

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: King's College London		
Unit of Assessment: 19 Politics and International Studies		
Title of case study: Countering Terrorism: Researching Jihadist Use of Social Media		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2014 - 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Professor Peter Neumann	Professor of Security Studies	From 2002
Dr Shiraz Maher	Research Fellow / Lecturer, Dept of War Studies / Director, International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation	From 2015
Dr Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens	Lecturer, Dept of War Studies	From 2018
Dr Joana Cook	Project Coordinator and Research Assistant	2017 - 2020
Dr Dounia Mahlouly	Research Associate	2016 - 2019
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014 - 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		

1. Summary of the impact

King's College London's International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR) has carried out pioneering research on Western jihadists' use of the internet. This has been crucial in informing public and political discourse, as well as shaping public policy, on how to counter the presence of jihadist groups online, the importance of online radicalisation, and the potential for counter-narratives. More importantly, it has allowed the world's leading online platforms, such as Google, YouTube and Facebook, to ensure that they do not promote banned organisations such as Islamic State and has resulted in the identification, arrest and detainment of leading Jihadist recruiters in Australia, India, and the United States.

2. Underpinning research

The Syrian conflict has been the most socially mediated conflict in history. In practical terms, this meant that both terrorist movements, and individual actors, were able to exploit mainstream social media platforms to disseminate propaganda, win new recruits, spread disinformation, and build a so-called 'virtual Caliphate.' By the end of 2014 an influential study published by the Brookings Institution estimated that at least 46,000 accounts on Twitter were operated by members, or supporters of, Islamic State (IS). Overall, more than 30,000 people are estimated to have travelled to IS territory to lend material support to the organisation.

King's research has focused on Western jihadists in the Syrian conflict, in which online radicalisation and mobilisation, played an important part. By gathering and archiving significant amounts of freely available online material with already long-established expertise on jihadist ideology and online extremism, King's researchers were able to make important contributions to understanding the way in which jihadist organisations have used the internet to radicalise and recruit individuals.

Specifically, the body of research has involved: i) populating a 'foreign fighter database', in which King's researchers systematically collected publicly available data for ~750 Western foreign fighters who were active on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or Ask.fm, and were posting pictures, videos, tweets, blog posts, and conversations; ii) creating an 'Islamic State propaganda archive' which contains videos, pictures, and other official

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pronouncements by 'Islamic State' iii) the use of Palantir, a powerful analytics platform, to establish networks and relationships between them as well as generate measures of importance and influence; and iv) ongoing reviews of research about online radicalisation and the impact of narratives and counter-narratives.

The objective was to understand the structure, dynamics, and evolution of the jihadist online 'ecosystem' in the context of the jihadist mobilisation for the Syrian conflict. This has resulted in a series of influential peer-reviewed publications and reports, drawing on our knowledge and understanding of the jihadist movement and its ideology, as well as online radicalisation and the use of social media in the context of the Syrian conflict in equal parts.

The body of research produced by King's researchers in these areas have made the following particular innovations and/or new insights:

- It led to the development of a new methodology for measuring 'sources of importance and influence' within foreign fighter networks, making it possible to highlight jihadist 'influencers' who had previously been largely unknown to the public [6]
- It demonstrated that, contrary to much of the media coverage of IS, radicalisation and especially foreign fighter recruitment in the context of the Syrian conflict often had a face-to-face component, and – though important – the role of online interactions could easily be overestimated [2,5]
- It showed that IS' presence on the internet (its 'online ecosystem') was driven and sustained by (unaffiliated) grassroots supporters rather than the organisation itself, while confirming the impression that the group's official messaging was sophisticated and followed a consistent approach towards audience segmentation [1,3,6].

3. References to the research

- [1] Meleagrou-Hitchens, A. (2020), *Incitement: Anwar al-Awlaki's Western Jihad*. Harvard University Press
- [2] Neumann, P. (2016), *Radicalized: New Jihadists and the Threat to the West*. I.B. Tauris
- [3] Maher, S. (2016), *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea*. Oxford University Press, USA, New York
- [4] Winter, C., Neumann, P., Meleagrou-Hitchens, A., Ranstorp, M., Vidino, L. & Fürst, J. (2020), 'Online extremism: Research trends in internet activism, radicalization, and counter-strategies', *International Journal of Conflict and Violence*, vol. 14, no. 2, pp. 1-20
- [5] Mahlouly, D. & Winter, C. (2018), *A Tale of Two Caliphates: Comparing Islamic State's Internal and External Messaging Priorities*. VOX-Pol Network of Excellence for Research in Violent Online Political Extremism
- [6] Carter, J., Maher S., and Neumann, P. (2014), *#Greenbirds: Measuring Importance and Influence in Syrian Foreign Fighter Networks*, International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation

4. Details of the impact

The impact of King's research on the jihadist use of social media is wide-ranging, and has been realised via hundreds of public engagements, including extensive media coverage and personal briefings for policymakers. As a result of this widespread and high-level engagement King's research has led to impact across policy and practice. Below are six concrete examples in which the research has helped to produce tangible outcomes.

Shaping Facebook's counter-terrorism policy and measures

Given that Facebook was one of the main platforms on which hundreds of 'foreign fighters' were found to be operating, the research on influencers and their networks in *#Greenbirds* [6] drew significant attention from the company. Facebook asked King's researchers to help identify ways in which extremist accounts could be identified through the use of linguistic, pictorial, and other markers. Data from the foreign fighter database, together with expert advice, helped inform the

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creation of Facebook's foreign fighter algorithms [A,B]. As a result, King's College London's International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR) now holds a grant from Facebook to develop an 'extremist content classifier', which looks at both jihadist and far-right content. According to Brian Fishman, Facebook's Global Head of Counterterrorism: *"ICSR research has made a significant contribution to Facebook's increased efforts in preventing and countering terrorist exploitation on our platforms"* [A].

Shaping Google and YouTube's counter-terrorism policy and measures

Based on expertise relating to online extremism, jihadist propaganda, and jihadism more generally [1, 2 & 3], King's researchers created a list of key terms, names, and terrorist insignias that Google has used to inform an artificial intelligence tool that detects and removes YouTube videos that are suspected of being jihadist [C]. ICSR has also worked on projects that help Google better understand how individuals might seek out violent extremist content across their platforms. William McCants, Google's Global Lead for Trust and Safety, describes the impact as follows: *"The collaboration with ICSR was a significant reason why Google was able to contain the spread of terrorist material as quickly as it did"* [C].

Development of 'Foreign Fighters Tool' with Palantir

King's researchers assisted the technology company Palantir in understanding the foreign fighter phenomenon and how it manifested itself on the internet, based on research on its ideology [3], patterns of movement and mobilisation [2] and networks of influence [6]. Palantir then developed a software application, which helps clients in government to create network analysis maps. According to Duncan Robertson, Palantir's UK Government Lead, the collaboration yielded tangible results: *"[T]he partnership between ICSR and Palantir led to the... identification of a number of would be foreign fighters by European Law Enforcement Agencies... ICSR's expertise... [made] it easier for law enforcement to detect foreign fighters and terrorists by combining the latest academic insight with cutting-edge technology"* [D].

Impacting Law Enforcement: Jihadist Recruiters in Australia, India, and the United States

The 2014 report *#Greenbirds* developed a new methodology for measuring importance and influence among foreign fighter networks in the West [6]. Applying it to a dataset of more than 200 foreign fighters, King's researchers identified several recruiters, who had previously been largely unknown to the public. This work revealed Islamic State's most influential 'influencer' on Twitter as 'Shami Witness', a 22-year-old from India who was arrested and charged as a direct consequence of this report [E]. In addition, Musa Cerantonio, a self-styled preacher from Australia, was arrested when attempting to travel to IS territory. During a period of bail, he confirmed in a newspaper interview that *"the whole mess started... when the International Centre for The Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence released its report"* [F].

Informing Global Policymakers to understand 'Islamic State's' narrative

King's researchers have consistently shared their findings with policymakers, which has included, for example, Prof. Neumann giving testimony in 2016 before the U.S. House of Representatives' Foreign Relations Committee [G], as well as Dr. Maher giving evidence to the UK Home Affairs and the Foreign Affairs Committees. King's research was also featured in a special 2014 Guardian video documenting their work and impact [H].

Among the most high-level contributions was Prof. Neumann's keynote remarks, alongside UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and US Secretary of State John Kerry, at the 2015 White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism in Washington DC [J]. David Wells, of UNCTED, confirmed that ICSR's contribution was *"crucial"*, especially *"for lower capacity states who had little previous experience in running strategic communications campaigns"* [I].

Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism, 2019-22

Recognising the impact of ICSR's work, the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT), a public-private partnership by Facebook, Google, Microsoft, and Twitter, in 2019 made ICSR its principal academic partner, charged with building a global network of universities and think-tanks. As Erin Saltman, Facebook GIFCT coordinator, confirmed: *"Because of ICSR's impact, I supported the decision to make it the principal academic lead for GIFCT... ICSR will continue to*

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play a pivotal role in building a bridge between private sector practitioners and academic researchers, making responses... more evidence-led and, therefore, effective” [B].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- [A] Testimonial from: Dr Brian Fishman, Global Lead, Counterterrorism and Dangerous Orgs, Facebook
- [B] Testimonial from: Dr Erin Saltman, Head of EMEA Policy and GIFCT Lead, Facebook
- [C] Testimonial from: Dr William McCants, Global Head, Trust and Safety Intelligence, Google
- [D] Testimonial from: Duncan Robertson, UK Policy Lead, Palantir
- [E] '[ISIS propagandist ShamiWitness: Man Charged in India](#)', *Channel 4*, 1 June 2015 [video]
- [F] Safran J, 'Musa Cerantonio: Islamic preacher and radical supporter of Islamic State', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 January 2015
- [G] '[U.S. House of Representatives, Foreign Relations Committee: Countering the Virtual Caliphate](#)', YouTube, 13 July 2016 [video]
- [H] Domokos J, Rees A, '[Jihad, Syria, and social media: how foreign fighters have documented their war](#)', *The Guardian*, 15 April 2014 [video]
- [I] Testimonial from: David Wells, political affairs officer, UN Counterterrorism Executive Directorate
- [J] Peter Neumann speaking at the [White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism](#) (starts at 54'), *DVIDS*, 19 February 2015 [video]