

ISIS Use of Twitter to Appeal to Saudis: Experts' Views on Saudi Counter-Measures

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Abstract

The so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has a thorn in neck for many countries around the world. ISIS has made no secret about its desire to conquer the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia via every means possible. One of the medium through which ISIS targets Saudi Arabia is the use of Twitter to exploit Saudis obsessive Twitter use. The aim of this paper to seek experts' opinions on ISIS targeting Saudis via the Twitter and measures taken by the Saudi authorities. To achieve the aforementioned objective, ten experts from the academia, security/cyber security and media and communication background were interviewed. The data was analysed through reflexive thematic analysis with the aid of Nvivo 12 Pro software. Finding of the interviews leads to the extraction of a number of themes. This study is expected to offer insight into the counter-measures taken in fighting ISIS Twitter and, to some extent, social media onslaught, particularly against the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Keywords: ISIS, Daesh, Twitter, Counterterrorism, Saudi Arabia

Uso de Twitter por parte del ISIS para atraer a los sauditas: opiniones de expertos sobre las contramedidas sauditas

Resumen

El llamado Estado Islámico en Irak y Siria (ISIS) tiene una espina en el cuello para muchos países de todo el mundo. ISIS no ha ocultado su deseo de conquistar el Reino de Arabia Saudita por todos los medios posibles.

Uno de los medios a través de los cuales ISIS apunta a Arabia Saudita es el uso de Twitter para explotar el uso obsesivo de Twitter de los sauditas. El objetivo de este documento es buscar las opiniones de expertos sobre ISIS dirigidas a sauditas a través de Twitter y las medidas tomadas por las autoridades sauditas. Para lograr el objetivo antes mencionado, se entrevistó a diez expertos de la academia, seguridad / ciberseguridad y medios y antecedentes de comunicación. Los datos se analizaron mediante análisis temático reflexivo con la ayuda del software Nvivo 12 Pro. El hallazgo de las entrevistas conduce a la extracción de una serie de temas. Se espera que este estudio ofrezca información sobre las contramedidas tomadas en la lucha contra ISIS Twitter y, en cierta medida, el ataque de las redes sociales, particularmente contra el Reino de Arabia Saudita.

Palabras clave: ISIS, Daesh, Twitter, contraterrorismo, Arabia Saudita

Introduction

In the early days of ISIS, the organization used to be confined within the borders of only Syria and Iraq. However, this changed in 2014 with the organisation's declaration of its plan to expand its operations into the neighboring states among which is the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Since then, ISIS has always maintained its desire, through both verbal utterances and physical activities, to conquer the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Bin Khaled Al-Saud, 2017). While ISIS uses various ways and methods to reach out to the Saudi people, one of its standout and most effective media is the Twitter social media platform. The Saudis are known for their preference of Twitter social media over other popular social media platforms making them the most active Twitter users in the entire Arab world with 4.8 million users making up 40 percent of all the tweets in the Arab world. (SAUDI ARABIA AND COUNTERTERRORISM, 2019) This underlines the significance of understanding ISIS use of Twitter to appeal to Saudis and the Saudi government measures to counter that, particularly from experts'¹ opinions.

Few studies have investigated ISIS in the context of Saudi Arabia.

(Abdullah Khaled Al-Saud & Zarea, 2018; Bin & Al-Saud, 2019; Bin Khaled Al-Saud, 2017; Jenkins, 2016) However, there has not been scholarly attention on ISIS Twitter exploitation to target Saudi people and there has not been any attempt to investigate measures taken by the Saudi authorities in countering this obvious threat. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been hailed for its effective counterterrorism measures from the Al Qaeda days to the ISIS (Byman, 2016; Ezzarqui, 2010; Porgess, 2014; Saudi Arabia and Counterterrorism, 2019) In spite of the commendation Saudi counterterrorism measures attract, thus far there has not been any study that seeks opinions of experts in Saudi Arabia on the country's counter measures against ISIS Twitter use to attract Saudis.

Thus, this article discusses experts' opinions on ISIS use of Twitter platform to target Saudis and the countermeasures taken by the Saudi authorities. To achieve this, a total of 10 experts were selected and thoroughly interviewed using semi-structured interview questions. A total of 17 questions were prepared first as general questions but, sometimes, probed further when there was need for doing so. Responses given by experts were recorded, transcribed in Arabic, and eventually translated into English for analysis. The analysis was carried out using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun, Clarke, Hayfield, & Terry, 2019) with the aid of Nvivo 12 Pro software. The analysis consisted of 7 steps which include data familiarization, codes generation, themes construction, themes definition and revision, and producing report. (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2019).

Twitter in Saudi Arabia

Twitter social media networking platform is one of the most popular social media networking sites throughout the world. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is one of the countries with the highest Twitter usage in the world and the highest in the entire Middle East (Saudi Arabia and Counterterrorism, 2019). A few studies have been carried out

¹This study selected 10 experts (5 academics, 3 security/cyber-security, 2 media/information). The experts were selected on the ground of having published works, experience in terrorism communication and being staffs of the Saudi law enforcement agencies.

on Twitter appeal and usage among Saudis which, as described by Winder (2014) demonstrates the growing desire of the Saudi youths to express their views on various social and other related issues despite government's attempt to censor Twitter and hold individual users accountable through legislation and other means. Having realized how difficult it is to regulate Twitter, the government changed its approach by attempting to engage the Saudi population on Twitter by creating accounts for ministries, public institutions and parastatals, high-profile princes, and other officials. As a result, there are 11.27 million Twitter active accounts as of January 2019, the fourth highest in the world after only the United States, Japan, and the United Kingdom. ²Twitter social media networking site is arguably the most popular among the Arab youths in general and Saudi youths in particular. Aissani and Abdullah (2018) studied the reason why the Arab youths have preference for Twitter and whether, gender, age, educational level and the country of origin play any role in the youths' use of Twitter. The study found that the Arab youths prefer the Twitter because of its relative ease of use and enables them to express their views and thoughts freely. In addition, the study also found statistically significant differences in the usage of Twitter among the youths which stem from their age, gender, educational level and country of origin differences. As a result of its widespread and ever increasing popularity among the Saudis, the Saudi government has incorporated Twitter in its dealing with the masses of the country (Al-Saggaf & Chutikulrungssee, 2015).

As shown in the preceding paragraph, the Twitter social media is one of the most popular social media platforms among the Saudis. This plays into the hand of ISIS as Twitter allows the organisation to reach out to as many Saudis as possible. Understanding this basic fact will pave the way for understanding the reason behind ISIS use of Twitter rather than the other social media networking sites to advance the mission of the organisation by trying to appeal to the

² <https://www.statista.com/statistics/242606/number-of-active-twitter-users-in-selected-countries/>

youths of Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Authorities Response to ISIS Social Media Appeal to its Youths
ISIS has made no secret in appealing and attracting the Saudi people (Bin & Al-Saud, 2019). On their part, the Saudi authorities have already realized ISIS encroaching its territories and the efforts the organization has been making to appeal to particularly its youths. King Salman bin Abdulaziz, the current Saudi King, has issued a warning against ISIS back in 2016 saying “The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is determined, God willing, to strike with an iron fist those who target the minds and attitudes of our youth.” (Saudi Arabia and Counterterrorism, 2019). In a different note, the King was quoted in 2017 saying that “We will not allow [terrorists] to distort our peaceful religion. Today we are sending a strong message that we are working together to fight terrorism. ... Today we affirm that we will pursue terrorism until it is eradicated completely.” (Saudi Arabia and Counterterrorism, 2019).

In addition, it has also been reported that the Saudi government has initiated many policies in an attempt to counter ISIS terrorism narratives, particularly on social media networking platforms. For example, one of the earliest initiatives started by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is As Sakinah (Tranquility) Campaign. The major purpose of the campaign is to go on the offensive against radical movements by challenging their fundamental beliefs using social media, infographics, caricatures, as well as challenging hashtags. (Abdullah Khaled Al-Saud & Zarea, 2018) In addition, the Saudi government inaugurated the Global Center for Countering Terrorist Ideology (Etidal) in May 2017. The purpose of Etidal is to become the hub of counterterrorism efforts especially by focusing on promoting media and online culture that is embedded in moderation and the prevention of the spread of propaganda (Abdullah Khaled Al-Saud & Zarea, 2018; (Saudi Arabia and Counterterrorism, 2019). In addition to the launch of Etidal, the Saudi Ministry of Education had also embarked on reversing its school textbooks by ensuring that they do not contain intolerant language as well as regularly monitoring and auditing the textbooks and the entire curricula (Saudi Arabia and Counterterrorism, 2019). Moreover, in 2004 the Saudi authorities have established a rehabil-

itation center called Mohammed bin Naif Counselling and Care Center. Under this rehabilitation center, a programme called Munasahah (counselling) was issued to counsel prisoners who were incarcerated following their involvements in radical and terrorism activities. In 2007, the Center was moved to its permanent location designed with the relevant and modern facilities (Abdullah Khaled Al-Saud & Zarea, 2018; Gonzalez, 2009).

Experts' Views on ISIS Reason for the Use of Twitter

The experts interviewed by this study were also asked about their opinions on the reason for ISIS use of Twitter social media as a tool to help the organisation reach out to the youths, particularly in Saudi Arabia. According to Expert 1, the reason for ISIS use of Twitter is that:

Twitter, by its very nature, is somewhat easy to deliver messages. The message is different from other sites such as Facebook, which requires a trend check between the follower and the followed. Twitter is open; its way of spreading messages is easy. Simple message with few letters and nothing like articles, and these also help to spread messages quickly, they have other channels like YouTube but I think the main means is Twitter.

According to Expert 1, ISIS gives Twitter preference among other social media networking sites due to the relative easiness of exchanging messages and the fact that Twitter has a snowballing effect where a simple tweet may reach thousands of people within a very short period of time. In addition, Twitter is the most appealing social media networking site in Saudi Arabia well ahead of Facebook, Telegraph and other forms of social media. Expert 1 added regarding this point:

Without a doubt, let's take Twitter back a little, meaning that Facebook in Saudi Arabia does not have that spread (like Twitter has inside Saudi Arabia), but Twitter has a very large spread, in America, for example Facebook is the first example (ahead of Twitter). If we look at Twitter in Saudi Arabia, it will be the first and has effect on

many issues, whether it is terrorism issues or the issues of society in general and the observers know this, when there is a hashtag trend this directly become a public opinion issue and the process became the opposite of what was known in the past before the means of social communication became rampant, news usually come through the traditional media and then turn into a public opinion issue. Now, issues start off from social media and spread through the society in the form of a long tape and then the traditional media begins to adopt this issue, there is change here, without doubt. Twitter in Saudi Arabia in particular and in the region around it has become very influential.

The opinion above is also shared by Expert 4 who opines that Twitter is the most influential tool among the Arabs due to its relative speed in spreading a message and Twitter's high concentration of users. The Expert stated:

Twitter, of course, is influential and the most important tools that spread very much in the Arab countries, because Twitter is the best, its messages are direct, short messages with a specific number get to young people more quickly, so as to attract young people quickly. One of the advantages of Twitter is that it's centered, with a very high presence all over the communities intensively, in which all these factors help Twitter in Saudi Arabia to achieve great acceptance.

ISIS showing preference for using Twitter does not mean that other forms of social media networking sites and applications are overlooked by the organisation. It still employs most of the social media networking sites for various reasons, sometimes using a particular medium for some certain forms of messages whereas other forms of messages are channeled through other options. The same expert added by stating that:

True, in the end no matter what method they use Twitter is the medium of publication, because Twitter is textual with images, often time they use Twitter to publish and other sites to publish information,

meaning they start on Twitter and then expand to other ways.

To this expert, he opines that Twitter is the starting point for ISIS when attempting to communicate and reach out to the youths or the public in general which is more the case in Saudi Arabia due to the large number of people using the social media. This is plausible when considering the fact that ISIS only shares the link of the Twitter campaigns some of which are analysed by this study which are more sophisticated and well-organised media contents produced by the organisation. This view is reiterated by the expert in the following words:

We are now talking about their means to spread their messages. We have to differentiate between two things; there is a way to spread this work and there is a way for it to get to larger audience. Twitter is the best way for them to spread their ideologies and messages, but communication between them, there are other methods. They enter the email and write "DRAFT" and the other person comes to modify the DRAFT and write his response and then another person adjusts the DRAFT so that there is no evidence left behind to follow them, this is in use for communication between them.

However, in communicating with the general public, all I saw and witnessed was via Twitter, unless for some YouTube accounts. On YouTube, they post some of their terrorist operations, such as what they post (on YouTube) about the Jordanian pilot when they killed him in a cage. They put it on YouTube and published it. But all these means of communication they operate can be overcome quickly.

In the excerpt above, Expert 1 opined that the Twitter channel is the best medium through which ISIS spreads its ideologies and messages. However, this expert reveals an important revelation which ISIS members use to establish communication among each other through the use of email which is beyond the scope of this research. The expert affirmed that, in terms of communication with the general public or potential recruits, ISIS seems to favor Twitter social media ahead of

other forms of social media such as YouTube, Facebook and so on. This particular point is also reiterated by Expert 3 who asserted that “Twitter is a more attractive medium than any other means of social communication, but the reality now is that ISIS role is very much in diminish”. The expert also added that:

I think the best way is Twitter and through direct communication in general, they hide their names, using fake names, this is the best way I have heard about, it has affected many countries and for that impact, countries have gathered to ban Twitter, because they found it the most dangerous means. Twitter is the best and fastest way for ISIS to spread its ideology.

A number of the experts (Expert 8 and Expert 9) also believe that currently ISIS use of Twitter is ineffective. However, without a doubt, they argue, Twitter used to be an effective communication means through which ISIS used to communicate with the youths in Saudi Arabia. As to why Twitter was or is still effective, Expert 2 clarifies that:

Sure, Twitter is the number one way to recruit whatever recruitment, in our current stage, we believe Twitter is characterized as an open arena, everyone can get away from it, unlike other communication methods that are almost closed, but Twitter means to access information is easy, it is a political tool, and these terrorist groups are completely political. It is easy to put a mark on your post on Twitter and publish it, and you can be searched for easily, for example, you can type ISIS and it will come back with results on ISIS, with their tweets on your page. It's easy for people to follow you and at the same time help you re-tweet your post, twitter remains the best till date. But people began to grow, other people began to like Snap-Chat but Snap-Chat are mostly meant to expose you to people, while people on Twitter look only for tweets, for that, it is easy to be exploited by ISIS and non-ISIS. Global intelligence is now operating and recruiting thousands of people and every possible person opens one hundred accounts or a thousand, and those operating these ac-

counts will say to you, for example, we represent Saudi Arabia and they all do not know the Kingdom and have not entered the Kingdom ever before, but you do not know about them; all are fake names.

ISIS Twitter Strategies

The experts were also asked about ISIS Twitter strategies, the future of the organisation in relation to the use of Twitter and ways to identify the organisation's Twitter messages. In reference to the Twitter strategies employed by ISIS in its attempt to reach out to the youths of Saudi Arabia, Expert 1 claimed that:

Here are two types of terrorist operations: First: Activating the terrorist operations they carry out on the ground. The traditional media unfortunately helped this in the sense that if there is a bombing or a terrorist operation, ISIS will declare responsibility for this event and put on video while other media indirectly publish it and these are the disadvantages of the mainstream media. As for their own messages, there is a group of followers who have a group of people who adopt their ideas, they publish their videos and these followers re-publish them. Also, one of their means is to enter some of the active hashtags and put their messages in them, these are the main three ways of publishing their ideologies on Twitter.

As is indicated in the excerpt above, Expert 1 sees that two media strategies helped ISIS in achieving its communication goals. The expert sees traditional mass media as a catalyst in promoting ISIS and making notoriously known by constantly reporting on the ISIS propaganda and responsibility claims of attacks. The second strategy that helps ISIS in spreading its ideologies is by using some of its members who have large followship. Therefore, once ISIS members publish a message or a video produced by the group, these followers republish the message making it spread widely and quickly. The view of the role of established mass media organisations in promoting ISIS ideology has also been echoed by Expert 6 who stated that:

Those who contributed to the publication of ISIS ideology and promoted it primarily are global news channels and ISIS then exploited this propaganda in social media and recruited 30,000 foreign fighters from 100 countries, according to the UN report in 2015.

As for Expert 2, his view slightly differs from the Expert 1. He opined that ISIS uses what he calls “the hook method” and painting the enemy as anti-Islam that it is the responsibility of the youths to bring glory back to Islam by freeing it from the influence of the enemy and their Muslim cronies. He claimed:

I always say that ISIS follow a theoretical policy called “the hook theory”, whereby they send a message that looks like a tricky food used by the fisherman thrown in the sea: even though they know that it will not catch every fish but at the same time it won't go out of these empty-handed. If you talk to a young man and tell him how the predecessor used to live and how Islam was complete with their presence and that the predecessor is considered superior to his mother and he stands the chance to enjoy these and sleep with these (meaning any lady) and have those ladies to serve him, this is a kind of ideology termed as mobilization of instincts. Some of them will come out of their house to say that their goal is only organizing a mere gesture for ISIS, their belief is that, this life will be for them, and we saw some people selling their images to the media then take women and sell them, although this is haraam and it's a damned act to do, Women aren't yet freed from their captivity not only in Iraq but in Syria also this is the attraction. Or they might quote to you from the strong verses and twist it to you without its context, all these affect, and young people differ in their view of things, but lately everyone is interested in a particular speech and each one feel moved by certain concerns in the same speech. Meaning, you won't be confronted by only one mechanism, for example, they won't tell you to come to where there is pleasure, or come to me and make some gestures, but perhaps if I tell you to defend your sisters being raped by the military Nasiri criminal, this may motivate the young man and feels she's his dependent.

This explains ISIS strategy in its use of Twitter platform to appeal to the youths. This so-called “the hook method” is plausible in the fact that ISIS follows Twitter trending hashtags that the youths are likely to be attracted to such as a high profile football match and so on. But as explained by the same expert ISIS is not keen to use Twitter just for the sake of it. What ISIS is concerned about is just a means of communication that will help the organisation attract the youths in every way possible. He explained:

When ISIS uses twitter it appears effective during the time it occupied Mosul, and during when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi appeared in al-Nouri Mosque and mounted the pulpit of Salah al-Din. The issue isn't with the usage process per se, the conditions warranted such, so Twitter and non-Twitter remain possible means of promoting the idea but depending on the circumstances, whether they are appropriate or inappropriate.

In addition, ISIS well-crafted audio-visual messages are understood to be one of the most potent strategies the organisation employs in its Twitter campaigns. This is the reason why ISIS uses Twitter campaigns which allows it to encrypt its high quality audio-visual messages without making it visible initially as if the organisation uses YouTube to post such messages. In the opinion of Expert 4, he stated:

It is professional, high-level, its design indicates that there is a professional difference in their recent work which is different from their previous work, because the design is not normal, design based on installation of images, audio or video are all thoughtful, and they knew exactly what young people need to become unconscious mind. It has been used for teenagers between the ages 15 to 24 years. Several video tools have been used as one of the tools of deceit. Direct dialogue is one of the most important tools, containing and collecting information about people is one of the most important tools, ISIS has got different types of tools, to the extent that some of their members end up using a single account for their operations.

Expert 4 called the strategy employed by ISIS as “shock and illusion” which resulted in quite a huge success for the organisation. He added that:

I think the strategy of shock and illusion ISIS succeeded in them. The Western media has contributed greatly to its spread and the media of the Arab countries too helped to enlarge ISIS image and then portrayed them as a beast that cannot be defeated. This puts a mental picture of ISIS into people's mind, which in return makes it easy for ISIS to recruit people, as they are being portrayed as a huge beast confronting the whole United Nations. The digital hero portrayed them to the virtual world in a serious dramatic sense.

ISIS as a media terrorist relies on the strategies of shock and illusion and those two strategies became their main goal. Their target group, which is almost 15 to 25 years old age group, ISIS project videos of 3 to 4 minutes to them, played regularly to them in order to gain their utmost focus and reliance through these short videos, their intention is always to attract these young minds through the use of video showing ISIS as strong people and monsters at the same time, these videos are meant to attract them and make them feel that they are looking for more, this is as if they are responding to questions. For that, ISIS relies strongly on direct reaction. Like I mentioned earlier, if you want to recruit a person and talk with the person through unconscious mind, you must be with him so that you isolate him. Isolation requires time, so when you talk to him you should try (as much as possible) in isolating the person. Therefore, among their strategies is isolation policy. Completely isolate the person from the society is living in, this isolation helps ISIS to recruit him and to feed him with terrorist ideas.

According to the Expert 4, there has been improvement in the quality of ISIS Twitter campaigns over the years. The video Twitter messages the organisation produces recently are high definition, high quality and astutely crafted video messages that aims at targeting certain age group i.e. the youths who are likely to be swayed by such deceitful

approach. Another key strategy seen to be employed by ISIS is direct and indirect approach in terms of how the publish the organisation's messages. This is opined by Expert 1 stating that:

There is something (or method) known as straightforward, which is discovering things without any ambiguity, that is, when they conduct operations they declare their responsibility through these accounts. There are other responsible accounts, I think they have publications and they have magazines that they broadcast their messages through them.

Saudi Authorities' Measures in Relation to ISIS Twitter Campaigns

Another aspect the experts' interviews consider is the measures taken by Saudi authorities in tackling ISIS Twitter campaigns targeting its youths. When asked about this issue, Expert 1 believes that the measures taken by the Saudi authorities are excellent and their effectiveness is increasing daily. In addition, Expert 2 believes that the idea of banning ISIS contents on the Twitter was first proposed by the Saudi authorities. He stated that:

There are efforts by the Kingdom in the urban-claim operations, to the extent that they've reached the level of having effect on the most influential parties on Twitter, such as; security agencies in America and Britain are beginning to be affected by these groups. Now they realized that allowing the terrorist groups on Twitter is causing harm to the world rather than Twitter. In this area, the Kingdom needs to be recognized and sincerely thanked, for its global alliance against ISIS because the kingdom is part of the advocates.

The expert believes that it is the efforts of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia that brought the Global Coalition together which then started to put pressure on the Twitter and other social media organisations. The expert continues to argue that the process and the measures taken by the Saudi authorities are largely effective. He added that:

The process was largely effective, using a strategy that was comprehensive, and this contributed to the success of its efforts. The proposal was diverse, the partners in its implementation were almost all and the reforms that were taking place in the country are all to counter these thoughts and confront and discard those who responded to it. I say, it's easy for me to fight someone who declares war against me, compared to someone who inspires people and tells me that he is with me while he stabs me in the back. The difficulty comes from this person, but the evidence of the effectiveness of the Saudi efforts is that even the endemic people are being exposed and brought naked to the people. And in general, the atmosphere is good and thankfully, efforts are diverse and it's difficult to limit this area, but overall it is very effective.

The expert stated two different measures taken by the Saudi authorities particularly in dealing with the individuals involved in promoting ISIS ideologies and agenda in the Kingdom. The expert recalls two kinds of measures namely preventive measures and therapeutic measures. In his words, the expert stated:

There are preventive measures and therapeutic measures. Preventive measures are awareness-raising through the media and social media, through schools and mosques about the danger of ISIS and other terrorist organizations, carried out by religious scholars, educators, sociologists and various models (role models) of society. Efforts are being made at a preventive and therapeutic levels in implementing Sharia and forge alliance with countries in the implementation of special programs, such as the Center for Counseling, by making great efforts at various levels, involving experts and scientists in all fields, and officials in security and competence agencies.

According to this expert, these measures have been largely successful and effective in tackling ISIS Twitter campaigns that have been targeting the booming youth's population in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Similarly, Expert 4 also agrees that the measures taken by Saudi

Arabia in tackling ISIS Twitter onslaught are successful and effective. However, he cites different dimensions from those mentioned by Expert 3. Expert 4 stated that:

Our first goal is to confront intellectual cyber of terrorists through the Internet so that they can be exposed, expose their lies and tricks in the campaigns they lead either against the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia or against the religion, which we have set for them an attempt to incite public opinion on Saudi Arabia, whereby we also targeting a certain segment who sees itself as oppressed until the targets are achieved (or terrorist). So ISIS grow in frustration and give people hope, by doing so, they believe they've used driving factors and attractiveness in their point of view, if you go to ISIS. We will rather give you your truthful worth, because the ISIS that you follow lives in a virtual and imaginary world, a person who follows ISIS finds himself as a very important one, sees himself as a decision maker and that he will change the map of the world. Our role in the As Sa-keenah Campaign is to monitor the terrorist and extremist content, and after analyzing it we direct it to the competent person to refute these findings.

As to the challenges faced by the Saudi authorities in working with the social media networking organisations, Expert 2 added that the Saudi authorities are not usually getting their ways in working with the Twitter organisation. He stated that:

You are communicating with Twitter to close accounts that are dangerous to national security. Of course, the response here is subjected to so-called selective policy. Here is the ruling for Twitter: Is this account of an extremist or non-extremist? For example, ISIS has a long-term strategy that works as a counter-government account and appear to be advocate of freedom of opinion. This is usually the biggest percentage that is not possible to be closed. So, only accounts that they believe are dangerous are closed.

He further believes that the Saudi authority's major policy in dealing

with the ISIS Twitter campaigns is to create awareness among the targeted youths and the rest of its citizens. For this reason, the Saudi government has placed priority to the education of the youths and families and a host of other things. The expert continues adding that:

The government has focused more on awareness, because it's everyone's first and last weapon. The government has also been very sensitively educating, giving the families signs to expose extremism in their own family, and providing a number to call when reporting any terrorism activities going on meant to encourage people and putting up rewards and these are the driving factors to fight terrorism. They opened center for counseling for treatment, help the family to treat their son and educate the family to report their son before entering into the terrorism crime, also the center of moderation, which is raising awareness. The Kingdom has tended to raise awareness and try to prevent the occurrence of terrorism and also after being in extremism there is a rehabilitation center for counseling treatment which is treated intellectually.

I worked with the (team of) preventive programs, intervention programs of prevention and programs of intellectual treatment after (individuals might have fell in) the involvement in terrorist thought. In the sense that the Kingdom is the leading and the first in the fight against terrorism, the leader in the Arab Alliance and the Islamic Alliance to combat terrorism, the Kingdom is a model to combat domestic terrorism, also a model to Arab and Islamic countries and at the global level as well.

As stated in the excerpt above, the expert believes that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is the leader in many fronts when it comes to the fight against ISIS particularly in the intellectual dimension. He believes that the Kingdom is a model to other countries in fighting terrorism which he, personally, has been part of many programs designed by the Saudi authorities. The expert added his experience on his involvement with the intellectual and cyber fights against ISIS.

He elucidated further saying that:

On Twitter, I have worked on raising awareness very much, I have raised the level of awareness of communities and families and several well established and specialized training courses have been arranged for teachers, specialists and interested individuals so that they can easily discover the terrorist activities. For example, there are many terminologies used by the ISIS when you observe properly, like paying attention to a person who begins with the illusion thought (in his speech) of ISIS orientation. Also, is the behavioral change of people, such as isolation from reality, the other point is attraction, a person might feel attracted to world of illusion, as if he was entering a real world, whereas, it's absolutely different from the world in which he lives. Another thing is, conducting studies on how to detect initial indications of how an individual has got involved with terrorist groups, Al-Munasah Center (Center for Counseling) has contributed to raising awareness among families, where some families went back to seek refuge from them. These measures are very effective and evidence of this could be seen when a member of ISIS was eliminated in the Saudi Arabia in 2017, so there's no record of ISIS successful terrorist operations in this year.

Similarly, Expert 5 is also of the believe that the measures taken by the Saudi authorities are of tremendous success particularly when one looks at the successes ISIS made in recruiting young Saudis some years back. He backs his claim with statistics stating that:

After the organization's plans have been thwarted and its effectiveness eliminated, there are scattered groups of sympathizers and dormant cells that carry out certain operations, especially in conflict areas where the power of the state is absent. As for the Kingdom, while the organization succeeded in recruiting 1542 young Saudis in 2013, only 22 young men were recruited in 2017, while in 2018 failed to recruit any young man. This indicates the erosion of the effectiveness of the organization as evidenced by the strength of the awareness message carried out by the Saudi government at all

levels.

When asked about the specific measures taken by the Saudi authorities, the expert added that the Saudi authorities have taken measures at three different levels that include community awareness, monitoring social media published contents, and by holding meetings, coordinating efforts and building international and regional alliances. He puts it in the following words:

The Saudi government works on three tracks: the first concerns community awareness and involves all stakeholders to contribute to this work. Second, the Kingdom shall monitor what is published through the security authorities and with the participation of the technical authorities and take the appropriate measures against those who are implicated in such acts. Third track: The Saudi government is coordinating with all countries to cooperate in thwarting this propaganda through holding meetings, coordinating efforts and building international and regional alliances. The Kingdom is a founding member of the international alliance against ISIS, also as the Islamic Alliance, as well as the establishment of research centers and confrontation centers such as Etidal, tranquility and other efforts.

According to the expert, all the three measures taken, as mentioned in the excerpt above, have made tremendous impacts in tackling ISIS influence, particularly on Twitter and other social media networking sites. He believes that among the three measures taken awareness is where more government emphasis goes which the government of the Kingdom has been doing through the means of broadcasting, and centers it opens that have been fighting against ISIS ideology and agenda. He further stated that:

Awareness has been employed, about the threat of terrorism, through the variety means of broadcasting. There are short messages, short films, info graphics and designs, in addition to the use of more than one language. There are many organizations working in this field. There are Etidal (moderation), the Islamic alliance, the center of

intellectual war, the right and the guidance and many other centers that fight this thought.

In addition, the same expert reveals that the Saudi authorities have been currently working on a new policy they call “immunity plan” which involves several ministries, other public institutions, civil societies as well as several other community and religious stakeholders. He mentioned that:

It is sufficient to say that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has worked on a national plan to address the organization calling for a “immunity plan” in 1436H which involved all concerned bodies, including the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, the Ministry of Information, the Interior Ministry, the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, Many of the concerned parties, and the Presidency of the State Security is currently drafting a comprehensive national strategy to combat extremism and terrorism.

Other experts, such as Expert 6, Expert 7, Expert 9 and Expert 10, are general in their responses on Saudi authorities' measures in tackling ISIS Twitter threats. For instance, both Expert 6 and Expert 7 claims that the Saudi government employs some measures which are identifying ISIS accounts and platforms and help in shutting them down, and creating awareness on the dangers ISIS poses to the Saudi society and Islam. Expert 7 added that the Saudi government also commits heavily in producing scientific studies on ISIS movement and ideology.

Saudi Authorities' Efforts against ISIS Targeting its Youths via Twitter

The Saudi authorities' efforts against ISIS targeting its youths through the Twitter campaigns are another aspect this research asked the experts about. When prompted with a question on this, Expert 1 responds in the following words:

Of course, the most important thing is the element of awareness and the element of positive messages. One is the “Center of Intellectu-

al War". The center carries out the opposite attack that Terrorist groups have misguided ideas and in one way or another they associate them with religion and try to mislead people. The center of intellectual war takes these messages and refutes them. And prove the lack of validity of those messages and clarify the moderate intellectual approach. The other thing as mentioned by the centers that contribute to the discovery of these accounts and writing reports until those accounts are being disabled.

Likewise, Expert 10 also is of the view that the best the Saudi government does is creating awareness and using schools, colleges and universities. Similar view is also voiced by Expert 2 who mentioned that the government of Saudi Arabia creates awareness among the youths through various institutions. He said:

The most important thing that the Kingdom is doing now is the awareness raising process, the development of strategic plans to fight against it. We now have awareness programs in the Kingdom aimed at youth and school students based on:

1. *Promoting sense of nationalism*
2. *Promoting Islamic, national and social values*
3. *Strengthening national identity.*

The other thing: psychological immunization: statement on the danger of terrorist groups and their negative effects on Islam, Muslims and security, and we quote what is happening around us. The participation of all governmental and non-governmental organizations in these campaigns is not limited to the general administration of intellectual security, but also different efforts such as the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Information and the Ministry of Islamic Affairs. Other institutions also participate, also, the establishment of independent non-profit institutions such as the Center for Intellectual Warfare. Research centers have made efforts and research councils have also made efforts too, they are more than one, and I do not forget the youths' effort in social media in the area of awareness, all of this is counted within the Kingdom's efforts in this area.

The comment made by Expert 2 above gives a detail account of what the Saudi government does on its part to prevent ISIS from targeting its youths through the Twitter campaigns. The view offered by Expert 6 slightly differs from the above. He claims that the Saudi government formulates proactive programs that aim at protecting the youths of the country through the education sector. The expert stated in his words that:

Provide proactive programs to protect youth in the education sector; media, mosques and social media, and contribute to the establishment of community institutions that help families to continue and solve the problems of their children before entering into crime.

Expert 9 also believes that the Saudi government engages in follow-ups, creating awareness and monitoring of all changes within its society. On the contrary, Expert 8 thought that Saudi government efforts in that regards are countless. The government is doing everything at all level to stop ISIS from attracting its youths which the expert believes the Kingdom is already distinguish in that.

Discussion

The interview entailed 17 questions as the core. However, being a semi-structured interview, some interviewees were asked further questions in order to probe deeper when the researcher feels the need for that. As shown at the beginning of this chapter, all the ten (10) experts fulfill the criteria set by the research for them to inform this research. The first major theme extracted through the experts' interviews are the strategies employed by ISIS on Twitter and social media networking sites to persuade their target. Some of the experts (Expert 2) interviewed by this research believes that ISIS target individuals with certain characteristics that include those lacking religious knowledge, dealing with some sorts of psychological, social or familial issue. This view was also stressed by Awan (2017) where he found seven common characteristics of those who fall into ISIS trap which include cyber mobs, loners, fantasists, thrill seekers, moral crusaders, narcissists and identity seekers. These conditions make

the youths susceptible to ISIS Twitter campaigns. Also, as highlighted by some of the experts interviewed (Expert 2 and Expert 4) both revealed that the contents of the messages sent by ISIS are usually very attractive and for those individuals with religious zeal end up believing what ISIS says. This view is supported by Pellerin (Pellerin, 2016) who upon reviewing works on terrorists communication found that among the recurring themes in the extant literature is terrorist groups such as ISIS use of religious scriptures to support their ideologies and activities. Similar views were echoed by Al Ibrahim and Shi (2018), Sahin (2017). Many youths fall into such trap due to the lack of proper religious guidance and end up joining ISIS organisation. Usually ISIS likens its activities with what the earlier Muslim generations or what Prophet Muhammad PBUH or other Prophets did. The success of the campaigns largely depends on the use of social media, particularly Twitter, as pointed out by the majority of experts interviewed. This view has also been pointed out by various studies (Al Ibrahim & Shi, 2018; Blanquart & Cook, 2013; Bowyer, 2015; De Cuia, 2015; Lang & Al Wari, 2016; Pellerin, 2016; Şahin, 2017; West, 2016; Wu, 2015).

As for the strategies employed by ISIS to appeal to the youths of Saudi Arabia, the experts interviewed by this research stated their personal views on what each believes is the strategy employed by ISIS. Some of the experts pointed out to the use of high quality audio-visual contents as part of the strategy employed. Other views given by the experts include what one expert called “the hook method”, the use of digital gaming sites, “shock and illusion” and so on. Although a number of studies look at the strategies employed by ISIS in its social media dealings and the Twitter medium in particular (see: Alfifi, Kaghazgaran, Caverlee, & Morstatter, 2018; Ceron, Curini, & Iacus, 2019; Maggioni & Magri, 2015; Veilleux-Lepage, 2014), however, none of these researchers see the strategies from the point of view of the experts consulted by this study. Therefore, it should be recommended for the future research to look into this views raised by experts, particularly with reference to the Saudi context.

The final finding of the interviews is related to the measures taken by the Saudi authorities in tackling ISIS Twitter campaigns target-

ing its youths. The experts interviewed by this research offered their different responses. However, the overwhelming majority cited the Saudi response in two categories which are preventive and therapeutic measures. The first entails educational and awareness programs offered by various institutions and educational and learning institutions. The second is a subject of rehabilitation programs offered to those youths who found themselves involved with ISIS. This finding is in line with that made by Madhian (2017) in his study of ISIS and Boucek (2008) in his study of Al Qaeda.

Conclusion

The objective of this paper is to discuss the opinions of experts on ISIS use of Twitter social media platforms in order to attract Saudi people and what kind of countermeasures the Saudi authorities take in combating such threat. To achieve the objective of the paper, 10 experts were interviewed and their responses were analysed through reflexive thematic analysis using Nvivo 12 Pro software. The findings made from the analysis led to the extraction of a number of themes that include ISIS Twitter strategies in the context of Saudi Arabia, reasons for ISIS use of Twitter, Measures taken by Saudi authorities. This will give new insight into ISIS Twitter threat and counterterrorism measures in relation to that.

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