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TERRORIST PROPAGANDA IN THE DIGITAL AGE: FEAR, IDEOLOGY AND ONLINE RECRUITMENT

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TERRORIST PROPAGANDA IN THE DIGITAL AGE: FEAR, IDEOLOGY AND ONLINE RECRUITMENT

Abstract: The internet has transformed jihadist terrorism, becoming a key channel for propaganda, recruitment, and radicalization. Repeated exposure to violent content and ideological narratives normalizes violence and strengthens the commitment of vulnerable individuals, especially minors and young people, who seek identity, belonging, and purpose. Extremist groups exploit these emotional needs, adapting their strategies to less-regulated digital platforms and video games. Therefore, prevention requires a comprehensive approach combining technological monitoring, digital education, and the strengthening of individual and social protective factors, addressing both external agents and the internal vulnerabilities of individuals. In this way, Internet emerges as a strategic domain of conflict, where cybersecurity and digital behavior analysis are essential to counter violent extremism.

Resumen: Internet ha transformado el terrorismo yihadista, convirtiéndose en un canal clave para la propaganda ideológica, el reclutamiento y el miedo. La exposición repetida a contenidos violentos y a narrativas ideológicas normaliza la violencia y refuerza la adhesión de individuos vulnerables, especialmente menores y jóvenes, quienes buscan identidad, pertenencia y propósito. Los grupos extremistas explotan estas necesidades emocionales, adaptando sus estrategias a plataformas digitales y videojuegos menos regulados. Por ello, la prevención requiere un enfoque integral que combine vigilancia tecnológica, educación digital y fortalecimiento de factores de protección individuales y sociales, abordando tanto los agentes externos como la vulnerabilidad interna de los individuos. Así, Internet se perfila como un territorio estratégico de conflicto, donde la ciberseguridad y el análisis del comportamiento digital son esenciales para contrarrestar el extremismo violento.

Keywords: Propaganda, cyberspace, cyberpsychology, online recruitment, radicalization, dissemination of fear, extremist ideology, terrorism.

Palabras clave: Propaganda, ciberespacio, ciberpsicología, reclutamiento online, radicalización, difusión de miedo, ideología extremista, terrorismo.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ARPANET: Advanced Research Agency Network

BOE: Official State Gazette

BMC: BioMed Central

CP: Penal Code

CITCO: Centre for Intelligence against Terrorism and Organised Crime

CTED: Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate

CTC: Combating Terrorism Center

DGT: Dirección General de Tráfico

DHS: Department of Homeland Security

USA: United States

ECTC: European Counter Terrorism Centre

IS: Islamic State

FBI: Federal Bureau of Investigation

FCSE: State Security Forces and Corps

ISIS: Islamic State of Iraq and Syria ISIS: Islamic State in Iraq and Syria

ICCT: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism

NCP: Network Control Protocol

OIET: International Observatory for the Study of Terrorism

UN: United Nations

NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

RAE: Royal Spanish Academy

RAN: Radicalisation Awareness Network

RDL: Royal Legislative Decree

TCC: The Carter Center

TCP/IP: Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol

ICT: Information and Communication Technologies

TOWs: Terrorist Operated Websites

EU: European Union

UNIR: Universidad Internacional de la Rioja

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INTRODUCTION

The origin of the Internet dates back to the 1960s, in the context of the Cold War, when the US Department of Defence promoted the development of a communications network capable of resisting nuclear attacks and guaranteeing the transmission of information between different computers, even in the event of the partial destruction of the network. As Cristina Martín Jiménez (2025) points out in *La tiranía de la mentira*: "this is how ARPANET (*Advanced Research Projects Agency Network*) was born, which initially connected four universities in California and Utah using the NCP (*Network Control Protocol*). Over time, the network evolved and, in 1983, adopted the TCP/IP protocol (*Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol*), which allowed the interconnection of multiple networks and laid the foundations of what is known today as the Internet" (Martín Jiménez, 2025, p. 89).

However, what initially emerged as a strategic military project was gradually transformed into a tool of global reach, capable of profoundly modifying society and everyday life. A globalised, open and dynamic ecosystem emerged that has transformed communication, economy and culture on a global scale. However, cyberspace, while an instrument of progress, has become a breeding ground for new forms of conflict, including terrorism. In line with this, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), the European Union (EU) and various states, including the United States, Spain, France, the United Kingdom, Germany and Canada, officially recognise cyberspace as a domain of operations that requires strategic protection on a par with the traditional domains of land, sea, air and space. This recognition, reflected by Artillery Colonel Fuente Cobo (2022) in his article *NATO and Cyberspace: A New Domain for Operations,* was formalised at the 2016 Warsaw Summit and thus reflects the growing strategic relevance of cyberspace in contemporary conflicts.

Likewise, in relation to the aforementioned concept of cyberspace, Major General Argumosa Pila (2022), in his article *Impacto del Ciberespacio en las Guerras del Siglo XXI*, defines it as a global domain made up of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), as well as other electronic systems. Furthermore, from this perspective, the General highlights that one of the most relevant characteristics of cyberspace is that "it is a virtual environment without geographical limits in which vital activities for society take place and where crime, terrorism and espionage appear" (Argumosa Pila, 2022, p. 69).

In this new context, and in line with the General's statements (2022), terrorism - especially in its jihadist aspect - has found in the Internet a medium that allows it to operate without the traditional physical limitations. Thus, as early as 2006, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly report entitled *Uniting against terrorism* noted that 'the Internet is an excellent example of how terrorists can act in a truly transnational manner [...]'. Furthermore, the report mentions that "those who wish to use cyberspace for terrorist purposes can do so from virtually anywhere in the world" (General Assembly, 2006, p.14). Thus, the Assembly explicitly refers not only to the adaptation of this type of groups to the responses of states, but also to the need to develop security strategies adapted to this new scenario. Furthermore, the report mentions Security Council Resolution 1624 (2005), which provides the basis for criminalising incitement to acts of terrorism and proselytising for such purposes, including through the Internet (General Assembly, 2006, p.14).

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Analysing the relationship between Islamist terrorism and the Internet is therefore a fundamental task today. However, in order to address this issue, it is relevant to start from the intersection between psychology and new technologies, i.e. digital psychology or "cyberpsychology". This discipline is the study of the interaction between technology and human behaviour, focusing on the influence of ICTs on the way society thinks, relates, communicates and behaves. Based on this, several studies have demonstrated the influence of digital stimuli on human perception and behaviour. In particular, Robert Boleslaw Zajonc, a social psychologist renowned for his research on emotions, cognition and social perception, showed in his paper *Attitudinal Effects of Mere Exposure*, published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, that the repetition of a stimulus - even if initially disturbing - increases its familiarity and reduces the negative reaction, facilitating its acceptance (Zajonc, 1968, p. 1-27). This principle helps to understand why the dissemination of extremist content - or harmful content in general - via the Internet is so efficient for criminal groups, reaching an increasing number of users every day.

Based on this premise, the jihadist activities in the digital sphere that most take advantage of the effects of cyber-psychology are mainly concentrated on two axes: propaganda and online recruitment. The two are closely linked, given that, in the framework of global terrorism, propaganda has become consolidated as a tool as powerful as physical weapons, and whose function is not only limited to generating fear or legitimising ideologies, but also extends to recruiting and recruiting new members. In this way, as discussed in subsequent chapters, propaganda becomes a central instrument for the expansion and sustainability of this type of criminal organisation.

Thus, based on an analysis of cyberspace as a new domain of conflict and the study of its use as a means of disseminating violent content and jihadist radicalisation, this article explores how online propaganda and recruitment reconfigure traditional patterns of terrorism. It also aims to highlight the relevance of combining technological surveillance with the analysis of digital behaviour based on psychological and even gender aspects in order to optimise the work of the State Security Forces and Corps (FCSE) and Intelligence Services.

2. ONLINE JIHADIST PROPAGANDA

According to the UN General Assembly (2006), the propagandistic use of the Internet by jihadist groups has grown exponentially over the last decade. While in 1998 these groups had fewer than 20 websites, by the end of 2005 there were approximately one million active digital platforms dedicated to the dissemination of combat information and terrorist propaganda. The report also mentions that "some of the major recent attacks [such as 9/11 or 11M at the time] relied on information obtained from the Internet" (General Assembly, 2006, p.14). Torres Soriano (2014) even underlines that "the main members of the 11-M cell spent a great deal of time surfing the web, consuming content downloaded from the Internet and maintaining virtual communications with other key elements of the organisation" (Torres Soriano, 2014, p. 98).

In this sense, recent evidence of the evolution in the dynamics of jihadist propaganda in the digital environment can be found in the *Jihadist Terrorism Yearbook 2024*, published by the International Observatory for Terrorism Studies (IOTS). The

report highlights *Operation Almuasasa*, an international intervention that represents the largest action in recent years against the online propaganda infrastructure linked to the Islamic State (IS), especially with regard to the so-called *Terrorist Operated Websites* (TOWs). The operation, which culminated on 11 June 2024 with a joint *takedown* action - a term that refers to the disruption, disabling or removal of illegal or harmful content on the internet - brought down the main servers used to disseminate propaganda aligned with ISIS. In this regard, the operation involved the participation of agencies such as the FBI and Europol, and in Spain it was led by the Special Central Unit No. 2 of the Guardia Civil's Information Headquarters. As a result, nine individuals were arrested in Spain in the towns of Algeciras (Cádiz), Almería, Tenerife and Girona. The detainees, originally from Morocco, Jordan and Palestine, were part of a network of media entities - which made up the structure known as "*Sarh al Khilafa*" - including the pro-Daesh website "*Fundación I'lam*", characterised by the publication of jihadist propaganda content translated into Spanish (OIET, 2024, p. 114).

In more concrete terms, the Royal Spanish Academy (RAE) offers several meanings of the term propaganda. However, in the context of this study, it is particularly relevant to understand it in two ways. Firstly, as the "action and effect of making something known in order to attract followers or buyers" and, secondly, as the "association whose purpose is to propagate doctrines, opinions, behaviour, etc.". In this sense, there is a direct link between the first meaning and the recruitment dimension, while the second meaning highlights the function of propaganda as an ideological instrument, reflecting the extent to which these organisations can operate as structures dedicated to spreading an extremist view of Islam, legitimising violence and consolidating a transnational community of radicalised believers.

Based on these definitions, three main motives behind the dissemination of propaganda by these groups can be observed: dissemination of fear, dissemination of extremist ideological narratives and, finally, recruitment. In this way, terrorist propaganda can be understood as the set of messages, images, symbols and narratives distributed with the purpose of intimidating societies, demoralising adversaries and amplifying the psychological impact of violent actions. Thus, through social networks such as Twitter (now X), Telegram or Facebook, terrorist groups constantly disseminate content specifically designed to capture the attention of users.

As has been announced, while these three main objectives in the dissemination of terrorist propaganda - the generation of fear, the propagation of ideological narratives and the recruitment of new members - can be distinguished, they do not occur in isolation, but are closely interconnected and often operate in a complementary manner within the communicative strategy of jihadist groups. In this framework, recruitment is understood as "the process of attracting people to join a group that adopts a radical ideology aimed at promoting fear, inter-group conflict and the use of violence" (Moyano Pacheco & Trujillo Mendoza, 2013, p.35), thus constituting, as mentioned in the previous chapter, another of the key elements to ensure the expansion and sustainability of these organisations.

Likewise, it is particularly relevant to understand the concept of recommendation algorithms, given the importance they play in the propagandistic process of this type of groups, and in the digital experience of users in general. These algorithms, designed to maximise time spent on a platform, continuously analyse interaction history - searches,

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clicks, viewing time and browsing patterns - in order to predict and prioritise the content most likely to capture the user's attention. This means that the greater the consumption of a certain type of content, the greater the amount of material of the same nature that the algorithm itself prioritises and teaches, with the aim of keeping the user connected for longer. This feedback mechanism, based on pattern detection and *machine learning* models, reinforces initial preferences and favours the creation of increasingly homogeneous information environments, in which exposure to similar messages progressively intensifies. In the context of extremist propaganda, this process is particularly worrying and dangerous, as each viewing or interaction contributes to increasing the visibility of radical content, providing environments with a lower percentage of different content and increasingly facilitating access to emotionally charged or sensationalist material.

2.1. PROPAGANDA AS THE DISSEMINATION OF FEAR

As previously noted, one of the essential functions of terrorist propaganda is the dissemination of fear as a strategic tool. Far from being a secondary consequence of violent acts, fear is their main objective. Terrorist groups carefully plan their propaganda campaigns to provoke large-scale psychological terror, generate social upheaval and condition political and civic behaviour. In this scenario, the hyper-connectivity provided by the Internet and the logic of digital viralisation act as multipliers of impact, allowing propaganda content to cross borders in a matter of minutes or even seconds.

Fear-based propaganda operates through a combination of explicit violence, emotional symbolism, theatricalisation of suffering and highly sophisticated audiovisual techniques. These resources maximise the reach of the message by leveraging digital platforms, and the aforementioned recommendation algorithms, for immediate and massive dissemination. As discussed above, repeated exposure to this type of content generates an effect of normalisation of violence and extremist narratives, reducing initial resistance and facilitating the ground for radicalisation. In this context, research on *online* extremism confirms that this dynamic is systematically exploited by jihadist groups. Specifically, the study *Terrorism in Cyberspace: The Next Generation* highlights that "constant repetition of violent content accustoms users to violence and extremist language" (Weiman, 2015, p. 47-50), coinciding with the aforementioned studies by Zajonc (1968) on the effects of repeated exposure to content on the perception and acceptance of stimuli.

To understand the magnitude and sophistication of this practice, it is illustrative to analyse paradigmatic cases of propaganda disseminated by jihadist groups. A representative example, described by Andrés Ortiz Moyano (2023) in his book *#Jihad: How the Islamic State has conquered the Internet and the media*, is the video starring Abu Suhayb al-Faransi, a French citizen and former businessman who in 2015 appeared on social networks carrying an *AK-47* rifle and displaying the typical image of the converted Jihadist: long beard, austere clothing and religious language. In the video, Abu Suhayb describes his new life in the caliphate as 'full and spiritually enriching', in contrast to his previous existence in France (Moyano, 2023, p. 43).

This is an example of how this type of narrative attempts to reinforce the emotional appeal of the jihadist project and, at the same time, conveys an implicit message of threat. With regard to the latter, by showing how a Western citizen can be

'transformed' into an extremist fighter, the Islamic State (IS) warns of its ability to influence and radicalise individuals beyond its borders. The figure of the convert thus becomes a propagandistic symbol of ideological success and personal transformation, appealing to young Westerners, while generating fear and uncertainty in host societies. Thus, this case illustrates how jihadist propaganda combines the dissemination of fear with emotional and identity appeal, using digital viralisation to amplify its impact and reach global audiences.

Another paradigmatic case, also documented by Ortiz Moyano (2014), is the video released by the Islamic State (IS) in August 2014, showing the beheading of the American journalist James Foley, kidnapped in Syria. Prior to his murder, the group demanded a million-dollar ransom from his family and agency, but these demands were not met. In retaliation and as a message to the Western world, IS published the video on the Internet, generating a global media impact thanks, once again, to the logic of viralisation. In the footage, Foley is shown kneeling, dressed in an orange jumpsuit that deliberately mimics the uniform of Guantánamo prisoners, while he delivers a message blaming the US government for his fate. The staging - submissive posture, political message and on-camera execution - was subsequently replicated in numerous videos, establishing itself as an Islamic State (IS) propaganda template aimed at maximising emotional and media impact (Moyano, 2023, p. 43). Even as of May 2025, the video is still available on the Internet, which shows that the permanence and viralisation capacity of this content as a tool of terror is very revealing.

Thus, both cases exemplify how fear-based propaganda not only seeks to terrorise audiences, but also to undermine collective morale and generate media impact.

2.2. IDEOLOGICAL PROPAGANDA

In addition to fear-based propaganda and media impact, jihadist groups use propaganda as an extremist ideological narrative to justify their actions and strengthen their support base. This type of propaganda is not limited to depicting violent images, but builds a doctrinal framework that legitimises violence as a necessary tool to achieve political or religious goals. Violence is presented as a moral duty or a form of divine justice through speeches, manifestos, online forums and audio-visual material. In this way, groups project a dual worldview that divides humanity into *'faithful believers'* and *'enemies of Islam'*, reinforcing polarisation and fuelling radicalisation processes.

Unlike fear-based propaganda, which seeks to intimidate and destabilise society, ideological propaganda aims to convince and manipulate. In this sense, this type of propaganda is much more closely linked to recruitment than the type explained above, by providing a narrative that explains the world, justifies violence and offers a transcendent motive and sense of identity to individuals. These narratives generate role models - exemplary fighters, martyrs or successful converts - that function as aspirational symbols for new recruits. Jihadist militancy is presented as a path of heroism, purpose and self-fulfilment. At the same time, they foster internal cohesion by building a sense of belonging and transnational community among sympathisers, reinforcing, in turn, loyalty to the group and ensuring continuity of the extremist message even in fragmented digital environments.

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A number of official studies also support the importance of ideology in this process. Dr. Donald Holbrook, through the report *Sacred Violence: The Enduring Role of Ideology in Terrorism and Radicalisation*, published by the UK's *Commission for Countering Extremism*, concludes that "ideology is indispensable to understanding why terrorists fight, what they hope to achieve and what they consider permissible" (Holbrook, 2025, p.5). Holbrook argues that this is because ideology plays an irreplaceable role in the field of terrorism, as it creates a framework for how to behave and what to think and then defines the rewards for carrying out certain actions (Holbrook, 2025, p.5). Complementarily, the United Nations Security Council *Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate*'s (CTED) *Analytical Brief*, *Countering Terrorist Narratives Online and Offline* (2020), identifies extremist narratives as one of the key drivers of radicalisation, highlighting that messages of shared grievance, promises of common goals and calls for collective action act as catalysts to mobilise individuals.

A particularly illustrative example of this strategy is the recurrent allusion to *Al-Andalus* in this type of propaganda. According to Torres Soriano (2015), the first explicit mention of Spain by Osama Bin Laden took place on 7 October 2001 in a video broadcast by the *Al Jazeera* channel, in which the leader of Al Qaeda declared: 'Let the world know that we will not allow the tragedy of Al-Andalus to be repeated in Palestine' (Torres Soriano, 2015, p. 27). With this reference, Bin Laden was evoking the loss of the territory that the Muslims ruled in the Iberian Peninsula between 711 and 1492, whose definitive fall came with the Christian Reconquest. In this case - and in almost all Jihadist imagery - *al-Andalus* functions as a symbol of lost Islamic glory, rather than as a specific territorial objective. Its recovery operates as a mobilising myth, as an emotionally charged historical claim that seeks to reinforce the sense of grievance, legitimise the armed struggle and connect the current aspirations of global jihadism with an idealised past. This use of history as a discursive weapon is fully in line with CTED (2020), which identifies historical grievance narratives as one of the most effective elements to radicalise, cohere and mobilise sympathisers both in digital and offline environments. Indeed, journalist Loretta Napoleoni (2015) also addresses this logic in her book *The Islamist Phoenix: The Islamic State and the Redesign of the Middle East*, where she explains the ability of Islamic terrorism to 'rise from the ashes once it has been destroyed' (Napoleoni, 2015, p. 18) by reinforcing the idea of a permanent conflict between Islam and the West.

Another paradigmatic example can be found in the digital magazine *Dabiq*, the official propaganda organ of the terrorist group Islamic State. According to Moreno Valle and Veres (2025), in their article *Jihad, the crossroads between violence and terrorism*, issue 6 of the aforementioned magazine stated the following: "They fabricate lies against us and describe us in the harshest way: apostates, deviants, madmen [...] and warn people that we are murderers and that we will massacre them" (Moreno Valle & Veres, 2025, p. 62). This victimhood discourse seeks to convince followers that there is a war against Islam, reinforcing the perception of an external threat. Likewise, in issue 10 of the same magazine, it was insisted that 'dozens of nations have joined in a war against the Islamic State', presenting the fight as a necessary defence, according to the group, against superior and oppressive enemies [the West]. Similarly, Talal Asad (2008), in his work *On Suicide Terrorism*, interprets such messages as not being disseminated as a 'clash of civilisations', but rather as these groups referring to a 'struggle of civilisation against the uncivilised', justifying violence as a moral response (Asad, 2008, p. 35-40).

Finally, *Dabiq*'s rhetoric culminates in an explicit call to action: 'Mujahideen, we call you to defend the Islamic State [...] they started their war against us at all levels. So stand up, mujahideen. Rise up and defend your state from wherever you are [...] to raise high the word of Allah and trample on democracy and nationalism" (Moreno Valle & Veres, 2025, p. 62). This message evidences the direct relationship between recruitment and the dissemination of ideological propaganda. Thus, a religious duty can be observed in the invocation of the defence of the "Islamic State" and the "word of Allah", as well as the presentation of the conflict as a sacred obligation and not as a political option. The rejection of Western values is also evident in the use of the expression "trampling on democracy and nationalism", which denotes a frontal opposition to different political systems. The idea of "war at all levels", on the other hand, communicates that the struggle is not only military, but also cultural, social and ideological. Finally, by addressing the mujahideen directly, it strengthens the sense of belonging and the idea that all believers are part of the same *umma* (Islamic community) that must, and needs, according to the group, to defend itself.

Thus, it is evident that the above messages clearly and forcefully reflect how jihadist propaganda articulates an extremist ideology, exalts terrorism and justifies its violent actions. Moreover, it shows the radicalisation component and the explicit call for the incorporation of new followers into their cells with the use of imperatives such as "stand up" or "defend yourselves". Likewise, by saying "from wherever you are", geographical and logistical barriers are eliminated, in line with the words of General Argumosa Pila (2022) mentioned at the beginning of this analysis, inviting both to travel to the caliphate and to act in the countries of origin (*homegrown terrorism*) and broadening the spectrum of potential recruits. The discourse, therefore, is designed to emotionally impact, polarise and attract people susceptible to radicalisation, thus consolidating the strategic function of propaganda in contemporary terrorism.

2.3. PROPAGANDA AS A MEANS OF RECRUITMENT

Although the importance of radicalisation as a central objective of jihadist propaganda has been discussed in the previous chapter, it is necessary to explore this issue further. In contrast to campaigns aimed at instilling fear or extremist and violent ideology, there is a type of propaganda whose purpose is, in a much more direct and specific way, to attract new followers and initiate their radicalisation process.

Several studies confirm the magnitude of this phenomenon in the digital environment. *The ISIS Twitter Census* report by Berger and Morgan (2016) estimated that between 2014 and 2015 there were approximately 460,000 Twitter accounts (now X) showing explicit support for the ideas of the self-styled Islamic State. Complementarily, an analysis by Ceron, Curini and Iacus, cited by Francesco Marone (2019) in his study *Digital Jihad: online communication and violent extremism*, revealed that, in the same period of time, the daily average number of *tweets* in favour of the Islamic State reached 160,000 (Marone, 2019, p. 74). These figures reflect the reach of recruitment propaganda, as well as the ability of jihadist groups to exploit social media as a recruitment ecosystem.

In some cases, however, terrorist organisations even develop their own media and apps to amplify their message. The Islamic State, for example, launched the *Dawn of Glad Tidings* app, designed to automatically publish propaganda *tweets* on the accounts of users who have it, thus multiplying the dissemination of pro-jihadist messages

(Marone, 2019, p. 6). Also, within the wide range of strategies of these groups, the use of *hashtags* plays a crucial role. By facilitating the search for content and the viralisation of messages, *hashtags* make it possible to reach a wide and segmented audience, connecting potential sympathisers with ideologically related material. For example, campaigns such as #HijrahToISIS ('emigrate to the Islamic State') urged young Muslims from Europe and other regions to travel to Syria and Iraq to join the ranks of the IS group. Other initiatives, such as #TheFridayOfSupportingISIS, #KhilafahNews or the dynamic '*Jihadist Follow Friday*', encouraged the creation of new accounts and the expansion of networks on a regular basis, replicating popular social media practices to reinforce their appeal.

However, terrorist propaganda is not launched arbitrarily or indiscriminately. On the contrary, it responds to a carefully designed strategy. Groups analyse the socio-political context, digital consumption trends and the psychological profiles of potential recruits. With regard to the latter, it is relevant to highlight that the selection of potential recruits is not random, but responds to sociological, psychological and political criteria , in order to optimise the chances of recruitment and radicalisation.

2.3.1. Target profile

The study entitled *The Devoted Actor* provides a fundamental theoretical framework for understanding why some people are willing to make extreme sacrifices - including risking or even giving their lives - for a cause or group, beyond any rational calculation of risks and rewards. In this work, Atram argues that "contemporary wars, revolutions and global terrorism are driven by devoted actors who fight and risk their lives not because they have to, but out of a deep moral commitment to a sacred or unassailable cause" (Atram, 2016, p. 3), reflecting the sense of belonging and identity of members of terrorist groups. For these individuals, violence is perceived as morally justified in defence of a supreme and common goal, thus rejecting state authority and subordinating personal life to a higher allegiance. Moreover, according to Atram, "the commitment of these devoted actors is total to what they consider morally right and does not attend to the risks and rewards involved in their actions" (Atram, 2016, p. 2). Identity fusion theory complements this idea by pointing out that an individual's actions can be seen as inseparable from those of the group, reinforcing the emotional bond and willingness to sacrifice.

In this context, violent radicalisation is defined, according to *Article 1 of the Framework Decision on Combating Terrorism*, as "the phenomenon whereby individuals subscribe to opinions, views and ideas which may lead them to commit terrorist acts" (European Commission, 2002, Art. 1). As various studies on persuasive communication and radicalisation have shown, jihadist propaganda adapts its content, format and dissemination channels according to the profile of the recipient, with the explicit aim of carrying out such violent radicalisation (CTED, 2020B, p. 9). For example, messages aimed at Western youth often employ modern aesthetics, global cultural references and emotional language that appeals to a search for identity, belonging and purpose in life. In contrast, for audiences in Muslim-majority countries, the narrative emphasises religious duty, defence of the *ummah* and denunciation of foreign oppression. Also, propaganda is adjusted to international events, intensifying in times of crisis, conflict or military campaigns to increase social and political pressure and evidencing the triple objective of jihadist propaganda defined in this article.

Moreover, in the context of this study, authors such as Coolsaet (2005), Kirby (2007) and Sageman (2008), in their study *The evolution of terrorism in 2005,* stress that so-called self-recruitment is becoming increasingly common, especially thanks to the role of the internet. On this basis, it is worth highlighting the difference in meaning between recruitment, as defined in previous chapters, and radicalisation. The latter can occur independently, without a formal recruitment process, as a person can adopt extremist ideas on their own and even act as a "lone wolf". On the other hand, recruitment is often more effective when the individual is already radicalised to a certain degree, as at that stage he or she is more likely to accept the influence of an organisation and to join in its activities.

For his part, Gabriel Weinmann (2004) carried out a study in his work *Terror on Internet* on the use that terrorists make of the internet, concluding that this tool plays an important role in the selection of new recruits (Weinmann, 2004, p. 55). However, despite the growing importance of the internet in the process of recruiting potential recruits, the organisations themselves continue to play the central role in the recruitment and search for sympathisers. In this way, recruiting profiles do not adopt a passive stance, but actively seek out potential recruits who, generally speaking, tend to have vulnerability as a common characteristic.

According to Manuel Moyano Pacheco, PhD in psychology from the University of Granada, and Humberto M. Trujillo Mendoza, professor of psychology at the same university, in the book *Radicalización islamista y terrorismo*, the reality is that "whether or not there is an external figure (active recruiter or leader) who acts as a link between the recruit and the organisation, it must be assumed that, from a psychological point of view, vulnerabilities (what we could call risk factors) are personal [...]". Thus, when analysing the functional relationships of the person with their environment, recruitment will always be "external" and the vulnerabilities will be carried by the person, thus being at greater or lesser risk of recruitment, radicalisation and subsequent recruitment" (Moyano Pacheco & Trujillo Mendoza, 2013, p. 37-42). This statement explains that it is not only the existence of a recruiter that determines the risk of radicalisation, but also the personal characteristics and circumstances of the individual victim. Prevention should therefore focus both on reducing the influence of external agents and on strengthening individual and social protective factors.

In this sense, people considered as "vulnerable" often share certain characteristics or circumstances that make them more likely to be influenced by extremist discourses. People who feel marginalised or discriminated against on ethnic, religious, economic or cultural grounds may seek belonging in radical groups that offer them identity and purpose. In addition, victims of violence, abuse, war or major losses may develop resentment or seek revenge, which can be exploited by extremist groups. On the other hand, the absence of support figures, broken families or lack of positive role models may lead them to look to radical leaders for role models. Even poverty, unemployment or lack of opportunities can make the promises of a radical group (money, status, "justice", etc.) attractive.

A particularly relevant aspect in this context is the volume and age of users accessing the Internet and this type of content. The number of Internet users is growing significantly every day, while the average age is decreasing significantly. According to the *Digital Report 2025* published by *We Are Social*, at the beginning of 2025, there will be 5.56 billion Internet users in the world, equivalent to 67.9% of the global population

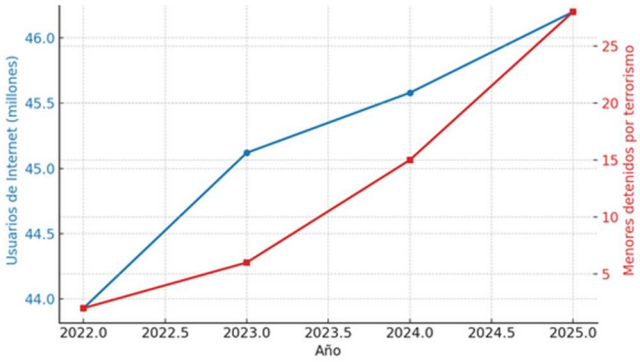
(We Are Social, 2025). In 2024 alone, the number of users increased by 266 million, i.e. 5.6% more than the previous year (We Are Social, 2024), and over the last 25 years the number of internet users has grown by 1,301%. In practical terms, this means that Internet access among children and adolescents is practically universal. In Spain, for example, as reflected in the study by Rideout and Roob (2020) cited in the report *Uso de los dispositivos móviles en la infancia* published by the University of La Coruña, 97% of children between 0 and 8 years old have access from home and connect at increasingly younger ages, and most of them even start to use social networks before the minimum age allowed (González-Sanmamed, Losada-Puente & Rebollo-Quintela, 2023, p. 3).

Thus, platforms such as YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram and TikTok are part of young people's daily lives from a very early age, and many spend several hours a day online, which increases the risks of their exposure to content of various kinds, including those potentially dangerous for their emotional, psychological and social development. These risks include misinformation, manipulation, hate speech, violence, misogyny, xenophobia and, of course, extremist propaganda and messages that encourage radicalisation.

In terms of figures in Spain, over the last decade Spain has experienced a profound digital transformation that has had a direct impact on children and adolescents. According to the Save the Children report, *almost 9 out of 10 adolescents go online several times a day or are permanently on the internet*, and almost 30% of minors regularly access the internet before the age of 10. This trend has intensified over time, with the average age of access to the internet standing at around 7.5 years in 2025 (Save the Children, 2024). In parallel, the report *Digital 2025: Spain*, published by *We Are Social & Meltwater*, points out that the number of Internet users has grown steadily, reaching 46.2 million in 2025, equivalent to 96.4% of the Spanish population. This high rate of digital penetration has facilitated the access of minors to social networks and content platforms, often without adequate supervision, which increases their exposure to risks such as misinformation, cyberbullying and, in the most serious cases, violent radicalisation.

In this context, official records on arrests of minors for jihadist terrorism in Spain between 2015 and 2025, based on data from the Ministry of the Interior and the Centre for Intelligence against Terrorism and Organised Crime (CITCO), reflect a worrying evolution. The number of minors arrested for activities linked to jihadism has increased significantly, from isolated figures (2-4 cases per year between 2015 and 2020) to 28 arrests in 2025, evidencing the direct relationship between the growing early digital exposure and the intensification of online recruitment and radicalisation strategies.

Figure 1
Evolution of the number of arrests and % female in Spain (2020-2025).



Own elaboration.

At the same time, several studies show that cyberbullying has increased in parallel to the growth of Internet access, especially among minors and adolescents. Specifically, a study by the International University of La Rioja (UNIR) carried out in 2023 and involving 1,142 adolescents between 11 and 18 years of age, showed that more than 4 out of 10 adolescents had suffered cyberbullying at some point during the 13 months the study lasted, and an incidence (new cases) of 25%, which means that a quarter of minors were added to the problem in that period. Similarly, the scientific publisher BioMed Central (BMC) published a study entitled *Longer hours on social media may increase teens' risk of cyberbullying* highlighting that adolescents aged 14-17 are more likely to be cyberbullied if they use social networks more than 2 hours a day on school days. Also, a 2010 study entitled *Cyberbullying: adolescent victimization through mobile phone and internet*, based on a sample of 2,000 adolescents aged 11-17, concluded that 24.6% had been victims of bullying via mobile phone during the same year and 29% had experienced some form of aggression via the internet.

This phenomenon has profound consequences: many victims of cyberbullying tend to isolate themselves further in digital environments, seeking refuge in online video games, chat rooms, forums and other platforms, creating a vicious cycle of isolation and vulnerability. This tendency not only aggravates mental health problems such as anxiety, depression or low self-esteem, but also increases susceptibility to falling into extremist networks, as they look to *online* communities for a sense of belonging, identity and validation that they do not find in their everyday environment.

Radical and extremist groups exploit precisely these emotional needs, offering acceptance, purpose and a sense of mission to those who feel marginalised. A recent example is provided by the study *Policing extremism on gaming-adjacent platforms: Awful but lawful?* by researchers William Allchorn and Elisa Orofino, which notes that the use of the internet as a primary channel of radicalisation among young people under 30 increased by 413 % in the last decade (Allchorn & Orofino, 2025, p. 2). This shows how extremist groups adapt their strategies and migrate to less regulated platforms, such as video games, where they can interact directly with young and vulnerable users, thus reinforcing the recruitment and radicalisation mechanisms already analysed.

2.3.2. Gendered strategies for online recruitment

On 26 May 2025, according to information published by López-Fonseca (2025) in the newspaper *El País*, two sisters were arrested in Spain accused of having created a so-called 'Jihad Academy', whose purpose was to attract young women into the ranks of the self-styled Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Both had hundreds of followers and managed more than twenty profiles on social networks, from which they disseminated propaganda messages, audiovisual materials and proclamations related to jihadist ideology.

This case illustrates how contemporary jihadist recruitment and propaganda campaigns have deliberately incorporated gender strategies, adapting their narrative to specifically target women and present them as essential actors in the Caliphate's ideological project. In this sense, Paul Cruickshank, in his report *A View from the CT Foxhole*, published by the *Combating Terrorism Center (CTC)*, reports on an interview conducted in 2019 with the former executive director of Europol, Catherine De Bolle, who pointed out that 'the Islamic State (IS), of course, needs women to build a state [...]. While IS claims that offensive jihad is not obligatory for women, it also argues that a woman's honour lies in being a producer of jihadists' (Cruickshank, 2019, p. 17).

In this context, a more detailed analysis of the quantitative evolution of female participation in jihadist terrorism in Spain during the period between 2020 and 2025 shows a progressive increase in both the total number of arrests for jihadist-related activities and the percentage of women involved in them. This trend reflects not only the increasing involvement of women in radicalisation processes, but also the effectiveness of recruitment strategies specifically targeting women. Below is a table showing the annual evolution of arrests for jihadist terrorism in Spain, together with the corresponding percentage of women arrested, with the aim of highlighting the correlation between both variables.

Table 1
Study between arrests for terrorism and % female detainees in Spain between 2020 and 2025

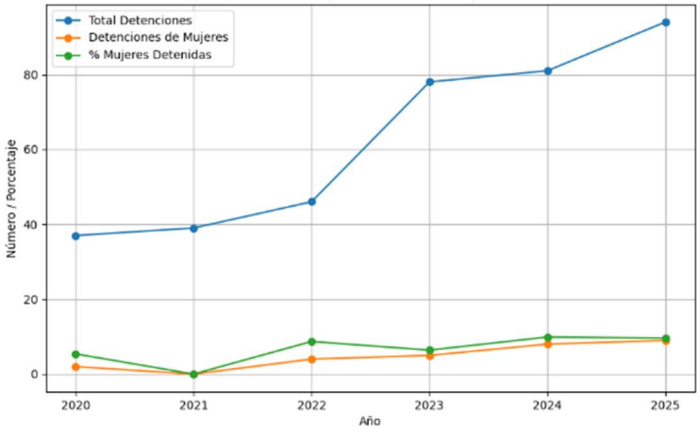
Year	No. of arrests	Approximate % of female detainees
2020	37	6%
2021	39	0%
2022	46	8,7%
2023	78	7%
2024	81	8%
2025	94	10%

Own elaboration.

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) (2025), in one of its most recent publications, points out that five years ago, in 2020, a total of 37 arrests related to jihadist terrorism were recorded in Spain, of which only two corresponded to women, representing 6% of the total. A year later, in 2021, there were 39 arrests, although on this occasion no female cases were recorded, an exception to the general trend. In 2022, there were 46 arrests, of which four were women, thus reaching 8.7%, the highest percentage up to that time. Subsequently, in 2023, 78 arrests were recorded, with an estimated female participation of 6-7%. In 2024, both the total number of arrests and the rate of women

involved increased again, closing the year with 81 arrests and 10% women. Finally, in 2025, and according to the data available up to 3 October, 94 arrests were recorded, maintaining a similar proportion to the previous year, with a percentage of female participation ranging between 8 and 10%.

Figure 2
Relationship between the number of Internet users and juvenile arrests (Spain, 2022-2025).



Prepared by the authors.

However, in light of the above data, it is relevant to highlight not only the directly proportional correlation between the increase in the number of arrests for terrorism and the increase in the percentage of women involved in Spain, but also the role played by the COVID-19 pandemic in this evolution. In this sense, the health crisis acted as a catalyst, moving from marginal figures in 2020 and 2021 to percentages close to 10% in 2024 and 2025. Prolonged confinement and the consequent reduction of face-to-face social interactions favoured greater exposure to digital environments, spaces where jihadist organisations significantly intensified their propaganda and recruitment activities.

In this context, and in line with the aforementioned assertions of former director De Bolle, the narratives used to attract women through social networks tend to focus on values such as a sense of belonging, social status - materialised in the promise of becoming a wife or 'mother of the community' - and even personal fulfilment through the assumption of reproductive and family roles. Based on this premise, it is important to point out that in many cases, it is the women themselves who become agents of recruitment of other women, replicating and reinforcing these discourses from a perspective of proximity and trust. However, there are also situations in which this dynamic is partially present, with male figures intervening as influences or facilitators in the radicalisation process.

In relation to direct *online* radicalisation among women, this dynamic responds to the fact that, once integrated into the group, many of them take an active role in disseminating propaganda and recruiting new followers. In this sense, Al Khazraji, in her article *Turning to Terrorism: Why Shamima Begum and Other Women Joined ISIS*, highlights that approximately 80 per cent of the women recruited spend most of their day interacting on social networks with the aim of attracting new members to the cause (Al Khazraji, 2023, p. 1). Complementarily, the *European Counter Terrorism Centre* (ECTC), in the article *Suffering and Hardship as Stepping-Stones to Paradise:*

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Radicalisation of Women in IS, notes that between 30% and 40% of women who travelled to Syria and Iraq between 2013 and 2018 were directly recruited by other women (ECTC, 2019, p. 25). These figures coincide with those provided by Arianna Braga in her report *ISIS Brides and Their Children*, which highlights that 'between 664 and 746 Western women travelled to Syria and Iraq to join IS between 2013 and 2019' (Braga, 2025, p. 1). Furthermore, according to sources such as *Infobae*, as of March 2025, more than 200 women remained imprisoned in Iraq for their links to IS, while nearly 500 children had been repatriated from Iraq, although their current situation is unknown (Newsroom Infobae, 2024).

In this regard, and according to the report *Women in Islamic State Propaganda*, the use of female recruiters is a particularly effective tool to increase the recruitment of Western teenagers and young adults, mainly in the 15-25 age range (Europol, 2019). This is because jihadist groups, such as Daesh or Al-Qaeda, perceive women as more effective agents to attract and retain other women by offering a discourse of empathy, legitimacy and emotional proximity. These recruiters address issues related to marriage, family life, modesty or the role of women in Islam from a perspective that is more credible and persuasive. In this way, jihadists operate as digital 'big sisters', generating bonds of trust and belonging among their followers.

An illustrative example of this dynamic dates back to 2014, when a Canadian woman known as Aisha travelled to Syria after participating in an online Quran study course taught by an Edmonton-based woman who offered classes in small groups of fifteen students. Subsequently, Aisha's sister stated that the same instructor also recruited her to join the Islamic State and facilitated her travel to Syria, where she lived for a time with another woman from Quebec (Margolin & Cook, 2024, p. 23).

However, as noted above, in some cases women do not act in isolation in recruitment processes. Various studies, such as the United Nations (UN) *CTED Trends Report*, published in 2019 and updated in 2021, as well as reports by the *Radicalisation Awareness Network* (RAN), show that, in certain contexts, male recruiters play an initial role as 'fishermen', identifying potential candidates and subsequently referring them to female networks responsible for ideological or logistical consolidation. In these cases, men often appeal to emotional components of a romantic or protective nature through expressions such as "I will take care of you", "you are special" or "your role will be important", with the aim of generating a bond of affection and dependency. Subsequently, female recruiters reinforce this bond through a discourse that legitimises subordination within the jihadist ideology, using appeals such as "you will be a good wife" or "mother of martyrs".

Based on the above, two main schemes of female *online* radicalisation can be distinguished. On the one hand, the female-female model, in which radicalised women directly recruit other women - often teenagers - and on the other hand, the male-female model, where a man initiates the contact and, once the emotional bond is established, transfers it to a woman in charge of consolidating the radicalisation process.

With respect to the latter scheme, the case of a woman resident in Ceuta, whose two children -a boy and a girl- were recruited by Daesh and completed their radicalisation process by migrating to Syrian territory between 2014 and 2015, clearly illustrates the sequence in which men act as initial agents in the recruitment process before the female intervention. In this case, the son was first recruited by a group of young men he met in a

vocational training programme. Contact with his family only occurred when the young man was already in Turkey on his way to Syria.

Subsequently, her sister - refusing to disown her brother - began to spend entire nights in her room surfing social networks such as Facebook, WhatsApp and Telegram in search of news about him. In this context, she made contact with a young man who claimed to know her brother and who was also planning to travel to Syria. The relationship evolved quickly: first a friendship, then a romance, and finally a marriage. It should be stressed, however, that all this interaction took place entirely online, reflecting the relevance of the digital environment and cyberspace in contemporary recruitment and radicalisation processes. The two young men did not meet in person until she travelled to Syria to join the ranks of Daesh.

Aisha - the name by which the young woman identified herself - subsequently contacted her mother after her husband's death, sending her photographs of her newborn son and refusing pleas to return to Spain. In her communications, she claimed that Da'esh had provided her with housing, a stipend and an opportunity to contribute to the construction of a project of global historical significance. As a result of the feeling of empowerment she experienced within the Caliphate, Aisha began to mentor other migrant women in Syria (The Carter Center, 2019, p. 4), which highlights the recruiting role described in this chapter, as well as the influence of doctrinal factors linked to a sense of belonging, family and the notion of a higher cause.

This case, therefore, is a representative example of the male-female schema and how it combines emotional seduction and ideological indoctrination, taking advantage of the initial affective influence of the male and the doctrinal reinforcement provided by other women already integrated into the group structure.

Finally, with regard to the techniques used by female recruiters, the report *Daesh Online Recruitment and Women*, published in 2020 by the *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism* (ICCT), documents the existence of various closed groups on platforms such as Telegram, Facebook and WhatsApp, managed exclusively by women. In these spaces - to which only other women are allowed access - religious instructions, manuals of conduct, propaganda materials and links to logistical information linked to travel to conflict zones are shared (ICCT, 2020). For example, the report *The Agency and Roles of Foreign Women in Islamic State* reports the case of the British woman Aqsa Mahmood, who ran a blog in which she was dedicated to dismantling the 'myths' about life in the Caliphate, offering an idealised and apparently normalised vision of daily life in territory controlled by Daesh. Through this digital space, she invited her readers to contact her if they wished to travel to Syria, thus acting as a direct link in the group's recruitment and facilitation chains (Margolin & Cook, 2024, p. 23).

3. CONCLUSION

The Internet has profoundly transformed the patterns of action of jihadist terrorism, becoming a strategic tool for the expansion and consolidation of its objectives. Jihadist propaganda online combines three fundamental purposes in a structured way: the dissemination of fear, the legitimisation and consolidation of extremist ideologies, and the recruitment of new members. In this context, the particular vulnerability of minors and young people has been highlighted, who, due to their early, continuous and massive

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exposure to the digital environment, become priority targets for virtual propaganda and recruitment. Factors such as social isolation, experiences of marginalisation or discrimination, and even cyber-bullying, are systematically exploited by extremist groups to generate feelings of belonging and offer false promises of purpose and recognition.

Similarly, contemporary jihadist recruitment and propaganda campaigns have consciously incorporated gendered strategies, adapting their discourse to specifically target women and present them as key players in the Caliphate's ideological project. In this sense, two main schemes of female radicalisation in the digital environment can be distinguished: the male-female model, in which a male initiates the contact and a woman consolidates the process, and the female-female model, in which radicalised women directly recruit other women, generally teenagers or young adults.

Consequently, the fight against Jihadist radicalisation in cyberspace requires a comprehensive and multidisciplinary approach that acts both on external agents - the groups and structures that generate and disseminate propaganda - and on the internal factors of individual vulnerability. Understanding the phenomenon from a psychological, sociological and gender perspective, together with a continuous analysis of digital dynamics, is essential for the design of effective prevention policies and intervention strategies, capable of counteracting the capacity for attraction, persuasion and global expansion of these extremist groups.

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