Changing organizational structures of jihadist networks in the Netherlands

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**Abstract**

This paper uses Social Network Analysis to study and compare the organizational structures and division of roles of three jihadist networks in the Netherlands. It uses unique longitudinal Dutch police data covering the 2000–2013 period. This study demonstrates how the organizational structures transform from a hierarchical cell-structure with a clear division of labor to horizontal and dense networks with less clear orientation on tasks. The core member types in the jihadist movement transform from international jihadist veterans with clear leadership skills to homegrown radicals with less status and often a lack of expertise.

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1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the jihadist movement in the Netherlands and analyzes unique longitudinal Dutch police data. We use Social Network Analysis (SNA) to capture changes in the organizational features of Dutch jihadist networks and their members’ roles during the 2000–2013 period. SNA is ideally suited to uncover the structure, social dynamics, and members’ position in a group, including illicit networks.

Over the last decade studies have used SNA to illuminate the organizational structures of terrorist groups. SNA has been used to visually map structures, identify key players, and uncover organizational developments over time. These studies have deepened our understanding of terrorist groups, particularly jihadist networks. The current study extends prior research by combining their objectives and discussing several concepts and approaches.

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Academics and policy analysts have both highlighted the need to pay attention to criminal and terrorist networks' features. The organizational structures of illicit networks are highly affected by the outcome of an efficiency-security trade-off. Efficiency refers to the shortest possible way of communication, which is necessary to effectively execute tasks. Dense and decentralized networks have the most suitable structure to achieve efficiency because they contain many direct communication lines among their members. Conversely, secrecy refers to minimal communication between members to avoid exposing the network. A suitable network structure would therefore be centralized and less dense with mainly strong ties, minimizing the level of direct information transfers and maximizing trust between and among members. In essence, the trade-off means that illicit networks need to balance the need to act collectively and the need to maintain trust and secrecy within collaborative settings to effectively withstand law enforcement interventions. Allegedly, most terrorist networks choose security over efficiency because they often aim for a one-time, significant action. These networks prefer not to rush their plans and to maximize the likelihood of their one time attack by avoiding frequent communication and maintaining a low profile. Yet, to achieve their desired aim, they cannot completely dismiss efficiency.

Many therefore conclude that the necessary balance between efficiency and security is the compartmentalization of networks, which is based on Granovetter's weak-and-strong-ties concept. Compartmentalizing the network into cohesive sub-cells with strong redundant social ties, that only have weak non-redundant social ties with other sub-cells and/or a network's core, ensures that the entire network will not be exposed if a member or sub-cell is removed by law enforcement interventions. This increases efficiency within the sub-cells, but maintains the security of the network as a whole. Helfstein & Wright, however, argue that this network type may not in fact be used by all terrorist networks. This warning against hasty assumptions can be endorsed via the notion that SNA is relatively difficult to apply on illicit networks due to their covertness and fuzzy boundaries. Covertness makes it difficult to determine who belongs to a network. These difficulties highlight the possibility of missing data and incorrect relations, which can affect the quantitative SNA measures that are highly sensitive for minor adjustments.

Another important point concerns the role and position of a network's key player. It is often claimed that high actor level centrality scores classify individuals' roles. For instance, a subject is considered a leader when she/he has many direct contacts (high degree centrality), due to their centralized position. Also, a subject is considered a broker when she/he is on the geodesic path (shortest route) between two unrelated subjects (high between-ness centrality). In other words, when she connects isolated or distanced compartments within the network. It is often assumed that identifying these key players will result in effective strategies to disrupt the network, although this is disputed. Some claim that the removal of centralized actors only has a temporary effect, often caused by the network's resilience and ability to find an immediate replacement. In addition, the most centralized actors are not always the most important actors, but rather the most visible ones. This could be due to the distinction between social and human capital. Whereas the former reflects the amount of a person's connections, the latter displays personal qualities, such as skills and expertise. These qualities are difficult to capture with centrality metrics. Targeting and removing central actors may not be the silver bullet to counter-terrorism strategies. Rather it may be necessary to assess both the actor's social and human capital by relying on centrality metrics and a qualitative analysis, to determine the actor's centralized position and his or her qualities and assets.

Finally, most SNA studies only portray a static picture of clan-desine networks. These SNA studies highlight how a particular network operates at one specific moment in time, without comparing them to networks from different periods. While focusing on a single time period is useful, it overlooks organizational differences or the transformation of group members' roles, positions, and activities. Moreover, there is only limited attention paid to whether changing organizational features and roles affect each other over time. Identifying dynamic changes could aid policy makers in devising more effective counter terrorism measures.

The discussion thus far demonstrates that findings about illicit network structures and roles are interesting but should be interpreted with caution. This study therefore uses SNA to examine to what extent particular network features and assumptions apply to...
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