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THE SYRIAN CALLING: WESTERN JIHAD RECRUITMENT AND MARTYRDOM

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Abstract

The crisis in Syria has attracted worldwide attention as well as condemnation and has degraded into a violent civil conflict. Not only are there more than a thousand rebel groups including a number of hard-line jihadist groups operating within Syria, but these jihadist groups are attracting a significant number of foreigners including Australians. This study examined social media discourses from Facebook and embedded YouTube links for recruiting Westerners to the war in Syria. Findings suggest that the perceived inaction of the international community and in particular the West coupled with the atrocities committed has become a platform for jihadi recruitment. Furthermore, Jihadi operations are promoted as an essential obligation for Muslims and are supported by the Quran as well as legal and religious arguments. However, the major finding was that the call was not for combatants but for martyrs willing to sacrifice everything for the cause of Allah. The dimensions of this call are further analysed as well as the security and policy implications for Australia.

Keywords

Syria conflict, jihad, martyrdom, recruitment, Western recruitment, Australia, Facebook

INTRODUCTION

The situation in Syria has gained much media attention as the international community struggles with how best to deal with the crisis. In reality the crisis should not come as unexpected given that the ruling regime is a Shiite minority as opposed to the Sunni majority population (Fletcher, 2008). Al-Qaeda's interest in Syria also stems from historical roots with key historical figures such as IbnTaymiyyah who was based in Damascus as well as sharing a border with its enemies Israel and Jordan (Seth G. Jones, 2013; Seth G Jones, 2013). Further to this, early in the Iraq conflict, Syria became a key strategic transit point for al-Qaeda (Seth G. Jones, 2013; Seth G Jones, 2013).

Although there are many perspectives or specific areas of focus involving the Syrian crisis, this paper focuses on the risks to Western nations by foreign fighters who develop a jihad ideology. More specifically, social media (Facebook) discourses relating to jihad and the Syrian conflict will form the basis of this analysis. Fundamental to such analysis is the need to overview the jihad influence in the Syrian conflict including the main groups, the role of foreign combatants, and the risks they pose on their return, as well as how social media is being utilized to support these jihad groups.

KEY JIHAD GROUPS IN SYRIAN CONFLICT AND RISKS POSED

There are over 1000 rebel groups in Syria comprising over 100 000 fighters (for a full overview see Sinjab, 2013; Sinjab et al., 2013). This section outlines the main Western backed resistance as well as the two primary jihadist groups that Westerners are joining.

After the Free Syria Army (FSA) was formed in August 2011 following the atrocities of the Assad regime, it gained increasing backing from Western and Gulf States resulting in a need for a more co-ordinated resistance (Sinjab, Gritten, Longman, & Irshaid, 2013). Much needed co-ordination came in the form of the Supreme Military Council (SMC) formed in 2012 which consisted of a network of fighting brigades and groups (Sinjab et al., 2013). Although SMC associated groups are expected to distance themselves from al-Qaeda based groups, in reality this does not always occur (Lund, 2013).

In addition to the SMC, there are the independent military groups as well as the jihadist groups (Sinjab, 2013) which are the focus of this paper.

Jabhat al-Nusra (al Nusra) is the largest well known jihadist group which is linked to al-Qaeda in Iraq (Al-Saleh & White, 2013). Al-Nusra was the first group linked to suicide bombings in Syria (Arango, Barnard, & Saad, 2012). It has also been reported that many are deserting the FSA to join al-Nusra especially due to the fact that it is better funded (Jaber, 2013). On December 11, 2012 the US declared al-Nusra a terrorist organisation (O'Bagy, 2013). Early this year (March 15, 2013), the Australian government also listed al-Nusra as a terrorist entity (Australian Government, 2013). Reasons for the listing included its links with al-Qaeda, its extremist ideology and its operations which included improvised explosive devices (IED) and suicide attacks against military and civilian targets (Australian Government, 2013). Another concern was the outcome of post Assad Syria and the likelihood the jihad groups will oppose any newly formed secular government (Australian Government, 2013) as well as promote sectarian violence (Seth G. Jones, 2013; Seth G Jones, 2013).

In April 2013 the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS or ISIL) was formed when it split from al-Nusra when al-Nusra's commander Abu Muhammad al-Julani rejected the decision to have Iraq and Syrian brigades under one command (Lund, 2013). Although ISIS has fewer members than al-Nusra, its fighters are reportedly more ruthless.

What is particularly concerning is the fact that the extremist jihad groups of the al-Nusra front and ISIS are well financed and well resourced, resulting in a number of major strategic victories against the regime (Arango et al., 2012). In fact, many non-jihadist regimes have adopted a similar appearance and discourses so that they can attract funding from Islamist donors (Arango et al., 2012).

Influx of foreign fighters

It has been reported that at least 200 Australians, many with dual citizenship, are fighting in Syria with many of these under the al-Nusra group ("Australian extremists in Syria," 2013). The Australian Federal Police (AFP) deputy commissioner of national security has confirmed this fact (Bucci, 2013). Security officials have also confirmed that at least six Australians have died in the Syrian conflict (Maley, 2013). This includes Australian suicide bomber 'Abu Asma' linked to the group al-Nusra (Brown, 2013). In addition, other jihadists from Western nations such as Britain and the US have also joined the conflict with a number of reported deaths ("Australian extremists in Syria," 2013; Herridge, 2013; Hope, 2013; Maley, 2013).

In terms of recruitment, some European nations such as Belgium have groups of recruiters canvassing for recruits. Security officials in Australia indicate that there is no evidence of such strategies here in Australia (Bucci, 2013).

Risks and threats to Western States

The British foreign secretary is concerned about the risk that British citizens who travel to Syria pose when they return ("Britons fighting with extremist groups in Syria, warns Hague," 2013). In particular, there is the al-Nusra held territory where recruits can be easily and extensively trained in jihad and martyrdom operations ("Britons fighting with extremist groups in Syria, warns Hague," 2013). In fact, Syria is regarded as the new terrorist training ground just like Afghanistan was in the 1980's where new skills are learned and contacts are made (Seth G. Jones, 2013; Seth G Jones, 2013).

European nations in particular are concerned about the risk that young Muslims will be radicalised because of the conflict (Bucci, 2013), with many returning with a jihadi mindset (Kerbaj, 2013). Moreover, British officials are concerned that Syria could be a breeding ground for a new generation of terrorists (Hope, 2013; Kerbaj, 2013). This sentiment is also echoed by other Western states (Seth

G. Jones, 2013; Seth G Jones, 2013). Western states have good reason for concern given that research indicates that most al-Qaeda operatives were initially war veterans (Seth G. Jones, 2013; Seth G Jones, 2013). The US is also concerned about the potential of fighters to return as terrorists especially given the large numbers (Herridge, 2013). Already a US female revert to Islam has died in Syria participating in the conflict (Bates, 2013). A final concern is that of terrorist funding. Charity money targeted for aid organisation in Syria is often funnelled to terrorist groups such as al-Nusra (Hope, 2013).

Use of social media

Al-Nusra has a dedicated propaganda and social media arm called the White Minaret Group that utilises social media including Facebook, Twitter and YouTube for many purposes including recruitment, intelligence and money transfers (Seth G. Jones, 2013; Seth G Jones, 2013). Al-Nusra is quick to point out on its social media platforms that it was they who intervened to protect Syrian civilians when the US failed to act (Arango et al., 2012). Further to their discourse is that any talk of US intervention is just a pretext to US interference in Syrian affairs (Arango et al., 2012). Coupled with this is the narrative of the global war against Muslims (Lund, 2013). In addition, al-Nusra makes no secret about its goal for a new Syria, an Islamist state ruled by Sunni's that adheres to Sharia law (Arango et al., 2012). Sharia law is already proudly promoted in al-Nusra held areas (Seth G. Jones, 2013; Seth G Jones, 2013). Despite these discourses by al-Nusra, the regime has used the actions of al-Nusra, especially the suicide bombings, to promote their counter discourse through the media that al-Nusra is nothing more than a terrorist group and that it needs to be stopped (Al-Saleh & White, 2013).

Joining the conflict in Syria or at the very least providing financial support, has been portrayed through media channels as a religious obligation for Muslims with leading Sunni Clerics in Egypt declaring this the case (Seth G. Jones, 2013; Seth G Jones, 2013)

Online forums are especially focused on foreigners who carry out martyrdom operations listing their name, nationality and city of martyrdom (Bucci, 2013). One such case is the video of Australian suicide bomber Abu Asma al-Australi as well as Australian Martyr Abu al-Walid al-Australi (Lund, 2013). Experts believe that although such information is difficult to verify it is unlikely to have been fabricated (Bucci, 2013). Other sources also give accounts of online propaganda promoting martyrdom operations and how different nationalities join together to farewell the martyr for their marriage in heaven to 72 virgins (Jaber, 2013). Also stated was the fact that some were envious that they had not been selected for a martyrdom operation (Jaber, 2013).

METHODOLOGY

The research project utilised a grounded theory approach where discourses were collected from multiple Facebook page groups using multiple pseudonym user names. Discourses were collected over a period of six months. Although the main focus was on Facebook pages, a large number of embedded YouTube links were also investigated as well as several document links. The study was also limited mostly to Australian based profiles associated with supporting the war on Syria with some UK pages also being analysed. These ranged from more conservative pages supporting the FSA to more radical jihadist pages.

Data was analysed using an inductive qualitative approach. There were no pre-existing coding categories and these were allowed to emerge using open comparative coding (Mills, Bonnor & Francis, 2006; Holton, 2007). In addition, meanings were questioned to avoid taken for granted assumptions (Mills, Bonnor & Francis, 2006). Additionally, data was cross checked and searched to ensure no new themes emerged and hence data saturation was achieved (Holton, 2007). This project has received ethical clearance and data has been collected in accordance with these standards. All spelling mistakes and variations have been left in the original posts.

RESULTS

The narrative of the Syrian calling took on several key aspects which were repeated on numerous Facebook pages and posts. What was especially notable was the large number of YouTube links embedded within Facebook pages. In addition photographs and imagery were important tools used in posts and their contribution will be described in each section.

Inaction of governments

The first key theme emerging from the coding was the failure of governments to act and intervene in Syria. Coupled with this is the criticism of governments for condemning those who do act (See Figure 1).

How could we have leaders who urge the government to ban muslims who return from syria. This is disgusting. Shows there hypocrisy. Watch out from these paid shieks. (Youth for Syria)

What more can we add?!?! Of course, the stats don't include the number of injured, how many have been raped, the number of buildings destroyed and more..... Where is the rush to put an end to the rising numbers? Enough with the fake & useless political solutions!!!

when 1 dog from the other side dies its ok but when the whole sunna nation from syria dies know 1 cares

Source: Youth for Syria Pages (Australia)

Figure 1. Posts relating to inaction of governments

Presentation of atrocities in Syria

The atrocities in Syria are well documented both outside and within the social media jihad community. Given this fact, outside sources are often included to give greater legitimacy as well as the presentation of shocking statistics outlining the number of deaths.

Women in Syria are being forced to stand in front of tanks and act as human shields before they're stripped and raped by soldiers. This is the depravity humanity has sunk to in Syria as the war there drags on. (Youth for Syria)

WHAT ABOUT THE SYRIAN PEOPLE??? BEING SLAUGHTERED LIKE SHEEP BY THE DISGUSTING DICTATOR BASHAR ALASSAD. ITS ABSOLUTELY INHUMANE AND REVOLTING TO SEE AT LEAST 100 DEAD IN SYRIA EVERY SINGLE DAY DUE TO BLATANT MURDERS OF THE ASSAD REGIME

Amnesty International Australia

Sources: Moderate pages on Syria

Figure 2. Posts highlighting the atrocities in Syria

Also worthy of note is the fact that nearly every Facebook page relating to Syria had photos of atrocities, in particular children. These images were very potent and in combination with the inaction of governments, provided a powerful platform for jihadi discourse.

Broader narrative of Muslim persecution

What was also interesting was the fact that the Syrian conflict was not viewed in isolation but was encapsulated within a broader narrative of Muslim persecution that includes many other conflicts such as Iraq, Afghanistan and Chechnya. Pages dedicated to the Syrian conflict contained many posts such as those in Figure 3 providing a much broader narrative. Even the protests in Sydney in 2012 over an anti-Islamic film ensured the continuation of this narrative (Fig. 3). In other words, each new event is viewed as another case of global persecution of Muslims.

Muslims captured and tortured as Nigerian troops committing atrocities in fight against Islamic uprising. (linked with photos & story)

Why were some protesters chanting "Our dead are in paradise, your dead are in hell"? Waleed Aly has correctly identified that, "This isn't about the film". ...The reference to corpses made by these protesters is not at all surprising to anybody who has worked closely with the Muslim community. They are referring to those killed in the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq; they are referring to the many children killed by US drone attacks; they are referring to the Rohingya Muslims burnt to death in Burma; they are referring to Uyghur Muslims being persecuted in China; they are referring to the daily oppression of Palestinians; they are referring to the war on terrorism which they see as targeting Muslims; they are referring to Kashmir, Guantanamo Bay, Chechnya, and the many other places around the world where they witness injustice and persecution.

Sources: Moderate and extremist Facebook pages on Syria

Figure 3. Posts highlighting the broader narrative of Muslim persecution

Coupled with this narrative is the need for a response which is best summed up by the following post:

You are in Syria. Assad forces have just hit this little child [photo below of a child victim] and others in an attack. He looks at you the way he is looking at you now. What do you?!!

Call for Australian Muslims to take action

Coupled with the call for action was also the condemnation of inaction by Muslims. As can be seen in Figure 4, this was conveyed as not just a call, but an obligation for Muslims with the example of the Afghan war against the Soviets. In conjunction, the brotherhood of those who choose to act is emphasised and is no doubt appealing to disaffected individuals.

WHERE ARE THE MUSLIMS??!! <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P6wOjHNVufM&feature=related>

"What is the matter with you that you won't fight in the cause of Allah?"
To fight for the oppressed women, men and children
You don't have an ounce of religion in you...
I swear by Allah, you don't have an ounce of religion in you
"...oh mother of the martyr do not cry.. We are your children, we are your children."

Oh Muslims of Syria: Muslims of Australia stand with you and nothing can extinguish the light of Allah, no power on the face of this earth can extinguish your power of la ilahailallah. There is no God but Allah. Assad is the enemy of Allah. There is no God by Allah (Syria calling)

Where are the real lions of Islam? While you men sit behind your computer screens and are on facebook, women have taken your place on the battlefield... you have an obligation

You will never find Brotherhood similar to the Brotherhood that exists between the Mujahedeen!

We have people who are killed and injured. After that, Islamically, one is NOT allowed to refuse, but must enter and give assistance. We went in and fought the Russians, although we did not wish to enter

Sources: Extremist Facebook pages on Syria with embedded YouTube links

Figure 4. Posts calling Muslims to act and outlining their obligation

Practicalities and legalities of jihad

a) Justification from Quran

Quran 9:38 – o you believe! What is the matter with you, that when you are asked to march forth in the Cause of Allah (Jihad) you cling heavily to the earth? Are you pleased with the life of this world rather than the hereafter? But little is the enjoyment of the life of this world compared to the hereafter.

Quran 9:24 – say: if your fathers and your sons, your brothers, your wives, your kindred, the wealth that you have gained, the commerce in which you fear a decline, and the dwellings in which you delight are dearer to you than ALLAH and His messenger, and striving hard and fighting in his cause, then wait until ALLAH brings about His decision (torment). And ALLAH guides not the people who are Al-Fasiqun (the rebellious, disobedient to ALLAH)

Quran 4:74 – So let those fight in the cause of ALLAH who sell the life of this world for the Hereafter. And he who fights in the cause of ALLAH and is killed or achieves victory we will bestow upon him a great reward.

Quran 9:111 – Indeed, ALLAH has purchased from the believers their lives and properties (in exchange) for that they will have Paradise. They fight in the cause of ALLAH, so they kill and are killed. (It is) a true promise (binding) upon Him in the Torah and the Gospel and the Qur'an. And who is truer to his covenant than ALLAH? So rejoice in your transaction which you have contracted. And it is that which is the great attainment

b) Religious justification

Recently, and in many circles, discussions have begun in relation to the Islamic ruling on participating in military fighting, Jihad, in Syria. [full religious argument]

<https://www.facebook.com/notes/mamoon-soofi/do-we-go-for-jihad-in-syria/10151590390110491>

c) Practical legal advice

Fighting in Syria and taking up arms in general with any group is an offence of up to 20 years jail in Australia. Anyone who is considering engaging in fighting in Syria against Bashar Al Assad, should be cautious.

However, it is very hard for ASIO, AFP and Attorney Gen. office to prove that an Australian had fought or is fighting with any group unless that individual has uploaded a video showing himself fighting on social network or an undercover operative/s or covert operatives working in Syria as undercover for Western Intelligence identify you as a 'Western fighter'. ASIO and AFP cannot directly and evidently prove that an Australian is fighting in Syria. I can get anyone to Syria, what they do there is up to them.

Sources: Extremist personal and group Facebook pages

Figure 5. Legal justifications and practicalities of Jihad

Several justifications were found for the practice of jihad in Syria. Many of these were provided directly from the Quran as shown in Fig 5. Interestingly, there was little reference to the book of law (The Hadith). Secondly, there were links to extensive discussions on whether Muslims should conduct jihad in Syria. Without reproducing the entire argument, the basic thrust was to legitimise jihad as a defensive war against the slaughter of innocent women and children. Finally in Figure 5, there is the issue of dealing with Australia's counter terrorism laws and the listing of al-Nusra as a terrorist organisation. The thrust is to avoid social media postings if you intend coming back to Australia. In addition, it is clear that passage to Syria can be easily provided for Australians that wish to go. In fact, a 2013 Australian 'tour' of Syria has been overtly advertised on social media platforms.

Call to martyrdom

Clearly the most significant theme to emerge from the coding is that of the call to martyrdom. In other words, there was not so much the call for soldiers to fight, rather the call to give one's life as a martyr. Due to the fact that this theme was so large, it has been divided into a number of subsections. Also worthy of note is the fact that Facebook pages dedicated to martyrdom in Syria in most cases contained a YouTube link that was designed to convey powerful imagery to enforce the rewards of being a martyr.

Announcement of martyrdom

A very important aspect of social media posts on the war on Syria is the announcement of martyrs. In addition to details about a martyr's death, almost always a photo and YouTube video link is given as shown in Figure 6. The last post also demonstrates comments posted by some about this desire for martyrdom. However, the extent of this desire and willingness of individuals to follow through cannot be determined.

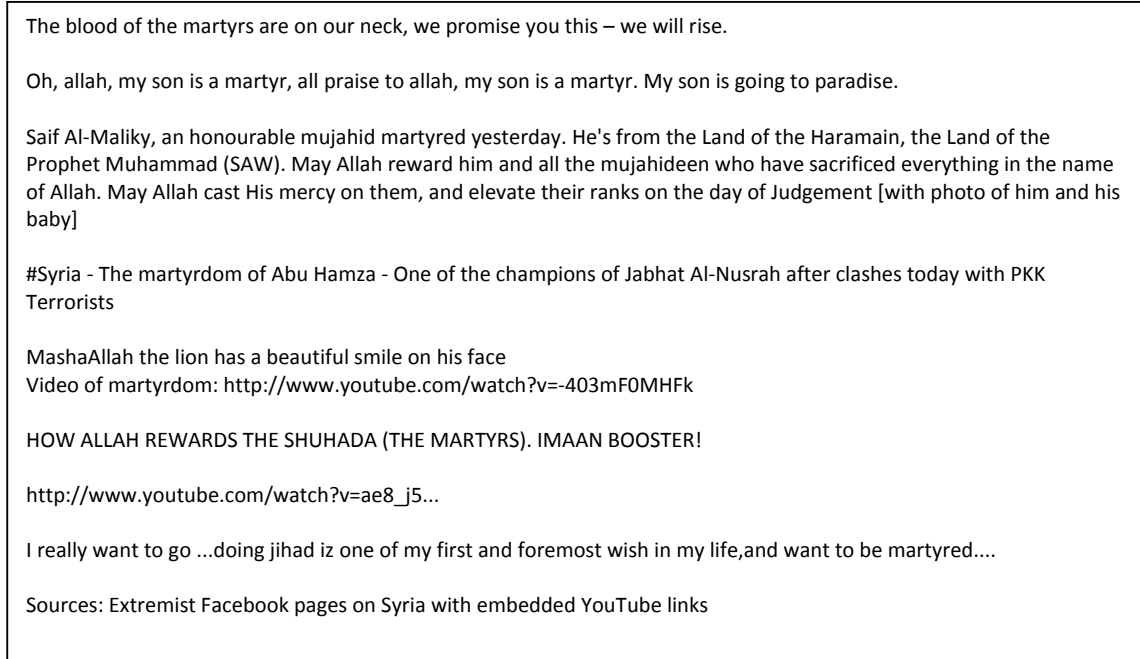


Figure 6. Announcement of martyrdom

Virtues of martyrdom

There was an abundance of material on martyrdom on Facebook pages related to Syria. Additionally, there were important links such as Figure 7 below that gave a very good summary of these virtues found on sites. Important imagery and the benefits of martyrdom were clearly spelt out.

“Their (i.e., the martyrs souls) will live inside green birds that dwell in designated lamps which hang on the throne of Allaah, they will roam freely in Paradise as they please, then return to these lamps””

ALSO When your brothers were killed in Uhud, Allah placed their souls inside green birds that tend to the rivers of Paradise and eat from its fruits.

‘The soul of the believer becomes a bird that feeds on the trees of Paradise, until Allah sends him back to his body when He resurrects him.’

“A martyr has six bounties¹: He will be forgiven with the first drop of his blood that is spilt; He will see his place in Paradise (at the time of death); He will be saved from the ‘Great Horror’ (on the Day of Judgment): A Crown of Dignity will be placed on his head, which contains many corundums, each one being more precious than this life and all that it contains; He will have seventy two Women of Paradise; And, he will be allowed to intercede for seventy of his family members (who would have otherwise gone to hell).” (Tirmidhi & IbnMaajah).

“A martyr only feels from the effect of being killed that which one would when being stung by a mosquito.”

“Nobody who enters Paradise would ever wish to return to this life again, even if he was to be given the whole world and everything in it – except for a martyr; for he would wish to return and get killed ten times due to the honour that he received (in Paradise).”

Virtues of martyrdom

Source: <http://www.alminbar.com/khutbaheng/1478.htm> (link found on Extremist Facebook page)

Notes. 1. Elsewhere there is noted 7 favours (bounties), the additional favour noted is being saved from the fitnah of the grave, the interrogation or great questioning

Figure 7. Key discourses on the virtues of martyrdom

Repeating the cycle of martyrdom

Imagery was an essential aspect of martyrdom and one aspect that came up was the concept of martyrs wanting to repeat this cycle over again because it was such an honour.

“I swear by the One in Whose Hands my soul is, I wish that I would fight for the sake of Allaah (i.e., Jihaad) and get martyred, then return and fight again and get martyred, then return and fight again and get martyred” (Bukhaari & Muslim)

Imam Ahmad recorded that Anas said that the Messenger of Allah (sallallaahu ‘alayhiwasallam) said, ‘No soul that has a good standing with Allah and dies would wish to go back to the life of this world, except for the martyr. He would like to be returned to this life so that he could be martyred gain, for he tastes the honour achieved from martyrdom.’

“Nobody who enters Paradise would ever wish to return to this life again, even if he was to be given the whole world and everything in it – except for a martyr; for he would wish to return and get killed ten times due to the honour that he received (in Paradise).”

Martyrs ask: what more could we wish for, what more could they (martyrs wish for) wish for when their souls are in green birds? Could you imagine? How many of you when you were a child you wished you were a “green bird”? How many of you? Did any of you wish you were a worm or an ant? No! But when you are young and you see that bird you wish you were that bird so you could fly. That’s why they create all those movies, “Superman”. It’s amazing to be able to fly. It would be incredible. So the shaeed will be in these green birds – their souls. And Allah will ask them: “is there anything you wish?”. They reply, ‘what else can we have when we can fly over all paradise?’ The shaeed realise Allah will continue to ask them three times is there anything they want or wish. And when the shaeed realise Allah will not stop asking them they will reply – ‘we wish for our souls to go back to our bodies so we can be killed again for your sake’. No other person not even a righteous person will want to come back to this dunya except the shaeed.

Sources: Extremist Facebook pages

Figure 8. Posts demonstrating the willingly repetition of martyrdom

Reconceptualising death

One of the most critical aspects of martyrdom presented is the reconceptualization of death as a transition from this world to the next. This concept is coupled with an attitude of willingness to undertake martyrdom operations.

Think not of those who are killed in the Way of Allah as dead. Nay, they are alive, with their Lord, and they have provision

Think not of those who are killed in the Way of Allah as dead...

Allah's statement, 'They rejoice in what Allah has bestowed upon them' indicates that the martyrs who were killed in Allah's cause are alive with Allah, delighted because of the bounty and happiness they are enjoying. They are also awaiting their brethren, who will die in Allah's cause after them, for they will be meeting them soon.

Figure 9. Posts relating to the reconceptualization of death

In summary, martyrdom was perhaps the most predominant theme that arose during the investigation. Not only were discourses presented directly on Facebook and via links to other sites, but also links to YouTube videos were prominent which promoted martyrdom. Figure 10 provides a useful summary of key discourses found on a YouTube video. This lecture was given with the overlaying images promising rewards to the shaheed, and was also reiterated on Facebook posts. An additional important note is the fact that these beliefs and actions attract widespread criticism from the moderate Muslim community.

All good signs of death - to die on the battlefield, this is a very, very good sign. And this is a testimony for those people who have belittled, and mocked and condemned us; they are the fake salifs or the so called moderate muslims. When a person dies on the battlefield that is a tremendous sign

like a bird returning to their nest, so is the brother who just died as a shaheed – he will return back to allah. They go back to allah's thrown. flying free like a bird.

We wish our souls could be returned back to our bodies so that we could be killed again in your name, for your names sake. Not even a pious, righteous person will want to come back to life again, only the shaheed will want to come back. The martyr understands why he wants to come back again, because he has experienced what it is to die for the honor and sake of allah. They have seen the reward to die for the sake of allah. The martyr is protected from the fitnah and fear of the grave, the questioning and interrogations from allah. The matry will be saved from the day of terror (Day of Judgment).

Forget the term "terrorism" how we understand it. Everyone is going to be terrified on the Day of Judgment except the shaheed - no fear on the Day of Judgment for the shaheed

Lovely women of paradise, the most beautiful, and the shaheed gets them

What a great thing it is to be a shaheed – yet few people want to be it martyr. I was asked a question – why do all believers EXCEPT the shaheed tremble in their grave? All believers face fitnah in the grave EXCEPT the shaheed. What makes the shaheed exempt and will not be tested in the grave? They are exempt because of the flashing of the swords over his head in battle, the flying F16 and bombs falling to his right and left - that was enough fitna for him in the life and the next.

Every Muslim should want martyrdom. Only a foolish person would not want it.

Source: Extremist YouTube video

Figure 10. Summary of key discourses of martyrdom

DISCUSSION

From the results, the most significant finding was the fact that Syria does not call for soldiers or combatants, rather it calls for martyrs. In other words, all who travel to Syria to fight must be prepared to die for the cause of Allah. Not only that, they should have a willingness and eagerness to be a martyr. This may help to explain a number of foreigners including an Australian involved in a suicide bombing (Malet, 2013).

Whilst the atrocities committed by the Assad regime coupled with the perceived inaction of the international community provided a foundation to call Muslims to action, it is the discourse of what a 'good' Muslim 'ought to do' that aims to exert a moral imperative to join the cause. This study also supported the discourse reported by Malet (2013) of a single global war against Muslims. This discourse is important because it has clear implications in that the Syrian conflict is viewed in a similar light and demands the same response as previous conflicts. Coupled with this, just as martyrs were honoured in these previous conflicts they are also honoured in the current one and social media has become one of the most important platforms in which to do this.

Whilst this research does not examine events or discourses in Syria and cannot test Jones' 2013 assertion that Syria is the training ground for violent jihad, it does indicate that those being called to Syria are being done so with discourses of martyrdom and death. Moreover, those willing to go must be willing to face criticism from the majority of moderate Muslims. Previous research (Torok, 2012), as well as surveys conducted in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon indicate very low levels of support for al-Qaeda or affiliated groups amongst the Islamic community (Seth G. Jones, 2013). Further to this, support for Shia groups such as Hezbollah is also low in the region (Pew Research, 2013). In conjunction, support for violent methods such as suicide bombings has decreased dramatically in recent years with the overwhelming majority of Muslims opposing such methods (Pew Research, 2013).

Martyrdom is a major commitment and is viewed as a natural extension of jihad for radical Muslims (Heck, 2004). Previous research on martyrdom found that the Hadith was more highly emphasised (Torok, 2012) whereas for this conflict the Quran was the main foundation for the justification of jihad. This can be explained by the difference in the nature of the conflicts. The Afghanistan conflict was clearly much more difficult to justify in comparison with Syria where there are clear cut atrocities. Nonetheless, imagery associated with martyrdom was very similar to previous findings (Torok, 2012). In particular, the green birds' imagery which was reminiscent of the Bosnia conflict was also strongly present in Facebook posts. Further evidence of this exists in the fact that many from the Balkans have joined the Syria conflict (Milos & Synovitz, 2013). Western "Superman" imagery was paralleled to the Islamic green birds' imagery as a bridge to recruits in the West to entice them to undertake martyrdom operations. Additionally, the term 'terrorism' was challenged and redirected for Western recruits, referring to the only terror they need to be concerned about is the Day of Judgment. Yet, since recruits are going to be martyrs, terror is something they will never fear, as this will be waived for the martyr for they followed in the cause of Allah. Furthermore, there was also copious material on the rewards and virtues of martyrdom.

Clearly there was evidence of attempts at online recruitment; however, these efforts were more targeted at those who were inclined to go or considering going. In agreement with other findings, those going to Syria seem to be those that have the jihadi mindset prior to going (Kerbaj, 2013; Milos & Synovitz, 2013) as well as a mindset for martyrdom. Whether this is further developed in Syria is beyond the scope of this study. However, there is a reported case of an Australian returning from

Syria with the martyrdom mentality (Olding, 2013). What is clear though is that a large amount of indoctrination of the necessary jihadi mindset is done as part of the recruitment process. Once recruits get to Syria then no doubt the process of homophily would occur where like-minded individuals get together and often become more extreme in their views (Centola, González-Avella, Eguíluz, & San Miguel, 2007; Wang, Walther, Pingree, & Hawkins, 2008).

Finally, in terms of the implications for policy and security, there are a number of clear outcomes. Firstly, it appears that those travelling to Syria already have a significant jihadi mindset. An important focus of this is the desire for martyrdom. Given this, the concern that Western governments have for citizens that return is well founded (Herridge, 2013; Hope, 2013; Seth G. Jones, 2013; Seth G Jones, 2013; Kerbaj, 2013). Another cause for concern is the fact that the conflict in Syria is not localised, rather it is encapsulated as part of a perceived global war on Islam. If operatives in Syria can convey this discourse to Western citizens and convince them that their government is part of this global war on Islam, then the risk of domestic terrorism becomes significant, especially if they have gained practical operational skills (Seth G. Jones, 2013; Seth G Jones, 2013).

CONCLUSION

Recruiting Muslims for Syria is by no means an easy task. It takes a careful combination and layering of discourses. It appears that those already with a predisposition or interest in jihad would be most likely to be targets of this online recruitment which seeks to clearly instill a mindset that seeks martyrdom. Facebook was found to be a key social media tool, supported by images and embedded YouTube videos that contained a combination of imagery and discourses.

Given the mind set of those travelling to Syria, coupled with the likelihood of developing key operational skills, as well as a broader narrative of Muslim oppression, it will be imperative for Western security agencies to consider the risks such citizens may pose if they return.

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