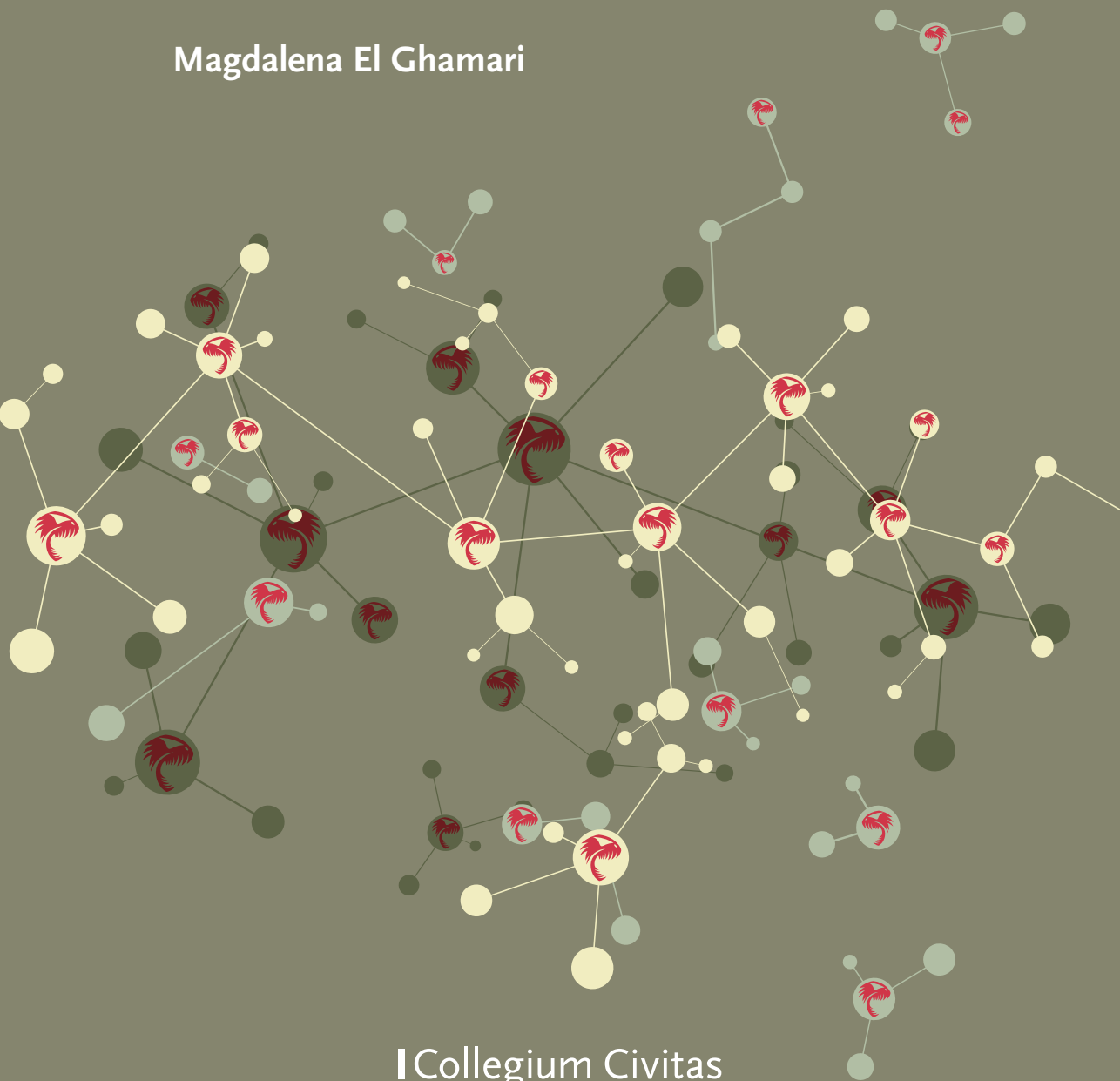


*Online platforms as an environment  
for multidimensional radicalization?  
The extremist symbolism and rhetoric  
of the Daesh terrorist organization*

Magdalena El Ghamari



# COLLEGIUM CIVITAS

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Abstract

This article is an empirical study of the visual mobilization strategies implemented by terrorist organizations seeking recruits or fighters. Drawing on the interdisciplinary theoretical approach of social movement studies and international relations and security studies, the author focuses on the propaganda narratives used by the Daesh organization from its inception to the COVID-19 pandemic. Between 2011 and 2022, the Daesh organization produced several publications and recordings containing migratory rhetoric, combined with provocative gender images and political or climate themes. Approaching terrorist propaganda through the lens of actors constructing visual forms of political mobilization, the article shows how the analyzed organizations are supported by professional graphic designers commercializing extremist ideologies by creating ambivalent images and text messages. In doing so, they construct a multidimensional environment that fosters reciprocal and cumulative radicalization.

Keywords

terrorist organizations, Daesh, propaganda, radicalization, social media, recruitment, fighters, broadcasting

## Introduction.

### Propaganda activities: the internet as a catalyst for Daesh's image-building activities

After the terrorist attack in the United States (US) in 2001, when Al-Qaeda terrorists hijacked four planes, two of which crashed into the World Trade Center buildings in New York and the third into the Pentagon, the West entered a new era where radical Islamic extremists posed a constant threat to its values and way of life. This event was a turning point as it marked the beginning of a series of attacks by extremist groups on behalf of the so-called Islamic State, also known as Daesh. Therefore, one of the main priorities of the European Union has become to protect the fundamental rights of its citizens and ensure their security by combating all kinds and variants of terrorism. In 2005, the European Council established a counter-terrorism strategy based on four tenets: prevention, protection (Garriga Guitart 2015), pursuit and response (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2012).

The European Council reworked this strategy in 2014, creating measures and guidelines for European member states (European Commission 2016). Although the new jihadist terrorism shares characteristics with other types of terrorism, it has a distinguishing feature, which is who radicalizes its fighters. It is necessary to study the unique characteristics of jihadist terrorism to recognise its specificity and the different phases through which a person goes to become radicalized. This can provide vital information to detect and stop radicalization. Constant innovation in the way terrorists carry out their attacks, the extent of the violence they commit and the psychological consequences for westerners make counter-terrorism measures and the prevention of radicalization critical issues for governments and counter-terrorism institutions (Garriga Guitart 2015).

As regards jihadist radicalization, many vulnerability factors make these fighters suitable targets. According to the United Nations Office

on Drugs and Crime, these factors are related to socio-economic and demographic conditions (European Commission 2016). However, analyzing the last two decades of the fight against terrorist activity, one can safely say that this explanation is very trivial and does not exhaust the features of this phenomenon. It must be noted that there are approximately 1.300 million practicing Muslims worldwide who suffer from the same social, economic and political problems as jihadists. Moreover, only a small percentage of these practicing Muslims share these fanatical views (Corte Ibáñez, Jordán 2007).

On this basis, by conducting numerous studies of terrorist organizations, the author puts forward a research thesis that Daesh should be treated not only as a terrorist organization but, above all, as a military project, whose multidimensional activities show its ideological connections and define it as an ultra-sectarian organization influenced by Sunni Salafis and Wahhabis. Attempting to build a profile of this organization, locate it in time, define the specific features of its activity and characterize selected dimensions and methods of Daesh's activity, the author puts forward the thesis that the organization was able to strengthen itself enormously and continues to be strong in propaganda and ideological terms despite its recent territorial defeats because it was wrongly associated with one of the Al-Qaeda factions from 2006 to 2011, while the threat resulting from its activities in the virtual sphere was not noticed. On the other hand, conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, the destabilization of individual Arab countries, fallen regimes, social unrest and economic problems make it easier for Daesh to operate in all the analyzed dimensions.

In this article, the author presents the results of her theoretical and empirical research whose main research problem is: What activities of the Daesh organization lead to radicalization processes and acts of a terrorist nature in the MENA region? The component research problems that the author answers in this article are defined by the following questions: How does the organization diversify its activities in the virtual

sphere (Online)? What methods and techniques does the Daesh organization use in the surveyed dimensions? What is the specificity of Daesh's information messages and propaganda activities? What cultural and confessional elements define the specificity of the cultural and religious activity of this terrorist organization? The research issues outlined in this way will make it possible to identify Online platforms which form an environment for multidimensional radicalization with specific rhetoric, supported by extremist symbolism.

The conceptual and semantic apparatus used has been determined by the activity of the organization in the virtual sphere (Online) related to socio-cultural and confessional (religious) conditions, which, according to the author, can be called cultural and confessional security owing to the specificity of the analysis of the MENA region and the Muslim religion. The author has divided the aforementioned problems into exploratory and descriptive goals and explanatory goals, which, in her opinion, meet the needs of the research procedure used in this scientific article.

The theses put forward in this text are as follows:

- According to the author, Daesh is not only a terrorist organization but, above all, a military project that can be described as an ultra-sectarian organization with Sunni Salafist and Wahhabi influences, following the assumption of apocalyptic global jihadism under the leadership of the Ba'athists.
- The internet has become a catalyst for Daesh's image-building activities as well as a target and tool for the processes of radicalization and spreading the terrorist narrative. The organization has taken an advanced approach to radicalization, targeting a number of cutting-edge platforms and using them to propagate its ideology, thereby combining tradition and technology in an unprecedented way. Daesh is constantly present Online, running a campaign and simultaneously using the cyber community on many

portals and messengers, such as Facebook, Twitter, Google, Viber, WhatsApp, Telegram, Tumblr and Kik.

- The virtual caliphate emerged as an enhanced version of Daesh's state-building project in line with its propaganda. However, the Online environment is no longer just a place where Daesh can strengthen its brand position, but also creates independent entities based on the original concept of "al-Dawla." This is possible thanks to the diversification of platforms and a decentralized communication strategy, under which Daesh and its supporters are active on various communication channels and portals. Since Europol removed terrorist propaganda from Telegram in November 2019, Daesh and its supporters have dispersed and spread their activities on various other smaller encrypted instant messaging platforms, such as Rocket.Chat, Hoop and Threema (see: Europol 2019). According to the author, there has been a kind of de-platforming, during which the leaders of the organization reorganize and look for new fronts of activity.
- Focusing on the strategic logic and communication tools used by Daesh makes it possible to understand the tactics used in radicalization processes and the recruitment of both men and women. It is worth noting that the recent years of the organization's activity indicate the dynamic relationship between information messages and gender, which may be the next reasonable stage in the evolution of the messages and the entire research on Daesh's activity.
- Daesh is well-versed in persuasion techniques that manipulate not only its opponents but also its members and supporters. By paying close attention to the basic principles of influence, we can identify how the group implements its strategy and the reasons why its information strategies are so effective.

- The areas of influence of contemporary terrorist organizations, including Daesh, explain the radicalization processes that are reflected in the area of research on cultural security and confessional security.

Taking the above statements as a starting point, the author describes her research results, identifying the propaganda activities of the Daesh organization in the virtual sphere and proposing an innovative approach to the cool jihad strategy as an element of a dedicated message. In addition, she verifies the organization's activity during the COVID-19 pandemic, indicates the implications for international security and points to the challenges of interpreting the Daesh media message, which determines its confessional conditions and specificity. Certainly, the presented dimensions of the analyzed Online platforms as an environment for multidimensional radicalization are not exhaustive due to their dynamics, but they show the research area, important in the author's opinion, which determines contemporary challenges and threats to political science, international relations, security, sociology and religious studies understood in a broad sense.

#### The virtual dimension of the Daesh terrorist organization's activity

The Daesh campaign in the virtual sphere is closely related to both radicalization processes and the multidimensional spectrum of terrorist activity. Therefore, it reflects the nuances and the essence of the interdisciplinary nature of Daesh's activity, which the international community has to face. The fact that Daesh uses mass media to spread its message shows the unconventional information dimension of the modern battlefield, indicating that it is also necessary to adapt anti-terrorist activities to the specificity of the virtual sphere. Posting, sharing, propagating and making Daesh's messages available is aimed at strengthening and initiating radicalization processes that may lead to sympathy and support for or participation in Daesh's activities on a large scale. In the analyzed



literature, this phenomenon has been described as a “radicalization echo chamber.”

The chamber consists of three groups of users: nodes, enhancers and shouts, which can best be understood as a level-like system (see: Jenkins 2011). Nodes (first level) are by far the loudest and most authoritative voices in the area of jihad on social media as they tweet videos, phrases, articles, and so on (see: Gorka, Gorka 2015: 9). Enhancers then send the content further from the nodes and while they do not necessarily present new material and propaganda, they actively use Twitter accounts. Finally, notifications allow users to familiarize themselves with Daesh accounts by giving them a “shout” or naming them in tweets, thus promoting genuine node accounts and making shouted users essential to Daesh’s Online survival. An average Daesh Twitter account has a thousand followers (see: Morgan, Berger 2015: 3) and the echo chamber process is an integral part of ensuring the continued success of the accounts. This translates into radicalization and recruitment success at the same time. Constantly benefiting from modern technology, Daesh supporters can continuously engage the Online community as “keyboard warriors.”

The conducted analysis has shown that the Daesh organization has been active in the virtual world at every stage of the organization’s activity. It works in different ways, depending on the identified needs of its recruits, supporters and militants. The very name of the organization represents the main message of the group and has a propaganda dimension. The group wants to be described by westerners as “the ISIS” or “the Islamic State,” and by Middle Eastern audiences as “ad-Dawlah al-Islamiyya,” “ad-Dawlah al-Caliphate” or “the Caliphate.” The English transcription “Daesh,” which the author uses with full awareness, is not recognized. Shortly after the Daesh group declared itself a caliphate on 28 June 2014, it launched an official international English-language magazine entitled *Dabiq*. Having a global reach that spans national and

regional boundaries, the magazine covered the group's strategic direction, military strategy and alliances.

Therefore, this article aims to provide information about the formula and scope of the information campaign, communication tools and techniques used by the terrorist group. The author has decided to describe the specificity of the Daesh terrorist organization's activity through the information dimension, taking the form of propaganda activities, from many different perspectives, including social psychology, communication and analysis of web portals. The theoretical and empirical research conducted has shown that the cultural and confessional area and specificity determine the organization's propaganda activity. The analysis of the virtual environment shows that terrorist organizations also use Online platforms including social networking services. It includes the following elements: data extraction from social networks (including analysis of radicalized persons' profiles), data collection, data processing, data representation and their use in relation to a given type of personality. One or more specific algorithms are used and the results obtained are analyzed taking account of the specific character of extremist publications. Using this scientific criterion, the author presents the results of her research conducted using the monographic method, the document research method, literature analysis and criticism: analysis of sources, content, recipients, media, including social media (Twitter, Facebook) and channels (Telegram, TamTam, WhatsApp, Viber). This has helped operationalize the strategy and tactics used in Daesh's media products.

The collected data available in open access sources have been published, among others, by the following media (including television, blogs and press departments of individual cities and regions):

- Amaq;
- Al-Hayat Media Centre;
- Ansarukhilafah Blog;<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The blog was active until 2017 at: <https://ansarukhilafah.wordpress.com/tag/raqqa>.

- from the Al-Barakah Province;
- from the Dijalah Province;
- from the Yemen Province;
- from the Homs Province;
- from the Raqqa Province;
- from the Ninawa Province;
- Kawkaz;
- the media of the Al-Khansaa Brigade;
- Burhan Media Center, Kashmir;
- Al-Hayat;
- Arkan Centre;
- Al-Andalus, the recordings of emirs affiliated with Al-Qaeda and Daesh released since 2011;
- Al-Ma'sadat, video messages from individual leaders since 2011;
- Al-Sabiqun, from Afghanistan (spread by Telegram) since 2019;
- Khalid Media, Khorasan Province, Afghanistan, released since 21 February 2021.

The media are not listed in chronological order. During the research, it turned out that some of the media operated continuously, some cyclically, while the operation time of others was difficult to determine. Based on the verification of the researched information messages, the author has divided the publications of the Daesh organization into:

- Magazines and periodicals:
  - *Dabiq*, 15 issues from 2014 to 2016 in English, Arabic, German and French, published by the Al-Hayat Media Center;
  - *Konstantiniyye*, six issues from 2015 to 2016 in Turkish;
  - *Rumiyah*, 13 issues from 2016 to 2017 in Arabic, Bosnian, English, German, French, Indonesian, Turkish, Uyghur and Urdu;
  - *Mustaqbal*, 17 issues, irregularly published in 2014 and 2016 in Malay;

- *Ibnat Al-Islam*, 17 issues published from 2017 to 2 March 2021;
- *Sawt Al-Hind Magazine*, 12 issues published from April 2020 to 2 March 2021;
- *Katibat al-Mahdi fi Bilad al-Arkan*, one issue published on 15 February 2021;
- *Birma: Katibat al-Mahdi fi Bilad al-Arkan*, two issues published since December 2020;
- *Al-Risalah Magazine*, Kashmir region, 32 issues published since 2019 in Dardic and Hindi;
- *IOS Minaret*, 34 issues published from 2015 to today in English and Arabic;
- *Al-Naba*, 353 issues published from 2014 to 2 September 2022;
- *Al-Qaraar*, 11 issues published from 2016 to 2020 in French, English and Arabic;
- *Amka*, two issues published in 2015 in English and African languages;
- *Dar Al-Islam*, 14 issues published from 2014 to 2016 in French;
- *Gaidi Mtaani Kenia*, nine issues published from 2012 to 2017 in English and African languages;
- *Dar Al-Harb*, 16 issues published from 2011 to 2014 in Arabic, German and French;
- *Al-Shamikhah*, four issues published from 2011 to 2012 in Arabic;
- *Ihya Kalikhat*, eight issues published from 2011 to 2015 in African languages;
- *Ihya-e-Khilafat* – Taliban Pakistan, 13 issues published periodically from 2012 to 2018 in Urdu and Pashtu;
- Islamic State reports, approximately 460 issues published from 2012 to 2 September 2022 in English and Arabic;

- *Al-Samud*, Khorasan region, Afghanistan, 198 issues published periodically from 2011 to 2022 in Urdu, Pashtu;
- *Istok* (orig. ICTOK), four issues published from 2015 to 2016 in Russian.
- Films and videos:
  - Ad-Dawlah, sometimes known as Ansar Daulah, is a portal publishing recordings, reports and statements since 2013, including recordings on: happiness, revenge, fighting, pardoning, children, administration, politics and all kinds of social, cultural and religious issues; example titles are:
    - ✓ *Happiness of the Muslims for the Burning of the Jordanian Pilot*;
    - ✓ *I Am Returning #2*;
    - ✓ *Pardoning and Blood Money*;
    - ✓ *Municipal Office Carries Out Repair and Opening of Roads in Abbasiyah*;
    - ✓ *Messages from the Murabiteen #3*;
    - ✓ *Reopening the Schools with the New Curriculum*;
    - ✓ *Sons of My People, A Message for You #3*;
    - ✓ *To the Lone Lions*;
    - ✓ *Nasheed: My Aspiration in This World*;
    - ✓ *A Message to the Leaders of Disbelievers*;
    - ✓ *Eliminating a Cell Belonging to the Sahawaat*.
- Radio stations:
  - Al-Bayan, broadcasting recordings, talks and talk shows in Arabic, Kurdish, English, French and Russian;
  - official Islamic State radio broadcasting in English and German on the Polish internet domain in 2018;
  - Makmadas from 2013 to 2016 in Sirte (Libya) in Arabic;
  - Al-Tawheed from 2013 to 2015 in Sirte (Libya) in Arabic;

- Cyrene broadcasting from 2013 to 2015 in Derna (Libya) in Arabic on 95.5 FM.<sup>2</sup>
- Foundations and associations:
  - Bayan Foundation for Media Production;
  - Hidayyah Media Foundation;
  - Fadhakar Foundation;
  - Zahra Foundation.
- Applications for mobile phones (smartphones), video games:
  - terrorist versions of popular games *Call of Duty*, *GTA 5*, *6*, *7*, *Counter-Strike* and *Intifada*, among others.
- Organization documents:
  - Jaysh Khalid bin al-Waleed internal structure;
  - Jaysh Khalid bin al-Waleed databases;
  - Islamic State study and position on the internal structure and functioning of the judiciary;
  - document no. 39 of the Islamic State's al-Qada wa al-Madhalim diwan;
  - early electricity generation regulations: Nineveh Province;
  - Islamic State's property: from the Al-Raqqa Province (issued since January 8 2021).
- Portals, webpages and posts on social networks:
  - in 2013, an official Twitter channel, @shomokhalislam, was launched, representing a website associated with Al-Qaeda (it already had over 6,000 followers in 2013 and about 11,000 in 2015; the channel coordinators were very active and posted messages in Arabic and English). Since 2017, the account has not been active like most of these types of pages created at the peak of the organization's activity on Twitter;

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<sup>2</sup> The author analyzed the broadcast content in terms of the propaganda message during field research in Libya.

- Maysarah al-al Damud, regulations for dealing with media and mujahideen, first published on March 7, 2019 by a Telegram messenger group;
- Caliphatebook – the equivalent of Facebook, available only to registered users, operating from 2012 to 2015;
- profiles of supporters (fan pages) of Daesh on the following portals: Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.<sup>3</sup>
- Other:
  - signs and symbols for cars (for example, mirror guards, flags, rosaries, stickers, and so on);
  - the mujahideen clothing line – a chain of stores promoting the ideas of jihad.<sup>4</sup>

When discussing this varied range of Daesh propaganda materials (which is certainly not exhaustive), it is worth emphasizing that the key to the survival of Daesh content on Online platforms was how the group's followers learned to modify their content to avoid scrutiny. The ongoing observation of source materials has shown that cyberterrorists<sup>5</sup> split texts and used strange punctuation marks to bypass tools that search for keywords.

A popular trick, particularly in the new ongoing stage of Daesh's activity (since 2019), was to blur the Daesh brand or add one's own video effects to Facebook or Twitter. In the first quarter of 2021, major news services were also used to brand radicalizing content. An example is recordings that included introductions from well-known news channels such as the BBC, CNN, Al-Jazeera and France 24 for the first 30 seconds

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<sup>3</sup> So as not to disseminate their names, indicate specific website addresses and avoid spreading them, the author has decided not to list them in this publication. The materials and content of the message are available in the author's private collection.

<sup>4</sup> Films and series produced in the MENA region show a very interesting concept and ideas. They often give them a comedic and satirical dimension, e.g. *Farce*, or show the problem of radicalization, e.g. in the series: *Black Crows*, *The Platform* (the films are in Arabic). They are available on Netflix.

<sup>5</sup> For the purposes of this monograph, the author uses the term "cyberfighters" or "cyberterrorists" when referring to fighters who implement virtual activities.

and then went on to present the organization's actual content (consecutive 30-50 minutes). In another case, a remix of a BBC News jingle with a pop song that went viral during the coronavirus outbreak was used to mask content. The number of films, recordings, magazines and institutions that have been publishing Daesh propaganda materials proves the group adapts very quickly and circumvents security by moving from one account to another. In some forums, members of the #cyberjihad group publicly mocked Facebook for not understanding how they operated on the platform. Analysis of the comments and the number of shares shows that the followers and friends of the main and "popular" Daesh accounts included supporters from many different language groups, including the Albanian, Turkish, Somali, Ethiopian and Indonesian communities. These were much less moderated or advanced compared to Arab, German or English accounts. Similarly, the magazines published in the Western, Asian or African markets were of very good visual, technical and informative quality. For example, one Indonesian account had a video made using a smartphone in a kitchen of a man wearing a balaclava and explaining how to make explosives with household items.

In October 2019, police in the Netherlands and Great Britain arrested two people responsible for running a popular English-language pro-Daesh Telegram channel and account called "GreenB1rds" (DutchNews.nl 2019). A British woman allegedly created a false identity of herself as a man and instructed many administrators to follow her suicide bombing.

It is also interesting how Daesh supporters reacted when they discovered that the two arrested administrators of the channel were women. On the one hand, they drew attention to Online activities and recommended greater operational security; on the other hand, they called for the special protection of women: "Please ikhwan (brothers), in the future we must not allow our precious pearls to run such sensitive groups/channels" (Telegram of October 17, 2019 [This source, due to the terrorist profile, are removed from the Internet – this and two following



quotes are from the author's archive]). Another channel supporting Daesh shared a message saying that "many sisters would like to be men" while shaming men for not taking action while women could only dream of such an opportunity (*Ibidem*). This confirms women are involved in producing and spreading Daesh propaganda and planning attacks. On the other hand, it is an attempt to push them to non-virtual reality by calling female administrators precious pearls. The detained women manifested their fight and dedication very strongly, embarrassing and insulting men on the channel with claims that many of them did not take any action, thus failing to fulfil their manly duty, which is to contribute to the fight. Such activities may suggest a hypothesis of increasing acceptance for women and their more frequent participation in such activities, as evidenced by a comment in a chat group: "a lot of sisters now help in the media, akhi. We need more brothers" (*Ibidem*).

Online channels such as GreenB1rds challenge concepts about how women's participation in terrorist activities may be shaped by virtual jihad. Katherine E. Brown states it is important to recognize that "women's agency as extending beyond the private sphere challenges many of our inherited gender images" (Brown 2011: 214).

Watching how parts of the Daesh Online ecosystem renegotiate gender boundaries provides a wealth of important insights and helps understand how terrorist groups pursuing different ideologies can re-evaluate women's participation, following the possibly evolving nature of gender dynamics. Different contexts can force supporters to move the line inconsistently and recognize how Islamic State supporters try to shape different narratives about women's empowerment – even when some of these narratives contradict each other. To determine the radicalization path in the virtual sphere, it is useful to categorize people into one of three groups, consistent with those also used by other researchers (Reinares, García-Calvo, Vicente 2017).

The first group consists of those who are mainly radicalized Online (the “internet” group). The second group includes those who are radicalized by a combination of Online and offline influences (the “hybrid” group) and the third is those who are mainly radicalized offline (the “face to face” group). As the above certainly incomplete analysis indicates, Online activity will continue to be a catalyst for Daesh’s image-building activity as well as a goal and tool in the processes of radicalization and spreading the terrorist narrative.

It is certainly impossible to collect full research material without the appropriate help of a research team and significant commitment, requiring work, a 24/7 Online presence and the use of translations from many oriental languages, which show a number of scientifically interesting mechanisms the organization has used. From 2011 (with an error margin of about two or three months) to the first quarter of 2021, the author managed to collect: 887 issues of Daesh magazines, two books, six full-length films, 924 religious announcements and five games. At the same time, 11 different phone apps, 45 Facebook channels, 23 Twitter channels, seven Telegram forums and two TamTam forums were monitored. During her stay in Libya, the author had the opportunity to listen to several radio broadcasts in the cities of Benghazi and Derna. During the peak period of Daesh’s activity in Libya, the author noticed the Al-Tawheed radio station enabled safe passage through checkpoints set up in the city and outside its borders. Likewise, emblems and elements indicating sympathy towards Daesh were used *en masse* by the local (non-radicalized) community.

Verification of the information message was possible thanks to the observation sheet, which was used to analyze how the following areas of the Daesh organization’s virtual activity were managed:

- strategy and goals,
- topic and messages,
- lines of action,
- radicalization,

- tools and techniques used by Daesh to implement the information strategy (influencing).

This has made it possible to analyze and systematize all the collected theoretical and practical knowledge about information warfare and the implementation of particular propaganda processes, subordinated to the assumed goals of the organization. It turns out that Daesh has no single strategy and no single management concept. The analysis has shown that different media can complement and even contradict each other (especially when a message in several languages: Arabic, German and English, is analyzed).

Daesh's information strategy includes clearly defined short- and long-term goals. The first short-term goal was achieved in late June 2014 when Daesh seized Iraqi Mosul and announced the creation of a new caliphate. It was also a turning point in the Islamic State's global publicity aimed at recruiting and radicalizing potential fighters for future operations. From a strategic communications point of view, the first goal was a massive coup d'état that could be used in the organization's propaganda materials, disseminating information about the group's effectiveness and indicating what to expect in the future from the newly declared state. The caliphate's proclamation drew the attention of not only the Middle East but also Western countries, allowing the group to open up new channels of communication on social media, spreading the message of a "new state" and revolution breaking the old "artificial agreements" that divided Muslim society.

The next goal is deterrence. The group widely disseminates information about the brutality of its members to raise public awareness of their willful cruelty and convince enemies that it is impossible to defeat them. This goal is supported by messages and actions aimed at weakening opponents' morale. At the same time, the Islamic State continues to fight its internal adversaries, physically and psychologically, expelling religious minorities and secular populations from the territory they control.

The Islamic State targets its internal enemies and releases videos showing the destruction of ancient heritage sites, as well as beheadings and killings, to create a sense of fear among its opponents and spread the word about its plans. This shows the group's regional aspirations to be an important player and change-maker in the Middle East. Almost every issue of *Dabiq* informs about their ultimate long-term goal, which is to win the "final battle." Considering how this idea is related to the religious message, this goal plays an important role in guiding the information strategy of the Islamic State. By defining their actions in terms of the "final battle," any deployment of Western or non-Sunni forces against Daesh in the region contributes to fulfilling the prophecy, thus attracting both domestic and foreign fighters who support the cause.

Another element of the Daesh information strategy is the division of the narrative into three main themes:

- politics,
- religion,
- society.

Daesh's political aspirations are to take over territory and establish a caliphate (global state) with a caliph at its head. In a religious sense, only Daesh can rebuild what has been lost in history by Muslims and bring peace to its followers. Socially, the caliphate is meant to be a place where all true Muslims can live in peace as members of the ummah. In each case, there is also an element of the enemy that successively threatens the political (and military) activities of Daesh, the Muslim religion, and the ummah. The enemy can come from both within and outside the Muslim world.

Daesh's information strategy is based on four types of messages:

- informative (for example, administrative issues, such as fees, orders, bans, resolutions, planned activities, education, ecology, battles and war campaigns);
- unifying (for example, portraying the ummah as oppressed by its enemies, whose names, surnames and photos are often provided);

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- supportive (for example, providing data for people in need of support and creating humanitarian institutions);
- frightening (for example, about penalties for non-compliance with orders, the end of the world and the COVID-19 plague [Figure 1]).



**Figure 1.** Recommendation not to use AstraZeneca's COVID-19 vaccine

**Source:** Author's own materials.

The group adapted their messages from the beginning of their Online campaign to the audience, whom they had probably analyzed, as evidenced by the constant evolution and topics of common concern to people.

The third element of Daesh's information strategy is the division of the organization's activities:

- joint planning of operations (for example, identifying assassination sites, tools and methods with a broad technical description and an indication of advantages and disadvantages) (Figure 2);
- joint implementation of tasks and missions;
- joint celebrations (of military success, terrorist acts or deaths of fighters).



**Figure 2.** An example of Daesh's information about how to plan operations

**Source:** Author's own materials.

The fourth element of Daesh's information strategy is the division of the target group of fighters and sympathizers into:

- women (taking account of their interests: kitchen, home, children, care, marital life or their activity in the ranks of organizations through participation in women's groups; in addition, women are mentioned in 28 issues of *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* over 1,500 times (see: Baele, Boyd 2019: 119);
- men (they are present in every issue of Daesh's publications);
- children (boys and girls are offered a separate message, which has been stronger and more common since 2018).

These potential audiences can be further categorized based on their vulnerabilities by affiliation and demographics, current needs and motivations (dreams) that correlate with the times when and places where particular activities and events take place. The organization has been using various tools to radicalize or inform people about its activities (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Examples of Daesh's publications

**Source:** Author's own materials.

The diversified informative message, intended to radicalize views, covers the following categories:

- active armed struggle;
- fighting the invader (government, regime) and fighting for territory, a just cause;
- educational;
- affectionate;
- financial (aimed at earning money and paying the necessary specialists).

Daesh has taken an advanced approach to radicalization, combining tradition and technology in an unprecedented way, targeting a number of cutting-edge platforms and using them to disseminate its ideology. Moreover, the organization is constantly and stably present Online. While running a campaign, it uses the cyber community on many portals and messengers such as Facebook, Twitter, Google, Superspt, Viber, WhatsApp, Telegram, Tumblr and Kik.

Initially, Twitter was used as an umbrella media platform that combined various media sources into one easily browsable and searchable information index but, as the analysis has shown, from 2018 this trend turned into dispersed activities, numerous accounts, access passwords and, in extreme cases, the need for passing a test or entering a password. Daesh uses the structure of the virtual community as a defense against account deletion and suspension. The structure can recover quickly by organizing in several small communities and some larger ones. Supporters of the organization have found ways to outsmart the constant account deletion on social networking sites by creating the Bait al-Ansar (house of supporters) institution, which allows users to quickly create new accounts without having to enter new information (see: MEMRI 2016).

In fact, according to a study by George Washington University from 2015, many cyber militants view the suspension of accounts as a “badge of honor.” In addition, it is worth paying attention to one more important element of the Online battlefield, which also defines the essence of radicalization processes. Namely, unlike a frontline fighter, who can be killed or injured, a cyberterrorist’s Online message taking the form of a tweet or post cannot. The person leaves a trace that is imperceptible in the initial stages of radicalization and may therefore be ignored or unnoticed in the broad context of the process.

The fifth element of Daesh’s information strategy is the tools and techniques used to implement the strategy, influence and spread fear. The tools and techniques used by Daesh to implement its information strategy are specifically designed to inform and influence various environments. The tools and therefore all kinds of Daesh productions are synchronized in time and space in connection with the religious calendar, the battlefield, successes and other important events for Daesh. The effective implementation and coordination of messaging have a strong impact on the overall information strategy, giving Daesh an important



advantage in modern information warfare. The group does deliver single messages but implements a series of messages that build a story and create expectations of future events among the target audiences. This is evidenced by the season, recording episodes, the continuation of topics in various publications and references to other publications. The virtual caliphate does not segregate recipients according to latitude but looks for such a message that, on the one hand, will be universal and, on the other, will respond to various types of needs. The message is specifically tailored to exploit each target group's vulnerabilities and delivered using the best tools to reach target groups and achieve a positive outcome.

Various tools, including social media propaganda, direct physical actions and computer network operations, are used to access or target potential audiences. The information techniques used by Daesh in a practical way when drafting and transmitting messages include:

- open-source jihad – an open invitation and campaign aimed at disseminating terrorist materials (in the author's opinion, this can be dated from 2011 to 2018);
- cool jihad – a message targeted or dedicated to a specific group of recipients according to their preferences and interests, which was practiced from 2014 to 2018, as evidenced by the researched source materials.

To prepare and disseminate an effective terrorist message using an appropriate tool and technique, knowledge about the needs, beliefs and fears of the population is required. The conducted research has shown that the analyzed materials published by Daesh use the basic principles of exerting influence and manipulation methods, based on the rule of reciprocity, the rule of commitment and consistency, socio-cultural and religious proof and the rule of authority.

## Cool jihad as an element of a dedicated extremist message

Cool jihad is a concept that can be treated as a technique for exerting influence and as a form of directing or dedicating a message to a specific group of recipients according to their identified needs. In the area of security sciences and the analyzed literature on the subject, there is no single mainstream message that would define this “terrorist” phenomenon. A thorough analysis of Polish source materials has shown that the concept is closest to the phenomenon of branding, widely used in management sciences (marketing — see: Górak-Sosnowska 2015), and the term “jihadi cool,” which was mainly mentioned by foreign authors from 2014 to 2021 in the context of: combating “lone wolves” (see: Hamm, Mark, Ramón 2017), Daesh’s approach to recruitment (Cf. Winter 2016), counter-terrorism narratives (Cf. Joosse, Bucerius, Thompson 2015), foreign fighters in Syria (see: Barrett 2014) and Jihadi popular culture (see: Oren 2018).

The analyzed materials lack a conceptual methodological structure that would show the scale of this phenomenon and define and describe it in detail, referring to the theory of security sciences.

Therefore, the author suggests that forecasting, simulating and counteracting contemporary threats determine the need to specify the division of security in question, including socio-cultural security, into two completely new derivatives: cultural security and confessional security. Cultural security from the Polish perspective mainly concerns cultural heritage and security culture, but confessional security has not yet been described. This creates both an interaction gap and a huge challenge for security researchers, which the author of this publication would like to face and fill. The young security sciences are subject to constant analysis and should respond to contemporary threats to define the problems of the phenomena they concern, as well as responding, simulating and proposing methods, tools and techniques corresponding to contemporary, dynamically developing terrorist threats. In the author’s opinion, there

is neither a theoretical nor practical possibility of analyzing the activities of terrorist organizations only from the military perspective.

This limits the interpretation of the full scale of terrorist activities and prevents cultural and confessional (religious) analysis, which constitutes the ideology of contemporary and future terrorist organizations. Certainly, both areas have much in common but, in the broad sense of international security, there are cultural areas that do not have to be defined in terms of religion. However, in the analyzed case of the activity of the Daesh terrorist organization, there is a need for a dual approach to the proposed concepts, for which the common threat is the use of the cool jihad technique.

The interpretation basis for the described concept may be the following components:

- the name of the organization, “Islamic State”;
- the use of the figure of a caliph and the concept of a caliphate;
- the flag and anthem.

The above-mentioned elements can have various functions: integrative, agitating, informative, interpretative, misinforming and unmasking. The aim of the first is to stabilize the existing political and social system; it is intended to unify and strengthen structures and is addressed to educated and well-informed audiences. The second defines actions aimed at inciting people to act, while the real goal is to gain acceptance for an ideology or political system and develop new patterns of behavior, most often practiced in revolutionary situations – as in the case of the Arab revolutions. In the informative and interpretative function, information plays a secondary role and is only an element of a message, based on which interpretation is built. The misinforming function plays a significant role in external propaganda, in which the object of influence is an opponent or enemy of the state. The last function – unmasking – is a reaction to disinformation and is used to discover untrue information.

The cool jihad technique was most strongly implemented from 2014 to 2018, and currently functions mainly in the virtual dimension and is

constantly evolving, responding to trends prevailing among potential supporters and recruits of the organization. Analyses conducted over the last decade have shown that the most frequent Islamic State (IS) techniques include:

- repetition – the same anti-Western content is repeated in publications, leaflets, music and inscriptions on walls;
- concealment – one of the most difficult-to-detect techniques, which eliminates certain content from public life, for example, non-Muslim topics, regarding the role of women, human rights and the possibility of social and cultural changes;
- the so-called inherited audience – the use of those audiences who are interested in completely different content, for example, broadcasting video recordings just before an important football match;
- symbols – easily communicative, related to a given idea, affect the mental, motivational and emotional spheres, for example, the IS symbol (a black flag with Koranic inscription);
- the uniqueness of a message – often in the form of a sensational presentation of a problem or a fact, for example, a paradoxical situation in the title of an article;
- trends – the recipient succumbs to the trends prevailing in their environment, the technique is built on the mechanism of imitation, fear of ridicule, the tendency to not stand out, to be modern (cool jihad, that is, a trend of belonging to the IS);
- selection – biased elimination of content that is inconvenient for the propagandists, for example, highlighting only the opponent's shortcomings (articles devoted to the shortcomings in the Western world);
- distraction manoeuvres – diverting the public's attention from unfavorable matters by suggesting another object of interest, for example, descriptions of stores opened under the aegis of IS in Syria and Iraq, photos of available products, happy people making purchases while fighting is going on;

- exaggeration, hyperbolization – presenting facts as “extraordinary,” “historical” and multiplying a message, for example, titles in *Dabiq*;
- excessive generalization – this is supposed to create a belief that a given phenomenon shows signs of universality, for example, using the phrases “all Muslims are like that” or “as it is commonly known”;
- openness – the creators of propaganda associated with Islamic extremism often emphasize that they have nothing to hide, which is often a technique of delaying information about events, for example, they publish information about events that are about to happen;
- authority – this makes the content credible or, as the so-called transferred authority, speaks on topics in which it is not an expert, for example, Osama bin Laden gave an interview about the greenhouse effect and climate change;
- imperative content – a categorical call from the addressee to comply with the wishes and guidelines prompts the recipients to make the expected decisions, for example, post titles: “Address to Muslims,” “Attention Muslims!”;
- indirect impact – this is most often addressed to some people from the environment of the relevant addressee, for example, information about foundations supporting children in the caliphate;
- wording ultimatum – narrows down the choice, clearly indicating the recommended content, for example, either fight against the West or fight against infidels, and so on;
- the chaos of concepts and ideas – this is supposed to create a sense of chaos in the area of values and relativization of meanings, for example, using linguistic nonsense in the description of certain religious phenomena, an example is articles in *Dabiq*.

The assumptions of the cool jihad technique are based on:

- psychological assumptions and their relation to Islamic extremism;

- use of social media;
- dedicated propaganda.

The essence of the activities of the Daesh organization (and other extremist organizations) is that the attacked persons or groups of people cannot influence the achievement of their goals. Actions of a terrorist nature have a psychological effect that manifests itself in the form of media and social hype. The key aspects of Islamic fundamentalism's activities are fear and a sense of threat evoked by threats of action or direct actions by militants. Fundamentalists recognize the principle that the bloodier the attack, the more fear and terror it evokes. As a result, it has a strong psychological impact on the masses of recipients. This triggers reactions that paralyze and prevent the functioning of entire societies.

This mechanism works regardless of whether the actual use of force or the threat of its use is involved. Fear takes on individual and collective dimensions. Fundamentalists only need to launch a successful attack or series of attacks to trigger this psychological factor. Through these actions, they authenticate themselves and their cause.

The mechanism of such action usually follows the already established, classic scheme:

- attack on an often-random target,
- revealing oneself through the media (admitting to the act, mentioning the name of the organization that carried out the attack, presenting the motives and goals of the action),
- formulating a renewed threat of attack,
- making demands and defining conditions that will not result in further attacks,
- informing that failure to comply with the demands will result in further attacks.

Existing theories say that there are three ways in which fundamentalists can psychologically influence public opinion:

- drawing attention,

- fueling a spiral of violence,
- causing measurable losses.

It should be noted that, today, all three phenomena used by Islamic extremists occur simultaneously. When analyzing the subject of the psychological factor in the activities of Islamic extremists, attention should be paid to the selection of the means and tactics they use. The tools and methods of action are key elements in the process of influencing public opinion. A properly refined and selected form of combat strengthens the effectiveness of terrorist activities. Daesh's activities are characterized by a psychological aspect, social resonance and media hype. Only in this way can a given terrorist act be effective.

Drawing attention and evoking a certain reaction in a large social group form the essence of every terrorist operation. The tools, means and methods used in attacks play an important role in the psychological process of adapting fighters. Appropriate tactics can multiply the effectiveness of the forces and means used by extremists. In Islamic extremism, in particular, several recurring features can be distinguished. Among the main ones is the psychological maximization of the scale of impact on the attacked population, through which the entire society will be shocked by the enormity of personal losses inflicted during the attack. Such actions prove the brutality and determination of terrorists. Islamic extremists can skillfully combine the strategy of terrorist activities, psychological methods affecting the population, the use of socio-cultural means and the environment in which they operate. The use of the media and the latest communication techniques make Islamists very dangerous opponents in combat. They are unpredictable and their fight is clearly different from the previous forms of terrorist activities from the late twentieth century.

During the events of the Arab revolutions, social networking sites gained a new quality and played a new role. They stopped being just a place to exchange photos and messages between friends but also became a meeting point for revolutionaries. Through groups and profiles created

on Facebook, activists informed each other about peaceful protests, encouraging others to participate in them. The authorities realized the scale of this phenomenon too late. The preventive measure was cutting off the internet for Egyptians. However, this did not have any effect because the appalled population used other possibilities. One of them was posting entries on Twitter through a hotline set up especially for this purpose. The information published in the local media largely differed from the facts, which were shown in videos posted on YouTube by the demonstrators. They showed the differences between propaganda television programs and real events in the region.

It should be emphasized that social networking sites played an important role in integrating and identifying the population. They served to express one's own self, views and values, and not only to entertain. They enabled the exchange of views on a mass scale. The events in North Africa in 2011 revealed the important role of internet forums. Not only young, embittered people taking part in demonstrations have their place on the internet, but also political parties, religious groups and representatives of the older generation.

The use of internet blogs and internet communication moved part of the political discussion Online. Thanks to being able to comment, social networking sites create a space for interpersonal interaction, larger and stronger than before, impossible to develop using traditional mass media. Information posted by politicians evokes the reaction of citizens in a direct way, which was practically impossible before. Social, political and terrorist organizations have found their place in the network.

Therefore, it is trivial, but still valid to say that one of the basic guarantors of political, economic or social success in the modern world is quick access to information. The role of various types of media has also become one of the key aspects of the operation of terrorist groups. These activities are increasingly asymmetric and so countries of the anti-terrorist coalition cannot catch up with them because they are undetectable. Thanks to the rapid development of information and technological



progress, the media have become a strong entity influencing global reality. Modern communication techniques, satellite transmissions, GPS, the internet and the constant pursuit of the latest information enable the media to be at the center of every potentially important or interesting event.

It is also not entirely true that the media are only interested in sensational news. However, they are particularly interested in what arouses emotions, fear, horror or outrage. This is for purely economic reasons, on the one hand, and psychosocial conditioning, on the other.

Another cool jihad technique is the aforementioned dedicated propaganda. It shows a wide spectrum of multidimensional propaganda, using social, cultural, confessional, economic or military information. Propaganda messages and narratives skillfully use images, slogans, religious content and symbols that refer to the prejudices and emotions of the audiences. These elements form effective communication on multiple levels, aimed at inducing recipients to “voluntarily” adopt a given point of view as their own.

The communication planes depend on the target group of recipients, who can be divided according to their social status, wealth, religious beliefs, social attitudes, conservatism or political orientation. On this basis, the strengths of propaganda are:

- making systematic attempts to influence the thoughts, feelings and actions of subordinate people with the use of arguments;
- spreading unambiguous information about the necessity to make a specific choice, particularly when justifying suicide bombers;
- disseminating specific ideas, doctrines or ways of acting to support one’s own position or to discredit the opponent’s position – the concept of the faithful and the unfaithful;
- indoctrinating through a new school system and educational models based on rote learning.

The analysis of the activities of the Daesh organization and the concept of cool jihad determines the need to refer to the nature of contemporary

conflicts in the MENA region, which combine cultural change, the cultural turn, the syndrome of a lack of resistance to information, “the trap of temporariness,” religious resentments, social changes, changes in social arrangements and cultural alienation. Thus, paradoxically, it can be said that analyses must take account of several elements that have not found their place in the previous discussions of security.

The activity of the Daesh organization  
during the COVID-19 pandemic and its implications

Given the research conducted and the number of narratives described in the above chapter, it is worth noting how the Daesh organization used the COVID-19 pandemic to spread its messages in the media and the narrative about the pandemic in its radicalization paths. The topic of the pandemic was used in the information strategy and set the directions of the organization’s activity. It is both a technique and a tool to influence sympathizers and committed militants.

The use of the pandemic is based on the belief that natural or man-made disasters are God’s punishment for kuffars (infidels), apostates and polytheists. This mechanism is deeply rooted in the ideology of extremists and fundamentalists on various levels of interpretation. When the COVID-19 outbreak hit the headlines at the end of December 2019, the author observed that in the materials published by Daesh, the message was full of speculation and beliefs that it was divine revenge on China. Subsequently, in February 2020, Daesh assured that it was divine revenge on infidels, particularly on China and Iran, as well as on the West. They described it in the 220<sup>th</sup> (*Al-Naba* 2020a) and 223<sup>rd</sup> (Vines 2020) issues of the weekly *Al-Naba*. This narrative not only fueled anti-Chinese and anti-Shia sentiments but also targeted so-called Muslim hypocrites, infidels and non-believers in general, which was repeated in the Daesh speech (mp3 file) read by spokesman Abu Hamzah Al-Qurasyi.

Daesh subsequently issued self-proclaimed guidelines for their supporters on how to deal with the pandemic (see: Vines 2020).

Basically, the analyzed content indicates that Daesh's official position on the pandemic is twofold. Some of the materials show that the organization particularly focused on its followers (ummah) at the beginning of the epidemic, advising them to continue to use measures protecting them from the virus. It also instructed militants to avoid territories infected with the virus and refrain from outside contacts.<sup>6</sup>

The second part of the narrative was related to the militant mujahideen, who were encouraged to seize opportunities to continue and intensify operations and put pressure on their opponents, including threats of assassinations and logistical preparation or redeployment of their forces. Daesh took advantage of the pandemic and significantly increased its attacks throughout Iraq and Syria, went on the offensive in Africa (Jalloh 2020) and Southeast Asia and almost succeeded in launching attacks in Germany (Al-Naba 2020b).

Although these actions, in the author's opinion, cannot be fully attributed to the pandemic, they demonstrated opportunistic ideological slogans and the ability to adapt to a crisis situation (see: Banlaoi 2020). During the pandemic (which is still ongoing, as of December 2022), Daesh's strategy is strengthened by attacks on prisons, the release of prisoners and incitement to riots in prisons, detention centers, camps and places where migrants (including refugees) reside (Al-Furqan Media Foundation 2020). Daesh has targeted closed or semi-closed centers as places to attack the external forces of its enemies, thus trying to recover commanders and fighters, restoring operational forces (territorial and land) and describing its attacks as propaganda victories in the media.

For example, in the 226<sup>th</sup> issue of the magazine *Naba*, the editorial suggested that the mujahideen should focus on the release of ethnic Uyghurs from Chinese re-education camps and Syrian refugee camps and

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<sup>6</sup> Daesh's publications on Telegram and TamTam, January-March 2020.

detention centers (Webber 2021) (Figure 2). In August 2020, the province of Khorasan Daesh (ISKP), associated with the terrorist group in Afghanistan, also described ways to protect themselves from the COVID-19 plague in their materials (see: Avis 2020).

Through its increased activity, the ISKP group freed hundreds of prisoners from the Nangarhar Central Prison in Jalalabad. In the 246<sup>th</sup> issue of *Al-Naba*, Daesh praised the attacks and emphasized the importance of releasing prisoners (*Al-Naba* 2020c). To some extent, Daesh's aforementioned narrative of resilience also resonates in Southeast Asia. The group's war of attrition narrative continues to be reflected in reports on operations conducted by IS affiliates in the Philippines and Indonesia as part of its East Asian wilayah. In the 236<sup>th</sup> and 246<sup>th</sup> issues of *Al-Naba*, the organization confirms operations in the Philippines and Indonesia, which are considered part of the "Battle of Attrition" campaign conducted in May and August 2020 (*Al-Naba* 2020d; *idem* 2020e). In October 2020, the group claimed responsibility for an attack on a prison in the Democratic Republic of Congo that resulted in the release of at least 1,300 prisoners (see: Ives, Kwai 2021). The Al-Battar Media Foundation designed and distributed posters about Daesh, as well as audio and video materials with key figures of the group, amplifying information about its structure among its supporters.

Other media entities such as the Ash-Shaff Media Foundation and Iqra Media Foundation have produced a mix of nationality- and language-based content including Indonesian, English, French, Russian, German, Spanish and Dutch. The content includes regular news updates on the organization and references to current events and socio-political debates, with a focus on the pandemic by country (Krona 2020).

In the current geopolitical situation, international security understood in a broad sense has the following serious implications:

- militants take advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic (also in a technological sense) to advance their agenda believing that the attention of the security forces will be diverted elsewhere;

- blockades and isolation increase the chances of radicalization and heightened strategic, operational and tactical activity in the offline (traditional) and Online (virtual) dimensions.

Although the pandemic has made it difficult to travel and cross borders, extremist propaganda is gaining strength, generating violence through virtual messages, leading to the resurrection of the fallen caliphate. This poses a serious challenge in various regions and to events involving Muslim communities, such as the Rohingya exodus or clashes in Kashmir and Burma. These events exacerbate social divisions and reinforce the extremist narrative. They further deepen the shared sense of hostility and resentment towards the Western world among vulnerable sections of the Muslim community. Just as for the anti-Daesh forces, the pandemic is an obstacle (also in the financial dimension) to their operations, so for the Daesh organization, it is an opportunity to apply new technologies as well as radicalize and use militants or sympathizers (solo terrorists, lone wolves). As the world's focus is on fighting the pandemic, Daesh extremist preachers and cyber fighters spread exclusive ideas Online and offline to indoctrinate their members, new recruits and followers.

As indicated by both the division of the collected materials and their operationalization, Daesh is an innovative organization as it modifies the technologies available on the market for various purposes. The COVID-19 pandemic has made it necessary to introduce drone technology for parcel deliveries, surveillance of quarantined neighborhoods and area-specific disinfection (Criezis 2020). It can thus be speculated that Daesh can use drones for surveillance and attacks by equipping them with explosives. Both Daesh and other groups worked on drone technology in the past with considerable success and accuracy (*Ibidem*). To introduce drones in major cities, terrorist groups simply had to make minor modifications to repurpose them for conducting terrorist field operations. Analysis of the use of new technologies and the information on their use available in scientific source texts and Daesh publications

has proven that the organization has repeatedly used drones for its attacks.

For example, in October 2016, Daesh used an explosive-filled drone to kill two Kurdish Peshmerga soldiers in Iraq (see: *The Guardian* 2016). Similarly, in January 2017, Daesh released a propaganda video showing several quadcopters launching explosives from the air, thus proving that the organization is experienced in creating bombing-capable drones. In November 2018, the group released a video from the Afghan-Pakistan Khorasan Province reporting a drone crash in Gomal (in Paktika Province). Of note in this area is a 124-page report published in 2017 by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy entitled *Survived Drones, Uprisings, and the Islamic State* (Zelin 2017).

As for the increased activity in the virtual (Online) dimension, it can be concluded that the outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic has increased the flow of extremist materials closely related to the concept of annihilation, infidel crusaders and the day of judgement on all analyzed social networking sites and messengers. According to analysts dealing with the subject of media coverage, the Daesh organization puts less effort into its activities thanks to the spread of COVID-19 (see Bell 2020), which can be confirmed somewhat when analyzing its activities since its inception, evolution and efforts both Online and in the traditional, territorial sphere of the theatre of operations. The analysis of the media message and references to the virtual caliphate and the lost homeland point to the cultural and national specificity of the ummah and not – as was the case until 2019 – the idea of a global caliphate with strong leadership.

## Conclusions

The virtual caliphate has emerged as an enhanced version of Daesh's state-building project seen through the prism of its propaganda. However, the Online environment is no longer just a place where Daesh can

strengthen its brand position. It also uses it to create independent entities based on the original concept of “ad-Dawla.” This is possible thanks to the diversification of platforms and a decentralized communication strategy, under which Daesh and its supporters are active on various communication channels and portals. Since Europol removed terrorist propaganda from Telegram in November 2019, Daesh and its supporters have dispersed and disseminated their activities on various other smaller message encryption platforms such as Rocket.Chat, Hoop and Threema (Europol 2019). According to the author, there has been a kind of “de-platforming,” during which the leaders of the organization reorganize and look for new fronts of activity.

This dispersion may result from the increased activity, creativity and persistence of Daesh sympathizers, supporters and fighters, and is not necessarily a strategy imposed by the organization’s leaders. This indicates a change in the qualitative perception of the organization whose participants evolve from passive observers of the narrative to active cyber fighters who engage in and create their own structures in the network. It is also worth noting that Daesh also tries to cash in on social distancing measures announced by governments by offering support and assistance and by disseminating materials and information about vaccinations and the pandemic. As people are confined to their homes, they spend more time on social media, chatting with friends and family and, in many cases, consuming social media content (Matney 2020). In times of crisis, people need mechanisms to deal with their fears, which are fueled by the prolonged pandemic.

It is also worth remembering about the phenomenon of self-radicalization, which also involves other issues, such as conspiracy theories, alternative treatment methods, self-healing, spiritual coaching and terrorist aspects.<sup>7</sup> Self-radicalization without social interaction is virtually

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<sup>7</sup> As part of the project: Young – Angry – Safe – the Youth University, the author conducts classes with young people aged 15-19 from 15 secondary schools (general secondary schools, technical schools, trade schools) on cultural and confessional safety. A large number of the classes cover the aspect of radicalization processes.

impossible, which confirms the importance of Online connections. Even in cases where an individual seemed to be alone in the radicalization process, there was a strong activity of and support from already radicalized individuals and even members of terrorist groups (Buezo 2013). However, in some cases, communication with them may be accidental (Sageman 2004). Some people feel the need to return to religion. Emerging spiritual resentments indicate that societies are unable to cope alone with the pain caused by pandemics or other natural disasters (Berman 2020). Terrorist groups use this mechanism to lure vulnerable social groups by referring to their needs, fears, frustrations, expectations and dreams.

Increased strategic, operational and tactical activity in the traditional offline dimension may affect the planning and execution of attacks by Daesh fighters (including recruits) or solo terrorists<sup>8</sup> (self-radicalized supporters of the group). An informative message which intensifies pain and misery among crusading nations affects the moods of militants and increases their readiness to act. An excerpt from *Al-Naba* magazine states: “The last thing they hope for today is that this difficult time will coincide with the preparations of the soldiers of the caliphate for new strikes on them, similar to those in Paris, London and Brussels and elsewhere” (Basit 2020: 10). On April 5, 2022, a Sudanese man killed two people and stabbed five others in an attack near Lyon, a city in south-east France (Keohane 2020). French anti-terror police arrested the assailant and the initial investigation has revealed that the attack was aimed at disturbing public order by intimidation or terror (Basit 2020: 10).

Following the suggested thesis about Daesh’s terrorist activity and its implications for international security, and based on the Daesh media content analysis, it should be stated that the organization called for no

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<sup>8</sup> The author does not use the phrase “lone wolves”, drawing attention to a certain scientific myth that is refuted in the scientific literature: Hamm, Spaaij 2017b; Hankiss 2018; Miller 1956.



mercy for “infidels” and “apostates” at the time of the pandemic crisis. Furthermore, it asserts that “they [the infidels – M.E.G.] will be less able to harm the Muslims because their ability to wage the war against the Mujahideen will be affected” (*Ibidem*). Daesh asked its supporters to launch attacks in areas where security measures were relaxed, and security personnel were redirected to ensure social distancing and maintain socio-economic order (Al-Tamimi 2020), so that punishment will hit the crusader nations more than the plague itself (Mazzoni 2020).

Essentially, as this text shows, the entire sphere of terrorist activity is communication, while acts of terror are basically propaganda in themselves. Therefore, strategic communication, related in particular to cyber jihad, will permanently be a central element in the fight against modern terrorism. The above-described activity and dynamics of Daesh’s terrorist activity and its successful and extensive use of Online propaganda have brought the issue of terrorist propaganda to the public’s mind, in particular in the context of recruitment and radicalization. In response to this, de-radicalization and the desire to understand the subject to counteract such messages are becoming increasingly important. Currently, the terrorist narrative is prevented by disrupting the information flow, that is, removing content from the internet or banning illegal speech. However, “the effectiveness of this response is severely limited given the speed of new data transfer and the limited capacity of law enforcement agencies” (Briggs, Feve 2013: 6-7)

Moreover, it should be noted that academic research in this field is still developing and the study of the use of the internet by terrorist groups has become an increasingly popular area of exploration. However, research is overwhelmingly focused on websites and virtual community analysis (Avan 2007). A related area of academic research is the analysis of web content and its potential impact on vulnerable individuals. Little attention has been paid to the individual experiences of internet users, the role of symbols and the use of the internet in the radicalization process, that is, whether and how the internet is related to

the fact that a person starts to support terrorism or forms of extremism leading to terrorism. When academic studies analyze these people's Online engagement, they often do so by examining secondary sources or anecdotal evidence.

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About the book "The Virus of Radicalization":

"I regard this monograph as an example of high-quality academic craftsmanship. It is an important supplement to the literature on the phenomena and processes of radicalization and extremism (primarily those taking place in the Polish socio-political system, but not only). It will be interesting both for scientists, students and a wider audience interested in socio-political issues."

Associate Professor Mikołaj Cześnik, Ph.D., SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Warsaw, Poland

"The volume is a collection of chapters on the topic of mostly right-wing political radicalization in Poland, Europe, and the world. (...) Excellent empirical case studies of particular cases of political radicalization in Poland and Europe are the bulk and the highlight of the volume. (...) Overall, the volume is a useful, well-written and well-conceived contribution to literature on political radicalism and crisis of liberal democracy."

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