The Terror Times:
The Depth and Breadth of the Islamic State Alternative News Outlet Ecosystem Online

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Introduction

Understanding the innovative propaganda machineries of extremist and terrorist ecosystems online requires better analysis of the range of techniques employed by harmful actors to evade moderation responses, across a broad range of language and platform contexts.

To this end, over the past year, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) undertook a multi-platform study, analyzing the links between networks of Islamic State and other Salafi-jihadist propagators, and their deliberate and strategic build-out of self-branded news operations. Focused on the news outlets of Islamic State supporters and other Salafi-jihadist actors online, researchers explored how extremist narratives are used to undercut the actions of government and non-governmental actors globally.

By tracking and monitoring the actors (influencer nodes on popular platforms and encrypted messaging applications) within networks, and mapping their linkages to standalone websites, as well as groups, pages, and channels on popular platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, and encrypted messaging applications such as Telegram and WhatsApp, researchers are piecing together the landscape of interlocking and interlinked Islamic State networks online. Researchers were particularly interested in the intersection of disinformation and terrorist group support, as there have been few studies that have delved into this hybridized threat.

Hence, over the course of a year, researchers monitored a network of 39 key Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, Instagram and TikTok pages and accounts with over 100,000 followers most of which are involved in three primary activities on the platforms: (i) disinformation operations and covert seeding of propaganda; (ii) attacking the online presence of governments, politicians, religious authorities, civil society, and media; and (iii) building the digital infrastructure to support their continued presence on popular social media platforms, despite moderation efforts.

ISD reported a number of these pages, accounts, and channels in February 2022, all of which were subsequently taken down. However, these entities have been able to reconstitute themselves and build audiences in the tens of thousands in the process. ISD monitored this process and researchers now have a deeper understanding of how these pages were able to rebuild in the wake of takedowns.

Researchers also monitored and tracked Islamic State 'sockpuppet' accounts (existing accounts that are hacked and repurposed to spread Islamic State propaganda) on Twitter and Facebook, which latch on to and build out popular hashtags that target populations in a range of Middle Eastern and North African states, including Iraq. To date, researchers have found hundreds of sockpuppet accounts involved in Islamic State activity. These accounts play a key role in promoting newly released content, linking to Islamic State pages, profiles, and channels, as well as sharing Islamic State standalone websites.

To complement this effort, researchers similarly monitored and tracked 60 Telegram channels linked to official propaganda arms of the Islamic State as well as the alternative news operations laundering official news to larger audiences in their ambit.

While these seem like disparate networks, they are in fact cogs within the machinery of an extensive propaganda network spread and working in tandem across numerous platforms and messaging applications. To accurately assess the impact of these networks and their relationship to on-the-ground developments, researchers cross-referenced platform data, while using a snowball method (exploring a single Islamic State-linked account's likes, followers and likers, leading to other Islamic State supportive accounts) to build out a picture of a constantly shifting online influencer and news network.

Such insights are crucial to developing a holistic understanding of the dynamic landscape of extremist and terrorist networks. These findings are critical for developing more evidence-based strategies for countering Islamic State and other Salafi-jihadist networks online. Since the fall of the 'caliphate', Islamic State supporters have adapted and adopted new practices to sustain their online existence. These practices constitute a series of platform evasion tactics, as well as propagation strategies, which are ultimately enabling Islamic State networks to survive take-downs on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, Instagram and TikTok, while continuing to innovate and trial new online dissemination methods. Understanding how these networks are working in tandem is only one part of the challenge posed by these groups. A more pressing concern is the ability of pro-Islamic State disinformation operations to not only dodge moderation, but to remain and expand, even in the wake of takedowns. These outlets are of a particular concern because of their focus on conflict countries, where polarization online is generally already rife, and their ability to disguise pro-Islamic State content as news offerings.

Key findings

- Pro-Islamic State alternative news outlets are operating multi-platform, multi-lingual disinformation operations under the guise of "media" and "media personalities," contributing to an already fractured and polarized online media landscape in Iraq. Researchers found 38 Pro-Islamic State alternative news outlets spread across Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, TikTok, and Instagram with a collective follower base of 108,268 followers.

- The Pro-Islamic State alternative news outlets have significant impact beyond their follower bases. Videos shared by the Islamic State networks identified by ISD on Facebook garnered more 1 million views over the course of a year, more than 20 times their collective follower base. Content shared by Pro-Islamic State alternative news outlet is clearly viewed by a much larger and broader audience.

- The Pro-Islamic State alternative news outlets have developed resilience mechanisms to stave off take downs. When a few of the pages and channels were taken down in early February 2022, the outlets were able to reconstitute themselves by building out (i) duplicate pages with scant to no content prior to their takedowns to funnel followers to, and (ii) used multiple individual profiles as a means to provide backstop measures while the pages were reconstituting themselves. The individual profiles were shared by the pages as follow suggestions, and generally after the page had received a notice about its content violating platform community guidelines. These measures ensured the outlets could, in the words of the group, "remain and expand."

- Pro-Islamic State alternative news outlets used a 43-emoji code to describe types of attacks, official and unofficial messaging, and enemies of the group. These codes are also used to evade moderation, and function as signals to other Islamic State supporters on platforms. The outlets also have built-in contingency plans in the event of account takedowns, namely creating back-up accounts, cross-linking and signposting to their multi-platform presence.

Figure 1 Videos extolling the virtues of migrating to Africa to fight were posted on the Global Happenings primary Facebook page, generating more than 2,800 views.

- An alternative news outlet with significant presence on Facebook and Telegram, with 7 pages and one channel and a collective follower base of 21,000 followers, is seemingly linked to the pro-Islamic State Moata News Agency. Moata News Agency has been operational since 2016 and has been a key unofficial support outlet for the terrorist group. At one point in its history, Moata had more than 22,200 followers on Twitter. Moata seems to be linked the newly developed Central Media Centre page on Facebook, which rebranded its content while hyperlinking "news" to the Moata News Agency bot on Telegram. This is one of the clearest instances of legacy Islamic State news outlets shedding their known branding to spread "news" further and farther on popular social media outlets.

- Pro-Islamic State alternative news outlets are fixated on conflict zones where there are Islamic State affiliates on the ground. The alternative news outlets seek to portray these regions as failed states, where security and politics suffer from sectarianism, and Sunni populations are targeted by the state and its security apparatus. The outlets position themselves as a counterbalance to mainstream news, providing an "independent" and "accurate" version of the news.

- Following attacks on security forces, Pro-Islamic State alternative news outlets use photographs of individual officers and fighters, stripped from mainstream media outlets or social media pages, to taunt governments. While most of the news shared by Pro-Islamic State alternative news outlets relay repurposed attack news from official Islamic State outlets, they similarly latch on to comments by politicians and media personalities that highlight the strength of the Islamic State.

- Pro-Islamic State alternative news outlets have been increasingly focused on supporting fighter flows to Africa, creating outlets in regional languages such as Hausa, and parroting official calls for mujahideen to travel to Africa. The outlets created heat maps of locations across the continent where fighters could go support "their brothers in jihad."

- Days prior to the Ghuwayran Prison attack in Syria's Hasaka province, Pro-Islamic State alternative news outlets began using the hashtag "Persist_in_your_incitement" — a call that was first made by the Islamic State in its weekly al-Naba magazine on January 6, 2022. The attack was used to highlight security failures in both Syria and Iraq. Researchers believe there may be a link between Pro-Islamic State alternative news outlets, official Islamic State media outlets and the attack itself.

Recommendations

The Pro-Islamic State alternative news outlets pose a serious challenge to the health of the overall information ecosystem online in the Middle East, Africa and beyond. Narratives espoused by the alternative news networks undermining governments, technology companies and wider civil society are often coupled with sectarian tropes focused on the real and perceived injustices faced by Muslims at the hands of various governments, and their security forces.

The Pro-Islamic State alternative news networks similarly pose a challenge for moderation, in that rather than simply publishing overt aligned content, there is a shift in practices that focus on repurposing news from official channels, shedding branding and even problematic language that would signify affiliation. Their ability to camouflage under the guise of news outlets, and most recently as observed by researchers at ISD, terrorism research centres, requires deeper understanding of Islamic State networks online and how they mobilize to survive in the face of increased moderation. There are several recommendations for technology companies that should be considered, namely:

- A clear need for more expert moderation and human-led tracking of accounts. This expert moderation should come with greater investments in trust and safety divisions in smaller/less profitable markets. The ability of these outlets to survive takedowns, requires both the in-depth tracking of Islamic State support networks on all of the platforms in question, and the use of subject, linguistic and contextual expertise in a number of regions.

- A model of cross-platform network coordination around deletion should be developed for these networks, rather than a reliance on piecemeal takedowns that focus on single actor behaviors online. The Pro-Islamic State alternative news outlets very clearly demonstrated their coordination, and technology companies can demonstrate the same coordination through entities such as the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT). Europol demonstrated the ability in 2019, when it targeted Islamic State channels in a wide ranging, multiplatform takedown effort.

- Enhanced capabilities of artificial intelligence to recognize "broken text" posting, a format used by all of the outlets as a means to get controversial words past moderation mechanisms. While there continue to be issues with artificial intelligence, namely over moderation, creating mechanisms by which companies can detect variations in language that allow the outlets to continue to publish inflammatory content is an important endeavor.

- Islamic State supporters are exploiting platform inability to verify media sources. While platforms such as Facebook and Twitter continue to play pivotal roles in assisting independent media outlets globally, Pro-Islamic State alternative news outlets are spreading out across Meta under the same guise as "independent" and "objective" news. Unlike independent journalists, outlets, and civil society groups, however, these outlets are only focused on Islamic State actions.

Based on ISD researchers' understanding of the networks and their narratives, operational capabilities as well as their linkages across multiple platforms in a range of different languages, there are several recommendations that can be actioned for national government and civil society stakeholders, namely:

- Pro-Islamic State alternative news outlets pose a threat to the digital comprehension of a range of audiences online, by masquerading as legitimate news outlets. By designing, developing, and deploying digital comprehension activities and programs, both national and civil society organizations can build resilience to and understanding of the types of the misinformation and disinformation that exists on the internet. These initiatives do not have to address the narratives of the Islamic State head on, and should focus more on the types of tactics used by groups, e.g. the use of "institutional branding," as a means to cloak true intentions.

- Pro-Islamic State alternative news outlets provide a narrative bank that should be leveraged by national governments for enhancing strategic communications, building out engagement programming and addressing the fears/anxieties of Sunni populations globally, but more specifically, Iraq. The strategy of these outlets is to create a rift between Sunni populations and governments. They similarly highlight global injustices faced by Muslims in Africa and Asia and provide solutions that can only be attained by joining and fighting for the Islamic State. Strategic communications campaigns should address the very real fears populations harbour, and they should be coupled by concrete actions.

- There is a need to develop more rigorous media training for officials and analysts that speak about the threat of the Islamic State on mainstream media. The ability of the Islamic State news outlets to repurpose government narratives about the strength of the group, are ultimately leading to narrative "blowback." Communications training for officials as well as affiliated analysts would at least identify what those pitfalls and make government officials aware of their words and their potential to be used against them.

- Coordination amongst government as well as civil society organizations under the band of enhancing engagement should also be seriously considered, by creating engagement working groups across the different governorates and ensuring that local voices are heard and supported, the ability to address fractious narratives could improve.

The 'Terror Times': Target Iraq

Building on ISD's previous work focused on the exploitation of social media platforms in the wake of terrorist attacks in Iraq, and Islamic State support networks self-organizing to conduct "spamming raids" on media targets online, researchers have identified Pro-Islamic State alternative 'news' outlets conducting multi-platform, multi-lingual disinformation operations targeting Iraqi audiences, its military, Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), media, and politicians. These outlets seek to exploit the ability of platforms to moderate "news" outlet content and build out their own brands to whitewash and launder terrorist news operations through third-party, self-branded entities, that only exist on social media platforms. Using Iraq as a case study to understand these networks, researchers focused on alternative news outlets that sought to litter the Iraqi news ecosystem with pro-Islamic State news.

Using disinformation as their primary weapon, these Pro-Islamic State alternative news outlets are contributing to a severely fractured and polarizing online news landscape in Iraq, sowing further discord. As research conducted by the London School of Economics Middle East Centre noted in a October 2021 study on "Disinformation in Iraqi Media," audiences in Iraq are "turning away from mainstream platforms to social media for their news and here the playing field is even more contested." The research similarly noted that "fake social media accounts, deep fakes and patently false media narratives [have] become endemic in Iraq." This disinformation dynamic is not lost on supporters of the Islamic State and other Salafi-jihadist groups. Disinformation tactics and tools at the disposal of states, political parties and opposition groups are clearly being used by supporters of the Islamic State.

Thus, this report highlights the networks, supporters, and the platforms of Islamic State disinformation disseminators, focusing on popular social media platforms as well as encrypted messaging applications. These disinformation networks are creating self-branded media outlets with followers in the tens of thousands, and often with innocuous names, like "Global Happenings," "DRIL" and "Media Center," to evade moderation and takedowns. These same networks use coded language and a codebook of emojis to spread Islamic State "news" to other networks of supporters, who similarly evade moderation. These 'alternative news outlets' are trying to outcompete narratives publicized by government officials as well as independent mainstream media and

individual journalists – groups that were also heavily targeted by Islamic State "spamming attacks." The Pro-Islamic State alternative news networks are thus attempting to accomplish three primary strategic goals:

- **Resilience: maintain disinformation mechanisms that can evade platform takedowns and moderation by being self-branded, stand-alone news operations claiming to provide "independent news" focused on Iraq specifically, as well as the wider Middle East and Africa.** By playing a fulcrum-style role in the wider disinformation landscape in Iraq, these Pro-Islamic State alternative news outlets are openly sharing polarizing propaganda to wider audiences than their official news outlets, which are relegated to niche platforms and messaging applications.

- **Creation: develop the narrative ammunition for networks of supporters attacking governments, civil society, and media in Iraq as well as the wider Middle East and Africa.** These disinformation operatives and outlets cast doubt on the legitimacy of official government information and mainstream media outlets in Iraq, but similarly focus on regional and global news as well.

- **Contestation: combat the anti-Islamic State narratives of governments and media by providing alternative and localized narratives that portray Sunni populations globally as marginalized, discriminated against, and subject to state violence.** Often based on mainstream media accounts of violence or intimidation of Sunni populations in Iraq and beyond, these outlets are feeding off real world injustice to spur on action by their audiences.

Cross-platform breakdown

Researchers found 16 Facebook pages affiliated with Pro-Islamic State alternative news outlets targeting Iraq and the wider Middle East, as well as Africa, with a collective audience of 45,907 followers. These 16 Facebook pages have garnered 1,001,595 views on videos shared on the platform over the past year, according to the Facebook research tool CrowdTangle. Researchers refer to these outlets as 'alternative news', as their primary objective is to upcycle official Islamic State news channel content, rebranding the content and hence functioning as alternative sources for 'news'-type content.

The 16 Facebook pages were connected to a network of 17 Telegram channels with a collective audience of 55,210 followers. The Telegram channels associated with these alternative news outlets were themselves tied to regional news operations exclusively on Telegram, sharing links directly to official Islamic State news channels, such as Nashir News, and Amaq.

Three of the alternative news outlets similarly linked to Arabic, English and Hausa language Twitter accounts with 5,763 followers, all of which were promoting both their Facebook, Telegram, Instagram and TikTok presence. Researchers found one alternative news outlet with Instagram and TikTok accounts, which had a collective follower base of 1,388.

All the alternative news operations were focused on Iraq, with a secondary focus on Syria, and more growth-oriented focus on African operations in the wake of an al-Naba newsletter call for mujahideen to make hijra, or migration, to Africa. The development of a regional outlet in Hausa, for instance, was a key part of this dissemination strategy.

For the purposes of this report, researchers have thoroughly dissected three of the largest disinformation purveyors managed by Islamic State supporters: "Global Happenings," "DRIL," and "Media Centre." These three outlets have the largest followings on Facebook, Telegram and Twitter out of the alternative media outlets that researchers uncovered. The research period coincided with the Ghuwayran Prison attack, perpetrated by Islamic State fighters detained in Kurdish-controlled Northern Syria. After the prison attack, significant spikes in content shared by Pro-Islamic State alternative news outlets exposed possible linkages of the network to official Islamic State news purveyors. The research period

similarly coincided with calls to fight in Africa, which the alternative news outlets amplified further.

The Pro-Islamic State Alternative News Outlet: Methodology and Sample

Researchers homed in on three of the largest Pro-Islamic State alternative news outlets on Facebook, Twitter and Telegram, in order to better understand the mechanisms, tactics and strategies used by these disparate news networks. ISD found the alternative networks by mining a sample of 500 Islamic State Facebook profiles sharing Iraq-linked content. The sample of Facebook profiles represent a segment of profiles mapped to date, which hold significant importance to understanding the linkages between Islamic State propaganda efforts and Iraq-specific narratives. As a part of its extremist ecosystem mapping ISD is comprehensively analyzing publicly available data from these profiles, including page likes.

The "Global Happenings" network manages the most extensive presence of all the Pro-Islamic State alternative news outlets on social media and encrypted messaging applications, with followings in thousands on Facebook, Twitter, and Telegram, and to a lesser extent on TikTok and Instagram. The Global Happenings network operates several core Global Happenings -branded publication channels: 18 Telegram channels, Twitter accounts, and Facebook pages, and multiple Facebook profiles. The network additionally interacts with profiles that are not branded or introduced as official arms of the Global Happenings network but still share Global Happenings content consistently. The "Media Centre" network highlights the continued presence of pro-Islamic State media on Facebook. The network operates 7 Facebook pages and a Telegram channel, focused almost exclusively on Iraq. The Media Centre brand became so successful that one copycat page was set-up by supporters of the Islamic State, and was called out by the others for being a fake. "DRIL" is a "media personality" on Facebook that feeds its audience Iraq-specific news, that often captures the casualties of Iraqi armed forces and PMF militias as gloating points, and links to two pro-Islamic State Telegram channels by the same name.

Combined, these three networks cater to followers that are part of a wider ecosystem of thousands of dedicated Islamic State support accounts on multiple social media platforms and encrypted messaging applications (see Table 1).

Figure 2 Link list posted on the 'Global Happenings' Telegram channel on December 5, 2021.

ISD analysts previously came across all three networks while examining the page likes of individual profiles identified in wider mapping of the extremist and terrorist ecosystem online. Researchers have been monitoring the Global Happenings network since 2020. Analysts noted the presence of the Media Centre network in 2021 and DRIL was being monitored as early as June 2021. Based on known publication channels of the networks, we identified additional outlets on social media platforms (see Figure 1). ISD subsequently monitored the online presence of all of these networks in depth, starting in August 2021, when the Global Happenings created new Twitter accounts, as well as Facebook pages and profiles.

ISD researchers found linkages of the Media Centre with the unofficial pro-Islamic State news purveyor Moata News Agency. Moata News Agency has been active on social media platforms since 2016. Moata News Agency developed a format for reporting on Islamic State attacks in Iraq that used the social media and mainstream photographs of individual soldiers, officers and PMF fighters to drive home the personal toll of Islamic State attacks. These tactics have been adopted by all of the pro-Islamic State alternative news outlets monitored by ISD for this report.

Table 1. Social media presence of Pro-Islamic State alternative media outlets[1]

Account	Platform	Language	Followers	Status[2]
Account 1	Telegram channel	Arabic	14,015	online
Account 2	Telegram channel	Arabic	5,591	online
Account 3	Telegram channel	Arabic	1,904	online
Account 4	Telegram channel	Arabic	2,619	online
Account 5	Telegram channel	Arabic	1,499	online
Account 6	Telegram channel	Kurdish	522	online
Account 7	Telegram channel	Arabic	3,622	online
Account 8	Telegram channel	English	1,244	online
Account 9	Telegram channel	Arabic	5,591	online
Account 10	Telegram channel	Hausa	515	online
Account 11	TikTok	Arabic	317	online
Account 12	Instagram	Arabic	1,071	online
Account 13	Twitter	English	975	online
Account 14	Twitter	Arabic	4,773	online
Account 15	Twitter	Hausa	15	online
Account 16	Facebook page	Arabic	10,967	online
Account 17	Facebook page	Arabic	4,000	online
Account 18	Telegram channel	Arabic	2,212	online
Account 19	Telegram channel	Arabic	622	online
Account 20	Facebook page	Arabic	518	online
Account 21	Facebook page	Arabic	413	online
Account 22	Telegram channel	Arabic	2,214	online
Account 23	Facebook page	Arabic	2,550	online
Account 24	Facebook page	Arabic	2,244	online
Account 25	Facebook page	Arabic	1,129	online
Account 26	Facebook page	Arabic	716	online
Account 27	Facebook page	Arabic	812	online
Account 28	Facebook page	Arabic	15,770	online
Account 29	Facebook page	Arabic	1,062	online
Account 30	Facebook page	Arabic	925	online
Account 31	Facebook page	Arabic	2,284	online
Account 32	Facebook page	Arabic	1,561	online
Account 33	Facebook page	Arabic	259	online
Account 34	Telegram channel	Arabic	114	online
Account 35	Facebook page	Arabic	697	online
Account 36	Telegram channel	Arabic	9,691	online
Account 37	Telegram channel	English	1,012	online
Account 38	Telegram channel	Arabic	2,223	online

1   In line with ISD's Ethics policy, account names in this table have been anonymised. A list of the account names can be supplied on request.

2   Status as of August 15, 2022. Names of outlets have been altered.

Daesh Disinformation: Content and Narratives

The primary function of Pro-Islamic State alternative news outlets is spreading the Islamic State version of current events on as many popular platforms as possible. In that sense, the outlets monitored represent a quasi-coordinated disinformation operation, consisting of key nodes that are branded "media" outlets or personalities, providing "false information deliberately and often covertly spread (as by the planting of rumors) in order to influence public opinion or obscure the truth." In some cases, such as Media Centre, the outlet claims to be a "politician" on Facebook, or a "blog", as is the case for DRIL. All use official Islamic State news and propaganda as a foundation to then frame additional content as such and to present themselves as objective outlets.

As alternative news and media outlets, most of the content published covers Islamic State-affiliated attacks, instilling the image of an ascendant Islamic State and a deteriorating security situation in Iraq and beyond. The networks use mainstream media as sources for their posts, publicizing any attack they believe was carried out by the Islamic State. After such an attack is officially claimed by the Islamic State, the networks amplify the official claims to their follower base.

Amplification, establishing trust, and shaping the environment

Reporting on Islamic State attacks and their impact is a contested field. The Islamic State and its adversaries often present very different narratives of the same event. It is common knowledge that the Islamic State inflates casualty figures. In some cases, this is due to imprecise and hyperbolic framing. For instance, Islamic State official news networks usually summarize the deceased and injured victims of its attacks in their headlines, speaking of "[number] killed and wounded". At first glance, readers may take the number to refer to only those killed, rather than both those killed and wounded. This imprecision inflates the impact of Islamic State attacks to spur support amongst its followers and incite fear and terror amongst wider audiences.

Pro-Islamic State alternative news outlets strengthen these claims with inflated accounts of the impact of Islamic State attacks by repurposing images and other content as evidence of the attacks. This includes posts that visually confirm an attack, mostly taken from mainstream media. Photos showing members of the Iraqi army or militia who were killed in each attack routinely appear next to claims about fatalities and injuries (see Figures 2 and 5). The content is usually taken from social media profiles linked to the victims, especially those of the Iraqi armed forces or PMF militias. Repurposing these pictures adds a sense of "weight" and legitimacy to the claims, ultimately helping to dispel doubts about the content of claims and the Islamic State's wider communications.

Figure 3 Global Happenings Twitter account: #Iraq urgent A local source confirmed an IS attack targeting the "Rejectionist" Mobilization Militia in the Fatha sector near the city of Bayji in the Salahuddin governorate on Thursday evening 22/12/2021 that led to the killing of three members and the wounding of four others. #Only_their_pictures_remain

Through graphic imagery and inflation of fatalities and other impacts of violence, the Pro-Islamic State alternative media outlets can evoke strong emotional responses to their content. On the one hand, those opposed to the Islamic State will feel anger and hate, and may feel demoralized. On the other hand, supporters will consume this content as evidence of a still strong and ascending Islamic State. Ultimately, the nature of Islamic State communications, particularly their intention to evoke strong responses, helps fuel the socially polarized conditions in which the Islamic State thrives.

Remaining and expanding

A heavy focus on attacks and inflated claims about fatalities and injuries paints a picture of the Islamic State being stronger than it is. The Pro-Islamic State alternative news outlets use different narratives to convey this point further. The Global Happenings network focuses on global Islamic State attacks, especially in Africa (Nigeria, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Mozambique). Islamic State advances in these countries are used to

bolster its image in Iraq. Military successes overseas are often described as the result of guidance from Islamic State central leadership, including knowledge transfer and operational support from Islamic State core networks in Iraq and Syria to Africa.

In contrast, the Media Centre network pursues an Iraq-focused approach. Apart from attack claims, Islamic State strength is projected through adversarial statements using mainstream content that can be couched in sectarianism. Mainstream media interviews with Iraqi civilian and military officials are mined for statements that underline the continued danger posed by the Islamic State to the security situation in Iraq. Videos of such interviews are often posted and accompanied with written bullet points of key statements that are commented on by the network in brackets. For example, one official is quoted as saying that "he dreams of finishing terrorism", which Media Centre comments on by stating that "not all dreams can come true." Media Centre takes special care to point out holes in official Iraqi government narratives. A major point in this context is the Iraqi announcement of having vanquished the Islamic State in 2017, which is often framed by Media Centre as being untruthful based on the continuing security challenge the Islamic State poses.

Pro-Islamic State alternative media outlets contrast the image of a strong Islamic State with a weak Iraqi state. This perceived weakness of the state is almost always linked to disunity and is often contrasted with the alleged unity of the Islamic State in the face of its opponents, based on its self-image as a so-called "caliphate" that all Muslims should join to become strong and successful. Its adversaries are, in turn, framed as the opposite: disunited and in conflict, which causes, and is evidenced in, their "weakness". This is particularly the case in framing the Iraqi state, where post-election political conflicts and violent protests are posted by the Media Centre network to present the Iraqi state as one prone to conflict and chaos. To this end, attacks by pro-Iranian militias on United States military installations and Iraqi politicians are a recurring topic for the Global Happenings network.

At least in some instances, Pro-Islamic State alternative news outlets reported on attacks that they perceived to have been Islamic State attacks, but that were later attributed to either criminal activity, tribal clashes, or the work of PMF militias. A case in point is the Basra bombing in early December 2021 that was not perpetrated by the

Islamic State but excitedly reported as such by the Global Happenings network and the Media Centre network (See Figure 3).The constant reporting on unrest in Iraq – Islamic State-related or not – is used to paint a picture of the Iraqi state as one that fails to provide security and ensure public safety.

Figure 4 'Media Centre 1' and 'Global Happenings (Ibn Sirte)' Facebook pages reporting on the explosion in Basra

Iraq as a malicious actor

Iraq is not only described as a disunited entity. Indeed, the Media Centre network also presents the state as a malicious actor intent on harming Sunnis. Sectarian messaging is meant to drive a wedge between the Sunni constituency from which the Islamic State wants to recruit and general society. This sectarian angle is not pursued by the Global Happenings network. Unlike Media Centre, they do not care to convince its audience of Sunni-Shia enmity, which they instead consider and frame as an established precept.

The Media Centre network referred to two instances of high civilian casualties in Sunni areas, claimed to be the result of operations by Iraqi security forces, pro-Iranian militias, and allied tribes. In October 2021, a number of Sunni civilians were killed in clashes in Nahr al-Imam in Diyala. Additionally, a Sunni mosque was torched during the course of events. Media Centre placed the blame squarely on members of the Badr militia and allied Shia tribal fighters in the area. In December 2021, a security operation led to the killing of a suspect and his family. According to initial reports, the suspect was responsible for the killing of his family — a claim disputed by neighbours and relatives. In both cases, Media Centre included interviews with relatives and pictures of the deceased, including children, to elicit an emotional response from its audience (See Figure 4).

Viewing dead innocent victims, especially children, leads to feelings of anger, disempowerment, and pity. Islamic State supporters might feel galvanized to engage in revenge attacks on behalf of the victims, claiming it was punishment for the perpetrators. Disenfranchised Sunnis in turn might be led to believe that the Iraqi state is part of a Shia conspiracy against Sunnis — regardless of affiliation to Islamic State. Islamic State and its predecessors have long tried to generate a civil war along sectarian lines to appear as champion, avenger, and protector of Sunnis against a Shia onslaught. The underlying narrative is bolstered when human rights of Sunni Iraqis are infringed upon.

Figure 5 'Media Centre 1' Facebook page: #Urgent #Babil Government forces killed a family of 20 individuals, amongst them women and children after targeting their house with rockets and hand-grenades during their attempt to arrest a person in the al-Rashad area, belonging to Kutha district, North Babil #Babil_massacre

Technical aspects

The use of popular social media platforms is a cornerstone of pro-Islamic State messaging. An aspect explaining the popularity of these platforms is easy access, and wider reach. The only requirement to open new profiles on Facebook and Twitter is a working email address. In contrast, Telegram asks for a mobile number. It is markedly easier to obtain an email address than a mobile phone number. Still, Islamic State supporters have long been able to spoof telephone numbers to join Telegram anonymously. Therefore, a key aim of the Pro-Islamic State alternative news networks is the evasion of deletion as well as building contingency options in case of eventual deletion.

Camouflage to counter deletion and ensure wider circulation

One of the most significant measures used by Pro-Islamic State alternative news networks to evade moderation is camouflaging. On the one hand, camouflaging protects their profiles from deletion, on the other hand, it facilitates the spread of pro-Islamic State media content to wider audiences. Camouflaging starts with profile names and avatars. Pro-Islamic State alternative news networks choose mundane profile pictures that suggest a media outlet affiliation. The same mostly holds true for profile names. Other network names have apparently benign names, such as "Media Centre," a moniker for gathering places where Islamic State would broadcast media content to members and the wider public when the group still controlled territory. To that end, moderators would not be able to easily distinguish the observed profiles from actual news blogs found on social media.

Camouflaging also affects content posted by the observed profiles. To feign the appearance of an accredited news outlet, the Global Happenings network hides pro-Islamic State material within non-Islamic State related news items. For example, Events of the World (Telegram channel), Global Happenings (Facebook page), and Global Happenings Arabic (Twitter account) covered the early January unrest in Kazakhstan in detail even though it had nothing to do with Islamic State. This coverage of global unrest helps legitimize Pro-Islamic State alternative news networks. The Media Centre network on the other hand, is rather focused on conflicts with Islamic State involvement. Here, hiding Islamic State material amidst other media is achieved through reposting material from mainstream media or using information gained from social media. Still, the apparent goal of news networks is amplifying Islamic State messaging by reporting on Islamic State attacks without explicitly showing commitment to the group.

Apart from hiding content originally released by the Islamic State in between other more mainstream content, editing Islamic State content to camouflage its origins is commonplace. While the Pro-Islamic State alternative news outlets tend to avoid directly sharing audio-visual Islamic State propaganda, the few cases of such behaviour usually involve masking of Islamic State logos or blurring out visually graphic content. All the Pro-Islamic State alternative news outlets spread written statements released by Islamic State in a heavily coded format. Camouflaging Islamic State statements starts by moderating language. For example, researchers compared the language used by official Islamic State outlets to those used by the Pro-Islamic State alternative news outlets on Facebook to understand what was changed to appeal to a larger audience (see Figure 5).

Derogatory terms for Islamic State adversaries, such as the "Rejectionist Apostate Army", were removed by the Pro-Islamic State alternative news outlets and replaced with a neutral appellation of "the Iraqi army". Going a step further, the Media Centre Facebook page simply calls Islamic State "the terrorist d.s", simplifying the term "Daesh," which is widely used by Islamic State adversaries, down to two letters separated by a dot. Researchers have previously noted that Islamic State supporters relish the opportunity to refer to themselves as both "terrorists" and "Daesh," eschewing the notion that these names are insults to the group and its membership. By using terms such as "terrorist" or "d.s" to describe the Islamic State, the outlets are adopting the language used to disparage the group to mask the intentions of the page, itself a tactic to evade moderation by confusing moderators.

The Global Happenings network equally tries to avoid automatic detection through orthographic tactics by inserting a dot in words like "soldiers" and "army." ISD researchers noted the use of this "broken-text posting" while monitoring other pro-Islamic State networks on Facebook. Using "broken-text posting" is not the only method of camouflaging content. The Pro-Islamic State alternative news outlets have also developed emoji coding systems to mask Islamic State content. The Global Happenings network has developed a 43-emoji system to deliver Islamic State news content (the code and its translation are attached in the appendix; see also Figure 2 for an example of this code in practice). Researchers

have previously identified both emojis and "broken-text posting" as effective moderation workarounds, assisting pro-Islamic State supporters in coding their language, while still allowing them to share primary narratives and official content of the group.

Figure 6 The Tarmiya attack on January 8 as reported by official Islamic State media, the 'Global Happenings ', and the 'Media Centre 1' Facebook pages

Avoiding moderation through platform specific behaviour

The Global Happenings network is aware of the moderation practices and protocols of the social media platforms they use to disseminate content. The outlets adjust the content and style of their postings according to the knowledge they have gleaned by posting Islamic State content on each respective platform, demonstrating a series of learnings that can be used to remain present on key platforms.

Reviewing the content posted by these networks, Iraq-related Islamic State material was typically most shared by the News of Iraq-Syria channel on Telegram, which not only used Islamic State statements verbatim but also reported on other group developments. The News of Iraq-Syria channel is one outlet of the larger Global Happenings network, sharing the same branding but localized to deliver content on just Iraq and Syria. Researchers reviewed official Islamic State statements between December 21, 2021 and January 21, 2022 in order to compare the language and the content of both the News of Iraq-Syria Telegram channel and the Global Happenings Facebook page. It is clear from this review that Telegram provides the Pro-Islamic State alternative news outlets with a sense of privacy that allows them to directly share Islamic State news with no camouflaging or augmenting of the content. This stands in stark contrast to Twitter and Facebook, where the Pro-Islamic State alternative news outlets have developed and refined their disinformation operations to mask, camouflage and augment written and visual content stripped from official channels of the Islamic State. Based on analyst review, ISD found that Pro-Islamic State alternative news outlets reported on 10 out of 25 claimed attacks on Telegram. This strategy – where unveiled Islamic State content is used on encrypted platforms versus highly augmented and camouflaged content on popular platforms — illustrates that Islamic State support groups are familiar with the moderation practices of social media platforms and can both disguise and adjust their actions accordingly.

Preparing for deletion through cross-platform network retention

Having multiple ways of publication, ideally on multiple platforms, not only opens a larger potential audience but imbues the Pro-Islamic State alternative news outlets with increased resilience against take downs by the various platforms they exploit. When one profile on Facebook is deleted, that profile's content might still be available via other profiles or pages. If a platform deletes all the Pro-Islamic State alternative news outlet pages and profiles, their content is still preserved on other platforms.

Even more valuable than preserving content, Pro-Islamic State alternative news outlets see an integral part of their existence in publicizing their multi-platform and multi-profile/page presence. If followers of a deleted profile or page know other profiles and pages affiliated with a given network – on or off-platform – they can be easily shepherded to new profiles and pages to follow. A prerequisite for the preservation of the Pro-Islamic State alternative news outlets' followership therefore is cross-profile and cross-platform interaction.

Accordingly, the Global Happenings network on Facebook consistently linked to its multiple profiles on Facebook and asked those who had befriended their profiles to follow and subscribe to the main page. The stated aim of this process is to "surpass al-Jazeera" in followers. Another stated aim of the Global Happenings network is getting Facebook and Twitter users to join its respective Telegram channels. The Pro-Islamic State alternative news network repeatedly advertised direct links to Telegram channels below news posts on Facebook or tweets, and sometimes had Telegram links in its profile bio. The Global Happenings network Telegram channel on the other hand linked to its Facebook profiles and Twitter accounts via dedicated posts (see Figure 1). Media Centre also linked to Telegram accounts but reserved dedicated posts for advertising its other Facebook pages.

Mask Off: The Ghuwayran Prison Attack

During the monitoring period, researchers noticed a stark shift in behaviour in mid-January 2022. The Pro-Islamic State alternative news outlets visibly relaxed camouflaging measures and took part in hashtag campaigns initiated by the wider pro-Islamic State community online. This shift was triggered by an infographic published by the official media apparatus of the Islamic State.

The al-Naba infographic, the ensuing hashtag, and the Ghuwayran prison break attempt

On January 6, 2022, the Islamic State published issue 320 of its weekly newsletter al-Naba. The newsletter included an infographic on the last page entitled "persist in your incitement". The infographic emphasized the importance of inciting jihad for its spiritual rewards. The group appealed to the "media mujahid" to persist in propaganda work and stressed the importance of media to the jihadist movement: "Persist, oh media mujahid, in your incitement to jihad. Make it your priority, for you don't know who is guided by the impact of your words and stands up [...]."

Starting on January 7, the title of the previous day's infographic was used as a hashtag on social media. Hashtags are used to gather content on a common topic under one searchable term. They might also be used as a tool for outreach, for example to publicize a specific agenda. When enough users employ a hashtag, it registers as a "trending" topic (e.g. on Twitter) and achieves greater visibility, including amongst the wider public social media. By using the #persist_in_your_incitement hashtag, users outed their accounts, profiles, and pages as part of the larger Islamic State ecosystem online. All of the Pro-Islamic State alternative news network accounts took part in the hashtag campaign, which at its height contributed 520 tweets on the first day of the attacks.

On Thursday, January 20, 2022, the Islamic State attacked the Ghuwayran Prison in al-Hasaka, Syria. The campaign published in al-Naba was deliberately timed to precede this major operation – the biggest Islamic State attack since the loss of its self-declared caliphate in the region. Fighting in al-Hasaka persisted until January 27 and has been supplemented by a flurry of small-scale attacks in Eastern Syria. This Syrian offensive is accompanied by close media coverage, specifically by the official Islamic State news media outlet Amaq.

The Pro-Islamic State alternative news outlets and the Ghuwayran Prison

The Pro-Islamic State alternative news outlets reported extensively on the fighting in al-Hasaka, shedding their camouflage as media outlets. Footage and news from the prison were greeted with takbirat and prayers in the comment sections of their respective pages and profiles. Once more, hashtags were used to spread news of the attempted prison break. A clear-cut Islamic State slogan, #breaking_the_walls, which had been coined by the group in its 2012-2013 campaign to free its members from Iraqi prisons, was very popular. The second most popular hashtag was the #pledge_of_death followed by the most recent, the #Epic_Battle_of_Ghuwayran. #Ghuwayran_Prison and #Battle_of_Ghuwayran did not show any ideological alignment. Additionally, the #Persist_in_your_incitement hashtag continued to be used.

The Global Happenings Facebook page used the #Epic_Battle_of_Ghuwayran hashtag to lampoon the commander of the Syrian Democratic Forces' (SDF), Mazlum Abdi's, ever-shifting narrative of events in the city (see Figure 6). Disinformation about the status of the prison was used to undermine trust in the official narrative, thereby establishing the Global Happenings network as a clear cog in the Islamic State's disinformation operations. The Global Happenings network went out of its way to document the widespread celebration in Islamic State supporter circles and asked for more material from all over the world to showcase solidarity with the prisoners attempting to escape.

This international show of support was meant to inspire supporters of the Islamic State all over the Muslim world. Solidarity was not confined to moral support in the online sphere though. The Global Happenings Facebook profile shared screenshots showing Islamic State supporters engaging in an information operation against the SDF, messaging emergency numbers released by the group to gather information on Islamic State movements in al-Hasaka. The profile also called Syrian supporters to arms and asked them to target the SDF in diversionary attacks throughout eastern Syria. These calls reached an ever-increasing audience as followership of all the monitored profiles, accounts, pages, and channels soared during this time period.

The Global Happenings channel on Telegram increased its followership by nearly 4,000, a 25 percent rise during a week-long period during the attack. Heightened activity and exposure also led to social media scrutiny. The Global Happenings Facebook page was deleted between January 23 and 24. Already expecting this development as the page had been flagged, the Global Happenings page stopped posting and set up an unofficial replacement page – Global Happenings Ibn Sirte – on January 20. Other profiles, especially those branded as "Ibn Sirte", switched to quoting the new page, barely posting content themselves to evade moderation. The Global Happenings network then warned its followers to refrain from posting videos from Ghuwayran Prison for fear of more takedowns. This case study highlights a sophisticated, multi-platform propaganda strategy that understands that platform moderation will eventually lead to disruption, and ultimately, adjusts to the constraints ahead of inevitable takedowns.

Figure 7 'Global Happenings ' Facebook profile: #Epic_Battle_of_Ghuwayran
Despite the false statements by Mazlum Abdi in his talk about controlling the position in Ghuwayran prisons, the Americans are not forbidden by [the stamen] to come to the prison's perimeter in their Bradley war tanks.
The matter is bigger than you think.

Conclusion

Alternative news outlets represent a central aspect of pro-Islamic State disinformation operations on social media platforms. Researchers have noted how different Pro-Islamic State alternative news outlets leverage problematic statements by officials to discredit the official government narratives, attempting to establish themselves as credible alternative sources of information. Analysts also note that camouflaging as a "news blog," "media," or a "politician" on social media does not only help in evading detection by moderators but can lead to acceptance as a news source by casual readers, putting them in danger of becoming victims of disinformation campaigns launched by supporters of the Islamic State.

Pro-Islamic State alternative news outlets want to project an image of an active and aggressive Islamic State, an image predicated on the fact that it is actively engaged in fighting a campaign for the unity of Iraqis, as well as focused on the abuses of the state, government corruption, and its inability to protect the safety of its citizenry. The outlets, through disparate, but ultimately connected disinformation operations, are fundamentally challenging platforms and governments under the guise of being accredited news outlets, organizations, and personalities. This tactic, and its larger strategy, is integral to understanding how the supporters of the Islamic State are attempting not just to mainstream their content, but at the same time contextualize it in a large Iraqi media ecosystem. The development of a large, multi-platform, multi-lingual landscape of self-branded news networks operating on the basic premise to spread Islamic State news further, fits within the larger strategy that the Islamic State has outlined in its official communications.

The ability of the Pro-Islamic State alternative news networks to continue to innovate and survive takedowns make them a persistent challenge for both technology companies and governments. They also highlight the connections between real world violence and attacks, such as the Ghuwayran attack in Syria and several attacks in Iraq, and the social media activities of Islamic State supporters. The use of decentralized news networks, each with their own branding, role, and function as alternative news sources, indicates a series of learnings that were adapted from state disinformation operations. By using seemingly "independent" news outlets as cover, coupled with the use of coded language and camouflaged branding, Pro-Islamic State alternative news networks can spread content to wider audiences, challenge government narratives and build communities under the guise of accountable media.

Appendix: Global Happenings network emoji code

#administration#the_way_to_view_news_events_promptly #reminding_everyone_to_follow_the_steps_in_the_picture #table_of_symbols_below

Follow the steps to receive news right after publishing! The catalogue (table) is for understanding the posts. I will publish in a different way on Facebook. Learn the symbols to follow them during my stay on Facebook

Rocket
Grenade
Burning
Explosion
Destruction
Damage
Mine or car bomb
Imprisoning or kidnapping
The United Nations
Muslims [IS]
Killing
Wounding
Ambush
Attack
Military camp
This is known [Christian]
This is known [Jew]
The Muslim masses
Allied militia
Unknown armed persons
Robbers
Patrol
Column or convoy
Taliban
Capture
Charge
Weapon
Control
Storming
Targeting
Fleeing
Security detachment
Check-point
Assassination
Shiites or Rejectionists
Spy
Government scholar
Safely
Material damages
Expansion
Attributed to
Fight or struggle
Clash or engagement

Without your understanding of the characters above – a reminder – you won't understand anything I publish. Telegram channel [link]

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