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Sultan Al-Masaeed

Al Ahliyya Amman University, s.masaeed@ammanu.edu.jo

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Islamic State E-Caliphate on Twitter: An Observational Study

الخلافة الإلكترونية للدولة الإسلامية على تويتر: دراسة مراقبة

Dr. Sultan Al-masaeed

Al-Ahliyya Amman University

s.masaeed@ammanu.edu.jo

Abstract

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) media strategy is a successful one. It has enabled a small group of social media users to amplify impressions of the organization far beyond its actual effect, capturing global attention. This terrorist group has proven quite effective in using Twitter to spread their evil ideas, recruit followers and post obscene videos depicting the most egregious cruelty imaginable. In this exploratory research, an observational research was undertaken to explore the strategies and tactics deployed by the group in their use of Twitter. The results show that ISIS has successfully utilized this social media platform as a tool to achieve its goals and implement its media strategy.

Keywords: ISIS Twitter, Islamic state media, ISIS social media, Islamic E-Caliphate, counterterrorism intelligence.

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المخلص

تعتبر استراتيجية تنظيم الدولة الإسلامية الإعلامية على مواقع التواصل الاجتماعي ناجحة لحد كبير. مكنت هذه الاستراتيجية مجموعة صغيرة من مستخدمي مواقع التواصل من تضخيم حجم هذه المنظمة أكبر بكثير من حجمها الفعلي. أثبت هذا التنظيم الإرهابي فاعلية عالية في استخدام موقع تويتر لنشر الافكار الشيطانية تجنيد التابعين ونشر المواد التي تحتوي على أقسى الأعمال الوحشية. هذا البحث هو عبارة عن بحث استكشافي من خلال مراقبة وتحليل تغريدات مجموعة مختارة من أنصار هذا التنظيم من أجل استكشاف آليات استخدام هذا التنظيم لموقع تويتر. أظهرت النتائج اهم استخدامات التنظيم الإرهابي لموقع تويتر والالية التي يستخدمها التنظيم من أجل تجنب إغلاق حسابات مناصريه.

الكلمات المفتاحية: داعش , الخلافة الالكترونية لداعش , تنظيم الدولة الاسلامية , مكافحة الإرهاب , مكافحة التطرف , مواقع التواصل الاجتماعي والإرهاب .

Background

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is one of the plethora of terrorist groups and paramilitary organizations that emerged from instability in Iraq. Its operations permeated the Syrian border (particularly after 2011) and achieved particular notoriety after the rout of the Iraqi army in Mosul in June 2014. It seized a great volume of military hardware that greatly enhanced its military capabilities and potential political legitimacy. This is particularly important given the immense historical and geostrategic importance of Mosul Province (Stanton et al., 2015). Consequently it was emboldened to announce the restoration of the Islamic Caliphate three weeks later, under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. In addition to its logistical differentiation from conventional terrorist groups and sectarian militias, ISIS presents a qualitative evolution of the al-Qaeda model with a more professional strategy, which incorporates a practical model for social governance (Lister, 2014).

Al-Qaeda style groups and terrorist organizations in general have been universally denounced from the outset by Islamic clerics and mainstream religious es-

tablishments as a criminal aberration, such as in the Amman Message of 2006, and the more recent specific and comprehensive refutation of ISIS issued by the respected Sheikh Mohammad Al-Yaqoubi (2015), an opponent of the Syrian regime as well as terrorist groups. Nevertheless, the declaration by ISIS of an "Islamic State" as a tangible geopolitical phenomenon with the potential to dramatically transform the geopolitical setting of the Middle East appeared to give hope of redressing the grievances of many discontented people arising from political oppression, neo-colonialism and poor socio-economic development, which apparently overrode conventional norms and inspired an influx of young jihadists from around the world (Jabareen, 2015; Wood, 2015).

ISIS use of social media

Terrorist groups have used various means of media through history, and recently they have focused on the internet and social media tools (Crilley, 2001; Jacopson, 2010; Ogun, 2012; Lister, 2014; Shane and Hubbard, 2014; Chatfield, Reddick and Brajawidagna, 2015). Social media has become a vital part of modern news and conflict, making it the informational weapon of choice for terrorist groups,

especially ISIS (Nissen, 2015). ISIS has succeeded in establishing territorial authority due to its successful recruitment of personnel by media propagation and its brute terror to consolidate control (Cronin, 2016). ISIS declared a Caliphate in the areas under its control across Iraq and Syria in 2014, seizing the advantage of domestic civil and sectarian cleavages in the Arab World since 2011, with polarizing regional stressors. ISIS is able to translate military victories into political success through an extensive and pro-active social media campaign, which has been widely recognized as superior among professional organizations (Lewis, 2014). Its use of Twitter has been particularly effective in disseminating its evil ideas, recruiting followers and posting outrageous content such as videos of decapitations and amputations by which it seeks to demonstrate its authority (Stern and Berger, 2015). ISIS members use social media both to communicate with one another and to recruit new supporters and members. Consequently the Department of Homeland Security in the US has expanded its inspection of social-media posts as part of its visa application process, and it is actively considering additional ways to incorporate the use of social media review in other programs (Paletta and Hughes, 2015). ISIS has an extremely large and powerful social media campaign and presence on Twitter that consists primarily of a few hundred effective accounts and thousands more accounts tweeting only a few times before being suspended for violation of the terms of use. The ISIS media strategy is considered a success because of this efficiency, whereby a small group of social media users can exploit the slow responsiveness of social media sites to effectively disseminate information that amplify impressions of the organization far beyond its actual effect (Berger and Morgan, 2015). It is able to do this by the astute use of hashtags (Lister, 2014; Milmo, 2014). Finally, the reach of social media and the Internet enables ISIS to mobilize supporters from all over the world, and to continuously refill its ranks with fresh volunteers (Eisenstadt, 2014).

Research justification and contribution

While some Western studies have recently analyzed the use of social media by ISIS (Berger and Morgan,

2015; Berger and Perez, 2016), very few studies have analyzed their Arabic accounts. Although the majority of Arabs and Muslims view the group as a terrorist death cult, ISIS itself attempts to justify itself on religious grounds, entailing a contextual analysis of its tactics (Wood, 2015). As noted by McCants (2015), ISIS is careful to present its vision (i.e. propaganda) in Arabic, written in classical language and drawing on traditional concepts in an attempt to legitimize its otherwise untenable ideology. Accordingly, understanding its beliefs and tactics requires a guide proficient in Islamic theology and Arabic language, to counteract its chief ideologues who are mainly Arabs (Saltman and Winter, 2014). They speak in codes and allusions whose meanings may be lost for those unfamiliar with specific traditions and texts of traditional Islam. As a consequence, it is very important for Arabic-speaking researchers to observe their Arabic effective accounts and analyze their tweets in order to understand their theology and strategies. Therefore, this research can contribute to international efforts aiming to fight this terrorist group.

Methodology

Epistemology

This research utilized the qualitative approach of online participant observation, a new ethnographic method suitable for online studies called 'netnography' (Kozinets, 2015). Thirty effective Twitter accounts belonging to ISIS supporters were selected and followed in order to uncover ISIS supporters' tactics of using Twitter. Traditional ethnography suffers barriers in accessing social settings relevant to the research problem (Bryman, 2008; Hesse-Biber, Nagy and Leavy, 2010), but netnography typically circumvents this as anyone can follow any account on Twitter without the permission of the account owner.

The researcher assumed a covert role, not disclosing the fact that he is a researcher (Browne, 2005; Bryman, 2008). The researcher's role is based on Gold's (1958) classification of participant observer roles, namely

the “complete observer” who does not interact with subjects. Qualitative research usually applies “a general approach of beginning with general research questions” (Bryman, 2008, p. 417); this research began with the general research question of What are ISIS tactics in using Twitter and why do they use it?

Design

Thirty ISIS supporters' accounts each having more than 2000 followers were selected. This research was undertaken over a period of one month (June 1st to July 1st, 2015). Captured tweets were analyzed through thematic analysis and daily notes were made.

proaches used for qualitative data analysis (Bryman, 2008). Based on the thematic analysis, all tweets collected were coded in order to identify repeated themes. Furthermore, the researcher's daily notes, written down after noting something interesting, were taken into account when extracting results.

Results

Through observing ISIS Twitter accounts and thematic analysis, the researcher managed to define the following:

A. How ISIS can keep their effective accounts

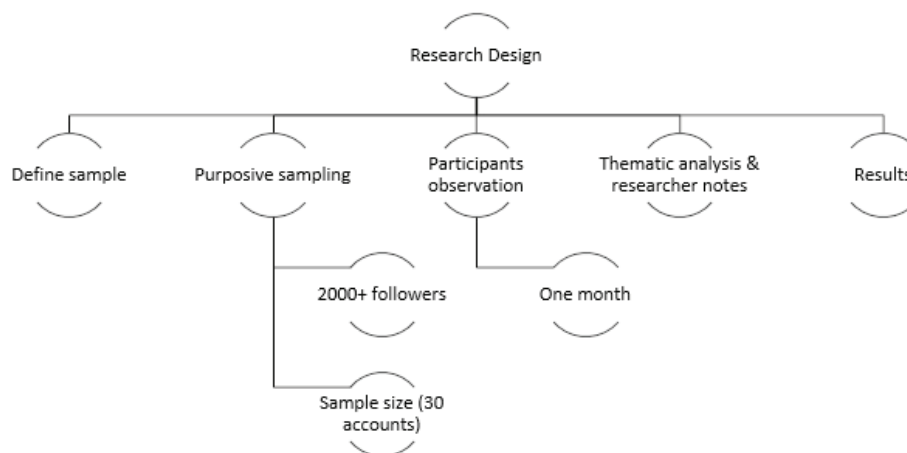


Figure (1): Research design

The research design is illustrated in figure (1).

Sample

Purposive sampling, which “can provide reliable and robust data” (Tongco, 2007, p 154), was used in this research to identify the subjects: 30 ISIS-supporting accounts with more than 2000 followers in each Twitter. Sample characteristics were defined as being ISIS supporters with more than 2000 followers.

Data analysis

Captured tweets were analyzed using thematic analysis approach, which is one of the most common ap-

proaches used for qualitative data analysis (Bryman, 2008). Based on the thematic analysis, all tweets collected were coded in order to identify repeated themes. Furthermore, the researcher's daily notes, written down after noting something interesting, were taken into account when extracting results.

B. Their security policy when using social media.

C. The main uses of Twitter by ISIS.

A. Keeping effective accounts active methodology

ISIS uses a unique method of keeping their key accounts active which explains why it is very difficult for Twitter and security enforcement agencies to suspend these accounts. The method consists of the steps ex-

plained below and shown in figures (2) and (3):

- Opening a new account similar to the current account name through leaving the same letters and changing numbers in a sequential way.
- Account owners announce the new backup account and ask followers to follow this account without tweeting from the backup account.
- When the original account is suspended, the account owner starts using the backup account.
- The backup account owner follows other major ISIS accounts, whose accounts owners follow the backup account and ask their followers to support the new

account.

- The backup account becomes main account and the process starts again.

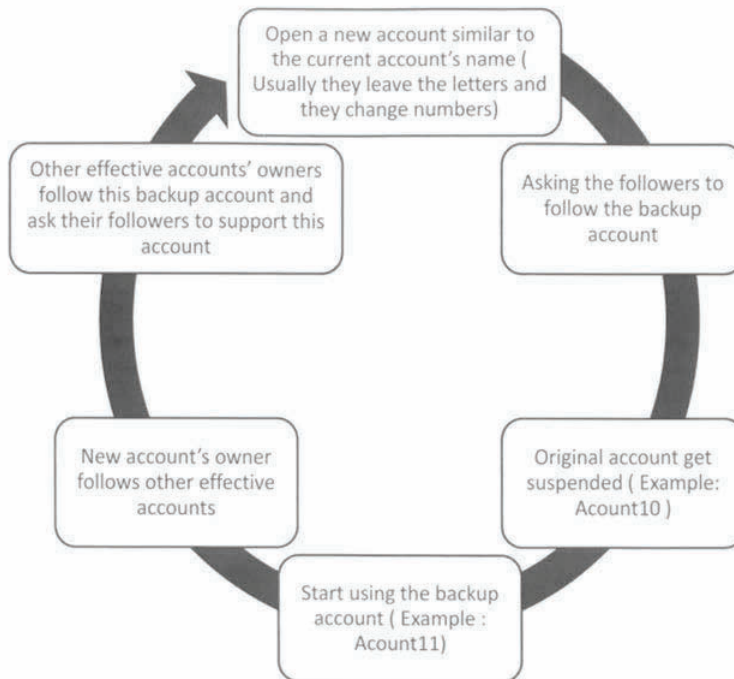


Figure (2): Keeping effective accounts active methodology

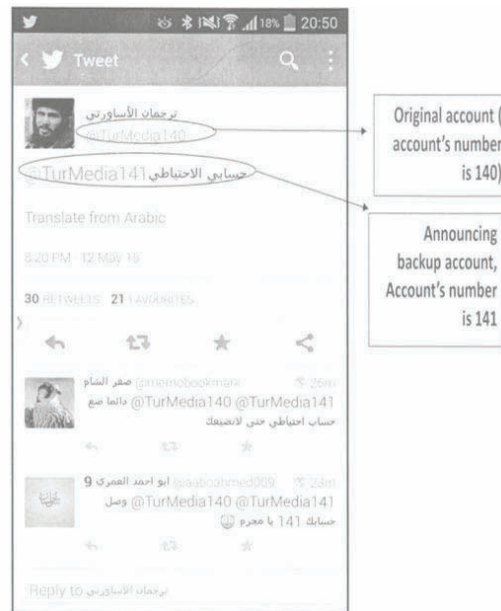


Figure (3): Back-up accounts using the same letters and changing numbers in a sequential way

B. ISIS security policy when using social media

ISIS effective accounts keep asking their supporters to be cautious and to do the following:

- Not to trust anyone on the Internet, especially as some intelligence agencies open Twitter accounts pretending that they are ISIS supporters to try to spread rumors.
- Not to give any location-identifying information for anyone.
- Not to activate GPS in mobiles.
- Preparing backup accounts to be ready when primary accounts get suspended.

C. Main uses of Twitter by ISIS

Through thematic analysis, it was obvious that the terrorist organization uses Twitter mainly to achieve the following objectives.

1. **Wage their ideological battle** ISIS draws strength from the climate that fomented its emergence, namely the complex circumstances causing the

failure of the states of Iraq and Syria, including domestic civil and sectarian cleavages, authoritarian leadership and polarizing regional stressors. ISIS uses Twitter to spread its propaganda, explain its objectives, ideas and news, succeed in convincing many naïve Sunni Muslims that justice can only be achieved by supporting ISIS (particularly in Iraq, where Iranian hegemony made the Iraqi state a tool of Shia sectarianism seeking revenge from Arab Sunnis after 2003). Governments are held to be oppressive apostates, while other Sunni paramilitary/terrorist organizations are presented as effete hypocrites.

2. **Force multiplication** ISIS is trying to multiply its force through the use of social media in order to present itself as more powerful than it may actually be by the aggressive dissemination of online content, especially when they face defeat on the ground to put a positive spin on events. This serves two purposes: gaining mass-media attention



Figure (4): Advertising a campaign against Hamas entitled “Hamis is capturing Salafis”.

and getting more followers.

3. **Existence of a tangible state and establishing legitimacy** ISIS tries to ensure that its religious justification is robust and to establish its legitimacy over other jihadi groups. It uses Twitter to attack its religious competitors such as al-Qaeda, Jabhat al-Nusra and the Muslim Brotherhood (including Hamas). Figure (4) shows an advertising a campaign in Twitter against Hamas under the title of “Hamis is capturing [i.e. imprisoning] Salafis,” referring to the followers of the Salafist Islamic movement with which ISIS identifies (Reese, 2012).

Salafism is an ultra-Orthodox refinement of the Hanbalite reformist movement launched by Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab, known as Wahhabism in the West, which has been the official school of the Saudi state since the 18th century. Reflecting its long history of providing religious legitimacy for successive Saudi regimes, Salafism heavily emphasizes Islamic doctrines affirming obedience and

loyalty to the government. While senior Salafist scholars disagreed with the Saudi support for the Gulf War in 1990 they never ceased to urge obedience. (It should be noted that Salafist scholars have been the most persistent critics of terrorism and terrorist actions, particularly suicide bombing when it emerged in the Palestinian resistance of the 1990s.) Consequently, they are generally viewed as regime stooges (‘scholars for dollars’) by more militant Salafists such as al-Qaeda and their successors, as well as some more mainstream Muslim organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood.

The disconnect between the denunciation of terrorism by every reputed Islamic scholar and the victims of ISIS recruitment being seduced by their ideology lies in the perception that the official institutions of Islam have been coopted by the oppressive neocolonial regimes who are the primary target of al-Qaeda style groups, making any attempt at de-radicalization based on state control of religion counter-productive (On Contact: The Perversion of Islam with Hamza Yusuf, 2016).

Conversely, ISIS draws on the long tradition of obedience to the “Islamic state” historically promulgated by scholars in the Arab World to justify obedience to itself, purporting to provide the accoutrements of a genuine state to its “citizens”, such as education, health and economic services.

4. **Enlisting new members** ISIS primarily uses Twitter to promote its ideologies, part of which is information warfare whereby it seeks to promote its successes on the battlefield while denouncing the atrocities of its enemies to gain sympathy. They particularly enjoy showing the supposed benefits of suicide bombings, such as showing images of dead bombers smiling as if they see paradise. Based on subsequent reactions and comments, ISIS begins to identify people who are sympathetic with them and exchange direct messages with them as the first stage of recruitment, trying to convince them to join the group, commit a terrorist act or provide other assistance to terrorist activities in their own countries, which is the way ISIS becomes complicit in lone wolf attacks in Western countries. Lone wolf attacks diverge from traditional political violence in their intersection with personal psychoses; that is mentally disturbed and socially alienated individuals who find expression for their manias in Internet ideologies such as Islamism or neo-Nazism that seduce isolated individuals with terrorist tendencies and can ultimately guide them to commit terroristic acts (Simon, 2013). The process by which ISIS enlists new members is displayed in figure (5).

5. **Strategic use of fear** In this tactic, the group creates a pervasive climate of fear as a force multiplier (Vinci, 2005). The basic tactic of ISIS is to make a surprise attack, inflict maximum casualties, spread fear, and then withdraws without

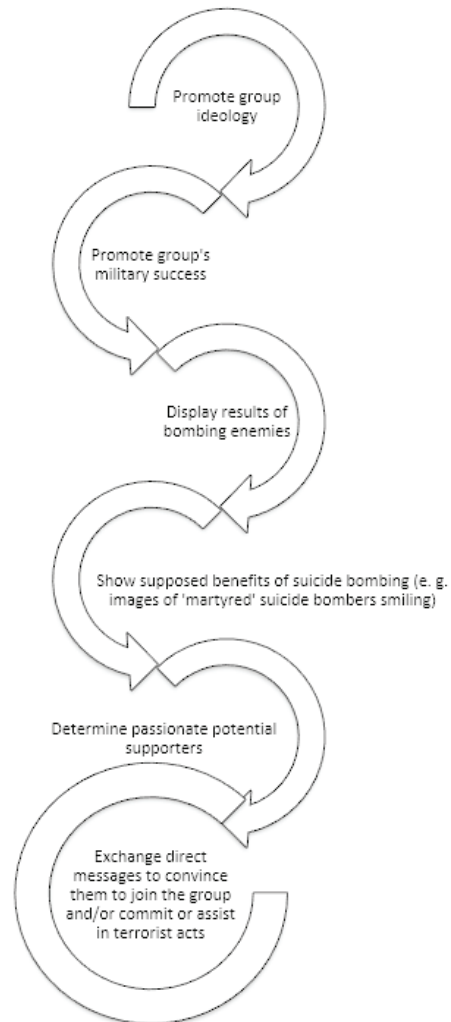


Figure (5): Recruitment process

suffering heavy losses. Members of ISIS then broadcast their brutal acts such as beheading and burning people alive, and wait for their opponents and unsympathetic locals to evacuate or flee from the previously attacked territory. This harrying strategy explains the use of gratuitous violence by the group and their dissemination of horrific photos and videos as part of a shock-and-awe campaign that derives the



Figure (6): “An important lesson for the supporters to learn and implement: [kidnapping and assassination]”.



Figure (7): Checking hyperlinks for viruses

maximum emotive value from military resources deployment. Therefore, their use of violence is not random but strategic, aiming to literally terrorize the inhabitants of certain areas they wish to control to flee, leaving only willing or coerced supporters. This strategy makes the holding phase easier to realize. It can be concluded that this strategic use of fear was used for propaganda purposes in addition for controlling the territory captured.

6. **Provide training materials to their supporters** The jihadists’ tech skills are undeniable. Nearly every day their effective accounts Tweet posts offering tutorials on encryption, phishing and securing messaging. They use Twitter to provide information security training to their supporters, in addition to other training materials such as a lessons on hijacking and assassination, as shown in figure (6), which provides a link to the justpaste.it website billed as an important lesson for supporters to learn and implement: kidnapping and assassination. Another example shown in figure (7) provides a hyperlink to the dump.to website for checking hyperlinks for viruses.
7. **Wage electronic battles** Members of ISIS wage what they call electronic battles from time to time, following certain steps. First, they determine the exact time and the electronic content they need to distribute. After that, they define the targeted hash tags, which are usually active hash tags that belong to the targeted country or audience, as illustrated in figure (8), which is a tweet that defines an ISIS report about services provided in Palmyra city as the intended electronic content, and also it defines some active hash tags, mainly in Saudi Arabia.

Taking the previous results into account, it’s clear



Figure (8): How to wage electronic battles

that the method of waging electronic battles for ISIS has three fundamental stages, as illustrated below in figure (9).

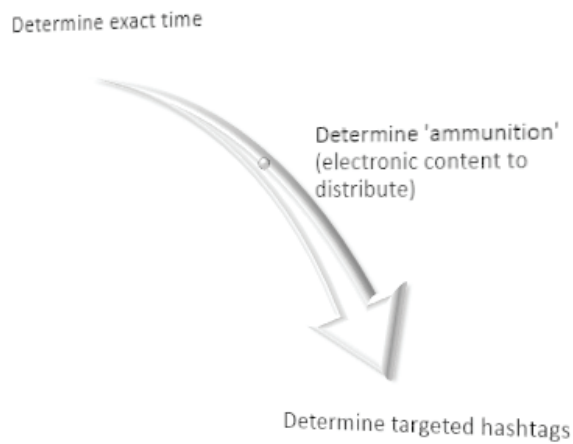


Figure (9): ISIS method of waging electronic battles

Summary and recommendations

ISIS so far has succeeded in their media strategy. The terrorist group has proven quite effective in using Twitter to achieve some strategic goals, such as enlisting new members, spreading their ideology, providing training materials to their supporters and more importantly using fear strategically for propaganda purposes in addition to capturing and controlling new territories. The terrorist group has a clear methodology in keeping its major accounts active and in keeping a security policy. Furthermore, the terrorist group uses hash tag marketing effectively.

ISIS is also trying to prove the existence of a state in the captured territories that provide all required services to citizens, such as education, health and economic welfare services. ISIS wants to prove that it has a strong infrastructure and many services for families who are willing to migrate to its "Caliphate".

ISIS is trying hard to ensure that its religious legitimacy is robust; therefore counter-messaging efforts should focus on theological challenges and on exposing the inherent brutality of the group. Based on the above, this research recommends the following techniques and actions to combat ISIS in social media:

- It is essential for mainstream religious preaching and propagation to be transferred from the mosque to social media, which is the true battleground of their ideological war.
- It is very important for moderate Islamic countries to get into direct ideological arguments with ISIS supporters on Twitter, with the establishment of a special unit to generate and disseminate counter-messages.
- It is very important for Muslim families to be aware of their responsibilities towards their children by safeguarding them against ISIS and its dangerous activities and ideologies.
- There should be an international entity to organize electronic content on the internet and oversee issues related to international legislation.

Counter-messaging efforts should focus

Conclusion

on the main weaknesses of ISIS, which are its spurious religious justification and egregious carnage.

Research limitations and further research

The major limitation of this study was that Twitter suspended many accounts during the observation period; while this is to be welcomed, it prevents obtaining complete data for the purposes of this study. Future research should focus on testing the efficiency of counter-messaging. Researchers can observe different counter-messaging accounts for different countries and analyze and compare their efforts in combating ISIS ideologically. Future research may develop a suggested counter-messaging framework as guidance for combating ISIS and other terrorist organizations through social media.

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