



Home Office



Department  
for Education

# HOW SOCIAL MEDIA IS USED TO ENCOURAGE TRAVEL TO SYRIA AND IRAQ BRIEFING NOTE FOR SCHOOLS

Terrorist organisations, such as ISIL, are trying to radicalise and recruit young people through an extensive use of social media and the internet. Young people, some as young as 14, have tried to leave the UK to travel to join ISIL and other terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq.

As with other online harms, every teacher needs to be aware of the risks posed by the online activity of extremist and terrorist groups. This briefing note is aimed at head teachers, teachers and safeguarding leads and provides advice about online terrorist and extremist material. It includes a short summary of some of the main ISIL propaganda claims and identifies social media sites which ISIL is using.

## What action do schools and teachers need to take?

Schools have a vital role to play in protecting pupils from the risks of extremism and radicalisation. Keeping children safe from risks posed by terrorist exploitation of social media should be approached in the same way as safeguarding children from any other online abuse.

- In the same way that teachers are vigilant about signs of possible physical or emotional abuse in any of their pupils, if you have a concern for the safety of a specific young person at risk of radicalisation, **you should follow your school's safeguarding procedures**, including discussing with your school's designated safeguarding lead, and where deemed necessary, with the designated officer(s) of your local authority. If you are in a 'Prevent' priority area, your local authority will have a 'Prevent' lead who can also provide support.

- **You can also contact your local police force or dial 101** (the non-emergency number). They can talk to you in confidence about your concerns and help you gain access to support and advice.

- **The local authority or police might suggest a referral to the 'Channel' programme.** 'Channel' is a voluntary Government funded programme which aims to safeguard children and adults from being drawn into terrorist activity. 'Channel' can provide a support plan and specific interventions to protect people at risk, including mentoring support or an ideological or theological intervention. If you want to find out more about 'Channel' [click here](#) or call 101 to discuss your concerns.

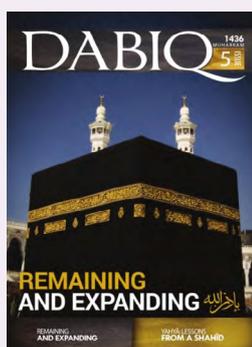
**If you are concerned that a child's life is in immediate danger, or that they may be imminently planning to travel to Syria or Iraq dial 999 or call the confidential Anti-Terrorist Hotline on 0800 789 321.**

For further background information on the roles of schools and teachers in safeguarding children, and preventing pupils from the risks of terrorism and extremism the following documents will be of use:

- **Keeping children safe in education:** statutory guidance for schools and colleges
- **Prevent Duty Guidance:** for specified authorities in England and Wales on the duty in the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 to have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism.

## PROPAGANDA THEMES

ISIL, also sometimes referred to as ISIS, is a violent terrorist group which has caused huge suffering to people in both Syria and Iraq in the name of an Islamist extremist ideology. They are a brutal group that wants to impose rule on people and has used violence and extortion. ISIL's claim to have established an 'Islamic State' or 'caliphate' in the region has no theological credibility.



ISIL propaganda includes images and videos that present the group as an exciting alternative to life in the West. This media presents ISIL as the powerful creators of a new state, to which all Muslims (male and female) have a duty to travel. The propaganda continuously ignores the fact that ISIL is a terrorist organisation engaged in killing innocent men, women and children. When ISIL's official media groups release material online the group encourages supporters on social media to share the material – this is what gives ISIL its large reach, particularly to young people.

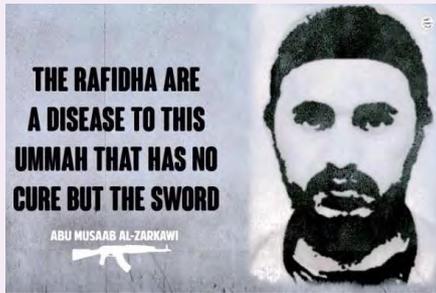
ISIL propaganda uses **four main themes** to encourage young people to travel to Syria and Iraq. These themes are used to recruit both men and women, and are also widely used in discussions on social media around ISIL.



ISIL celebrates and promotes an **image of success** online in order to attract young people – it tells them that ISIL are the winning side and can offer them an exciting life. The ISIL slogan 'Baqiyah wa-Tatamaddad' (remaining and expanding) presents the group as one that consistently achieves success. ISIL propaganda ignores the reality that ISIL are not winning and are opposed by the majority of people in Syria and Iraq.



ISIL portray their 'Caliphate' as an ideal, utopian state where Muslims will find **status and belonging**. ISIL propaganda claims that it is the duty of Muslim men and women in the West to travel there and regularly states that all foreigners are welcome in its ranks, so long as they are Sunni Muslims. In reality the claimed Caliphate has been rejected by the overwhelming majority of Islamic scholars around the world. ISIL abuse of women and children and killing of innocent civilians has been well documented.



The propaganda output of ISIL insists that it is the **personal duty** of Muslims to support them and travel to the 'Caliphate'. Islamic scholars have clearly dismissed this and have made clear there is no such obligation. ISIL wants to portray itself as the only group able to **defend Sunnis** from the Assad regime, the Iraqi army or the threat of the West. ISIL communications also show the group providing food and services to people in Syria and Iraq. In reality most Sunnis fear and oppose ISIL and recognise that they are a threat to their lives and security.

## SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

Social media has become an essential and exciting part of how we live. Millions of young people use these platforms daily to share content. But there are a small minority of users who exploit social media to radicalise and recruit vulnerable people.

The government and police work closely with the communications industry to remove extremist and terrorist content from the internet. Since February 2010, over 95,000 pieces of terrorist content have been removed from the internet and the companies' below continue to work with us to limit the abuse of their platforms by terrorists and their supporters. However, more content is uploaded all the time by people from this country and elsewhere who have joined ISIL in Syria and Iraq. Many of these people have an established online identity using platforms described below.

Many community based organisations respond to ISIL propaganda and debunk its messages. For example, London-based group **Families Against Stress and Trauma (FAST)** have designed an online guide for parents on the dangers of radicalisation, as well as producing a YouTube film with testimonies from parents whose children have travelled to Syria. They are currently sharing their knowledge in a series of parenting workshops.

### FACEBOOK

ISIL supporters use Facebook to share content, such as news stories and YouTube videos, among their peer groups.



### TWITTER

Twitter is another popular social media platform for pro-ISIL accounts and those sharing ISIL propaganda. It is easy to establish an account, stay relatively anonymous and share material with large numbers of people.



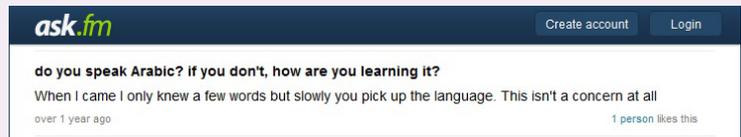
## YouTube YOUTUBE

YouTube is also used to host videos, both of official ISIL output and videos created by users themselves. Multiple 'dummy' accounts will be set up so that when videos are taken down they can be reposted quickly.

Users will post YouTube links across their own social media platforms in order to disseminate material, particularly Twitter and Facebook.

## ASK.FM

People considering travel to Syria or Iraq sometimes use Ask.fm to ask British jihadis and female ISIL supporters about travel, living standards, recruitment, fighting and broader ideology.



The answers given by ISIL supporters are encouraging, saying all their difficulties will be solved if they travel to the region.



## INSTAGRAM

Instagram is used by fighters and ISIL supporters to share the photosets frequently produced by various ISIL media organisations.

ISIL supporters also use Instagram to share pictures of their life in Syria, often showing landscapes and images suggesting they are living a full and happy life.



## TUMBLR

Tumblr, the blogging site, is exploited by fighters to promote longer, theological arguments for travel.

Tumblr is popular with female ISIL supporters, who have written blogs addressing the concerns girls have about travelling to the region, such as leaving their families behind and living standards in Syria.



## PRIVATE MESSAGING

On social media, ISIL supporters frequently encourage others to message them on closed peer-to-peer networks when asked for sensitive information, such as on how to travel to the region, what to pack and who to contact when they arrive.



Popular private messaging apps include WhatsApp, Kik, SureSpot and Viber.

## LANGUAGE USED BY ISIL

ISIL relies heavily on Islamic terminology, and often twists its meaning, to reinforce the impression that it is fighting for a religious cause and has established a truly Islamic state.

Terms used in ISIL propaganda and by supporters on social media include:

**Dawla/Dawlah** - A term used to describe ISIL by its supporters, an alternative to 'Islamic State.'

**Caliphate** - A Caliphate (or Khilafah) is a form of government used by early Muslims, under a single leader, or Caliph. ISIL supporters describe the territory the group controls in Iraq and Syria as the 'Caliphate'.

**Jihad** - Literally meaning 'struggle,' jihad can also refer to violence. Extremists may claim that undertaking violent jihad is obligatory for Muslims.

**Mujahid** - Someone who fights jihad, the plural of which is mujahideen.

**Hijrah** - Referring originally to the journey made by the Prophet Muhammad and his followers from Mecca to Medina, today hijrah is used by many to mean moving from a non-Muslim country to a Muslim country. ISIL uses this term to reinforce the idea that there is a religious obligation to travel to their so called Caliphate.

**Shahada** - This can refer both to the Islamic declaration of faith (the first of the five pillars of Islam) and to someone considered to have achieved martyrdom. In this case they will be referred to as a 'Shaheed'.

**Kaffir/kuffar** - A pejorative term used to describe non-Muslims, on the basis that they reject the tenets of Islam.

**Ummah** - This is the concept of the world community of Muslims, who are bound by common faith. ISIL regularly makes claims to be representing the 'one true Ummah' and that it is building a community for them.

**Rafidha** - The Arabic word for 'rejecters' or 'those who refuse', it is a term used to describe those believed to reject Islamic authority and leadership. 'Rafidha' is often used by ISIL supporters as a pejorative or sectarian term against Shia Muslims.

**Sham** - A classical Arabic term used to describe the region of the Levant, largely focused on Syria.