THE MEDIA WAR OF ISIS AND ITS IMPACT

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ABSTRACT
The social media is one of the essential tools of the ISIS to garner attention of the people so as to get them to support their cause, motivate the people to join them and spread terror around the world. The organization is known to have many social media accounts and have also created their own website on which they upload explicit posts which contain disturbing contents such as videos of the members torturing or beheading hostages. Using the social media as a platform to promote their propaganda, the organization has gathered a huge following, which has helped in recruiting members from around the world.

The use of social media by the ISIS has caused many people to act on their digitized demand. While many get recruited, there are some who get inspired by their cause and act on their own account. The social media has become a mechanism to manipulate and exaggerate the attention of the people. This has caused deaths of millions of people, destruction of properties and environment and other socio-economic problems. Women and children have been subject to abduction, sexual assaults, mutation and forced marriage, all of which is posted on their social media accounts. Their acts have gravely violated human rights. It is because of social media that the world public immediately creates a social cohesion against rulers and governments that find human rights abuses, suffering, and death acceptable.

The paper seeks to elucidate upon the many facets of social media usage by ISIS and the impact of such social propagation of religious terrorism on the society. It will also shed light on the possible measures that can be taken to curb such usage by the outfit for the overall safety and security of the international community.

Introduction

In a world run by technology, the Islamic State has been able to combine their interpretation of the theories and beliefs of Islam with the internet by use of social media to expand their influence around the world. Social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter have become handmaidens to their dangerous and radical propagandas, mostly because of the convenience and easy access to these social media websites.

The internet helps people collect information on anything they want to learn about and with the development of mass media system, terrorist organizations have been able to change the way they work as they try to manipulate the social media platform to communicate with the world about their ideas and strategies. After any terrorist attack, they want the world to know that it was them and they do so by using such platform. In fact, any type of media wants to be the first to cover such an event, whether it is the newspaper, television or radio, to be the ones to break the news only furthers the purpose of these organizations to attract attention.

The symbiotic relationship between social media and terrorism has become more intertwined and mutually beneficial and often puts the media and legal authorities in a conflict. On one hand, the media capitalizes from the confusion and consternation caused by terrorist attacks to produce the kind of dramatic news that draws the attention of its viewers and readers. [1] On the other hand, the terrorists carefully enact their plans to generate ample media attention to advertise their messages on a global level. Walter Laqueur has called the media as the "terrorists' best friend" [2] and Margaret Thatcher had once condemned the media as the "oxygen" for the terrorists.

Leaving behind the traditional media outlets, today, the Islamic State uses social media as a tool to spread their propaganda, influencing the global community, for recruitment purposes, gathering intelligence, sharing news, videos, etc, among many things and has emerged as one of the most dangerous users of social media. Even though the ISIS is almost defeated on the ground, their online operations has eclipsed its military operations and, therefore, its virtual caliphate will continue to live in the form of social media.

What is 'Islamic State'?

The Islamic State, or the Islamic State od Iraq and Syria (ISIS), or the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL), was founded in 1999 by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian extremist. They are considered to be Islamic extremists who seek to eradicate obstacles to restoring God's rule on Earth and to defend the Muslim community, or umma, against infidels and apostates. [3]

They follow an extreme form of Islam called Salafism, which in Arabic means "pious forefathers". It promotes violence and slaughter to establish and maintain quranic domination through a strict adherence to the Quran and the *Shari'a* law. ISIS adheres to an apocalyptic theology and believes that the *Mhadi* or "guided one" will soon arrive and redeem Islam. ISIS has declared *jihad* against all infidels which includes westerners, Christians and Jews [4] and also any other Muslims who do not pledge their allegiance to them, like the Hamas.

A few years after its foundation, the ISIS started to associate themselves with al-Qaeda and their insurgent group in Iraq, AQI. After the death of their founder in 2006, the group renamed themselves as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), however, the group was weakened by the US troop surge steadily and by the Sunni Arab tribesmen, who rejected their brutal ways. In 2010, the group appointed a new leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and soon after, the group was carrying out dozens of terrorist attacks in Iraq.

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[1] Javier Delgado Riviera, *The Symbiotic relationship between Western Media and Terrorism*, Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs, (May 24, 2016),
https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/publications/ethics_online/0117

[2] Prabhjot Singh, *Terrorism and Media*, FPRC Journal. 37, 38 (2003)

[3] *What is Islamic State?*, BBC News, (Dec. 02, 2015), http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29052144

[4] *A Brief History of ISIS*, Chosen People Ministries, https://chosenpeople.com/site/ministry-news-brief-history-isis/

It was in 2013 that the group announced their merger with the forces in Syria and were rebranded as the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant. The al-Qaeda rejected this move since they were establishing the al-Nusra front. The two were at war with each other and eventually the al-Qaeda disassociated themselves with the ISIS, calling their methods to be too extreme.

With the onset of the Syrian Civil War, the ISIS started capturing major cities and in 2014, the group captured Mosul in Iraq and drove south until it was on the borders of Baghdad. A few weeks later it rebranded itself as the Islamic State, a Caliphate and demanded that all Muslims pledge allegiance. Groups like Boko Haram in Nigeria and Ansar Beit Al Maqdis in Egypt's Sinai began pledging allegiance and flew the black flag of ISIS.[5]

From 2014 till the end of 2017, the ISIS was on the news almost every month. From their capturing of major cities in Iraq and Syria to the terrorist attacks all over Europe, the ISIS seemed to be on a roll, gathering attention of the whole world. Their acts have led to the death of thousands of people and destruction of infrastructure and the environment. However, as a result of counter-terrorism, many ISIS fighters have been killed and its leadership has shrunk with the re-capturing of cities like Raqqa, Mosul and Rawa by the Iraqi forces, forcing the Islamic State to lose their grounds in both Syria and Iraq.

Use of Social Media by the ISIS

Many terrorist organizations have had their own propaganda websites for decades. Al Qaeda had launched their first official site way back in 2001. The use of internet by them has inspired several other such groups to do the same, most famous being the Islamic State.

Unlike the traditional media, which is dominated and controlled by established institutions that disseminate information to their audience, social media enables anyone to publish and access information without editorial limit and control, by adding further complex dimensions to reporting, such as in interactivity, reach, frequency, immediacy and permanence.[6]

The ISIS discovered the power of digital media and has since then, maximized its reach by exploiting several social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Telegram despite losing its grounds in Iraq and Syria. They are very astute in using the social networks and the internet to spread their propaganda of terror, as well as recruit fighters all over the world.[7]

The social media is one of the most essential tools of the ISIS which helps attract the attention of the people around the world. This helps them in getting people to support their cause, motivate them to join their organization, spread their ideologies across the global community and also spread terror around the world. The group is known to have accounts on Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, Telegram and Surespot. They have their own website and has also created website on the Dark Web.

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[5]*A Brief History of ISIS*, The Week, (Nov. 21, 2015), http://theweek.com/articles/589924/brief-history-isis

[6] Laura Scaife, *Social Networks as the New Frontier of Terrorism #Terror*, 84-85, (1ˢᵗ Ed. 2017)
[7]*Supra* note 5

The group uploads contents like videos, articles, flyers, etc., which are disturbing in nature. These contain their interpretation of Islam, videos luring people to join them, videos of their hostages being tortured or beheaded by the members. Women and children have been abducted, subject to sexual assaults, mutations, slavery and forced marriage, all of which is posted online on their social media accounts. These online platforms have become a mechanism to manipulate and exaggerate the attention of the people.

ISIS uses its presence online to communicate, both internally and externally, with a key goal of projecting its propaganda into areas outside its physical domain. These messages often contain shockingly sadistic violence, designed to inspire or recruit people with borderline personalities to carry out their own violence in ISIS's name, whether as fighters with the organization or in so-called "lone wolf" terrorist attacks where they live. In sharp counterpoint to its grisly executions, ISIS also sends out carefully manipulated images of life in its territories, which it depicts as idyllic and utopian, although tinged with harsh, violent justice for any who fail to conform to its warped vision of Islamic law.[8]

Today the Islamic State is as much a media conglomerate as a fighting force. According to Documenting the Virtual Caliphate, an October 2015 report by the Quilliam Foundation, the organization releases, on average, 38 new items per day—20-minute videos, full-length documentaries, photo essays, audio clips, and pamphlets, in languages ranging from Russian to Bengali.[9] Unfortunately, their effort have helped them gathering support and in the expansion of their organization with thousand of people around the world joining them.

ISIS's social media success is a product of a (1) centralized and controlled message, (2) a propaganda machine with a tightly organized production team and a distribution team in which various members have discrete tasks, and (3) the use of deceptive technology (such as bots) and hashtag campaigns. These factors allow ISIS to create a highly visible message that is broadly disseminated, resonating with a wide audience and giving ISIS a disproportionate presence on the Internet.[10]

At least 38,200 foreign fighters— including at least 6,900 from Western countries—have travelled to Syria from at least 120 countries since the beginning of the conflict in 2012.[11] Out of these, all, or at least most of them, had spent hours and hours on the internet declaring their feelings about the Islamic State. They have expanded their base beyond Iraq and Syria. From Middle-East to Europe to the United States. The world from

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[8] J.M Berger, *Can We Win the War Against ISIS by Focussing on Social Media?*, Huffington Post, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/jm-berger/isis-social-media_b_6733206.html

[9] Brendan I. Koerner, *Why is ISIS Winning the Social Media War*, Wired, (2016), https://www.wired.com/2016/03/isis-winning-social-media-war-heres-beat/

[10] Donna Farag, *From Tweeter to Terrorist: Combatting Online Propaganda When Jihad Goes Viral*, 54 Am. Crim. L. Rev. 843,845 (2017)

[11] *Senate Armed Services Committee Hearing – IC's Worldwide Threat Assessment Opening Statement*, Office of the Director of National Intelligence, (Feb. 09, 2016), https://fas.org/irp/congress/2016_hr/020916-sasc-ad.pdf

2014 till 2017 witnessed series of terrorist attacks starting from the Beirut Bombings, several attacks in Paris, Westminster and Manchester Bombings, etc. for which the ISIS claimed responsibility.

Their influence has inspired many homegrown extremist violence in the United States of America.[12] The Orlando Nightclub shooting is one such example. An American-born man who'd pledged allegiance to ISIS gunned down 49 people early Sunday at a gay nightclub in Orlando, the deadliest mass shooting in the United States and the nation's worst terror attack since 9/11.[13]

The key element of their social media campaigns is its projection of strength, which has surpassed that of their parent organization, i.e., al-Qaeda, claiming that they are already victorious where the al-Qaeda failed: re-establishing the caliphate. [14] This projection is already becoming the "normal" model for other terrorist organizations. Furthermore, the process of globalization is only being appreciated by terrorists more and more with time because their channel of communication is no longer confined to a specific area. They can now reach any corner of the world in an instant by using the social media platform causing the virtual jihad and its ideas to spread within minutes.

This is when ethics come into the picture. The ISIS on a regular basis releases messages and videos on social media which contain explicit and/or graphic contents like beheading of hostages. Once these are uploaded and shared, the ethical debate with respect to sharing of highly explicit contents and how to deal with such situation arises. According to the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJs) and their Code of Ethics (2014), there should be a guideline for handling the dilemmas of vicious propaganda, and four pillars are key in this regard[15]:

- Seek truth and report it;
- Minimize harm;
- Act independently;
- Be accountable and transparent.

However, these tools are not enough as they are insufficient since people are geographically spread and it is difficult to find and hold them accountable. There is lack of efforts by society as a whole to help curb this problem. Another challenge is that the rules and regulations on how social media should approach terrorism differ from one country to another.Even though many efforts are made by the government to remove such contents, the account or the websites completely, one may say that blocking such websites or contents violates the freedom of speech and expression. Also, the efforts to ban lack consistency because most of the times the rule is not applied evenly and, therefore, the usage of social media platform by ISIS continues to grow.

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[12] Donna Farag, *supra* note 10 at 844

[13] Ralph Ellis, *Orlando Shooting: 49 Killed, Shooter Pledged ISIS Allegiance*, CNN (June 13, 2016), https://edition.cnn.com/2016/06/12/us/orlando-nightclub-shooting/

[14] Donna Farag, *supra* note 10 at 845

[15]Tuva Julie Engebrethsen Smith, *Islamic State and Social Media: Ethical Challenges and Power Relations*, Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis;https://idsa.in/idsacomments/IslamicStateandSocialMedia_tjesmith_230115

Impact of Social Media Usage by ISIS

1. **Threat to international and national peace and security**

Despite the counter-terrorism programmes, on ground or in the cyber-world, initiated by many states and international organizations, the Islamic State continues to pose a significant threat to security and peace at both national and international level. In a Security Council meeting on 08 February 2018, Vladimir Voronkov, the head of the UN Counter-Terrorism Office spoke of international peace and security caused by terrorist acts and said, "The rapidly evolving and transnational threat from ISIL presents a difficult challenge for Member States and the international community…ISIL is no longer focused on conquering and holding territory. It has been forced to adapt and focus primarily on a smaller and more motivated group of individuals who remain committed to inspiring, enabling and carrying out attacks."[16] Their usage of social media is leading to a large influx of people to join them and carry out terrorist attacks and are also inspiring vulnerable individuals to do the same, thus, causing a threat to the global community.

2. **Threat to cyber-security**

The popularity of social media around the world provides a huge potential audience for terrorist content. Unfortunately, because of states' inability to cooperate, previous attempts to govern and police the Internet have failed. Any regulation of the Internet or social media also raises collective action problems.[17] It has several features advantageous to dissemination of content: open access to users, the ability to reproduce and transmit information quickly, and easy-to-use interfaces.[18]

With the use of videos and messages of hate and propaganda on social media platforms, the ISIS have been able to create a new generation of cyber-jihadists which has helped spread their ideologies to their online sympathisers. As a result, ISIS have been able to attract vulnerable young minds who are most of the time surfing online through these sites. Their online influence has led to people join them and even carry on the "lone wolf" attacks. Therefore, the use of social media is not only becoming a threat to cyber-security but also furthers the scope for cyber-terrorism

3. **Expansion by recruitment**

The nature of participation on the Internet and participation in online discussion via social media is the new political activism. This process of turning to political violence is an active one, and not a passive one.[19] To recruit more people, the ISIS uses more interactive internet platform like Twitter, Telegram, WhatsApp and other online chat rooms which helps form an

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[16] *International Community Must Stay 'One Step Ahead' Of ISIL, Stresses UN Official*, UN News (Feb. 08, 2018), https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/02/1002311

[17] Paulina Wu, *Impossible to Regulate: Social Media, Terrorists, and the Role for the U.N*, 16 Chi. J. Int'l L 281, 281 (2015), http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cjil/vol16/iss1/1 1
[18] *Id*
[19] Imran Awan, *Cyber-Extremism: ISIS and the Power of Social Media*, Society 54, no. 2 (April 15, 2017): 138–149, https://doi:10.1007/s12115-017-0114-0

ideological relationship with the users thereby radicalizing the young minds. The use of emotional and psychological factors lures people into joining the ISIS. They post radical as well as misleading contents of how the organization works such as members of ISIS visiting hospitals, playing with rabbits, their interpretation of the ideologies of Islam, etc.

Vulnerable individuals are influenced by these posts and are often eager to join the group or provide any sort of assistance to them. The number of members of ISIS has increased massively. They carry out terrorist activities and provide with information to them via apps like WhatsApp. These posts also influence the "lone wolves", who carry out acts of terror on their own after being inspired by the ideologies and acts of ISIS. Therefore, the social media usage by ISIS has become a psychological warfare.

4. **Human rights violation**
On March 1, 2011, Arid Uka, an Albanian Muslim living in Germany, was online looking at YouTube videos. Like many before him, he watched a jihadist video that presented the gruesome rape of a Muslim woman by US soldiers—a clip edited and posted on YouTube for jihadi propaganda purposes. Within hours of watching the video, Arid Uka boarded a bus at Frankfurt Airport, where he killed two US servicemen and wounded two others with a handgun. Investigators reviewed the history of Arid Uka's internet activity. It showeda growing interest in jihadist content, subsequent self-radicalization, and ultimately his viewing of the aforementioned video,

which led him to take action in an alleged war in defense of Muslims. [20] Many individuals are often influenced by the messages and online contents of social media put up ISIS and this was one such example. They even propagate people to kill others and cause mass destruction by self-sacrificing, calling it the only way to reach heaven.

Their posts also contain vile messages, disturbing contents like beheading of soldiers and civilians, journalists in particular, videos declaring that women and children have been abducted and are subject to physical tortures, sexual assault, mutations, forced marriage and slavery. Some of these are even put up on the websites. This shows that they have been violating human rights of their hostages such as Art. 4-prohibition of slavery, Art. 5-protection from tortures and punishment, Art. 7-protection against any discrimination, Art. 13-right to move freely, Art.16-right to marry with consent and Art. 18- right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, to name a few, of the United Nations Universal Human Rights Declaration. [21]

5. **Economic impact**
Terrorism affects the economies of countries. Every year, terrorist attacks make a considerable impact on the world's

[20] Gabriel Weimann, *New Terrorism and New Media*, DC: Commons Lab of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars (2014), https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/STIP _140501_new_terrorism_F.pdf
[21] *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, United Nations Organization,http://www.un.org/en/udhrbook/pdf/udh r_booklet_en_web.pdf

economy. According to the 2017 Global Terrorism Index, the impact fell by seven percent in 2016, the second year in succession that it declined. Despite the decline, costs still reached a grim $84 billion last year. Since the attacks on 9/11, economic losses from terrorism generally fluctuated before reaching $41 billion in 2007, primarily because of violence in Iraq. Amid the rise of ISIS, there was a further surge in losses since 2012 and they reached a peak of $104 billion in 2014.[22]

The impact of their acts, whether it is on the ground or on the social media platform, may be primary or secondary in nature. Primary impact will include physical destruction of infrastructure and human casualties and are direct impacts arising from the immediate aftermath of the terrorist event. Furthermore, secondary impact is the result of an interdependent economic system wherein the terrorist attacks cause disruption of economic activities which may feed through even to economic entities which have not been direct targets of the attack; that is, terrorism may also produce considerable but indirect effects like fall in FDIs, savings and investments, tourism, increased uncertainty in the markets.[23]This may lead to unemployment and ultimately poverty. Supporting counter-terrorism programmes also requires huge amount of money to be spent by the government further draining out the money from the government's pocket.

6. Social impact

i. Wrong religious education.

Every religion has peaceful and violent ideologies from which the followers can choose, and these ideologies are what the terrorists use to justify their actions. The rise in religious terrorism is also connected with the rapid spread of Western influence, especially in the Muslim world.[24] Much education in the Islamic world is provided by Muslim clerics, or religious leaders, who are less concerned with subjects like science and math than in drumming basic religious values into the minds of their young male students. Graduates of such schools may well be convinced that the way to heaven is through strict observance of religious rules and removing Western influences from their society. Thus, violent terrorist acts are viewed as evidence of religious devotion, and self-sacrifice is praised as a way to get to paradise.[25]

ii. Propagation and sponsorship of terrorism by states.

It has been reported by many international organizations and human rights organizations that many terrorist organizations are sponsored by the states. Iran, Syria, North Korea and Sudan are currently on the list of "State Sponsors of Terrorism" made by the United States

[22] Neil McCarthy,*The Global Economic Impact of Terrorism [Infographic]*, Forbes (Nov 16, 2017), https://www.forbes.com/sites/niallmccarthy/2017/11/16/the-global-economic-impact-of-terrorism-infographic/#28e15cca1d0f

[23] Schneider, Friedrich and Brück, Tilman and Meierrieks, Daniel, *"The Economics of Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism: A Survey (Part I)"* (April 2010), http://www.cesifo-group.de/DocDL/cesifo1_wp3011.pdf

[24] *Religious Terrorism*, Encylcopedia.com (Feb. 27, 2018), https://www.encyclopedia.com/books/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/religious-terrorism

[25]*Id*

Department of States. Many governments use violence to gain control not only over the society but also over their political opponents. Whether it is in terms of money or in terms of training and arms, governments of many countries have been accused of sponsoring the terrorists to achieve their political and economic goals.

Conclusion

The continuous acts of ISIS have made the people around the world witness millions of people die and destruction of properties. Their acts have crossed national borders and they have become a threat to international peace and security. They have destroyed the basic philosophy within which the concept of human rights is rooted. Therefore, to curb the presence of ISIS, offline and online, states and their governments have turned to counter-terrorism programmes. The government agencies, to restrict ISIS and similar organizations, have turned to "new media", i.e., social media platforms and other digital media to restrict the presence of such organizations.

Although these organizations are almost defeated on grounds but they continue to live in the cyber world. Young adults are joining or following their accounts on social media platforms rapidly, but the government has not been able to do anything to curb it down. Therefore, there is need for strong cyber-policing to- (i.) Catch hold of the perpetrators by tracking them down, (ii.) stop such accounts or media pages from being started and (iii.) prevent the people from joining these terrorist organizations.

The cost of making a new account being negligible, censorship policies of the social media companies should be stronger and stricter. The need of the hour, therefore, is a strong cyber-policing game by states and their governments. Conventions should be mandatorily implemented. Account holders should be tracked down, tried and punished for their crimes. Awareness must be spread about the usage of social media by ISIS and similar organizations and its impact so that people can report any of their online activities they come across so as to remove them from the digital platform.

International organizations must try to coordinate regulatory efforts between states and also, provide them with useful information from their sources so as to hinder the use of social media by terrorists. Costs regulatory initiatives should be launched and imposed on the private actors of the society, they can help identify best ways to solve the problems. The member states should invest in IT and cyber-crime experts to get their opinions and develop protocols and standards and other counter-measures. These organizations should also have a separate body to monitor and bring down websites like the Dark Web where the best brains of the world can work together.

The Eighth UN Congress on Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders in 1990 called for member states to intensify their efforts to fight cyber-crimes by way of modernizing their criminal laws, improving computer security and come up with prevention measures.[26] The Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development adopted the Guidelines for Security Systems, recognizing the need for greater

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[26]*Supra* note 17 at 297

cybersecurity protections.[27] These are some successful conventions still in application.

Due to the growing terrorist presence on social media, regulation to limit and remove harmful content has the potential to save lives.[28]With expert technologists developing and improving the information technology and the new media, their efforts have made it possible for users of social media to report the accounts of ISIS and their sub-organizations. The security community has to adjust counterterrorism strategies to the new arenas, applying new types of online warfare, intelligence gathering, and training for cyber warriors.

The National Security Agency, the Department of Defense, the CIA, the FBI, the Defense Intelligence Agency, other US and foreign intelligence agencies, and some private contractors are already fighting back. They are monitoring suspicious websites and social media, cyberattacking others, and planting bogus information. The virtual war between terrorists and counterterrorism forces and agencies is vital, dynamic, and ferocious.[29]

There is a need for more comprehensive tactic for countering and thwarting violent online radicalization to empower community strength. However, no such strategy has been formed till now. The social media usage by ISIS has posed several challenges

and requires strategic thinking to counter terrorism, cyber-terrorism specifically, so that the global community, is able to prevent human rights violations and work to protect human welfare.

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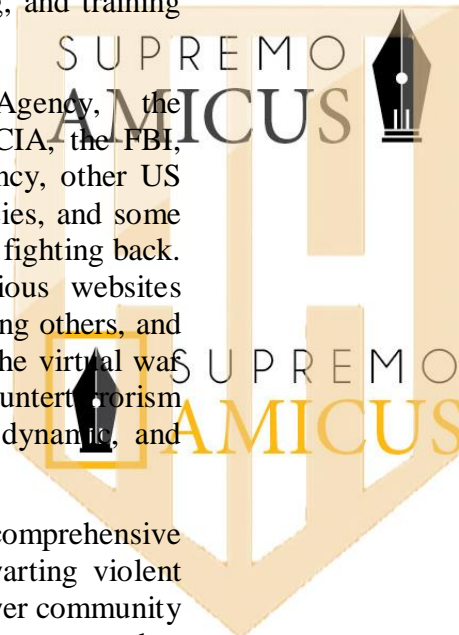
[27] *2002 Guidelines for The Security of Information Systems and Networks: Towards A Culturie Of Security Questions and Answers*, OECD,http://www.oecd.org/sti/ieconomy/oecdguidel inesforthesecurityofinformationsystemsandnetworkst owardsacultureofsecurity.htm

[28]*Supra* note 17 at 283

[29]*Supra* note 20 at 14