

Online Jihadist Propaganda

2021 in review



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Catalogue number	QL-AQ-22-001-EN-N
ISBN	978-92-95220-39-3
ISSN	2600-4410
DOI	10.2813/43926

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Cite this publication: Europol (2022), Online Jihadist Propaganda 2021 in review, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

This publication and more information on Europol are available on the Internet.

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1. List of abbreviations

AQ	Al-Qaeda
AQAP	Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
AQIM	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
AQIS	Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent
DGSE	Direction Générale De La Sécurité Extérieure
EU	European Union
EU IRU	EU Internet Referral Unit
HTS	Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham 'Levant Liberation Committee'
IS	Self-proclaimed Islamic State terrorist group also referred to as ISIS 'Islamic State in Iraq and Sham', ISIL 'Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant', Daesh or Da'ish (after the Arabic name al-dawla al-Islamiyya fil-Iraq wal-Sham)
ISI	Islamic State of Iraq
JNIM	Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin 'Group in support of Islam and Muslims'
MINUSMA	The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
TE-SAT	EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report
THD	Tanzim Hurras al-Din 'Organisation of the Guardians of Religion'
UK	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
UN	United Nations
US	United States of America

2. Key findings

Islamic State

- 1 / Propaganda by the so-called Islamic State (IS) continued to highlight the military achievements of local insurgencies that co-opted its brand, in an attempt to showcase its global reach.
- 2 / 2021 saw a dip in the number of messages by the IS leadership, who delivered only one audio message to its cohorts. The message by IS spokesperson Abu Hamza al-Qurashi was one of praise for the efforts of IS global affiliates. The late IS leader, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, never appeared in propaganda nor did he release an audio statement.
- 3 / IS-supporting media outlets continued to dominate the production and distribution of pro-IS propaganda. Their releases – which comprised original creations, repurposed content and translations – dwarfed the volume of official IS releases.
- 4 / IS online supporters continued to test new open-source and decentralised technologies to disseminate their propaganda releases.
- 5 / IS-supporting media continued to issue threats against declared enemies, including EU countries, and praise previous IS-led or IS-inspired attacks in their productions. New content relied on quotes by influential, but deceased, IS figures to rally supporters, further underscoring the lack of new inspirational messaging by IS leadership.
- 6 / IS did not claim any attacks on EU soil in 2021, but the group's online supporters capitalised on violent incidents, with unclear motives, to promote the IS cause.
- 7 / Claims of attacks by IS showed an escalation of violence against Shia Muslims in Iraq and Afghanistan. In the same vein, IS documented attacks against Christian communities in the Sahel and Central Africa. Accounts of these attacks were intertwined into broader anti-Shia and anti-Christian narratives in IS propaganda.
- 8 / IS continued to emphasise the importance of freeing prisoners and commended the 'media jihad' efforts of its adherents. The group also continued to target critical infrastructure and energy targets worldwide as part of its 'economic war' strategy.

- 9 / IS downplayed the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan and argued that the movement's return to power was part of a Western ploy to undermine IS.

Al-Qaeda

- 1 / Al-Qaeda (AQ) adhered to its usual discourse, with its propaganda conveying the group's viewpoint on geopolitical and military developments.
- 2 / France continued to be the focus of threats by the AQ network over its foreign policy in North Africa and the Sahel, as well as over the republication of satirical cartoons portraying the Prophet Muhammad. In addition to France, threats by the AQ network singled out the US and Israel as primary targets for attacks.
- 3 / The al-Shabab al-Mujahidin movement (al-Shabab) emerged as one of the most powerful AQ affiliates in 2021. It was able to thrive by capitalising on political instability in Somalia ahead of delayed parliamentary and presidential elections.
- 4 / Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) provided new instructions for planning attacks in the West, also suggesting to livestream the attacks on social media.
- 5 / AQ-supporting media took a more prominent role in issuing threats: it called for attacks against police forces and urged its supporters to exploit demonstrations against COVID-19 restrictions and vaccinations in Europe to carry out attacks.
- 6 / The AQ network framed the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan as a triumph for global jihad.
- 7 / AQ and its affiliates appeared to perceive the Western drawdown of forces worldwide as a major upturn in the jihadist struggle.

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)

- 1 / Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) revamped its communication strategy to paint itself as a mainstream opposition group. It attempted to further distance itself from its terrorist beginnings by arresting other jihadists, beating off rivals and consolidating authority over Idlib, Syria.

3. Introduction

This report is the fourth edition of the annual review of online jihadist propaganda produced by the European Union’s Internet Referral Unit (EU IRU) at Europol.

The review covers the period from 1 January to 31 December 2021 and analyses the major trends and developments in the propaganda of the most prominent Sunni jihadist organisations – the self-proclaimed Islamic State and al-Qaeda– as well as their branches and offshoots. The review addresses the trajectories of these groups, and how they have responded to shifting dynamics and attempted to overcome setbacks. It further identifies the dominant themes and types of publications and media exploited by the two groups during this period, while highlighting changes in key areas related to online jihadist propaganda, such as the main narratives and the abuse of technology for propaganda dissemination. In order to shed light on changes in the groups’ narratives and online communication patterns, the research includes primary sources, including the groups’ operational claims, publications, statements, videos, and audio speeches. The above-mentioned material was collected by the EU IRU over 2021 and stored in the Check the Web (CtW) portal. To build a broader picture, the research also took into account jihadist supporter discussions on a wide array of online service providers.

While this review focuses on 2021, it nevertheless puts these trends into context and references further developments that took place in early 2022, prior to the review’s publication. IS lost its leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, who died in a US raid in Atimah in Syria’s Idlib province, on 3 February 2022. The group confirmed his death in an audio speech released by the IS official media outlet al-Furqan Media on 10 March 2022. The speaker, who was introduced as IS spokesperson Abu Umar al-Muhajir, also reported the death of the previous IS spokesperson Abu Hamza al-Qurashi, and announced Abu al-Hassan al-Hashimi al-Qurashi as the new leader of IS. All references to the ‘IS leader’ or ‘IS spokesman’ in the review refer to the individuals who held the posts in 2021.

The review distinguishes between narratives promulgated by official media outlets of terrorist groups and those disseminated by their supporter networks. In particular, issues of the IS weekly magazine al-Naba’, released in 2021, were used to determine IS’s strategic direction. In the context of the decrease in official IS publications, al-Naba’ sheds light on IS’s goals and motivations and the group’s perception of global dynamics. The review is intended to help formulate a focused threat assessment that takes into account the amplification and, at times, manipulation of terrorist messaging by supporter networks whose links to the hierarchy of terrorist groups remain unclear.

The review stems from the EU IRU's ongoing observation of online jihadist propaganda and feeds into Europol's wider work on strategic analysis, including the EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT).

The review is divided into four main chapters. The first discusses the main narratives and online campaigns displayed in official IS media, as well as changes in the landscape of IS-supporting media, IS supporter networks and their digital capabilities. The second assesses the dominant themes in AQ propaganda and highlights relevant developments concerning four of its affiliates. The third elaborates on HTS's quest for international recognition and consolidation of authority in Idlib and, finally, the fourth outlines cross-cutting themes across the jihadist milieu. The review aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of jihadist propaganda and to raise awareness among the public of how jihadist groups and their supporters abuse technology to broadcast their messages.

4. IS narratives and online campaigns in 2021

4.1. Core messages from the IS leadership

Propaganda releases by the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) in 2021 reflected the group's reliance on local jihadist insurgencies to display force and remain relevant. The bulk of IS official propaganda releases portrayed the actions of regional militants who co-opted the IS brand and fought to seize territories under its banner. Their efforts were applauded by an otherwise invisible leadership.

The IS spokesperson, identified by the name of Abu Hamza al-Qurashi, addressed the group's adherents only once in 2021. In the audio statement, entitled 'And you will be superior if you are indeed believers', al-Qurashi commended the IS contingents across all their territories. In particular, the IS spokesman praised the actions of militants in their self-proclaimed IS West Africa and IS Central Africa provinces for conquering land and introducing *sharia* law.¹ In a plausible reference to Boko Haram supporters and to the suicide death of their leader Abubakr Shekau, al-Qurashi applauded 'the brave actions' of IS West Africa Province militants in 'exterminating the subversion of the *Khawarij*'.² Three days after the IS spokesman praised the militants, IS West Africa Province issued a video showing fighters who allegedly returned to IS (presumably defecting from Boko Haram after Shekau's death) and renewed their allegiance to the IS leader.³

The IS leadership praised the efforts of its global affiliates and specifically addressed its Iraq and Syria provinces, urging them to 'break down the walls of the prisons'. According to the IS spokesman, the IS leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi promised cash rewards for those who could target judges and investigators.⁴ The IS spokesman also called upon Muslims in the Palestinian

¹ Abu Hamza al-Qurashi audio speech, 'And you will be superior if you are indeed believers', Islamic State (IS), Al-Furqan Media Production Company, 22/06/2021.

² *Khawarij* (or Kharijites) literally means 'those who left from the group' and refers to a group of Muslims in early Islam who rebelled against the authority of the fourth caliph, Ali ibn Abu Talib. The audio speech does not explicitly mention the death of Boko Haram's leader Abubakr Shekau. There were no official releases by IS that explicitly commented on the event until an article in al-Naba' issue no. 293 (p.10-11), which revealed detailed information about the circumstances that led to the suicide of Shekau. Media reports quoted national sources, saying that Shekau blew himself up after negotiations with IS fighters in the region; 'Boko Haram leader tried to kill himself during clash with rivals, officials claim', The Guardian, 20/05/2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/20/boko-haram-leader-abubakar-shekau-nigeria-forest>.

³ IS West Africa Province video, 'Those who enjoy what is good - the return to the group of Muslims in West Africa', Islamic State (IS), 25/06/2021. Both the audio speech by al-Qurashi and the video by IS West Africa Province mentioned the return of the '*mujahidin*' to the IS fold, without elaborating or giving details on the circumstances or explicitly mentioning the death of Shekau.

⁴ Abu Hamza al-Qurashi audio speech, 'And you will be superior if you are indeed believers', Islamic State (IS), Al-Furqan Media Production Company, 22/06/2021.

territories not to 'bow down' but to rise and 'seek jihad to lift oppression', and to 'fight the mercenaries of Iran'.⁵ The Israeli-Palestinian conflict was previously referenced in a January 2020 speech by Abu Hamza al-Qurashi, whereby the IS spokesman announced a 'new phase' of the struggle focused on fighting the Jews and conquering Jerusalem.⁶

IS also rebuffed statements by Western countries warning that the group is experiencing a 'resurgence', instead maintaining that it was never weakened by the military efforts of coalition countries.⁷ IS challenged the concept of 'revival' and boasted about the expansion of the frontlines of its conflict beyond Iraq and Syria, mentioning Khorasan (Afghanistan), South-East Asia, Africa, and Sinai (Egypt). In IS's words, 'the truth that the Crusaders are trying to ignore is that the Islamic State did not shift its centre of gravity from one region to another, but rather increased the strength of its ranks everywhere with proud soldiers'.⁸ In parallel, IS sought to underscore the weakness of democratic governments by commenting on the invasion of the US Capitol in Washington D.C. on 6 January 2021.⁹ In al-Naba', IS gloated about the US's preoccupation with internal dissent as it would lead (in IS's view) to a reduced military pressure on Muslim countries where US military forces are deployed.¹⁰

IS lost two prominent leaders in 2021: Abu al-Walid al-Sahrawi,¹¹ the leader of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS),¹² and Abu Musab al-Barnawi,¹³ the leader of the Islamic State West Africa Province. The group paid tribute to al-Sahrawi by releasing the second and last part of an interview with the slain ISGS leader in al-Naba'. In line with its first instalment, published in 2020, the posthumous interview offered insights into the relationship between IS and al-Qaeda (AQ) from IS's perspective, elaborating on the dynamics among AQ's branches in the Sahel-Sahara region.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Abu Hamza al-Qurashi audio speech, 'God brought destruction on them, and a similar (fate) awaits the disbelievers – [Quran 47:10]', Islamic State (IS), al-Furqan Media Production Company, 27/01/2020.

⁷ Al-Naba' (The News), issue no. 284, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al I'lam al-Markazi, 30/04/2021.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Al-Naba' (The News), issue no. 268, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al I'lam al-Markazi, 07/01/2021.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ France's president Emmanuel Macron announced al-Sahrawi's death in September 2021; 'France says it has killed Islamic State leader in Greater Sahara', The Guardian, 16/09/2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/sep/16/france-says-it-has-killed-islamic-state-leader-in-greater-sahara-adnan-abu-walid-al-sahrawi>; in al-Naba' issue no. 308, al-Sahrawi was referred to as "may God accept him", explicitly confirming his death. His death had previously been hinted at by the group in al-Naba' issue no. 306.

¹² ISGS has been formally part of IS West Africa Province since March 2019, although they appear to remain operationally independent contingents. The fight against ISGS was previously identified as a matter of priority by the G5 Sahel in January 2020.

¹³ The Nigerian army reported al-Barnawi's death in October 2021; 'Key Leader of West African Terrorist Group Is Dead, Nigerian Army Says', The New York Times, 15/10/2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/15/world/africa/nigeria-islamic-state-abu-musab-al-barnawi-dead.html>.

4.2. IS capitalised on achievements by local insurgencies to project global expansion

These leadership losses constituted a setback within an otherwise significant military effort by the IS affiliate in the Sahel, whose pockets of instability provided increasingly fertile ground for jihadist operations. Battlefield advances by IS West Africa Province are routinely applauded in official IS propaganda and are central to the group's expansionist ambitions. Tellingly, IS multiplied its efforts to highlight regional achievements and continued to build its communication strategy on Amaq News Agency reports as well as official claims by its local affiliates, painting itself as a key actor in the Sahel and sub-Saharan region. In this context, the Amaq News Agency remained one of the terrorist group's most valuable communication assets, entrusted with editing and distributing combat footage filmed by IS militants. Amaq News Agency video releases serve the two-fold purpose of countering reports about IS's decline whilst gaining visibility, including on mainstream media.

Propaganda by IS West Africa Province underscored the actions of insurgent affiliates as they overran swathes of Nigeria, where the group appears to harbour 'caliphate' rebuilding ambitions.¹⁴ Operations claimed by IS Central Africa Province predominantly concerned the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Mozambique, whereby IS continued to capitalise on the military advances of local insurgencies, namely the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) in the DRC and Ahlu-Sunna wa-Jamma (ASWJ) in Mozambique. IS propaganda flaunted its achievements in Central Africa, including the temporary takeover of the city of Palma, Mozambique, as well as the contingent's expansion of operations into Uganda in October 2021. The temporary takeover of towns was posited by the group in al-Naba' as part of its military strategy in 2019 and reiterated in 2021.¹⁵

Following the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan, claims of attacks by IS Khorasan Province displayed a spike in violence against the 'apostate Taliban militias'. IS Khorasan Province, led by Shahab al-Muhajir since June 2020, appeared to be set on proving operational capacity and raising its profile as the only 'authentic' jihadist group in Afghanistan. In the final days of the US military presence in Afghanistan, IS Khorasan Province claimed a deadly suicide attack near the Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul that killed at least 170 civilians and 13 US troops.¹⁶ IS Khorasan Province also claimed a number of attacks in Pakistan,¹⁷ perhaps in a bid to amplify its operational strength.

¹⁴ A video by IS West Africa Province released in early 2022 showed children undergoing military training and following *sharia* lessons as part of the 'Cubs of the caliphate school', underscoring IS's attempts to establish territorial governance and train a new generation of fighters; IS West Africa Province video, 'The generation of empowerment', Islamic State (IS), 18/01/2022.

¹⁵ Al-Naba' (The News), issue no. 284, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al I'lam al-Markazi, 30/04/2021.

¹⁶ IS Khorasan Province statement, '160 members of the US forces and their spies dead and injured in a martyrdom operation on their gathering in the area of the Kabul airport', Islamic State (IS), 26/08/2021; 'Lone ISIS Bomber Carried Out Attack at Kabul Airport, Pentagon Says', The New York Times, 04/02/2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/04/us/politics/kabul-airport-attack-report.html>.

¹⁷ IS has been claiming attacks in Pakistan as a separate branch, the IS Pakistan Province, since 15/05/2019.

In a September issue of *al-Naba'*, an infographic dedicated to Afghanistan and entitled 'Harvest of Khorasan Province' reported that the group carried out 20 operations in Afghanistan between 18 and 22 September 2021, reportedly leading to 85 casualties.¹⁸ *Al-Naba's* 'Harvest of the soldiers' infographic also indicated IS Khorasan as the IS province with the highest number of operations and the highest death and injury tolls, followed by IS West Africa and IS Iraq provinces.¹⁹ While fighting the Taliban on the battlefield, IS appeared poised to discredit the movement's perceived ability to provide security in Afghanistan, especially in the eyes of the international community. The boost in propaganda productions highlighting IS's operational capabilities in Afghanistan was an integral part of that effort. Additionally, IS's Afghanistan-based contingent appeared to rely on sectarian violence against the Hazara Shia community to expose the Taliban's incompetence at protecting civilians. Attacks included two large-scale suicide bombings on Shia mosques in the Kunduz and Kandahar provinces in October 2021.²⁰

4.3. IS promoted anti-Shia and anti-Christian narratives to instigate sectarian violence in its operational areas

An article in an October 2021 issue of *al-Naba'* further elaborated on the group's approach towards Shia Muslims. IS sniped at other jihadi and Islamist groups, such as AQ, the Taliban and the Muslim Brotherhood for condemning IS's attacks against Shia Muslims and accused them of deviating from the 'authentic' Islamic belief.²¹ The last page of IS's digital newsletter also included an infographic entitled 'Hazara *rafida*'²² that provided, with an IS bias, information on the Hazara's beliefs, alleged quotes of Shia imams, predominantly Shia areas in Afghanistan and an overview of recent attacks against Hazara Shia.²³ Further violence against Shia Muslims was documented by IS Pakistan Province, whose production of the IS cross-province series 'The makers of epic battles' featured the brutal execution of 11 Hazara Shia coal miners, who were captured in Balochistan, western Pakistan, in January 2021.²⁴

Shia Muslims were also primary targets of violence by IS militants in Iraq, who were able to conduct a series of large-scale attacks in Baghdad. IS claimed responsibility for a double suicide bombing in a busy marketplace in Tayaran Square, at the heart of Baghdad, on 21 January 2021.²⁵ IS Baghdad Province

¹⁸ *Al-Naba'* (The News), issue no. 305, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al I'lam al-Markazi, 24/09/2021.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ IS Khorasan Province statement, 'More than 300 dead and wounded among Shia in a suicide operation inside a mosque in Kunduz', Islamic State (IS), 08/10/2021; IS Khorasan Province statement claiming the killing of dozens of Shia in a double suicide operation against a Shia mosque in Kandahar, Islamic State (IS), 16/10/2021.

²¹ *Al-Naba'* (The News), issue no. 308, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al I'lam al-Markazi, 15/10/2021.

²² *Rafida* is a derogatory term for Shia Muslims, it can be translated as 'rejectionists'.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ IS Pakistan Province video, 'The makers of epic battles', Islamic State (IS), 19/03/2021.

²⁵ IS Baghdad Province statement, 'Over 30 killed and 100 injured among "*rafida*" polytheists in two suicide operations in central Baghdad', Islamic State (IS), 21/01/2021.

stated that the attack left at least 30 dead and wounded more than 100.²⁶ In al-Naba', IS clarified that the bombing specifically targeted '*rafida*' and boasted that the coordinated bombings constituted one of the most lethal attacks launched by the group against Shia Muslims in years.²⁷ The weekly newsletter also elaborated on the motives of violence against Shia Muslims in an editorial entitled 'The *rafida* are weeping again!'²⁸ In it, IS slammed Hezbollah, the Iranian regime and Bashar al-Assad for colluding against 'the truth of their religion' and against other Muslims, particularly Iraqi Muslims who suffered wars and were abandoned by 'misled' cohorts of fellow Muslims. IS urged its adherents to fulfil their obligation to 'fight them [Shia] everywhere'.²⁹ IS Baghdad Province claimed responsibility for other attacks carried out in 'predominantly Shia areas' in 2021, such as a series of car bombings in the Shia neighbourhood of Sadr City, Baghdad, on 15 April 2021³⁰ and another suicide bombing of a Shia gathering that killed over 30 people in Sadr City on 19 July 2021.³¹

Attacks against Christian communities were given significant space in official IS propaganda during 2021. Claims by IS indicated soaring violence against Christians, predominantly in sub-Saharan African countries but also in Indonesia and in the Sinai region (Egypt). The group's media seized on the opportunity to highlight these attacks and weaved them into a broader anti-Christian narrative. In the aftermath of Pope Francis's visit to Iraq in March 2021, IS referred to the pontiff as 'the tyrant of the Christians', claiming that his visit had a hidden agenda and threatening the Pope and his supporters in future visits to Islamic countries.³² IS inveighed against Christianity in its al-Naba' issue released after Christmas. Through an article laced with Quranic verses in a bid to prove that the Christian religion is based on false belief, IS argued that Christians are guilty of 'tearing apart body parts of Muslims with their airstrikes and bombardments'.³³ IS urged supporters to perpetrate attacks against Christians and 'turn [their] celebrations into funerals and tragedies'.³⁴ In the following issue of al-Naba', released in early January 2022, IS positioned its attacks against Christians in Africa within the context of a war between Islam and Christianity, purporting the existence of a plan to convert all Africans to Christianity through the work of missionaries 'under the guise of relief societies and institutions'.³⁵

The anti-Christian theme was reinforced by IS online supporters through unofficial propaganda releases and media campaigns. Several propaganda items in Arabic, English and French were shared online to denounce the alleged crimes

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Al-Naba' (The News), issue no. 271, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al I'lam al-Markazi, 29/01/2021.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ IS Baghdad Province claims multiple bombings in the area of al-Habibiya in Sadr City, Islamic State (IS), 16/04/2021.

³¹ IS Baghdad Province statement, 'More than 65 dead and wounded "*rafida* pagans" in a suicide attack in Sadr City, east of Baghdad', Islamic State (IS), 20/07/2021.

³² Al-Naba' (The News), issue no. 277, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al I'lam al-Markazi, 11/03/2021.

³³ Al-Naba' (The News), issue no. 319, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al I'lam al-Markazi, 31/12/2021.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Al-Naba' (The News), issue no. 320, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al I'lam al-Markazi, 06/01/2022.

perpetrated by the Christians of Rwanda and inciting violence against Christian communities in central Africa under the hashtag #Rwanda_Christians_Crimes (translated from French), in multiple languages.³⁶ IS online supporters' focus on Rwanda in August and September 2021 can be ascribed to the country's military intervention and reported progress against the IS-led insurgency in northern Mozambique.³⁷ IS-supporting media outlets climbed on the bandwagon and used the same hashtag to call for attacks against Christian churches in the EU. A French language audio message by the pro-IS al-Adiyat Media Production Company advocated for the destruction of Christian churches, refuting their status as holy places.³⁸ The audio message was complemented by a poster with the hashtag #Rwanda_Christians_Crimes. Former French Prime Minister, Manuel Valls, was mentioned in the audio message as having threatened to 'see the piled up bodies' of IS supporters.³⁹

4.4. IS sustained its 'economic war', incited further prison raids and praised 'media jihad' efforts

IS continued to take pride in inflicting serious economic losses to declared enemies as part of its so-called economic war targeting critical electric and security infrastructures. Attacks against power and electricity towers, oil tankers and energy plants were consistently claimed by the group's affiliates across different areas of Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan and the Philippines. Through al-Naba', IS reminded its supporters of the importance of targeting critical infrastructure to destabilise the enemy.⁴⁰

Throughout 2021, imprisoned Muslims and IS members remained a rallying cry for IS. Prison breaks are mainstays of the military strategy of groups like IS, whose evolution into a proto-state was propelled by a series of assaults on Iraqi prisons in 2012 in the context of a campaign named 'breaking the walls'.⁴¹ In January 2021, al-Naba' featured an infographic entitled 'We have not forgotten you - Prisons whose fences were destroyed by the soldiers of the Islamic State in Iraq' that listed prison breaks carried out by IS fighters across different Iraqi provinces over a span of a few years.⁴² Since IS's loss of its territorial holdings in Syria and Iraq, the group and its online supporters have

³⁶ Al-Battar Media Company poster, 'Grant them a short time', al-Battar Media Company, 19/08/2021; Hadm al-Aswar poster, 'To our brothers in Rwanda: stay strong', Hadm al-Aswar, 19/08/2021; al-Taqwa poster, 'Support of the Muslims of Africa and Rwanda', al-Taqwa Media Production, 03/09/2021; al-Adiyat Media poster, 'The crimes of the Christians of Rwanda', al-Adiyat Media Production Company, 19/08/2021.

³⁷ 'Mozambican military chief lauds joint offensive against insurgents', The New Times - Rwanda's Leading Daily, 09/08/2021, <https://www.newtimes.co.rw/news/mozambican-military-chief-lauds-joint-offensive-against-insurgents>.

³⁸ Al-Adiyat Media Centre audio speech, 'The destruction of churches', al-Adiyat Media Production Company, 03/09/2021.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Al-Naba' (The News), issue no. 275, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al I'lam al-Markazi, 25/02/2021.

⁴¹ Clifford B., Weiss C. "Breaking the Walls" Goes Global: The Evolving Threat of Jihadi Prison Assaults and Riots', West Point Combating Terrorism Centre (CTC), February 2020, volume 13, issue 2.

⁴² Al-Naba' (The News), issue no. 269, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al I'lam al-Markazi, 14/01/2021.

repeatedly called for the liberation of captive IS members held in prisons and refugee camps.

Triggered by the release of the infographic, IS-supporting media outlets launched an online campaign that saw several propaganda releases published with the hashtag #We_have_not_forgotten_you (translated from Arabic). Many of the posters displayed quotes from speeches by former IS leaders and spokesmen, including Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, Abubakr al-Baghdadi and Abu al-Hassan al-Muhajir.⁴³ The common narrative in these speeches placed emphasis on the significance of freeing Muslim prisoners, presented as one of the most important obligations for the group's operatives. Some of the posters also contained summations from *hadith* about 'freeing the captives', in an attempt to draw links between the Prophet Muhammad's method and IS's objectives, thus conferring a religious aspect to the group's operational strategy. Also worth noting was the predilection by IS supporters to use quotes by influential, deceased IS figures, a fact that further underscored the lack of new inspirational speeches and the limited visibility of the current chain of command.

The following week, al-Naba' doubled down on the matter and published a second infographic using the same title, this time stretching its focus to prison assaults in other countries such as Syria, Libya, Yemen, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, the Philippines, Indonesia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), among others.⁴⁴ The volume and style of supporter-generated content produced after the release of both infographics suggested strategic coherence among IS-supporting media outlets, and potentially some coordination with IS official media.

The infographics issued by the IS media department set these prison breaks as a clear operational goal of the group, presented as poised to regain military capacities and pursue its 'statehood strategy'. In January 2022, a large-scale prison break was claimed by IS at the Ghwayran prison in al-Hasaka, Syria.⁴⁵ While the activity of IS's Syrian cohorts appeared in official propaganda as consisting mostly of low-scale insurgency actions, the scale of the prison break signalled greater operational capabilities and a certain degree of coordination among IS's ranks. In addition to the extensive coverage of the attack by IS official media, IS supporters produced several propaganda items promoting the prison break, some of them sharing handwritten messages of support from different parts of the world. This online campaign recycled the popular hashtag #Hadm_al_aswar, meaning 'breaking the walls'.

⁴³ Al-Dir' al-Sunni poster quoting the deceased leader of the Islamic State of Iraq, Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, al-Dir' al-Sunni Foundation, 18/01/2021; Sarh al-Khilafa poster quoting a speech by the deceased IS spokesperson Abu al-Hassan al-Muhajir, Sarh al-Khilafa, 20/01/2021; Sah al-Wagha al-Iftiradiyya poster, 'We have not forgotten you', Sah al-Wagha al-Iftiradiyya, 15/01/2021.

⁴⁴ Al-Naba' (The News), issue no. 270, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al I'lam al-Markazi, 21/01/2021.

⁴⁵ Amaq News Agency statement reporting on ongoing attacks against Ghwayran prison in al-Hasaka Province on 20/01/2022, Islamic State (IS), Amaq News Agency, 21/01/2022.

An all-female online campaign in support of imprisoned women ran from mid-April to the beginning of May 2021 with the hashtag #Muslim_female_prisoners_be_patient (translated from Arabic) and included over 100 propaganda items such as posters and videos created by IS-supporting media outlets. The online campaign aimed at denouncing the perceived plight of female detainees during the Muslim month of Ramadan.⁴⁶ The majority of the productions for this online campaign displayed the brands of Sarh al-Khilafa, Tala'i' al-Ansar, al-Adiyat, Hadm al-Aswar and al-Battar media outlets. A video entitled 'Muslim female prisoners, be patient' by al-Battar included excerpts from speeches by Abubakr al-Baghdadi, Abu al-Hassan al-Muhajir and Abu Hamza al-Qurashi.⁴⁷ The IS message for imprisoned Muslim women substantially replicated the message for imprisoned Muslim men. Women were praised for their perseverance and were reassured that the '*mujahidin*' stand ready to offer their lives in order to 'break the walls' of prisons and set them free.⁴⁸

The year 2021 saw a revival of the trope of 'media jihad' in IS propaganda. An infographic entitled 'The goals of media jihad' appeared in al-Naba' in May 2021.⁴⁹ Through the words of the former and late 'war minister' of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, IS warned its supporters of the danger of disinformation as broadcast by the 'Satanic media', describing it as more dangerous to the *umma* than missiles. The infographic also listed 10 goals of 'media jihad', which included debunking lies about the '*mujahidin*', presenting their true lives, achievements and sacrifices, as well as defeating enemies through psychological warfare. In a later issue of al-Naba', IS stressed that women can also contribute to the task of 'incitement to jihad'.⁵⁰

The first instalment of a new feature of al-Naba' entitled 'Story of a martyr' was dedicated to the former IS 'media minister' Abu Muhammad al-Furqan.⁵¹ IS said that al-Furqan played an essential role in building and developing IS media production capabilities, whilst staying out of the limelight. According to the biography, published in two instalments, al-Furqan was a self-taught graphic designer and media producer, as well as the author of a number of IS flagship media productions such as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) video 'Clanging of the swords'. IS further revealed that al-Furqan had been leading a unit within IS tasked with planning terrorist attacks in the West.⁵²

The efforts of IS-supporting media were commended by the group in al-Naba'. In particular, IS vaunted the importance placed on IS-supporting media by 'crusader research centres', and the 'costly' expert conferences and seminars organised by 'crusaders' with the goal of hindering the commitment of IS online

⁴⁶ Ramadan 2021 began on 12 April 2021 and ended on 11 May 2021.

⁴⁷ Al-Battar Media video, 'Muslim female prisoners be patient', al-Battar Media Company, 24/04/2021.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Al-Naba' (The News), issue no. 288, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al I'lam al-Markazi, 28/05/2021.

⁵⁰ Al-Naba' (The News), issue no. 320, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al I'lam al-Markazi, 06/01/2022.

⁵¹ Al-Naba' (The News), issue no. 285, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al I'lam al-Markazi, 06/05/2021.

⁵² Al-Naba' (The News), issue no. 287, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al I'lam al-Markazi, 20/05/2021.

supporters.⁵³ According to IS, the efforts of the international community in waging a military and information war against the group have been in vain. The ‘media war’, said IS, influenced the policies of a number of online platforms and forced the governments of the ‘disbelievers’, their intelligence services and researchers to employ tremendous resources in the ‘media jihad’ battlefield.⁵⁴ Official IS media appreciation of the work of supporters and supporting media outlets not just as amplifiers, but also as creators of propaganda, is to be seen in light of the constrained production and dissemination capabilities of official IS media outlets. In line with previous messaging by the IS hierarchy on this topic, the group also highlighted the importance of maintaining coherence in its media efforts.

4.5. IS-supporting media joined forces and issued new threats

Following the acknowledgement by IS official media, a flurry of posters were issued by pro-IS media outlets, encouraging supporters to engage in media production, providing guidance and suggesting new content or visuals to support the group’s communication strategy. For instance, the IS-aligned media outlet Tala’i’ al-Ansar, or ‘Vanguards of supporters’ announced the launch of a course to learn how to design on Android-based devices. Similarly, al-Taqwa Media claimed it created a new media unit named ‘Asf’ (Arabic for storm) whose purpose is to facilitate the diffusion of the IS message across social media and web assets, while promoting techniques to avoid detection.

IS-supporting media sought to ease the IS hierarchy’s concerns about maintaining a cohesive message and pledged in their releases to continue fighting the so-called disinformation campaigns conducted against the group by its detractors. IS-supporting media positioned itself in line with IS official media in a video entitled ‘Although the disbelievers dislike it’ by the pro-IS media outlet Hadm al-Aswar.⁵⁵ The video elaborated on the perceived media war waged by Western society against Islam, which Hadm al-Aswar understood to be aimed at blighting the image of IS fighters in the eyes of Muslims, while also instilling fear of the Muslim community among Western audiences. The juxtaposition of Western media and IS to underscore a credibility gap is a recurrent element in IS’s discourse⁵⁶ and has been adopted by the supporting media to highlight the legitimacy of its work. The video also presented an exhaustive list of IS official media outlets, flanked by the supporting media, which included the unofficial outlets al-Battar, al-Taqwa, al-Adiyat, al-Murhafat, Tala’i’ al-Ansar, Sarh al-

⁵³ Al-Naba’ (The News), issue no. 289, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al I’lam al-Markazi, 04/06/2021.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Hadm al-Aswar video, ‘Although the disbelievers dislike it’, Hadm al-Aswar, 18/05/2021.

⁵⁶ Ingram H. J., Whiteside C., Winter C., ‘The ISIS Reader: Milestone Texts of the Islamic State Movement’, 2020, Hurst & Company London.

Khilafa, al-Dir' al-Sunni, Bank al-Ansar and the Electronic Horizons Foundation, in addition to Hadm al-Aswar.⁵⁷

The IS-supporting media outlets listed in the video share some commonalities in terms of type of productions, breadth of themes, dissemination techniques and platforms exploited for the distribution of their releases. A number of them focused on the re-mediatisation and repurposing of IS official productions. Editorials from al-Naba', for instance, were repurposed as audios by al-Battar Media, while Hadm al-Aswar turned highlights from al-Naba' into brief videos. Entire articles from al-Naba' were also recycled and copied into new templates, bearing the al-Naba' logo as well as the logo of the IS-supporting media outlet. Co-productions between these media outlets and others specialised in translation were recurrent in 2021. In the same vein, collaboration efforts were observed among IS operatives and media outlets whose main task was to supply IS supporters with accounts for propaganda dissemination across different platforms. According to a post on Telegram in June 2021, a merger took place under the name al-Iqtihat brigade, or 'Intrusions brigade' and included Bank al-Ansar, Hayya Inghamis brigade, Ajnad brigade, al-Bayyina brigade, Falq al-Ru'us brigade, Retweet brigade and al-Dayaghim brigade.⁵⁸

IS-supporting media outlets dominated the production and distribution of pro-IS propaganda in 2021. Their releases - which comprised their own creations, repurposed content and translations - dwarfed the volume of official IS releases. The discourse of supporting media in 2021 continued to focus on issuing threats against declared enemies, including EU countries, and on the glorification of previous IS-led or IS-inspired attacks. Echoing Abu Muhammad al-Adnani's notorious speech in May 2016, a large portion of material produced by IS-supporting media aimed to mobilise Muslims living in the West to carry out attacks. In this context, the issuing of threats against specific targets such as landmarks, events, heads of state and other prominent public figures contributed to an amplification of the threat perception in EU countries.

The pro-IS media outlet Du'at al-Falah surfaced in 2021 and churned out several posters celebrating the September 2001 terrorist attacks, while encouraging supporters to replicate that type of attack against EU landmarks, for instance the Berlin TV tower.⁵⁹ These releases were made available in Arabic, English and German. Additionally, channels linked to the media outlet were observed as providing 'tactical advice' to prospective lone actors to carry out attacks using 'explosive belts, silencers and deadly poisons'. The media outlet and its affiliated network of supporters maintained a resilient online presence across different platforms, including Telegram, Instagram, Facebook, Hoop Messenger and TechHaven (Rocket.Chat).

⁵⁷ Hadm al-Aswar video, 'Although the disbelievers dislike it', Hadm al-Aswar, 18/05/2021.

⁵⁸ Al-Iqtihat brigade post, 'Announcement of a merger', 11/06/2021.

⁵⁹ Du'at al-Falah Media poster, 'Hallo Deutschland', Du'at al-Falah, 17/09/2021.

While IS did not claim any attacks on EU soil in 2021, IS online supporters and some IS-supporting media exploited violent incidents with unclear motives to incite for terrorist attacks and promote IS and its goals. A violent incident which occurred in June 2021 in Würzburg, Germany, led to speculation among IS supporters over the perpetrator's motives, some of them anticipating an official IS claim that failed to materialise. Shortly after the incident, the pro-IS media outlet al-Mahdi published a poster praising the perpetrator for his actions.⁶⁰ Al-Mahdi continued to take aim at Germany by creating a poster that pictured the severed head of the former German president, Joachim Gauck.⁶¹ Other releases by the same media outlet featured unspecified threats with sentences simply stating: 'Kill the disbelievers'.⁶²

A video released in late December 2021 by Tala'i' al-Ansar showed footage of previous terrorist attacks in Western cities, including Paris, Vienna, Berlin, Boston, Nice and London.⁶³ The video also showed short clips featuring the perpetrators of the attacks, for instance Anis Amri, the perpetrator of the 2016 attack on a Christmas market in Berlin, Germany. The video also featured a media report stating 'Europol has warned that Europe can expect more terrorist attacks in the near future, carried out by the self-styled Islamic State group or in its name'. In the video, an unidentified masked individual urged IS supporters to follow the paths of Umar Matin (perpetrator of the 2016 terrorist attack in Orlando, US) and Abdullah al-Arusi (perpetrator of the 2016 attack in Magnanville, France).⁶⁴

4.6. IS supporter networks spearheaded experimentation efforts with emerging technologies

IS online supporters focused on expanding their activities to new online spaces. IS was forced to decentralise its online presence across a wide array of online platforms after its networks on Telegram were destabilised in a 2019 action coordinated by EU Member States and Europol. This was compounded by sustained deletion campaigns targeting pro-IS channels, groups, users and bots on the messaging application throughout 2021.

A key tenet in IS's propaganda dissemination strategy is to maintain an uninterrupted flow of official IS releases. Only a few of the platforms within IS's current arsenal afford supporters timely, constant and direct access to official IS releases. In 2021, IS supporters developed a significant foothold on a third-party

⁶⁰ Al-Mahdi Media poster praising a knife attack carried out in Würzburg (Germany) on 25/06/2021, al-Mahdi Media, 27/06/2021.

⁶¹ Al-Mahdi Media poster threatening the former German president Joachim Gauck, al-Mahdi Media, 28/06/2021.

⁶² Al-Mahdi Media poster, 'Join the Islamic State – Return to the glory of Islam', al-Mahdi Media, 30/06/2021; Al-Mahdi Media poster, 'Kill the disbelievers', al-Mahdi Media, 30/08/2021.

⁶³ Tala'i' al-Ansar video, 'O you lone wolf, when will you wake up?', Tala'i' al-Ansar, 29/12/2021.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

hosted ‘homeserver’⁶⁵ of the previously exploited open-source instant messaging application Element. Instructions on how to create accounts and configure rooms on the coffespot.com homeserver of Element were circulated online by the Electronic Horizons Foundation, whose self-assigned mission is to provide IS supporters with operational security (OpSec) advice. Horizons continued to provide OpSec advice in multiple languages, including Arabic, English and French.⁶⁶

IS-supporting media outlets and their networks of supporters continued to rely on websites on the Surface Web and the Dark Web to archive and distribute official IS statements, photo reports, al-Naba’ issues and video releases. Some of these web pages, for instance the one managed by the IS-supporting I’lam Media, offered translations of IS content in multiple EU and non-EU languages. IS supporters in charge of the al-‘Uqab (Elokab) project, which aims to garner the terrorist group’s video archives on a single website, denounced the recurrent attacks they suffered on their domain names and web hosting infrastructure. Through newly created accounts, Elokab’s operatives also asked for financial support in messaging applications (for instance Telegram, Hoop and Conversations). Later in the year, the Elokab website was reportedly compromised, and showed on its main page a screenshot of a conversation suggesting that the website’s administrator had been selling user information logs in exchange for cryptocurrency. Elokab’s operatives confirmed ‘the breach of one of the website’s servers’,⁶⁷ but maintained that the conversation was ‘falsified’ in order to undermine trust among supporters and create confusion. They also reassured supporters that security measures had been reinforced in order to protect the website and prevent future breaches.⁶⁸ The Elokab website was eventually discontinued and seemingly replaced by the al-Ru’ud (al-Raud) project, also marketed as a video streaming platform for IS releases. The website Shine of Islam, which provided ideologically-oriented pro-IS content, was also allegedly breached, resulting in the exposure of users’ IP addresses. The alleged hacking of the Element account of the IS-supporting media outlet Sarh al-Khilafa led to pro-IS circles online criticising the unreliability of related websites Shine of Islam and Elokab,⁶⁹ and calling their administrators ‘incompetent’. IS supporters further encouraged supporters to use VPNs, proxies and the TOR browser to access propaganda.

⁶⁵ A ‘homeserver’ is defined by Matrix as a space where a user can host their account. Homeservers store the communication history and account information for each user, and share data with the wider Matrix ecosystem by synchronising communication history with other homeservers. Matrix website, <https://matrix.org/faq/#what-is-a-homeserver%3F>, accessed on: 02/05/2022.

⁶⁶ Horizons infographics providing guidance on how to register on the platform Element with a public server, Electronic Horizons Foundation, 19/10/2021.

⁶⁷ Elokab website statement, ‘An important statement by your brothers of the El-Okab website’, Elokab Website, 12/06/2021.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Lions of Tawheed statement warning against visiting pro-IS websites ‘Shine of Islam’ and ‘Elokab’, Lions of Tawheed, 03/08/2021.

IS-supporting websites relied on complex infrastructures, using blockchain-based naming protocols that emerged as alternatives to the Domain Name System (DNS). The Fihris al-Ansar (Fahras al-Ansar) project, an aggregator of links to other websites and described by supporters as an ‘index website’ or ‘a supporter website to publish other supporter websites’, relied on the Ethereum Name Service (ENS).⁷⁰ The pro-IS I’lam Media featured a Handshake webpage.⁷¹ Both websites displayed a Dark Web version.

In 2021, IS online supporters displayed increased attempts to experiment with new open-source and decentralised technologies for propaganda dissemination. Videos by IS self-proclaimed provinces, IS-supporting media and a number of issues of al-Naba’ were uploaded to Skynet.⁷² Al-Naba’ was also stored by IS supporters on the Inter-Planetary File System (IPFS),⁷³ a distributed system for storing and accessing information. Similarly, several instances of IS videos have been detected on D.Tube (Decentralised Tube), which emerged as an alternative to YouTube and self-advertised as ‘the first crypto-decentralized video platform, built on top of the Steem Blockchain⁷⁴ and the IPFS peer-to-peer network’.⁷⁵ IS supporters also experimented with Ignite, a decentralised microblogging service which allows users to exchange text and media files that can be distributed among the nodes via Skynet.⁷⁶ Gorf (gorf.pub), an open-source frontend for Mastodon that allows subscribers to ‘follow people on any server in the fediverse’⁷⁷ was used to launch a page representing the Centre Médiatique an-Nur, an IS-supporting media outlet specialised in the translation of official IS propaganda into French.⁷⁸ Platforms more commonly exploited by right wing extremism audiences, such as Gab and Odysee,⁷⁹ also saw pages and accounts dedicated to the sharing of IS propaganda.

⁷⁰ The Ethereum Name Service (ENS) is a distributed, open, and extensible naming system based on the Ethereum blockchain, <https://docs.ens.domains/>, accessed on: 30/03/2022.

⁷¹ Handshake is a naming protocol that is ‘backwards compatible with the existing DNS system’, <https://learn.namebase.io/about-handshake/about-handshake>, accessed on: 30/03/2022.

⁷² Skynet is an open protocol for hosting data and web applications on the decentralised web using Sia, which is a decentralised cloud storage platform leveraging blockchain technology. Data on Skynet is ‘content-addressable’ which means that Skylinks point to a file based on its content and not its name, Skynet website, <https://support.skynetlabs.com/>, accessed on: 30/02/2022; <https://sia.tech/>, accessed on: 30/03/2022.

⁷³ IPFS is a distributed system for storing and accessing files, websites, applications, and data, IPFS website, <https://docs.ipfs.io/concepts/what-is-ipfs/>, accessed on: 02/05/2022.

⁷⁴ Steem is a blockchain database that supports community building and social interaction with cryptocurrency rewards, Steem WhitePaper, <https://steem.io/SteemWhitePaper.pdf>, accessed on 02/05/2022.

⁷⁵ D.Tube website, <https://about.d.tube/>, accessed on: 30/03/2022.

⁷⁶ Ignite is a decentralised microblogging service, powered by Prometheus framework. Its website reports that Ignite ‘was designed to fight against censorship and stand for freedom of speech. In its essence, Ignite represents a set of independent and equitable nodes’, Ignite website, <https://ignite.so/>, accessed on: 03/03/2022.

⁷⁷ Gorf website, <https://gorf.pub>, accessed on 30/03/2022. Definitions for fediverse include ‘the distributed social network of federated (independent and interconnected) servers using open standard communication protocols, especially ActivityPub and OStatus’, <https://www.wordsense.eu/Fediverse/>, accessed on 02/05/2022.

⁷⁸ In late 2019, IS and its supporter networks directed considerable efforts at establishing a presence on federated social networks that are built on open-source software, providing options for self-hosting and allowing for communication among users on different servers.

⁷⁹ Odysee is a video sharing platform built on the LBRY (library) blockchain protocol, Odysee website, <https://odysee.com/>, accessed on: 30/03/2022.

Whilst landing on new technological solutions, IS online supporters also directed efforts towards regaining a digital presence on more popular platforms. Instagram, Facebook and Tam Tam witnessed a resurgence of pro-IS accounts in 2021.

5. Narratives by AQ and its affiliates in 2021

5.1 AQ and its global franchises adhered to traditional messaging amid an uncertain general direction

The propaganda output by the al-Qaeda (AQ) network remained constant in 2021. Propaganda releases by the AQ network framed the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan as a triumph for global jihad. AQ and its affiliates were emboldened and appeared to perceive the Western drawdown of forces worldwide as a major upturn in the jihadist struggle.

AQ continued to adhere to its usual discourse, with its propaganda conveying the group's viewpoint on geopolitical and military developments. AQ affiliates remained focused on local grievances, at times showing an *esprit de corps* in the production of propaganda reflecting overarching issues. Whilst regionally oriented, AQ affiliates strived to ensure their local agendas tapped into AQ's overarching goal of waging war against the far enemy (i.e. the US and the West in general). Support for the Palestinian cause remained a cornerstone in the narratives of AQ and its affiliates, with the AQ network painting itself as the defender of Palestine.

Chatter in online jihadist circles in 2021 was marked by rumours about the alleged death of the AQ Core⁸⁰ leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, as well as speculations as to the state of his health. These speculations intensified in March 2021, when an al-Sahab video only featured brief audio messages by al-Zawahiri, who was not shown on screen.⁸¹ However, in a later video released on the 20th anniversary of the 11 September 2001 attacks, al-Zawahiri appeared and mentioned the 1 January 2021 attack on Russian forces in Tal al-Saman in rural al-Raqqa, Syria, claimed by AQ's Syrian affiliate Tanzim Hurras al-Din (THD).⁸² The mention of the event, known as the al-Usra battle, confirmed al-Zawahiri was alive in January 2021.⁸³ In the same video, the AQ leader commented on a number of events that took place over the course of 2020. Among them, the death of the former leader of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Abu

⁸⁰ The general command of al-Qaeda (AQ).

⁸¹ Al-Sahab Media Production Company video, 'The wound of Rohingya is the wound of the Ummah', al-Qaeda (AQ) Core, al-Sahab Media Production Company, 12/03/2021.

⁸² Al-Sahab Media Production Company video, 'Jerusalem will not be judaized - Part 1 - The Zionists of the Arabs: from Faisal to Bin Zayed', Al-Qaeda (AQ) Core, al-Sahab Media Production Company.

⁸³ In April 2022, al-Zawahiri appeared in an al-Sahab video whereby he commented on protests over the ban on hijab in India's Karnataka state in mid-February 2022; al-Sahab Media Production Company video, 'The noble woman of India', al-Qaeda (AQ) Core, al-Sahab Media Production Company, 05/04/2022.

Musab Abdulwadud, as well as the former al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) leader, Qasim al-Raymi. Al-Zawahiri also praised the conversion of Sophie Petronin following her release from Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) in October 2020. AQ sought to dispel rumours about his death by accompanying al-Zawahiri's name with the caption 'May God protect him'.⁸⁴ A few days before the release of the video, a book of over 800 pages authored by al-Zawahiri entitled 'The book and the power - agreement and separation' was published. The introduction of the book was dated April 2021.⁸⁵ In November 2021, the AQ Core leader appeared in another video that lacked references to any recent event. In the 38-minute video, al-Zawahiri took aim at the United Nations (UN), contending that the UN charter is incompatible with *sharia* and that being part of the UN entailed unequivocally abandoning *sharia*. Al-Zawahiri elaborated on a number of UN decisions that he judged as being detrimental to Muslims' interests and concluded that the UN 'is not an organisation for international cooperation' but rather 'an organisation that was created by the irreligious victors of World War II to impose their hegemony and belief system on the rest of the world'.⁸⁶

AQ messages attempted to portray the US as a country in decline, which is ravaged by political dissent, a faltering economy and the COVID-19 pandemic. The AQ Core official mouthpiece al-Sahab published the fifth issue of its magazine 'One Ummah' in April 2021, in which AQ provided its perspective on different issues affecting the US, including the country's perceived rampant racism and the 6 January 2021 Capitol riots.⁸⁷ The same editorial was repurposed by AQ in a video entitled 'America burns', issued on the occasion of the celebration of *Eid al-Adha* on 20 July 2021.⁸⁸ In line with the editorial, the video elaborated on what AQ termed 'the five cornerstones of America's coffin', namely the coronavirus pandemic, political divisions, racism, a declining economy and the attacks by the '*mujahidin*'. The video also included an excerpt from an older video of Ayman al-Zawahiri, in which the AQ leader elaborated on the issue of racism in the US and quoted Malcolm X.⁸⁹

Adversities that affected the US in 2021 were also highlighted by AQAP. The perceived end of American hegemony was addressed by the AQAP leader Khalid

⁸⁴ Arabic expression used to refer to living people.

⁸⁵ The book's preface (p.11) states that the content of the book represents solely the views of Ayman al-Zawahiri and that no individual, organisation or group takes responsibility for it; Ayman al-Zawahiri, 'The book and the power - agreement and separation', 10/09/2021.

⁸⁶ Al-Sahab Media Production Company video, 'An advice for the united Ummah concerning the reality of the United Nations', al-Qaeda (AQ) Core, al-Sahab Media Production Company, 23/11/2021.

⁸⁷ One ummah, issue no. 5, al-Qaeda (AQ) Core, al-Sahab Media Production Company, 14/04/2021. The same issue of 'One Ummah' was updated to include the four-page AQ release 'Statement of love, veneration and support for our people in Palestine' and the two-page publication al-Nafir issue no. 34. The updated magazine was republished by al-Sahab Media on 27/05/2021.

⁸⁸ Literally the 'Feast of the Sacrifice', *Eid al-Adha* is one of the two most important annual Islamic holidays (the other being *Eid al-Fitr*). The day commemorates the willingness of the prophet Abraham to sacrifice his son as an act of obedience to God's command.

⁸⁹ Al-Sahab Media Production Company video, 'America burns', al-Qaeda (AQ) Core, al-Sahab Media Production Company, 20/07/2021.

Batarfi in the video ‘America and the painful seizure’.⁹⁰ Batarfi urged the ‘*mujahidin*’ and all Muslims to ‘rejoice in the imminent victory and be ready to lead humanity’, and not to give the chance to other ‘oppressive nations’ to fill the power vacuum left by the US. The video address by Batarfi also aimed at disputing reports about his alleged arrest in October 2020 and his detention by Saudi Arabian authorities.

AQ and its affiliates continued to snipe at France and to exploit the outcry generated by the depiction of the Prophet Muhammad in satirical cartoons to promote anti-French narratives. AQ Core justified terrorist attacks occurring in the EU or targeting EU interests as retaliation for the publication of the cartoons. The 41-minute video titled ‘An unforgivable crime’ by al-Sahab Media Production,⁹¹ for instance, called upon Muslims to carry out new attacks to avenge the Prophet, highlighting the assassination of Theo Van Gogh in November 2004, the bombing of the Danish embassy in Pakistan in June 2008 and the January 2015 attack against the headquarters of the magazine Charlie Hebdo. Notably, the video featured footage from trials and interviews of French far-right figures, namely Alain Soral and Eric Zemmour, to denounce the ‘hypocrisy’ of the French principle of freedom of expression. AQ scolded France for applying ‘double standards’ when addressing topics such as the Holocaust denial compared to, for instance, the right for French Muslim women to wear the full-face veil in public spaces.

5.2 Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)

Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), AQ's Sahel-based affiliate, continued to wage a large-scale insurgency across North and West Africa, operating predominantly out of Mali. Over the course of 2021, attacks claimed by JNIM have caused scores of casualties among dissident jihadist groups, civilians, French-led Barkhane forces, Joint European Forces involved in the Takuba Task Force, and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission (MINUSMA). Through its official al-Zallaqa Media Production Company, JNIM stressed that its operations targeting MINUSMA ‘take place almost daily’ and added that ‘the number of their dead is much more than is being tallied’.⁹² The group added that it is not able to report all the attacks it carries out, arguing that not even the ‘media of the French occupation, nor the rest of the media’ release accurate figures for their forces’ death toll. JNIM also denounced the Chadian government for its normalisation of ties with Israel and singled out Chad and its forces as priority targets for the ‘*mujahidin*’.⁹³ In a

⁹⁰ Al-Malahim Media Production video, ‘America and the painful seizure’, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al-Malahim Media Production Company, 10/02/2021.

⁹¹ Al-Sahab Media Production Company video, ‘An unforgivable crime’, al-Qaeda (AQ) Core, al-Sahab Media Production Company, 15/07/2021.

⁹² JNIM statement, ‘Targeting MINUSMA and Bamako Government Forces with several mines in various regions of Mali’, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), al-Zallaqa Media Production Company, 07/02/2021.

⁹³ Ibid.

display of strategic coherence among AQ franchises, JNIM alluded to its East African affiliate al-Shabab al-Mujahidin Movement (al-Shabab) and explained that operations against Chad ‘fall within the framework of the operations’ launched by al-Shabab in Somalia under the slogan ‘Jerusalem will never be judaized’.⁹⁴

In 2021, JNIM continued to condemn France’s foreign policy in North Africa and the Sahel. The group framed its attacks against France as a continuation of its ‘blessed campaign’ to defend the Prophet Muhammad, protect Muslims in Mali and ‘avenge the innocent people killed by the French killing machine’.⁹⁵ Through its official media foundation al-Zallaqa, JNIM continued to denounce the ‘occupying French forces’. In a 14-minute video, entitled ‘If they kill you, kill them’, the group once again lambasted France and its president Macron for justifying the republication of the depictions of the Prophet Muhammad.

France announced in June 2021 its decision to end Operation Barkhane, through which the country spearheaded counter terrorism efforts in the Sahel.⁹⁶ JNIM had previously sniped at French president Macron for using ‘any means, be it coercion or intimidation’ to try to justify France’s presence in the Sahel.⁹⁷ In JNIM’s view, the French government failed to coax support among the public for keeping French forces in Mali, and instead faced increasing demands ‘from the political elite or from French civil society’ to withdraw from the region.⁹⁸ According to JNIM, France used its foreign intelligence agency, the Direction Générale De La Sécurité Extérieure (DGSE), to coerce Sahelian governments into continuing to support France’s presence in the region, as well as to stir up dissent among the ranks of its ‘*mujahidin*’. JNIM claimed that the DGSE ‘deliberately leaked a video clip’ of a meeting between ‘*mujahidin* leaders in the Sahel’, led by the former leader of AQIM, Abu Musab Abdulwadud. According to JNIM, remarks by the DGSE director that the video had been recorded by an infiltrator constituted a ‘blatant manipulation’. The group also argued that the video was leaked in the days leading up to the N’Djamena G5 summit in a bid to ‘blackmail the governments of the region, scaring them with regard to the expansion of the *mujahidin* if the French withdraw’.⁹⁹

JNIM’s leader Iyyad Ag Ghali later commented on France’s decision to terminate Operation Barkhane and abandon its ‘leading position in the crusader

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ JNIM statement, ‘Suicide operation on French occupation forces and a rocket attack from O3 Axes on the same day on an occupation base’, Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), al-Zallaqa Media Production Company, 14/01/2021.

⁹⁶ ‘France ends West African Barkhane military operation’, Reuters, 10/06/2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/france-announce-troop-reduction-sahel-operations-sources-2021-06-10/>.

⁹⁷ JNIM statement, ‘15 Killed and a large number of war spoils in an overwhelming attack on a military location of the Bamako Government Forces on Boni and a message to the French elite and people after the DGSE leak in the days leading up to the N’Djamena Summit’, Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), al-Zallaqa Media Production Company, 12/02/2021.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

campaign'.¹⁰⁰ In Ghali's view, France was being punished for 'fighting against God's laws', insulting the Prophet and invading Muslim countries.¹⁰¹ Ghali added that France's punishment was delivered by God's 'hidden soldiers', who beheaded those who mocked the Prophet.¹⁰² In addition, Ghali framed the COVID-19 pandemic as a punishment affecting both France and the US.¹⁰³ JNIM also addressed the French population, requesting them to put pressure on their political leaders in order to hasten the withdrawal from Mali and allow for *sharia* implementation in the country. The alternative, JNIM threatened, would be costly both economically and in terms of human lives.¹⁰⁴

JNIM has yet to confirm its involvement in the kidnapping of French journalist Olivier Dubois in Gao on 8 April 2021. In May 2021, a short video in which Olivier Dubois stated he was kidnapped by JNIM circulated among pro-AQ supporters on Telegram.¹⁰⁵ Similarly, no official claim of responsibility has emerged so far following an attack near Pama Reserve in eastern Burkina Faso on 26 April 2021. In the attack, two Spanish reporters and an Irish wildlife campaigner were killed by militants while on an anti-poaching mission. The area was reportedly under the control of JNIM.¹⁰⁶ Pro-AQ online circles shared pictures said to show the bodies of 'European crusaders', allegedly extracted from a video in which one of the militants claimed his affiliation to JNIM. The group's perceived policy to steer away from new instances of hostage-taking or violence targeting civilians could signal its intention to emulate the Taliban approach. In 2020, JNIM had already appeared willing to engage in talks with the Malian government, contingent upon France's withdrawal from Mali. While the Malian government previously entertained the idea of negotiations with JNIM, in 2021 the plan appeared to have reached an impasse. Mali experienced two recent coups and the new interim government appeared to reconsider pursuing dialogue with JNIM in light of France's opposition to negotiations.

Messages by JNIM's close affiliate in the Sahel, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), predominantly focused on the political situation in Algeria. In a statement by its official mouthpiece al-Andalus Media, AQIM addressed the 'free Algerian people' and stated that the consequences of 'half a revolution' could be worse than no revolution at all.¹⁰⁷ In AQIM's view, the Algerian

¹⁰⁰ Iyyad Ghali audio speech, 'Verily, the help of God is near - [Quran 2:214]', Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), al-Zallaqa Media Production Company, 10/08/2021.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² It is most likely that Ghali is referring to the terrorist attack that took place in Conflans-Sainte-Honorine, France, on 16/10/2020.

¹⁰³ Iyyad Ghali audio speech, 'Verily, the help of God is near - [Quran 2:214]', Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), al-Zallaqa Media Production Company, 10/08/2021.

¹⁰⁴ JNIM statement, 'Killing of 3 Elite Forces in a qualitative operation against French occupation forces near Hombori', Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), al-Zallaqa Media Production Company, 02/01/2021.

¹⁰⁵ Warith al-Qassam shares video showing French journalist Olivier Dubois kidnapped in Mali, Warith al-Qassam, 05/05/2021.

¹⁰⁶ 'Impossible to rescue: how three foreigners died in Burkina Faso', Al Jazeera, 1/12/2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2021/12/1/impossible-to-rescue-how-three-foreigners-died-in-burkina-faso/>.

¹⁰⁷ AQIM statement, 'Statement about the jihadist and current political events in Algeria', al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), al-Andalus Media Production Company, 18/01/2021.

government endeavoured to receive international recognition, especially from the US and France, to avoid being overthrown as had occurred in other countries, including Iraq and Yemen. Labelling counter terrorism measures in Algeria as part of a 'fight against Islam', AQIM suggested that the Algerian government adopted a number of ploys to prevent Algerians from protesting, including the COVID-19 pandemic and terrorism-related concerns.¹⁰⁸

With a statement issued on 31 December 2021, the Nigeria-based group Jama'at Ansar al-Muslimin fi Bilad al-Sudan (Ansaru) revealed that it had pledged allegiance to AQIM in 2020. The statement provided insight into the foundation of Ansaru in 2012, which allegedly occurred because of the deviation of Boko Haram's leader Abubakr Shekau from the 'authentic' ideological mainstay. According to the statement, Ansaru operates in the north of Nigeria, bordering Niger in the north and Benin in the west.¹⁰⁹

5.3 Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahidin (al-Shabab)

The al-Shabab al-Mujahidin Movement (al-Shabab), AQ's contingent in the Horn of Africa, stepped up its military operations across Somalia and neighbouring Kenya. In 2021, propaganda by al-Shabab highlighted attacks against multiple targets of the Western-backed Somali government and the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) forces. Targets included government buildings¹¹⁰ and employees, as well as a UN-funded airport in central Somalia.¹¹¹

Al-Shabab was able to capitalise on Somalia's simmering political instability ahead of repeatedly delayed parliamentary and presidential elections to create upheaval.¹¹² The group was also emboldened by the disengagement of Western powers, as the US withdrew its troops supporting Somalia's counter terror efforts in January 2021 and AMISOM was downscaled. The staggering number of attacks carried out in 2021 identified al-Shabab as one of AQ's most powerful affiliates and one that displayed increased operational capabilities.

The prolific propaganda apparatus of al-Shabab comprises Shahada News Agency, which reports on the group's operations and al-Kata'ib Media Production Company, which publishes messages from al-Shabab's leadership as

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Jama'at Ansar al-Muslimin fi Bilad al-Sudan (Ansaru) statement giving information about the group and announcing that they pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Jama'at Ansar al-Muslimin fi Bilad al-Sudan (Ansaru), 31/12/2021.

¹¹⁰ Shahada News Agency article, 'Dozens killed and wounded in an attack by Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahidin at the main security checkpoint for the Presidential Palace in Mogadishu', al-Shabab al-Mujahidin Movement, Shahada News Agency, 13/02/2021.

¹¹¹ Shahada News Agency article, 'Al-Shabab al-Mujahidin Movement destroy UN-funded airport ahead of its opening in central Somalia', al-Shabab al-Mujahidin Movement, Shahada News Agency, 19/09/2021.

¹¹² Somali parliamentarians were sworn into office on 14/04/2022. At the time of writing, a date to select a new president is yet to be set. 'Somalia swears in lawmakers, paving way for presidential vote', Reuters, 15/04/2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/somalia-swears-lawmakers-paving-way-presidential-vote-2022-04-14/>.

well as audio-visual productions on ideological matters. Such productions are often delivered as a series comprising several instalments. The AQ-aligned Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF) complements al-Shabab's propaganda efforts by translating the group's claims of attacks into English.

In line with other AQ affiliates, al-Shabab singled out French and American interests in Africa as the 'highest priority' for attacks through the words of its leader Abu Ubaida Ahmad Umar. In a 21-minute video, Umar addressed the people of Djibouti, a country he described as a 'home and safe sanctuary for the American and French crusaders'. Umar urged Muslims in Djibouti to target US and French nationals and to 'kill them in the streets and in the hotels where they rejoice; bury them in the beaches where they party; massacre them as they have massacred our Muslim brothers. They have led our youth astray so kill them and let their blood flow in the streets of Djibouti'.¹¹³ The al-Shabab leader called upon the youth in Djibouti to emulate the perpetrators of terrorist attacks inside France, mentioning the Kouachi brothers (perpetrators of the 2015 Charlie Hebdo attacks) and Abdullah al-Shishani (perpetrator of the 2020 Conflans-Sainte-Honorine attack) and explaining that 'nothing terrorises the disbelievers more than individual martyrdom operations'.¹¹⁴

Al-Shabab highlighted the opportunism of 'occupying forces' in the Horn of Africa, denouncing their lack of consideration for the 'massacres' perpetrated by local regimes. For al-Shabab, the situation in the Tigray region and 'the proxy war' in northern Ethiopia are a case in point.¹¹⁵ The civil war between the Ethiopian government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front could provide fertile ground for al-Shabab to take root in Ethiopia as a result of weakened counter terrorism efforts against the group in Somalia. Al-Shabab also alleged that a reduction of EU funds dedicated to the support of Kenyan forces in Somalia led to their withdrawal from Somalia, where they had been deployed since 2007. The article by Shahada News also implied that the reduction may have been triggered by a discrepancy between the funds received by the local governments and the actual support delivered to African troops in the field.¹¹⁶

In the context of the upcoming elections in Somalia, Al-Shabab upbraided the Somali government in a six-part video series entitled 'Farmajo: False promises and fading hopes', which aimed at assessing the work carried out by the Somali government, headed by the president Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, aka Farmajo. The videos, released both in English and Somali with an English transcript, elaborated on various issues, from the economy to federalism, while shedding light on the plundering of Somali resources. Upon this assessment, al-

¹¹³ Abu Ubaida Ahmad Umar speech, 'A message to the people of Djibouti', al-Shabab al-Mujahidin Movement, al-Kata'ib Media Production Company, 27/03/2021.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Shahada news article, 'Hundreds of Somalis were killed in massacres by Afar militias and the proxy war intensified in Ethiopia', al-Shabab al-Mujahidin Movement, Shahada News Agency, 28/07/2021.

¹¹⁶ Shahada news article, 'European Union cuts budget for Kenyan forces in Somalia by more than half after secret partial withdrawal of Kenyans', al-Shabab al-Mujahidin Movement, Shahada News Agency, 27/07/2021.

Shabab concluded that in order for Somalia to be self-sufficient and achieve peace, *sharia* needs to be established in the country, which is now ‘at the mercy of foreign countries and institutions’.¹¹⁷ On the occasion of the celebration of *Eid al-Adha*, al-Shabab urged Somalis to boycott the upcoming elections and instead focus on pursuing the establishment of *sharia* law.¹¹⁸

In March 2021, Shahada News Agency claimed that the group succeeded in freeing over 400 prisoners from the central prison of Bosaso, in the semi-autonomous Puntland state of Somalia. The claim of responsibility was followed by an audio speech by Abu Abdurahman Mahad Warsame, one of the group’s most prominent leaders. The Somali language audio speech was released by al-Kata’ib Media and translated into Arabic by Shahada News Agency. According to Shahada News, Warsame reiterated that ‘freeing Muslims who are held captive in enemies’ prisons’ is a component of jihad and an obligation on all Muslims. According to Warsame, ‘freeing the captives’ presents two advantages: firstly, it prevents the prisoners from being killed or tortured; and secondly, it protects them from abandoning Islam. Warsame defined the prison raid in Bosaso as ‘a blessed attack against the administration of Puntland’ that led to the freeing of 400 prisoners, including ‘innocent women’. He also explained that the ‘*mujahidin*’ brought the liberated prisoners to secure regions that are under al-Shabab’s control, implying that they were absorbed into their ranks.¹¹⁹

It is worth noting that al-Shabab warned Muslims in Somalia against taking the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccination due to its ‘adverse side effects’.¹²⁰ Al-Shabab highlighted that a number of European countries, including Germany, France, Italy, Spain and Ireland, had suspended the use of the AstraZeneca vaccine due to safety concerns. Al-Shabab urged Muslims in Somalia to reject this vaccine, in order to prevent risks to their health and lives. The group also expressed their condolences for Muslims who died due to the COVID-19 pandemic and urged those who live in Mogadishu to stay away from ‘the Western crusaders’ living in the Halane base camp and TurkSom military base describing them as ‘the main source of coronavirus reaching Somalia’.¹²¹

5.4 Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)

Official propaganda by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) highlighted a limited number of attacks in Yemen during 2021, suggesting a decline in the group’s operational capabilities. The group’s narrative focused on mobilising

¹¹⁷ Al-Kata’ib Media Production Company video series, ‘Farmajo: False promises and fading hopes’, al-Shabab al-Mujahidin Movement, al-Kata’ib Media Production Company, February 2021.

¹¹⁸ Al-Kata’ib Media Production Company video, ‘O my people, fear Allah - An Address by Sheikh Abu Ubaida Ahmad Umar – May Allah protect him’, al-Shabab al-Mujahidin Movement, al-Kata’ib Media Production Company, 19/07/2021.

¹¹⁹ Abu Abdurahman Mahad Warsame audio speech, ‘Free the captives’, al-Shabab al-Mujahidin Movement, al-Kata’ib Media Production Company, 08/03/2021.

¹²⁰ Al-Shabab statement, ‘Muslims of Somalia must reject the unsafe coronavirus vaccine [AstraZeneca]’, al-Shabab al-Mujahidin Movement, al-Kata’ib Media Production Company, 30/03/2021.

¹²¹ Ibid.

Yemenis to fight against Shia and on portraying the Houthis as American pawns. For instance, in a five-page statement issued through its official media outlet al-Malahim Media, AQAP condemned a Houthi attack on Marib, Yemen, which occurred after the US's decision to remove the Houthis from their list of foreign terrorist organisations.¹²² AQAP berated the US and Western countries for supporting the Houthis and called upon the people of Yemen to stay patient and steadfast in the fight against them.¹²³

AQAP also rebuffed claims featured in a UN report maintaining that its leader, Khalid Batarfi, had been arrested in October 2020. The report also mentioned that the high-ranking AQAP member Saad bin Atif al-Awlaqi was killed during the same operation. Almost two months after the UN report was published, AQAP officially denied the claims, highlighting in a two-page statement that 'these kinds of repetitive rumours' only aim to maintain a 'psychological war on the *mujahidin*'. Preceding al-Zawahiri's tirade on the topic, AQAP accused the UN of being a tool to support US and Western interests and urged mainstream media outlets to disseminate the news about the denial of the arrest.¹²⁴ During 2021, al-Malahim Media issued multiple videos featuring its leader. Most of them were instalments of various different video series on ideological and religious topics.

After a four-year hiatus, in June 2021 AQAP published the sixth issue of its 'Inspire Guide', dedicated to the supermarket shooting in Colorado, US, which occurred on 22 March 2021. The 14-page document provided an overview of the life of the Syria-born perpetrator, who moved to the US with his parents at an early age. The author of the magazine quoted posts from the perpetrator's social media accounts, adding that in 2017 the perpetrator physically attacked an American student who insulted him because of his name and for being a Muslim. The publication also included a series of instructions for planning a terrorist attack, highlighting the importance of choosing a location where targeted crowds could not easily hide or escape. AQAP also underscored the importance of creating a media message for the operation, emphasising that it 'multiplies its impact many times over'. The author also provided detailed instructions on how to film the attack, suggesting livestreaming the attack via Facebook or YouTube, 'so our enemies who killed the Muslims in New Zealand in this way would not be ahead of us' (a reference to the New Zealand attack of 15 March 2019). The distribution of the media message, from the social media accounts in the perpetrator's name to national media outlets, was also explained in detail by AQAP.¹²⁵

¹²² US Department of State, 'Revocation of the terrorist designation of Ansarallah', 12/02/2021, <https://www.state.gov/revocation-of-the-terrorist-designations-of-ansarallah/>.

¹²³ AQAP statement, 'Statement regarding the attack by the Houthis on Marib', al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al-Malahim Media Production Company, 01/03/2021.

¹²⁴ AQAP statement, 'Statement of Denial', al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al-Malahim Media Production Company, 08/04/2021.

¹²⁵ Inspire Praise & Guide, issue no. 6, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al-Malahim Media Production Company, 29/06/2021.

In late December 2021, AQAP promoted in a video the launch of a new media outlet called Shahed, described as ‘a media service from al-Malahim Media Foundation’.¹²⁶ In the video, AQAP criticised Arab governments over the normalisation of ties with Israel. It praised attacks that took place in Israel and in the Palestinian territories over the course of one month between November and December 2021. The video also featured a short speech by AQAP leader Khalid Batarfi, in which he addressed Palestinians, praised them for their ‘jihad, steadfastness and sacrifices’ and called upon them to continue their jihad.¹²⁷

5.5 AQ-supporting propaganda incited and praised terrorist attacks against police forces

AQ-supporting online networks took their cue from AQ official media and reflected an anti-French narrative in their productions. In the aftermath of the terrorist attack in which a police employee was killed on 23 April 2021 in Rambouillet, France, pro-AQ online supporters and supporting media expressed satisfaction at the failure of Western countries to suppress the terrorist threat against police forces within their own borders. Thabat News Agency, a pro-AQ media outlet, published a statement celebrating the attack in Rambouillet as a ‘major escalation’ in the ‘Muslim conquest’ of Europe.¹²⁸ It noted that some countries had mobilised in preparation for the targeting of police forces, mentioning that Spain and Argentina took heed of the threat after the publication of the second issue of the ‘Wolves of Manhattan’ magazine, which provided instructions on how to attack the police.¹²⁹ However, for Thabat, the Rambouillet attack represented a failure of the French intelligence services in protecting police personnel, as it noted that the perpetrator had no criminal history and escaped intelligence surveillance. Thabat also underscored that Muslims were moving beyond group affiliations to join the battle against the ‘enemies in the West’ en masse.

Jaysh al-Malahim al-Elektroni (Al-Malahem Cyber Army), another pro-AQ media group responsible for the publication of the ‘Wolves of Manhattan’ magazine, praised the perpetrator of the Rambouillet terrorist attack and urged sympathisers to follow his example. Jaysh al-Malahim al-Elektroni described the attack as revenge against ‘the enemies of the *umma*’ who insulted ‘the messenger of God’.¹³⁰ The media group listed a number of perpetrators of terrorist attacks and called on supporters to emulate them. Jaysh al-Malahim al-

¹²⁶ Al-Malahim Media video, ‘Shahed, a media service from al-Malahim’, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Shahed, 25/12/2021.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Thabat News Agency statement praising the Rambouillet attacker, Thabat News Agency, 03/05/2021.

¹²⁹ Wolves of Manhattan issue no. 2, Jaysh al-Malahim al-Elektroni (Al-Malahem Cyber Army), 14/04/2021.

¹³⁰ Jaysh al-Malahim al-Elektroni, ‘Statement of blessings for the martyrdom operation of Jamal Gorchene - may God accept him - near the French capital, Paris’, Jaysh al-Malahim al-Elektroni (Al-Malahem Cyber Army), 24/04/2021.

Elektroni maintained that French president Macron failed to protect the French people and announced ‘to all Western peoples that the operations of the Muslims in your homes will continue and intensify, so do not fall for the false promises of your rulers’.¹³¹ No official claim of responsibility has been made so far for the attack in Rambouillet.

In 2021, AQ online supporters and supporting media displayed an increase in propaganda production and related technical capabilities. The pro-AQ media outlet Jaysh al-Malahim al-Elektroni exemplified this trend, by boasting a resilient online presence spanning across multiple platforms and including web assets. The media outlet promised a cryptocurrency reward to the first individual to send photo evidence documenting the killing of a police officer in Western countries.¹³² The threatening nature of the content produced by Jaysh al-Malahim al-Elektroni is reminiscent of IS-supporting propaganda. For instance, the media outlet published a statement inciting supporters to exploit demonstrations against COVID-19 restrictions and vaccinations in Europe to carry out attacks. The statement urged ‘Muslim brothers in the countries of the crusaders’, especially in France, Spain and the UK to seize upon the opportunity provided by these gatherings and carry out jihad against the ‘enemies of God’. The editors added that if supporters were not able to target police officers, they should ‘at least’ damage their vehicles, leading to financial damage. In addition, the media outlet urged Muslims to call on Christians to join these demonstrations.¹³³

Finally, in the wake of suspension campaigns on Telegram during 2021, AQ propagandists redoubled their efforts to remain relevant online thanks to GeoNews, a self-hosted instance of Rocket.Chat technologies. Websites containing official addresses by AQ Core leader al-Zawahiri surfaced on new domains, testifying to the importance the group places on diversifying its propaganda dissemination vectors.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Wolves of Manhattan issue no. 2, Jaysh al-Malahim al-Elektroni (Al-Malahem Cyber Army), 14/04/2021.

¹³³ Jaysh al-Malahim al-Elektroni statement, ‘Urgent statement - Statement regarding the demonstrations in the countries of filthy Christians because of the consequences of the coronavirus’, Jaysh al-Malahim al-Elektroni (Al-Malahem Cyber Army), 11/08/2021.

6. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham

6.1 HTS continued to stamp out opposition in Idlib while casting itself as a mainstream opposition group

In 2021, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) continued to consolidate its military and administrative control over part of north-western Syria. It did so by beating off opposition groups, arresting commanders of other jihadist groups that do not belong to the 'al-Fath al-Mubin' operations room,¹³⁴ and by stifling internal dissent. HTS's communications reflected the group's endeavours to cast itself as a mainstream opposition group, focused on providing services to the people of Idlib through its civilian wing, the so-called salvation government.

In a bid to gain international recognition, HTS leader Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani granted interviews to American Frontline journalist Martin Smith on 1 and 14 February 2021.¹³⁵ In the interviews, al-Jawlani termed the terrorist designation of HTS 'unfair' and 'political'. Al-Jawlani stressed that his group had always been against carrying out operations outside of Syria to target European or US citizens. He also denied torture allegations and said he would grant international human rights groups access to prisons.¹³⁶ IS online supporters, in particular, blasted al-Jawlani not only for his perceived duplicity, but also for wearing Western attire during the interview. A photo of al-Jawlani posted on Twitter by Smith inspired supporter-generated content such as memes and posters, including one by the IS-aligned Al Dawat Media.

HTS continued to reject its terrorist designation, including by rebuffing statements that referred to it as a terrorist group. In response to a communiqué issued by the Turkish Ministry of Defence that mentioned individuals trying to enter Turkey illegally as 'members of the terrorist group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham',¹³⁷ HTS's Media Relations Office denied HTS's affiliation with the individuals and objected to being described as 'terrorists' by the Ministry. HTS insisted on presenting itself as 'a Sunni entity that preserves the security and safety of a large segment of the Syrian people in the liberated areas', and as 'an essential actor defending the Syrian revolution and protecting the liberated areas from the attacks of Russia, Iran and other sectarian militias'.¹³⁸ However, HTS faced growing resentment from locals over the deteriorating economic situation in the areas it controls. The unprecedented increase in the cost of bread prompted al-Jawlani to make a USD 3 million subsidy available to bakeries

¹³⁴ Al-Fath al-Mubin is an HTS-led operations room of Syrian rebel and jihadist factions participating in the Syrian civil war.

¹³⁵ The interviews were included in a Frontline documentary entitled 'The Jihadist', released on 01/06/2021.

¹³⁶ Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani Interview, 'The Jihadist', PBS Frontline, 01/06/2021, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/the-jihadist/>.

¹³⁷ Iba' News article, 'Clarification from Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham about the Turkish Ministry of Defence's statement', Iba' News Agency, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), 25/02/2021.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

run by the ‘salvation government’.¹³⁹ In an attempt to stimulate an economic rebound, HTS also supported development projects, such as the opening of a food market in Sarmada, north of Idlib.¹⁴⁰ In its communications, HTS blamed the dire economic and social crises on the Syrian regime and Russia, stressing that ‘thousands of civilians’ preferred to flee Syria rather than remain in the areas ‘occupied by the Russian militias’.¹⁴¹

Tanzim Hurras al-Din (THD), AQ’s local affiliate, expressed its frustration over HTS’s heavy-handed approach towards opponents. The THD leader, Abu Hammam al-Suri, also known as Abu Hammam al-Shami, sniped at rival HTS for refusing to settle a feud related to the imprisonment of ‘*mujahidin* brothers’ through an independent and impartial court.¹⁴² According to al-Shami, HTS was responsible for the ‘unfair’ imprisonment of a number of militants for over a year, in spite of several attempts by THD to settle the matter according to *sharia*.¹⁴³ Al-Shami labelled HTS’s approach to the matter, conveyed through its media channels, as ‘arrogant and defiant of Islamic principles’.¹⁴⁴ The THD leader even compared HTS with IS, as the latter also spurned attempts at independent and impartial judgement to conflict resolution and instead opted for capturing and killing ‘*mujahidin*’.¹⁴⁵ HTS’s reluctance to solve the dispute and its relentless crackdown on THD members signalled the group’s intention of quashing THD.

In the same vein, HTS continued to arrest prominent members of other jihadist factions, for instance Firqatul Ghuraba. In September 2021, Firqatul Ghuraba’s media outlet 19HH issued a statement reportedly on behalf of the family of its leader Omar Diaby, aka ‘Omar Omsen’, who had been arrested by HTS on 29 August 2021. In the statement, Omsen’s family lamented the continued imprisonment of Omar Omsen, who had been held by HTS for more than a year, while also denouncing the conditions of his detention.¹⁴⁶ The group revealed that Omsen’s son, Bilal, was also allegedly arrested by HTS while welcoming a new member of Firqatul Ghuraba. Following a disagreement with HTS’s border security officials, Bilal Diaby, the new recruit and another member were detained by HTS. Omsen’s family added that while the new recruit and the other member were apparently released after a one-month detention, Bilal Diaby remained in jail without any charges having been pressed by HTS. Omsen’s family also accused HTS of preventing them from living a ‘safe and secure’ life

¹³⁹ ‘HTS subsidises bread in Idlib as part of attempt to govern’, al-Monitor, 01/12/2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/12/hts-subsidizes-bread-idlib-part-attempt-govern>.

¹⁴⁰ ‘Syrian jihadist group opens food market north of Idlib’, al-Monitor, 26/12/2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/12/syrian-jihadist-group-opens-food-market-north-idlib>.

¹⁴¹ Iba’ News article, ‘Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham denies rumours of a crossing for civilians in the Saraqib area’, Iba’ News Agency, 22/02/2021.

¹⁴² Abu Hammam al-Suri statement, ‘God does not like the disclosure of [anyone’s] evil [conduct] in speech except by someone who has been wronged, and God is all-hearing, all-knowing [4:148]’, Tanzim Hurras al-Din (THD), 11/09/2021.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Abu Hammam al-Suri statement, ‘And when it is said to him, ‘Fear Allah’, pride in the sin takes hold of him [2:206]’, Tanzim Hurras al-Din (THD), 23/09/2021.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Firqatul Ghuraba statement allegedly issued by Omar Omsen’s family regarding his detention by HTS, 19HH Studio Oms Firdaws, Firqatul Ghuraba, 15/09/2021.

according to their interpretation of the religion, comparing HTS's approach to the one of the 'disbelieving French authorities'. A later 19HH statement announced that Omar Omsen had started a hunger strike to protest his detention.¹⁴⁷

HTS's suppression of jihadist groups, as well as the purges of hardline members within its own ranks, fed into the group's overarching strategy of distancing itself from its terrorist brand and seeking international recognition. With this in mind, the media apparatus linked to HTS displayed some notable changes in 2021. A new media outlet, Alaskary Media, took a prominent stance in the reporting of activities by the al-Fath al-Mubin Operations Room. Alaskary Media, whose content was distributed via its official website and other online assets such as YouTube, Telegram and Facebook, resembled an unbiased and credible media outlet in content and style. It attempted to portray HTS's forces as regular armed forces, for instance by introducing HTS militants as experts in military engineering, medical support and tactical deployment. Alaskary exhibited a diversified media production, including videos, statements and infographics listing the 'military operations' carried out by HTS and its affiliates in the areas of Idlib and Aleppo. While the links between Alaskary Media and the HTS leadership remained unclear, productions by the media outlet painted HTS as a political entity as much as an armed group, reflecting HTS's desire to present itself as a normalised actor on the international scene.

¹⁴⁷ Firqatul Ghuraba statement allegedly issued by Omar Omsen's family regarding his detention by HTS and his hunger strike, 19HH Studio Oms Firdaws, Firqatul Ghuraba, 18/10/2021.

7. Cross-cutting themes in online jihadist propaganda

7.1. The Palestinian cause

In May 2021, protests over the potential eviction of Palestinian families from their homes in East Jerusalem led to a new outbreak of violence between Israel and the Palestinians. The unrest had started in Sheikh Jarrah, a contentious district in East Jerusalem, but soon grew and spread to the Palestinian territories, turning into a full-fledged conflict in the Gaza strip. Jihadist groups of different ideological shades rallied behind the Palestinians and showed their support in their propaganda releases.

AQ and its affiliates vilified Israel for its suppression of the demonstrations and lambasted Arab countries for taking sides with the West instead of defending the Palestinian cause. AQ firstly elaborated on the clashes through its newsletter *al-Nafir*, whereby it equalled the current predicament of the *umma* to the one experienced during the Arab-Israeli wars in 1948 and 1967. In the newsletter, AQ railed against governments of Arab countries that ‘betrayed their own people and religion’ and instead sided with the West. By contrast, *al-Nafir* praised the actions of the ‘*mujahidin*’ who remained steadfast in fighting the enemy and incited all Muslims to rise against the ‘oppressors’.¹⁴⁸ In AQ’s view, jihad does not require any specific means or weapons, just the strong will of each Muslim to support the Palestinian cause.

Another encomium appeared in a subsequent official statement by AQ Core, in which the group applauded the mettle of Palestinians in the face of the ‘umpteenth attack’ carried out by the Israeli forces inside their territories, as well as their refusal of any compromise or proposal of peaceful coexistence. AQ Core emphasised the global nature of the Palestinian cause, while calling upon its affiliates to continue the jihadist campaign ‘Jerusalem will never be Judaized’ and wage jihad, especially against Arab countries, accused by AQ of colluding with the Jews.¹⁴⁹ The Palestinian cause is recurrently posited by AQ as an overarching goal, as the group strives to project a unity of purpose among its branches. The statement concluded by urging ‘*mujahidin*’ to conduct new attacks against Israel, ‘crusaders’ and ‘Zionist’ Arab countries.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ *Al-Nafir*, issue no.34, Al-Qaeda (AQ) Core, al-Sahab Media Production Company, 12/05/2021.

¹⁴⁹ AQ Core statement, ‘Statement of love, veneration and support for our people in Palestine’, al-Qaeda (AQ) Core, al-Sahab Media Production Company, 17/05/2021.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

The message of solidarity with Palestinians was echoed in the propaganda by other AQ branches. Al-Shabab's official mouthpiece al-Kata'ib Media Foundation issued a statement commenting on 'the latest Jewish assault on al-Quds [Jerusalem]',¹⁵¹ once again praising 'the brave knights of Jerusalem and Gaza' for their sacrifice and for remaining firm on 'the battlefronts defending the sanctities of Islam, the lands of the Muslims and instilling fear in the hearts of the Zionists'.¹⁵²

The gist of the *Eid al-Fitr's* celebratory message by AQAP focused on the Palestinian cause, wishing victory upon the *umma* in the Palestinian territories and downfall for all its declared enemies.¹⁵³ The soaring of the conflict and the ensuing annulment of Palestinian elections was viewed by AQIM as a blessing, as the group reminded its followers that democracy should not be perceived as a solution to the plight of Palestinians. Instead, AQIM propounded jihad against the enemy as the only viable means of regaining possession of the disputed lands.¹⁵⁴ For its part, AQ's Syrian affiliate THD lauded 'the heroic behaviour of brothers in Palestine' and encouraged all Muslims to mobilise against the 'Zio-Crusader' campaign usurping Palestinian territories.¹⁵⁵

IS commented on the escalation in a dedicated editorial of its al-Naba' magazine, issued nearly two weeks following the onset of the clashes. The group cast itself and its vision of jihad as the only way 'to reach Jerusalem' and boasted that its contingents, stretching from Iraq to Africa, are on the right track to succeed.¹⁵⁶ IS-supporting media outlets like the al-Battar Media honed in on the official IS position, calling upon Palestinians and 'lone actors' in the conflict area to undertake jihad, which they framed as the 'only solution'.¹⁵⁷

7.2. 20th anniversary of the 11 September 2001 attacks

As the world marked the 20th anniversary of the 11 September 2001 attacks (aka 9/11), jihadist terrorist groups and their supporters took to their online spaces in an outpouring of celebration. The occasion acquired an even greater significance in light of the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan. AQ online supporters, in particular, redoubled their efforts on Telegram by creating scores of accounts to share propaganda content celebrating the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks.

¹⁵¹ Arabic name for Jerusalem.

¹⁵² Al-Shabab statement, 'The latest Jewish assault on al-Quds', al-Shabab al-Mujahidin Movement, al-Kata'ib Media Production Company, 18/05/2021.

¹⁵³ AQAP statement, 'Statement on the celebration of Eid al-Fitr', al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al-Malahim Media Production Company, 13/05/2021.

¹⁵⁴ AQIM statement, 'Statement on the celebration of *Eid al-Fitr*', al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), al-Andalus Media Production Company, 13/05/2021.

¹⁵⁵ THD statement, 'Al-Aqsa mosque is a responsibility on our necks', Tanzim Hurras al-Din, Sham al-Ribat Media, 16/05/2021.

¹⁵⁶ Al-Naba' (The News), issue no. 268, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al 'I'lam al-Markazi, 20/05/2021.

¹⁵⁷ Al-Battar Media video, 'Oh people of Palestine, this is the only solution', al-Battar Media, 20/05/2021.

The AQ Core leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, appeared in a video for the first time after a long absence that had triggered widespread speculation about his alleged death. In the video, entitled ‘Jerusalem will not be judaized’, al-Zawahiri elaborated on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and voiced condemnation of Arab and Western politicians for their politics and agendas towards Israel.¹⁵⁸ While his address primarily focused on the Palestinian cause, al-Zawahiri also praised the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks, labelling them as the ‘19 lions of Islam’, who ‘stabbed the USA in their heart’ and led the US to withdraw from Afghanistan ‘broken after a war that lasted 20 years’.¹⁵⁹

Jaysh al-Malahim al-Elektroni, which stood out in 2021 as one of the most prominent media outlets in the AQ-supporting landscape, capitalised on the anniversary to level new threats against the West. Its productions included several posters celebrating the 9/11 attacks, as well as a first appendix to its serial publication ‘Wolves of Manhattan’, which hailed the attacks and their perpetrators, while calling for new violence relying on the same or a similar modus operandi. The author of the appendix contended that these attacks should not necessarily be carried out in the US and that ‘the enemies of Islam are spread all over the world’, suggesting France, UK, Spain, Russia, China, Sweden, Italy and other ‘crusader’ countries as potential targets.¹⁶⁰ Nashir al-Khayr, a media outlet that joined Jaysh al-Malahim al-Elektroni with a merger announced in June 2021, celebrated the anniversary with a ‘documentary’ video that traced back the history of terror attack plots against the US from the 1980s to 2001. Following a detailed summary of the events preceding and following 9/11, the narrator stressed that 20 years after the events, the ‘*mujahidin*’ are still carrying out attacks.¹⁶¹ Another popular pro-AQ media outlet, Thabat News Agency, echoed the words of al-Zawahiri in a statement describing the 19 perpetrators as ‘lions’.¹⁶²

IS and its online supporters endeavoured to portray 9/11 as a global jihadist victory against the US, as opposed to an AQ accomplishment. As AQ and its supporting media issued self-congratulatory messages for 9/11, IS supporters latched onto the online campaign with messaging that urged for more attacks, including against EU targets. The recently emerged pro-IS media outlet Du’at al-Falah released a series of 9/11-themed posters as part of an online campaign under the hashtag #The_war_of_Manhattan_11/09/2001.

¹⁵⁸ The title of this video, ‘Jerusalem will not be judaized’, references an operational campaign launched in January 2019 with attacks claimed by al-Shabab al-Mujahidin Movement (al-Shabab) and Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and praised by AQ Core in an official statement.

¹⁵⁹ Al-Sahab Media Production Company video, ‘Jerusalem will not be judaized - Part 1 - The Zionists of the Arabs: from Faisal to Bin Zayed’, al-Qaeda (AQ) Core, Al-Sahab Media Production Company.

¹⁶⁰ Jaysh al-Malahim al-Elektroni, ‘Wolves of Manhattan - Appendix No. 1 - 11 September “Are we not able to repeat it?!”’, Jaysh al-Malahim al-Elektroni (Al-Malahem Cyber Army), 11/09/2021.

¹⁶¹ Nashir al-Khayr video, ‘The trigger of wars’, Nashir al-Khayr, 11/09/2021.

¹⁶² Thabat News Agency statement, ‘The nineteen Lions’, Thabat News Agency, 12/09/2021.

7.3. Taliban takeover in Afghanistan

The planned withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan materialised at the end of August 2021, marking the end of a 20-year war and paving the way for the Taliban's return to power in the country. With a sweeping offensive starting in May 2021, the Taliban took control of virtually all of Afghanistan's provincial capitals and entered its capital city, Kabul, on 15 August 2021.

On the same day, the Taliban announced the takeover of Kabul, a move that crystallised the collapse of the Afghan government and affirmed the Taliban as the de facto governing power in Afghanistan. The Taliban justified its entry into Kabul with the need to fill a growing security vacuum that ensued after Afghanistan's military, police and government personnel defected or were evacuated from the capital.¹⁶³ As the last US Forces left Afghanistan and the Taliban took control of Kabul's international airport on 31 August 2021, the Taliban's spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid announced via Twitter the 'complete independence' of Afghanistan.¹⁶⁴

In its transition from insurgent actor to ruling authority, the Taliban overhauled its public strategic communications. In terms of content, it mothballed information on military operations in favour of topics related to governance and service provision. The Taliban also revamped its Twitter presence and relied on the account of its spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid¹⁶⁵ as the main platform for official announcements, alongside its traditional multilingual website 'Voice of Jihad'. Its official statements gained considerable traction on social media and were broadcast by international news outlets.

Aware of the intense international scrutiny, the Taliban adopted a conciliatory tone in its official communications while attempting to leverage internal and external support. In the immediate aftermath of its takeover, the Taliban focused on softening public perceptions and reassuring domestic and foreign audiences about its intention to establish an inclusive, participatory government fostering good governance, protection and development for all Afghans. While blasting the Afghan government for its poor provision of public services and disregard for civilians,¹⁶⁶ the group sought to highlight its ability to provide services in the country and its consideration for the protection of civilians.

¹⁶³ Taliban statement, 'Statement of the Islamic Emirate on the necessity for its forces to enter the city of Kabul', Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Voice of Jihad, 15/08/2021

¹⁶⁴ Zabihullah Mujahid, [@Zabehulah_M33], 30/08/2021, Twitter, https://twitter.com/Zabehulah_M33/status/1432449793926762503.

¹⁶⁵ Mujahid displayed the title 'Spokesman of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan' on his Twitter account [@Zabehulah_M33].

¹⁶⁶ Taliban statement, 'Theft and embezzlement even during the coronavirus epidemic?!', Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Voice of Jihad, 05/05/2020; Taliban statement, 'Using COVID-19 as a weapon of war', Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Voice of Jihad, 01/05/2020; Taliban statement 'Bidding Masters Farewell', Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Voice of Jihad, 05/05/2021; Taliban statement, 'The unmasking of Democracy', Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Voice of Jihad, 14/06/2021.

The Taliban highlighted its commitment to a peaceful transition of power, and the implementation of a genuine Islamic system that would make provisions for protecting Afghans across all segments of society. In particular, the group vowed to safeguard women's rights. Citizens, entrepreneurs, business owners, employees of the private and public sectors, diplomats and aid workers were all reassured that they would suffer no disruption or harm to their regular lives and activities under the political leadership of the Taliban.¹⁶⁷ In addition to granting 'amnesty' to all those who served in the Kabul administration or collaborated with foreign countries, the Taliban extended an open invitation to join its ranks and offered work opportunities matching one's 'skills and talents'.¹⁶⁸

The Taliban also refuted accusations of forcing females into marrying its fighters, and killing and mistreating civilians, prisoners and captives. It claimed those to be part of the 'baseless and vicious propaganda' of the Kabul administration against the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. The group reiterated its commitment to preventing violence and crimes, and asked the population to help report to its 'Grievance and Complaint Commission' anyone '[misusing] the title of *Mujahid* to harass or inflict pain to the people'.¹⁶⁹

In September 2021, the Leadership Office of the Taliban unveiled the composition of the newly formed government, referred to as 'the caretaker cabinet'.¹⁷⁰ The interim government featured a number of members of the Haqqani Network, a Sunni militant faction with links to AQ.¹⁷¹ Soon after, Hibatullah Akhundzada, the 'Supreme Leader of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan' laid out the main 'policies of the Islamic Emirate'. In particular, Akhundzada reiterated the Taliban's commitment to all provisions of international law, provided they are compatible with *sharia*. The Taliban leader also vowed not to allow Afghanistan to be manipulated by anyone in the country to engage in war or threaten the international community.¹⁷²

The Taliban also expressed its regret about the blacklisted status of some members of its new cabinet, especially members of the Haqqani network. According to the Taliban, the blacklisting constituted 'a clear violation of the Doha Agreement which is neither in the interest of the United States nor

¹⁶⁷ Taliban statement, 'Statement of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan on the latest advancements and developments in the country', Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Voice of Jihad, 15/08/2021; Taliban statement, 'Statement by the spokesman of the Islamic Emirate to reassure banks, chambers of commerce, exchange companies and the market in Kabul and the rest of the country', Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Voice of Jihad, 15/08/2021.

¹⁶⁸ Taliban statement, 'Statement of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan on the latest advancements and developments in the country', Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Voice of Jihad, 15/08/2021; Taliban statement, 'Message of felicitation of the esteemed Amir-ul-Mumineen Sheikh-ul-Hadith Mawlawi Hibatullah Akhundzada (HA) on the occasion of Eid-ul-Adha', Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Voice of Jihad, 18/07/2021.

¹⁶⁹ Taliban statement, 'Statement of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan on the latest advancements and developments in the country', Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Voice of Jihad, 15/08/2021.

¹⁷⁰ Taliban statement, 'Statement of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan regarding the 'caretaker' cabinet announcement', Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Voice of Jihad, 07/09/2021.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Taliban statement, 'Statement of the Leadership Office regarding Policies of Islamic Emirate following announcement of New Islamic Government and Cabinet', Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Voice of Jihad, 08/09/2021.

Afghanistan’, as well as an attempt ‘to meddle [in] the internal affairs of Afghanistan’.¹⁷³

Official communications by the Taliban since it seized control of Afghanistan continued to advocate for a ‘positive relationship with the rest of the world based on interaction’.¹⁷⁴ Nevertheless, the group did not refrain from denouncing perceived violations of its sovereignty over Afghanistan. For instance, an official statement by the group lambasted the US for allegedly invading the airspace of Afghanistan with drones.¹⁷⁵ On the 20th anniversary of the US invasion of Afghanistan, the Taliban warned of grave consequences should any other country decide to embark on similar military interventions.¹⁷⁶

As Afghanistan lurched into a dire humanitarian crisis, the Taliban appealed to the international community for the release of the country’s frozen assets. In parallel, the group needed to prove its law and order capabilities amid a deteriorating security situation. It tried to strike a balance between showing a pragmatic, palatable image to appease public opinion and consolidating power by quelling dissent. Tellingly, the Taliban adopted a counterinsurgency approach towards other jihadist groups operating in Afghanistan, especially the IS Khorasan Province, whose suspected members faced arrest and execution.¹⁷⁷ The large-scale suicide attack outside the Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul perpetrated at the end of August 2021 by an IS Khorasan Province operative was vehemently condemned by Zabihullah Mujahid on his Twitter account, vowing a ‘full force’ response against those responsible for the attack.¹⁷⁸

7.3.1. The Taliban takeover in Afghanistan: Reactions by IS

Since the signing of the US-Taliban agreement, IS has aimed to undermine the Taliban’s jihadist credentials, in a bid to cast itself as the only true guardian of Islamic values and *sharia*. Al-Naba’ gave considerable space to the IS Khorasan Province’s operations against the Taliban, which was portrayed as a US sell-out that betrayed the jihadist cause. For IS, the Taliban’s declared objective of establishing an independent Islamic regime was merely a facade, noting that the movement had previously failed in preventing the US from invading

¹⁷³ Taliban statement, ‘Latest US position regarding blacklist is a violation of Doha Agreement’, Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Voice of Jihad, 09/09/2021.

¹⁷⁴ Zabihullah Mujahid, [@Zabihullah_M3], 25/10/2021, Twitter, https://twitter.com/zabihullah_m3/status/1452569504941105152?s=21&t=NYIdFyWkfQPcOpyzX2uV9g.

¹⁷⁵ Zabihullah Mujahid statement, ‘About airspace of Afghanistan’, Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, 29/09/2021.

¹⁷⁶ Taliban statement, ‘Declaration of the Islamic Emirate on the American invasion of our Country’, Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, 07/10/2021.

¹⁷⁷ Susannah George, ‘Taliban sends hundreds of fighters to eastern Afghanistan to wage war against Islamic State’, The Washington Post, 22/11/2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/11/22/taliban-isis-afghanistan/>.

¹⁷⁸ Zabihullah Mujahid, [@Zabihullah_M33], 26/08/2021, Twitter, https://twitter.com/Zabihullah_M33/status/1430968651470020609.

Afghanistan. Before the takeover, IS had argued that the Taliban had pledged to ensure security and stability for the US and its allies in Afghanistan in exchange for their withdrawal from the country.¹⁷⁹ As such, according to IS, the Doha Agreement only served the interests of the US and its allies. According to the group, in spite of conflicting agendas, all parties agreed to constitute a common front to fight IS and prevent Afghanistan from becoming ‘a safe haven for the *mujahidin*’.¹⁸⁰

Soon after the Taliban’s march to Kabul, IS’s first reaction was to downplay the development by instead arguing that the fall of the country was part of a Western ploy to undermine IS. In *al-Naba’*, IS stated that there was ‘nothing new or surprising’ in the current situation for anyone who followed the Doha talks.¹⁸¹ According to the group, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan was an irreversible decision initiated by former US president Donald Trump and implemented by US president Joe Biden, and as such, the country’s capitulation to the Taliban was a natural, foreseeable consequence. IS upheld the view that the US simply returned the country to the Taliban, upon the latter’s acceptance of US terms. As such, the Taliban’s return to power should not be viewed as the result of a military or even political victory, but rather as the outcome of long negotiations, ‘peace talks, in luxury hotels’ and coordination between both parties. For IS, the fact that Taliban militants seized Kabul and met little resistance and that ‘the evacuation of thousands of crusaders and spies’ took place in an ‘atmosphere of confidence’ shows that the developments in Afghanistan were ‘not a victory for Islam’, but rather the ‘peaceful transfer of power from one tyrant to another’.¹⁸² The Taliban’s example, IS warned, is likely to undermine the jihadist cause as ‘more fighters will turn into negotiators, wandering around in hotel halls, hating the trenches and leaving them’. Once again, IS portrayed itself as the only guardian of Islamic values and laws, while reminding its adherents that true victory will not be achieved through peace talks and the mediations of Qatar, Russia, China and Iran.¹⁸³ This message was echoed by the group’s adherents across different platforms. Propaganda items shared by IS supporters conveyed an anti-Taliban stance and rejected the view that the developments in Afghanistan constitute a military or even political victory by the Taliban.

In addition to highlighting the Taliban’s perceived deviation from an ‘authentic’ ideological mainstay, IS’s communication strategy focused on exposing the group’s incapacity to provide stability and security in Afghanistan. IS criticised the perceived ‘deliberate media concealment’ efforts by the Taliban on the outcome of the recent attacks in the region, avoiding any ‘numbers’ or ‘statistics’ regarding the people killed and wounded by IS.¹⁸⁴ Amaq News Agency

¹⁷⁹ *Al-Naba’* (The News), issue no. 291, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al I’lam al-Markazi, 18/06/2021.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁸¹ *Al-Naba’* (The News), issue no. 300, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al I’lam al-Markazi, 20/08/2021.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁴ Amaq News Agency report, ‘Dozens of Shia killed and wounded in a double suicide attack that hit their largest temple in Kandahar, southern Afghanistan’, Islamic State (IS), Amaq News Agency, 16/10/2021.

also upbraided the Taliban for failing to fight terrorism, contrary to their pledge under the Doha peace agreement.¹⁸⁵ In its claim of the attack near the Hamid Karzai International Airport, IS boasted about the fact that the perpetrator, identified by the group as ‘Abdulrahman al-Lughari’, managed to evade security measures placed across Kabul by US forces and the Taliban.¹⁸⁶ In al-Naba’, IS bragged that the attack resulted in the highest number of casualties among US forces for the past ten years, further underscoring the Taliban’s failure in securing US interests in Afghanistan.¹⁸⁷

IS supporters also criticised the Taliban’s perceived openness vis-à-vis the US, Iran, and China. In particular, IS decried the Taliban’s relations with China, in light of the country’s treatment of its Uyghur population. In the aftermath of a bombing against a Shia mosque in Afghanistan’s Kunduz province on 8 October 2021, Amaq News Agency identified the perpetrator as an ethnic Uyghur, named ‘Muhammad al-Uyghuri’.¹⁸⁸ In addition to providing a photo of the perpetrator, Amaq News Agency adduced as motive for the attack an alleged promise made by the Taliban to China to expel the Uyghurs from Afghanistan.¹⁸⁹ A number of pro-IS publications displayed a focus on the South Asia region. The English language magazine ‘The Voice of Hind’, by the IS-supporting media outlet Sawt al-Hind, has promoted an anti-Taliban discourse since its release in February 2020. Additionally, an Urdu language online magazine entitled ‘Yalghar’ was launched in April 2021 and another English language magazine entitled ‘Voice of Khurasan’ was launched in February 2022 by the pro-IS al Azaim Foundation for Media Production.

IS also lambasted the Taliban for their perceived tolerance vis-à-vis the Hazara Shia minority in Afghanistan. An issue of the ‘The voice of Hind’ entitled ‘Indeed *Rafida* are the disease of the *Ummah*’, condemned the Taliban for committing to a peaceful relationship with the Shia. It mentioned the participation of a Taliban leader, Amir Khan Muttaqi, to a gathering of Hazara Shia. The Voice of Hind argued that the Taliban were successful in their negotiations only after ‘fulfilling their promises of protection to the *Rafida*’, and ‘giving the *Rafida* important positions’.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ IS Khorasan Province statement, ‘160 members of the US forces and their spies dead and injured in a martyrdom operation on their gathering in the area of the Kabul airport’, Islamic State (IS), 26/08/2021; Amaq News statement, ‘Around 160 members of the US forces and their collaborators dead and injured after a martyrdom attack by IS near Kabul airport’, Islamic State (IS), Amaq News Agency, 26/08/2021.

¹⁸⁷ Al-Naba’ (The News), issue no. 302, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al I’lam al-Markazi, 03/09/2021.

¹⁸⁸ Amaq News Agency picture, ‘The martyr Muhammad al-Uyghuri, the perpetrator of the martyrdom attack on the Hazara temple in Kunduz’, Islamic State (IS), Amaq News Agency, 08/10/2021.

¹⁸⁹ Amaq News Agency report, ‘300 killed and injured among the Hazara Shia in a martyrdom-seeking attack in northern Afghanistan’, Islamic State (IS), Amaq News Agency, 08/10/2021.

¹⁹⁰ The voice of Hind, issue no. 20, Sawt al-Hind, 18/09/2021.

7.3.2. The Taliban takeover in Afghanistan: Reactions by the AQ network and HTS

AQ and its affiliates celebrated the Taliban's return to power and framed the achievement as a victory for the global jihadist movement, a testament to the successful outcome of long-term jihadist resistance. AQ messages were bolstered by a perceived triumph over declared enemies and by the hope that the Taliban's achievement will help their cause gain public support and new recruits.

The Taliban's lightning offensive and the ensuing overthrow of Kabul was applauded by a number of AQ affiliates with messages of congratulations in the days leading up to the official withdrawal of US troops. Perhaps as a strategically timed release, AQ Core congratulated the 'Islamic nation for the victory in Afghanistan' with a statement in Arabic and English, issued on the date of the US withdrawal (31 August 2021). AQ Core praised the Afghan people, the Taliban and their leaders for this 'historic victory', their sacrifices and steadfastness on the 'path of jihad and martyrdom'. Furthermore, it called on the Afghan nation to support their new leadership, while urging the 'nation of Islam' (i.e. Muslims outside Afghanistan) to stand by the Afghan people and support them with experience, knowledge, and financial aid during this 'sensitive phase'.¹⁹¹

In the same vein, AQAP officially congratulated the Taliban 'on the conquest and empowerment of Afghanistan'.¹⁹² The group said the Taliban's 'obvious victory' served Islam and the global Muslim community, wishing for the takeover in Afghanistan to be the beginning of an essential transformation that would change the contemporary history of Islam. According to AQAP, this 'victory' would lead Muslim nations towards progress, sovereignty, self-determination, emancipation from slavery and oppression by foreign powers. The group also said that the current developments in Afghanistan showed that the only realistic way to restore rights, liberate people from 'occupiers' and 'invaders', and bring back dignity to the Muslim community is through jihad. Highlighting the defeat of both the US and the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, AQAP reminded its adherents that democracy and peaceful settlement of conflicts are only smoke and mirrors.

In a video message, Ibrahim al-Qusi, one of the leaders of AQAP, congratulated the Taliban and in particular its leader Hibatullah Akhundzada on 'the magnificent victory and evident conquest that shocked the world and all politicians and observers'.¹⁹³ Commenting on a speech delivered by US president Joe Biden about the fall of Kabul, al-Qusi reminded Americans that '[their]

¹⁹¹ AQ Core statement, 'Congratulations to the Islamic Ummah on the victory granted by Allah in Afghanistan!', al-Qaeda (AQ) Core, al-Sahab Media Production Company, 31/08/2021.

¹⁹² AQAP statement, 'Congratulations and blessing on the conquest and empowerment in Afghanistan', al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al-Malahim Media Production Company, 18/08/2021.

¹⁹³ AQAP statement, 'A message to the American people: You have yet to understand the lesson', al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al-Malahim Media Production Company, 06/10/2021.

security is still at risk as long as [they] do not comprehend the lesson in all its aspects, and as long as [they] do not act to remove the reasons for which the events of 11 September took place'. Al-Qusi mentioned the perpetrators of attacks against US army bases, namely Nidal Hasan and Muhammad al-Shamrani, who perpetrated attacks in Fort Hood in 2009 and in Pensacola in 2019 as examples of '*mujahidin*' that stand ready to carry out attacks. 'Any delays in *mujahidin*'s attacks against the US' al-Qusi stressed, 'is not due to the difficulties in penetrating the security apparatus, but only due to the time needed to prepare [such actions]'.¹⁹⁴

AQ's Sahel-based affiliates, JNIM and AQIM, avoided explicitly mentioning the Taliban in their joint message of congratulations to the Afghan people. Nevertheless, the statement featured a prescient quote by the former Taliban leader, Mulla Umar, who reportedly said, 'Bush promised me defeat but God promised me victory [...]'.¹⁹⁵ Another AQ affiliate, al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), released a statement expressing their happiness about the situation in Afghanistan and congratulating the Taliban.¹⁹⁶

Much like the Taliban, al-Shabab has relied on anti-government discourse and governance-oriented communications to embed itself into the local population. The apparent success of the Taliban model seems to have emboldened the group, which has also capitalised on the scaling down of Western engagement in Somalia. In light of renewed US drone strikes against al-Shabab, Shahada News issued an article entitled 'Biden's drone war: the consequences of a prolonged US intervention in Somalia'.¹⁹⁷ Elaborating on the analysis of a UK-based journalist, the article reported that al-Shabab has remained resilient and largely succeeded in finding new *modi operandi* and in resorting to various combat tactics, such as IEDs and grenade attacks. Shahada News highlighted that US air strikes have limited the group's movement, but that they have not completely undermined its operational capacity. The article quoted the journalist in drawing a parallel between the situation in Afghanistan and in Somalia following the US withdrawal: 'The concerning events in Afghanistan, when the Taliban overran the country in August and seized Kabul, serve as a stark reminder of the consequences of Washington's failure in building a permanent security apparatus focusing, to a large extent, on countering terrorism. [...] Despite the fact that the US was militarily involved in the country [Somalia], there have been no notable efforts in building a strong police force and national army'.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ AQIM and JNIM joint statement, 'Statement of congratulation and blessing', al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), al-Andalus Media Production Company and al-Zallaqa Media Production Company, 23/08/2021.

¹⁹⁶ AQIS statement, 'Congratulating the Taliban', al-Qaeda in the Indian Sub-continent (AQIS), al-Sahab Media Production Company, 24/08/2021.

¹⁹⁷ Shahada News Agency article, 'Biden's drone war: the consequences of a prolonged U.S. intervention in Somalia', al-Shabab al-Mujahidin Movement, Shahada News Agency, 16/08/2021.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

In its statement of congratulations on the occasion of the Taliban's 'victory', HTS stressed that the steadfastness and persistence showed by the Taliban over the past years should be emulated.¹⁹⁹ Nevertheless, HTS's senior jurist Abdul-Rahim Attoun (aka Abu Abdullah al-Shami) highlighted differences between the Taliban's circumstances in Afghanistan and HTS's situation in Idlib. In a public lecture on 'jihad and resistance', Attoun argued that pursuing guerrilla warfare in Syria and attempting to replicate the Taliban's example would trigger a brutal crackdown from the Syrian regime.²⁰⁰

Several AQ-supporting media outlets joined the outpouring of celebration²⁰¹ from the official media sphere, expressing the hope that this 'victory' would inject renewed vitality and strength to those pursuing jihad against foreign occupation.²⁰² For instance, the pro-AQ news aggregator Thabat News Agency described the developments as the 'beginning of the end' and as a 'brilliant capture and shattering victory that restore the dignity of Muslims and humiliate its enemies'.²⁰³ The Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF) expressed its happiness about the Taliban takeover, stating that it was achieved thanks to the movement's 'firmness on religious principles and [its] dedication to *sharia* judgements and rulings, coupled with [its] valour on the battlefield'.²⁰⁴

¹⁹⁹ HTS statement, 'Congratulating the Taliban and the Afghan people', Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), 18/08/2021.

²⁰⁰ 'How Islamist Militants Elsewhere View the Taliban's Victory in Afghanistan', International Crisis Group, 27/10/2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/how-islamist-militants-elsewhere-view-talibans-victory-afghanistan>.

²⁰¹ Jaysh al-Malahim al-Elektroni statement, 'Statement of congratulations to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan', Jaysh al-Malahim al-Elektroni (Al-Malahem Cyber Army), 17/08/2021.

²⁰² Jaysh al-Malahim al-Elektroni (Al-Malahem Cyber Army), Sawt al-Qaeda, al-Tabyan, Qurtuba Media and Nashir al-Khayr joint statement, 'A statement of congratulations on the victory of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (Taliban)', 16/08/2021.

²⁰³ Thabat News Agency statement, 'The land of the Afghans...and the shattering victory', Thabat News Agency, 18/08/2021.

²⁰⁴ GIMF statement, 'Statement of congratulations on the conquest of Afghanistan', Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF), 23/08/2021.

8. Conclusions

Despite leadership losses and transitions, IS has succeeded in remaining close to its core tenets and maintaining its strategic direction. Its message did not significantly change in 2021. It continued to be fuelled by the military achievements of its regional offshoots, especially in Africa. IS's self-proclaimed West Africa Province provides spaces where IS may attempt to re-enact territorial governance. In its quest for territorial control, IS continued to espouse a sectarian agenda and instigated attacks against Shia Muslims and Christians. IS's reclusive leadership failed to take an active role in motivating or providing guidance to its adherents. Nevertheless, official IS narratives remained focused on promoting strategies that from past experience had proven integral to the group's success, such as the freeing of imprisoned members and the continuation of its propaganda efforts. By co-opting militant groups and remaining relevant online, IS maintains the capability to prepare for a resurgence.

The AQ network navigated ebbs and flows in 2021. AQ Core continued to adhere to its usual narratives but faced uncertainties linked to its leadership and its future direction. While AQ's African affiliates (al-Shabab and JNIM) displayed operational strength, AQ appears to have lost ground in Syria, where HTS subdued THD militarily. Despite these mixed fortunes, AQ continued to call for attacks in the West and against Western (in particular French) interests.

The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan further polarised the positions of jihadist groups based on their IS or AQ affiliations. Fault lines widened over the Taliban's willingness to negotiate with the US, an approach that was berated by IS but that AQ affiliates may emulate in the future. Both groups exploited the development to advance their own narratives and to emerge as frontrunners in the jihadist struggle.

Messages by both groups were magnified and repurposed into new threats by their network of supporters, who continue to call for terrorist attacks in the EU. IS and AQ supporter networks displayed increased technical capabilities in their propaganda dissemination efforts. Understanding the technical complexity of the phenomenon, limiting the online accessibility of the terrorist messaging and identifying key players in the dissemination of online jihadist propaganda should remain a priority in international counter terrorism efforts.