

UNITED STATES: RADICAL GROUPS USING ONLINE TECHNIQUES SIMILAR TO ISIS

Introduction:

Social media and similar platforms are powerful tools that have sustained and advanced the cause of many organizations and movements. The Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIS), considered by some a digital media pioneer, has used social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Telegram and others to successfully organize, recruit, incite violence, fundraise, and disseminate hate. Their techniques, tactics, and procedures (TTPs) have been replicated by radical and fringe groups in the United States (U.S.) to influence and empower like-minded individuals. As these movements continue to mature and evolve, it is instructive to examine the lessons of ISIS's use of these platforms to assess similar trends used by U.S.-based groups as they gravitate toward more secure platforms to recruit, organize, incite violence, and disseminate information.

BLUF:

- U.S.-based radical groups use digital platforms to propagate ideology, recruit members, and possibly incite violence in ways similar to ISIS
- While U.S. radical groups have varying ideologies, there has been widespread adaptation of ISIS techniques, either implicitly or explicitly
- Like ISIS, radical domestic groups are migrating to smaller, more secure online platforms—decreasing their reach but increasing their freedom of operation

Digital Battlefield

A critical portion of today's data universe is comprised of social platforms, message boards, and applications that serve as a public square where ideas are shared, contested, and amplified. Across this diverse set of platforms, proponents of radical and fringe ideologies have carved out communities to discuss ideas and philosophies. In many cases, these online communities have evolved from places where ideas were merely shared and discussed, to online coordination centers for radical or fringe elements seeking real-world change. Their online activities include building organizational support structures, aggressive recruiting efforts, encouraging action, and spreading information or misinformation relevant to their cause. Moreover, what is evident is that radical and fringe groups and organizations have fully embraced social media, leveraging it to conduct nefarious activities while also learning TTPs from other groups making their operations potentially more effective and secure over time.

ISIS – Masters of Online Recruitment and Incitement

ISIS is a prime example of an organization that promoted their online presence to great effect through the use social media platforms. According to a Rand Corporation study, the group used Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to recruit approximately 40,000 foreign nationals from

110 countries.¹ Through these platforms, ISIS would manipulate vulnerable, marginalized, and ideological sympathizers through visual propaganda, inspiring (albeit nihilistic) recruitment videos, and online magazines such as Dabiq. These various forms of media served to radicalize followers, many of whom migrated to the Levant (particularly Syria or Iraq) or remained in their homeland to execute attacks.

When ISIS accounts were mostly shut down and removed because of their radical and violent content by these mainstream social media companies, ISIS redirected their efforts on more obscure (but also more secure) platforms like Telegram. Here, they pushed recruitment and propaganda videos, infographics, and magazine-like content to networks of close followers. These followers would then repost the content back onto mainstream platforms, resulting in widespread reach and consumption of their propaganda. Telegram subsequently became more vigilant in policing this activity as ISIS proliferated its ideology on its platform, and eventually, as on the mainstream social media companies, ISIS affiliated public channels were mostly banned. ISIS and its affiliates remain active on the platform, however, via closed channels. ISIS supporters continue to look for new online venues and are reportedly considering secure block chain messaging apps such as BCM (Because Communication Matters) which allows for the sharing of both videos and photos.²

U.S. Groups Replicate ISIS TTPs

While ISIS is a well-established and centralized group with a hierarchical organizational structure, the TTPs they leverage to organize, recruit, incite action, and disseminate information online appear to have been adopted by several emergent radical domestic groups in the United States. Specifically, we have seen fringe groups like the Boogaloo Bois, Atomwaffen Division, and the newly formed Not Fucking Around Coalition (NFAC) employ ISIS-like TTPs. While the TTPs are often less sophisticated, these groups have engaged in activities that mirror the TTPs ISIS used to project their image around the globe.

Organizing Across Radical and Fringe Ideologies

The Boogaloo Bois is a loosely connected movement with supporters scattered across the political spectrum but with roots in pro-violence, anti-government, anti-authority sentiment. The common unifying factor across the movement is strong support for the Second Amendment, which protects an individual's right to keep and bear arms, and belief that social structure in the U.S. is collapsing, leading to widespread social upheaval and increased federal government oversight.

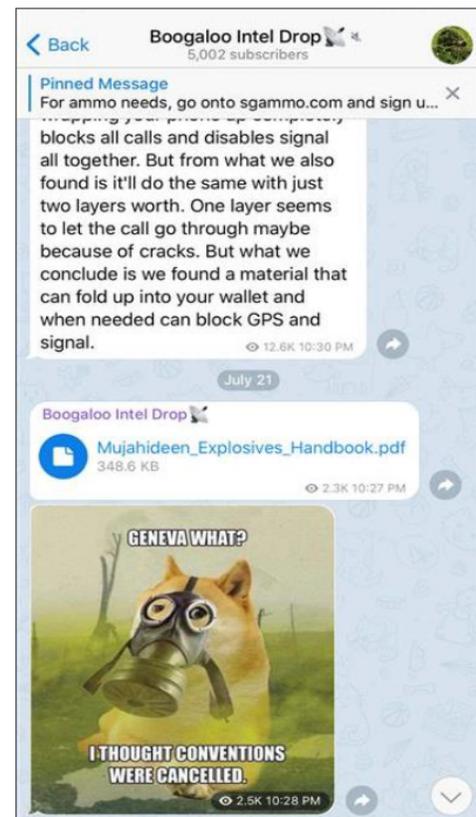


Figure 1

¹<https://www.rand.org/blog/2018/12/isis-use-of-social-media-still-poses-a-threat-to-stability.html>

² https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/v744yy/isis-is-experimenting-with-this-new-blockchain-messaging-app

While many supporters are drawn to the movement because they view the Second Amendment as the safeguard to preserve individual liberties during such a time, many members also actively promote the acceleration of this decline through violence. Similar to the ways in which ISIS supporters were drawn to small networks that provided details about the ongoing struggle for a global caliphate and shared content to inspire support for the cause—such as asking for Bitcoin donations or persuading migration to ISIS territory—proponents of the Boogaloo (violent uprising or civil war) have been drawn to groups where they discuss the deterioration of the United States. For example, accounts across various pro-gun communities on Reddit critique photos of one another’s gear that they will use during the social collapse (commonly displaying the now iconic Hawaiian shirt). Within Telegram, the “Boogaloo Intel Drop” channel unites members by providing resources on topics from hunting, foraging and gardening resources that help prepare for societal collapse, to IED handbooks that previously circulated among radical Islamic networks (*Figure 1*).

Targeting Users through Advertisement, Recruitment, and Indoctrination

By targeting individuals who have expressed shared beliefs or tacit support for an ideology, members of radical groups encourage recruitment by connecting the sympathizers with additional information, thus prompting them to take the next step in supporting a radical organization. These practices were used by ISIS to recruit lone wolves like Syed Rizwan Farook and Tashfeen Malik who were perpetrators of the San Bernardino shooting in 2015. While not identical in nature, similar actions have been noted within fringe communities where propaganda from specific groups such as Atomwaffen (a small, radical neo-Nazi group that advocates for followers to establish their own “cells”), is shared into more generic “pro-white” and “alt-right” Telegram channels (*Figure 2*).

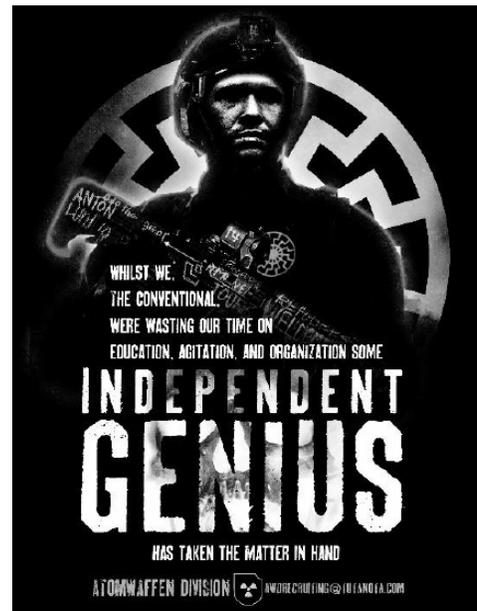


Figure 2

Other radical groups have taken an indirect approach to recruitment by staging marches and rallies to promote their ideology; such actions are often subsequently publicized and used to create new interest. ISIS was known to produce propaganda videos displaying the strength of their movement (e.g., beheadings, ambushes, the destruction of non-Islamic sites, etc.). Similarly, fringe groups within the U.S. can engage in activities such as armed marches or protests that display their strength and the growing size of their following, and they often can rely on bystanders and media outlets to distribute images and videos across the web—free propaganda, in essence. An example of this approach are the recent actions by NFAC, a black-nationalist militia that organized an armed march through Stone Mountain State Park in Georgia. While the group received little prior social media attention, their founder claims the march publicized their name across the internet and had helped establish chapters across the nation (*Figure 3*).

While the NFAC currently has a mainstream online presence, its founder reported the group is heavily censored on Instagram and Facebook, and YouTube may become their new platform. Similar to other radical and militia groups, NFAC will likely look for more low-profile platforms like Telegram to communicate their messages and gain cultural attention while avoiding policing from mainstream social media companies.



Figure 3

Launchpad to Incite Action and Violence

ISIS routinely used graphics and propaganda to encourage lone wolf attacks in the West against perceived enemies. Similarly, domestic proponents of radical ideologies have discussed similar tactics to capitalize on existing tensions and pit opposing groups within the U.S. against one another. In the aftermath of the 2019 New York Monsey stabbing – when an African American man with antisemitic views attacked a Hanukkah celebration – several users within far-right communities across Telegram highlighted how the current tension between the African American and Jewish communities in New York could be exploited to encourage violence between the two groups. One user suggested they canvas Brooklyn and Jersey City with posters that read “*Jews Aren’t White; Jews Were Behind the Slave Trade.*” Another user encouraged the creation of fake, online Jewish personas, which could then be used to insult members of the black community and posted an example saying, “*We need more [Twitter] accounts like this out there. Make an account with a fake email and put 3-4 nasty tweets and just leave it up there forever, don’t even sign back on. RT on some other account so it spreads. Enjoy the laughs.*” In another example, posts appeared on a pro-Atomwaffen Telegram channel in June 2020 advocating doing anything to make the situation worse, whether that would be attacking police, protestors, or journalists (Figure 4).

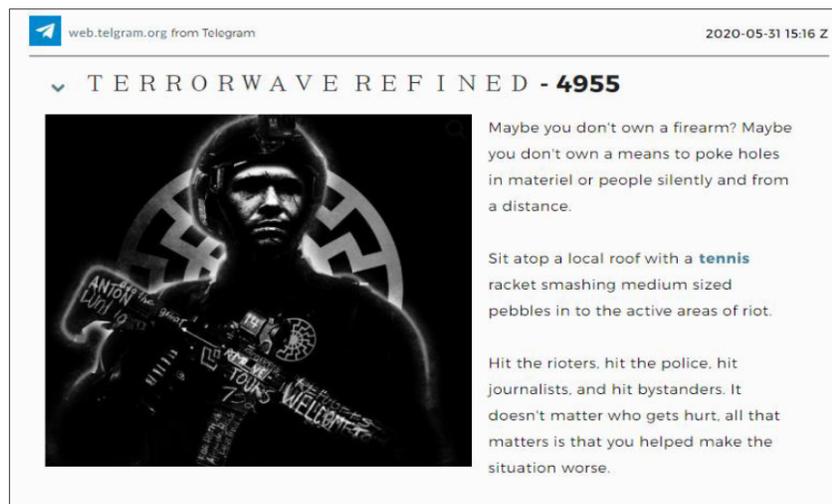


Figure 4

Knowledge is Power When Disseminated Online

Just as ISIS was known to disseminate tactical knowledge online, radical domestic groups engage in similar activities to educate their followers. Again, Telegram serves as a common venue to transfer knowledge related to topics such as operational security, information security, and tactical arms training. The “alt-right” aligned channel “Privacy and Security Goys” is run by an administrator who is knowledgeable in cybersecurity and who provides tips and tricks on managing computer and cellphone security and privacy. The channel discussions include how to use burner phones, encryption programs

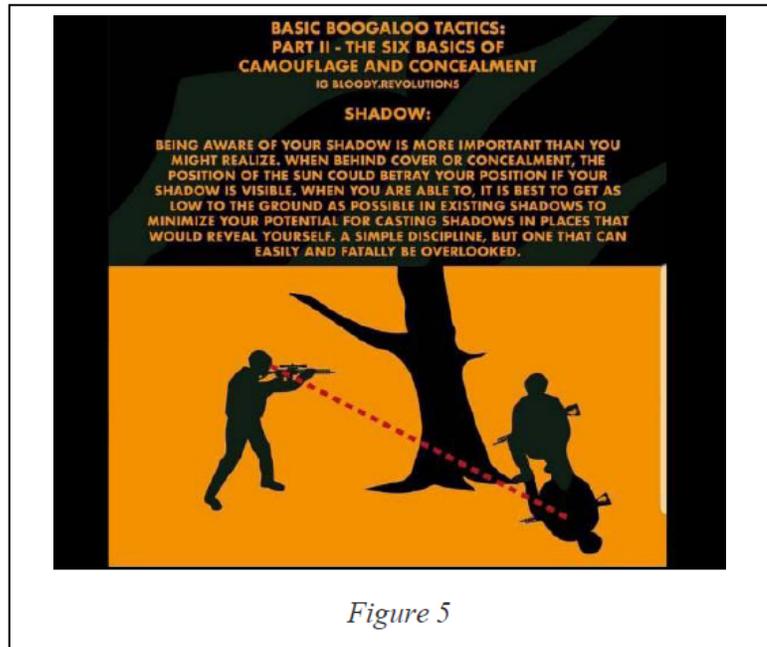


Figure 5

such as Pretty Good Privacy, and scripts to generate secure passwords or encrypt material. These groups have also established hidden services on the dark web Tor network. This channel provides resources to members, teaching them how to obfuscate their identities and messages sent and received both privately and publicly. Additionally, channels such as “Boogaloo Intel Drop” have generated posts teaching tactics and techniques used for gunfighting—complete with visualizations and infographics showing the basics of camouflage and concealment (*Figure 5*).

ISIS Likely to Continue Setting Trends

In the digital age there is a correlation between the amount of influence that a group has across the digital realm and the influence it holds within the mind of the user and thereby the real world. Though the influence of ISIS and their online footprint has waned significantly in recent years, its influence is not gone. Not only do they continue to search for new digital safe havens, the digital TTPs they perfected at the peak of their power continue to shape and influence the online activities of other fringe groups. Despite the decreasing attention that ISIS receives, its online methods and practices merit continued study, as they will continue to serve as guidelines and examples that other groups—either implicitly or explicitly—will seek to follow. Indeed, a historical understanding of ISIS online practices may provide insights and lessons that inform collective understanding of the future online practices and physical trajectory of emerging radical groups, enabling collective action to combat the growth of extremism in the U.S. and abroad.

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