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Al-Qaeda's Propaganda in the Virtual Turkey

Dr. Ariel Koch

Introduction

Since the outbreak of the war in Syria, Turkey, under the rule of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, became one of the most influential players exacerbating the ongoing fighting.¹ Turkey functioned as the gateway through which tens of thousands of Muslims from around the world entered Syria and Iraq to join the war against Bashar al-Assad's regime. Among them were thousands who joined the Islamic State (IS) and Jabhat al-Nusra (hereinafter: the Nusra Front), al-Qaeda's branch in Syria.²

Turkey assisted the jihadi elements among the rebels in Syria, however it was not immune against them. Turkey became a recruitment base on the basis of fundamentalism and sectarianism for those who sought to fight in the combat zones of Syria and Iraq against Assad's regime.³ Yet the more extremist elements within the Salafi-jihadi movement continue to regard Turkey as an infidel and illegitimate entity. This perspective interpreted Turkey's cooperation with Russia and Iran as an effort to protect the interests of the Assad regime.

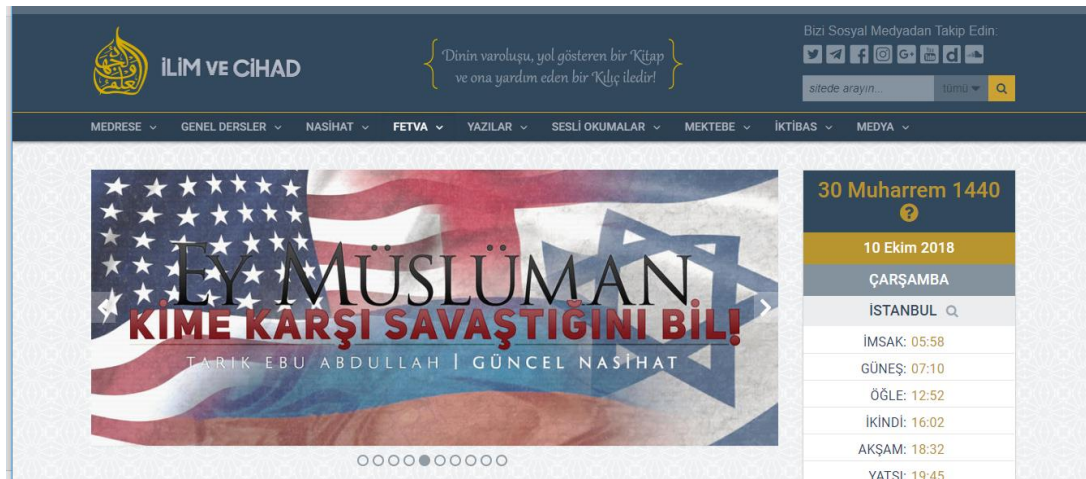
In this article I will focus on the recent efforts by al-Qaeda and its adherents to communicate with Turkish-speaking audiences, an underexplored subject within the context of the war in Syria. One of the reasons for focusing on al-Qaeda's Turkish propaganda efforts is the resurrection of the organization. Bruce Hoffman, a political analyst specializing in the study of terrorism, also highlighted this phenomenon by stating that al-Qaeda has been quietly rebuilding itself while the self-proclaimed Islamic State

dominated the headlines and preoccupied national security officials for the past four years.⁴

Another reason is the potential implications of Turkish-language activity, both for Turkey itself and for the Turkish diaspora in Europe. The article's main questions are: Which Turkish language platforms serve al-Qaeda today? How do they serve al-Qaeda? Do they have an expression in Syria? Why did they appear now?

New al-Qaeda's Turkish platforms

This article covers a limited number of online platforms and jihadist groups identified with al-Qaeda, which are characterized by Turkish language and are not widely known. The main platform is *İlim ve Cihad* ([religious] Knowledge and Holy War) – a website that promotes the jihad in Syria as part of al-Qaeda's global jihad worldview. Apart from producing its own content the platform also provides translations of the Arabic texts and videos that were produced by Salafi-jihadi ideologues affiliated with al-Qaeda (i.e. Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, Abu Qatada al-Filistini, etc.), as well as videos by al-Qaeda's Central (AQC) leadership and other al-Qaeda affiliates such as in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Maghreb (AQIM) to Turkish.



[Screenshot of İlim ve Cihad] "Oh Muslim. You must know against whom you are fighting!"

This site, whose name may refer to al-Qaeda's Abu Yahya al-Libi's video message entitled, "Balancing Between Jihad and Seeking Knowledge,"⁵ runs various accounts on social media platforms such as Facebook (with 2,100 likes), Twitter (1,570 followers), Google Plus (44 followers), Instagram (1,714 followers), YouTube (the channel was shut down due to violation of the terms of use), DailyMotion (shutdown), SoundCloud (64

followers), and Telegram (824 members on the channel).⁶ Unlike other abovementioned platforms, Telegram is an application that enables the exchanging of text messages in encrypted form and is widely popular and used by jihadists worldwide.

Another pro al-Qaeda Turkish online platform is the WordPress blog *Tevhid Davası* (“The Struggle for One God”) which was launched on May 2018. This blog is linked to a suspended Twitter account and to a Facebook account with almost 2,000 likes. It also provides an electronic mail (Gmail) address.⁷ The blog openly expresses its admiration and support for al-Qaeda's former and current leaders such as Osama bin Laden,⁸ Ayman al-Zawahiri, and Anwar al-Awlaki. As might be expected it also translates and disseminates al-Qaeda's media wing's productions to Turkish audiences.



[Screenshot of Tevhid Davası]

Why are we stressing the necessity for the declaration of Sharia Law's Sovereignty?

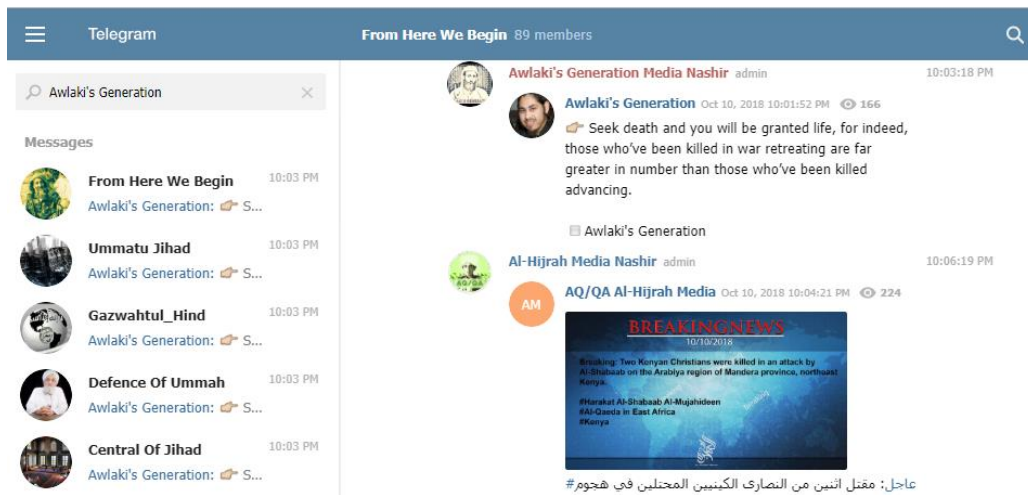
Dr. İyad Kuneybi

Another al-Qaeda affiliated blog is EnsarKardes (Ensar Kardeş) (“Brotherhood of al-Ansar”),⁹ which is linked to the Salafi-jihadi group Ansar al-Sharia. The later operates a Google Plus account through which it propagates bin-Laden's call for a global jihad.¹⁰ Ansar al-Sharia's Google Plus account demonstrates how all of the above-mentioned (as well as the following) Turkish platforms are connected to each other. The account shares links to the Ensarkardes blog, as well as to the İlim ve Cihad website.

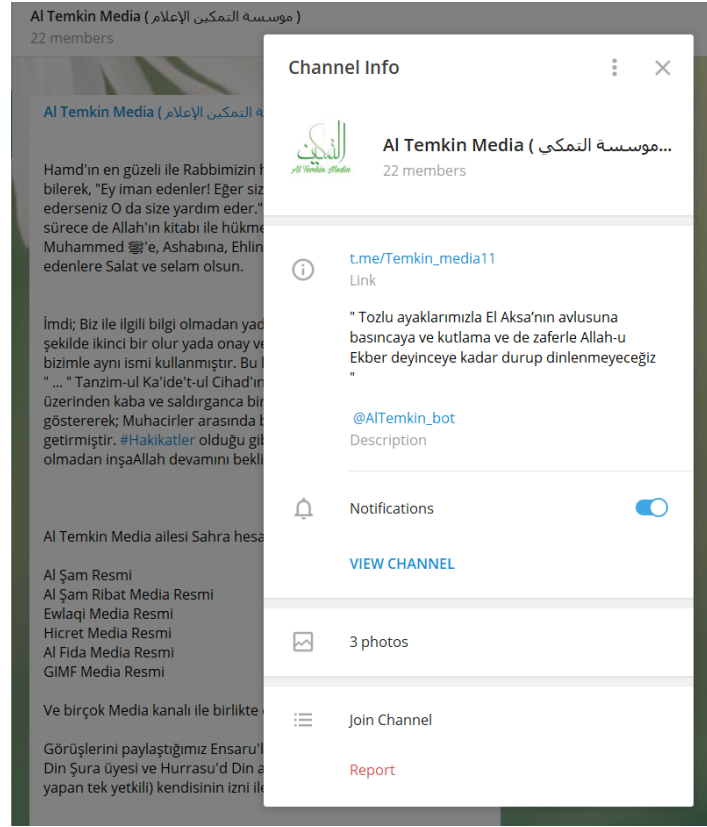
On Telegram, al-Qaeda's network includes channels in various languages (such as Arabic, English, Urdu, and German) which operate as the multifaceted mouthpiece for al-Qaeda itself (i.e. AQC and its official channels) as well as for its affiliates, such as al-Shabab al-Mujahidin in Somalia or Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin in Mali. In fact, there

is a "family" of channels that promotes al-Qaeda's agenda on Telegram. Besides the official Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF), al-Tamkin and al-Kifah channels, al-Qaeda is linked to a group of channels under different names but which share the same content and operate as one.

Al-Qaeda's web of channels on Telegram reveals the group's efforts to propagate itself as relevant in the post-IS era while using the most popular tool among Salafi-jihadists and other Islamist groups and individuals. These channels include Awlaki's Generation (and Awlaki's Generation Media Nashir), AQ/QA Hijrah Media (and Al-Hijrah Media Nashir), From Here We Begin, Ummatu Jihad, Gazwahtul-Hind, Defence of Ummah, Central of Jihad,¹¹ Coming, O Aqsa Media, and others. Although none of them boast more than 200 followers, these channels provide al-Qaeda the ability to continue recruiting and mobilizing adherents; to communicate between groups and their supporters; and to continue the (propaganda) "war on hearts and minds".



For the Turkish-speaking audience, al-Qaeda has recently launched al-Temkin Media. The first channel was launched in early September 2018 by al-Qaeda's network of channels. However, it was quickly closed by Telegram (which is not rare for jihadist accounts). The next al-Temkin account (@Temkin_Media11) was closed on 10 October 2018 shortly after launching. The third one was launched on the same day, and it currently has less than 10 followers.¹² Al-Temkin Media translates and disseminates al-Qaeda-related content to its affiliates worldwide, such as Hurras al-Deen group in Syria; al-Shabab al-Mujahideen in Somalia; and Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) in Mali.¹³



According to a message that was posted by the second Temkin channel, the channel belongs to a family of channels, such as Sham al-Ribat Media and GIMF Media. It also mentions Ewlaqi Media, which might be Awlaki's Generation Media channels, and Hicret Media, which might be the AQ/QA Hijrah Media (and Al-Hijrah Media Nashir) channels. The alleged connection between al-Temkin and al-Qaeda's other Telegram channels may suggest that al-Qaeda is interested in deepening its control in Turkey, and it might affect Turkish jihadists in Turkey and in Syria. Moreover, the Telegram channel of *İlim ve Cihad* links to other pro-jihadi Turkish channels, such as the *Hayat; İman ve Cihad* channel, which shares al-Temkin posts and other posts by other channels affiliated with al-Qaeda.¹⁴

Turkish Speaking Jihadists in Syria

Turkish Jihadi propaganda is aimed at Turkish-speaking individuals worldwide and has an audience in Syria. Indeed, the war in Syria and Turkey's "open-door" policy towards jihadists provided an opportunity for Turkish jihadists who wanted to participate in a violent jihad. There is little surprise to learn about Turkish fighting groups in Syria.

One such group is Katiba Fursan al-Deen (Knights of Religion, KFD), which was founded in 2014 and includes "Muhajirin" (immigrants, foreigners) and "Ansar" (local

Syrians). The researcher Aymann Jawad al-Tamimi provided an interview with the group's leader. According to this interview, although the group did not give Baya'a (a pledge of allegiance) to anyone it does seek to establish a Taliban-like emirate in Syria and regards the Taliban as a role model.¹⁵

Besides military activity, KFD also engages in Dawa (call to Islam) efforts aimed at spreading the idea of a Taliban-like, Sharia-controlled emirate that the group wishes to establish. In regard to their Dawa, which can also be seen as propaganda, KFD is active online. It operates a Twitter account with more than 230 followers and a Telegram channel with almost 200 followers, through which it publishes its activities.¹⁶ KFD is just one group that fights in Syria. Other Turkish nationals have joined various rebel fighting groups, including IS and the Nusra Front. However, the break between AQC and the Nusra Front leadership, which later adopted the name Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), led to divisions within the pro-al-Qaeda elements in Syria. Turkey is also linked to this inter-jihadi conflict.

Russia, Iran, Turkey, and the Jihadists

The cooperation between Turkey, Iran, and Russia in Syria created a situation in which jihadists enjoy the protection of Turkey. It is not surprising, therefore, that the anger within the global jihad movement is growing towards rebel organizations in Syria, such as HTS, which is blamed for cooperating with an "atheist", an "Ikhwanji" (a derogatory term referring to a member of the Muslim Brotherhood) and a "Majus" (A derogatory term referring to Iranians as idolaters). These terms were frequently utilized against Vladimir Putin, Erdoğan, and Hassan Rouhani in order to express the hostility of the Salafi-jihadists to the "Russian-Shiite-Turkish axis", which was perceived as part of the Western (and Jewish) plot to save Assad and destroy the Sunni dream of a Sharia-controlled emirate.

In July 2016 Abu Muhammad al-Julani, the leader of al-Nusra Front, announced that he will abandon his alliance with al-Qaeda without prior consultation with al-Qaeda's leadership and especially al-Qaeda's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. Al-Julani renamed his organization Jabhat Fatah al-Sham in order to distance itself from the image of the terrorist organization. Al-Julani renamed his organization once more in February 2017 to Tahrir al-Sham. These moves alienated some hardcore jihadists within HTS which ultimately led to the establishment of the Huraas al-Din organization, which is

subordinate to the leadership of Al-Qaeda by means of an oath of allegiance to Ayman al-Zawahiri.¹⁷

Conclusion

According to developments in the Syrian arena, most of the allegations of cooperation with the Russian-Shiite-Turkish axis are now directed at the Tahrir al-Sham organization, which is trying to stop the desertion of fighters to other organizations, particularly Khoras al-Din. It also appears that the influence of Turkish jihadists on the Syrian arena is growing; they can help smuggle fighters, money, and weapons into Syria, and they can also help jihadists out of the war zone.

In light of the above, it seems logical that global jihadists such as al-Qaeda are trying to recruit Turkish speakers, as reflected in the increase in the jihadist propaganda in Turkey. This phenomenon can also be seen in the *İlim ve Cihad* website or on the Telegram channel of Al-Tamakin. If the Salafi-jihadists will manage to establish their power in Syria near the border with Turkey, someday they may turn their wrath against Turkey as well. In addition, al-Qaeda may exploit the social networks to infiltrate weapons or terrorists into Europe. Regardless, the issue of Turkish fighters and jihadist propaganda in the Turkish language will remain relevant issues in the near future.

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Notes

¹ Emrullah Uslu, "Jihadist Highway to Jihadist Haven: Turkey's Jihadi Policies and Western Security", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Volume 39, Issue 9, 2016: 781-802. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2015.1119544>

² Peter R. Neumann, *Radicalized: New Jihadists and the Threat to the West* (2016), p. 98.

³ Stephen Starr, "A Deeper Look at Syria-Related Jihadist Activity in Turkey", *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 7, Issue 8, August 2014: 7 -11, p. 7. <https://ctc.usma.edu/a-deeper-look-at-syria-related-jihadist-activity-in-turkey/>

⁴ Bruce Hoffman, "Al-Qaeda's Resurrection", *Council on Foreign Relations*, March 6, 2018. <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/al-qaedas-resurrection>

⁵ See: Abu Yahya Al-Libi, "Balancing Between Jihad and Seeking Knowledge - Translation of the video released by As-Sahab Media 'The Closing Words of a Shar'i Course' By Shaykh AbuYahya Al-Libi (may Allah preserve him)", *Jihadology*, August 2010. <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2010/08/abu-yahya-al-libi-balancing-between-jihad-and-seeking-knowledge.pdf>

⁶ Ilmi ve Cihad online platforms (accessed 10.10.2018):

- Website: <https://ilimvecihad.com/>
- Twitter: https://twitter.com/ilim_vc_1
- Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/ilimvecihad1>
- Google Plus: <https://plus.google.com/u/0/+IlmiveCihad>
- Instagram: <https://instagram.com/ilimvecihad>
- YouTube (closed): https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC7Y_UXINuJpnf2tzY5mSMhA/
- DailyMotion (closed): <https://www.dailymotion.com/ilimvecihad>
- SoundCloud: <https://soundcloud.com/ilimvecihad>
- Telegram: https://telegram.me/ilim_v_cihad

⁷ Tevhid Davasi online platforms:

- Blog: <https://tevhiddavasi.wordpress.com/>
- Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/davasitevhid>
- Twitter: <https://twitter.com/davasitevhid>
- Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/tevhiddavasi/>
- Gmail: dwestwhd1@gmail.com

⁸ "Nurdan Kandiller Şeyh Usame Bin Ladin (رحمه الله)", *Tevhiddavasi*, May 11, 2018. <https://tevhiddavasi.wordpress.com/2018/05/11/nurdan-kandiller-seyh-usame-bin-ladin-%D8%B1%D8%AD%D9%85%DB%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87/>

⁹ Ensar Kardes blog: <https://ensarkardes.blogspot.com/>

¹⁰ Ansar al-Sharia in Turkey Google Plus account: <https://plus.google.com/u/0/103581981689946748708>

¹¹ An invitation link to this channel is available: <https://t.me/joinchat/IUQJ-kzEFVz7IIqyo2Sb8g> (accessed 10.10.2018)

¹² An invitation link to join this channel is available: <https://t.me/horasnkmlm> (accessed 10.10.2018)

¹³ The newest al-Temkin Media channels: https://t.me/Temkin_media11 (accessed 10.10.2018)

¹⁴ The Hayat; Iman ve Cihad Telegram channel: <https://t.me/Flamesofwar> (accessed 11.10.2018)

¹⁵ Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Fursan al-Din: Interview", Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi's blog, September 11, 2018. <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2018/09/fursan-al-din-interview>

¹⁶ Fursan al-Deen online platforms:

- Telegram: <https://t.me/Fursanuddin>
- Twitter: <https://twitter.com/fursanuddin1>

¹⁷ Aymen Jawad al-Tamimi, "From Jabhat al-Nusra to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham", *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung*, June 29, 2018. <http://www.kas.de/syrien-irak/en/publications/52977/>;
Gilad Shiloach, "Al-Qaida and its Syrian affiliates air their dirty laundry on social media", *Jihadiscope: Insights on Global Jihad, The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Tel Aviv University*, December 4, 2017. <https://dayan.org/content/al-qaida-and-its-syrian-affiliates-air-their-dirty-laundry-social-media>