

#FailedRevolutions: Using Twitter to Study the Antecedents of ISIS Support

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Abstract

During the last two years, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has managed to control large parts of Syria and Iraq. To better understand the roots of support for ISIS, we present a study using Twitter data. We collected a large number of Arabic tweets referring to ISIS and classified them as pro-ISIS and anti-ISIS. We then analyzed historic timelines of both users supporting and opposing and looked at their pre-ISIS period to gain insights into the antecedents of support. To achieve this, we built a classifier to predict, in retrospect, who will support or oppose the group. We show that ISIS supporters largely differ from ISIS opposition in that they referred a lot more to Arab Spring uprisings that failed. Our work not only contributes insights into what might be behind support for ISIS, but it also presents a methodology of how to use historic social media data to understand the root causes of political polarization.