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Digital radicalization of terrorist groups: how technological change affects the organization of modern international terrorism

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Abstract:

During the decade of 1990 Salafist-jihadist terrorist groups start emerging to end playing a starring role at the beginning of the XXI century, especially after the attacks of the 9th of September of 2001. With the exponential develop of the digitalization phenomenon and the growing popularity of the internet, these groups, eventually, integrated those tools into their general strategy.

The present work analyses the impact of the digitalization phenomenon in the Global Jihad Movement, how technological development have helped them to achieve their goals and how the digital era has made them redirect their objectives, targets and aims. Sometimes the digitalization phenomenon has been the trigger for several changes in the structure of these groups, reshaping their original composition, as can be seen in the cases-study of Al Qaeda and the Islamic State.

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Keywords:

Terrorism, Internet, digitalization, Al Qaeda, Islamic State, social networks.

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Introduction

The decade of 1990 was a decade of change for the international scenario. The end of the Cold War monopolized the headlines of the newspapers during the first years of that decade. Meanwhile, the World Order changed from a bipolar one to a multipolar one. In that new multipolar World Order, the globe started reshaping, countries started emerging and others were vanished from the map. However, the change that shook the roots of the international security was the apparition of non-state actors in the international panorama, essentially, the rise of Salafi-jihadist terrorism.

These terrorist groups, whose main aim has always been the spread of the Global Jihad through the whole world, from an extremist perspective and, mainly, using violence and threat against their no-sympathizers, were highly favoured by the wave of digitalization experienced from the end of the XX century and the begging of the XXI.

The digitalization phenomenon and, thus, the technological development were converted in mighty tools to spread the global jihad to all over the world. At the begging, the internet functioned mostly as a medium to spread the «message of the jihad» and to release some content. However, as the digitalization was developed and the digital tools were gaining weight within societies, the terrorist groups started diversifying their activities in the cyberspace. That diversification was followed by a professionalization of the media strategy of the Global Jihad Movement (GJM), being internet and the social networks a principal component of the self-radicalization process, the self-training, and the recruitment to the point of the apparition of individuals who, not having contact before with the terrorist organizations, plotted terrorist (even suicidal) attacks in the name of the Global Jihad and supported the Agenda of the GJM.

At the same time, from an inner perspective, the digitalization changed the way that the Salafist-jihadist terrorist approached the jihad. It permitted the movement to find support not only among liked-minded Muslims, but also among the world population. On the other hand, the capacity of the internet of storing content permit the terrorist groups to have a permanent influence and a rapid reach among the internet users with the minimum effort. All this, besides some external circumstances, have done that the Global Jihad Groups reshaped their structures to adapt themselves to these modern times.

What is understood as terrorism? Main objectives of those groups in modern times

Before deepening in the topic considered as subject of study of this work, it is necessary to clarify what means terrorism. Since the concept of terrorism does not have an official definition, in this work it has been selected the definition given by Fernando Reinares, understanding terrorism as «a set of violent actions that generate, in a given aggregate of the population, disproportionate psychic effects with respect to their material consequences and which aims to condition the attitudes of that social collective and to guide their behaviours in a certain direction».

Today, the world faces an international terrorist threat, which emerged in the decade of 1990 and is known as the fourth wave of terrorism. The fourth generation of terrorism is better known as religious terrorism and framed within those global movements of the Salafist-jihadist groups such as Al-Qaeda or the ISIS¹.

The religious terrorism that these groups have proclaimed worldwide through the last decades is a revivalist movement based on a kind of violent jihad linked with Salafism. Their ultimate goal is the restoration of what they believe that is the «authentic Islam» by the reestablishment of the past Muslim glory in a great Islamic state, eliminating national boundaries at any cost².

Regarding the previous paragraph, one of the main concerns about this sort of jihadist terrorism is that they are actual experts in the psychological-mediatic war. They can influence and permeate in the mindset of public opinion with basic and repetitive slogans, but persuasive after all. In the end, their main goal is to sway public opinion with the aim to create a permanent feeling of insecurity in western societies, weaken national cohesion, break alliances, and force democratic governments to vulnerate their own values.

Jihadist groups are undoubtedly greater dependents of technological devices to spread their message among societies. They depend completely on mass media, seeking victory through unconventional tools since there are an accused asymmetry of forces between

¹ JORDÁN, J; TORRES, M. "Terrorismo", *Manual de estudios estratégicos y seguridad internacional*. Madrid. Plaza y Valdés, 2013, pp. 312-315.

² SAGEMAN, M. "The Origins of the Jihad", *Understanding Terror Networks*. Philadelphia. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004, p. 1.

them and the States, adversaries with military resources to defeat them thousands of times in a conventional conflict³.

Globalization and westernization, an action-reaction movement

«When modernity bears the mark of «the other» it is not surprising if some people confronting it brandish symbols of atavism to assert their difference. This reaction may be seen today among some Muslims, men and women, but the phenomenon is not peculiar to one culture or religion».

Following the previous statement of the Lebanese French writer Amin Maalouf, from a socio-cultural approach, globalization can be understood from a twofold perspective. On one hand, globalization exerts a centripetal movement since it helps to spread acknowledge from every culture to all over the world. On the other hand, however, globalization has contributed enormously to the rise of violent and no violent extremist groups claiming for not losing their allegiances within the «Melting Pot» that the world turned out to be.

Regarding Salafist radicalization, there is a logic behind the behaviour of this extremist groups. Globalization has proved to be no more than a brand of the West-capitalist countries, better labelled as «Westernization». Through «Westernization», western societies not only shaped a blurred geographical imagination of the East, but also created a generic conception of Arab population and spread a considerable amount of popular prejudices anti-Arab and anti-Muslim. It is more than obvious that there is a solid web of racism, cultural stereotypes, political imperialism, and dehumanized ideology which is loomed over every Arab or Muslim person⁴.

Then, these Salafist-jihadist devotees have on the bottom of their minds a deep feeling of revenge against those who underestimate their inner culture and values. A feeling which is exalted by those responsible of radicalization. In this regard, the main premise of Salafism to conduct the jihad against the West is that, through globalization and the

³ BAÑOS, P. *El dominio mundial*. Madrid. Ariel, 2018, pp. 233-235.

⁴ SAID, E. "Introducción", *Orientalismo*. Barcelona. Penguin Random House, 1997, pp. 52-53.

further adoption of western behaviors, the Islam became decadent because it strayed from the rigorous path⁵.

It is that to say that, in sum, Westernization has been used as an effective excuse to drive the jihad against western societies and to justify the violent actions of Salafist groups in the eyes of the Muslim societies.

One of their main messages is the necessity of fighting against the corruption of the West, which permeates within Muslim populations, making them abandon their rigorous path, understood as the only way to recover the glory of the past Islamic Califates.

To comprehend which is the message that the GJM want to transmit and the goals that they would like to achieve is vital to understand what the role is that digitalization, internet, and social networks play in the development, conformation, organization, and radicalization process of these terrorist groups. It is impossible to guess the position of the mean without knowing the purpose.

Power of internet and social networks, the double edge of digitalization

Outlook

It is remarkable the powerful linkage between the GJM and the digital tools to counterbalance the asymmetry of forces against those actors with strong conventional capabilities. In this regard, the Jihadist apply what was coined by Carlo Pisacane as the «propaganda by deed». Following this concept, violence was a necessary tool to educate and mobilize societies to make them achieve freedom. Therefore, it can be inferred that violence has an instrumental character for the GJM⁶. It must be remembered that the ultimate goals of terrorism are political after all.

Considering this, violence can be understood as key element for the GJM. Even though, not only violence but also propaganda has a starring role in the spread of terrorism, since the main aim of these groups is to cause the more psychological impact with the less amount of damage⁷. Since the beginning of the XXI Century that aim has been favoured

⁵ SAGEMAN, M. "The Origins of the Jihad", *Understanding Terror Networks...* Íbidem. *op. cit.* 2004, pp. 4-5.

⁶ JORDÁN, J; TORRES, M. "Terrorismo", *Manual de estudios estratégicos y seguridad internacional...*Íbidem. *op. cit.* 2013, p. 310.

⁷ BAÑOS, P. *El dominio mundial...*Íbidem. *op. cit.* 2018, p. 233.

by the exponential development of the digital devices and tools, making way easier to distribute their material worldwide.

Undoubtedly, the knowledge of the GJM by the public opinion before the XXI Century was very limited, even if, in 1996, Bin Laden declared war against the United States and Saudi Arabia, and later, in 1998, he presented to the globe the «Global Islamic Front for the Struggle against Jews and Crusaders». Nevertheless, the jihadist movements only gained actual power after the attacks of the 9th of September of 2001 (9/11). This fact changed the fate of the GJM both for good and bad. Somehow their threat reached and shocked western audiences, and, in the aftermath, triggered a persecution against the authors of that dreadful event in an unprecedented multilateral response led by the United States and commonly known as «War on Terror»⁸.

But the fundamental importance of the 9/11 relies on that it transmitted a message that was understood globally. This was the first terrorist message which transcended every border, spreading fear worldwide and, therefore, achieving the goal of the GJM of causing the more fear with the less effort, putting for the last decades jihadism in the spotlight.

The 9/11 and its aftermath can be studied from many perspectives, but, from the standpoint of the globalization and digitalization trends there is no doubt of that the development of technological devices and digital communications were fundamental for the GJM to make themselves known in the international arena and to prepare and develop such a highly well-structured and coordinated attack in a country which is important to remark that was far away from the land of origin of these jihadist movements.

Online extremism: an approach of how the Global Jihad Movement take advantage on digitalization trends

«Al Qaeda's informational resistance against the West must be conducted using modern technology of all forms, especially satellite and internet». This quote of Abu Mus'ab al Suri⁹ clearly expresses the focal strategy of the GJM after the 9/11. The key to succeed in the war of global jihadism against the West was stoop to its level by taking advantage

⁸ VILDINO, L. "Radicalization, Linkage and Diversity. Current Trends in Terrorism in Europe", *National Defense Research Institute (RAND)*, 2011. Retrieved from: https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/occasional_papers/2011/RAND_OP333.pdf (Last accessed: 01/10/2021).

⁹ Global jihad strategist.

on the power of contemporary mass media and technology. As well, John Mackinlay argued that «the techniques of an insurgency evolve with societies from which it arises». Therefore, from this perspective, it was only a matter of time that the GJM adopted the digitalization as a mean to carry out its «mission».

Despite several complications, such as the lack of access to the internet in several regions and the generation gap between those who blindly trust in digitalization and those who were scarcely aware of the technological possibilities, digitalization became an active tool for the GJM due to its multiple benefits for the spread of jihadism.

Since the beginning, internet worked as the perfect tool for the radicalization recruitment process since it worked in four essential areas to achieve a successful radicalization procedure: it functioned as an eco-chamber, creating a space of similar ideas-sharing. It also worked as browser for like-minded individuals and as a broadcast platform. And, more important, it provided the jihadist sympathizers with instructional material to create their own weapons and self-learning how to do the jihad.

Undoubtedly, the internet offered a low-cost approach to the editing process of the GJM propaganda. In this regard, websites provided the information released by the jihadist groups of a greater accessibility, speed, and diffusion. That information revolution offered «new and promising opportunities for terrorist organizations in a global scale¹⁰».

And the opportunities of the information revolution for terrorist organizations did not end in a low-cost propaganda. They faced for the first time an uncensored platform where to spread their message freely, a place where they could also share ideological and tactical documents and facilitate contact among linked-minded sympathizers¹¹, spreading their web of terror alongside the world.

On the other hand, the GJM deepened within the possibilities that internet offered using non-open resources to spread that clandestine propaganda that could trouble its objectives if published through open sources. That way the jihadist could keep an active

¹⁰ ARQUILLA, J., RONFELDT, D. "The Advent of Netwar", *Networks and Netwars: The Future of Terror, Crime and Militancy*. Santa Monica. National Defense Research Institute (RAND), 2011, pp. 1-25. Retrieved from: https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1382.html (Last accessed: 01/11/2021).

¹¹ SCHAFER, J. "Spinning the web of hate: web-based hate propagation by extremist organizations", *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture*, 2002. Retrieved from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/247622782_Spinning_the_Web_of_hate_Web-based_hate_propagation_by_extremist_organizations (Last accessed: 01/11/2021).

communication with their growing networks regardless the possible censorship of the internet open sources.

Besides, online anonymity helped individuals to ease about taboo subjects, turning the digital world to be a comfort zone out of the rules of society, a place for disinhibition steeped in a false sense of security. Furthermore, Levin argued that some of those sympathizers of the GJM even adopted their virtual identity in the real life. In this regard, Newman stated that internet could catalyse self-idealization, leading those individuals to believe in their irreplaceability for the cause.

However, the cyberspace gained a starring role for the GJM as the cornerstone of the radicalization process in the new century. Internet became not only a medium to spread the Jihadist's extremist narratives, but also a tool to provided relevant information for self-radicalization. In this regard, the existence of multimedia content, storable and downloadable, replaced the necessity of interaction between radicalizers and sympathizers. This, joint to the fact the internet provides a ready-made audience and the emergence of «virtual plotters» has made the radicalization process easier and more accessible¹².

Even though, although radicalization, indeed, has experienced a deep digitalization process, some scholars remain sceptical to the possibility of a full self-radicalization procedure. Some of them argue that radicalization still need for some personal interaction to be completed. In this respect, it is remarkable -and concerning as well- the meticulous work made by the jihadist groups to provide a window for interaction for their sympathizers, mostly through the social media.

There are many reasons to understand why social media has become an indispensable tool for GJM within the radicalization recruitment process. Among the capabilities of that media, it can be remarked that they make jihadist activism far more accessible to the public, they help to create and impression, information can be updated in real time and, moreover, the GJM no longer requires the mainstream media to disseminate information.

Besides, social media have an important psychological impact that must not be underestimated. From the approach of the radicalization process, the social media play

¹² EDWARDS, C; GRIBBON, L. "Pathways to Violent Extremism in the Digital Era", *The RUSI Journal*, 2013, pp. 42-45. Retrieved from: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/03071847.2013.847714?needAccess=true> (Last accessed: 01/14/2021).

a critical role by providing those jihadist sympathizers by allowing users to implant selectively themselves of like-minded individuals and, therefore, helping to grow a sense of brotherhood among them. On the other hand, social media serve to establish familiarity between recruiters and sympathizers by being the first contact through social networks interactions¹³.

Therefore, it is undeniable the vital role that the cyberspace and the digitalization play as tools for the GJM since they work as operational tools, including recruitment, training, coordination, and communication as well as the spread of wider propaganda. Nowadays the concerning question among the scholars is if this groups would be able to develop a full self-radicalization recruitment in the short run.

The scope of digitalization within the Jihadist terrorism: how these groups have changed their behaviour and organization due to digitalization: the case-studies of Al Qaeda and ISIS

When public opinion talks about jihadist terrorism, the mindset of a wider range of worldwide population tends to remind those attacks plotted by Al Qaeda and the ISIS. Every person, at any age, at least those living in western countries, can vividly remember at least one time that the news broke with some dreadful act perpetrated by one of these two groups. These acts, in fact, are fixtured in the public memory.

Both, Al Qaeda and the ISIS, have successfully use their communicative tools to be in the spotlight at least for the las two decades. As terrorism is not just the use of violence but also the threat surrounding its use, these groups have used the digitalization as helpful instrument to demoralize and cause confusion in the west through their actions, causing the major psychological impact with the less physical harm.

In this regard, the more that these groups adapted themselves to the digitalization era, the more that their techniques, targets, aims, and organization change. Therefore, it can be argued that, somehow, digitalization reshaped both groups.

¹³ HORSBURGH, N., JORDÁN, J., TORRES, M. "Analysis and Evolution of the Global Jihadist Movement Propaganda", *Taylor and Francis Group*, 2006, p. 411. Retrieved from: <http://hera.ugr.es/doi/16517003.pdf> (Last accessed: 01/14/2021).

Al Qaeda

Before the 9/11, the GJM did not extended beyond the sympathizers of the movement. They basically recorded a sort of audio-visual material for internal consumption. During this period Osama Bin Laden was the solo protagonist of all the messages transmitted. The nature of the propaganda broadcast by Al Qaeda was clearly precarious because of the limitations in terms of data transmission via internet and the lack of access to the cyberspace. It is striking that, at that moment, the intentions of the group were to stay in the shadows.

Eventually, Al Qaeda started seeing internet as a perfect tool to spread its propaganda. However, the turning point that make Al Qaeda started seeking for international attention was one of the attacks perpetrated by the Chechen Mujahedin against the Russians during the war in Chechenia.

The Chechen Mujahedin ambushed a Russian convoy and, in a period where the Russian propagandistic tool was still strong, they recorded a video of the attack and uploaded to the internet, mainly with the aim to have a prove of their assault in case the soviet propagandist tool tried to hide it. Almost accidentally they discover the incredible power of that video in terms of that the video was a powerful tool to spread fear and demoralize Russian public with a little amount of effort.

This must be understood as the turning point for Al Qaeda to become one of the major threats for the international security. The video of the Chechen ambush showed the effectiveness of the digital tools to create a great impact in the societies by causing the less possible harm. The jihadist group understood the worth of having a good digital infrastructure supporting their terrorist acts. Since one of their main objectives was to spread fear among public opinion, after all, without the adequate broadcast media, all their terrorist acts would have been meaningless¹⁴.

The new course of Al Qaeda was visible on the video recorded on the attacks on the USS Cole in 2000. This video, produced by an Al-Qaeda communication commission, was suspiciously like that one released by the Chechens, with the same aesthetic and with one remarkable innovation: the video was released in Arabic and English¹⁵. Although the

¹⁴ HORSBURGH, N., JORDÁN, J., TORRES, M. "Analysis and Evolution of the Global Jihadist Movement Propaganda...", *Íbidem. op. cit.* 2006, pp. 401-411.

¹⁵ O'ROURKE, R; PEARL, R. "Terrorist Attack on USS Cole: background and issues for Congress", *The Navy Department Library*, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online->

video regarding the attacks on the USS Cole can be considered as one more among the others, its success converted it in the early precedent of the 9/11.

The 9/11 had a twofold consequence for the organization. On one hand, Al-Qaeda use its new global recognition as a mean to spread the GJM message¹⁶. Under the new circumstances given, the group started kidnapping and killing selected hostage for propaganda gain. This is the best example to show how the formula of the digitalization of the group perfectly functioned since Al Qaeda members had the chance the select their victims.

On the other hand, the «War on Terror» that that dreadful act unchained encourage to the jihadist group to venture in the digital clandestinity. The post-9/11 was an era of change for the organization, fostering and strengthening ties with other new and existing terrorist groups.

The years following the 9/11 supposed a period of change for Al Qaeda. Although the constrains imposed by the «War on Terror», the fame that the group acquired because of the attacks among their sympathizers help its regional expansion which, along with the new trends of the international terrorism made the group face a new time of decentralization. A sort of new terrorist groups, called as branches or even franchises, emerged within the territorial area of influence of Al Qaeda, such as Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), or Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQIM)¹⁷.

Although it is true that Al Qaeda keep functioning with a hardcore nucleus based around Pakistan, the structure of the group finally started to disperse. Eventually, an uncontrollable and chaotic amount of new jihadist cells with supposedly common goals appeared. The chaos provoked by these sudden apparitions and, essentially, the lack of organization and cohesion among the new cells were the breeding ground for the creation

[reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/t/terrorist-attack-on-uss-cole-background-and-issues-for-congress.html](#) (Last accessed: 01/16/2021).

¹⁶ HOFFMAN, B. "Al Qaeda, Trends in Terrorism and Future Potentialities: An Assessment", *National Defense Research Institute (RAND)*, Washington D.C., 2003. Retrieved from: <https://www.rand.org/pubs/papers/P8078.html> (Last accessed: 01/16/2021).

¹⁷ HORSBURGH, N., JORDÁN, J., TORRES, M. "Analysis and Evolution of the Global Jihadist Movement Propaganda..." *Ibidem. op. cit.* 2006, p. 414.

of a kind of media nexus among the different groups, mainly, to establish common goals and coordinate themselves through the media¹⁸.

By 2005, most of the content released by the organization was made through internet. The digital tools of Al Qaeda experienced, from 2001 onwards, an actual development to, finally, be on the vanguard of the technological devices. The main aim behind that was the necessity to satisfy a younger audience, more used to technology than their elder generations¹⁹. Indeed, according to the growth of the media capabilities of this jihadist group, one could speak of a professionalization of the media.

In this regard, by the dead of Osama bin Laden, in 2011, the charismatic leader and face of Al Qaeda, the organization turned out to be a worldwide web of interconnected cells through media nexus than a centralized group. Apart from the central core and the territorial branches of the jihadist group, new forms emerged within the organization, such as the affiliated entities. However, the most remarkable one of that new forms of Al Qaeda was the apparition, for the first time, of independent jihadist cells and individuals. Although some of these new independent cells and individuals interacted with the Al Qaeda's central commands, some others had no connection with the core, but nonetheless were «prepared to carry out attacks in solidarity with or support of Al Qaeda's jihadist agenda»²⁰. This is, undoubtedly, the best example of how digitalization helped the GJM to its expansion and organization without the necessity of face-to-face meetings to be arranged.

Anyway, even if digitalization favoured the apparition of the so called «lone wolves» within the Al Qaeda jihadist group, this phenomenon would take a higher importance within the structure of the Islamic State, a group more prepared to establish a global digital jihad than Al Qaeda ever was.

¹⁸ KIMMAGE, D. "The Al Qaeda Media Nexus: The Virtual Networks Behind the Global Message", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, Washington D.C., 2008, p. 17. Retrieved from: https://docs.rferl.org/en-US/AQ_Media_Nexus.pdf (Last accessed: 01/16/2021).

¹⁹ HORSBURGH, N., JORDÁN, J., TORRES, M. "Analysis and Evolution of the Global Jihadist Movement Propaganda...", *Íbidem. op. cit.* 2006, p. 414.

²⁰ HOFFMAN, B; REINARES, F. "The Evolution of the Global Terrorist Threat. From 9/11 to Osama bin Laden's Death", *Columbia University Press*, New York.

Islamic State

In the year 2006 the world had to face another jihadist threat with the proclamation of the statehood of the Islamic State. This new group challenged the international security in a way never seen before. Conversely to its precedent, Al Qaeda, since the beginning of its existence, the ISIS had a sort of defined objectives and the mechanism to support them.

To achieve its objectives the group followed three well defined lines of action: the use of traditional and terrorist tactics as a threat, terrorism as mean to obtain political gains and, in the doctrinal approach, the «inspiration» of a corpus of proper religious beliefs, being their sympathizers inspired by an ideology deeply grounded on a radical interpretation of the writings.

With the main aim of creating a state that besides being an alternative to those existing ones, should acquire a symbolic value that transcendent the physical, territorial dimension²¹, the group, instead of taking advantage of the existent media surrounding it, created a custom-made media to match the immediate objectives, being the most remarkable: to create a perception of «the world as immoral and divided», to threaten its enemies while directly communicating with the people all over the world, to instil fear in the hearts and minds of their opponents and rivals, to recruit new militants, strengthen its force and area of influence or to persuade all Muslims that battling to restore a caliphate is a religious duty.

As it was stated previously, the Islamic State develop a strong media which deferred consistently from that seen in other jihadist organizations, consistent, clearly modernized and with high quality. With an enormous strategical apparatus behind their backs, one could say that, for the decision-makers of this terrorist group, the jihad was considered as a product to sell, using the ISIS a sort of quasi-commercial techniques to encourage people to «subscribe» themselves to the movement.

In this regard, one of the main strategies of the ISIS has been to surround its publications with a very convenient halo of attractiveness, with the aim to glamorize its extreme

²¹ SAVEIRO, F. "Islamic State's Qubist Statehood: A Systemic Threat to the Concept of Sovereignty as a Primary Institution in the English School of International Relations", *Revue Maroco-Espagnole de Droit International et Relations Internationales*, 2017, p. 184. Retrieved from: <https://rodin.uca.es/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10498/20001/psi05-etudes-angio-english.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y> (Last accessed: 01/17/2021).

violence. Following this trend of developing and promoting its own «brand awareness», this jihadist group created and released a sort of material which emulated a Hollywoodian aesthetic, in which is remarkable the simplification of the reality between two differentiated poles, the good and the bad, to position itself as an avenger group against social injustice and the agents of change²².

Although the ISIS relied part of its propaganda and communications on the traditional media, that traditional media still was designed and promoted in a completely different way than the elder generations of international terrorist did before. With a modern and very visual model, this media content was mainly released only online. But the most remarkable characteristic of this content is that was written in English rather than Arab. This responds to the aim of the terrorist group to captive worldwide attention and find «followers» for the cause over the whole globe.

For instance, a brief analysis of one of the independent media of the ISIS, the «Inspire» magazine, can tell everything about the catchy strategy followed by this terrorist group. With an eye-catching cover, a hundred percent of the content was written in English. Besides, the document followed a very clear structure, full of pictures to make it visual. Photoshop and collages can be observed as a main resource within the document. Regarding the content, the most remarkable points are that almost all of document is written with the aim to justify the commitment of terrorist attacks to achieve freedom and it is steeped with a longing nimbus of their previous successful terrorist actions. Observing this magazine, one could say that marketing has been a fruitful tool in service of the ISIS.

However, the cornerstone of the media strategy of the Islamic State has been the social networks. Although the main idea under the overwhelming use of the social networks as a tool was to reach the youngest and, therefore, the most susceptible group of being radicalized, the group used these tools to project a self-image of justice by distorting the meaning of morality and to find like-minded individuals of their «social justice». Even though, apart of employing social networks as an eco-chamber, the terrorist group used these tools to provide their sympathizers useful content for self-radicalization and, being this even more concerning, they also provided handy content for self-training, which included from lessons about fighting to tutorials to create weapons and perpetrate

²² KHATIB, L. «The Islamic State Strategy: Lasting and Expanding», *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2015. Retrieved from : <https://carnegieendowment.org/2015/06/29/islamic-state-s-strategy-lasting-and-expanding/ibmd> (Last accessed: 01/18/2021).

attacks²³. For all of this, the social media help to carry out the ISIS a violent jihad all over the world through digital means. After all, «social media is a double-edged sword that serves its interest²⁴».

The effective use of the media and digitalization by the ISIS let it behave as decentralized phenomenon. Some people could say that it is quite surprising to state the ISIS as a decentralized phenomenon, when the main political aim of the group has been to establish a pan-Arab Caliphate from Iraq to Syria and to all the old Arab territories within a revivalist geographical imagination. But, indeed, this political aim is, at least in part, the cause of the decentralized structure of the ISIS.

In fact, the lack of a clear territorial base, the local problems, the struggles over the territory and the expansionist pretentions of the jihadist group have converted the territorial locations under the domain of the ISIS in a changing scenario. This phenomenon has been aggravated due to the differences between the Islamic State and other non-state actors such Al Qaeda, the ethnical and cultural differences with other groups inhabitants in the territories²⁵... But, essentially, this phenomenon has been aggravated because of the harsh of the «War on Terror» driven during the last decade, mainly, against the Islamic State to the point of almost vanish it from the territorial space.

However, the main power of the Islamic State has always been «linked» to the media. That tremendous apparatus behind its actions, that well-kept scenography, both have enabled the group to achieve an incredible number of sympathizers all over the world, creating a strong digital nexus which permits the ISIS to plot attacks and threats in every region, country, city, or village in the globe. Besides, this terrorist group has been able to radicalize people from every culture, regardless their previous religion, beliefs, and general background. Therefore, the strength of this group has always resided in the digitalization.

²³ HUSSAIN, A; SHAKIR. "Media Strategy of the ISIS: An Analysis", *Strategic Studies*, 2016, pp. 107-108. Retrieved from: https://www.jstor.org/stable/48535950?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents (Last accessed: 01/16/2021).

²⁴ DALE, H. "Social Media Prove Double-Edged Sword for ISIS", *CNS News*, 2014. Retrieved from: <https://www.cnsnews.com/commentary/helle-dale/social-media-prove-double-edged-sword-isis> (Last accessed: 01/18/2021).

²⁵ MAMMOURA, J. "ISIS and the Nexus between Media and Powers", *Middle East Institute for Research and Strategic Studies*, 2018, p. 2. Retrieved from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329488911_ISIS_and_the_Nexus_between_Media_and_Powers (Last accessed: 01/18/2021).

So much so that numerous attacks related to the Islamic State has been driven by those individuals known as «lone wolves». These individuals support the Islamic State's Agenda, plan terrorist actions, and even drive suicidal attacks without have had any contact with the organization itself. Although there is not a real consensus of what is the motivation of these persons to behave that way, all signs point to the internet as the main contributor to the radicalization of the «lone wolves», enabling those potential «lone wolves» to connect with other like-minded individuals, express their grievances and potentially feel part of a group or cause²⁶.

In this sense, therefore, the apparition and rapid spread of «lone wolves» over the world corroborates the magnitude of the digital power of the ISIS. One could even say that the Islamic State has been the first international terrorist group which had more power in the cyberspace than in the physical world.

Generation Z. «Digital native» individuals and the twofold problem of the suggestibility of the youngest generations and the overexposure to information nowadays

Nowadays societies are living in an era in which the exposure to information is a fact. The daily task in modernized countries have laid in the cyberworld and mass media. In words of the Canadian psychologist Albert Bandura, media can turn out to be the tutor of the society since it can inoculate values and knowledge on the people.

In this regard, it is necessary to remark that to mobilize people is much easier than it seems. From a psychological perspective, it is enough to provoke a certain mental impact, the demonization of the adversary, and a sort of repetitive messages aimed at the emotional axis²⁷ of the people to make them react for a cause. This turns out to be a concern when the GJM applies these media techniques to their inner strategy.

Currently, the worrisome matter is the overexposure to information of the young generations, for several reasons. In this respect, it is especially concerning the targeting of the GJM, particularly, the ISIS, in what has been labelled as Generation Z. This

²⁶ DICKSON, L. "Lone Wolf Terrorism. A Case Study: The Radicalization Process of a Continually Investigated and Islamic State Inspired Lone Wolf Terrorism", *DIVA*, Malmö University, 2015. Retrieved from: <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1487949/FULLTEXT01.pdf> (Last accessed: 01/18/2021).

²⁷ BAÑOS, P. *El dominio mental*. Barcelona. Ariel, 2020, pp. 55-67.

generation is better known as the generation of the «digital natives». Their linkage with the technology since their birth and the attractiveness of the social networks convert these individuals in an easy target for the terrorist groups.

In fact, there are key developmental factors that make youth particularly susceptible to radicalization. Adolescents (11 to 17 years old) and young adults (18 to 25 years old) have their socioemotional network not fully developed. Moreover, this period of the life is characterized by identity explorations, instability, impulsivity, risk-taking and the perceived need for independence. All this makes this section of the population very vulnerable to persuasive messaging from violent extremist organizations.

This mental predisposition, couple with the fact that the strong familiarity of the Generation Z with technology has profound implications for their social interactions, cognition, psychological development, and worldviews is a breeding ground for radicalization.

The power of internet and the social media as recruiting tools is not an undiscovered truth. However, the ISIS has stepped forward by taking advantage on the overexposure of the younger generations to the cyberspace to explore a possible fruitful niche of radicalization.

With an attractive narrative, applications of easy access and the release of multiple media productions that mimic the artistic animation styles of violent video games²⁸, the group tried to promote the jihad among the youngest individuals. In this regard, scientific studies says that internet addiction disorder and a propensity for playing violent video games lead to patterns of heightened aggressive behaviour²⁹.

From this information can be inferred that behind the recruitment tools of the Islamic State there are psychological-social narrative, a deep understanding of the youth and an aesthetic made to eye-catching the younger generations, all this tremendously magnified because of the overexposure of this «Gen Z» to the technology.

²⁸ BAFFA, C; CHAN, W; FANLO, A; Vest; N. "Defining and Understanding the Next Generation of Salafi-Jihadist", *National Defense Research Institute (RAND)*, 2019, pp. 2-9. Retrieved from: <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE341.html> (Last accessed: 18/01/2021).

²⁹ JONES, S. "A Persistent Threat. The Evolution of al Qai'da and Other Salafi Jihadists", *National Defense Research Institute (RAND)*, 2014. Retrieved from: https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR600/RR637/RAND_RR637.pdf. (Last accessed: 01/18/2021).

For all this, although, currently, in-person radicalization is more effective, societies should be aware of how the overexposure to technology could lead to more susceptible younger generations. Internet is not seen by the terrorist groups only as an eco-chamber anymore, now it is an interactive tool in the radicalization process with a marketing mechanism never seen before.

Conclusions

The success that Global Jihad Movement experienced from the early beginning of the 21st Century onwards was, mainly, due to the digitalization phenomenon. Since the main aim of the Salafi-jihadist terrorism was to create a permanent sensation of threat and insecurity in western societies using violence, if the attacks carried out did not have the media coverage they had, these groups never achieve a worldwide recognition. Therefore, in the case of these terrorist groups, any act of violence or threat, without a proper propaganda would be, at the very least, meaningless.

Indeed, it can be stated that, nowadays, the tools that the digitalization brings to the Global Jihad are their only useful «weapon» to fight states on equal terms due to the asymmetry of conventional forces between the terrorist groups and the states, making the terrorist organizations be always weaker in that terms. In this regard, these groups converted themselves in experts in psychological-mediatic war. They have been very skilled in the «art» of glamorizing violence and creating a casual, some say that even Hollywoodian, aesthetic. With the adequate tools, they make their message permeate in the public opinion with a little effort. For instance, the 9/11 is the best example of how helpful digitalization can be when it comes to spread terror. Is a matter of fact that people born before the year 2000 have the image of the Twin Towers falling etched forever on their minds.

In this regard, the internet offered to the terrorist groups an open window to the world, making easier for them to reach a wide range o population from every location of the world. On one hand, the capacity of internet of releasing content storable, downloadable, of easy access and independent of the mass media and, on the other hand, the ability of the social networks to provide a direct connection between terrorist and sympathizers, besides the power of these social networks to be a speaker for the jihadist activism made

the jihadist terrorism a borderless phenomenon. Therefore, internet can be understood as the catalyser of the distant jihad.

This distant jihad, mainly driven by digital means, the «brand awareness» of the jihadist movement, the increasing popularity of the Global Jihad Movement among its sympathizers, coupled with the apparition of «virtual plotters» shook the roots of the inner structures of the terrorist groups, starting the Global Jihad Movement a process of decentralization.

In the case of Al Qaeda, the territorial expansion, and the increasing fame of the group after the 9/11 led to a rise in the number of adepts to the group over the globe, making the group became chaotic. A disordered amalgam of international terror cells and the lack of organization encourage some activist to coordinate the group and pursue common goals through the coordinate use of online media, working since then with this decentralize structure. On the other hand, in the case of the Islamic State, although its geographic-political pretensions of expanding that Pan-Arab califate, have followed always a more decentralized structure, being, usually, the so-called «lone wolves» the plotters of the attacks. All this means that, nowadays, a major part of the Global Jihad Movement is driven online and even more important, that the scope of digitalization of these Salafist-jihadist group is that that even there is an open debate about if is correct to talk already of a full online radicalization process.

In this regard, today, the major concern is the massive targeting of the GJM of the younger generations. The overexposure of the youngest to the cyberspace and, essentially, to the social networks, coupled with a socioemotional network not fully developed makes these individuals tremendously vulnerable to the persuasive and attractive propaganda from violent extremist organizations.

In the end, it is clear that, at least nowadays, the strength of the remaining Salafist-jihadist groups comes from their online networks rather than their geographical, political, or financial influence. Eventually, these international terrorist groups have adapted themselves to the digitalization becoming actual masters in replicating the narrative and the aesthetic of the social media to appeal more attractive to the younger generations. Having said that, the question arises as to if this world is going towards to an era of full digital terrorism.

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