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Maintaining the Movement: ISIS Outreach to Westerners in the Post-Caliphate Era

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Maintaining the Movement: ISIS Outreach to Westerners in the Post-Caliphate Era

Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens and Julien Bellaiche
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About the Program on Extremism

The Program on Extremism at The George Washington University provides analysis on issues related to violent and nonviolent extremism. The Program spearheads innovative and thoughtful academic inquiry, producing empirical work that strengthens extremism research as a distinct field of study. The Program aims to develop pragmatic policy solutions that resonate with policymakers, civic leaders, and the general public. The views and conclusions contained in this document are those of the authors and should not be interpreted as necessarily representing the official policies, either expressed or implied, of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security or The George Washington University. This material is based upon work supported by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security under Grant Award Number 0STTPC00001-03-01.

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Introduction

Since the fall of the Caliphate, the activities and overall threat posed by Western jihadists has undoubtedly diminished.¹ A recent study released by the Program on Extremism, for example, demonstrated a steady decline in jihadist activity in the United States (U.S.) since 2020. In this three-year period, only twenty-nine Americans have been charged, compared to eighty-two in the previous three years.² Similarly, Europe has experienced a steady annual reduction in jihadist arrests from 718 in 2016 to 260 in 2021.³ This is the second period since 9/11 where there has been a marked decline in the ability to radicalize and mobilize people to support the jihadi movement or conduct attacks in the West.⁴ Whether or not the cycle of (relative) success and decline will repeat itself depends on a number of factors, some of which are harder to predict than others. What is clear for now is that there remains a pool of committed Western jihadists who are working to keep the movement alive in the U.S. and Europe in hope that future opportunities for mass mobilization may arise.

This report investigates how Western jihadists and efforts to radicalize Westerners have adapted to the post-Caliphate reality and the current downward trajectory and complements the Program's recent quantitative analysis of the Islamic State (IS) threat in the U.S. Some Western jihadi strategies have remained the same, such as the calls to conduct lone actor attacks in the West. However, there have been some marked shifts in strategic communications. For instance, in some cases the discourse about Muslim grievances resembles those that were prevalent during the previous lull in Western jihadist activity, such as a refocusing on Muslim prisoners in the West.

The report opens with an overview of how Western jihadists have responded to the online post-Caliphate world in which many of the online platforms popular among jihadists have become increasingly proactive in removing jihadist accounts and content. Here, there is evidence of a reversion to an earlier, pre-Caliphate, era of online jihadism in which much activity and file sharing took place on forums rather than mainstream social media platforms.

¹ While there is no exact date which can be identified as the fall of the IS Caliphate, this report will date this roughly to the start of 2019, by which point the group's hold in territory in Iraq had come to an end and just three months before the fall of one of the final IS holdouts in Baghuz, Syria.

² Vidino, Lorenzo, Seamus Hughes, and Bennett Clifford. "The Islamic State in America: After the Caliphate." Program on Extremism. 2022. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/islamic-state-in-america-after-the-caliphate>.

³ European Union. "TE-Sat 2020." Pg. 33. <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-events/main-reports/european-union-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report-te-sat-2020>.; European Union. "TE-Sat 2022." Pg. 21. <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-events/main-reports/tesat-report>.

⁴ After an initial flurry of jihadist activity in the West after 9/11, the period between 2005-2010 saw the fewest annual plots and attacks. The impact of the emergence of IS in 2011 led to a new and unprecedented mobilization of Western jihadist which lasted until the Caliphate began to collapse in 2018 and finally fell in 2019. For more see: Nesser, Peter. "Toward and Increasingly Heterogeneous Threat: A Chronology of Jihadist Terrorism in Europe, 2008-2013," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 37, no. 5 (2014); Klausen, Jytte. *Western Jihadism*. Oxford, 2021: 398-448.

Following this, the study introduces the ideologues and propaganda that currently define the state of jihadism in the West. One key development has been recent releases from prison, or removal of communication restrictions, of influential ideologues such as Ahmad Musa Jibril and Anjem Choudary.

Finally, the report addresses how jihadist output aimed at Westerners, produced by sympathizers and official jihadist group media wings, has responded to the fall of the Caliphate. This section will analyze the discourse around new or re-emerging themes in the jihadist media, focusing on two prevalent issues – the fight to release imprisoned jihadists, and the response and narrative around the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

How do Jihadists Use the Internet Today?

The jihadist information ecosystem is a complex network connecting a variety of platforms across the surface and dark web. The ecosystem's resiliency relies on diverse means of content diffusion to ensure survival – when activity is removed from one platform, it can be moved to another.⁵ While this ecosystem has developed relatively freely, growing concerns over the proliferation of jihadist content prompted governments and security agencies to adopt countermeasures.⁶ These steps – which included suspending accounts, “deplatforming,” removing online jihadist content, and pressuring social media companies to act against jihadists using their platforms – significantly impeded jihadists' online activity. Yet, jihadist groups have repeatedly and adeptly adapted to these measures and remained active on multiple platforms. This section briefly describes how the online jihadist ecosystem was disrupted by governments and social media companies in the recent past and provides an assessment of how jihadists continue to use the internet today.

⁵ Fischer, Ali, Nico Prucha and Emily Winterbotham. “Mapping the Jihadist Information Ecosystem.” *Global Research Network on Terrorism and Technology*, no. 6 (2019): 22.

⁶ Weimann, Gabriel and Asia Vellante. “The Dead Drops of Online Terrorism: How Jihadists Use Anonymous Online Platforms.” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 15, no. 4 (2021): 39.

Earlier Disruptions of Jihadists' Online Activity

As has been well established by years of research on the topic, jihadist groups and individuals quickly leveraged the internet for internal communication, ideological promotion, and online recruitment.⁷ In response to a surge of jihadist activity across the web, especially since the emergence of Islamic State (IS), companies such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have initiated a series of countermeasures to curtail jihadist propaganda shared on their platforms, including content and account removals.⁸ Additionally, Telegram, an encrypted messenger app that was long been favored by jihadists, began to actively remove harmful content from its platform. To highlight these efforts, it created "ISIS Watch", a bot that provides updates on the number of channels linked to IS that have been banned by the company.⁹

These efforts occurred in tandem with governmental efforts to disrupt jihadist' online activity. Beginning August 2016, Europol led a first strike against the IS news agency, Amaq's, mobile application and web infrastructure. A second action led by the Spanish Guardia Civil and supported by Europol, Eurojust and the United States further targeted IS web infrastructure in June 2017. These strikes reportedly enabled the identification of radicalized individuals across 133 countries and detection of 200 million accesses to IS content by 52,000 potential users.¹⁰ In October 2018, Europol's European Union Internet Referral Unit (EU IRU) intensified its efforts and launched a coordinated action with the National Referral Units of Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom (U.K.) that focused on the removal of IS and al-Qaeda (AQ) online propaganda shared on Telegram.¹¹ This operation occurred about two months after Telegram's founder, Pavel Durov, announced the platform would disclose terrorists' IP addresses and phone numbers to the relevant authorities if it received a court order to do so.¹² In November 2019, Europol strengthened its efforts through a joint plan involving twelve Member States and nine online service providers – including Telegram, Google, Instagram, and Twitter – effectively degrading much of the IS activity on Telegram.¹³ More recently, in May 2022, Europol coordinated a joint operation involving authorities of six European countries to remove extremist content from the online distribution platform SoundCloud. The most recent strike led to the

⁷ Charlie Winter et al. "Online Extremism: Research Trends in Internet Activism, Radicalization, and Counter-Strategies." *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* 14, no. 2 (2020); Zeiger, Sara and Joseph Gyte. 2020. "Prevention of Radicalization on Social Media and the Internet." In *Handbook of Terrorism Prevention and Preparedness*. Ed. Alex P. Schmidt. International Center for Counter-Terrorism, 2020: 358.

⁸ Zeiger and Gyte, "Prevention of Radicalization on Social Media and the Internet," 358.

⁹ See Telegram channel "ISIS Watch." <https://t.me/ISISwatch>.

¹⁰ Europol. "EU Law Enforcement and Judicial Authorities Join Forces to Disrupt Terrorist Propaganda Online." November 19, 2019. Accessed August 11, 2022. <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/eu-law-enforcement-and-judicial-authorities-join-forces-to-disrupt-terrorist-propaganda-online>.

¹¹ Europol. "Referral Action Day with Six EU Member States and Telegram." October 18, 2018. Accessed August 11, 2022. <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/referral-action-day-six-eu-member-states-and-telegram>.

¹² "Messaging App to Cooperate in Terror Probes, But Not in Russia." *CBS News*, August 29, 2018. Accessed on September 7, 2022. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/telegram-encrypted-messaging-app-cooperate-terror-investigations-not-russia/>.

¹³ Europol. "EU Law Enforcement and Judicial Authorities Join Forces to Disrupt Terrorist Propaganda Online."

suppression of 1,100 profiles and audio files from a range of violent extremist movements, including jihadist propaganda such as *nasheed* (jihadist chants) in several languages and audio promoting violence.¹⁴

These actions initiated by law enforcement and social media companies significantly impacted jihadist online activity, principally on Telegram.¹⁵ Jihadists were however quick to adapt to their changing online environment and found new ways to disseminate content across the internet by migrating to both settled and new platforms such as Twitter, Rocket.Chat, TamTam, Nandbox, and Hoop messenger.¹⁶

¹⁴ Europol. "Terrorist and Extremist Chants Used to Woo Recruits – Focus of Latest Europol Referral Action Day." May 20, 2022. Accessed August 11th, 2022. <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/europol-coordinates-action-against-bomb-manuals-available-online>.

¹⁵ Binder, Laurence and Raphael Gluck. "Affaiblie mais pas hors-jeu : les récentes mutations de la propagande de l'EI." *IFRI Security and Defence Blog*, January 2020.

¹⁶ Amarasingam, Amarnath, Shiraz Maher and Charlie Winter. "How Telegram Disruption Impacts Jihadist Platform Migration." *Center for Research and Evidence on Security Threats*. January 8, 2021. Accessed August 11, 2022. <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/how-telegram-disruption-impacts-jihadist-platform-migration/>.; Europol. "Online Jihadist Propaganda: 2021 in review." March 24, 2022. <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-events/publications/online-jihadist-propaganda-2021-in-review>.

The State of Today's Jihadist Online Ecosystem

Despite the disturbance of jihadist online activity by social media companies and law enforcement agencies, jihadi groups and individuals continued to invest resources to expand their audiences across the internet. Over time, they found ways to circumvent regulations and exploit loopholes in each platform's content policies on mainstream social media such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. As seen on Facebook and Instagram, jihadists reportedly use emojis in place of words that could be linked to harmful content to avoid detection. On Twitter, jihadists seem to censor English content more compared to posts written in Arabic.¹⁷ Jihadists also regained visibility on Telegram by constantly replacing channels removed by online moderators with new ones. This resurgence is, however, hardly comparable to the level of jihadist activity on platforms prior to Europol's 2018 and 2019 operations.

Jihadists' social media resilience is also supported by an ecosystem of channels specializing in operational security (OpSec) advice in the supply of hacked accounts, and in the production of phone numbers to create new accounts. Until recently, IS Electronic Horizons Foundation (Afaq) was one of the most important OpSec actors in the jihadist online scene which educated jihadists on how to navigate the internet safely. Among other things, Afaq advised followers to use tools like Tor or VPN to avoid detection, shift to more secured platforms, and use private cryptocurrencies. Other foundations, such as Bank al-Ansar, have supplied similar services such as providing OpSec advice and offering accounts and phone numbers to gain visibility on social media.¹⁸

Online jihadist magazines play a significant role in disseminating OpSec advice as well. A recent issue of the AQ-aligned magazine *O Mujahideen in the West* included two pages dedicated to online safety, providing instructions on how to carry out online activities while avoiding detection. This included covering their digital footprints using a VPN and/or Virtual Machines, adopting discreet behavior both online and offline, and installing portable versions of apps popular in jihadist circles on USB drives to use them on multiple devices while keeping their personal computers clean of suspicious software.¹⁹

The jihadist online ecosystem also migrated towards less exposed social networking sites, such as Rocket.Chat. In recent years, this open-source chat platform has become one of the most reliable havens for online jihadist communication. Often described as an alternative to the messaging program Slack, Rocket.Chat enables jihadist groups and individuals to chat with one another and share content via servers on controlled platforms that resemble traditional internet forums.²⁰ Its decentralized architecture and owner-operated servers make it particularly resilient and difficult for law enforcement agencies to trace, allowing jihadists to access it virtually without restraints. These features proved

¹⁷ Scott, Mark. "Islamic State Evolves 'Emoji' Tactics to Peddle Propaganda Online." *Politico*, February 10, 2022. Accessed August 11, 2022. <https://www.politico.eu/article/islamic-state-disinformation-social-media/>.

¹⁸ Europol. "Online Jihadist Propaganda: 2019 in Review." July 28, 2019. <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/online-jihadist-propaganda-2019-in-review>.

¹⁹ al-Tawhid, Hurras. "O Mujahideen in the West". *Hurras al-Tawhid*, no. 5 (April 2022): 3-4.

²⁰ "Homepage." Rocket.Chat. Accessed August 11, 2022. <https://rocket.chat/>.

attractive to jihadist groups: IS launched its Rocket.Chat server *TechHaven* in December 2018, shortly after Europol's 2018 Telegram crackdown, and a year later, AQ-affiliated Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF) announced the creation of AQ's Rocket.Chat server *GeoNews*.²¹ Both groups actively operate there, freely conversing, sharing propaganda, and regularly posting links to content hosted in other platforms. Rocket.Chat remains one of the main platforms jihadists use for online communications.

Rocket.Chat is also used to promote other platforms including Element, an open-source software of instant messaging that implements Matrix protocols and enables users to communicate across different service providers.²² Sometimes called by its former name Riot, IS supporters first used Element in 2017.²³ Later, Afaq strongly encouraged followers to switch to Element, arguing it was more secure than other messaging apps like Telegram, Signal, and WhatsApp. The foundation even opened a chat platform called *S-Chat* on Element in April 2021, which was shut-down a month later for unknown reasons. Shortly thereafter, in July 2021, Afaq developed the chat server *Coffespot* which provided direct access to chat rooms connected to IS supporters and became increasingly popular among its followers.²⁴ However, in March 2022, a cyberattack against *Coffespot* resulted in the server shutting down and considerably impacted jihadists' trust in the platform. While links to Element chat rooms are still shared on Rocket.Chat, it has declined in popularity.

Another method jihadists have adopted is the use of virtual "dead drops." Taken from intelligence terminology, the term describes an espionage method of passing items between individuals through secret locations while avoiding direct contact. Recently, jihadists began operating in a similar fashion online, using anonymous sharing portals (such as JustPaste.it and Telegraph) and cloud-sharing platforms (such as files.fm, Pixeldrain, Mediafire, OneDrive, CloudShare, Nextcloud, Cloudflare, Yandex.Disk, Mixdrop, 4shared, Cloudmail, Top4top, pCloud, UsersDrive, and Dropapk) as virtual "dead drops."²⁵ These platforms enable users to upload content without any identification requirements and provide sharing links. They allow jihadists to anonymously upload and download propaganda material, enhancing their resilience against content loss from other platforms. Jihadists promote these links across platforms, especially on Rocket.Chat where the material posted is often accompanied with sharing links from several "dead drops" platforms.

Finally, it is worth noting that non-jihadist Salafi movements play an increasing role in promoting narratives of identity, religious guidance, and political grievances online, which may in turn fuel sympathy towards violent Salafi-jihadist groups. For instance, The Institute for Strategic Dialogue estimated that the number of daily messages shared from Salafi accounts more than doubled on social media platforms between October 2019 and July 2021. Their online reach also grew across languages

²¹ "Rocket.Chat Remains One of the Most Resilient Platforms for Jihadists." *Flashpoint*, December 20, 2020. Accessed August 11, 2022. <https://flashpoint.io/blog/rocket-chat-remains-resilient-platform-for-jihadists/>.

²² "Homepage." Element. Accessed August 11, 2022. <https://element.io/>.

²³ Europol. "Islamic State Group's Experiments with the Decentralised Web." 2019. Pg. 5.

²⁴ Azani and Haberland, "The End of Islamic State's Cyber Security Unit Afaq," 5-6.

²⁵ Weimann and Vellante, "The Dead Drops of Online Terrorism: How Jihadists Use Anonymous Online Platforms," 44-46.

and social media platforms, including mainstream ones such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and TikTok.²⁶

²⁶ Guhl, Jakob and Milo Comerford. "Understanding the Salafi Online Ecosystem: A Digital Snapshot." *The Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, November 2021. Pg. 5.

Current Trends in Jihadist Outreach to Westerners

Influential extremist ideologues have over recent years served their prison sentences and are active online again, using both open platforms like YouTube and Odysee, and more private platforms such as Telegram and others discussed in the previous section. The most popular living preacher among American jihadists, Ahmad Musa Jibril, was released from prison in 2012, and since 2014 has been among the most popular English-speaking preachers for Western jihadists.²⁷ Unlike other Western jihadist preachers, Jibril has religious pedigree. He underwent classical theological training in Saudi Arabia and even claims to have *tazkiyyah* (official commendation) from major scholars in the Saudi religious establishment including former grand mufti of Saudi Arabia Abdullah bin Baz and Muhammad ibn al-Uthaymeen. Jamaican-born jihadist cleric and former ISIS recruiter Abdullah al-Faisal is the only other jihadist in the West with similar credentials to Jibril's, having also studied in Saudi Arabia for many years.

While Jibril does not make direct calls to violence nor openly support specific jihadist groups, his lectures focus on all of the key themes of the movement, including the importance of establishing an Islamic state, the threat to Muslims posed by secular governance, and the importance of hating and distrusting non-Muslims in Western society. Using standard Salafi-jihadist terminology, he refers to Western states as evil systems of *jahilliyah* (ignorance) under the control of *taghut* (tyrant) rulers who oppress Muslims and prevent the establishment of Islamic law.

Jibril was imprisoned between 2005 and 2012 after being convicted alongside his father on a litany of charges unrelated to terrorism or extremism. A jury found both men guilty of bank fraud, mail fraud, social security fraud, money laundering, possession of firearms and ammunition by a felon, and failure to pay income taxes.²⁸ During the sentencing phase of his trial, however, the government presented evidence that Jibril was an extremist to maximize the penalties and sentence length. The government's memorandum drew on materials from a website Jibril operated called *alSalafyoon.com*.

While regularly encouraging his students to spread Islam by the sword and to hate and kill non-Muslims, Jibril also recommended other influential activists and Salafi-jihadists that shaped his views on the pursuit of jihad to his students. He frequently recommended the work of Saudi sheikh Hamoud bin Uqla al-Shuaybi, and his acolytes Nasir al-Fahd and Ali al-Khudayr, calling them the true imams of *tawhid* (oneness of God). Jibril told his followers that Uqla gave "many good *fatwas* (Islamic judicial decree)" including the "best *fatwas* for our current situation, the 9/11 situation."²⁹ Uqla's ruling that 9/11 was a justified attack on the U.S. also influenced another American jihadist preacher, Ali al-Tamimi,

²⁷ Carter, Joseph A., Shiraz Maher, Peter R. Neumann. "#Greenbirds: Measuring Importance and Influence in Syrian Foreign Fighter Networks." *International Center for the Study of Radicalization and Violence*. April 22, 2014. <https://icsr.info/2014/04/22/icsr-report-inspires-syrian-foreign-fighters/>.

²⁸ "Government Sentencing Memorandum." United States v. Ahmad Musa Jibril.

²⁹ "Ahmad Musa Jibril." Unnamed and undated lecture.

who referred to the same *fatwa* when urging his followers to take up arms against the U.S.³⁰ Jibril continues to promote the works of these Saudi jihadists today. In 2022, he began a campaign in support of Nasir al-Fahd, endorsing and translating his work into English for his Western followers.³¹ Jibril described Fahd as an *alim* (respected scholar), and claimed to be providing the translation partly to “raise awareness” about him. Fahd pledged allegiance to IS from his Saudi prison cell in 2015 and is now among the most highly qualified and respected living jihadist scholars.³²

Jibril’s association with more extreme elements of Saudi Islamist-influenced Salafism likely formed his views on the legitimacy and merits of jihadist violence that predate 9/11. Just weeks before the attacks, he posted an article entitled “The Call to Jihad in the Quran” in which he praised violent jihad and urged Muslims to embrace its hardships.³³ Another post, “Jihad in Allah’s Cause,” recounted various stories about the tenants of jihad. Jibril argued that even paradise is no match for martyrdom: “Nobody who dies and finds good from Allah [in the Hereafter] would wish to come back to this world...except the martyr who, on seeing the superiority of martyrdom, would like to come back to the world and get killed [in Allah's Cause].”³⁴ In a post titled “Jihad and Expedition,” readers were told that non-Muslims must accept Islam or pay *jizya* (a special tax) and, if they refuse to pay, “seek Allah's help and fight them.”³⁵

The website also featured a poem praising Osama bin Laden and Taliban leader Mullah Omar and contained many standard Salafi-jihadist themes.³⁶ Jibril bemoaned Western Muslims’ “love of life,” which prevented them from fighting to defend the *ummah* (Muslim community) while “our women are raped and our children are butchered.” What was needed, according to him, was a “lesson to kill by use of weapon” and “battle with joy.” The honor and dignity of Muslim women – “dignity and respect of a single Muslim woman is most precious than all *Kafir* (non-Muslim) men” – is a key theme which Jibril used to engender moral outrage among his audience with the intent of inspiring armament. He similarly pointed towards sectarian messages that regularly refer to Shia Muslims as “followers of the Devils” and used the derogatory *rafidha* (rejectionists) in order to elicit strong reactions.³⁷ Jibril continues to successfully deploy both of these themes to this day.

³⁰ “Indictment.” United States v. Ali Asad Chandia et al. United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia. Pg. 7.

³¹ One example of this is Chandia’s translation of Nasir al-Fahd’s “The Causes of Istighfar,” released in late 2021.

³² Bunzel, Cole. “The Kingdom and the Caliphate: Duel of the Islamic States,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. 2008. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/02/18/kingdom-and-caliphate-duel-of-islamic-states-pub-62810>.

³³ Jibril, Ahmad Musa. “The Call to Jihad in the Quran.” alSalafyoon.com. <https://web.archive.org/web/20011108093442/http://alsalafyoon.com:80/EnglishPosts/jihad2.html>.

³⁴ Jibril, Ahmad Musa. “Jihad in Allah’s Cause.” alSalafyoon.com. <https://web.archive.org/web/20010904200013/http://www.alsalafyoon.com:80/EnglishPosts/jihad.html>.

³⁵ Jibril, Ahmad Musa. “Jihad and Expedition.” alSalafyoon.com. <https://web.archive.org/web/20011108092143/http://alsalafyoon.com:80/EnglishPosts/jihad1.html>.

³⁶ Jibril, Ahmad Musa. “Al-Jihad.” alSalafyoon.com. <https://web.archive.org/web/20010831133234/http://www.alsalafyoon.com:80/EnglishPosts/poem2.html>.

³⁷ Jibril, Ahmad Musa, “What Scholars Say About Shi’a Sect”, alSalafyoon.com. <https://web.archive.org/web/20010107210400/http://www.alsalafyoon.com:80/EnglishPosts/shclarsonshia.htm>.

After 9/11, many Salafis in the U.S. sought to distance themselves from promotions of violent jihad. However, Jibril remained defiant and made no effort to hide his views. Not only did he openly praise Uqla's *fatwa* but, almost as an act of defiance, did not even seek to remove his praise of bin Laden from the site. In January 2003, Jibril moved to a new website, *ahmadjibril.com*, although *aSalafyoon.com* remained online for many years. The new site eventually was taken down but was replaced in early 2022 by another site maintained by his followers.

While Jibril was active online and became an influential preacher among Western IS supporters within the first few years after his release from prison, his online activities were restricted from 2014 until 2017.³⁸ Since then, he has once again become a prolific content producer, releasing long lectures on a range of issues which concern Western jihadists. Having learned from past experiences, he avoids any direct incitement to violence or support for specific groups, but nonetheless produces work which helps to create the conditions for jihadist violence at home and abroad. While less explicit than what was found on *aSalafyoon.com*, elements of Jibril's Salafi-jihadist beliefs are still present in his recent works. He avoids directly calling for jihad as he had done on his old site, but does allude to it, including naming it as one way of entering paradise.³⁹ He also regularly refers to secular leaders as *taghut*, a derogatory term popular among Salafi-jihadists, and warns of the evils of choosing man-made law over Sharia'. In one article he discusses *takfir* (excommunication) warning that to "judge by other than Shari'a" was an act of disbelief that "nullified" one's Islam and could make them an unbeliever.⁴⁰

Worryingly, Jibril has a significant presence on popular platforms including YouTube, with both official and unofficial accounts attracting tens of thousands of views and subscribers. Despite YouTube's efforts to remove extremists from its platform, Jibril remains an active user, likely due to his cautious discourse that goes undetected by content moderators who lack the necessary knowledge of jihadism to recognize his content as problematic. Although YouTube has restricted and "demonetized" some of his videos, the platform has decided not to remove his account.

Other non-U.S. based English-speaking ideologues who have influenced American jihadists are also re-emerging after years in prison for terrorism offenses. The U.K.'s Anjem Choudary and his protégé Abu Baraa have both served their sentences for calling followers to join IS and pledging allegiance to the group. Since their release in late 2018 they have continued to be active online. They produce output which, while clearly still in support of the jihad movement, is carefully worded to avoid incitement to violence or any other violation of the terms of their release.⁴¹

³⁸ Maher et al., "#Greenbirds: Measuring Importance and Influence in Syrian Foreign Fighter Networks."

³⁹ Jibril, Ahmad Musa. "Paradise is Unique." *ahmadjibril.com*.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20041014151338/http://ahmadjibril.com:80/students/paradise.html>.

⁴⁰ Jibril, Ahmad Musa. "Ten Things Which Nullify One's Islam." *ahmadjibril.com*. <http://ahmadjibril.com/articles/nullify.html>.

⁴¹ "Anjem Choudary's Extremist Network Rebuilds in Year After Radical Cleric's Early Release from Prison," *Counter-Extremism Project*. October 23, 2019. <https://www.counterextremism.com/press/anjem-choudary%E2%80%99s-extremist-network-rebuilds-year-after-radical-cleric%E2%80%99s-early-release-prison>.

One preacher who has recently had his ability to influence extremists removed is Abdullah al-Faisal who acted as a preacher and recruiter for IS from his base in Jamaica during the height of the Caliphate.⁴² Unlike his counterparts, however, he was extradited to the U.S. in late 2020 where he remains in custody awaiting trial for multiple terrorism charges and is unlikely to be free to continue his work for many years to come.

Finally, despite his death in 2011, American-born AQ preacher, recruiter, and attack planner Anwar al-Awlaki remains among the most respected and cited sources among American jihadists. He is regularly referenced in new jihadist propaganda emanating from both AQ and IS supporters, and by convicted IS-influenced American terrorists despite his AQ roots. Al-Awlaki is quoted widely in recent English-language jihadist propaganda.

Key Platforms and Outlets

Dabiq and *Rumiyah*, the two most popular official IS magazines often aimed at Westerners, stopped producing new and regular content in mid-2016 and late 2017 respectively.⁴³ Since then, there has been a marked decrease in jihadist propaganda tailored to Westerners. This is partly due to the killing of experienced and influential American content producers who were based in IS territory. American citizen Ahmad Abousamra, for example, was central to the production of *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* until his death in 2017 and has proven difficult to replace.

While Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's (AQAP) *Inspire* magazine has significantly reduced its output since it stopped producing regular editions in 2017, it has seen a small revival in recent years.⁴⁴ The *Inspire* brand is still used to produce brief "Praise and Guide" magazines intended to help Americans conduct lone-actor attacks and analyze recent plots, including the 2021 shooting in Boulder, Colorado by Ahmed Al-Aliwi Al-Issa.⁴⁵ AQAP has continued to call for attacks on the U.S. and is among the most active current jihadist groups to focus on this. While it does not seem to retain the capacity to be directly involved in planning operations in the U.S. as it did during the height of Anwar al-Awlaki's involvement in the late 2000s, it has been suggested that these calls for attacks on the U.S. may partly be an attempt to deflect from AQAP's struggles in Yemen.⁴⁶

The main IS English-language output today with an official affiliation comes from the ISIS branch in Afghanistan, IS Khorasan Province (ISKP) via its media outlet al-Azaim. It produces English-language

⁴² Hughes, Seamus, Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, and Clifford, Bennett. *Homegrown: ISIS in America*. November 12, 2020. <https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/homegrown-9781788314855/>.

⁴³ Ingram, Haroro. "Learning from ISIS's virtual propaganda war for Western Muslims: A comparison of Inspire and Dabiq." *The International Center for Counter Terrorism*. July 26, 2017. <https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2017/07/INGRAM-nato-chapter-21JUL17.pdf>.

⁴⁴ Kendall, Elizabeth. "Twenty Years After 9/11: The Jihadi Threat in the Arabian Peninsula." *CTC Sentinel* 14, no. 7 (September 2021).

⁴⁵ *Inspire: Praise and Guide* no. 6 (June 2021).

⁴⁶ Kendall, Elizabeth. "Twenty Years After 9/11: The Jihadi Threat in the Arabian Peninsula."

audio lectures focusing on issues such as *aqeedah* (creed) and jihad, and a regular magazine called *Voice of Khurasan* (VoK), which at the time of writing, had published eighteen issues since it emerged in January 2022.⁴⁷ VoK's emerged soon after the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021 and is aimed at attacking the Taliban's leadership as apostates due to what IS perceives as their improper implementation of Islamic law, their nationalism, and their fight against ISKP in the country at the behest of Western powers. It pushes a conspiracy about the "*murtad*[d] (apostate) Taliban" as "US mercenaries" who signed a peace agreement with America and were put in power as part of a plot by America and its allies in Afghanistan.⁴⁸

Made up of lengthy and dense articles, VoK is almost entirely focused on communicating the IS anti-Taliban agenda to Western supporters, while highlighting ISKP military successes against the Taliban and foreign forces in Afghanistan. It also continues to disseminate standard IS themes such as its virulent sectarianism, the importance of establishing a "pure" Islamic state which follows the correct *aqeedah* (creed) and methodology, and the war between "truth and falsehood" which heralds the imminent end of days. India also receives attention from ISKP due to its government's extreme anti-Muslim policies and the increasing levels of violence against Indian Muslims at the hands of Hindutva ultra-nationalists, who IS perceives as polytheists and idol worshippers.⁴⁹ Much of the current propaganda aimed at Westerners emphasizes the oppression of Muslims in India and presents it as an important new front in the global war on Islam.

There is, however, little effort to promote terrorism in the West to be found in the pages of VoK. In the rare instances where the magazine does turn to the domestic situation in the U.S., the focus is on presenting it as a nation in terminal decline. It purports that American citizens are being killed in ever-increasing numbers as a result of the "American boomerang." According to this metaphor, the U.S. is enduring the divine punishment for the violence it meted out to Muslims: "They never considered that their pointless war on Islam, in the name of 'war on terror,' will be answered in a divinely dictated way, when a shooter having nothing to do with Islam and 'radicalization' (in their words) welcomes a mass gathering of U.S. civilians with several rounds of automatic rifle... The Americans will be paid back in such a divine way, from the Lord of the worlds, until they step back from their bellicose foreign policy."⁵⁰

VoK does, however, claim that it wishes to target neighboring "nations of *kufir* (disbeliever)" including Uzbekistan, Iran, and China.⁵¹ It also celebrates stories of supposed foreign fighters who traveled to Afghanistan to fight and die for ISKP, and calls on its readers to follow suit and make *hijrah* (migration), although none of the cases highlighted are of Westerners.⁵² Afghanistan is presented as an example

⁴⁷ All issues in author's possession.

⁴⁸ See for example: *Voice of Khurasan* 2. Pg. 8.

⁴⁹ See for example: "India: Between Pain and Hope." *Voice of Khurasan* 9. Pgs. 3-6.

⁵⁰ *Voice of Khurasan* 10. Pg. 46.

⁵¹ *Voice of Khurasan* 4. Pg. 12.

⁵² See for example: *Voice of Khurasan* 4.

of the success of the Islamic State since its struggles in Iraq and Syria, noting that “after Iraq and Syria, the most important province is the province of Khurasan.”⁵³

While VoK is an official product of ISKP (not central IS leadership), much of the jihadist propaganda available online is currently produced by non-official media outlets and sympathizers instead of centrally controlled media outlets.⁵⁴ This is also reflected in English-language jihadist output aimed at Westerners that encourages terrorist attacks in the West. Although these calls for action remain relatively limited, they continue to emerge from unofficial AQ and IS supporter networks based online. One of the main examples of this is *O Mujahideen in the West (OMW)*, an online magazine produced by a pro-AQ network of online jihadists under the banner of Hurras al-Tawheed (HAT). HAT emerged from an AQ Rocket.Chat platform and has a presence on other social media platforms including Chirpwire.⁵⁵ While the magazine has an AQ affiliation and claims to be in direct contact with AQ, it also claims it is “not an AQ magazine” and avoids attacking IS or becoming involved in the general bad blood between the two groups.⁵⁶ In an interview with scholar Tore Hamming, one of the members of HAT explains that “Hurras Al-Tawheed has not made the magazine exclusive to AQ supporters, it is for every Muslim who resides in Western countries to do an attack.”⁵⁷

One edition of the magazine also directly addresses the enmity that has arisen between AQ and IS under the headline “Al-Qaeda or Dawlah?”⁵⁸ The author argues that the dispute only benefits the “nation of kufr” and Western jihadists must ignore the divisions between jihadists seen in the East to unite against their common enemies. Western jihadists are asked to “forget all this and stand together under the banner of tawheed. Don't we both want to establish *Hudud* (punishments based on Islamic laws)? Don't we both want to enjoy the execution of the Zionists? Have we forgotten that we always fail when we do not stand together?”⁵⁹ In its most recent issue from May 2022, *OMW* readers are also reassured and told they must have patience as “the *Khilafa* (caliphate) will return.”⁶⁰ This trend of unifying the movement in the West while rejecting, or otherwise ignoring, the *fitna* (disunity) between AQ and IS taking place in the Middle East and Africa is a common feature of post-Caliphate jihadism in the West. It is notable that such calls for unity and avoidance of *fitna* with other jihadists is mostly found in AQ-related output, while IS remains focused on attacking AQ and the Taliban. According to EUROPOL, another unofficial AQ outlet, Thabat News Agency, which focuses much of its efforts on Western audiences, has also celebrated the fact that jihadists in the West were moving beyond specific group affiliations to target their enemies more effectively.⁶¹

⁵³ *Voice of Khurasan* 1. Pg. 27.

⁵⁴ Europol. “Online Jihadist Propaganda: 2021 in review.”

⁵⁵ Hamming, Tore. “‘O Mujahideen in the West’: Interview with Hurras al-Tawheed.” *Jihadica*, May 28, 2022. <https://www.jihadica.com/o-mujahideen-in-the-west-interview-with-hurras-al-tawheed/>.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*; “Al-Qaeda of Dawlah?” *O Mujahideen of the West*. March 4, 2022.

⁵⁷ Hamming, “‘O Mujahideen in the West’: Interview with Hurras al-Tawheed.”

⁵⁸ *O Mujahideen in the West* 4.

⁵⁹ “Al-Qaeda of Dawlah?” *O Mujahideen of the West*.

⁶⁰ *O Mujahideen in the West* 6.

⁶¹ Europol, “Online Jihadist Propaganda: 2021 in review,” 34.

This “post affiliation” jihadism has continued to evolve, and in some cases, attackers are inspired by generic jihadist causes they pick up in the propaganda or in other online spaces where the messages have diffused into, but do not claim any affiliation or support for a specific group. A recent example is Faisal Malik Akram, a British extremist who was inspired by both the antisemitic and prisoner-victim tropes found in current jihadist output to undertake his January 2022 terrorist hostage taking at a Texas synagogue while demanding the release of convicted terrorist and jihadist cause *célèbre* Aafia Siddique.⁶² While it remains unclear what specific content Akram was viewing, the ideology has become so diffuse and widespread that such a question is rapidly losing its relevance. Similar attacks that are disconnected but loosely jihadist-influenced may become more common as extremist ideas continue to be diluted and made available across multiple platforms, often presented as generic Islamic content.

The quality of *OMW*'s design and general output, including the writing style, is noticeably inferior to the magazines which precede it and contrasts starkly with the style of *VoK*. The issues are short, often no more than eight or ten pages, and contain brief articles or simply quotations from popular AQ-aligned jihadists such as Anwar al-Awlaki, Abdullah Azzam and Ayman al-Zawahiri. It also contains tributes to Samir Khan, one of the most impactful Western jihadist propagandists and, alongside Awlaki, the creator and editor of *Inspire*. Indeed, *OMW*'s editor addresses the brevity of their output, explaining that they have “adapted the *Dawah* (proselytization)” to the needs of today’s youth who are used to “short and quick information” and are inspired by the popularity of short Tik-Tok videos and YouTube “shorts.”⁶³

Similar to its predecessors, *OMW* is aimed at inspiring and assisting Western jihadists to carry out attacks in their home countries. It contains bomb-making instructions along with guides on how to conduct assassinations and other attacks. At the same time, it urges readers to ensure that the attack motives are made clear to the public so as to avoid “giving the *kuffar* (disbeliever) chance to lie about you....and say that you were a “crazy individual” who did not take your meds that day.” Prospective attackers are therefore encouraged to “make sure to shout your *Takbirat* (Allahu akbar). Let the nation of *kufir* know that the *Ummah* has sent a lion to seek revenge for the mistreated believers.”⁶⁴

While magazines like *Inspire* and *Dabiq* encouraged Western jihadists to pursue small scale “lone-wolf” attacks, *OMW* tells readers to think bigger and “not waste your time on small lone wolf attacks, go to their embassies, courts, security checkpoints and strike them in their gathering of *kufir*. Let the blamers blame! While you are in *Jannah* (heaven) after your operation, the *munafiqeen* (hypocrites) will suffer

⁶² Barrett, Devlin, Matt Zapotosky, Jack Douglas, and Souad Mekhennet. “Texas hostage-taker searched Internet for rabbis, gun shops and Aafia Siddiqui.” *The Washington Post*, January 20, 2022.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/texas-hostage-akram-buchdahl/2022/01/20/69296bc0-7a01-11ec-9102-d65488c31bb1_story.html.

⁶³ “Why Short Magazine?” *O Mujahideen of the West* 3, March 2022.

⁶⁴ *O Mujahideen in the West* 6.

in their graves.”⁶⁵ However, it presents itself as a continuation of *Inspire*, and has even re-produced *Inspire*’s “Lone Wolf Guide” containing a compilation of all the bomb-making and tactical instructions.⁶⁶

The editor of *OMW* is also well aware that many of his readers will be researchers and analysts (present company included), and he directly, and often playfully, addresses this demographic with articles such as “Kafir Feedback.” “We enjoy your distress by our magazines,” taunts the author, “May our words continue [to] give you restless nights. We see your tweets, and articles. Go ahead!”⁶⁷ In another taunt, the author writes: “We know you are looking at our magazine, we know you are spying on us, we know you want us jailed. O Kafir, we have conquered your languages, we know how to blend in. So enjoy the fear, knowing that the Muslim who lives in your country, who is your neighbor, will be the one who is going to make you meet your Creator.”⁶⁸ Both playful and intimidating, this breaking of the analyst wall, as it were, is a natural evolution of jihadist propaganda and communication after years of Western jihadists noting how researchers and academics are monitoring and analyzing them.⁶⁹

Although the collapse of the Caliphate dented the confidence and prospects of Western jihadists, recent propaganda output attempts to retain hope and encourage optimism by offering opportunities for continued involvement in the movement. One recent Western jihadist memoir, published unofficially and shared in Western jihadist networks, captures the sadness of losing the Caliphate but also the hope and defiance which remains among Western jihadists. “The Forgotten Wound: Baghuz,” is an anonymous account of a Western female survivor of the fall of Baghuz, which signaled the end of the Caliphate as a territory-holding entity. The account, allegedly sent from the al-Hol camp where she is (or was) held, provides a graphic and gloomy account of the final days of IS in Baghuz, but also hope and belief for the future of the movement. The author opens with a statement explaining why she decided to share the memoir, expressing hope that it “would benefit our hearts and strengthen our *imaan* (faith), increase our *yaqeen* (confidence/certainty) and make us firm in our trust in Allah. And I hope that even just one person reads these reminders and goes forth to sacrifice for Allah.”⁷⁰ She begins her story with a description of how she and other mothers tried to care for their children while under heavy bombardment during the siege of Baghuz. Food was scarce and conditions were becoming increasingly unlivable: “it was a nightmare in the toilets, everyday it would be blocked with feces. every time I would have to wash my son, I would place my hand on his backside to clean him and feel all the bubbles and sores and rashes caused by the cloth nappy and he would cry out of pain which would put a knot in my throat. but there was no choice.”

In the final days, she and other families frantically dug trenches as places to shelter and sleep during nighttime bombardments. It felt like “the world was caving in on us” after years of living in relative

⁶⁵ *O Mujahideen in the West* 3.

⁶⁶ Al-Tawheed, Hurras. “Lone Wolf Guide.”

⁶⁷ *O Mujahideen in the West* 3.

⁶⁸ *O Mujahideen of the West* 2.

⁶⁹ AQAP’s *Inspire* was among the first to dedicate sections of the magazine to Western articles and analysis about the jihad movement but did not go as far as directly addressing them in the way *OMW* does.

⁷⁰ Anonymous. “The Forgotten Wound: Baghuz.” 2022.

prosperity and comfort in the Islamic State. A far cry from how things started out for her and other Western travelers to the Islamic State, she recalls the days of the “5-star jihad” when they all lived in mansions and there were no food shortages. But then, “there came the tests which crumbled all the luxury into rubble.” Many failed and ran away, leaving only the most committed behind: “the truthful ones were made evident and the liars were exposed.”

She and many others found solace in famous stories from the *seerah* (histories of Mohammed and his companions) in which the *sahaba* (companions of the Prophet) faced similar trials “under siege and encircled by enemies,” but nonetheless emerged victorious and stronger. She and her fellow IS members are merely the latest generation of true believers to face the tests of God: “Allah repeats the tests and trials for the believers among the generations and indeed the Promise of Allah is True. and if we are to be tested like the righteous before us, surely we will also reap the rewards and the victories that came after the tests.”

Now in camps or facing arrest and prosecution back home, she and her fellow travelers have but one regret – allowing themselves to be captured and taken to camps. Looking back, she claims that “every second we spent there under the rockets and missiles, the bullets and every blow, every bang, it was the most valuable time of our lives.” They were living the most authentic life and should have “attained the ultimate victory, *shahada* (martyrdom), like our companions did.” The IS, and thus wider *ummah*, has been “betrayed” by Muslims who fled the Caliphate and those who refused to take part in its preservation and expansion in the first place. It will, however, expand again to protect the *ummah*, and terrorize its enemies:

Our corpses and skulls will make a bridge for this *ummah* to get to the brighter side, to return to the days of might and strength. Our *dawla* has not ended and the enemies of Allah know this themselves. Our *aqeeda* has not ceased to remain in the pumping hearts of the *muwahideen*. We will remain taking revenge for our state and the *muslimeen* everywhere and we will remain making the lives of the *kuffar* a nightmare. We will remain supporting our brothers from the *mujahideen*. We will remain fighting and going to lengths to implement the Laws of Allah upon the earth.

Although these are the words of just one of the many thousands of Westerners who joined IS during its heyday, this memoir is a useful example of the mindset of those who remain committed to its project and ideology. Defiant to the end, they intend to continue their work in its former territories, along with areas where IS is emerging, and back home in the West.

Despite the examples discussed in this section, overall jihadist content curated specifically for Westerners has declined in both quantity and quality. However, there has been a growth in the outsourcing of translating jihadist material into English for online sympathizers. Through a loose network of social media accounts and static websites, English-speaking jihadist sympathizers are

invited to provide translations to historic as well as new jihadist content produced in Arabic or other languages.⁷¹ Users are also able to request specific translations through these channels.

Imprisoned Jihadists

The following sections will analyze how the theme of Muslim prisoners today has a renewed relevance for Western jihadists in the post-Caliphate landscape. This is a defining feature of the post-Caliphate world for Western jihadists, since most of those who joined IS or acted on its behalf in the West are dead, imprisoned in either camps or Western prisons, or awaiting trial. Connected to this, there has also been an emergence of coordinated attacks conducted by jihadist prisoners in the West which are recognized as in-prison jihadist terrorist attacks.

While this has always been a topic of interest among Western jihadists, there has been a clear shift in focus to imprisoned jihadists over recent years, both in output aimed at them and in the activities Western jihadists have pursued. English-speaking jihadists have even produced an online magazine, *al-Aseer* (the prisoners) specifically focused on this issue.

Prisons and Prisoners in Western Jihadist Propaganda

A significant portion of propaganda aimed at Westerners now focuses on jihadists in prison, but often masquerades as concern for all Muslims imprisoned in the West. The magazine *al-Aseer*, for example, is produced by Western jihadist sympathizers whose *kunyas* (name) suggest they are Canadian but with no clear allegiance to AQ, IS, or any other specific jihadist group. It is also a useful representation of the post-affiliation jihadism presents itself as a benign Islamic magazine and part of a wider “Free the Aseer” movement. The imprisonment of jihadists is framed by the editors as part of an effort to oppress all Muslims around the world. However, the magazine only addresses the cases of notorious jihadists. The front cover of the first issue included pictures of a range of known ideologues, preachers, and recruiters from the Saudi AQ ideologue Nasr al-Fahd, to the Jamaican pro-IS sheikh and former recruiter Abdullah al-Faisal. In addition, the magazine expresses support for the overthrow of un-Islamic governments and praises the work of jihadist preachers in the West for playing a “vital role in the revival of Islam” in Europe and the U.S.⁷²

The featured article of the first issue is authored by British jihadist ideologue Anjem Choudary who has sought to highlight the Muslim prisoner issue to his online audience since his release from prison in 2018 after serving a two-year sentence for promoting IS. According to Choudary, Muslims are in prison in the West because of the “absence of Islam as a ruling system and hence a shield behind which to defend themselves.”⁷³ In keeping with the theme of the magazine, he calls on Muslims to do all they

⁷¹ The authors have accessed multiple static websites which have emerged over recent years which offer crowdsourced English translations upon request, but have chosen not to share the names of these to avoid disseminating them further.

⁷² *Al-Aseer* 1. November 2021.

⁷³ Choudary, Anjem. “The Tragedy of Muslim Prisoners in our Times!” *al-Aseer* 1. November 2021.

can to free Muslim prisoners without offering many clear suggestions as to how this can be done. In the context of both his and the magazine's pro-jihad stance, there is a clear implication that violence may be one effective and legitimate way to achieve this goal. Later in the first issue, readers are provided with other suggestions about how to help prisoners and are informed that hastening their release is a religious duty ordained by God. In this case, the suggestions focus on campaigns, protests, financial support for prisoners and their families, and writing them letters of support.

The second issue of *al-Aseer* shifts focus to women and their role in supporting Muslim prisoners, often portraying them as wives of imprisoned jihadists. This issue is significant because it covers the case of Aafia Siddique, and it was released just two months before Faisal Malik Akram attacked a synagogue in Texas in support of Siddiqui. Described as the "bleeding wound of the *Ummah*," Siddique's imprisonment in the United States is presented as the result of a combination of Muslim leaders who have betrayed Islam (such as Pakistan's lack of action in securing her release after her arrest in the country), and American "oppression and injustice against the Muslim *Ummah*."⁷⁴ It is also claimed that she suffers anti-Muslim abuse at the hands of prisoners and guards by being refused access to a prayer mat and headscarf, and that she was as attacked by an inmate and placed into solitary confinement in July 2021.⁷⁵

The issue also places the blame on the U.S. and the U.K. for the "rape and murder of children" in the al-Hol and al-Roj camps in Syria.⁷⁶ The U.K.'s decision not to repatriate women and children who are British-citizens, a policy which has been widely criticized by analysts, researchers, and officials from international partners, draws particular ire from the author.⁷⁷ This exploitation of the plight of women and children in the camps has become a popular propaganda message over recent years, in particular for IS.

The third and thus far final issue of *al-Aseer* examines violence against Muslims in south Asia which is an increasingly popular concern among Western jihadists. They are especially concerned with India, where Muslims have been targeted by Hindutva extremists, and Sri Lanka, where Muslims have faced increased persecution since the Easter 2019 IS-inspired attacks in the country. The author is particularly concerned with what they claim to be mass arrests and jailing of Indian Muslims for offences which have been created specifically to target Muslims such as proselytizing to Hindus, along with the lynching of Muslims by Hindu extremists. Additionally, the magazine focuses on Sri Lanka's anti-terror laws since the 2019 bombings which have led to attacks and large-scale imprisonment of Muslims and the banning of the face veil for Muslim women.

⁷⁴ Al-Kanadi, Abu Aisha. "Aafia Siddique: The Bleeding Wound of the Ummah." *al-Aseer* 2. November 2021.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ "The Scandal of the Rape and Murder of Children in al-Hol Camp and US/UK Complicity!" *al-Aseer* 2. November 2021.

⁷⁷ Sabbagh, Dan. "Britain must repatriate Isis fighters, warns US defence secretary." *The Guardian*, September 6, 2019.; Dworkin, Anthony. "Beyond good and evil: Why Europe should bring ISIS foreign fighters home." European Council on Foreign Relations. October 25, 2019.

While *O Mujahideen of the West* does not give as much attention to prisoners as *al-Aseer*, it turns to this issue in various articles, often imploring Western jihadists to conduct attacks aimed at freeing prisoners or killing prison guards on their way home from work. One article asks, “Are we going to let them rot in jail?” before imploring readers to conduct “operations” including: “Destroy their prisons, bomb their guards, slaughter each and every officer, and rescue the poor souls who have been oppressed. Stab the guards who work in any prison, who have Muslims in it!”⁷⁸

The situation is considered urgent, and the jailing of jihadists in the West is often compared either to the treatment of Uyghurs in China or Jews during the Holocaust: “The Jews were sent to their camps during WWII, and this same event is happening to the Muslims.” Protests and online posts, readers are told, will make no difference and only violence will do: “and still no one is willing to fight back. By Allah, your protest does not save them, your twitter or Facebook posts have not saved a single person!”⁷⁹

Anjem Choudary’s contribution to *al-Aseer* is one of a number of examples where he and other Western jihadist ideologues have sought to highlight the problem of jihadist prisoners in the West. In late August 2022, he and other notorious U.K. jihadists, including Abu Izzadeen who has served prison time for inciting and funding terrorism, held an online conference called “Free the Muslim Prisoners,” in partnership with that AQ-affiliated media outlet Thabat News Agency.⁸⁰ At the conference, they continued their written work by framing the jailing of jihadists as a crime against Muslims, and part of the wider conspiracy to destroy Islam in the West. Convicted terrorists were lionized uncritically and presented as heroes and victims.⁸¹

This is one of a series of similar events held over the last few years that focused on freeing jihadist prisoners hosted by convicted Western jihadists who had recently been released. In January 2021, Abu Izzadeen, Choudary, and Abu Baraa held an online conference of the same name.⁸² While the events avoided direct incitement to violence, seen in the context of the background of the speakers, the support they received from a known AQ media organ, and the vitriolic language used about Western nations, they certainly helped create the conditions for violence related to imprisoned Muslims in the West.

Near the end of his contribution to the August 2022 conference, Choudary expressed his hope that future events could include the participation of Ahmad Musa Jibril. Choudary spoke of his respect for Jibril while also noting that he may be unavailable due to certain “restrictions” placed on him. This is likely a reference to possible ongoing court orders Jibril faces about consorting with known extremists. It is notable that Choudary, a key figure in Western jihadist radicalization, views Jibril as a fellow traveler, although it is unclear if the feeling is mutual.

⁷⁸ *O Mujahideen in the West* 5.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ For more on Thabat see: Europol, “Online Jihadist Propaganda 2021 in Review.”

⁸¹ A video of the conference is in the author’s possession along with online publicity for it.

⁸² A video of the conference is in the author’s possession along with online publicity for it.

It is unsurprising that Choudary views Jibril as a potential partner when discussing imprisoned jihadists, as it is a topic also very close to Jibril's heart. In September 2021, roughly four months prior to Faisal Malik Akram's attack on the synagogue in Texas in support of Aafia Siddiqui, Jibril released a lecture entitled "Free the Captives and the Plight of Aafia Siddiqui."⁸³ As a former prisoner himself, it is a subject of regular interest to him and one he can speak about with authority. The lecture was presented by his followers as part of an online campaign called "#Free_Sister_Aafia."⁸⁴

Freeing Muslim prisoners is framed as a religious duty, a claim he backs up by citing Hadith, specifically from Sahih Bukhari: "The Prophet said, 'Feed the hungry, visit the sick, and set free the captives.'"⁸⁵ The jailing of Siddiqui is presented as "one of the thousands of acts of hostility we see today" being carried out against Muslims by the U.S. and its allies. That she is a woman makes the issue even more serious: "you fear for her *deen* (faith), and her wellbeing" but also "her honor", which it is a Muslim man's duty to protect. This specifically refers to preserving chastity and wearing *niqab* (face covering), which he suggests female Muslim prisoners are not allowed to do when they are imprisoned – "their niqabs are forcefully lifted off their faces." In Islamic history, according to Jibril, "when an outsider took captives, especially when it was women, it was a declaration of war considered more hostile than invading Muslim land," and the Muslims would "eradicate towns off the face of the earth."⁸⁶

All over the world, he says, there are examples of female prisoners having their honor disrespected, such as in Iraq, Palestine, Syria, and China's Uyghurs, and the "prime example": Aafia Siddiqui's "horrific personal ordeal has made her an icon for the plight of Muslim women unjustly held in prisons all over the globe." Her case is a "crown of disgrace" for the U.S. and an "unmasking of the reality of their injustice system." Although he stops short of calling for violence, he claims Muslims should feel shame for failing to help and encourages them to do more.

Jibril also included his own personal experience in the U.S. justice system as a prisoner to lend further legitimacy to his words, and to provide the basis for his claim that Siddiqui was set up and did not commit the shooting of a U.S. soldier while in custody. The protocols for weapons around prisoners, in his experience, are so tight and exact that the idea that a "100-pound woman surrounded by translators and soldiers" could get hold of a rifle and shoot a highly trained American soldier is "not even something you could put in a fictional book...it's something only a halfwit can believe." The entire judicial system is against Muslims, and he claims that even a Muslim's own lawyers cannot be trusted, noting both he and Siddique attempted to fire their lawyers who were "imposed upon us." Muslims are being jailed by a corrupt and flawed "*tawaghit* (secular) system...of *jahilliyah* (non-Islamic state)" which relies on twelve jurors who are made up of "random crackheads or biased meth addicts from some alley or slum, and between hearing a fairy tale story and slumbering and sleeping in the courtroom like they did in my

⁸³ Jibril, Ahmad Musa. "Free the Captives and the Plight of Aafia Siddiqui." September 2021.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Sahih al-Bukhari, Book 75, Hadith 9.

⁸⁶ Jibril, "Free the Captives and the Plight of Aafia Siddiqui."

own case, they wake up convicting an innocent woman.”⁸⁷ Once in prison, Muslims are mistreated by guards who invade their privacy and “take their PTSD anger out” on them. Speaking again from his own experience, he claims that most of the correctional officers he encountered were veterans of the War on Terror who harbored special animosity towards Muslims.

Aafia Siddiqui is not the only jihadist prisoner of interest to Jibril. In his translation and analysis of one of AQ ideologue Nasir al-Fahd’s more recent works, he claimed that Fahd is “being unjustly held as a captive.”⁸⁸ Full of praise for “Sheikh Nasir,” whose work he compared in quality to that of Ibn Taymiyya, he explained the importance of promoting “such *ulema* (respected scholars)” so that “people can know them” and benefit from their teachings despite their imprisonment. Jibril also provided details of his personal relationship with Fahd, stating that they have been in direct contact both before and after Jibril’s imprisonment. Prior to going to jail, Jibril would receive all of Fahd’s latest publications directly from him and disseminate them among his followers via his now defunct *al-Salafyoon.com* website. The book he translates in the video, according to him, was sent to him by Fahd’s followers after Jibril’s release from prison. Keeping the works of Saudi jihadist scholars like Fahd alive and relevant for Western Muslims not only demonstrates Jibril’s ongoing jihadist intentions but is also a unique contribution that only he is currently making to jihadist activism in the West.

Jihadist Violence in Prisons

Violent jihadist activity in prisons predates the post-2019 period covered in this report, and such incidents should also be seen in the context of wider violence against prison guards. However, it is only in the last few years that attacks officially recognized as, or at least resembling, terrorism have begun to emerge, and they are usually linked with IS sympathizers. Given the number of jailed IS sympathizers today, it is likely that this form of terrorism will make up a significant portion of post-Caliphate jihadism in the West.

There are several examples of this phenomenon across Western countries. One of the first known such cases in the U.S. was that of Abdulrahman El-Bahnasawy. In December 2020, El-Bahnasawy shanked a prison officer in the eye whilst shouting “Allahu akhbar” at the Allenwood Federal Penitentiary in Middleburg, Pennsylvania.⁸⁹ At the time of the stabbing, in which the victim survived, Bahnasawy was serving a 40-year sentence for planning a IS inspired attack in New York. Prior to this, in France in March 2019, a convicted jihadist prisoner stabbed two prison officers in what was described by the then French Justice Minister as a terrorist attack.⁹⁰ In January 2020, convicted British terrorist Brusthom

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Jibril, “The Causes of Istigfar.”

⁸⁹ Beauge, John. “Prisoner charged with trying to kill Allenwood guard who was stabbed in the eye.” *Penn Live*, August 21, 2021.

<https://www.pennlive.com/news/2021/08/prisoner-charged-with-trying-to-kill-allenwood-guard-who-was-stabbed-in-the-eye.html>.

⁹⁰ Giordano, Chiara. “French prison guards stabbed by suspected Islamist inmate in ‘terror attack.’” *The Independent*, March 5, 2019.

Ziamani and an accomplice undertook a planned attack on a prison officer. They were found guilty of attempted murder in what was the first officially recorded terrorist attack in a British prison. Then, in May 2020, three convicted British jihadists, including Hashem Abedi, the brother of Manchester bomber Salman Abedi, attacked a guard in the high-security Belmarsh prison and beat him severely before being restrained by other prison staff.⁹¹

To date, the U.K. is the only Western state to produce an official report specifically looking at terrorism in prisons. Written by the independent reviewer of terrorism legislation Jonathan Hall, the report set out what hall describes as “a matter of international concern.” Hall warned that more work is needed to ensure that prison does not “become a second opportunity for committed terrorists whose attack plans are thwarted in the community.”⁹² While some attacks are committed by extreme right terrorists, Hall writes that “the current terrorist threat in prisons in England and Wales is Islamist terrorism. There is no other comparable threat.”⁹³

Western Jihadist Reactions to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

While the imprisonment of jihadists is a long-standing, if newly renewed, interest of Western jihadists, recent global events have allowed them to project and frame their ideas in new and relevant ways. The Russian invasion of Ukraine provided the perfect opportunity for this and has energized online Islamist and jihadist networks. Many celebrated the emergence of a conflict between enemies, expressing hope that it would serve the interests of jihadist groups, notably in Syria.⁹⁴ In particular, some actors have used the war as an opportunity to increase *dawah*, attempting to fuel resentment against the West among Muslim communities. These allegations echo discontent among Arab and Muslim audiences who denounce Western double standards in its response to Ukraine compared to conflicts involving Muslims and accuse Western policymakers and the media of anti-Muslim and anti-Arab bias.⁹⁵ This

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/france-terrorist-attack-islamist-prison-stabbed-terror-a8809251.html>.

⁹¹ Crown Prosecution Service. “Three terrorists convicted of attacking a prison officer.” February 22, 2022.

<https://www.cps.gov.uk/london-south/news/three-terrorists-convicted-attacking-prison-officer>.

⁹² Hall, Jonathan. “Terrorism in Prisons.” HM Government, April 2022. Pg. 5.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1071318/terrorism-in-prisons.pdf.

⁹³ *Ibid* 7.

⁹⁴ “Jihadist Snapshot: Daesh & AQ Trends – Monthly Analysis #01.” *Moonshot*, April 13, 2022. Accessed August 12, 2022. <https://moonshotteam.medium.com/moonshot-mea-snapshot-series-2dfb8302a261>; “Crusader on Crusader Wars”. *Al-Naba* 328. March 2022.

⁹⁵ Agence France Presse. “Arabs Decry ‘Racist’ Double Standard in Ukraine Media Commentary.” *France 24*. March 1, 2022. Accessed August 12, 2022. <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220301-arabs-decry-racist-double-standard-in-ukraine-media-commentary>; Hankir, Hassan and Hams Rabah. “Arab Refugees See Double Standards in Europe’s Embrace of Ukrainians.” *Reuters*, March 2 2022. Accessed August 12, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/arab-refugees-see-double-standards-europes-embrace-ukrainians-2022-03-02/>; Krauss, Joseph. “Many in Mideast See Hypocrisy in Western Embrace of Ukraine.” *Associated Press*, March 29, 2022. Accessed August 12, 2022.

<https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-islamic-state-group-jerusalem-migration-europe-1ce41cc04aed6afc415e6ed83f83c984>; DiMartino, Jessie and Deena Zaru. “Europe’s Unified Welcome of Ukrainian Refugees Exposes ‘Double Standard’ for Nonwhite Asylum Seekers: Experts.” *ABC News*, March 8, 2022. Accessed August 12, 2022. <https://abcnews.go.com/International/europes-unified-ukrainian-refugees-exposes-double-standard-nonwhite/story?id=83251970>.

section provides an analysis of some of the main trends of reactions to the war in Ukraine, with a focus on narratives aimed at Western audiences. It will argue that these reactions are articulated around three main trends designed to deepen antagonisms and incite violence against the West: 1) Hostile neutrality towards both sides of the conflict; 2) Denunciation of racist double-standards against Muslims; 3) Calls to exploit the war to serve long-term objectives.

Hostile Neutrality

Islamist and jihadist online spheres celebrated the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. They encouraged Muslims not to support either side of the conflict, depicting both belligerents as enemies of Islam whom Muslims should despise and unite against. Ahmad Musa Jibril was amongst the most prominent voices advocating for such a hostile neutral stance in the West. In a tweet shared on his Twitter account hours after the start of the Russian invasion on February 24, 2022, Jibril argued that both “Ukraine and Russia have Muslim blood on their hands” and wished they would destroy one another.⁹⁶ He also called on Muslims to “spare their tears for the *muwahideen* (monotheists, common term for ‘proper’ Muslims) massacred.” This indirectly incited hostility towards both warring parties by portraying them as enemies of Islam whom Muslims should not feel empathy for.

A similar point of view echoed Jibril’s stance a few days later in the 328th issue of *al-Naba*, the IS weekly newspaper. In an editorial dedicated to the war in Ukraine and translated to English, it is argued that the Russian invasion is an example of the “Crusader against Crusader wars.” In this view, the war is the result of the divine curse Allah inflicted upon the West to punish it for exporting wars to Muslim countries.⁹⁷ *Al-Naba* also called on Muslims to disregard any empathy or compassion they might feel after seeing photographs of the destruction in Ukraine, commanding them to remain uncommitted to either side. Again, both Russia and Ukraine are portrayed as enemies of Islam - disbelievers who have Muslim blood on their hands.

Al-Naba furthers this argument by criticizing Muslims involved with either side of the conflict. For instance, *al-Naba*’s editorial accused them of disregarding the doctrine of *al-wala wal-baraa* (loyalty and enmity), blaming some for supporting Ukraine or Russia, and blaming others for waiting for the outcome of the war “to take a position between the two Crusaders.”⁹⁸ It also expressed harsh criticism of Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov and his militias fighting alongside Russia in Ukraine, calling them *murtadd* for serving the “Russian Crusaders.” It thus accused the Chechens of betraying Islam itself.⁹⁹ Prominent Salafi-jihadist preacher Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi shared similar views. He

⁹⁶ “Jihad and Terrorism Threat Monitor (JTTM) Weekly: February 26 – March 5, 2022.” *MEMRI*, March 5, 2022. Accessed September 9, 2022. <https://www.memri.org/reports/jihad-and-terrorism-threat-monitor-jttm-weekly-february-26-march-5-2022>.

⁹⁷ *Al-Naba*, “Crusader on Crusader Wars.”

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*; Maher, Shiraz. *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea*. London: Hurst & Co, 2016: 109-142.

⁹⁹ *Al-Naba*, “Crusader on Crusader Wars.”

declared in a tweet posted on March 5th, 2022, that serving the *tawaghit* opposes the laws of worship, referring to the Chechens fighting alongside Russia.¹⁰⁰

This trend of Islamist and Jihadist reactions to the war in Ukraine establishes both belligerents as enemies of Islam, encouraging Muslims to take a neutral stance and unite against them. At the same time, it condemns the “seditious elements” – Muslims who, by supporting Russia or Ukraine, are seen as traitors to Islam itself.

Denouncing Double Standards

Accusations of racist double standards in the Western response to the war in Ukraine resonated in online Islamist and jihadist circles. Ideologues attempted to exploit this discontent to galvanize Muslim communities against the West. Amongst them, Choudary emerged as a leading voice, actively denouncing these so-called double standards in an extensive online campaign. In the days following the outbreak of the war, hashtags such as #RussianInvasionHypocrisy appeared in posts on social media. They were part of Choudary’s ongoing campaign “Free the Aseer”, which calls for the release of prisoners convicted of terrorism offenses, notably through weekly online protests. Leaflets denouncing “Western hypocrisy” branded with the campaign’s logo and signed by Choudary circulated online, mainly through anonymous accounts.¹⁰¹

Choudary’s denunciation of double standards revolves around three main arguments designed to expose alleged Western enmity towards Islam, as well as alienate and galvanize Muslim communities against the West: 1) Contrasting the Western response to the war in Ukraine and reactions to conflicts in which Muslims are involved; 2) Criticizing the distinction between resistance and terrorism when it comes to Muslim populations; 3) Exposing the discrepancy in Western reactions to the flow of Ukrainian refugees and similar movements of population coming from Muslim countries.

Numerous leaflets produced by Choudary illustrate the first argument. Some focused on the Western reactions to Russian interventions in Muslim countries, and others focused on the wars the West waged across the Muslim world. For instance, one online leaflet had a picture of an alleged bombing in Ukraine alongside a similar picture of bombing that allegedly took place in Syria.¹⁰² The pictures were accompanied with a text accusing the West of indifference when similar bombings against civilians, sometimes conducted by Western countries, took place in Muslim lands. Another leaflet featured three pictures of ruins – one attributed to the war in Ukraine, the two others to two conflicts in which Russia bombed Muslim areas, Syria and Chechnya, accompanied with the above-mentioned hashtags accusing the West of hypocrisy.¹⁰³ Other leaflets denounced the lack of public outrage and

¹⁰⁰ Al-Lami, Mina. “Analysis: Key Jihadist Responses to Russia-Ukraine War.” *BBC Monitoring*, March 4, 2022. Accessed September 9, 2022. <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c203aibr>.

¹⁰¹ Free the Aseer campaign. “Stop Russian Oppression of Muslims.” March 2022.; Free the Aseer campaign. “Twitter Storm Tonight.” March 2022.; Free the Aseer campaign. “Double Standards & Hypocrisy.” March 2022.

¹⁰² Free the Aseer campaign. “Hypocrites – 2.” March 2022.

¹⁰³ Free the Aseer campaign. “Stop Russian Oppression of Muslims.” March 2022.

condemnations from the West of American and NATO operations in Muslim countries, of Israeli actions against the Palestinians, or of Western violations of international law.¹⁰⁴

Choudary's campaign also decries what it considers as Western racist double standards in the distinction between resistance and terrorism. It argues that where Ukrainians are considered heroes when resisting oppression, Muslims are called terrorists. One leaflet notably refers to Vitaly Skakun, a Ukrainian soldier who blew himself up over a bridge outside of Crimea to stop the advance of Russian troops, and whose military commanders honored as a hero.¹⁰⁵ The leaflet goes on to question why Muslims are seen as terrorists in analogous cases.¹⁰⁶ Another collection of posts surmise that neither Ukraine nor Russia is called "terrorist" because neither is a Muslim country. Others point to the U.K. government's support of British citizens who wish to travel to Ukraine to fight against Russia while preventing Muslim from doing the same in Syria.¹⁰⁷

Finally, Choudary's campaign contrasts the Western response to the predicted flow of Ukrainian refugees to that of refugees coming from Muslim-majority countries. One leaflet used images of refugees accompanied with a text accusing Western media and policymakers of hypocrisy. It displays a quote from *CBS News* Senior Correspondent Charlie d'Agata who argued that Ukraine is "a relatively civilized" country compared to Iraq and Afghanistan. The association of d'Agata's quote with pictures of refugees implicitly links the treatment of Muslim refugees in the West with alleged Western racism against Muslims, thus emboldening the accusation of anti-Muslim bias.¹⁰⁸

Accusations of racist double standards are also found in online jihadist spheres. For instance, two letters signed by Abu-l-Qaqa' al-Firansi - possibly a Frenchman who joined the IS in December 2013 - circulated online blame the West for its alleged anti-Muslim bias, and call Muslims to return to Islam because Allah is their "only true ally".¹⁰⁹ The letters revolve around similar arguments found in Choudary's campaign, accusing the West of hypocrisy and double standards. A recent video released by pro-IS media foundation, Asawriti Media, furthered this narrative by adopting and supporting the

¹⁰⁴ Free the Aseer campaign, "Twitter Storm Tonight." Free the Aseer campaign, "Hypocrites." March 2022.; Free the Aseer campaign. "Unlike Ukrainian Blood, It Seems Iraqi Blood Is Not Real Blood." March 2022., Free the Aseer campaign. "Hypocrites – 2."

¹⁰⁵ Quinn, Allison. "Ukrainian Soldier Blew Up Bridge and Himself to Stop Advance of Russian Troops, Kyiv Says." *The Daily Beast*, February 25, 2022. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/ukrainian-soldier-blew-up-bridge-and-himself-to-stop-advance-of-russian-troops-kyiv-says>.

¹⁰⁶ Free the Aseer campaign, "Double Standards & Hypocrisy."

¹⁰⁷ Free the Aseer campaign. "Hypocrites – 3." March 2022.; Free the Aseer campaign. "Hypocrites – 4." March 2022.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*; Lambert, Harper. "CBS Reporter Calls Ukraine 'Relatively Civilized' as Opposed to Iraq and Afghanistan, Outrage Ensues." *Yahoo News*, February 26, 2022. https://www.yahoo.com/entertainment/cbs-reporter-calls-ukraine-relatively-215800274.html?soc_src=social-sh&soc_trk=tw&tsrc=twtr.

¹⁰⁹ "Daesh : Deux Djihadistes Français Appellent à Manifester Contre Obama et Hollande." *Le Parisien*, June 27, 2016. <https://www.leparisien.fr/faits-divers/daech-deux-djihadistes-francais-appellent-a-manifester-contre-obama-et-hollande-27-06-2016-5918191.php>.; Al-Firansi, Abu-l-Qaqa'. "Tirez-en une leçon, O vous qui êtes doués de clairvoyance." April 2022.; Al-Firansi, Abu-l-Qaqa'. "Tu les croirais unis, alors que leurs cœurs sont divisés." April 2022.

Russian view that Ukraine is a Nazi haven.¹¹⁰ In doing so, the group strengthened the sense of Western duplicity and anti-Muslim bias, and pointed out that the West would side with Nazis rather than treat Muslims as equals.

This second trend of reactions to the war in Ukraine is the denunciation of a perceived double standard which serves as proof of the profound and immutable Western enmity towards Islam and Muslims. These accusations of anti-Muslim bias constitute a polarizing rhetoric that aims to enhance bounds within Muslim communities and alienate the community from the West. Perceived double standards in Western foreign policy may also have far-reaching implications regarding the radicalization of individuals. A 2004 leaked report draft written jointly by officials from the British Foreign Office and Home Office identified perceived double standards in the foreign policy of Western governments as a “particularly strong cause of disillusionment amongst Muslims.”¹¹¹ That type of rhetoric may contribute towards the disaffection of elements within Western Muslim communities, making them more open to radical messages.

Exploiting the War

The magnitude of the Russian intervention coupled with the intensity of Western outcry in support for Ukraine led online jihadist spheres to push for a strategic exploitation of the situation. They called on their followers to take advantage of the war, using it as an opportunity to gain strategic advantages on the ground, earn fighting experience, and carry out attacks. As tensions were building ahead of the Russian invasion, a limited trend of jihadists online hoped a war in Ukraine would divert Russia, the United States, and other “foes” away from jihadist fronts. They called other jihadists to seize this opportunity to strengthen their operational capabilities.¹¹²

Such calls appeared, among other places, in the second issue of *O Mujahideen in the West*. In a short article entitled “The state of Putin,” readers are reminded that Russia, like the United States, bombed Syria. It also called on their followers to use the opportunity of the war in Ukraine to prepare for the jihad in Kavkaz.¹¹³ Hurras al-Tawheed’s assumption here is that the Russian invasion would hinder Russian capabilities on other fronts. Jihadists in the West should therefore take advantage of these predicted circumstances and prepare for tomorrow’s jihad in Muslim areas in which Russian influence is deemed to be fading away.

¹¹⁰ Media, Asawriti. “On the Method of the Prophecy.” September 2022.; Bartov, Omer. “Why Does Russia’s Leadership Keep Saying that Ukrainians Are Nazis?” *Wall Street Journal*, May 12, 2022. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/why-does-russias-leadership-keep-saying-that-ukrainians-are-nazis-11652361854>.

¹¹¹ UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office/ Home Office. “Draft Report on Young Muslims and Extremism.” April 2004.

¹¹² “Analysis: Key Jihadist Responses to Russia-Ukraine War.” *BBC Monitoring*. March 4, 2022.

<https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c203aibr>.; “Jihadist Snapshot: Daesh & AQ Trends – Monthly Analysis #01.” *Moonshot*.

¹¹³ *O Mujahideen in the West 2*.

Another example of such narratives is found in *Wolves of Manhattan*, a magazine produced by Jaysh al-Malahem (or al-Malahem Cyber Army), an AQ-affiliated media platform. The magazine, described as “a guide for lone wolves in the Crusaders’ land,” is published in Arabic, French, and English.¹¹⁴ In its third issue, two articles referring to the war in Ukraine suggested that followers exploit the conflict to gain operational knowledge and sow discord in the West.¹¹⁵ In the first article, Jaish al-Malahem encouraged readers to take advantage of Western support of volunteer fighters intending to join Ukrainian forces. They see it as an opportunity to gain “free weapons training” and then leave before being sent to combat zones. The article further argues that as war settles in the country, Ukraine can serve as a launching pad for future attacks where jihadists can set up support bases with limited impediments, stressing that Ibn al-Khattab went to Chechnya and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi to Iraq under similar circumstances.¹¹⁶ The second article points to what Jaish al-Malahem deems as strains resulting from the flow of Ukrainian refugees into Western countries. They encourage followers to contribute to tensions by infiltrating these refugee flows in order to carry out mass casualty attacks across the West.¹¹⁷

The breakout of the war in Ukraine was thus perceived by some jihadist actors as a window of opportunity to progress towards their long-term objectives. The third trend goes beyond incitement against the West and calls for actions such as exploiting Russian involvement to gain a strategic advantage on jihadist fronts, benefit from weapons training, and take advantage of the flow of refugees to sow discord and conduct attacks.

¹¹⁴ Aymenn al-Tamimi. “The Wolves of Manhattan Magazine’: Interview.” March 5, 2021. <https://aymennjawad.org/2021/03/the-wolves-of-manhattan-magazine-interview>.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Conclusion

Despite experiencing a clear and steady decline in popularity and activity, the jihadist movement in the West continues to adapt and evolve while remaining defiant and patient. The movement showed resilience in the past and was rewarded when IS emerged in 2014 and successfully mobilized groups of Westerners who had remained faithful to jihadism through years of decline and decimation at the hands of Western counter-terrorism authorities. This has not been forgotten by the current crop of Western jihadists who express little doubt that more opportunities will emerge in the future.

Their resilience and ability to adapt is reflected in various areas covered in this report. In the online sphere, they have been hit hard by efforts to remove jihadists from mainstream platforms. Output has declined in quantity and quality, and yet they continue to find ways to remain on mainstream platforms like YouTube, Twitter, and Telegram, while also jumping onto emerging ones such as Rocket.chat. Some Western jihadists, such as the creators of *O Mujahideen in the West* or *al-Aseer*, have taken matters into their own hands, producing original jihadist propaganda without any connection to IS, AQ, or any of their official organizational media outlets.

Although propaganda output acknowledges the movement's current struggles, it nonetheless encourages supporters to find new ways to offer their support in such trying times, including helping those who have been imprisoned during the period of decline. In connection to this, it identifies prisons and prison staff as new targets. Additionally, new enemies are also being identified further afield, reflected in the increased interest of Western jihadist propaganda in the rise of anti-Muslim Hindu nationalism in India.

Ideologues, while not as brazen and effective as predecessors such as Anwar al-Awlaki, have re-emerged after years of imprisonment or court-ordered digital silence. They continue to amass supporters and frame jihadist ideology in ways which keep it relevant and appealing to the current generation of Western jihadists. Their jobs, like Awlaki's before them, is to keep the pot boiling for the movement in a time of difficulty, ensuring the preservation of a pool of Western jihadists who are readily available the next time IS, or a group like it, comes calling. They work to keep faith in jihadism strong amongst their supporters and continue to follow and comment on current events. They offer a jihadist framing for major events, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and provide examples of how Muslims remain oppressed and in need of a violent defensive response. The movement will need another significant boost in order to regain the traction it reached during the peak of IS, and while it is unclear if or when this will happen, the will to fight on remains strong.

The findings of this study also have implications for researchers and practitioners focused on understanding and responding to jihadism in the West. One of the key themes which concerns Western jihadists today is the plight of jihadist prisoners both in the West and in camps in Syria and Iraq. As Faisal Akram's 2022 attack in Texas demonstrates, the narrative of Muslim oppression within the American justice system has the potential to help inspire acts of violence. The possibility of future

attacks related to this issue should be considered and planned for, including the targeting of prisons and prison staff as well as the taking of hostages connected to demands for the release of jihadist prisoners.

Secondly, while online censorship remains an important component of countering jihadist propaganda, we show that its ability to silence jihadists and jihadist sympathizers remains limited. After years of observing the moderation and censorship of online jihadist propaganda by technology companies and states, jihadists have learned how to remain accessible and relevant online. Not only do propagandists continue to be easily accessible via platforms such as Rocket.chat and Telegram, but influential ideologues such as Ahmad Musa Jibril have curated their content so that it does not fall foul of the current content policies of mainstream platforms. Jibril retains a sizeable presence on YouTube, for example, where he continues to promote key components of jihadist ideology while avoiding direct incitement to violence. This presents an ongoing challenge for security practitioners, in particular those working in the countering violent extremism (CVE) space, who will need to plan for a future in which jihadist propagandists and sympathizers remain on mainstream platforms.

Relatedly, our findings show that jihadists use their online presence to provide continuous reactions to major world events in order to retain relevance for their audiences. Issues and events which are likely to be attracting the attention of potential recruits and followers are framed in terms of their relevance to jihadist ideology. In their reactions to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, for example, Western jihadists framed it around how the global reaction to Russia's actions prove some of the central claims and themes of jihadist ideology, including that much of the world is inherently hostile to Muslims. This is also an important consideration for those working in CVE, especially those focused on counter-messaging. It demonstrates that, despite the lack of Western military occupation of Muslim lands which helped to legitimize the claims of jihadists during the height War on Terror, jihadist propagandists will always seek to spin world events in ways which further their goals related to recruitment and incitement to terrorism.



Program on
Extremism