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# From the Islamic State to the 'Islamic State of Mind': The evolution of the 'jihadisphere' and the rise of the Lone Jihad

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## **Abstract**

*Recent terrorist attacks in Orlando (USA) or Magnanville (France) highlight the globalised power of Jihadi rhetoric and narrative across the Web, reshaping reality and promoting the 'Lone Jihad'. Since 2012, from Mohammed Merah to Omar Mateen, 'Lone Wolf Terrorism' is characterised by the capacity to attack soft targets considered as the main threat for the urban scenario. Law enforcement professionals have to explore the dynamics of the 'Jihadisphere' by considering it not just as a repository but the core of the 'culture of terrorism' globally spread. The author explains the main phases of internet Jihadism evolution focusing on the self-radicalisation process, the rise of lone wolf terrorism (LWT) and the Lone Jihad as a new scenario moving from the Islamic State ideology and propaganda to the 'Islamic State of Mind' (cyber-)experience.*

## **Keywords:**

*Terrorism, jihad, jihadisphere, radicalisation, mediamorphosis*

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## **Preamble**

The author wants to clarify that all the spiritual concepts typical of the Islamic religion — such as, for example, references to jihad — do not regard their original meaning. On the contrary, they regard the violent-based ideological distortion typical of the violent extremism and terrorism that has self-defined jihadist, as reported in Open Source Jihad (OSJ), a section of the digital magazine Inspire, published by al\_Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula

(AQAP) — strictly connected to Ansar al\_Shari\_a, the Yemen-based branch of al\_Qaeda — as of June 2010, and its 16th issue.

The author wants to underline the evolution of the jihadism across the Web and the rise of the Lone Jihad thanks to open source (cyber-)ecosystem. Therefore, the contents of this article are not related to any Deep Web and Dark Web. In this article, as well as in several scripts, the author expresses the concept of 'cyber' by using the term '(cyber-)' — in brackets — to highlight the already blurred boundary between 'real' and 'cyber' (as not real) dimension of life. Therefore, shortly, it won't be opportune to identify the cyber dimension as 'other' in comparison with the uniqueness of the human experience, especially within social dynamics. According to the author, this is totally redefining the concept of criminality, imposing a new semantic, as well as new methodological and technical interpretation in the monitoring, analysis, prevention and counter-action activities. Hence, law enforcement professionals need a comprehensive and holistic approach to operate in a systemic and multi-dimensional way in order to develop education, innovation and motivation at the same time, as essential drivers to deal with the evolution of criminal complex phenomena (Antinori, 2014a).

### **'Mediamorphosis' of Terrorism**

Today, Member States have to consider the so-called 'jihadism' as one of the main threats not just from a national and/or European Union perspective, but more specifically for an interconnected EU–MENA region in terms of geo-strategic vision in jihadism. This is a result of the involvement of trans-national and trans-continental hostile entities and dynamics in contemporary terrorism, as well as the process of 'media-weaponisation' (Antinori, 2014b: 169) and 'glocalisation' of terror across digital media after the globalisation.

European law enforcement has to enhance the prevention, anticipation and counter-actions of the activities conducted by jihadist terrorists all over EU territory, as well as their massive media campaign promoted through the internet and social media platforms.

Thus, a concerted and efficient intervention strategy, in terms of prevention and counter-ing, can be implemented only developing a deep insight of the phenomenon — considering its traditional roots as its completely new codes, (cyber-)social dynamics and technological assets — which is becoming the first globalised criminal phenomenon in human history. Therefore, it is opportune to identify relevant elements in order to understand what jihadist threat represents today in its own whole complexity. Furthermore, it is very important to highlight how this threat is changing in the last 2 years — which saw the rise of the self-proclaimed Islamic State — and how the jihadism will evolve in the near future when visual culture, digital nomadism, communication and information will perform an essential role in people's daily life.

The end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century represent a crucial segment of time for jihadism, thanks to the concept that the author calls 'mediamorphosis' (Antinori, 2015a: 4). It is a rapid process of transformation in which the medium is not only a container of messages aimed to generate terror, such as in traditional propaganda strategies, but it also becomes 'media-terror' itself, an asymmetric weapon of the globalised contemporary reality throughout the violent action/representation nexus.

Hence, communication technology has a relevant impact especially through the development of digital and social media, in the dynamic of (cyber-)social transformation of terrorism, as well as its (cyber-)social environment, actors, resources, strategies and modi operandi.

The 'mediamorphosis' is strongly linked to the transition from the 'analogue' world — organised into a hierarchy and institutional centres of information and knowledge production which used a one-to-many communication model — to the digital. The latter is a reticular and globalised world exclusively based on a many-to-many communication model — founded on the 'cross-mediality' and populated by user-generated and remediated (Bolter and Gruisin, 2000) contents and spread out through the Web, able to violently invade our daily life. For these reasons, law enforcement professionals should develop new cross-disciplinary skills, particularly in the interrelated social sciences, communication/media studies and computational sciences. Such cross-disciplinary skills have to focus on the integrated system of information and data necessary to understand the terrorist threat and its unceasing evolutionary change.

## Internet Jihadism and Jihadisphere

In order to understand the essence of jihadist mediamorphosis and, thus, the threat change currently in place we have to go back 11 years ago.

On 9 July 2005, the Egyptian Ayman al\_Zawahiri, al\_Qaeda strategic leader, sent a letter to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, Jordan qaedist leader of al\_Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), in which he described the battle of terrorist entities by saying 'more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media, [...] in a race for the hearts and minds of our Umma' (US DNI, 2005).

In 2005, the international community considered this statement as a traditional cyber-terrorist threat specifically related to the critical infrastructures protection or even as a cybergeddon future scenario.

Unfortunately, the purely 'revolutionary' aspect expressed by such assertions was underestimated, as well as the deep impact that the 'battle' should have produced in terms of social change and threat in the following decade.

The 'media battle', the 'race for the hearts and minds' can be considered as the delineation of a conflicting scenario completely new which occurs, *in primis*, through the (cyber-) social environment as a result of the development of the internet Jihadism phenomenon (Antinori, 2017a).

Thus, it is impossible approaching jihadism by trying to isolate it from its media nature which represents its essence and allows us to consider it a global criminal phenomenon. Just consider that the Islamic State, since its self-proclamation, has been developing the first globalised collective imaginary of the Digital Age. Some roots of such imaginary are connected to Western visual and media culture, completely opposite to Islam aniconism.

With respect to jihadism, it is opportune to specify that we are not in front of a static and monolithic phenomenon but it is extremely dynamic and its development occurs according to a complex evolution path whose phases are briefly described as following:

**Table 1**  
Internet Jihadism

INTERNET JIHADISM					
PHASE	TIMELINE	COM MODEL	WEB	TARGET ACTOR	MAIN DEVICE
TERROR ARENA	1998-2004	Post-analog	1.0	Groups (AQ, Hamas, Hizbollah)	Desktop
DIGIHAD	2004-2014	Post-analog, early digital	1.5	Groups (AQ) and virtual communities	Laptop
CYBER-JIHAD	2014-2016	Digital, cyber-social	2.0	Groups (IS, AQ) hacking groups and individuals	Tablet/mobile
LONE JIHAD	2016-	Cyber-social	2.5	Individuals and groups (IS, AQ)	Smartphone

The ongoing evolutionary change of internet Jihadism is strongly connected to the 'mobile convergence', that is the convergence of several media and tools as television, camera, navigator, book, newspaper, telephone, radio, planner, game, music, mail, chat, intimate communication, pray, wallet, etc., in one portable and soon wearable device.

In particular, the author points out Digihad as crucial phase, not only for its 10-year time frame, but for the massive exploitation of the internet carried out by al\_Qaeda through the dissemination of violent videos of propaganda, tactical manuals and doctrine texts. Since 2010, thanks to the issue of Inspire (the first jihadist serialised English-language online pdf magazine published by AQAP), the Open Source Jihad (OSJ) violent concept began to 'pol-

linate' the Web, forums, blogs and sharing platforms, promoting do-it-yourself attacks and inspiring young generations of self-proclaimed 'jihadi warriors' as we have been experiencing since 2013 in Western countries.

al-Qaeda uploaded a great part of the online material to celebrate its iconic and charismatic leader Osama Bin Laden according to its strategy. The totality of online-shared media gave life to the Jihadisphere (Antinori, 2015b), the terrorist infosphere (Floridi, 2015). At the beginning, it was considered merely an online repository. Then, thanks to (cyber-)social evolution, it has been expanding its interactive power, becoming the 'living' core of the 'culture of terrorism'. The Jihadisphere represents the socio-relational (cyber-)environment promoting the appealing, persuasive and seductive power of the 'jihadidentity' — jihadist identity (Antinori, 2016) — as demonstrated by the Western foreign terrorist fighters who left their own countries to join the ranks of the Islamic State. The Jihadisphere has a strong impact on youngsters potentially representing 'Generation-T' (Antinori, 2015c: 32), the next generation of lone wolf terrorists 'cultivated' through ad hoc specific rhetoric and narratives to incite them to attack.

As a result of that, the author suggests to adopt a comprehensive, multi-dimensional and holistic approach to analyse the Jihadisphere, as (cyber-)social ecosystem. It is necessary to deeply understand jihadism complexity, assets, actors, violent radicalisation models and its particular ability to create (cyber-)experience.

## **Radicalisation and Self-Redicalisation**

In order to understand how the (cyber-)environment can be useful to trigger the jihadist self-radicalisation process and the relevance of this threat for the future generations, it is important to point out some differences. The traditional, face-to-face, radicalisation is based on a simple Manichean dichotomy between 'pures and unpures', and is appealing for barely educated people that live in a context typified by a lack of tools and resources.

The 'traditional' radicalisation, as well as the self-radicalisation process, represents a fundamental challenge for law enforcement professionals.

The main differences between the two processes are shown below:

- 1) (Traditional) Radicalisation — it is based on an 'analog' environment and human relations. The process is characterised by local issues, blood-ties, face-to-face dynamics and direct participation. The individual is looking for religiousness to mitigate his distress, and becomes vulnerable to jihadist recruiters that misuse Islam for terrorist purposes. In a restricted socialisation environment, such as prison, the brotherhood, solidarity and in-group dynamics can activate the emotional drivers pushing the individual to the

jihadisation. The need of religious participation and ritual prayer led by 'hate imams', using hate speech to legitimate the violence against others, facilitate individual radicalisation. The jihadist proselytism and propaganda are restricted to a small group of participants, as affiliates, thus secrecy is an asymmetric asset for jihadism.

The option mentioned above makes law enforcement professionals use 'traditional' tools and methodologies to deal with behaviour profiles, standard criminal organisation models, communication dynamics and events timeline.

- 2) (Cyber-) Self-radicalisation — it occurs across the cyber-ecosystem and is mainly typified by global issues. The superficial religious knowledge based on simple stereotypes and few religious concepts characterise many violent products shared across the jihadisphere. The (cyber-)connections between supporters, followers, proto-jihadists and jihadists produce new (cyber-)slangs, concepts, thanks to the use of mobile devices, instant messaging apps, online game chats, etc. There is no geographic distance between people, the jihadisphere is the (cyber-)social environment as a completely new place in which the individual has his own experience. Space and time limits fall in a never-ending (cyber-)hub of hate and violence where i-nculturation and self-training are open and available for everyone whether they are active participants or not. The jihadisphere is created to provide open sources, activities and experiences across internet and social media platforms. The visibility and representation are an asymmetric asset for jihadism.

Law enforcement professionals have to develop new tools and trans-disciplinary skills to deal with complexity, 'technolution' — technology-based criminal phenomenon evolution — multiactoriality, new (cyber-)social sub-culture and code, pathways profiles, instead of behavioural ones.

From its inception, the Islamic State has been able to exploit the emergence of the mobile culture in order to foster the self-radicalisation, encouraged by the development of specific technological resources to guarantee the security of information. Considering the relevance of the semantic as media battle asset, the author calls that process 'jihadisation' (self-radicalisation to jihadism) to underline the clear difference between religion and terrorism.

The jihadisation basically considers four different modalities, as follows:

1. 'imam of hate' preaching;
2. 'brotherhood' and recruitment in prison;
3. (cyber-)sociality across social media platforms;

4. 'mobile radicalisation' as self-isolation.

The acceptance of the jihadentity, that is jihadist identity model proposed across internet and social media platforms by the Islamic State, is based on six principal factors of context, shown below:

- A. Violent cultivation — the promotion of a formal and informal violence-based system of justice;
- B. Personal vulnerabilities — the capability to target specific audiences all over the world to inspire vulnerable people to attack;
- C. 'Culture of terrorism' — the sub-culture globally widespread to reinforce in-group dynamic;
- D. Mobile generation issues — the role of mobile culture for the digital natives and mobile born generations that perceive space and time in a completely new way;
- E. Cyber-narcissism and compulsive selfism — the need of self-representing through the Web, sharing of oneself image and actions, using emphatic model and linguistic code based on a 'mythical' past by using concepts as knight, princess, realm, etc.

The jihadist self-radicalisation is exclusively connected to the internet, social media platforms and mobile apps. It is characterised by the providing of a complex (cyber-)experience across the Jihadisphere, especially for Western young audiences satisfying their fruition needs.

This process is articulated in an eight cross-levels system, as follows:

- 1. Literacy and education — books, magazines and app which, since his early childhood, provide the person with a view of life based on the recognition of the Adversary and the need/legitimacy to eliminate it;
- 2. Economy — misrepresentative exploitation of the zakat as a religious pillar based on the coining of Dinar as identification coin of the Caliphate;
- 3. Creativity — encouraging the realisation of user-generated contents, such as wallpapers, stickers, photos, magazines, books, videos, comics, nasheed, app, videogames and game mods. In this way, young individuals reinforce the collective identity, jihadist 'image' and the gamification dynamics used to activate hetero-direct violence.

4. Globalisation — building and reinforcing of the collective consciousness and jihadist critical mass, able to involve more individuals in the active participation and/or promotion of the online spread of jihadism at a global level. From here the main role of the followers is guaranteeing the cross-media 'bouncing' of the jihadist media campaign and promoting violent self-determination at a local level according to always more asymmetric modalities.
5. Sadistic behaviour — posting, reading and watching violent contents through hyper violent tubes, social media, reinforced from the 'post-branding' following the attacks;
6. Technical training — manuals, handbooks, magazines and training videos;
7. Multi-actoriality — rhetoric and narratives which glorify and put several jihad interpreters in connection, such as 'classic' mujahidin, foreign terrorist fighters, self-started actors, home-grown, lone wolf terrorists, followers, United Cyber Caliphate, sleeping cells;
8. Money income — criminal trafficking, THB, narcotics, money-laundering.

Therefore, the seductive power of the jihadist 'offer' in terms of complex (cyber-)experience is able to turn the self-radicalised individual into a lone wolf terrorist.

## Conclusions

During the last year, the Islamic State has been launching its massive online media campaign to celebrate the lone wolf terrorist and promote the 'Lone Jihad' — focusing on the asymmetric power of the tactical-violent actions — improving its ability to create fear. Young individuals are particularly encouraged to attack against the Adversary, mainly soft targets, in several ways — shooting, stabbing, bombing and suicide-bombing, mowing down, stoning, intoxicating, hitting and screaming — getting inspiration from the Jihadisphere.

The lone wolf terrorist represents one of the most relevant threat of the contemporary scenario, though he is not a lone actor *stricto sensu* due to his (cyber-)life. In fact, the recent lone wolf attacks reveal the terrorists need to (cyber-)socialise and online share their actions.

The increasing power of the Jihadisphere and the spread of the Lone Jihad attacks imply that law enforcement professionals' analysis move from a traditional 'static' approach — based on the repository categorisation of the jihadist products — to a holistic approach based on multi-dimensional and proactive analysis of the interactions between the 'live' interactions across the Jihadisphere. The new perspective makes possible to understand the evolution of Lone Jihad and self-radicalisation phenomenon and its impacts on the new



generations with the aim to prevent and anticipate the 'Islamic State of Mind', as the most dangerous threat for the near future, in a 'swarm wolf' scenario (Antinori, 2017b).

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