
COUNTERING ONLINE TERRORIST PROPAGANDA

SEASON 2, EPISODE 1

INTRODUCTION

Frederik, Europol (formerly Federal Judicial Police of Belgium)

In any terrorist attack that I've covered as an investigator so far, it's always the propaganda that has a pivotal role in the radicalisation pathway.

Camille, Europol

I think it was very important for law enforcement agencies to acknowledge that the online presence of a terrorist organisation is as important as the physical presence.

Europol Narrator

Welcome to the Europol podcast, the official podcast of the EU agency for law enforcement cooperation. In this series, we shine a light on some of the biggest operations Europol has supported, and how we continue to fight crime.

Europol Narrator

Today's episode: Shutting Down Online Extremists

INTRODUCING AMAQ, THE TERRORIST NEWS AGENCY

Europol Narrator

Terrorism remains a significant threat to the internal security of the European Union. As a result, EU law enforcement authorities remain vigilant and united in fighting the threat. Here at Europol, we monitor for and counter terrorist threats from our European Counter Terrorism Centre.

One of the main ways terrorists recruit others to their cause is propaganda. It takes many forms – misinformation and disinformation; blog posts; videos; social media posts – you name it.

By putting out propaganda, these groups targeted the disaffected and vulnerable. The more people the propaganda radicalises, the better.

These terrorist and extremist groups operate – usually – at the edges of society. But in 2014, the world was confronted by the rise of so-called Islamic State, or IS. IS took large swathes of territory in

the Middle East, beckoning a reign of terror for all those trapped in IS-controlled lands. Suddenly a radical – and violent – extremist group was operating not like a fringe group but a real country.

IS decided they would invest in a modern, western-style central news agency. A news agency that would spread the news as they wanted it told; so that they could reach around the world, and spread their violent rhetoric far and wide.

That news agency was called AMAQ. And in this episode, we'll meet the dedicated people who brought it all down.

THE THREAT OF THE IS PROPAGANDA NETWORK

Camille, Europol

And the idea was to mimic exactly what a news agency will do in order also to give the Islamic State some kind of an image of a state.

Europol Narrator

This is Camille, who works at Europol in the ECTC – The European Counter Terrorism Centre.

Camille, Europol

So my name is Camille. I'm working for the Counter Terrorism Centre at Europol, and I'm a CT specialist working for the EU IRU, which is the European Union Internet Referral Unit within the Counter Terrorism Centre.

Europol Narrator

The EU Internet Referral Unit was founded in 2015. Its role is to support internet investigations and provide strategic assessments regarding extremism and violent terrorist content. They work on a wide range of topics, conducting all kinds of interventions to limit the reach of terrorist groups online.

Terrorist propaganda is not protected by freedom of speech due to its inherent nature of inciting violence, causing harm, and threatening national security. It promotes and glorifies terrorism, which directly contradicts the principles of human rights, democratic values, and the well-being of society as a whole.

When it came to the AMAQ case, Camille had actually worked as a journalist before joining Europol. So when an investigation into a jihadist terrorist news agency came up, she leapt at the opportunity to dig deeper.

Camille, Europol

So AMAQ was created in 2014 during the siege of Kobani. The idea for the so-called Islamic State was to create a news agency that will report on what was happening on the battlefield in order to counter what the mainstream media, into brackets, reports will say about the siege of Kobani.

Europol Narrator

In 2014, IS was trying to overtake a region of Northern Syria, and as part of that AMAQ was set up to disseminate reports from the battlefield – along with IS propaganda and misinformation.

Camille, Europol

They were publishing breaking news or just leads, to report about an attack, progress on the battlefields or a new institution that will provide, for example, education for the kids, or they will depict how the market is progressing for the Islamic State, how much the life was really well-organised and ruled by the Sharia under the caliphate.

Europol Narrator

A mix of battlefield news, coupled with propaganda extolling the virtues of the IS regime, meant AMAQ could attract an audience. But AMAQ's success was down to more than just the content; the structure of the agency was what made it unique.

Camille, Europol

The media department of the Islamic State was very keen into using our means of communication, and they would flood social media such as the platforms like Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, to disseminate the content that they were producing videos, but mainly on a daily basis.

But they also created, in 2015, an application for Android phone and then in 2016 they started to build a resilient infrastructure of websites but also add-ons. This kind of like a proxy that will allow the people that want to consume the information produced by AMAQ to follow up on which website will be up or down.

Europol Narrator

So AMAQ was more than just a website. It was an app, a social media feed, and a news website – all in one. In fact it was several websites, made available tactically so that law enforcement wouldn't be able to block the links or take them down.

AMAQ also used instant messaging apps such as Telegram as an initial point of publication. From there, supporters could take the propaganda and push it into mainstream platforms. The scale was huge.

One question you might be asking is – how come a terrorist organisation knew enough about modern media to do this?

Camille, Europol

So actually it's known that the creator of AMAQ was a former journalist from a regular media in Syria and he used all the things that a regular journalist will use to create the agency. This person was supported by the people that joined the ranks of the terrorist organisation - including foreign fighters coming from European Union member states.

Europol Narrator

So radicalised experts in their own territory, plus a batch of foreign fighters with IT and journalism skills – AMAQ was a content powerhouse. And thanks to the skills of their recruits, AMAQ's content was very high quality.

Camille, Europol

They gained a wider audience as our mainstream media started to use the content produced by AMAQ to share it on regular news reports. And this is part of the very keen communications strategy of AMAQ and the Islamic State. Using this news agency, they gained a lot of soft power.

Europol Narrator

The power of AMAQ soon became clear. When countries in Europe and beyond acted to prevent citizens from travelling to join IS in 2015, jihadist attacks outside IS territory became a key strategy for the terrorist group.

And when fighters made their videos claiming responsibility for their atrocities, AMAQ was the outlet where they'd be published. Orlando, Paris, Brussels, Manchester – Just a few of the heinous attacks where the video claiming responsibility was published on AMAQ. AMAQ was also churning out violent propaganda of its own – videos showing violent clashes, executions, and all kinds of content that would galvanise supporters and terrorise their enemies.

Meanwhile police offices in Europe were homing in on the threat of AMAQ. At the desk of one specialist in Belgium, the first leads were being developed.

THE START OF THE INVESTIGATION

Frederik, Europol (formerly Federal Judicial Police of Belgium)

They were very good at disseminating publications that were of a very high quality. Once I saw the publications from AMAQ, it was clear that there was a new level of propaganda activity and strategy behind it, and also the dissemination was quite different and very well thought out. The online platforms was really a new step when it comes to terrorist propaganda.

Europol Narrator

This is Frederik.

Frederik, Europol (formerly Federal Judicial Police of Belgium)

My name is Frederik. I'm a senior specialist at the moment at the EU internal referral unit here at Europol. But before that, I was a counter terrorist investigator for six years with the Federal Judicial Police in Belgium.

Europol Narrator (formerly Federal Judicial Police of Belgium)

The case began for Frederik in Belgium when a new piece of information came in from a separate law enforcement agency, sent via Europol's secure information exchange application, which is called SIENA.

SIENA is a tool developed by Europol, and it allows reliable and secure operational information exchange. It's got built-in state of the art data protection audit logs and other features to ensure confidentiality and integrity in the system.

Frederik, Europol (formerly Federal Judicial Police of Belgium)

They shared, a list of IP addresses that were circulated through international channels without much context. And since I was the, the one in the unit who could make most sense of an IP address, they gave me that list and basically said, "Look into it and see what you can find out."

The IP addresses were the result of a previous chapter in this investigation where they managed to procure a list of visitors to a website that was known for issuing or publicising terrorist propaganda branded with the AMAQ logo. The branding is also a very important aspect of that. That's a next level propaganda approach.

Europol Narrator

It didn't take Frederik long to turn these IP addresses into actionable intelligence.

Frederik, Europol (formerly Federal Judicial Police of Belgium)

After doing some internal and international cross checks, we identified known targets, known foreign terrorist fighters that were linked to those IP addresses. As soon as we had that connection, we were in the possibility of identifying the rest of the IP addresses to find out who else was connected to that network.

Europol Narrator

And from there, Frederik was able to get rid of the irrelevant data and focus on his targets: the people behind AMAQ.

Frederik, Europol (formerly Federal Judicial Police of Belgium)

Of course, most of those IP addresses are irrelevant. Or they can be law enforcement, they can be, researchers, they can be, uh, just ordinary citizens with no harmful intent. But we focused on those three persons of interest and continued to investigate those.

And once we had relevant information to share and also connections to other member states, then we got in touch with Europol and it kind of took off from there.

Europol Narrator

Frederik was now driving an international counter terrorism investigation. He was working with police in EU Member States and at Europol, overseen by prosecutors in his home country of Belgium. He was also looking for private companies, such as online service providers, who would be able to assist him, in limiting the reach of AMAQ's propaganda.

THE CHALLENGE OF TARGETING A PROPAGANDA NETWORK**Europol Narrator**

In any investigation, what you're really trying to do is to find the perpetrators and put them in front of a judge. But often that's a very simplified version of reality. The job consists of several steps – identifying the persons of interest, capturing them, interrogating them, and finding the proper

evidence against them. In this case, the persons of interest were foreign terrorist fighters - they could be abroad, they could have returned, they could have died in the conflict.

Frederik, Europol (formerly Federal Judicial Police of Belgium)

So it's very hard to, um, to pin all this on a single person. And realistically, considering the scope and the decentralised nature of, um, of the propaganda network, it's very unlikely that it was led by one or a couple of people. So the other option that was open to us was to really disrupt their activity.

Europol Narrator

Law enforcement realised their best bet at tackling AMAQ was to go after its content and infrastructure, rather than seeking out individuals.

Frederik, Europol (formerly Federal Judicial Police of Belgium)

So the main focus in the beginning was to track their publications, so there was a fixed time where they would release, the monthly issue of a publication. And we, together with the IRU again, tracked the dissemination of their content and tried to take down as much of those links that we could find as possible.

But after a while we found that just taking down the links is not sufficient, if we can't look at the structure or the organisation behind it, so we really went looking to other possibilities to put a stop to this, uh, propaganda machine. And one of them was to map the infrastructure which identified certain servers and communication channels that we could then target.

Europol Narrator

With this new strategy, the investigation became a cat and mouse game, with law enforcement just one step behind AMAQ's operators. Servers and server farms were identified, with many seizures taking place.

It was at this point investigators understood how much IS had invested in AMAQ. Despite the server seizures and other actions by law enforcement, that news agency endured.

How were IS doing this? The answer came when Frederik looked the skies.

UNCOVERING THE COMPLEXITY OF AMAQ

Frederik, Europol (formerly Federal Judicial Police of Belgium)

Quickly you learn that they attract all kinds of people. They attract scientists to attract drone pilots, they attract I.T. specialists.

And Islamic State was very good at, uh, bringing together those people and making sure they can work in their specialty to further advance the cause. So, at that point, I wasn't really surprised anymore that they managed to develop a network like this on this scale.

Europol Narrator

On top of the countless servers, proxies and add-ons used to hide its origins, Frederik uncovered that AMAQ was even using satellites to protect its position on the internet.

Frederik, Europol (formerly Federal Judicial Police of Belgium)

We definitely didn't have the expertise on satellite communications in the Belgian Federal Police, but they were also not really readily available here at Europol.

So we decided to reach out to the, the company and did some interviews to find out the expertise that we lacked, which also led to some interesting results.

Europol Narrator

By 'interesting results', Frederik means he was able to map out nodes on the AMAQ network. AMAQ's secrets were being revealed. However, the agency continued spewing out its extreme terrorist propaganda.

THE FIRST TAKEDOWNS

Camille, Europol

They were polluting all our information. I don't know if you can remember that in 2016 and 17, not only we were hearing about what was happening on the ground, but everything was online. And daily, this content was publicly available. So any kind of citizen could see the content on a daily basis, and, the content was very galvanizing and also very gory sometimes.

One thing they were reporting about what was happening on the battlefield, so imagine seeing video of clashes on the ground. So you had content that would show the corpse of the people that they killed on the ground. There were also using methods for instilling fear, so you will have execution on public spaces, in the caliphate that will be broadcast by AMAQ. And it will be reachable by any kind of internet user. So one of our missions was to reduce the possibility to disseminate this content on all those platforms, and those platforms were very responsive.

Europol Narrator

While Frederik was building the international cooperation, Camille and the colleagues in the Internet referral Unit were taking action against AMAQ's content and infrastructure. Europol was building partnerships with private companies and online service providers who could assist police in blocking the reach of AMAQ.

In fact, three action days took place in 2017, each seeing Camille and her team shutting down servers, channels, websites, apps and social media profiles belonging to AMAQ.

Camille, Europol

So not only we were outreaching to the platforms, the social media platforms, but also the hosting providers. So those cross-checks led to build up some kind of a team, to address the content on the one side and to analyse the infrastructure on the other side, to put in place some kind of a strategy to take down those web assets.

Europol Narrator

As a result, its online presence was reduced to its initial mode of dissemination – instant messaging apps.

Camille, Europol

We forced them to go in other kind of means of communication and actually they changed their communication strategy in 2017. They were under attack because the Coalition was pressuring, pressuring them on the ground and they were under attack online as well because we were pushing them in platforms where the public will not see them.

Europol Narrator

AMAQ was running out of places to hide online.

Camille, Europol

They stopped procuring and managing websites. So they started to invest a lot into encrypted messaging application like Telegram and others in the future. They used a lot WhatsApp as well to disseminate the content, but where they master it is that they use the features of those messaging application in order to create still, a one to multiple communication.

Europol Narrator

AMAQ was diminished, but not gone. By retaining their core operations in messaging apps and telling trusted supporters to push the material from there into the mainstream, AMAQ endured.

What AMAQ's operators didn't know was that Europol was now working with messaging applications, including Telegram, in their mission to take AMAQ and its violence jihadist messages down. A fourth action was planned for 2018, and this one was different.

THE FINAL PUSH AGAINST AMAQ**Europol Narrator**

In preparation for the final push against AMAQ, Camille had been focusing on the IS magazine that was disseminated by AMAQ. It was published on a regular basis via closed a Telegram channel, so police could predict when it would go live. The investigators then devised a plan to watch how the magazine travelled from its original point of publication, and law enforcement would chase it across cyberspace.

After that the job is simple; crash all the infrastructure in sight, creating a shutdown so great that IS would be forever banished back to the corners of the internet.

Camille, Europol

It was a tremendous amount of work for us, first of all, because they were very clever in building operational security.

Europol Narrator

However their operational security wasn't enough. On the action day, hundreds of experts from law enforcement, judicial authorities, and online service providers, came to Europol and were ready to act as one.

Frederik had even been able to bring in a prosecutor from Belgium, and they were able to write and issue subpoenas on the spot, so law enforcement could continue following the magazine, respecting legal and ethical rules the whole way.

On the day of the action, AMAQ published its regular monthly IS magazine on its Telegram channels. 15 accounts, controlled by extremists, then started spreading the message as they usually would.

But this time, they were in for a surprise. The online service providers that AMAQ relied on were now aware their products and services were being abused. And they were all watching the magazine make its final journey.

Europol Narrator

So it was six days and nights, where we were flagging constantly, whether we're popping up, in those kind of like fare, you have those. They were trying to see their content online and we were there flagging it to the platform or the platform detecting it because they put in place some detection as well.

At the end of the six days, the impact of the takedown was massive, because telegram was a safe haven and they were not ready for that. And what they were not expecting is that Telegram went beyond what we referred to them. They prevent the people that were using the platform to be able to recreate an account so that it took action beyond what we asked them.

Europol Narrator

The tight partnerships with tech companies were paying off. Telegram and others took decisive action against AMAQ's abuse of their platform, forcing AMAQ to migrate to other platforms – and recreate their groups and communities every single time.

ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF THE TAKEDOWN

Amarnath, Queen's University Ontario, Canada

And so, yeah, every reiteration would be smaller than the previous one. And so the strength of that network disappears or starts to diminish. You had actual IS supporters on Telegram saying like, "Where do I go? Like where? What's happening? Where is where are things happening?" Right. People actually didn't know where these links were being posted, how to join these channels.

Europol Narrator

This is Amarnath Amarasingam.

Amarnath, Queen's University Ontario, Canada

I am Amarnath Amarasingam. I'm an assistant professor in the School of Religion across listed to the Department of Political Studies at Queen's University in Ontario, Canada.

Europol Narrator

Amarnath is an expert in terrorist and extremist propaganda, and he is the author of a UK Research and Innovation report, co-authored with colleagues at King's College London, that assesses the impact of that final takedown.

Amarnath, Queen's University Ontario, Canada

It was like the entire ISIS media apparatus was taken down. And, you know, in our report, we have this kind of chart where it literally shows the November drop off. Right that the November 2019 post, is a particularly tall bar on the bar graph. And then it just kind of falls off a cliff and interestingly and importantly, stays falling off the cliff.

You had a 66% drop of original posts and a 95% drop of forwarded posts. Right. So you're looking at 470 000 forwarded posts in the 30 days beforehand and only about 24 000 to 30 days after. And so it was this kind of major difference that in just in terms of the content that was taken down, for one, the outlinks also dropped dramatically.

Europol Narrator

Channels uncovered in previous actions had survived sometimes for as long as 300 days – but the pressure stayed on after this final action. AMAQ tried creating new channels, but they'd rarely live longer than two weeks - a dramatic difference.

Amarnath, Queen's University Ontario, Canada

They did create the channels elsewhere. They just didn't have the same following as they had on Telegram, because they'd kind of scattered themselves so thinly across multiple platforms, and those networks didn't know how to recreate themselves because they couldn't find the necessary links.

You had several supporters, very suspicious after the 2019 action day that these new channels that were popping up on RocketChat or wherever were actually legitimate. They didn't know how to actually tell that this was a legitimate ISIS channel that had popped up in another platform. So they were terrified that it was created by the FBI or created by other, you know, other law enforcement. And so, things became quiet because of that.

Because they were clandestine organisations and they never shared their real names, they never shared their real identities with each other, there was no other mechanism by which to establish that trust. Right?

It was just like, I only know you through your kunya. I only know you through your single presence on this single platform. If someone with your kunya showed up on an entirely separate platform, how do I know that this is you? And how do I know I can trust you? Right. And so all of that contributed to the kind of disintegration of that of that community.

Europol Narrator

After years of pushing the violent extremist propaganda of the so called Islamic State, AMAQ's operators realised the game was up. Law enforcement had outsmarted them, and they stopped investing in the proxies, servers and other tools that had kept their terrorist new agency alive.

These days, if you want to find their propaganda, you have to look in the deepest and darkest corners of the internet. By working together, law enforcement, judicial authorities and online service providers had effectively put a stop to IS' attempts to reach the mainstream.

Camille, Europol

So this takedown and thanks to the effort of the Belgium authorities, not only the law enforcement authorities, but also the judicial authorities that took the lead and served subpoenas to the platform, in order to identify the people behind.

We were able to locate supporters of the Islamic State that were supporting the structure online of the Islamic State and were in our member states. So those cases popped up one after another. The takedown allowed us to identify and attribute the dissemination of content of IS online. And so a lot of those supporters were arrested. The disseminator or was arrested and the people remaining are very few actually.

And when we arrest people, it's very committed supporters, no longer just consumers. And people started to be scared because after the takedown of Telegram, they saw that they could be identified. And the fact that the member states, Europol and the platforms went public to say, okay, it's no longer possible for IS to abuse the means of communication that regular citizens are using for freedom of expression.

WRAPPING UP**Europol Narrator**

Thank you for listening. We hope you enjoyed this episode of the Europol Podcast. Be sure to rate, review and subscribe so you get notified about new episodes. You can also mail us via the Europol website – we'd love to hear what you think of the show.