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A tool for terrorism

Exploring how ISIL, al-Shabaab and Boko Haram use social media in Africa

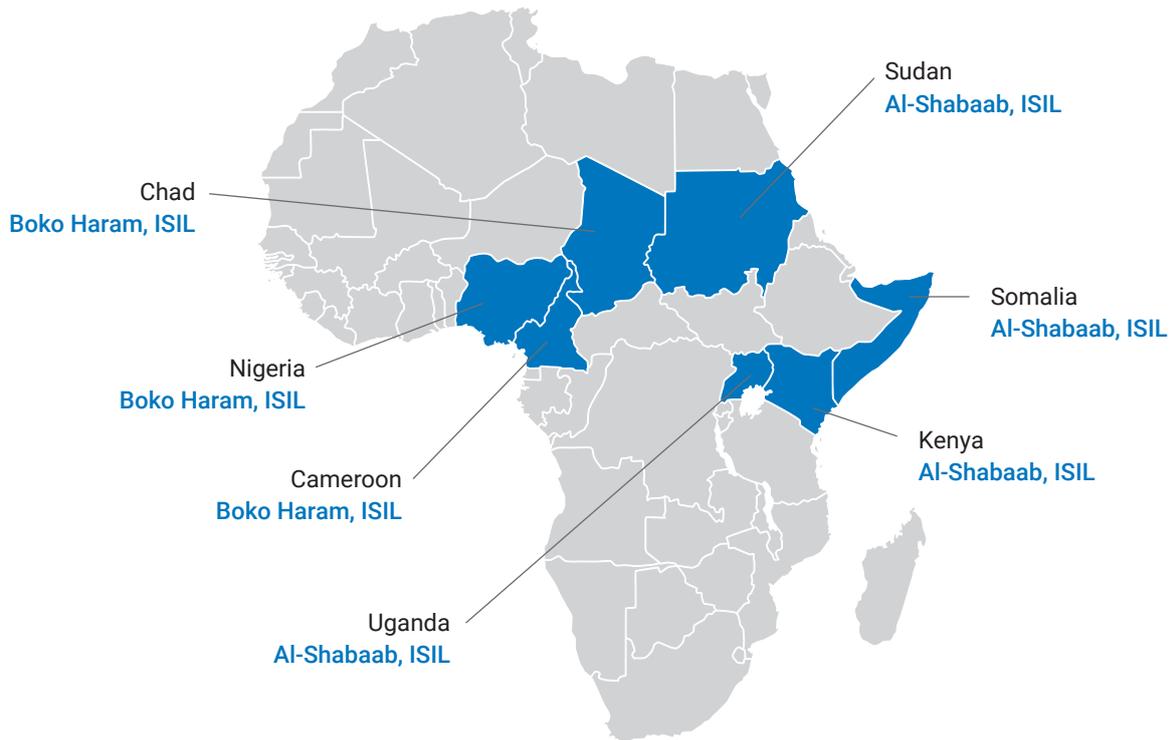
Internet bandwidth availability for Africa's 1.2 billion population has grown twenty-fold between 2008 and 2012, with 46 per cent of the African population subscribing to mobile services by the end of 2015. The growth of the Internet and spread of mobile phones have increased social media use and been described by experts as the technological breakthroughs with the greatest impact on the African continent. While the growing use of Facebook, Twitter, news apps and other types of social media can promote social, political and economic development, it may also increase opportunities for radicalisation. The increasing availability of online resources can equip terrorists with a low-cost tool to remotely enlist, train, coordinate and communicate with followers and potential recruits.

Aims of the research

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) commissioned RAND Europe to explore social media use and its links to online radicalisation in Africa. The use of social media by three Islamist terrorist groups based in Africa – al-Shabaab, Boko Haram and ISIL – was analysed

across seven countries: Cameroon, Chad, Kenya, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan and Uganda. To get to the heart of the issue, the study, conducted in late 2017 and early 2018, drew on three research methods: a structured literature review, key informant interviews and Twitter data analysis.

Figure 1. Focus countries and terrorist groups



Social media trends

All three terrorist groups use social media and other online channels to broadcast their messages, inspire followers and recruit new fighters.



Social media platforms – The terrorist groups use a wide range of platforms. Some are well-known and public, such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, while others are private channels, such as Telegram and WhatsApp. In the case of ISIL, the group has shifted a number of its online activities to private channels following account closures on mainstream social media sites.



Propaganda – The terrorist groups use social media to claim or publicise major attacks, showcase operational victories, demonstrate tactics, and criticise opponents.

Video communications often aim to demonstrate military strength and appeal to new fighters.



Recruitment – All three terrorist groups have increased their recruitment efforts online. There is evidence that al-Shabaab, ISIL and, to a lesser extent, Boko Haram use social media as part of their wider online recruitment strategies.



Offline influences – The role of social media in the radicalisation process is often complemented by 'offline' peer influences in the form of in-person interactions with family, friends and other peer networks.

Figure 2. Social media activity

ISIL	Boko Haram	Al-Shabaab
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most sophisticated social media strategy of the three terrorist groups and use of the widest range of platforms • Social media managed by the Media Council of its central leadership outside of Africa • Widespread social media support base worldwide • Has shifted more online activities to Telegram following account closures on mainstream social media sites • Favours online over in-person recruitment, using social media to attract foreign fighters, women and children by offering a glamorised depiction of life in ‘the Caliphate’ • Coordinates a number of activities online, especially in relation to its overseas attacks • Uses technique known as ‘swarmcasting’ where core content is distributed to as many platforms as possible to build resilience against social media account suspensions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of social media is not as sophisticated as that of ISIL or al-Shabaab • Increased use of social media likely to have been influenced by the rapid increase in Internet access across Nigeria, with this tripling between 2012 and 2015 • Growing interest in Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and other public social media platforms to target disaffected Nigerian youths • Allegiance to ISIL in March 2015 exposed the group to a well-established and significant social media base, and closer coordination with ISIL’s central leadership in Iraq and Syria • Video content typically focuses on ongoing attacks, operational victories and beheadings of hostages • Little available evidence of direct engagement by social media users with Boko Haram 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ambitious social media strategy, despite limited Internet access in its core area of Somalia • Particularly active on Twitter, YouTube and its own online al-Kata’ib news channel • Aim on Twitter is to project its own overarching narrative of events and deliver ‘sound bite’ messages that can be rapidly picked up and shared by the mainstream media • Uses social media for funding purposes by contacting sympathetic Salafi networks • Uses video communications and private chatrooms to recruit foreign fighters • Social media creates challenges to the group’s coordination efforts, with its rapid growth leading to a ‘loss of control’ of the narrative by central leaders • Cases of Zachary Chesser and Michael Adebawale demonstrate how Western-based individuals have engaged with the group by exchanging emails with influential leaders and communicating with other extremists on social media platforms

Twitter data analysis

Methodology

The Twitter analysis approach involved three steps:

Data crawling – Running targeted search queries aimed at scraping relevant Twitter data relating to the three terrorist groups from selected dates before, during and immediately after significant events (e.g. major terrorist attacks) between 2012 and 2017.

Machine-based analysis – Analysing the resulting Twitter dataset through tools employing social network and lexical analysis approaches.

Research team interpretation – Analysing and interpreting the results and findings generated through the machine-based analysis.

Findings



Twitter results – 223,152 tweets were found across the selected dates between 2012 and 2017 in relation to the three terrorist groups.

Of these, 27,741 tweets related to al-Shabaab, 159,095 to Boko Haram, and 36,316 to ISIL. It is likely that the highest number of tweets focused on Boko Haram due to the group’s kidnapping of 136 schoolgirls from Chibok, Nigeria, in April 2014,

which sparked an international media campaign referred to as #BringBackOurGirls.



Twitter communities – Within the mentions of the three terrorist groups, there were 3,223 Twitter ‘communities’ comprising 59,489 users. These large, region-based communities are engaged in the discussion of activities and events connected to al-Shabaab and Boko Haram, with a smaller community connected to ISIL in the seven focus countries. In the case of ISIL, the Twitter content appears to originate from international accounts in the Middle East.



Twitter activity – The tweets analysed were posted on and around key dates of terrorist attacks,

with users discussing the unfolding events. These users comprise of accounts not normally engaged in conversations relating to the three terrorist groups, such as news outlets. On Twitter, wider media-driven discussions generated by major events are likely to have overshadowed the slower-paced continuous messaging strategies of the terrorist groups that are aimed at radicalisation and recruitment.



Twitter as a source of information –

In the context of terrorist attacks and associated responses, Twitter appears to be an important source of information for users. However, there is a strong degree of uncertainty from users about the news circulating on the social media platform.

Recommendations

RAND Europe presented the governments of Cameroon, Chad, Kenya, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan and Uganda with the following recommendations.

1. Where not already present, each government should consider developing a bespoke national strategy for countering online radicalisation in their own country. This could be done in consultation with UNDP, social media providers, local institutions and law enforcement agencies.
2. After preparing a bespoke national strategy, each government should consider developing counter-online-radicalisation programmes that are tailored to the local context. Engaging with relevant community actors can help to ensure that the messaging is sensitive to local conditions and relevant to its audience.
3. Online counter-radicalisation programmes should consider focusing not only on offering reactive social media responses following major terrorist attacks, but also on developing more proactive, continuous and preventative narratives. There is a need for trusted institutional accounts to share reliable news to counter fake news and damaging extremist content.
4. Each government should consider sharing lessons on ‘what works’ in countering online radicalisation at the national, regional and international levels – particularly given that social media is borderless and many terrorist groups operate in multiple countries. These lessons could be shared at annual regional roundtables or conferences, and the creation of new online communities could increase inter-governmental cooperation in this field.