

Al-Qaeda's Failed Migration to Electronic Jihad and Twitter Propaganda

By Taylor Nelson

Beginning in the early 2000s, terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda expanded their propaganda to the virtual world. With the rise of the Internet, these groups could use blog sites, internet forums, and other webpages to send messages and recruit supporters. Today, many terrorist groups seek to broadcast their messages to even wider audiences through social media, and Al-Qaeda is no exception. That being said, however, Al-Qaeda has not found "success" in their social media

efforts in the same way as groups like the Islamic State (ISIS).

Al-Qaeda lacks social media savvy compared to other jihadist groups, and their inefficient use of social media is also a reflection of their declining operational capabilities, leadership challenges, and organizational problems. Al-Qaeda has not seen the same levels of buy-in from social media recruitment and propaganda, particularly on Twitter, that other terrorist groups like ISIS have.

Setting the Stage for Al-Qaeda's Twitter Propaganda

Since its inception as a terrorist group, Al-Qaeda has adapted to challenges over the years. This, of course, also applies to Al-Qaeda's online propaganda; however, Al-Qaeda's migration from physical space to cyberspace was not as seamless as the migration of Osama Bin Laden (1957-2011) to Sudan in the 1990s. This process occurred over many years, eventually leading to the development of social media propaganda such as that found on Twitter.¹

While it is difficult to pinpoint Al-Qaeda's emergence on Twitter, it appears that it occurred during 2010. The Ansarullah blog launched a Twitter account in October 2010 titled "Ansaruddin." Although there might have been others like Ansaruddin in 2010, it was the only account particularly active in generating tweets that distributed Al-Qaeda propaganda. The account also followed other jihadist groups.² Of course, this was not an official Al-Qae-

da sanctioned Twitter account, but it is important because it seems to be the first instance where content promoting Al-Qaeda was known to circulate on Twitter.

In December 2011, Harakat Al-Shabaab Al Mujahideen, otherwise known as Al-Shabaab, a group that would later become an affiliate of Al-Qaeda in February 2012, posted their first official tweet under the handle @HSMPress. The tweet, "Bismillahi Rahmani-I Rahim," translated as "In the name of God the merciful," invoked a Koranic phrase often used when starting new and serious

ventures.³ Thus, Al-Qaeda's official presence reached Twitter in 2011 with representation from Al-Shabaab. Twitter shut down this account in January 2013, but just two weeks later, Al-Shabaab set up a new account and resumed tweeting.⁴ In March 2013, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) created their first official Twitter profile using the handle @Andalus_Media. Al-Qaeda verified the account about twelve days later on a jihadist forum.⁵ By that point, Al-Qaeda had established their roots in the Twitter network.

The Impact of Al-Qaeda's Electronic Jihad on Twitter

While organizations such as Al-Shabaab and AQIM were first able to establish their accounts in 2013, by 2016, Twitter continued shutting down more accounts, making it difficult to share content. For example, Twitter suspended AQIM's account nine months after it was created.⁵ By 2016, Twitter became even more vigilant in suspending terror-related accounts; throughout 2016, Twitter suspended over 235,000 accounts that promoted terrorism, many of which were undoubtedly related to Al-Qaeda.⁶ In addition, Twitter suspended the accounts of Al-Qaeda's spiritual leader, Abu Qatada, and two other influential scholars.⁷ Despite these suspensions, Al-Qaeda still utilizes Twitter to incite violence, link to content containing terror training, recruit more followers, gain new funding, and issue statements.

Groups like Al-Qaeda use Twitter to encourage violence. Many of Al-Qaeda's communications are designed to encourage lone followers to carry out operations in their name. By publicly applauding the actions of lone wolves such as the Boston Bombers and other extremists, Al-Qaeda helps online sym-

pathizers feel connected to the larger jihadist movement.⁸

Al-Qaeda uses Twitter to link to training content that leads to terror operations. For example, Al-Qaeda-based affiliates link to external websites, forums, and even YouTube, where followers can see videos and documents about weaponry, explosives, and terror tactics. Al-Qaeda affiliates differ in their content; for example, the majority of Al-Shabaab tweets during 2013 did not link to external websites, YouTube, or contain any images.⁹ The case of Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), an affiliate of Al-Qaeda in Syria until their split in 2016, is different, however.¹⁰ In 2013, while JN was still an affiliate of Al-Qaeda, thousands of their tweets contained links to YouTube and websites, ensuring thousands of views.¹¹ These videos were also used as a tool for recruitment.

Recruitment is one of the primary reasons behind Al-Qaeda's Twitter usage. Al-Qaeda's recruitment process via the internet "follows a bottom-up strategy in which sympathizers, who are predisposed to be affected by propaganda, perhaps indoctrinate themselves

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through repeated exposure to these sites and videos.¹² Twitter has expanded Al-Qaeda's geographic and demographic reach, bringing radicalization directly to the user. Twitter also enables expatriates of Middle Eastern and African countries to see Al-Qaeda's presence, which motivates them to fight jihad in their country of origin. Many would not see these messages if they were solely on an Al-Qaeda website, but Twitter's far reach exposes otherwise protected users to such campaigns.¹³

When it comes to terror financing, militant Islamist organizations typically raise funds through private donations, gathering revenue from charities and other religious institutions. Since terror funds are outlawed, however, Al-Qaeda utilizes money-laundering and has sought out new methods to finance their

endeavors.¹⁴

Enter Twitter, which allows funds to be more easily diverted to Al-Qaeda front organizations. Twitter also enables Al-Qaeda to mobilize crowdfunding from sympathizers for their activities. While Twitter allows for private donations from Al-Qaeda's followers, it also enables content and external link sharing to websites which sell inspirational tracts, advocacy literature, audio cassettes, videos, CDs, and other iconic paraphernalia.¹³ All of these methods allow more money to reach Al-Qaeda's pockets.

From terror financing to recruiting to training to inciting violence, Twitter has a great deal to offer Al-Qaeda. To truly understand Al-Qaeda's Twitter capacity, one must compare it to the success of other terror groups such as ISIS.

ISIS and Al-Qaeda on Twitter: A Comparison

ISIS' propaganda strategy uses opposing themes of brutality and utopianism. The glorification of extreme violence and brutality is a tactic that ISIS uses to showcase their strength.¹⁵ Twitter is also a means to bypass media outlets that do not share graphic content, which is why ISIS uses it to post screenshots and other propaganda.¹² On the other hand, ISIS uses Twitter to demonstrate how people living under their control live normal, happy lives. For example, propaganda videos show doctors treating children or people shopping at markets.¹⁶ This utopian offer is alluring to new recruits.¹⁷ Thus, ISIS' sophisticated strategy is just one reason why it has been successful in winning over hearts and minds through propaganda.

ISIS better uses technology to build their brand. For example, through the use of custom apps to bolster their visibility:

[A] custom-developed app called Dawn of Glad Tidings...allows IS to send out centrally written tweets through their accounts. Released simultaneously, the messages swamp social media and extend IS's online presence much further than normal. In addition to centralized Twitter accounts, provincial accounts publish live feeds about local IS operations. Also, an online fan club of thousands of IS supporters retweets its hashtags and translates messages from Arabic to Western languages.¹²

Beyond their vast twitter network, ISIS uses bots and twitter hashtag bombs to gain more impressions.¹⁸ While it appears that ISIS has maximized their online presence, there is no evidence of Al-Qaeda ever using such sophisticated technology to bolster their propaganda network. Whereas ISIS is intent on publicly boasting their victories, Al-Qaeda's strategy involves a far lower profile. For example, Al-Qaeda has sought to obscure their connections with militant groups.¹⁶ This applies to their Twitter operations as well. While a less prominent social media presence might mean less success in recruitment and incitement, it also benefits the terrorist organization. In June 2015, U.S. Air Force personnel were combing through social media and found an ISIS fighter bragging about command - and - control capabilities, even posting a selfie of his location. Less than a day later, the Air Force bombed the entire building to dust.¹⁵ By the numbers, Al-Qaeda and their affiliates tweet far less than ISIS and their affiliates. While volume of propaganda is not necessarily an indication of success, more posts allow for greater access to visuals, and thereby more recruits. When ISIS is compared to either AQIM or Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), ISIS still produces far more propaganda per week. In just one week in 2015, ISIS issued 141 propaganda posts; conversely, AQIM achieved this same number over

the span of a year, and none of the content was comparable in terms of quality and impact.⁵

While ISIS has a more sophisticated propaganda strategy and a larger network than Al-Qaeda, the content of their propaganda is simpler. A study released in 2017 found that less complex communication—similar to ISIS’ style of communication—is more effective for groups and organizations seeking to gain power and political success.¹⁹ Thus, although ISIS’ online propaganda tactics are more complicated, their content is easier to understand. The key lies in understanding why Al-Qaeda has fallen behind.

There are a few reasons why Al-Qaeda’s Twitter capabilities have not enjoyed the same level of success as ISIS; firstly, Al-Qaeda’s lack of social media know-how. In 2013, an Al-Qaeda Twitter account asked followers for suggestions on public relations and media development ideas. This attempt backfired, with many users offering satirical advice, suggesting that Al-Qaeda should release cat videos and sell Osama bin Laden’s pornography collection on eBay.²⁰ The account was eventually suspended by Twitter. Al-Qaeda’s Twitter propaganda has suffered in their general lack of resources and lack of solid leadership pushing the

organization and their affiliates to truly integrate electronic jihad as ISIS has.⁵ In fact, much of the recent literature on Al-Qaeda has emphasized their leadership challenges, organizational problems, and overall decline, both before and after the rise of ISIS.¹⁷ This suggests that Al-Qaeda’s organizational decline can explain, in part, why their Twitter propaganda has not seen success similar to ISIS.

With the threat of radicalization, both globally and domestically, terrorism will not disappear anytime soon. Years ago, parents had little concern that a child may see egregious content at the hands of terrorists, but ISIS and Al-Qaeda’s increased social media presence—especially on Twitter—ensures that violence is broadcast to thousands across the internet daily. Twitter enables these groups to expand their organizations globally which they will continue to take advantage of. Despite the number of account suspensions they have seen throughout the years, new accounts will be created and new ideologies will be propagated. Like other social media platforms, Twitter has unwittingly become a host for the spread of dangerous ideologies across the world—all with the click of a button.



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