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*Cyber Jihadi Propaganda: The Curious Case of
Jabhat Al-Nusra*

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Abstract

Operating for two years, Jabhat al-Nusra, Al-Qaeda's Syrian branch, has attracted ample international attention and Jihadi support. Al-Nusra's Social Network tactics - aimed at establishing web-presence and enticing potential sympathizers and recruits - underscore the efficacy of cyber Jihadi propaganda. Due to the Internet's global reach, covert nature and cost effectiveness, it serves as an optimal tool of web-radicalization and mobilization. This study examines al-Nusra's cyber-presence on Twitter, including its usage patterns, potential implications and this tactic's relative effectiveness. To this end two databases were constructed and analogized: The first consists of al-Nusra's old Twitter account records, operational from June 2012 to April 2013. The second consists of al-Nusra's new and improved Twitter account records, operational from December 2013 to present time.

This study observed four evolutionary trends in al-Nusra's use of Twitter overtime. In light of these trends, it is argued that the Internet acts as a game changer in the traditional 'symbiotic' relationship between terrorism and the media. Contemporary terrorist organizations can now address a wider target audience individually, personalizing their message and acuminating their power displays according to popular demand. A personalized e-Jihad offers additional, innovative benefits to traditional battlefield tactics and should therefore be further explored, monitored and countered.

Cyber Jihadi Propaganda: The Curious Case of Jabhat Al-Nusra

Danit Gal

In a letter intercepted by American Intelligence, Ayman al-Zawahiri stated: “We are in a battle, and more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media. We are in a media battle for the hearts and minds of our *umma*.”¹ The evolution of the Web 1.0 to the Web 2.0 introduced greater individual participation and generated numerous online communities², which are a fertile ground for global communications, information sharing, the spread of democracy, yet also fundamentalism and terrorism. In light of al-Nusra’s limited new Social Networks platforms, this study will focus on quantitatively mapping al-Nusra’s Twitter usage patterns in both its old and new accounts, in order to distinguish different trends and possible shifts in its cyber-Jihadi propaganda dissemination strategies via a yearlong comparative study of both accounts.

Al-Qaeda

Al-Qaeda’s origins can be traced back to foreign Mujahidin warriors who joined forces with local Afghan resistance groups in fighting Soviet invaders in the ten years long Afghan-Soviet war. Among them was Osama Bin Laden, a Saudi citizen and devoted Mujahidin fighter that established ‘Al-Qaeda’ in 1988, in his search of an international Jihad³. After the Afghan – Soviet war ended in 1989, Bin Laden further pursued his policy of violent resistance in Kuwait, which Hussein invaded in 1990. Banned from his Saudi homeland, Bin Laden and his organization took refuge in Sudan from 1991 to 1996, where Al-Qaeda assumed the role of the Global Salafi Jihadi movement vanguard. In Sudan Bin Laden established a wide network of international connections and became a logistic and ideological facilitator of local violent attacks⁴.

In 1996 Bin Laden returned to Afghanistan where Al-Qaeda soon began building training camps, expanding its original role from a mere facilitator to a well funded executor. During 1996 Bin Laden issued fatwas calling for a global Jihad against the ‘far enemy’

mainly the United States and its regional proxy – Israel. By 1998 Bin Laden’s globally oriented fatwas gained considerable Muslim support, further amplified by Al-Qaeda’s successful twin bombing of American embassies in Nairobi and Dar al-Salam. Al-Qaeda’s aggressive ideology, well-funded training facilities and numerous successful attacks established its regional presence and prestige. However, its crown jewel operation - the 9/11 attacks that changed the face of modern terrorism - was the peak of its terrorist ‘career’ and the main catalyst of its physical destruction⁵.

Al-Qaeda’s propagating methods

Until the 1990’s Al-Qaeda’s modus operandi and ideology were mainly conveyed to recruits directly via interpersonal indoctrination and training or written material, disseminated by hand in local markets and mosques. During the 1990’s Al-Qaeda is believed to have kept record of its knowledge, compiling it into vast manuals and books that would further facilitate training and indoctrination and ensure the survivability of its ideological heritage⁶. During the second half of the 20th century these writings were typed and backed up in electronic copies. The hard copies were soon after replaced by floppy disks, CD-ROMs and USB flash drives, making them easier to produce and distribute while harder to trace, decode and destroy⁷.

By 1996 Al-Qaeda’s propaganda efforts expanded to encompass Bin Laden’s televised interviews and slowly started diffusing into the cyberspace. This expansion resulted with new recruits and sympathizers, heightened global status and prestige and increase in donations⁸. These lucrative benefits convinced the senior leadership to further experiment with online propaganda⁹, yet it did not play a significant role throughout the 90’s as well as early 2000. With the success of the 9/11 attacks, Al-Qaeda, now at the center of global media attention, sought to profit from its exposure by mobilizing potential recruits and threatening its numerous enemies¹⁰.

Bin Laden encouraged the use of multiple propaganda channels and alongside its growing use of the Internet to disseminate ideological writings, recordings and full-length videos; Al-Qaeda continued issuing printed propaganda materials and handing them out individually. However, the erosion of Al-Qaeda’s physical capabilities, the growing internal Arab resentment towards the group following the Western invasion to Iraq and Afghanistan, the natural decline of global media interest, and the proliferation of Internet access in the region forced it to adapt and disseminate the majority of its Jihadi propaganda online, in order to stay logistically operational and relevant in the global scene¹¹.

The emergence of Al-Qaeda 2.0

In retaliation of 9/11, the United States demolished Al-Qaeda's physical infrastructure in Afghanistan, captured or killed some of its senior leaders and forced its members into hiding¹². In light of Al-Qaeda's operational setback and due to the widespread denunciation backlash of Arab communities that suffered from the American invasion, Al-Qaeda morphed into the 'new Al-Qaeda' or 'Al-Qaeda 2.0' in order to survive¹³. With the evolution of the Internet from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0, greater individual participation has been introduced into the cyberspace. This resulted with the proliferation of cyber-communities of shared interests and hobbies, which allowed them to ignore geo-political borders and physical distance. The emergence of the Web 2.0 is the founding base of new Social Networks, created in order to bring together individuals from all over the world and allow them to communication with greater ease¹⁴. Al-Qaeda 2.0 started utilizing global communication means both discretely, via shared encrypted information or using covert methods such as 'dead dropping' on shared email accounts¹⁵, and out in the open via the shift from classic media channels like radio, televised news, newspapers and magazines to new channels like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Blogs and forums¹⁶.

The Internet soon became a means of mobilization rather than just a means of survival. It served both as Al-Qaeda's new shelter and source of power, as it enabled it to continue radicalizing and inspiring individuals to participate in terrorist activities with lower costs, a global reach and with little effort. Al-Qaeda's successful adaptation to cutting edge, Western technologies inspired Marc Sageman's famous concept of "leaderless Jihad", Al-Qaeda's evolutionary modus operandi in replacing conventional hierarchical structures with a loose network of operational cells, motivated by shared ideology, ideas and concepts injected into the cyberspace¹⁷.

Cyber-Jihadi Propaganda

New Jihadi propaganda dissemination methods available online provide terrorist groups with greater control over the content and the original narrative of the message they wish to send out to their audiences. This is particularly important in the context of Al-Qaeda's growing concern with possible distortion of its original message and narrative by media channels and government officials. Soon after Al-Qaeda started looking for ways to ensure that its messages are conveyed in their original form, only open for interpretation among believers and enemies on the individual level¹⁸. Consequentially, Al-Qaeda's leadership began using the Internet in a 'top-down' approach of propaganda dissemination¹⁹ that enabled

it to preserve its original message and narrative while still ensuring high accessibility for a wider variety of audiences²⁰. A recent study of new Social Networks Jihad reveals a concerning pattern of increasing popularity of cyber Jihadi propaganda along with increasing dispersion of its sources across the web²¹. Twitter in particular has aroused vast interest among researchers who presented clear empirical evidence of the aforementioned pattern²². Nonetheless, other channels of new social media are also concerning in the platform they provide for insurgency. This evolving model is further reinforced by the propaganda ‘top-down’ approach, favored by Jihadists and adopted by al-Nusra, consisting of the distribution of official statements by the group in various new social media channels. Such statements are open for discussion, comments and further radicalization, making it harder to trace and stop new recruits and sympathizers²³.

Assessed as the most effective usage of the Internet by terrorists, the Jihadi propaganda²⁴ has become even bolder, allowing radicalized members to voice their opinions to thousands of viewers²⁵. The evolution of cheap and available filming equipment exposed the battlefield to the cyber public, making documentary videos one of terrorists’ favorite propaganda forms, as its effectiveness lies in its appeal to the majority of emotionally manipulated audience²⁶. Written statements are even easier to produce and distribute, appealing to adherences on a daily basis and allowing them to redistribute and endorse it with a single click, taking it worldwide in seconds²⁷. However, in his book Marc Sageman maintains that the ‘top-down’ method of spreading information online, often favored by Jihadists and commonly utilized by Al-Qaeda²⁸ and as an extension of that by Jabhat al-Nusra, are inefficient as the real radicalization process occurs in the private conversational sphere of forums, chat rooms and emails²⁹. In contrast to Sageman’s opinion, recent articles still perceive the ‘top-down’ approach as effective. An example of that is Assaf Moghadam’s article, advocating the ‘top-down’ notion in claiming that Al-Qaeda’s operational paradigm is characterized by the “centralization of decision and decentralization of execution”³⁰. Hence, Moghadam largely maintains that although Al-Qaeda 2.0 did adjust to technological advancement it still accommodates Abu Musab Al-Suri’s advanced ideological vision of a loosely tied, globally dispersed network of terrorist cells, launching individualized acts of Jihad in a pious pursuit of the shared global goal of restoring the Islamic Caliphate³¹. Despite this academic debate, it appears that Al-Qaeda cyber-operational strategy, while becoming tech savvy and less hierarchal oriented, still largely remains a ‘top-down’ one³².

In conclusion, this discussion further suggests that in analyzing Jabhat al-Nusra’s cyber-Jihadi propaganda strategy the term “individualized Jihad”, coined by Al-Qaeda’s strategist

al-Suri is better suited than “leaderless Jihad”. Jabhat al-Nusra’s propaganda is mainly conceived and conveyed by leading key figures, yet the operationalization of the messages and the ideological basis it spreads are aimed to be carried out in the physical battlefield individually, by each devoted fighter.

Jabhat al-Nusra

The origins of Al-Qaeda’s presence in Syria are believed to date back to the early 2000’s by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the deceased leader of Al-Qaeda in Iraq. Al-Zarqawi set up a network of operatives that established guesthouses in Lebanon, Syria and Afghanistan to train new recruits and smuggle them into Afghanistan. During the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Syria served as both a shelter and an open route for numerous Jihadi fighters³³. Al-Qaeda’s presence in Syria was relatively mild during that period of time, yet with the 2011 civil uprising it began growing in numbers and assuming further territorial influence.

Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham, the front for assistance of the residents of Greater Syria, also known as the al-Nusra front, is a Salafi-Jihadi terrorist organization established on January 24, 2012 through a video announcement by its leader, Abu Muhammad al-Julani³⁴. The group was established nearly Eight and half months after the fighting in Syria began, yet intelligence estimates maintain that it existed prior to its official establishment announcement as a Syrian militant Branch of Al-Qaeda in Iraq now formally known as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS)³⁵. On April 10th, 2013, al-Nusra pledged its direct allegiances to Ayman al-Zawahiri, the current leader of Al-Qaeda³⁶ and by that put the final seal of approval on the blacklisting of the group by both the USA in December 11th, 2012³⁷ and the UN in May 31st, 2013³⁸.

On February 2, 2014, al-Zawahiri, Al-Qaeda Core current leader denounced ISIS and publicly declared that Al-Qaeda hold no ties with that group, which further strengthened al-Nusra’s status as Al-Qaeda’s central and official Syrian branch³⁹. ISIS and al-Nusra have been cooperating and clashing alternately, according to their strategic necessities, yet such a statement may lead to further violent clashes between the two groups and complicate the struggle against Assad. Al-Nusra’s fighters consist of Afghan and Iraqi Jihadi veterans, from both the Soviet and American wars, young and inexperienced Jihadi foreign fighters from the region and a growing number of foreign fighters coming from the West and Western Europe in particular⁴⁰. Today al-Nusra is considered as the most effective, well-funded, fastest growing and most threatening militia among all groups of the Syrian opposition⁴¹, this is partly attributed to its prominent online presence⁴².

Jabhat al-Nusra's fight online

Al-Nusra spreads its message via its Media wing, Al-Manara al-Baydhaa' lil-Intaj al-I'lami, the White Minaret for PR productions, al-Nusra's sole authorized propaganda distributor. The White Minaret maintains visibly strong ties with Al-Qaeda online with official statements published by Al-Qaeda core, calling Jihadi fighters to join al-Nusra and help support it in the Syrian struggle⁴³. The White Minaret media channel allegedly disseminates its propaganda online by sending out documentary videos, recorded statements and interviews with operatives in a central Jihadist forum called Shumukh al-Islam, the Glory of Islam, and reposting them on video sharing platforms such as YouTube and social networks like Facebook, Twitter, Forums and Blogs. An instance of a popular forum utilized by the White Minaret is Ansar al-Mujahedeen, where it frequently claims responsibility for and brags about its terrorist attacks⁴⁴. Al-Nusra reportedly operates an official Forum website (www.jalnosra.com) called Muntadayat al-Nusra li-Jabhat al-Nusra, the Forums of Assistance to the Al-Nusra Front⁴⁵, where one may find recorded statements and videos with links to Al-Nusra's old and new Twitter accounts. The Forum also contains a link to a news agency under the name of #Hemm Agency, which produces Tweets Al-Nusra's twitter account has Retweeted. Al-Nusra is also believed to be operating a blog (djebhet-enossra.blogspot.com) where one may find reposts of the group's official statements, videos, updates on the Syrian struggle and different articles and posts relating to Al-Nusra⁴⁶.

Twitter

Before examining Twitter, a set of definitions of its inner jargon is in order. Twitter is a micro-blogging tool, where only the account admin can post in his account. It is a new Social Network platform that allows individuals to Tweet, post whatever a person may wish in up to 140 characters; use Hashtags, use a popular phrase consisting of one or more words to quickly place their Tweet in a specific context and increase its social impact; and Retweet, repost someone else's Tweets in your account in order to actively demonstrated your support or disapproval of its content and share it with followers. For the purpose of this research a distinction between active and passive popularity is drawn: Active Participation is measured by the number of Retweets, since this action exposes the original Tweet to further Twitter constituencies and by that actively demonstrates an interest in that particular post. Passive participation is the marking of a Tweet as a 'Favorite', showing that a user likes the contents of the post, for all intents and purposes, yet may not want followers to know of such interests.

Twitter was originally conceived by four individuals, Evan Williams, Noah Glass, Jack Dorsey and 'Biz' Stone and launched on March 21, 2006⁴⁷. As of December 30, 2013 it consists of nearly 500 million active users with an average of 58 million Tweets per day⁴⁸. The Global Web Index declared Twitter as the 'fastest growing social platform in the world' with nearly 288 Million monthly active users⁴⁹. Twitter is an open Social Network platform, as it can be easily viewed without Twitter membership, allowing everyone to see an accounts' Tweets, monitor their behavior and collect information on users without their knowledge or consent. It is also important to note that Twitter deletes an accounts' content after 30 days from the day of an account's deactivation. An inactive account that has not been deactivated may still be accessed, although it has not been operational

Twitter as an effective Terrorism platform

According to the 304th MI Bn OSINT Team report, published in October 16, 2008, Twitter may be used by Terrorists in three different scenarios: first, Twitter will allow terrorists to share intelligence and logistic reports in a matter of minutes, improving their operational coordination. Second, Twitter will allow terrorist operatives to remotely detonate explosive mobile devices or bomb vests according to shared GPS locations. Third, Twitter will allow Terrorists to privately reach individuals worldwide and to collect intelligence on their private lives and Internet usage patterns. This information can be used to steal identities or serve for other cyber-scams⁵⁰.

Intelligence-wise, Twitter still appears to be outside of governmental agencies' reach. A prominent example in this regard is the inability of well established and highly funded American intelligence agencies such as the American National Security Agency, the Central Intelligence Agency and the Federal Bureau of Investigations, to effectively collect the masses of information and monitor Terrorist organization on Twitter. As intelligence efforts in tracking geographical locations through Twitter seem futile, experts began using methods of linguistic analysis as indicators of geographic origins⁵¹. Although the information flows in massive amounts of data, turning Twitter into more than an effectively accurate prediction tool seems to be a difficult task⁵². Based on Hamas's effective utilization of Twitter during the IDF's last operation in the Gaza Strip 'Pillar of Defense', many calls have been made, demanding that Twitter shuts down Hamas's new media channel⁵³. However, despite growing concerns among government officials and regulators in the American administration regarding the platform Twitter allows Terrorist organizations by not shutting down their official accounts, Twitter's management seems largely indifferent to such high level demands

as well as emerging legal threats and regulations that may eventually force Twitter's hands on the matter⁵⁴. Nonetheless, maintaining web-Freedom of Speech holds its benefits as intelligence agencies have been mining the Twitter sphere for operational information that may hold valuable information on the progress Terrorist groups are making and wish to publicly brag about. In this regard, officials emphasize that the strong inclination of younger generations to over-share and over-bare information⁵⁵ plays to agencies clear advantage. These platforms allow counter-terrorism forces to maintain counter web-presence and even interact with Terrorist groups and confront them online⁵⁶. Furthermore, specialists also claim that shutting down official Twitter accounts will only lead to the proliferation of unofficial and affiliated accounts, making it harder to trace these groups online⁵⁷.

Twitter can also be used as an effective self-marketing and self-promotion tool. In a large-scale E-Marketing study conducted in the United Kingdom and Romania, Bulearca and Bulearca found that Twitter is an effective tool of E-Marketing. According to the study, an E-Word of Mouth can either build up or nearly destroy a small to medium sized business's reputation online with few Tweets. The pilot conclusions indicate that a positive sentiment explicitly expressed online via the use of favorable, personal consumer experiences has increased the enterprise's pool of customers and the sense of public trust in the business. This study also showed that negative sentiments expressed by Twitter viewers tend to spread more rapidly among the cyber-Twitter community, spill-over into other new Social Networks, such as Facebook, Forums and Blogs, and tarnish enterprise's reputations rapidly and effectively, leaving them with high costs of attempting to win back the hearts and minds of their consumers⁵⁸. Instances of e-reputational damage have drawn much negative media attention⁵⁹ and reports estimates show that many companies have grown weary of such threats and began extensively utilizing e-marketing strategies on Twitter in order to avoid potential online hazards⁶⁰.

Research Methodology

In mapping al-Nusra's Twitter usage patterns I employed a quantitative approach that recorded its Tweets in numerical values as indications of specific behavioral patterns. This method was used in a comparative study of al-Nusra's use of Twitter for the duration of 12 months, with nine active months from June 2012 to April 2013 on its old account, and three active months from December 2013 to February 2014 on its new account. I also employed minor qualitative analysis, but as I do not read Arabic I chose to focus on five specific Tweets

that I deemed crucial for the analysis, as they presented significant behavioral shifts, and had them semi-professionally translated. To the end of examining al-Nusra's Twitter usage pattern overtime I built a database where I recorded the data of 360 Tweets according to (1) Serial Numbers, (2) original Date of Publication, (3) Comments on the Tweet, (4) number of Retweets and (5) number of times the Tweet was marked as 'Favorite'. In addition, I distinguished between two (6) Languages of Publication, which are Arabic and English, and classified the Tweets under the categories of (7) Fighting Update and (8) Martyrdom Operations. These eight indicators allowed me to track al-Nusra's Twitter accounts in two separate, identical databases that yielded numerical indications of specific trends and shifts.

It is important to acknowledge several crucial limitations that may impede on this research's conclusions. First, this research lacks qualitative analysis that would have allowed it to examine the trends identified in this study in depth and validate them with sound content analysis and support. Second, the research includes two allegedly official Twitter accounts of Jabhat al-Nusra, yet cannot explain the reasons for the termination of use of the first account and the need to open a new account. Third, only 360 Tweets have been analyzed through a yearlong period of Twitter use. Identified usage patterns are subject to change and cannot be used as a valid usage pattern indication. Considering the billions of Tweets posted monthly on Twitter this presents a comparatively small, yet still representative, sample. Fourth, there are no available explanations as to why Twitter allows al-Nusra to maintain its official page operational while other new Social Networking platforms such as YouTube, Facebook and WordPress shut them down. Hence, an effective explanation of my choice to focus on Twitter is mainly the fact that it is the sole tracking tool the remains publicly visible until today.

Study Results and Data Analysis

Report no. 1 – A change in Twitter's strategic role

In Al-Nusra's second tweet, published on August 19, 2012 in its old account, it declares that the statements being published, besides links to official statements, should be considered as secondary sources to the original sources – which are the White Minaret's publications on the 'Glory of Islam' and 'Ansar Al-Mujahideen' Forums⁶¹. This tweet (see Appendix B, serial number #2) received two comments, the first reposting the tweet in another supporting account and the second comment extending blessings to the account. This tweet was Retweeted 36 times and was marked as 'favorite' by eleven users. This stands in stark contrast to Al-Nusra's second tweet on its new account, published on December 31, 2013,

where it announces the renewal of its official account⁶². In the linked official statement posted in justpaste.it, it states that Twitter is the sole and exclusive source of its media publications, audio-visual messages, official statements, operational data and public opinion. It further notes that it does not currently operate any official website, forum or a Facebook page. In fighting the efforts to eliminate its online propaganda, the statement requests that supporters avoid labeling their posts with the words ‘the White Minaret’ in order to prevent confusion. The statement is concluded by directing the supporters to official statements that are published under the banner of ‘the White Minaret’ in the webpages of ‘Islamic web-redemption’, ‘the Glory of Islam’ and ‘Ansar Al-Mujahideen’. The original press release has been viewed 5,510 times⁶³. The tweet received seven comments that congratulated the group and celebrated its success in returning to the Social Networking scene and carried on the message to other supporter’s accounts⁶⁴. The tweet (see Appendix C, serial number #2) was Retweeted 292 times - eight times the web-sharing ratio of the second tweet in the old account - and was marked as ‘favorite’ by 88 users, again eight times the web-sharing ratio of the compared tweet in Al-Nusra’s old account.

Report no. 2 – Evident change in al-Nusra’s usage patterns

Much has changed over al-Nusra’s nine-month long Twitter silence. A quick glance over the two accounts shows a significant change in style and usage patterns. For example, the old al-Nusra Twitter account used the standard Twitter background while the new one uses a high definition, digitalized image with the group’s logo and Arabic inscriptions. However, further changes in al-Nusra’s Twitter usage pattern are quickly revealed when a comparison is made between the content of Tweets from both accounts. While the first account contained no links to images, 56.3% of the Tweets in the new account contained links to images and incorporated images alongside official statements and videos in the actual Tweet, showing a higher level of user interface complexity.

Another apparent change deriving from this observation is the use of hybrid Tweets, which consist of two or more links instead of using a separate Tweet for each link, as done in the old account. However, this did not result with a decrease in the number of Tweets in the new account. The old account posted on average 28.6 Tweets per month with the monthly average of 66 Retweets, while the new account sports a monthly average of 34.3 Tweets with a monthly Retweeting average of 260.8 in its first three months – four times the popularity of the older account’s Tweets. This serves as another indication of al-Nusra’s learning process and understanding in utilizing Twitter in order to maximize its web presence, public exposure

and arouse media interest. The difference between the two accounts becomes even clearer when comparing the statistics of the two most popular Tweets of each account. On the old account, the most popular Tweet was its last Tweet, where it provided with a link to a recorded message on April 10th, 2013, the day al-Zawahiri officially announced al-Nusra as Al-Qaeda's Syrian branch. This tweet (see Appendix B, serial number #257) received three comments, 604 Retweets and was marked as 'favorite' 298 times. Although the old account has nearly 30,700 more followers than the new al-Nusra Twitter account, these stats look pale compared to al-Nusra's most popular post on its new account. The most popular Tweet on the new account, so far, contains a regular message about al-Nusra's resilience with Arabic Hashtags about Syria and contains no external links or added images. This tweet (see Appendix C, serial number # 14) received 12 comments, 1,330 Retweets and was marked as 'favorite' 269 times. As active, rather than passive popularity is measured by Retweets, this seemingly ordinary Tweet is more than twice as popular as al-Nusra's last and most popular post on its old account.

Report no. 3: Twitter as the battleground in the war of information

Al-Nusra often used the old account and still uses the new account in order to convey messages to the public, as well Assad, his army and Hezbollah. Tweets threatening Assad or individuals affiliated with him are not an uncommon occurrence and often involve unpleasant images of corpses and threatening digital images. Al-Nusra further utilizes its Twitter accounts in order to report its operations (which will be more elaborately discussed in the 4th report), deny its involvement or claim responsibility for attacks, and expose Assad's cruelty to the outside world. Al-Nusra mainly achieves these ends by Retweeting posts from unknown news agencies such as News Shamia⁶⁵, an unidentified source of news about the fighting in Syria with 18 al-Nusra Retweets in its old Twitter accounts, and Hemm Agency⁶⁶, another unidentified news agency with over ten thousand Twitter followers that was allegedly created by al-Nusra to serve as a seemingly unbiased news source⁶⁷. Al-Nusra Retweeted its posts three times in its new Twitter account. Al-Nusra broadcasts its view of the fighting in Syria through the posting of official statements with shocking images of adult and child corpses, identifying them as the victims of Assad's murderous killing sprees.

Considering the fact that Facebook, YouTube and WordPress closed al-Nusra's official accounts, as they openly declared in six rare English-speaking Tweets on December 13, 2012 (for more details see Appendix B), Twitter is their only new media news outlet. However, these posts were focused on condemning the aforementioned social media platforms for their

ensorship and power abuse rather than appeal to English speaking audiences. Al-Nusra's attempt to expose Assad is more noticeable in its new Twitter account, through the frequent use of images and 'text bites' that tempt the audience to read more about it in their official statements and press releases. In contrast, in its old Twitter account, the main line of thought appears to be that al-Nusra either believed people cared enough to consume their information without any teasers or the fact that Twitter was used as a secondary source, used for web-presence and legitimacy. The use of Hashtags is yet another indication of their use of Twitter as an effective tool of information dissemination. Hashtags are used in order to describe situations or set a certain web-context with one or two words. By clicking the Hashtag one can see all the Tweets that included them in their post. Hence, using popular search words such as Syria, al-Sham, Allahu Akbar, Jihad, Assad, Freedom and Justice, al-Nusra gets further public exposure and attention it could not have achieved solely by Tweeting in its own account. The statistic evidence of al-Nusra's excessive use of Hashtags, with 191 Hashtags used in al-Nusra's old account, accounting for 74.32% of its Tweets and 84 Hashtags used in its new account, accounting for 81.5% of its Tweets, reveals another indication of improved Twitter utilization.

Report no. 4: Twitter as a self-marketing and promotion tool

From the comparison of both al-Nusra's Twitter accounts it is becoming evident that this platform is being skillfully used as a self-marketing and self-promotion tool. In contrast to its old Twitter account, where al-Nusra mainly used fragmented Tweets to promote its official statements exposure with different links to the same content and used 2.33% of its posts to fight with WordPress and Facebook in English, the new Twitter account provides a more professional touch with improved user interface expertise. The new account takes notice not to exhaust its followers with a multitude of Tweets in one single day as often seen in the old account, with sixteen Tweets published on February 3, 2013, and eleven Tweets published on March 22, 2013 (see Appendix B for more details). Furthermore, the new account used two Tweets (serial numbers #48 and #89 –see Appendix C for more details) as previews for other upcoming publications by al-Nusra, creating anticipation and public hype.

In the new account, al-Nusra uses numerous images, some of them even animated, in order to provide illustrational proof of its operational success. Alongside its official statements where operations are often described with details with images of operational proof, al-Nusra posts regular Tweets with Hashtags that convey short messages of threats to Assad's supporters or quickly report its success and then follows later with more details. This stands

in contrast to the old account where al-Nusra declared operational success with significant delays. Another interesting aspect of operational marketing is the one-time highly vague Tweet it posted, turning to its fighters and notifying them that it will deliver what it promised to their agreed locations (serial number #15, see Appendix C for more details). As this was a rather rare occurrence it was worth noting, yet no real conclusion can be drawn from this one-time Tweet. Another interesting pattern observed in the new account is al-Nusra's increased communication with other groups to demonstrate web presence, declare cooperation and support al-Nusra's branch in Lebanon. Al-Nusra even expressed its condolences to a fighting group for the decease of their Sheikh (serial number #95, see Appendix C for more details) and posted other Tweets relating to joint operations and logistic cooperation with other opposition groups. In particular, al-Nusra shows great support of its new branch in Lebanon and often mentions it in its Tweets, posts official statements issued by it and has Retweeted its Tweets six times, which constitute 5.82% of its posts. This growing support extends beyond mere support for the fight against Hezbollah forces; it shows that al-Nusra is a rapidly growing and developing brand. Al-Nusra's branch in Lebanon holds over 15,000 followers with less than 40 Tweets⁶⁸, which stands for approximately 454 followers for each Tweet.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study observed four main trends in al-Nusra's use of Twitter as a new Social Networking platform. First is the change of the role it played in al-Nusra's cyber-operational strategy, where it upgraded from a secondary source of information to its primary one as well as al-Nusra's only new Social Networking platform. One of the reasons accounting for such a shift is the absence of alternative or additional Social Networking popular platforms like Facebook, YouTube and WordPress, who closed down al-Nusra's accounts and deleted their content. However, there is no clear explanation as to why Twitter remains the last new Social Networking platform standing and to the fact that al-Nusra's old account has not been deactivated, as its contents remain publically visible. Is the dissemination of cyber-Jihadi propaganda the violation of terms of use in one platform but not in the other? Furthermore, an interesting question deriving from this predicament is whether Twitter should remain open in order to allow Intelligence agencies to collect viable information on the group, such as its current modus operandi, the ammunition it uses, its declared operational geographic location, whom it explicitly supports, and with whom it chooses to communicate online?

The availability of such detailed OSINT leaves much room for question as to privacy terms and violations online, or the diffusion of younger generations and their over-sharing and over-baring technological tendencies into 21st century Terrorist organizations. If a B.A. student is able to construct a database of 360 Tweets and observe changing usage trends, one can only imagine what a tech-savvy, Arabic reading surveillance expert can do with this abundance of information exposed online in order to brag, self-promote and establish web-presence as the possible new Jihadi trend of the hour. The expansion of these 21st century Terrorist groups into new battlefronts opens room for discussion regarding the scope of a similar expansion of governmental and militant bodies into Social Networks in order to monitor and counter hostile groups in areas that did not belong to the Security sphere before.

While Twitter's role developed into a central one in al-Nusra's online propaganda strategy, it also developed into a central source of cyber OSINT gathering by government officials. This chain reaction suggests that Twitter earns thousands of viewers from both sides. The role Twitter plays as the last standing English speaking, open Social Network platform is clearly a crucial one, based on the first report– but is it really al-Nusra's main channel or simply a wisely calculated distraction? Perhaps al-Nusra is attempting to reach a larger audience of Arabic speaking and writing individuals who use Social Networks with minimal effort and then draws them into its more 'hardcore' Forums? A study connecting the data analysis produced in this research with a similar data analysis conducted in Forums like the 'Glory of Islam' and 'Ansar Al-Mujahideen' would better investigate whether Twitter is a clever tool for shaping world discourse and pushing out messages, or perhaps for pulling in younger generations of Arabic speakers into the deeper circles of cyber-Jihadi propaganda. Currently, I believe it is both.

The second trend is the change in al-Nusra's usage patterns, where they increasingly began incorporating images alongside texts and using hybrid Tweets consisting of two or more links. This is currently helping them reach significantly higher levels of both Active and Passive popularity online. Although al-Nusra still employed 'top-down' cyber-Jihadi propaganda dissemination methods, it shows a clear technical and logistic improvement. There is no explanation as to why al-Nusra opened a new Twitter account or what user interface learning experience it may have acquired during that time. It may also simply be that tech savvy individuals have taken over al-Nusra's cyber Jihadi front, utilizing new Social Networking platforms more efficiently with greater know how. This may serve as a possible indication of younger fighters from the Y and the millennial generations taking the lead next

to experienced Jihadi veterans – developing contemporary technological aspects of Jihad and revealing the advanced learning capabilities brought into the battlefield and how they are used to win different, yet complimentary battles over the hearts and minds of potential cyber-constituencies.

The developed expertise in using Twitter and the growing success of its utilization as a direct result, show that al-Nusra is learning how to utilize the Internet to its advantage, and it is learning fast. While the emerging use of hybrid Tweets and Hashtags may strike readers as irrelevant and perhaps even odd to truly discuss, its growing popularity illustrates that it speaks directly to the heart of younger users and helps expose them to material that would have ideally remained in Jihadi forums. The source of al-Nusra's innovative use of Twitter after the nine-months long Twitter silence may not be known to this study, yet its effect on al-Nusra's online success is significant, as evident in all four reports.

On the one side, cyber-Jihadi propaganda presents many challenges in numerous new fronts, among them intelligence, psychological warfare and even related fields in computer sciences, yet it also reveals new weaknesses in its structure. The inclination to share too much information and the fact that most content uploaded to the World Wide Web remains documented there and demands excessive measures to conceal or remove it completely afterwards – plays to the strategic disadvantage of Terrorist organizations. By changing their usage patterns to increase web-popularity they also increasingly draw the attention of Intelligence Agencies and other hostile bodies. If everything they share online can and is used against them, will they still be able to disclose enough 'juicy' content to generate web-popularity and interest without harming themselves by disclosing too much strategic information? On the other side, the overload of information available in cyber-Jihadi propaganda efforts is not necessarily a blessing. It can bring about incompetence in recognizing viable intelligence from false claims and cyber-ego wars that are only meant to distract such intelligence data miners. It can also be used to feed Intelligence Agencies with false or misleading information in real time, a serious threat the OSINT report (see page 10) did not mention. Finally, the data-mining capabilities such a qualitative and quantitative research requires in order to yield strategically viable information are truly pioneering and seem to continue developing.

The third trend observed in this study is the effective use of Twitter as a front in the war on Information in Syria. Al-Nusra seems to have developed a better understanding of user communications and now knows how to reach more individuals with one single Tweet. And

indeed, it appears that both its Active and Passive popularity measures have increased substantially. Yet the actual translation of such popularity into social impact is hard to define. And it becomes even harder when trying to measure al-Nusra's ability to shape real global discourse regarding Syria, beyond the realization that it is Al-Qaeda's Syrian branch, fighting against Assad in Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Al-Nusra's frequent threats against Assad, his collaborators, and against Hezbollah shows more than the desire to strike fear in their hearts, it is an online public declaration of war that aims to mobilize physical and emotional support. Posts exposing the unimagined humanitarian disasters occurring in Syria all share one common motif; they all direct a blaming finger towards Assad as the perpetrator of these mass-casualty attacks in order to publicize his faults, and serve as an emotional blackmail against potential Mujahidin fighters that remain silent in the face of their brother's needs. The process of spoon-feeding the media with images, reports and videos has a dual purpose, shaping world opinion on the Syrian Civil War, with a focus on the Arab world, and promoting the image of al-Nusra as a legitimate and credible source of civil protection while fighting for a just cause.

The interaction with unidentified News Agencies and the allegation that al-Nusra created them in order to broadcast its views may indicate that it uses Twitter as a platform to generate and share information that will be later used by other media channels. The origins of the reports on the current fighting in Syria appear to be secretive at best, and evidently one sided at worst. Al-Nusra's use of a Western Social Network platform holds more implications in terms of the target audience it wants to reach and the social impact it wishes to make by both direct and indirect propaganda dissemination online. In this regard, a boarder research is needed in order to trace the progress and global reach of al-Nusra's images, official statements, videos, recorded messages and regular Tweets, in order to distinguish its real social impact in shaping world opinion on the Syrian Civil War. This goes beyond the scope of this research, but would make for an extremely interesting and practical study for a variety of strategic communications studies.

The fourth trend observed in this study reveals the use of Twitter as an effective tool of self-marketing and self-promotion. The increasing web-popularity demonstrated in al-Nusra's new Twitter account may partially be attributed to Twitters effectiveness as an E-Marketing tool, generating the cyber-public discourse regarding the fighting in Syria and shaping world opinion on al-Nusra and its well-documented actions. Yet the E-Word of Mouth effect discussed under the scope of the literature review is extremely hard to fully

identify and validate. However, This strongly correlates with the previous three identified trends and in a way effectively concludes them – as one of al-Nusra’s main targets in using new Social Networks platforms is to establish its presence, success and prestige in the Syrian landscape and the global Jihadi scene. It is evident in al-Nusra’s branching out into Lebanon and the web-promotion of its Jihadi brand with frequent mentions, Hashtags, shared official statements and Retweets.

In regards to its one-time operational Tweet and the first scenario discussed in the literature review (see page 10) under the scope of the OSINT report, one cannot conclude that even if this has occurred several times, it is a real al-Nusra usage pattern or a viable threat in contemporary battlefields. Although al-Nusra shows an increased tendency to reveal much more than its official affiliate, Al-Qaeda, it still Tweets about operations with delay and jealously maintains security measures in not mentioning the name of live operative, not giving away exact geographical locations in nearly real-time Tweets and other similar measures. In light of the three previous identified trends, this study assumes that al-Nusra mainly uses Twitter for self-promotion purposes via the improved method of E-Marketing. This is demonstrated with greater availability of information that is presented in a manner, which is audience-oriented in al-Nusra’s new account. After all, Twitter is a micro-blogging Social Network platform, and most online users use these platforms for self-promotion, just in a different context, and hopefully, with different goals and results.

In conclusion, this study was able to identify four evolutionary trends in al-Nusra’s Twitter usage patterns and provide limited statistical analysis in order to support it. However, this research revealed more questions than clear observations and answers. Conducting this study also reveals the immense amounts of data that are yet to be explored and their great practical potential in intelligence gathering efforts, Security and Terrorism studies, psychological and sociological web-analysis and further studies in a variety of disciplines. This study observed two main aspects that may prove extremely useful for both intelligence and information gathering and the development of academic research on the dangers of Social Networks: First is the intelligence gathering on operational details al-Nusra shares in its official statements, consisting of preferred targets, reported locations of operation, use of specific weapons with frequent images that are shared in order to brag, and fighting techniques employed in the field. This may prove key in countering the threat of using Twitter to publish false and misleading information in real time, as a study identifying al-Nusra’s strategies so far may prevent such a future threat. Second is al-Nusra’s pattern of

communication with other actors both inside and outside the Syrian fighting scene. This is currently a developing trend, observed to a limited extent in the fourth data report – yet it may prove useful in identifying potential emerging actors and revealing more information on the fighting in Syria through focused data mining efforts on key players in the cyber-Jihadi scene.

Al-Nusra now uses Twitter as its key new Social Network and new media platform and it is doing a strategically sound job at it. Amplified by increasing web-exposure and popularity, al-Nusra's messages seem to attain further global exposure and become fully incorporated into the cyber-Syrian discourse. Can these alleged achievements be fully attributed to effective user interface learning and improved accessibility to the Internet, or are they simply the byproduct of a well thought out E-Marketing strategy? Only time and further research may tell.

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