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# EXTREMIST COMMUNICATION CAPABILITIES IN NORTH AFRICA AND THE SAHEL

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## Extremist communication capabilities in North Africa and the Sahel

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**The Terrorism-Joint Analysis Group (T-JAG)** was formed in 2017 with the aim to provide a more global, interdisciplinary and practical approach to fighting terrorism, incorporating the wide variety of experts, knowledge and expertise that the GCSP has to offer. The group delivers timely analysis to both the public and private sectors on the global manifestations of terror. In doing so, it aims to bridge the gap between diplomats, military officers, policy makers, academics, and journalists who are active in the field of preventing violent extremism (PVE). The main activities of the group include: monitoring and analysing the online and offline activities of extremist networks, providing workshops and training on intelligence gathering, open source investigations; publishing reports on past, current, and future security challenges; organising dialogues and round table discussions about violent extremism in Europe and beyond; engaging with partners in external conferences, workshops and other events; and sharing information and cooperating with our audiences to reach a comprehensive understanding on specific topics. The core team currently consists of manager **Jean-Paul Rouiller**, deputy and senior analyst **Jean-Pierre Keller**, and analyst **Faisal Paktian**, as well as GCSP Fellows **Hafez AbuAdwan** and **Dr. Andreea Stoian Karadeli** who work with the T-JAG at a large capacity to enhance the reach, expertise and capabilities of the group.

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The following analysis does not reflect the research team's personal views on Islam, Koranic references, local governments, politicians, leaders, other individuals referenced, nor any race or religion discussed herein.

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# CONTENTS

<b>Executive Summary .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>The jihadi ecosystem in North Africa and Sahel .....</b>	<b>9</b>
1.1 Evolution of the jihadi ecosystem in the region .....	10
1.2 Current challenges .....	15
<b>Mapping the communication capabilities of terrorist groups in North Africa and Sahel ..</b>	<b>22</b>
2.1 Traditional vs. Modern forms of communication .....	24
2.2 The reach of “Cyberjihad” .....	27
2.3 Communication strategy vs. spheres of recruitment .....	31
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>Key Findings and Policy Suggestions.....</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>Policy Suggestions .....</b>	<b>37</b>



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The complex nature of the threat of terrorism caused by groups active in **North Africa and the Sahel** requires effective information to prevent, detect, and eventually investigate all criminal activities related to their areas of interest. In the Maghreb-Sahel region, more than in any other place, the boundary between the two main Salafi-jihadi groups – al-Qaeda and ISIS – is porous at best and non-existent at worst. While borders between these Salafist religious spheres can be hard to define, they are tangled with contextual and interest-based factors, thereby transforming the regional jihadi ecosystem into a challenging mosaic.

The main aim of this research is **to map the communication capabilities of terrorist groups in North Africa and the Sahel, taking into consideration the local context as well as to identify and categorise the specific means used to disseminate propaganda in each country / region by contextualising the material produced in / for / about African Jihadism by both al-Qaeda and ISIS groups**. Bearing in mind that terrorism functions as a communicative act, the groups' **multilevel communication capabilities** are a core element of the jihadi phenomenon in North Africa and the Sahel. Starting from the individual and transcending the jihadi ecosystem to the global level, jihadi-terrorist communication capabilities develop on a multilevel structure, adapting

their main elements according to context, goal, and strategy.

The **multilevel communication capabilities analysis framework** illustrated in the introduction is based on five main elements: **source, audience, content, channel, and goal**. Each of these elements can provide different characteristics and contexts, depending on the analysed material. For instance, the source can be internal, from within the designated jihadi ecosystem, or external, outside of the designated area. In the same way, the message can address various audience types: internal/external (to audiences found within the jihadi-ecosystem or outside of it), sympathisers/enemies or members/non-members). The respective content can largely be characterised as either operational (tactics, strategies, planning, etc.) or non-operational (such as ideology-related knowledge/propaganda), based on local, regional or international events, delivered in audio, video or textual formats, in Arabic or foreign languages. The channel of communication chosen by the source is also crucial to the analysis: online/offline, verbal/non-verbal, wired/wireless. Last but not least, all the elements mentioned above provide the necessary information to determine the goal of communication. This can vary from radicalisation and recruitment, planning and coordination, knowledge and training to fundraising, psychological war-





fare, publicity, and propaganda. Observing and understanding correctly all five of these elements is crucial to unravelling the true logic and purpose within jihadi communication strategies and capabilities in North Africa and the Sahel, and beyond this region.

Jihadist groups have developed effective and sophisticated communication strategies via the creation of magazines and weekly media outlets, such as Dabiq / Dar al Islam / Rumiyah / al Naba' (ISIS) and Inspire / one Ummah (Al Qaeda), but mainly through the use of social media channels, such as Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, Instagram, Rocketchat, Tam Tam, and Riot. Jihadist groups' online strategy – the “cyberjihad” – is perceived by terrorism experts as the perfect reflection of terrorists' core interests: their ability to **communicate on logistical and operational issues** as well as strengthening their survival capacity through spreading radical propaganda and recruiting new adherents or sympathisers. Therefore, the propaganda strategies of those groups have a dual effect: they serve both as a tool for terrorist movements to **enforce their belief system vis-à-vis potential recruits** and as a means to **signal and project alternative forms of legitimacy and distinguish themselves** from rival movements.

While interests, views, and trajectories leading to extremist radicalisation and acts of terror remain highly diverse, intensive research on first-hand material has emphasised the correlation between communication capabilities and recruitment strategies for the jihadi ecosystem in North Africa and the Sahel, while pointing out

similarities and contextual distinctions regarding four factors: **ideological and religious, socio-political, geopolitical, and the marketing of violence**. To fully grasp both the similarity and diversity of these factors, it is necessary to examine the content of the numerous channels focusing on North Africa and Sahel, such as Geonews – a portal dedicated to Al-Qaeda on the Rocket chat platform. Recruitment patterns are identified and discussed for each factor, outlining the main themes, means, and terminological tools used by the jihadist groups in the region, based on the methodological framework of this research.

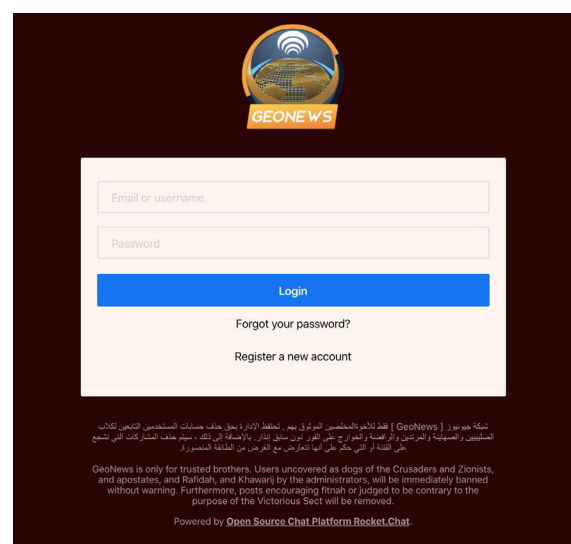


Fig. 1 Al-Qaeda's Geonews portal on the platform Rocketchat

The conclusion of this article summarises the **main findings** and provides valuable **recommendations** for the development of a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy that encompasses all of the actors, means, and tools present within the jihadi ecosystem in North Africa and the Sahel, and beyond.

” “And y’know what they decided the number one threat was? The destructive and disruptive capability of a small group. That’s what they’re worried about most...they’re terrified of a small group with a committed goal.”

Brad Meltzer, The Inner Circle

## INTRODUCTION

The complex nature of the threat caused by the terrorist groups that are active in **North Africa and the Sahel** requires effective information to prevent, detect, and eventually investigate criminal activities related to their areas of interest. In the Maghreb-Sahel region, more than in any other place, the boundary between the two main Salafi-jihadi groups - al-Qaeda and ISIS - is porous at best and nonexistent at worse. While borders between these Salafist religious spheres can be hard to define, they are tangled to contextual and interest-based factors, thereby transforming the regional jihadi ecosystem into a challenging mosaic.

Bearing in mind that terrorism functions as a communicative act, the groups’ **multilev-**

**el communication capabilities** are a core element of the jihadi phenomenon in North Africa and the Sahel. Starting from the individual and transcending the jihadi ecosystem to the global level, the jihadi-terrorist communication capabilities are developed on a multilevel structure, adapting their main elements according to context, goal, and strategy. An in-depth analysis based on structured intelligence in conjunction with strategic, tactical, and operational frameworks that clearly acknowledge and evaluate the local, national and international dimensions of the phenomenon, is instrumental to understanding and countering the terrorist threat in this region.

The main aim of this research is to map **the communication capabilities of the terror-**



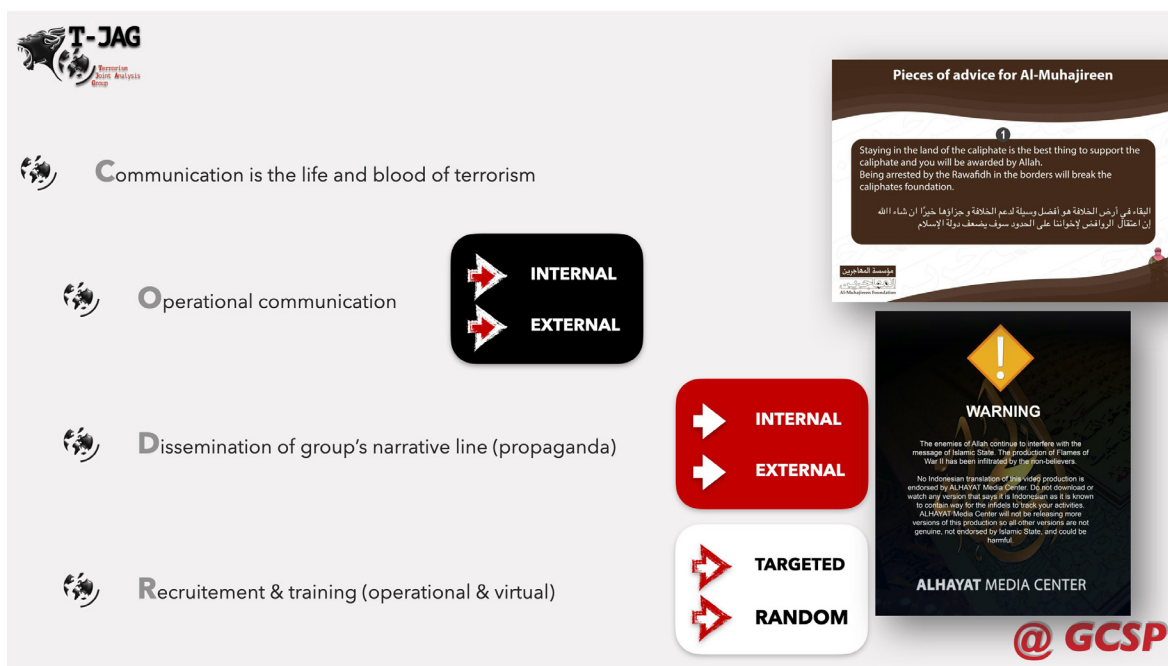


Fig. 2 Communication and terrorism

**ist groups in North Africa and the Sahel, based on the local context, by identifying and categorising the specific means used to disseminate propaganda in each country / region through the material produced in / for / about African Jihadism by both al-Qaeda and ISIS groups.**

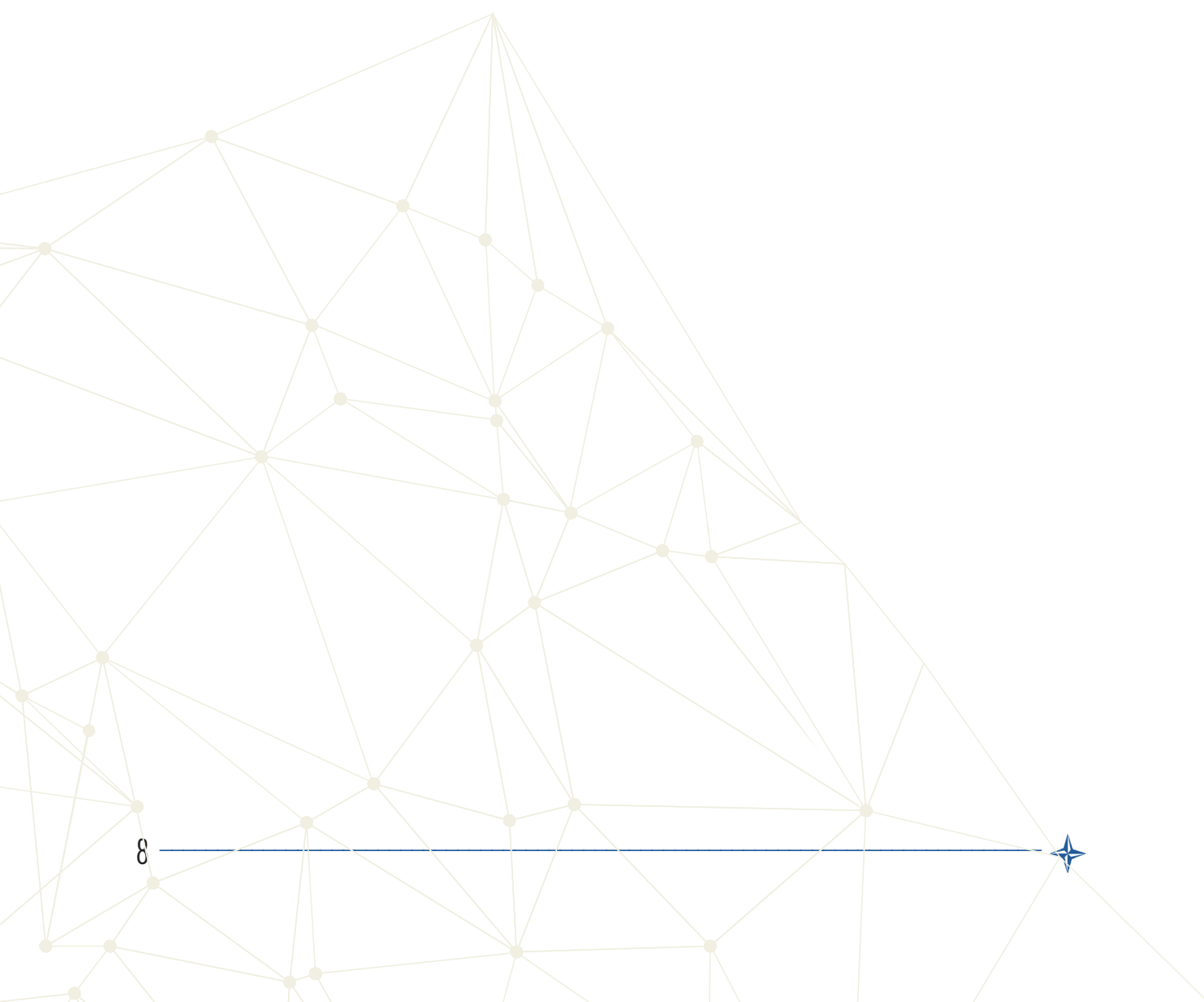
The structure of this report is based on three main pillars:

- synthesis of the jihadi ecosystem's evolution in North Africa and the Sahel;
- analysis of the communication capabilities and strategies developed by the subject-groups;
- main findings and policy recommendations.

In order to assess the communication capabilities of the terrorist groups active in the target region, a multilevel communication capabilities analysis framework has been developed in order to correlate **the jihadi ecosystem and the fundamental elements of communications: source, audience, content, channel/platform and goal**. Each of these elements can reflect different characteristics and contexts, depending on the analysed material. For instance, the **source** can be internal, from within the designated jihadi ecosystem, or external, coming from an outside area. In the same way, the message can address various types of **audiences**: internal/external (to an audience found within the jihadi-ecosystem or outside of it), sympathisers/enemies, members/non-members).

The respective **content** can largely be characterised as either operational (tactics, strategies, planning, etc.) or non-operational (such as ideology-related knowledge or propaganda), based on local, regional or international events, delivered in audio, video or textual formats, in Arabic or any other foreign/local language. Based on the system of communication chosen (interpersonal, telecommunication, mass communication), the **channel** used by the source is also crucial to the analysis: online/offline, verbal/non-verbal, wired/

wireless. Finally, all of the elements mentioned prior provide the necessary information to determine the **goal** of communication. This can vary from radicalisation and recruitment, planning and coordination, knowledge and training to fundraising, psychological warfare, publicity, and propaganda. Observing and understanding correctly all five of these elements is crucial **to unravelling the true logic and purpose within the jihadi communication strategies and capabilities in North Africa and the Sahel, and beyond.**





” The groups play on identity politics and local relationships to strengthen their position in the region. Their coordinated effort to transform governance of societies in the Sahel along their vision of Islam has helped destabilise the region and created additional opportunities for Salafi-jihadi expansion.

## 1. THE JIHADI ECOSYSTEM IN NORTH AFRICA AND THE SAHEL

The threat represented by the jihadi groups in Africa is not monolithic, comprising activity from an ever-shifting mix of approximately two dozen groups that actively operate across 14 countries. While **largely concentrated in five main theatres**, the distribution of violent extremist activity across the continent has grown more dispersed. Bearing in mind that each theatre faces unique dynamics, this research focuses on **the jihadi phenomenon in the context of North Africa and the Sahel**.

**North Africa** is a region encompassing the northern portion of the African continent. Although there is no singularly accepted

scope for the region, it is sometimes defined as stretching from the Atlantic shores of Mauritania in the west, to Egypt’s Suez Canal and the Red Sea in the east. The most commonly accepted definition includes Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Sudan, the 6 countries that shape the top North of the African continent.<sup>1</sup>

**The Sahel** is used to describe a part of Africa that from west to east includes parts of northern Senegal, southern Mauritania, central Mali, northern Burkina Faso, the extreme south of Algeria, Niger, the extreme north of Nigeria, the extreme north





Fig. 3 Map of North Africa and the Sahel

of Cameroon and Central African Republic, central Chad, central and southern Sudan, the extreme north of South Sudan, Eritrea, and the extreme north of Ethiopia<sup>2</sup>. It is a vast region that represents a cradle of history, culture, languages, traditions and, at the same time, conflict.

### 1.1 Evolution of the jihadi ecosystem in the region

The Salafi-jihadi network in North Africa and the Sahel can be traced back to the Algerian civil war, and particularly to one of the two main Islamist factions fighting the Algerian government -- the Armed Islamic Group (GIA). Formed in 1992, the founders and leaders of the GIA had fought against the Soviets in Afghanistan. The group quickly gained a

reputation for its brutality, leading to the separation of a faction that eventually became the Salafist Group for Call and Combat (GSPC). The GSPC was recognised as an affiliate of **al-Qaeda back in September 2006<sup>3</sup> and rebranded soon thereafter as al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)**. AQIM began infiltrating societies across the Sahel in the 2000s (especially in northern Mali) and established itself in the local society and economy, including trafficking networks, through cultivating relationships with communities by providing assistance, marrying into the communities, and recruiting members. Although AQIM units have managed to expand their power in the Sahel region, AQIM has continued to focus its Jihad, however, against the Algerian state, leading to further division within the organisation. The first major splinter from AQIM occurred in October



2011, when the **Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA/MUJAO<sup>4</sup>)** was established. MUJAO continued to follow the same Salafi-jihadi ideology as AQIM, but it managed to contextualise the ideology in the West African Islamic history in order to resonate with the local communities and gather more participants.<sup>5</sup>

A separate group was established under the leadership of Ag Ghali – a historical leader of the Tuareg communities of Northern Mali. Ag Ghali founded **Ansar al-Din** after returning from Libya, where he served under the guard of Qaddafi, and from where he extracted large quantities of weapons and trained men. After their formation, **Ansar al Din, MUJAO** and **AQIM** enforced basic governance through providing public services and security in northern Mali during this time. At the end of 2012, AQIM was undermined by a second major splinter, and, as a result, **Muwaqqi'un Biddam** (Signers with Blood) was formed. Shortly after, in August 2013, MUJAO and al Muwaqqi'un Biddam / Mulathamun merged to form **al Murabitoun**,<sup>6</sup> uniting as the group in the Sahel, focusing on terror attacks against French and other Western targets.<sup>7</sup>

In 2015, the **Macina Liberation Front** – a new Malian jihadi group – claimed responsibility for the attacks in central Mali. Personal relationships built with members of Ansar al Din translated into close ties between the two groups, including a notable relationship that ran through a Macina Liberation Front member, Hassan Dicko, to an Ansar al Din brigade that operated in southern Mali. Like

Ansar al Din, the Macina Liberation Front uses insurgent tactics to weaken competing authorities and fill governance voids.

ISIS has also started to gain sympathisers across the region long before the first concrete step toward an association with any of the groups on the ground. Adnan Abu Walid al Sahrawi pledged his loyalty – and that of his followers – to the so-called Islamic State in May 2015, calling into question the unity of effort that the Salafi-jihadi groups in the Sahel had achieved. A small faction that had been part of MUJAO splintered from al Murabitoun with Sahrawi to build the foundation of the **Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)**. Sahrawi's group did not conduct its first attacks until September 2016, and it was ignored both by the father-organisation and by the media until mid-October 2016, when it managed to attract attention through a spectacular attack on a Nigerian prison. Since then, the group has become one of the most active in the Sahel, operating in the tri-border disputed region between Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. The group's total membership has remained in the low hundreds, relying heavily on support networks and working with the other Salafi-jihadi groups in the region. The Salafi-jihadi network expanded into Burkina Faso by the end of 2016. A new group calling itself Ansar al Islam launched a low-level insurgency among disenfranchised Fulani in northern Burkina Faso in December 2016. **Ansar al Islam** remains independent from al Qaeda and Islamic State affiliations, but in addition to the support from the al Qaeda-linked groups, its members have received support from ISGS<sup>8</sup>. In early 2017, al-Qaeda followers in the Sahel

united to form Jama'a Nusrat al Islam wa al Muslimeen – JNIM. JNIM now presents a unified Salafi-jihadi front across Mali.

**At present, JNIM<sup>9</sup>, ISGS, and Ansar al Din** apparently all operate together in the Sahel region via “mutually agreed cooperation”. While it is true that their shared ideology – Salafi-jihadism – defines a set of common objectives that includes the enforcement of shari’a-based governance (in line with their interpretation of it) through weakening the state and expelling Western influence, the situation on the ground is notably different from the way it is reflected in both state media and terrorist propaganda. Cross-organisation relationships have created personal networks that facilitate this cooperation, along with individuals that have ties to all three groups, effectively blurring the distinctions between them. Membership among the groups became rath-

er fluid, as factions would follow the group deemed best suited to achieve their aims. ISGS has incorporated defections from JNIM, including a faction from the Macina Liberation Front and the Salaheddine Brigade<sup>10</sup>, which had been loosely affiliated with JNIM and commanded by a long-time Salafi-jihadist, in the process bolstering cross-organisation relationships<sup>11</sup>. Additionally, the efforts of the three groups to stoke inter-communal conflict has created pockets of support for the Salafi-jihadis among communities that perceive them as defenders against other local, ethnicity-based militia.

The resulting **Salafi-jihadi ecosystem in the Sahel is strengthening rapidly**, but in forms that elude the traditional Western framework of analysis. The number of attacks will continue to rise and become deadlier as groups’ capabilities improve.

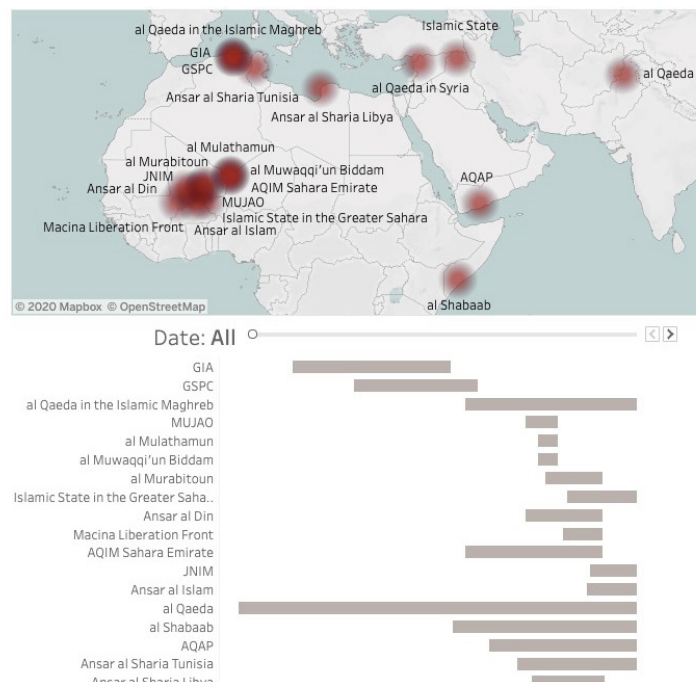


Fig. 4 Regional implantation of the jihadi ecosystem 1988-2020



The trajectory of ISGS attacks demonstrates this pattern.

ISGS attacks have been particularly effective at targeting Malian and Nigerien soldiers. Salafi-jihadi influence will also strengthen as local governance breaks down and vulnerable communities accept the protection of these groups. The Salafi-jihadi network's ability to infiltrate segments of the population and use

local conflicts to integrate itself further into communities has embedded Salafi-jihadi influence and interests within local dynamics. Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger have been unable to address these security challenges in their countries, even with significant external assistance. Both ISGS and JNIM have ambitions to destabilise the littoral states of the Sahel, including Benin, Ghana, the Ivory Coast, and Togo.

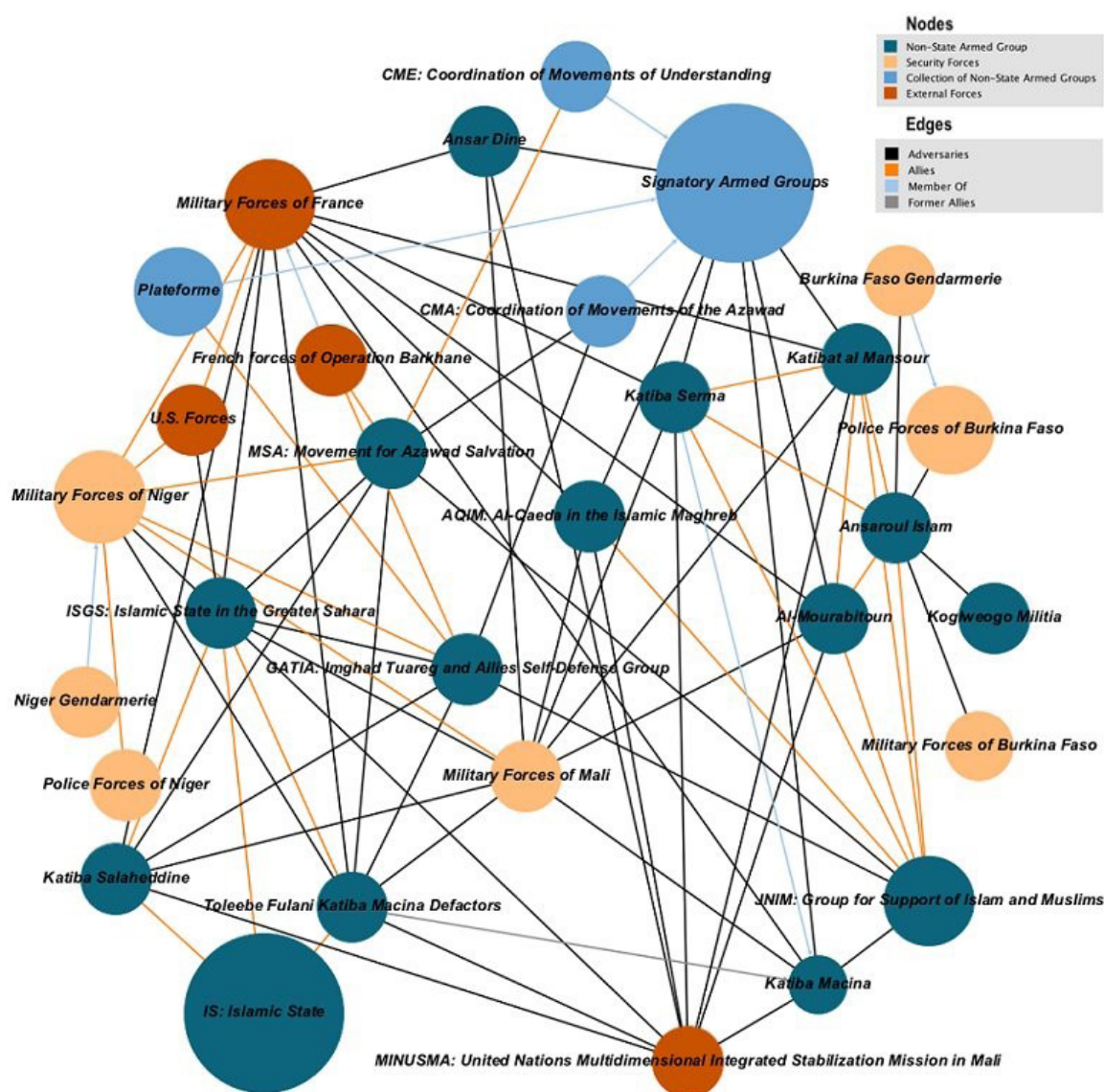


Fig. 5 Map of countries, jihadi groups and other actors, local dynamics and interactions<sup>13</sup>





In the light of current developments, the Salafi-jihadi network will continue to expand in North Africa and the Sahel, where regional states are weak and local conditions have rendered communities vulnerable. The groups play on **identity politics and local relationships** to strengthen their position in the region. Their coordinated effort to transform governance of societies in the Sahel along their vision of Islam has helped destabilise the region and created additional opportunities for Salafi-jihadi expansion. However, the apparent cooperation between these groups has always been debated, bearing in mind reports of multiple clashes between ISGS and JNIM. Notably, JNIM lost 50 militants in a fight against ISGS in northern Burkina Faso in April<sup>14</sup>, whereas ISGS also captured 40 militants. Tensions between the two factions are known to have increased over the past few months, with reports of JNIM militants defecting to the ISGS. This new dynamic has been largely overlooked by the Sahel watchers, including researchers and government and defence officials, despite its potential for increasing havoc and destabilisation.<sup>15</sup>

In the 233rd edition (May 7) of Al-Naba, ISIS for the first time acknowledges fighting against al-Qaeda's Mali-based JNIM in the Sahel, claiming that al-Qaeda started a "war" against the so-called Caliphate's men in West Africa. Independent reporting confirms that the two sides have clashed in recent weeks. ISIS also confirmed attacks on French forces and local forces based in Algeria, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. Al-Naba accuses JNIM of working with local parties to gain the upper hand in the intra-jihadist rivalry, claiming

that al-Qaeda's men "organised their armed movements and fronts in northern Mali" from "all kinds" of groups, including both those opposed to the "apostate government" and those "loyal to it." Al-Qaeda is also blamed for working with the "idolatrous tribal movements," according to Al-Naba's contributors. The self-declared caliphate bristles that JNIM "accepted an invitation by the apostate Malian government to negotiate and to set themselves up as guards of the borders of Algeria and Mauritania." This is similar to ISIS's criticisms of the Taliban, which negotiated a withdrawal deal with the Americans and claims to prevent jihadists from using Afghan soil to threaten other countries. Al-Naba accuses the "Crusader campaign in the region" of failing to "target [JNIM's] soldiers or the areas in which they are stationed." This argument mirrors the Islamic State's critique of the jihad in Afghanistan, employing similar discourse. For its part, JNIM has said it is willing to negotiate with the Malian government – as Al-Naba claims – but only on the condition that French forces are withdrawn from the country and the surrounding region. This is fundamentally the same negotiating tactic employed by the Taliban, which secured an American commitment to withdraw from Afghanistan before "intra-Afghan" talks take place. Of course, ejecting Western forces from the region greatly increases the jihadists' chances of success. Both JNIM and the Taliban seek to build or resurrect Islamic emirates in their respective countries, while the deal with the West is merely a means of obtaining increased power and control over their respective regions.



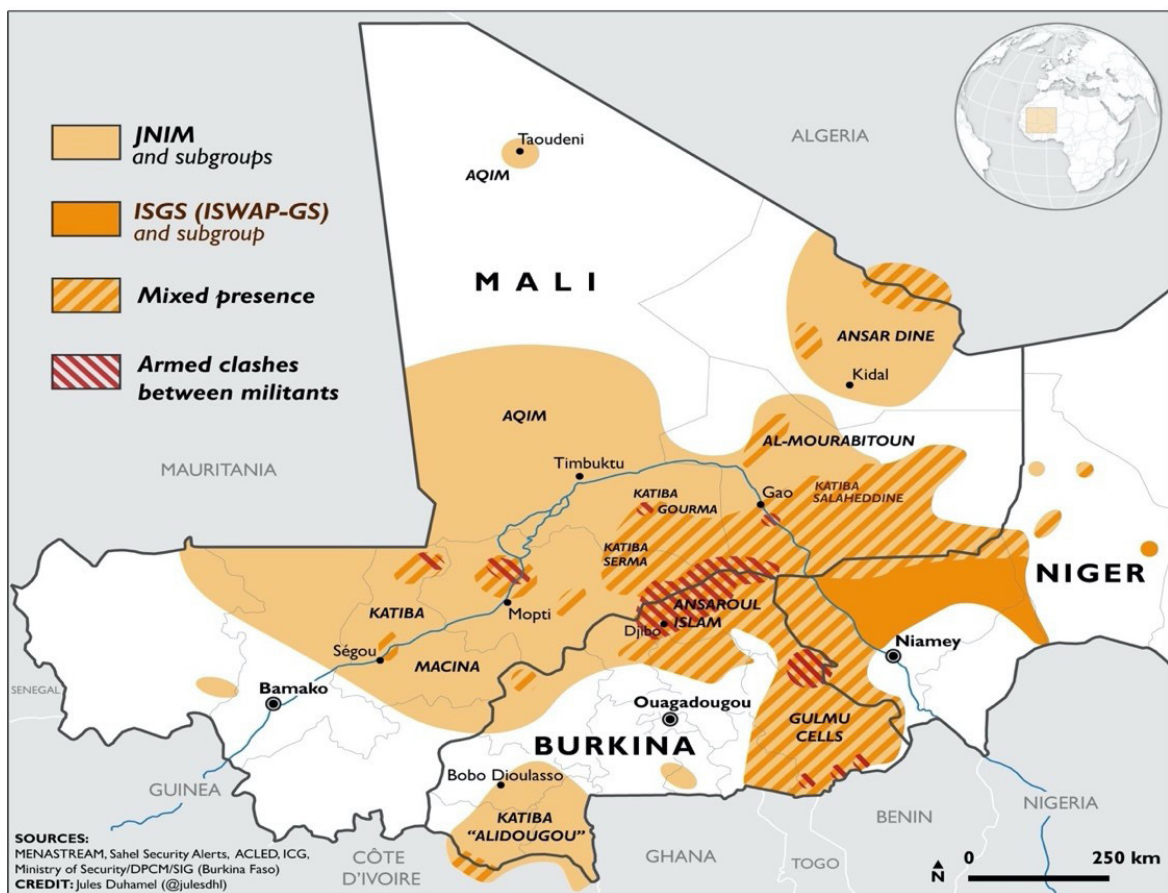


Fig. 6 Insurgent Area of Operations in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Western Niger (January 2016–June 2020)<sup>16</sup>

Throughout its evolution, the **jihadi ecosystem in North Africa and the Sahel** has proved to be a **continuously changing entanglement of interest-based partnerships and operational, organisational or/and strategic affiliations**. The local contexts define the relations between the terrorist groups, while the distinctions between them are rather blurred and suffer from a lack of stability and certainty.

## 1.2 Current challenges and opportunities for the jihadi ecosystem in the region

### Covid-19

The African continent reported its first case of the novel coronavirus, or **COVID-19**, on **February 15, 2020**, two months after it was first identified in China. Since February, reports of the virus have come from all 54 African countries. Hotspots have emerged along with dissemination linked to a host of factors, including urban population density, effectiveness of testing and reporting, and

levels of international exposure, among others. In North Africa, Morocco and Tunisia are experiencing a sustained increase in cases, while the unrest in Libya is also manifested in the rapid spread of the virus, according to the World Health Organisation.<sup>17</sup> Morocco reported the highest number of new cases on the continent over the last weeks, more than in South Africa and Ethiopia. COVID-19 cases are also on the rise in the Sahel, as countries like Mali and Burkina Faso are highly dependent on rain-fed agriculture, cross-border trade, transhumance, and livestock herding; all negatively impacted by seasonal droughts, floods, and violence, impeding the ability of millions of people to access food and earn a living.<sup>19</sup>

The region of North Africa and the Sahel has faced a wide range of challenges, and its conflict dynamics continue to exist and unfold independently of the COVID-19 crisis. From the first months of the pandemic, warnings<sup>20</sup> were raised that jihadist groups would use the virus to further their agendas and make calculated advances. The extremist groups' patterns of violence, cross border movement, and strategic strikes have contributed to an exacerbation of negative displacement trends in the region – yet another threat faced by governance institutions amidst the current epidemic.

COVID-19 is at least as much of a threat for Northern Africa and the Sahel as it is for the rest of the world, presenting an added challenge to an already deteriorating security environment. Existing conflict and governance-related issues<sup>21</sup> have worsened

from the impact of the pandemic, including exacerbating problems in refugee and IDP camps. Many of these camps are in border areas, hereby presenting a additional health risks for all cross-border movement during the pandemic. The tri-border area shared by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger is just one site of special concern. For instance, despite efforts by Nigerien authorities, borders remain porous due to long-standing ethnic and economic ties. As a result, Malian refugees continue to regularly travel back and forth<sup>22</sup>. At the same time, military operations carried out by the Group of Five Sahel (FC-G5 Sahel) and the French operation Barkhane are seeking to push armed extremists back in this region. Governance-related issues and ongoing conflicts have undermined the implementation of the political solutions that could potentially curtail extremist groups' activities.

Although a challenge for all actors involved, COVID-19 has already transformed into an opportunity by the jihadi groups on the ground to enhance their current strategies. The vulnerability of many communities across North Africa and the Sahel is likely to advance terrorist recruitment as financial hardships and food insecurity precede ideological preference in commanding membership in a terror group. While the COVID-19 pandemic is exacerbating the persistent challenges found in region and exposing operational weaknesses in return, the virus-factor and the evolving jihadi ecosystem will require comprehensive and cooperative responses that ensure adequate protections for those in need. In this regard, the weak state structures of most of the countries in



North Africa and the Sahel will have to reach and protect all of the communities in the region, without presenting opportunities for jihadi groups to assume control and gain the confidence of the people through exploiting the COVID-19 context.

### **The death of Abdelmalek Droukdel**

On June 3rd, the French government victoriously announced that its troops in the Sahel eliminated the leader of Al-Qaeda in

the Islamic Maghreb's (AQIM) – Abdelmalek Droukdel, along with several members of his inner circle. According to a local source, Droukdel and other AQIM commanders met in a remote desert valley, 20 kilometres from the Algerian border. French forces moved quickly, first with an airstrike that hit a vehicle, followed by half a dozen helicopters and ground troops. The reason for the presence of Abdelmalek Droukdel in the Ouadjane valley remains unclear, but it can reasonably assumed that it was for a very important reason.



Fig. 7 Map of the area where Abdelmalek Droukdel was killed<sup>23</sup>







Al Qaeda's General Command



Al-Shabaab, al Qaeda's branch in East Africa



Al Qaeda's Thabat News Agency



Jaish al Ummah, a pro-al Qaeda outfit in Gaza, Palestine



Hurras al Din, al Qaeda's current franchise in Syria



Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula

Fig. 8 Eulogies for Abdelmalek Droukdel<sup>24</sup>

The identification of AQIM's communications manager Toufik Chaib among the dead supports the theory of an important negotiation having taken place, with the necessity for decisions to be communicated quickly and in due form.

Abdelmalek Droukdel (nom de guerre Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud), an Algerian national, was trained in building explosives and is believed to be the one of the responsible for the first suicide bombings in Algeria. Droukdel began working with the Movement





of the Islamic State (MEI) in 1993, and reportedly named Abu Musab al-Zarqawi as his mentor. By the time of his mentor's death, he had risen through the ranks of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) and the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC). He assumed leadership of the GSPC in June 2004 and initiated the merger with al-Qaeda in 2006 to form AQIM (Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb) that he controlled as an emir. Droukdel has been described as tough and strong-minded, his personal ideology being framed in terms of a mix of political Islam and Arab nationalism. Throughout his appearances, his charisma and public speaking abilities have been repeatedly emphasised. Despite having advanced skills in manufacturing bombs and explosive devices, Droukdel has not trained in any of the al-Qaeda camps in Yemen or Afghanistan, nor has he received education in foreign madrassas. Based on his explosives-related skills, he managed to develop a specialised unit for suicide bombing back in 2007, causing dozens of bombings across Algeria, targeting both civilians, government and security forces. During the past nearly two decades, Droukdel appeared in countless videos, often threatening France for its political role and military intervention in North Africa and the Sahel and was among the most recognisable faces in the Al-Qaeda community. His last appearance back in March has been seen as a call for negotiations with the government, despite yet again blaming France and calling the French troops "foreign occupation" and the local leaders "domestic tyranny". In fact, a correct understanding of his

whole speech reveals the rejection of calls for peace talks with the local governments that have "revealed their malice".

After nearly two weeks, AQIM has officially acknowledged the death of its long-time leader Droukdel with a video eulogy narrated by AQIM's head of media, pledging continued battles against occupying French forces and others in North Africa and the Sahel. Considering that AQIM has released very few eulogies in the past years, the acknowledgment of Droukdel's death came earlier than expected. Thus far, we have obtained the eulogies produced by AQAP, Harakat as-Shabaab al-Mujahideen, al-Qa'eda General Command, al-Qaeda's Thabat News Agency, Jaish al-Ummah, and Hurras al-Din.

As the last standing "historic personality" on the continent, the death of Abdelmalek Droukdel has impacted al-Qaeda's position in Africa. He was the relay and guarantor of Ayman al-Zawahiri's speech for all of the African-affiliated groups, from the Sahelian zone to Somalia. His death cuts the last direct channel of communication between central al-Qaeda and Algeria, Tunisia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and Somalia. The realignments that are certain to occur will undoubtedly benefit its main rival, ISIS, while Al-Zawahiri's plans for Africa are at best on hold for now, if not simply obsolete. AQIM, as a subsidiary of Central al-Qaeda, has been struck at the heart, as the very survival of the organisation will be played out in the next months. Appointing Abu Obeida Youssef al-Annabi, current head of the AQIM advisory board, is the assurance of the group's



continuity and an affirmation of its Algerian roots. Bearing in mind the balance of power between Kabylia and Mali, it is very unlikely that Iyad ag Ghali, Talha al-Libi or Abou Qaqa 'al-Mauritani will accept – albeit for different reasons – such a choice. Additionally, it must not be forgotten that Algeria has provided ISIS with a contingent of a few thousand fighters. Jihadism, like nature, abhors a vacuum, which is why the potential for an Algerian branch of ISIS to quickly seize the place of a declining AQIM cannot be excluded. Droukdel's death will also have ramifications for the relations of the Sahelian units with their Nigerian and Somali counterparts. The ties woven with Ansaru (Nigeria) and the Shabaab (Somalia) were almost exclusively dependent on two men: Abdelmalek Droukdel and Mokhtar Belmokhtar. With both having died, a reconstruction of the landscape is to be expected. For now, only ISIS is likely to benefit from the vacuum left by the death of Abdelmalek Droukdel. The developments that are sure to come will be different and determined by local contexts, yet exert a global impact. Droukdel was the guardian of a fragile and complex structure that no longer exists. An ISIS takeover of the area would have incalculable consequences that broadly transcend the African context.

A range of difficulties contribute to the region's instability and insecurity, as violence persists. National governments continue to be undermined by political tensions. Complaints of government mismanagement and maltreatment of civilians by national armies are also common in the region, making Droukdel's last speech even more

powerful in the hearts of local communities and supporters. The two features that enable a terrorist group to withstand a senior officer's death are: popular support and internal bureaucracy. While the bureaucracy has evolved differently from one group to another, popular support is mainly contingent on the local context. As long as the local context allows it, communities will have to choose and support what they perceive to be the lesser of evils, which, in many cases, is a terrorist group.

### **Mali's Coup d'état – version 2020**

On 18 August, Malian President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta was overthrown following mass protests against his rule over corruption, the mismanagement of the economy, and a dispute over legislative elections. While welcomed by many Malians, the fourth coup in the history of the country since its independence<sup>25</sup> fuelled international condemnation: the European Union, France, the United States, the UN Security Council, and the African Union<sup>26</sup> condemned the putsch.<sup>27</sup> All of the main international partners agree that the potential power vacuum caused by the recent coup could further destabilise the region and provide a major advantage to the jihadist groups operating in Mali. The previous coup that took place in 2012 led to jihadi extremism exploiting the instability to seize territory in northern Mali. While French troops helped the Malian government regain territory, terrorist attacks have persisted and escalated ever since.



Over the past eight years, the country has been fighting an intractable insurgency, as anger over the government's failure to resolve conflict, respect democratic norms, and provide basic services has pushed citizens and the military to the brink. An estimated half of Mali's population lives in severe poverty, ethnic divisions are chronically unaddressed, and jihadist groups roam much of the northern half of the country. Bearing in mind the evolution of events after the last coup, the

chances that these dynamics would change are very low. In fact, many analysts expect a deterioration of the local and regional post-coup contexts, signalling that further unrest and uncertainty could provide a great opportunity for the jihadi groups that have already taken advantage of the existing nexus of challenges. What comes next in Mali over the coming months could have significant implications for the country's democracy and for the potential stability of the entire region.



” “More than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media. We are in a media battle in a race for the hearts and minds of our Ummah (the community of believers)”.<sup>28</sup>

## 2. MAPPING THE COMMUNICATION CAPABILITIES OF TERRORIST GROUPS IN NORTH AFRICA AND THE SAHEL

The travel of information from the source to the recipient is known as a communication process. This basic process, both in the case of a simple idea or a complex message, has been further translated into various systems of communication, such as **interpersonal communication** (communication among people), telecommunication (communication at a distance by electronic transmission), and **mass communication** (communication that reaches a large audience through the use of media).<sup>29</sup>

Shaped by the evolution of our societies, communication has also developed within

the culture(s) that have eventually established certain codes, structures, meanings, and contexts of communication particular to every region, area or community.<sup>30</sup> This idea especially bears credence in the case of Africa, where successful communication depends largely upon consideration for the cultures present within its communities. The Western conception of communication in its modern forms, such as via mobile phones and e-mail, faces a completely different environment in the African context(s), where many communities cannot rely on technology for a constant source of information.



Because of this disparity, governments and organisations seeking to communicate with African people must look inward into the community structures of the specific countries to better understand how people communicate within the region.

Applying the same logic, an in-depth analysis reflects the **impact of local historical, cultural, and social contexts** upon the terrorist goals and means. In North Africa and the Sahel, these contexts together with **the intra-network of personal relations** between individuals and local tribes/groups/communities have the power to shape the terrorist priorities and strategy more than the religious ideology or political goals of the group itself. Communication is also developed at different levels in this region, and it does not depend entirely on information communication technology. In this way, the channels of communication become more varied and harder to follow, forcing counterterrorism strategies to adapt and engage with the local context, in the process developing means and ways to provide the local communities with the active role that they deserve in the fight against terrorism.

The use of **information communication technology** does not undermine counterterrorism efforts, but on the contrary, it **diversifies the communications' map**. Once again, local context(s) play an integral role in the analysis. Bearing in mind that societies interact with technology in a variety of ways, the use of information communication technologies in North Africa and the Sahel varies from country to country, region to region,

even city to city, depending on the reach of these technologies, the openness of the society, their perceived cultural value, and the level of technological innovation within a society.

Therefore, this research is based on a multilevel communication framework of analysis that ensures an in-depth understanding of the communication strategies, tools, and means of the target terrorist groups, taking into account all of the dimensions of the local context (historical, cultural, social, technological etc.). The framework correlates the jihadi ecosystem with the fundamental elements of communications: source, audience, content, channel/platform, and goal. Based on each material analysed, the analysis identifies both similarities and differences in the communication capabilities of the jihadi groups involved in the region.

For instance, the **source** of the message can be internal, from within the designated jihadi ecosystem, or external, coming from an outside area. In the same way, the message can address various types of **audiences**: internal/external (to audiences found within the jihadi-ecosystem or outside of it), sympathisers/enemies, members/non-members. The **content** can be broadly characterised as either operational (tactics, strategies, planning, etc.) or non-operational (such as ideology-related knowledge or propaganda); based on local, regional or international events; delivered in audio, video or textual formats, in Arabic or any other foreign/local language. The **channel** of communication chosen by the source is also





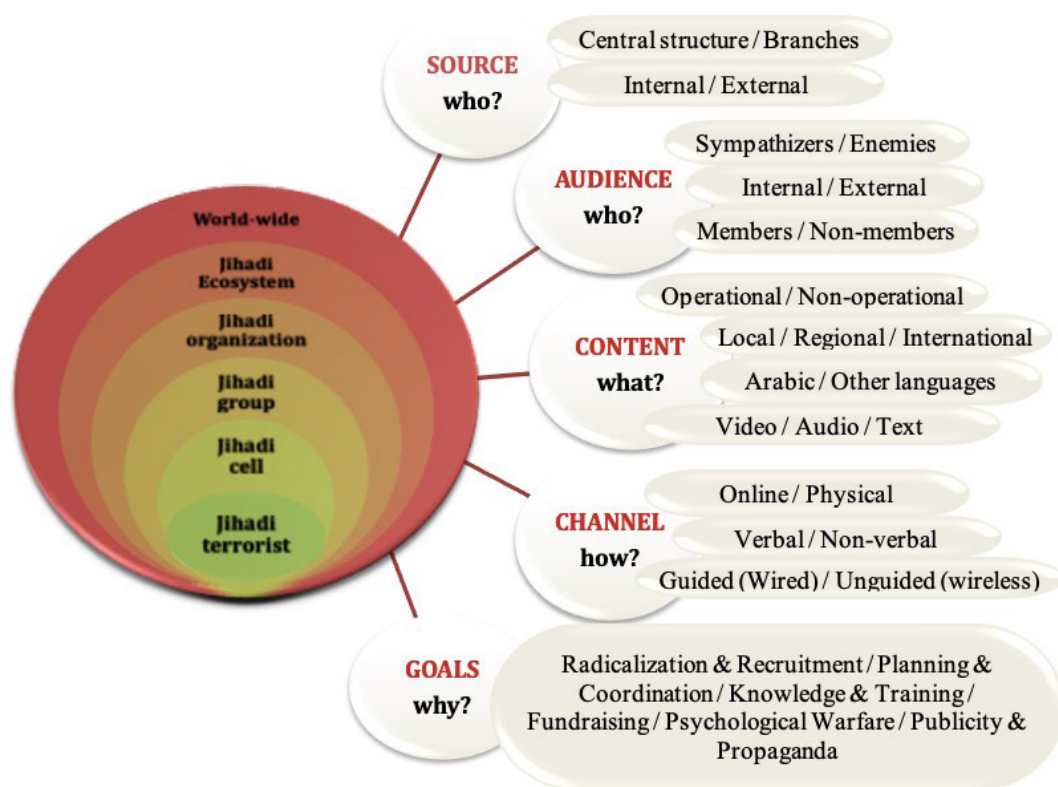


Fig. 9 Jihadi Multilevel Communication Analysis Framework

pivotal to the analysis: verbal/non-verbal, online/offline, wired/wireless. Furthermore, all of these elements provide us with the necessary information to determine the **goal** of communication. This can vary from radicalisation and recruitment, planning and coordination, knowledge and training to fundraising, psychological warfare, publicity and propaganda.

Observing and understanding correctly all five of these elements is crucial **to unraveling the true logic and purpose within the jihadi communication strategies and capabilities in North Africa and the Sahel, and beyond this region.**

## 2.1 Traditional vs. Modern forms of communication

The cultural diversity characteristic of North Africa and the Sahel is also reflected in the countless modes of communication found in this region. **Traditional forms of communication** include **non-verbal** instruments, such as tribal marks, textile patterns, beads, and hairstyles; **verbal communication** not only constitutes plain speech comprised of simple statements, but also proverbs, riddles, narratives, songs, the use of drama, and ritualised performance arts.<sup>31</sup> **Modern forms of communication** include wired or wireless technology, such as land telephones, cellular phones, television, and the



Internet. While all of these instruments are present in the region, the prevalence and accessibility of modern technologies is lower in this region than in more developed parts of the world. Also, most of the population lack the financial capital to adapt to the lifestyle imposed by the Western technologies. Therefore, urban centres are more likely to benefit from advances in technologies, as they have more wealth and more developed telecommunications infrastructure.

### **Local dynamics and traditional communications**

Bearing in mind the three main systems of communication, traditional tools are mainly used for the purpose of interpersonal communication, while modern forms and tools have developed in order to ensure telecommunication and mass communication. While the traditional communication tools have retained their role as crucial cultural elements for the African population, the **“oramedia”** has remained its most renowned form, passed from generation to generation, incorporating a high content of non-verbal messages. Local communities and tribes have their own communication environments, using specific means and tools that are difficult to understand and utilise for external actors. Therefore, the **first level of communication** in the context of North Africa and the Sahel is constituted by **interpersonal communication, using direct/physical, vocal or written, verbal or non-verbal means.**

Jihadi groups active in the region do not operate in isolation from their local context and have demonstrated a genuine capacity to **understand local dynamics and adapt to local circumstances**, recruiting within communities through **“bridge-individuals,”** who have the trust of their fellows. They often radicalise local people in order to consolidate their networks and acquire intelligence. Moreover, social relations encourage pragmatic attitudes and behavioural choices from terrorist groups, in order to develop or maintain popular support. Jihadi groups are redefining their strategy, feeding off and aggravating inter-community conflicts, expanding the number of unstable areas in the region, and exercising pressure on the international community, forcing it to resort to military intervention – a vicious circle that feeds the radicalising jihadist rhetoric.

The jihadist ecosystem becomes even more varied in the neglected rural areas where other armed groups, including ethnic militias, self-defence groups, transnational criminal groups, armed bandits, renegades from national armies and even separatist and autonomist movements, are also emerging to find a niche in a complex and shifting local network of alliances. Violent extremist groups tend not to create crises but manipulate them. They ally with communities that feel the state is iniquitous and absent, or because they can help with conflicts about rights of access to critical resources.<sup>32</sup>



## Urbanisation rates and modern communication tools

**Modern communication tools** have also been adapted to the local context(s) and their evolution in the region can be observed within the past two decades. Currently, a digital overview of Africa reflects a percentage of 81% mobile phone connections per total population and a 34% Internet penetration rate for the entire continent. However, a regional analysis of the same communication channels reflects huge contrasts and heterogeneous development of telecommu-

nications and information communication technologies.<sup>33</sup> These contrasts are evident within the subregions themselves as well as within individual countries. Among the five main African regions, the most developed in terms of communications are Southern and Northern Africa, while Sub-Saharan Africa is the least developed. Based on data provided by the Digital 2020 Report<sup>34</sup>, **Northern Africa has the second highest rate of mobile connectivity (101%) and internet penetration (53%) in Africa, coming in first among the five regions for rate of social media use per total population (39%).**

Rates	Africa Overall	Northern Africa	Southern Africa	Western Africa	Eastern Africa	Middle Africa
Mobile connectivity	81%	101%	169%	92%	60%	51%
Internet penetration	34%	53%	60%	36%	23%	22%
Social media use	16%	39%	36%	13%	8%	6%

Table 1. Digital Africa 2020 rates

Rates	Algeria	Egypt	Lybia	Morocco	Tunisia
Urbanisation	73%	43%	80%	62%	69%
Mobile connectivity	114%	94%	167%	118%	151%
Internet penetration	52%	51%	75%	69%	64%
Social media use	51%	41%	75%	49%	62%

Table 2. Digital Africa 2020 - Northern Africa Rates

Rates	Central African Republic	Chad	Mali	Niger	Burkina Faso
Urbanisation	41%	23%	42%	16%	29%
Mobile connectivity	48%	37%	108%	47%	97%
Internet penetration	14%	14%	24%	12%	22%
Social media use	2,5%	2,0%	8,5%	2,1%	7,8%

Table 3. Digital Africa 2020 - The Sahel Rates



A comparative assessment of the main countries in Northern Africa that are the subject of this research provides a better understanding of the use of modern communications among the population. With the exception of Egypt, the number of mobile connections is higher than the total population in each of the target Northern African countries. Considering that urban centres are more likely to benefit from technological advancements due to a more developed telecommunications infrastructure, the lower rate of mobile phone connections found in Egypt can be understood to reflect the lower urbanisation rate (43%) in the country. On the other hand, the percentage of Internet users per population exceeds 50% for all the five target countries, with the highest rate in Libya.

Although the situation in the Northern African countries demonstrates a widely differing and uneven development of modern communications channels and tools, the situation in most of the Sahelian countries, such as the Central African Republic, Chad, Mali, Niger, and Guinea, reflect a lack of ICT access. The low urbanisation rates have a direct effect over the modern communications in this region. Among the target countries analysed, Mali has the highest urbanisation rates and, as a result, higher rates of penetration for all of the modern communication channels.

Due to the **striking differences between the countries in the target region**, terrorist groups need to **understand the local digital environment and adapt their com-**

**munications capabilities accordingly.** In the regions with lower urbanisation rates, traditional communications and direct interaction serve their purpose better than any modern channel or tool. Also, the digital material produced in these regions does not target the local population, but the external audience, helping groups to show presence and/or control in the region, share recent actions on the ground (such as attacks, bombings, kidnapping, etc), and further develop propaganda material for future recruits from other regions.

The communication strategies in the regions with lower urbanisation rates are based largely on interpersonal communication, along with telecommunications to certain extent, according to the rate of land/mobile phone connectivity. Meanwhile, the mass communication strategies and tools are targeting more developed regions, with both mobile connectivity and internet penetration. Among the mass communication strategies developed by jihadi groups, there is one highly emphasised trend visible at the global level of exposure – the “Cyberjihad”.

## 2.2 The reach of “Cyberjihad”

Over the last 15 years, jihadist groups have developed effective and sophisticated communication strategies via the creation of webzines, such as Dabiq / Dar al Islam / Rumiyah (ISIS) and Inspire / one Ummah (Al Qaeda), and primarily via social media channels, such as Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, Instagram, Rocketchat, Tam Tam, Riot and



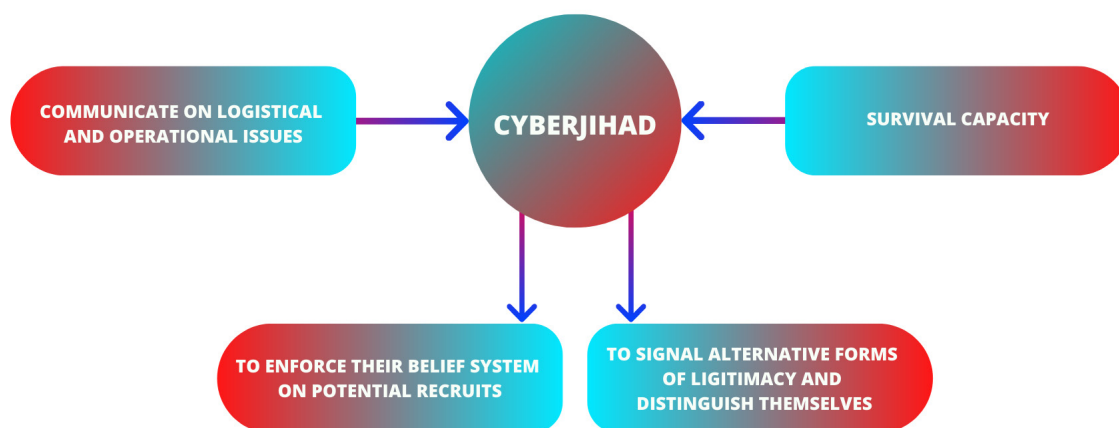


Fig. 10 The 'cyberjihad'

Zeronet. Jihadist groups' online strategy – the "cyberjihad" – is perceived by terrorism experts as the perfect encapsulation of terrorists' core interests: it develops the abilities to **communicate on logistical and operational issues**, while ensuring and consolidating their **survival capacity** through the spread of radical propaganda and recruitment of new adherents or sympathisers.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, the propaganda strategies of those groups have a dual effect: they serve both as a tool for terrorist movements to **enforce their belief system on potential recruits** and as a means to **signal and project alternative forms of legitimacy and distinguish themselves** from rival movements.

The cyberjihad provides salafi-jihadi groups with the perfect opportunity to project external influence by using social media as a launching pad. Instead of the traditional term **da'wa** (proselytism), Sunni militant and non-militant extremists refer to this as **Jihad bi-l lisan** (verbal jihad)<sup>36</sup> and /or Jihad of the Pen.

The success of "cyberjihad" is ensured through the **extended use of social media among the target audience**. Therefore, with regard to the region examined in this report, the greater the reach of social media, the broader the online network of the jihadi groups and, consequently, their recruiting activities. Once again, the highest rates of social media access in Africa have been registered among the Northern African countries, where Facebook, followed by WhatsApp, are the most favoured applications for online communications.

Although in recent years **ISIS** has taken the lead for the modernisation and expansion of "cyberjihad", the materials gathered from the North African propaganda channels show an intensification of al-Qaeda's online communication strategy in this region and beyond.<sup>37</sup> In line with the global trends of world's most-used social platforms, Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp, jihadi groups use the channels that serve their goals and reach the target audience easier, faster, and more efficiently. Beyond the general use of Facebook





and WhatsApp for messaging purposes in North Africa and the Sahel (to the extent permitted by mobile connectivity and internet penetration rates), according to the jihadist online strategy, YouTube has emerged as a critical tool for facilitating the dissemination of propaganda. Most notably, it provides any Internet user with the opportunity to join the battlefield of the “cyberjihad” “live” or become an active member of the **“digital Caliphate”**. An added advantage of YouTube is the ability to spread radical content via multiple media types, such as videos from the battlefield, songs, lectures, or interviews. Furthermore, the use of WhatsApp enables **easy accessibility of content** that can be targeted both on the global scale, as well as at the community level through the creation of very specific groups. The tactical use of both YouTube and WhatsApp in North African countries is essential for Jihadist movements as they operate in a highly connected network.

However, social media outlets are merely catalysts of highly complex radicalisation processes that remain always connected to individual stories and socio-cultural-economical local contexts.<sup>38</sup> The radicalisation dynamics are highly entangled into a mixture of internal and external factors that vary from one individual to another, rendering each pattern unique. Still, there are **common strategic elements** that we can identify by applying the multilevel communication analysis framework to the radicalisation propaganda materials developed for target regions: **manipulation of political contexts/political tipping points, manipu-**

**lation of socio-economic local grievances, critiques of local/national governments, critiques of foreign intervention/lifestyle/influence, the use of charismatic orators for offline/online lectures, and the use of the right language for the target audience.**

In the context of North Africa, the political tipping points have been the revolutions that unfolded and evolved in the so-called **“Arab Spring”** in Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, Libya, Syria and all over the Arab world. The ability of local governments to survive the protests<sup>39</sup> and prudently manage the political context determined the number of foreign terrorist fighters radicalised by jihadist groups. Libya and Tunisia, where governments fell during the Arab Spring, produced more fighters per capita than Morocco and Algeria, where governments survived local protests. In Tunisia, ISIS built upon local Salafi-Jihadist recruiting networks like Ansar al-Sharia, which took advantage of both the post-Ben Ali environment of political openness and of their founders’ experience with aQ to openly promote jihad. In Libya, jihadists who had also been close to bin Laden and his movement before 9/11<sup>40</sup>, were able to operate and recruit openly amid the patchwork of militias<sup>42</sup> that emerged following Qaddafi’s fall. Most regions in North Africa with high rates of ISIS fighter recruitment were **economically and politically marginalised**. These are the same regions that heavily contributed to the flows of foreign terrorist fighters who joined al-Qaeda in Iraq and other insurrection groups between 2003 and 2009. The geographical origins of ISIS recruits from North Africa suggest that the group took



advantage of both the long-standing **socio-economic grievances in marginalised communities** and of the presence of “returnees” from the preceding jihadi campaigns in Iraq to mobilise fighters.<sup>42</sup> There is a negative correlation between the quality of employment and the number of ISIS recruits in the top 20 per capita fighter-producing provinces in North Africa. Provinces in North Africa where fighters reported the least reliable employment had the highest rates of ISIS recruitment. Furthermore, Tunisia is the country with the highest ratio and number of foreign terrorist fighters in the world: more than 6,000 Tunisians reportedly joined Daesh ranks either in the Middle East or in Libya.<sup>43</sup>

### The use of the Arabic language

While communities living in North Africa use a rich variety of languages and local dialects, most of the propaganda content material originating in North Africa and the Sahel is in the Koranic Arabic language. A 2017 study conducted by the University of South California on a dataset of over 1,9 million messages posted on Twitter by about 25,000 ISIS members highlighted that 92% of these messages were written in Koranic Arabic. Although many Western reports focus on social media accounts and sources that use the English language, Arabic is the primary language of jihadi groups globally: **more than 95% of all materials produced by jihadist groups are released in Arabic.** There are several reasons that explain this pattern, most of which derive from the analysis of propaganda materials released

by the jihadi groups in North Africa and the Sahel:

- the religious/ideological explanation: Jihadists believe that speaking Koranic Arabic ensures a true respect of the words pronounced by the Salaf, the glorious ancestors and first companions of Prophet Muhammed;
- it underscores a respect for fundamentalism in online texts and videos<sup>45</sup>;
- it highlights the ability to reach a broader audience beyond the preachers’ countries of origins;
- it features a symbol of unity among an audience that is scattered along various geographical, cultural, and linguistic areas;
- it provides access to clandestine networks, where knowledge of Arabic is a prerequisite (lingual firewall);
- it gives knowledge of the coherent use of coded religious language and keywords (initiation firewall).

At the same time, the use of the Arabic language for propaganda material in the case of North Africa and the Sahel is also justified by the fact that the highest rate of social media use per total population in the case of Africa is observed in the northern region - 39%.<sup>46</sup>



## 2.3 Communication capabilities vs. spheres of recruitment

This report acknowledges that factors, experiences, views, and paths leading to jihadi radicalisation and terrorism are highly diverse and personalised. Nevertheless, intensive research on first-hand material gathered from the online platforms of the subject-groups, has pointed out similarities and geographical patterns in Jihadi preachers' online usage of lexicon, metaphors, and Surat in reference to religious, socio-political, geopolitical or military themes, allowing them to successfully reach and feed a receptive audience in North Africa and the Sahel.

While the **main themes of the discourse are common to the global jihadi propaganda** - using twisted understandings of religious texts, manipulating existing griev-

ances and targeting socially marginalised groups, justifying violence through historical victimisation of the Ummah, promising material and spiritual rewards – the preaching targeting the audience in North Africa and the Sahel **imprints those themes into the local/regional contexts.**

For most of the material analysed, the **source of the message** has been mainly local groups, part of the jihadi ecosystem developed in the region, communicating to a **target audience** that is not limited to the geographical borders of North Africa and the Sahel. Bearing in mind that the intensive use of Arabic is an indicator toward the North Africa and Arab audience, the propaganda material is drafted so that it reaches both non-members (for recruitment) and members (for further motivation), sympathisers and enemies. Although the distinctions between the groups are rather blurred, some of

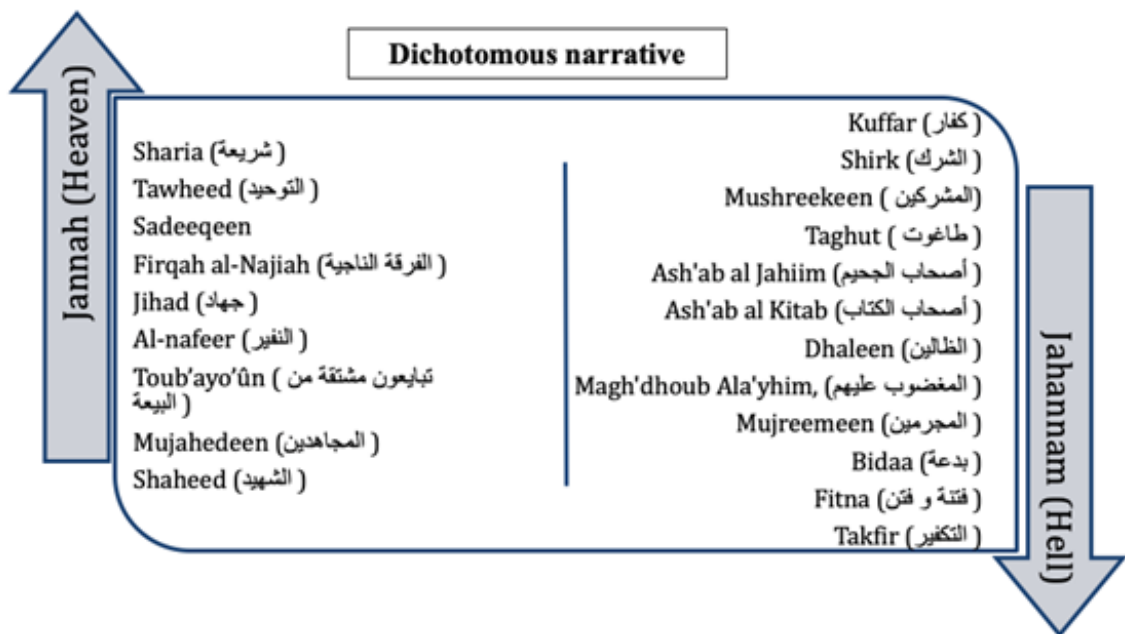


Fig.11 Examples of terminology used in the jihadist dichotomous narrative

the material released by the local/regional branches of the global jihad network also targets rival groups, with the intention of asserting supremacy or control and attracting fighters from other sides. The **content** of the analysed propaganda material can be separated into four main categories: the ideological/religious sphere, the socio-political sphere, the geopolitical sphere, and the marketing of violence sphere. As outlined prior, the main themes observed in all these spheres are common to the global jihadi propaganda, but the discourse is localised. The **channel** for delivering the messages to the audience depends on the system of communication chosen by the group. For interpersonal communication, the channel is mainly physical, through both verbal and non-verbal

means. Telecommunication and mass communication are also used in the urbanised areas that offer the necessary wired and wireless infrastructure for either online or offline tools. The main **goals** of communication identified throughout the analysis are radicalisation and recruitment, propaganda and publicity.

**The ideological/religious sphere** of the propaganda content is developed around a “right vs. wrong” dichotomous narrative, drawing a contrast between the Kuffar and the Sadeeqeen. While the “other” is denigrated and labelled as infidel, **Kuffar**, the ones that accept and follow the group’s understanding of **Sharia** are praised as rightful believers, **Sadeeqeen**.

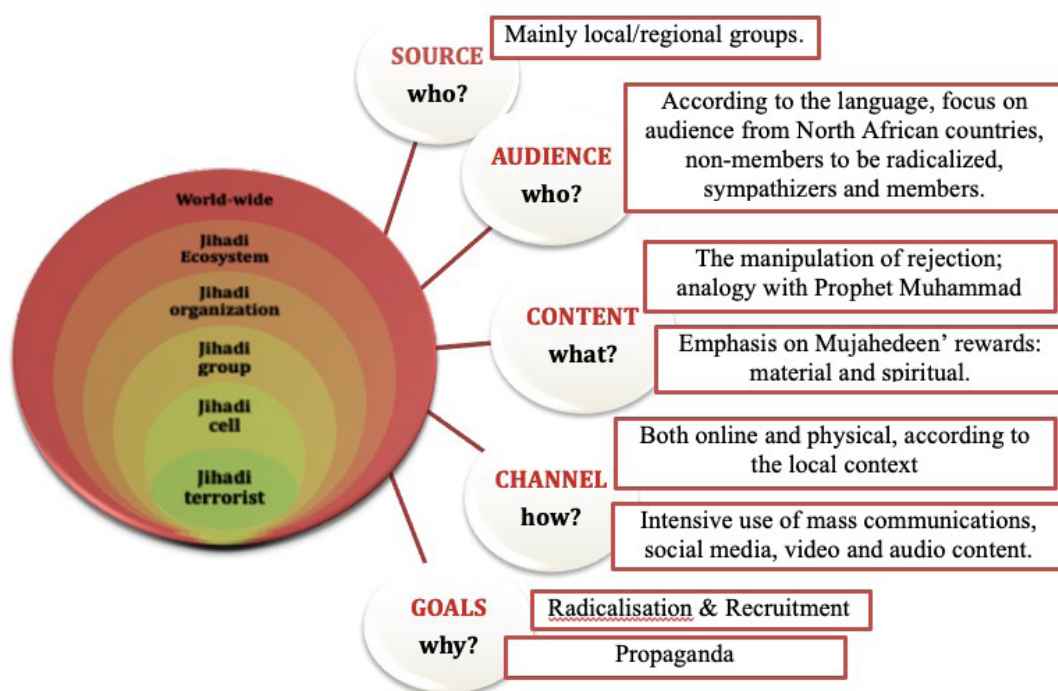


Fig. 12 Identified recruiting patterns for the ideological/religious sphere



The same strategic pattern of contrasts can also be observed in the propaganda material that is rooted in the **socio-political sphere** of recruitment. Terrorist groups are already known for the exploitation of local contexts, power vacuums and social-political grievances of target communities. Across North Africa and especially

in Tunisia and Libya, jihadi groups have shaped a specific discourse to increase recruitment among current and former prisoners and delinquents – the promise of a new start and forgiveness for their sins, a recurrent narrative also present in the radicalisation process of ISIS groups in Western countries.

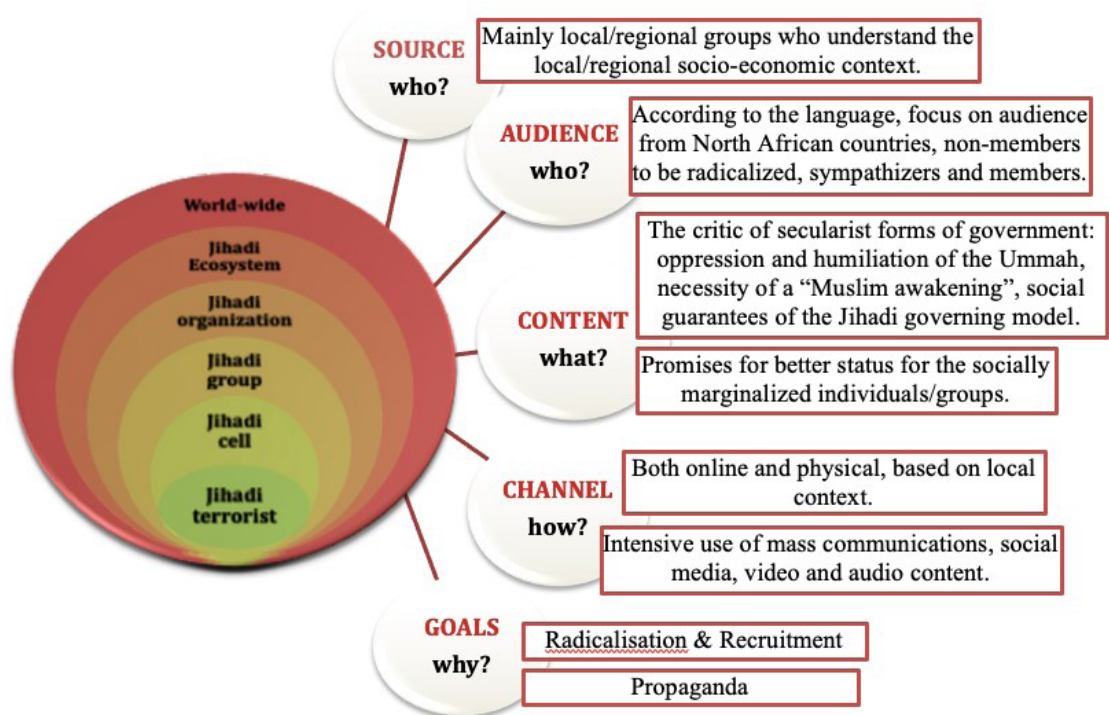


Fig. 13 Identified recruiting patterns for the socio-political sphere

The **geopolitical sphere** of the propaganda material is further enriched with examples that are aimed at **justifying current violence through auto-victimisation**: the Ummah of Islam is historically portrayed as besieged by numerous Kuffar enemies up to the present day.

Through an intensive **marketing of violence**, manifest in most of the jihadi propaganda, particularly within the online material shared by their members, the armed Jihad is justified as the only option, whereas the **Mujahedeen are glorified** for their courageous acts and portrayed as “the lions of the Sunnah/Tawheed”.



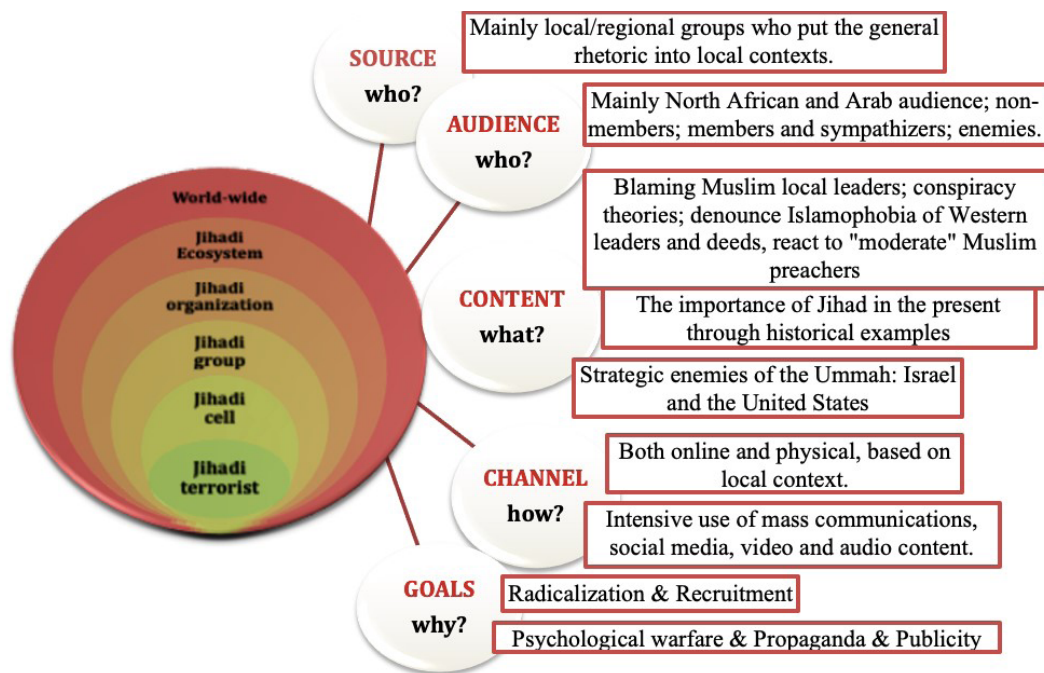


Fig. 14 Identified recruiting patterns for the geopolitical sphere

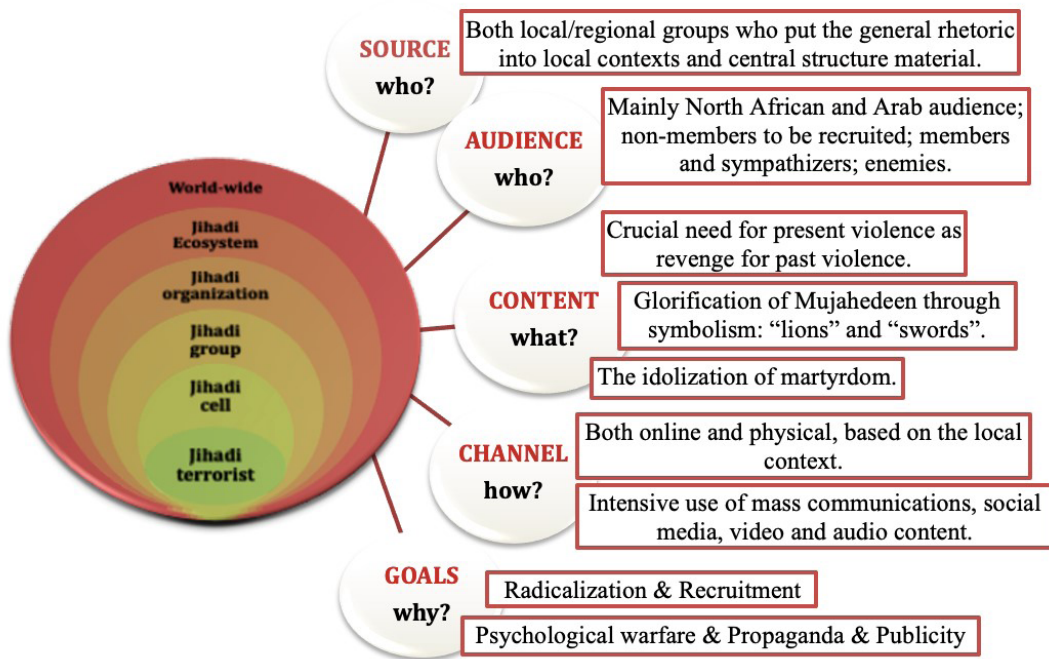


Fig. 15 Identified recruiting patterns for marketing of violence



” The jihadi-terrorist communication capabilities develop on a multilevel structure, adapting their main elements according to context, goal and strategy.

## CONCLUSION

The jihadi ecosystem in North Africa and the Sahel represents an entanglement of interest-based partnerships and operational, organisational or strategic affiliations. The local context defines the relations between the terrorist groups, while the distinctions between them are rather blurred and subject to continuous change. Recently, African jihadi groups have gone through strategic, structural, and operational mutations and their communication strategies have been subjected to similar changes. From encrypted means of communication to the use of drones and animation of webpages and channels on different virtual platforms, all groups have developed a set of highly professional tools, media, and applications. The development of their communication capabilities has provided tools to share logistical and operational issues among the groups, to ensure survival through the spreading of radical propaganda and the recruit new adherents or sympathisers as well as to signal alternative forms of legitimacy and distinguish themselves from rival movements.

Bearing in mind that terrorism functions as a communicative act, the groups' **multilevel communication capabilities** are a core element of the jihadi phenomenon in North Africa and the Sahel. Starting from the individual and transcending the jihadi ecosystem to the global level, the jihadi-terrorist communication capabilities develop on a multilevel structure, adapting their main elements according to context, goal and strategy. While interests, views and trajec-

ries leading to extremist radicalisation and terror acts remain highly diverse, intensive research on first-hand material has emphasised the correlation between communication capabilities and recruitment strategies for the jihadi ecosystem in North Africa and the Sahel. Overall, our team has identified recruiting patterns in relation to the **ideological and religious, social, geographical and violence-based central themes**.



# KEY FINDINGS

1. In the light of current developments, the jihadi ecosystem will continue to expand in North Africa and in the Sahel, where regional states are weak, communities are vulnerable and jihadi actors play on identity politics and local relationships to strengthen their position in the region.
2. The vulnerability of many communities across North Africa and the Sahel is likely to amplify terrorist recruitment as financial hardships and food insecurity precede ideological sympathy in commanding membership in a terror group.
3. While the COVID-19 pandemic is exacerbating the persistent challenges found in region and exposing operational weaknesses in return, the virus-factor and the evolving jihadi ecosystem will require comprehensive and cooperative responses that ensure protection for vulnerable communities.
4. The jihadi ecosystem in North Africa and the Sahel benefits from a multilevel communication capabilities framework based on five main pillars: source, audience, content, channel, and goal. Observing and understanding correctly all five of these elements is crucial to unravelling the true logic and purpose within the jihadi communication strategies and capabilities in North Africa and the Sahel, and beyond this region.
5. Arabic is the primary language of jihadi groups globally; the target audience of the propaganda materials are not local communities, but a wider audience that is spread along various geographical, cultural, and linguistic areas.
6. Local distinctive references and local dialects are solely employed by Northern African Jihadist preachers when addressing marginalised and low-educated communities on the ground. These public interventions and preaching are rarely recorded and diffused online.
7. The North Africa and the Sahel jihadi ecosystem adapts general communication vs. recruitment trends to the regional context, aiming at both internal and external audience: the dichotomous narrative (the manipulation of rejection and the emphasis on the Mujahedeen's rewards); the oppression and humiliation of the Ummah in the Murtadds governments, the necessity of a "Muslim awakening" and the social guarantees of the Jihadi governance model (a general critique toward secularist forms of government and the targeting of socially marginalised groups); the threat represented by the enemies that surround the Ummah of Islam, the historical arguments supporting the need for violent Jihad, the main strategic enemies of Ummah (Israel and US); the indispensability of violence, the glorification of Mujahedeen, and the idolisation of martyrdom.



# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

## **Acknowledge and address the need for context-specific responses to terrorism.**

The current analysis has pointed out that context is instrumental to understanding and targeting the terrorist threat; the only way to counter violent extremism in the region is to empower the local communities that are directly targeted by terrorist groups, develop locally-grounded analysis and enhance complementarity between the national, regional, and local levels of peacebuilding infrastructure, effectively including critical stakeholders, such as women and youth.

## **Understand and tackle the communications capabilities of the jihadi ecosystem through the multilevel communication**

**framework.** Based on the framework provided by this research, counterterrorism analysts can further analyse and map the communication capabilities of the actors active in the jihadi ecosystem in the region and beyond.

**Developing an active not reactive counter-terrorism strategy.** A detailed exposition of the dynamics of the jihadi ecosystem can only be provided through a complex analysis of these groups' communications. Rather than reacting to the moves of the actors involved, the local, regional and international counterterrorism community should actively infiltrate these dynamics, both in online and offline environments.



# ENDNOTES

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