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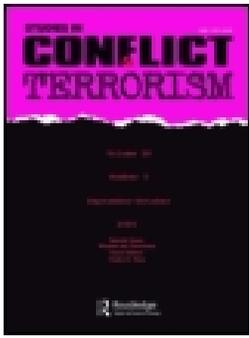**Manuel R. Torres-Soriano**
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Manuel R. Torres-Soriano

Accepted author version posted online: 01 Mar 2016.

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THE CALIPHATE IS NOT A TWEET AWAY: THE SOCIAL MEDIA EXPERIENCE OF AL QAEDA IN THE ISLAMIC MAGHREB

Manuel R. Torres-Soriano

Universidad Pablo de Olavide, Sevilla, Spain and Universidad Autónoma de Chile, Santiago, Chile

Address correspondence to:

Manuel R. Torres Soriano, Área de Ciencia Política, Universidad Pablo de Olavide, Carretera de Utrera Km. 1, Sevilla, 41013 Spain.

E-mail: mrtorsor@upo.es

Abstract

This paper offers a descriptive analysis of the propaganda activities of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb on Internet social media. It examines the group's propaganda actions from its creation in 1998 until the end of 2015 and argues that the use of social media, Twitter in particular, has failed to offer any real remedy to its mediocre propaganda actions. During the period in which its Twitter profiles were active, the organisation continued to manifest the same problems, including a shortage of qualified human resources and poor internal coordination, which had prevented it from engaging in efficient propaganda activity previously. The study of the social media experience of the group offers further evidence of the vulnerabilities of this Maghrebi jihadist organisation.

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The North African jihadist Group Al Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) created its first official Twitter profile on 14 March 2013, using the name @Andalus_Media. The account was part of a drive set in motion in October 2009, when AQIM created the Al-Andalus Institute for Media Production as its official propaganda wing in order to improve its communications actions by bringing them under one roof.

Ever since its creation in Algeria as the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat, GSPC), the terrorist organisation had performed poorly as regards its communications activity[1], a situation which compounded its other problems such as a lack of social relevance, factionalism and constant internal disputes. Its affiliation to Al Qaeda in January 2007 not only led to a change in name but also a determination to improve its poor propaganda apparatus, taking as its model Al Qaeda Central and the latter's most successful regional franchises in terms of communications, particularly Al Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers (Iraq). AQIM managed to increase not only the quantity but also the quality of its propaganda, producing larger amounts of more carefully edited audiovisual materials bearing the hallmarks of the global jihadist movement.

AQIM's decision to engage with the world of social media marked an interesting milestone in its communications strategy and an analysis is of interest for improving our understanding of the propaganda face of jihadist terrorism and the return gained by such organisations from their use of Internet-based instruments of communication.

Academic research into jihadists' use of social media has explored diverse issues, such as the role played by social media in the organisations' global strategy[2], the contribution of "followers" to propaganda dissemination[3], the operational use of social media for perpetrating attacks[4], how follower networks are generated on these platforms and the impact on them of the disappearance of the profiles[5], and the effectiveness of counter-radicalisation strategies that use social media[6].

The present article seeks to provide a meaningful contribution to an aspect of the terrorism/social media relationship which has received little attention to date, namely, how the chosen communication instrument can end up impacting on the group's discourse. The aim of the investigation is not to offer a quantitative analysis of the group's interactions with other users or of the scope of the materials published but rather to examine the impact of Twitter on the volume, content and format of the organisation's propaganda activities.

As the article will show, AQIM's use of Internet social media has produced scant return in terms of enhancing the organisation's propaganda actions. Not only has AQIM failed in its strategy to improve the quality of its communications but, during the period in which its Twitter profiles were active, it continued to be plagued by a lack of qualified human resources and by poor internal coordination, problems which had prevented it from engaging in effective propaganda activity in the past. In this regard, the analysis of its social media experience provides further evidence of the vulnerabilities within the Maghrebi jihadist organisation.

Information sources and methodology

The present work is based on a detailed examination of the content of the propaganda actions of the Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) terrorist group. A comprehensive corpus of

documents was compiled featuring all communiqués issued by the terrorist organisation from its creation in 1998 under the name Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) until the end of 2015. All communiqués for essentially propaganda ends, that is, those created and disseminated with the aim of reaching the widest possible audience, have been included. A requirement for inclusion was that the communiqués had to be "signed" by the organisation, by one of its different sections or by a person acting as the authorised spokesperson of the group. Accordingly, the corpus includes all materials which, although achieving only dissemination due to the channels used or to logistical difficulties, were created for maximum impact. Conversely, it does not include other information on the group - media news for example - which may have been widely published but whose authorship or aims are debateable.

Various documentary sources have been used in order to ensure the most comprehensive range of materials possible (see Table 1). Information held on websites administered directly by the group or on jihadist sites and forums where the materials were either disseminated initially or added later has been included, together with information on Internet social media profiles administered by the group. Translations by organisations, companies, research centres and foundations that monitor jihadist activity on the web have also been used. Cross-referencing all this information has produced 482 communiqués issued by GSPC/AQIM between 1998 and the end of 2015.

For much of its life, the propaganda actions of the main jihadist group in the Maghreb have been characterised by their irrelevance, negligible activities and poor product quality[7]. Compared to other jihadist-inspired groups, the GSPC was one of the last to realise the strategic need for extensive communicative actions. This explains why it was not until 2005 (see Figure 1) that it

began to demonstrate a major level of activity, which increased and improved in the wake of the formal announcement of its alliance with Al Qaeda. The volume of production remained relatively stable until the group launched its Twitter profiles in 2013, which led to an almost three-fold rise in the annual number of public communiqués attributed to the organisation. Following the suspension of its Twitter accounts, the volume of communications activity reverted to previous levels.

Context of the social media appearance of AQIM

AQIM entered the world of social media in a context full of difficulties. To begin with, far from fulfilling the high expectations[8] generated concerning the "globalist" boost that affiliation to Al Qaeda would bring to its operations, in reality AQIM continued to focus essentially on a more local agenda. Proof of this its operational activities would receive lukewarm global commitment can be seen in the outcomes of the abductions of westerners. In most cases the group released the hostages in return for a ransom and showed little interest in options more to the liking of Al Qaeda, such as exchanges for jihadist prisoners or even the murder of hostages for propaganda purposes.

The outbreak of the political crisis in Mali in January 2012 provided a window of opportunity for the group, which secured control of important parts of the country, raising its international profile in the process[9]. However, the emergence of other jihadist actors[10] in the zone, including MUJWA (Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa) and Ansar al-Dine ("Defenders of the Faith" in Arabic), and the decision of veteran militant Moktar Belmoktar (a.k.a. Khaled Abu Al-

Abbas) to abandon the group and create a new organisation, demonstrated that factionalism and splits were once again hampering the new Al Qaeda affiliate, a situation which had plagued it since its creation as a splinter of the Algerian Armed Islamic Group (GIA, from French *Groupe Islamique Armé)*[11].

The enforced retreat of AQIM in the Sahel following France's "Serval" military operation (January 2013-July 2014) entailed considerable human losses for the group, an added problem being the less visible but sustained and effective anti-terrorist pressure by Algeria, which saw AQIM lose members constantly and its operational capabilities seriously eroded[12].

The consequences of the lack of human resources were felt particularly in the area of communications, where the required skills are more difficult to replace and losses impair the group's ability to continue to produce propaganda. A prime example was the arrest[13] of the head of AQIM's media wing, Salah Gasmi (a.k.a Salah Abu Mohammed), whose loss - as acknowledged by his successor[14]- prevented the Al-Andalus Institute for Media Production from issuing any new products for two months.

Secondly, communications by the group continued to reflect an obsession with the role of traditional media and its manipulation of the messages and reality of the organisation. AQIM blamed the media for the scant impact of its message among the Muslim community, which it said was being "anaesthetised" with "football matches"[15]. It also urged the population of Algeria to record abuses by the government and "broadcast them through the media and Internet"[16].

From its early days, AQIM had suffered a serious problem with respect to the authenticity of communiqués and messages attributed to the group. A significant amount of its communications efforts was spent on denying the authorship of certain communiqués or the status of individuals claiming to issue statements on its behalf. Although AQIM generally blamed such misunderstandings on "tricks of the Algerian intelligence"[17], in reality the group was incapable of centralising and controlling all the public communiqués by its members, some of whom contacted journalists directly and without permission from the leadership. Although the creation of Al-Andalus Media sought to remedy the problem, the group was forced by ill-disciplined members to tacitly accept as "official" various messages disseminated through channels other than its media wing. This multiplicity of origins caused confusion among followers[18] while also providing fertile ground for its enemies to spread "black propaganda"[19]. The creation of a Twitter account failed to bring a definitive solution to the problem. Shortly after its social media debut, AQIM was once again forced to deny authorship of a new communiqué attributed to the group[20].

The difficulties encountered by the AQIM leadership in controlling communications from the group extended to jihadist Internet forums also. These platforms acted as a filter[21], only publishing materials received in the name of the organisation from a "correspondent" whose credibility had been verified. AQIM was unable to benefit fully from this authentication system given that some of its cadres contacted forum administrators directly and sent them messages for publication, without the media wing being informed or participating. The most blatant example of such "bypassing" was veteran jihadist Mokhtar Belmokhtar. Private correspondence between the controversial leader and the Advisory Board of AQIM intercepted by French troops in Mali

revealed the group leadership's anger towards not only the maverick subordinate but also the site administrators - "young ignorant people whose identity nobody seems certain about!"[22] - for acceding to his requests.

Although the technical and narrative quality of its propaganda output improved noticeably following formal affiliation to Al Qaeda, AQIM had still not put behind it some of its problems in terms of the appeal of its communications. To begin with, operational activities and propaganda activity were poorly coordinated. The group filmed only a small number of its attacks and would claim responsibility for armed actions in written communiqués, grouping together up to 58 different acts of violence in a single release[23]. Similarly, although it managed to increase the number of audiovisual productions over the years (see Figure 2), their quality was very uneven. Only a small number could be considered in any way ambitious and included operational footage and an element of dynamism in conveying their message. The vast majority were merely "talking heads" reading a text to camera, while in other cases audio recordings with a still picture were passed off as new videos. This attempt to add more visual appeal to audio messages would explain, for example, the increase in the dissemination of videos witnessed during 2015 (see Figure 2). Of 27 videos published by the group, 16 correspond to different versions of the same audio recording of a theological address issued by al-Ḥasan Rashid al-Bulaydi, head of its *Shariah Committe*, prior to his death in an ambush in Algeria's Tizi Ouzou province at the end of the year.

Analysis of AQIM social media activity

The media wing of AQIM created its Twitter profile on 16 March 2013. The authenticity of the account was validated in a public communiqué released twelve days later on a jihadist forum. Five weeks later the group created a second Twitter account under the name "Africa Muslima", to which it added a Facebook profile[24] with the same name and a blog[25]. The Facebook account was quickly closed down by Facebook and the blog was not updated, leaving the Twitter account as the only instrument to distribute the materials of AQIM's new propaganda label.

Asked "what is the role of Twitter in jihad?" the group's head of propaganda responded "We are an inalienable part of this world, we live our time and benefit from every mean that serves our goals"[26]. According to Ahmed Abi Abd al-Ellah, AQIM's presence on this popular social media channel would allow it to evade the communications siege imposed by its enemies, which had seen "free journalists who search for the truth"[27] end up in jail. The popular microblogging site would assist it with clarifying "the equity of our cause to the international public opinion who is unaware of a lot of facts".

The above exchange of questions and answers was part of one of the experiments carried out by the group to heighten the media impact of its message. Under the name "Open Meeting", it offered Internet users the chance to submit questions to the head of the Al-Andalus Institute for Media Production. Through Tweets in Arabic, English, French and Spanish, AQIM encouraged "international media and the interested figures" to send questions via the group's new Twitter account, although it later rectified and announced that it would answer questions in the first two languages only. Despite its triumphalist boast that it had achieved "a big impact in the media,

even that the international press headlined: "In a precedent of its kind!... Al-Qaeda opens to the media", in reality the Open Meeting merely replicated the model initiated by Al Qaeda in 2007 and subsequently repeated by other jihadist organisations and figures.[28]

Equally, the terrorist group's use of Internet social media was by no means an innovation. Jihadist content can be identified during the earliest days of social media. Early content tended to be created by supporters of the jihadist movement, with the actual organisations taking longer to avail themselves of the new tools. Their presence received a boost with the Syrian crisis of 2012[29]. By taking to Twitter, AQIM followed in the footsteps of other jihadist organisations[30] who had decided to strengthen their propaganda apparatuses through an active presence on the popular microblogging network.

Twitter offered a number of advantages compared to other social media. Its simple interface allowed it to function properly even in cases of poor Internet connection and it even offered the possibility to read and send tweets via SMS on any mobile phone. However, the most attractive features for a jihadist organisation were Twitter's initial reluctance to suspend accounts that disseminated terrorist content and the limitations users faced when trying to flag terrorist content for review[31]. This made jihadist profiles on Twitter more durable than those created on other social media.

AQIM decided to take advantage of the viral potential and reach of content distributed on social media and set up not just an official Twitter profile for its media wing but also the so-called Muslim Africa Blog. This second account was described by the group as "an open platform for every Muslim", designed to give "support and cooperation to the cause of the Muslim nation

generally and African [nation] in particular"[32]. As will be shown below, the content and formal aspects of the propaganda distributed through this second channel were very different to the products bearing the Al-Andalus Media seal.

Both accounts remained active until they were suspended by Twitter on 18 December 2013. Prior to the suspension, the Al-Andalus Twitter account had amassed over 15,000 followers, and followed seven accounts: Ansar al-Islam, Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), al-Nusra Front, Echo of the Caucasus Agency, Muslim Africa, Ansar al-Shariah in Tunisia, and a locked account called "UB". The Muslim Africa account had far fewer followers, approximately 3,350, and followed two accounts: al-Andalus and "UB"[33].

Following two months with no social media activity, AQIM relaunched the two accounts in May 2014 under a different user name, albeit one similar to that used for its social media debut. In November of the same year both accounts were suspended again and the group did not attempt to launch new Twitter profiles until July 2015. However, this renewed attempt to resurrect its social media profiles had to contend with an even more hostile environment due to the adoption by Twitter of a much more agile and aggressive policy regarding the suspension of accounts linked to jihadist terrorism.

The beginnings of the Twitter period were particularly active and included the aforementioned initiative for an Open Meeting with the head of the group's propaganda wing. Although AQIM used Twitter in the conventional sense to publish photographs accompanied by text or promote certain hashtags, in fact the Al-Andalus Media account was used mainly as the exclusive channel for the distribution of new propaganda communiqués. While some messages continued to appear

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on the main jihadist Internet forums, the bulk of the group's propaganda output was redirected to this channel. For example, during its first period (prior to the first suspension) of activity the Al-Andalus Media Twitter account was the origin of 25 group communiqués, compared to 14 distributed using other channels. Due to the restrictions imposed by Twitter on the length of tweets and the type of files that could be published, AQIM disseminated propaganda communiqués by publishing links on Twitter to a number of anonymous file hosting services, including JustPaste.it or Twitmail.com.

A very different use was made of the Africa Muslima account. Although initially designed to be a blog whose publications would be promoted on the Twitter and Facebook profiles, the site soon ceased being updated and the Twitter account performed the blog's role, publishing links to text files hosted on the above virtual hosting services.

The launch of Africa Muslima had a number of effects on the group's communications activities during 2013:

The volume of the group's communications (see Figure 3) almost doubled, if we take its most productive year as our reference. Africa Muslima alone published 40 communiqués in 2013, in addition to the 46 released by AQIM on Twitter, Internet forums or sent to the media.

The materials published using this channel (written texts in almost all cases) sought to differentiate themselves from those released using the seal of AQIM's media wing. To achieve this, they adopted a specific logo and a different graphic appearance to those of official communiqués by AQIM. Although very different in appearance to those released through the

"sister" account, the Africa Muslima texts did not reflect a single graphic identity but used multiple fonts, colours and backgrounds[34]. Similarly, the texts made much greater use of embedded photos (27% of messages), in marked contrast to the scant use in Al Andalus Media communiqués (5.5%). Moreover, the AQIM blog was the preferred avenue for long texts. For example, only 16.6% of the written texts published on the Al Andalus Media account exceeded four pages in length, compared to 54% of Africa Muslima texts.

However, the main Africa Muslima difference was the content of its messages. The texts included a series of contents rarely found in AQIM propaganda until then, such as jihadist poetry[35]. Africa Muslima also reflected issues which, given their minor impact and relevance, would have been unlikely to appear in the group's "official" propaganda. Examples include the closure of a Koranic school in Morocco[36] or the news that a Muslim woman had been forced to undress during security screening in a Spanish airport[37]. One of the most popular themes was the plight of Salafist prisoners in Moroccan prisons[38]. Indeed, this interest in Morocco could be said to be the distinctive element of the account. Over 27% of communiqués mention the country, compared to just 6% of mentions in non-Twitter AQIM communiqués (see Table II).

Whereas the relative importance of countries and international organisations in AQIM propaganda differed little between Twitter and non-Twitter communiqués issued by the group, the same is not true of the AQIM blog, whose centre of interest differed to that of the group's media wing (see Table 2).

It may be that AQIM outsourced both management of this account and the preparation of its content to followers outside the Al Andalus Media propaganda wing, which would explain not only the bias towards Moroccan issues but also the highly personal nature of the published content. For example, 88% of the content disseminated by Africa Muslima bore the signatures of named individuals, whereas the AQIM tendency was for collective authorship of messages or signature by its media wing, with just 37.3% of communiqués signed individually. Indeed, individual AQIM communiqués tended to be the work of leaders or cadres acting in the name of the group, whereas the majority of the messages on Africa Muslima bore the names and pseudonyms of people about whom nothing was known in terms of their track record or links to the group. Some even signed their messages giving their personal Twitter accounts[39], indicating a history of individual jihadist activism not necessarily involving membership of the organisation.

Conclusions

It is likely that AQIM was less than satisfied with the results of its social media presence, as evidenced by its negligible efforts to re-establish its official profiles when these were suspended by Twitter administrators. Following the first suspension the group's media wing took six months to create a new profile, even though the job requires just a few minutes. The second suspension caused the group to give up totally and its volume of propaganda reverted to pre-Twitter levels. When in May 2015 AQIM decided to create alternative channels to existing jihadist forums for the distribution of its propaganda (including new materials with the Africa Muslima seal[40]), it did not set up new profiles on non-Twitter social media but rather uploaded

files to the popular Internet Archive repository[41] and the DailyMotion.com video hosting website[42]. One can see, therefore, how easily AQIM abandoned its presence on Internet platforms and services where it had encountered problems and opted instead for services where its publications would not be removed, such as the channels it opened on the Telegram messaging application[43]. AQIM did make a fresh Twitter attempt in the summer of 2015, although Twitter's more hostile and swifter policy with regard to the elimination of jihadist content compounded the group's difficulties in terms of profiting from its social media presence. AQIM's attitude constitutes further proof of the disruptive effects of policies to block and remove radical content from the Internet.

Leaving aside for the moment the impact of the aforementioned suspensions on AQIM's Internet presence, it is clear that the group was incapable of putting the new tools to a use which would boost its propaganda apparatus and increase its impact. The account created for the group's media wing merely bypassed jihadist forums and was little more than a mechanism for publishing links to download files with propaganda texts and videos. The account failed to take full advantage of the possibilities afforded by Twitter to interact with followers or viralise content, nor did it harness the speed with which information could circulate on the network.

The Africa Muslima experience proved somewhat more positive in that the apparent outsourcing of the initiative allowed the group to broaden the range of subjects addressed in its propaganda. However, like the Al Andalus Media account, it also reflected a lack of ambition a regards maximising the potential of social media.

AQIM's fleeting Twitter experience is also an interesting example of the importance of an individual in the evolution of such a crucial facet of a terrorist organisation as its propaganda activity.

The arrival of Abu Abdul Ilah Ahmed as the new head of the group's media wing following the arrest of Salah Gasmi prompted the setting up of AQIM's Twitter profiles. Although it was an option the group had been contemplating for some time, the decision was not taken until a person who expressed keener interest in the possibilities of social media was appointed as head of communications.

A further argument supporting the importance of the individual factor in explaining the changes in the terrorist group's propaganda policy is the use made by AQIM of languages other than Arabic. Strategic importance tends to be attached to the appearance of a communiqué in a language different to that habitually employed by the group, as if constituting evidence of a deliberate desire to reach a different audience or an indication of a greater threat against the country or countries where the language is spoken. The AQIM example shows that less crucial motives lie behind the use of other languages, which can be put down to the availability or lack of availability of members or trustworthy collaborators with the required language skills. This would explain, for example, why all propaganda communiqués were released in Arabic during the group's GSPC days. Following the adoption of the AQIM label and up until the creation of the Twitter accounts, French was used in 13 communiqués, a number which appears incongruous with the main thrust of the group's discourse[44] which singled France out as the main enemy. Conversely, during the group's social media period English was used (for the first time ever) in

20 different messages, compared to French on just one occasion, as part of a communiqué in Arabic which the group issued simultaneously with translations in English and Spanish[45].

It would be illogical to think that a strategic change in direction occurred during this social media phase and that the group lost interest in its French-speaking audience, focusing its attentions solely on the English-speaking public. Rather, the explanation would appear to be the temporary shortage (unlike for English) of members able to translate texts properly into French. This would also explain why Twitter followers were advised that only questions in Arabic and English would be accepted for the "Open Meeting" with the head of propaganda. Thus, it was the availability or lack of availability of human resources with translation skills (who may have joined for random reasons) and not strategic planning issues that determined the changes in the group's discourse and communications actions, in terms of both of the form and substance of its messages.

AQIM has shown itself down the years to be one of the jihadist groups to have performed most poorly in terms of propaganda actions. This weakness is all the more evident if compared to the results achieved by other groups that did succeed in maximising the potential afforded by new information technologies. A case in point is the Islamic State (ISIS), which in the course of just one week in 2015 issued 141 propaganda products, 24 of them videos[46]. Conversely, AQIM needed the entire year to achieve the same number and none of its audiovisual products can be considered comparable in terms of technical quality and media impact. Nonetheless, during the past year it has become increasingly apparent that AQIM has sought to learn and draw inspiration from the most successful jihadist organisations from the communications standpoint.

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By way of example, it published[47] a joint communiqué with Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in the form of a video with English subtitles in which the two organisations criticised the stances of ISIS. Despite its objections to the doctrines of the group led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, for some of its more ambitious productions in 2015[48] AQIM has not hesitated to avail itself of certain characteristic features of Islamic State videos such as slow-motion images, sound editing, aerial views, use of uniforms, etc.

In sum, the AQIM Twitter experience indicates that the use of such instruments per se does not automatically generate benefit for users but requires individuals capable of mastering their potential and with an awareness of the codes and subculture of Internet social media. Far from contributing decisively to its communications dimension, AQIM's Twitter presence has once again highlighted the vulnerabilities of the organisation, namely, the lack of qualified human resources and lack of a solid leadership capable of conferring coherence on its actions.

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[15] AQIM, "Surrender of the two brothers is a lie (Abu Al-Abbas and Abu Nu'Man)" (June 7, 2010) (in Arabic). Available at http://occident2.blogspot.com.es/2010/06/al-qaida-in-islamic-maghreb-issues.html

[16] Abu Abd al-Ilah Ahmad al-Jijili al-Jazairi (AQIM), "Crimes of the Ṭaghut and the Return of the Death Squads" (June 26, 2013).
https://twitter.com/Andalus_Media/status/350180459801608192 (no longer available)

[17] AQIM, "Denial of the Manufactured Dialogue with the Newspaper al-Ḥayyat al-Londoniyyah" (April 19, 2011) (in Arabic) http://aljahad.com/vb/showthread.php?p=12926#post12926 (no longer available)

[18] For example, a Twitter user with the name @AboubaraMaliki asked the head of Al Andalus Media: "The past period witnessed publication of several videos from the brothers of the Emirate of the Sahara and its source wasn't Al-Andalus Media. What's the reason?". In reply, the AQIM leader merely acknowledged that "The important thing is that the message of the mujahidin has been delivered to the Ummah and the international public opinion". AQIM (see note 14 above).

[19] Aaron Y. Zelin, "AQIM Statement Hoax?", *al-Wasat* (April 4, 2011). Available at
https://thewasat.wordpress.com/2011/04/04/aqim-statement-hoax/

[20] AQIM, "Denying What Was Attributed to the Organization Falsely and Slanderously" (in arabic), (April 8, 2013) http://justpaste.it/2czm

[21] Manuel R. Torres-Soriano, "The Dynamics of the Creation, Evolution, and Disappearance of Terrorist Internet Forums", *International Journal of Conflict and Violence*, 7 (1) (2013), pp. 164-178.

[22] In response to an earlier letter from Belmokhtar in which he excused his lack of communication with the group's leaders due to the need "to protect the secrets of the Mujahideen and our action plans", for which reason he avoided Internet communications sine these might be intercepted by the enemy. The Advisory Board responded angrily: "It is really surprising that those like you who boast about their commitment to protecting the secrets of the Mujahideen by not having confidence in the methods of communication via the internet, should also be the ones who reveal all the secrets of our Jihad (…) Haven't you contacted the Ansar Al-Mujahideen network, urging them to have your own correspondent? Didn't you tell the network managers of Jihad Net that you were in conflict with the Central Command of the organization? [...] Is the idea to give yourself the image of a field commander while painting the organization's Central Command as incompetent and lazy? See: Mathieu Guidere, "The Timbuktu Letters: New Insights about AQIM", *Res Militaris*, 4 (1) (2014), pp. 1-16. Available at http://resmilitaris.net/ressources/10184/89/res_militaris_article_guid_re_new_insights_about_aqi m.pdf

[23] AQIM, "Killing and wounding more than 170 apostates in separate operations of the mujahidin" (May 7, 2012). http://www.shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=160369 (no longer available)

[24] www.facebook.com/africamuslima

25 http://africamuslima.blogspot.com/

[26] Reply to a @KDIPRESS

[27] Reply to @Al_Pacino

[28] The then Al Qaeda No. 2, Ayman al-Zawahiri, pioneered such interactions with the public, although his organisation did not repeat the experience due to the mixed results. Despite the high media impact achieved, it was unable to prevent a high number of uncomfortable questions challenging the legitimacy of the group and its actions. The criterion used by the terrorist leader for choosing which questions would receive replies and which were ignored was also apparent. Other organisations and radical preachers were to imitate the model, albeit with preventive measures such as hiding from the public the content of all the messages received in order to reduce the visibility of dissenting voices. See: Manuel R. Torres-Soriano, "The Vulnerabilities of Online Terrorism", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 35 (4) (2012), pp. 263-277.

[29] Nico Prucha, "Jihadi Twitter activism – Introduction", *Jihadica.com,* (April 27, 2014). Available at http://www.jihadica.com/jihadi-twitter-activism-introduction/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=jihadi-twitter-activism-introduction

[30] The first jihadist group to create an official Twitter profile were the Taliban, who opened their account in January 2011. Somali group Al Shabaab did likewise at the end of the same year, although it was their @HSMPress account of December 2012 that attracted most international attention. This was designed primarily to reach the English-speaking community and by 25 January 2013, the date on which the account was suspended for the first time, the group had published 1250 *tweets* and had over 20,000 followers. Shiraz Maher, Alexander Meleagrou-

Hitchens and James Sheehan, "Lights, Camera, Jihad: Al-Shabaab's Western Media Strategy", *ICSR Report* (2012). Available at

http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/ICSR-Lights-Camera-Jihad-Report_Nov2012_ForWeb-2.pdf

[31] Jessica Stern and J. M. Berger, *ISIS. The State of Terror* (New York: Ecco, 2015)

[32] AQIM, "Glad Tidings to Our Muslim Ummah: The Muslim Africa Blog" (June 5, 2013) (in Arabic). http://www.as-ansar.com/vb/showthread.php?t=88550 (no longer available)

[33] Rita Katz and Adam Raisman "Al-Qaeda-Affiliates Expand Online Platform to Twitter", *SITE Articles & Analysis* (June 18, 2014). Available at https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Articles-Analysis/al-qaeda-affiliates-expand-online-platform-to-twitter.html

[34] See, for example: Ahmad Abu Abd al-Ilah al-Jijili (Africa Muslima), "Did Africa Really Get Its Independence?" (June 14, 2013). https://twitter.com/Africamuslima/status/345572285593288705 (no longer available)

[35] Amal, "If You Have Forgotten Me, So What Has Your Lord Forgotten" (July 17, 2013) (in Arabic). https://twitter.com/Africamuslima/status/357596580423016449 (no longer available)

[36] Abu Ismail al-Maghribi, "Another Great Achievement in the History of the Emirate of Believers, the Order to Close the Quran Schools", (July 4, 2013) (in Arabic). https://twitter.com/Africamuslima/status/353272175404384257 (no longer available)

[37] Abu Ismail al-Maghribi, "A New Cry From al-Andalus" (July 22, 2013). https://twitter.com/Africamuslima/status/359423321122684930 (no longer available)

[38] Zakaria Bughrarah al-Maghribi, "Let It Be: Id Gift to the Prisoners of Tawid in Moroccan Jails" (August 8, 2013) (in Arabic). https://twitter.com/Africamuslima/status/365184959876575233 (no longer available)

[39] @elmohajir_said, "Crusades did not end!" (September, 25, 2014) (in Arabic). Available at http://www.almeshkat.net/vb/showthread.php?t=28576#gsc.tab=0

[40] See, for example: Abu Ahmad Abd al-Karim al-Jazairi, "Superb Comments on the Shariah and Realistic Justifications of Bayah to The Islamic State" (June 23, 2015) https://ia801500.us.archive.org/6/items/T3lqtBhia

[41] https://archive.org/details/@prodisicilia#uploads

[42] http://www.dailymotion.com/AQIM_AQMI

[43] https://telegram.me/Al_Andalus (created on October, 31, 2015); https://telegram.me/Afrika_Muslima (created on December 7, 2015)

[44] Manuel R. Torres-Soriano, "The Evolution of the Discourse of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Themes, Countries and Individuals", *Mediterranean Politics*, 16 (2) (2011), pp. 279-298.

[45] Abu Abd al-Ilah Ahmad al-Jijili, "Ceuta and Melilla: Inquisitions Overlook the Muslims Once Again" (June 28, 2013) (in Arabic). https://twitter.com/Andalus_Media/status/350675787860553728 (no longer available)

[46] Aaron Zelin, "Picture Or It Didn't Happen: A Snapshot of the Islamic State's Official Media Output", *Perspectives on Terrorism,* 9 (4) (2015), pp. 85-97.

[47] AQIM-AQAP, "Regarding the Address Titled 'Say to Those Who Disbelieve' Given By the Official Spokesman of al-Baghdadi's Group" (Novembe 1, 2015) (in Arabic). https://justpaste.it/staadna

[48] The videos most clearly evidencing the influence of ISIS propaganda are: AQIM, "Trip to Meet With the Two Prisoners" (June 21, 2015). https://ia801505.us.archive.org/10/items/Trip_AQIM/ ; AQIM, "The Blessed Incursion" (September 2, 2015). https://archive.org/details/AQMI.2015.TheBlessedIncursion._201510
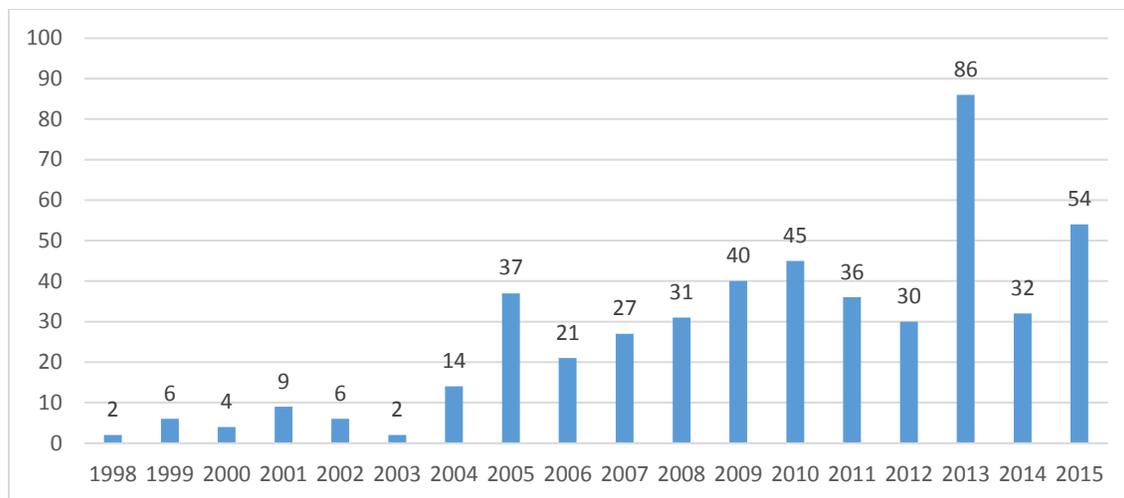
Figure 1: Number of annual communiqués issued by GSPC/AQIM (1998-2015)

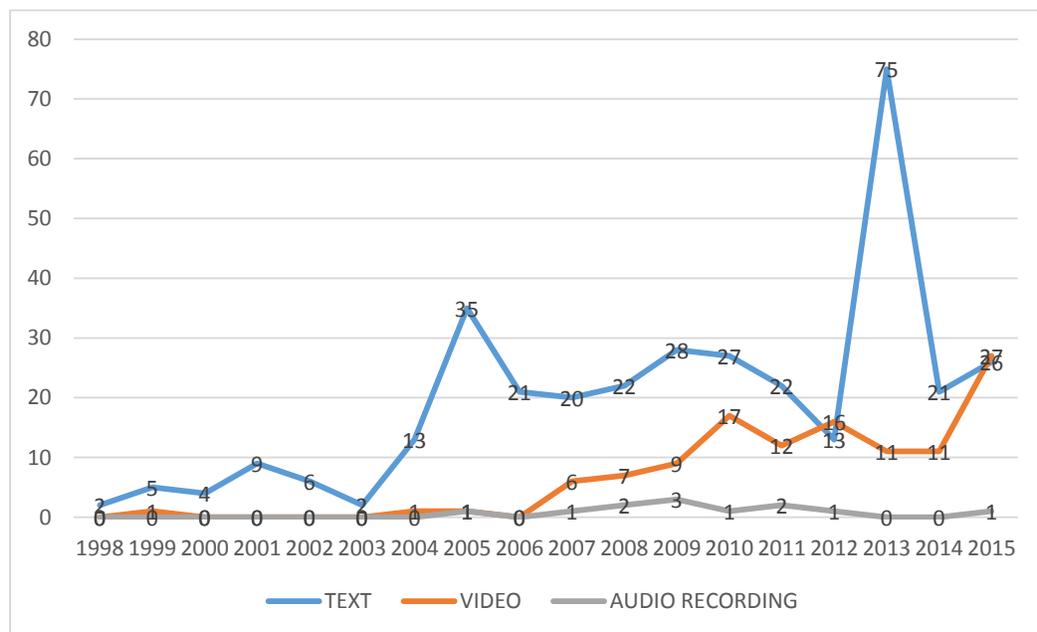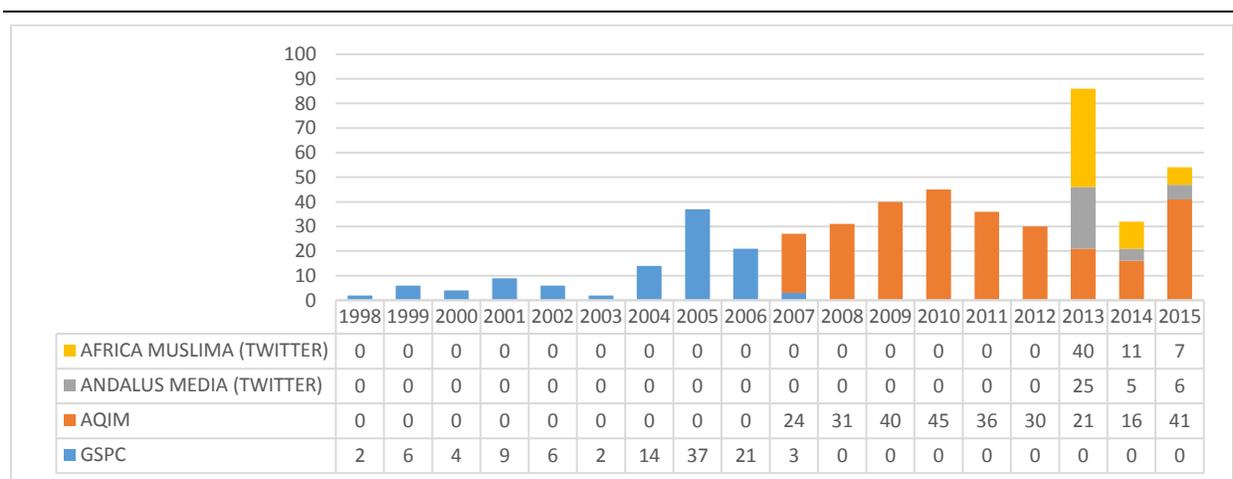Figure 2: Formats of communiqués issued per year by GSPC/AQIM (1998-2015)

	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
AFRICA MUSLIMA (TWITTER)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	40	11	7
ANDALUS MEDIA (TWITTER)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	25	5	6
AQIM	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	24	31	40	45	36	30	21	16	41
GSPC	2	6	4	9	6	2	14	37	21	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Figure 3: Number of communiqués by year and source (1998-2015)

Table 1: Main data sources for the compilation of GSPC/AQIM communiqués

Jihadist websites	Other sources
Official GSPC/AQIM sites	CBS Internet Terror Monitor
	http://www.cbsnews.com/
http://www.jihad-algeria.com (2004)	
	Evan Kohlmann web site
http://www.salafiahweb1.tk (2005)	http://www.globalterroralert.com
http://www.salafia.ne1.net (2005)	
	Flashpoint Partners
http://www.jihad-algerie.com (2005)	http://www.flashpoint-intel.com
http://www.moon4321.net (2006)	Internet Archive http://www.archive.org/
http://www.moonnight1234.com (2006)	
	Jihadology http://jihadology.net/
http://www.moonnight9876.com (2006)	
	Middle East Media Research Institute
http://www.qmagreb.org (2007)	(MEMRI) http://www.memri.org/
http://africamuslima.blogspot.com.es (2013)	NEFA Foundation

Jihadist forums on Internet	http://www.nefafoundation.org/
al-Ekhlas Forum	Sahara Media Agency
http://www.al-ekhlaas.net (2008)	http://www.saharamedias.net
al-Faloja Forum	SITE Intelligence Group (SITE Institute)
http://www.alfalojaweb.info/vb/ (2009)	http://www.siteintelgroup.org/
Jihad Archive	World Analysis http://worldanalysis.net/
http://www.jarchive.info/index.php (2009)	
Shumukh al-Islam Forum	
https://shamikh1.info/ (2010-13)	
Ansar al-Mujahidin Forum	
http://www.as-ansar.com/vb/ (2010-13)	
http://ansar1.info (2011-13)	
Atahadi Forum	
http://www.atahadi.com/vb/ (2010-11)	
al-Fidaa Forum	
https://alfidaa.info/(2012-13)	
al-Jahad Forum	
http://www.aljahad.com (2011-13)	

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Social media profiles	
https://twitter.com/Africamuslima (2013)	
https://twitter.com/Andalus_Media (2013)	
https://www.facebook.com/africamuslima (2013)	
https://twitter.com/Andalus_AQMI/ (2014)	
https://twitter.com/AfricaMusIIma (2014)	
https://twitter.com/Al_Andalus (2015)	
https://twitter.com/Africa_Muslimah (2015)	
https://twitter.com/Al_Andalus2 (2015)	
https://twitter.com/Al_Andalus4 (2015)	
https://twitter.com/Afrika_Muslima (2015)	

Table 2: Country references in AQIM propaganda communiqués (%)

MOST CITED COUNTRIES	STAGE				
	GSPC	AQIM	ANDALUS MEDIA (TWITTER)	AFRICA MUSLIMA (TWITTER)	TOTAL PROPAGANDA PRODUCTION (1998-2015)
ALGERIA	67.3	30.8	21.2	7	35.2
FRANCE	20.2	42.3	40	9.8	32.9
UNITED STATES	30.8	25.1	30	5.9	24.5
PALESTINE	20.2	16	9.1	0	13.2
IRAQ	20.2	12.8	3.3	3.9	12.8
AFGHANISTAN	15.4	11.5	10	2	11.2
MAURITANIA	3.8	14.2	12	5.9	10.7
ISRAEL	11.5	7.8	6.6	3.9	8.2
MOROCCO	1.9	6.6	10	27.5	8.2
MALI	0	10.2	13.3	10.5	8.2
CHECHNYA	16.3	4.6	0	2	6.5
TUNISIA	1.9	9.2	0	5.2	6.5
EU	8.7	5.8	6.6	0	5.8
EGYPT	2.9	5.8	3.3	9.8	5.4

LIBYA	0	6.7	12.1	3.5	5.2
UNITED KINGDOM	2.9	6.2	3.9	3.9	5.1
SPAIN	1.9	6.2	3.3	5.9	4.9
SYRIA	2.9	5.3	10	3.9	4.9
SAUDI ARABIA	7.7	2.1	3.3	9.8	4.4
NATO	4.8	4.1	10	0	4.2
YEMEN	1.9	4.9	6.1	2	3.7
NIGER	0	5.3	0	3.9	3.5
RUSSIA	7.7	2.9	0	0	3.5
UN	1.9	3.3	6.6	3.9	3.3
SOMALIA	0	4.5	6.7	0	3
SAHARA	0	2.9	6.6	3.9	2.6