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## HOW AL-QAEDA AND ISIS EMPLOYED MEDIA? A COMPARATIVE STUDY

### Abstract

Terrorist movements express their discourse through messages, which they are keen to send a specific state or people or the whole world. However, terrorist blasts are not the only message, but rather ideological reasoning accompanies every terrorist act. This was clearly observable in the discourse of Al-Qa'eda, especially as the group tried to rely on considerable grievances which cannot be denied. Al-Qa'eda has a wide and accumulated experience in turns and events, which make it a phenomenon worthy of study. With the development of Al-Qa'eda's experience, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria's power, speed of spread, ascendancy and brutality since it took control of Mosul without noticeable resistance on June 20, 2013 has been remarkable. This moment was a point of transformation in the media's view of the organization. And it becomes clear that any of both organizations will not be sustainable so long as they lack justifications considered reasonable by outside observers and lack grievances to push their soldiers to recruit youth and convince them with their media arguments.

**Keywords:** Al-Qa'eda, ISIS, media discourse, messages, terrorism

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## Introduction

Terrorist attacks, since the beginning of the millennium and the September 2001 attacks, have been the most prominent media event on the global level. Intensive discussion of terrorism then retreated, only to return in 2013 with the declaration of what is known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or Da'esh.

To some it appears that terrorism is a relatively modern phenomenon, despite its antiquity if we consider it as violent expression of human desire for change. However, the close relationship between terrorism and media, which spreads its news and terrorist crimes, in addition to the intense suicide bombings in the multiple attacks committed by these groups have inculcated the belief that terrorism is a modern global phenomenon.

Two media events reflected the logic and means of working of two terrorist organizations that have become famous over the past years, Al-Qa'eda and the Islamic State. The first event was the appearance of Al-Qa'eda's leader, Osama Bin Laden, on the Qatari Al-Jazeera channel on November 2, 2003, two years after the attacks of September 11, in which he attributed full responsibility for the attacks to the United States. Meanwhile, the event which expressed ISIS' terrorism embodied in unrivaled brutality was the execution of 21 Egyptian Coptic workers on the beaches of the Libyan capital of Tripoli in February 2015. The execution was produced in a video clip which was clearly prepared and directed with well-recognized professional techniques.

Extremist organizations are aware of the importance of psychological effects among their targeted audiences, as they know all too well that fear is one of the most important emotions which result from any violent act. As such, these groups work to take advantage of their violence and crimes in order to spread sufficient fear, in the hope that this fear will create change in a particular political issue, as terrorist acts aim fundamentally to create a distant and continual psychological effect. This effect does not only include the immediate victim or the targeted audience of the crime, but tries to plant fear in the widest audience possible.

The video which ISIS prepared of the moment it killed 21 Copts directs us to the global media techniques and professionalism which accompany terrorist organizations' methods and means of expressing themselves.

Historically, the first wave of modern terrorism was made up of anarchism, according to David C. Rapoport, who divided terrorism into four waves. As the first wave, anarchists were unique in their use of political assassinations, such as the assassination of American president William McKinley by the anarchist Leon Czolgosz in 1901, and before that, the assassination of Russian Czar Alexander II in 1881 at the hands of the *Narodnaya Volya* anarchist organization. According to Rapoport, the first wave, which was made up of anarchists, was represented in establishing terrorism in terms of propaganda as action or as a new form of communication. In the second wave, groups that aimed to achieve independence from Western colonialism wanted to distance themselves from the label "terrorism" due to its negative

connotations, instead preferring labels like revolution and fighting for the sake of liberation. The third wave was made up of leftist groups like the Japanese Red Army, the Italian Red Brigades and the Red Army Faction in Western Germany, all of which had support from the Soviet Union, and presented themselves as protecting the rights of the peoples of the Third World. The fourth wave is the religious wave which appeared at the end of the seventies.

With the end of the seventies, and the failure of Pan-Arab nationalism in the July 1967 war, these Islamic groups spread, especially in Egypt. The role of religious groups was amplified after the Iranian revolution in 1979 overthrew the Shah, which exacerbated the conflict which had broken out between the Islamists fleeing from the Middle East as a result of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan from 1979-1989. The conflict zone in Afghanistan and the spread of weapons, experience and gradually the development of thought made terrorism into a compete institution based on financing, investments and expansion. These groups exited the womb of the Afghan-Soviet conflict from being mere secret organizations to eventually expanding to the point that the organization of the Islamic State took control over wide expanses of Syria and Iraq, with an area equivalent to Britain.

### **Al-Qa'eda- One Man Show**

It is noticeable that traditionally most terrorist organizations were local, or emerged from local needs before transforming into a global phenomenon, despite current international conflicts participating to a large degree in stimulating local terrorist groups to become international organizations.<sup>4</sup> However, after the September 11 attacks, Al-Qa'eda became a truly global danger, as its operations led to two important wars in what the United States terms the Greater Middle East.

On the level of media discourse, the Al-Qa'eda organization, since its birth until the recession of its global influence, was connected to the name of almost one man, Osama Bin Laden, an offspring of the rich Saudi family which had obtained massive sums of wealth through the contracting business. However, the gathering of Arab muhajidin in Afghanistan inspired by the ideas of Abdullah Azzam, the Jordanian-Palestinian who called to wage jihad against the communists in Afghanistan an individual obligation (*fard ayn*),<sup>5</sup> served as a preliminary for the group's emergence. Azzam had released a fatwa justifying defensive jihad as an individual obligation, not just in Afghanistan, but in all the areas previously controlled by Muslim empires currently under non-Muslim rule. Later Al-Qa'eda emerged as an idea stimulated by the participation of Arab mujahidin in the Afghan war against the Soviets. Their presence there likewise facilitated the establishment of this organization. This idea was formed in actuality in January 1987, when Bin Laden employed two Egyptians, Abu Ubaida and Abu Hafz, on his personal payroll.<sup>6</sup>

4 Louise Richardson, *The Roots of Terrorism*, Routledge, New York, 2006, p. 2.

5 Paul Kawolmick, *The Al Qaeda Organization and The Islamic State Organization: History, Doctrine, Modus Operandi, And U.S. Policy to degrade and defeat Terrorism Conducted in The Name of Sunni Islam*, Strategic Studies Institute & U.S. Army War College Press, Carlisle, 2017, pp. 11-12.

6 Peter Bergen, *The Rise and Fall of Osama Bin Ladin*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2021, p. 46.

The nucleus of Al-Qa'eda was established on August 11, 1988, in a meeting between Bin Laden, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, and Dr. Fadl in Peshawar, Pakistan, where the organization rose from the funding presented by Bin Laden, and the efforts of the two Egyptian military experts and ideologues. The meeting resulted in a decision to train 314 people through half a year. Later, Bin Laden left Saudi Arabia after his refusal of his country's hosting of American forces, following the Second Gulf War in 1991. Bin Laden moved to live in Sudan. There he began to prepare for the terrorist operations the organization would commit afterwards.

The organization committed its first operation by targeting a hotel in the Yemeni city of Aden, and then another attack against the World Trade Center in the United States of America in February 1993 before Bin Laden moved to Afghanistan in 1996 as a result of the pressure on Sudan to kick him out. The world came to know the organization more widely after the explosion of car bombs near the American consulates in Nairobi, Kenya and Darussalam, Tanzania, which led to the deaths of more than 200 people on August 8, 1998. With the chain of attacks, the organization committed in different areas, especially the attacks of September 11, 2001, it gained international fame. As such, the concept of international terrorism came to its fourth wave with the widespread recognition of the organization.

The organization succeeded in filling the media chamber in every corner of the globe, and introduced the new concept of suicide bombing to terrorism by adding the tactic to its jihadi operations. As such, Al-Qa'eda's occupation of a wide space of global media enabled it to become a model for many organizations which came later, despite the presence of extremist ideas on many digital platforms before Al-Qa'eda's emergence.

The Nazi George Diet was one of the first promoters of extremist thought online in 1983. Indeed, many extremist organizations were of the first intellectual groups to use modern technology, a phenomenon not confined to only Islamic organizations. In the different research papers that discuss terrorism, we find terrorist organization as having always aimed to achieve political goals in addition to achieving psychological effects. As such, explosions made up one of the most important means by which they could achieve the desired psychological effect on people.<sup>7</sup> Historically, Johaun Most, as an anarchist aiming to spread his propaganda, was the first to employ explosions in terrorist operations.

However, Al-Qa'eda formed a different type of danger, as the war which the United States waged against terrorism was not only against a tangible enemy clear to observers upon whom the classic principles of war would be enforced,<sup>8</sup> as it was not against a state in itself, but against a secret network that enforced secrecy on its funders, suicide bombers and agents. This continued after the death of Bin Laden, especially as the organization worked as a web and depended on a network of independent sleeper cells. These cells were made up of armed agents prepared in 76

7 Muhammad El-Gendy, *Matahat Al Irhab: Al Sharq Al Awsat Men AL Khilafah Ila Al Irhab Fi Al Fadh'a Al Ilktroni, Arab Nile Group*, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, Cairo, 2020, p. 66.

8 Samy Cohen, *Democracies at War against Terrorism: A Comparative Perspective*, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2008, p. 41.

countries all across the globe.<sup>9</sup> It is clear that this model granted Al-Qa'eda the ability to hide. Therefore, its media performance was not centralized and controllable in a hierarchal fashion, or controlled from one direction following orders in coordination, but was rather spread out and could not be contained. This manner randomly takes advantage of gaps or weak points of youth and those making individual efforts here and there.<sup>10</sup>

These organizations were known for their isolation and adoption of categorical discourse with regards to the specific audience of extremist or radical Muslims or those who feel they have been unjustly and unfairly treated. As such, Al-Qa'eda was not able to transcend its nodal component and inspire others. Consequently, the media discourse of Al-Qa'eda was connected to the messages of Osama Bin Laden which satellite channels relayed, just like they followed his speeches and interviews with prominent journalists.<sup>11</sup> Bin Laden's charismatic personality and eloquence allowed him to explain his arguments and grievances in an interesting manner,<sup>12</sup> compared to Mullah Muhammad Omar, the leader of the Taliban, who was known for his reclusion from media. This was likewise contrary to the personality of Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISIS, who did not appear in the media with the same intensity as Bin Laden. Al-Baghdadi did not have the same charismatic personality and was not an ideologue in the same manner, and did not place himself in the place of questions and answers. His personality or ideas did not inspire global curiosity or debate compared to the curiosity which ISIS and its manner of working in general attracted. Indeed, his followers found Al-Baghdadi's personality revolting, truly different from his predecessor Bin Laden.<sup>13</sup>

Bin Laden was also able to attract modern youth to Islam through his messages and videotapes which focused on Muslims' crises in Palestine, Kashmir and East Timor, as Bin Laden also promoted his theory calling for fighting the shared enemy, and not the closer enemy, as expressed by Al-Zawahiri, the leader of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad at the time. Bin Laden's discourse was distinguished by its simplicity, as even villagers and wage-laborers could understand it just as well as intellectuals, giving his speeches wide resonance among Arabs. Nonetheless, Al-Zawahiri did not possess the same characteristics as Bin Laden, and therefore, even after his death in May, 2011, Al-Qa'eda was always connected to the name of Bin Laden. As is well known, Bin Laden used to prefer meeting directly with journalists so he could re-act in a sort of question-and-answer debate. As such, Bin Laden held a media conference on May 28, 1998 in Khost, East Afghanistan. This media conference was a culmination in a series of media statements and meetings which the famous Al-Qa'eda leader conducted with American and British journalists through 18 months before

9 Jerrold M. Post, *Killing in the Name of God: Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda*, USAF Counterproliferation Center, Maxwell AFB, 2002, p. 17.

10 Daniel Byman, *Al Qaeda, The Islamic State and The Global Jihadist Movement: What Everyone Needs to Know*, Vol. 36, Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad, 2016, p. 57.

11 Bruce Lawrence, *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama Bin Laden*, Verso, London, 2005, p. 60.

12 Mbaye Lo, *Understanding Muslim Discourse: Language, Tradition and The Message of bin Laden*, University Press of America, Lanham, 2009, p. 3.

13 Ahmed Zaidan, *Bin Laden Bidoon Qina'a: Liqa'at Hatharat Nashraha Taliban*, International Book Company, Beirut, 2003, p. 7.

this event. Of those journalists were Robert Fisk, Peter Arne, and John Miller, in addition to his meetings with correspondents of the Qatari Al-Jazeera station, such as Ahmad Zaydan, Al-Jazeera's correspondent in Islamabad, in addition to Abdulbari Atwan, the head editor of the London Al-Quds newspaper at that time.

The media conferences and meetings which Bin Laden held reflected a "one man show" media policy. It was also easy for international media to isolate Al-Qa'eda in the personality of Bin Laden, like how the international media isolated the crisis of Iraq from 1990-2003 in the personality of Saddam Hussein. With regards to Bin Laden, we see how former US president Barack Obama considered his extermination in Pakistan as an exceptional victory for his administration which would increase the Democratic Party's chances in the presidential elections.<sup>14</sup>

Bin Laden's views and the content of his messages become clear in his media interviews. In an interview with an Aljazeera correspondent, Bin Laden answered the question if he thought the American-British attack on Iraq in 2003 would increase the support presented to organizations resisting America or if it would scare these organizations away from conducting any military or non-military actions against American interests. Bin Laden answered the question by saying that Muslims at the time had to know that the countries of the Middle East did not possess sovereignty, and that the regional regimes had either conspired with America and the UK in this shameful conspiracy to invade Iraq or did not possess any power to stop Iraq's occupation.<sup>15</sup>

In his interview with Aljazeera as well, Bin Laden said that his obligation was to motivate the Islamic Ummah to wage jihad in Allah's way against the United States, Israel and their allies. He also added that gathering people for this aim in the period of Iraq's occupation was heading in the right direction to expel America out of Muslim countries. As such, we can clearly see that Bin Laden's answers refused Western influence on Muslim peoples in general.<sup>16</sup>

The statement of Al-Qa'eda leader came after former US president George W. Bush's directly called his "War on Terrorism," a crusade after the September 11 attacks, declaring that his country was waging a crusade against terrorists and those who support them in self-defense.<sup>17</sup> Many defended George Jr. calling his war on Afghanistan and Iraq a crusade as being within a context that Western politicians use when declaring a large and wide campaign. Others viewed its use as almost neutral, due to bringing to mind one of the founding historical events of Western civilization, not to mention it being an expression of gathering people for a campaign with a specific aim. This however does not sufficiently explain the religious connotations of Bush's statement, who said in a radio statement that "This crusade, this war on

14 Mario Gollwitzer, Linda J. Skitka, Daniel Wisneski, Arne Sjöström, Peter Liberman, Syed J. Nazir, and Brad J. Bushma, Vicarious Revenge and the Death of Osama Bin Laden, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol. 40, No. 5, 2014, p. 1.

15 Ibidem.

16 Michael Scheuer, *Osama Bin Laden*, Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 15.

17 Sophia Menache and Daniel Gutwein, Just War; Crusade, and Jihad: Conflicting Propaganda Strategies During the Gulf Crisis (1990-1991), *Belgian Journal of Philology and History*, Vol. 80, 2002, p. 385.

terrorism will take a long time...” and directed Americans to pray on that holy day.<sup>18</sup> This is in addition to George Bush himself being considered a conservative politician with well-known close relations to the Anglican church.<sup>19</sup>

The truth of the matter is that there is sufficient proof of an effective religious relationship of Christian-Jewish cooperation during the George W. Bush administration. A record of an undeclared meeting between Christian fundamentalists and White House officials was leaked to the media. The leaks made it clear that the Christian fundamentalists had met with Bush Jr. on March 25, 2003 for two hours. As such, Al-Qa’eda used such suspicious events to elicit justifications and depict the other side as a Christian-Jewish alliance, especially when it was clear during the Bush administration. The organization also heavily relied on calling attention to the grievances which excused its fight against the “crusader-Jewish alliance complicit with the region’s regimes,” and searching for justifications and reasons for the terrorist operations it carried out. The organization crystallized all of that in the equation of aggression against the United States as a higher aim of its most prominent terrorist operations.

Building on the aforementioned, Al-Qa’eda’s media messages also held the Crusader-Jewish alliance as being responsible for the resulting chaos in the Muslim world. The organization viewed this as motivating the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate to take the place of those failed Arab regimes. In order to achieve this aim, it argued that recourse must be taken to violent jihad, which encouraged suicide bombings against their enemies under the rule “there is no difference between combatants and civilians while fighting the enemy.” From the very first day, Al-Qa’eda declared its opposition to the United States which it considered directly responsible for the Gulf invasion. This is contrary to the Islamic State which avoided clashing with Western nations at the beginning of its activities, and later justified targeting those nations due to their targeting of it first. As such, after the formation of the international coalition against the organization, ISIS spokesperson, Abu Muhammad Al-Adnani, declared on September 22, 2014, the beginning of targeting American and French citizens among the citizens of the other nations participating in the coalition.<sup>20</sup>

While Al-Qa’eda in its media discourse encouraged Muslims to expel the United States from Muslim countries, the newly emerging Islamic state, among many messages, planned to lure the United States to the region as a preface to the war in the end times which is supposed to take place in Syria.<sup>21</sup> This element, however, did not make up the basic media framework for the Islamic state organization. Instead,

18 George W. Bush, “Remarks by The President Upon Arrival”, 2001. Available at: <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010916-2.html> (accessed May 2, 2022).

19 Victor Bulmer-Thomas, *Empire in Retreat: The Past, Present and Future of the United States*, Tawfiq Sakhan Trans., Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Doha, 2022, p. 321.

20 Theo W. Oosterveld and Williem Bloem, *The Rise and Fall of ISIS: From Evitability to Inevitability*, The Hague Centre for the Strategic Studies, Hague, 2017, p. 8.

21 Caroline Kennon, *Battling Terrorism in The United States*, Lucent Press, New York, 2018, p. 83.

there were other more prominent elements in its media which will be mentioned in the section devoted to the Islamic state.

Generally, Al-Qa'eda did not aim to establish an Islamic caliphate, and the conditions did not prepare it to do so. It remained working secretly in cities in a state of chaos, but Bin Laden always considered the caliphate to be the final aim, though he realized that declaring it before its time and before being able to defend it would simply make it a target of the United States and make it easier to hit and eliminate. However, its remnants hidden and spread over the world would make it difficult for the incredible American military power to contain it, keep track of it and eliminate it especially as it had faced American military power in Afghanistan's Tora Bora.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to all the justifications used by Bin Laden, Al-Qa'eda still relied on an ideological discourse built on the teachings of traditional Jihadi Salafism. These teachings promote violence, killing and hatred, and even with the different interpretations of the organization's teachings through its individuals' presence in one state or another, the organization's intellectual facade remained the same. These teachings go back to Salafi Islamic groups in Egypt, or to the Jihadist organization known by "The Islamic Front for Jihad against the Jews and Crusaders."<sup>23</sup>

Likewise, the two leaders of Al-Qa'eda also legalized killing Muslims using the argument of their complicity with the West and governments that do not apply the Sharia. There are many clear examples of this, such as their killing of Muslim translators that accompanied the American forces in their tours in Iraq, arguing that they had supported the invaders. Here it becomes clear that Al-Qa'eda relied on the principle of takfir due to not applying the Sharia, and noticed that most Muslims in the Muslim world truly feel and agree with these grievances.

Al-Qa'eda's messages expanded and eventually crystallized by agitating against the crusading campaigns, or what Bin Laden named the Jewish-Crusader alliance (America, Britain and Israel) against the Muslim world.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, Al-Qa'eda's message or declared creed was in its unitary narrative, which is a framework that unified religious interpretations and provided its followers with a satisfying and emotionally convincing image of their role as Muslim individuals in an unequal and oppressive world. These interpretations confer on those who believe in them a powerful feeling that they carry a special identity, which adds meaning to their life.<sup>25</sup>

So too, religious interpretations aim to motivate and direct Muslims to the same aim, through the sermons that aim over the long term to frustrate Western morale, and motivate Muslims to work and conduct jihad against the Western enemy. Undoubtedly, this propaganda contains true grievances, especially when focusing on Western oppression, its wars against Muslim countries, and its attacks which appear to target Islam. In order to solidify these concepts, Al-Qa'eda's discourse focused on

22 Daniel Bymen, "What Comes After ISIS?", Brookings Institution, 2019. Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/02/22/what-comes-after-isis/> (accessed April 13, 2022).

23 Magdy Ibrahim, *Risalat Al Fikr Fi Zaman Al Idwan*, Rawabet for Publishing and information Technology, Vol. 1, Cairo, 2019, p. 189.

24 Ibidem.

25 Alex P. Schmid, *Al Qaeda's "Single Narrative" and Attempts to Develop Counter-Narratives: The State of Knowledge*, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, Hague, 2014, p. 5.

certain facts like the killing of innocents in Iraq and Afghanistan and Western nations' support for dictatorial and oppressive Arab nations in the region, to the point that Bin Laden on several occasions described himself as a freedom-fighter.<sup>26</sup>

Al-Qa'eda kept up with media developments, which helped its move its message, interpretations and aims. Al-Qa'eda was mostly interested in satellite channels, due to their popularity in the nineties, that decade in which the Qatari Aljazeera channel emerged in addition to numerous Pan-Arab news channels. However, Bin Laden preferred Aljazeera, which enjoyed wide popularity and spread at the time, over its competitors. Bin Laden realized early on the channel's popularity and specialty in moving what it repeatedly expressed as "the other opinion."<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, the organization also had the well-known Sihab company to specifically execute its propaganda activities. It also depended on the internet, in that period when content moved from cassette tapes to professional videos.

Previously, terrorist groups relied on presenting themselves to the public through primitive means like leaflets, or posters which activists in these groups would hang on walls. The posters would show off the details of their operations and the message they wanted to send to the government and public. Those groups aimed to create the desired psychological effect through their leaflets, which were the most developed media outlet at the time.<sup>28</sup> On the level of traditional Islamic terrorist groups, diffusion was one of the important of recruiting youth, gaining popularity and spreading their propaganda. These groups spared no effort in taking advantage of any means to do so, beginning with the available means such as audio cassettes, video tapes and publications which they could design, print and distribute.<sup>29</sup>

Despite the group's great dependence on Bin Laden's motivational speeches, Al-Qa'eda also depended on broadcasting its messages through the internet and sneaking into blogs and special chat rooms, which reviewed articles and interventions on different topics. After the September 11 attacks, what is known as digital jihad manifested itself clearly, including (hacking, destroying websites, and participating in spreading jihadi discourse on blogs), which the group used to achieve its aims.

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26 David C. Rapoport, *The Four Waves of Modern Terror: International Dimensions and Consequences*, University of California Press, 2013, p. 14.

27 Ibidem.

28 Ibidem.

29 Muhammad Al-Arabi, *Deia'ayat Al Ithab: la'alam Daesh Wa Istrateegyat A'maloh*, King Faisal Center for Research and Studies, Riyadh, 2016, p. 11.

## The ISIS - The Media Phenomenon

What is called the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or Da'esh, can be considered the second stage of the Al-Qa'eda international organization. Al-Qa'eda was truly the mother organization of the Islamic state, which occupied the world with its crimes and media messages. Meanwhile, all of the groups which preceded these two groups were merely local movements without a global reputation.

The relationship between Al-Qa'eda and its peer the Islamic state should be noted. The core of the relationship began when Al-Qa'eda moved its activities to Iraq after the downfall of the Socialist Arab Baathist regime in 2003. It clearly hoped to take advantage of the chaos happening in the Middle East region to build an Islamic state that extended and expanded and did not remain in the borders of Iraq and Syria, but reached to Yemen and Libya and other nations suffering from chaos and the failure of the central state and rule of law. This chaos permitted, according to the understanding of the founders of the Islamic state, it to spread its roots amid the failure of the traditional states in the region.<sup>30</sup>

On 29 June, 2013 the spokesperson of the Islamic state, Abu Muhammad Al-Adnani, declared in an audio recording the establishment of what he named at the time "The Islamic State," and that *bay'a* (oath of allegiance) had been given to Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi as the *amir* of this state. However, prior to that by a few years, the seed of the Islamic state organization in Iraq began as an effective extension of Al-Qa'eda, when Abu Mus'ab Al-Zarqawi<sup>31</sup> established what was known at the time as the Jihad and Tawhid organization in September 2003, to declare the "Islamic State of Iraq" in 2006.

Towards the end of 2011, The Nusra Front for the People of Syria declared itself as a branch of Al-Qa'eda in Syria, which was ripped apart by civil war, until the preliminary emergence of the "Islamic State of Iraq and Syria" in April 2013. Most of the foreign fighters left the Nusra Front for the Islamic state when it was established, forming a clear break between the classic Al-Qa'eda organization and the emerging organization. ISIS fought all the organizations, including Al-Nusra, that is Al-Qa'eda, and forced them out to establish its control over the Iraqi-Syrian borders.<sup>32</sup> The Islamic state's victories at its formation gave it free propaganda that was needed at least on the local level in the regions under its control. At this moment, it was considered an invincible organization. In the chaos, no organization was able to accom-

30 Ibidem.

31 Mustafa Ahmed Abdel Rahman, *Daesh Men AL ZinZana Ila Al Khilafah*, Dar Horouf Manthura, Cairo, 2015, p. 25.

32 Terrence K. Kelly, James Dobbins, Barbara Sude, and Ben Connable, "Knowing the Enemy: Understanding the Islamic State and Principles for Defeating It", Rand Corporation, Santa Monica, 2017, p. 2.

plish a similar influence to that of the Islamic state on the ground due to its barbarity that was unprecedented even among previous Jihadi groups.

Al-Qa'eda itself washed its hands of the unrivaled barbarity. This aversion did not prevent the Islamic state from realizing great achievements, especially its ability to declare the establishment of a state with the territorial size of Britain. Through the tactic of media shock,<sup>33</sup> the Islamic state was able to force itself as a difficult factor in the regional equation of the Levant. The Islamic state became a phenomenon which confirmed its existence through crude media. This was on two levels: as criminal acts including killing and execution in the ugliest manner, and through media that employed death and bloody scenes with professionalism. The group benefited from the professionalism of some of its members in the most up to date techniques in media and film production. The Islamic state gave intensive attention to its media aspect, which created a reaction that cannot be underestimated. The group became an aim of Western and global media in general and became the top news for news bulletins.

ISIS formed one of the biggest media issues over the past decade, side by side with Covid-19 which came after it, and the events of the Russian war against Ukraine and the possible indicators of a world war. These three crises were the most prominent in the media over the decade. All three crises carried in their folds a serious global threat. Here, we must imagine how an organization the size of ISIS was truly a threat of the same degree as a pandemic that happens once every century, or the warnings of a world war that has only happened twice in modern history. This means that ISIS formed a global threat and anxiety in the perceptions it created among the public it and created itself into a boogeyman which will rule the world or rule it with its radical model. ISIS was keen to intentionally spread fear through the video clips it spread among people. Al-Qae'da, to the contrary, did not aim to spread fear and terror, but to spread its religious and political messages. ISIS viewed these attacks as revenge operation in response to the grievances it saw as deserving this "punishment."<sup>34</sup> The Islamic State depended on this type of brutality unprecedented by any similar group to gain wide regions of influence at the expense of peer-rival organizations which it fought with on the same front, and at the expense of Kurds in North Syria and its enemy, the central Syrian state.<sup>35</sup>

It is clear that the nature of ISIS' attacks stem from the traditional definition of terrorism as "political violence," even though this concept has developed to include

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33 Simon Cottee, *ISIS and the Pornography of Violence*, Anthem Press, London and New York, 2019, p. 14.

34 Jamileh Kadivar, "Daesh and the Power of Media and Message", *Arab Media & Society*, Cairo, March 22, 2021. Available at: <https://www.arabmediasociety.com/daesh-and-the-power-of-media-and-message/> (accessed June 5, 2022)

35 Dag Tessore, *Religious Violence from the Bible to ISIS*, John Calvin, Trans., Lulu Press, Morrisville, 2018, p. 141.

concepts of propaganda and communication. If terrorists' killings, assassinations and explosions aim to change the other party's stance through coercion or violence, then terrorist organizations often still try in a balanced manner to change public convictions and behavior through propaganda,<sup>36</sup> something which was not a priority for ISIS.

Bruce Hoffman defined terrorism as "Violence or the threat of violence used in service of a political aim. Terrorism is specifically designed to have long-term psychological effects that transcend its victim or direct victims or the targets of aggression... the aim is to plant fear among them, and therefore terrorize the largest audience possible."<sup>37</sup> Other times the same manner is used many times in order to coerce a particular individual to review his most important beliefs, or review his negative acts. This style is precise and organized in order to create a state of self-doubt, which could lead to creating an unbalanced and unstable state. This could be described as a paradigm shift which often helps to review the programming of individual perceptions on a particular issue, and this is one of the most effective means in enforcing change and making the victim feel guilt or shame.<sup>38</sup>

The Islamic state organization used this style in a reverse manner. Its aim was to shatter people's confidence in the state and present the organization as an alternative in a disbelieving society and traitorous authority. Naturally, these feelings accumulate in individuals, and such groups become more attractive in failed states. Here, the organization not only presented an ideological alternative, but a refuge for individuals fleeing from the meaningless of failed states, especially after the organization ignited a chaotic environment which spread terror. These elements lead to a state of societal breakup and therefore complete submission to the group's administration, power and all of its extremist laws.

If the academic framework of media presents media in terms of lines that help in the contemporary cultural and social environment, then we cannot ignore the most comprehensive and universal feature of the ISIS project, especially the digital media technology that developed in the form of complex networks.<sup>39</sup> When we realize this reality, and how social media can influence and participate in daily life, then we must imagine the extent of the aura which ISIS or Da'esh created through this incredible technology. This demonstrates that terrorist organizations which aimed to employ media for their interests could not achieve what ISIS did. It was a milestone

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36 Ibidem.

37 Jailer M. Guhel and Peter Forster, "Counter-Terrorism Reference Approach", NATO International Staff, Brussels, 2020, p. 11.

38 Buthaina Al-Nasiri, *Ihtilal Al A'aQ: Al Ia'alam wa Al Harb Al Nafssiah*, Arab Press Agency, Cairo, 2017, p. 14.

39 Mark Balnafez, Stephanie Heimelemek, and Brian Schumist Brian, *Media Theories and Methods*, Translated by Atef Hatiba, and Manal Abul-Hassan, Universities Publishing House, Cairo, 2017, p. 73.

compared to them and this great distinction was incredible enough to create the idea of this article and motivate this comparison as a model for media development among extremist organizations in the era of social media.

The ISIS use of the digital space was clearly different from other extremist organizations, as it employed the internet with all of its energy. This reflected its great capacity for professional performance as well as a deep understanding among the organization's leadership of the connection between media and the real world.<sup>40</sup> The organization realized that the moment it releases a bloody clip, it will circulate on popular platforms on the web. ISIS was distinguished by its use of media through its multiple media platforms, from developed ones like social media and film production technologies to more traditional means, such as journals and news organizations, among other technologies it employed and audiences it targeted.

The media platforms used by ISIS included journals, documentary films and visual publications, news agencies, radio stations that translate into several different other languages. Some of the organization's publications: The Al-Naba journal, Dabiq journal, Al-Rumiya journal, in addition to foreign language journals such as the French-language Dar Al-Islam, the Turkish-language Al-Qustantiniyya, and the Russian "Istok" journal. It also possessed other media platforms such as: the Yaqeen Telegram channel, the Anjad media institute, the Al-Hayat media center, the Furqan media institute, the Bayan radio, the Al-Munisirun publication and Al-Hama printed publication, in addition to several media offices in the areas under the control of the Diwan, the media equivalent to the Ministry of Media in civil institutions.<sup>41</sup> This brings the number of media platforms affiliated with the organization to approximately 13 different platforms in five languages, reflecting the organization's great interest in its global media image, and its desire to spread its messages.

ISIS always employed Quranic verses in the titles of topics it presented for different media means, and excerpts from its leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi or in visual publications. Likewise, ISIS relied on a non-central strategy on the internet in order to spread terror through lone wolves. This method focused on spreading instruction on how to create highly-explosive bombs through primitive means. In actuality, the organization employed audio and visual messages and which were prepared literally and high-quality techniques through young skills in all corners of the globe. It is easy to touch upon the effect of American action movies on the videos filmed for scenes and clips documenting ISIS' crimes. The organization benefited from the development of photo technology and its development and globalization of opin-

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40 Engy Mahdi, Al Jihad Al Iliktrooni: Dirasah Li Tantheem Daesh Wa Istrateegyat AL Wilayat Al Motahida Limowajahtoho, *Journal of the Faculty of Economics and Political Science*, Cairo, 2021, p. 151.

41 Ibidem.

ions and ideas.<sup>42</sup>

Clearly the organization's brutal appearance had tangible effects. Those characteristics which it deliberately displayed and which were not directed towards terrorism on the one hand, and abandoning a civilized diplomatic appearance on the other hand, as the organization was uninterested in presenting logical arguments. It did not even have prominent spokespersons presenting clear arguments like Osama Bin Laden's speeches or even the video messages of Ayman Al-Zawahiri which came later. It seems that Al-Baghdadi's appearance was limited and his speaking abilities limited as well in comparison to Abu Muhammad Al-Joulani, the leader of the Nusra Front,<sup>43</sup> whereas ISIS did not base its work on grievances like its rival Al-Qa'eda. ISIS fought everyone, even sister Islamic factions in Syria, including the Nusra Front, which declared its allegiance to Al-Qa'eda. Despite the extent of its atrociousness, the organization made it clear that it was aware of its brutality. Do terrorists know that they are committing great crimes which could take innocent victims, women, children, the elderly and civilians, or does they live in a state of denial in which it does not dwell on them that they are criminals acting outside the law? In reality, terrorists realize full well that they are committing a horrifying act. Therefore, ISIS' perseverance in brutal operations was a reflection of its media professionalism. This professionalism was necessary for the organization to display its acts to the public. Its messages were reflected in that the organization conducted deliberate terrorist acts intended to be as terrifying, brutal and bloody as possible.

To the contrary of Al-Qa'eda which was interested in spreading and working overseas, and spreading its messages to expose the hypocrisy of Western policy and its hegemony over the Middle East, The ISIS was keen to geographically barricade themselves in the region of Iraq and the Levant (the Fertile Crescent) to get ready to expand to neighboring countries, and partially to draw the West into the battle of Armageddon pointed to by evangelicals like former US president Ronald Reagan.<sup>44</sup>

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42 Ibidem.

43 Khaled Abul-Hassan, Al Nofooth Al Iqlimi Le Turkya Fi Thel Al Azmah Al Sooryah, *Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, No. 66, 2014, p. 38.

44 Asmir Al Rajbo Abd al-Sattar al-Hajj, *Mahraqat Harmajdon Al Nawawyah Wa Awdat Al Massih Demn Wjhat Nathr Islamiyah*, Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyya, Beirut, 2003, p. 11.

## **Conclusions**

The comparisons and historical examination show that as the older movement, Al-Qa'eda was more influential in terms of being the establishing organization, and in its transitioning its traditional media broadcasting to electronic media.

Al-Qa'eda as an organization occupied a time period characterized by a number of events, as the harbingers of the organization's establishment began in 1988, compared to the Islamic state, with idea of its establishment beginning in 2004, and 2014 seeing the formal declaration of its establishment in Iraq and Syria. Al-Qa'eda succeeded in the biggest operation (September 11), which resulted in the American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, changed the face of the world towards fighting terrorism, and placed jihadi movements under the microscope worldwide, and led at the end of the day to crystallizing the term: "Global War on Terrorism."

ISIS remained limited in one way or another in the place it declared itself from, Syria and Iraq, and as soon as its defeat happened there and its state fell, the organization clearly regressed. Al-Qa'eda's dependence on diffusion and secrecy helped it survive even after it lost its strategic location in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, ISIS is a media phenomenon in itself due to its excessive reliance on producing a brutal image to the outside as a military means to spread fear and broadcast paralysis in its enemies before swooping on them. ISIS' coexistence with popular social media platforms and their wide use among the populace weakened the organization's presence in the media.

Throughout this study, it becomes clear that Al-Qa'eda was the first model in terrorist operations among extremist Islamic groups, and was for a long time strongly connected to the discourse of the group's leader Osama Bin Laden. In its messages, most of which were expressed by Bin Laden, Al-Qa'eda focused on specific grievances represented in the Crusader-Zionist alliance which included the United States, United Kingdom, and Israel and the hegemony of this alliance over the oppressive Arab regimes. Al-Qa'eda's obscure and secretive nature was represented in its terrorist activities through what is known as sleeper cells. These cells worked according to orientations and padded keys in Bin Laden's speeches, whereas ISIS relied on lone wolves among its extremist fans based on imitating the organization. With regards to ISIS, it can be considered a media bubble that had a tremendous temporary psychological effect, but cannot be compared to Al-Qa'eda which promoted grievances which were widely accepted by the populace and lasted longer in comparison.

ISIS's brutality and taking advantage of chaos which dominated more than one Arab nation made the group a bad omen that was equally refused by Muslim pop-

ulations and formal regimes. Rather, ISIS became a boogeyman used by dictatorial regimes to scare off any attempt at popular change in Middle Eastern nations. That, however, did not prevent the group from being professional in its employment of different media tools, and presenting itself as being able to control advanced means of media professionally making it the best group in creating psychological effects, regardless of the permanence or negativity of this effect.

Nonetheless, it is difficult to separate the two movements from each other due to their spatial, ideological, and temporal connections and their dependence on terrorism as a means of change. There is an important and final element, that Al-Qa'eda did not establish a state for media to be a principal element in its governance like that of the Islamic State. ISIS established a diwan of media and worked through a state in easing its media means with all freedom, and a special budget, and full-time professional employees.

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**Ајман Абуши, Шарифа Хајати Сајед Исмаил ал-Кудси, Амир  
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## **КАКО СУ АЛ КАИДА И ИСЛАМСКА ДРЖАВА КОРИСТИЛЕ МЕДИЈЕ? УПОРЕДНА АНАЛИЗА**

### **Сажетак**

Терористички покрети приказују свој дискурс кроз поруке, које они шаљу специфичним државама и људима, или целом свету. Међутим, терористички напад није једина порука која се шаље, већ и идеолошко оправдање које прати сваки терористички акт. Ово се јасно видело у дискурсу Ал Каиде, јер се ова група ослањала на патњу која не може бити игнорисана. Ал Каида је имала акумулирано искуство у различитим догађајима, што ју чини феноменом који заслужује нашу пажњу. Али, са развојем Ал Каиде, треба и погледати огроман развој Исламске државе Сирије и Леванта, која је преузела моћ, и веома брзо и брутално преузела контролу над Мосулом 20. јуна 2013. Ово је био тренутак промене у погледу медија на ову организацију. Постало је јасно да нити једна од ових организација неће дуго трајати ако немају оправдање за своје следбенике и моћ да регрутују нове вернике и убеде их у њихове аргументе путем медија.

**Кључне речи:** Ал Каида, ИСИС, медијски дискурс, поруке, тероризам