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Islamic State: Supporter-Based Feeder Groups

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User Journeys in Online Extremist Groups

This project by the Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET) looks at the user journeys of individuals who enter and participate in the online spaces of extremist communities. A user journey here refers to the distinct path a user may follow to reach their goals when accessing and using an online space belonging to extremist communities.

User journeys are particularly important in offering insights into the rationale and motivations of users on the one hand, and to the inner workings of extremist online communities on the other. This is vital for understanding their goals and objectives.

In selecting the ideologies for this project, we drew upon extremist communities – rather than extremist and terrorist organisations or groups – including those actors that participate in the extremist milieu and share ideas but do not necessarily operate in concert. These ideologies include those of formal and well-defined extremist organisations of White supremacist and anti-government extremist groups in the United States, supporter networks of Islamic State (IS), and looser communities of extremist actors including accelerationists, incels and chan site members who operate on shared platforms, congregating around common beliefs but without the connection of formal membership.

This project is a response to the growing interest in understanding how individuals enter and participate in online spaces of extremist communities. A core goal of the project was to understand the role of algorithms in leading users to extremist communities, including the changes in algorithmic recommendations that lead users to more extreme content online. However, examining these changes proved impossible due to the precautions taken by the expert contributors to the project, such as the use of separate technology and VPNs throughout their research.

The project also highlights the distinct posting behaviour and operational security protocols of different groups, usually along ideological lines.

Executive Summary

This is the third in a series of short reports of user journeys of individuals in extremist communities. This report focuses on IS support-based feeder groups, particularly the Roma group. Supporter-based feeder groups are standalone brands, often tied to a specific platform, which are built in the image of a specific and prolific supporter – or a group of supporters – that has united to build out an organisation, usually from scratch. It is pertinent to note that these groups thrive on centrally sanctioned media outlets as well as larger support groups, and reproduce, remix, and rebrand content produced by IS’s Central Media Diwan as well as other more recognised support groups.

The decision to focus specifically on the Roma group, which is one of more than 60 IS-recognised groups, is informed by its prominence as a supporter-based feeder group within the broader spectrum of unofficial groups. It is also due to its being an experiment in platform-specific “memetic warfare”. The various sections of the report highlight platform use, which includes “swarmcasting”, “micro-influencers”, directing the “media invasion”, raids, violence and attacks, and gendered dynamics.

With regard to its methodology, the study used focus groups, mostly involving individuals who have accessed, observed, and sometimes participated in the private communication channels of these extremist communities. The names of all communities mentioned during the focus group, including those that participants accessed, have been removed.

Key findings from the report indicate that:

- Some of these groups – such as Roma, which this report spotlights – have never been supported by an official outlet or by any of the semi-official or larger unofficial IS media outlets.
- The activities of the group, which operates exclusively on Facebook, are characterised by “swarmcasting” and the use of “collective intelligence”.
- The group is dependent on micro-influencers, who have built their own terrorist distribution brands through Facebook accounts that have been hijacked.
- The higher the value of a target in a raid, the more attention, follows and support a micro-influencer can garner on a specific platform. While a few accounts that promote raids identify as women, they rarely took part in actual “swarming” of targeted pages.

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1 Overview

The IS central media apparatus is supported and amplified by supporter-based feeder groups. Supporter-based feeder groups are standalone brands, often tied to a specific platform, that disseminate IS content. These groups usually perform specific tasks such as translation and sharing official IS content. The content of each supporter groups often reflects both geographic focus and function. However, the role of supporter groups within the larger IS online ecosystem has received less attention. This section of the report does a deep dive on one supporter-based feeder group: the Roma group.

In early 2020, as the world's population began to grapple with the Covid-19 pandemic, an IS support network, the Roma group was founded and launched exclusively on Facebook. Roma began an experiment in high-profile, quasi-coordinated social media raids. It was neither the first,¹ nor will it be the last, but Roma – an IS supporter-based feeder group named after jihadist visions of ransacking Rome – has been, if anything, persistent in transforming itself. Since the widespread removal of IS accounts from mainstream social media platforms and the waning territorial control of IS Central, IS media has increasingly come from support networks. This section outlines the role and influence of the Roma group as a case study of IS support networks.

The Roma group is one of more than 60 IS-recognised support groups, but has never been supported by an official outlet or by any of the semi-official or larger unofficial IS media outlets.^{2, 3} Hence, Roma should be classified as a supporter-based feeder group within the spectrum of unofficial groups. The Roma group was, and continues to be, an experiment in platform-specific “memetic warfare”,⁴ born out of the strategies and tactics used by the trolls of 4chan in the run-up to the US Election 2016,⁵ Russia's Internet Research Agency,⁶ larger IS support groups, and previous iterations of IS campaigns designed to latch on to trending hashtags across

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- 1 Nico Prucha, “Part 6: Substituting the Jihadi Twittersphere for Islamic State Telegrams,” *Online Jihad: Monitoring Jihadist Online Communities*, 2017, <https://onlinejihad.net/2017/10/10/part-5-substituting-the-jihadist-twittersphere-for-islamic-state-telegram/>. In 2018, Prucha detailed the activities of the Telegram channel ‘Ghazwa,’ which used Telegram as a base to conduct ghazawat, or raids. “The ‘Ghazwa’ channel on Telegram sees itself in the tradition of the classical horseback riding ‘hit-and-run’ warrior, independent of a fixed base or camp.”
 - 2 Based on an analysis of a folder of both active and non-active Islamic State support groups contained in one of the largest archives of Islamic State content on the open web. The list of archived Islamic State support groups contained in the cloud drive is by no means exhaustive, however, it does indicate a level of popularity for certain unofficial groups over others.
 - 3 An Al-Battar Media video, released in late 2022, similarly outlined 29 Islamic State support groups (involved in translation, media, cyber support and military sciences) which had come together to form a collective known as *Entaj al-Ansar*. The Roma group was not one of those recognised support groups, indicating that it does not sit in the primary constellation of known support organisations. <https://twitter.com/rafhaanRSF/status/1606019534023839744/photo/1>.
 - 4 Jeff Giese, “It’s Time to Embrace Memetic Warfare,” 2016, NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, March 1, 2016, <https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/its-time-to-embrace-memetic-warfare/164>.
 - 5 Joan Donovan, Emily Dreyfuss, and Brian Friedberg, “Donald Trump, Meme Leader in Chief,” *The Harvard Gazette*, October 3, 2022. <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2022/10/excerpt-from-meme-wars-by-joan-donovan-emily-dreyfuss-brian-friedberg/>. An excerpt from the book by the authors: *“Meme Wars: The Untold Story of the Online Battles Upending Democracy in America.”*
 - 6 Craig Silverman and Jeff Kao, “Infamous Russian Troll Farm Appears to Be Source of Anti-Ukraine Propaganda,” *ProPublica*, March 11, 2022. <https://www.propublica.org/article/infamous-russian-troll-farm-appears-to-be-source-of-anti-ukraine-propaganda>.

platforms and deluge comment spaces with terrorist propaganda.⁷ Roma is similarly an experiment, in the sense that it is reliant firstly on quasi-centralised command architectures that build out Facebook pages to launch coordinated attacks with prescribed rules of engagement, and secondly, self-organised network mobilisation, in that it relies on a shifting set of accounts and their followers as a battalion of ready-made digital soldiers.

As with larger IS support groups focused on the “media jihad”,⁸ Roma has fashioned itself as a digital vanguard tasked with defending IS principles and attacking its enemies. It has carved out its own niche precisely by choosing Facebook as its primary operational theatre, choosing to fight on the world’s largest social networking site, even if in obscurity. A detailed analysis of the Roma group has yet to be undertaken. However, a Roma group case study holds value for researchers, academics and platforms hoping to understand the mechanisms deployed by a generation of supporter-based feeder groups involved in digital guerrilla tactics and internet-based psychological warfare, even if at this stage of its progression they are rudimentary.

7 Lt. Col. Jarred Prier, United States Air Force, “Commanding the Trend: Social Media as Information Warfare,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 11, no. 4 (2017), https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/SSQ/documents/Volume-11_Issue-4/Prier.pdf.

8 Charlie Winter, “Media Jihad: The Islamic State’s Doctrine for information Warfare,” The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence and the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), 2017, <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/ICSR-Report-Media-Jihad-The-Islamic-State%E2%80%99s-Docctrine-for-Information-Warfare.pdf>.

2 Methodology

This report used focus groups with individuals who had accessed, observed and occasionally participated in the private communication platforms and channels of extremist communities. Focus groups collect data through informal discussion and group interaction on a topic determined by the researchers.

The focus groups took place online and consisted of six participants with expertise across the extremist ideological spectrum – in this case, broadly defined as Islamist extremist communities. Focus groups took place over three hours and concentrated on three core areas: access and onboarding, posting behaviour and content, and exiting communities. The project received ethics clearance from King's College London. The scope of this report is the shortest in the series, given the difficulties associated with obtaining sufficient information relevant to the study.

3 IS Supporter-Based Feeder Groups

Supporter-based feeder groups are standalone brands, often tied to a specific platform, built in the image of a specific and prolific supporter or a group of supporters that have united to build out an organisation from scratch. They feed off centrally sanctioned media outlets as well as larger support groups, and reproduce, remix and rebrand content produced by the IS Central Media Diwan and more recognised support groups.

Many IS supporter-based feeder groups have specific unitary functions, such as translation, news “whitewashing” and promotion of the theological aspects of the group on a specific platform. Supporter-based feeder groups will often choose a platform of choice on which they seek to exert influence, or a play a role in “feeding” users’ appetites for IS content. They are often not sanctioned by the IS Central Media Diwan or a more prominent support group. Supporter-based feeder groups build out their own communities, brands and aesthetics, essentially duplicating the functions of official and more recognisable support groups. They are typically animated by rules set by the IS Central Media Diwan’s “Essential Duties of the Media Mujahid in the Wilayah of the IS”.⁹

However, many of the activities of supporter-based feeder groups run contrary to the directives contained in the “Essential Duties of the Media Mujahid in the Wilayah of the IS”, especially where “innovation” is concerned. The Central Media Diwan has made it abundantly clear that “exterior publishing (via the internet) is the responsibility of the central media exclusively. The media bureaus of the wilayah are authorised to publish according to restrictions and directions centrally formed that are executed under the supervision of the Media Monitoring Committee of the Diwan of Media”.¹⁰

It is in this unsanctioned media space that more prominent support and supporter-based feeder groups thrive. Yet to date, there has been no comprehensive analysis of supporter-based feeder groups, as there are likely to be scores across a range of platforms.

⁹ “The Essential Duties of the Media Mujahid in the Wilayah of the Islamic State,” Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 2018. English translation of an internal media leaflet. <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/The-Essential-Duties-of-the-Media-Mujahid.pdf>.

¹⁰ Daniel Milton, “Pulling Back the Curtain: An Inside Look at the Islamic State’s Media Organization,” Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 2018, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Pulling-Back-the-Curtain.pdf>.

4 Public Activities of IS: Supporter-Based Feeder Groups

Platform Use

The Roma group operates exclusively on Facebook. In August 2020, a small group of IS supporters began sharing a video which indicated that small band of supporters had an idea to “change the mechanisms to support the Caliphate in the online world [sic]”.¹¹ This group of supporters, according to the video, began by testing the idea of attacking the “sheikhs of hypocrisy” on Facebook.¹² They peppered the comment sections of pages affiliated with the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia Abdulsais al Shiekh, Ismail ibn Musa Menk, Amr Khaled, and Shiekh Dr. Aaidh ibn Abdullah al-Qarni with comments about their theological stances and alliances with Middle Eastern leaders, considered *tawagheet*, or tyrants. The attacks were considered a “training exercise” in how to exert influence and to – in the words of an unidentified Roma spokesperson – “expose their lies and lay out facts to the public”.¹³ The primary purpose of the ‘loosely coordinated’ raids on religious figures tied to, or supportive of, regimes in the Middle East and North Africa was to pilot a quasi-centralised “swarmcast”¹⁴ function on Facebook.

“Swarmcasting”

The process by which the Roma group goes about its activities is steeped in both “swarmcasting” and the use of “collective intelligence”, in that it requires self-organisation rather than centralised organisation. Heylighen notes that this self-organisation “happens in a distributed or decentralised manner: the different members of the group all contribute to the emerging organisation, and no one is in control”.¹⁵ Fisher describes swarming as a part and parcel of “netwar” tactics, which online jihadists have used “to operate through a dispersed network of accounts which constantly reconfigures much like the way a swarm of bees or lock of birds constantly reorganises in mid-flight”.¹⁶ The effect of this model is that there is no “clear division between the audience and a content producer in control of the means through which to broadcast content to that audience”.¹⁷ What Fisher described

11 Author collected Roma video, August 5, 2020. Primary source data.

12 Author collected Roma video, August 5, 2020. Primary source data.

13 Author collected Roma video, August 5, 2020. Primary source data.

14 Ali Fisher, “Swarmcast: How Jihadist Networks Maintain a Persistent Online Presence,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 3, June 2015, https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/26297378.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3AAddc0b9b26cc14ca063df3bc774938334&ab_segments=&origin=&initiator=&acceptTC=1s.

15 Francis Heylighen, “Collective Intelligence and Its Implementation on the Web: Algorithms to Develop a Collective Mental Map,” *Computational and Mathematical Organization Theory* 5 (1999): 253–280, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1023/a:1009690407292>.

16 Fisher, “Swarmcast.”

17 Fisher, “Swarmcast.”

as “swarmcasting” was outlined by cybernetist Francis Heylighen in 1999 as “collective intelligence”, which is when “a group of initially independent agents develop a collective approach to the tackling of some shared problem that is more powerful than the approach any of them might have developed individually”.¹⁸

“Micro-Influencers” Directing the “Media Invasion”

At the core of the engine which drives the Roma group are micro-influencers who have built out their own terrorist propaganda distribution brands using hijacked accounts on Facebook.¹⁹

These communities play a central role in spreading IS propaganda on Facebook, and teaching others moderation evasion techniques, either by doing them or by explicitly providing instruction.²⁰

Micro-influencers were the first to spread the “instructions” for the “media invasion” targeting the “sheikhs of hypocrisy” launched by the nascent Roma group in early 2020, and they continue to play a central role in ensuring the survival and “expansion” of the group.

Raids

Raids are key to consolidating respect, power and status for IS supporters on Facebook. The higher the value of a target in a raid, the more attention, follows and support a micro-influencer can garner on a specific platform. The micro-influencers involved in the spread of the Roma group raid announcements hoard hijacked accounts as backups. By tracing three sets of micro-influencers, whom the author is calling Account X, Account Y and Account Z,²¹ all of which have numerous dormant backup accounts, the quasi-centralised, self-organisation of the Roma group becomes more apparent.

Account X was one of the first to post the “media invasion” directives of the Roma group on Facebook, based on an analysis of one of the first public pages developed by the group on the platform. The seven directives, which were dubbed a “strategy”, outlined specific advice for IS supporters participating in the raids:

- **Timing of raids:** The group specifically noted raids would be announced in the evening, Mecca time, and on Sundays, Mondays and Thursdays.
- **Typology of raids:** The group made a distinction between types of raid. Raids would be classified as either support for “proselytisation” or “terrorism”.
- **Freedom to post, with one caveat:** The group wanted users participating in raids to expand on central ideas and debate. However, insults and foul language were to be banned.

18 Francis Heylighen, “Collective Intelligence and its Implementation on the Web,” 253–280, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1023/a:1009690407292>.

19 Micro-influencers are accounts that set trends in online subcommunities and typically have follower counts between 1,000 and 10,000. Micro-influencers have highly engaged follower bases. In IS circles on Facebook, micro-influencers will often have avatars.

20 Moustafa Ayad, “The Propaganda Pipeline: The ISIS Fuouaris Upload Network on Facebook,” Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2020, <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/The-Propaganda-Pipeline-1.pdf>.

21 The author has omitted the specific usernames to avoid directing news followers to the accounts. The users continue to use the same avatars and usernames on new hijacked accounts they use once an account is taken down.

- **Raid content:** The group would prepare five pieces of content for each raid and post them in the comments section of the Roma group page. Users participating in raids were encouraged to use the content as they saw fit.
- **Raid the comments:** The group wanted to ensure that users focused on replies from individual users on the platforms during targeted raids. Those participating in the raids were to expand individual users' understanding of IS.
- **Raid announcements:** The group implored users to share news of the raids to their respective follower bases to grow the network of participants. The group specifically advised not to "hesitate" to share news of upcoming raids.
- **Emotional appeal:** The group noted that "mujahideen are spilling their blood and their innards" for the cause, and that it was up to users to defend their battlefield sacrifices online through the raids.

While the directives and the use of a singular Facebook page indicate a centralised and organisational style, the expansion of the raid announcements and the unfettered spread of the content with the freedom to experiment with narratives are very much in line with "swarmcast" and "collective intelligence" principles. Hence, the Roma group uses a quasi-centralised model for raids. Micro-influencers such as Account X would not only share raid content and announcements with their users, but would bring about a cascade effect, with other followers within their ranks doing the same, and so on. Account X not only shared announcements of raids by the Roma group, it also tagged other micro-influencers in comment sections of the announcements. The author noted 75 instances of Account X doing this, tagging more than 100 accounts in posts.

Account X, Account Y and Account Z used similar models for tagging, announcements and content related to Roma group raids, generating shares of raid posts and up to 50 user confirmations of participation in upcoming raids. The author analysed one month of raid posts by each individual account involved in the spread of raid content, and found that each account dedicated 25 posts to the promotion of upcoming, ongoing and additional raid content. Linking to raid pages for these micro-influencers is an endeavour fraught with the risk of account deletion. The Roma group micro-influencers, however, seemed to mitigate this risk by signposting to auxiliary accounts while actively promoting raid content and simultaneously migrating followers to "lie-in-wait" accounts, to be activated once their primary accounts were either locked or deleted. To this day, Account X, Account Y and Account Z are using this tactic to actively share IS propaganda as well as signpost to new accounts.

Account Y, a self-described Roma group "knight" similarly posted Roma raid announcements and ongoing raid updates in a consistent way. In addition to raid content, Account Y engaged in actively scouring the internet for research focused on IS supporters and their various group affiliations, sharing the intelligence with other supporters either to bolster claims that "the enemy was exhausted" or to poke fun at the idea that counter-extremism organisations are fighting terrorism. Account Y was also engaged in the production of IS support meme content, creating memes of the Jordanian pilot burned to death by the IS to mock the Global Coalition Against Daesh. Account Y ran three simultaneous accounts linking back to the Roma group page during 2021. The account similarly led a complimentary

“terrorism”-focused raid on the platform GETTR. In a post from July 2021, Account Y shared a screenshot with its first GETTR post on Facebook, and wrote, “come brothers, fill it with terror, and be proactive [heart emoji]”. The raid on GETTR in its first month after its launch seemed to net the IS supporters that participated through 250 accounts on the platform, and indicated a measure of strength within Roma-linked micro-influencers circles.

Violence and Attacks

Although the Roma group operates online, there have been efforts within the network to spark violence. Amid nationwide anti-corruption protests in Lebanon, which began in late 2019 and continued through to 2020, the Roma group sought to incite strife in Tripoli by compelling “Sunni youth” to take up arms. The strategy behind this push by Roma was to target “wedge issues”, such as a planned sit-in against the alleged insulting of the Prophet’s wife in Tripoli, a post about a mother being murdered in the Palestinian Refugee Shatila Camp, and then another on a supposedly peaceful march in Lebanon. The issues were selected for their ability to decisively spark confrontation and conflict by supporters.

The “raids” were actioned by creating multiple responses in the comment sections of these pages. The Roma group used pre-made materials, such as digital posters featuring a gun with a silencer that asked “ahl el-Sunna”, that is to say, “Sunnis, rise up”. Overall, the “raid” mechanisms were not incredibly sophisticated, but were a semi-effective means of drowning out voices and an attempt to create division and spur on recruitment. What was clear from the attempt to drive offline incitement around polarising issues in Lebanon was the group’s intention to cause violence in some shape or form. By inciting “Sunni youth to kill rafidah”, Roma was taking a centralised IS narrative built around galvanising Sunnis to violence and targeting specific communities in the throes of upheaval.

Gendered Dynamics

The accounts connected with the Roma group identify as men, as do many of the others involved in the online raids. This, however, does not mean that accounts that self-identify as woman do not have a role to play in the raids. During the period of research, the author found that accounts identifying as women promoted raids, yet rarely took part in the actual “swarming” of targeted pages.

5 Private Activities of IS: Supporter-Based Feeder Groups

Invitations were used in Islamist extremist communities to reform platforms and channels, especially after deplatforming. Islamist online communities are now mostly centred on Rocket Chat, Threema, TamTam and Hoop Messenger.²² Islamist extremist communities do not name or title their networks or channels as supporter groups of organisations. Their affiliation is instead evident in the content that they post. Existing accounts in previous channels were automatically issued invitations to newly created channels. Once an individual has been issued an invitation by a trusted group member, they can often move throughout the group's communication channels, including across platforms, relatively easily.

Another method of Islamist extremist communities uses evidence and action. Such verification processes were identified by Aina and Ojo in a recent report noting the channels used by IS in West African Provinces (ISWAP) such as on Telegram. Channel administrators verify identities through each member's account name, commander (*Qaid*) and command (*Jaesh*). These measures were implemented after the communication channels of these groups were infiltrated by Nigerian military personnel.²³ Potential joiners of Islamist extremist channels were asked about their beliefs and motivations.

It is also worth noting that with regard to branded and official content, Islamist extremist communities are usually established to share and disseminate official group content. Supporter networks, then, are not creating and sharing original content but merely shared official branded content. Group magazines are one example of the type of core content shared. Some communities are also dedicated to the translation of official content to increase the reach of the group. Manuals are also shared within communities. Islamist communities are reliant on supporter networks, as content shared across platforms routinely gets taken down by companies. As groups such as IS and al-Qaeda are proscribed terrorist organisations, all official content is illegal. Extremist communities also use private channels to fundraise. There is no way of knowing whether these fundraising campaigns are a scam or are genuinely directing money to these groups.

Extremist communities also create mirror accounts which are a carbon copy of the content on other platforms and channels.²⁴ These mirror channels are so designed that when one channel is taken down,

22 See also Suraj Ganesan and Mohammed Sinan, "Islamic State Online: A Look at the Group's South Asian Presence on Alternate Platforms," GNET, February 2023, <https://doi.org/10.18742/pub01-114>.

23 Aina Folahanmi and Ojo John Sunday, "The 'Webification' of Jihadism: Trends in the Use of Online Platforms Before and After Attacks by Violent Extremists in Nigeria", Global Network on Extremism and Technology, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.18742/pub01-136>

24 This tactic is also observed by Ahmet S. Yayla and Anne Speckhard, "Telegram: The Mighty Application That ISIS Loves," *International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism* 9 (2017); Ganesan and Sinan, "Islamic State Online."

a backup channel already exists with the same content.²⁵ It was noted by participants that the takedown rate of Islamist extremist communities was so frequent that it takes a lot of effort for followers to remain connected to the community.

²⁵ Mirror accounts were also observed by Ganesan and Sinan, "Islamic State Online."

6 Conclusion

IS supporter-based feeder groups such as Roma continue to outlast moderation efforts, precisely due to their modus operandi, a quasi-centralised network of users directing and learning from each other through “swarmcast” and “collective intelligence”.

The Roma group claims to have launched 440 raids over a period of 20 months from September 2019 to May 2021.²⁶ These raids were conducted through “official” channels such as Facebook pages, and through networks of micro-influencers who support the Roma group across the platform. The types of Roma group raid were self-classified as “routine” and “special”.²⁷ Under raids considered “routine”, the Roma group sub-classified “raids that highlight the truth of the Islamic State”, “raids that support proselytization on behalf of the Islamic State creed” and “terrorism raids targeting the Islamic State’s enemies”.²⁸ Raids that targeted Facebook pages focused on “Muslim knowledge”, “Muslim scholars and bad sheikhs” and “the crusaders and their leaders”.²⁹

Raids were used to gloat over the 11 September 2001 attacks, and targeted pages affiliated with the US military, such as the US Air Force Academy. During the raid, the Roma group participants posted digital flyers of the 11 September 2001 attacks and photograph of Osama bin Laden, with the words, “From Osama to Obama, if our messages were arriving in words we would not have carried them on planes”, and others that read “your aircraft cannot defeat our faith”.³⁰

The Roma group similarly engaged in virtual training of graphic designers, which according to the group was vital to the development of content-based ammunition for raids.³¹ One of the more prominent raids the Roma group launched was on former President Donald Trump’s Facebook page at the height of the social justice protests, in the aftermath of the police killing of George Floyd. The group directed users to create accounts that were to look like Black American accounts on Facebook, and to incite polarisation in the US – an incredibly lofty goal for a comment-based campaign. The fake Black American accounts were used to target a post by the former President, in which he advised New York City to set up an “11pm curfew” and to “CALL UP THE NATIONAL GUARD”. The users involved in the raid used hashtags such as “#Rise_up_black_giant”, “#all_the_black_are_Warriors” and “#Black_Army”. The posts using those hashtags contained comments such as “marching to the edge, you make it a challenge, and we will all revenge” and “do not provoke the black, you lose your life when we get angry”. Roma considered the raid a success and used it as a basis for its first videos,

26 *Ain al-Yaqeen* Newsletter No. 1, a product of the Roma group. Primary source data. The number of raids was calculated based on a 20-month period and has not been calculated by the group since.

27 *Ain al-Yaqeen* Newsletter No. 1, a product of the Roma group. Primary source data.

28 *Ain al-Yaqeen* Newsletter No. 1, a product of the Roma group. Primary source data.

29 *Ain al-Yaqeen* Newsletter No. 1, a product of the Roma group. Primary source data.

30 Roma group produced video from August 5, 2020. Primary source data.

31 Roma group produced video from August 5, 2020. Primary source data.

showcasing its strength on the platform and its ability to “shake” the resolve of its enemies. The group even classified the raid as being central to “America’s drowning”.³²

Roma’s foray into creating long-form media was short-lived, despite claims of its overwhelming success. One of its early videos, “Why do I Support Them?”, was a two-hour long montage of Islamic history and its connections to the rise of IS, its killings, and the rationale behind the need to support the terrorist group.³³ Roma claimed the video was used to target youth in the West, and was a propaganda tool that would provide the rationale for joining the IS. The video was narrated by an “electronic voice” in English. After it was released, the group claimed that the video was downloaded 20,000 times from “one site only”, a mark of its success.³⁴ The Roma group has frequently used its own metrics as hallmarks of success, and indicates that it dedicates time to analyse its social media metrics to adjust and refine its online strategies.

Roma similarly experimented with production and with the development of its own al-Naba-style newsletter.³⁵ The group used a similar distribution strategy for the development of the newsletter, which was designed to look and feel like the al-Naba newsletter. The newsletter carried articles that were meant to enrage users and compel them to join the “raid” cause. The newsletter also included infographics dedicated to the aftermath of raids across Facebook. However, the newsletter fissioned out after its second issue. The newsletter can still be found in comment sections and posts of micro-influencers who promote Roma group raids.

While many of its designed content seems to have disappeared, Roma itself has never disappeared during its three years of existence on Facebook. The group has had an uncanny ability to survive more than 15 takedowns of its central pages used for launching “raids” on hundreds of targets across the platform. At the time of writing, there are two active Roma group pages directing raids on Facebook. It is this legacy that Roma will probably be most well known for – its ability to feed off content produced by official and larger unofficial groups, while “swarmcasting” and using “collective intelligence” to mobilise users on the platform. The Roma group may have started as an experiment, but it has found a way to be a mainstay in the overall supporter-based ecosystem on Facebook.

³² *Ain al-Yaqeen* Newsletter No. 1, a product of the Roma group. Primary source data.

³³ Roma group-produced video from May 16, 2021. Primary source data.

³⁴ *Ain al-Yaqeen* Newsletter No. 1, a product of the Roma group. Primary source data.

³⁵ The al-Naba newsletter is one of the longest running Salafi-jihadist publications, and is the longest-running and recurring Islamic State publication. *Ain al-Yaqeen* Newsletter No. 1 and No. 2, a product of the Roma group. Primary source data.



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