Student Work                                                    International & Global Studies

Fall 2022

# Respawning Jihadist: ISIS Recruiting Through Online Gaming Communities

Alexander J. Ham-Kucharski
*Portland State University*

# Respawning Jihadist

## ISIS Recruiting Through Online Gaming Communities

By Alex Ham-Kucharski
Portland State University
INTL 366 Fall 2022
Professor Smallman

# Prologue

The purpose of my research is to educate and bring awareness of ISIS's (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) recruiting programs through social media and video games. As stated by Lakomy (2019): "Cyber *jihad* is nowadays rightly perceived as a rising threat to international security" (2019, p. 383). ISIS targets individuals as young as teenagers through games such as *Call of Duty*, *Far Cry*, *Halo, ARMA3*, and *Grand Theft Auto* as to recruit those from the Western world for their *Jihad*. ISIS Recruiters use these platforms to attract initiates via the gaming world through imagery that is already imprinted in the mind of avid first person shooter gamers.

ABC News (2017) illustrates this in "A Look at How ISIS is Recruiting Young Americans through the Internet"

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4FZC0WWzHQs

# Mission Objectives

A.    The ability to recognize ISIS recruiters in video game platforms

 B.    Education of the gaming community and awareness of the ISIS efforts of recruitment through these platforms and social media.

 C.    Figure out how security and gaming developers can work together to protect targeted individuals from the recruitment programs.



Figure 1: Bouzar, D., & Rollie Flynn, C. (Artist). (2017). ISIS Recruiting: It's Not (Just) Ideological. [Image of painting]. Foreign Policy Research Institute. https://www.fpri.org/article/2017/09/isis-recruiting-not-just-ideological/

# Lore

ISIS has a long history (albeit their early technology is grainy in terms of technology footage; they were no Sony or Microsoft or Activision) of following in the already laden technological footprints of other terrorists organizations, like Hezbollah and Al-Qaeda, in use of video games in recruiment of individuals across race, ethnicity, and ironically, religion. Recently, "...the overall problem of jihadists propaganda quality is improving and IS[IS] is becoming a model for other groups, the motif of 'game' is being used by IS[IS] and copied by others" (Dauber et al., 2019)

ISIS also utilizes many platforms of social media to spread memes, send individual messages, face to face networking in their recruitment tool box, and their propaganda knows no bounds: "[ISIS] also [has] released a series called *Mujatweets*, which stresses the brotherhood of ISIS fighter and shows them handing out candy to children" (Kang, 2014). ISIS uses the cyber domain to enable cyber *Jihad* through recruitment and radicalization.

As illustrated below in "The Media Jihad of ISIS (Propaganda)" ("Media Jihad of ISIS", 2017).  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ubrvV1yUPnk

# "Players"

- ISIS Recruiters
  - Pose as gamers
  - They send friend invites across social media platforms
  - They utilize private message platforms across social media
    - For example, French journalist "Anna Erelle," (a pseudonym to protect her identity) conducted undercover research, portraying herself as a recent convert to Islam to infiltrate the world of online ISIS recruitment. She creates a fake Facebook account which led to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's "right hand man" Bilel to use Instant Messenger to recruit her to *jihad* and to be his wife, or so he said (Erelle, 2015).

# "Players" - Continued

- They even do IRL online question and answer sessions such as on the lesser known Ask.fm which has over 180 million users. An ISIS recruiter who "identifies" as an American told an audience member: "...his favorite dessert is hot apple pie with ice cream on top. That he maintains his beard using shampoo, scented oils, and a comb. And that the day he fell in love was the day he embraced Islam" And the recruiters us their Kik username to continue private conversations (Segall, 2014).

# Targeted Audience

- Male
- 35 and Under
- Technologically Savvy
- Aggressive Gamers

According to "a study from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill…'First Person Shooter [FPS] games, notably *Call of Duty*…played by hundreds of millions of people, generally under age 35 and 90 percent male–a key target demographic for Islamic Terrorists organizations" (Price, 2019).

For example, the audience targeted images such as FPS excite in violence: weapons, teammates, take down the enemy type tropes, ones the ISIS knows how to utilize in a brainwash recruitment type fashion: "Many of the ISIS recruitment videos are dedicated to showcasing rocket launchers, mines, and assault rifles, as if to say, 'If you join us, you'll get to shoot these things'" (Kang, 2014). Ultimately, ISIS know that targeting a young audience, many of whom are typical frustrated teens, is a perfect manipulation to *jihadist* cause.

# Targeted Audience

"Today it is estimated that 15,000 foreign fighters have joined ISIS's ranks since 2010. They come from eighty [80] different countries, including, according to official numbers, 1,089 French nationals, from 87 national districts. One hundred twenty [120] have returned to France. Forty [40] have died in Syria." (Erelle, 2015, p. 230)

Cited from French journalist Erelle's (2015) true life experience as shared in her book: *In the Skin of a Jihadist: A Young Journalist Enters the ISIS Recruitment Network*

# *Jihadist* **Inventory**

ISIS *Jihadist* recruiters has an indepth multi-platform approach to target their audience as future recruits across many forms of gaming and social media and can enter those forums, identify potential recruits, and further delve into manipulation and agenda. In February 2015, President Obama stated in regard to ISIS' strategies: "'The high quality videos, the online magazines, the use of social media, terrorist Twitter accounts–its all designed to target today's young people online in cyberspace'" (Al-Rawi, 2018, p. 744).

- Games
- Apps
- Social Media
- Video Domains

Live Streaming works across many of these platforms, and "in recent years attackers themselves have taken this a step further by live streaming attacks on...Twitch and Facebook Live" (RAN, 2020).

# *Jihadist* Inventory - Games

ISIS utilizes FPS (First Person Shooter) style games to recruit as they are most likely played by their target audience and thus already a magnet for those male, 35 and under tech savvy players. Often almost a part of their subconscious in image recognition: "Back in June [2014], an ISIS fighter told the BBC that his new life was 'better than that game *Call of Duty*'" (Kang, 2014).

ISIS has also become technologically able to copy similar techniques of drone view usage and specific pixel palettes of games such as *Call of Duty*, and use similar weaponry (Dauber, 2019, pp. 18-21)..
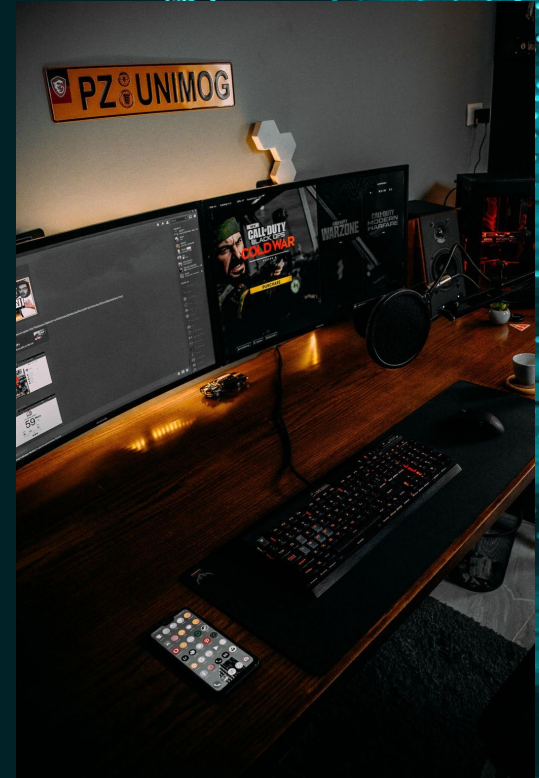
# *Jihadist* Inventory - ISIS Developed Apps

- Childhood Indoctrination:
  - ISIS has even gained app technology building and design, and have created for children in ISIS territories, a desktop and Android app game, similar to the LeapFrog technology genre, in which the Arabic alphabet is taught to children through ISIS *Jihadi* chants: "...*Huroof*...is the only known cross-platform game created by a terrorist organization. ...it was designed as an interactive Arabic alphabet teacher for toddlers...graphic and sound style are cartoonish..and uses 'militaristic vocabulary' as well as illustrations of guns, bullets, cannons, or tanks" (Lakomy, 2017, p. 394).

# *Jihadist* Inventory - Social Media

ISIS recruiting techniques of memes and break-out chats are proliferated throughout social media platforms, such as the *Call of Duty* themed meme that announces "THIS IS OUR CALL OF DUTY AND WE RESPAWN IN JANNAH [Paradise]" (Kang, 2014).

The below list is most frequently utilized by ISIS recruiters.

- Facebook
- Instagram
- Instant Messenger
- Kik
- Skype
- Twitter
- Discord
- WhatsApp



Figure 3: (2014). [Image of painting]. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/23/who-behind-isis-propaganda-operation-iraq

# *Jihadist* Inventory - Social Media

"The online presence of terrorist groups has risen to unprecedented level over the last 20 years...reported 14 million messages from more than 350,000 authors over 1.5 million conversation threads"

(as paraphrased in Sultan, 2016, p. 2).

# *Jihadist* Inventory - Social Media - Next Level

- Twitter
  - An example of a tweet of ISIS *Jihadist* recruiter "telling readers to 'put the chicken wings down n come to "Jihad Bro"'" (Segall, 2014).
- Facebook and Instagram have stated that they takedown posts from terrorists groups like ISIS, and that this is a policy that they take seriously (Segall, 2014), yet we know that individuals can easily escape this take down process. BOOK
- Discord: ISIS recruiters frequently use "Discord as a social space to radicalise and recruit others" (RAN, 2020)

# *Jihadist* Inventory - Social Media - Next Level

- Instant Messenger
- Kik
- WhatsApp
- Skype
  - In the memoir by Erelle (2015), Bilel, the ISIS top recruiter, insisted on Skype usage and Erelle questioned this: "'Why do you want to Skype?' I had Melodie [her fake Facebook account name] reply awkwardly. [Bilel responded] 'Conversations on Skype are more secure, if you see what I mean.'" (2015, p. 29). Skype is used in this text and by ISIS recruiters as a form of control and manipulation of their target.

# *Jihadist* Inventory - Social Media - Next Level

All of these message platforms allow recruiters to talk private conversations with the gamers they are pursuing, and names, handles, and such are often first shared in gaming chat rooms, such as is allowed in MMOs (Massive Multiplayer Online) games.

These messenger platforms: "'...allow individuals to communicate directly with recruiting agents for ISIS. Those protected conversations cover everything from how to cross the border, what to bring, and what life as an ISIS member is like' ...according to Laith Alkhouri, director of Research at Flashpoint Global Partners, which analyzes terrorists communities" (Segall 2014).

# *Jihadist* Inventory - Video Domains

ISIS took the use of video from Al-Qaeda to spread propaganda, recruit, and promote their ideologies, and this is infiltrated throughout:

- YouTube
- Twitch

And as Bloom and Daymon (2018) point out in regard to recognizing the pop culture attraction of their targeted audience: "Rather than focus on battlefield losses, ISIS propaganda emphasizes resilience, while branding is achieved using iconography such as billowing ISIS flag gifs and emojis, stickers, and memes" (2018, p. 379).



"First and foremost, the most profound weapon a nation or special interest can possess is Control over information. This contributes to control over the narrative and the meme is the embryo of the narrative."

James Scott
Institute for Critical
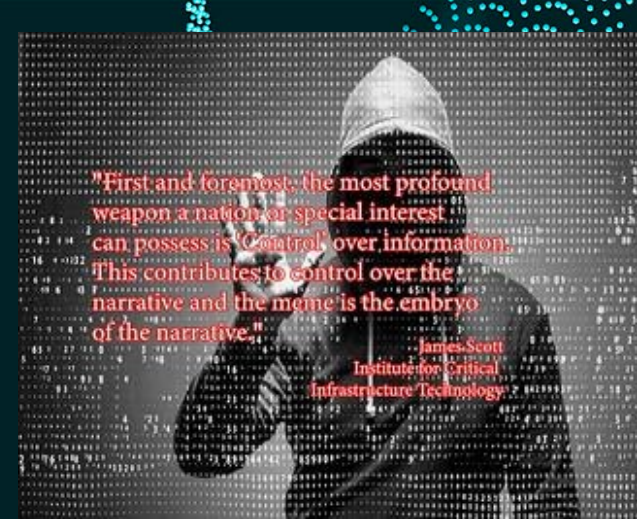Infrastructure Technology

Figure 4: Lamp, C. (Artist). First and Foremost, the Most Profound #weapon a Nation or Special Interest Can Possess Is #control over #information. [Image of painting]. Flickr. https://www.flickr.com/search/?text=cyberwarfare

# *Jihadist* Inventory - Video Domains

"A study by the Brookings Institute found that, in an effort to increase viewership, 40 percent of ISIS's videos included 'cultural images of modernity in order to promote a political project based on anti-modern values.' The constantly-evolving nature of social media and pop culture creates an opportunity for ISIS to infiltrate the platforms and use current trends to aid in the spread of their content" (Cambron, 2019, p. 303).

# Game Over

- How can we stop this type of video game recruitment by ISIS?
  - Better research studies focusing on ISIS propaganda also need to include game study research an area often ignored.
  - Include gamers in the conversation and avoid stereotyping gamers: "There is a long history for blaming video games for mass violence, stereotyping gamers as loners and assuming that the gaming community as a whole is 'at - risk'. Participants consider this to be inaccurate, unproven and counterproductive and suggest working with the gaming community on this issue" (RAN, 2020)

# Game Over

- What can we do to educate and empower gamers against ISIS recruiters?
    - Professor Cori Dauber of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill says we need to get "anti-extremism messages to gamers [which] could be deployed to the same target audience through [the gaming]…medium" (Price, 2019)
    - In her own research, Prof. Dauber further suggests that positive and anti-extremist messages need to occur at gaming conferences, events, and online competitions with sponsors being governments and NGOs (Dauber, 2020, p. 28).
    - "Gamers need more tools and better access to mechanisms for reporting and notifying extremist content" (RAN, 2020)

# Game Over

- How can gaming developers combat this?
  - Just as ISIS seeks out the 35 and under very tech savvy gamer to recruit, so can developers and anti-terrorists orgaizations in order to be taught how to "game." Anti-terrorist organizations need to "familiarise themselves with gaming environments" and need to employ gaming individuals with: "knowledge of the gaming environment, platforms, and related trends [including knowledge] of violent extremism within the gaming environment, online dynamics and technicalities, [who are also knowledgable] in research on psychological drivers and impacts [of gaming]'" (RAN, 2020).
  - The Anti-Terrorist organizations need gamers.

# Epilogue

Resources:
- RAN (Radicalisation Awareness Network)
  - https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/radicalisation-awareness-network-ran_en
- Erelle, A. (2015). *In the Skin of a Jihadist: A Young Journalist Enters the ISIS Recruitment Network*. New York: Harper Collins.
  - A real life non-fiction account of an undercover journalist who pretends to be a convert to Islam in order to gain information on how ISIS recruits using social media platforms.

# REFERENCES

Al-Rawi, A. (2018). Video games, terrorism, and ISIS's Jihad 3.0. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 30(4), 740-760.

Bloom, M., & Daymon, C. (2018, April). Assessing the future threat: ISIS's virtual caliphate. *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 372-388.

Cambron, R. J. (2019). World war web: rethinking "aiding and abetting" in the social media age. *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law*, 51, 293-325.

Dauber, C. E., Robinson, M. D., Baslious, J. J., & Blair, A. G. (2019, June). Call of Duty: Jihad--How the video game motif has migrated downstream from Islamic State propagandistic videos. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 13(3), 17-31.

Erelle, A. (2015). *In the Skin of a Jihadist: A Young Journalist Enters the ISIS Recruitment Network*. New York: Harper Collins.

Extremists' use of video gaming -- strategies and narratives (2020, September 11). In *RAN: Radicalisation Awareness Network*. Retrieved from https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2020-11/ran_cn_conclusion_paper_videogames_15-17092020_en.pdf

# REFERENCES

(2015). *How the Islamic State Uses Video Games t* [Online video]. The Washington Post. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/national/how-isis-uses-video-games-as-propaganda/2015/11/20/3de89b32-8f0e-11e5-934c-a369c80822c2_video.html

Kang, J. C. (2014, September 18). ISIS's Call of Duty. *The New Yorker*. Retrieved from https://www.newyorker.com/tech/annals-of-technology/isis-video-game

Lakomy, M. (2019). Let's Play a Video Game: Jihadi Propaganda in the World of Electronic Entertainment. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 42(4), 383–406. https://doi-org.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/10.1080/1057610X.2017.1385903

"A look at how ISIS is recruiting young Americans through the internet." *YouTube*, ABC News, 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=4FZC0WWzHQs.
"The Media Jihad of ISIS (Propaganda)." *YouTube*, Human Rights Network, 22 Oct. 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ubrvV1yUPnk.

# REFERENCES

Price, P. (2019, August 20). How 'Call of Duty' is transformed into a call for Jihad. *In Subject Matter Areas Counterterrorism Terrorism Study*. Retrieved from https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/counterterrorism/how-call-of-duty-is-transformed-into-a-call-for-jihad/

Segall, L. (2014, September 30). ISIS recruiting tactics: apple pie and video games. In *CNN Business*. Retrieved from https://money.cnn.com/2014/09/30/technology/isis-recruiting/

Sultan, K. (2016). The "ISIS" online media war: A construction of ideology through terrorism. *Pakistan Journal of Peace and Conflict Studies*, 1(2), 1-14. Retrieved from http://stats.lib.pdx.edu/proxy.php?url=http://search.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/isis-online-media-war-construction-ideology/docview/2099256125/se-2

# REFERENCES - IMAGES

Figure 1: Bouzar, D., & Rollie Flynn, C. (Artist). (2017). ISIS Recruiting: It's Not (Just) Ideological. [Image of painting]. Foreign Policy Research Institute. https://www.fpri.org/article/2017/09/isis-recruiting-not-just-ideological/

Figure 2: Taha, A. (Artist). [Image of painting]. Unsplash. https://unsplash.com/photos/aGQigjc_5TA?utm_source=unsplash&utm_medium=referral&utm_content=creditShareLink

Figure 3: (2014). [Image of painting]. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/23/who-behind-isis-propaganda-operation-iraq

Figure 4: Lamp, C. (Artist). First and Foremost, the Most Profound #weapon a Nation or Special Interest Can Possess Is #control over #information. [Image of painting]. Flickr. https://www.flickr.com/search/?text=cyberwarfare