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From the Editors

The Doron Halpern Middle East Network Analysis Desk is proud to present the June issue of **Beehive**. In this issue, we expose the anti-Islamic ideology of websites being used to recruit Western Christian volunteers to fight in Iraq and Syria - an ideology also reflected in violence against Muslims in Europe and North America. We review Iranian SNS' responses to Hassan Rouhani's victory in the Iranian presidential elections, and the demands for reforms that users directed at their newly re-elected president. Lastly, we examine the means by which ISIS maintains the threat of terrorism in areas beyond Iraq and Syria, where it is suffering territorial losses.

Enjoy!

“Jihad Works Both Ways:” Representations of the New Crusaders

Ariel Koch

Over the course of ISIS’ expansion into large areas of Iraq and Syria, the organization has severely victimized Christians and other minority communities. In opposition to Christian victimization, a few hundred volunteers from various Christian countries, mainly in North America and Europe, have been recruited via social networking sites (SNS).¹ This recruitment effort has developed a Christian discourse to oppose the online ISIS discourse. The Christian discourse reflects an anti-Islamic ideology identified with the West’s new right, and ironically, echoes many of the elements of ISIS’ discourse.² Down the road, this type of recruitment discourse may result in violence against Muslims in the volunteers’ countries of origin, as volunteers return home with military experience from Iraq and Syria. In fact, it is already evident that such anti-Islamic elements are active in Western countries.

The SNS pages that aim to recruit Christian volunteers are adorned with Crusader symbols and images drawn from a reservoir of verbal and nonverbal messages justifying Christian religious violence as a “crusade” against oppositional religious violence, particularly “jihad.”³ These symbols include those of the Knights Templar (see picture), reflecting the desire of extreme right-wing elements in the West to perpetuate the Crusaders’ legacy and eradicate the Muslim threat. They contend that a containment process must be enacted in the Middle East, where ISIS embodies this



A picture from the Facebook page of the Britain First movement, with the caption “Brave anti- ISIS volunteers waving the Templar flag in Syria!”

threat, and in the Christian countries of Europe and North America, wherever there are Muslims who identify with the Salafi-Jihadi ideology. The use of crusader symbols creates a parallelism, juxtaposing the Templar flag with the Salafi-Jihadi black flag. Among other manifestations of this theme, this exemplifies the fact that these SNS pages ultimately develop a discourse similar to the jihadi discourse, in terms of symbolism and content. The stylistic similarity is also evident in the religious arguments presented on the SNS pages, including reference to New Testament verses that emphasize a desire to protect brethren of the Christian faith, destroy the enemy, and remove its influence from Christendom.

Parties identified with the new extreme right in Western Europe, North America, and Australia recruit Christian fighters and have them absorbed into designated military units. These units include the Babylon Battalion of the Popular Mobilization (*al-Shaqib al-Sha’bi*), a Shiite militia supported by Iran, and the Self-Sacrificing (*Dwekh Nawsha* in Assyrian), a Christian unit of the Kurdish Peshmerga.⁴

The Christian volunteers pose a security threat and challenge to the authorities in their countries of origin, whose main concern has been the return of jihadists, but now must also cope with the possible return of militant, combative Christians.

During the early 21st century, extreme right-wing violence has gained ground in Europe. Prominent examples include the activities of the German neo-Nazi underground between 2000 and 2006, whose members detonated explosives in crowded streets and murdered 10 people, mostly of Turkish origin. The European extreme right also sharply criticizes leftists' support for refugees, sometimes accusing leftists of treason for helping to "Islamize" the West. Indeed, some rightists assert that due to this treason, leftists must be eradicated. For example, Anders Behring Breivik, a Norwegian nationalist who identified himself as a Knight Templar, murdered dozens of youth from the Norwegian Labor Party in July 2011. A more recent example was the June 2016 murder of British MP Jo Cox, who supported allowing refugees fleeing the Syrian war to enter Great Britain. The two most recent examples of extreme right-wing attacks in Europe occurred in June 2017, when a neo-Nazi youth attempted to run over Iraqi demonstrators in Malmo, Sweden,⁵ and a similar vehicle attack targeted Muslims near the Finsbury Park mosque in London five days later, injuring eight people.⁶

North America is also witnessing an increase in anti-Islamic violence. Since the beginning of the year, there have been several cases of violence defined as hate crimes and terrorism. One example was a shooting at a mosque in Quebec in January, perpetrated by Canadian nationalist Alexandre Bissonnette, who murdered six worshipers. In late May, Jeremy Joseph Christian, a racist, stabbed three train passengers in Portland, Oregon after being reprimanded for verbally assaulting two Muslim women. The stabbing left two passengers dead and one injured. The new extreme right's violence extends beyond Muslims, leaving leftists and the general public in the crossfire.

In recent years, the English Defense League (EDL) has been one of the foremost right-wing elements appropriating Crusader-Templar discourse on SNS. EDL is a street movement that began in England in 2009, and was followed by similar groups in Europe and elsewhere. This movement exalts the Knights Templar and aspires to continue their legacy. The emblem of the EDL and of the other "Leagues for Defense" is the cross of St. George, the patron saint of England, captioned with the Crusaders' motto, "In this sign [the cross] you shall conquer" (in Latin: *In Hoc Signo Vincas*). The movement makes extensive use of SNS, distributing memes and pictures of crusaders accompanied by slogans threatening a crusade on jihad: "Jihad works both ways," and "I'll see your jihad, and raise you one crusade."

Another example of this movement is Britain First, which maintains a Facebook page with approximately two million likes.⁷ Britain First activists march through Muslim neighborhoods holding crosses and Templar flags, and demonstrate at mosques' entrances, distributing copies of the New Testament. Other Facebook pages displaying similar Christian content and recruiting fighters to battle ISIS can be found in English, Spanish, French, and German, demonstrating that this is a broad, cross-border phenomenon, not confined to a specific country.

In conclusion, the new anti-Islamic right in the West poses a substantial threat, considering the Christian militants volunteering to fight ISIS in Syria and Iraq, or operating in their countries of origin against supporters of the Salafi-Jihadi Muslim ideology. This movement utilizes a Crusader discourse that encourages religious Christian radicalization, and emphasizes that violence is a legitimate response to the jihadist threat, which is expanding from the Middle East into Europe. The result might lead to militarization of social movements identified with the right, and the formation of quasi-military bodies composed of fighters with combat experience who have accumulated in the battlefields of Syria and Iraq, who want to eradicate what they see as the Muslim enemy that physically and spiritually threatens the Christians around the world.

Hassan Rouhani's Presidential Victory in Iranian Social Media

Dr. Raz Zimmt

Despite the ISIS attack in Tehran on June 7, Hassan Rouhani's sweeping victory in the May 19 presidential election was the focus of public discourse on Iranian social networking sites (SNS). Prior to the election, SNS were a key tool that candidates from both main political movements used in their campaigns. However, following the election results, while supporters of the president used SNS to express joy and expectations of the newly elected president, supporters of the rival candidate, conservative cleric Ebrahim Raisi, chose to stay away from SNS.

The 2017 presidential election campaign was characterized by widespread use of SNS by all candidates in their efforts to mobilize public support. Unlike previous campaigns, use of SNS was not restricted to the president's reformist supporters, whose presence on the Internet has been widespread for years. Conservative contenders, headed by Raisi, had a significant SNS presence as well, newly acknowledging SNS' great influence and effective conveyance of messages to mass audiences. As the election drew closer, conservative candidates increasingly used SNS to elicit support from citizens, especially young people. A few days before the election, Raisi made an ill-fated effort to increase his visibility by uploading a photograph of himself with Iranian rapper Amir Tataloo. The picture was apparently intended to improve Raisi's image among young voters, but instead provoked ridicule. The conservative cleric is known for his vehement opposition to any hint of Western culture permeating Iranian society, including Western music, and was therefore accused of opportunism.



Poster disseminated on Twitter after Rouhani's election victory, with hashtag "We won"

Even traditional media coverage emphasized SNS' centrality to the election campaign. In an article published by reformist newspaper Etemad, SNS were called "the most important and influential means in the elections." The article claimed that Rouhani's victory was largely made possible by his supporters' SNS posts, which succeeded in influencing undecided voters. Furthermore, Rouhani's election speeches were broadcast live to tens of thousands of citizens via Instagram, an alternative to the establishment radio and television channels controlled by unelected government institutions.⁸

In response to the election results, Rouhani's supporters flooded SNS with expressions of joy. Their reactions were accompanied by hashtags such as, "the heroic story of *Ordibehesht*" [the Iranian month parallel to May], "We won," and "Until 1400" [the Iranian year equivalent to 2021, the date of the next presidential elections]. Users uploaded videos of victory celebrations held by the president's supporters across Iran, congratulations to the newly re-elected president, expressions of joy at the expense of Raisi, and pictures of the reformist

opposition leaders, particularly former president Mohammad Khatami, whose images are banned in state media.⁹

At the same time, Rouhani's supporters also used SNS to express their expectations for the president's second term. Many stressed that the president should use his victory to fulfill his campaign promises, and not to take the public's support for granted. "Mr. Rouhani: as of today, we will supervise your conduct and will remain your critics. The ability of the reform [movement] to persist is dependent on criticism, and nowadays there is much room for criticism," tweeted one user.¹⁰ Iranian users created a hashtag, "If I were Rouhani," and uploaded comments listing demands, mainly regarding improvement of the economic situation and expansion of individual liberties.¹¹ These responses expressed disappointment – even among the president's supporters – in Rouhani's limited achievements during his first term, particularly in redressing the Iranian economic and human rights situation. Conservative control of most main centers of power in Iran – including the Supreme Leader's Office, the judiciary, security forces, law enforcement agencies, and the Revolutionary Guard – made it difficult for the president to keep his promises. Rouhani's supporters, who are well aware of the limitations of his power, now hope that his sweeping victory will better enable him to fulfill his promises. As one user tweeted, "If I were Rouhani, I would see the number 24 million [the number of votes he received] before my eyes every day, and I would tell myself without fear, for everything I would like to do: 'Go, do it, the people are behind you.'"¹²

In contrast to Rouhani's supporters, the SNS presence of Raisi's supporters diminished significantly following the election result. A number of users affiliated with the conservative camp admitted their failure in the elections, assigning the results to irregularities in the elections or conservatives' flawed campaign efforts. For example, journalist and conservative scholar Payam Fazlinejad claimed that Rouhani's victory was not surprising given the withdrawal of Tehran's mayor Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf from the race a few days prior to the elections, and the distribution of Raisi's controversial picture with rapper Tataloo.¹³ The decline in conservatives' activity on SNS after the elections can be explained by their traditional attitude toward the platform, and the restrictions they place on its use, limited to elections or specific campaigns. This contrasts with the reformists, who view their Internet presence as essential to dissemination of their positions and mobilization of public support, considering the authorities' control over most of the media.

The Iranian presidential election campaign is another expression of the increasingly politicized use of SNS. There is no doubt that this development impacted the election results, as the Iranian public was exposed to information to which they formerly had limited access. Although the conservative right now recognizes the importance of SNS, the prominent and continuous presence of the reformists on SNS enables them to more effectively exploit these platforms, both in routine circumstances and during election campaigns. This poses considerable difficulty for the conservative right in mobilizing citizens' support. As a result, the gap between the Iranian public and the conservative dominated institutions of the regime is deepening.

Mosul, London, Tehran: ISIS Prepares for the Day After

Gilad Shiloach

Over the past two months, the media conduct of ISIS and its supporters on social networking sites (SNS) reflects the critical processes taking place within the organization, just three years after it declared the establishment of the Islamic Caliphate. On the one hand, the summer of 2017 marks what appears to be the loss of the organization's most important stronghold in Iraq, and the beginning of battles to remove it from the Syrian stronghold of al-Raqqa, which it considers the capital of the Caliphate. On the other hand, ISIS has enjoyed several significant successes outside of Syria and Iraq, with terrorist attacks mounted in its name around the world, particularly in Europe. These attacks show that despite its losses, the threat of ISIS has not dissipated; rather, it has transformed.

Eight months after the campaign to liberate Mosul was officially launched under the leadership of the Iraqi army, with the backing of an international coalition organized by the United States, it appears that ISIS recognizes its defeat. ISIS is now cultivating the narrative that the loss in Mosul is Allah's test of his followers' faith, preparing them for future successes, and that it was, from the outset, an impossible battle of "the few against the many."¹⁴ This was explicated by the organization's leader, Abū Bakr al-Baghdadi, in a speech last November, and by its current spokesman, Abū al-Ḥasan al-Muhājir, in a recorded speech on June 12.¹⁵ However, after months of fighting, the move that most powerfully symbolized the final renunciation of the city was ISIS activists' explosion of al-Nuri Mosque in the old quarter of Mosul. The mosque, built in the 12th century, is considered one of the most important sites in the city, and was the location where al-Baghdadi declared the establishment of the Caliphate in June 2014. Despite evidence that the mosque was destroyed by a controlled explosion, the organization denied its involvement, blamed the coalition, and published a video through Amaq News Agency that ostensibly proves its claims.

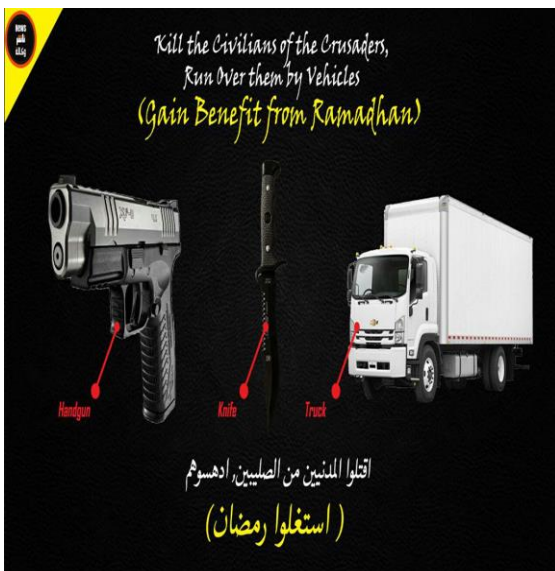
¹⁶

At the same time, ISIS is facing another campaign that began in early June. A coalition of Kurdish and Arab militias, led by the Syrian Democratic Forces and supported by the US, are attempting to conquer al-Raqqa. The first days of the ISIS campaign against al-Raqqa were characterized by extensive reports by the Amaq News Agency that American planes were dropping phosphorous bombs on population centers in al-Raqqa, in contravention of international law.¹⁷ Videos distributed by the agency show children and civilians allegedly injured by the bombs. The organization aims to convey the message that it is not the aggressor, but rather the victim, and that Muslim citizens are paying the price for Western aggression. Promoting a narrative of victimization is a familiar media tactic that ISIS uses to earn support from Muslims around the world and to justify its actions, including attacks against the West.

Along with the expected losses, ISIS has scored quite a few successes. The recent attacks in Manchester, London, Melbourne, and Tehran are part of a series of more than 20 attacks since June 2016 in large European cities that have resulted in hundreds of deaths, for which ISIS has

claimed responsibility, through the Amaq News Agency. Despite the fact that many of the attacks were inspired by the organization without its direct involvement, ISIS continues its media practice of describing the perpetrators as “soldiers” acting on its behalf, which helps position the organization as a threat to world security. However, there have been a number of recent events for which ISIS has taken responsibility despite a lack of any ideological connection, attesting to the pressure – even the despair – the organization is experiencing. For example, at the beginning of June, the organization claimed responsibility for a casino torching in Manila, the capital of the Philippines, which killed 36 people, and even reported that the terrorist was Abu al-Khir al-Arghabili.¹⁸ The local authorities rejected these claims, and reported that the perpetrator was a 42-year-old Philippine citizen named Jesse Carlos, a known gambling addict, who committed the attack in retaliation for being barred from the casino a month earlier.¹⁹ Another incident that casts doubts on the organization’s claims of responsibility occurred on June 17, when ISIS took credit for a combined attack by a squad of three terrorists at the Damascus Gate in Jerusalem, in which an Israeli Border Policewoman was killed. This was a unique event, the first time that the organization claimed responsibility for an attack carried out in Israeli territory. However, Palestinian organizations, including Hamas, rejected the announcement and claimed that the terrorists belonged to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP).²⁰ Furthermore, ISIS did not provide any concrete proof of its involvement in the attack.

ISIS’s decision to adopt these terrorist attacks stems from practical considerations and reflects an innovative approach propagated by ISIS: reliance on a virtual community that relies on Internet content for tangibility. This approach developed as the use of SNS grew. In the cases described, ISIS formulaically repeated the claim that the terrorists were “soldiers of the Islamic State who carried out the attack in response to calls to attack the coalition countries,” to bolster its status, adding these attacks to its general activity.



ISIS Poster disseminated on Telegram ,
June 2017

It is not without cause that ISIS continues its intensive activities on SNS, aimed at encouraging “lone wolf” attacks in the West. This campaign illustrates its expectations of continued attacks worldwide, whether directly or by inspiration. ISIS makes extensive use of its official magazine, Rumiya, which is published in 10 different languages (English, French, German, Pashto, Indonesian, Bosnian, and others), and the Telegram network for disseminating ideological content and practical guidance. Articles circulated by the organization on these platforms use the slogan “Just Terror.” This series includes detailed lessons on how to conduct stabbing, truck, and arson

attacks, and how to exploit the lack of control over weapons In the United States to take hostages. A poster distributed in English and Arabic in early June on Telegram channels affiliated with the organization called users to “take advantage of Ramadan” to perpetrate terrorist attacks and

stabblings (see photo). Meanwhile, the organization's supporters unofficially use Telegram to assist "the novice terrorist," sharing guidance and resources on physical fitness training, weapons usage, explosive device construction, behavior in interrogation settings, and more.

These efforts to encourage attacks on the West shows that ISIS' significant territorial contraction does not mean that the organization will disappear, or that the threat it poses to the West and the Middle East will dissipate. It is likely that these types of efforts will intensify as ISIS has increasing difficulty achieving its other goals. This was demonstrated in early June, when ISIS mounted its first attack on Iranian soil, which was considered a great success. After terrorists infiltrated the Iranian Majlis (parliament) building and the Khomeini mausoleum, killing 18 people, Amaq News Agency published a video showing several terrorists shooting at victims inside the Majlis, while shouting: "Do you think we'll go away? We [ISIS] remain here until Judgment Day." This is the message that the organization is expected to continue promoting.

¹ Henry Tuck, Tanya Silverman and Candace Smalley, "'Shooting in the Right Direction": Anti-ISIS Foreign Fighters in Syria & Iraq", *The Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, Horizons Series No. 1, 2016, pp. 8-9.

<http://www.strategicdialogue.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/ISD-Report-Shooting-in-the-right-direction-Anti-ISIS-Fighters.pdf>

² The difference between the new extreme right and the traditional extreme right is the focus of the newer movement on a single issue, namely, opposition to Islam, and thus opposition to Muslims and the migration of Muslims to Europe. Ostensibly, the new movement is based in cultural, rather than racial, superiority, while the traditional extreme right seeks to replace democracy with fascist, racist regimes.

³ Using the term "crusaders" for people from Western, Christian countries began with the Osama bin Laden's declaration of "Jihad against the Jews and the Crusaders" in 1998.

⁴ Tuck et al. pp. 36-37 .

⁵ 19 June 2017: <https://www.rt.com/news/392278-sweden-refugees-nazi-car/>

⁶ 19 June 2017: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/live/2017/jun/19/north-london-van-incident-finsbury-park-casualties-collides-pedestrians-live-updates>

⁷ 16 June 2017: The online platforms Britain First: <https://www.britainfirst.org/>; <https://www.facebook.com/OfficialBritainFirst/>; <https://twitter.com/BritainFirstHQ>; <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCtEsYNHwF37Ird9IH7Tv-uA>

⁸ "The Social Networks: The Media Winner of the Elections." Etemad, 25 May 2017.

⁹ Users' responses to Rouhani's victory on Twitter, 28 May 2017:

<https://twitter.com/search?q=%23%D8%AA%DA%A9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B1%DA%A9%D8%B1%D8%AF%DB%8C%D9%85&src=typd>;

https://twitter.com/search?vertical=default&q=%20%23%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%87_%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AF%DB%8C%D8%A8%D9%87%D8%B4%D8%AA&src=typd<https://twitter.com/search?q=%23%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%AF%DB%8C%D9%85%20&src=typd> .

¹⁰ 28 May 2017: <https://twitter.com/smt0/status/865810499837079553>

¹¹ 28 May 2017:

https://twitter.com/hashtag/%D9%85%D9%86_%D8%AC%D8%A7%DB%8C_%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C_%D8%A8%D9%88%D8%AF%D9%85?src=hash .

¹² 28 May 2017: https://twitter.com/mohmd_mozafari/status/865838362653061124 .

¹³ 28 May 2017: <https://twitter.com/Fazlinejad/status/865717257695088642>

¹⁴ An example of this narrative is the comparison ISIS has made between the battle for Mosul and the the Battle of the Confederates (“*Ghazwah al-Ahzab*”) also known as the Battle of the Trench in 627 C.E. in which the young Muslim community, under the command of the Prophet Mohammed, fought a large coalition of enemies led by the Quraysh tribe.

¹⁵ “New audio message from The Islamic State’s Abū al-Ḥasan al-Muhājir: ‘And When The Believers Saw The Companies,’” *Jihadology*, 12.06.17

<http://jihadology.net/2017/06/12/new-audio-message-from-the-islamic-states-abu-al-%E1%B8%A5asan-al-muhajir-and-when-the-believers-saw-the-companies/>

¹⁶ 22 June 2017: : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N6oXY-6UjnE>

¹⁷ Gilad Shiloach, “Syrians Accuse U.S.-Led Forces Of Bombing Raqqa With White Phosphorus,” *Vocativ* 11.06.17 <http://www.vocativ.com/437565/syrians-accuse-u-s-led-forces-of-bombing-raqqa-with-white-phosphorus/>

¹⁸ James Griffiths, “ISIS claims Manila Casino Attack despite Police Denial,” CNN, 2 June 2017

<http://edition.cnn.com/2017/06/02/asia/manila-philippines-resort-world-isis/index.html>

¹⁹ Richard C. Paddock and Felipe Villamor, “Manila Casino Attacker Was a Gambling Addict, the Philippine Police Say,” *New York Times*, 04.06.17 <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/04/world/asia/philippines-casino-resorts-world-manila-jessie-carlos.html>

²⁰ Maayan Lubell, “No evidence of Islamic State link to Jerusalem attack: Israeli Police,” *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-palestinians-idUSKBN19805U>