Online Jihadist Propaganda

2022 in review

ONLINE JIHADIST PROPAGANDA – 2022 IN REVIEW

CONTENTS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AAS	Ansar al-Sharia or 'Partisans of Islamic Law'
ASwJ	Ahlu-Sunna wa-Jamma
AQAP	Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
AQIM	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
AQS	Al-Qaeda in the Subcontinent
EU	European Union
EU IRU	EU Internet Referral Unit
HAT	Hurras Al-Tawheed or 'Guardians of Monotheism'
HTS	Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham or 'Levant Liberation Committee'
IS	Self-proclaimed Islamic State also referred to as ISIS 'Islamic State in Iraq and Sham', ISIL 'Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant', Daesh or Da'ish (an acronym based on the group's Arabic name 'al-dawla al-Islamiyya fil-Iraq wal-Sham')
JNIM	Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin or 'Group in support of Islam and Muslims'
NFTs	Non-Fungible Tokens
TE-SAT	EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report
TTP	Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan

Key findings

▶ The so-called Islamic State (IS) lost and replaced two 'caliphs' within 8 months. IS has repeatedly highlighted that the killing of its leaders should not be seen as a setback. It should instead renew its militants' strength to pursue the fight and die for the cause, as IS leaders have done.

▶ IS was able to leverage its global affiliates in propaganda releases that portrayed the group as continuing to expand to new territories, while concealing actual capacity in the Levant.

▶ Sub-Saharan Africa remained at the core of a rampant jihadist crisis led by insurgencies that graft onto local grievances while vaunting links to either al-Qaeda or IS. Propaganda documented violent clashes between IS Sahel province and Jama'at Nusra al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), both parties also sparring against security forces of Sahelian countries and the Russian private military company Wagner group.

▶ IS propaganda presented Africa as a destination for religious migration (*hijra*) and displayed the group's endeavours to consolidate territorial control and provide governance, especially in Nigeria.

▶ IS's communication strategy in Afghanistan focused on exposing the Taliban's incapacity to provide stability and security in Afghanistan, thus harming its quest for international recognition.

▶ The IS online ecosystem, still dominated by the productions of IS-supporting media, saw multilingual and translation outlets play a leading role in 2022.

▶ IS propaganda gained a larger foothold on blockchain-based video sharing platforms. IS supporters also experimented with non-fungible tokens (NFTs), which were created with official IS statements to enhance their online resilience and potentially for trading and financing purposes.

▶ 2022 saw frequent messages issued by al-Qaeda Core and its global branches, including video releases featuring al-Qaeda's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri (now deceased), some of them providing proof of life. Al-Zawahiri was later killed in a US drone strike in Kabul in July 2022. At the time of writing, al-Qaeda has yet to acknowledge his death or declare a successor.

▶ The sustained flow of official propaganda messages by the al-Qaeda network was matched by productions by its supporting media. A turnover of branded media outlets supportive of al-Qaeda was observed in 2022, with new entities being introduced to replace discontinued outlets.

► Al-Qaeda's Core leadership has predicted that al-Shabab, which further consolidated its control of southern and central Somalia, would seize power in Somalia following the Taliban's example.

► Since the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan, the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) emerged as emboldened and intensified its attacks against the Pakistani state.

► In 2022, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) continued its communication strategy to rebrand HTS as the defender of the Syrian people from the current regime and its allies, as well the only actor able to mitigate the effects of the ongoing conflict on Syria's social fabric and economy.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is the fifth edition of the annual review of online jihadist propaganda and 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 2022 and analyses the major trends and developments in the propaganda of the most prominent Sunni jihadist organisations – the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda (AQ) – as well as their branches and offshoots.

The review addresses the trajectories of these groups, and how they have responded to shifting dynamics and attempted to overcome setbacks. It further identifies the dominant themes and types of productions exploited by the two groups during this period, while highlighting changes in key areas related to online jihadist propaganda, such as main narratives and the abuse of technology for propaganda dissemination.

In order to shed light on changes in the groups' narratives and online communication patterns, the research examined primary sources, including the groups' operational claims, publications, statements, videos and audio speeches.

The above-mentioned material was collected by the EU IRU over 2022 and stored in the Check the Web (CtW) portal.[1] To build a broader picture, the research also took into account jihadist supporter discussions on a wide array of Online Service Providers (OSPs).

Among the research limitations of the review, linguistic constraints were encountered in relation to the increase of online jihadist propaganda shared and produced in African and Central Asian languages, especially in Somali, Swahili, Hausa, Amharic, Tajik and Uzbek. Furthermore, online jihadist messaging in African countries is often broadcast by radio stations. These communications could not be examined.

While the review focuses on 2022, it nevertheless puts these trends into context, with reference to further developments that took place in early 2023, prior to the review's publication.

The review distinguishes between narratives promulgated by official media outlets of terrorist groups and those disseminated by their supporter networks. In particular, issues of the IS weekly magazine al-Naba released in 2022 were used to determine IS's strategic direction. In the context of the decrease in official IS publications, al-Naba sheds light on IS's goals and motivations and the group's perception of global dynamics.

The review is intended to help formulate a focused threat assessment that takes into account the amplification and, at times, manipulation of terrorist messaging by supporter networks whose links to the hierarchy of terrorist groups remain unclear.

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

This review has been divided into four main chapters. The first discusses the main narratives and media campaigns showcased in official IS media, as well as changes in the landscape of IS-supporting media and its digital capabilities; the second assesses the dominant themes in AQ propaganda, offers an insight into the activities of Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and highlights relevant developments in AQ-supporting media;

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[1] The CtW portal is an electronic reference library that aims to document and analyse online content produced by groups or individuals who are inspired by terrorist and violent extremist ideologies. The portal is accessible by law enforcement in the EU MS.

the third elaborates on Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and its propaganda, which is focused on military advances and political aspirations; and the fourth outlines cross-cutting themes across the jihadist milieu.

The aim of the review is to contribute to a deeper understanding of jihadist propaganda and to raise awareness among law enforcement practitioners, hosting service providers and the public of how jihadist organisations and their supporters abuse technology to broadcast their messages to intended audiences.

The Regulation on addressing the dissemination of terrorist content online (TCO Regulation) entered into force in June 2022, in order to reduce the spread of online terrorist propaganda. It establishes a new set of operational measures, notably forbidding the hosting of terrorist propaganda and the obligation to remove it when flagged by law enforcement authorities and Europol. To facilitate the implementation of the TCO Regulation, Europol launched an innovative technical solution called PERCI that has been developed to centralise, coordinate and support the transmission of removal orders and referrals by competent authorities to hosting service providers. The review aims at providing a strategic framework for such efforts.

IS NARRATIVES AND ONLINE CAMPAIGNS IN 2022

Narrative by the IS leadership and online campaigns

IS suffered major leadership losses in 2022. It lost and promptly replaced two 'caliphs' within eight months. After IS leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi and his official spokesman Abu Hamza al-Qurashi were killed in February 2022, IS's new spokesman Abu Umar al-Muhajir declared Abu al-Hassan al-Hashimi al-Qurashi as the new leader of the group in a speech in early March 2022.[2] The announcement of the new leadership sparked an online campaign entitled 'The jihad of the believers continues',[3] which comprised an IS cross-province video series that showed IS militants globally as they pledged allegiance to their new leader Abu al-Hassan al-Hashimi al-Qurashi. The IS media apparatus paid tribute to the deceased leaders with another media and military campaign under the slogan 'Battle to avenge the two Sheikhs', which was launched by Abu Umar al-Muhajir in mid-April 2022. Consequently, IS regional affiliates referenced the campaign in their attack claims.

Abu al-Hassan al-Hashimi al-Qurashi was reportedly killed[4] in mid-October in Syria's Dar'a province in an operation by the Free Syrian Army.[5] Like his predecessor, he had never appeared in propaganda nor did he release an audio statement. After declaring his successor to be Abu al-Husain al-Husaini al-Qurashi,[6] IS boasted about its 'credibility' in publishing the news of the death of its leader before its adversaries.[7] In December, several IS provinces released another cross-province series entitled 'And God will surely support those who support Him', this time showing the pledge of allegiance of IS militants to Abu al-Husain al-Husaini al-Qurashi. The series allowed IS to reinforce the message that the death of its 'caliph' would not spell the group's demise, but simply a change of leadership. In the words of an IS militant identified as Abu Mujahid al-Ansari in the episode by IS Iraq province, the killing of IS leaders is not to be seen as a setback for the group. Conversely, it gives militants strength to pursue the fight, following the example of their leaders.[8]

In spite of leadership changes, IS narratives remained largely unchanged in 2022. Prison breaks and the freeing of imprisoned Muslims and IS members remained a priority for IS command in 2022. It was described by IS's spokesperson Abu Umar al-Muhajir as IS's "primary goal".[9] Indeed, IS carried out large-scale prison breaks in 2022: one at the Ghuwayran prison in al-Hasaka, Syria in January 2022, one at the Kuje prison in Abuja, Nigeria on 5 July 2022,[10] and one at the Kakwangora central prison in

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[2] Abu Umar al-Muhajir Audio Speech, 'So among them is one who fulfilled his vow', Islamic State (IS), al-Furqan Media Production Company, 10.3.2022.

[3] The title of the video series references an infographic that had appeared in al-Naba (The News), issue No 324 (p.12), Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al I'lam al-Markazi, 3.2.2022.

[4] US Central Command, 'Death of ISIS leader', 2022, [10.01.2023], (https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/3232259/death-of-isis-leader).

[5] Coalition of rebel groups and opposition forces fighting against the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

[6] Abu Umar al-Muhajir speech, 'So they kill and are killed', Islamic State (IS), al-Furqan Media Production Company, 30.11.2022.

[7] Al-Naba (The News), issue No 368, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al I'lam al-Markazi, 9.12.2022.

[8] IS Iraq province video 'And God will surely support those who support Him', Islamic State (IS), 16.12.2022.

[9] Abu Umar al-Muhajir audio speech, 'And hold firmly together to the rope of God and be not divided among yourselves', Islamic State (IS), al-Furqan Media Production Company, 13.9.2022.

[10] IS West Africa province claim for the 5.7.2022 attack against a prison near Abuja after demolishing its walls and freeing dozens of Muslim prisoners, Islamic State (IS), 6.7.2022.

Butembo, DRC.[11] Each prison break revived IS's historical slogan 'breaking the walls' and offered inspiration to supporters to produce and share new material celebrating the liberation of IS members. In al-Naba, IS conferred a religious aspect to the freeing of prisoners, stating it answers the 'eternal call' of the Prophet Muhammad of 'freeing the captives'.[12]

The IS media department seized on the opportunity to highlight these prison breaks, both to boost supporter morale and to convey operational strength. In the aftermath of the prison break of Ghuwayran, videos from within the prison were largely disseminated and reedited by IS-supporting media outlets to showcase IS' 'victorious' military operation, said to be fulfilling multiple objectives of the group. IS online supporters shared messages, including handwritten messages and pictures of themselves or their children, celebrating the freeing of IS militants.

IS regional affiliates

IS regional affiliates have attempted to broaden their geographical scope and to resume attacks in previously targeted areas. After a 4-year hiatus, IS claimed responsibility for an attack in Iran in October 2022.[13] Two attacks that took place in Israel in March 2022 were also claimed by the group.[14] The events provided material for multiple official and unofficial IS productions. IS' Afghanistan-based contingent, the IS Khorasan province, claimed cross-border rocket strikes into Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.[15] In September 2022, IS announced the expansion of its territorial operations into Benin.[16]

Africa remained the main ostensible theatre for the group's endeavours to expand geographically and consolidate territorial control. IS' own statistics indicated a total of 2 058 attacks claimed by the group in 2022. Nigeria ranked first with 517 attacks, followed by Iraq and Syria with respectively 484 and 297 attacks.[17] The overall high number of attacks in its traditional heartlands, coupled with the relatively substantial operational capabilities shown in the Ghuwayran prison break, may signal that IS is poised to regain strength in the region.

Furthermore, if attacks in Syria featured less prominently in propaganda, it could be partly due to a strategic choice by IS to conceal its actual capacity in Syria. An 'exclusive' al-Naba interview with an IS official introduced as 'the head of mujahidin of the Badia' vouchsafed that IS had intentionally kept a low profile about a number of operations in the Syrian desert (known as the Badia) in order to avoid its militants being targeted in strikes.[18]

[11] IS Central Africa province statement, 'Dozens of Muslim prisoners freed in an attack by soldiers of the caliphate at the central prison in Butembo city, east Congo', Islamic State (IS), 12.8.2022.

[12] Al-Naba (The News), issue No 346, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al I'lam al-Markazi, 8.7.2022.

[13] IS statement, 'Iran, dozens of polytheists "rafida" killed and wounded in an infiltration attack on a polytheistic shrine in the city of Shiraz, south of Iran', Islamic State (IS), 26.10.2022.

[14] IS statement, '12 killed and injured among members of the "disbelievers" Jewish forces in a suicide attack by soldiers of the caliphate in the north of Palestine', Islamic State (IS), 27.3.2022.

[15] IS Khorasan province statement claiming the bombing of positions of the Uzbek forces with ten 'Katyusha' missiles in Termez in the south of Uzbekistan as part of 'the battle to avenge the two Sheikhs', Islamic State (IS), 18.4.2022; IS Khorasan province photo report showing the 'Katyusha' missiles used by IS militants to bomb the Uzbek forces' positions in Termez, Islamic State (IS), 18.4.2022; Amaq News Agency video showing the shooting of Tajik forces close to Takhar on the northern border of Afghanistan on 7.5.2022, Islamic State (IS), Amaq News Agency, 11.5.2022.

[16] Al-Naba (The News), issue No 356, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al I'lam al-Markazi, 15.9.2022.

[17] Amaq News Agency infographic, 'Results of the attacks by Islamic State fighters in 2022', Islamic State (IS), Amaq News Agency, 4.1.2023.

[18] Al-Naba (The News), issue No 349, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al I'lam al-Markazi, 29.7.2022.

IS affiliates in Africa

IS presented Africa as a destination for *hijra*.[19] Calls for religious migration to Africa were included in IS official videos and in the weekly newsletter al-Naba.[20] Notably, an IS West Africa province video urged all Muslims, especially those living in Africa, to join the territories under its influence. The video also aimed to portray areas of Nigeria as spaces where IS has already established territorial governance.[21] Other propaganda by the IS West Africa province focused on projecting governance capabilities, testifying to the group's ambition to cement territorial control in the region, especially in Nigeria. These releases showed IS' attempts to provide governance in the areas it operates in, for instance by confiscating drugs and training children as 'cubs of the caliphate'.[22]

IS West Africa province remained the largest and most active IS affiliate in Africa, predominantly targeting national armed and police forces, as well as Christian communities. The Kuje prison attack in particular was framed as a milestone for IS' reach in Nigeria, as IS stated in al-Naba that it succeeded in 'expanding the scope of its attacks from the north to the centre and south of the country'. The prison break was also described as a 'new phase of war […] that was not expected by anyone'.[23] An IS West Africa province video released on the occasion of *Eid al-Adha*[24] described its local militants as being able to target 'enemies in any province or region', seemingly suggesting their availability to take part in operations wherever IS may need them.[25]

Violence against Christians featured in numerous claims by IS' regional offshoots, especially in Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Mozambique. IS media publicised attacks on Christian communities and featured the burning of churches and gruesome executions. An Italian nun, whom IS said 'went too far in spreading Christianity', was also killed in an attack in Mozambique's Nampula region.[26] IS' weekly newsletter al-Naba gave considerable space to the reporting and praising of attacks committed by IS affiliates against Christians. In January 2022 the magazine also published an infographic entitled 'Bleeding of Christians', which gave an overview of attacks against Christians over 21 days and whose title inspired an online campaign by IS-supporting media inciting violence against Christians.[27]

Throughout 2022, IS reorganised its provinces in Africa and declared new ones. Ahlu-Sunna wa-Jamma (ASwJ), previously the Mozambique faction of IS Central Africa province, was granted '*wilaya*'[28] status in May 2022. In March 2022, IS first claimed responsibility for an attack against a military base in northern Mali under the name 'Sahel province'.[29] IS Sahel province predominantly operates across the tri-border area between Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, known as Liptako-Gourma. Propaganda by IS

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[19] Migration to sharia-controlled territory.

[20] Al-Naba editorial, 'Africa, the land of hijra and jihad', al-Naba issue No 343 (p.3), Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al I'lam al-Markazi, 16.6.2022.

[21] IS West Africa province video, 'A book guides and a sword leads to victory', Islamic State (IS), 15.6.2022.

[22] IS West Africa photo report, 'Part of the activity of the religious police department in burning a quantity of narcotic substances after seizing them', Islamic State (IS), 10.3.2022; IS West Africa province video, 'The generation of empowerment', Islamic State (IS), 18.1.2022.

[23] Al-Naba (The News), issue No 346, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al I'lam al-Markazi, 8.7.2022.

[24] Literally the 'Feast of the Sacrifice', Eid al-Adha is one of the two most important annual Islamic holidays (the other being Eid al-Fitr which marks the end of the month of Ramadan). The day commemorates the willingness of the prophet Abraham to sacrifice his son as an act of obedience to God's command. Eid al-Adha was celebrated this year on 9 and 10 July 2022.

[25] IS West Africa province video, 'And to glorify God for that he has guided you', Islamic State (IS), 18.7.2022.

[26] IS Mozambique province statement, 'The killing of 4 Christians, including an Italian nun, and the burning of a church, buildings and other properties in an attack by soldiers of the caliphate in the Nampula region, northern Mozambique', Islamic State (IS), 7.9.2022.

[27] Al-Naba (The News), issue No 321, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al I'lam al-Markazi, 13.1.2022.

[28] Province.

[29] IS Sahel province was previously known as Islamic State Greater Sahara (ISGS) province, which between March 2019 and March 2022 was formally part of IS West Africa province, while remaining operationally independent.

Sahel province highlighted successful operations against AQ's Sahel-based affiliate Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) in the second half of 2022,[30] as the two groups continued to vie for dominance in the region.

IS affiliates in Afghanistan and Pakistan

IS propaganda highlighted frequent operations by IS Khorasan province. The IS faction also conducted operations in Pakistan, where attacks were also claimed by a separate *wilaya,* the IS Pakistan province. Overall in 2022, IS's own statistics reported 181 attacks in Afghanistan and 58 in Pakistan.[31] Most of the attacks carried out by IS Khorasan province in Afghanistan targeted Taliban fighters and assets of countries IS perceives as allies of the Taliban, such as Russia and China. In December 2022, a Kabul hotel popular with Chinese diplomats and businessmen was hit in a suicide bombing that was claimed by IS Khorasan province.[32] In addition to the claim, IS official media released a short video of the perpetrators while reciting the oath of allegiance to the IS leader Abu al-Husain al-Husaini al-Qurashi.[33] IS devoted an editorial piece of al-Naba to the attack, whereby it painted itself as the defender of the Uyghur community in China.[34]

IS Khorasan province claimed another suicide bombing at the Russian embassy in Kabul in September 2022, which reportedly killed two Russian diplomats and four civilians.[35] IS initially identified the perpetrator as 'Waqqas al-Muhajir',[36] but IS later replaced 'al-Muhajir' (Arabic for 'migrant') with 'al-Waziristani' (meaning 'from Waziristan') in al-Naba.[37] Amaq News Agency released a report about the attack, also providing a picture of the masked perpetrator.[38] Amaq underscored that the attack occurred a few days after Taliban authorities had reassured foreign nationals, including Russian citizens, about their safety.[39] This remark feeds into IS' communication strategy, which is focused on exposing the Taliban's inability to provide stability and security in Afghanistan, thus harming its quest for international recognition. IS Khorasan province militants also attempted to assassinate the Pakistani Chargé d'Affaires in Kabul,[40] potentially with the intention of damaging diplomatic relations between the Taliban and Pakistan.

Attacks claimed by IS Khorasan province also underscored IS's perseverance in attacking Shia communities in Pakistan and Afghanistan. IS stated that its Khorasan militants had killed and injured over 250 people in a suicide attack at a Shia mosque in Peshawar, Pakistan. According to IS, the sustained series of attacks against Shias frustrated the efforts of the 'Taliban militia' and Pakistani authorities to protect Shia

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[30] Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), 'Actor Profile: The Islamic State Sahel Province', 2023, [2.02.2023], (https://acleddata.com/2023/01/13/actor-profile-the-islamic-state-sahel-province).

[31] Amaq News Agency infographic, 'Results of attacks by Islamic State fighters in 2022', Islamic State (IS), Amaq News Agency, 4.1.2023.

[32] IS Khorasan province statement, 'About 30 killed and wounded among 'communist' Chinese nationals and members of the Taliban in a double suicide attack against a big hotel in the capital Kabul', Islamic State (IS), 12.12.2022.

[33] Amaq News Agency video, 'Oath of allegiance to the Sheikh Abu al-Husein al-Qurashi by the two perpetrators of the suicide attack against the Chinese hotel in the Afghan capital Kabul, today', Islamic State (IS), 12.12.2022.

[34] Al-Naba (The News), issue No 369, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al I'lam al-Markazi, 16.12.2022.

[35] IS Khorasan province claim of responsibility for the suicide bombing on the Russian embassy in Kabul, Islamic State (IS), 5.9.2022.

[36] Amaq News Agency report, 'The explosion of an IS "martyr" at the entrance to the Russian embassy, killing and injuring more than 25 people, including two Russian officials and many of their spies', Islamic State (IS), 5.9.2022.

[37] Al-Naba (The News), issue No 355, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al I'lam al-Markazi, 9.9.2022.

[38] Amaq News Agency report, 'The explosion of an IS "martyr" at the entrance to the Russian embassy, killing and injuring more than 25 people, including two Russian officials and many of their spies', Islamic State (IS), 5.9.2022.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Reuters, 'Pakistani embassy in Kabul attacked, one injured', 2022, [15.04.2023], (https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/pakistan-says-kabul-head-mission-target-attack-embassy-2022-12-02).

mosques and centres of interest and defied heightened security measures.[41] Since the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, IS Khorasan province reverted to guerrilla warfare in a bid to hinder the Taliban's governance efforts. The IS affiliate appears poised to capitalise on Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis and to exploit local grievances to poach Taliban militants.[42] Similar recruitment efforts are carried out by the group in Pakistan, where it targets Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) foot soldiers.[43]

IS Pakistan militants are active predominantly in Pakistan's Balochistan province, where they carry out simple, small-scale attacks and assassinations targeting government forces[44] and civilians they accuse of sorcery.[45]

IS Khorasan province boasts a productive and far-reaching propaganda arm. Its releases aim to reach out to Central and South Asian audiences and target specific ethnic groups. In addition to providing IS propaganda translations into English and other Central Asian languages, the IS Khorasan province-linked media outlet al-Azaim Media tailors its content for audiences in Central Asia, including Pashto, Uzbek, Tajik, Kyrgyz and Dari/Persian speakers.

Its English language magazine 'Voice of Khurasan', whose first issue was launched in February 2022, propagates an anti-Taliban rhetoric, while also frequently addressing Muslims in India, painted as oppressed by the country's Hindu majority.[46] Propaganda items linked to IS Pakistan province include the Urdu language magazine 'Yalghar'[47], launched in April 2021 and whose third issue was published in August 2022. Its pages focused on IS attacks in Pakistan and reminded supporters that Pakistan and India are both 'disbeliever' countries, and as such there is no difference between them.

IS-supporting media and online spaces

The IS online ecosystem, still dominated by the productions of IS-supporting media, saw multilingual and translation outlets play a leading role in 2022. The translation of propaganda content is a mainstay of IS's communication strategy, as translated content allows IS to break down language barriers and reach sympathisers across the world. The Moata News Agency[48] resumed its operations on Telegram and stepped up its productions to cover multiple languages, including Arabic, English, French, Turkish and Persian.

The IS-supporting I'lam Foundation, which manages websites on the surface web and dark web, took on a pivotal role by offering translations of IS content in multiple EU and non-EU languages. Since its inception, the I'lam Foundation rapidly evolved into the main go-to platform for accessing translated IS content. Whilst ostensibly not linked to official IS media, the translation efforts of the I'lam Foundation were supported by other media outlets. For instance, the I'lam Foundation appears to rely on translations into English by Halummu, al-Azaim Media and Sons of Khilaafah. Co-productions between these media outlets specialised in translations were recurrent in 2022, and the I'lam Media website featured several examples of such collaboration

[41] Amaq News Agency statement, 'At least 250 dead and wounded in a big explosion that hit a Shia temple in western Pakistan', Islamic State (IS), 4.3.2022.

[42] Sayed, A. and Hamming, T.R., *The Growing Threat of the Islamic State in Afghanistan and South Asia*, United States Institute of Peace (USIP), 7.6. 2023, pp. 9-11.

[43] Ibid.

[44] IS Pakistan province statement claiming the assassination of an officer of the Pakistani police in Lahore, Islamic State (IS), 25.10.2022.

[45] IS Pakistan province claim for an attack targeting a 'magician' in Mastung in the region of Balochistan, Islamic State (IS), 10.4.2023.

[46] Al-Azaim launched magazines of the same name in Pashto and Dari.

[47] Meaning 'invasion' in Urdu.

[48] Moata News Agency is a multilingual foundation that became prominent among IS-supporting media mainly for reporting on IS operations in Iraq and Syria, at times releasing exclusive footage of such operations.

efforts. Nevertheless, internal disputes among these media outlets were observed, as they competed for being perceived as authoritative sources close to the official IS media sphere. In August 2022, the I'lam Foundation and Sons of Khilaafah were the subject of a dispute with regard to their links to more established translation projects, such as Halummu, and official IS media. A Telegram channel named 'Exposing Infiltrators' questioned the authenticity of the content published by the I'lam Foundation, which they defined as the "central media 'diwan'[49] for infiltrators and those who try to trap naïve supporters".[50] The same channel also accused Sons of Khilaafah of using the Halummu's template without permission. According to 'Exposing Infiltrators', Halummu denied any affiliation with I'lam or Sons of Khilaafah and reiterated that "the only official 'diwan' translation media is al-Hayat Media" and that I'lam Foundation and Sons of Khilaafah simply follow and re-publish content by Halummu and other "translating media", including al-Azaim.[51]

In 2022, IS messaging remained dispersed across different online spaces. The feed of IS official propaganda remained available on the main aggregators Telegram and Rocket Chat, but instances were also detected on more mainstream platforms, including X (previously known as Twitter), Facebook, Instagram and TikTok. IS propaganda gained a larger foothold on Odysee, an open-source video sharing platform that relies on the LBRY decentralised blockchain. The Inter-Planetary File System (IPFS),[52] a distributed system for storing and accessing information, continued to be used by IS supporters to store issues of al-Naba and video releases by IS provinces.

IS supporters also experimented with non-fungible tokens (NFTs),[53] which were created with official IS statements to enhance their online resilience and potentially for trading and financing purposes.[54]

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[49] Department.
[50] 'Exposing Infiltrators' Telegram channel.
[51] Ibid.
[52] IPFS is a modular suite of protocols for organizing and transferring data, designed from the ground up with the principles of content addressing and peer-to-peer networking. IPFS, 'What is IPFS?', 2023, [16.05.2023], (https://docs.ipfs.io/concepts/what-is-ipfs).
[53] Non-fungible tokens (NFTs) are tokens that are individually unique. They can be used to represent ownership of unique items, for instance art, collectibles, music and real estate. Ethereum, 'Non-fungible tokens (NFT)', 2023, [13.05.2023], (https://ethereum.org/en/nft).
[54] The Wall Street Journal, 'Islamic State Turns to NFTs to Spread Terror Message', 2023, [19.05.2023], (https://www.wsj.com/articles/islamic-state-turns-to-nfts-to-spread-terror-message-11662292800).

NARRATIVES BY AL-QAEDA AND ITS AFFILIATES IN 2022

Al-Qaeda Core's leadership

Al-Qaeda and its regional affiliates were able to provide their adherents with frequent messages in 2022. Although the last couple of years were marked by speculations concerning the presumed death of al-Qaeda's nominal leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, 2022 saw an increased number of video messages by the al-Qaeda leader, some of them providing proof of life.

Al-Zawahiri was eventually killed in a US drone strike in Kabul, announced by US President Joe Biden on 31 July 2022. At the time of writing, al-Qaeda has yet to acknowledge his death or declare a successor.[55] Somewhat ironically, after al-Zawahiri's death, al-Qaeda released a number of videos that featured the leader paying tribute to the lives of deceased al-Qaeda regional leaders.[56]

Propaganda by al-Qaeda Core's leadership continued to snipe at the US. Through its magazine One Ummah, al-Qaeda gloated about the perceived failures of US President Joe Biden's administration.[57] Additionally, al-Qaeda's official media wing al-Sahab Media Production Company decried the bilateral meeting between the US and Saudi Arabia in July 2022.[58] The group posited that the meeting took place in a bid to overturn the US's increasingly 'fragile' role in the region following its withdrawal from Afghanistan and Iraq. Arab governments, in al-Qaeda's view, fear the US may not fulfil its promise to protect them should their populations rise against them.[59] Al-Sahab closed the year with a banner entitled 'Did Santa Claus pledge allegiance to al-Qaeda?'.[60] The banner glorified past operations carried out by al-Qaeda, such as the suicide attack on Camp Chapman in Afghanistan's Khost province, which occurred in December 2009 and led to the death of seven CIA agents. The graphic style of the banner is reminiscent of productions by supporting media and uncharacteristic of al-Sahab releases.

2022 marked a critical moment for al-Qaeda's evolution and prospects of survival. The question of leadership succession may raise challenges for al-Qaeda's regional branches, especially in terms of pledging allegiance (bay'a).[61] Al-Qaeda is keen on being perceived as a global movement and the affiliation of regional branches is essential to this end. As such, al-Qaeda's media apparatus gives considerable space to the achievements of its regional branches.

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[55] Several sources report that the de facto al-Qaeda leader is Sayf al-Adl, an Iran-based al-Qaeda senior leader and leader of the Hittin Committee, which oversees the group's global activities.

[56] Ayman al-Zawahiri video, 'The martyrs of the subcontinent under the banner of the Prophet', al-Qaeda Core, al-Sahab Media Production Company, 23.12.2022; Al-Sahab Media video 'The martyr of the call - Tribute to Sheikh Abu Iyadh Al-Tunisi', al-Qaeda Core, al-Sahab Media Production Company, 27.12.2022.

[57] One Ummah issue No 6, al-Qaeda Core, al-Sahab Media Production Company, 19.2.2022.

[58] The White House, 'Results of bilateral meeting between the United States and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia', 2022, [20.05.2023], (https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/07/15/fact-sheet-results-of-bilateral-meeting-between-the-united-states-and-the-kingdom-of-saudi-arabia).

[59] Al-Qaeda Core statement, 'Statement in relation to the American-"Zionist"-Saudi summit in Jeddah', al-Sahab Media Production Company, 25.8.2022.

[60] Al-Qaeda Core poster, 'Did Santa Claus pledge allegiance to al-Qaeda', al-Sahab Media, 31.12.2022

[61] Should the leader of one of al-Qaeda's regional branches die, the new one would need to pledge allegiance to the al-Qaeda Core leader, who would not be able to accept it if still undeclared. See also Bacon, T., *The Looming Problem for al-Qaeda's Affiliate Alliances*, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), 17.5.2023.

Al-Qaeda's regional branches

Al-Shabab al-Mujahidin Movement (al-Shabab)

In 2022, al-Shabab al-Mujahidin Movement (al-Shabab) cemented its control over southern and central Somalia. The group was able to carry out large-scale attacks, which resulted in high death tolls. Sustained attacks were carried out against targets in the country's capital Mogadishu. These included the 23 March 2022 attack against the Halane military base at the Aden Adde International Airport, which houses, among others, the headquarters of several Western embassies and UN offices.[62] Another major attack carried out by al-Shabab in 2022 was the 3-day siege of the Hayat Hotel in Mogadishu (19-21 August 2022).[63]

Al-Shabab also expanded its efforts in other countries in the region, such as Kenya and Ethiopia. In mid-June 2022, al-Shabab waged multiple operations against local military bases in the northeast of Kenya. According to Shahada News, following a raid in Kenya's Lamu District on 16 June 2022, al-Shabab managed to take control of the area 'after local forces fled, and maintained it until the morning after'. Al-Shabab militants reportedly delivered speeches to the local population, in which they commented on Kenya's general elections that took place in August 2022, warning citizens 'not to be drawn into this trap'.[64] In the wake of its general elections, Kenya remained in the cross hairs of al-Shabab, which addressed the new government and threatened more attacks should the new administration 'persist on its war path and unjust invasion of Somalia'.[65]

In July 2022, al-Shabab exploited Ethiopia's civil unrest to cross the border from Somalia into Ethiopia's Somali region. The foray inside Ethiopia is reported to have taken place following two major al-Shabab attacks against Ethiopian military bases in the cities of Yeet and Aato, located on the border between Somalia and Ethiopia, which led to the killing of 87 Ethiopian soldiers.[66]

Al-Shabab's propaganda apparatus grew in parallel with its military might. In addition to the detailed reporting of military activities, propaganda by al-Shabab's media outlets focused on underscoring the provision of public services by the group to embed itself into the local population. Al-Shabab called upon Muslims to join the jihadist cause in Somalia, also addressing the youth in Kenya. The video series entitled 'And inspire the believers', published by al-Shabab's official media wing al-Kata'ib Media Production, is a case in point.[67] The video features a speech by an individual, identified as Ahmed 'Nyuki', who addresses the youth in Kenya and repeatedly urges them to "wake up and come to the lands of jihad", and to not let "kuffar[68] deceive [them] with their false propaganda claiming that they have killed al-Shabab".[69] Video releases by al-Kata'ib are made available in Arabic, Somali and Swahili.

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[62] Al-Shabab al-Mujahidin Movement statement, 'Violent attack by al-Shabab fighters against the largest foreign military base in the capital Mogadishu', Shahada News Agency, 23.3.2022.
[63] Al-Shabab al-Mujahidin Movement statement, '170 government officials and Somali forces killed and wounded in the longest immersive attack of al-Shabab al-Mujahidin Movement that lasted for three days in Mogadishu', Shahada News Agency, 21.8.2022.
[64] Al-Shabab al-Mujahidin Movement statement claiming an attack against a military base located in Kenya's Lamu District, Shahada News Agency, 16.6.2022.
[65] Al-Shabab al-Mujahidin Movement statement, 'New statement by al-Shabab al-Mujahidin Movement entitled "Kenya at a crossroad"', Shahada News Agency, 27.8.2022.
[66] Al-Shabab al-Mujahidin Movement statement, '87 members of the Ethiopian troops killed in two massive al-Shabab attacks that brought full control of two cities', Shahada News Agency, 21.7.2022.
[67] Al-Shabab al-Mujahidin Movement, video 'And Inspire the Believers – episode 20', al-Kata'ib Foundation, 16.2.2022.
[68] Disbelievers.
[69] Al-Shabab al-Mujahidin Movement, video 'And Inspire the Believers – episode 20', al-Kata'ib Foundation, 16.2.2022.

The editorial piece of the 7th issue of One Ummah was dedicated to al-Shabab. In it, al-Qaeda Core's leadership predicted that the group would take over Somalia, just like the Taliban had done in Afghanistan. According to the author, 'the fate of Mogadishu will be for those who protect it and sacrifice for it, the jihad of its people will not be far from the fate of the people of Afghanistan'.[70]

Jama'at Nusra al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Jama'at Ansar al-Muslimin fi Bilad al-Sudan (Ansaru)

Al-Qaeda's branch in the Sahel region, Jama'at Nusra al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), expanded its operational reach beyond Mali and Burkina Faso to Benin and Togo. Through its media wing al-Zallaqa, the group regularly released claims of attacks, as well as infographics detailing spoils of war and casualties. The group continued to lock horns with IS Sahel province, while also battling security forces of Sahelian countries and the Russian private military company Wagner group.[71]

Propaganda by both JNIM and IS Sahel province indicated heightened violence between the two groups, especially towards the end of 2022. Footage depicting clashes between JNIM and IS militants[72] near Tessit, Mali, were included in a 17-minute video by JNIM's official media outlet al-Zallaqa in December 2022.[73] Earlier in the same week, IS Sahel province had claimed the killing of 'more than 100 members of the apostate al-Qaeda militia' in clashes near Ménaka, Mali.[74] JNIM's attacks against security forces included an attack against Mali's largest military base in Kati, close to the capital Bamako in July 2022.[75]

JNIM is keen on being perceived as a group that targets the military as opposed to civilians. Its statements continued to blame the loss of civilian lives in its operations on the Malian army and the Wagner group.[76] It is also worth noting that JNIM has shown reluctance in being linked to new instances of hostage-taking. Its presumed involvement in the kidnapping of the French journalist Olivier Dubois that occurred in Gao, Mali, on 8 April 2021, was never confirmed by the group's official media. A second 'proof of life' video showing Olivier Dubois circulated in pro-al-Qaeda online channels in March 2022. Addressing his family, close friends and the French government, Dubois reiterated that he had been kidnapped by JNIM.[77]

JNIM's parent faction, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) continued to target Algeria in its productions. On the occasion of the 60th anniversary of Algeria's independence from France, AQIM condemned the 'oppression' and 'brutality' of the French rule in Algeria over 130 years, and called upon Muslims to use any means, including force, and wage jihad to overthrow the military regime in the country.[78] In

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[70] One Ummah issue No 7, al-Qaeda Core, al-Sahab Media Production Company, 26.8.2022.

[71] In mid-August 2022, JNIM released a statement claiming it killed four Wagner members near Bandiagara, in Mali's Mopti region. The group subsequently published a photo report documenting the attack. Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) photo report, 'Traces of blood and motorcycles of Wagner mercenaries in Diallo', al-Zallaqa, 17.8.2022.

[72] JNIM refers to IS militants as Khawarij (or Kharijites), literally meaning 'those who left from the group'. The term refers to a group of Muslims in early Islam who rebelled against the authority of the fourth caliph, Ali ibn Abu Talib.

[73] Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) video 'Battle with the "Kharijites" 10 km south of Tessit', al-Zallaqa, 17.12.2022.

[74] IS Sahel province statement, 'More than 100 members of the apostate militia of al-Qaeda were killed and dozens others wounded in clashes with the soldiers of the caliphate north of Mali', Islamic State (IS), 14.12.2022.

[75] Jama'at Nusra al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) statement, 'The blessed Kati strike, in Bamako, carried out by the heroes of JNIM in defence of the oppressed and in revenge for the vulnerable killed by the Malian army and Wagner', al-Zallaqa, 23.7.2022.

[76] Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) statement, 'Destruction of a car of the Malian army and condemnation of the killing of innocents', al-Zallaqa Media, 1.11.2022.

[77] Proof of life video showing French journalist Olivier Dubois kidnapped in Mali, 14.3.2022.

[78] Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) video, 'Sadness and hopes in the anniversary of the Independence Day', al-Andalus Media Production Company, 19.7.2022.

2022, militants with links to AQIM were targeted in counterterror operations by Algerian armed forces in the region of Skikda, East Algeria. In a May 2022 video message, Abu Khalil Idris, leader of AQIM in Western Algeria, declared that several AQIM fighters were killed and some others were imprisoned in Skikda.[79] In the words of one of AQIM's militants, identified as Abdulmuhsin aka Abu Julaybib, AQIM also called on the Muslim youth to remain steadfast on their path of jihad.[80]

Jama'at Ansar al-Muslimin fi Bilad al-Sudan (Ansaru) is a Nigerian group that pledged allegiance to AQIM in 2020.[81] In 2022, through its official media wing al-Yaqout Media Center, Ansaru claimed attacks in the northern Nigerian states of Kaduna and Zamfara.[82] In January 2022, Ansaru designated the Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF) as the 'sole exclusive and official source' of content for its al-Yaqout Media Center.[83] GIMF is an organisation with historical ties to al-Qaeda and that has supported the media operations of different al-Qaeda branches, predominantly those of al-Shabab. In addition to reaffirming Ansaru's position within the al-Qaeda network, the prominent role of GIMF in Ansaru's propaganda activities afforded more sophistication to Ansaru's productions and allowed for their translation from Arabic into English and French. In 2022, Ansaru also launched a periodic newsletter entitled Sawt al-Qarra al-Samra,[84] in which Ansaru highlighted that al-Qaeda is forced to follow a decentralised approach and as such, the organisation cannot be held responsible for any fault or deviation of its worldwide branches.[85]

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)

Incitement to commit attacks in western countries remained a recurrent thread in propaganda by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). A video featuring AQAP's Ibrahim al-Qusi called upon Muslims in France, India and elsewhere to "storm out" in defence of the Prophet Muhammad and "kill those who mock him", referring to the allegedly offensive comments against the Prophet Muhammad made by certain members of Indian political parties. Al-Qusi drew a parallel with France, which in his view is also guilty of blasphemy.[86] He praised the perpetrators of terrorist attacks in France, such as the Kouachi brothers, who stormed the offices of Charlie Hebdo on 7 January 2015, and Abdoullakh Anzorov, who killed a teacher in Conflans-Sainte-Honorine on 16 October 2020. According to al-Qusi, the perpetrators acted to avenge the Prophet Muhammad and there should be no doubt regarding the legality and righteousness of their actions.[87] In a docu-film by Shahed, promoted as 'a media service from al-Malahim Foundation', AQAP decried Western countries acting as

[79] Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) video, 'We would surely be fabricating a lie against God if we were to return to your faith - after God has saved us from it', al-Andalus Media Production Company, 20.5.2022.

[80] Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) video, 'Interview of al-Andalus Media with the brother and mujahid Abudlmuhsin Abu Julaybib', al-Andalus Media Production Company, 9.5.2022.

[81] With a statement issued on 31 December 2021, the Nigeria-based group Jama'at Ansar al-Muslimin fi Bilad al-Sudan (Ansaru) revealed that it had pledged allegiance to AQIM in 2020. The statement provided insight into the foundation of Ansaru in 2012, which allegedly occurred because of the deviation of Boko Haram's leader Abubakr Shekau from the 'authentic' ideological mainstay. According to the statement, Ansaru operates in the north of Nigeria, bordering Niger in the north and Benin in the west. See Jama'at Ansar al-Muslimin fi Bilad al-Sudan (Ansaru) statement giving information about the group and announcing that they pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Jama'at Ansar al-Muslimin fi Bilad al-Sudan (Ansaru), 31.12.2021.

[82] Jama'at Ansar al-Muslimin fi Bilad al-Sudan (Ansaru) photo report, 'Aftermath of the attack by the mujahidin in areas of Birnin Gwari and Tun Sado in Kaduna and Zamfara provinces', al-Yaqout Media Center, 9.4.2022.

[83] Statement from Jama'at Ansar al-Muslimin fi Bilad al-Sudan (Ansaru), al-Yaqout Media Center, 14.1.2022.

[84] The voice of the dark continent.

[85] Sawt al-Qarra al-Samra, issue No 1, Jama'at Ansar al-Muslimin fi Bilad al-Sudan (Ansaru), al-Yaqout Media Center, 30.3.2022.

[86] Ibrahim al-Qusi video speech, 'Indeed in that is a reminder', al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al-Malahim Media Production Company, 9.7.2022.

[87] Ibid.

colonising forces in Yemen and pillaging the country's resources.[88] In particular, AQAP highlighted the presence of the French TOTAL oil company in Balhaf, Yemen. The group accused France of controlling gas resources while the Yemeni population lives in extreme poverty. In addition to France, the US and the UK were also accused by AQAP of supporting the Saudi-UAE alliance[89] to Yemen's detriment.[90]

AQAP also released a hostage plea video through its mouthpiece al-Malahim Media. The video reportedly showed Akam Sofyol Anam, identified by the group as the director of the United Nations (UN) Office of Security and Safety in Yemen. The UN worker was reportedly abducted with four other colleagues in February 2022 in Abyan, south Yemen.[91]

Ansar al-Sharia (AAS), which directs part of AQAP's activity in Yemen, is entrusted with reporting on AQAP's operational activities against the Yemeni army and the Houthi rebels. As part of a wider effort to step up AQAP's media strategy, AAS launched the media and military campaign Siham al-Haqq ('Arrows of the truth') in September 2022, aimed at documenting AQAP's intensified attacks against 'the aggressors and the agents of the US and the UAE' in Yemen. Additionally, Shahed, the latest addition to AQAP's media apparatus, focused its productions on different aspects of the conflict in Yemen, such as the historical overview of the Houthis' rise to power and the need for Sunnis to unite and join AQAP's 'mujahidin' in their fight against the Houthis.[92]

Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP)

Deeply rooted in Pakistan's tribal areas, the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) operates in areas of both Afghanistan and Pakistan. The TTP's agenda is locally focused and its main goals revolve around reducing Pakistani military presence in the country's tribal districts, imposing sharia law in its areas of influence, and achieving the release of its imprisoned members. The group's ideological underpinnings are aligned to those of al-Qaeda.

Since the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan, the TTP experienced a resurgence after a period of decline during which the group faced military pressure, infighting and significant defections to IS Khorasan province. TTP leader Noor Wali Mehsud[93] renewed his oath of allegiance to the Afghan Taliban, whose example the TTP hopes to emulate. Mehsud congratulated the Afghan Taliban for seizing control of Afghanistan.[94] For its part, the Afghan Taliban leadership avoided displaying public support to TTP, even though it has acted as a mediator in negotiations between the TTP and the Pakistani government. A ceasefire between the TTP and the Pakistani government that was agreed upon in May 2022 through Afghan Taliban mediation was called off by the TTP in November 2022, following the alleged killing by Pakistani forces of two senior TTP commanders in Afghanistan.[95]

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[88] Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) video, 'Shahed 3 - Occupied Yemen', Shahed, 25.9.2022.

[89] Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are both part of a coalition that backs the internationally recognised government of Yemen against the Houthi movement in the ongoing civil war.

[90] Ibid.

[91] Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) video, 'Appeal from the Director of the United Nations Office of Security and Safety in Yemen - Akam Sofyol Anam', al- Malahim Media Production Company, 3.9.2022.

[92] Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) video 'Marib and the battle of steadfastness', Shahed, 14.2.2022.

[93] Noor Wali Mehsud became the leader of TTP in 2018 following the death of his predecessor Maulana Qazi Fazlullah in a drone strike in Afghanistan.

[94] Joscelyn, T., *Pakistani Taliban's emir renews allegiance to Afghan Taliban*, Long War Journal, 19.8.2021.

[95] Letter dated 13 February 2023 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities addressed to the President of the Security Council, *United Nations Security Council*, S/2023/95, paragraph 74.

Lately, the group has held considerable sway especially with disaffected youths, which replenished its ranks and allowed the TTP to intensify its operations against the Pakistani state. Additionally, the TTP has faced less pressure in Afghanistan due to the Afghan Taliban's return to government and its veiled support for the TTP. Under the leadership of Noor Wali Mehsud, the TTP was able to rehabilitate its image by reducing civilian casualties in its attacks and refraining from indiscriminate violence.[96] In addition to an increase in the frequency of its attacks, the TTP also expanded its operations outside of its traditional stronghold of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and claimed attacks in Balochistan, Sindh, Punjab provinces as well as in Islamabad.[97]

TTP's propaganda operations are led by the group's official mouthpiece Umar Media, whose multilingual productions include textual as well as audio-visual material. TTP's revived operational tempo was highlighted in infographics by Umar Media, which provide a monthly overview of the group's attacks. The TTP also releases a magazine in the Urdu language entitled 'Mujalla Taliban', which offers an insight into TTP's strategic direction, as well as the group's perception of the current political situation in Pakistan. By October 2022, the magazine counted ten issues. The TTP retains an online presence across a variety of platforms and web assets, including Chirpwire, a pro-al-Qaeda platform whose interface is similar to that of Twitter, as well as the official Umar Media website.

Al-Qaeda-supporting media and online spaces

The sustained flow of official propaganda messages by the al-Qaeda network was matched by productions by its supporting media. 2022 saw a turnover of branded media outlets supportive of al-Qaeda, with new entities being introduced and replacing ones that had been discontinued. A case in point is the al-Nusra Foundation for Media Production, which was announced on the 21st anniversary of the 11 September 2001 attacks. Al-Nusra's self-professed mission is to support Muslims against declared enemies worldwide and 'disseminate the true news about the *mujahidin*'.[98] The media outlet's visual identity and mission are similar to those of Thabat News Agency, a media outlet reporting on al-Qaeda and its affiliates' battlefield activities.

In 2022, the group Hurras Al-Tawheed (HAT) or 'Guardians of Monotheism' issued a series of six magazines in English urging readers to attack the West from within, to perform *hijra* or carry out an operation in [their own] homeland. Regarding its affiliation, HAT stressed that it never stated to be pro-AQ, nor to be against IS.[99] It also reproached Western 'mujahidin' for fighting each other instead of uniting against the 'crusaders'.[100] In spite of HAT's declared 'neutrality', issues of their magazines were shared in online spaces linked to the AQ network and its supporters.

In addition to Telegram, the bulk of al-Qaeda-supporting content was shared on the self-hosted instance of Rocket.Chat technologies known among al-Qaeda supporters as GNews, and Chirpwire. In parallel, AQ's branches appeared to step up their propaganda dissemination strategy and foster the online resilience of their productions by launching new web assets. AQAP launched a website for its official al-Malahim Media Company, which provided a large repository of official AQAP propaganda including statements by the media outlet Ansar al-Shariah Correspondent, photo reports and video releases. Similarly, the main purpose of the file sharing

96 Sayed, A. and Hamming, T.R., 'The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan After the Taliban's Afghanistan Takeover', Vol. 16 issue No 5, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 2023, pp. 1-12.
97 Ibid.
98 Al-Nusra Foundation for Media Production statement 'Founding statement - Statement number 01', 11.9.2022.
99 O Mujahideen in the West issue No 4 'Al-Qaeda or Dawlah?', Hurras Al-Tawheed (HAT) (Guardians of Tawheed), 20.3.2022.
100 Ibid.

website Sahel News was to archive propaganda material by al-Qaeda's affiliates in the Sahel, namely AQIM and JNIM. The domain was detected in pro-al-Qaeda Telegram channels and bots starting in early December 2022. While access to the site's main page required registration, direct links to specific content (e.g. videos, documents, images) could be viewed when publicly shared.

HA'YAT TAHRIR AL-SHAM (HTS)

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) has been in control of the province of Idlib in addition to areas in north Hama. The group continued to impose governance in these areas through its civilian wing, the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG). Launched in November 2017, the SSG provides civil administration in the areas under HTS's influence, including security and public services such as education and healthcare. In 2022, HTS's communication strategy continued to rebrand HTS as the defender of the Syrian people from the regime and its allies, as well the only actor able to mitigate the ongoing conflict's effect on Syria's social fabric and economy.

Since the March 2020 Idlib ceasefire agreed upon by Russia and Türkiye, HTS was able to dismantle or absorb smaller factions operating in the area it controls, while also compelling any rival group from hampering the ceasefire agreements. In May 2022, HTS held talks with the Levant Front, a group in the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA).[101] In mid-October 2022 HTS took control of Afrin, a Syrian Kurdish-majority city in the northern Aleppo province that was under the control of the SNA, reportedly without meeting resistance. HTS subsequently withdrew its forces from Afrin following a ceasefire imposed by Türkiye.[102]

HTS undertakes its military activities through the al-Fath al-Mubin operations room, which it has led since 2019. Al-Fath al-Mubin's military efforts, focused on fighting the Syrian regime and its allies, are documented and disseminated by Alaskary Media. During 2022, the media outlet played a key role in highlighting HTS's military preparedness by releasing numerous videos (as well as infographics) displaying HTS's clashes against Syrian regime forces, as well as HTS's military equipment and targets.

Political analysis and reporting by HTS's media apparatus supported the group's quest to emerge as a political alternative while shedding links to terrorism. This effort was complemented by the multiple public appearances of HTS leader Muhammad al-Jawlani, in which he posed as a civilian figure promoting governance and development initiatives. These included a visit to the General Authority for Displaced Persons Affairs in the city of Hama, as well as the inauguration of a project to draw water from Ain al-Zarqa to Al-Roj, which were documented by HTS's media outlet Amjad Production.[103] By meeting with representatives of religious minorities, such as Christians and Druze,[104] al-Jawlani also aimed to showcase religious tolerance and promote HTS's 'moderate' stance.[105] Through Alaskary Media, HTS decried the bombing of the Orthodox Christian Suqaylabiyah church, in the southwest of Idlib, which it ascribed to Russia and Iran.[106]

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[101] Al-Monitor, 'Turkish-backed forces meet with rival HTS in north Syria', 2022, [10.06.2023], (https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/05/turkish-backed-forces-meet-rival-hts-north-syria).

[102] Middle East Eye, 'Syria: Turkey to reorganise rebel groups as HTS withdraws from Afrin', 2022, [10.06.2023], (https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/syria-turkey-reorganise-rebel-groups-hts-withdraws-afrin).

[103] Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) video, 'Commander Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani meets with the General Authority for Displaced Persons Affairs in the city of Hama and its countryside', Amjad Production, 25.7.2022; Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) photo report showing abu Muhammad al-Jawlani and representatives of the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) inaugurating a project to draw water from Ain Zarqa to the Al-Roj, Amjad Production, 23.7.2022.

[104] North press agency, 'Al-Julani's moves contradict HTS policies in Syria's Idlib', 2022, [10.6.2023], (https://npasyria.com/en/81153).

[105] BBC Monitoring, 'Analysis: Syria jihadist leader al-Jawlani continues rebrand quest', 2022, [11.06.2023], (https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c203y2h5).

[106] Alaskary Media video 'The one behind the bombing of the Church of the Suqaylabiyah?' Alaskary Media, 26.7.2022.

Publications by Alaskary Media recurrently berated Russia's involvement in the Syrian conflict and denounced Vladimir Putin's interventionism, in HTS's view epitomised by Russia's war of aggression on Ukraine. Alaskary Media produced a variety of videos aimed at exposing the Syrian regime's 'dependency' on its allies.

Alaskary Media also attempted to step up its online presence while promoting HTS's recruitment efforts, for instance by engaging users in weekly contests comprising questions based on the information in podcasts.[107] On the occasion of the 5th anniversary of the creation of HTS, Alaskary Media released an interview with Hamza al-Yusuf, an HTS military official who provided insight into the group's recruitment methods and the profile of the candidates who join its ranks.[108]

In August 2022, HTS ideologue Abu Mariya al-Qahtani released a controversial message on his Telegram channel, in which he argued for the dissolution of the al-Qaeda franchise. According to al-Qahtani, the presence of a plausible successor to al-Zawahiri in Iran, where he is said to be under confinement, makes him unfit to lead al-Qaeda's branches. Al-Qahtani also insisted that al-Qaeda branches, especially AQAP, focus on battling Iran and its influence in Muslim countries. Al-Qahtani's advice to al-Qaeda's branches to emulate HTS and break ties with al-Qaeda Core generated an outcry in online circles loyal to al-Qaeda.[109]

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[107] Alaskary poster 'Weekly competition #Knowledge_is_strength', Alaskary Media, 4.12.2021.
[108] 'Telegram Interview with Hamza al-Yusuf, HTS military leader', Alaskary Media, 4.2.2022.
[109] Bunzel, C., *"Dissolve al-Qaida": The Advice of Abu Mariya al-Qahtani*, Jihadica, 24.8.2022.

CROSSCUTTING THEMES AND EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES IN JIHADIST PROPAGANDA

A number of globally relevant events triggered similar reactions in jihadist circles online, underlining the fact that, in spite of divergent views, these groups share ideological underpinnings and grievances.

IS labelled Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine as one of the 'wars between crusaders' in al-Naba, predicting that more of these wars will mark the fall of 'crusaders'. The group also deplored the involvement of Chechen militias alongside the Russians and called upon Muslims, especially those in Russia and Ukraine, to reject any call to join the military ranks of either country.[110] The title of the editorial 'wars between crusaders' was turned into a hashtag and used to facilitate the dissemination of new content. IS-supporting media also strongly criticised the West for appearing to condone the 'call to arms' for foreign fighters in Ukraine. According to IS supporters, Western audiences were able to sympathise with the call to join the fight in Ukraine, as the ongoing conflict is collectively perceived as unjust.

By contrast, IS's call to join its ranks was globally condemned.[111] IS supporters also expressed their frustration over perceived double standards in Western empathy for the humanitarian plight of people depending on their race and religion. In a similar vein, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, the dominant militant group in the Idlib enclave, berated the West for standing by and 'watching the war, displacement, and atrocities committed by the Russian occupier in Syria', while 'supporting the Ukrainians with everything they need to repel the Russian aggressor'.[112] Al-Qaeda and its affiliates also adopted a narrative focused on perceived 'double standards' and racial discrimination. In AQAP's view, the West opposed Russia for attacking Ukraine but did nothing to stop Russian support for the Syrian regime. It noted that Europe welcomed Ukrainian refugees with open arms, in stark contrast with the approach towards Muslim refugees.[113] The pro-al-Qaeda media Jaysh al-Malahim al-Elektroni published the third issue of the Wolves of Manhattan magazine, which encouraged young Muslims to capitalise on the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. It advised them to travel to the country in order to receive military training from the Ukrainian government, as well as weapons and ammunition to be used to commit attacks in the EU and the US.[114]

Throughout 2022, the propaganda releases of both al-Qaeda and IS also focused on India's domestic political developments. In April 2022, al-Qaeda's late leader Ayman al-Zawahiri commented on the protests over the ban on hijab in schools and pre-university colleges in India's Karnataka state. In particular, al-Zawahiri praised the behaviour of "a sister in an Indian University" whose video was shared across "news

[110] Al-Naba (The News), issue No 328, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al I'lam al-Markazi, 4.3.2022.
[111] Al-Dir' al-Sunni Foundation poster, 'Two calls to arms and two different public perceptions', Al-Dir' al-Sunni Foundation, 7.3.2022.
[112] Alaskary report, 'The latest developments in the Russian war on Ukraine', Alaskary Media, 20.4.2022.
[113] Ibrahim al-Qusi video speech, 'Indeed in that is a reminder', al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al-Malahim Media Production Company, 9.7.2022.
[114] Jaysh al-Malahim al-Elektroni 'Wolves of Manhattan 3', Jaysh al-Malahim al-Elektroni, 3.4.2022.

channels and social media accounts" and whose actions, in al-Zawahiri's view, "embodied the spirit of Jihad, as she challenged a mob of Hindu polytheists with defiant slogans of *takbeer*, with immense pride in her identity, and her hijab".[115] Additionally, al-Qaeda and IS affiliates alike instrumentalised Hindu-Muslim tensions and alleged comments against the Prophet Muhammad. Al-Qaeda in the Subcontinent (AQS) incited attacks in retaliation for the alleged blasphemies and reminded all 'brothers' in the subcontinent that the Prophet Muhammad foretold the victory of Islam in India.[116] Similarly, in al-Shabab's view, the alleged offensive remarks are 'part of a systematic campaign of fierce war against Islam and Muslims in India'. Al-Shabab also called on all Muslims to defend the honour of the Prophet Muhammad and 'take revenge against the Hindu polytheists wherever they find them'.[117]

In this context, IS praised the attack carried out by IS Khorasan province against a Hindu temple in Kabul which left at least 50 dead and wounded.[118] Issues of the 'Voice of Khurasan' magazine, linked to IS Khorasan province, highlighted the perceived Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiment in India. Issue 15 of the magazine included an article that described the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS),[119] the ideological parent organisation of the Bharaitya Janata Party (BJP), as an 'organisation whose sole aim is to target and denigrate Muslims, and ultimately wipe out Islam'. The article also highlighted that since 2014, 'Muslims have often been attacked and killed in the name of protecting cows in mostly northern states where BJP has stronger mass support'.[120]

Jihadist groups sought to capitalise on the 2022 World Cup in Qatar to advance their long-standing narratives and position themselves as beacons of the global jihadist movement. Al-Qaeda urged Muslims to shun the Qatar World Cup, describing it as the epitome of corruption and decadence of Arab rulers.[121] While displaying a similar anti-Qatar stance, IS took the opportunity to discredit al-Qaeda's approach, by remarking on the lack of an explicit call for attacks against the Qatari government and military in messages by al-Qaeda. IS called for attacks during the tournament, while deriding al-Qaeda for its proposed proselytisation of the tourists who flocked to Qatar to participate in the World Cup.[122]

Jihadist groups of different ideological shades continuously seek innovative solutions to outdo competitors in terms of online presence and outreach, while also countering deletion efforts. In this context, the use of NFTs and other decentralised technologies to disseminate jihadist content presents challenges for law enforcement in terms of content removal, due to their advantageous technical features that make them resilient to takedown. The increased control over data on the part of the user and enhanced anonymity afforded by decentralised technologies is also likely to hinder investigative efforts aimed at the identification of propaganda operatives and network administrators on decentralised platforms.

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[115] Ayman al-Zawahiri video, 'The noble woman of India', al-Qaeda Core, al-Sahab Media Production Company, 5.4.2022.
[116] Al-Qaeda in the Subcontinent (AQS) statement, 'May our mothers be bereaved of us, if we fail to defend our Prophet', al-Sahab Media (The Subcontinent), 6.6.2022.
[117] Al-Shabab al-Mujahidin Movement statement, 'Statement on defending the honour of the Prophet (PBUH)', al-Kata'ib Media Production Company, 19.6.2022.
[118] Amaq News Agency statement, 'About 50 killed and wounded among the Hindus, the Sikhs and the Taliban in a complex attack by IS fighters against a temple in Kabul', Islamic State (IS), 6.6.2022.
[119] Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Hindi for 'National Volunteer Organization', is an Indian right-wing, Hindu nationalist volunteer paramilitary organisation.
[120] Voice of Khurasan, issue No 15, 'Hindutva, RSS, and an Islamophobic State', al-Azaim Foundation for Media Production, 1.10.2022.
[121] Al-Qaeda Core statement, 'Statement of the General Command on the march of indecency towards the Island of Muhammad - May God bless him and grant him peace - through the Qatar World Cup 2022', al-Sahab Media Production Company, 28.11.2022.
[122] Al-Naba (The News), issue No 366, Islamic State (IS), IS Diwan al I'lam al-Markazi, 24.11.2022.

Additionally, immersive virtual worlds such as metaverses[123] can provide new opportunities for propaganda creation and distribution, as well as recruitment and logistical planning of attacks. Terrorist supporters on the metaverse could create virtual worlds based on their ideological underpinnings and where their virtual lives could observe rules that may oppose fundamental values or infringe laws of the physical world.[124] For instance, avatars resembling prominent jihadist ideologues could be created and used to engage with users to promote jihadist narratives, enabling recruitment. Such avatars could be enabled by Large Language Models (LLMs) to spread messages reflecting a specific narrative.[125] Jihadist propaganda and training material could also be made accessible in virtual buildings on the metaverse. Virtual environments could also be exploited to plan and train for terrorist attacks. Lastly, jihadist groups could exploit generative AI[126] to create new propaganda releases as synthetic media, as well as manipulate content and create deepfakes[127] to use in online disinformation campaigns.

[123] A metaverse can be described as an immersive virtual world where users interact with each other and the environment.

[124] Europol (2022), Policing in the metaverse: what law enforcement needs to know, an observatory report from the Europol Innovation Lab, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

[125] A large language model is a type of AI system that can process, manipulate, and generate text. See Europol (2023), ChatGPT - The impact of Large Language Models on Law Enforcement, a Tech Watch Flash Report from the Europol Innovation Lab, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

[126] Generative AI is a type of artificial intelligence technology that allows for the creation of different types of content, such as text, visuals and audio.

[127] A deepfake is a specific kind of synthetic media, for instance a video or sound recording that replaces someone's face or voice with that of someone else, in a way that appears real. Cambridge Dictionary, 2023, [15.06.2023], (https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/deepfake).

CONCLUSIONS

Both IS and al-Qaeda experienced leadership changes in 2022. On one side, IS announced its leadership losses and spun the narrative to glorify its leaders who died for the jihadist cause. On the other side, al-Qaeda Core has so far shied away from acknowledging al-Zawahiri's death and has thus avoided naming a successor. The announcement of a new leader will be a tall order for al-Qaeda Core, but its silence on succession may negatively reflect upon its role vis-à-vis its network of affiliates. It is worth highlighting that, for both al-Qaeda and IS, leadership losses did not translate into narrative changes, nor did they affect the operational activities of their global affiliates.

IS operations in Africa continued to feature prominently in propaganda, reiterating the importance of local insurgencies for the global IS project. IS further demonstrated its will to empower branches at local level by conferring the status of separate provinces (*wilayat*) to affiliated insurgencies in Mali and in Mozambique. IS-supporting media also endeavoured to incorporate local narratives into the group's global discourse, by translating IS content into new languages and by tailoring original material to reflect the grievances of specific ethnic groups and demographics. In this context, the media operations of IS Khorasan province stood out in terms of translation capabilities and outreach to Central and South Asian audiences.

The Taliban's return to government in Afghanistan continued to influence and inspire the ambitions of different groups within the jihadist milieu aligned to al-Qaeda. Al-Shabab's military gains in particular raise concern about the group's capacity to seize power in Somalia. The Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has also taken advantage of the return of the Taliban in Kabul to expand its operational range and tempo.

Drawing on geopolitical developments, jihadist groups continued to seize on opportunities to advance their own vision of global jihad, especially by portraying Islam and the Muslim community as under attack by the West. Russia's war of aggression on Ukraine, for instance, united the jihadist front in condemning the double standards in the way the West reacted to the conflict, as well as the lack of empathy for the predicament of Muslims in other conflicts elsewhere. Additionally, online jihadist propaganda instrumentalised perceived insults to Islam and measures perceived as discriminatory against Muslims to galvanise sympathisers and urge them to engage in violent acts.

The message of jihadist groups still resonates with its intended audiences and continues to fuel the threat of terrorism. Maintaining online resilience is integral to the survival of jihadist groups, which consistently rely on the latest technologies to broadcast their viewpoint and communicate with like-minded individuals. Efforts to investigate and disrupt the dissemination of online jihadist propaganda should heed the increasingly widespread adoption of decentralised technologies, such as NFTs, as well as other emerging technologies like the metaverse and generative AI. In this context, devising targeted, future-proof approaches should remain a priority for law enforcement.