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HARNESSING DIGITAL GAMING PLATFORMS FOR IDEOLOGICAL INDOCTRINATION OF THE YOUTH TOWARDS TERRORISTIC ENGAGEMENTS

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HARNESSING DIGITAL GAMING PLATFORMS FOR IDEOLOGICAL INDOCTRINATION OF THE YOUTH TOWARDS TERRORISTIC ENGAGEMENTS

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This scholarly inquiry endeavors to dissect the phenomena encapsulated under “Harnessing Digital Gaming Platforms for Ideological Indoctrination of the Youth towards Terroristic Engagements.” It seeks to unravel the intricate methodologies employed to sway the cognitive paradigms of the younger demographic through digital gaming environments, scrutinize the primary modalities of enlistment utilized by terror factions via advanced informational technologies, and elucidate the stratagems through which these factions permeate the psyches of the youth under the guise of digital entertainment. The revelations of this study elucidate that the sway over the younger minds predominantly transpires through their interaction with a diverse array of messages emanating from their immediate milieu, including familial, educational, religious, and media spheres. It has been discerned that terror conglomerates adeptly capitalize on the fervor of the youth towards assorted digital games and their protracted engagements therewith, exploiting digital vulnerabilities to subtly allure and ensnare them, thereby priming them for indoctrination and eventual recruitment. The radicalization and enlistment stratagem of these extremist entities encompasses multifarious tactics, such as the creation of bespoke games, the alteration of extant games with the infusion of symbols, graphical elements, and motions that propagate their nefarious ideology, or leveraging communication channels within these platforms to engage with individuals predisposed to their dogma. Notably, these factions do not necessitate unwavering allegiance to their ideology but rather seek to identify a predisposition or a commonality as a precursor to initiate the recruitment process through enhanced interaction and methodically crafted messaging.

Conclusively, this examination proffers a compendium of advisories, encompassing:

- Provisioning of comprehensive material and scholarly resources to all pertinent bodies and institutions tasked with the eradication of terrorism and digital extremism, with an emphasis on augmenting support for research establishments specializing in this domain within the Arab milieu.
- Deriving insights from significant international and regional precedents in the domain of “Digital Terrorism” eradication through meticulous scholarly examination and the distillation of these investigations’ findings for the edification of the Arab populace, ensuring a holistic appropriation of knowledge.
- The imperative for continued exploration and analysis concerning the exploitation of digital realms, social media platforms, and gaming environments by terrorist factions for the recruitment of juveniles and adolescents, with an aim to unveil the exploitable loopholes utilized to infiltrate the youth demographic, counteract their machinations, and safeguard the “Digital Sanctity” of individuals and the collective society.

Keywords: Digital Gaming Platforms, Youth Ideological Indoctrination, Extremist Factions, Recruitment Strategies, Terroristic Engagements.



sense of pleasure derived from aggressive acts. This proclivity towards aggression and violence is further amplified by a myriad of motivations, among which is the assailants' ambition to assert their dominance and command recognition and importance within societal and personal realms. Consequently, the engagement of children in violent electronic gaming environments becomes a source of delight through the conquest of adversaries in a virtual realm, thereby augmenting their gaming engagement and propensity for addiction, which may transmute into violent manifestations towards others in the tangible world.⁽⁷⁾

Arousal (Stimulus) Hypothesis: Originating from the scholarly contributions of Leonard Berkowitz, a distinguished social psychologist, this hypothesis presents a comprehensive framework for understanding the impact of media depictions of violence. Also known as the "Aggressive Mood" hypothesis, it postulates that the exposure to aggressive stimuli or incentives can catalyze an increase in psychological arousal, subsequently heightening the propensity for aggressive conduct.⁽⁸⁾ This hypothesis is pertinent to the portrayal of violence within "Electronic Games" accessible through computers or smartphones.

Innovative Aggression Theory: This theory, as conceptualized by Bach, posits a dual-function model serving both as a psychotherapeutic system and a self-enhancement methodology aimed at significantly augmenting individuals' competencies in fostering harmonious interpersonal relationships. The theoretical underpinning of creative aggression encompasses a holistic examination of human aggression in its myriad forms—whether direct or indirect, self-inflicted or directed towards others, and whether manifested on an individual or collective level. It challenges the conventional notion that aggression primarily serves as a defensive mechanism against stressors such as fear, feelings of inadequacy, or frustration, emphasizing instead the strategic harnessing of constructive aggressive energies. It acknowledges the relative ease with which human aggression, whether innate or acquired, can be incited and proposes that once activated, the expression and channeling of aggression can be navigated to mitigate malevolent hostility and augment constructive or beneficial forms of aggression, fostering growth.⁽⁹⁾

Creative aggression emerges as a therapeutic modality that interprets aggressive emotions, attitudes, and be-

haviors not as fundamentally defensive mechanisms but as potential sources of constructive energy.⁽¹⁰⁾ It offers an in-depth exploration of human aggression, addressing both its manifest and latent aspects, and aims at averting the mismanagement and mishandling of destructive aggression. Hence, it is employed as an efficacious strategy in the training and clinical intervention with aggressive individuals. Within the realm of childhood development, aggressive tendencies are initially manifested through vigorous play, serving three pivotal functions: the establishment of social bonds, the selection of companions, and the cultivation of personal dominion within peer groups. If left unchecked, this valorization of aggression may evolve into a predisposition for physical altercations, marking the initial phase towards antisocial aggressive behaviors.⁽¹¹⁾ This theoretical framework is equally applicable to the context of "Electronic Games."

*** Comments on the Scientific Theories Explaining the Relationship Between Electronic Games and Youth Behavior:**

- It has been discerned that the triad of theoretical constructs elucidates the aggressive comportment manifest in children and adolescents efficaciously:

- Predominantly, episodes of emotional aggression materialize impulsively; within the ambit of "Emotional Aggression Theory," emphasis is laid on aggression that transpires devoid of deliberate cogitation, as the cognitive processes exert a profound influence on an individual's affective responses. Ergo, juveniles engaging in violent electronic games derive satisfaction from the conquest of adversaries in the digital realm.

- The Arousal (Stimulus) Theory substantiates the premise that exposure to an aggressive stimulus or incentive precipitates an augmentation in an individual's psychological arousal, potentially elevating the propensity for aggressive conduct. This premise is applicable to the portrayal of violence in "Electronic Games."

- The Creative Aggression Theory encompasses a comprehensive exploration of human aggression, irrespective of it being self-directed or directed towards others, enacted individually or collectively. It accentuates the harnessing of constructive aggressive energy.

- Thus, within the purview of these scholarly theories, elucidation is provided on how extremist terrorist entities manipulate the comportment of the youth via "Electronic Games."



Conceptual Framework and Terminology:

- **“Electronic Games”** are delineated as activities of a mental or physical nature predicated on the principle of “interactivity,” utilizing computational devices, smartphones, video or television, or avant-garde smart screens, operational through the global information nexus (Internet), with a subset functioning independently of an internet connection. The essence of these games lies in entertainment, amusement, and the engagement of intellect and acumen. Pertaining to their modality, certain games necessitate solitary participation, whereas others involve collective engagement, either proximally or remotely, through internet connectivity.

- **The demarcation of “youth,”** as inferred from specialized scholarly sources, commences approximately at the age of fifteen and persists until the cusp of legal adulthood (18-20), acknowledging variances in the trajectories of physical and cognitive maturation. This definition accommodates the evident heterogeneity in perspectives concerning this categorization, as will be delineated in the ensuing research.

Foremost, the Notion of Electronic Games and Their Classification:

The notion of electronic games is a salient phenomenon concomitant with the advent and evolution of computing technology. From an informational standpoint, they are software that emulates real or fictive scenarios, leveraging the computing prowess for multimedia processing, animation, and auditory output. Socially, they represent an interface of human-machine interaction, capitalizing on technological capabilities for educational, recreational, and entertainment purposes.⁽¹²⁾

Defined as mental or physical engagements undertaken by individuals across the age spectrum to satisfy a gamut of desires and necessities such as leisure, education, curiosity, and the dissipation of surplus energy, electronic games are as crucial for children as fundamental needs like nourishment, rest, and security.⁽¹³⁾

In contemporary discourse, electronic games have emerged as a globally prevalent form of entertainment, showcased on television as “video games” or computer monitors as “computer games,” and played via specialized controllers or in dedicated arcades, of-

fering participants enjoyment through the challenges of synchronizing manual and visual coordination or cognitive challenges via the evolution of electronic software. Over the past four decades, the domain of computer games has transitioned from floppy disks to CD-ROMs, to web-based interfaces, featuring advancements such as three-dimensional visuals, elevated processing capabilities, and sophisticated auditory systems that influence the gaming experience. These games offer modes of play that range from solitary engagement (player versus computer) to competitive or cooperative interactions across the digital expanse of the internet.⁽¹⁴⁾

Sherry Turkle, in her seminal work “Life on the Screen,” delves into the realm of online gaming worlds and Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs), enabling individuals equipped with a computer, internet access, and fundamental computing skills to reinvent their identities, traverse alternative realities, and proliferate across the digital landscape. Turkle observes that in these digital environments, “characters are not confined to human forms; the spectrum of genders extends beyond the binary. Participants are encouraged to contribute to the construction of the digital world. With access to a relatively straightforward programming language, they can craft a space within the game universe, setting the stage, defining the rules, and these realms are accessible to users across all age brackets.”⁽¹⁵⁾

Classification of Electronic Games: The genesis and progression of electronic games are intrinsically linked to the advancements in computing and, subsequently, smartphones. The early 1980s witnessed the emergence of new gaming formats, marking their integration into children’s cultural landscape as electronic games—a phenomenon meriting academic inquiry.⁽¹⁶⁾

The heterogeneity of “electronic games” permits the categorization into three primary families, each characterized by distinct player attributes, shared rules, and unified objectives, namely action games, strategy games, and simulation games. A succinct exposition follows⁽¹⁷⁾:

A. Action Games: Coinciding with the advent of platform games, action games initially gained prominence in arcades before achieving widespread acclaim on gaming consoles. “Pong,” conceived in 1972, stands as one of the pioneering games, succeeded by iconic titles such as “Arkanoid,” “Tetris,” the “Pacman” series, and the “Mario” series. These games emphasize movement



control, featuring progressively challenging levels, escalating speed and skill requirements, and typically confined scenarios. "Fighting games" are set within a delineated space akin to a ring or a designated combat area, where physical confrontations involving punches, kicks, headbutts, and an arsenal of martial arts weaponry are permissible.

B. Strategy Games (Cognitive Games): This genre subdivides into four categories as delineated below:

- Adventure and Cognitive Games: Visually akin to action and adventure games, these are distinguished by their enigmatic elements, which play a pivotal role in advancing the narrative.

- Economic Strategy Games: Bearing resemblance to role-playing games, they simulate the core dynamics essential for the sustenance and development of a city. Players are tasked with strategic planning and resource management, encompassing decisions regarding geographical positioning, resource allocation, trade, and industrial development, with the ultimate aim of optimizing city management.

Military Strategy Games: Adhering to a similar foundational principle but with a focus on militaristic themes, players assume the mantle of a renowned military leader. Success hinges on the effective utilization of provincial resources, construction of military edifices, and the assembly of legions for territorial expansion.

Traditional Games: This category includes electronic card games, renowned for their strategic depth.

C. Simulation Games: These games meticulously replicate real-life activities, predominantly sports, adhering closely to the rules and intricacies of the activities they emulate. Inspired by either actual events or perceived realities, they prioritize not only graphical fidelity but also the role assigned to the player. For instance, flight simulation games like Microsoft's "Flight Simulator" immerse the player in the cockpit, with the control panel and external vistas populated with adversarial aircraft rendered on the screen. Historical adventure games, such as "Assassin's Creed" (2008) and "Assassin's Creed 2" (2009), offer simulations of specific historical contexts.⁽¹⁸⁾

Psychological inquiries in this domain have unveiled numerous adverse effects of "electronic games" on children, encompassing physical, psychological, cognitive, behavioral, and cultural ramifications. The negative consequences stem from a substantial portion of these games, which predicate entertainment and

enjoyment on the perpetration of violence against others, destruction of property, and unwarranted assaults. Such games indoctrinate children and adolescents with methodologies, tactics, and subterfuges for criminal conduct, instilling predispositions towards bullying, aggression, culminating in criminality and aggressive dispositions.⁽¹⁹⁾



Socialization and the Concept of Youth and How to Influence the "Youth":

The process of socialization, encompassing both social and political dimensions, entails the transformation of an individual into a socially and politically aware entity. It involves the comprehensive development of an individual across physical, psychological, cognitive, value-oriented, cultural, and behavioral spectrums, facilitating their adaptation to life, the environment, society, and the polity. Thus, socialization upholds the status quo and accommodates new paradigms.⁽²⁰⁾ Defined as a learning, teaching, and educational process predicated on social interaction, it aims at the acquisition of individual behaviors and standards pertinent to specific roles.⁽²¹⁾

Richard Dawson and collaborators posit that political learning is rooted in early life experiences, which subsequently shape political attitudes.⁽²²⁾ Research on political socialization in developing nations highlights the diversity of socialization processes, attributable to the heterogeneity of these societies. These societies, characterized by a mosaic of traditional communities bound by competitive tribal loyalties and reliant on individual agency in the absence of institutional attributes, are susceptible to penetration by hostile forces when the cohesive ties within local communities are dismantled. Furthermore, the efficacy of educational institutions in instilling national values and principles is paramount in integrating diverse segments of society into a unified socio-cultural fabric that distinguishes national identity without conflicting with sub-identities.⁽²³⁾

In this vein, some scholarly works suggest a correlation between the nature of socialization and extremism, influenced by the socio-economic milieu, particularly in contexts that have faltered in achieving "development."

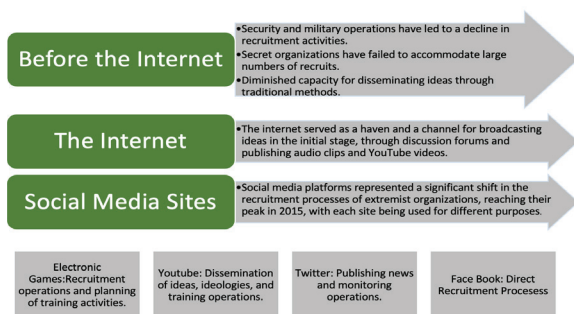
⁽²⁵⁾ Scientific studies affirm that a significant majority



ist factions such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS.

These entities have capitalized on the mechanisms of globalization, including social media platforms and messaging applications, to conscript combatants, employing “electronic armies” comprised of youths adept in social media navigation and proficient in the creation of compelling narratives through professionally edited videos that highlight the organizations’ training endeavors and purported triumphs.

Terrorist organizations harness the internet as a medium to propagate their extremist ideologies and to solicit new recruits ⁽³⁶⁾, leveraging social media tools to disseminate instructions on fabricating explosives, executing terrorist operations, and through an array of YouTube tutorials detailing the assembly of weaponry, explosives, and rudimentary bombs, or the operational use of firearms such as the AK-47. Furthermore, there exist instances where weapon transactions are openly facilitated on platforms like Facebook ⁽³⁷⁾. ISIS, for example, launched a multilingual promotional magazine, “Dabiq,” in July 2014, accessible electronically, featuring illustrations of weaponry wielded by its combatants, and also released an electronic game titled “Salil al-Sawarim,” mirroring warfare simulations developed by major powers to glorify their martial exploits. Besides financial incentives, this organization also depends on local youth intermediaries for the recruitment of their peers, tailoring their communication to suit the specific conditions of each country, and allocating substantial funds to expedite these recruitment processes ⁽³⁸⁾.



Figure“ (1) The Evolution of Recruitment Operations by Extremist Terrorist Organizations”

Source :Ahmed Abdel Hafez Mohamed“ ,(2023) ,International Stances on Returning Foreign Fighters from ISIS :An Analytical Study of the Legal and Political Issues Concerning Return ,”**The Scientific Journal of the**

Faculty of Economic Studies and Political Science, Alexandria University, Volume: Eight, Issue: Sixteen, July, p. 457.

Fourth: The Utilization of Electronic Games by Extremist Entities to Manipulate the Psyches of Young Individuals Towards Executing Terrorist Operations:

These organizations have discerned the pivotal role of electronic games, given their widespread appeal across diverse age demographics and their capacity to encapsulate a broad spectrum of ideologies. Consequently, they have embarked on exploiting these platforms as conduits for disseminating their pernicious ideologies and scouting for individuals susceptible to such doctrines. A report by the European Union on “The State of Terrorism and its Trends for 2021” issued a caution regarding the escalating misuse of “video games” and gaming platforms as mediums to propagate extremist ideologies, aiming to tap into the extensive user base of the “electronic games” domain. ⁽³⁹⁾

A scrutiny conducted by the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre unearthed that terrorist factions and extremists are disseminating their malevolent and extremist ideologies among minors through “electronic games.” This revelation is corroborated by American researchers who have verified the burgeoning presence of extremism within the realm of video games. Moreover, the research and analytical divisions of the Global Center for Extremist Thought “Etidal” have detected incursions by terrorist entities into the video game industry, with the intent of swaying the minds of children and adolescents towards embracing their destructive and sanguinary agendas. ⁽⁴⁰⁾

- The Strategy of Extremist Organizations in Attracting Gamers and Recruiting Them into Their Ranks:

The stratagem deployed by extremist organizations to ensnare gamers and enlist them within their echelons encompasses various tactics. These include the creation of new games, the modification of existing ones by embedding icons, graphical designs, and movements that resonate with their degenerate ideology, or leveraging chat functions to forge connections with players who exhibit propensities towards their ideologies or exhibit affinity towards them. For these entities, it is not imperative for individuals to wholly subscribe to their ideologies; a mere semblance of alignment or a shared nexus suffices to initiate the recruitment process, characterized by intensified interactions and the dissemination of orchestrated messages. They also

exploit gaming platforms as a medium to engage with youthful players, where the orientation of the group or extremist element may not be fully disclosed initially, preferring a phased approach in communication. This methodology equally applies to the extremist ideology that the group endeavors to implant in individuals who exhibit a predilection towards it or exhibit deviations in their thought processes. By leveraging comments and humorous content, their objective is to subtly embed the extremist ideology, striving to decipher the intellectual tendencies of gamers and subsequently ensnare them, ideologically encapsulating them to assimilate them into their ranks.

Furthermore, the enticement of victims transpires over variable durations and materializes in an indirect, phased manner; endeavors are undertaken to cultivate the victim's trust and extract disparate information from them through interactive engagements in "electronic games". The aspirations of extremist organizations or factions diverge; some pursue financial gains by exploiting gamers' aspirations to ascend to elevated levels or secure privileges within the game, others seek information, while a segment aims at the disintegration of societies and their infiltration with their ideologies, in addition to eroding national cohesion and undermining public confidence in their governance.

A practical examination of prominent "electronic games" platforms revealed that users are capable of establishing public or private servers, with the tally reaching approximately (7 million) servers facilitating chats, voice, and video interactions among players devoid of external oversight by the platform administrators or those inclined towards monitoring the content circulated among players on the private server. With in excess of (300 million) registered accounts and surpassing (140 million) monthly active users, the magnitude of interactions among them becomes apparent.⁽⁴¹⁾

These factions transcend the majority of electronic security fortifications, breach them, and infiltrate the accounts of children and teenagers engaged in "electronic games", subsequently accessing their psyches by fostering an emotional linkage with them, seeking optimal methodologies to exert control over them, and subsequently progressing towards indoctrination, rendering them subservient to the directives of their recruiters, and potentially priming them for the execution of perilous terrorist acts with a sense of pride and preparedness in the ensuing phase.⁽⁴²⁾

*** The employment of electronic games in recruitment endeavors: The case study of ISIS:**

The terrorist conglomerate "ISIS" has harnessed electronic games as a mechanism to lure an augmented contingent of children and youth into its fold, indoctrinating them to espouse the organization's extremist ideology and condone its acts of violence and barbarism. It has concocted a digital game dubbed "Salil al-Sawarim", with the objective of acclimatizing children and adolescents to combat "its adversaries". Subsequently, it utilized the game (Grand Theft Auto) as a magnet for teenagers following its annexation of Mosul in June 2014, disseminating a video pertaining to the game, which boasts a global player base of approximately 34 million individuals, articulating its intent to incite children towards joining the organization under the guise of adventure. Thereafter, the organization undertook the development of the game (Arma 3) in February 2014, a game that empowers children to select the military attire they don with, alongside the locale and the terrain, as though they were integrants of the organization.

ISIS has accentuated this game as a vehicle to amalgamate additional children within its ranks. The overarching ambition of "ISIS" through these endeavors is the recruitment of children, acquainting them with armaments and terrorist operations, and the cultivation of a nascent generation of extremists fervently aligned with the organization's militaristic endeavors.⁽⁴³⁾

Certain researchers delineate recruited players into three typologies: the "jihadist" player, the "curious" player, and the "attentive listener". In essence, the utilization of "electronic games" by "ISIS" elements to further their objectives was not fraught with difficulty, as they are adept at navigating them, being products of their era and having been reared alongside them. The implementation of "mods" pertaining to maps, imagery, and characters by affiliates of al-Qaeda within the game "Counter-Strike" predates the game "Salil al-Sawarim" by approximately a decade and is associated with the Third Gulf War, as some opt to refer to it, or the American incursion into Iraq, notwithstanding its inception in 1999. Programmers were adept at instituting modifications to it, transitioning the imagery and banners from depictions of females or advertisements for carbonated beverage corporations to images of Osama bin Laden and flags of al-Qaeda, whilst the musical accompaniment transitioned to anthems



of al-Qaeda, heralding the onset of so-called “jihadist” proclamations.⁽⁴⁴⁾

In conclusion, subsequent to an exhaustive examination of “electronic games” encompassing their conceptualization, typologies, perils, and the stratagem of terrorist organizations in ensnaring players and integrating them within their ranks, it is discernible that terrorist factions have exploited the facets of the electronic domain to actualize their nefarious agendas and fulfill their interests. They have orchestrated “electronic armies” with the explicit objective of disseminating their extremist terrorist ideologies and enlisting youthful individuals within their ranks. Furthermore, they have engineered electronic games predicated on the paradigm of “incremental indoctrination” of children, teenagers, and youth into their ranks, capitalizing on their juvenescence, lack of discernment, and obliviousness to the perils inherent in these groups’ ideologies. They initiate their overtures towards these demographics until they ensnare them, rendering them constituents of their ranks. Moreover, they exploit all conceivable vulnerabilities within the electronic domain to accomplish these objectives, eluding governmental surveillance, both domestically, regionally, and internationally, and assiduously exploring optimal recruitment methodologies and identifying suitable candidates that resonate with their ideological and dogmatic convictions, all facilitated through the global information network (the Internet). This renders the endeavor to counteract this variant of extremism and electronic terrorism a formidable challenge, not solely for individual and collective states but also for familial units and societies within the Arab and Islamic realms. It signifies that the fruition of any strategy aimed at combating these destructive phenomena and mitigating their impact unequivocally necessitates a concerted effort and earnest collaboration from the pertinent nations, civil society institutions within them, and regional and international organizations.

Research Findings:

1. Electronic games are a mental or physical activity based on the concept of “interactivity” using computers, smartphones, or through video, television, or modern smart screens, operated by (the Internet), and some do not require the presence of the Internet. The purpose of these games is entertainment, fun, and the use of intellect and intelligence.
2. The idea of influencing the youth essentially involves

exposure to different types of messages received by the child from the surrounding environment, whether from home, school, mosque, or media.

3. Terrorist groups exploit children’s and adolescents’ love for different electronic games and their spending long periods on them, utilizing electronic loopholes that enable them to gradually attract them through these games, ensnaring them, and preparing them for recruitment into their ranks.

4. The strategy of extremist organizations in recruiting and attracting players relies on several methods, including producing new games, modifying existing games by adding icons, graphic shapes, and movements that serve their corrupt ideology, or using chats to communicate with players inclined towards their ideology. These organizations do not require complete conviction in their ideology; finding a slight inclination or a common bond suffices to begin the recruitment process through intensified communication with them and providing them with systematic messages.

5. If there is not a good awareness and proper understanding of the terrorist groups’ plans based on electronic recruitment through electronic games and others, the risks of this issue will increase; due to the existence of electronic armies mobilized by terrorist groups to ensnare children and adolescents in their traps, offering all temptations and exploiting all available conditions and data for their recruitment into their ranks.

6. There are several mechanisms to counter the exploitation of terrorist groups’ appeal to the youth towards “electronic games”, distributed over several axes: the axis of socialization, the media axis, the security axis, and the technological axis. These mechanisms rely on all institutions performing their designated role in protecting Arab and Islamic societies from “electronic terrorism”, enhancing bilateral and regional cooperation Arabically and Islamically to block and combat dangerous and destructive websites, understanding the loopholes through which they infiltrate children and youth (to attempt their recruitment), and providing all available means and preparing tight strategies to counter the activities of terrorist groups electronically and realistically. The responsibility of protecting the youth from the dangers of terrorism and extremism is a collective responsibility that rests on everyone’s shoulders, and success in it entails protecting national and regional security.



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