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رسول
محمد

Online jihadist propaganda

2018
in review

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1. Key findings

- The loss of the Islamic State’s (IS) territorial control in Syria/Iraq denied the group one of its most potent propaganda tools
- IS still commands a number of branches – in particular it retains a small but potent presence in the Af-Pak region – and continues to inspire thousands of online supporters
- IS’ dire situation has had a significant impact on its digital capabilities: the quality and quantity of IS official releases have dropped. The only publication that continued to be issued on a regular basis was the official Arabic weekly newsletter *al-Naba’*
- A lack of IS propaganda from the battlefield resulted in re-mediatisation and was accompanied by a mushrooming of pro-IS media outlets and supporter-generated productions (SGC)
- The spin-off media outlets aim to project the image of an IS franchise
- Attempts at reviving English-language publications were crude and amateurish
- IS’ loss of significant territory stands in stark contrast with al-Qaeda’s lack of major change over the same period. Despite boasting a less diversified online infrastructure, AQ’s propaganda output has remained constant
- AQ sets itself apart from IS in its discourse and presents itself as a level-headed pragmatic group with legitimate political and socio-economic grievances
- The AQ network has proved resilient and is potentially a greater threat than IS in a number of regions, including in the Sahel
- France, the UK and the US are singled out as targets by both groups. France in particular has been the focus for a plethora of jihadist organisations, both for attacks and recruitment purposes
- IS and AQ continue to experiment with online platforms

- Pro-IS and pro-AQ Telegram channels are advertising the use of alternative platforms and open source technologies (e.g. Rocket.Chat, the ZeroNet solution, Minds.com platform, and Riot.im)

2. Introduction

This paper is the second edition of the Annual Review of online jihadist propaganda produced by the EU's Internet Referral Unit (EU IRU).¹

The current Review covers the period from 1 January to 31 December 2018 and outlines the major trends and developments in the propaganda of the two most prominent Sunni terrorist organisations – the Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda (AQ). In particular, the review aims to analyse how these organisations have responded to shifting political realities, and attempted to overcome setbacks. It further identifies the dominant themes and types of productions exploited by the two groups during this period.

In order to elaborate on changes in the groups' narratives and online communication patterns, the research examined primary sources, including the groups' operational claims, publications, statements, videos, and *anashid*². The above-mentioned material was collected by the EU IRU over 2018 and stored in the Check the Web (CtW) portal. To build a broader picture, the research also took into account jihadist supporter discussions on Telegram. Furthermore, while the review focuses on 2018, it nevertheless put these trends into context, with reference to further developments that took place in early 2019, prior to the Review's publication.

This paper has been divided into three main chapters. The first discusses the current state and digital capabilities of IS; the second points to a potential resurgence of AQ; while the third looks at the two organisations' commonalities and analyses IS' and AQ's online distribution strategies.

The publication intends to serve as a conduit for enhanced information-sharing between EU law enforcement and policymakers.

¹ For the previous report, please see: Europol's report 'Online jihadist propaganda: 2017 in review', April 2018.

² Jihadi *a cappella* chants

3. Islamic State media: current state of play

3.1. The state project collapses

What is left of the Islamic State's (IS) physical caliphate in Syria and Iraq is rapidly crumbling. After the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) ousted IS militants from their last urban base in the Eastern town of Hajin in December 2018, the group's physical footprint was reduced to a couple of villages along the eastern bank of the Euphrates – these were also taken by the SDF in early 2019.

In addition to generating the resources that enabled the organisation to carry out its hybrid warfare beyond its borders, the physical caliphate was also a central propaganda tool in itself. The organisation's ideology combined with successful military advances convinced thousands to emigrate to the lands of the caliphate.

Today, despite its territorial losses, IS still commands a number of branches worldwide and continues to inspire thousands of dispersed supporters around the world.

3.2. IS strategy loses its prescience

The group's shrinking capabilities on the ground have significantly impacted its strategic discernment and foresight. This was obvious in the group's failure to implement a planned remapping of its provinces. In July 2018, IS attempted to re-brand its propaganda to portray Syria and Iraq as consisting of just two provinces: *Wilayat al-Sham* (levant province) and *Wilayat al-Iraq* (Iraq province), with each province consisting of a number of regions. Videos began featuring these new epithets alongside the previous titles, e.g. "*Wilayat al-Iraq – al-Anbar*" or "*Wilayat al-Sham – Damascus*". However, this only lasted for a couple of weeks before the new titles were dropped and propaganda reverted to the use of the previous labels.³ Similarly, IS Hawran province – established in July 2018 and

³ While reference has again been made in early 2019 to these wider provinces, the terminology is not consistently implemented.

encompassing the southern Syrian regions of Daraa, Quneytra, and the Yarmouk basin – produced very limited propaganda and ceased that same month.

There is also a certain amount of confusion as to the actual number of IS provinces worldwide. One example is that of the IS East Asia province which released its first propaganda item in May 2018. While East Asia was recognised as an IS province in *al-Naba'* issue 140 on 20 July 2018⁴, it was subsequently downgraded to a “region” in the magazine’s 141st issue on 27 July 2018⁵, before again being referred to as a province in August of the same year.

One of the few regions where IS appears to be growing in strength and capability is in its Khorasan branch with the Islamic State in Khorasan (ISK) becoming an increasingly prominent actor in the Afghan conflict. ISK’s operational reach even extends beyond Afghanistan to Pakistan. ISK also boasts a steady propaganda machine. While ISK propaganda has focused heavily on the local conflict, it also released a few videos over 2018 suggesting Khorasan as a new haven for those wishing to join IS but who are “unable to immigrate to Iraq and Syria”.⁶ One of these videos, entitled “The land of God is wide” and released on 05 March 2018, purported to document ISK’s authority over territories in Jowzjan (Afghanistan). The implication is that the utopian idea of the caliphate still holds potential in Afghanistan. This message was underscored in the video’s use of

⁴ Islamic State. *Al-Naba'* issue 140, Diwan al-I'lam al-Markazi, 20/07/2018.

⁵ Islamic State. *Al-Naba'* issue 141, Diwan al-I'lam al-Markazi, 27/07/2018.

⁶ See for example the following two ISK videos: ‘The land of God is wide’ and ‘Answer the call 2’, released in March and August 2018, respectively.

languages: while most of the narration was in Arabic, fighters also delivered messages in Pashto, Persian and Uzbek.



Figure 1: IS fighter calling on supporters to come to Khorasan province if they are "unable to make *hijra*" to Iraq and Syria for "the road [to khorasan] is easy". Taken from ISK province video "Answer the call 2", 11 August 2018.

Nevertheless, the various shifts and inconsistencies reflect the overall collapse of IS as a state, previously the central pillar of its project. However, this collapse combined with the group's battlefield attrition did not stop the group's sympathisers from continuing to proclaim their support for the group online.

3.3. A lack of IS propaganda from the battlefield results in re-mediatisation

IS leaders issued a total of three audio speeches in 2018: one was delivered by the group's "caliph" Abubakr al-Baghdadi on the occasion of the celebration of Eid al-Adha⁷ on 22 August 2018 and two by the group's official spokesperson Abu al-Hasan al-Muhajir.

⁷ 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.

The low number of speeches is not in itself unusual (neither the group’s elusive leader nor its current spokesperson have delivered more than two speeches a year since 2015). Nevertheless, this has meant that IS sympathisers have been forced to resort to recycling older material to produce their supporter-generated content (SGC). In fact, the most notable speeches used for SGC purposes date back to 2016 and were delivered by former IS spokesperson Abu Muhammad al-Adnani. This contrasts heavily with Al-Qaeda (AQ) – both core and affiliates – who issue topical speeches grounded in the context of current political developments on a more regular basis.

2018 also saw a decrease in IS videos featuring high-production values and high-definition drone footage of the battlefields contested by the organisation. Official IS videos were unable to feature much beyond blitzed-out towns and the occasional forays into enemy territory. A rare exception to this was the group’s attack on Iranian forces during a national military parade in Ahvaz, Iran in September 2018. This attack provided IS with the opportunity to debunk the idea that it was losing the ability to mount major military operations. Unsurprisingly, IS official media and sympathetic media outlets latched on to the event and drew inspiration for their propaganda from it for weeks afterwards.

Another audio-visual production which attempted to highlight IS’ kinetic and non-kinetic capabilities was the video series entitled “Harvest of the soldiers”. The series consisted of detailed statistics and information regarding the types and the results of operations conducted by IS over a given week. Released in Arabic and English by the *al-Hayat Media Center*, the first episode in the series appeared on 2 August 2018 and the 22nd episode on 27 December 2018.⁸ Ironically, while the production aimed to showcase IS’ relevance and

⁸ The last series to appear was the 25th on 17 January 2019.

technical proficiency, the reutilisation of the same graphics and special effects from one video to the next illustrated instead the dwindling capabilities of the organisation.



Figure 2: 'Harvest of the soldiers', episode 16, Al-Hayat Media, 15 November 2018.

3.4. SGC produced by pro-IS media outlets increases

Despite the shrinking of its physical footprint, the group continues to galvanise a significant amount of online supporters. A flurry of new media outlets burgeoned in the wake of IS' loss of territory and there was a noted increase over 2018 in supporter-generated content (SGC) publications that were not officially linked to any terrorist organisation but which were obviously sympathetic to the IS.

Posters were the most recurrent type of SGC visual propaganda and covered a wide range of topics, including doctrinal texts and the familiar glorification of martyrdom. The most significant group of SGC posters called for lone-wolf attacks and featured Western landmarks alongside exhortative quotes by IS leaders. The posters were produced in an array of languages and featured varying levels of refinement.

SGC experienced an uptick of activity over certain periods (e.g. during the 2018 FIFA World Cup; Christmas and New Year holidays; and the “Gilets Jaunes” protests in France), making them more visible in mainstream media. It is worth highlighting that the threats relating to the World Cup and the “Gilets Jaunes” were posted on media platforms supportive of the IS rather than in official communiqués or speeches by the group. It is therefore difficult to ascertain whether they resulted from a concerted decision by senior members of the group or if they were instead a spontaneous effort by propagandists eager to jump on the bandwagon. Discussions on Telegram later claimed that IS had distanced itself from the World Cup threats which did not materialise, highlighting a further issue of command-and-control within the IS media apparatus.

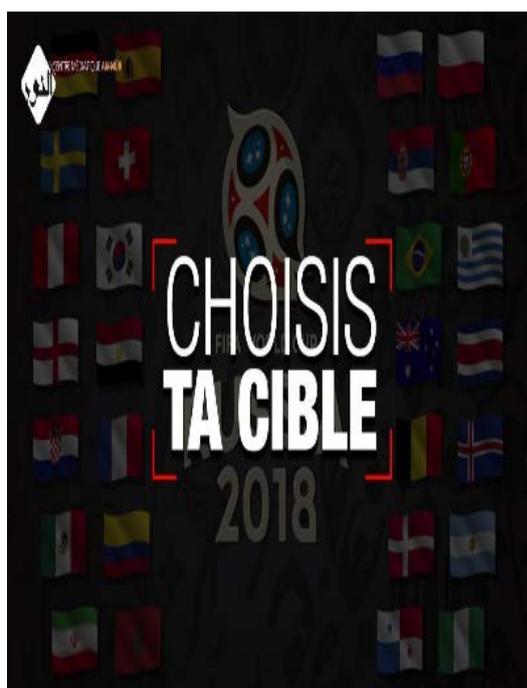


Figure 3: 'Choose your target' (Choisis ta cible), Centre Mediatique An-Nur, 11 May 2018.

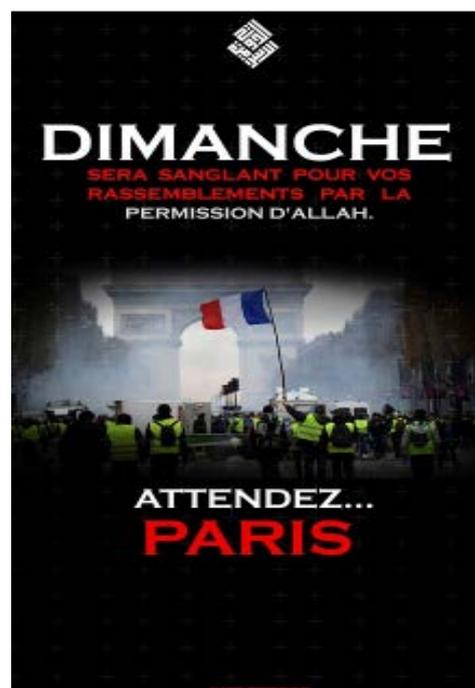


Figure 4: 'Wait... Paris' (Attendez... Paris), Islamic State, 26 November 2018.

3.5. IS propagandists strive to project an idea of unity

Conscious of their disjointed appearance, the spin-off media outlets are increasingly aware of the need to appear more united and aim to project the image of an IS franchise. With this in mind, they are careful to produce propaganda that carries the hallmarks of IS and mimic the group’s official braggadocio. The need to appear more as a monolithic bloc and less like disparate groups has also led to joint campaigns on Telegram, including #Answer_the_call and #Remaining_steadfast, in which the various pro-IS outlets produce publications under a common hashtag.

Another joint project is the unofficial *Youth of the Caliphate* magazine, of which three issues were released in 2018. The magazine is managed by a consortium of pro-IS media outlets (the *Ashhad Media Company*, the *Sunni Shield Foundation*, and *al-Saqri Corporation for Military Sciences*), and is headed by *al-Abd al-Faqir Foundation*. *Youth of the Caliphate* promotes publications from other IS-supportive media outlets, including *Asawirti Media*, the *Khattab Media Foundation*, *al-Battar Media*, *al-Bushrayat*, and *al-Adiyat Media Production Company*. The magazine even encourages individual readers to send in their own SGC contributions for publication.



Figure 5: 'Youth of the Caliphate' issue 3, Al-Abd al-Faqir Foundation, 09 December 2018.

3.6. IS struggles to unify its ideological position

The need to appear united is even more crucial in light of a long-standing ideological dispute – between the lesser and more radicals within IS – that is currently raging online.

The disagreements go back to May 2017 when the IS’ Delegated Committee⁹ issued a controversial memo which set out IS’ new stance on *takfir* (excommunication). The memo argued that excommunication is a foundation of the Islamic faith. In practical terms, this would mean that even if a Muslim committed no sin himself, he could be denounced as a disbeliever for failing to condemn other alleged sinners. The memo also included an opinion on the issue of “excuse of ignorance”, roughly equivalent to the legal principle *Ignorantia juris non excusat*. While the long-held IS position had been that ignorance of a religious obligation – such as refraining from excommunicating Muslims who take part in elections – was held to be excusable, the new memo rejected this interpretation. As a result, not only did the memo cast doubt on whether Sunni Muslims worldwide could be considered true Muslims, but some of the Islamic State’s own leaders and members could be excommunicated under the terms delineated in the ruling. In addition, the debate also included discussion of other religious concepts that undergird IS ideology, including *al-wala wal bara* (loyalty to Muslims and disavowal of polytheists) and *nawaqid al-Islam* or nullifiers of Islam (sets of conditions with which all Muslims must comply, e.g. not to ally with infidels against Muslims).

Unsurprisingly, the ruling was quick to spark controversy among IS followers and deepened the already existing debate on the issue. Some of the Islamic State’s senior ideologues objected to this definition of excommunication. It appears the issue was ultimately settled in favour of the lesser extremists and the memo was repealed in *al-Naba’* No. 98 on 22 September 2017.¹⁰

⁹ An official Islamic State video titled “The Structure of the Khilafah” described the Delegated Committee as “a body of individuals that supports [the Caliph]” and that supervises the provinces and the various departments. See ‘The structure of the Khilafah’, al-Furqan Media production Company, 07 July 2016.

¹⁰ Islamic State. *Al-Naba’* issue 98, al-I’tisam Media production Company, 22/09/2017.

It is therefore unclear why the current online dispute still appears to pit a radical IS Media Department against two more “moderate” media foundations formerly supportive of IS: *al-Wafa’* and *al-Turath al-‘Ilmi*. Supporters of the two camps exchange insults and refutations online, with the former arguing that the IS Media Department is too radical in its approach to issues such as *takfir* (excommunication), and the latter accusing *al-Wafa’* and *al-Turath al-‘Ilmi* of being spies and calling into question their support for the caliphate. It is currently unclear which group has the upper hand online.

The overall result is an energetic media campaign increasingly divorced from realities on the ground. The loss of a coherent narrative in light of the organisation’s territorial losses, its weakened branding and waning credibility, underscore a general state of confusion in the ranks of IS and a lack of cogency in its arguments.

The group’s ability to weather the storm - until it perceives an opportunity to re-establish a semblance of a state or expand in terms of local insurgencies - will greatly depend on its ability to continue to galvanise online sympathisers and to provide them with viable online infrastructures and networks to pursue its digital war.

4. An al-Qaeda resurgence?

IS' loss of significant territory in Iraq and Syria stands in stark contrast to al-Qaeda's lack of major change over the same period. Indeed, while the IS has dominated headlines and preoccupied national security officials for the past four years, AQ has focused on ramping up military muscle and consolidating its influence in new and existing theatres. As a result, it has succeeded in subsuming a number of franchises in a global movement that runs from North-West Africa to South Asia. Furthermore, despite boasting a less diversified online infrastructure than its rival, AQ's propaganda output has remained constant.

In addition, AQ's leader - Ayman al-Zawahiri - has demonstrated strategic vision. In particular, his prohibition of mass-casualty operations, especially those that could result in high numbers of Muslim casualties, has enabled AQ and its franchises to present themselves as "moderate" extremists in contrast with IS.

AQ sets itself apart from IS in its discourse and presents itself as a level-headed pragmatic group that seeks redress for the people. The organisation is currently focusing more on local concerns as opposed to global jihad and couches its speeches in the context of political realism. AQ has also successfully gained leverage by giving more space to local affiliates and recognizing the added value of coalescing power from the grassroots level.

AQ also takes a more nuanced approach in its diatribes against the West, although -like IS - it also conflates the terms "Crusaders", "Christians" and "Westerners". However, AQ focuses more substantially on what it describes as Western governments' iniquitous and predatory policies and less on the degeneracy and anathematisation of western culture as a whole.

4.1. AQ affiliates are gaining strength in the Sahel

Ayman al-Zawahiri mentioned the Sahel several times in his most recent speeches. He even devoted two videos over the course of one week in March 2018 to the topic of jihad

in Africa and took the opportunity to call for a bold uprising against “Western occupying powers in the region”¹¹. Confirming the importance of the region for AQ, September 2018 witnessed the establishment of a new AQ branch in Burkina Faso.

AQ’s affiliates in West Africa, most notably Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), also issued a wave of threats against Western interests in the region. Two of the most common themes in AQIM and JNIM’s speeches are the redistribution of resources and the need to resist Western hegemony. Both groups rail against the “colonially-installed governments” and “surrogate regimes” which allow their patrons largely unfettered access to local resources and serve the interests of foreign powers ahead of their own citizens.

In a region where corruption is widespread, AQIM’s indictment of the “puppet governments” for pocketing illicit funds in exchange for providing the West with “legal and security services to humiliate Muslims” aims to resonate with segments of the population. From there, the presentation of *sharia* as the only possible solution to ensure the people benefit from the riches of their own land could act as a compelling narrative.

AQ also stresses the paramountcy of the region’s Islamic identity and its own role as a revolutionary exemplar for the *umma*. It points to an alleged Western conspiracy against Islam and accuses the West of harbouring plots and designs to subordinate, humiliate and undermine Islamic institutions and culture. The West in general – and France in particular – are presented as an “occupying force corrupting [Islam]”.

While AQIM and JNIM present similar narratives in their audio-visual productions and their message projects an overriding sense of unity and complementarity – indeed they appear to share media resources – JNIM concentrates on the belligerent content, while AQIM has greater responsibility over the ideological.¹² An important point on the

¹¹ Ayman al-Zawahiri. ‘France has returned, O descendants of the lions’, al-Sahab Media production Company, 06 March 2018.

¹² For a more elaborate discussion on this, please see Europol report “Focus on JNIM: Emergence and activity in the Sahel-Sahara region”, 7 February 2019.

belligerent narrative is that AQ visibly attempts to differentiate itself from IS by not including scenes of brutality or beheadings in its propaganda items.

The way in which JNIM and AQIM attempt to reach out to Western civilians is also an interesting departure from IS, with the propaganda produced by both groups suggesting that it is the military contingents that are targeted and not the civilians. A case in point is the discourse put forward by Sophie Petronin, a French hostage held by JNIM who appears in three videos produced by JNIM's official mouthpiece al-Zallaqa over 2018.¹³ Petronin speaks of the "respectful" treatment she has received from her captors and describes them as "trustworthy". In contrast, it is the French government that she accuses of obstructing her release.¹⁴ While hostage-taking is a recurring theme in JNIM's productions, the group stresses that the hostages are taken as just retribution and that "the colonial power in this region is the reason why the negotiations are not coming to an end"¹⁵. The subtext is that, were these foreign powers to put a stop to their interventions in the region, their citizens would no longer be targeted.

Similarly, in a speech¹⁶ in which AQIM capitalized on the French "Gilets Jaunes" protests to denounce France's neo-colonialism, the group even attempted to appeal to the sympathy of the wider French public. Indeed, AQIM's leader Abu Mus'ab Abdulwadud evoked a growing dichotomy between a "corrupt French elite"¹⁷ and the working-class majority of the French population and drew parallels between the plight of the "Gilets Jaunes" protesters and that of the victims of French colonialism in Africa. He stated that "what the French people are suffering today, from the direct looting of their livelihood by the government, is just the tip of the iceberg of injustice of the French government [...]"

¹³ Sophie Petronin first appeared in a video produced by JNIM's al-Ezza media outlet and titled 'The correct equation' on 01 July 2017.

¹⁴ Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM). 'SOS 2 – Save our Souls', al-Zallaqa media Production Company, 13 June 2018.

¹⁵ Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM). 'One year of my captivity', al-Zallaqa Media Production Company, 29/01/2018.

¹⁶ Abu Mus'ab Abdulwadud audio speech "France between the curse of plundering wealth and the flames of protests", al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), al-Andalus Media Production Company, 11/12/2018.

¹⁷ Ibid.

against the rights of our Muslim people for over two centuries, starting from the direct occupation and ending with the indirect occupation"¹⁸. Abdulwadud describes the costly military involvement of France in Mali, Libya and other African countries as the root cause of the socio-economic issues that prompted the "Gilets Jaunes" movement.

4.2. AQ offshoots and branches in Syria continue to cause confusion

Soon after his appointment as head of AQ, Zawahiri ordered Abu Mohammad al-Jawlani, a Syrian veteran of the Iraqi insurgency and Abubakr al-Baghdadi's deputy, to return to his homeland to manage the expansion of the then Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) inside Syria. This AQ franchise would eventually become Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) - currently the dominant jihadist rebel force in Syria.

However, HTS seems to have severed ties with its founder since then. While the split from AQ (in the summer of 2016) was initially interpreted as a scam aimed at protecting AQ's branch in Syria by distancing it from a global terrorist organisation, it has since transpired that HTS does indeed represent an organizational and ideological break from AQ. Al-Jawlani's aim of distancing his group from an international terror brand was made obvious in a statement on 1 June 2018¹⁹ in which HTS condemned its terror designation by the U.S State Department and demanded evidence of HTS' links to AQ. The statement also stressed that HTS poses no threat to countries outside Syria.

In 2018, HTS focused on proving its state-building capabilities in a bid to position itself as a negotiating partner on the Syrian scene. With this in mind, it has presented itself as a group able to successfully assert discipline at a time of chaos. In particular, it utilizes its two media outlets (*Amjad* and the *Iba' News Agency*²⁰) to document its ability to galvanise

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ HTS statement: "American Administration: the double standard against the Syrian revolution", Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, 01/06/2018.

²⁰ While *Iba'* has not officially been linked to HTS, it unquestionably acts as a mouthpiece for the group.

popular support while exerting effective administrative control over the North-Western Idlib governorate, one of the last rebel strongholds in Syria.

HTS continues to push back against all attempts to designate the organisation as a terrorist threat and, with this in mind, attempts to market *Iba'* as an unbiased and credible media outlet. *Iba's* weekly newspaper, first issued on 9 June 2018, resembles a mainstream newspaper in content and style and covers foreign policy issues and internal social issues. In contrast to IS's weekly *al-Naba'*, *Iba'* contains no religious doctrinal texts and the only clue to its ideological leanings is the derogatory designation of the IS as *khawarij*²¹. Its desire to present itself as a mainstream media outlet led *Iba'* to denounce the Google Play Store in September 2018 for taking down its mobile phone Application.²²



Figure 6: Iba's article on the takedown of its mobile phone application by Google Play Store.

²¹ The *Khawarij* were a group that revolted against the fourth caliph, Ali ibn Abi Talib, during the first century of Islam. The movement is known in Sunni and Shii circles for their extreme dogma (e.g. with regard to excommunicating other Muslims).

²² 'Google Play Store takes down Iba.news application', Iba News agency, 20/09/2018.



Figure 7: Logo of the pro-AQ group THD, established in January 2018.

Another important armed group operating in Idlib is Tanzim Hurras al-Din (THD), a splinter group from HTS and widely believed to be AQ's new affiliate in Syria although it has not yet been officially accepted by al-Zawahiri. The creation of THD was announced by *Al-Sahab Media Production Company* on 9 January 2018. THD later subsumed a number of smaller rebel factions and joined with others to form new military alliances.

In a world where propaganda is crucial to galvanising supporters and advancing a group's cause, THD has also focused on developing its own brand. In addition to using *Sham al-Ribat Media* as its official mouthpiece, the group launched the first issue of its near-monthly magazine *Al-Falah* on 25 October 2018. *Al-Falah* offers political analysis interspersed with religious advice, political implementation of *sharia* law and technical guidance with regard to anonymization and online security.

4.3. Can AQ fill the void left by IS? A comparative analysis

IS and AQ are vying for the same territories and audiences in a number of theatres, including the Sahel and Syria. Overall, the AQ network has proved resilient and is potentially a greater threat than IS in the following regions: 1) North and West Africa where AQ affiliates have increased their activities; 2) East Africa where Al-Shabab has successfully upheld its dominance over IS groups; and 3) Yemen where al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) remains the most prominent of the two Sunni terrorist groups.

Indeed, while AQAP/Ansar al-Sharia²³ retains a presence (and at times effective control) in a number of governorates, the Yemeni branch of IS has failed to seize and control

²³ Ansar al-Sharia, established in 2011, is a Yemen-based affiliate of AQAP.

territory or develop a significant following in the country. This is likely due to the fact that IS has failed to include Yemenis in its leadership or to establish ties to local tribes, in addition to its brutal tactics including mass killings and mosque bombings. In contrast, AQAP has made a greater effort to embed itself among the local tribes, and has taken note of the community's aversion to overt brutality. More to the point, AQAP succeeded in leveraging the tribes' deep-rooted grievances vis-à-vis the Houthis.

AQ's success in a number of theatres appears to be the result of two main strategic policies: 1) strengthening and devolving more authority locally²⁴; and 2) renouncing mass casualty operations, thereby enabling AQ to present itself as more moderate than IS.

The two areas in which IS still trumps AQ is the power of its brand and its apparent ability to inspire and perpetrate attacks on Western soil. It is however possible that AQ is purposefully choosing to remain under the radar while the group rebuilds.

As such, AQ is well positioned to exploit IS's weakening military position, and could well retake its place at the vanguard of the Salafi-jihadi struggle. Nevertheless, this would require AQ to take better advantage of the Syrian conflict where confusion has remained rampant and clashes continue over territorial control and loyalty to AQ core.²⁵

Furthermore, a potential new threat is the convergence of the two rivals in certain regions. Currently, the degree of rivalry and/or cooperation between AQ and IS affiliates in the Sahel (in particular between the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and AQIM) remains a matter of debate.

²⁴ This was very much the case in Yemen. See for example: Ayman al-Zawahiri's speech: 'Days with the imam – episode 8', al-Sahab Media production Company, 05 May 2019.

²⁵ It is worth noting that HTS and THD attempted to broker a truce in early February 2019 and promised to stop trading insults in the media and to cooperate against their common enemy.

while “sending aid to the Assad regime under the supervision of the Russian occupation forces who destroyed Syria socially and economically”.²⁸

In terms of French-language propaganda, *Al-Kifah* continues to provide French translations of AQ productions while *Centre Mediatique an-Nur* and the online magazine "*Mediaction*" - first released in February 2018 - cater to IS francophone supporters. Perhaps more surprisingly, the official Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham outlet *Amjad* provided French subtitles to a number of its videos in what appears to be a bid to rally French-speaking supporters. The *Amjad* videos bore no direct link to France and neither was France designated by HTS as a target for attacks.

There have also been attempts to revive English-language publications. In February 2018, *Ahlu-Tawhid* launched a new English language magazine entitled “From Dabiq to Rome”. By 19 December 2018, 40 issues of the magazine had been produced. Although it claims to have no organizational ties to any group and is generally restrained in tone (with articles dedicated to the discussion of religious concepts such as apostasy and respect of *sharia* regulations), the magazine contains a "News Recap" section that provides a collection of updates on IS developments on the field. However, overall the newsletter proved to be amateurish and does not compare to the level of IS' former English language flagship magazines *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*.



Figure 9: 'From Dabiq to Rome', issue 7, Ahlu-Tawhid Publications, 17 April 2018.

²⁸ Iba's weekly newspaper Issue 7, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, 28/07/2018.

Similarly, the *Halummu News Agency*, which has been providing English translations of IS propaganda items on and off since December 2016, resurfaced on Telegram on 17 December 2018 as well as on alternative platforms.

To a lesser extent, IS supporting media outlets (e.g. *Muntasir Media*, *Muharir al-Ansar*, *al-Andaluzia Publicaciones* and *al-Mutarjim Foundation*) also provide ad hoc translations into Spanish. AQIM and JNIM also translate some of their official output into Spanish.

5.2. IS and AQ continue to experiment with online platforms

In addition to the territorial losses inflicted on IS over the past year, 2018 took its toll on the group's digital presence. The takedown operation by Member States (MS) and coordinated by the EU IRU in April 2018 and targeting the A'maq web infrastructure had a significant impact on the organisation's online resources.²⁹ This was followed by an intense suspension campaign carried out in late 2018 by Telegram, the current app of choice of IS sympathisers.

As a result, IS supporters redoubled their efforts to remain relevant online. Despite frequent deletions of content, the group remains persistent in publishing videos and other products on a wide array of media and file-sharing sites.

Through their ongoing exploitation of both new and old hosting service providers (HSPs), both IS and AQ have amassed a broad dissemination network for their propaganda. While certain platforms are more abused than others, the sheer number of HSPs exploited for terrorist purposes presents a challenge for disruption efforts.

Between 2015 and 2018, the EU IRU located jihadist content on 146 platforms. These include forums, file-sharing sites, pastebins, video streaming/sharing sites, URL shortening services, blogs, messaging/broadcast applications, news websites, live streaming platforms, social media sites and various services supporting the creation and

²⁹ Europol press release. 'Islamic State propaganda machine hit by law enforcement in coordinated takedown action', 27 April 2018. Available on: <https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/islamic-state-propaganda-machine-hit-law-enforcement-in-coordinated-takedown-action>

hosting of websites. These HSPs are spread across multiple jurisdictions and differ greatly in terms of size, services offered, business models, and abuse policies. Furthermore terrorist organisations benefit from a range of services providing obfuscation technology including Virtual Private Networks, anonymised cryptocurrencies and DDoS mitigation services.³⁰

Over 2018, pro-IS Telegram channels reiterated the importance of waging “media jihad” and urged supporters to join “invasion and publishing” brigades. This was accompanied by a noticeable increase in pro-IS media outlets specialising in providing instructions on cyber and operational security. The most prominent of these are *al-Saqri*, *Horizons Electronic Foundation*, and the *United Cyber Caliphate*. Given the relative scarcity of official Islamic State instructional guides in English, these unofficial but increasingly specialised media outlets are attempting to fill a perceived gap. They also provide advice on how to avoid account deletion, with suggestions including using channel names that cannot be associated with the Islamic State.³¹ This has resulted in the

proliferation of unexpected channel names (e.g. “DELETED”) or ones featuring Mandarin characters. Channel administrators are also increasingly creating several versions of the same channel, allowing them to swiftly rebound from account suspensions (e.g., there are currently dozens of replicates of IS’ *Nashir News Agency* channel on Telegram). Similarly,

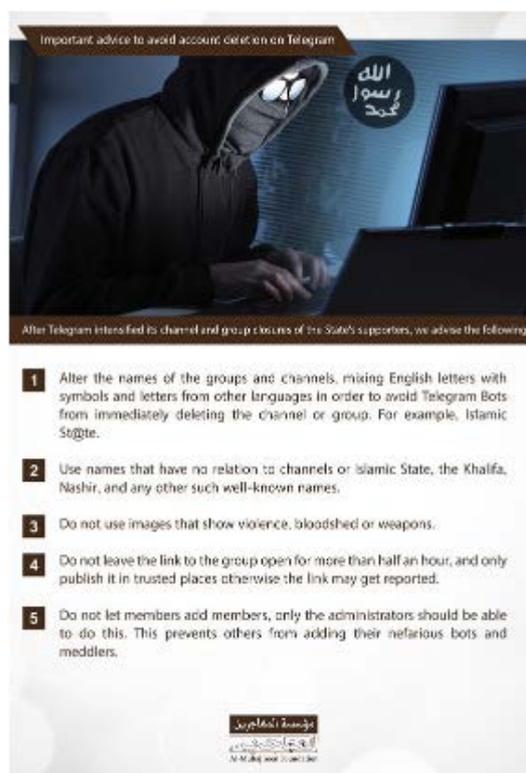


Figure 107: Al-Muhajireen Foundation Leaflet "Important advice to avoid account deletion on Telegram", 12/12/2018.

³⁰ For more on this topic, see Europol report ‘Online service providers’ abuse by terrorists and classification of terrorist propaganda content’, 15 November 2018.

³¹ Al-Muhajireen Foundation Leaflet "Important advice to avoid account deletion on Telegram", 12 December 2018.

IS-affiliated websites that act as repositories for the organisation's propaganda (e.g. *Ghuraba* or *Akhbar al-Muslimin*) have responded to recurrent suspensions by creating new domain names and re-emerging at new locations from backup copies.

Furthermore, pro-IS but also pro-AQ Telegram channels are advertising the use of alternative platforms and open source technologies. A number of IS-official and pro-IS media outlets (including the above-mentioned *Halummu*) have launched multiple channels on a self-hosted instance of Rocket.Chat as well as websites relying on the ZeroNet solution. The pro-IS *Horizons Electronic Foundation* also maintains an official page on Riot.im, a free instant messaging service based on the federated Matrix protocol.³² Similarly, HTS and the pro-AQ group THD have established accounts on the Minds.com platform and encouraged supporters to migrate to it.

However, despite the above-described instances, jihadist activities on these platforms have so far failed to gain traction. This is probably due to the alternative platforms' lack of visibility and poorer outreach capabilities. Additionally, some of these platforms are only accessible if users download their software, hence compromising the seamlessness of the propaganda dissemination flow. As a result, Telegram remains the platform of choice for both AQ and IS sympathisers. This is due in a large part to its advantageous encryption and file-sharing capabilities that allow users to share an unlimited number of files within one channel repository without the need to resort to external URLs.

³² For a more in-depth look at this topic, please see Europol report 'New technologies used in the dissemination of Jihadi propaganda', 30 January 2019.

6. Conclusion

IS has continued to suffer an aggravating crisis over 2018. The decimation of its quasi-state was coupled with major and coordinated attacks against its official propaganda machine. In particular, the disruption efforts by HSPs – working jointly with law enforcement organisations and the EU IRU – have continued to curtail the group’s broadcasting capabilities, ensuring the wider public has less direct access to terrorist propaganda.

As a result, propaganda produced by official IS media outlets has visibly declined - both in terms of quantity and quality. Moreover, its attempts to reach out to anglophone audiences have proved amateurish. In effect, the organisation has succeeded in maintaining an online presence thanks largely to the efforts of numerous unofficial *munasir* (supporter) networks. However, this attempt at damage control underscored a general confusion within IS ranks, especially in light of the group’s inability to unify its ideological position.

IS’ current predicament stands in stark contrast to al-Qaeda’s lack of major change (in terms of propaganda output) over the same period. Moreover, AQ’s various regional affiliates have proved resilient and are potentially a greater threat than IS in a number of regions including North and West Africa, Somalia and Yemen.

While this should not be mistaken for a lessening of IS’ long-term threat and capabilities, the current conjuncture does provide a window of opportunity to capitalise on the organisation’s disarray. In particular, combating the group’s media network should remain a priority.

Both IS and AQ continue to seek out new online vectors for their propaganda. The attempted shift to open-source and in some cases de-centralised, distributed platforms relying on blockchain or peer-to-peer technology testify to the fact that terrorist organisations continue to lay claim to a degree of technological adaptability and are often

early adopters of new technologies. Their efforts stand as a testimony to jihadist groups' continuous willingness to respond and adapt to shifting dynamics and developments.