

# Children as the targets for terrorists in cyber space

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## **Abstract**

*Modern ways of communication have enabled terrorists to successfully increase membership and their ranks without direct, physical contact. Internet is important tool which terrorist groups use to indirectly create an important psychological moment of provoking fear and insecurity through cyber space. Virtual or cyber space is perfect and very safe ground for various activities of terrorist groups, such are secret encrypted communication, file sharing, indoctrination and recruitment of vulnerable individuals, fund raising and promotions of their future actions and accomplishments spreading fear among people. Terrorist groups are using cyberspace to propagate propaganda, to place ideological, political, religious ideas, for mutual communication and organization of activities, planning attacks in the physical world, financing. Social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Telegrams have contributed to radicalization and recruitment, primarily of children and young people who accept the principles of terrorists and join their ranks.*

**Keywords:** *Internet, terrorism, children, children's protection on the Internet, cyber terrorism, social media*

## **1. Introduction**

Over the time, terrorism evolved into different forms. One of the most dangerous forms is cyber terrorism. There are many different motives for terrorists to develop cyber terrorist tactics as a weapon of fighting. Internet and computer networks are a powerful resource on which modern society relies. With different cyber space exploration, terrorist organizations have become more effective and unpredictable. The acts of cyber terrorism can be used as a tool in order to inflict damage, take away human lives, to expand fear and panic. Because cyber is an area without borders, attacks can come from any part of the world and they are not limited by physical boundaries.

Cyber terrorism, like any other form of terrorism, has become a global threat that could be a serious threat to the security of states and citizens. The inhumanity, brutality and cruelty, global action, the abuse of religious feelings and religious affiliation are just some of the features of modern terrorism. At the same time, the use of technological achievements is becoming more and more noticeable. Terrorist groups have adopted new strategies and developed new tactics of their struggles and attacks are unexpected, sudden, targets are public and civilian victims numerous.

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The cyber space has provided many benefits in the functioning of the society, but also opened up space for new threats that are transnational and global in nature. The possibility that terrorists through the use of new technologies through the Internet could violate the sovereignty of the states and the functioning of society is becoming more and more real. The cyber attack carried out by well-trained terrorists could seriously disrupt the functioning of the attacked system, lead to damage, but also endanger the lives of people.

From cyber terrorism as an illegal international act, it is necessary to differentiate between the abuse of the Internet for terrorist purposes, such as propaganda, radicalization and recruitment of people around the world.

When it comes to the issue of children's protection on the Internet, there are many dangers, especially on the social networks. Communication with strangers and different forms of cyber violence that children suffer - from harassing messages of inappropriate content, insulting on a religious, racial, sexual basis, setting false information, groups on social networks that aim to insult... all these are problems. Violent and inappropriate content is placed on a large number of sites and on social media and certainly one of the most serious forms of endangering the safety of children is pedophilia, abuse for sexual purposes, the possibility of kidnapping and various blackouts that have consequences for the physical and mental health of children who have been attacked. There is an increase in the number of video games that have the ultimate goal of self-hurting children and depriving their own lives. Nowadays, children also became targets for different terroristic groups in cyber space. Terrorists have realized that the young generation is spending a huge amount of time online, after all, our children are growing up in the new IT era, so that is why they developed online strategies on social networks in order to attract them and gain support<sup>2</sup>.

The most prominent terrorist organization, the Islamic State, recognized the importance of the Internet as a media. Since the outbreak of civil war in Syria and the creation of the Islamic state by a jihadist militant group in the territory of Syria and Iraq, the Internet is increasingly mentioned as one of the weapons in the hands of terrorists. Video footage of war crimes, killing, torture, hanging, burning, destruction of state and private property as well as cultural monuments flooded the "global network". Terrorists gathered around the ISIS propagate the world-wide crime as part of the fear-fearing strategy<sup>3</sup>. In parallel, they use social networking platforms such as Twitter, Facebook in order to recruit future jihadists.

## 2. Islamic state in the cyber space

The terrorist's presence on the Internet is not new. Over the past two decades, the cyber space became more than attractive to terrorists since it can protect their identity, their actions, the location of the potential cyber attack. They can send their messages and gain popularity over the globe. But one terrorist group made true revolution when it comes to influence on the Internet.

In the short period of time, the Islamic state attracted intense attention and caused the reaction of the international community for brutal actions, large fighting successes,

<sup>2</sup> Jonev, K, *Izloženost dece terorističkom sadržaju na Internetu*, Međunarodna Politika, Institut za međunarodnu politiku i privredu", decembar 2017, p. 105.

<sup>3</sup> Awan, Imran, *Cyber-Extremism: Isis and the Power of Social Media*, Social Science and Public Police, Springer, March 2016, p. 140.

the establishment of structures of "power" in occupied territories, the proclamation of supranational "caliphate" which has state-like character, and the ability to mobilize a large number of fighters from the Muslim world and from all over the world. What also made Islamic state becoming noticeable is their activities in the cyber space. The use of virtual space by ISIS has helped the organization brand itself globally. The Internet and social networks were the main instrument for disseminating their ideology and political messages, as well as means of recruiting foreign volunteers and financing, and the control the flow of information from the battle areas.

In 2014, the leader of the Islamic State in that period, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared "global jihad" and called on all Muslims to join the fights in Iraq or Syria or to support jihad at the "local level by using new ways of communication"<sup>4</sup>. The call was specifically focused on recruiting technically skilled individuals such as engineers and hackers. Through the influence of social media, the terrorist group has attracted a significant number of followers. Technically literate members have become part of the "cyber caliphate" or hacker extension of the Islamic state<sup>5</sup>. The ISIS has gained a reputation for its sophisticated use of various media and social media platforms that promoted violent jihad<sup>6</sup>.

The term "cyber jihad" refers to "the use of 21st century technological tools and cyberspace (the environment in which communication between computer networks occurs) in order to promote the notion of a violent jihad against those classified by its followers as enemies of Islam"<sup>7</sup>. Cyber jihad plays a key role in ISIS strategy. Currently, the cyber jihad concept refers mainly to the use of the most popular online social networks. The Islamic State effectively used the influence of social networks and the Internet as a global medium in order to promote its principles, its struggle and its ideals. With the active use of social networks, the terrorist group has managed to reach new sympathizers and fans around the globe.

The centrality of cyber jihad as a tool for recruitment, radicalization, and dissemination of propaganda makes the struggle against ISIS's use of cyberspace no less important than the physical engagement with its forces and the prevention of its geographic expansion.

Al-Furqan Institute for Public Relations Production and the "al-Athzam Agency for Media Production, al-Hayat (Life) Media Center, are main creators of ISIS's media and public promotions<sup>8</sup>. These agencies are dealing with contains such are videos, speeches, promo materials, texts, blogs, and distributing them on the social networks. Great deal of material about ISIS, including speeches and video clips has been translated into more than 10 languages.

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<sup>4</sup> Neumann, P., *The New Jihadism A Global Snapshot*, ICSR Department of War Studies King's College London, <http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/ICSR-REPORT-The-New-Jihadism-A-Global-Snapshot.pdf>, pp. 2-26.

<sup>5</sup> Scott, John, Spaniel, Drew, *ICIT Briefing: The Anatomy of Cyber-Jihad* June, 2016 Washington D.C., <http://icitech.org/event/the-anatomy-of-cyber-jihad-cyberspace-is-the-new-great-equalizer/>.

<sup>6</sup> Gartenstein-Ross, Daveed, Barr, Nathaniel, *The Winner's Messaging Strategy of the Islamic State: Wikistrat Report | Wikistrat*, 2015. <http://www.wikistrat.com/the-winner-messaging-strategy-of-the-islamic-state-wikistrat-report/>.

<sup>7</sup> Hofman, A., Schweitzer, Y., *Cyber Jihad in the Service of the Islamic State (ISIS) Strategic Assessment | Volume 18 | No. 1 | April 2015*, pp. 71-71.

<sup>8</sup> Siboni, G., Cohen, D., Koren, T., *The Islamic State's Strategy in Cyberspace*, Military and Strategic Affairs | Volume 7 No. 1 March 2015, pp. 127-128.

Messaging applications such as Telegram, Viber, WhatsApp and social media, including Facebook, YouTube, Ask.fm and Twitter, were used for video and photo propaganda, among others. As soon as a new platform appears, it is occupied by the ISIS supporters, who often use one application to direct followers to another. The result was the expansion of social media and the spread of influence by the organization. The generation of online support was driven by inactive action, that is, only and exclusively providing support in cyberspace, but through such an impact, young people traveled to Syria and Iraq to join active action on the ground during the military conflict or committed terrorist acts in their home countries.

### 3. Children as the targets in cyber space

The Islamic State differs from other terrorist organizations in terms of transparency, especially when it comes to training, recruitment and indoctrination of children<sup>9</sup>. In the past, terrorist groups and similar armed formations recruited children by force, by kidnapping or blackmail. The success of the ISIS to persuade young people from all over the world to join the fight against the "unbeliever" shows impressive ability and PR machinery that in the long run generate long-term plans and survival strategies. By using the cyberspace, the Islamic State has found a way to create a historical precedent by creating special sites for recruiting, making groups and profiles on various social networks, sharing blogs and take part in discussions in different chat rooms, by publishing an online magazine and bulletins. These propaganda and used psychological methods were effective<sup>10</sup>.

The Islamic State is weaponizing children. ISIS' use of child soldiers appears to be "a multi-layered, complex, dynamic, and emergent systematic practice wherein different players carry out pre-determined assignments and cooperate to achieve the terrorist organization's immediate and transgenerational objectives<sup>11</sup>". In unprecedented way, the Islamic State has managed to assimilate a large number of children, young people and teenagers in its ranks not only from the war-torn regions of the Middle East, but from all around the world.

The recruiters' behaviours and techniques throughout created trust, friendship, and attachment, and ultimately make the potential recruit feel special. The distinction between fiction and reality can be quite problematic for children, especially when it comes to identifying propaganda content<sup>12</sup>.

It is unclear what motivates children and youth to make such an extreme commitment to ISIS. However, the prolonged exposure to a culture of violence, ISIS'

<sup>9</sup> Carter Center (2017), *The Children in Daesh: 'Future Flag Bearers' of the 'Caliphate'* [https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict\\_resolution/countering-isis/children-in-daesh.pdf](https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/countering-isis/children-in-daesh.pdf), pp. 3-6.

<sup>10</sup> Weimann G.(2014), "Social Media's Appeal to Terrorists," Insite Blog on Terrorism and Extremism, 2014, <http://news.siteintelgroup.com/blog/index.php/entry/295-social-media's-appeal-to-terrorists>.

<sup>11</sup> Almohammad, A., *ISIS Child Soldiers in Syria: The Structural and Predatory Recruitment, Enlistment, Pre-Training Indoctrination, Training, and Deployment*, ICCT Research paper February 2018 DOI: 10.19165/2018.1.14 ISSN: 2468-0656 <https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/ICCT-Almohammad-ISIS-Child-Soldiers-In-Syria-Feb2018.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Pavlovic, Z., *Protection of privacy and dignity of children in media space*, Thematic conference proceedings of international significance, Institute of Criminological and Sociological Research, Palic, 2018, p. 93.

structural indoctrination campaign, and the increased probability of experiencing predatory forms of recruitment may influence or elicit such decisions.

Increasing evidences show that the goal of Islamic State is to, by intentionally indoctrinating, radicalizing, and recruiting young people, make a transgenerational “long game.” The active indoctrination represents “the weaponization of children and includes at least three lines of effort: intentional exposure to violence, active incorporation of the Islamic State narrative in educational materials, and Cubs of the Caliphate<sup>13</sup>.” It is important to consider ISIS’ ambitions: children are viewed as the next generation of stronger, better fighters, fighters that will continue to fight in the name of Islam and in the name of caliphate. In order to achieve this transgenerational objective, the training to deployment time period has dramatically decreased. The shortening of this process also seems to stem, at least to some degree, from ISIS’ increased adaptability and efficiency in training child soldiers.

Worldwide, research to give precise results on how accurate the number of children and youth from all parts of the world has left homes and joined the fighting in Syria after communicating with recruits through social platforms has not been carried out. We can only speculate about numbers. But the fact is this is a global problem and needs global attention and finding effective results in order to stop this trend.

#### 4. Online recruiting and propaganda

Members of the Islamic State are the first extremist group to use the Internet and social networks as the most important part of the recruitment strategy that has come to an obvious echo across the globe<sup>14</sup>. This is precisely why the ISIS differs from other radical Islamic groups when it comes to the use of Internet. Their ability to use the Internet and social networks to present themselves in a way that can seem like an attractive option for many young people has never been practiced in such a successful way<sup>15</sup>.

The children, youth, teenagers are most at risk. At the same time, they present the largest group of users of social media. Because of this, the Internet have become an important resource for the spread of terrorist propaganda, but also a way to get in touch with young people who would otherwise not have direct contact with the group. Weimann suggests that those who recruit for terrorist groups can use interactive Internet technology to search for individuals, primarily young people<sup>16</sup>.

It can be assumed that the Internet and social media can play an active role in the process of violent radicalization, mainly through the dissemination of information and propaganda. Until recently, real, violent radicalization that seeks to be effective has been considered to involve more complex social-psychological processes and face-to-face communication with group members as well as other offline factors. The question arises as to whether this has changed with the advancement of technology?

<sup>13</sup> McCue, C., Massengill, J., Milbrandt, D., Gaughan, J., Cumpston, M., *The Islamic State Long Game: A Tripartite Analysis of Youth Radicalization and Indoctrination*, CTC Sentinel 10, no. 8 (2017), pp. 21-26.

<sup>14</sup> Ristori Ch, “Online Jihad: ISIS’s Foreign Recruitment Strategies—Who, What, and How?” Advanced Seminar in Global Studies Carnegie Mellon University, 2016, p. 5, <http://www.cmu.edu/hss/globalstudies/images/cristina-martin-79-400-paper-s16.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> Weimann G. “How Modern Terrorism Uses the Internet”, Washington, Dc: United States Institute of peace, 2004, p. 8.

Social networks like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Telegrams have contributed to radicalization and recruitment, primarily young people. Modern ways of communication have enabled terrorists the ability to successfully increase membership and their ranks without direct, physical contact.

Some groups have made their own online platforms specifically for attracting children and young people, creating content that is popular and appealing to them. The content is reflected in specially designed propaganda material such as texts on blogs for young people, songs, books, photographs, as well as films, documentaries.

The profiles of young people joining the Islamic state are different and differ in their affiliation, religion, family heritage, age, social status, education<sup>17</sup>.

How far propaganda machine goes is the fact that terrorist cyber manipulators use computer games to radicalize children and young people. Video games are a tactical strategy to target the generation that is "computer-wise, media-heavy and video games dependent"<sup>18</sup>.

One of the earliest jihadist video games that attracted worldwide attention came in 2006, called "Quest for Bush" in which players fight against the Americans<sup>19</sup>. The game was created by the Islamic propaganda organization Global Islamic Media Front, close to Al Qaeda. Terrorists have developed games such as "The Stone Thrower", "Ummah Defense I, II", "Maze of Destiny", "The Resistance"<sup>20</sup>.

The Islamic State has exploited one of the most popular video game "Grand Theft Auto 5", or GTA 5 as an inspiration, and made clips of different lengths of embedded modifications. Game-related changes are that players as ISIS soldiers on the battlefield kill and shoot at US soldiers and attack convoys, with lots of explosions. One of the images says that "what's happening in the game, they (ISIS) work in real life, on the battlefield"<sup>21</sup>. Videos are distributed via channel on social networks as well as on the Youtube channel and quickly become viral, ie accessible and visible to a large number of people.

Instead of activities on the dark net or dark web which is not accessible to everyone, ISIS has chosen to operate openly on the social media channels, including Youtube, Twitter, Facebook, and other less well-known social networks that appeal to a Western target audience and in Muslim communities in the West. ISIS is flooding social networks with especially savage and graphic materials of torture, mass execution, beheading, and crucifixion.

The use of the social networks serves a number of purposes, such as psychological warfare and creating a deterrent effect on both a specific target audience in the battle

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<sup>17</sup> Vidino L, Hughes S., *ISIS in America: from retweet to Raqqa*, Program on Extremisms, George Washington University, December 2015, p. 11.

<sup>18</sup> Hoffman B (2006), *The Use of the Internet by Islamic Extremists*, Testimony before the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, RAND, [www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/2006/RAND\\_CT262-1.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/2006/RAND_CT262-1.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> Vargas A. (2006), *Way Radical, Dude*, Washington Post, [www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/10/08/AR2006100800931.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/10/08/AR2006100800931.html).

<sup>20</sup> Okaj M. (2012), *Computer Games and War on Terror*, Institute of Information and Media Studies University of Aarhus, Denmark.

<sup>21</sup> Clauson J. (2014) *INQUISITR, ISIS Uses 'Grand Theft Auto' Mock Up to Recruit and Boost Morale*, Sept. 19, 2014, [www.inquisitr.com/1486558/isis-uses-grand-theft-auto-mock-up-to-recruit-and-boost-morale/](http://www.inquisitr.com/1486558/isis-uses-grand-theft-auto-mock-up-to-recruit-and-boost-morale/).

zones and on Western public opinion, creating a presence and image of size in order to give the impression that the organization is larger than it actually is, disseminating ideology, obtaining financing, and calling for volunteers to join jihad.

One of the main goals of the use of the Internet by terrorists is the spread of propaganda in the form of multimedia communication and provides ideological or practical instruction, explanation, justification or promotion of terrorist activities. Propaganda contains virtual messages, presentations, magazines, discussions, audio and video materials. According to some research, operatives and supporters of the organization produce up to "90,000 tweets every day, there was at least 46,000 independent Twitter accounts, with 200-500 of these accounts active all day, thereby helping to disseminate the organization's propaganda<sup>22</sup>".

The propaganda machinery of the Islamic state on social networks made a real revolution in terms of terrorist groups and their "existence" on the Internet. Using the most popular social networks, they have attracted the attention of various target groups, as well as mass media, who place every message of terror on the public. However, when it comes to children and young people, active propaganda on social networks, the ISIS has created a myth, and the coming to the territory of Syria and Iraq and joining combat as a "one-in-one adventure".

The viral campaigns featuring beheading, crucifixions, burnings, and mass executions distributed through the various media are conducted with unprecedented brutality and cruelty. Moreover, research suggests that once the developmental trajectory has been influenced, there is very little that can be done to de-radicalize this group given current understanding of child development and behavior change. Therefore, primary prevention that disrupts the recruiting, radicalizing, and training pipeline is likely to offer the best outcomes<sup>23</sup>.

Although their content is constantly removed from social media, the Islamic state remains very active online. In the first half of 2016, the social network Twitter has removed more than 200,000 accounts that had touch points with the group, Youtube removed several million videos, while Facebook has established a department with hundreds of people working on the removal of the content set by this terrorist group<sup>24</sup>.

At the European Union level, the Europol Unit - the Europe Internet Referral Unit (IRU) was established. The IRU mission is to support EU member states in marking, referring and removing extremist content, in particular from the Islamic State and Al Qaeda. The unit has close cooperation with Internet service providers. The effectiveness of removing content from terrorists on the Internet is 91.4% and more than 11,000 messages related to extremist content on different social networks<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> Berger J.M, Morgan J, "The ISIS Twitter Census: Defining and Describing the Population of ISIS Supporters on Twitter," Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World, Analysis Paper No. 20, March 2015, [http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2015/03/isis-twitter-census-berger-morgan/isis\\_twitter\\_census\\_berger\\_morgan.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2015/03/isis-twitter-census-berger-morgan/isis_twitter_census_berger_morgan.pdf).

<sup>23</sup> Colleen McCue, Joseph T., Massengill, Dorothy Milbrandt, John Gaughan, and Meghan Cumpston, *The Islamic State Long Game: A Tripartite Analysis of Youth Radicalization and Indoctrination*, CTC Sentinel 10, no. 8 (2017), pp. 21-26.

<sup>24</sup> Scott J, Spaniel D., *ICIT Briefing: The Anatomy of Cyber-Jihad*, 2016, Washington D.C., pp. 6-8.

<sup>25</sup> Europol, 2016, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/europol-internet-referral-unit-one-year/>.

The countries of Europe work on mutual cooperation, as well as in strengthening cooperation with the international community and all relevant actors in order to join efforts to prevent radicalization of youth and the fight against violence in all its forms. An increasing number of countries, through national action plans, plan and implement comprehensive, effective measures to prevent the radicalization of young people leading to violence.

One of the means of a successful fight against the Islamic state, and any other terrorist organization that is present on the Internet and social networks is certainly education. In the UNESCO recommendation in the fight against terrorist content on the Internet, as well as recruitment and indoctrination, the education system of the state, schools and professors, educators must be included much more.

## 5. Conclusion

Children are getting recruited in different forms – from direct contact, from propaganda on social media from which they get inspiration and even by playing computer games, which is more than worrying and extremely dangerous.

Popular social networks have contributed to radicalization and recruitment, primarily of young people. Modern ways of communication have enabled the ability for terrorist to successfully increase membership and without direct, physical contact. Some terroristic groups have made their own online platforms specifically for attracting children and young people, creating content that is popular and appealing to them. The content is reflected in specially designed propaganda material like texts on blogs for young people, songs, books, photographs, as well as films, documentaries.

The success of IS to persuade young people from all over the world to join the fight against "unbelievers" shows impressive ability and PR machinery that in the long run generate long-term plans and survival strategies. By using cyberspace, the Islamic State has found a way to create a historical precedent by creating special sites for recruitment, just by creating groups and profiles on various social networks, blogs and chat rooms, by publishing an online magazine and manuals. These propaganda and psychological methods have proven to be more than successful.

Successful and effective fight against terrorists must include action on the land, on the sea, from the air but also online. Cyber space allowed terrorist groups to spread fear and panic among society but what worries is their success and influence they gain among children and youth above the globe. Although there is no global research on how many children and teenagers went to territory of Syria and Iraq to join the fight, and about the number we can only speculate, what also represent big potential security problem is – how many children accepted the idea of jihad, got radicalized by themselves and what can they potentially do with this "knowledge". Should there be more cases that youth performed terrorist attacks in the cities by building a bomb and instructions they got on the internet, simply by downloading materials? Or if the "big terrorist guy" from Middle East send message that is time to make suicide attack on the crowded places?

In order to decrease the influence on the children of the criminals and terrorist groups online, it is must that international community, states and private sector, IT

companies work together. Eliminating, removing, deleting terrorist content and at the same time education children about cyber security and how to be safe online are first steps.

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