstream and Digital Media in Terrorism and Counterterrorism* cited a statement posted in an important online jihadist forum (*al-Fida and Shumukh al-Islam*) that refers to the electronic jihad, arguing:

Any 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 the

³⁵ Maeghin Alarid, *Recruitment and Radicalization: The Role of Social Media and New Technology* (Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington: Center for Complex Operations, U.S. Department of Defense, 2016), 314, <http://cco.ndu.edu/Publications/Books/Impunity/Article/780274/chapter-13-recruitment-and-radicalization-the-role-of-social-media-and-new-tech/>.

³⁶ Abdel Bari Atwan, *Islamic State: The Digital Caliphate* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 165.

³⁷ Atwan.

³⁸ Nacos, *Mass-Mediated Terrorism*, 72.

Islam and defending it, even if he is far away from the battlefield. He is thus participating in jihad indirectly as long as the current context required such Jihadi participation that has effective impact on the enemy.³⁹

Another essential activity that ISIS has developed is fundraising through innovative methods, including the use of the Internet. According to Howard Shatz at RAND, “ISIS’ most important revenue source [in 2014, was] smuggling oil from the oil fields it controls in Syria and Iraq. The group reportedly controls about a dozen oil fields along with several refineries. Estimates of revenue vary, but a range of \$1 million to more than \$2 million a day is reasonable.”⁴⁰ In the digital realm, ISIS uses social media to market and sell a wide range of merchandise, including antiquities stolen from museums or archaeological sites. Nonetheless, perhaps the most important exploitation of Internet communications is raising funds through active donation campaigns targeting private families and individuals, particularly from wealthy sources in the Middle East. Their rhetoric asks for financial support as a Muslim’s duty in order to sustain a holy war. These funds are used to buy armaments, run services, and build infrastructure. ISIS has instructed donors to use online transactions in order to secure the transfer of funds without detection by law enforcement according to the Financial Action Task Force (FATF):

Intelligence information indicates that some individuals associated with ISIL have called for donations via Twitter and have asked the donors to contact them through Skype. The donors would be invited to buy an international prepaid card (e.g., credit for a mobile line or to purchase an application or other programs which store credit) and send the number of the prepaid card via Skype. The fundraiser would then send the numbers to one of his followers in close country from Syria and sell the number of the card with a lower price and take the cash, which was afterwards provided to ISIL.⁴¹

The Taliban, which is the focus of Chapter IV, is not labeled as a terrorist organization, but it is closely related to such organizations and employs similar strategies

³⁹ Nacos, *Mass-Mediated Terrorism*, 73.

⁴⁰ Howard Shatz, “How ISIS Funds Its Reign of Terror,” *New York Daily News*, September 8, 2014, <http://www.rand.org/blog/2014/09/how-isis-funds-its-reign-of-terror.html>.

⁴¹ Financial Action Task Force (FATF), *Financing of the Terrorist Organization Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)*, FATF Report (Paris: FATF Secretariat, 2015), <http://www.fatf-gafi.org/media/fatf/documents/reports/Financing-of-the-terrorist-organisation-ISIL.pdf>.

and tactics. Additionally, the Taliban harbors terrorist organizations inside its territories in Afghanistan, which made the Taliban an objective of the Global War on Terrorism. Like previously mentioned terrorist groups, the Taliban has used the Internet to advance its objectives. Specifically, it has adopted social media and digital platforms for spreading propaganda, obtaining economic support (fundraising), and recruiting. Ironically, in the 1990s when the Taliban imposed Sharia law in territories under its control, it banned the use of technology in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, for international consumption, the groups launched a website in 1998 (www.taliban.com)⁴² and ultimately came to embrace the use of digital platforms in pursuit of its goal of establishing the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Although its leaders initially held anti-technology views (considering the Internet contrary to their interpretation of Islam), they came to understand the advantages of the Internet to achieve political objectives. The use of social media and digital platforms by the Taliban reflected an evolutionary process that was impeded by the arrest of its first media spokesman, Abdul Latif Hakimi, by Pakistani authorities on October 4, 2005. Hakimi was replaced by Mohammed Hanif, but he was arrested in January 2007. This led to three more spokesmen in quick succession. At first, they emphasized the circulation of DVDs and *night letters*, which reached a limited public.⁴³ Eventually, however, the Internet proved to be a valuable tool, providing a faster and safer delivery of their message and actions in order to gain legitimacy in Afghanistan and worldwide.

Matthew Calvin argued in his thesis *The Use of English-Language Internet Propaganda by the Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan, 2007–2010* that the Taliban tried to shape its image in the Western world to achieve its strategic objectives.⁴⁴ He observed that “the Taliban have, since the beginning of the insurgency, published statements, stories, news and articles in Arabic and English, as well as Urdu, and distributed them largely

⁴² Aggarwal, *The Taliban's Virtual Emirate*, 1

⁴³ Tim Foxley, *The Taliban's Propaganda Activities: How Well Is the Afghan Insurgency Communicating and What is It Saying?* SIPRI, accessed October 30, 2017, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/96401/2007_06_foxley_paper.pdf.

⁴⁴ Matthew Calvin, “The Use of English-Language Internet Propaganda by the Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan, 2007–2010,” (master's thesis, International Security, University of Denver, June 2011), 3, <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://search.yahoo.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1107&context=etd>.

through the Internet. These efforts have grown more professional and more frequent as the war has progressed.”⁴⁵ The use of social media and digital platforms by the Taliban has increased to become its principal means of global communication.

The Taliban has also used social media to convey its message and to control its image internationally. In 2016, *The Diplomat* published the following:

The Taliban has relied on technology for over a decade in the name of propaganda and public relations; its relationship with social media has only taken root in the last few years, in parallel with the rise of ISIS. Just as terrorist organizations in the Middle East have made Facebook pages, Telegram channels, and Twitter accounts, the Taliban has expanded the breadth and depth of its outreach to the international community in general and the news media in particular.⁴⁶

In contrast with ISIS and Al Qaeda, there is less evidence of the Taliban using social media and digital platforms for international recruitment beyond Pakistan; however, through these digital platforms its message has global diffusion. Thomas Johnson, in *Taliban Narratives: The Use and Power of Stories in the Afghanistan Conflict*, argued the organization uses its website Alemarah to deliver information about the Taliban’s activities to a global audience. According to Johnson, this website provides information about the war, religious rhetoric, taranas (chants), books, magazines, and a link for the online Taliban radio station, Shar’iaht Voice. The website is published in five languages: Pashto, Dari, Urdu, Arabic, and English.⁴⁷ The Taliban through these languages intends to reach different ethnic groups that cohabit in Afghanistan to support its cause and achieve international recognition.

Another essential activity that the Taliban conducts on the Internet is fundraising. Although the Taliban was comparatively slow to exploit the advantages of the Internet for fundraising, it ultimately came to depend on digital financial platforms to process

⁴⁵ Calvin, “The Use of English-Language Internet Propaganda by the Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan, 2007–2010.”

⁴⁶ Austin Bodetti, “The Taliban’s Latest Battlefield: Social Media,” *Diplomat*, October 8, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/09/the-talibans-latest-battlefield-social-media/>.

⁴⁷ Thomas Johnson, *Taliban Narratives: The Use and Power of Stories in the Afghanistan Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 85.

donations. It appears, however, the Taliban depended on outside technological assistance from Al Qaeda. According to Abdel Bari Atwan in his book *After Bin Laden: Al Qaeda, the Next Generation* “from 2007 to the present, Jihadi websites sympathetic to Al Qaeda have joined Muslims to support the Taliban’s battle. Al Qaeda has also been actively fundraising for the Taliban, mostly via to the Internet.”⁴⁸ In 2012, the *Sunday Mirror* published an investigation detailing how the Taliban and Al Qaeda coordinated fundraising activities. The Taliban, through a website called the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Financial Commission, appealed for private donations. According to the newspaper, this website was hosted by the London-based UK2 Group, and donations were transferred safely to Karachi in Pakistan.⁴⁹ In order to confirm the authenticity of this website, a *Sunday Mirror* investigator posed as a donor willing to send money. Consequently, the reporter received a bank account number and instructions that the transaction could be through Western Union; in addition, he was provided with two physical addresses in Karachi (Pakistan) for mailing cash.⁵⁰ The Taliban has undoubtedly been fundraising and moving money through digital means to avoid disruption of funds, which are the central target of financial institutions in order to hinder the Taliban’s objective of the establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

C. POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS AND HYPOTHESES

Terrorist organizations exploit social media and digital platforms to enable global dissemination of ideas and information with a relatively low risk of disruption. Social media and digital platforms often offer safe havens for terrorist organizations to conduct not only information operations but other vital operations like fundraising and recruiting. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes (UNODC), in its 2012 report *The Use of the Internet for Terrorist Purposes*:

⁴⁸ Abdel Bari Atwan, *After Bin Laden: Al Qaeda, the Next Generation* (New York: The New Press, 2013), 143.

⁴⁹ Nick Owens, “Taliban Raising Cash for Terror on British-based website,” *Sunday Mirror*, May 6, 2012. <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/taliban-raising-cash-for-terror-on-british-based-819876>.

⁵⁰ Owens.

Since the late 1980s, the Internet has proven to be a highly dynamic means of communication, reaching an ever-growing audience worldwide. The development of increasingly sophisticated technologies has created a network with a truly global reach, and relatively low barriers to entry. Internet technology makes it easy for an individual to communicate with relative anonymity, quickly and effectively across borders, to an almost limitless audience.... It must also be recognized, however, that the same technology that facilitates such communication can also be exploited for the purposes of terrorism. The use of the Internet for terrorist purposes creates both challenges and opportunities in the fight against terrorism.⁵¹

The use of social media and digital platforms by terrorist organizations has grown exponentially. In 1998, approximately half of the 30 terrorist groups labeled by the U.S. Department of State had a website; in 1999, nearly all of them had a presence online. They were quickly joined by other enthusiasts and entities. A scan on the Internet from 2003 to 2005 confirmed that more than 4,300 websites were operated by terrorist organizations and their supporters.⁵² Nacos has argued that the Internet is useful to terrorists because it is “global, accessible, inexpensive, mostly unregulated, anonymous, inclusive in that it reaches huge audiences and exclusive in that it can grant and deny access.”⁵³ These characteristics make the Internet an indispensable tool to terrorist organizations in order to spread their ideologies targeting potential supporters in the vast universe of the Internet.

As this thesis will explain in detail, although ISIS, Al Qaeda, and the Taliban use the same social media (Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, chat rooms) and parallel digital platforms (especially for financial transactions) to execute essential operations, they differ in their strategic objectives. For example, Al Qaeda, as an essentially international enterprise, “has always portrayed itself more as a militant group comprised of highly trained operational masterminds whose successful attacks on America and Europe would ultimately gain them enough key followers to form a global movement of Muslims and

⁵¹ “The Use of the Internet for Terrorist Purposes,” United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes (UNODC), 2012, https://www.unodc.org/documents/frontpage/Use_of_Internet_for_Terrorist_Purposes.pdf.

⁵² Weimann, *Terror on the Internet*, 15.

⁵³ Nacos, *Mass-Mediated Terrorism*, 74.

detain the onslaught of the West.”⁵⁴ On the other hand, the goal of ISIS has been to gain control over territories to establish a caliphate under a pious Sunni leader who would rule through Sharia law. In contrast with these organizations the Taliban has sought to establish Islamist hegemony, specifically within Afghanistan, with no designs beyond that country’s borders.

These three groups are all labeled terrorist organizations, and they are now all avid users of social media and digital platforms to raise funds, execute information operations, and recruit new members. Nevertheless, each has particular characteristics, including but not limited to different ideologies: “the Taliban is more influenced by Saudi Wahhabi-style Hanafi ... beliefs [that] are unschooled and from rural areas, while al-Qaeda sides with the more radical Hanbali school, ... [who] are educated Arabs, many Egyptians, and very few if any Afghans.”⁵⁵ ISIS, by contrast, is a Salafi Jihadist group that tried to impose Sharia law in a caliphate.

Against this background, this thesis tests the following hypothesis: variations in online recruiting, fundraising, and information operations by ISIS, Al Qaeda, and the Taliban diverge due to the influence of differing ideologies.

D. RESEARCH DESIGN

This thesis employs a qualitative and a comparative study of ISIS, Al Qaeda, and the Taliban to determine the degrees and types of variation in those groups’ online information, recruiting, and fundraising operations. The origin, history, exploits, and strategic goals of each group are studied in detail, including but not limited to an examination of each group’s founding ideology. The thesis consults peer-reviewed sources including books, edited volumes and articles, as well as reports by interested governments and intergovernmental organizations. News accounts are referenced in regard to specific activities online.

⁵⁴ Nastasha Bertrand, “We’re Getting to Know Just How Different ISIS Is from al Qaeda,” *Business Insider*, May 21, 2015, <http://www.businessinsider.com/difference-between-isis-and-al-qaeda-2015-5>.

⁵⁵ Blake Fleetwood, “The Taliban Is Not al-Qaeda, and It’s Very Dangerous for the U.S. to Confuse the Two,” *Huffington Post*, June 5, 2014, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/blake-fleetwood/the-taliban-is-not-al-qae_b_5455252.html.

E. THESIS OVERVIEW AND CHAPTER OUTLINE

This thesis consists of five chapters. Chapter I explains why and how terrorist organizations moved their activities to cyberspace and their operations online. Chapters II, III, and IV are case studies of ISIS, Al Qaeda, and the Taliban, respectively, detailing how these terrorist organizations and extremist groups conduct information, fundraising, and recruiting operations on the Internet using social media and digital platforms. These chapters examine the organizations' objectives, with a focus on their final goals, and the factors that make each organization distinct from the others. Chapter V presents an analysis of the preceding case studies to determine how and why each organization pursues distinct Internet strategies. It concludes with potential policy recommendations as well as possible avenues for further research.

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II. AL QAEDA

A resilient terrorist organization, Al Qaeda is constantly shifting its strategies and tactics in order to continue pursuing its objectives, surpass other militant Islamist groups, and survive efforts by the United States and its allies (*far enemies*) to destroy it. Al Qaeda's strength and influence decreased when many of its leaders were targeted by drone strikes and especially when its most emblematic figure Osama Bin Laden was killed by the U.S. Special Forces. Additionally, this terrorist organization lost ground as the main Islamic terrorist organization with the rise of ISIS. Losing strength on the ground, Al Qaeda migrated essential activities such propaganda, radicalization, and recruiting operations to the Internet to take advantage of that realm's promise of anonymity, speed, low cost, and global reach.

A. THE GENESIS OF AL QAEDA

There are several versions of Al Qaeda's origins; however, all of them link the birth of the organization to the Soviet-Afghan war. Al Qaeda's establishment is attributed to Osama Bin Laden. The group was an evolutionary product of the *Service Office*, an initiative of Abdullah Azzam (Bin Laden's spiritual mentor).

Edwin Bakker and Leen Boer explain Al Qaeda's evolutionary process from the *Office*, which played a passive role during the Soviet-Afghan war providing support to mujahedeen, to become an active player of a global jihad, when they state:

The oldest organization that can be linked to 'Al-Qaeda' is the Maktab al-Khadamat (MAK, Office of Order in English, also known as the Afghan Services Bureau), which funneled money, arms and Muslim fighters from around the world to fight the Soviet Union and its local allies in Afghanistan. In addition, it provided relief to refugees and injured foreign fighters. The MAK is believed to have been founded in 1984 by the Palestinian Sheikh Abdullah Azzam and his former pupil Osama bin Laden.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Edwin Bakker and Leen Boer, "The Evolution of Al-Qaedaism: Ideology, Terrorists, and Appeal," December 2007, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/20071200_cscp_csp_bakker_boer.pdf.

By 1988, however, Bin Laden had political and strategic differences with Azzam and left MAK. Bakker and Boer claim that:

While Azzam and his MAK organization acted as support for the Afghan fighters and provided relief to refugees and injured, Bin Laden wanted a more military role in which the Arab fighters would not only be trained and equipped by the organization but also led on the battlefield by Arab commanders.”⁵⁷

Bin Laden’s political and religious ambitions set the stage for Al Qaeda’s evolution as a terrorist organization. On the other hand, Abdel Bari Atwan attributes Al Qaeda’s foundation exclusively to Osama Bin Laden when he claims that:

In 1982 Osama joined the Afghan jihad. In 1988 he established an office to record the name of the mujahedeen (Muslims who take up arms in the name of Islam) and to inform the families of those who were killed. The name of this register was Al Qaeda (the base or foundation), and that is how the organization got its name. Most Islamist sources say that the embryonic Al Qaeda network was established at this point.⁵⁸

Nevertheless, Daniel Byman attributes the Service Office creation to Azzam, with Bin Laden’s economic support.⁵⁹ Additionally, he claims that under Bin Laden’s leadership, Al Qaeda was formally established at a meeting in Peshawar in August 1988. Al Qaeda’s agenda was to serve three distinct purposes:

First, it would serve as a terrorist group in its own right; second, it would continue the Services Office’s role of helping train and otherwise provide logistics for Muslim jihadists—but this time to assist struggles around the world not just in Afghanistan; and third, it would try to unify, lead, and reorient the broader jihadist movement, giving it greater purpose and direction.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Bakker and Boer. “The Evolution of Al-Qaedaism.”

⁵⁸ Abdel Bari Atwan, *After Bin Laden: Al Qaeda the Next Generation* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 21.

⁵⁹ Daniel Byman, *Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the Global Jihadist Movement: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 8

⁶⁰ Byman, 9.

Byman also claims that Al Qaeda defined its own agenda and identified its *near enemies*; additionally, it was aware of the interference of foreign powers in the Arab world supporting local regimes, which became for them in the *far enemies*.

During this conflict, Bin Laden used his personal money in support of the Afghan cause and was opposed to Western involvement in the Soviet-Afghan conflict and Middle East affairs. Peter Bergen has asserted that during the Soviet/Afghan war, Bin Laden manifested his anger against the United States due to the support that nation provided to Israel. This motivated Bin Laden to call for a boycott against American products, specifically after the first Palestinian *intifada* in 1987.⁶¹ Definitively, Bin Laden increased his anti-U.S. posture when Saudi Arabia allowed the deployment of American forces to expel Iraq from Kuwait. Consequently, “in 1992 Al Qaeda issued a fatwa urging jihad to fight the U.S. occupation [deployment] of Saudi Arabia and other Muslim Lands.”⁶² This declaration firmly established the United States as the *far enemy*.

B. AL QAEDA IDEOLOGY, LEADERSHIP AND STRATEGIC GOAL

After 9/11 attacks Al Qaeda took the lead among Islamic jihadist groups. Al Qaeda gained notoriety and respect that granted to its leaders enough credibility to forge alliance to expand its ideology to gain support to consolidate the achievement of its strategic goals.

1. Ideology

Al Qaeda is a radical Islamist group that envisioned a Middle East free of apostate governments, free of any foreign interference, and under the rule of a pious leader who would impose Sharia law. Paul Kamolnick argues that Al Qaeda is a “Sunni theological orthodoxy, Sunni conservative Salafism, and Muhammad al-Wahhab’s Muwahiddun

⁶¹ Byman, *The Evolution of Al-Qaedaism*, 15.

⁶² Byman.

movement.”⁶³ However, Sean K. Anderson claims that the religious creed that “Al-Qaeda follows [is] the Wahhabi interpretation of the Hanbali Sunni school of law favoring literalist interpretations of the Koran and received traditions but rejecting rationalism, mysticism, and anything not part of primordial Islam.”⁶⁴ These religious principles must rule any political, social, or economic interactions in the Islamic community. Similarly, Christopher M. Blanchard points out Al Qaeda’s ideological principles respond to what Ayman al Zawahiri called the *three foundations* that were against any religious reform or implementation of democratic governments contrary to Muslim religious principles. The three foundations Al Zawahiri cited were *The Quran-Based Authority to Govern*, *The Liberation of the Homelands*, and *The Liberation of the Human Being*.⁶⁵ Al Qaeda was conceived as an organization to destabilize and overthrow secular governments to cleanse the Middle East from apostasy and return Islam to the supremacy it deserves.

2. Leadership

The founder and the most emblematic figure inside the organization was the wealthy Saudi Osama Bin Laden, who first served as a financial supporter and jihadist during the Soviet-Afghan war. This wealthy jihadist and charismatic figure graduated from King Abdul-Aziz University in Jeddah with a degree in business administration. Mistakenly, “For much of the West, the actions of Osama bin Laden have been cloaked in confusion and misinterpretation. No matter how barbaric his attacks may seem, he is not a bloodthirsty monster killing without rhyme or reason.”⁶⁶ In Al Qaeda’s growth, Bin Laden provided more than ideological and economic support to the mujahedeen; he planned the

⁶³ Paul Kamolnick, *The Al Qaeda Organization and the Islamic State Organization: History, Doctrine, Modus Operandi, and U.S. Policy to Degrade and Defeat Terrorism Conducted in the Name of Sunni Islam* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, February 2017), <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pdffiles/PUB1339.pdf>.

⁶⁴ Sean K. Anderson, “Al Qaeda,” Idaho University, accessed March 26, 2018, <http://www2.isu.edu/~andesean/Al-Qaeda.htm>.

⁶⁵ Christopher M. Blanchard, *Al Qaeda: Statements, and Evolving Ideology*, CRS Report No. RL32759 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, July 9, 2007), <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/RL32759.pdf>.

⁶⁶ Christopher R. Carey, “The Ideological Foundation of Osama Bin Laden” (master’s thesis, University of Kansas, 2008), 18, https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/bitstream/handle/1808/6622/umi-ku-2609_1.pdf;sequence=1.

establishment of an organization capable of conducting terrorist attacks and fighting jihad. Consequently, Bin Laden worried about providing qualified militants to jihad and established a training camp called *Maasadat al-Ansar* (Lion's Den of Supporters) to supply well-trained Arab fighters to Al Qaeda.⁶⁷ Bin Laden's closest collaborator was Ayman al-Zawahiri, an Egyptian eye surgeon who, in 1980, came to Peshawar on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border to work with the Red Crescent Society, the Islamic version of the International Committee of the Red Cross, in support of the Afghan refugees. The Soviet-Afghan struggle was the link between Bin Laden and al-Zawahiri, whose ties grew even stronger with the Afghan victory over the *infidels*.

After the end of the Soviet-Afghan conflict, Al Qaeda's role was redefined through "Bin Laden's vision to create a vanguard of elite fighters who could lead the global jihad project and bring together the hundreds of small jihadist groups struggling, often feebly, against their own regimes under a single umbrella."⁶⁸ However, Bin Laden also aimed to fight the Western countries that supported governments that did not follow the core values of Islam. Under Bin Laden and Zawahiri's leadership, Al Qaeda excelled within the jihadist world as the leading organization able to vindicate Islam and get rid of the influence of Western states within the Middle East. Martha Crenshaw and Gary Lafree observe that "Al Qaeda turned its attention from the '*near enemy*'—local regimes that stood in the way of the Islamist revolution sought by Jihadists—to the '*far enemy*' the United States and its allies. Without the support of 'far enemies,' 'near enemies' presumably could not resist the jihadist challenge."⁶⁹ Al Qaeda concentrated its efforts on U.S. interests close to its area of influence, as illustrated by the attacks on the embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, and on the USS Cole in 2000. In 2001, they went beyond the expected by attacking the World Trade Center through "four separate but *coordinated* attacks on each of the World Trade Center towers (thus 2,763 fatalities split between the two towers), on the Pentagon

⁶⁷ Byman, *Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the Global Jihadist Movement: What Everyone Needs to Know*, 8.

⁶⁸ Daniel L. Byman, "Comparing Al Qaeda and ISIS: Different Goals, Different Targets," Brookings Institution, April 29, 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/about-us/>.

⁶⁹ Crenshaw and Lafree, *Countering Terrorism*, 8.

and on United Airlines Flight 93 that crashed in Pennsylvania.”⁷⁰ After the 9/11 attack, President George W. Bush declared the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT):

The attack took place on American soil, but it was an attack on the heart and soul of the civilized world. And the world has come together to fight a new and different war, the first, and we hope the only one, of the 21st century. A war against all those who seek to export terror and a war against those governments that support or shelter them.⁷¹

The GWOT motivated the formation of a coalition force assembled under the command of the United States to fight terrorist organizations and the states that allowed their free operation inside their territories. Additionally, the intelligence services initiated a manhunt to capture Osama Bin Laden. Al Qaeda’s leader was a fugitive “that continued to make some strategic and operational decisions; he had already become a figurehead rather than an active commander long before his assassination in Abbottabad in May 2011.”⁷² Nevertheless, the physical disappearance of Bin Laden does not imply Al Qaeda’s extinction. The organization has reorganized under the leadership of Ayman al-Zawahiri, who is forging alliances and franchising (Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula), strengthening ties with the Taliban, Boko Haram in Nigeria, and remaining active in Afghanistan, Somalia, Mali, and Iraq.⁷³ These alliances usually respond to strategic movements when governments’ actions or other terrorist groups beat them out. As an example, Al Qaeda was facing difficult times due to drone strikes targeting its leaders and ISIS’ expansion as jihad’s champion. These conditions forced Al Qaeda to shift tactics, reorganize in other territories, and establish alliances in order to ensure its survival.

⁷⁰ Crenshaw and Lafree, *Countering Terrorism*, 38.

⁷¹ U.S. Department of State Archives, “The Global War on Terrorism: The First 100 Days,” January 20, 2001 to January 20, 2009, accessed March 26, 2018, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/s/ct/rls/wh/6947.htm>.

⁷² Abdel Bari Atwan, *After Bin Laden: Al Qaeda the Next Generation* (New York: The New Press, 2013), 13.

⁷³ Atwan, *After Bin Laden: Al Qaeda the next Generation*, 14.

3. Strategic Goal

Al Qaeda's long-term goal was submerging the Middle East in a long jihadist process, and harassing and debilitating apostate governments until overthrowing them. Additionally, it aimed to expel any foreign influence that foments any ideology contrary to Islam's principles. Al Qaeda conceives that its objectives are achievable only through violent methods to overthrow apostate governments and hit Western countries that support these regimes. For that reason, Katherine Zimmerman argues:

Al Qaeda senior leadership directed attacks against the United States and the West to compel them to retreat from the Muslim world and end their support for state governments, which al Qaeda believed would pave the way for the success of popular revolutions in the name of Islam. Attacks against the West were always subordinate to the larger aims al Qaeda pursues in the Muslim world itself.⁷⁴

C. INTERNET STRATEGIES

Early in the development of its jihad, Al Qaeda recognized how critical the Internet and social media access was in the consolidation of its objectives. Al Qaeda has long been aware that through these digital platforms its attacks reach a global audience, which grants recognition of the organization's capabilities, ambitions, scope, and messages even in places far away from its area of influence. Initially, Al Qaeda concentrated its effort to reach traditional media (radio, TV, newspapers). Aware of the importance of the media for terrorist organizations, Osama Bin Laden sent a letter to Mullah Muhammed Omar (the Taliban's leader), stating "it is obvious that the media war in this century is one of the strongest methods; in fact, its ratio may reach 90% of the preparation for the battle."⁷⁵ Nacos emphasizes that "the Internet allows contemporary terrorists to circumvent the gatekeepers of the mainstream media and communicate their propaganda directly to their various audiences."⁷⁶ The transition from traditional media to the Internet began with Al-

⁷⁴ Katherine Zimmerman, "Al Qaeda's Strengthening in the Shadows," American Enterprise Institute, July 13, 2017, <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/HM/HM05/20170713/106235/HHRG-115-HM05-Wstate-ZimmermanK-20170713.pdf>.

⁷⁵ Brigitte Nacos, *Terrorism and Counterterrorism* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 356.

⁷⁶ Nacos, *Terrorism and Counterterrorism*, 362.

Zarqawi. Bakker and Boer claim that “Al-Zarqawi, in particular, has been given credit for making the World Wide Web into a powerful tool of global jihad. While Bin Laden and his associates traditionally relied on satellite television, Al-Zarqawi went straight to the Internet, showing what he wanted people to see.”⁷⁷ The Internet through social media is the perfect platform for Al Qaeda to carry out radicalization, luring supporters to provide funds and militants to become multipliers of their narratives in favor of jihad.

The Internet is the technological tool that gave the independence of content in propaganda to Al Qaeda, facilitating the way it engages with a broad audience, broadcasting radical messages and videos with little to no disruption on the web. Social media and digital platforms provide a safe ground to Al Qaeda, facilitating the development of its successful information, recruiting, and fundraising operations. Consequently, radical groups affiliated with Al Qaeda (Boko Haram, al Shabaab, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, Taliban, Ansar Al-sharia, and its former allies like Al-Nusra and Al Qaeda in Iraq (ISIS)) are present in cyberspace on social media platforms like Twitter.⁷⁸ These terrorist organizations also find in social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Whatsapp, etc., multiple channels to claim their religious and political objectives beyond than their surrounding local or regional audience.

1. Information Operations

Since its inception, Al Qaeda has looked for support inside the Muslim world to sustain its jihad, a long process to overthrow apostate governments in the Middle East (near enemy) and establish a caliphate. Additionally, Al Qaeda needed to attack Western countries (far enemy) that supported these regimes. September 11, 2001, was the attack on the World Trade Center (the heart of the far enemy), prompting the Global War on Terror, which started the hunting of Al Qaeda’s leadership and supporters through intelligence and kinetic actions conducted by the United States and the coalition forces. These military actions limited Al Qaeda’s physical exposure, movements, and direct interactions with people. As result, Al Qaeda needed to operate under the anonymity and coverage

⁷⁷ Bakker and Boer, “The Evolution of Al-Qaedaism: Ideology, Terrorists, and Appeal.”

⁷⁸ Weimann, *Terrorism in Cyberspace: The Next Generation*, xii.

guaranteed by the Internet, which is fast, cheap, and allows direct interaction with the ummah within and beyond the Middle East. Indeed, Al Qaeda was the first terrorist organization taking full advantage of the Internet.⁷⁹ This organization scattered its radical speeches and graphic violence as propaganda on the Internet in order to achieve global distribution and gain support among the Muslim community. Its Internet messages appealed to a religious commitment to incite jihad, and is reflected in an excerpt from a video of Muhammad bin Shazzaf al-Shahri (Abu Tareq al-Asswad) posted on the Internet in October 2003 (as presented by Weimann):

Brothers in Islam, Jihad is one of the commandments of Islam and a solid pillar of the religion ... Jihad which has earned the level of the peak of the Islam is the sign of the glory and grace of Islam and of the Muslims, and no Muslim doubts that jihad for the sake of Allah is one of the greatest commandments of our religion, a commandment that has preserved the existence, the glory, and the honor of the [Muslim] nation ... The governments and regimes ruling the Muslim countries today are nothing more than examples of clear and overt collaboration with the enemies of the religion of Allah, in order to remove the religious law of Allah from the Muslims.⁸⁰

Al Qaeda's media arm is As-Sahab, which produces and disseminates the group's propaganda. Evan Kohlmann, in an interview for National Public Radio (NPR) in 2006, claimed that "since about the year 2000, al-Sahab has been responsible for putting out videotapes and video recordings from inside of central Afghanistan and Southeastern Afghanistan depicting propaganda, and it's also a little bit of documenting military operations."⁸¹ Kohlmann stated that al-Sahab's videos have English subtitles and are produced with high visual quality and dramatic content. Similarly, Weimann has pointed out that Al Qaeda also used websites like alneda.com and azzam.com to convey its

⁷⁹ Brian Michael Jenkins, *Is Al Qaeda Internet Strategy Working* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, December 6, 2011), https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/2011/RAND_CT371.pdf.

⁸⁰ Gabriel Weimann, *Terror on the Internet: The New Arena, the New Challenges* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2006), 63.

⁸¹ Evan Kohlmann, "Tracking Al-Qaida's Media Production Team," NPR, July 11, 2006, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5548044>.

messages, encouraging support for jihad through the Internet.⁸² Over the years, Al Qaeda has diversified its modus operandi on the Internet to avoid the exposure and disruption of its activities.

Another spearhead in Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's propaganda arsenal is the English version of the electronic magazine *Inspire* developed in 2010 by two American citizens: Samir Khan and Anwar al-Awlaki.⁸³ Both died in a drone strike in Yemen on September 30, 2011. *Inspire* aims to influence its readers' behavior through manipulated information, which in psychology is known as the "Information-Motivation-Behavioral Skills (IMB) model."⁸⁴ Consequently, there is a group of individuals just in the United States (Jose Pimentel, Naser Jason Abdo Quazi Mohammad, Rezwanul Ahsan Nafis, brothers Raees Alam Qazi and Sheheryar Alam Qazi, and Adel Daoud) linked to cases where investigations showed that they were influenced to plot or execute a terrorist attacks after being exposed to articles in *Inspire*. Such articles included "Make a Bomb in the Kitchen of Your Mom," "Organic Chemistry of Explosives," and "The Preparatory Manual of Explosives."⁸⁵ Additionally, in Australia and Britain were registered cases where *Inspire* magazine articles have influenced individuals to execute or plot terrorist attacks. In addition, Al Qaeda has used *Inspire* as a platform to send messages inciting followers in the Middle East and radicalized Westerners to conduct attacks in U.S. and European train stations, on airliners, or on businessman. In a 2017, issue of *Inspire*, Al Qaeda called on its followers to attack trains and "identified three methods of attack: the train's compartments, derailments or assaults on stations."⁸⁶ Through digital means Al Qaeda carries out a process of radicalization that takes effect among people who find a motive (political,

⁸² Weimann, *Terror on the Internet: The New Arena, the New Challenges*, 28.

⁸³ Tony Lemieux et al., "Inspire Magazine: A Critical Analysis of Its Significance and Potential Impact through the Lens of the Information, Motivation, and Behavioral Skills Mode," Georgia State University, 2014, https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1026&context=communication_facpub.

⁸⁴ Lemieux et al..

⁸⁵ Lemieux et al.

⁸⁶ Catherine Herridge, "Al Qaeda's Propaganda Magazine Inspire Calls for Train Attacks in US, Europe," Fox News, August 14, 2017, <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2017/08/14/al-qaedas-propaganda-magazine-inspire-calls-for-train-attacks-in-us-europe.html>.

perception, religious, economic, etc.) to embrace violence, a role to play (militant, lone wolf), and a brotherhood with which to belong.

As part of its propagandistic strategy on social media, Al Qaeda and its affiliates upload photos, radical speeches, videos related to fighting infidels, and praises for their leaders and martyrs. This diversified content aims to maintain the interest of followers and to attract new supporters. Additionally, Al Qaeda encourages its followers to use social media platforms in support of the organization's objectives; "in March 2010, one user on al-Qaeda's Fallujah Islamic Network posted the appeal: '*the least we can do to support the Mujahideen is to distribute their statements and releases.*' He added *we wish from the brothers to also distribute the statement via YouTube and widely . . . and on Facebook.*"⁸⁷ Through this social media contribution request to its followers, Al Qaeda ensures the major diffusion of its radical content because these supporters work as global multipliers of the electronic jihad. Indeed, Facebook and Twitter make efforts to keep their platforms free of terrorist organizations' propaganda, eliminating these groups' and their supporters' accounts to avoid the dissemination of their radical messages.

Al Qaeda's interest in establishing its presence on Facebook is due to this social media platform being a popular hub of connection for young people worldwide. Weimann notes, "As of January 2014, it had 1.31 billion users, of whom most (54 percent) log in on a regular basis, and almost half (48 percent) log on in any given day. Their average age is about 30 years."⁸⁸ Indeed, Facebook is a fertile ground for radicalization due to terrorist organizations uploading videos and pictures containing graphic violence and additionally allowing direct interaction among viewers. Furthermore, it is easy for the organization to open another account under a false identity as soon as the social media company has closed the offender's previous account.

Another social media platform that serves as a cornerstone for Al Qaeda's propaganda is Twitter. Weimann explains that:

⁸⁷ Gabriel Weimann, "New Terrorism and New Media," Wilson Center, 2014, 3, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/STIP_140501_new_terrorism_F_0.pdf.

⁸⁸ Weimann, 4.

By mid-2013, the 554,750,000 Twitter users tweeted about 9,100 messages every second, or 58 million per day, a number that is growing rapidly. Different from Facebook, Twitter is especially suitable for momentary, occasional users, who account for 72 percent of its members. Forty-three percent of the users are between 18 and 34 years old.⁸⁹

Al Qaeda and its affiliates use Twitter as a news platform to scatter information even of its tactical achievements. Another terrorist organization that uses Twitter is Al-Shabaab. This terrorist organization is a Somali Al Qaeda affiliate that in September 2013 attacked the Westgate Mall in Nairobi, Kenya, killing 72 people.⁹⁰ After initiating the shooting, they claimed through Twitter that “the Mujahideen (‘holy warriors’) entered Westgate mall today at around noon and they are still inside the mall, fighting the Kenyan kuffar (‘infidels’) inside their own turf.”⁹¹ Another of its affiliates that uses Twitter to scatter news is Al Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM), which also uses the social media application to promote press conferences. According to Weimann, “on April 18, 2013, wherein participants could post questions that AQIM answered one week later in a PDF document (announced again via Twitter).”⁹² This social media platform is one of the most popular among young populations, a target audience that provides vast opportunities to Al Qaeda and its affiliated groups to spread information and to influence them to adopt radicalized behavior.

Al Qaeda was very creative in developing and distributing diverse propaganda online, which has given its supporters several options to remain up to date about the organization’s agenda. For example, “*alhedra.com* has supported Al Qaeda’s efforts to disperse forces and enable them to operate independently, providing leadership via strategic guidance, theological arguments, and moral inspiration.”⁹³ Additionally, Al Qaeda receives propagandistic support from websites like *azzam.com* and the digital magazine *Azan*. Consequently, social media and digital platforms are the backbone of Al

⁸⁹ Weimann, “New Terrorism and New Media,” 8.

⁹⁰ Weimann.

⁹¹ Weimann.

⁹² Weimann, 9.

⁹³ Nacos, *Terrorism and Counterterrorism*, 393

Qaeda's propaganda channel, providing them autonomy over content, global presence, and anonymity. Additionally, this channel is uniquely effective at helping Al Qaeda to inspire fear among its enemies—near and far—and discourages any competitors who might seek to capitalize on actions against Al Qaeda.

2. Recruiting on Social Media and Digital Platforms

Al Qaeda's supply of militants depends on the people who support and embrace its radical ideology in order to fulfill strategic and tactical roles inside the organization. Weimann explains that "recruitment provides the killers, the suicide bombers, the kidnappers, the executioners, the engineers, the soldiers and the armies of modern terrorism."⁹⁴ Indeed, manpower has become a priority for Al Qaeda, which lost many of its militants in combat, to shifting allegiances to other terrorist groups, or to death from drone strikes.

Al Qaeda's recruitment process begins when recruiters approach and target potential recruits, who usually are young people congregated in schools, mosques, cultural circles, etc. As "Marc Sageman's (2004) research shows, the recruitment of members of the original Al Qaeda group or Al Qaeda Central was based on kinship and friendship."⁹⁵ Nevertheless, Al Qaeda's recruiters were in danger from these physical and direct interactions, because the institutions and law enforcement agencies in charge of combating terrorism could target them easily. Additionally, their area of influence was limited to people congregating in such places. Therefore, social media and digital platforms on the Internet enabled recruiters not only to avoid physical exposure but also to communicate with a global audience. As Nacos has observed, "in the Internet age, social media platforms offer groups, movements, and individuals ample opportunities for mass self-communication and for the establishment and cultivation of para-social relationships with audiences and particularly susceptible individuals."⁹⁶ Certainly, Al Qaeda has exploited

⁹⁴ Gabriel Weimann, *Terror on the Internet: The New Arena, the New Challenges* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2006), 117.

⁹⁵ Nacos, *Mass-Mediated Terrorism*, 81.

⁹⁶ Nacos, *Terrorism, and Counterterrorism*, 389.

the Internet to influence, radicalize, and incite, and to gain economic support to advance the organization's interests. Al Qaeda's online propaganda is full of radical speeches, religious sermons, and videos decrying the United States and its allies; which has proved an effective practice to attract recruits since 2003 (during the Iraq war).⁹⁷ As a result, Al Qaeda continued perfecting its persuasion tactics until it mastered its methods to radicalize people in support of the organization's objectives. Rosanna E. Guadagno reports that "from 2005 to 2006, Al Qaeda quadrupled its production of videos and used an estimated 4500 jihadist websites to spread its messages."⁹⁸ Al Qaeda's persistent presence on the Internet corresponds to its strategy of luring people from different backgrounds, especially Westerners, to add new capabilities (language, technology, knowledge, etc.) to execute different functions inside the organization. David K. Lyons provides as an example Al Qaeda's use of "American born Omar Hammami, Anwar al-Awlaki, and Adam Gadahn to specifically target U.S. and Western Muslims,"⁹⁹ by which "Al Qaeda is displaying the ability to adapt content to suit the audience. In a way, Al Qaeda uses these *Americans* to say to other Americans come join the right side with us."¹⁰⁰ Therefore, Al Qaeda disseminates its radical rhetoric through the Internet in several languages to recruit people from different corners of the world in order to nourish its organization with different skills. After the initial contact the recruiter must follow specific procedures to take the initiated to a next level of commitment, where the recruit feels that he is part of the organization.

⁹⁷ Weimann, *Terror on the Internet: The New Arena, the New Challenges*, 120.

⁹⁸ Rosanna E. Guadagno, "Social Influence in the Online Recruitment of Terrorists and Terrorist Sympathizers: Implications Social Psychological Research," *Revue Internationale de Psychologie Sociale* 23, no. 1 (2010), 25–56. <https://www.cairn.info/revue-internationale-de-psychologiesociale-2010-1-page-25.htm>.

⁹⁹ David K. Lyons, "Analyzing the Effectiveness of Al Qaeda's Online Influence Operations by Means of Propaganda Theory" (master's thesis, University of Texas, El Paso, 2013), https://www.utep.edu/liberalarts/nssi/_Files/docs/Theses1/Analyzing-the-Effectiveness-of-Al-Qaeda-s-Online-Influence-Operations-Lyons.pdf.

¹⁰⁰ David K. Lyons, "Analyzing the Effectiveness of Al Qaeda's Online Influence Operations by Means of Propaganda Theory,"

a. Recruiter Procedures

In 2009, Al Qaeda started using a 51-page manual titled *A Course in the Art of Recruitment* written by Abu-Amr al-Qaidi to instruct its recruiters on how to drive the recruitment process.¹⁰¹ As was pointed out by Brian Fishman and Abdullah Warius in the *Sentinel*, a publication of the West Point Combating Terrorism Center, the manual is “a tool designed to provide less-skilled jihadist recruiters operating independently of any cohesive terrorist organization the tools to effectively recruit secular and moderate Muslims into the global jihadist movement.”¹⁰² This manual arms recruiters with the basic tools to persuade potential recruits to join to Al Qaeda in support of jihad against infidels and to vindicate Islam. According to the manual, recruiters must take into consideration the following steps:

1. Nobody Likes a Pushy Terrorist! Reaffirming a strategy long familiar to weirdo cults, Abu-Amr recommends the soft sell. Be careful not to discuss the concerns of Muslims with the recruit at the beginning, he advises, so you do not seem as if you are attempting to recruit him.
2. Brush Up on Your Quran. You don’t have to be a scholar, but “seek knowledge, even if it is very little, so you can be prepared when your recruit experiences religious doubt.
3. Isolate, Isolate, Isolate! Although recruiters are advised to take care at first not to separate a recruit from his family, society, and reality, eventually it becomes necessary to create a favorable environment.
4. Be Nice. Your recruit will always appreciate a thoughtful gift. Take him to lunch. Take him for a boat ride on the Nile or some other retreat. Go to

¹⁰¹ Brian Fishman, “The Art of Recruitment: How the ‘Islamic State’ Trains its Community Organizers,” Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Institute of European Studies, University of California, Berkeley, accessed April 9, 2018, <https://cmes.berkeley.edu/the-art-of-recruitment-how-the-islamic-state-trains-its-community-organizers/>.

¹⁰² Timothy Noah, “Jihad Lite: Al-Qaida’s Dumbed-down Recruitment Manual,” *Slate*, March 24, 2009, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/chatterbox/2009/03/jihad_lite.html.

prayers together; ask him to supplicate on your behalf and vice versa.
Send him a nice da'wah [i.e., proselytizing] message on his mobile phone.

5. Choose Your Moment. When you're finally ready show your recruit jihadi propaganda, choose a time when he is tranquil and in the best religious mindset possible. Don't lay it on him when he's upset or worried or sad.¹⁰³

Once a recruit is under Al Qaeda's influence, the organization will provide a role to each recruit depending on the individual's educational background and work experience to contribute to the organization's goals. Al Qaeda also developed its own training manual that even advises how to mobilize recruits without raising suspicions. According to Weimann, in 2004, Al Qaeda published a training manual called *Al Battar*.¹⁰⁴ In one of its sections, the book describes safety measures related to mobilization that could apply to newcomers when it advises:

(a) No talking with their wives about jihad work, and (b) the members with security risks should not travel with their wives. A wife with an Islamic appearance (veil) attracts attention. Other [sections] relate to hiding places, using false documents, communication among *brothers* traveling (including instruction on *what to do when your travel to Pakistan is discovered*), meetings, *in case of being captured* and more.¹⁰⁵

Al Qaeda fueled its online recruitment process with radical ideology to influence people to support jihad as militants willing to travel to fight in a conflict zone. It also aimed to trigger the creation of cells composed of homegrown militants able to move freely in Western countries to execute an attack, or inspire lone wolves able to perpetrate an attack on behalf of the organization without assistance.

¹⁰³ Noah, "Jihad Lite."

¹⁰⁴ Weimann, *Terror on the Internet: The New Arena, the New Challenges*, 126.

¹⁰⁵ Weimann, 126.

3. Fundraising on Social Media and Digital Platforms

Al Qaeda, although not sponsored by a state, is one of the best-financed terrorist groups, obtaining funds through ransoms, smuggling, extortion, and donations. Additionally, this organization operates through social media and digital platforms to obtain funds from innovative methods, and such money finances training, pays bribes, buys armaments, and enables terrorist attacks abroad. According to Daniel Byman, “by 9/11 Al Qaeda’s yearly budget was roughly \$30 million, of which between \$10 million and \$20 million went to the Taliban its biggest pre-9/11 expense.”¹⁰⁶ Al Qaeda’s operations against the far enemy demand a great sum of money, which is hard to obtain due to the disruption of fund transfers by financial institutions. This has forced Al Qaeda to step up its use of the Internet and adopt other methods of fundraising through social media and digital platforms. Indeed, Al Qaeda has developed an aggressive fundraising campaign on social media and digital platforms throughout the Middle East, Europe, and even in the United States, the country that led the war against terrorism. In fact, as Weimann states, law enforcement agencies and financial institutions were aware of the terrorists’ intentions because:

In October 2003, a *Washington Post* correspondent reported that the FBI was probing Wahhabi Muslim websites and that the FBI and Treasury officials said they believe some Islamic conferences, as well as websites that extol radical Islam, are vehicles in the United States for recruitment and fundraising by terrorist groups.¹⁰⁷

The investigation proved that Al Qaeda was fundraising in the United States, which motivated the U.S. government to freeze the funds of the three charities that operated websites to collect money through donations. According to Weimann the charitable institutions supporting Al Qaeda through fundraising were the Benevolence International Foundation (BIF), the Global Relief Foundation (DRF), and the al-Haramain Foundation.¹⁰⁸ In the digital era, charities legitimately use social media and digital

¹⁰⁶ Daniel Byman, *Al Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Global Jihadist Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 109.

¹⁰⁷ Weimann, *Terror on the Internet*, 135.

¹⁰⁸ Weimann, 138.

platforms to have a global reach to advertise their work, encourage volunteer engagement, and receive donations for noble causes, but instead these three were providing economic support to Al Qaeda.

According to Weimann, Saudi Sheikh Adil Abdul Galil Batargy established the BIF in Illinois in 1980. Indeed, BIF used the web to advertise its humanitarian endeavors and provided information on how to contribute or subscribe to donate monthly. According to the FBI:

BIF raise millions of dollars for Bin Laden. It also reportedly sent \$600,000 to Chechen extremists trained by Al Qaeda. In addition, the BIF was linked to the 1993 World Trade Center bombing: U.S. prosecutor alleges that Enaam Arnout executive director of a Muslim charity known as the Benevolence International Foundation (BIF), helped Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda terrorist network move money and equipment around the world. The investigation says evidence found in Bosnia indicates that Arnaout was a personal friend of bin Laden's and that he had a relationship with several top figures in al-Qaeda.¹⁰⁹

Terrorist organizations have a well-structured operation for fundraising on the Internet through social media, using a group of people who surf profiles on the web to identify possible supporters based on their publications, interests, and sympathies. According to Weimann, "these individuals are then asked to make donations typically through emails sent by a front group (i.e., an organization broadly supportive of terrorist aims but operating publicly and legally, and usually having no direct ties to the terrorist organization)."¹¹⁰ One of these organizations was the Islamic Assembly of North America (IANA), which has received \$3 million from abroad since 1995. Indeed, this organization through its website called (islamway.com) shows videos in Arabic with violent scenes of jihadists fighting and contain radical Islamist rhetoric to motivate viewers to donate.¹¹¹ Undoubtedly, this is an effective method to obtain economic support under the radar of governments and financial institutions, and at the same time,

¹⁰⁹ Weimann, *Terror on the Internet*, 139.

¹¹⁰ Weimann, 138.

¹¹¹ Weimann, 135.

this website delivers propaganda promoting the recruitment of adepts to the terrorist group.

Nevertheless, requesting financial support through the Internet was one of the first online activities implemented by Al Qaeda. Before the attack of 9/11, a Saudi and graduate of Idaho University named Sami al-Hussayen was the webmaster at the service of this extremist group. He was responsible for developing the webpage for al-Haramain, a nongovernmental organization in Saudi Arabia, and the U.S. Treasury Department pointed him out for his ties to Al Qaeda.¹¹² Terrorist groups also try to recruit people with technical skills to work in the development of their websites.

Michael Jacobson recounts the growth of Al Qaeda's online presence, citing "the number of websites associated with Al Qaeda have increased from 12 in 1998 to approximately 2,600 by 2006, according to a UN study."¹¹³ This increase in the use of digital platforms has opened a new battlefield in the war against terrorism, and it requires proactive measures by the countries and institutions that fight to defeat terrorism.

The effectiveness of the Internet at providing a global presence captured the interest of these terrorist organizations seeking to recruit people through the delivery of their extremist rhetoric to potential supporters. Through the Internet, they spin a web trying to catch people from a wide spectrum of backgrounds, knowledge, and experience in order to put their capabilities to work for these terrorist organizations.

To obtain funds essential for these activities, terrorist groups have turned to the Internet as the best platform for operating anonymously from the electronic shadows. A young British man named Younis Tsouli, better known by his Internet pseudonym "Irhabi 007" (translated as "Terrorist 007"), began posting videos of terrorist activities on several websites, and in just two years he became the king of Internet terrorism, according to Evan Kohlman, a well-known terrorism expert. Tsouli developed close ties with Al Qaeda leaders in Iraq (AQI) who were impressed by his ability on the web and started to

¹¹² Michael Jacobson, "Terrorist Financing and the Internet," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, March 9, 2010, <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/uter20>.

¹¹³ Jacobson.

provide him with videos to post on the Internet.¹¹⁴ After gaining confidence, Tsouli started to conduct criminal activities on the Internet, such as stealing credit card numbers. He joined Tariq al-Daour, another al Qaeda supporter on the web, to develop a better website to improve the bandwidth.¹¹⁵ Consequently, they improved their money collection methods as Jacobson details:

By the time Tsouli and his partner were arrested, al-Daour had accumulated 37,000 stolen credit card numbers on his computer—which they had used to make more than \$3.5 million in charges. Tsouli laundered money through a number of online gambling sites, such as absolutepoker.com and paradisepoker.com, using the stolen credit card information, conducting hundreds of transactions at 43 different sites in all.¹¹⁶

This money was used in support of the mujahidin, buying equipment and opening more websites to promote Al Qaeda. Moreover, Tsouli supported mujahidin in other ways by developing models to teach other jihadists how to hack. He accomplished this through instructions that he translated into Arabic from the website *MILWORM* (a group of Hacktivists) and then posted the material as PDFs on several jihadi forums and HPIO, the Arabic-language hacking websites.¹¹⁷ Hackers inside terrorist organizations are technological mujahedeen who conduct cyber sabotage and data mining of government institutions as their contribution to support jihad.

Al Qaeda's efforts at fundraising on social media and digital platforms have remained constant. They have developed different tactics to create multiple methods of collecting money that enable them to continue fundraising, shifting from one method to another if their activities are disrupted by law enforcement of financial institutions.

According to a 2002 Council of Foreign Relations report titled *Terrorist Financing*, the main activities developed by Al Qaeda to finance its operations are complex and adaptable:

¹¹⁴ Jacobson.

¹¹⁵ Jacobson, "Terrorist Financing and the Internet."

¹¹⁶ Jacobson.

¹¹⁷ Atwan, *After Bin Laden: Al Qaeda, the Next Generation*, 241.

Al Qaeda's financial network is characterized by layers and redundancies. It raises money from a variety of sources and moves money in a variety of manners.... The most important sources of Al Qaeda's money is its continuous fundraising efforts. Al Qaeda's financial backbone was built from the foundation of charities, nongovernmental organizations, mosques, websites, fundraisers, intermediaries, facilitators, and banks and other financial institutions.... This network extended to all corners of the Muslim world. It included everyone from wealthy Gulf Arabs, who could be solicited directly to give huge sums themselves, to the masses, who would make regular charitable donations as part of their religious obligations.¹¹⁸

Nowadays Al Qaeda and its affiliates continue actively raising funds through social media and digital platforms because these guarantee they will reach and influence a large audience and deliver their requests for economic support freely. For example, Hajjaj bin Fahd al Ajmi, an Al Qaeda in Syria (Nusra Front) financier, started his fundraising activities in 2012 through a Twitter account that collected millions of dollars for Al Qaeda. Although his account was closed and he was labeled a terrorist supporter by the United States and the UN, he was running an Instagram account with more than 1.7 million followers until June 2017.¹¹⁹ The ease with which one can open accounts on social media platforms is one of the advantages that terrorists embraced on the Internet, which enables its operation in cyberspace.

After the declaration of GWOT, Al Qaeda took its jihad to cyberspace to take advantage of the singular characteristics of the Internet (anonymity, low cost, inclusiveness, and global reach), transmitting its radical Salafist ideology that promotes the reunification of the Middle East through the establishment of a caliphate under Sharia law. This organization's awareness of the global reach of the Internet and the way it links people through social media and digital platforms led the group to develop an aggressive strategy to disseminate its radical message and influence the ummah to take part in its jihad. Al Qaeda used the Internet as a backbone of its information operations to sustain its strategy of radicalization through the spread of propaganda, fundraising, and

¹¹⁸ Weimann, *Terror on the Internet*, 138.

¹¹⁹ Felicia Woron, "Insta-Terrorist: Al-Qaeda Financier on Instagram," Counter Extremism Project, August 3, 2017, <https://www.counterextremism.com/blog/insta-terrorist-al-qaeda-financier-instagram>.

recruitment. Additionally, Al Qaeda sought to launch its attacks on the United States and that country's allies under the cover of the Internet to prevent the targeting of its leaders, supporters, funds, and training camps. Indeed, the Internet has allowed Al Qaeda to spread its messages as a cornerstone of a radicalization process, disseminating digital propaganda through social media and digital platforms that provide human and economic resources to its jihad.

III. ISLAMIC STATE OF IRAQ AND SYRIA

ISIS, although not defeated or eradicated, has lost its momentum as the champion of jihadist organizations, which is evidenced through the loss of territories in Iraq and weakened control in Raqqa. Furthermore, the group has witnessed a considerable reduction in foreign fighter recruitment. Nevertheless, ISIS is seeking to recover territories and is pursuing its expansion in Africa, Afghanistan, and neighboring countries in the Middle East, as it is forging alliances with other groups that must plead allegiance to ISIS in order to be part of the franchise receive ISIS' support.

This chapter analyzes how ISIS emerged as an extension of Al Qaeda in Iraq, and how ISIS' own ideology, leadership, strategic goals, and Internet strategies evolved. Indeed, ISIS' sectarian violence against Shias, and its immediate determination to establish a caliphate challenged Al Qaeda's leadership, causing the split and rivalry between these organizations. Additionally, the central aim of this chapter is to study how and why ISIS has capitalized on its growth through its unprecedented use of the Internet, particularly social media and digital platforms, to sustain its caliphate through three pillars: propaganda, recruitment, and fundraising.

A. THE GENESIS OF ISIS

The Islamic State is a terrorist organization that emerged as an Al Qaeda splinter group dedicated to the establishment of an Islamic state under Sharia law. According to Daniel Byman, although ISIS grew out of Al Qaeda and they have common enemies and objectives as part of a bigger jihadist movement, since late 2013 these terrorist organizations have been antagonists. This rift occurred after Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, ISIS' leader, challenged Al Qaeda's leadership and its strategies.¹²⁰ Indeed, ISIS gained international recognition, the first ever for a terrorist organization, due to its strategy of conquering and retaining territories and through an impressive online media campaign broadcasting its radical messages and boasting of its massacres. Consequently, ISIS' main

¹²⁰ Byman, *Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the Global Jihadist Movement*, 163.

plan has been to achieve its political objectives through the establishment of an Islamic state in Iraq and Syria. It intends to use these countries as a platform to launch its jihad in order to annex other territories until they set up a caliphate throughout the whole Middle East.

ISIS' genesis is linked to Ahmad Fadeel al-Nazal al-Khalayleh (a Jordanian by birth), better known as Abub-Musab Al-Zarqawi. According to Luna Shamie and Szenes Zoltan, Zarqawi's terrorist affiliation first became known when "Zarqawi who was imprisoned in Jordan for 5 years, after being sentenced to 15 years for possession of weapons and being affiliated to the *Bayat al-Jihadi*. Zarqawi then left go to Afghanistan and made contact with Al Qaeda, where he was able to establish the *Jihadi Group Jund al-Sham*, which was named later *Jamaat al-Tawhid wal Jihad (Group Monotheism and Jihad)*."¹²¹ Although Zarqawi looked for Al Qaeda's support, he had his own criteria for how to conduct jihad and establish a caliphate.

In an evolutionary process, this terrorist organization changed its name several times. According to Byman, after the overthrow of the Taliban, Zarqawi moved the group's center of operations to Northern Iraq in 2004, when the name was changed to Al Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers, usually referred as Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).¹²² Initially, AQI worked as a franchise of Al Qaeda Central (AQC). Also, Byman points out that in 2006 the name changed to *Majlis Shura al-Mujahedin*, and after fusing several times with other small groups, it took the name the *Islamic State of Iraq* (ISI). In 2013, the group initiated its operations in Syria and added the name *al-Sham* (Greater Syria) to the *Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham: the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria* (ISIS).¹²³ In addition, ISIS has been called ISIS in the *Levant* (ISIL), a name given to the group by some American news agencies referring to *al-Sham*, which represents a Mediterranean area composed of Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and Jordan.¹²⁴ Another name given to ISIS, usually by its enemies, is

¹²¹ Luna Shamie and Szenes Zoltan, "The Raise of Islamic States of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)," AARMS 14. no. 4 (2015), <https://www.uni-nke.hu/document/uni-nke-hu/aarms-2015-4-shamieh.original.pdf>.

¹²² Byman, *Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the Global Jihadist Movement*, 163.

¹²³ Byman, 164.

¹²⁴ Byman.

Daesh, which stands for *al-Dawala al-Eslaiyya al-Iraq al-Sham*. ISIS' members dislike the term *Daesh* because when its pronunciation is similar to two Arabic words: (1) *daes*, which means (someone that crushes something under his feet), or (2) *dahes*, which means someone who sows discord.¹²⁵ Consequently, ISIS announced that they would cut the tongue off whoever called them *Daesh*.

Initially, AQC leadership and ISIS (AQI) shared the same objectives to establish a transnational Islamic State under an Islamic system for expansion throughout the region (caliphate) ruled under Sharia law.¹²⁶ However, Al Qaeda conceived of fulfilling this objective through a large process without a specific end date, concentrating its effort on targeting Western interests. By contrast, ISIS argued for an immediate declaration and establishment of an Islamic State. According to Lina Khatib, Director of the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut, "while al-Qaeda has always aimed to dismantle existing power arrangements without offering a concrete alternative, the Islamic State goes a step further, offering a vision for a state system that replaces the status quo."¹²⁷ These clear objectives and determination catapulted ISIS to take the lead of the jihadist movement in the Middle East, and to gain the militant support and economic favor among the Muslims who dream of the establishment of a caliphate.

B. ISIS IDEOLOGY, LEADERSHIP, AND STRATEGIC GOAL

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria as they called themselves, achieved great notoriety after its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared a caliphate in the territories under its control in Iraq and Syria that were ruled under Sharia law. This terrorist organization, used the Internet as strategic means to disseminate its radical rhetoric, and graphic extreme violence through high quality videos. As a result, this group integrated social media and digital platforms, to deliver propaganda, which granted militants and economic support from inside and outside the Middle East.

¹²⁵ Byman *Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the Global Jihadist Movement*.

¹²⁶ Shamie and Zoltan, "The Raise of Islamic States of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)."

¹²⁷ Lina Khatib, "The Islamic State's Strategy Lasting and Expanding," Carnegie Middle East Center, June 2015, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/islamic_state_strategy.pdf.

1. Ideology

The ideology of ISIS is hard to define because the group itself does not live according to core religious principles. They capitalize on the religion's interpretation (Salafist Sharia law) for propaganda, recruitment, and fundraising, and to rule conquered towns without opposition. According to Khatib, "the group does not follow any particular *Islamic marjaiya* (religious reference) and rejects the four sects of Islam. Instead, it continuously interprets sharia in ways that justify its actions. As such, its ideology must be seen as an instrument for cultivating legitimacy as well as resources, and it is still evolving."¹²⁸ As result, ISIS consolidates its power by administering barbaric practices against its enemies under the prerogative that it is rescuing Islam from the apostates. Thus, in many texts ISIS' ideology is referred to as either Salafist or Wahhabist ideology due to the similarities between both currents, which represent the most orthodox currents of Islam.

2. Leadership

Ideology and economic support are like fuel and wood in any conflict, but the spark of a leader is required to initiate a fire. In contrast with Al Qaeda's leadership that has a higher education, Zarqawi was barely educated and had a criminal background. Nevertheless, he was successful structuring (AQI) ISIS under Salafist theological principles and using extreme violence as the cornerstone to establishing a caliphate. Since its beginning, ISIS conceived the consolidation of its objectives through extreme violence. According to Justin O'Shea, "Zarqawi's primary tactics implemented ideas from *The Management of Savagery*, a famous jihadist text that encouraged violent resistance to obtain one's goals. He also utilized an intensely violent sectarian narrative, one that viciously opposed all Shia Muslims, considering them kufirs (unbelievers) and worthy of death."¹²⁹ Indeed, this strategy allowed Zarqawi to incite major radicalization among Muslims, particularly Sunnis targeting Shias. Although the religious grievances among

¹²⁸ Khatib, "The Islamic State's Strategy Lasting and Expanding."

¹²⁹ Justin O'Shea, "ISIS: The Role of Ideology and Eschatology in the Islamic State," *The Pardee Periodical Journal of Global Affairs*. accessed January 12, 2018, http://pardeeperiodical.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/OShea_Justin.pdf.

Shias and Sunnis had existed for centuries, Zarqawi stimulated the rivalry pointing out that Shias are kufirs (unbelievers) and traitors who facilitated the Iraq invasion.

After Zarqawi's death in a U.S. airstrike, his successor was Ibrahim Awad Ibrahim al-Badri (born 1971),¹³⁰ better known as Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi (Caliph Ibrahim), a well-educated person who received an M.A. and Ph.D. in Islamic Culture and Sharia Law¹³¹ from the Islamic University of Baghdad. Another important fact about this pious leader, according to O'Shea, was "his membership to the Quraysh tribe, the same as the Prophet Muhammad, [which] lent him further legitimacy in his new role."¹³² In 2004, during the Iraq invasion he was imprisoned in Camp Bucca where due to his background he gained respect among his peers. After Baghdadi's liberation, he joined AQI in 2006 and rose rapidly; within four years, he had become the group's leader, being linked to tortures, intimidations, and murders of civilians in Qaim town.¹³³ Under his guidance, the group started its operations in Syria, taking advantage of the power vacuum caused by the civil war, and also the group increased its economic resources and territories under its control. In 2014, Baghdadi in a sermon on the night of Ramadan claimed the establishment of a caliphate led by him, which entitled him to be addressed as the Caliph Ibrahim and to claim the obedience of Muslims around the world.¹³⁴ Baghdadi's proclamation found rejection among the Muslim community inside the Middle East and in its diaspora around the globe.

3. Strategic Goal

The Islamic State pursues political objectives fueled by a radical Salafist discourse that is embodied in the extreme violence this group carries out on behalf of Islam. The Internet supported the Islamic State's strategy specifically through social media because these platforms facilitate spreading its discourse and graphic violence to promote fear among its enemies and gain support among its followers. The self-proclaimed state,

¹³⁰ Byman, *Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the Global Jihadist Movement*, 164.

¹³¹ O'Shea, "ISIS: The Role of Ideology and Eschatology in the Islamic State."

¹³² O'Shea.

¹³³ O'Shea.

¹³⁴ Byman, *Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the Global Jihadist Movement*, 165.

according to Khatib, “is a hybrid jihadist group. It has appropriated the radical Islamist ideology of al-Qaeda while implementing the centralized command model of the paramilitary Hezbollah and some tactics from the Taliban’s local governance structures.”¹³⁵ ISIS since its beginning was conceived as a reign of terror administered by Sunnis that support the Salafist jihad, but moderate Sunnis could be victims of this violence. Shamie and Zoltan exposed that this group exercise excessive and calculated violence when they claim: “the Islamic State calls upon its people, and this is limited to Sunni people. They are against any non-Sunni people. They kill Shia and Christians; they are even against Sunnis who are not in favor of their strategy.”¹³⁶ ISIS would crush any who stand in its way or interfere with its plans.

When we analyze ISIS’ strategy, it is important to point out that this terrorist group shows great adaptability to change, and it is able to take advantage of the local political weaknesses and neighboring conflicts. After the U.S. troops withdrew from Iraq, ISIS initiated sectarian conflicts, plotting and carrying out attacks on the Shiite community to destabilize and submerge Iraq in bloodshed. Then, they executed military operations, conquering and holding cities to control the inhabitants and steal their economic resources. Then arose the conflict in Syria, and ISIS became one of the principal actors of the conflict, establishing the same scheme to conquer and hold cities, controlling its people and economic resources. Consequently, through conquering cities, ISIS aims to establish a scheme of *lasting and expanding (baqiya wa tatamaddad)* to attain “strategic objectives [that] revolve around the acquisition of money, resources, and power. Establishing a caliphate in Iraq and Syria is the beginning, not the end, for the group.”¹³⁷ It is important to realize that in the zones ruled by ISIS, the group has appropriated oil fields and conducted criminal activities in order to guarantee the economic assets and logistics to support military campaigns, to provide services in the cities under its control, and to provide payments to its personnel.

¹³⁵ Khatib, “The Islamic State’s Strategy Lasting and Expanding.”

¹³⁶ Shamie and Zoltan, “The Raise of Islamic States of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).”

¹³⁷ Khatib, “The Islamic State’s Strategy Lasting and Expanding.”

C. INTERNET STRATEGIES

The Islamic State has mastered the use of the Internet, taking advantage of its intrinsic characteristics (low cost, global reach, anonymity), to build a media machine that promotes the group and its ideology. Jihadist propaganda full of graphic violence content started with Al Qaeda in Iraq (ISIS today); filled with video images of beheadings, martyrdom, and car bombings, it was part of a new strategy to drive the holy war toward the establishment of a caliphate.

After the split with its parental organization Al Qaeda in Iraq, ISIS began to use online social media as the most effective apparatus to convey its radical message. According to Byman, “Islamic State’s fighters share flashy videos on social media (complete with CGI flames Michael Bay-worthy explosions) and engage in sophisticated public relations campaigns—even hijacking seemingly benign hashtags like #WorldCup2014 and others related to the Scottish independence campaign to propagate their message.”¹³⁸ ISIS’ videos appeal to their viewers’ minds and hearts (rational and emotional) with images of beheadings, crucifixions, and immolations, but others show militants in acts of charity, such as providing food or money in neighborhoods, or playing with their kids and families.

The Islamic State has achieved a successful promotion of its ideology through its skillful use of the Internet, which granted effective propaganda, recruitment, and fundraising efforts. Referring to how effective ISIS has been using the Internet, Abdel Bari Atwan argues, “Islamic State could never have achieved its territorial ambitions, nor could it have recruited a large army in so short a time, without its mastery of the Internet.”¹³⁹ In the Internet ISIS found a universe of advantages to conduct activities essential to the organization’s subsistence. One such advantage was the opportunity to connect with a vast Muslim population in and out of the Middle East, a population eager to provide militants or economic support for the establishment of the caliphate. Byman adds that “such tactics

¹³⁸ Byman, *Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the Global Jihadist Movement*, 177.

¹³⁹ Abdel Bari Atwan, *Islamic State: The Digital Caliphate* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 15.

do help the Islamic State to fundraise, recruit, and proselytize more effectively than traditional insurgent groups.”¹⁴⁰ Additionally, the Internet allows ISIS to avoid restrictions that would limit or censor its messages and ideology; social media and digital platforms allow the group to operate in anonymity, hiding their physical position and reducing immediate risk. Another advantage that ISIS has obtained from using the Internet is that nowadays we are living in a world connected by social media and digital platforms, with a young population as the main consumers targeted by ISIS’ propaganda. According to Abdel Bari Atwan, ISIS is favored by a *digital generation*:

Most people who participate in, or are attracted to, Islamic State are in their late teens and early twenties. Researchers have shown that, among this age range in the developed world, 89 percent are active online, 70 percent use social networks daily and each spend an average 19.2 hours a week on the Internet. The jihadists are not the exception and may spend even more time on their laptops, tablets, and smart phones, since their output across social media platforms is vital to maintain the digital health of their project.¹⁴¹

This chapter analyzed how ISIS has used the Internet to build a successful strategy based on three pillars, displacing other terrorist organizations to become the center of all jihadists’ support. The first pillar is an information operation that promotes its ideology to gain support in the Middle East and in the Muslim diaspora. Although this element of the strategy does not guarantee legitimacy, it does provide recognition. The second pillar is recruitment, which provides human resources with different capabilities to fulfill diverse functions inside the organization, and to conduct operations abroad. The third pillar is fundraising, which provides the required logistics to fight a holy war, and makes it possible to provide services inside conquered territories and consolidate the establishment of caliphate.

1. Information Operations on Social Media and Digital Platforms

ISIS’ use of the Internet is the principal means to conduct information operations to spread propaganda with the objective of disrupting, influencing, and manipulating the

¹⁴⁰ Byman, *Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the Global Jihadist Movement*, 178.

¹⁴¹ Atwan, *Islamic State: The Digital Caliphate*, 16.

decision-making process of its adversaries. According to Harlenn Gambhir, “ISIS’s IO [information operations] campaign has supported multiple objectives, including control over territory, coercion of populations, and recruitment. This campaign has enabled ISIS’s survival and execution of international terror attacks.”¹⁴² Certainly, this terrorist organization has been effective connecting with the *umma* (the worldwide Muslim community) through the Internet to gain supporters for fighting jihad in the ground battlefield or in the cyberspace battlefield.

This section studies how ISIS articulates its message surpassed that of other jihadist groups, and how the organization has based its propaganda on a hard line of murder and terrorist attacks. Additionally, this section analyzes how ISIS manipulates social media and digital platforms to convey its radical message, and how this terrorist organization uses its success on the Internet to forge alliances with other terrorist groups that seek ISIS’ support.

a. *The ISIS Message*

ISIS’ message embodies a Salafist rhetoric that idealizes a Muslim world through the establishment of a caliphate without any Western influence. As part of a well thought out strategy in information operations, ISIS uses the Internet as a penetrating tool to advance its radical message through the Middle East and the rest of the world. It particularly targets young Muslims struggling to adapt to a new culture or any Western teenager looking for an identity and adventure.

The content of the Islamic State’s message use religion, as a fuel to alive political grievance to gain support among Muslim communities through a radicalization process. According to Haroro J. Ingram, ISIS’ messages are loaded with radical narratives to influence its audience, and such messages appeal to pragmatic and perceptual factors.¹⁴³ Ingram claims that ISIS’ messages appeal to pragmatic concerns “like security, stability

¹⁴² Harlenn Gambhir, *The Virtual Caliphate: ISIS’s Information Warfare* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2016), <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISW%20The%20Virtual%20Caliphate%20Gambhir%202016.pdf>.

¹⁴³ Haroro J. Ingram, “Learning from ISIS’s Virtual Propaganda War for Western Muslims: A comparison of Inspire and Dabiq,” Department of International Relations & National Security College, Australian National University, accessed January 25, 2017, <https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/INGRAM-nato-chapter-21JUL17.pdf>.

and livelihood—[which] are drawn upon in communiques that are designed to promote ISIS’s politico-military efforts.”¹⁴⁴ In others words ISIS through its messages is working to fulfill an agenda. The rhetoric aims to prove that the group is a trusted and successful organization in contrast to its adversaries, who cannot fulfill their politico-military objectives. Ingram has also observed that ISIS’ message is designed to convince the audience of its legitimacy and credibility in contrast to its opponents. As an example of a pragmatic message, Ingram took this excerpt from ISIS’ video *Flames of War*,

The Islamic State was now on show for the world to see. The courts were established; prayer was being enforced; the hudood were being implemented; the people were being invited to good; and the zakat was being collected and distributed. Light glowed from the mujahideen, who were soft towards the believers and harsh against the kuffar. This harshness never wavered and was a constant trait of the brothers. So the war on the kuffar raged on.¹⁴⁵

As perceptual factors, ISIS built its message to take advantage of ongoing problems or crises to provide solutions that shape the perceptions of its audience. According to Ingram, “the central narrative of this type of messaging is simple: ISIS are champions and protectors of Sunnis (in-group identity), ISIS’s enemies are evil Others (out-group identities) that are responsible for Sunni crises to which ISIS are the only hope for solutions.”¹⁴⁶ Additionally, Ingram points out another perceptual factor that is evidence in this article from *Dabiq* magazine,

As the world progresses towards al-Malhamah al-Kubra [the battle preceding Armageddon], the option to stand on the sidelines as a mere observer is being lost. As those with hearts diseased by hypocrisy and bid’ah are driven towards the camp of kufr, those with a mustard seed of sincerity and Sunnah are driven towards the camp of iman.¹⁴⁷

The Islamic State has made propaganda the spearhead of its campaign and through the Internet has been able to reach a great audience from beyond Islam’s epicenter (the Middle East).

¹⁴⁴ Ingram, “Learning from ISIS’s Virtual Propaganda War for Western Muslims.”

¹⁴⁵ Ingram.

¹⁴⁶ Ingram.

¹⁴⁷ Ingram.

b. *ISIS' Bloody Propaganda through the Internet*

ISIS uses innovative tactics to create a major impact and capture the world's attention. ISIS' cruelties and barbaric methods have long been available to viewers on the web. These videos provide ISIS an unprecedented notoriety, which has enabled the group to take preeminence among terrorist organizations. Nacos has cited the following executions as a summary of ISIS' bloody propagandistic machinery:

(a) Tuesday, August 19, 2014, ISIS upload in YouTube a video of about 4 minutes and 40 seconds #NewMessagefromISISToUS where they beheaded the American journalist James Foley,

(b) Weeks later ISIS uploaded a video of 2 minutes 46 seconds on file-sharing websites where they show the beheading of the American journalist Steven Joel Sotloff

(c) Just ten days later ISIS uploaded on Twitter a video of 2 minutes and 27 seconds of the beheading of British citizen David Haines.

(d) In February 2015 was released the 22 minutes video of a Jordanian Pilot Moaz al-Kaasbeth in a cage where he was burned alive. This video was edited like a Hollywood production because its effects are comparable with such quality.¹⁴⁸

The quality of these videos implies the involvement of a professional media team due to the script, production, and editing. Careful staging is evidenced by the hostages wearing orange jumpsuits resembling those of jihadist prisoners in Guantanamo, which sends a subliminal message to the United States and its allies. These videos as a propaganda tool fulfill a direct and an implicit objective of targeting a broad audience (adversaries and supporters). The direct objective is to announce that ISIS is organized, possesses military capabilities, is ready to fight, and can conquer and hold territories; on the other hand, the implicit objective is to make its adversaries aware that this organization is determined to achieve its objectives without any mercy or limits to their actions. ISIS aims to inspire fear in its adversaries through these videos and thereby decrease the adversaries' willingness to fight, and at the same time, to engender the trust and determination of its supporters, who

¹⁴⁸ Nacos, *Terrorism and Counterterrorism*, 191, 192

should perceive ISIS' ideology as the route to gain supremacy and redeem Islam through the establishment of a caliphate.

c. ISIS' Digital Weaponry

In addition to guns and bullets, ISIS has in its inventory a robust, modern, and lethal social media armament like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Snap chat, and Whatsapp. ISIS' digital arsenal also consists of multiple digital platforms like websites, cell phone applications, electronic magazines, video games, etc. ISIS is aware of the strategic value of the Internet and social media; according to Abdel Bari Atwan, "the Islamic State has made a point of recruiting IT specialists and those with online marketing experience. As a result, its social media activists are well versed in the most effective brand-sharing strategies—except its brand is death."¹⁴⁹ To disseminate its propaganda on the web, ISIS uses at least 500–2,000 people, whom ISIS calls the *mujtahidun* (industrious), to tweet and re-tweet, to implement a radicalization process using moral, religious, and aggressive rhetoric.¹⁵⁰ ISIS also has a group of web developers working on its propaganda, creating an online training manual for jihadists called *Technical Mujahid* and released every two months.¹⁵¹ Indeed, ISIS' media center keeps extreme control over the information that goes on its domain to avoid the flow of sensitive information that could endanger the organization.

In order to reach a broader audience ISIS implemented periodic online publications in the form of magazines to provide graphic and explicit presentation of the organization's agenda and achievements. According to Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi, ISIS' activities online are well diversified through the creation of a magazine called *Dabiq*, and its content comes in several languages. This magazine can be downloaded as a PDF and features interviews with fighters portraying the lifestyle in the areas conquered.¹⁵² Al Qassemi points out two

¹⁴⁹ Atwan, *Islamic State: The Digital Caliphate*, 18.

¹⁵⁰ Badawy and Ferrara, "The Rise of Jihadist Propaganda on Social Networks," 17.

¹⁵¹ Atwan, *Islamic State: The Digital Caliphate*, 19.

¹⁵² Sultan Sooud, Al Qassemi, "Social Media in the Era of ISIS," Center for Global Communication Studies, April 14, 2015, <http://www.global.asc.upenn.edu/social-media-in-the-era-of-isis/>.

digital platforms employed by ISIS, one called Pal Talk, which has presented a preacher with radical Islamist messages exalting Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi, and the other one, a cell phone application called *Fajer Al Bashayer (Dawn of the Good Omens)*, which after being downloaded has stolen Twitter accounts to send messages in ISIS's support. ISIS does not just use established social media platforms, the group has also developed its own version of Facebook called Muslimbook, released a new phone app *Dawn of Glad Tidings*, and a video game called *Salil al-Sawareem (Clashing of Swords)* that is a hijacked and modified copy of the video game Grand Theft Auto.¹⁵³ Its skillful incorporation of technology (the Internet) to support its daily activities and strategic objectives has enabled ISIS not only to win the hearts and minds of a vast number of followers around the globe but also to gain preeminence among all terrorist organizations.

ISIS' success using the Internet did not happen by chance; this strategy rested on the shoulders of Ahmed Abousamra who managed ISIS' media department.¹⁵⁴ Abousamra was born in France in 1981, after which he moved to Massachusetts with his father an eminent endocrinologist. He earned an Information Technology (IT) degree, and worked in the field of telecommunications. Under his supervision were experienced journalists, editors, filmmakers, and photographers, who formed a team of qualified professionals. This team created *al-Hayat*, which established its office in Syria in 2014 under Abousamra's direction, and Abousamra himself developed *al-Furqa* in Iraq in 2006 and *al-Itisam*, which produces the films that are broadcast through *al-Hayat*.¹⁵⁵ The creations of these media organizations multiply the channels to spread ISIS' radical ideology, and its content is designed to target a broad audience but specifically a young population. Furthermore, ISIS' propagandistic platform operates a radio station in Mosul called *al-Bayan*, as well as a satellite TV station in Libya called *Tawhee*. In 2015 the group announced the creation of *The Islamic Caliphate Broadcast* a 24-hour Internet channel, through the website *KalifaLive.info*.¹⁵⁶ These digital platforms constitute a great part of ISIS' propagandistic

¹⁵³ Atwan, *Islamic State: The Digital Caliphate*, 19.

¹⁵⁴ Atwan, 21.

¹⁵⁵ Atwan.

¹⁵⁶ Atwan, 23.

apparatus, which is highly diversified, to assure that the group's radicalized message is spread to lure a diverse public.

By repeatedly launching cyberattacks on governmental institutions, ISIS has also affected, stolen, and disrupted official information. Additionally, they seek to interfere in the operating systems of installations that provide services to the general population. Abdel Bari Atwan states that ISIS has the support of a group of hackers dispersed on the web called the Cyber Caliphate. This group launched attacks on the web page of the United States Central Command (CentCom), stealing personal information about U.S. military personnel on duty through the Middle East.¹⁵⁷ Atwan also claims that the Cyber Caliphate has about 110, 000 followers on Twitter to execute attacks on behalf of the Islamic State. Certainly, among social media platforms Twitter is the digital means most exploited by ISIS because it is the most popular among young people. Consequently, ISIS has been able to expand the reach of its ideology, achieving direct interaction with radical followers and lures for newcomers. According to J.M. Berger and Jonathon Morgan, in their research *The ISIS Twitter Census: Defining and Describing the Population of ISIS Supporters on Twitter* for The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World, "During the period of October 4 through November 27, 2014, we estimate there were no fewer than 46,000 Twitter accounts supporting ISIS."¹⁵⁸ Additionally, Berger and Morgan reported that 28 percent of these Twitter accounts were in Iraq and Syria, 27 percent in Saudi Arabia, and the rest were found in several countries, none of them with more than 6 percent. Indeed, Twitter popularity among ISIS supporters as mean of communication has provided a fertile land to spread radicalization.

d. ISIS' Forging of International Alliances through the Internet

The successful propaganda that ISIS has developed using social media and digital platforms has granted the group respect and recognition among other radical groups. They

¹⁵⁷ Atwan, *Islamic State: The Digital Caliphate*, 27.

¹⁵⁸J. M. Berger and Jonathon Morgan, "The ISIS Twitter Census Defining and describing the population of ISIS supporters on Twitter," The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World, March 2015, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/isis_twitter_census_berger_morgan.pdf.

perceive ISIS as the heavyweight champion of jihad. As part of consolidating a caliphate and gaining legitimacy, ISIS needs to grow after its weakening inside Iraq and Syria. Consequently, ISIS seeks to expand its presence in other countries in the region, trying to forge an alliance with local jihadist groups by trading economic support and guns, and offering to develop these groups' propaganda on the Internet in exchange for their *bayat* (allegiance). According to the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague in its report *The Islamic State's Global Propaganda Strategy*, "IS [ISIS] has declared the formation of wilayats (provinces) in Afghanistan/Pakistan, Algeria, the Caucasus region of Russia, Egypt, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and West Africa, while carrying out attacks in several other countries in the surrounding regions."¹⁵⁹ Forging an alliance in these countries guarantees to ISIS more militants and a bigger area in which to maneuver while recycling its tactics. Indeed, ISIS always tries to capitalize on an opportunity from the tribal, religious, or political conflicts inside a country, as it did in Iraq and Syria, in order to gain terrain and supporters. As part of ISIS' strategy when it penetrates into new regions, it uses as a credential its previous victories and religious discourse to build the following principles:

(a) Winner's message, **(b)** discrediting the competition, **(c)** the illegitimacy of political Islamists, **(d)** sowing discord within enemy ranks, **(e)** exploiting sectarian tensions **(f)** the caliphate as an Islamic utopia, **(g)** jihadist adventure and camaraderie, **(h)** driving a wedge between Muslims and the West, and **(i)** religious obligation to join the caliphate.¹⁶⁰

After holding a territory, ISIS implements three basic steps to reaffirm its control: first, impose *dawa* (religious proselytization); second, *hisba* (forced implementation of religious norms); and third, provide services that the population requires¹⁶¹ in order to simulate the running of a state. To assure submission and total control ISIS implements an

¹⁵⁹ Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, Nathaniel Barr, and Bridget Moreng, "The Islamic State's Global Propaganda Strategy," International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague, March 2016, <https://www.icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/ICCT-Gartenstein-Ross-IS-Global-Propaganda-Strategy-March2016.pdf>.

¹⁶⁰ Gartenstein-Ross, Barr, and Moreng, "The Islamic State's Global Propaganda Strategy."

¹⁶¹ Gartenstein-Ross, Barr, and Moreng.

authoritarian way to rule these cities, forcing everybody to follow their interpretation of Sharia law in order to identify and target any dissident.

2. Recruiting on Social Media and Digital Platforms

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria developed an impressive recruiting strategy, which it implemented on the Internet to facilitate direct interaction with people, particularly on social media and digital platforms. Recruiting is one of the pillars that sustain ISIS' expansion, and consequently, this organization is constantly making appeals on the web in order to radicalize and mobilize people who amplify ISIS' mujahedeen army. Although ISIS' success at luring supporters via social media is well known, it is difficult to provide an exact number of recruits because no formal register of the people who travel in support of ISIS exists. According to H. Andrew Schwartz, "an accurate counting of foreign fighters is just not possible, but various official estimates exceed 40,000 fighters from more than 120 countries over the past five years of fighting in Syria, Iraq, and Libya."¹⁶² To be more specific "the Central Intelligence Agency estimates that as of September 2014, the Islamic State has perhaps 31,000. In February 2015, the head of the National Terrorism Center testifies that over 20,000 foreign fighters from at least 90 countries had gone to Iraq and Syria, including 3,400 from the United States and Western Europe and that the majority of them are fighting for the Islamic State."¹⁶³ ISIS' strategy is to attract supporters from a wide range of educational backgrounds and abilities who are able to travel to Syria and Iraq to augment their combat lines and fulfill duties in tactical, operational, and strategic levels depending on their experience. Certainly, ISIS shows great interest in people born in Western countries because they could be new initiates in Islam and are easy to manipulate and radicalize. Additionally, recruits from Western countries are a valuable acquisition to ISIS because they speak the language and can move inside these countries undetected to coordinate and execute terrorist attacks, even as lone wolves. The latest ISIS actions such as

¹⁶² H. Andrew, Schwartz, "Foreign Fighter Fallout: A Conversation with Lt. Gen. Michael K. Nagata," Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 5, 2017, accessed 05/28/17, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/foreign-fighter-fallout-conversation-lt-gen-michael-k-nagata>.

¹⁶³ Byman, *Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the Global Jihadist Movement*, 173.

the Paris and London attacks are examples of the damage that lone wolves who are part of the Western society can cause.

a. *ISIS Luring Online*

The Islamic State's members execute recruitment operations through the Internet, promoting a radical rhetoric to indoctrinate people in the Middle East and Western countries. Usually, this persuasion creates an identity of belonging to ISIS' brotherhood and an obligation to support and collaborate with the organization and its causes. According to Victoria Barrow, a research associate of the Citizens for Global Solutions, these recruiters work under the guidelines of a manual called *A Course in the Art of Recruiting*. During the process of luring newcomers, this manual advises recruiters to approach as friends, talking about their joys and sadness to create empathy, and then introduce a theme about Islam but without radicalization until developing a solid friendship.¹⁶⁴ Also, Barrow points out that these recruiters spend thousands of hours developing empathy with new ISIS prospects so that they can be indoctrinated in the group's theology and political ideals, but this amount of effort is not for free. Consequently, "ISIS pays its supporters up to \$10,000 for every person they recruit. The price paid depends on who is recruited—if the people are well educated, such as computer specialists or doctors, they are worth more."¹⁶⁵ The Islamic State tries to replenish its army not just with regular militants, but also professionals who will pledge allegiance to ISIS. In contrast with the general belief about these foreign fighters coming from a disadvantaged background, many of them are well educated and are living normal lives but fall prey to ISIS' radical narrative, which is so effective that the potential recruits lose their ties with their families, environments, and beliefs. According to Byman, ISIS has members with higher educations, even from London University, who are British jihadists without a criminal background. Additionally, one poll claims that out of 600 British Muslims, 2.4 sympathize with ISIS' jihad, and these sympathizers were students, people with an income of €75,000 yearly, and the young.¹⁶⁶ ISIS needs people with higher education in

¹⁶⁴ Barrow, "ISIS Recruitment: Social Media, Isolation, and Manipulation."

¹⁶⁵ Barrow.

¹⁶⁶ Byman, *Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the Global Jihadist Movement*, 174.

different areas to exercise functions that foment the development of a real state. For that reason, the Islamic State's leader Baghdadi has been urging engineers, doctors, judge, and specialists in diverse areas to travel and join ISIS.¹⁶⁷ Thus, the people who have responded to ISIS' calls come from different backgrounds and are motivated by particular circumstances. It is not possible to generalize about the motives behind why a person chooses to be part of ISIS' jihad.

Clearly, ISIS's recruitment actions stem from well-developed strategies. The successful implementation of these strategies is enhanced by the identification of a receptive target audience. For this reason, ISIS maintains a group of recruiters patrolling online to watch who is interested in the group's activities. In *Impunity*, a magazine of the Center for Complex Operations of the U.S. Department of Defense, Maeghin Alarid revealed that "a candidate for recruitment may come to the group's attention by making a financial donation, downloading extremist propaganda, entering a jihadi chat room, or visiting radical pages on Facebook. In today's environment, we see numerous examples of the radicalization process, from interest to recruitment, through execution of an actual mission, happening entirely online."¹⁶⁸ Consequentially, digital platforms and social media provide the most dynamic means to spread the Islamic State's violent narrative in their effort to radicalize and recruit people as militants, economic supporters, or as lone wolves.

In the Muslim community, a religious message has often been employed to booster solidarity and cooperation in the Arab world to support jihad against the infidels or crusaders. However, after global diffusion of the declaration of the caliphate by Baghdadi in 2014 on social media and digital platforms, the *hijrah* (migration) of foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq rose to an unprecedented level. Media sources in the region reported about 100,000 mujahideens supporting ISIS' military actions; about a third of these fighters were foreigners from 80 countries.¹⁶⁹ Nowadays, we are living in an interconnected world where the global

¹⁶⁷ Byman, 175.

¹⁶⁸ Alarid, "Recruitment and Radicalization: The Role of Social Media and New Technology."

¹⁶⁹ Atwan, *Islamic State: The Digital Caliphate*, 166, 168.

reach of the Internet spreads ideas that influence the behavior others like ISIS does, mobilizing people from different latitudes of the globe.

b. ISIS' Narrative on the Internet

ISIS narratives have been successful in attracting militants to fight jihad in order to establish the caliphate. Consequently, it is worthwhile to study the reasons why this message is so effective.¹⁷⁰ According to Berger, ISIS has developed five steps in its recruiting process:

1. Discovery—Target's first contact with ISIS.
2. Create a micro-community—ISIS introduces recruiters to target's environment.
3. Isolate Target from mainstream—Recruiters encourage target to cut ties with mainstream, friends and family.
4. Shift to private communication—Recruiters move from open source to closed.
5. Identify and encourage most-likely action—In both open and closed source communications, recruiters promote actions including hijra (emigration to ISIS territories), "lone wolf" attacks, and more advanced social media activism such as promoting the return of suspended accounts and taking part in organized posting campaigns.¹⁷¹

Additionally, Dounia Bouzar and Carol Rollie Flynn highlight seven narratives used by ISIS' recruiters to adapt their message to the potential recruit's life and needs:

1. The Search for a Better World
2. Mother Teresa Narrative
3. The Savior Narrative
4. The Marriage Narrative
5. The Lancelot Narrative

¹⁷⁰ Crenshaw and Lafree, *Countering Terrorism*, 124.

¹⁷¹ J. M. Berger, "Countering Violent Extremism (CVE): A Focused Approach Based on Process Disruption," The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT), May 2016, <https://www.icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/J.-M.-Berger-Making-CVE-Work-A-Focused-Approach-Based-on-Process-Disruption-.pdf>.

6. The Zeus Narrative

7. The Fortress Narrative.¹⁷²

Indeed, an appropriate narrative is fundamental to persuade people. ISIS through its narratives guarantees that people will find what they are looking for (stability, protection, and relief) and such necessities are obtainable only through the recruits' support and adherence to ISIS' radical principles. Certainly, ISIS' narratives assure that only by following Sharia law and supporting the creation of a caliphate all problems and suffering will find solutions.

3. Fundraising on Social Media and Digital Platforms

The economic factor determines the success or failure of a project or enterprise, and military actions are no exception. Indeed, ISIS is aware that it needs more than radical religious rhetoric to succeed; they also need money to fuel the holy war and acquire the logistics necessary to achieve the organization's objectives. Consequently, this terrorist organization has implemented several methods to finance its operations, concealing its modus operandi to avoid the interdiction or disruption of the revenue stream by the authorities. In order to obtain money, ISIS uses several methods to finance their operations like kidnapping, smuggling, and extortion, and the Internet, which provides innovative ways to raise funds on social media and digital platforms.

As the terrorist organization with major economic assets, ISIS recently became the wealthiest terrorist group in the world. The organization accomplished this by implementing a strategy to conquer and hold territories, imposing pseudo-governmental structures in those territories, and thereby taking control of the means of production and valuable assets. The Islamic State has annually received \$2 billion from "oil trade, kidnapping and ransom, collection of protection and taxes, bank robberies, and looting."¹⁷³ Although the main

¹⁷² Dounia Bouzar and Carol Rollie Flynn, "ISIS Recruiting: It's Not (Just) Ideological," Center for Security Studies, September 5, 2017, <http://www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/resources/docs/FPRI-ISIS%20Recruiting%20Its%20Not%20Just%20Ideological.pdf>.

¹⁷³ *Forbes*, "The World's 10 Richest Terrorist Organizations," December 12, 2014, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesinternational/2014/12/12/the-worlds-10-richest-terrorist-organizations/#4066e0724f8a>.

remuneration that ISIS receives comes from trade in criminal activities, this terrorist group is successful at fundraising through social media and digital platforms, conducting a wide range of activities, legal (donations) as well as illegal (credit card data subtraction). Definitely, ISIS' fundraising efforts reflect an effective use of social media and digital platforms that allow the development of innovative methods to request money to support ISIS' jihad and establishment of a caliphate.

a. ISIS' Fundraising on Twitter

ISIS' propaganda on Twitter increased in direct correlation with their followers' support. Consequently, "through such accounts, ISIL was able to maximize its ability to go viral to gain a wide range of support by generating a *Twitter storm* on June 18, 2014. A *Twitter storm* is the epitome of Internet popularity, creating an opportunity to gain immense support and potential funding."¹⁷⁴ ISIS launched a fiery technological offensive using its free mobile application the *Dawn of Glad Tidings* to advertise its successful military achievements and ISIS' lifestyle in the conquered cities.¹⁷⁵ According to the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), ISIS' news was viral in a short period during the summer offensive, achieving 40,000 tweets in just one day and created the *Dawn of Glad Tidings*, a free application. This campaign resulted in a war of hashtags such as #ISIS and #Islamicfront, which allowed ISIS to take supremacy over Jabhat Al Nusra [al-Qaeda in Syria or al-Qaeda in the Levant] on social media.¹⁷⁶ Through this strategy, ISIS heightened its image in Western countries on the Internet and social media, winning the aversion of many but at the same time assuring the sympathy and economic support of others. In September 2015, the Brookings Institution published "The ISIS Twitter Census: Defining and Describing the Population of ISIS supporters on Twitter," a census developed by Berger and Morgan, which revealed that just in Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Syria, and the United States, there were around

¹⁷⁴ Financial Action Task Force (FATF), "Financing of the Terrorist Organization Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)."

¹⁷⁵The Financial Action Task Force (FATF).

¹⁷⁶The Financial Action Task Force (FATF).

20,000 ISIS Twitter accounts.¹⁷⁷ This census confirmed how well ISIS was connecting with people through its propagandistic activities on social media and digital platforms. Additionally, ISIS developed innovative tactics for fundraising on social media (Twitter) and digital platforms. According to the FATF:

Intelligence information indicates that some individuals associated with ISIL have called for donations via Twitter and have asked the donors to contact them through Skype. The donors would be asked to buy an international prepaid card (e.g., a credit for a mobile line or to purchase an application or other program which stores credit) and send the number of the prepaid card via Skype. The fundraiser would then send the number to one of his followers in close country from Syria and sell the number of the card with a lower price and take the cash which was afterward provided to ISIL.¹⁷⁸

Apart from using innovative fundraising methods on social media and digital platforms, ISIS also had to create an effective mechanism to disguise its financial operations from governments and financial institutions engaged in the GWOT. David Cohen, the Treasury Department's Undersecretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, revealed that ISIS possesses an intricate system to fund its operations, maneuvering to avoid international finance regulations through the development of criminal activities inside Syria and Iraq and through porous borders.¹⁷⁹ Money buys guns and ammunition, but ISIS also needs money to run social services like schools, hospitals, police, and even ministries that manage and regulate the services inside the cities under their control. ISIS regulates the life of the people living in these cities according to their extremist (Salafist) principles of Islam. Ana Swanson has reported that ISIS "pays fighters roughly \$400 a month, which is more than the Iraqi government offers some staff. Moreover, the Islamic State sets and approves annual budgets, and it uses a chief financial officer-like figure to manage its accounts."¹⁸⁰ Consequently, ISIS needs to execute a budget that provides basic services to the people living

¹⁷⁷ Jerry Gordon, "The ISIS Twitter Census: Defining and Describing the Population of ISIS Supporters on Twitter," Brookings Institution, March 9, 2015, <https://counterjihadreport.com/tag/the-isis-twitter-census/>.

¹⁷⁸ Gordon.

¹⁷⁹ Ana Swanson, "How the Islamic State Makes Its Money," *Washington Post*, November 18, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/11/18/how-isis-makes-its-money/?utm_term=.dd60979ed2b7.

¹⁸⁰ Swanson, "How the Islamic State Makes Its Money."

in these cities, and social media and digital platforms are a safe haven to conduct fundraising. For that reason, ISIS has implemented crowdfunding that consists of “drawing donations from a large group of people through a combination of technology and marketing. Leading crowdfunding platforms have used statistical analysis to optimize online crowdfunding campaigns through the encouragement of perks or donation tiers.”¹⁸¹ ISIS’ technique creates a friendly tie with the possible donor and then requests his or her contribution to support their brothers fighting the holy war.

The global reach of social media and digital platforms has made ISIS actively present on these platforms at the moment of fundraising, even inside the United States, which leads the GWOT. The FATF has described the case of an ISIS supporter arrested in the United States:

On 31 May 2014, an individual was arrested and charged by criminal complaint with two counts of receipt and possession of an unregistered firearm silencer. On 16 September 2014, a federal grand jury in Rochester, New York, returned a seven-count indictment charging him with three counts of attempting to provide material support and resources to ISIL, among other charges. According to the criminal complaint, the individual has used Twitter to post and re-post tweets expressing support of various terrorist groups and violent extremism, and seeking donations to assist foreign terrorist fighters in Syria.... He urged people to donate money, often times a third of their salary, as it is considered a type of jihad.... One example included asking for specific cash donations of 5,000 USD from each family.¹⁸²

The Islamic State is constantly online looking for donors to provide money that could be utilized to pay for travel, training, and arms for mujahedeen. Sometimes they are specific about how the money donated will be used and offer a status as donor depending on the amount of money donated. The Twitter account Jahd bmalk of a cleric linked to ISIS and Al Qaeda “promised that if 50 dinars is donated, equivalent to 50 sniper rounds, one will receive a *silver status*. Likewise, if 100 dinars is donated, which buys eight mortar rounds, the contributor will earn the title of *gold status donor*.”¹⁸³ These strategies are designed to

¹⁸¹ Financial Action Task Force (FATF), “Financing of the Terrorist Organization Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).”

¹⁸² Financial Action Task Force (FATF).

¹⁸³ Financial Action Task Force (FATF), “Financing of the Terrorist Organization Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).”

encourage supporters to provide money, and depending on the amount donated, they will receive a particular status inside ISIS' donor hierarchy.

Once the donation is completed through social media, to turn the transaction into cash, ISIS has implemented several methods that involve banks and cash couriers to move the money through Syria and Iraq. The FATF has reported that:

According to sensitive financial information, terrorist financing risks were discovered regarding the use of both Electronic Funds Transfers (EFTs) via banking channels and other transfers via Money Value Transfers Systems (MVTs) to areas located near territories where ISIL operates or designated individuals. The location of the receipt of these transfers was often located in areas known to be a funding, logistical and smuggling hub for foreign terrorist fighters and terrorist organizations. In some of these cases, social media have suggested that beneficiaries of funds transfers may have links to terrorist or radical groups. In other cases, excessive cash deposits were made in the U.S. with subsequent wire transfers to beneficiaries in areas located near territories where ISIL operates. Risks identified also included lack of information of the purpose of the wires, the relationship of the receivers or the reason funds transfers were conducted in multiple transactions over short time periods.¹⁸⁴

b. ISIS' Fundraising on Facebook

Another social media platform where ISIS is actively luring fighters and seeking funds to support the establishment of a caliphate in the Middle East is Facebook. A British fighter known as Abu Zaid used his account for this purpose: "On April 5, 2016, he asks that "Anyone who is willing to donate some money to a trusted person living in the [Islamic] state then you can contact me and bi'ithnillah if anyone has special distribution request I am at your service. Please share and spread."¹⁸⁵ Facebook offers a great opportunity for fundraising because of its vast number of users.

Just 24 days later, Abu Zaid posted again, stressing his previous request for money: "People can now add me on surespot and wikr. For questions and answer session as well

¹⁸⁴ Financial Action Task Force (FATF).

¹⁸⁵ MEMRI Cyber and Jihad Lab, "British ISIS Fighter, Recruiter, Fundraiser, Share Experience in Islamic States on Facebook," May 24, 2016, <http://cjlalab.memri.org/lab-projects/tracking-jihadi-terrorist-use-of-social-media/british-isis-fighter-recruiter-fundraiser-shares-experiences-in-islamic-state-on-facebook/>.

facilitate jihad with your wealth in a secure way for those concerned about security.”¹⁸⁶ Certainly, these messages requesting economic support are addressed to an open audience worldwide that might wish to contribute to jihad.

Usually, ISIS’ fundraisers release statements requesting support on social media and digital platforms, and these statements often contain graphics and prices of the armaments that could be bought through donations. A Gaza-based Salafi jihadist group named Ibn Taymiyyah Media Center, which is also an ISIS media group, “kicked off its annual fundraising campaign across social media platforms, including Twitter, YouTube, Telegram, and Facebook, urging Muslims to donate money to help it buy weapons and ammunition and make explosive devices.”¹⁸⁷ ISIS’ tactics to fundraise on Facebook sometimes are very specific, posting an armament’s price in order to spur donations.

4. Innovative Methods for Fundraising on the Internet

Another way of fundraising on social media is selling, and ISIS offers merchandise that ranges from antiques to firearms. According to Nic R. Jenzen Jones, Director of the Armament Research Services (ARES), in territories controlled by ISIS lately, the selling of arms on Facebook has increased exponentially, especially after the Libya conflict.¹⁸⁸ In addition, ISIS is actively fundraising in Russia through supporters of the Islamic State’s jihadists in the North Caucasus region. They are an unofficial Russian-language IS [ISIS] media activist group called Sham Today. This is a group linked to the Chechen-led IS [ISIS] jihadist group Katibat al-Aqsa, which responds to IS’s military commander in Syria, Umar al-Shishani. Sham Today is very active requesting economic support on VKontakte, often

¹⁸⁶ MEMRI Cyber and Jihad Lab. ““British ISIS Fighter.”

¹⁸⁷ MEMRI Cyber and Jihad Lab, “*Gaza-based Pro-ISIS Kicks Off Annual Social Media Fundraising Campaign*,” June 24’ 2106, <http://cjlaboratory.org/lab-projects/tracking-jihadi-terrorist-use-of-social-media/gaza-based-pro-isis-group-kicks-off-annual-social-media-fundraising-campaign/>.

¹⁸⁸ C. J. Chivers, “Facebook Groups Act as Weapons Bazaars for Militias,” *New York Times*, April 6, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/07/world/middleeast/facebook-weapons-syria-libya-iraq.html>.

considered as Russia's Facebook.¹⁸⁹ Sham Today uses QIWI Wallet Electronic Payment System:

An electronic payment system was launched at the end of 2007. The system allows customers to make payments online for utilities, mobile phone bills, Internet, online purchases and bank loans. The company runs 15 million virtual wallets co-branded with Visa and operates cash-collecting terminals and kiosks. In 2012, revenue has reached USD 293 million, and profit attributable to shareholders amounted to USD 30 million.¹⁹⁰

QIWI is very popular among ISIS supporters because it is easy and safe to donate using this application, and because QIWI makes it very difficult to disrupt or follow the origins of the transactions:

The account number provided by ShamToday is a Russian mobile-phone number, which is most likely an untraceable anonymous SIM card and not a working number belonging to a member of ShamToday. Attempts to reach the phone number produced an automated message that said the phone was switched off or outside its provider's coverage area.¹⁹¹

Sham Today requests donations through a message that inspires their followers in Russia and Central Asia to contribute according to the "Koran's Surat al-Tawbah, which instruct Muslims to fight against the disbelievers collectively as they fight against you collectively."¹⁹² They also ask for economic support through a news page named *Novosti Khalifata* (Caliphate News), which delivers information in Russian about ISIS' activities in Iraq and Syria.¹⁹³ Moreover, as part of Sham Today's fundraising campaign on social media to support ISIS, they posted a QIWI account number on VKontakte and their official page KHILAF.

¹⁸⁹ Joanna Paraszczuk, "IS Militants Use Popular Russian Web Payment System to Raise Cash," Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, May 17, 2015, <https://www.rferl.org/a/islamic-state-funding-russian-Web-payments-qiwi/27021379.html>.

¹⁹⁰ "VISA QIWI Wallet," About Payments, accessed December 11, 2017, <https://www.about-payments.com/knowledge-base/method/qiwi>.

¹⁹¹ Paraszczuk, "IS Militants Use Popular Russian Web Payment System to Raise Cash." Radio Free Europe RadioLiberty, May 17, 2015, <https://www.rferl.org/a/islamic-state-funding-russian-Web-payments-qiwi/27021379.html>.

¹⁹² Paraszczuk.

¹⁹³ Paraszczuk.

Although the areas of influence of ISIS have decreased lately, they have provided a great example of an adaptable terrorist group leading in the use of social media and digital platforms to fundraise through innovative and virtually untraceable methods. ISIS' tactics on social media and digital platforms are so effective that other terrorist organizations are actually implementing them.

Before concluding this chapter, it is fair to point out that although ISIS has lost ground and the ability to tax and control oil revenue in these previously held territories, this terrorist organization is hardly defeated. Actually, ISIS is trying to relocate its franchise in other countries, forging alliances with local terrorist groups. The group has indeed been hobbled. As Joanna Vickers noted, "Three years after Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared the 'Caliphate', the group has lost more than 60 percent of its territory and 80 percent of its revenue, according to a new analysis released today by IHS Markit (Nasdaq: INFO), a world leader in critical information, analytics and solutions."¹⁹⁴ However, ISIS continues exercising kinetic force and using the Internet as a principal tool to conduct propaganda, recruitment, and fundraising activities.

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria is relocating in other countries after its loss of influence in regions once under its control, and the group continues to actively engage in jihad using the Internet as a cornerstone of its strategy. On October 4, 2017, ISIS released a video of an ambush where four American soldiers lost their lives in Niger.¹⁹⁵ Certainly through this video ISIS moved the lever of propaganda to show its power and to gain militants and economic supporters. The Islamic State has mastered the use of the Internet and continues relying on this technology to advance its plans for the establishment of a caliphate.

¹⁹⁴ Joanna Vickers, "Islamic State Territory Down 60 Percent and Revenue Down 80 Percent on Caliphate's Third Anniversary, IHS Markit Says," *Jane's* by IHS Markit, June 29, 2017, <http://news.ihsmarkit.com/press-release/aerospace-defense-security/islamic-state-territory-down-60-percent-and-revenue-down-80>.

¹⁹⁵ David Martin, "ISIS Propaganda Video Shows U.S. Soldiers under Attack in Niger," CBS NEWS, March 4, 2018, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/new-isis-propaganda-video-shows-niger-ambush-us-soldiers-killed/>.

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IV. TALIBAN

The Taliban is a radical Sunni organization fighting to return to power and establish the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA). Although its strategies and tactics are similar to those of other terrorist organizations, it is not formally designated as a terrorist organization by the United States. According to Masood Farivar, “To be declared a foreign terrorist organization by the State Department, a foreign group must engage in terrorism and threaten the security of U.S. nationals or the national security of the United States. The Afghan Taliban meet both criteria.”¹⁹⁶ If this group is labeled a terrorist organization, however, this new status will hamper the possibility of achieving a reconciliation in Afghanistan, because the United States does not negotiate with terrorist organizations.

A. THE GENESIS OF THE TALIBAN

After the Soviet Union left Afghanistan in 1989, Mohammed Najibullah’s government started to weaken, and finally fell in 1992.¹⁹⁷ This power vacuum was filled by mujahideen groups creating anarchy from their internal fights. Additionally, these unpaid armed groups repeatedly took part in criminal activities against the population such as extortion, taxation, rapes, and killings that decreased the mujahideen’s popularity.¹⁹⁸ All these acts discredited the mujahideen, and they were unable to bring stability to the country. As a result of this chaos, the “Taliban [was] formed in 1994 to oppose these groups, which have taken to plundering populations and raping minors, vowing to disarm rival commanders, establish peace, and purify society by implementing Islamic Sharia Law through Afghanistan.”¹⁹⁹ Consequently, the Taliban appeared as the best option to bring

¹⁹⁶ Masood Farivar, “Why Isn’t Afghan Taliban on U.S. List of Foreign Terror Groups?” Voice of America (VOA), February 20, 2017, <https://www.voanews.com/a/afghan-taliban-us-list-foreign-terror-groups/3732453.html>.

¹⁹⁷ Aggarwal, *The Taliban’s Virtual Emirate*, 6.

¹⁹⁸ Kamal Matinuddin, *The Taliban Phenomenon: Afghanistan 1994–1997* (Karachi, Pakistan: Oxford University Press, 1999). https://books.google.com/books?id=BlyVMkjat2MC&pg=PA12&lpg=PA12&dq=genesis+of+the+Taliban&source=bl&ots=sT1bjy-AwA&sig=gXIItL70mIztW-dzCw_x3CywjQZo&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjD87SWnL_aAhXD-IQKHbEaC_0Q6AEIkGEwCw#v=onepage&q=genesis%20of%20the%20Taliban&f=false.

¹⁹⁹ Aggarwal, *The Taliban’s Virtual*, 6.

order into a country devastated by ten years of war against the Soviet Union, and riddled with internal tribal conflicts among mujahideen who had initially been perceived as heroes and then became villains.

B. TALIBAN IDEOLOGY, LEADERSHIP, AND STRATEGIC GOAL

The Taliban objective is to return to the power to establish an Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan to be ruled under Sharia law. The Taliban leadership was organized under a shura (consultation) to take decisions under the approval of Mullah Omar entering in a long insurgency war using terrorist tactics and providing sanctuary to terrorist organizations. This group appeal to religious and historic narrative to gain legitimacy and support from Afghan population.

1. Ideology

The Soviet-Afghan conflict displaced many Afghans, who sought refuge in Pakistan. These refugees attended madrassas, a religious educational institution. According to Kamal Matinuddin, in these schools was born the name Taliban, which “is the plural of Talib, which means seekers, generally associated with the knowledge of religion.”²⁰⁰ These madrassas’ teachings were based on rigid religious beliefs. Qamar Fatima states that in the 16th century, madrassas started to grow under the auspices of Sunni Muslim leaders; she highlights that in these schools three currents of Sunni Islam prevail: Deobanis, Bravelis, and the Ahl-Hadith.²⁰¹ One of the currents more frequently taught in madrassas in Pakistan is the Deobanis, which “is a conservative orthodox Salafist egalitarian model exemplifying the life and times of Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) for the Muslims.”²⁰² Indeed, the Deobanis current is closely related to Wahhabism, because every aspect of life is ruled under Sharia law. Consequently, the Taliban used force and core

²⁰⁰ Qamar Fatima, “The Rise and Fall of Taliban Regime (1994-2001) In Afghanistan: The Internal Dynamics,” *Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 19, no. 1, ver. I (January 2014), accessed April 17, 2018, <http://www.iosrjournals.org/iosr-jhss/papers/Vol19-issue1/Version-1/F019113546.pdf>.

²⁰¹ Fatima.

²⁰² Fatima.

religious principles (Deobandis) to gain enough credibility to put order to the chaos created by the mujahideen disputes.

The Taliban's ideology is attributed to the combination of two factors, which Annala Sultana has cited as the religious factor (Deobandi, a radical interpretation of Islam) and the ethnic factor (Pashtun, a tribal code of honor).²⁰³ By the same token, Syed Hussain Shaheed Soherwordi highlighted the same two factors as determinant influencers in Taliban ideology: the ethnic factor (majority are Pashtun) and the religious factor, which is an interpretation of the Sharia law; when mixed, they originate a code of conduct known as Pashtunwali.²⁰⁴ As a result, the Taliban's ideology and ethnic background determine the agenda to follow, influencing the radical message and violent actions in order to achieve the establishment of the IEA. Taliban ideology took effect as soon as they took control of Afghanistan in 1996, and enforced Sharia law on the population. According to a Council on Foreign Relations' report, the Taliban established a regime with these characteristics:

Emphasis on policing morality, the Taliban established the Department for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, which attempted to enforce its puritanical interpretation of Sharia. Police beat Afghans who defied the Taliban's edicts and mores, including those mandating full beards for men and head-to-toe burqas for women. The Taliban shuttered girls' schools and forbade women from working, so many women widowed during the anti-Soviet jihad were forced to beg in the streets and many schools were closed for lack of teachers.²⁰⁵

2. Leadership

The Taliban was formed in 1994 in Kandahar through the assembly of a central *shoora* where Mullah Omar was appointed as the *Amirul Momineen* (Commander of the Faithful).²⁰⁶ In this meeting, Mullah Omar was proclaimed as the leading figure of the

²⁰³ Aggarwal, *The Taliban's Virtual Emirate*, 92

²⁰⁴ Aggarwal.

²⁰⁵ "The Taliban," Council on Foreign Relations, accessed April 22, 2018, https://www.cfr.org/interactives/taliban?cid=marketing_use-taliban_infoguide-012115#!/taliban?cid=marketing_use-taliban_infoguide-012115.

²⁰⁶ Kamal Matinuddin, *The Taliban Phenomenon: Afghanistan 1994-1997* (Pakistan: Oxford University Press, 1999). https://books.google.com/books?id=BIyVMkjat2MC&pg=PA12&lpg=PA12&dq=genesis+of+the+Taliban&source=bl&ots=sT1bjy-AwA&sig=gXIItL70mIztW-dzcw_x3CywjQZo&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjD87SWnL_aAhXD-lQKHbEaC_0Q6AEIkGEwCw#v=onepage&q=genesis%20of%20the%20Taliban&f=false

Taliban and “men took an oath of loyalty to Omar after which no senior Taliban commander has ever betrayed [his] whereabouts.”²⁰⁷ The composition of the Taliban’s leadership corresponds to religious, tribal, and multiethnic factors grouped in commissions that fulfill the role of governmental agencies. Nonetheless, the Taliban has centered all its activities in the religious context of their radical interpretation of Sharia law.

Mullah Mohammad Omar was a veteran of the Afghan-Soviet War. This enigmatic and charismatic Taliban leader made the important political and religious decisions inside the organization. Mullah Omar founded the Taliban in 1994. He immediately appeared on the radar of the United States’ intelligence services, which pointed out that “his legitimacy rests in four pillars: (1) piety, (2) effective command against the Soviet occupation in the 1980s, (3) opposition to corrupt mujahideen leaders after the eruption of anarchy in 1992, and (4) success in leading the Taliban to control 85 percent of the country.”²⁰⁸ Mullah Omar tried to have minimal exposure in the media, avoiding photos and interviews. He advised Bin Laden to refrain from giving interviews, which was a breaking point in their relationship. According to Neil K. Aggarwal, Mullah Omar put Bin Laden under house arrest, confiscated his cellphone, and prohibited him from promulgating fatwas or giving interviews to the press.²⁰⁹ After 9/11, the United States increased the pressure on the Taliban to surrender Al Qaeda’s leader. Although many inside the Taliban wanted to get rid of Bin Laden, “Mullah Omar felt bound by Pashtunwali, the strict code of honor that obligated him to protect bin Laden as his guest, and the two men were bound by blood after bin Laden’s daughter married Mullah Omar’s son.”²¹⁰ As a result of U.S. military operations, the Taliban regime fell in 2001, losing control of 85 percent of the country to become an insurgency group fighting to overthrow the Afghan government.

²⁰⁷ Aggarwal, *The Taliban’s Virtual Emirate: The Culture and Psychology of an Online Militant Community*, 31.

²⁰⁸ Aggarwal..

²⁰⁹ Aggarwal, 33.

²¹⁰ Jonathan Cristol, “The Taliban After Mullah Omar,” World Policy, August 4, 2015, <https://worldpolicy.org/2015/08/04/the-taliban-after-mullah-omar/>.

Mullah Omar lived a hermetic life until his death. Consequently, “In July 2015, the Taliban released an official statement that Mullah Omar had passed away, but it waited until September 2015 to clarify that his death occurred in 2013, leading to deputies running the organization.”²¹¹ The Taliban never gave details of the circumstances of Mullah Omar’s death. His successor was his deputy, Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour.

3. Strategic Goal

The Taliban’s ambitions differ from those of other radical Islamist groups like Al Qaeda or ISIS, which envision the establishment of a caliphate in the Middle East, and spreading their radical interpretation of Islam through the whole world. Instead, the Taliban’s objective is the establishment of the IEA. Thomas Johnson provides major details about the Taliban’s objectives when he states that:

IEA’s strategic objectives are to evict foreign troops force from Afghanistan, overthrow the US-supported Kabul government, restore the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, and implement Shar’iah law, the Taliban thereby utilize a strategic communication toolkit designed to delegitimize the current government and garner local support for the shortcomings and perceived failures of U.S. and NATO policies in Afghanistan.²¹²

C. INTERNET STRATEGIES

The Taliban relies on its narratives charged with religious, cultural, and political content as the center of its message to persuade Afghan people to support their organization. Before the advent of the Internet, the Taliban relied on traditional methods like *shabnamah* (night letters), which are “*threatening letters* to communities or individuals that are usually hand-delivered or posted to a door or mosque by insurgent groups at night and that are a common means of intimidation and control of local communities by insurgents.”²¹³ Moreover, they use *taranas* (chants) poems to convey their

²¹¹ Aggarwal, *The Taliban’s Virtual Emirate: The Culture and Psychology of an Online Militant Community*, 34.

²¹² Thomas Johnson, *Taliban Narratives: The Use and Power of Stories in the Afghanistan Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 21.

²¹³ Canada: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Afghanistan: Night Letters [Shab Nameha, Shabnamah, Shabnameh], including appearance (2010-2015), February 10, 2015, AFG105047.E, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/54f02a6c4.html>.

message to a tribal audience.²¹⁴ Johnson, in his 2017 book *Taliban Narratives*, cited Kilcullen who states:

That *shabnamah* are a good example of the Taliban's armed propaganda: they use them to threaten people who do not comply with its rules and it makes 'examples of people who do not cooperate: dozens of provincial level officials were killed between 2005 and 2006 as an armed propaganda tool after receiving such letters. With *shabnamah*, the Taliban were thus able to send the message that it could reach anybody at any time.²¹⁵

Johnson also argued that the Taliban integrated traditional and technological means to spread propaganda like printed material (pamphlets), video, graffiti, broadcasting through unregulated radio, *khutba* (Friday sermons), text messages, and social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Similarly, Aggarwal pointed out the emergence of a neo-Taliban that was less strict on religious principles, purchased modern military equipment, boots and jackets of good quality, and opium production.²¹⁶ This 'neo-Taliban,' according to Aggarwal, incorporated new technology like email and Twitter through the only two Internet lines in Afghanistan prior to 2001 (one was in Mullah Omar's office and the other in the Foreign Minister's office). Thus, the Taliban integrated the use of social media and digital platforms as part of its means to disseminate information, and commit people to provide support as militants or through donations. Consequently, Abdul Sattar Maiwandi, the editor of the Taliban official website Al-Emarah, recognized that "Wars today cannot be won without media.... Media aim at the heart rather than the body, [and] if the heart is defeated, the battle is won."²¹⁷ The Taliban that initially was reluctant to use technology progressively changed, advocating the use of the Internet through social media and digital platforms to convey the organization's messages locally and outside of Afghanistan.

²¹⁴ Johnson, *Taliban*, 15.

²¹⁵ Johnson, 16.

²¹⁶ Aggarwal, *The Taliban's Virtual Emirate: The Culture and Psychology of an Online Militant Community*, 14.

²¹⁷ Bashir Ahmad Gwakh, "The Taliban's Internet Strategy," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, September 9, 2011, https://www.rferl.org/a/the_talibans_Internet_strategy/24323901.html.

1. Information Operations

The Taliban, aware of the reach of the Internet, has relied on social media and digital platforms to spread propaganda promoting its victories (holy warriors defeating infidels, invaders), enforcing its actions through radical religious sermons (jihad, Shaheed or martyrdom, Shariah), and discrediting the government of Afghanistan and the occupation forces (Afghan puppets and foreign invaders). Its goal is to create an environment where the Taliban is the best option to provide religious and political stability. According to Johnson, the Taliban launched several weekly and monthly digital magazines that contain anti-coalition forces rhetoric and battlefield reports in English, Pashto, Arabic Urdu, and Dari.²¹⁸ According to Johnson, the Taliban created a substantial number of weekly and monthly communications such as digital magazines, pamphlets, and periodicals to promote its propaganda; these publications included *Al Somood (Resistance)* magazine 2002, the *Srak (Beam of Light)* pamphlet, and *Tora Bora* magazine.²¹⁹ Malali Bashir claims that although this group banned music, photography, TV, and the Internet when it was in power, almost two decades later, the Taliban now is open to using technology.²²⁰ Bashir adds, “Tweeting frontline photos, posting attack videos on Facebook, and widely circulating leadership pronouncements and viewpoints are now central to the Taliban’s military and political strategy to recapture power through frontline advances, winning over public opinion, and altering perceptions.”²²¹ The Taliban’s methods of propaganda have evolved from handwritten letters or printed pamphlets, and video cassettes, to a digital era propitiated by the global reach of the Internet. Johnson highlights that another digital platform the Taliban has used to spread propaganda is Alemarah, its official website established in 2005, which provides information targeting Afghan people and international audiences.²²² Johnson claims that Alemarah’s content

²¹⁸ Johnson, *Taliban Narratives*, 44, 45.

²¹⁹ Johnson.

²²⁰ Malali Bashir, “Taliban Propaganda Meets The Digital Age,” Gandhara, July 10, 2017, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/taliban-propaganda/28606576.html>.

²²¹ Bashir.

²²² Johnson, *Taliban Narratives*, 85.

comes in several sections (news, *taranas*, links to online Taliban's radio, magazines, poetry, and articles), presented in four local languages and in English to provide information from the Taliban in an effort to gain legitimacy among different tribal groups. In a recent Alemarah publication, the Taliban promoted its military's capabilities and announced its military operations in order to gain recognition and legitimacy among the Afghan population. On April 25, 2018, Alemarah announced Al Khandaq Jihadi Operations, which is the Taliban's spring offensive. "Its primary target will be the American invaders and their intelligence agents. Their internal supporters will be dealt with as a secondary target while the present and future mischievous plots of the mischief-mongers will be nipped in the bud."²²³ Through this communication the Taliban aims to look like a professional military organization that has a structured body to develop its strategies and tactics, which is corroborated when it states that "Al Khandaq Jihadi Operations will be organized and planned by Military Commission of the Islamic Emirate (led by Sirajuddin Haqqani and Mullah Mohammad Yaqoub, Mullah Omar's son)...."²²⁴

2. The Taliban's Message

The Taliban's propaganda is rooted in political, cultural, historical, and religious messages that seek support either through persuasion or intimidation of the population and through self-presentation as a legitimate Islamist option of power (the IEA). At the same time, it seeks to discredit the Afghan democratic government and the international intervention. Johnson highlights key rhetoric in the Taliban's message, such as

(a) Taliban victory in cosmic conflict is inevitable, (b) Islam cannot be defeated, (c) Taliban are *national heroes* and willing to sacrifice all for Allah and country, (d) Afghans have a long and honorable history of defeating invading foreign infidels, (e) Foreign invaders as well as their Afghan puppets are attempting to destroy Afghan religion and traditions,²²⁵

²²³ "MIxTRAC: Taliban/Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) Spring Offensive 2018: Launching the Al Khandaq Jihadi Operations," Mackenzie Institute, April 30, 2018, <http://mackenzieinstitute.com/mixtrac-talibanislamic-emirate-afghanistan-iea-spring-offensive-2018-launching-al-khandaq-jihadi-operations/>.

²²⁴ MIxTRAC.

²²⁵ Johnson, *Taliban Narratives*, 21.

and (f) all Afghans have an obligation to join the jihad against foreigners and apostates.²²⁶

The Taliban, to avoid disruption, does not release its propaganda on only a few digital platforms. Instead, it uses multiple digital means to communicate its propaganda to a bigger audience. According to Ehsanullah Amiri and Margherita Stancati, the Taliban is actively developing cell phone apps, such the Voice of Jihad website, Telegram Messenger, and other apps powered by Google's Play store or Amazon Appstore to advance its propaganda.²²⁷ Additionally, Amiri and Stancati highlight that Afghanistan's Interior Ministry spokesman Sediq Sediqqi states the Taliban uses propaganda (digital means) to exaggerate its military actions (victories, killings, armaments). According to those authors, Sidiqqi has said "since the Taliban have been defeated by Afghan security forces on the battlefield, they are now using propaganda to distort people's minds."²²⁸ The Taliban leadership releases information highlighting the U.S. and Afghan Security Forces' military operations that cause civilian victims (collateral damage) in order to delegitimize their cause .

Like Al Qaeda and ISIS, the Taliban builds support in cyberspace through Internet videos about beheadings, martyrdom, and roadside bombs, to intimidate the population, preventing them from collaborating with the government or the coalition forces. According to Danesh Karokhel, director of the independent news agency Pajhwok Afghan News, the Taliban "want to scare people so they do not support the government. They threaten people. Whoever sees those kinds of videos will obviously be scared."²²⁹ The Taliban's propaganda aims to secure support (or at least not opposition) among a population that fears retaliation.

²²⁶ Johnson, , *Taliban Narratives*, 22.

²²⁷ Ehsanullah Amiri and Margherita Stancati, "Afghanistan's Taliban Push Into New Media," *Wall Street Journal*, June 12, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/afghanistans-taliban-push-into-new-media-1465776097>.

²²⁸ Amiri and Stancati.

²²⁹ "Afghan Taliban Use Phones for Propaganda," BBC News, March 30, 2012, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-17563068>.

3. Recruiting on Social Media and Digital Platforms

The Taliban recently increased the use of social media and digital means to recruit militants. Majeed Qarar, who has been studying the Taliban's Internet presence for years, in an interview for Gandhara in 2017, "told Radio Free Afghanistan that in addition to propaganda the Taliban are using social media as a recruitment tool."²³⁰ A study done by Altai Consulting for Internews reveals that the Taliban is targeting people who are young, literate, and living in areas under government control. The most used social media platforms are Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat, which usually are accessed from smartphones.²³¹ The Taliban leaders, aware of the penetration of the Internet and social media in the Afghan population, survey these platforms to identify who is against them or who is supporting their goals. Majeed Qarar states that the Taliban "know everyone in our area. They know who is related to whom and where one works, [also] he said. They follow that person on Facebook and send messages to ask him to surrender to [their authority] and cooperate with them."²³² Although the Taliban uses traditional means (face-to-face interaction, pamphlets, night letters (Shabnamah), video cassettes) social media is the bridge that the Taliban uses to reach people in Kabul and other areas under government control. Hekmatullah Azamy says, "in areas outside the government control, the Taliban go to mosques to find recruits."²³³ He continues, "but in cities where the Taliban cannot approach people face to face, they use social media to either spread their message or find potential recruits."²³⁴ The Taliban uses religious rhetoric (defend oppressed land of infidels through jihad, which is an obligation for Muslims) as a core argument in its narratives to keep alive its recruitment process. However, the Norwegian Country of Origin Information Centre, Landinfo, highlights (1) "Material and Economic Conditions: the recruits are motivated by poverty, lack of other opportunities and the fact that the Taliban

²³⁰ Bashir, "Taliban Propaganda Meets the Digital Age."

²³¹ "Social Media in Afghanistan: Users and Engagement," Internews, January 25, 2018, <https://www.internews.org/news/social-media-afghanistan-users-and-engagement>.

²³² Bashir, "Taliban Propaganda Meets the Digital Age."

²³³ Bashir.

²³⁴ Bashir.

offers relatively good salaries,”²³⁵ and (2) “Religious and cultural conditions: The notion of the authorities’ and the international community’s lack of respect for Islam and traditional standards is central.”²³⁶ After almost two decades of fighting against the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and the Afghan government, the Taliban continues its endeavor to return to power and establish the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. To this end, the Taliban combines traditional methods and use of social media and digital platforms to support the recruitment process.

4. Fundraising on Social Media and Digital Platforms

The Taliban’s political interests are concentrated inside Afghanistan; they do not require money to execute terrorist operations on a grand scale like ISIS and Al Qaeda, which carry out terrorist attacks on international objectives. Nevertheless, the Taliban needs money to execute its agenda driven by a long insurgency, and to fulfill the function of a supposed state providing funds to different commissions (agencies) that are part of the IEA. Such endeavors to sustain a resilient military campaign and fulfill a state’s role have forced the Taliban to obtain money through different means. The Taliban carries out criminal activities and uses social media and digital platforms to procure money from donors in Pakistan and in the region. According to *Forbes*, the Taliban is the fifth wealthiest extremist organization, with an annual turnover of \$400 million collected in Afghanistan and Pakistan from sources like drug trafficking (mainly production of opium and heroin), sponsorship fees and taxes, financial assistance and donations.²³⁷ The Taliban is actively fundraising on social media and digital platforms such as Whatsapp, Twitter, Instagram, Telegram, Facebook, and YouTube. According to *Vice News*, the Taliban requests economic support through digital platforms and in English:

On September 9, 2016, the Taliban posted a statement to its English Telegram channel in anticipation of an annual Islamic holiday “As you know, Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan is the guardian of thousands of widows and orphans and provide them sacrifice of Eid-ul-Azha,” read the

²³⁵ “Afghanistan: Recruitment to Taliban Report,” Landinfo, Norway, June 29, 2017, 12, https://landinfo.no/asset/3588/1/3588_1.pdf.

²³⁶ Landinfo.

²³⁷ *Forbes*, “The World’s 10 Richest Terrorist Organizations.”

post, written in broken English. It implored “every fortune and sympathizer Muslim” to contact the Taliban’s treasury through its Gmail account or a phone number linked to Telegram, Viber, and WhatsApp.²³⁸

The Taliban loads sensitive messages on their digital platform to motivate donors from Muslim countries and the Muslim diaspora around the world to provide funds. These messages appeal to the goodwill of followers and to their sense of duty as Muslims. The Taliban has experimented with several tools to support fundraising, and one of them was PayPal. According to *The Long War Journal* report, a PayPal account was requesting economic contributions on behalf of the Taliban, although the Taliban refutes it.²³⁹ Although the Taliban is fundraising on social media and digital platforms, it is difficult to establish how much money they obtain from foreign income sources through informal transactions.

Although the Taliban’s political interests are in Afghanistan, they receive substantial economic support from Pakistan, specifically from the city of Karachi. The Taliban has a stronghold in Karachi for recruitment, propaganda, and fundraising activities; “the UN Security Council and the U.S. Treasury listed two Afghan brothers—Haji Faizullah Noorzai and Haji Malik Noorzai—living in Karachi as Taliban financiers. Faizullah has collected more than \$100,000 for the Taliban from donors in the Gulf and in 2009 gave a portion of his own money to the organization.”²⁴⁰ The Taliban fundraising activities are diverse and although the main funding source for the Taliban does not come from social media, the Taliban is proficient at using digital platforms for fundraising in the consolidation of their political objectives in Afghanistan.

Paradoxically, the Taliban, at the beginning of its regime, banned the use of TV, radio, music, and technology to be congruent with their orthodox Islamic beliefs. Now, however, this extremist group incorporates the Internet as essential means to spread its

²³⁸ Austin Bodetti, “From WhatsApp to Hawala, How the Taliban Moves Money Around,” Vice, Motherboard, November 15, 2016, https://motherboard.vice.com/en_us/article/bmv3g3/from-whatsapp-to-hawala-how-the-taliban-moves-money-around.

²³⁹Bodetti.

²⁴⁰ Zia Ur Rehman, “Exposing the Karachi-Afghanistan Link,” Norwegian Peacebuilding Institute, December 2013, <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/175236/62255901a49df8d77e0e33b4611a4270.pdf>.

radical religious message and gain support to overthrow the government. As a result, the Taliban is actively on the Internet spreading propaganda, recruiting, and fundraising, while eluding physical exposure and avoiding direct confrontation with the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). The Taliban uses social media and digital platforms as a key instrument of its strategies and tactics, as most terrorist organizations now do in order to advance their strategic goals.

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V. CONCLUSION

Terrorist organizations and extremist groups use the Internet, social media, and digital platforms to advance their strategic goals. This use of these digital resources gives rise to the following questions:

Why do terrorist organizations use the Internet?

How do terrorist organizations use the Internet?

The first question elicits many responses that overlap, but the central argument of this thesis is based on the intrinsic characteristics of the Internet, which allow terrorist organizations to conduct essential activities (disseminating propaganda, recruiting, and fundraising) without physical exposure. Al Qaeda, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, and the Taliban, aware of the opportunities that cyberspace provides, use the Internet to access multiple communications channels that allow a fast dissemination of information. Their propaganda aims to modify people's behavior through a radicalization process that reaches even beyond their immediate area of influence. These organizations exploit the Internet's characteristics (global reach, low cost, anonymity) to legitimize their actions and gain support.

The second question in thesis asks how organizations like Al Qaeda, ISIS, and the Taliban use the Internet to disseminate propaganda, pursue recruitment, and engage in fundraising. These organizations draw on religion (Islam) as the central argument of their message to justify their actions and gain the ummah's support. These organizations fire up anti-Western resentment through their narratives of victimization, highlighting that Islam is under attack from infidels or crusaders. Consequently, they appeal to a revivalist mood that seeks a return to Islam's golden age, overthrowing apostate regimes through jihad (an obligatory duty) to defend Dar al-Islam (House of Islam), and establishing an Islamist government or caliphate under a pious ruler (caliph) that implements Sharia law.

In order to sustain jihad, Al Qaeda, ISIS, and the Taliban have migrated their essential operations to cyberspace, exploring the vast universe of opportunities that the Internet provides through social media and digital platforms to interact with the ummah

globally. Consequently, these organizations share similar strategies and tactics to conduct a radicalization process shaped by extreme violence and disseminated on the Internet. This radicalization process is propelled by online information operations (propaganda) to discredit the adversary and highlight the terrorists' own capabilities and to gain new militants (recruitment) and economic support (fundraising). All these essential activities take place in a digital environment through social media (YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat) and digital platforms (websites, digital magazines, cell phone apps) as alternative means to connect with people without being detected. Although the messages of these radical organizations share the same religious current (Salafist-Wahhabist), and have similarities in their strategies and tactics, they differ in their strategic goals. As a result, these similarities and differences create the appropriate environment to forge an alliance or to put them on a collision path that creates enmity.

Chapter II analyzed Al Qaeda's strategy to attack the far enemy. Its attacks on the Kenyan and Tanzanian embassies, *USS Cole*, and the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 9/11 aimed to cut the United States' support to apostate governments in the Middle East and consequently replace these regimes with Islamist governments. These attacks catapulted Al Qaeda to lead the Salafist Jihadist movement, and consequently, Al Qaeda became the main target of the Global War on Terrorism. This war targeted Al Qaeda's leadership, supporters, finances, and training camps, and sped up its migration to the Internet. On the Internet, Al Qaeda has used radical religious rhetoric in videos and on websites and digital platforms to fuel anti-Western resentment, specifically against the United States and its intervention in Iraq, which is perceived as an attack on Islam.

Chapter III highlights the origins of ISIS as a splinter group of Al Qaeda in Iraq after it broke ties with the central organization. ISIS' focus was the immediate establishment of a caliphate by securing territories in Iraq and Syria, appropriating its resources and developing criminal activities (smuggling oil, banks, looting, ransom, extortion, taxation) to carry out the functions of a state. Additionally, ISIS based its strategies on stimulating a sectarian struggle targeting the Shia population. Moreover, ISIS took Al Qaeda's Internet strategies to a more sophisticated level, waging a bloody propaganda campaign on the web (with images of beheadings, mass executions, people

being set on fire) through social media. Capitalizing on these professionally produced videos, ISIS garnered an unprecedented level of support in the recruitment of foreign fighters and fundraising. ISIS became the Salafist-jihadist organization best known for executing international attacks conducted by homegrown radicalized people who act as lone wolves or independent cells.

Chapter IV explains how the Taliban concentrates its religious and political interest inside Afghanistan's borders, focusing its efforts on the establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan under Sharia law. Although it is not tagged as a terrorist organization, the Taliban was one of the United States' objectives during the Global War on Terrorism, because the group harbored Al Qaeda and refused to hand over Osama Bin Laden. As a result, this organization embarked on a long insurgency, initially using traditional methods of disseminating propaganda (night letters (Shabnamah), chants, poems, madrassas, video cassettes), recruiting, and fundraising, which require physical exposure. Despite its early religious objections to technology, the Taliban gradually started to use the Internet, targeting a domestic audience for appeals for volunteers and economic support and an international audience for legitimacy, recognition, and establishment of diplomatic channels. Additionally, the Taliban found global reach, anonymity, low cost, and low risk of disruption on the Internet. This helped the group to spread a radical religious message and historical narratives (Islam never has been defeated, the infidels attacked Islam in complicity with Kabul's puppets, jihad is a duty), which are the backbone that sustains its propaganda, recruitment, and fundraising activities. The Taliban, through its presence in cyberspace, disseminates its narratives pursuing tribal support and discrediting the International Security Assistance Force and Afghanistan's government in an effort to retake control of the country.

As described in the preceding chapters, Al Qaeda, ISIS, and the Taliban skillfully use social media and digital platforms to disseminate radical messages based on religious rhetoric mixed with a historical anti-colonialist sentiment that appeals to a revivalist mood in Islam that seeks the establishment of a caliphate and Sharia law. These organizations base their strategies on extreme violence, which is implicit in their social media tactics to spread propaganda incorporating videos of their barbaric acts. Additionally, they have

established websites, digital magazines, digital newspapers, and even radio stations and digital TV channels to establish a direct connection with the ummah, who provide these groups with recruits and economic support.

A. RECOMMENDATION

After terrorist organizations opened a new battlefield in cyberspace, among the countries committed to fighting and defeating terrorist organizations like Al Qaeda, ISIS, and extremist groups like the Taliban, there arose the prevailing need to create new strategies and tactics to combat these organizations on a new battlefield. Now fighting these extremist groups requires the integration of simultaneous efforts. While countries are using intelligence and kinetic operations to target the groups' leaders, training camps, and income sources, these countries must simultaneously fight them on social media and digital platforms with a digital army dedicated to combating radicalized ideas and narratives. To defeat these organizations in cyberspace, efforts should focus on countering propaganda online because propaganda can support recruitment and fundraising. Such efforts should also focus on fighting these radical organizations on social media and digital platforms.

B. FUTURE RESEARCH

Combating terrorist organizations in cyberspace requires more research that would help to develop specific and effective strategies to generate counter-arguments to fight radical rhetoric online. Additionally, one of these researches should focus on the cooperation of Muslim countries in developing propaganda on the Internet, particularly through social media and digital platforms promoting true Islam.

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