REPORT

Public Meeting:
"ISIS: The State of Terror" with J.M. Berger

Organized by Netherlands Atlantic Youth

Monday, 25 January 2016
University of Amsterdam, Oudemanhuispoort

On Monday, 25 January 2016, Netherlands Atlantic Youth organized a meeting on ‘ISIS: The State of Terror’ with American guest speaker J.M. Berger, fellow with the George Washington University’s Program on Extremism. Berger is a researcher, analyst and consultant with a special focus on extremist activities in the United States and the use of social media. According to prof. dr. Marianne van Leeuwen, moderator for this meeting, Berger’s acclaimed book ISIS: The State of Terror, co-authored by Jessica Stern, opens a new episode on Jihadism and provides us with insights on the use of social media especially. Some 110 people (mostly students and young professionals) attended the meeting.

By showing a picture of the ISIS black flag flying over a field of purple flowers, Berger stated that ISIS uses social media to sell the image of an utopian millenarian society or the creation of a perfect society to reach out to as many people as possible online. To explain this, he took his audience back to Al Qaeda and the September 11 attacks. Until 2000, Al Qaeda could be characterised as an ‘traditional’ terrorist organisation surrounded by secrecy, that was very hard to join, and with mostly covert operations. After 9/11 Al Qaida outperformed its own expectations: no longer were they able to operate from a safe haven in Afghanistan. Berger mentioned two important developments after the September 11 attacks. Firstly, a fundamental change in the structure of Al Qaeda and secondly, the rise of the use of social
media.

**Structural change of Al Qaeda**

Due to the continued military pressure after the Twin Towers attacks, Al Qaeda turned to an ‘affiliates’ structure by building alliances with other groups and establishing their presence in other countries. Next to Al Qaeda ‘central’ an Al Qaeda ‘Iraq’-group was established for instance, out of which ashes ISIS arose. Before the rise of the affiliates, Al Qaeda had the following characteristics; it was an elite group, it focused on the West as enemy No. 1. and it was training for years to execute a terrorist attack. Yet under the affiliate model, local insurgent groups began rebranding itself as Al Qaeda. They focused on local enemies and started reaching out to the masses, as they needed an army to fight and die for their cause.

**The rise of social media**

As the internet became more prominent, jihadists used message boards and online forums to communicate with the outside world and also to recruit members. Their ability to do that was very constrained as they were easily shut down. Communications on forums posed often challenges as both governments or jihadi moderators were able to monitor them. Governments were able to close these online forums, however as they provided them with a lot of intelligence on terrorist groups. These sites did not stop to exist, yet were therefore a very controlled environment. In 2012, two different terrorists, American Omar Hammami who joined al-Shabaab, and Abdullah bin Muhammed of Al Qaeda central, used Twitter to express their discontent, as their accusations were quickly deleted on jihadi forums. This created the immense following and joining on social media of opponents and supporters. ISIS saw this and changed their propaganda and tactics to benefit from this development in their recruitment. They first shifted to a populist model, as opposed to an elite, and small organisation with covert operations like Al Qaeda. Secondly, they used the idea of ‘apocalyptic time’ to attract people.

**Recruitment strategy: populist model and apocalyptic millenarian**

In 2012, ISIS began to focus on showing their strength and extreme violence in their propaganda, by for instance putting out videos of beheadings. This violence was used to attract people that are already inclined to violence. In contrast with Al Qaeda, that feared extreme violence would alienate mainstream Muslims, ISIS put emphasis on being an army and the willingness to take anybody. The selling of an image of an apocalyptic millenarian meant not only believing in this prophecy, but also fulfilling it by showing a vision of a perfect society and the use of violence to make it happen. According to Berger, ISIS is not the first to do this, already in Medieval times Islamist and Christian apocalyptic sects existed. The ideas of ISIS are very contagious. Groups with these kind of beliefs used to be constrained by geography, but with social media it is easier for them to share their views. This explains the swift spread of ISIS propaganda through social networks. Combined with the use of a predatory recruitment cycle with the focus on grooming a vulnerable audience such as young adults and children, ISIS has effectively recruited foreign fighters from all over the world.
What is ISIS, what kind of capabilities has it and what does it want?

According to Berger, ISIS is a hybrid of hybrids; an insurgent group with a terrorist arm and elements of statehood. ISIS has a growing physical reach as it holds territory - something that Al Qaeda never managed to do for very long. ISIS has technological capabilities that strengthens its appeal and is therefore both a military as well as a media operation. Berger claims that a lot of people misunderstand the real objectives of ISIS. It is not really an Islamist group, but rather an identity group that uses Islam to gain in-group dominance and territorial holdings. To ensure this, they create (regional) chaos, as they can operate better under those circumstances. The conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Yemen have not been solved yet as none of the regional and international actors have the same agenda and interests. ISIS uses this chaos as a strategy tactic. Furthermore, they want an apocalyptic war and fulfilment of their prophecy regarding the state that will arise before the end of times. For this, the use of social media is essential to discover fellow thinkers easily online. ISIS is reaching out to the masses with the promise of the utopian millenarian society and by using online accounts with profile pictures of black ISIS flags flying in purple flower fields.

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