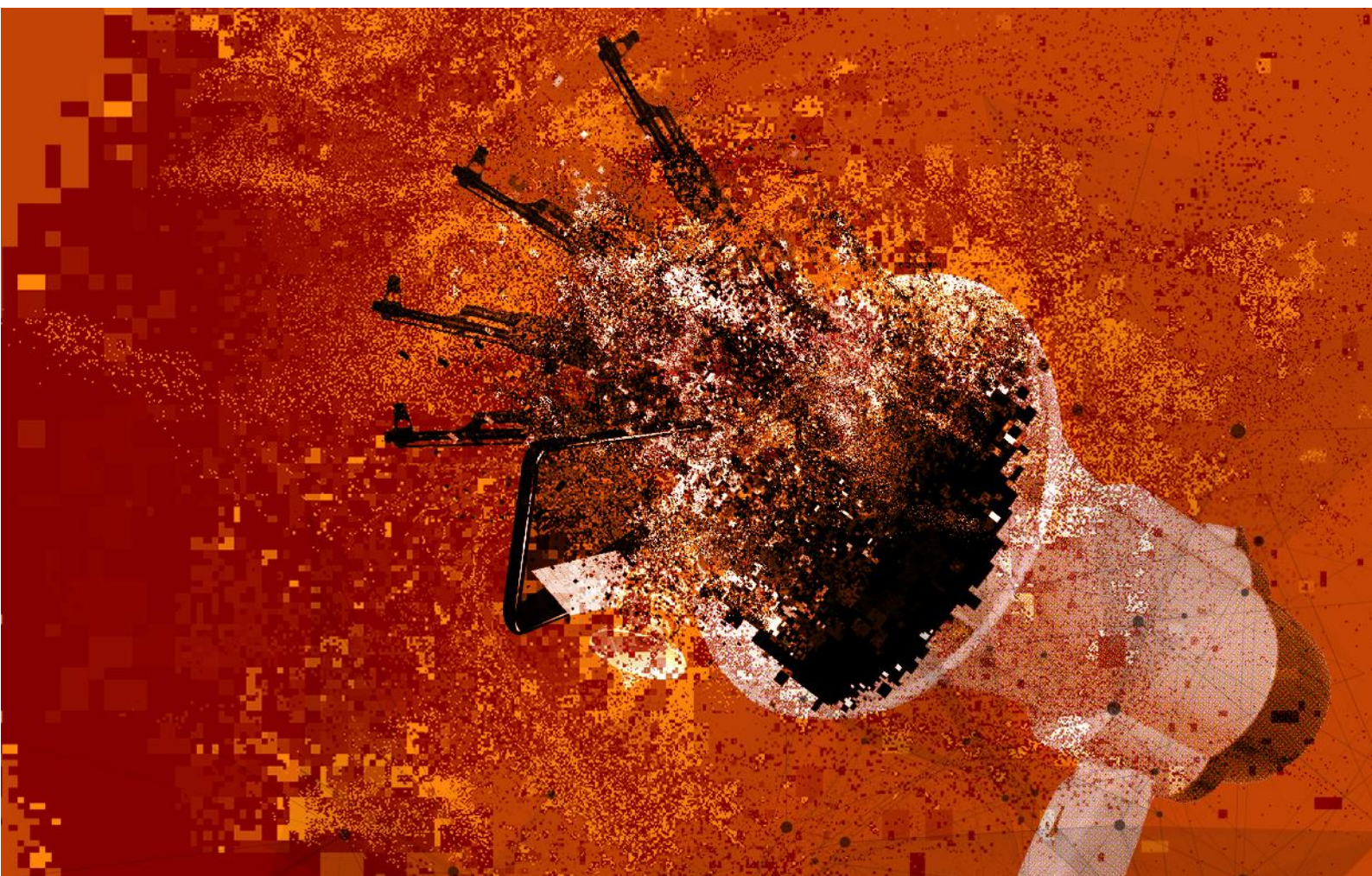




Online Jihadist Propaganda

2023 in review





ONLINE JIHADIST PROPAGANDA – 2023 IN REVIEW

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KEY FINDINGS

AL-QAEDA (AQ)

- ▶ The death of the Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri on 31 July 2022 had a major impact on the propaganda production of the AQ 'core', and has considerably reduced its media presence to perceived key events.
- ▶ Al-Qaeda appears to be going through a third phase since its inception. The first, from 1988 until 2011, coincided with the period under Usama bin Laden's hierarchically oriented guidance. The second - marked by al-Zawahiri's leadership until 2022 – was defined by the plan of keeping the Umma united by devoting attention to local grievances on the one hand, and to a global diffusion of the ideology on the other. The current and third phase lacks a clear monolithic leadership, and seems to have decentralised tasks and responsibilities.
- ▶ Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) appears to have taken the lead role in AQ's international efforts towards ideological indoctrination.
- ▶ If AQAP has replaced the AQ 'core' online, in the field it is AQAP's proxy group, Ansar al-Shari'a, which is covering the operational part in Yemen. Ansar al-Shari'a is mainly targeting mercenaries allegedly on the payroll of the United Arab Emirates' (UAE), who are officially operating in the governorates of Abyan and al-Bayda' in support of the Yemeni government.
- ▶ Al-Shabaab was the AQ branch which most acutely increased its online activity, including its attack statements and articles discussing the geo-political situation of the countries neighbouring Somalia.
- ▶ Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Jama'at Nusra al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) continue to act in synergy in the Sahel region (i.e. in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger).
- ▶ Slow to react, but violent in its intent, the AQ 'core' condemned the Qur'an burning incidents which occurred in the EU. The group urged Muslims living in those countries to kill the people responsible for such incidents.
- ▶ Among AQ-supportive outlets, al-Nusra Foundation is the most active. It both re-publishes official material and corroborates it with its own propaganda production.
- ▶ Jaysh al-Malahim al-Elektroni covers the more technical aspect of the supportive outlets' online presence. Its 'Wolves of Manhattan' magazine is entirely dedicated to encouraging and supporting the activity of 'lone actors'.

ISLAMIC STATE (IS)

- ▶ The audio message by the IS spokesperson in August 2023, announcing the appointment of the new 'Caliph', Abu Hafs al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, was the sole online contribution of IS' top leadership in 2023.
- ▶ Al-Naba' magazine and the claims of attacks issued by local provinces, along with those issued by the Amaq agency, represent the entire official production of the IS propaganda apparatus.
- ▶ This dwindling online activity reflects the terrorist activity trend in the field, as it has significantly decreased in almost all the provinces of the 'caliphate'.
- ▶ Countries that have experienced some relief from the reduced IS terrorist activity are Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and Egypt. Nonetheless, Afghanistan witnessed some of the deadliest attacks.
- ▶ A military campaign against Christian communities often made headlines in al-Naba' magazine, as part of efforts to achieve a military expansion in Africa and countries in the Far East such as the Philippines.
- ▶ An invaluable role continues to be played by IS-supportive outlets in distributing propaganda and narratives. In the aftermath of the Qur'an burning events in the EU, supportive media conveyed a more prompt and effective reaction, launching the online campaign entitled 'Religious war, not individual conduct'.
- ▶ The list of the most active IS-supportive media includes al-Azaim (which publishes the English-language magazine 'Voice of Khurasan'), Sarh al-Khilafa, and the longstanding al-Battar.

'AL-AQSA FLOOD OPERATION'

- ▶ The 7 October terrorist attack perpetrated by Hamas against Israel represented a turning point in the jihadist propaganda flow. Following the attack, known as the Al-Aqsa flood operation, jihadist groups involved in the conflict and those supporting them increased their production of propaganda.
- ▶ In the aftermath of the attack, a heterogeneous allegiance came into place, aligning Hamas Sunni with Shi'a factions based in the Middle East, namely Ansar Allah in Yemen and Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad Movement (PIJ), and the Islamic Resistance in Iraq.
- ▶ Among the factions siding with Hamas on the field, it was Ansar Allah, the military wing of the Houthis in Yemen, which probably played the biggest strategic role by targeting shipping vessels in the Red Sea.

- ▶ Excluding IS, the whole jihadist realm - especially the AQ network - reacted by glorifying the Hamas attack. It condemned what it said was an overreaction by Israel, along with the support Israel receives from the Western coalition with the blessing of neighbouring Arab countries.
- ▶ Among AQ-supportive media, it was Jaysh al-Malahim al-Elektroni that conveyed what was probably the most vehement reaction to the outbreak of the conflict when it published an appendix to the 'Wolves of Manhattan' magazine. The outlet set out several suggestions for ways Muslims could strike against Israel, both in Palestine and in Europe.
- ▶ Neither IS nor its many supportive outlets praised the 'Al-Aqsa Flood Operation'. Instead, their reaction has been limited to stressing the existence of an alleged religious war being waged against Islam by Israel and the West. IS vowed to target Jewish and Western objectives, and called upon all Muslims to consider this battle as religious.
- ▶ Among IS-supportive media, al-Azaim stood out by publishing an article in the magazine 'Voice of Khurasan' arguing how the Jews 'deserved' the Holocaust.

INTRODUCTION

This is the seventh edition of the Annual Review of online jihadist propaganda that has been produced by the European Union's Internet Referral Unit (EU IRU) at Europol. The Review covers the period from 1 January to 31 December 2023 and presents an analysis of the major trends and developments in the online propaganda of the most prominent Sunni jihadist organisations – al-Qaeda (AQ) and the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) – as well as their branches and offshoots. In the Review, we examine the trajectories of these groups, their responses to shifting dynamics, and their attempts to overcome setbacks. It also identifies the both types of and dominant themes within 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. To build a broader picture, the research also took into account jihadist content produced by non-official media outlets in support of the major jihadist terrorist networks.

In order to shed light on changes in the groups' narratives and online communication patterns, the research involved examining primary sources (including the groups' operational claims), publications, statements, videos and audio speeches. This material was collected by the EU IRU during 2023 and stored in the Check-the-Web (CtW) portal. In particular, issues of the weekly IS magazine al-Naba' released in 2023 were used to determine the strategic direction of IS. In this context, an analysis of the magazine's infographics, which provide a weekly overview of the attacks perpetrated by the different branches of the organisation, allowed for detailed insight into IS activity on the ground in 2023 and for a comparison with 2022.

Finally, the Review studied the propaganda flow that emerged from the 7 October terrorist attack waged by Hamas against Israel, including content produced by the terrorist groups directly involved in the "Al-Aqsa Flood Operation" and those that subsequently intervened in support of Hamas. This includes the online reactions of the major jihadist terrorist networks and factions to the attack, their narratives, and the heterogeneous alliance that they formed in opposition to Israel. In addition, the EU IRU conducted an analysis of the topics covered in some 200 pieces of propaganda published by Hamas and its military wing, the Ezzeddine al-Qassam Brigades (EQB), including videos, audio messages and statements. The analysis results identify the main narratives exploited by Hamas in the aftermath of the 'Al-Aqsa Flood Operation'.

The aim of this paper is to help formulate threat assessments that account for the amplification and, at times, manipulation of terrorist messaging by supportive networks whose links to the hierarchy of terrorist groups remain unclear. The Review stems from the EU IRU's ongoing observation of online jihadist propaganda, and feeds into Europol's wider work on strategic analysis, including the EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT).

The Europol Annual Review is divided into five main chapters. The first examines AQ's current state of play, as it passes through its third phase since

its foundation, and possibly is planning its fourth phase. The second chapter assesses the current trajectory of the self-proclaimed IS, as it struggles with a significant decrease of both online and field activity. Chapter three explores the online repercussions for jihadist propaganda of the 7 October attack perpetrated by Hamas against Israel. Chapter four examines the contribution of the supportive media structures to both the main Sunni jihadist terrorist networks (AQ and IS). The fifth and final chapter assesses the online reactions of the major jihadist groups in the aftermath of the earthquake that devastated regions of Türkiye and Syria on 6 February 2023, and reactions to the Qur'an burning events which occurred in some EU Member States.

THE AL-QAEDA (AQ) MESSAGE ENDURES

In 2023, al-Qaeda's propaganda production, narrative and online presence remained stable. The death of the leader Ayman al-Zawahiri generated a vacuum in the dissemination of ideological messages. The series of videos featuring al-Zawahiri's long speeches was a large contributor to the diffusion of AQ's jihadist vision and appeared essential in maintaining cohesion among the branches of the terrorist organisation. Since August 2022, it is worth underscoring that the AQ 'core' intervened only in the aftermath of key events, and mainly via brief statements.

In this context, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which until al-Zawahiri's death held co-leadership in generating narratives, currently appears to be in the driver's seat. This is likely to remain the case unless future changes occur in view of the death of Khaled Batarfi, leader of the group, which was announced in a video on March 2024¹, or a new AQ 'core' leader will be announced meanwhile. At the same time, other branches of the organisation have manifested changes in their online propaganda production. For instance, the growth of al-Shabaab's propaganda apparatus remains steady, especially of Shahada News Agency's products, and they are playing a prominent role in the network. Although making only a minor impact online, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) maintain a stable flow of propaganda production. They continue to enact a sort of symbiosis in releasing supportive communiqués in the aftermath of specific events, such as in the Qur'an burning campaigns or the earthquake in Türkiye and Syria.

The operational decentralisation of leadership urged by the AQ ideologue Abu Mus'ab al-Suri in 2005², at the time relating to terrorist acts being carried out in Western countries, started with al-Zawahiri's blessing and has been enforced over the years, also in the ideological sphere. It must be said that the contributions provided by AQ's branches are contextualised to local situations and grievances, while AQAP and partially the AQ 'core' remain at the front of the global guidance. Despite the loss of leadership suffered by the AQ 'core' and AQAP in the recent past, the terrorist network retains its main narratives, i.e. the unity of the Muslim community, the focus on the enemies, and the closeness to local populations.

Although still maintaining a presence on traditional and file-sharing platforms, the network takes advantage of decentralised environments and social media. The group's dedicated websites, such as 'Shahadanews', effectively contribute to a wider dissemination of the propaganda.

- ¹ Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula statement, 'A statement to mourn Shaykh Khalid Batarfi', al-Malahim Media Production Company, 10/03/2024,. In the video, the appointment of the new leader of AQAP is announced, namely Saad bin Atef al-Awlaki.
- ² Mustafa bin Abdalqadir Sitt Maryam Nasar aka Abu Mus'ab al-Suri, can be considered Al Qaeda's leading strategist, and the architect of the post-9/11 strategy for the terrorist organisation. Prolific in his writings, he became infamous for the 1 600-page book 'Global Islamic Resistance Call'. In his book, he invites the readers to join the jihad and become independent (individual) terrorists, theorising in that sense the change of al-Qaeda from a 'vulnerable hierarchical organisation into a resilient decentralised movement'.

AQ 'CORE': BETWEEN HOLDING THE REINS AND DECENTRALISATION

2023 was the first year without AQ's global leader Al Zawahiri. The AQ 'core' felt the loss and its influence on the production of jihadist propaganda was limited to statements published in the aftermath of specific events. The earthquake that hit Türkiye and Syria in February gave an opportunity to the 'core' to condemn³ the inadequacy of financial and humanitarian aid to Muslims in Syria, and to blame Arab countries in the Gulf for squandering money on useless activities.

In the same month, the AQ 'core' praised the resistance of the 'mujahidin' in Somalia⁴, who showed perseverance despite the fact that 'immense conspiracies continue to devise against Islam'. The authors condemned the Somali government, which 'brought crusaders and oppressors on the lands of Islam and Muslims' and suggested that the 'oppressors' leave the country before incurring a 'dishonourable defeat'.

AQ's leadership has repeatedly intervened in support of the Palestinian cause, glorifying the 7 October terrorist attack perpetrated against Israel by Hamas' military wing, the Ezzeddine al-Qassam Brigades (EQB)⁵. The 'core' defines the current battle as 'the most important Islamic step in liberating all Palestine'. Moreover, the group condemns the attack by Israel against the EQB, perpetrated near the al-Shifa Hospital located in Gaza City⁶. Interestingly, in February 2023, AQ analysed the situation in Palestine in an article issued in the 'One Umma' magazine⁷, arguing that 'terrorism can only be fought with terrorism'⁸. The authors returned to the subject in the following issue in April⁹, condemning Arab countries for their political behaviour aimed at 'normalising' relations with Israel.

The AQ 'core' did not miss making its voice heard on each religious event. Taking advantage of the 'Eid al-Fitr'¹⁰, the leadership issued a reminder of the importance of this event in a Muslim's life, insisting on the concept of cohesion and unity of intents inside the Umma, and reiterating the need for setting Muslims free from Arab 'tyrants' and Israel¹¹. In June, still in the religious context of 'Eid al-Adha'¹², the group focused on the existence of alleged implications of the ruling Saudi government with Jewish and Western interests

³ Al-Qaeda 'core' statement, 'Condolences, prayers and support to our Muslim brothers in Turkiye and Sham', As-Sahab Media Production Company, 20/02/2023.

⁴ Al-Qaeda 'core' statement, 'Statement regarding the latest crusade against the Muslims of Somalia', As-Sahab Media Production Company, 21/02/2023.

⁵ Al-Qaeda 'core' statement, 'Victory of God is close', As-Sahab Media Production Company, 13/10/2023.

⁶ Al-Qaeda 'core' statement, 'A statement regarding the Zionist-Crusaders war on against hospitals in Gaza', As-Sahab Media Production Company, 18/11/2023.

⁷ Al-Qaeda 'core' publication, 'One Umma' magazine issue No. 8, As-Sahab Media Production Company, 10/02/2023.

⁸ In this case, the reference is to the attack perpetrated by an individual called Khayri Alqam, who carried out a terrorist attack in Jerusalem on 27/01/2023.

⁹ Al-Qaeda 'core' publication, 'One Umma' magazine issue No. 9, As-Sahab Media Production Company, 06/04/2023.

¹⁰ Celebration in correspondence of the end of the holy month of Ramadan.

¹¹ Al-Qaeda 'core' statement, 'Congratulations and insight on the occasion of Eid Al-Fitr 1444 AH', As-Sahab Media Production Company, 29/04/2023.

¹² Marks the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice his son to obey God.

in the region¹³. The magazine 'One Umma', published by the group, provides an exhaustive overview on all the narratives and topics touched upon during the year. In four issues from February to September, the content spanned from the colonial past suffered by Muslim countries to the Qur'an burning events in Europe in 2023, without missing the opportunity to criticise the lifestyle of Muslims living in Western countries and alleged corruption of Arab countries. Such behaviour, the authors argued, undermines the success of Islam and the formation of a single global community, of 'One Umma' to be precise. Fighting the Western coalition led by the US and Israel remains the central element in the narratives of the AQ 'core'.

Between October and November, following the Hamas attack, As-Sahab Media produced four issues of a new publication titled 'This is Gaza', authored by Salim al-Sharif. The publication glorified the Hamas attacks against Israel, criticised the military response by the latter, and the position taken by Arab countries backing the Western-led coalition against Muslims. Salim al-Sharif incited Muslims living in Israel's neighbouring countries to cross the border and participate in the conflict against Israel.

In February 2024, a fifth issue of the magazine was published online. On this occasion, below the name of the original author, Salim al-Sharif, appears the name of the real author between brackets: Muhammad Salah al-Din Zaydan, also known as Sayf al-Adl¹⁴. This individual is thought to be AQ's de facto leader and the possible successor to Ayman al-Zawahiri.

In this last issue of the magazine, Sayf al-Adl took advantage of his alleged experience as a colonel in the Egyptian Army and focused on the guerrilla strategy of the Palestinian mujahidin in Gaza. The author described the mujahidin in Palestine as 'a giant in guerrilla warfare', underlining the advantage of fighting in smaller groups by using multiple weapons when it comes to confronting the more structured units of a traditional army. According to Sayf al-Adl, what the mujahidin achieved politically, militarily, and in terms of outreach with propaganda, represents the highest peak climbed in the history of nationalist and Islamist liberation movements.

AQAP AND ANSAR AL-SHARI'A: THE BRAIN AND THE BRAWN

Since the inception of the first Inspire magazine in May 2010¹⁵, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) co-leads the ideological indoctrination with the AQ 'core'. Al-Zawahiri's death (31 July 2022) seemingly forced the group to play a more prominent role, as AQAP's leaders are the ones who mainly appear in

¹³ Al-Qaeda 'core' statement, 'Communique on the occasion of the entry of the ten of al-Adha and the great pilgrimage 1444 of the Hegira', As-Sahab Media Production Company, 23/06/2023.

¹⁴ Muhammad Salah al-Din Zaydan is a long-term high-ranking officer in the AQ ranks. See also United Nations document <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n23/038/91/pdf/n2303891.pdf?token=ptej9EghC7t4iRnGDz&fe=true> and <https://scsanctions.un.org/61kppen-all.html>. The individual has been indicated by many analysts as the possible successor to Ayman al-Zawahiri.

¹⁵ Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, Inspire magazine issue No. 1, al-Malahim Media Production Company, 16/05/2010.

videos and are visible to the audience on global and regional topics. Khaled Batarfi¹⁶ was the first of the AQ network leaders to feature in a video¹⁷ in January, addressing the Yemeni population and encouraging them to live up to their religious and historical responsibilities. Batarfi urged the Yemenis to fight the Americans, the Iranians and their allies, and to remain steadfast even though ‘the entire world seems to stand against them’. Other AQAP leaders who appeared in videos over 2023 include Ibrahim al-Qusi¹⁸ and Nasr al-Anisi.

The leadership role assumed by AQAP in spreading the message to all the branches of the network became clear in a video published in July¹⁹, featuring Ibrahim al-Qusi. The latter addressed the Palestinians, the ‘mujahidin’ in Somalia (al-Shabaab) and those fighting for AQIM. He praised their deeds and steadfastness and urged them to continue the fight until victory is achieved or martyrdom gained. On 9 October 2023, AQAP was the first in the terrorist network to congratulate Hamas on the attack against Israel²⁰. The group glorified the operation led by the EQB, calling on ‘fellow Muslims’ in Egypt, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan to ‘rise in support of the Palestinians by all means’.

At the national level, the presence of ‘mercenaries’ in Yemen - allegedly on the payroll of the United Arab Emirates²¹ (UAE) - generates clashes with the AQAP proxy group, Ansar al-Shari’a. AQAP, through the voice of Abu Abdullah al-Awlaqi, and capitalising on local tribal resentment, denounced purported crimes perpetrated by the mercenaries in the Yemeni governorates of Abyan and Shabwa. The leader blamed the agreements in place between the UAE and the US, which occupy cities in the south of the country, and reported the alleged creation of an intelligence-led military base in the island of Socotra established by the UAE together with Israel.

Still in Yemen, the AQAP’s strategy entails resorting to hostage-taking to raise awareness and funds. After being kidnapped in February 2022, Akam Sofyol Anam, the Field Security Coordination Officer of the UN Department of Safety and Security in Aden, Yemen, appeared in a video in June 2023. The UN officer reported suffering health issues and complained about the delay of negotiations, even doubting the real interest of the US, Saudi Arabia and UAE in setting him and his colleagues free.

AQAP’s propaganda apparatus concluded its 2023 propaganda production with the release of a poster²³ and a video²⁴ announcing the return of the longstanding flagship magazine ‘Inspire’. The publication, which was novel and dominated the jihadist propaganda scene from May 2010 to August 2017, acted as a source of ‘inspiration’ not only for the audience but also for IS, the

¹⁶ Abu al-Miqdad al-Kindi also known as Khaled Batarfi.

¹⁷ Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula video, ‘Oh people of faith and wisdom’, al-Malahim Media Production Company, 14/01/2023.

¹⁸ Khubayb al-Sudani, also known as Ibrahim al-Qusi.

¹⁹ Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula video, ‘Congratulations and support’, al-Malahim Media Production Company, 01/07/2023.

²⁰ Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula statement, ‘Statement related to the blessed operation of al-Aqsa Flood’, al-Malahim Media Production Company, 09/10/2023.

²¹ Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula video, ‘The truth on the United Arab Emirates mercenaries’, Shahed, 10/06/2023.

²³ Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula statement, ‘Coming Soon’ Promo for ‘Inspire: What America and the West Do Not Expect’, Al-Malahim Media Production Company, 26/12/2023.

²⁴ Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula video, ‘Inspire 2024’, al-Malahim Media Production Company, 30/12/2023,.

rival jihadist terrorist network. IS Dabiq and Rumiya were created because of AQAP's publication.

The poster is dated 'Winter 2023/1445' and offers a preview of the magazine's contents, with topics ranging from support for the Palestinian cause to the notorious 'Open Source Jihad (OSJ)' section, usually dedicated to giving advice on how to carry out attacks in Western countries. The message of the video titled 'Inspire 2024' is twofold: in the first part the authors deplore all the countries backing Israel's government in the 'war against Islam'. A revival of an old message by Anwar al-Awlaki urges 'lone mujahid' living in the West to cause the same devastation experienced by the Palestinians in cities such as New York and Washington. The second part of the footage details the recipe for an undetectable bomb aimed at carrying out attacks on airplanes.

AQAP's ideological indoctrination is complemented by activity in the field accomplished by Ansar al-Shari'a and duly reported online by the propaganda apparatus. Since September 2022, the group has been carrying on the military campaign 'Siham al-Haqq' (Arrows of the Truth), concentrated in particular in the south-eastern part of Yemen. The campaign targets in particular UAE 'mercenaries' deployed in support of the internationally-recognised Yemeni government, temporarily settled in Aden. Every terrorist attack under the 'Siham al-Haqq' campaign has been promptly claimed and often corroborated with photo reports. The use of drones to carry out terrorist attacks has become common practice for Ansar al-Shari'a. Among many others, the bombing of the high commander of the first brigade of defence of the UAE forces in the Shabwa region, Ahmad Muhsan al-Sulaymani, was probably the most prominent in terms of strategic military impact²⁵.

Since its inception, the claims of the military campaign not only revitalised the presence of the group online, but brought back the perception that the AQAP resumed its strategic role in the region.

AI-SHABAAB: PROBABLY JUST ONE STEP AWAY

Al-Shabaab has risen to regional prominence in the last few years for posing a threat in the Horn of Africa, and internationally as being potentially the first AQ ally to seize power in a country, and the second aligned to the terrorist network after the Taliban in Afghanistan²⁶. While maintaining high tensions in Somalia, especially through the perpetration of tailored attacks against institutional targets, in the last two years al-Shabaab has been entrusting the Shahada News Agency (SNA) with the diffusion of its ideological message alongside the al-Kataib Foundation. The Agency still maintains the role of main information outlet for the group in relation to the military situation in the field, sometimes enriching accounts of the most lethal attacks with statements from al-Kataib. Simultaneously, in 2023 the SNA increased its publication of articles on the geopolitical situation in East Africa, and on the inefficiency of the Somali

²⁵ Ansar al-Sharia statement, 'Statement related to two consecutive attacks against the commander of the defence forces ('mercenaries') in the Shabwa region, Yemen, Ansar al-Shariah Correspondent, 24/05/2023.

²⁶ EU Internet Referral Unit report, 'Somalia and al-Shabaab: 'The makings of a new Afghanistan?', 03/11/2022.

government. It mainly accused the government of being backed by Western countries to the detriment of the local population.

In the aftermath of the attack against the military base in the Lower Shabelle region that killed 200 Ugandan soldiers perpetrated in May²⁷, the SNA released an article²⁸ quoting a piece issued in 'The Independent' newspaper titled 'Time to get out of Somalia'. In that article, the journalist questioned the opportunity of engaging the Uganda People's Defense Forces, the Africa Union and the Western coalition forces in a war against al-Shabaab, and wondered whether leaving the AQ branch to seize power in the country would be a better solution.

The Shahada Agency's attempt to influence the audience on the same topic was reiterated a few days later with the publication of a second article²⁹. The authors highlighted protests allegedly staged by Ugandan activists on social media against the Ugandan president, stressing the killing of 200 soldiers and urging the withdrawal of Ugandan troops from Somalia. Several other newspaper articles were highlighted by al-Shabaab's agency in the following days, mentioning the resilience shown by the group since its inception and even arguing about the possibility to reach an agreement with the leadership, aimed at bringing an end to the violence in Somalia³⁰.

Since 2013, al-Shabaab's intelligence apparatus has been very efficient, and has progressively enabled the group to strike the most sensitive targets in Somalia at any time³¹. In 2023, al-Shabaab's militants perpetrated a series of attacks against institutional objectives. In February, the SNA released a statement³² claiming an attack against a Ministry of Defence building in the capital Mogadishu. In April, the Agency claimed the shelling of the Presidential palace in Mogadishu, which impacted also the office of the Oil Ministry, killing guards and causing material losses³³.

On 5 September, al-Shabaab made an attempt on the Somali President's life. The group released a first statement³⁴ on the same day, and a more detailed article was released by the Shahada Agency on 6 September. According to the documents, a government delegation led by the President, Hasan Sheykh, was hosted in a military base located in the city of Mahas, Hiran province, central

²⁷ Al-Shabaab al-Mujahidin Movement publication, 'It was not you "believers" who killed them, but it was Allah Who did so', al-Kata'ib Media Production Company, 29/05/2023.

²⁸ Al-Shabaab al-Mujahidin Movement publication, 'Why we should leave al-Shabaab to control Somalia', Shahada News Agency, 04/06/2023.

²⁹ Al-Shabaab al-Mujahidin Movement publication, 'Ugandan activists under shock after watching "And Heal the Breasts of a believing people", and ask for the retreat of the military forces from Somalia', Shahada News Agency, 08/06/2023.

³⁰ Al-Shabaab al-Mujahidin Movement publication, 'Is Somalia A Repeat of Afghanistan?', Shahada News Agency, 02/07/2023, and 'It's Time to talk to al-Shabaab', Shahada News Agency, 08/07/2023.

³¹ EU Internet Referral Unit report, 'Somalia and al-Shabaab: The makings of a new Afghanistan?', 03/11/2022.

³² Al-Shabaab al-Mujahidin Movement statement, 'Statement claiming an attack on a building of Somali Ministry of Defence, in Mogadishu', Shahada News Agency, 26/02/2023.

³³ Al-Shabaab al-Mujahidin Movement statement, 'Statement claiming an attack on Presidential palace in Mogadishu', Shahada News Agency, 10/04/2023.

³⁴ Al-Shabaab al-Mujahidin Movement statement, 'Statement related to an attack against a high-ranking delegation in which there was also the Somali President in Hiran region, Central Somalia' Shahada News Agency, 05/09/2023 and 'al-Shabaab al-Mujahidin Movement targets the delegation of the Somali President 'Hasan Sheykh' by a suicide operation in the city of Mahas, central Somalia', Shahada News Agency, 06/09/2023.

Somalia. A suicide operation targeted the military base, killing some soldiers and the entire security detail of the President.

The change in the online strategy, entrusting the Shahada Agency with the task of influencing the audience even on a geopolitical level, became apparent on the occasion of a devastating attack against the Ethiopian military forces belonging to the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS), perpetrated in September. The Al-Kataib Media and Shahada Agency released six documents describing the terrorist operation³⁵. The official claim by the former highlights the alleged ‘innumerable crimes’ committed in the past by the ‘crusaders’ of Ethiopia against Muslims. It warns the soldiers of the ATMIS that they will be defeated by Muslims in Somalia who are in charge of their own territories. The document praises the deeds of local Somali tribes in the Bakool region, who sided with the mujahidin in the battle and defended Islam. Finally, the statement calls on Muslims living in Somalia to follow the example of the local tribes. In this case, the lack of documentation seems to recall the method used by the self-proclaimed Islamic State to boost their activities in the field; a method that has been a trademark of the rival terrorist network.

Aligned to the precepts of the AQ ‘core’, al-Shabaab shows closeness to the local population, concern for their grievances, and the will to build strong ties with them. In several circumstances, through its Shahada Agency, the group announced³⁶ the supply in different Somali regions of humanitarian assistance to the local population. According to the statements, al-Shabaab has set up the ‘Ihsan Charity Association’, responsible for the distribution of food products. In the same context, the group served also as a ‘police authority’, attacking drug smugglers’ posts in the capital Mogadishu³⁷. The services recall Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham’s (HTS) Syrian Salvation Government (SSG), providing ‘civil administration in the areas under HTS’s influence, including security and public services such as education and healthcare’³⁸.

On 21 and 29 May, al-Kataib released three items related to the eight-day conference held in Somalia by the group (8-15 May), to which scholars, senior community members and tribe leaders attended. The conference mainly focused on the topic of jihad in East Africa, but also on the economic and social

³⁵ Al-Shabaab al-Mujahidin Movement statements, ‘Statement related to the attack against a military convoy of Ethiopian soldiers in Bakool region’, Shahada News Agency, 17/09/2023; ‘Initial claim related to the attack by al-Shabaab against a convoy of the Ethiopian soldiers in Bakool region’ Shahada News Agency, 17/09/2023; ‘167 crusaders killed in an ambush against Ethiopian ATMIS crusaders’, al-Kata’ib Media Production Company, 17/09/2023; ‘Statement updating on the attack against a convoy of Ethiopian forces in Bakool region, central Somalia’, Shahada News Agency, 17/09/2023; ‘Statement giving a second update in relation to the attack against the convoy of Ethiopian troops in Rabdhuure, Bakool region, central Somalia’, Shahada News Agency, 17/09/2023; ‘Shahada publishes photos of the sweeping attack of al-Shabaab al-Mujahidin Movement which led to the killing of 249 Ethiopian soldiers in South West of Somalia’, Shahada News Agency, 17/09/2023.

³⁶ See as examples: Al-Shabaab al-Mujahidin Movement statement, ‘Statement related to the distribution of food to families in Galguduud region, Somalia’, Shahada News Agency, 18/02/2023; or ‘Statement related to distribution of foodstuffs to more than 350 families by a relief organisation belongs to al-Shabab al-Mujahidin’, Shahada News Agency, 03/04/2023; or ‘Statement related to the distribution of food to families in need by ‘Ihsan Charity Association’ belonging to al-Shabaab’ Shahada News Agency, 04/04/2023.

³⁷ See for instance Al-Shabaab al-Mujahidin Movement statement, ‘Statement claiming an attack on a drug shop in Mogadishu’, Shahada News Agency, 02/03/2023; and ‘Statement claiming responsibility for various attacks on drug traffickers in Mogadishu’, Shahada News Agency, 05/03/2023.

³⁸ EU Internet Referral Unit report, ‘Online jihadist propaganda: 2022 in review’, 18/12/2023.: https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/Online_Jihadist_Propaganda_2021_in_review.pdf

situation of Muslim communities in Somalia, especially those living in the areas under the control of al-Shabaab³⁹. As a result of the conference, 68 scholars undersigned 9 fatwa orders on different subjects. Among others, it was decided by the Somali Federal Government and the regional directorates, on those who defend the Somalian government, to issue a jihad on the neighbouring enemy, warning Muslims about Islamic State members and how to disavow them.

AQIM AND JNIM IN TOTAL SYNERGY

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) seem to operate in symbiosis, particularly on the ideological side related to specific events. In February, a joint statement⁴⁰ expressing condolences to all Muslims for the victims of the earthquake in Türkiye and Syria is just an example of such a relation⁴¹. The two groups also acted jointly on the occasion of the death of Hamad al-Tamimi, the head of the 'information department' of AQAP who had been killed in the aftermath of a raid by US forces in February, according to a statement released by AQAP⁴². The groups released a statement⁴³ of condolences praising the deeds of the leader.

Looking at the relation more closely, while AQIM shows a more robust contribution to the distribution of the jihadist ideological message, JNIM appears more involved in the activity in the field. Mainly through the publication of statements, the group highlights the results obtained against Malian, Burkinabe and Nigerian armies, or against the rival local branch of the self-proclaimed Islamic State.

Two audio messages⁴⁴ from Abu Yasir al-Jazairi, a high-ranking officer in AQIM and prominent ideologue, were released by the al-Andalus Media in April and June. The messages addressed the 'mujahidin' in Africa and those fighting for JNIM in particular, praising them for their steadfastness in facing the 'tyrant regimes' and IS. He rails against the Algerian government and religious leaders who, in his opinion, follow the Western political model and are disregarding Shari'a and veering away from Islam. Al-Jazairi criticises also the Algerian

³⁹ See Al-Shabaab al-Mujahidin Movement statements, 'The concluding statement issued by the second session of the consultative meeting on jihad issues in East Africa', 21/05/2023; and the publication 'The Second Session of the Consultative Forum on Jihad issues in East Africa', 21/05/2023, and the video 'The second session of the consultative meeting on jihad issues in East Africa', 29/05/2023, all of them published by al-Kataib Media Production Company.

⁴⁰ Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin joint statement, 'Condolences and a reminder: indeed your Lord is admonishing you, so heed him', al-Andalus and al-Zallaqa Media Production Companies, 19/02/2023.

⁴¹ See also dedicated paragraph.

⁴² Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula statement, 'Condolences of Sheikh Hamad bin Hamoud al-Tamimi', al-Malahim Media Production Company, 05/03/2023.

⁴³ Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin joint statement, 'Condolences and eulogy on the martyrdom of Sheikh Hamad bin Hamoud al-Tamimi', al-Andalus and al-Zallaqa Media Production Companies, 07/03/2023.

⁴⁴ Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb videos, 'Al-Khawarij, the most evil creatures under the sky', al-Andalus Media Production Company, 19/04/2023; and 'Enlightening the perceptions regarding the disbelief of Algeria's leaders - Episode 5', al-Andalus Media Production Company, 25/06/2023.

Constitution, considered the product of a nationalist and non-religious revolution and consequently open to influences from the democratic system⁴⁵.

JNIM's terrorist activity is mainly orchestrated in Mali and Burkina Faso, on some occasions crossing into Niger. This was the case of a series of attacks perpetrated by the group between 4 and 8 March 2023 against the armies of those countries⁴⁶. In what may be a renewal of the communication strategy, JNIM's propaganda apparatus also provided traditional photo reports detailing attacks carried out against enemies, and seemed to mimic IS propagandists' method of posting several pieces of content on the same event, amplifying each act's perceived importance⁴⁷.

The two branches of the terrorist network seem to be replaying the same model applied in Yemen by AQAP and Ansar al-Shari'a. The closeness to local populations is maintained by proxy factions, while the ideological aspect is delivered by the groups that these factions stem from.

⁴⁵ Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb statement, 'Enlightening the Insights (Episode Six) - On the infidelity of the rulers of Algeria', al-Andalus Media Production Company, 19/09/2023.

⁴⁶ See statements produced by Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin statements, 'Statement claiming the attack against a Malian army's vehicle in March 2023'; 'Clash between JNIM fighters and the Malian army between Marja and Nara'; 'Malian army in the trap of the mujahidin'; 'Double strike on the Burkinabe army', az-Zallaqa, on 04 and 08/03/2023.

⁴⁷ Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, 'Killing of 5 Malian army soldiers near the capital Bamako', al-Andalus Media Production Company, 08/04/2023.

IS: ITS IDEOLOGICAL INSPIRATION IS STRONGER THAN ITS PRESENCE ONLINE AND IN THE FIELD

2023 saw a further decline in the online propaganda production and distribution by the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) jihadist terrorist network. The official releases were reduced to the publication of the al-Naba' flagship magazine and to the issuing of claims of attacks in the local provinces. The Amaq agency's production also dwindled noticeably and seems to be focused mainly on detailing the group's major attacks, often corroborating claims with videos of the perpetrators pledging allegiance to the 'caliph'. Although on a lower scale, the release of short videos from the field remains common practice. The decrease in volume has been observed on traditional platforms, but also on decentralised ones, where the official propaganda has not been released since November. However, websites (e.g. al-Raud) serve as useful repositories of official and supportive generated content.

The apparent lack of online leadership guidance has been a constant at least since Abubakr al-Baghdadi's death (27 October 2019). The audio message⁴⁸ by Abu Hudhaifa al-Ansar, an IS spokesperson, announcing the name of the new 'caliph' (Abu Hafs al-Hashimi al-Qurashi) remains the only official online presence of a top leader in 2023. The audio issued in August came about three months after Türkiye claimed to have killed IS leader Abu al-Husayn al-Husayni al-Qurashi in Syria. The aim of the long speech is to reinforce the idea that the Islamic State will continue its fight regardless of how many of its leaders are killed. The spokesperson denied statements from the Turkish government claiming the killing of the IS leader, by clarifying that al-Husayni al-Qurashi died during clashes with Hay'at tahrir al-Sham. After the announcement, a long series of pledges of allegiance from all IS branches followed on the audio.

The ideological indoctrination is entrusted to the weekly al-Naba' magazine's editorial. Among the recurrent themes is the steadfastness shown by IS fighters and the failure of the Western coalition forces in defeating them. The war against IS that the West should have won years ago is still ongoing, the authors in the magazine point out. The mujahidin that the coalition forces confirm were defeated in Iraq and Syria, are now fighting on a global scale. According to the IS narrative, the mainstream media 'analyse and highlight each and every single word' of the propaganda produced by the network, which it claims is a recognition of the outstanding endeavours of IS media during this time. It goes on to confirm that this work will continue, maintaining the strategic role played so far⁵².

Another recurrent topic in IS narratives is the military campaign against Christian communities in Africa, waged with the aim of reinforcing the Islamic presence across the continent. The propaganda apparatus has issued documents produced by all the provinces on as many platforms as possible,

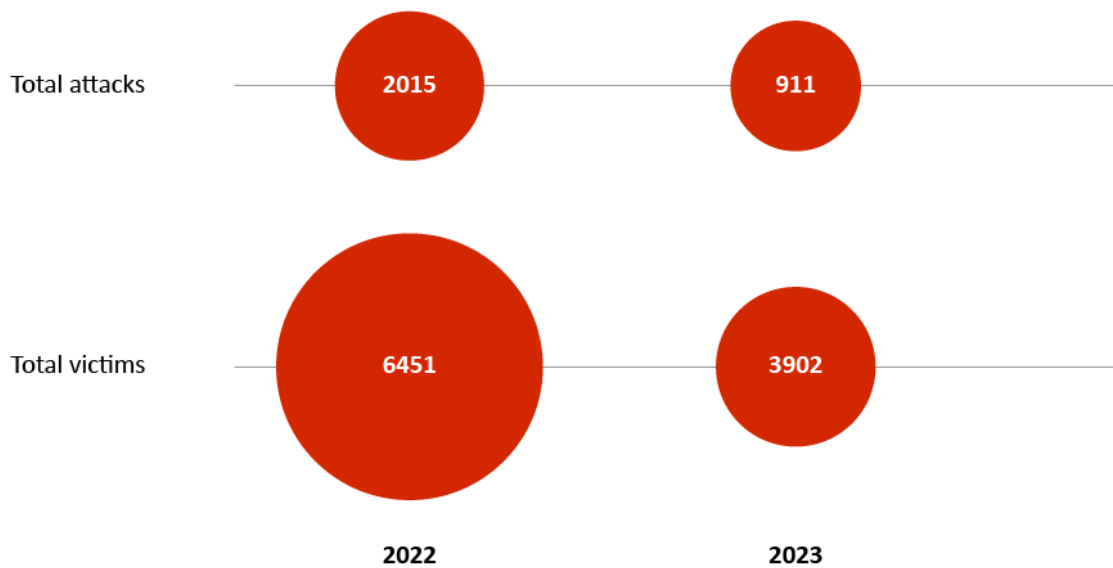
⁴⁸ Islamic State audio, 'Audio speech of the official spokesman of the Islamic State, Sheikh Mujahid Abu Hudhaifa al-Ansari', Alfurqan Media Production Company, 03/08/2023.

⁵² See for instance: Islamic State, 'al-Naba'' issues Nos. 372 and 382, IS Diwan al 'I'lam al-Markazi.

claiming attacks against Christian villages and towns, often highlighted also in al-Naba⁵³. Through the magazine, IS' top leadership does not hesitate to reproach Arab countries as, in their opinion, they side with the Western coalition led by the US at the expense of the Umma and they keep pursuing their project of 'normalising' their relationships with Israel⁵⁴.

The online activity reflects the trend of operations on the ground. According to the Global Terrorism Index⁵⁵, the terrorist attacks carried out by the self-proclaimed IS have been dwindling since 2016. Based on the comparison made by the EU IRU of the claimed terrorist activities in the years 2022 and 2023, published in al-Naba' magazines, it is possible to conclude that the number of IS attacks decreased globally by 55 % in 2023, compared to 2022. The al-Naba' magazine reports the number of victims, grouping the death and wounded tolls, and the decrease in victims has been 40 % in the same timeframe⁵⁶. The results of the analyses are summarised in the graphics overleaf.

Total of IS attacks and victims



Data retrieved from the infographics published in al-Naba' magazine in 2022 and 2023

⁵³ See for instance: Islamic State statements, 'Killing three Christians in Abindi and Ituri'; 'Claiming responsibility for an attack on the Christian village of Namulu'; 'Claiming responsibility for the attack on the Christian village of Tchapa'; and the photo report 'Burning of Christian properties in an attack of IS fighters on the village of Namulu', IS Central Africa and IS Mozambique provinces, on 24/01/2023 and 05/02/2023.

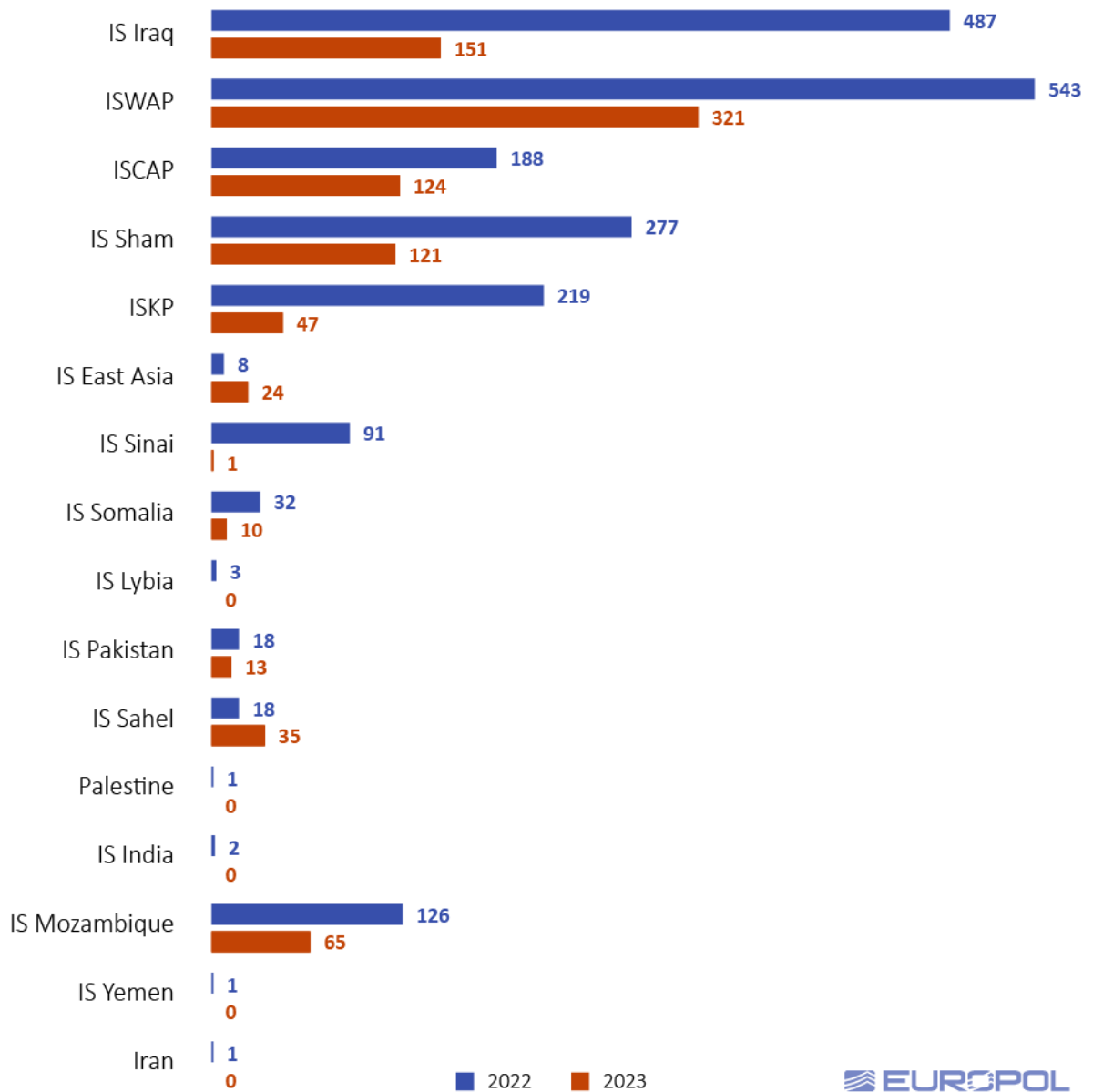
⁵⁴ Islamic State publications, al-Naba', issues Nos. 384 and 410, IS Diwan al l'lam al-Markazi, 31/03/2023 and 29/09/2023 respectively.

⁵⁵ Institute for Economics & Peace, 'Global Terrorism Index', <https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/GTI-2024-web-290224.pdf>

⁵⁶ The EU IRU analysed all the infographics published on page 2 of the al-Naba' magazines issued in 2022 and 2023 (104 issues), that reported, among other data, the numbers of attacks perpetrated and casualties inflicted by IS provinces. All the magazines analysed are stored in the EU IRU 'Check the Web' database.

According to al-Naba', the country which benefitted the most from the decrease was Iraq, with a 69 % lower percentage of attacks and 71 % fewer victims. IS Khurasan province (ISKP)⁵⁷ perpetrated 79 % fewer attacks and caused 40 % fewer victims. In other IS provinces, such as West Africa and Sham (Syria), attacks and victims dropped by about 50 %. Some IS branches were completely inactive, such as IS Yemen, IS Libya and IS India, while IS Sinai province decreased its attacks by 99 %, and the number of victims by 94 %. Only IS Central Africa province remained stable, perpetrating 124 attacks and causing 777 victims.

Attacks by provinces



Data retrieved from the infographics published in al-Naba' magazine in the years 2022 and 2023

⁵⁷ Mostly operating in Afghanistan.

IS KHORASAN PROVINCE

Despite the huge decline (79 %) in the number of attacks in 2023 compared to 2022, IS Khorasan province was still very active and Afghanistan witnessed some of the year's deadliest terrorist raids. In January, a detailed claim⁵⁸ by the Amaq Agency reported the killing and wounding of 50 individuals of the Taliban militia in the aftermath of an attack on the main entrance of a military headquarters attached to Kabul International Airport. The actions were then glorified in the al-Naba' magazine issue No. 372⁵⁹. The authors label the numerous announcements by Western countries regarding the victory against IS as 'hasty', stressing that the real victory is the death of the fighters on the path of jihad. The latter are elevated to the companion of the Prophet Muhammad, who fought the 'disbelievers' despite their overwhelming numerical supremacy.

In March, another martyrdom operation carried out by a member of IS Khorasan province led to the killing of a Taliban provincial governor in the Balkh region of Afghanistan. The official claim was accompanied by the usual Amaq statement⁶⁰. In July, one of the year's deadliest attacks struck a gathering of the political party Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam in the town of Khar, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, in northwest Pakistan, where 270 people were killed and wounded according to official IS propaganda. The meeting was being held ahead of general elections scheduled for January 2024⁶¹. The ISKP terrorist operation triggered strong condemnation by local and global rival jihadist groups. Al-Qaeda in the Subcontinent (AQS), for instance, released a statement⁶² blaming the event as 'directly in opposition with the Islamic Shari'a'. In the statement, the group reminds the audience that 'the fundamental purposes of the jihad of the mujahidin of Islam (regardless of their affiliations with any party, organisation or land) is to liberate and support the Muslims worldwide, and the oppressed (belonging to the other communities and religions) and to protect their lives, wealth and honour. It is beyond any doubt that such evil acts are perpetrated by the anti-Islam intelligence agencies and devious sects such as the Khawarij!'

IS WEST AFRICA PROVINCE

Although the decline of IS activity on the ground has also been evident in the West Africa province, it remains the most active branch of the terrorist network with 321 attacks and 811 casualties claimed in 2023. In this context, propaganda paid specific attention to the attacks carried out in central and

⁵⁸ Islamic State statement, 'Killing and injuring 50 members of the Taliban militia in a 'martyrdom' attack against the military entrance of Kabul airport', Amaq News Agency, 02/01/2023.

⁵⁹ Islamic State publication, 'Al-Naba'', issue No. 372, Diwan al 'Ilam al-Markazi, 05/01/2023.

⁶⁰ Islamic State statement, 'Senior Official in the Taliban Militia was Killed in a Qualitative Strike by the Islamic State in Balkh, Northern Afghanistan', Amaq News Agency, 09/03/2023.

⁶¹ Islamic State statements, 'Tens killed in a bombing targeting a gathering of a political party which forms part of the government coalition in Pakistan', Amaq News Agency, 31/07/2023; and '60 dead and dozens wounded in the ranks of one of the "apostate" political parties in a martyrdom operation at the border area of Bajaur', Islamic State, 31/07/2023.

⁶² Al-Qaeda 'core' statement, 'Criminal attack in Bajaur', As-Sahab Media Production Company, 31/07/2023.

northern Nigeria ahead of the February 2023 presidential elections. According to the article in al-Naba' issue No. 379⁶³, IS fighters perpetrated attacks against military stations and the Independent National Electoral Commission office in the town of Okehi, in the state of Kogi. The operation was also the subject of an IS claim and a photo report⁶⁴. The attempt to influence the democratic process of voting was corroborated by the release of a 15-minute video⁶⁵ condemning the participation in political elections, considering it an exercise of polytheism. Furthermore, the footage blames religious imams who promote participation in elections, and describes them as 'worshippers of tyrants who invite you to hell'.

IS CENTRAL AFRICA AND MOZAMBIQUE PROVINCES

IS Central Africa Province (ISCAP) decreased its activities in the field by just 34 % but, notably, slightly increased the number of casualties. Together with IS Mozambique province, whose attacks dwindled by 48 % and casualties by 22 %, the two branches made the war against Christians their 'pièce de résistance'. There have been numerous raids against Christian villages, especially by ISCAP and particularly concentrated in the Republic of Congo⁶⁶. In the issue No. 382 of the al-Naba' magazine⁶⁷, the authors highlighted the intense series of raids against seven villages carried out by the 'mujahidin' in the region of Beni, Congo. In the attacks, 100 people were killed and several others wounded; houses and governmental buildings were set on fire.

THE REST OF THE 'CALIPHATE'

Provinces considered IS strongholds in the period of maximum expansion (2014-2016) benefitted from a slump in terms of attacks and the number of casualties. In 2023, the Iraq and Sham IS branches decreased their terrorist activities by about 70 % and 50 % respectively. Activities there were typically hit-and-run operations rather than massive, orchestrated attacks. IS Sinai province perpetrated only one attack during the whole of 2023, while other provinces such as Yemen, Libya and India were completely inactive.

In December, issue No. 420⁶⁸ of the al-Naba' magazine dedicated the editorial to the expansion of IS in the Philippines, a land the authors alleged was colonised by Christian communities with the blessing of the United States. After a biased historical overview of events, quoting unsubstantiated abuses perpetrated by the Christians against the Muslims (especially since the Second

⁶³ Islamic State publication, 'Al-Naba'', issue No. 379, Diwan al-I'lam al-Markazi, 23/02/2023.

⁶⁴ Islamic State publication, 'Bombing of a government headquarters for the polytheist elections in the region of Kugi, central Nigeria', IS West Africa province, 22/02/2023.

⁶⁵ Islamic State video, 'Polytheism is a great injustice', IS West Africa Province, 21/02/2023,.

⁶⁶ See, for example: Islamic State statements, '20 killed and wounded among the Christians, and burning their houses and vehicles, in an attack in the town of Kasindi, located in eastern Congo', 13/06/2023; and 'Statement claiming an attack against "Christians" in Beni region, Congo', 07/06/2023, both released by IS Central Africa province, and 'Statement claiming responsibility for an attack on the "Christian" village of Tchapa', IS Mozambique province, 05/02/2023.

⁶⁷ Islamic State publication, 'al-Naba'', issue No. 382, Diwan al-I'lam al-Markazi, 17/03/2023.

⁶⁸ Islamic State publication, 'al-Naba'', issue No. 420, Diwan al-I'lam al-Markazi, 07/12/2023.

World War), the article blessed the presence of a group of 'righteous mujahidin' who lavish efforts on mitigating the suffering and nourish the hope for future revenge. The mujahidin's presence, argue the authors, is not only in defence of Islam, but serves as a foothold for Muslims to fight the projects of the 'tyrant' government in the region, and marks the inception of the conquest of East Asian countries by the organisation. According to the EU IRU's analysis, attacks by IS East Asia province increased by 200 % and casualties rose by 79 %.

The IS terrorist network doubled the number of ground operations carried out in the Sahel province, although the number of casualties slightly decreased, hitting both governmental forces in the region, and the rival group, JNIM. Among the deadliest was the attack in February against Burkinabe military forces in Oudalan province, which killed 70 soldiers⁶⁹. In May, an attack against JNIM members in Northern Mali left 50 people dead⁷⁰. A video⁷¹ released in March by IS Sahel province underscored the crucial role played by the African branch in the IS expansion plan. After showing some terrorist operations carried out by IS fighters in the region, the footage referred to the alleged inability of local and Western coalition forces to face the impetuosity and bravery of the 'mujahidin'. The authors presented the Sahel front as the dawn of a new global jihadist phase which would lead to the expansion of the 'caliphate' in Africa, before entering Western countries.

⁶⁹ Islamic State statement, 'Killing about 70 members of Burkinabe army and taking 5 hostages in IS fighters attack in Ouladan in Northern Burkina Faso', Sahel province, 24/02/2023.

⁷⁰ Islamic State publication, 'al-Naba', issue No. 390, Diwan al-'Ilam al-Markazi, 11/05/2023.

⁷¹ Islamic State video, 'Sons of the Hateful', Sahel province, 21/03/2023.

THE AL-AQSA FLOOD OPERATION

THE PALESTINIAN CAUSE SET UP A HETEROGENEOUS ALLIANCE

The turning point of the jihadist propaganda flow in the year 2023 occurred on 7 October. In the aftermath of the terrorist attack orchestrated by Hamas against Israel, Muhammad Deif⁷², the Commander in chief of the Ezzeddine al-Qassam Brigades (EQB)⁷³, released a statement⁷⁴ announcing the launch of a 'military operation' called 'Al-Aqsa Flood' against Israel. The claim came at the end of a three-page statement that justified the terrorist act. Muhammad Deif, inter alia, accused Israel of occupying Palestinian territories, displacing locals, destroying towns and villages and committing massacres against women and children.

Since 8 October, Hamas has conveyed the message through mainstream and local media, entrusting the EQB with producing the online propaganda. In fact, since the attack, the EQB's military spokesperson, Abu Ubayda, has provided a series of military updates on the ongoing conflict through audio messages. The first of these messages⁷⁶ saw Ubayda announce the capture of the Israeli hostages.

An analysis of Hamas propaganda shows how the main narrative consists of accusing Israel of committing war crimes against the Palestinian population, and preventing the establishment of an independent state in the Palestinian territories⁷⁷. Hamas also repeatedly calls on Muslims to mobilise against Israel and the coalition headed by the US, even asking them to march toward the borders of Palestine, and to gather in front of the embassies of Israel and USA and expel their ambassadors⁷⁸.

During the 7 October attack, more than 200 Israeli citizens were taken captive by Hamas. Another recurrent topic in the propaganda has been the hostages' safety, which, according to Hamas, has been sometimes jeopardised by the 'irresponsible' bombings carried out by the Israel Defence Forces (IDF).⁷⁹ In other circumstances, hostages were used as a bargaining chip in retaliation to Israel's attacks, even threatening to kill a hostage and broadcast it on the web

⁷² Muhammad Deif, also known as Abu Khaled, is the commander in chief of the Ezzeddine al-Qassam Brigades.

⁷³ The Ezzeddine al-Qassam Brigades (EQB) is the military wing of Hamas. Hamas is an organisation that was founded in 1998 as a clandestine military group of the Muslim Brotherhood, which, at a later time, was incorporated into Hamas itself. In line with this background, Hamas continues to carry out independent activities providing support and assistance to the Palestinian population in those territories. Over time, military actions on behalf of Hamas became a prerogative of the EQB.

⁷⁴ Ezzeddine al-Qassam Brigades statement, 'Statement by Hamas's al-Qassam Brigades top military commander', 07/10/2023.

⁷⁶ Ezzeddine al-Qassam Brigades audio, Abu Ubayda, 'Speech by the Ezzeddine al-Qassam Brigades' spokesman Abu Ubayda regarding the latest updates on Operation Al-Aqsa Flood', 08/10/2023.

⁷⁷ Ezzeddine al-Qassam Brigades video, 'And those who gave shelter and aided- it is they who are the believers', Ali'lam Alaskari, – 28/12/2023.

⁷⁸ See for instance: Ezzeddine al-Qassam Brigades video, 'In support of the Holy City', Ali'lam Alaskari, 19/10/2023.

⁷⁹ Ezzeddine al-Qassam Brigades video, 'Unquestionably, the help of Allah is near', Ali'lam Alaskari, 16/10/2023.

‘if Israel attacks again civilians in Gaza without warning’⁸⁰. Furthermore, hostages appear in videos beseeching the Israeli government to release Palestinian prisoners, in order to set them free in return⁸¹. Two EQB posters in the video accuse Israel of having abandoned the hostages⁸², and exploit their images to attribute possible fatalities as a direct consequence of Israel’s inaction⁸³.

Over time, a system of heterogeneous allegiances took shape, deploying on the same side Sunni and Shi’a denominations in support of the Palestinian cause. Abdul Malik Badr al-Houthi, leader of the Houthis’ military branch Ansar Allah, appeared in a video congratulating the Palestinians and the mujahidin of the EQB and Saraya al-Quds Brigades⁸⁴, on the successful attack against Israel, praising the timing and the strategy⁸⁵. In the following weeks, Ansar Allah would prove to be a precious ally for the Hamas military wing. On 8 November, Yahya Saree, military spokesperson of Ansar Allah, confirmed the group’s participation by announcing successful operations perpetrated against Israel in the area of Eilat⁸⁶.

Ansar Allah raised the level of the threat on 19 November 2023, with the inception of a series of attacks against civilian vessels crossing the Red Sea in front of the Yemeni stretch of coastline controlled by the Houthis. According to the footage⁸⁷ released in the aftermath of the first assault, Ansar Allah carried out the ‘military operation’ seizing a supposed Israeli-linked ship and taking it to Yemen. The voiceover argued that the naval military operation was carried out ‘in implementation of the directives of the leader of the revolution, Commander Abdul Malik Badr al-Houthi’ and ‘based on religious, humanitarian and moral responsibility towards the oppressed Palestinian people and the unjust siege they are subjected to and the continuation of horrific and heinous massacres by the Israeli enemy’.

In a video⁸⁸ published the same day, Yahya Saree claimed responsibility for the terrorist attack and the seizure of the ship in the Red Sea. The leader threatened more ‘naval operations’ targeting Israeli-linked vessels in the waterway over the Hamas/Israeli conflict and warned that all ships ‘belonging to the Israeli enemy or dealing with it’ will become a ‘legitimate target’ for Ansar Allah. Furthermore, Yahya Saree urged all countries with nationals working in the Red Sea to refrain from performing ‘any work or activity with Israeli ships or ships owned by Israelis’.

⁸⁰ Ezzeddine al-Qassam Brigades video, ‘That is so. And whoever retaliates in equivalence to the injury they have received, and then are wronged “again”, Allah will certainly help them. Surely Allah is Ever-Pardoning, All-Forgiving’, Ali’lam Alaskari, 09/10/2023.

⁸¹ Ezzeddine al-Qassam Brigades video, ‘A number of Zionist prisoners held by al-Qassam send a message to Netanyahu and the Zionist government’, Ali’lam Alaskari, 30/10/2023.

⁸² Ezzeddine al-Qassam Brigades statement, ‘Why have we been abandoned here?’, Ali’lam Alaskari, 18/12/2023.

⁸³ Ezzeddine al-Qassam Brigades statement, ‘In a coffin or alive, your choice!’, Ali’lam Alaskari, 16/12/2023.

⁸⁴ Military wing of the Islamic Jihad Movement in Palestine.

⁸⁵ Abdul Malik Badr Al-Din Al-Houthi video, ‘Speech of Commander Abdul Malik Badr Al-Din Al-Houthi on the latest developments in the Palestinian arena 10/10/2023’, Military Media Yemen, 10/10/2023.

⁸⁶ Almasirah.net.ye, ‘Statement issued by the Yemeni armed forces’, 08/11/2023,.

⁸⁷ Ansar Allah video, ‘Israeli ships legitimate target for the Yemeni Armed Forces – Flash’, Military Media Yemen, 19/11/2023.

⁸⁸ Ansar Allah video, ‘Statement by the Yemeni Armed Forces on the seizure of an Israeli ship’, Military Media Yemen, 19/11/2023.

More assaults followed against civilian vessels, even using naval missiles and drones on the grounds that the ships rejected warning messages forwarded by Ansar Allah⁸⁹. In several video statements, the group assured the Yemeni armed forces of its ongoing military support against the Israeli enemy ‘until the aggression against the Gaza Strip stops and the heinous crimes that continue until this moment against our Palestinian brothers in Gaza and the West Bank stop’.

Other allies loyal to Hamas included the al-Quds Brigades group, the military branch of the Islamic Jihad Movement in Palestine (PIJ), the Lebanese Hezbollah, and the Islamic Resistance in Iraq. The first two groups combined footage from the battlefield with communiqués from its leaders. In a video statement released on 9 November, Abu Hamza, the al-Quds Brigades’ military spokesperson, claimed the involvement of Saraya al-Quds in the initial 7 October terrorist attack. In the footage, Abu Hamza praised the deeds of the fighters in the ‘Al-Aqsa Flood Operation’, which ‘will be taught in military academies’ and announced the release of two Israeli hostages.

THE JIHADIST FRONT REACTION IS UNITED WITH JUST ONE MAJOR DEFECTION

All branches within the al-Qaeda network praised the terrorist operation and unity of intents in crafting the narrative. From al-Qaeda in the Subcontinent (AQs)⁹⁰ to the al-Shabaab al-Mujahidin Movement⁹¹ in East Africa, all branches of the organisation glorified the terrorist attack and called upon the entire Muslim community to support Hamas and the Palestinian cause. In its statement⁹², the AQ ‘core’ threatened ‘severe repercussions after the operation’ for the whole world after this ‘major change in the jihadist direction’. As with AQAP⁹³, the AQ ‘core’ incited Muslims residing in neighbouring countries, such as Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon and Syria, to join the battle in Palestine or to face the enemy at the borders.

Sticking to their recent best practice, AQIM and JNIM released a joint statement⁹⁴ suggesting that Hamas should refrain from receiving support from Shi’ite groups, and promising their engagement in the battle if the opportunity arose. After more than two years of silence, JNIM leader Iyyad agh-Ghali appeared in a video in support of the ‘Palestinian brothers’, promising to side with them until victory is achieved⁹⁵.

⁸⁹ Ansar Allah video, ‘Statement by the spokesperson of the armed forces about the targeting of two Israeli ships in the red Sea’, Military Media Yemen , 03/12/2023.

⁹⁰ Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent statement, ‘Remember the conquest of Khyber, O Jews... For the army of Muhammad returns to the battlefield!’, As-Sahab Media (The Subcontinent), 07/10/2023.

⁹¹ Al-Shabaab al-Mujahidin Movement statement, ‘Central Command Statement, Congratulations and Blessing for the Battle of al-Aqsa Flood’, al-Kataib Media Production Company, 11/10/2023.

⁹² Al-Qaeda ‘core’ statement, ‘Victory of God is close’, As-Sahab Media Production Company, 13/10/2023.

⁹³ Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, ‘Statement related to the blessed operation of Al-Aqsa Flood’, al-Malahim Media Production Company, 09/10/2023.

⁹⁴ Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb statement, ‘Jews are frightened because of the approaching of the promises’, al-Andalus Media Production Company, 13/10/2023.

⁹⁵ Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin video, ‘And Allah will surely support those who support Him’, Az-Zallaqa, 12/12/2023.

AQIM spoke through the voice of Abu Yasir al-Jazairi, narrator for the group in several videos and audios, who compared the Hamas terrorist act to the 9/11 attack in New York⁹⁶. In terms of psychological impact, historical importance, and strategy, he went on to say that the two events are similar because they both surprised the enemy and awakened Muslims to the ongoing situation in the world in relation to Islam. According to al-Jazairi, the Jewish people feel a deep-seated hatred of Muslims, particularly in the Palestinian territories, as is clearly perceivable from the events currently occurring in Gaza.

Israel seems to have dictated US foreign policy in the Muslim world for years, al-Jazairi continued, pushing first the Arab governments in the 'Gulf' towards normalisation of relations, and now applying the same policy in North Africa, notably in Morocco. He ends by urging Muslims in North Africa to take action against the Jewish people, and to support the Palestinians by any means possible, identifying the violent jihad targeting of enemy interests in North Africa and beyond as the top Muslim priorities.

Among AQ-supportive media outlets, a vehement reaction came from Jaysh al-Malahim al-Elektroni, usually concentrated on providing technical support to AQ sympathisers. The outlet released 'Appendix No. 2' to the magazine 'Wolves of Manhattan', titled 'How do I fight with my family in Palestine?'⁹⁷, suggesting different ways of fighting alongside the 'brothers' in Gaza. The authors propose to send money to the 'holy combatants', to arm 'any brother who wishes to do a martyrdom operation against the Jews and their Christian stewards anywhere in the world' or to directly take to the field and target the Jewish communities everywhere in the world. The magazine urged sympathisers to target Jewish families residing in their neighbourhoods by any means, such as by knife, explosive device, or using a car as a ram.

Quoting suggestions by Sayf al-Adl and Abu Umar al-Baghdadi⁹⁸, Jaysh al-Malahim portrayed support for Muslims in Gaza as an obligation⁹⁹, and called on 'mature Islamic currents' to form sleeper cells aimed at assassinating Gulf country rulers, and conducting operations against Jewish people and interests¹⁰⁰. In this context, the outlet claimed¹⁰¹ its involvement in a highly sophisticated cyber-attack qualified as the 'first of its kind', wherein a series of bomb threats were called into over 50 airports in Europe, as well as to schools and other various sensitive targets. The planned terrorist operation envisaged the use of advanced tools and software to seize law enforcement and emergency personnel data, and to carry out an 'electronic strike' that would see them gain access to the security systems and websites of seven major airlines and at least eight airports, in particular across France.

According to the claim, the group aimed at striking 'fear in the hearts of the Zionist-Crusader alliance' in response to the 'suffering and displacement in

⁹⁶ Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb video, 'Al-Aqsa flood is more powerful than the Jews', al-Andalus, 13/11/2023.

⁹⁷ Jaysh al-Malahim al-Elektroni publication, 'Wolves of Manhattan - Appendix No. 2 - How do I fight with my family in Palestine?', 19/10/2023.

⁹⁸ Leader of the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI).

⁹⁹ Jaysh al-Malahim al-Elektroni statement, 'Supporting vulnerable Muslims in Gaza is an obligation on every Muslim', 19/10/2023.

¹⁰⁰ Jaysh al-Malahim al-Elektroni, 'Statement calling on believers to kill Gulf countries' rulers and Jewish people', 26/10/2023.

¹⁰¹ Jaysh al-Malahim al-Elektroni, 'Statement on the suspension of work at dozens of airports and Jewish institutes in European countries', 22/10/2023.

Gaza'. The outlet published the results of the cyber-attack in an infographic¹⁰², claiming, among others, the evacuation of 34 airports in France and the cancellation of more than 130 flights, causing 'tens of millions of dollars in losses'.

A lukewarm reaction to the Hamas attack came from the self-proclaimed IS. The takfiri¹⁰³ method, adopted to the extreme, leads the terrorist network to include among its wide range of enemies those Muslims and jihadist factions not siding with it. IS did not glorify the Hamas attack. The terrorist network concentrated its narrative on an alleged ongoing religious clash carried out against Islam by the Jewish people and supported by Western countries, trying to turn away Muslims from their religion.

The plot against Islam, according to the authors, finds application through the support of an accommodating mainstream media that is able to disorientate Muslim audiences and hide their anti-Muslim agenda. In the al-Naba' articles on the subject, IS envisages providing its support by targeting Jewish or Western objectives such as embassies. They incite Muslims to target synagogues or Jewish economic interests in the world, and suggest educating the new generations of Muslims to consider 'the battle against the Jews as purely religious and ideological, not patriotic or nationalist.'

IS-supportive media outlets produced propaganda along the same lines, and the terrorist attack against Israel was never praised as such. The Palestinian cause is touched on to a lesser extent, to remind the audience of the importance of fighting to free Jerusalem¹⁰⁴, and that the Prophet Muhammad 'has moved armies to defend Muslims against the infidels'¹⁰⁵. An article titled 'The Nation deserving Holocaust the most', published in the issue No. 31 of the magazine 'Voice of Khurasan' was particularly impactful¹⁰⁶. Although admitting the occurrence of genocide of the Jews during the Second World War, the authors explain how, in their opinion, the Jews cannot be considered as innocent victims, since they commit the same crimes against the Palestinian population. At the end of the article, two posters were used to incite the audience to 'kill the Jews wherever you find them', suggesting 'practical ways of confronting Jews'. The recommendations range from boycotting the Jewish economy, to cyber-attacks against Jewish web pages, and even to 'exterminating the Jews' in universities, colleges, schools, and at popular tourist sites and music events.

¹⁰² Jaysh al-Malahim al-Elektroni statement, 'Results of the Spiderweb Raid', 24/10/2023.

¹⁰³ Pronouncement that someone is an unbeliever (kafir) and no longer Muslim.

¹⁰⁴ al-Adiyat Media Production Company EST statement, 'We will come, God willing', 03/11/2023.

¹⁰⁵ At-Taqwa media production statement, 'Prophet Muhammad's support for Muslims', – 03/11/2023.

¹⁰⁶ al-Azaim Foundation for Media Production publication, 'Voice of Khurasan', issue No.31, 21/12/2023.

SUPPORTIVE BEYOND EXPECTATIONS

The two main jihadist terrorist networks rely on a plethora of supportive outlets serving to promote their products and narratives. However, while the AQ network's official propaganda may appear to be self-reliant, the apparatus of IS needs to lean on supportive media to boost the production of propaganda and republish old items.

The al-Nusra Foundation, among AQ-supportive media, seems to be the most effective, as it consistently publishes material both belonging to other outlets and from its own production. On all its channels, present on multiple platforms, al-Nusra distributes all the claims produced by the Shahada agency and al-Zallaqa Media, relating to al-Shabaab and JNIM attacks respectively. Moreover, al-Nusra boosts the official propaganda with the release of self-produced items in support of the narratives. In January, the media outlet underlined the allegiance pledged to JNIM by the Azawagh tribes in Mali, highlighting the key role played by links with locals in the achievement of objectives¹⁰⁷.

More technical support is provided by Jaysh al-Malahim al-Elektroni, a media outlet stealing the limelight for the publication of the magazine 'Wolves of Manhattan', mainly dedicated to supporting the activity of so-called 'lone actors'. The technical advice in 2023 ranged from the use of VPN services to downloading messaging applications¹⁰⁸, comparing existing apps, tips on encryption and how to make messaging applications secure. Translation by the Islamic Translation Center makes more dated and recent propaganda available to European and Asian users. It is not rare to find recruitment offers on the website of the outlet. The administrators need translations of material 'produced by scholars and mujahidin', providing instructions on safety matters and on technical procedures to reach the 'virtual office'¹⁰⁹.

Among the multitude of IS-supportive outlets, many are republishing old official material or translating new material. Al-Azaim seems to be one of the most active and effective, if only for the publication of the magazine 'Voice of Khurasan'. The magazine condemns Arab country rulers and Muslim scholars for 'playing a pivotal role in enabling the contamination of the Umma with the kuffar (infidels)'¹¹⁰. Likewise, the magazine blames some jihadist leaders who seemingly guide the activities of their groups towards political horizons to the detriment of the initial objectives¹¹¹. Among the favourite targets in the narrative are the Taliban, blamed by the authors for 'befriending' infidels such as Russia and China, or for being the 'cheap-rated replacement' of the former

¹⁰⁷ An-Nusra Media Foundation statement, 'The allegiance of the Azawagh tribes to the mujahidin of al-Qaeda', 25/01/2023.

¹⁰⁸ Jaysh al-Malahim al-Elektroni publications: 'Best VPN Services for 2023', 19/11/2023; and 'Best Secure Messaging App', 20/11/2023.

¹⁰⁹ Islamic Translation Center statements, 'War against the enemy', 02/04/2023; and 'Statement aiming at recruiting 'brothers and sisters' for the translation of items generated by scholars and mujahidin', 19/02/2023.

¹¹⁰ al-Azaim Foundation for Media Production publication, 'Voice of Khurasan issue no. 21 – Allah's Hudood and Taliban's Drama' - 04/02/2023.

¹¹¹ al-Azaim Foundation for Media Production publication, 'Voice of Khurasan, issue no. 22 – Reality of the Wild West United Kingdom of kufr', 21/02/2023.

Afghan government chosen by the US¹¹². Moreover, the Qimam Electronic Foundation outlet produced a three-page article on artificial intelligence, focusing on the importance of technology and its history, as well as detailing its applications and leverage in the automation field¹¹³.

Official IS propaganda reaches a broader audience through the creation of an umbrella group called Fursan al-Tarjuma, to which several supportive outlets have aligned themselves. The group is committed to translating propaganda relating to IS. In the statement¹¹⁴ announcing the new lineup, it mentions, for instance, that al-Azaim media covers Pashtu, Uzbek, Tajik and Farsi languages. The umbrella group covers 18 languages in total, among them Somali, Albanian, Kurdish, but also English, French and Spanish, for Europe. Much the same as official IS propaganda, the translated material is retrievable from websites used as repositories, and from some traditional online service providers. Unlike IS official propaganda however, the flow generated by the supportive outlets is still significant on decentralised platforms.

¹¹² See for instance: al-Azaim Foundation for Media Production publication, 'Voice of Khurasan' magazine, issues No. 20 and 21, 17/01/2023 and 04/02/2023.

¹¹³ Qimam Electronic Foundation statement, 'What is artificial intelligence? Its definition, history and applications', 02/05/2023.

¹¹⁴ Fursan al-Tarjuma statement, 'Announcement by the groups dedicated to the translation of media from the Khilafah', 04/03/2023.

CROSS-CUTTING EVENTS TRIGGERING REACTION IN JIHADIST PROPAGANDA

BURNING THE QUR'AN

During 2023, Qur'an burning events took place in Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands, shaking the local and international Muslim communities and sparking a backlash inside the jihadist terrorist online milieu. One of the first events occurred on 21 January, when the leader of the far-right Danish political party held a meeting and burned a copy of the Qur'an outside the Turkish embassy in Stockholm, Sweden. The event triggered a series of reactions from the jihadist community, especially from pro-Islamic State media outlets, which strongly condemned the symbolic act.

Interestingly, the official propaganda apparatuses of AQ and IS did not react vehemently to the symbolic gesture. However, in the days immediately following the event, a general reaction by pro-IS media outlets was observed. This took the form of numerous statements being made within the online campaign 'Religious war, not individual conduct'¹¹⁵, strongly condemning the action in a twofold-focused narrative. Firstly, the major pro-IS media outlets threatened the Danish political leader, Sweden and the 'infidels' in general for the lack of respect shown toward God and Islam. Secondly, they addressed all Muslims, inciting them to take action, rebel against unacceptable abuses, and avenge them¹¹⁶.

Further Qur'an burning events occurred in Stockholm in June and in Copenhagen in July¹¹⁷, while in August, a Qur'an was torn up in the Netherlands in front of the Turkish Embassy in the city of The Hague. The reaction by the jihadist terrorist realm was especially swift. In June, the pro-AQ 'Sandar' released a statement¹¹⁸ inciting all Muslims to react to the desecration of the 'Holy Book' and attributing part of the responsibility to the lack of response to previous abuses against the Muslim community.

The official reaction by IS was published in July, in the editorial of the al-Naba' magazine, issue No. 398, and maintained the same tone. The authors affirmed that words of condemnation used by the Muslim community were not enough and that the 'crusaders' would continue committing such desecrating acts if there was no firm reply by Muslims, possibly in the field. The authors suggested a 'religious boycott' of people and countries who insult Islam, and a return to the Muslim faith through jihad, because, 'anyone who does not apply the Qur'an will not be supported (by God).'

¹¹⁵ EU Internet Referral Unit, 'Religious war, not individual conduct', Dossier opened on the 'Check the Web portal'.

¹¹⁶ See for instance: al-Battar statement, 'Aren't you ashamed Oh Muslim?', 25/01/2023; and Sarh al-Khilafa video, 'Avenge your religion, O Muslim in Europe', 03/02/2023.

¹¹⁷ On 28/06/2023, an Iraqi refugee burned a copy of the Qur'an outside the Stockholm central mosque; on 21/07/2023, a Danish ultranationalist group burned a copy of the Qur'an near the Iraqi embassy in Copenhagen.

¹¹⁸ Sandar statement, 'O people of the Quran, embellish the Quran with your actions!', 30/06/2023.

The reaction of the AQ 'core' took longer, but was more articulate and violent in its intent. The group released a three-page statement in Arabic¹¹⁹, calling on all Muslims to act against the Qur'an desecration and presenting their proposed reaction as an obligation. In particular, the authors called for the Muslim youth to give a reply commensurate to the offence, suggesting killing the individuals who committed the offence and those who helped them. Moreover, the statement incited Muslims to bomb and burn Swedish and Danish embassies around the world, torture their diplomats, and launch a series of attacks in a campaign called 'To achieve victory for the Qur'an'. Furthermore, AQ suggested that the Muslim youth either joins the mujahidin on the battlefield or to form small cells, composed of three individuals only, in order to punish 'whoever dares to attack the Qur'an'. Finally, the group added its voice to those condemning the passivity of Muslim countries in reacting against the desecration of the Qur'an.

In September 2023, after a gap of 12 years, AQAP published a new issue¹²⁰ (No. 17) of Sada al-Malahim¹²¹. The magazine focused on the burning of the Qur'an in Sweden in an extensive article, explaining that this act of desecration placed Sweden side-by-side with France and Denmark in the fight against Islam. The authors blamed Sweden for removing Muslim children from their families so that they would not grow up with religious traditions, and suggested that Sweden should allow Muslim families educate their children according to the principles of Islam. The article announced that 'Sweden and its sisters (France and Denmark) will only get the message when their embassy is blown up or a ministry explodes in Paris'.

EARTHQUAKE IN TÜRKIYE AND SYRIA

Another emotionally-charged event leading to a show of grief and support from across the jihadist spectrum was the earthquake which struck Türkiye and Syria in February 2023. Al-Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State networks, along with their supportive media outlets, released statements and articles in their publications unanimously supporting the Muslim community affected by the event and counting thousands of victims. The first official comment came from al-Naba'¹²², stating that earthquakes are not natural disasters, but 'are great acts of God'; with the aim of warning people to return to God before the 'biggest earthquake' (judgment day).

The Al-Qaeda network firstly reacted through its branch in the Arabian Peninsula, releasing a communique¹²³ subsequently echoed by the two branches in North Africa (AQIM) and the Sahel (JNIM) in a joint statement¹²⁴. In

¹¹⁹ Al-Qaeda 'core', 'Statement in relation to the aggressions on the Quran and the necessity of fighting the aggressors', As-Sahab Media Production Company, 13/08/2023.

¹²⁰ Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula publication, 'Sada al-Malahim' (Echo of the Battles), al-Malahim Media Production Company, 15/09/2023.

¹²¹ A magazine published in Arabic, addressed to a local population, containing material glorifying the actions of the mujahidin, but also articles related to theological topics, an article dedicated to women and sometimes poetry.

¹²² Islamic State publication, al-Naba' magazine issue No. 377, Diwan al 'I'lam al-Markazi, 09/02/2023.

¹²³ Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, 'Statement of condolences to our families in Sham and Turkiye', al-Malahim Media Production Company, 12/02/2023.

¹²⁴ AQIM and JNIM joint statement, 'Condolences and a reminder: Indeed your Lord is admonishing you, so heed him', al-Andalus Media Production Company and al-Zallaqa Media Production Company, 19/02/2023, .

their narratives, the groups referred to the Islamic State's article in al-Naba' magazine, warning Muslims to remain on or return to the right path, interpreting the earthquake as a sort of admonishment from God. In addition, in its statement¹²⁵, the AQ 'core' condemned the lack of opportunity for Muslims in Syria to benefit from local and international aid, and being forced 'to dig with their own hands' to try to rescue their beloved ones. The authors suggested that the Muslim community should take action in order to stop Arab rulers in the Gulf spending money on fighting Islam and spreading 'immorality' in their countries, and exhorted Muslims to support their brothers and sisters in Syria by any means.

Claiming to administer the Greater Idlib area in Syria, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) was directly impacted by the disaster and reacted by publishing a series of statements and short videos online related to the event. The documents had a double aim: to denounce the delayed response in sending aid by international institutions to the local population¹²⁶, and to show the situation live on the ground. Short videos showed entire families rescued after a prolonged stay in the rubble and children wandering in search of their parents¹²⁷. HTS released an infographic summarising the rescue activities taking place in the aftermath of the calamitous event.

¹²⁵ Al-Qaeda 'core' statement, 'Condolences, prayers and support to our Muslim brothers in Türkiye and Sham', As-Sahab Media Production Company, 20/02/2023.

¹²⁶ See for instance: Hay'at tahrir al-Sham poster, 'The failure to send aid to Syrians in the northwest must be corrected', Alaskari Media, 13/02/2023.

¹²⁷ Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham videos, 'The story of Mustafa and his children under the rubble', 13/02/2023; and 'I will tell God about your inaction', 15/02/2023, Alaskari Media.

CONCLUSIONS

The death of al-Zawahiri in July 2022 inaugurated a third phase in the history of the AQ terrorist network, at least with regard to the online propaganda production. If under Bin Laden's leadership the power was wielded hierarchically, under al-Zawahiri the network began a process of a decentralisation and delegation of tasks, especially in favour of the Yemeni branch of the organisation. It is unclear whether the change was the outcome of a predetermined strategy or dictated by external factors, but the vacuum of power left by al-Zawahiri seems to have accelerated it and, at the time of writing, appears to have completed the process of decentralisation, especially implemented to enhance ideological indoctrination.

In the absence of an ideological leading figure of al-Zawahiri's standing, AQAP seems to have been entrusted with the ideological indoctrination of the global Muslim audience. Khaled Batarfi and other senior officials upheld the cornerstones of AQ's brand, namely the unity of intent and closeness to population. The input from the AQ 'core' input in 2023 was limited to particular topical incidents, and the most relevant news was the entrance of Sayf al-Adl to the field with the publication 'This is Gaza'. The online presence of the other AQ branches remains stable in comparison with 2022, with al-Shabaab and JNIM being the only exceptions.

JNIM appeared to be more effective at reflecting on the internet the activities carried out in the field, leaving the discussion on ideological topics to joint statements with AQIM. Al-Shabaab, through its links with the Shahada agency, greatly increased its presence online. It released more detailed claims in the aftermath of attacks, often followed by comprehensive articles describing the event. The agency focused extensively on the geopolitical situation in Somalia and in bordering countries, addressing Somali neighbouring populations, probably with the aim of changing the political agenda of those governments.

An important role is played by the supportive outlets in the dissemination and re-distribution of propaganda and narratives. Al-Nusra Front and Jaysh al-Malahim al-Elektroni stand out from the rest, with the former providing a boost to the official propaganda and the latter providing products that are widely usable by the targeted audience. For instance, the magazine 'Wolves of Manhattan' targets aspiring 'lone actors', dealing with topics ranging from inciting random attacks globally against Jewish and Christian communities to providing advice on online security matters.

The weekly al-Naba' magazine and one audio message in August, featuring IS spokesperson Abu Hudhaifa al-Ansari, represented the main source of official propaganda releases of the IS terrorist network in 2023, and were the only means used by the top leadership to harangue the audience. The main narrative was that IS is still alive despite Western governments' proclaiming that the organisation has been annihilated. The emphasis placed by mainstream media on official IS propaganda is said to confirm its main narrative that the network is indeed still alive. Furthermore, it is claimed that this emphasis by the mainstream media corroborates the extraordinary activity accomplished by IS's propaganda apparatus over time. According to IS

narratives, Africa is a land of conquest and the successes on the ground, together with military campaigns against Christians, are promptly reported in statements and diligently amplified on al-Naba'.

In terms of official IS propaganda, a decrease has been observed in the volume of propaganda being produced, especially related to claims reporting activity on the ground. This is a natural consequence of the major decline in the number of attacks. Supportive media outlets, such as al-Azaim, Sarh al-Khilafa and the longstanding al-Battar, played such a fundamental role in promoting the dissemination of the message that it seems legitimate to ask whether it has overtaken official propaganda in the work of recruiting and radicalising online.

With a few exceptions, such as the Qur'an burning events and the earthquake in Syria and Türkiye, the IS terrorist network remains isolated in the jihadist realm because of its takfiri ideology. The propaganda generated in the aftermath of the 7 October terrorist attack against Israel seems to be the perfect case in point. In fact, while praised and emphasised by all the jihadist groups, the importance of the Palestinian cause is barely mentioned in al-Naba', and its authors refer to the conflict as an ongoing war against Islam waged by Israel and Western governments.

Presented as a 'military operation', the meticulously orchestrated terrorist action perpetrated by Hamas in October inevitably sparked a series of changes in the production of jihadist propaganda online. The volume of propaganda released by Hamas and its allies increased, initially aimed at justifying the attack, and then blaming Israel for its 'disproportionate' military response. A heterogeneous alliance composed of Sunni and Shi'a jihadist terrorist groups was formed, bringing together in the field the Islamic Jihad Movement in Palestine, the Houthis in Yemen, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the Islamic Resistance in Iraq. The Ansar Allah group in particular turned out to be of strategic relevance in the conflict, as a result of its terrorist activities in the Red Sea.

If the reaction to the 7 October attack of the self-proclaimed Islamic State has been mild, the rest of the jihadist realm has praised it. The AQ network and its supporting outlets unanimously glorified the 'Al-Aqsa Flood Operation' and firmly condemned the reaction by Israel. A protracted conflict will maintain the high volume of propaganda production and will reinforce the narratives of the dominant networks, especially those of AQ.

In this context, the online presence of the major jihadist groups appears to have taken a twofold direction. Isolated from the rest of the jihadist realm, IS seems to have undertaken a new strategy, entrusting the diffusion of its official propaganda to dedicated websites while abandoning (or at least significantly decreasing) its presence in other digital environments. A monolithic group is represented by AQ and its branches, aligned with the jihadist actors involved in the Palestinian conflict, as well as consistent both in a traditional and in a decentralised online environment.

An active role in AQ's 'core' leadership played by Sayf al-Adl and a different orientation undertaken by Saad bin Atef al-Awlaki, the AQAP's new leader in Yemen, might envisage significant future changes.