



The Hybrid Nature of Jabhat Al-Nusra through the lens of its magazine Al-Risalah

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List of Acronyms:

AQ	<i>Al-Qaida</i>
AQAP	<i>Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula</i>
AQC	<i>Al-Qaida Core</i>
AQIM	<i>Al-Qaida In the Maghreb</i>
AQIS	<i>Al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent</i>
CSI	<i>Connection Strength Index</i>
HTS	<i>Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham</i>
INLA	<i>Irish National Liberation Army</i>
IRA	<i>Irish Republican Army</i>
IS	<i>Islamic State</i>
ISI	<i>Islamic State in Iraq</i>
ISIL	<i>Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant</i>
ISIS	<i>Islamic State of Iraq and Syria</i>
JAN	<i>Jabhat Al-Nusra</i>
JFS	<i>Jabhat Fateh Al-Sham</i>
VEO	<i>Violent Extremist Organisation</i>

“The name risalah comes from the Arabic word meaning ‘a letter’. Thus, this Risalah from us to you is aimed at presenting to our dear readers a clear presentation of Islam, as practised and understood by the companions of the Prophet Muhammad and the righteous predecessors.”

Editor’s note, Al-Risalah Issue 1,2015, p.1.

Introduction

"We are in a battle, and more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media"¹.

Ayman Al-Zawahiri, Oct 12, 2005.

Violent extremist organisations (VEOs), and especially jihadist groups have increasingly relied on the media to bolster the effects of their terror campaign, promote their political goals, recruit new cadres, and attract financial support. Videos portraying Osama Bin Laden threatening America and the West from caves in Afghanistan and Pakistan became the emblem of the early stages of Al-Qaida’s (AQ) media campaign. A lot has changed in jihadist propaganda since then, with the proliferation of a wide variety of propaganda material released via several new mediums made available by fast-evolving technologies and platforms. The emergence and establishment of the cyberspace constituted a new, unparalleled opportunity for jihadists, an El-Dorado for their propaganda that could suddenly reach an immensely wider audience without the filter operated by state and mainstream media (Torres et.al.,2006:407). Via mediums such as blogs, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, violent content became available to anyone interested in accessing it, while online blogs, messaging apps, and chats started playing a growing role in the planning and execution of terror operations. Each medium constitutes the preferred channel for a particular type of message. YouTube became the ideal medium for the distribution of messages and updates concerning of the status of military operations in the lands of Jihad. Online blogs and platforms such as Facebook have been widely used by jihadists to identify young alienated Muslims in the West and persuade them to either perpetrate attacks in their countries or leave their homes to become foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq. Terrorist groups have displayed great levels

¹ Statement included in a letter sent by Ayman Al-Zawahiri to Al-Zarqawi in 2005, translated and reported by CNN, <http://edition.cnn.com/2005/WORLD/meast/10/11/alqaeda.letter/>.

of adaptability that allowed them to escape detection in spite of progressively increased surveillance and intensification of the so-called “war on terror”. Along with the technological development and the fast emergence of the internet, other strictly interrelated factors have driven the evolution of jihadist organisations’ propaganda, namely the establishment of the Islamic State (IS) with its model as a prominent actor of global jihad, and the escalation of violence in Syria and Iraq. Although the availability, via the web, of new mediums stands out as the most significant factor directing the evolution of jihadist propaganda, the combination of the other factors maximised its impact and provided the powerful message with a direction, a target, and a theatre where to be put into action. Among all mediums used by jihadists to spread their propaganda material, English language magazines surely constitute one of the most complete and resourceful instruments at their disposal. Although the first magazines released online by jihadist organisations date back to 2008, the rapid emergence of IS and its magazine “Dabiq” revolutionised and breathed new life into the role of this propaganda medium.

Jihadists have occasionally unveiled intentions and strategies via the content of their online magazines. Changes in the articles’ themes, style, language, and targets, as well as in the frequency of release, can all constitute signals of strategic developments occurring within the organisation. On the other hand, the fact that online magazines are readily available by governments, analysts, researchers, and rival groups, makes magazines an essential instrument of diplomacy and in the competition with jihadist rivals. The choice of the content, targets, and language of their publications can serve a multitude of scopes, including enhancing radicalisation, promoting attacks, attract foreign fighters and recruits, and undermine competitors.

Analysing the content of jihadist magazines can benefit three aspects of the fight against terrorist organisations: law-enforcement and counter-terrorism, counter-radicalisation, and strategy. As highlighted in several articles and reports (Brendan, 2016), the monitoring of influential jihadist magazines can enhance security services’ capability to predict which weapons, modus operandi and targets homegrown terrorists are more likely to choose. Better predictive performance allows a more effective prioritisation and allocation of resources to develop preventive security measures and as well as crisis response

mechanisms. Secondly, an examination of the communication strategies employed by VEOs to share their alternative system of meanings and promote behavioural change in vulnerable individuals would improve the understanding of the dynamics of radicalisation. As a consequence, better knowledge of jihadist propaganda would enable the formulation of more efficient de-radicalisation and disengagement programs. While the benefits for policing and counter-radicalisation are more self-evident, important insights regarding organisational structure, capabilities, affiliation, and objectives can be inferred via an analysis of the content, language, and frequency of their publications. In general, jihadist magazines' articles mirror the organisation's condition and strategic priorities and, therefore, often display changes in strategies and vision before these are even visible on the battlefield or in the relations with friends and foes. Being able to detect these signals would constitute a key advantage, in the formulation of long-term political and military strategies aimed at tackling terrorism at home as well as abroad.

In a global jihadist movement characterised by an almost uncontested Al-Qaida guidance, the emergence and rapid gains of the Islamic State constituted a stiff challenge to the jihadist old guard and inaugurated an "era of escalatory intra-jihadist competition" (Lister,2016a:54). This competition has resulted in armed clashes on the battlefield as well as online, with each group presenting itself as the only legitimate model for the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate. The battle between the two competitive jihadi pathways has since then filled the pages of the groups' English magazines Dabiq and Inspire, which became pivotal instruments to analyse AQ and IS's ideology, targets, tactics, and strategies. At the time of the split between AQ and IS, Jabhat Al-Nusra (JAN), originally created as the Syrian branch of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), found itself entangled in its parents' divorce. Too weak to stand against IS on its own, JAN unilaterally declared itself an AQ affiliate in 2013 and has progressively established itself as a leading jihadist faction in Syria. With most literature focusing on IS's Dabiq and AQ's Inspire, little attention has been devoted to analysing the propaganda output in English of more localised actors such as JAN. Often described simplistically as a mere extension of AQ in Syria due to its ideology and affiliation, the group's evolution and strategy displayed

characteristics that can earn it the denomination of “hybrid jihadist”, a third way between IS’s extremism and AQ’s cautiousness.

The present research analyses Jabhat Al-Nusra’s English language magazine Al-Risalah to assess its relationship with the two leading jihadist groups worldwide. On the one hand, the information campaign against IS is analysed to determine the causes of friction and affinities with the group as they emerge from the magazine. At the same time, articles and images in Al-Risalah are explored to highlight the patterns of the relationship between JAN and its parent organisation AQ. In particular, the research focuses on detecting potential signs of preference diversion and loose command and control that Byman (2014) identified as the key obstacles undermining mergers and acquisitions in the jihadist world. The research combines multiple layers and subjects of analysis in order to evaluate whether results from Al-Risalah are consistent with the hypothesis of Jabhat Al-Nusra’s destiny as an independent alternative to the IS-AQ monopoly. The idea is that JAN can be seen as a jihadi hybrid, strongly hostile towards IS ideology while embracing some of its characteristics, and ostensibly well disposed towards AQ despite rejecting its oversight and its global strategic view.

In a broader context, the contribution of the present paper to research on jihadist organisations is twofold. On the one hand, it stresses the need for further research on less popular groups and affiliates that overcomes preconceptions deriving from the monopoly of IS and Al-Qaida in the global jihadist movement. IS’s nature and origin as al-Qaida’s Iraqi branch should constitute a reminder of how rapidly and radically can affiliates deviate from their parent organisation and pose an immediate, deadlier threat in the West as well as in their local theatres. Secondly, the present work highlights the potential benefits of a more systematic analysis for future research on jihadist propaganda by offering a structured analytical framework that can be employed and further developed to minimise the impact of cognitive biases such as the bandwagon effect² and confirmation bias³ affecting qualitative research in the field.

² “The tendency to do (or believe) things because many other people do (or believe) the same”. (Colman,2003:77)

³ “The tendency to interpret new evidence as confirmation of one’s existing beliefs or theories” (Oxford Dictionaries, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/bandwagon>)

Chapter 1. Literature review: the evolution, use, and purpose of online jihadist magazines

Among all mediums at the disposal of jihadists, online magazines constitute one of the most powerful and complete responses to the needs of VEOs seeking a window for a more detailed promotion of their agenda and ideological manifesto.

Since 2009, several online English magazines addressing Muslim readers in the West have emerged and continuously evolved. More and more resources have been dedicated by jihadist organisations to the production and editing of these products, as proven by the increasing quality and frequency of the publications. Although magazines only constitute a portion of the jihadist propaganda online, their characteristics make them the ideal mean for the delivery of more complex messages for which other mediums -including videos or tweets- are simply not enough. Through their propaganda, jihadists seek to offer an alternative system of meanings to gradually change their readers' perception of reality, eventually leading them to the desired behavioural and belief change.

Concerning the emergence and consolidation of online jihadist magazines as an essential vector of radicalisation, three main "waves" of innovations can be identified. The first wave, corresponding to the foundation of the first influential jihadist magazine in English, can be traced back to the year 2008. "Jihad Recollections", the name of the publication, was created by Samir Khan, a 21 year- old American citizen with an affinity for Islamic extremism and outstanding web editing skills (Pauly,2015). As reported in Lemieux et al. (2014:356), Khan identified the three objectives of his publication as: "1) tackle issues that are not only happening abroad in the Muslim world but also focus on domestic issues pertinent to the Muslim community in the West; 2) to clean the image of the Mujahideen; and 3) to present well-researched and thought-out articles on relevant issues of interest. What characterised this first concept magazine was the sophisticated and complex theological content, made for an informed, reading elite (Lemieux et al.,2014:356). Nevertheless, "Jihad Recollections" did not go unnoticed, and one year later the young aspiring jihadist joined the AQ leading figure Anwar al-Awlaki, one of his models, in Yemen. In 2010, the collaboration between the two gave birth to "Inspire", the

first magazine officially published by AQAP, which constitutes the second wave of innovation identified by the author of this paper. In particular, two main features can be identified as the magazine's revolutionary power. The first development concerns the language used: Al-Awlaki noticed the potential of Khan's work, but he also understood how a more conversational style of writing could drastically expand the magazine's audience. Secondly, a new section, called "Open Source Jihad" was introduced and consisted of a how-to series providing simple operational guides for young aspiring terrorists (Droogan, Shane,2016:2). If a more colloquial language helped to spread the magazine among young American Muslims, it is the new set of operational guides that enhanced a more active involvement of its audience. Inspire became more focused on driving its audience to action rather than in shaping their ideas and identity (Lemieux et al.,2014,357), therefore enhancing the so-called lone-wolf jihad. Between 2010 and 2014, AQAP magazine continued to "inspire" and constitute the model for other jihadist publications. However, the emergence and rapid affirmation of the Islamic State (IS) as AQ's main competitor rapidly lead to the release of the caliphate's magazine "Dabiq", which inaugurated the third wave in online jihadist magazines. Although Inspire displayed a surprisingly modern format and language, Dabiq represented a revolution concerning content and, most importantly, graphics. As explained by Farwell (2014:49), "ISIS stands apart for its sophisticated use and understanding of social media to achieve its goals". Life in the territories controlled by the self-proclaimed caliphate was depicted in the magazine, emphasising aspects of daily life to enhance credibility and promote Hijra (migration) from the corrupted West to the lands of true Islam. At the same time, the brutality of IS actions against enemies and rival jihadist groups were portrayed using HD pictures of executions, together with charts and tables summarising the military achievements on the battlefield. In particular, graphics taken from the world of video games, portraying IS soldiers fully equipped and ready to the fight have created the "Call of Duty" effect, subsequently imported by all the other major rival magazines, including Inspire, Rumiya, and Jabhat Al-Nusra's Al-Risalah.

1.1 The 3 + 1 purposes of jihadists' English magazines

Enhancing radicalisation

Online jihadist magazines have proven an important medium for self-radicalisation, as demonstrated by their proliferation in the jihadist circles and the high number of downloads in the West. As identified by Siviek (2013:5), specialised magazines can create active communities around a common topic of interest, establishing a special empathy with the readers' community. Other strategies contribute to making the articles a useful tool for self-radicalisation: many authors focused on Dabiq and Inspire to highlight how each organisation strategically plays with in-group and out-group identity, rational choice models, as well as with value, dichotomy, and crisis reinforcing narratives (Ingram,2016:2). Similarly, Novenario (2016:954) identified five strategic logics of the jihadist publications as attrition, intimidation, provocation, spoiling, and outbidding. Shaping a new identity, favouring a sense of belonging to the group, and exclusion from the hostile Western social construct, constitute key objectives for jihadist propaganda and have been widely analysed by scholars. Particularly interesting for the goals of the present paper is Lemieux and Brachman's analysis on "Inspire", based on the Information-Motivation-Behavioral Skills (IMB) framework. The model contributes to explain the magazines' outstanding effectiveness in modifying the behaviour of a small number of vulnerable young Muslims and driving them to action (Lemieux and Brachman,2014:360). What the IMB framework suggests, is that "for information and motivation to influence actual behaviours, there must be a sufficient level of behavioural skills to allow someone to perform the behaviour in question" (Lemieux,2016:366). In fact, sections such as Inspire "Open-Source Jihad" - included in almost every contemporary jihadist magazine- not only train the wannabe terrorist to conduct the attack but lead the individual to action by empowering the subject's self-confidence. The message is "you can do it", providing statistics which support the idea of a high probability of success.

“DID YOU KNOW? That a TSA security officer is more likely to confiscate a water bottle than a BOMB? DHS undercover investigators managed to get weapons and bombs pass through airport security checkpoints. They succeeded in 67 out of the 70 tests conducted. A success rate of 95.7 %”. Inspire Issue n.14 (2015:60).

Other authors focused on how Inspire and Dabiq seek to shape the audience’s perception by providing an alternative system of values opposed to those of the societies they live in. In particular, Ingram (2016) analyses how content in Dabiq appeals to its readers by designing in-group identity, solution, and crisis constructs promoted via value, crisis and dichotomy-reinforcing narratives. In a successive publication, the author applies the same methodology to a comparative analysis between Inspire and Dabiq, highlighting the different strategies and communication techniques used by AQ and IS to shape their audiences’ systems of meanings, gain their support, and “radicalise them toward action” (Ingram,2017:362).

Providing operational guidance

Inspire and Dabiq have proven their direct impact not only by influencing their readers and leading them through the different stages of the radicalisation process but also by providing them with training and practical skills required to perpetrate attacks. Many of the previously cited magazines have been cited in several terrorist plots and terrorism investigations. Despite the escalation of violence in theatres such as Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, some groups and their respective magazines have remained highly focused on promoting and guiding lone-wolf jihad against the far enemy. It is the case of Al-Qaida and IS who, through their magazines, continued to provide their readers abroad with open source jihad guides and tactical analyses of successful operations, urging Muslims in Western societies to do the same. In particular, recent attacks in Europe show the systematic adoption of modus operandi that were included in several issues of Inspire and Dabiq. In fact, tactics and weapons suggested by past issues of various magazines became frequent protagonists in the terror campaign that has been increasingly targeting the West since 2015. For instance, while vehicle-ramming and the use of knives appear to constitute

recent developments in terrorists' tactics, these types of attacks were promoted in jihadist magazines years before their operational adoption. For instance, vehicles became one of the preferred weapons-of-choice for lone attackers in Europe since the Nice attack of 2016, which proved the extreme effectiveness of simple lone-wolf attacks (Maher,2017). The idea of using a pickup truck as a "mowing machine, not to mow grass but mow down the enemies of Allah" was included in al-Qaida's second issue of Inspire magazine, released in 2010 (Veilleux-Lepage,2017). Another consequence is that a successful operation, especially if widely covered in the media, gives confidence and inspiration to imitators who, by accessing the guides themselves, can replicate the attack (Maher,2017). Far from being the only significant factor, jihadist magazines have nevertheless played an important role in launching and alimending the sequence of low-scale attacks that have been characterising Europe since 2015. More recently, in 2016, both al-Qaida and IS through their English magazines had called for small-scale, frequent knife attacks in the West. The growing adoption of simpler tactics, although promoted via a wide variety of mediums, undoubtedly constitutes a dominant feature of Inspire, Dabiq and, most recently, Rumiya -the new magazine released by IS. To further prove the impact achieved by jihadist magazines' open source jihad sections, in June 2016 Al-Qaida started a new series of publications named "Inspire Guide". Each issue came following an attack in the West and constitutes of a detailed analysis of the operation, highlighting strengths and weaknesses of the choices made by the perpetrator, and providing new insights on how to achieve better results. As previously noted, jihadist magazines have often anticipated the use of certain tactics months or even years before their adoption. Although further research is required to assess the level of correlation between the promotion by magazines of certain tactics and their subsequent establishment as weapons-of-choice for terrorists, the evolution in operational and tactical trends appears to confirm the role of magazines in the adoption of certain modus operandi by lone-wolves. As a consequence, the systematic analysis of these propaganda items constitutes an incredibly valuable tool in the hands of policy-makers, security services, and law-enforcement agencies to predict the emergence of new tactics and better prepare for each eventuality.

Attracting foreign fighters

Despite the fact that most literature related to jihadist magazines' role in inspiring and guiding attacks in the West, this is far from being their sole scope. The conflict in Syria and the declaration of IS's caliphate in Iraq caused a dramatic increase in the phenomenon of foreign fighters, who left Arab and Western countries to join the civil wars in the Middle East (Dawson and Amarasingam,2016:191). It is estimated that, by 2014, about three thousand Western Muslims had filled the ranks of the mujahideen in Syria (Mishali-Ram,2017:1). If attracting foreign fighters has always constituted one of the first objectives of jihadist propaganda, the establishment of political control over territory by jihadist groups has increased a wider need for all kinds of professional figure: doctors, teachers and technicians, but also simply citizens to populate the newly established caliphate. Promoting Hijra⁴ and economic support for the groups' struggles in the lands of jihad have therefore become main features of certain magazines since 2012.

Many studies on radicalisation have used different methodologies and types of data to identify the key factors influencing the choices of those who decide to make Hijra and become foreign fighters. As highlighted by Dawson and Amarasingam (2016:206), scholars and experts have traditionally identified marginalisation and low socioeconomic status as two of the most significant motives driving the life-changing decision of foreign fighters. On the other hand, as the same authors highlight, the positive image associated to the figure of the mujahid and the subjects' extreme religious beliefs appear to overtake material limitations as the decisive factor in the radical choice of aspiring foreign fighters (Dawson and Amarasingam,2016:206). Although affinities can be identified in the way different magazines address potential recruits, significant differences characterise the communication techniques used and final purposes of the items. Some magazines stress the corruption of Western and apostate societies in opposition to the lands of jihad where Muslims can live according to a pure version of Islam. Others highlight the after-life rewards for the mujahid and the martyr, or stress the duty to protect brothers and sisters

⁴ Or "migration", term typically referring to Muhammad and his Companions' migration from Mecca to Medina in 622 C.E. It came to constitute one of the key duties promoted by jihadist groups in their promotion of jihad as a responsibility of the entire Ummah.

against the aggression of authoritarian apostate regimes or the Jewish and Christian “Crusaders”. In most cases, the propaganda output of major jihadist factions is the result of an interplay between all these motivations, but magazines tend to prioritise one or the other technique, emphasising either theological matters, emotions or rational-choice models. As a consequence, a systematic and structured analysis of jihadist magazines can shed more light on the complex and articulated dynamics of radicalisation, improving the understanding of the various narratives and communication strategies employed by jihadist organisations in order to better counter their message and the triggering factors behind the choice of foreign fighters or lone wolf terrorists.

Undermining rivals

As noted in Watts (2016), “terror groups bound to specific geographies must compete for fighters and money or fade from power”: as a direct result, some groups’ propaganda increasingly focused on undermining jihadist rivals operating in the same area. Along clashes on the battlefield, the conflict between jihadist competitors has increasingly characterised their propaganda. In this context, magazines have become a major medium through which radical groups seek to delegitimise each other and establish themselves as the champion of international jihad. Following the divorce between Al-Qaida and the Islamic State, propaganda online has increasingly been about undermining the legitimacy or success of the rival. In particular, while al-Qaida's propaganda war has revolved around the theological illegitimacy of al-Baghdadi's caliphate and the un-Islamic nature of its actions and doctrine, the Islamic State has highly focused on highlighting its preference for action and initiative in contrast to its rival’s old slumber. Additionally, the open-source nature of English language jihadist magazines makes them a potential instrument of diplomacy, a function largely neglected by researchers and commentators. On a local level, they can provide the target of their campaign of violence with a clear statement regarding their demands and political objectives, bringing together groups with similar ideologies or embracing a similar cause. On a global level, jihadists’ natural opposition to international diplomacy, magazines in English often constitute the only channel via which they can address the international community and model

the way they are viewed by regional and international state and non-state actors. This PR function of English language magazines makes them suitable for a wide variety of purposes: from attracting funds and weapons to de-escalate military efforts against the group and deceive external actors about their intentions or long-term strategic goals.

While the impact of online magazines in the radicalisation process has been widely analysed by academic research, less attention has been devoted to their role in the competition within the Global Jihadist Movement and their potential as tools for deception or international diplomacy.

Due to the characteristics highlighted, magazines constitute a powerful instrument through which the competition among jihadist actors can be analysed. Without ignoring more conventional approaches to research on jihadist propaganda, the present paper primarily aims at improving the understanding the often-downplayed role of magazines such as Al-Risalah in the analysis of intra-jihadist relationships and competition. With this objective in mind, Jabhat Al-Nusra's complex relation with IS and Al-Qaida makes its magazine Al-Risalah the ideal case study for the present work.

Chapter 2. Competition in the Global Jihadist Movement: Jabhat Al-Nusra⁵ between al-Qaida & the Islamic State

Since 2013, the rapid affirmation of the Islamic State challenged the supremacy of Al-Qaida as the uncontested leader of the so-called Global Jihadist Movement. In particular, IS's barbarism, rapid territorial expansion, and the declaration of a caliphate in Syria and Iraq presented the jihadist world with an appealing alternative to the old-fashioned gradualist approach adopted by Al-Qaida. In a moment when Al-Qaida was struggling to impose its leadership, IS inherited the role of jihadist superpower. This schism in the jihadist landscape prompted conflict between the two groups which took the form of armed clashes in Syria, and that of a "war of ideas" on a variety of online mediums, including English magazines. Although the term caliphate is immediately associated to the Islamic State, this is not the only group who made the political control over territory a key feature of its strategy. Another jihadist actor in Syria has rapidly established itself as a key player, attracting foreign fighters, foreign support, and establishing territorial control over some areas as a preliminary step for the creation of a regional Emirate. This actor is Jabhat Al-Nusra (JAN), formerly the Syrian branch of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) at the time of its establishment in 2012, before cutting ties with the group to become Al-Qaeda's affiliate in Syria. The group's dynamics, strategy, and history constitute an interesting example of the competition between rival jihadist organisations, each seeking to place itself at the forefront of the global jihadist movement. This rivalry between competitive jihadist models is traditionally monopolised by Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, with all the rest of the jihadist substratum assigned, based on affiliation or similarities, to either one or the other faction.

⁵ The name "Jabhat Al-Nusra" is here used to identify the group formerly affiliated with Al-Qaida, as well as its rebrandings Jabhat Fateh Al-Sham (JFS) and, more recently, Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS). This simplification follows from two interrelated issues. On the one hand JFS and HTS, although formally constituting alliances between many groups, have always been characterised by a strong JAN leadership. Concerning JFS, at the moment of its establishment Al-Nusra's leader Al-Jawlani took the role as its leader, stressing the group's dominant role in the military alliance; in a later development, JFS dissolved and HTS was created by JAN members together with the most extreme fringes of other groups, including Ahrar Al-Sham. On the other hand, the first two issues of the magazine Al-Risalah were released before the first rebranding into JFS, making the magazine a propaganda output directly linked to JAN.

Competing ideologies, narratives, and strategies between the Islamic State and Al-Qaida have been widely studied via their most popular magazines. With most of the previous literature focusing on Inspire or Dabiq, little attention has been devoted to other, more recent products published by local actors. For instance, Jabhat Al-Nusra released the first issue of its English magazine Al-Risalah in July 2015, one year after the first publication of Dabiq. Although the group does not enjoy the media coverage of Al-Qaida or the self-proclaimed caliphate, it reportedly constitutes the most powerful militant group fighting in the Syrian war against the Assad regime.

2.1 From the origins to the rebranding

Established as a Syrian wing of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) in 2011, the group improved its popular acceptance through a combination of military cooperation with branches of the Syrian opposition (Lister,2016a:62) and social programs within areas under their influence or control. Throughout 2012, JAN experienced a significant growth due to a combination of factors, including escalating violence in the country, the fragmentation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), and the consistent influx of foreign fighters and AQ leaders (Lister,2016a:12). The role played by the group in the Syrian civil war, and the affiliation with ISI resulted, the same year, in the inclusion of Jabhat Al-Nusra in the U.S. list of designated terrorist organisations. Towards the end of 2012, however, the group's successes and independent initiative became a source of concern for ISI leadership, worried that Al-Jawlani's organisation was on the verge to secede from the core organisation. A series of events escalated tensions between the two and, in April 2013, the refusal of Abu Muhammad Al-Jawlani -JAN leader at the time- to pledge allegiance to Al-Baghdadi resulted in the split from IS and the oath of fealty, or bay'a, given to al-Qaida's Shaikh Ayman Al-Zawahiri. The split from IS resulted in a drastic reduction of JAN's funding and the defection of many of its fighting force and was followed by several attacks launched by IS against Jabhat Al-Nusra positions and several assassination attempts targeting its leadership. Given JAN's early days, its evolution and establishment in Syria must be understood in the broader schism in the global jihadist movement between Al-Qaida and the Islamic State. To respond to IS's hostility and continuous expansion throughout 2014, JAN further strengthened

its ties with the mainstream Syrian opposition, increasing the dependence on other rebel groups on its military capabilities, while contemporarily hardening its ideological position to show its “Al-Qaida face” (Lister,2016a:15-16). In particular, Al-Jawlani’s group, in opposition to AQ’s traditional distrust of “nationalists”, successfully pursued a strategy of inclusion rather than conflict with other Islamic armed groups (Lister,2016:62). The leader’s strategic view of making friends and avoiding enemies is well exemplified by its leader in the very first article published on the first Al-Risalah.

“The groups in Jaish al-Fath are all Muslims, even if they differ somewhat with us. There are some groups which have some mistakes, we overlook those mistakes because of the enormous severity of the battles.” Abu Muhammad Fatih Al Jawlani, Al-Risalah Issue 1, p.2.

In spite of frequent violent escalations with its allies, the Syrian branch of AQ displayed a much more pragmatic approach, by seeking to unite ranks with the rebels. At the same time, high levels of fragmentation and poor external support provided to the secular Free Syrian Army (FSA) in combination the start of the Russian air campaign in 2015 facilitated JAN’s objective by making its military support essential to the other armed factions of the Syrian opposition operating in Northern Syria. In contrast to traditional al-Qaida's strategic doctrine, JAN established territorial presence and governance structures in Idlib, the Syrian city that constituted a first step for Al-Nusra’s emirate in Northern Syria. Although the group continued pushing for more extended integration within the framework of the military alliance Jaish Al-Fath, its affiliation with AQ constituted an obstacle for other Islamist armed groups such as Ahrar Al-Sham, concerned about the consequences of being associated to AQ by the international community.

On July 28, 2016, the group surprisingly announced cutting ties with Al-Zawahiri’s organisation, rebranding itself “Jabhat Fateh Al-Shaam”, incorporating a broad range of armed groups under the leadership of Al-Jawlani. The vast majority of experts and commentators interpreted the development as a mere PR strategy to escape Western airstrikes, attract more support from the Gulf and Turkey, and, most importantly, favour further integration with other Islamist factions.

In addition, with IS heading towards defeat in Iraq and Syria, AQ was allegedly worried that the U.S. would soon elevate its Syrian affiliate as its number-one target (Clarke,2017). Ahmed Hassan Abu al-Khayr, deputy of Al-Zawahiri publicly blessed the split as a way to ensure the preservation of Jabhat Al-Nusra's jihad in Syria (Chulov,2016). The words of AQ's deputy in Syria were widely interpreted as a formal endorsement to the rebranding, therefore nullifying its meaning. The constant references to Bin Laden and his organisation contribution to the jihadist cause supported the idea of the move as a merely opportunistic strategy designed in total agreement with AQ. Additionally, the alignment with JFS of the six groups supporting AQ has further corroborated the idea that nothing truly changed in Al-Nusra's ideology and strategic goals nor its relation with al-Qaida (Jones et al.,2016). As expected, the move did not result in significant changes in the way the international community saw JAN, which continued to be considered de facto an AQ affiliate. Nevertheless, if the announcement was perceived as "little more than window dressing" by the international community (Jones et al.,2016), in Syria it constituted a critical step towards the progressive absorption by JAN of sizeable fringes of the Syrian opposition. If, on the one hand, no change of attitude towards the group resulted from the decision, its importance in the medium-term for the composition of the Syrian armed opposition became soon evident. The Astana peace-talks⁶ in December-January 2016 apparently put the group's efforts and cohesion at risk: Jabhat Al-Nusra's influence and survival strictly rely on high levels of violence and the presence at the peace talks of many representatives for the rebels had the potential to undermine the group's position severely. Al-Jawlani reacted to the danger by pre-emptively attacking groups that intended to attend the talks, which led to a confrontation with Ahrar Al-Sham, the other major Salafist armed group. Clashes erupted among jihadists in and around Idlib and resulted, in January 2017, in the dismemberment of Jabhat Fateh Al-Sham and the creation of a new entity, Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS), composed by Al-Nusra, splinter ranks of Ahrar Al-Sham -estimated in

⁶ See Al Jazeera, Russia, Turkey, Iran discuss Syria ceasefire in Astana, Al Jazeera News, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/02/russia-turkey-iran-syria-ceasefire-astana-170206080423207.html>

about one thousand defectors-, and a plethora of other smaller armed factions such as Nour al-Din al-Zenki, Ansar al-Din, Liwa al-Haq, and Jaish al-Sunna. The new rebranding, as highlighted by experts and confirmed by developments on the ground, showed the unity of the jihadist hard-liners in opposition to the rest of the armed opposition. Due to the lack of external support, the regime offence backed by the Russian air campaign, and high levels of internal fragmentation, high shares of the armed opposition either dissolved or had to merge with the Jabhat Al-Nusra-led new military alliance. In February 2017, militants from U.S.-backed rebel groups operating in the area reported that Al-Qaida was “eating” them, controlling every aspect of life, including mosques and schools and that its ideology is spreading everywhere (Zakaria and Sly,2017). Nonetheless, JAN’s aggression against Ahrar Al-Sham and escalating violence to enforce its authority in Idlib prompted a plethora of armed groups belonging to JFS to take the side of Ahrar Al-Sham for protection, as well as increasing social unrest in cities and villages under its control. The JAN-led coalition was labelled Khawarij (extremist) by The Syrian Islamic Council, which openly called for Syrians to fight the group and, by the end of February, the Arabic acronym Hetesh started being used to call Hay’at Tahrir Al-Sham (Lister,2017b:25-26).

2.2 Jabhat Al-Nusra and the al-Qaida franchise

An affiliate is defined as “an organisation that is connected with or controlled by another, usually larger, organisation” (Cambridge Dictionary). In the case of jihadist groups, it is an independent actor that officially embraces the core’s brand, leadership, and ideology. As Byman (2014:431) argued “al Qaeda seeks affiliates to expand the scope and scale of its operations, gain the benefits of greater local expertise, better spread innovations, and—most important—endow itself and its mission with greater legitimacy”. Nevertheless, the relationship between AQ Core and its affiliates, despite presenting some benefits, is often plagued with problems and challenges. In particular, by applying organisational perspectives from the field of economics, Byman identified a set of factors that downsize the affiliates’ value to the parent organisation. These variables include divergent preferences and strategic

priorities, costly control mechanisms, and branding problems (Byman,2014:433). AQ's problems in managing affiliates became increasingly manifested following 9/11 and the killing of Osama Bin Laden in 2011. With the organisation being increasingly decentralised, a more flexible character, weak connection with affiliates and ideological leadership allowed the organisation to evolve and survive emerging challenges (Turner,2014:209), at the expense of organisational capability and oversight of its subordinates. Some affiliates have taken on the formal AQ label (Byman,2014:436) following the oath of fealty given to Al-Zawahiri. It is the case of Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and Al-Qaida in Iraq, before splitting from the parent and rebranding itself Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). Other jihadist groups, including Ansar Al-Din in Mali, Ansar Al-Sharia in Tunisia, and Boko Haram (before joining the Islamic State) in Nigeria, the Taliban and Haqqani Network in Pakistan and Afghanistan, share ideological traits and strong cooperation on the ground with AQ without pledging allegiance to the Core (Byman,2014:436). On the other hand, JAN, similarly to its Somalian sibling Al-Shabab, constitutes a third type of affiliate as it formally pledged allegiance to Ayman Al-Zawahiri without including the Al-Qaida label in its name and keeping an independent organisational structure. The relationship between the parent organisation and the affiliate should entail mutual benefit and competitive advantage for both. In the case of AQ and JAN, the former strengthened its image and global presence in a critical moment when the rapid affirmation of the Islamic State largely eroded its power and appeal. Conversely, JAN greatly benefited from the AQ umbrella by receiving funding, tactical and operational training, and by reaching more and skilled recruits attracted to Syria by AQ's "global brand". All considered, JAN enjoyed substantial support and freedom of action due to the difficult situation of AQ in the early stages of the affiliation. In 2013, the split of ISI, constituted a significant blow to the core brand and saw the defection of high numbers of fighters to the new-born Islamic State. Al-Qaida needed Jabhat Al-Nusra as much as Al-Nusra needed its parent's umbrella: however, mutual need is often not sufficient for good partnerships to continue. As Byman, shows in his research, the combination of preference diversion and weak command and control often creates increasing tensions in the relationship parent-affiliate: as

he pointed out by referencing studies on business mergers, in the long term more than half of acquisitions do not meet the subjects' expectations, prompting the failure of about three quarters of franchises (Byman,2014:444). The reason for the low-rate of success is often identified in the unbalanced distribution of gains, which most of the time are one-sided and benefit the affiliate. According to the same author, preference diversion constitutes a particularly significant problem for umbrella organisations in their relationship with the affiliates who often retain their original, localised goals (Byman,2014:454). Although his research did not include the case of Jabhat Al-Nusra, the identified obstacles and problems related to the core – affiliate relationship also applies for the Syrian group. In particular, the problems with preference diversion and weak command and control structures appear to constitute sources of increasing tensions between JAN and AQ's leadership. Although the split from its parent was widely considered as a mere PR strategy, the long-lasting local agenda pursued by Jabhat Al-Nusra and its attempt to establish and maintain political control over territory appear to be progressively broadening the distance between the two groups' strategic views. As noticed by Charles Lister (2017), Al-Qaida is growing exasperated by its former Syrian affiliate, as Al-Nusra appears to have progressively distanced itself from the core's guidance in terms of organisational structure, practices, strategic vision (Lister,2017a). In a video message released in April 2017, AQ leader Al-Zawahiri strengthened the idea that the mujahideen in Syria must avoid turning the conflict into a merely nationalistic effort limited to Syria and that they should focus instead on a "guerrilla" war against the enemies rather than establishing control and hold territory (Joscelyn,2017). At the time of writing, the video constitutes the latest, though probably not the last, of a series of attempts made by AQ Core throughout 2016 and 2017 to guide Jabhat Al-Nusra's campaign in Syria and bring the group back under its control (Lister, 2017).

2.3 Jabhat Al-Nusra's magazine Al-Risalah

Four issues of the magazine have been published between July 2015 and January 2017. The first issue of Al-Risalah was labelled the "official magazine of the

Mujahideen in Bilad Ash Shaam” and its origin was immediately traced back to JAN. However, while smaller groups or local affiliates have generally relied on less sophisticated publications in the local language, English language magazines have largely constituted the exclusive product of leading transnational groups such as al-Qaida and, more recently, IS. In this monopoly, Al-Risalah constitutes the first example to date of a well refined magazine in English published by an AQ regional affiliate.

The editor’s note introduced the name of the magazine as “the letter” and listed the core objectives of the publication: presenting the readers with a “clear presentation of Islam”, “credible and reliable news from the land of Shaam, primarily on Syria”, and dispelling “from the minds of the Muslims some of the mistaken notions and doubts promoted by the kuffar, hypocrites and deviant groups... who aim to distort and destroy the clear and pure message of Islam and Jihad in the way of Allah”. As stated in the introductory section, the magazine, that is not published directly by Al-Qaida nor affiliated with “Inspire”, admittedly focuses mainly on reporting local issues related to the struggle of the mujahideen against the apostate regime of Bashar Al-Assad.

In comparison to other magazines released by regional militant groups and other AQ affiliates, Al-Risalah displays a sleek and sophisticated design that reminds that of the Islamic State’s Dabiq and even outdoes Al-Qaida’s Inspire. Structured and detailed articles describe the group’s ideology, support the group’s efforts, celebrate the Mujahideen, and undermine enemies as well as rivals, while catchy ads and graphics provide auxiliary power to the message. The publication of JAN’s magazine was widely interpreted as AQ’s way to revitalise its reputation as the leader of the global jihadist movement in reaction to the successes of the Islamic State on the ground and online (Hoffman and Schweitzer,2015)(Religion and geopolitics,2015). Nevertheless, in spite of Al-Risalah’s high editorial quality and its exceptionalism in comparison to other localised groups’ magazines, this has not earned it a proportionate level of attention in the media, policy-making, and academia.

Chapter 3. Research Goals & Methodology

3.1. Research Goals

As evidenced by Marta Crenshaw (1987:22), the competitive nature of the environment in which terrorist groups operate lead them to confront rivals with similar ideologies or political objectives: some examples the author highlighted include the competition between the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the Irish National Liberation Army; the Red Brigades and Prima Linea in Italy, Fatah and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PLO). Likewise, this inherently conflictual context can be observed in the global jihadist movement.

With the competition among jihadist models monopolised by Al-Qaida and IS, traditional approaches to research on jihadism tend to over-simplify the categorisation by assigning the remaining jihadist substratum to either one or the other faction. Nonetheless, JAN, traditionally considered a mere extension of AQ in Syria, appears to stand out of this categorisation by presenting characteristics that potentially make it an alternative “jihadi pathway”. The idea is well summarised by the following statement:

"We're just calling it Al Qaeda or ISIS, but I think we'll see the emergence of a third, which is taking bits and pieces of Al Qaeda and ISIS, trying to do state-building without crazy violence and trying to live in Al Qaeda's image without having the Al Qaeda label...So there will be the third generation of something, and it'll be harder, actually, for the West to counter." Watts (2016)

As previously evidenced, online magazines often provide useful and more detailed insights into the ideology, strategy, and agenda of jihadists that can be used to better frame the group's stance within the constellation of jihadist movements and factions. With most literature focusing on more popular magazines such as AQ's "Inspire" or IS's "Dabiq", little attention has been devoted to the English language magazines from localised affiliates such as JAN's Al-Risalah. Two main reasons appear behind the lack of attention devoted to the magazine. On the one hand, the monopolisation of the jihadist sphere by Al-Qaida and IS inevitably affects research on jihadist groups by

channelling the attention of policy-makers, scholars, and public almost exclusively into the propaganda material of the two dominant factions. On the other hand, the lower level of interest enjoyed by the magazine can be explained by the significantly higher amount of material published by AQ and IS. While these groups' publications count dozens of issues released on a semi-regular basis, Al-Risalah was first published in July 2015 and constitutes of about 250 pages divided among four issues. The limited amount of material released and the quite variable frequency of the publications, therefore, might be a second factor behind the lack of extensive research on the subject. Nevertheless, the nature of Al-Risalah as JAN's manifesto, together with the outstanding editorial quality of the publication make it a particularly interesting subject of analysis to improve the knowledge on the group and its relation with AQ and IS.

The present research pursues two primary objectives via a content analysis of JAN's Al-Risalah magazine: identifying the key characteristics of JAN's propaganda and strategy, and assessing the connection strength and affinity/hostility between jihadist networks locally and globally.

On the one hand, qualitative content analysis of a wide range of factors highlights dominant themes, communication techniques and targets, allowing the identification of the key characteristics of JAN propaganda and strategy in comparison to the two jihadist champions. In this section, Jabhat Al-Nusra's conflictual relation with IS, its view of a caliphate as well as its source of legitimisation and authority are analysed in order to assess whether or not the original affiliation to Al-Baghdadi's ISI has left a permanent mark on the development of its own strategic view. Although hostility and conflict erupted between JAN and IS shortly after its proclamation, the emphasis on territorial control as the first step for the establishment of the caliphate is something the two seem to share. The idea, to be tested via the systematic examination of the magazine's content, communication, and main purposes, is that the two groups still present significant strategic similarities dating back to the time when JAN constituted the Syrian avant-garde of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI).

Conversely, the total identification of JAN with its parent organisation AQ is here challenged through an analysis of the group's outreach, targets, and message in Al-Risalah. Organisational approaches to terrorism stressed how conspiratorial organizations like Al-Qaida can be more sensitive to internal

disagreement than to defection (Crenshaw,1987:23). More recently, Byman (2014) employed organisation theories to study the relationship between AQ and its affiliates: in particular, by applying a business model of mergers and acquisitions, the author identifies incentives to affiliations as well as problems and challenges that often lead to the failure of franchises. Among others, preference diversion and weak command and control as the two key challenges that cause acquisitions to fail. The magazine Al-Risalah is analysed in order to detect whether evidence of these problems emerge from the magazine's pages. The hypothesis is that, in spite of a strong ideological affiliation, significant differences in terms strategic view and targets exist and can be detected in the magazine. In particular, the local nature of JAN and its focus on territorial control seem to constitute source of increasing consternation among Al-Qaida's senior leadership, increasingly nervous about their Syrian affiliate's nationalistic drift. The second level of analysis is focused on measuring the strength and sentiment of JAN's connection with IS and AQ and is pursued via a page-based reference intensity and sentiment analysis related to each of the group. References to IS and AQ in Al-Risalah are coded with scores describing the intensity of the connection and its sentiment. As a result, a Connection Strength Index (CSI) for references to each group is calculated and can be used to assess how close is JAN to Al-Qaida and IS.

Overall, the two-layers analysis allows to better frame Jabhat Al-Nusra's position within the global jihadist movement, stressing the level of proximity of the group's strategy and ideology to these of IS and Al-Qaida. The results of the analysis are used to assess whether content in Al-Risalah is consistent with the hypothesis of JAN's destiny as a jihadi hybrid characterised by hostility towards IS while partly adopting its strategic view and, in spite of ideological affinities, progressively disconnected from Al-Qaida due to preference diversion and loose command and control. Among other factors and indicators, English magazines such as Al-Risalah constitute an ideal instrument to monitor the ideology and strategic evolution of jihadist organisations and potential changes in their mutual relationships.

Jabhat Al-Nusra's pragmatic strategy is likely to survive in Syria, especially given the unlikely eventuality of an imminent resolution of the conflict. Fed by the violence in the country, the group is probably here to stay and grow stronger

and, although currently focused exclusively on fighting the Assad regime, it is likely to remain loyal to a transnational jihadist agenda. It is therefore paramount to consistently and systematically monitor the evolution of the group's narrative, communication, and strategy not as a mere subaltern of Al-Qaida, but as a potentially free-standing subject. Improving the understanding of the group as a third-way between IS and Al-Qaida constitutes a fundamental requisite to produce better conflict resolution strategies in Syria, and be prepared should the group's bull's eye move back to the far enemy. As proven by the shock caused by the emergence of IS as a more radical and active alternative than Al-Qaida, revolutionary changes in the global jihadist movement can go undetected in spite of warning signals. With the public discourse monopolised by the IS-AQ dichotomy, the present research stands out as a wake-up-call to avoid a dangerous oversimplification and to rethink the jihadist landscape as a complex galaxy of groups, strategies, and ideologies.

3.2. Methodology

3.2.1. Qualitative Content Analysis of Al-Risalah Magazine.

The four issues of Al-Risalah released to date were collated through jihadology.com, a popular clearinghouse of jihadist primary sources widely used by researchers and experts. Mayring (2013) describes qualitative content analysis as a set of techniques for the systematic analysis of a wide variety of textual products, focused on key themes and ideas found in texts. Schreier (2014b) stated that qualitative content analyses allow data reduction via the analytic use of descriptive categories or themes in order to summarise and highlight key content. These features make qualitative content analysis similar to thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1988). Although labelled with different names, methods for coding descriptive themes adopted by Saldaña (2009) present similar characteristics to those defined by Mayring (2013) and Schreier (2012) as qualitative content analysis. For this reason, although summarising meaning in data is the focus of both thematic analysis and qualitative content analysis, thematic analysis can be seen, according to Drisko and Maschi (2015), as an embryonic stage of qualitative content analysis.

While quantitative analytical tools such as network analysis and data mining certainly constitute unparalleled tools in understanding how violent content and extremist propaganda is spread on the internet, their performance appears modest in describing how content and communication strategies are shaped by VEOs in order to persuade their audience and achieve their objectives (Wignell et.al.,2017:3). Among the existing methods available, qualitative content analysis constitutes the most suitable option for the present project. While the research method is probably not an excellent tool for theory development, its characteristics make it the perfect instrument for the descriptive and comparative aims of the present work. As Weber (1990:12) stated, “a central idea in content analysis is that the many words of the text are classified into much fewer categories.” Content analysis is a widely-adopted methodology for empirically identifying and analysing themes or other factors in communication: the method allows a large amount of data to be examined in a systematic way, helping simplifying and categorising it. By detailing the proportion of text devoted to a certain theme or use of different communication strategies, the method supports the identification of recurrent themes and allows evaluative comparisons, a feature that earned it a relevant role in previous studies on jihadist propaganda.

Qualitative content analysis is used in order to identify dominant themes in the articles of Al-Risalah. Following Schreier’s (2014) three uses of qualitative content analysis in research designs, the present research will make use of this type of analysis for evaluation and comparative designs. On the one hand, analysing recurrent themes and topics within Al-Risalah allows the identification and evaluation of the group’s message, narrative, and can provide useful insights into the way it sees its enemies or allies, and its future strategies. The themes, targets, types of message, and purposes emerging from the content analysis of the magazine are examined in relation to the two leading jihadist groups in order to examine whether the theorised hybrid nature of Jabhat Al-Nusra is mirrored in its online manifesto. Ingram’s comparative analysis of Inspire and Dabiq provides a useful framework for the analysis of jihadist magazines.

Statements, paragraphs and articles are coded according to certain coding categories, each identified in order to successfully provide an answer to a

specific research question. As presented in Drisko, Maschi (2015:107), a combination of inductive and deductive code-creation can benefit qualitative content analysis. For the purpose of the present research, a set of expected recurrent themes, strategies, and targets were inductively identified prior to the coding phase and then deductively reviewed in order to better classify the content emerged in the magazine. Shaped on the model used, amongst others, by Novenario (2016), coded categories are employed to classify each article. While Novenario's classification was guided by the five strategies theorised by Kydd and Walter -namely Attrition, intimidation, provocation, spoiling, and outbidding- the present research applies to different factors useful to decipher the characteristics of the group's messaging, ideology and strategy. Coding frequencies from the magazine are extracted using QDA Miner Lite, a "free-to-use qualitative data analysis software package for coding textual data, annotating, retrieving, and reviewing coded data in the selected documents" (Provalis).

The coding categories identified for the present research comprise of:

a. Group outreach: Local vs. Global Focus

The code divides text-segments according to "Local" or "Global focus"⁷. As a result of its limited outreach, the group received less attention than other jihadist rivals such as IS or Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Analysing the group's dominant focus would allow to better circumscribe Jabhat AL-Nusra's outreach, a key feature in framing the group's strategy in relation to Al-Qaida's and IS transnational nature. Despite an operational focus that is inherently limited on the local struggle in Syria, the traditional relation between Al-Qaida and local affiliates entails that consistent portions of content are expected to be related to a transnational context to mirror its parent's focus on the far enemy.

⁷ Given that Jabhat Al-Nusra's presence is limited to Syria, articles related to areas of operations of other Al-Qaida affiliates are classified as "Global". On the other hand, given IS's extensive territorial presence worldwide, articles related to areas where IS controls territories or has significant extremely presence -Iraq, Syria, Libya, Philippines, Afghanistan- are classified as "local jihad".

b. Distribution of Value and Dichotomy-reinforcing messages.

One of the central purposes of jihadist propaganda is the establishment and promotion of an alternative system of meanings that shapes the targeted audience's perception of the group's values, ideology, and mission. As Berger (2017:2) noted, the system of meaning generally describes a crisis afflicting an in-group, which is caused by an out-group. Jihadist magazines commonly share several characteristics with other subversive systems of meanings: as seen in research on Nazi propaganda, the psychology of the masses theory "explains group behaviour in terms of ingroup cohesion, feelings of superiority and a decreased sense of individuality" (Kohl,2011:7). This code category classifies text according to the same interpretive framework for radical narrative analysis, which explains how radical narratives strategically design in-group identity, solution, out-group identity (Other) and crisis constructs (Ingram,2016:462). Therefore, by classifying messages into value, dichotomy- and crisis reinforcing narratives, it is possible to understand how radical narratives are used to create identity constructs that drive audiences towards support and engagement in the group's cause (Ingram,2016:462). Value-reinforcing messages strengthen in-group identity by highlighting the innate positive traits and actions of the in-group. This type of message, rather than undermining enemies, is aimed at portraying the group's struggle as legitimate and just. On the other hand, dichotomy-reinforcing messages aim at strengthening the opposition with the out-group -not necessarily the primary enemy- seen as the cause of the crisis affecting the in-group. Although VEOs make extensive use of a combination of both message types, analysing proportions between the types of messages used by different groups allows to identify how they address and seek to persuade their audience. Secondly, given the aim of the present research, assessing parallelisms and differences between the communication techniques used by Jabhat Al-Nusra from those employed by IS and AQ highlighted by Ingram can constitute another factor to more accurately identify the group's stance between the two divorced parents.

c. Targets of dichotomy-reinforcing messages.

The code aims at identifying the main targets of dichotomy-reinforcing messages. As explained during the introduction, jihadist magazines have at times revealed future intentions and anticipated trends in the groups' activities locally as well as globally. By observing changes in the preferred targets in jihadist propaganda articles, it is possible to detect and predict future developments before they materialise. At the same time, comparing the targets preferred targets among different groups' magazines allows to draw conclusions or support assumptions regarding the affinity between their strategic views. Dichotomy reinforcing messages are here divided into four different targets, namely, Assad regime, Jihadist competitor (IS), Far Enemy⁸, Apostate regimes, and other Muslims. The aim of this classification is to identify key targets of the group in order to highlight priorities, the audience of its messages, and support the identification of the final purpose of the propaganda effort. While pursuing their own goals on the ground, jihadist affiliates of umbrella organisations such as Al-Qaida ostensibly take on the core's anti-American and anti-Western agenda of the parent (Byman,2014:449), in order to continue attracting funding, and strengthen the belonging to the popular "jihadi brand". In spite of an inherently local focus, JAN' affiliation with AQ and Al-Risalah's nature as the group's manifesto make it reasonable to expect significant proportions of content to directly threaten the West, as it appears in Inspire.

d. Dominant purpose of the article.

Defined as "information, ideas, opinions, or images, often only giving one part of an argument, that are broadcast, published, or in some other way spread with the intention of influencing people's opinions" (Cambridge Dictionary), propaganda, in all of its various forms, has traditionally been focused around one or more objectives. As propaganda mediums, magazines' articles are also designed to achieve a specific goal. Assessing the dominant purposes of Al-Risalah's articles can provide useful insights on the use the group makes of the online magazine and its strategic priorities. The different purposes are classified according to the following codes:

⁸ The code "Far Enemy" includes Western democracies and, more in general, secular models of societies and their values.

1) *Incite Attacks Abroad*: the code classifies articles encouraging direct engagement in violent activities in the West or providing operational guidance to perpetrate terrorist attacks.

2) *Undermine Enemies*: includes articles aimed at highlighting the corrupted nature of the group's enemies and their hostility towards the Muslim community. While heavily focused on a victimisation of the Muslim community in locally and worldwide, the code does not include articles that are calling for attacks.

3) *Undermine Rivals* (other jihadist groups): given the propaganda war within the jihadi landscape, the code groups articles aimed at eroding the legitimacy and popularity of rival jihadist groups.

4) *Promote Hijra / Financial Support*: identified as one of the main objectives of jihadist groups operating in Syria, this code includes articles that are explicitly or subtly encouraging Muslims abroad to join the Mujahideen in their struggle against the Syrian regime.

5) *Educate on Theological/Ideological Matters*: magazines constitute the ideal medium for VEOs to better promote their ideas and have therefore often constituted a quasi-manifesto of their ideology and interpretation of Islam. The present section includes articles aimed at explicitly educating their audience regarding specific theological matters and religious practices linked to the group's ideology.

As previously mentioned, the publication of online magazines in English published by jihadist groups clearly address audiences in the West, especially potential new recruits. Al-Qaida's and the Islamic State's English publications are known to be especially oriented against the far enemy, inspiring and providing guidance for potential recruits able to perpetrate attacks in the West. Electronic copies of Inspire and Dabiq were found in possession of a significant number of individuals linked to terror attacks or plots. Given the relation commonly established between Al-Qaida and its regional branches, the affiliate's propaganda effort tends to be aligned with that of the parent, therefore displaying a unified view and final purpose. In particular, Al-Qaida is traditionally committed to ensure that its proxies maintained the global focus that characterise its agenda and brand. As a consequence, Jabhat Al-Nusra is expected to devote significant portions of its magazine to inciting attacks abroad while undermining the far enemy and strengthening its bond with its parent's

core values, ideology, and long-term agenda. In order to improve the descriptive and comparative performance of the research, the frequency data related to articles' purposes in Al-Risalah is compared to these related to issues of Al-Qaida's Inspire and IS's Rumiya magazines released in the same time-frame (July 2015 - January 2017).

3.2.2. Page-Based Intensity and Sentiment Analysis of references to IS and AQ in Al-Risalah

In addition to the textual and visual content analysis, the frequency and intensity of text, images and graphics related to IS or Al-Qaida are also analysed via the recording of direct references to the groups, their symbols and banners, key personalities and ideology. Each page of Al-Risalah is assigned with a score related to intensity and sentiment of the relationship with IS and AQ. By analysing the overall scores related to each issue it becomes become feasible to assess with more accuracy the connection between JAN and the two jihadist champions in terms of both intensity and nature (positive or negative). On the one hand, results can better display the intensity of the hostility towards Al-Baghdadi's group as it appears in textual and graphic content. Secondly, monitoring the frequency, type, and intensity of references to the parent organisation AQ can provide further evidence regarding the level of intensity of parent-affiliate relationship and allow the detection of warning signs related to preference diversion and loose control. In order to better measure the type of relation (positive/negative) and the intensity of the link (weak/strong) suggested by the code, scores ranging from 0 to 1 are assigned to each page. As a consequence, the average score for each factor can be analysed in order to assess the type and intensity of JAN's links with AQ and IS in the overall magazine as well as their evolution overtime. The following tables summarises the way scores are assigned to each score in relation to the two factors investigated:

SCORE	Link Intensity & Frequency	Description
0	Very Weak / Non-Existent	No reference to the group is included or references to the group are so rare and implicit that can be hardly detectable.
0.25	Weak	References to the group are rare, rather implicit and indirect. Examples include quotes

		from Islamic Scholars with links to the group, or isolated references to other affiliates.
0.5	Medium	References to the group emerge although they are not extremely frequent and do not constitute a prominent theme. Examples include isolated references to names of prominent figures of the organisations considered.
0.75	Strong	Reference to the group is easily identifiable and constitutes a significant portion of the message delivered. Examples include the combination of different references to the groups considered, either in images or textual content.
1	Very Strong	References to the group are frequent, explicit, and constitute the dominant portion of the message delivered. This section includes articles or images clearly referring to the organisations and their leaders, either to stress the connection with them or to openly criticise them. Examples include, for instance, pictures of popular AQ and IS leaders or symbols, including flags and logos.

FIGURE 1- REFERENCE INTENSITY TABLE

Score	Sentiment	Description
0	Very negative	Includes open critiques against the group, its leadership, actions, and legitimacy together with threats and declarations of hostility.
0.25	Negative	Includes open critiques against the group, its leadership, actions, and legitimacy. The attitude towards the group, however, is defensive, aimed at displaying the injustices perpetrated by the group against Al-Nusra and fellow Muslims.
0.5	Neutral	No evidence of positive or negative attitude towards the group.
0.75	Positive	Includes messages or images indirectly stressing the positive values of the group and its followers/leaders.
1	Very Positive	Includes messages explicitly stressing the positive values of the group, its leaders and followers.

FIGURE 2-REFERENCE SENTIMENT TABLE

Intensity and sentiment of references to IS and AQ in Al-Risalah are widely analysed in relation to the totality of the magazine in order to describe JAN's closeness with IS and its parent AQ. In particular, as a way to more clearly assess and depict the connection strength between JAN and the two groups displayed by content in the magazine, an index is calculated for both IS and AQ. This index, named "*Connection Strength Index*" constitutes of a weighted

numeric value between intensity and proportion of references in each magazine. The examination of connection strength indexes values for AQ and IS provides further evidence to assess whether JAN can be directly associated to AQ in opposition to IS, or if the progressively fainting connection between parents and affiliates theorised by Byman is corroborated in Al-Risalah.

The evaluation of combined results for the qualitative content analysis and connection strength constitutes the final steps in order to assess whether evidence from Jabhat Al-Nusra's magazine Al-Risalah are compatible or not with a characterisation of Jabhat Al-Nusra as a hybrid jihadist group that cannot be simplistically defined according to its hostility towards IS nor to its affiliation with Al-Qaida.

Chapter 4: Qualitative Content Analysis of Al-Risalah

The qualitative content analysis of the magazine Al-Risalah constitutes the first of two levels of the present study aimed at describing the propaganda effort of Jabhat Al-Nusra, and better locating the group within the global jihadist movement. Through the examination of codes' retrievals related to group's outreach, type and targets of messages, and article purposes, the present section provides useful insights on the JAN's ideological and strategic affinities and differences with the Islamic State and Al-Qaida. With the magazine widely considered as a reaction against IS, the present research examines how Al-Baghdadi's group is depicted, how strong is the hostility against it, and what are the main points of friction that prompted the split and the ensuing conflict between the two jihadist competitors. At the same time, given JAN's origin as the avant-garde of ISI to Syria, articles related to IS are meticulously examined to detect evidence of affinities dating back to the common past.

On the other hand, statistics derived from the systematic analysis of content in Al-Risalah are used to identify signs of potential friction between JAN and its parent Al-Qaida. With preference diversion identified by Byman (2014) as one of the two main challenges that cause franchises to fail, the messages' types, targets, and purposes are analysed in order to assess whether JAN's vision is compatible with that of its parent, or consistent with the hypothesis of strategic or ideological disagreements as potential hindrances in the parent-affiliate relationship.

4.1. Group Outreach- Global vs. Local Focus

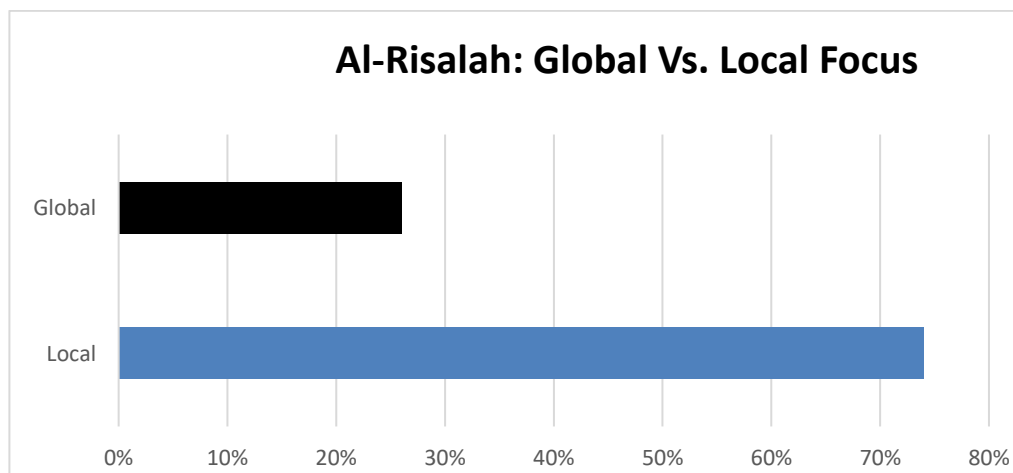


FIGURE 3- AL-RISALAH FOCUS

As evidenced in the methodology, a systematic analysis of the magazine's outreach can support the identification of key features of Jabhat Al-Nusra, as well as highlight differences in the strategic view from its allies and competitors. Jihadist magazines in English are transnational by nature: they address audiences in the West to persuade them to get involved in a wide variety of reasons: by making Hijra and becoming foreign fighters, by supporting the group financially, or via direct attacks against the far enemy. The global nature of the jihadist struggle is stressed in the pages of English magazines as a key strategy to engage and mobilise young Western Muslims. This trend is further emphasised in the propaganda output of localised affiliates of transnational groups. As evidenced by Byman (2014) smaller local insurgents tend to stress their association to bigger and more popular jihadist groups, exploiting their successful brand to attract recruits and external support for their cause. The incentives for joining a terrorist franchise, especially one that is already established and of known character as AQ, include a variety of gains: the membership to a group, acquisition of social status and reputation, sense of comradeship or excitement, or material gains. In this context, English magazines such as Al-Risalah constitute the essential medium through which the membership of the global jihadist movement is flaunted. In spite of an actually limited intention to target infidels worldwide, magazines released by local affiliates tend to include large portions of content related to their parent organisation's global activities, targets, and symbols. For instance, the link to AQ is commonly stressed in the propaganda outlet of its affiliates by recalling popular successes against the far enemy. Pictures, articles and statements related to 9/11 or other recent major attacks in the West, AQ leaders, religious figures, and key personalities such as Osama Bin Laden, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, the Mullah Omar, or Anwar Al-Awlaki, together with updates concerning the activities of other affiliates worldwide.

In contrast to what one can expect from a member of a transnational organisation, the analysis of content included in Al-Risalah shows a clear dominance of local focus, with about 80% of content confined to issues regarding the Syrian conflict and the mujahideen involved in it. The remaining 20% of retrieved textual segments mainly concern the struggle of Sunni

Muslims in Somalia, Nigeria, Yemen, and Iraq, past successes of the mujahideen in Afghanistan or Iraq, or general criticism of Western democracies. Surprisingly, no references to AQ's recent or past global operations can be detected in Al-Risalah's articles.

“The Prophet when he was asked to choose between Ash-Shaam, Iraq and Yemen for Abdullah ibn Hawala, he said: “Go to Shaam” as it is the best land of Allah and it's where He gathers his chosen slaves”. Al-Risalah Issue n. 1 p.21.

“Why Shaam? It's a war zone, we witness children, women, and men dying everyday. Could you not find any place better?”. Al-Risalah Issue n. 1 p.14.

Two alternative explanations can be identified for the choice. Those who firmly believe in the total identification of JAN with AQ would argue that Al-Risalah's localised focus constitutes another component of the groups' PR strategy to deceive other rebel factions and the international community and favour a more compliant attitude towards the Syrian jihadist group. According to this interpretation, JAN's choices, including those related to its propaganda output would either be made in total agreement or directly dictated by AQC leadership. Nevertheless, al-Qaida's loose command and control structures, the high level of autonomy enjoyed by its affiliates, and JAN's establishment and growth, make it extremely complicated for Al-Qaida to manage or strongly influence its subsidiary's actions and propaganda.

The second interpretation, on the contrary, emphasises the overwhelming local focus of the magazine as an indicator of increasing preference diversion between JAN and AQ. In particular, content in Al-Risalah corroborates AQ's fears, emerged in Al-Zawahiri's video of April 2017, of a nationalist drift of the jihadist struggle in Syria. This is not to argue that JAN has entirely given up the global jihadist movement to become an exclusively Syrian actor: nevertheless, with the Syrian conflict likely to continue well beyond the defeat of IS, JAN's preferences in Al-Risalah suggest the intention to continue rejecting AQ's primary focus on the far enemy. Instead, the frequent references to Al-Nusra's social role in the administered areas well represent the different strategic view of the group, whose priority is to establish and maintain control

over territory as a first step for the establishment of a caliphate in Syria. The focus on establishing political control over territory as a strategic priority constitutes another difference from AQ's vision, focused more on the military struggle against the government in the form of guerrilla warfare. As evidenced by Al-Zawahiri's video-message, which did not explicitly address Jabhat Al-Nusra, Al-Qaida's leader emphasised the need to continue bleeding the enemy by destroying its morale and refrain from being deceived by the West into considering the Syrian jihad as a merely national struggle instead of as a part of a global cause for the Muslim Ummah. AL-Zawahiri's rebuke, therefore, is not consistent with the hypothesis of Al-Risalah as an AQ puppet used as an instrument to deceive the international community and local non-jihadist armed groups.

4.2. Distribution of messages in Al-Risalah

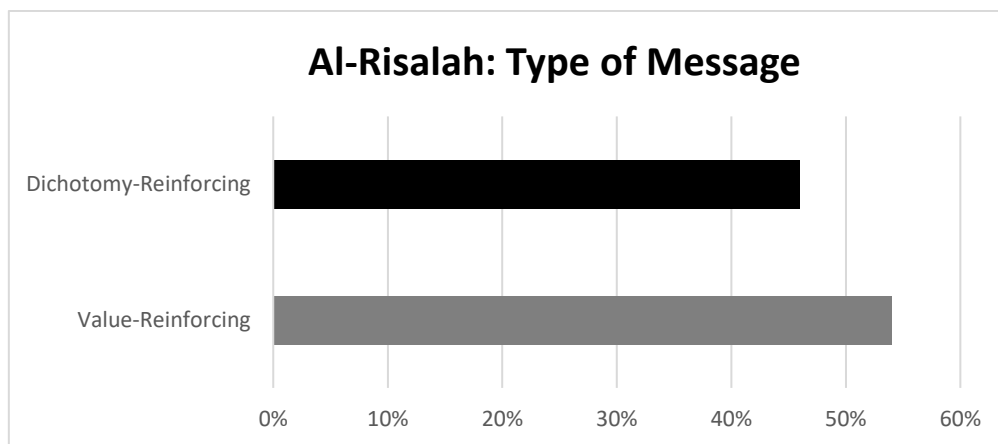


FIGURE 4 -AL-RISALAH: TYPE OF MESSAGES

Unpacking Al-Risalah's preferred type of message does not necessarily contribute to locating the group within the jihadist landscape, but can constitute a resourceful tool for the examination of the group's strategy and communication techniques. As previously mentioned, jihadist propaganda traditionally consists of a mixture of messages creating in-Group identity and others strengthening Out-Group opposition. Despite the fact that both techniques are paramount for the aims and purposes of extremist propaganda, messages targeting the enemy have often constituted the preferred tactic to gain support and mobilise the audience. This appears to be particularly true when observing IS's prominent jihadist magazines such as Dabiq or its successor

Rumiyah, which tend to stress out-group opposition as the preferred way to enhance belief and behavioural changes in their readers.

On the other hand, the analysis of messages' type in Al-Risalah shows how, although dichotomy-Reinforcing messages still constitute almost half of the total count, JAN tends to prioritise in-group identity constructs through the use of value-reinforcing messages. Incentives related to value-reinforcing messages are used in Al-Risalah to stress in-group identity and promote behavioural change in the audience. As evidenced by Ingram (2016:9), al-Qaida's Inspire also tends to prioritise in-group identity to direct the decisions of the readers, what differs is the final objective of identity choice appeals. In AQ's Inspire, value-reinforcing messages throughout the issues constitute the "gateway" for a powerful conclusive dichotomy-reinforcing section consisting of the "open jihad" section, which provides operational training and calls for attacks against the far enemy Ingram (2016:9). The same pattern can be observed in IS's Rumiyah magazine, where a clear prevalence of dichotomy-reinforcing messages targeting far and close enemies culminates, at the end of each issue, with infographics or articles related to the group's successful attacks against apostate regimes. On the contrary, in Al-Risalah, the combination of value and dichotomy reinforcing messages culminates with an invitation to join the group's efforts in Syria. As AQ's choice of messages prepares the reader to accept the honour and duty to target the enemies, the rhetoric constructs offered by Al-Risalah paves the way to the principal objective of its propaganda: promoting hijra to the lands of jihad.

Religious fervour and ideological commitment undoubtedly constitute dominant incentives, but other factors contribute to the engagement in political violence and include material benefits, reputation, and redemption. While the display of the mujahideen's material gains for joining the group are not recorded in Al-Risalah, the magazine makes extensive use of the other incentives. As correctly pointed out by Crenshaw (1987:19), membership in the organisation and the social status, respect and admiration that follows, all constitute powerful values that underground groups, and surely jihadists, exploit to produce behavioural change in their audience. According to Crenshaw (1987:20), redemption constitutes one of the key incentives that terrorist organisations use to attract recruits. In Al-Risalah, the incentive of redemption represents a

prominent strategy to persuade the readers. The objective is pursued via the emphasis on the virtues of the muhajreen who abandon the corrupted and un-Islamic societies in which they live for a new life as true Muslims in the lands of Jihad. The following examples constitute a sample of the way messages are structured in Al-Risalah and well represent how the combination of value and dichotomy- reinforcing messages is used to promote the desired changes into the readers' view of their condition and encourage a reaction that takes the form of a journey to Syria.

“I found it hard to fit in with the Australian society...When I got older I felt as if I wasn't meant to be in Australia. I couldn't connect with the people or their way-of-life, and I found myself alone after some problems with drugs and alcohol at about twenty-one years old”. Al-Risalah Issue n.2 p.16

“Living in the west for the majority of my life, and witnessing the horrors the Ummah has been facing I couldn't bring myself to live any longer amidst my enemies, so I decided to make hijra to Shaam with my children”. Al-Risalah Issue n. 1 p.17

“I would welcome my fellow Muslims to leave the life of discrimination under the oppressive, apostate, and disbelieving regimes, and come and live here with respect and honour”. Al-Risalah Issue n. 1 p.10

The above captions well encapsulate one of the most used strategies to encourage their audience in the West to leave their countries. The emphasis is initially put on the alienation and marginalisation experienced by Muslims in the West: while ignoring other factors such as lack of education and opportunities, the articles stress how the cause of the brothers' sufferings in the West is simply the incompatibility between these societies and Islam. Subsequently, the solution to the personal crisis is provided and can be found in the lands of jihad. In particular, the inherently negative description of western societies as apostate, oppressive, and discriminatory is opposed to the honour and respect enjoyed by the Muhajireen in Syria. While the combination of value and dichotomy reinforcing messages is a constant feature of jihadist propaganda, groups like AQ and IS have widely employed this type of messages to address their enemies and provide Western Muslims with a target for revenge.

4.3 Targets of Dichotomy-Reinforcing messages in Al-Risalah

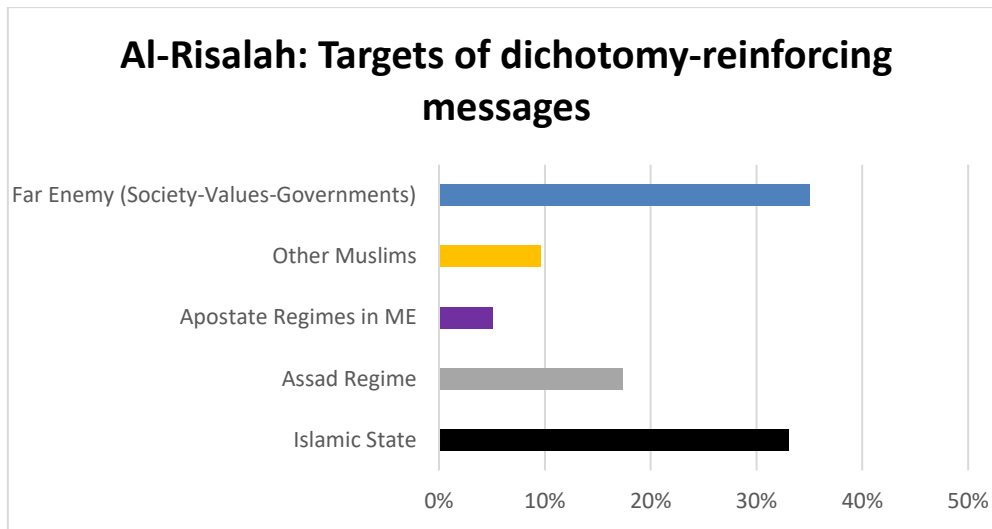


FIGURE 5- AL-RISALAH: TARGETS OF DICHOTOMY-REINFORCING MESSAGES

The Assad regime and the “Far enemy”

Surprisingly, the Assad regime does not appear as the overwhelmingly dominant target of dichotomy reinforcing messages. Through an in-depth analysis of the magazines’ articles, however, it emerges that, although short and concise, attacks against Assad and references to the mujahideen’s fight against his corrupt regime are extremely cutting and extend throughout the whole publication. The impression deriving from these observations is that Assad’s apparent nature as a secondary target in the magazine should not deceive into thinking that defeating the Syrian regime does not constitute the primary strategic objective of the group. The idea conveyed in Al-Risalah is that the legitimacy of the mujahideen’s struggle against Assad is so obvious that there is no need to stress it further and provide argumentations. Nevertheless, in spite of the concise nature of the references to the regime, these constitute the most intense and aggressive dichotomy-reinforcing messages directly threatening the opponent.

“...the Nusayris⁹ are Kuffar. Ibn Taymiyyah states these people named Al-Nusayriyyah...are greater disbelievers than the Jews and Christians. Nay, they are greater disbelievers than most of the mushrikeen (polytheists), and their harm to the Ummah of Muhammad

⁹“A member of a minority Shiite sect (Al-Nusayriyyah) practising a form of Islam with gnostic and animist elements. The term is now widely used, especially by Sunni Salafists, as a derogatory word for Alawite” (Oxford Dictionary), a Syrian religious Shi’a minority to which the Al-Assad family belongs.

is greater than the harm of the disbelievers who are in war with Muslims.” Al-Risalah Issue n. 2 p.81

“Bashar al-Assad, in my view is worse, with a more violent and twisted view and policy towards the Muslims than America have”. Al-Risalah Issue n.2 p.18

On the other hand, representing 35% of the targets of dichotomy-reinforcing messages, the far enemy appears to constitute a principal target in Al-Risalah. Nonetheless, in spite of sizeable portions of content related to critiques and attacks against western, secular, and democratic societies, these do not frequently present a high intensity, and direct threats are exceedingly rare. As Byman noted (2014:449), affiliates tend to “ostensibly take on the core’s anti-American and anti-Western agenda, often shifting targets as a result”. Particularly interesting in JAN’s magazine is the low frequency and strength of statements directly threatening America and its allies: no content is related to successful attacks perpetrated by Al-Qaida in the West and the hostility towards the far enemy is limited to references to Western intervention or interference in the Muslim world. With Al-Risalah’s heavy focus on promoting hijra rather than inciting attacks in the West, the vast majority of these messages simply highlights the corruption and un-Islamic nature of secular societies in contrast to the just and truly Islamic society that the mujahideen are establishing in Syria. As a consequence, Muslims who choose to continue living in the West in spite of the suffering of their brothers in places like Yemen, Syria and Iraq, has allegedly fallen into apostasy and will respond to Allah for their choices. The following statements taken from Al-Risalah adequately summarise the characteristics of messages targeting the far enemy mentioned before.

“Thus, any group that fights under the banner of democracy and secularism has fallen into apostasy”. Al-Risalah Issue n. 4

“Living in the west for the majority of my life, and witnessing the horrors the Ummah has been facing I couldn't bring myself to live any longer amidst my enemies, so I decided to make Hijra to Shaam with my children”. Al-Risalah Issue n.1

Despite the fact that western and secular democracies represent the most frequent target, the low intensity of these messages makes the overall focus on the far enemy weak, and, therefore, cannot be considered as an evidence of

JAN's affinity with its parent AQ. On the contrary, a comparative examination of Inspire and Al-Risalah promptly displays a dominance and high intensity of messages targeting the West, with articles, graphics, and images celebrating successful attacks, both in the past as well as in recent years.

The info-war against IS

As anticipated, Al-Risalah has been commonly associated with JAN's attempt to strike back at IS's military offensive against other rebel groups in Syria. The assumption seems to be corroborated by the proportion of messages directed against Al-Baghdadi's caliphate, constituting about one-third of the total number of dichotomy reinforcing messages recorded in the four issues of the magazine. As supported by the data related to the content analysis, the information campaign targeting IS and its leadership appears to constitute a principal, recurrent theme throughout the publication, especially in the first two releases. While the intensity of the connection IS-JAN is more extensively analysed during the second level of analysis, the present sections highlight fault-lines and potential affinities between the two groups as they appear in Al-Risalah. In particular, the information campaign launched in Al-Risalah against Al-Baghdadi seems to revolve around many factors, namely, IS offensive against the mujahideen, the legitimacy of the self-appointed caliph, the takfiri ideology, and IS disregard for the Islamic Scholarship. Refraining from making takfir is explicitly mentioned in IS's Rumiya magazine as a key issue to legitimise the hostility towards Jabhat Al-Nusra, whose members are called, in a derogatory way, "Sahawat" to stress the claimed friendly relationship between the group and the infidels. Al-Jawlani's group is also accused of "forcefully resisting the implementation of Allah's Shari'ah", and for assisting the apostates in establishing a democratic state. In Al-Risalah, JAN strikes back by openly declaring the caliphate as illegitimate and extremist. In particular, the way JAN sees the Islamic State is well portrayed by the term "Khawarij" (Arabic خوارج) used to define the group and its followers. The word comes from the Arabic verb kha-ra-ja (خرج), meaning "to go out, to exit": the Khawarij are defined by Islamic tradition as seceders, nor Sunni nor Shi'a, extremists who have deviated from the correct path of Islam. IS is accused of killing Muslims and acting

against the mujahideen, to the point that they are considered worse than Christians and Jews and, therefore, need to be fought by the mujahideen.

“There hasn't been a worse evil towards Muslims than the Khawarij; not even Jews and Christians. They strive to kill every Muslim who doesn't agree with them. They legitimize bloodshed, taking the wealth of Muslims, and the killing of their children by proclaiming them as apostates and believing that these atrocious acts are righteous, based on their massive ignorance and misguided innovation” Al-Risalah Issue n.4 p.37

Not only the Khilafah (Caliphate) established by IS does not result from the consensus of the Islamic Scholars and the support of the whole Muslim community but, using an image from the magazine, it acts as a sword against the Ummah while it should constitute the shield protecting it.

In the Islamic State's magazine Rumiya, action is as important as knowledge. This is used to delegitimise the vast majority of Islamic scholars who rejected the legitimacy of Al-Baghdadi's caliphate. They are accused of “abandoning action and concealing the truth”, two choices that, according to the magazine, make them allies of the infidels. In particular, refraining from making takfir is explicitly mentioned a critical issue to legitimise the hostility towards Jabhat Al-Nusra, whose members are called, in a derogatory way, “Sahawat” to stress the claimed friendly relationship between the group and the infidels. Al-Jawlani's group is also accused of “forcefully resisting the implementation of Allah's Shari'ah”, and for assisting the apostates in establishing a democratic state.

On the contrary, throughout its issues, Al-Risalah emphasises the need for preparation and knowledge as the only ways to perform jihad according to Allah's will. In the magazine, the Islamic State's neglect and delegitimization of Islamic Scholars are openly criticised as a way to deceive young, uneducated Muslims into fighting under the un-Islamic banners of Al-Baghdadi's caliphate.

“The scholars were very clear that the newly announced Khilafa was illegitimate and that Baghdadi had no right to make such a claim. However, the scholars were rejected and slandered, as the ignorant youth labeled them as “old, senile men”. Al-Risalah Issue n.1, p.23

Not only the Islamic State legitimacy is dismembered by theological arguments, but its choices and actions are also harshly criticised from an operational and strategic stance. IS's lack of preparation is, therefore, responsible for rash decision that, in addition to be in most cases forbidden by Islam, are also extremely detrimental for the Syrian Jihad as a whole. In reporting examples of IS's strategic short-sightedness, including the beheading of Alan Henning and the execution of the Jordanian pilot, Al-Risalah constitutes further evidence of JAN's pragmatism, which has traditionally been associated with its parent AQ.

These young, foolish, reckless soldiers of the 'Islamic State', along with their foul mouthed counter-parts across social media, are so consumed by their hatred towards the western world, they fail to see how their actions and words will affect the Ummah at large. Al-Risalah Issue n.1 p.24

Throughout the publication, the idea conveyed is that JAN constitutes a “balanced” path between two extremes: the brutality of IS on one side, and the hypocrisy of the Murji'a, those Muslims who fell into apostasy by accepting secularism and democracy while abstaining from jihad. In the following paragraphs, the group's ideology affinity with Al-Qaida is highlighted in contrast to either apostasy or extremism.

“Unlike the extremists and the Murji'ah we take the middle path... And thus We have made you a moderate nation”. Al-Risalah n.2 p.3

“One of the greatest things about IS is that before people saw Al-Qaeda and the Mujahideen as the extremists, and those that abstain from jihad as the normal 'moderate' Muslims. But now the truth has come out the Mujahideen are in fact upon the correct and 'moderate' path, with IS being the extremists. So I think that IS is a blessing in disguise for the Muslim Ummah”. Al-Risalah n.2 p.13

Nevertheless, in spite of all the differences, disagreements and hostility, some affinities in the strategic views of the two groups transpire from some isolated statements in Al-Risalah.

“...the announcement of the khilafa was most welcome, as it gave the Muslims a sense of hope in this dark, oppressive time... After such a long time, someone had finally emerged from the shackles of darkness to take control of our affairs. It was an exciting Ramadan for the

Ummah, as the reappearance of the Khilafa signified a return to the glorious days of the Islamic Empire”. Al-Risalah Issue n. 1 p.22

“Baghdadi and his men have done a lot of good work in Syria and Iraq. They have destroyed countless regime soldiers and have freed our brothers and sisters from some of the dark prisons. They have heavily promoted the concept of Jihad and have awakened the Muslims from their deep slumber, urging the fit and able to leave the comfort of their homes to fight in the way of Allah”. Al-Risalah Issue n.1 p.23

In the above statements, JAN gives credit to the Islamic State’s initiative and energy which have awakened the Muslims and stressed once again the importance of jihad in opposition to the “deep slumber” affecting the Ummah. Although AQ is not openly mentioned or criticised, these statements highlight IS’s action and initiative in opposition to the paralysis and cautiousness characterising Al-Zawahiri’s group.

Overall, Al-Risalah’s depiction of the Islamic State is extremely negative with the differences between the two groups extending to ideological, theological, and strategic matters. Although these fault-lines leave no doubt about JAN’s ideological affinity with Al-Qaida, some isolated paragraphs signal the group’s inclination to a more proactive and resolute initiative than Al-Qaida’s old-fashioned cautious approach. In particular, the stronger initiative displayed by JAN in Al-Risalah in comparison to the parent organisation can be considered as a first potential source of tension.

4.4. Frequency of key articles' purposes in Al-Risalah, Rumiya, and Inspire

In the introductory section of the present research, different roles of jihadist magazines were highlighted. Although most propaganda publications from VEOs perform a combination of functions, each organisation prioritise them in line with its strategic objectives.

While the examination of the previous code categories improved the understanding of how the message in the group’s propaganda is structured to achieve its purpose, the present section is devoted to identifying what is the main aim of its propaganda magazine. Identifying the overall dominant purposes of English language jihadist magazines constitutes the simplest and most effective way to understand key features of the group strategic view and, in the context of the present paper, systematically marking potential differences from rivals and allies. For this reason, the results of the articles’ purposes in Al-Risalah are

here compared to the those related to IS’s Rumiya and al-Qaida's Inspire magazines released during the same time-span.

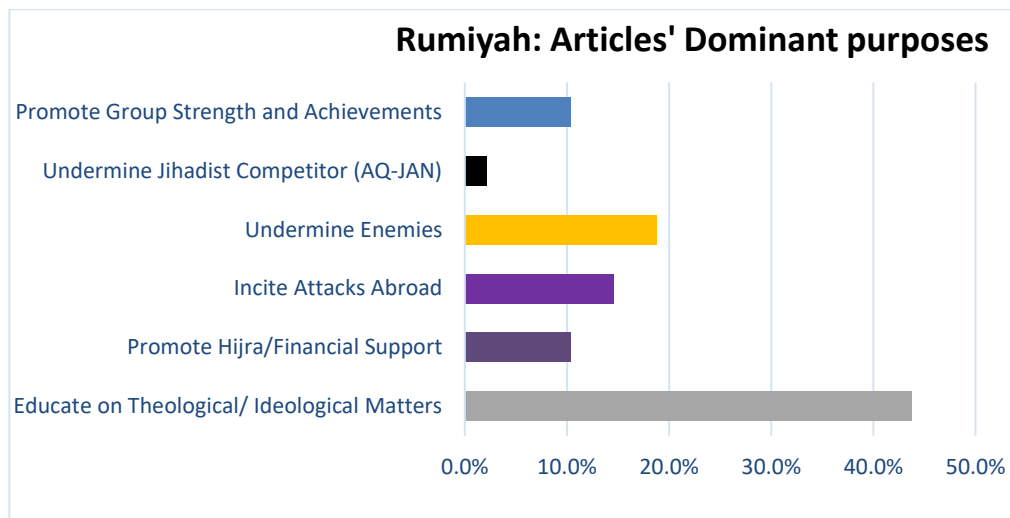


FIGURE 6 - RUMIYAH – DOMINANT ARTICLES’ PURPOSE

Rumiya, the newest Islamic State magazine which replaced Dabiq at the end of 2015, represents an excellent example of the variety of roles played by magazines as ideal mediums for jihadist groups’ propaganda. Figure 6 shows the variety of purposes behind articles in Rumiya. Due to frequent IS-inspired attacks in the West, one could expect its magazine to be largely focused on inciting attacks by lone-wolf terrorists in the U.S. and their allies, a feature that earned extraordinary popularity to its predecessor Dabiq. However, as displayed in the chart, undermining enemies and inciting attacks abroad constitute less than 20% of the overall purposes of Rumiya’s articles. In fact, with many enemies and jihadist competitors targeting IS for its brutality, violence, and takfiri ideology, the dominance of articles aimed at defending the group’s legitimacy and actions should not constitute a big surprise. Particularly surprising is the high density of articles devoted to educational material on theological issues, justifying the group’s ideology but also guiding the group’s followers through the various duties and responsibilities that every Muslims should comply with. With IS’s militants and sympathisers often regarded as rather uneducated and unsophisticated Muslims, the magazine constitutes the most suitable medium to educate its readers and counter the narrative of those accusing Al-Baghdadi’s organisation to be un-Islamic.

Nevertheless, although these do not constitute the vast majority of content in the magazine, concise but incredibly impactful operational guides and articles calling for attacks against the far enemy are disseminated throughout all the issues.

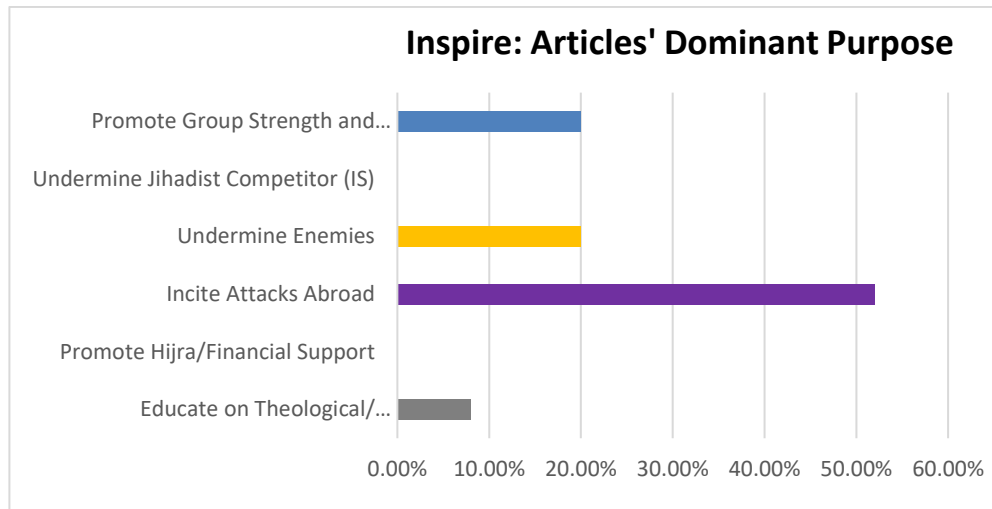


FIGURE 7- INSPIRE DOMINANT ARTICLES' PURPOSE

Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula's (AQAP) magazine *Inspire*, as noted in the introductory section, constituted the pioneer of English language magazines published by jihadist organisations. Its editorial quality evolved and improved drastically, especially following the release of the first issues of IS's *Dabiq*. Similarly to *Rumiyah* and *Dabiq*, the global outreach of the organisation drives the focus of the magazine, which is overwhelmingly focused on targeting the far enemy. In the issues analysed for the present research, those released between summer 2015 and January 2017, the central purpose of the articles constitutes of the incitement of attacks abroad. The combination of dichotomy and value-reinforcing messaging stresses in-group identity and out-group opposition, creating and progressively strengthening the idea of a crisis affecting the target reader. The process culminates with the solution offered by the magazine to the reader's crisis: as can be noted from the study of the magazines, this apogee coincides with the promotion of lone-wolf attacks against the far enemy. Articles promoting terror operations in the West include those providing the moral, practical, and Islamic justification for the attacks, which commonly precede those offering detailed operational guidance. The low proportion of educational material has two possible explanations. On the one

hand, militants affiliated with Al-Qaida usually present a higher level of theological education and ideological sophistication. Secondly, AQ is faced with the challenge posed by the high number of attacks in the West inspired and claimed by Al-Baghdadi’s group. The overwhelming proportion of articles devoted to “inspiring” attacks in the West can, therefore, be seen as an attempt to revitalise its activity and appeal to young Muslims, often more interested in the operational component of militancy rather than in its theological and ideological framework.

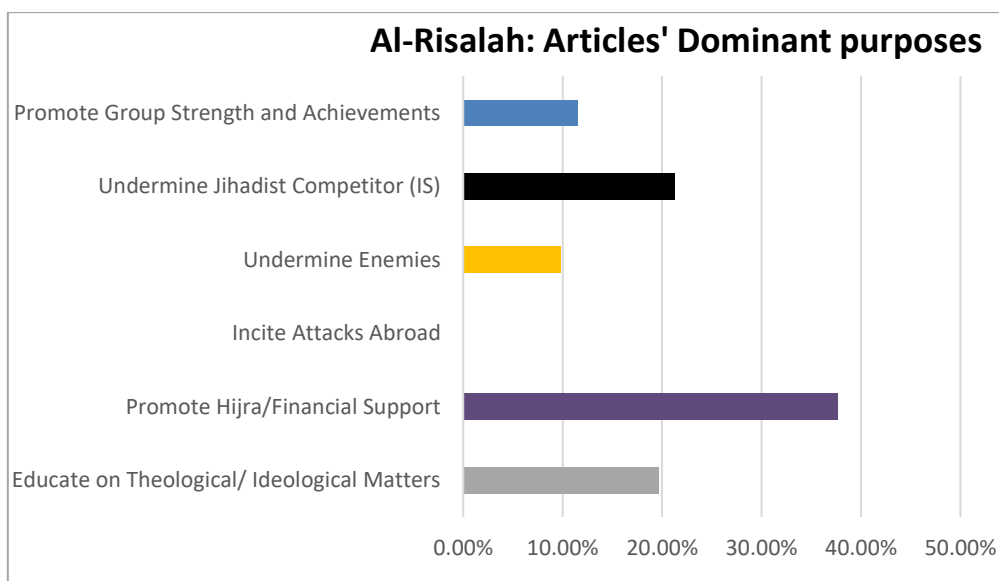


FIGURE 8- AL-RISALAH DOMINANT ARTICLES' PURPOSE

Figure 8 represents the dominant themes and purposes identified in Al-Risalah. As the results of the content analysis show, promoting hijra or support to the group from Western Muslims constitutes the key final goal for most of Al-Risalah’s articles. In the previous section, the analysis of codes related to the use of value and dichotomy-reinforcing messages showed how in-group identity and out-group opposition is strengthened throughout each issue of the magazine. In particular, the corruption of Western democracies and the hypocrisy of some state-sponsored scholars who discredit the image of the mujahideen are used in the magazine to trigger a reaction in the reader. Promoting hijra, strictly linked in the magazine to the duty of jihad, is strengthened in the vast majority of articles and, in almost 40% of cases, constitutes the dominant purpose. While for AQAP’s Inspire and IS’s Dabiq, the solution for this crisis is represented by the execution of lone attacks in the West, the preferred solution offered in Al-

Risalah is leaving the corrupted lands of the kuffar (infidels) to join the mujahideen and live as a true Muslim in Shaam.

“...making Hijra is an obligation, and a legislated and praiseworthy form of worship and servitude to Allah.” Al-Risalah Issue n.1 p.17

I remind you of the words of the Prophet Muhammad when he was asked: “Tell me about something to do?”, he then said: “Make hijra because there is nothing like it”. Al-Risalah Issue n.1, p.18

Throughout the articles, the magazine provides various argumentations in support to its idea of hijra and jihad as a duty for every Muslim. To achieve the desired reaction in the reader, the magazine uses, as previously noted, a combination of positive and negative incentives. Positive incentives leverage the isolation experienced by a lot of Western Muslims to strengthen the idea of hijra and life in Syria as a dignifying experience, an occasion to be finally respected and even admired.

Along with the heavy focus on encouraging the journey to Syria, two interesting figures emerge from the analysis of Al-Risalah’s dominant purposes: the comparatively high focus on the jihadist rival IS, and the total absence of articles promoting or offering guidance for attacks in the West.

The figures related to principal article purposes in Inspire and Rumiya highlight how undermining other jihadist rivals does not constitute a relevant theme. If in Rumiya one can detect only one article aimed at damaging the image of JAN, content in al-Qaida's magazine disregards Al-Baghdadi’s group. On the contrary, Al-Risalah immediately appears as a reaction against the brutality and aggressive expansion of IS in Syria. The legitimacy of Al-Baghdadi as a caliph is questioned and taken apart throughout the magazine’s articles and, as noted in the previous sections, the group is considered on a par with the Assad regime.

Concerning the second factor, it was previously noted how Al-Qaida affiliates tend to ostensibly incorporate the anti-Western and anti-American narrative of their parent organisation (Byman,2014:448), in return for an increase in appeal, protection, and various types of support. In general, it would be reasonable to expect that, in spite of minor contextual differences linked to the theatre they operate in, the identification under a common brand would entail some level of

convergence in the themes and purposes of the two groups' propaganda output. Jihadist propaganda via mediums such as Twitter, Facebook, and You-Tube can be considered more "operational", and therefore present a higher level of divergence between the local scope of the localised branch and the global outreach of the parent. On the contrary, the role of English language magazines as propaganda manifestos of the group's ideology and strategy would require an adequate degree of affinity between the parent organisation and the affiliate. Therefore, although a less intense focus on the far enemy would constitute a natural consequence of the initial localised focus of the regional branch, the total absence of articles aimed at promoting its parent's strategic priority constitutes a significant factor in analysing AQ-JAN relationship and its destiny. The significantly different distribution of purposes in Al-Risalah and Inspire can form a signal for preference diversion, one of the two primary motives behind the failure of business franchises evidenced by Byman (2014). JAN's focus on the territorial control and disavowal of its transnational legacy might not have weakened the relationship with AQ to the tipping point, but initial signs of friction can already be detected to support the interpretation of the content analysis' results. In particular, reports from some clerics and fighters within the Syria's armed opposition seem to confirm AQ's increasing disagreement with HTS -the latest reincarnation of Jabhat Al-Nusra- and its view (Lister,2017a). According to recent public declarations of Al-Qaida linked figures, even the August 2016 rebranding of JAN into JFS came without the blessing of Al-Zawahiri (Lister,2017a). A third factor consistent with the hypothesis of preference diversion highlighted by the content analysis of Al-Risalah is, again, Al-Zawahiri's video criticising the drift of the Syrian mujahideen from the transnational struggle that is the central attribute of AQ's path to victory.

Chapter 5. Intensity and sentiment Analysis of references to IS and AQ in Al-Risalah.

The present section explores results related to the intensity and sentiment analysis of Al-Risalah in its connections to both the Islamic State and Al-Qaida. The aim is to assess whether the assumptions related to JAN-IS hostility and JAN-AQ affiliation find evidence in the pages of Jabhat Al-Nusra's magazine. Such process would allow to examine the overall connection between Jabhat Al-Nusra and the two jihadist factions as well as potential changes in its attitude towards them over time. For instance, a progressive softening or escalation of the hostility towards the Islamic State can be detected via the results of sentiment analysis across the four issues of the magazine. On the other hand, changes in the intensity and frequency of references can signal either weaker connection to the group or the choice to move from an explicit and official affiliation to a more implicit and masked membership.

As previously mentioned, assigned values for intensity and sentiment range from 0 to 1, as summarised in the following tables.

Score	Reference Sentiment
0	Very Negative
0.25	Negative
0.5	Neutral
0.75	Positive
1	Very Positive

Score	Reference Intensity & Frequency
0	Non-Existent- Very Weak
0.25	Weak
0.5	Medium
0.75	Strong
1	Very Strong

FIGURE 9- REFERENCE SENTIMENT AND INTENSITY TABLES

Figure 10 summarises the results related to intensity and sentiment of the references to the two groups. Data related to sentiment and intensity of the references to IS and AQ displays an overall weak level of connection with the two jihadist organisations. Although references to IS and AQ are present in

every issue of the magazine, the vast majority of pages appear free from identifiable links to Al-Zawahiri's and Al-Baghdadi's groups, causing the values for each group to appear rather stable and flat. The low proportion of references to the two actors can already constitute an indication that the role of the magazine is not limited to that of a declaration of affiliation to AQ and war against IS.

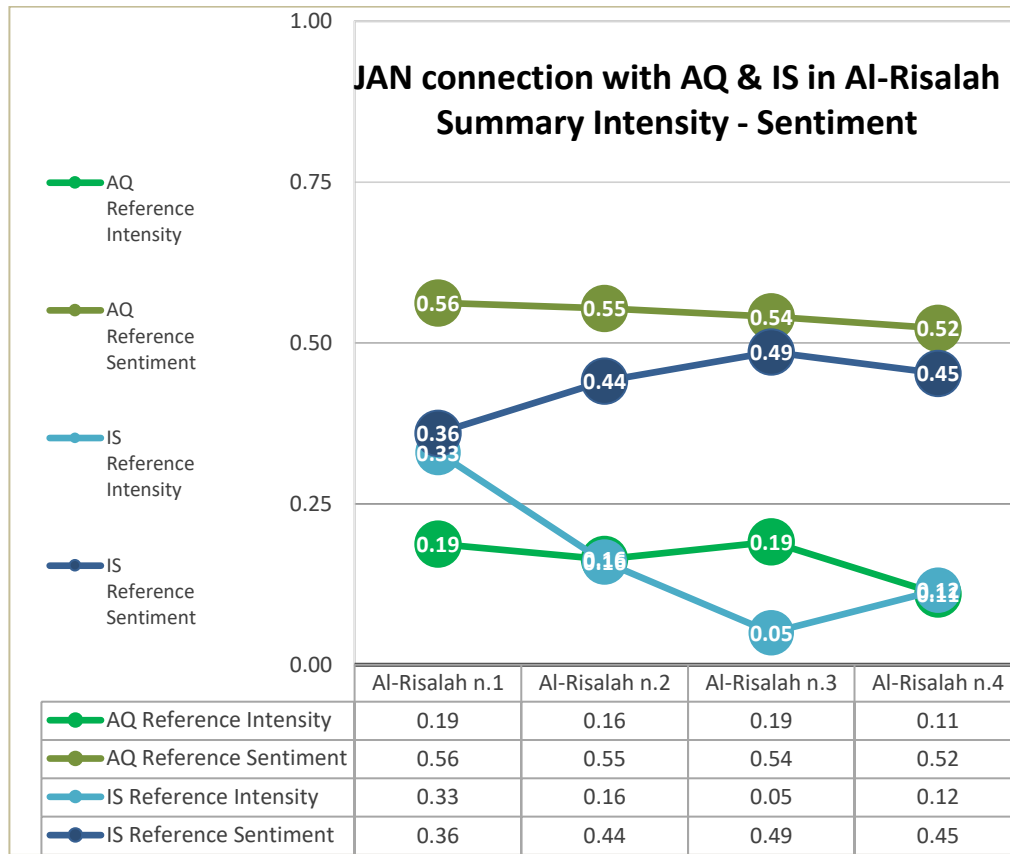


FIGURE 10 - SUMMARY INTENSITY - SENTIMENT AQ & IS IN AL-RISALAH

5.1 Intensity and sentiment of references to the Islamic State in Al-Risalah

As shown in the previous chart, the connection between JAN and IS in Al-Risalah initially appears to be more frequent and intense than the one with AQ. In particular, the first publication released in July 2015 includes articles and images directly criticising and attacking Al-Baghdadi's group, its legitimacy and actions. The stronger emphasis on IS was widely interpreted as JAN and AQ's attempt to strike back against the rival's successful military campaigns in Syria and Iraq, and its aggressive stance against JAN and other jihadist groups

in Syria. Al-Risalah's publication was seen as mainly aimed at undermining IS to regain competitive advantages and restore the primacy of the Al-Qaida brand. Nevertheless, as shown in figure 8, the overall intensity of connection goes from WEAK to MEDIUM in the first issue (with a score of 0.33) to VERY WEAK (scores ranging from 0.05 to 0.16) in the following cases.

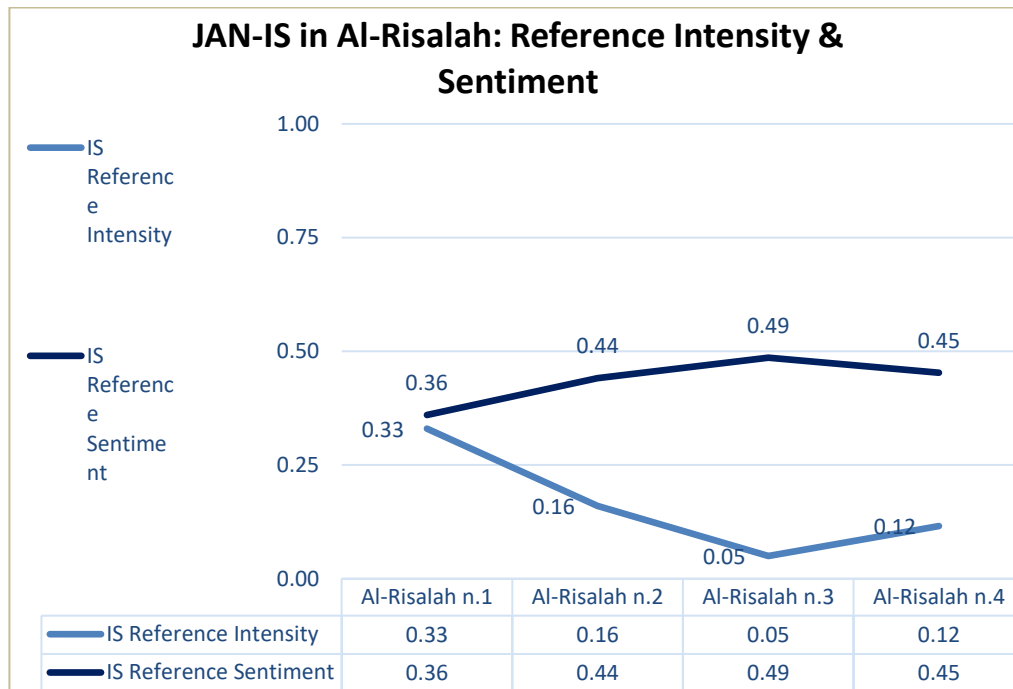


FIGURE 11- JAN-IS REFERENCE INTENSITY & SENTIMENT

Concerning the overall sentiment, this progressively evolves from moderately NEGATIVE (0.36 in the first issue) towards NEUTRAL (0.49-0.45 in the last two issues). In particular, a negative correlation between references' intensity and sentiment characterises the pages of Al-Risalah. Decreasing frequency of references to IS in the magazine produces an overall softening of the negative sentiment towards the group: this trend towards neutrality is therefore not the result of JAN's increasingly positive view of IS but, more simply, of fewer references to the group. To better visualise the sentiment and intensity of IS references in the magazine, the ensuing chart only includes pages with references to IS to better depict the trends related to the two factors throughout the different issues.

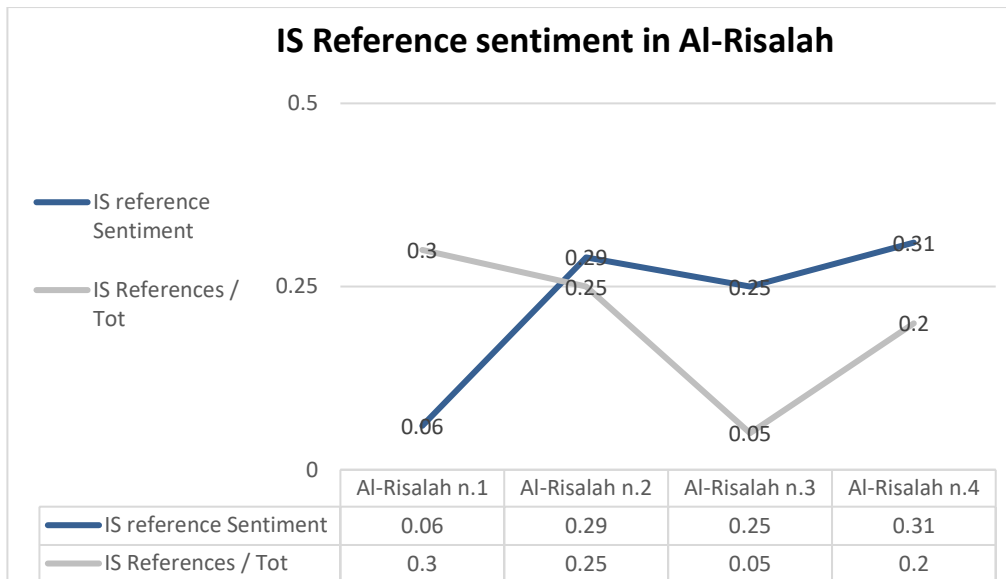


FIGURE 12- IS REFERENCE SENTIMENT IN AL-RISALAH

Figure 11, excluding all cases in which no reference to IS is identified, shows how the negative sentiment towards IS is progressively mitigated over time (from 0.06 -VERY NEGATIVE- in the first issue to 0.31 -NEGATIVE- in the fourth issue). Therefore, not only references to the group tend to become less prominent and frequent, but each reference's hostility level also appears softened. While Al-Risalah's debut issue was characterised by its rather clear anti-IS function, the focus on Al-Baghdadi's group appears drastically declining, leaving room for other dominant themes.

In order to better display this trend, the "Connection Strength Index" (CSI) can be calculated as a weighted value between reference intensity and proportion of IS references over the totality of the magazines' pages. The advantage from the identification of a weighted index is that the impact of isolated high-intensity references is mitigated, and a more accurate depiction of each issue's connection strength with the group can be achieved. In the case of Al-Risalah's reference to IS, issues 1 and 3 present an exceptionally high intensity of references to IS which is not mirrored by the CSI. The reason is that, in spite of a VERY STRONG reference intensity, the references considered constitute a minor portion of the overall edition of the publication: in particular, the 0.92 score assigned to IS references in the third issue of Al-Risalah is the result of only 3 references out of 58 pages. The values taken by the CSI throughout the four issues of Al-Risalah therefore portray an overall decrease in the negative

connection between JAN and IS that, starting with a WEAK to MEDIUM strength on the magazine's opening, drops to VERY WEAK levels in the following publications.

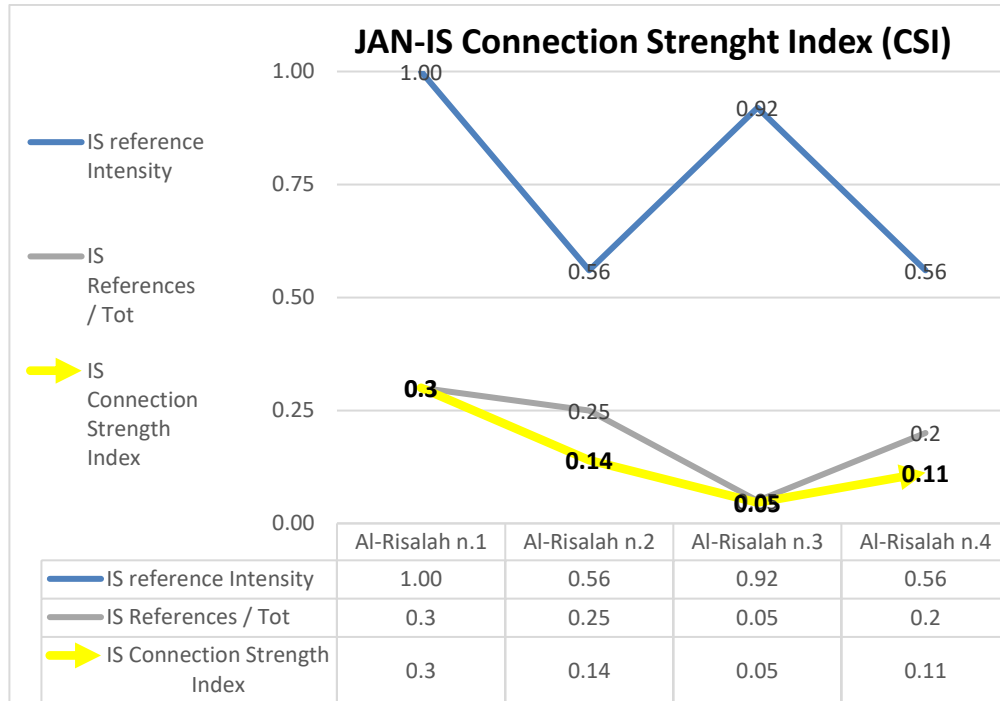


FIGURE 13- JAN-IS CONNECTION STRENGHT INDEX

Overall, two verdicts can be inferred from the intensity and sentiment analysis of IS references in Al-Risalah. On the one hand, the overwhelmingly hostile attitude of JAN towards Al-Baghdadi's group is supported by substantial evidence generated by the sentiment analysis of the magazine's pages. On the other hand, however, the overall strength of the connection portrayed by the CSI shows an overall WEAK connection to IS. Although some sections, as in the first issue, present a strong anti-IS narrative, the hostility towards the group is progressively far from being the overwhelmingly dominant theme of JAN propaganda output.

5.2 Connection intensity and sentiment with Al-Qaida in Al-Risalah

As previously stressed, JAN has been merely considered as the Syrian branch of Al-Qaida. Conversely, its magazine Al-Risalah is seen as part of Al-Qaida's effort to re-establish itself as the dominant force in the global jihadist

movement. As a consequence, the publication was not considered anything more than a direct emanation of Al-Qaida, while the idea that Al-Risalah could represent an indicator of JAN's progressive affirmation as a third option in addition to AQ and IS has never been really considered. Even the survival of Al-Risalah to the July 2016 split from AQ did not result in an increased interest devoted to the magazine. If the original assumptions were correct, JAN's affiliation with AQ should shine through the pages of Al-Risalah via constant implicit and explicit references to the parent organisation, its leaders, ideology, and enemies.

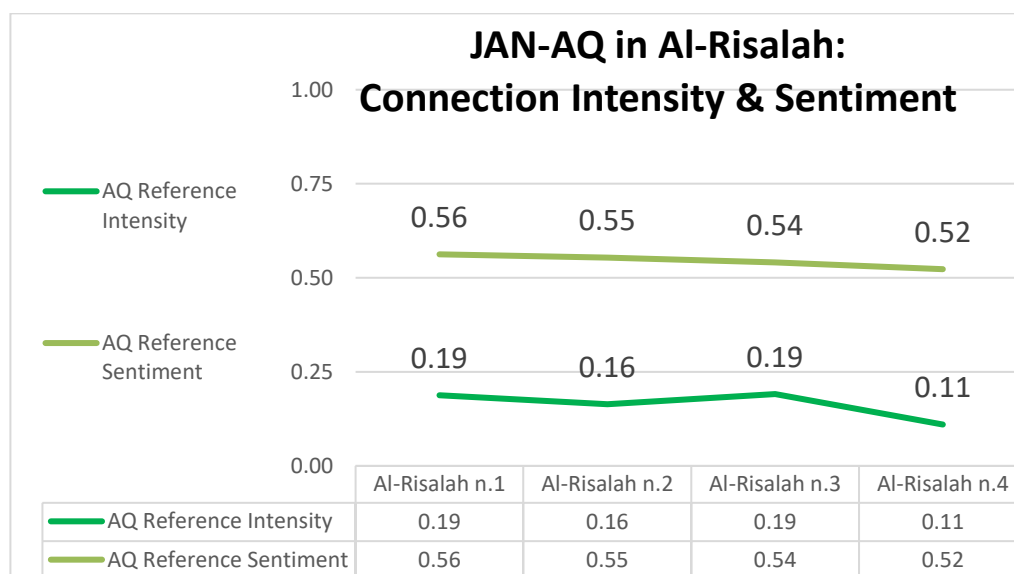


FIGURE 14 - JAN-AQ REFERENCE INTENSITY & SENTIMENT

Figure 13 shows how the overall intensity of Al-Risalah's connection to AQ is VERY WEAK throughout all the magazine's issues (ranging from 0.19 in the first to 0.11 in the last). Conversely, the average values related to the references' sentiment towards AQ are classified as NEUTRAL in all issues (ranging from 0.56 in the first to 0.52 in the last). As evidenced for IS, the overall WEAK intensity and NEUTRAL sentiment of the references are strongly affected by the low frequency of items related to the parent organisation, its key personalities and goals. Despite JAN's alleged total identification with its parent organisation, explicit or more subtle references to AQ do not appear to constitute a significant portion of the group's magazine. The following chart (figure 14), portrays the evolution of sentiment of references to AQ throughout the four issues. In spite of a rather stable trend, a

decrease towards a progressively NEUTRAL sentiment can be identified in issues 3 and 4. An interview with Hamza Australi in the second issue includes the strongest reference to the parent organisation by portraying AQ's moderation in contrast to the extremism of IS:

AQ as an organisation along with the Taliban...all of us as Mujahideen, distance ourselves greatly from the takfir methodology and ideology... I truly believe that AQ's methodology is the right way, the way of mercy, the way of forgiveness, the way of da'wah, the way of strength...and strength is not just in killing. Of course we have enemies who are fighting us and they must be dealt with, but at the same time we are also merciful and just. Everything that we do in AQ must be for the benefit of the Muslim Ummah. Al-Risalah Issue n.2

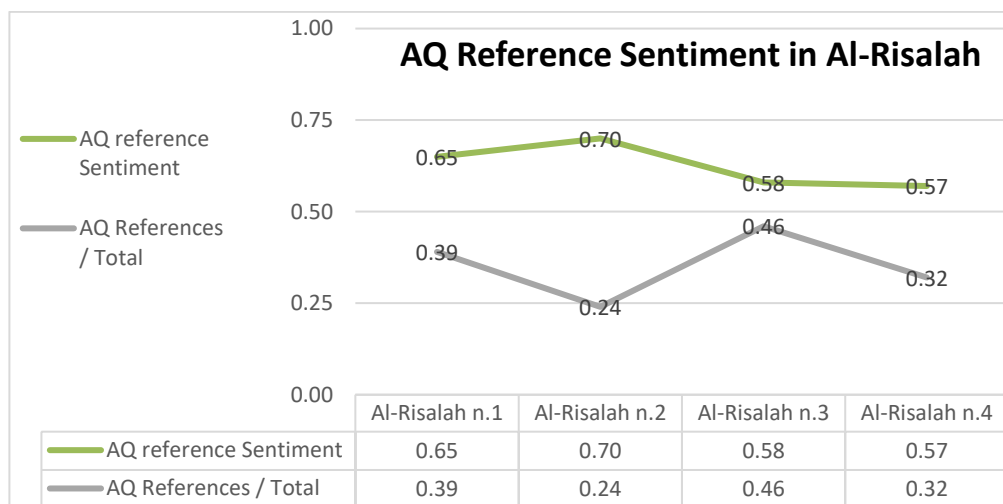


FIGURE 15- AQ REFERENCE SENTIMENT IN AL-RISALAH

In order to better display how intense is the connection established by Al-Risalah with JAN's parent Al-Qaida, the Connection Strength Index is calculated.

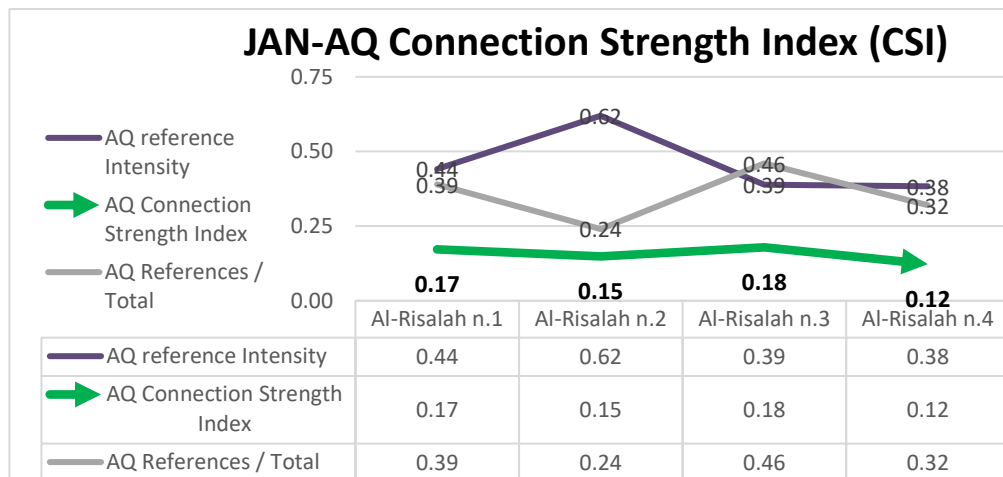


FIGURE 16 - JAN-AQ CONNECTION STRENGTH INDEX (CSI)

The values of the CSI show how the overall strength of the magazine's connection to AQ remains steadily low with values well below the threshold of 0.25, indicating a fragile connection between the magazine and the parent organisation. In spite of a largely stable CSI for AQ, the four issues show a progressive decrease in the intensity of references, from 0.44 and 0.62 of the first issues to 0.39 and 0.38 of the last two. In particular, although occasional, explicit references to AQ membership could be found in the first two issues: these included black flags with captions -in English or Arabic- stating "Jabhat Al-Nusra: Al-Qaida in Bilaad Al-Sham", or pictures and references to AQ leaders explicitly stressing their virtues and guidance. Strong, explicit references almost disappear in issues 3 and four: in spite of an increase in the proportion of references detected in issue 3, the nature of the references tends to become more implicit and the association with AQ more subtle. In particular, images of black AQ banners or pictures and articles portraying Bin-Laden, Anwar Al-Awlaki and Ayman Al-Zawahiri leave the space to weaker links to the shared ideology and common past.

The recorded shift from MEDIUM/STRONG to WEAK/MEDIUM is consistent with two interpretations. On the one hand, the split from Al-Qaida was announced less than a month before the release of the third issue: as previously explained, the decision was widely interpreted simply as a PR move to deceive the international community and other rebel groups in Syria. In this context, the decreasing connection strength recorded in issue 3 and 4 can, therefore, be explained as an attempt by JAN and AQ to use Al-Risalah as an instrument of deception and diplomacy. On the other hand, however, the trend is consistent with the hypothesis of a progressively weakening relationship between AQ and JAN. In spite of a robust and enduring ideological affinity, the gradual waning of the connection with AQ can constitute a symptom of preference diversion and loosening control by the parent organisation. In this scenario, JAN would still retain its AQ heritage, but diverging strategic views and focus would continue to weaken the franchise.

5.3 The AQ and IS Connection Strength Index in Al-Risalah

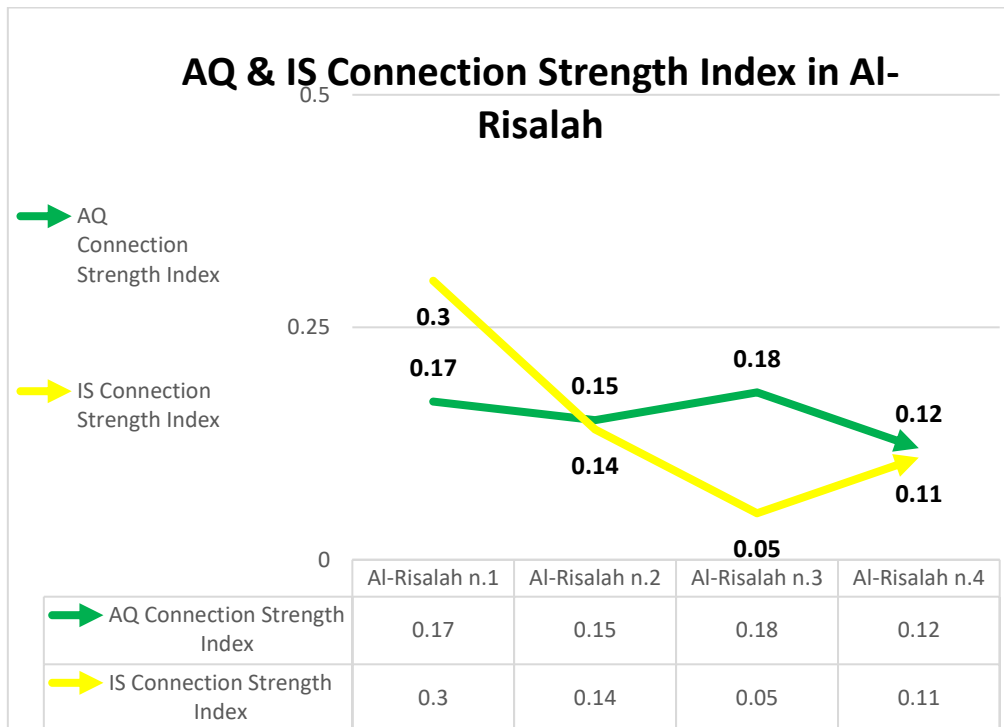


FIGURE 17 - SUMMARY IS AND AQ CONNECTION STRENGTH INDEX IN AL-RISALAH

Figure 17 summarises the connection strength established by Al-Risalah with IS and AQ and provides useful insights into Jabhat Al-Nusra's relationship with the two leading jihadist groups, and into the overall purpose of its magazine.

The evolution of the CSI related to IS throughout Al-Risalah shows how the hostility towards Al-Baghdadi's group progressively declines from issue 1. The magazine, widely interpreted as a reaction to IS appears to increasingly forget about its initial target, with intensity and frequency of references making the connection strength level VERY WEAK in three of the four issues released to date (presenting scores ranging from 0.05 to 0.14). The first issue, characterised by a WEAK to MEDIUM connection strength, represents the strongest effort to delegitimise its Islamic nature, views, and actions of IS leaders and militants: the focus on the rival is here likely to be the result of the prolonged heavy clashes between IS and JAN occurred in 2014 and 2015. The decreasing intensity and hostility of references to IS can also be explained by looking at the condition of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria between 2015 and 2017. In May

2015, IS reportedly controlled half of the Syrian territory (Al-Arabiya,2015), with high portions of its territorial gains resulting from an offensive against JAN and other rebel groups. In the summer of 2015, when the first issue of Al-Risalah was released, IS constituted a more severe threat to the survival of JAN than the regime. However, since 2015, the advance of Kurdish forces, the Syrian regime's army, and Russian and U.S. airstrikes have caused a rapid and progressive contraction of IS territory and military capability. the caliphate's progressive territorial loss and subsequent de-escalation of clashes with other jihadist groups are mirrored in the pages of Al-Risalah that devotes progressively less attention and animosity into the information war against its rival and competitor. Nevertheless, in spite of the recorded decrease in the overall intensity of hostility levels towards IS throughout the following editions of the publication, each issue continued to present content explicitly targeting Al-Baghdadi's caliphate.

On the other hand, the CSI value related to references to AQ displays an overall VERY WEAK connection established by Al-Risalah with the former parent organisation. The VERY WEAK connection to AQ portrayed by JAN's magazine and the decrease of references' intensity following the official split from the parent group is compatible with the hypothesis of Al-Risalah as an instrument of diplomacy and deception. According to this interpretation, the primary audience of the magazine would not be Western Muslims, but the international community and other rebel groups. According to this view, the whole publication would, therefore, constitute, a red herring aimed at downplaying the link with AQ to escape airstrikes and unite rebels under JAN's banner.

Although other interpretations of the results can be provided, the results are consistent with the challenges affecting the parent – affiliate relationship identified by Byman. In particular, if the qualitative content analysis of the magazine highlighted potential signs of preference diversion, the intensity/sentiment of references to AQ in the magazine is consistent with the hypothesis of weak oversight by the parent organisation. By analysing the data, not only the overall connection strength is low, but the intensity related to each reference is decreasing quite significantly in the last two issues. While, as previously stated, affiliates in their propaganda outlets tend to stress the

connection to the core, in Al-Risalah we see few and progressively less explicit references to AQ. In its magazine, JAN exhibits the traits of a rather free-standing armed group that, while still inspired by AQ ideology, sees its formal and operational links to AQ fading out throughout the four releases.

Conclusion

The present paper examined Jabhat Al-Nusra's relationship with the Islamic State and Al-Qaida through the lens of its magazine Al-Risalah.

The two levels of analysis have contributed to better assess the way JAN views the Islamic State, its ideology and strategy. In particular, two main conclusions can be inferred via the qualitative content analysis of Al-Risalah's articles. On the one hand, the hostility towards Al-Baghdadi's groups is corroborated by a significant proportion of articles aimed at undermining its legitimacy and openly criticising its extremism. Three main reasons appear behind the information campaign of the magazine against IS: the unilateral declaration of the caliphate, its neglect of the Islamic scholars, and its takfiri ideology that sparked fitna (division) within the ranks of the mujahideen. At the same time, however, a number of statements throughout the publication shows some degree of affinity with the group's proactive posture and its initially positive role in awakening the Muslim community and promote jihad. As evidenced in the magazine, JAN emphasises its non-military component as well as its governance and law-enforcement structures in the areas it administers. The focus on territorial and political authority that emerges from Al-Risalah constitutes a similarity IS's first publication Dabiq, confirming JAN's emulation of the strategy pursued by IS in the administration of areas under its control, including Idlib (Watts,2016:4). Secondly, the intensity and sentiment analysis of Al-Risalah's references to IS display a decreasing focus on the rival between 2015 and 2017, interpreted as a consequence of the decline of the caliphate in Iraq and Syria and, conversely the decrease of the threat posed to Jabhat Al-Nusra's survival. As noted by Turner (2015:217), similarly to IS, JAN attempts to establish itself as a military, social, and political actor by performing the functions that are normally the burden of a state. Nonetheless, Al-Risalah's harsh criticism of the rival's extremism confirms how, although "ISIS and Al-Nusra may not differ a great deal on matters of religious ideology" (Turner,2015:217), al-Nusra's pragmatism allows it to understand the blowback of the takfiri ideology adopted by Al-Baghdadi.

Concerning the relationship with AQ, a number of factors in the magazine highlight potential sources of tensions and crisis between the two groups. Evidence in Al-Risalah suggests how the challenges of preference diversion and

weak oversight affecting the relationship between parent organisations and affiliates, identified by Byman (2014), appear to apply for the AQ – JAN relationship. The qualitative content analysis highlights differences in themes, targets and objectives between the affiliate and its parent. In particular, the absence of a global scope and the total disregard for the far enemy clearly emerge from the magazine. At the same time, the intensity and sentiment analysis of the JAN-AQ relationship in Al-Risalah displays a positive yet very weak connection strength, characterised by progressively fewer and less explicit references to the parent organisation, as displayed by the Connection Strength Index. As thoroughly explained in each section, advocates of the total identification of JAN with AQ would argue that the differences detected in the magazine and the weak relationship emerging from its pages would be the result of a strategy developed by AQ to ensure the survival of its Syrian affiliate. However, such a theory would imply an authoritative and centralised Al-Qaida, with a strong command and control structure that allows its leadership to effectively direct the action and strategies of its local affiliates. Such an organisation ceased to exist a long time ago. While in 2013 Jabhat Al-Nusra's survival highly depended on the protection, appeal, and assistance of its parent, things seem to have radically changed since then. Following the progressive affirmation of JAN as one of the leading rebel factions in Syria, AQ's ability to maintain its command over the affiliate appears on the verge of vanishing. Not only JAN's localised struggle does not appear to gain benefits from its affiliation with AQ, but the association to the popular international terrorist network came to constitute a serious problem to JAN's plans in Syria. As reminded by Byman (2014:458), AQ's propaganda and striking attacks in the West were "a disaster" for its local jihadist affiliates, as they prompt counterterrorism efforts worldwide, including in areas where global powers would rather not be dragged in. As a consequence, despite a strong ideological affinity, the neglect of its transnational nature, the focus on the territory, and the weak references to the AQ brand noted in Al-Risalah can be seen as an expression of preference diversion and weakening connection between JAN and its parent.

Overall, the findings of the present research appear to be consistent with the hypothesis of Jabhat Al-Nusra as a progressively independent actor with its own agenda, methods and strategy. In particular, a number of characteristics

highlighted by the analysis of Al-Risalah, such as its localised nature, Salafi-jihadist ideology, focus on territorial control, and strategic pragmatism, are all compatible with the idea of Jabhat Al-Nusra as a “jihadist hybrid” between Al-Qaida and the Islamic State. The future of the group would be characterised by adherence to the Al-Qaida’s ideological heritage without formal nor operational cooperation with the former parent organisation. Additionally, AQ’s traditional pragmatism would remain part of JAN’s legacy, allowing the group to successfully navigate the tumultuous waters of the Syrian civil war and exploit to its advantage the power vacuum that will likely follow. On the other hand, in spite of the ongoing violent conflict against IS, JAN continues to display some affinity with IS’s strategic view based on strong initiative, territorial control, and forceful imposition of its authority in the administered areas. These characteristics potentially make JAN a third path to the caliphate, via media between the non-strategy of IS and the old-fashioned immobility of AQ. If we add to the hodgepodge the localised focus clearly displayed by JAN in Al-Risalah, the group’s evolution could make it more and more similar to what the Taliban have become in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Similarly to the jihadist cousins, JAN’s destiny in Syria could be characterised by its control over limited areas of Syria, where the group enforces its authority and imposes Islamic law, and from where it directs a long-term insurgency against the central government.

The fourth and latest issue of Al-Risalah was released in January 2017, simultaneously with the new rebranding into Hay’at Tahrir Al-Sham. In the past two years the group has changed dramatically, eating other jihadist factions and losing some others. It is unclear if Al-Risalah will survive the new rebranding; however, should the magazine be released in a new issue, it would constitute an extremely interesting instrument to analyse the evolution of the messages, targets, language, and references to AQ and IS.

Although a wide range of endogenous and external factors contribute to determine and modify the evolution and strategies of jihadist groups, evidence from jihadists’ propaganda output can benefit the overall understanding of each group’s behaviour and strategic view, leaving the door open to interpretations

that challenge traditional presumptions and avoid over-simplifications and group-think. The identification of Jabhat Al-Nusra as a jihadist exception made by the present research on Al-Risalah can bring two, distinct, positive contributions to the future of the research focused on the global jihadist movement. Firstly, in a field dominated by studies on IS and Al-Qaida's propaganda, the present research highlighted the need to devote more attention to the products of less popular and more local actors like Jabhat Al-Nusra. On the other hand, the content, intensity, and sentiment analysis adopted for the present research can serve as examples to more systematically analyse jihadist magazines and further stress the extraordinary role of this type of propaganda items for violent extremist organisations.

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