

Jihadists make Telegram messaging app a recruiting tool

The 'Islamic State' glorifies terrorism and turns to German teenagers

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An app called Telegram is the new hot thing for jihadists to disseminate their propaganda. Terror organizations like the 'Islamic State' (IS) also use this app to win over German users. jugendschutz.net documented a vast amount of graphic content like beheading videos – anyone can use his smartphone to access such content. So far, the provider has taken only little action to protect his young users.

Key propaganda tool for jihadists MASSIVE INCREASE OF CHANNELS AND MESSAGES

The messaging service Telegram becomes increasingly important for Islamists to disseminate their propaganda. Since jugendschutz.net has started to take a closer look and monitor this service the number of channels in German language has climbed to 130; two thirds belong to the jihadist spectrum.

What is striking: Channels with jihadist content such as beheading videos of the terror organization Islamic State, calls for war and advertising for terrorist groups received the most responses, sometimes more than 200 a day.

Telegram is a highly encrypted messaging app with a focus on security and speed. It is designed for mobile use and allows users to create channels for broadcasting messages to a large audience; easy to find, subscribe to and make public with permanent URLs. Channel subscribers automatically receive news on their smartphones – the easiest way to reach a large audience.

For **young people**, who are specifically attracted to mobile messengers, Telegram poses a high risk of coming across endangering content. There are no explicit terms of service and no sufficient reporting mechanisms.

A reference to everyday life and youth culture as bait

PROXIMITY TO REAL LIFE OFFERS EASY START

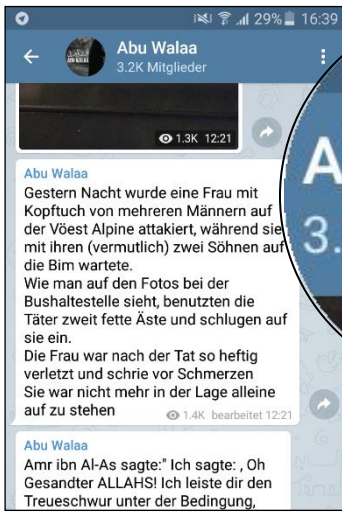
Very often, Islamist Facebook profiles which specifically young people go for make advertising for the Telegram channels luring with a reference to everyday life. Since the extremist background is not visible at first sight, users can inadvertently come across jihadist content.



From Facebook to Telegram: Users are lured to jihadist channels. (Source: Facebook, original not pixelated)

Without any background knowledge, for example, nobody could identify the Telegram channel of the meanwhile arrested self-proclaimed German-speaking preacher Abu Walaa as sympathizing with IS. He gained greater visibility after his public dispute with the Salafist Pierre Vogel carried out in a so-called statement video. These films appear authentic and inviting and they are specifically familiar and popular among young people in the hip-hop scene. Gangster rappers use them as stylistic elements to stage their conflicts with a view to public appeal.

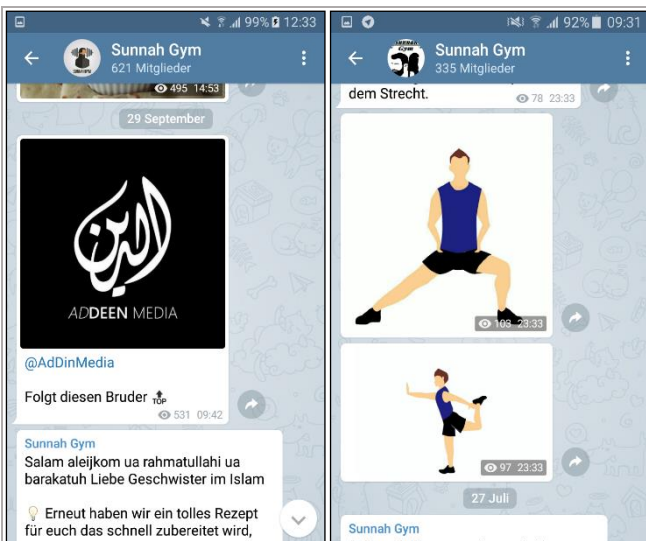
Short trailers on various channels introduce the videos, advertise and share them to increase suspense. Viewers get the impression of having first hand information. This is how Abu Walaa temporarily gained more than 3,000 subscribers to his Telegram channel.



Salafist Abu Walaa: Temporarily more than 3,000 followers on Telegram. (Source: Telegram)

Links lead to militant spectrum STEP-BY-STEP TO EXTREMIST IDEOLOGY

Whoever subscribes to an Islamist channel on Telegram, innocent at first glance, is confronted with statements of third parties introducing them step-by-step to the inhuman ideology and more and more extremist ideas. Associated links quickly direct young people to content from the militant jihadist spectrum.



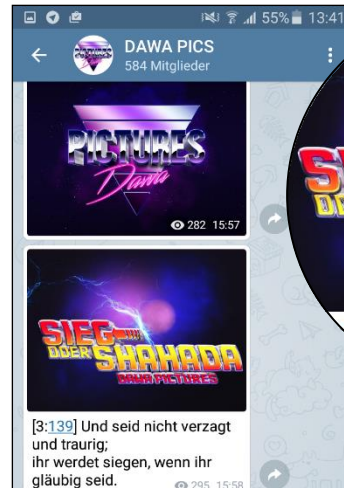
First fitness then jihad: Popular channel guides to extremist content. (Source: Telegram)

For example, channels with instructions for 'Islam-compliant' fitness exercises or Afghan kitchen recipes tie in radical statements promoting the implementation of Sharia (Islamic law) and stirring up hatred against Western society. These channels again include statements from other channels calling for militant action and promoting terror organizations such as Al Qaeda or the 'Islamic State'.

Example: A less radical channel shared the emotionalizing false statement that a Muslim woman was shot in the head by police in France. Clicking on this statement revealed the original source, a channel saying that German police would soon also shoot Muslims. At the same time, the creator of the channel called on followers to equip themselves with weapons and special ammunition that could penetrate bulletproof police vests.

Elements of pop culture to attract young people EMOJIS CARRY ISLAMIST ICONOGRAPHY

Telegram channels of the German jihadist scene publish images linked to pop culture. This is a quick and easy way to convey Islamist ideas. A channel specifically attractive to young people, for example, used logos of popular films such as 'Star Wars' or 'Back to the Future' connecting these with jihadist slogans and blatantly called for violence and terror.

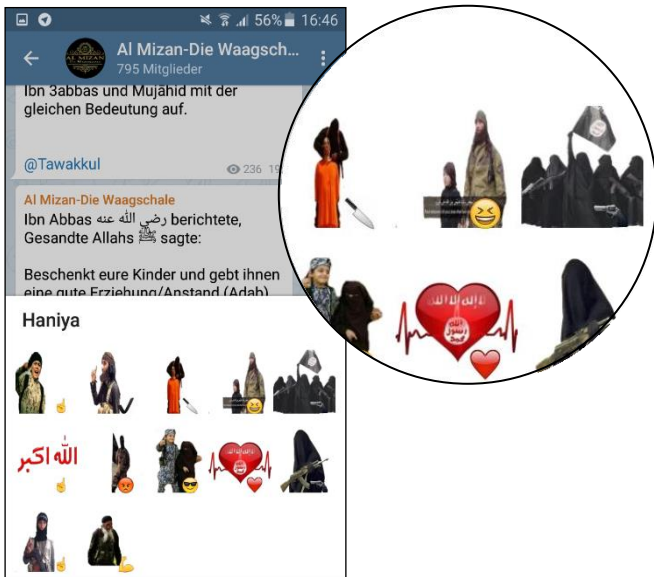


Re-dedication of film logos: 'Back to the Future' becomes a jihadist slogan. (Source: Telegram)

Islamists also use emojis, popular and fun elements of communication, to disseminate jihadist images and to express their support for terrorist groups like the IS or Al Qaeda. Here, they take advantage of a special Telegram feature that enables them to create their own sticker pack. The user chooses a personal image and can turn it into an emoji.

Stickers, for example, depict the American journalist James Foley dressed in an orange jumpsuit and his murderer wearing a black mask and carrying a knife. The black IS flag is also used. Users who click on such symbols also gain access and can disseminate them.

This is how they are quickly brought into circulation also finding their way into moderate communication streams. Thus, young people can gain easy access to jihadist iconography and the corresponding inhuman ideology.



Icons of the terrorist organization IS: Jihadist sticker pack offers 'fun factor'. (Source: Telegram)

Live events of war and terror MOBILE WAR ZONE PROPAGANDA

To young people, jihadist telegram channels are also appealing because of all the apparently authentic information – specifically about the conflict in Syria and Iraq – that is directly available without retrieving it from traditional media. Particularly the IS uses Telegram to present combat operations as live events: Users can witness these on their mobile phone, tablet or PC. More and more war zone images and videos give them the feeling of being as close as possible. This enables them to meet their target group and put the picture of the glorious 'Islamic State' into their minds.

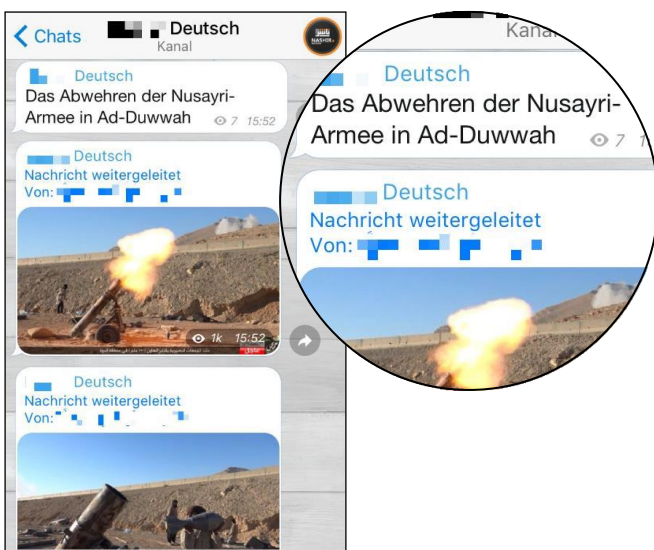


Photo series of combat operations: Glorification of the militant jihad. (Source: Telegram; original not pixelated)

Push notifications are notifications that pop up on the lock screen or in the news section of a mobile device without being in the app. Users are kept informed with timely and relevant content, for instance on a telegram channel, and receive a short preview. They can choose an alert sound for every new push notification or let the mobile phone blink or vibrate. The app has to be open in the background.

Events like the terror attacks in Nice and Ansbach or the coup d'état attempt in Turkey involve a high number of news items on jihadist's Telegram channels. These serve as a parallel reporting structure and publish material that German media would not display. Right after the terror attack in Nice, jihadist channels published a smartphone video showing the dead or suffering victims. The propaganda glorified the act and mocked these people as non-believers who deserved death. At the same time, they encouraged their followers to do the same.

Generally, jihadist channels on Telegram receive more contributions than other rather moderate messaging apps and they constantly provide their users with information throughout the day. Push notifications bring the propaganda directly to the smartphone and they even come up on the lock screen. This shall keep young people interested and strengthen their ties with Islamist ideology.

IS targets women and men SPECIAL CHANNELS LURE INTO THE 'NEW CLIPHATE'

Several channels in German language address women and girls who are specifically courted by IS – with romantic stories of love and long distance relationships, with the portrayal of a perfect, idyllic Islamic community – and encouraged to join the 'caliphate' and marry a jihadi fighter. Women were the 'queens' in the house and it was their task to raise the next generation of 'true fighters'.

The creators of the channels provided their E-mail addresses and private chat options for direct contact and for receiving further information on how to travel to Syria or Iraq. Such a one-to-one communication takes place without any social control and creates a direct gateway to indoctrination and recruiting.

Propaganda channels addressing men and boys are more 'warlike': Photos and videos depicting executions of prisoners or dead enemy soldiers romanticize the jihadi fighters. At the same time, they glorify the suicide bombers to win over new 'martyrs'. Depictions showing jihadists cutting off the hands of alleged thieves or stoning 'adulterers', homosexuals and 'sorcerers' to death shall demonstrate the strict application of sharia.



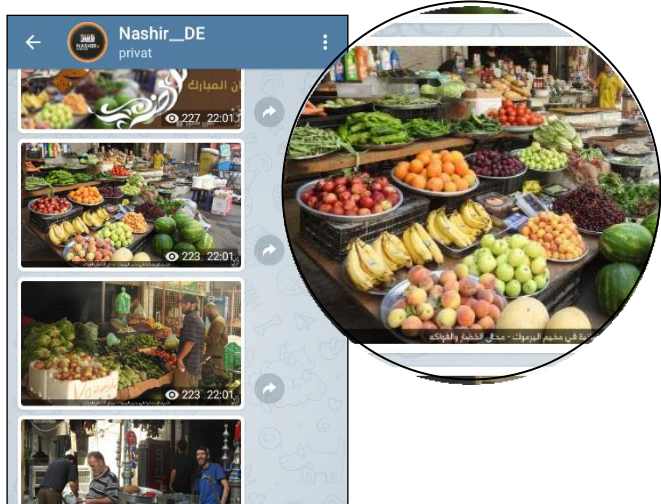
Targeted approach: Gils and women are lured into jihad. (Source: Telegram; original not pixelated)

Terrorists give the impression of a perfect state

'ACHIEVEMENTS' SHALL CREATE LEGITIMACY

On their channels, the 'Islamic State' presents the 'new caliphate' as a fully functioning state. Contributions and statements shall prove that the jihadists take care of maintaining the infrastructure such as streets and utility lines and therefore make a social and civilized life possible.

Photos show an allegedly sound healthcare, education and judicial system. Glossy prints of shelves stocked with goods and markets teeming with vibrant fruits and vegetables shall give evidence of extensive shopping possibilities; beautiful flowers and abundant crops shall give the impression that the land is fertile and therefore the ideal place to start a new life.



Market filled with fruits and vegetables: The IS suggests that nothing is missing in the caliphate. (Source: Telegram; original not pixelated).

The IS also uses this image to address potential recruits in Western consumer societies. The conception of the 'caliphate' being blessed by God lends jihadist propaganda and ultimately also killing the 'non-believers' alleged legitimacy.

Service provider must delete and take preventive measures

HUGE AMOUNT OF CONTENT GLORIFYING WAR AND CALLS FOR VIOLENCE

jugendschutz.net documented content violating youth protection laws on 51 Islamist Telegram channels, partially more than half of the contributions and statements were illegal. Most cases openly promoted the jihad in terms of an armed conflict and martyrdom (glorification of war). Additionally, jugendschutz.net found execution videos and images violating human dignity as well as illegal symbols such as the symbol of the IS.

The Telegram operator only deleted six channels; five following flagging through the integrated report button and one after contacting the support team via an anonymous E-mail address. The problem: Deleted channels usually pop up again the next day with a slightly different name. And organizations banned in Germany like 'DawaFFM' and 'Millatu Ibrahim', can also disseminate their propaganda on Telegram and get away with it. jugendschutz.net forwarded some cases to German law enforcement, because users incited to murder and published the addresses of potential victims.

Despite of numerous efforts being made, jugendschutz.net did not succeed in establishing a direct contact and in sensitizing Telegram for the protection of minors. In order to stop jihadists from using Telegram to lure young people and negatively influence them, the operator must consistently delete these contributions, channels and accounts and avoid further misuse. There is also a need for clear terms of service that prohibit content like violence and hatred.

Islamism on the internet – background of the project

Within its project on political extremism, jugendschutz.net takes a close look at Islamist content on the internet and develops counter strategies. This work is presently funded by the German Federal Agency for Civic Education.

