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Abstract

This paper attempts to contribute to academic discussion on the current state and capabilities of the Islamic State's digital propaganda. Its primary objective was to measure and analyze one month's output of the "Caliphate's" cyber jihadist machine, released on the non-Arabic "surface web." It also attempted to identify the dominant themes and types of productions exploited by the Islamic State during this period. It argues that the long-term campaign attempting to cripple the propaganda of Daesh on the Internet has not yet brought satisfying effects. Its productions in various forms are still easily achievable on the non-Arabic "surface web," even through standalone websites, which are rarely and slowly banned by the law enforcement. In this context, while its releases are still easily accessible by the average Western Internet users, their quality and quantity were visibly reduced, which makes them slightly less alluring for some potential audiences. This, in turn, confirms that the current, difficult situation of this terrorist organization has had a significant impact on its digital jihadist capabilities.

Keywords

Introduction

Since 2016 the Islamic State has suffered an aggravating crisis. Significant defeats on the battlefields of Libya, Iraq and Syria, symbolized by the losses of Sirte, Mosul and Raqqa, were followed by serious problems encountered by the Internet propaganda machine of Daesh.[1] Its most prominent cyber jihadist capabilities have been impaired, which was caused by both kinetic (airstrikes conducted by the US-led coalition) and cyber (tech firms curbing the propaganda more efficiently) actions. In effect, the self-proclaimed "Caliphate" has ceased to publish its most sophisticated and resonating productions, such as flagship online magazines ("Dabiq" and "Rumiyah"), or a series of execution videos of Western hostages. Moreover, the quality and quantity of its other releases have significantly decreased.[2]

However, the crisis of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's organization does not mean that it has lost all of its former abilities to influence Internet users. Despite the joint efforts of numerous international and local actors in the Middle East and Central Asia, the pockets of Islamic State's resistance in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan are still noticeable.[3] Persistence of its militants has surprised the academic community, media and Western political elite which expected its quick downfall after the loss of Raqqa.[4] A similar situation is visible in cyberspace. While the propaganda machine from Daesh's apogee in 2014 and 2015 is nowhere to be seen, the organization has been able to maintain limited presence on the Internet.[5] This has been proven by numerous releases in recent months, which succeeded in drawing the attention of the mass media.[6] This basically means that the "Caliphate's" cyber *jihad* still poses a significant threat to international security.

This paper attempts to contribute to academic discussion on the current state and capabilities of the Islamic State's digital propaganda. It is a result of a research project entitled "Picturing Islamic State's Propaganda: Towards Digital Decline?", which was carried out in September and October 2018 at the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies of the European University Institute in Florence, Italy. Its primary objective was to measure and analyze one month's output of the "Caliphate's" cyber jihadist machine, released on the non-Arabic "surface web." Its secondary objective was to identify the dominant themes and types of online productions exploited by the Islamic State during this period. In other words, the project attempted to understand how Daesh's propaganda on the Internet has adapted to the crisis experienced by this organization. The study was based on a number of open source intelligence techniques (OSINT), limited content analysis, as well as quantitative methods.

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[1]   At its peak, the media arm of the Islamic State consisted of numerous professional cells, such as al-Hayat Media Center, al-Furqan Media Foundation, al-I'tisam Media, al-Ajnad Foundation for Media Production, andthe Amaq News Agency

[2]   See e.g. Daniel Milton, *Communication Breakdown: Unraveling the Islamic State's Media Efforts*, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, United States Military Academy, October 2016; Daniel Milton, *Down, but Not Out: An Updated Examination of the Islamic State's Visual Propaganda*, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, United States Military Academy, July 2018; Miron Lakomy, "Cracks in the Online "Caliphate": How the Islamic State is Losing Ground in the Battle for Cyberspace," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 3 (2017).

[3]   Derek Henry Flood, "From Caliphate to Caves: The Islamic State's Asymmetric War in Northern Iraq," *CTC Sentinel*, September (2018), 30-34.

[4]   Robert G. Rabil, "ISIS Isn't Dead Yet," *The National Interest*, last modified September 1, 2018, https://nationalinterest.org/feature/isis-isnt-dead-yet-30152 ;"'Islamic State': Up to 30,000 fighters still in Syria and Iraq, UN says," *DW.com*, last modified August 13, 2018, https://www.dw.com/en/islamic-state-up-to-30000-fighters-still-in-syria-and-iraq-un-says/a-45070311.

[5]   See "'We are in your home': the Islamic State's propaganda machine is still alive," *The European Post*, last modified January 24, 2018, http://europeanpost.co/we-are-in-your-home-the-islamic-states-propaganda-machine-is-still-alive/.

[6]   See e.g. Jamie Bullen, "Sick ISIS video 'shows desperate final moments of US soldiers ambushed and killed in Niger," *Mirror*, last modified March 5, 2018, https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/us-news/sick-isis-video-shows-desperate-12130064.

However, this project had three important caveats. Firstly, it excluded online communication apps, such as the Telegram, as well as the "dark web" (accessible, for example, *via* the TOR browser).[7] This was due to the fact that the study aimed to measure the output of IS's propaganda in these parts of the World Wide Web ("surface web"), which are easily accessible for Anglophone (Western) Internet users. Secondly, for the same reasons Arabic-only websites were not monitored. Three, short, informative communiqués, distributed primarily with the use of extra-WWW channels, as well as Daesh followers' posts and messages in social media, were also not taken into consideration. This means that Amaq News Agency's statements, for example, which are customarily released through Telegram, were not collected. In contrast, the study gathered productions of both official IS's bodies (Al-Hayat Media and al-Furqan Media Foundation) and unofficial centers, such as the Ahlut-Tawhid Publications. This effectively means that the study identified only a certain, but significant, part of the Islamic State-affiliated propaganda materials released between September 15th and October 15th 2018.

This paper has been divided into five parts. The first discusses the project's findings concerning the predominant channels of distribution exploited by Daesh in the World Wide Web in September and October 2018. It also describes the methodology used to identify, collect and analyze its digital jihadist productions. The second discusses text propaganda released by this terrorist organization, including online magazines, newsletters and statements. The third one debates audio propaganda, such as al-Bayan Radio recordings and *nasheed* chants. The fourth focuses on the wide range of audiovisuals. Finally, the last one analyzesthe broadly understood visual propaganda, including photographs, advertisement banners, infographics, and posters.

Islamic State's distribution strategy in the "surface web"

The research project collected the Islamic State's propaganda productions released in the World Wide Web between September 15th 2018 and October 15th 2018. The study focused on the Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 ("surface web")[8] environments exclusively. A number of open source intelligence methods were employed. Initially, the study discovered – through the use of advanced search engine options, in conjuncture with keywords associated with the "Caliphate" – four incarnations of the bilingual (Arabic and English) Daesh-affiliated standalone website entitled *Ghuraba* ("strangers"). It was operated by the unofficial propaganda cell of the Islamic State – Ahlut-Tawhid Publications (Figure 1). Its address changed prior and during the research project, presumably due to the actions of law enforcement. Nevertheless, new embodiments almost instantly reemerged at new locations from backup copies.[9] *Ghuraba* utilized both rarely used top-level domains, such as .top, .host, or .website, as well as the popular ones like .com. Interestingly, the address localized at the .com top-level domain did not contain any evident references to extremist Islamism, *jihad* or the Islamic State. However, it was still banned at the beginning of October, in contrast to the URL using .website TLD, which was still operating two weeks later. It should also be noted that, according to the who.is queries, servers of the Ahlut-Tawhid Publications website were operated from Makkah and Abu Dhabi (Figures 2 and 3).

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[7] About these environments see Vincenzo Ciancaglini et al., *Below the Surface: Exploring the Deep Web*, TrendLabs Research Paper, Trend Micro 2015.

[8] About Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 see e.g.: Manishkumar R. Solanki, Abhijit Dongaonkar, "A Journey of Human Comfort: Web 1.0 to Web 4.0," *International Journal of Research and Scientific Innovation* III, no. 9 (2016), 75.
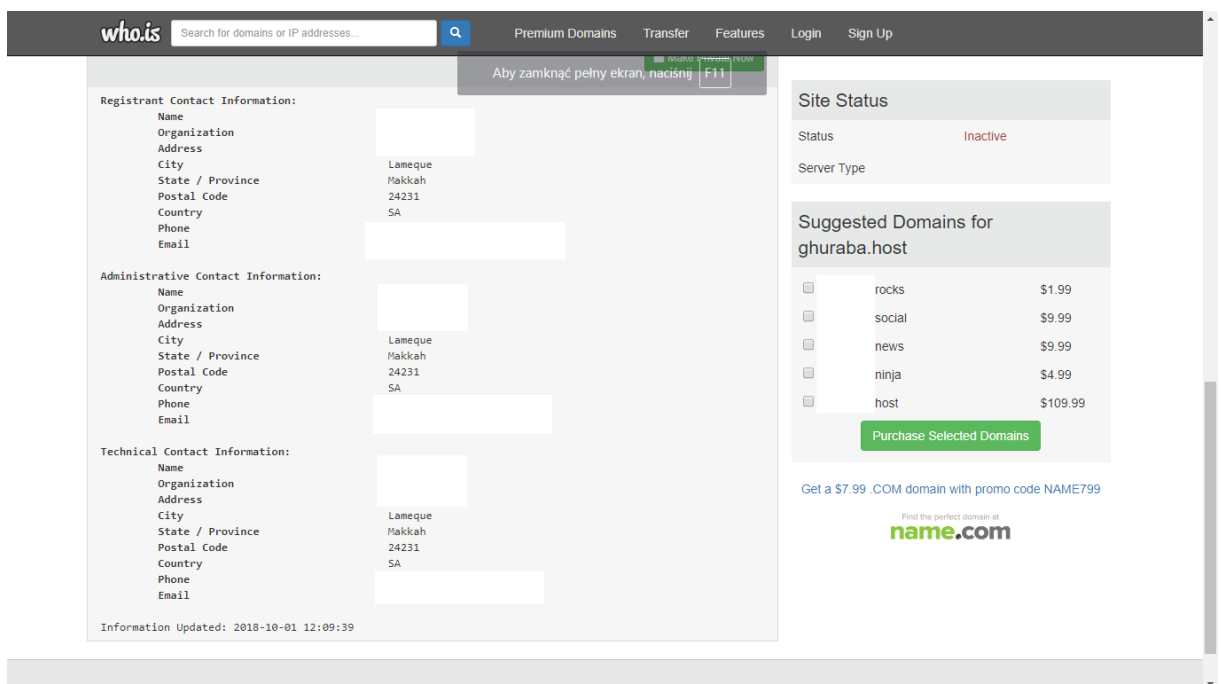
[9] The study, due to counter-terrorist reasons, avoids providing exact addresses of websites used by terrorists.

Figure 1. *Ghuraba* main page
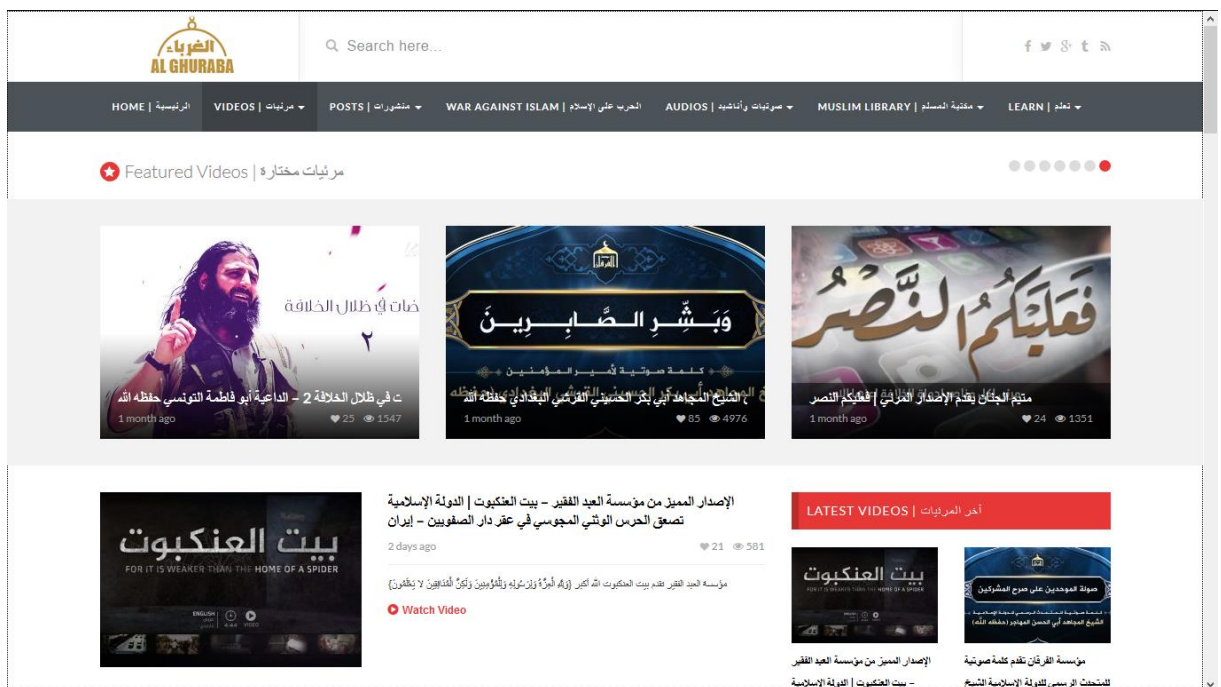
Source: Ahlut-Tawhid Publications / *Ghuraba* website

Figure 2. Who.is query of one of the *Ghuraba's* incarnations using the .host top-level domain

Source: Who.is

Figure 3. Who.is query of one of the *Ghuraba's* incarnations using the .com top-level domain

Source: Who.is

Ghuraba regularly provided all types of propaganda affiliated to the Islamic State's official and unofficial media cells, including, among others, the al-Hayat Media Centre, Amaq News Agency, al-Bayan Radio, Furat Media Foundation, as well as Ahlut-Tawhid Publications. Organization of the content of this website included the following subpages:

- Home – which allowed the user to have a preview of the most recent releases uploaded, as well as to get access to visual content (photographs, Amaq News Agency's statements etc.),

- Videos – consisting of, for example, documentaries, battle videos, music videos, religious deliberations,

- Posts – containing text propaganda, including standalone articles, magazines, news, statements, and e-books,

- War Against Islam – focusing on presenting gore materials (text and audiovisual), which "proved" that *kuffar* (infidels) commit crimes against the *Ummah*,

- Audios – consisting of al-Bayan Radio archives, statements and *nasheed* chants,

- Muslim Library – which allowed users to download e-books, as well as press, leaflets, and magazines,

- Learn – which promoted the IS's narrative concerning the history of Islam, as well as a wide range of religious topics. This subpage even featured the "Complete Quran Recitation by Various Reciters," elaborated by the Ajnad Foundation for Media Production (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Advertisement banner of the audiobook entitled "Complete Quran Recitation by Various Reciters"

Source: Ajnad Foundation for Media Production / *Ghuraba* website

Moreover, the study identified one standalone website, which was operated by the al-Muhajireen Foundation (Figure 5). It exploited the popular .com Top-Level Domain. In contrast to *Ghuraba*, it focused exclusively on distributing releases of this propaganda cell, which usually consisted of statements and warnings. Interestingly, the website was multilingual. Its featured publications in Arabic, English, Dutch, German, French and Persian. Moreover, it ought to be noted that its organization of content was much simpler in comparison to the Ahlut-Tawhid Publication's website, as it copied classic blogosphere solutions. This means that the available subpages consisted of only those which organized content in terms of its language and date of release. The website was banned on October 4th 2018.

Figure 5. Al-Muhajireen Foundation website
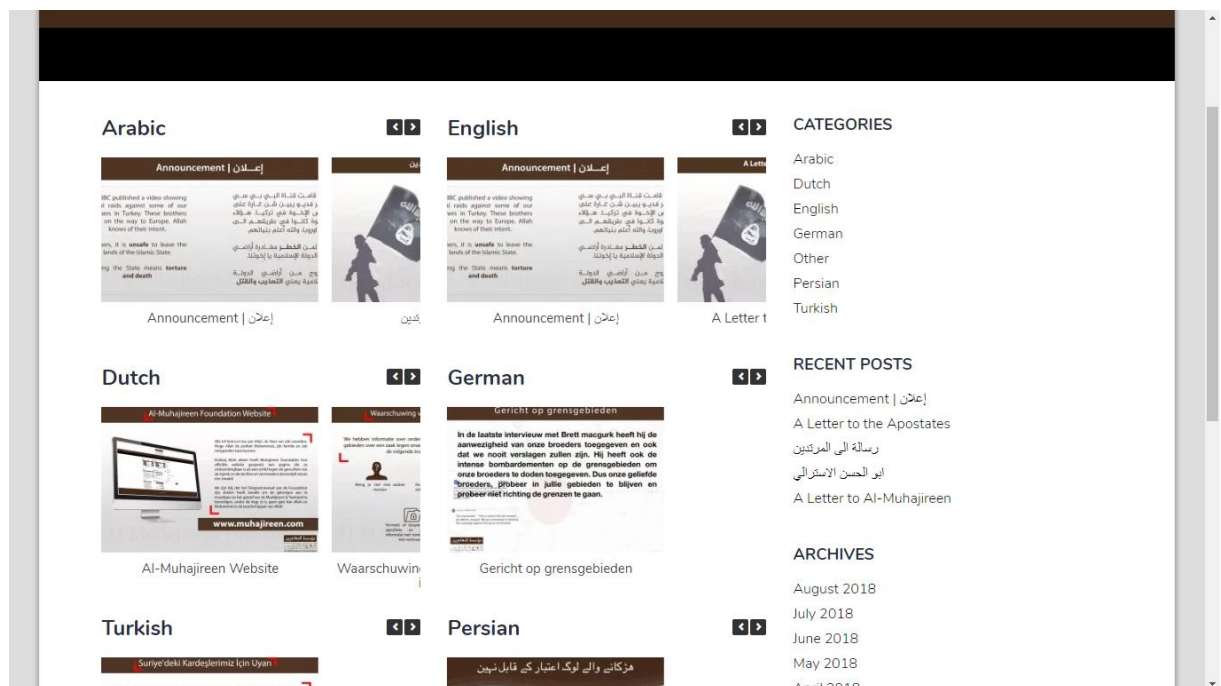
Source: al-Muhajireen Foundation website

Secondly, various Internet services, which were exploited by the IS-affiliated users to proliferate propaganda, were identified and monitored on a daily basis. They included:

- Internet Archive,
- various types of pastebins,
- bitchute.com,
- and medium.com.

The study also discovered a number of online services, which were exploited by Daesh prior to the research project. They were, however, inactive between September 15th and October 15th 2018. They were usually operated by the aforementioned Ahlut-Tawhid Publications. These were:

- Scribd.com (text propaganda),
- Docdroid.net (text propaganda),
- En.calameo.com (text propaganda),
- Reddit.com (text propaganda),
- Drive.google.com (text propaganda),
- H4.tgkanal.com (text propaganda),
- Pdf-archive.com (text propaganda),
- Docgo.net (text propaganda),
- Archive.fo (text propaganda),
- Dailymotion.com (audiovisual propaganda).

Additionally, an unfinished Ahlut-Tawhid Publications blog was identified on the yolasite.com sitebuilder. AHP even possessed a Tumblr account, which was, however, inactive (or banned) during the time of the research project.

In this context, it has to be stressed that Ahlut-Tawhid Publications proved to be extremely active in the non-Arabic "surface web" in 2018, in contrast to the official IS media branches such the al-Hayat Media Centre, or the Furat Media Foundation. These cells at the time of the research project did not host standalone websites in English. Moreover, their productions were usually proliferated through the Internet Archive, or were uploaded to the previously mentioned *Ghuraba*. Meanwhile original AHP's releases were scattered among a multitude of supplementary channels, such as Reddit.com or Dailymotion.com. This visible contrast between the unofficial and official cells of Daesh, in terms of their distribution strategy in the World Wide Web, was possibly caused by the fact that Ahlut-Tawhid Publications and al-Muhajireen Foundation at the time were some of the least known groups supporting the Islamic State in cyberspace. Thus, some of the tech firms, website administrators, as well as – possibly – also law enforcement agencies could not recognize them yet as the part of "Caliphate's" propaganda machine. This meant that their publications and accounts could survive on the "surface web" relatively longer in comparison to, for example, al-Hayat Media Center's which was affiliated with the "Caliphate" since day one. In effect, its releases were much easier to spot and quicker to ban.

Thirdly, Twitter chatter[10] was monitored with the use of a Twitonomy service in order to discover new IS propaganda releases. A number of *hashtags* and key words affiliated with the "Caliphate's" ideology and Islamist terrorism were used. However, it has to be stressed that the activity of jihadists on Twitter proved to be insignificant. The vast majority of messages concerning the Islamic State's online propaganda were generated by independent, critical Internet users and professionals.

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[10] Twitter is considered to be the most popular social media among Islamist terrorists. See e.g. J.M. Berger, Jonathon Morgan, "The ISIS Twitter Census," *The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World Analysis Paper*, no. 20 (2015).

Fourthly, information about new releases were also extracted from websites and Twitter accounts of think-tanks specialized in collecting and analyzing digital jihadist productions, such as SITE Intelligence, TRAC Terrorism, or Terror Monitor. The project also referred to the Jihadology website, founded by a recognized academic specialized in terrorist propaganda – Aaron Y. Zelin. News about releases of the Islamic State provided by these sources were matched with monitored propaganda channels. The study also attempted to look for original channels of distribution of these materials, based on a number of OSINT tools, such as Tineye.

In another phase of the research project, Islamic State's productions were categorized in one of four qualitatively different groups ofcyber jihadist propaganda:

- *audiovisual content* (executions, promotional videos, advertisements, documentaries and reports, interviews etc.),
- *audio propaganda* (*nasheeds*, audio statements, radio recordings),
- *text messages* (online magazines, newsletters, bulletins, website articles, statements in .PDF, e-books),
- *visual propaganda* (photo reportages, banners, posters, infographics).

Finally, all productions were also analyzed in terms of their dominating themes (e.g. battle

footage, executions, religious deliberations, political statements) in order to understand what the current priorities of the IS online propaganda machine are.

Text propaganda of Daesh: online magazines strike back?

The research project discovered 35 new pieces of text propaganda affiliated to Daesh, released on the "surface web" between September 15th and October 15th 2018. The predominant channels of their distribution consisted of Internet Archive and standalone websites.

Statements published in various formats, such as .PDF and .PNG, constituted the largest part of this group. As many as 18 pieces were discovered. The vast majority of them were issued by the al-Muhajireen Foundation in various languages: English, Arabic, German, French, Persian etc. They were very specific in terms of the content as they were predominantly focused on the situation of the Islamic State's militants in Syria. AMF short statements referred to, for example, the safety of *mujahidin* in Idlib, where they were targeted by the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (former branch of the Syrian al-Qaeda),[11] and divisions among the *jihadis*, their morale, and the situation in Deir ez-Zor (Figures 6 and 7). In other words, they frequently consisted of warnings on the difficulties experienced by the "Caliphate" in Levant (*al-Sham*). However, these productions lacked sophisticated narration or developed argumentation based on, for example, religious texts (Quran, *hadiths*), which is common in other forms of the Islamic State's text propaganda.

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[11] See e.g. Aymen Jawad al-Tamimi, *From Jabhat al-Nusra to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham: Evolution, Approach, and Future*, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung 2018; Charles Lister, "Hayat Tahrir al-Sham: To Unite or To Divide the Ranks?," in *How al-Qaeda Survived Drones, Uprising, and the Islamic State*, ed. Aaron Y. Zelin (Washington D.C.: The Washington Institute For Near East Policy, 2017).

Figure 6. Al-Muhajireen Foundation statement entitled "Be aware of Apostates"

Be aware of Apostates

O brother, be wary of leaving the lands of the Islamic State in Wilayat Sham and leaving Jihad to go to the lands that are controlled by the apostates. Recently, (**Ibrahim Al-Idlibi**) left the lands of the Islamic State, and now his destiny is in the hands of the apostate HTS in Idlib, for they arrested him while he was trying to sneak into Idlib.

One of the agents of HTS who were involved in arresting Al-Idlibi was (**Abu Shaheen Al-Iraqi**), who is a senior officer in the arrest cell of the apostate HTS.

Source: al-Muhajireen Foundation's website

Figure 7. Al-Muhajireen Foundation statement entitled "The evil ways are exposed"

Their evil ways are exposed

The apostates in Idlib in Wilayat Sham are spying on the houses of our brothers, and are marking the doors with red marks to indicate that these are houses of Islamic State's Mujahideen, before they send a security force to arrest our brothers and scare their families and children.

Thus, Al-Muhajireen Foundation warns all Islamic State's Mujahideen from falling as victims to such operations.

Save yourselves and your families, do not go to the places where Allah's enemies exist.

Source: al-Muhajireen Foundation's website

Other important statements were issued e.g. by the al-Hayat Media Center and the Ansar al-Khilafah fi Italia. The first cell released transcriptions and translations of the Islamic State's spokesperson Abul-Hasan al-Muhajir statement, in which he praised the *mujahidin* who conducted a terrorist attack against a military parade in Ahwaz (Iran).[12] Ansar al-Khilafah fi Italia issued an Italian translation of the old speech of the self-proclaimed "Caliph" Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The document was released on the Internet Archive on September 22nd 2018 (Figure 8). This may indicate the rising interest of this terrorist organization in the dynamically growing Muslim minority of Italy. One statement in French was also released by the Centre Médiatique an-Nur ("Écoute & Obéis").

Figure 8. Title page of the Italian translation of the speech of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi

Source: Ansar al-Khilafa fi Italia / Internet Archive

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[12] Abul-Hasan al-Muhajir, *The Muwahhidin's Assault on the Tower of the Mushrikin*, al-Hayat Media Center 2018.

The second group of text propaganda consists of online magazines, bulletins and newsletters. As many as 11 pieces released by Daesh official and unofficial media wings were discovered. They consisted of:

- 4 issues of "al-Naba" (official IS release),
- 5 issues of "From Dabiq to Rome" (Ahlut-Tawhid Publications),
- 1 issue of the "Journal of Youth of the Caliphate" (al-Faqeer Media),
- 1 bulletin published by the Afaaq Electronic Foundation.

The presence of the "al-Naba" was not a surprise, as it is probably the oldest periodical released regularly by Daesh. More than 150 issues of this newsletter had been released by mid-October 2018.[13] The other two publications were much more interesting. On the one hand, Al-Faqeer Media's production constituted another attempt to reach out to the generation of the "cubs of the Caliphate."[14] On the other, AHP's "From Dabiq to Rome" newsletter – as its title suggests – proved to be an ambitious, but somewhat unsophisticated attempt to make up for the absence of the two former flagship magazines of Daesh: "Dabiq" and "Rumiyah." Until mid-October 2018 more than 30 editions of this periodical were published online. It was proliferated primarily through the Ahlut-Tawhid Publications' Internet Archive[15] official account (Figure 9).

Figure 9. Screenshot of the AHP's official account at the Internet Archive
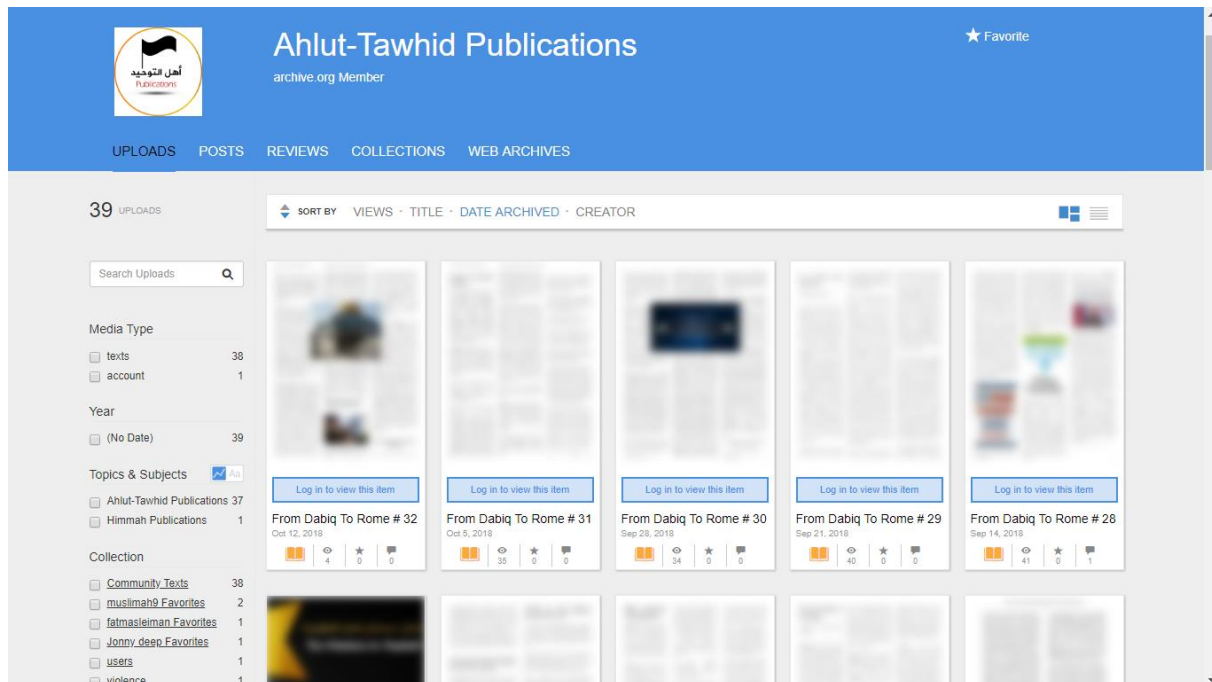
Source: Internet Archive

This piece, published in English, usually consisted of about dozen pages, which discussed a number of classical issues important from the viewpoint of the Islamic State's agenda (Figure 10). The newsletter was predominantly composed of only four sections:

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[13] See "New issue of The Islamic State's newsletter: al-Naba #152," *Jihadology*, last modified October 18, 2018, https://jihadology.net/2018/10/18/new-issue-of-the-islamic-states-newsletter-al-naba-152/.

[14] See Kara Anderson, "Cubs of the Caliphate." The Systematic Recruitment, Training, and Use of Children in the Islamic State, International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, January 2016.

[15] "From Dabiq to Rome" was also released through the *Ghuraba* website, but usually with a short delay of one or two days.

- a simplistic title page merged with the table of content,
- articles usually discussing classical topics reiterated in a multitude of other*jihadi* publications,[16]
- news headlines,
- and infographics, which were utilized as interludes between other sections.

For instance, the 29th edition underlined the significance of *jihad* and criticized the *mushrikin* (polytheists), this was based – among others – on selectively chosen citations from the Quran and *hadiths*. The article discussing this topic ended with a promise to fight them "until everyone submits to the din of Allah (…) and complies with its rules and surrenders to its authority."[17] The same release consisted of an infographic attacking the Israeli political elite and featured news on the IS's activities. The following edition, similarly to other productions of the IS, focused on praising the terrorist attack in Ahwaz, which was a major success for the organization at the time.[18]To summarize, this was an interesting but still crude attempt to provide Anglophone Internet users with *jihadi* text propaganda once again, in absence of the professional magazines published by the official Islamic State media cells.

Figure 10. Title page of the "From Dabiq to Rome" #30

Source: Ahlut-Tawhid Publications / Internet Archive

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[16] There were, however, exceptions. For instance FDR #31 consisted of Q&A articles. See "Q&A w/ Shaykh Hassan Husayn," *From Dabiq to Rome* 31 (2018), 9.

[17] "What Are The Foundations of the Jihadi Manhaj?," *From Dabiq to Rome* 29 (2018), 4.

[18] "The Reality of the Shi'ah," *From Dabiq to Rome* 30 (2018), 2.

Afaaq Electronic Foundation's bulletin constituted another attempt to provide Islamic State's followers with basic knowledge on cyber security issues. Therefore it was a continuation of the older publications containing similar instructions, such as the magazine published in German – "Kybernetiq."[19]

Other publications discovered by the study consisted of statistical charts, standalone articles, and e-books, some of them were one of a kind. This was the case with al-Bayan Radio, which surprisingly published a document presenting data on the Islamic State's military and terrorist activities. There three standalone articles were also discovered, published in .PDF format or posted on *jihadi* websites. For instance, Centre Médiatique an-Nur published an essay entitled "C'est comme ca qu'ils etaient", authored by Abu Umar az-Zanji (Figure 11). It was basically a damage control piece, attempting to address plunging morale problems among the *mujahidin*. The other two (including one published by al-Battar Media) concerned widely understood religious issues.

Figure 11. Title page of the "C'estcomme ca qu'ilsétaient" essay published by Centre Médiatique an-Nur


Source: Centre Médiatique an-Nur / Internet Archive

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[19] See more in: Aaron Brantly, „Innovation and Adaptation in Jihadist Digital Security," *Survival. Global Politics and Strategy* 59, no. 1 (2017), 83-84.

Finally, two short e-books were also released at the time. The first one, published on September 15th 2018 by the Samoud Media in Arabic, was authored by Shaykh bin Ahmad. The second one, entitled "Ten Matters in Aqidah That a Muslim Cannot be Ignorant of and Must Learn" (Figure 12), was an English translation of the pamphlet released in the past by the "Caliphate's" al-Maktabah al-Himmah. It summarized "the most important matters of *'aqidah* (creed) that every single Muslim must know (and act upon)."[20] Ahlut Tawhid Publications, which translated this text, also stressed metaphorically in the introduction: "Whoever is familiar with the said publisher, and with the *Khilafah* in general, one notices, if he is honest, the care for knowledge, alongside, the dissemination and teaching of it. From longer books, medium sized booklets, to short pamphlets, all covering a wide range of issues, the *Khilafah* has stroven to free the Muslim, which then frees mankind, from the bonds and darkness of ignorance that covers the hearts and minds by the pen, alongside of the oft-spoken jihad with the sword."[21]

Figure 12. Title page of the "Ten Matters of 'Aqidah…" e-book
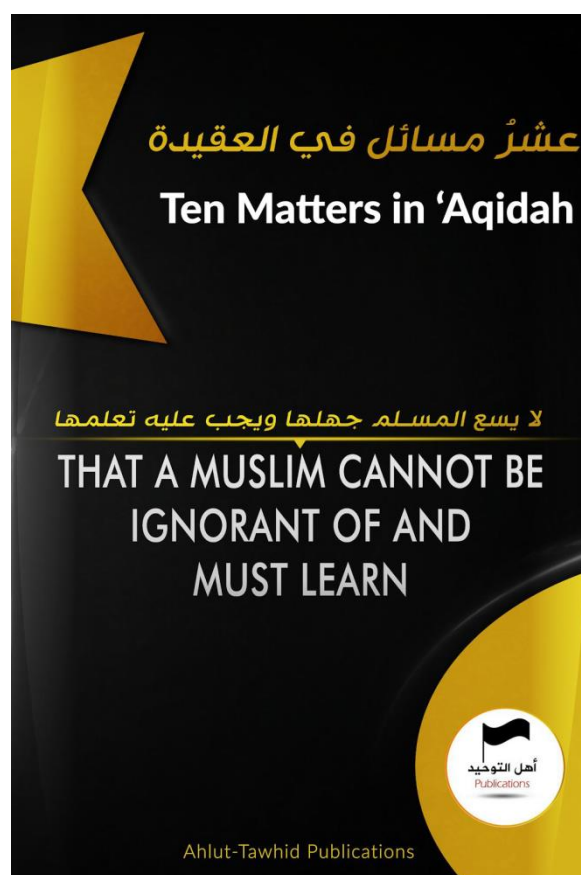
Source: Ahlut-Tawhid Publications / *Ghuraba* website

Audio propaganda: news, "theology" of *jihad*, statements, and martyrdom all over again

The study identified only fifteen new pieces of audio propaganda proliferated through monitored distribution channels between mid-September and mid-October 2018. They were categorized in three groups. The first consisted of eleven recordings produced by the official Islamic State's cyber jihadist cell – al-Bayan Radio. They were released in Arabic and the majority of them focused on providing

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[20] *Ten Matters in 'Aqidah That a Muslim Cannot Be Ignorant Of and Must Learn* (Ahlut Tawhid Publications, 2018), 3.

[21] Ibid., 3.

news on the organization's activities. One of them discussed detailed statistics of Daesh's activities. Two others constituted a series of religious lectures. It is worth mentioning that they were predominantly released through the Internet Archive (Figure 13).

Figure 13. Al-Bayan Radio audio lectures on the Internet Archive
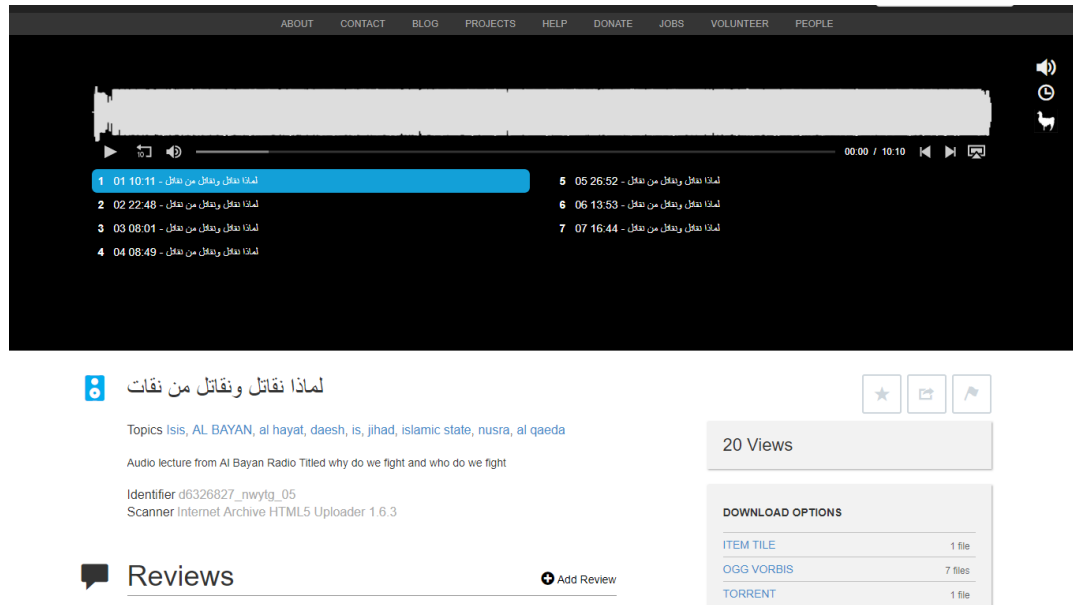
Source: al-Bayan Radio / Internet Archive

The three identified audio productions were all *nasheed* chants. The first entitled "Martyr" was released by the Ahlut-Tawhid Publications website in Arabic. The second entitled "Knights of martyrdom" was produced by the al-Hayat Media Center in Arabic. It was also accessible through the *Ghuraba* web page. Thus, both chants focused on the *shuhada* (martyrdom) as a leading theme. The third and the most interesting one, entitled "This is ibadah" was produced by the Furat Media Foundation in English and released through *Ghuraba* and Internet Archive (Figure 14). This piece focused on the *ibadah* (worship), *jihad* for the sake of Allah, and hardships suffered by the Muslim's *Ummah*. It also highlighted the theme of martyrdom and presented *jihad* as a path to *Jannah* ("garden", i.e. Islamic paradise).

Figure 14. "This is ibadah" advertisement banner

Source: Furat Media Foundation / Internet Archive

The last piece of audio propaganda was entitled "The Mujahidin Assault on the Tower of Polytheists." It was a speech by the Islamic State's spokesperson Abul-Hasan al-Muhajir, focusing on the terrorist attack in Iran. As mentioned in the previous chapter, translated transcriptions of this statement circulated in the World Wide Web in the form of .PDF documents.

Audiovisual propaganda: towards decreasing quality?

The study discovered 30 new videos produced by the Islamic State and its unofficial cells. They were categorized in several groups, depending on their form and content. The first consisted of seven classic battle videos, presenting Daesh militants in various combat situations. For instance, the "Eradicate enemies" movie produced by Wilayat Adan Abyan, presented suicide ("martyrdom") operations, as well as executions of the "enemies of Allah." Others, such as the "Jihad will be performed until the coming of the Hour" featured IED (Improvised Explosive Device) attacks. Some productions even focused on the use of drones by the IS's militants. This was the case with the piece entitled the "Islamic State Nightmare," which additionally threatened to use them in a terrorist attack against the American Statue of Liberty. Such a possibility was hinted in its advertisement banner (Figure 15). These usually short and unsophisticated productions were released, among others, by the Amaq News Agency through standalone, but unofficial websites (*Ghuraba*). This was an interesting development, as this cell usually operated in the Telegram communication app exclusively.

Figure 15. "Islamic State Nightmare" advertisement banner
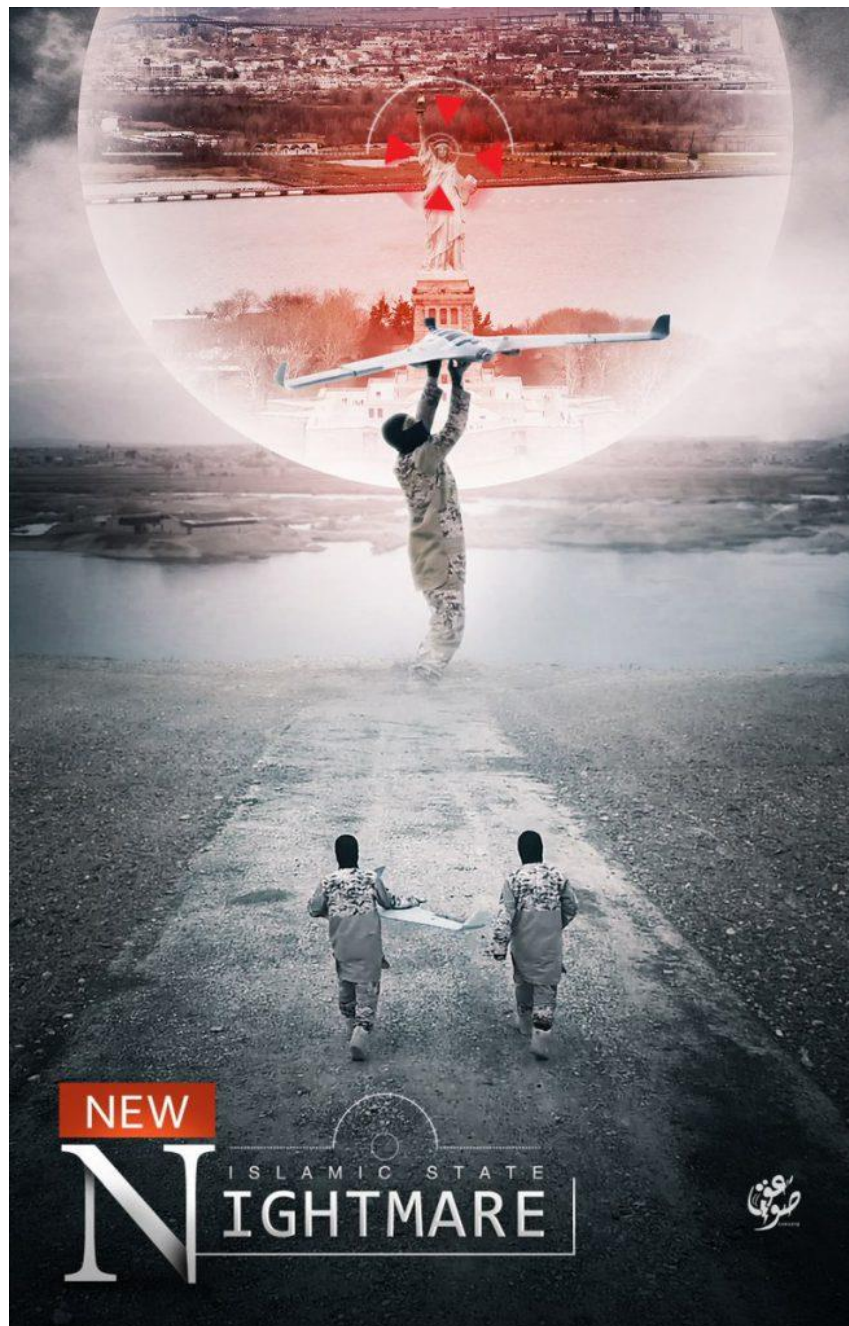
Source: *Ghuraba* website

The second group consisted of six videos, which focused on a plethora of *quasi*-religious topics. These were:

- "The victorious group,"
- "Is takfir only for the scholars?" (by *shaykh* Hassan Husayn as-Somali),
- "The kufr of those who rule by other than what Allah revealed" (by Sulayman al-Alwaan),
- "Such are the messengers tested & the outcome will be in their favor,"
- "The light of Islamic law will spread,"
- "Explanation of the story of the boy" (by Osama bin Laden).

Many of them were just simple reproductions of older voice recordings or videos featuring various terrorist leaders and extremist scholars, such as Abu Musab al-Zarkawi and Osama bin Laden. From a technical viewpoint, this category of audiovisuals was somewhat unappealing in comparison to the battle videos, mostly due to their low technical quality (Figure 16). They were simplistic in terms of directing and the post production methods employed. This was manifested by the fact that some reproductions of older recordings consisted of just an added introduction, as well as an English translation. Other elements remained unchanged.

These *quasi*-religious videos deliberated on a range of classical topics for digital *jihad*, such as *takfir* (labeling a Muslim as infidel)[22], *iman* (faith), hardships experienced by the *mujahidin*, and *kufr* (disbelief).Obviously, similarly to text propaganda, they heavily referred to citations from the Quran and *hadiths*. For instance, Osama bin Laden in his video reproduced and translated in English by the Ahlut-Tawhid Publications, posed as a "scholar" attempting to explain to *mujahidin* the meaning of a history of a boy related to the Prophet.

In this context it has to be mentioned that all these releases, discovered on the *Ghuraba* web page and at bitchute.com, were produced exclusively by unofficial IS's media cells, such as Ahlut-Tawhid Publications and al-Tamkin Media. This may suggest that the official propaganda of Daesh was at the time less interested in exploiting audiovisuals to spread its extremist ideology based on purely religious argumentation. Instead it focused on more appealing themes, such as the military and terrorist achievements of the "Caliphate."

Figure 16. "Explanation of the story of the boy" video screenshot, published by the Ahlut-Tawhid Publications

Source: Ahlut-Tawhid Publications / Bitchute.com

The third group of audiovisuals was composed of four videos from the series entitled the "Harvest of the soldiers," which was regularly released in Arabic and English by the al-Hayat Media Center. Each audiovisual of this type consisted of professionally presented statistics on the operations conducted by

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[22]   See e.g. Bader al-Ibrahim, „ISIS, Wahhabism and Takfir," *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 8, no. 3 (2015).

the Islamic State over a period of one week. While, from the viewpoint of its technical proficiency, it was the most impressive piece of the IS's audiovisual propaganda at the time, it has to be stressed that each production looked almost identical. Every new edition of this series was based on the same set of graphics and special effects. The elements which changed included only the news, the statistics, as well as the statements of the narrator. This is an important finding, as at the apogee of its campaign, Islamic State's digital *jihad* usually avoided reusing scenes from older recordings in new productions. This started to change at the beginning of its crisis, when more and more new releases contained already played out fragments of earlier videos.[23] Thus such a solution possibly decreased the series' efficiency in promoting the "Caliphate's" agenda. This is due to the fact that it proves to be tedious in the long run to watch the same special effects over and over again. Furthermore, such a tendency could also suggest that the al-Hayat Media Center's capabilities to prepare new and technically advanced audiovisuals containing professional post-production effects were effectively crippled.

The "Harvest of the soldiers" usually attacked broadly understood *kuffar* (infidels), with special emphasis put on the United States, which was depicted as the "protector of the cross" (Figure 17), for example. They were also accused of sins, tyranny and deception, which was opposed and in contrast to the nobility and heroism of the Muslims following the IS's agenda. Interestingly, these videos also addressed defeats suffered by this organization, warning against divisions among *mujahidin*, calling them to be obedient to the leaders of *jihad*, and stating that the battle has not yet ended. Aside from damage control, they were, however, primarily destined to maintain the triumphant image of the Islamic State among its followers by highlighting losses inflicted to disbelievers and apostates. It has to be stressed that statistics they provided were very detailed, including for instance: killed and wounded "crusaders," *murtaddin* (apostates), *Rafidah* (rejectors, i.e. Shia), *Nusayriyyah* (Alawites), officers and commanders, as well as destroyed vehicles, homes, farms, and barracks. This series also provided data on the types of operations conducted, including IEDs, assaults, assassinations, artillery attacks and more. Taking this into consideration, it has to be emphasized that the "Harvest of the soldiers" proved to be one of the most important productions discovered by the research project, which aimed to contribute to the "winner's image" of the organization.

Figure 17. Eight edition of the "Harvest of the Soldiers" screenshot

Source: Al-Hayat Media Center / *Ghuraba* website

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[23] See Miron Lakomy, "Cracks on the Online "Caliphate": How the Islamic State is Losing Ground in the Battle for Cyberspace," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 3 (2017), 46.

Another distinctive group of audiovisuals was composed of three statements/messages. The first challenged the United States to defeat the "Caliphate." The second was a message from the IS to the people of Kashmir. Finally, the third and most resonating video was recorded by the members of the cell that conducted a terrorist attack against a military parade in Iran. It was released by the Amaq News Agency in Arabic and proliferated via multiple channels, including the *Ghuraba* website. It proved to be another propaganda piece which attempted to highlight this achievement of the Islamic State.

Nine other videos were categorized as "miscellaneous" as their content merged various topics, including battle footage, religious and political deliberations, statements and more. These pieces included Ahlut-Tawhid Publications' video containing harsh criticism of the Sunni "traitors" (metaphorically labeled as *sahwat*) in the form of a dialogue and the "Infidel inferno", which was a mashup of previous widely known IS videos (such as "No Respite") in a completely new form. This group also consisted of the al-Furqan Media Foundation "documentary" presenting the "Caliphate's" members during an indoctrination meeting with a Muslim crowd, including children. This piece copied the infamous *Mujatweets* series[24] *modus operandi* in terms of presenting the everyday life of the *mujahidin* and their cordial relations with non-belligerent members of the *Ummah* (Figure 18).

Figure 18. Al-Furqan Media Foundation's video screenshot

Source: al-Furqan Media Foundation /*Ghuraba* website

Finally, also one instructional video was published by the Afaaq Electronic Foundation, being, as Mark Saunokonoko described it, "a kind of IT helpdesk for Islamic State supporters."[25] It featured Arabic and English advice on how to remove cameras and microphones from the popular brands of smartphones, in order to prevent their use as eavesdropping devices by governments.

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[24] See *Daesh Meta Narratives: From the Global Ummah to the Hyperlocal*, The Carter Center, June 2017, 5.

[25] Mark Saunokonoko, "The secretive IT unit helping Islamic State supporters hide in dark corners of Internet," 9News.com, last modified September 24, 2018, https://www.9news.com.au/2018/09/24/11/11/afaq-islamic-state-secretive-it-unit-helping-isis-supporters-hide-on-internet.

Towards the growing importance of visual propaganda?

The research project identified 178 new pieces of visual propaganda. They were categorized into four qualitatively distinctive categories, based on their content and form:

- photographs,
- advertisement banners,
- infographics,
- posters.

To begin with, as many as 100 images were discovered. The majority of them were produced by the IS's *wilayahs* in the form of photo reportages, documenting various activities undertaken by their militants. Initially, numerous pieces of battle footage were collected. They focused on armed clashes between the *mujahidin* and the Syrian Democratic Forces, Syrian Arab Army and Nigerian national forces (Figure 19).

Figure 19. Example of the battle footage featuring Islamic State's militant

Source: Twitter

In addition to the predominant battle footage, other themes were also observable. These themes included pre-execution images, such as the ones issued by the Wilayat Khurasan of the Islamic State, which depicted alleged US and Afghani spies (Figure 20).

Figure 20. Hostages of the Islamic State's Wilayah Khurasan

Source: Twitter

Moreover, scenes of the everyday life of *mujahidin* were also featured. Once again they were published by the Wilayat Khurasan, depicting militants reading the Quran, praying or taking positions in Afghanistan's mountains (Figure 21).

Figure 21. Everyday life of the IS Wilayah Khurasan members

Source: Twitter

Finally, classic pictures, which promoted *shuhada*, were published. They presented profiles of soon-to-be martyrs, their last moments among their comrades, as well as their departure and the execution of suicide operations (Figure 22).

Figure 22. *Shahid* in the IS's photo reportage

Source: Twitter

The second group consisted of 19 advertisement banners promoting new audiovisual and audio propaganda (videos, *nasheeds*) of Daesh. They effectively constituted advanced 2D graphics, consisting of the title, producer and chosen scenes of the promoted release (Figures 23 and 24). As mentioned previously, some of them also hinted at threats issued to various enemies of the Islamic State. These pieces were classic, both in form and content, as they were alike to similar productions released in 2014 and 2015.

Figure 23. "Harvest of the soldiers" #10 advertisement banner

Source: al-Hayat Media Center / *Ghuraba* website

Figure 24. "The victorious group" advertisement banner

Source: *Ghuraba* website

The third group consisted of 22 infographics, which covered a wide range of issues, starting from simple religious advice, through to the achievements of the Islamic State on the battlegrounds of Syria and Iraq, to instructions on how to prepare a "Molotov cocktail." It is worth mentioning that some infographics, which were released independently, were initially included in the "al-Naba" newsletter. In this case the *modus operandi* of the IS propaganda once again did not change. This type of production maintained visual forms and topics known from the apogee of the propaganda campaign of the IS in 2014 and 2015 (Figure 25).

Figure 25. One of the infographics prepared by the "al-Naba" editorial staff

Source: al-Naba Infographics / *Ghuraba* website

This study also identified 37 posters. This proved to be the most important type of visual propaganda and they were mostly produced by unofficial media branches, such as the Moata Agency and the al-Faqeer Media. They covered a wide range of topics. To begin with, the familiar theme of martyrdom was noticeable. This was the case with "A caravan of the shuhada" poster (Figure 26), which showed the profile of deceased militant from Sinai. It was consistent with other propaganda pieces, which referred to dying "in the path of Allah" as the greatest achievement possible, which ensures a privileged place in *Jannah*.

Figure 26. "Caravan of the shuhada" poster, presenting a profile of a martyr from Sinai

Source: Wilayah Sinai /*Ghuraba* website

Moreover, some of the posters collected focused on informing the viewers about various events, which were important from the viewpoint of the Islamic State's agenda. They covered, for instance, killed enemies and presented their mutilated corpses. This trend was visible in the Moata Agency's releases. However, the most significant group of posters contained warnings in English, which targeted Western audiences. These series of visual productions were relatively sophisticated in terms of their technical proficiency and they consisted of statements hinting at possible terrorist attacks in future, as well as their potential targets. For instance, one poster threatened to use drones to damage the Eiffel Tower in Paris (Figure 27). Another one hinted at the use of grenade during music concerts in the West (Figure 28). It contained a statement that the goal of the "Caliphate" is to intimidate infidel societies. Finally, the largest group consisted of posters threatening Australia. These included visuals which suggested the possibility of contaminating food (fruits, such as strawberries) with needles. This threat was in fact realized, as according to various electronic Australian media, needles in food were discovered in Sydney in September 2018. These incidents were even labeled as "food terrorism."[26]

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[26] See Ava Benny-Morrion, Ben Pike, "First contaminated strawberries found in Sydney as Coles removes QLD-grown punnets from shelves," *News.com.au*, last modified September 15, 2018, https://www.news.com.au/lifestyle/food/food-warnings/first-contaminated-strawberries-found-in-sydney-as-coles-removes-qldgrown-punnets-from-shelves/news-story/dcfb8c807e747032b0234156f70bf2c7.

Figure 27. "Await for our surprises" poster, hinting at a possible drone attack in Paris

Source: Twitter

Figure 28. Al-Faqeer Media poster containing threat

Source: Twitter

It is worth highlighting that a significant part of the visual propaganda was collected through monitoring Twitter chatter referring to the Islamic State's propaganda, conducted by the professionals and pundits interested in digital *jihad*. Other significant sources include the *Ghuraba* website and the Internet Archive.

Conclusions

The aforementioned findings allow certain conclusions on the nature of the Islamic State's propaganda in the non-Arabic "surface web" to be drawn. To begin with, the surprising activity of unofficial media branches of the "Caliphate" is noticeable. They were much more visible in the Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 environments than the official cells. This trend was especially evident in the case of Ahlut-Tawhid Publications, which only produced its own text and audiovisual propaganda, but also operated the *Ghuraba* website. It was effectively a repository, updated on a daily basis, of all major cyber jihadist releases of the "Caliphate," including those created by the al-Hayat Media Center, al-Bayan Radio, and the al-Furqan Media Foundation. Other notable examples include the al-Muhajireen Foundation, which attempted to reach out to non-Arabic *mujahidin* through its standalone website, and the Centre Médiatique an-Nur, which issued leaflets and articles in French.

Text propaganda collected during the period of one month between September and October 2018 proved to be, surprisingly, numerous. While the statements, standalone articles and e-books were nothing new or surprising in the IS's online campaign, 11 editions of magazines, newsletters, and bulletins including one completely new series targeting children and teenagers, proved that additional emphasis was put on rebuilding its former proficiency in this type of digital *jihad*. However, the technical quality and manipulation techniques exploited in these releases were still much below the level of the flagship periodicals from the 2014-2017 period, like "Dabiq" or "Rumiyah."

Moreover, there was little to no surprise in terms of the dominant themes discussed in the text propaganda. Some of these releases concerned a wide range of religious topics favored by Islamist terrorists, such as the ideology of military *jihad*, creed, martyrdom, as well as criticism of infidels, apostates, and polytheists. Others discussed the achievements of the organization (news, statistics, statements), in an attempt to maintain the Islamic State's "winner's image," and this consisted of instructions and deliberations addressing morale problems among the *mujahidin* or focused on the political and military situation in the Middle East. The only relatively new type of text propaganda was the messages (issued by AMF), which warned the "Caliphate's" followers and militants about the dangers they could encounter in Syria.

There were several interesting trends visible in terms of exploiting audio propaganda by Daesh. To begin with, the vast majority of these productions were released in Arabic, which means that Anglophone, Western Internet users, were not prioritized. This was in contrast with the tendency visible in 2014 and 2015, when *nasheeds* were recorded in multiple languages, including English, French, German etc. Moreover, all of these audio productions were produced only by the official media branches of the "Caliphate," such as the al-Bayan Radio, al-Hayat Media Center, and Furat Media Foundation, which was in contrast with the text propaganda. Finally, topics covered by this type of releases were familiar. Information bulletins discussed events which were important from the viewpoint of the Islamic State's agenda and religious lectures covered various issues connected to the ideology of *jihad*. A similar theme was exploited by *nasheeds*, which focused on martyrdom and the obligation of fighting the infidels "for the sake of Allah."

Audiovisual propaganda is in a visible crisis in comparison to the apogee of the IS's online campaign. To begin with, output of these productions has visibly decreased.[27] Moreover, their forms were much

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[27] As mentioned above, the research project did not attempt to identify all productions released by the Islamic State at the time, as it did not monitor Arabic-only channels, as well as the "dark net" and encrypted communication apps. Nevertheless, possibly most of IS's audiovisuals produced between mid-September and mid-October 2018 were still discovered, as the monitored distribution channels proliferated videos which were predominantly in Arabic. In this context, it should be emphasized that the output of audiovisual propaganda of the IS in 2015 was considerably bigger. According to Aaron Y. Zelin's paper, only during a period of one week of April 2015, 24 new videos were released by the organization, which is almost as many as all audiovisuals discovered during a month-long research project conducted in September and October 2018. See Aaron Y. Zelin, "Picture Or It Didn't Happen: A Snapshot of the Islamic State's Official Media Output," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 4 (2015), 85-89.

less differentiated than before, lacking, for instance, dedicated *nasheed* music videos, professional reportages, as well as advertisements (in a similar style to, for example, "No Respite"). Additionally, no traditional, standalone execution-only video was produced between mid-September and mid-October 2018. Identified productions consisted of executions and broadly understood gore, but only as a certain part of longer videos, referring to a wide range of issues. As a matter of fact, surprisingly many audiovisual productions merged multiple themes together, including political and religious deliberations, which were followed by, for example, scenes of armed clashes, or IED attacks. Finally, the quality of these productions were usually lacking. They contained much less special effects than used to be utilized two or three years ago. Many consisted of just an introduction and some random scenes of fighting, being evidence that the general know-how of Daesh media cells on the production and direction of professional propaganda movies visibly decreased. This was especially noticeable in religious releases of the Ahlut-Tawhid Publications, which were basically reproductions of older videos, even from the turn of the 21st century, which were "enriched" by some unappealing special effects, and/or translations. Even the most advanced releases of al-Hayat Media Center used the same set of special effects again. In other words, while the quality and quantity of the audiovisual propaganda of the Islamic State seems to have decreased, there is no surprise in terms of the dominant topics exploited, such as battle videos, *quasi*-theological deliberations, political rants and statistics.

Finally, the biggest and the most resonating part of the propaganda discovered consisted of various types of visuals, which is not a surprise. Photo reportages released by the IS consisted of the same scenes as used several years ago, focusing on the everyday life of *mujahidin*, armed clashes with various groups considered the "enemies of Allah,""martyrdom operations," as well as executions. Interestingly, many of these photographs documented activities of the "Caliphate" militants not only in Syria and Iraq, but also in Afghanistan, which is symbolic. It may suggest that this terrorist organization attaches more and more attention to activities in the *Khurasan* area (Afghanistan, Pakistan, Central Asia, parts of India and Iran).[28] While the infographics and advertisement banners bore no signs of significant changes in comparison to the earlier period, interesting trends were noticeable in its posters, which frequently conveyed various threats of terrorist attacks, including the real cases of food contamination in Australia.

To summarize, the long-term campaign attempting to cripple the Islamic State's propaganda on the Internet has not yet brought satisfying effects. Its ability to make productions in various forms is still easily achievable in the non-Arabic "surface web," even through standalone websites, which are rarely and slowly banned by law enforcement. In this context, while its releases are still easily accessible by the average Western Internet users, their quality and quantity were visibly reduced, which makes themslightly less alluring for some potential audiences. This, in turn, confirms that the current, difficult situation of this terrorist organization has had a significant impact on its digital jihadist capabilities. However, while Daesh's online propaganda potential has been decreased, it is far from being dead. This is especially evident considering the activities of the plethora of unofficial media cells, which attempt to support the "Caliphate's" cause on the World Wide Web.

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[28] See Antonio Giustozzi, The Islamic Sthate in Khorasan: Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the New Central Asian Jihad (London: Hurst Publishers, 2018).

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