

Terrorism and Political Violence



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Video games, terrorism, and ISIS's Jihad 3.0

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ABSTRACT

This study discusses different media strategies followed by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). In particular, the study attempts to understand the way ISIS's video game that is called "Salil al-Sawarem" (The Clanging of the Swords) has been received by the online Arab public. The article argues that the goal behind making and releasing the video game was to gain publicity and attract attention to the group, and the general target was young people. The main technique used by ISIS is what I call "troll, flame, and engage." The results indicate that the majority of comments are against ISIS and its game, though most of the top ten videos are favorable towards the group. The sectarian dimension between Sunnis and Shiites is highly emphasized in the online exchanges, and YouTube remains an active social networking site that is used by ISIS followers and sympathizers to promote the group and recruit others.

KEYWORDS

Iraq; ISIS; Islam; Middle East; online jihad; terrorism; video game

Introduction

Many global terrorist organizations such as ISIS are increasingly trying to recruit Western youth. According to US intelligence experts, about 1000 foreign fighters join ISIS every month. Some of those recruits come from Western countries. According to a source in the FBI, there are over 150 Americans who are allegedly in Syria to fight for ISIS, while the Canadian Intelligence agency estimates that about 130 Canadians have already joined ISIS as of 2014. According to the Canadian Standing Senate Committee on National Security and Defence (SSCNSD), "eighty radicalized Canadians have been identified as participating with terrorists overseas and have returned to Canada and approximately 145 Canadians are believed to be abroad providing support to terrorist groups."

Indeed, ISIS is a terrorist organization that has an "apocalyptic, end-of-days strategic vision," as Army general Martin Dempsey rightly describes it. The organization evolved to be a more radical and dangerous extension of Al-Qaeda terrorist group. According to a senior leading figure in this group, the ideological foundation of ISIS was established in Camp Bucca, which was the largest US detention facility in Iraq. Due to the time prisoners spent at the Camp and the fact that many other insurgent members were detained there, it became a fertile ground for extremism wherein Islamists managed to hold numerous meetings and make detailed agreements for future plans. When ISIS advanced in the Sunni provinces, it looted banks and became the richest terrorist group in the world. It

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also committed war crimes as hundreds of captured Iraqi soldiers, especially Shiites, were executed, while the Yezihdi and Christian minorities suffered a great deal as many were forced to flee to Iraqi Kurdistan.¹⁰ However, the main areas identified that sustain ISIS's power grip are related to "psychological tactics such as terrorizing populations, religious and sectarian narratives, [and] economic controls."

Literature review

Back in 1982, Schmid and de Graaf emphasized that "an act of terrorism is in reality an act of communication. For the terrorist, the message matters, not the victim." Numerous other scholars rightly claim that communication and terrorism go hand in hand because communication is the oxygen of terrorist acts. Similarly, Freedman and Thussu believe that media outlets are at the core of terrorism because they are "increasingly seen as active agents in the actual conceptualization of terrorist events." As discussed below, ISIS fully exploits various media platforms in order to disseminate fearful messages and create an effective impact on their receivers.

In contemporary times, one of the main platforms mentioned above is social media, which plays a major role in people's lives. In fact, some scholars believe that social media can become instrumental in uniting and sometimes radicalizing the public in relation to political and social issues. Al-Qaeda, for example, has been active on many online forums for several years waging an E-Jihad to recruit sympathizers and spread its ideology. It also created a "jihadist cloud" which allowed it to maintain "its virtual spaces and niches on the Internet." These (offline) extremists groups use modern technology and the Internet as the main means to influence others. "For the terrorists themselves, new media are, collectively, a transformative tool that offers endless possibilities for communication and expansion." In this regard, there are different psychological motivations that lead some individuals to join extremist groups that can be categorized as "revenge seekers [who] need an outlet for their frustration, status seekers [who] need recognition, identity seekers [who] need a group to join, and thrill seekers [who] need adventure."

Video games and terrorism

In relation to video games and terrorism, a number of games directly deal with terror-related issues, especially in connection with the War on Terror. For example, *Splinter Cell* is a game that revolves around the 9/11 events, while *Counter-Strike* allows teams from opposing sides to take the role of terrorists as well as counter-terrorists. Similar to *Counter-Strike*, other games like *America's Army, Modern Warfare 2*, and *Medal of Honor: Warfighter* allow players to become terrorists, which could have some psychological and educational benefits. In 2006, Al-Qaeda group made changes to the first person shooter (FPS) game *Quest for Saddam* (2003) and introduced another game called *Quest for Bush*. The goal of the original game was to kill Iraqi soldiers and capture Saddam Hussein, whereas Al-Qaeda completely reversed the players' roles. Further, the Iraqi American artist, Wafaa Bilal, made more adaptations to the same game, which he called *Night of Bush Capturing: A Virtual Jihadi* (2008). As a social and artistic experience, Bilal's video



game version created some controversy because the player was "in the position of a suicide bomber whose aim is to kill the president of the United States."²⁴

On the other hand, video games by the Lebanese Hezbollah and Syrian Afkar Media company were used as alternative media outlets to offer playing roles that were contrary to the mainstream Western representation of Arab Muslims.²⁵ In this way, "video games provide violent non-state actors and organizations sympathetic to them with a means of presenting their grievances and displaying their fighting prowess in ways that advance the organizations' strategic goals."26 Some of these alternative games include Quraish and *Under Siege*, which were both produced by Afkar Media.²⁷

Trolling, flaming, and social media effects

This paper covers two concepts that are related to the use of harsh and violent language, namely trolling and flaming. There is, however, a conceptual problem in defining these two terms because of the apparent overlap between them. In fact, "trolling and flaming often merge, in that in both cases there is intent to disrupt the ongoing conversation, and both can lead to extended aggravated argument." ²⁸ In this regard, the relative anonymity of online users enhances the kind of flaming or trolling that can occur on different platforms.²⁹ In general, the two terms involve using some kind of negative face that is explained below by employing computer-mediated communication.

The literature on these two types of anti-social behavior is also connected to studies and reports on child protection practices. In general, there is often a sense of moral panic, risk, and public anxiety when it comes to children's Internet exposure and use.³⁰ Social media use could have negative effects on the well-being of some adolescents including what is known as "E-Crime 2.0," which includes "offences that exploit the ways in which users of new communication technologies make themselves publicly visible and available through new social media."31 Some of the harmful social media effects that are reported in previous research on adolescents and children include "social isolation, depression and cyber-bullying."32 In a large-scale study that involved about 10,000 EU children, the respondents themselves reported certain types of risks that they find on the Internet including pornography, cyber-bullying, and violent content.³³ Other types of harmful effects include "poor self-rating of mental health and experiences of high levels of psychological distress and suicidal ideation."34 Indeed, exposure to violent content seems to be one of the main recurrent public concerns when it comes to social media use by adolescents and children.

In their politeness theory, Brown and Levinson discuss the different motivations behind using negative face. For example, it might be used when discussing "dangerously emotional or divisive topics e.g. politics, race, religion."35 Some of the goals behind employing it include certain kinds of "orders and requests" made to denote to the other person a desire to do or refrain from doing something.³⁶ In their compliance gaining theory, Marwell and Schmitt discussed several techniques to persuade people including "punishing activity," which refers to the use of negative face or actions which usually entail uttering threats.³⁷ Though the study was published long before the emergence of the Internet, trolling and flaming can be linked to this theoretical concept since they can be regarded as an online attempt to gain compliance by either modifying or preventing certain kinds of behavior with the persistent use of negative face.

In relation to trolling, one of the first studies that examined it was conducted by Donath on Usernet groups.³⁸ Also, Hardaker provides several definitions for trolling and classifies it into different types based on four main features: aggression, deception, disruption, and success. In relation to this study, two categories are more relevant. The first one is called thwarted/frustrated impoliteness, which refers to the malicious intent of a message, but its intention is frustrated or thwarted by the receiver either because (s)he is not offended, so no action is taken (frustrated), or because it is countered by, for example, "sarcasm, contempt, amusement, or suchlike" (thwarted). The second type is called genuine, malicious, or strategic impoliteness, which successfully achieves its goal in offending the receiver(s).³⁹ Further, Bishop discusses two types of trolling: flame trolling and kudus trolling. The former refers to vitriolic comments that are not intended to be humorous, unlike the latter type. Again, the overlap between the two terms is obvious here. Bishop also classified people who troll others into different types, ⁴⁰ yet none of the classifications he offered could be applicable to this study on mediated terrorism.

In all cases, trolling seeks to create an argument, entice others into endless discussion, or hijack a discussion. ⁴¹ In other words, trolling is meant as a distraction from the main online discussion in the forum or platform by diverting attention to another issue which is mostly irrelevant.

Similar to trolling, there is no agreement on a unified definition of flaming, but it usually "consists of aggressive or hostile communication occurring via computer-mediated channels." Indeed, flaming is similar to trolling, but the language is usually harsher, more personal and is far more aggressive since it contains insults, obscenity, swearing, and curses, ⁴³ especially if the topic relates to religion. 44

Whether trolling or flaming, ISIS sympathizers run what is called "disseminator' accounts" on social media, especially Twitter, which "lend moral and political support to those in the conflict."⁴⁵ It is also known as the Swarmcast model in communication studies; "once content is produced and released, it is often the distributing network of media mujahideen, rather than the original producer, that ensures continuing content availability."⁴⁶ This model suggests that sympathizers gather like a swarm of bees or birds that always re-organize themselves and are ready to engage and attack at any given time. In the following section, a discussion is made on ISIS's media techniques.

ISIS communication strategy

ISIS employs a communication strategy that is based on highlighting certain appeals. Haroro J. Ingram identified three media strategies followed by ISIS: "the use of a multi-dimensional, multi-platform approach that simultaneously targets 'friends and foes' to enhance the reach, relevance and resonance of its messaging; the synchronisation of narrative and action to maximise operational and strategic 'effects' in the field; and the centrality of the Islamic State 'brand' to its entire campaign." In this regard, the high number of ISIS recruits indicates that ISIS is still successful since one of its most important appeals being employed is its professed link to a conservative version of Islam (salaf or pious predecessors). This claim is used as a marketing tool by ISIS as its members insist on utilizing the black banner which was originally used by Muslims when Islam first emerged. Further, the group's name itself is meant to sound Islamic (ISIS), or later abbreviated as the Islamic State (Tandheem Al-Dawlah Al-Islamiah). Third, there is

an ongoing flow of information from cities controlled by ISIS, showing that the group intends to rule in a utopian way that is allegedly reminiscent of early Islam, especially in relation to highlighting religious duties and obligations. 48 The above claims are all meant to brand ISIS as a purely Islamic group, ⁴⁹ so any attack against its members is regarded as an attack against Islam itself. For example, ISIS's Dabiq magazine refers to anyone that fights the group as an enemy of Islam, infidel, or apostate. In an article on Abū Sinān an-Najdī, who was killed in his attack on the Āl Salūl Emergency Task Force in Saudi Arabia, the writer pledges revenge against Saudi security forces: "By Allah! You will not enjoy safety and security, and you will not have a comfortable life as long as you wage war against Islam and the Muslims and remain as tails of the West, which plays around with you as it pleases. Your coalition with the Majūs [pejorative for Shiites] and the Crusaders against Ahlus-Sunnah [Sunnis] in Iraq and Shām is the biggest witness against you."50 Further, ISIS repeatedly portrays itself as "the protective vanguard for the world's Sunni Muslims,"51 while the theme of victimhood in the sense that Muslims, especially Sunnis, are victims of world powers is prominent in ISIS's promotional materials.⁵² Indeed, equating the group with Islam and the Sunni faith is one of the appeals that drives some devout Muslims to join this criminal organization.

On the other hand, ISIS also releases favorable images by showing its charitable side, such as helping elderly people or organizing life in the cities they control. Some also show fighters relaxing, swimming, eating, and playing with cats.⁵³ According to a study conducted by Voactiv on ISIS's promotional materials for about a one-month period, 45% of the materials posted online are focused "on its efforts to build and sustain the caliphate." 54 The study also found that only 2% of the materials posted targeted the West, in comparison to 4% on Libya that recently witnessed a growing ISIS presence. James Farwell claims that these "warmer images aim to communicate the message that, while strictly Islamic, ISIS stands for promoting the welfare of people, not murdering them."55 Yet this is not the only message ISIS wants to communicate, as the main intention behind releasing such positive images is to give the impression to the outside world as well as to the people they control that the group is strong and resilient as it is not affected by the ongoing military operations against its fighters. Further, some recruits seek thrilling experiences and adventure and regard ISIS as the "hippest" 56 and "sexiest jihadi group on the block." 57 Bennhold observes that some young ISIS recruits come "from a world in which ... Islam is punk rock. The headscarf is liberating. Beards are sexy." 58 Other reports on "pop jihadists" in Europe fit this category, and they are defined as "Muslim youngsters who flirt with terrorist symbols" with the use of social media.⁵⁹

Finally and most importantly, ISIS uses propaganda and misinformation which are based on disseminating its ideology to as many people as possible and in various languages. President Obama revealed some of ISIS's strategies in a speech delivered in February 2015: "The high-quality videos, the online magazines, the use of social media, terrorist Twitter accounts—it's all designed to target today's young people online, in cyberspace."60 Aside from the different tools that circumvent Internet censorship, ISIS and its affiliates and sympathizers use Al-Hayat, Al-Furgan, and Al-Ethar media centers, which function as their centralized Information Ministry. These different media centers use social media outlets like YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook besides certain websites, radio stations, the Clanging of the Swords promotional videos, and its Dabiq magazine to disseminate their ideology.⁶¹ The New York Times is accurate in describing ISIS media strategy as Jihad 3.0⁶² due to its highly sophisticated media campaign that involves the use of "multidimensional propaganda,"⁶³ high-tech filming, and editing equipment.⁶⁴ The term is originally derived from Web 3.0, which developed from Web 2.0. According to Manuel Castells, this new phenomenon refers to "the cluster of technologies, devices, and applications that support the proliferation of social spaces on the Internet thanks to increased broadband capacity, open source software, and enhanced computer graphics and interface, including avatar interaction in three-dimensional virtual spaces."⁶⁵ Indeed, ISIS is making full use of different technologies that are not confined to social media, especially Twitter, but extend to video games, hacking by its Cyber Caliphate Army, apps, and the Dark Web.

According to an ISIS follower, the group uses a few centralized Twitter accounts that "tweet official statements and news updates" as well as provincial accounts run from the provinces ISIS controls, "which publish a live feed about [local] Isis operations." In addition, there are ISIS "jihobbyists," fan clubs, or followers and sympathizers, for it is estimated that ISIS has about 46,000 Twitter accounts that are sympathetic to or supportive of the group, which are mostly based in Iraq, Syria, and Saudi Arabia, prompting the EU to commission the European Law Enforcement Agency, Europol, to block ISIS access to social media. This decentralized communication method makes it challenging to counter ISIS messages, though it can offer some security benefits like disclosing valuable information about the location of some ISIS fighters. According to Berger and Morgan's study on ISIS Twitter accounts, 73% of the followers selected Arabic as their main language followed by 18% English and 6% French, "a finding that tracks to some extent with the distribution of Western foreign fighters." In fact, the Arabic language has long been one of the fastest growing languages on Twitter, with more than 2 million tweets posted every single day.

Other media platforms are actively exploited by ISIS. In April 2014, ISIS "introduced an Android app, called 'The Dawn of Glad Tidings,' which leverages Twitter users' accounts to share ISIS-related tweets." It was only recently that ISIS moved to another social network called "Diaspora" and other lesser known networks and websites like Friendica, Quitter, Justpaste, Ask.fm, Soundcloud, and Mixlr after its Twitter accounts were blocked. In terms of online influence, it seems that ISIS has a wide network of followers and/or sympathizers that exist not only in the Middle East region but that extend to North America and Europe. The support of the

It is important to note here that the shocking beheading and killing images and videos that are disseminated by ISIS are meant to create awareness about the group and its activities similar to the shock advertising techniques used by some commercial corporations which are well documented in previous scientific research.⁷⁷ This is another persuasive strategy as ISIS attempts to brand itself as a savage group that is defending Islam against the infidels, represented by anyone that fights them. In this regard, social networking sites are mostly used to attract attention and entice possible victims, after which other communication technologies are used, especially mobile services like Viber, Surespot, WhatsApp, FaceTime, Kik, Skype, and Telegram.⁷⁸ In brief, the different platforms used and media strategies followed by ISIS that seem to complement each other indicate that this group is waging a new Jihad that goes beyond what Web 2.0 offers, making it far more effective than traditional terrorist organizations like Al-Qaeda.



ISIS's video game

The focus of this study is on the video game released by ISIS that is adapted from the well-known Grand Theft Auto (GTA). In particular, the research is limited to the videos and comments posted on this video game trailer. It is not clear whether the game was truly produced or not; it is also not clear who exactly developed it since there are many links to the video game, especially those leading to torrent websites. However, the current links either do not work or lead to malicious websites (see for example Figure 1).⁷⁹ Certainly, the video game's trailer is not produced by the centralized media centers of ISIS like Al-Hayat, Al-Furqan, and Al-Ethar, especially in that the group stands against entertainment activities like listening to music or playing games that can divert attention from prayer and faith.⁸⁰ This means that the game is made by some ISIS followers or sympathizers probably outside the group's controlled territories. In terms of its development, it is not difficult to make changes to the original GTA game by customizing characters or playing opposing roles similar to America's Army and Modern Warfare 2, as mentioned above (see Figure 2). As for the date of ISIS's video game release, one of the first videos to report on the GTA game appeared on YouTube in June 2014, but the game became more popular in September of the same year, based on a Google search in Arabic using the term "Download Salil al-Sawarem's game." "Salil al-Sawarem" is also the name given by ISIS to its motivational religious chant, which must be distinguished from the video game.⁸¹

In all cases, the game is called "Salil al-Sawarem" in Arabic (The Clanging of the Swords), which is a first person shooter game.⁸² The game's cover reads: "Your games which are producing from you, we do the same actions in the battlefields!!"83 In other words, the types of real armed confrontations ISIS is engaged with are similar to the virtual wars produced in Western video games. Further, the name itself given to the game is also supposed to project the idea of strength, fearlessness, and resilience at times of war. It is alleged that ISIS adapted

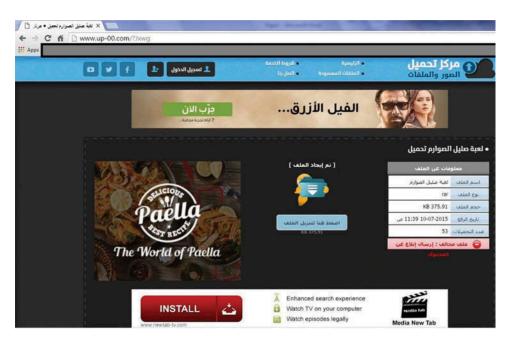


Figure 1. A seemingly malicious website that hosts ISIS's game. The file looks malicious because its size is only 375KB, which is too small for a game like GTA.



Figure 2. ISIS's video game cover.

another first person shooter game called RMA~III which is developed for Microsoft⁸⁴ as well as another version of the famous Call~of~Duty.

In general, the target group of such video games is young people who are supposed to be more attracted to violent and first shooter games. There seems to be certain emotional appeals for young male adolescents to play first shooter games, ⁸⁶ including a desire to "experience fantasies of power and fame, to explore and master what they perceive as exciting and realistic environments (but distinct from real life), to work through angry feelings or relieve stress, and as social tools." Other studies showed that there is a positive correlation between adolescents' anger, frustration, and peer rejection on the one hand and preference for antisocial media content and cyberbullying on the other hand. ⁸⁸ Indeed, violent video games are more appealing for adolescents than for adults, ⁸⁹ partly due to the wishful identification with some of the games' characters. ⁹⁰ As mentioned above, some view ISIS as a "cool" organization in its Jihad 3.0 efforts, so producing such games can help in recruiting young people to its organization.

Results and discussion

In terms of methodology, an Arabic language search was made on YouTube using the term "ISIS's Salil al-Sawarem game" on September 5, 2015. YouTube is selected because it is regarded as one of the most famous video platforms in the world, 91 and YouTube gaming channels that attract people from different ages, especially teenagers, are regarded as the most popular ones. 92 In fact, YouTube gaming offers massive economic opportunities for videogame producers and professional gamers because of the large number of fans. 93 According to *Forbes* magazine, YouTube gaming channels bring in over 3.5 billion views a month as of June 2014. 94

The top ten clips were selected based on the number of views (See Table 1),⁹⁵ and a content analysis of the posted videos and their comments was conducted to understand

Table	Table 1. YouTube clips on ISIS's video game.						
No.	Hyperlinks	No. of views	Tone	No. of comments	Date posted	No. of likes	No. of dislikes
-	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v = 45EG2MVmzC4&list = PLOdRtf56-ng5VGGvNYf169dH9TzOdVYMS&index = 25	119,814	Negative	196	Oct 8, 2014	1154	254
2		37,552	Positive	9	Sep 21, 2014	176	291
m	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v = 5HEdnrG37ZM	37,256	Positive	14	Sep 21, 2014	73	29
4	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v = W5LDEJ8qAEA	27,853	Positive	83	Jul 8, 2015	117	143
2	https://www.youtube.com/watch? $v = ck_9gpJBOSs$	12,952	Positive	Disabled	Sep 21, 2014	31	78
9	https://www.youtube.com/watch? $v = CNyclc4lmSl$	11,844	Neutral	13	Sep 20, 2014	34	31
7	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v = mN4e_8uaD6I	11,096	Neutral	17	Mar 13, 2015	25	94
∞	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v = eupl1LICSpl	10,654	Positive	2	Aug 7, 2015	28	29
6	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v = 5PxBUIEH504	9,576	Positive	20	Jun 7, 2014	78	39
10	https://www.youtube.com/watch? $v = zcLuyrTd7Vc$	8,091	Negative	43	Oct 17, 2014	26	55

their tone or valence in terms of expressing negative, positive, or neutral views towards the game and its sponsor.96 The tone of the video towards ISIS and its video game was assessed based on what is presented in the video itself, the title, and/or its accompanying description. This is a method that has been followed in many studies on YouTube videos and their comments.⁹⁷

In relation to this study, video clips (8) and (9) mostly presented the game in a neutral way, yet their descriptions referred to ISIS as a state that must remain forever (Baqyyah , or that it was the one which follows the right path of Prophet Muhammed. Hence, these two videos were coded as positive towards ISIS and the game. If the stance was not clear, the video was coded as neutral. Before coding all the videos and comments, two coders examined over 10% of the sample (n = 3 videos and 50 comments), and intercoder reliability was measured using Cohen's Kappa. A .890 agreement was reached that was very acceptable. 98

The total number of views for these ten videos was 286,688 and the earliest clip posted was on June 7, 2014. The highest number of views (119,861) and comments (196) was for a video that made fun of the game and ISIS that was posted by an Iraqi comedian who imitates Jon Stewart and Bassem Youssef. As for the tone of posted videos, there were more positive clips towards ISIS and its video game (n = 6) than negative (n = 2) or neutral (n = 2) ones. In fact, some video posters openly showed their support for ISIS. For example, video clip number (2) is posted by user "Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi's lovers," while many other commentators have ISIS's black banner as their users' photo (see Figure 3). With regard to the total number of likes and dislikes, it was only accurate to count them by taking into account the tone of the videos posted. In total, there were 1,944 dislikes (68.3%) of the game and ISIS in comparison to 901 likes (31.5%).

As for the comments, there were in total 397 comments and replies on the posted videos. Due to the highly personal nature of replies, they were discarded from the study together with any irrelevant and ambiguous posts. In total, 199 comments were identified; 57.2% (n = 114) of the comments were negative towards the game and ISIS, 33.6% (n = 67) comments were positive, and 9% (n = 18) were neutral without supporting any side (see Figure 4). With regard to the negative comments, they usually contained praise for anyone who criticized ISIS and its game, which was usually ridiculed for the claim that it was independently developed from Grand Theft Auto. For example, YouTuber "Hadji M" mentioned that "this is a famous American video game, and any person with some experience in programming can change the shapes of its characters and even the sound effects." Further, most of the criticism was centered on showing that ISIS did not represent Islam and/or that Shiite militias fighting ISIS were victorious. As for the positive comments that praised the game and ISIS, they constituted 33.6% of the total comments. These results closely correspond with the number of video dislikes (68.3%) of the game and their likes (31.5%). Despite the dominance of negative comments against ISIS, there was still an active group of sympathizers and followers who mostly believed that supporting ISIS online was an expression of their devotion to Sunni Islam, allegedly under attack by Shiites. To give a few examples, YouTuber "Islamic Flood" says: "You've reached a cowardice stage that you're afraid of an Islamic State's game.... Hail to the Islamic state's men and let [Allah] fortify its Mujahideen.... The Islamic State has defeated you in all the religious, military, cultural and even electronic fronts." Another YouTuber called "Muhammed Al-Mutairi" gave ISIS a more regional scope, stating: "We wish the game's



Figure 3. Screenshot of the video game trailer uploaded by the user "Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi's lovers."

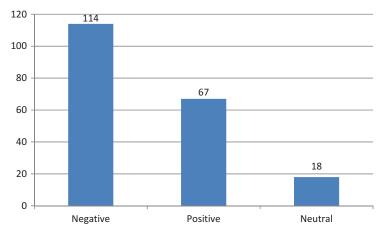


Figure 4. Tone of comments on the top 10 YouTube videos.

objective is to make the Mujahideen heroes.... Their goal is to spread Islam, defend the righteous, and lift injustice from Muslims.... Frankly, we need such games in order to have a new generation whose goal is to remove Israel and its agents from Muslim lands." Finally, YouTuber "Hasoon A" connected his favorable comment towards ISIS with famous Twitter hashtags such as "ISIS remains" that is mentioned above, saying: "It'll expand (#ئند#); if you leave it alone, it'll be strengthened (تشند#). By Allah's will, if you fight it, it'll remain (باقية#)."

As mentioned above, almost all the replies were personal, containing attacks on individual posters who opposed ISIS or vice versa. These replies were highly sectarian in nature as there was intense flaming in the kind of exchange of obscene language and religious curses especially between Sunnis and Shiites. For example, any criticism against ISIS was interpreted by some of the group's sympathizers as criticism against Islam and/or the Sunni faith. This finding is similar to other studies that examined religious comments on YouTube and the divisive sectarian rhetoric that characterizes this platform. 99 The prevalent use of the negative face by the two opposing online communities was expected because of the nature of the religious topic discussed. 100 The main function of the negative face was to gain compliance via punishing activity. 101 This was routinely done by using flaming in order to either force the opponents to leave the platform/video commentary section or make them stop writing negative comments.

Further and in relation to the swarming communication model, ISIS followers seemed to gather around videos that referred to DAESH (ساعث), which is the Arabic acronym of ISIS. The term itself is regarded as demeaning by ISIS, which prohibits people living under its control from using it. 102 ISIS followers are usually very active in responding to ISIS criticism and are often accompanied by other users who share the same beliefs. Similar to a swarming activity, they closely coordinate and synchronize their trolls as they suddenly appear to assist some ISIS members in the exchange of insults, and they disappear afterwards. It is like waging a constant online war.

The other main function of this trolling activity is to silence opposition and dissent, especially that which comes from Shiite Muslims. Most importantly, the trolling and flaming game played by ISIS followers on YouTube serves the purpose of winning some oppositional or neutral voices to their side since the exchange of insults frequently results in curses against Sunni figures who are highly venerated, like Prophet Mohammed's companions. In this way, ISIS followers will get the required evidence that Shiites hold antagonistic views against Sunnis, which might produce the possible impact on some devout Sunnis. This sophisticated technique is similar to what is used by ISIS on Englishlanguage platforms that target Westerners. For example, Shawn Carrie observes that condemning ISIS on Twitter usually results in "openly mixing statements like 'support our troops' mingled cozily next to 'kill all muslims.'" Carrie emphasizes that the latter term is repeatedly used by ISIS as a recruitment tool to convince some that there is inherent Western hatred and an ongoing attack against Islam and that ISIS is the only group that truly defends the doctrine. Further, other news reports like "US Gun-maker Creates 'Crusader' Rifle to Fight Islamic State" 104 are regarded by ISIS as excellent examples that support their abovementioned claim.

In this regard, this trolling and flaming game, which I call the "troll, flame, and engage" technique, is regarded as an effective recruitment tool in ISIS's Jihad 3.0 efforts. It is important to note here that some of the attempts made by ISIS followers and sympathizers

to create a reaction from the online audience fail in what is called thwarted/frustrated impoliteness. 105 These attempts to agitate YouTubers are meant to be tactical diversions from the main negative discussion on and criticism of ISIS, which is what characterizes trolling. 106 Yet, a few other attempts by ISIS followers can be categorized as genuine, malicious, or strategic impoliteness 107 because they succeed in offending their opponents by using highly obscene terms, insults, and curses. For example, Figure 5 shows how one YouTuber, "Layth Jamal," systematically flames by posting abusive comments in response to anyone criticizing ISIS in order to gain compliance. He starts trolling one user, "Abdulla ahmmad12," and is suddenly accompanied by YouTuber "Gvhh Gbj," who both personally attack and succeed in offending their target. In the end, they engage him by using sectarian rhetoric which is meant to gain his support, silence him, or force him to abandon the online platform. In the example given here, "Abdulla ahmmad12" starts questioning "Layth Jamal" for the latter's flaming language. In his response, "Layth

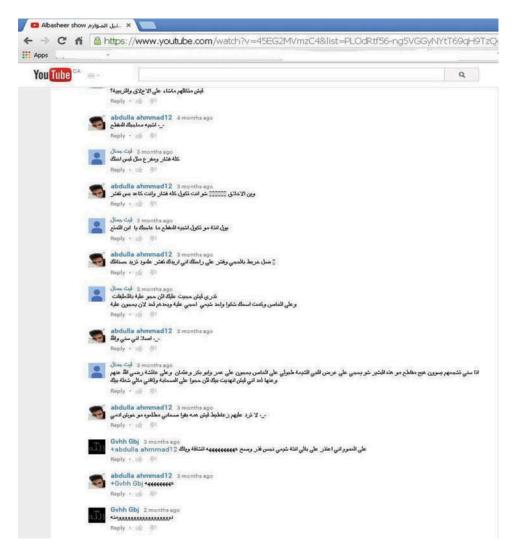


Figure 5. Trolling, flaming, and engaging on YouTube.

Jamal" says: "I have started insulting any Shiite I encounter online though they still post negative comments against me" because he praises ISIS. In this case, "Layth Jamal" believes that flaming can drive users away from the platform or from posting negative comments. Further, the sectarian language was meant to engage others, for "Abdulla ahmmad12" responded by saying: "By Allah, I'm a Sunni myself." "Layth Jamal" further manipulated the sectarian discussion by questioning "Abdulla ahmmad12"'s faith: "If you are a Sunni, how come you encourage them to make such offensive clips that insult the Prophet. The Shiites sent me private messages in which they cursed Abu Bakr, Othman, and Aysha [Muhammed's companions]." Further, "Gvhh Gbj" offered his apology for flaming, stating that he thought that "Abdulla ahmmad12" was a "dirty and filthy Shiite." The online engagement ended with a cheerful tone due to reaching some kind of mutual understanding. In brief, "Layth Jamal" and "Gvhh Gbj" made use of the anonymous feature of YouTube to swarm and troll others whenever they found a suitable video that demeaned ISIS. The purpose was to divert attention from the main discussion, and flaming was used if the impoliteness was thwarted or frustrated, which ultimately ended in engaging some neutral or opposing voices.

Conclusion

The general goal behind making and releasing Salil al-Sawarem's video game is to gain publicity and attract attention to the group. This is part of the group's Jihad 3.0 efforts, as the main target is young people who might get the impression that ISIS is a technologically advanced group that not only produces high-definition and well-edited videos but also has its owns apps, social media tools, drones, and video games. The findings of this study show that the majority of comments and number of likes and dislikes are against ISIS and its video game, but YouTube remains one of the main online platforms wherein ISIS is still sharing and spreading its messages, which is evident in the high number of favorable ISIS videos. Also, there are a considerable number of followers and sympathizers who constantly try to influence others by using trolls, flames, and certain kinds of engagements, while a highly divisive and sectarian rhetoric is used in order to polarize the audience and possibly gain the support of some users.

For future research, more studies are needed in order to examine other social media platforms like Facebook in order to investigate whether swarming and the troll, flame, and engage method is also used by ISIS followers. Further, interviews with online users who are actively engaged with ISIS members are needed in order to further understand the various motivations and possible effects of this online interaction with a focus on gender, sectarian discussion, and age.

Notes on contributor

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