

STARBUCKS, PIZZA & JIHAD: HOW 21ST CENTURY TERRORISM IS CAPITALISING ON WESTERN POP CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

In 2014, the world witnessed the rise of the Islamic State, a group who appeared to simultaneously wage war against the West and Middle East. This article has analysed ISIS attacks against the West, in order to demonstrate that most attacks are committed by inspired individuals rather than ISIS's members. This article will then add to the ever growing literature on ISIS's English language propaganda, by showing this propaganda is specifically targeting Western audiences through mimicking Western pop culture. An example of this is a remake of the popular videogame *Call of Duty*, set in Syria named *Call of Jihad*. The paper argues that, by using Western imagery, the group has made terrorism more relatable to Western citizens and has increased the number of attacks by inspired lone wolves. To demonstrate this, the paper uses data extrapolated from the Global Terrorism Database relating to Islamic terrorist attacks on the West between 1998 and 2017, to show that after 2014 there has been fewer Islamic terrorist attacks linked to a terrorist group. The paper will then analyse ISIS's films, posters, video games and music to understand how they have used Western references to target a Western audience.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, the most prominent and, at times, versatile, security threat the world has faced has been Islamic extremism. At the start of the new millennium, it was Al Qaeda who led the radical jihadist front, declaring war against America and its allies. In 2014 it this role was held by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS or IS), who vowed to build an Islamic State and kill all non-believers. Alongside these groups, there are hundreds of other Islamic terrorist organisations from around the world who have at times pledged allegiance to Al Qaeda or ISIS, and even fought alongside them. In recent years, there has been a sharp increase in jihadist attacks against the West as well as Western recruits flocking to join these groups in the Middle East. Neumann [11] found that more Western citizens had travelled to fight alongside ISIS as of 2016 than all previous jihadist conflicts combined – 4,000 as of 2016. This indicates that jihadist terrorism is growing and attracting citizens from around the globe. This paper explores its development, through examining attacks on the West and the propaganda aimed at the citizens within these countries. Overall, the findings show that, although attacks have increased in the West, they have been committed by local, inspired individuals rather than terrorist groups themselves. This paper will argue that the increase in domestic Western attacks could have been facilitated through carefully constructed propaganda that specifically targets Western audiences by emulating Western popular culture.

Previous literature has established that many attacks against the West attributed to the Islamic State have been committed by those who have little or no link to the group. Nesser and Hegghammer [7] studied ISIS attacks after its initial emergence in 2014 and found that many of the attacks the group claimed responsibility for were committed by individuals who were inspired by the group or had tenuous links with it. They examined 69 attacks through news reports, open source material and police investigations, finding that 30 had a link to ISIS. This link was almost always a declaration of support for ISIS rather than any direct contact with the group. Four years on from this

study, there have been significantly more terror attacks against the West and many classified information regarding ISIS attacks has become available. The methods of this study are similar to Nesser and Hegghammer [7], but this work includes further two and a half years of data.

This study then considers how the Islamic State is inspiring Western recruits to commit attacks on their own volition. In recent years, there have been extensive studies into the Islamic State's propaganda to understand how numerous foreign nationals have been radicalised. Ingram [8] found that the Islamic State's propaganda has been designed to provoke readers into believing there is a crisis that only ISIS can resolve. This is done by creating an identity crisis, where the in-group (ISIS) has the solution to the out-group's problem. ISIS's identity crisis includes the idea that true Islam is under attack, Muslims are under threat and Western culture is "degrading". Winters [17] analysed hundreds of Islamic State propaganda items released in 2015 and found that the most common topics discussed were utopia (52.7%) and war (37.2%). Winters argues Utopia is the most prominent theme as it has global appeal, convincing the world that it has established a 'jihadist utopia' that functions as a state and where people can flourish. War themes, such as battles and attacks, is discussed to show the world how successful the Islamic State have been in the Middle East and abroad. Cohen and Kaati [3] note that in both of the Islamic State's magazines *Dabiq* and *Rumiya*, the group reinforce the idea of being a global force. The magazines dedicate a great deal of space towards foreign attacks, such as Brussels and Paris, but also do features on the attackers. They argue that the purpose of these articles is to convince average people that they can be ISIS heroes too.

Adding to the literature, this study proposes that the group is using Western pop culture references and imagery in its media in an attempt to gain attention from Western recruits and make the Islamic State feel more familiar to them. This is done through using Western branding, Hollywood images and references and even through linguistics. The present paper will examine this hypothesis through looking at ISIS propaganda

and previous literature in the field. In the past, groups such as Al Qaeda have not made professional and slick propaganda to the extent that ISIS has [13]. Since ISIS has created this media campaign, it has increased the volume of inspired attacks and have increased recruits. Whilst it is virtually impossible to know how individual attackers and fighters have become radicalised, this study explores the influence that the propaganda campaign aimed at Western audiences might have had on the volume of inspired attacks.

METHODOLOGY

In order to understand if there has been an increase in volume of terrorist attacks and an increase in inspired terrorist attacks, all available data pertaining to Islamic attacks against the West since 1998 was extrapolated from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) and displayed in a spreadsheet (Appendix I and II). The GTD is managed by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), which is based at the University of Maryland. The GTD is an open access database of worldwide terror attacks that publishes only verified information and is the largest of its kind. Most of the sources come from the media, court records and police reports and is carefully reviewed by researchers before publication.

All attacks attributed to either Al Qaeda, an Al Qaeda affiliate, the Islamic State or Jihadist and Muslim inspired extremists were collated. The West has been defined as North America, Australia, Western and Eastern Europe. The attacks have been separated into Al Qaeda peak and ISIS peak, in order to compare how effective ISIS have been. ISIS peak started after their first attack on the West and Al Qaeda peak started in 1998 after their attacks on the U.S embassy in Nairobi. This data was then displayed in two tables representing Al Qaeda and ISIS (Table 1 and Table 2 respectively), comparing the number of attacks linked to the group and the number of attacks they inspired. There is a one-year overlap between between ISIS and Al Qaeda attacks, this is due to an Al Qaeda attack that took place in 2015. The GTD were able to assign this attack based on evidence the perpetrator had links to Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula rather than the ISIS.

Next, ISIS's English language propaganda and current literature on their propaganda was examined for references to Western pop culture and imagery. As terrorist propaganda is illegal to access and is often taken off of the internet very quickly, most items were only accessible through academic literature. The study looked for images or references to Western lifestyle such as Hollywood film references, branding, games and styles of music.

RESULTS

An investigation of all types of jihadist attacks against the West demonstrates that there has been a sharp increase in attacks after 2014. Attacks either attributed to Al Qaeda or committed during their peak totalled 39, whereas attacks attributed to ISIS or committed during their peak totalled 110. Table 1 shows that there were more attacks linked to Al Qaeda than inspired, whereas Table 2 shows that there were substantially more inspired attacks than ISIS linked. ISIS on average committed more attacks per year on average than Al Qaeda. Notably, the Al Qaeda data is spread out over 17 years and the ISIS data is from a 4-year period, showing that radical Islamic attacks have increased significantly. This indicates that radical Islamic terror attacks are potentially becoming more decentralised, as

individuals are committing attacks without having any direct contact with the terrorist groups.

Table 1: Responsibility of Al Qaeda Peak Attacks on the West– 1998-2015

Responsibility	Number	Percentage
Al Qaeda Linked Attacks	22	56.5%
Jihadist Inspired	17	43.5%

Table 2: Responsibility of ISIS Peak Attacks on the West – 2014-2017

Responsibility	Number	Percentage
ISIS Linked Attacks	14	12.7%
Jihadist Inspired	96	87.3%

DISCUSSION

The results of the research support Nesser and Hegghammer [7], who argue that many of the most recent attacks are decentralised and committed by inspired individuals. This study found that 87.3% of attacks are terrorists with no link to any formal terrorist organisation. This suggests that more individuals are becoming self-radicalised or inspired. Another implication is that terrorist attacks against the West are increasing. Rather than organising attacks directly, the group may be targeting their propaganda towards Western citizens to attack on behalf of the group. This part of the paper is going to examine ISIS's English language propaganda to show that the group and its members have made clear attempts to use Western pop culture and imagery to radicalise Western citizens.

By utilizing Western imagery, ISIS can make the cultural differences between life in the Islamic State and life in the West seem smaller and can make the propaganda more engaging and exciting for many potential recruits. The references to Western pop culture come in a range of forms; this could be featuring an American brand such as Starbucks or it can be subtler, where certain style of music is mimicked. It is important to examine this imagery as it can convey a deeper message. ISIS ideology is anti-Western, and to use Western references in its propaganda may seem hypocritical [1]. However, this paper proposes that this is actually a tactic to gain the attention of Western audiences. As Goren [5] notes, many audiences do not consciously think about the deeper assertions behind the media they are consuming, but the media influence how people view their own identity and the cultures of others. Many consumers of ISIS propaganda may not realise that these references are there to draw them in and are change how they see their own Western identity.



Figure 1: Call of Jihad Vs Call of Duty [12], [16]

The first example this section addresses is the Islamic State's impersonations of popular U.S. video game *Call of Duty* and Scottish *Grand Theft Auto*. Both games are highly popular in the West and as of 2016, the *Call of Duty* franchise has made \$15 billion [5]. *Call of Duty: Black Ops* was renamed *Call of Jihad* - where the game still looks the same but with added ISIS related text (Figure 1). *Grand Theft Auto* was renamed *Grand Theft Auto: Clash of Swords* and the gameplay was reformulated to look like Syria and Iraq, and the player has to kill US military officers [16]. The poster for the game features the main player holding a gun and dressed in clothing normally worn by militants in ISIS (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Edited Grand Theft Auto poster, with ISIS flag and "Clash of Swords" written under the famous logo [1], [12], [16]

By using these games, the Islamic State paints the scenes in Syria and Iraq in a familiar way for potential recruits who may have played the original games. It also turns the idea of becoming a terrorist into a game – with the ultimate aim to kill as many US military officers as possible. Using this as a means to deliver the ISIS message is highly effective, as it is considerably more exciting and engaging than a video lecture and targets a different audience – young men. Whilst the audiences playing this game know they are engaging with terrorist material, they may not realise that the use of Western pop culture has potentially been the reason they were drawn in. An Islamic State official has claimed that the game was made to “raise moral of the mujahedin” and train young people to commit attacks [6] – despite the group’s ideology banning entertainment [1]. As these games are available online, it could

be played by anyone in the world and be alluring to those who have played the original version. This demonstrates a willingness by the group to go against its own ideology in order to infiltrate the minds of young people, suggesting that strategy is more important than ideology to the Islamic State.

The group have made further explicit references to Western pop culture through their feature films, either directly copying Hollywood scenes, mimicking film posters or using clips lifted directly from films. The Counter Extremism Project analysed 1,275 Islamic State films and found that the group directly lifted clips from the Clint Eastwood film *Flags of our Fathers* (2006) and featured them in their own film *Healing of the Believers' Chests* [2]. The group found that ISIS had imitated a key scene from the film *American Sniper* where Bradley Cooper is seen shooting a gun in slow motion in their own film *Shoot to Redeem Yourself 2* (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Bradley Cooper in 'American Sniper' (2014) top, Islamic State's 'Shoot to Redeem Yourself 2' bottom [2]

In another case the group used footage from *G. I. Joe: The Rise of Cobra* of the Eiffel Tower being destroyed in their *Paris has Collapsed*, a film about the terror attacks in France. Other Hollywood films that have been copied include *The Hunger Games* and *The Matrix* [2],[9]. ISIS mimicking Western films and even using the original clips is an interesting move for the group, given that they fight against Western culture. Although the group may argue it is for recruitment purposes, using Hollywood references has an entertainment aspect. For the audience, watching films that copy *The Hunger Games* or *American Sniper* is much more engaging than watching a preacher speak for hours at time. As Stern and Berger [13] note, the videos produced by the terrorist group are professional quality and use complex filming techniques, which could give the group more legitimacy in the eyes of the viewer. By using films from the West, they give young impressionable audiences the idea that although ISIS is a jihadist terrorist group fighting in Syria and Iraq, they can have the best of both worlds, a jihadist experience with Western culture. However, it is interesting to note that although the films do have the action genre in common, they are not necessarily all directed at the same target audience. ‘The Hunger Games’ franchise is based on book series of the same name, categorised as Young Adult and targets a young age group. Whereas ‘Flags of Our Fathers’ is a World War II war film depicting the U.S. side of Iwo Jima battle in Japan, which may interest an older age group. Whilst younger audiences are targeted most, the group may be ensuring they cater to all ages to maximise their reach.

The references to Western films do not stop at video footage, the group have also adapted film posters for their cause. Figure 4 shows the film poster for Gerard Butler’s film ‘300’ (2006), changed to fit the Islamic State’s message. The poster has been edited to say ‘Coming to a Tyrant Near You’, instead of ‘coming to a cinema’. The picture has been changed to show ISIS fighters throwing members of the U.S military off of a cliff and has changed the credits to include Bin Laden and Baghdadi – leaders of Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. In contrast to video propaganda, this poster appears to be mocking the concept of Western entertainment. However, there could be a deeper message - that jihad is in fact better than watching Hollywood action films and that there are ‘real’ enemies to fight. By mentioning Bin Laden, it directly links ISIS’s fight with the War on Terror and Al Qaeda – adding a subtler reference to Western involvement in the Middle East. Given how little the group have directly attacked the West compared to those inspired by them, they have referenced the West significantly in their visual media.

Western jihadists push the idea of the ‘best of both worlds’, by discussing Western pop culture whilst discussing life in the Islamic State on their social media. For example, Jean-Edouard, a 20-year-old Parisian, went to fight with ISIS in 2013. He used his social media to update followers on what life was like in Syria and convince more Western citizens follow his lead. In one of his earlier posts he stated ‘There are English people here, Bosnians, Somalians, Japanese, even Chinese. We are the EuroDisney of the mujahideen’. He later posted ‘Jihad is compulsory. We offer slaves, pizza and martyrdom’ [11]. By using references such as Disney and pizza, it likens the Islamic State more to the West. It suggests life is not *that* much different and that recruits will still have home comforts. By ‘offering’ slaves and pizza, it suggests that by joining their group not only can you have violent power over others that you would not have in the West but also the things you enjoy.

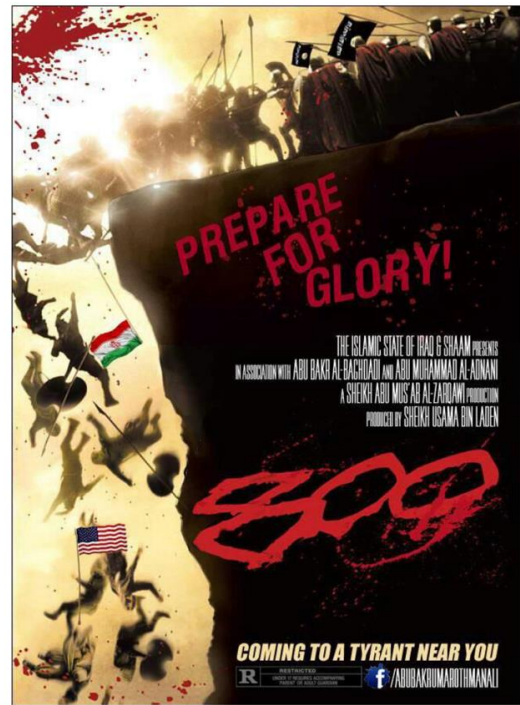


Figure 4: Islamic State mimicking the Hollywood film ‘300’ [12]

Similarly, Figure 5 (below) shows a twitter post by a member of ISIS of a picture of popular American food: Starbucks coffee and chocolate cookies. Winters [17] found that ISIS significantly push the idea of Utopia in their propaganda, and using these kinds of images supports this idea. The group want to paint this idea of a violent Islamic caliphate where recruits will still be able to enjoy all of the benefits of home. However, many potential recruits may not realise the deeper message ISIS are trying to send. By incorporating images such as Starbucks, pizza and Disney, it is an effort by the group to normalize life in a warzone where they are the deadly enemy. Prior to ISIS, when Al Qaeda were at their peak, social media was not as influential and accessible. However now, for many people, it is a part of every day life. By using social media to document members’ daily life, it makes propaganda seem like ordinary non-terrorist posts. Figure 5 would not seem unusual on any American’s Twitter feed without the mention of Raqqah.



Figure 5: A post of Twitter of American sweets by a member of ISIS [12]

Images of day-to-day life are not the only way members of ISIS use their social media to gain more recruits and portray a more Western vision of the Islamic State. A female member of the

group had used the online blogging site Tumblr to post about marriage in the caliphate before she was banned. The blogger painted a romanticised image of finding love with ISIS and used Westernised quotes on images to show this. Figure 6 shows an image of a young, smiling attractive terrorist alongside a fully dressed female with the quote “The love of Jihad, Till Martyrdom do us Part” [12]. The quote is a reference to the phrase “till death do us part”, commonly said during wedding ceremonies in the West. The image merges Western culture and terrorism by using marriage as a symbol for the members’ commitment to dying in the name of terrorism. Targeting a Western audience this way could be interpreted as an attempt to incite violence by comparing suicide attacks to a familiar concept.



Figure 6: A Tumblr post by female ISIS member “Bird of Jannah” [12]

This style of propaganda belongs to a younger generation for whom social media is an important part of daily life and is used to regularly update friends and followers. The younger generation of Jihadists is creating new ways to distribute the terrorist message and gain recruits, including through hip-hop. Hip-hop, which originates from the United States, is not only a genre of music but a subculture that does not necessarily fit in with the Islamic State’s anti-entertainment ideology. However, this has not stopped the group using younger Western recruits to create ‘jihadist rap’ videos and songs to radicalise and self-radicalise citizens all over Europe and America [4]. Conti (2017) [4] studied German ISIS member “Deso Dogg”, finding him in 260 Islamic State videos. Deso Dogg raps on behalf of the Islamic State. Conti [4] found that he used this to merge jihadist culture and Western pop culture together. They would feature terrorist lyrics, with a hip-hop style of music. He would often wear hip-hop style clothes and everyone he would feature in the videos would also be of Western descent. Cohen and Kaati [3] argue that this is part of a new jihadist subculture in

itself – jihadi cool, whereby recruits have their own music (such as rap), style of clothes and retain other cultural manifestations. They state this new subculture is aiming to give role models to potential young recruits. ISIS member’s are shown with popular Western brands such as Skittles and Nutella, and post ‘funny’ jihadist pictures online.

CONCLUSION

This paper aimed to demonstrate two main characteristics of contemporary terrorism. Firstly, that terrorism against the West is rising and is mostly being committed by inspired individuals rather than the terrorist groups themselves. Secondly, that contemporary terrorist propaganda is utilizing Western pop culture and imagery to gain the attention and radicalise Western citizens. Jihadist terror attacks against the West have increased dramatically over the past nineteen years. As terror attacks have risen, so has the number of inspired attacks committed by those with no ties to terrorist groups. Of the 110 attacks against the West since 2014, only 14 had any direct connection with the Islamic State. This indicates a troubling evolution: most recent terrorism is due to individuals and not organisations. Alongside the fact that 4,000 Western citizens have travelled to fight alongside ISIS in the Middle East, this suggests that terrorism is becoming more attractive to individuals from the West.

To understand this attraction, this paper examined how Western pop culture has been used in the Islamic State’s propaganda. Prior to the Islamic State, terrorist materials were not as slick and professional, which may have highlighted cultural differences between terrorist groups and individuals in West. In contrast, ISIS have channelled every available media output and used their resources to capture the attention of citizens worldwide. Through examining their propaganda, it is clear they have used this as a strategy to engage with Western citizens through familiar imagery. The group capitalise on Hollywood imagery, Western video games, the hip hop subculture and popular American brands, such as Starbucks. Although the group adheres to a strict vision of Islamic law that prohibits entertainment, the latter is still used as a way to target audiences who would otherwise feel alienated. By showing home comforts, they make jihadism and their caliphate seem familiar at times.

Finally, it is important to note how little the group has directly attacked the West even though so much of their propaganda is clearly aimed at a Western audience. Whilst there is evidence that ISIS and its followers are targeting Western citizens through their materials, there is no direct evidence that this is the reason why inspired attacks are increasing. However, to argue that these are not related would be to ignore the link between terrorist propaganda and terrorist recruitment.

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