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All ye unbelievers...

It may be surprising to introduce a text on Jihadism with a quotation from a text of the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel. But it is reminding us that a lack of critical thought is *not* a recent phenomenon:

„But there is still another way of proceeding upon which criticism must especially fasten; the one that gives itself out to be in possession of philosophy, which uses the forms and vocabulary in which great philosophical systems are expressed, goes in for lengthy debates, but is at bottom only an empty fog of words without inner content. This sort of chatter, though lacking the idea of philosophy, gains for itself a kind of authority through its very prolixity and arrogance. Partly this is because it seems almost incredible that such a big shell should be without a kernel, and partly because the emptiness is in its way universally understandable. Since there is nothing more sickening than this transformation of the seriousness of philosophy into platitude, criticism must summon up all its forces to ward off this disaster.“¹

Replace philosophy with Jihadism research these thoughts may remind us of a sector of contemporary academia still claiming influence in public discourse...

Since we will again analyze IS' online activity a short remark on al-Qa'ida, Jabhat al-Nusra, HTS, etc. is necessary (see below). Just quotation:

„A branch if al-Qaeda in #Syria has gained ground in the ongoing fight against rival. While the world has been focused on #ISIS & its „defeat“, note how #AlQaeda has been left alone.“²

Leaving aside that it was not „the world“ being focused, the truth in this Tweet is that research has to turn to other Jihadi subcultures, too.³

There was a widespread assumption that IS⁴ was in decline without understanding the power of the phenomenon that is known as IS. One pundit declared:

1 To be found in Hegel's introduction on *The Essence of Philosophical Criticism Generally, and its Relationship to the Present State of Philosophy in Particular*.

2 On Twitter: @Ehsani22 on January 2, 2019 (retrieved January 3, 2019).

3 And not in an attempt to conceal the former failures in the analysis of IS to reclaim their „authority“.

4 Propaganda based acronyms like ISIL or ISIS show the inability of mainstream ISISology to grasp the development of the Islamic State far beyond Greater Syria and Iraq. This „big shell“ is a desperate attempt to avoid getting tempted by a real understanding of the dynamics and drivers of Jihadism online and offline.

„However, despite its terrorist grandstanding, the Islamic State has been in unambiguous decline since mid-2015: its territories have shrunk; its rate of incoming foreigners – once a flood of men, women, and children – has dwindled to just a trickle; and, on top of that, dozens of its senior leaders have been killed. Besides losing territory, experience leaders, and a steady flow of recruits, there is one more indicator of the Islamic State’s decline that has been largely overlooked: its propaganda.“⁵

Leaving aside the parochialism trying to make out a lack of *European* fighters a decisive indicator for *European* experts, this paper demonstrated that the „largely overlooked“ factor does not yield data for a prove of decline. And there are more declarations of pundits:

„One of the first signs of their changing fortunes came in mid-2016, when the caliphate’s audio-visual capabilities temporarily dropped off a cliff online, its propaganda dissemination network on the Telegram app failing almost simultaneously. In the aftermath of this collapse, the group recovered, continuing to make propaganda (and lots of it) and adopting more resilient distribution tactics. Still, a new and less productive norm had emerged.“⁶

And providing some more fancy infographics trying to build some credentials of being empirical researcher they continued:

„Considered in aggregate over the course of the last year, the data show that the Islamic State’s on-line productivity fell steadily by about five percent a month between February and September 2017 (see Figure I). From the end of September through December, though, the previously steady decline accelerated precipitously: By October, the group’s output levels had collapsed by more than 50 percent, falling by a further 17 percent in November, and 23 percent in December. In early 2018, it exhibited something of a recovery, with a 68 percent increase in productivity in the month of January that left its overall output not dissimilar to what it had been four months earlier. In February, though, online output once again dropped – albeit nowhere near as rapidly as had been the case in the fall and winter of 2017.“⁷

Surprise: IS didn’t disappear! Much to the dismay of our pundist. So they had to put out another declaration:

5 Charlie Winter, *The ISIS Propaganda Decline* (<https://icsr.info/2017/03/23/isis-propaganda-decline/>) (retrieved January 3, 2018).

6 Charlie Winter/Haroro J. Ingram, „Terror, Online and Off: Recent Trends in Islamic State Propaganda Operations“, in *War on the Rocks* (<https://warontherocks.com/2018/03/terror-online-and-off-recent-trends-in-islamic-state-propaganda-operations/>) (retrieved January 3, 2019).

7 Ibid.; for the critique of the data analysis of mainstream Jihadism research see the recent publications of Ali Fisher (e. g., his contribution in *World Wide Warriors*, to appear in March 2019).

„recognise that the territorial collapse of the caliphate does not constitute its full defeat as the jihadist ideology remains alive“⁸

Another Surprise: No analysis of the former declarations on IS' online operations! And after many years the al-Qa'ida related subculture appears again on the screens without any attempt to explain the former neglect of this subculture.

And other pundits are declaring:

„With the collapse of the so-called caliphate and the morphing of the proto-state back into an insurgency, the virtual presence of Islamic State is now one the ways for the group to maintain a link with its international audience and supporters. Nevertheless, after a peak in the years 2014-2015, IS' media production has also sharply declined, reflecting military setbacks that have included the targeting of high-profile media figures within the organisation. The group has also faced online push-back due to increased monitoring of jihadist content by social media and web companies.

Notwithstanding these setbacks, IS has shown itself able to maintain an enduring online presence, with its propaganda still reaching sizeable audiences. In addition to its attempts to circumvent the removal of posts, accounts, groups or pages on social media, IS has diversified its outlets exploiting alternative platforms as safe havens for its material.“⁹

There is a „decline“ – no reliable proof exists for – and at the same time there are: diversification, safe havens, enduring online presence, etc. But we solemnly declare there is a „pushback“. An „empty fog of words without content“, let's say it with Hegel. Or to adopt another saying of Hegel: Since there is nothing more sickening than this transformation of the seriousness of research into platitude, criticism must summon up all its forces to ward off this disaster.

To stop people saying these line could be read as personal attacks we may return to the first sentence of Hegel's text:

„In whatever domain of art or [speculative] science is employed, criticism requires a standard which is just as independent of the person who makes the judgement as it is of thing that is judged.“¹⁰

8 Lisbeth van der Heide/Charlie Winter/Shiraz Maher, *The Cost of Crying Victory: Policy Implications of the Islamic State's Territorial Collapse* (<https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/ICCT-VanDerHeide-Winter-Shiraz-The-Cost-of-Crying-Victory-November-2018.pdf>) (retrieved January 3, 2019).

9 Laurence Bindner/Rapael Gluck, *Trends in Islamic State's Online Propaganda: Shorter Longevity, Wider Dissemination of Content* (<https://icct.nl/publication/trends-in-islamic-states-online-propaganda-shorter-longevity-wider-dissemination-of-content/>) (retrieved January 3, 2019).

10 See Hegel, *The Essence*.

The standard for Jihadism research is simple evidence based research. We will apply this standard in the following parts of this paper as a modest attempt „to ward off this disaster“.

A disturbing phenomenon is the resurgence of European language¹¹ videos and material on IS-related¹² *telegram* sources addressing Western governments etc. This may be understood as a clear proof that Western European-language sources address not only European/North American supporters, but also Western governments, agencies, and media.

Let's start with the infamous „lone wolves“ (*al-dhi'āb al-munfarida*)! The *al-battār* media outlet issued a new „alarm ... to target the quarters of the infidels“. This „alarm“ is targeting explicitly civilians in Western countries and Russia, esp., during „Christian holidays“. For those bragging about the defeat of IS because of the loss of territory the answer is quite clear: „You cannot stop the march of The Caliphate, no matter what And as long as we have established the path of it jihad, and as long as the sons of this Ummah spilled their blood for the sake of Allah The life of our nation is with our blood.“ I. e., the caliphate of IS is military jihad, not a territory to be lost or conquered.¹³



A spin-off from the IS-weekly *al-Naba'* is the video series „Harvests of the soldiers“ (*ḥiṣād al-aj-nād*), started as a series of infographics in the journal as a video by the *wilāya Saynā'*. It is an animated video-style infographic publishing the weekly ‚successes‘ of IS operations with a standard introduction, showing a very dark violent visual combat-style presentation with English subtitles. Out now is No. 26, end of December 2018.



11 Arabic is already a European language used at places experts don't move around.

12 In the IS ecosphere there are not only so-called ‚official‘ statements of importance.

13 And this call to action has been issued in Arabic, too, a proof of the still multilingual structure of IS communication (see below).

A multilingual video of this new group of videos is *Mécréants_de_l'humanité* published by *al-ḥayāt* Media Center combining at text and audio level the driving force of a French-language *nashīd* with subtitles in Arabic and English, at visual level combining the texts with a wide array of cruel scenes intensifying the threats of the texts and identifying the enemies of IS, at theological level all the keywords of IS theology of violence are brought together spanning von Christianity to non-IS Sunni Muslims to Shiite Muslims to Buddhism.

The proclamation of a withdrawal of US troops from Syria by president Trump has immediately caused a response, e. g., by a video by two media outlets, the *'abd al-faqīr* and *al-battār*, titled „The Fighting has just Begun“ (*al-ān al-ān jā'a al-qitāl*).



Starting from the alleged victory in Iraq in 2003, claiming that IS will fight until they pray in Rome. The video tells about internal discussions in the US, the withdrawal of the SDF forces, etc., creating the impression IS is still successfully fighting. Combining news and combat scenes, sometimes they even are referring to the history of the crusades. Turning to a list of actions like burning buildings, woods, etc. the video is charged by emotions by an English-language *nashīd* and a final scene of beheading prisoners of war, their heads rolling on the ground.

The third video to be discussed is called „Just Remember: It's still Burning“ (*mā tazāl multahiba*) by the IS-media outlet *tarjumān al-asāwiri*:



Evidently to the former videos titled „The Flames of War“ the dominant visual element of this video are the flames burning everything beginning with president Trump (referring to him announcing the withdrawal of US troops; see above), then turning to a roaring lion, the symbol for IS-fighters, combat scenes, and a résumé by the authors: „They have anticipated they can't fight against us forever. The US-withdrawal because IS is defeated is turned around to a victory of IS in English. The video is subtitled in English, English text bits are interspersed in all of the videos. Former Obama is cut into the video to prove that the former withdrawal from Iraq did not work, is to be regarded as a flight or escape „and in sha Allah will soon the flames of war come to America“, as the video tells us. The background *nashīd* ends with a repeated *bāqiyya*, „[IS] will last.“

This final word indicates the persistence of the IS theology of violence, coded in the video as Jihadi mentality:



There is an increased communication of IS addressing a ‚Western‘ audience in non-Arabic language that may indicate an increasing risk of operations on the ground, a risk only understood if you turn away from mainstream Jihadism research.

And don't forget: the Arabic-language media production of IS is still running strong:

1) No. 163 of the IS-weekly *al-Naba'* is out having their usual military information from Western Africa to Khorasan¹⁴, summarized in another „Harvest of the Soldiers“ (*hiṣād al-aḡnād*) infographics (see above). The journal includes some articles on theological matters, a recent add-on to the military news.



2) advertising a new *nashīd* with the title „Palestine, the revolution of the martyrs“ (*filasṭīn thawrat al-shuhadā'*).



14 That is the reason why it is not appropriate to use ISIS and similar acronyms any more (as it has been in the past).

3) the Internet radio *al-bayān* issued the news report No. 26 in January 2019.

الدولة الإسلامية
الأربعاء 26 ربيع الثاني
1440

إذاعة
البيان

أخبار اليوم

4) the audio course *al-walā' wa'l-barā'* (association and dissociation), one of the central tenets of IS-theology of violence now out No. 20.



5) *al-A'māq* is issuing news on a day by day level.



6) Many, many Arabic language posts, videos, audios disseminating the message if IS.

The IS media structure is best described as follows:



All the media outlets shown here are mentioned in this research paper. Only the ‘traditional’ - in Jihadi terms – of *al-Battār* has to be added, an audio and video outlet.

Evidently „a less productive norm“ appears out of the fog of the experts „chatter“: productive, but maybe at places the experts are not able to find.

The unofficial media outlets close to IS produce ambitious videos, e. g., the recent „Come out to Revenge“ (*hubbū li'l-tha'r*) by Muntaṣir Media showing the attack on women wearing Hijab and Niqab coded as attacks on „sisters and mothers“ by Arab security agents, e. g., from the Moroccan DGST, countered by attacks on airport, e. g., 2016 in Istanbul.



Arabic-language videos may also call for attacks in Western Europe:



From the video *Āsād fursān al-balāgh wa‘l-i‘lām* on electronic warfare online evidently referring to truck attacks in Western Europe by the media outlet *al-battār*.

Ignoring the interconnectedness of this swarm-like communication by the Jihadi subculture of IS means restricting the abilities of law enforcement agencies to detect, prevent, fight and persecute Jihadi operations. To begin with, the „unambiguous decline“ narrative has to be thoroughly criticized to fill the „empty shell“ with a kernel.