How jihadists use social media to recruit children

Apps playfully teach kids extremist ideologies

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Over the past months, the terror organization 'Islamic State' (IS) has published several apps specifically targeting children. Other Islamists also use content specifically designed to attract young internet users. Not being problematic at first sight, this content latently conveys a militant attitude, hatred against enemy images and a positive picture of jihadism.

Advertising for the militant jihad
KIDS CONTENT PREPARING FOR THE FIGHT

With their professional propaganda targeting specific audiences the tech-savvy Salafist groups meanwhile aim at the youngest internet users. The 'Islamic State' uses mobile applications specifically focusing on children. These apps have plain language, bright colors, many pictures, and the look and feel users would expect from any app today. They aim at bringing their extremist ideology to children as early as possible and at creating a positive image of jihad in terms of an armed battle.
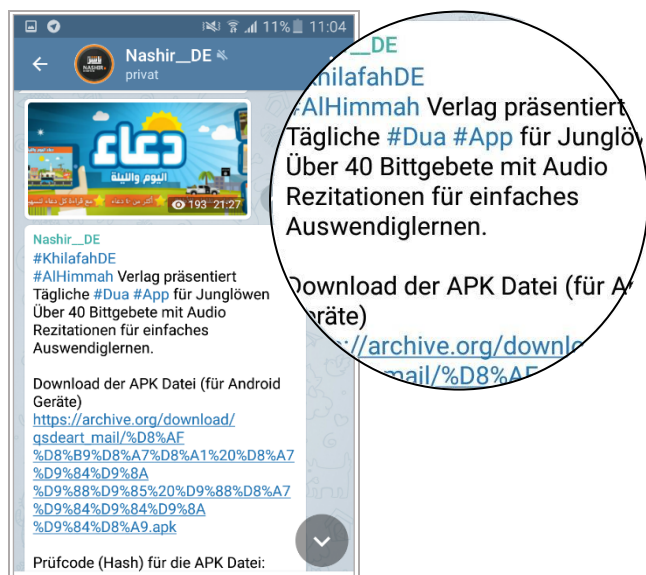
App for 'lion cubs': Available for download on a Telegram channel. (Source: Telegram)

jugendschutz.net looked closely at three apps; these were not available in the market places of Google, Apple and Microsoft, but offered by Islamists for download via file hosting and cloud services (e.g. archive.org, Google Drive).

On the instant messaging service Telegram that is very popular among young persons, blogs and channels in German language make the accompanying links accessible to a broad, not extremist audience.

Playful introduction to violence
APP 'HUROOF' COUNTS ON EARLY INDOCTRINATION

The IS app 'Huroof' (meaning alphabet or letter in Arabic) is designed specifically to teach the Arabic alphabet in an easy and playful way and get users in the right mood for the 'holy war'. The app is primarily aimed at children in an Arabic speaking environment.

Playfully learning the Arabic alphabet: The first letter (right picture) of the Arabic word for gun. (Source: App "Huroof")

When started, the app plays a nasheed, an Islamic acapella chant. The splash screen shows the black IS flag and leads the way to interactive games like popping balloons filled with letters or drawing letters to unlock new features. In another game, you can hear the voice from a child reading the alphabet and every letter is associated with specific terms and images often rooting in militaristic and jihadist iconography.

Defusing bombs in children's rooms
App 'Moalem Al-Huroof' focuses on interaction

The 'Islamic State' created the app 'Moalem Al-Huroof' (teacher of the alphabet) to expand the learning of the alphabet to learning numbers, and integrated extensive options for interacting as well as more playful elements than in 'Huroof'. They teach kids to learn the Arabic alphabet by bringing the letters in the right order or recognizing them in a word.

Visual language with militaristic vocabulary remains an essential element. Additionally, users have to carry out certain tasks, e.g. find a bomb in a virtual children's room before it explodes. Numbers are taught by using depictions of weaponry. The number 'one' is linked to the caliphate, a religion and direction of prayer. Subsequent numbers up to 'ten' are all connected to the corresponding number of weapons such as Kalashnikovs and machetes.
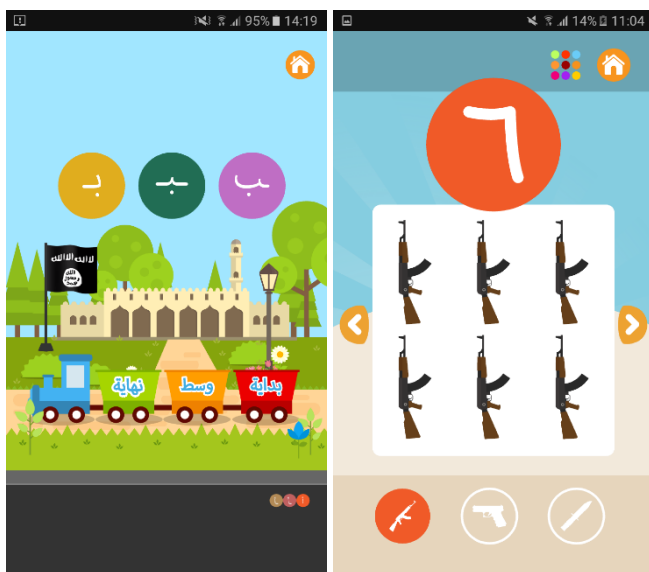
Reading, writing, and calculating: Learning with the help of weapons. (Source: App 'Moalem Al-Huroof')

Prayers of petition for the 'Islamic State'
App 'Dua' with propaganda cartoons

The IS uses the app 'Dua' (term for petitionary prayer) with cartoon style design to communicate its ideology specifically to children trying to give them an understanding of everyday life in the terror organization. The application in Arabic language links its jihadist propaganda directly to religious education: good night prayers and prayers for saying grace in parallel with petitions for successfully destroying the enemy.

The app connects everyday, completely innocent activities with pictures of war and violence rather subliminally conveying the militant message. The scenario shows a city with a school, a mosque and a bus, the black IS flag fluttering in the background, a gun and a war plane users can tap on to shoot it down. A bazooka ('man-portable antitank rocket launcher') standing next to a bed, a virtual market not only selling fruits and vegetables but also guns.

Small games shall help to strengthen enemy images: For example, users can tap on explosives and guns to attack American tanks and shoot the flags of nations fighting against terrorism.

Mosque, school, hospital: A staged IS city with anti-aircraft guns to tap on. (Source: App 'Dua')

Praying for the destruction of the enemies: Users can tap on the screen to shoot US tanks. (Source: App 'Dua')

Salafists lure children with their website
'Children in Islam' offers easy start

On its website, the Salafist group 'True religion' specifically addressed children in the section 'Children in Islam'. According to its self-description the group aims at convincing people to convert to Islam. The kids section specifically targets the youngest users offering them easy access to Salafist content. Meanwhile the organization is banned, after the authorities accused it of recruiting jihadists to fight in Iraq and Syria.

'Children in Islam' offered religious education with coloring pages, craft ideas, poems or riddles presented in bright colors and easy language specifically targeting young children. There was no extremist content in this section, however, on the main website of 'True religion' Salafists disseminated messages making propaganda for the caliphate as the preferred form of rule, for 'martyrdom' in terms of a military action or the death sentence for homosexuals. Children could stumble across such endangering content with just a few clicks. Since the ban the website is offline.

Kids section on 'True Religion': Two clicks away from extrem-
ist content. (Source: diewahrereligion.de)

Service providers must prevent dissemination
NEED FOR INFORMATION AND SENSITIZATION

jugendschutz.net documented unlawful content in all three
apps: using symbols of unconstitutional organizations (IS
symbol). After being put on notice by jugendschutz.net all
platform operators deleted downloads, however, the apps
are quickly re-uploaded and therefore still circulate online.
Operators are challenged to take proactive technical
measures to prevent further dissemination of the IS apps.

In order to stop extremists from using such playful media to
indoctrinate very young children and impart an inhuman
and warped world view, parents and carers must be made
more aware of this easily perceivable propaganda.