



# ONLINE JIHADIST PROPAGANDA

2020 IN REVIEW



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## 1. Foreword

Jihadist terrorist groups dedicate significant efforts to set up effective online communication campaigns. The production and dissemination of propaganda content is integral to these efforts. Driven by digital innovation, these groups do not refrain from exploiting the latest technologies to broadcast their message to intended audiences.

I am pleased to present this detailed report, which contributes to a deeper understanding of jihadist propaganda, its dissemination patterns and related abuse of technology. The Online Jihadist Propaganda: 2020 in Review is the third edition of the Annual Review by Europol's EU Internet Referral Unit. The Review focuses on the most prominent jihadist organisations – the Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda (AQ) – as well as their branches and offshoots. By analysing the major trends and developments in the online propaganda of these groups and their impact on the online information environment, the Review aims to inform the work of the main stakeholders in the field as well as foster public understanding of the phenomenon.

The picture presented in the Review is a clear reminder that the messaging of jihadist groups continues to have a mobilising effect and to inspire and incite lone actor attacks by individuals who may not have physical connections to any of these groups.

In order to reduce the spread of online terrorist propaganda, the Regulation on addressing the dissemination of terrorist content online (TCO Regulation), which will apply as of June 2022, establishes a new set of operational measures, notably forbidding the hosting of terrorist propaganda and the obligation to remove it when flagged by law enforcement authorities and Europol. To facilitate the implementation of the TCO Regulation, Europol is developing an innovative technical solution called PERCI and will support law enforcement authorities with its subject-matter expertise. This report aims at providing a strategic framework for such efforts.

More than ever, law enforcement authorities in the Member States and Europol are committed to preventing online jihadist propaganda from reaching potentially vulnerable members of the public. The identification of key players in the dissemination of propaganda that fuels terrorist attacks on EU soil continues to be a priority for law enforcement and constitutes an increasingly important element in the overall counter-terrorism efforts.

**Catherine De Bolle**  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF EUROPOL

## 2. Key Findings

### Islamic State (IS)

- Under new leadership, the so-called Islamic State (IS) displays increasing insurgent activity in its traditional heartlands and continuous global reach.
- A year on from IS's military defeat, the group's media production capabilities remain limited, marred by the loss of infrastructure and personnel.
- As a result, official IS propaganda continued to dwindle in 2020. Video releases by IS provinces, in particular, have become a rare occurrence.
- Propaganda by the group highlighted attempts to stage a revival in Iraq. The group appears to seize on opportunities such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the economic crisis and the withdrawal of coalition forces to intensify its operations.
- IS's aspirations for a comeback in Iraq and Syria are coupled with the group's expansionist ambitions, with its contingents in the African continent gaining strength and influence.
- The group's propaganda highlighted the importance of Africa to the overall IS project. In particular, the group capitalised on the military advances of affiliated local insurgencies in Africa to show it still can seize and retain territory.
- IS West Africa and Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) vied for influence in Mali and Burkina Faso, where the groups fought over territorial control, recruits and resources.
- The freeing of prisoners is considered as a matter of priority for IS, which urged its global affiliates to conduct raids against prisons to free "brothers and sisters".
- IS and its supporting networks committed significant resources to establishing themselves across the new multi-platform environment.
- As official IS propaganda decreased, the IS message continued to be broadcast and reached its target audiences thanks to the efforts of committed IS supporters and their networks.
- Supporter (*munasir*) networks appear to manage a large community of online supporters that is instrumental to the advancement of IS's operational activity online and offline.
- IS propaganda continues to direct and inspire lone actor attacks on EU soil, with supporter networks magnifying the threat with Supporter-Generated Content (SGC) campaigns.



### Al-Qaeda (AQ)

- Al-Qaeda (AQ) has weathered a series of major blows and lost some significant senior leaders.
- AQ continues to capitalise on current events to advance its ideological leanings, which are presented as “less extreme” in comparison with IS.
- AQ franchises continue to champion regional objectives, which they frame within AQ’s overarching discourse.
- Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) is keen to demonstrate that it is still capable of mounting external operations, even if events seem to suggest a decline in abilities on the ground.
- Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and JNIM have shown that they intend to engage in negotiations with local governments, following the Taliban approach.

### Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)

- Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)’s observed openness vis-à-vis Turkey seems to have caused an internal rift between more radical and less radical members of the group; more radical members view HTS leader Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani’s pragmatism as irreconcilable with the group’s ideology.
- HTS is working towards its goal of expanding and consolidating its control over Idlib, as shown by its ban on the formation of new Operations Rooms, coupled with its crackdown on rival groups.
- While HTS’s jihadist agenda is pursued locally, the group aspires to be recognised internationally and maintains political pretensions.

### 3. Introduction

This paper is the third 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 2020 and analyses the major trends and developments in the online propaganda of the most prominent Sunni jihadist organisations – the Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda (AQ) – 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 also identifies the dominant themes and types of material produced by the two groups during this period, while highlighting changes in key areas related to online jihadist propaganda, such as 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 examined primary sources, including the groups' operational claims, publications, statements, videos, and audio speeches. This material was collected by the EU IRU during 2020 and stored in the Check the Web (CtW) portal. To build up a broader picture, the research also took into account jihadist supporter discussions on a wide array of Online Service Providers (OSPs). Although the Review focuses on 2020, it also puts these trends into context, with reference to further developments that took place in early 2021, prior to the Review's publication. The Review distinguishes between narratives promulgated by official media outlets of terrorist groups and those disseminated by their supporter networks. In particular, issues of IS weekly magazine al-Naba' released in 2020 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).

This Review has been divided into four main chapters. The first discusses the current trajectory of IS under the new leadership, the group's potential for resurgence in Iraq and Syria, and its global pretensions and digital capabilities; the second assesses the current status of AQ and looks



at how two of its affiliates adapted after losing leaders; the third examines HTS's ambitions for local governance in Idlib; and the fourth outlines jihadist reactions to shifting political realities.

## 4. Islamic State (IS): a worldwide venture still attached to its roots

### 4.1 Islamic State (IS): Core messages from IS's new leadership

The year 2019 marked a defining moment for the so-called Islamic State (IS). Grappling with the loss of its last stronghold in the eastern Syrian border town of Baghuz, the group was deprived of its first "Caliph" Abubakr al-Baghdadi and its spokesperson Abu Hasan al-Muhajir, who were killed in targeted operations in October 2019. The collapse of its proto-state was coupled with coordinated attacks against its official propaganda machine, which was significantly weakened.

IS entered 2020 at a critical moment in its evolution. It was dealing with new leadership and rampant insurgent activity in its domestic theatres, while also endeavouring to maintain its unparalleled global reach. Today, the group is focused on attempting a resurgence in Iraq and expanding its international presence by further empowering its global network of affiliates. IS succeeded in maintaining an online presence thanks to the efforts of supporter (*munasir*) networks that compensated for the dwindling number of releases by official IS media.

The threat posed by IS still looms as the group continues to direct a dispersed network of affiliates that stand ready to answer its call, both online and offline.

IS's new leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi appears to be even more elusive than his predecessor, who did not reappear on video for five years after proclaiming the creation of the "caliphate" in 2014. Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi has yet to appear in propaganda or to release an audio statement, and his vision for IS has been imparted to his cohorts by IS spokesperson Abu Hamza al-Qurashi, who delivered three audio speeches in 2020. While it remains to be seen whether the new leader's reluctance to make public appearances can potentially undermine his authority and credibility, his strategic direction appears so far to be unquestioned by his coterie of commanders and supporters.

In his audio speech of January 2020, Abu Hamza al-Qurashi stressed that while the group had been declared defeated by two US presidents, it was in fact expanding to several new countries



and regions.<sup>1</sup> Vowing to initiate a “new phase” of attacks against Israel as a reaction to the Peace Plan<sup>2</sup> announced by President Trump during the same week, the IS spokesperson called on the group’s supporters to “work harder and intensify their attacks”. The new leadership also emphasised the theme of *hijra* (migration to *sharia*-controlled territory), calling on “Muslims everywhere” to defend their religion and their brothers, and to make *hijra* to the closest *wilaya* (province).<sup>3</sup>

Freeing of prisoners remained a matter of priority for IS, whose leadership had previously devoted a number of speeches to the topic. In 2020, IS reiterated this call through its mouthpiece *al-Naba'*, in an editorial entitled “The prisons, the prisons, O soldiers of the caliphate!”<sup>4</sup> The editorial capitalised on a recent operation by IS Khorasan, IS’s Afghanistan-based contingent, which mounted a large-scale prison raid in Jalalabad, Nangarhar, in which its fighters allegedly freed “hundreds of Muslims”, and caused the death of “nearly 100 members of the ‘apostate’ police and army”.<sup>5</sup> The article in *al-Naba'* provided some insight into IS’s approach to prisoners, confirming for instance that the group adopts various techniques to free Muslim prisoners. In addition to attacking prisons, IS militants may pay money gathered as *ghanima*<sup>6</sup> to free prisoners, to shorten their sentence, or even to have them transferred to a different prison with better conditions. The group acknowledged that its fighters carry out attacks with the purpose of capturing “disbelievers” and especially influential individuals that can be used as bartering chips to negotiate the release of Muslim prisoners. The group stated that such attacks and ensuing negotiations were not public knowledge. If all else fails, IS may kill prison personnel to instil fear and ensure more favourable treatment of its imprisoned members. The families of prisoners are also financially supported by IS, according to the editorial.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Abu Hamza al-Qurashi audio speech "God brought destruction on them, and similar (fate) avails the disbelievers" Quran 47:10, Islamic State (IS), al-Furqan Media Production Company, 27/01/2020.

<sup>2</sup> See paragraph 6.3 on the so-called “deal of the century”.

<sup>3</sup> An excerpt from this video speech was later included in the third episode of an IS cross-province series entitled “Answer the call”. The video urged Muslims in East Africa to make *hijra* to the IS Somalia Province. The first and second issue of the series (produced by IS al-Khayr in 2017 and IS Khorasan in 2018 respectively) had incited *hijra* to Syria/Iraq and then to Khorasan (Afghanistan); Abu Hamza al-Qurashi audio speech "God brought destruction on them, and similar (fate) avails the disbelievers" Quran 47:10, Islamic State (IS), al-Furqan Media Production Company, 27/01/2020.

<sup>4</sup> *Al-Naba'* (The News), issue no. 246, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al I'lam al-Markazi, 06/08/2020.

<sup>5</sup> IS Khorasan statement "The walls of the Nangarhar Central Prison demolished in the blessed battle of caliphate soldiers in the city of Jalalabad", Islamic State (IS), 02/08/2020.

<sup>6</sup> Spoils of war.

<sup>7</sup> *Al-Naba'* (The News), issue no. 246, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al I'lam al-Markazi, 06/08/2020.

The prison raid in Jalalabad was also commended by IS spokesperson Abu Hamza al-Qurashi in his October 2020 speech.<sup>8</sup> In the same speech, he also relayed a message to “all male and female prisoners”, inviting them to be patient and remain steadfast.<sup>9</sup> He reassured prisoners that they had not been forgotten by IS and that the group was actively pursuing their liberation. A few days after the release of this audio speech, IS launched a new campaign named “Answer the call” with the aim of freeing Muslim prisoners worldwide.<sup>10</sup> Unsurprisingly, IS provinces around the globe responded to the call by launching a string of attacks against various targets. Most notably, IS Central Africa fighters reportedly freed hundreds of prisoners following a raid on the Kangbaya prison in Beni, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).<sup>11</sup> The operation was praised in *al-Naba’*, which described it as “a massive attack by the caliphate’s soldiers on a central prison in eastern Congo” that was launched in the framework of the “Answer the call” campaign.<sup>12</sup> IS fighters are said to have carried out simultaneous attacks on two Congolese army barracks near the Kangbaya prison, and to have assaulted prison guards, thus “succeeding in the liberation of hundreds of Muslim prisoners”.<sup>13</sup>

The media campaign offered a source of inspiration for IS supporters and supporting media outlets, that used hashtags related to the campaign to disseminate their Supporter-Generated Content (SGC) productions<sup>14</sup> on Telegram and across other platforms. SGC highlighting the plight of prisoners held in refugee camps under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) were also circulated, asking supporters for donations to assist IS relatives held in the camps.<sup>15</sup> A number of pro-IS Telegram channels were dedicated to the sharing of messages from women marooned in the camps. Pictures appearing to have been taken in refugee camps, showed handwritten letters in a variety of languages, including French, German, English and Arabic. The author of these posts on Telegram elicited financial contributions to help the women get

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<sup>8</sup> Abu Hamza al-Qurashi audio speech “So relate the stories, so perhaps they may give thought”, Islamic State (IS), al-Furqan Media Production Company, 18/10/2020.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> A first iteration of this campaign was launched in 2017 and was focused on bolstering the ranks of IS fighters in Syria at the heights of the conflict against the SDF.

<sup>11</sup> IS Central Africa Province Statement “Within the battle of Answer the Call, the walls of Kangbaya Central Prison were demolished in the area of Beni”, Islamic State (IS), 21/10/2020.

<sup>12</sup> *Al-Naba’* (The News), issue no. 257, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al ‘Iam al-Markazi, 22/10/2020.

<sup>13</sup> IS Central Africa Province Statement “Within the battle of Answer the Call, the walls of Kangbaya Central Prison were demolished in the area of Beni”, Islamic State (IS), 21/10/2020.

<sup>14</sup> See for example Sarh al-Khilafa poster picturing Abu Suhaib al-Firansi as part of the campaign “Answer the call”, 02/11/2020.

<sup>15</sup> Supporter Generated Content (SGC) poster “Grab the opportunity. Race towards Ajr!”, 12/06/2020.



supplies, such as milk and clothes for their children, as these would help “mitigate their agony in the camp [...] held by atheists Kurds”.<sup>16</sup> A number of mobile videos, purportedly filmed within the al-Hol camp, were shared on Telegram and Hoop Messenger over the course of the year. In a video, a woman expresses her disappointment at Muslim men for failing to help their “sisters in the camps”.<sup>17</sup>

#### 4.2 IS staged a revival in the Syria/Iraq conflict zone

A year on from IS’s loss of territorial control, propaganda showed the group increasing the frequency of its attacks in a sizeable area of Iraq. Online productions by the group showed a spike in activity in the self-proclaimed IS provinces of Diyala, Kirkuk, Anbar, North Baghdad and Salahuddin in Iraq. These attacks seemingly started out as low-impact, guerrilla-type operations such as hit-and-run and Improvised Explosive Device (IED) attacks, then increased in scale and sophistication by mid-2020.<sup>18</sup> The trend appears to have continued in 2021, as the group claimed responsibility for the double suicide bombing in a busy market at Tayaran square, in the centre of Baghdad, on 21 January 2021.<sup>19</sup> IS militants in Iraq carry out frequent attacks against Popular Mobilisation Forces, the Iraqi authorities and tribes, whose chiefs or village elders known as *mukhtars* have repeatedly been targeted by IS.

Propaganda by IS’s self-styled provinces in Syria has also shown heightened activity in rural areas, including a number of large-scale attacks<sup>20</sup> against the Syrian army and SDF forces, predominantly in the IS Syrian provinces of al-Khayr, Homs and al-Raqqa. IS militants have also focused on affecting the enemy’s supply lines by launching attacks on refineries,<sup>21</sup> oil wells<sup>22</sup> and oil tanker trucks.<sup>23</sup> Propaganda by IS showcased the group’s capability to adapt its tactics to

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<sup>16</sup> German language letter from a woman in al-Hol camp asking for financial support, 19/05/2020.

<sup>17</sup> Supporter-Generated Content (SGC) video about al-Hol Camp "Free the female prisoners", 03/04/2020.

<sup>18</sup> IS Baghdad Province statement "Death and injury of 36 *rafida* following the detonation of 5 devices in separate areas of Bagdad by soldiers of the caliphate", Islamic State (IS), 11/05/2020.

<sup>19</sup> IS Iraq Province "Over 30 killed and 100 injured among *rafidi* polytheists in two martyrdom operations in central Baghdad", Islamic State (IS), 21/01/2021.

<sup>20</sup> IS Homs Province Statement "20 members of the Syrian army destroyed and two tanks destroyed in the west of the city of Al-Sukhnah [phon.]", Islamic State (IS), 29/11/2020.

<sup>21</sup> IS Salahuddin Province statement claiming a missile attack on the refinery of the al-Siniya [phon.] oil area, Islamic State (IS), 03/12/2020.

<sup>22</sup> IS Kirkuk Province claims attack at Khabbaz oilfield, west of Kirkuk, 09/12/2020; IS al-Khayr Province claims attack on an oil tank, Islamic State (IS), 19/05/2020.

<sup>23</sup> IS al-Raqqa Province statement "Within the Battle of Answer the Call, IS soldiers targeted a tanker transporting oil to the Syrian regime", Islamic State (IS), 21/10/2020.



different terrains, not just to destabilise enemy forces in the areas it intends to control, but also to inflict material and economic damage.

Al-Naba' reported on the Coalition countries' withdrawal of troops from Iraq,<sup>24</sup> further suggesting that the instability brought by the pandemic continues to degrade Iraqi and coalition efforts against IS, which remains a growing "global threat".<sup>25</sup> IS appeared to capitalise on the current critical situation – with US military withdrawals from remote but key bases in Iraq, the restrictions linked to the pandemic, and continuing political stagnation in Baghdad – to stage a revival of its insurgency in the country. Al-Naba' indicated that IS's operations in Iraq had doubled in the course of a week between the end of April and the beginning of May.<sup>26</sup> The terrorist group also reported that it had scaled up its global operations during the same period. Based on the broad local and international media coverage generated by the spike in attacks, the group noted that it was being given a platform to showcase its power to enemy forces.<sup>27</sup> A December issue of al-Naba' closed with a special "Harvest of the soldiers" infographic on IS's activity in Iraq during the last four months of 2020. IS claimed it launched more than 452 operations, killing 794 people and destroying 171 vehicles, as well as targeting of enemy military positions, houses and agricultural fields, thermal cameras, and power towers.<sup>28</sup>

Since the demise of its physical "caliphate", IS adopted attrition warfare to weaken its opponents with small-scale but frequent attacks, also intended to weaken its enemy's morale. In a bid to display coordination among its global contingents, IS launched the third iteration of the "war of attrition" campaign during the Muslim month of Ramadan 2020.<sup>29</sup> In the same week, a video<sup>30</sup> from the media office of the self-proclaimed IS Iraq Province included an excerpt from the January 2020 audio speech by the IS spokesperson. Abu Hamza al-Qurashi stressed that IS fighters had been up to the task of "forcing the US to disengage from Iraq around a decade ago"<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Article "The crusader's coalition withdraws from two bases in Ninawa and Kirkuk", al-Naba' (The News), issue no. 228, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al 'I'lam al-Markazi, 02/04/2020; al-Naba' (The News), issue no. 229, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al 'I'lam al-Markazi, 09/04/2020.

<sup>25</sup> Al-Naba' (The News), issue no. 233, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al 'I'lam al-Markazi, 07/05/2020.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Al-Naba' (The News), issue no. 264, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al 'I'lam al-Markazi, 10/12/2020.

<sup>29</sup> Ramadan 2020 began on 24 April 2020 and ended on 23 May 2020.

<sup>30</sup> "Strike [their] necks", Islamic State (IS), IS Iraq province, 15/05/2020.

<sup>31</sup> Abu Hamza al-Qurashi audio speech "God brought destruction on them, and similar (fate) awaits the disbelievers" Quran 47:10, Islamic State (IS), al-Furqan Media Production Company, 27/01/2020.



and that a “war of attrition” is still ongoing against the *rafida*.<sup>32</sup> IS Iraq Province further evoked the importance of the “war of attrition” in the words of the late IS leader Abubakr al-Baghdadi. In his last video appearance, al-Baghdadi declared “a war of attrition” ordained by God and urged supporters to focus on weakening their enemies’ “human, military, economic, and logistical” capabilities.<sup>33</sup>

IS statements<sup>34</sup> referencing the third iteration of the “war of attrition” were first noted across Telegram and Hoop Messenger. In May 2020, the online campaign was referenced in the vast majority of IS communiqués by “domestic” provinces in Iraq and Syria as well as by outlying provinces, such as East Asia, Khorasan, and West and Central Africa. Al-Naba’ included an infographic with detailed statistics on the outcome of the campaign, indicating that that over the course of 10 days, the majority of attacks were carried out in Iraq, Syria and West Africa. A fourth wave of the “war of attrition” was declared in July 2020, and at its conclusion Deir al Zour’s media wing (al-Khayr) released a video documenting the group’s alleged successes in the region during the campaign, that included a rocket attack on a US base in al-Omar oil field and the execution of an Armenian priest.<sup>35</sup> IS supporters and supporting media outlets latched onto the resumed “war of attrition” campaigns, which inspired them to create new visuals, such as posters and banners aimed at boosting supporter morale.

#### 4.3 IS increasingly morphed into a global enterprise

IS’s aspirations for a comeback in Iraq and Syria are coupled with expansionist ambitions, with its contingents in the African continent gaining in strength and influence. The group’s battlefield strategy takes a different shape in Africa, where IS has focused on ramping up its military muscle and establishing a firm foothold, especially in West Africa. The degree of lethality<sup>36</sup> of the attacks claimed by IS West Africa Province, along with their scale and complexity, underscore the military potential of IS militias in the continent of Africa. IS militants in West Africa operate predominantly in pockets of Nigeria’s Borno and Yobe states, in the Lake Chad basin, in the south of Niger, and

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<sup>32</sup> A derogatory term for Shia Muslims, it can be translated as “rejectionists”.

<sup>33</sup> “In the hospitality of the Emir of the believers”, Islamic State (IS), al-Furqan Media, 29/04/2019

<sup>34</sup> Statements were dated 21<sup>st</sup> Ramadan 1441 (14/05/2020).

<sup>35</sup> “Epic war of attrition 4”, Islamic State (IS), IS al-Khayr, 09/08/2020.

<sup>36</sup> IS West Africa Statement: “100 members of the apostate Niger army killed in caliphate soldiers attack on a military base near the border with Mali”, Islamic State (IS), 14/01/2020; IS West Africa province statement “More than 100 people and a number of injured as the apostate Nigerian army repelled an attack in the town of Guniri”, Islamic State (IS), 25/03/2020.

in the north-west of Cameroon.<sup>37</sup> An article in al-Naba' argued that the efforts of the African alliance against IS are throttled by financial constraints and a lack of trust among its members. It added that IS was able to create a strong fighting front in northern and western Niger, in Burkina Faso and Mali, and it was also attempting to extend the battle to northern and western Chad.<sup>38</sup> While Africa is hardly a new theatre of operations for IS, propaganda in 2020 highlighted the importance of this affiliate to the overall IS project. In particular, as IS largely reverted to insurgent tactics in Syria and Iraq, the group needs to show it still can seize and retain territory.

IS contingents in West Africa have assaulted and kidnapped humanitarian workers, including employees of the Red Cross,<sup>39</sup> as al-Naba' affirmed that there is "no protection for organisations fighting the religion of Islam".<sup>40</sup> It alleged that humanitarian and relief organisations operating in Nigeria are in fact supporting the military and intelligence services of the "crusaders", helping them advance the policies and objectives of foreign governments in Muslim countries. IS further accused aid organisations of spying and lending assistance to these governments that are reinforcing their military positions in Muslim lands under the cover of humanitarian action. According to the group, these organisations are actively seeking to spread Christianity and are promoting "blasphemous" ideas of secularism, democracy, socialism and other beliefs IS says are contrary to Islam and *sharia*.<sup>41</sup> A month after these statements, IS claimed responsibility for the killing of six French humanitarian workers in Niger.<sup>42</sup>

A meeting of the G5 Sahel in January 2020 highlighted the fight against the Islamic State Greater Sahara (ISGS) as a matter of priority.<sup>43</sup> ISGS has been formally part of IS West Africa province since March 2019, although they appear to remain operationally independent contingents. In

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<sup>37</sup> "Eleventh report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to international peace and security and the range of United Nations efforts in support of Member States in countering the threat", United Nations Security Council, S/2020/774, 04/08/2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-documents/terrorism/>.

<sup>38</sup> Al-Naba' (The News), issue no. 230, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al 'I'lam al-Markazi, 16/04/2020.

<sup>39</sup> IS West Africa Province statement claiming the capture of an employee of the Red Cross, Islamic State (IS), 02/12/2020.

<sup>40</sup> Al-Naba' (The News), issue no. 247, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al 'I'lam al-Markazi, 13/08/2020.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Al-Naba' (The News), issue no. 252, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al 'I'lam al-Markazi, 17/09/2020.

<sup>43</sup> Ministère de L'Europe et Des Affaires Étrangères. (2020). G5 Sahel – Pau Summit – Statement by the Heads of State (13 Jan. 2020). Retrieved from: <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/security-disarmament-and-non-proliferation/news/2020/article/g5-sahel-pau-summit-statement-by-the-heads-of-state-13-jan-2020>.



propaganda, the IS affiliate in the Sahel brands its releases as IS West Africa Province. In 2020 the group claimed a spate of lethal attacks in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger.<sup>44</sup>

IS Central Africa Province, one of IS's recently established provinces,<sup>45</sup> claimed numerous attacks over the course of 2020, reportedly carried out in Congo's Beni region and in Mozambique's northern province of Cabo Delgado. In August, militants linked to IS claimed to have seized the gas-rich Mozambique port city of Mocimboa da Praia, located in the province of Cabo Delgado. The dramatic clashes with the Mozambican army were documented in a photo report branded IS Central Africa Province.<sup>46</sup> Abu Hamza al-Qurashi explicitly mentioned Mozambique in his last speech of 2020, pinpointing the country as a key theatre of operations for the group. The IS spokesman congratulated fighters in Mozambique for their actions and urged them to continue fighting.<sup>47</sup> Tellingly, local insurgents in Mozambique intensified their operations in 2021 and carried out a "largescale attack"<sup>48</sup> on 24 March 2021 on the coastal city of Palma in north-eastern Mozambique, claiming to have taken control of the city.<sup>49</sup>

While the nature of the cooperation between Mozambican local insurgents and IS remains unclear, IS appears to be gaining traction in Mozambique by exploiting local grievances. The two-way cooperation between IS and local militants is mutually beneficial: the IS brand draws global attention to the insurgency, giving its militants credibility, while in turn allowing IS to appear to be a global enterprise still able to conquer land.

IS elaborated on the insurgency in Mozambique in an editorial in al-Naba', in which the group accused foreign state actors of exploiting the country for its "vast reserves of different natural

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<sup>44</sup> Al-Naba' issue no. 260 provided extensive details about recent military operations across the Sub-Saharan region; Al-Naba' (The News), issue no. 260, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al l'lam al-Markazi, 12/11/2020.

<sup>45</sup> On 18 April 2019 IS claimed eight casualties in its first attack in the region of Beni, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC); IS Central Africa Province statement "Killing and wounding of 8 elements of the Congolese army by soldiers of the caliphate (Beni)", IS Central Africa Province, 18/04/2019.

<sup>46</sup> IS Central Africa Province photo report showing result of attack on Mozambican army in Mocimboa da Praia, Islamic State (IS), 11/08/2020.

<sup>47</sup> Abu Hamza al-Qurashi audio speech "So relate the stories, so perhaps they may give thought", Islamic State (IS), al-Furqan Media Production Company, 18/10/2020.

<sup>48</sup> IS Central Africa Province "Caliphate soldiers take control over the strategic city of Palma and kill more than 55 members of the Mozambican army and Christians", Islamic State (IS), 29/03/2021.

<sup>49</sup> Amaq News Agency released several propaganda items documenting the events; Amaq News Agency statement "Control over the economic city Palma after killing dozens of Mozambican forces and Christians", Islamic State (IS), 29/03/2021; Amaq News Agency video "Islamic State fighters take control over the city of Palma in Cabo Delgado after a wide attack, that they carried out last Wednesday", Islamic State (IS), 30/03/2021; Amaq News Agency photo report "Islamic State fighters inside the city of Palma after they took control over it", Islamic State (IS), 29/03/2021.

resources”, leading to centuries of oppression for the local Muslim population. The editorial focused on IS’s intervention and how the Mozambican government was unsuccessful at keeping IS at bay.<sup>50</sup> IS Central Africa Province also declared that it was present in Tanzania for the first time in October, claiming an attack against the Tanzanian army in the Mtwara region.<sup>51</sup>

In November 2020, al-Naba’ interviewed Abu al-Walid al-Sahrawi, a former leader of Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM)'s constituent group al-Murabitun and current leader of ISGS.<sup>52</sup> Al-Sahrawi offered insights into the relationship between its group and al-Qaeda (AQ), the dynamics among AQ's branches in the Sahel-Sahara region, and the history of the establishment of ISGS. According to al-Sahrawi, AQ’s splinter groups in the Sahara region lurched into a crisis due to a lack of strong leadership that led to internal dissent and competition among the constituent groups. He further described AQ's hostility towards IS as originating from its desire to keep a tight grip on political power in the region. Al-Sahrawi accused AQ branches in the Sahel-Sahara of spreading false information about IS in order to undermine its influence and diminish its popular support base. Al-Sahrawi noted that a number of defectors from JNIM’s constituent groups Ansar al-Din and al-Murabitun have joined IS, encouraging more to follow their example. The ISGS leader also criticised JNIM for its “failed war against IS in the region” and for negotiating with the "apostate" G5 Sahel governments against Islam.<sup>53</sup> One of the main points of contention in the rivalry between IS and AQ is the willingness of AQ affiliates to enter talks with local governments.

2020 saw the complicated relationship between JNIM and IS West Africa reach a climax as clashes broke out in March and continued for several months in Mali and Burkina Faso. IS reported on the escalation through al-Naba’, in which it accused AQ of being in the pay of the Malian government, adding that “the ‘crusader’ campaign in the region does not attack AQ soldiers and areas [of influence]”, thereby allowing JNIM leaders Iyad Ghali and Amadou Koufa to wage their war against IS.<sup>54</sup> The weekly newsletter continued to portray AQ and its affiliates as being in collusion with the Western Coalition in West Africa. According to this account, AQ came to realise that by fighting IS it could avoid being targeted by the coalition. IS also asserted that this is now

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<sup>50</sup> Al-Naba' (The News), issue no. 241, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al I'lam al-Markazi, 02/07/2020.

<sup>51</sup> IS Central Africa province statement claiming an attack against the Tanzanian army in the region of Mtwara, Islamic State (IS), 15/10/2020.

<sup>52</sup> Al-Naba' (The News), issue no. 260, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al I'lam al-Markazi, 12/11/2020.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Al-Naba' (The News), issue no. 233, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al I'lam al-Markazi, 07/05/2020.



AQ's top priority, paving the way for it to receive financial support and other forms of assistance from IS's enemies.<sup>55</sup>

IS reported multiple attacks against JNIM in several locations of Burkina Faso, and in the areas of Macina and Mopti in Mali.<sup>56</sup> In al-Naba', IS claimed the killing of 76 JNIM militants in Mali and Burkina Faso between August and November,<sup>57</sup> and again the killing of 35 "apostates" of AQ militias at the border between Mali and Burkina Faso in December.<sup>58</sup>

In addition to competing for territorial expansion and local support in the Sahel, IS and AQ's branches have vied for influence in different areas, notably Syria, Somalia and Yemen. Propaganda by IS in 2020 included many attempts to undermine AQ's ability to attract recruits by denouncing its perceived deviation from key ideological pillars. The cross-province IS video series "To be absolved before your Lord" is a case in point. In each of the three episodes, by IS Yemen Province, IS Khorasan Province and IS Somalia Province respectively, IS sought to undermine the jihadist credentials of its opponents. On the occasion of the anniversary of the 11 September 2001 attacks, IS sniped at AQ for directing all its efforts against the US and the Western world, while maintaining a passive attitude towards local governments.<sup>59</sup> According to IS, its rival is guilty of allowing Arab populations be ruled by 'apostate' governments who decided to follow 'polytheist democracy' instead of *sharia*. IS added that the war should be waged not only against the US and the Western world, but also against those Arab regimes that support them, such as in Egypt and Tunisia.<sup>60</sup> IS spokesman Abu Hamza al-Qurashi reiterated the message in his October 2020 audio speech, in which he urged IS supporters to target the Arabian Peninsula and Saudi Arabia in particular, a country that IS sees as supporting "all wars against the monotheists".<sup>61</sup>

In the same context of IS's rivalry with other jihadist groups, Abu Hamza al-Qurashi emphasised in his May audio speech the active presence of IS in the self-proclaimed IS Khorasan and West

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<sup>55</sup> Al-Naba' (The News), issue no. 239, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al-I'lam al-Markazi, 18/06/2020.

<sup>56</sup> Al-Naba' (The News), issue no. 260, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al-I'lam al-Markazi, 12/11/2020.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> IS West Africa Province statement "More than 35 of the militia al-Qaeda dead and dozens injured after clashes in Mali", Islamic State (IS), 15/12/2020.

<sup>59</sup> Al-Naba' (The News), issue no. 251, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al-I'lam al-Markazi, 10/09/2020.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Abu Hamza al-Qurashi audio speech "So relate the stories, so perhaps they may give thought", Islamic State (IS), al-Furqan Media Production Company, 18/10/2020.

Africa provinces, where the group continued to lock horns with the Taliban and AQ.<sup>62</sup> Focusing on IS's Afghanistan-based affiliate, the IS Khorasan Province, Abu Hamza al-Qurashi praised the contingent for its activity in spite of the infighting with the Taliban. Tellingly, attacks in Afghanistan by IS Khorasan Province in 2020 stood out for their high death tolls. In spite of battlefield setbacks, IS communiqués continued to highlight IS Khorasan Province militants' ability to carry out large-scale attacks.<sup>63</sup> Over the course of 2020, IS Khorasan was responsible for a spate of attacks targeting Kabul University,<sup>64</sup> places of worship<sup>65</sup> and prominent figures in Afghan society such as journalists.<sup>66</sup>

#### 4.4 Dearth of official IS media prompted supporter networks to take the lead

Following its loss of territorial control in Iraq and Syria, IS's media production capabilities were affected by a dearth of resources, leading in turn to limited reliable sources from the IS hierarchy. Official IS propaganda continued to dwindle in 2020. While IS's official media feed of information is sustained by the daily release of statements, other more sophisticated types of digital products such as video releases by official IS provinces have become a rare occurrence. Short statements by the Amaq News Agency, for instance, were also encountered less frequently in late 2020 as the media outlet appeared to favour producing longer reports documenting attacks deemed of relevance, or short videos, consisting mostly of raw and unedited footage.

IS media operatives highlighted the group's attacks in areas where it can claim military advances. To this end, IS relied on the reporting of remote fighters who embraced IS's cause. The group continued to depend on Nashir News Agency and dedicated online "24/7 news" channels to document its territorial operations.

IS's online presence suffered a major setback when on 21-22 November 2019, EU Member States and Europol coordinated an action targeting IS's online networks. The action dealt a severe blow to IS's strategic communications and in particular to the highly organised propaganda

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<sup>62</sup> Abu Hamza al-Qurashi audio speech "And the disbelievers will know for whom is the final home", Islamic State (IS), al-Furqan Media Production Company, 28/05/2020.

<sup>63</sup> Amaq news agency statement "80 Afghan judges, investigators and security members were killed and wounded in an attack carried out by IS fighters in Kabul", 02/11/2020.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> IS Khorasan Province statement claiming responsibility for the attack on a gathering of Sikh and Hindu "polytheists", Islamic State (IS), 26/03/2020; IS Khorasan claim an attack during Kabul Shia ceremony, Islamic State (IS), 06/03/2020.

<sup>66</sup> IS Khorasan Province claim for attack against journalists of the Khurshid TV, Islamic State (IS), 30/05/2020.

distribution and authentication processes that characterised IS's networks on Telegram, which had provided a stable home for the group's media arm since 2016. In the aftermath of the action, IS media outlets and online supporters alike have attempted to rebuild their networks on Telegram, while also decentralising their presence across multiple online platforms, including Rocket.Chat, Hoop Messenger, Tam Tam, Element (formerly Riot), and Conversations.im. Lately, IS propagandists and online supporters have also ramped up their circumvention measures in a bid to regain digital ground on Telegram and other mainstream platforms. Faced with sustained pressure from online disruption actions and investigations, IS online supporters relied on supporter (*munasir*) networks for guidance in navigating IS's online assets, now fragmented and dispersed across multiple OSPs. IS supporters have continued to direct efforts towards the creation of IS-supporting websites, encompassing different purposes. Among the most notable, the Isdarat website (recently known also as al-'Uqab) serves as a complete archive of official IS video releases. In spite of frequent suspensions, these websites continue to emerge at new domains that are consistently advertised by networks of supporters across the multi-platform environment.

The disruption of IS's dissemination networks also led to a de-branding effect for the group, as its supporters started to dilute the IS brand image in favour of less recognisable textual and visual features to avoid detection. In this context, previously unknown IS-supporting media outlets began to surface while others disappeared. As channels, groups and bots representing Nashir News Agency and Amaq News Agency faced growing suspensions on Telegram and elsewhere, new media outlets took over the task of delivering IS's daily feed of information. Other IS-supporting media outlets stepped up their capabilities and attempted to take over the role of official media outlet. Uqab News Agency, for instance, surfaced in 2020 and produced digital media products such as statements and infographics reporting news from the battlefield, mimicking the role traditionally fulfilled by Amaq News Agency. A number of IS-supporting media outlets expanded their media production portfolios, issuing new digital products. Al-Battar Media, in particular, launched a new monthly magazine compiling photos and visuals issued by IS official media outlets.<sup>67</sup> In the same vein, the West Africa Agency, a media outlet with the mission statement "Every week, West Africa Agency informs you on news about the Caliphate soldiers in West Africa"<sup>68</sup>, published the first issue of its magazine in June. This magazine, which later adopted the title "al-Fath", includes contents in English, French and Arabic.

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<sup>67</sup> Al-Battar photo magazine "The Islamic State in pictures, issue no. 1, al-Battar Media Foundation, 29/09/2020.

<sup>68</sup> West Africa Agency weekly magazine issue no. 1, West Africa Agency, 01/06/2020.



2020 witnessed a profusion of pro-IS posters and messages calling on Muslim Indians to “rise up against Hindu oppression”<sup>69</sup> in India. IS supporters endeavoured to prey on tensions between Hindus and Muslims, exacerbated by legal measures adopted by the Indian government and regarded as anti-Muslim, such as the Citizenship Amendment Bill.<sup>70</sup> Marginal media outlets with a focus on India and Kashmir – such as Dawaat al-Haq, al- Muhajir and al-Tijara – regained traction and put out numerous posters in Urdu and, more predominantly, in English – presumably to reach a wider audience. Most notably, the IS-aligned media outlet Sawt al-Hind issued a monthly English language magazine titled “The voice of Hind”. The magazine was the subject of a dispute between IS supporters about its authenticity, as different versions of it were shared and presented as authentic on different platforms. The alleged falsification of “The Voice of Hind” highlights the authentication challenges that arise because IS’s media operations run on multiple platforms.

IS-aligned media outlets that specialise in cybersecurity, privacy, and encrypted communications remained committed to their mission of providing online security awareness to IS supporters. The Electronic Horizons Foundations even established a virtual “weekly meeting” with its technical support administrators to provide answers on technical and security-related questions. The virtual “meeting” took place on the Element application.<sup>71</sup>

As a stable online presence is essential to project the group’s strength, IS and its supporter networks committed significant resources to establishing themselves across the new multi-platform environment. As official IS propaganda decreased, the IS message continued to be broadcast and reach its target audiences thanks to the effort of committed IS supporters and their networks. Supporter networks appear to manage a large community of online supporters that is instrumental to the advancement of IS’s operational activity online and offline.

#### 4.5 IS propaganda continued to direct and inspire lone actor attacks

Official IS propaganda continued to direct and inspire lone actor attacks on EU soil. Echoing a popular message delivered by former IS spokesperson Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, IS urged

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<sup>69</sup> Al-Muhajir Media poster “O’ Oppressed Muslims of Hind”, al-Muhajir Media, 15/04/2020.

<sup>70</sup> “Citizenship Amendment Bill: India’s new ‘anti-Muslim’ law explained”, BBC News, 11/12/2019, Retrieved from: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-50670393>.

<sup>71</sup> Horizons statement “Weekly Meeting”, Horizons Electronic Foundation, 06/10/2020; Horizons statement “Answers from the weekly meeting”, Horizons Electronic Foundation, 15/10/2020.

Muslims to carry out attacks “by any means available”<sup>72</sup>, suggesting fire as a viable means. The official IS al-Hayat Media, that specialises in producing propaganda for the group in multiple languages, released only one video in 2020. The “Incite the believers” video called on Muslims around the globe to avenge their “brothers” who were hit by airstrikes or were imprisoned in Western prisons. IS encouraged its adherents to fulfil their duty towards violent jihad, while emphasising that there is no need for sophisticated weaponry to carry out attacks and suggesting means such as vehicles, hunting rifles, knives, toxic substances, ropes for strangulation, electrocution, or starting fires.<sup>73</sup> Following the release of the video, IS supporters and supporting media outlets such as Uqab News Agency and Quraysh Media published posters and posts inciting IS supporters to perpetrate attacks by starting fires on the lands of the “disbelievers”.

Following the beheading of a teacher in Conflans-Sainte-Honorine, France, IS applauded the terrorist act purportedly committed to retaliate against the depictions of the Prophet Muhammad. Through an editorial in al-Naba’,<sup>74</sup> IS eulogised the perpetrator of the attack Abdoullakh Anzorov, aka “Abdullah al-Shishani”, describing him as a “martyr” who chose death over surrender to the French police. The editorial elaborated on IS’s influence in the inspiration of attacks using “any means available”. The article praised IS supporters, particularly the youth, for the innovative modi operandi and weapons used to wage war against the “disbelievers” and the “apostates”. IS particularly noted that techniques like knife attacks, ramming with vehicles, arson, manufacturing chemical poisons, and stealing enemies’ money proved to be efficient ways to bypass and deter the security measures of the “crusaders”.<sup>75</sup>

In the aftermath of a terrorist attack in Nice in October 2020 in which three people were stabbed to death, an online campaign entitled “Hunt them - O muwahid” led by supporter networks called for attacks against “disbelievers” and encouraged supporters to target their interests everywhere, especially in France. The campaign, which went viral, was intended to spread anti-French messages across online platforms and trigger further attacks.

IS claimed an attack that took place in November 2020, when a gunman opened fire in six different locations in the city of Vienna, causing the death of 4 people. The perpetrator was identified in IS’s claim as “Abu Dujana al-Albani”. Amaq News Agency released a report and a

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<sup>72</sup> “Incite the believers”, Islamic State (IS), al-Hayat Media, 26/07/2020.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Al-Naba’ (The News), issue no. 257, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al I’lam al-Markazi, 22/10/2020.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.



video of the attacker pledging allegiance to the leader of IS.<sup>76</sup> While the attack was still ongoing, bystanders' videos started circulating online on social media and messenger applications. The videos showed the perpetrator running through the streets and shooting victims. Later the same week, IS supporters recycled the footage in their SGC productions to glorify the attack.

An article in al-Naba' hailed the impact of the attack on European countries. It stated that Germany, Switzerland and the Czech Republic "declared their concerns for similar attacks" and mentioned "intensified security measures on their borders with Austria". The article also welcomed the continuous media coverage that reached "millions of people" and "brought hope to the hearts of the believers".<sup>77</sup> IS online supporters were immediately galvanised by the modus operandi adopted by the attacker. Many expressed hope it would result in a coordinated large-scale attack such as the one seen in the 2015 attack at the Bataclan concert hall and in the streets of Paris.

IS supporter networks play a major role in broadcasting and amplifying IS's message. Pro-IS media outlets such as Tala'i' al-Ansar, al-Taqwa, Al Dawat media (now renamed to al-Mahdi Media), Sarh al-Khilafa and Quraysh Media called for lone actor attacks, often featuring Western landmarks and political leaders in the visual materials they released. There was a spike in this type of production in the aftermath of terrorist attacks that took place in 2020 and over the Christmas and New Year holidays. In particular, IS supporter networks have gone to great lengths to amplify the threat messages against EU countries, to an extent that does not seem to parallel the narrative promulgated by official IS media.

## 5. Al-Qaeda (AQ): a transnational network through leadership transitions

### 5.1 Al-Qaeda's future course of action remains unclear amid series of targeted killings and vulnerable leadership

The al-Qaeda responsible for the 11 September 2001 attacks was a highly hierarchical, centralised organisation, whose leadership exuded authority and projected a unity of purpose

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<sup>76</sup> Amaq News Agency had not released a video featuring the perpetrator of an attack on EU soil since the attack carried out close to Opera Garnier in Paris, in May 2018; "Perpetrator of yesterday's attack on citizens of the coalition countries in Vienna, the capital of Austria, pledges allegiance to Shaykh Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi", Islamic State (IS), Amaq News Agency, 03/11/2020.

<sup>77</sup> Al-Naba' (The News), issue no. 259, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al 'I'lam al-Markazi, 05/11/2020.



across its branches. Most notably, it was a group that took pride in having orchestrated attacks that caused the death of nearly 3 000 civilians.

Nearly twenty years later, AQ's overall strategy involves devolving operational decision-making from the core to its regional affiliates, with its overarching goals being set by the organisation's central leadership. AQ's delegation of responsibilities regarding tactics led to some of its affiliates acting independently to pursue their local interests, which at times may be even at odds with AQ's general guidance. On the nineteenth anniversary of the 11 September attacks, AQ Core leader Ayman al-Zawahiri acknowledged the importance of local agendas, but reminded its regional branches that the conflict between "crusaders" and Muslims "is an international struggle and not a local one. In fact, the local conflicts cannot be disconnected from this larger struggle".<sup>78</sup>

AQ was able to construct a new narrative around a rejection of brutality and a prohibition on killing innocent Muslims. As a result, it portrayed itself as a "less extremist" jihadist organisation in contrast with IS.

Over the course of 2020, AQ has weathered a series of major blows and lost some significant senior leaders. Abu Muhammad al-Masri, a likely candidate to succeed AQ current leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, was reportedly killed by Israeli operatives in Teheran in August 2020.<sup>79</sup> Additionally, Afghan Forces announced in October 2020 the killing of Husam Abdurra'uf, AQ's Information Chief and one of the group's most prominent propagandists. A number of AQ's top operatives in Syria, including the deputy Emir of the group Tanzim Hurras al-Din Abu al-Qassam al-Urduni, were also reportedly killed in a drone strike in Idlib.<sup>80</sup>

Recently, Ayman al-Zawahiri's intermittent public appearances led to widespread speculations among IS supporters about his alleged death, his poor health or whether he is being forced into hiding. The low number of speeches and the long pause between them are atypical for the AQ's leader, who used to deliver more regular speeches, either framed as religious lectures or as topical speeches grounded in the context of current affairs. As its leadership has been decimated

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<sup>78</sup> Ayman al-Zawahiri's speech "Deal of the Century or the Crusade of the Century", Al-Qaeda "central command", al-Sahab Media Production Company, 11/09/2020.

<sup>79</sup> "Al Qaeda's No.2, Accused in U.S. Embassy Attacks, Was Killed in Iran", The New York Times, 13/11/2020, retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/13/world/middleeast/al-masri-abdullah-qaeda-dead.html>.

<sup>80</sup> AQAP Statement "Condolences for the martyrdom of the Jordanian Leader, Abu al-Qassam, Deputy Emir of the group Hurras al-Din", al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), 29/06/2020; AQIM Statement "Condolences for the killing of Jordanian leader, Abu al-Qassam, Deputy Emir of the group Hurras al-Din", al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), al-Andalus Media Production Company, 30/06/2020.



and is vulnerable to being targeted in counterterror raids, the group's future prospects look bleak. Finding a suitable successor for al-Zawahiri, someone who can be trusted and can command respect among AQ's affiliates, is a tall order for AQ.

Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahidin (al-Shabab) and Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) remain AQ's most powerful affiliates and the ones with the largest military potential, which both groups continued to exert in the areas under their influence. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) lost their long-standing leaders as their survival, and relevance, is undermined by external and internal factors.

To show the most pressing challenges faced by the AQ network, three of the most significant AQ affiliates will be examined in more detail below.

## 5.2 Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) adapted to a new leadership

Over the course of 2020, AQAP continued to entrench itself in the ongoing conflict in Yemen. The group's focus on gaining support by exploiting local grievances has allowed the group to survive and maintain some territorial control. The provision of goods and services in the areas it controls, coupled with a dispute resolution mechanism, has helped the group bolster recruitment. AQAP is keen to be perceived as protecting the local population against other actors, especially the Houthis. Its chameleonic strategy, which changes according to contingent needs, allowed the group to survive despite several roadblocks encountered along the way. This characteristic is evident also in propaganda production, considerably reduced during 2019, but suddenly prolific again in the aftermath of leader Qasim al-Raymi's death in early 2020.

AQAP directs part of its activity through Ansar al-Shari'a (AAS), a core task of which is to foster trust and good relations with the local population. AAS is in charge of recruiting new affiliates, especially within local tribes. The mutual assistance between the two groups is also evident in the propaganda material released by their main media outlets. In general, AQAP's propaganda dissemination strategy differs greatly from its rival IS affiliates in Yemen. While IS seems to manipulate and inflate information in its daily communiques to maximise visibility, AQAP does not issue claims of responsibility for every attack it perpetrates. Statements claiming local operational activities are released through AAS. This feeds into AQAP's wider strategy, which combines a low profile attitude with an attempt to embed itself in local communities.



AQAP and IS affiliates in Yemen continued to clash throughout 2020,<sup>81</sup> especially in the governorate of al-Bayda', in central Yemen.<sup>82</sup> While AQAP and its front organisation Ansar al-Shari'a retain a presence across different Yemeni governorates, IS's military capabilities in the region appear to be dwindling and centred around the al-Qifa area, in al-Bayda'. In August 2020, IS al-Bayda' Province reported an escalation of hostilities against Houthis,<sup>83</sup> who had reportedly launched an offensive against the positions of AQAP and IS in al-Qifa.

The group's cautious approach to information disclosure emerged also in the aftermath of the killing of Qasim al-Raymi. In an attempt to buy time and devise a strategy following initial reports of the killing of its leader at the end of January 2020, AQAP released an audio message by Qasim al-Raymi on 2 February 2020.<sup>84</sup> In the speech, al-Raymi claimed responsibility for the attack perpetrated by Muhammad bin Saeed al-Shamrani against the US Naval Air Station of Pensacola, Florida, in December 2019.<sup>85</sup> Reminding its followers of the instructions contained in the Inspire magazine series, al-Raymi called for future attacks, against both sensitive cyber targets and important political figures using any means available.

In light of the sustained pressure and the military setbacks at the hands of the Houthis, AQAP capitalised on the Pensacola attack to show that it remains a threat and is still capable of mounting external operations, even when events seems to suggest a decline in abilities on the ground.

AQAP eventually acknowledged the death of its leader in an audio message by Hamad al-Tamimi at the end of February 2020.<sup>86</sup> The message confirmed that al-Raymi was killed by a US drone and eulogised the slain leader for his sacrifices and achievements. The appointment of his successor, Khalid Batarfi (aka Abu al-Miqdad al-Kindi), was also announced. In his first address as

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<sup>81</sup> In August 2020, rumours spread that AQAP and IS called a truce in order to counter an attack by the Houthis on their bases.

<sup>82</sup> Amaq claims IS Yemeni branch kills 8 AQAP affiliates during different attacks on 03/02/2020, Islamic State (IS), Amaq News Agency, 04/02/2020; IS Yemeni branch claims the killing of 8 AQAP members on 03/02/2020 after being attacked, Islamic State (IS), IS al-Bayda' Province, 04/02/2020.

<sup>83</sup> IS al-Bayda' claims to have targeted 25 Houthis in multiple attacks in al-Qifa, Yemen, 17/08/2020.

<sup>84</sup> "And Heal the chests of a Believing People ", al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Al-Malahim Media Production Company, 02/02/2020.

<sup>85</sup> Muhammad bin Saeed al-Shamrani, 21 years old, second lieutenant of the Saudi Royal Air Force, was attending training at the US naval base.

<sup>86</sup> "Statement regarding the martyr death of Shaykh Abu Huraira Qasim al-Raymi - May God have mercy on him", al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Al-Malahim Media Production Company, 23/02/2020.



the new AQAP leader, Batarfi renewed his allegiance to AQ leader Ayman al-Zawahiri.<sup>87</sup> Furthermore, the new leader confirmed the death of Ansar al-Shari'a judge Abu al-Bara al-Ibbi, also killed in an US counterterrorism operation in Yemen in late January 2020, and vowed revenge against the US for the loss of its leaders. Batarfi's message praised the efforts of other AQ branches in Afghanistan, the Levant, Somalia, the Sahel and North Africa. In particular, Batarfi commended the Taliban for the successful implementation of the peace deal with the US government, and praised Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahidin (al-Shabab) for targeting US interests in the field. It remains to be seen whether Khalid Batarfi will be able to coalesce power and mitigate the dissent in its ranks, mostly caused by alleged infiltrations.<sup>88</sup>

### 5.3 IS discredited AQAP over internal dissent and alleges groundless espionage claims

AQAP's concerns over espionage date back to 2018, when the security committee of AQAP announced that following a year-long investigation, the group was able to dismantle a network of spies allegedly responsible for having provided intelligence to the enemy to enable targeting of AQAP members. Between September 2018 and February 2020, AQAP released the video series "Demolishing of the espionage", comprising a "preliminary introduction" and four episodes. The videos denounced the infiltration of spies within the group and featured the testimony of a number of spies uncovered by AQAP's security service.

AQAP's focus on uncovering spies led to internal strife, which IS and its online supporters endeavoured to exacerbate. IS online supporters widely disseminated a series of posters entitled "school of espionage" accusing the AQ leadership of killing its members on the basis of hearsay and weak accusations of espionage. With this series, IS online supporters aimed to underscore the weakness of both AQ Core and AQAP after the alleged defection of many of its members. In particular, four SGC posters entitled "al-Qaeda under the magnifying glass" featured excerpts from statements allegedly released by AQAP defectors, who expressed their grievances and turned to al-Zawahiri to resolve the conflict. The defectors accused AQAP of transgressing *sharia*

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<sup>87</sup> Khalid Batarfi video "Rather, it is one of the two best outcomes", al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Al-Malahim Media Production Company, 19/03/2020.

<sup>88</sup> In early February 2021, a United Nations' report claimed that the leader of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Khalid Batarfi, had been arrested in October 2020. Almost two months after this report was published, AQAP officially denied these claims, highlighting in a two-page statement that "these kinds of repetitive rumours" only aim to maintain a "psychological war on the mujahidin". AQAP "Statement of Denial", al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Al-Malahim Media Production Company, 08/04/2021.



and revealed that the group had issued death sentences against a number of its leaders based on “groundless” claims of espionage.

Additionally, in April 2020, IS Yemen Province released the first episode of an IS cross-province series titled “To be absolved before your Lord”. The video denounced what is defined as the “unwillingness” of AQ Core to exploit the Arab Spring revolutions to establish *sharia* and religious rule, along with its alleged failure to unify its branches in the “post-spring” period. While referring to AQAP as “the most powerful” AQ’s affiliate “after the organisation’s decline in Afghanistan and the absence of al-Zawahiri”,<sup>89</sup> IS Yemen Province lambasted AQAP for failing to “establish *sharia* and religious punishments” when they took over the city of al-Mukalla in the south of Yemen, in 2015. Focusing on fighters who allegedly defected from AQ and joined IS, the video accused AQ leaders of siding with the Yemeni army.<sup>90</sup> This tirade against AQAP and its failure to implement religious punishments is a clear attempt to poach AQ defectors.

An article in al-Naba’ was also dedicated to the subject, further displaying IS’s intention to take advantage of the purported disagreement between AQAP members and their leadership, thus urging AQ militants to repent and join IS.<sup>91</sup> IS’s discourse places emphasis on the contrast between its vehement denouncement of “polytheism” (i.e. Houthi, formal government) and AQAP’s compromising approach, underlining AQAP’s alleged association with the Yemeni armed forces.

AQAP rejected the accusations and confirmed the allegations of internal dissent in a statement released in May 2020.<sup>92</sup> While highlighting the complexity of the conflict the group is facing on different fronts, AQAP reiterated compliance with AQ’s ban on operations involving mass casualties, stressing that a number of operations were aborted to prevent the killing of innocent Muslims. In contrast to IS, AQ and the majority of its affiliates stress the importance of not alienating the Muslim masses and avoiding brutal tactics such as mass killings. With regard to the “spies”, AQAP stated that they went through a “fair trial by fair judges”.<sup>93</sup>

This controversy did not discourage AQAP from continuing its hunt for spies. In August 2020 the group announced it uncovered a network of spies allegedly working for the US, the Houthi

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<sup>89</sup> “To be absolved before your Lord”, Islamic State (IS), IS Yemen province, 29/04/2020.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Al-Naba' (The News), issue no. 232, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al I'lam al-Markazi, 30/04/2020.

<sup>92</sup> AQAP (Audio) Statement "And do not be for the deceitful an advocate", al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Al-Malahim Media Production Company, 11/05/2020.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.



National Security, the intelligence services of Saudi Arabia and the UAE.<sup>94</sup> AQAP stated that it executed a “judicial verdict” against one of these spies, leading to the crucifixion of a doctor.

#### 5.4 AQIM and JNIM expressed intention to negotiate with Sahel governments

AQ’s affiliates in the Sahel, most notably al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), offer similar narratives in their propaganda releases. JNIM has displayed a greater capacity to take action on the ground, and makes propaganda content that mostly reflects the group’s military advances. AQIM oversees the production of the ideological message, which it conveys predominantly through audio-visual releases by its leaders or high-ranking officials. The official media outlets of the groups, al-Andalus Media for AQIM and al-Zallaqa Media for JNIM, appear to share media resources, a fact that further testifies to the strong links between the groups.

Over the course of 2020, both groups continued to denounce France’s presence in West Africa and urged local governments to pursue dialogue and negotiations with AQ local branches. A week after a statement by JNIM expressing the group’s intention to engage in negotiations with the Malian government,<sup>95</sup> AQIM’s leader Abu Mus'ab Abdulwadud (now deceased) urged the governments of the Sahel countries to engage in direct talks to end France’s military presence in the region. In the audio speech entitled “France and the spider web”, released by AQIM’s official media outlet al-Andalus Media, Abdulwadud railed against the “unjust alliance” between regional leaders and France. In the context of the G5 Sahel summit meeting that took place in the French city of Pau in mid-January 2020, Abdulwadud highlighted that the losing parties of this alliance are the leaders of the Sahel countries, as they betrayed the will of their citizens who are fighting against French occupation.<sup>96</sup> While condemning a “corrupt French political class” that leads a lavish lifestyle at the expenses of “the oppressed people” in West Africa, Abdulwadud appealed to the integrity of Sahel leaders, calling on them to join AQIM at the negotiating table for “serious talks”. In the same message, AQIM’s former leader ordered the *mujahidin* to avoid targeting civilian gatherings such as markets.<sup>97</sup> AQ’s focus on targeting the

<sup>94</sup> AQAP (Audio) Statement "Announcement of the arrest of a network of spies in the state of al-Bayda", al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Al-Malahim Media Production Company, 23/08/2020.

<sup>95</sup> JNIM statement "In relation to the request of negotiations", Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), al-Zallaqa Media Production Company, 08/03/2020.

<sup>96</sup> "France and the spiderweb", al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), al-Andalus Media Production Company, 16/03/2020.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.



military rather than civilians is one of its hallmarks and one that sets the group and its affiliates apart from IS, which is known not only to excuse the use of indiscriminate violence but to weaponise it in its strategic messaging.

A year on from the onset of nationwide demonstrations that led to the resignation of Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika in February 2019, AQIM congratulated the Algerian citizens on the successful outcome of the protests, while also stressing that elections are not the means to achieve real change. In an audio message by Abu Ubayda Yusuf al-Annabi - AQIM's head of the Council of dignitaries at the time – AQIM urged Algerians not to settle with the current regime and to continue with the “blessed uprisings”<sup>98</sup> until the government is overthrown. Al-Annabi devoted a number of speeches to the Algerian uprisings in 2019, leveraging the protesters’ grievances against the regime to galvanise support for a return to what he described as Algeria’s Islamic identity and to *sharia*.

As happened to other AQ branches, AQIM and JNIM saw their leadership targeted in counterterrorism operations. In a video published in February 2020, AQIM confirmed the deaths of Abu Iyyad al-Tunisi, reportedly a member of the AQIM’s *shura* council and Yahya Abu al-Hammam al-Jazairi, who is described as the deputy leader of JNIM and a member of the *Shura* Council of AQIM.<sup>99</sup> A more grievous blow was dealt to the group when its leader Abu Mus'ab Abdulwadud aka Abdulmalik Droukdal was killed in an operation led by the French army in Mali in early June 2020. Unlike AQAP, AQIM acknowledged the death of its leader soon enough after the public announcement by the French authorities,<sup>100</sup> in a video message entitled "The deal was profitable, Abu Musab". Offering its condolences to AQ members across the Sahel and North Africa, AQIM spokesperson Abu Abdalilah Ahmad eulogised the slain AQIM leader by recounting his ascent to the AQ leadership.<sup>101</sup> AQIM’s mouthpiece al-Andalus Media failed to indicate a successor in the video, perhaps pointing to divergent opinions over potential contenders or to a lack of communication with AQ Core. In the same video, AQIM particularly encouraged the youth across North Africa and the Sahel region to follow Abdulwadud’s path in jihad.<sup>102</sup> Echoing the

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<sup>98</sup> "And the battle to free Algeria continues", al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), al-Andalus Media Production Company, 22/02/2020.

<sup>99</sup> "The martyr death of our leaders and brothers is a proof of the truth of our call", al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), al-Andalus Media Production Company, 27/02/2020.

<sup>100</sup> French authorities announced the death of Abdulmalik Droukdal on 05/06/2020, claiming he was targeted on 03/06/2020.

<sup>101</sup> "The deal was profitable, Abu Musab", al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), al-Andalus Media Production Company, 18/06/2020.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

message in one of Abdulwadud's latest speeches, AQIM called on the Sahel governments to oppose foreign domination and reject "French guardianship" in the region. AQIM warned these governments of the risk of spiralling into further political failures, violence and civil unrest.<sup>103</sup> Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) expressed its condolences and described Droukhal as "a quiet achiever", more focused on actions than words.<sup>104</sup> Al-Shabab, for its part, warned France: "do not think that you have seen the end of your woes and nightmares by killing Sheikh Abu Musab [...], for he has left in his wake lions and *mujahidin*" who will continue to haunt France for a long time".<sup>105</sup>

AQIM announced the appointment of its new leader, the Algerian Abu Ubayda Yusuf al-Annabi, over five months after the death of his predecessor Abu Mus'ab Abdulwadud.<sup>106</sup> Al-Annabi, often viewed as AQIM's second-in-command, served previously as AQIM's head of the Council of dignitaries and broadcast the group's viewpoint in prominent AQIM propaganda releases, including in an interview granted to France 24 news network in 2019.<sup>107</sup> Al-Annabi also pledged allegiance to Ayman al-Zawahiri on behalf of AQIM in July 2011.<sup>108</sup>

In addition to declaring al-Annabi as its new leader, AQIM's video showed the dead body of Abdulwadud and once again identified France as the "head of the crusade", further accusing the country of interfering in Muslims' interests everywhere and by any means. A case in point is, according to the group, the failed attempt to free Swiss hostage Béatrice Stöckli. Addressing the Swiss government and Swiss citizens, AQIM stresses that the French government is to blame for the death of the hostage.<sup>109</sup>

Hostage taking is a recurring theme in propaganda by AQ's Sahel affiliates, especially JNIM, which released four hostages following a prisoner swap deal in October 2020. JNIM issued an official

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> AQAP statement "Condolences for the martyrdom of [...] Abu Musa'b Abdulwadud, Emir of AQIM", al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al-Malahim Media Production Company, 23/06/2020.

<sup>105</sup> Al-Shabab statement "Congratulations and condolences on the martyrdom of the Emir, Leader Sheikh Yahya Abu Mus'ab Abd al-Wadud, and his brothers" al-Shabab al-Mujahidin Movement, al-Kata'ib Media Production Company, 22/06/2020.

<sup>106</sup> "Therein let them rejoice", al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), al-Andalus Media Production Company, 21/11/2020.

<sup>107</sup> "Interview with Shaykh Abu Ubayda Yusuf al-Annabi", al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), al-Andalus Media, 30/05/2019.

<sup>108</sup> AQIM video "Special interview with Shaykh Abu Ubayda Yusuf al-Annabi, member of the shura council and head of the organisation's elders", al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), al-Andalus Media, 07/07/2011.

<sup>109</sup> "Therein let them rejoice", al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), al-Andalus Media Production Company, 21/11/2020.

statement regarding the deal in which it celebrated the liberation of "more than 200 of their Muslim brothers who were imprisoned in Mali unjustly and enduring aggression".<sup>110</sup> Praising the outcome of the prisoner exchange,<sup>111</sup> JNIM urged the Malian government to return to Islam and to distance itself from "the aggressive Crusader French occupier", who it held responsible for alienating Islam in the country and for attempting to replace its features with "deviant rituals of Christianity".<sup>112</sup> The issue of France's military presence in the Sahel remains at the core of JNIM's grievances. The vast majority of its statements focuses on various operations targeting the French and G5 Sahel coalition forces, as well as the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). The group's propaganda often features criticism of President Macron's policies aimed at countering jihadist presence in the region. JNIM drew parallels between "France's neo-colonialism" in Mali and the US's presence in Afghanistan, warning France that: "It is in your best interest to depart from our lands now, just as the Americans left Afghanistan, and leave us to live in our homeland free, just as you live in yours, before your losses increase multifold and the numbers of your killed and captured rise".<sup>113</sup>

In the same vein, the group seemed to be trying to replicate the approach of the Taliban and engage in negotiations with the Malian government, as previously noted. ISGS's leader Abu al-Walid al-Sahrawi bashed JNIM for intending to negotiate with "apostate" G5 Sahel governments in his interview with IS's al-Naba'.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Official reports of the number of the freed captives have varied, with each of the parties involved in the swap (i.e. the Malian government, JNIM, and France) providing different figures; JNIM Statement no.158 "On the Freeing of Prisoners and Release of the Kidnapped", Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), al-Zallaqa Media Production Company, 14/10/2020.

<sup>111</sup> In its official statement JNIM named only two of the four released hostages, namely the French aid worker Sophie Petronin and the Malian politician Soumaila Cisse. The two Italian nationals, the tourist Nicola Ciacco and Father Pierluigi Maccali, were not mentioned by JNIM.

<sup>112</sup> JNIM Statement no.158 "On the Freeing of Prisoners and Release of the Kidnapped", Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), al-Zallaqa Media Production Company, 14/10/2020.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Al-Naba' (The News), issue no. 260, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al I'lam al-Markazi, 12/11/2020.

## 5.5 AQ diversified its propaganda dissemination arsenal: the case of Thabat News Agency

The cull of IS accounts on Telegram in late November 2019 had repercussions also for AQ's propaganda outreach. As IS adopted a multi-platform approach to propaganda dissemination, AQ followed suit by expanding its presence on alternative platforms. Official AQ and supporting media outlets alike boast an active presence on Geo News, a self-hosted instance of the open source communication platform Rocket.Chat. The group and its franchises became early adopters of new platforms such as Chirpwire, which describes itself as "an independent social media platform with similar layout and features as Twitter". The group and its affiliates have also continued to launch new versions of the official AQ Core al-Sahab website, and websites representing supporting media outlets such as the recently emerged Thabat News Agency.

The case of Thabat News Agency epitomizes the efforts of AQ propagandists to embrace an innovative approach to propaganda dissemination. In a way reminiscent of Amaq News Agency, Thabat News Agency surfaced in 2020 as a media outlet reporting on AQ and its affiliates' battlefield operations. Combining a sleek graphic style with savvy use of hashtags, Thabat News Agency gradually diversified its propaganda products to include a weekly magazine that appears to mimic IS's al-Naba' digital newsletter. Issues of the Thabat Magazine were also translated into English, testifying to the group's ambitions to reach a wider audience. The magazine's self-professed mission is to "shed light on the most prominent events of the *mujahidin* in all the countries of Islam".<sup>115</sup> Thabat News Agency appeared to take a prominent role in reporting on terrorist attacks occurred in France, for instance the killing of Samuel Paty in Conflans-Sainte-Honorine.<sup>116</sup>

Thabat News Agency ran its own website, exploring various hosting solutions, and even launched several versions of an Android application, which was advertised as "the strongest and fastest jihadi news service".<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Thabat Magazine, issue no. 1, Thabat News Agency, 23/10/2020.

<sup>116</sup> Thabat Agency poster related to the terrorist attack perpetrated on 16 October 2020 in Conflans-Sainte-Honorine (France), Thabat News Agency, 17/10/2020

<sup>117</sup> Telegram post "Thabat News Agency announces the launch of a new mobile application", 16/05/2020

## 6. HTS curtailed coordination efforts of AQ's offshoots while aspiring to international recognition

Hay'at Tahir al-Sham (HTS), a group that splintered from its founder AQ in 2016, cemented its presence in the north-western governorate of Idlib after fighting off rival factions. While HTS is the most dominant group in Idlib, the last rebel-held bastion of Syria, other groups are present in the area, including Tanzim Hurras al-Din (THD), the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP), as well as other factions under the umbrella of the Turkey-backed National Liberation Front (NLF).

Idlib has witnessed a fierce battle for control since Russian-backed Syrian government forces launched an offensive to regain control of the area in late 2019. Turkey and Russia signed a ceasefire on 5 March 2020, according to which Idlib's M4 motorway was to be reopened when a security corridor was established with joint Turkish-Russian patrols.<sup>118</sup> HTS initially resisted the conditions of the ceasefire<sup>119</sup> and issued a statement claiming that the ceasefire "will not be possible until Russian forces leave".<sup>120</sup> The statement also praised Turkey's support for "the Syrian revolution" and "the protection of civilians from the bombings of the occupiers".<sup>121</sup> HTS's conciliatory approach towards Turkey was also evident in its decision to adopt the Turkish Lira as a response to the rapid depreciation of the Syrian Pound.<sup>122</sup> The observed openness vis-à-vis Turkey seems to have caused an internal rift between more radical and less radical members of the group; more radical members view HTS leader Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani's pragmatism as irreconcilable with the group's ideology. The infighting appears to have led to factions effectively splitting from HTS<sup>123</sup> and to defections by HTS hardliners who oppose the organisation's more

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<sup>118</sup> "Syria war: Russia and Turkey agree Idlib ceasefire", BBC News, 05/03/2020, Retrieved from: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-51747592>

<sup>119</sup> "Extremist Syrian rebel group tests Turkey's limits in Idlib", al-Monitor, 01/05/2020, Retrieved from: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/05/turkey-syria-russia-idlib-hts-radicals-test-limits-of-ankara.html>

<sup>120</sup> HTS statement "Moscow agreement... a new mirage", Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), Iba' News Agency, 07/03/2020.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> According to the article "Following the collapse of the Syrian Lira... Turkish currency reaches the liberated areas", appeared on Iba' Weekly Newspaper issue no. 98, the Salvation Government declared on 11/06/2020 that it would begin paying its employees' salaries in Turkish Lira given the depreciation of the Syrian Lira and the difficulty in procuring US Dollars. The article notes that the Syrian Lira is likely to further plummet upon implementation of the Caesar Act (US Sanctions); Iba' weekly newspaper, issue no. 98, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), Iba' News Agency, 13/06/2020.

<sup>123</sup> Abu al-Abd Ashda', the leader of Tansiqiyat al-Jihad, an HTS splinter faction that emerged in June, accused HTS of nepotism and of restricting freedom of expression in a 2019 video entitled "So that the ship will not sink". He also criticised Turkey for the plan to open supply routes with the Syrian regime and for agreeing to joint Turkish-



moderate stances, viewing al-Jawlani as an opportunistic leader who has sold out on key jihadist principles.

In April 2020, HTS's linked media outlets, Iba' News Agency and Amjad, used their Telegram channels to publish a number of official "Internal Decisions" reporting changes in the military structure and leadership within HTS ranks. These changes have taken place in the context of rumours of defections from HTS.<sup>124</sup> During April 2020, Iba's Telegram channel also reported mounting tensions between HTS and Tanzim Hurras al-Din (THD), thought to be al-Qaeda's current affiliate in Syria. The conflict escalated when a new Operations Room named "Be Steadfast" was established on 12 June 2020.<sup>125</sup> "Be Steadfast" brought together a number of paramilitary groups including Tanzim Hurras al-Din (THD), Jabhat Ansar al-Din<sup>126</sup> and other pro-AQ groups that rejected the March ceasefire and declared their readiness to confront the Syrian regime and its allies in the region.

HTS deplored "an unjustified escalation" of conflict in a statement released two weeks after the establishment of "Be Steadfast".<sup>127</sup> The group rejected the possibility of reconciliation and blamed THD and Jabhat Ansar al-Din for escalating tensions and for the wrongful arrests of HTS members. The group also lamented the factions' limited contributions and lack of effective participation in the fight against the Syrian regime.

The feud between AQ's Syrian offshoots and branches did not escape the attention of IS, which reported in its weekly newsletter that there were growing defections within HTS ranks, arguing that dissent has been rife since the onset of joint Russian-Turkish operations in northern Syria.<sup>128</sup>

The establishment of the "Be Steadfast" Operations Room appeared to have undermined HTS's authority in Idlib, prompting the group to react with a statement in which it forbade "the

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Russian patrols on the highways through Idlib. He did this for example in an interview with Bilal Abdul Kareem on 14 May 2020.

<sup>124</sup> Including on 7 April by Jamal Zainiyah, a hardline senior HTS leader and a member of its *Shura* Council. While it only took Zainiyah a few hours to go back on his resignation, the report had put a spotlight on dissent within the organisation. That same day, the head of the General Shura Council in Idlib affiliated to HTS, Bassam Sahyouni, also announced his resignation.

<sup>125</sup> "Be Steadfast Operations Room - Funding statement", Be Steadfast Operations Room, 12/06/2020.

<sup>126</sup> Tanzim Hurras al-Din and Jabhat Ansar al-Din, along with other groups, had formed the "Incite the Believers Operations Room" in 2018.

<sup>127</sup> HTS statement "Every good call is acceptable (regarding the reconciliation call)" Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), 25/06/2020.

<sup>128</sup> al-Naba' (The News), issue no. 240, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al 'I'lam al-Markazi, 25/06/2020.

establishment of any new Operations Room or paramilitary group”,<sup>129</sup> in order to ensure “that all military activity is under the management of the al-Fath al-Mubin Operations Room”,<sup>130</sup> led by HTS. A ceasefire was attempted between HTS and THD, in which it was agreed that the independent Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) would act as mediator.<sup>131</sup> Instead, during the summer of 2020, HTS carried out a crackdown targeting defectors, rival militants and foreign nationals,<sup>132</sup> including journalists. It is worth noting that the group Firqatul Ghuraba announced in August that its leader Omar Diaby, aka "Omar Omsen", was arrested by HTS together with three other “brothers”. The arrest reportedly took place after Omar Omsen appeared before an HTS court under the pretext of reconciliation following a dispute with a few members of the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP).<sup>133</sup> Taqiyyu al-Din Umar, a representative of the public relations office of HTS, commented on the incident stating that Omsen committed a number of violations during his stay in northern Syria, which led to his arrest. According to Taqiyyu al-Din, Omsen stood accused of having created “a small administration for himself and the inhabitants of his region” as well as having established a small prison in his region, where trials were also being held. HTS’s representative added that these actions were not endorsed by the relevant administration of the liberated north.<sup>134</sup>

HTS’s ban on the formation of new Operations Rooms, coupled with its clampdown on rival groups, could accelerate further defections from HTS hardliners who oppose the organisation’s more moderate stances.

In recent years, HTS has sought to portray itself as a pragmatic, level-headed group that fiercely contests its terrorist designation. Through its civilian wing the “Salvation Government”, launched in November 2017, the group focused on developing civil administration in the area under its influence and providing security and public services including education and healthcare. One of the key goals of the group’s propaganda is to promote its alleged success in establishing or co-

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<sup>129</sup> HTS statement "On the unification of military efforts", Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), 26/06/2020.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid; The statement stresses that "God ordered [Muslims] to cooperate [...], to unite [their] ranks and efforts", adding that this was the purpose of the establishment of the al-Fath al-Mubin Operations Room which - according to the statement - "brought together the majority of the military groups which are active in the liberated areas."

<sup>131</sup> THD Statement "Acquiescence of THD to HTS' [agreement]", Tanzim Hurras al-Din, 26/06/2020.

<sup>132</sup> Including Tauqir Sharif, a former British citizen and a well-known foreign aid worker in Syria, who was released in November 2020. See: HTS statement "The public relations office provides the reasoning regarding the release of Abu Hussam al-Britani", Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), 30/11/2020

<sup>133</sup> Firqatul Ghuraba statement about the arrest of Omar Omsen by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), Firqatul Ghuraba, 29/08/2020.

<sup>134</sup> Telegram Post "Taqiyyu al-Din Umar explains the reason behind the arrest of the French national Omar Diaby aka Omar Omsen", Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), 03/09/2020.



opting systems of governance. Articles published by the Iba' network, an affiliated media outlet that has not been officially endorsed by HTS, contain many references to the group's civil administration work. HTS's weekly magazine Iba' News appeared to have been discontinued since July 2020, when the 100<sup>th</sup> issue was released.

As Idlib's humanitarian situation further deteriorated over the course of 2020 amid the COVID-19 pandemic and an economic crisis, the Salvation Government provided food assistance and imported commodities from Turkey in a bid to maintain its popular support base. A video by Iba' News Agency underscored the exponential increase in the price of everyday goods, which created a considerable gap between individuals' incomes and their consumption needs. In particular, the video focused on the increase in the price of bread, a staple food in Syria. The video highlighted the steps undertaken by the Salvation Government to reduce the crisis: providing free bread to the poorest families; allowing businesspeople to introduce the Turkish Lira to the liberated areas; and connecting to the electricity grid of Turkey to prevent prices from soaring.<sup>135</sup>

HTS is keen to be perceived as a political alternative and a reliable interlocutor by other conflict parties. With this in mind, it makes a point of addressing claims that could result in negative publicity or be detrimental to its carefully constructed image. On 7 July 2020, the UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria released a report in which it accused both pro-government forces and HTS of committing war crimes during the battle for Idlib. HTS then issued a statement accusing the UN Security Council of bowing to Russian-Chinese pressure, the aim of which is – according to HTS – to "stop the entry of humanitarian aid to the liberated north".<sup>136</sup> HTS expressed surprise at the report's findings, which it claimed were based on "false allegations" and "distort the image of the liberated areas". The statement added that the report was released in the immediate aftermath of a savage one-year military campaign by the allied Russian/Iranian/Syrian government forces, which "resulted in the displacement of one million civilians, and the destruction of basic infrastructure, as well as schools and hospitals". Instead, HTS stated that Idlib rates higher than other Syrian regions in terms of public security, freedom of expression and of the press, and humanitarian assistance. HTS declared the "biased report" to be an "irresponsible step vis-a-vis a people waiting for the criminal regime to be punished" in that it equates the victims with the executioners. The statement invited the UN team, which it claimed

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<sup>135</sup> Iba news agency video "Urgent measures taken by the government to limit the effects of the Syrian currency collapse", Iba' News Agency, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), 16/06/2020

<sup>136</sup> HTS statement : "In response to the UN's Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria's 7 July report ", Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), 09/07/2020



"lacks detailed [on the ground] information" to travel to Idlib to listen to the revolutionary groups' concerns.<sup>137</sup>

While HTS's jihadist agenda is locally pursued, the group aspires to be recognised internationally and maintains political pretensions. To this end, HTS's leader increased his public appearances in 2020 and the group promoted its purported openness towards international media groups and journalists. However, the group faced growing accusations of media freedom violations.<sup>138</sup> HTS's suppression of media work came under the spotlight with the arrest of the US citizen Bilal Abdul Kareem, captured by the group in August 2020. HTS's Media Relations Office issued a statement addressed to the International Committee to Protect Journalists and other human rights organisations.<sup>139</sup> In this statement, HTS accused the journalist of engaging "in other work far from his [...] media field", of challenging the judicial and security institutions, of basing his journalistic work on lies and of not supporting the Syrian revolution. HTS denied having tortured Abdul Kareem, instead highlighting that more than 500 journalists visited Idlib during 2019.<sup>140</sup>

Despite HTS's attempts to distance itself from its terrorist beginnings by projecting a moderate, more palatable public image, the group continues to be listed as a terrorist organisation by several countries and international bodies,<sup>141</sup> with limited chances of seeing its "terror" blacklisting reversed.

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Violations of media freedom perpetrated by HTS have been reported by various sources. See for example: "Syrian journalists in Idlib face crackdown from jihadist-affiliated government", al-Monitor, 26/10/2020, Retrieved from: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/10/syria-idlib-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-permits-journalists-freedom.html>; "Legal environment for media in Syria", Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM), 04/09/2020, Retrieved from: <https://scm.bz/en/en-studies/legal-environment-for-media-in-syria>.

<sup>139</sup> Iba' News Agency Statement "Against the backdrop of the arrest of Bilal Abdul Kareem... Statement from the Media Relations Office to the Committee to Protect Journalists", Iba' News Agency, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), 19/08/2020.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Europol EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) 2021.



## 7. Jihadist reactions to a changing world

Jihadist groups across the ideological spectrum have responded to current events in 2020 and their online reactions at times indicated similar views, while at other times they had opposing stances.

### 7.1 COVID-19 pandemic

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on society had repercussions on the jihadist ecosystem, with groups seeking to capitalise on the widespread uncertainty to advance their cause. In particular, conspiracy theories regarding the origin of COVID-19 and the purported role of governments were reflected in the propaganda produced by jihadist groups.

At times, the narratives spearheaded by these groups' official media and the ones circulating in jihadist online circles appeared disconnected, highlighting once again an issue of command-and-control within these group's propaganda arms.

Official propaganda by jihadist groups focused around three main narratives: 1) highlighting the negative impact of the pandemic and the economic recession on Western societies; 2) blaming Western governments for the pandemic and framing a return to Islam as the solution; and 3) providing health and hygiene guidance to their adherents, in an attempt to demonstrate governance capabilities.

AQ Core conveyed its view of the global pandemic in a statement issued by its mouthpiece al-Sahab, in which it highlighted how the crisis exposed "the brittleness of a global economy dominated by the United States", with the emergence of Covid-19 striking the US economy like a "powerful tsunami".<sup>142</sup> AQ Core framed the emergence of the pandemic in the Muslim world as a consequence of people distancing themselves from the "divine methodology". Describing the events as an opportunity for the Islamic community to seek God's mercy, AQ encouraged Muslims to take "practical steps for the liberation of prisoners and missing persons across the Islamic World" and also to "take care of the orphans, widows, families of the prisoners and to support the sincere *mujahidin*". AQ also urged the masses of the Western world to embrace Islam, encouraging non-Muslims to "utilize their time in quarantine for finding out more about Islam from authentic sources; reading, and reflecting on the merits that make Islam stand out

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<sup>142</sup> Al-Qaeda statement "The Way Forward. A Word of Advice on the Coronavirus Pandemic", al-Qaeda "central command", al-Sahab Media Production Company, 31/03/2020.

from all other religions, isms and systems".<sup>143</sup> AQ also praised Islam as a hygiene orientated religion that gives great importance on preventing all forms of disease.

In the same vein, AQAP's Ibrahim al-Qusi ascribed the COVID-19 pandemic to a series of mistakes made by people, including not believing in God. He highlighted that COVID-19 "shows us what one of God's soldiers, invisible to the naked eye, can do [to us] [...] and how it can shake the economy of countries [...]".<sup>144</sup> Al-Qusi also emphasised that the "tyrants of this world" are the main culprits for the current situation, as they deviated from God's path.<sup>145</sup>

JNIM also referred to COVID-19 as one of God's soldiers. While claiming an attack perpetrated against a Malian military base in Bamba, JNIM commented on the spread of virus Covid-19, thanking God for "deciding to send his soldier to help fight the enemy".<sup>146</sup>

IS addressed the topic of COVID-19 in multiple issues of al-Naba'. The group referred to the pandemic as "The worst nightmares of the Crusaders". Referring to the widespread lockdown and containment measures, IS noted that the fear of the pandemic has had more impact than the pandemic itself, putting those affected on the brink of a major economic crisis. The group highlighted that the coalition countries affected by the pandemic are particularly vulnerable now, and urged its followers to put them under more pressure in order to exacerbate the current climate of fear linked to the pandemic. IS remarked that these countries are concentrating significant efforts and resources on curbing the spread of the pandemic, which is also affecting their capacity to pursue their aggression against Muslim populations and lands. IS boasted that "the last thing they hope for today is that their difficult time coincides with the caliphate's preparations for new strikes against them, similar to those of Paris, London, and Brussels, among others", and added "kill the polytheists [...] as they will kill a believer if they can do so. Do not spare them [...], as they will not spare you [...]".<sup>147</sup> In his May audio speech, the IS spokesman described the pandemic as a divine punishment and compared the related lockdown in Western countries to the situation faced by Muslims in cities fearing 'crusader' raids. Abu Hamza al-Qurashi expressed his content to see that Western countries are unable to fight the virus and that the economies of these countries are suffering as a result.

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Ibrahim al-Qusi's speech "Congratulations and stances on the occasion of the blessed Eid al-Adha 1441 AH", al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al-Malahim Media Production Company, 03/08/2020.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> JNIM Statement on the Bamba incursion in Mali, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), al-Zallaqa Media Production Company, 11/04/2020.

<sup>147</sup> Al-Naba' (The News), issue no. 226, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al 'I'lam al-Markazi, 19/03/2020.

IS's messaging also adopted current conspiracy theories that ascribe the emergence and expansion of coronavirus, first in China and then in the rest of the world, to a US plan to weaken the rest of the world.<sup>148</sup>

In a previous issue of al-Naba', the group had shared an infographic providing safety guidelines to IS supporters.<sup>149</sup> Similarly, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) issued a one-pager entitled "Your medical guide, How to save yourself from corona virus (COVID-19)?" providing health and hygiene advice.<sup>150</sup> On his Telegram channel, Abdullah al-Muhaysini, a former member of HTS, acknowledged the need to apply preventive measures but criticised the closure of mosques as a result of efforts to contain the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic was a recurrent topic in online chatter among jihadist supporters throughout 2020. Their messaging, while inspired by official propaganda, featured independent nuances. The IS-supporting media outlet Sarh al-Khilafa linked COVID-19 to the fall of Baghuz in a banner reading: "Corona- It's the prayer of the people of al- Baghuz, whom you burned alive. It has killed you so reap the results of your actions".<sup>151</sup>

Similarly, the second issue of the IS-aligned English-language magazine "Voice of Hind" included an article on coronavirus, which it called "a punishment sent by Allah on whom it wished, and Allah made it a source of mercy for the believers". The article encouraged supporters to strike "disbelievers" with a sword, a knife or even with a rope.<sup>152</sup>

## 7.2 The US-Taliban agreement

The "Agreement for bringing peace in Afghanistan", signed by the Taliban and the US on 29 February 2020, paved the way for a ceasefire between conflicting parties in Afghanistan and opened the door for the withdrawal of US and NATO troops from Afghan soil. As part of the agreement, the Taliban pledged to undertake a number of steps "to prevent any group or individual, including al-Qa'ida, from using the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the

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<sup>148</sup> Al-Naba' (The News), issue no. 227, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al I'lam al-Markazi, 26/03/2020.

<sup>149</sup> Al-Naba' (The News), issue no. 225, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al I'lam al-Markazi, 12/03/2020.

<sup>150</sup> Iba' News Agency statement "Your medical guide - How to protect yourself from the corona virus (COVID 19)?" Iba' News Agency, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), 18/03/2020.

<sup>151</sup> "Corona- It's the prayer of the people of al-Baghuz, whom you burned alive. It has killed you so reap the results of your actions", Sarh al-Khilafa, 23/03/2020.

<sup>152</sup> "The voice of Hind", issue no. 2, Sawt al-Hind, 25/03/2020.



United States and its allies".<sup>153</sup> Such steps included a ban on hosting or cooperating with such groups or individuals and an obligation to prevent them from recruiting, training and fundraising. Negotiations with the Afghan government, which began in September 2020, were also included in the agreement.

In the Sunni jihadist milieu, reactions to the US-Taliban agreement and ensuing negotiations were polarised.

Hibatullah Akhundzada, leader of the Taliban, welcomed the agreement in a statement in which he praised the peace deal as "a collective victory of the entire Muslim and Mujahid nation".<sup>154</sup> On *Eid al-Fitr*, the Taliban leader urged the opposition to fulfil their obligations in order not to endanger the successful implementation of the agreement. He went as far as offering general amnesty to those in the opposition ranks if they renounced fighting.<sup>155</sup>

Unsurprisingly IS, which was not involved in the negotiations, declared itself unwilling to respect the ceasefire. A number of articles in the weekly al-Naba' newsletter were devoted to the US-Taliban agreement and provided insight into the group's perception of the deal. A March 2020 editorial indicated IS's intent to continue fighting, as demonstrated by the group's intensified operations against strategic places in the region, such as the series of rocket attacks against the US airbase in Bagram, Afghanistan.<sup>156</sup> IS spokesperson Abu Hamza al-Qurashi elaborated on the agreement in a speech in May 2020, in which he accused the Taliban of being involved in a long-standing alliance with the "crusaders", whose purpose, according to IS, is to oust them from Khorasan.<sup>157</sup> This narrative was further reinforced in al-Naba', which contained an editorial that framed the cooperation between the Taliban, the US and the Afghan government in the context of the priority of the fight between the "near enemy" and the "far enemy".<sup>158</sup> It stated that the US is acting as an intermediary and putting pressure on conflicting parties to reconcile, while

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<sup>153</sup> Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America", 29/02/2020, Retrieved from: <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>.

<sup>154</sup> Taliban statement "Message of Esteemed Amir ul Mumineen, Sheikh-ul-Hadith Mawlawi Hibatullah Akhundzada (HA), regarding Termination of Occupation Agreement with the United States", Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (Taleban; Taliban), Al-Emara Studio - "Voice of Jihad", 29/02/2020.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Al-Naba' (The News), issue no.225, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al 'I'lam al-Markazi, 12/03/2020.

<sup>157</sup> Abu Hamza al-Qurashi audio speech "And the disbelievers will know for whom is the final home", Islamic State (IS), al-Furqan Media Production Company, 28/05/2020.

<sup>158</sup> Al-Naba' (The News), issue no. 252, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al 'I'lam al-Markazi, 17/09/2020.

working towards shared rule of Afghanistan and driving IS, the “common enemy”, out of the region.<sup>159</sup> IS-supporting media jumped on the bandwagon as many of their productions fed into the narrative that the Taliban have deviated from the “right” path, and vilified them as traitors who traded jihad for collusion with the “crusader” enemies.<sup>160</sup>

AQ also capitalised on the US-Taliban agreement to advance its ideological leanings. AQ’s official outlet al-Sahab Media issued a statement praising the Taliban’s achievement, especially with regard to the withdrawal of US and NATO contingents from Afghanistan. In contrast with IS, AQ stressed the perseverance of the Taliban in fighting the occupation, while remaining true to the jihadist cause.<sup>161</sup> Similarly, AQIM leader Khalid Batarfi congratulated the Taliban for a successful peace deal.<sup>162</sup> Even though the Taliban vowed to no longer host or cooperate with terrorist groups, including AQ, the latter appeared to disregard this commitment in its congratulatory statements.

Abu Abdallah al-Shami, a senior official of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), hailed the “big victory” that was gained by “the Muslims of Afghanistan”.<sup>163</sup> Al-Shami contended that this is the result of hard work and patience in fighting the occupiers for decades and until today. According to al-Shami, the Taliban were able to make military and political work complementary. He argued that politics is not as valuable without military force to safeguard it, and it is important to exploit military advances for political gains.<sup>164</sup>

### 7.3 The “deal of the century”

US President Donald Trump’s vision for peace in the Middle East sparked a wave of resentment in jihadist circles online. Trump’s peace plan, dubbed by its advocates as the “deal of the century”, was met with indignation by Sunni jihadist groups that saw its conditions as detrimental to the Palestinian cause and to the Muslim community. Trump’s proposal for a two-state solution, which many have labelled as too favourable to Israel, envisioned an “undivided”

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> “Awakenings that were jihadi”, Asawirti Media, 20/07/2020.

<sup>161</sup> AQ statement “Verily We have granted thee a manifest Victory”, al-Qaeda “central command”, al-Sahab Media Production Company, 12/03/2020.

<sup>162</sup> Khalid Batarfi video “Rather, it is one of the two best outcomes”, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Al-Malahim Media Production Company, 19/03/2020.

<sup>163</sup> HTS statement by Abu Abdallah al-Shami “Congratulations, Taliban!”, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), 14/09/2020.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

Jerusalem as Israel's capital and Israeli control over the Jordan valley and settlements across the Palestinian territories.

The focus on Palestine as the “central cause of the *umma*” is well embedded into the jihadist global discourse and AQ leveraged its support for the issue of Palestine in coordinated media and military campaigns. As early as 2019, al-Shabab<sup>165</sup> and JNIM<sup>166</sup> referenced the campaign “Jerusalem Will Never Be Judaized” when claiming attacks, pointing to some degree of coordination between AQ's African affiliates. Al-Shabab continued to use the slogan when claiming attacks in 2020, for instance in its statement claiming responsibility for the attack against the US naval base "Camp Simba" in the district of Lamu in Manda Bay, Kenya.<sup>167</sup> Al-Shabab spokesperson Ali Mahmud Rage explained in an audio message that the campaign was carried out as a response to the US's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, while stressing the importance of Palestine and the Al-Aqsa Mosque for all Muslims.<sup>168</sup>

In the same vein, a few days after the unveiling of Trump's peace plan, AQIM urged Muslims to resist the "deal of the century", and to join forces to “liberate Palestine and engage in war with the Jews throughout the world”.<sup>169</sup> AQIM views the “loss of Palestine and its delivery to the Jews” as the “inevitable consequence of losing the Caliphate and Islam being neutralised in this battle for existence”. As a result, the group called on Muslims “to refocus on the Palestinian issue”, adding that “what was taken by force can only be returned through force”.

AQ Core devoted its annual message on the anniversary of the September 2001 attacks to the “deal of the century”, or as AQ renamed it, the “crusade of the century”. Ayman al-Zawahiri accused Gulf countries of duplicitously claiming to defend the Islamic *umma* while maintaining open or covert relations with Israel and working towards the normalisation of ties with the latter. Additionally, al-Zawahiri stressed that these countries seek to aggravate the lack of awareness within the *umma* “through the use of deceptive media and intellectual tools”. A case in point for

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<sup>165</sup> Al-Shabab statement "Jerusalem will never be Judaized", al-Shabab al-Mujahidin Movement, al-Kata'ib Media Production Company, 16/01/2019.

<sup>166</sup> JNIM statement "The Aguelhok battle... Standing in the face of normalization process", Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), al-Zallaqa Media Production Company, 20/01/2019

<sup>167</sup> Al-Shabab statement "Manda Bay expedition: attack on the US naval base in Kenya", al-Shabab al-Mujahidin Movement, al-Kata'ib Media Production Company, 05/01/2020.

<sup>168</sup> Al-Shabab “Statement from the leadership – Manda Bay raid: Storming the US Naval Base in Kenya - part of 'al-Quds (Jerusalem) will never be Judaized", al-Shabab al-Mujahidin Movement, al-Kata'ib Media Production Company, 08/01/2020.

<sup>169</sup> AQIM "A statement on the Deal of the Century", al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), al-Andalus Media Production Company, 07/02/2020.



AQ's leader is the 2019 Al-Jazeera docufilm "Playing with fire", in which AQ is accused of conspiring with intelligence services. Al-Zawahiri delved into all the accusations with the aim of debunking them and labelled al-Jazeera as a mouthpiece for "America's dirty propaganda".<sup>170</sup>

A month later, with its "Statement on the normalization of ties with Israel by Arab Zionists", the official outlet al-Sahab Media voiced AQ's condemnation of the normalization of relations between Israel and the Gulf countries. According to AQ, US President Donald Trump finally exposed the Gulf countries' deceit regarding the Muslim *umma* and their hypocritical pretence of commitment to the Palestinian cause. AQ warned both "the Crusaders" and "the Zionists" that their interests (including embassies, consulates, companies, and combatant nationals) are to be legitimate targets as part of the operational campaign "Jerusalem shall not be Judaized". It added that every Zionist should be targeted, Jews and non-Jews, in the Arabian Peninsula or elsewhere in the Muslim world.

The focus on Jerusalem by IS's new leadership is also an interesting departure from the group's typical messaging, which previously did not appear to single out Israel as its priority target. In the past, IS detractors accused the group of not fighting Israel and of "killing other Muslims instead". IS spokesperson Abu Hamza al-Qurashi conveyed the new leader's determination to steer the group towards a "new phase", declaring through an audio speech the leadership's intention of "freeing Jerusalem" and "getting back what was stolen from the Muslims".<sup>171</sup> While urging IS fighters in Sinai and Syria to target Israel with chemical weapons and missiles, al-Qurashi emphasised that even when IS fighters were active in domestic theatres, "their sights were set on Jerusalem".<sup>172</sup> In al-Naba', IS dubbed President Trump's plan as the "deal of the end of the American Century".<sup>173</sup> The magazine also accused Arab countries and Turkey of instrumentalising Islam while disregarding the Palestinian cause. According to IS, their criticism of the normalisation of diplomatic ties between Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is aimed at advancing their political agendas.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> Ayman Al-Zawahiri's speech "Deal of the Century or the Crusade of the Century", Al-Qaeda "central command", al-Sahab Media Production Company, 11/09/2020.

<sup>171</sup> Abu Hamza al-Qurashi audio speech "God brought destruction on them, and similar (fate) awaits the disbelievers" Quran 47:10, Islamic State (IS), al-Furqan Media Production Company, 27/01/2020.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Al-Naba' (The News), issue no. 220, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al 'I'am al-Markazi, 06/02/2020.

<sup>174</sup> Al-Naba' (The News), issue no. 248, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al 'I'am al-Markazi, 20/08/2020.

#### 7.4 The republication of the depictions of the Prophet by Charlie Hebdo

When the French magazine Charlie Hebdo republished its depictions of the Prophet Muhammad in September 2020, this generated a renewed outcry and calls for violence from terrorist groups and their online supporters.

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) was the first group to vehemently denounce Charlie Hebdo's decision in a statement in which the group launched new threats against the magazine's employees and against "all those who have ridiculed our Prophet and the book of our Lord".<sup>175</sup> AQAP urged its adherents to pursue revenge attacks, in the footsteps of the Kouachi brothers, whose terrorist actions against Charlie Hebdo on 7 January 2015 are described by the group as "an operation [that] was a complete success based on all standards".<sup>176</sup> In particular, AQAP called for the targeting of individuals who previously offended the Prophet and the Qur'an, listing personalities such as cartoonists from Denmark and Sweden and right-wing politicians from the Netherlands and Denmark.<sup>177</sup>

Other media outlets in the jihadosphere latched on to the event and drew inspiration for their propaganda calling for new attacks. Al-Kifah Media mimicked the style of the Charlie Hebdo magazine in a communique that decried Charlie Hebdo's decision and criticised France's president Macron for supporting the magazine.<sup>178</sup> The pro-IS Nur al-Tawhid media outlet released a number of banners against the republication of the cartoons, inciting supporters to carry out lone actors attacks against French citizens.<sup>179</sup> A lone actor attack took place in September, in which two people were injured outside the former offices of Charlie Hebdo in Paris. In October, two other terrorist attacks took place in France, one resulting in the killing of a teacher in Conflans-Sainte-Honorine, and a stabbing attack in which three people died at the Catholic Basilica of Notre Dame, in Nice.<sup>180</sup>

France remained the focus for a plethora of jihadist groups and their online supporters over the past year, as a series of media campaigns continued to spread anti-France messaging through terrorist groups' mouthpieces, unofficial media outlets, and supporters' accounts across a wide

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<sup>175</sup> AQAP "Statement of support to the honourable messenger of God, peace and blessings upon him", al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al-Malahim Media Production Company, 10/09/2020.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> "Communique regarding the republication of despicable caricatures against the Prophet Muhammad - All this and more", Al-Kifah Media, 09/09/2020.

<sup>179</sup> See for example the poster "You must fight them, oh monotheist", Nur al-Tawhid, 05/09/2020.

<sup>180</sup> See paragraph 3.5.

array of platforms. Several statements, banners, images and videos, were shared online as part of a campaign to mobilise online supporters to target France and French interests abroad.<sup>181</sup>

AQ Core paid tribute to the perpetrator of the terrorist attack in Conflans-Sainte-Honorine in its publication "al-Nafir", calling him and the perpetrators of the 2015 attacks on Charlie Hebdo "heroes of Islam", who had to "sharpen their knives" and "sacrifice their souls" in defence of the Prophet.<sup>182</sup> AQ contended that France's justification of offensive rhetoric against the Prophet Muhammad, coupled with its military presence in "Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Mali, and other Muslim countries" prove that the country is waging a war against Islam. AQ further urged Muslims in Europe and in France to retaliate against the insults to the Prophet Muhammad, to boycott French products, and to provide AQ with human and financial support.<sup>183</sup> Similarly, the leader of JNIM capitalised on the raging protests to rally all Muslims "under the flag of *Tawhid*"<sup>184</sup> and specifically encouraged Muslim youth to "wear explosive belts" and attack the enemy with any possible means, because "the worshippers of the Cross have crossed the line".<sup>185</sup>

IS devoted an editorial of its weekly al-Naba' magazine to "the recent attitude of France" in relation to the republication of the cartoons and the French government's support for freedom of expression. IS also criticised the attitude of a segment of the Muslim population, which it accused of changing sides depending on the circumstances. In particular, boycotting French products is perceived by IS as a soft form of protest against the insults towards the Prophet Muhammad, which stands in stark contrast with the support expressed by the same people for the "enemy" when it "occupies Muslim lands". IS cited the reaction of a part of the Libyan population after the ousting of Ghaddafi, as well as calls for international intervention in Syria.<sup>186</sup>

France was also in the cross hairs of jihadist organisations due to President Macron's stance against radical Islam. HTS issued a statement through its "Syrian Salvation Government – Prime Minister's office", in which it lamented "France and Macron's irresponsible actions against Islam", which HTS recalled is "a religion accepted all over the world".<sup>187</sup> AQ Core also blasted President Macron's alleged anti-Islam policies and his support to freedom of expression in a

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<sup>181</sup> "A call for mobilization in France to confront the crusader campaign", Thabat News Agency, 25/10/2020.

<sup>182</sup> Al-Nafir (Call to arms), issue no. 33, al-Qaeda "central command", al-Sahab Media Production Company, 06/11/2020.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> The oneness of God, monotheism.

<sup>185</sup> Audio speech by Iyad Ag Ghali, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), 27/10/2020.

<sup>186</sup> Al-Naba' (The News), issue no. 258, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al 'I'lam al-Markazi, 29/10/2020.

<sup>187</sup> HTS statement "Syrian Salvation Government - Prime Minister's Office", Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), 25/10/2020.



statement dated November 2020, but only circulated in early January 2021. The statement also commented on the terrorist attacks in France in October 2020 and pointed to the boycotting of French products as a way of fighting jihad “with silent killing”.<sup>188</sup> AQ Core called upon the “youth of [their] generous nation” worldwide to join jihad in the battlefields and to carry out terrorist attacks similar to the one against Charlie Hebdo, in retaliation for the insults against the Prophet.

SGC and unofficial propaganda featuring anti-France rhetoric and glorifying the perpetrators of the recent terror acts in France were shared by supporter (*munasir*) networks and their supporting media outlets, some of them linked to the AQ sphere, such as Thabat News Agency and al-Thughur Media Network, and others aligned to IS, namely Tafakkar, al-Taqwa and Asawirti Media.

## 8. Conclusion

Jihadist terrorist groups need to adapt to shifting realities to survive. Their ability to evolve, restructure, and morph into seemingly less cohesive entities shows that they are striving not just to survive, but to be relevant.

For IS, the loss of its first self-styled “Caliph” was a blow, but one that could be remedied. The group was always cautious not to place too much emphasis on the individual exercising the role and not to make him central to the group’s discourse. As its state project crumbled in 2019, IS did not give up on the idea of a “caliphate”. Instead, its strategy became twofold: it regrouped in Iraq and Syria, relentlessly weakening its adversaries with a “war of attrition”, while seeking to conquer land through its global network of affiliates. Achieving territorial governance (*tamkin*) is important to IS, but so are its adherents, especially those held in Western prisons or in refugee camps. They are, together with online supporters (*munasirin*), the “real caliphate” and their commitment to the cause allowed IS and its ideology to outlive territorial defeat and leadership changes.

For its part, AQ continued to capitalise on current events to promote its ideological leanings, seeking to emerge as the true beacon of global jihad thanks to its more palatable image in contrast with IS. AQ franchises demonstrated continued leeway in their championing of local

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<sup>188</sup> AQ statement “If you repeat the crime, we shall repeat the punishment”, AQ “central command”, al-Sahab Media Production Company, 02/01/2021.



objectives, while propaganda by AQ Core featured a notable reduction in appearances by Ayman al-Zawahiri. Seen by its detractors as uncharismatic, al-Zawahiri provided the AQ enterprise with the stability it needed to develop resilience. As the appointment of the new AQAP and AQIM leaders signifies continuity for the two splinters, replacing al-Zawahiri will be a tall order for AQ. Faced with uncertain prospects for its leadership, in the future the group may move towards decentralisation.

While fighting their own struggles to remain relevant, AQ and IS are still on a collision course as their rivalry is likely to further intensify and play out on the battlefield as well as online. One of the latest points of contention between the groups appears to be AQ's perceived willingness to engage in negotiations with local governments of countries in which it has a presence. Both groups perceive Islam as an embattled religion and attempt to position themselves as the true defenders of Islam. Propaganda by both groups, amplified by their supporter networks, continues to call for and to inspire lone actor attacks by individuals who have no physical connections to either group.

AQ and IS continue to strive for online resilience and to show high levels of adaptability to online environments made more hostile by joint disruption efforts. The risk of online jihadist propaganda being translated into offline violence remains high, underscoring the need for ever stronger public-private partnerships at European and international level.



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