1 Going virtual

Islamic State's *shock and awe* campaign on the Internet

1.1 Origins of the "virtual Caliphate"

The emergence of the Internet as a global communication network since the turn of the 1990s was surely one of the most important technological breakthroughs in history.[1] Aside from the great benefits that this invention has brought for humankind, it has also created significant – but mostly unexpected – challenges for international security. One of them is strictly related to terrorist organisations. The emerging Web 1.0 environment combined with constantly increasing access to the Internet proved to be a huge opportunity for these groups to move beyond the classic constraints of their *modus operandi*. Cyberspace became a "promised land" for Islamist terrorists in terms of safe communication, coordination, and financing. Moreover, it allowed them to undertake new types of hostile activities, namely cyber-attacks. Last, but not least, the World Wide Web initially had tremendous potential in terms of gaining direct access to millions and later to billions of Internet users.[2] As Sageman argued:

> the nature of this relationship between individuals and the Internet favors the Salafi message. The Internet both appeals to and fosters disembeddedness […] it appeals to isolated individuals by easing their loneliness through connections to people sharing some commonality […] it leads them to spend more time with this virtual community at the expense of interaction with the immediate social environment.[3]

According to Sageman, the Internet "can help bridge the gap from the isolated potential mujahed to the global jihad."[4] Overall, *jihadis* gained instruments that circumvented the traditional barrier of public communication being controlled by the mass media and governments. Holtmann accurately summarised this trend by stating that their major goal was to "make the divide between the virtual and the physical more permeable with the help of elaborate media strategies."[5]

At the beginning of the 1990s this tremendous opportunity was yet to be recognised. It took more than half a decade before the first Islamist terrorist organisations could grasp the rising potential of cyberspace. The breakthrough took place between 1995 and 1996, when they slowly began to realise that the Internet allowed them to influence global audiences without committing acts of terrorism.

Surprisingly, their archaic, medieval-like and radical ideology was no obstacle to adopting new technologies of Western, "crusader" as they frequently refer to it, origin. Political Islam, as well as Salafi-*jihadis*, proved to be very keen to exploit these technologies for the purposes of furthering their agenda.[6] As Kosmynka noted, Salafi violent extremist organisations (VEOs) primarily recognised the usability of the Internet to manipulate the beliefs and opinions of online audiences, present a twisted interpretation of the religious texts of Islam, distort the reality surrounding Muslim communities, and exploit visual symbols to generate affective states among their target groups, which would inspire them and channel their activities in a desired direction.[7]

Groupe Islamique Armé (GIA) from Algeria were among the first Islamist terrorist organisations to "test the waters" when they published their first online bulletins (*al-Kital, al-Ansar*). Additionally, Hamas and Hezbollah established their first websites and also created anti-Semitic and anti-American comics dedicated to indoctrinating children.[8] The most compelling and comprehensive experiments were, however, undertaken by al-Qaeda, as well as its affiliated groups, such as the Chechen Salafi militants of Shamil Basayev and Thamir Samir Saleh Abdullah (bearing the *nom de guerre* of ibn al-Khattab).[9] They were probably behind the early – somewhat rudimentary – attempts at creating various forms of text propaganda, which were distributed through traditional Web 1.0 channels, namely in the form of standalone websites. These usually contained news and articles which were enriched with rather simplistic visuals, including all sorts of banners, logos, and images of leaders (*sheikhs*). Interestingly, some of them stood in line with the latest trends in developing websites at the time, such as dedicated guestbooks. At the turn of the century, online radios broadcasting in Arabic also emerged as a tool of influencing Internet users. This was visible, among others, on the al-Qaeda-affiliated jehad.net webpage. Salafi-*jihadis* also utilised increasingly popular message boards, such as *Ansar, Hanin, Shumukh, al-Buraq, Sinam al-Islam, at-Tahaddi*,[10] as well as dedicated communication software.[11] As Sageman noted, they allowed radicalised young Muslims to

> share their hopes and dreams with their virtual friends […] Some might have joined a given forum out of a sense of alienation, of feeling alone […] This mutual sharing makes them feel ever closer to each other, in a virtual process similar to the one previously described as in-group love with face-to-face interactions. This provides them with a sense of belonging to a greater community on the basis of what they have in common, Islam.[12]

In this context, according to Weimann, in 1998 around half of the 30 terrorist organisations recognised by the United States had websites. Two years later all of them had established an online presence.[13]

As for the early audiovisual propaganda, its birth probably took place in the North Caucasus. Accessible data suggests that – once again – the Chechen Salafi militants were the first to record low quality videos attempting to promote *jihad* against Russian "crusaders." Having a good opportunity to do so, due

to two military conflicts with the Russian Federation between 1994–1996 and 1999–2000, they produced a number of pieces, some of which are still accessible online. In a certain sense these usually short movies set the standard for the Islamist terrorist audiovisuals that followed. They usually contained instances of combat footage and executions of Russian soldiers, compiled with *anashid* soundtracks and profiles of leaders (e.g. ibn al-Khattab). Initially, these productions were distributed via VHS cassettes. Later, however, they emerged online.[14] Some of them, such as the infamous Shatoy ambush video, are still accessible on YouTube, despite the fact that they show corpses of Russian soldiers. Militants in the northern Caucasus were also among the "pioneers" that developed dedicated decapitation videos.[15] In 1998 three British citizens and one from New Zealand were executed in Chechnya. Their confessions of alleged spying and acting against the spread of Islamic fundamentalism, followed by their beheading, were recorded on camera and made public.[16] In 1999 they released the beheading of a Russian conscript.[17] In 2000 al-Khattab's group published the *Hell of the Russians* video, which became iconic for *jihadi* propaganda going forward.[18] Nevertheless, the online activities of these groups until the end of the 20th century were merely an experiment, an interesting yet unsophisticated addition to their everyday, classic – and offline – activities.

These relatively primitive instances of digital *jihad* started to evolve at the turn of the 21st century, marking the increased interest of al-Qaeda, as well as other Salafi groups, in exploiting cyberspace for propaganda purposes. There were several reasons for this shift. First of all, the tragic 9/11 attacks occurred, which caused the outbreak of the War on Terror, effectively drawing the attention of the international community to the armed struggle against Islamist terrorists. This meant that all communiqués coming from al-Qaeda *et consortes* began to have potentially a much greater – global – audience.[19] The subsequent US interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq were even more important. From the Salafi-*jihadi* perspective they provided a great opportunity to depict both interventions as a Christian "Holy War" against Islam. According to Ibrahim, they also "provided useful confirmation for their ideological model."[20] This, in turn, facilitated all recruitment and inspiration initiatives, which were heavily reliant on arguments emphasising the subjugation and hardships of Muslim societies. In this context, Sageman was right to stress that "the invasion of Iraq galvanized young Muslims worldwide to join the fight against the West."[21] Symbolic stories of Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, or even simple mistakes committed by American and allied soldiers resulting in casualties suffered by the civilian population,[22] proved to be a great opportunity to fan the flames of this narration. This was fuelled even more by George W. Bush himself who recklessly declared a "crusade" against terrorism.[23] From this moment on, this infamous statement was relentlessly exploited by the *jihadis* to legitimise their cause. Moreover, the arrival of Western soldiers in the Middle East and Central Asia provided opportunities for creating new types of propaganda. Both wars increased the opportunities to record audiovisuals depicting *mujahidin* fighting against or even executing "crusaders." Finally, the beginning of the 21st century marked

new developments in the field of information and communication technologies (ICT). Internet bandwidth increased significantly. In contrast to the 56k modems in the 1990s, emerging broadband access enabled the uploading and downloading of increasingly sophisticated multimedia. The same happened with Internet coverage. In only four years, between December 1999 and December 2003, the number of Internet users almost tripled from 248 to 719 million.[24] The Web 2.0 environment also emerged, which marked the advent of the era of social media.[25] The establishment of MySpace in 2003 and Facebook in February 2004 opened new, increasingly important venues of Internet communication and interaction.[26] The advent of mobile phones, and eventually smartphones, also had a significant impact.[27] Mobile phone cameras and increased access to editing software provided new ways of producing alluring, but frequently shocking propaganda. Greater Internet bandwidth enabled their easy upload and distribution among the rising pool of online audiences.[28] All of these developments combined clearly constituted a great opportunity for *jihadis*.

In effect, since the advent of the War on Terror, al-Qaeda, as well as other *jihadi* movements, started to become increasingly immersed in the online environment. As Jordán, Torres and Jeep argued in 2004,

> after September 11th, Al Qaeda's true communication-intensive and propagandistic nature emerged. The organization then converted into a much more recognizable and communicative enemy. Of the almost four hundred texts and documents of various types released since 1993, only twenty four date from before September 11th.[29]

In the following years al-Qaeda developed a set of tools which allowed them to influence and manipulate Internet users on a massive scale. Its actions in cyberspace began to be supported by a number of dedicated media cells. The official cells, bearing the name of al-Sahab Institute for Media Production and al-Fajr Media Center, were backed by a plethora of semi-official and unofficial groups, promoting their cause and productions in the Web 1.0 environment. One of the most renowned was the Global Islamic Media Front, which, among others, released propaganda supporting the cause of AQ.[30]

As Schmid emphasised, at this time al-Qaeda's propaganda was founded on several core messages. Firstly, it emphasised the sufferings of the Muslim *ummah*, which were allegedly caused by the alliance of "crusaders" and "Zionists." Secondly, it stated that the only way to bring back the dignity of Muslims was to proclaim a Caliphate that should replace the *tawaghit* (apostate political elite).[31] Thirdly, it stressed that the way to reach this objective was through violent *jihad* against Western influence in the Muslim world, conducted by the vanguard of AQ's *mujahidin*. Additional elements, according to Schmid, consisted of presenting martyrdom as a legitimate asymmetric tactic of warfare, making no distinction between civilian and military targets, *takfir* (excommunication of Muslims who do not comply to *shari'ah* law), as well as presenting *jihad* as an individual obligation of every member of the *ummah*.[32]

The distribution strategy of its emerging online campaign was founded on a plethora of unofficial and semi-official webpages, such as:

- Alneda.com – which was officially endorsed by AQ Central officials and featured news on its achievements and transmitted encrypted messages to its members,
- Almuhrajiroun.com – consisting of al-Qaeda's demands to assassinate the President of Pakistan,
- Jehad.net – publishing AQ's statements,
- Aloswa.org – featuring lectures and statements of bin Laden, as well as *fatwas* justifying terrorist attacks,
- Drasat.com – reporting on the achievements of al-Qaeda.[33]

There is no consensus within academia on the role and efficiency of these instruments. For instance, Sageman argued that such "passive" websites in the early 21st century were hardly an "engine of radicalization," but at the same time they fostered "a terrorist worldview."[34] In contrast, Powers and Armstrong emphasised that these websites were in fact an instrument of Islamic extremism and radicalisation.[35] Despite these differences, it has to be stressed that their number and level of sophistication increased dramatically in just a few years. By 2007 there were thousands of webpages which were more or less engaged in propagating AQ-related propaganda.[36] By the end of the decade, al-Qaeda grew proficient in exploiting popular Web 2.0 communication channels, such as blogs and YouTube.[37] It also took the first steps in using popular social networks and even managed to set up an online library consisting of thousands of e-books and articles.[38]

Through these websites al-Qaeda started to proliferate increasingly differentiated forms of propaganda, starting from audiovisuals, such as combat footage or recordings of suicide attacks, through audio statements and lectures, to visuals (e.g. photo reportages), and various text publications, including essays, e-books and manuals.[39] In 2002 the organisation released the first dedicated, AQ-produced decapitation video of Daniel Pearl, which was met with consternation and shock by the international public.[40] The organisation was also responsible for the publication of a series of online magazines and bulletins, such as the *Sawt al-Jihad* ("Voice of Jihad"),[41] *al-Khansaa* (literally "the snub-nosed," which was a periodical dedicated to women),[42] and *Mu'askar al-Battar* (being, in fact, a dedicated training manual).[43] As Bunt noted, they discussed issues of religious significance, as well as news, which acted as a "motivation for future activities and to provide exemplary models to follow."[44] Additionally, legitimisation of violence was also provided. These periodicals were followed in 2010 by the "*Vanity Fair* of jihadi publications" as Bruce Hoffman described the *Inspire* magazine.[45] It constituted a major breakthrough in terms of text propaganda. It was the first high-quality *jihadi* periodical published in English, which was sophisticated not only in terms of the messages conveyed but also in terms of graphic design (Figure 1.1). It was founded by the members of the al-Qaeda from the Arabian Peninsula: Samir Khan and Anwar al-Awlaki. As Dziewanowski noted, each volume of this magazine

Figure 1.1 Comparison of the front pages and regular sections of AQ's magazines *Mu'askar al-Battar* #10 (left) and *Inspire* #1 (right).

Source: Internet Archive.

constituted a mixture of complex techniques of indoctrination combined with manuals providing advice on the planning of terrorist attacks.[46] In this context, it has to be stressed that training manuals were also provided by other magazines at the time. For instance, *Alma'sadah al-Jihadiah* released instructions on how to create a dirty bomb.[47] The aforementioned *Mu'askar al-Battar*, according to Springer et al., "covered everything from instruction in using weapons to case studies for assassinations and ambushes."[48] However, some academics doubted the efficiency of these instructions, compared to the personal training received in terrorist camps.[49]

The videos produced by the group proved to be increasingly popular among Internet users. In 2005 websites featuring images and recordings of beheadings were visited as often as 60,000 times per hour.[50] Moreover, al-Qaeda started to experiment with other innovatory formats of audiovisual propaganda. Among others, it followed the example of Hezbollah and developed a video game entitled the *Quest for Bush* (also known as the *Night of Bush Capturing*). This piece was released by the Global Islamic Media Front in 2006 and constituted a simple modification of an American-made FPS (First-Person Shooter) – *Quest for Saddam* – which was launched three years earlier. The game promoted the profiles of Osama bin Laden and Abu Musab az-Zarqawi and allowed players to kill the President of the United States. The game also featured a soundtrack composed of *anashids*.[51] However, the majority of al-Qaeda's audiovisual productions were much less alluring. As Kepel noted, at the beginning of the 21st century, the organisation published numerous video statements of Zawahiri, which were "generally videotaped in front of a background cloth featuring a rifle or a machine gun (the symbol of armed jihad)."[52] According to Kepel, they were repetitive in nature, had "little news value" and were "mentioned by large media organizations […] only when a precise threat against a particular target"[53] was issued.

In this context, there is a final way in which the US intervention toppling Saddam Hussein's rule affected the emergence of the "virtual Caliphate." As Torres, Jordán, and Horsburgh accurately noted, from the spring of 2003 "Iraq became the epicenter of GJM [global jihadi movement – M.L.] propaganda."[54] The eruption of insurgency in Iraq constituted a fantastic opportunity to expand the presence of al-Qaeda in the area and this eventually resulted in the creation of the al-Qaeda Organisation in the Lands of the Two Rivers (Tanzim Qaidat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn).[55] After some years, this branch, created by the notorious Abu Musab az-Zarqawi, mutated into the Islamic State.[56] Despite the fact that he pledged allegiance to Osama bin Laden, significant tensions between him and AQ's leadership arose. They were related mostly to the volatile *modus operandi* adopted by az-Zarqawi, including his aggressive attitude towards Shia Muslims, who were continuously attacked despite the firm opposition of Ayman al-Zawahiri.[57] Micallef summarised this peculiar 'schism' by stating that

> Bin Laden wanted to unite both Shia and Sunni in a war 'against the global infidel alliance,' while Zarqawi argued that the 'near enemy,' the apostate Shia and moderate Sunni, posed a bigger threat than the 'far enemy,' the United States and its allies.[58]

These differences were also visible when it came to online propaganda. Ibrahim rightly argued that

> the US-led invasion lifted the constraint on the group from Saddam's regime, and it quickly emerged as one of the most violent parts of the anti-US opposition. From the start its tactics differed from those preferred by Al-Qaeda's international leadership; their tactics also shaped AQI from its foundation to the current Islamic State. Very early on, the use of public beheadings, filmed and placed on the Internet, was adopted along with that of suicide bombing.[59]

Iraqi al-Qaeda (AQI) was behind the second dedicated decapitation video of a Western hostage, which caused worldwide public outrage.[60] The death of Nicolas Berg proved to be a breakthrough in terms of exploiting gore videos for propaganda purposes. As Harrow noted, "even though the Daniel Pearl decapitation received a lot of attention, the decapitation campaign did not really start before the Nicolas Berg decapitation, two years later."[61] According to Harrow, the recording of Berg's death proved to be the model for all execution videos that followed, including, for example, the use of orange jumpsuits, which were similar to the uniforms of the Guantanamo prisoners.[62] Iraqi al-Qaeda was also behind a series of videos presenting terrorist and militant attacks. For instance, in July 2005 the Global Islamic Media Front published a piece entitled *Top 10 Video of Insurgent Attacks in Iraq,* which featured combat with US-led coalition soldiers. Another, similar production – *Jihadist Candid Camera* – combined laughter with scenes presenting attacks against American troops in Iraq,[63] which was unprecedented. It also regularly released videos presenting IED attacks against patrols, e.g. in Ramadi, Anbar and Baghdad (Figure 1.2).[64] As Stern and Berger summarised, all audiovisuals of this kind

> were distributed physically on DVDs in Iraq, but they became an Internet phenomenon. Unlabeled online file repositories were linked to by members of jihadist message boards, and the videos were passed around the Web, violence porn with a mission to intimidate and enrage. They succeeded.[65]

Propaganda productions of az-Zarqawi's organisation proved to be not only more shocking and attention-drawing but also of a higher quality when compared to releases of other AQ branches. This was mostly caused by their more thoughtful exploitation of editing software in order to satisfy the needs of younger Internet users, who were accustomed, according to Torres et al., to more sophisticated multimedia pieces.[66] The group also operated standalone websites, such as the *Voice of Jihad*, which constituted an online repository providing downloads of all propaganda productions related to AQI.[67]

Iraqi al-Qaeda and its subsequent incarnations were also active in generating text propaganda. From March 2005, it began to release a magazine entitled *Thurwat al-Sinan* ("The Camel's Hump"), which was dedicated to legitimising *jihad* with religious argumentation, distributing military instructions for al-Qaeda followers, praising the group's achievements, as well as presenting the core

Figure 1.2 Al-Furqan Media Productions' video presenting ISI's (Islamic State in Iraq) sniping attacks.

Source: Internet Archive.

elements of its agenda. For instance, a volume released on March 2, 2005 featured an article of AQI's spokesperson, Abu Maysara, who listed the most important motives behind the group's activities, including the restoration of pure monotheism, carrying out *jihad* against "infidels" and "apostates" to liberate Muslim lands, freeing Muslim prisoners, establishing *shari'ah*, as well as defending the honour and dignity of the members of *ummah*, including "sisters" and children allegedly kidnapped by Americans and Shias. It also emphasised willingness to restore the "Caliphate" in Baghdad.[68]

Propaganda productions promoting all subsequent incarnations of al-Qaeda in Iraq (Islamic State in Iraq) were usually related to the activities of al-Furqan Media. For the years preceding the eruption of the civil war in Syria in 2011, this media outlet accumulated significant experience in producing and distributing increasingly professional propaganda. In 2010 it was listed by the Middle East Media Research Institute's experts among the four primary media organisations that generated high-end digital jihadist releases.[69] As Stern and Berger noted, a visible change in ISI's online propaganda could be seen at the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century. This was marked by a series of audio statements by Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, the group's spokesperson. Among others, he emphasised that the organisation will remain (*baqiyyah*), which subsequently became a slogan exploited by Daesh in the years to come.[70] Between 2012 and 2013 the organisation advertised a successful campaign called *Breaking the Walls*, this being a series of successful jail breaks of *jihadi* inmates.[71] The group also started to promote its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as his first audio statements emerged online. In one such recording published on April 9, 2013, he proclaimed the creation of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS/ISIL), which was a natural step when considering the recent extension of its activities into Syria, due to the ongoing civil war.[72] Development of the ISI/ISIS's online capabilities in terms of promoting its radical agenda is especially noticeable when analysing

the video series called *Salil as-Sawarim* ("The Clanging of the Swords"). Its first part, released in June 2012,[73] was followed by three sequels published in August 2012, January 2013 and May 2014 (Figure 1.3). They featured SVBIED (Suicide Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Device) attacks, house raids, combat footage (in the first-person perspective) and even shots taken from UAVs (unmanned aerial vehicles).[74] While the first audiovisual production of ISI did not bear signs of noticeable changes when compared to other mainstream *jihadi* propaganda at the time, the second part looked significantly better, in terms of content (combat footage), filmmaking techniques exploited and the overall quality of the video. According to Stern and Berger, it constituted a great step forward and was of comparable quality to professional television programmes. The final, fourth part of the series meant, as they suggested, that ISIS's propaganda specialists had to be considered professionals.[75] Soufan held a similar opinion and stated that "the group began producing slick, high-definition videos depicting the fighting as a sort of real-life, post-apocalyptic Hollywood action movie, complete with explosions and bleeding corpses."[76]

It is therefore not a surprise that ISIS consisted of a critical number of experienced specialists in information warfare, as for years they polished their skills in manipulating online audiences. It also recognised the great potential of using Internet propaganda to promote its cause. Byman was therefore right when stating that "The Islamic State and its predecessors inherited Al Qaeda's emphasis on proselytizing and propaganda."[77] Digital *jihad* was perceived by its leadership as an integral part of its strategy, as it fulfilled several functions, such as influencing (intimidating) adversaries, manipulating worldwide public opinion and inspired audiences to follow the group's radical agenda. The latter was manifested in engagement in violent actions (including lone-wolf terrorist attacks[78]) against

Figure 1.3 Screenshot from *Clanging of the Swords IV*, published in May 2014.

Source: Jihadology.net.

real or artificial enemies or in the direct enlistment of members into ISIS ranks (through *hijrah*).[79] The motives behind ISIS/IS's online presence were accurately described by Winter, who argued that its propagandists

> are not just seeking to attract new supporters and intimidate enemies, but are also working to polarise international publics, sustain their organisation's global relevance (in jihadist and non-jihadist spheres) and present their enlisters with 'evidence' to convince potential recruits to become active members.[80]

To summarise, ISIS's propaganda arm from around the turn of 2014 proved to be an efficient media force multiplier.[81]

This was evident as early as November 2013, when ISIS demonstrated sophisticated capabilities of creating high-definition movies consisting of battle footage. Its unusual quality managed to gather increased attention from Internet users on the popular video-hosting website Liveleak.com. With the series of military victories achieved by the group at the beginning of 2014, productions of similar quality started to be published more and more frequently. While the quality of these releases clearly increased, the group's online popularity was still somewhat limited. Everything changed when the "Caliphate" was proclaimed on June 29, 2014. From that moment, all the experience and skills developed were utilised to promote the idea that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is the legitimate successor of the Caliphs from the Golden Age of Islam, and that the Islamic State is the only true representation of Islamic values.[82] Nance and Sampson noted that "Al-Furqan shocked the world and thrust ISIS upon the stage with a series of videos launched in the summer of 2014."[83] On July 5, 2014 the group published its first audiovisual production – *Kutbah and Jum'ah Prayer in the Grand Mosque of Mosul* – which featured Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's speech. It quickly and easily captured the attention of the world's media. It was, however, nothing when compared to the video released on August 19, 2014 – *A Message to America*. This piece is, probably, one of the most – if not the most – popular digital jihadist productions in history. The five-minute recording challenged the United States by brutally decapitating its citizen James Foley.[84] On YouTube alone, its censored or modified versions, with media commentary attached, were viewed by millions of Internet users.[85] This piece, which received a huge amount of coverage from the mass media and a rapid reaction from the political elite and international public opinion, was quickly followed by other productions. *Second Message to America* appeared online on September 2, 2014 and featured the execution of Steven Sotloff. Twelve days later *A Message to the Allies of America* emerged, which presented the death of David Haines. This was followed by the subsequent murders of Alan Henning, Peter Kassig, Kenji Goto and Haruna Yukawa.[86] This period between June and August 2014 proved to be a turning point in the history of online Salafi-*jihadi* propaganda. Never before had productions associated with the Islamic terrorist organisation proved to be so "popular" among Internet users. It was also the moment when the behemoth of the "virtual Caliphate" was born. No other VEO in history, in such a short period of time, generated such enormous propaganda

output, both in terms of quality and quantity. At the apogee of its power, Islamic State created almost 800 visual releases and almost 150 videos per month, not to mention audio and text publications. Milton's study identified over 9,000 official pieces of visual (including videos) propaganda productions of Daesh released only between January 2015 and August 2016, as well as 52,000 photographs.[87] While the scope of its digital *jihad* decreased in time due to the deepening crisis of the group, in just a few years it still managed to produce thousands of different pieces which inspired online audiences to follow its radical agenda and intimidated disbelievers.

1.2 Understanding IS's digital *jihad*: why has it drawn the world's attention?

Alexander and Alexander noted that "the extent of IS's political and media outreach aimed at garnering support is unprecedented in the history of global jihadist movements."[88] Friis underlined the Islamic State's ability to capture the imagination of the global public and labelled it as one of the most remarkable phenomena in recent years.[89] Both are correct, as since 2013/2014 millions of Internet users have been exposed, both willingly and unwillingly, to its propaganda in cyberspace. In effect, the Internet constituted a significant tool for its radicalisation and recruitment efforts,[90] targeting mostly young men and women, as well as minors.[91] In this context, the vast majority of experts agree that the reasons for this unprecedented efficiency in generating the attention of online audiences are related to unique features of its campaign. According to Byman, the digital *jihad* of Daesh "has earned grudging respect from a range of commentators in the West who, though they obviously abhor the content of the messages, acknowledge the level of sophistication of the group's social media strategy."[92]

From the viewpoint of the goals of this study, it is, therefore, interesting to understand and outline what exactly has contributed to the uniqueness and scale of the Islamic State's online campaign at the apogee of its power between 2014 and 2016. To begin with, its campaign was abundant with different types of propaganda, frequently combined together, which enabled the creation of new, sometimes surprising and compelling formats. As for visual productions, it not only produced banners and photo reportages, which were utilised by Salafi terrorists in the past, but also memes, infographics, maps and 3D logos. Audio releases were less concentrated on relatively tedious and boring statements and lectures, but focused more on catchy *anashids*, such as *Salil al-Sawarim* (quickly becoming the unofficial anthem of Daesh), *Let's go for Jihad* or *Fisabilillah*.[93] It also developed the professional al-Bayan Radio, which combined *anashids* with news and lectures. Text propaganda became unprecedentedly varied; in addition to a number of newsletters and bulletins released (*Islamic State News, al-Naba, Islamic State Report*), Daesh started to release high-profile, sophisticated, and technically advanced magazines in various languages (*Dabiq, Konstantiniyye, Dar al-Islam*), e-books, manuals, essays and even leaflets.[94] Finally, multiple forms of audiovisuals were utilised. They consisted not only of executions but also of full-blown "documentaries," advertisements, combat footage, as well as materials depicting

suicide terrorist attacks. Some of them were even recorded with UAVs. The most sophisticated videos were usually published by the al-Hayat Media Center and were dedicated to targeting global audiences. For instance, IS exploited one of its British hostages – John Cantlie – to produce slick "reportages," providing viewers with the illusion of a "reasonable" and "unbiased" perspective.[95] It also managed to develop music videos combining *anashids* with advanced filmmaking that encouraged, for example, home-grown terrorism. Daesh even exploited video games (e.g. *Grand Theft Auto 5* and *ARMA 3* mods) in order to target youngsters, being the main group that the organisation attempted to manipulate.[96] Interestingly, it was also responsible for developing standalone applications for *Android* smartphones, which were used either to facilitate the propagation of its messages (through programs such as *Dawn of Glad Tidings* or *Amaq Agency*) or to indoctrinate priority targets, such as toddlers (*Huroof* – Arabic teacher for children). Some authors suggested that some of IS's apps were used to create a botnet, which was responsible for DDoS attacks against Internet root name servers.[97]

Secondly, these releases proved to be outstanding in terms of technical quality. In contrast to the earlier, mostly amateurish productions of other *jihadi* groups, Daesh released pieces of propaganda which were developed by professionals, who sometimes had Western education or experience.[98] For instance, Mohammad Emwazi (a.k.a. Jihadi John), the infamous executioner of James Foley and other prominent hostages, was a computer scientist educated in Great Britain.[99] Ahmad Abousamra (a.k.a. Abu Sulayman ash-Shami) was the co-founder and a member of the editorial staff of *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*, and he was also a computer scientist educated in the United States.[100] Denis Cuspert (known as Abu Talha al-Almani or Deso Dogg) was a popular "gangsta" rapper in Germany prior to his radicalisation and accession to the Islamic State. In its ranks, he was responsible for the production of *anashids* and featured as a celebrity in recruitment videos.[101] However, it has to be stressed that the Western-educated media operatives were accompanied in IS's ranks by a number of skilled professionals originating from the Middle East.[102] In this context, it is therefore unsurprising that the propaganda productions of the Islamic State were of the highest technical quality. Materials were produced in high definition, with the use of advanced equipment, consisted of excellent post-production effects and were skilfully directed. The movies of Daesh used filmmaking methods which were rare or non-existent in the earlier productions of other Islamist terrorist organisations, such as: aerial shots, crowd shots, ambient light, depth of field, various camera angles (including the first person perspective), special effects, electronically augmented sound, compilations, slow motion and adjustment of the range of colours.[103]

Thirdly, Islamic State proved to be the only Islamist terrorist organisation that reconstructed its traditional *jihadi* propaganda in a way that allowed it to become much more universal in its message, which was adapted to the specificity of many cultural and civilisational backgrounds. In a certain sense, the campaign of the "Caliphate" had a truly global scope, not only in sense of scale, but also in terms of its content.

On one hand, it was the first truly multilingual campaign of Salafi extremists in history. With the exception of Arabic and English, being the most obvious choices,

its media outlets also published pieces in French, Italian, German, Russian, Turkish, Urdu, Pashto, Chinese, Japanese, Dutch, Persian, and even in Hebrew and Polish.[104] Some even exploited sign language for deaf audiences.[105] This meant that IS was the first to find a proper solution to the classic problem experienced by terrorist organisations attempting to instil the ideology of *jihad* among Internet users. In the past most of their productions were either published in a few local and regional languages (Arabic, Farsi, Pashto, Dari or Urdu) or – quite rarely – in English.[106] Considering the fact that only about a quarter of Internet users are English-speakers and only 5% speak Arabic,[107] their propaganda initiatives did not and could not reach the majority of online audiences due to obvious linguistic barriers (Figure 1.4).

On the other hand, followers of al-Baghdadi showed great proficiency in exploiting canons of mass culture. Until the advent of the IS campaign, Salafi-*jihadis* exploited somewhat played out and intricate themes, mostly related to perplexing religious deliberations. Classic theological audio lectures of the most important radical Sunni leaders and "scholars," such as Anwar al-Awlaki and Osama bin Laden,[108] were tiresome and anything but alluring for most youngsters, who are, by definition, the primary target of digital *jihad*. If these early productions of al-Qaeda, al-Shabab, Hamas, Hezbollah or the Taliban referred to mass culture, it was usually depicted in a negative manner, as a threat to the pure and true foundations of Islam. It was customarily depicted as concentrated on materialism, secularism, hedonism, individualism and, thus, permeated with moral decay.[109] Daesh decided to choose a different path. Obviously, it did not back away from harsh criticism of Western values. Its publications are full of arguments denouncing mass culture, which – according to its ideology – stands in direct opposition to the purity of Islam founded on the prophetic methodology. Nevertheless, while

Figure 1.4 The inactive website of the Wilayat al-Qawkaz blog in Polish.

Source: Blogspot.com.

it targeted young Muslims from developed (not only Western) countries, it symbolically crossed the boundaries of classic *jihadi* propaganda by adopting some, selected elements of pop culture. Some of its canons, which were not directly related to moral or religious issues, were skilfully exploited in the form of memes, photographs, slogans and even videos. For instance, Daesh was known for using images of militants posing with jars of Nutella.[110] Moreover, the group used references to popular brands of video games. Among others, it released banners advertising the *Call of Jihad*, which was a direct refence to the globally acclaimed *Call of Duty* First Person Shooter series. In this context, armed struggle against infidels was frequently compared to electronic entertainment.[111] Sometimes media outlets promoting Daesh appealed to its audiences' sense of humour, which was a rare technique among Islamist terrorists. For instance, as emphasised by Semati and Szpunar, *mujahidin* recited poetry, posed with cats, and complained about the lack of specific types of candy.[112] The instrumental use of kittens was especially eye-catching, as they constitute a leading theme in many popular online communities.[113] As Roy emphasised, the Islamic State's propaganda even drew from popular culture canons related to "superheroes," which might be alluring for some members of younger audiences. According to Roy, its narrative

> plays on the image of movie and videogame superheroes. A typical cliché is that of the future hero whose destiny is not at first clear, as he leads an empty or too-normal life. And then he receives the call (taken in its religious sense of a sudden vocation, but with reference to the popular video game "Call of Duty") and turns into an almost supernatural, omnipotent character. Not only does he save the suffering and passive *ummah*, but he also possesses great powers, including the power of life and death and sexual power.[114]

Finally, to advertise its cause, Daesh exploited the popularity of the World Cup in 2014 by posting an image of a decapitated head on Twitter with a statement "This is our football, it's made of skin #WorldCup."[115] Thus, Daesh proved that it was not only following the latest trends in pop culture but that it could use them for furthering its agenda. The exploitation of humour, as well as global trends in mass communication was a valid method of moving away from their image as senseless savages, which effectively improved their chances of successfully recruiting children and teenagers.

Fourthly, as Stern and Berger rightly argued:

> ISIS has made its name on the marketing of savagery, evolving its message to sell a strange but potent new blend of utopianism and appalling carnage to a worldwide audience, documenting a carefully manipulated version of its military campaigns, including its bloody 2014 rampage across much of Iraq and Syria. ISIS is using beheadings as a form of marketing, manipulation, and recruitment, determined to bring the public display of savagery into our lives, trying to instill in us a state of terror.[116]

This peculiar relationship between raw brutality and utopianism was also noted by Nance who argued that members of IS's media outlets

> make videogame-like combat videos of merciless mayhem and bathe them with sacred mission rhetoric purposed by God alone to the tune of nasheeds or religious chants and hymns. To a man (and sometimes woman) they use the phrase "In the name of God" to justify whatever horror they are about to reveal.

He labelled such videos as "thrill kill cult."[117]

Clearly, the Islamic State's media outlets demonstrated exceptional inventiveness in presenting the death of its enemies. Their recordings not only consisted of beheadings but also of immolations, crucifixions, stonings and shotgun executions. They showed people being dropped from rooftops or run over by tanks. Daesh did not shy away from anything that could draw additional attention of their target audience, such as the unprecedented use of children (including toddlers) and teenagers as executioners. Many pieces of IS's propaganda were literally full of death and gore. Obviously, there was a clear motive behind this distressing *danse macabre*.[118] On the one hand, Friis labelled it as a specific type of political practice.[119] On the other, Micallef argued that they allowed Daesh "to shape and control its media exposure in the West."[120] It was a means of moulding the public debate in Europe and the US, as well as an efficient tool of putting Western governments under public pressure. Nevertheless, these images were also a valid tool for inspiring and recruiting followers.[121] Pictures of brutally killed enemies of the "Caliphate" served as proof of its efficiency and they were – in effect – an instrument for creating its triumphant image.

However, there was something more behind the "gore content." Daesh did not just publish images and videos depicting the death of "infidels" (*kuffar*), many also consisted of the bodies of its fallen members. According to Soufan "propaganda across all media glorified gruesome images of the dead who had martyred themselves."[122] From a qualitative viewpoint, they were usually considerably less appalling, as they did not contain excessive amounts of blood, were less concentrated on depicting serious injuries and body mutilations, and were frequently artificially brightened with computer graphics software. This was due to the fact that they served the purpose of familiarising its followers with the final and desirable goal of all *mujahidin*, i.e. death in the service of the Islamic State.[123] Thus, from a certain viewpoint, savagery was also a valid means of inspiring members to tread in the footsteps of the "sacred" *shuhada* (martyrs).[124]

Fifthly, IS exploited advanced strategies of distribution, which were founded on the deliberate and advanced use of the potential offered by the Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 environments. To begin with, it operated hundreds (if not thousands) of standalone websites and message boards from 2014. Webpages, frequently built with the use of popular CMSs (content management systems), served as sources of news on the Islamic State's achievements and as repositories of propaganda releases. Both standalone websites and message boards frequently exploited names and addresses which had little to nothing in common with jihadism in

order to avoid being detected by law enforcement agencies. They were also located in secondary folders, away from the root directory (home page), for the same purpose. Additionally, these websites were also known for exploiting unpopular TLDs (Top-Level Domains) such as: .ml, .biz, .host, .website, and .top. Nevertheless, common TLDs such as .com were exploited as well. Islamic State websites were primarily located in the surface web, but the dark web (accessible via The Onion Router) was also utilised.[125]

While the Web 1.0 environment was clearly an important channel of distribution, the proliferation of IS propaganda was heavily founded on professional and extensive use of social networks.[126] According to Herrick, social media provided Islamic State with

> a flexible and streamlined set of tools for creating and distributing videos, images, and other content […] Inherent network effects then magnify the reach and effect of this propaganda. Social media also provides ISIS with a valuable means of engaging in targeted recruitment campaigns and attempts to radicalise target populations.[127]

Lister noted that social media has "not only attracted recruits and worldwide attention but also enabled potential recruits to coordinate their arrival in Syria or Iraq, and to secure *tazkiyya*."[128] Daesh has been primarily known for exploiting the vast potential of Twitter, which is the most popular social network for political debates. According to the study of Morgan and Berger, just between September and December 2014 Islamic State supporters exploited at least 46,000 accounts on Twitter and about 20% of them primarily used English. On average, each ISIS-linked account had approximately 1,000 followers.[129] Just one user, based in the United Kingdom, was able to post 45,000 pro-Daesh messages on Twitter and Instagram in less than a year, which is on average approximately 125 posts per day.[130] The scope of IS propaganda on social media was proven by the activities of Twitter itself. Since mid-2015 to February 2016, the company banned as many as 125,000 pro-IS accounts. Between January and August 2016 an additional 235,000 were deleted.[131] While IS activity on Twitter was generated by a relatively small number of dedicated Internet users,[132] the scale of this campaign was unprecedented when compared to previous actions of other Salafi terrorist organisations.

In addition to Twitter, the group used a plethora of other popular and niche social networks, including Instagram, Facebook, Ask.fm, and even Vkontakte, the last of which was used to target Russian-speaking users.[133] As Stern and Berger emphasised, "ISIS social media operatives liked Facebook, with its rich media capabilities and multiple network options (such as fan pages and moderated groups that resembled the old forums), and they took a sophisticated approach to establishing its presence."[134] Their activities on FB included fan pages of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and Bilad al-Shaam. The group was also behind a Facebook campaign which exploited the slogan "We Are All ISIS."[135] It also exploited less popular networks such as Quitter, Friendica and Diaspora.[136]

Additionally, the "Caliphate" was also engaged in exploiting popular microblog platforms, such as Tumblr and Reddit, as well as the most popular video and

audio hosting websites, such as YouTube, LiveLeak, SoundCloud, Medium.com, Dailymotion.com, and Bitchute.com.[137] Both individual users as well as official and unofficial media outlets frequently exploited these – and many others – webpages to proliferate productions promoting al-Baghdadi's cause. IS also utilised blogosphere platforms such as Wordpress and BlogSpot. Finally, the group was heavily involved in disseminating its propaganda or communicating via a set of popular apps, such as Skype, Signal, Wickr, Surespot, Threema, Silent Circle, Viber, Whatsapp and SnapChat.[138] All these Web 2.0 communication channels were used by Daesh with great proficiency and the group showed determination in maintaining its networks. However, due to the increased efforts of the IT community and law enforcement agencies to curb digital *jihad*, for several years the Islamic State's strategy of distribution has become increasingly focused on the utilisation of Telegram.[139]

Since 2014 the organisation has also exploited a huge number of file sharing websites and pastebins. Daesh was known for utilising JustPaste.it to proliferate its text releases (e.g. statements, articles and essays), as well as to propagate its website addresses and Telegram channels. As for their use of file sharing websites, the following can be mentioned: Google Drive, Internet Archive (Archive.org), Scribd.com, Docdroid.net, En.calameo.com, Pdf-archive.org, Docgo.net, Archive.fo, and many others.[140]

Finally, many Daesh productions were designed to draw the attention of the mass media, which was indirectly used to proliferate news on developments in IS's propaganda. As Fishman accurately noted:

> Most Islamic State propaganda is produced in Arabic, but English-language content tends to get far more attention in the international press – and it should be thought of as an effort to generate earned media. In other words, it is often constructed so that journalists will cover the content and amplify the Islamic State's message.[141]

Moreover, the campaign utilised methods known from viral marketing by mixing technical proficiency with differentiated and up-to-date forms of online communication and shocking, gruesome scenes and images.[142] The aforementioned, infamous executions of Western hostages in 2014 and 2015 went viral and constituted the most "popular" terrorist-produced content in history. This was even more visible considering the fact that Internet users created a plethora of content referring to IS's beheadings, including memes and parodies.[143]

Last, but not least, on a general level, the content of Islamic State's productions was a mixture of both new and old themes,[144] which were customarily exploited in *jihadi* propaganda. According to Winter, IS's brand was advertised with six core narratives, including: brutality, mercy, victimhood, war, belonging and utopianism.[145] Zelin identified six top types of messages: productions promoting military-related activities, governance, *hisbah* (control of the observance of Islamic values), *da'wah* (invitation to Islam), promotion of the "Caliphate," and attacks against Muslims.[146] Macnair and Frank listed the following themes:

brotherhood and inclusivity, depictions of violence, strength and victory, crimes of enemies, calls for recruitment and spiritual fulfilment.[147] Finally, according to Gertenstein et al. there were nine core narratives deployed:

- winner's image,
- discrediting the competition (al-Qaeda, Taliban),
- illegitimacy of political Islamists (Muslim Brotherhood),
- sowing discord within enemy ranks (misinformation),
- exploiting sectarian tensions,
- the "Caliphate" as an Islamic utopia,
- jihadist adventure and camaraderie,
- driving a wedge between Muslims and the West,
- joining the IS as a religious obligation.[148]

Among the relatively new themes that distinguished IS from other Islamist terrorist organisations one can mention the strong emphasis placed on the legitimisation of the "Caliphate's" statehood (including *hisbah*, Islamic punishments and the military achievements of the group), as well as relentless attacks against so called "*jihadi* claimants," i.e. rival Islamist factions. Daesh continued its tradition, originating from the Zarqawi era, of exploiting sectarian tensions (especially in relation to Shias and Sufis), which is not so evident in the propaganda of other Salafi terrorist groups. Additionally, the cherry on top of all of the themes mentioned above was the "End Times" narrative, combined with millenarian bent.[149] As Weiss and Hassan argued, "ISIS relies on Islamic eschatology for legitimacy and mobilization […] ISIS has managed to turn outsider or enemy opinion of it into part of its world-historical struggle."[150] According to McCants, this was a "big selling point with foreign fighters, who want to travel to the lands where the final battles of the apocalypse will take place."[151] However, it has to be noted that since the beginning of IS's crisis around 2016, the group has become less and less interested in exploiting this particular topic.

Ingram was right when stating that:

> the appeal of ISIS propaganda and its role in radicalising potential supporters cannot be adequately explained by pointing to any single factor. Rather its potency lies in the cumulative impact of a range of strategies and levers it deploys as part of its propaganda efforts.[152]

Truly, it drew the world's attention because it constituted a carefully considered conglomerate of features, which were either traditional or unusual for *jihadi* propaganda. Even these standard traits were brought by Daesh to a completely new level in terms of innovativeness and technical proficiency. Simply, its communication methods, as well as its means of distributing productions advertising al-Baghdadi's group were well adapted to the specificity of online mass communication in the second decade of the 21st century, especially among youngsters, which were the most important target group for Daesh.

1.3 Organisation of the Islamic State's media arm

The roots of the propaganda machine of Daesh originated, as previously mentioned, from the times of az-Zarqawi, but it has evolved considerably over time. The "Caliphate's" specific style and narrative were partially inherited from the experience gathered by AQI, Mujahideen Shura Council (Majlis Shura al-Mujahidin), and the Islamic State in Iraq. In April 2007 ISI established a Ministry of Media (*diwan*), which controlled all developments in the field of the online and offline propaganda of the group.[153]

In this context, it is not a surprise that at the apogee of Islamic State prominence in 2014 and 2015, the group was capable of developing a constellation of professional structures that were responsible for the emergence of its "mediated phenomenon."[154] According to Badar,

> the propaganda machine at the forefront of IS artillery is comprised of a robust, multi-level organizational structure designed to exercise central control over the terrorist groups' external messaging, while also harvesting important content from different geographic areas of its operations. Their media proficiency exists because of an extensive media infrastructure that allows it to produce high-quality, timely products.[155]

From an organisational viewpoint, the Islamic State's arm which was responsible for manipulating Internet users was composed of central and local media cells, and overseen by the Ministry of Central Media, which was inherited from the internal structure of ISI. This particular *diwan* was primarily tasked with exercising control over all propaganda activities of the group, both internally and externally. It was also responsible for acquiring financial resources to maintain the media machine, as well as to pay salaries to its operatives.[156] Moreover, as Milton's report suggests, the Ministry

> has gone to great lengths to centralize the propaganda production and dissemination process. It has done so through written guidance, an evaluation system for both bureaus and products, and a quality-control process that provides near real-time interaction between itself and the local media bureaus.[157]

Interestingly, it was also extremely interested in information security, due to possible leaks caused by the propaganda productions, which could be used to gather intelligence.[158]

Islamic State's digital jihadist production was highly organised. Media officers were skilled professionals and received higher salary than frontline fighters.[159] According to Winter's study, at the peak of its power in 2015, there were seven core media offices directly subjected to Islamic State's leadership: al-Furqan Foundation (Mu'assasat al-Furqan), al-I'tisam Foundation (Mu'assasat al-I'tisam), al-Hayat Media Center (Markaz al-Hayat l-il-l'lam), Ajnad Foundation (Mu'assasat Ajnad), al-Bayan Radio (Idha'at al-Bayan), al-Himma Library (Maktabat al-Himma) and A'maq News Agency (Wakalat A'maq al-Akhbariyya).

Their actions were supported by around 35 local media offices, including: Khurasan Province Media Office (Wilayat Khurasan), responsible for Afghanistan and Pakistan, al-Aba Foundation (Mu'assasat al-Aba-Tunus) in Tunisia, nine offices in Syria, ten in Iraq, three in Libya, as well as six in Yemen. Dedicated media units also operated in Algeria, Western Africa, Saudi Arabia, the Caucasus and Egypt.[160] However, according to Milton, al-Naba was also considered to be a central media entity of Daesh, which was responsible for releasing a newsletter in Arabic.[161] This was confirmed by the *Structure of the Caliphate* video published in 2016, which included al-Naba's logo in the core of "Diwan of Media's" structure, besides al-Bayan Radio and the al-Furqan Foundation (Figure 1.5).

The distribution of tasks between these groups was not entirely clear,[162] but their general specialisation was more or less visible. The first prominent centre which was established and remained active under the "Caliphate" was the previously mentioned al-Furqan Foundation (also described in Anglophone literature as the al-Furqan Media Foundation or al-Furqan Media). As Nance noted, "with hundreds of releases, before the group called itself ISIS, al-Furqan was the granddaddy media organization."[163] From 2012 this office was responsible for publishing a series of increasingly compelling videos, including the previously mentioned *Clanging of the Swords*. Later the group produced a plethora of other, usually high-quality audiovisuals, including videos promoting the statehood ambitions of the "Caliphate," as well as executions. Between 2014 and 2015 the office released multiple recordings containing gruesome images of the enemies of Daesh being brutally murdered. They included, for instance, the immolation of a Jordanian pilot Muath al-Kasasabeh, the execution of Muhammad Musallam conducted by a child, as well as beheadings of Syrian soldiers and Christians

Figure 1.5 Screenshot of the *Structure of the Caliphate* video, published by the al-Furqan Foundation.

Source: Jihadology.net.

from Maghreb.[164] The office was also responsible for publishing the statements of the Islamic State's leaders, proving that its members were close to the "Caliph." Thus, al-Furqan was primarily known for producing high-profile video and audio releases. They were distributed, among other methods, via a standalone Twitter account.[165]

The second cell that received widespread attention from the worldwide media and Internet users was the al-Hayat Media Center. It was established in 2014 and was tasked with producing propaganda targeting non-Arabic audiences, including materials in English, German, Russian and French. Al-Hayat was known for elaborating the most technically exquisite productions promoting al-Baghdadi's organisation.[166] In effect, it was deemed to be responsible for the "Hollywood style" of the online campaign.[167] It not only released videos but also pieces of text propaganda, such as its flagship magazines – *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* – as well as numerous periodicals targeting more specific audiences: *Konstantiniyye, Istok* or *Dar al-Islam*.[168] Similarly to al-Furqan, this cell also owned a separate Twitter account.[169]

In contrast to al-Hayat and al-Furqan, the tasks of the Ajnad Foundation were much more limited. This bureau was responsible, strictly, for producing audio content, in the form of *anashids*, which usually glorified the Islamic State's martyrs, advertised the proclamation of the "Caliphate," as well as encouraged audiences to embark on the path of *jihad*. It released the following chants: *Oh Soldiers of Truth*; *Let's Go*; *Soon, Soon*; *My Brother, Inform My Companions*; *Oh My Lord I Ask You*; *We Have The Swords*; *Alhamdullilah*; *In the Way of God*; *This Brotherhood*; *Walk Towards the Light* and *Oh Hearts of Iron*.[170]Ajnad was responsible for producing two of the most recognised Islamic hymns, which are sometimes even considered to be IS's unofficial anthems: *My Ummah, Dawn Has Appeared* and *Clanging of the Swords*.[171] The group was also engaged in the production of popular recitations of the Quran.[172]

Similarly, al-I'tisam Foundation's tasks were limited to messages recorded from inside Islamic State territories. The apogee of this cell's activity was between 2013 and 2015.[173] According to El Araby, it was primarily focused on producing war propaganda videos that showcased the triumphs and efficiency of the *mujahidin* on various fronts. Its releases focused, among others, on battles against Shias in Iraq (including the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps) and against Kurdish troops. Furthermore, it was responsible for elaborating recruitment videos targeting various groups of audiences, including Uzbeks (*Follow the Caravan*), Britons (*Message of a Jihadist*) and Jordanians (*A Message to Jordan*).[174]

Radio al-Bayan was the main radio network of the self-proclaimed "Caliphate" and it was established after the conquest of Mosul in summer 2014. Therefore, aside from the Ajnad Foundation, it was the primary source of the group's audio propaganda. Initially it broadcasted 9 hours a day. It aired daily bulletins and dispatches from the frontlines in multiple languages, including Arabic, English, French, Russian and Kurdish. The content of the radio broadcasts also included religious *anashids*, IS's decrees, religious lectures, as well as news from the provinces of the organisation. This radio station operated both online (among others, via *al-Sawarim* and *Haqq* websites, as well as through its profile at Internet Archive) and offline.[175]

The Al-Himma Library, as its name suggests, was the official publishing house of the "Caliphate" tasked with providing *da'wah* literature.[176] It distributed e-books and pamphlets discussing various, usually religion-related, issues.[177] Interestingly, the office not only released its own, original publications but was also engaged in elaborating new editions of older *jihadi* pieces, such as *Thirty Suggestions for Islamic State Emirs and Soldiers*, which was released in November 2010.[178] Furthermore, the Al-Himma Library launched various instructions for *mujahidin*, such as the *Media Operative. You are also a mujahid*, which discussed the propaganda doctrine of Daesh.[179]

Finally, the A'maq News Agency is considered to be the "press agency" of the "Caliphate" and it was primarily responsible for issuing news and statements to online audiences, including terrorist attacks and conducted military operations.[180] It released propaganda both in written and audiovisual forms. According to available data, A'maq was considered to be a crucial element of the media branch of Daesh. Milton's study indicates that each local media office was encouraged to cooperate with the news agency. Results of their monthly evaluations were also dependent on the efficiency of their collaboration with A'maq.[181] This cell disseminated its releases both through a variety of Telegram channels, as well as through standalone websites, such as *Akhbar al-Muslimin*. Its announcements were also easily accessible on Twitter, not only due to the activities of the followers of Daesh, but also via pundits and experts who frequently share its claims of responsibility for terrorist attacks. Interestingly, while the group primarily published in Arabic, it also sometimes exploited English, German, French, Russian and even Italian.[182]

The structure and *modus operandi* of the media branch of IS obviously changed over time due to the deteriorating strategic situation of the group. Both central and local media offices, which produced a plethora of different forms of propaganda, were heavily influenced by the changes in the territorial organisation of the "Caliphate." In effect, over time many bureaus ceased to operate, due to the series of losses experienced by the group. For instance, al-I'tisam Foundation became inactive in 2016.[183] The same happened with the most crucial channels of distribution exploited by the Islamic State's media branch, such as the *Haqq* and *al-Ansar* websites, as well as profiles on social media.[184]

As of 2014 the group has also been supported by a constantly changing constellation of online groups, which formally were not a part of the organisation, nor funded by its leadership. Nevertheless, due to ideological proximity and the universal appeal of the "Caliphate," radicalised Internet users formed specialised, unofficial online "centres" or "media foundations" that became engaged either in the independent production of pro-Islamic State's materials or in the redistribution of its official releases in cyberspace (Table 1.1). Among the most active groups in recent years one can mention the al-Battar Foundation, Ahlut-Tawhid Publications and al-Furat Media Foundation. The first was known for publishing different formats of propaganda, including audiovisuals, audio productions and visual productions, which were released, among others, via the Blogspot platform. This cell was also responsible for posting standalone articles promoting the "Caliphate's" ideology.[185] The second was specialised in releasing pieces of written propaganda,

Table 1.1 Selection of the unofficial propaganda centres affiliated to the Islamic State between 2014 and 2019

Name	*Specialisation*	*Name*	*Specialisation*
al-Furat Media Foundation	Audiovisual, audio and visual propaganda in Russian, Arabic, English and Pashto	al-Qarar	Local news agency affiliated with followers of IS in Kashmir
Ahlut-Tawhid Publications	Written propaganda in English, including e-books and a bulletin *From Dabiq to Rome*	al-Muhajireen Foundation	Written and visual propaganda, responsible for operating a standalone website issuing statements for *mujahidin*
Al-Battar Foundation	High-quality audiovisual, audio and visual propaganda related to events in Syria, Sinai, Khurasan and West Africa	Ansar al-Khilafah fi Italia	Group of IS supporters releasing Italian translations of IS written propaganda
Al-Dhakhair Foundation	Visual propaganda, including posters containing threats related to President Donald Trump	Centre Médiatique an-Nur	Written propaganda in French, including pamphlets and religious essays
Al-Wafa Foundation	Visual and written propaganda, including posters on lone-wolf terrorism, calls for terrorist attacks and religious e-books	Afaaq Electronic Foundation	Cybersecurity instructions
Remah Foundation	Audiovisual propaganda in Arabic and English, active since 2017	al-Faqeer Media	Visual propaganda, including posters containing threats to the West
al-Yaqin Foundation	Audiovisual propaganda in Arabic and English	Media Front to Support the Islamic State	Written propaganda in the form of translations of IS materials, active on Twitter
Muharir al-Ansar	Visual propaganda, such as posters containing threats to the West, both in English and Arabic	Bunat al-Amjad Media	Visual propaganda in the form of posters
Al-Abd al-Faqir Foundation	Audiovisual, written and visual propaganda, including posters containing calls to conduct terrorist attacks in the West, animated videos for children and magazines (*Shahab al-Khilafah* and *Ashbal al-Ummah*)	Al-Fateh Media	Visual propaganda

(*Continued*)

Table 1.1 (Continued)

Name	*Specialisation*	*Name*	*Specialisation*
Mu'ta Agency	Press agency releasing visual and written propaganda on Telegram, including claims of responsibility in Arabic and English	Al-Wafa Media Foundation	Visual propaganda, including photographs
Ashhad Foundation	Audiovisual, visual and written propaganda, e.g. in the form of brochures	Khattab Media Foundation	Group active on social media, responsible for publishing pieces supporting violent *jihad*
Muntasir Media	Audiovisual and visual propaganda, including calls for terrorist attacks in the West	Al-Dar al-Sunni Foundation	Written propaganda in the form of booklets and magazines ("Al-Anfal")

Sources: *ISIS's media network: Developments in 2018 and future courses of action* (Ramat Hasharon: The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, 2019); *ISIS's Media Network in the Era after the Fall of the Islamic State* (Ramat Hasharon: The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, 2018); Miron Lakomy, "Picturing the Islamic State's online propaganda: vanishing or resurfacing from the World Wide Web?," *EUI RSCAS Working Papers*, 70 (2018); "Tracking Terrorism," www.trackingterrorism.org; "Jihad Intel," jihadintel.meforum.org; Bennett Clifford and Helen Powell, *Encrypted Extremism. Inside the English-Speaking Islamic State Ecosystem on Telegram* (Washington D.C.: The George Washington University Program on Extremism, 2019).

including reproductions of *jihadi* e-books in English, as well as the *From Dabiq to Rome* bulletin.[186] The Al-Furat Media Foundation was established in July 2015 in the Caucasus and was initially specialised in producing pro-IS propaganda in Russian. However, over time, it expanded its activities to Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, and Eastern and Southern Asia. In effect, the group produced audiovisual and audio pieces (*anashids*) in Arabic, English and Pashto.[187]

It ought to be emphasised that these groups were usually ephemeral in nature. While some of them, including the cases mentioned above, remained active for years, others produced only several propaganda pieces and were quickly replaced by others. Interestingly, aside from unofficial propaganda cells, there were also pro-Daesh groups, which were tasked with coordinating the cyberwarfare efforts of the "Caliphate": Sons of the Caliphate Army, the Caliphate Cyber Army, the Ghost Caliphate Section, and the Kalashnikov E-security Team. They were merged into the United Cyber Caliphate in 2016, but it is uncertain whether this group was officially affiliated to the IS. It was accused of being responsible for cyber-attacks against Twitter accounts, as well as for numerous defacements of websites.[188]

1.4 From apex to crisis: Islamic State's online propaganda in the post-territorial phase

At the end of 2015, the Islamic State started to face a rising wave of military challenges in the lands of Iraq and Syria. The activities of the Syrian, Kurdish, and Iraqi forces, combined with support from the US-led coalition and Russian

airstrikes proved to be an extremely difficult obstacle to overcome for troops faithful to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.[189] Around this time, the first manifestations of a crisis within its prolific propaganda machine occurred. However, at first glance, no negative changes were noticeable and some innovations in its online campaign were also introduced. The technical quality of some video series was visibly improved, especially in terms of special effects and CGI (computer-generated imagery). The Islamic State started to exploit drone footage more frequently, mostly as a means of advertising its SVBIED attacks against disbelievers. It also introduced a series of videos and photo reportages, which documented assassinations conducted by members of Daesh in the first-person perspective. This means of presenting violent actions against *kuffar* was probably borrowed from video games, namely those from the first-person shooter genre, which effectively increased the "immersion" of younger audiences. In 2016, the group also released the aforementioned *Huroof* mobile application which was dedicated to indoctrinating children (Figure 1.6).[190]

In spite of these certain improvements, a number of weaknesses started to become visible as well. Initially, some of the most important, high-profile audiovisuals produced by the group's official and unofficial media cells consisted of surprising mistakes or instances of downgrading, in terms of language used, editing, montage, and post-production. Secondly, Daesh started to reuse content elaborated at the apogee of IS's power much more frequently. This tendency clearly indicated that they were encountering growing challenges in terms of recording new, alluring videos in high definition. This was visible, for example, in the video on anti-tank warfare featuring John Cantlie that was released in December 2016, as it utilised fragments of battles recorded more than two years earlier. Thirdly, the campaign started to be more focused on the forms of online propaganda which were easier and quicker to produce. This tendency proved to be especially noticeable from the initiation of the Mosul operation at the end of 2016. Islamic State's media arm started to produce less and less sophisticated productions which were replaced by simpler formats of propaganda.[191] Finally, there was a significant drop in terms of the Islamic State's propaganda output. According to Milton's study conducted between January 2015 and August 2016 the monthly productions of visual content experienced an almost four-fold decrease in just 12 months, from 761 in August 2015 to 194 in August 2016.[192]

These trends continued in the subsequent years, which corresponded with the deteriorating strategic situation of the "Caliphate" and a series of defeats suffered in Iraq, Syria, and Libya. By early 2016, the US-led coalition alone damaged and destroyed more than 21,500 targets owned by this terrorist organisation. By the end of 2015 only, airstrikes had killed around 20,000 militants.[193] In 2016 the Islamic State lost Sirte in Maghreb, as well as Ramadi and Manbij in the Middle East.[194] As Jones et al. reported, it had lost 45,377 km^2 and 2.5 million inhabitants in Iraq and Syria by early 2017, which constituted a 56% decline in its Syrian population and an 83% decline in its Iraqi population, when compared to its peak in the autumn of 2014. At this time, the group had lost almost all of its territories in Libya, 75% in Nigeria and 87% in Afghanistan.[195] In 2017 Daesh lost its two most important hubs – Raqqa and Mosul – which constituted a major breakthrough in

Figure 1.6 Advertisement of the *Huroof* application.

Source: Rumiyah 2 (2016), 31.

the war. This also meant, as Othman Alkaff and Mahzam stressed, that the group had lost its main sources of revenue.[196] Its last remaining pocket of resistance in Syria – the town of Baghuz Faqani – was seized in March 2019.[197]

The fall of the "Caliphate" as a territorial organisation had a critical impact on its online propaganda capabilities, which – for years – were supported by its vast financial resources and logistical backbone. Due to rapidly decreasing revenue, the salaries of IS militants dropped by 50% by early 2016.[198] It is likely that the same happened to members of its media operations. Aside from the shortfalls in terms of infrastructure and finances, the Islamic State's propaganda machine suffered serious losses among its most prominent and skilled members. Accessible data suggests that the US-led coalition since, at least, 2016 specifically targeted members of Daesh who played crucial roles in its digital jihadist campaign. Among others, it managed to kill two of the key figures of its media arm: Daesh's spokesman Taha Subhi Falaha (Abu Muhammad al-Adnani) and Wa'il Adil Hasan Salman al-Fayad (also known as Abu Muhammad al-Furqan), who was the minister of media and the mastermind behind the online and offline propaganda efforts of the group. Moreover, airstrikes killed Ibrahim al-Ansari (responsible for instructions for homegrown terrorists and the recruitment of foreign fighters), Mohammad Emwazi (the aforementioned Jihadi John) and Ahmad Abousamra (Abu Sulayman ash-Shami, co-founder and editor of *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*). Casualties also included Abu Khabbab al-Masri (a member of IS's methodological committee and a close collaborator of Abu Muhammad al-Furqan), Denis Cuspert (Abu Talha al-Almani, aforementioned IS celebrity and *anashid* producer), Amr al-Absi (head of IS's Media Council) and Shaker Wahib al-Fahdawi (warlord and a "star" in many productions of the "Caliphate").[199] Islamic State's media branch announced the "martyrdom" of 91 media operatives in just three years, between the second quarter of 2015 and the second quarter of 2018.[200] In effect, the group lost a great part of its online propaganda professionals.

Another factor which impaired IS's capabilities on the Web was related to countermeasures undertaken by law enforcement agencies and leading Internet companies. Due to the huge popularity and dynamic proliferation of its productions, from the end of 2014 the world's top Internet corporations steadily increased their efforts to curb *jihadi* propaganda in the surface web. For instance, between mid-2015 and February 2016 Twitter alone removed 125,000 Islamist extremist accounts, most of which were related to Daesh. Between January and August 2016, 235,000 profiles were banned.[201] In order to detect and delete these releases more efficiently Facebook, Twitter, Microsoft and YouTube formed a Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism in June 2017, which works in close partnership with, for example, the UN Counter Terrorism Executive Directorate and the Tech Against Terrorism initiative. In time, GIFCT proved to be the cornerstone of efficient international efforts to combat the Islamic State's presence on the surface web. It has developed and exploited a number of advanced technological solutions to facilitate and automatise the identification of terrorist-related content. Thanks to this, Twitter, for instance, managed to suspend more than 274,000 accounts related to the promotion of terrorism between July 2017 and December 2017, but not all of them were related to IS.[202]

Likewise, Western governments launched countering violent extremism (CVE) programmes in 2015, which aimed to hinder the narratives employed by Daesh and other VEOs. For example, the United Kingdom established the Commonwealth Countering Violent Extremism Unit, which works under the auspices of the secretariat of the Commonwealth of Nations. Similar initiatives were conducted in the United States, where the Department of Homeland Security created a CVE task force. Moreover, in May 2016 the US Department of State and USAID released a joint strategy on countering violent extremism.[203] This corresponded with the increased efficiency of law enforcement in spotting and curbing the online presence of Daesh, such as standalone websites, blogs, and message boards. In effect, since 2017 it has become increasingly difficult to find instances of the Islamic State's presence in the Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 environments.[204]

Finally, Internet communities took an active part in campaigns targeting extremist narratives related to al-Baghdadi's organisation. Since 2014, more and more content has been produced independently by electronic media and Internet users, which attempted either to undermine the argumentation of Daesh or – more frequently – to ridicule it. For instance, in April 2016 Vice News uploaded a video on YouTube, which was recorded by the headcam of a fallen Islamic State's militant. It presented pure chaos among *mujahidin* during the battle against the Kurdish troops. This audiovisual, entitled *What It's Really Like to Fight for the Islamic State*, stood in direct opposition to the "official" propaganda of Daesh, which presented its militants as brave and skilled. By August 2019 it had been viewed more than 23 million times, which proves the huge popularity of this piece which, in fact, ridiculed IS's military efforts.[205]

In effect, the lack of developed logistics and experienced professionals behind the online campaign of Daesh, combined with much more hostile online environments, resulted in its output and quality being significantly reduced.[206] The aforementioned trends, which were noticeable from 2016, intensified over time. In 2018 the production of the "Caliphate's" propaganda proved to be just a fraction of its former self from the apogee of its capabilities in 2014 and 2015. According to Zelin's study, during a one-week period in April 2015, Islamic State was able to release 24 new videos. In contrast, it took one month for a similar number of new audiovisuals to be published between September and October 2018.[207] This suggests that the output of IS's media bureaus in terms of videos produced significantly decreased after more than three years. This trend was confirmed by Nanninga; according to his research, "the average number of videos released per month decreased from more than 70 in the first half of 2015 to less than four in the first half of 2018."[208] Other, more indicative data provided by Milton demonstrate that there was a 94% drop in the visual propaganda output of Daesh between August 2015 and June 2018 – from 754 to 44 new releases per month.[209]

Furthermore, high-quality and carefully thought-out productions were less and less visible from 2017. The group ceased to publish flagship magazines in English. The last issue of *Rumiyah* was released in September 2017. The only prominent periodical, which remained unaffected by the crisis and was regularly published since the apogee of IS's campaign was the Arabic newsletter *al-Naba*. Execution videos of comparable quality and coverage to *A Message to America* were

nowhere to be seen. The same trend was visible with dedicated music videos or high quality "documentaries." Instead, the group's online activity became more focused on compilations and battle videos, bearing little to no signs of advanced post-production. Islamic State's increasingly incapacitated media arm started to visibly prefer the types of propaganda which were the easiest and quickest to produce without support from the non-existent logistical backbone of the territorial organisation. In effect, many of the features, which were responsible for the uniqueness of its digital *jihad*, slowly faded away and disappeared.[210] This is proven by the fact that since 2017 there have been very few productions of Daesh which have drawn the increased attention of the worldwide public. Among the very few that did, one can mention a video depicting the death of the US special forces operators in Niger, which was released by the group in March 2018.[211] Another was al-Baghdadi's video statement released in April 2019.[212] Both, however, sparked great interest from mass media and Internet users, not because of their exquisite quality but due to other factors at play. The first video was, in fact, recorded by the headcams of the fallen US soldiers and released online by Daesh. This was the very reason why it went viral. The second production was met with increased attention because the self-proclaimed "Caliph" made an appearance for the first time since 2014. It was obviously a means of damage control in the face of a morale crisis among IS ranks. Both releases lacked, however, sophisticated post-production or directing. Even the most advanced cells, such as the al-Hayat Media Center, were much more inclined to exploit recordings and CGI elaborated at the apogee of the "Caliphate's" power.[213] For instance, a series called *Harvest of the Soldiers*, which was published regularly between August 2018 and January 2019, and focused on presenting statistics of IS's achievements in one-week intervals,[214] exploited the same set of special effects in every edition (Figure 1.7). This clearly meant that al-Hayat lacked the necessary human or technical resources to create more interesting and differentiated pieces. Finally, propaganda published in languages other than Arabic and (to a lesser extent) English proved to be much more sporadic than a couple of years prior. This was possibly related to serious casualties among IS's ranks and to a great drop in the inflow of foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq,[215] effectively cutting the access of its media arm to a wide pool of capable translators.

The themes exploited in the visual releases became predominantly focused on military issues. Non-military productions constituted only about 15% of the output in the first quarter of 2018. Moreover, the group's videos increased in length when compared to those from early 2015. Their average duration between the first five months of 2015 and 2018 grew from a bit more than six minutes to 16 minutes 30 seconds. According to Milton, "this may suggest a decreased ability to create narrowly tailored and targeted videos."[216]

To summarise, not only did the output and quality of the online propaganda of Daesh plunge but it also received much less attention from Internet communities. The vast logistical backbone of the Islamic State's media branch, as well as its "winner's image," fuelling the interest of potential recruits, were gone by 2018. This does not mean, however, that the group's online campaign ceased to pose a

Figure 1.7 Screenshot from the *Harvest of the Soldiers* #5 video, released by the al-Hayat Media Center in August 2018.

Source: Jihadology.net.

significant threat to international security, as it did adapt to these new determinants discussed above. There were generally three ways in which its propaganda branch responded to the crisis.

Firstly, while the Islamic State suffered from the increased awareness of Internet companies and law enforcement of digital *jihad,* resulting in quicker detection of its productions on the surface web, it shifted to exploiting the previously mentioned Telegram encrypted communication software as its primary means of propaganda distribution.[217] As Clifford and Powell argued, it "remains vital to the organization's ecosystem of communications. The platform's functional affordances, paired with relatively lax enforcement of Telegram's terms of service (ToS), offers IS sympathizers a user-friendly medium to engage with like-minded supporters and content."[218] Their study identified 636 pro-IS Telegram channels, which were active between June 1, 2017 and October 24, 2018.[219] Moreover, between June and December 2017, 98 channels on this platform disseminated instructional materials.[220] This data indicates how important this application has become for the Islamic State. In this context, as Shehabat, Mitew and Alzoubi emphasised, the emergence of end-to-end encrypted communication software, such as Telegram, but also Kik, Surespot, and WhatsApp, "have allowed ISIS, as well as other groups, to establish and successfully leverage a secure medium of communication."[221] Such a tendency also had one more important implication. IS's official media cells, such as al-Hayat Media Center, A'maq News Agency, or al-Furqan Media gradually resigned from maintaining a significant presence on the Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 environments, in the form of standalone websites or dedicated accounts on social networks and hosting websites. Instead, they operated their channels on Telegram, which were accessible for the group's followers.

Secondly, the gap left by the official media outlets of Daesh was quickly filled by a plethora of semi-official and unofficial groups, such as the aforementioned al-Muhajireen Foundation, Centre Médiatique an-Nur, Ahlut-Tawhid Publications, Ansar al-Khilafa fi Italia, al-Faqeer Media, al-Battar Media Foundation or Afaaq Electronic Foundation. While most of them also operated on Telegram, many have remained very active on the surface web, producing their own content and redistributing official releases of the Islamic State. For instance, the Afaaq Electronic Foundation proliferated bulletins consisting of cyber security manuals for *mujahidin*, while Centre Médiatique an-Nur published essays on the Internet Archive in French. Ahlut-Tawhid Publications in 2018 operated a *Ghuraba* website (Figure 1.8) and maintained an active, online presence in various Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 hotspots, including Bitchute.com, Medium.com and the popular microblog platform Reddit. The Al-Muhajireen Foundation operated a standalone website, which consisted of statements and messages to *mujahidin* in several languages, including English, Arabic, Persian, Dutch, Turkish, and German. Many of these groups kept a low-profile for a long time and benefited from a lack of awareness of Internet companies and law enforcement. Thus, their releases and online profiles were relatively more long-lasting, when compared to, for example, the productions of the al-Hayat Media Center.[222]

Thirdly, the core of the "Caliphate's" narration was slightly modified to meet the new circumstances. The group started to argue that it is in a state of a long war of attrition against the disbelievers, and that territorial control is not necessarily crucial at the time, which stood in direct opposition to the messages it conveyed in 2014. Its media releases started to be more inclined to present IS's terrorist and militant activities as an insurgency campaign and proof that it cannot be

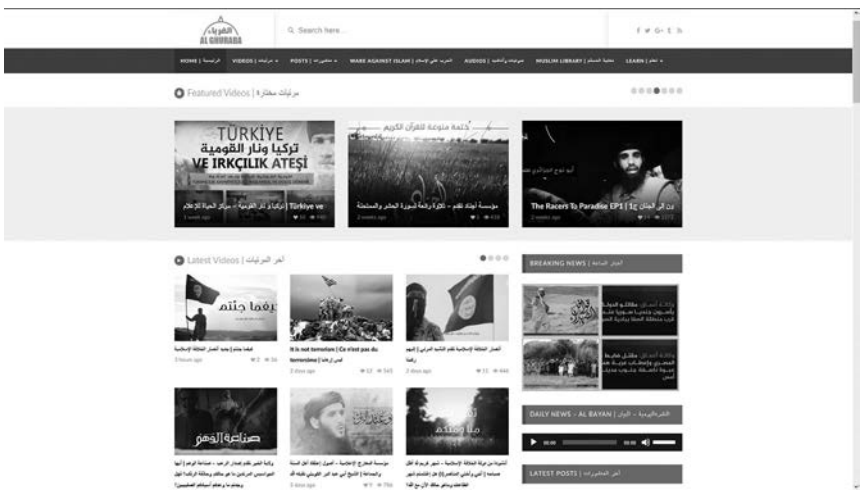

Figure 1.8 Ahlut-Tawhid Publications' *al-Ghuraba* website, state as of June 22, 2018.

Source: Wayback Machine.

defeated, as it maintained a global appeal. Its supporters were encouraged to join IS in more easily accessible provinces than Iraq and Syria, such as the Khurasan region. Ordinary life under the "Caliphate" ceased to be an important theme.[223] Moreover, according to Nanninga, video propaganda in this phase of decline heavily exploited nostalgia over the Islamic State's apogee, and presented current hardships experienced by *mujahidin* as a trial from God, as well as a means of purification and a promise of imminent victory.[224] All these themes were incorporated into the classic, core narratives used by Daesh.

Effectively, Islamic State's propaganda capabilities in the post-territorial phase were seriously maimed, but not entirely crippled. The group failed to maintain the same quality and quantity of productions when compared to its peak, but it still released some of the best digital jihadist materials. Its official media cells received valuable help from a plethora of unofficial groups, which basically took over part of the burden of disseminating propaganda in the surface web. Thus, the online campaign of Daesh in the post-Raqqa period mutated, but it was far from over.

Notes

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