ISIS in Florida

by Christopher B. Hopkins

There are countless high school students in South Florida who are fans of the Miami Heat, Jay-Z, and South Park. It would seem implausible that any one of them, so distanced from the Middle East, might convert to radical Islam, appear in a *jihadist* video, and detonate a suicide bomb in Syria. Yet that happened in 2014. How does such a seemingly normal young man, born in West Palm Beach, turn into a terrorist?

Floridians of all ages have turned to violence in the name of ISIS. Last summer, a man dressed in tactical gear appeared in a terrorist video warning viewers that they will "never destroy the Islamic State." The video did not originate in places like Mosul or Fallujah; it was filmed last summer in Homestead, Florida. The video continues, "we are now on U.S. soil, Florida… there are a lot of us too." Fortunately, a tip from the Palm Beach Sheriff's Office to the FBI led to this man's capture after he purchased galvanized nails from Home Depot for a remote-detonated bomb. In July 2015, another man near Gainesville shot at police and yelled, "I am ISIS… I'm going to kill you." Unquestionably, terrorism has returned to Florida.

This current terrorist assault is novel since it reaches us without anyone crossing our border or invading our airspace. Instead, the threat streams through the internet in 140 characters called a tweet. ISIS has a motto, *Baquya wa Tatamaddad* (Remaining and Expanding), and it uses social media to achieve that goal. According to the Department of Homeland Security, "ISIS aggressively exploits social media in order to recruit fighters, disseminate propaganda, and trigger attacks in the West." Each day, 200,000 pro-ISIS tweets are sent. ISIS has 50,000 - 70,000 supporters on Twitter of which 2,000 accounts "hyperactively" spread propaganda. ISIS may only have a digital presence inside our nation but it can still effectively tap into vulnerable and unstable people who create a real-world threat.

How does ISIS use social media to threaten and recruit? To answer this question, we first must understand the origin of ISIS and its internet-based strategy. ISIS first achieved global attention as a faction known as "Al Qaeda in Iraq" but, by relentlessly spewing videos of beheadings and other cruelties, the group became too violent and uncontrollable for Al Qaeda. In 2014, the group broke away and declared that it was *caliphate* (an area controlled by an Islamic steward) known as *Daesh* or the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Sometimes it is identified as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), referring to several countries along the eastern Mediterranean. Regardless of the lands it occupies, ISIS has swarmed the planet via social media with calls-to-arms directed to Muslims and siren recruitment messages to converts who seek belonging, purpose, or an outlet for violence. In hip parlance, ISIS is "branding" terrorism as a product.

So what is ISIS' strategy on Twitter? According to George Washington University, ISIS employs a three-tiered social media campaign: first, there are "nodes" which create content. Second, "amplifiers" re-Tweet the nodes, "favorite" specific posts, and circulate Twitter lists of jihadists. Third, "shout out" accounts pop up by the thousands to promote new accounts and spread content. These accounts are frequently suspended yet immediately reappear with waves of followers (@Abdul_Aliy_4 reappears as _5 and so on). This distributed method of attack effectively spreads the message while minimizing risk for the messenger. In a final step, ISIS "spotters" use hashtags and other searches to locate and coax exploitable Twitter users into encrypted chats for recruitment to fight as *mujahideen* or emigrate on a *hijrah*. According to the UN, "the internet and social media play significant roles in radicalizing youth, rather than as a source of positive change."

Back in the U.S., a Florida plaintiff in *Tamara Fields v. Twitter* claims that Twitter failed to restrict ISIS accounts and that, "without Twitter, the explosive growth of ISIS… into the most-feared terrorist group in the world would not have been possible." The complaint alleges that ISIS "has exploited social media, most notoriously Twitter, [...] to post instructional guidelines and promotional videos known as *mujatweets*… and to draw in people vulnerable to radicalization." The suit asserts that the deaths of two American contractors were caused by ISIS campaigns on Twitter. The social media company recently filed a motion to dismiss.

It is frighteningly easy to communicate with a (supposed) ISIS Twitter account which responds as swiftly as a customer service department. It takes a Twitter search and a few clicks to discover ISIS' full-color magazine, *Dabiq*, or locate an official 100-page guidebook on how to join and move to Syria. The UN reports that ISIS has 38 media offices worldwide which, in 2015, published 2,000 memes, reports, and magazines. Sadly, a recent *Wired* magazine article declared that "ISIS is winning the social media war." ISIS faces little opposition since our government's social media response rests primarily on one Twitter account, *@TheGEC*, with a paltry 23,000 followers. Individually, we need to become aware of the digital threat and, collectively, our country needs to develop an engaging social media response.

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In Memoriam

Laura L. Mall
June 1959 – April 2016