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"Working and Waiting": The Salafi-Jihadi movement on Telegram in 2021

Ali Fisher – Nico Prucha

Ali Fisher has a dual specialism in Strategic Communication and Data Science. Ali worked at the University of Exeter as a Lecturer in International Relations and as Director of Counterpoint, the think tank of the British Council in London. He subsequently worked as Associate Director of Digital Media Research at InterMedia, and Director of Mappa Mundi Consulting. In recent years he was Principal Data Scientist at the Vienna Observatory for Applied Research into Terrorism and Extremism, (VORTEX) at the University of Vienna, a Research Fellow at the University of Southern California, and now is Director of Human Cognition ltd. based on London. In additions to his academic work, he has worked on Strategic Communication projects and Counter Terrorism projects for European and US Government Departments. He has used Big Data techniques and Network Analysis to support efforts to disrupt extremist networks of influence as well as the interrupt the distribution of images of child sexual abuse. Ali has a PhD from University of Birmingham.

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Abstract

Salafi-Jihadi groups adopted the Telegram messaging platform around 2016. Since then, it has been a mainstay of the information ecosystem for groups such as al-Dawlat al-Islamiyah (IS) and al-Qaeda (AQ) and other foreign terrorist organisations (FTO). While the Salafi-Jihadi movement has been using Telegram, the general userbase of the platform has grown rapidly, it was 5th most downloaded mobile app worldwide in 2021 and 13th most used social platform globally.[1] This paper uses examines how the Salafi-Jihadi movement operates on Telegram as a network of interconnected hubs where traffic and influence flow in multiple directions creating a vast dynamic ecosystem. This research offers the most comprehensive analysis, to date, of the information ecosystem of Salafi-Jihadi groups on Telegram. It is based on observation during 2021 of over 7,000

[1] Simon Kemp, TikTok Hits 1 Billion Users—Faster Than Facebook (And More New Stats), October 21, 2021 https://blog.hootsuite.com/simon-kemp-social-media/; https://blog.hootsuite.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Digital-2021-Report-October-Update-Mobile-App-Rankings-Downloads.png; https://blog.hootsuite.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Digital-2021-Report-October-Update-Worlds-Most-Used-Social-Platforms.png

channels belonging to elements of the Salafi-Jihadi movement including IS, AQ, Taliban, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Hamas, along with Salafi channels of importance to the movement. It finds that just under 90% of the channels connect into a single giant network (including channels from IS, AQ, Taliban, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Hamas). This means they are part of an interconnected ecosystem which comprise sub-clusters that have varying degrees of shared meaning. They often share common sources of content, frequently those channels on the Salafi side of the Salafi-Jihadi nexus. Such channels create a permissive environment in which Salafi-Jihadi groups can target their intended audience, and share material to bolster their theological position to craft a specific religious identity. Furthermore, the most important Salafi channels are much more likely than other channels to be sharing join links to other channels. Despite the volume of data available via Telegram, with some notable exceptions, much of the analysis and commentary of the Salafi-Jihad movement on Telegram has been anecdotal or superficial, resulting in the image of very insular Jihadi communities just talking to themselves.[2] In 2021, far from being driven off Telegram (or the internet) by EUROPOL led disruption efforts, the Salafi-Jihadi movement and the FTO elements within it, have reconfigured just as a flock of birds adjusts in flight to the attack of a predator. In 2022 they continue to exploit the platform.

Keywords

Salafi-Jihadi movement, Telegram, strategic communication

1. Introduction

Salafi-Jihadi groups adopted The Telegram messaging platform around 2016. Since then, it has been a mainstay of the Salafi-Jihadi information ecosystem for groups such as al-Dawlat al-Islamiyya (IS) and al-Qaeda (AQ) and other foreign terrorist organisations (FTO). While the Salafi-Jihadi movement has been using Telegram, the userbase of the platform has grown rapidly. It was 5th most downloaded mobile app worldwide and 13th most used social platform in 2021.[3] In contrast, Twitter once hailed as the platform on which IS achieved mass reach is now ranked 15th by user numbers and has approximately 100 million fewer users than Telegram and didn't feature in the top mobile downloads.[4]

[2] For a lengthy analysis see, Spagna, Nicolo' Giuseppe, Ethnographizing Islamic State's Digital Community on Telegram Platform; Socio-Organizational Anatomy and New Models of Threat, BTT, (November 2021).

[3] Simon Kemp, TikTok Hits 1 Billion Users—Faster Than Facebook (And More New Stats), October 21, 2021 https://blog.hootsuite.com/simon-kemp-social-media/; https://blog.hootsuite.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Digital-2021-Report-October-Update-Mobile-App-Rankings-Downloads.png; https://blog.hootsuite.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Digital-2021-Report-October-Update-Worlds-Most-Used-Social-Platforms.png

[4] Simon Kemp, TikTok Hits 1 Billion Users—Faster Than Facebook (And More New Stats), October 21, 2021 https://blog.hootsuite.com/simon-kemp-social-media/; https://blog.hootsuite.

There have been numerous attempts over the years to 'deplatform' Salafi-Jihadi groups. Much has been made in the press and by 'embedded academics' from the transatlantic orthodoxy of Terrorism Studies, about the attempt by EUROPOL to prevent Jihadi groups from using Telegram.[5] The imminent removal of Jihadi groups from Telegram was trailed in advance by some researchers, whom have advisory connections to EUROPOL, and later the effort was hailed as having "resolutely trashed the Islamic State's presence on Telegram".[6] This follows a familiar pattern where many researchers and 'embedded academics' in the transatlantic orthodoxy of Terrorism Studies, have perpetuated a 'success narrative' about the online efforts against Salafi-Jihadi groups, while the Media Mujahidin have been forging ahead, exploiting new technologies and approaches.[7]

Despite the volume of data available via Telegram, with some notable exceptions, much of the analysis and commentary of the Salafi-Jihad movement on Telegram has been anecdotal, superficial, or focused on a single group resulting in the image of very insular Jihadi communities just talking to themselves.[8] Most work focuses on the use of Telegram by IS, with comparatively little attention paid to AQ or Taliban activity.[9]

com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Digital-2021-Report-October-Update-Mobile-App-Rankings-Downloads.png; https://blog.hootsuite.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Digital-2021-Report-October-Update-Worlds-Most-Used-Social-Platforms.png

[5] The role of 'embedded academics' in the transatlantic orthodoxy of Terrorism Studies, Jackson, RDW, 'The Case for a Critical Terrorism Studies' (2007) http://hdl.handle.net/2160/1945; https://pure.aber.ac.uk/portal/files/99753/APSA-2007-Paper-final2.pdf

[6] https://www.wired.co.uk/article/isis-telegram-security

[7] The role of 'embedded academics' in the transatlantic orthodoxy of Terrorism Studies, Jackson, RDW, 'The Case for a Critical Terrorism Studies' (2007) http://hdl.handle.net/2160/1945; https://pure.aber.ac.uk/portal/files/99753/APSA-2007-Paper-final2.pdf

[8] For a lengthy analysis see, Spagna, Nicolo' Giuseppe, Ethnographizing Islamic State's Digital Community on Telegram Platform; Socio-Organizational Anatomy and New Models of Threat, BTT, (November 2021); Yayla, Ahmet S., and Anne Speckhard. "Telegram: The mighty application that ISIS loves." International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism 9 (2017); Bloom, Mia, Hicham Tiflati, and John Horgan. "Navigating ISIS's preferred platform: Telegram1." Terrorism and Political Violence 31.6 (2019): 1242-1254; Shehabat, Ahmad, Teodor Mitew, and Yahia Alzoubi. "Encrypted jihad: Investigating the role of Telegram App in lone wolf attacks in the West." Journal of strategic security 10.3 (2017): 27-53; Bloom, Mia, and Chelsea Daymon. "Assessing the future threat: ISIS's virtual caliphate." Orbis 62.3 (2018): 372-388; Criezis, Meili. "Online Deceptions." Perspectives on Terrorism 14.1 (2020): 67-73; Amarasingam, Amarnath, Shiraz Maher, and Charlie Winter. "How Telegram disruption impacts jihadist platform migration." Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats (2021).

[9] Prucha, Nico. "Is and the jihadist information highway–projecting influence and religious identity via telegram." Perspectives on Terrorism 10.6 (2016): 48-58.

Using a progressive evidence-based approach, the collaboration between data science and domain expertise, is fundamental for this research. This approach enables researchers to develop a strategic level 'bird's eye view' of the way Salafi-Jihadi use the Telegram platform, how the groups related to each other and how designated Foreign Terrorist Organisations relate to other groups who coordinate around interpretations of Salafi theology and employ the rich and long-standing textual traditions to further their cause.

The paper offers the most comprehensive analysis, to date of the information ecosystem of Salafi-Jihadi groups on Telegram. Based on Telegram messages observed during 2021 of over 7,000 channels belonging to elements of the Salafi-Jihadi movement including IS, AQ, Taliban, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Hamas, along with Salafi channels of importance to the movement.

It finds around 90% of the channels connect into a single giant network. They are not insular, as some would believe, but part of an interconnected ecosystem which comprise sub-clusters that have varying degrees of shared meaning. This does not necessarily mean that FTO channels directly share content from each other, they instead share common sources of content, frequently those on the Salafi side of the Salafi-Jihadi nexus. Common sources of content are, for example, a range of historical Salafi writings by scholar such as Ibn Taymiyya, Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, or Ibn al-Qayyim. Such channels create a permissive environment in which Salafi-Jihadi groups can target their intended audience, and from which theologically aligned material to bolster the credibility of their theological position is shared.

In 2021, far from being driven off Telegram (or the internet) the Salafi-Jihadi movement and the FTO elements within it, have reconfigured just as a flock of birds adjusts in flight to the attack of a predator. In 2022 they have continued to exploit the platform.

2. What is Telegram

The Media Mujahidin have used Telegram to communicate since 2016.[10] According to Telegram developers, Telegram is a cloud-based instant messaging service, providing optional end-to-end encrypted messaging. Telegram lets users access their chats from multiple devices with messages that are heavily encrypted and can self-destruct. Telegram has no limits on the size of your

[10] Prucha, Nico. "Is and the jihadist information highway–projecting influence and religious identity via telegram." Perspectives on Terrorism 10.6 (2016): 48-58; Frampton, Martyn, Ali Fisher, Nico Prucha, and David H. Petraeus. The New Netwar: Countering extremism online. Policy Exchange, 2017.

media and chats, and groups can hold up to 200,000 members.[11] It is free and open, having an open API and protocol free for everyone, which has allowed users to build their own bots, and even their own clients to access Telegram.

Over the last five years Telegram has been the most important social media platform for jihadist media operatives, to project influence, disseminate videos, text documents, pictures, audio and torrent files. Since its adoption, Telegram has customarily been the first point where Salafi-Jihadi content is released into the information ecosystem.

Much of the 'success narrative' produced by the Transatlantic orthodoxy of Terrorism Studies has presented the adoption of Telegram as the result of disruption on Twitter forcing IS and AQ to use smaller platforms on the margins of the internet. From the perspective of the Media Mujahidin Telegram has had much greater utility for their efforts to communicate with supporters. Telegram created the opportunity for the Media Mujahidin to use one app to have encrypted conversations, share large files, broadcast content to thousands of users, large group text chat, now with the option to allow millions of users to chat live[12] along with one-to-one video, and automated features including bots[13] to moderate groups or interact with users to share content.

It is important to note, while the move to Telegram by the Media Mujahidin has been mythologized within the transatlantic orthodoxy of terrorism studies as the result of a 'successful' effort to drive them from Twitter, there is another perspective. First, the tech landscape has shifted dramatically. Telegram now has both a larger userbase than Twitter and a greater number of mobile downloads. Second, even when Salafi-Jihadi groups such as the Taliban are able to use Twitter openly and maintain classical websites, they have Telegram groups with tens of thousands of users. Third, Telegram enables users to engage with the full range of groups and content across both sides of the Salafi-Jihadi nexus, not just Foreign Terrorist Organisations.[14] Fourth, on Telegram large Salafi networks are well established. This is the primary target audience for Salafi-Jihadi groups to garner sympathizers and recruits, with the Media Mujahidin linking to Salafi-only channels and resharing Salafi content within Salafi-Jihadi channels to demonstrate the application of theology at the center of Salafi scholarship in the Salafi-Jihadi ambition of why and for what they fight. For example, the Islamic States uses anti-Shiite theology to dehumanize Iraqi Shiites and as an ultimate justification to execute captured Iraqis, accused of working for the army and being Shiite. For this pur-

[11] https://telegram.org/

[12] https://telegram.org/blog/voice-chats-on-steroids#limitless-voice-chats

[13] https://core.telegram.org/bots

[14] For detail on Salafi-Jihadi Nexus see: Fisher, Prucha, 'Understanding the Global Jihadist Movement 20 years after 9/11', EICTP Expert Paper, October 2021.

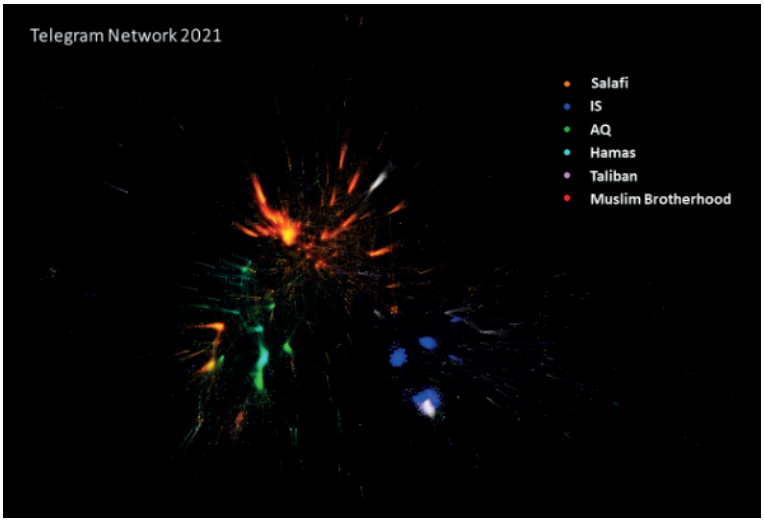
pose, Salafi scholar positions are embedded into IS videos showing the killing and filming inside Shia mosques in Iraq as further 'proof' of the 'heresy' that makes the fight against all Shia Muslims an ultimate obligation.[15]

3. Telegram Data

The full range of material of mainstream Salafi and Salafi-Jihad material is available on Telegram. Channels[16] were identified by fluent Arabic speaking subject matter experts, joining both open channels and channels requiring prior interaction with group admins to gain access. The channels which were joined were associated with well-known Salafi-Jihadi groups and aligned organisations or Salafi channels shared by Salafi-Jihadi groups. Data is collected in near real-time via the Telegram API.[17] All messages forwarded in 2021 were aggregated to build the dataset for the network graph.

The network of content sharing (one channel/group resharing messages from another channel/group) within the core of the movement shows a network of over 7,200 channels. The network of content sharing during 2021 shows that despite the orthodox narrative about "trashed" networks and driving IS from Telegram, the movement is still well established and active on the platform.

Figure 1 - *Telegram Network 2021*



[15] Out of the many possible examples, the IS videos Salil al-Sawarim, part 4 and 'ala Minhaj al-Nubuwa demonstrate this mindset based on theology very clearly.

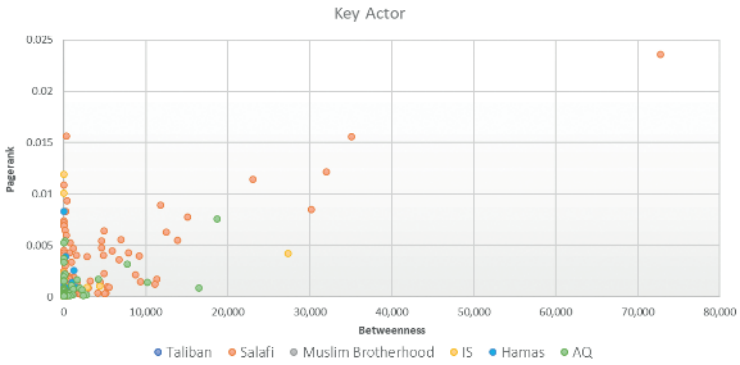
[16] Channels is used to describe the range of broadcast channels, and group chats.

[17] Data was collected by BlackLight, a product of Human Cognition ltd. BlackLight has been used to deliver data to Governmental agencies and Social Media companies in Europe and the United States.

There are 11,553 connections between the channels. While this creates a large network, this is only 0.04% of the potential connections. This is a sparse network but one which still has an underlying structure. Examining the graph in detail finds almost 90% (89.3% – 6,466 of 7,241 total) of channels are connected in a single giant component. This network has a diameter of 14 and comprises 36 communities or particularly interconnected network sub-clusters.[18]

The existence of the giant component emphasises the ability for the network to remain connected despite efforts at disruption. This 'giant' component comprises channels associated with groups including IS, AQ, Taliban, Hamas, and the Muslim Brotherhood, along with many Salafi channels. It shows that while Salafi-Jihadi groups rarely share content directly from each other's channels, they are still connected via primarily Salafi groups. This means that while IS, AQ, Hamas, Taliban and the Muslim Brotherhood may not connect directly, they are all connected to the same network, and draw on the same ecosystem of content and theological material, which, at its heart, is comprised of thousands and thousands of pages mainly in Arabic, penned by historical and contemporary Salafi scholars.

Figure 2 - *Key Actor graph based on betweenness and PageRank*



A Key Actor graph shows the important nodes within a network based on betweenness and PageRank.[19] Betweenness shows how important a node is

[18] Vincent D Blondel, Jean-Loup Guillaume, Renaud Lambiotte, Etienne Lefebvre, Fast unfolding of communities in large networks, in Journal of Statistical Mechanics: Theory and Experiment 2008 (10), P1000; R. Lambiotte, J.-C. Delvenne, M. Barahona Laplacian Dynamics and Multiscale Modular Structure in Networks 2009

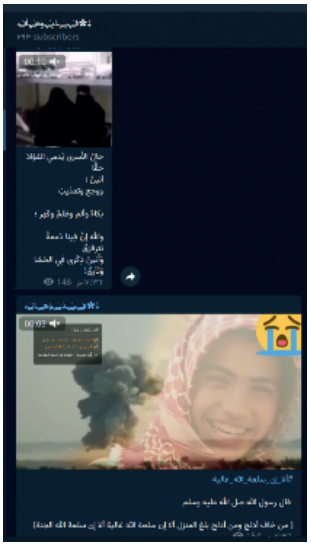
[19] Fisher, A., et al. "Mapping the jihadist information ecosystem: Towards the 3rd generation of disruption capability." Policy Brief, Royal United Services Institute, London (2019). (p.16); Willis, Alistair, Ali Fisher, and Ilia Lvov. "Mapping networks of influence: tracking Twitter conversations through time and space." Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies 12.1 (2015): 494-530; Marie Gillespie et al., "Understanding the Changing Cultural Value

in information flow across the network, while PageRank shows how important a node is to other important nodes. The analysis shows that many of the important nodes on both measures are Salafi rather than the numerous channels aligned with Jihadi or FTO elements in the network. Salafi channels are much less likely to be closed by Telegram and therefore have greater longevity and may contribute to the importance of these channels. However, as other channels would still have to repeatedly share content from these Salafi channels to increase their PageRank, this would indicate their ongoing importance to the network. The important role of these channels is also confirmed by a review of the content they share.

Using the top five most important Salafi Channels (by PageRank) an analysis was conducted of the URL they share. 99.2% of shared URL were to other Telegram Channels. This reiterates the importance of these channels for users looking for further content within the network.

Examining the content found through the most frequently shared URL, highlights why Salafi channels are important to the efforts of Salafi-Jihadi FTO and specifically their effort to reach a large part of their target audience. The following section reviews some of the content found via the most shared URL with particular reference to content which would resonate with a Salafi-Jihadi target audience. It is presented as an overview rather than tied to specific channels as a detailed analysis of Salafi channels is beyond the scope of this specific article.

Figure 3 - *Screenshot from Telegram*



of the BBC World Service and the British Council", Open University Cultural Value Project, July 2014.

Elements of IS content are easy to find within these channels. Here two clips from IS videos appear between pictures of a cat and a picture of roses. One clip features an IS-suicide bomber, with his smiling portrait blended into the explosion with the IS-logo in the top right replaced with a crying emoji. Beneath the video the context is made clear in the comment: "The messenger of god, peace and blessings be upon him, said: "who fears setting out at nightfall and does so nevertheless will reach a house, for god's rewards are plentiful, for god's reward is nothing but paradise."[20] The part of this hadith (saying by prophet Muhammad) "for god's rewards are plentiful" is used as a hashtag that easily allows users to find the same or similar content within subscribed Telegram groups. The passage of the above stated hadith "for god's rewards are plentiful" is used in texts produced by AQ, as a reference for those killed in the 1980s in Afghanistan, as well as in addresses by senior leaders, including Osama bin Laden.

Figure 4 - *Screenshot from Telegram*

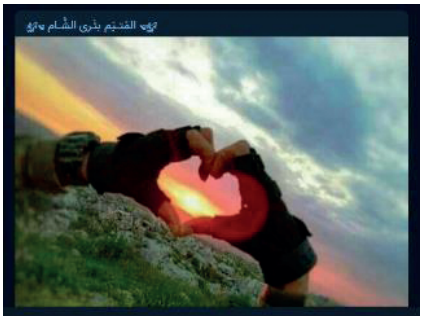
Other images depict the suffering of IS-women in Syrian/Iraqi prison camps. Emphasising the importance of the Salafi-Jihadi nexus, in addition to IS material the channel shares links to other Salafi channels.

Other channels feature a mixture of Salafi and jihadi content, including the imagery of horse and rider flying a black banner in the background, while an armed man – seen here as a mujahid – tends to his white horse. The most dedicated hearts are often those who are silent. The imagery presents to the initiated audience the Mujahideen being on the frontlines (ribat), observant,

[20] Narrated by Abu Hurayra, one of the prophet's companions, relayed via the hadith collections by al-Bukhari, Muslim, Tirmidhi and Abu Dawud. For an explanation of the hadith and the sources: Ibn Taymiyya, al-Tuhfat al-'Iraqiyya.

ready for action, while first and foremost serving God and the Islamic community they claim to represent.

Figure 5 - *Screenshots from Telegram*



The channels also link to each other, note the image of the cat in the channel profile. In classical Islam cats were pure animals and the complete opposite to dogs. This may also call to mind the example of Omar who on finding a cat was sleeping on his sleeve, decided that instead of waking the cat he would cut off his sleeve.

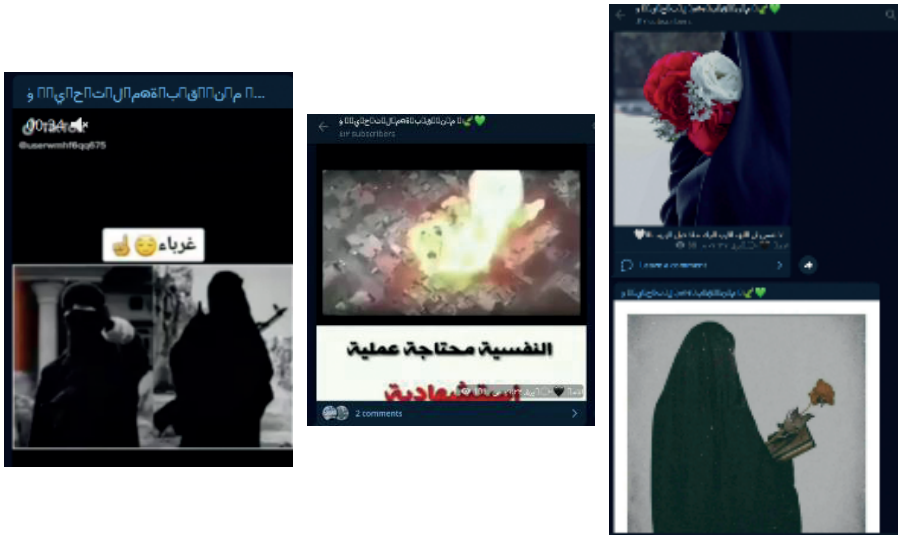
Some of the links shared by Salafi channels connect to Telelgram channels which amongst Salafi content also reshare from TikTok a clip of an IS video, under the Arabic term ghuraba' with one emoji of a raised right index finger, to confess the oneness of God, and a satisfied smiley. Ghuraba' is the plural of gharib and can be translated in the sense of 'being strange' / estranged by worldly existence. It is a prominent theological concept at the heart of the Salafi-Jihadi nexus as it demands the individual believer to be of most pure intention of acting and living according to god's command. In western societies this can lead to a form of self-chosen isolation to avoid committing sinful acts, such as seeing humans violating the ultra-conservative dress codes, being exposed to places that serve alcohol etc. The term was coined by prophet Muhammad who stated, "Islam has begun as something strange (or alien) and will return as such." Salafis and especially Salafi-Jihadis consider themselves as the people who are actively applying theology through

every available means, and as part of those who bring back Islam despite it being seen as alien, strange or not taken seriously at all.

Other posts feature praise for suicide bombing attacks with images taken from drone footage of the explosion.

Some images resonate with both Salafi and Jihadi sides of the Salafi-Jihadi nexus, including content portraying the ideal woman or wife, often shown carrying roses. In addition to the beauty of God's creation, roses symbolize life and eternity. The colour choice also references specific concepts, red often associated with blood and hence martyrs, white symbolizing life and purity.

Figure 6 - *Screenshots from Telegram*

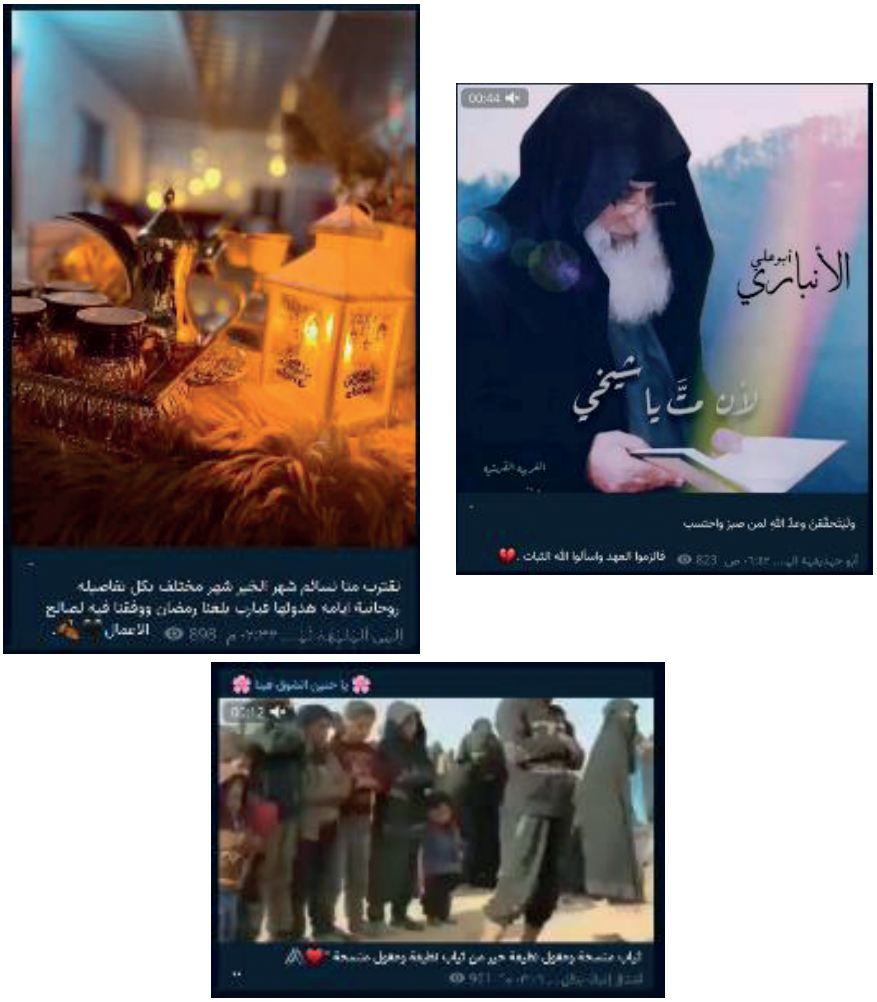


However, the images of combat are not the only parts of the Salafi-Jihadi content to feature in these predominantly Salafi channels. Nasheed, pictures of coffee being served and intermixed with jihadi content that – to the initiated consumer – is clear.

For example, Abu Ali al-Anbari (pictured below right) is one of the most important IS theologians, who is eulogized in a nasheed as man of great knowledge and respect. Within Islamic State online networks Abu Ali al-Anbari is heavily featured with al-Bayan radio programs dedicated to his speeches, writings and a lengthy biography was published as well. His anti-Shia theological tractates, for example, outline in detail how the practice of 'polytheism', the association of items, persons or good to God, leads to a total violation of the oneness of god. This is a fundamental allega-

tion lanced against Shiites in general who are accused as being 'polytheists' rather than 'monotheist' and hence are obligatory to be killed. The Arabic words, references and general rhetoric employed by al-Anbari are very similar and often the same to what ultra-conservative scholars from the Gulf region use and broadcast globally. Other posts feature brief IS video clips that emphasize the importance of theological aspects common to Salafi and Salafi-Jihadis alike.

Figure 7 - *Screenshots from Telegram*

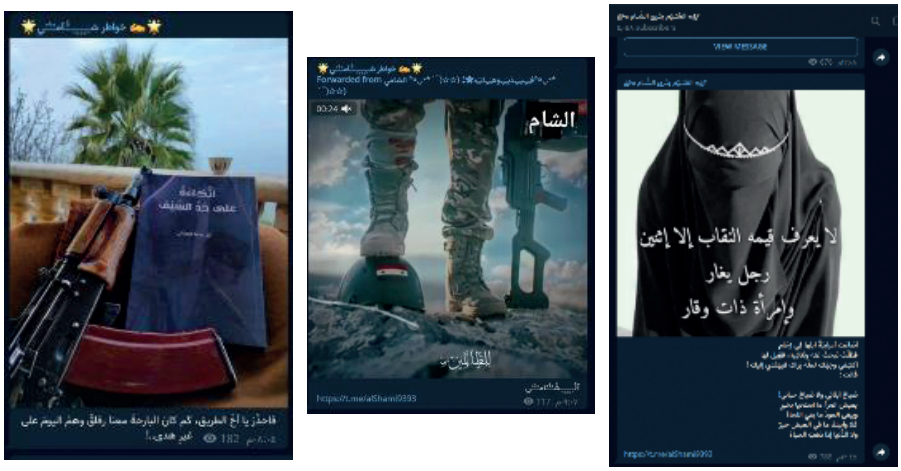


The importance of theology while expressed in writing, is also demonstrated through practical application. With the fall of what was often referred to as "the last IS stronghold", al-Baghuz, images and video by the

mainstream media surfaced showing the families of male IS-fighters. Videos, for example, showing male children praying is framed as demonstrating steadfastness and unchallenged loyalty to God where the believer shall withstand the trials, torture and tribulation of this world to receive entry to paradise as reward in the afterlife.

The sharing of material in Salafi channels is not limited to IS, links shared by the most important Salafi channels in the network also lead to groups featuring AQ material interwoven with the Syrian revolution in general and Salafi content. Examples include, in a classical jihadi arrangement, a print copy of writing by Abu Hudhayfa al-Sudani, a core AQ theologue alongside a weapon. Another example features a boot on the helmet of the regular Syrian Arab Army showing disrespect to the conquered enemy in the eyes of the target audience, and the idealized image of a woman.

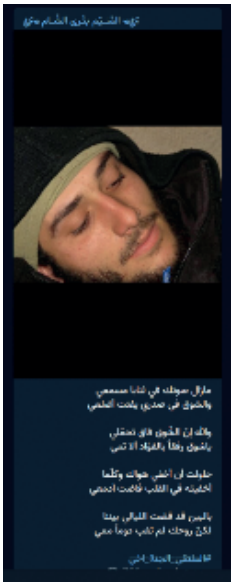
Figure 8 - *Screenshots from Telegram*



The writing by al-Sudani with the title "Bearing on the Blade of the Sword" is a theological book with the intention to offer divine guidance to the fighter – with a comment warning that yesterday's brothers might be misguided today. The intellectual framework of AQ seeks to offer clarity on why and who to fight – and what for. The book was released by AQ's media house Bayt al-Maqdis, a reference to Jerusalem, and was subsequently praised online.

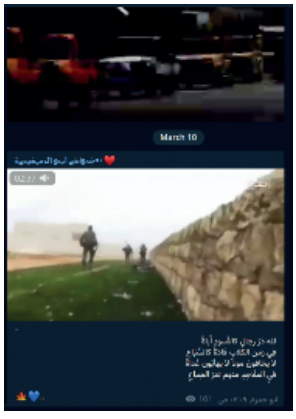
Another Syrian group sharing pro-AQ posts, include poems and commemoration of a martyr tagged by the statement "#in paradise we shall meet my brother" and cite Salafi authors, in this example, Ibn al-Qayyim.

Figure 9 - *Screenshots from Telegram*



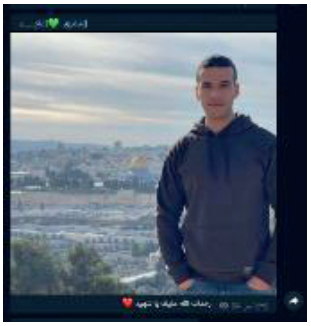
Another channel offers a combination of AQ and Amjad videos mixed with posts offering advice and religious role models juxtaposed with short videos from inside al-Hol detention camp and women calling for help.

Figure 10 - *Screenshots from Telegram*



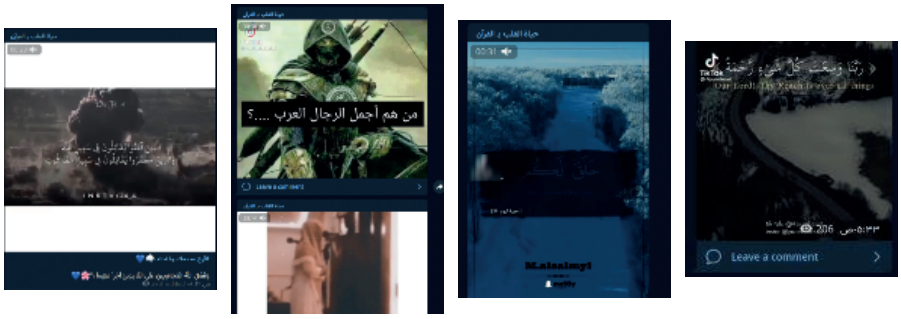
The commemoration of Palestinian martyrs, without any further information or context, can also be found in links shared by the top Salafi channels in the network. These draw on many of the same theological references as other parts of the Salafi-Jihadi network and thus suggest the young man died fighting (or violently) for the sake of the Dome of the Rock (seen in the background) in Jerusalem. As it turned out, the young man seen in the image was one of the perpetrators of random attacks against civilians in Israel in March 2022 and was shot to death.

Figure 11 - *Screenshot from Telegram*



Some channels combine videos from Jihadi sub-cultural with material from preachers based in or from the Gulf region, drawing on the multiplatform nature of the Salafi-jihadi movement. This is evident in IS video scenes showing suicide bombing attacks with verses of the Quran embedded and a link to the Instagram account. It also appears in stylised imagery from TikTok juxtaposed with preachers. Resharing material from TikTok is also used for posts where scenes from nature are presented as proof of god's creation, enriched with English Quran translations.

Figure 12 - *Screenshots from Telegram*



Other channels use common visual themes for example prisoners, particularly female, to express specific theological concepts which resonate with Salafi and Salafi-Jihadi audiences. These themes are obvious to the intended audience but can often pass by many researchers and social media filters as the material is not explicitly identified as from an FTO group nor is the imagery of a graphic nature.

Figure 13 - *Screenshot from Telegram*

A final series of images captures the nuance and challenge posed by the Salafi-Jihadi nexus as it is expressed through social media. The image of applied theology in the form of religious ritual (prayer) is immediately followed by imagery relating to another form of applied theology in the Salafi-Jihadi understanding.

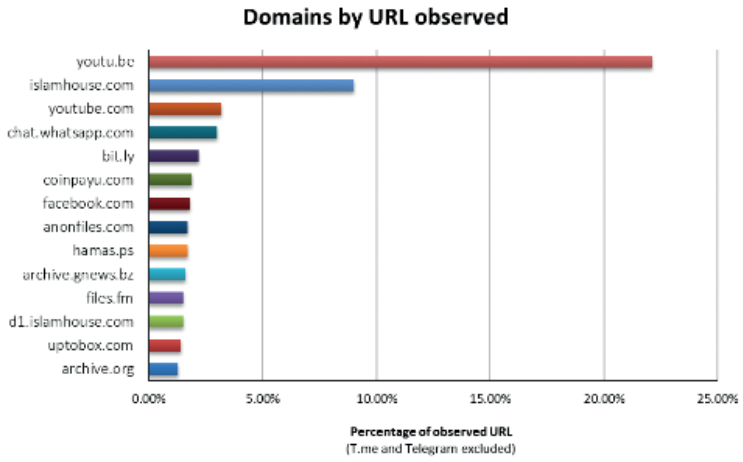
The juxtaposition of hand, watch and gun on the one side and red flower likely a reference to blood and martyrdom on the other in a channel which could be joined via links shared in a channel focused on sharing Salafi material highlights the role which some Salafi channels fulfil in sustaining access to Salafi-Jihadi theology. Not only are brief clips of IS and AQ content avail-

able via these channels, posted between material produced by Salafi authors, but the visual references and theological concepts which underpin them are also a familiar part of these Salafi channels.

The overview of material shared in channels promoted by the important Salafi elements of the network, highlights both the interplay between Salafi and Salafi-Jihadi content and the multiplatform communication paradigm in which this sharing occurs. Examining the URL shared in the channels that make up the Salafi-Jihadi ecosystem on Telegram provides another level of insight.

As a proportion of total sharing for the observed activity in 2021, YouTube remains an important element, for the Salafi-Jihadi information ecosystem, with many other familiar platforms including Facebook, Archive.org and WhatsApp also appearing in the most shared.[21]

Figure 14 - *On-line platforms most shared among the Salafi-Jihadi movement*



The most shared domains on Telegram include platforms fulfilling the main roles within the multiplatform communication paradigm; 'beacon', 'content aggregator', and 'file store'. In addition to Telegram, WhatsApp chat links are shared frequently. Justpaste.it and Telegra.ph are the most frequently used aggregators, with YouTube, archive.org, annonfiles being prominent content stores.

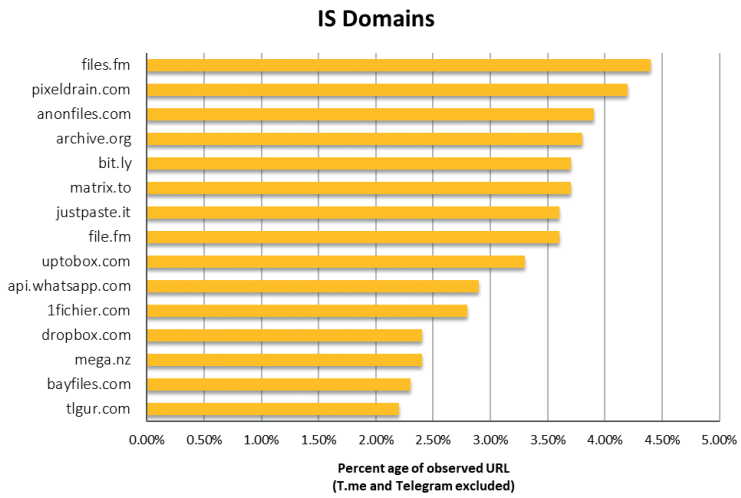
Other particularly noteworthy domains; Coinpayu.com enables users to earn cryptocurrency and gives access a number of cryptocurrency mining and exchange apps – cryptocurrency, NFT, and blockchain being prominent ele-

[21] Telegram and T.me were removed from analysis.

ments of current Web3 applications.[22] Second, Islamhouse.com describes itself as "The largest and the most authentic free reference to introduce Islam in the world languages on the internet".[23] That it is part of the Salafi-Jihadi nexus should not be surprising given the theological nature of the movement and the tendency to use mainstream Salafi material alongside branded IS or AQ content.[24] Islamhouse.com offers mainly books in Arabic, and in another 120 languages, where selected Arabic writings are free to read online and download as translations. The site hosts the writings of Sunni Islamic scholars – hence the writings are all theological and offer a wide range of shared meaning with the Salafi-Jihadi movement, ranging from hatred against Shi'ites to historical books framing it a divine obligation for any Muslim to kill anyone accused of blasphemy, especially of insulting god or prophet Muhammad.

However, while the network exists predominantly as a single giant interconnected unit, there are specific clusters within it. The emphasis of these specific clusters is shown by the alignment or allegiance of the channels which comprise the cluster, but also by the material they share. The URL they share to sites outside Telegram highlights the difference in the sharing behaviour adopted by the different groups and the numerous distinctions between the sharing behaviours adopted by the different groups.

Figure 15 - *On-line platforms most shared among the Salafi-Jihadi movement. Brakedown by organization*



[22] For example, current options promoted on the site include: KuCoin, Bitdeer, Binance, HOO, Indoex

[23] http://islamhouse.com/en

[24] For description of Salafi-Jihadi Nexus see: Fisher, Prucha, 'Understanding the Global Jihadist Movement 20 years after 9/11', EICTP Expert Paper, October 2021. p. 23.

Figure 16 - *On-line platforms most shared among the Salafi-Jihadi movement. Brakedown by organization*

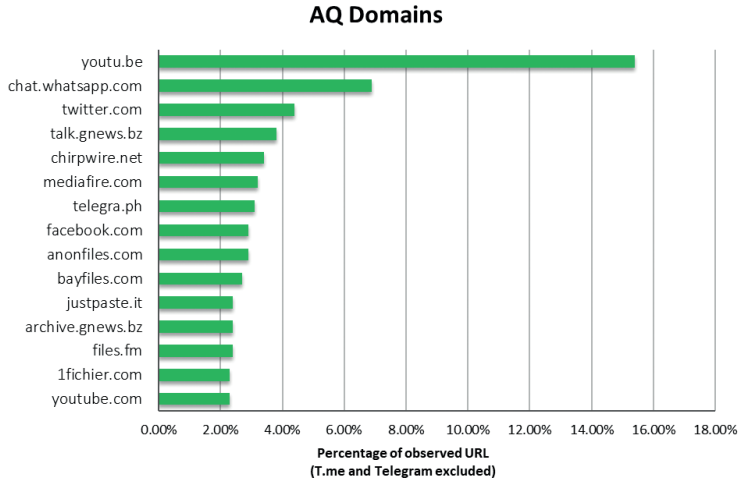


Figure 17 - *On-line platforms most shared among the Salafi-Jihadi movement. Brakedown by organization*

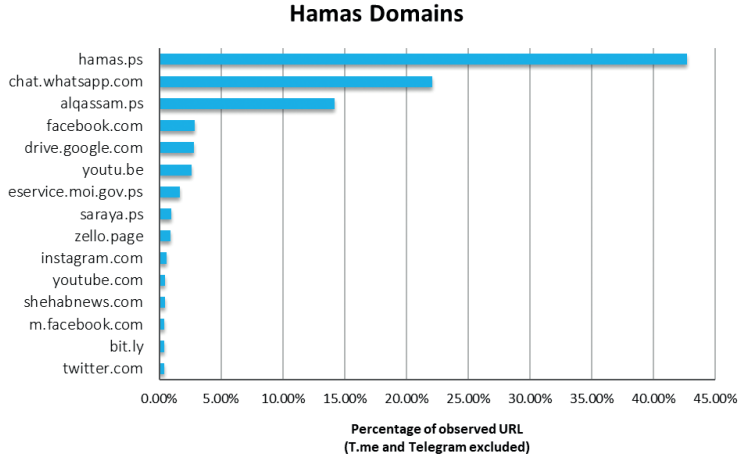
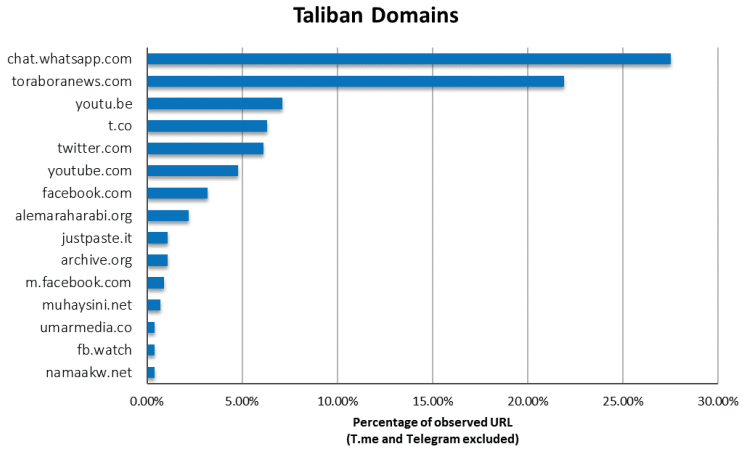


Figure 18 - *On-line platforms most shared among the Salafi-Jihadi movement. Brakedown by organization*



Observations from the specific groups show some commonalities and some specific nuances. First, WhatsApp is a prominent domain in the overall graph and in each of the graphs relating to specific groups.

Second, IS is the only example where a group specific URL does not appear in the most shared. This may have more to do with the constant pressure IS websites are under in comparison to the other groups. This may also account for the rapid cycling through many different types of platforms used a 'content stores' or filesharing platforms.[25] AQ, Taliban and Hamas respectively utilise a combination of their own specific websites, social media and file sharing platforms – with some sites or names of sites almost as old as the internet itself.

Third, the most used domains highlight the alternative communication options AQ and IS advertise to their supporters. AQ share links to Chirpwire and gnews.bz which is the former location of their Rocket Chat server. IS channels share links to Matrix, where users can access material via an IS run server.

4. Discussion

The evidence-based analysis of the Salafi-Jihadi information ecosystem on Telegram, and the URL shared to other domains highlights several important findings about the current state of the movement online and the multiplatform communication paradigm (MCP) which makes it possible to maintain

[25] Fisher, A., et al. "Mapping the jihadist information ecosystem: Towards the 3rd generation of disruption capability." Policy Brief, Royal United Services Institute, London (2019).

a persistent presence. Many of these findings challenge the orthodox 'success narrative' about the efforts taken against the Salafi-Jihadi movement online.

First, is the breadth of the network identified. There is a tendency to separate 'terrorist' networks – those related to formally designated FTO – from Salafi or groups not considered FTO. The network data from Telegram in 2021 shows that on a network level there is no such distinction. This significantly challenges the idea of studying FTO networks separately from the material which is important to those networks, but which falls outside an FTO designation.

Homophily or similarity, is an important reason that networks form and individuals interact. At its simplest, "Similarity breeds connection. This principle – the homophily principle – structures network ties of every type".[26] In addition to creating forms of relational ties, shared elements underpin collaborative or cooperative relationships.

> Cooperation requires that individuals are able to identify, and preferentially associate with, others who have compatible preferences and the shared background knowledge needed to solve interpersonal coordination problems.[27]

The creation of a single giant network component containing almost 90% of observed nodes and including AQ, IS, Hamas, Taliban and the Muslim Brotherhood alongside Salafi channels shows there is an element of importance to all groups. That is to say, being part of the network does not imply the specific group is aligned with the objectives of terrorists. It does, however, indicate there are elements of Salafi theology which are important to all.

Second, the dominant orthodox narrative has focused on how successful efforts have been in 'deplatforming' IS. It is widely accepted within the transatlantic orthodoxy of Terrorism Studies that "Broad improvements in the detection and removal of terrorist content on mainstream social media platforms has pushed such actors onto smaller online spaces".[28] As "Tech Against Terrorism director Adam Hadley said smaller platforms and social media services are where extremists moved to after being shut down by giants like Facebook and Twitter".[29] The primary difficulty with such a narrative is that

[26] McPherson, Miller, Lynn Smith-Lovin, and James M. Cook. "Birds of a feather: Homophily in social networks." *Annual review of sociology* 27.1 (2001): 415-444.

[27] Curry, Oliver, and Robin IM Dunbar. "Do birds of a feather flock together?." *Human nature* 24.3 (2013): 336-347.

[28] THE THREAT OF TERRORIST AND VIOLENT EXTREMIST OPERATED WEBSITES, Tech Against Terrorism, January 2022, p. 4; https://www.techagainstterrorism.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/The-Threat-of-Terrorist-and-Violent-Extremist-Operated-Websites-Jan-2022-1.pdf

[29] Dominic Giannini, ISIS app ignored by governments: inquiry, The Canberra Times, NOVEMBER 17 2021; https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/7515010/isis-app-ignored-by-gov-

Telegram was the 5th most downloaded mobile app globally in 2021, 13th most used social media platform, and claims 100 million more users than Twitter. As such, it is hard to consider Twitter a giant and Telegram a 'small' platform.

Furthermore, when the URL sharing behaviour of specific Salafi-Jihadi groups are analysed, it is clear they are all sharing links to WhatsApp, which boasts more than 2 billion people in over 180 countries. It was the third most used social platform and fourth most downloaded mobile app globally in Q3 2021.[20] In January 2022 Hootsuite reported WhatsApp was the world's favourite social platform.[21]

TikTok and Instagram both featured heavily in the sample of channels which could be joined through URL shared by the top 5 Salafi channels. As shown above, this includes sharing non-branded material which resonates with Salafi-Jihadi audiences and posts which feature images from branded videos. TikTok reached a billion users faster than Facebook and, while still smaller than Facebook, is more than twice the size of the Twitter userbase.[30] Similarly, Instagram was the fourth most used social media platform in 2021, and the second most downloaded mobile app of the year.[31] The platform claims to have over 1.4 billion users. Far from being deplatformed or driven to the fringes of social media, Salafi-Jihadi groups, supporters and aligned networks are still very much a feature on many of the world's biggest and most popular platforms.

The third challenge is the ability of the mobile enabled Salafi-Jihadi Swarmcast to reconfigure to maintain a persistent presence and fulfil the strategic or intended purpose.

> This swarm effect has many parallels to the speed and volume of content produced by jihadist groups. In addition, observable nature and computer simulations demonstrate that when a predator strikes, the swarm shifts to evade them.[32] If the predator keeps looking in the same place, the number of avail-

ernments-inquiry/?utm_source=Tech+Against+Terrorism&utm_campaign=4e8f-78f06d-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2019_03_24_07_51_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_cb464fdb7d-4e8f78f06d-68658615

[30] Simon Kemp, TikTok Hits 1 Billion Users—Faster Than Facebook (And More New Stats), October 21, 2021 https://blog.hootsuite.com/simon-kemp-social-media/

[31] The Global State of Digital 2022, Hootsuite, January 2022, https://blog.hootsuite.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Digital-2022-Slide-233-App-Annie-App-Ranking-Downloads.png; https://blog.hootsuite.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Digital-2022-Slide-99-The-Worlds-Most-Used-Social-Platforms.png

[32] Chen, Yuxin and Theodore Kolokolnikov. "A minimal model of predator-swarm interactions." Journal of the Royal Society Interface, vol. 11, no. 94, 2014; Milinski, Manfred. "A predator's costs of overcoming the confusion-efect of swarming prey." Animal Behaviour, vol. 32, no. 4, Nov. 1984, pp. 1157-1162; Parrish, Julia K. and Leah Edelstein-Keshet. "Complexity, pattern, and evolutionary trade-ofs in animal aggregation." Science, vol. 284, no. 5411, 1999, pp. 99-101.

> able prey will appear to decline. But, if the predator shifts its perspective and looks elsewhere, it will be clear that the prey has not disappeared nor has the size of the swarm declined. Instead, the swarm has moved.[33]

Based on the evidence, it is clear the assessments supporting the orthodox narrative do not equate to meaningful, strategic nor effective disruption of Media Mujahidin operations. As outlined in the Swarmcast metaphor, a swarm or flock reconfiguring does not mean they have disappeared. Yet OTS has consistently pursued the success narrative claiming that shifting position means disappearing. The success narrative began around 2014, when J.M. Berger believed "that Twitter suspensions have seriously degraded IS ability to game hashtags and distribute content".[34] Following a similar approach, a VoxPol report concluded, "IS Twitter Community is now almost nonexistent".[35] At the time of the VoxPol research IS Ghazwat (raids) on Twitter were coordinated via Telegram, and the focal point of ISIS 'community' had been Telegram for 18 months by that point. As such, the majority of these accounts were never intended to serve a 'community' function. Instead, they follow the hit and move approach of classical horse backed raiders.

Raiders on the Arabian Peninsula at the time Islam began to spread, did not intend to hold territory but achieve a specific purpose and move on, these were Ghazwat. The Ghazwat of the Twitter era follow the same ethos, no account is intended to last but to make content available for a short time before the user moves on to another account. Losing accounts, just as raiders would abandon positions they had taken, were entirely expected and acceptable losses. This strategy was laid out by IS on Telegram, however, the authors of the VoxPol report by focusing on content distributed via Twitter as a 'community' misinterprets what IS was trying to achieve. Just as a Swarm or flock moves so the Swarmcast had reconfigured, with the IS community function existing on Telegram. In focusing on Twitter when the IS core was active on an alternative platform, the VoxPol evaluation reflects the desire within the Transatlantic orthodoxy to measure success of disruption efforts rather than evaluate IS activity against what IS was trying to achieve.

Now seven years later, OTS papers have continued to conclude each of the latest efforts to disrupt IS content distribution have been successful. Wit-

[33] Ali Fisher, Netwar in Cyberia: decoding the media mujahidin, paper 5, USC Center on Public Diplomacy, 2018, http://humanshuddle.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/Netwar%20in%20Cyberia%20Web%20Ready_with%20disclosure%20page%2011.08.18.pdf

[34] Critique at the time was offered in: Fisher, Ali. "No Respite on Social Media After ISIS Attacks in Paris." CPD Blog, 9 Dec. 2017, uscpublicdiplomacy.org/blog/ no-respite-social-media-after-isis-attacks-paris.

[35] Conway, Maura, et al. "Disrupting Daesh: measuring takedown of online terrorist material and it's impacts." (2017).

ness, following the Europol led efforts, the immediate bullish assessment that the operation had "resolutely trashed the Islamic State's presence on Telegram".[36] However, the evidence-based analysis of data for the year 2021 shows the Salafi-Jihadi movement has maintained a persistent presence and, undeterred, has reconfigured to enable continued operations in the face of pressure. In addition, as the 2021 network graph found almost 90% of channels connected to a single giant component, channels and users have not been trashed or scattered to the wind. Instead, they reconnected to the channels which remained to continue as before.

Fourth, researchers within the orthodoxy of Terrorism Studies have long struggled to explain how Salafi-Jihadi networks survive Western attempts at disruption – particularly given the virtual uniformity in assessments that these disruption efforts have been successful. For example, over the same time-period as one OTS paper claimed IS suffered high levels of disruption on Twitter,[37] one third of all known traffic to IS content was still coming from Twitter.[38] Equally, while Berger was claiming disruption of content dissemination, and the orthodox narrative questioned the "purported resilience" of the ISIS social network[39] a single video was downloaded or viewed approximately half a million times across multiple postings on Archive.org alone.[40] Similarly, while the orthodox interpretation claimed Salafi-Jihad groups had been 'deplatformed'[41] and content dissemination degraded, IS videos posted on Twitter were receiving tens of thousands of views.[42] No explanation has yet been offered for the extent that to which users were still directed to IS content, while researchers could not find what they deemed relevant IS accounts on the platform.[43]

[36] https://www.wired.co.uk/article/isis-telegram-security. For evaluation of disruption using a very short timescale see: Amarasingam, Amarnath, Shiraz Maher, and Charlie Winter. "How Telegram disruption impacts jihadist platform migration." *Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats* (2021).

[37] Conway, Maura, et al. "Disrupting Daesh: measuring takedown of online terrorist material and it's impacts." (2017): 1-45.

[38] Frampton, Martyn, Ali Fisher, Nico Prucha, and David H. Petraeus. *The New Netwar: Countering extremism online*. Policy Exchange, 2017.

[39] http://www.brookings.edu/~/media/research/files/papers/2015/03/isis-twitter-census-berger-morgan/isis_twitter_census_berger_morgan.pdf

[40] https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/blog/no-respite-social-media-after-isis-attacks-paris

[41] https://gnet-research.org/2021/01/15/why-deplatforming-the-extreme-right-is-a-lot-more-challenging-than-deplatforming-is/

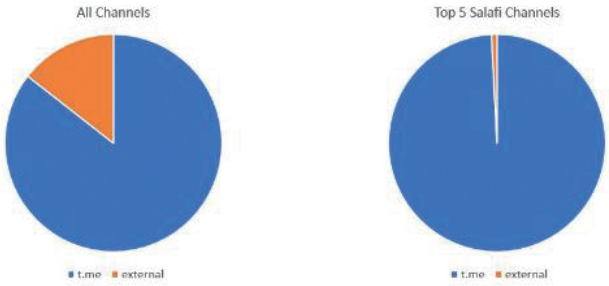
[42] Ali Fisher, Netwar in Cyberia: decoding the media mujahidin, paper 5, USC Center on Public Diplomacy, 2018.

[43] Conway, Maura, et al. "Disrupting Daesh: measuring takedown of online terrorist material and it's impacts." (2017): 1-45.

The network analysis presented here demonstrates that the structure and the nature of the networks makes disruption difficult on a single platform – let alone across multiple platforms embodied by the Jihadi Multiplatform Communication Paradigm.[44] First, the data presented here reiterates previous findings that the sparse network structure makes it very hard to remove sufficient channels to destroy a network.[45] On Telegram, just as earlier on Twitter, elements of the network would likely remain, and as the early work on network resilience demonstrated, very low levels of redundancy were required for a network to survive attack.[46]

The nature of the movement also contributes through the presence of Salafi material. The Salafi material is important due to the shared theological meaning,[47] and the tendency for Salafi channels to remain during the attempts to remove channels operated by Foreign Terrorist Organisations (FTO). The network data and key actor graph showed the many ways in which Salafi channels are important to the Salafi-Jihadi network. The Salafi channels are important bridges or conduits which connected different parts of the network (represented by betweenness centrality) as well as important to the core of the network (represented by PageRank).

Figure 19 - *Network data – channels*



[44] Fisher, A., et al. "Mapping the jihadist information ecosystem: Towards the 3rd generation of disruption capability." Policy Brief, Royal United Services Institute, London (2019).

[45] Ali Fisher, "Interrogating the electronic ribat: Data Science in the study of the Jihadist movement", in Lohlker, R. (ed.) World wide warriors: How Jihadis operate online. (2019); Ali Fisher, Netwar in Cyberia: decoding the media mujahidin, paper 5, USC Center on Public Diplomacy, 2018.

[46] The resilience of dispersed or distributed systems was demonstrated in: http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_ memoranda/RM3420.html

[47] Ali Fisher, Nico Prucha, Pavel Tupek, The Salafi-Jihadi Nexus: An Evidence Based Approach of the Caliphate Library, EICTP Expert Paper, February 2022.

In addition to the network metrics, the URL shared by the Salafi Channels indicate another reason they are so important to the network. The URL from the top five Salafi channels (by PageRank) shows they are more likely to be sharing join links to other channels than the average behaviour by all channels. Within the top Salafi channels 99.2% of all URL shared were links to join Telegram channels or contact specific individuals. This comprised over 2,700 unique Telegram URL, or an average of 7.5 unique links to join other channels every day. This is contrast to 85.5% of the 725,000 URL shared by all channels observed.

Given the commonality in theological meaning, the audience for Salafi channels is one of the largest target audiences for Salafi-Jihadi groups. By contrast, conclusions from much of the orthodox terrorism studies research have undervalued or even ignored the role of the Salafi elements within the Salafi-Jihadi movement. It is unclear whether this is because the method focused on finding 'official' FTO material, looking for markers such as logos and flags in user profiles,[48] or, as Winter and others have attempted to do, have sought to 'whittle away' theology[49] to 'uncloak' alternative explanations for the movement including ice cream, Nutella, kittens, crime, and Utopia.[50] Whatever the cause of this effective blind spot in elements of the orthodox transatlantic understanding, Salafi-Jihadi groups exploit it to engage with audiences across their multiplatform communication paradigm (MCP).[51]

Finally, the evolution of a single giant network has occurred despite the various groups on both sides of the Salafi-Jihadi nexus being subject to very different pressures. This challenges the orthodox assumption that IS was driven to use Telegram, due to the difficulty of using Twitter. This pressure did not apply to Taliban and many Salafi organisations, but in spite of being free to use Twitter, these groups have built large networks on Telegram. This

[48] 'Disrupting Daesh: Measuring Takedown of Online Terrorist Material and its Impacts', VOX-Pol, 2017, http://www.voxpol.eu/download/voxpol_publication/DCUJ5528-Disrupting-DAESH-1706-WEB-v2.pdf

[49] Ingram, Haroro J., Craig Whiteside, and Charlie Winter. The ISIS Reader: Milestone texts of the Islamic state movement. Oxford University Press, USA, 2020. pp. 7, 225.

[50] Smith, Samantha K., "Kittens and Nutella: Why Women Join ISIS" (2015). What All Americans Should Know About Women in the Muslim World. 7. https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/islamandwomen/7; Amanda Taub, No, CNN, women are not joining ISIS because of "kittens and Nutella", Vox, 18 February 2015 https://www.vox.com/2014/10/20/6987673/isis-women; Charlie Winter, quoted in: https://www.bendigoadvertiser.com.au/story/3202519/is-propaganda-to-push-a-new-utopia/; Ingram, Haroro J., Craig Whiteside, and Charlie Winter. The ISIS Reader: Milestone texts of the Islamic state movement. Oxford University Press, USA, 2020. pp. 7, 225.

[51] Fisher, A., et al. "Mapping the jihadist information ecosystem: Towards the 3rd generation of disruption capability." Policy Brief, Royal United Services Institute, London (2019).

indicates there are persuasive 'pull' factors for using Telegram beyond having difficulty using Twitter, and that there is a large target audience for Salafi, and Salafi-Jihadi content. This perspective is almost entirely absent from the orthodox interpretation due to the emphasis on 'push' factors and the 'success narrative'.

Furthermore, that the giant component still exists despite Telegram targeting disruption efforts against some Salafi-Jihadi groups, indicates disruption has not been able to separate the FTO from the Salafi. FTO groups have been able to reconnect with those who share elements of theology, and the potential target audience which that provides.

5. Conclusion

This study has challenged the image of very insular Jihadi communities just talking to themselves. In 2021, far from being driven off Telegram (or the internet) by EUROPOL led disruption efforts the Salafi-Jihadi movement and the FTO elements within it, have reconfigured just as a flock of birds adjusts in flight to the attack of a predator. In 2022 they continue to exploit the platform.

Further studies will be required to understand the ecology of the Salafi-Jihadi ecosystem in greater depth. Specifically, how the interaction between Salafi and Salafi-Jihadi network clusters influences how future disruption is planned and evaluated.

The progressive, evidence-based approach to the Telegram data has reiterated the importance of elements of Salafi theology to the Salafi-Jihadi movement highlighted by previous research. As Adam Hoffman argued previously: "Ignoring the religiosity of ISIS and other Islamist movements is characteristic of many Western commentators and analysts, but discomfort in the face of religious belief is a major obstacle in the analysis of movements which see religion as the overall framework for interpreting and justifying their actions."[52] This is a problem because, as Rudiger Lohlker put it, "It is crystal clear – to virtually anyone who has the linguistic capacity to grasp and the opportunity to witness what jihadists are actually saying, writing and doing, both online and offline – that religion matters."[53]

[52] Adam Hoffman, 'The Religiosity Challenge in Analyzing Islamist Movements', 07/09/2017; https://regthink.org/en/articles/the-religiosity-challenge-in-analyzing-islamist-movements

[53] Rüdiger Lohlker, "Why Theology Matters – The Case of ISIS," Strategic Review, July – September 2016; URL: http://sr-indonesia.com/in-the-journal/view/europe-s-misunderstanding-of-islam-and-isis

Given the importance of theology, the Telegram network is an online manifestation of the Salafi-Jihadi Nexus. As noted in a previous paper:

> The Salafi materials are often quick and easy to find online – and in several languages. This enables jihadis to attain credibility as a religious movement fighting for ultraorthodox theological parameters while the networks online on the Salafi side of the nexus are rarely taken down or pushed offline. This reality strengthens Salafi-Jihadi networks online as it is one column, upon which they can rely to repopulate their content and continue to attract consumers of the Salafi world to their 'enhanced' world where religion is applied by force and based on theological constants and commandments that are explained in a soft-power fashion within the Salafi networks.[54]

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