

Strengthening Counterterrorism with Open Source Intelligence

Acts of terrorism range from bombings and hijackings to piracy and kidnappings. They are committed by at least two types of terrorists: those acting as part of organized cells or networks, and lone wolves. “Lone wolf” is a phrase used to describe one (or two) terrorists working without the assistance of an organized group.

Effective counterterrorism depends on thwarting both organized terrorist groups and lone actors. It is a complex, multi-pronged effort, typically involving a range of strategies and tactics coordinated by a variety of government agencies. For example, in the United States organizations such as the FBI, CIA, Department of Homeland Security, and National Security Agency all fight terrorism. In the United Kingdom, responsibility is shared among agencies such as MI5 and MI6 security services, the Government Communications Headquarters, and specialist units within police agencies — particularly the Counter Terrorism Command of the Metropolitan Police.

Open-source intelligence (OSINT), or intelligence gleaned from processing and analyzing publicly available and commercially available information (PAI/CAI), is a vital component of effective counterterrorism. The Babel Street Insights OSINT solution provides persistent searches of a vast array of PAI and CAI sources. These include more than a billion top-level domains, along with real-world interactions generated on chats, social media posts, online comments, and message boards. Insights understands more than 200 languages (including Arabic, Chinese, Russian, and other languages rendered in non-Latin scripts), and translates information found into the user’s language of choice. These capabilities may help counterterrorism professionals:

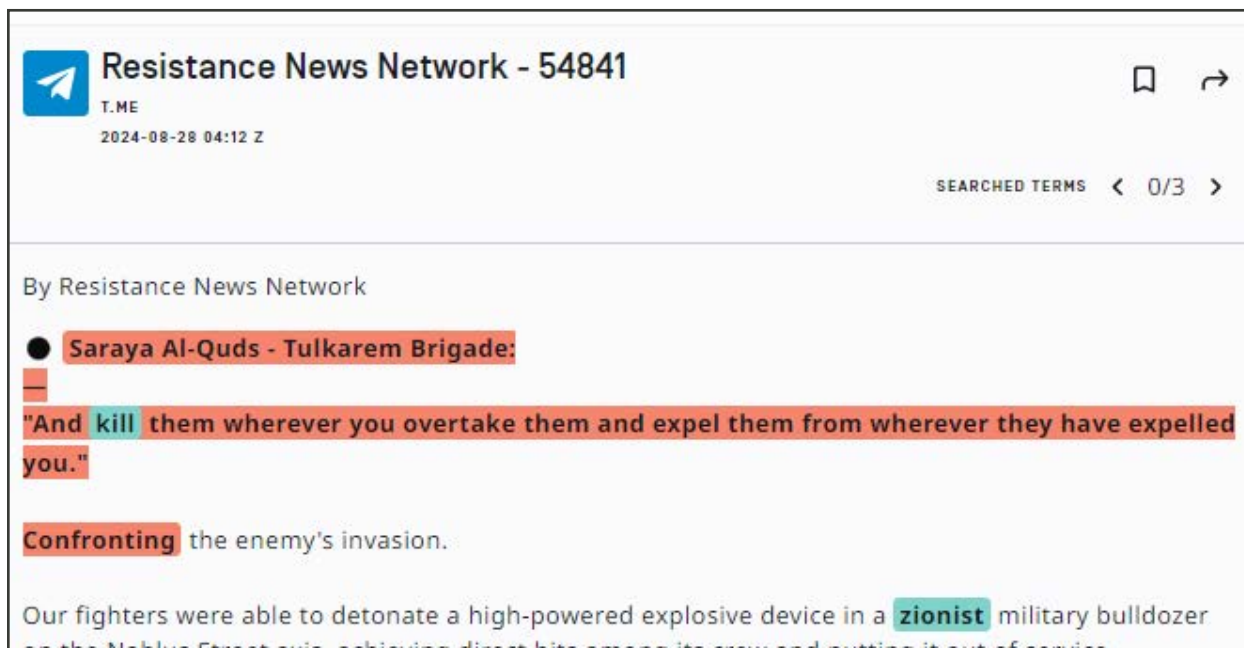
- Detect extremism and stem recruitment
- Analyze terrorist networks
- Dismantle terror plots
- Track and stem the flow of money

How it works

Piercing terrorist networks

Hezbollah is a Lebanese Shi'ite Muslim organization, unfriendly to Israel, with close religious and strategic ties to Iran. The U.S. State Department has designated Hezbollah a terrorist organization.¹ The Israel– Hamas war has led Hezbollah and Israel to engage in strikes and counterstrikes.

Babel Street Insights can help counterterrorism analysts determine the possibility of future Hezbollah incursions against Israel and chart the organization's role in already-turbulent Mideast relations.



This anti-Israeli sentiment lauds the work of the Tulkarem Brigade, an armed Palestinian militant group.

Counterterrorism professionals can start their analyses with a keyword search, using terms such as "Hezbollah," "Nasrallah" (the last name of Hezbollah's secretary-general), and "Israel." Hundreds of thousands of documents posted over the last 30 days may be returned, from sites ranging from X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook to MSN and manartv.com — a Hezbollah-linked Arabic satellite station. (Insights also automatically returns documents using alternate spellings of Hezbollah, including Hizbollah and Hizballah).

From this point, analysts study Hezbollah's past activities to predict its future actions. For example, mainstream news sources have reported that Hezbollah and Hamas have met to discuss "intensified" action against Israel² as part of the ongoing Israel– Hamas war. Counterterrorism professionals may also learn more about Hezbollah's relationship with anti-Israeli forces, particularly the Houthi movement in Yemen.

Analysts trying to predict likely future events in the Mideast can study this information. They can view and filter it by data source. If analysts want a deeper objective dive into Hezbollah's role in the Mideast, they may decide to filter by reputable news source. If they want insight into what Hezbollah

members and supporters think, they can search social media posts for keywords aligning with the organization. If they want to access chatter or possible future plans, they can enter search terms that align with known code words used by Hezbollah.

Babel Street’s time-saving persistent search capabilities are an important part of this effort. Persistent search continuously attaches new documents to search terms whenever new information is found, regardless of whether users are actively searching at the time.

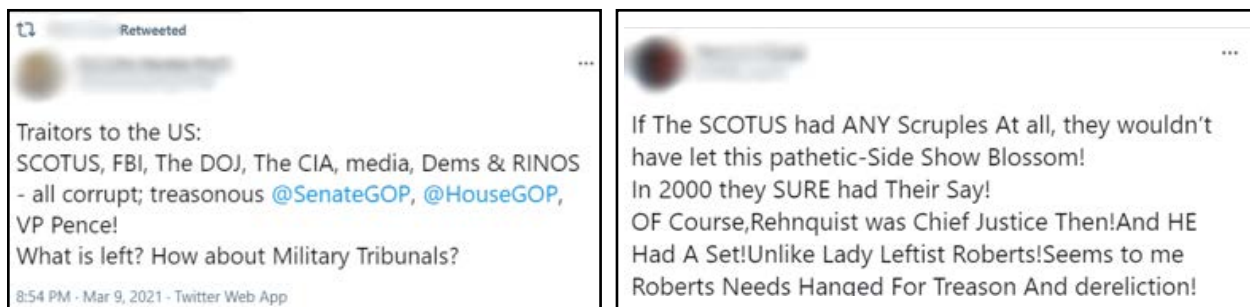
Analysts concerned about Hezbollah’s relationships to the Houthi and Hamas, and about possible future strikes against Israel, may want to see which Hezbollah members are in some way connected to Houthi or Hamas members. Using names and aliases found in previous searches, analysts can use Babel Street Insights Synthesis to chart relationships. Entering Hezbollah names and known aliases into Synthesis helps analysts to map key relationships within social networks, precisely identifying those who wield the most influence. Counterterrorism professionals can tailor their investigations accordingly.

Stalking lone wolves

In the example above, analysts embark on a defined search: they want to learn more about Hezbollah. But how can analysts use Insights to track lone wolves? By their very nature, these terrorists fly under the radar. Analysts have no organization or personal name to search, no reputable news sources to examine for insight.

In these cases, analysts use Babel Street Insights to find search terms related to lone wolf terrorism. From there, they can delve deeper into the people using those terms in online communications. Searches can be performed on a variety of sites — in dark web chat groups and marketplaces, and in mainstream and niche social media sites, among others.

What terms are associated with lone wolf terrorism? Babel Street has identified more than 200, ranging from “annihilate” to “bloodbath” to “xplode.” These include words, symbols and phrases commonly used in hashtags.³ Analysts interested in domestic terrorism in the United States may search for #WWGIWGA, an acronym for “Where We Go One, We Go All.” This is the motto of the QAnon conspiracy theory movement.⁴ Insights can also search for emojis meant to evoke violence, including depictions of guns, skulls, bombs, and swords.



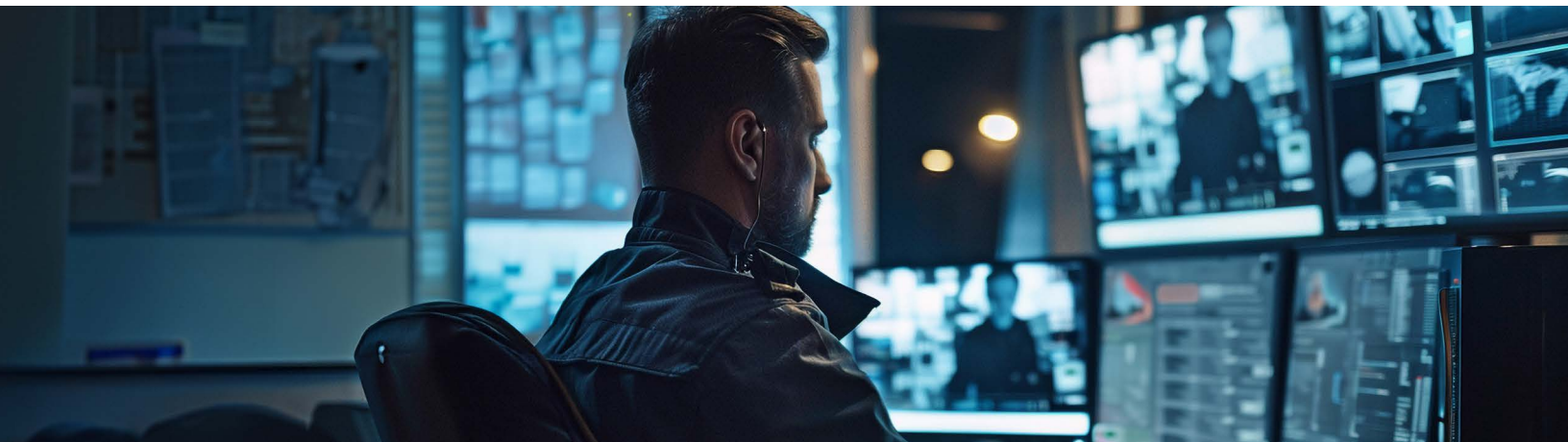
Posts such as these indicated deep dissatisfaction with the Federal government.

In this fictitious example, an analyst concerned with domestic terrorism may search X for these red-flag keywords. There, they find a user with the screen name Live2Kill583 who expresses violent hatred for the Federal government. He wants to “annihilate the cabal” and “start the storm.” His post is followed by skull emojis. He uses the hashtag #WWG1WGA. The hashtag telegraphs the poster’s devotion to QAnon.⁵ Analysts also know that in the QAnon world view, the “cabal” is a shadowy group that secretly controls world governments. The “storm” is the event during which members of the “cabal” will be found, arrested, and executed.⁶

Interested in this Tweet, the analyst accesses the user’s X profile. There, they find that the poster lists Cleveland as his hometown. Under likes, he lists “Hanging with my boys from WTPC at Big Mel’s, being a TRUE PATRIOT, guns&ammo.” With a quick search, the analyst learns that Big Mel’s Billiards is a pool hall in Cleveland. The analyst then searches Facebook, Instagram, and other social media sites for the name “Big Mel’s.” The search returns a lot of posts — Big Mel’s is a popular hangout. Narrowing the search with the acronym WTPC (short for “We the People Convention,” a QAnon offshoot⁷), they find a handful of photographs tagging different social media users. One, John Smith of Cleveland, lists his email address as Live2Kill528@AmericasISP.com.

From the social media user’s profiles, the analyst learns that this John Smith is a white male in his mid-20s. He lists his occupation as “Part time landscaper @LawnDesignsInc, full-time patriot at #greatawakening.” (“Great awakening” is another hashtag associated with QAnon.⁸) Using Insight’s people search function, the analyst can easily find the social media user’s home address and contact information.

More research is needed to determine if this John Smith poses a threat. The analyst knows that he uses the same screen name for a variety of accounts. They decide to search some dark web marketplaces for “Live2Kill.” On one of them, the analyst finds someone using that screen name communicating with a poster who advertises himself as the “best beauty supply from China.” He promises John Smith “guaranteed delivery” of “product overruns” from his beauty supply shop. These are phrases regularly used for contraband. “Guaranteed delivery”⁹ means that the seller has ways to skirt border security processes. “Discrete packaging” is a phrase used by buyers and sellers who wish to avoid detection by customs and other prying eyes.¹⁰ With more research, the analyst learns that this particular seller often ships significant amounts of nail-polish remover. The acetone used in nail-polish remover is a precursor chemical for the manufacturing of certain explosives. John Smith from Cleveland may be a problem.



Why Babel Street?

Babel Street Insights has helped prevent real-world disasters. Before the 2023 Formula 1 Grand Prix in Las Vegas, a private security firm worked with Babel Street to uncover and mitigate risks to the venue, guests, and drivers. Babel Street Insights was able to help this firm identify a group of individuals, based in Las Vegas, who planned to disrupt the event. That same year, a Babel Street client spotted a post in which the writer threatened a mass shooting — even naming the individuals he planned to target. Using pivotal information generated by Babel Street Insights, law enforcement officials tracked down the would-be murderer. The man, who had access to firearms and hand grenades, was arrested before he could put his plan into action. And Babel Street Insights helped European law enforcement spot and monitor a man whose posts indicated he planned to shoot up a family planning clinic.

Spotting and stopping terrorists — whether organized cells or lone wolves — is vital to ensuring the safety of nations and individuals worldwide. By delivering advanced data and analytics solutions that transform diverse data sources into actionable insights, Babel Street can help.

Endnotes

¹ National Counterterrorism Center, “Lebanese Hizballah,” September 2022, https://www.dni.gov/nctc/ftos/lebanese_hizballah_fto.html#:~:text=The%20US%20State%20Department%20designated,entirety%E2%80%94as%20a%20terrorist%20group.

² Times of Israel, “Terror chiefs Nasrallah, Haniyeh meet in Beirut, vow ‘intensified’ anti-Israel action,” April 2023, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/terror-chiefs-nasrallah-haniyeh-meet-in-beirut-to-discuss-cooperation-amid-violence/>

³ Crimando, Steve, “Q Speak: The Language of QAnon,” ASIS International (The American Society for Industrial Security), January 2021, <https://www.asisonline.org/security-management-magazine/latest-news/online-exclusives/2021/q-speak-the-language-of-qanon/>

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Fox8 News, “Ohio political group asks Trump to impose martial law, hold new election,” December 2020, https://fox8.com/news/ohio-political-group-asks-trump-to-impose-martial-law-hold-new-election/?fbclid=IwY2xjawEkyGJleHRuA2FlbQlxMQABHeZ_iMXRwW-GO4iOLXU2B9KC2BITYHOEozXHccvQD5VymAnujWU8JRop2A_aem_TTYFMrkRYFfSbW3aug5UGw

⁸ Crimando, Steve, “Q Speak: The Language of QAnon,” ASIS International (The American Society for Industrial Security), January 2021, <https://www.asisonline.org/security-management-magazine/latest-news/online-exclusives/2021/q-speak-the-language-of-qanon/>

⁹ Babel Street, 2024

¹⁰ Ibid

Disclaimer: All names, companies, and incidents portrayed in this document are fictitious. No identification with actual persons (living or deceased), places, companies, and products are intended or should be inferred.

Babel Street is the trusted technology partner for the world’s most advanced identity intelligence and risk operations. The Babel Street Insights platform delivers advanced AI and data analytics solutions to close the Risk–Confidence Gap.

Babel Street provides unmatched, analysis-ready data regardless of language, proactive risk identification, 360-degree insights, high-speed automation, and seamless integration into existing systems. We empower government and commercial organizations to transform high-stakes identity and risk operations into a strategic advantage.

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