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The Captivating Visual Utopias of Sunni Jihadism

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Background

What will one encounter in the realm of Sunni jihadist visual propaganda if one wanders beyond the edge of grim realities that portray diverse schemes of vile atrocities perpetrated by the self-styled Islamic State or various al-Qaeda affiliates? The audiences of Western media spectacles periodically seized by the virulent dreadfulness of decapitation scenes would perhaps answer that there is nothing to be found but a desert of pointless violence. This distorted snapshot readily summons a cycle not unlike the one discovered by August Ferdinand Möbius. The trajectory of its perpetual circles passing first through a repugnant provocation reaches the point of its departure by retaliatory strikes only to begin a new round of a possibly endless iteration. Devised by its perpetrators as a ceaseless cause of socio-political ripples, it strives to embroil the liberal democratic societies in an apocalyptic standoff resolved only through an annihilation of the other.

There is however a coherent deeper level underpinning the visual violence of the surface plane propaganda. The following analysis presents a cursory review of the reality suppression strategies employed to build what I term "alluring utopias", or compositions of virtual post-apocalyptic socio-political orders.

Analysis

When trying to prescribe an order of the socio-political conduct most of the pre-IS (Islamic State) jihadi groups could display only a bleak historical "wreck record". Despite the existence of a methodological groundwork established in Abu Bakr Naji's 2004 treatise *The Management of Savagery: The Most Critical Stage Through Which the Umma Will Pass*, inability to carve out an order from the self-induced chaos prevailed. Perhaps the first indication of the upcoming change in the strategic conduct and propaganda undertakings was the inception of Ansar al-Sharia groups in Tunisia and more importantly Libya in 2011. These groups, albeit inherently violent as their ideological forbearers, exhibited instrumental interest in socio-political conduct anchored in a purist interpretation of Sharia that they would impose in the areas suffering from a power vacuum.

The matured version of this disposition is now firmly embedded into the mechanisms guiding the daily routine of the self-styled IS. It would be mistaken to portray the group as endowed with a considerably higher potential to foster and maintain a socio-political order since its foothold is greatly self-exaggerated. The visual propaganda inflating the capacity to build a semblance of an ideal society is

however painting precisely such deceptive picture; a picture of a seamless utopia brimming with abundance of everything for anybody who answers the call and comes to the lands of the Caliphate. The virtual precursor of the ideal society is continuously filled with scenes of market stalls overflowing with food and shelves bending under the weight of Hisbah-sanctioned consumer goods intertwined with an imagery of frenetic improvement and construction activities elevating the public spaces closer to the pious qualities of the utterly surreal. The diorama foreground is a stage of repetitive charitable events scripted in the rigid fashion of a recurrent totalitarian bliss. All of this unfolds against a poetic backdrop of a rustic landscape imagery subtly focused on its innate pastoral traits.

If we were able to abstract away all the cases of recruits drawn to the ranks of the self-styled IS due to their pathological fascination with violence, a significant number of those that remain could be seen to be succumbing to the alluring effects of the group's visual propaganda. If one transmits an incessant social-media *staccato* of grandiose utopia imagery, some will come and help build the next, more advanced virtual and more importantly physical layers, and the cycle of exponential materialization begins. These strains of visual propaganda, although in a disparate phase of rudimentary, are now converging across the diverse terrain of Sunni jihadism clearly in a bid to replicate the success of the self-styled IS. The phenomenon of the aspiring copycats reinforces the conjecture about the prominence and potency found in the reality-suppression imagery. The fact that at least in the case of the self-styled IS this is beginning to overshadow the traditional battle reporting implies the following question: What can be done to mitigate or better sterilize the effects of the reality suppression that propel the recruits to trade their in many cases relatively comfortable and safe homes for the WiFi-less streets of bombarded Raqqa?

The simple answer is rather intuitive – a patient debunking should suffice to crack or even shatter the barrier separating the virtual utopia from the totalitarian realities of the actual. Despite the numerous public sector initiatives engaged in these activities, the results are largely inconclusive. One of the likely explanations relates to the negative angle of this approach – a potential recruit captured

by the reality-suppressing utopia is likely to discount the debunking efforts as an instance of a government-sponsored conspiracy designed to persuade him or her to betray their chosen righteous path. This inevitably leaves us with a positive program; one poised to erect the utopias of our own, utopias that do not perceive the liberal democratic arrangements as a granted routine but as a tenuous system which, when maintained properly, empowers anybody regardless of their background to thrive without the heavens on earth promised by the self-proclaimed Messiahs.

Additionally, the overall circumstances leave us no choice but to continue building and improving software toolsets capable enough to help law enforcement agencies produce firmly rooted empirical assessments. Although there is a considerable development in the area concerned with mapping the social network topologies, tools for computational content analysis proven by the professional public are still, especially in the visual domain, largely absent. The decentralized and fugitive character of the content distribution networks referred to in EUROPOL's 2015 TE-SAT further complicates the matter to the level at which the laboriousness of an analytical effort reaches beyond the humanly possible. For a countering violent extremism (CVE) approach to be effective, an analytical ensemble should thus incorporate computational components able to accommodate the dynamics of the processed empirical domain.

Bottom Line

- A growing body of the reality-suppressing visual propaganda floods the social media in an attempt to paint a deceptive picture of sustainable utopias capable of providing the potential recruits and their families with the righteous life-style the liberal democratic societies allegedly cannot offer them;
- Across the diverse terrain of Sunni jihadism a considerable convergence is now arising in terms of an attempt to imitate these depictions of an orderly socio-political conduct that were initially spearheaded by the visual propaganda of the IS;
- The public sector initiatives engaged in coun-

tering the effects of the reality-suppressing propaganda commonly approach the problem *via* debunking campaigns that are susceptible to be dismissed as lures of government sponsored attempts to thwart the inception of an ideal society. Therefore, a positive program is needed, one that does not impose interpretations of the opponent's utopias on the already disillusioned potential recruits;

- Moreover, emphasis should be placed on the advancement of computational content analysis methods that are capable to embrace the vastness and dynamics of the empirical domain and thus establish firm foundations of effective CVE approaches.