

Terrorists on Telegram

May 2017

COUNTER
EXTREMISM
PROJECT

Terrorists on Telegram

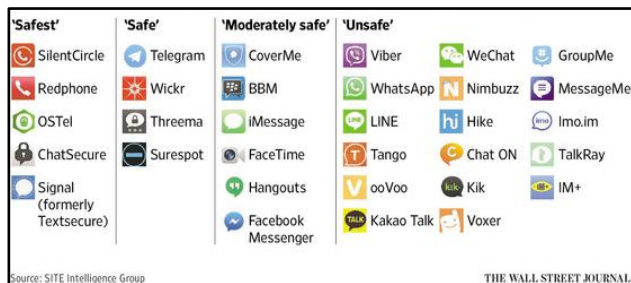
Terrorist and extremist groups use encrypted application Telegram to recruit new members, fundraise, incite to violence, and even coordinate terrorist activity. Telegram’s messaging application has both public-facing and private components. This flexible interface enables extremists to do everything from self-promotion, brand development and propaganda dissemination, to secret plotting of attacks outside detection or interference from law enforcement.

Telegram’s public-facing “channels” and private messaging “chats” make it a “dual-use” weapon for extremist groups like ISIS, al-Qaeda and Hamas.

Brief History of Telegram and Terrorism

For years, ISIS has used a variety of online platforms—including Twitter and WhatsApp among others—to communicate with recruits and operatives, issue claims of responsibility for attacks, and disseminate news updates and propaganda materials. In January 2015, the group even circulated a list of recommended private messaging applications, ranking them from least to most “secure.” At the time, ISIS considered Telegram to be a ‘safe’ or secure communications application and accordingly recommended its use. (Source: [Wall Street Journal](#))

ISIS has encouraged its followers on Twitter and other social media sites to connect with ISIS coordinators and recruiters on Telegram to discuss sensitive matters such as travel to ISIS-held territory. ISIS also created public channels on Telegram to broadcast pro-ISIS news updates and disseminate other propaganda materials through its Amaq Agency news outlet.



ISIS circulates a list of secure messaging applications, January 2015. Via WSJ.



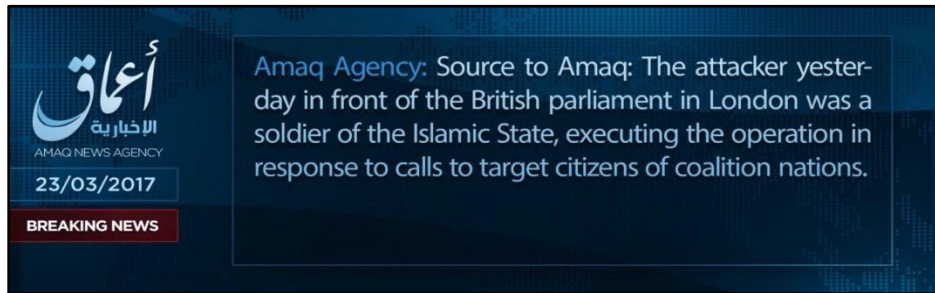
ISIS recruiter Neil Prakash encourages supporters on German-based social media platform Askbook to contact him on Telegram, mid-2015.

The ISIS presence online has caused considerable concern among authorities. However, at a TechCrunch conference in September 2015, Telegram founder Pavel Durov dismissed these concerns, asserting that “[t]he right for privacy is more important [to Telegram] than our fear of bad things happening, like terrorism.” Two months later, ISIS carried out the deadliest terrorist attack on French soil since World War II, killing 130 people and wounding 350 more. According to French investigators, the group had relied in part on Telegram and WhatsApp to coordinate and plan the attacks. (Sources: [YouTube](#), [International Business Times](#))

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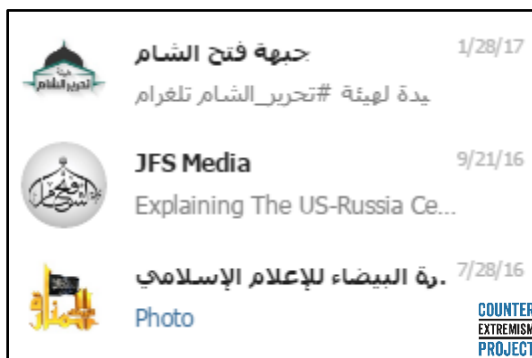
Since the Paris attacks, Telegram has revised its formal position, pledging to remove ISIS accounts from public channels. The company has, however, adamantly refused to take down private ISIS chats, where the attacks coordination is believed to take place. As Telegram says on its Frequently Asked Questions page, “All Telegram chats and group chats are private amongst their participants. *We do not process any requests related to them [emphasis added].*” While Telegram pledges to block ISIS-related “bots and channels, *we will not block anybody who peacefully expresses alternative opinions [emphasis added].*” (Source: [Telegram](#))

Telegram’s contradictory position toward ISIS and other terrorist organizations has allowed these groups to continue to operate on the platform with relative impunity. Although Telegram removes some public ISIS channels from its platform, ISIS’s Amaq Agency frequently reappears to claim responsibility for terrorist attacks and disseminate propaganda materials. On March 23, 2017, for example, ISIS used the platform to claim responsibility for the lone-wolf terrorist attack the day before in London, which left four people dead and more than a dozen wounded. On May 23, 2017, ISIS again claimed responsibility for the Manchester Arena attack, releasing responsibility claims and other propaganda materials on Telegram.



ISIS claims responsibility for Westminster attack in London, March 2017.

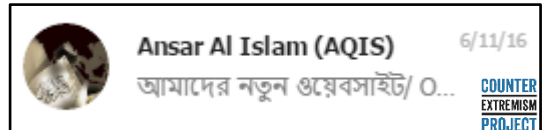
Other extremist and terrorist groups continue to operate freely on Telegram without comment by Telegram. Telegram continues to host channels operating on behalf of internationally-sanctioned terrorist organizations, including al-Qaeda, the Nusra Front, Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Taliban.



Above: Channels operating on behalf of the al-Qaeda-affiliated Nusra Front group remain live on Telegram. March 2017.



U.S.-sanctioned Hamas and Hezbollah channels live on Telegram (above). Al-Qaeda’s Indian Subcontinent channel is also live on Telegram (below). March 2017.



Telegram has remained noticeably silent on the presence of these and other terrorist groups. In some instances, the aforementioned channels have remained operational for well over a year without takedown.

How Terrorists Use Telegram: Channels and Chats

The Telegram platform consists of public channels and private chats. Terrorists have co-opted both forms of communication to distribute propaganda, incite to violence, coordinate travel to foreign conflicts, and claim responsibility for terrorist attacks.

Channels

Telegram channels allow ISIS, al-Qaeda, Hamas, the Taliban, and other extremist and terrorist groups to broadcast messages to groups of followers at once. CEP has collected examples demonstrating how terrorist-affiliated channels on Telegram publish propaganda materials to subscribers, claim responsibility for attacks, issue calls to action, and solicit donations.



Nusra-affiliated media channel promotes a fundraising campaign for jihadists in Syria. January 2017.

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ISIS releases propaganda videos (left) and magazines (right) through public channels on Telegram.

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ANSAR AL ISLAM

AL-QA'DAH IN THE INDIAN SUB-CONTINENT

17th Rajab, 1437 hijri.

Alhamdulillah. By the grace of Almighty Allah, the mujahidin of Ansar al-Islam (AQIS, Bangladesh branch) were able to assassinate **Xulhaz Mannan** and his associate **Samir Mahub Tonoy**. They were the pioneers of practicing and promoting homosexuality in Bangladesh.

Xulhaz Mannan was the director of **Roopbaan** (A cult comprised of the gays and the lesbians) while Samir Mahub Tonoy was one of its most important activists.

They were working day and night to promote homosexuality among the people of this land since 1998 with the help of their masters, the US crusaders and its Indian allies.

We will follow up with additional details later on inshaAllah...

Mufti Abdullah Ashraf Spokesman, Ansar Al Islam | Al-Qai'dah In The Indian Sub-Continent

AnsarAlIslam5 | ansaralislam.wordpress.com | telegram.me/Ansar_Al_Islam

Al-Qaeda's South Asian branch claims responsibility for the murder of LGBT activists in Bangladesh.

Groups like ISIS have also issued calls to violence on Telegram channels in advance of major attacks. On December 6, 2016, one such message read, “Christmas, Hanukah, And New Years [sic] Day is very soon Insha Allah[.] So let’s prepare a gift for the filthy pigs/apes.” Less than two weeks later, Tunisian suspect Anis Amri plowed a truck into a crowd of people at a Christmas market in Berlin, killing 12 people and injuring 48 others. ISIS also claimed responsibility on Telegram for the New Year’s Eve shooting attack at an Istanbul nightclub. The attack left 39 people dead and dozens wounded. (Sources: [MEMRI](#), [Telegraph](#), [New York Times](#), [Newsweek](#))

Chats

ISIS encourages individuals demonstrating support for ISIS on platforms like Twitter, YouTube, and WordPress—as well as through Telegram’s public channels—to contact the group privately on secure messaging platforms like WhatsApp, Viber, or Telegram’s secure chat platform.

Telegram’s chats can accommodate up to 5,000 members. ISIS’s supporters use chats to share pro-ISIS content amongst themselves.

Once on the Telegram’s secure chat platform, ISIS operatives can engage with its followers one-on-one or in small groups to plan attacks or coordinate travel to and from ISIS-held territory. Telegram’s chats can accommodate up to 5,000 members. For that reason, ISIS’s supporters also

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use the chat platform to share pro-ISIS content amongst themselves, chatting and sharing links on the newest ISIS videos, magazines, and attacks claims. ISIS supporters on Telegram often try to vet journalists, analysts, and others—whom they refer to as “spies”—so they can share pro-ISIS content amongst themselves.



ISIS supporters on a Telegram chat room share details about a “spy” so others can block him, January 2017.

Telegram has today surpassed Twitter as ISIS’s “most important platform,” according to counterterrorism expert Steven Stalinsky. In the past, ISIS would typically coordinate its PR campaigns on Twitter and other social media platforms, sharing the relevant materials—posters, statements, hashtags, and links to ISIS videos hosted on other sites like JustPaste.it, SendVid, and Internet Archive—amongst themselves before pushing the materials out en masse. This process has now largely moved to Telegram, where ISIS operatives often first coordinate ISIS PR campaigns in secret, before deploying them across other social media platforms, like Twitter and YouTube. (Sources: [Washington Post](#), [MEMRI](#))

From Telegram to Terrorism

Terrorists have used Telegram in the lead-up to a number of successful and thwarted terrorist attacks worldwide:

- **November 13, 2015** – *France*: ISIS assailants target civilian locations across Paris in a synchronized attack, killing 130 people and wound more than 350 others. French investigators reveal a month later that the assailants used chats on Telegram to plan and coordinate the attacks. (Sources: [CNN](#), [Hill](#))
- **December 2015** – *Indonesia*: Indonesian police arrest Arif Hidayatullah and members of his pro-ISIS cell, who are believed to have received bomb-making instructions via Telegram. Bahrin Naim, an Indonesian ISIS recruiter based in Raqqa, Syria, reportedly directed Hidayatullah to target non-Muslim religious sites in Java, alongside a team of suicide bombers. (Source: [Vocativ](#))
- **December 30, 2015** – *United States*: Police arrest [Emanuel Lutchman](#) the day before he plans to attack a bar on behalf of ISIS. Lutchman was allegedly directed to carry out the attack by an ISIS recruiter on Telegram who told Lutchman that he should “find the places where the most population, take as many as possible out.” (Source: [U.S. Department of Justice](#))

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- **June 13, 2016** – *France*: French ISIS supporter [Larossi Abballa](#) breaks into the home of a French police officer and kills him and his wife. From the victims’ home, Abballa uses Facebook Live to livestream his pledge of allegiance to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. French officials later discover that Abballa had been in a Telegram chat group with ISIS executioner and recruiter [Rachid Kassim](#). (Source: [BBC News](#))
- **June 29, 2016** – *India*: India’s National Investigation Agency arrests five men who had allegedly created an ISIS terror cell with the aim of carrying out attacks in India. The alleged leader of the cell, Mohammed Ibrahim Yazdani, had reached out to an ISIS recruiter on Telegram months before his arrest in an effort to reach Syria. When his efforts to travel abroad failed, he and the recruiter switched between a number of encrypted apps in order to plan and coordinate an attack within India. The ISIS recruiter reportedly vetted cell members for Yazdani and even orchestrated weapon sales on his behalf. (Sources: [Times of India](#), [New York Times](#))
- **Late July 2016** – *Brazil*: Ten members of a pro-ISIS cell are arrested in Brazil after allegedly plotting terrorist attacks against gays, Shiite Muslims, and Jews, as well as foreigners at the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro. According to prosecutors, members of the cell had communicated with each other over various platforms including Telegram, where they had discussed training, how to obtain weapons, and plans for carrying out attacks. (Sources: [Reuters](#), [New York Times](#))
- **July 26, 2016** – *France*: Abdel-Malik Petitjean and Adel Kermiche kill a priest in Normandy after being introduced to one another through a pro-ISIS group on Telegram. ISIS executioner and recruiter Rachid Kassim reportedly provided instruction and encouragement to the assailants via Telegram. (Source: [BBC News](#))
- **August 4, 2016** – *France*: Police detain a 16-year-old girl for administering a Telegram group where ISIS supporters discussed propaganda and called for terrorist attacks. According to a French investigator, the girl “relayed numerous Islamic State group propaganda messages calling for attacks, and she also expressed her own intention of taking action.” (Source: [BBC News](#))
- **August 9, 2016** – *Kuwait*: Police arrest a Filipino woman whom they say was planning a suicide bombing attack within Kuwait. According to Kuwaiti authorities, the woman had used Telegram to communicate with her husband, an ISIS militant in Libya. (Source: [ABS-CBN News](#))
- **September 14, 2016** – *France*: Police detain a 15-year-old boy who allegedly volunteered to conduct a terrorist attack. According to French authorities, the boy had used Telegram to stay in contact with ISIS executioner and recruiter Rachid Kassim. (Source [BBC News](#))
- **December 19, 2016** – *Germany*: A driver—believed to be deceased Tunisian-born suspect Anis Amri—plows a truck into a crowd of people at a Christmas market in Berlin, killing 12 people and injuring 48 others. Amri had previously used Telegram chat to communicate with his nephew, urging him to pledge allegiance to ISIS. Two weeks prior to the attack, a message appeared on a Telegram channel calling on ISIS supporters to “prepare a gift for the filthy pigs/apes” in advance of the holiday season. (Sources: [NBC News](#), [MEMRI](#))

Conclusion: End Terrorists’ Access to Telegram

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Telegram has been reluctant to respond seriously to the threat of terrorist activity on its platform. CEO Pavel Durov has refused to take any steps to curtail ISIS's access to Telegram's private chats despite evidence that the platform has been used to plan and coordinate attacks. ISIS's Amaq Agency channel also continues to appear regularly on Telegram to issue attack claims, propaganda videos, and threats of violence. Notably, Durov has refused to publicly address concerns of other terrorist groups operating on his platform, including the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

It is clear that more can and should be done. Terrorists continue to use Telegram to plan attacks and recruit followers in North America, Europe, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia. And despite efforts by Durov to present Telegram as a refuge for privacy and encryption, the company has become a safe haven for groups like ISIS, Hamas, al-Qaeda, the Taliban. Until we take serious efforts to reduce terrorists' access to Telegram and other platforms, these groups will continue to inflict violence on civilians around the world, destabilizing the countries where attacks occur, and reducing a global sense of security and safety.