Transcending Organization: Individuals and "The Islamic State"

BACKGROUND

The innovative ways that foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq are leveraging social media and mobile apps to recruit aspirational supporters in the West reveal what is actually a paradigm shift occurring within the global jihadist movement, away from the organization-centric model advanced by Al-Qaida, to a movement unhindered by organizational structures. Counterterrorism policy and practice must rethink the way it approaches countering online radicalization.

MAJOR FINDINGS

- After losing most of its top communicators from 2010 - 2012, Al-Qaida's remaining senior leadership has been unable to fill the resulting messaging vacuum.

    Senior Leaders – No Longer En Vogue

    - The organization's consequent silence during the Arab Spring further compounded the group's perceived irrelevance in the eyes of their global support movement.
    - In an effort to reclaim his following's attention and adoration, Al-Qaida emir, Ayman al-Zawahiri, has since issued numerous statements. The global jihadist movement's lack of interest in these statements suggests that quantity of media releases is no longer a substitute for meaningful and direct communication in the now crowded marketplace of global jihadist messaging.

- Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula's (AQAP) Shaykh Anwar al-Awlaki and his do-it-yourself approach to operationalizing the global jihadist movement's Internet-based following seemed to have been the natural successor methodology to Al-Qaida's traditional top-down approach. But despite AQAP's publication of several more issues of the Inspire magazine after al-Awlaki's September 2011 death, the momentum he had sparked has not proved transcendent.

- Despite the decline in overt attempts by the global jihadist movement to link homegrown attacks in the West back to the Inspire magazine and Anwar al-Awlaki, this online movement of ideological adherents have not declined in their level of participation. To the contrary, today's global jihadist supporters are now more active on social media channels and mobile apps than ever before, a consequence of not only the times but that they have achieved a critical mass of supporters who are openly participating online.

- The rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) further challenged the senior leadership's organizationally-rooted conception of Al-Qaida. After explicitly breaking with al-Zawahiri, the ISIS demonstrated that much of today's global jihadist support movement no longer sees the global jihadist ideology being exclusively represented by Al-Qaida.

    - Rather, the current deluge of pro-ISIS online messaging and visual propaganda has continued the Inspire approach of heralding themes of individual duty, unity and Islamic resistance over particular individuals or organizations in aesthetically compelling and generationally appropriate ways.

- Many global jihadist supporters have been inspired to engage in more direct forms of communication with those actively fighting on the battlefield. Mobile apps like "Ask.fm" and "Kik" have made that kind of direct, real-time communication a reality.

    - Today, aspiring mujahidin who previously would have had few avenues to ask the kinds of rudimentary questions that they need answered in order to heighten their level of radicalization and/or mobilization are now flocking to sites like Ask.fm in order to find the guidance and mentorship that they might have otherwise not had immediately available, or only had in a one-directional way through videos and e-magazines they would have downloaded.
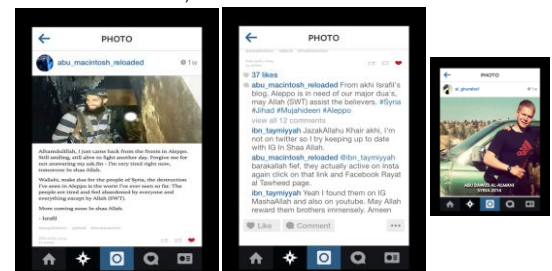
- These social media channels feed into one another, where an individual inspired by visual propaganda he sees on Instagram may follow a foreign fighter on Twitter until he decides to ask that fighter a question on Ask.fm, which may result in a direct messaging session on Kik until they move to an encrypted direct message conversation on Surespot.

- The global jihadist movement now has more ways to more directly follow and even correspond with fighters on the battlefield because these fighters are actively using social media as well to chronicle their jihadist adventures.

  - One result has been that the credentialing process among online jihadist supporters has shifted from 'who knows what' to 'who speaks to whom' on the battlefield.

  - Similarly, those supporters who actually migrate to the battlefield can now receive instant credibility online simply for making that transition from supporter to fighter.

  - No longer do the senior jihadist scholars or even the well-known operational commanders have an exclusive claim over ideological authority. Rather, those faceless fighters who have heeded the call to join the ISIS are now celebrated as the model to be emulated.
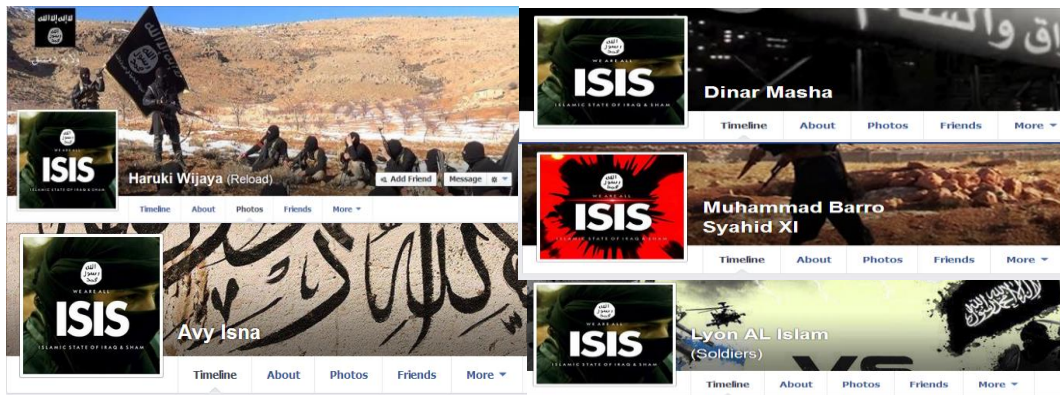
THE SPECTRUM OF HOW GLOBAL JIHADISTS USE SOCIAL MEDIA

YouTube, Flickr, Tumblr – open and searchable, not particularly interactive. Used for accessing very generic media.
Twitter, Instagram, Facebook – requires some degree of 'following' to access material, comment and interaction possible. Used to access more personalized content.

Ask.Fm – requires knowledge of a user's screen name. Allows for anonymous, mediated communication. Used by global jihadist movement for everything from advice on rudimentary personal grooming and hygiene issues to building packing lists for migrating to the Syrian battlefield.

Kik, Surespot, Skype Messenger – requires both parties to approve one another. Used by global jihadist movement to directly communicate in real-time with mujahidin on the battlefield about recruitment, mobilization and migration issues

EVOLUTION OF MESSAGING TO THE GLOBAL JIHADIST MOVEMENT

Al-Qaida's senior leadership: Stay in your home countries, spend the bulk of your time learning about how oppressed you are and do what you can to support Al-Qaida's core group of fighters but leave the terrorism to us.

Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula: Stay in your home countries, gain a sense for the overall situation facing Muslims today and then engage in DIY acts of terrorism.

Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham: Flock to the battlefields and fight with us. You have an individual duty to do so.

The innovative ways that foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq are leveraging social media and mobile apps to recruit aspirational supporters in the West reveal what is actually a paradigm shift occurring within the global jihadist movement, away from the organization-centric model advanced by al-Qaida, to a movement unhindered by organizational structures. Counterterrorism policy and practice must rethink the way it approaches countering online radicalization.

Since its inception, Usama Bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri and al-Qaida's senior leadership structure have touted al-Qaida as an elitist, hierarchically structured global terrorist group. As the organization grew less operationally capable of committing acts of terrorism, however, its senior leaders sought to compensate for the lack of action with rhetoric through its As-Sahab Media Establishment. al-Qaida's online media efforts during the mid to late 2000's helped to catalyze the growth of a global social movement by providing directly accessible content about al-Qaida's organization, membership, ideology and strategy, as well as operations. It did so, though, in a one-directional manner in the sense that there was limited avenues for interaction between the global following and al-Qaida's senior leaders. Messages were produced, disseminated and received – there was no formal feedback mechanism built into the process.

As the United States killed most of al-Qaida's remaining top commanders, including Usama bin Laden, al-Qaida's senior leadership quieted, diminishing its perceived relevance to its global community of followers. Compounded with al-Qaida's complete inability to speak to the Arab Spring, much less meaningfully participate in any way, al-Qaida's global movement began looking to what seemed like the natural successor, al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

In the eyes of al-Qaida's global movement, AQAP offered a far more enticing way to support the al-Qaida movement. On the one hand, AQAP was both conducting its own terrorist operations regionally and globally – in addition to making local military advancements on the ground in Yemen – but it was also inspiring a Do-It-Yourself (DIY) terrorist methodology that AQAP followers were operationalizing in their own countries. Their position was that al-Qaida no longer needed to be understood as elitist and hierarchical. Anyone could be al-Qaida anywhere in the world simply by conducting a terrorist attack.

AQAP was speaking more directly to the needs and desires of their global followers. Lowering the sophistication of discourse from grand geopolitical strategy to basic insights into what life on the battlefield really looks like, AQAP seemed to be stealing the wind out of their parent company's sails. And as opposed to al-Qaida's senior leaders who offered their followers little way to provide their reactions and thoughts, AQAP established multiple avenues for the global movement to directly contact them via the Internet.

In many ways, AQAP's approach was a paradigm shift for al-Qaida. Rather than conceptualizing the global al-Qaida movement as just an audience, AQAP made the movement the star of their media efforts. This everyman everywhere mentality undercut everything that al-Qaida's senior leaders had preached for two decades about the need for operational experience and deep religious knowledge. DIY terrorism, in the eyes of men like Ayman al-Zawahiri or Atiyah Abd al-Rayhan al-Libi, diluted the al-Qaida mystique and was harder for the senior leadership to keep in check. Targeting gaffes by an individual who may have never even met an al-Qaida member could do the al-Qaida brand grave harm.

Despite the senior leadership's serious reservations about the DIY approach to al-Qaida, charismatic calls for grassroots action by Anwar al-Awlaki and AQAP's hugely popular Inspire magazine had already opened a Pandora's Box where individuals around the world felt empowered to take matters into their own hands. Where al-Qaida's global followers struggled, however, was in articulating under what auspices these DIY attacks were being conducted. Was Nidal Hasan's massacre at Fort Hood done in the name of al-Qaida? Or AQAP? Or was it some amorphous notion of this global jihadist ideology?

Anwar al-Awlaki's death dealt the global al-Qaida movement, which had come to coalesce around both the man and his call for grassroots jihadist violence, a difficult blow. Although the message al-Awlaki preached was meant to transcend his own life, in reality the momentum he had initiated among his online followers could not last without him there to fuel it.

What could have been an opportunity for Ayman al-Zawahiri and what remained of the senior leadership to steal back their once loyal following, the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) thwarted any such plans. The ISIS's 2011 break with al-Qaida's senior leadership left the global movement confused about what exactly they were supporting. Was it the organizational legacy, however degraded and operationally ineffectual, of their charismatic godfather, Usama bin Laden and his longtime deputy? Or should they instead support Islamist militancy in its most ruthless, violent and successful form no matter which organization was advancing it?

While some online followers debated the finer points of jurisprudence around the issue, a new generation rushed headfirst into social media channels to cheer on the fighters of the ISIS. Already predisposed to a DIY global jihadist experience thanks to the

first paradigm shift by AQAP's al-Awlaki, the global al-Qaida movement began to see that they need not be tied to an organizational brand, particularly one that offered little in terms of recent operational successes.

The ISIS march towards Baghdad has offered the global jihadist movement an operationally successful group in an accessible location for whom they can cheer. It no longer mattered for many of its followers that the group had broken ties with al-Qaida's senior leaders because for them, al-Qaida had become an outmoded relic of a previous era. The group had sparked a global movement but no longer had the operational capacity or strength of will to do what needed to be done.

With the number of Western foreign fighters in Syria now estimated in the thousands, English-language supporters have found a new cadre of heroes to idolize. These "mujahidin" fighting in Syria, despite their lack of virtually any substantive ideological knowledge, are using mobile apps to rally supporters around the world. Different from previous conflicts, however, where a fighter's ability to correspond with those back home was limited, the advent of mobile phones on the battlefield means that the individual fighter can become a propaganda outlet unto themselves. They can snap shots of their comrades in action, Photoshop those into meme-like propaganda images, and disseminate them via Instagram, Tumblr, Twitter or Facebook.

Al-Qaida's English language online support movement continues to adapt to changes in available technology, global political events, internal dynamics within al-Qaida's official structures and generational differences. Perhaps most notably, the smartphone has given every al-Qaida supporter the ability to participate – both as consumers as well as producers – in the reclaiming of this movement from the official structures that had created it as one where authority and credibility was only found at the top.

Mobile apps and social media channels now allow for the delivery of streamlined, highly visual content that is updated instantaneously and infinitely customized and personalized. Social networks have never been easier to build because such little effort or actual engagement is necessary. Support for al-Qaida can now come in the form of simply tapping 'like' or 'follow' on a particular image or account. And the lack of space for meaningful text-based discussions has seen the withering of substantive debate within this movement.

The consequence has been the hyper-empowerment of individual adherents who feel less wedded to the organizational trappings of "al-Qaida" or a particular leader and more committed to a vague idea of being a mujahid. Participation has become so superficial in nature that very little substantive knowledge is actually required any more – one no longer needs to have read the key texts or be familiar with the towering figures. In fact, some of the most popular online figures in today's English language global al-Qaida movement are relative nobodies – individuals who became famous for being famous – not because of any great military accomplishments or ideological knowledge.

Al-Qaida's global support movement's technologically-facilitated populism has unmoored it from its previous constraints, allowing it to transcend the very label of "al-Qaida" altogether. There is now a mass of individuals participating through mobile apps and social media channels who feel themselves as being part of a global mujahidin movement that may have been initiated by al-Qaida but for which al-Qaida no longer holds much relevance or authority today. With very limited knowledge about this fuzzy global jihadist movement to which they claim to be adherents, these participants use online spaces to steer, guide and educate one another. Peer-to-peer radicalization, recruitment and mobilization has become the norm. And credibility is now held by those who the crowd believes deserves it, not those who have necessarily earned it according to conventional metrics.

The questions being asked on Ask.fm may seem mundane or trite on first glance but they are important for several reasons. First, the overall process of communicating back-and-forth with a foreign fighter creates the feeling of familiarity and an emotional bond, helping to lower any psychological barriers that one may have to actually traveling to Syria themselves. Joining the fight now seems more accessible and possible because the humanization of these fighters through the Ask.fm platform makes them more real and able to be emulated.

Second, Ask.fm allows individuals to actually receive answers to their questions. This means that questioners – both those who asked the question and those who follow the fighter's feed, gain more information than they originally had on any number of jihadist related topics. They also begin to feel a sense of intellectual authority and credibility in their own social circles for having corresponded directly with an 'actual' mujahid. As supporters grow more serious about the idea of actually traveling to Syria, they use the Ask.fm site to pose more logistical questions about what kind of supplies to bring, whether they can bring their spouse with them, good entry points and safe-houses, the cost of living in Syria, access to wifi and an array of similar questions.

Because the foreign fighters in-country are aware that their pages are open and potentially accessible to intelligence agencies, they typically provide their "Kik" username (another mobile app for direct messaging) or Skype handle or "Surespot" username to the questioner, which allows them to have a private, direct exchange that they believe to be secure. This integrates one additional level of exclusivity and personal connection for the questioner as now they are corresponding one-to-one.

In other words, as individuals move from simple support to direct engagement, they employ different social media tools that afford them greater communicative options and higher degrees of security and exclusivity in their conversations. These secure spaces in which supporters can directly dialog with fighters on the battlefield are wholly new, at least to the degree in which they are being used, and are transforming global jihadist understandings of concepts like support, participation and authority.

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