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Current Trends in Jihadist On-line Magazines

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Abstract

Despite increased efforts in the fight against terrorism in the last decade we are witnessing a spread of jihadist activities in cyberspace (online). A rising number of Islamist activities have taken place on the internet. These include spread of propaganda, recruitment activities, attacks preparation and others activities aimed at support of jihadist goals. At the same time the conflicts in Syria and Iraq have revealed a great potential of foreign fighters from Western countries who joined the ranks of Islamists, some of them after contact with online Jihadist literature. This paper brings comparative insight into English written Islamist online magazines including the Islamic State Magazine Dabiq (Al Hayat Media) and Al-Qaeda al-Jihad Organization in the Arabian Peninsula magazine Inspire (Al Malahem Media).

Introduction and research issue

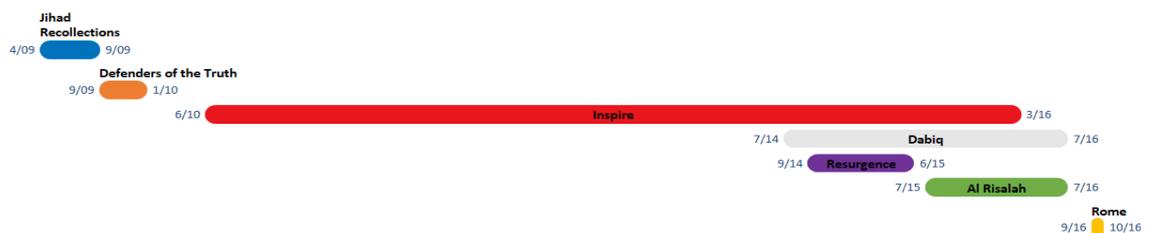
The emergence of the Islamic state revealed several important problems related to terrorism including the issue of foreign fighters. As estimated there are around 30 thousand foreign fighters from around 100 countries who joined ISIS. Next to Arabic, ISIS fighters use language of their origin country which includes Turkish, Russian, French, German or English (Soufan Group 2015). The intention to recruit new fighters and the desire to spread Jihad to other countries challenged recruitment strategy of terrorist organizations. They started to use the advantage of internet and social networks to spread their propaganda beyond borders to Europe and on the American continent. In order to attract foreign fighters at home they adapted the language of their websites and online magazines.

The relatively easy availability of online magazines can together with modern design effectively promote a terrorist organization. Because the number of recruits is limited, terrorist organizations adopted their marketing strategies and tools in order to compete for attention of potential Islamists in cyberspace. The first professional online magazine¹ seems to be Sawt al-Jihad Magazine issued from October 2003 to February 2007 with a two-year hiatus during 2005-2007 (Bockstette, 2008). This magazine has been a propaganda tool published by Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula during the attacks on foreigners in Saudi Arabia during 2003-2005. Another, Dhurwat al-Sanam, focused on recruitment activities in Iraq. Both magazines were until 2009 oriented on Arabic speaking potential recruits coming especially from Arabian Peninsula and North Africa. The strategy to attract European fighters were absent.

¹ Authors decided not to publish full reference to individual issues in order to make accessibility and possible misuse of the content more difficult.

The strategic concept has been changed by the use of English. Instead of internal propaganda from within Arabic countries, magazines started to play a more important role in the recruitment of European militants who started to join terrorist groups on the Arabian Peninsula. English written Jihad online magazines have been issued since 2009 and are published until now. Their characteristic features are similar with Western lifestyle magazines where the emphasis is added on high quality pictures with strong emotional context. In Jihadist magazines this modern emotional context is made of radical interpretation of Islam which is characteristic for several journals (see chart 1 for their timeline). From April to September 2009 were issued 4 issues of al-Fursan Media Group “Jihad Recollections”. Together with Al Mosul Islamic Network’s magazine “Defenders of the Truth” (5 issues) they were orientated on the destruction of the Western decadent world and the enemies were clearly named; so along with Atheists, Christians and Jews, also the governments and leaders of pro-Western orientated Muslim countries. Among all journals, Jihad Recollections were the most progressive and had a higher graphic standard.

Chart 1: Timeline of English language Jihadist magazines issues



Source: Authors, own research.

The publication of Inspire Magazine by Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in June 2010 marked the unprecedented status of the group in the Western world. The majority of terrorist attacks were attributed to Al Qaeda and the organization became famous for sharing their ideas how to develop home made weapons and explosives. Moreover, Inspire Magazine presented Al Qaeda as homogenous organization and virtually united branches and franchises of Al Qaeda. The content of the magazines was made by modern presentation of Jihadist traditions from Sawt al-Jihad connected with individual attacks by sympathizers, step by step guides how to create weapons and organization strategy presented in the newsletter Maaskar al-Battar. After the emergence and successful operations of the Islamic State of Iraq and as-Sham the internal struggle between the two terror organizations accelerated and both enhanced focus on recruitment activities and promoting successes of international terrorism. The media branch of the Islamic state, Al-Hayat, published in July 2014 the first issue of Dabiq magazine in order to promote its own activities.

Except for written issues of Dabiq written in English, Al-Hayat Media prepared also a French-language magazine Dar al-Islam and Konstantiniyye, a magazine written in Turkish. Individual issues of Dabiq were also translated into Russian or Arabic. The publication of Rumiyyah, another magazine by al-Hayat Media Center since September 2016 is similar to Inspire. Both magazines target mainly young radical Muslims in Western Europe and North America. The main aim is to attract Mujahideen to the Caliphate, but not to make them lone wolves operating in the West. The overview of individual magazines is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: English written terrorist organization magazines²

<i>Media center</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Organization</i>	<i>Quantity</i>
Al Hayat	Dabiq	magazine	ISIS	15
Al Hayat	Rumiyyah	magazine	ISIS	2
Al Malahem	Inspire	magazine	AQAP	15
As Sahab	Resurgence	magazine	AQ (IS)	2
Al Risalah	Al-Risalah	magazine	Syrian fighters	3

Source: Clarion Project, 2016; Jihadology, 2016.

It is also necessary to note the attempts to issue professional magazines for the Indian Subcontinent by Al-Qaeda and specialized issues of the recruitment magazine al-Risalah. Regarding its content, it is in concurrence with the Islamic State targeting the opposition forces, Syrian rebel fighters, to the Assad regime.

In this article, the focus is on trends of the most important English language Jihadi magazines – Inspire and Dabiq. Despite the Islamic State's Al-Hayat Media Centre publication since September 2016 of a new online magazine Rumiyyah, the continuation of Dabiq is not clear now due to the absence of official Al Qaeda statements and progress in the fight against terrorism. However, it can be argued that an absence of a new issue is not related to the liberation of Dabiq (town) by the Syrian opposition forces. It is expected that Rumiyyah is an alternative type of magazine after the death of Abu Muhammad al-Adnani in Aleppo (Rumiyyah, issue 1), which is aimed at enhancing radicalization and which accelerates rhetoric against kuffar (unbelievers). We focus on the comparison of contents and trends in continuous magazines with more than 10 issues. A partially disputable variable can be observed in the publishing periodicity of magazines. Inspire is issued for more than seven years, whereas Dabiq has been published for only three years. A relevant comparative analysis has been presented by Charles Vallee (2015) from International Institute for Counter Terrorism.

² Current status, October 2016. We excluded Taliban magazine Azan due its different geographical location outside the Al-Qaeda organization or Arabian Peninsula and Levant region.

In this study, our contribution as authors is that we paid attention to structural changes in the individual issues of magazines, which we divided into eight categories: politics, religion, motivation, practical, glorification, self-promotion, visual and others. It is important to note that these categories are overlapping and sometimes it is not possible to precisely mark an article as political or religious as the article may fall within several categories. However, some articles focus more on contemporary politics, other are focusing more on religious argumentation and some focus on motivation. Despite some religious references to the Quran and the life of the Prophet Mohammad in almost every article, it is possible to distinguish the main dominant purpose of the articles. When it was not clear whether the article belonged to one category or a different category, the hidden message and purpose of the article has been used for determination of the category. Moreover, overlapping categories has been put in chart 2 and 3 one next to each other so it is possible to see the cumulated share of the most related categories.

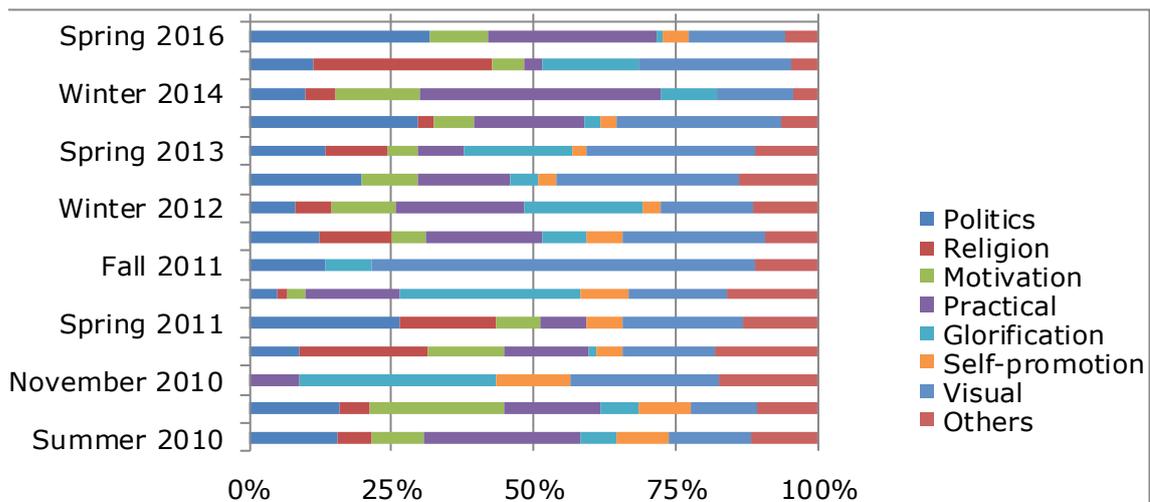
The problematic categories like visual and others which we won't compare in the comparative analysis, we still describe the approach. The visual part is a very important element in Jihadi magazines in English and pictures accompany almost all articles in both researched magazines. Sometimes pictures are designed as posters to enhance motivation. A special issue of Inspire in Fall 2011 was dedicated to a visual part of the Jihadi campaign. Pictures are serving as regular propaganda showing positive side of Jihad and negative side of enemies. All of them are aimed to produce and fuel emotions. However, some pictures are accompanied by poems, especially the glorification of martyred Jihadists. Jihadist poetry develops spiritual and cultural dimension of the visual propaganda. There are other parts which are necessary to all journals including content, editorial, front page, back page, feedback or news review. When possible, cover pages are made of emotional pictures, with news selected to support the cause of the magazine.

Inspire Magazine

Inspire is an Al-Qaeda online journal in the Arabian Peninsula which was released for the first time in summer 2010. Since then until summer 2016 it has had 15 issues, including three special issues (November 2010, fall 2011 and spring 2013). Due to it being an English language journal it is easily accessible to English speaking Western radicals and potential recruits and allows for the spread of Al-Qaeda propaganda. This article shows that the journal is going far beyond political propaganda as it is used to spread also practical combat experience, military strategy and provides motivation to young radicals, guiding them towards terror. Without any doubt Inspire magazine is a mirror of contemporary Jihad and presents an important probe into new trends of Islamist terrorism including urban guerrilla warfare. For this reason the magazine is worthy of content analysis and deriving counter measures which may help to deal with future terrorist attacks.

There are several prominent contributors in the Inspire magazine whose serials may be read in almost every issue. It includes Abu Musab al-Awlaki who wrote several promotional articles under series “Why did I choose al Qaeda?”, Abu Musab Al-Suri, Abu Yahya al-Libi aimed at religious motivation. Additionally, Anwar al-Awlaki, Samir Khan or Yahia Ibrahim. There is also Umm Yahya's contribution offering a female propaganda point of view on Jihadi activities.

Chart 2: Perceptual share of thematic parts (Inspire Magazine)



Source: Authors, own research.

Political views

Almost all issues of Inspire magazine deal with political topics and commentary on the contemporary development in the world. There are several topics which are favorites in the journals. A central topic of all issues is the United States of America (sometimes referred to as United Snakes of America). Political articles focus on US immorality, corruption and all the evil done to Muslims. Several articles discuss President Barack Obama, who is the main enemy. Articles commenting on US evil done to Muslims are sometimes accompanied by statements addressed to the American public or political declarations. Next to the United States, there are other enemies mentioned, especially the United Kingdom, France and Israel. Moreover, some negative articles are dedicated to rulers in Egypt, Libya and Yemen who are presented as hypocrites and corrupted opportunists. Additionally, a favorite and very exploited topic in Islamist propaganda is the suffering and atrocities in Palestine or Guantanamo Bay.

Religious views

Religion articles in Inspire usually focus on religious justification of the fight against enemies which are presented as aggressors and oppressors. Jihad is presented as the supreme activity and individual duty of every Muslim. Many articles call for the defeat of aggressors, the spread of Islam and establishment of the Caliphate and life under Sharia law. Religious articles and comments are usually tightly related to religious motivation.

Especially the issue of martyrdom and reward in the afterlife is strongly stressed and encouraged. Moreover, almost all religious articles highlight the unique status of Mujahideen, giving new spiritual sense to the life which shall be dedicated to Jihad crowned by martyrdom.

Motivation

Next to the encouragement by religious means there are many other articles in Inspire that helps to motivate and support potential radicals in joining the group or more often to lone wolf Jihadism. There is a series of articles aimed at expectations in Jihad where positive experiences of Jihadists are presented. These types of articles helps to build imagination of great adventure in the company of like-minded brothers. Such articles usually supplements religious means by natural human desire of belongingness, excitement, happiness and helps to support the illusion of exclusive status of the individual among other people.

Practical

Practical articles are the most dangerous in terms of security and they are not scarce in Inspire. There are simple “do it yourself” step by step guides how to create tools for terrorism from freely available and cheap items. The magazine teaches how to create various bombs (remote control, magnetic car bombs, fire bombs, timed bombs, hand grenades, truck bombs, door bombs etc.), how to exercise and attack with knife, hand guns and assault rifles or how to conduct attacks including arson, assassinations, bombings, car mobbing, building destruction etc. Moreover, practical advices are given to overcome airport controls or avoid communication infiltration by using Ansar al-Mujahideen 2.0 software. Several articles are dedicated to target selection and avoiding suspicion. Next to the practical skills also strategic approaches are presented, most of them aimed at lone wolf terrorism. While previous types of articles give reasons, and motivations for attacks, practical articles of “Open Source Jihad” empowers terrorists for conducting operations in the western cities.

Glorification

Some articles in Inspire magazine are dedicated to the glorification of martyrs who died or are imprisoned. In the magazine, there are profiles of successful terrorists presented with all the background stories and their achievements in Jihad. Promotion of good examples (including both people and attacks) which are worth to follow again encourages readers to join them. Glorification ads contain important psychological aspects as it is visible that martyrdom is honored by others. To support this effect glorification articles are accompanied by pictures of “heroes”, always smiling or pictures of martyred Mujahideen who are already happy in Heaven.

Self-promotion

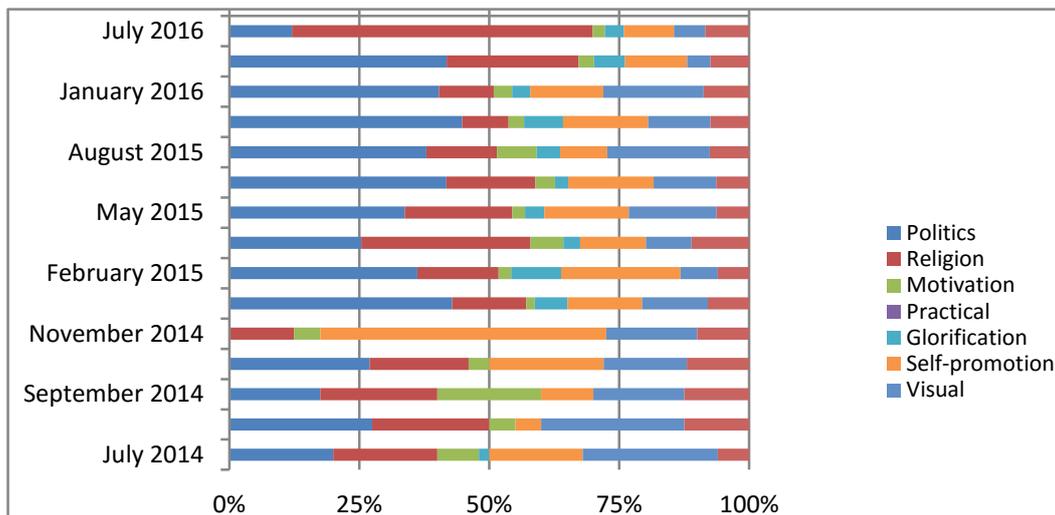
There is also a few of articles in Inspire which in a hidden way promotes Al-Qaeda as the organization or

its leaders with special focus on Usama Bin Laden or Ayman Al-Zawahiri. Abu Musab Al-Awlaki wrote a series of articles called “Why did I choose Al Qaeda?” where the rational and religious reasons were presented and Al-Qaeda itself was introduced in various aspects including political priorities.

Dabiq Magazine

Dabiq online magazine was released for the first time in July 2014, just one month after the fall of Mosul. It was published by al-Hayat Media Center and it has released 15 issues since. The name of the magazine has a symbolic meaning and was used from the quote of Abu Musab az-Zarqawi, first emir of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, that the final (and successful) battle against crusader armies will take place in Syrian city of Dabiq. Before Dabiq magazine there were four pilot issues of the Islamic State Report (short issues from June to July 2014). After the fall of Mosul, Dabiq became the main source of ideological propaganda, and self-promotion of the self-founded Islamic State. Therefore, the magazine was not oriented on lone wolves or practical issues, but tried to give reasons for the existence of the Caliphate and tried to support the emigration and recruitment of new fighters to the Islamic State (Gambhir, 2014). The articles in Dabiq often presented ISIS as political organization with its own network of institutions. The ideology was justified by religious argumentation and the magazine presented the concept ISIS authority over other Muslim organizations. A religious justification of the Islamic State emergence also played an important role especially in the first issues of the magazine.

Chart 3: Perceptual share of thematic parts (Dabiq Magazine)



Source: Authors, own research.

There are several prominent contributors in Dabiq. Except for the ideas of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the majority of articles in the first issues of the magazine developed the ideas of Zarqawi. Some articles presented ideas of Islamic State spokesperson Abu Muhammad al-Adnani.

Very controversial and offensive series of articles dedicated to woman's role in society and during Jihad "To Our Sisters" (lately renamed as For Women) was written by Umm Summayah al-Muhajirah. There were also regular contributions from the jailed photographer John Cantlie. Except those contributors, a number of articles have been written by Abul Harith ath-Thagri and in the first few issues also Abdullah ibn Amr.

Political views

In the first issues, ISIS praised the establishment of the self-declared Khilafa, when they followed the footsteps of Zarqawi and justified the path to the founding of the Caliphate. All the enemies of the caliphate were named as apostates, including Sunni leaders cooperating with the West. Among the first mentioned enemies in Dabiq are the Kurdish militant PKK/Peshmerga who are labelled as secularized communists. Next were enemies presented as all the militant organizations, functioning against the Assad regime in Syria. They were labelled as deceitful parties. ISIS tried to invalidate the Jawlani Front's declaration about the extremist position of ISIS. Although the article was mixed-up with scholars Quran interpretations, the main reason was the degradation of the other groups fighting in Syrian territory rather than ISIS. In the case of the execution of James Foley, Dabiq promoted hate towards the US, as the main enemy of all Muslims in the World.

The expansive politics towards the West is a core topic. War against the crusader armies, even civilians, but first and foremost Muslim Kurds as the toughest of fighters. Crusaders are depicted as part of a weak Western civilization, who is serving Russia and Iran. These countries are accomplices of brutal regimes against the Sunni Muslims who were presented as enemies as well. The Islamic State also presented its radical position towards the functioning of religiously divided Yemen and criticized Shia Muslims in Waziristan. There may be observed a deeper radicalization of the magazine after Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris when several articles criticized apostasy and hypocrisy among Muslims in Europe. That Issue begins with the report of the burning of a Jordanian pilot and continued with threats addressed to all Muslim leaders who are not on the side of ISIS. Other threats were addressed to Christian minorities in Egypt. Several new enemies were mentioned including Syrian organizations under the Syrian Revolutionary Command Council and other allied groups of Al Qaeda in Sham (in five continuing issues). Dabiq also criticized implementing government with some elements of Islam and democracy in the Constitutions of Egypt, Libya and Tunisia. Everyone who is against the Islamic State, is fighting against the law of Allah and the fight against is then apostasy from the only true faith. Dabiq has regularly warned Muslims going into Europe because according to promoted ideology supported by radical scholars they will be considered as apostates. There is also a danger for Muslims they will be cooperating with kafir against other Muslims which is considered a sin. The Islamic State repeatedly criticized and openly attacked almost all countries fighting against the true Islam including states with a Shia majority and

Turkey, while celebrating attacks conducted by Jihadi fighters (eg. in Bengal). With the weakening position of the Islamic State in Syria the number of propagandist attacks increased. Attacks were targeted against other Jihadi Muslim organizations, especially Al Qaeda and Syrian organizations. There was also an increase in comments dedicated to political events with an international impact. In the 13th issue Dabiq clearly demonstrates apostasy of Saudi regime and the rafidah - Shia Muslims, latter continued with the criticism of Muslim Brotherhood.

Religious views

The religious argumentation of different concepts of Muslim tradition were reinterpreted in Dabiq in line with the official position of ISIS leadership considered as the only true interpretation of Quran. Justification of imamah (leadership) led into unquestionable imamah of Islamic State over territory and everyone who rebels against it, is considered a renegade. Religious justification emphasizes principles of "free choice" eradication and confronts pacifists with the fact they have turned away from the religion and that is necessary to continue to fight the people of deviation until the religion will be triumphant. The liberation of individuality, the liberation from modern society and wrong friends, every day problems is only through Jihad which offers the true way of life which begins by hijrah (emigration). The Prophet will guide those who will fight against kafirun (disbelievers) and crusaders and the prophecy will be filled. Religious advice to ISIS soldiers justifies conduct according to Quran and ensured submission to the militant leaders and their wantonness.

Among analyzed and interpreted parts belonged also differences ribat in jihad and the entrance of shirk in the mind of many scholars and interpreters of Quran. One of the most controversial religious views was praising the justification of slavery revival and creation of slave hierarchy. In May 2015, an article was published justifying the taking of women captured in war as sex slaves (saby practice), so that the sexual misuse of Yazidi women is not interpreted against the words of Quran. The practice of saby according to a Dabiq article (and ISIS) is both a divine punishment and a natural part of Jihad. Women were part of attacks so they can serve as sexual slaves and wives of Jihadi warriors. Despite the fact that they are not allowed to fight in Jihad they are involved by knowledge and raising 'lion cubs'. Polygamy is presented as a standard and natural part of Islam. In the final issue, the religious view was dedicated to the attack on Christianity and its continuity in Islam and what Prophet revealed to the People of the Scripture. The issue presented positive and mainly peaceful site of Islam.

Motivation

Motivation to come and join ISIS was determined with the division of the world into two camps. Therefore, ISIS tries to rush Muslims to the newly created state for all Muslims, spreading the vision of hijrah as obligatory. ISIS calls especially for scholars, judges, military, but also tried to motivate the

administrative workers, medical doctors and specialized engineers. A special article was dedicated to strengthening the motivation to leave countries of origin and to inhabitate Sham (Syria) by the Muslims from all the world tribes. Motivational articles about the way to Syria were in contrast with motivational articles in the magazine Inspire which called for Jihad in the West.

Practical

In any single issue of Dabiq there is not presented practical information dedicated to lone wolf terrorism in the Western countries (contrary to Inspire which considerably promotes do it yourself manuals).

Glorification

With the small exception in the first issue, glorification enters Dabiq in the sixth issue where Abu Musab az-Zarqawi and Mulla Ummar wrote on the subject. The article highlights their campaign in Afghanistan. In the seventh issue a lengthy obituary on Abu Quamah al-Misri appeared and a special report of Amedy Coulibaly's actions in Montrogue shooting in January 2015, with latter martyrdom of many soldiers of terror (Tunisia against tourist, Iraq against rafidah-Shi'a Muslims, attack on Christians in Baghdad) or Mulla Khadim. Latter issues periodically glorified martyrs.

Self-promotion

A khilafah declaration was also used as a special promotion of new era and dignity for all the Muslims. The new era begins with the establishment of the new state which will be fought 'under the sun' of Jihad. There were regular news in Dabiq about the restoration of destroyed cities, happiness of citizens, new fair society or introduction of new currency. In the fifth issue of Dabiq was presented lengthy article about remaining and expanding ISIS into the other parts of the Muslim world and the promotion of all the local groups which undertook an oath of allegiance to the Caliphate and its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. It continued with the oath of Qawqazi, Khurasani and parts of an-Nusra warriors (in a latter issue also mujahideen from West Africa) and continuing terrorist actions in North Africa. Actions of purification were presented on sodomite cases with stoning and throwing off a building. One of the most bizarre self-promotions was destroying the statues and world heritage site in Ninawah.

Very detailed information (propaganda) on status of health care in ISIS was found in the ninth issue. In all issues we can identify columns written upon the succes of ISIS. Special category of the self-promotion in Dabiq was observed in "The Islamic State in the word of the enemy", which de facto satirized the West and strengthened the ISIS position in the statements of Western politicians and soldiers, alongside the letters of executed Western journalists and aid workers to their families, with continuing propaganda articles by war photographer John Cantlie, kidnapped by ISIS in 2012 on the actual situation in ISIS. Cantli's articles were since the sixth issue discussed as political views on the current international situation. Self-promotion in Dabiq also was boldly realized in its visual section, which was especially devoted to the progress of ISIS fighters, with photographs and very brief quotes.

Conclusion

This article deals with current trends in jihadist online magazines with special focus on Islamic State's Dabiq and Al Qaeda's Inspire. The phenomenon of online Jihadi literature shall not be underestimated. Both journals have the appearance of Western style magazines and excellent visual qualities which makes them an attractive source of propaganda. Propaganda itself is dangerous and may lead to recruitment and support of Jihadist terrorism. However, both journals are going beyond traditional propaganda as they focus also on encouragement and psychological support of potential warriors and lone wolf terrorists.

Moreover, especially Inspire focuses on practical help and advice for Jihadists to build step by step "do it yourself" explosives and weapons suitable for terrorist attacks. Both inspire and to lesser degree also Dabiq is a dangerous mixture for the transformation of people to killers and as a such can be considered a non-lethal weapon with lethal content when turned into reality. This is especially true with practical advice being published that is dangerous since Jihad may move from war torn countries to Europe or the USA.

Despite some ideological and religious "common ground" it can be observed other differences in the field of ideology with roots in antipathy between ISIS and Al Qaeda and their competition for new recruits. Recruitment and motivation are key issues in both journals and both journals showed a high degree of flexibility to react on contemporary political development. The continuing appearance of new issues is sign of well organized media strategy. However, it is a question whether Western media will sustain the advances in the fight against terrorism. For the truth remains that when Dabiq or Inspire will disappear they will be replaced by similar journals, but with different titles. Thus fighting Jihad online via such magazines is a fight for a long time.

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