

The background of the entire page is a composite image. It features a close-up of a person's face, looking slightly to the right, with their hands positioned as if typing on a keyboard. The image is overlaid with a digital aesthetic, including a grid of binary code (0s and 1s) and glowing blue lines that suggest a network or data flow. The overall color palette is dominated by warm tones (peach, orange) and cool tones (blue, teal).

# ONLINE JIHADIST PROPAGANDA

2019 in review

## Contents

1.	Key findings .....	3
2.	Introduction .....	5
3.	Islamic State (IS): striving for post-state relevance .....	6
3.1.	Loss of territory in Syria leads to demonstration of force in peripheries .....	6
3.2.	IS falls back on guerrilla tactics.....	9
3.3.	IS synchronises its media campaigns to demonstrate an <i>esprit de corps</i> .....	11
3.4.	IS supporters emphasize the role of women and children .....	14
3.5.	IS struggles to keep its footing online .....	15
4.	Al-Qaeda (AQ): a network of local militancy and focused incrementalism.....	18
4.1.	Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS).....	20
4.2.	Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahideen (al-Shabab).....	22
4.3.	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) .....	23
5.	Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) extends its authority over Idlib.....	27
6.	Running themes across jihadi groups .....	31
7.	Conclusion .....	34

## 1. Key findings

### Islamic State (IS)

- IS's loss of the town of Baghuz in March 2019 marked the end of the terrorist group's self-proclaimed caliphate over populated territory.
- Loss of territory has compelled IS to return to its guerrilla beginnings. The group has highlighted its aim of weakening the enemy through a "war of attrition".
- The start of 2019 saw a dip in the release of official IS propaganda. This was accompanied by a steady dissemination of Supporter Generated Content (SGC) and recycled material. Short Amaq claims and photo reports, along with the weekly newspaper al-Naba', made up the bulk of IS official publications.
- IS propaganda has focused on highlighting attacks in its "provinces", from West Africa to the Philippines. The implication is that these provinces provide spaces from which IS can prepare for a resurgence.
- IS leveraged its regional outposts in a number of coordinated media campaigns. The most noteworthy was a series of fifteen videos released between June and September, which showcased fighters renewing their allegiance to Abubakr al-Baghdadi. A second media campaign was coordinated in the aftermath of the declaration of Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi as new "caliph" in October and included a wave of endorsements from various IS provinces.<sup>1</sup>
- The takedown action coordinated by EU Member States and Europol on 21-22 November resulted in an extensive eradication of pro-IS accounts, channels and groups from Telegram.
- Official as well as supportive IS media outlets and groups are still struggling to rebuild their networks online, with efforts continuing across several platforms.

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<sup>1</sup> In March 2020, the US government identified the new IS leader as Muhammad Sa'id Abdal-Rahman al-Mawla (also known as Hajji Abdallah, 'Abdul Amir Muhammad Sa'id Salbi, and Abu-'Umar al-Turkmani). See: <https://www.state.gov/terrorist-designation-of-isis-leader-amir-muhammad-said-abdal-rahman-al-mawla/>

### **Al-Qaeda (AQ)**

- Al-Qaeda has succeeded in strengthening its network over the years via the implementation of a “flexible” administration, i.e. setting the overarching aims but delegating responsibility regarding tactics to its regional branches.
- Most of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb’s (AQIM) rhetoric targeted France. Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (‘Group to support Islam and Muslims’) – AQ’s branch in West Africa – intensified its military activities against local and international targets (including EU, MINUSMA, and G5 Sahel bases).

### **Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)**

- Following its takeover of Idlib and parts of the neighbouring provinces of Aleppo and Hama, HTS imposed its administration over all aspects of life in the areas under its control.
- Although HTS continues to pursue a jihadist agenda, its focus is local.
- HTS has put significant effort in strengthening its communication strategy by multiplying the production of statements, videos, and opinion articles. In disseminating its propaganda, HTS relies on ostensibly independent institutions, both online and offline (e.g. the Salvation Government, and the Iba network).

## 2. Introduction

This paper is the third edition of the Annual Review of online jihadist propaganda produced by the European Union's Internet Referral Unit (EU IRU) at Europol.

The Review covers the period from 1 January to 31 December 2019 and outlines the major trends and developments in the propaganda of the most prominent Sunni jihadist organisations – the Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda (AQ) – as well as their affiliates and offshoots. In particular, the review aims to analyse how these organisations have responded to shifting political realities, and attempted to overcome setbacks. It further identifies the dominant themes exploited by the groups during this period.

In order to elaborate on changes in the groups' narratives and online communication patterns, the research examines primary sources, including the groups' operational claims, publications, and videos. The above-mentioned material was collected by the EU IRU over 2019. To build a broader picture, the research also took into account jihadist supporter discussions on Telegram and other platforms. While the review focuses on 2019, it nevertheless puts these trends into context, with reference to further developments that took place in early 2020, prior to the Review's publication.

This paper has been divided into four chapters. The first discusses the current state and digital capabilities of IS; the second looks at the disparate regional movements that have sworn allegiance to AQ; the third gives a brief overview of one particularly relevant AQ offshoot (Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham) and analyses its propaganda over the year; while the fourth looks into the major political events that prompted similar reactions across the Sunni-jihadi spectrum. As will be noted, more space has been granted to IS communications given the organisation's continuous investment of resources towards its "media jihad"; its particular effort towards diversifying its message; its elaborate dissemination strategy; and the layers of support it can rely on online (from both official media outlets and individual supporters).

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

### 3. Islamic State (IS): striving for post-state relevance

#### 3.1. Loss of territory in Syria leads to demonstration of force in peripheries

At its peak in 2015, the so-called Islamic State (IS) administered large expanses of territory across Iraq and Syria, and had established and/or co-opted extensive systems of governance. In 2017, national armies and their international allies in Syria and Iraq inflicted increasing defeats on IS and ultimately forced it back on the eastern Syrian border town of Baghuz.

IS militants remained besieged there for months until the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) – a coalition of armed Kurdish groups allied with the United States (US) – launched a final assault on Baghuz in early March 2019. That same month, the SDF announced it had retaken the town and that thousands of IS militants had capitulated.

While the fall of Baghuz epitomised the end of IS' self-proclaimed 'caliphate', the terrorist organisation continues to constitute a major security threat, both in the Middle East and elsewhere. IS maintains underground cells in Iraq and Syria, its branches continue to operate in various parts of the world, and its sympathisers are eager to conduct attacks worldwide. One of IS's deadliest international operations (a series of suicide attacks on churches and hotels across Sri Lanka) occurred on 21 April 2019, two months after US President Donald Trump had declared that the defeat of the 'caliphate' meant that IS "now lacks a significant territorial base from which to launch terrorist attacks against other countries, recruit foreign fighters, and spread havoc across the region"<sup>2</sup>.

Indeed, while IS has lost its territorial "caliphate" in Iraq and Syria, it has survived in a modified, reduced form. IS fighters have set up camp along the Iraqi-Syrian border and in the eastern Syrian province of Deir al-Zour. Its surviving foot soldiers carry out simple but frequent small-scale attacks against government forces (including ambushes and

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<sup>2</sup> 'Remarks by President Trump to the Ministers of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS', National Security & Defense, 06/02/2019. See <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-ministers-global-coalition-defeat-isis/>

assassinations of SDF collaborators). Deir al-Zour's media wing (al-Khayr province) repeatedly stresses that "the organisation's cells are spread across the region which is supposedly under SDF control and are capable of creating a security chaos in the area".<sup>3</sup>

In addition to focusing on attacks against security forces, IS media publicises the assassination of *mukhtars* (village headmen). The purpose of these assassinations is twofold: 1. to thwart the state's attempts at collecting local information (a *mukhtar's* role includes providing this information to government forces); and 2. to deter civilians from cooperating with government forces.<sup>4</sup>

In his first video appearance since 2014, on 29 April 2019, then IS leader Abubakr al-Baghdadi insisted that his group had not been defeated, that it was in fact expanding and that it remained a potent actor with the ability and will to carry out attacks worldwide. He called for revenge, adding that 290 operations had already been perpetrated by IS fighters in eight countries in retaliation for the group's losses in Syria; in particular, he praised the perpetrators of the Easter Sunday attacks in Sri Lanka, which he claimed were a reprisal for the loss of Baghuz.<sup>5</sup>

In a bid to portray itself as an organisation with a global reach, IS propaganda focused on highlighting attacks outside Syria and Iraq. Essentially, IS has attempted to demonstrate that – despite loss of territory and later despite the death of its 'caliph' – its global provinces have remained loyal. The provinces' continued loyalty to IS enabled the group to preserve a certain level of credibility, and has allowed it to project an image of a still-functioning organisation.

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<sup>3</sup> "Epic war of attrition", Islamic State, IS al-Khayr province, 12/08/2019.

<sup>4</sup> "Cleaving the heads 2", Islamic State, Tigris province, 11/06/2019 (CTW-C-7-6694). The focus on *mukhtars* continued into 2020; see for example: "Amaq claims responsibility for attack against a *mukhtar* (village headman) in al-Raqqa", Islamic State, Amaq News Agency, 10/02/2020.

<sup>5</sup> "In the hospitality of the Emir of the believers", Islamic State (IS), al-Furqan Media, 29/04/2019.

IS is attempting to portray itself as stretching from West Africa<sup>6</sup> to the Philippines. The organisation's branches in these two areas as well as in Libya, Egypt ("Sinai") and Afghanistan ("Khorasan") have been the most active provinces outside of Syria and Iraq.

Propaganda has demonstrated the importance of the provinces for the IS project. This was made obvious in the April video appearance of al-Baghdadi<sup>7</sup> which closes on the IS leader reviewing documents labelled "Monthly Activity Report" concerning various provinces, including Sinai, West Africa, Libya, Yemen, Somalia, and, for the first time, Turkey and Central Africa. Al-Baghdadi also pointed to new affiliates in Burkina Faso, Mali and Sri Lanka, and took the opportunity to recognise the oath of allegiance given by the Islamic State in the Great Sahara (ISGS) in May 2015.<sup>8</sup>

Throughout 2019, IS declared new provinces and reorganised existing ones. In March, the organisation announced the establishment of the Libya province, which subsumed the three previously independent provinces of Barqa, Fezzan and Tripoli. In April, IS declared the establishment of the Central Africa province, and that same month claimed a first-time attack in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC); two months later, the group claimed a first time presence in Mozambique.<sup>9</sup> The terrorist group has since claimed responsibility for numerous attacks in the DRC. In May, IS announced that it had established provinces in India and Pakistan. The announcement entailed a restructuring of its "Khorasan" province, which had previously covered operations in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Jammu and Kashmir, and parts of Iran. IS is also attempting to assert its presence in Southeast Asia. With this in mind, IS supporters have focused on translating official IS propaganda into East Asian languages (namely Tagalog and

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<sup>6</sup> In March 2019, rumours spread that the head of IS West Africa province Abu Mus'ab al-Barnawi had been replaced. While no comment or confirmation has come from IS central, it is worth noting that it took IS a few months in 2016 to confirm the previous change of leadership from Shekau to al-Barnawi.

<sup>7</sup> "In the hospitality of the Emir of the believers", Islamic State (IS), al-Furqan Media, 29/04/2019.

<sup>8</sup> Claim of responsibility for the kidnapping of a Romanian citizen in Burkina Faso and confirmation of allegiance to Abubakr al-Baghdadi, Al-Murabitun, 18/05/2015.

<sup>9</sup> IS West Africa statement about armed clashes in Mozambique as part of the "war of attrition", Islamic State (IS), 04/06/2019.

Indonesian). In January 2019, the group claimed a bombing at a church in Jolo, Philippines,<sup>10</sup> which killed over 20 people.

While it remains to be seen how much actual activity will follow for some of these branches, the aim of IS propaganda is to highlight that its array of provinces provide spaces from which it can metastasize and prepare for a resurgence. In particular, the Sri Lanka attacks have been IS's most conclusive assertion of post-caliphate relevance.

IS also continued to call for *hijra* (migration to sharia-governed territory), although less perceptibly. While the theme of *hijra* no longer takes pride of place in IS propaganda, at least two official IS videos called for religious migration in 2019. One call was made in January by an alleged Canadian 'martyr' (Dr. Yusuf al-Majirtini) in the IS Somalia province video "Men who have believed". Al-Majirtini was introduced as a Canadian doctor who travelled to Somalia to put his expertise at the service of the jihadist organisation.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, an IS Yemen province video titled "You adhere heavily to earth" encouraged Muslims to travel to conflict zones to take part in jihad. While the video stressed the religious duty of living in Islamic lands among fellow Muslims, it added that it is the duty of anyone unable to travel to carry out attacks in their country of residence.<sup>12</sup>

### 3.2. IS falls back on guerrilla tactics

Loss of territory has compelled IS to return to its guerrilla beginnings. The group is eschewing direct confrontation and aiming to incrementally weaken the enemy through a "war of attrition". In his April video appearance, al-Baghdadi framed the struggle as protracted: "The war of Islam and its followers against the crusaders and their followers is a long one. [...] Our battle today is a war of attrition to harm the enemy, and they should

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<sup>10</sup> Amaq claim for double attack against a Christian church in Philippines, Islamic State (IS), Amaq News Agency, 27/01/2019.

<sup>11</sup> "Men who have believed (what God promised)", Islamic State, IS Somalia province, 23/01/2019.

<sup>12</sup> "You adhere heavily to the earth", Islamic State, IS al-Bayda' province, 01/04/2019.

know that jihad will continue until doomsday”.<sup>13</sup> He reminded IS fighters that their status as “martyrs” granted them victory (in the hereafter) even if militarily defeated. As he put it: “God ordered us to wage jihad, but he did not order us to achieve victory” – a narrative that was soon echoed in Supporter Generated Content (SGC). Referring to IS’ short takeover of the city of Fuqaha in Libya, al-Baghdadi declared “a war of attrition” (ordained by God) and urged supporters to focus on weakening their enemies’ “human, military, economic, and logistical” capabilities.<sup>14</sup>

That same month, IS’ weekly newspaper *al-Naba’* published a four-part series titled “The temporary takeover of towns as a modus operandi for the mujahidin”. The series provided instructions on guerrilla tactics and warned against direct confrontation with the enemy.<sup>15</sup> The aims of hit-and-run attacks, according to the article, included taking hostages and executing them, and collecting spoils (namely weapons, money, food, medicine, and fuel). Similarly, an earlier article titled “The path of the mujahidin towards victory and territorial consolidation” in *al-Naba’* Issue 178 urged IS branches to wage a war of attrition worldwide, reminding them that: “During times of weakness [...], the mujahidin do not [...] wait to form large armies [...] but rather they fight [...] guerrilla wars [...] to weaken the enemy”. The author added, the “mujahidin in Iraq did not seize control over cities or consolidate their presence there overnight [...]. Instead they persisted in an exhausting war of attrition for many years [...]”, and further vowed that “the caliphate’s troops, currently spread across various countries will be able, [...], to replicate the example of the conquest of Mosul [...]. If the mujahidin in Iraq needed close to seven years to establish territorial consolidation, today the goal is closer, and we will restore the abode of Islam [...] in the East and the West”.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> “In the hospitality of the Emir of the believers”, Islamic State (IS), al-Furqan Media, 29/04/2019.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Al-Naba’ Issues 179 to 182, Islamic State, IS Diwan al-I’lam al-Markazi.

<sup>16</sup> Al-Naba’ issue 178, Islamic State, IS Diwan al-I’lam al-Markazi, 18/04/2019.

*Amaq News* announced the start of al-Baghdadi’s “war of attrition” at the end of the Muslim month of Ramadan.<sup>17</sup> The campaign received significant attention from the umbrella of supportive IS media outlets, with the ninth issue of the *Youth of the Caliphate* magazine urging sympathisers to set fields ablaze in order to destroy enemy crops.<sup>18</sup> A few months later, an IS al-Khayr province video titled “Epic war of attrition” called on supporters to increase attacks against the SDF and to declare a “war of attrition” in Syria.<sup>19</sup> IS is also using this tactic in regions in which it wishes to expand (including West and Central Africa). The group’s media seizes on the opportunity to highlight these attacks, both to boost supporter morale and to appear to be expanding geographically.

### 3.3. IS synchronises its media campaigns to demonstrate an *esprit de corps*

IS was able to leverage its regional outposts in a number of major media campaigns that distracted from its struggles in Syria and Iraq but more importantly portrayed it as still expanding to new territories. One of these campaigns (in August 2019) related to the “war of attrition” theme mentioned above. Another was publicised in late 2019 and was titled “War of vengeance for the killing of the two sheikhs” (in reference to the former leader and spokesperson of the organisation who were killed in anti-IS coalition airstrikes in October 2019). However, the most noteworthy campaign was a series of fifteen videos released between June and September 2019, the title of which was gleaned from Quranic verse [11:49]: “And the best outcome is for the righteous”.

The series showcased fighters from West Africa, East Asia, Khorasan, Central Africa, Bangladesh, the Caucasus, Tunisia, Sinai, Libya, Somalia, Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and – for the first time – Turkey and Azerbaijan. The militants renewed their allegiance to Abubakr al-

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<sup>17</sup> “Amaq News Agency statement on the start of the war of attrition and an attack on the Syrian army”, Islamic State, A’maq News Agency, 01/06/2019.

<sup>18</sup> Youth of the Caliphate Issue 9, Al-Abd al-Faqir Foundation, 07/06/2019. An article in al-Naba' issue 183 titled "Roll up your sleeves and start the harvest" also claimed responsibility for the burning of Shia-owned crops in Iraq and Syria.

<sup>19</sup> “Epic war of attrition”, Islamic State, IS al-Khayr province, 12/08/2019.

Baghdadi, vowed to continue the fight and called on Muslims who had not pledged their allegiance to the IS leader, to do so.

The series fed into IS' main strategy this year, which was to argue that the organisation continues to expand on a global scale. However, the claim of an expanding organisation is somewhat marred by the fact that none of the groups' videos (other than Sinai) featured more than a dozen members. In addition to the original videos, multiple translations were made available for each of the videos. IS' online followers and supporting media outlets also advertised the series with the use of hashtags and the production of promotional posters and videos.

In addition to stressing their enduring loyalty to al-Baghdadi, IS fighters also expressed allegiance to each other and even more specifically to fighters in Syria and Iraq, and promised to avenge them for their losses. In some of the videos, IS militants were also heard shouting out IS' previously much-used rallying-cry "*Baqiya*" [Arabic for "remaining"]. The series underscores IS' ability to centrally steer the releases of its disparate provinces and to ensure they convey a cohesive message. This is especially relevant given the alleged internal disputes within IS (in particular, formerly pro-IS media outlets *al-Turath al-'Ilmi* and *al-Wafa* continued to focus during 2019 on uncovering alleged corruption within IS).

The series also allowed IS to reformulate its narrative and vindicate its defeat. The narrative (as well as the title of the videos) reinforces al-Baghdadi's message in his April speech – and later in his September speech titled "And say: Act" –; namely that setbacks are only temporary and that God rewards those who prove steadfast during times of adversity.<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, a wave of endorsements from various IS provinces (documented in photo reports) as well as from pro-IS media outlets followed the declaration of Abu Ibrahim al-

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<sup>20</sup> Abubakr al-Baghdadi speech: "And say: Act!", Islamic State (IS), al-Furqan Media Production Company, 16/09/2019.

Hashimi al-Qurashi as new “caliph” in October 2019.<sup>21</sup> Provinces included Somalia, Pakistan, Yemen, Central Africa, East Asia, Bengal, Tunisia, al-Bayda (Yemen), the Iraqi “North Baghdad province” as well as five provinces which fall under the IS Syria province: Hawran, Homs, Aleppo, al-Raqqa and al-Khayr. In particular, the cachet of Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi was reinforced as a result of the backing of some of the group's largest affiliates (Khorasan, West Africa, and Sinai). The overarching message was that the death of its “caliph” would not spell complete upheaval for IS, but simply a change of leadership.

The appointment of a new leader followed days of mixed reactions online by IS supporters which included outright rejection of the news of al-Baghdadi’s death – attributing it to demoralisation tactics and disinformation campaigns waged by the West – as well as numerous warnings against spreading rumours that had not been confirmed by official IS mouthpieces.<sup>22</sup> Much ink was spilled over the year with regard to the trustworthiness of various media outlets, accompanied by repeated calls to only trust news published by IS’ central media outlets (i.e *Amaq News*, *al-Naba’*, *al-Furqan Media*, *al-Hayat Media*, *Ajnad Media*, and *Maktabat al-Himma*). *Quraysh Media Centre* in particular became more vocal as of October 2019, and attempted to take over the role of official media outlet – including by appearing to have insider knowledge (gleaned from interviews with IS officials) and providing on-the-spot reporting. Earlier in the year, there had also been significant criticism in the form of SGC of the seemingly pro-IS *Moata News Agency* for not conforming to IS’ official media feed of information.

In this context, it is worth noting that the main pro-IS SGC publication, the monthly magazine titled *Youth of the Caliphate* published by *al-Abd al-Faqir Media*, released its last issue in September 2019 after having been a year in circulation. The magazine – which included contributions by various IS-supporting media outlets, including *al-Battar Media*

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<sup>21</sup> Al-Naba' Issue 207, Islamic State, Diwan al I'lam al-Markazi, 08/11/2019.

<sup>22</sup> "And he who fulfils that which he has promised Allah - He will give him a great reward [48:10]", Islamic State (IS), al-Furqan Media Production Company, 31/10/2019.

Company, the Sunni Shield Foundation, al-Saqri Corporation for Military Sciences, and Sarh al-Khilafa – requested readers to share ideas for future projects.<sup>23</sup>

### 3.4. IS supporters emphasize the role of women and children

IS supporters on Telegram are turning the SDF-controlled refugee camps holding individuals displaced from IS-occupied territory (namely the al-Hol camp) into a rallying cry for the terrorist organisation, with pro-IS Telegram channels posting PayPal pool links purportedly for donations to support IS relatives marooned in the camps.

A number of short mobile videos, allegedly filmed from within the al-Hol camp, were shared over the year. A 45 second video posted on the pro-IS Telegram channel “Green Birds” on 1 October featured a boy declaring his aspiration to become an *“inghimasi* [suicide attacker] who would kill apostates”.<sup>24</sup> Previous videos had shown the raising of the IS flag in the camp as well as children declaring their allegiance to IS. The videos aimed to present the children as a revenge generation who are nostalgic for IS’ rule and who are willing to bring IS’ fundamentalist utopia and violent methods back to life.

An earlier all-female campaign had been launched in July 2019. Titled “the lofty [women] of Baghuz” (*“Shamikhath al-Baghuz”*), it appeared to be led by – and aimed at – women.<sup>25</sup> The campaign included posters by a newly established media outlet of the same name (*“Shamikhath al-Baghuz”*) and one video. The video addressed both men and women, encouraging both to persevere in defending the cause. The women are praised for their motivation in “raising a generation who will wage jihad, [...] annihilate unbelief, [...] and conquer Rome”. A second campaign led by IS supportive media outlets titled “Revenge for the chaste (women)”<sup>26</sup> was launched by IS supporters later in the year. The latter

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<sup>23</sup> “Youth of the caliphate - The End”, al-Abd al-Faqir Foundation, 04/09/2019.

<sup>24</sup> Video showing a child allegedly being interviewed at the al-Hol Camp in Syria, 01/10/2019.

<sup>25</sup> Shamikhath al-Baghuz: the campaign, 03/07/2019.

<sup>26</sup> “Revenge for the chaste women” is a rallying cry that has reappeared at various times since the formation of the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI). It had also appeared in “Inside the Khilafah 7”, al-Hayat Media Center, 07 February 2018, which featured women fighting on the battlefield.

campaign included a video allegedly filmed inside the camp showing women threatening to perpetrate attacks, and calling on al-Baghdadi and IS fighters to liberate them and to restore the caliphate. This call was echoed in al-Baghdadi's September 2019 speech in which he urged supporters to free "the brothers and sisters" held in the camps.<sup>27</sup> Numerous *Amaq News* and supportive media outlets portrayed attacks against Kurdish forces as revenge for the imprisonment of Muslim women in the camps.<sup>28</sup>

IS considers its female adherents as crucial to its survival. In the words of one supporter allegedly living in the al-Hol camp: "the Islamic State will not end, as it is imprinted on the brains and hearts of the infants and youth". For IS, the involvement of women and families endorses the group's enterprise. In addition, IS's sanctioning of combative roles for women has important implications for the future of jihadism.<sup>29</sup> The fact that one of the perpetrators of the Sri Lanka bombings was a female is an indication of how women are likely to figure in IS operations and in the terrorist group's possible resurgence.<sup>30</sup>

### 3.5. IS struggles to keep its footing online

The start of 2019 saw a dip in the release of official IS propaganda. This was accompanied by a steady dissemination of SGC and recycled material. Short *Amaq News* claims and photo reports made up the bulk of IS official publications. IS' weak presence online was compounded when on 21-22 November 2019, EU Member States and Europol coordinated an action targeting IS's online ecosystem.<sup>31</sup> The action resulted in an

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<sup>27</sup> Abubakr al-Baghdadi speech: "And say: act!", al-Furqan Media Production Company, Islamic State, 19/09/2019.

<sup>28</sup> Al-Dir' Sunni Foundation: "Revenge for the chaste [women]", al-Dir'al-Sunni Foundation, 15/10/2019; and Al-Battar video: Revenge for the chaste [women], 26/07/2019.

<sup>29</sup> For more on women's roles within IS see: "Women in Islamic State propaganda", Europol, 14 June 2019. <https://www.europol.europa.eu/activities-services/europol-specialist-reporting/women-in-islamic-state-propaganda>

<sup>30</sup> "Sri Lanka attacks: Bomber 'studied in UK and Australia", BBC News, 24 April 2019. See <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-48035043>

<sup>31</sup> "Europol and Telegram take on terrorist propaganda online", 25 November 2019, Europol. See: <https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/europol-and-telegram-take-terrorist-propaganda-online>

extensive eradication of pro-IS accounts, channels and groups on Telegram, previously the primary source for terrorist propaganda online.

IS supporters' subsequent attempts to regenerate their networks via the creation of new groups and channels were unsuccessful as many of these were quickly disabled (this, despite the use of bots to share join chat links). IS' weekly newsletter *al-Naba'* pointed to the removals but boasted that IS' enemies had failed to obliterate the organisation's propaganda.

At the time of writing, official as well as supportive IS media outlets and groups are still struggling to rebuild their networks. Efforts to establish an IS presence online are continuing across several platforms, including Telegram. While they appear to have flocked to TamTam and Hoop Messenger, their attempts were met by increasing efforts by these companies to bring down content. IS also continues to explore more marginal applications, such as the Blockchain messenger BCM, RocketChat<sup>32</sup> and the free software instant messenger Riot. It also continues to call on supporters to hijack hashtags on Twitter and Facebook. In addition, the pro-IS *Qimam Electronic Foundation* promoted the encrypted messaging application Conversations, previously endorsed by official IS propaganda due to its focus on secure communication.

In this context, numerous official IS and pro-IS SGC outlets shared security and technical awareness tips over the year, including guidance on which online platforms could provide more safety to IS supporters following the loss of Telegram.

While the weekly *al-Naba'* includes a regular article titled "Be wary" which urges supporters to exert caution in their communications, most of the cybersecurity reports and tutorials are published by supportive media outlets on an ad hoc basis. The *AFAQ/Electronic Horizons Foundation* (EHF) has been the most prolific in this field (although towards the end of the year, the *Qimam Electronic Foundation* became

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<sup>32</sup> It is worth noting that AQ also launched the Geo News channel on Rocket.Chat, underscoring a move by other jihadist groups to open-source and decentralised platforms.

considerably more vocal). Established in January 2016, the EHF offers guidance on topics such as information security and counter-surveillance. In addition to its weekly “Tech News Bulletin” which aims to educate IS followers on cybersecurity trends and vulnerabilities, it published numerous reports and tutorials over the year cautioning supporters against unsecure online payment services, vulnerabilities in iPhone applications, as well as detailed tutorials on how to use the Tor proxy server for anonymisation purposes. In its July 2019 publication, EHF reported on Facebook handing over data on hate-speech suspects to French courts.

EHF, along with the pro-IS entity *Bank al-Ansar* – which claims to provide sympathisers with Facebook and Twitter accounts – was also behind a new project (labelled *Talai’ al-Ansar*, or “Vanguards of followers”) aimed at developing jihadists’ computer and media skills. An additional pro-IS outlet focusing on providing design tutorials to IS supporters was the “Design learning” channel on Telegram. It provided tutorials (in English and Malay) on graphic design software such as Adobe Photoshop, Canva and PicsArt. The encouragement of supporters to produce and disseminate their own SGC is to be seen in light of the increasingly strained production and dissemination capabilities of official IS media outlets.

## 4. Al-Qaeda (AQ): a network of local militancy and focused incrementalism

Eighteen years since the September 2001 attacks, AQ has survived – and in some areas thrived –, due partly to a deliberate focus on gaining local support and exploiting local grievances.<sup>33</sup> In particular, AQ’s regional affiliates in South Asia and Yemen (aka. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, AQAP) have succeeded in incorporating the local narrative into the movement’s global discourse and are gaining more traction than IS’ branches in the above regions. AQ also feeds on governance weaknesses and mismanagement, with some factions like Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahideen (al-Shabab) arbitrating land disputes.<sup>34</sup>

A dyadic cooperation between AQ and local groups provides mutual benefits: beyond the implicit knowledge-sharing, the cooperation can strengthen the local affiliate’s jihadi standing while in turn allowing AQ to appear like a global movement that nevertheless champions regional concerns.

Despite their regional focus, AQ affiliates align their agendas to accommodate AQ’s primary aim of fighting the far enemy (the USA and the West in general) which is – according to AQ – at war with Islam. Most recently, on the eighteenth anniversary of the 11 September attacks, AQ leader Ayman al-Zawahiri urged for more attacks against US interests worldwide,<sup>35</sup> arguing that “the US does not understand anything except the language of force”. As a result, regional attacks are framed as part of an overarching

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<sup>33</sup> One of the most common grievances is the alleged pillaging of resources by local governments and their Western allies. See for example: Abu Ubeydah Ahmad Umar Speech "But Allah Will Complete His Light Even Though the Disbelievers Hate it", al-Shabab al-Mujahidin Movement, Shahada News Agency, 20/09/2019.

<sup>34</sup> Mediation and enforcement of agreements by al-Shabaab have been reported by various sources. See for example: Michael Keating and Matt Waldman, “War and peace in Somalia: National grievances, local conflict and al-Shabaab”, Oxford University Press, 2018.

<sup>35</sup> Ayman al-Zawahiri "And they shall continue to fight you", al-Qaeda ("central command"), al-Sahab Media Production Company, 11/09/2019.

strategy of “targeting Western and Zionist interests”<sup>36</sup>. In addition, long-standing political disputes such as Kashmir and Palestine continue to provide grist to the mill of AQ propaganda across its various branches.

AQ is keen on projecting a unity of purpose across its branches. As such, the vast majority of AQ-related videos open with an audio excerpt of the same speech by Usama bin Laden in which the former AQ leader promises Palestinians that AQ will not abandon them.<sup>37</sup> The videos then display the logos of AQ-central and regional media outlets: *al-Kata'ib*, *al-Malahim*, *al-Sahab*, *al-Andalus* and *al-Zallaqa*. All videos end on the following text: “We are coming, o al-Aqsa”. Abu Ubayda al-Annabi, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb’s (AQIM) head of the Council of dignitaries, described AQ’s administration as “flexible”, explaining that while AQ-central sets the general goals and the main guidelines for jihad, it delegates responsibility to its regional branches with regard to tactics.<sup>38</sup>

AQ also repeatedly declares its rejection of IS’ brutality, believing it leads to a revulsion amongst Muslim masses. The organisation and its affiliates make a point of apologising if innocent Muslim bystanders are victims of an AQ attack. On 20 September 2019, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (‘Group to support Islam and Muslims’, JNIM), AQ’s branch in West Africa, apologised for causing the death of several Muslims who were on board a truck caught up in an attack in Burkina Faso,<sup>39</sup> adding that JNIM forces responsible will answer to Islamic law. AQAP is also known to have apologised in similar cases.

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<sup>36</sup> This is how al-Shabab framed its January 2019 attack against the Riverside complex in Nairobi, Kenya. The attack was allegedly a response to US President Donald Trump’s declaration of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. See: “Jerusalem will never be Judaized”, al-Shabab al-Mujahidin Movement, al-Kata'ib Media Production Company, 16/01/2019.

<sup>37</sup> The excerpt dates from 09/09/2002. In the speech, Usama Ben Laden addresses “Our brothers in Palestine, assuring them that “your blood is our blood. [...] We will not forsake you”.

<sup>38</sup> “Interview with Shaykh Abu Ubayda Yusuf al-Annabi”, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), al-Andalus Media, 30/05/2019.

<sup>39</sup> The statement read: “With deep sadness and grief, we received news about the killing of a group of our brothers and children”. See: “Communiqué of condolences and apologies”, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), al-Zallaqa Media Production Company, 20/09/2019.

AQ is keen on being perceived as an organisation that targets the military as opposed to civilians; this goes for both Muslims and non-Muslims. Al-Zawahiri repeatedly stresses the importance of targets being “permissible in the light of the sharia” in that “no harm shall accrue to Muslims as a result of his actions”.<sup>40</sup> To avoid ambiguity, al-Zawahiri encouraged “martyrdom-seekers” to target the military forces and bases of Israeli, British, French, Russian, NATO and European targets. Similarly, in the foreword which he penned for AQ’s new Arabic-language magazine *One Umma*,<sup>41</sup> al-Zawahiri set a tone of moderation and restraint for the publication which covers an array of topics from global politics and economy, to Islamic ethics and family affairs.

In late July 2019, Hamza bin Laden –Usama bin Laden’s son – was reported killed.<sup>42</sup> While his role within the organisation remains unclear, it is thought AQ hoped to market him as a voice for a younger generation and potentially as a unifier – in a bid to poach IS supporters.

In an effort to comprehend the AQ network’s insidious viability, three of the most significant AQ affiliates will be looked at in more detail below. It is worth noting that, while AQ no longer has any formal affiliate in Syria, it still commands the loyalty of several high-profile militants. In particular, AQ loyalists and defectors from Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) announced the formation of Tanzim Hurras al-Din (THD) in 2018, making THD a potentially important future node for AQ investment.

#### 4.1. Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS)

AQIS, AQ’s youngest affiliate, is a patchwork of jihadi groups. Currently, the AQIS network is present across South Asia, including in Myanmar (where AQ has capitalised on the

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<sup>40</sup> Ayman al-Zawahiri "And they shall continue to fight you", al-Qaeda ("central command"), al-Sahab Media Production Company, 11/09/2019.

<sup>41</sup> "One Umma", al-Qaeda ("central command"), al-Sahab Media Production Company, 05/04/2019.

<sup>42</sup> "Trump confirms US has killed Osama bin Laden's son Hamza", The Guardian, 14/09/2019. See: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/14/trump-confirms-us-has-killed-osama-bin-ladens-son-hamza>

Rohingya conflict). AQIS is also collaborating with the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA, aka Taleban) and has managed to establish itself in Kashmir, with Kashmiris leading the AQIS wing in the disputed territory.

AQ has focused on denouncing Pakistan's role in Kashmir through targeted Urdu propaganda in which it accuses the Pakistani government of being an apostate US agent and "a bunch of traitors who fill their pockets with bribes and illegitimate wealth"<sup>43</sup>. In a 9 July video titled "Don't forget Kashmir",<sup>44</sup> al-Zawahiri accused the Pakistani intelligence agencies of providing "crusaders" with information about the IEA, arresting and killing AQ and IEA fighters and providing the US with safe houses and secured land routes. Describing Kashmir as "a bleeding wound in our hearts", al-Zawahiri stressed that bellicosity against Kashmir would be interpreted as directed against the entire *umma*. Al-Zawahiri urged Kashmiri mujahidin to focus on targeting the Indian Army and government "so as to bleed the Indian economy".

AQIS is also endeavouring to capitalise on tensions between Hindus and Muslims through its Urdu-language propaganda. In keeping with AQ's overall strategy, AQIS abstains from attacking non-combatant Buddhists, Christians, and Hindus.

AQIS also expanded into other countries in the region, such as Bangladesh. This is noteworthy given that Bangladesh has become a sparring arena for AQ and IS. Given its geographic disadvantage, IS has relied on online propaganda to propagate its message via the locally-based Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), while AQIS has focused on collaborating more directly with local jihadi groups (including Harakat al-Jihad al-Islami Bangladesh and Ansarullah Bangla Team).

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<sup>43</sup> Ayman al-Zawahiri video speech "Don't Forget Kashmir" al-Qaeda ("central command"), al-Sahab Media Production Company, 10/07/2019.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

## 4.2. Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahideen (al-Shabab)

Al-Shabab, AQ's Horn of Africa branch, operates primarily in southern and central Somalia but is also known to carry out attacks across East Africa. It stepped up activity in Somalia and neighbouring Kenya in 2019, with a string of attacks leading into 2020 (including on 5 January 2020 against the Manda Bay military base used by US forces in Kenya's coastal Lamu region). The group has proved resilient and has repeatedly demonstrated its ability to perpetrate large-scale attacks despite increased US airstrikes. It also boasts one of the most sophisticated AQ media apparatuses.

Major attacks in 2019 included the attack at the Riverside complex in Nairobi, Kenya, in January, in which over fifty-nine people, including Americans and other westerners, were killed. In late September 2019, al-Shabab claimed responsibility for an attack against the U.S. military base in Ballidogle<sup>45</sup>. The base, situated 100 km North West of Mogadishu, served as a command and control centre for US drone operations in Somalia as well as a training centre for the Somali special operations unit. The same day, a further attack targeting an EU convoy was perpetrated in Mogadishu and according to al-Shabab, resulted in the death of "at least two commanders". Al-Shabab also showcased a string of targeted killings of security and military officials in Somalia and Kenya in a video titled "The Successful faces 2" released on 9 February 2019 by its *Shahada News Agency*.<sup>46</sup> The video also showcased a series of ambushes involving the use of explosive devices against Burundi, Kenyan, Somalian, Ethiopian, Ugandan, as well as "Crusader" (i.e. Western) forces.

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<sup>45</sup> al-Shabab Statement "Storming the US Military Base in Ballidoogle", al-Shabab al-Mujahidin Movement, al-Kata'ib Media Production Company, 30/09/2019; al-Shabab Statement "Ballidoogle Airbase Raid: 121 U.S. Soldiers Killed", al-Shabab al-Mujahidin Movement, al-Kata'ib Media Production Company, 30/09/2019; al-Shabab Statement "No Safe Haven for US Crusaders, African Invaders and Apostate Traitors in Somalia", al-Shabab al-Mujahidin Movement, al-Kata'ib Media Production Company, 02/10/2019. NB: The US Africa Command (AFRICOM) reported that only one US service member had been a victim of the attack against the Ballidogle airfield, adding that he had suffered a concussion injury.

<sup>46</sup> Al-Shabab al-Mujahidin Movement video "The Successful Face 2" Shahada New Agency, 09/02/2019.

### 4.3. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)

As previously identified, most of AQIM and JNIM's rhetoric targeted France, depicted as "the old and new enemy".<sup>47</sup> In particular, AQIM urged Muslims in Algeria and Tunisia to denounce and fight against the oppression they are allegedly subjected to by France and its local allies.<sup>48</sup> In a number of speeches designed to capitalise on nationwide demonstrations against the 20-year rule of Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika,<sup>49</sup> Abu Ubayda Yusuf al-Annabi – AQIM's head of the Council of dignitaries – encouraged continued protests against the "French-backed regime".<sup>50</sup> He pointed to the "savagery of the French in Algeria" and accused France of continuously attempting to wipe out Algeria's Islamic identity. He also railed against the "internationally-backed elite" which "controls the country" and which attempts to "take away [people's] Islamic identity [...]" so they can better bend [the people] to the Crusaders' [...] will". He urged Algerians to "pick [their] side in the defining battle" taking place between those calling for sharia and those fighting against it (i.e. advocates of Western culture), and called for a "revolution that would return governance to God". According to al-Annabi, this revolution would also do away with subordination to the West, along with the accompanying financial corruption and moral depravity. It would also redistribute wealth justly among the population. He added that the obstacles to such a revolution are those whom France has placed as agents: i.e. army [officers], politicians, the media and businessmen. The first step towards bringing about radical change is therefore (in AQIM's view) to "boycott the criminal ruling gang", in part by refusing to perform military service and resisting taxes.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Al-Andalus Media video "Interview with Shaykh Abu Ubayda Yusuf al-Annabi", al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), 30/05/2019.

<sup>48</sup> AQIM statement "The war on Islam in Tunisia and Algeria... Silence until when?!", 12/02/2019.

<sup>49</sup> Abu Ubaida Yusuf al-Annabi speech: "Algeria... Getting Out from the Dark Tunnel". 10/03/2019; and Abu Ubayda Yusuf al-Annabi speech: "We Advise you in God Not to Retreat", 04/04/2019.

<sup>50</sup> Abu Ubaida Yusuf al-Annabi speech "Appeal to the Algerian people... Oh our people, answer the call", al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), al-Andalus Media Production Company, 24/01/2019.

<sup>51</sup> Abu Ubaida Yusuf al-Annabi speech "Appeal to the Algerian people... Oh our people, answer the call", al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), al-Andalus Media Production Company, 24/01/2019.

In the same vein, on 12 February AQIM issued a 4-page statement condemning “anti-Islamic” political moves in Algeria and Tunisia.<sup>52</sup> AQIM strongly condemned the alleged banning of prayer in schools in Algeria, and denounced it as a manoeuvre to Westernise and secularise the country. According to AQIM, a prayer ban in Algerian schools reflects only one part of the broader fight against Islam by the Algerian government. AQIM also reacted to the news of the closing of a Quranic school in Tunisia, which, according to the group, was the subject of a media campaign aimed at discrediting the legitimacy and reputation of religious institutions in Tunisia.

Somewhat ironically given its anti-French stance, AQIM published an interview granted by al-Annabi to Wassim Nasr, a France 24 journalist.<sup>53</sup> The interview was released by *al-Andalus Media*, AQIM’s official media outlet. Al-Annabi praised Nasr’s courage in giving a jihadist organisation the chance to freely express its viewpoint. He then commended the Algerian protesters for their bravery in rising up against their “unjust” leaders, adding that one of the reasons for the success of this “revolution” is that it is a peaceful one. He nevertheless stressed that in some cases militant ‘jihad’ is the only solution and that AQIM will not cease its armed ‘jihad’ until Algeria has an ‘Islamic’ government. Al-Annabi added that AQIM fights against those who fight them, underlining the fact that non-belligerent “infidels” are therefore not targets. However, he added that France (including its military, economic and missionary arms) and its allies are legitimate targets, regardless of whether they are “in their countries or in ours”.

In parallel, JNIM intensified its military activities against both local and international targets (including EU, MINUSMA, and G5 Sahel targets). On 20 January 2019, JNIM claimed the attack against the MINUSMA base in Mali, which killed ten Chadian soldiers. The attack was orchestrated to coincide with the visit of Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to Chad. JNIM’s claim of responsibility accused the President of Chad, Idriss

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid; and AQIM statement “The war on Islam in Tunisia and Algeria... Silence until when?!” , 12/02/2019.

<sup>53</sup> “Interview with Shaykh Abu Ubayda Yusuf al-Annabi”, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), al-Andalus Media, 30/05/2019.

Deby, the crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Muhammad bin Salman, and the crown Prince of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Muhammad bin Zayed, of having "disregarded the feelings of their people". The document also condemned the visit that President Deby made to Israel (November 2018) in order to obtain "an economic lifeline from the Jews". The claim specified that the attack was the response to the "guidelines of AQ" and aimed to thwart Zionist schemes.<sup>54</sup> On 15 February 2019, JNIM announced it would intensify its operations across Malian territory against the "French crusaders' occupation" and its allies in the region: "We inform France and its agents in the region that our war against them will not stop until they are defeated or are forced out of Mali".<sup>55</sup> This was soon followed by a raid on the European Union Training Mission in Mali (EUTM).<sup>56</sup>

Furthermore, JNIM is using its propaganda to wage a battle for credibility with France. On 28 February 2019, JNIM's *al-Zallaqa Media* – in collaboration with AQIM's *al-Andalus Media Foundation* – released a video refuting claims by the French and Malian military that a senior JNIM official, Mohamed Koufa, was killed in a French airstrike in Mali in November 2018.<sup>57</sup> In the video, Koufa accused France of making a number of false claims, including that a martyrdom operation in Timbuktu had been perpetrated by a woman.

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<sup>54</sup> "The Aguelhok battle... Standing in the face of normalization process", Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), al-Zallaqa Media Production Company, 20/01/2019.

<sup>55</sup> "A martyr operation against a patrol on the French occupant in Timbuktu", Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), al-Zallaqa, 16/02/2019; and "The Executor of the Martyrdom operation on a Patrol of French Occupation Forces in Timbuktu", Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), al-Zallaqa, 17/02/2019.

<sup>56</sup> JNIM Statement 103 "Martyrdom operations and attack on a base of European Union invading forces in Bamako"- Arabic, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), al-Zallaqa Media Production Company, 26/02/2019; JNIM Statement 101 "Attack on a joint checkpoint operated by the "MSA" movement and "GATIA" both agents of France and the "Bamako" governments", Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), al-Zallaqa Media Production Company, 17/02/2019; JNIM Statement 102 "Explosion of a device on a vehicle for an officer in the MSA movement, the agent of the Crusaders, wounding the officer Musa al-Hadi and his escorts", Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), al-Zallaqa Media Production Company, 17/02/2019; JNIM Statement 99 "Ambush on a convoy of Malian gendarmerie and killing 5 of them", Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), al-Zallaqa Media Production Company, 17/02/2019; and JNIM Statement 98 "Attack on a Burkinabe military center in Kompienga and killing and wounding of at least 10 soldiers", Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), al-Zallaqa Media Production Company, 02/02/2019.

<sup>57</sup> "Interview with Mohammed Koufa", Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), al-Zallaqa Media Production Company, 28/02/2019.

Koufa underscored the absurdity of such claims by France at a time of easy access to information. Koufa's interview was published shortly after the French military's declaration on 22 February 2019 that its Barkhane forces had killed AQIM leader Yahya Abu al-Hammam. AQIM and JNIM have yet to officially comment on the statement of Abu al-Hammam's death.

## 5. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) extends its authority over Idlib

The Syrian government's attempt to recapture Idlib, the last rebel-held bastion in Syria, has drawn attention to the jihadist group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a group that splintered from the AQ franchise in 2016.<sup>58</sup>

HTS consolidated its military and administrative control in the region by beating back rival groups. Following days of fighting in January 2019, during which HTS seized numerous villages from the Turkey-backed National Liberation Front (NLF) and specifically from the NLF's Nur al-din al-Zinki (NDZ) component (which had previously defected from HTS), HTS and the NLF managed to reach an agreement. On 10 January 2019, a ceasefire – a copy of which was circulated on numerous Telegram channels – was signed between the two groups. The deal provided for an immediate cessation of hostilities, an exchange of prisoners, the dismantling of all checkpoints, and the province's submission to the authority of the self-proclaimed "Salvation Government", an HTS-dominated body which had been governing large parts of Idlib and parts of the neighbouring provinces of Aleppo and Hama.<sup>59</sup> Other groups – including Tanzim Hurras al-Din (THD) and the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP) – are also present in Idlib.

It is worth noting that there were recurrent clashes between HTS and THD – the latter having been established by HTS defectors in 2018 and currently assumed to be AQ's affiliate in Syria.<sup>60</sup> The latest spate of violence occurred in mid-December 2019 as a result of HTS' security forces arresting a number of THD militants near the town of Batabo and

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<sup>58</sup> At the time it was known as the Nusra Front.

<sup>59</sup> Announced in November 2017, the Salvation Government consists of eleven ministries: interior, justice, religious endowments, education, higher education, agriculture, economy, societal affairs and displaced persons, residence and building, local administration, and health.

<sup>60</sup> Al-Sahab Media released a statement in which AQ central command expressed its condolences for the death of assumed THD member Sari Shihab, aka Abu Khallad al-Muhandis. See: AQ central command statement "Eulogy for the loyal mujahid Abu Khallad al-Muhandis, may God accept him", al-Sahab Media Production Company, 28/08/2019.

THD responding to the arrest by abducting a field commander of HTS in the town of Muhambal. In September 2018, the two terrorist groups were heading to a military confrontation due to a similar incident. They managed to resolve the crisis thanks to a partnership agreement reached on 8 February 2019. In the agreement, HTS and THD promised to cease trading insults via social media and to instead cooperate against their common enemy. A few days later, a broader agreement was also signed between the two groups. The second document stated that both organisations acknowledge one another to be Sunni jihadist organisations and that their common aim is to "implement sharia via preaching and jihad".<sup>61</sup>

In the same vein, intra-rebel disputes in Idlib concerning HTS and its leader, Abu Muhammad Al-Jawlani, also increased in October. The criticism of HTS by a senior member of the group (Abu Al-Abd Ashda'a) resulted in protests for and against the organisation. The disagreements also affected the foreign fighters (HTS hosts a significant number of foreign fighters including Arabs, Turks, Chechens, Uzbeks, and Muslims from China's Xinjiang province). On 7 October 2019, a number of Idlib-based foreign fighter groups released a statement in support of HTS – accused by AQ supporters of delivering poor governance and of being an intractable organisation that is not open to criticism. That same day, "a group of [rank and file] immigrant fighters in Syria" published a document distancing themselves from the statement of support for HTS and contending that it merely represented the leaders of the signatory organisations.

Unlike IS, HTS is focused on a local (albeit also jihadist) agenda. Throughout its communiqués and propaganda, HTS is careful to project an image of fairness and consideration for the protection of civilians, including by assuring members of NLF

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<sup>61</sup> Joint statement by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and Tanzim Hurras al-Din, 11/02/2019; and Agreement between Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and Tanzim Hurras al-Din, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, 08/02/2019.

factions (e.g. Ahrar al-Sham and Suqur al-Sham) that they would face no retributions for their former alliances.<sup>62</sup>

AQ stalwarts accuse HTS of diluting the purity of the cause and of betraying key jihadist ideals for the purpose of strategic and political gain. They also accuse HTS of being a Turkish pawn. HTS has repeatedly acknowledged Turkey's support to Syrian refugees and the group celebrated the Turkish intervention after the withdrawal of US troops from northern Syria in October 2019. HTS also warned of false reporting by opposing groups accusing Turkey of targeting civilians.

Following its takeover, HTS imposed its control over all aspects of life in the Idlib province, including administration, healthcare and cultural and educational initiatives. As a result, the majority of HTS propaganda concerns civilian issues (e.g. governance and service provision), and military and security operations against Russian/Iranian/Syrian forces. Articles published by the *Iba* network, an affiliated media outlet which has not been officially endorsed by HTS, attempted to underline the group's ability to provide decent services in the areas under its control, and more specifically, to contrast this with the Syrian regime's alleged inability to do the same. The provision of services is even more critical given that forced and voluntary displacement from other areas retaken by the government has tripled the Idlib province population to approximately 3 million in the second half of 2019. Essentially, HTS aims to present itself as a political alternative in the region and an indispensable interlocutor in any solution to Idlib. Issue 50 of the *Iba* weekly newspaper reported on the successful efforts of the "Salvation Government" to liberate an Italian hostage kidnapped while on holiday in Turkey in 2016.

HTS has put significant effort in its communication strategy by multiplying the production of statements, videos, opinion articles and religious opinions of its high-profile figures and like-minded scholars, such as Abu al-Fath al-Farghali. The group also communicates with the local population through face-to-face interactions (materials

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<sup>62</sup> One example includes the military wing of HTS releasing a communiqué ordering that no arrest of Ahrar al-Sham, Suqur al-Sham or members of other factions should take place without a judicial warrant.

distributed for this purpose are adapted to immediate concerns (e.g. mobilisation leaflets)).

In disseminating its propaganda, HTS relies on nominally independent institutions, both online and offline (e.g. the Salvation Government, the *Iba* network and *maktab al-da'wa wal irshad* [Dawa and Guidance Office]).

Most of HTS' online propaganda is created and published by either the *Iba* network or *Amjad Video Production*. *Iba* publishes daily op-eds, detailed political analysis and investigative journalism pieces and short videos concerning developments in Idlib (whether social, political or otherwise) on its website and Telegram channels. *Amjad* produces a variety of videos, with many showcasing HTS' military training or documenting clashes against Syrian regime forces, as well as motivational speeches delivered by HTS ideologues and military commanders.

## 6. Running themes across jihadi groups

A number of globally relevant events incited similar reactions in jihadist circles online, underlining the fact that despite disagreements, these groups share ideological underpinnings and grievances.

One such event was the visit of Pope Francis to the UAE on 3-5 February, during which he met with the Imam of Al-Azhar University, Ahmed al-Tayeb. Both AQ and IS condemned what they viewed as a never-ending placatory approach by Arab countries towards the West. Issue 168<sup>63</sup> of IS' weekly *al-Naba'* criticised the UAE for putting the fight against "Islamic organisations" as a top priority while AQ's *al-Nafir* magazine Issue 28<sup>64</sup> strongly criticised the event and suggested that the only way to stop the advance of the "Crusaders' religion" is with the sword.

AQ reacted in much the same way to the US-initiated "Peace to prosperity" workshop held in Manama, Bahrain, on 25-26 June 2019. In a July statement titled "Jerusalem unites Muslims",<sup>65</sup> AQ lambasted Arab states for attending the workshop and betraying the Palestinian people's fight against occupation. AQ underscored the obligation upon all Muslims to reject this plan and to fight the "crusader" aggressors in Palestine and elsewhere.

Similarly, the murder of at least fifty people by a gunman at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, on 15 March 2019, resulted in a flow of online activity by jihadi groups. The groups exploited the right-wing terror attacks to push the narrative that the West is at war with Islam. The IEA and HTS were the first to issue public statements commenting

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<sup>63</sup> Al-Naba' (The News), issue no. 168, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al I'lam al Markazi, 07/02/2019.

<sup>64</sup> Al-Nafir ("Call to arms"), al-Qaeda ("central command"), al-Sahab Media Production Company, 07/02/2019.

<sup>65</sup> Al-Qaeda statement "Jerusalem unites Muslims - Statement on the holding of a treasonous workshop in Bahrain to sell Palestine", al-Qaeda ("central command"), al-Sahab Media Production Company, 06/07/2019.

on the attack. The IEA expressed sympathy with the victims' families and urged New Zealand to carry out a comprehensive investigation into "the root cause of this form of terrorism and to hand a hefty punishment to the attackers". HTS attributed the attack to widespread Islamophobia and condemned the double standards in the way terrorism is defined in the West as well as the lack of empathy for Muslim victims suffering in other parts of the world.

These were followed by statements by Jabhat Ansar al-Din (a jihadist alliance in Syria) and al-Shabab as well as a joint statement from AQIM and JNIM. The statements invariably referred to "crusaders", denounced Western governments and incited violent jihad in response to the attack. In particular, the joint AQIM/JNIM statement lamented "the rise of [...] right-wing populist movements and their ascension to power [...] in Europe, America, or elsewhere" and described it as the "visible part of the mountain of Western hatred against the *umma*". The joint statement also called on "the ardent youth of the *umma* [...] to be lone wolves and not to consult anyone in targeting the heads of the Crusader far right and in targeting all who congratulated this cowardly operation".<sup>66</sup>

AQ condemned the attack and released a two-page document offering condolences to the victims' families.<sup>67</sup> AQ also incited Muslims to attack Americans and Zionists, alongside all the extremists who targeted innocent Muslims, in retaliation for the attack in New Zealand and other attacks against the *umma*. The statement incited fighters to follow the example set by the 'heroes' of the "Charlie Hebdo" attack which took place in Paris in January 2015 and to target the enemies at their [military] bases or in public gathering places, but not in their churches or places of worship.

A variety of SGC also surfaced following the attack, mostly calling for revenge. IS supporters in particular capitalised on the attack to justify the Easter Sunday terrorist

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<sup>66</sup> Joint AQIM-JNIM "Statement of condolences and incitement - Condolences for the martyrdom of vulnerable worshippers in the New Zealand attack" – Arabic, French and English, 18/03/2019.

<sup>67</sup> "Our mothers should lose us if we do not take revenge of the blood of the worshippers", al-Qaeda ("central command"), al-Sahab Media Production Company, 22/03/2019.

attacks in Sri Lanka<sup>68</sup> and disseminated propaganda on Telegram using the hashtag #Revenge4NewZealand. IS' official spokesperson at the time, Abu al-Hassan al-Muhajir, declared in an audio speech released on 18 March that the attack should be a wake-up call, especially to IS supporters living "there".<sup>69</sup> He urged them to avenge their religion and kinsmen "who are being slaughtered everywhere in the world with the blessing of the crusaders' countries and the apostate [...] governments".

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<sup>68</sup> A'maq news agency claim for Sri Lanka attack - Arabic, Islamic State (IS), 23/04/2019; A'maq news agency communiqué on attack in Sri Lanka: "Suicide attacks by fighters from the Islamic state shake Sri Lanka" 23/04/2019; IS statement "Approximately 1,000 crusaders were killed and wounded in separate attacks in Sri Lanka", 23/04/2019; and A'maq video: "The allegiance of the perpetrators of the first attacks in Sri Lanka to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi", Islamic State (IS), 23/04/2019.

<sup>69</sup> Abu al-Hasan al-Muhajir audio speech: "If you are true to God, He will reward you", Al-Furqan Media Production Company, 18/03/2019.

## 7. Conclusion

Following its loss of territorial control in Iraq and Syria, IS appears to have converted to a number of small local fronts. Its propaganda claims to include 15 separate affiliates in countries across Asia and Africa, as well as cells in Western Europe.

This makes it all the more similar to AQ, heightening its rivalry with the latter for the hegemony of international jihadism. Both IS and AQ central commands issue broad guidance to the organisations' affiliates, though they do not direct them on a day-to-day basis.

For IS, the post-state phase has meant a return to its guerrilla beginnings. Its propaganda has attempted to show that it remains a threat, albeit a de-territorialised one but one that could regroup in the future. Furthermore, al-Baghdadi's death did not deal a significant blow to the group. More than al-Baghdadi, it is the idea of the caliphate that will continue to attract potential sympathisers. However, IS' emphasis on being a state along with its continued inability to realise territorial governance (*tamkin*), could undermine its credibility in the long run.

While counter-terrorism attention was focused on IS, AQ was patiently strengthening its local network of affiliates, from West Africa to Southeast Asia. AQ's ability to ingratiate itself locally has made the organisation more resilient. Furthermore, al-Zawahiri's leadership, which many have termed uncharismatic, lends AQ the benefit of continuity.

The future of AQ and IS will be largely defined by the competition between the two. One key question is whether this competition will evolve towards more confrontation, or whether some alliances will be forged – at least in some regions (such as have been reported in West Africa).

One of the reasons for this competition (which has played out on social media) is due to the similarity in ideology and ultimate objectives. The main points of contention concern

IS' establishment of a "caliphate" – which according to AQ was premature and did not follow the proper *shura* [consultation] process for the appointment of the caliph – as well as the extremely violent and sectarian agenda espoused by IS to bring about territorial control. However, both groups' propaganda argue that Islam is under attack by the West, and that global jihad is needed to fight back. Furthermore, propaganda disseminated online by both groups – although less readily accessible thanks to disruptive action carried out jointly by EU Member States and the EU IRU – continues to inspire and incite lone actor attacks by individuals who have no physical connections to either group.

Combating the terrorist groups' media reach, limiting their ability to carry out attacks, and attributing online terrorist offences via heightened international cooperation should therefore remain a priority.