

The Baghdadi Net

November 2019

'The Baghdadi Net': How A Network of ISIL-Supporting Accounts Spread Across Twitter

By
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The Baghdadi Net

November 2019

Executive summary

Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIL) supporters fanned out large amounts of Arabic content across Twitter all through the week in the wake of the news surrounding the death of Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. Many accounts were exhibiting strong and multiple signals of automated behavior¹, spawning every hour, on the hour, and Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) researchers monitored and tracked these accounts, and their tactics for the past week following the news. Twitter, and accounts specifically designed to report ISIL activity, were limiting some of the effects of what researchers were calling the ‘Baghdadi Net.’ However, it was clear the accounts were able to generate again, sometimes seconds within a takedown period, and spread video, and audio, as well as new ISIL-news content. Many accounts used western avatars, linked to real people, as well as hashtags that were trending across the Middle East and North Africa, including those being used in the Iraq and Lebanon protests. Latching on to trending topics is a well-documented tactic by ISIL and other groups to increase impressions and overall reach of content. As of Friday, the accounts were tweeting out audio content produced by al Furqan media heralding the ascension of the new ISIL leader Abu Ibrahim al Hashimi al Qurashi.

¹ Researchers and academics struggle with interchangeable terminology in regards to accounts that exhibit strong and multiple signs of automated and semi-automated behavior, like bot, sock puppet, sybils, and cyborgs. See Growa, R. and Guilbeault, D. 2018. “Unpacking the Social Media Bot: A Typology to Guide Research and Policy.” Policy & Internet. “The etymology of “bot” is complicated and ambiguous. During the early days of personal computing, the term was employed to refer to a variety of different software systems, such as daemons and scripts that communicated warning messages to human users (Leonard 1997). Other types of software, such as the early programs that deployed procedural writing to converse with a human user, were eventually referred to as “bots” or “chatbots.” In the 2000s, “bot” developed an entirely new series of associations in the network and information security literatures, where it was used to refer to computers compromised, co-opted, and remotely controlled by malware (Yang et al. 2014).”

The Baghdadi Net

November 2019

Key Findings

- Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) researchers identified 145 accounts exhibiting strong and multiple signs of automated and semi-automated behavior spreading Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) content as part of a coordinated campaign across Twitter in the wake of Abu Bakr al Baghdadi's death on Sunday. Over the course of the past five days, some 590 accounts were identified by ISD researchers, as well as other Twitter channels, with an average of 118 accounts regenerating daily. The accounts exhibiting strong signs of automated and semi-automated behavior were tweeting out key propaganda ISIL ideology, attacking other Salafi-jihadist groups, reiterating al Baghdadi's vision, and venerating the fighters within the group's ranks. As Twitter responded to take down these accounts, and other groups on the platform attempted to similarly blunt the effects of these accounts by reporting them, new accounts were being launched every few minutes. ISD researchers tracked many of these accounts into Friday, and a new swath of accounts exhibiting strong signs of automated behavior were developing and spreading content as of this briefing note's publishing.
- The 'Baghdadi Net' identified by ISD illustrated just how groups, and other users could maneuver, and exploit gaps in the detection of automated and semi-automated accounts, which have been revisited by tech companies in the wake of events like the Christchurch massacre. Overall, the tactics used by accounts showing strong signs of automated and semi-automated behavior, were not new, or innovative, but their abilities to continue to push out branded-terrorist content, and in Arabic, the lingua franca of Salafi-jihadists, proved that Twitter is still struggling with how to deal with terrorist accounts on its platform. Researchers identified proprietary software that

The Baghdadi Net

November 2019

was aiding 'The Baghdadi Net,' namely TweetItBot and IFTTT. TweetItBot is a Telegram bot that supports sharing content from Telegram directly to Twitter. Many companies have indicated that encrypted platforms have become the primary locus gathering point for extremist and terrorist group supporters, and hence content levels have gone down dramatically on their platforms. However, with tools such as TweetItBot, groups still have the capacity to spread terrorist content at high speed from encrypted channels onto more public platforms. IFTTT is a software that can automate tasks as posting content to several channels simultaneously, and is used by marketing professionals, as well as news outlets such as the New York Times and others.

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- The network of accounts used proprietary software, namely TweetItBot and IFTTT. TweetItBot is a Telegram bot that supports sharing content from Telegram directly to Twitter. Many companies have indicated that encrypted platforms have become the primary locus point for extremist and terrorist group supporters, and hence content levels have gone down dramatically on their platforms. However, with tools such as TweetItBot, groups still have the capacity to spread terrorist content at high speed from encrypted channels onto more public platforms. IFTTT is a software that can automate tasks as posting content to several channels simultaneously, and is used by marketing professionals, as well as news outlets such as the New York Times and others.
 - As one account would go down, reported by the community, or identified by Twitter, another would go up with the exact same content, and hashtags within moments. ISD witnessed regeneration of the same accounts on several occasions, and documented it through screenshots. This could mean a number of the semi-automated accounts were being sold to marketing firms, or third parties on the internet's disinformation black market. The account @Report_ISIS, an Arabic group reporting ISIL accounts across Twitter and claiming to be part of a program managed by United States Central Command, similarly claimed to have reported 590 accounts

The Baghdadi Net

November 2019

during this week long time period. Many of those accounts were active again within minutes, and sometimes seconds, through proxies that were followers of the originally-reported accounts showing strong signs of automated and semi-automated behavior. ISD was following 75 of these on Thursday, with more becoming active as this briefing note was being finalized.

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- Many of the accounts showing strong signs of automated and semi-automated behavior tweeted replies to threads and articles started by CNN Arabic, Russia Today Arabic, Al Arabiya, and journalists affiliated with those news outlets. This strategy worked on several occasions, with other users commenting on the new pieces produced by those respective outlets engaging with the accounts exhibiting automated and semi-automated behavior.
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- The accounts used a broad range of hashtags for trending topics, which began specifically with #Baghdadi and #Erdogan_Created_alBaghdadi, and descended into trending topics such as #This_Age-Taught_Us_Injustice, #Memories_of_Elementary_School, #Eventador_Rental_Cars_Dubai, #A_Indian_Child_Falls_In_Well, #Marry_Sudanese, #Salute_Hillal. This eclectic mix of hashtags ensured that ISIL content was a part of almost of the trending topics talking places across the Middle East. It also included hashtags specific to the Iraq and Lebanon protests, including #Lebanon_RisesUp.

The Baghdadi Net

November 2019

The Baghdadi Net

Analysis

On Saturday evening United States President Donald J. Trump released a cryptic Tweet through his personal account that read “something very big just happened!” and launched a chain of events that led to a Newsweek journalist breaking the news around the death of terrorist ideologue Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. The news similarly brought to life 145 Arabic Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) accounts showing strong signs of automated and semi-automated behavior, which fanned out content across the platform, tagging popular media outlets, journalists, and latching themselves onto trending topics.

The ‘Baghdadi Net,’ as researchers have dubbed it, formed and activated as a Twitter community of pundits, academics, journalists, and extremism researchers began speculating about the death, as well as its impact on the group. Hashtags sprung up around al Baghdadi, ISIL, and other terms affiliated with terrorism become launchpads for these accounts to share terrorist content. The Institute of Strategic Dialogue (ISD) began monitoring and tracking these hashtags, and the 145 accounts exhibiting strong signs of automated and semi-automated behavior that were part of the central ‘Baghdadi Net’ responding to these hashtags and spreading official propaganda, which included media, speeches, and photographic content as part of the online conversation. Over the course of the past five days, some 590 accounts were identified by ISD researchers, as well as other

Twitter channels, with an average of 118 accounts forming daily.

Networks of automated and semi-automated accounts such as these have received increased public attention over the past four years, as there has been more and more public scrutiny, and conversation about misinformation, disinformation and propaganda on social media platforms. While most of the attention has been focused on Russian-backed interference in the 2016 US elections and the 2016 Brexit vote, ISIL was one of the first terrorist groups to pioneer swarming across platforms and the use of automated and semi-automated accounts to do so. This recent rebirth, signals the ability of ISIL supporters to still control accounts on Twitter, and amplify their narratives in ways which still demonstrate their effectiveness as Salafi-jihadist propagandists.



The Baghdadi Net

November 2019

Dissemination tactics

These accounts — many of which were formed in the years prior to al Baghdadi’s seminal speech in 2014 from the heart of Mosul, establishing a “Caliphate,” and doing away with the artificial borders of the Sykes-Picot agreement — spring-boarded to life, tweeting ISIL-content in some instances every second and minute, with the same content, the same language, and the exact same series of hashtags. While Twitter did much to take them down within the first 24-hours after the announcement of al Baghdadi’s death, new accounts continued to activate a week after the news broke. ISD researchers were tracking the accounts late into Monday evening, and the accounts seemed to keep spawning, and fanning out more and more diverse ISIL-branded content under a diverse array of hashtags. The accounts showing strong signs of automated behavior seemed, in many ways, to be adapting to take down strategies, and in



A video posted to Twitter by @carlasoosa



A video posted to Twitter by @alibhai920Q

some instances instructing other accounts how to get around censors and monitors reporting them.

The account @kievan123 presented a four-step process to other users on how to present ISIL, and Salafi-jihadist content to musrikun, individuals that reject the oneness of God. The account instructed others to use allegories as the primary narrative vehicle to spread propaganda. For instance, rather than rigidly stating a person is a kaffir, a disbeliever, use allegories to spread such a message. The account used the example of al wala’ wal barra’, the hard-line Salafi-jihadist concepts of loyalty and unloyalty. Instead of using the terms, which are often tied to keyword searches for ISIL content, the account suggested using an allegory of “pollen from flowers” that attracts the “bees to suckle,” and if the flowers do not have “honest pollen,” the “bees will go elsewhere.”

As one account would go down, reported by the community, or identified by Twitter, another would go up with the exact same content, and hashtags within moments. ISD witnessed this on several occasions, and documented it through screenshots. Many

The Baghdadi Net

November 2019



A video posted to Twitter by @brenssallal

of those accounts were activate once again within minutes, and sometimes seconds through proxies that were followers of the originally-reported accounts. ISD was following 75 of these on Friday, with more being identified as this briefing note was being finalized. Many of the accounts shared al Baghdadi’s last recorded video, and focused on the military successes of ISIL, as well as the atrocities committed against Syrians during the nine-year conflict. Similarly, many of the accounts shared ideologue-specific content that was celebratory of the legacies of Usama bin Laden, Abu Mus’ab al Zaraqawi, Abu Mohammad al Adnani, the now deceased spokesperson for ISIL, and al Baghdadi.

The accounts that were a part of the ‘Baghdadi Net’ were using property software, namely TweetItBot and IFTTT. The tweets by these accounts were either tagged “TweetItBot” or “IFTTT” underneath them. TweetItBot is a Telegram bot that supports sharing content from Telegram directly to Twitter. Many large social media companies have indicated that encrypted platforms have become the primary locus gathering point for extremist and terrorist group supporters, and hence content levels have

gone down dramatically on their platforms. However, with tools such as TweetItBot, groups still have the capacity to spread terrorist content at high speed through encrypted channels onto more public platforms. IFTTT is a software that can automate tasks as posting content to several channels.

The primary hashtags the accounts were focused on were very specific to the Arab World, including the Saudi football league, as well as the popular protests in Iraq and Lebanon. #Erdogan_Created_alBaghdadi — a trending hashtag in Saudi Arabia and Jordan — was flooded by accounts that had Western-style names such as “Karen,” or the “SaxonYouth,” which was an account that was linking itself to the Peterborough Youth club in the United Kingdom, and sharing the ISIL-affiliated news blasts from al Amaq news agency. The accounts had scant followers, and were primarily being followed by other marketing, or automated-like personalities, however, in some instances they were being followed by verified, official Twitter accounts. The certified England Rugby Twitter account, with more than 1 million followers, was following @Lollipop57778519, affiliated with a user dubbed “Ahmad al Nahdi,” who was tweeting out ISIL-branded videos that included a wheelchair-bound fighter kissing his children goodbye before going on a “martyrdom mission against the Nusayri [Crusaders].”

Extremist narratives

All of the ‘Baghdadi Net’ accounts were focused on the legacy of al Baghdadi. His image, his video speeches, and his audio content, were all being repurposed for the sake of amplifying the Islamic State message. The messaging based on a selection of the content that featured al Baghdadi suggested that the glory of the Islamic State

The Baghdadi Net

November 2019



A video posted to Twitter by @chaz4321

The Days and the Punishment of the Righteous.” The video’s title was graphically overlaid on a still image of a serene lake, and was written poorly in Arabic. Other versions of the video were titled “A Message to the Soldiers of Hayat Tahir al Sham and Jaysh al Ahrar.” The content was created out of an al Baghdadi speech directed toward leaders and fighters of Hayat Tahrir al Sham and Jaysh al Ahrar, two ISIL-opposed Salafi-jihadist groups, and featured his distinct voice and cadence saying it is important “to know what you are fighting for. Yes, know what you are fighting for. You are fighting under the cover of the jahiliyya,” which is a period predating Islam and considered by many theologians as an age of ignorance. This was shared by many other accounts within the ‘Baghdadi Net,’ and the two versions of the videos had a combined viewership of 22,500 as of late Monday evening. In total, the ISIL videos — roughly 10 different pieces — posted by the accounts showing strong signs of automated and semi-automated behavior received more than 70,000 views.

was not in its leadership but in its will to continue the fight. Whether it was other nonbelieving Muslims, the taghut, in English the tyrants, or other Salafi-jihadist groups, the semi-automated and automated accounts of the ‘Baghdadi Net’ seemed to be focused on reminding Twitter, as well as the general public, of the strength, and the lasting legacy of the group, through the words of its now deceased leader.

One central piece of ISIL content 10 percent of the accounts were sharing, was a video dubbed “A Voice Production Titled:



@los3000104 posted a link to ISIL content via Google Drive

The Baghdadi Net

November 2019

While some accounts were relegated to only tweeting out written content, others were frequently posting similar video content. This video content was held on two accounts, an account called @Terwpi_ and another @brenssallal, both accounts served as repository for the other accounts showing strong and multiple signs of automated and semi-automated to use their videos. These videos were branded ISIL content, which included a very specific piece of ISIL content that highlighted God’s word as their guiding principles. The piece was titled “Some of the people are Muslim and some are Kaffirs [apostates],” and it featured out context, theological content, supporting the killing of apostates, and specifically, highlighting the differences between those “who fight in God’s name, and those who fight in the name of Taghut” [tyrants or tyranny].

The ‘Baghdadi Net’ accounts also engaged in posting content with an odd set of hashtags on Twitter that allowed their content to spread beyond those interested in simply al Baghdadi or specific ISIL-related topics. The accounts frequently used the same Arabic hashtags in one tweet, and those were *This_Age-Taught_Us_Injustice*, *#Memories_of_Elementary_School*, *#Eventador_Rental_Cars_Dubai*, *#A_Indian_Child_Falls_In_Well*, *#Marry_Sudanese*, *#Salute_Hillal*. Hillal, a Saudi football club, played an important match on Saturday night, and the accounts attached a lot of their content to this particular hashtag. Similarly, companies, such as Aventador Rent a Car in Dubai were hashtagged as part of the outreach by these accounts. This increased the chances a number of different audiences would see the content, and ultimately interact with the content. However, it should have also seemed been a potential marker for Twitter to identify these accounts in much more coordinated fashion, as it played an integral role for ISD researchers.



It was clear to ISD researchers that many of the accounts were formerly used for marketing. Many of them had previous tweets from 2012, and 2009, that were in marketing jargon, like “I made \$574 today working a few hour [sic] from home!” followed by a link. One account retweeted “#NobodyLikes Muggles” by a Lord Voldemort account — the villain from the Harry Potter book and movie series. Overall, the accounts exhibited a mixture of Arabic, and English, and the written Arabic content was in and of itself a strange amalgamation of vernacular and misspellings in some instances. Many of the semi-automated accounts, specifically those tagged IFTTT, had previous tweets affiliated with previous marketing campaigns, suggesting that they were likely being sold and bought on an internet black market.

As Twitter began taking down the accounts from the initial 48-hours, ISD researchers witnessed new accounts with the same hashtags and new video content get posted. Repository video accounts also began to reappear, and continue to repost more content for other accounts to use in their tweets. It was clear to researchers that

The Baghdadi Net

November 2019



reach audiences and remind them of ISIL is tantamount in this current period. In the words of ISIL supporters, fighters and leaders, the group is *qadimoon*, advancing, and is *bakiya*, staying.

Twitter was not prepared for the announcement of the death, and the potential for ISIL supporters online to exploit gaps in the platform's identification techniques. The use of accounts exhibiting strong and multiple signs of automated and semi-automated behavior is not new for ISIL, and similarly a key component of current misinformation, disinformation and propaganda campaigns. The 'Baghdadi Net' is continuing to thrive, and is currently still posting content across Twitter. The network signifies a new era for a post-al Baghdadi ISIL. During this period, without the charismatic leadership of al Baghdadi, or his respective spokesmen, ISIL will rely on these tactics, specifically mass diffusion of content, on popular platforms, through accounts exhibiting strong and multiple signs of automated and semi-automated behavior. With much of ISIL central command either dead, or in disarray, the ability to spread content easily and quickly, was paramount to strategically. Hence, the 'Baghdadi Net' was a smart, cheap, and easy workaround for showing the continued support of ISIL narratives publicly, as well as responding to the celebratory narratives of ISIL enemies online. While some will argue that the use of these accounts exhibiting strong and multiple signs of automated and semi-automated behavior cheapens the ideology, reducing it to a cheap marketing ploy and campaign, however, the ability to

The Baghdadi Net

November 2019



About the Institute for Strategic Dialogue

ISD is an independent organisation that upholds the highest ethical standards. Our independence guarantees us the freedom and responsibility to only pursue projects that comply with the core aims and values of the organisation – to challenge extremism and hate globally.

Our strategic direction and policies are governed by an independent Board of Trustees.



About the Author

Moustafa Ayad is the Deputy Director of International Technology, Communications and Education at the ISD. Moustafa is currently leading the relaunch of the Against Violent Extremism Network (AVE) — the largest, and oldest, global network of former extremists and survivors of extremist attacks — in the US and Canada. He has advised the UN, the Foreign & Commonwealth Office of the United Kingdom, the US Department of State, and other global and regional actors on the strategic use of counter and alternative narratives.

Moustafa's previous experience included designing and deploying youth, elections, and alternative narrative creative campaigns in conflict and post-conflict environments across the Middle East and North Africa. Moustafa has worked with regional experts, community organisations, media outlets, and regional-global production hubs on the creation of multi-platform creative content aimed at disrupting and denigrating extremism draws online and offline. He has experience working in environments such as Iraq, Yemen, Syria, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey.

