

SHORT ARTICLE—The Enemy of my Enemy is not my Friend: Arabic Twitter Sentiment Toward ISIS and the United States

David Romney,¹ Amaney Jamal,² Robert O. Keohane,³ and Dustin Tingley⁴

This draft: August 26, 2019⁵

Abstract (133 words): A counter-intuitive finding emerges from an analysis of Arabic Twitter posts from 2014–15: Twitter participants who are negative toward the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) are also more likely to hold negative views of the United States (US). This surprising correlation is not the result of many participants being negative toward everything. Instead, it is due to the interpretations of two sets of users. One set of users views the US and ISIS negatively as independent interventionist powers in the region. The other set of users draws a causal link between the US and ISIS, often asserting a conspiracy between them. The intense negativity toward the United States in the Middle East seems conducive to views that, in one way or another, associate the United States causally with ISIS.

¹Harvard University, Department of Government

²Princeton University, Politics Department

³Princeton University, Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs

⁴Harvard University, Department of Government

⁵This paper is not for distribution or citation. Please send questions to our corresponding author at dromney@fas.harvard.edu. Our thanks to the Crimson Hexagon team for working with us to gain access to their platform. Thanks to Annabell Barry for research assistance. We also appreciate the excellent comments we received at our panel at ISA 2017 as well as written comments from Sara Bush.

1. Introduction

The United States' (US) war against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) has been waged both on the ground in Iraq and Syria and online in social media (Greenberg 2016). Because social media plays an increasingly important role in a range of conflicts (Zeitsoff 2017), studying it can show us how digital political communities feel about the entities involved in these conflicts. This is particularly interesting in the case of the US and ISIS because Arabs intensely dislike both entities. Only 0.4 to 6.4% across the Arab world agree with ISIS's goals (Tessler, Robbins, and Jamal, 2016), but the US is also exceedingly unpopular (Jamal et al. 2015; Lynch 2007), with favorable views ranging from 15 to 34% (Pew Global Attitudes 2017). When two disliked entities fight each other, how do citizens pick a side, if they pick one at all?

One possibility is that individuals become more favorable toward the entity they least dislike. This "enemy of my enemy is my friend" dynamic has been shown to affect relationships in a variety of political contexts (Findley and Teo 2006; Maoz et al. 2007; Joyce et al. 2013). To determine whether this logic is useful in analyzing the political attitudes of people in the Middle East toward the US and ISIS, we build on previous work on politics in social media (Barceló and Labzina 2018; Jamal et al. 2015; Zeitsoff et al. 2015) and anti-Americanism (Corstange 2016, Katzenstein and Keohane 2007) by examining Arabic Twitter posts about the US and ISIS from 2014 to 2015. We reject the "enemy of my enemy is my friend" hypothesis in this context. We find that Arab Twitter publics simultaneously dislike the US and ISIS and that expressed dislike of both entities increases as the US intervenes against ISIS. We provide evidence that two distinct groups of Twitter participants drive the correlation between negative sentiment toward the US and ISIS. One group negatively views the US and ISIS but sees them as acting independently; the other sees them as causally linked, often in a conspiratorial manner.

2. Aggregate Analyses

Our analysis is based on all public Arabic Twitter posts 2014–2015, which we gain access to and analyze with textual analysis models on the platform of Crimson Hexagon (CH), a social media analytics company. These main CH models used for this paper are based on the algorithm described by Hopkins and King (2010).⁶

Three of our analyses examine data at the aggregate level, where our quantity of interest is the percentage of posts (Tweets) that fit into certain categories. Of these analyses, one examines posts about the US (*US Analysis*), a second about ISIS (*ISIS Analysis*), and a third about both entities (*Combined Analysis*) from January 1, 2014 to December 31, 2015. These analyses each utilize hundreds of user-trained posts that the researchers categorize into negative, neutral, and positive categories. The models use the trained posts to then categorize the universe of posts for each analysis. For the *Combined Analysis*, we omit the positive category (for lack of posts) and add negative categories based on the entities with which the US is associated, differentiating posts that associate the US with ISIS from those that associate it with another disliked entity (e.g. the Syrian Regime, Iran, or Shias) and those that do not associate the US with any entity.

The results from these aggregate analyses, which are shown in Table 1, demonstrate a high degree of negativity toward both the US and ISIS. In the *US Analysis* (column 1), over two-thirds of the traffic is negative, mostly political in nature; the rest is neutral, with negligible positive traffic. In the *ISIS Analysis* (column 2), over half of the traffic is neutral, and of the traffic that expresses an opinion, eighty percent is negative. Looking at posts that mention both entities in the *Combined Analysis* (column 3), we find that about 40% of the traffic expresses a negative opinion about at least one of the entities. Of this negative traffic, over half associates the US with ISIS or another disliked entity, while just under half does not associate the US with anyone.

⁶For a detailed description of our models and training procedure, please see the online appendix.

Table 1 – Results of the Aggregate Analyses

Sentiment	US Analysis (N = 88,092,712)		ISIS Analysis (N = 103,228,106)		Combined Analysis (N = 5,832,491)	
	Negative	1. Neg. Pol.	60%	1. Neg.	34%	1. Neg. – US & ISIS
2. Neg. Soc.		11%			2. Neg. – US & Syria/Iran/Shia	11%
					3. Neg. – Other	18%
Neutral	3. Neu. Pol.	28%	2. Neu.	58%	4. Neu.	58%
	4. Neu. Soc.	1%				
Positive	5. Pos.	<1%	3. Pos.	8%	N/A	

3. Group-Based Analysis

To examine the correlation between users’ views towards the US and ISIS, we use the same aggregate models on subsets of users defined by post frequency and levels of negativity toward ISIS, which we call our *Group-Based Analysis*. First, we identify subsets of users based on the number of posts they have and their negativity toward ISIS in a randomly selected sample of 1,078,832 posts (262,906 unique users) from the ISIS Analysis. We define sixteen groups of users, classified by volume and negativity, as seen in Table 2. Most users fall into the very low category (1-3 posts), with only a small proportion having more than 10 posts. Then, to examine US-ISIS sentiment correlation, we use the *US Analysis* model to estimate sentiment toward the US within each group. This approach is superior to an aggregate-level approach (to avoid an ecological fallacy) and an individual-level approach (only possible among high-volume users).

Table 2 – User groups for the Group-Based Analysis

% Negative Traffic: Sample Volume:	Very Low (~0%)	Low (0–40%)	Medium (40–60%)	High (60–100%)
Very Low (1–3)	134,181 (51%)	4,557 (2%)	13,092 (5%)	78,933 (30%)
Low (4–5)	4,066 (2%)	4,006 (2%)	2,485 (<1%)	1,946 (<1%)
Medium (6–10)	2,237 (<1%)	3,789 (1%)	2,104 (<1%)	1,599 (<1%)
High (>10)	1,466 (<1%)	4,973 (2%)	2,685 (1%)	1,279 (<1%)

The results of the *Group-Based Analysis* are found in Figure 1. The figure shows percent negative political US traffic on the y-axis and, on the x-axis, negativity towards ISIS (measured as a ratio). The colors differentiate the groups by number of posts in the sample. Across all levels, there is a strong positive relationship between negativity toward the US and ISIS. For the lowest-volume group (1–3 sample posts), a move from lowest to highest ISIS negativity is associated with a 39.4 percentage point increase in political negativity in the US Analysis; for those with 4–5 posts, the increase is 82.6 percentage points; for those with 6–10 posts, it is 83.8 percentage points; and, for those with more than 10 posts, it is 82.8 percentage points. In general, the correlation is stronger for those with more than three posts—a finding which suggests that our correlation is not driven by neutral news reporting in the “low negativity” group, since news organizations generate high traffic. We also check to make sure this pattern was not driven by our choice of our 16 analysis groups by examining the US-ISIS sentiment relationship at the individual level for 80 randomly-sampled high-volume users (>10 ISIS sample posts). What we found—an increase of 69.4 points in average negative political US traffic as you move from lowest to highest ISIS negativity level—closely mirrors the results in the *Group-Based Analysis*.⁷

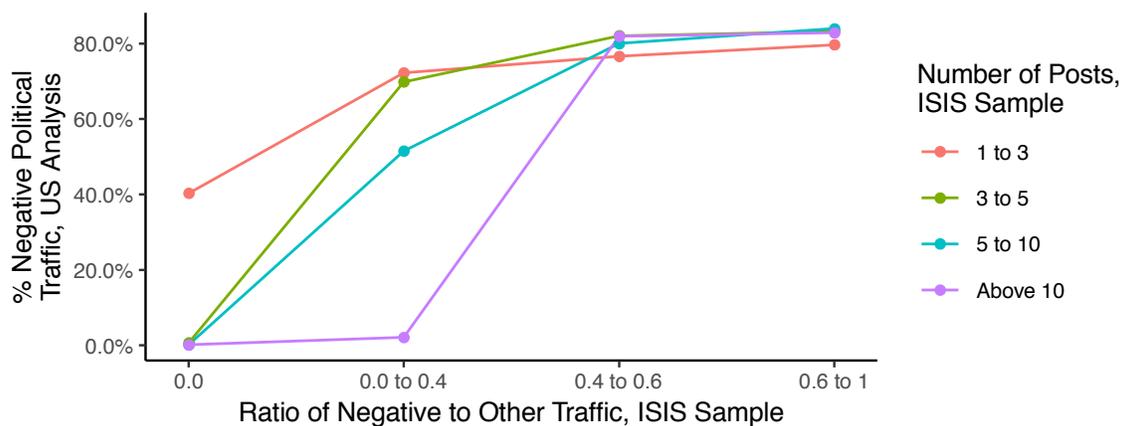


Figure 1 – Percent negative political traffic in the Group-Based Analysis.

⁷This individual-level analysis can be found in the online appendix.

We therefore argue that negativity toward the US is positively correlated with negativity toward ISIS. This conclusion is robust to a number of alternative hypotheses, the most plausible being that the correlation comes from users negative toward everything—imagine an “angry uncle” on Twitter. If true, we should see a correlation between negativity toward ISIS and the negativity of users’ non-US and non-ISIS traffic. To test this, we apply a sentiment analysis model on all Arabic posts not including our keywords for our sixteen analysis groups. This automated model estimates general sentiment using over 500,000 texts categorized by CH. We apply the same model to US traffic for a fair comparison. The results from this test do not support this alternative hypothesis. Going from the lowest to highest ISIS negativity level is associated with an average increase of 10 percentage points in general negative traffic, compared to 17 percentage points for negative US traffic. This difference only increases in size if comparing to the user-trained US Analysis instead. This hypothesis cannot fully explain our findings.

There is stronger evidence against two additional hypotheses. First, we consider that individuals’ interest in international politics may explain the US-ISIS sentiment correlation—i.e. those interested in expressing an opinion express negativity, so interest is really what matters. If true, this would imply that negativity toward ISIS is correlated with how frequently users post about the US; the data indicate that this is not the case. Overall, and especially for high-volume users, there is a negative correlation. Second, we consider the possibility that Shia Twitter users, who could be more negative toward both the US and ISIS than Sunni users, are driving the results. We test this at the country level and find that, on average, countries with small Shia populations have the same correlation between US and ISIS negativity as those with large ones.⁸

⁸Greater detail on tests of each alternative hypothesis can be found in the online appendix.

4. Behind the Correlation

What is behind this US-ISIS sentiment correlation? We can identify and label two interpretations. (1) *The independence interpretation*: Members of the Arabic Twitter universe have a firm, long-term dislike of the US; they believe that US actions are hostile to Arabs. They also perceive ISIS as hostile to their values and perhaps directly threatening to themselves. However, the one does not affect the other; the US and ISIS are viewed independently. (2) *The causal connection interpretation*. Some hold the US responsible for ISIS. Two different interpretations fall into this category: (A) US actions in the region have inadvertently led to ISIS (*non-conspiratorial*) and (B) the US purposefully created ISIS and/or is collaborating with the group (*conspiratorial*). We examine evidence from our models that bears on these interpretations.

Our *Combined Analysis* can help us address how often users take an independent vs. causal interpretation when both entities are mentioned in the same posts. In Table 3, we examine only posts that express negativity (corresponding to the first row, third column, of Table 1). In almost half of the negative traffic, both the US and ISIS are mentioned but no causal association is made between the US and other entities. However, almost a third of the negative traffic makes an association between the US and ISIS, while just over one quarter of it associates the US with other disliked entities. Many of these posts are conspiratorial in nature, while others merely indicate that US policy in the region has led to ISIS's formation.

Table 3 – Focus of Negative Posts from Combined Analysis

US associated with ISIS	29%
US associated with Syria, Iran, and/or Shia	27%
No association between US and other entities	44%

Because the Combined Analysis only examines posts containing references to both the US and ISIS, it may be inflating our sense of how often users associate the two entities. For this reason, we also conducted a detailed content analysis of posts from 100 users, 25 randomly sam-

pled from each of our high ISIS-negativity groups (i.e. the final column of Table 2). We examine users' Twitter posts to determine how they link the US and ISIS. Example posts in Table 4 illustrate the range of connections that users draw: the conspiratorial posts directly implicate the US in either creating or supporting ISIS, while the non-conspiratorial ones see the US as creating the conditions leading to ISIS but do not invoke conspiratorial claims in doing so.

Table 4: Example Posts Linking the US and ISIS

<u>Conspiratorial</u>	
I hope you understand one thing, the story of Daesh is an American project	بتمنى تفهمي شغله قصة داعش مشروع أمريكي
Daesh is a Zionist and American creation and it is apparent that (even) their passports are printed in Israel or the US.	داعش صناعة صهيوي أمريكية والظاهر ان جوازاتهم مطبوعة في اسرائيل او امريكا
The US claims to be fighting Daesh. I believe the proper claim is to say that the US is supporting Daesh	أمريكا تدعي حرب #داعش !! أعتقد أن العبارة الصحيحة هكذا : أمريكا تغذي #داعش
<u>Non-conspiratorial</u>	
American military orders resulted in al-Malaki handing over North Iraq to Daesh. Similar orders in Yemen left the Houthis in control	بأمر الامريكان سلمت حكومة المالكي شمال العراق لداعش بعد انسحاب الجيش وكذلك فعلت في اليمن حين أمرت الجيش بتسليم صنعاء للحوثي
The Soviet Union's intervention in Afghanistan brought us al-Qaeda. America's intervention in Iraq brought us ISIS. What is the Russian's intervention in Syria going to bring us?	تدخل الاتحاد السوفيتي في افغانستان انتج لنا القاعدة. وتدخل امريكا في العراق انتج لنا داعش. ماذا سينتج لنا تدخل الروس في سوريا.؟!

From this small-N analysis, we draw a few conclusions. We find that causally linking the US and ISIS is common. Out of 100 high-negativity users, almost half (48 users) have at least some posts causally linking the two entities. Additionally, these data strongly indicate that those who causally link the US and ISIS tend to do so in a conspiratorial manner—only 5 of the 48 users who causally linked the US and ISIS avoided ever resorting to conspiracy theories. Lastly, these data may indicate a relationship between the frequency with which one posts and the tendency to causally link the US and ISIS. Out of those with “Very Low” and “Low” volume in the

sample, there are 20 combined that causally connect the US and ISIS, whereas for those with “Medium” or “High” volume there are 28 combined that do so. This difference is relatively small and therefore tentative, but it supports recent work (Guess et al. 2019) indicating a correlation of high social media engagement with endorsing conspiracy theories and other toxic messages.

5. Temporal Variation: Responses to Intervention and Attacks

The variation of our results across time in both the aggregate analyses and the *Group-Based Analysis* confirms previous work on anti-Americanism and ISIS. In all analyses, US intervention in the region plays a primary role. Figure 2 shows the percent negative traffic for the *ISIS Analysis*, the *US Analysis*, and high ISIS-negativity users from the *Group-Based Analysis*. In all three, negative traffic peaks as the US begins its military intervention against ISIS in mid-2014. In the *ISIS Analysis*, high negative traffic also follows ISIS attacks and killings in the West (e.g. the Nov. 2015 attacks in France) and the Middle East (e.g. the killing of a Jordanian pilot in Jan. 2015).⁹ These results mirror findings that US intervention drives anti-Americanism in the Middle East (Jamal et al. 2015) and that ISIS attacks decrease its support (Barceló and Labzina 2018).

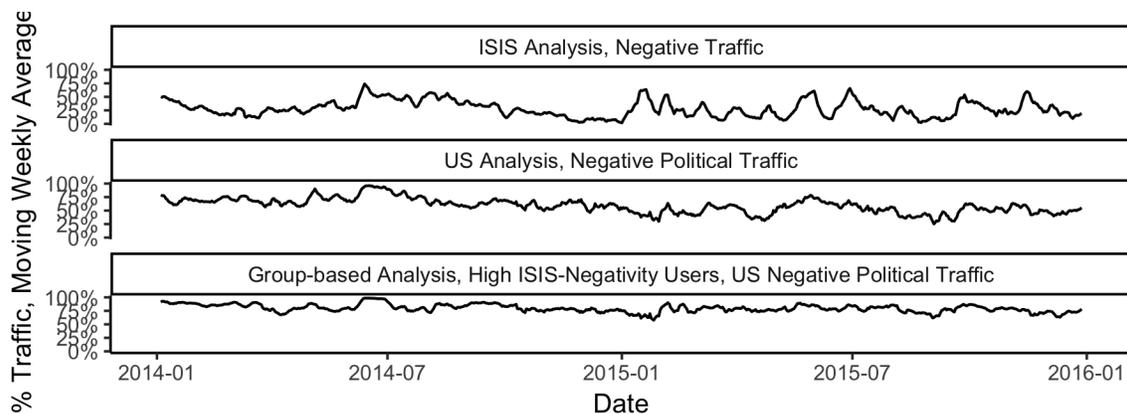


Figure 2 – Percent negative traffic in the ISIS, US, and Group-Based Analyses.

⁹These temporal dynamics are further explored in the online appendix.

6. Conclusion

We conclude that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” hypothesis is incorrect for Arabic Twitter users posting about either ISIS or the United States during 2014–15. On the contrary, there is a positive correlation between negative views of ISIS and the United States. Such a correlation is not spurious. It reflects both independent dislike of the United States and ISIS and belief in covert connections—connections that usually have a conspiratorial flavor—between these two widely disliked entities. The implications of these findings warrant further research and speak to debates about the role of fake and inaccurate news on political life in the Middle East in particular and throughout the world more generally.

References

- Barceló, Joan and Elena Labzina. 2018. “Do Islamic State’s deadly attacks disengage, deter, or mobilize supporters?” *British Journal of Political Science* 1–21.
- Corstange, Daniel. 2016. “Anti-American behavior in the Middle East: Evidence from a field experiment in Lebanon.” *Journal of Politics* 78 (1): 311–325.
- Findley, Michael G., and Tze Kwang Teo. 2006. “Rethinking third-party interventions into civil wars: An actor-centric approach.” *Journal of Politics* 68 (4): 828–837.
- Greenberg, Karen J. 2016. “Counter-radicalization via the Internet.” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 668 (1): 165–179.
- Guess, Andrew, Jin Woo Kim, Brendan Nyhan, and Jason Reifler. 2019. “The distorting prism of social media: How online comments amplify toxicity.” *Working Paper*.
- Hopkins, Daniel, and Gary King. 2010. “A method of automated nonparametric content analysis for social science.” *American Journal of Political Science* 54 (1): 229–247.

- Jamal, Amaney A., Robert O. Keohane, David Romney, and Dustin Tingley. 2015. "Anti-Americanism and anti-interventionism in Arabic Twitter discourses." *Perspectives on Politics* 13 (01): 55–73.
- Joyce, Kyle A., Faten Ghosn, and Reşat Bayer. 2014. When and whom to join: The expansion of ongoing violent interstate conflicts. *British Journal of Political Science* 44 (1): 205–238.
- Katzenstein, Peter J., and Robert O. Keohane 2007. "Varieties of Anti-Americanism: A Framework for Analysis." In *Anti-Americanisms in World Politics*, ed. Peter J. Katzenstein and Robert O. Keohane. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Lynch, Marc. 2007. "Anti-Americanism in the Arab World." In *Anti-Americanisms in World Politics*, ed. Peter J. Katzenstein and Robert O. Keohane. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Maoz, Zeev, Lesley G. Terris, Ranan D. Kuperman, and Ilan Talmud. 2007. "What is the enemy of my enemy? Causes and consequences of imbalanced international relations, 1816–2001." *Journal of Politics* 69 (1): 100–15.
- Tessler, Mark, Michael Robbins, and Amaney Jamal. "What do ordinary citizens in the Arab world really think about the Islamic State"? *Monkey Cage*. July 27, 2016.
- Zeitsoff, Thomas, John Kelly, and Gilad Lotan. 2015. "Using social media to measure foreign policy dynamics: An empirical analysis of the Iranian–Israeli confrontation (2012–13)." *Journal of Peace Research* 52 (3): 368–83.
- Zeitsoff, Thomas. 2017. "How social media is changing conflict." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 61 (9): 1970–91.