JIHADIST MEDIA NETWORKS AND VIRTUAL PROPAGANDA IN THE RUSSIAN

CYBERSPACE

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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This study marks the first attempt in Western scholarship to analyze the evolution of Al-Qaeda affiliated terrorist groups' and the Islamic State's online branding in the Russian Federation, trying to explain how radicals' sporadic activities have been transformed into recognizable brands and how to counter terrorist branding. It relies on products that are directly produced and presented on the Russian part of the Internet in 2013 - 2017. The study scrutinizes the set of issues related to the presence of radical groups in cyberspace through the prism of brand identity theory, framing Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State as corporations that have created and advanced their global brands in order to disseminate their products across the world. Both groups embraced a set of sub-brands, however, the Al-Qaeda network produced a larger number of local brands with well-articulated identities compared to the Islamic State network. The study reveals that while the ISIS network focused on the promotion of its global brand through domestic outlets, the Al-Qaeda network advanced local sub-brands, overshadowing its master brand. The research discovered that these organizations practiced a different approach to their networking, Internet presence, and production strategy. Further research is needed on online fundraising campaigns conducted by radicals as well as the limits of censorship software.

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List of Abbreviations

F – Facebook.com

INS – Instagram.com

OK – Odnoklassniki.ru

T – Telegram.com

TW – Twitter.com

SC – SoundCloud.com

VK – Vkontakte.com

YT – YouTube.com

C – Community page, public account

P – Personal account

W - Website

A – Abandoned account

B – Blocked account

 L – Active account

Chapter One: Study Introduction

Cyberspace plays a crucial role in terrorist connections all over the world. Terrorist presence in cyberspace grows every year in light of the unprecedented development of online technologies, and in particular, social media. In the age of the Internet, traditional face-to-face communication between masterminds, potential members, or operatives as well as established cells or groups no longer plays a significant role. Self-radicalization of individuals through the Internet has become a more common event in many countries, including the Russian Federation. Looking for inspiration, the Boston Marathon bombers found radical online channels in the Russian cyberspace: two Chechens, who attacked the Moscow traffic police station on August 17th, 2016, stayed connected with ISIS affiliated online outlets. The rise of lone wolf attacks reveals the limited ability of law enforcement units to predict and prevent plots on their preparatory stages. In the beginning of the 2000s, Al-Qaeda recognized the effectiveness of this type of attack. Nowadays, the Islamic State aggressively promotes individual jihad beyond the Middle East region, creating a vast amount of online instructions for lone-wolves. In light of this development, the purpose of my research is to investigate the shift in jihadist usage of the Internet, referring to two major terrorist actors: Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.

Being a Sunni organization, the Islamic State has specifically targeted Russia, which is the home state for a huge Muslim population sharing the same religious tradition. Given persistent socio-political decay, the unresolved Chechen-Russian conflicts, and a lack of adequate Internet censorship, radical organizations have found fertile ground for their virtual activities. At the same time, Kadirov's regime and the hardline counterterrorist

policy of the Kremlin make people look for an alternative. As long as the Islamic State aggressively proposes and welcomes building a fair and prosperous caliphate, many people consider it to be a real opportunity for a better life. Worth noting is the fact that the Russian military assistance for Assad's regime started in the fall of 2015. The jihadist accounts have conducted intense anti-Russian propaganda, presenting videos and pictures of killed children during the Russian airstrikes on a daily basis.

Nonetheless, the terrorist threat to the Russian Federation is not presented only by the Islamic State. Al-Qaeda emerged as an essential destabilizing power and established significant influence over the North Caucasus region prior to the appearance of the Islamic State. The growing popularity of ISIS has reduced the number of Russian citizens radicalized and recruited by Al-Qaeda rather than stopped it; Al-Qaeda remains active and relevant. While the Islamic State has launched a special media team in order to cover the Russian speaking audience, Al-Qaeda has tried to move from sporadically spread propaganda driven by the efforts of enthusiasts to a more professional approach. In the 2000s, pro-Al-Qaeda websites emerged in the Russian cyberspace, but the successful ISIS media campaign proved more effective in capturing people's hearts and minds. To keep their influence over the region, Al-Qaeda adopted a similar media approach with a heavy reliance on the Internet.

1.1   Research Question

The majority of studies have a tendency to focus only on English and Arabic speaking radical propaganda materials. As a result, a huge segment of radical propaganda for the Russian speaking audience remains out of academic attention. This study marks the

first attempt in Western scholarship to analyze the evolution of Al-Qaeda affiliated terrorist groups' and the Islamic State's online branding in the Russian Federation, trying to explain how radicals' sporadic activities have been transformed into recognizable brands and how to counter terrorist branding.

In this regard, the main research question is: What is the difference between Al-Qaeda's and ISIS's approaches to the online brand networking within the Russian cyberspace across social media platforms (2013-2017)? To analyze this overall problem in depth, the research formulated the following hypotheses:

H_1: In comparison with the Al-Qaeda brand, the Islamic State developed the stronger online brand identity.

H_2: Given ISIS's prominent global image, the ISIS outlets should have a larger number of online supporters than the Al-Qaeda channels.

H_3: ISIS's and Al-Qaeda's domestic outlets differently addressed their relationship with global branding in terms of self-identification and network structure.

H_4: The ISIS network was a social media project while the Al-Qaeda network had more options to advance itself (social media platforms, websites, blogs). In light of this, censorship actions affected the ISIS network more than its competitor.

H_5: In contrast to the Islamic State entities, Al-Qaeda affiliated channels did not adhere to strong symbolic culture and brand name approach.

H_6: Communication patterns between the global brands with their local affiliates have a significant impact on Al-Qaeda's and ISIS's production strategy.

Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State are considered as corporations that have established and promoted their global brands. For Al-Qaeda and ISIS, the central goal of marketing is the propagation of their ideological agenda. In accordance with this frame, their "commercial" products are intangible (ideas) and material (video, audio, text, photo).

Regarding the time frame, the period from January 2013 to November 2017 is covered. This time frame allows one to observe and examine the dynamic of the jihadist networks, including their structure, centrality, and the establishment of local jihadi brands. In addition, this time frame helps in analyzing the networks' resilience in a "hostile" online environment, the evolution of product quality, and the number of supporters. It must be underlined that in 2013 ISIS propaganda experienced a radical transformation as the conflict in Syria escalated and began to infiltrate society, build its realm, and become more salient to the Russian cyberspace. During this year, jihadist grassroots enthusiasts established a close connection with official ISIS media teams through Russian recruiters fighting in Syria; they created the Islamic State Russian brand "Sham Today" as well as many affiliated accounts on popular social media platforms. Simultaneously, a number of militant pages emerged, contributing to the dissemination of ISIS ideology.

1.2 Literature Review

The invention of the Internet created another dimension to the physical world in which every social, cultural or political event finds its reflection. As an unfortunate part of our society, Jihadist Salafist terrorist organizations and groups have occupied their niche in cyber space, discovering the new advantages of having an online presence. At the same time, the Internet provides a unique opportunity to observe what radicals do and say,

analyzing jihadist activities from the inside. To present this literature overview, I have divided it into two parts, as follows. The first part is devoted to the analysis of general trends in the Jihadist segment of the Internet. The second part scrutinizes the development of terrorist networks and its perceptions towards media in the Russian Federation.

1.2.1 The World wide web as a source of information. The academic community demonstrates agreement on the prominent role of the Internet in promoting a terrorist agenda, underlining that terrorists' Internet usage will expand drastically (Arquilla & Ronfeldt, 1993; Briggs & Strugnell, 2011; Bunt, 2009; Conway & McInerney, 2008; Jenkins, 2011; Lawrence, 2005; Mathieson, 2005; Pantucci, 2011; Precht, 2007; Ramsay, 2015; Weimann, 2015). In 1993, perceiving the Internet as a revolutionary power, Arquilla and Ronfeldt (1993) argue in their article 'Cyberwar is coming' that the informational period could diversify and change existing, well-known modes of war. They stress that "…the information revolution will cause shifts both in how societies may come into conflict, and how their armed forces may wage war" (Arquilla & Ronfeldt, 1993, p. 27). The authors implement two new terms, "cyberwar" and "netwar" which refer to the power of knowledge, communication development, and a rise of non-state actors' roles. While cyberwars are considered to be on a par with military level operations, netwars are located on a socio-public level and embrace the following methods: diplomatic actions, propaganda campaigns, etc. Later, Arquilla and Ronfeldt (2001) emphasize that modern communication technology and the Internet in particular enable the uncontrollable emergence of non-hierarchal organizations and doctrines with an unavoidable power shift from state to non-state actors (pp. 1-25).

A handful of studies highlight the power of the global web for building and spreading radical communities and social networks. Sageman emphasizes that the revolutionary breakthrough in   contemporary informational technologies "... coincided with the rise of the global Salafi jihad" that instigated the upsurge of the global jihad (Sageman, 2004, p. 158). The Internet has reshaped individual relationships, invigorating them through online platforms. However, radicals found these new types of connections perfectly suitable for their own purposes. Describing terrorists' advantages, the scholar states: "The virtual community is no longer tied to any nation, a condition that corresponds to the mythical Umma of Salafism, which specifically rejects nationalism and fosters the global Salafi jihad priority of fighting against the 'far enemy' rather than the 'near enemy" (Sageman, 2004, p. 161). Other researchers underline that the Internet provides a wide range of beneficial communicative attributes that jihadists utilize in order to reach their goals: fast dissemination of information, easy and cheap access, low government control, anonymity for users, and the possibility to override geographical borders (Hoffman, 2006; Neumann 2013; Podesta & Goyle, 2005; Schmidle, 2009; Weimann, 2015).

 Relatively inexpensive virtual platforms (forums, communities, websites) give radicals plenty of advantageous capabilities, such as a wide reach to a huge audience, the acceleration of informational exchange, and various communicative modes (video clips, operational documentaries, songs, broadcastings, photo reports) (Berger & Jonathon, 2015; Bjelopera, 2013; Peresin & Cervone, 2015; Rogan, 2007; Ramsay, 2015; Weimann, 2015; Zelin, 2013). A handful of studies suggest that these features make the Internet extremely attractive for jihadists because they are an effective tool for the spreading of their agenda;

they give them the opportunity to articulate their means and objectives (Ramsay, 2015; Thomas, 2003; Weimann, 2015; Zelin, 2013). Many Jihadi web sites with their video, text, and audio content were under scrutiny from the academic community (Bunt, 2009; Weimann, 2015; Zelin, 2013).

Researchers directly connect the Internet to the global jihadist movement, admitting to the huge impact of the global web on the nature of terrorism. The increasing presence of radicals in cyberspace makes the Internet a crucial source of information about Jihadists and provides new perspectives for scientific research and an endless variety of materials (videos, texts, audio, and pictures). However, this digital library is not stable and could disappear suddenly due to counter-terrorism measures.

1.2.2 Radicals in cyberspace. The research scrutinizes more than 100 articles, not one of which was devoted to the Russian Federation. However, their empirical findings can be applied to this region, enhancing the understanding of the local challenges faced. From my research, this section can be divided into several areas:

a.   Internet advantages for radical organizations (website content is scrutinized in order to identify a range of objectives for why terrorists use the global web)

b.   The focus on the connections between the Internet and radicalization

c.   Description of web content, presented on online platforms through the analysis of video, audio, and text materials and forum, community, and group discussions

1.2.2.1 The advantages of the Internet for radical organizations. Research about the Internet and terrorism identifies the various ways terrorists use cyberspace that directly depends on a target audience (potential or actual members, sympathizers, opponents),

ranging from fundraising and propaganda to data research and tactical coordination. Many scholars (Bjelopera, 2013; Briggs & Strugnell, 2011; Jenkins, 2011; Neumann & Rogers, 2007; Sageman, 2004; Weimann, 2015) suggest that Jihadi online entities (forums, communities, groups, websites) have facilitated   actual members of Jihadist organizations in adapting and developing the Salafist attitude and vision of the world. For Al Qaeda, Hoffman (2006) encapsulates three central features that the Internet serves: 1) recruitment, propaganda, and fund-raising 2) training, and 3) operational planning (p.214). Discussing the goals of radicals on the Internet, Weimann (2006) emphasizes the difference between the operative and the communicative functions of the Internet for terrorists. The scholar argues that "… terrorists are using the Internet for propaganda and communication more than they are attacking it" (Weimann, 2006, p. 7). While communicative functions pursue the gathering of public recognition and sympathy through the dissemination of the radical agenda, instrumental or operational functions refer to the strategic planning of particular attacks through e-mail communications, chat rooms, etc. Corman and Schiefelbein's study, based on an analysis of Al Qaeda activities, observes the instrumental jihadist functions of the media (traditional and modern) differently and narrows them down to two main points: 1) to legitimize and promote radical movements, and 2) to intimidate enemies (Corman & Schiefelbein, 2006). As the authors fairly point out, terrorists use media outlets not only to spread information or recruit more members, but to terrify and demoralize their opponents. Observing the difference in Jihadists propaganda goals in terms of audience, Paz (2007) writes: "...The Internet may be used to intimidate Western publics, knowing the audience's wide exposure to global media and the huge effect that exposure has upon the sense of

security in the West. Jihadis know that the widely circulated video clips of beheaded foreigners and Muslims in Iraq terrorize the Western public." (para 8). However, some researchers do not articulate this crucial function of the Internet. Emphasizing the strategic value of shifting to the Internet, Jenkins states that over time Al Qaeda leaders began to observe online activity to be just as essential as physical action (Jenkins, 2011, p. 17). He writes that the Internet undoubtedly plays an inspectional role, but "…may also become a substitute for action, allowing would-be terrorists to safely engage in vicarious terrorism while avoiding the risks of real action, in which case al Qaeda and its allies have created a virtual army that thus far has remained virtual." (Jenkins, 2011, p. 17). The emergence and development of the Internet not only provokes changes in individual-media connections, but transforms the relationship between media and terrorists. Previously, radical organizations desperately looked for traditional media attention, but now, with a wide spread of social networks, radical activities can get desirable publicity and adequate coverage without relying on news networks (Ganor, 2015; Klausen, 2015). Another researcher, David Benson (2014), understanding the multiple advantages of the Internet for radicals, emphasizes that the same advantages available for intelligence services can be utilized to defeat terrorists. He states that "… the Internet actually provides an opportunity to defang transnational terrorism almost completely… the solution lies in treating it as a resource and not a threat." (Benson, 2014, p. 328).

However, a significant body of scholarly studies accentuates the negative assessments of the Internet in terms of the growth of jihadist online presence. Given the fact that the Internet allows the overrunning of real-world limitations and restrictions, the jihadist

movements will occupy more and more online space. This process is driven by the incredible potential of the Internet and the versatility of its online features, and in the matter of functional applicability, this illuminates the difference between the real world and the online world for terrorist advancement.

  1.2.2.2 A focus on the connections between the Internet and radicalization. A handful of studies argues that the Internet has a prominent role in radicalization and the mobilization of radical forces, accelerating the process of radicalization and increasing opportunities for individual radicalization (lone wolves) (Awan, 2007; Berger & Jonathon, 2015; Bjelopera, 2013; Hoffman, 2006; Kohlmann, 2008; Pantucci, 2011; Precht, 2007; Thompson, 2011). On one hand, the Internet helps recruits to connect and communicate like-minded individuals without knowing their core groups or families. On the other hand, individuals can use the online resources to contact clerics, religious teachers, militants, family members, or friends with radical views. The Internet helps to override geographical limitations, minimizing distance and maximizing the immediacy of connections between individuals. A growing body of scholarly studies stresses that through cyberspace, people have become more reachable for radical ideologists, who can connect and communicate with potential members in a risk-free way (Benson, 2014; Ganor, 2015; Neumann, 2013). Given the fact that the Internet makes socially unacceptable or extreme beliefs and actions normal, for anonymous people, it is easy to join any terrorist network (Stevens & Neumann, 2009). Jenkins (2011) expresses reasonable doubts, underlining that "… the Internet has facilitated access to many more recruits than al Qaeda could reach personally, but it is low yield mining. The ranks of online jihadists, no doubt swollen by masquerading intelligence

operatives pretending to be jihadists, include the merely curious as well as those who may be attracted by the ideology or the glamour." (p.17).

Analyzing the correlation between radicalization and the Internet, scholars highlight that forums, chat rooms, communities, and websites have a different impact on radicalization. While mosques used to be a crucial tactical asset for the previous generation of terrorists, modern radicals have switched to online platforms. Sageman (2008) argues that websites have carried a decisive instrumental role, disseminating video, audio, and other informational materials, whereas forums as an interactive communication platform establish and reinforce personal relationships, attitudes, cohesion, and stance. Going further, the researcher states that "… it is the forums, not the images of the passive websites, which are crucial in the process of radicalization. People change their minds through discussion with friends, not by simply reading impersonal stories" (Sageman, 2008, p. 116). Nonetheless, McCants (2008) argues that personal face-to-face communications with committed members of radical groups are a crucial step in the process of radicalization, typically coming before online interactions. At the same time, the author stresses that general, wide-spread Muslim forums provide more opportunities for online Jihadi propagandists than radical forums (McCants W. , 2008). In the jihadi hunt for souls, chat rooms carry important functions, creating in-person contacts (Schmidle, 2009). Nowadays, one of the most powerful Islamist organization, ISIS, extensively relies on social media and in particular on individual accounts on various networks (Facebook, Twitter, Vkontakte, etc.). This decentralization makes it almost impossible for security services and allows the unceasing dissemination of information (Hoffman & Schweitzer,

2015). To summarize, due to modern communication technologies, there is no society immune to radicalization and the online adaptation of the Jihadi ideology. Rather than being community based, the process of radicalization can be characterized as being on an individual level, oftentimes clandestine to family members. The Internet can inspire lone wolves, but it is not able to mobilize a whole army. Without real human contacts, the Internet may remain a fantasy land or a chest-thumping platform that can dissuade potential militants or supporters from real acts.

1.2.2.3 Description of web content, presented on online platforms through the analysis of video, audio, and text materials on forum, community, and group discussions. Academic circles are engaged in discussion regarding the goals of Jihadist web platforms. Every web site can be considered a unique online entity, and many of them present information in line with Internet literate and educated audiences in a modern context. Furthermore, contemporary Jihadist web sites are very diverse in terms of their language use. Sageman (2004) believes that radical web sites are very useful for potential and actual militants in adopting and elaborating the Salafist ideological platforms. For jihadists, web sites, organizing the global Jihad presence, are perfectly suitable for the identification process, as well as the establishment of connections and increasing the numbers of those physically joining terrorist groups. At the same time, the Internet platforms reconnect individuals with a virtual community of Muslims and any ideological trend disregarding national affiliations, social status, etc. According to Roy (2004), cyberspace gives the impression of impunity and hence, the absence of restrictions for radicals and their army of sympathizers. Weimann (2015) stresses that the Internet helps avoid serious in-depth

inquiry of the Islamic tradition and jurisprudence, narrowing down this old scholarly work to minimalistic readings.

As many researchers agree, the online Jihadist segment has grown daily. Nonetheless, it is difficult to state an exact number of radical online entities. Weimann states that "… In 1998, fewer than half of the thirty organizations designated as foreign terrorist organizations by the U.S Department of State maintained Web sites; by the end of 1999, nearly all thirty terrorist groups had established their presence on the Net. Today there are more than forty active terrorist groups, each with an established presence on the Internet. A thorough and extensive scan of the Internet in 2003-2005 revealed more than 4,300 web sites serving terrorists and their supporters" (Weimann, 2006, p. 5). According to the researcher, more than 5,300 web platforms of Al-Qaeda functioned in cyberspace by 2008 (Weimann, 2008, pp. 6-8). The most alarming signals came from the Dark Web Portal project of the University of Arizona, which states that around 50,000 radical websites operated online in 2007 (Ramsay, 2015, p. 11).

At the beginning, web platforms served as easy access to Salafist ideology and individuals who held similar views. After a while, supporters and militants stopped being just consumers for ideology; they began actively disseminating propagandist materials, fueling the process of radicalization. Eventually, media outlets turned into informational storage units, whose content ranged from operational information to attack justification (Lieberman & Collins, 2008). The topics of discussion usually embraced official informational exchange, articles depicting the miserable situation of Muslims, and their religion is under constant attack, messages with conspiracy theories, justification of

terrorist attacks (oftentimes with historical underpinnings), celebrations of war victories, negative attitudes towards the Western civilization and in particular Israel, condemnation of apostates, a wide set of Islamic traditions, various instructions and manuals about making bombs, explosive belts, etc. (Bergin, Osman, Ungerer, & Yasin, 2009; Bunt, 2009; Ramsay G., 2015; Weimann,2015).

1.2.3 Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State: Why does the Islamic State outstrip Al-Qaeda?

Undoubtedly, the Internet provides plenty of opportunities for Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, empowering their message and widening their media range. Nonetheless, these groups have developed distinct approaches to propaganda, where the groups not only try to overrun the Western civilization's attractiveness, but, primarily, win the intergroup competition. Cyberspace provides an endless variety of tools for effective propaganda, however not every online user demonstrates the ability to utilize them in full capacity. In the competition for jihadist supremacy, the Islamic State has presented the most inventive, sophisticated media approach in terms of technical and ideological aspects. While Al-Qaeda has used more traditional and, sometimes, old fashioned online communication techniques (websites, forums), ISIS media teams have concentrated on social media platforms (Byman & Williams, ISIS vs. Al Qaeda: Jihadism's global civil war, 2015). The heavy reliance of the Islamic State on modern social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Telegram) was repeatedly underlined (Berger & Jonathon, 2015; Byman & Williams, 2015; Horgan, Bloom, & Tiflati, 2017; Lakomy, 2017; Pues, 2016). Pues stresses that ISIS has exploited social media's function – to communicate with its audience directly without any mediators, which gives the Islamic State the opportunity to

create and maintain its own global image (Pues, 2016, p. 7). It can be concluded that, in comparison with the Islamic State, Al-Qaeda could not take advantage of contemporary communication in full scale. ISIS's sophisticated approach to social media networks provides global reach and ideological influence.

Propaganda content is another crucial issue in the intergroup competition and one of the reasons for Al-Qaeda's defeat (Byman & Williams, 2015; Pues, 2016). The analysis of magazines and videos, produced by both groups, help scholars to underline a set of crucial features of the groups' propaganda (Colas, 2016; Conway, Parker, & Looney, 2017; Droogan & Peattie, 2017; Fernandez, 2015; Ingram H. J., 2017; Novenario, 2016). There are several similarities in the content: jihad as an obligation and the negative role of the West (Fernandez, 2015). The numerous thematic analyses of these groups' magazines reveal that Al-Qaeda's and ISIS's messages about obligatory jihad for every true believer are indistinguishable. In the magazines, "Inspire" (Al-Qaeda) and Dabiq (ISIS), articles promote the idea that abandoning and rejecting jihad is treason and hypocrisy (Fink & Sugg, 2015). Both groups describe the Western civilization as inherently hostile to Umma and a main enemy whose secular society is not compatible with Islam. Despite the apparent similarities between Al-Qaeda's and the Islamic State's propaganda, the latter's narrative embraces the bigger audience and the emergence of potential local operatives (lone-wolf terrorists) and recruits.

Existing studies emphasize the crucial differences in the content of each group's propaganda. One of the central distinctions that had a detrimental impact on the success of Al-Qaeda in the inter-group competition is its overwhelming concentration on the West

and Western policy; at the same time, ISIS refocused its ideological frame toward outplaying its competitors and calling for a Caliphate (Badawy & Ferrara, 2017; Novenario, 2016). To undercut credibility, the Islamic State has constantly accused Al-Qaeda and its affiliates of abandoning Sharia law (Gartenstein-Ross, Barr, & Moreng, 2016). Depicting its competition as weak, outdated entities who seek popularity, the Islamic State depicts itself as the creator of the new statehood, a land gatherer, and a political organization (Droogan & Peattie, 2017; Gambhir, 2014), whereas Al-Qaeda's narrative portrays the group as a militant entity or operational unit (Fink & Sugg, 2015). Given the above, Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State have identified their propaganda goals differently. Overall, researchers accentuate that the groups have almost identical objectives for their online propaganda such as the intimidation of enemies, gaining sympathy within the Muslim population, and the recruitment of new fighters (Lakomy, 2017; Siboni, Cohen, & Koren, The Islamic State's strategy in cyberspace, 2015; Williams L. , 2015). Nonetheless, scholars underline that ISIS has tried to uphold its legitimate status, advancing itself as a statehood builder (Gartenstein-Ross, Barr, & Moreng, 2016; Williams L. , 2015)

Previous studies have pointed out the gruesome brutality of the Islamic State (Conway, Parker, & Looney, 2017; Gartenstein-Ross, Barr, & Moreng, 2016; Rosiny, 2016; Siboni, Cohen, & Koren, 2017). ISIS's numerous videos and images have contained plenty of savage scenes of beheadings, throwing individuals from buildings, punitive limb amputation, etc. In light of this, Al-Qaeda's propaganda is percived as less interesting, weak, and inarticulate (Conway M. C., 2017). This shocking propaganda leads to ISIS's

wide recognition, and in the narrow perspective, it deflects attention from ISIS's military activity in Syria and Iraq (Gartenstein-Ross, Barr, & Moreng, 2016). Friis questions the visibility of ISIS's atrocities, stressing the fact that not all savage actions circulated through cyberspace receive political and public attention (Friis, 2015). Analyzing the UK and the U.S., the researcher concludes that ISIS's executions of western hostages meet enormous reaction from political and public sectors, whereas beheadings of locals, which are conducted in the same execrable manner, have less attention (Friis, 2015, p. 743). Besides garnering awareness, the Islamic State has practiced violence to control territories, suppress rivals, and attract new recruits or supporters. In light of this, it would be difficult to retreat from these acts (Rosiny, 2016; Zech & Kelly, 2015).

For several years, ISIS has maintained its reputation of being the most bloody in its use of extreme violence, releasing footage or photo reports of executions weekly. ISIS's considerable number of supporters, who come from all over the globe, anticipate that it will sustain this reputation (Winter C. , 2015, pp. 21-22). In their eyes, global injustice toward Muslims justifies the vicious actions of the Islamic State, which according to this logic, is the only defender of true believers (Al-Rawi, 2016). It is worth noting that this propaganda infuses the impression of the group's robustness and the ability to impose its rules on the conquered territories (Fernandez, 2015; Gartenstein-Ross, Barr, & Moreng, 2016). Steven T. Zech and Zane M. Kelly were correct in their projections in 2015 about the continuation of ISIS's savage beheadings (Zech & Kelly, 2015). This unprecedented viciousness can determine the future of the group, resulting in the debacle of the Islamic State as a group (Rosiny, 2016). Putting aside the contrast with Al-Qaeda, the Islamic

State's content is versatile and includes international and domestic situations, religious questions, and competitive groups. However, their diverse propaganda, atrocities and violence do not encompass their most important aspect (Gartenstein-Ross, Barr, & Moreng, 2016; Winter C. , 2015).To summarize, as of today, the Islamic State has won the competition with Al-Qaeda due to its savvy online media team, its wide usage of social media platforms, and its propaganda content. Analyzing Al-Qaeda and ISIS's content, scholars predominantly focus on its ideological message, target audience, etc. Nonetheless, the propagandist content is very important, but an effective propaganda strategy embraces other elements - the frequency of propaganda production, design, quality of products, and the variety of products, which do not receive adequate attention.

1.2.3.1 Propaganda products. Returning to the previous topic about the content of Al-Qaeda and ISIS magazines, studies repeatedly show the importance of jihadist magazines (Dar al-Islam, Dabiq, Istok, Konstantiniyyas) as a source of information. While the number of studies evaluating jihadist magazines has increased significantly, today, ISIS's magazines grasp the overwhelming part of academic scrutiny (Conway, Parker, & Looney, 2017; Gambhir, 2014; Ingram H. J., 2017; Kovacs, 2015; Lemieux A. , 2012; Lemieux, Brachman, Levitt, & Wood, 2014; Wignell, Tan, O'Halloran, & Lange, 2017). Researchers evaluate their text, images and text-image interconnections. For example, analyzing three Al-Qaeda magazines (Inspire, Jihad Recollections and Gaidi M'taani), Conway, Parker, and Looney (2017) reveal that images of militants (group or individial), enemies, and instructions were intensely presented in 26 issues. In comparison with the other two magazines, Inspire contains various instructions, which range from bomb making

to car destruction; these bomb-making instructions, which are presented in a combination of images and explanatory texts, are usually the longest and most heavily detailed section (Conway, Parker, & Looney, 2017, p. 11). Scholars agree that Inspire differs from other Al-Qaeda products in terms of content and language (Conway, Parker, & Looney, 2017; Lemieux, Brachman, Levitt, & Wood, 2014). Its content contains a mix of inspirational articles and skill building guidance.

As was noted previously, a considerable amount of literature has been published about the Islamic State magazines. Researchers predominantly focus on Dabiq (Colas, 2016; Gambhir H., 2014; Ingram H. J., 2016; Kibble, 2016; Ryan, 2014; Wignell, Tan, O'Halloran, & Lange, 2017) and, to a lesser extent, on Rumiyah (Azman, 2016; Wignell, Tan, O'Halloran, & Lange, 2017; Ghosh & Basnett, 2017). Harleen K. Gambhir (2014) emphasizes that Dabiq magazine's "...significance thus lies not only in its content, but in its very existence" (p.2). To explain ISIS's global strategy and objectives, Ryan (2014), Gambhir (2014), and Colas (2016) examine the magazines' structure and contents. The authors accentuate that Islamic State messaging campaigns appeal to Westerners (Muslim immigrants and converts). Referring to ISIS's English products, Ingram (2016) stresses that they target English speaking Muslims in order to form a constant influx of new recruits and a huge net of supporters outside Syria and Iraq. Like the previous studies, Ingram (2016) examines Dabiq's content, elaborating a theoretical approach based on identity, solution, and crisis. Throughout this magazine, the Islamic State promotes an influential alternative value system that inflames readers' beliefs, moving their polarization and radicalization forward (Ingram H. J., 2016, p. 17). Further, Ingram (2017) uses this

framework to compare the content of Dabiq and the Al-Qaeda magazine Inspire. The present findings seem to be consistent with other studies which reveal that ISIS and Al-Qaeda jihadist propaganda primarily focus on mobilization. Dabiq includes crisis-reinforcing messages which attack moderate Muslims and label them as apostates three times more than Inspire (Ingram H. J., 2017, pp. 7-8). Another study compares Dabiq with the popular ISIS product - Rumiyah (Wignell, Tan, O'Halloran, & Lange, 2017). In both magazines, the tone of the main themes is similar (jihad, the glory of martyrdom, field news, and the role of women) but the latter embraces fewer articles with apocalyptic topics (Wignell, Tan, O'Halloran, & Lange, 2017, p. 16). While the previous works disregard the graphic aspects of the magazines, this research points out that Dabiq's style has changed over its fifteen issues, but the general image-article frame was quite uniform across both magazines (Wignell, Tan, O'Halloran, & Lange, 2017, p. 16). There is, however, a substantial distinction between the English and Arabic speaking magazines in the way they apply images (Kovacs, 2015, pp. 60-63). The Islamic State magazines include many "…figurative representations of humans" (Kovacs, 2015, p. 61). Underlining a growing part of jihadist visual propaganda, Kovacs explains the dominance of images by the fact that images help disseminate even the simple, unsophisticated agenda of terrorists (Kovacs, 2015, pp. 65-66).Together, these studies provide important insights into jihadist magazines, considering them as a crucial part of the entire propaganda apparatus, whose versatile content targets Westerners. Nonetheless, further research has to acknowledge that some propaganda products receive more academic attention than others. Although scholars have agreed on the threat from jihadist propaganda, there needs to be additional scrutiny

over the connections between the content of the magazines and their digital accessibility in terms of language variety, governmental Internet censorship, etc.

1.2.3.2 Recruits. The phenomenon of foreign recruits is well known and by no means new, (Hegghammer T. , 2010; Neri, 2016; Sinkkonen, 2015), whereas jihadist foreign recruitment is considered to be a relatively new sub-category (Bakker & de Bont, 2016). In the 20th century, there were a number of bloody conflicts which attracted recruits from all over the world: the war in Afghanistan (1978-1992), the conflict in Bosnia, and the Chechen wars in the 1990s. However, in contemporary society, the revolution in communication technologies makes this phenomenon global and more intense. As a result, the mobilization of foreign fighters for the ongoing conflict in Syria became unprecedented.

The majority of recruits arrive from the Middle East, but there is a constant flow of new militants coming from European countries, Canada, the U.S, and the post-Soviet region. Scholars have actively discussed the development of this phenomenon in the European Union (Benmelech & Klor, 2016; Hegghammer & Nesser, 2015; Lindekilde, Bertelsen, & Stohl, 2016; Verwimp, 2016; Rocha, 2015) and separate European states: Norway (Lia & Nesser, 2016; Pedersen, Vestel, & Bakken, 2017), Belgium (Bakker & de Bont, 2016; Van Vlierden, 2016), Denmark (Hemmingsen, 2016), Spain (García-Calvo & Reinares, 2016), and Italy (Marone, 2016).

It is nearly impossible to determine statistically how many European recruits have joined the Islamic State and how many of them have fought for Al-Qaeda. Nonetheless, given the pervasive propaganda since the Islamic State was declared a caliphate, most foreign

fighters have joined IS, eschewing al-Qaeda. As stated in the collective research, the larger part of recruits have moved to I (Bakker & de Bont, 2016; Ford, Sims, Bergen, & Sterman, 2016; García-Calvo & Reinares, 2016) ISIS held areas, and "…only one-tenth have joined Jabhat al-Nusra…and only seven percent have joined other smaller militant groups (Ford, Sims, Bergen, & Sterman, 2016, p. 5)." This trend reinforces the IS's claims that it is the new champion of the jihadist movement, and that al-Qaeda is archaic and overly cautious and thus unable to attract the support of the younger generation.

The terrorist threat to Europe is extremely high due to a well-placed transnational jihadist net, a high number of recruits, and jihadist supporters who stay in their own countries (Ford, Sims, Bergen, & Sterman, 2016; Hegghammer T. , 2016). For example, in Spain, a significant number of IS supporters, who were detained between June 2013 and August 2016, were involved in jihadist activities and acted as a part of a network (García-Calvo & Reinares, 2016). Investigating the recruits from Norway, Lia and Nesser (2016) present several factors which could have a negative impact on national security: world events and developments, the multinational character of the terrorist network, the situation in the Middle East, and the international acts of allies. Along with these factors, Hegghammer (2016) points out the role of the Internet, which provides "operational freedom" for jihadist propagandists and operatives.

Recent studies have tried to evaluate jihadist demographics (Ford, Sims, Bergen, & Sterman, 2016; Rich & Burchill (Eds.), 2017; Weggemans, Bakker, & Grol, 2014; Van Ginkel & Entenmann (Eds.), 2016). Prior to the relocation, or hijra, to Syria, scholars indicate that radicals became devoted believers that changed their usual behavioral pattern,

eating habits, and dress code (Bakker & de Bont, 2016; Weggemans, Bakker, & Grol, 2014). A European dataset about foreign fighters for the period from 2011 up to 2015 reveals that France, Belgium, the UK, and Germany produce 66.1% of foreign militants (Boutin, et al., 2016, p. 49). Analysing the algorithm of radicalization, Meserole estimates the numbers of foreign recruits state by state (Meserole, 2016). According to his calculations, Belgium has the biggest proportion of foreign fighters in Europe: 52.01 militants per one million residents (Meserole, 2016). The second position belongs to the UK with 31.21 recruits per one million residents (Meserole, 2016). Based on the comparison of the Muslim population and the number of foreign recruits, this study apparently omits statistics of converts to Islam. This could be important in light of the fact that the study focuses on traditionally Christian states and the fact that converts comprise around 20% of all recruits. In Spain, among the people detained by police for terrorism, 13.3% are converts (García-Calvo & Reinares, 2016, p. 109). In Belgium and the Netherlands, recruits who changed their original faith made up 6% (Bakker & de Bont, 2016, p. 842), and interestingly enough the majority of these converts are female (van San, 2015, pp. 47-48). In Norway, the proportion of converts is up to 18% (Lia & Nesser, 2016, p. 130), whereas in Germany converts comprise 12 % of all recruits (Van Ginkel & Entenmann, 2016, p. 52). France is a champion in this regard, as their converts comprise 25% (Roy O. , 2015, p. 9). The report of Vidino, Marone, and Entenmann (2017) evaluates 51 terror attacks conducted in Europe and the U.S between June 2014 and June 2017. It discovers that 17% of attackers were converts, underlining that the proportion of convert-perpetrators is much higher in the U.S (Vidino, Entenmann, & Marone, 2017, p. 16). In the

conference report, Oliver Roy (2015) states that the statistics of converts in the West are mostly ommited "…because it contradicts the (culturalist) idea that individual radicalisation reflects a radicalisation of a frustrated Muslim community" (p. 9). In fact, the number of converts from the Western states who joined foreign terrorist organizations is substantial and shows a tendency to increase, especially in light of the fact that in some cases the proportion of attacker-converts is high (for example, the prevented attack in the Spanish capital in June 2015).

While the main target of jihadist propaganda remains the Muslim diaspora, the current demographics of foreign recruits have changed since the Afghanistan conflict and the Chechen wars. The emergence of the Islamic State, which has served as a magnet for many people all over the world, has influenced the recruitment pattern. As Thomas Hegghammer points out, two factors - ideological and organizational, play a critical role for the large-scale mobilization of foreign recruits (Hegghammer T. , 2010). Even though the article was published before the outbreak of the tragic events in the Middle East (known as the Arab Spring), his arguments are extremely useful, explaining the success of ISIS's mobilization within the West. While the ideological agenda (the first factor) provides motivation, a network of enthusiasts (the second factor) organize the transition for recruits from Western states to Syria and Iraq (Hegghammer T. , 2010). In comparison with Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State has implemented both factors in a very effective way. Regarding the demographics of recruits, an important contribution is made by the report, published by the organization "New America" in May 2016 (Ford, Sims, Bergen, & Sterman, 2016). The study is based on the analysis of 604 recruits who resided in 26 Western states, including the United

States. According to the report, ongoing jihadist mobilization has embraced diverse populations in terms of gender, marital status, social position, criminal background, and age. Modern recruits are young and Internet savvy individuals with "family ties to jihad" (Ford, Sims, Bergen, & Sterman, 2016, pp. 8-11). The study underlines the interconnectedness of age and gender: The average age for male recruits is 25 years, whereas for females, this number is lower – 22 years old. The same dynamics are revealed for age range: men become foreign recruits between 13 and 75 years old; female age statistics fluctuate between 15 and 53 years old (Ford, Sims, Bergen, & Sterman, 2016, p. 7). In the case of Belgium and the Netherlands, these conclusions are well-supported. As Bakker and de Bont (2016) argue, the age of Belgium and Dutch jihadists ranges from 13 to 67 years old with the average age being 23.5 years (p.840). Usually, female recruits tend to be younger than their male counterparts (Bakker & de Bont, 2016, pp. 840-841). In Spain, the analysis of detained ISIS recruits shows the wide age range of these detainees, where 83.8% were between 20 and 44 years-old (García-Calvo & Reinares, 2016, p. 109). Therefore, the age range is very broad within the Western countries and includes almost every category of population, which refers to the prominence of the ideological agenda rather than the generational character of the foreign fighters' phenomenon.

As it was underlined previously, the target audience for jihadist propaganda is the Muslim diasporas in Europe. Van Vlierden (2016) emphasizes that a significant majority of Belgian fighters have a Moroccan origin (p. 56). Among detained ISIS operatives in Spain, Moroccan immigrants and their next generations make up 41.4% of their number (García-Calvo & Reinares, 2016, p. 109). García-Calvo and Reinares (2016) elaborate that "…five

out of every ten are immigrants and four out of ten are second generation descendants of (mainly) Moroccan immigrants" (p. 109). In Norway, the Muslim diaspora embraces immigrants from North Africa (Algeria), Kosovo, Pakistan, Somalia, Russia, and Iraq. According to statistics, more than 60% of Norwegian jihadists were not born there, rather their parents brought them to Norway during their childhood (Lia & Nesser, 2016, p. 131). Hence, creating the profile of a Western foreign militant, religious affiliation should be one of the most crucial components; even representatives of traditional European nations convert to Islam before undertaking the trip to Syria as a recruit. However, in terms of nationality, there is not a clear-cut profile of foreign militants.

Scholars reveal other factors which can facilitate the creation of this profile: residence and criminal background. In an investigation of the demographics of foreign fighters, researchers found out that recruits are mainly urban dwellers, residing either in densely-populated metropolitan districts or suburban areas (Bakker & de Bont, 2016; Lia & Nesser, 2016; Van Ginkel & Entenmann, 2016). For example, out of 122 recruits from the Netherlands, 70% of them originated from four urban districts: The Hague, Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and Utrecht (Bakker & de Bont, 2016, p. 841). In the case of Belgium, around 65% of foreign fighters resided in Brussels, Antwerp, and other cities (Bakker & de Bont, 2016, p. 841). Militants from Finland have moved to Syria from various parts of the state, but the majority resided, prior to relocation, in cities (Helsinki and Turku) or their Southern and Western surroundings. (Saarinen, 2015, p. 4). Many militants resided in the same urban areas prior to the trip to Syria and it is possible that they could be a part of the same radical network. Also, as research indicates, some recruits have criminal records and were

involved in illicit activities before radicalization in their home countries: Spain (García-Calvo & Reinares, 2016), Denmark (Hemmingsen, 2016), Norway (Lia & Nesser, 2016), Kosovo (Xharra & Gojani, 2017), Belgium, and the Netherlands (van San, 2015).

In 2013, analyzing the foreign fighter phenomenon during the decades 1990 to 2010, Thomas Hegghammer (2013) stressed that a significant number of Western volunteers, who joined the conflicts in Pakistan, Somalia, Bosnia, and Afghanistan, were male. Nowadays, the proportion of females who traveled to Syria and Iraq and joined the Islamic State has increased dramatically. Speckhard (2015) focuses on the role of female recruits for various terrorist organizations, including Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Arguing against the widely spread public assumption that women cannot be violent, the author underlines that women are a part of terrorist organizations and often serve as operatives who participate and conduct lethal actions (Speckhard A. , 2015, pp. 5-7). Mah-Rukh Ali scrutinizes the Islamic State' propagandist products to identify its approach towards women, including both Muslims and non-Muslims (Ali, 2015). A comparison between the Islamic State and Taliban helps the author to make persuasive conclusions about ISIS. First, ISIS's statements about women vary and depend on the audience at which the propaganda is aimed. Second, this terrorist group observes women as sexual objects, whose place must be hidden inside the home and whose space must be limited by the home size (Ali, 2015, pp. 19-20). According to Ali (2015), an evaluation of the Islamic State's propaganda reveals not only ISIS's obsession with the sexual sphere, where women are the subject of subjugation and a source of pleasure for men, but the fact that the Islamic State is a purely male entity; it glorifies weapons, destructive power, torture and abuse, all of which

undermine Islam (Ali, 2015, pp. 21-22). In addition, Ali agrees with other researchers, who emphasize the wide coverage of ISIS propaganda; the author adds that ISIS's message reached a larger number of females than the Taliban's propaganda due to their reliance on social media platforms. Another researcher, Pues (2016), analyzes the recruitment of Western women and the role of blogging, focusing on the propagandist online resource created by a young woman from Glasgow, Aqsa Mahmood, who joined ISIS and moved to Syria. The evaluation of its posts leads to a conclusion about the significant role of personal blogs, which help to mesmerize females. Blogs infuse impressions about their authenticity, trying to present themselves as something apart from official ISIS campaigns (Pues, 2016, pp. 15-17).While the majority of works do not provide a clear answer as to why Western females join terrorist organizations, Pues's study stands out in this regard, giving an explanation on this question and adumbrating the future research. Nonetheless, many questions arise that demand close attention. What is the proportion of female converts in comparison to female-born Muslims? Do online or offline contacts play a more crucial role in radicalization? Given the fact that many young girls from various countries (the UK, Russia, Belgium, etc.) moved to Syria or Iraq looking for their love and then, to get married, we need to know how this "honey" network operates and by whom.

Considering this, the question about the role of family in recruits' decision to make "hijra" and be a part of a terrorist group arises. Numerous pieces of literature are devoted to the analysis of recruits' family environments (Andre & Harris-Hogan, 2013; Harris-Hogan, 2014; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2011). On the one hand, previous studies have reported family support, the impact of close-knit family ties with radicalization, and their relocation

to the conflict zones in the Middle East (Asal, Fair, & Shellman, 2008; Post, Sprinzak, & Denny, 2003). Indeed, even before the rise of the Islamic State, Marc Sageman (2004) underlines the high proportion of foreign militants with familial relationships (14%) (p. 112). In more than a decade since Sageman's research, this issue has become more acute. For example, the research of the New America organization concludes that out of 474 recruits from the West, around one-third of the volunteers have kinship ties with radical organizations via relatives, who joined one of the radical groups through marriage and other types of connections (Schuster, Sterman, & Bergen, 2015, p. 3). In the case of Albanians from the Western Balkans, Shtuni (2015) points out a similar trend and the crucial role of family traditions which, in some cases, facilitate recruitment. At least eight militants out of twenty have blood connections, being brothers or cousins (Shtuni, 2015, p. 13).

On the other hand, some publications have not found a clear connection between family and the radicalization of youths and have underlined that many families tried to preclude the engagement of their youths into radical activities (Lankford, 2013; Merari, 2010). For individuals, membership in radical groups can be a form of revolt against the socio-political environment in the broad sense and against parents in the narrow sense (Roy O. , 2015). The study of the impact of families on the process of children's radicalization was carried out by Sieckelinck and de Winter, who argue that there are many other more powerful triggers than family (Sieckelinck & De Winter, 2015). Simultaneously, they stress that family environment can indirectly facilitate radicalization (Sieckelinck & De Winter, 2015).

Another study scrutinizes the role of parents of Belgian and Dutch recruits, evaluating families' attitude towards the Syrian conflict, signs of radicalization, and families' actions to stop the departure of their youths (Van San, 2017). Signs of youths' radicalization along with behavioral changes do not go unnoticed by their families, however, parents do not perceive the threat, refusing to observe the reality. Apart from the online propaganda and well-integrated local networks of radicals, the problem of recruitment became more serious because the parent-responders rejected the signs of radicalization, or if they began to realize the threat, government authorities and police failed to prevent their departure for Syria, and schools dismissed warnings from troubling behaviors (Van San, 2017, pp. 50-52). Conflicting views on many aspects of the war in Syria do not allow parents and their children to find a common ground and in some cases, lead to the alienation of youths. The focus on the differentiation of converts' and Muslim families was beyond this study, therefore, the research does not provide the information of how many Muslim and converts' families gave an interview. Nonetheless, in some cases, the author stresses the differences between parents. The parents of converts discern, if not the signs of radicalization, the critical changes of behavior, whereas Muslim parents initially do not perceive the sudden religious devotion of their children as a threat "...because they often received positive reactions from the Islamic community…" (Van San, 2017, p. 48). However, more research on this topic can be conducted on this distinction in light of varying backgrounds and heritage (If the Muslim community supports this religious devotion of young Muslims, how does the Muslim community observe the existence of

converts, who show similar religious feelings? Are the signals of radicalization the same for Muslim youths and converts?).

A handful of academic studies have evaluated the motivation of individuals to join terrorist groups. After the 9/11 terror attack in the United States, it has commonly been assumed that there is some interconnectedness between poverty and terrorism, and this can be discerned through testing several variables such as GDP, social inequality, educational level, and an increase of violent predators (Newman, 2006; Pedahzur, Perliger, & Weinburg, 2003). Many studies object to the positive connection between poverty and terrorism, stressing that contrary to widely spread assumptions, persons with high degrees and/or financial success can be involved in radical groups (Abadie, 2006; Krueger & Maleckova, 2003; Piazza, 2006). This indicates the absence of agreement within academia. Nowadays, analyzing the new wave of foreign fighters provoked by the emergence of the Islamic State, scholars present a wide range of explanations for reasons and motivations behind the high mobilization of recruits. The theory, stating that social grievances are a driving engine for terrorism, is still around and has not been dismissed. Analyzing the situation in Belgium, Coolsaet (2016) argues that the country presents "…a poor track record in many sociocultural and socio-economic categories" (p. 34). In particular, Muslim youths have experienced injustice and animosity from the native population that triggers radicalization and relocation to Syria or Iraq. In the same vein, Philip Verwimp (2016) elaborates that underrepresentation of the immigrant population in the labor market and lack of educational achievements provide a fertile ground for recruitment in Belgium. Hegghammer (2016) questions the influence of economic hardship on radicalization, but

he emphasizes that foreign recruits originate from the European impoverished immigrant diaspora (p. 159). Underlining the role of urbanization and the employment rate among youth populations, McCants and Meserole (2016) point out that in Francophone countries, a political tradition with a strong focus on secularism provides a benign climate for radicalization. In comparison with the United Kingdom and Saudi Arabia, Belgium faces a high rate of radicalized individuals per capita (McCants & Meserole, 2016).

Other researchers consider ideology and a failed process of assimilation as central triggers for radicalization and recruitment (Benmelech & Klor, 2016; Dragon, 2015; Mironova & Whitt, 2014; Sheikh, 2016). ISIS propaganda has called for the creation of a Muslim state (caliphate) with its own military forces, judiciary system, and civil administration. The continuous narratives about its statehood, pride, and revanchism serve as powerful motivators for potential recruits (Sheikh, 2016, pp. 65-66). Undoubtedly, many individuals, hypnotized by ISIS propaganda, have been trapped by the myth about the heroism of the Islamic State's militants, and they move to Syria or Iraq in order to be a part of this group (Roy O. , 2015, p. 4). The research, conducted by Benmelech and Klor (2017), asserts that ideology and poor assimilation into the Western cultural environment stimulate the rise of foreign fighters rather than economic marginalization. Many recruits originated from financially stable states with well-developed political systems and low-income inequality.

As the cross-country analysis presents, Western Muslims, who are born in European states, have experienced an identity crisis, which is based on the socio-cultural and religious distinctions of the immigrants and homogeneous European population (Benmelech & Klor, 2016, pp. 14-19). As a result, these individuals, once radicalized, become a main source

for ISIS recruitment. All in all, the ongoing mobilization of foreign fighters is hardly explainable by one-sided reasoning. There are a set of motivations, which range from an obligation to defend Islam and the suffered Muslim community from crusaders, to an opportunity to avoid state persecution and obtain a better life.

    1.2.4 Terrorism and marketing. Few scholars undertake an attempt to evaluate terrorism and its various aspects through the perspective of marketing theories (Soler, 2016; Wiechert, 2017). Given the fact that the Islamic State has demonstrated advanced marketing strategies in comparison with other groups, the academic community predominantly focuses on this terrorist group. The marketing expert, Hanlon, has developed a system of primal codes for the establishment of successful brands and applies it to the Islamic State brand. The main parcels of the system - story, creed, icon, ritual, pagan, vocabulary, and leadership, work together to build a strong brand image and its ideological foundation (Hanlon P. , 2011). Applying these codes to the Islamic State, Hanlon (2015) defines ISIS as an actively growing brand community which embraces like-minded people. Along with a recognizable visual culture, the Islamic State has established its own war rituals (beheadings, conversion to Islam, sectarianism) and vocabulary (Hanlon P. , 2015). Its operatives and supporters have developed a secret lexicon. Being a part of a brand community narrative, the vocabulary simplifies the identification of members, as well as helps to avoid online censorship. Hanlon (2015) argues that effective counter-terrorist policy has to decipher ISIS's primal codes in order to be effective.

It has to be underlined that some researchers use commercial terms, describing the terrorist group without the application of a marketing theoretical base (Al-Rawi, 2016; Benotman

& Winter, 2015; Fighel, 2007; Ostovar, 2017; Zech & Kelly, 2015). Few scholars consider brutality and beheadings as ISIS's brand attribute (Al-Rawi, 2016; Zech & Kelly, 2015). This feature is not a sudden invention, rather, it is deliberate and well-calculated (Winter C. , 2015; Zech & Kelly, 2015). It serves several crucial objectives: the creation of a famous brand, recruitment, and recognition from competitors (Al-Rawi, 2016; Winter C. , 2015; Zech & Kelly, 2015).

Media and government officials refer to the same terms when describing the Islamic State (Bershidsky, 2016; Bereznak, 2015; Haggerty, 2014; Sheffield, 2015). While the media speculates about the similarities between ISIS and commercial brands (Apple, Nutella, Cola-Cola), officials consider the Islamic State as a well-crafted brand, emphasizing the salient symbolic elements (uniforms, the flag, music) and the role of high level professionalism, organizational hierarchy, and linguistic diversity (Bereznak, 2015; Sheffield, 2015; Shields, 2016).

The article of Soler (2016) evaluates the problem of radicalization within the marketing framework. The author underlines that a recruitment campaign and an effective marketing strategy embrace the same key elements: objective, target, message, and methods of implementation (Soler, 2016, pp. 12-15). ISIS propagandists identify a target population, tailoring an online advertising approach with persuasive emotional narratives. Soler (2016) suggests that "… terrorism could be considered as a specific category of marketing since it is designed for the same general purpose: to have psychological effects on a target audience in order to influence in their behaviors" (p.14). Establishing marketing-terrorism

analogies, the research provides guidance and a theoretical frame for future studies, giving less attention to the deep case studies.

To summarize, every military group has created its own unique brand, however, the level of brand recognition varies from group to group and depends on how a group communicates its brand identity and establishes narratives, a system of values, and visual symbols. The majority of studies examine the nature of terrorism and the range of terrorist attacks without close attention to jihadist organizations' brand identities.

      1.2.5 Terrorism in Russia. After the fall of the USSR, the rise of terrorism in Russia has been directly connected to the outbreak of the Chechen conflict, which became the bloodiest and most protracted conflict in the Post-Soviet region. Russian-Chechen hostility takes its roots in the 19th century with Chechen people opposing Russian conquest. In the communist period, Stalin's government initiated the mass deportation of Chechens to Siberian and East Asian regions. There is an agreement between scholars about the profound impact of history on the dynamics of Chechnya-Russia relations after the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Abraham, 2001; Gall & Wall, 1998; Hahn, 2007; Hughes, 2007; Tsatsos, 2012) At the beginning of the 1990s, a hard line military approach towards separatist tendencies during the first Chechen war resulted in a negative development, which predetermined the future not only in this region, but the entire state (Hahn, 2007; Hughes, 2007; Hunter, 2004; Souleimanov, 2005; Speckhard & Akhmedova, 2007). First of all, armed groups multiplied in the region and secondly, they widely referred to the Islamist ideology in order to consolidate and inspire locals, plunging the state into chaos. On one hand, in the inter-war period, Islamism gained momentum within the

Chechen populace. On the other hand, the autonomous status of Chechnya was never reached by negotiations between the national leaders and the Yeltsin government. The gridlock of diplomacy and the failure of agreements between 1996-1997 led to a new conflict and the renewal of attacks from the Russian army in 1999 (Hughes, 2007, pp. 94-95). There are a number of reasons behind this conflict that range from economic to geopolitical considerations. For some researchers, geopolitical narratives were the driving force of this collision, whereas others explain the conflict in light of domestic circumstances and make geopolitical causes less visible. As Gall and de Waal (1998) underline the gist of the conflict, the Russian authorities referred to "terrirorial integrity, whreas Chechen people were eager for independence" (p. 370). Ashour (2004) emphasizes several causes of this continuous conflict in terms of domestic and international perspectives. Suppressing the Chechen insurgency, the Russian government tried to prevent other autonomous republics from looking for independence and attempted to diffuse armed military groups or separatist attitudes within other regions. As for the international perspective, Russia could not lose such an important strategic region and gave an opportunity for old historical rivals to enter and establish control over Chechnya (Ashour, 2004, p. 133). Trenin (2003) argues that high criminal activities (bus hijacking, kidnapping) with the involvement of Chechen gangs in the Southern region spurred the government into entering Chechnya (p. 2). Worth noting is the fact that both domestic and geopolitical perspectives added to the war in equal proportions, making the conflict dynamics difficult, unmanageable and barely predictable.

The retrieval of the Russian armed forces from Chechnya in 1996 was not accompanied by effective solutions for multiple contradictions in the region. The conflict essentially impaired the existing structural institutions and moved new leaders to a forefront that had no concern for strong statehood and socio-political stability in Chechnya as well as the entire region (Kramer, 2005). Aslan Maskhadov, a successor of Dudayev, had very limited control over radical militants operating in Chechnya, such as Basayev, Kebedov, and Khattad. The neighboring Dagestan experienced an upsurge of Wahhabi followers and was affected by the Chechen development (Ware & Kisriev, 2010). The spread of instability and terror attacks inside the Russian territories forced Putin's government into launching the second campaign. Chechen field commanders searched for an establishment of the Islamic state within Dagestan and Chechnya. In August 1999, Basaev and Khattab undertook a raid to the Western parts of Dagestan (Ware & Kisriev, 2010, pp. 122-123). At the same time, explosions of several civil objects in Russian cities, including Moscow, made a new military operation against rebels unavoidable.

 In fact, the second military campaign in Chechnya was presented as an indispensable action in order to minimize damage from organized crime and prevent terrorist activities (Campana & Légaré, 2010; Dannreuther & Marchn, 2008; Trenin, 2003). Analysing the period between 1996 and 1999, Tsatsos (2012) elaborates that "… the so-called interwar period … is characterized by increased armed crime and organized kidnapping business as well as by competition among warlords for power and for profits respectively. The fragile state authority and institutions were dismantled and replaced by alternative criminal ones" (Tsatsos, 2012, p. 6). A number of scholars agree that this campaign had quite a distinct

character and can be distinguished from the previous collision for both sides of the conflict. For Chechens, as Hughes (2007) states, the second war was different, because "the extent of the islamization has become obvious from changes in … parapolitical warfare – forms of language and dress or appearance" (p.106). The nature of ideological changes referred to the shift from a pure politico-separatist agenda towards a religious-Islamic one, which transformed the entire status of this conflict, especially for the Muslim side (Tsatsos, 2012, p. 10). As for Russians, it looked like a vendetta rather than a counterinsurgency operation; Russian military actions were just revenge for the previous miserable retrieve in order to punish Chechens for terrorist attacks (Baev, 2004, p. 338).

 Russian society has changed its attitude towards the Caucasus conflict over time from a negative attitude and hostility to unquestionable support of government actions against insurgents (Russell, 2002). Nonetheless, scrutinizing the correlation between human rights and the Chechen war in the public perception of Russians, Gerber and Mendelson (2002) underline that "despite the Putin administration's attempts to play the "terrorism card," our data show Russians in 2001 were not especially fearful of terrorism. Evidence connecting Chechens to the apartment bombings in 1999 has not been publicly produced" (p. 301).

Looking for a strong and powerful national player in Chechnya, the Kremlin actively encouraged a political resolution which would reflect the following aspects: withholding political grievances from the Chechen side and upholding the territorial integrity of Russia. Kadyrov Ahmad, a militia commander and a leader of the pro-Russian group in Chechnya, was ready to participate in peace reconstruction in accordance with the Moscow rules (Dannreuther & Marchn, 2008, p. 103). Kadyrov Ahmad and the federal authority settled

an agreement. Worth noting is the fact that many Chechens, despite ethnic lines, supported this collaboration and the Kremlin's approach, hoping to create a new national elite (Russell, 2011). As a part of peace rebuilding, Ahmad Kadyrov was appointed head of the Chechen administration in 2003. However, after his assassination in 2004, his son, Ramzan Kadyrov, took this position and began to build a new political image of the republic (Russell, 2011, p. 512). Despite the Moscow expectations and repressive measures, the new administration did not stop the violence and popularity of the separatist agenda. Separatists and their groups are not only very active, but the neighboring republics have become a breeding ground for militants. As a result, violence and insurgency have deluged the North Caucasus (Dannreuther & Marchn, 2008; Ware & Kisriev, 2010),

Many researchers argue that the terror attack in the US on September 11, 2001 changed the rhetoric of the global community towards the Chechen conflict (Hahn, 2007; Hughes, 2007; Simons, 2006; Trenin, 2003; Welch & Kennedy, 2005). Previously, the global leaders repeatedly underlined the numerous human rights violations and disproportional heavy military attacks of the Russian army, but after the US terror attack, the world community began to express more support for the government's actions. In light of this, freedom fighters became terrorists and the scale of human rights violations stopped being so enormous. In addition to this, domestically, the 9-11 attack allowed the Putin administration to reconstruct the Chechen conflict from the traditional axis of territorial discourse to global scale rhetoric, where Russia allied with the West in the anti-terrorism fight (O'Loughlin, Ó Tuathail, & Kolossov, 2004, p. 4). Putin expected that the Russian support for the US-led war on terrorism legitimized the domestic war on terrorism. With

this pro-Western agenda, the majority of the Russian populace supported the government and particularly, Putin (O'Loughlin, Ó Tuathail, & Kolossov, 2004, pp. 25-26). Nonetheless, White and McAllister (2008) scrutinize the scope of Putin's support and power, underling the significance of economic performance, high oil prices, and other socio-economic factors (pp. 619-621). Gerber and Mendelson's research (2002) reveals that Russians are not really concerned about terrorists and their actions, rather, they express more anxiety about economic decline and financial instability. Through the focus of the war on terror, Russia presented itself as an ally in the US counter-terrorist initiatives. Also, the attitude towards the Russian-Chechen war was revised, which resulted in the legitimization of Russian military operations in Chechnya through the connection between domestic separatists and international terrorism. Further, the consequent terror attacks on the Russian soul and in particular, the Moscow hostage crisis in October 2003, just strengthened this connection in the eyes of the global community (Welch & Kennedy, 2005, p. 284).

 In the North Caucasus, the appearance of various militant groups was connected to the conflict between Chechnya with the Kremlin over separatist political goals (Byman, 2012; Gall & Wall, 1998; Hughes, 2007; Hunter, 2004; Pokalova, 2015). Given the fall of the USSR and weakness of the new Russian statehood, Global jihadist players specifically targeted this region in order to add it to their circle (Hahn, 2014, pp. 28-29). The engagement of foreign fighters and the influence of radical Islamic ideology transformed the nature of this conflict from local to global and from separatist to religious. The escalated violence coined the religious identity of Chechens as Sunni Muslims and it is then that they

realized their place in the global Muslim community (Hahn, 2014, p. 26; Moore & Tumelty, 2008, p. 418). In general, Islamization widened the cultural and political rift between the federal center and Chechnya, as well as encouraged external engagement, which just accelerated the division (Hughes, 2007, p. xii). In light of this, Trenin (2003) articulates: "Jihad against Russia was not only proclaimed, but attempts were made to turn the North Caucasus into an Islamic republic" (p. 2). As a result, the penetration of radical Islam with a wide use of terrorist strategy entrenched the inimical image of Islam and its followers as a real threat to the Russian Federation and national security (Hunter, 2004, pp. 152-154). Polakova (2015) argues that the presence of foreign fighters, and in particular participants in the anti-Soviet Union operations in Afghanistan, inspired Russia to launch the second Chechen war (p. 84). Simultaneously, the new outbreak of the conflict attracted jihadists from the Middle East and Europe. As Steinberg (2014) stresses, the number of foreign militants was not very significant because "… prior military training was a precondition for joining the fight in the Caucasus" (p.2). Many researchers underline the role of Ibn al-Khattab in reconnecting post-Soviet Muslims to the global jihadist movement (Byman, 2012; Hahn, 2014; Hughes, 2007; Pokalova, 2015). With the influx of foreign fighters, Chechen insurgents had the opportunity to acquire new military strategies such as suicide terrorism, beheading, etc. or to move for training practice in Middle East field camps.

Analyzing the connection between the global jihadist movement and Chechen militants, Hanh (2014) emphasizes a strong ideological underpinning, where "… global jihadi forms of theo-ideological and charismatic authority have proven to be powerful enough for jihadi

leaders across the Muslim world operating in differing cultures to mobilize significant numbers of young Muslim men and women to embark on likely or intentionally fatal missions" (p.15). In part, globalization of the Chechen jihadist mission was connected to financial problems that arose after 9/11. The world community pressured Middle Eastern states to prevent funding and control money flows to Chechen militants (Byman, 2012, p. 16). There are no doubts that foreign fighters play a crucial role in reconnecting Russian Muslims to the global ummah, the dissemination of radical Islamism, the change of the tone of the Chechen war, and the conflict's dynamics.

Russian counterterrorism policy, in all its controversy, provokes many discussions within the academic community about the role of Putin as a leader in regards to human rights violations, public attitude fluctuations for the Chechen war, etc. In addition to this, researchers emphasize some inherent features of the counterterrorism policy that have detrimental long-term impacts. First of all, Russia was not ready to tackle terrorism due to its weak obsolete structure and legal base (Pokalova, 2015; Stepanova, 2005). Despite the existence of the Department on the Fight against Terrorism, before the terror attacks on Budennovsk, Pervomaiskoe, and Kizlyar in the 1990s, counterterrorist operations were managed by outdated legislation issued in 1960 (Pokalova, 2015, p. 65). This legislation was upgraded only in 1996, and included some crucial questions about hostage situations, terrorist actions, etc. The high terrorist activity forced the Yeltsin administration to reconstruct the Department, moving it under the jurisdiction of the FSB in 1996 and further, turning it into a new structure – the Counterterrorist Committee (Pokalova, 2015; Stepanova, 2005). Another essential flaw was the simplistic hardline approach to the

deterrence of terrorism (Hughes, 2007; Luchterhandt, 2006; Omelicheva, 2008; Stepanova, 2005; Trenin, 2003). As from Omelicheva's research, the modern counterterrorism approach can be observed and explained in terms of "Russia's imperial tradition", which referred to militaristic methods of the Imperial and Soviet Russian past (Omelicheva, 2008, p. 3). In part, the extensive reliance on army power is dictated by structural ineffectiveness, a semi-democratic regime, a low level of cooperation between army, police, and the service, the lack of experts, and legislative backwardness (Dannreuther & March, 2011; Hughes, 2007; Luchterhandt, 2006; Omelicheva, 2008). To some, there are differences between Putin's and Medvedev's approaches to terrorism, referring to Medvedev's focus on the improvement of the socio-economic situation in the Caucasus as a part of the counterterrorism strategy. Nonetheless, this difference should not be exaggerated due to the character of Medvedev's rule, which was under the full control of Putin. In light of this, underlining the evasive nature of Medvedev's orders, Andrew Monaghan (2010) writes: "… he has also given orders in no uncertain terms to destroy terrorists ('уроды всякие'/ 'all sorts of scum') "systematically" – to stamp out terrorism in Russia with 'unflinching resolve', that terrorists should be killed 'without emotion or hesitation" (p.4). For decades, the overreliance on extensive military power as an effective and main tool for the prevention and fighting of terrorism in the North Caucasus has been a mainstream trend for the Russian government, despite the fact that terrorists are very flexible strategically and inventive in terms of informational and recruitment objectives. As a result, the authorities have failed to detect the growing terrorist activity in the Russian cyberspace.

There is no holistic study on the presence and activity of Jihadist groups in Russian cyberspace. Few researchers underline the importance of the Internet in radicalization, propaganda, and recruitment, avoiding a deep analysis of this issue (Balaev, 2015; Eldeeb, 2015; Hahn, 2014; Malashenko, 2016; Mazur, 2015; Pokalova, 2015; Silantyev, 2015). With the growing number of Internet users, many radical preachers, militants and leaders receive the opportunity not only to spread their ideas but to become frontrunners in the ideological war in the name of Allah (Hahn, 2014, p. 10). Underlining the fact that terrorists use the Internet in order to get publicity and recognition, Pokalova (2015) emphasizes the enormous impact of radical online propaganda on the rate of Russian conversion into Islam and in particular its radical version (p.121). In addition to this, the researcher states that local radicals realize the propagandist power of cyberspace under the influence of foreign fighters (Pokalova, 2015, p. 85). Silantyev (2015) stresses that cyberspace provides easy access for any radical propagandist materials, thus recruitment and conversion to radical Islam has become a common event. According to the scholar, the government should establish strong control over conversion of Russians into Islam in order to prevent their radicalization (Silantyev, 2015).

Worth noticing is the fact that Russian academic circles have begun mentioning the role of the Internet as an instrument of radical propaganda after the emergence of ISIS more often. Previously, the central reasons for radicalization and joining militant groups were mainly connected to the immigration influx from Central Asia, the absence of indispensable control over Wahhabi preachers, chronic socio-economic disorder, political depravation, etc. In part, this can be explained by the pragmatic approach to the Internet as

a strategic tool, which is developed and practiced by ISIS. Nonetheless, articulation and recognition of the problem with the rise of terrorists' online activities within the academic community do not lead to a comprehensive evaluation for the Jihadi segment in the Russian cyberspace.

1.3 Theoretical Frame

The study relies on a quantitative analysis of the terrorist brands of the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda in affiliated online propagandist outlets. This research is predominantly based on materials collected from the digital realm. The Internet has become a harbor for an endless variety of extremists' outlets where concerned persons, operatives, and recruiters communicate, avoiding state censorship. The online social space is perceived as a safe zone with a particular level of privacy, anonymity, and as a result, immunity. The sense of privacy, coupled with anonymity, allows people to be more honest and direct in online discussions and sharing information, thoughts, emotions, and experiences.

1.3.1 Data collecting. Over a period of 4 years, I collected information from 8 social networks - Twitter, Facebook, Vk.com, Odnoklassniki.ru, Telegram.org, Instagram, YouTube, and Archive.org. Due to the increase of online jihadist presence, I have conducted daily output monitoring from September 2015 to November 2017.

The Internet activities that persist and address jihadist objectives are not produced by a single media source. Propagandist content is produced by a constellation of radical agents (individuals and groups), which act along with the official outlets of the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda. Thus, the study is based on information extracted from the continued monitoring of militants' personal pages, so-called official and non-official news accounts, and websites

of both terrorist groups as well as accounts and forums that were created by their supporters and which are not established as their official outlets.

To investigate radical networks in the Russian cyberspace, four general criteria have been adopted. They have allowed me to gather and examine a vast amount of materials.

1. Only outlets which are affiliated with the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda have been accounted for. Given the fact that these groups compete with each other and exude mutual animosity, members always identify their affiliation though posting their particular group's symbols, propagandist images, photos of their leaders, special words or phrases (like "Umma News"), emoticons, etc. These manifestations of ideological preferences are usually present on an outlet's avatar or within a group's content.

2. The research relies on products that are directly produced and presented on the Russian part of the Internet: all materials were presented in the Russian language. These products refer to jihadi forum communications, videos, text files, statements, news reports, audio records (voice messages, lectures, and nasheeds), photos, interviews, letters, images, emoticons, and poetry. Some propaganda was translated from Arabic and redesigned by Russian speaking radicals. All these materials were screen shot and stored, and then consequently examined by content analysis.

3. The collected data embraces two segments: official terrorist propaganda, translated to the Russian language, and materials produced by domestic jihadi brands, which are not a part of the official propaganda campaigns. The primary focus is given to

the latter. However, the official propaganda materials were collected as well in order to construct the whole picture, provide a holistic analysis, and distinguish the domestic jihadi production from the global production.

4. Information in various formats (video, audio, image, text) was collected from active and inactive outlets.

Table 1

Social Networks, Used as a Data Source (March 2013-November 2017)

Platform	Number of accounts	Number of posts
1. Facebook	56	289
2. Vkontakte (VK)	123	25,005
3. Odnoklassniki (OK.ru)	19	499
4. Telegram	120	7,900
5. Instagram	6	31
6. YouTube and Mail.ru	21	156
7. Archive.org	16	722

8. Twitter	35	7,789
Total:	396	42,391

Table 2

Websites, Used as a Data Resource

Name	Time frame	Materials/Posts
1. FuratMedia.com	August 2015-October 2015	25
2. Vkavkaz.com	December 2015-April 2016	89
3. FiSyria.com	March/April 2013-May 2015	53
4. Blog "Voenkorr"	January 2015-2017	41
5. Blog "DawlatulIslam.over-blog.com"	January-March 2016	7

6. Blog "Halifat-blog.tumblr.com (Sham Today)."	2014	5
7. Dawla (blog)	2016	5
8. Furat.info	2015	4
9. Whiteminaret.com	2014-2016	57
10. Shamcenter.site	2016-2017	158
11. VD.ag	2014-2017	88
12. Kavkazcenter.com	2013-2017	114
Total:		626

During the period between 2013 and 2017, 4 blogs, 8 websites, and 8 social media platforms with 396 outlets were examined. These included 43,017 posts.

The timeframe for this research project can be divided into 2 periods in terms of data gathering: 1). March of 2013 to September of 2015

2). September of 2015 to November 2017

During the second time period, I conducted the daily monitoring of a number of jihadist outlets, but the indispensable data about jihadist online channels, which were active during the first period, was gathered from secondary informational sources (active) and abandoned

pages (inactive). The secondary informational sources are active websites, community pages, or accounts, which made reposts from censored outlets in 2013-2015. Abandoned pages are various types of jihadist outlets which successfully survived after multiple censorship campaigns, but whose media team stopped using them.

Within the vast propaganda materials, several main propaganda themes have been identified: religion and the coexistence of Muslims with infidels, the threat of new attacks to Russia and other states, reactions to terror attacks and the role of women, recruitment and hijra, military operations in Syria and Iraq; the defamation of Russia and Assad, new methods of terror attacks, and the Sunni-Shia tensions. Many channels duplicate posts by reposting them from one account to another. In this research, every post is considered as a unique entity, whereas reposts were excluded from the statistical analysis.

 1.3.2 Conceptual framework. The research seeks to explain the set of issues related to the presence of radical groups in cyberspace through the prism of the brand identity concept. This study frames Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State as corporations that have created and advanced their global brands in order to disseminate their products (ideological agenda and video, audio, text, and other propaganda materials) across the world. These groups can be considered the most famous global terrorist brands, and both have received multiple opportunities to shape and advance their brands with the emergence and branching out of social media platforms. In the business sector, the primary goal of marketing is commercial profitability, whereas the ultimate objective for the terrorist groups is the propagation of their ideological agenda. Following this line, advertising turns

into propaganda, and product trading becomes associated with a number of foreign recruits and attacks launched by supporters beyond the war-torn-regions.

Traditionally, markets have been associated with goods and services, but now various non-business entities (political figures, churches, museums, or even cities) successfully utilize marketing principles. Ideas have become a valuable part of the modern marketplace (Burnett, 2008, pp. 2-7; Fine, 1981, p. 6). Radical organizations and groups adopt and appreciate benefits from the usage of marketing tools, especially in light of advanced communication technologies. Beifuss (2013) points out that "…Brand, marketing, and the visual communication of ideas and messages are tools…used not only by corporations and political parties" (p.10). Following Peter Drucker's theory of the age of discontinuity in Western civilization where the world is turned into a global shopping mall, terrorist groups can be considered as active market agents with a certain set of general objectives: recruitment, indoctrination, the dissemination of ideas, the spread of fear among enemies, etc. (Drucker, 1969). Their heavy reliance on violence does not discount them as marketers. Radical groups have many similarities with contemporary corporations such as consistent symbolic culture, firm-like organizational structure, social media presence, and brand values.

As have many global corporations, the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda established propagandist branches in many regions. In light of marketing perspectives, these global jihadist groups tried to adjust their agenda to local markets in order to address radical propaganda more productively and enlarge its global scope. Product management and marketing techniques play a critical role in the corporation's development and profitability.

Cultural and economic factors such as demographics, language, taste, and traditions help to create loyal customers. In the multinational environment of the Russian Federation and its variety in language, Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State propagandists actively use the Russian language, despite the fact that many of their supporters are not Russian nationals and prefer to use their own native languages. In propaganda materials, these groups repeatedly reference local historical narratives and well-known figures (militants or preachers), exacerbating domestic tensions and galvanizing socio-political grievances. These special marketing strategies are one of the main reasons behind the success of ISIS and Al-Qaeda in Russia. Therefore, the comprehension of the customer's expectations and behaviors has a pivotal role in attracting, building, and keeping the customer base.

1.3.2.1 Brand and brand identity. Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State established consistent and well-known brands, which are associated with a number of distinguishable signs that determine and regulate their public identity and personify their appeal to a particular audience. From a narrow perspective, a brand can be defined as a symbol which helps to distinguish products. In the broad sense, a brand is a unique idea which embraces a set of certain values (Ind & Horlings, 2016). This research relies on the following definition, according to which, a brand is "a reputational asset which has been developed over time so as to embrace a set of values and attributes. As a result, people hold a set of beliefs about the brand which are often powerful" (Urwin, Karuk, Hedges, & Auton, 2008, p. 9). It should be mentioned that marketing and brands are different things. Marketing means promotional activities, whereas brands refer to personality, the idea, and the

message. Actually, the brand plays the role of communicator and mediator between various audiences, jihadi activists, and radical groups.

In the contemporary world, customers and businesses recognize the power of branding. The "brand" means "…the major enduring asset of a company, outlasting the company's specific products and facilities…" (Kotler, Armstrong, Wong, & Saunders, 2008). Some corporations develop particular marketing strategies to promote their brands on a global scale. Van Gelder considers a global brand as a brand that is available and has high recognition within multiple nations without counting its generated revenue (Van Gelder, 2005, p. ix). Aaker and Joachimsthaler emphasize that a global brand refers to "…a high degree of similarity across countries with respect to brand identity, position, advertising strategy, personality, product…" (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, Brand leadership, 2000, p. 306). Hence, a global brand can be envisaged as an instrument for the dissemination of brand and corporate images, disregarding geographical restrictions.

Brand identity embraces a set of elements that make a brand unique and distinguishable for customers, as well as underline the differences between brand-competitors (Esch, 2008; Melewar, Karaosmanoglu, & Paterson, 2005). It can be defined as a verbal and visual message from companies to their actual and potential customers. Therefore, business entrepreneurs develop and manage their own brand identity, presenting what their brands stand for and consequently, the process of developing the brand's identity is the initial stage (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, Brand leadership, 2000).

Logo, symbol, color palette, slogan, design, and brand name – all these elements help to establish comprehensive and recognizable visual components of brand identity.

Nonetheless, the number of discernable cues is more impressive than it seems for common customers, who usually refer to logo, emblem, and design. Considering the brand identity as a main engine within a market of goods, Verma discerns packing, content, product form, and communication, as its crucial facets (Verma, 2012, p. 466). Gaillard, Sharp, and Romaniuk (2006) underline the importance of graphics, celebrities, taglines, advertising style, and music. There are six features that are crucial for selecting and creating a set of brand elements or cues in order to originate brand identity: memorability, meaningfulness, likability, transferability, adaptability, and protectability. (Keller K. , 2003, pp. 142-143). Through a unique name and image, brand identity plays a critical role in the establishment of customer-firm relationships and customers' perceptions about the brand (Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004).

1.3.2.2 Aaker's model. The research is based on Aaker's model of brand identity, applying its several dimensions. From different aspects, Aaker's model presents exhaustive metrics that play a crucial role in building brands; thus, they are able to provide reliable knowledge not only about the most prominent brand outlets but about the central principles of their networks. This allows the research to evaluate the dynamics and pivotal organizational principles of the radical groups within the Russian online environment. On a global scale, the concept of brand identity provides a frame for the analysis of the radical international strategies and the character of global-to-local connections, in particular, on how the Arabic speaking propagandists build equity and overcome language, cultural, geographic and other differences, expanding their reach.

To analyze the brand concept, Aaker's brand identity model provides several characteristics: brand as a product, brand as an organization, brand as a person, and brand as a symbol (Aaker D. , 1996, p. 78).

1. Brand as a product. This characteristic deals with product related attributes, its quality, product scope, country of origin, etc.

2. Brand as an organization. This embraces the organization's core values, culture, and mission.

3. Brand as a person. This category refers to emotional associations, where brand is depicted in terms of human traits such as being impressive, active, competent, etc.

4. Brand as a symbol. Every strong brand has a well-developed symbolic culture which is presented as its logo, symbol, particular design, etc.

1.3.2.2.1 Measuring brand identity. The study refers to the array of domestic jihadist sub-brands. It counts every jihadist outlet that was established for the Russian speaking audience as domestic. In light of this, neither an actual geographical location nor the status of their creators (a recruiter, an immigrant, a local resident, etc.) are found to be relevant, and hence, are disregarded. During the research timeframe, the Russian cyber space hosted plenty of radical outlets, but only a few of them can be counted as a brand. The study selects the outlets in accordance to the dual set of characteristics: primary and secondary. The former set includes: 1. a unique logo; 2. a recognizable name; and 3. high level of flexibility. The "high level of flexibility" characteristic means that despite multiple censorship actions, an outlet had been reopened under the same name and logo. To avoid closing down, some outlets changed their name, but these alterations were minor and did

not undermine brand's visibility and recognition. The study counts them as a brand, in case the other two conditions are fulfilled. Particular design (text patterns, ornaments), operational mode (rules, a path to membership, administrators), the type of outlet, and content - all these characteristics are classified as secondary.

The research is formed on the belief that the branding of terrorist groups greatly contributes to its success, provoking unprecedented foreign recruitment, online radicalization, the rise of a number of terror attacks, the wave of lone wolf terrorism, etc. At the beginning, jihadist propagandists utilized marketing strategies unintentionally and sporadically. Then, with recognition of the almighty social media, the application of marketing strategies became more deliberate and systematic.

Marketing strategies help to promote terrorist groups and attract supporters, as well as distinguish them from each other. The most helpful method to state the group's uniqueness is to develop brand identity. Radicals have embedded certain facets of the brand identity model of Aaker which have helped them to articulate their brand's singularity; through the application of Aaker's model, the study interprets ISIS's and Al-Qaeda's brand identities. In light of this, the following hypotheses rise up:

H_1: In comparison with the Al-Qaeda brand, the Islamic State developed the stronger online brand identity.

H_2: Given ISIS's prominent global image, the ISIS outlets should have the larger number of online supporters than the Al-Qaeda channels.

H$_3$: ISIS and Al-Qaeda domestic outlets differently addressed their relationship with global branding in terms of self-identification and network structure.

H$_4$: The ISIS network was a social media project while the Al-Qaeda network had more options to advance itself (social media platforms, websites, blogs). In light of this, censorship actions affected the ISIS network more than its competitor.

H$_5$: In contrast to the Islamic State entities, Al-Qaeda affiliated channels did not adhere to strong symbolic culture or a strong brand name approach.

H$_6$: Communication patterns between the global brands with their local affiliates have had a significant impact on Al-Qaeda's and ISIS's production strategy.

As mentioned previously, the brand identity includes four blocks: brand as a product, brand as an organization, brand as a person and brand as a symbol. The research uses the following three blocks with the following sequence of analysis: brand as a symbol, brand as a product, and brand as an organization. The block of "brand as a person" is not excluded from the general frame; the study merges this block with the block of "brand as a symbol" given the specificity of the research topic, where emotional characteristics are undeniable from products. The block of "brand as an organization" has two sections, which are designed to scrutinize different aspects of the groups as an organization. The first section explains the brand meaning, while the second part focuses on the propaganda apparatus.

     1.3.2.2.2 Brand as symbol. Visual symbols are one of the central driving forces for the communication and dissemination of radical ideas on the Internet. The Islamic State and Al-Qaeda developed their own unique visual attributes such as logos, flags, and

emblems. In return, their local branches develop their own name, image and style. Nowadays, visual culture has become versatile, including design forms, profile pictures, color palettes, fonts, etc. However, IS and Al-Qaeda approaches to social media and online promotions of the visual symbols are different.

To explain IS's and Al-Qaeda's symbolic metaphors and their differences, this research collects online visual data that is presented on mainstream domestic sub-symbols. Given the logic of the research, symbols are divided into two main sub-categories: account symbols and a person as brand. The account symbols set is divided in two parts:

1. Brand image (profile logo, personal avatar, background cover, account design, specific color palette, video emblem, and photo emblem)
2. Brand name
3. Brand face (images of prominent militants or leaders)

The collection of brand images and brand names constitutes the data set. The research analyzed the conformity of outlet's name across social media platforms and the consistency of brand application (the way and how often radical propagandists utilize their symbols and design elements). In addition, concerning the visual content analysis, the images are examined based on the image's source (a propaganda video, a photo, national heritage), objectives (to underline or conceal a group's affiliation, to identify the group type), and symbolic homogeneity across outlet branches.

1.3.2.2.3 Brand as product and organization. To examine criteria involving product and organization, the content analysis develops two lines of inquiry applied for the research: technique (for "brand as a product") and network (for "brand as an

organization"). Terrorist groups offer a wide range of products that can be singled out into video, photo, text, and audio types. The radical propaganda machine has produced footage, podcasts, posters, and photos. The technique inquiry includes a variety of products (genres and types), language variety, product quality, style (Do militants cover their face? What people are presented (gender, age, nationality, religious affiliation, group membership, etc)?) and production strategy. It should be noted that the "production strategy" characteristic includes a number of questions: how many products do the groups produce during a particular timeframe; what type of propaganda materials does every group tend to produce?

The research discerns two parts in the block "brand as an organization": brand meaning and an organizational structure. Following the line of the study, the brand meaning is defined as the ideological platform, promoted by the terrorist groups and imbedded in every propaganda piece. Brand value is generated not only by its products, but the meanings or culture they accumulate. So, successful online brands are the work of inventive strategists, who design every product (post, video, audio) in accordance with particular values and corporate culture. IS's and Al-Qaeda's propagandists have followed this well-traveled path: they have produced plenty of products that reflect their ideological platform. Customers embrace and appropriate the brand meaning in order to articulate their self-identity (who they are) and agenda (what they stand for).

This sub-category includes the following features, which are applied in accordance to data relevancy:

1. Network coverage (websites, blogs, social media accounts)

2. Types of outlets (personal and community channels; news, military group, educational channels, etc.)

3. Membership

4. Language variety (accounts in other languages than Russian)

5. Outlet lifespan

6. Posting order (frequency of updating social media accounts)

7. Story of a brand (information about an entity (outlet, group), its media team, individuals)

Within the membership criterion, the study discerns two types of growth rate: 1. daily rate, and 2. overall rate. While the former means the numerical expression of the number of members by day in a brand account, the latter refers to the average number of brand followers during its existence. According to data relevance, the research calculates the daily engagement rate by dividing the number of members by the number of days between the establishment date of an outlet and sampling. Statistics run for every social media platform independently. However, some brands have several parallel accounts on the same social media platform at the day of sampling; this means that all its accounts have almost the same followers. In this case, there are two solutions: 1. to disregard reserve-outlets; 2. to count the average number of followers in all active accounts.

1.3.2.3 Network analysis. To evaluate the Al-Qaeda and ISIS network organizations, which were directed entities, the research refers to several descriptive properties: reciprocity, in-degree, out-degree, and density. *Reciprocity.* It is interpreted as

symmetric or mutual ties between two accounts; it is when both accounts publish each other's posts and promote each other via their news threads.

In-degree and out-degree metrics. The in-degree of a node in the Al-Qaeda or ISIS network can be interpreted as a pro-Al-Qaeda or pro-ISIS entity, which can be called "followings" and whose unique content was reposted on other accounts. The out-degree of a node refers to an outlet which is connected to other accounts and makes posts from other accounts to its news thread (followers).

Network density. It refers to the proportion of possible connections which are established among accounts within a network. The study refers to these characteristics in accordance to data relevancy. All calculations concerning the network analysis were carried out applying Gephi 0.9.1.

The analysis of the network processes with Gephi, a visualization software, allows the construction of informative graphs. In the research, all graphs present a bimodal network image that contain two different types of entries whose combinations serve the goals of the study: social media platforms, categories of accounts, inside contacts, outside resources, etc. The graph part includes consequential steps: the identification of a general framework, the labeling of outlets (metrics), and application.

1.3.2.4 Limitations. Regarding Al-Qaeda, the research has a limitation in the application of this theoretical frame. Data scarcity and the pattern of online communication practiced by pro-Al-Qaeda groups and their supporters, are behind this limitation. Since 2016, Russian Al-Qaeda supporters have exposed a decline in the need for virtual

communication or two-way-communication, enjoying membership in militant groups and news/propaganda outlets. Despite this general tendency, I cannot disregard the fact that I could miss the creation of some forums. All in all, the customer-to-brand-theoretical frame is useful for the evaluation of brand equity despite the differences in the communication patterns between the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda.

Social media monitoring suggests an endless variety of online analytical tools. Nonetheless, this study does not utilize available applications for social media monitoring due to the specificity of the targeted audience. The monitoring options across Facebook, Vk, OK, Twitter, Telegram, and Instagram do not help to aggregate comprehensive data for a number of reasons. First of all, many radical groups are closed communities, where new members can join by personal invitation from a group's administration only, personal invitation from actual group members, and by links, circulated on interconnected jihadist outlets. It means that by conducting a general search, their content will be hidden from the public, and unreachable for researchers and analytical applications. Private corporations keep changing their search options. In 2017, Facebook modified its full text search capability for users, which drastically restricted search options on this platform. The fact that many users do not make hashtags, while providing or sharing online content, just aggravates the problem. Third, given the Russian data base, the majority of social media tools were found to be useless in providing comprehensive text analysis. This brings another problem with grammar mistakes (intentional or unintentional), creative spelling, and coded words, which are a common issue for online users in radical groups. All of these issues have a detrimental effect on the scope of indispensable data for this study. In light

of these considerations, the research is based on manual social media monitoring or listening. The manual approach to social media listening helps to eliminate noise (invalid and duplicate content) and reinforce semantic accuracy.

Every message was recorded and put in my personal digital storage. Also, long forum discussions were videotaped. However, there is still a gap between the jihadist web and its elements that were monitored. The study omitted several groups and outlets; they either had low activities and their administrators did not share a link, or had an extremely short lifespan and were closed down for rule violations within several hours. Some outlets, trying to prevent attacks from "trolls", established themselves as a closed community. As a result, membership in these groups is given to a very limited number of people, who asked for personal permission to join the community. These communities were excluded from the research due to ethical and security reasons. Referring to graphs and observations, I believe that the study cannot encompass the entire complexity of the computer-generated visualization of the social networks.

By and large, the study is based on information extracted from the continued monitoring of militants' personal pages, news accounts, and websites of Al-Qaeda and ISIS as well as accounts and forums that were created by their supporters. The research relies on qualitative and quantitative data collected from 8 social media platforms, 4 blogs, and 8 websites in 2013-2017. Referring to the mixed methods research approach, this study has the convergent parallel design. This allows an analysis of the outlets' content and the terrorist networks. Given the research topic and data, content analysis is found to be a helpful analytic strategy.

Chapter Two: Al-Qaeda Network 2013-2017

In domestic cyber space, the Al-Qaida global brand had a multidimensional representation via websites, public (community), and personal accounts on social media. Applying marketing strategies, some of these entities were able to state their uniqueness via the development of brand identity and become local sub-brands. Nonetheless, at the beginning, jihadist propagandists utilized marketing strategies unintentionally and sporadically. Then, with recognition from the almighty social media, the application of marketing strategies became more deliberate and systematic.

The present chapter evaluates the equity of the global jihadist brand (Al-Qaeda) via its local sub-brand entities. The logic of the analysis is as follows.

1. To track their development, the research applies three brand identity blocks from Aaker's models: brand as symbol, brand as product, and brand as organization. These blocks include the following criteria, which have been utilized according to relevancy of data:

Brand as symbol	Brand as product	Brand as organization
Account's symbol, logo, avatar	Videos	Brand meaning (ideology)
Design of account (visual characteristics, account name)	Photos	Network organization (social media reach, account lifespan, membership, posting pattern)
Face of account	Other propaganda products	Story of brand

2. To evaluate the Al-Qaeda network organization, which is a directed network, the research utilizes several descriptive properties: reciprocity, in-degree, out-degree, and density. Reciprocity is interpreted as symmetric or mutual ties between two accounts; it is when both accounts publish each other's posts and promote each other via their news threads. The in-degree of a node in the Al-Qaeda network can be interpreted as a pro-Al-Qaeda channel, which can be called "followings" and whose unique content was reposted on other accounts. The out-degree of a node refers to an outlet which is connected to other accounts and makes posts from other Al-Qaeda accounts to its news thread (followers). Network density refers to the proportion of possible connections which are established among accounts within a network. The study refers to these characteristics in accordance to data relevancy. All calculations concerning the network analysis were carried out applying Gephi 0.9.1.

3.The presented properties are applied to three segments of data, which have been sorted out in accordance to the chronological stages of the Al-Qaeda network's advancement: 1. 2013 – fall of 2015, 2. fall of 2015 – summer of 2016, and 3. summer of 2016 – November 2017.

These data segments embrace the most active Al-Qaeda outlets, which are differentiated though the application of the described metrics in order to detect and evaluate a sub-brand. From a broad perspective, the present study relies on the following definition, definition of brand, which is "a reputational asset which has been developed over time so as to embrace a set of values and attributes…" (Urwin, Karuk, Hedges, & Auton, 2008, p. 9). From a narrow sense, a brand is an outlet or a set of outlets (social media accounts or website)

within the Al-Qaeda network that sustains symbolic culture and a unique name and demonstrates a high level of flexibility[1].

2.1   First Stage (2013 –2015)

The following part of the study is based on 49 informational sources: 8 websites, 2 blogs, 23 community pages, and 16 personal accounts. They were active online entities between 2013 and 2015. Ideological affiliation of community groups was identified via scrutiny of their news threads if the affiliation was not stated by a group's media team in an introductory note or group name. News threads, a profile image, membership in groups, "likes", comments, and "friends" – all these factors together played a crucial role in the classification of personal pages by its ideological affiliation. However, during the time, the identification of the ideological affiliation could be problematic since many supporters did not yet differentiate between the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda, remaining members in their community outlets and reposting their messages. The rift between these terrorist groups became more evident later, especially when Islamic State public accounts began to warn followers about the rival accounts. Personal pages can be divided into 2 categories: accounts of supporters and accounts of militants. Sometimes, it is difficult to distinguish one type from another. In light of this, the research elaborates the following criteria: page name, photos, posting pattern, and consistency of posts.

In contrast to militants, who usually write their religious names (for instance, Adu Shishani), supporters use their real names (last and first names, or a short version) or

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[1] The "high level of flexibility" characteristic means that despite multiple censorship actions, an outlet had been reopened under the same name and logo.

secular nicknames. Supporters' profile photos can be inappropriate for militants' images, as they sometimes show women, smoking individuals, dogs, etc. Recruits who relocated to Syria are more meticulous in this regard. Militants usually refrain not only from publicly uploading their personal photos with an uncovered face, but they avoid posting their relatives' or friends' photos. In contrast, supporters present their numerous personal photos and photos of their loved ones.

Under the consistency of posts, the study identifies the ideological uniformity of posts on personal pages. Given the previously underlined issue with posts, the research checked all available posts on personal accounts in order to determine ideological affiliation. Another criterion of the posting pattern refers to the sequence of posts on a page. Along with reposts from radical community accounts, supporters place plenty of posts from regular communities. Their news threads show that supporters follow radical groups even after their closure. For a long period of time, sympathizers keep reposting radical posts and mixing them with regular unharmful information. Given the fact that recruits spend their time fighting, they do not have enough time, a reliable connection, and sometimes, equipment (laptops) for regular presence on social media. As a result, their accounts usually do not have many posts as well as posts from regular communities associated with peaceful life. In addition, this criterion includes several useful determinants such as the number of daily posts, frequency of online activity (for instance, every 3 months, daily), etc.

The outbreak of the Syrian conflict and the boom of informational technologies instigated the growth of the Al-Qaeda network in Russian cyber space. By this time, this segment of the Internet had some outlets well known to radicals, such as "Kavkaz Center". Newly

emerged personal and community pages spontaneously spread across social media platforms, invigorating the entire network, and later, becoming its vanguard. During this period, the Al-Qaeda cyber niche included at least eight websites, two blogs, and an endless number of social media accounts; the latter will soon play the role of "glue" for the entire network. By 2015, dominated by personal accounts, the Al-Qaeda network was scattered and not structured.

The majority of these websites and blogs (60%) appeared before 2013 and remained active up to 2018 (Table A1). Two blogs and two websites, which became functional after January of 2013, had a short lifespan; the blogs Newsmirislamic and Akhbarsham were abandoned, while two websites became inactive. During different periods, the Russian authorities detected these online sources and banned their activities. However, these prohibited websites have continued to circulate in the Russian cyberspace despite government measures (Table A1). In light of the information technology boom, these online sources began to rely on social media pages. Ten out of eleven entities had social media channels. Four sources (40%) established more than one social media account (Table A1). Worth noticing is the fact that their media teams have been very persistent in reopening affiliated social media accounts which revealed the vanity of the government's actions and the growth of the websites' "customer base".

Both personal and group outlets preferred domestic social media platforms (Vkontakte) over global platforms. As the study shows,16 community pages out of 23 and 10 personal accounts out of 16 circulated on this social media platform (Table A2, A3). For militants with personal pages, this simplified communication with their families and friends, whom

they left at home; for community outlets, the domestic platforms allowed them to stay close to their target audience. The fact that censorship was barely effective due to the novelty of the issue facilitated the existence of radical accounts.

Creators of radical outlets can be militants themselves or enthusiastic sympathizers, an individual or a group of individuals, women or men. If creators want to hide their identity, what they usually do, it makes it difficult to identify them. Sometimes, administrators release personal information voluntarily. Also, goals of a radical outlet, the order of posting, and published products (posts, messages) reveal some information about their media team. As mentioned previously, recruits established their own accounts via social media for personal reasons. So, personal pages are most likely established by militants themselves, who manage these accounts at their convenience. In contrast to community outlets, personal pages do not require dedication from their host or high discretion in regard to possible restrictive measures from social media censorship. Online activists can reside in any part of the world, including Syria. These pages disperse propagandist information daily, but sometimes this posting order can be irregular. Group outlets, run by militants, prefer to manage these groups anonymously by the group's name. Once established, these characteristics of online entities persist and remained relevant up to 2017.

From 2013-2015, the Al-Qaeda network began to adopt social media accounts, applying previous cyber experience and embracing the online success of its main rival – the Islamic State. Individuals who were novices in online "marketing" did not consider a logo and a unique account name as crucial preconditions for the successful functioning of their accounts. Administrators uploaded random pictures for outlets' profiles, which were

available on the Internet. However, they did not pick traditionally popular photos of kitties, puppies, or flowers. Their choice was dictated by particular cultural preferences and included images of lions, warriors, warriors on horses, swords, shahadas, etc. Sometimes, community channels uploaded photos of real recruits with an uncovered face. Customary logos were extremely rare at the time.

A similar practice was often applicable to account titles. Mainly, communities' names were not distinguishable or memorable for online users because this was not a primary goal for cyber activists. Picking a name, they tried to underline the purposes of communities and content via an outlet's name. Radical administrators practiced such titles as "Syria – a revolution of Sham", "Sham without tyrants", "Jihad is in Sham: the search for truth", "Free Syria. The organization of Northern Holmes", and "White Minaret RU." Individuals behind these radical outlets did not undertake attempts to create a recognizable brand name or win sympathizers and compete with other communities. Their main goal was to disseminate information; they did not care how this information was delivered. Interestingly, weak control over social media platforms enabled the existence of community pages and their long circulation despite their controversial names. Many online groups were named after eminent militant groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra, Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar, and others.

Only a few media activists have utilized consistency in network design across social media platforms, which embraces the following traits: an account title, a visual design (for instance, a profile image), and an organizational structure (types of accounts, content order, etc.). The Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar group's network operated on Twitter and

Vkontakte in 2014-2015 and demonstrated name and symbolic uniformity. All accounts had the same name "White Snow" ("Bely Sneg") and the same profile picture (Archive A. , 2015). Nonetheless, the majority of radical networks with an outreach over at least two platforms did not practice this principle of consistency. For instance, the Jabhat al-Nusra account "Converging lines", which operated on Vkontakte as a community page (Archive A. , Al-Qaeda groups 2016, 8 (2,3,4,5), 2015-2016), had a connected page on Twitter under a different name - Abu Zaki[2]. Moreover, this account was organized as personal. Likewise, the media team of the website Bedusham.com had an associated public personal page with a different name – "Destitute people, needed mercy" (Archive A. , 2013). Twitter and Vkontakte branches of the World-News network were barely connected in light of name and logo disparateness. Its Twitter accounts carried name of "Hanif Hunafa," but its Vkontakte channel was named – "World-News" (Archive A. , 2015). Its media team used a red colored profile picture for the Vkontakte account and an image of a Kalashnikov for the Twitter branch (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The World-News branch on Twitter (2015).

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[2] The account "Объединение рядов" ("converging lines") operated in 2015-2016 on VK. VK censorship closed the account down at least 3 times until its administrators stopped to reopen it under the same name. The Twitter outlet "Abu Zaki" was as public and personal. Nowadays the account is abandoned.

While Twitter and Vkontakte branches of "InstaSyria" had almost the same name and page type, their profile pictures had nothing in common (Figure 2, Figure 3)[3].

Figure 2. The InstaSyria logo for Vkontakte.com (2013 - 2014).

In the post of May 22nd, 2013, the group expressed its admiration to one of its followers who created a logo for "InstaSyria" with the Syrian national flag in the upper left corner (Figure 2). Later, the logo was modified and instead of the Syrian flag, its administrators placed a black banner. These manipulations were more meaningful for the InstaSyria media team and its followers rather than for the overall design of its Twitter and Vkontakte branches.

Figure 3. The InstaSyria account logo for its Twitter page (2013-2014).

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[3] The network InstaSyria operated in 2013-2016.

As it follows from their network content, the outlets were disconnected from each other. Individuals proceeding them began to learn how to establish cooperation between account administrators and how to gather a crowd. The accounts' news threads were updated by two major methods: their own posts and reposting from other external or internal sources. Predominantly, their media teams preferred to upload their own posts. They did not provide references to other sources, nor did administrators practice reposts from other affiliated outlets even within the same social media platform. Some outlets made reposts from a limited number of affiliated accounts. Rare accounts practiced reposting across social media platforms. However, this was frequently limited by references to video storage on YouTube. Neither of these accounts made invitation-links or announcements from other Al-Qaeda channels, and their administrators rarely promoted their own accounts, which were located on other social media platforms. Indeed, making references to its own posts, InstaSyria sometimes reposted articles from only two Al-Qaeda affiliated websites - "Beladusham" and "Khilafa". Reposts from other VK groups with similar political agendas were extremely rare. Worth noting is that the connection between InstaSyria accounts was not frequent: the accounts rarely promoted each other. After closing down the InstraSyria community page on Vkontakte, its Twitter account did not provide a new referential link. On the Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar Twitter channel, out of 398 posts 158 were references to 8 external sources, where YouTube and Vkontakte had a striking majority - 87% (Archive A. , 2015). This channel provided links to various YouTube videos, while Vkontakte references (40%) were direct links to its VK main and reserve accounts.

However, the Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar network operated autonomously from other partisan accounts and websites, which were operated in the Russian cyberspace[4].

Kavkaz Center, VDagestan, and other "website" brands did not receive wide recognition, remaining known to the limited audience. They had big chances to articulate their brand singularity, but their media teams disregarded social media opportunities. As a result, the Al-Qaeda network shifted from the domination of websites to outlets on social media platforms. During this period, the Al-Qaeda accounts began to appear across global and domestic platforms, preferring to function on the latter. Militants and enthusiasts behind numerous channels did not have much online marketing experience, which explains the initial network disarray and the absence of the design consistency. While the former was associated with a lack of network reach (branches across platforms), coordination, and cooperation between accounts, the latter referred to the weak appearance of circulated outlets. Social media brands were a matter of the future. Nonetheless, the initial disorganized existence of Al-Qaeda network branches was overridden by the end of 2015.

2.2 Second stage (2016): the emergence of short-term sub-brands

By the beginning of 2016, the activity of the pro-Al-Qaeda websites remained relatively stable, whereas the realm of social media experienced constant development. Many previously circulated outlets were censored for inappropriate activities, closed or

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[4] In the second part of 2015, a female who ran this network announced that she discontinued her activities and all outlets under the name "White Snow" could be considered as fake. The absence of dedication led to the decline of any brand. In this case, the White Snow network could become a strong radical brand with a solid base of supporters, but it was ended for other reasons than efforts of social media censorship.

abandoned by their host. Some militants intentionally removed their accounts; other personal pages became inactive due to the death of a recruit. Simultaneously, the Al-Qaeda network discovered a new opportunity on Telegram, so its network switched from Vkontakte to this platform.

Since 2015, this platform became very popular among radicals partially because of the activation of censorship actions on Vkontakte. In general, the Russian authorities began to pay close attention to the Internet and stressed the upsurge of jihadists' recruitment activities on social media platforms. In 2014, the founder of Vkontakte left his project and his home country, Russia (Medialeaks, 2015). Durov underlined that he was forced to sell his VK shares to pro-Kremlin moguls Sechin and Usmanov (Bertrand, 2015). These profound changes incited fears of the upcoming rigorous government control over the Internet, and especially, over Vkontakte (Sindelar, 2014). For radicals, who looked for safe cyber space to operate, Telegram, which was positioned as one of the safest social media platforms, seemed attractive.

Shortly after the relocation, competition broke out between Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. At the beginning of 2016, the activity of many outlets was interrupted due to their continuous closure on Twitter and Telegram; their media teams restored outlets, struggling to get their crowd back. In March 2016, Russian Al-Qaeda activists figured out reasons for the constant attacks on their channels. English ISIS online outlets organized complaint campaigns against their main competitor, asking followers to send complaints to particular channels (Archive A. , 2016). Islamic State activists did research, joined suspicious accounts, and then published a litany of accounts which they wanted to shut down. Among

these outlets, there were several Russian sources (Archive A. , 2016). The Russian network issued a statement which warned its audience that ISIS, using infidels for online attacks, tried to censor Al-Qaeda channels and other affiliated sources, which "... did not share ISIS's deceptive ideology" (Archive A. , 2016). Labeling Islamic State supporters as dogs, this statement underlined their low moral values (Archive A. , 2016). Al-Qaeda administrators blamed ISIS sympathizers in spreading rumors about them, stressing that purportedly the Al-Qaeda network was a honey trap, organized by police operatives (Archive A. , 2016). This message was an attempt to reinstate brand trust and underline its authenticity, which could be undermined by ISIS's actions. In addition, as damage control, Al-Qaeda cyber activists built a chain of reserve accounts. In January 2017, the An-Nur News outlet conducted a survey among its followers, asking if they would report the Islamic State accounts to social media administration. Eighty-five percent of participants (64 people) responded that they would not turn in ISIS pages, while fifteen percent of participants stated that they would complain on these pages (Archive A. , 2017).

At this time, the pro-Al-Qaeda social media niche was dominated by at least 20 public sources, which had a different reach across multiple platforms (Table A4). Their coverage expanded significantly: 75% of sources ran multiple outlets (Table A4). Seven websites had on average three social media accounts, while 13 social media sources had on average 2.7 active accounts (Table A4). Returning to the subject of reserve accounts, the study excluded them from this statistical data (Table A4). In fact, the number of accounts with dormant parallel outlets was low – 25% (5 channels) because ISIS accounts were more

visible (Table A4); this allowed the Al-Qaeda network to function relatively uninterrupted without the acute need for reserve outlets.

The majority of brands maintained their accounts on Telegram and Twitter; Vkontakte and Facebook were less popular. Sixteen out of twenty entities established their channels on Telegram; fourteen entities placed their affiliates on Twitter (Table A4). Radicals expected a less friendly environment on Facebook and they often complained about the short-termed lifespan of channels. Nonetheless, radicals successfully restored their Facebook pages even for a short period of time.

The comprehension of the importance to cultivate consistent symbolic culture began to increase. Ten sources (50 %) developed a unique logo and used it as their accounts' picture (Table A4). It's worth highlighting that five entities with only an outlet, attempted to form a recognizable brand, and three of them designed a peculiar logo, which in combination with an account's unique name gave them visibility (Table A4). Maintaining logo consistency, two other outlets failed to provide a unique logo. Their media teams uploaded an available image from the Internet, which fitted their brand ideology and could be a voice of the brands.

During this time, the Al-Qaeda network became more versatile, adopting a multilingual approach that increased its brand's value and recognition. Three outlets out of 20 launched channels in languages other than Russian (Table A4). To embrace the Tajik speakers, the social media network "An-Nur News" ran special channels on Telegram and Vkontakte (Archive A. , 2016). In March 2016, the well-known VDagestan brand created a Telegram account for the Arabic speaking audience (Archive A. , 2016). Another network "Ummah

News", which was initiated by an international team of recruits, managed accounts in Russian, English, and German languages. In addition, the network looked more professional. Media teams tried to translate video and photo reports' headlines, news, and other propaganda products, creating a short description in the Russian language.

Two sources out of 20 were abandoned by their media activists; the other 18 outlets were the constant subject of censorship (Table A4). Fifty percent of these sources were discontinued forever (Table A4). While only one social media brand remained fully functional in 2017, all presented website networks continued to operate despite restrictive measures. Nonetheless, these established short-term brands became a frontrunner for the entire network at this time.

2.2.1 "Victory is Coming" network. The most prominent network "Victory is coming" included 10 branches (Table A5)[5]. Its media team established every outlet as a separate (independent) entity. The accounts had a different title, logo, and content. The people behind this brand had a clear vision of their objectives; so, almost every outlet was shaped to fulfill its own goal. This network developed several crucial branches and

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[5] There are several crucial factors that indicate the presence of the same cyber management. First of all, the network branches had the same posting order with the concurrent appearance of updates in the outlets' threads. Second, in January of 2017, every branch in the network changed their avatars when Jabhat Fatah al-Sham announced another rebranding under the new name - Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. The media team uploaded the HTS's logo and kept it for a while, celebrating the decision of militant groups to form a new entity in Syria. In addition, this visual demonstration unequivocally underlined the network's ideological affiliation. Third, its branches were abandoned simultaneously in March 2018. It could be possible that the "Victory is coming" network was established by different media teams, but later their administrators coordinated their efforts and joined their outlets. So, the channels became a united entity under the same management.

maintained a special hierarchy: news outlets, link outlets, inspirational (propaganda and educational) outlets, storage outlets, and a forum.

Two channels provided fresh news from Al-Qaeda's frontlines. The other two accounts were dedicated to the dissemination of links among online users, which reconnected supporters in the case of an account's closure. The team created and managed the space – the chat "Guraba", where pro-Al-Qaeda enthusiasts could communicate safely. While 4 outlets served as propagandist platforms, one account contained poems about the Syrian war. As this outlet claimed, these poems were written by Russian-speaking militants. Another channel, entitled "Read", presented quotes from religious masterpieces or statements of prominent figures. The outlet of "Leaders of the Ummah", established in January 2017, introduced pertinent religious scholars, trying to provide spiritual guidance and prevent Al-Qaeda supporters from falling for ISIS's ideological trap. The collection of nasheeds (audio files) and video products were stored in two different channels. This network operated Telegram for two years (2015-2017). In 2017, the majority of its outlets made updates very rarely. As a result, the network's branches became abandoned almost simultaneously in March 2018.

Seven accounts out of ten were abandoned by their media team, and only three accounts were censored. Heeding the data, the research calculated the lifespan of the branches separately for every account. For seven inactive accounts the end date was the date of the research timeframe – November 1st, 2017; for blocked accounts, the date of their actual closure. The online lifespan of its outlets was significant – 430 days (Table A5). Two reasons can clarify this longevity. On the one hand, the slow activities on these branches

had a positive impact on their online longevity which helped them to go undetected. On the other hand, the Islamic State cyber activities kept the significant attention of the world community. Worth noting is the fact that Guraba chat had the shortest online activity, which was blocked frequently due to complaints from the Islamic State supporters and violations of the Telegram's policy (Table A5).

For other radical accounts from Telegram and Twitter, the average of the lifespan was shorter in comparison to "Victory is coming's" determinant, but impressive: 268 days (Telegram) and 258 days (Twitter) (Table A6). Interestingly, the Twitter and Telegram branches of the "Hanif" network showed different longevity. Its Telegram outlet functioned without interruption for 610 days, whereas the Hanif team reopened its branches three times (Table A6).

Its membership fluctuated from account to account, depending on the channel's content. After 11 months since its creation, the most popular news branch membership reached 375 followers (Figure 4). The link (GdeWse) and inspirational channels (Read!) gained a smaller crowd. The GdeWse outlet, established in August 2016, gathered its biggest audience (304 people) in February 2017 (Figure 4). In nine months after their appearance, another account "Read!" attracted 350 people and kept its crowd until February 2017, when followers began to leave the account due to its extremely slow activity (Figure 4). There are 3 outlets (video, audio, and verse) with a low follower turnout. The forum 'Guraba" embraced no more than 120 members.

2.2.2 Al-Qaeda network membership. As the research indicates, channels had a significant daily influx of members after their establishment, but only for a short period of

time. Further, this influx reduced. Membership could be increased by promotional campaigns across the Al-Qaeda network, however, this was not the case for this period. Among the presented six channels, the outlet "Vdagestan" showed the largest influx – 17.6 new members per day during the first 18 days after its appearance in March 12, 2016 (Table A10). This can be justified by the brand name, which was around for a long time; however, "Kavkaz Center", an equally well-known brand, added only four new members per day and its total membership was also not impressive (119 followers) (Table A10). Apparently, the lack of advertisement across the Al-Qaeda network led to a low number of followers. The newly established outlet "Revelation of Daesh"[6], dedicated to the anti-Islamic State propaganda among the Al-Qaeda supporters, had low member turnout – 3.5 individuals per day. Due to the novelty and the absence of reputation of this account, online users did not rush to join. Two social media news outlets – Al-Saff Media Center and Victory is coming, demonstrated similar trends (Table A10). In comparison, the An-Nur News outlet had the lower influx – 6.6 and its total membership reached 132 people (Table A10).

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[6] This outlet had another name – "State of Lie."
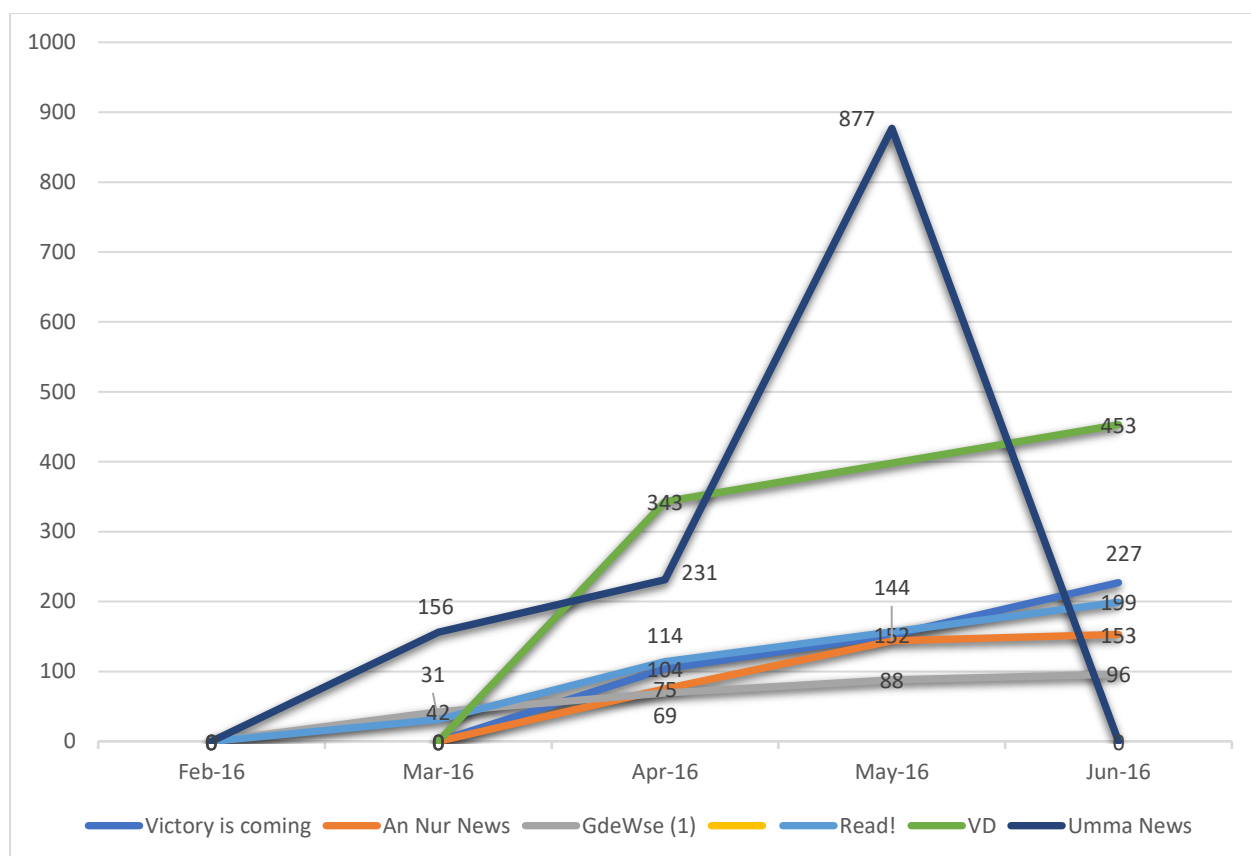
Figure 4. The membership of Al-Qaeda accounts on Telegram (February 2016 – June 2016).
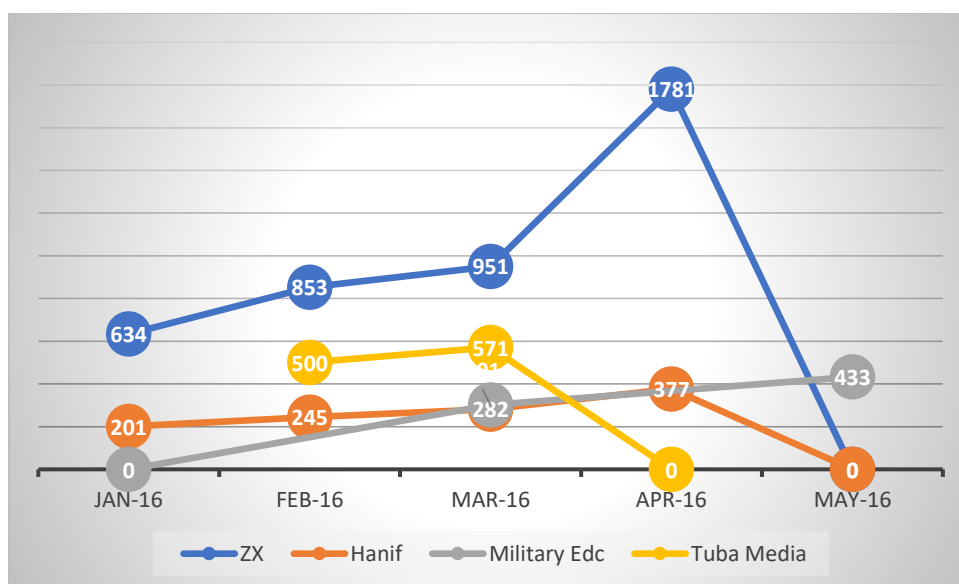
Figure 5. The membership of Al-Qaeda accounts on Twitter (2016).

Despite the fact that the membership of the entire network increased steadily, the Al-Qaeda network on Telegram was not very crowded in comparison to its Twitter accounts (Figure 4, Figure 5). For Twitter accounts, membership ranged from 245 to 951 from February - March 2016, whereas Telegram membership fluctuated from 31 followers on the "Read!" channel to 343 members on the VDagestan outlet from March to April 2016 (Figure 4, Figure 5). The average Twitter membership was 526, but the Telegram average was lower – 156 followers. In May 2016, one of the most crowded Telegram channels was "Ummah News", which gathered 877 followers and was banned the next month. These discrepancies were caused by the fact that Telegram was a relatively new platform and many militants and supporters had just begun to build their presence there.

2.2.3 The network organization. In the first part of 2016, the Al-Qaeda network progressed significantly. First of all, the net of outlets appeared and maintained their online

presence meticulously. Outlets aired fresh information on a daily basis, so their audience could find and follow the Al-Qaeda channels easily. Secondly, a layer of online enthusiasts and semi-professionals emerged, organizing media teams. They began to learn how to survive and thrive on the Internet via cooperation.

As the study shows, 12 accounts out of 20 maintained mutual relationships, reposting information from each other (Figure 6). Also, the channels actively provided space for the promotion of other affiliated and ideologically related channels. Four accounts – Victory is coming, An-Nur News, Guide, and GWE, maintained the highest number of reciprocated contacts (5-7) (Figure 6). Nevertheless, even though the network was full of YouTube video references, the reciprocated relationships across social media platforms was underdeveloped. Out of 20 accounts, "An-Nur News" was the only brand which kept symmetric ties with an Al-Qaeda channel on Twitter – "Hanif". It is important to highlight that while the channels mainly established mutual connections within the same platform, website branches (Kavkaz Center, Alisnad, VDagestan, White Minaret) did not cooperate with other accounts in the Al-Qaeda network (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Al-Qaeda accounts of 2016 with mutual connections. The size of the nodes is proportional to the number of ties.
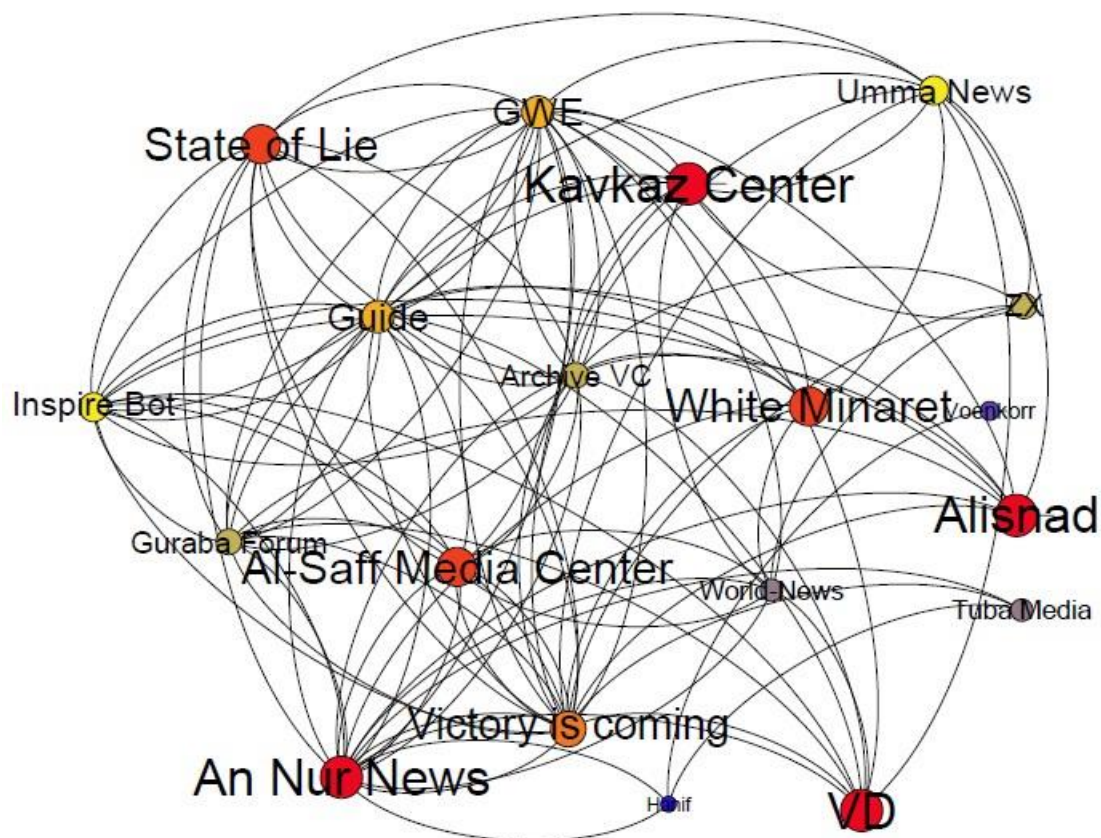
Figure 7. Al-Qaeda accounts of 2016 or "followings" with incoming ties. The size of the

nodes is directly proportional to the number of ties, which every node has.
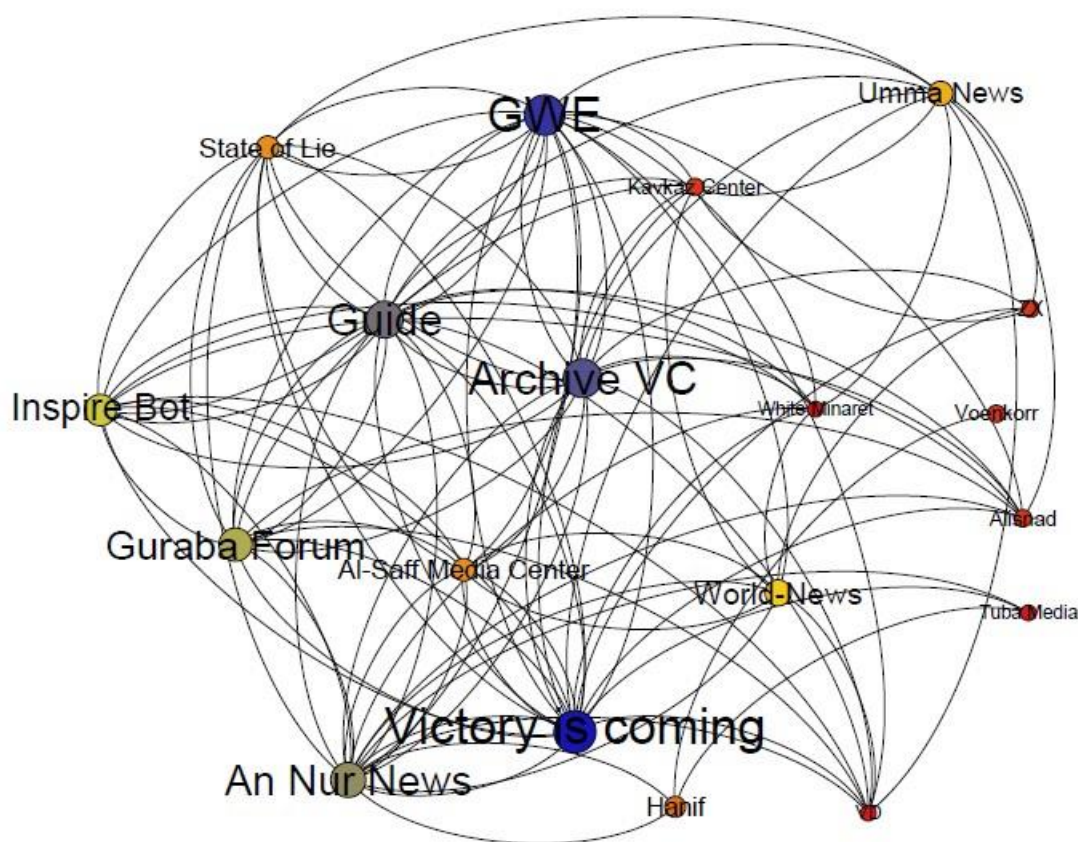
Figure 8. Al-Qaeda accounts or "followers" with outcoming ties.

Figure 7 depictures the in-degree centrality of the Al-Qaeda network, a starkly different picture. In the Al-Qaeda network, other accounts frequently posted articles from these websites and their social media channels, making them the most quoted sources within the network (Figure 7). There are several other accounts with a high in-degree centrality such as An-Nur News, Al-Saff Media Center, and State of Lie (Figure 7). Al-Qaeda supporters on Telegram had little opportunity to read information originated on relevant Twitter accounts because only a few Telegram accounts made reposts from Twitter.

Figure 8 shows different classifications according to the out-degree. The enormously followed sources (Kavkaz Center, White Minaret, VDagestan, etc.) followed a few other affiliated channels from the network. The outlets - GWE, Victory is coming, Archive VC, Guide, and An-Nur News, connected the largest number of Al-Qaeda accounts, they unified the entire network within Telegram and Twitter.

At this stage, several social media brands appeared, which elevated the website brands' awareness within online circles and outlined the path for a successful brand. During the first part of 2016, the most salient brand was An-Nur News; it brought together the Al-Qaeda network, maintained symmetrical connections and presented a high in-degree and out-degree. Its media team dedicated plenty of time to this brand, searching and introducing new reliable sources and promoting the old ones to its audience. The Victory is coming brand with its branches GWE, Victory is coming, and Guide also played a significant role in the representation of the global brand Al-Qaeda to Russian speaking supporters. Demonstrating a modest out-degree, the affiliated Twitter accounts were self-centered entities with very limited reposting practice. Nonetheless, media teams of other accounts considered these Twitter accounts as authentic and presenting the same ideological stance, tracking them and spreading their posts.

2.3 Third Stage (2016-2017)

At this period, two brand types – group and news, became a vanguard for the Al-Qaeda network. The short-term brands of 2015-2016 initially provided a strong foundation for the emergence and circulation of these new brands. Within the existing Al-Qaeda branches, the old outlets widely promoted the newly emerged entities. If group brands were

more or less known to the pertinent audience, new news brands without reputation received quick recognition due to this assistance. As a result, the new brands overtook the position of frontrunner and then eventually, replaced old brands. Out of a number of investigated Twitter accounts, only brand "ZX" successfully functioned in 2017, advancing its brand.

At the end of 2016 and the beginning of 2017, several new group and news brands established their online niche. These outlets became a very significant addition to the existing network, which provided assistance and a successful entrance for these new brands. Through the circulated branches, the outlets with reputations widely promoted the newly emerged entities, inevitably increasing their recognition and the trust of the concerned audience. Eventually, the new brands took up a leading position, while many old brands were abandoned by their media teams.

In this part, the research conducts a two-fold analysis of the Al-Qaeda network. The first segment scrutinizes the structure of 25 accounts up until March 2017. The second segment evaluates the network of up until October 2017. In-degree, out-degree, degree, and density – these criteria of centrality are applied in both sections in order to test organizational and team behavior.

In March 2017, the sub-brands with their branches, established in 2015-2016, remained a frontrunner for the entire network. An-Nur News, Victory is coming, and State of lie showed the highest degree of centrality (Table 1). They maintained symmetrical connections, increasing their number by adding new outlets within the range of their influence. The centrality criteria of the newly emerged news brands – Muhhamad Jazira, Faruq Shami, and Sham Center revealed their differences. As previously stated, the MJ

brand focused on reposting information rather than on its production, so it had high in-degree and out-degree data. Focusing on spreading their own unique propaganda materials, two other brands showed a low out-degree (1 and 4) and a high in-degree (13 and 11) (Table 1). In addition, six group brands had a higher in-degree (7.8 on average) than the out-degree determinant (3.2 in average)[7]. Loosely connected to other affiliated branches, these channels served as sources of information, publishing militants' photos, videos, and statements, which spread through the news branches.

Table 1

In-degree, out-degree, and degree metrics of the Al-Qaeda branches (March 2017)

Outlets	In-degree	Out-degree	Degree
An-Nur News	11	17	28
Victory is coming	10	17	27
GWE	10	17	27
State of Lie	9	16	25
Kavkaz Center	6	14	20
Muhammad Jazira	11	11	22
Guide	5	16	21
News of Islamic Ummah	7	13	20

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[7] The militant group brands included the groups: Ajnad Kavkaz, Nogay Shamda, Warriors of Sham, Imarat Kavkaz, LMA, and Malhama Tacticals. Warriors of Sham was created at the end of 2016. Its founder was a militant from Uzbekistan, who discontinued the network in 2017 after joining the Voice of Sham network. He aired video and photo materials from the Syrian frontlines.

Read!	4	12	16
Faruq Shami	11	4	15
LMA	13	2	15
Sham Center	13	1	14
Warriors of Sham	10	3	13
Alisnad	10	1	11
Websites	10	1	11
Malhama Tactical	9	2	11
World-News/Hanif	3	8	11
Umma Video	2	8	10
Leaders of the Ummah	8	2	10
Imarat Kavkaz	5	4	9
Ajnad al-Kavkaz	6	3	9
Nogay Shamda	4	5	9
Archive VC	1	7	8
Truth about ISIS	7	1	8
ZX	1	5	6

Between March 2016 and March 2017, the density of the Al-Qaeda network increased from 0.292 to 0.315. In October 2017, this determinant rose up to 0.421. Since the Al-Qaeda branches' reach across social media platforms increased, the rate at which information was dispersed also increased. Their followers received fresh news almost simultaneously across

the Al-Qaeda branches. Moreover, density influences account membership as well as flexibility. Skimming through Twitter partisan accounts, an online user could easily find connections to partisan branches located on other social media platforms. For instance, if an affiliated account was censored on Facebook, the concerned audience on Telegram would be notified about this action as well as the creation of a new channel as soon as the banned account's team issued a warning note. The Al-Qaeda network density presented a tendency to be robust, which continued to increase without complex restrictive measures.

Table 2

In-degree, out-degree, and degree metrics of the Al-Qaeda branches (October 2017)

Outlets	In-degree	Out-degree	Degree
Muhammad Jazira	14	14	28
Faruq Shami	12	12	24
Voice of Sham	11	9	20
Mukkarin Hazari	9	11	20
Sham Center	11	8	19
An-Nur News	5	14	19
Abdulaziz Kazanly	7	10	17
Notes of mujahedins	8	8	16
LMA	11	5	16
Thoughts at midnight	7	8	15
Nogay Shamda	7	8	15

News of Ummah	4	10	14
Ajnad al-Kavkaz	8	5	13
Websites	11	1	12
Malhama Tactical	9	2	11
Warriors of Sham	5	4	9
Truth in Syria	2	5	7
ZX	2	4	6
World-News/Hanif	1	7	8

In October 2017, the research detects changes in the circulation of some accounts from 2015-2016. The brand Victory is coming became inactive, and updates appeared very rarely. This led to the overall decrease of its followers, which were forced to leave the branches. As a result, this brand was removed from the network analysis of October 2017. Another brand, An-Nur News, eventually disappeared by November 2017. As the statistics show, the channel stayed connected to many old and new partisan outlets (Table 2). Although, between March 2017 and October 2017, An-Nur News not only collected new followers, but began to lose the old ones; its in-degree reduced from 11 in March 2017 to 5 in October 2017 (Table 1, Table 2). Signs of decline showed World-News (Hanif), whose news thread updates became irregular in the fall of 2017. Soon, its media team abandoned their Telegram and Twitter channels. Worth noting is the fact that several sources from 2015-2016 continued to play an important role, such as website brands, ZX, and News of Ummah.
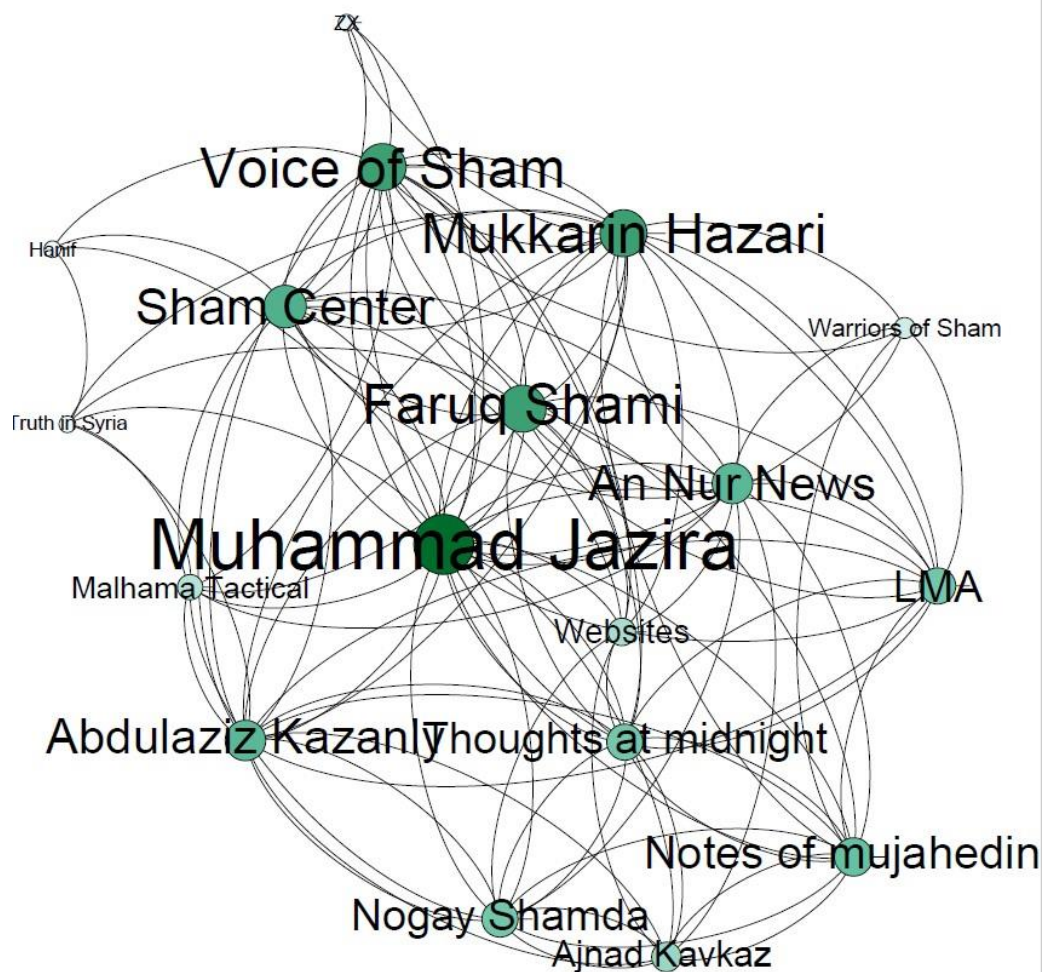
Figure 9. Degree distribution of Al-Qaeda accounts (October 2017). The size of the nodes is directly proportional to the number of ties, which every node has. The node "websites" includes website brands (Kavkaz Center, White Minaret, etc.).

As data from October 2017 demonstrates, the new brands (Muhammad Jazira, Faruq Shami, Voice of Sham, Sham Center, and Mukkarin Hazari) were gatekeepers of the entire Al-Qaeda network in Russian cyberspace. Within the network, these brands were highly interconnected, maintaining a significant number of in-coming and out-coming ties (Table 2, Figure 9). In particular, from March 2017 and up to October 2017, Muhammad Jazira

and Faruq Shami actively worked on the brands. As a result, their in-degree and out-degree characteristics increased (Table 1, Table 2). Being central nodes of the Al-Qaeda network, their news thread can reveal the most active agents (partisan accounts) of the radical network, while their circle of followers provides information about the less active agents (accounts, individuals).

At the time, 16 presented sources ran 43 accounts across 8 social media platforms, and five brands developed their websites; on average, every branch consisted of 2.7 outlets, which could be reserve, dormant and active channels (Table A7). Indeed, the brand Muhammad Jazira had two reserve accounts on Telegram, established in July and October 2017 (Table A7). The group brand of Ajnad Kavkaz maintained a propagandist account, named "The vertex of Islam", where its media savvy militants posted inspirational texts (Table A7). For new videos, Nogay Shamda referred followers to its video storage account (Abu Kavkaz) on YouTube (Table A7). Only 20% of all presented sources did not have any branches, whereas the overwhelming majority (80%) of the sources conducted multi-channel "marketing" (Table A7).

As the statistics show, Telegram and Twitter were the favorite platforms; 32% of all outlets (14) circulated on Telegram, while 21% of branches (9) were on Twitter (Table A7). Severe restrictions on Facebook and Vkontakte declined their favorability at least for a while. Fourteen percent of all accounts were established on Facebook and 7% on Vkontakte (Table A7). For instance, the brands – Muhammad Jazira and Faruq Shami repeatedly reopened branches on Facebook, because they gathered a significant crowd for a relatively short period of time. One of the M.J pages, established in the spring of 2017, reached the

limit of 4,999 followers in August 2017. Circulating on Facebook for 30 days, Faruq Shami's outlet gathered 954 followers (Table A7).

It is important to underline that the radical sources established their main (central) accounts on platforms where their accounts could operate undisrupted for a longer time. For instance, the Sham Center brand was set up on Twitter, where its outlet collected 2952 followers after 359 days of activity (Table A7). The established brand recognition and trust from Twitter users allowed its Telegram branch to receive 1225 members after 45 days of account circulation (Table A7). In general, the average of lifespan of the main accounts on Twitter was 266 days, whereas the Telegram outlets had 156 days (Table A8, Table A9)[8].

The Syrian conflict and the boom of informational technologies encouraged the expansion of the Al-Qaeda network in Russian cyber space. By this time, this segment of the Internet was occupied by several outlets (Kavkaz Center, VDagestan) well known to radicals. These website brands neglected multiple social media opportunities to articulate their brand's singularity. As a result, the Al-Qaeda network shifted from the domination of websites to outlets on social media platforms. New radical accounts emerged in the social media realm, evolving from sporadically emerged channels to well organized brands.

In the first stage (2013-2015), the Al-Qaeda network was disorganized and scattered, its branches preferring domestic social media platforms over global platforms. The initial network disarray was associated with a lack of multi-channel marketing, coordination, and cooperation between outlets. Circulated channels widely neglected the development of

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[8] The study calculates active accounts circulated on these platforms in October 2017.

unique symbolic images, name consistency, and design homogeneity across channels. While a random image available on the Internet had a great chance to become an online community profile image, community names were a communicative device, which embodied purposes of communities and content. Individuals behind these radical outlets did not undertake attempts to create a recognizable brand name. Their central goal was to disseminate information rather than focus on how it was disseminated.

The disorganized existence of Al-Qaeda network branches was overridden by the end of 2015. During the second stage, several social media brands can be discerned: Ummah News, World News, An-Nur News, State of Lie, Al-Saff Media, ZX, Voenkorr, and Victory is Coming. The majority of these sources practiced visual consistency, presenting a logo and maintaining a homogeneous design across social media platforms. Being central nodes, Telegram brands Victory is Coming and An-Nur News stayed connected to many partisan accounts, constituting a framework for consolidation and strengthening the branches of the entire Al-Qaeda network. Accounts focused on expanding their operational strategy, exploiting a variety of platforms, practicing multilingual channels, and mutual promotions. As membership statistics indicated, the outlets elevated brand recognition and trust among their audience. However, these brands were short term entities: seven brands disappeared at different times during 2017.

 In the third stage, several new groups and news brands emerged in Russian cyber space. These outlets became a very significant addition to the existing network, which provided assistance and a successful entrance for these new brands. Through the circulated branches, the outlets with reputations widely promoted the newly emerged entities, inevitably

increasing their recognition and the trust of pertinent audience. Eventually, the new brands (Muhammad Jazira, Faruq Shami, Malhama Tactical, etc.) began to determine the image of the Al-Qaeda network. The brands not only developed a unique symbolic culture, but they produced propaganda products (videos, photos), applied hashtags, and communicated with their followers. Relying on a multi-channel marketing, several sources established their own websites to advance their brands.

Chapter Three: Case Studies of Al-Qaeda Outlets

Within the Al-Qaeda network, the study discerns two major types of outlets:

1. Entities created by and served for a particular militant group (Ajnad al-Kavkaz, Malhama Tactical, and Nogay Shamda)

2. Entities which spread news and did not have affiliation with a regional militant group (Muhhamad Jazira, Sham Center, Faruq Shami, and Voice of Sham)

Given this typology, in this part, the research separately evaluates the seven most prominent militant groups' and news brands through the Aaker's model of brand identity and network characteristics.

3.1 Al-Qaeda Militant Groups

3.1.1 Ajnad al-Kavkaz. With the beginning of the Syrian turmoil, a group of people with military skills which were acquired and polished during the Chechen wars in the 1990s left the North Caucasus for Syria. There they formed several ethnic military groups and began active participation in numerous battles against the government forces. In 2014, one of these jihadist groups, named "Jamaat Khalifat", was transformed into a new semi-military unit, and in 2015, the group became known under the name "Ajnad al-Kavkaz" (Nohchicho, 2017). According to its leader, Rustam Ajiev (aka Abdul Hakim Shishani), the militants worked out its symbols, banner, and the unit's structure in spring 2015 (Nohchicho, 2017).

In the statement of August 13th, 2015, the group recognized its emir as its only leader, who acted together with a military council in some special situations (Archive A. , 2015). Ajnad al-Kavkaz underlined the spiritual authority of prominent religious figures, stressing that

the group would follow their guidance in the decision-making process (Archive A. , 2015). Underlining the independent status of the jamaat, the document tried to clarify the interrelation with Jabhat al-Nusra: "…nothing connects us with other groups (such as Jabhat al-Nusra and Jund al-Aqsa) other than our joined military activities…" (Archive A. , 2015). Remarkably, as it follows from the statement, the independence of the group was ostensibly guaranteed by the fact that the Ajnad al-Kavkaz's militants would comply only with their emir (Rustam Ajiev or his successor in case of his death) and a lack of influence on the group from any power (political party or government). Later, in an interview to a Chechen website, Ajiev responded to the question about the connection of Ajnad al-Kavkaz with Jabhat al-Nusra and other jihadist organizations (Nohchicho, 2017). He said that Ajnad al-Kavkaz tried to avoid conflicts with them, and to some extent, the groups cooperated with each other (Nohchicho, 2017). In light of this, the real status of Ajnad al-Kavkaz has nothing in common with its perceived presentation in the statement.

Just like many other jihadist groups of foreign recruits, Ajnad al-Kavkaz was created as an ethnic entity. It mainly embraced Chechens and other nations from the North Caucasus, such as Russia, whose territory remained the primary source of recruits. Later, Chechens from the European and the Turkish diasporas joined Ajnad al-Kavkaz along with Syrians (Nohchicho, 2017). Expectedly, videos recorded by this group were largely in the Chechen language but with Russian captions. In 2015 – 2017, there were a number of video clips, where its leader and militants interacted with their audience using Chechen. While the group's statements have been issued in the Arabic and Russian versions, its social media network predominantly used the Russian language. A few accounts aired posts for the

Turkish speakers. In fact, the language preferences reveal not only the national diversity of Ajnad Kavkaz' militants, but also the targeted audience, especially the recruiting territories.

In Syria, the leader of Ajnad al-Kavkaz, Rustam Ajiev, became famous under the nick name Abdul Hakim Shishani. During the second Chechen campaign, he joined a separatist group (the so-called jamaat Umtkira) in the North Caucasus, where Ajiev participated in multiple bloody attacks against the Russian military Forces. Due to injuries and looking for medical assistance, he moved to Turkey. When the Syrian war broke out, Ajiev remained in Turkey, and according to him, he was not able to return to the Russian Federation (Nohchicho, 2017). Alone with a group of Chechens, Ajiev moved to Syria and joined Ansar al-Sham (Nohchicho, 2017). Nothing is known about his personal life. However, the pro-Al-Qaeda Russian outlets praised the leader of Ajnad al-Kavkaz, who was a good sportsman and became a true warrior, similar to his two brothers – Rustam and Anzor, a Chechen MMA fighter (Archive A. , 2016).

3.1.1.1 Brand as organization.

3.1.1.1.1 Brand meaning. The ideology of this group is similar with any other militant entity in modern Syria. In its statement of 2015, the group highlighted its spiritual adherence to remarkable religious leaders as a source of the group's knowledge about religion (Archive A. , 2015). For Ajnad al-Kavkaz and its militants, the comprehension of jihad is limited to armed combat, which is a way to protect religion and to defend Muslims from infidels; other Muslims could participate via financial aid, online activities, the creation of propagandist products (videos), etc. The fight for independent Muslim

territories with the further possibility to establish Sharia law should be an obligation for every Muslim. Although, in the contemporary world, to build this statehood could almost be impossible within one nation. For Chechnya, the presence of the Russian Federation made this process impossible despite the efforts of Dudaev, sheikh Mansour Aldinsky, and other Chechen leaders who tried to unite Muslims and to combat the bloody Russian Empire. The primary objective of the group is the creation of an independent Muslim state in the short range – within Chechnya or the North Caucasus, and in the long range – within several Muslim nations, which allows for the group's survival in a truculent world (Nohchicho, 2017). The group's engagement into the Syrian conflict is its assistance to the oppressed nation, which confronts the Russian aggression and the tyranny of Bashar Assad. Ajnad al-Kavkaz argues that Islam is a religion under attack, which was forcibly removed from all aspects of social-political development. In line of this logic, the group poses itself as warriors for religion, demanding cooperation in the battle against Russia and its partners.

3.1.1.1.2 Network. The group's network was widely spread, embracing more and more social media platforms as these platforms appeared and gained popularity (Figure 3). Its website "Khilafa" (in 2017, Kavkaz.army) served as the foundation for the entire network since 2013. Several facts underline the central role of the website in the hierarchy of the brand network. First, there was the intensive advertisement campaign; the group's social media accounts contained repeated referrals to the website under almost every post. Second, the Ajnad al-Kavkaz media branches have widely used the website symbols for their profile and background covers. Third, the short lifespan of its branches on various

social media platforms just elevated the role of the website while the social media accounts have had a secondary role.

Its accounts on Twitter, Telegram, and Facebook have been surrounded by a chain of personal or service accounts (Figure 1). Usually, militants, who maintained the network, established their own accounts, which could help them not only to communicate with other militants or relatives, but to sustain main outlets. The personal accounts were not necessarily connected to the main network. For instance, there were several personal pages on Vkontakte in 2015-2017. The recruits launched them for other purposes rather than service of the network. The research did not detect brand community, functioned during the research time frame, on this platform. Also, the media team practiced with reserve accounts (on Telegram), protecting the network from losing its branch and simultaneously, its customer base. It could be suggested that similar accounts were circulated on other social media platforms.
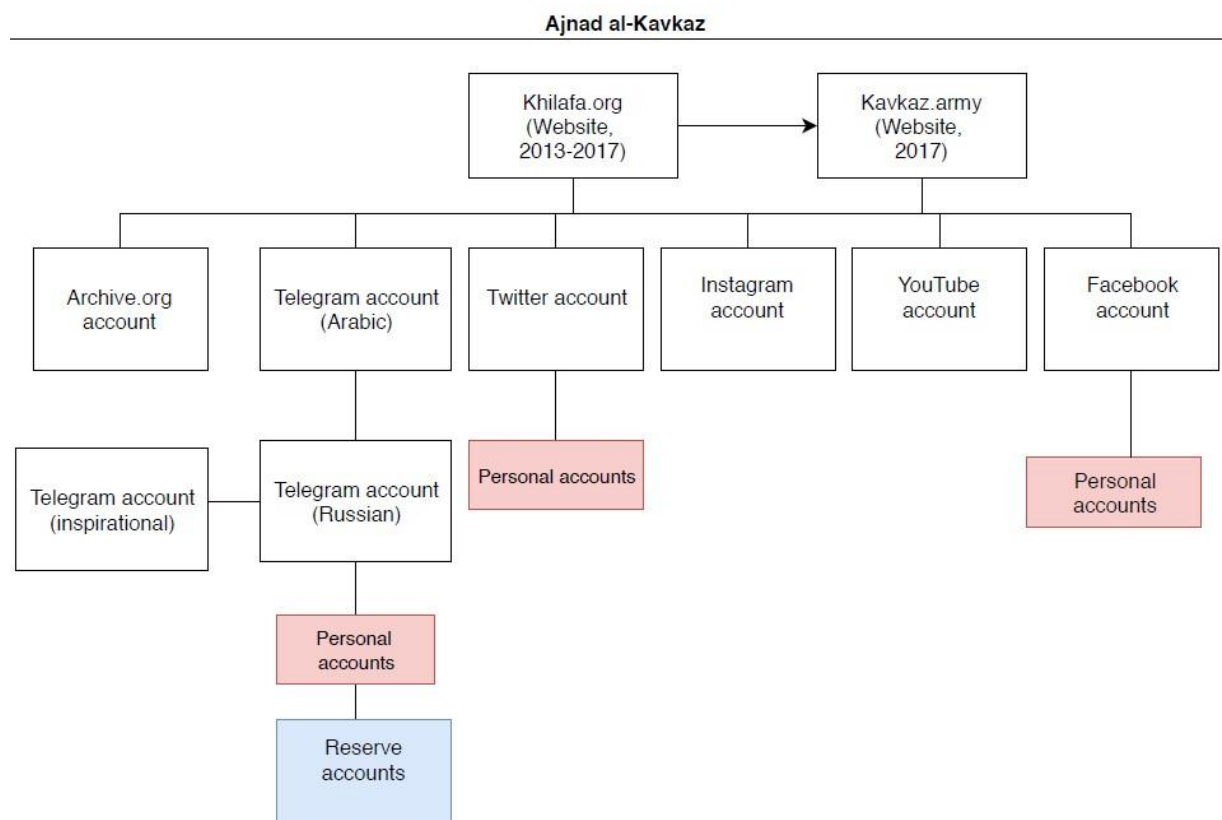
Figure 1. The general scheme of the Ajnad al-Kavkaz network.

The website has had external video storage on Archive.org and YouTube[9]. Its visitors have commonly referred to either platform, and if a video or a whole account was blocked, visitors did not have the possibility to watch the video. Some unavailable videos (usually, the group's products) could be uploaded by visitors directly from the website. The account on Archive.org, which was launched in 2013, remained active in 2017, but the Khilafa channel on YouTube, created at the beginning of 2014, was censored in 2016. Once detected, all subsequent accounts had a short lifespan. Trying to circumvent censorship, the media team stopped using the brand name for its accounts as well as the group's or the

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[9] In 2016, the research detected an attempt of the militants to collect the videos on a personal google account.

website symbols for the cover and profile image. After the closure, the militants meticulously established its new YouTube page. These assiduous efforts were motivated by the fact that this platform brought more attention to Ajnad al-Kavkaz than another platform – Archive.org. If the former has 2.2 average views per day, the latter has the more impressive number – 73 views per day (Table C4, Table C5). Interestingly, the number of viewers was higher on YouTube than on Archive.org despite the extremely low account activities (Table C5). This account stayed inactive for months and was updated fewer times than its counterpart.

3.1.1.1.3 Language approach. Its media team tried to run the social media branches in several languages: Turkish (Twitter, Facebook), Russian (Telegram, YouTube), and Arabic (Telegram). In November 2016, its English version appeared on Telegram, but the accounts, as it was stated in the introductory note, were "the unofficial channel…" (Archive A. , 2016). Apparently, to advance Ajnad al-Kavkaz, the group's supporters, with basic knowledge of the English language, created its outlet. After several months of functioning, the account became abandoned, and its last post appeared in February 2017 (Archive A. , 2017).

3.1.1.1.4 Membership and posting pattern. The repeated closures of the brand accounts resulted in the short lifespan of its outlets. Its Twitter community pages had been blocked at least 5 times between May 2016 and October 2016. Ajnad al-Kavkaz found a similar environment on Facebook, which blocked the group's accounts several times in 2016. The virtual community on Facebook did not gather a significant crowd and as a result its media team reduced the brand's presence there. However, on Twitter, the militants

undertook constant attempts to reopen the Ajnad al-Kavkaz channels because its accounts attracted many followers. Indeed, after 38 days after the outlet's establishment in May 2016, this Twitter page gained 845 followers and 22 new members per day (Archive A. , 2016). In comparison, its Arabic Telegram account's membership jumped from 298 followers to 916 (8 new members per day) between July 17th, 2016 and September 29th, 2016 (Figure 2).
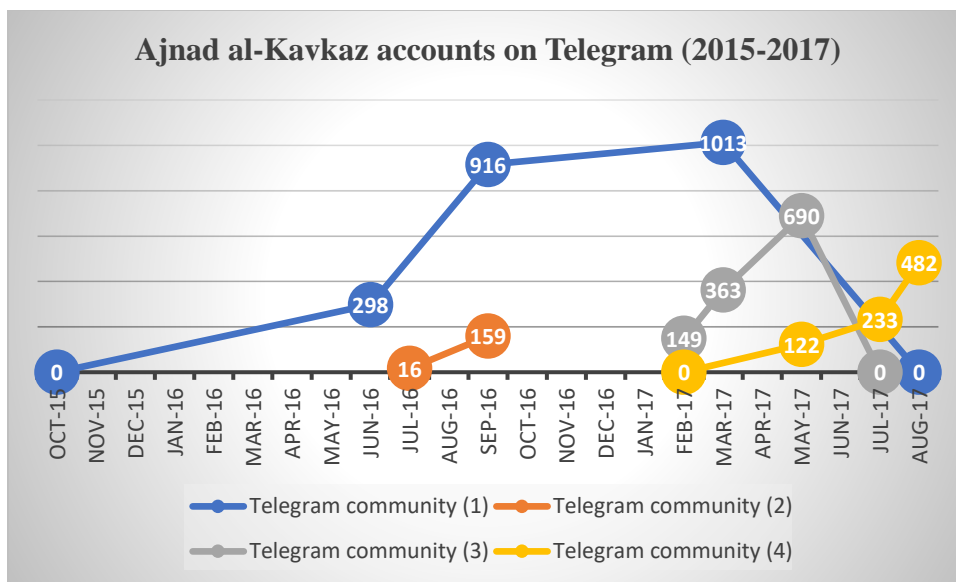
Figure 2. Ajnad al-Kavkaz accounts on Telegram (2015-2017).

On Telegram, the Ajnad al-Kavkaz media team found a more comfortable atmosphere. The brand's channel for Arabic speakers, launched in October 2015, functioned for more than 1 year (until the end of summer 2017) (Figure 2). The Russian account, which was active since July 2016, was abandoned by the militants, but not blocked. During 2016, the network widened its scope, embracing many social media platforms (Figure 1), however, the various social media outlets received unequal attention. As was mentioned previously,

focusing on the group's Twitter niche, the Telegram branch experienced a lack of management. Apparently, the continuous persecution on Twitter forced Ajnad al-Kavkaz to concentrate its efforts on Telegram in 2017. This platform shift and brand recognition led to a significant leap in membership on Telegram (Figure 2). Main and reserve accounts of the group appeared on Telegram almost simultaneously. After 3 months of functioning, its reserve account had 122 followers (May 2017), whereas the main outlet attracted 690 members (Figure 2). With the closure of the main outlet, its followers moved to the reserve account, which changed its status to main. As the graph shows, membership doubled (482) in August 2017.

The inconsistencies were visible not solely in the network design, but its content. Its social media branches were updated with irregularity. The posting order was sporadic even within the network. Indeed, the news thread on the Ajnad al-Kavkaz Facebook account presented posts which never appeared or were posted later on other outlets. Another problem is the posting pattern. As with many other busy groups, Ajnad al-Kavkaz militants did not have the ability to devote a lot of time to the image of their network. It then follows that the network had an irregular posting pattern. Concordantly, the brand's Telegram account was active 11 days out of 74 days on the air, starting from the establishment of the channel on July 7th, 2016 and going until its last post on September 12th, 2016 (Table C1). During the period from February 28th, 2017 to May 26th, 2017, out of 88 days, its media team was active on the group's Telegram account only 27 days (Table C2). The number of posts per day had fluctuated between 1 and 4 (Table C2). Frequently, the group did not have new

information for its followers; to keep up followers, it simply reposted old information (photos, videos, etc.).

3.1.1.2 Brand as symbol. The design of the network has not been homogeneous. Its branches, which functioned concurrently but on different social media platforms, have different appearances and even different names. Indeed, the Twitter and YouTube account of Ajnad al-Kavkaz has the Khilafa website symbols on its avatar and background cover, whilst for the brand's Instagram account, the militants uploaded the group's logo (Figure 3, Figure 4). Sometimes, instead of the logo, the militants uploaded their personal photos and the leader's photo as an avatar.

Figure 3. The Khilafa background on the Ajnad al-Kavkaz account on YouTube (2017).

Figure 4. The Khilafa background on the Ajnad al-Kavkaz account on Twitter (2016).

There are at least 5 types of Ajnad al-Kavkaz logos which were used on cyberspace. The central objects on these logos are symbolic images of mountains and the inscription of the group's name (Figure 5). The latter could be in the Russian, English, or Arabic versions. The Internet savvy militants experimented with the background, the font colors and the font. They added other objects such as the website's name (Khilafa.org) or the black flag of jihad (Figure 6). Nonetheless, the most common color combination in the logo was black and while.

Figure 5. The Ajnad al-Kavkaz logo (2016).

Figure 6. The version of the Ajnad al-Kavkaz logo (2017).

As mentioned previously, some Ajnad al-Kavkaz accounts had distinct names. Out of 14 detected accounts, four brand outlets stand out. In 2016, the Facebook community page was entitled "Ecnadul Kavkaz" (Archive A. , 2016). In the same year, its Instagram, YouTube, and Archive outlets had the more recognizable name – "Khilafa.org" (Archive A. , 2016). In this regard, the inspirational channel on Telegram should be made note of, as it was presented as "the department of recruitment for Ajnad al-Kavkaz" and established

in September 2017 (Archive A. , 2017). The account carried a different name – "The pinnacle of Islam," also, it does not have the brand logo, nor the brand logo on its profile. The introductory note referred to early connects this channel to Ajnad al-Kavkaz.

3.1.1.3 Brand as product. The network content was versatile and included photos, videos, posters, audio files, and text messages. For instance, during the period from February 28th, 2017 to May 26th, 2017, the Ajnad al-Kavkaz Telegram outlet presented 31% of Ajnad al-Kavkaz Telegram's posts were solely text, which ranged from the group's greetings and encouraging quotes to news (Table C3). 23% of the thread contained old and new videos, produced by Ajnad al-Kavkaz militants. Remarkedly, it is hard to find active militant groups in Syria, which has not tried to pose its recruits as highly religious people who follow all religious postulates on a daily basis. To underline militants' adherence to religion, these groups have often aired photos or videos of praying recruits or recruits reading the Quran. Ajnad al-Kavkaz was not an exception in this regard. Its media team produced similar propaganda products, but the group advanced the method. Since 2017, Ajnad al-Kavkaz has begun to record its militants reading religious masterpieces, spreading these audio files via its network. In fact, during the determined timeframe, 20% of all posts on Telegram were audio files (Table C3), whereas in 2016, there were no audio posts on the Ajnad al-Kavkaz channel on Telegram (Table C1). Photos were the least popular type of posts on Telegram (7%) (Table C3). While the number of members on the channel jumped from 149 followers on February 24th, 2017 to 690 followers by May 26th, 2017, the average number of views for its posts was 1,669 (Table C2). This determinant jumped significantly since 2016, when the average number of views was 223 per post (Table C1).

The longer the brand lasts, the higher the number of viewers. It is important to heed the way of counting "views" on this platform, which calculates the total number of views for every post, disregarding if the post was reposted to several channels. Therefore, apparently, the Ajnad al-Kavkaz channel's posts, once created, dispersed via affiliated accounts on Telegram, and its unique posts received many views outside the original outlet. The Ajnad al-Kavkaz brand became an integral part of the growing jihadist network circulating on Telegram.

Seemingly, Ajnad al-Kavkaz militants have enjoyed the video production process and the opportunity to air their footage all over cyberspace. Prior to the establishment of the Khalifate jamaat and later – Ajnad al-Kavkaz, its website predominantly showed videos about Ansar al- Sham, who were a part of this group. Although, at the same time, the Khilafa platform presented a number of videos from Syria with Chechen recruits under the website logo. On Archive.org, its account, which was launched perhaps alongside the Khilafa website in October 2013, has been rarely updated. Three videos appeared on virtual storage in 2013 and only four new videos in 2014 (Table C4). In 2015, the situation changed. The group presented 17 new records on the account (Table C4).

With the establishment of the new group – Ajnad al-Kavkaz, the video production underwent significant alterations. Every year, Ajnad al-Kavkaz supporters observed a modified video design. At the beginning and the end of every video, there was a short presentation of the Ajnad al-Kavkaz logo, usually together with references to the Khilafa website. The videos contained not only the group's symbols, but they became more professional, at least, in terms of video equipment. From the low-quality cell-phone

recording, the group shifted if not to high definition videos, at least to better video recording parameters. The militants experimented with video recording. For instance, in 2016, Ajnad al-Kavkaz aired some videos, recorded by an attached mini-camera to a rifle and night vision cameras. Worth noticing is the fact that Ajnad al-Kavkaz has widened the types of videos he produces, recording not solely frontlines and battlefield related activities, but religious readings, interviews, and lessons.

The Ajnad al-Kavkaz video products have demonstrated an array of content and technical features. First, its video products - out of 37 videos, the majority of records (57%) have a duration of up to 5 minutes, and the duration of only 2 pieces of footage (5%) exceed 10 minutes (Table C4). Second, some militants, who starred in these videos, have uncovered faces; other, covered. Usually, the leader of the group, his assistant, Abu Hakim Shishani, or fallen recruits have demonstrated their identity, whereas live and active operatives are concealed behind black balaclavas or blurred spots. Also, despite the multilingual approach towards the network, the group has recorded an overwhelming majority of the video in the Chechen language. Some videos contain Russian subtitles. On other videos, the Russian speakers can be heard. The overall quality of its video products has been improved but it has fluctuated from fair to low. Notwithstanding the militants acquiring new recording equipment, background noise, poor resolution, and blurriness were persistent in many videos of 2016 and even, in 2017.

The militants released their photos via the network and personal accounts. In contrast to Malhama Tactical, the group has not developed and followed the pattern of using a unique design for their photo products. In 2015-2016, some photos had the Khilafa website address

on them. In 2016 -2017, the photos with the Ajnad al-Kavkaz logo were circulated on cyberspace. The militants' appearance in the photos was the same as on the group's videos. Abdul Hakim Shishani, who can be considered as the brand face, and Abu Hamza remained the main stars on the photo products. Sometimes, the media team simply made screenshots from the group's videos. Since 2017, Ajnad al-Kavkaz began to release posters which were altered photos with a short quote and its logo on the bottom.

    3.1.2 Malhama Tactical. The group "Malhama Tactical" (MT), which is a part of the Jabhat Fateh Al-Sham group, has become well known since 2016. Western literature defines the meaning of "malhama" as a bloody fight and massacre (Wehr, 1993, p. 1011; Meisami & Starkey, 1998, p. 498). Chalyan-Daffner (2017) states that in terms of historical perspective, the word is associated with a specific, real event - the wars between Arab Armies and Byzantium Forces. For Arab society, the wars had an apocalyptic sense (p.209-210). Undoubtedly, the founder of this group tried to create a significant and memorable title, which can be read easily by a particular audience. So, the word "malhama" with its symbolic meaning and historical reflections serves this purpose. According to Akhram Hapef's hypothesis (2017), the place of the emergence of "Malhama Tactical" – the Syrian town of Dabiq, is reflected in its title (p.3). Dabiq, located between the city of Aleppo and the Turkish border, does not have much strategic value, but it has significant importance for Islamic apocalypticism (Hapef, 2017, p. 3). The group's title is a result of meticulous considerations. First, its militants effectively reconnect their glorious mission, history, and religion, conveying the group's core identity. Second, the combination of historical, religious and military elements with a unique and well promoted symbol-laden emblem

produces the concert statement of this military group. Thus, they fight for suffered Muslims against unbelievers which embrace Assad's forces, the Western coalition, and the Russian Army. The second word is "tactical" and the green or khaki color on the group logo refers to militancy, its active status, the participation in battlefields, and certain objectives. At the same time, for online audiences, the color combination of the logo and the group's title promise to satisfy followers' expectations to see videos and photos from the Syrian war events where MT members were directly engaged. On social media, the title, "Malhama Tactical," appears in its English version as its founder or founders intended. Russian followers of the group's accounts on social media have translated and rewritten the title in the Russian language for further reposting.

3.1.2.1 Brand as symbols. Usually, the group utilizes three versions of its logo and two fonts for social media accounts. The first logo is a black unfinished hexagon with two black arrows on either side of a red arrow pointing inside the figure (Figure 7).

Figure 7. The Malhama Tactical logo – 1 (a screenshot from a Facebook account, 2016).

The composition appears on a green or a black background and, rarely, in grey (Figure 7). In case of a black background, the colors of the hexagon and arrows have monochromatic color schemes: the hexagon and two arrows are presented in black, the arrows in the middle, in red (Figure 8).

Figure 8. The Malhama Tactical logo – 2 (a screenshot from a Facebook account, 2016).

The abstract symbol is accompanied with a wordmark, which is comprised of two words - Malhama Tactical. On the videos and photos, it comes in only one typeface, but in different fonts. Its position on propaganda products is highly flexible (below or beside the hexagon), depending on how it is used.

Another text logo presents as a circle with the wordmark inside, designed in solid or transparent white and black colors (Figure 9):

Figure 9. The Malhama Tactical logo – 3 (a screenshot from a Twitter account, 2016).

The MT media team places this emblem on the group's photos, appearing in the middle, if it serves as a profile picture, or in the corner. Sometimes, the pound sign or the hashtag symbol (#) appears before the words Malhama Tactical. While the typeface of this logo is

the same as on the previous group's logos (Figure 7, Figure 8), its digital representation of typeface is distinct. It is printed in all-uppercase letters, and the last word is underlined.

In a religious sense, the text based geometric logo does not carry a hidden meaning or statement, apparently being a successful branding invention. By contrast, other groups' emblems have more complex compositions with assault rifles, the globe (Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Magreb), swords (Caucasus Emirate), and other elements (Beifuss & Bellini, 2013, pp. 63-67; 97-99).

Embracing black, green, and red colors, MT selected their palette in accordance to the Islamic heritage. Their predecessors and many active militant groups use the same color combination. While the vibrant red color symbolizes bloodshed, anger, and uprising, the green color is associated with paradise. Given the fact that the green color was used by the Prophet Muhamad for banners, it has religious significance. As a result, for centuries, publishers provided green covers for Copies of the Quran (Pastoureau, 2014, pp. 48-49). The black background refers to the Prophet Muhamad's war flag; it epitomizes religious devotion and holiness (Figure 8) (Beifuss & Bellini, 2013, pp. 51, 79).

All in all, the MT propagandists have done plenty of experimentation with their symbols in order to serve the goals of the group and attract more followers to their accounts. The established text logos are not overloaded by design elements and demonstrate unique simplicity. The singular abstract design provides the power of its group identity and to communicate the brand instantly.

3.1.2.1.1 Brand name and design. Through these channels, the MT cyber team worked to build their brand. All outlets demonstrated uncommon consistency in channel design, product branding, and messaging. The same group logo, a specific color palette, and the cover images were utilized across the Malhama Tactical channels. When potential followers want to acquire more information about this brand, they could search for it on several social media platforms. The fact that Malhama Tactical's channels maintained a consistent manner helped the MT cyber team control public perception of the brand.

While the group has the unique name "Malhama Tactical", its names on social media platforms were not only consistent with the mission of Malhama Tactical but were the same or very similar in their appearance. There were most often versions of the group's name, written in the Russian and English languages:

- Malhama Tactical

- Военно-тактическая подготовка[10], Malhama Tactical

- Военно-тактическая подготовка

- Instructor Team – Malhama Tactical

- Инструкторская команда[11] Malhama Tactical / Syria

Out of 11 of the group's channels, established between May 2016 and July 2017, 7 accounts contained "Malhama Tactical" in their titles.

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[10] This phrase is in Russian. It means military training.
[11] This phrase is in Russian. It means a team of coaches.

Usually, market specialists advocate that modification of a brand name can bring detrimental consequences for a brand, especially a new one: confusion of customers, reduction of the customer base, etc. However, the Malhama Tactical brand followed a different pattern. Together with the well-branded layout of every channel, the presented name variations became insignificant: users could easily recognize the MT outlets. Moreover, followers were aware of censorship on social media platforms, which justified these variations in the eyes of people without undermining the Malhama Tactical network's authenticity.

3.1.2.2 Brand as person. As posted videos and photos show, the total number of militants in this group is about 4 to 10. Nonetheless, an accurate number is impossible to determine due to several reasons. Its multiple social media outlets do not cover this information, but a few of the group's pictures are circulated on the Internet. The appearance of militants with covered faces prevent their identification on photos and video footage. Also, during the ongoing conflict, human losses are very common, thus, the contingent's members often change frequently. Abu Rofiq or Abu Mustafa Rofiq, the leader of Malhama Tactical, posted eulogies for fallen militants. One of the fighters was killed near Aleppo on January 1st, 2017. Sixteen-year-old Abdul Aziz Rif, whose ethnicity and real name remain unknown, participated in the Syrian war since 2014 (Archive A. , 2016). In 2015, he joined Malhama Tactical, serving as an instructor. As a Malhama Tactical fighter, Abdul Aziz Rif took part in battles for the western provinces of Aleppo, Latakia, and Hama (Archive A. , 2016).

The ethnicity of the Malhama Tactical fighters is diverse. The group includes recruits from the former Soviet Union region as well as from the Middle East. One of the militants is a Chechen, who appeared with a covered face in at least two MT videos of 2016 (Archive A. , 2016). The militant, who starred in 6 videos (2016-2017), speaks perfect Russian with a slight accent. This accent is more typical for Tatars than for Muslims from the North Caucasus.

All information about MT militants, including its leader, is contained in the group's footage, written posts on social media platforms, photos, rare interviews, and audio messages. Mainly, we know only information that they let us know. Given the fact that Abu Rofiq became MT's public icon and face, more information is available about him than about its other operatives. Nonetheless, the real name of Abu Rofiq as well as various details about him remain unknown.

The slight accent in his Russian is an indication that Abu Rofiq's first language is not Russian. Abu Rofiq made controversial statements about his ethnicity. In 2014, the militant underlined his Uzbek heritage in an interview published on a Turkish outlet – Ummetislamblog (Isra, 2014). In January 2017, in the comments under a newly released MT video on YouTube, someone under the nickname "Razamas" asked Abu Rofiq if he was from Dagestan. In his response, Abu Rofiq stressed that he was an Uzbek from the Russian Federation (Archive A. , YouTube, 2016). According to J. Paraszczuk (2015), Abu Rofiq presented himself as a Meskhetian Turk. Prior to the deportation of 1944, this people resided in South Georgia (Cobb, 2013). Nowadays, they have dispersed through the post-Soviet region. Uzbekistan and Russia have Meskhetian Turk communities. The foregoing

discussion implies that Abu Rofiq's origin remains unknown, but in the broad perspective, he was from the post-Soviet region.

Following Abu Rofiq's story line, he resided for several years in Moscow, Russia, where he joined the Russian Special Forces and then, in 2012, moved to Syria with a group of other recruits from the Russian Federation. Apparently, they entered Syria through Turkey. Shortly after their arrival, one of these recruits died on the battlefield, and Abu Rofiq took care of his son Shamil. Also, as it became known from the interviews, he tried to receive computer science education in Russia.

In 2014, Abu Rofiq, along with one of his wives, lived in the Syrian town of Atma, which is 60 kilometers from Aleppo, although his training base of Jabhat al-Nusra was located in the Al-Layramoun district of Aleppo. After heavy battles, Al-Qaeda militants captured this town in 2013 (Oweis, 2013). Apparently, he had several wives and children. In the post issued on February 3rd, 2017, Abu Rofiq informed his Twitter followers about his newly born son, Khalid (TW, 2017). Later, the MT public outlet declared that its leader was killed along with his pregnant wife (TW, 2017). Thus, the militant had at least two wives: the mother of his son Khalid and the woman who died with him. Also, he had a relationship in Russia, and the couple had a child (Paraszczuk J. , 2015).

 One of these women was a Muslim from the Russian Federation who spoke fluent Russian (MT, 2016). Her real name remains unknown, but on VK, she called herself "Muslima Umm-Samina." This account was active between the spring and fall of 2016. Along with food recipes, the public part of her page contained multiple reposts from Abu Rofiq's account and the Malhama Tactical community, established in May 2016. Seemingly, this

woman resided in Syria, although it is not known if she lived there permanently after her relocation from Russia. Given the fact that she stayed in touch with the Russian community in Turkey via Vkontakte, she might have spent some time there too. Nevertheless, she lived near or with her husband because in September 2016, Muslima Umm-Samina posted a photo of chocolate bars and a pack of chips with the description "[Abu Rofiq] spoils [me]" (VK, 2016). In February 2017, Abu Rofiq and one of his wives were killed in Idlib, Syria; this dead woman could be her. The comment, which was placed in Muslima Umm-Samina's abandoned page, stressed that the couple died together.

Also, her posts and likes indicate that Muslima Umm-Samina along with Abu Rofiq shared a positive view on polygamy. In November of 2016, he left the very telling post: "Polygamy is a common event; Allah allows it for men and frankly, why not, why can't a man have four wives? Get married and live together! All men, including me, can have four wives" (VK, 2016).

As many other foreign recruits in Syria, Abu Rofiq was not thrilled about the Western modern approach to a family. He used a social account as an outlet for self-expression, so the posts reflect a lot about Abu Rofiq's personal views. The Christian West promoted prostitution, homosexuality, abortions, and alcohol, and in contrast, only the religion of Islam provided rights for women (VK, 2016). Abu Rofiq supported wives' total obedience, full-face veils, and a ban on marriages between Muslim women and non-Muslim men (VK, 2016).

There are seven training facilities of the Syrian branch of Al-Qaeda in Aleppo, Idlib, Deir al Zour, Homs, Raqqah, and Daraa (Roggio & Weiss, 2014). With the rise of the Islamic

State in Raqqah and Deir ez-Zor districts in 2014, camps stopped being functional (Roggio & Weiss, 2014). Abu Rofiq served as an instructor in Aleppo and Idlib, after gathering some relevant experience. At the beginning of his "career" in Syria, the militant organized and conducted sniper trainings for a group of 10 people (Rofiq, 2017). He spent 5 months on training his snipers, and then, Abu Rofiq began to focus on the training of "swat" groups.

He starred in a propagandist Jabhat al-Nusra video, posted on social media on October 27th, 2015 (TRAC, 2015). The footage features Russian, Uzbek, and other militants conducting exercises in Aleppo. Wearing a balaclava, Abu Rofiq explained the principles of urban warfare to a group of militants.

In one of the videos, Abu Rofiq stressed that he served in the Russian special forces. According to state legislation, citizens and foreigners can serve in the military, so the MT leader used to be a Russian citizen or a foreign citizen who voluntarily signed a military contract. To serve in the Russian special forces, every citizen must fulfill 12 requirements, finishing the military draft with an officer rank or a junior rank of a commissioned officer (Smirnov, 2018). Since 2003, the government has admitted foreigners to serve in the Army with some restrictions (TASS, Military service of foreign citizens in the armies of several countries, 2015). First, candidates must enter the state legally and have a legal status without criminal records. Second, foreigners cannot be admitted to officers' positions or serve in the Russian Special Forces and the Internal Troops of the Ministry for Internal Affairs. Third, the law prescribes foreigners to sign their first military contract for five years. The number of foreigners in the military was extremely low: in 2011, only 107 citizens of the post-Soviet countries were soldiers (TASS, Military service of foreign

citizens in the armies of several countries, 2015). Apparently, military service is not a popular occupation, especially for foreigners. On one hand, Russia has practiced bureaucracy, underdeveloped law regulations, an insufficient salary, and the absence of benefits, and on the other hand, devoted Muslims refrain from joining the Russian Army. So, as a Russian citizen, Abu Rofiq had to be conscripted to the Russian Army like the majority of the Russian male population, but the possibility that he was in special forces is very low due to his age[12]. As a foreign citizen and a labor migrant, the leader of Malhama Tactical had not served in the special forces because of the legal regulations for the Russian military. Whenever he was a Russian citizen or a labor migrant to Russia, it seems highly unlikely that Abu Rofiq had experience in the Special Forces. However, Abu Rofiq could have been drafted in the Russian military or any other state in the Post-Soviet region, where he could acquire initial military training. After his time in the Russian army, the MT leader learned and advanced his military skills in Syria.

Speaking in Russian, the MT leader demonstrated an advanced vocabulary, nearly grammatically correct sentences, and good pronunciation. The posts on Malhama Tactical accounts demonstrate that one of their writers has very fair skills in writing the Russian language. If Abu Rofiq managed the MT outlets by himself and was the only administrator, the suggestion that he attended a school in Russia rather than in Central Asia could be very feasible. Also, he could have resided in Russia for a long time or had Russian family members whose first language was Russian. He might have also attended educational facilities that could enhance his language skills. As shown in the footage of 2016, which

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[12] Abu Rofiq was born approximately in 1991.

presents the aftermath of airstrikes on the Syrian town, Idlib, Abu Rofiq was a good learner: he speaks the Arabic language with only a slight accent (YouTube, 2016).

Being the brand inventor, promoter, and manager, Abu Rofiq simultaneously became the face or icon of the Malhama Tactical brand. This brings up another question about the existence of this group. Commonly, militants form groups that participate in various conflicts and as a result, become famous (for example, Imarat Kavkaz, Ajnad Kavkaz), then these groups try to acquire their own niche in cyberspace. It seems possible that the MT group emerged purely as an Internet entity, whose main driving force was Abu Rofiq himself. In reality, several instructors, foreign recruits with different backgrounds, conducted basic military training for newcomers in Syria. One of these instructors, Abu Rofiq, decided to promote his own image and shortly after that, created a new so-called group "Malhama Tactical". The study found evidence of the existence of another MT "promoter" who assisted Abu Rofiq with this new brand - his friend Abdullah. This Russian speaking recruit appeared on MT videos with a hidden face. Only his name was repeated several times in the videos by Abu Rofiq. In October 2016, he posted a photo of their meal in Aleppo (T, 2016). When the leader lost his life in Idlib, Abdullah would be able to stay in charge of the group's accounts.

3.1.2.3 Brand as organization.

3.1.2.3.1 Brand meaning. In May of 2016, in one of the group's posts, Abu Rofiq justified his online activity by presenting a number of primary goals: 1. distribute truth, 2. provide military knowledge, and 3. do something useful for Islam (VK, 2016). Later, the

objectives became more exact and were articulated in the title of the group: "Military training".

One of the brand features was the group's independency, distancing themselves from the Islamic State and the Syrian branch of Al-Qaeda. Their independence was strongly maintained and promoted prior to the death of the group's founder. Setting up the new group "Notizia per tutti", Abu Rofiq highlighted his negative attitude toward the Islamic State. The group had the following tagline: "ISIS supporters … must get out of this outlet" (VK, 2016). In January 2017, a YouTube user from Kazakhstan asked Abu Rofiq about his views on ISIS. Abu Rofiq responded that his group did not support this organization because Islamic theologians rejected the Islamic State (YT, 2017). Followers repeatedly expressed their concern about their affiliation with Al-Qaeda. Presenting themselves as the defenders of oppressed Muslims, MT propagandists underlined that the group's objective was to fight against the Syrian dictator, Bashar al-Assad and the Russian "aggressors." Shortly after the establishment of its VK community page, one of its numerous followers asked Abu Rofiq about the MT targeted audience (all people and exclusively, Muslims) (VK, 2016). Abu Rofiq responded that the MT militants and the network worked for only Muslims and their religion (VK, 2016).

Nonetheless, on November 4th, 2016, looking for new recruits, the MT online administrators leaked the MT's true affiliation in the Syrian conflict. Later, on January 28th, 2017, when Jabhat Fateh al-Sham embraced several other militant groups and was renamed Tahrir al-Sham, the group "Malhama Tactical" aired its public endorsement to this action. The next day it reposted the following statement from the Russian Al-Qaeda channel: "We

are very grateful to Abu Mohammad al-Julani. He is the only one who sacrifices for his Umma. This is for Allah. This remains in our history. 01/29/2017" (MT, 2017). Later, he joined operations with the group "Ajnad Kavkaz", which has never hidden its affiliation, making MT's independence an obsolete brand trait.

In 2015-2016, Abu Rofiq experimented with cyberspace, looking for his recognition and publicity through an online entity (groups, pages, etc.). As previously mentioned, in the spring of 2016, he established a closed community under the name of "Notizia per tutti" on Vkontakte. The name means "news for everybody" in Italian. The choice of the language was dictated by VK censorship and Abu Rofiq's logic is fully explainable. First, in contrast to English, this language is not very popular among Russian speakers, thus, the group could escape dangerous attention for a while and accumulate followers. Second, the Italian name "Notizia per tutti" seems irrelevant to the content of the established group, which could buy some time. In addition, Abu Rofiq organized the closed group which added new members only by request and with the administrator's permission. The user name "Abusamina Muslim", hidden by Aby Rofiq, was the only administrator for Notizia per tutti (Archive A. , VK, 2016). By July 1, 2016, 277 people had gained membership (VK, 2016).

The public page of the group was designed thoroughly. While in its avatar viewers easily read the word "Syria", the administrator's avatar depicted a militant (Abu Rofiq) in camouflage with a covered face, holding a weapon. This visual composition came together with a compelling introductory note. It rejected any affiliation with the Islamic State, where in the sentence, Abu Rofiq used a common addition requested by the Russian authorities –

"the Islamic State is a banned organization". That served to outwit VK censorship. In the introduction, he presented himself as a blogger and military instructor who would provide fresh accurate news directly from Syria (Archive A. , VK, 2016). Abu Rofiq underlined his independency and affiliation with any militant group in the region. Further, the recruit repeatedly stressed his and the group's independent and freestanding status (YouTube, 2016; YouTube, 2017). Also, the introductory note welcomed communication between the administrator and the group's members, who highlighted his personal responsibility for every post. This added value and authenticity in the eyes of VK users.

In May 2016, Abu Rofiq decided to establish a new online community. This project received the brand name of "Malhama Tactical" and brought popularity and public attention. It embraced several accounts, established almost simultaneously on various social media platforms. Outlets on YouTube, Vkontakte, and Telegram emerged during the second part of May 2016, whereas Facebook and Twitter pages were established two months later, in August 2016 (Figure 10). However, the Twitter outlet was not active until October 2016, when daily posts became routine and hence, membership began to grow.

Table 1

Malhama Tactical outlets: first time established accounts (May 2016 – September 2017)

Platform	Name of the group	Timeframe	Type of a group	Status

VK	Военно-тактическая подготовка, Malhama Tactical	05/14/2016 - 01/09/2017	Open community	Blocked
Telegram	Instructor Team – Malhama Tactical	06/21/2016 - 01/2017	Open community	Blocked
YouTube	Malhama Tactical	05/2016 - 09/2017	Open community	Blocked
Facebook	Военно-тактическая подготовка	08/25/2016 - 12/2016	Open community	Blocked
Twitter	Malhama Tactical	08/2016 - 08/2017	Open community	Blocked
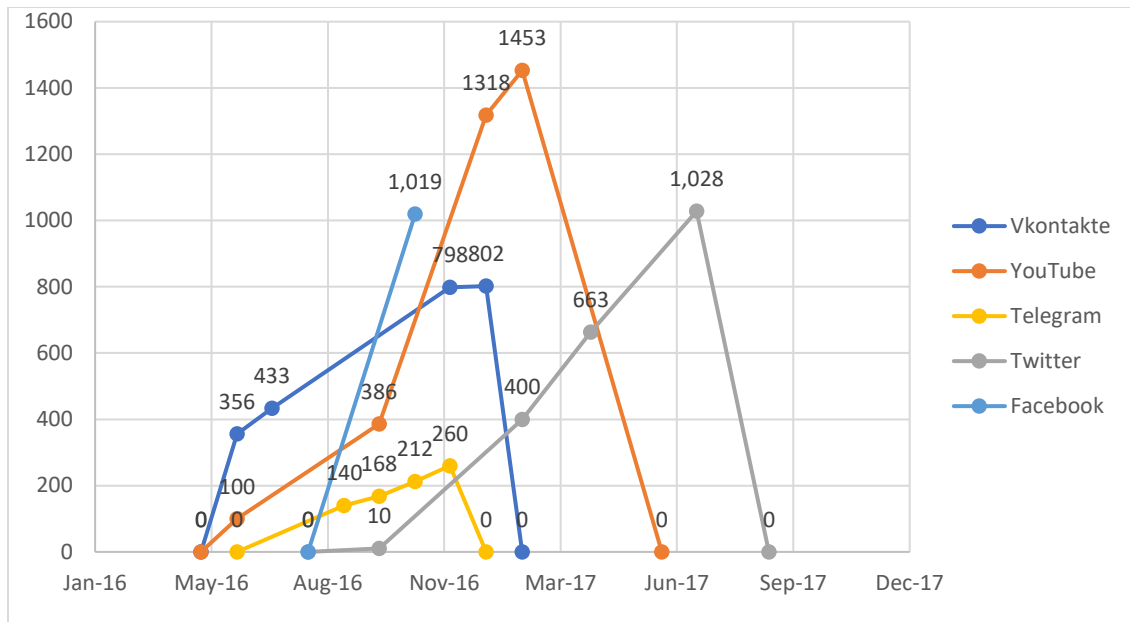
Figure 10. Malhama Tactical network: first time established accounts (May 2016 - 2017).

During almost five months (between August and December of 2016) the Malhama Tactical network functioned on five major social platforms (Table 1). Then, its outlets became a common target for censorship on Telegram, Vkontakte, and Facebook. The MT outlets were closed at the end of 2016 and on into the beginning of 2017. Having been completely terminated in the second part of 2017, the MT accounts on Twitter and YouTube demonstrated the longest lifespan (Table 1). Nonetheless, the brand received enough time to accumulate its follower base and maintain flexibility.

Usually, the MT network included "open-community" outlets and their extent of openness depended on features of social media platforms (Table 1). For instance, on Vkontakte, Facebook, and Twitter, to see post threads, users do not have to be a part of the MT group. However, Telegram has a different operational mode: posts are available only for the MT community members. New members can join the group by an invitation link. Malhama

Tactical administrators spread its links via Russian Al-Qaeda outlets, which were roaming on Telegram. Unlike the Islamic State accounts on Telegram, the MT team did not maintain extra security measures to sort out newcomers and detect unwanted followers. The same rule of inclusiveness is typical for all MT accounts. In the long run, for the expansion of the MT brand, open digital communities along with slack membership rules were very promising.

The Malhama Tactical network had a highly developed level of interconnectedness between its various outlets on social media platforms. References to its YouTube video storage page and announcements about newly created outlets were common practice. On YouTube, the description for videos contained links to existent MT accounts on other social media (YT, 2016). On October 13th, 2016, MT warned its followers that due to numerous Facebook restrictions towards the Malhama Tactical's content, the majority of video and photo data would be available on the MT Telegram outlet (FB, 2016). Also, besides the group's invitation links, the VK page contained many announcements with personal MT militants' accounts on Telegram for the group's supporters, who wanted to donate money or discuss military experience. It should be mentioned that a chain of personal accounts provided successful functioning for the entire MT network (Figure 11).
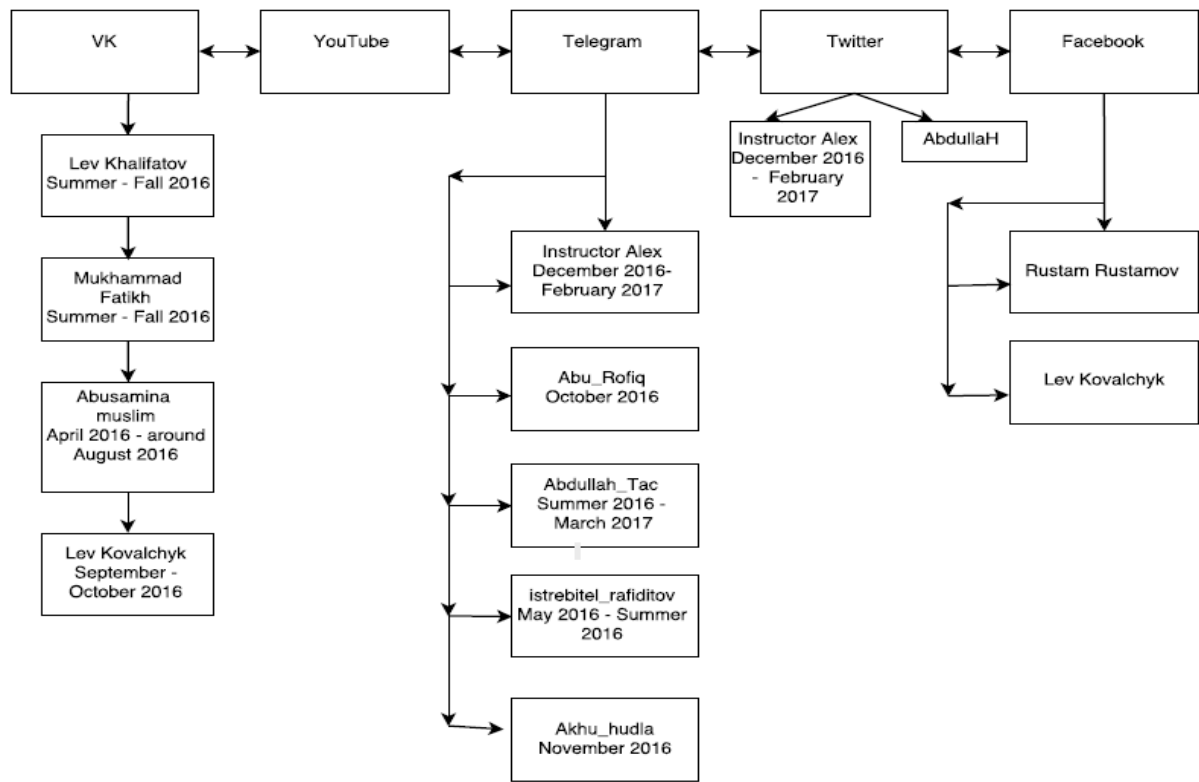
Figure 11. The MT network: administrators' accounts (2016 - 2017).

These personal accounts apparently belonged to MT fighters. These accounts were often targets for censorship, thus the public groups outlasted their administrators sometimes. On Vkontakte, Abu Rofiq reopened his personal accounts several times under the following user names: "Abusamina Muslim", "Mukhammad Fatikh", and "Lev Kovalchyk." On Telegram, the MT leader had at least three accounts: "Instructor Alex", "istrebitel_rafitditov", and "Abu_ Rofiq". The first two accounts were used most, but the accounts "Abu Rofiq" and "Akhu_hudla" appeared only once in the groups' posts. As on Telegram, his Twitter page was entitled "Instructor Alex" (Figure 11). Another MT

militant under the nickname "Lev Khalifatov" monitored the MT public group on VK.com, established in May 2016. Perhaps, the same militant hid under the user name "Rustam Rustamov" and ran the MT community on Facebook during the fall of 2016 (FB, 2016). Despite the repetition of the accounts' names ("Lev Kovalchyk" on Facebook and VK, "Instructor Alex" on Twitter and Telegram), personal accounts presented a tendency to have unrelated user names to the MT brand, and were dictated by the need to hide militants' real identities (Figure 11).

Since the winter of 2017, the vigilance of social media platforms has had a two-fold impact on the MT operational approach and the behavior of its followers. MT supporters tried to check the community pages frequently in case of its closure, join newly established outlets as fast as possible, and conduct monitoring of the groups' announcements on existent outlets. As a result, the significant growth of MT membership fell on the first days after reopening its accounts. After having returned on March 5th, 2017, the page attracted 24 people by the following day (VK, 2017). The Telegram account gained 121 members in 11 days (11 people per day) after its reopening in January 2017 (T, 2017). The same rate of account growth was shown by another Telegram account, functioning since March of 2017. The next outlet accumulated 133 members on the day of its appearance – June 20th, 2017 (T, 2017).

3.1.2.3.2 Posts and posting order. Across social media platforms, posts of the Malhama Tactical have a similar pattern: text (a title or an introductory note), content (photo, video, or audio), and a signature. Mostly, the titles of the posts effectively describe Malhama Tactical's content, delivering an idea of what its posts are about before followers

proceed to an embedded link. In this regard, hashtags become very functional. The pattern can have variations due to social media features. Indeed, on Facebook and Vkontakte, the MT pages contain longer posts in comparison with the MT posts on its Twitter or Telegram accounts. For the Facebook community page, the MT managers add a link to its content inside the description of posts despite Facebook's video upload features.

 It must be underlined that MT propagandists inscribe every social media post differently in regard to what outlet they are posting on. On the MT community page on Vkontakte, 14 out of 60 posts are signed by Abu Rofiq, whereas 18 posts have the signature "Malhama Tactical" (Table D1). Messages on Telegram are finished with the words: "The team of Malhama Tactical". Sometimes, Abu Rofiq put his name at the end of posts. Needless to say, the situation changed after his death. The content is aired either unsigned or with the signature "The team of Malhama Tactical." Social media platforms implement diverse digital features including emoji, infographics, GIF, or stickers. As with many other terrorist outlets, the Malhama Tactical media team have never used this option for public accounts.

Since the fall of 2016, its hashtags are used on an ongoing basis and written in Russian and English. They are short, memorable, and include the MT brand name. In general, MT posts include hashtags along with captions that allow people who search via key words to find its posts.

Its propagandists follow network traits, pinning hashtags to their messages. While Facebook and Vkontakte posts may comprise many hashtags (for instance, MT posts on Facebook have up to 15 hashtags), the Malhama Tactical posts on Twitter usually carry few of them, given the Twitter word limit policy (Table D2). According to an analysis of

92 posts across social media, there are several of the most popular group's hashtags: Malhama Tactical, тактика (tactics), Сирия (Syria), Шам (Sham), and воина (war) (Table 2). The "Malhama Tactical" branded hashtag performs as a community hashtag, and since the fall of 2016, it is attached to almost every post.

Table 2

Malhama Tactical's hashtag popularity on Twitter, Facebook, and Vkontakte (2016 - 2017)

	Hashtag	Language	Number of mentions	Percentage
1	Malhama Tactical	English	43	25%
2	Тактика (tactics)	Russian	19	11%
3	Сирия (Syria)	Russian	19	11%
4	Шам (Sham)	Russian	16	9%
5	Воина (war)	Russian	16	9%
6	Алеппо (Aleppo)	Russian	11	6%
7	Ислам (Islam)	Russian	8	4.6%
8	Syria	English	6	3%
9	War	English	6	3%
10	Халяб (Halab)	Russian	5	2.8%
11	Tactics	English	5	2.8%
12	Пмп (a type of mine)	Russian	3	1.7%

13	Рпг (a grenade launcher)	Russian		3	1.7%
14	Sham	English		2	1%
15	Стрельба (shooting)	Russian		2	1%
16	Идлиб (Idlib)	Russian		2	1%
17	Aleppo	English		1	0.5%
18	Оборона (defense)	Russian		1	0.5%
19	Учения (training)	Russian		1	0.5%
20	Медицина (medicine)	Russian		1	0.5%
21	Деблокада (blockade removal)	Russian		1	0.5%
22	Ранение (wounds)	Russian		1	0.5%
23	Первая помощь (first aid)	Russian		1	0.5%
24	Винтовка (rifle)	Russian		1	0.5%
	Total	English =25%	Russian =75%	174	

Even though the trendiest hashtag "Malhama Tactical" is written in English, the majority of MT hashtags are presented in the Russian language (75%). On Russian social media, the MT propagandists promote the branded hashtag and pick few Russian hashtags. On global platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, they tend to apply a set of English words along with the Malhama Tactical hashtag to get the brand discovered (Table D2). The hashtags

correlate with the mission of the group as well as indicate its geolocations (Syria, Idlib, Aleppo, Halab), target audience (Ислам (Islam)), and account content (воина (war), учения (training), рпг (a grenade launcher)). Since the fall of 2016, the Malhama Tactical network works out and utilizes a set of relevant hashtags, including specific vocabulary (Sham) and signed content that allows it to look more professional and promote network engagement.

As with the channels' names and the brand visuals, the MT team had a serious approach towards posting timing and content consistency. It tried to spread out the content (video, photo, text, and audio messages) to all the MT outlets without letting any page drift. Occasionally, it takes time (up to 5 - 7 days) to distribute the same posts via the network. The eulogy about the death of the militant Abul Baraa al-Khani emerged on its Vkontakte community page on October 28th, 2016, whereas an MT administrator for its Telegram account aired the same announcement 5 days earlier (October 23rd, 2016) (MT, 2016). On November 9th, 2016, VK users had an opportunity to watch footage with Abu Rofiq, but the Facebook followers observed the same video 2 days later (November 11th, 2016) (MT, 2016).

Nonetheless, MT recruits could not dedicate all their time to brand development on the Internet, so, sometimes the outlets were inactive for several days. On Vk.com, 1.3 posts per day were aired on the MT page between May 14th, 2016 and July 6th, 2016 (MT, 2016). During the period October 1st, 2016 – November 20th, 2016[13], the Malhama Tactical

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[13] This community was established on August 25th, 2016 on Facebook. However, the page remained inactive till October 1st, 2016, which is considered as a starting data for the calculation of posting frequency.

administrators posted 0.5 posts per day (Table D2). The posting frequency on its Telegram account was almost the same – 0.8 posts per day (January 19th, 2017 – March 9th, 2017) (Table D3). This posting pace did not affect MT membership. The loyalty of its followers was high enough to wait several days while MT fighters fulfilled their primary objectives on the Syrian battlefields. From time to time, the Malhama Tactical propagandists did not have new material to air. To keep the network alive, they retweeted related information from other sources or reposted old material.

   3.1.2.3.3 Content. The topics of the MT products – audio, video, photo, or text, served the brand's mission in a precise and homogeneous manner. As mentioned previously, the MT channels maintained regularly posted theme-connected messages: military lessons and the activities of the group. Daily news coverage from Syria or any other country is excluded from the content. The Malhama Tactical group yields unique content produced by its militants about Malhama Tactical and with elements of personal stories.

An analysis of the group's announcements reveals that Malhama Tactical has confronted a continuous shortage in money, people, and attention. In 2016 - 2017, the Malhama Tactical militants attempted to collect money several times via the Internet, processing payments through Qiwi Wallet, Wallet One, Visa Card, and Bitcoin (Twitter, 2017; Telegram, 2017). Their initial demands had a vague and general character (the announcements were issued in July 27th and August 5th), but then the MT announcements changed, becoming more precise and concrete. For instance, in August 2016, Abu Rofiq initiated fundraising for his project through the MT outlet on Vk.com (MT, 2016). He did not articulate the particular

reasons behind this post. However, his next public call for money, which went out in 10 days, was more exact: the group planned to purchase 10 airsoft guns for training purposes (MT, 2016). On November 6th, 2016, via the Telegram community page, he called for financial support for MT militants, highlighting that "…participating in jihad by financial assistance will make you closer to Allah … On the way to Allah, they [MT militants] fight, die, and kill" (MT, 2016). Later, at the beginning of January 2017, the MT team set up a new fundraising campaign for several new male and female recruits, providing Abdullah and Abu Rofiq's accounts for further connection (MT, 2017). Asking for support in their mission of "pig hunting" in Syria, MT militants tried to gather money to buy new weapons in July 2017 (MT, 2017). Their multiple fundraising initiatives apparently encountered many problems and one of them was that only a few people contributed to the group as the MT team complained repeatedly (MT, 2017; MT, 2016). Looking to external financial sources, the group utilized a diversified approach to the creation of messages, producing video, text, and audio files as well as using various financial systems for money transfers. The group initiated at least 8 fundraisers between June 2016 and July 2017 across various social media outlets. Malhama Tactical considered financial contributions from supporters as their direct religious obligation and their way to conduct jihad. Asking for support, the MT team referred to Allah, presenting the MT militants as Muslims' defenders. The reasons for financial assistance varied from aid for the MT project to money for the trips (hijra) of new recruits to Syria and for the purchase of weapons.

In November 2016, the group needed to fill 3 sniper positions (users of the M16 rifle) (FB, 2016). The announcement was placed on its Facebook account and addressed to the

recruiters with Facebook accounts who were already in Syria and the HTS held areas. Later, a 3 day-military training that covered skills for light anti-tank weapons (RPG-7) was open for students up to February 1st, 2017 and was divided into 2 parts – theory and practice (TW, 2017). The group looked for single young men (between 18 and 30 years-old) without health problems and with any national background. Potential candidates' military experience did not play a significant role because the MT team promised to teach newcomers (MT, 2017). As previously mentioned, the MT militants collected money for the recruits' trip to Syria via the Internet (January 2017); this means that the group successfully received new cadres or at least, it attempted to not only from affiliated groups but from other countries.

To build curiosity, the MT online team posted audio and text announcements about upcoming videos and lessons. On July 10th, 2016, MT followers received a notification for a new video lesson about a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG 7) (MT, 2016). At the end of the month, Abu Rofiq aired an audio announcement where he declared that he was recording a new lesson about the recipe of khattabka (a homemade hand grenade) (MT, 2016). Less than a month before the death of Abu Rofiq in Idlib, the MT outlets together with HTS affiliated channels tried to attract the audience's attention by the announcement of an interview of Abu Rofiq for Faruq Shami (MT, 2017).

The MT brand actively promoted and was engaged in communication with its followers. The media team responded publicly, but some topics (for example, money transfers) were discussed in a private message after the first public response. The Malhama media team actively responded to comments (if any were aired) under its YouTube videos. The

Vkontakte community of Malhama Tactical ran a question section where supporters expressed their concerns: What is the difference between an AK and an AKM? What rifle is better - an AK-74 or an AKSU? Which physical exercises help recruits to prepare for a hijra? What medications do militants use? (VK, 2016). Before the death of Abu Rofiq, at least 2 Malhama Tactical militants – Abu Rofiq and another militant, had VK and Facebook personal pages that allowed them to maintain the MT community account and interact with followers (see Figure 5). Its followers left questions under community posts or in the question section.

The MT team paid attention to the majority of questions and tried to ignore extraneous or hostile questions as well as negative comments. For instance, a subscriber of "Talha Muhajir" demanded for the clarification of MT's stance: "At least, explain… what are you fighting for?" (FB, 2016). The comment was written under a very detailed post about new recruits, explaining the position of Malhama Tactical in the Syrian conflict and its goals. As a result, the follower did not receive any response. On November 8th, 2016, Khalid Umarov, a VK user, asked if the group of Abu Rofiq was preparing "surprises" for Assad's Army (VK, 2016). This question was disregarded intentionally because Abu Rofiq or another MT media manager responded to the next message under the same post. Vitriolic comments were routine for the MT team, which did not rush to purge them all. On YouTube, a video posted on January 19th, 2017, provoked a strong reaction from active viewers. While the video received predominantly positive comments, the most liked comment contained harsh sarcasm: "Why are you heavily concerned with fortifications or

bulletproof vests if your central goal is to get to Heaven? Go to the Heaven. Hurry up!" (YT, 2017).

Also, threats are an unfortunate part of social media visibility, and this group did not become an exception. In November 2016, on one of the MT accounts, a user "Vitaly Ryilshikov" sent the following message: "You will die soon. All of you" (FB, 2016). Labeling the author of this message a troll-provocateur, Abu Rofiq shared this experience with MT supporters across social media platforms (FB, 2016). To prevent unexpected activities, the Malhama Tactical online administrators apparently practiced blocking hostile users.

Thus, the MT group interacted with its audience in 2 ways: public and private. The public way refers to open-to-followers comments under posts (VK, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter), and the private messages were practiced on the group's outlets on VK, Facebook, Twitter, and Telegram. Having been a central force of the MT online presence, Abu Rofiq promoted brand communication with supporters. His team learned to control, listen to, and carefully manage the MT brand community in regard to negative commentaries, threats, etc.

3.1.2.4 Brand as product. As for MT product branding, the group's photos carried an iconic mark and the videos had a recognizable design order. The majority of the group's photos had the group's logo. With slight variations, the branding pattern of the video design included:

1. The screen with a small MT logo on a black background and the same message at the beginning of footage; the message underlined the educational purposes of the presented video, which did not call for any violent or illegal actions. Further, it warned that attempts to repeat presented acts by unprepared individuals could lead to serious physical injuries.

2. The screen with a big logo on a green (or khaki) background at the end of footage.

Starting from the end of 2016, every video contained a new symbolic element: an iconic mark (the group's emblem) in a corner of the screen. Out of 35 analyzed videos[14] produced in 2016-2017, MT propagandists failed to craft two videos in accordance to the branding design order. The group produced unique video content that served as a realm for powerful storytelling. Through their videos, the group presented the story of Malhama Tactical and its background and ideology, justifying the group's existence. The research applies the following video content classifications: educational, occasional, and training (Table 3). The occasional category includes videos devoted to a particular event (for instance, a militant's death or the aftermath of airstrikes), group propaganda, or footage without clear educational or training purposes. While the category "training" embraces footage, which shows Malhama Tactical operations and drills, educational videos offer to teach battlefield tips from real militants (a Czech rifle: guide (2017); a guide for hand grenades (2017)).

Table 3

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[14] During the research period, the group created around 44 videos, and only 35 of them were archived. So, the study is based on 35 fully recorded MT videos.

Types of the Malhama Tactical videos (2016-2017)

Video categories:	Quantity	Percentage
Educational/Lessons	16	36%
Occasional	10	23%
Training/Battle experience	18	41%
Total	44	100%

The creation of video products was driven by brand advancement within the frame of the brand mission. Seventy-seven percent of the visual content was dedicated to training (41%) and lessons (36%) (Table 3). These products established MT's authority and expertise, and allowed people to successfully find them with search engines. The MT media team intended to pose the Malhama Tactical militants as professionals, who not only have military skills but are ready to share their expertise with people. This promoted the idea that everybody could acquire military skills and join jihad in Syria.

The videos covered different battlefield related themes, which ranged from attacks inside urban buildings to shooting exercises with a portable rocket-propelled grenade launcher to the aftermath of a bombing in Idlib, Syria. The overwhelming majority of the videos have poor image and sound quality. Oftentimes, wind and other background noises are a common event on the MT videos, which prevent viewers from hearing militants' voices. Modern Internet users are seasoned viewers, however, MT followers or   followers of any other militant group usually do not expect high caliber videos due to extreme circumstances. Video production in a war zone is a very complicated process, especially

for militants, who focus on fighting rather than being stars on the Internet. Their recording equipment (computers, cameras, etc.) may be worn out, outdated, or damaged during operations. It is useful to note that nowadays, even for regular brands, it's permissible to have lower-quality videos for posting on their social media outlets or blogs (DMI, 2017).

In addition, several other traits of the MT videos should be underlined. First of all, this group realized the significance of video marketing for the Malhama Tactical brand, creating a prodigious number of products. Second, in every video, MT militants concealed their identities by covering their faces. However, their trainees mainly did not cover their faces. This means that MT instructors are a part of the society where they looked for their audience – mainly, Russia and other countries of the post-Soviet region (to a lesser extent). Supposedly, they tried to protect their families from persecution as well as themselves in case of their return from Syria. Third, as the brand face, Abu Rofiq starred in 31 videos, some of which he recorded alone or with a camera man who was hidden from view. As mentioned previously, this group targeted the Russian speaking audience. There is other supportive evidence for this statement: not only was the MT network designed in the Russian language, its videos were also presented in the Russian language.

An analysis of its group's video accounts show that the Malhama Tactical videos had a solid user base. For this brand, the late fall of 2016 (October – November) became the turning point. As the MT brand became more recognizable, the number of daily viewers increased accordingly (Table D4). In general, the longer the videos stayed on social media, the more views they had. Since the fall of 2016, increasing MT recognition resulted in new videos, which were aired on social media from several hours to 4 weeks, and attracted more

daily viewers than old videos (Table D4). A 3 minute-video of how to make a homemade grenade was the most popular MT video product on its outlet (Table D4). Its success is based on the well-known word "khattabka" in its title, which means a handmade explosive. Having been widely used during the Chechen wars of the 1990s, it was named after the famous field commander – Khattab or Samer ben Saleh ben Abdallah al-Sweleim (Williams B. , 2003). He was born in 1969 in Saudi Arabia and was poisoned in the North Caucasus in 2002. To add visibility, the MT team included the words of "Malhama" and "Tactical" (together or separately) in the titles of videos posted on YouTube.

While the overall average length of the videos is 3.73 minutes, the average lesson length is longer – 5.7 minutes.

3.1.2.5 Brand decline (2017). The death of an inventor results in the consequential decline of a brand if it did not have ardent supporters and enthusiastic successors. This happened with the Malhama Tactical brand after the death of Abu Rofiq in February of 2017, which led to the gradual abatement of the group's online presence from March to September of 2017. There are two broad reasons which contributed to this decline: internal (the Malhama Tactical group) and external (online censorship). The invented MT attributes were partially adopted by the group's other members (if they are still alive). While new administrators continued to promote the MT symbols, they barely mentioned Abu Rofiq and avoided posting his photos or using them as avatars for social media accounts. The new management disregarded the fact that for followers, Abu Rofiq is a symbolic, attractive, and recognizable figure which is indistinguishable from the MT brand.

The rise of brand awareness and recognition make the group visible and thus, more vulnerable to censorship. This process coincided with the death of Abu Rofiq. The brand lost its main driving force. His replacement was not found, and the pressure of online restrictions required another creative mind to be in charge of the brand in order to continue its advancement. Apparently, unlike the Islamic State group, the MT team did not have reliable individuals outside the war zone to continue and manage the Malhama Tactical network. Under these circumstances, the online brand presence began fading away. Trying to outwit the VK censorship policy, one of the militants who assisted Abu Rofiq in the brand establishment, opened a new MT page under a different name: "Sham Today."

3.1.3 The Nogais Jamaat. The Nogais militant group, "the Nogais Djamaat", as a part of Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, announced its creation via the Internet at the beginning of November 2016. At that time, its militants undertook attempts to establish the group's network on social media platforms, including local (Vkontakte) and global (Telegram, YouTube, and Twitter). During the Chechen wars in the 1990s, the Nogais battalion was active in the North Caucasus. Even though Russians and Kumyks joined the group, the residents of two Chechen regions, ethnic Nogais, were its core (Gordienko, 2011). The Russian authorities argue that its militants have been responsible for at least seven terror attacks, committed on the territory of the Russian Federation (Gordienko, 2011). The group became active again during the Syrian war.

3.1.3.1 Brand as symbol. On November 6th, 2016, its main accounts appeared concurrently on Vkontakte, Twitter, and Telegram. A day later, the militants registered the group's YouTube channel in order to upload its footage. Every network branch carried the

peculiar emblem with Nogais signs on a white background and the name of the group, written in English and placed on a light green backdrop (Figure 12). Its round emblem is encircled by a wide blue line. The creators of the emblem put emphasis on the word "Sham", placing it on the bottom of the emblem. This visual language highlights the group's ethnic roots, the geographic location of the group, its affiliation in the ongoing war, and its historical heritage.

Figure 12. The Nogais militant group's logo (2016).

Between November 2016 and June 2017, the application of the Nogais symbols was consistent all over its social media accounts, excluding reserve Telegram accounts. It can be explained in terms of the Nogais network hierarchy. These accounts on Telegram had been established as dormant branches whose main goal was to be invisible until a main channel would be blocked and in the case of the blockage, to continue news coverage, reconnecting the Nogais group customer base with the brand. While the main accounts had the Nogais group logo as a profile picture (Figure 12), the reserve outlets usually floated without any avatar. After activation, the group's team uploaded their peculiar logo, and renamed a reserve account if needed. Most times, the reserve channels' names were picked in order to disguise the channel affiliation.

3.1.3.2 Brand as organization.

3.1.3.2.1 Brand mission. The Nogais Shamda proclaimed itself to be an independent militant and ethnically diverse group (Archive A. , 2017). Its members are from the former Soviet Union region, but with Nogais recruits as the group's traditional ethnic core. The media team repeatedly describe the group's mission, which embraced 2 objectives. First, fighting in Syria against "…the tyranny of infidels", the Nogais jamaat elevated Allah's will and established Sharia law (Archive A. , 2017). The main content of this channel was the inspirational posts. For instance, under a photo of a militant, the Nogais propagandists stated: "Rise up for the battle! Jihad is the easiest way to Heaven" (Archive A. , 2017). Another post was circulated, underlining that "…jihad is the pinnacle of Islam…" (Archive A. , 2017).

The second objective was to encourage Muslims by their personal example to join jihad, contributing properties or recruitment (Archive A. , 2017). In the introductory pinned statement on the Vkontakte page, the militants complained about the shortage of weapons and ammunition in their jamaat (Archive A. , 2016). To motivate supporters for contributions, the statement underlined that generous donors could be "…blessed by Allah…", while passive Muslims should expect punishment (Archive A. , 2016). In December 2016, the group received a used Toyota truck, which needed repair, so it asked for financial support via Telegram to purchase indispensable new parts for the car (Archive A. , 2016). To buy new weapons for the militants, another fundraising company was launched in February 2017 (Archive A. , 2017). Its media team promised to provide an anonymous way to transfer money to Syria (Archive A. , 2017). These frequent initiatives had been successful. People, who refrained from hijra, sent money to the Nogais militants.

In April 2017, its media team expressed gratitude for its online followers, reporting about several crucial purchases (Archive A. , 2017).

In addition, the media team frequently invited individuals to fulfill hijra to Syria and join the Nogais group. Providing personal contacts via Telegram, it promised to guide potential recruits on how to circumvent the government's security service (Archive A. , 2017). These "invitations" found fertile ground. As the Nogais propagandists reported, in November 2016, a new recruit, who supposedly was a member of the affiliated group "the Nogais prairie", arrived in Syria and became an active operative (Archive A. , 2016). In April 2017, another man joined the Nogais group and soon after his arrival, the recruit attended the military training (Archive A. , 2017).

The Nogais jamaat is a part of a large militant organization whose name the jamaat's militants had never ever mentioned. Nonetheless, this comes from the overall analysis of the group's news thread - the Nogais jamaat was subordinated to HTS. As a part of HTS, the Nogais militants received seasonal military outfits, weapons, and training (Archive A. , 2017). As mentioned previously, the group tried to receive extra funds from its online followers in order to buy some additional military accessories (Archive A. , 2017). Several Nogais militants attended a military training, including sniper practice through November 2016 up to February 2017. Experienced and newly arrived militants got these military exercises on specialized bases near Idlib, Syria. Its social media accounts spread photos of newly trained snipers and videos from the training. According to one Nogais militant, "students" acquired Arabic language classes along with the main military exercises. Also, HTS obligated the militants to attend religious classes, where prominent imams explained

central religious questions, widening the theoretical knowledge base of the militants (Archive A. , 2017).

While the group did not promote its independent status nor directly underline its HTS affiliation, it strongly rejected any connections with the Islamic State. To prevent discussions, its media savvy militants denigrated ISIS in the title of the Nogais community page on Vkontakte, and the page had the name "the Nogais in Syria (no ISIS) (Archive A. , 2016). Trying to distance itself from ISIS and pacify its followers, the Nogais group aired the following post: "…We have nothing in common with the Islamic State group and we do not support ISIS's crimes against Muslims" (Archive A. , 2016).

3.1.3.2.2 Brand network. As it was stated previously, the Nogais militants had tried to establish and manage three main (visible) news branches on Vkontakte, Twitter, and Telegram. The research dismisses its YouTube accounts due to its secondary status of video storage in the network hierarchy. In March 2017, the group launched its website which did not last long and was discontinued because the cyber team of the group stopped paying for the domain. The website disappeared in 6-8 months. According to the statement aired on March 19th, 2017, this website was created in order to provide a unique cyber platform for publishing referral-links to the group's network branches on social media (Archive A. , 2017). It had a very primitive design with 8 sections, where five sections were direct references to the external brand channels (VK, Twitter, etc.). The other three sections had the following titles: "News", "About us", and "Security". The group planned to air new video and photo products, recorded by the Nogais militants on the Syrian battlefields, in the section "News" (Archive A. , 2017). The short description of the group's

mission was posted in the section "About us", whereas another section provided guidance on how to keep online anonymity and manage personal devices (cell phones, tablets, etc.) to avoid being persecuted by the authorities. The website background did not contain the Nogais group's logo, which was a central piece of every social media account of the group. Instead, it shows an image of bellicose horsemen in black garbs carrying swords (Archive A. , Nogais jamaat, 2017).

The Nogais network, including its website, had a slow pace of online activities. Although, as the collected data shows, the media team of the Nogais group updated their accounts simultaneously (Table B1). Like any other group brand, this online pattern of posting can be explained by the shortfall of human resources and censorship pressure on social media platforms. Active operatives in Syria prioritized the participation in the ongoing war rather than continue the brand's online presence. For instance, its Twitter and VK pages remained dormant around 3 weeks (between November 17th and December 6, 2016) (Table B1). Since January 2016 and prior to April 2016, the administrators reduced the activities to one post per month. On this group's page, the last post was aired on April 10th, 2017 and since this data, the page has been abandoned. To some extent, the censorship pressure from the Vkontakte administration led to its dereliction. In February, the Nogais militants warned that the group's Vkontakte outlet was censored for Russian users with Russian IP addresses. In this post, the Nogais jamaat recommended its supporters download VPN software that would help them to circumvent the government's cyber measures (Archive A. , 2017). At the end of spring 2017, its Twitter account was blocked and had never been reopened, along with as the Vkontakte outlet.

During summer 2017, Telegram became a main social media platform for the group's online activities despite repeated shutdowns of its accounts. Given the significant number of blocked accounts, Telegram can be considered the most inimical space for this militant group. The gathered data exposes that the Nogais media team was forced to frequently establish reserve accounts, which floated around in a dormant condition. Many of them were blocked before these channels could become the group's propaganda platform. Worth noting is the fact that the Nogais jamaat had maintained two types of outlets: news and inspirational. The last channel fulfilled the inspirational goals rather than reporting news from the frontlines. It contained a number of quotations from various religious books and relevant statements of various prominent figures. Due to its content, this account had fewer supporters than the regular news channels of the Nogais jamaat. Together with these outlets, there were at least two semi-private "service" accounts, which the group used for communication with its supporters. In 2016-2017, these service accounts had survived over several closures of the main and reserve Nogais channels on Telegram.
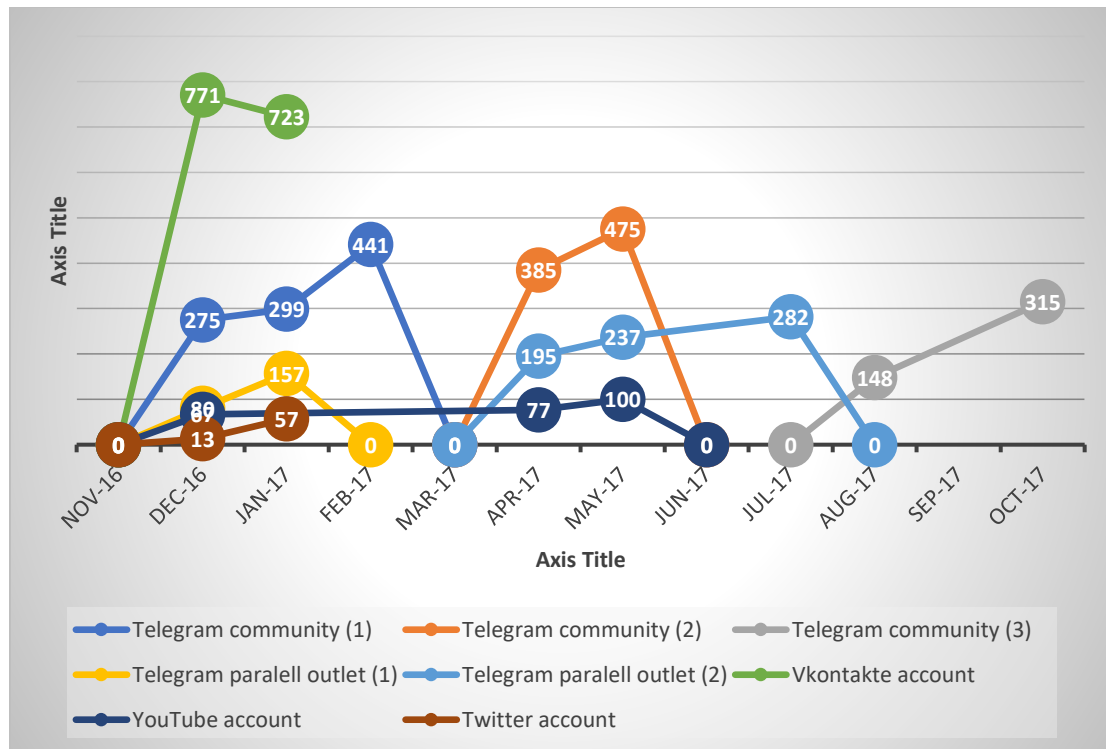
Figure 13. The membership of Nogais jamaat's network on Telegram, Twitter, YouTube, and Vkontakte (November 2016 – October 2017).

On the domestic social media platform, Vkontakte, the Nogais jamaat gathered the biggest crowd for the relatively short period of time (Figure 13). Having become visible since November 6th, 2016, its community page embraced more than 700 people after less than three weeks. Telegram became another social media platform where the group succeeded. Between November 2016 and October 2017, its accounts, whose longer cyber activities resulted in a bigger crowd, attracted around 450 members (Figure 13). The Telegram account, established on November 6th, 2016, had more than 400 members in February 2017 (Figure 13). Although, the Nogais Twitter and YouTube accounts were less popular among

the Russian speaking audience. Indeed, in 7 months after its establishment, the YouTube channel's membership had not exceeded 100 subscribers (Figure 13).

   3.1.3.3 Brand as product.   The group produced photos and videos which were released via the Nogais branches on social media platforms. The Nogais group's logo usually appeared on its video and photo products. On some videos, the logo proceeded along with the black banner of HTS (in the upper right corner). Almost every video finished with a list of fresh links to the Nogais accounts. The aired photos carried the round logo on the upper left corner and the referral link to its website or the main account on social media. This promotional method with placing working links on the photos or footage is effective, especially if censorship countermeasures are lagging behind. Worth noting is the fact that the Nogais jamaat was the first group which launched and widely applied this promotional action.

3.2   Al-Qaeda News Brands

3.2.1 Sham Center brand.

   3.2.1.1 Brand as symbol.   The Al-Qaeda network on Telegram introduced a new partisan outlet, entitled "Sham Center", at the beginning of June 2016. Looking for a memorable identity, this source uploaded a blue/white logo (Figure 14), which was replaced by a more sophisticated logo in several days (Figure 15).

Figure 14. The initial logo aired in June 2016.

Figure 15. The new logo for the Sham Center outlets, airing since the end of June 2016.

The new logo has a grey background with a symbolic blue circle, placed in the middle of the logo. The title of the outlet comes together with the second explanatory line: "News network" (Figure 2). Targeting the Russian speaking audience exclusively, its title is written in the English language (Figure 14, Figure 15). The Sham Center team designed a distinguishable background image, which contains photos of a little girl, military vehicles, and aircrafts (Figure 16).

Figure 16. The Sham Center's background visual.

These visual symbols have not been changed since June 2016 and were uploaded for every brand account. Also, the title of the network – "Sham Center", has not undergone any modification and was consistent across the social media platforms. While Malhama Tactical, Voice of Sham, and Faruq Shami networks have personalized their brand by the association of the brands with particular people, the Sham Center brand has not adopted the same practice. Therefore, the brand's symbols were constant, but faceless (without promotion via a person or persons).

On its Twitter page, the Sham Center team described the network as an informational source which provides "an analysis of the events and news from the region of Syria (Archive A. , Sham Center, (1), 2016)". Later, this self-description underlined the brand's independent status, posing itself as an "… analytical agency…" which focused on the socio-political situation in Syria (Archive A. , 2016). The statement, aired in July 2017, underlined the Islamic character of the brand (Archive A. , 2017).

Even though Sham Center is a result of a group effort, there is no personal information (photos, names, details of a biography) about the individuals behind this network. This information was meticulously concealed by the brand's media team (Center, 2016). The Sham Center account informed the followers that the brand's home city was in Istanbul, Turkey. In May 2017, the network asked for financial assistance for its followers, providing the personal Telegram account of "Imran Turki" for further contact (Archive A. , 2017). To protect themselves and their families from persecution, radicals often provide false information on their online accounts. Therefore, there is no reason to take this information provided by the Sham Center team for granted. Nonetheless, the analysis of presented

statements leads to the conclusion that the brand creators had close connections to Ukraine. Given the multiple references to the Ukrainian situation, they could be Muslim immigrants from Ukraine to Turkey. With some certainty, it can be stated that the network team members received school education (at least) in the Russian language. Considering the propaganda products and brand statements, its team members did not participate in the battles in Syria. Perhaps, they reside in a peaceful country (Turkey and less likely, in Ukraine or Russia).

3.2.1.2 Brand as organization. In fact, the brand mission reflects the views of its founders. According to its creators, the Sham Center mission is to deliver actual news and serve as an intermediary between the audience and militants (Archive A. , 2017). The overwhelming majority of media sources, which upheld opposite viewpoints to Sham Center, have created a hostile informational environment. In light of this, its media team observed itself as a rebel and the last resort for truth, and which challenged powerful Western anti-Muslim propaganda (Archive A. , 2017). While HTS militants have fought in the Syrian war, the brand's online activities have assisted them in informational jihad against infidels (Archive A. , 2017).

The brand's ideology has shaped the Sham Center network content. The center pillars in this ideology are the Syrian government, the Russian military assistance in Syria, and the US-led coalition. As stated in its multiple posts, the Alawite bloody regime in Syria oppressed the Syrians for decades and now, are fighting for the control over a Syrian Sunni majority (Shamcenter, Syria - the revolution of faith, 2012). The antigovernment protests transformed into a full-fledged war between "Islamic military groups and the Russian-

Shiite army" (Shamcenter, 2017). Backed by the Russian military specialists, Bashar al-Assad's Army has deliberately targeted civilians, trying to annihilate the rebellious Syrians. Not only have the allies murdered the civilians, but they have also destroyed public infrastructure, attacking hospitals, children's facilities, and mosques (Shamcenter, 2016). Sham Center argues that Assad's Forces, Iranian Shiite groups, and Putin's government are partners in crime, conducting genocide (Shamcenter, 2016).

The U.S – led coalition and the Russian Forces are considered as ruthless invaders in the Syrian territories. For Sham Center, Syria became a drill field for the Russian Forces, where the troops have used "… cluster bombs, white phosphorus and mustard gas bombs, and even submarine depth bombs" (TSN, 2016). Also, it has viciously promoted the conspiracy theory that the Russian military mission has tested new types of weapons in Syria (TSN, 2016). On December 29, 2016, its team writers published a post stating that the Russian Army launched 160 new types of weapons (Archive A. , 2016). According to the Sham Center posts, the US-led coalition has intentionally shelled public places with a significant concentration of civilians (Shamcenter, 2017). Since the U.S military proved the effectiveness of chemical weaponry in the Iraqi war, they have launched some chemical attacks (Shamcenter, 2017). However, the world community has repudiated the coalition's actions as terror attacks because the victims of these actions were Muslims, not Europeans, Russians or U.S citizens (Shamcenter, 2017).

On April 3rd, 2017 a Kyrgyz native, A. Dzhalilov, committed a suicide attack inside a subway in Saint – Petersburg, Russia (TASS, Investigators name terrorist group behind St. Petersburg metro attack, 2018). The explosion left 15 people dead and more than 100

received multiple injuries. Shortly after the incident, Sham Center spread the conspiracy theory that attributed the planning of this deceitful attack to the Russian Intelligence Service, which covered victims with dust in order to present the incident as a terror act (Archive A. , 2017). Pushing the idea of the Iranian Shiites/Bashar Assad's genocide against the Syrians, the outlet declared that the world community ignored this genocide, whereas many world leaders expressed their condolences to the Russian government. The next day after the subway blast, Sham Center wrote: "Today, Russian terrorists killed 22 locals near Damask, but nobody cares because these victims are subhuman, not dwellers of St. Petersburg" (Archive A. , 2017). On April 7, 2017, it aired the statement which encouraged Muslims of Russia to "…do everything to stop Russia" from killing "…their brothers…" in Syria (Archive A. , 2017). In light of the bloody St. Petersburg attack, this post is an open invitation for attacks inside the Russian Federation. Previously, in December 2016, the outlet responded to the news about the assassination of the Russian Ambassador to Turkey, A. Karlov, that as long as Mevlüt Mert Altintas murdered "a child killer", this action should not be counted as a terror attack (Archive A. , 2016). Repeatedly rejecting recognition of committed terror attacks against the Russian Federation, this network has labeled Putin and other Russian officials as terrorists, cold blooded murderers of Muslims, and the vanguard of the Syrian genocide.

Along with the inimical attitude toward the Russian military's assistance in Syria and the encouragement of violence inside the state, the Sham Center network has published threating messages for Russian society. For instance, on its Twitter channel, the team aired

the apocalyptic picture of the ruined Red Square in Moscow with the Kremlin and St. Basil's Cathedral (Figure 17).

Figure 17. The Sham Center's post the image of the ruined Red Square in Moscow (November 2016).

Its team writers attached the following statement to this visual: "So-called Great Russian nation, we never ever forgot how your militants liberated us. We will liberate Moscow!" (Archive A. , 2016). Another post, which appeared in the brand's news thread in the fall of 2017, stated that Putin and Russia would pay soon for the murders of Muslims in Syria (Archive A. , 2017).

 Sham Center rejected any affiliation of HTS and Al-Qaeda. However, the network's posts revealed the opposite. In 2016, it disseminated an announcement about the high demand of new recruits for HTS (Archive A. , 2016). Sham Center has not only called HTS and its affiliated groups' militants, "rebels" or "defenders", but the brand has created numerous posts, glorifying their attacks and suicide missions against the Syrian, Russian and Iranian troops. According to the brand's ideology, in the region, there is only one force that confronts these aggressors - Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (TSN, 2016). Serving as an umbrella, it has embraced numerous military groups whose central objective is to defend the oppressed

Sunni population. Waging jihad, HTS militants obey the Quran and follow Sharia law (TSN, 2016). Sham Center has emphasized that the Russian Forces targeted Assad's opposition, pretending to fight against ISIS and Al-Qaeda (TSN, 2016). This group aims to establish the Islamic state, which would be ruled by Sharia law (TSN, 2016).Thus, in terms of the brand's logic, HTS became the vanguard of the persecuted Sunni population in their uprising against Assad's tyranny. International players engaged in this conflict have helped the Syrian government to exterminate its own people, conducting devastating premeditated attacks against civilians.

3.2.1.2.1 Network. Overall, the brand network embraces public and personal accounts that are connected to the central node – the Sham Center website (Figure 18). The Sham Center network appeared at the end of the spring of 2016, and whose channels began to function on Telegram, Twitter, Facebook, and VK.com. Its VK account had a short lifespan – around 3 months, when the VK administration removed it. The brand media team did not undertake further attempts to reopen the Sham Center VK page. The real motivation to retreat from Vkontakte was not announced by its team, but it could be strict VK regulations and a low amount of engagement. On the contrary, Sham Center reopened its Facebook accounts at least three times between May and October 2016. With the establishment of the Sham Center website in October 2016, the brand network on social media shrank to two channels on Twitter and Telegram.
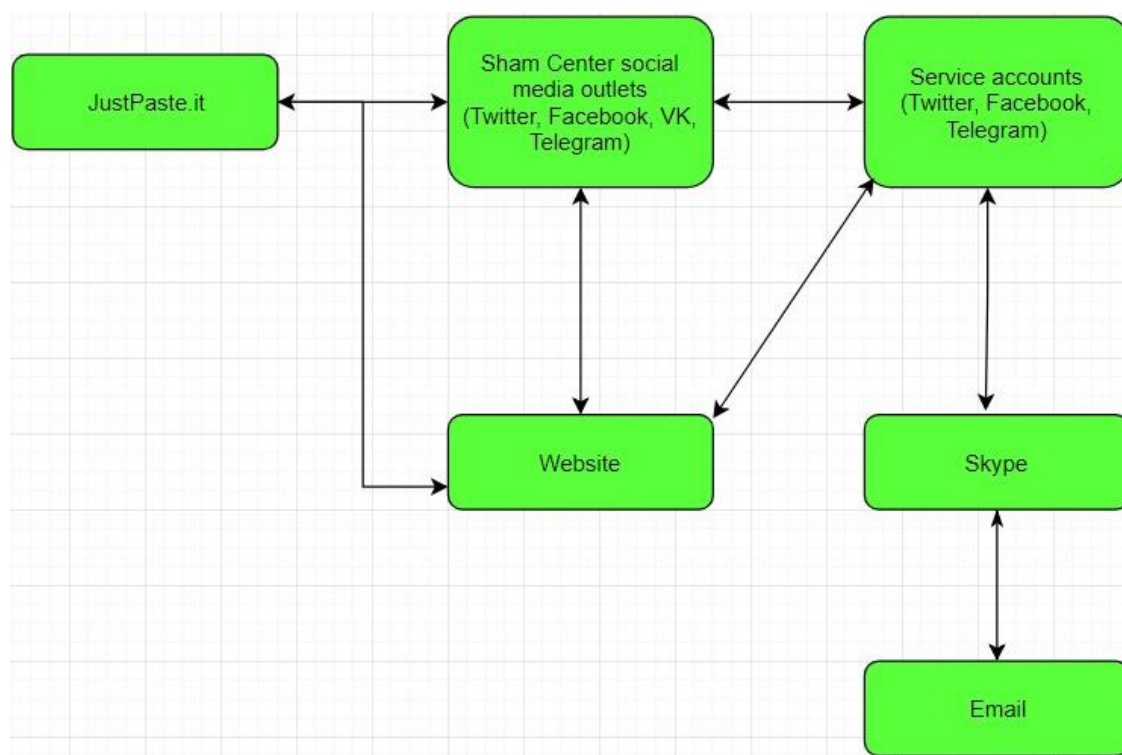
Figure 18. The Sham Center network 2016 – 2017.
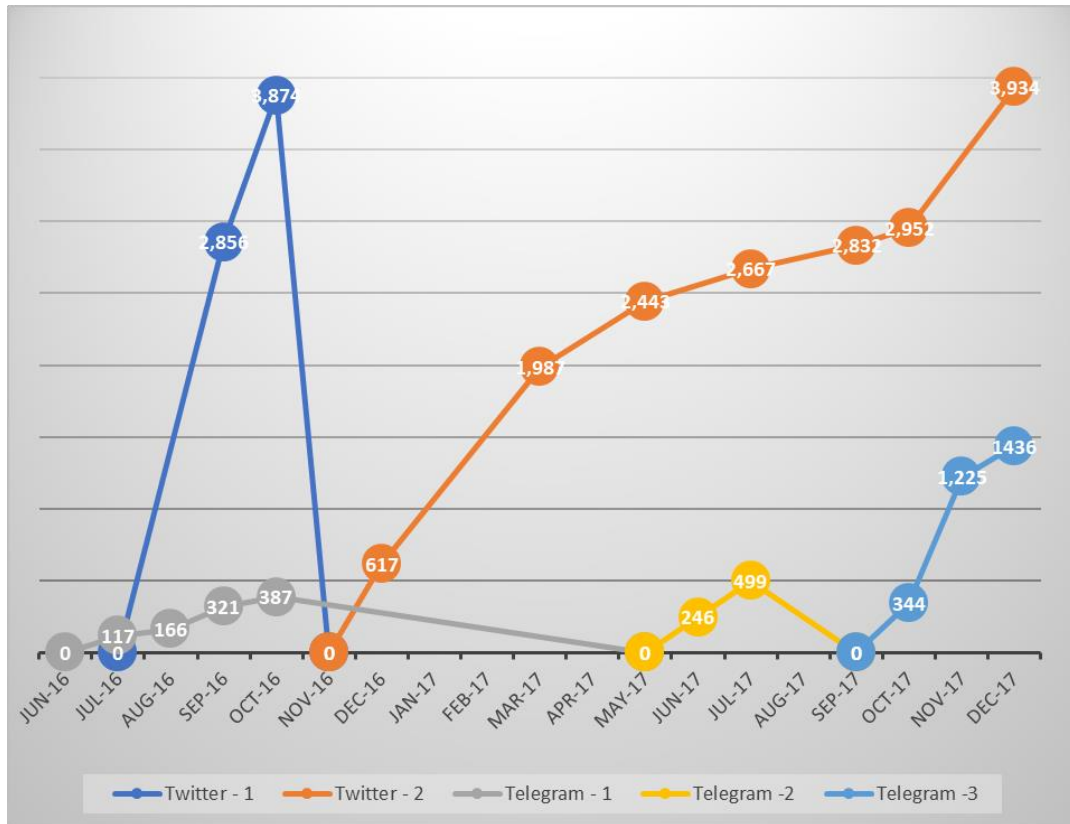
Figure 19. The Sham Center network between June 2016 and December 2017.

Comparing these social media platforms, the Sham Center team found the most benign climate on Twitter. During the period between November 2016 and March 2017, the Sham Center channel on Twitter added four new followers per day (Archive A. , 2017). In terms of crowd, its Twitter account accumulated 10 times more followers than the brand's account on Telegram during the same period from June 2016 to November 2016 (Figure 19). The accounts' lifespan on both platforms is impressive. Sham Center on Twitter, which was reestablished in November 2016, has been active since then, whereas its Telegram channel has been successfully operating for one year after its establishment in September 11, 2017.

These types of networks cannot exist without a number of hidden service outlets that are commonly personal accounts. Shortly after the brand's appearance on the Internet, its media team distributed a post asking for financial and professional assistance. For the communication, Sham Center provided Skype, Facebook, Twitter, and Telegram accounts, including a Yahoo email. These accounts have the same name of "Abu Mansur bitcoin" and an identical profile image (Archive A. , 2016). However, its Facebook account received two name – "Alexander Petrashkevich" (Abu Mansur Bitcoin) (Archive A. , 2016). The chain of the service accounts comprised another contact, mentioned previously – "Imran Turki". On the brand's website, this account was provided as a main contact.

After several failed attempts to cave the Sham Center niche on Vkontakte and Facebook, its management considered the creation of its website. In October 2016, the Sham Center audience got an announcement about its website. It became the central hub for the brand network, assisted by two channels on Twitter and Telegram. Thus, the Sham Center network was not well branched out via social media platforms. Although, this cannot be considered as a limitation because its social media accounts have aired without interruption for a long period of time. They have accumulated a significant customer base, reinforcing the Sham Center brand recognition. Worth noting is the fact that the brand's Telegram account was not leading in terms of the network hierarchy. Nonetheless, the team has kept it active in order to stay in touch with the well-established Al-Qaeda network, which in case of censorship, would help to reconnect the Sham Center brand with its followers.

To look more professional, Sham Center has maintained a set of standards: a ban on expletives, communication with followers, and brand authorship. The brand outlets have

been public in contrast to the Sham Center service accounts, which have had private access. On the brand outlets, its followers have been free to express their opinions, concerns, and questions. In 2016, its team issued a warning to the followers about the usage of appropriate language, commenting on followers' posts (Archive A. , 2016). Often, the team members have responded to the supporters on its Twitter page. For instance, reporting about the first success in the Aleppo offensive, launched in October 2016, the Sham Center explained the objective of this operation to one of its Twitter readers in the comments. Sham Center underlined that the Syrians fought against foreign invaders, and the crucial goal of the Aleppo offensive was "…to eradicate foreign occupants from Aleppo entirely…" (Archive A. , 2016). In March 21, 2017, one of the brand's Twitter followers, who asked to explain the gist of the Syrian conflict, received the following answer: "Russia and Shiites took over Syria and have killed civilians. Muslims have fought against them…" (Archive A. , 2017). Also, the followers send emails to the Sham Center team and sometimes, they get responses. Indeed, the Sham Center Telegram outlet notified its supporters that its team replied to all emails received from concerned individuals (Archive A. , 2016). Shortly after the brand's appearance, many pro-Al-Qaeda outlets retweeted its posts on Twitter and Telegram. As a result, the Sham Center team issued a post demanding authorship references from the administrators of the affiliated channels.

3.2.1.2.2 Content and posting pattern. The Sham Center network has not created propaganda products, which have been disseminated via its branches. In general, it has reposted information (whole or in part) from other sources with or without links to these external sources. The Sham Center's writers have simply added a unique annotation and

aired to the news thread. To invigorate the network, its team asked militants, who were in Syria, to transfer new photos, videos, etc. (Archive A. , 2016). Some photo reports have the brand logo along with a symbol of an original source. Indeed, the brand's Twitter followers observed a new photo of the airstrikes' aftermath, initially released by the White Helmet group in October 2016 (Archive A. , 2016). The photo contained the White Helmet's logo in the upper left corner and the Sham Center's logo in the upper right corner. Also, prior to posting across the network, the brand team has edited some videos by adding its round, blue/white logo at the beginning of a video and at its end. For radical affiliated outlets, this is a common practice used to advertise each other in order to stay interconnected and to gather a bigger crowd. The Sham Center has not placed invitational links for other partisan groups, whereas 11 of these groups on Telegram and Twitter out of 23 have continuously aired Sham Center's reference links and posts since the establishment of the brand in the spring of 2016 and up to March 23, 2017. It should be mentioned that the longer the brand stays on the Internet, the more channels promote it and repost its products.

News updates have appeared on the Sham Center network daily. During the period between June 27, 2016 – October 26, 2016, the posting pace on its Twitter account was 32 posts per day (Archive A. , 2016). The brand's Telegram outlet was updated with a slower pace – around 26 posts per day from June 12, 2016 to November 22, 2016 (Archive A. , 2016). Overall, the network activity cannot be characterized as prolific (in terms of the number of daily posts) and regular (in terms of the posting order), but sometimes, it has stopped

updating for several days. Indeed, the Sham Center outlet on Telegram was dormant for 7 days between September 21, 2017 and September 28, 2017 (Archive A. , 2017).

An analysis of 173 posts, aired between November 2016 – May 2017, revealed that the majority of the posts (60%) were devoted to the actions of the Russian, Syrian and Iranian Forces in Syria, while only 2% of the posts describe the devastating aftermath arising from actions conducted by the coalition (Table 4). The Sham Center's statements comprise 17%, which covered various topics from the incitement of imminent violence to recruitment. The network has consistently devoted several posts to the description of HTS actions (11%) (Table 4). The brand writers have paid less but constant attention to HTS's prominent rival, ISIS – 5%. During this period, the membership of the Sham Center page on Twitter jumped from 64 followers on November 16th, 2016 to 2,443 followers in May 2017. Although, the number of active members who left "likes", shared, and commented on Sham Center's posts was not very significant. Indeed, the average number of "likes" per post was around 13, while the average number of "shares" equaled 46. Worth noting is the fact that the brand followers were not actively engaged in commenting; there were two comments on average per post (Table 4).

Table 4

The Sham Center posts (2016-2017) on its Twitter outlet

Topics of the posts	Number of posts	Percentage

Russian actions in Syria	58	34%
Posts about killed Russian troops in Syria	12	7%
The Syrian government Forces' actions	16	9%
Posts about ISIS	9	5%
Posts about Shiites	18	10%
Posts about the Kurdish Forces	8	5%
The Sham Center's statements	29	17%
Posts about HTS's activities	19	11%
Posts about the U.S. airstrikes	4	2%
Total:	173	

From its first days, to increase brand recognition, the Sham Center team began to create relevant hashtags for its Twitter account. Predominantly, the hashtags were written in the Russian language, but there were a few English hashtags (Table 5). The most popular hashtags were geographical terms such as "#Сирия" (it appeared in 3,614 posts), "#Алеппо", or "#Хама" (Table 5). Interestingly, Sham Center has avoided or minimized (in some cases) circulating more accurate information - #Sham, #Malhama Tactical, or #Adjnad al-Kavkaz. This measure has helped the brand to survive and stay longer on social media platforms.

Table 5

Hangtags used by Sham Center (June 2016 – December 2016)

Labels	Number of posts, where a label is used
#Сирия (Syria)	3,614
#Syria	63
#Алеппо (Aleppo)	1,865
#Aleppo	77
#Хама (Hama)	443
#Идлиб (Idlib)	254
#Латакия (Latakia)	169
# Путин (Putin)	162
#Хомс (Homs)	106

#ВКС (The Russian Aerospace Forces)	85
#Асад (Assad)	72
#Дарайя (Daraa)	44
#Манбидж (Manbij)	31
#Гута (Ghouta)	29
#Ракка (Rakka)	11
#Россия	13
#Russia	10
#США (USA)	8

Based on the brand's ideology, the Sham Center team has developed a particular lexicon with a set of negative or positive words, whose application depended on the topic of a post. Usually, the posts contained the same sets of negative or positive words utilized for the same themes. These sets can be divided into 2 broad categories. The first category refers to the words (labels) describing a subject (the Russian military staff, HTS, the Kurdish fighters, etc.). The second category embraces words connected to a subject's actions (airstrikes of the Russian Air Forces, etc.). "Russian terrorists", "Russian pigs", "Assad's terrorists", "bangs", "Assadists", "Russian-Shiites terrorists", "cutthroats", "invaders", and "Assad's guerillas" – these labels have been frequently applied by Sham Center in the posts about the Russian, Syrian, and Iranian troops. The most common negative label for the Kurdish fighters was "Kurdish communists". These labels have come together with the

second category of words: "bloody message", "slaughter", "butchery", "Syrian genocide", and "murders". Some posts have used the label of "Rusnia" instead of "the Russian Federation". This label is the vulgar modification of the word of "Russia", which has the goal of underlining disrespect to the country. In contrast, for HTS and its affiliated militant groups, the network has circulated words with positive connotations such as "rebels", "mujahideen", and "warriors".

Asking its followers to send videos and photos from the Syrian frontline, the network has reposted received products with the brand team's emotional comments. Given the fact that the brand has not hesitated to use old visual products for propaganda purposes, one of its Twitter users underlined the photo manipulations in the comment section under a Sham Center post. Also, it is a common practice for the brand team to provide a unique description under every photo from the same photo report and post them separately. For instance, under the photo of a destroyed Aleppo, the brand wrote: "…Assad's Shiite militants along with Putin's Air Forces finally cleaned up Aleppo from its own residents. The mission is accomplished!" (Archive A. , 2016). Another post with a photo of children, sitting in a class room, contained the annotation that these children wanted to go to school, but "the cursed Russia" deprived them from this opportunity (Archive A. , 2016). In December 2016, its followers received a new edited photo of Vladimir Putin with the following description: "While Muslims in Russia attend a halal meat exhibition, Putin "minced" the Sham residents as meat" (Archive A. , 2016). Sham Center has intentionally used such dramatizing vocabulary to create emotional stories and even presented them as analytical and balanced entities. Despite this clearly disproportional approach, many

people (online users) did not experience compassion fatigue: the brand network has increased its number of followers. Its online crowd does not look for knowledge-based perspectives, rather it looks a partisan platform. The brand's emotional appeal is not tested against the objectivity of news.

3.2.2 Muhammad Jazira brand.

3.2.2.1 Brand as organization. The Muhammad Jazira brand emerged on social media in January-February 2017. Its network looks organized and was meticulously structured by its administrator or administrators: the network, the logo and its application, the brand name, and content. In fact, many new outlets have undergone plenty of difficulties, trying to take over the niche in cyberspace, attract supporters, and differentiate themselves from other brands. This brand "Muhamad Jazira" entered and occupied its niche after an extremely short time. It bombarded the audience by numerous invitation-links, thoughtful brand symbols, a unique name, and vigorous posting activity. The efficient approach to the brand content and well-coordinated presence on the popular social media platforms network and the Russian Al-Qaeda affiliated outlets, indicate that the brand founder has extensive knowledge in these subjects. Apparently, the creator of the Muhamad Jazira brand tried to form or run similar channels.

The brand has usually covered 3 social media platforms: Facebook, Telegram, and Twitter.

Regardless of censorship, the brand's main accounts keep the same name across social media – "Muhammad Jazira". The chain of the parallel or reserve outlets were very recognizable variations from the brand name: M&J, Jazira – 2, or Jazira Muhammad.

Keeping the same brand name, its Twitter accounts differed by attached numbers: "@MuhammadJazira1", "@MuhammadJazira4", or "@MuhammadJazira3". This helped to avoid confusion and inconsistency for the audience

Every main account on Telegram, Facebook or Twitter is backed up by a frozen or parallel (mirror) outlet, which remains inactive until the main accounts are closed. Moreover, the reserve-accounts are vigorously promoted via the main channels across social media platforms. Indeed, its Twitter brand page contains multiple referral-links to the brand outlets on Telegram and Facebook; the Facebook and Telegram channels guide the crowd to its Twitter page and to each other. This allows them to gather a crowd and should the outlets be terminated by the social media censors, the brand media team can switch to a reserve-outlet immediately without losing connections with the brand followers.
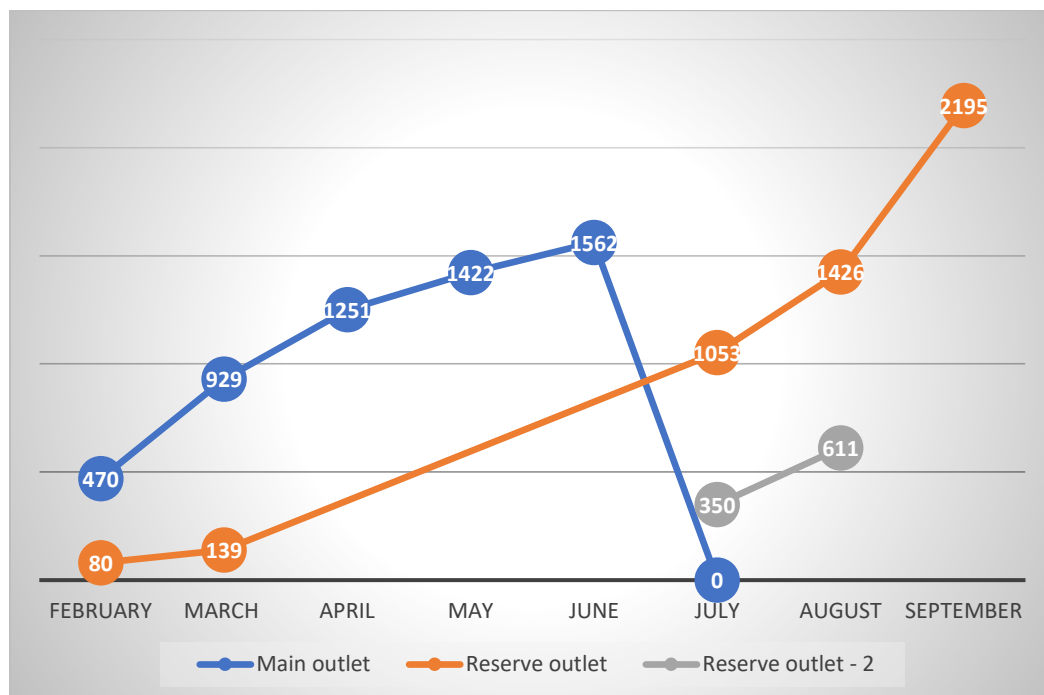
Figure 20. M.J membership on its Telegram main and reserve accounts (February – September 2017).

The Telegram accounts were established at the end of January to the beginning of February 2017. The main outlet stayed active and got undated daily, whereas another account stayed dormant but accumulated followers, who were warned about the high possibility the main outlet's potential closure. In 4 months on Telegram, the main M.J channel gathered 1562 followers (Figure 20). Then, it was censored by the Telegram administration around July 14th, 2017. Since that time, the M.J media team began to work on the reserved account. As a result, its membership rose quickly, jumping from 1053 followers in July 2017 to 2195 members in September 2017 (Figure 20). In less than 2 weeks, another reserve was opened under the same brand name. In accordance with the established pattern, the supporters began to follow this outlet, increasing its membership to more than 600 in August 2017.
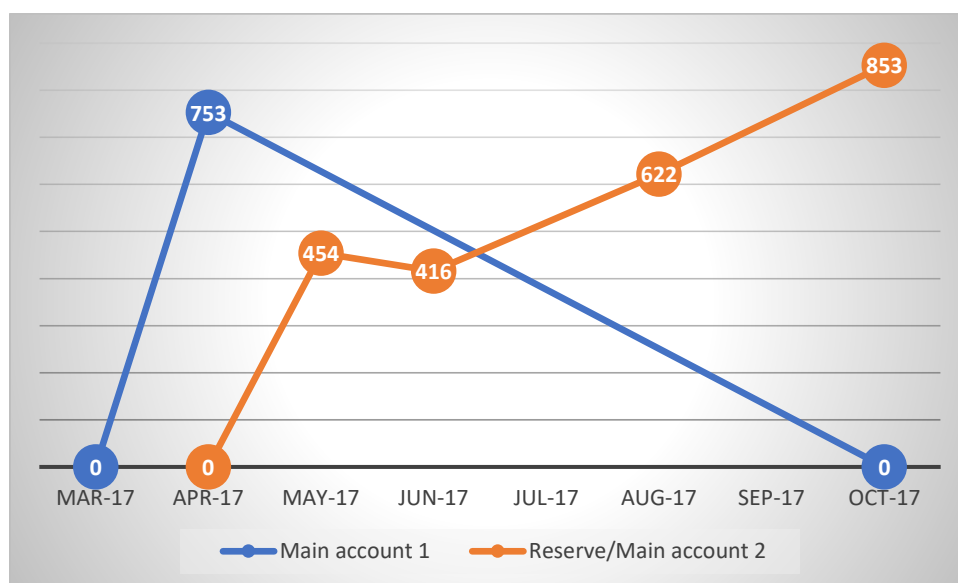
Figure 21. M.J membership on its main and reserve Twitter accounts (February – October 2017).

In March 2017, the M.J page began to function on Twitter, providing fresh news for the Russian speaking audience. On April 5th, 2017, its parallel reserve account was set up and accumulated more than 400 members by the next month (Figure 21). Both accounts existed simultaneously, until October 2017 when the main M.J channel was blocked by the Twitter administration. Instead of the censored page, the brand media team opened a new dormant account. These pages have successfully survived censorship companies and are still active on Twitter in 2018.

The Facebook platform provided the least welcoming environment for the brand. In February 2017, the brand pages (main and reserve) were created on Facebook. However, on April 21st, its media team complained about the frequent closure of brand accounts, both active and dormant (Archive A. , 2017). On this social media platform, the M.J brand was forced to establish several reserve pages. During the research time frame, there were four brand pages, each blocked one at a time. Despite serious Facebook censorship, one of these pages reached the limit of 4,999 followers by August 28th, 2017. This outlet had been circulating from March – April 2017 and was censored at the beginning of September 2017. The Muhammad Jazira team continued to work on its reserve Facebook account. In October 2017, the brand's outlet was closed down again. Its team undertook one more unfortunate attempt to reopen M.J accounts until the brand announced its temporary withdrawal from Facebook due to harsh censorship. The return of the brand in 4 months to this social media platform was predictable. While its Telegram account had around 1500

followers after 4 months of establishment, the M.J page on Facebook attracted almost 5000. Its Twitter accounts could not gather a significant crowd either.

Therefore, the M.J brand expanded its presence over three social media platforms. The brand could attack a larger crowd on Facebook, despite the harsh censorship and the repeated closure of its accounts. Less membership was accumulated on Telegram and Twitter. However, the continuous presence on these social media platforms helped the M.J team to keep the brand around during their forced removal from Facebook.

    3.2.2.2 Brand as symbol. From its first days on the Internet, Muhammad Jazira could be distinguished by a memorable logo which has the same appeal through all social media platforms. Its initial logo can hardly be considered sophisticated (Figure 22), but it has since been redesigned and is now more complex. This logo appeared in the spring of 2017(Figure 23).

Figure 22. The MJ logo presented in February 2017.
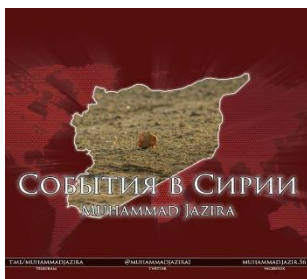
Figure 23. The modified MJ logo aired in the spring of 2017.

The new visual identity includes three major elements: the background (colors and "share"), the text, and the referral to the brand network. The color palette of the updated brand logo varies from light red to dark burgundy, creating the world map outline with Syria, depicted in khaki, standing out from the rest (Figure 23). In the previous version, the map of Syria was brown with two inserted photos which show the devastation from the ongoing war (Figure 22).

Despite changing the typeface and the font of the text, the brand keeps the words - "Events in Syria. Muhammad Jazira". With the red variations in its logo, the text usually comes in white. Still, the simplified version of the logo should be mentioned (Figure 24). For the reserve accounts, the media team often uses this version of the brand logo (Figure 24). On the upper level, two letters – "MJ", are inscribed upon a red background with visible contours of the world map. On the lower level, the phrase – "Events in Syria" and the brand name "Muhammad Jazira'' are written in red on a white background (Figure 24).

Figure 24. The logo of the "Muhhammad Jazira" brand.

The last element of the brand symbol is the reference to the MJ network, whose appearance depends on the social media requirements for avatars. The references contain a symbol or a name of a social media platform and a brand outlet's nickname, associated with it. The updated logo has three references to the brand outlets located on Facebook, Twitter, and Telegram (Figure 23), while the old version invited people to join only two channels on Facebook and Twitter (Figure 22). The references are located on the bottom of the logo and highlighted by a dark burgundy color. Therefore, despite the overall simplicity of the MJ visual identity, it is multifunctional and complex. The logo not only stresses its regional relations (Syria), but identifies the type of brand content (news). In addition, the brand reveals its reach via social media platforms that help its followers to find its outlets.

It is not known how many people are involved in the creation and promotion of this brand. However, the brand has tried to give off the impression that the MJ brand and its network were established and managed only by a dedicated person. Given brand consistency is crucial in many aspects, the dedication to the brand mission, and the reliance on particular informational sources, this research is inclined to share this impression. There is not much known about the MJ creator. Surely, he is a Muslim male, who was born in the Russian Federation. His obvious and constant interest to the domestic Russian politics supports this

conclusion as well as his average knowledge of the Russian written language. In a statement on October 10th, 2017, he underlined that he moved to Sham and now lives and conducts his activities from there (Archive A. , ALQ Muhammad Jazira, 2017). The date when he decided to leave Russia for Syria (if he ever committed hijra), is unknown. Also, the brand founder does not disclose his real name, preferring to use a nick name as many foreign recruits do in Syria. However, the analysis of the network and the posting order allows us to conclude that he must devote plenty of time for the management of the brand network on various social media platforms. He has not created his own photo or video materials from the war zone in Syria, providing reposts exclusively. Among propagandist-foreign fighters or their groups, it is a common practice to ask for financial support from time to time. Nonetheless, the Muhammad Jazira brand has not begged its followers for assistance. Heeding these observations, the brand founder, apparently, has not participated in battlefields in Syria and lives in a peaceful county (Turkey or even Russia).

As noted previously, the MJ founder demonstrates a skillful approach to social media. First, he knows the Russian pro-Al-Qaeda social media network and does not get involved with the Islamic State informational sources and groups. During the research timeframe, only one post was aired with the Islamic State symbols (the Amaq news agency). Shortly after its emergence, the brand obtained recognition within the existing ALQ network in the Russia cyberspace. They have inserted MJ referral-links, encouraging their followers to join the new brand and legitimizing it in the eyes of the audience. Secondly, the brand logo and name "Muhammad Jazira" was promoted immediately when the brand accounts were established. In addition, the MJ imagery has not experienced significant changes ever since.

Third, the chain of Muhammad Jazira channels across social media exhibits multifaced consistency: imagery (symbol, design), content, and management. The MJ brand is built through multiple outlets that were concurrently established on several social media platforms. They have the same design, symbols, and color combinations. Through the MT outlets, there is content and posting consistency: the same posts are spread across the network on a regular basis. This means that the MJ brand is not his first project, or he was a part of other propagandist networks (most likely associated with Al-Qaeda) on the Internet.

Muhammad Jazira positions himself as an independent media anchor, whose main objective is to disseminate truth about the real situation in Syria and the ongoing war (Archive A. , ALQ Muhammad Jazira, 2017). There are two brand mission statements posted in July and October 2017. As it follows from the statementposted on July 21st, 2017, some users criticize the content of the M.J account or the accounts in private correspondence. Responding to the criticism, the M.J founder addressed the statement, highlighting the brand's independence and rejecting its affiliation with any militant groups in Syria (Archive A. , 2017). He pointed out: "…I tried to deliver news as much as I can. The publications of battlefield news or opinions on my channel does not mean I entirely support them or the veracity of these new… Please be patient to the fact that my posts do not reflect your opinion…" (Archive A. , 2017).

While the emotional appeal of the first statement reveals the upset brand media founder who had a disagreement with the Internet audience, the second statement (October 1st, 2017) was written in a more professional and straightforward manner. This indicates brand

maturity and the accumulation of social management skills by its team. In a statement on October 10, 2017, the brand's mission is to confront the propagandist lie of the Western media about the threat of terrorism (Archive A. , ALQ Muhammad Jazira, 2017). The author underlines that Muslims must pick up news not from the media sources of the enemy-states, which try to defeat Islam, but from individuals who witness massacres, committed by infidels against Muslims (Archive A. , ALQ Muhammad Jazira, 2017). According to this line of logic, the brand tries to find its niche in in a vitriolic media environment that is dominated by Western propaganda, which deceives the audience (Archive A. , ALQ Muhammad Jazira, 2017). In light of these circumstances, the MJ brand is the only "word of truth" (Archive A. , ALQ Muhammad Jazira, 2017).

The Muhammad Jazira brand strategy is daily news reposting from various sources. This information and the sources are selected in accordance to a set of principles dictated by the mission of the brand. It does not produce the brand's unique content – photos or videos, which usually carry relevant symbolic indications of their author, although the media team undertook several attempts and even released some branded products. In the fall of 2017, the MT symbols appeared only on a photo report, which presented Syrian children's activities and a few photo-eulogies for a North Caucasian recruit from Imarat Kavkaz, killed by Assad's soldiers (Archive A. , 2017). In a month, the video-eulogy for a Chechen recruit, Salahuddin Shishani, was released with the brand logo (Archive A. , 2017). These events can be considered isolated because they do not provoke any changes in the main brand strategy.

3.2.2.3 The M.J brand's independence: a true or false narrative? Despite its self-proclaimed brand independence, Muhammad Jazira's true approach can be identified via issue filtering (a selective approach to news themes) and news framing (semantic presentation of issues). To measure the prejudice of the M.J. source, the research inspects its published content: 2468 posts were published during the period July 14th, 2017-September 30th, 2017 on the M.J Telegram channel. The study counts every entry, not post, on Telegram: if a post contained several pictures, it is considered as several entries. The M.J brand has utilized an inner logo, which has a decorative purpose, and initially the logo was applied randomly. Since August of 2017, the administrator began to use the logo for the separation of posts in thread, which caused the posting thread to look more organized. Given the absence of the content bias impact, this inner logo is separated from the entry statistics. In addition, multiple link-reposts from censored accounts and without a post headline or a description, maps without group's allocation, posts without a translation, isolated posts about militant groups or events (for instance, the election in Turkey), and news websites or blogs with questionable reputation are disregarded.

Collecting posts, the research goes in two major directions:

1. Issue filtering: topics and informational sources

2. Post framing: word choice (personal comments, statements, translation).

Then, the content analysis of the M.J posts allows them to be categorized by theme according to posting frequency: (1) HTS military activities; (2) the Syrian Army and Bashar Assad's government; (3) the Russian military assistance in Syria; (4) inspirational posts; (5) the coalition's presence; (6) Kurdish groups; (7) the socio-political situation

(Russia or other states); (8) the White Helmets group; and (9) other. Examining these categories, the research distinguishes several sub-categories within. The topics and their sub-categories are presented in table 6:

Table 6

The thematic categories of the M.J posts, aired between July 14th - September 30th, 2017

N	Category		Sub-category
1	HTS's and affiliated groups' military activities	300	
2	The Syrian Army, the Russian and Iranian military units	584	
3	Inspirational posts	67	
4	The coalition's presence	68	• General news • Killed Western soldiers • Airstrikes
5	Kurdish groups	63	• Kurdish activities (on battlefields and controlled areas)

			• Attacks against Kurdish groups • Killed or captured Kurds
6	The socio-political situation	73	• Russia • Other states
7	The White Helmets group	42	
8	Promotions	98	
19	ISIS	122	
20	Hezbollah	33	
21	Other	175	Uncategorized posts (Personal statements, non-news)

At the next stage, the study separately scrutinizes every block (topics, informational sources, and word choice) and category. This approach seeks to identify and explain the brand's mission and ideology via its news reporting.

3.2.2.3.1 News filtering and framing. The Muhammad Jazira outlet devoted a significant amount of time to reporting and translating news about Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and affiliated groups. During July and August of 2017, the channel was full of posts about the disputes and intermittent fights between HTS and Ahrar al-Sham. They revealed the M.J media team's bitterness over the unnecessary ongoing conflict. Trying to influence

the situation, Muhamad Jazira provided inspirational posts, where various religious leaders supported the unity between the groups in Syria. On July 20th, 2017, the M.J outlet presented a statement from a Syrian cleric, Abdul Razzaq al-Mahdi: "Fear Allah and stop the fight! My eyes cry and my head is in pain, because the fight is going on between brothers by religion and jihad…" (Archive A. , 2017). Muhammad Jazira shared this idea, perceiving these groups as allies that pursued the same objective – to eradicate Bashar Assad's political regime. With open sympathy for HTS, the M.J outlet continued to exude a positive attitude toward Ahrar al-Sham. In their posts, despite this schism, the M.J brand did not change its practice to name Ahrar al-Sham militants in the same respectful way as the HTS militants: mujahideen. Moreover, the posts, devoted to Ahrar al-Sham, did not contain negative tagging or comments; the coverage for this group on the M.J Telegram outlet was not reduced.

3.2.2.3.1.1 The Syrian Military Forces and their allies. For this channel, the practice of labeling or tagging is common and constant towards the Syrian government Army, the Kurdish militant organizations, the U.S. led-coalition forces, and the Russian and Iranian military missions in Syria. This undermines M.J's declaration about its independence. The brand considered the Syrian Army and the government of Bashar Assad as their main enemy and an ultimate obstacle to peace in Syria. It constantly referred to Assad's soldiers in a disparaging manner – "асадиты"[15], while the source called HTS's and affiliated groups' militants "муджахеды" (mujahideen) or "повстанцы" (rebels). Both

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[15] The word "асадиты", which is written in the Russian language, is an informal word with a negative connotation "Assad's soldiers" and the vernacular word is widely used by the Russian speaking opponents of the Syrian government).

words have an apperant positive connotation, especially, if they are counterbalanced by the negative labels of the Syrian Military Forces in the same post. Simultaneously, along with the word "асадиты", the Muhhamad Jazira channel utilized the words – "evil", "guerillas" or "bloody Assad's regime", presenting fresh news from Syrian battlefields to its followers. To describe Assad's allies – the Russian and Iranian military staff, the M.J brand used similar derogatory words (infidels, invaders) (Table 7).

Table 7

The M.J labeling for the Syrian, Russian, and Iranian military forces in their posts (07/14/2017-09/30/2017)

Description	Posts containing negative labels		Total
	M.J's posts	Reposts from other sources	
Bashar al-Assad's Army/soldiers and the government	60	18	78
The Russian military staff in Syria	21	0	21
Total:			99

The M.J media team created its own headlines with incremented negative labels about Russian soldiers (21 posts, 0 reposts). That said, 18 posts out of 78 about the Syrian Forces and Bashar al-Assad's government were simply reposted from other informational outlets roaming on Telegram. The brand team did not alter the headlines of these reposts, which indicated its support for the reposts' statements. This terminology casts an adverse light on Bashar al-Assad's government and army, the Russian and Iranian soldiers, and downplays the violence conducted by militant groups.

The news about the actions of the Syrian government and its allies took over a significant part of the M.J news line. The analysis of the M.J post thread, devoted to the Syrian, Russian, and Iranian military forces, reveals seven main themes that the outlet focused on (Table 8). The actions of the Iranian troops attacked the brand's attention to a lesser extent in comparison to the Russian and especially, the Syrian army (35 news posts). Only 35 posts were displayed in the M.J news thread during the study's timeframe.

Table 8

The M.J thematical coverage of the Syrian Forces and their allies' activities (07/14/2017-09/30/2017)

Theme	Number of posts	Percentage
Civilian casualties and the aftermath of the Syrian Army's attacks and airstrikes	168	29%

Syrian military casualties	154	27%
Activities of the Syrian Forces without mentioning killed civilians	129	22%
Failed military operations of the Syrian Army without mentioning the killed Syrian soldiers	43	7%
Presence of the Iranian (Shiite Forces)	35	6%
The Russian military casualties in Syria	32	6%
Chemical attacks	16	3%
Total:	577	

A remarkable part of the brand coverage (56%) was dedicated to photo reports and news about the severe destruction of the Syrian cities and civilian casualties after the Syrian Army's attacks and airstrikes (29%) and the human losses in the Syrian Army (27%) (Table 8). On a daily basis, the outlet informed its followers about what district was under the attack of the Syrian government, how many, and what type of bombs had landed, or when new military equipment (planes, weapons) arrived at the Syrian military bases. In fact, this segment of news (22%) did not include the information about the killed civilians as the

result of Assad's soldiers' maneuvers. The Syrian Army lost many battles and the brand aired 43 posts (7%) describing the misfortune of the Syrian soldiers.

In 2015, the Russian government deployed its mission in Syria. Since that time, Russian society has begun to count its military casualties in this on-going war. Muhammad Jazira meticulously collected and published the information about killed Russian fighters (Table 6). On September 1st, 2017, the channel reported about a 21-year-old fighter from Dagestan who was killed trying to deactivate an explosive device. M.J posted an unclear picture with military doctors carrying either human remnants or a military uniform, covered by blood. This photo was allegedly taken in a Syrian hospital after the soldier's transportation there. At the end of the post, the M.J media team wrote: "…Burn in Hell, soldier!" (Archive A. , 2017). On September 24th, 2017, the Russian Defense Ministry announced the death of the Russian Lieutenant-General, Valery Asapov, near Deir ez-Zor, where the Islamic State's militants attacked the Russian Forces (Jykovsky, 2017). The outlet could not miss this news, declaring: "Thanks to Allah, one more invader was eliminated in Syria!" (Archive A. , 2017).

Chemical attacks became routine practice in Syria. Sometimes, the M.J channel reposted news or victims' photos accusing Bashar al-Assad's government of using chemical weapons. Nonetheless, during that time, the M.J media team did not provide its comments or statements about the chemical attacks. It simply reposted the information from other sources.

Therefore, the M.J coverage of this theme is intensive and continuous, but highly prejudiced. Humanitarian assistance from the Russian Federation, free medical treatment,

or Bashar al-Assad's protection for vulnerable religious minorities – all this news was ignored by this outlet. This one-sided coverage combined with persistent negative tagging for the Syrian Military Forces and its allies undermine the brand's self-proclaimed independence.

3.2.2.3.1.2 The U.S. led – coalition. In the brand mission statement of October 1st, 2017, the M.J media team stated its position on the U.S. and its coalition's offensive activity. The US-led coalition is depicted as a group of states which fought against Muslims, massacred their women and children, and destroyed their cities (Archive A. , 2017). This negative attitude shaped M. J's selection of news about the coalition for further reposting on its outlets. This news was rare (only 68 posts, during the research time frame), but consistent in the M.J news tread.

Table 9

Coalition activities in Syria and Iraq (the issue coverage on the M.J Telegram outlet (07/14/2017-09/30/2017))

Theme	Number of posts	Percentage
General news	3	4%
Killed Western soldiers	2	3%
Airstrikes from coalition forces	59	87%
Anti-Western propaganda	4	6%
Total:	68	

Sometimes, the brand followers received news about the coalition's operations in Syria along with a small dosage of anti-Western posts (6%) and reports about its fallen soldiers (3%) (Table 9). In accordance to the brand's ideological agenda, the biggest segment of the M.J coverage (87%) was about air raids, conducted by the U.S led-coalition forces and their effects (Table 9).

    3.2.2.3.1.3 The Kurdish groups. Another example of the channel's biased approach can be found in the posts on the Kurdish groups, active in the Syrian territories. All these news posts can be divided into 3 central segments (Table 10).

Table 10

Kurdish groups' activities (issue coverage on the M.J Telegram outlet (07/14/2017-09/30/2017))[16]

Theme	Number of posts	Percentage
Kurdish battlefield activities and killed or captured Kurdish fighters	29	46%
Attacks against Kurdish groups	16	25%

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[16] The post with maps (22 posts), which presented areas held by various groups including Kurds, were separated from the statistics.

The situation in the controlled territories	18	29%
Total:	63	

The first segment (46%) is comprised of news about conducted attacks, international military assistance, detained or killed Kurdish soldiers, and accepted defectors from other groups. Twenty-five percent of M.J coverage is the next segment, which embraces the reports about launched attacks by Kurdish rivalries (Table 10). Twenty-nine percent of the posts depict various aspects of life on the Kurdish held areas (Table 10).

The M.J coverage of the Kurdish activities was not only very limited in terms of news topics but was infrequent (Table). Simultaneously, the M.J outlet demonstrated a tendency to omit facts and reshape stories in accordance to its agenda. At the beginning of the fall of 2017, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) deployed an operation against ISIS in the northern valleys of Deir al-Zor province (Davison & Said, 2017). On September 9th, 2017, Ahmed Abu Kholeh, the commander of the Deir al-Zor military council, declared the Jazeera Storm campaign (Davison & Said, 2017). Nonetheless, the Muhammad Jazira outlet ignored this news entirely, airing a post with a short excerpt: "The commander of the so-called military council of Deir al-Zor, Ahmed Abu Kholeh said: If Assad's regime tries to attack us (Kurds) even with a single bullet, we will respond" (Archive A. , 2017). This isolated post, presented without the explanation of its context, can be read by the brand followers as a warning signal for upcoming clashes between the Kurdish groups and the government forces. In fact, as the Syrian Army succeeded at the same region, this SDF

initiative could lead to their confrontation. In the speech, Ahmed Abu Kholeh underlined that his forces should not anticipate fights with Bashar al-Assad's army, but he warned in the case of an attack, the SDF would respond (Davison & Said, 2017). Expectedly, the M.J channel did not mention the essential territorial gains of the Kurdish soldiers in the province. The M.J brand supported and escalated another side in the Syrian conflict - HTS.

Following this ideological line of logic, Muhammad Jazira sorted out news about the situation in the Kurdish held territories. All posts (18) depict Kurds in a negative light, presenting them as oppressors of the local population. On July 18th, 2017, the channel reported the successful escape of 20 new recruits, who were forcibly conscripted by the Kurdish Forces in Hassakeh, on the way to a military camp (Archive A. , 2017). Then, the outlet placed a post with a striking headline "Kurds execute people in Raqqa, Syria" with an outside link to a poor-quality video. In August 2017, its followers had a photo report about teachers' protests against a Kurdish curriculum, imposed by the Kurdish authorities of Hassakeh (Archive A. , 2017). In the provided news description, the M.J team suggested that the low number of protesters on the streets was a result of their fear over the Kurdish "Asyaish" (the Kurdish intelligence unit), which allegedly were full of highly-indoctrinated and intolerant Kurdish nationalists (Archive A. , 2017).

In addition, along with the Syrian military forces, Muhammad Jazira's posts stigmatized the Kurdish groups as "communists", "evil", or "jackals". Out of 63 posts, 17 messages (27%) contain these negative tags, referring to the Kurdish fighters. Worth noting is the fact that all these posts were not reposts from other sources but the brand's translation or its own writings.

3.2.2.3.1.4 The Islamic State. Worth noting is the fact that the M.J outlet did not stigmatize even the Islamic State militants, who committed multiple atrocities in the region. In the posts, it used the neutral term "довля" (Dawlah), which is the short Russian version of the Islamic State's name – "ad-Dawlah al-Islāmiyah". In fact, the M.J outlet frequently aired news about the Islamic State and its activities. As was mentioned previously, the headlines or comments did not include negative labels or other non-verbal indications (emoji, pictures, etc.) of M. J's real attitude towards this group. The news about the Islamic State was concise and limited thematically (Table 11).

Table 11

M.J posts about the Islamic State's actions

N	Topic	The number of posts	Percentage
1.	Successful ISIS attacks where the Syrian, Russian, and Iranian Forces lost their people or military equipment	58	48%
2.	Attacks against guerrilla groups (Hezbollah, etc.)	15	12%
3.	Maps	37	30%
4.	General news	12	10%
Total:		122	

A significant part of the M.J coverage for the Islamic State focused on how many of the allies and Assad's soldiers were captured or killed, and what military equipment was destroyed by ISIS militants (48%). The map posts embrace general information about the territorial distribution of the militant groups in Syria, including the Islamic State (30%). Given the fact that ISIS has a well-developed media apparatus and introduces new propaganda products on a regular basis, the M.J brand left many topics uncovered, such as news about executed militants and civilians, the massacres of Christians, human losses among ISIS militants due to coalition airstrikes, and the death of famous ISIS field commanders (some of them were from the former Soviet Union). Nevertheless, ISIS militants were never ever called "mujahideen" or "rebels" like the HTS and affiliated groups' militants were referred to on a regular basis.

   3.2.2.3.1.5 References and invitational links. Another fact sheds light on the so-called independence of this brand. As was mentioned previously, the M.J channel's thread is filled by various reposts, but not all of them fall under the news category. Some of them are invitational links for other Telegram accounts, provided by the courtesy of the M.J brand in order to support affiliated channels (Table E1). The majority of these promoted outlets are a part of the Russian Al-Qaeda network, established on Telegram. To be promoted via the M.J channel, an outlet must be managed by a Muslim or Muslims with sympathy towards pro-Al-Qaeda groups or at least, to be neutrally affiliated but useful for the Ummah. Muhammad Jazira placed the references for the outlet, which focused on personal cybersecurity, underlining that "our Muslim brother manages this account". Some channels were promoted repeatedly; others, just once. Mainly, the M.J outlet advertised

channels which were active on the Internet and stayed connected with other Al-Qaeda outlets. On September 24th, 2017, the channel invited other "…brothers-administrators, whose outlets have more than 500 followers. Let's make mutual reposts on our channels in order to attract more followers…" (Archive A. , 2017).

Muhammad Jazira had elaborated its own informational base. There were 39 Telegram accounts, which were used for daily news updates (Table E1). The overwhelming majority of these channels (82%) had an affiliation with Al-Qaeda and its Russian network (Table E2). Fifteen percent of the of promoted outlets did not have a clear group affiliation, whereas only 1 account stayed out, being a regular news channel, and did not support the jihadist radical agenda (Table E2). The M.J outlet actively conducted brand self-promotion (27%), which helped the Muhammad Jazira channel to gather a crowd of followers for a short period (Table E3). The research detected that the M.J outlets tried to promote six outlets with unclear affiliation. Pro-Al-Qaeda channels were provided 64 % of the M.J promotional coverage, whereas military groups' outlets or regular media were not promoted via this channel (Table E3).

Worth noting is the fact that during the spring of 2017, the M.J outlet along with two other Al-Qaeda channels repeatedly initiated fundraising companies for new recruits. The channels assisted individuals from the Russian Federation who wanted to join Al-Qaeda groups in Syria. On April 13th, 2017, they asked their followers to help four potential militants to buy airplane tickets (Archive A. , 2017). In the joined announcement, the channels referred online users, who were able to provide financial assistance, to a special

account on Telegram. This account released requisites and guidance of where and how contributions could be transferred.

3.2.2.3.1.6 Du'a. In July 2017, the channel adopted the practice of posting "du'a" (a personal supplication). Sometimes, the outlet reposted similar demands from other Russian Al-Qaeda accounts. During the research timeframe, there were 31 demands. The channel circulated posts, asking followers to pray for militants in Syria. Usually, these demands for "du'a" were located under news posts about activities of HTS and its umbrella groups, fighting against the Syrian Forces. On July 6th, 2017, the M.J brand reported that HTS's militants launched an attack against the Syrian army in the southern Quneitra province (Archive A. , 2017). At the end of the post, the outlet asked the supporters to help the militants by "du'a", adding the following phrase: "O, Allah! Help the mujahideen, make them strong and enduring. Give them a victory! (Archive A. , 2017)". Another post from September 19th, 2017, informed about an on-going HTS military operation in Hama, Syria, during which many of Assad's soldiers were killed. Yet, it warned that media outlets should not distribute this information to save militants' lives. Then, warning media outlets to be cautious with this operative information and not to jeopardize militants' lives, the M.J channel called for followers' supplications for them (Archive A. , 2017). There were not similar demands to pray on the behalf of other fighting groups or government forces.

Therefore, the M.J news thread revealed the brand's true side in this conflict, destroying the self-constructed and promoted myth about the brand's independence. Frequent reposts from regular media sources with a well-established reputation were an unsophisticated disguise used to pretend to be an ordinary and harmless outlet. The M.J outlet posted only

articles from regular media sources (international and domestic) which fitted its ideological agenda. This helps the brand not only attract new naive followers, but, to some extent, prolong the M.J channels' lifespan. Labeling the Kurdish, Syrian Forces, and Bashar al-Assad's international allies, the outlet expressed a supportive attitude toward HTS and its affiliated groups. If the set of extreme negative labels were applied from time to time, the "mujahedeen" vs. "evil Assad's forces" pattern became a cliché. In every brand's posts, presented news from battlefields, the M.J media team applied this pattern. Simultaneously, the limited thematical range of aired posts also undermined the M.J brand's image as an independent source.

3.2.3 Faruq Shami.

3.2.3.1 Brand as symbol. Faruq or Faruq Shami is the creator of another pro-ALQ brand outlet with himself as the face of the brand. Prior to his relocation to Syria, he attended a Russian college, apparently trying to get an associate degree. In Russia, he was often a visitor in a local mosque, where he communicated with its imam. This young male in his 20s introduced himself as Faruq and a Tajik national. However, he provided very limited information about himself (his real name, the college he attended, the town in Russia where he resided, his activities in Syria in 2015-2016) and his family (their primary residency (in Tajikistan or Russia), and the number of family members). In one of his videos, he only spoke of his mother, avoiding mentioning brothers, his father (if he is alive), and other relatives. Although, presenting a recently opened small restaurant, Faruq leaked that he had a family in Syria. In his previous videos, Faruq pointed out that the locals

willingly arranged marriages of their daughters with foreign recruits like him. In Syria, he got married too and the couple had a child by May of 2017 (Archive A. , 2017).

He moved to Syria in November of 2015 via Turkey. Faruq was not a naïve victim of online recruits, rather, he was an enthusiastic supporter of pro-Al-Qaeda groups. Having been a follower of radical outlets, Faruq eventually decided to contact militants who posted footage from Syria. As Faruq stated, these militants provided indispensable money for his "hijra". Shortly after his arrival to the Turkish city, Antalya, he reached the North Caucasian diaspora, whose members guided him on how to cross the Turkish border with Syria. On the Syrian territory, Faruq joined the HTS group, where he met recruits from Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, France, and Russia (the North Caucasus and Tatarstan).

Through personal branding, Faruq Shami built a wide social media network, and he positioned himself as an anchor and a social media activist without concealing his personality. The brand creator used his own face as an image for his online endeavors. Being a foreign recruit and a voice of the Al-Qaeda associated groups, Faruq Shami filled social media platforms with his selfies without fear of personal retribution. On these pictures, he posed with an uncovered face and usually, with a camera or video equipment around his neck. Faruq posted his selfies alone or together with smiling children. The photos' background usually did not show scenes of the war-torn Syria, rather, it showed average and even beautiful surroundings (as on his YouTube channel). Also, his brand network did not upload photos with militants or weapons as an account picture. In 2017, there were three versions of faceless avatars. Two of them contained the sign "Faruq

Shami" (in the Russian and the English languages) (Figure 25) and on one profile image, the word "Press" was written (Figure 26).

Figure 25. The logo of the Faruq Shami outlet (August 2017).

Figure 26. The logo of the Faruq Shami outlet (October 2017).

   3.2.3.2 Brand as organization. In December of 2016, Faruq Shami aired his first footage on social media. However, his brand became significant within the Russian Al-Qaeda network by the end of January 2017, when its outlets began to repost Faruq's posts frequently. During the research timeframe, he established 18 accounts on various social media sites, but the study tracked only 16 pages. These 16 accounts had the same brand name; even harsh censorship on social media platforms did not force the brand creator to

change the brand name. The channels' title always contained the words – "Faruq Shami" and could be combined with such words as "channel", "news", etc.

It became a tradition among Russian pro-Al-Qaeda outlets to depict themselves as an independent media source. In this regard, Faruq Shami was not an exception. In the brand mission statements, he emphasized the brand's independency. In the introductory note for Faruq's Telegram channel, he stressed the channel's independent status, posing himself as a media reporter from "…the blessed land of the Sham", who would share his thoughts with the brand's followers (Archive A. , 2017). On April 12th, 2017, Faruq Shami spread the following statement: "I am an independent reporter, who does not affiliate with and fight for any militant group. I want to spread truth about the Syrian war among the Russian speakers" (Archive A. , Faruq Shami, 2017). However, from February to March 2017, the brand's profile image on Telegram and Twitter showed Faruq holding the HTS banner with a supportive statement toward this militant group (Archive A. , 2017). This symbolic action was the presentation of his support of another rebranding of Jabhat Fateh al-Sham to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in January 2017.

Faruq had maintained the brand's presence across global and domestic social media. His network reach fluctuated from 4 to 7 social media platforms, depending on censorship policy. The brand's accounts frequently became detected as suspicious and closed down by a social media administration. Shortly after the emergence of his first footage from Syria (around 1 month), Faruq complained about the frequent censorship of his channels (Archive A. , 2017). On the Twitter page, he even considered the idea to open a personal blog to help the brand be more secure from censoring. This idea was not fulfilled, because

his network never made an announcement or references to Faruq's blog. Moreover, the brand's presence on four major platforms worked without censorship interruption between April and July of 2017 (Figure 27).
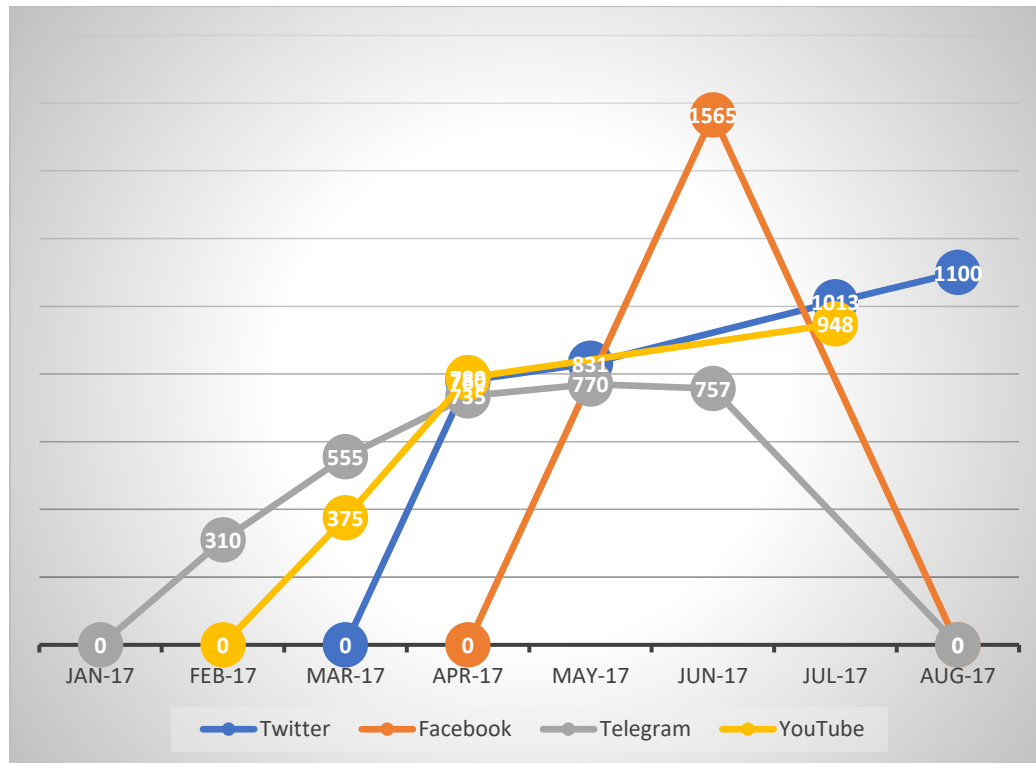
Figure 27. Faruq Shami's accounts (January 2017 – August 2017).

Despite repeated closures, Faruq's page on Facebook attracted the biggest crowd (Figure 27). The account, reopened at the beginning of April, had 1,565 "friends" (Figure 27). Its Telegram, Twitter, and YouTube channels functioned for more than six months. This extended presence helped the brand to build a base of sympathizers. Comparing the brand's membership on Twitter and Telegram, its Twitter account attracted more followers than the Telegram outlet during a shorter period. In terms of brand membership, Facebook was definitely the champion, and Twitter could take second place at the time. On Instagram,

Ok.ru, and Vkontakte, Faruq's brand encountered the most hostile environment, where the brand could not stay for a long time and raise the number of followers.

Table 12

Faruq Shami's censored accounts

N	Platform	Number of established/ reopened accounts	Total number of censored accounts
1	Telegram	3	2
2	OK.ru	2	2
3	Twitter	3	2
4	Facebook	4	3
5	Vkontakte	3	2
6	YouTube	1	0
7	Instagram	1	1

Censorship on social media is highly unpredictable. Indeed, 2 accounts were closed down shortly after their establishment, but the new Faruq Shami account, which became active in April, existed on Twitter for more than 6 months (Table 12). A similar situation occurred on other platforms. As other Russian radical outlets, the brand network faced a serious issue: how to maintain their presence and visibility on social media and circumvent censorship. The fact that the brand accounts were usually public complicated the search for a reasonable solution. In addition, its HTS affiliation became obvious for Islamic State

supporters, who organized complain-attacks against the brand. In light of this, the brand founder provided a differential approach for every platform. On Telegram and Twitter, the Faruq Shami brand practiced a system of parallel channels (main/active and reserve/dormant). On Ok.ru, the brand did not last for a long period of time. Despite this fact, Faruq built up the brand followers' base there too. To maintain a brand-customer connection, the outlet warned its followers about an upcoming unavoidable closure. So, the followers got the impression that the brand would be active regardless of the censorship and come back again on Ok.ru. To survive on the domestic social media, Vkontakte, the Faruq Shami brand was forced to freeze the account's daily activities. In August 2017, Faruq aired a note where he underlined that his VK account served only for personal contacts, but any correspondence via this account was not safe (Archive A. , 2017). On Facebook, the brand pages, which were formed as a personal account, sometimes restricted access to their content for general public.

3.2.3.3 Brand as products. Through the network, the Faruq Shami brand mainly presented its own photo and video products. Nonetheless, as a part of Russian Al-Qaeda space, it repeatedly reposted information and invitational links to other affiliated channels. Its YouTube channel aired 35 videos between December 2016 and May 2017 (Table 13). The average video duration is 5 minutes (Table 13).

Table 13

Type of Faruq Shami' video products

Type	Percentage	Number of videos

Aftermath of the Russian and Syrian airstrikes	42%	15
Aftermath of the U.S. led coalition	6%	2
Life of civilians in Syria	26%	9
Chemical attacks	6%	2
Interviews and videos of HTS militants	12%	4
Faruq Shami's statements	8%	3
Total		35

The majority of the brand videos, 48%, show sites of Russian or U.S. led coalition airstrike attacks, ruined buildings, victims of air rides, and locals, trying to find people who are alive under people under the debris. Twenty-six percent of the videos present civilians' hardships on the HTS controlled areas. Out of four videos (12%), Faruq recorded an interview with Halid Farah, a member of the "White Helmets" group on March 10th, 2017. On the brand channels, there are many pictures with Faruq Shami and HTS militants, but he released only 2 videos which were devoted to them. To communicate with his followers, Faruq posted 3 videos statements (8%) where he spoke of himself, equipment problems, and his activities in Syria.

On April 4th, 2017, the two versions of the same video depicting victims of a chemical attack in Syria were aired on the brand's video channel. These videos became the most

popular brand products. In total, they had more than 40,000 views. Another popular video was Faruq's footage about himself, posted in February 2017.

From his first day on social media, the Tajik recruit imitated the appeal of a news reporter from a legitimate TV channel. For his followers, he posed himself as a knowledgeable and self-assured reporter with a neat outfit. There were two mixed strategies of the brand's videos: footage from a particular site and an interview with witnesses (the locals, militants). Commonly, his video began with a short introduction, which contained his name, the date, and a location. At the end of the footage, Faruq repeated the introductory note. Since April 2017, the format of the videos slightly evolved, revealing video editing efforts in the brand's video production. In the videos, the running text of "Faruq Shami, an activist" appeared in the lower left corner.

The brand released photo products, which aired without a logo. However, in February and April of 2017, Faruq posted marked photos on his accounts. These logos were presented in a blue, black and white color palette., but their writing was different. The logo, which aired in February, carried the signature of "Faruk Shami"; in contrast, its April version had the following signature: "Faruq Shami (Archive A. , 2017)".

Figure 28. The photo logo of Faruq Shami (February 2nd, 2017)

On the contrary to real news anchors, he did not need to build his brand credibility because it came with the group's affiliation: the pro-Al-Qaeda crowd would follow his network, whereas the ISIS supporters would reject the brand without even checking its credibility.

3.2.4 Voice of Sham.

3.2.4.1 Brand as organization. At the end of May of 2017, Faruq Shami joined the new project of the HTS' media sources – "Voice of Sham". This network was designed as a Muslim project (Archive A. , 2017). Its team included the chief of the network – Abu Ramazan and five anchors – Saad Muhtor, Aub ibn Assabulla, Abu Munzir, Abu Yusuf, and Faruq Shami. Focusing predominantly on the Russian and Uzbek speakers, the network's team planned to extend its coverage, embracing other languages from the former Soviet Union territories and Turkey. Ramazan, Faruq Shami, and Abu Yusuf provided coverage for the Russian audience, while the Uzbek audience watched videos with Abu Munzir, Aub ibn Assabulla, and Saad Muhtor. These people were not professionals, rather they were skillful social media users. Apparently, the brand located and transmitted videos, audio and other products from Idlib, Syria, which remained under control of HTS's militants for a long time.

The driving force of this network has been Ruslan Yakybov (Abu Ramazan, his Islamic name), a Tatar national. For several years, he was in charge of a local religious organization "Mahallia 1350" in Volgograd, Russia. Its building was set ablaze by identified individuals after the terror attacks in October 2013 (Vernyi, 2013). Supposedly, in 2013, Yakybov together with his family immigrated to Turkey, after which he alone moved to Syria. In his interview for the Voice of Sham channel, which aired on June 6th, 2017, he shifted from

critiquing Western democracy of the Western democracy and Russian society to advertising the harmonious life in Sham and inviting new recruits. He described not only his experience in the Russian Federation and Turkey but explained the purpose behind the creation of the Voice of Sham network. First of all, he argued that Russian society was highly biased toward Muslims and, in general, Islam, stressing that Russian citizens perceived Muslims as extremely dangerous people with Kalashnikov rifles (Archive A. , 2017). According to Yakybov, he made multiple but futile attempts to contact Russian media with a proposal to create a TV program to discuss real Islam, which would help to destroy negative stereotypes (Archive A. , 2017). The Russian authorities denied this idea because of the fear that Islam could be popular among Russians (Archive A. , 2017). Further, Yakybov underlined his unfortunate experience in Turkey. His idea about an establishment of a religious media platform was not fulfilled due to low support from the local immigrants' diaspora. However, in the territory of Sham, which Yakybov depicted as a modern center of the world, he was able to build his own team with like-minded individuals.

3.2.4.1.1 Brand mission. According to the chief of the network, its central purpose was to deliver reliable and objective news from Sham to the Muslim communities. Along with the brands "Muhammad Jazira" and "Faruq Shami, the brand was promoted as a vanguard of informational jihad, whose target was to undermine Western media propaganda about the ongoing conflict in Syria. In light of this, the brand's main strategy was to present various but not war related aspects of life there. However, Abu Ramazan promised to provide information about fighters or "defenders of the entire Muslim

Ummah" (Archive A. , 2017). In fact, the network turned into a recruiting engine, which tried to entice as many new fighters as possible. Even in introductory videos, Yakybov quickly shifted to shaming Muslims who stayed in their home states and posed himself and other recruits who moved to Syria as the only true believers (Archive A. , 2017). On June 17th, 2017, Abu Yusuf starred in a video guide, where he meticulously described his hijra to Syria for new recruits (Archive A. , 2017). The border control in Turkey could became a serious impediment, so personal luggage must be assembled and sorted out in order to conceal the true purpose of the trip (Archive A. , 2017). According to the anchor, the Russian Muslim diaspora in Turkey had connections with recruits from the Russian Federation, who moved to the conflict zone (Archive A. , 2017). Also, on the Syrian border in Turkey, there were people who assisted newcomers in resolving issues with luggage, border crossing and other issues (Archive A. , 2017).

The Voice of Sham network claimed its independent status, following a well-trodden technique, deployed by the Muhammad Jazira, Faruq Shami, and Malhama Tactical outlets. As Yakybov stated, concerned people provided substantial financial support via charitable contributions for the brand (Archive A. , 2017). Based on this argument, the network promoted itself as independent and rejected affiliation with any military group. Indeed, its introductory post for online users stressed that "It is the first independent Islamic radio station", which worked on "...the blessed land of Sham" (Archive A. , 2017).

As was stated previously, the Voice of Sham media team did not include media professionals. In general, the brand underwent many issues such as a lack of media experience, human resources, and equipment (cars, computers). In June 2017, the network

chief invited people with IT skills, translators, or media enthusiasts, who resided outside the war-torn region, to join the brand in order to bring the network to a more professional level (Archive A. , 2017). Indeed, Faruq Shami accomplished multiple tasks and learned on the job, recording, redacting, and transmitting brand materials by himself. These issues had a negative impact on the brand. First of all, in the brand's studio, there were piles of unedited videos (Archive A. , 2017). Second, the brand network could not provide continuous coverage and coverage uniformity. With the goal to establish an internet TV, the brand team constantly aired short video reports on its social media outlets. The brand's radio station was only available in the FM format in the Syrian territories. Trying to reach a broader audience, the team spread the studio's audio records via the brand's website and social media platforms (SoundCloud) (Archive A. , 2017). Airing during daytime, the network remained mute overnight.

3.2.4.2 Brand network. Initially, on May 26th, 2017, the brand outlets became active simultaneously on several international platforms: Twitter, Telegram, Facebook, and YouTube (Archive A. , 2017). In 3 days, the media team announced the creation of the brand's application on Google Play[17] and its website - voiceofsham.co[18]. Then, in June 2017, its accounts emerged on domestic social media such as Vkontakte and Ok.ru (Archive A. , 2017). During the period between June to September 2017, the Voice of Sham established two accounts on Soundcloud, where it uploaded random brand audio tracks. One of these accounts was blocked, but the second channel, established in August,

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[17] The Voice of Sham application worked up until August 2017, when it was apparently removed from Google Play. Any reference on this application did not appear ever since.
[18] This website (voiceofsham.co) had a short lifespan because its last promotion on the network was posted in June 2017.

has remained inactive since the last track was aired in September 2017. The interconnectedness between all brand branches was maintained via their constant reciprocal promotions. Even its YouTube account persistently posted links to other brand channels, circulated at that time on the Internet, instead of in a video description section. The Voice of Sham brand entered cyberspace as a serious brand with a widely dispersed and well-established chain of accounts.

Apparently, its media team tried to update their outlets constantly, but these attempts were unfortunate. As a result, heeding the posting order, the unintended inner hierarchy in this dispersed chain of accounts can be determined. On Telegram, the content of its channel has been refreshed on a regular basis, which remained in contrast to its Facebook page. It was updated at a slower pace. On Twitter, the Voice of Sham outlet had been filled irregularly, airing without any activity for days. In light of this, the dynamics of the Telegram account makes it one of the main informational entities of the brand. Other channels, including outlets on domestic websites, served as secondary nodes in the network. They played a functional role in providing either storage space (its YouTube channel) or invitational links to the Voice of Sham accounts. So, to obtain daily news updates, the most active supporters gathered on its central account on Telegram.

During the first two months, its media team broadcasted propaganda products very often (Table 12). The followers had an opportunity to observe new products in different formats (audio, video, and photo), presented in the Russian and the Uzbek languages. As a result, the network's membership increased steadily (Figure 29). The slower dynamics in the

growth of members was on its Twitter account, which attracted 414 people in August 2017 (Figure 29).
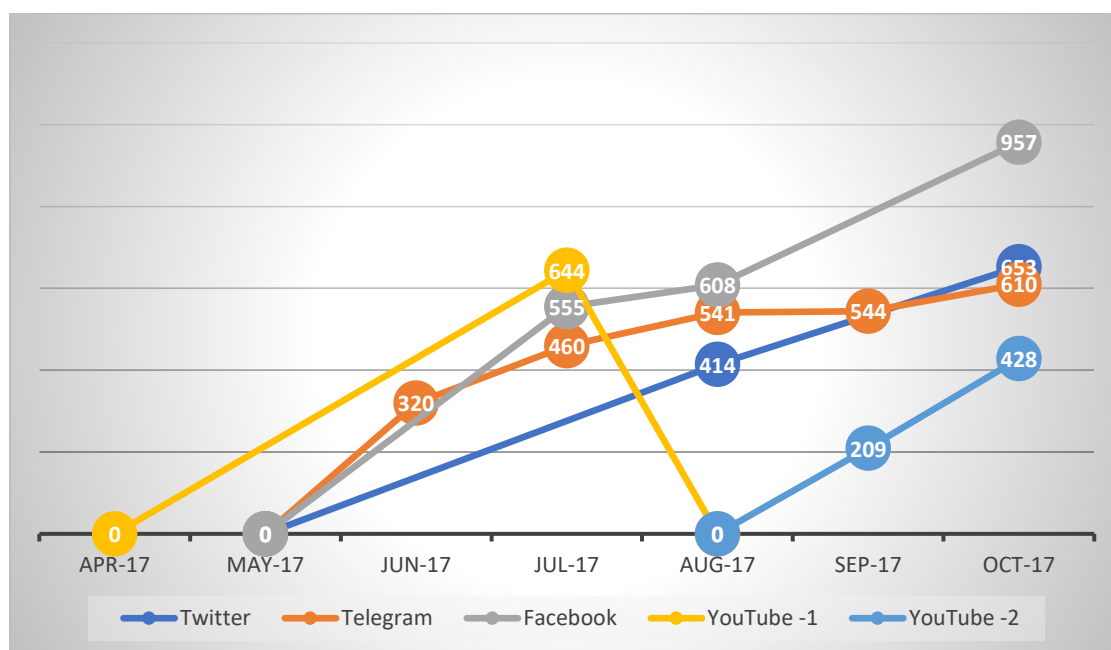
Figure 29. The Voice of Sham network (April – October 2017).

In terms of membership and the outlets' lifespan, the Voice of Sham page on Facebook showed the most significant results (957 followers in October 2017) in comparison to the accounts on Twitter, and Telegram. It is important to underline that after October 2017, the brand's media team had repeatedly reopened its pages (under the same name) on Facebook because of censorship. After the termination of its YouTube account in August 2017, a new channel began to circulate on this platform under the same name and content at the end of August. This new channel gathered 209 followers the next month and its membership continued to increase (Figure 29). Later, according to the Voice of Sham team, the access to this channel was restricted allegedly due to an official complaint from the Russian

Federation. Despite this measure, nowadays, this account is roaming on YouTube without supervision, but its membership is up to more than 1,000 people. In addition, the Voice of Sham outlets on Twitter and Telegram have been functioning without interference. By now, the latter has actively been working, whereas the former has remained inactive since April 2018.

Shortly after such a promising beginning, the network remained sluggish for an extended period of time. While in August 2017, its media team was off the air for 12 days, the situation in September became even worse. It almost did not work (Table 14).

Table 14

The Voice of Sham network's activities (June – October 2017)

Date	Number of days off the air
June	7
July	4
August	12
September	26

In October 2017, the Voice of Sham chain of outlets returned to its previous work order, but its return came together with significant modifications. Its media team did not produce its own propaganda products, rather, it reposted worthy news from other media sources. In contrast to its previous activity, the network started to present products of Ibaa news

agency[19], and reposts from the Russian Al-Qaeda network circulating on social media websites. In October, the only anchor out of the entire brand team, Faruq Shami, recorded new videos for the Voice of Sham brand. Perhaps other crew members were busy somewhere, and he was the only network manager available for a while. Also, the brand removed the word "radio station", instead its team began to use the word "media agency". In the middle of November, the Voice of Sham brand restored its own propaganda production and later, launched a charity project.

The network did not undertake security measures (parallel accounts, special invitation links, etc.) in order to stay on social media in case of censorship. For instance, for the Malhama Tactical and Muhammad Jazira brands the establishment of parallel accounts became routine, whereas the Voice of Sham did not practice this measure. Everybody could find and then, join its channels by running a reach option on social media platforms. Given the visual consistency of the brand, even not very savvy Internet users could identify the brand outlets across various platforms without serious effort. In fact, the Voice of Sham brand did not need to implement these security measures. Its outlets went undetected by social media censorship for several months[20]. In contrast, Faruq Shami complained about frequent closures of his channels shortly after the brand's Internet appearance.

3.2.4.3 Brand as symbol. On the highly competitive online space, the "Voice of Sham" brand introduced itself by a dome shaped emblem, created in a green-white color

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[19] The Ibaa news agency is the Al-Qaeda informational brand in Syria.

[20] There is only one exception - the Voice of Sham outlet on YouTube, which was closed in August 2017. A new outlet was set up at the end of August 2017.

combination (Figure 30). On the bottom of the logo, the name of the network was written in the Russian language.

Figure 30. The brand's logo (2017).

Across the brand network, every outlet was designed in a consistent manner. The brand channels not only had the same name of "Voice of Sham" but utilized its green-white logo as a profile image. Like other branches of the Russian Al-Qaeda network (Malhama Tactical, Muhammad Jazira), the Voice of Sham outlets were public, and its post threads were visible even for non-members.

    3.2.4.4 Brand as product. The Voice of Sham team has produced videos, audio, and photo format propaganda, which was dispersed via the brand network. It has aired several types of products: news reports (audio and video), thematical reports (video), and religious lectures. Initially, it created the news reports in audio tracks or converted them into videos without visuals (a dark blue image with an Arabic date). This conversion allowed the media team to upload the news reports to its YouTube channel. The religious lectures, mainly touched by Abu Ramazan, underwent the same audio-video conversion procedure. In these news reports, anchors informed their audience about the domestic (Syrian) and international situation. The worthy news was sorted out in a highly selective manner in terms of subject and geography. First of all, the network delivered news exclusively about the Muslim populations. Second, it has covered Muslim populated

regions (Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Palestine, etc.) and Western countries, including Russia and Ukraine if news were related to the Muslim Ummah.

The style of how media products was presented was derivative and emotional. The derivative aspect refers to the attempt of the network to imitate common media (TV channels, radio stations). There were two approaches to this aspect: technical (products' design) and behavioral (the anchors' appearance). While the network successfully copied the technical design (visual and audio/sound attributes) of well-known informational sources, the anchors emulated the way of delivering news. For instance, the thematical videos, which had good quality, began with the presentation of the brand symbols. Then, one of the anchors delivered a short preliminary note with his name, date, and location, and simultaneously, on the screen, there was a line with his name. Also, the anchors, who were well dressed and trimmed, always appeared with uncovered faces. Sometimes, Faruq Shami wore a bullet proof vest as war journalists usually carried. In videos, recorded inside the studio, the team members sat at a wide table with the Voice of Sham emblems in the background. Recording radio programs, the brand media team imitated the elements of regular radio including conversational style news.

For their inexperienced audience, this replication made the Voice of Sham network look like many regular stations, which can be listened to daily. Nevertheless, the emotional aspect exposes the specificity of the network. Indeed, reporting news about Bashar Assad's military Forces, the anchors have used the following phrases: "maniac Assad", "Assadists came for their coffins…", and "Assad's terrorists." As the Muhammad Jazira outlets referred to the Kurdish Forces, this network called them "Kurdish Communists",

"guerillas", or "Kurdish evil." "Kuffars" or "Chekists" – these tags were used describing the activities of the Russian military units in Syria. The label of "the enemy of Islam" revealed a negative attitude toward the U.S. led - coalition Forces. Presenting news from Palestine, the brand team members demonstrated disdain for Israel, calling the state – "so-called Israel." The Islamic State militants received a number of pejorative descriptions such as "apostates", "kharijites", or "betrayers of Islam." However, the anchors called HTS militants – "rebels" or 'mujahideen", repeatedly sending them best wishes ("please, Allah, make them stronger!"). Therefore, the Voice of Sham network's replication was driven not by desire to conceal the brand's affiliation, but the desire to look more professional. The anchors have not failed to be unbiased, they merely have no intentions to be neutral. The wide range of the labels determined which side in the Syrian war the brand adhered to.

To conclude, the Voice of Sham network is a pro-Al-Qaeda voice organized by a team of foreign recruits from the former Soviet Union region. It actively uploaded its own unique products for the Russian and the Uzbek speaking audience via the broad chain of accounts on domestic and international social media platforms. The variety of the media products, the team of anchors, who did not hide their identity, the well-developed symbolic culture, and the design consistency across the accounts – all these features make the brand viable.

Conclusion

The pro-Al-Qaeda network contained news and military group brands. During the research timeframe, the most active and prominent entities were (1) Ajnad al-Kavkaz, Malhama Tactical, Nogay Shamda and (2) Muhhamad Jazira, Sham Center, Faruq Shami, and Voice of Sham. The explosion of the Syrian war resulted in the appearance of new radical sources;

a lack of effective online censorship contributed to their development, having ramifications across multiple social media platforms.

The pro-Al-Qaeda outlets depicted themselves as a rebellious, independent source and the last resort for truth. They complained the hostile informational environment, dominated by powerful Western anti-Muslim media that they fought against. Their accounts' content exposed their pro-Al-Qaeda affiliation and sympathy. The brands called HTS and its affiliated groups' militants "defenders" and aired posts glorifying their attacks and suicide missions against the Syrian Forces and their allies.

Some brands avoided articulating their attitude toward the Islamic State, while several entities expressed their opinions. Repudiating an affiliation with ISIS, their statements appeared once on outlets and were reposted very rarely; also, these statements were concise and without details. Apparently, these outlets did not dismiss the possibility of cooperation and kept the door open for IS recruits.

The majority of brands were engaged in the production of propaganda products (video, photo, etc), especially military group entities. The latter was the main producer of unique propaganda products, airing photos and videos of their militants. At the same time, the number of news brands (Faruq Shami) engaged in production was lower; many of them (Muhammad Jazira) simply reposted information from other sources with or without links to these external sources. Host teams have simply added a unique annotation and aired to the news thread. Created propaganda products which targeted the Russian speaking audience were not a part of the mainstream propaganda. Their presented domestic sub-

brands as primary, while the global brand and its affiliated products were crucial but secondary.

The network coverage was significant and included at least 3 branches on various social media platforms. The Al-Qaeda brands expanded on new platforms as they appeared and gained popularity. Along with a net of social media accounts, many brands maintained a website which served as a foundation for a brand network. There were brands which emerged and remained a social media entity (Malhama Tactical). Within a social media platform, brands managed one main account (per social media platform) and several dormant outlets. During the research timeframe, pro-Al-Qaeda channels found a benign environment on Twitter and Telegram (Ajnad al-Kavkaz, Faruq Shami, Nogay Shamda). In contrast, they could not maintain their continuous presence on VK and Facebook.

An attribute of the news brands was their sophisticated symbolic culture. Teams invented singular and recognizable visuals (logo, channel layout, background, etc.), and applied them in a persistent and unified manner across social media platforms. The military group brands had their brand symbols, but sometimes, the design of their network has not been homogeneous. Within a brand network, branches, which functioned concurrently but on different social media platforms, have different layouts and even different names (Ajnad al-Kavkaz).

Chapter Four: ISIS Domestic Sub-brands

Nowadays, ISIS has infiltrated the Russian cyber space, trying to obtain fresh blood, recognition, and popularity within the Muslim population of the Russian Federation. Given the ideological power of this organization, the difficult Caucasus history and dormant separatism, ISIS's propaganda campaign has been very effective. Looking for support, recognition, and new members, ISIS has welcomed Muslims from around the world, including the Russian Federation. The diverse landscaping of this country embraces not only Christians, but Buddhists and Muslims. The latter group is the second biggest religious group in Russia, and in light of the previous unresolved conflict in North Caucasus, ISIS can find people who share and are ready to promote its agenda. Several militant groups from Ingushetia, Chechnya, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Dagestan announced obedience to ISIS and its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

The Islamic State is a Jihadist Salafist organization, which is ideologically connected to 14th century Islamic theologian, Ibn Taymiyyah. Its main goal is to create a transnational state-caliphate with Sharia law as a legal foundation. Following this expansionist idea, in 2014, Al-Baghdadi stressed that the organization would try to add Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen to the ISIS realm. By April 2015, ISIS took over some territories in Iraq and Syria and has continued to move deeper into the region. This territorial growth became possible due to an increase of manpower, which was obvious in 2014. According to the CIA report, there were 20,000 to 31,500 ISIS militants.

After their significant advancement over Iraq and declaring a caliphate in the summer of 2014, the ISIS propaganda apparatus has petrified the world community. It has a highly

centralized structure with several regional segments, foundations, and national outlets, which produced an immense and fluid informational stream via cyberspace (Winter C. , 2016). Initially, ISIS's products demonstrated a lack of professionalism in regard to its media teams. Nonetheless, as ISIS tried to underline its singularity, its media apparatus developed particular standards and uniformity that resulted in the increase of the overall quality of their products. Maintaining a multi-language strategy, ISIS's media dedicated a branch for the Russian speaking population. A number of threatening videos were created. Since May of 2015, al-Hayat Media Center released several issues of the digital magazine, named Istok.

The present chapter scrutinizes the equity of the global jihadist brand of ISIS via Russian sub-brand entities. The analysis includes two subsequent phases. In the first phase, the research applies the following brand identity blocks from Aaker's model: brand as symbol, brand as product, and brand as organization.

 Every block has several facets, which have been utilized according to the relevancy of the data:

Brand as symbol	Brand as product	Brand as organization
Account's symbol, logo, avatar	Videos	Brand meaning (ideology)
Design of the account (visual characteristics, the account name)	Photos	Network organization (social media reach, account lifespan,

		membership, posting pattern)
Brand face	Posters	Story of brand
	Other propaganda products	

The second phase looks to broaden the analysis of network organization, applying descriptive properties: reciprocity, in-degree, out-degree, and density. Reciprocity is interpreted as symmetric or mutual ties between two accounts, when both accounts publish each other's posts and promote each other via their news threads. The in-degree of a node in the Islamic State network can be interpreted as an ISIS channel, which can be called "followings" where its unique content was reposted on other accounts. The out-degree of a node refers to an outlet, which is connected to other accounts and makes posts from other ISIS accounts to its news thread (followers). Network density refers to the proportion of possible connections which are established among accounts within a network. The study refers to these characteristics in accordance to data relevancy. The presented properties are applied to sections of data, which have been sorted out in accordance to the chronological stages of the ISIS network's advancement: 1. 2013 – 2015, 2. 2016 - November 2017. To examine the network dynamics, the research includes four data tests with 5-7 month intervals (April 2016, August 2016, March 2017, October 2017). All calculations concerning the network analysis were carried out applying Gephi 0.9.1.

4.1   First Stage 2013-2015

An analysis of terrorist online semi-public and individual pages reveals that long before the announcement about the establishment of the Islamic State in 2014, its Russian speaking supporters and recruits had begun the creation of a Russian ISIS media segment. Radicals have established community or individual pages mainly on domestic social networks such as Vkontakte.com and Odnoklassniki.ru (Ok.ru). The majority of propagandistic materials about ISIS, published on these individual pages, was predominantly in the Arabic language and accompanied by a short introductory note in Russian. By the end of 2013, admins actively provided materials in Russian. Given the fact that many Muslims, and in particular non-Muslims, didn't know the Arabic language, the language barrier curtailed recruitment possibilities and undercut the efficacy of ISIS propagandistic campaigns. The content of these pages embraced video, audio, and printed materials, and directly promoted the ISIS agenda. They included a section with religious questions and answers, books, lectures, pictures and video narratives. Therefore, the network was scattered and disorganized with a lack of coordination and recognition. Nonetheless, this nascent disarray was overturned in 2013.

In comparison to Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State is a relatively young terrorist group. So, with the outburst of the Syrian war, the former had an established network overtaking the Russian cyber space, whereas the latter began to form its online niche from scratch. The development of the ISIS network was two-dimensional. While some activists advanced its social media presence, others constructed websites and blogs. In 2013, one of the most

popular social media brands, Sham Today, and the website, FiSyria, appeared and became a driving force of the ISIS brand in the Russian cyber space.

In the social media realm, many individual pages of recruits and community accounts appeared on a daily basis. During this period, radicals were inclined to place their outlets on domestic platforms with which they were familiar with and which were a hub of the Russian speaking audience. Radical entities circulated there undisrupted for some time, until the Russian authorities initiated a serious wave of censorship actions in 2014 (TASS, The majority of radical pages are located in Vkontakte, 2014). As the research determined, 34 (94%) community pages out of 36 entities[21], opened between 2013-2015, were located on Vkontakte, while OK.ru was less popular, hosting 6% of radical pages (Table F1). Indeed, Vkontakte became a birthplace for the previously mentioned ISIS brand – Sham Today.

The Islamic State as a global brand demonstrated a sophisticated symbolic culture, which ranged from a black banner to a logo for each media branch. So, many Russian outlets uploaded various images of the ISIS banner, aligning an account design with their goals and ideological identification. Rare administrators designed a customary profile image for their communities. Indeed, while 78% of the presented sources used available visuals as their self-representation, only 22% of the presented outlets created a unique logo (Table F1).

For community outlets, their hosts used a conspicuous name, which gave a specific first impression about the channel to a potential member. In this regard, the initiative of the ISIS

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[21] The research does not include two websites, presented in the Table F1.

activists was limitless, and they opened ISIS affiliated communities with the following names: "Free. Shishani", "True Caliphate", "Sham", "#IS", "Cyber.Jihad", and "Official slaughter | Demand to act". Some names without a profile image emphasized the content of an outlet (ISIS helpers, #IS); others simply delivered the goals of an account, uploaded only with an avatar ("TeaCoffee", "Free. Shishani", or "Revenge") (Table F1). For these names, activists mainly used the Russian or English languages, whereas 8% of groups' names were written in two languages: Russian and English, and Russian and Arabic (Table F1).

At the time, within the ISIS network, many of its nodes remained isolated from each other and conducted their activity with limited mutual reposting and without advertisement or cooperation. Nonetheless, some management teams demonstrated perseverance and growing skills. In 2014, to enhance their account's flexibility, they began to practice using reserve dormant accounts, which became active should one of their main accounts be censored. Media activists learned how to accelerate the visibility of their accounts. Even sources with the ISIS black banner as a profile image needed to attract a crowd. For instance, the Sariat Online[22] administrator became a member in 27 communities such as Sunna Online, Trade in Dagestan, Muslim As-Salyafi, Group Alfauz and others (Archive A. , Sariat Online account, 2015). This membership makes the outlet visible for other members of different communities: the symbolic avatar allows community and group

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[22] The Sariat Online account was established on Vkontake.com in April 2013 and was abandoned in May 2015. Despite the jihadi content, this account survived after a wide campaign by the authorities to close ISIS affiliated web entities in fall 2015. Obviously, the government cyber team did not track down inactive accounts and did not consider them as potential threats. To underline goals and ideological identification, the admin uploaded the ISIS banner as their page logo.

members to observe logos of each other. This highly-recognizable symbol welcomes other members of the community to check the ISIS page content.

ISIS outlets accumulated a significant number of members (Table F2). In part, this was a result of insufficient restrictions; many radical accounts functioned for several months prior to their closure. The longer outlets existed, the more followers they gained. After the wave of censorship actions in the second part of 2014, many ISIS personal and community pages were removed from Vkontakte.com (Paraszczuk J. , 2015). As the study detects, the membership of nine informational sources on this platform fluctuated from 437 to 10,773 followers between April 2014 and August 2014 (Table F2). The outlet "Islamic State News" was established around July 1st, 2014, and in 18 days, its number of followers increased to 1,122 people (Table F2).

4.1.1 Central outlets of the Islamic State network: Sham Today, FiSyria. As noted, in 2013-2014, ISIS activists founded a social media brand - Sham Today and FiSyria (a website). These informational sources became central nodes of the entire network in 2013-2015.

4.1.1.1 ShamToday (ST). The ShamToday media outlet appeared as a public news entity in Vkontakte in 2013. Its media team included two parts: ISIS operatives, who fought in Syria, and activists, who resided outside of the Syrian war zone. While the former consisted of Ilyas Deniev (Sayfullakh Shamsky), Musa Abu Yusuf al-Shishani, Abu Amin, and other fighters, whose names remained unknown, the latter was allegedly included M.Ataev, an immigrant from Russia to Germany. In 2016, its Turkish branch began to circulate on Telegram.

The number of people involved in this network could be larger, but their names were impossible to determine as the brand was managed anonymously after the deaths of its initial team. One of its founders, Deniev, or Sayfullakh Shamsky, (his new name after his relocation to Syria) was killed in April 2015 in fights for Baiji, Iraq. The exact time when he joined ISIS remained unknown, along with his background, but Deniev was an operative in a Chechen brigade. He was a participant of the battle for Mosul in 2014, as the militant uploaded his photo from there. After his death, affiliated militants aired a eulogy video, underlining his leading role for the "Sham Today Studio" (Archive A. , 2015). Being an active operative, Deniev could provide unique photo and video materials. However, his actual contribution to the network is not clear. Another recruit, Musa Abu Yusuf al-Shishani (23 years-old), was killed in 2015. There was not much known of his life either. Prior to joining ISIS, Musa Abu Yusuf was a member of Imarat Kavkaz and later, served as an Al-Qaeda militant in Yemen (Archive A. , 2016). In ISIS, he became a Sharia judge, who managed a personal account on VK and created educational articles for ShamToday's audience (Archive A. , 2016).

Murad Ataev is a pro-ISIS media activist, who supposedly has connections with ISIS recruits from the North Caucasus region. In an interview for the Russian outlet Meduza, Ataev stressed that he was a news analyst rather than news creator for ISIS (Turovsky, 2015). In 2002, Ataev moved to Germany, but according to the local authorities, he entered the country illegally, so his asylum application was rejected. As a victim of Russian government persecution, Ataev remained residing in Germany, where he worked in a mosque in Berlin (Turovsky, 2015). At the beginning of 2015, a police raid in this mosque

resulted in the detention of its workers. According to Ataev, he became a victim of police brutality, and as proof Ataev uploaded a number of his photos with injures. Pro-ISIS social media accounts expressed empathy for him and his plight. On January 21st, 2015, his supporters warned each other to eradicate Ataev's social media accounts and especially, a WhatsApp outlet (Archive A. , 2015). Worth noting is the fact that the ShamToday account conducted a fundraising campaign for Ataev via the Russian payment platform – Qiwi (Archive A. , 2015). In 2016, Murat Ataev was sentenced for ISIS recruitment (Meduza, 2016). The deaths of affiliated militants and Ataev's detention did not change the ST operational mode; the brand functioned until its media team voluntarily discontinued the network in 2017.

ShamToday was created as a social media brand that dispersed ISIS products (news, videos, photo reports) within the Russian speaking population. Connected to official and unofficial international ISIS outlets, its media team reposted (sometimes, providing a translation) posts from these channels. Initially, along with ISIS's official propaganda, the ST network released its own products (mainly, photos), which contained ST symbols. In 2015-2016, a few poorly made video-eulogies for killed militants affiliated with this brand circulated on the Internet. Given the unclear branding on these videos, it is impossible to ensure they were made by ST production. Since 2016, ShamToday altered its approach to its operational strategy, focusing on news transmission rather than the production of propaganda products.

The research detected the first ST outlet in December 2013, which entered the Russian cyber space under a unique brand name and logo (Archive A. , 2013). The brand name

remained unchanged, but the ST logo was modified at least three times (Figure 1, 2). To make the network distinctive, the ST team designed an initial brand logo in a blue and white palette with a militant holding a waving ISIS banner. The brand name (ShamToday), written in the English language, was placed on the bottom of the logo. The description of the brand (News from the holy Sham land) was created in the Russian language and highlighted by a sword (Figure 1). As Figure 2 shows, later, the profile logo became more schematic and was designed with a black and white color mix.

Figure 1. ShamToday logo (2014).

Figure 2. ShamToday logos (2016).

ShamToday included its brand symbol on its photo products and directed its proper implementation on every news entry. Indeed, a similar or slightly different brand logo (Figure 1) appeared on photos, produced by the brand media activists. Every news post

contained an evocative brand visual frame, which was circulated in 2014 (Figure 3). In 2015, this frame was modified and presented in a different palette (Figure 4).

Figure 3. ST's news frame (2014).
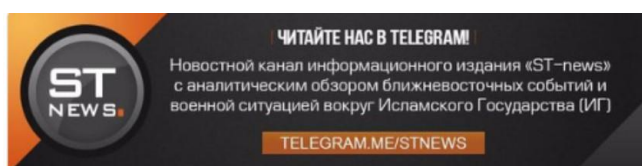
Figure 4. ST's news frame (2015).

The ST network embraced the following types of branches: active and dormant, community and administrators' accounts. Usually, an active account was supported by a dormant outlet, which was open for new members and circulated without updates until censorship closed the main account. Then, the team created a new dormant account. Apparently, the first reserve or dormant channel "ShamToday1" was set up in July 2014, when the VK administration began to eliminate suspicious entities (Archive A. , 2014). Brand community pages were created as public with unrestricted access for VK users. The community channels had a chain of personal pages of brand administrators, which provided a way to sustain the presence.

As stated previously, ShamToday appeared as a social media brand and operated in Vkontakte, up to 2016. In October 2015, Ataev's Twitter account announced the establishment of the first ST channel on Telegram (Archive A. , 2015). So, between 2013-2015, the ST network's primary location was VK, later, ShamToday moved to Telegram. Also, a brand outlet was created on Zello, which became abandoned with the death of affiliated militants (Ilyas Deniev).

4.1.1.2 FiSyria. On April 1st, 2013, Kavkaz Center announced the creation of a new informational source of Syrian news, named FiSyria (Archive A. , 2013). The website was under management a Chechen militant group, ruled by Omar Shishani. Prior to the end of 2013, when this group pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, this entity provided information about the group's activity in Syria. For instance, FiSyria aired updates about the group's actions near Menagh Air Base; in October 2013, the website published an interview with Omar Shishani (Archive A. , 2013). In 2014, the website began to provide not only news about Omar Shishani's group but presented general news about the Islamic State (Paraszczuk J. , IS boosts Russian-language propaganda efforts, 2015). Also, its media team established community outlets on Vkontakte, connected to the website. In June 2014, two media activists, the FiSyria leader, Ahmad, and a translator, Abu Mudjahid[23], were captured and executed near Deir ez-zor, Syria (Archive A. , 2014). Worth noting is the fact that another website, H-Center, disseminated the Islamic State propaganda on the Russian cyberspace, which could be a part of the Al-Hayat media branch.

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[23] According to FiSyria, Abu Mudjahid, who was from the Crimea, translated propaganda products from the Arabic language for further publishing on the website.

While the name of the network remained the same, its media team did not develop a clear visual brand expression. Its VK public account had a random photo with an ISIS banner as an avatar (Archive A. , 2014). In May 2014, two YouTube video storage spaces did not carry the brand name, nor the same profile image (Archive A. , 2014). The FiSyria website changed its color palette at least three times in 2013-2014. As a result, the FiSyria network, consisting of the website and social media accounts, did not present design consistency across platforms. According to the Russian anti-extremism law of 2014, FySiria.info was banned on February 7th, 2015 and shut down, but only partially; its posts can still be found on KavkazCenter.

4.1.1.3 ST, FiSyria, and Islamic State of Iraq and Syria network. In August 2014, three ISIS outlets (ST, FiSyria, and Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISN)) coordinated their efforts and created a network within Vkontakte. They released a mutual statement, declaring their superior status and legitimacy because ISIS operatives were creators of these accounts (Archive A. , 2014). Warning that other outlets had nothing to do with the Islamic State the statement underlined that these false accounts could spread inaccurate information (Archive A. , 2014).

This network widely practiced searchable hashtags, which were placed in a short description of each post. There were a number of hashtags such as #Syria, #Damask, #IS, #Islamic State, and others. Some of them were in the Russian language, while other hashtags were written in the English language (Archive A. , 2014). They helped to accumulate followers and increase the account's flexibility in case of censorship. Indeed, one of the administrators guided followers on how to search these three accounts if the VK

administration banned them. He provided several hangtags which allowed members to track the accounts: # ИГ[24], #ShamToday, #FiSyria, and #ISN (Archive A. , 2014).
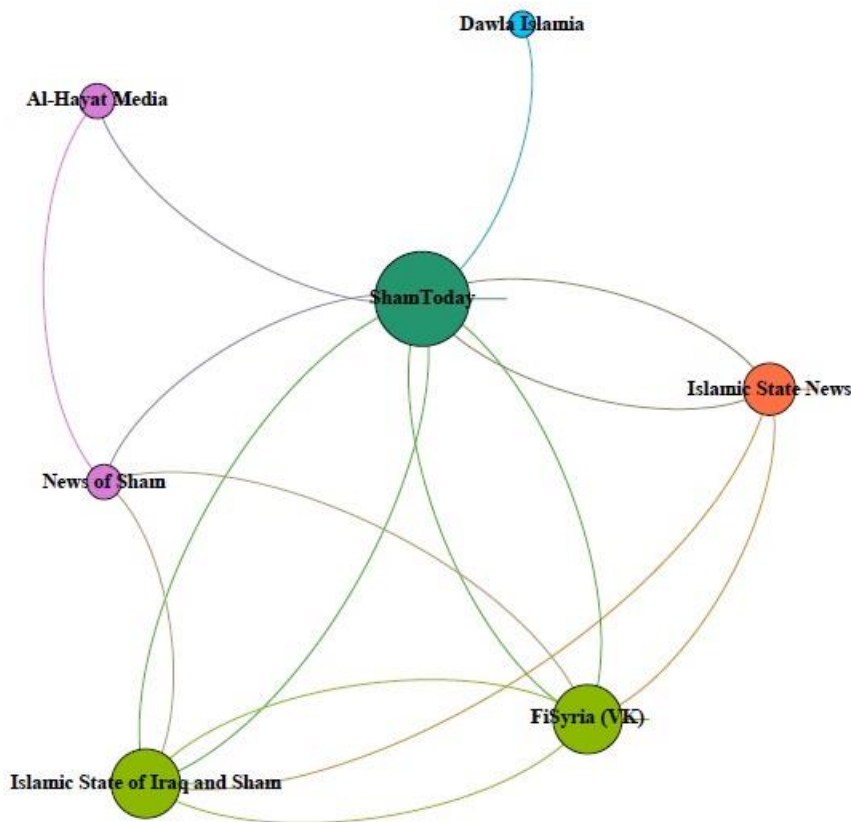
Figure 5. Connections of Islamic State accounts in Vkontakte (2014).

In the network, the ShamToday outlet was the most prominent entity which ran the highest number of relationships (Figure 5). Promoting each other via regular reposting, these channels maintained ties with other partisan sources (Figure 5). In the eyes of their members, the appearance of a post from a lesser known channel on these three outlets' news threads would increase the value, membership, and trust of this unknown account.

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[24] This hangtag is created in the Russian language and means ISIS.

The interconnectedness of the central three channels determined the fair density of the network (0.52), which would rise with the growth of the network.

The membership of the three-accounts-network was impressive. The ST outlet's membership jumped to 230% from April 2014 to August 2014, when the account gathered 10,773 followers (Archive A. , 2014). Another channel (FiSyria) experienced an influx of members (480%) between May and August 2014, but the actual number of followers was lower – 4,668 (Archive A. , 2014). Other pro-ISIS accounts, which were out of this network, collected a large "customer" base. For instance, the Fadjir channel had more than 2,500 people in July 2014 (Archive A. , 2014). This large membership of radical accounts can be explained by the relatively long lifespan of the accounts and their recognizable visual design.

4.1.1.4 Furat media branch. In 2015, the ISIS media group "Furat" announced that the site FiSyria.com was taken over and renamed Furat.info (Figure 6). After discovering this platform, the government closed it down on June 15th, 2015, preventing the dissemination of radical propaganda.

Figure 6. The announcement about the fate of the website FiSyria (2015).

However, in August 2015, the ISIS cyber team began the coverage of Caliphate news again, but under a different name - FuratMedia.com. The tactic of name changing for web entities is a common practice which allows radicals to outwit government control and continue their mission. Furat accounts appeared on Twitter, Vkontakte, Tumblr, Facebook, and Telegram. Facebook and Vkontakte accounts have been closed, but groups were reopened under slightly different names. The Furat group began to operate on July 1st, 2015, and the next day, its membership jumped to 87 people (Paraszczuk J. , 2015). On January 14th, 2016, a new page "Furat ISIS" was reopened for three days, and by January 18th, 2016, the page had 11 friends and 96 followers. After functioning for 12 days in April 2016, its Facebook outlet accumulated 560 "friends" and 57 "followers" (Archive A. , 2016). Despite the fact that Furat Facebook and Twitter pages were shut down the next day – January 19th, 2016 (almost simultaneously), its accounts on Soundcloud.com still operate, providing fresh news for their followers. Given the danger of being closed down every day, the cyber team established several accounts. They utilize this tactic on Facebook, Twitter, Vkontakte and other online networks. For example, on Soundcloud, two parallel accounts were established and have similar content: "Furat Media" and "Furat ISIS" (Figure 7). Both have the same recognizable blue-white logo.

It should be noted that all Russian ISIS accounts on various online platforms (Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, Soundcloud, and others), news written reports, and online broadcastings have the same discernable design and the "Furat" logo. This adds and promotes immediate public recognition. The specific graphic design helps an army of persecuted online ISIS

supporters to identify each other in case of blocking or the suspension of a communication or news platform. For example, news reports are written in white on a dark blue background with a red headline; in the left corner, there is a wordmark (Figure 8). Oftentimes, accounts established by ISIS supporters repost Furat news reports without direct links to the external resource, but online visitors can read the hidden identity of an informational source due to the identifiable web design. The reposts of ISIS news on individual pages provoke questioning the ideological views of the page's creators. The usage of the Islamic calendar Hijri makes the Furat accounts distinct and visible. Online broadcasts also have a particular eye catching design (Figure 9).
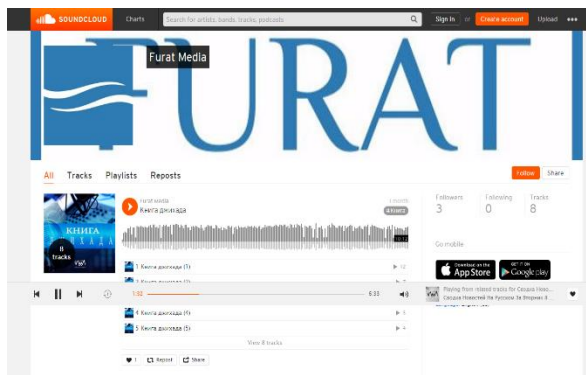
Figure 7. Furat Media account on Soundcloud.com.
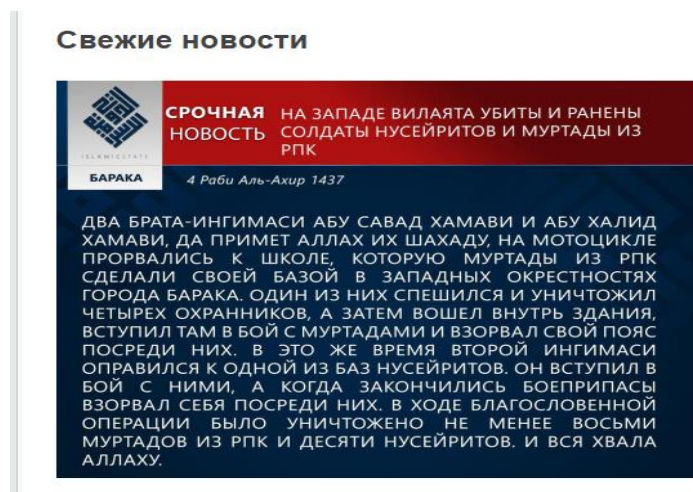
Figure 8. ISIS news framework (2016).
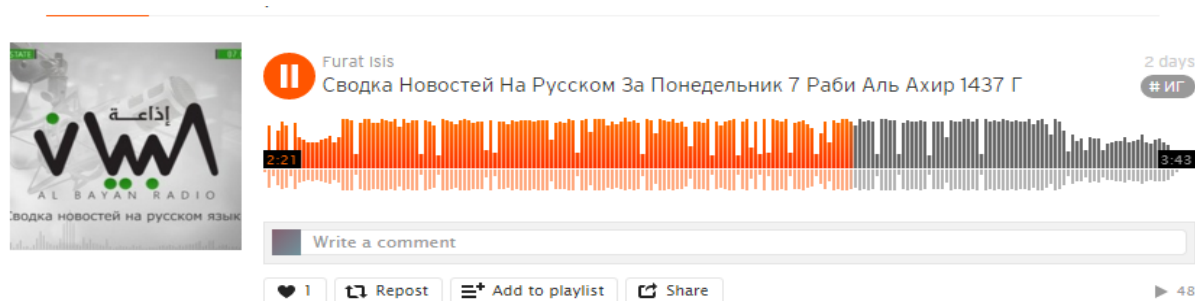
Figure 9. Al Bayan Radio: news report 7 Rabi al-Akhir 1437 (January 17th, 2016).

The resilience of ISIS media outlets was high; their cyber team was in constant search for new opportunities to stay connected with supporters, mobilize militants and sympathizers, recruit new members and disseminate information. Video, audio and text content was not only presented on one outlet, but simultaneously appeared in different web resources: video and audio materials – on external video storage units (archive.org, onedrive.live.com, my.mail.ru, soundcloud.com, yadi.sk); audio files – on Russian music sites

(muzofon.com), photo materials – on external outlets (justpaste.it); text materials –
drive.google, archive.org, 4shared.com, copy.com, etc.

Understanding the importance of the Internet in the ISIS propaganda campaign, the Furat
cyber team made the website interactive by using basic methods. First of all, it added the
ability to check Furat accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and Telegram from
Furatmedia.com. Interestingly, radicals widely used Telegram.org for instant
communication, repeatedly referring online visitors to their "telegram"- accounts (Figure
10, 11). This allowed them to hide contact information but maintain close ties with
supporters. Secondly, the majority of Furat outlets updated the content frequently,
presenting new videos, podcasts, and other materials. For instance, during the period
between December 9th, 2015 to January 17th, 2016, Furatmedia.com released one hundred
news announcements and one hundred ninety photo-reports. Also, the Furat accounts
established a comment feature on images and posts, welcoming users to post their opinions
and comments and interact with other users.
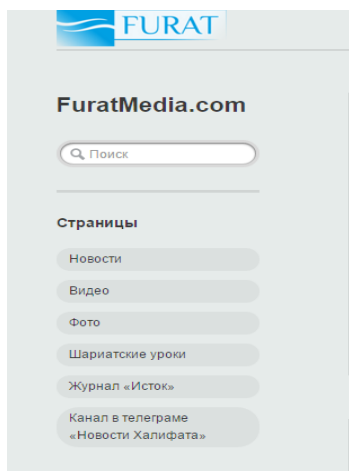
Figure 10. Sections (Channel in Telegram, Caliphate News) on FuratMedia.com (2016).
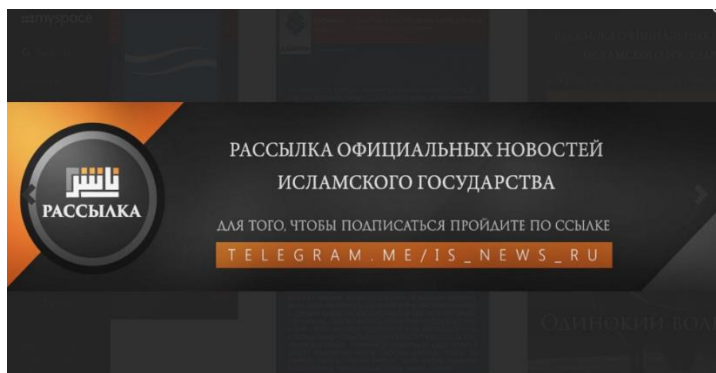
Figure 11. Subscription for official news from the Furat website.

Furatmedia.com consists of several sections: news reports, videos, photos, Sharia education, the "Istok" ISIS informational magazine, and the channel "News of Caliphate" on Telegram.me. Every day, the platform released a number of online statements about the situation in the ISIS territories, tactical information, executions of war prisoners, and photo reports from battlefields. Overall, video and photo materials predominantly had a propagandist character devoted to the description of the situation in the ISIS territories, conversations with supporters, messages for potential fighters living abroad, training camps, schools for kids, and the political and social life under ISIS control. Furatmedia.com posts operational documentaries or pictures uploaded shortly after an operation. For instance, daily news reports were presented in two types: 1) as written accounts and/or 2) broadcasts, which were backed up by PDF and DOC text statements. The most common topics were results of battles, human losses within Assad's military, civilian losses, the destruction after Russian and French airstrikes, and war trophies. A number of human losses in the Syrian government army was one of the main elements of every news report. However, it is impossible to estimate the accuracy of these reports. The

propagandistic character of this website makes it prone to overestimate the enemy's damage in order to encourage the spirit of the audience and ISIS militants. Also, the Furat site shows deceased ISIS operatives, presenting them as shahids and justifying the operation in which they were killed. In video messages, pictures of killed militants are embedded with religious symbols and language.

Obviously, ISIS, just like any other terrorist organization, tries to take full advantage of the Internet. In 2015-2016, given the wide geography of ISIS accounts, its penetration into the Russian cyber space increased daily along with its resilience to isolated government restrictive measures. The Furat network successfully carved a niche by elevating a so-called ISIS brand in the Russian Internet. This network developed an unprecedented reach, adopting more than ten social media platforms, including narrow specialized entities (SoundCloud, MySpace, etc.). Its captivating symbolic culture was well articulated and custom-crafted in accordance to the goals of its branches.

4.2   Second Stage 2016-2017

4.2.1 Network coverage and hierarchy.   Under the pressure of VK censorship, the ISIS network moved to other social media platforms, predominantly to Telegram, where ISIS media savvy activists built prominent branches. Six outlets out of 15 were established and circulated initially on Vkontakte in 2013-2015. As the study shows, none of 15 tracked channels had its main "base" on Vkontakte, and only five sources maintained their presence there despite constant restrictions (Table F3). Worth noting is the fact that the ISIS activists reduced their website and blog presence. Out of 15 sources, two informational entities (Vkavkaz and Hot News) established a website or a blog (Table F3).

By August of 2016, if the blog activity became irregular, whereas the Russian government successfully blocked ISIS websites within the Russian cyberspace.

The network hierarchy embraced two types of accounts: so-called official and unofficial. In January 2017, the Russian ISIS media group clarified that there were only two official ISIS accounts[25]: "Khalifat Furat" and "Rassilka" (Archive A. , 2017). While, official channels were source, established by the ISIS media apparatus, unofficial accounts were sources, created by ISIS supporters. Both accounts looked for mutual close and reliable connections. Also, every newly established outlet had to clarify its status (official or unofficial) for the audience and other channels' teams, in order to become a legitimate entity in this network. The official ISIS outlet on Twitter promoted a Telegram outlet of "On way to Allah" as one of verified partisan entities (Archive A. , 2016). In an invitational note, the administrator of "On way to Allah" stated: "I am not an official ISIS representative. I just spread news" (Archive A. , 2016). The research tracked 31 community outlets that included 11 official entities (Table F3).

By the end of summer 2016, these accounts were still around; in May, a new official entity, "Katibat", appeared and began to provide ISIS products to the local outlets (Table F5). Even though these official sources operated under different names (Media IG, Khalifat Infos, Rassilka, etc.), their links mostly underlined their affiliation to each other. For instance, the account "Rassilka" had the following link – mediaig12, which was very similar to the link from a channel of "Media IG" – mediaig3. Disregarding a number of

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[25] These accounts circulated since at least the end of 2015. However, ISIS's official media group explained their status due to the ceaseless activities on social media.

accounts, the research argues that two media teams run these two official entities: (1) Katibat and (2) the Rassilka network (Media IG, Khalifat Infos, Furat, and Rassilka channels). There was a crucial difference between these entities: the network structure and the customer-brand-relationship. First, during 2016 - 2017, the "Katibat" channels were exclusively a Telegram brand, but the Rassilka group utilized a multi-channel strategy, operating on at least four platforms (VK, Facebook, Twitter, and Telegram). Along with community pages, the latter had several managers' personal accounts, which served its group channels. In addition, Katibat was designed as a source with restricted access through temporary open links. The Rassilka group mainly practiced open community pages with unlimited entry. However, at the end of 2016, under the pressure of censorship, it experimented with close communities on Facebook and Vkontakte. In two months, this network returned to the previous type of community. Second, the Katibat media team was not open for correspondence with ISIS supporters. In contrast with this brand, the Rassilka network communicated with its followers via comments and direct messages in accordance to the social media platform's design (Archive A. , 2016). Therefore, within social media, two official ISIS teams operated in the Russian cyberspace from 2016 and up to the end of 2017.

The ISIS network included several types of accounts, which became entirely developed during the second part of 2016 (Table F5). Account types varied based on the channel's content. These included informational (news), inspirational (video, audio, picture, text, news), forums, and referential (link storage). In August 2016, the ISIS network was comprised of 59% news accounts, 32% inspirational sources, and 7% link storage entities

(Table F5). Also, at this time, there was one chat for communication (Table F5). Worth noting is the fact that the news channels were the most common type of accounts, while storage channels were the most crowded. For instance, an account of the link brand "Мост", established in June 2016, gathered 1552 members on August 6th, 2016 (Archive A. , 2016). They were the subject of censorship, but in comparison with news outlets, their closure did not happen as frequently. Thus, referential accounts revealed a strong connection between membership and an account's lifespan.

4.2.1.1 Membership. With their relocation to Telegram, the ISIS network lost a significant part of its audience. In comparison to Vkontakte, Telegram was a new platform and had a different design, which demanded extra efforts from individuals to adjust to the new environment. Apparently, only the most dedicated supporters decided to move to Telegram and follow ISIS outlets. The study indicated that the membership of the accounts, operating in the spring of 2016, fluctuated from 302 to 2344 followers (Table F4). As the daily monitoring revealed, the most significant number of new followers joined channels during the first seven days after the creation of an account. Given this tendency, the research sorted out the presented accounts in two groups in accordance to their lifespan. The first group included the accounts, which functioned up to seven days. The second group embraced the outlets, which were active for more than one week. In light of this division, the research reveals that newly established sources had 273 new members per day on average (Table F4). Later, the daily influx of members slowed down (26 people per day on average) (Table F4).

In 2017, the Islamic State lost many of its territories. In July 2017, the Iraqi Forces overtook its stronghold, Mosul, which was under ISIS control since June 2014. By the end of the summer of 2017, it became obvious that IS's militants would lose another city, Raqqa, Syria. The defeat of this terrorist organization on the ground led to its online decline in the second part of 2017. Indeed, the number of online users per day who joined IS's entities in Telegram dropped 65% from March of 2016 to August 2017 (Table F4, Table F8).

At this time, many IS outlets returned to Vkontakte. As the research shows, its groups, functioning in the summer 2017, grew from 103 individuals to 2,984 (Table 1). It is important to highlight that a well-known entity accumulated the larger audience in comparison to newer entities. Indeed, Ansaruddin, established in 2013, had 2,984 members for 24 days of activity, whereas Shahada's membership totaled 345 people in 15 days (Table 1). In comparison, 96 VK users per day on average joined an ISIS group during the first seven days after an account emerged (Table 2).

Table 1

ISIS groups' membership in Vkontakte (2017)

Outlet	Activity	Days	Membership
Shahada	08/19/2017-09/03/2017	15	345
Rumiya	08/24/2017-08/27/2017	3	103

Lite Media	8/21/2017-08/29/2017	8	228
Desert militants	8/24/2017-08/25/2017	1	158
Ansaruddin	08/3/2017-08/27/2017	24	2,984
Muhajir	07/16/2017-09/01/2017	47	598
News XLF	08/27/2017-08/31/2017	4	230

Table 2

ISIS groups circulating in Vkontakte (2017)

Outlet	Date of establishment	Date of membership monitoring	Days	Membership	Users per day
Sending/ Rassilka	4/13/2017	4/13/2017	1	113	113
Printed materials of ISIS	4/13/2017	4/13/2017	1	92	92
ISIS videos	4/13/2017	4/13/2017	1	106	106

ISIS photo reports	4/13/2017	4/13/2017	1	86	86
Shahada	8/19/2017	08/25/2017	7	255	36
Rumiya	8/24/2017	8/27/2017	3	103	34
Desert militants	8/24/2017	8/25/2017	1	158	158
Ansaruddin	8/27/2017	8/30/2017	3	632	210
Lite Media (1)	8/21/2017	8/24/2017	3	191	67
Lite Media (2)	8/24/2017	8/27/2017	3	228	76
News XLF	08/27/2017	08/30/2017	3	230	77

4.2.1.2 Network. By April 2016, there were six actors which could be regarded as the most influential actors: ABX, ST, Falyak News, Active Terror, Demand for actions, and Dihad (Figure 12). These outlets had a larger number of incoming and outgoing ties than other actors in the network. Some of these channels (ST, Falyak news) became influential due to direct connections with official ISIS outlets and instant news delivery to the public; other accounts (Djihad, Active Terror) gained their prestige providing unique and high demand information (homemade poisons, bomb recipes, how to set a car on fire, etc.). The content of these six accounts was highly reposted across affiliated actors, and they reposted other accounts' content widely via their outlets (Figure 13, 14). In contrast,

official ISIS sources, being a crucial actor in the network as a source of ISIS products, were not very influential. Many other outlets sought to establish direct connections with so-called official channels of ISIS (Figure 13). However, solely sharing the ISIS propaganda products, these official entities did not maintain ties with other partisan accounts in the network (Figure 14). Hence, they demonstrated a high in-degree and low out-degree centrality. The main distributors for ISIS propaganda were numerous local accounts rather than ISIS's so-called official outlets, which served as a source.
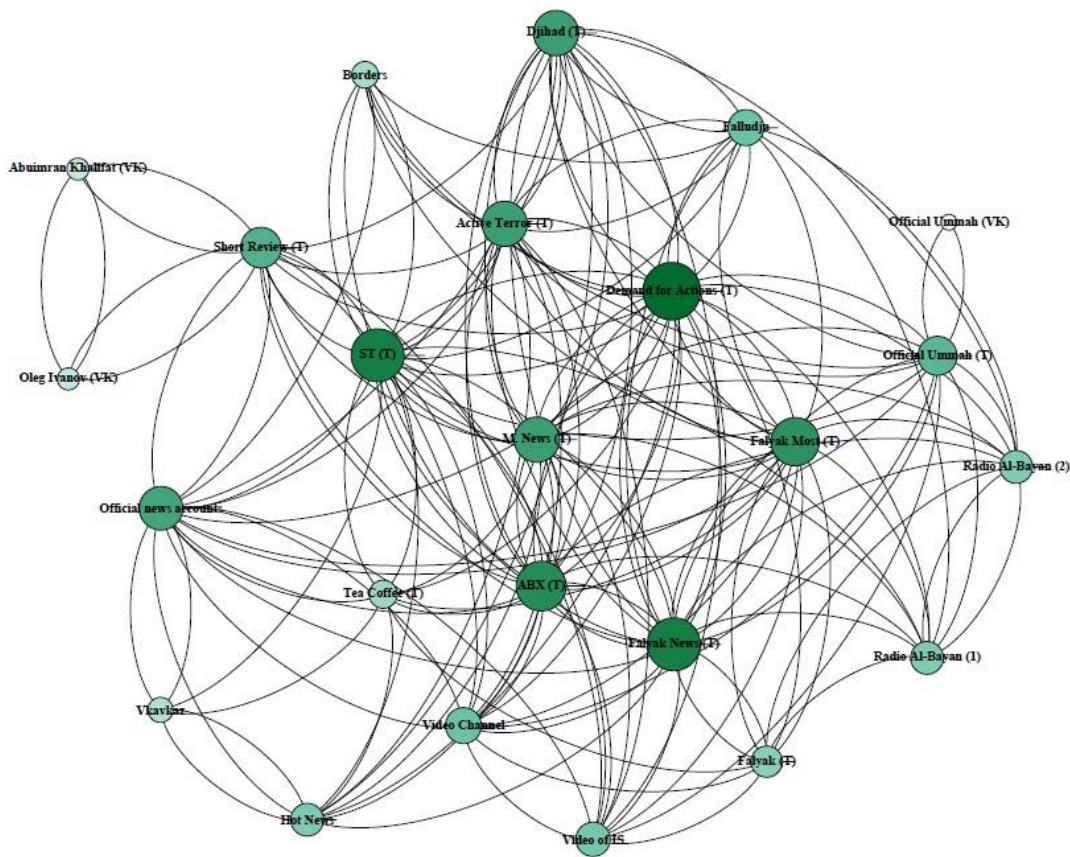
Figure 12. Degree distribution of ISIS affiliated accounts (April 2016). The size of the nodes is directly proportional to the number of ties, which every node has.
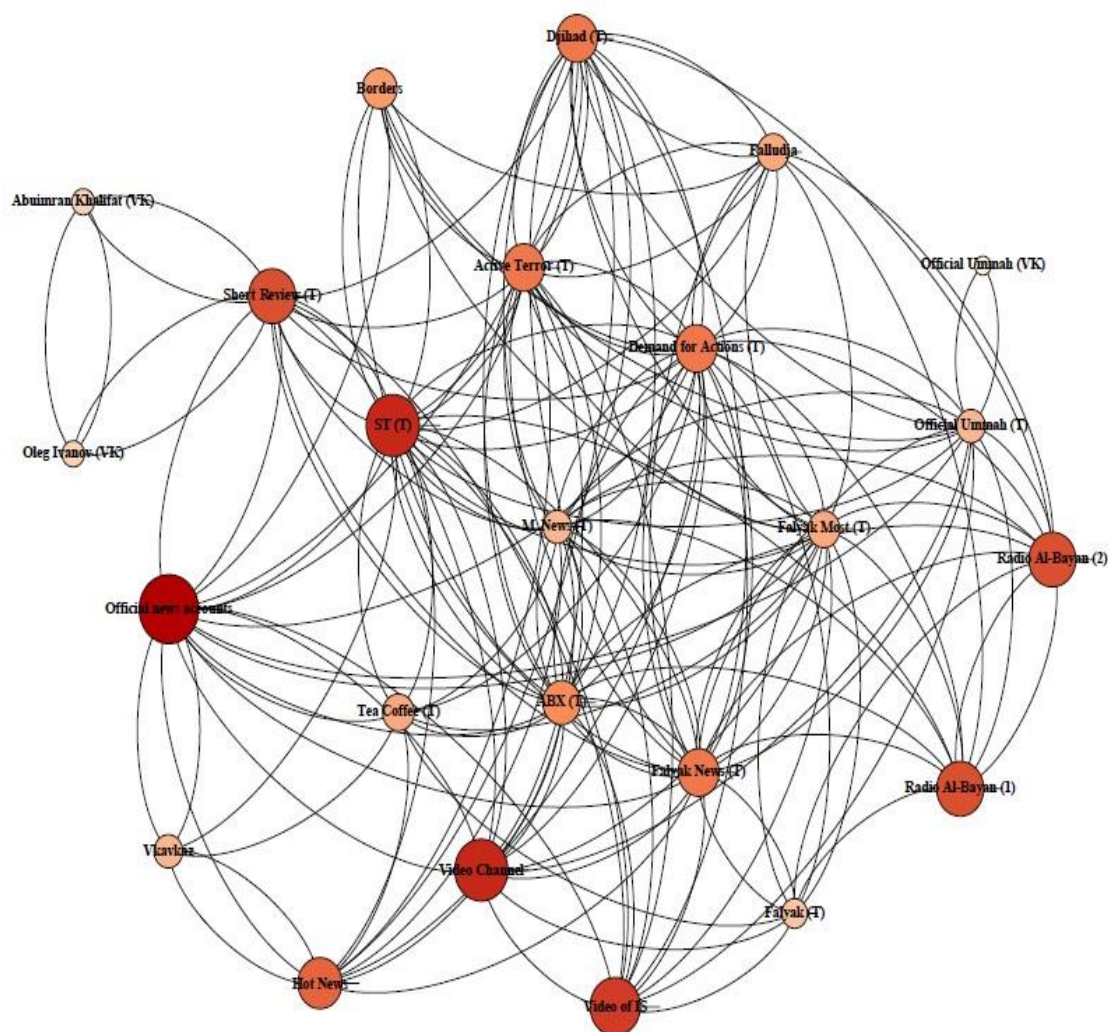
Figure 13. In-degree distribution of ISIS affiliated accounts (April 2016). The size of the

nodes is directly proportional to the number of ties, which every node has.
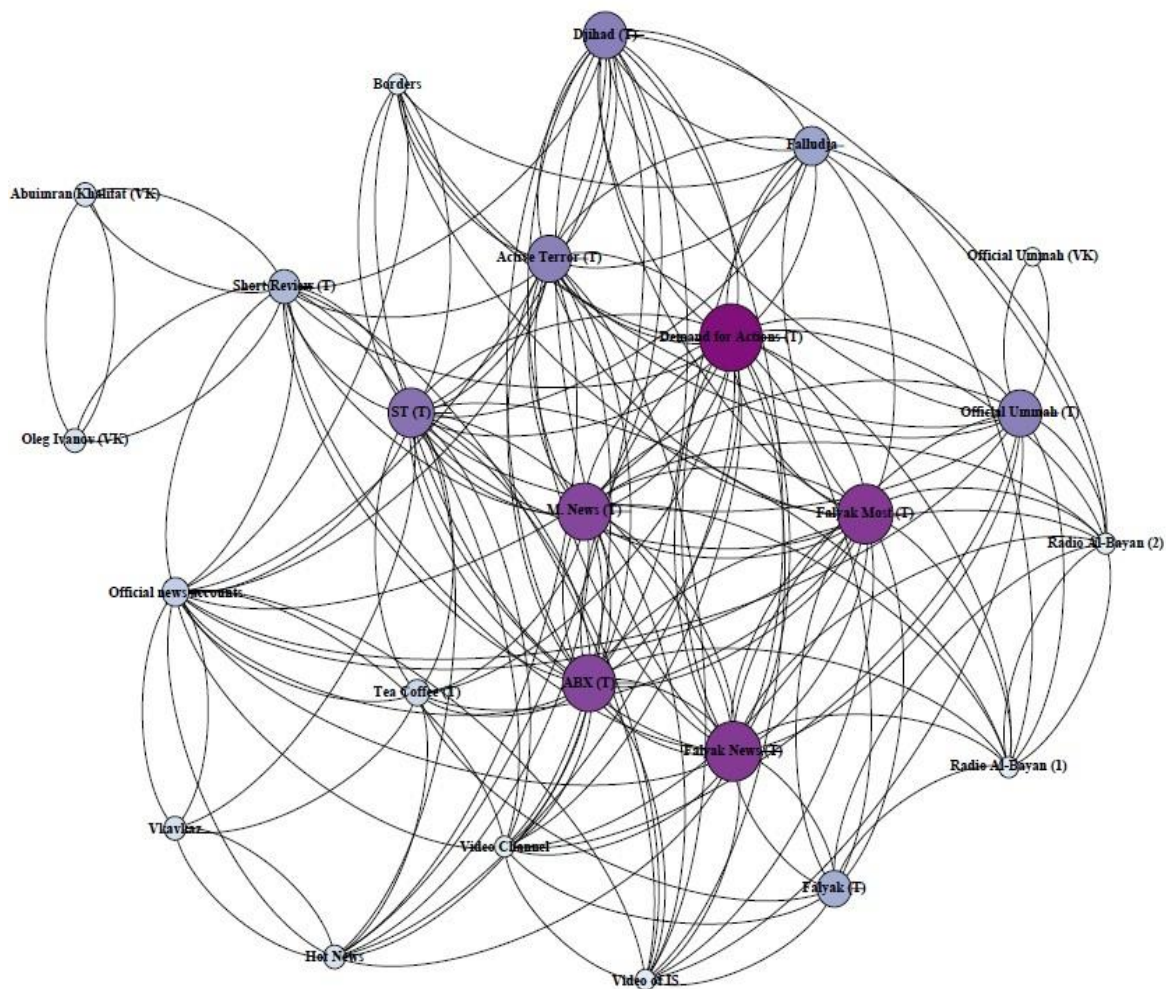
Figure 14. Out-degree distribution of ISIS affiliated accounts (April 2016). The size of the nodes is directly proportional to the number of ties, which every node has.

The outlets, which were highly influential in April 2016, kept their status by August 2016 (Figure 15). Nonetheless, with the appearance of new outlets, the quantity of central actors in the ISIS network increased up to 22 (Tabqa, CC, Vilayat Kavkaz, etc.), the degree value of which ranged between 50 and 65 (Table 3). The link accounts were the champion in terms of the number of incoming and outgoing connections (Figure 15). Their degree value fluctuated between 62 and 65, while the highest possible degree value equaled 65 (Table

3). They not only promoted new partisan entities, but the link storage spaces were a bridge between followers and outlets in case of censorship.

Table 3

The most significant ISIS accounts with their inward and outward connections (August 2016)

Account	Degree
Tabqa	65
CC	65
Links CC	64
Vilayat Kavkaz (News)	63
Sabilluna	62
Links VQ	62
Moct	62
Fresh News	62
Demand for action	61
Massacre	61
Djihad	60
Guraba	59
Falyak News	58
News of militants	58

|	
ST	57
Revenge	57
All in all	55
ABX	55
Vilayat Kavkaz (Chat)	53
SpecCorr	53
Infidels will shiver	52
Stranger	50
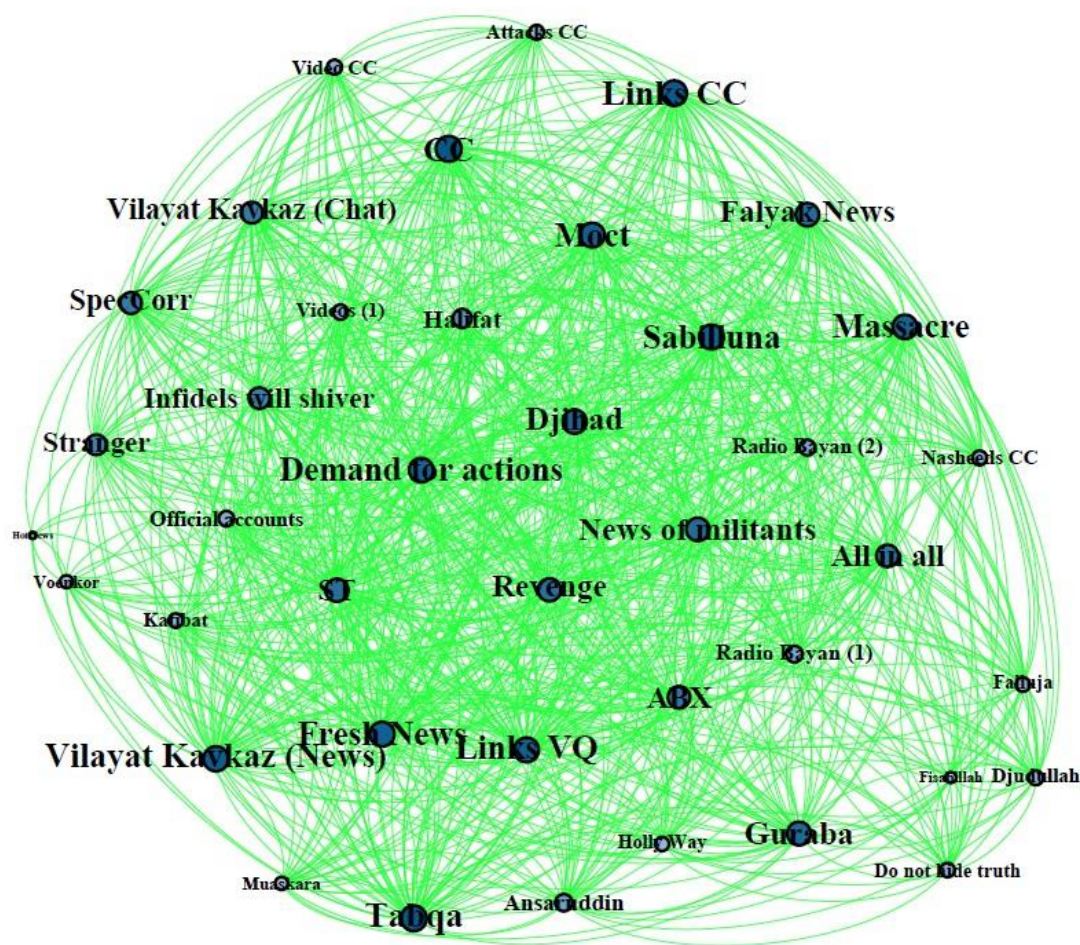
Figure 15. Degree distribution of ISIS affiliated accounts (August 2016). The size of the nodes and labels are directly proportional to the number of ties, which every node has.

Within the Islamic State brand franchise, the domestic outlets delivered ISIS's official propaganda products to the local audience via reposting from their Russian representatives (Table 4). As the research indicates, reposts from these official entities, which had the highest in-degree value, comprised an impressive part of local accounts' content. While the official ISIS outlets were the indisputable leader, the IS's sub-brand, Sham Today, was in second position with an in-degree value of 29. This domestic brand was well known; for

many followers and account hosts it was easy to locate ST accounts on Telegram, rather than receive access to official outlets, even though, being vessels for ISIS's official products, 96% of domestic outlets aired their own exclusive products such as posters, poems, personal stories of recruits or their relatives, photos, videos, etc. Worth noting is the fact that from April 2016 to August 2016, the density of the network increased from 0.36 to 0.6[26]. This growth signified the acceleration of such network properties as solidarity and cooperation between its actors.

Table 4

In-degree distribution of ISIS's official accounts (August 2016)

Outlet	In-degree
Radio Bayan (1)	34
Official accounts	32
Videos (1)	32
Radio Bayan (2)	31
Katibat	31

---

[26] Graph density value ranges from a minimum of 0 to a maximum of 1.

By the end of August 2016, the overwhelming majority of the accounts (79%), which were active in April of 2016, were functional despite repetitive censorship actions. As previously mentioned, with the blocking of the website Vkavkaz, its affiliated accounts stopped their activities. The study did not detect further activity from the Vkavkaz media team; no media activists claimed association with this brand. Two other accounts – Ummah News and TeaCoffee, diminished their online presence temporarily. Perhaps, given the name confusion (an Al-Qaeda partisan account had the same name), this ISIS linked channel experienced operational difficulties. Both Al-Qaeda and ISIS supporters could attack it via complaints to Telegram. Also, ISIS administrators could reject it as a part of the network.

Despite the censorship pressure and the disappearance of 34% of channels, functioning in August 2016, the Islamic State network did not change its main operatives (Table F5). Eighty-four percent of ISIS accounts, which operated in March 2017, were active in August 2016 (Table F6). While the overwhelming majority of outlets continued to function under the same name, only one channel was repeatedly reopened under a different name. The channel, Infidels Will Shiver, became the outlet of "Islamic" in March 2017 (Table F6). Therefore, the same teams of enthusiasts controlled the network.

The ISIS network expanded its branches across global and domestic social media entities, where the most common targets were VK, Facebook, Twitter, and Telegram. By March 2017, many IS outlets, functioning in VK in April of 2016, were forced to stop their activity; it was diminished to 18% (Table F6). During the first part of 2016, its presence in Twitter plunged from 20% in April to 9% in August and further, in March 2017, the number of Twitter branches reduced to 3% (Table F3, Table F5, Table F6). In addition, for ISIS

activists, Facebook was not a very attractive platform, where their presence was on average 5% between April 2016 and March 2017.

In terms of the social media approach, ISIS media activists were highly flexible and inventive. As the previous results show, they constantly monitored various social media platforms, trying to expand their presence. IS's media teams would decrease their presence while never abolishing the social media platforms completely. Some accounts were active within only one platform; other sources relied on social media platform-performance. As the study reveals, during 2016, the number of ISIS accounts which maintained a multi-channel strategy steadily declined from 60% in April 2016 to 42% in March 2017. Simultaneously, the number of ISIS channels which operated within one platform (Telegram) showed the opposite tendency, increasing from 40% in April 2016 to 58% in March 2017. So, at this time, under censorship pressure, the ISIS network found fertile ground on Telegram; It allowed the ISIS accounts to reduce their presence across other platforms without   a decline in membership and popularity. Nonetheless, with the reduction of censorship pressure, ISIS media teams were ready to widen their activity.

By the end of summer 2017, 55% of IS's outlets aired between 2016 and March 2017, vanished from the ISIS online niche (Table F9). The Sham Today team announced its temporary dissolution, while four IS sub-brands (Moct, Caucas, Ansaruddin, and Sending) changed their names and logos and slowed down their online activities, shut themselves down by the beginning of 2018.

Table 5

The features of ISIS domestic accounts, circulated in 2016-2017

Outlet	Visual identity	Other visual attributes	Name consistency	Activity	Network significance, while active	Type of brand
1. Sham Today	+	+	+	01/2016 06/2017	High	Strong
2. ABX	-	-	+	03/2016- 06/2016)	High	-
3. Falyak News	+	-	+	03/2016- 06/2016	High	-
4. Active Terror (military preparation)	-	-	-	03/2016- 11/2017	High	-
5. Muaskara (military preparation)	+	-	+	03/2016- 04/2017	High	Strong
6. Demand for action	+	-	+	03/2016- 11/2016	High	Strong
7. Djihad	-	-	-	02/2016- 12/2016	High	-
8. Tabqa	-	-	+	07/2016- 05/2017	High	Fair

9. CC	+	-	+	04/2016-11/2017	High	Strong
10. Vilayat Kavkaz	-	-	+	03/2016 -11/2017	High	Fair
11. Sabilluna	+	-	+	07/2016-11/2016	Average	Fair
12. Moct	+	-	+	07/2016-11/2017	High	Fair
13. Fresh News	+	-	+	07/2016-09/2016	High	-
14. Guraba	-	-	+	03/2016 -05/2017	Average	-
15. News of militants	-	-	+	03/2016-09/2016	High	-
16. Revenge	-	-	+	04/2016-09/2016	Average	Weak
17. All in All	-	-	+	07/2016-12/2016	High	-
18. SpecCorr	+	+	+	07/2016-11/2016	High	-
19. Stranger	+	-	+	07/2016-04/2017	High	Strong

20. Hot News	+	-	+	03/2016-05/2017	Low	Fair
21. Ansaruddin	+	+	+	04/2016-11/2017	Average	Strong

The research considers that brands with strong identities had to fit the following conditions: a unique logo, other visual attributes (frame for statements, photo logos, etc.), name consistency, network significance, and outlet activity (Table 5). Accounts which designed one or two unique logos served as a brand identifier for several months and were counted as entities with a strong visual identity. If an account did not meet the first criteria but it elaborated additional visual attributes, it compensated for this inconsistency in the use of its logo (the criteria 1). The factor of network significance is based on the total number of incoming and outcoming ties which the account maintained. Outlets with less than 4 months of circulation cannot be considered as a brand, even though they could fulfill the previous conditions. According to these measures, the ISIS network of 2016-2017 had six strong brands with well-developed symbolic culture and a good reputation. While five brands had underdeveloped visual identity, the "Revenge" brand, categorized as weak, suffered from the absence of a logo and average network significance. The research does not count the other nine accounts as brands, mainly due to their short lifespan.

4.2.2 Brand as symbol. As the statistics show, the overwhelming majority of ISIS accounts (57%), circulated by April of 2016, did not develop unique visual identities (Table F3). To underline a group's affiliation, their hosts usually used circulated images with the

ISIS banner. Sometimes, administrators uploaded these pictures after slight graphic modification, which did not turn an image into a singular logo, but just enhanced its visual features. Some of these accounts used a dedicated team and designed their own logo later. Nonetheless, other entities (43%) attracted online users by a recognizable logo, including the previously mentioned the ST and Furat brands (Figure 17). Across several social media platforms, official sources demonstrated persistence in the application of the same brand visuals. There were at least three unique logos, which emerged at the end of 2015 to the beginning of 2016 (Figure 15, 16, and 17).

Figure 15. An ISIS account's logo (2016-2017).

Figure 16. An ISIS account's logo (2016).

Figure 17. A Furat media branch's logo (2015-2016).

As Figure 15 presents, this logo, depicting wild flowers, did not speak about the channel's content, goals, and affiliation. Apparently, these factors allowed this account to survive in the hostile environment of social media. With this logo, its media team repeatedly emerged on Vkontakte and Telegram.

As monitoring revealed, by August of 2016, 98% of IS's entities elaborated a singular visual identity (Table F5). While 17 outlets out of 40 had only one unique logo, 23 other ISIS affiliated accounts developed more than one logo. The brand Ansaruddin appeared in 2013, using two profile logos for its accounts on Telegram and Vkontakte in 2016 (Figure 18) (Archive A. , 2013). Worth noting is that by March 2017, 97.5% of outlets maintained a singular logo, keeping the symbols despite censorship (Table F6).

Figure 18. Ansaruddin's logos, circulated in 2016 on Telegram and Vkontakte.

Comprehending the importance of a recognizable online logo, many domestic ISIS activists did not maintain visual consistency; they tended to create unique but multiple profile logos. The account, "Revenge", maintained visual diversity, designing different profile logos across its accounts. In Vkontakte, its team used a simple image of a rifle inscribed with the group's name on a white background (Figure 19). For Telegram accounts, its host presented a new logo after every instance of censorship; each logo had

few visual details in common (an ISIS banner) (Figure 20). Despite their apparent low graphic design skills, this approach to visual identity indicated that the group's administrators realized the benefits from utilizing unique symbols.

Figure 19. The Revenge logo (2016).

Figure 20. Revenge logos created in 2016 for its Telegram accounts.

Disregarding visual consistency, the ISIS outlets demonstrated a strong tendency to stay with one account name, which was a crucial element of the brand's symbolic identity. After their relocation from Vkontakte to Telegram, many ISIS accounts continued to operate under the same name (Sham Today, Revenge, etc). Nonetheless, the acceleration of censorship measures in Telegram forced some accounts to make slight name changes in order to survive. For instance, the Ansaruddin network practiced writing the brand name in three languages (Arabic, Russian, and English). Other accounts with provocative names such as Active Terror, Djihad, and Demand for Action, chose to change their name or stop

their activity. As the analysis of the content showed, the Active Terror team renamed their account several times, operating under the following names: Bomb, Military Preparation for Brothers, Learn to Kill Infidels, etc. Its recognition within supporters was sustained via network support (mutual reposting, announcement).

Despite some attempts to maintain a website or blog (Vkavkaz, Dawla blog, etc.), the ISIS network became a social media entity. At this time, the staggering majority of ISIS accounts were harbored in Telegram. Among the enormous amount of ISIS outlets, several influential brands emerged (ST, Falyak, Demand for Action, Moct, etc.), which became the central nodes for the entire network in 2016. To reinforce the global brand of the Islamic State, these outlets developed a visual self-representation and maintained some symbolic consistency (brand name). Along with these marketing strategies, brand media teams realized the importance of a sustained online presence; ISIS administrators began to establish connections between each other. The cooperation among partisan accounts resulted in the crystallization of a network hierarchy, which calibrated brand types (referential, news) and enhanced network resilience. While the creation of outlets was driven by the individual initiative of ISIS enthusiasts, their further advancement was a result of collective efforts. The network organization allowed newly established accounts with a dedicated team, if recognized as a partisan entity by other ISIS hosts, to became a brand.

4.2.3 Brand as product.

4.2.3.1 Caucas and Calculator apps. Domestic Islamic State volunteers created one app, Caucasus, and a messenger, Calculator. There were two separate groups who worked on them.

The first ISIS app, named "Caucas", became available for the pertinent audience in the first part of 2016 (Figure 21). In July, ISIS chat visitors in Telegram discussed where to find its link to download. Nothing is known about the people who created this Android based app. The Caucas entity allowed its users to store ISIS propaganda products in one place. To support the app, its media team launched an account in Telegram. Together with links of the Caucas app, this outlet provided fresh news from ISIS battlefields. In December 2016, this channel conducted a survey, questioning its followers on how difficult it was to upload the app on their personal devices (Archive, 2016). The overwhelming majority of participants (89%) responded that they did not have problems with the app (Archive, 2016).

In the spring of 2016, a new group of ISIS enthusiasts organized a chain of Telegram outlets, named "CCS." Given the fact that its main account was devoted to cyber security for ISIS supporters, the CCS media team embraced not Internet savvy individuals, but IT professionals. The study does not find much information about these people. However, the CCS network was established and operated from the Russian Federation by people who refrained from relocation to the Middle East. One of its members was a Russian national who converted to Islam, and perhaps, resided in or was originally from the Northwestern Federal district of Russia.

The CCS network, based in Telegram, was a quickly grown entity and very popular. The membership of its cyber security channels reached 3,135 followers in January of 2017

(Archive A. , 2017). It included six to nine outlets and bots, which served different objectives from providing educational materials for children and adults to cyber safety tips. For instance, a CCS outlet hacked and disseminated personal data of individuals who organized the group League of Infidels, in Vkontakte (Archive A. , 2017). Later, it spread the names and addresses of Ukrainian politicians, members of the President's party, and a list of strategically important objects (bridges, military bases, etc.) in Ukraine (Archive A. , 2017). Actually, the brand inspired and guided ISIS supporters to commit attacks against these people.

For two years, its team worked on a VPN service and a messenger. In September 2016, the ISIS network dispersed the CCS's message about needed financial support. To transfer money, ISIS supporters could use two CCS accounts on Visa and QIWI platforms (Archive A. , 2016). In February 2017, CCS began to accept crypto currency via its Bitcoin account (Archive A. , 2017).The CCS messenger was released in August 2016 via Sham Today outlets. In December 2016, its updated version, Calculator, became available, which worked through the OpenKeychain program (Archive A. , 2016). The messenger's primary purpose was safe communication via text or voice messages between ISIS supporters. According to the inventors' design, users did not have to provide their emails, phone numbers, or other personal information in order to join the app. The Calculator app was disguised as a calculator (Figure 22); so, in case of police detention, a phone could not reveal the true ideological stance of its owner. In addition, the CCS team built an option which allowed the user to delete or block the messenger by entering a particular password. To support the Calculator app, the CCS established a channel named after this app. Another

product of the CCS brand, the VPN, was released in April 2017 (Archive A. , 2017). Along with the VPN file, the CCS network released its manual in order to facilitate the VPN service usage (Archive A. , 2017).
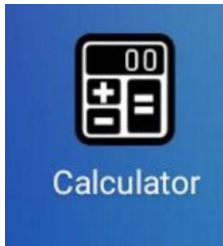
Figure 22. The icon for the ISIS messenger, "Calculator".

    4.2.3.2 Images. As mentioned previously, Russian ISIS outlets disseminated so-called official ISIS products. Refraining from the production of propaganda, some accounts (in particular, Ansaruddin) experimented with images, designing plenty of posters. The study focuses on 221 images, collected from August 2016 and up to October 2017, created by local media activists. As the analysis reveals, this visual propaganda covers a number of preeminent themes (Table F7):

1.   The glory of jihad and hijra

2.   Post-Soviet traditions and customs

3.   ISIS military success

4.   The role of women

5.   ISIS heroes

6.   Enemies of the Ummah (apostates, infidels, and politicians)

7.   The religious conflict "Shiites vs Sunnis"

4.2.3.2.1 Jihad and hijra. The biggest segment of the visual propaganda (43%) is devoted to the glory of jihad and hijra (migration) and has an inspirational character (Table F7). In fact, for the Islamic State, the recruitment of fresh blood is critical, and its propagandists perceive the Russian Federation, with its large population, as an opportunity to fulfill their goals. There are a number of reasons why Russia is attractive for the Islamic State. First of all, the Islamic State is created as a Sunni group, so Russian Muslims, who belong to the same religious tradition, are observed as a legitimate target. The difficult history of Chechen wars in the 1990s, the current regime of Ramzan Kadyrov, and constant counter-terrorist military operations provide   fertile ground for   recruitment.

From a broad perspective, the propaganda seeks to attract new recruits and sympathizers; in a narrow sense, this inspirational segment is comprised of few sub-narratives: the promotion of the concept of hijra (migration), an urging for jihad, the endless and immediate killing of infidels, and the invigoration of the Chechen conflict. These narratives are advanced by a combination of text and certain visual appearances through 1. quoting the Quran and contemporary clerics, 2. persuasive statements, and   3. colorful images of ISIS militants, weapons (in particular, knives), dead enemies, and suffering children (Figure 23, Figure 24).

Figure 23. An ISIS propaganda poster (2016). Translation: And among those We created is a community which guides by truth and thereby establishes justice.

Figure 24. An ISIS propaganda poster (2016). Translation: Go to fight, whether light or heavy, and strive with your wealth and your lives in the cause of Allah. That is better for you, if you only knew.

Technically, screen shots from ISIS footage or photo reports serve as a base for these Russian propagandist images (Figure 25, Figure 27). Then ISIS activists redesign them adding Russian text, changing colors and the level of brightness. Mostly, the pictures present unknown militants whose identities are hard to define. Ideologically, jihad and the concept of hijra are presented as an obligation for every Muslim. To deliver these ideas, militants are depicted as Ummah defenders and winners over infidels. In this victorious

logic, they are always winners even in death, because killed warriors will receive multiple benefits in Paradise as well as perpetual memory among the living. Positioning ISIS fighters as fearless and truthful, images indicate that militants seek mortality and are ready to put their lives on the line (Figure 26). In terms of geography, this domestic propaganda is circulated within the Russian jihadists and appears on different social networks once created.
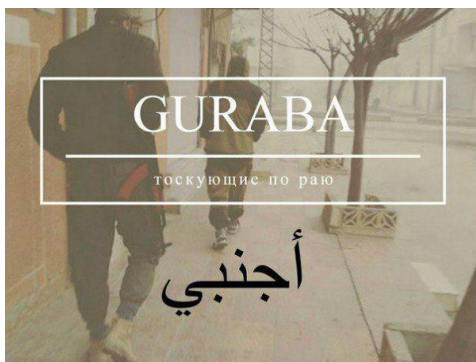
Figure 25. An ISIS propaganda poster (2016). Translation: We miss Paradise.

Figure 26. An ISIS propaganda poster (2016-2017). Translation: We are the people who do not expect to have a long life.
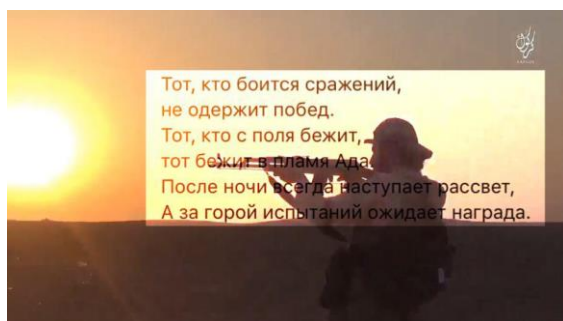
Figure 27. An ISIS propaganda poster (2017). Translation: If you are afraid of battle fields, you never will be a winner. If you escape from a battle field, you will burn in Hell. After unbearable casualties, you will find a brilliant future.

    4.2.3.2.2 ISIS heroes. In order to connect local conflicts in Russia to the global jihadist movement and set an example for Russian Muslims, ISIS activists have used photos of popular ISIS fighters. The local militants are the most popular subject of propaganda (51 % out of all fighter images): Adu Zeid (Figure 28), Ali Abu Halid (Figure 29) among others.

Figure 28. The eulogy for Abu Zeid (from Dagestan).

Figure 29. Ali Abu Halid (from Dagestan).

This research has coincided with several recent key events. Among others it was the death of Omar Shishani. a former officer from Georgia of Chechen origin. The famous commander in the Islamic State hierarchy was killed on July 10th, 2016, in Iraq (Figure 30, Figure 31). While a number of Russian outlets released his rare personal pictures as a eulogy, other channels posted propagandist images, which served dual goals: to give a eulogy and to promote propaganda about jihad and hijra. His iconic status among ISIS supporters is evident; 20% of propagandist images present his face. It should be noted that his pictures were very common on the Russian cyber space long before his death.
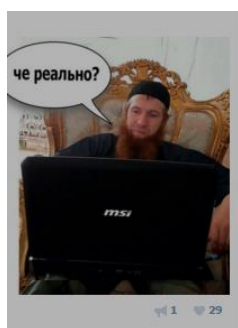
Figure 30. Omar Shishani – April 2016 – before his death.

Figure 31. The eulogy for Omar Shishani – October 10th, 2016 – after his death.

The popularity of the ISIS leader Al-Baghdadi and the official spokesperson, Adnani, is undeniable, but their photos are used less for propaganda purposes on a local level.

    4.2.3.2.3 ISIS military operations. ISIS battles are another frequent target of propaganda (6%). The massive clashes between the government forces and ISIS militants for Manbij (Syria) in the summer of 2016 (31 May – 27 August 2016), Mosul (Iraq) in the fall of 2016, and Palmyra in December 2016, generated a significant volume of propagandist images (Figure 32, Figure 33). Following winner rhetoric, ISIS activists incorporated the impression of great solidarity among militants, presenting them as a tight-knit group.
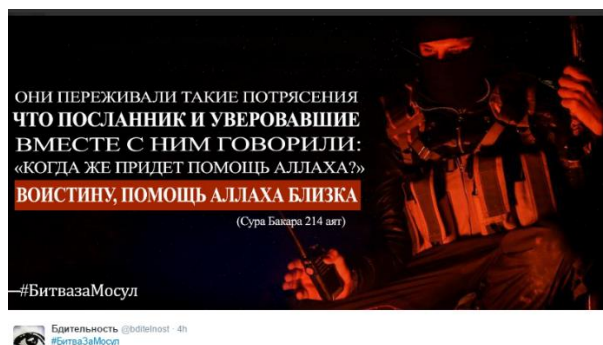
Figure 32. The fight for Mosul (October 2016).

Figure 33. Persistence of Mosul (July 27th, 2016).

  4.2.3.2.4 Post-Soviet traditions and customs, the role of women, and apostates. Rejecting other states, the Islamic State has worked on the establishment of its own statehood, propagating itself as an alternative for Muslims. It calls for the mobilization of Muslims who live in the West, to fight against infidels. In terms of Russia, the traditionally Muslim territories are a part of the Russian state. This means that ISIS supporters can attack civilians in the pure Russian regions as well as instigate a fight for the North Caucasus's independence under the ISIS banner. To reinstate the Muslim identity and make further coexistence with Russian infidels unbearable, ISIS propaganda aims to lift cultural rejections by widely promoting the bans on many traditional holidays. Russian society has established traditions and customs, which are sometimes inherited from its Soviet past: the day of fools (April 1st), international women's day (March 8th), New Year, etc. (Figure 34, 35 and 36). The depth of jihadist hostility is reflected by their rejection of Russian culture, which is observed as dangerous and threatens to undermine the Islamic culture. This jihadist propaganda usually flourishes on the Internet when one of these holidays is around the corner.
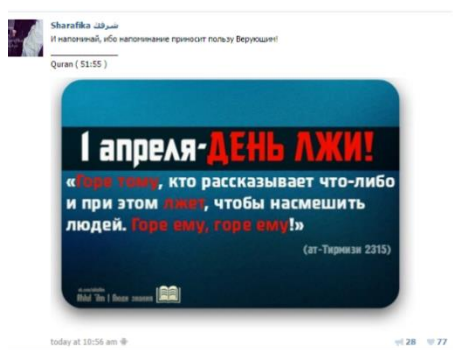
Figure 34. An ISIS propaganda poster (2016). Translation: The day of Lies: April 1st!

Shame on people who lie to others in order to make fun.

Figure 35. An ISIS propaganda poster (2016). Translation: Muslims, stay away from

infidel's holidays! March 8th.
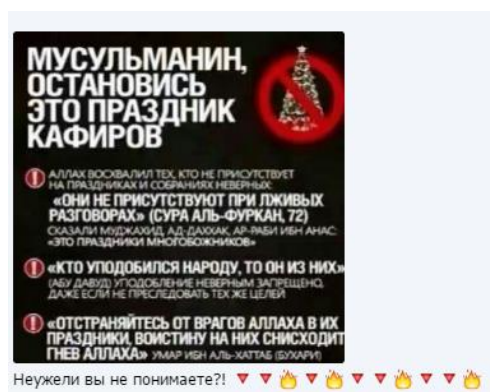
Figure 36. An ISIS propaganda poster. Translation: Muslim, News Year Eve is a kafir's holiday!

In addition, it should be noted that in ISIS-held areas Christians are murdered, frequently after public torture and mutilation. The Christian heritage, including literature, architecture and other cultural objects, is burned down leaving no trace. A similar behavioral pattern is presented as fully justifiable for potential recruits, and then adopted by the local ISIS supporters, as their multiple forum discussions indicate.

ISIS's visual propaganda establishes only one socially acceptable way for a woman to appear, where a female is covered by black clothes almost completely, except for her eyes (Figure 37, Figure 38). The Western looking woman is proclaimed to be against religion and traditions, completely improper. This approach to women who do not wear Islamic clothing, along with the rejection of any tolerance of non-Islamic culture legitimizes aggression and disrespect towards Western women.

Figure 37. An ISIS propaganda poster (2017). Translation: Where is your shame? How do you allow your women to walk among men who stare at them?

Figure 38. An ISIS propaganda poster (2016-2017). Translation: You need to decide who you are: 1. A modest Muslim, covered to please Allah or 2. a woman, who tries to please Satan?

Other images take as their subject matter the Muslims who do not support the Islamic State, for instance, those who serve the Russian state apparatus including police, sportsmen, etc. Displays of Olympic champions are denigrated though depictions of them as traitors of their community (Figure 39, Figure 40).

Figure 39. The Russian Olympic champion. Translation: Look at this apostate! Do not be like him, Muslims!

Figure 40. The Olympic team of Russia (2016). Translation: The Olympic team of Russia: From servants with love to Putin.

ISIS activists frequently use politicians as an object of propaganda. Putin (36%), Obama (26%), and Kadyrov (20%) – all these political figures are the subject matter of jihadist images. They are deemed as murderers of innocent Muslims and the main enemies of the Islamic State. Images of Putin, as an illegitimate ruler and a non-believer as well, show him dead or as a target for assassination (Figure 41, Figure 42):
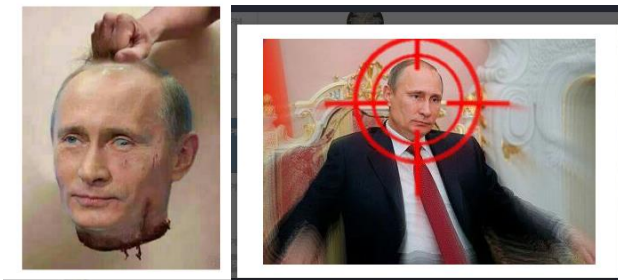
Figure 41. The Russian President, Vladimir Putin.

| [DCL] новое

HALIFAT 11:30 PM 👁 738

(Скоро)___

| Мы доберемся до тебя |

[ИН ША АЛЛАХ]
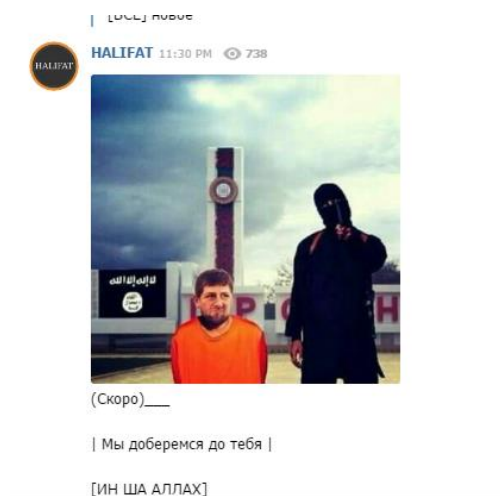
Figure 42. Ramzan Kadyrov on an ISIS propaganda image.

These doctored pictures express an explicit meaning: Putin or Kadyrov must be dead for their crimes against the Muslim Ummah.

4.2.3.3 Brand survival via network cooperation. The whole network assisted in the elevation of sub-brands, whose emergence was due to the initiative of individuals, but whose sustained existence can be contributed to collective effort. Outlets cooperated in order to 1. defeat Al-Qaeda outlets, 2. sustain network authenticity, and 3. enhance resilience of accounts.

First, being under the ISIS umbrella, these accounts did consider each other as rivals. Their main competition remained Al-Qaeda sub-brands, which functioned within the same online niche. One of the ISIS accounts warned about the appearance and circulation of Al-Qaeda affiliated channels, advising followers to leave channels with an unclear affiliation (Archive A. , 2016). For media teams of other ISIS channels, it warned against posting unverified promotional links (Archive A. , 2016). Since the end of 2016, a team of media

enthusiasts created a specific account for anti-Al-Qaeda propaganda. In January 2017, its account attacked the popular Al-Qaeda account, "Rad Alkhawarij", which combated ISIS's ideology within Al-Qaeda supporters (Archive A. , 2017).

Second, to keep up authenticity, the ISIS local network monitored cyberspace in order to reveal fake accounts. In case of the existence of these entities, every branch received a warning note about the suspicious account or accounts. Indeed, SpecCorr accounts warned followers to sign out of the Voenkorr entity, which its team found to be very distrustful. However, in several hours, ST retracted this warning after communication with the Voenkorr hosts (Archive A. , 2016). Later, the managers of the Voenkorr channel detected that one of the ISIS supporters on Telegram used its brand name. Its screenshot was dispersed via partisan outlets, demanding other supporters to refrain from similar actions (Archive A. , 2016). In December 2016, the ST brand released a statement about the dissemination of a fake ST outlet; the ST team underlined that this account had the brand logo, but a different link (stnews, instead of stnews333) (Archive A. , 2016). Media activists and the brand's followers were infuriated by the attempt to create false official accounts (Rassilka). In January 2017, in a statement, ISIS media hosts underlined that the only places where online users could find original access to official accounts, were the Sham Today network and the link storage account, Moct (Archive A. , 2017). Along with network authenticity, these monitoring efforts helped ISIS sub-brands entrench their singularity and enhance audience trust. Online followers received an impression that the network was under strong control.

Third, for ISIS media activists, the accounts' resilience was a crucial issue due to the fact that the outlets tried to thrive in an extremely hostile environment. To enhance resilience, the ISIS network invented a set of measures. As mentioned previously, one of the earliest tactics launched by outlets in order to survive, was the usage of hashtags, which simplified their search for followers in case of censorship of the outlets. Another measure was the creation of reserve or dormant accounts, which became routine since 2014.

As the research discovers, the method of network survival (reserve accounts) became routine. In April 2016, 13 sources out of 15 maintained parallel outlets on a regular basis (Table F3). Between August 2016 and March 2017, more than 90% of ISIS outlets managed at least one dormant account (Table F5, Table F6). For instance, Sham Today had eight dormant accounts, while the CC brand ran three reserve channels. These accounts remained dormant and became active as soon as a main account became the subject of censorship actions. Floating under unrelated names, they were widely advertised via host accounts, gathering dedicated members there. If reserve accounts changed their status, media activists altered unrelated names and their logo to a brand name and logo.

The access to partisan accounts was an essential issue for ISIS media activists, because links provided free entry not only for dedicated followers but for Al-Qaeda supporters or other unwelcomed people. ISIS media teams invented at least three tactics for safe link distribution. Since 2016, they ran a chain of storage accounts. Their only content was various invitational links, placed by outlet hosts. The link accounts had slow activity and an extended lifespan in comparison to regular news or forum sources. Established in April

29th, 2016, the link storage, "Links to Caliphate"[27], outlived many ISIS accounts and was active at the end of August of 2016, gathering around 600 members.

In 2017, when accounts' suppression on Telegram became more rigorous, ISIS media teams began to practice temporary promotional links. These referrals, serving as an invitation to radical accounts, were open for new members for a short period of time (30 minutes, 1 hour). Then, administrators blocked these links and new members could not reach them anymore, until the hosts provided refreshed links.

During 2014-2017, ISIS affiliated accounts created specific links for themselves. On one hand, this allowed online users to find new outlets in case of the closure of an old one. For instance, the Sham Today brand used particular words and digits in its links: stnews1, stnews2, and so on. The same method was practiced by IS's so-called official media team (mediaig1, mediaig2). The ST media team meticulously controlled this order of link construction. However, it was hard to state if official entities operated with similar persistence in link construction.

Another way to increase the resilience of the network was the creation and reinforcement of group rules in 2016-2017. First, regulations on online activity were created for ISIS forums in the summer of 2016; once invented, IS's hosts continued to add new regulations, which helped them survive in the hostile online environment. There were two major areas to impose the regulations: membership control and content control. Membership control included ideological identification, gender management, and a communication framework.

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[27] This account has the Russian name "Ссылки халифат халифат."

The content control referred to topic and question choice, group promotion, and fundraising initiatives.

To manage the audience, ISIS outlets welcomed Sunni Muslims, who supported the Islamic State ideology (Archive A. , 2016). The network was opened exclusively for males, while females and individuals with female avatars were restricted by the media team (Archive A. , 2016). Later, some outlets applied regulations on users' avatars and names, claiming that true believers must chose proper visuals and names for their profiles.

To conduct proper communication, the outlets prohibited idle conversation, aggressive disputes, cursing, labeling each other, and the disclosure of personal information about members. In October of 2016, the forum "Muslim Chat" implemented time regulations, which allowed online communication between its followers only during a particular time period (from 5pm to 6pm) (Archive A. , 2016). In addition, the dissemination of unverified links was a prerogative only for IS's media teams, so IS's channels punished their members for the promotion of other groups (Archive A. , 2016).

Administrators determined a set of themes, questions, and initiatives which members had to avoid. First of all, members could not initiate discussions or questions related to relocating to Syria or Iraq (hijra). Also, within the ISIS network, its activists tried to hide not only their own personal data, but the administrators penalized followers for asking personal questions such as members' geographical location, name, relatives' names, etc. (Archive A. , 2016). Second, IS's affiliated channels demanded that followers stop collecting money; they did not advertise fundraising campaigns, which were initiated by random online users rather than the in-network media activists (Archive A. , 2016).

Followers who disregarded these rules were banned from the group, and other ISIS entities received a notification about the perpetrator or perpetrators. The duration of a ban was a subject of consideration. An introductory note for an IS chat, "Believing brothers", stated that every person who violated the chat rules would be suspended for one day (Archive A. , 2016). However, another partisan forum, which circulated in the fall of 2016, removed violators forever (Archive A. , 2016).

Chapter Five: Discussion and Conclusions: ISIS and Al-Qaeda Online Brands

This work focused on comprehending the difference between Al-Qaeda's and ISIS's approaches to the online brand networking within the Russian cyberspace across social media platforms (2013-2017). To analyze this overall problem in depth, the research formulated the following hypothesis:

H_1: In comparison with the Al-Qaeda brand, the Islamic State developed the stronger online brand identity.

H_2: Given ISIS's prominent global image, the ISIS outlets have the larger number of online supporters than the Al-Qaeda channels.

H_3: ISIS and Al-Qaeda's domestic outlets differently addressed their relationship with the global branding in terms of self-identification and network structure.

H_4: The ISIS network was a social media project while the Al-Qaeda network had more options to advance itself (social media platforms, websites, blogs). In light of this, censorship actions affected the ISIS network more than its competitor.

H_5: In contrast to the Islamic State entities, Al-Qaeda affiliated channels did not adhere to strong symbolic culture or a strong brand name approach.

H_6: Communication patterns between the global brands with their local affiliates have a significant impact on Al-Qaeda and ISIS's production strategy.

5.1   Brand as Organization

5.1.1 Hypothesis 1. The first hypothesis was subsequently identified as follows: In comparison with the Al-Qaeda brand, the Islamic State developed the stronger online brand identity. However, final conclusions do not support this hypothesis.

The research considers a brand as strong if it meets the following conditions: a unique logo, other visual attributes (frame for statements, photo logos, etc.), name consistency, network significance, and outlet lifespan. In the broad perspective, the features of a unique logo signify the creation and circulation of original profile symbols which embraced a number of design elements (background, profile image, design of messages, etc.). In the narrow perspective, accounts which designed one or two unique logos served as a brand identifier for several months, and are counted as entities with a strong visual identity. If an account does not meet the first criteria but it elaborates additional visual attributes, it compensates for the inconsistency in the use of a logo (the criteria 1). Another factor, network significance, is based on the total number of ingoing and outcoming ties which an account maintained. Due to the fact that militant groups often have restrictions on time allotted for online activities, these entities did not have significant network engagement. The study heeds this trait, considering it as a less influential factor for this type of brand. Outlets with less than 4 months of circulation cannot be considered as a brand, even though they could fulfil the previous conditions. The measure of coverage refers to the number of social media platforms where a channel functioned since its appearance; the study uses numerical expression for this feature without mentioning social media platforms. Despite all these factors, the study detected several exclusions within both networks.

According to these measures, the ISIS network of 2016-2017 had six strong brands with well-developed symbolic culture and a good reputation (Table G1). Despite the lack of visual identity, the research counts the Vilayat Kavkaz brand[28] as strong, because of the brand's unique name. The word "vilayet" is a widely applied interpretation, used by Russian ISIS supporters, for the word of "wilayat" (province). Al-Qaeda supporters did not use this word for their groups, considering the word as an ISIS attribute. While five brands had underdeveloped visual identity, the "Revenge" brand, categorized as weak, suffered from the absence of a logo and average network significance (Table G1). The research does not count the other nine accounts as brand, mainly due to their short lifespan (Table G1).

Its competitor developed 12 strong brands, which included three groups and nine news entities (Table G2). The research detected a correlation between the type of outlet and the overall number of connections; as a result, three military group brands should be identified as entities with a strong brand identity. Two brands – Kavkaz Center and VD, should be considered as strong entities due to their unusually long lifespan. They became famous within radical circles prior to the beginning of the Syrian war. Also, the significance of the Sham Center and Abdulaziz Kazanly brands increased due to the fact that both sources maintained their own websites.

Four Al-Qaeda brands developed a weaker identity due to limited inclusiveness into the network and a vague (underdeveloped) visual culture or a lack of online presentation (Table G2). The study finds another exclusion – the ZX brand, which operated since 2015 and

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[28] The study uses the original spelling for this brand name.

gathered a significant number of followers. This source must be counted as a fair brand. As Table G2 shows, there was only one weak brand - Umma News, which functioned for a significant period of time. Along with incipient visual and network characteristics, this pro-Al-Qaeda outlet did not maintain a unique name: an ISIS account under the same name circulated via Telegram.

Therefore, within the Russian cyber space, both groups created a set of online sub-brands, however, the Al-Qaeda network produced the larger number of local brands with a well-articulated identity than the Islamic State network. Nonetheless, the study cannot underestimate the powerful brand image of ISIS within the Russian cyberspace, whose value was empowered to a large extent by IS's international actions and their unprecedented TV coverage. The study inclined to explain this discrepancy by outlet lifespan and weak censorship. Given the shocking ISIS propaganda products along with essential territorial expansion, this group became a main troublemaker for the world community, whereas Al-Qaeda affiliates were unfairly disregarded as a serious threat. In light of this, online censorship predominantly targeted IS's sources rather than Al-Qaeda's channels. As a result, Al-Qaeda partisan outlets had a longer lifespan, which helped them to develop recognizable and visible brand outlets.

While the ISIS network focused on the promotion of its global brand through domestic outlets, the Al-Qaeda network advanced local sub-brands, overshadowing its master brand. Both networks elaborated a set of well-recognizable brands, which could be reinstated at any time and which would help them to regain their popularity.

5.1.2 Hypothesis 2. As the research suggested, given the ISIS global image, the ISIS outlets would have the larger number of online supporters than the Al-Qaeda channels. This led to the conclusion that the Russian speaking audience would demonstrate high brand awareness and loyalty to this group. The tracked networks elaborated and maintained different dimensions of online user engagement which correlated with brand loyalty and brand awareness; they were tracked via membership (overall and daily influx), the users' adherence to community rules and restrictions, and the members' behavioral pattern.

The research discovered that the Islamic State network attracted a larger crowd than the Al-Qaeda channels. Considering this, the study needs to describe tendencies detected during the daily monitoring. First of all, it is a cliché to state that any radical outlet gathers an essential crowd if it functions without interruption. Prior to VK censorship actions in 2014-2015, IS's and Al-Qaeda's channels, which circulated for several months, accumulated thousands of followers. For the ISIS network, the relocation from one platform to another had a detrimental impact on the size of its audience (Figure 1). Indeed, in 2014, the average of number the ISIS members was more than 3,000, but its average VK crowd was much smaller (1,276 members) (Figure 1). Under the pressure of censorship and the multiple failures of the Islamic State ground operations, this value continued to decline in 2017 (Figure 1). Even ISIS's 2017 return to Vkontakte just underlined the existence of the IS's supporters rather than help to increase the ISIS audience significantly (Figure 1). As overall ISIS membership reduced, the category of daily influx of new followers was also in decline, slipping down from 283 individuals to 75 members (75%) (Table 1).

As Figure 2 shows, the Al-Qaeda outlets did not attract a significant crowd within its favorite platforms – Twitter and Telegram. While the ISIS network experienced a decrease in membership in 2016-2017, its competitor's audience soared up to 75% on Twitter and up to 310% on Telegram (Figure 2) at the same period. Nonetheless, Al-Qaeda's 2016 membership did not reach the ISIS membership size and yet outpaced it in 2017 due to the overall decline of the ISIS network. In comparison with 2016, the Al-Qaeda network of 2017 added more new followers daily; this determinant jumped by 475% (Table 1). Mainly, the growth of the Al-Qaeda membership correlated with the emergence of prominent brands (Sham Center, M.J, and Faruq Shami) which indicated the growth of brand awareness.
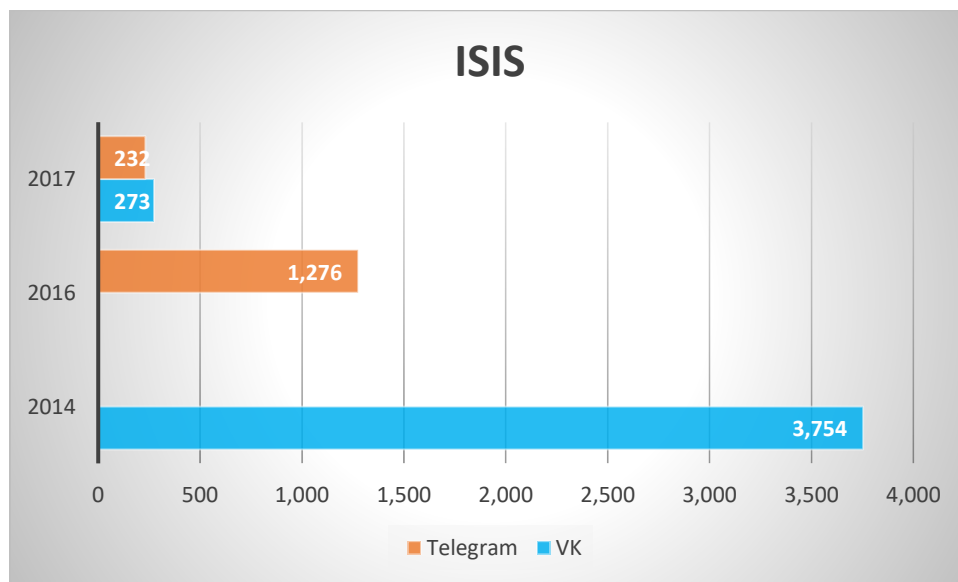
Figure 1. The average of the IS's public group membership on Telegram and Vkontakte (2014-2017).
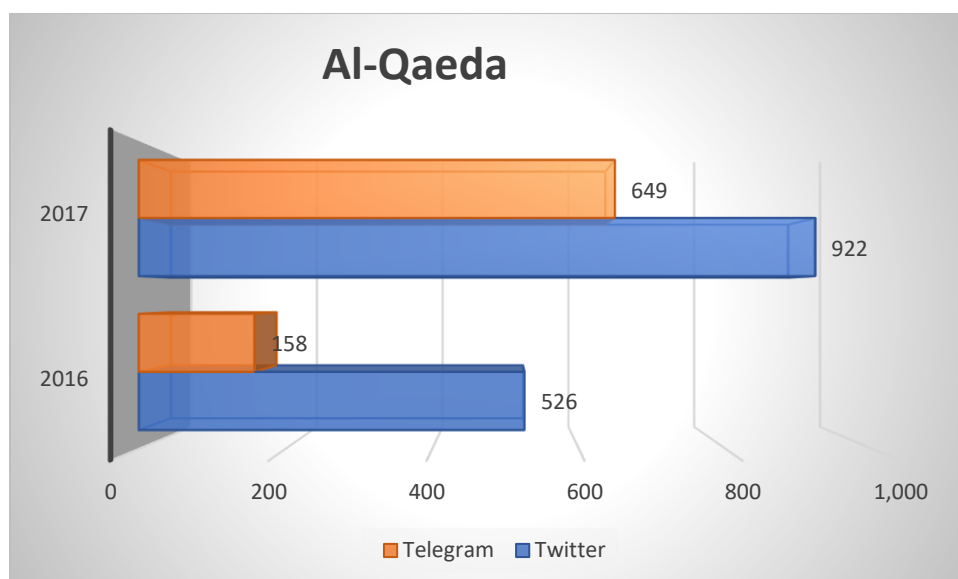
Figure 2. The average number of members for the Al-Qaeda affiliated public outlets (2016-2017).

Second, Al-Qaeda's crowd and ISIS's crowd had a different behavioral pattern. IS's audience was more dynamic and dedicated. Anticipating censorship at any moment, ISIS supporters checked not only news updates, but network developments in order to stay connected with banned and reopened sources. This "habit" explained why IS's outlets experienced a vast influx of members shortly after their return. In contrast, Al-Qaeda's partisan accounts had a slow but stable increase of new members, because their followers did not expect harsh and immediate restrictions (Table 1). Third, when the Islamic State had one defeat after another, its online presence diminished. Simultaneously, Al-Qaeda's account membership began to increase.

Table 1

Al-Qaeda and ISIS's influx of members per day (2016-2017)

Group	Platform	New members per day (average) 2016	New members per day (average) 2017	Percentage
Al-Qaeda	T	8	46	+ 475%
ISIS	T	283	75	-75%
ISIS	VK	-	86	-

Note. To calculate the average number of new members joining daily, the study used the statistics for Al-Qaeda and ISIS accounts, which operated on the same social media platform and had around 30 days of activity in 2016 and 2017.

Both networks managed a special safe space for communication on Telegram. In contrast with Al-Qaeda supporters, IS's audience demonstrated a high demand for communication. While an Al-Qaeda chat stopped its activity after less than one year (in 2016), an ISIS entity operated under slightly different names for more than two years. Worth noting is the fact that its chat experienced unusual invigoration among its participants after every successful ISIS operation (a terror attack in Western states or a battlefield victory in Syria or Iraq). In 2016, its membership reached up to almost 400 individuals. However, the number of Al-Qaeda forum participants was lower, fluctuating between 80 to 130 individuals. Its discussion mode did not change significantly in light of Al-Qaeda military advancement and IS's actions. Both forums were common targets for censorship. The Al-

Qaeda entity had a difficult time staying open; however, its competitor demonstrated its superior media team after constantly reopening its chat despite censorship actions.

This team reestablished the outlet persistently and did not let it remain off the air for an extended period of time. In fact, this chat became active within several hours of being shut down. This team reestablished the outlet persistently and did not let it remain off the air for an extended period of time. In fact, this chat became active within several hours of being shut down.

ISIS and Al-Qaeda administrators invented and imposed regulatory rules which increased their resilience. In comparison with Al-Qaeda channels, ISIS hosts were highly exigent toward their audience. The former usually controlled their "intellectual property rights", asking users to make references in case of reposting. Also, Al-Qaeda channels tried to manage customer-to-host communication, demanding followers to be respectful in their public comments. As mentioned previously, ISIS outlets imposed a set of rules whose fulfillment was not optional but compulsory. IS hosts managed the following aspects of users' online behavior: user names[29], avatars, writing rules[30], outlet's engagement, gender restriction, and selective membership[31]. All these aspects indicated the significant level of the ISIS supporters' dedication and brand loyalty; they were ready to follow any invented rule without resentment.

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[29] Users must pick nonsecular and male names. Some IS hosts provided lists of available user names.
[30] In 2016, ISIS hosts announced to their followers that they cannot use certain Russian letters: ъ, й, and ь.
[31] In 2016-2017, some IS supporters were banned from ISIS communities due to their membership in Al-Qaeda affiliated groups. Screenshots of their profiles with a warning note spread via the ISIS network. To resolve the issue, these restricted users contacted IS hosts in order to remove the restriction.

5.1.2.1 Female issues. In contrast with Al-Qaeda communities, ISIS administrators did not let female supporters join their outlets. In 2016, the study detected one female group within the IS's online niche, which was reopened at least two times. Al-Qaeda channels did not insist on exclusively male followers. Being more inclusive, Al-Qaeda community hosts allowed females to be a part of their communities. To stay connected, they advised female followers to be modest and refrain from public comments or conversations. Worth noting is that apparently the ISIS network relied predominantly on male hosts, whereas the Al-Qaeda network had a prominent female administrator, Bely Sneg (White Snow), who ran several news outlets in 2014-2015.

Therefore, on the domestic level, the Islamic State network demonstrated the larger membership and daily influx of new followers; the research argues that the brand awareness and loyalty for the Islamic State within the Russian cyberspace was high prior to the declaration of a Caliphate in 2014. Further, this criterion remained higher than for its competitor. For Al-Qaeda, the situation began to alter with the appearance of new brands (M.J, Sham Center, Faruq Shami, and Malhama Tactical), which stimulated the overall level of brand awareness. Despite the fact that the ISIS network implemented serious regulations for its supporters, the number of its followers continued to grow; censorship actions only had a serious impact on membership growth. The decline of ISIS membership was not caused by Al-Qaeda's victory in the inter-group competition.

5.1.3 Hypothesis 3. Within the online realm, the connection between the group's domestic franchise and its global brand was distinct. While ISIS domestic outlets promoted the global brand and its "official" products, Al-Qaeda partisan channels presented an

indistinct image of their master brand. The latter advanced their own entities rather than the global brand, positioning themselves as a primary force. As for the former, its foreign fighters from the Russian Federation did not establish their own militant groups with a distinct name, a stated group's mission, or self-promoted independent status, as the Ajnad al-Kavkaz or Nogay Shamda groups did.

The Al-Qaeda and Islamic State networks maintained a different approach to their inner network hierarchy. For ISIS, there was a widely accepted agreement between activists and followers that any ISIS affiliated outlet had to declare its official or unofficial status (Figure 3). For its competitor, the situation was different. Channels did not only articulate their affiliation, but many of them (Sham Center, MT, Faruq Shami, etc.) stated their independent status. These characteristics explain the distinction between Al-Qaeda and ISIS brand types. It was found that their brands had a similar structure in accordance to channel content: informational, inspirational, forums, and referential (link storage). Nonetheless, the Al-Qaeda network had military group brands (Malhama Tactical, Ajnad Kavkaz, Nogay Shamda).
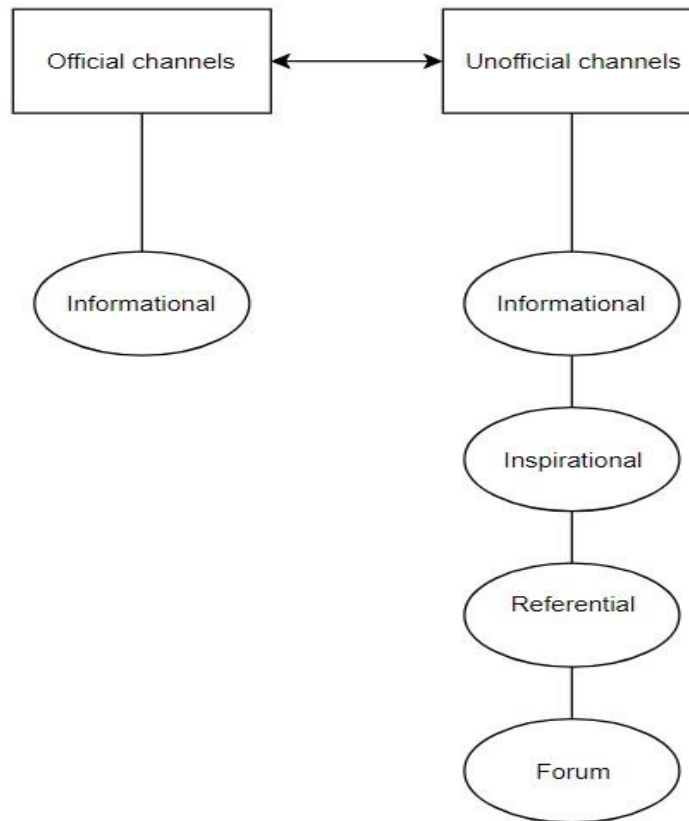
Figure 3. ISIS outlet types (2013-2017).

5.1.4 Hypothesis 4. By the onset of the Syrian conflict, the Al-Qaeda network had functioned and accumulated recognition within Russian cyber space. In comparison to Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State as a relatively young terrorist group did not have this advantage and began to form a network. To advance their image, both groups utilized various online options, establishing websites, blogs, and social media channels. Nonetheless, the foundation for their networks became social media platforms.

Driven by huge enthusiasm, the IS's activists were more inventive, organized, and Internet savvy. These features helped the activists not only to override the mentioned Al-Qaeda network advantage, but to build their first prominent brands (Sham Today) in 2013. The

appearance of these brands ended the initial disarray. However, up until 2015, its competitor remained disorganized and did not develop leading outlets, despite the circulation of several websites, blogs, and an endless number of social media accounts. The Kavkaz Center, VD, and other website brands which had been around prior to the Syrian conflict did not expand their recognition, disregarding their brand's singularity advantage and social media opportunities. In light of this, the Al-Qaeda network shifted from the domination of websites to outlets on social media platforms.

5.1.4.1 Al-Qaeda and ISIS network in 2013-2016. The organizations tended to allocate their outlets on domestic platforms rather than on international entities. During 2013-2015, 92% of ISIS and 87% of Al-Qaeda community accounts operated on the Russian social media platform, VK. For militants with personal pages, this facilitated communication with their families and friends, whom they left at home; for community outlets, the domestic platforms allowed them to stay close to their target audience. Nonetheless, over time, this tendency became less important, because continuous restrictions changed followers' behavior. Chasing favorite channels, Al-Qaeda and ISIS's supporters grew accustomed to various social media platforms and maintained several personal accounts.

By the end of 2015, under the pressure of VK censorship, the ISIS and Al-Qaeda outlets adopted other social media platforms. The overwhelming majority of their channels found fertile ground on Telegram. During the first part of 2016, the IS's and Al-Qaeda's VK presence reduced to less than 35%. It should be underlined that VK branches played a

secondary role, while core accounts were placed on Telegram (for ISIS) and on Telegram and Twitter (for Al-Qaeda).

     5.1.4.2 Al-Qaeda and ISIS networks in 2016-2017. For the Al-Qaeda network, there were two main platforms - Telegram and Twitter, where the majority of its entities maintained a permanent presence (Table 2). Indeed, in 2016, the most notable Al-Qaeda brands emerged on Telegram (An-Nur News, Victory is coming) and Twitter (ZX, Hanif, Sham Center). Since 2016, the range of Al-Qaeda networks increased, embracing new social media platforms, and in 2017, its outlets opened on Vimeo, Sound Cloud, and Instagram. At the same time, it reduced number of partisan outlets established for the VK (18%) and Archive (10%) audience (Table 2).

Table 2

Al-Qaeda network coverage (2016-2017)

Platform	Percentage of accounts placed on a platform in 2016	Percentage of accounts placed on a platform in 2017
Twitter	70%	69%
Telegram	75%	87%
Facebook	15%	37%
YouTube	15%	25%
Archive.org	10%	0
Vkontakte	30%	12%

Sound Cloud	0	6%
Vimeo	0	6%
Instagram	0	12%

At this time, the ISIS network maintained its branches across global and domestic social media entities, where the most common targets were Telegram, VK, Twitter, and Facebook. While Telegram remained a main base for the ISIS outlets, the IS's presence diminished continuously on Vkontakte (by 18% for 12 months) and Twitter (on 17% for 12 months). As statistics show, while the Al-Qaeda outlets expanded their Facebook space, the IS's niche on Facebook remained low (around 5%). IS's media teams could decrease their presence but they never abolished their social media platforms completely. With the reduction of censorship pressure, ISIS media teams were ready to widen their activity.

In 2016-2017, the Islamic State domestic network was more focused on its resilience (reserve accounts 90%) than on the expansion of multi-channel marketing (Table 3). The number of IS brands with branches across social media platforms reduced by 5% (Table 3). In return, the overwhelming majority of Al-Qaeda outlets were presented by several branches on various social media platforms (Table 3). In light of censorship actions and attacks from ISIS supporters, a number of Al-Qaeda affiliated outlets which began to establish reserve dormant accounts jumped from 25% in 2016 to 44% in 2017 (Table 3).

Table 3

Statistics for social media coverage and reserve accounts (2016-2017)

Date	Date	Multi-channel marketing	Accounts with reserve entities
Al-Qaeda	2016	75%	25%
ISIS	2016	47%	90%
Al-Qaeda	2017	80%	44%
ISIS	2017	42%	90%

5.1.4.3 Websites. Along with a large milieu of social media outlets, the Al-Qaeda network included 14 websites and blogs, where 50% of these informational sources circulated prior to 2013. By September 2017, 71% of Al-Qaeda websites remained active up to 2018. Some of them were detected by authorities, but these prohibited websites have continued to circulate in the Russian cyberspace despite government measures.

The ISIS network was mainly a social media project, which relied on its presence within social media platforms. The most prominent websites (FiSyria/Furat, Vkavkaz) operated between 2013 and 2016. During the first part of 2016, the ISIS activists reduced their website and blog activities; only 13% were ISIS entities that (Vkavkaz and Hot News) maintained a website or a blog, which were censored by government actions in 2016. Since this time, the study did not detect any significant entity (website or blog) within the IS's niche.

Therefore, initially, both networks harbored on Vkontakte, but since 2015, they were forced to look for another place to propagate; ISIS and Al-Qaeda found fertile ground on Telegram. As a major threat to the world community, the IS's network was under constant

attack, which reduced its chances to expand its presence. In contrast with the Islamic State, its competitor had a unique opportunity to settle on Twitter and acquire its space on Facebook and YouTube. In addition, the Al-Qaeda network existed in two structural versions: on social media platforms and on websites. In this regard, the Islamic State network was limited, being mainly a social media project.

5.1.4.4 Lifespan. The research suggests that continuous censorship actions had a profound impact on network features such as branch lifespan. Initially, between 2013 and 2015, the IS's affiliated channels circulated for up to several months. Later, their activity cycle reduced drastically, fluctuating from several days to several weeks. On rare occasions, ISIS accounts circulated for more than two months without disruption in 2015-2017. There was only one exclusion for referential accounts, whose average life cycle was longer than the lifespan for regular news or inspirational outlets. Indeed, one of ISIS's storage entities on Telegram, created in April 2016, remained active for more than five months. Worth noting is the fact that many Al-Qaeda sources were abandoned by their hosts. For ISIS accounts, this fate was an extremely rare case; ISIS sources were a common target for restrictions.

Once in a while, Al-Qaeda outlets were censored; many of their teams complained about harsh restrictions on brand activities. The brand Sham Center was not able to perform effectively on VK in 2016, whereas the group Ajnad Kavkaz was forced to reopen its accounts several times on Facebook and Twitter during the summer of 2016. Nonetheless, in contrast to ISIS entities, the Al-Qaeda affiliated outlets had a significant lifespan in 2013-2017. In 2016, the most prominent brand on Telegram, Victory is Coming, had on

average a 430 days lifecycle, while other affiliated accounts circulated 268 days (Table 4).

In 2017, the lifespan on Telegram decreased by 42%. On Twitter, the average of the

lifespan in 2016-2017 remained stable: 258 days (2016) and 266 (2017) (Table 4).

Table 4

The Al-Qaeda network branches' lifespans (2016-2017)

Outlet	Timeframe	Platform	Average lifecycle (in days)
Al-Qaeda accounts	2016	T	268
Al-Qaeda accounts	2016	TW	258
Victory is Coming branches	2016	T	430
Al-Qaeda accounts	2017	TW	266
Al-Qaeda accounts	2017	T	156

5.2 Brand as Symbol

5.2.1 Hypothesis 1. H1: In contrast to the Islamic State entities, Al-Qaeda affiliated

channels did not adhere to strong symbolic culture or a strong brand name approach.

In 2014-2017, the ISIS network relied on its unified symbolic culture, promoting its

attributes persistently despite censorship. Given ISIS's sophisticated symbolic attributes,

many Russian channels (78%) just uploaded images of the ISIS banner, underlining their

group identification (Table 5). Further, the number of outlets with unique visual symbols

increased from 43% in April (2016) to 98% in August (2016) (Table 5). In fact, the ISIS

network tried to implement the principle of name uniformity across social media platforms. However, under censorship pressure, sometimes, ISIS channels were forced to name their branches differently. It was an intended measure rather than an indication of network disarray as the study observed within the Al-Qaeda network.

In 2014-2016, the Al-Qaeda outlets were disorganized in this regard, demonstrating a lack of symbolic uniqueness, design and name consistency. In 2016, 50% of Al-Qaeda sources developed their own unique symbolic attributes, whereas 98% of IS's outlets circulated with a unique logo (Table 5). In 2017, the emergence of social media brands (Malhama Tactical, Muhammad Jazira, Faruq Shami, etc.) led to the development of unique symbolic culture. In addition, since this time, the channels began to adhere to name, design and symbol consistency across social media platforms.

The research discovered that the ISIS network began to adhere to visual uniformity (design, name and symbol homogeneity) much earlier than when this standard became widely applied by the Al-Qaeda entities.

Table 5

ISIS and Al-Qaeda's approach to symbolic culture (2013-2017)

Network	Date	Accounts with a unique logo
ISIS	2013-2015	22%[32]
ISIS	The spring of 2016	43%
ISIS	The summer 2017	98%

[32] 78% of ISIS outlets uploaded the IS's banner as a profile logo.

| ISIS | The spring of 2017 | 97.5% |
| Al-Qaeda | The summer of 2016 | 50% |

5.3 Brand as Product

5.3.1 Hypothesis 1. As the research previously stated, the relationship between the ISIS and Al-Qaeda domestic franchise and its global brand had a different character; the ISIS network served as a vessel for the advancement of the global brand and its "official" products, whereas the Al-Qaeda network promoted sub-brands and its products rather than the global brand, positioning itself as a primary force.

In 2013-2015, some IS accounts (Sham Today) presented their own propaganda products, adding them to the ISIS mainstream propaganda flows. Nonetheless, the production of propaganda products by the local sub-brands was in a constant and sharp decline since the end of 2014. While the majority of IS's outlets refrained from the production of propaganda, some accounts (Ansaruddin) were engaged in the sporadic production of curated images for the Russian speaking audience.

In contrast to ISIS's production approach, the Al-Qaeda domestic channels constantly increased their number of produced propaganda products. As the collected data indicated, 44% of the Al-Qaeda affiliated entities circulating between 2015 and 2017, created their own propaganda products (videos, photos, posters, texts) (Table G3). Every military group aired various propaganda products whose quality was lower than the quality of the ISIS official products. In addition, the news brands, circulated in 2017, significantly invigorated

the Al-Qaeda "market" by infusing of high quality products and unusual appeal (recruits with open face, interviews).

5.4   Recommendations and future research

To improve online censorship, the research recommends the following steps:

1.   The Internet must be treated as a regulated space with its own concrete laws and regulations;

2.   The Internet user has to be a responsible user. So, the anonymity of the Internet must be terminated; VPN services have to be restricted;

3.   No radical account should be treated as an isolated entity, but as a part of a network. Given their close informational and structural interconnectedness, every suspect account (its content) has to be checked in order to track its associated branches (including dormant channels), public and individual accounts.

4.   External links (across social media platforms) from suspected outlets have to be reported to relevant platforms and government agencies immediately;

5.   Members from a suspect account have to be checked and banned (temporarily or permanently). This makes people stop joining suspect channels;

6.   Brand outlets must be prevented from emerging, reappearing, and developing. Accounts which presented a tendency to stay with one unique name despite continuously being shut down have become a priority target for social media platforms. Radical hosts

are very inventive with brand names; brand names can be modified slightly or translated to other languages (usually English or Arabic). This tendency has to be heeded;

7.   All propaganda products (video, photo, text, etc.) created and labeled (a logo) by radical brands have to be eliminated from social media platforms completely;

8.   Rumors (government spies, honey trap accounts, etc.) must be spread via the Internet in order to discourage people from joining radical outlets;

9.   Measures to undermine their authenticity must be implemented such as honey-trap accounts, imitation radical brand accounts, etc.

Being newly studied problems, there are many issues to be examined. Below, I list several important directions for future research:

-     Online fundraising campaigns (in particular, the role of crypto currencies) are conducted by radicals;

-     The dynamics and content of female radical outlets;

-     Limits of word censorship software;

-     Content of radical forums (in particular, online security concerns among participants) and their role for an entire network.

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Appendix A

The Al-Qaeda network (2013-2017)

Table A1

Pro-Al-Qaeda websites and blogs in the Russian cyber space, circulated between 2013 and

2015

Source	Legal status	Status	Social media accounts	Activity
1. Beladusham	Blocked on 10/24/2014	B	VK	2013 - 2014
2. Alisnad	Blocked on 02/04/2016	L	TW, VK	2012 - present
3. White minaret	Blocked On 12/04/2015	L	VK, TW	2012 - present
4. Khilafa	Blocked on 12/04/2015	L	VK	2013 - present
5. KavkazCenter	Blocked on 09/12/2011	L		2009 - present
6. VD	2014	L		2009 - present
7. Usudusham	n/a	B	F, Google Play, VK	2013 - 2014
8. Akhbarsham. wordpress.com (active 01/2014-abandoned)	-	A	VK, TW	2014-2015
9. Hunafa	04/12/2010	L	VK	2009(?) -present
10. Newsmirislamic. wordpress.com	-	A	OK	05/19/2015-08/18/2015
Total:				10 websites

Table A2

Community pages of Al-Qaeda supporters and militants (2013-2015)

Name	Activity	Status	Platform
1. Notes of the Sham militant записки муджахида шама	2014	B	VK
2. Military Expert Voin Levanta	2015-2016	B	VK
3. Together Forever (female group)	2015	A	VK
4. InstaSyria network	2013-2016(?)	A	TW, VK
5. Syrian News (Новости Сирии (by InstaSyria))		B	VK
6. Jihad in Sham: search for truth (Джихад в Шаме)	2014	B	VK
7. Unofficial Alisnad.com (HANY@vaabil5)	June 2015 – August 2015	A	TW
8. Syria – the Sham revolution (Сирия-революция благословенного Шама)	Active in January 2013 -2015	B	VK
9. Sham without tyrants (Шам без тиранов)	2012 - 2014	B	VK
10. Unique informational source (Редкий Информатор)	2015	B	VK
11. Jabhat al-Nusra (Джабхат ан-нусра)	Active on 07/2015-2015	B	VK
12. United lines (Объединение рядов)	2015-2016	B	VK, TW
13. World-News (мир-новости)	2015-2017	B	VK, F, T
14. Alisnad.com	2015	B	VK
15. White Minaret RU	2015	B	VK

16. Free Syria. The organization of Northern Holmes (Свободная Сирия. Организация Северного Хомса)	Active in 2014	B	VK
17. They need our help (beladusham.com)	09/05/2013 - 10/2014	A	VK
18. White Snow (Bely Sneg)	2014-2015	A, B	TW, VK
19. Shoulder to shoulder (ПЛЕЧОМ К ПЛЕЧУ)	07-2014 - 12/2014	A	VK
سلاميةلإا القوقاز .20 @abumuslim_sh	06/2015 – 08/2015	A	TW
21. Islam Hikmet	06/2013 - 2014	A	VK
22. Syrian news network (Сеть Новостей Сирии)	2015	B	VK
23. Abu Idris Salafi (Абу Идрис Саляфи @AskerKrim)	July 2014-June 2015	A	TW
Total:			23

Table A3

Personal pages of Al-Qaeda supporters and militants (2013-2015)

Name	Gender	Activity	Status	Platform
1) Ruman Ash-Sham	F	04/07/2013- 05/18/2015	A	VK
2) Roza Stechkina	F	2014-08/2015	A	VK
3) Salikha Saetova	F	08/2014-2018	A	VK
4) Muslim Darov	M	2014 - 2016	B	VK
5) Abu-Abdullakh Al-Gumuki	M	07/2014 - 2012	A	VK

6) Jabhat al-Nusra@ArgunShishani	M	Active in 02/2016	B	TW
7) Abu_Kavkaz@AliArgunskiy	M	2013-2016	B	TW
8) Abu Isa@AbuTamamivan	M	2013	A	TW
9) Ruslan Ataev	M	2015-09/2015	A	VK
10) Chanakan Chanakan чанакан чанакаев	M	2013-2016	A	TW
11) @djukaev1994	M	06/2015-12/2015	A	TW
12) AbdullaAbdulla	M	2011-2016	A	TW
13) Muslim Shishani	M	2015	A	VK
14) Shamil Nuretdinov	M	2011-2014	A	VK
15) Kamalov Ibn Malik	M	2013-2014	A	VK
16) Abdulla Barri @musallahun	M	03/2015-10/2015	A	TW
Total:				16

Table A4

The Al-Qaeda network during the first part of 2016[33]

Account	Coverage across social media platforms	Number of branches	Unique Logo/ symbolic consistency	Language	Reserve accounts	Date of activity	Status
1) Victory is coming	T	10	-	Russian	+	2015-2017	A/D[34]
2) Al-Saff Media	T, VK, TW	4	+	Russian	+	2015-2017	B/D
3) Revelation of Daesh/ The state of lie	T, F	2	+	Russian	-	2016-2017	B/D
4) An Nur News	T, VK	2	+	Russian Tajik	+	2016-2017	B/D
5) Kavkaz News	T	1	-	Russian	-	2015-2016	B/D
6) News from front lines	T, VK, TW	3	-	Russian	-	2016	B/D
7) Vdoxnovlia (BOT)	T	1	-	Russian	-	2016-2017	B/D
8) Umma News	T	3	-	Russian German English	+	2016-2017	B/D
9) VoenKor	TW	1	+	Russian	-	2015 - 2016	B/D
10) Zeynal Xidirov (ZX)	TW, F	2	-	Russian	-	2015-present	B
11) Military Edc	TW	1	+	Russian	+	2015-2016	B/D

[33] The study excluded dormant reserve accounts from statistics, counting only active accounts.
[34] The "D" mark means a brand was discontinued.

12) Tuba Media	TW	1	+	Russian	-	2015-2016	B/D
13) Hanif	T, TW, VK	4	+	Russian	-	2015-2017	A/D
14) Islamdin	T, YT, TW, website	3	+	Russian	-	present	B
15) Alisnad	T, TW, F, website	3	-	Russian	-	present	B
16) White minaret	T, TW, YT, F, Archive.org, website	5	+	Russian	-	present	B
17) Kavkaz Center	T, TW, website	2	-	Russian	-	present	B
18) VDagestan	T, VK, TW, website	3	+	Russian Arabic	-	present	B
19) Khilafa	VK, T, Archive.org, TW, YT, website	5	-	Russian	-	present	B
20) Hunafa	VK, TW, T, website	3	-	Russian	-	present	B

Table A5

The "Victory is coming" network branches' lifespan (2016)

Account	Platform	Lifespan	Date of establishment
1) Archive -VC	T	636 days	02/04/2016 – 11/01/2017

2) Victory is coming	T	502 days	04/17/2016 – 09/01/2017
3) Read!	T	506 days	03/29/2016 – 08/17/2017
4) Video Channel	T	413 days	09/14/2016 – 11/01/2017
5) GdeWse (1)	T	154 days	03/29/2016 – 08/30/2016
6) GdeWse (2)	T	422 days	09/05/2016 – 11/01/2017
7) Guide (Bot)	T	609 days	03/02/2016 – 11/01/2017
8) Best Nasheed	T	399 days	09/02/2016 – 11/01/2017
9) Leaders of the Ummah	T	290 days	01/15/2017- 11/01/2017
10) Poems	T	438 days	08/20/2016 – 11/01/2017
Total: 10 branches		Average lifespan: 430 days	

Table A6

The Al-Qaeda network lifespan on Telegram and Twitter (2016)

Account	Platform	Activity	Lifespan (days)	Status
An Nur News (1)	T	03/10/2016 – 04/16/2016	37	B
An Nur News (2)	T	04/17/2016 - 10/01/2017	167	B
Vdoxnovlia (BOT)	T	03/01/2016 – 01/21/ 2017	326	B
World - News	T	03/01/2016 – 11/01/2017	610	A
Al-Saff Media	T	03/12/2016 –01/21/2017	321	B
State of Lie	T	03/15/2016 – 01/20/2017	311	B
Rad Alkhawarij	T	03/14/2016 – 03/23/2017	374	B
Hanif (1)	TW	01/01/2015 – 04/06/2016	461	B
Hanif (2)	TW	04/07/ 2016 – 01/01/2017	269	B
Hanif (3)	TW	01/02/2017 – 11/01/2017	303	A
Tuba Media	TW	08/17/2015 – 05/22/2016	279	B
ZX/ ZeynalXidirov (1)	TW	01/01/2015 – 04/01/2016	91	B
XidirovZ (2)	TW	04/02/2016 – 06/01/2016	60	B
XidirovZeynal (3)	TW	06/02/2016 – 09/01/2016	91	B

Зеинал Хидиров (4) @zeinalxidirov	TW	09/02/2016 – 11/01/2017	425	L
Military Edc	TW	01/01/2015 – 11/14/2016	349	B

Table A7

Al-Qaeda account statistics from their establishment date up to October 26, 2017

Outlet	N	Number of presented accounts	Date of establishment	Lifespan	Network, Number of actual and main accounts	Logo	Members	Reserve account	Platform
Mukkarin Hazari (1)	1	2	7/8/2017	110	T, TW (2)	+	742	-	T
Mukkarin Hazari (2)			4/9/2017	200		+	69		TW
Sham Center (1)	2	2	9/11/2017	45	T, TW, W (2)	+	1005	-	T
Sham Center (2)			11/1/2016	359		+	2952		TW

LWA (1)	3	3	6/20/2017	128	T, YT (2)	+	871	+	T
LWA (2)			10/15/2017	11		+	285		T
LWA (3)			10/19/2017	7		+	8		YT
Truth about Syria	4	1	11/28/2016	332	TW (1)	-	1220		TW
Voice of Sham (1)	5	4	5/26/2017	153	TW, T, YT, F, VK, W (5)	+	653	-	TW
Voice of Sham (2)			5/26/2017	153		+	708 likes (957 followers)		F
Voice of Sham (3)			5/28/2017	155		+	802		YT
Voice of Sham (4)			5/31/2017	148		+	428		YT
Muhammad Jazira (1)	6	5	4/5/2017	204	T, TW, F (3)	+	2195	+	T
Muhammad Jazira (2)			7/26/2017	92		+	1144		T
Muhammad Jazira (3)			10/20/2017	6		+	48		T

Muhammad Jazira (4)			10/14/2017	12		+	n/a		F
Muhammad Jazira (5)			04/05/2017	204		+	853		TW
Notes of mujahedins (1)	7	2	9/1/2017	55	T, F (2)	+	515	-	T
Abu Umair Al-Kazahi (2)	8		9/6/2017	50	W, TW, T (2)	+	726		F
Abdulaziz Kazanly (1)		3	7/1/2017	177		+	71	+	TW
Abdulaziz Kazanly (2)			8/13/2017	74		+	353		T
News of Islamic Umma (3)			7/19/2017	99		-	546		T
Ajnad Kavkaz (1)	9	5	7/17/2017	101	T, IN, TW, W (3)	+	389	+	T
Ajnad Kavkaz (2)			11/15/2016	345		+	30		T
Ajnad Kavkaz (3)			7/31/2016	452		+	282		T

The vertex of Islam (4)			9/5/2017	53		+	500		T
The vertex of Islam (5)			9/19/2017	37		+	2		IN
Nogay Shamda (1)	10	2	7/18/2017	95	T, YT, W (2)	+	327	+	T
Abu Kavkaz (2)			7/21/2017	97		+	379		YT
Malhama Tactical (1)	11	4	7/17/2017	101	T,TW,F, YT,Vk, IN (6)	+	687	+	T
Malhama Tactical (2)			1/19/2017	280		+	185		T
Malhama Tactical (3)			1/10/2017	289		+	559		FB
Malhama Tactical (4)			8/1/2016	451		+	1468		TW
Faruq Shami (1)	12	4	7/19/2017	99	T,F,TW, SC, Vimeo (5)	+	455	+	T
Faruq Shami (2)			4/3/2017	206		+	1324		TW

Faruq Shami (3)			9/26/2017	30		+	954 (112 followers)		F
Faruq Shami (4)			8/13/2017	74		+	8		SC
Thoughts at midnight (1)	13	1	8/30/2017	57	T (1)	+	504	-	T
An Nur News	14	1	4/17/2016	557	T (2)	+	280	-	T
Warriors of Sham	15	2	1/25/2017	274	T,TW (2)	-	416	-	T
Warriors of Sham			12/16/2016	314		-	534		TW
ZX	16	2	n/a	n/a	TW, F (2)		n/a	-	TW
ZX			n/a	n/a			n/a		F

Table A8

Lifespan of pro-Al-Qaeda accounts on Twitter (2017)

Outlet	N	Date of establishment	Lifespan
Mukkarin Hazari (2)	1	4/9/2017	200
Sham Center (2)	2	11/1/2016	359
Truth about Syria	3	11/28/2016	332
Voice of Sham (1)	4	5/26/2017	153

Muhammad Jazira (5)	5	04/05/2017	204
Abdulaziz Kazanly (1)	6	7/1/2017	177
Malhama Tactical (4)	7	8/1/2016	451
Faruq Shami (2)	8	4/3/2017	206
Warriors of Sham	9	12/16/2016	314
Average			266

Table A9

Lifespan of pro-Al-Qaeda accounts on Telegram (2017). Al-Qaeda account statistics from their establishment date up to October 26, 2017

Outlet	N	Date of establishment	Lifespan
Mukkarin Hazari (1)	1	7/8/2017	110
Sham Center (1)	2	9/11/2017	45
LWA (1)	3	6/20/2017	128
Muhammad Jazira (1)	4	4/5/2017	204
Notes of mujahedins (1)	5	9/1/2017	55
Abdulaziz Kazanly (2)	6	8/13/2017	74
News of Islamic	7	7/19/2017	99

Umma (3)			
Ajnad Kavkaz (1)	8	7/17/2017	101
Ajnad Kavkaz (3)	9	7/31/2016	452
The vertex of Islam (4)	10	9/5/2017	53
Nogay Shamda (1)	11	7/18/2017	95
Malhama Tactical (1)	12	7/17/2017	101
Faruq Shami (1)	13	7/19/2017	99
Thoughts at midnight (1)	14	8/30/2017	57
An Nur News	15	4/17/2016	557
Warriors of Sham	16	1/25/2017	274
Average			156

Table A10

Al-Qaeda Telegram accounts' membership growth from establishment and up to March 30th, 2016

Name	Membership	Date of group establishment	People per day
Vdagestan	318	12-Mar-16	17.6
Al-Saff Media Center	153	12-Mar-16	8.5

Victory is coming	171	9-Mar-16	8
An-Nur News	132	10-Mar-16	6.6
Kavkaz Center	119	2-Mar-16	4
Revelation of Daesh/State of Lie	56	14-Mar-16	3.5

Appendix B

Al-Qaeda Militant Groups: the Nogais Jamaat

Table B1

The posting pattern of the Nogais jamaat accounts on Twitter and Vkontakte (November 2016 – April 2017)

Date	VK	Number of posts on Twitter
11/06/2016	5	5
11/08/2016	1	1
11/09/2016	3	4
11/10/2016	1	1
11/13/2016	1	1
11/15/2016	5	7
11/17/2016	1	2
12/06/2016	7	8
12/07/2016	0	1
12/08/2016	1	1
12/09/2016	1	1
12/13/2016	1	n/a
12/18/2016	1	n/a
01/09/2017	1	n/a
02/28/2017	1	n/a

03/19/2017	1	n/a
04/10/2017	1	n/a
Total:	32	32

Appendix C

Al-Qaeda Militant Groups: Ajnad al-Kavkaz

Table C1

The number of watchers on the Ajnad al-Kavkaz account on Telegram between 07/02/2016

and 09/12/2016

Date of a post	The number of posts per day	Type	Number of readers
07/02/2016	9	Text	116
07/02/2016		Video	119
07/02/2016		Video	120
07/02/2016		Text	120
07/02/2016		Text	123
07/02/2016		Text	123
07/02/2016		Text	120
07/02/2016		Text	126
07/02/2016		Text	123
07/03/2016	12	Video	126
07/03/2016		Text	125
07/03/2016		Text	130
07/03/2016		Photo	131
07/03/2016		Text	131
07/03/2016		Photo	140

07/03/2016		Text	132
07/03/2016		Text	133
07/03/2016		Photo	136
07/03/2016		Text	138
07/03/2016		Photo	139
07/03/2016		Text	145
07/04/2016	4	Text/	140
07/04/2016		Photo	147
07/04/2016		Text	148
07/04/2016		Text	148
07/05/2016	6	Text	147
07/05/2016		Text	148
07/05/2016		Text	148
07/05/2016		Poster	156
07/05/2016		Photo	160
07/05/2016		Text	161
07/06/2016	5	Text	160
07/06/2016		Text	161
07/06/2016		Video	172
07/06/2016		Video	391
07/06/2016		Video	425
07/08/2016	7	Text	178

07/08/2016		Photo	181
07/08/2016		Photo	191
07/08/2016		Photo	189
07/08/2016		Photo	190
07/08/2016		Text	202
07/08/2016		Text	205
07/09/2016	5	Text	212
07/09/2016		Text	220
07/09/2016		Text	226
07/09/2016		Photo	239
07/09/2016		Photo	272
07/12/2016	2	Photo	261
07/12/2016		Photo	268
07/13/2016	2	Photo	293
07/13/2016		Photo	296
07/22/2016	9	Video	395
07/22/2016		Video	404
07/22/2016		Video	425
07/22/2016		Video	448
07/22/2016		Video	469
07/22/2016		Video	500
07/22/2016		Video	522

07/22/2016		Text	530
07/22/2016		Text	563
09/12/2016	1	Text	448
Average:			223.14

Table C2

The number of watchers on the Ajnad al-Kavkaz account on Telegram between 02/28/2017

and 05/26/2017

Date of post	The number of posts per day	Number of readers
02/28/2017	1	849
03/02/2017	1	1,500
03/03/2017	4	713
03/03/2017		1,100
03/03/2017		1,100
03/03/2017		1,500
03/04/2017	2	1,300
03/04/2017		1,400
03/05/2017	2	1,300
03/05/2017		1,500

03/07/2017	1	1,600
03/08/2017	1	3,100
03/10/2017	1	1,600
03/11/2017	1	1,700
03/12/2017	1	3,200
03/15/2017	1	1,900
03/19/2017	1	2,200
03/20/2017	1	1,700
03/23/2017	1	1,700
03/29/2017	1	2,900
04/01/2017	1	2,000
04/02/2017	1	1,500
04/11/2017	1	2,300
04/12/2017	1	1,200
04/15/2017	4	2,300
04/15/2017		1,600
04/15/2017		1,600
04/15/2017		1,600
04/22/2017	1	1,200
04/23/2017	1	5,600
04/24/2017	1	1,600
05/03/2017	1	1,400

05/08/2017	1	1,100
05/25/2017	1	767
05/26/2017	2	232
05/26/2017		237
Average:		1,669

Table C3

The types of posts on the Ajnad al-Kavkaz account on Telegram between 02/28/2017 and

05/26/2017

Type of the post	The number of posts	Percentage
Text	11	31
Photo	3	9
Video	8	23
Poster	6	17
Audio	7	20
Total:		35

Table C4

The number of video watchers by 06/03/2016 on the Ajnad al-Kavkaz video storage

account on Archive.org (est. in October 2013)

Date when a video was uploaded	Title of video	Total number of views	Days on air	Views per day	Duration
10/02/2013	Message from the militants	468	975	0.5	7:50
10/03/2013	Message from the militants	658	974	0.7	7:50
10/04/2013	Abdurahman: the response to our critics	122	973	0.12	2:47
07/24/2014	Shakhids: Abu Bakr and Abu Hamza	161	680	0.23	4:53
07/30/2014	Zeid Abu Abdullah became a shakhid in Latakia	15	674	0.02	13:09
07/30/2014	Zeid Abu Abdullah became a shakhid in Latakia*	81	674	0.12	13:09
10/13/2014	The response of Abdulhakim to Abu Hamza (via Zello)	50	599	0.08	14:49
04/04/2015	Ajnad al-Kavkaz. Night fights in Idlib	297	426	0.7	4:48
04/04/2015	Ajnad al-Kavkaz. Day 2. Fights for Idlib	623	426	1.5	4:36
04/04/2015	Ajnad al-Kavkaz. The triumph march in Idlib	44	426	0.1	1:22
04/08/2015	Ajnad al-Kavkaz. With greetings from Idlib	840	422	2	6:57
04/22/2015	Ajnad al-Kavkaz. The military operation "Bashkoj", Aleppo	551	408	1.3	5:01
05/10/2015	Ajnad al-Kavkaz. The military operation in Mykbalya	583	390	1.5	9:09
05/10/2015	Ajnad al-Kavkaz is on ribat	540	390	1.4	2:19

05/21/2015	Ajnad al-Kavkaz is fighting for Al-Mastum	1,118	379	3	7:21
06/03/2015	Ajnad al-Kavkaz: a kafir	389	366	1.1	2:31
06/03/2015	Ajnad al-Kavkaz	633	366	1.7	1:48
06/10/2015	The fight is in the forest of Basankul	1,178	359	3.3	3:22
06/10/2015	A shooter is in Basankul	26	359	0.07	5:14
06/17/2015	The operation is in Basankul	2, 024	352	5.8	5:14
08/09/2015	The military operation for taking over the heights in Idlib	882	299	3	9:48
09/20/2015	Accomplished promises: eulogy	54	257	0.2	4:07
11/05/2015	The emir of Ajnad al-Kavkaz, Hamza about the taking over of the heights in Latakia	61	211	0.3	1:49
12/13/2015	Ajnad al-Kavkaz is in Idlib	528	173	3	4:14
12/13/2015	Ajnad al-Kavkaz is in Idlib	49	173	0.2	4:14
02/16/2016	Ajnad Al Kavkaz - the last operation in Djabaal Turkman	322	108	3	6:05
05/16/2016	The message of the emir Abdul Hakim to Muslims	335	18	19	7:23

Table C5

The number of video watchers by 01/23/2016 on the Ajnad al-Kavkaz video storage account on YouTube.com

Title of video	Total number of views	Days on air	Views per day	Duration

			(average)	
Message from the militants	29,763	730	41	7:50
Shakhids: Abu Bakr and Abu Hamza	74,200	365	203	4:53
Zeid Abu Abdullah became a shakhid in Latakia	13,351	674	37	13:09
Ajnad al-Kavkaz. Night fights in Idlib	5,861	275	21	4:48
Ajnad al-Kavkaz. The triumph march in Idlib	6,074	275	22	1:22
Ajnad al-Kavkaz. With greetings from Idlib	7,852	275	28	6:57
Ajnad al-Kavkaz. The military operation in Mykbalya	4,312	244	18	9:09
Ajnad al-Kavkaz is on ribat	9,166	244	37	2:19
Ajnad al-Kavkaz is fighting for Al-Mastum	44,663	244	183	7:21
Agnad al-Kavkaz is in Idlib	4,570	31	147	4:14

Appendix D

Al-Qaeda Militant Group: Malhama Tactical

Table D1

VK community's posts, aired in May 2016 – November 2016

Date of post	N	Usage of hashtags	Number of hashtags	Used hashtags	Sign under post	
					Abu Rofiq	Malhama Tactical
20 May 2016	1	-	-	-	-	-
20 May 2016	2	-	-	-	+	-
22 May 2016	3	-	-	-	+	-
26 May 2016	4	-	-	-	-	-
31 May 2016	5	-	-	-	+	-
5 June 2016	6	-	-	-	+	-
6 June 2016	7	-	-	-	-	-
6 June 2016	9	-	-	-	-	-
6 June 2016	10	-	-	-	+	-
7 June 2016	11	-	-	-	+	-
7 June 2016	12	-	-	-	-	-
7 June 2016	13	-	-	-	-	-
10 June 2016	14	-	-	-	+	-
14 June 2016	15	-	-	-	-	-
17 June 2016	16	-	-	-	-	-
17 June 2016	17	-	-	-	-	-
17 June 2016	18	-	-	-	-	-
18 June 2016	19	-	-	-	-	-
19 June 2016	20	-	-	-	+	-
19 June 2016	21	-	-	-	+	-
20 June 2016	22	-	-	-	-	-
20 June 2016	23	-	-	-	-	-
20 June 2016	24	-	-	-	-	-
22 June 2016	25	-	-	-	-	-
24 June 2016	26	-	-	-	-	-
24 June 2016	27	-	-	-	+	-
26 June 2016	28	-	-	-	-	-

27 June 2016	29	-	-	-	-	-
29 June 2016	30	-	-	-	+	-
29 June 2016	31	-	-	-	+	-
29 June 2016	32	-	-	-	-	-
29 June 2016	33	-	-	-	-	-
29 June 2016	34	-	-	-	+	-
30 June 2016	35	-	-	-	-	-
1 July 2016	36	-	-	-	-	-
6 July 2016	37	-	-	-	-	-
5 August 2016	38	-	0	-	-	+
26 August 2016	39	-	0	-	-	+
14 September 2016	40	+	1	Malhama Tactical	-	+
1 October 2016	41	+	1	Malhama Tactical	-	+
4 October 2016	42	+	2	Malhama Tactical, тактика	-	+
14 October 2016	43	+	1	Malhama Tactical	-	+
22 October 2016	44	+	1	Malhama Tactical	-	+
28 October 2016	45	+	1	Malhama Tactical	-	+
28 October 2016	46	+	1	Malhama Tactical	-	+
28 October 2016	47	+	1	Malhama Tactical	-	+
4 November 2016	48	+	1	Malhama Tactical	-	+
8 November 2016	49	+	1	Malhama Tactical	-	+
9 November 2016	50	+	1	Malhama Tactical	-	+
9 November 2016	51	-	0	-	-	-
16 November 2016	52	-	0	-	-	-
16 November 2016	53	+	1	Malhama Tactical	-	+
16 November 2016	54	+	1	Malhama Tactical	-	+

16 November 2016	55	+	1	Malhama Tactical	-	+
18 November 2016	56	-	0	-	-	-
19 November 2016	57	-	0	-	-	-
20 November 2016	58	+	1	Malhama Tactical	-	+
26 November 2016	59	+	1	Malhama Tactical	-	+
27 November 2016	60	+	4	Malhama Tactical, Сирия, Алеппо, идлиб	+	-
Total:	60	17			14	18

Table D2

The Malhama Tactical community's posts on Facebook (August 2016 – November 2016)[35]

Date of post	N	Total number of posts per day	Usage of hashtags	Number of hashtags	Used hashtags
08/25/2016	1	1	N/A		
10/01/2016	2	1	+	11	# Malhama Tactical, Тактика, Сирия, Алеппо, Шам, оборона, идлиб, халяб, учения, воина, рпг
10/02/2016	3	2	+	8	# Malhama Tactical, Тактика, Сирия, Шам, воина, пмп, Ранение, первая помощь
10/02/2016	4		+	8	# Malhama Tactical, Тактика, Сирия,

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[35] On Facebook, during the period August 25th, 2016 to November 20th, 2016, the MT community included 25 posts (FB, 2016). Given the fact that 6 posts are archived partially, the research scrutinizes only full posts (19 out of 25).

					Алеппо, Шам, халяб, воина, пмп
10/04/2016	5	1	+	6	# Malhama Tactical, Тактика, Сирия, Алеппо, Шам, ислам
10/12/2016	6	1	N/A		
10/13/2016	7	1	N/A		
10/15/2016	8	1	N/A		
10/19/2016	9	1	+	7	# Malhama Tactical, Тактика, Сирия, Алеппо, Шам, халяб, воина
10/21/2016	10	1	+	6	# Malhama Tactical, Тактика, Сирия, Алеппо, Шам, воина
10/22/2016	11	1	+	1	# Malhama Tactical
10/31/2016	12	3	+	5	# Malhama Tactical, Тактика, Сирия, Шам, воина
10/31/2016	13		+	6	# Malhama Tactical, Сирия, Алеппо, Шам, ислам, воина
10/31/2016	14		+	1	# Malhama Tactical
11/04/2016	15	4	+	7	# Malhama Tactical, Сирия, Алеппо, Шам, воина, Тактика, халяб
11/04/2016	16		+	8	Malhama Tactical, Сирия, Алеппо, Шам, воина, Тактика, ислам, деблокада,
11/04/2016	17		+	5	Malhama Tactical, Сирия, Шам, Тактика, ислам
11/04/2016	18		N/A		
11/11/2016	19	1	+	10	# Malhama Tactical, Тактика, Сирия, Syria, war, Sham, воина, рпг, пго, ислам
11/13/2016	20	1	+	15	# Malhama Tactical, Tactics, Тактика, Сирия, Syria, war, military, Aleppo, Алеппо, rpg, воина, рпг, пго, ислам, халяб

11/16/2016	21		N/A		
11/16/2016	22	2	+	15	# Malhama Tactical, М16, М16а4, М16а2, Tactics, Тактика, Шам, Сирия, Syria, war, military, воина, стрельба, кучность, винтовка
11/17/2016	23	2	+	12	# Malhama Tactical, Tactics, Тактика, Алеппо, Шам, Сирия, Syria, war, military, воина, защита, бронежилет
11/17/2016	24		+	9	# Malhama Tactical, Tactics, Тактика, Шам, Сирия, Syria, war, military, воина
11/20/2016	25	1	+	10	# Malhama Tactical, Тактика, воина, war, Syria, military, tactics, Sham, медицина, пмп

Table D3

MT posts on its Telegram communities 2016-2017

Date of post	N	Number of posts per day		The usage of hashtags	Used hashtags	Sign under post	
						Abu Rofiq	Malhama Tactical
Group A (est.06/21/2016)							
06/21/2016	1			-	-	+	-
07/27/2016	2			-	-	+	-
09/25/2016	3			1	Malhama Tactical	-	+

10/14/2016	4		1	Malhama Tactical	-	+
10/22/2016	5		1	-	-	-
10/23/2016	6		1	Malhama Tactical	-	+
10/29/2016	7		1	Malhama Tactical	-	+
11/08/2016	8		-	-	+	-
11/14/2016	9		-	-	-	+
11/27/2016	10		-	-	+	-
11/28/2016	11		-	-	-	-
12/06/2016	12		-	-	-	-
Total		12	5		4	5
Group B (est. 01/19/2017 - 03/2017)						
01/19/2017	1	7	+	Malhama Tactical	-	-
01/19/2017	2		-	-	-	-
01/19/2017	3		-	-	-	-
01/19/2017	4		-	-	-	-
01/19/2017	5		-	-	-	-
01/19/2017	6		-	-	-	-

01/19/2017	7			-	-	-	-
01/20/2017	8	1		-	-	-	-
01/21/2017	9	1		-	-	-	-
01/22/2017	10	2		-	-	-	-
01/22/2017	11			-	-	-	-
01/26/2017	12	1		-	-	-	-
01/28/2017	13	2		-	-	-	-
01/28/2017	14			-	-	-	+
01/29/2017	15	3		-	-	-	-
01/29/2017	16			-	-	-	+
01/29/2017	17			-	-	-	-
01/30/2017	18	8		-	-	+	-
01/30/2017	19			-	-	+	-
01/30/2017	20			-	-	+	-
01/30/2017	21			-	-	-	-
01/30/2017	22			-	-	-	-
01/30/2017	23			-	-	-	-
01/30/2017	24			-	-	-	-
01/30/2017	25			-	-	-	-
01/31/2017	26	1		-	-	-	-
02/07/2017	27	1		+	Malhama Tactical	-	+

02/13/2017	28	2	-	-	-	-
02/13/2017	29		-	-	-	-
02/21/2017	30	2	-	-	-	-
02/21/2017	31		-	-	-	-
02/26/2017	32	1	-	-	-	+
02/27/2017	33	1	-	-	-	+
02/28/2017	34	1	-	-	-	+
03/02/2017	35	1	-	-	-	+
03/04/2017	36	1	-	-	-	-
03/05/2017	37	1	-	-	-	-
03/09/2017	38	1	-	-	-	-
Total:		38	2		3	7

Table D4

Malhama Tactical: The statistics of views on its YouTube account (2016-2017)

Description	Date of posting	June 29, 2016	July 16, 2016	October 7, 2016	January 27, 2017	Increase From June to October 2016	Increase From October 2016 to January 2017	Daily rate watching	Months/ weeks on social media

Lesson	October 2016	-	-	3,790	23,036	-	508%	204	4 months
Lesson	15-22 June 2016	432	995	2,067	12,719	378%	515%	60	7 months
Lesson	May 2016	716	1,074	2,671	10,619	273%	297%	50	7 months
Occasional (eulogy)	7-14 January 2017	-	-	-	10,147	-	-	483	3 weeks
Training	August/ September 2016	-	-	4,341	8,555	-	97%	76	5 months
Occasional	17-30 July 2016	-	-	5,430	7,590	-	40%	67	6 months
Lesson	12/30/2016 - 01/07/2017	-	-	-	7,470	-	-	241	1 month
Occasional	1 June 2016	896	1,608	2,594	6,982	189%	169%	34	7 months
Lesson	15-22 June 2016	371	785	1,601	6,493	331%	305%	30	7 months

Lesson	26 June 2016	853	1,987	3,725	6,493	337%	74%	30	7 months
Training	October 2016	-	-	1,154	6,227	-	440%	55	4 months
Training	15-22 June 2016	293	660	2,485	5,887	748%	137%	28	7 months
Lesson	29 June 2016	72	610	1,417	5,312	1868%	275%	25	7 months
Lesson	December 2016	-	-	-	5,015	-	-	162	1 month
Occasional	1-8 June 2016	584	768	1,551	4,450	165%	187%	21	7 months
Occasional	15-22 June 2016	1,248	1,820	2,432	4,158	95%	71%	19	7 months
Lesson	24 June 2016	324	585	1,267	4,053	291%	220%	19	7 months
Lesson	17-30 July 2016	-	-	1,360	3,578	-	163%	31	6 months
Training	8-15 June 2016	447	657	1,234	3,262	176%	164%	15	7 months
Lesson	9	-	-	-	2,931 (by 02/	-	-	48	2 months

	November 2016				07/2017 – 3,137)			
Occasional	13 July 2016	-	352	1.246	2,889	-	132%	14	6 months
Lesson	15-22 June 2016	336	686	1,185	2,823	253%	138%	13	7 months
Training	November 2016	-	-	-	2,706	-	-	44	2 months
Lesson	19-27 January 2017	-	-	-	2,487	-	-	355	1 week
Occasional	29 June 2016	184	653	1,120	2,280	509%	103%	11	6 months
Lesson	19-27 January 2017	-	-	-	2,224	-	-	371	6 days
Training	17 July 2016	-	-	859	2,079	-	142%	18	6 months
Lesson	19-27 January 2017	-	-	-	1,837	-	-	262	1 week

Lesson	19 January 2017	-	-	-	1,594	-	-	228	1 week
Occasional	27 January 2017	-	-	-	582	-	-	-	21 hours
Occasional	22 June 2017	261	340	572	1,611	119%	181%	7	7 months

Appendix E

Muhhammad Jazira Brand

Table E1

Informational sources used by the M.J brand for reposting (07/14/2017-09/30/2017)

Source's name	N	Description	References	Entries
Ajnad Kavkaz	1	pro-Al-Qaeda militant group	23	27
Nogay Shamda	2	pro-Al-Qaeda militant group	3	7
Liwa al Muhajireen	3	pro-Al-Qaeda militant group	4	4
Malhama Tactical	4	pro-Al-Qaeda militant group	14	16
Sham Militant (Воин Шама)	5	pro-Al-Qaeda news outlet	4	4
Voice of Sham	6	pro-Al-Qaeda news outlet	12	16
Islam Din	7	pro-Al-Qaeda news outlet	3	3
Saad Muhtor	8	Uzbek pro-Al-Qaeda news outlet	1	1
Ummah Rus News/News Ummah on Rus	9	pro-Al-Qaeda news outlet	61	73
An Nur News	10	pro-Al-Qaeda news outlet	1	1
Analytics (Исламский канал Абдульазиза Казанлы и Ишмухаммада Уфимского)	11	pro-Al-Qaeda outlet	37	45
Faruq Shami	12	pro-Al-Qaeda news outlet	14	14
Gulam Muhhamad	13	pro-Al-Qaeda news outlet	21	23
Kavkaz Center	14	pro-Al-Qaeda news outlet	13	13
Book and Sword	15	pro-Al-Qaeda outlet	30	30
Life in Syria	16	News outlet, unclear affiliation	3	3
Abu Muhammad Takoy	17	pro-Al-Qaeda outlet	4	4

Pick of Islam (Вершина Ислама)	18	pro-Al-Qaeda outlet	4	4
Diary of Militant (Дневник Муджахида)	19	pro-Al-Qaeda outlet	6	6
Thoughts at Midnight (Мысли в полночь)	20	pro-Al-Qaeda outlet	6	6
Victory is Approaching (Победа близка)	21	pro-Al-Qaeda news outlet	3	4
ДайДжест сообщений от шейхов	22	pro-Al-Qaeda news outlet	15	16
Alisnad	23	pro-Al-Qaeda news outlet	3	3
Conflict Intelligence Team	24	No affiliation with Al-Qaeda	9	9
Mukkarin Kavkazi/ MUkkarin Hazari	25	Pro-Al-Qaeda news outlet	4	4
Huda Rus	26	N/A	7	7
Explanations of Abdulla Kosteksky/ Ответы Абдуллы Костекского	27	Pro-Qaeda religious account	7	7
8 accounts, which were used very rarely		Pro-Qaeda account	11	11
4 accounts, which were used very rarely		N/A	4	4
Total:	39		327	365

Table E2

The M.J informational base of accounts, which the brand used for daily reposts

Accounts	Number of accounts	Percentage of the M.J coverage
Pro-Al-Qaeda channels	32	82%
Unclear affiliation accounts	6	15%
Regular news account/ no militant group affiliation	1	3%

Table E3

Outlets that were promoted on the M.J Telegram channel (07/14/2017 – 09/30/2017)

Channel	N	Description	Total number of links advertised on the M.J outlet
Ajnad Kavkaz	1	pro-Al-Qaeda militant group	3
Nogay Shamda	2	pro-Al-Qaeda militant group	4
Liwa al muhajireen	3	pro-Al-Qaeda militant group	1
Malhama Tactical	4	pro-Al-Qaeda militant group	2
Sham militant (Воин Шама)	5	pro-Al-Qaeda news outlet	0
Voice of Sham	6	pro-Al-Qaeda news outlet	1
Islam Din	7	pro-Al-Qaeda news outlet	4
Saad Muhtor	8	Uzbek pro-Al-Qaeda news outlet	1
Ummah Rus News	9	pro-Al-Qaeda news outlet	1
An Nur News	10	pro-Al-Qaeda news outlet	1
News of Ummah	11	pro-Al-Qaeda outlet	5

(Новости Исламской Уммы/ Analytics/ Исламский канал Абдульазиза Казанлы и Ишмухаммада Уфимского)			
Faruq Shami	12	pro-Al-Qaeda news outlet	3
Gulam Muhhamad	13	pro-Al-Qaeda news outlet	2
Kavkaz Center	14	pro-Al-Qaeda news outlet	1
Book and sword	15	pro-Al-Qaeda outlet	2
Life in Syria	16	News outlet, unclear affiliation	2
Abu Muhammad Takoy	17	pro-Al-Qaeda outlet	4
Pick of Islam (Вершина Ислама)	18	pro-Al-Qaeda outlet	1
Diary of militant (Дневник Муджахида)	19	pro-Al-Qaeda outlet	3
Thoughts at midnight (Мысли в полночь)	20	pro-Al-Qaeda outlet	4
Victory is approaching (Победа близка)	21	pro-Al-Qaeda news outlet	1
Imams' statements (ДайДжест сообщений от шейхов)	22	pro-Al-Qaeda news outlet	2
Alisnad	23	pro-Al-Qaeda news outlet	2
Mukkarin Kavkazi/ MUkkarin Hazari	24	pro-Al-Qaeda news outlet	4
Muhammad Jazira	25		26
Sabiq Jihadmal	26	pro-Al-Qaeda outlet	1
Pasta (self-defense/ military resistance)	27	pro-Al-Qaeda outlet	1
CyberSec (Muslim channel)	28	N/A	1
History of Islam and Muslims	29	N/A	1

Huda Rus (Inspirational channel)	30	N/A	2
Wasat Media	31	pro-Al-Qaeda mixed content outlet	2
Lectures of Said Byratsky	32	pro-Al-Qaeda outlet	1
Explanations of Abdulla Kosteksky	33	pro-Al-Qaeda outlet	2
Stronghold for Muslim females	34	N/A	1
Nazametke_bot	35	pro-Al-Qaeda mixed content outlet	1
Methods of rebellion	36	pro-Al-Qaeda mixed content outlet	2
Moto Maktab/motorcycles in Syria	37	N/A	1
Shekh Abdul Aziz al-Tafere/ Шейх Абдуль Азиз	38	pro-Al-Qaeda outlet	2
Conflict Intelligence Team	39	No Al-Qaeda affiliation	0
Total:			98

Appendix F

The study refers to the collected data about the Islamic State network, circulated in the

Russian cyberspace.

Table F1

ISIS accounts 2012-2015

Name	P	Type	Activity	Logo	Hashtags	Status
Ali Abu Halid	VK	C	2014-2016	+	-	A
Lectures of Abu Amina al-Tiwaki	VK	C	2013-2014	+	-	A
Sariat Online	VK	P	2013-2015	-	-	A
Limitless mercy of Allah (Net graniz milosti Allah)	VK	C	2015	-	ISN	B
Right Caliphate (Pravelny Xalifat)	VK	C	2015	-	ISN	B
Djindullah	VK	C	2013-2017	-	-	B
Holy way to Heaven (Pravedny pyt k Rau)	VK	C	2015	-	-	B
Raqqah	VK	C	2015	-	-	B
Ahlu Sunnah	VK	C	2015	-	-	B
Abdullah Moldovsky (Абдуллах Молдовский)	VK	C	05/2015	+	-	A
Ansaruddin	VK	C	2013-2015	-	-	B
Guidance fom Ahmad Medensky	VK	C	2015	+	-	B

(Nastavlenia Ahmada Medenskogo)						
Official page, Ummah	VK	C	2015-2017	-	-	B
Fisabililah	VK	C	2014-2017	-	-	B
Guraba	VK	C	2014-2017	-	-	B
Free. Shishani	VK	C	2014-2015	-	-	B
Official slaughter/Demand for Action (Official Резня Призыв к Действию)	VK	C	2015-2016	-	-	B
Retribution (Vozmeznie)	VK	C	2015-2016	-	-	B
Cyber.Jihad.	VK	C	2015	-	-	B
Beard (Boroda)	VK	C	2015	-	-	B
Fear of infidels (Strax kafirov)	VK	C	2014	-	-	B
Vilayt Noxiciyco	VK	C	2014-2015	-	-	B
Statements of militants (Обращения муджах1идов)	VK	C	2015	-	-	B
True believers-brothers (По Истине Верущие Братья أجنب)	OK	C	2015-2016	-	-	B
Sunnah	OK	C	2011-2016	-	-	B
TeaCoffee	VK	C	2014	-	-	B
Sham Today	VK	C	2013-2017	+	Shamtoday, Сирия, ИГИШ	B
ISIS helpers (Pomowniki Islamskogo gocydarctva)	VK	C	2014	-	n/a	B
WAM (Sham)	VK	C	2014	-	n/a	B
Standing in lines	VK	C	2015	-	-	A

(стоящие в ряд سورة الصافات)						
#IS	VK	C	2014	-	n/a	B
H-center.info (1)	W	W		+	ISN	
Islamic State News (2)	VK	C	07/2014 -2015		Shamtoday, ISN, FiSyria, Halifat, Khilafah, Чечня Дагестан, ИГ	B
Islam FiSyria (1)	VK	C	2014	+	n/a	B
FiSyria.com (2) FiSyria.info	W	W	2013-2014		-	
News of Sham	VK	C	2014	-	#Иордания. Алеппо Сирия, #Дамаск	B
AlHayat Media	VK	C	2014	+	-	B
Fadjir	VK	C	2014	-	-	B

Table F2

The membership in ISIS's outlets (2014)

Group	Platform	Date of monitoring	Membership
Islamic State News	VK	07/18/2014	1,122
		08/25/2014	3,780

Sham Today	VK	04/27/2014	3,259
		05/04/2014	3,410
		08/25/2014	10,773
Dawla Islamia	VK	05/15/2014	2,960
		07/25/2014	3,990
Islam FiSyria (1)	VK	05/19/2014	809
		05/24/2014	938
		08/25/2014	4,668
Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (2)	VK	05/14/2014	649
		05/31/2014	1,341
Djeisgama (3)	YT	June 2014	437
News of Sham	VK	07/07/2014	1,019
		07/10/2014	1,188

| Al-Hayat Media | VK | 07/29/2014 | 1,520 |
| Fadjir | VK | 07/09/2014 | 2,779 |

Table F3

ISIS accounts (April 2016)

N	Number of networks	Account	Platform	Reach	Reserve account	Logo
1	1	Vkavkaz.com	W	W, TW, T	n/a	+
2		@ISkavkaz0001	TW		+	
3		Vilyat Kavkaz	T		+	-
4	2	Hot News (Горячие Новости)	TW	TW, T, Blog, VK	-	-
5		Hot News	VK		-	
6		Hot News	T		-	
7		hot-news-001	Blog		n/a	

		.blogspot.com				
8	3	Media IG (Official account) (1)	T	T, TW, F	+	+
9		Sending (Rassilka)	T		+	
10		Khalifat_rus1	TW		+	
11	4	Video Channel	T	T	-	+
12		Video of ISIS	T		-	+
13	5	Radio Bayan	T	T	-	+
14		Radio Bayan (bot)	T		-	
15	6	Short review (Краткий обзор)	T	T, VK	+	+
16		Abuimran Khalifat (personal page)	VK		-	
17		Oleg Ivanov (3) (personal page)	VK		-	
18	7	Demand for Action (Призыв к Действию)	T	T	+	-
19	8	ST	T	T	+	+

20	9	Tea Coffee	T	T, VK	+	-
21	10	Djihad	T	T	+	-
22		A B X	T		+	-
23		News of militants	T		+	-
24	11	Active Terror	T	T	+	+
25	12	Falyak news	T	T	+	+
26		Falyak	T		+	
27		Falyak Most	T		+	
28	13	Falludja	T	T	+	+
29	14	Official Page | Ummah	T	T, VK	+	+
30		Official Page | Ummah	VK		-	+
31	15	الخلافة / ТОЛЬКО ЧЕТКО ОЧЕРЧЕННЫЕ ГРАНИЦЫ (Ansaruddin)	T	T, VK	+	-

Table F4

Membership of ISIS accounts on April 8th, 2016 (Telegram)

Group	N	Type of account	Time of establishment	Days	Members	Members per day
News of Militants	1	News	4/1/2016	7	874	125
Demand for Action	2	News	2/19/2016	49	1025	21
ST	3	News	4/6/2016	2	1114	557
Djihad	4	News	2/5/2016	63	1429	23
TeaCoffee	5	News	4/4/2016	4	468	117
A B X	6	News	3/1/2016	38	1328	35
Active Terror	7	Inspirational	4/6/2016	2	585	292
Falyak News	8	News	2/28/2016	40	1755	44
Falludja	9	Inspirational	1/30/2016	69	2433	35
Falyak	10	News	2/28/2016	40	1360	34
Falyak Most	11	News	3/1/2016	38	919	24
Official Page | Ummah	12	News	3/16/2016	23	302	13
Official Page | Ummah (VK)	13	News	2/19/2016	49	360	7

Table F5

ISIS accounts (August 2016)

N	#	Account	Type	Disappeared by March 2017	Social media reach	Reserve account	Logo	Multiple logos
1	1	Katibat	Official/ news	-	T	+	+	-
2	2	Short Review/ Media IG/ Sending (Rassilka)	Official/ news	-	T, VK, TW	+	+	-
3	3	Tabqa	News	-	VK, T	+	+	+
4	4	Videos	Official/ Inspirational	-	T	-	+	+
5		Videos of ISIS	Official/ Inspirational			-	+	+
6	5	Muaskara (military preparation)	Inspirational	-	T	+	+	-
7	6	Infidels will Shiver	Inspirational	-	T	+	+	+
8	7	Vilayat Kavkaz	News	-	T	+	+	+
9		Vilayat KAVKAz (1)	Forum			+	+	+
10		Links Vyliat Kavkaz	Link storage			+	+	-
11	8	Ansaruddin	Inspirational	-	T, VK	+	+	+

12	9	Radio Bayan (1) Радио Аль Баян	Official/ Inspirational	-	T, VK	+	+	-
13		Radio Bayan (2) Радио Аль Баян	Official/ Inspirational			+	+	-
14	10	CC (1)	News	-	T	+	+	-
15		Attacks Caliphate Caliphate (2)	Inspirational			+	+	-
16		Links Caliphate Caliphate (3)	Link storage			+	+	-
17		Video Caliphate Caliphate (4)	Inspirational			+	+	-
18		Nasheeds Caliphate Caliphate (5)	Inspirational			+	+	-
19	11	Demand for Action	News	+	T	+	+	+
20	12	Sabilluna	News	+	T	+	+	+
21	13	Massacre	News	-	T	+	+	+

		(ST | Резня)						
22	14	Stranger	News	-	T, VK	+	+	-
23	15	Sham Today	News	-	T	+	+	-
24	16	Moct	Link storage	-	T, VK	+	+	+
25	17	Fresh News	News	+	T, VK	+	+	+
26	18	SpecCorr	News	-	T, VK	+	+	-
27	19	Holy Way	News	-	T, VK	+	+	+
28	20	Voenkor	News	+	T, TW, F, VK	+	+	+
29	21	Hot News	News	-	T, TW, VK	+	+	+
30	22	G.U.R.A.B.A ~Guraba~	News	-	T, VK	+	+	+
31	23	Halifat	News	-	T, VK	+	+	+
32	24	All in One	News	+	T, VK	+	+	-
33	25	DjuduLLAh	Inspirational	-	T	+	+	+
34	26	Falyak News	News	+	T	+	+	-
35	27	Do not Hide Truth	Inspirational	+	T, VK	+	+	-
36	28	Falludja	Inspirational	+	T, VK	-	+	+
37	29	ABX	News	+	T	+	+	-
38		News of Militants	News			+	+	+

		(Новости от муджахиди)							
39	30	Dijad	News	+	T	+	-	-
40	31	Revenge	News	+	T, VK	+	+	+
41	32	Fisabillah	Inspirational	-	T, VK	+	+	+

Table F6

ISIS accounts (March 2017)[36]

N	Number of networks	Account	Status	Reach	Type	Active in 2016	Reserve account	Logo

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[36] This statistic includes three accounts which functioned in August 2016, but the research excluded them from the statistic of August 2016 (Table) due to a lack of information.

1	1	Katibat	official	T	News	+	+	+
2	2	Sending (Rassilka)/ News News	official	T, VK, F, TW	News	+	+	+
3	3	Tabqa	local	T	News	+	+	+
4	4	Videos	official	T	Inspirational	+	-	+
5		Dauly	official		Inspirational	+	-	+
6	5	Radical	local	T	Inspirational	+	+	+
7	6	Caucas/Daavat Caucasus	local	T	News	+	+	+
8	7	Muaskara (military preparation)	local	T	Inspirational	+	+	+
9	8	Muslim Group (Chat)	local	T	Forum	+	+	+
10	9	Ansaruddin	local	T, VK, W	Inspirational	+	+	+
11	10	Radio Bayan	official	T, YT	Inspirational	+	+	+
12	11	CC (1)	local	T	News	+	+	+

13		Links			Link storage		+	+
		Caliphate						
		Caliphate (2)						
14		CC Video (3)			Inspirational		+	+
15		Nasheeds			Inspirational		+	+
		Caliphate						
		Caliphate (4)						
16	12	Holy way	local	T, VK	News/ inspirational		+	+
17	13	ISN	local	T, VK	News	+	+	+
18	14	Islamic (military preparation)	local	T	Inspirational	+	+	+
19	15	Stranger	local	T, VK	News	+	+	+
20	16	Sham Today	local	T	News	+	+	+
21	17	Moct	local	T, VK	Link storage	+	+	+
22	18	Link	local	T	Link storage	+	+	+
23	19	Hot News	local	T, TW, VK	News	+	+	+
24	20	G.U.R.A.B.A	local	T, VK	News	+	+	+
25	21	Halifat	local	T	News	+	+	+
26	22	DjuduLLAh	local	T	Inspirational	+	+	+

27	23	Lie of Savahatnikov	local	T, F, VK	Inspirational	-	+	+
28	24	Lite Media (Videos)	Local	T, VK	Inspirational	-	+	+
29	24	Fisabillah	local	T	Inspirational	+	+	+
30	26	CCS/ Cyber Security (1)	local	T	Educational	+	+	+
31		CCS Links (2)			Link storage		+	+
32		CCS News (3)			News		+	+
33		CCS Kids (4)			Educational		+	+
34		CCS Library (5)			Inspirational		+	+
35		CCS Video (6)			Inspirational		+	+
36	27	Rezny	local	T	News	+	+	+
37	28	Al-Muvahhid	local	T, VK	Inspirational	+	+	+
38	29	Believing Brothers	local	T	Forum	-	+	-
39	30	Traveler (Strannik)	local	T, VK	Inspirational	-	-	+
40	31	Al Haqq Media Center	official	T	News	-	-	+

Table F7

Visual propaganda from the Russian sector of the Internet (2016-2017)

Topic	Number of Images	By category	Percentage
1.Traditions and customs	18		8%
2.ISIS battles	13		6%
3.Women	13		6%
4.Inspirational	95	1. Death and Paradize-44 2. Jihad, hijra – 39 3. N. Caucasus – 5 4. International terror attacks -4 5. Against nationalism – 3	43%
5. Apostate	10		4%
6. ISIS heroes	35	1. Locals -18	16%

		2. Omar Shishani (ISIS commander from Georgia) -7 3. Adnani -6 4. Al-Baghdadi – 3 5. Osama bin Laden- 1	
7.Political leaders	30	1. Putin -11 2. Obama -8 3. Kadyrov – 6 4. Erdogan -3 5. Assad – 2 6. Abdulatipov -2 7. Hollande -1 8. Trump – 1	13%
8. Shiites vs Sunnis	7		3%
Total:	221		

Table F8

ISIS membership in Telegram accounts (August 2017)

Outlet	N	Date of group establishment	Monitoring data	Membership	Days	People per day
Khalifat News	1	8/25/2017	8/30/2017	175	5	35
Djindullah (джундуЛлах)	2	8/25/2017	8/28/2017	178	3	59
Djundullah	3	8/24/2017	8/26/2017	164	2	82
Shahada (1)	4	8/24/2017	8/25/2017	79	1	79
Shahada (2)	5	8/26/2017	8/27/2017	129	1	129
CC (1)	6	8/24/2017	8/25/2017	121	1	121
CC (2)	7	8/25/2017	8/25/2017	71	0	71
CC (3)	8	8/25/2017	8/25/2017	105	0	105
Bag of links	9	8/25/2017	8/25/2017	109	0	109
Thoughts of aliens	10	8/25/2017	8/26/2017	184	1	184
Ummah Today	11	8/27/2017	8/27/2017	320	0	320
Travelers	12	8/28/2017	8/29/2017	356	1	356
Video IS	13	8/25/2017	8/26/2017	71	1	71
Muharib	14	8/22/2017	8/26/2017	460	4	115
ISN	15	8/25/2017	8/27/2017	299	2	149
Catalog of Telegram	16	8/26/2017	8/30/2017	215	4	54
Infidels Must Die	17	8/26/2017	8/30/2017	132	4	33

Table F9

ISIS network (August 2017)

N	Account	Active in 2016	Active in August 2017
1	Katibat	+	+
2	Sending (Rassilka)/ News News	+	-
3	Tabqa	+	-
4	Videos	+	+
5	Dauly	+	+
6	Radical	+	-
7	Caucas/Daavat Caucasus	+	-
8	Muaskara (military preparation)	+	-
9	Muslim group (Chat)	+	-
10	Ansaruddin	+	+
11	Radio Bayan	+	-
12	CC (1)	+	+

13	Holy Way	+	-
14	ISN	+	+
15	Islamic (military preparation)	+	-
16	Stranger	+	-
17	Sham Today	+	-
18	Moct	+	+
19	Vilayat Kavlaz/Believing brothers (forum)	+	+
20	Djundullah	+	+

Appendix G

Table G1

The features of ISIS domestic accounts, circulated in 2016-2017

Outlet	#	Visual identity	Other visual attributes	Name consistency	Activity	Coverage	Network significance, while active	Type of brand
Sham Today	1	+	+	+	01/2016 06/2017	2	High	Strong
ABX	2	-	-	+	03/2016-06/2016)	1	High	-
Falyak News	3	+	-	+	03/2016-06/2016	2	High	-
Active Terror (military preparation)	4	-	-	-	03/2016-11/2017	1	High	-
Muaskara (military preparation)	5	+	-	+	03/2016-04/2017	1	High	Fair
Demand for actions	6	+	-	+	03/2016-11/2016	1	High	Fair
Djihad	7	-	-	-	02/2016-12/2016	2	High	-
Tabqa	8	-	-	+	07/2016-05/2017	2	High	Fair
CC	9	+	-	+	04/2016-11/2017	1	High	Strong
Vilayat Kavkaz	10	-	-	+	03/2016-11/2017	2	High	Strong
Sabilluna	11	+	-	+	07/2016-11/2016	1	Average	Fair
Moct	12	+	-	+	07/2016-11/2017	2	High	Strong
Fresh News	13	+	-	+	07/2016-09/2016	1	High	-
Guraba	14	-	-	+	03/2016-05/2017	2	Average	-
News of militants	15	-	-	+	03/2016-09/2016	1	High	-
Revenge	16	-	-	+	04/2016-09/2016	2	Average	Weak

Outlet	#				Activity				
All in one	17	-	-	+	07/2016-12/2016	2	High	-
SpecCorr	18	+	+	+	07/2016-11/2016	2	High	-
Stranger	19	+	-	+	07/2016-04/2017	2	High	Strong
Hot News	20	+	-	+	03/2016-05/2017	3	Low	Fair
Ansaruddin	21	+	+	+	04/2016-11/2017	3	Average	Strong

Table G2

The features of Al-Qaeda domestic accounts, circulated in 2016-2017

Outlet	#	Visual identity	Other visual attributes	Name consistency	Activity	Coverage	Network significance, while active[37]	Type of brand
Ajnad Kavkaz	1	+	-	+	2013-2017	6	Low	Strong
Nogay Shamda	2	+	+	+	2016-2017	4	Average	Strong
Malhama Tactical	3	+	+	+	2016-2017	5	Low	Strong
Faruq Shami	4	+	+	+	2017	7	High	Strong
Muhammad Jazira	5	+	-	+	2017	3	High	Strong

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[37] The study relies on the statistics, collected by October 2017

Voice of Sham	6	+	+	+	2017	6	High	Strong
Victory is coming	7	+	-	+	2016-2017	1	High	Fair
Kavkaz Center	8	+	-	+	2011-2017	3	Low	Strong
VD	9	+	-	+	2011-2017	3	Low	Strong
An Nur News	10	+	-	+	2016-2017	2	Average	Fair
Umma News	11	-	-	+	2016-2017	1	Average	Weak
Alisnad	12	+	-	+	2013-2017	3	Low	Fair
White Minaret	13	+	-	+	2013-2017	3	Low	Fair
Sham Center	14	+	+	+	2016-2017	2	Average	Strong
ZX	15	-	-	+	2015-2017	2	Low	Fair
Abdulaziz Kazanly	16	+	-	+	2016-2017	3	Average	Strong
Mukkarin Hazari	17	+	-	+	2015-2017	3	High	Strong

Table G3

Production mode for the Al-Qaeda outlets (2015-2017)

Outlet	#	Type of account	Production mode
Nogay Shamda	1	Military group	producer
Ajnad al-Kavkaz	2	Military group	producer
Malhama Tactical	3	Military group	producer
VD	4	mixed	producer
Victory is Coming	5	News	reposting
Al-Saff Media	6	News	reposting
An-Nur News	7	News	reposting
Ummah News	8	News	reposting
ZX	9	News	reposting
Hanif	10	News	reposting
White Minaret	11	mixed	producer
Kavkaz Center	12	News	reposting
MJ	13	News	reposting
Sham Center	14	News	reposting
Faruq Shami	15	News	producer
Voice of Sham	16	News	producer