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# Discussing the Islamic State on Twitter

Matteo Colombo  
Luigi Curini

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# Middle East Today

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# Introduction

**Abstract** In the introductory chapter of the book, it is discussed the approach we chose to adopt when discussing IS and social media: rather than focusing on the discourse *from* IS, as usually done in the literature, we will zoom on the discourse *about* IS instead. More specifically, we will look at the way in which Arabic language users on Twitter received, discussed, and re-elaborated the IS narrative. By charting the way in which the messages of IS have been negotiated on Twitter by ordinary Arabic speakers, the aim is to shed new light on the successes and failures of IS online communication strategy among the general Arab public.

**Keywords** IS · Social media · Twitter · Terrorism · Online audience · Arabic public

## 1.1 A TERRITORIAL ORGANISATION WITH A GLOBAL OUTREACH

The Friday prayer ceremony of the al-Nuri mosque of Mosul, held on 4 June 2014, was arguably the most globally broadcast religious function at a Muslim house of worship. The media office of the so-called Islamic State (IS) left nothing to chance. Ibrāhīm ‘Awed Ibrāhīm ‘Alī al-Badrī al-Sāmarrā’ī, the self-proclaimed Caliph of all Muslims, known as Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī, made his first public appearance with a long

black beard, wearing black robes and a turban. The external appearance of the leader of IS resembled that of the Caliphs of the Abbasid age: the golden age of Islam for many Sunni Muslims. The television broadcast of al-Baghdādī's first public presence alternated shots from different angles to make his face recognisable to a large audience. The images of a crowd participating in the function led by the self-proclaimed Caliph became a symbol of the relations between the political and religious community and its leader.

A few months later, the IS organisation became infamous everywhere in the world. Although the terrorist organisation controlled a territory no bigger than Belgium (Gilsinan 2014), its name became synonymous with the mass murder of infidels, the beheading of rebels, the torturing of prisoners, and the destruction of art works. In a way, this was the most impressive result of the IS's media strategy: it was able to turn a local terrorist organisation into a global brand even among its enemies. It should be noted, however, that the violent images which appeared on the world's television screens represented only a small fraction of the IS media production. Since the proclamation of the Caliphate, IS had developed a plurality of messages tailored to different media environments, in which it spread its propaganda and targeted various audiences. Not only did IS make use of traditional media to present its messages, such as video and radio broadcasts and billboards, but it also proved particularly adept at exploiting the unprecedented communication opportunities provided by social media to reach a worldwide audience.

Among this plurality of communication means, Twitter was crucial for the terrorist organisation, as this book will document. Twitter proved particularly useful for IS because it enabled the organisation to disseminate its messages to a worldwide audience with little to no censorship in the first period of its political trajectory. Moreover, journalists routinely cited Twitter as a reliable news source, which allowed the terrorist organisation to exploit its perceived authority in the early days of its use. Not only could the platform be used by IS to spread its message, but it also offered unprecedented opportunities for interaction, so that IS ideologues could learn from users' reactions and adapt their message to increase the organisation's appeal.

## 1.2 A PERSPECTIVE CHANGE ON THE COMMUNICATION STRATEGY OF THE ISLAMIC STATE

To say that IS attracted quite some attention is an understatement. The world watched with awe and shock as the organisation expanded into Syria, assumed control in northern Iraq, and declared the Caliphate in Mosul, all within the time span of just a few months. Politicians, journalists, human rights activists, scholars, and the general public sought to understand this swift rise to dominance. Many turned to the messages promulgated by IS to understand its nature and objectives. Studies on the communication strategy of IS can be usefully categorised into five groups.

The *first* comprises those studies that broadly analyse this strategy (Ammar and Xu 2018; Atwan 2015; Farwell 2014; Fernandez 2015; Gambhir 2016; Ingram 2014; Maggioni et al. 2015; Krona and Pannington 2019; Siboni et al. 2015; Stern and Berger 2015), also by utilising the categories of online marketing (Wiechert 2017) and public relations (Minty 2019). The *second* comprises studies that consider IS communication in specific digital environments, such as Twitter (Badawy and Ferrara 2017; Berger and Morgan 2015; Magdy et al. 2016; Moriarty 2015; Torregrosa et al. 2020; Zahra et al. 2020), Telegram (Shehabat et al. 2017; Bloom et al. 2019) or the dark web (Weimann 2016). The *third* provides a thematic classification of the online IS contents, including both written materials (Droogan and Peattie 2017; Heck 2017; Ingram 2016; Quintan 2017; Toguslu 2019) and images (Winter 2015, 2017). The *fourth* comprises the body of literature which examines the narratives of the IS propaganda with reference to the historical and religious framework behind IS (Pelletier et al. 2016; Pregill 2016; Winter 2017, 2019) and its ideology (Bunzel 2015; Erdem and Bilge 2017; McCants 2015; Quintan 2017). The *fifth*, finally, considers the online media to identify jihadist fighters' online networks (Carter et al. 2014; Klausen 2015).

This book intends to contribute to this debate, but it adopts a unique approach by zooming in on the discourse *about* IS instead of the discourse *from* IS. More specifically, it looks at the way in which Arabic language users on Twitter received, discussed, and re-elaborated the IS narrative. We believe that this shift of focus yields a better understanding of the communication strategy in a media environment like Twitter. The distinct nature of social media entails that political discourse cannot be

controlled by an agent that targets an audience but is shaped through interactions between the agent and the audience. Discussion on Twitter develops through discursive interactions among several accounts that share, discuss, or comment on events or topics. Users are therefore not passive communication targets, but instead actively participate in the discussion through their (re)actions. The success of a communication campaign on Twitter depends on whether users disseminate the contents of a political organisation (e.g. likes, retweets) or express a positive view on the shared propaganda materials (e.g. comments). Users can also decide, however, to ignore the group's propaganda, react negatively to its message, or write about the organisation without engaging with its official discourse. On Twitter, major events (e.g. terrorist attacks) and ideological issues (e.g. independence of a region) are often debated among users without engaging with the official propaganda of a specific organisation. The dynamic nature of Twitter as a medium of reciprocal communication therefore furnishes unique opportunities to analyse not only how IS sought to present itself through its media strategy, but also how this strategy was negotiated by Twitter users.

Our analysis specifically considers how Arabic-speaking Twitter users responded to the Islamic State. This focus reflects the facts that the purported Caliphate was declared in the Arab lands of Iraq and Syria, and that its development was closely intertwined with political dynamics in the Arab world. It could be argued that the Caliphate could not have emerged anywhere else because its historical experience was entirely linked to the Arab world, and the Islamic tradition states that the Caliphate must be founded in Arab land. Within this context, obtaining support from Arab citizens increases the prestige and legitimacy of the organisation, which can go further in claiming that its proclamation of the Caliphate is not baseless, but relies on the popular support of many Arabs.

The Arabic community is thus the most interesting one on which to focus for reasons revolving around the cultural, social, and linguistic continuity between IS and this audience. For IS, Arabs are not like other Muslims; they are the most important group, the only community which must be convinced in order to maintain power. The leaders of IS are Arabs; the official language of the organisation is Arabic; the group gained control of largely Arab-inhabited lands; IS's religious and cultural system of references is often shared with members of the Arab Sunni community. To convey its discourse, IS utilises Islamic symbols which

can be understood by ordinary Arab Sunni Muslims. For example, IS utilises a black banner as its flag, which resembles the banner of Muḥammad and the Abbasids (Bahari and Hassan 2014). Another symbol on the IS flag is the seal of Muḥammad, which refers to the seal utilised by the Prophet of Islam to sign official letters.

These symbols have been always communicated via the use of Arabic as IS's "official language". This is not irrelevant. With its dialectal variants, Arabic is spoken and understood by at least 406 million people (World Bank 2017) between the Atlantic coast of North Africa and the Persian Gulf. And although Arabs commonly speak their dialects in everyday life, most of them can understand each other with some exceptions. Furthermore, all Arabs understand Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), which is taught in schools and is the prevalent language in politics and the news in all Arab States (Mellor 2013, 13). Arabs are bonded together also by common cultural and historical elements (Hopkins and Ibrahim 2003, 4), and politics in Arab states is often shaped by regional trends (e.g. Islamism, Pan-Arabism, Jihadism).

Some authors (Telhami 1999; Lynch 2006) have used the term *new-Arabism* to denote the widespread transnational media network through which Arab citizens are connected and its critical role in forging a transnational Arabic-speaking community. These authors argue that this community emerged thanks to the creation of pan-Arab radio stations (1950s), a prolific entertainment industry (1950–1960s), pan-Arab newspapers (1950–1970s), satellite television (1990s), websites (2000s), and social media (2010s). Today, an ordinary Arab can easily access news about regional events by reading pan-Arab newspapers like *al-Quds al-Arabi*, watching TV stations such as Aljazeera and Al Arabiya, accessing news websites, or reading posts on social media. This new form of Arabism connects to "a supra-national sense of political and cultural identity" (Phillips 2012, 29). In Pintak's words, it is "an 'imagined' community perceived, in large measure, through the camera lens and pen of the Arab journalists" (Pintak 2009, 192). We transpose this concept to Twitter by defining those individuals who discuss the Islamic state on Twitter in Arabic as "the Arabic-speaking Twitter-sphere". In a Habermasian sense (1991), this Twitter-sphere can then be conceptualised as a virtual space in which users focus on the political development of IS from different viewpoints.

Against this background, this book adopts an original approach by analysing the reactions of this audience to the propaganda and ideology of the