2.1: THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF SUPPORT: EXAMINING THE CO-EVOLUTION OF A TERRORIST GROUP AND ITS ONLINE FOLLOWERS

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Executive Summary

The study monitors the evolution of perceptions and opinions of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) online, during a time that it was active in Syria and Iraq (2013-2014). A popular web-forum discussing current Islamic affairs was selected for its extensive discussion of ISIS related events. This web-forum had users following ISIS as early as September 2013, many months before the group was making the headlines around the world on a daily basis. We examine why certain terrorist events elicit more reaction online than others, and in what way forum participants affect the proliferation of these events. We hypothesize that there are opinion leaders (individuals who influence the opinions, attitudes, beliefs, motivations, and behaviours of others) that facilitate the discussion of particular terrorist events online. This research is important for two reasons. First, online activity is best viewed as a social place or setting. Research on violent extremism supports online followers of extremist groups that organize themselves into cohesive groups, or what can be referred to as online "communities". Being connected to an extremist dialogue online is often more than a single behaviour that can be deterred –individuals can be embedded in it. Second, this online space can foster radical violent ideologies offline. We aim to expand the understanding of how extremist material makes its way from its source into the public. We aim to do so by capitalizing on the advantages the internet affords researchers: post-content, longitudinally oriented, and coded interactions of individuals.

The study first uses interrupted time series models to examine the impact of six events on online activity, four external events associated with ISIS, and two events internal to the forum. In order the models tested for: 1) The Anbar offensive of December 30, 2013 which coincided with 2) a large cohort of opinion leaders entering the thread; 3) AQ denouncing ISIS in February 2014; 4) A Twitter "star" entering the thread February 2014; 5) The May 2014 crucifixions; 6) Kurds repel of ISIS in Kobani June 2014. The results indicate that the most dramatic change in discussion occurred when a major ISIS event was accompanied by a substantial increase in opinion leadership in the online community. Afterwards, users were less negative and more likely to form small, cohesive cliques. These results indicate that the conversation became less hostile and more homogenous over time for two reasons. First, the decrease in negativity scores was not accompanied by a noticeable change in the types of material being discussed. Second, users became more cohesive in their conversations, indicating less focus on specific users and greater levels of collective interactions. These results support our hypothesis that the discussion of major-ISIS events is facilitated by opinion leaders. Not indicated by our hypothesis, but an interesting implication, is our finding of a group-based effect: the greater the share of the network opinion leaders had (as opposed to specific opinion leaders), the greater the impact of an external event on forum participants.

The study also used ordinary least square regression to test the role of opinion leaders on the structure of interactions among participants to the ISIS threads. The results show that, as more opinion leaders were present in the network, forum participants were more successful in forming more egalitarian groups to discuss material. In times with fewer opinion leaders, these conversations tended to devolve into arguments, increasing negativity and increasing centralization around particular individuals.

These results corroborate an existing literature on communities focusing on violent extremism, and describe an underexplored area of how communities evolve over time. We propose that opinion leaders facilitate this discussion and are a key characteristic of why certain extremist narratives gain traction and are proliferated through the online violent milieu. This work is a first step in generating a better understanding of how extremist organizations elicit support. Our objective was to begin an assessment of how the public - specifically those interested in jihadi activity, followed and discussed terrorist events. The findings of this report indicate that it is not merely the worthiness of a news story in the eyes of the community that creates a more cohesive and interested discussion, rather it is a suitable event that has a number of key community participants discussing it. It support the findings of prior proposing that the online networks of individuals interested in discussing the activities of major terrorist groups generate their own social structure and trends independent from the influence of terrorist groups.