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Sommario

Fading jihadism? Understanding Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's online propaganda campaign

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Abstract

This article, founded primarily on the combination of open-source intelligence (OSINT) and social network analysis (SNA), discusses the most important features of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's (HTS) propaganda campaign on the Internet between mid-2023 and February 2024. It proves that during this period, HTS maintained a relatively small but well-designed information ecosystem founded on two distinct pillars. The first was composed of three standalone websites, run by Amjad Foundation and Alaskary Media, which served as hotspots for pro-HTS strategic communication on the surface web. The second pillar was founded on several Telegram channels, which makes it similar to information ecosystems maintained by other Salafi-jihadist violent extremist organizations. This paper also demonstrates that in 2023 and 2024, HTS and its media offices visibly drifted away from most types of narratives and topics that could be associated with Salafi-jihadist terrorism, which seems to be a long-lasting priority in its strategic communication. However, its focus on militarism and the promotion of suicide attacks confirms that HTS still constitutes a violent extremist organization that carries out a broad range of controversial activities and maintains links with more radical entities based in Idlib. Last, this study shows that Alaskary Media had much greater propaganda production capabilities than the Amjad Foundation. The latter, however, frequently produced technically better, alluring videos portraying the dynamically growing HTS's military capabilities.

Questo articolo, basato principalmente sulla combinazione di open-source intelligence (OSINT) e social network analysis (SNA), discute le caratteristiche più importanti della campagna di propaganda di Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) su Internet tra la metà del 2023 e il febbraio 2024. Il documento dimostra che in questo periodo HTS ha mantenuto un ecosistema informativo relativamente piccolo ma ben progettato, fondato su due pilastri distinti. Il primo composto da tre siti web autonomi, gestiti dalla Fondazione Amjad e da Alaskary Media, che fungevano da hotspot per la comunicazione strategica pro-HTS sul web di superficie. Il secondo fondato su diversi canali Telegram, rendendolo simile agli ecosistemi informativi gestiti da

altre organizzazioni estremiste violente salafite-jihadiste. Questo articolo dimostra anche che nel 2023 e nel 2024, HTS e le sue articolazioni mediatiche si sono visibilmente allontanate dalla maggior parte dei tipi di narrazioni e tematiche generalmente associati al terrorismo salafita-jihadista. Questa appare essere una priorità duratura nella sua comunicazione strategica dell'organizzazione. Tuttavia, la sua attenzione al militarismo e alla promozione di attacchi suicidi conferma che HTS costituisce ancora un'organizzazione estremista violenta che svolge un'ampia gamma di attività controverse e mantiene legami con entità più radicali con sede a Idlib. Infine, questo studio dimostra che Alaskary Media ha capacità di produzione di propaganda molto più elevate rispetto alla Fondazione Amjad. Quest'ultima, tuttavia, ha spesso prodotto video tecnicamente migliori e maggiormente capaci di attrarre, che ritraggono le capacità militari HTS in dinamica crescita.

Keywords

Acknowledgment

1. Introduction

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) has been the subject of a heated academic debate in recent years. Due to its control over the Northwestern part of Syria – the Idlib Governorate – scholars have intensively studied its role in the Syrian civil war, including its complex relations with Turkey or the competition with other rebel and terrorist groups (Schwab, 2023; Martinez & Eng, 2018; Zelin, 2023; Bakkour, 2023). Aside from its role in the military conflict in the Levant, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham attracted the interest of terrorism and political violence researchers. This is because it represented the Salafi-jihadist ideology, at least partially inherited from the al-Qaeda-aligned Jabhat al-Nusra. It also hosted other violent extremist organizations (VEOs) on its territory and had a long track record of violating human rights in the area (Heller, 2017; Hamming, 2019). These are the primary reasons why certain states, such as the United States, have designated HTS as a terrorist organization (Amendments to the Terrorist Designations, 2018). However, in recent years, the group has undergone a process of at least partial "mainstreamization," manifesting in attaching, at least officially, lesser importance to traditional elements of Salafi-jihadist *credo* despite still carrying out a broad range of controversial activities in Syria. While there is no consensus among scholars on

how to perceive this shift, it is still widely considered the most powerful and one of the most controversial violent extremist organizations in the Levant (Zelin, 2022; Drevon & Haenni, 2021).

Surprisingly, in this heated scientific debate, relatively little attention has been devoted to better understanding its propaganda activities. Only a handful of studies have focused on identifying the most essential features of HTS's strategic communication (Haid, 2019; Barnard, Winter, 2023). This is despite the fact that HTS has been known to carry out complex and well-developed media activities on the Internet since its creation. Throughout the years, the group's capabilities in this regard were supported by a number of official and unofficial media outlets, such as the Amjad Foundation for Media Production, Ebaa News Agency (ENA), Alaskary Media, and al-Bunyan Radio,[1] which employed differentiated approaches to influence online audiences. They included, among others, methods and narratives that are usually associated with digital *jihad* (Lakomy, 2023a; Online jihadist propaganda, 2023, p. 21). In this context, while there are studies that cover selected aspects of HTS's propaganda campaign (Barnard, Winter, 2023), we still do not have enough understanding of how its propaganda machine evolves and how it adapts to the aforementioned political and ideological changes introduced by its leadership in recent years.

This study aims to fill this gap in research. It has four scientific objectives. First, to understand the most important features of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's propaganda campaign on the Internet between mid-2023 and March 2024. Second, to map the structure and evolution of the information ecosystem utilized by this group and its followers on the surface web during this period. Third, to measure the propaganda output generated by the group's official (the Amjad Foundation for Media Production) and unofficial (the Alaskary Media) media offices. Fourth, to understand what themes have been primarily exploited in the HTS-aligned propaganda. In order to reach these objectives, this study exploited a combination of open-source intelligence (OSINT), online observation, content, comparative analysis, and social network analysis (SNA).

This paper has been divided into three sections. The first briefly covers the methodology of this project. The second explores the evolution and structure of the pro-HTS information ecosystem discoverable on and from the surface web from July 2023 to February 2024. The third section discusses the scope of pro-HTS propaganda production during this period. It also identifies the most critical tendencies regarding the topics its media offices covered at the time.

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[1] ENA and al-Bunyan Radio went inactive in recent years.

2. Methodology

This study is predominantly founded on open-source intelligence, which Rita Gill (2023) defines as "intelligence produced by collecting, evaluating, and analyzing publicly available information with the purpose of answering a specific intelligence question." It employed a broad range of different OSINT tools and techniques to reach research objectives. First, it exploited so-called "Google hacking," which manifests in using advanced options and operators in the Google search engine (Mider et al., 2019). Other available and capable search engines, including Bing and Yandex, were utilized in a similar manner. Advanced operators and options were combined with Arabic and English keywords associated with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, including names of its media offices, titles of prominent propaganda productions, or associated terminology. This allowed the identification of primary surface web locations, which were subject to subsequent verification regarding being associated with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, including supporting its agenda even unofficially. Aside from search engines, this step also included the use of popular reverse image search tools, such as *TinEye* (Bitirim, 2022). Several popular visuals associated with HTS, such as its logotypes, were subject to reverse image search, allowing to find locations where they were posted.

In the second phase of the study, all discovered and available surface web locations aligned with HTS were subject to data scraping (Niu et al., 2022), which was founded on a broad range of tools, including primarily the *Spiderfoot* web reconnaissance software. Its goal was to detect information on other interconnected communication channels constituting part of the HTS-associated information ecosystem. This includes predominantly external links, although other significant data, such as webpages co-hosted on the same server, were also considered. It should be stressed that in this phase, the study collected links to surface, deep, and dark web locations, as well as information about channels and profiles on messaging apps. Subsequently, each link was verified regarding its association with HTS or its followers. Internet addresses, which could be accessed with an ordinary web browser without additional registration, were subject to similar data scraping in the third phase. Effectively, this approach allowed the registration of all discovered URLs associated with HTS and their interconnectedness in the database.

It must be emphasized that this study has focused on communication channels available on the surface web or discoverable from it (Mead & Agarwal, 2020). For the purpose of this project, the surface web is perceived as the part of the Internet that is available to the general public, does not require an additional signing-up procedure, and can be detected by search engines. There are three particular reasons why this approach was adopted. First, ter-

rorist-operated websites (TOWs) have remained an essential means of distributing propaganda by a broad range of non-state actors, including violent extremist organizations, in recent years (Lakomy, 2023b). This is mainly because the surface web is the easiest for all interested users to access. Second, the use of this layer of Internet communication by VEOs has remained under-researched for years as scholars were more inclined to analyze messaging apps and social media platforms (Conway & Looney, 2021). Thirdly, there are certain legal constraints on the territory of some of the European Union's member-states – where this study was carried out – in researching violent extremist communication channels located on restricted communication channels, such as messaging apps (Lakomy, 2024). Effectively, the adopted approach allowed for the detection of HTS-aligned communication channels available on and from the surface web. This includes not only standalone websites and blogs but also Telegram channels and profiles on social media.

Each detected and positively verified URL was subject to coding into several categories in databases. First, its location was registered under Web 1.0 (standalone websites, blogs, message boards), Web 2.0 (file-sharing services, social networks), dark web (.onion domains), and messaging apps (including, for instance, Telegram, WhatsApp, or Rocket Chat). Its availability in a given month was also verified at the beginning and the end of each period. The website was coded as "positive," even if it was available only for one day in a month. Thirdly, for the purpose of mapping the whole of the information ecosystem, all outlinks leading to other HTS-aligned URLs were registered. In this context, it should be stressed that file-sharing platforms were subject to slightly different coding due to their function as storage for individual propaganda files (Macdonald et al., 2022). To be more precise, links leading from one website to multiple propaganda pieces stored on a single file-sharing platform were still treated as one link in the database. Multiple links were included only if they led to file-sharing services constituting separate propaganda dissemination channels, such as the Internet Archive. On top of this, the study registered specific functions of each URL and the approximate dates of their creation and takedown. New URLs identified in a given month were counted separately. Overall, this approach allowed the creation of eight monthly databases covering the period between July 2023 and February 2024.[2] Each database was cumulative, i.e., it contained all newly collected data on top of all the information gathered in previous periods.

[2] All monthly databases were cumulative, meaning they were built upon the data gathered in a previous period and included new discoveries and changes on the monitored communication channels. Databases included both available and unavailable Internet addresses.

All collected data was subject to subsequent social network analysis that focused on identifying the most critical parts of the information ecosystem maintained by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, as well as understanding its evolution over eight months. In order to do so, all individual Internet addresses in this study were assigned unique IDs used in SNA. Due to counterterrorism reasons, IDs were only loosely associated with URL titles acquired through OSINT. Subsequently, collected data allowed the creation of two databases exploited in social network analysis. The first – node list – consisted of IDs of all URLs included in eight monthly databases, as well as their selected attributes, including availability in a given month and the number of mirrors detected. The second database – edge list – included all connections between nodes in the form of external links leading from one ID to another. Both databases combined were subject to the SNA, which focused predominantly on the network's degree level, modularity, and page rank (Hua et al., 2019). This approach allowed identifying the most crucial elements of the propaganda dissemination network of HTS.

Aside from OSINT and SNA, this study also adopted a combination of online observation and content analysis, which were used in two distinct ways (Słupińska, 2020). First, the content of the Amjad Foundation's webpage, being an official propaganda arm of HTS, was subject to monitoring at regular intervals. All individual propaganda productions published on this website between July 2023 and February 2024 were subject to limited analysis and coding in four general categories (visuals, audiovisuals, audio content, text content) and 24 subcategories. The topic of each propaganda production was also individually assessed. This approach allowed measuring the propaganda output generated by the group's official propaganda arm throughout the eight-month period. Second, content released on the two other unofficial websites linked to HTS, run by Alaskary Media, was also assessed. However, both domains were subject to more general screening, aiming to measure the quantity of propaganda items available under all sections of its domains.

Finally, the study employed a limited comparative analysis. Both quantitative and qualitative approaches were adopted. The quantitative comparative analysis focused on identifying monthly changes in the number and types of URLs exploited in the HTS's information ecosystem, as well as the changes in the Amjad Foundation's propaganda production. On the other hand, the qualitative approach focused on changes in the essential features of the information ecosystem over time, as well as in the topics covered in propaganda productions.

This study has four caveats. First, for the reasons discussed above, it focused on exploring HTS's propaganda dissemination networks detectable on and through the surface web. Effectively, there is a risk that not all communi-

cation channels exploited by this VEO have been uncovered. Still, this study allowed the discovery of the core, most crucial, and available propaganda dissemination channels used by this violent extremist organization. Second, for security and ethical reasons, this paper does not provide the exact Internet addresses used by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. Instead, it refers to IDs used in social network analysis. Third, the study disregarded all data that could potentially lead to identifying individuals engaged in propaganda dissemination. It did not consist of activities understood as profiling natural persons with online identifiers (Lakomy, 2024). Fourth, the study focused on mapping communication channels directly associated with pro-HTS propaganda. Therefore, it did not consider websites maintained by the Syrian Salvation Government.

3. Mapping Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's information ecosystem

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's propaganda dissemination network uncovered in July 2023 consisted of 35 individual Internet addresses, including five domains on the surface web, 19 Web 2.0 locations, and 11 channels on encrypted messaging apps. No .onion domain was discovered. Three of five surface web locations were available at the time (Figure 1). The first was the official website of the Amjad Foundation for Media Production (*idAMJAAD*), which constituted a critical means of influencing HTS's followers on the surface web. This domain maintained a relatively small network of interconnected communication channels, including two Telegram channels, a WhatsApp group, an Internet Archive profile, and a Soundcloud profile, which focused on disseminating *nasheeds*. A second crucial standalone domain was run by Alaskary Media (*idALASKARY*). In contrast to the Amjad Foundation, it avoided being labeled as an official media outlet for HSM. Still, the vast majority of its activities focused on discussing the situation in Idlib and Syria, as well as highlighting Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's activities in the area. Due to these features, it seemed to replace the Ebaa News Agency, which went inactive in 2021, as a media outlet that supports HTS while pretending to be an instance of non-partisan journalism in the Levant. The Alaskary's webpage redirected users to four interconnected propaganda dissemination channels, namely Facebook and Twitter profiles, both unavailable as of July 2023, a Telegram channel, and another standalone website. The latter called the Alaskary Tube (*idALASKARYTUBE*), has proved to be a video-sharing platform. It constitutes a solution similar to the one adopted by the Ebaa News Agency, which ran a separate "tube" website in 2020 (Lakomy, 2023a). These features may hint at a possible organizational or functional connection between Alaskary Media and Ebaa News Agency. The other two detected standalone websites, including an old domain used by al-Bunyan Radio, proved to be inaccessible

as of July 2023. In this context, it should be stressed that other HTS websites that were active in 2020 and 2021, including the aforementioned domains run by ENA (Lakomy, 2023a), were unavailable in mid-2023.

Figure 1 – *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham-associated information ecosystem as of July 2023*[3]
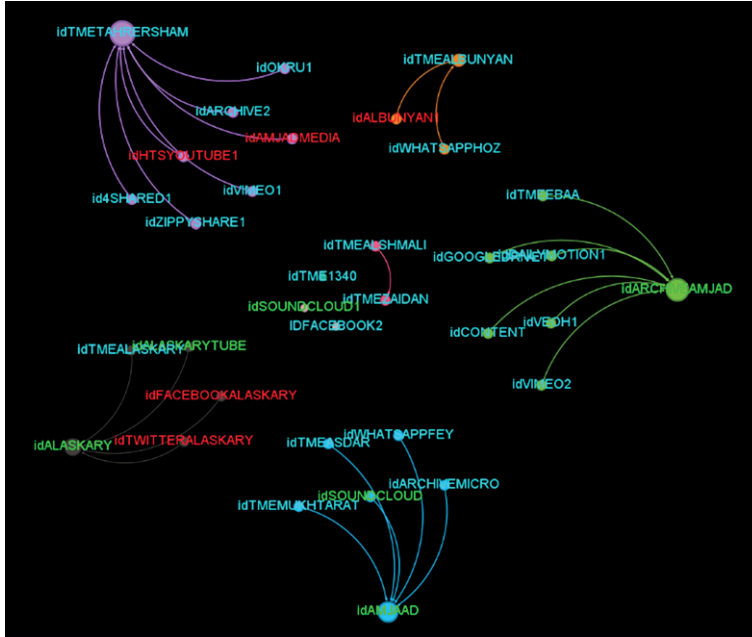
Source: OSINT

As for the relevant Web 2.0 communication channels, the study detected an old Facebook profile of al-Bunyan Radio with 282 followers. It was still available in July 2023, but it has not been updated since 2020. Two Internet Archive (IA) profiles were also discovered, which were associated with the Amjad Foundation for Media Production. The first one (*idARCHIVEAM-JAD*) contained 13 videos released by this office in 2017 and 2018 and viewed by a limited number (100-1000+) of users. It redirected all the visitors to a former Ebaa News Agency's Telegram channel and a number of file-sharing platforms, including Vimeo, Google Drive, and veoh.com. A second repository on IA (*idARCHIVEAMJADMEDIA1*) consisted of only three items from 2019, which were viewed more than 2600 times. This channel lacked any

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[3] The size of the nodes indicates their degree level and the number of mirrors detected. The green color indicates accessible nodes, red inaccessible, and blue communication channels, which were not subject to monthly monitoring due to the reasons mentioned above. It should be stressed, however, that upon their detection, most of the Web 2.0 communication channels identified were available.

connectivity with other parts of the HTS-aligned ecosystem. On top of this, an old al-Bunyan Radio profile on Soundcloud was detected. It consisted of 14 tracks and had 115 followers as of July 2023. However, it was last updated in 2021. Effectively, these Internet addresses were mostly remnants of the propaganda distribution activities carried out several years earlier.

The last part of the uncovered propaganda dissemination network associated with HTS consisted of several channels in encrypted messaging apps. The first one was run by Zidane Media on Telegram and had more than 10,000 subscribers. It frequently shared Amjad's content and redirected users to its official webpage. Another Telegram channel, discovered through one of the search engines, had more than 22,000 subscribers but seemed inactive in July 2023. It comprised links leading to six file-sharing or streaming platforms, including Vimeo, Internet Archive, and YouTube, although none of these locations were accessible as of July 2023.

In this context, during a period of another eight months, this study discovered 18 unique new Internet addresses used by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and its followers for propaganda dissemination. Effectively, as of February 2024, its network (Figure 2) consisted of ten domains on the surface web (additional five), 25 Web 2.0 URLs (additional six), and 18 channels on encrypted communication apps (an additional seven).

Figure 2 – *HTS's-associated information ecosystem as of February 2024*

Source: OSINT

Additional surface web domains detected included primarily another mirror of the Amjad Foundation home page, as the former one was blocked in December 2023. Interestingly, the new address used the exact Top-Level Domain (TLD) as the old one – .video. A second new domain proved to be a mirror of the Alaskary Media website,[4] which was also banned in September 2023. Similarly to Amjad Foundation's URL, it exploited the same TLD as its predecessor – .media. It is also worth mentioning that while the main page of Alaskary got blocked, the "tube" platform remained accessible, which demonstrates the lack of consistency on the part of authorities involved in this removal. Another standalone website detected proved to be an official webpage for Xhemati Alban, an Albanian jihadist group associated with HTS and active in Idlib in recent years (Shtuni, 2019). The webpage featured mainly photo reports and videos from combat training and *ribat* service (Lecoquierre, 2023) by the members of this organization. The last two domains proved to be quite unusual, as both constituted niche platforms predominantly used for uploading pornography. Both were, however, used to distribute HTS-related content.

The most important new Web 2.0 location detected proved to be a TikTok profile run by the Amjad Foundation for Media Production. Despite the fact that it had only 59 followers as of December 2023, it proved that HTS-affiliated media offices made some attempts to establish their presence on mainstream social networks. This trend was also demonstrated by other new profiles supporting HTS, which were discovered on Twitter and Facebook. None of them had significant reach, indicating the lack of success in the exploitation of social media.

As for the changes in the use of encrypted messaging apps, a new Telegram channel for the Idlib city area seemed particularly important. It is because it developed its own propaganda distribution network, which was composed of an Instagram profile, another Telegram channel, and a YouTube profile. The whole network was directly associated with the Amjad Foundation, as all channels redirected visitors to its home page.

4. Exploring the thematic landscape of the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's propaganda campaign

The social network analysis of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's information ecosystem shows that there were two core propaganda communication channels responsible for conveying its message to the surface web audience. The first

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[4] It should be stressed that multiple mirrors of one webpage of HTS were treated as a single node in social network analysis.

official was the Amjad Foundation for Media Production's website (Figure 3). Its content, exclusively in Arabic, was divided into eight sections: Everyone, Documentary, Video clips, Short Films, Dangerous Moments series, and Vocal Anthems, which is a relatively classic structure for many Salafi-jihadist websites in the Middle East. Most of the content released by this domain was either audiovisual or visual. While other types of propaganda were present, they usually originated from a period predating summer 2023. Amjad's general attitude was to release relatively infrequent but usually high-quality audiovisuals highlighting Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's military capabilities and achievements. In eight months, this domain published 39 combat videos. They can be generally divided into two distinct groups. On the one hand, they included a variety of short clips depicting artillery shelling and sniping attacks against the Syrian Arab Army (SAA). For instance, on December 23rd, 2023, it released a recording of the HTS sniper shooting at Syrian soldiers on the *ribat*, all in first-person perspective reminiscent of the FPS video games. A similar propaganda item was also released on November 18th, 2023. As for the artillery attacks, they were frequently published in October 2023 and depicted both rocket and classic artillery barrages against al-Assad forces in a third-person perspective. Such videos were usually relatively short and lacked advanced editing or special effects.

Figure 3 – *Amjad Foundation for Media Production's main page as of July 2023*
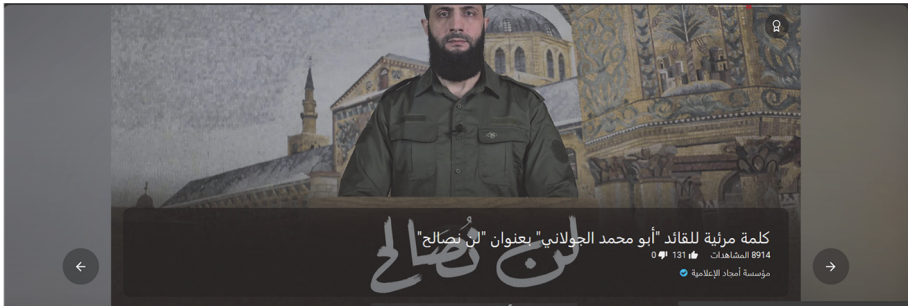
Source: OSINT

On the other hand, Amjad released less numerous but much more advanced audiovisual productions that featured combat training carried out by HTS's militants. These videos consisted of advanced directing, editing, and professional special effects combined with an alluring soundtrack. These propaganda items were designed to highlight the professionalism and dedication of the group's members, as well as showcase their special forces-like equipment (Figure 4). In a certain way, these videos exploited the same aesthetics that special forces worldwide frequently utilize in their promotional

materials. An audiovisual, which was released at the end of July 2023, may serve as a good example. It depicted a "graduation training," which focused on testing militants' skills in seizing a multi-story building. A similar video portraying HTS members carrying advanced training on the shooting range somewhere in the Syrian mountains was released at the beginning of November 2023.

Figure 4 – *Screenshot from a combat training video released by Amjad Foundation for Media Production*
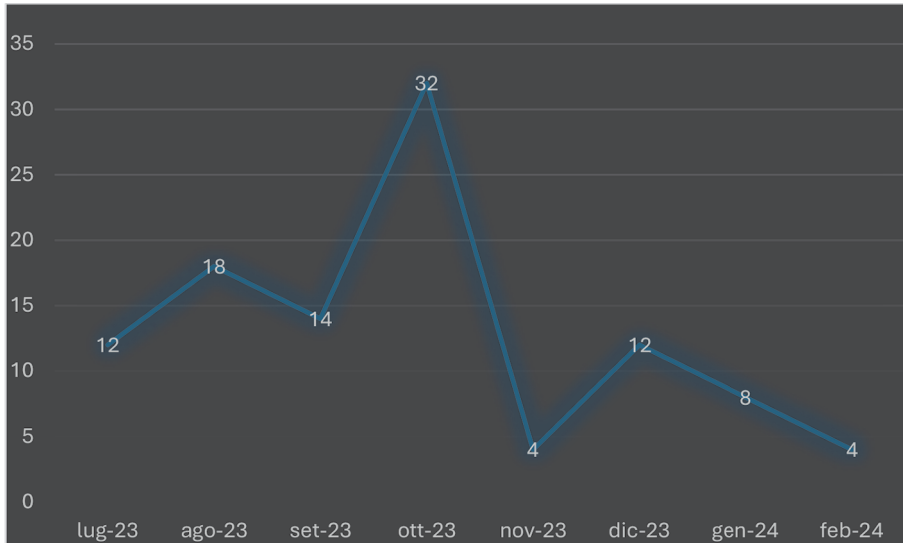

Source: OSINT

Aside from these productions, during the eight-month period, Amjad also released three short news videos, one music video, two advertisements, and seven productions coded as "miscellaneous." The two news videos focused on the HTS *shura* council meeting in Idlib and night operations north of Latakia. Two advertisements, produced in January 2024, publicized HTS's military potential and leaders. One concentrated on praising Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani's role in the organization, while the second compared HTS militants to *mujahidin* fighting against Crusaders. Miscellaneous videos were largely politics-related and usually consisted of statements from military commanders on a variety of issues.

Overall, in eight months, the Amjad Foundation's website published only 104 individual propaganda items, including 52 audiovisuals and 52 assorted images. From a monthly perspective, the greatest output was generated in October 2023 (32 items), followed by August (18) and September (14). Start-

ing from November 2023, Amjad's propaganda production dropped significantly (Figure 5).

Figure 5 – *Amjad Foundation for Media Production propaganda releases on the surface web between July 2023 and February 2024*
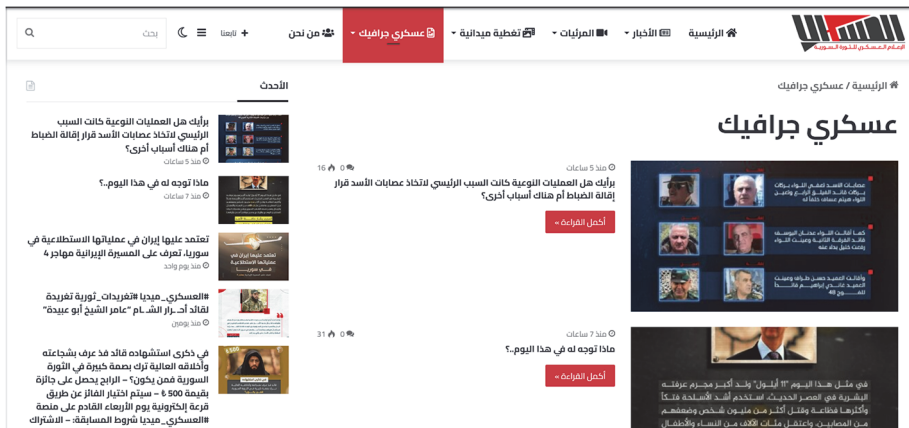

Source: OSINT

The second website, run by Alaskary Media, proved much more abundant in propaganda items, although it pretended not to be formally associated with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in a similar manner to Amjad. Aside from HTS, it also reported on other groups active in Idlib, such as Ansar al-Tawhid. Its content was organized into six sections: Main Page, News, Visuals, Field Coverage, Military Graphics, and Who We Are. The most important News section comprised seven subsections:

- Special Statements, having a similar visual form to Islamic State's Amaq News Agency communiqués;
- Detailed News, which usually focuses on frontline events in Syria;
- Written Reports, being, in fact, standalone articles on a variety of subjects;
- News with Picture, combining information with photo reports;
- News Infographics, which summarized activities of Syrian rebel factions or the SAA;
- Interviews, frequently with field commanders;
- Military Analyses, which were op-eds prepared by Syrian, rebel-aligned pundits.

The Visuals comprised three subsections: Short Films, Knowledge is Power, and Visual Reports. Knowledge is Power proved to be the most interesting one, as it consisted of manuals on various aspects of military tactics. Among others, these materials highlighted the importance of camouflage on the battlefield. Other types of Visuals also had an alluring form. For instance, they consisted of video reportages made by Alaskary's media officers on the frontlines of Syria.

Other sections seemed slightly less important in the website's structure of content. Field Coverage consisted of photo reports and videos portraying military-related activities of the Syrian opposition, including primarily HTS, as well as attacks against forces loyal to Bashar al-Assad's regime. Similarly to Visual Reports, this section featured Alaskary's media operatives visiting the frontlines and conducting interviews with *mujahidin*. The Military Graphic featured visual and audiovisual propaganda in the form of, among others, infographics and posters. They covered a variety of topics, ranging from combat training of the Syrian rebels to the Ramadan wishes (Figure 6). Finally, the Who We Are section merely briefly described the objectives of this media office in the form of a single infographic.

Figure 6 – *Alaskary Media's webpage, as of September 11, 2023*

Source: OSINT

In this context, it must be stressed that the structure of the content of Alaskary Media's website reminded, in many aspects, the domain run by the Ebaa News Agency in 2020, before this propaganda bureau went inactive. This is hinted by the identical names of many subsections on their websites, including "News with Picture," "Graphic Videos," and "News Reports," which indicates a similar approach in designing webpages. Moreover, ENA and Alaskary released similar types of content, such as *quasi*-journalist reports

from the frontlines and interviews with *mujahidin* (Lakomy, 2023a, pp. 11-12).

Furthermore, it should be noted that the Alaskary Media's propaganda production capabilities proved to be significantly greater than those of the Amjad. While the latter focused on a relatively narrow set of topics and produced primarily audiovisuals, the Alaskary released a broad spectrum of propaganda materials with much greater intensity. As of March 13th, 2024, the Alaskary Tube webpage alone comprised 1068 individual video productions uploaded since its creation.[5] The Alaskary's main page was much more abundant in content, as it consisted of 3078 individual propaganda entries at the time, all released since November 2021 (Figure 7). This means that this media office was capable of releasing approximately 106 propaganda items per month on average (November 2021-March 2024). The categories that consisted of the greatest amount of content were Detailed News (738), Video Graphics (415), and News with Photos (347).[6]

Figure 7 – *Structure of the Alaskary Media propaganda uploads on its main website as of March 13th, 2024*
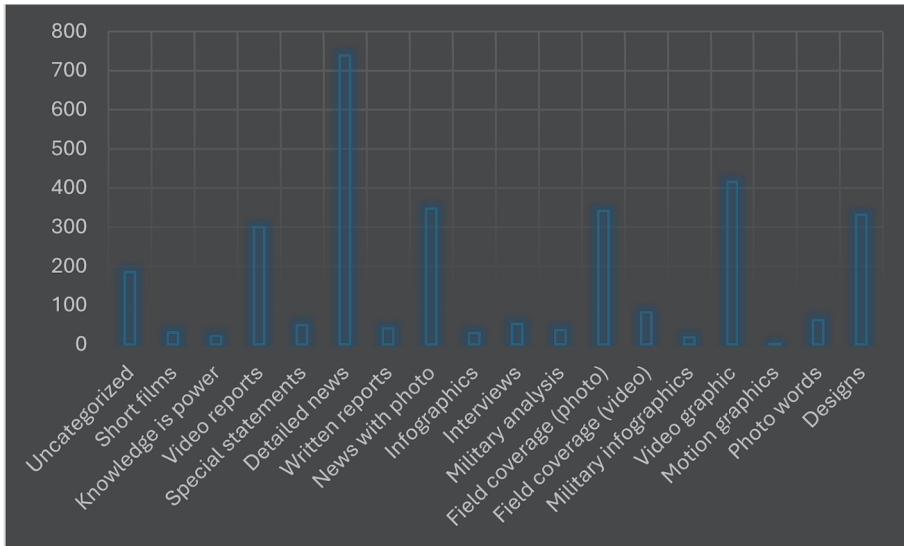
Source: OSINT

In this context, the pro-HTS media machine proved dedicated to shifting away from the traditional narratives used in Salafi-jihadist propaganda (Zelin, 2022). The content released by Amjad and Alaskary paid particular attention to promoting the political, social, economic, and military achievements of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Syria, as well as negatively framing all enemies of this group. While doing so, both media offices visibly tried to avoid the exploitation of themes, narratives, and propaganda devices usually present in content released by Salafi-jihadist terrorist organizations, such as Islamic State or al-Qaeda (Winter, 2017). This was consistent with its strategy, which was designed to improve the international image of HTS. However, not all traces of extremist narratives in its strategic communication were completely erased. This is because both Alaskary and Amjad, from time to time, conveyed content containing controversial messages, which did not match well with its new, "moderate" image. Aside from evident militarism, predominantly represented by the Amjad Foundation, for instance, HTS-aligned media also promoted *inghimasiyyin*, i.e., units of highly dedicated combatants wearing suicide vests (Barfi, 2016).

5. Conclusions

This study allows several conclusions to be made. It shows that Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the most prominent violent extremist organization in Syria, carried out a well-thought-out online propaganda campaign in 2023 and the beginning of 2024. It developed and exploited a relatively small but well-designed information ecosystem founded on two distinct pillars. The first was composed of three websites, run by the Amjad Foundation and Alaskary Media, which served as hotspots for pro-HTS strategic communication on the surface web and were supported by a number of secondary communication channels. The second pillar was founded on several Telegram channels. The latter makes the HTS-aligned network similar to information ecosystems maintained by other Salafi-jihadist violent extremist organizations in existence.

Throughout eight months (mid-2023-February 2024), this information ecosystem grew by 66%, although the introduction of most new channels had little impact on its overall functionality. The most important changes were related to establishing mirrors of the blocked domains used by both propaganda offices aligned with HTS, which ensured stable access for all supporters of the group on the surface web. Other changes, including the rising use of social media, had little impact on the overall connectivity of this network.

Pro-HTS media offices proved to have differentiated capabilities in propaganda production. The Amjad Foundation produced relatively few pieces

of content during this period. However, their overall quality was very high, sometimes comparable to the best audiovisuals released by Islamic State at the apogee of its online campaign in 2014 and 2015 (Dauber et al., 2019). Alaskary Media regularly provided large amounts of media items through its standalone website and most of them demonstrated professionalism of their media operatives. It is worth mentioning that Alaskary's releases were usually met with much greater interest from the online audience than the Amjad Foundation. Aside from this, available communication channels consisted of large amounts of pro-HTS propaganda produced in earlier periods.

In this context, a comparison of the information ecosystem of HTS detected in 2023 and 2024 with its network mapped in 2020 (Lakomy, 2023a) shows that the overall approach of HTS towards propaganda distribution on the surface web has not changed significantly, although some innovations can also be spotted. The group still primarily relied on standalone websites and Telegram channels, but the number of essential domains decreased. Compared to 2020, the HTS-aligned network lacked, for instance, the al-Bunyan Radio. HTS has also probably resigned from utilizing the dark web, which was tested during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, as of 2023 and 2024, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham made some attempts to exploit mainstream social media, although these experiments proved rather unsuccessful, considering the popularity and accessibility of its profiles. In contrast to 2017-2020, the group also released visibly fewer propaganda items, although their quality remained extraordinary when compared to productions of other Salafi-jihadist violent extremist organizations. On top of this, as discussed above, HTS-aligned media offices paid visibly more attention to avoiding controversial topics and narratives.

Lastly, this study identified multiple similarities between media operations carried out by the Ebaa News Agency in 2020 and Alaskary Media in 2023 and 2024. Both offices used similar propaganda dissemination methods, produced similar types of content and the overall layout of their pages was alike in many aspects. They also played identical roles by promoting the HTS agenda in Syria disguised as instances of non-partisan journalism. On top of this, an interesting chronological coincidence may be spotted, as ENA went inactive in the second half of 2021, i.e., roughly at the same time when the Alaskary Media was established, at least according to the Wayback Machine data.[7] These similarities may hint that either Alaskary Media is a direct successor of ENA or it constitutes the same bureau after a rebranding process. However, no definitive evidence could be found to confirm any of these explanations.

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[7] More data on the accessibility of the ENA webpage can be found at: https://web.archive.org/web/20240000000000*/ebaa.news.

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